

Hamlet as a 'Wager': A Duel for a Bogus Winning Game, and What Claudius' Miscalculation Means in the Play

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Introduction

After a long delay in making the decision to avenge his father, Hamlet finally accomplishes what he has been waiting for, though accidentally, and stabs Claudius, his uncle, in Act 5, Scene 2. He is urged to avenge the untimely death in Act 1, Scene 2, by his father's ghost. Hence, his uncle's death could be regarded as a success if the aim of 'revenge' only implied taking the life of the person who murdered 'So excellent a king' (1.2.139). However, several aspects must be considered while focusing on the development of the revenge scene. First, Hamlet's success of revenge is attributed to the accumulation of coincidences. His constant deliberation nurturing his determination in the previous scenes is not directly related to his grabbing a once-in-a-lifetime moment to act against the 'incestuous, damned Dane' (5.2.309).¹ Second, the duel scene is ironic in that the fencing match that provides Hamlet with an opportunity to avenge his father is in fact carefully calculated by the very person he wants to retaliate against. Third, the duel scene begins with the cheerful atmosphere of entertainment and appears to be quite a courtly and chivalrous game. This atmosphere contradicts the hidden motive behind their performances.

Additionally, this duel is accompanied by a bet between Claudius and Laertes wherein Hamlet is at stake. Claudius and Laertes collude with each other and coat a rapier with fatal poison. Evidently, both are convinced about cheating in a bet despite maintaining the ceremonial atmosphere in a court duel, conforming to the traditional rules of the Middle Ages of an aristocratic court. This paper clarifies the dramatic effects of combining wagers and cheating with such a seemingly noble aspect of the scene as well as how such gambling influences the catastrophic ending of the play. Although Hamlet asks Osric the reason behind his words of praise for Laertes in Act 5, Scene 2, it is unclear whether Hamlet has an inkling about how Claudius tricks him by instigating him against Laertes, or whether he instinctively sees the dark plot of Claudius and Laertes. However, as Bullough says, 'the careful details of the wager and fencing were probably introduced by Shakespeare,' focusing on the aspects of wagers would help us understand the deeper meaning of this scene. (49)

absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences,
of very soft society and great showing. Indeed, to speak
sellingly of him, he is the card or calendar of gentry, for
you shall find in him the continent of what part a
gentleman would see. (5.2.91-97)

Hamlet admits Osric's praise of Laertes as being true and describes him as 'a soul of great article' (5.2.102) and 'his semblable is his mirror' (5.2.104). Laertes symbolises the noble aspect of the duel itself, and his sophistication owes much to the stimulus-rich environment of France, which he prioritises to fulfil his adolescent years.

Osric utters the abovementioned words immediately after he tells Hamlet: 'his majesty bade me signify to / you that 'a has laid a great wager on your head' (5.2.87-88). His words are intended to instill the feeling of rivalry in Hamlet, thereby prompting him to fence with Laertes. At the same time, his message insinuates that this offer from the king is official and must be accepted as such if Hamlet considers himself a strong contender against Laertes. Hamlet is also conscious of Laertes' expertise at fencing and, when told by Horatio that 'You will lose, my lord' (5.2.187), he protests against his anxiety and insists by saying, 'I do not think so. Since he went into France I / have been in continual practice' (5.2.188-89).

In the 16th and 17th centuries, it was also common for a challenge to duel in public to be unconditionally accepted as an honour because it was rude and ungentlemanly to refuse the same, especially when challenged by an aristocratic opponent. Therefore, Hamlet also accepts the challenge without hesitation when asked by Osric 'if your lordship would vouchsafe the answer' (5.2.149-50). The first and the most important mission of Hamlet is to avenge his father's death. However, his instantaneous response to the king's offer implies that he understands the offer should be official, and he should also behave sane and in a manner befitting of a royal prince, though he still pretends to be insane. The problem is that, as Peltonen indicates, 'the rapier was much more dangerous and lethal than the cumbersome sword, and, whereas the sword required the maximum muscular strength, the adroit handling of the rapier demanded special skills and technical dexterity' (61). This could be the very reason why Claudius decided to adopt this way of vengeance for Laertes. He is aware of risk of the duel being fatal.

