

AI

Dr. Jeffrey Wilson

Shakespeare's Inventions

23 February 2014

God, Man, and Justice in *Hamlet*

Justice is a theme that is **not often tackled** when discussing *Hamlet*. Regret comes up.

Vengeance is nearly synonymous with the titular character. However, in discussing the smaller details, we tend to overlook the bigger overarching theme that runs throughout the whole play:

What defines justice in Shakespeare's mind. The issue is not easy to tackle, as the idea of justice can often get bogged down by the other strands dealing with retaliation and vengeance.

Part of the issue might be that we tend to look at justice in the bigger picture. However, Shakespeare's portrayal of justice in the play is shown in the interactions between two characters: Hamlet and Claudius. This is, **of course**, the center of the moral conflict of the play: Hamlet seeking to correct the wrong done to his father. There has been an upset of the natural order- something that the Hamlet's ghost states when he says that the murder was "most foul, strange, and unnatural" (1.5.28).

This is the presumption from the beginning: Not only that there is some type of natural order, but that **something has to be done to fix it.** Claudius is the culprit, having committed a crime by murdering his brother for no greater reason than to gain the throne for himself. For better or for worse, Hamlet becomes the most plausible agent to restore the natural order in Denmark.

The question then becomes: What is the best way to fix the natural order? Shakespeare presents two distinct possibilities. The first one, of course, revolves around Hamlet carrying out

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 5:08 AM

Comment [1]: All! You forgot a Cover Letter!

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 5:09 AM

Comment [2]: My initial sense: that's a lot of ground to cover!

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 5:10 AM

Comment [3]: This claim relies on scholarly research, which isn't present in a close reading such as this assignment. (In fact, justice is quite often discussed in the scholarship on *Hamlet*.)

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 5:12 AM

Comment [4]: I like that you're looking for the author's intent here. Can we narrow the question to "What defines justice in *Hamlet*?" because otherwise you're making claims about 36 other plays that aren't discussed in this paper.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 5:13 AM

Comment [5]: I try to stay away from "of course": I find that moments when I try to use it are actually not obvious at all.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:43 AM

Comment [6]: Do you mean (as you say) that the natural order needs to be fixed, or (as I think you mean to say) that the natural order has been disturbed and that disturbance needs to be fixed?

his vengeance against Claudius by doing unto him as he did unto his father. Many people, however, think this is the only possibility of justice upon a first reading of *Hamlet*. However, an exploration of several key passages, especially Act 3, Scene 3, shows that there is still the possibility of divine justice against Claudius. The dilemma at the crux of the latter part of the scene is this: Whether divine justice is superior to human justice.

Claudius believes that he is bound by his sin. He states that his “stronger guilt defeats [his] stronger intent” (3.3.40). Shakespeare acknowledges here the pitfalls of our current human condition. How, then, can justice apply to a man who cannot be forgiven? Above the heinousness of his sin, Claudius also recognizes that he is still in possession of “those effects for which I did the murder” (3.3.54). All of these passages help to recognize that Claudius is not asking for forgiveness in the latter part of this speech; he is asking for justice against himself.

The source of this justice, however, is not human. He asks for a type of mercy that would make him be able to approach God with his problem. By this statement, he seems to clearly put himself beyond the reach of God, as it were. He doubts his very ability to pray to God and whether He would listen at all. He is too far gone, and there seems to be no hope left for him in this life that God would reach down and acknowledge his wretched condition.

That puts the latter passages into much clearer focus. Claudius’ prostrate position indicates that he is begging for his life. The death sentence over his head is that he is completely indifferent to his own sin. He begs that his “heart with strings of steel” become as “soft as sinews of the newborn babe” (3.3.70-71). This leads us to the justice that Claudius is going for: A redemptive justice that, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, can free humans from the indifference to their own sins.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:44 AM

Comment [7]: Again, this is a claim that you’ve read the scholarship of “many people”; instead, try, “Some might think ...”

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 5:18 AM

Comment [8]: There are a few inter-related analytical questions floating around here: What did Shakespeare understand justice to be? What is the best way to fix the natural order? Is divine justice superior to human justice? I think the paper would benefit from a clearly stated *central* question. Doing so would help you map out a *central* argument (i.e., a thesis statement), which is currently missing.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 5:21 AM

Comment [9]: In what way?

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:47 AM

Comment [10]: A good reading. As analysis of the evidence presented about, it should be part of the same paragraph.

The question arises, though: Can divine justice exist in the fallen human condition? By Claudius's own admission, he is unable to desire justice against himself if he so willingly embraces the fruit of his wickedness. In order for divine justice to be effective, God has set to set aright the hearts of men- a possibility that Shakespeare shoots down by the complete lack of involvement of the divine in the rest of the play.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:48 AM

Comment [11]: Very interesting.

