

“Pestilent speeches, infected ears”. Confessions in Hamlet

A few days ago I read in The New York Times that a businessman had entirely funded a production of Hamlet at Broadway where he himself acted Hamlet. The fact that this suffering, cerebral character created in the very beginning of the seventeenth century still appeals to us in a center of the modern world is something that may arouse some curiosity, to say the least. My thesis is that the character of Hamlet was built with material resulting from the cultural earthquake that changed the profile of European geography, and whose legacy is still with us today. The earthquake I am talking about was provoked by the Protestant and the Catholic Reformations: by the sacramental revolution and its juridical, political, and anthropological corollaries. If, as I will try to show, the tragedy of Hamlet has something to do with the profound and subtle transformation of the sacrament of confession in the sixteenth century, and with the institutional and individual stress it caused, this may constitute one good reason why *Hamlet* has left such permanent traces in our culture. The aim of my research, in sum, is not only to provide a cultural and a historical background to *Hamlet*. Its aim is not merely archaeological investigation. Rather it will ask *Hamlet* to illuminate the cultural background and the conceptual picture that are still with us today. Needless to say, *Hamlet* is not the only the subject under the scrutiny of this research. Other tragedies and plays, such as *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Measure for Measure*, *Romeo and Juliet* will be taken into consideration. But I want to start with *Hamlet*.



The question I am going to ask is not “what’s wrong with Hamlet”, rather, it is “how was the character of Hamlet possible”.

When Hamlet appears for the first time in the second scene of the first act of the play, he presents himself as a traumatized young man, obstinately mourning: “obstinate condolment” are Claudius’s words of reproach: “to persevere in obstinate condolment is a course of impious stubbornness, it is unmanly grief” (1.2.92-94). But Hamlet’s grief is authentic, it is not a show: “I have that within that passeth show” (1.2.85), he has just replied resentfully to his mother. Generations of critics have scrutinized that troubled, stubborn, rebellious, impatient (Claudius’s words again) *within*. From Goethe to Freud, and beyond, no critic or reader seems to have resisted the hermeneutic challenge thrown by Hamlet’s mysterious ‘within’. And perhaps this instinctive and universal response to the play is not so illegitimate. The many attempts at “plucking out” (to use a textual expression) the enigmatic ‘within’ of Hamlet are a natural continuation of an interpretive activity that is present throughout the play. An activity that starts the very moment Hamlet resolves to adopt “an antic disposition”.

It is not at all clear, however, whether Hamlet feigns madness because he must follow the model of the many Hamlets who preceded him, and who had un-problematically killed the usurper by using this stratagem – or, as in fact happens, he wants to attract attention to the ‘within’ he all too unusually and all too patently hides. Shakespeare’s Hamlet provokes rather than shuns the suspicion of the court of Elsinore. It is from the moment he starts feigning his madness that Hamlet’s within occupies the center of the scene, and of the inquisitiveness, curiosity, and concern of all the other characters of the play. Polonius makes up a convoluted hypothesis about Ophelia’s and Hamlet’s love story, Guildenstern believes that Hamlet is tormented by a frustrated ambition, Claudius believes he is plotting against him. Neither love, nor power, nor persecution. And this is clear to Gertrude - “His father’s death and our hasty marriage” (2.2.57).

Comment: Patently hides?? Non completamente chiaro

Comment: Non chiaro - manca il soggetto e il verbo...

Hamlet stubbornly mourns for his father, as both Claudius and Gertrude remark, but Hamlet’s story develops in the contradictory attempt to do justice to his father’s memory and to elude this predicament: “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite/ That ever I was born to set it right” (1.5.196-7). The story of Hamlet’s attempt at escaping his destiny, or at finding a remedy for it, is wholly articulated within the language and the syntax of a fundamental sacrament that was attacked by Protestants: the sacrament of confession. Inextricably related to Purgatory and Eucharist, the sacrament of confession underwent conspicuous reform in the sixteenth century, and was the most crucial of the responses of the Catholic Church to the Lutheran Reformation.

