

**Annotation of Antony Johae's "Wole Soyinka's 'Hamlet': The Rotten State of Denmark Revisited", *Research in African Literatures* 38.4 (2007), pp. 61-69.**

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Antony Johae's article provides a close reading of Wole Soyinka's sonnet 'Hamlet', a poem composed when the Nigerian writer was in prison, and which was later included in the collection *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972). Placing the context of literary production at the centre of his analysis, the critic argues that the poet's use of Shakespeare's play acted as camouflage to disguise the deeper meaning of the sonnet. Soyinka, it is alleged, implemented this textual "strateg[y] of deception" to escape his gaolers' censorship.

Johae develops this hypothesis by demonstrating that 'Hamlet', while seemingly dealing with the eponymous Shakespearean figure, in fact explores the Nigerian author's predicament during his incarceration. For instance, it is claimed that the lines from Soyinka's text that describe Hamlet's desire to avenge his father's murder may equally be read as an expression of the poet's anger at being held captive; similarly, the words evoking Hamlet's indecisiveness about his vengeance may also allude to the prisoner's sense of vulnerability.

Somewhat disconcertingly, Johae temporarily leaves aside his promising exegesis to introduce a theoretical framework, which, however interesting, interrupts the flow of the argument. In this section of the essay, the critic proposes to elaborate on another scholar's interpretation of Soyinka's metaphor of the shuttle, a trope – featured in the title of the collection of poetry containing 'Hamlet' – whereby the text is compared to a tapestry made up of horizontal and vertical threads. Drawing on this analogy, Johae contends that a reading of the poem 'Hamlet' foregrounding Shakespeare's character can be regarded as an interpretation on a "vertical axis", while an analysis focusing on the poet's experience in

prison can be considered an examination on the “horizontal plane”. After highlighting other interesting elements that support this double reading, the article concludes by attributing Soyinka’s choice of *Hamlet* as a basis for his own poem to the similarities between the political situation in the “rotten state of Denmark” and in Nigeria.

While Johae’s piece is slightly uneven on the levels of structure and style (one cannot help but cringe at some of the scholar’s puns), the essay ultimately provides valuable insights into Soyinka’s elaborate poem. As such, this article should hold interest both for researchers specialising in the works of the Nigerian Nobel Prize winner and for those studying the postcolonial rewritings of Shakespeare’s plays.