The Burden of Influence: Expectation and Responsibility in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

Atop the walls of Elsinore, the Ghost implores Prince Hamlet to avenge his murder, leaving the young prince in a state of disillusion, or perhaps madness. It is young Hamlet’s reluctance to seek revenge against Claudius that has spawned furious debate amongst critics. Sigmund Freud writes that young Hamlet’s “active energy” is debilitated by “excessive intellectual activity” (63), which suggests that Prince Hamlet’s penchant for philosophical debate with himself proves a disservice in swiftly meting out justice to Claudius, who also struggles with internal conflict regarding the implications of his actions. Unhae Langis suggests that Prince Hamlet’s inaction is caused by his magnanimous countenance, noting that the young prince, “a student of Christian humanism, strives for… rational guidance of passions towards virtuous ends” (20); although, if a reader made an attempt to view the younger Hamlet as a paragon of unshakable virtue, his willingness to send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths so dexterously, as well as Hamlet’s cruelty towards Ophelia, is problematic. Harold Skulsky states that Hamlet’s fear of “after-death punishment” prevents any irrational displays of vengeance from the prince (82). This idea provides a welcome contrast against Langis’s, as the former posits that Hamlet hesitates to act due to an inherent opposition towards the taking of life, whereas Skulsky supposes that Hamlet is only afraid of the repercussions of murder, not wholly of the act itself. T.S. Eliot writes that “Hamlet’s bafflement…is a prolongation of his creator,” referencing Shakespeare’s inability to keep up with the character of his own making, although this assumption is not easy to support based on the text alone—outside factors are needed for this conjecture to resonate (143). Marvin Rosenberg offers an enticing interpretation of Hamlet’s inadequacy by examining Claudius and King Hamlet’s “father” roles toward prince Hamlet, which Rosenberg states as being ambiguously “unsure” (62). Through Harold Bloom’s theory,
the anxiety of influence, I submit that Prince Hamlet’s delay is vindicated by his eventual success in “slaying” the influence of his father. I will contrast this triumph with Claudius’s failure to “slay” the influence of his brother.

Before continuing, a distinction must be made as to the “slaying of the precursor.” The physical act of “killing” is irrelevant—instead, the idea refers to the latecomer’s ability to overcome and surpass the influence of the precursor. In analyzing Harold Bloom’s theory, Michael Wood asserts that it is necessary for the latecomer to “devour the [precursor].” The latecomer must either surpass or reject the expectations of the precursor—only then will the ascendancy of the two be reversed. In commentary on this, Paul de Man wrote that “it is not the weakness of the present, but the strength of the past” that plagues present day latecomers in achieving a position of relevancy. Often, the latecomer is unable to identify the responsibilities required of it because the expectations of the predecessor are unclear or are not in harmony with the sensibilities of the latecomer. This leads to the anxiety of influence. In order to expel the burden of expectation, the latecomer must determine the nature of its character and decide where that character fits in with expectations of the precursor. In relation to Hamlet, the Prince embodies the latecomer, a young man burdened by the dissolution of a world that he previously trusted in. Claudius, like Prince Hamlet, is a latecomer to King Hamlet’s precursor role. By the conclusion of the play, Prince Hamlet and Claudius both are presented with the opportunity to slay the influence of their “precursor”—only Hamlet manages to do so, although the price comes through sacrifice of his life. Claudius fails and dies by the sword he himself poisoned, forfeiting his prospects to ascend to a bearing of significance.

As a latecomer to King Hamlet, Claudius laments his succession to the throne, his conscience heavy from his killing of his brother. Claudius subtly hints at his inner turmoil by
telling Polonius, “How smart a lash…doth give my conscience / O heavy burden” (III. i. 58, 62) and later confesses that his crime has “the primal eldest curse upon’t” (III. iii. 40), a reference to God’s curse upon Cain for murdering his brother Abel (Hamlet, 84). Despite his heavy conscience, Claudius, in confession, is unwilling to give up the “effects for which [he] did the murder / [his] crown…ambition, and… queen” (III. iii. 56-8). The secular honor bestowed upon a king is what Claudius expects for himself, even if its attainment should come through extreme methods. He, an “arrant knave” (I. v. 138), has no true comprehension of his responsibilities as a goodly king, particularly in relation to the political happenings of the body politic in Denmark. His capacity to be a fair and honest ruler is undermined by his exploitation of the power he took in his act of murder. For instance, the now dead King, had he remained alive, would likely have met and killed the young Fortinbras on the battlefield before the Norwegian prince and his horde had a chance to overthrow Elsinore; but Claudius remains ineffective to the pre-established expectations of the throne because he is unable to take action without contemplating his own predicament and manipulating those around him. Claudius’s apocryphal “success” in this instance comes only in disillusioning Denmark as to its impending fall. Grace Tiffany notes this and writes that Claudius’ “diversion” of Fortinbras to Poland does not stop the young conqueror; it only delays the capture of Denmark (163). Ironically, through Claudius’ delay of Fortinbras, the royal family destroys itself, allowing Fortinbras to take over the kingdom without a substantial effort.

