

HAMLET'S ADMIRABLE DELAY

Student: Mara McCain

Hamlet's inability to make the snap judgment necessary to kill Claudius has often been cited as the reason for the tragic end to the play. "Surely," most people will say, "if he had acted immediately then Act V wouldn't end in a pile of corpses." They ignore the fact that Hamlet's agonizing internal debate over the proper course of action is correct and necessary; his more than reasonable doubts as to the veracity of the Ghost, his distaste for acting through passion instead of reason, and the actions of chance and hostile parties, all combined with almost unbearable pressure to make the right choice leave him for most of the play apparently paralyzed. Hamlet is not the master of his own fate, able to choose his own destiny, and therefore is not the cause of the bloodbath of the final scenes. Hamlet is an intelligent, capable young man confronted with an enormous responsibility, conflicted with divided loyalties and told different versions of the same truth. While random events and his enemies conspire against him he is expected in some quarters to solve the crime, save the fair maiden, slay the dragon, and reduce the deficit, all with a snap of his fingers. It is the purpose of this essay to defend Hamlet's actions as his only rational choice, and to acquit him and his "indecision" of the full burden of blame.

Hamlet's internal debate is, to a great extent, a product of his character. Hamlet is the very heart and soul of honesty, rationality and fairness. He admires truth above all else. "I know not seems, (I, ii)" he says, and this affection for the truth alone informs all his decisions. He reviles himself for his inability to act immediately upon the Ghost's command, but he knows he cannot act hastily. Hamlet is aware, as was the Elizabethan audience, that ghosts are not necessarily forces of good, no matter what they look like. "The spirit I have seen may be a devil...(II,ii)" in disguise, luring him into murder and destruction. Hamlet kicks himself for his cowardice, but he knows that the proper course is unknown, and the possible consequences are enormous. After all, this is the king, as well as a relative, and someone with Hamlet's respect for justice must take that seriously. Despite his feelings to the contrary, he is correct to make sure of the messenger before believing the message. Any thoughtful person should be expected to question as Hamlet does.

Hamlet is a young man for whom reason and truth are paramount. As he says to Horatio, "Give me that man that is not passion's slave, and I will wear him in my heart's core...(III,ii)". He is university educated, fond of books and reading, and his conversation is that of a very literate individual. He bewails his lack of courage throughout the play. "I am pigeon-livered and lack gall, (II,ii)" he says. He praises Fortinbras for his strength in defending his father. He admires the Player for his ability to act purely from passion. "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I! (II,ii)" he cries. But, is he sincere in his hatred of his supposed cowardice, and is it even cowardice at all? I believe it is only prudence, and admirable. To act purely from the whim of the moment would be more dangerous and rash than sensible. I believe that it is a mistake to take Hamlet's self-criticism at face value. He courageously meets his problems head-on, in the only way he can. He solves his dilemma, in the manner of a scientist or modern detective, by devising an experiment to prove or disprove his hypothesis. This

experiment is the play within a play of Act III, and results in confirming the Ghost's testimony. Sure of his course at last, Hamlet prepares himself to act. "Now could I drink hot blood (III,ii)," he says, and leaves for Gertrude's room prepared to deliver justice.

When Hamlet finally steels his resolve, and sets out upon his revenge, random chance and the actions of Claudius prevent him from making a speedy and clean end of things, and lead to the tragedy of the ending. Hamlet comes upon Claudius shortly after the play within a play, and is ready to dispense punishment, but Claudius happens to be praying. Hamlet won't kill him in that situation, when Claudius has made his peace with God, and retires to find a better moment. In Gertrude's bed chamber Hamlet kills Polonius, mistakenly. From his words after the killing it is obvious Hamlet thought he was killing Claudius. "Is it the King? (III,iv)" he asks. "I took thee for thy better," he says to the corpse. These actions alone should dispel all thought of Hamlet as a dithering fool, unable to act. He has reasoned, tested to see what the correct action is, and then acted. Only chance, chance that the King was praying, chance that it was Polonius behind the arras, has to this point kept Hamlet's revenge from consummation.

After the King takes action to protect himself Hamlet's difficulties increase. He is sent out of Elsinore to England, and barely escapes with his life. While he is escaping from pirates and trying to return to Denmark Ophelia kills herself, fueling Laertes' desire for revenge, and handing Claudius an opportunity for a preemptive strike against Hamlet, who he now knows is only feigning madness. This attack on Hamlet, while backfiring horribly and giving Hamlet his chance to finally avenge his father, also kills Gertrude, Laertes, and the Prince.

Hamlet has unfairly taken the blame for the casualty count in the play for far too long, even becoming almost a metaphor for indecision. In the early stages of the last Presidential campaign Mario Cuomo was referred to as "The Hamlet of the Hudson" for his wavering on running or not running. However, Hamlet's actions, while perhaps not those of Clint Eastwood or the Terminator, are the only actions a reasonable man in his position could have taken. It is not an easy thing to kill one's uncle and king, merely on the word of a phantom of uncertain source and motive, but Hamlet shoulders his burden, investigates his facts, and once his case is proven acts accordingly. He is thwarted nearly until the end, but he has made a decision. A case might be made arguing Hamlet's lack of skill, although I don't see why killing a powerful king should be easy, but Hamlet's delay in reaching a decision is nothing less than admirable.