In this sense, therefore, the idea of divine justice is flawed in our present human condition. This is a principle that we see over and over again throughout the whole play, not just in this particular instance. According to Shakespeare, God is unable to come down and be the kind of judge that sets right and wrong apart. There is no healing, no therapeutic remission of sins according to divine justice. The only solution to Claudius's problem is death.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:48 AM

Comment [12]: Yes, this is true.

What this leaves us with, of course, is Hamlet's own sense of justice. To call it rational would be laughable; to call it vigilante would be highly misinformed. Hamlet, by and by, is an advocate of natural justice, as he has the right to fix what is unbalanced in nature. As we have already seen, this is the original calling that his father asks him to carry out.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:50 AM

Comment [13]: These are fascinating thoughts, but you've got to show – through the presentation of evidence – how they're born out in the play (that is, how it is that Shakespeare wants us to think these things as opposed to *you* wanting us to think these things).

Hamlet, however, twists the idea of natural justice into something much darker. This does not mean that there are not similarities between the two, at least the way Hamlet views it. At the very end, he describes himself as "physic" who is choosing to prolong Claudius' life. Hamlet, therefore, assumes the role of God. As strange as it may seem, Hamlet is the closest thing that Claudius has to an answer to his prayers- because he could bring death. And, at this point in time, death is both the highest physical and moral good that Claudius could receive.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:51 AM

Comment [14]: I think the paper would benefit from some defining of terms near the beginning, especially your distinction between divine and natural justice.

Hamlet's view on eternal rewards, however, is amusingly twisted. The irony is that, right after Claudius acknowledges his own damnation, Hamlet is fearful that killing Claudius at that moment would send him to heaven. What Hamlet is doing is playing the role of God without the

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:52 AM

Comment [15]: How so? I thought he was assuming the role of "physic," as you just quoted.

knowledge necessary for such a part. He is blurring the lines between human and divine justice, thereby creating little more than a murky moral code that does good to no one.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:53 AM
Comment [16]: Fascinating idea.

Claudius' last statement, however, puts everything into perspective. After sending his last prayer to heaven, he laments that it has not been fulfilled. However, what if God did send an agent to fulfill that prayer- and that agent refused to carry out His will, as it were? This is the failure of Hamlet- that he lets his own desires for divine justice muddle his simple mission. The paradox here, of course, is that Hamlet had to embrace his own natural desire for justice in order to carry out the divine aspect of it. But this shows a clear separation between God and man, which is exactly what Shakespeare is trying to convey.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:56 AM
Comment [17]: Great point. See Hamlet's "scourge and minister" comment.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:56 AM
Comment [18]: Things are getting confusing here (again, having defined your terms would help).

The irony of the situation arises from the fact that Claudius is ripe for death, both by his own terms and those of Hamlet. But Hamlet is so concerned with the outward appearance of justice that he forgets its biggest purpose: To fix what is unnatural. Hamlet's justice is fueled by a desire to be little more than a vigilante who wants to see his uncle go straight to hell. Although Shakespeare does not condemn Hamlet's desire for justice, he thinks that Hamlet takes it too far by trying to interfere in the area of the divine.

Hamlet was indeed a doctor sent to heal Claudius through death. Claudius acknowledges that the current human condition does not give him any possibility of finding justice in this life. The only justice he can find is in the next life. It is at this point that we find the mix between divine and human justice- but the overlap, as we see, occurs only in a very specific situation in the context of the whole play.

Claudius cannot face justice apart from death. Hamlet will only find justice once he kills his uncle in order to avenge his father. The unwillingness of both of these men to face these

realities is what contributes to the conflict of the play and, in the end, what makes the sense of justice so murky and unclear.

This brings us back to the main concern. Upon reaching this point, it is impossible not to notice that both the divine and the human aspects of justice have their serious shortcomings in Shakespeare's presentation. The divine is inscrutable and incomprehensible to human beings, while the human is carried out by flawed, emotional beings with an agenda that extends beyond justice. This does not completely disqualify the possibility, however, of the two working hand in hand to fix an unnatural situation and establish a more perfect state of justice.

Would another character beside Hamlet have been able to follow human justice to the fullest and, as a result, been able to carry out divine justice? This question, obviously, is impossible to answer, as Shakespeare chose to give us a specific character in order to convey this particular point. What we end up seeing is that it was not Hamlet's desire for rightful vengeance that brought him down; rather, it was his desire to act in a role of divine judge that did not belong to him. This does not dim the nature of the cautionary tale, but instead brings a new, more chilling perspective to it.

Wilson, Jeffrey Robert 2/24/2014 7:58 AM
Comment [19]: That's called "tragedy."

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. New York: Penguin Books, 2001. Print.

