
A Comparative Analysis of Claudius and Hamlet

To See or Not To See: The Hero-Villain Dichotomy in Hamlet

Shakespeare's Hamlet is a play with few unambiguous revelations of motive or deed. However, after three acts of intimations, suspicions, and accusals, the freshly crowned King Claudius finally and conclusively reveals that he has killed his own brother. His "O my offence is rank" soliloquy would appear to confirm our assumption of Claudius as villain and Hamlet as victim that is supported throughout the earlier acts. And, in fact, it does. However, to say that is all that it does would be to overlook a profoundly pivotal moment of the play. On the surface, this scene seems to support the previously established hero-villain dichotomy. On a deeper level, it showcases for the first time the parallel indecisiveness of the two men. While it doesn't quite reverse their previous characterizations, it does place Hamlet's fatal flaw within Claudius to erode our understanding of their roles and alter culpability for the destruction of the kingdom. Precisely because Hamlet cannot recognize this fatal flaw of indecision within himself, he cannot see through the appearance of piety to recognize the flaw within Claudius, perpetuating a limbo of inaction.

The most conspicuous similarity between Claudius and Hamlet is their indecisiveness. The king cannot force himself to feel remorse, even though he wants to: "Like a man to double business bound," he tells us, "I stand in pause where I shall first begin, / And both neglect" (III.iii.41-43). He is "bound" to be trapped in this moral dilemma, unable to escape despite his own volition, just as Hamlet is indecisive about whether or not to avenge his father. In fact, Hamlet's indecision for vengeance reaches a crisis immediately after these lines. "Now I'll don't [kill Claudius]" (III.iii.74) he declares. He then analyzes his decision and lays out the consequence: "I, his sole son, do this same villain send / To heaven" (III.iii.76-77). The dawning of this realization leads to a line devoid of four full iambs. Such a pregnant silence, more than words ever could, betrays his vacillation. He then asks whether he might kill the king now, answering with a simple yet emphatic "No!" (III.iii.87). This exclamation also takes up an entire line by itself. Taken together these silences make his response seem stuttered, unbalanced, and unfinished. Hamlet's inability to verbalize his predicament parallels his loss of moral clarity.

While the nature of their indecision differs – Claudius' irresolution occurs after his murder of the king, while Hamlet's occurs before the fact – the reasoning behind it is the same. Both fear damnation and divine judgement, two factors that terrify them to the point of moral inertia. Claudius bemoans the fact that in heaven "the action lies / In his true nature" (III.iii.61-62), with no gilded hand to fool justice like there is on earth. Although Hamlet cannot hear Claudius, he responds almost as if he could, asking "who knows save heaven?" of Claudius' judgement. Even Hamlet's earlier speech discloses this terror of the unknown: "Who would bear the whips and scorns of time, ... / But the dread of something after death" (III.i.72-80). In fact, both Claudius and Hamlet attribute their actions to outside forces to try to explain their indecision and loss of agency. Claudius gives his offences form: they have a "visage" (III.iii.47) and a "gilded hand" (III.iii.58). He makes them out to be living, breathing entities, so that he deflects blame, victimizes himself, and transfers agency onto his crimes. Hamlet also chooses to explain away his inaction in this manner. "Conscience does make cowards of us all" (III.i.85) he tells us, arguing that cowardice is not a personal fault but instead is intrinsic to the machinations of the

mind and thus an inevitable state of being. This loss of agency also signals the rejection of responsibility and ability, preventing them from escaping this limbo of doing/not doing and seeing/not seeing. Hamlet foreshadows this two scenes earlier when he says that with awareness of death, “currents turn awry and lose the name of action”, not only suggesting that he will remain inactive but also that he will purposefully attempt to lose the name of action. This scene is the tipping point, the culminating moment after which there is no hope for “finding” action.

In the end, however, the responsibility for their actions lies with them. Hamlet knows that Claudius is guilty. Yet he operates under the false assumption that the appearance of Claudius’ repentance (the physical act) must therefore equate to a mental state of true repentance. Claudius’ pantomime of a prayer fools him. He can’t recognize that Claudius is only acting remorseful, not that he is actually remorseful. This is ironic in two parts. First, in the opening scenes of the play, Gertrude asks Hamlet why his father’s death affects him so much. “Why seems it so particular with thee?” (I.ii.74-75) she probes. He responds with “Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not ‘seems’” (I.ii.76). Hamlet is far too confident in his ability to both project and detect truth. Of everyone in the play, he should be the most aware of duplicitous states, considering how he himself decides put on an “antic disposition” to trick others. Yet his own lack of resolution seems to blind him to the reality of Claudius’ guilt. Claudius even references physical changes that expose sinners in the physical world. He claims his heart is made of “strings of steel” and orders “bow, stubborn knees” (III.iii.70). He links wicked deeds with the corruption of one’s physical body, much like Wilde would write almost three hundred years later in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Even with these intimations that he has been marked by his murder, Hamlet accepts Claudius’ remorse at face value. His resolution to once again wait to kill Claudius suggests a profound lack of self-awareness, not just of the parallels of their dilemmas but also any awareness of his own situation in the first place. His inability to perceive his own flaw within Claudius means the further perpetuation of their conflict.

This is why the scene paradoxically is not the one that presents Claudius in the most villainous light, even though it names Claudius as the murderer. In the first two acts, Hamlet’s characterization is driven by his presentation as the most authentic and perceptive character. However, immediately after Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius because he would go to heaven, Claudius delivers the damning last lines of the scene: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (III.iii.97-98). We’re forced to ask, if Hamlet is so perceptive that he claims to know not even the word “seems”, why does he fail to grasp that Claudius is only presenting a facade much in the same way he is? If Hamlet is so authentic, why doesn’t he truly know himself? If Hamlet’s defining characteristic is not his authenticity but instead his doubt, why should we accept him as the arbiter of justice and Claudius as the ruination of the court?

Ultimately, by presenting the duality of Claudius’ emotional state, the scene throws into relief Hamlet’s own inability to act. Illuminating the similarities between the “villain” and the “hero,” the prayer speech equates the two characters’ moral positions, forcing readers and viewers to reevaluate the role of each. Thus the scene represents the damning moment of the play: because Hamlet cannot recognize his struggles in others, neither he nor Claudius will be able to escape the cycle that will lead to the devastation of their kingdom.