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Revenge or Scruples?

"'Vengeance is mine,' sayith the Lord". What does this mean? I believe what the Christians meant it to mean is that we, as humans, have no right to seek revenge, that only "the Lord" has the right to decide when to take revenge. We say this, but do we follow it? No, I think not. We all try to take revenge into our own hands, in one form or another.

Revenge is one strong theme that holds throughout "Hamlet". We see Prince Hamlet try to execute a kind of private vengeance, an eye for an eye, which is completely opposite of the Christian teachings. Hamlet is a man who believes in heaven and hell and who feels that a man who challenges divine ordinance will ultimately face judgment. We might look at the ghost of the late king Hamlet as the part of us that wants to take vengeance into our own minds. Like the little voice in our heads that tells us to do something, when in our hearts we know it is wrong.

When Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus tell Hamlet of their sighting of the ghost, Hamlet agrees to join them that night and see if he can observe the ghost firsthand and possibly speak with it. That night when Horatio, Marcellus, and Hamlet sight the ghost, it beckons Hamlet to leave the other two and speak to it in privacy. Hamlet follows, despite the protests of the others, who fear it may be an evil spirit, disguising as King Hamlet in order to gain their trust. Horatio suggests that it may lead him astray and then "assume some other horrible form / Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason / And draw you into madness..." (I, iv, 80-82). Hamlet insists on listening to the message of the ghost. Although he does not state it, perhaps Hamlet subconsciously considers that Horatio is right, that the ghost is indeed a false messenger sent to trouble him.

Hamlet does not kill Claudius immediately following his encounter with the ghost because he is unsure of the ghost's accusations of Claudius and does not want to murder him without proper motive. Hamlet would suffer in the eyes of the people if he were to murder Claudius, the reigning king, and claim his motive was the words of a ghost. Hamlet already disapproves of Claudius due to his marriage to Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, so soon after the death of her first husband, King Hamlet. Prince Hamlet feels that the widow did not sufficiently mourn and that the marriage is incestuous due to the relation between the late husband and the new groom. The timing of the marriage causes Hamlet to suspect that Claudius and Gertrude had an affair during her marriage with King Hamlet. Despite this, most Danes see nothing wrong with the marriage and express no suspicions about King Hamlet's death. Because he must expose Claudius's murder of King Hamlet in order to legitimize his own murder of Claudius, Hamlet can not immediately kill Claudius and explain his motive later, once he is guilty of murder. He must first find proof that Claudius did in fact do wrong that brought about his father's death.

Some of Hamlet's opportunities for killing King Claudius are poorly timed, most notably following Claudius's expression of alarm after watching an enactment of the murder of Gonzago. This is a time when Claudius's image has been tarnished and the people may be suspicious of him in connection to the death of King Hamlet. However, when Hamlet goes to the royal chambers to confront him, but finds Claudius kneeling in prayer.

Now might I do it, now he is a-praying,

And now I'll do 't. And so he goes to heaven,
And so am I revenged. That would be scanned:
A villain kills my father, and for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
He took my father grossly, full of bread,
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven.
But in our circumstance and course of thought
'Tis heavy with him. And am I then revenged
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?
No.
Up sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.
(III, iii, 77-93)

Hamlet decides that if he were to kill Claudius during prayer, Claudius would be sent to heaven, which would not be the proper revenge he seeks, so instead, Hamlet decides to wait and take his life at a time he is in sin. Hamlet hesitates and analyses the situation of each assassination opportunity in a likewise manner. Instead of simply acting on an opportunity he considers each consequence of the timing and circumstances; each time he decides, "The time is out of joint" (I, v, 210).

After promising his father's ghost that he will gain revenge on Claudius for the "foul and most unnatural murder" (I, v, 31), Hamlet lets opportunities to murder Claudius pass by, waiting for a time when all will realize he is right in the act so that Claudius will die in shame. He hesitates because he is unsure the ghost was indeed his father's ghost, he can not be sure that Claudius did murder King Hamlet, and because there are times when Claudius's soul and/or public image would benefit from Hamlet's deed, thus he would not die a villain's shameful death. In the end Hamlet does accomplish this goal of revenge and Claudius is known to be the villain, but due to the delay in the murder, both Hamlet and his mother, Queen Gertrude, also join the two kings among the realm of the deceased.

I believe that humans have a craving for revenge and this unquenchable thirst is depicted in "Hamlet". But I do not feel that anyway, man or god, has the right to take revenge. I believe that this is one wall that Humanity must climb before it is to reach the next plain of evolution. We need to look past what others do and try to show them why it is wrong and how they not only hurt others, but themselves as well. When we become one as the human race, then we shall be able to move out of the rut we have been in for centuries. "How we approach other people determines how quickly we evolve, how quickly our life questions are answered. You must be completely open as are the people who bring you messages. They will help you by opening you up. And they will fill you with warmth and energy."
(The Celestine Prophecy) I do not remember seeing Hamlet trying to understand his step-father, nor did he try to help him see what he had done wrong. No, he only saw anger and hatred. He let this hatred eat him inside and control his actions. So I see "Hamlet" as a reflection of the rut that humanity is stuck in. So I now end with this one question; "do two wrongs equal a right one?"

