

The Collision of Christian and Pagan Values in Shakespearean Tragedies (Othello, Hamlet, Macbeth)

Any literature is created in line with the value system of the times that it belongs to. The transcendence between Pagan and Christian values marks the period where the dichotomy of moral value systems and their interpretation generated a conflict between the external circumstances and the internal world of the protagonists. "Genuine tragedies in the world are not conflicts between right and wrong. There are conflicts between two rights" ¹

And now, we'll discuss how the values morphed throughout the period when European literature marked its renaissance, together with all the humanities.

Pagan and Judeo-Christian values have fundamentally shaped the trajectory of European and subsequent American literature. The evolution of these value systems, marked by periods of confrontation and assimilation, has consequently fostered a unique understanding and development of literary traditions.

While the concept of "pagan values" is inherently broad, for the purposes of our investigation, we will primarily focus on those reflected in European literary tradition, specifically drawing from ancient Greek and Roman traditions. This includes their foundational mythology, drama, epic poetry, and the intertwined nature of these influences, where the Roman tradition often serves as a successor to the Greek. Therefore, in this context, "pagan values" will refer specifically to the Greek and Roman cultural and literary legacy.

Firstly, we consider the Greek set of values as the bedrock of ancient European values. We will examine their development and how Roman culture subsequently refurbished and crystallized these values, often omitting elements less conducive to imperialism and imbuing them with their own interpretations and objectives.

In ancient Roman cultural ideology, valor was considered the paramount virtue, prominently exemplified in Virgil's "Aeneid". The epic centers on Aeneas, a hero characterized by his divine lineage and inherent heroic qualities, a heroic nature that persists throughout the narrative. This focus on the individual protagonist, in contrast to the Iliad's designation by geographical locale, adheres to the Roman value system's emphasis on personal destiny and heroic agency.

Alas, great Caesar! And thy race so great!
When shall this man arise, this man of might,
This heaven-born hero, whose bright virtues shine
To guide the world, whose conquest shall be peace,
Whose name shall be the solace of our age? ²

¹Hegel, G.W.F. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T.M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. Vol. II, p. 119the2

² Virgil. *Aeneid*. Translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, revised by G.P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. Book VI, lines 847

1 The principal Greek value system emphasized perfection, conceptualized as
 2 the superlative degree of a quality within its class, evidenced, for instance, in the
 3 “fastest horse among horses” or the “most beautiful flower among flowers” as
 4 mentioned by Aristotle³. This Greek ideal of perfection sometimes stands in
 5 contrast to Roman valor, particularly in epic narratives where Roman heroes are
 6 characterized by their drive for conquest, whereas Greek heroes often engage in
 7 a pursuit that is more akin to a divine instruction or following the route of
 8 destiny.

9 And so, in the intelligible realm, the form of the good is the last to be seen,
 10 and it is hardly seen, but when it is seen, it is inferred that this is the cause of all
 11 right and beautiful things for all, and that in the visible world it is the cause of
 12 light and of the ruler of light, and also is itself ruler in the sphere of the seen.⁴

13 Assessment of pagan values encompasses both their mythological and
 14 philosophical dimensions. Greek mythology typically depicts gods as whimsical,
 15 prone to impulsive actions, sensual gratification, and sudden inclinations. In
 16 contrast, the philosophical sphere witnessed the maturation and formalization of
 17 a coherent value structure, primarily articulated by the philosophers Socrates,
 18 Plato, and Aristotle. It could be derived somehow ironically that philosophers in
 19 Ancient Greece demonstrated more godly conduct than pagan G=gods
 20 themselves.

21 Both Socrates and his disciple Plato approached concepts resonant with
 22 Christian morality, particularly concerning self-reflection. This philosophical
 23 inquiry led to Socrates' ostracization, accused of corrupting Athenian youth and
 24 deviating from traditional Greek customs and devotion to the Olympian gods,
 25 signaling the obsolescence of the prevailing pagan framework. Concurrently,
 26 while formulations of morality, the good, and evil began to mature with Socrates
 27 and Plato, Aristotle later provided substantial empirical evidence for human
 28 existence and psychological development within the material world.

