
RESEARCH ARTICLE

“To be, or not to be”: Has Hamlet’s Famous Line been Misunderstood?

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare’s “To be, or not to be” is perhaps the most famous line in English literature, yet it remains frequently reduced to a mere contemplation of suicide. This paper challenges that traditional interpretation, arguing instead that the soliloquy represents a complex philosophical inquiry into morality, the nature of existence, and the ethics of revenge. By examining the linguistic limitations encountered in translation—specifically within Arabic interpretations—the study demonstrates how translating the ambiguous syntax of the verb “to be” often forces a reductionist reading of “suicide versus life,” thereby stripping the text of its inherent subtlety. Furthermore, this article contextualizes the soliloquy within the play’s immediate dramatic action. It argues that Hamlet’s meditation is not the result of paralyzed melancholia, but rather a calculated performance intended for the eavesdropping King Claudius and Polonius. By highlighting Hamlet’s contradictions regarding the afterlife and his simultaneous, active planning of the “mousetrap,” this paper posits that the speech serves a dual purpose: it is both a genuine moral interrogation of the validity of private revenge and a strategic deployment of feigned madness designed to mislead his enemies. Ultimately, this analysis suggests that a faithful understanding of the soliloquy requires looking beyond the text to the staging, the ambiguity of language, and the strategic intellect of the protagonist.

KEYWORDS

William Shakespeare, Hamlet, To be or not to be, Soliloquy, Literary Translation, Feigned Madness, Revenge, Moral Dilemma

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1. Introduction

“To be, or not to be, that is the question” is a famous line said by a famous character of Shakespeare, Hamlet, though it is perhaps not the best understood. This paper provides an analysis for some parts of the most important soliloquy in Hamlet, “To be, or not to be.” This paper will demonstrate the motives that drive Hamlet’s revenge; it is important to note that the question of “To be or not to be” is not simply about suicide but encompasses a multitude of choices. Merely contemplating suicide limits readers’ understanding and overlooks the myriad interpretations of “To be, or not to be”.

Furthermore, this paper delves into how the audience may be misled in interpreting this renowned soliloquy. To illustrate more, it attempts to partially identify whether having this soliloquy translated into different languages would raise the question of the impact of Shakespeare’s language or not. While this line is traditionally interpreted as Hamlet’s contemplation of suicide, it could certainly be considered as Hamlet’s reflection of something much broader, that is, his morality. If this is the case, it invites questions of what it really means to ‘be’. This appears to be a fitting contemplation for Hamlet in the context of the play, and it is a theme that Shakespeare explores further in the play. Finally, the techniques that Hamlet has been through in producing his

speech will be considered, as well as some small lines outside this soliloquy, which will be beneficial to correlate them with the soliloquy.

2. Linguistic Ambiguity and Translation Challenges

From the very beginning of Hamlet, it seems that the motives underlying the action cannot be identified due to the obscurity of the plot; for example, Hamlet remains unsure about the guilt of Claudius. Strangely, Hamlet has adequate motives to fuel his revenge—the will, the strength, and the means—but he tends to be ambivalent and indecisive (his ambivalence overcomes his will, which shows how contradictory he is with himself), which mystifies his motives. His father's will, his social status that initiates enough power, and his strong connections to clever friends like Horatio and Marcellus trigger the motives to enact his task.

When one reads the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, for instance, one could draw a lot of possible explanations from the first line of it. However, the syntax of the phrase "To be or not to be" resonates in the mind musically. Surprisingly, the main verb of this line is considered the most basic one in the English language: "To be." Nevertheless, critics still cannot and won't find the specific meaning of it, which leads, also, for instance, to the difficulty of translating it into different languages. It carries an underlying meaning that makes it resistant to translation. Therefore, verbs are considered the most important elements of the English language. They play significant roles in conveying the message of a sentence. In Hamlet, one cannot perceive the intended themes of the play without paying attention to soliloquies, especially their verbs.