When, in December 1520, Luther publicly burned the *Angelica*, one of the most widespread *Summae* for confessors (31 editions between 1476 and 1520) written by Angelo Carletti di Chivasso, doctor in theology and successful preacher, together with Pope Leo X’s bull of excommunication *Exsurge Domine*, he knew that he was attacking a nuclear institution of the Church. The sacrament of confession, Luther thundered in *Babylonya Captivitate Ecclesiae* (1520), the most devastating attack on the sacramental system ever written so far, is a perverse power system, a tyrannical institution of social control invented by the rapacious elite of the ecclesiastical class at the expense of the faithful¹. The *Angelica* was the last and most refined of a long tradition of *Summae* for confessors that started in 1215, when the Fourth Lateran Council and Pope Innocent III decreed in the bull *Omnis utriusque sexus* that the practice of private confession was mandatory, and once a year, at Lent time, every man and woman had to confess her/his sins to “her/his own priest” before being admitted to the sacrament of the Eucharist. Penalties for not respecting such duties were harsh. It was the first time that an introspective practice, the examination of conscience, until then the exclusive prerogative of the monks, was extended and imposed to the laity. The IV Lateran Council was an epochal event within the history of the

¹ *Luther’s Works*, Abdel Ross Wentz, gen ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 9..., 55 vols., vol. 36, p. 81



Church that slowly transformed penitence from a collective public rite of reconciliation of the transgressor within the community into a private one, and that extended “sin” to the quotidian, ordinary life of every single member of the Christian world.

The grandiose intention of the Council was to create a vast network of juridical control over the Christian population. The project in fact failed, but the decree required an immediate theory for the priests to follow, which was indeed provided with extreme competence by Dominican and Franciscan schoolmen, expert canonists and theologians. A flood of *Summae* were written in order to instruct the puzzled and often unlearned priests on how to face their utterly new and heavy responsibilities. Concrete cases were analysed in an effort to cover exhaustively all areas of life in the external (social) and internal (conscience) forum; and for the sake of the clarity and distinctiveness typical of the scholastic style of their authors, they listed them in alphabetical order -- from Adultery to Usury and Uxoricide. They took into consideration the hierarchical system of medieval society, divided according to sex, status, condition, and age. They distinguished mortal and venial sins according to circumstances, differentiated sins of omission from sins of commission, weighted their gravity according to the intention of the agent and the value of the object. They put under different headings sins of thought and sins of deed. What these manuals indeed created was an absurd multiplication of sins, a never heard of accountability of the faithful’s souls, in the words of a famous historian, a “ratiocinating delirium” (cit legoff)

It is not in the least surprising that Luther angrily burnt what he dubbed the “diabolic” *Angelica*. In one bonfire he symbolically destroyed the very core of the legal ecclesiastical order, its system of social obligations controlled by the Church, the most capillary network of Roman discipline and the philosophical and theological presuppositions which legitimized that discipline. “They only pile laws upon laws, by which they torture themselves and others and make their consciences so miserable that many of them die before their time because of excessive anguish of heart. For one law always

produces ten more, until they grow into infinity” he vibrantly protested in *Lectures on Galatians* (Luther *Works*, 26, St.Louis,1963, 405-06).

And yet, of all sacraments, confession was the one that most aroused Luther’s contradictions and doubts. For Luther’s disquieted and anxious heart, the practice of confession was “useful, even necessary ... it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences (*Babylonia*, 86)”. In order for confession to be a cure, however, it was not the Church which one should resort to, that “insatiable bloodsucker”(*Babylonia*, 90). The remission of sins had to be taken away from ecclesiastical power and returned to God, by whom the penitent could be justified only if he had a complete and unconditional faith in God’s infinite mercy.

Luther’s revolutionary rebellion prompted the immediate reaction of the other side of the religious divide. The most authoritative and authoritarian response was of course embodied in the Council of Trent (1545-1563). According to Paolo Sarpi, “Chi sentiva parlare quei dottori non poteva concludere se non che gli apostoli e gli antichi vescovi mai facessero altro che o a star in ginocchia a confessarsi, o sentati a confessr gli altri” (*Istoria del Concilio Tridentino*, libro IV, cap.2). In the long fourteenth session of the Council the terms of the reform were unequivocal: they energetically re-established the legitimacy of the priests’ power to remit sins, and reinforced the decree of the Fourth Lateran council of 1215.

Adriano Prospero has written magisterial pages in his *Tribunali della coscienza* (Torino, 1996) about the use and abuse by the Tribunal of the Inquisition of the Tridentine confession as an instrument of anti-heretical action, and on the overlapping of confession and delation in Catholic countries.