29 Several indicative details suggest the nascent emergence of Christian ideals
 30 within ancient Greek philosophy. The symbolic resonance of Socrates walking
 31 barefoot, mirroring accounts of Christ's life, alongside Plato's emphasis on the
 32 primacy of the world of Ideas over material existence, collectively illustrates
 33 how philosophical inquiry was fundamentally preparing the conceptual
 34 landscape for a profound shift in ethical and value paradigms.

35 The differentiation between social and personal goodness is underscored by
 36 Socrates' emphasis on the prevalence and authority of law, contrasted with
 37 Plato's focus on societal structures dedicated to the common good. Plato argued
 38 that such collective well-being inherently provides the essential foundation upon
 39 which individual goodness can be securely built.

40 Unless philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and
 41 leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, and political power and
 42 philosophy completely coincide, and unless those same persons, who now

³ Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated by Hugh Tredennick. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933. Book V, 1021b.

⁴ Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894. Book VII, 517b–c.

1 pursue either aim exclusively, are compelled to do so, cities will have no respite
2 from evil, my dear Glaucon, nor, I think, will the human race.⁵

3 Christianity heralded a paradigm shift in virtue and morality, foregrounding
4 self-sacrifice and the primacy of the soul's strength above bodily perfection.
5 Although Plato considered the soul immortal, subsequent medieval and
6 Renaissance understandings merged this immortality with notions of voluntary
7 suffering, martyrdom, and the practical pursuit of the common good, a concept
8 seeded by Plato and Aristotle, paving the way for a redefined understanding of
9 individual virtue and its role in augmenting universal spiritual values.

10 The locus of morality and ideology shifted from abstract, supra-individual
11 influences to an internalized system. Christian commandments and theological
12 exegeses of biblical texts subsequently served as the basis for internal censorship
13 and the derivation of ideals, marking a departure from previous modes of ethical
14 regulation.

15 During Shakespeare's era, England experienced profound, albeit often
16 invisible, ideological conflicts between burgeoning Christian morality and
17 enduring pagan values. The common populace sometimes struggled with the
18 adoption of Christian tenets, perceiving them as meek and submissive in contrast
19 to the valor and perfection characteristic of the secular, classical tradition.
20 Meanwhile, a segment of English society actively promoted these new Christian
21 morals. Shakespeare's works, including tragedies like "Hamlet" and "Macbeth",
22 Othello and comedies such as "The Merchant of Venice", vividly represent these
23 internal battles and contradictions.

24 Christian values inherently foster introspection, guiding the hero toward
25 simultaneous self-identification, self-condemnation, and self-atonement. This
26 process establishes the very rules by which worldviews are constructed, leading
27 to distinct perceptual boundaries and a clear demarcation between differing
28 categories of understanding as this watershed moment is actively established.

29 Shakespearean protagonists often embody a Christian hero whose
30 introspective nature and unique inner world are juxtaposed against pagan or
31 secular scenarios demanding immediate, unhesitating action devoid of moral
32 scruples. In contrast, Christian contexts generally necessitate self-absorption,
33 arduous contemplation, and a profound internal trial, sometimes leading to a
34 perceived inaction that transcends into spiritual deliberation. For instance,
35 Hamlet, embedded within a traditional revenge narrative (recorded in the legend
36 that served as a source to Hamlet) that typically calls for swift, remorseless action,
37 hesitates due to the influence of nascent Christian ideals that preclude such
38 precipitate responses.

39
40 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
41 That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
42 Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
43 To sleep, perchance to dream, ay, there's the rub:
44 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,

⁵ Plato. Republic 473c-e. Translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992.

1 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
2 Must give us pause, there's the respect
3 That makes calamity of so long life. ⁶

4
5 Shakespeare masterfully illustrates the tension between Christian and pagan
6 ideals through the exchange between Hamlet and Horatio. Horatio's skepticism
7 toward the rapid imposition of Christian tenets, expressed through ironic
8 commentary on baptism, reflects a broader societal unease, which Hamlet shares
9 with a sardonic jest about the forceful conversion of Denmark's inhabitants.
10 When Hamlet is pondering the skull Yorick, Horatio, a paragon of antic stoicism,
11 says "Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?"⁷

12 The foundational pagan values of Greece and Rome, while influencing
13 Christian ethics, led to a distinct difference in the hero's internal landscape. The
14 Christian hero's journey was largely characterized by self-reflection and critical
15 self-assessment, in contrast to the pagan hero's imperative to navigate and fulfill
16 external conditions and assigned objectives.