Critics attempt to elucidate the meaning of the phrase "To be, or not to be," but this often results in the inability to achieve a precise translation. For example, in an Arabic translation of Hamlet, Mahmoud translates, "To be or not to be" as "Life or death." On the other hand, Ameen translates this phrase as "Will I be alive, or will I commit suicide." These two different translations have almost the same meaning, which makes the audience have only one possible view. In fact, the meaning of the major question in "To be or not to be" cannot be suicide for some objections that will be mentioned ahead. If it were, as many assume, the dramatic action would be irrelevant. Hamlet is no longer sunk in the depths of sorrow as he is in his first soliloquy, "O that this too too solid flesh would melt," where the primary function of it is to disclose to the audience Hamlet's profound melancholy and sorrow. (Shakespeare 38) He begins to be active and just finds the idea of how to test the ghost's word with the "mousetrap."

Shakespeare doesn't use any images or specific allusions in the opening line of this soliloquy, "To be or not to be." This is said to be why this sentence is so powerful and can't be paraphrased. However, after this phrase, Shakespeare extends the soliloquy with a lot of metaphors that suggest that Hamlet's choice is between suffering the troubles of this world and taking determined actions against them but not suffering the troubles and escaping them. "To take arms against a sea of troubles, / and by opposing end them" cannot be translated, for instance, "To kill myself and then escape from troubles." "To take arms against a sea of troubles," suggests the forceful activity of a battle. "By opposing end them" suggests that the troubles can be demolished.

I am quite skeptical of the Arabic interpretations of the phrase, "To be or not to be," as they present a singular interpretation that limits the comprehension of the statement. The problem of the impossibility of translating Hamlet is that some critics have explained Hamlet's delay and ambivalence as the outcome of an abnormal state of mind. Some see the impossibility of translating this phrase as a result of a violent shock when vigor has been adversely affected by grief and disillusion. Others think it is because of the subconscious conflict in his relationship with his mother. All of these opposing viewpoints, however, concur that Hamlet's melancholy is the primary factor in his delay because it causes him to put off performing the task that the ghost requests. After all, while having different views of a certain literature portion, one cannot find a faithful translation to it, especially for this soliloquy, which is written by the most remarkable playwright in English history. Therefore, such translations would not give readers the opportunity to pinpoint their viewpoints because translators narrow the meaning into one possible view, while the original version opens up for debate some different understandings and viewpoints.

3. The Moral Dilemma of Revenge

In fact, in the soliloquy, Hamlet is encountering a moral question that has been thought to be irrelevant to the play: whether he should enact a private revenge. This fact has been unclear only because Shakespeare "delves below the familiar platitude" (Prosser 160). Hamlet does not seem to ask the question, "Should I oppose the heaven's command?" But, he tends to ask, "Can one follow his sense by obeying an ethic?" In the Elizabethan time, revenge is considered immoral, and that led

revengers not to accept opposing morality. Shakespeare seems to intend to push Hamlet by asking a familiar question. Hamlet does not ask whether he is supposed, or not supposed to do an evil act, but he asks whether what he is going to do is an evil act. Hamlet is not worried about two options; rather, he is worried about his only option and whether it breaks his belief or not.

However, one wonders why Hamlet would raise such a moral question at this moment in the play. He is debating within his internal thought whether he should kill Claudius or not, while he is not yet sure about Claudius' guilt. The audience is aware that Hamlet gets his way to find the truth, but still, he does not apply this way yet, a play within a play. One of the studies made by Irving T. Richards argues that Hamlet is asking himself, "Whether Claudius is innocent or not, shall I kill him?" (Prosser 160) Arguably, this interpretation is not convincing for several reasons. First of all, as Hamlet cares about moral issues, he supposedly avoids killing someone who might be innocent. If Hamlet kills someone who is innocent, then his conscience which obstructs him from killing his uncle shows that he is a coward. In other words, what is the purpose of Hamlet asking whether to kill or not to kill his uncle? He should have asked such a question for a moral purpose, but killing someone who might be innocent, which is Richard's interpretation, causes Hamlet to commit an immoral act. Richard's argument is also unconvincing because it is not reasonable for Hamlet to ask whether or not to kill his uncle at this very moment without proof. Hamlet has found a way to get the proof. Therefore, it is not reasonable that Hamlet asks himself, "Whether Claudius is innocent or not, shall I kill him?" (Prosser 160)