But, as is known, the Jesuits were the true reformers of confession in the wake of the two Reformations. They used it all over the world as an instrument of conversion in non-Christian or no longer Catholic nations (England included); and the style of their reform was firmly grounded on the rhetoric of persuasion rather than on the rhetoric of prescription.

At the center of the debate on confession stood nothing less crucial than sin. And on this subject there was no disagreement between Catholics and Protestants: sin was inherent in the human condition. But the two reformations proceeded in two opposite directions. For Luther confession had to be brief. For the Jesuits it had to be very long - it could last for an entire life. For Luther the emphasis was placed entirely on the new life of the penitent, freed from the memory of the past. For the Jesuits it was placed instead on the past, which had to be meticulously reconstructed in memory, even written, if memory should fail. For Luther sin was incommensurable, and no merit or work could ever erase it. On the opposite, for the Jesuits sin is always immersed in the circumstances of the when, how, where, and could be periodically removed. For Luther confession could be poured in the ears of any neighbor, who would be the representative of God. On the opposite, for the Jesuits, the reform of confession focused entirely on the figure of the confessor.

According to Erasmus, the eight virtues of the confessor which Aquinas had recommended -- “Dulcis, affabilis atque suavis, prudens, discretus, mitis, pius atque benignus” -- had been sadly ignored in the actual practice of confession. Typically, Erasmus did not attack the institution, but its executors.² To listen to the penitents’ recitation of their impure acts was a difficult task, and not every priest was able to resist the moral infection poured into his ears. Sooner or later the inexperienced priest would fall ill, for the diseases of the soul were no less contagious than the diseases of the flesh. For Erasmus the confessor had to be “qualified”.

Thus, while the Tridentine Council insisted on the legitimacy of the confessor to judge and to absolve the penitent, the Jesuits developed the figure of the confessor as physician and father³. While the former conceived

² John B. Payne, *Erasmus. His Theology of the Sacraments*, M.E. Bratcher, 1970, “The most significant fact about the sacraments for Erasmus is that they contain both flesh and spirit, both the visible and the invisible, both the outward and the inward.” P. 101.

³ See A. Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza*, Torino, Einaudi, 1996, and *Il Concilio di Trento. Una introduzione storica*, Torino, Einaudi, 2001.



the sacrament of confession as a tribunal where the penitent was a self-accusing witness before the judging priest, for the latter confession was slowly becoming a cure for disquieted hearts, and the confessor a physician of the soul.

The souls of the European Christian populations, which were until then largely supposed to be one whole sacred body, suddenly became the field of a fierce battle that engaged the two religious factions in a huge propaganda. While Protestants could count on the spontaneous and historical resistance of European population to confess their quotidian misdemeanors to some inquisitive and unworthy priest, as thousands of witnesses testified, Catholic authors, more and more preoccupied of loosing souls to the other side of the religious divide presented milder and milder versions of the sacrament of confession.

The literature about confession is enormous, rich, and contradictory, and so today I have to be very schematic. But I want to pick up two significant examples taken from two influential figures of the time that might help us understand how the sacrament of confession slowly developed into a psychological cure. In 1549, Francis Xavier, one of the founding members of the Company of Jesus, wrote from Goa a letter to Gaspar Barzaeus, who was in charge of the mission of Hormuz, in the Persian Gulf, instructing him in the following way:

if during the confession, the shame for sins seizes the heart of the penitent so much that it ties up his tongue, as it may often happen when their quality and quantity is enormous, one must take heed not to enhancing this fear with signs of wonder, with words, or with sighs. Rather, with a face full of love and compassion [the confessor] must encourage the soul during the pains of this delivery and use the charms of benevolence and the sweetness of

the Holy Spirit in order to pull out the tortuous serpent from its hole, imitating the skills of the obstetrician.⁴

No wonder the Jesuits became famous exorcists. Confession is here conceived as delivery, and confessors as obstetricians. Listening and talking were not easy tasks: for the penitent to confess was a long and painful process, while digging out the penitent’s words was an art (“the art of arts” according to Jean Gerson) that the confessor had to acquire and patiently practice in order to win over what today we would call, in technical terms, the resistances of the penitent: shame, humiliation, fear, bad memory.

