

The Controversial Subject Of Revenge In Shakespeare's Hamlet

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Revenge is one of the central problems in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but the play does not present it as a simple moral duty. The Ghost commands Prince Hamlet to avenge the murder of his father, King Hamlet, after revealing that Claudius killed him and seized the throne. From that point, the play asks whether revenge can produce justice or whether it reproduces the violence it seeks to punish. Hamlet delays, investigates, stages a play, confronts his mother, accidentally kills Polonius, and eventually kills Claudius only after the royal court has collapsed into poisoning and death. The original essay correctly identifies revenge as controversial because Hamlet's hesitation makes him appear thoughtful to some readers and weak to others. A stronger interpretation recognizes that delay is part of Shakespeare's ethical design: Hamlet must decide whether the Ghost is trustworthy, whether killing Claudius is morally justified, and what happens when private revenge replaces public law. (Shakespeare, 2012)

The Revenge-Tragedy Tradition

Hamlet belongs to the early modern tradition of revenge tragedy, a genre shaped strongly by Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and by Senecan drama. Typical features include a murdered relative, a demand for revenge, delay, madness or performed madness, spying, a play or spectacle, violence, and a final stage filled with bodies. Shakespeare uses many of these conventions but also questions them. (Kyd, 1989; Woodbridge, 2010)

In a conventional revenge plot, the audience may expect the avenger to identify the guilty person and kill him. Hamlet's situation is more complicated. The alleged victim appears as a ghost, the murderer is the lawful king, and the avenger is a Christian prince whose moral culture condemns murder and suicide. The genre demands action while the play creates reasons to distrust action.

The Ghost's Command

The Ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered King Hamlet by pouring poison into his ear and commands the prince to remember and avenge him. The Ghost also tells Hamlet not to harm Gertrude directly. The scene creates the central obligation of the play, yet Hamlet cannot know immediately whether the apparition is his father, a truthful spirit, a demon, or a psychological deception. (Greenblatt, 2001)

Early modern audiences lived within competing religious beliefs about ghosts. Protestant theology

rejected many Catholic ideas concerning purgatory, while popular culture retained stories of returning spirits. Shakespeare uses this uncertainty to make revenge epistemological: before Hamlet can act justly, he must know what happened and whether the source demanding violence is reliable.

Hamlet's Delay

Hamlet's delay is often treated as a personal defect. He criticizes himself for thinking too much and compares his hesitation with actors, soldiers, and Laertes. Yet delay also prevents immediate murder based solely on supernatural testimony.

Hamlet gathers evidence. He observes Claudius, questions circumstances, and constructs "The Mousetrap," a theatrical reenactment resembling the alleged murder. Claudius's reaction convinces Hamlet that the Ghost spoke truth. Delay therefore serves investigation as well as avoidance.

After receiving confirmation, however, Hamlet still delays. At that stage the problem shifts from knowledge toward morality, opportunity, temperament, and the desire for a punishment greater than simple death.

The Mousetrap

Hamlet asks traveling actors to perform a scene in which a ruler is murdered by poison. He watches Claudius rather than the play itself, hoping guilt will become physically visible. When Claudius interrupts the performance, Hamlet treats the response as confirmation.

The scene demonstrates both intelligence and risk. Theatre becomes an investigative instrument, yet body language is not perfect proof. Hamlet and Horatio interpret Claudius's reaction within expectations already shaped by the Ghost.

Shakespeare also makes drama self-reflective. A fictional performance inside a fictional performance reveals truth more effectively than official political speech. Claudius can control the court, but he cannot comfortably watch a representation of his crime.

Claudius at Prayer

Hamlet finds Claudius apparently praying and has an opportunity to kill him. He refuses because he believes killing Claudius during prayer might send the murderer's soul to heaven. Hamlet wants a punishment equivalent to his father's death, which occurred without time for repentance.

This reasoning complicates claims that Hamlet is simply too moral to kill. At this moment he does not reject revenge because murder is wrong; he wants revenge severe enough to include damnation. The plan exceeds ordinary justice and becomes an attempt to control Claudius's eternal fate.

