Historical Analysis of the Persistence of Pagan Beliefs and Mythological Figures into the Renaissance, Their Restoration During the Renaissance, and Their Impact on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as the single greatest writer in the history of the modern English language, and *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is considered by many to be his most influential tragic play. *Hamlet* has provided the inspiration and framework for numerous works, from classic and contemporary literature to modern television and cinema. However, this powerful, influential landmark of literary importance was also influenced by the ideologies of Shakespeare and the world around him. Literature does not exist in a vacuum; like with all forms of human art, the information, beliefs, and societal standards of the period during which they were written exert a powerful influence on written works. William Shakespeare lived and worked during the early Modern Era, a historical period that coincided with the tail-end of the renowned Renaissance. The Renaissance was a period of artistic revolution that thrived in Europe between the fourteenth and early seventeenth centuries ("Renaissance Era"), and it saw an increased tolerance of art forms and subject matters previously considered sinful by Christian authorities. Notably, it ushered in an increased acceptance of the depiction of Pagan beliefs and mythological figures in media that directly influenced references made within William Shakespeare's revolutionary *Hamlet*.

Throughout history, practitioners of Christianity have not been particularly tolerant of other belief systems. Wherever Christians traveled, their paths were littered with violence and forced conversion of native peoples. The crusades in distant Southwestern Asia are met with extreme distaste from contemporary scholars, but the Northern Crusades are a notable example of Christian Europeans practicing ethnocide against other Europeans. These crusades are also a powerful example of the attitude toward Paganism that relatively closely preceded the Renaissance. In his account of these Northern

Crusades, a hostile invasion of non-Christian tribal regions located in what is now the Baltic states, Kevin O'Connor states that

> Bernard of Clairveaux (1090–1153), in collaboration with his former student Pope Eugenius III, called for the forcible conversion of the bothersome Slavic peoples living on the empire's eastern frontier. […] Intensely devoted to combating heresy while putting forward an aggressive defense of the Church's prerogatives, the French abbot exercised little restraint when it came to the [Pagan] Wends: 'They shall be either converted or wiped out. (20)

It might come as a surprise that Pagan myths and legends were able to persist before Renaissance society revitalized them as subjects for literature and art. Pagan ideologies usually directly conflict with Christian beliefs and adherences, but Classical manuscripts were preserved and retold for over a millennium before the turn of the fourteenth century. This is because artists and theologians at the time did not recognize depicting Pagan legends or gods as heresy— at least, as long as they were distorted into allegorical tales to teach Christian morals. German philologist and professor Dieter Bremer uses this concept to explain references to the Greco-Roman Titan Prometheus, a deity whose creator-god status directly conflicted with Christian doctrine, stating that, "der mythische Menschenbildner [ist] als ein das göttliche Schöphungswerk nachahmender Künstler neu konstituiert. Daß auch im Verhältnis der künstlerischen imitatio die Möglichkeit einer Rivalität mit Gott einhalten war, hat erst die spätere Wirkungsgeschichte des Prometheus-Mythologems erkennen lassen" ("the mythical human creator is reconstituted as an artist imitating divine creation. That the relationship of artistic *imitatio* also contained the possibility of a rivalry with God was first recognized in the later history of the impact of Promethean mythologism"; 267). This symbolic form of Classical mythology allowed it to survive for centuries despite fierce opposition to Paganism. The long, demanding voyages of Odysseus and Aeneas were construed as artists' interpretations of the human journey through life; Cronus devouring the newborn gods could simply represent the ticking of the clock and the consuming nature of time (Miles 9).

However, beginning around the fourteenth century, after nearly a thousand years of conflict with Pagan ideologies, these myths and figures were restored to their original forms and readopted into European art, literature, and society as a whole. At the time of the Renaissance, Classical Paganism had been unpracticed for nearly a millennium—indeed, the emperor of mighty Rome had converted from Classical Paganism to Christianity in 312—and scholars began to view these myths and legends with a greater degree of detachment. This was vital to the mythological resurgence; it allowed educated circles to return the allegorical myths and figures to their original forms. "Acknowledgment of the distance between themselves and a remote past permitted Renaissance men to study the civilizations of Greece and Rome in a way that had never occurred to medieval scholars who saw themselves as simply the latest members of late classical society. Now, artists and patrons alike sought authentic representations" (*Inquiring Eye* 10).