The Value of Wagers

As aforementioned, the duel scene and arranging such royal entertainment are closely connected to the traditional behaviour of courtiers. However, Osric's insistence of the Laertes' nobleness in Act 5, Scene 2 ironically highlights the loss of Laertes' nobility because the audience already knows from the previous scene that Laertes is the very person who 'bought an unction of a mountebank' (4.7.139), which would be fatal if touched, and he is also the one who decides to coat his rapier with it.

In Act 4, Scene 7, Claudius proposes to Laertes that he should avenge his father under the garb of an official event to avoid raising suspicions in the court. He also suggests that, in the case of an accidental failure of Laertes in the duel, he still has a chance to kill Hamlet with poison by toasting to him. Claudius sets all scenarios. However, Laertes also confesses that he had an unction from a mountebank, who is 'a travelling salesman offering dubious cures and potions' (Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, 434n).² His aim of obtaining that 'unction' is clear: to kill the assassinator of his father. This indicates that he had preplanned this killing on his own in any case from the start: His primary intention of accepting the suggestion of a duel is to get rid of the opponent's life and not to cross rapiers with the opponent in a gentlemanly fashion. Despite prior knowledge about using a toxic rapier in an official fencing match being unfair and offensive to chivalry and law, Laertes does not hesitate to use it. Consequently, his intention is consistent with Claudius' scheme, and both conspire together and cheat Hamlet in a match of rapier, for which they publicly offer the wagers. The official performance of loyalty proves to be the most treacherous murder plot, which is cleverly rigged to assassinate the prince of Denmark, just as Low refers to this situation by stating, 'The match, which had seemed a lawful entertainment, reveals itself as a ploy of the monarch, created by the king's design and yet unlawful' (124).

Claudius expects Hamlet to lose the game. This way, Hamlet himself becomes Claudius' bet. Claudius chooses his bets on the premise that Laertes will win and 'has wagered with him[Laertes] six Barbary / horses' (5.2.130-31). These are the ostensible wagers that Laertes should be given if he wins. Barbary horses are 'Arab horses, much prized, and soon to be bred in England by James I' (Edwards, 243n). According to the *OED*, they are said to be 'of the breed imported from Barbary and Morocco, noted for great speed and endurance.'³ However, the truth is that Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, is himself given by Claudius as a wager to Laertes: Hamlet is worth six Barbary horses, and his death would be a hidden and more precious prize both for Laertes and Claudius. Claudius involves Laertes into a dangerous gambling 'against which he [Laertes] has impawned,' as he takes

it, 'six French rapiers and poniards, with their assigns, as / girdle, hanger and so' (5.2.131-33).

Claudius could have tempted Hamlet to the fencing game without betting on these items, but Shakespeare incorporated these sophisticated, expensive, and fashionable items conforming to the French style that were trendy in early modern England into the play and added the spectacular atmosphere of princely wagers to contrast them with a disguise of treacherous murder plot. The more gorgeous the wagers, the more they clearly contrast with the one which Claudius and Laertes truly seek in Hamlet's death because the wagers are just a pretext and not what both characters truly desire. At the same time, the value of wagers implies the value of what they intend to evaluate: again, Hamlet's death. The values of both are ironically described as the same.

Cheating and Miscalculation: The Effect of Poison

The murder plot of Claudius and Laertes results in a completely unexpected catastrophe in Act 5, Scene 2. On the one hand, it could be possible to interpret this contingency from a religious perspective, reflected in what Hamlet says to Horatio after accepting the duel challenge:

Hamlet:	There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. (5.2.197-200)
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Reith refers to a belief that repeatedly penetrated in the 17th century and dominated Europe after the Enlightenment, and compares it with a typical idea in the Age of Reason.