The irony is that Claudius admits privately that he cannot truly repent because he refuses to surrender the crown and queen gained through murder. Hamlet therefore misses an opportunity partly because he misreads the spiritual situation.

The Killing of Polonius

Hamlet's hesitation disappears suddenly when he hears someone behind the arras in Gertrude's room. He stabs without confirming the person's identity and kills Polonius. The act is one of the play's strongest arguments against the idea that Hamlet's only problem is excessive thought.

When he acts impulsively, he kills the wrong man. The revenge plot spreads to a new family because Laertes now has the same reason Hamlet has: a murdered father. Ophelia loses her father and later dies after psychological collapse.

Private violence therefore multiplies obligations rather than settling them.

Hamlet and Laertes

Laertes functions as a contrast to Hamlet. When he learns of Polonius's death, he returns to Denmark quickly and is willing to confront the king. Claudius redirects that anger toward Hamlet and recruits Laertes into a secret assassination plan.

Laertes's speed initially looks like the decisiveness Hamlet lacks, but his willingness to use a poisoned weapon and participate in deception makes him vulnerable to manipulation. Action without sufficient reflection is no more admirable than endless hesitation.

Before dying, Laertes acknowledges his responsibility and exchanges forgiveness with Hamlet. His recognition comes too late to prevent the deaths produced by revenge.

Fortinbras

Fortinbras provides another contrast. His father was killed by King Hamlet, and he initially seeks to recover territory lost to Denmark. Unlike Hamlet and Laertes, his ambitions are redirected through political negotiation.

Fortinbras later leads troops toward Poland for a small territory, prompting Hamlet to compare his own inaction with military honor. Yet Shakespeare does not straightforwardly endorse the campaign. Thousands of soldiers may risk death over land with little practical value.

At the end, Fortinbras enters a court destroyed by private vengeance and becomes the likely new ruler. Political order survives through someone outside the revenge cycle that consumed the Danish

royal family.

Gertrude and Revenge

The Ghost specifically tells Hamlet to leave Gertrude to heaven and her conscience. Hamlet nevertheless directs substantial anger toward his mother, especially because she remarried quickly.

His confrontation in her chamber becomes verbally violent, and the accidental killing of Polonius occurs during this encounter. The scene shows how revenge against Claudius becomes entangled with Hamlet's feelings about sexuality, family loyalty, and female behavior.

Gertrude eventually drinks the poisoned wine intended for Hamlet and dies. Whether she fully understands Claudius's plot before drinking has been debated, but her death demonstrates that conspiracies rarely remain confined to intended targets.

Ophelia

Ophelia is not responsible for King Hamlet's murder, yet she becomes one of the people most damaged by the revenge plot. Hamlet uses cruelty toward her partly as part of his antic disposition and partly because his distrust of Gertrude appears to expand into distrust of women.

After Hamlet kills Polonius, Ophelia experiences severe grief and psychological disintegration. Her songs express loss, sexuality, betrayal, and death in forms the court cannot easily control.

Her death by drowning deepens Laertes's desire for revenge. The cycle demonstrates that private vengeance creates casualties among people who were never part of the original crime.

Madness and Performance

Hamlet tells Horatio that he may adopt an "antic disposition," suggesting that at least part of his madness is performed. The performance gives him freedom to insult, probe, and confuse people while hiding his investigation.

Yet grief, suicidal thinking, anger, and emotional instability are genuine. The distinction between performance and suffering becomes difficult to maintain. Hamlet may control some behavior while also experiencing psychological distress.

Ophelia's later madness is different because it is not presented as strategic. Placing the two forms side by side complicates the theatrical use of madness as a revenge convention.

“To Be or Not to Be”

The famous soliloquy is often treated as a direct discussion of Hamlet’s revenge plan, but it considers a broader problem: whether suffering should be endured or ended through death. Fear of what comes after death makes decisive self-destruction uncertain.

The passage connects with the play’s revenge problem because both killing another person and killing oneself involve uncertainty about death and judgment. Thought interrupts action because consequences cannot be fully known.

Hamlet’s philosophical intelligence is therefore not ornamental. His ability to imagine consequences makes the simple mechanics of revenge difficult.

