

The Controversial Subject Of Revenge In Shakespeare's Hamlet

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Introduction

Revenge in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is not presented as a simple duty that becomes morally clear once the murderer is identified. The Ghost tells Prince Hamlet that Claudius killed King Hamlet and commands the son to avenge his father, but the command immediately creates problems of evidence, religion, political authority, and personal responsibility. Hamlet cannot know at first whether the apparition is truthful, deceptive, demonic, or the product of grief, and he lives in a court where the suspected murderer is also the king. The play therefore makes delay central to its ethical structure. Hamlet investigates Claudius through observation and theatre, repeatedly questions the consequences of killing, and ultimately becomes responsible for violence of his own. His hesitation can look indecisive, yet impulsive action proves equally dangerous when he kills Polonius without confirming who is behind the arras. Shakespeare uses these contradictions to ask whether private vengeance can ever remain confined to the guilty person. By the final scene, revenge has spread through multiple families and destroyed the Danish royal household, making justice and retaliation increasingly difficult to separate (Shakespeare, 2012; Woodbridge, 2010).

The Ghost, Knowledge, and the Burden of Proof

The Ghost's accusation establishes the revenge plot, but Shakespeare makes the source of that accusation deliberately uncertain. The spirit claims that Claudius murdered King Hamlet by pouring poison into his ear and then asks Hamlet to remember and avenge him while leaving Gertrude to heaven and her conscience. For an early modern audience, a ghost could evoke competing religious interpretations concerning purgatory, demonic deception, memory, and the afterlife, which means that supernatural testimony does not function as uncomplicated legal evidence (Greenblatt, 2001). Hamlet's caution is therefore more than fear of action. If the apparition is false, killing Claudius would make Hamlet a murderer; if it is truthful, inaction allows a murderer to retain political power. The prince responds by seeking confirmation through "The Mousetrap," a play whose murder scene resembles the Ghost's account. Claudius's disturbed reaction persuades Hamlet that the accusation is credible, but the method itself remains interpretive rather than forensic. Shakespeare thus makes revenge depend on an epistemological problem: private punishment becomes dangerous when the avenger must also investigate and judge the evidence.

Delay, Conscience, and the Prayer Scene

Hamlet's delay changes meaning after Claudius reacts to the staged murder. Before that moment, postponement allows investigation; afterward, it reflects a more complicated mixture of conscience, opportunity, temperament, grief, and the desire to control the moral meaning of punishment. The prayer scene demonstrates this shift. Hamlet finds Claudius alone and apparently praying but chooses not to kill him because he fears that death during repentance might send the murderer's soul to heaven. His reasoning undermines the idea that he hesitates only because he is too morally sensitive to kill. At this moment, he seeks not merely Claudius's death but a punishment that resembles or exceeds the spiritual disadvantage suffered by King Hamlet. The irony is that Claudius privately admits he cannot truly repent while keeping the crown and queen gained through murder. Hamlet's attempt to calculate eternal consequences therefore causes him to misread the situation. The scene shows how revenge can expand beyond proportionate accountability into a desire to control another person's fate beyond death, making private punishment increasingly entangled with anger and theological speculation (Shakespeare, 2012).

Polonius, Ophelia, and the Spread of Retaliation

The killing of Polonius provides the clearest evidence that impulsive action is no safer than prolonged hesitation. Hearing movement behind the arras in Gertrude's chamber, Hamlet thrusts his sword without identifying the hidden person and discovers that he has killed Polonius rather than Claudius. The act creates a second revenge structure because Laertes now returns to Denmark as a son whose father has been killed. Ophelia also becomes a casualty of a conflict she did not initiate. Already hurt by Hamlet's rejection and by the court's use of her as part of its surveillance, she loses her father and descends into severe psychological distress before drowning. Shakespeare thereby shows that private vengeance generates consequences beyond its intended target. Hamlet's grief does not excuse Polonius's death, just as Laertes's grief will not remove responsibility for participating in Claudius's poisoned-duel plot. The tragedy becomes recursive: one father's murder creates an avenger, that avenger kills another father, and the second bereaved son is recruited into another secret act of violence. Revenge reproduces the conditions that originally made revenge appear necessary.