It is important to note, however, that the increased tolerance of non-Christian belief systems that resulted from the Renaissance was not universal. While specific ancient, unpracticed faiths were revitalized, other living religions still faced discrimination and violence. A prime example of this is the Catholic Church's forced conversion and assimilation of Granada, a Moorish kingdom with a population of approximately 300,000 Muslims. Granada was conquered by the Iberian kingdom of Castile in November of 1491, and what followed was nearly eight years of religious tolerance in the kingdom. That ended, however, with Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros; with his arrival, he brought with him the oppressive side of Christian leadership: forced baptisms and conversion under duress. The first Christian archbishop of Granada, Hernando de Talavera, published a blunt order that commanded that the unwilling converts abandon Ramadan fasting and eating *ḥalāl*, attend mass, participate in idol veneration—a major sin in Islam—and "[forget] whatever you can of the Arabic language and [make] it forgotten and never spoken in your homes" (M. Johnston 53). Within three years, the formerly-Muslim country was officially recognized as entirely Christian.

The fact that the Renaissance tolerance of Pagan traditions and non-Christian religious practices had limitations is vital to understanding Shakespeare's incorporation of Classical mythology into *Hamlet*. Which pantheons were allowed and disallowed by English and European society shaped the tragic play in a fundamental way: every single mythological event and figure directly mentioned in the text is Greco-Roman. If the temporal detachment between the Renaissance and Pagan religious practice is truly what allowed for mythological resurgence, then the more recently practiced Northern religions would be met with less tolerance by artists and scholars. As a result, non-Classical Pagan legends remained untranslated and undistributed until centuries later; the mythologies of Northern Europe were not translated and available to the public until 1665, nearly half a century after the death of Shakespeare (Larrington 21). *Hamlet* is set in the Kingdom of Denmark, a region that worshiped the Scandinavian pantheon that included the likes of Thor and Týr, not Jupiter and Mars ("Old Religion"). The myths that Shakespeare invokes stem from an entirely different region thousands of kilometers away. Therefore, references to Pagan cultures must not be included for the purpose of establishing the setting.

Instead, the most recognizable use for Pagan beliefs and mythological figures in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is as a tool with which the educated characters describe the world around them. Specifically, Hamlet often utilizes these legends to describe his late father. Multiple times throughout the play, the prince of Denmark compares his father to the Greek Titan Hyperion, the personification of heavenly light. The use of Pagan deities as a literary device gives Hamlet the ability to articulate his adoration for his father in much more powerful terms than simply using earthly descriptions like "radiant" or "like the sun." The act of comparing King Hamlet to a Titan—a primordial being even older than the Greco-Roman gods—with powers incomparable to those of mortal men shows how important Hamlet's father was to him and how he pictured him as a larger-than-life figure to be idolized, adored, and emulated. The educated upper class in attendance would grasp the potency of Hamlet's comparisons, as the

translation and reading of mythological texts was included in many liberal arts curricula during the Renaissance (Cartwright).

In addition, these references to Pagan mythology help Hamlet demonstrate his extreme disdain for his mother's marriage to Claudius, his father's brother; in line 144 of Act One, as the late king is likened to a glorious Titan, King Claudius is compared to a satyr, a half man, half goat creature magnitudes inferior to great Hyperion. Later in the same monologue, Hamlet reinforces his position by comparing his father to the mightiest Greek hero Hercules and stating that Claudius is "my father's brother, but no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" (Shakespeare 31). In a later act, after Hamlet has been made aware that Claudius murdered his father to usurp the throne, he once again uses Greco-Roman figures to compare the two brothers. Alone with his mother, he now invokes Hyperion as a handsome figure to whom the old King Hamlet was comparable. Hamlet compares his father's looks to those of the mighty king of the gods, Jupiter, as well; these comparisons are especially significant because, during the time of writing, artistic interpretations of figures from Classical mythology followed mathematical principles of bodily perfection (Godwin 4). He simultaneously describes his eyes and military aptitude as being like those of the warrior god Mars, and he claims that his posture and stature were like that of Mercury, the messenger of the gods renowned for his dexterity. Then, after depicting his father as equal to gods and Titans in beauty and mind, he refers to Gertrude's new husband in much more brief, less glorious terms, calling him "a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" (Shakespeare 175). These metaphors of Pagan origin provide a much more powerful description of the late king and Hamlet's mental image of him than the linguistic tools available to writers and scholars before the Renaissance could have allowed, and by doing so, relate his disgust for his incestuous uncle.