Christian Ethics

Hamlet takes place in a world where Christian teaching condemns murder and assigns final judgment to God, yet the revenge tradition requires a son to avenge a father. These ethical systems conflict.

The Ghost’s instruction appears to authorize revenge, but Hamlet’s concern about souls, confession, burial, and the afterlife repeatedly complicates action. Suicide is feared because of divine judgment, and Ophelia’s burial raises questions about whether her death was self-inflicted.

Shakespeare does not resolve the theological contradiction through a simple rule. He dramatizes the instability created when religious conscience and honor culture demand different actions.

Law and Private Justice

Claudius’s position as king makes legal justice difficult. The person responsible for maintaining law is himself the alleged murderer. Hamlet cannot simply bring the accusation to a neutral court with modern investigative institutions.

This weakness helps explain the appeal of private revenge. Yet Shakespeare shows why private justice is dangerous: evidence is uncertain, punishment becomes personal, innocent people are harmed, and retaliation generates new retaliation.

The play therefore exposes a political problem as well as a psychological one. Denmark lacks a trustworthy mechanism capable of judging its ruler.

Poison

Poison links the beginning and ending of the tragedy. Claudius murders his brother secretly through poison in the ear. Later he and Laertes prepare a poisoned sword and poisoned cup for Hamlet.

The method symbolizes hidden corruption. The crime enters privately and spreads through the body, just as deception spreads through the court.

By the final scene, the poison intended for Hamlet kills Gertrude, Laertes, Hamlet, and indirectly Claudius. Revenge reproduces the original method of murder until the entire royal family is consumed.

The Graveyard

The graveyard scene forces Hamlet to confront death materially rather than philosophically. He handles skulls and recognizes Yorick, whose memory connects mortality with childhood affection. Social rank disappears as bodies become bones. (Neill, 1997)

When Ophelia's funeral arrives, abstract reflection becomes personal grief. Hamlet and Laertes compete publicly over who loved her more, turning mourning into another contest of masculine honor.

The scene prepares Hamlet for a changed attitude toward death, but it does not make revenge morally simple.

Providence

After returning to Denmark, Hamlet speaks of a providence that shapes human outcomes and says that readiness is what matters. His attitude appears less obsessed with controlling every circumstance.

This change may help explain why the final revenge is not executed through a carefully planned assassination. Hamlet enters the duel despite suspicion and reacts when Claudius's plot becomes visible.

Acceptance of uncertainty replaces some earlier desire for perfect knowledge, though the cost is catastrophic.

The Final Duel

Claudius and Laertes arrange a fencing match in which Laertes will use an unblunted, poisoned sword. Claudius prepares poisoned wine as a second method. Hamlet accepts the duel even though Horatio warns him.

Gertrude drinks the poisoned cup, Laertes and Hamlet wound each other with the poisoned weapon, and the plot is exposed. Only then does Hamlet kill Claudius with the poisoned sword and force him to drink.

The final revenge occurs when evidence is public and Hamlet himself is dying. The action resembles punishment, self-defense, and revenge simultaneously.

Does Hamlet Achieve Justice?

Claudius is guilty of murder, political usurpation, surveillance, attempted murder, and conspiracy. His death can therefore appear deserved. Yet the path to that death has killed Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Hamlet himself.

If justice is measured only by whether Claudius dies, Hamlet succeeds. If justice includes proportionality, protection of the innocent, lawful process, and restoration of community, the revenge project fails badly.

Fortinbras inherits a state without its royal family, suggesting that Denmark pays a collective cost for crimes committed within the palace.

Hamlet's Moral Responsibility

Hamlet is both victim and agent. His father has been murdered, his mother remarried the suspected murderer, and he is placed under extraordinary pressure by a supernatural command.

These circumstances explain his distress but do not remove responsibility. He kills Polonius, treats Ophelia cruelly, arranges the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and participates willingly in the final violence.

Tragedy depends on this mixture. Hamlet is sympathetic without being innocent and intelligent without always being wise.

