

Comparison of Two Soliloquies in Hamlet- "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I", and "How all occasions do inform against me"

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Humanities 121-003

There is an important relationship between these two soliloquies in that they show the evolution of Hamlet's character in a predictable and yet disturbing way. Both contain desperate language- not just desperate to uncover the truth of what happened to his father, but also desperately seeking the willpower to actually take action, especially if that action must involve avenging his father's death. However, this is also where the soliloquies diverge - he at first resolves to pursue the matter without remarking on the implications of discovering that his uncle had actually killed his father- "the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king!"¹- but later, upon discovering his uncle's apparent guilt, he then decides to take action- and condemns himself for failing to act sooner- "Sure, he that made us with such large discourse, looking before and after, gave us not that capability and god-like reason to fust in us unused." (pg. 80)- in other words, Hamlet mockingly acknowledges that God didn't give him reason to be left unused and unaccounted for. It is only in the second soliloquy that Hamlet decides to be truly honest with himself- and mentally prepare to exact revenge on his murderous uncle. The easily overlooked omission from the first soliloquy

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, as found in Experience Humanities Volume II, ed. By Roy T. Matthews, F. DeWitt Platt, McGraw Hill, New York, N.Y., 2014.

of mentioning the potential bloodshed that would be required of him if his uncle was found guilty is a symptom of Hamlet's avoidance of the true nature of the issue- a naiveté which comes to be shattered in soliloquy two. He mentions the idea of revenge in soliloquy one- "O, vengeance!...that I, the son of a dear father murder'd, prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell..." (pg. 65), but he avoids mentioning the *method* of revenge, which is to ultimately kill his uncle, until soliloquy two.

In soliloquy two, Hamlet even compares himself to a worthless animal for tarrying so long in his vengeance- "How all occasions do inform against me, and spur my dull revenge! What is a man, if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more." (pg. 80). In saying this he essentially declares everything he has done up to this point to have been a complete waste of time in order to (unconsciously) delay his killing of his uncle- he may as well have merely been consistently sleeping and eating, or other such inconsequential actions. Also in soliloquy two, Hamlet wonders why his uncle is possibly still alive even after all he has done against his father- especially as by this point, Hamlet has long known what has to be done: "...I do not know why yet I live to say, 'This thing's to do'; sith I have cause and will and strength and means to do 't." (pg. 80). One may notice that although Hamlet may be aware of his cause, will, strength and means, he does not mention the *courage*, or resolve, required of him to exact vengeance on his uncle. Perhaps this is because he knows that his lack of courage is the only good reason to have put off his perceived duty for this long; it is unlikely that he was genuinely perplexed as to his hesitance when he declares "I do not know why yet I live to say..." (pg. 80) , as he does

recognize that his thoughts have been cowardly: "...a thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom and ever three parts coward..." (pg. 80). He is not yet being honest with himself at this point. Nonetheless, by the end of soliloquy two, he (seemingly) finally garners the courage to move on with his plan- "O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (pg. 80).

Is it possible that this sudden epiphany of Hamlet's- that he would have to get his hands bloody if he were to be truly honest with himself- was inspired by a concern Shakespeare may have had? England was living through a period of uncertainty while Shakespeare was alive- and much of the population may have been relatively stagnant, from his point of view, when it came to building a world where they could truly flourish. For example, after the revolutionary effects of the Renaissance began to wear off, Protestants and Catholics continued to war with one another, cutting off further possibility of cultural or social evolution, for the time being. It is possible that Shakespeare was frustrated by this cultural malaise, despite the popularity of his plays; he may have wanted to communicate something deeper than mere tragic and humorous, but otherwise anecdotal, stories. The political turmoil and romantic content of his plays may have filled a subconscious desire to rise up against some power (such as the protestant power that jailed Shakespeare's Catholic father, for example). This desire could have been present in Shakespeare himself as well as in his audiences. However, although Shakespeare was hardly the only Catholic-born citizen to be oppressed by the Protestant community, the messages in Shakespeare go far beyond the religious. In the society of his time, there was little diversion from what one was

born into- if you were born royalty, your power was essentially guaranteed to remain in place, and if you were born a pauper, you had next to no chance of lifting yourself from poverty. Not only that, but different professions were ranked differently, almost as a caste system. Certain professions were the most reviled- prostitution, hard labor (such as builders, farmers, gravediggers), and- surprisingly for our time- actors. All of these groups were the ones most in touch with Shakespeare- he wrote his plays for the common people just as much, if not more, than royalty. It is entirely possible that Shakespeare wrote moments such as Hamlet's heroic epiphany in order to strike a fire under England's disenfranchised - a call to action to both throw off the yolk of oppression and take hold of one's destiny, all hidden behind the guise of entertainment. In addition to this, many of his plays show people of great power and influence falling from grace- this may have been to illustrate the true fickle nature of the ruling class, which conversely must have seemed to the peasantry as something unalterable by nature.

But it is also important to note that Hamlet's intense resolve does not end happily for him- in fact, many of the characters in his plays fall from grace after making difficult personal promises to themselves (Romeo and Juliet are another great example). So what could Shakespeare be telling us if some of these tales of self-reflection end in ruin? Is it possible he is warning against the dangers of *overreaching* in one's efforts to improve one's situation, and that what seems like standing up for oneself in adversity can easily change to obsessive and dangerous compulsion? Of course Hamlet had to take action, but he wasn't going about it in a good way. Acting as though one is mad is

hardly a good decision- let alone killing one's uncle. It would have been better if he had a system of justice he could appeal to (this could also be a message from Shakespeare lamenting the state of England's justice system). In the end, instead of pursuing his goals effectively, Hamlet puts his friends (such as Ophelia, Rosenkranz and Guildenstern), as well as himself, in mortal danger.

In the first soliloquy, Hamlet is sowing the seeds of what will happen later in the play, but he still has his wits about him and, naively, thinks that he is still able to save himself. By the second soliloquy though, he is essentially condemning himself to his fate- by virtue of condemning his uncle to his. Perhaps the play can also be read on another level, where Shakespeare is goading his audiences to take action, and to become responsible for the state of their lives- with the added warning not to put too much trust in bloodshed alone.