17 Shakespeare's works, as examined by Bloom, can be viewed through the
18 lens of the "invention of the human," which could be further refined to the
19 "invention of the Christian human" Macbeth's early portrayal as a triumphant
20 pagan warrior, dedicated to his king and country with unparalleled perfection,
21 powerfully sets the stage for the subsequent construction of a new, Christian-
22 influenced human identity in the play."⁸

23 The pagan value system sanctions a direct pursuit of power and a drive for
24 preeminence stemming from individual strengths and virtues. Conversely,
25 Christian values delineate a hierarchical structure wherein power is bestowed by
26 God, advocating for the obedience of "vessels" to their "suzerains" and
27 rigorously condemning homicide due to its grave repercussions.

28 Bloom argues that Shakespeare's unique achievement lay in creating
29 characters of such psychological complexity that they seem to possess an inner
30 life independent of their dramatic situations, their capacity for self-examination
31 being what makes them feel profoundly human. ⁹

32 Othello illustrates a Christian framework where individuals are accountable
33 for their actions and choices, rather than attributing outcomes solely to fate. The
34 play underscores the importance of individual will and the consequent
35 responsibility to remain committed to one's chosen path, especially in matters of
36 love. Othello's realization that 'her eyes saw what he chose' serves as a powerful
37 testament to this principle, implying that a chosen commitment, according to
38 Christian tenets, necessitates enduring faithfulness.

39 Shakespeare's Othello vividly illustrates the clash between classical
40 traditions and the emerging Christian values, particularly concerning the nature

⁶Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. In *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al., 3rd ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 2015. Act 3, Scene 1, lines 62-68.

⁷Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Act 5, Scene 1, lines 201-218. *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet* edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (Bloomsbury, 2016)

⁸Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Riverhead Books, 1998. P. 15

⁹Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998, p. 16

1 of love and commitment. The classical ethos, encompassing both antiquity and
 2 later classicism, prioritized faithfulness to duty and merit, dictating behavioral
 3 norms such as marriage within congruent social strata, upbringing, and age. In
 4 stark contrast, the union of Othello and Desdemona defies these conventions,
 5 transcending disparities in age, social standing, and, crucially, race, a significant
 6 determinant in the era. Despite these profound controversies, their love prevails,
 7 demonstrating the ascendance of genuine affection over societal strictures.

8 Classical ideals emphasizing sacrifice for the collective, motherland, king,
 9 or shared worldview are supplanted by a model of personal sacrifice, particularly
 10 pronounced in Christian contexts and mirrored in Othello. The sentiment that
 11 'she loved him for his sufferings' encapsulates this shift, drawing a parallel with
 12 Christian theology's appreciation of suffering for mankind. Othello, a warrior
 13 demonstrating profound loyalty to Venice, undergoes personal tribulations that
 14 align with this Christian emphasis on enduring hardship for a chosen cause, even
 15 when it transcends his own national identity.

16
 17 "O, thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd Vicentio?

18 [...]

19 Bond-slaves and pagans shall our race adopt?"¹⁰

20
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 27 Christian tenets, necessitates enduring faithfulness.

28 The hero's rage is all the more terrible for being inextricably bound up with
 29 his love, and his love all the more fragile for being always on the verge of
 30 collapsing into murderous hatred.

31 Christian and pagan values find a tangible representation in geographical
 32 divides. The perceived "barbarity" and "belligerence" of the Norwegian
 33 territories bordering Denmark, associated with paganism, establish a distinct
 34 cultural frontier. Likewise, the Venetian military engagement in Cyprus against
 35 the Turks, with Othello embodying a "pagan" outsider, illustrates how
 36 geopolitical contexts reinforce religious and cultural dichotomies. Individuals
 37 residing at these transitional geographical margins consequently endure
 38 fragmentation and internal conflict, caught between disparate value systems.

39
 40 Desdemona's resolve to join Othello in Cyprus actively challenges the
 41 patriarchal norms of her time, demonstrating a willingness to abandon traditional
 42 boundaries and exemplifying a more assertive feminine ideal.