Claudius

Claudius is not a simple villain without conscience. His prayer scene reveals guilt and awareness that his achievements are inseparable from murder. He wants forgiveness while retaining the crown, ambition, and queen obtained through the crime.

His inability to surrender the benefits of wrongdoing makes repentance impossible on his own terms. As danger increases, he repeatedly chooses additional crime to protect the original crime.

This pattern is another form of revenge logic: violence committed to preserve power generates further violence.

Revenge and Masculinity

Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras are sons responding to dead fathers. Each faces expectations concerning honor and masculine action.

Hamlet fears that hesitation makes him cowardly. Laertes demonstrates immediate rage. Fortinbras links honor with military action. The play repeatedly asks whether manhood requires violence.

The devastation surrounding these characters suggests that masculine honor becomes dangerous when grief can be expressed only through domination or revenge.

Revenge and Memory

The Ghost demands not only vengeance but remembrance. Hamlet fears forgetting his father and treats memory as a moral obligation.

Yet memory can become destructive when it permits no future outside the original injury. Hamlet's identity becomes organized around the command he received.

Horatio offers a different form of remembrance at the end. Hamlet asks him to remain alive and tell the story. Narrative replaces revenge as the means by which the dead will be remembered.

Horatio

Horatio is Hamlet's trusted witness. He helps verify the Ghost, observes Claudius during the play, and remains present at the final duel.

He does not participate actively in the revenge plot and tries to warn Hamlet against danger. At the

end, he wants to die with his friend, but Hamlet asks him to live and explain what happened.

Horatio's survival gives the tragedy a possibility of public truth. Justice cannot restore the dead, but accurate testimony can prevent the story from being controlled entirely by rumor or political convenience.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Hamlet's former school companions become agents of Claudius and accompany him toward England carrying orders for his execution. Hamlet discovers the plan and replaces the letter so that they will be killed instead.

The episode raises another ethical question. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern participate in surveillance and transport the sealed order, but the play does not show clearly how much they know about the intended execution.

Hamlet's willingness to arrange their deaths demonstrates how far he has moved from hesitation when he believes opponents threaten him.

Is Revenge Ever Justified in the Play?

The play does not say that wrongdoing should go unpunished. Claudius's murder demands response, and the failure of legitimate institutions makes inaction morally troubling.

However, Shakespeare repeatedly demonstrates that revenge directed by private grief is unstable. The avenger can misidentify a target, expand punishment, become manipulable, or harm bystanders.

The play therefore separates the need for accountability from the idea that personal vengeance is a reliable way to produce it.

Why the Subject Remains Controversial

Readers continue to disagree because Hamlet's alternatives are all compromised. Immediate revenge risks murder based on uncertain evidence. Delay allows Claudius to remain king and creates additional danger. Legal action appears unavailable. Religious belief complicates killing.

Modern readers may prefer institutional justice, but the play deliberately constructs a state where institutions are corrupted at the top. Hamlet's predicament remains compelling because the demand for action exists alongside good reasons for restraint.

The controversy is therefore not a flaw in the play. It is the mechanism through which Shakespeare

turns a revenge plot into philosophical tragedy.

Conclusion

Revenge in *Hamlet* begins as a command to punish a murderer but expands into a crisis of knowledge, morality, politics, religion, and identity. Hamlet's delay is partly weakness and partly responsible doubt. He tests the Ghost's accusation through theatre, yet once convinced, he still struggles with the meaning and timing of revenge.

Laertes shows the danger of immediate retaliation, Fortinbras demonstrates a more political alternative, and Claudius shows how one hidden murder generates further crime. Hamlet's accidental killing of Polonius creates another revenge plot, while Ophelia and Gertrude become casualties of conflicts they did not initiate.

The final killing of Claudius provides punishment but not restoration. By the time revenge is achieved, Denmark's royal household has destroyed itself. Shakespeare therefore does not offer revenge as clean justice. He presents it as an understandable response to grave wrongdoing that becomes morally dangerous when individuals assume the power to investigate, judge, and execute through personal violence. The play's enduring controversy lies in the absence of an easy alternative—and in its insistence that even justified anger can produce unjust consequences.

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