24 February 2014

Dear Al,

This is a fascinating paper. It's not (alas) a successful paper in its current form, but there is a richness to your ideas and a certain intellectual riskiness that I find compelling. Your major task for revision will be to fashion your thoughts into an argument, and the first step will be for us (in our conference) to figure out what your argument is. I think you offer something close to a thesis near the end of the paper:

Claudius cannot face justice apart from death. Hamlet will only find justice once he kills his uncle in order to avenge his father. The unwillingness of both of these men to face these realities is what contributes to the conflict of the play and, in the end, what makes the sense of justice so murky and unclear. (4-5)

That's really interesting, and I think there's a paper there, one that gets to the heart of *justice*, yes, but also *tragedy*. During our conference, let's talk about how to bring this idea together with some of your introductory material for a thesis that really captures what you want to discuss about *Hamlet*. Then we can talk about how to rework your introduction so that it serves as a frame for your thesis. Here are some additional points for us to focus on in our conference:

- *Structure*: Right now, the paper reads more as the development of an idea than the presentation of an argument. That is, the paper reads (even if this isn't true) as though you're "figuring it out as you go." That kind of writing is very important to do, but it's a different kind of writing than what you'll be asked to produce in an analytical paper. For an analytical paper, you should aim to have a thesis statement clearly articulated in the introduction, and support for that thesis presented throughout the body of the paper. The paper, as it currently stands, doesn't have a strong, central claim in the introduction that gives it direction, which leads to some ambling in the body.
- *Evidence*: The purpose of a body paragraph is really to present evidence, so you want to make sure that each paragraph in your paper is structured around the presentation of an important piece (or important pieces) of evidence. Then, evidence leads to analysis. Right now, the draft is heavy on analysis and light on evidence, which means (at times) that you're giving a number of your own ideas which are very interesting but not necessarily grounded in the play. Your paper is basically an extended close reading of Claudius's repentance speech, with elements from elsewhere in the play peppered in: let's talk about how to organize such a paper.
- *Paragraphing*: Short, punchy paragraphs are not necessarily a bad thing; in the draft as it currently stands, however, the short paragraphs lead to a rather frenetic presentation of ideas. I'll suggest that you try to organize paragraphs around a single point, and that you take the time to develop each of those points in full.

Please let me know if you have any questions about my feedback. I look forward to our conference, where we can talk more about my marginal feedback, my feedback letter, and the ideas for revision that you raise in your Cover Letter.

Yours,

Wilson

14 March 2014

Dear Al,

Your paper was a difficult read – I’ve read it three times now – in two senses: (1) it’s wrestling with big, complicated ideas, and (2) it’s not fully revised into a polished form.

Your argument, it seems, is that Claudius’s repentance scene in *Hamlet* puts two forms of justice in tension – a divine justice in which God rewards virtue and punishes vice, and a human justice that is administered by us here on earth – and that Shakespeare shows the shortcomings of both: “The divine is inscrutable and incomprehensible to human beings, while the human is carried out by flawed, emotional beings with an agenda that goes beyond justice” (6). I find this idea compelling, and indeed a good reading of the scene in question, although it would have been nice to get this thesis statement on page 1 or 2, not in your last paragraph. As the paper is currently structured, you lay out a thesis in the introduction that only tells half the story of your argument and does so without framing your paper with a clear statement of your *problem/question* and discussion of the *terms* of your topic.

As we look toward Essay 2, one “take away” from the current paper should be the knowledge that you have the desire and ability to produce bold, ambitious, potentially ground-breaking ideas; in order to do so, however, you’ll need to make sure you do your thinking and pre-writing early enough that you’ll be able to work through multiple rounds of revision.

- *Language*: Your ideas are complex and quickly delivered (that’s a good thing), but you need to make sure your language is clear enough for your reader to follow. Let’s sit down together during office hours to do a line-edit on your Essay 1. Then I’d like for you to visit the Writing Center between your draft and revision of Essay 2.
- *Keywords*: Because your argument is fairly conceptual, it would be nice to define your terms somewhere in the introduction before employing them in a thesis statement. In order for your claim that “the struggle between these two ideas of justice greatly contributes to the sense of conflict in the play” to be meaningful, you have to give us a clear overview of what “divine justice,” “redemptive justice,” and “retributive justice” are.
- *Structure*: While the body of your paper has a fairly logical super-structure – first Claudius’s confession, second Hamlet’s response – those sections could have some better internal organization. Rather than diving straight into evidence, then providing analysis, and then wrapping it all up at the end of a section, try to give a “thesis for the section” at the start of the section.

Hopefully your continued work on these Elements of Academic Writing will translate into your draft of Essay 2, and this time around you’ll be able to approach the draft phase

with more perspective on the draft/revision process. Feel free to get in touch with me if you'd like to discuss your revision in more detail in office hours.

Yours,

Wilson

Grade: C