43

¹⁰Shakespeare, W. (2003). *The Comedy of Errors*. (Any standard edition). Act 5, Scene 1. (Original work published c. 1594)

1 “She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished / That heaven had made her such
2 a man.¹¹”
3

4 The words Othello said showcase Desdemona’s character. The feminine
5 ideal accepted by society runs like a thread through many Shakespearean plays.
6 In contrast to Desdemona, who demonstrates an adventurous nature along with
7 the desire and capacity to break the rules by which society obeys, Ofelia is
8 instructed to act as a real woman ready to please.
9

10 Tender yourself more dearly;
11 Or, not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,
12 Running it thus, you'll tender me a fool.
13 Act 1, scene 3¹²
14

15 Shakespeare frequently employs character dichotomies to illustrate the
16 pervasive tension between Christian and pagan value systems; the famous couple
17 Duncan-Macbeth. Shakespeare presents Duncan as a real Christian king, albeit
18 the fact that his meekness and gentleness do not correspond with the imperatives
19 of the time, whereas Macbeth profoundly matches the criteria of the Pagan
20 exemplary king who is able to defeat any foe taking no account of the nature of
21 measures exercised. Blood doesn’t perplex his character; meanwhile, Duncan
22 nearly fades at the sight of the murdered soldier. So value systems start to clash
23 at the point where the faith of the kingdom is at stake. Who to choose? An
24 adamant warrior with no sense of remorse, or the Christian king who adheres to
25 Christian tenets but could endanger the future of his subjects.
26

27 The divergence between Christian and pagan values is profoundly evident
28 in their respective approaches to human nature, distinguishing between Christian
29 attributes like rationality, empathy, self-reflection, and conscientiousness, and
30 pagan tendencies such as intense rage, envy, immediate emotional
31 breakthroughs, and simplistic moral codes centered on duty and heroic impulse.
32 This creates a tension between subconscious drives and conscious control,
33 manifesting as Christian reserve versus pagan unbridled emotion. Consequently,
34 while pagan valor relies on swift, unthinking action, Christian morality,
35 embodied by characters like Hamlet and Duncan, emphasizes measured
36 deliberation and the potential for self-sacrifice as the highest form of valor,
37 mirroring Christ's actions.

38 That, in his hope,
39 Might be my world, and the right gift of heaven,
40 If I can cross him, nature's in him, that

¹¹Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Edited by E.A.J. Honigmann. 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016. Act 1, Scene 3, lines 186-187.

¹²Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016. Act 1, Scene 3, lines 107–109., isdisapprovedalbeitalthoughkindnessthe

1 It shall begin to feel and to be good."¹³

2

3 Nietzsche's assertion in "On the Genealogy of Morals" that Christianity
4 makes human beings "more interesting" can be applied here, as well as the
5 second quote by Nietzsche that humanity needs "Ceaser with a soul of Christ,"
6 both of which indicate that a spiritual realm should be severed from a perceived
7 external world characterized by cruelty and violence.

8

9 That I did love the Moor to live with him,
10 My downright violence and storm of fortunes
11 Will evermore be witness and allow
12 Commend me to my kind lord; away! away!¹⁴

13

14 Macbeth's actions illustrate this dichotomy: while his engagement in combat
15 against enemies showcases pagan values of bravery and duty, where pagan and
16 Christian ideals resonate, his violation of hierarchical humility within the king-
17 vassal or father-son dynamic (metaphorically representing the king's role)
18 transgresses a fundamental tenet with the soul of Christ' suggests a potential
19 synthesis of pagan and Christian values, embodying a new morality validated
20 emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually.

21 The same tendency works with female characters. Gertrude and Desdemona
22 are portrayed as more "paganized". This susceptibility to emotional impulses is
23 attributed to their restricted social roles, limited educational opportunities, and a
24 circumscribed feminine nature, though figures like Desdemona, aspiring for
25 agency even in the face of her "inner warrior's spirit, complicate a simple
26 categorization.