Shakespeare also uses references to mythological figures to communicate Lady Gertrude's agonizing woe following the death of her husband. In his soliloquy in Act One, Scene Two, Hamlet describes his mother's grievous state at King Hamlet's funeral by stating that "she followed my poor

father's body / Like Niobe, all tears" (Shakespeare 29). By comparing his mother to Niobe, a Greco-Roman figure who weeps for all of eternity after the twin gods Apollo and Diana slaughtered her twelve children, the depths of her sorrow can be communicated. This increases the audience's surprise and disgust at her marriage to Claudius; within a month, "Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears / Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes," (Shakespeare 31) Gertrude had seemingly forgotten her grief and happily married her husband's brother. According to the still-grieving Hamlet, "She married. O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (Shakespeare 31).

Hamlet is an educated man of high society, and from his speech, it is obvious that he was taught the Pagan myths and legends during his education at Wittenberg; the Pagan outlook on murderous revenge most likely produced or reinforced Hamlet's own attitude toward revenge. One legend in particular that parallels Hamlet's plight and almost definitely influenced his revenge was Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid*. Whenever the theater troupe arrives at Elsinore, Hamlet requests that one of the players recount "Aeneas' tale to Dido", a speech that he remembers enjoying. The speech is derived from *The Aeneid* and recounts Pyrrhus's slaughter of the Trojan king Priam following the breach of the walls of Troy. This reference serves a less obvious purpose than the others; the myth of Pyrrhus slaying Priam suggests a means by which Hamlet justifies killing Claudius. In the player's detailed account, gore-stained Pyrrhus seeks out the King of Troy, slaughters him, and dismembers him. The actual text of *The Aeneid* establishes that Pyrrhus butchers the old king in order to avenge the death of his father, Achilles, who died during the long siege of Troy. Furthermore, in Pyrrhus's murderous rage, Priam is slain on a religious altar with complete disregard for faith and basic decency (Bertany). Whether intentionally or by mere chance, Hamlet's preference for this speech reveals a work that may have encouraged him to avenge his father's death with his uncle's murder. That the influence of Pagan myths and legends softened the protagonist's perception of homicide as revenge is a logical conclusion; the rash revenge plot of Laertes, who received the same level of education in Paris as Hamlet did in

Wittenberg, are also akin to these mythological tales of revenge. Whenever Claudius asks to what extent Laertes will avenge his father, he gives a biting response that eerily mirrors the actions of Pyrrhus: "To cut his throat i' th' church" (Shakespeare 231). If this is indeed the case, then Pagan influences directly result in the murder plot that drives the entire machine of the play, as well as Laertes's plot that results in the deaths of himself, Gertrude, and Hamlet. At the very least, the Classical myths and legends would have desensitized Hamlet to the crime of regicide. However, all information regarding Shakespeare's inclusion of the "Aeneas' tale to Dido" speech is purely speculative. In his version of *Hamlet*, Professor Dover Wilson writes, "Critics are agreed neither upon the purpose of the episode … nor whether Shakespeare himself approved of the Pyrrhus speech" (qtd. in A. Johnston).

This scene also serves another purpose: as Hecuba watches Pyrrhus mince her husband's body, her excruciating reaction to her husband's death is in stark contrast to Gertrude's. In the case of the mythological queen Hecuba, "The instant burst of clamor that she made / (Unless things mortal move them not at all) / Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven / And passion in the gods"; however, although Queen Gertrude's initial reaction was one of dispair, she has seemingly forgotten her husband and albeit unknowingly married his murderer. This further reinforces that Gertrude's marriage to Claudius is heartless and sinful.

Pagan beliefs and mythological figures were absolutely foundational to William Shakespeare's tragic play *Hamlet*. The Renaissance's revitalization of Classical mythology gave Shakespeare a tool with which to explain his characters' complex thoughts and emotions. These myths and legends fortified the plot and produced a far greater depth than pre-Renaissance society could have possibly allowed. Although the story of a Danish prince avenging his father's murder is not original to Shakespeare—"Amleth, Prince of Denmark" was written in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* over four hundred years earlier (Grammaticus ix)—his retelling gives it the heart and soul that has kept it alive for over four hundred years and will be cherished for centuries to come. These mythological influences are vital

to the essence of one of the most prominent and culturally impactful works in the history of modern English literature.

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