

## Unforgiven

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In William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, the title character is charged by a ghost purporting to be his murdered father the King with exacting revenge upon the one who allegedly did the deed, the new King Claudius, Hamlet's uncle. The question of whether Hamlet is ultimately "successful in assuming the role of God's avenger, untainted and uncorrupted by the bloody vengeance that he seeks" can be answered thusly: whatever else Hamlet is, he is a murderer. He's at least partly to blame, directly or indirectly, for the deaths of the courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, court counsel Polonius and his two children Laertes and Ophelia, his mother the Queen Gertrude, and the aforementioned Claudius. A man who leaves that many dead in his wake can hardly be judged a "righteous avenger" free of taint.

It's my contention that the point at which Hamlet accepts the assertions of the ghost as indisputable truth is the precise point at which he surrenders all claims to the moral high ground. At this juncture in the play -- Act 1, Scene 5 -- there is absolutely no hard evidence that Claudius is in fact the man responsible for his father's death. When the ghost unfurls its story of how the elder Hamlet was poisoned while sleeping by his brother, Hamlet fails to ask even one incredulous question or probe further for some kind of objective proof. He greets the revelation not with shocked surprise but instead as a confirmation. "O, my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (1.5, line 42) Hamlet cries, as if he suspected as much all along. Actually, the young Prince has been nursing a grudge against Claudius from our first acquaintance with him. When the new King addresses him as "my cousin Hamlet, and my son," his snide rejoinder is "a little more than kin, and less than kind." (1.2, line 64) Later, he soliloquizes on the unseemly haste with which his mother Gertrude the Queen has married Claudius the "satyr" while his father lies "but two months dead -- nay, not so much, not two." (1.2, 138, 140) It's possible therefore that Hamlet, sick with grief over his father's passing and deeply hurt at his mother's swift remarriage (in an act tantamount to abandonment), may allow himself to be deceived into murder by the ghost. It's never conclusively proven that the ghost is that of Hamlet's dead father; he could be the devil himself for all we know. Yet Hamlet isn't interested in the truth of the matter, only in hearing what he wants to hear. Whatever the motives of the ghost, Hamlet makes a *conscious choice* to accept its mandate, though another course of action was surely

available. To me, this demonstrates a predisposition to act the way he subsequently does, and marks him not as God's untainted avenger but as a reckless, self-absorbed young man consumed with hatred and bent on revenge, regardless of the consequences.

The first person to suffer those consequences is the octogenarian court counselor Polonius, who seeks to ascertain the reason behind Hamlet's increasingly erratic behavior in the aftermath of his encounter with the ghost. Previously, Polonius had instructed his daughter Ophelia to reject the romantic advances of the Prince, and by Act 2, Scene 2, he is convinced that this is the reason for Hamlet's "madness." (86-150) Later in the same scene, Polonius attempts to draw Hamlet into conversation to substantiate his theory, but finds himself on the receiving end of a thinly-veiled personal attack instead. Hamlet, his words fairly dripping with disdain, says he knows that "old men (like Polonius) "have beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams." (198-201) There is a desire to injure in these words, a compulsion to strike out against a relatively impotent adversary -- after all, Polonius isn't the object of the ghost's edict, Claudius is -- that ill-befits a righteous avenger of God. In Act 3, Scene 4, Hamlet mistakes Polonius for Claudius hiding behind a curtain in his mother's bedroom, stabbing and killing him. His reaction to this unexpected turn of events speaks volumes about a self-righteousness, a lack of remorse for the disastrous results of his actions, that borders on amorality: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune. Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger." (32-34) Later he adds, "this counselor is now most still, most secret, and most grave, who was in life a foolish prating knave." (220-222) What is Hamlet's moral justification for this murder? "I must be cruel only to be kind," (185) he says, pointing to the slain Polonius, as if no further explanation were necessary. Clearly, the Prince is unperturbed about the effect Polonius' death will have on his children. Rather, Hamlet is thinking only of Hamlet (and, perhaps, Claudius); not Polonius' fragile daughter Ophelia, nor his absent son Laertes, not anyone, save himself. How can a man who thinks and behaves as Hamlet does be viewed as anything *like* a spotless avenger?

If further proof of the tragic repercussions of Hamlet's actions is required, one need look only to the sorry end that Ophelia comes to. A sweet and servile daughter used to the guidance of a protective father, Ophelia is the most innocent (indeed, the least "tainted") character in the play, and her father's death drives her to madness. (Act 4, Scene 5) She wanders about speaking gibberish, singing songs that appear to make no sense, and bestowing flowers upon the King, the Queen, and her brother Laertes, who has returned upon the news of Polonius' demise. Although much earlier Hamlet had sought, unsuccessfully, to woo Ophelia, and subsequently revealed "I did

love you once" (3.1 line 116), after he murders Polonius he sails for England at the behest of Claudius with nary a thought for her. At no time between the killing and the time he leaves does he publicly state his concern for her welfare. He simply leaves, his thoughts more occupied with the King's ulterior motives than Ophelia's state of mind. By the time he makes it back to Denmark and learns of her death by drowning, any kind words or declarations of eternal love ring hollow. The text of the play leaves open the possibility that Ophelia died not by accident but rather committed suicide. Whatever the case, it never even occurs to Hamlet that his murder of Polonius led directly to Ophelia's insanity and her death shortly thereafter.