In the medieval penitential tradition these resistances testified to the sinfulness of the penitent’s hidden acts or thoughts. But in early modern manuals for confessors, sin gradually becomes a disease of the soul, a passion constantly represented as a corporeal disease, poison to be vomited: ulcer, tumor, putrid wound, rotten sore; judgment gradually gives way to cure; confessors, from judges, become physicians, surgeons, obstetricians; and penitents become patients who must be persuaded to purge their souls and keep them clean. Confession was promoted as a hygiene of the soul.

For the first time in these manuals a special type of patient appears, and the most difficult disease to cure: the disease of the ‘*scrupoloso*’. In his *Breve istruttione de’ confessori* (Salamanca 1579, Rome 1588) Bartolomè de Medina, the great Spanish Dominican reader of Theology at Salamanca, father of a notorious probabilism, which would later be argued against by Blaise Pascal, devotes an entire chapter of his treatise to the *scrupoloso*:

⁴ Cited in J. Delumeau, *L’aveu e le pardon, Les difficultés de la confession. XIII-XVIII siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 1990, p. 26.

“Fra le altre infermità , che nell’anima sono di cura difficilissima, et hanno bisogno di rimedij grandi, et di medico di grande scienza & esperienza, è quella de’ scrupolosi & pusillanimità.... Scrupolo è latino, che vuol dire sassetto, ò piccola pietra, la quale entrata nella scarpa dà travaglio, & angoscia, & non lascia camminare liberamente, un’ angoscia della coscienza, che viene da congetture deboli e incerte, ò da paura e pusillanimità senza fondamento. ... Scrupolosi poi si chiamano coloro, i quali usano sempre rodersi fra se stessi, se consenti non consenti; se recitò, se non recitò; se confessò non confesso’;...lo scrupoloso è melanconico, e la sua malinconia [muove] l’immagination e l’appetito con diverse passioni d’afflittioni, & di paure smisurate, & di spaventi e di ombre... Questa infermità...è pericolosissima, et è differente dall’altre in molte maniere. Prima perché...è nell’intimo del cuore.Secondo perchè questa procede da molte cagioni. Terzo perché è una tentazione che arriva fino alla disperazione,4. affatica perché è continua.5 perché è difficile da curare, 6 perché...questa passione è tenuta dagli scrupolosi come virtù. 7 perché questa fa danno a molti facendogli codardi, & paurosi 8 perchè impedisce di operare ...acceca la ragione, fa l’uomo negligente, leva la forza. Lo scrupoloso [è] come un naviglio, che vada correndo per l’alto mare con qualche grande tempesta, combattuto da diversi venti...”



Yet the scrupulous character is afflicted by a huge “amor proprio...e da superbia”.⁵ Nonetheless, the disease has some virtuous effects: “disprezzo per il mondo ; freno del corpo ; il principio della sapienza che è il timor di dio; mortificazione del piacere.”⁶

One may wonder whether this disease is the outcome of the many contradictory “opinions”, or, in Luther’s words, of the infinite laws that crowded the many instructions for confessors, thus torturing and leading the “poor penitent to desperation and death”; or whether the disease was only a literary “invention” that re-affirmed the necessity of the cure. In either case, this cerebral, anguished, self-indulging victim of himself, dangerous for himself and others, seems to be a source for Hamlet’s character.

Scruples, ulcers, infected ears, diseases, poison, passions, repentances, confessions, hidden faults, contagion. This is the lexicon of *Hamlet*.

Since time is a notorious tyrant, I will give you only three examples where problems related to confession are opened up in *Hamlet*: one for each of the main characters of the play.

At one point Hamlet asks Guildenstern to play a pipe. Guildenstern refuses to do so. Hamlet insists. Guildenstern protests: “I have not the skill”. Hamlet’s is just a provocation: “Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak “ (3.2.343-351). How could a common and vulgar spy such as Guildenstern make a scrupulous character such as Hamlet speak? He does not have the skill to make him “expell”, in Claudius’s words, “this something-settled matter in his heart” (3.1.172).

⁵ Bartolomè de Medina, *Breve istruttione de’ confessori, come si debba amministrare il Sacramento della Penitentia* (Salamanca 1579), Roma, 1588, p. 220

⁶ Bartolomè de Medina *Breve istruttione de’ confessori, come si debba amministrare il Sacramento della Penitentia* (Salamanca 1579), Roma, 1588, p. 222.

