**Question #2**

*NB: in your essay, you are required to illustrate your answer with at least two explicit references to the text of the play (using act, scene and line numbers, e.g. 2.2.236-251) either in the New Oxford Shakespeare database (accessible through the LIMO catalogue) or in the version/translation of your choice. Please indicate which version you used at the end of your essay.*

*2. Sir Laurence Olivier’s famous 1948 film Hamlet opened with the words: “This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind” (compare with Meyerhold’s view below, question 3). Is this borne out by your reading of the play? Discuss two passages which, to your mind, best confirm and contradict that view of Hamlet’s tragic flaw (viz. one passage in support and one passage against)*

**Passage 1: Support (He cannot make up his mind)**

* 3.3.77-101
* I choose this passage as one that demonstrates he *cannot* make up his mind. I do think it is one of the more complex passages and can be interpreted either way. On the one hand, Hamlet methodically reasons out why this isn’t a good time to kill Claudius – he doesn’t want him to be killed right after praying; he’d rather have him full of sin so that he goes to Hell after death.
* However, I think that is more of an excuse and more illogical than logical:
  + If Claudius has prayed and asked forgiveness for killing Hamlet’s father, then he will not be judged for that if Hamlet is to kill him later. And the states he wishes to catch him in (“drunk asleep,” “rage,” or “incestuous pleasure”) are hardly acts that would have sent him to hell without the chance of salvation; note that “incestuous pleasure” refers to Claudius’ marriage to the Queen, which would have most likely been acceptable by the Church (EX: looking at Old Testament law, it would have even been encouraged).
* Additionally, if we look at how he kills Polonius (who he thinks is the King), he clearly *doesn’t* wait to kill him during a moment of sin; he stabs behind the current without directly knowing who he is even killing. Hamlet cannot make up his mind in how he even wants the king to die; one moment he wants it to happen while he sees Claudius sinning, and the next he attempts to kill who he thinks is the king without even seeing his face.
* Even after killing Polonius, when is Mother asks “O me, what hast thou done?”, Hamlet responds “Nay, I know not. Is it the King?” (3.4.31-32)
* His reaction to this killing is just as indecisive.
* With Polonius, Hamlet struggles in identifying who he exactly is throughout the play. Before the “The Mousetrap” is performed, Hamlet speaks kindly with him about acting. But later, at Polonius’ death, he seems to absolutely despise him. This spite isn’t even final; when the Queen describes how Hamlet killed Polonius to Claudius, she says she saw him crying as he moved the body.

**Passage 2 (Against Hamlet as indecisive)**

* 5.2.352-363
* In this passage, Hamlet is finally able to take his revenge by killing Claudius. He kills Claudius by both stabbing him and making him drink the poison.
* This act of killing almost seems to be an overcompensation for any lack of decisions earlier – in stabbing Claudius with a poison blade, that would have been enough; yet, he is so determined that Claudius must die, he also forces the poison drink down his throat.
* Earlier in this scene, Hamlet also seeks some forgiveness from Laertes by explaining his “madness.” While this doesn’t excuse his earlier behavior, one might say he was not inherently indecisive, rather just “under a spell” of grief from his father’s death (causing a range of strange and violent behaviors and actions).

**Miscellaneous**

* Hamlet cannot make up his mind in how he views people: Key Example is Ophelia
* At one moment, he is writing Ophelia strong love notes; in the next, he is chastising her (even verbally abusing her) and telling her he does not love her. Then, at the performance of “The Mousetrap,” he makes lots of sexual jokes around her, saying he would rather sit near her than the queen, and asking if he can “lie in [her] lap” (3.2.19). Then again, at her burial he says he loved her.
* At times, Hamlet suggests that this indecision (and “madness”) is of a plan – that he is not crazy at all. When speaking with the Queen he says he is “mad in craft,” possibly suggesting that craziness and indecisiveness is part of an act (3.4.210).
* When speaking about where Polonius’ body is, Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to go alone, then changes his mind and says he will go with them (turning it into a game) (4.3.31-32)
* Hamlet’s reflection on the Norwegian army is interesting… He says, “O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!” (4.5.68-69). That doesn’t seem true, as he does other things (even somewhat doubting or looking for reassurance if he should kill Claudius later when speaking with Horatio).
* Answer to Guildenstern at one point: “My wit’s diseased” (3.2.349-350).
* Discussion over temperature with Osric

**Text Used: Folger Shakespeare Edition**

* 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>

Hamlet’s indecisiveness towards revenge expands beyond act 3. In act 4, Hamlet questions his efforts after speaking to Fortinbras’ Captain and witnessing the determination Fortinbras’ brings to avenging his own father. In an effort to strengthen a confident, decisive self-image, Hamlet exclaims, “from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!” (4.4.68-69). But this steadfastness does not last long; later, when speaking with Horatio in act 5, Hamlet is again conflicted on whether he should kill Claudius or not. He asks, “is ’t not perfect conscience / To quit him 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). Interestingly, Horatio does not give him a way out by answering the question.