

Hamlet As Instrument of Divine Justice

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Abstract

Hence given the clear demarcation between good and evil and the imbalance and chaos that is brought into the kingdom by Claudius' act of murder and incest, Hamlet is undoubtedly an instrument of divine justice in the play and when he declares himself as the scourge of heaven one is likely more than not to agree with him given that things are rotten in the state of Denmark since Claudius' immoral usurpation of the throne as well as the abominable acts of incest that he performs with Gertrude. At the end of the play when Hamlet forces Claudius to drink the poison he had prepared for him the audience undoubtedly feels that divine justice has been done and the moral order restored when evil has been purged from the kingdom and Fortinbras from Norway takes over as the reign of Claudius was a reign of unspeakable evil as the ghost of Hamlet's father rightly points out. Hence there is little doubt that Hamlet is an agent of divine justice rather than merely harbouring a personal vendetta against the king because Claudius is unrepentant to the end, choosing to kill Hamlet rather than redeem himself.

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Shortly after Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius behind the arras thinking it is Claudius Hamlet refers to himself as a scourge of heaven. Indeed, instructed by the ghost to exact revenge on Claudius for corruptly usurping the throne, this may indeed be Hamlet's assumed function in the play, to enact revenge and hence restore divine justice to the kingdom. However it is not without doubt, trepidation and uncertainty that Hamlet takes on this role, his madness may not be falsely assumed but an indication of his psychological state of radical doubt and being unhinged by the task that is brought upon him by his father.

The moral order of Denmark had been disrupted and thrown into chaos by the evil act of Claudius killing king Hamlet and performing incest by marrying his wife Gertrude. In Shakespeare's plays, tragedy is typically brought about by evil, such as in Lear's decision to bestow his inheritance upon the evil sisters Goneril and Regan. Moral order is only restored when evil is defeated and purged from the kingdom, as Goneril and Regan die and Claudius is brought to death when Hamlet forces him to drink the poisoned drink he prepared for Hamlet and was consumed instead by Gertrude, bringing about her death. As Hamlet says at the beginning, "Something rotten is in the state of Denmark." (Hamlet 1: 4) Denmark has been thrown into chaos by Claudius' evil act of murdering and usurping the throne and performing incest with king Hamlet's wife Gertrude.

There is however a problem with viewing Hamlet as an instrument of divine justice and this is due to Christian morality in which one is instructed not to enact revenge for as the Lord says "Vengeance is mine. I will repay." (Romans 12:19) This is perhaps the largest reason for Hamlet's delay and prevarication. He is instructed by the ghost of his father to perform a task that he does not feel equal to performing. Hence his soliloquy "To be or not to be". Hamlet would rather escape the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and to die and sleep than have to face his situation in which all he knows to be good and true is emptied from the kingdom and he is instead faced with a situation of chaos brought about by evil and anarchy. Hamlet is a reluctant avenger of his father's death because he is more a philosopher and poet than a man of action. Though he is thoroughly appalled by Claudius' deed, it is not in his nature to kill and be a man of violence but to think and surmise or philosophize about existence rather than recklessly bring about death.

Yet the idea of Hamlet not being an instrument of divine justice but harbouring a personal vendetta is not without problems. Indeed it is said that vengeance is the Lord and he will repay but it is arguably through agents that this vengeance has to be performed, and in Hamlet's case Hamlet is arguably an agent of divine justice. This can be seen from the injunction of the ghost to avenge his death, it is a supernatural force that seeks to restore order to the kingdom that instructs Hamlet to bring about the

death of Claudius in order to restore moral order to the kingdom. It is also undeniable that Claudius' deed of killing king Hamlet and marrying his brother's wife in incest is an act of darkness. Hence when Hamlet pronounces himself a scourge of heaven one cannot help but agree.

One of the ideas examined in the play is the chaos and absurdity of existence as Hamlet says, "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"(Hamlet 3:1) This chaos is arguably not a natural state of affairs but brought about by evil such as Claudius' act of murder and incest. Tragedy is thus brought about when Hamlet is called upon to bring about Claudius' death, avenging his father but also then bringing about his own ruin as he has to kill the king and thus face worldly justice of regicide. Hamlet is undoubtedly an agent of divine justice as it is sheer evil that he faces in his final hours, with Claudius poisoning his drink and inadvertently bringing about the death of Gertrude.

Good and evil are thus metaphysical opposites in this play but also not mere metaphysical opposites but moral absolutes distinct from one another rather than defined in relation to each other as was the case in Lear. In Shakespeare's plays the division between good and evil is clear and there is seldom any moral ambiguity. It is of course clear that Claudius has performed an act of unspeakable evil in murdering his brother the King and then performing incest with his wife Gertrude. It is the horror of facing such

an act of unspeakable evil that launches Hamlet into madness. Hamlet's madness may be feigned but it is also largely a psychological reaction to the moral horror that faces him. Indeed Hamlet assumes the guise of madness so he may rant at the moral horror that is around him without being held accountable for his speech and so Claudius will not perceive him as a threat or know that is plotting vengeance.

Women are largely victims of the foibles of men in this play as Hamlet develops an unhealthy rage towards women because of his mother's incest and takes it out on Ophelia whom he declares he never loved, thus driving her into insanity compounded by the fact that he eventually kills Polonius. Ophelia is undone by Hamlet's cruel treatment of her following his disappointment with women due to his mother's infidelity. Gertrude is killed at the hands of Claudius. Arguably then, women suffer at the hands of men in this play but this is largely a reflection of the patriarchy of the time.

Hence given the clear demarcation between good and evil and the imbalance and chaos that is brought into the kingdom by Claudius' act of murder and incest, Hamlet is undoubtedly an instrument of divine justice in the play and when he declares himself as the scourge of heaven one is likely more than not to agree with him given that things are rotten in the state of Denmark since Claudius' immoral usurpation of the throne as well as the

abominable acts of incest that he performs with Gertrude. At the end of the play when Hamlet forces Claudius to drink the poison he had prepared for him the audience undoubtedly feels that divine justice has been done and the moral order restored when evil has been purged from the kingdom and Fortinbras from Norway takes over as the reign of Claudius was a reign of unspeakable evil as the ghost of Hamlet's father rightly points out. Hence there is little doubt that Hamlet is an agent of divine justice rather than merely harbouring a personal vendetta against the king because

Claudius is unrepentant to the end, choosing to kill Hamlet rather than redeem himself. Hamlet's launch into madness and prevarication is due to the instability he experiences about being unequal to the task of restoring moral order to the kingdom and being an agent of divine justice and scourge of heaven, a task he feels unequal to as Hamlet is more a philosopher than a man of action. There is little doubt at the end however that Hamlet has enacted divine retribution for Claudius and thus is a divine agent than a bearer of a personal grudge or vendetta against the king.

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