27 Internal suffering emerges as a defining characteristic of Christian conduct
28 in Shakespeare, increasingly overshadowing the pagan expectation of immediate
29 retribution. Hamlet's predicament showcases this transition, where the pagan
30 duty of swift revenge is supplanted by moral hesitations and a contemplation of
31 higher Christian obligations. Also, with regard to the feminine factor, Hamlet
32 demonstrates Christian intolerance towards feminine self-expression, which
33 particularly implies Hamlet's attitude towards sex. He chastizes his mother for
34 the possibility of having sex with his uncle, picturing scenes of sexual
35 intercourse and suspicion of Ofelia of dirty motives and inclinations.

36

37 Nay, but to live In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
38 Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
39 Over the nasty sty.¹⁵

40

¹³Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015. Act 1, Scene 7, lines 1-28.

¹⁴Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Edited by E.A.J. Honigmann. 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016. 1.3.248-254.

¹⁵Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016. 3.4.91-94.

1 Beyond geographical boundaries, Shakespeare employs the symbolism of
 2 light and darkness to represent the dichotomy between Christian and pagan
 3 consciousness. Pagan traditions are typically depicted in daylight, with direct,
 4 overt clashes between individuals. Conversely, actions involving the
 5 subconscious, introspection, and self-reflection are often shrouded in the dim,
 6 feeble flames of candles or in sheer darkness, symbolizing the complex, often
 7 unmotivated or inscrutable movements of the human soul and its hidden desires,
 8 frequently concealed even from the actors themselves.

9 The divergence between Christian and pagan values extends to their
 10 respective modes of punishment. That's why, while experiencing moral scruples,
 11 while watching the scene of his brother's murder staged by Hamlet, Claudius
 12 shouts "Give me some light. Away".¹⁶

13 Pagan traditions typically prescribe direct execution or murder as
 14 retribution. In contrast, Christian punishment is notably more complex, often
 15 targeting the individual's distorted psyche or compromised self, as seen in Lady
 16 Macbeth's descent into madness, Gertrude's ambiguous or "covert" death, or
 17 Polonius's demise behind the scenes, a consequence of his cunning and betrayal,
 18 illustrating a punishment that affects the very being rather than merely ending it.

19 The differing psychologies surrounding revenge and retribution between
 20 Christian and pagan value systems are starkly evident in Shakespeare's
 21 characters. Laertes exemplifies pagan immediacy, willing to commit murder
 22 even within a sacred space like a church to avenge his father. In contrast, Hamlet,
 23 despite his conviction of his uncle's guilt, hesitates to commit murder during
 24 prayer, reflecting the Christian hero's characteristic moral scruples,
 25 introspection, and the heightened self-awareness that scrutinizes not only actions
 26 but also thoughts.

27 The perspective on suffering diverges significantly between Christian and
 28 pagan values. As observed in "Othello", Christian frameworks elevate suffering,
 29 making it a fertile ground for Desdemona's affection towards Othello, a hero
 30 valued not for conventional Venetian attractiveness but for his "bizarre and
 31 queer" nature, his darkness and age implicitly linked to his endured hardships.
 32 This underscores how, within a Christian context, the soul's capacity to suffer
 33 becomes a primary asset, determining a human being's worth and value.

34 Shakespeare's "The Tempest", a late work, vividly portrays the conflict
 35 between Christian and pagan values alongside themes of governance and power
 36 struggles. The archetypal figures of Ariel and Caliban symbolize the division
 37 between Eros and Thanatos—spirit versus instinct—which Prospero masterfully
 38 governs. While Prospero's authority relies on logos, represented here by magic,
 39 a force historically linked to pagan witchcraft, his regal ambitions and conduct
 40 align more closely with the Christian model of authoritarian kingship. This
 41 creates a paradox where pagan means are employed to maintain a seemingly
 42 Christian-derived authority.

43 In essence, the constant oscillation between Christian and pagan values
 44 generates an intense internal struggle within the hero, presenting a compelling

¹⁶Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016. 3.2.256.p.72

1 perspective of conflicting moralities that imbues Shakespearean drama with a
2 new dimension of tension and profound emotional depth.

3 Firstly, we can trace the typology and historical development of the human
4 being. Subsequently, we observe how the growth of ego and soul influences
5 modes of expression, thereby delineating historical periods and revealing their
6 corresponding moral codes within each observed phase.

7 Indeed, the clash of values serves as the very engine of tragedy, while the
8 resolution of these collisions ushers in comedy, ultimately reconciling human
9 conflicts and their moral disparities:

10

11

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