

### Essay Question #2

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet faces many difficult decisions in his quest for vengeance. At different occasions, he finds himself needing to answer questions surrounding love, loyalty, and life itself. Nevertheless, he regularly responds to these situations by vacillating between different opinions and planned courses of action. In this essay, I will focus on Hamlet's approach to the eventual murder of Claudius, showing how his actions lean towards indecisiveness and rashness rather than prudence. I will pay specific attention to act 3 scene 3, where Hamlet conspicuously delays the murder, and the end of scene 5 act 2, where he seemingly takes decisive action. In focusing on these passages, I read against interpretations of Hamlet as a heroic figure who represents independent thinking and show how his inability to make up his mind ultimately results in the death of six others.

In act 3 scene 3, Hamlet is prepared to kill Claudius but superficially avoids it based on an eccentric interpretation of the Christian afterlife. In this scene, Hamlet witnesses Claudius kneeling and assumes that he is seeking divine forgiveness for killing King Hamlet (though, ironically, this is something Claudius realizes he cannot ask for). This worries Hamlet who allegedly does not want to murder Claudius only for him to be sent to heaven, a fate which he sees as better than life. Instead, Hamlet insists that it is better to wait and kill Claudius when

he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed,  
At game, a-swearing, or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in 't (3.3.94-97).

However, Hamlet's murder in the following scene contradicts this statement, revealing its excusatory or insincere nature.

In act 3 scene 4, Hamlet blindly murders Polonius through a tapestry. He asks, "Is it the King?" (line 32), suggesting that the death of Polonius is a case of mistaken identity. In lines 38 and 39 this is confirmed as Hamlet pulls back the tapestry, sees Polonius, and says, "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell. / I took thee for thy better" (meaning Claudius). Here, Hamlet rashly murders based upon on his own agitation in the moment. This contradicts his earlier statement about wanting to kill Claudius in a moment of great sin – listening in on a conversation might be unethical, but is certainly not an action that "has no relish of salvation in 't." Hamlet's actions show his capriciousness, lack of clarity, and indecisiveness when it comes to revenge.

In returning to act 3 scene 3, another key feature that stands out is the setting's overt openness. Hamlet has already used "The Mousetrap" as a test to judge Claudius' guilt, and he is – for the first time – alone with an unaware Claudius. While Claudius kneels, Hamlet is thus presented with the most logical opportunity to confront or kill him. The threat of collateral damage to others is at its lowest, and Hamlet could potentially leave with his own life. Notably, this chance does not come again. Due to Hamlet's inability to decisively act or take others into account, six other deaths eventually occur while seeking revenge (two by his own hands, two by his own words, and two by positions based upon his actions).

Another helpful way to examine Hamlet's indecisiveness is to compare it with Laertes' revenge arc. Laertes differs from Hamlet in that he seeks revenge unscrupulously; he is

quite willing (from the beginning) to be condemned to Hell in order to achieve it. When he first learns about his father's murder, he exclaims,

To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!  
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!  
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,  
That both the worlds I give to negligence,  
Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged  
Most thoroughly for my father. (4.5.149-154)

In contrast to Hamlet, Laertes does not pause to question whether the information Claudius gives him is true, whether Hamlet will go to heaven or hell after death, or even whether it is morally right to kill Hamlet – it is what he *must* do.

However, by act 5 scene 2, Laertes' decisiveness proves to be a poor model. After realizing that the King is responsible for the death of the Queen, Laertes sees how his deterministic and revengeful rage was foolish. While both he and Hamlet are dying, he says, "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet. / Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, / Nor thine on me (5.2.361-63). Laertes realizes his mistake and must ultimately seek forgiveness for his actions (along with exculpating Hamlet from his crimes).

In light of this, one might see Hamlet's so-called indecisiveness as prudent independent thought-processing. Hamlet is willing to question whether or not he has the right to kill Claudius, a thought no one else asks in their revenge narratives. While Laertes damns "[c]onscience and grace, to the profoundest pit," Hamlet seems to be more humble in his view of revenge. Even after Hamlet knows Claudius is treacherous, he still asks, "is 't not perfect conscience / To quit [Claudius] with this arm? And is 't not to be damned / To let this canker of our nature come / In further evil?" (5.2.75-80). Because of this, critics such as I. Wertzman see Hamlet as a heroic figure, a "titan of conscience" (qtd. in Mendel 736), who should be praised rather than viewed negatively as an unsure prince.

Hamlet's hesitation to kill is also praised when compared to his family's instinct for violence. For example, King Hamlet kills many in his war with Norway – including the Norwegian King Fortinbras – and Claudius murders his own brother for power. As a member of such a family, one may see it as remarkable that Hamlet considers the morality of murder at all. In choosing to keep an open mind towards death and killing, Hamlet thus represents “[c]onscience, doubt, free thought, and essential alienation from a corrupt and oppressive society” (Mendel 743). Though Hamlet eventually murders Claudius, supporters of this perspective claim he does so *deliberately* to rid Elsinore of a corrupt ruler who has just murdered a second family member.

In response to this perspective, I will briefly question Hamlet's deliberateness. By looking at the sequence leading up to the murder, one may notice that it is primarily instigated by others. Hamlet does take a decisive step in killing Claudius (and Laertes), but it is not the first step in the sequence. Only after witnessing his mother being poisoned, and suffering from poison himself, does he choose to kill Claudius. This looks similar to Hamlet's killing of Polonius – he finds himself in an aggravating or tense situation and acts rashly. Hypothetically, if Hamlet was not stabbed nor is mother poisoned, there is a very plausible ending in which Hamlet again chooses to avoid murdering Claudius further continuing the cycle of indecision (and possibly cause even more deaths as he contemplates his options).

Hamlet's decisions throughout the play are rarely concrete. From the ghost's commission to murder Claudius until that murder takes place, Hamlet cannot clearly decide what vengeance should look like. While some applaud Hamlet for independently doubting the question of regicide, the six unnecessary deaths surrounding his indecision stand out to me. Hamlet may question killing Claudius, but the inability to clearly make up his mind leads

him to kill two others while simultaneously influencing the death of another four. In Act 3 Scene 3, Hamlet is presented with a clear moment to either confront or murder Claudius with as little collateral damage as possible; nevertheless, he chooses to ignore it based on shaky claims and leaves murder for another time.

#### Works Cited

- Mendel, Arthur P. "Hamlet and Soviet Humanism." *Slavic Review*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1971, pp. 733-747.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* from The Folger Shakespeare. Ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library, November 16, 2022. <https://shakespeare.folger.edu>