Hamlet tries to resort to philosophy. “Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out” (2, 2, 352-3). But Hamlet’s perfect reasoning can only confirm that “there are more things in heaven and earth than in your philosophy”. In his impeccable arguments, the voice of the “I” and the ears of the “you” are missing: in his most famous monologue (“To be or not to be”), Hamlet does not refer to himself, nor to any interlocutor. Here, an excess of logic increases the isolation within which his grief is blocked. Perhaps this is the reason why hundreds of critics, readers, and spectators, have tried to untangle the inextricable knot of Hamlet’s disease of the soul, in an attempt to save him.

Lacking a skilled “confessor” and the techniques for a real examination of conscience, Hamlet, therefore, acts as an “unqualified” confessor when he faces his uncle and his mother, in presumably secret encounters.

In a most famous episode, Claudius kneels down and prays after having been proved guilty at the theatre test, and confesses his crime. But, if we read it closely, that prayer is made up of a series of questions centered on a crucial doubt: “May one be pardoned and retain the offence?” (3.3.56). Claudius’s doubt has nothing to do with death and life. The hidden fault that Hamlet forces him to confess is quite simply a crime, and his question -- “May one be pardoned and retain the offence?”-- obsessively resounded in the debate between canonists and theologians when, in the early modern age, *culpa theologica* and *culpa juridica*, the logic of forgiveness, and logic of right, which had been one and the same thing for centuries, were in the process of splitting apart, each claiming primacy over the other, each assuming a part of the other’s domain. The destiny of the relationship between Churches and States in early modern Europe would unfold around just this question⁷.

⁷ See Miriam Turrini, *La coscienza e le leggi. Morale e diritto nei testi per la confessione della prima Età moderna*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1991.



But Hamlet, who sees unseen Claudius praying, seems to side with the theologians. He does not want to set the *culpa juridica* right; he does not act like a judging priest, but like a judging God. It is not the external forum, but the internal forum for which he aims. He wants to send Claudius to hell, not to the scaffold.

In a similar apocalyptic style, Hamlet approaches Gertrude. Hamlet’s aim here is not to discover some hidden crime, but to arouse his mother’s sense of guilt. Armed with “speaking daggers”, Hamlet behaves in a way in which hundreds of manuals warned a confessor should never behave--most probably because priests were prone to behave in that way with their penitents--: he shouts, threatens, inveighs, thunders, roars, frightens the sinner Gertrude, commands her to confess to heaven. And as a remedy to cure “the ulcerous place” “where rank corruption, mining all within, infects unseen” (34.151-153) –her sexual appetite—he displays a long list of advice at the center of which is the Aristotelian and Thomistic notion of virtue and vice as habit, the very core of Jesuit ethics. The anthropological dynamics of the Thomistic notion of sin as “actus vitiosus” is far more complex than the confrontation with the law. But it is not a virtuous habit that Hamlet succeeds in instilling into Gertrude’s soul. What Hamlet has “dagged” in her ears is a painful, bottomless disease: “to my sick soul, as sin’s nature is,/ Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss,/ So full of artless jealousy is guilt,/ It spills itself in fearing to be spilt” (4.5.17-20). Frightened and anguished, Gertrude has finally become conscious of her sin.

Guilt and sense of guilt are clearly distinguished in Shakespeare’s most famous tragedy, respectively incarnated in Hamlet’s mother and in the iciest of Shakespearean villains. This distinction marks one of the most traumatic transitions of European history of justice. It marks, that is, the separation of the respective competences of the two most important European powers- the State and the Church-- and the secularization of justice. Arrived to the end of a historical competition, State and Church divide, but each assumes elements of the other.



The simultaneous separation and contamination of legal and theological competences over crime and sin seem to be embodied in the highly conflicting character of Hamlet: while sharply differentiating the techniques forcing Gertrude and Claudius to disclose their respective guilt, thus distinguishing offence from vice, Hamlet criminalizes sin and moralizes crime. Moral and right are still entangled in Hamlet’s mind, obsessed as he is with moral reform rather than with legal resolutions. Resisting the separation of moral from right, Hamlet ends up with rejecting his dead father’s command and with allowing the course of action to loose its cause. In the tragic final slaughter offenders and sinners alike are randomly killed, the tie between will and action is cut off, and ultimately the unity of the self that Hamlet had desperately tried to keep together, dissolves. What my research aims at showing is that rather than representing the first modern character as an individual, Shakespeare represents modernity as a tragic loss of individuality.