

Echoes of John the Baptist in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Song Cho, M.A.

=====

Abstract

This paper discusses the possible semblance of Hamlet's story with the last days of John the Baptist as narrated in the New Testament books. Allusions to the life and death of the preacher are made throughout *Hamlet*. The protagonist takes upon himself the role of John the Baptist when he makes some criticism and condemnation of Gertrude. Other contexts are analyzed in light of the allusions.

Key words: Hamlet, John the Baptist, Gertrude, Ophelia

Hamlet's Appeal to Gertrude and John the Baptist's Message of Repentance

"*Confess yourself to heaven; / Repent what's past, avoid what is to come*". (III.iv.140-1, my emphasis) With these words Hamlet urges Gertrude to abandon her sexual relationship with Claudius, possibly alluding to John the Baptist's message:

"*Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand . . . Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, And they were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. Now when he saw many of the Pharisees, and of the Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O*

generation of vipers, *who hath forewarned you to flee from the anger to come?*”

(Matthew 3:2, 5-7, my emphasis) ¹

Gertrude’s Response

Gertrude’s response warrants attention: “O Hamlet, / thou has *cleft my heart in twain!*”

(III.iv.147, my emphasis)

These words evoke the baptism of Jesus when “John saw the heavens *cloven in twain*”. (Mark 1: 10, my emphasis) When John warns the crowd of the coming judgment, “the people asked him, saying, *What shall we do then?* . . . Then came there Publicans also to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, *what shall we do?* . . . The soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, *And what shall we do?* (Luke 3: 10-14, my emphasis)

Similarly, Gertrude asks Hamlet: “What shall I do?” (III.iv.164)

Claudius and King Herod

John is later put into prison by King Herod, whose name is mentioned in Act III. scene ii. 14: “It out-Herods Herod.” Also of note is a name reminding the reader of the itinerant preacher, namely Baptista (III.ii.228) -- a character in a play called *The Mousetrap* within *Hamlet*. Herod had John arrested “for Herodias’ sake, his brother Philip’s wife. For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her” (Matthew 13: 3-4).

This bears a strong likeness to Hamlet’s attitude toward his mother’s marriage to Claudius, his father’s brother. Eventually Herod had John beheaded: “But when Herod’s

birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod. Wherefore he promised with an oath, that he would give her whatsoever she would ask. And she being before instructed of her mother, said, *Give me here John Baptist's head in a platter*". (Matthew 14: 6-8, my emphasis)

This description calls to mind two passages. Hamlet reads a sealed letter ordering his execution: "My head should be struck off" (V.ii.26). The other is when Osric tells Hamlet: "But my lord, his Majesty bade me / signify to you that a has laid a great wager on your / head". (V.ii.102-5)

"Wantonness"

Hamlet's ranting at Ophelia also deserves close attention: "I have heard of your paintings, too, well enough. / God hath given you one face and you make yourselves / another. *You jig, you amble*, and you lisp, and / nickname God's creatures, and make your *wantonness* / your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't. It hath made / me mad. I say we will have no more marriages. Those / that are married already— all but one— shall live. The / rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go". (III.i.145-52, my emphasis)

An allusion to John's beheading comes into view when reading "wantonness" in the marginal note of Matthew 14: 1: "Here is in John an example of an invincible courage, which all faithful Ministers of God's word ought to follow; in Herod, an example of tyrannous vanity, pride and cruelty, and to be short, of a courtly conscience, and of their insufferable slavery, which have once given themselves over to pleasures; in Herodias and her daughter, an example

of *whore-like wantonness*, and womanlike cruelty” (my emphasis).

“Jig” and “Amble”

Against this background, the aforementioned verbs *jig* and *amble* may bring to mind Herodias’ daughter’s dance. Also relevant here is the word *whore-like* as Hamlet uses the phrase “like a whore” in one of his monologues (III.i.588).

Ophelia’s Death

Finally, some thoughts on John’s particular message may be offered here. He preached a baptism of repentance. Interestingly enough, Ophelia in her madness hands out rue and keeps some for herself — an object symbolizing repentance. “Country folk four hundred years ago,” writes Jessica Kerr, “believed that grace and forgiveness followed repentance, which is demonstrated by the other name given to the plant— ‘herb of grace o’ Sundays’”. (50) In considering how Shakespeare intersperses the play with biblical material surrounding John the Baptist, Ophelia’s drowning may subtly recall his water baptism. Hence one could perhaps argue—at least symbolically speaking—that Ophelia died in a state of grace. It is hoped that such allusions may provide some insight into the interpretation of Ophelia’s death among other subjects in the play.

Notes

¹ All spellings have been modernized. For other biblical allusions in *Hamlet* see Naseeb Shaheen’s *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Associated University Press, Inc., 1999) and Richmond Noble’s *Shakespeare’s Biblical Knowledge* (Octagon Books, 1970).

=====

Works Cited

The Geneva Bible: A facsimile of the 1599 edition with undated Sternhold & Hopkins Psalms. Ozark, 1990.

Kerr, Jessica. *Shakespeare's Flowers*. Big Earth Publishing, 1997.

Shakespeare, William. *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Song Cho, M.A.
Assistant Professor of Spanish
Oklahoma Baptist University
Shawnee 74804, OK USA
song.cho@okbu.edu