Claudius, through his own fault, inherits a kingdom in disarray; he remains unable to lead it to a point of safety and security. He cries out in his confession: “O wretched state! / O bosom black as death,” referring to his stained conscience. The usurper king Claudius, is a slave to his conscience, unfit to rule an unstable country while shackled to the grievous chains of his
“rank…offense” (III. iii. 39). He does not fulfill the responsibilities of his role, although he makes every pretense to the contrary, particularly when reaching out to the latecomer, young Hamlet, under the semblance of patriarchal love: “with no less nobility of love / Than that which dearest father bears his son / Do I impart to you” (I. ii. 116-8). This insincerity does not allow Claudius to fulfill his expectation as king, nor does it allow him to “wash” his hands of his “brother’s blood” (III. iii. 47-9), with repentance being a way of purging his soul of his brother’s influence, which can be equated to a certain degree as represented by Claudius’s guilt of his “true nature” (III. iii. 65). Claudius further fails to destroy the influence of his predecessor when his attempt to kill young Hamlet, who is an implied extension of King Hamlet in a generational sense, brings about his own demise. Hamlet’s wrath is brought back in full force against the kingdom after he is sent to England—this drives Claudius into a corner from which he cannot escape, save it be through manipulation of Laertes’ emotional oath to kill Hamlet. Claudius feels it his “responsibility” to rid Denmark of Hamlet’s volatility, although he must do so without the notice of the “distracted multitude,” which has a strong affection for Prince Hamlet (IV. iii. 4). This plan indeed results in Hamlet’s death, although it is ultimately a failure, for Claudius is also slain in the proceedings. Claudius fails to slay the influence of his precursor because he does not take charge and have Prince Hamlet killed outright earlier in the play. In doing this, his actions would never be justified, universally speaking, but by killing Prince Hamlet, as Claudius did the king, Claudius would have at least had an opportunity to overcome the legacy of King Hamlet’s influence, if only until Fortinbras arrived.

Prince Hamlet’s moral quandary mirrors Claudius’s predicament, although the outcomes are unique. The young prince’s inner conflict with the ambiguous expectation of the Ghost is the catalyst by which the play examines the dichotomy between latecomer and precursor. The
Ghost’s presence is never given a purposeful explanation—it may be a “spirit of health” or a “goblin damned” (I. iv. 44). Its inclusion in the drama, though, is to induce uncertainty as to the responsibility that Prince Hamlet is expected to fulfill. Grace Tiffany writes that the presence of the Ghost is of “particular importance” to the drama of the story and notes that the Ghost is a predecessor to Prince Hamlet (159). Accordingly, the spirit signifies a difficult representation of expectation in the play: its role in young Hamlet’s life is not limited to its posthumous state, but is appended more significantly by the nature of King Hamlet, the Ghost’s temporal form. The Ghost, as a depiction of the dead king, represents the deceased precursor’s warped grasp of the throne, even beyond the bounds of death.

Hamlet admires his father, with his oft mention of the dead king as a “wholesome” ruler, although the young prince does not share the elder’s penchant for war-making (III. iv. 75). J.E. Cirlot speculates that Hamlet’s father and the Ghost “seem to be [Prince Hamlet’s] own projection”—divinations that have an inordinate amount of influence in young Hamlet’s mind, despite their unreliability (136); essentially, that Hamlet remembers the “benevolence” of his father, as almost any loyal son would, though this loyalty is misguided, or perhaps even foolish, given the King’s true character. Naturally, the late King Hamlet is remembered fondly by his family and loyal subjects, although the general description of him is as being a man of action, with the tendency to make decisions impulsively and without consideration to the implications of his enterprise. His responsibility to the crown is archaic; the ludicrous perceptions of honor during King Hamlet’s rule denote a generational proclivity to violence as a resolution to conflict, rather than the mediation of conflict through rational discourse. The Ghost’s appearance in “the very armor [Hamlet] had on” (I. i. 72) supports this, representing the inimical nature of the dead king whilst he was alive. For consideration, the conflict with Norway only comes about through
the “emulate pride” (I. i. 96) of King Hamlet and King Fortinbras. It is indicative of the skewed sense of honor that is upheld by the kingdom with naught for reason. Although he is more reflective than his father, Prince Hamlet is aware of this concept, saying that “to find quarrel in a straw / when honor’s at stake” is the nature of honor, at least in a kingly expectation (IV. iv. 57-8). Even still, Prince Hamlet’s feelings on his father’s foolish concept of honor and warmongering are more acutely evidenced when the young prince says:

I see the imminent death of twenty thousand men,  
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,  
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
Which is not tomb enough and continent  
To hide the slain? (IV. iv. 61-7).

