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### In Hamlet's Defense, Morality is Harder Pursued Than Murder

Just as the pursuit of truth be, the pursuit of justice embeds itself in both sides of kindness and cruelty. As oft comes packaged with complex works, no simple explanation ever explicates itself in the deep branches of character motivations. Hamlet, of the play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, is one such masked delivery, as he plays both literal false acts and honest, twisted reflection as he brings these conflicting personas in hand with perceived procrastination throughout the play, sourced in Hamlet's own tragic nature.

One may define Hamlet's inactivity as the failure to act. Although he takes action in the form of schemes such as the 'Mousetrap' (Act III. Scene II.223), Hamlet does not take the simple and direct action of murdering King Claudius even when he is presented with the most opportune moment for immediate violence in Act 3 Scene 3, where Claudius is praying in solitude. However, it is precisely the failure to grasp this opportunity that we glean furthestmost insight into the cause of Hamlet's dwindling; "He fails because he is himself, Hamlet, and because the particular circumstance he is called upon to encounter proves itself to be exactly of the sort which a man such as he cannot surmount." (Charlton) It is precisely because Hamlet is a scholar, a student of the college in Wittenberg, and a man well-versed in plays and performances that he tends to overthink, moving his brain rather than his hands.

Despite the coldness he shows towards most other characters in the play for the duration of his feigned madness, Hamlet is an empathetic man that holds high moral standards close to his heart. Although some may proclaim him a coward due to the many times he laments his own acknowledged idleness in his soliloquies, such as “And he voices his bewilderment at his inexplicable inertia once more in his last great soliloquy: ‘I do not know / Why yet I live to say “This thing’s to do”, / Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do’t’ (4.4.43–46). The same soliloquy makes it clear that Hamlet finds neither of the reasons he considers for his delay convincing.” wherein Kiernan proclaims Hamlet thinks to delay even as he knows his reasons unconvincing, as one attempting to flee their duties are bound to do. On the contrary, it is more likely that Hamlet’s self-deprecation is not sourced solely in his cowardice but rather the heavy importance of the owed justice by revenge, a self-imposed debt not yet paid. Although it is the ghost of the late King Hamlet that demands revenge from his son, it is Prince Hamlet’s will and desire to believe in the image of his beloved father, know it to be a devil or not, and the criminality that he sees in the sin retold.

The condemnation Hamlet feels for King Claudius only grows, as even without regard for his prior and now convinced suspicions of Claudius’s involvement with King Hamlet’s death, he views Claudius as having tainted Gertrude and betrayed his own brother in seizing the throne and betrothing his wife, not two months past his death. For one that holds morality, if not religion, in such value as Hamlet does, the sins of his uncle brand themselves to Hamlet as unbearable crimes, evident from his coarse attitude towards Claudius from the start of the play.

On the contrary, some may argue that Prince Hamlet’s humanitarian attitude seems not to extend to those that he himself seemingly arbitrarily killed, like Polonius as “how he talks about

the body of Polonius, a body which would still have been alive had Hamlet not just made it a corpse,” (Charlton) and the sending of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, nor to those he feigned madness towards. As Kiernan Ryan says in a claim of hypocrisy by a coward named Hamlet, “But it doesn’t square with Hamlet’s obvious ability to act decisively when he wants to, as he does when he charges fearlessly after the ghost; when he sets *The Mousetrap* ‘to catch the conscience of the king’ (2.2.605); when he runs his sword through Polonius in the belief that he’s stabbing the king.” However, it is only reasonable to allow Hamlet some form of standard to which he extends his sympathy-- which he does, as seen in his attempt at reconciliation with Laertes in Act 5, the melancholic reminiscence of Yorick and his skull, and the fact that his mad speech at Ophelia was also in the deliverance of his wish for her to stay pure and live well, unlike the sin and unfaithfulness that he sees women bear by engagement with men, by isolating herself to never marry even if the deliverance itself was an unbearably insulting and jarring realization to Ophelia that the Hamlet she knew is no longer.