Until this moment, during this soliloquy, one should not be resolute that Hamlet has to face the unavoidable moral question. If the word of his father's spirit is approved, as Hamlet expects, then Hamlet may decide now: "If my uncle is guilty, shall I murder him?" In fact, having Claudius confess his guilt right before this soliloquy makes it almost certain that this is the question Shakespeare is trying to convey. The confession is a technique that warns the audience that Hamlet will not debate the morality of killing an innocent man. Claudius does not act like a conventional scoundrel, and the attentive audience should not be misled. If the audience has any doubt of his guilt, they will divert from the real issue with which Hamlet is about to struggle, which is whether Claudius is guilty, and if so, should Hamlet kill him?

4. Strategic Performance and Feigned Madness

One may wonder about the reason driving Hamlet to articulate this famous soliloquy in a way that indicates his weakness and hesitation. He feigns madness as a cover and defense from his enemies. If readers look at this soliloquy from a different perspective, one may think that English Renaissance drama contains a plentiful number of eavesdropping scenes, which occur in all types of plays. However, in some scenes, a character sometimes tends to be aware of the eavesdroppers, and this is a good opportunity to mislead them. Hamlet is an intelligent character due to the fact that he regards anyone associated with the king as an enemy. In the previous scene, which precedes this soliloquy, Hamlet is suspicious of the visit of his two college friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He asks them the reason for their abrupt visit, "You were sent for, and there is a kind of confession in your looks." (Shakespeare 69) They hesitate to give the sincere answer, and then Hamlet declares in an aside, "Nay then, I have an eye of you." (Shakespeare 69) After that, Hamlet believes that he has a reason to expect the presence of these enemy agents at the king's place. However, before saying this soliloquy, Hamlet feels the presence of Ophelia, whom he does not trust, as she is obedient to her untrustworthy father. He pretends to speak to himself, as a sign of madness that he feigns, but actually allows the eavesdroppers, Claudius and Polonius, to hear his speech. He does this in order to deceive them about his frame of mind. What he mostly cares about is to convey the impression of his inability to act so that he can mislead his enemies while they are listening. In this way, Hamlet can achieve his own plans without any defensive attention from his enemies.

The audience is led to believe that Hamlet means to feign his madness because he mentions earlier to his close friends, Horatio and Marcellus, that he would behave in a strange manner, act like a madman, "To put an antic disposition on." (Shakespeare 56) One of the pieces of evidence that proves Hamlet is feigning madness is that he contradicts himself in this soliloquy. He declares that no traveller returns from the bourn of death, even though he encounters a traveller in apparition. The audience should logically understand that Hamlet intends to deceive his eavesdropping enemies about his actual state of mind. In other words, what Hamlet says, as he is addressing himself, contradicts his experience, and there should be a reason that he is trying to contradict himself: deceiving his enemies. Also, the remarkable thing about this soliloquy is that it says nothing at all about Hamlet's grievances. It makes no references to his murdered father, nor to the revenge he has promised to take. These two important issues are not mentioned in the soliloquy, which increases the possibility of Hamlet's awareness that there are some eavesdropping enemies.

5. Conclusion

Translating Shakespeare's language is exceptionally challenging due to its inherent multilayered interpretations and nuances. One may notice the different understandings through different periods of time. With the course of time, the underlying meaning of Shakespeare's play tends to vary from one period to another because of, for instance, the traditional changes. Also, paying attention to the intelligent techniques Shakespeare applies in the play is crucial to identifying the possible underlying meaning. Missing such techniques leads readers astray. What all the possible interpretations have in common is the implication that Hamlet pretends to speak to himself but actually intends the "To be" speech or some part of it to reach the ears of the King in order to mislead his enemy about his state of mind and to convince his enemy that he is incapable of action.

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