The belief in purposefulness dominated all Enlightenment thought; chance was banished as a sign of human ignorance which the rational individual had a duty to resolve, and in this we can see in the seventeenth century a recurrence of the classical concern with providential purpose and harmony. . . . In the Age of Reason . . . chance thus had no real *being*, and existed only in an epistemological sense as a deficit, a lack of knowledge. (29-30)

On the other hand, when considering the role of the poison from the perspective of wagers, it is regarded as the means of tricking or cheating in gambling, and the failure of gambling means washing

out or being extorted what they bet. Additionally, the miscalculation of Claudius and Laertes is mostly attributed to their very use of poison, because it causes all the characters who get involved in the fatal match of fencing to die in the end. It could be said that the poison itself plays a dramatic role by betraying its users, just like Laertes tells Osric, ‘Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric: / I am justly killed with mine own treachery’ (5.2.291-92).

Both Claudius and Laertes could have cheated the surrounding characters and simultaneously pretended to maintain the courtier’s civility without being noticed by anyone only if they could handle their weapon, poison, like a sharper who manipulates every trick in gambling. The consequence is that the poison works as if it has the *will* or has nothing to do with the characters that set up a trap because no one can stop the instant spread of venom. This also means that Claudius and Laertes are washing out or being extorted of replaceable money: their own lives.

It is ironic that Hamlet is also helped by the same poison that had been prepared for ‘cheating’ him. He hurts Claudius enough to kill him, thanks to the poison, though he cannot escape from the trap of traitors. The fencing match, or the duel for revenge ends in an expensive draw and the wagers disappear in the end.

Conclusion

As already mentioned, the detailed descriptions of wagers and the failure of the plot of Claudius and Laertes enhance the contrast between the apparently civil entertainment and the grotesque result of cheating in betting wagers. Adding wagers to betting luxurious items would make the fencing match more attractive. However, once a cheating plot is disclosed due to miscalculation and wagers lose their meaning, everything turns upside down. In that sense, Hamlet’s words to Horatio before the fatal match sound ironic: ‘There is special / providence in the fall of a sparrow’ (5.2.197-98). Hamlet is regarded as a noble prince until the end of the play, and Fortinbras is declared as successor to the sovereignty of Denmark. However, the atmosphere of the darker plots of Claudius and Laertes linger till the end, which also highlights an aspect of the tragic end.

Notes

1. Bullough says, ‘Hamlet is a play of one hero, yet of all Shakespeare’s tragedies it is the richest in incidents, in the variety of extraneous matter not essentially connected with the one plot running through the whole piece. To account for all this material in dramatic terms, to explain how it seems to occur quite naturally

(despite anachronisms) and to fall into a satisfying pattern with the major interest is a task which critical enquiry has not yet fully achieved' (50). He also refers to Hamlet's final moment as follows: 'Hamlet's return to princely simplicity brings him to death, and he obtains his revenge not . . . through a planned holocaust, but through the mistakes of his enemies, who by overreaching themselves prove the inexorable justice which Belleforest saw Hamlet as meting out on God's behalf.' (58)

2. This mountebank could be a similar kind of trader who is called 'Apothecary' in *Romeo and Juliet*. In Act 5, Scene 1, Romeo purchases 'a dram of poison' (5.1.60) from a poor apothecary who he believes is in need of money. The apothecary tells Romeo that 'Such mortal drugs I have, but Mantua's law / Is death to any he that utters them.' (5.1.66-67) However, he sells that poison in the end saying, 'My poverty but not my will consents.' (5.1.75) I analysed the roles of the apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet* in my paper titled 'On the Relationship between Friar Lawrence and the Apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet*: The Similarity in Their Roles from the Religious Point of View.' As for the dangerous traders and social backgrounds surrounding them, see A. L. Beier's *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640*, pp. 86-105.
3. See 'Barb,' sb. 3, 1 in *OED*.

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