Although he successfully plotted the counter-scheme to Claudius’s decree in his execution, he also quite literally killed the messengers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In his defense, although they were supposed to be his friends and allies, their loyalty lay with Claudius and betrayed him not only in acting as spies but also in their roles in the murder plot of his father’s killer, now meant for him. In direct contrast to this, Hamlet did have one person to which he never held falsity nor did he hold any hesitance in their loyalty. His schoolmate and confidant, Horatio, whose trust was earned in both parts unquestionable loyalty, unlike the betrayals he has experienced from almost everyone in the play including his own mother, and admiration for the traits and virtues like level-headedness that he himself did not hold. Horatio, as such a character,

is thus a singularity that leaves a striking mark amidst the complex web of self-interest and conniving schemes, as is with Shakespeare's use of both directness in poison and blade, and coyness in played madness and performance, and so oft referred to as Hamlet's one true friend, providing however minimal validation of Hamlet's capacity for closeness as not fully evaporated. In this, it is clear that although coldly does Hamlet seem to most people that he casts deceit and trickery upon, it is not without discrimination as he and his emotions see fit.

And it is to this level of significance that Hamlet places on morality that drives his indecision and decision alike. The passage of time is clearly shown from the first Act wherein Hamlet discovers the truth from the ghost as mentioned by H.B. Charlton, "The time-lapse is made clear by the introduction of seemingly extraneous incidents. Laertes has gone back to Paris, and Polonius is sending his spy there to see how Laertes is settling down." (Charlton) Despite the reveal and promise he swore to the ghost, his uncle still yet sits on the throne and makes merriment as Hamlet holds no solid plan of attack. Thinking of planning he has done, but hold of decisive conviction he has not. On this, he laments and edges himself closer to despair with each passing soliloquy as the play goes on, but does not much more than the amount with which he inches closer towards the rot of his own reality that took root at the same time as the truth.

To murder is a sin, and to murder the king is treason. As a prince and direct heir to said target, opportunities present themselves in the form of unguarded soldiers and the ability to command said guards away for a private 'conversation' with the king. Yet it lives on one face of a coin, the opposite of which being the obvious consequence of unhidden murder where if Hamlet commits it, the aftermath would mean either death, disbelief, dethronement, or ascension to the crown. Hamlet is not a most youthful man, but kingship was not thought due to change

hands any time soon as King Hamlet was as healthy as could be until he was killed, switching the head upon which the crown rests to Claudius wherein upon Hamlet's necessary manslaughter would then face itself upon the current prince. By all means, he was yet a scholar and as shown with his previous flirtations with Ophelia, thinking not of bearing the responsibility of Denmark in its whole in the near future, living not much unlike an unemployed student independent in his desires.

Even past the probable mullings of the consequence of a yet necessary joining of treason with murder, in which the morality of the act is muddled at its core for is it treacherous to kill when the victim is the one that committed treacherous slaughter in the first place out of justifiable vengeance, the conviction to shamelessly thrust his blade into the life of Claudius was not formed despite Hamlet's frequent attempts at reasoning with himself. His knee-jerk reaction to the ghost was anger and burning desire for revenge as he cried with sympathy, but the strong belief that lent itself to him in the throes of emotion had faded with time and turmoil as the more he thought, the more he needed to think.

Although the plot of Hamlet was regarded mostly as the estranged decision to bring the death of King Claudius an actuality after all the pondering and delay, it is not only the pursuit of the act of vengeance that drives the play. As seen through the eyes of characters such as Ophelia and Rosencrantz, the events that occurred were tragic and misfortunate happenings strung by fate. However, by the eyes of the main influencers in the entanglement of the causes and results of the fallen, Claudius lived and thus died through the lust for power and love of Gertrude. This unbending desire fuelled his treachery and following hostility that ultimately wove the death of Gertrude which was also the striking instant of determination within Hamlet. Fuelled by the

sheer injustice that he witnesses in the murder of his mother, whom even the ghost of his father had requested for Hamlet to not harm, he made his decision. In the pursuit of resolution of the wavering belief in his own morality and that which should be clearly outlined for him by the morals that both religion and himself hold to high value, even if only in the image, Prince Hamlet goes mad in the whirlwind of complexity and blood. In his defense, the truth in morality shines as translucently as the deepness of blood.

## Works Cited

“Hamlet.” by H.B. Charlton, M.A.

<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/hamlet-and-revenge> (Kiernan Ryan)