Laertes, Fortinbras, and Alternative Responses to Loss

Laertes and Fortinbras function as important comparisons because each is also a son responding to a father's death and questions of honor. Laertes reacts quickly to Polonius's killing, returns to Denmark, confronts Claudius, and is willing to act before fully examining the king's manipulation. His decisiveness initially appears to contrast favorably with Hamlet's delay, yet Claudius redirects that anger into a deceptive duel involving a poisoned weapon. Laertes eventually recognizes the dishonor

of the plan and exchanges forgiveness with Hamlet, but the insight comes only after both have been mortally wounded. Fortinbras offers a different trajectory. His father died in combat against King Hamlet, and he initially seeks to recover lost territory, but diplomatic pressure redirects his campaign. His later military expedition still raises questions about the costs of honor, yet he is not consumed by a personal assassination plot. When he enters Denmark after the final deaths, he encounters a court destroyed from within and becomes positioned to restore political continuity. Shakespeare uses these contrasts to test both unreflective action and obsessive private revenge without presenting either speed or delay as sufficient wisdom (Woodbridge, 2010).

Religion, Law, and the Failure of Public Justice

Hamlet places revenge inside a world where Christian moral teaching, dynastic politics, and revenge-tragedy conventions conflict. Murder and suicide raise fears of divine judgment, burial practices reflect religious anxiety, and Hamlet repeatedly imagines consequences after death. At the same time, ordinary legal justice appears unavailable because Claudius, the suspected murderer, occupies the throne and controls the institutions that might investigate him. This political condition helps explain the appeal of private vengeance without making it safe. A trustworthy court could separate evidence, judgment, and punishment among institutions, but Hamlet must perform all three roles personally. Shakespeare then dramatizes the predictable risks: evidence remains uncertain, personal anger shapes punishment, bystanders are harmed, and retaliation creates further retaliation. Claudius himself deepens the cycle because the initial murder requires surveillance, attempted assassination, and the final poisoned-duel conspiracy to preserve what he gained. The state's corruption therefore makes lawful accountability difficult while private action makes restoration nearly impossible. Revenge becomes controversial precisely because Hamlet faces a genuine crime in a system unable to address it through legitimate public mechanisms.

The Final Duel and the Meaning of Justice

By the final duel, revenge, self-defense, public exposure, and punishment converge. Claudius and Laertes arrange for an unblunted poisoned sword to kill Hamlet and prepare poisoned wine as a second method. Gertrude unknowingly drinks from the cup, Laertes and Hamlet wound one another with the poisoned blade, and Laertes reveals the conspiracy after being struck by his own weapon. Only when the plot becomes publicly visible and Hamlet knows that he is dying does he kill Claudius with the poisoned sword and force him to drink. The act punishes a guilty king, but it cannot restore the people already lost. Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet, and Claudius are all dead by the end, while Fortinbras inherits a kingdom emptied of its ruling family. The graveyard scenes and Hamlet's growing acceptance of mortality prepare him psychologically for this conclusion, yet they do not make vengeance morally simple (Neill, 1997). Shakespeare separates the satisfaction of seeing Claudius exposed from the broader question of whether the path to that punishment constitutes justice.

Conclusion

The controversy surrounding revenge in *Hamlet* arises because Shakespeare gives the prince serious reasons both to act and to hesitate. Claudius has committed a grave crime and corrupted the authority that should provide lawful judgment, yet the Ghost's testimony is initially uncertain and private vengeance gives Hamlet power to investigate, sentence, and kill without institutional restraint. Delay sometimes protects against error, while impulsive action kills Polonius and creates another avenger. Laertes demonstrates how grief can be manipulated into reckless retaliation, Fortinbras shows a more political response to inherited conflict, and Claudius reveals how one concealed murder generates further crimes in order to preserve its benefits. Hamlet eventually kills a demonstrably guilty king, but the timing of that act means punishment arrives only after the court has been consumed by the revenge cycle. Shakespeare therefore does not reduce the tragedy to a lesson that vengeance is either always justified or always cowardly. He presents revenge as an understandable response to serious wrongdoing whose private execution can multiply uncertainty, collateral harm, and competing claims of justice (Shakespeare, 2012; Greenblatt, 2001).

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