

Carly Cardinal

Ms. Engelbert

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Hamlet's Hesitation (5)

Francis Bacon contends that man may do what is necessary when “the law provides no remedy” for a crime; yet, Shakespeare’s title character struggles to take the law into his own hands. Therefore, Hamlet’s hesitation to avenge the death of his father stems from pure cowardice. When the ghost visits Hamlet, the prodigal son vows to avenge his father “with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love, may sweep to my revenge” (1.5. 35-37). However, Hamlet stagnates out of self-doubt. Like a coward, he makes excuses. He claims that he must first determine if the spirit of his father is sent from hell (1.4. 44). Later, even when Claudius confesses to the crime, Hamlet still falters, claiming that he cannot kill Claudius because his spirit will go to heaven (3.3. 77-80). Hamlet’s cowardice is obvious when he fails to avenge his father’s death once hearing indisputable evidence.

Even though Hamlet begins to take action by killing Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his success in eliminating his enemies stems more from “necessity and accident” than “by merit of his own courage” (Bates). Hamlet does not look Polonius in the face when stabbing him, therefore circumventing his true desire to and acceptance of killing his enemy. Even when writing away the death of his two “friends”, Hamlet’s cleverness signed their death

warrants rather than a man coming face to face with his enemies and telling them why their lives are being diluted as Francis Bacon would recommend. Thus, these deaths are the actions of a coward too hesitant to seek justice like a man: face to face.

Loyalty and Feigned Friendship (3)

“Who lives, who dies, who tells your story” ring the words of the famous finale from the world shattering musical, *Hamilton*. Yet, this modern miracle of music calls into question a watershed thought all people, fictitious or real must ponder. Equally difficult to digest is the thought that after we’re gone, we can no longer influence those whose memories of us fade, change or erupt into new impact; we can only hope our loyalty to survivors benefits our legacies.

In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the title character uses true loyalty as an indicator for deciding who should live, who dies, and who tells his story. In the opening act, Horatio acts as Hamlet’s keeper, checking the validity of claims that the ghost of his father had appeared. Being a true friend, Horatio witnessed the ghost and then promises Hamlet to “never make known what [he has] seen tonight” (1.5.160). Horatio further demonstrates his loyalty by keeping Hamlet’s feigned madness a secret. According to literary critic Frederick Kiefer, Horatio is “the only character in the play whom Hamlet admires, the only person for whom the prince has unqualified affection” and “the only figure who enjoys Hamlet’s confidence” (187-188). Therefore, Shakespeare justifies Horatio’s survival at the end play as a testament to what he values most in a friend: loyalty.

To foil Horatio’s loyalty, Shakespeare decides, justifiably, to kill off Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for their lack of loyalty. When the jolly twosome come to visit Hamlet upon

Claudius' request, they only confess their true intent when pressed by Hamlet (2.2. 315). A true and **loyal** friend would reveal his motives before being prompted. And yet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern still do King Claudius' bidding by escorting Hamlet to England with a secret letter ordering the murder of Hamlet. Some would argue that R & G are unable to go against the King's wishes; yet, true friends would come up with some plan to botch the plan or completely fail to carry out the orders if it meant holding back the truth from their friend. In response, Hamlet switches the letters and feels no guilt ordering the death of his disloyal friends because "their defeat does by their own insinuation grow" (5.2.64-65). Hamlet is therefore justified in ordering the murders of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for their absence of loyalty to him.

Works Cited

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