In fact, when he sees Laertes leap into Ophelia's grave and embrace her, he steps forward to proclaim:

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers  
Could not with all their quantity of love  
Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?  
Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast? Woo't tear  
thyself?  
Woo't drink up eisel? Eat a crocodile?  
I'll do't. Dost come here to whine?  
To outface me with leaping in her grave? (5.1 272-274, 278-281)

With pathological narcissism Hamlet reduces the death of an innocent victim of his rash behavior and the anguish of her grieving brother to a referendum on who feels the greater sorrow. Once again, the selfishness so central to his character comes to the fore, while he remains completely oblivious to the suffering he's caused. Following this display, Hamlet relates to Horatio how the King supplied unsuspecting courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with papers instructing the English authorities to put him to death. Having expected this, Hamlet disposed of the original papers and replaced them with orders to kill the men bearing them, i.e. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When Horatio expresses qualms about the murder of two men who had no real complicity in the King's machinations, Hamlet responds with cavalier indifference, "Why, man, they did make love to this employment. They are not near my conscience. Their defeat does by their own insinuation grow," and with more than a touch of megalomania, "'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes between the pass and fell incensed points of mighty opposites." (5.2, 57-61) Courtiers are fools and those two got what they deserved, Hamlet is saying; they never should have gotten in my way to begin with. His attitude makes plain that whatever pretensions he might have had toward being heaven's holy scourge, they've been irrevocably lost for quite some time.

The only thing left to do is to justify himself, either through words or action. Having agreed to a fencing match with Laertes engineered by Claudius (who, with Laertes consent, has seen to it that both Laertes rapier and Hamlet's refreshments during the event are poisoned), Hamlet seeks forgiveness from the son of Polonius for the scene he created at Ophelia's grave. Incredibly, he fobs off that offense by pleading madness:

Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.  
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,  
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,  
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.  
Who does it, then? His madness. If't be so,  
Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged;  
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.  
Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil  
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts... (5.2, 231-240)

One can make the case that Hamlet, fully aware of Claudius' desire to be rid of him and suspecting some kind of plot connected with the match, may realize that either he or Laertes will be dead when it's over, maybe even both of them. For that reason Hamlet might be looking for absolution from Laertes for all that's happened *and* for the very real possibility that the one he now calls "brother" will die at his hands. The two engage each other, and the envenomed foil wounds first Hamlet and then, in the heat of the exchange, Laertes. Both men begin to succumb to the poison, but not before the Queen, having imbibed from Hamlet's cup, falls to the floor dead. Laertes tells Hamlet about the King's scheme, and Hamlet runs Claudius through with the lethal rapier. Then, for good measure, he forces the King to drink from the poisoned cup, whereupon Claudius dies. Though from the very beginning Hamlet has wanted his uncle dead, the fact that he "kills him twice," as it were, and with such vehemence, may be indicative of a desire for something more than retribution. The devastating toll in human life Hamlet's revenge fantasy has produced may have finally dawned on him, and along with that realization, an understanding of the guilt he must bear. By the end of the play there's an awful lot of blood on his hands, and in dramatically killing Claudius the "incestuous, murderous, damned Dane" at long last, Hamlet might be attempting to wash a little of it off. "Horatio, I am dead," he says, "report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied," (5.2, 340-342) trying to justify what he's done yet, true to form, still believing it was the right thing to do.

Throughout much of this play Hamlet makes others pay for the pain he feels, whether they are culpable in his eyes or not. He is self-centered, arrogant, and out of control, either unable or unwilling to see the carnage his actions have wrought. It's true that he's in a state of hysterical shock over his father's death, and it's equally true that all signs of malfeasance lead to his uncle, Claudius. Yet even granted these factors, in the final analysis his conduct cannot be excused. The end, however richly deserved, does not justify the means; in fact, in larger terms, the means *are* the end. When the methods toward a given goal are compromised, the goal itself is corrupted. Which brings me to my final point; Hamlet could never hope to emerge from his exploits unscathed, because murder, committed once or a thousand times, is a fundamentally aberrant act, "tainted" by its very nature. It doesn't matter that Claudius, for one, probably deserved to die -- it only matters that the decision to end his life was not Hamlet's to make. If the Prince expected a pat on the back from God, I fear he was greatly mistaken. The Biblical phrase "vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord" is an oft-quoted line for a reason, and it's unfortunate in the extreme for all concerned that Hamlet chose to ignore that advice.

**Work Cited:**

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