Thus, the price of King Hamlet’s actions is never paid in his lifetime, instead being deferred to his young son. King Hamlet sublimates his warmongering into a matter of honor, expecting this “honor” to be upheld by the heir apparent: in this case, Prince Hamlet, had Claudius not stepped in. Harold Skulsky states that “Honor, in the chivalric sense, is far from a contemptible prize; but it is equally far from recommending itself as a criterion of moral choice (80).Hamlet recognizes the ugliness of the world that his father has created, an empire of decay that clings to its past glory, and rejects the pernicious responsibility that has been forced on his head by the expectation of his predecessor. Prince Hamlet reflects this observation, saying, “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right” (I. v. 215-6). Friedrich Nietzsche endorses this, stating that “Hamlet… [looks] truly into the essence of things” and recognizes that his actions “[cannot] set right a world that is out of joint” (115). J.E. Cirlot also examines this, suggesting that “Hamlet…is in rebellion against the ‘filial’ situation”; that is, Hamlet cannot reconcile the responsibilities of his father’s expectation to his conscience, and seeks to reject the expectation forced upon him. This should not suggest that Prince Hamlet is invulnerable to the
irrational sympathy that he at times feels for his father. In swearing that “thy commandment all alone shall live within the book and volume of my brain, unmixed with baser matter” (I. v. 109-11), Hamlet temporarily replaces his own rational sensibilities with a cancerous desire to fulfill the Ghost’s expectation. Had Hamlet been sincere in this pledge and succumbed to the vengeful, ominous nature of the Ghost, rather than stay his hand, he would never have had the chance to properly “slay” his father’s influence—Prince Hamlet would only have killed Claudius and become a tool to be implemented at the opprobrious disposal of the Ghost, perhaps even beyond the drama of the story.

Hamlet’s delay in slaying his uncle represents the anxiety of influence that Hamlet feels—he is forced to decide how he will mete out justice to Claudius: through the avenging sword or through public justice. Hamlet’s meditative self feels an earnest responsibility to bring his uncle to justice by means of confession, thereby clarifying the Ghost’s cryptic call for vengeance; conversely, Hamlet’s impassioned but misguided loyalty to his father’s spirit suggests that the act of vengeance is designed, if in accordance to the Ghost’s wishes, to be carried out as personal. It is true that upon hearing Claudius’s repentant confession, Hamlet displays a version of himself not dissimilar to his father, and caves to his impulsive nature, vowing to kill Claudius in “some act / That has no relish of salvation in’t” (III. iv. 94-5). This ruthless, but ultimately hollow pledge puts Hamlet’s ability to “slay” the influence of his “precursor” in a state of limbo; however, like other instances within the play, Hamlet’s impulsivity is not lasting, nor is it sincere, despite its acid-tongued delivery.

Hamlet’s resolve to maintain a sense of order is never completely overruled by his skeptical loyalty to the Ghost, which he suspects, “abuses [him] to damn [him]” (II. ii. 611). When he approaches his responsibility to the throne rationally, young Hamlet provides intricate
Hamlet’s success in slaying the influence of his father does not come in the act of killing Claudius; frankly, his slaying of Claudius is anti-climactic to the rest of the drama. What towers over Claudius’ death is Hamlet’s ceremonial succession of the throne to Fortinbras. While Prince
Hamlet, in the throes of death, is in no position to oppose Prince Fortinbras’ conquering of Elsinore, the young Hamlet lets go of the violent cycle that originated from the pride his father. Denmark became a monarchy of nothingness under the rule of King Hamlet and Claudius, who traded safety, reason, and virtue for pride, fleeting pleasure, and corruption. There is a sense of irony to Prince Hamlet’s endorsement of Fortinbras’ capture of Denmark, “He has my dying voice” (V. ii. 382); that the conflict between Denmark and Norway began as a violent struggle between nations, and ended with the destruction of its originators, the royal family of Elsinore. While the latecomer Hamlet’s passing of responsibility to Fortinbras may be viewed as Denmark’s failure to endure, it can be equally reasoned that in his dying minutes, Prince Hamlet purges Denmark of its detractors, achieving a higher sense of honor than the surrounding characters are capable of possessing; furthermore, the Prince of Denmark successfully slays the influence of his predecessor, King Hamlet. It can only be speculation as to the nature of Fortinbras as a ruler and his plans for Denmark; however, despite he and young Hamlet’s failure to be introduced in life, Fortinbras regards Prince Hamlet with genuine reverence, regretting that “had [Hamlet] been put on,” he would have “proved most royally” (V. ii. 429-30). Thus, it is tragic that the kingdom of Denmark fell; more so, that so many of its rulers perished. But the true tragedy of Hamlet is that the sacrifice of the young prince was necessary in order to cast off the influence of the precursors, King Hamlet and Claudius.

Despite its popularity, Hamlet by William Shakespeare remains an endlessly mysterious and enduring puzzle, one that may never be solved to completion. It is clear, however, that the anxiety of influence is present within the play, particularly in the contrast between Claudius’ latecomer to King Hamlet’s precursor, and Prince Hamlet as the latecomer to, yet a second time, King Hamlet’s precursor. Both latecomers die, although in death, Hamlet succeeds where
Claudius fails. Whereas Claudius declines to destroy the influence of King Hamlet, Prince Hamlet succeeds in doing so. Although the young prince cannot be classified a hero in the typical sense, Prince Hamlet represents a light in the darkness of Denmark’s destructive sovereignty.
Works Cited


Samuelson, Scott. Personal interview. 3 June 2013.


