

# Tipping the scales of fate the imbalance of thought and action in shakespeare's ha...

[War](#), [Intelligence](#)



\n[toc title="Table of Contents"]\n

\n \t

1. [My father's spirit in arms! all is not well;](#) \n \t
2. [Till then sit still, my soul: foul deeds will rise,](#) \n \t
3. [Works Cited](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

If we truly are masters of our own fates, then the actions that we take guide the course of our lives; in contrast, if we fail to take action, then our lives do not move forward. In order for a human being's life to be harmonious, there must always be a delicate balance of thought and action that allows that person to make decisions wisely while at the same time keeping the urge to act on impulse too often at bay. However, if the scales tip too far in one way or another, then the results can be disastrous for everyone involved in those decisions. Nowhere else in literature is this more apparent than in Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet; because thoughts and actions were not balanced in the minds of Prince Hamlet and his stepfather, King Claudius, their delaying in some situations and acting rashly in others caused the deaths of their family members and friends before eventually bringing about the downfall and destruction of the royal family.

Prince Hamlet is a rational and intelligent young man; in fact, critic John McKloskey asserts that Hamlet is successful at "keeping in check the impulsiveness of his nature, which, given free rein, might have defeated his vengeance" (445). However, while Hamlet is indeed a rational man, is he given to an excess of thought? When he is first told that his father's spirit

has appeared to the men on night watch and that the ghost had been heavily armed, he muses to himself that although he does not doubt what the men have seen, he will wait to act until he sees for himself because he believes that even if bad deeds have been done, they will reveal themselves over the course of time without his immediate action:

**My father's spirit in arms! all is not well;**

I doubt some foul play: would the night were come!

**Till then sit still, my soul: foul deeds will rise,**

Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes. (1. 2. 476-479)

It is this kind of contemplation that causes Hamlet to stall in his actions, even after his father's ghost confronts him a short time later and tells him that he was indeed slain by his brother Claudius, who is now king and married to Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. Even though Hamlet knows that he must act and avenge his father, the complexities of his mind and his intelligent nature cause him over-analyze every step he takes in planning his revenge. Critic Michael Taylor notes that while Hamlet desires revenge upon Claudius, "his preoccupation with his own actions, whether they are right or wrong, and the constant contemplation of his own nature delays his vengeful act for a time." (147). Even though Hamlet's plan to expose Claudius' treachery is a very intelligent one, it is rendered impotent for quite a long period because he instead ponders whether or not it is the right thing to do.

While Hamlet's intelligence is an asset and helps him to concoct the plan of using the play to prove Claudius' guilt, it is also the thing that causes him to

constantly dwell upon the nature of not only mankind's existence and actions, but his own nature as well. In a Samuel Tannenbaum analysis, the author believes that while Hamlet has the means and opportunity to kill Claudius right away, he uses the long soliloquies that he speaks to delay the act because he doesn't have the stomach for it (239). There is some truth to this viewpoint, but the cause for Hamlet's pondering isn't completely out of cowardice—after all, he is a scholar, not a soldier, and this is evident in the fact that he wishes to think hard about the consequences of murder, as a rational man would do. However, the rationalizing that Hamlet does ultimately causes him to turn it inward upon himself instead of concluding why he should carry out his ghostly father's plans for revenge. He knows that even though he is “ Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,” he instead chooses to “ pack my heart with words / And fall a-cursing like a very drab, / A scullion!” (2. 2 1659-62). This speech is a turning point for Hamlet, however, and he is finally able to move beyond self-doubt and inaction so that he can take his revenge, but the tragic irony here is that it tips the scales too far in the other direction, causing Hamlet to act impulsively and set events in motion that will ultimately cause his own downfall.

When Claudius reacts with guilt and dismay to the play that Hamlet stages, it seems that at last he will get his revenge, but now the prince becomes too zealous in his actions. There is no balance with thought any longer and he becomes too eager to strike Claudius down. When Polonius hides behind the tapestry in Queen Gertrude's room in order to eavesdrop on a conversation between Hamlet and his mother after the play takes place, Hamlet stabs him

and shows no remorse for the murder, saying to Polonius, “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better” (3. 4. 2421-22). This Hamlet is the complete opposite of the one we have seen through the play up until this act, and because he is now acting too rashly, he fails to see what these impulsive actions might cause. In his article “Tragic Balance in Hamlet,” author Philip Edwards observes this as well, writing that “By this misdeed, he triggers off a new cycle of vengeance and by unwittingly killing Polonius, Hamlet unwittingly takes his own life” (45). Indeed, Hamlet’s overabundance of thought has now turned to an excess of impulsive action and because there is no balance in his life between the two, his killing of Polonius has now trapped him into a chain of events from which he will not be able to escape. This includes the suicide of Ophelia, Hamlet’s former love and Polonius’ daughter, who apparently drowns herself in grief over the death of her father. In his desire to act, Hamlet has now traveled to the extreme opposite end of the spectrum and is becoming no better than the man on which he seeks such a bloody revenge.

As the play reaches its tragic conclusion, it is also the imbalance of thought versus action in Claudius that brings about the sad and final events which have bound these people together. Fear causes the king to act too swiftly and he sends Hamlet away to England, where he plans to have the prince murdered instead of biding his time and considering the consequences of his actions. Because he is afraid for his life, he acts impulsively in sending Hamlet into a hastily-laid trap, saying, “‘Do it, England; / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me’” (4. 3. 2780-81). Claudius is

looking for a quick fix for his troubles here because he now knows that Hamlet is aware that he murdered the previous king, his father.

Shakespearian critic Francis Ferguson asserts that Hamlet's knowledge is like a disease that eats at Claudius' patience, and that " he must be rendered harmless quickly" (175). This causes him to undercount Hamlet's intelligence and the prince escapes the trap, instead causing the deaths of the courtiers and spies Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who Hamlet arranges to have executed in his place.

Upon Hamlet's return to Denmark, Claudius hastily concocts another plan to poison the prince while he duels with Ophelia's brother, Laertes. Even though this plan is ultimately successful and Hamlet is pierced with a poisoned rapier, it also brings about the death of the queen, who accidentally drinks from a poisoned cup and Laertes, who is also cut with the poisoned sword. Claudius' rash plan now backfires and causes his own death when Hamlet forces him to drink from the queen's cup before he himself dies. The final irony of the prince is that it is only in his last moments that he becomes the contemplative scholar once again, telling the shocked bystanders that "' Had I but time (as this fell sergeant, Death, / Is strict in his arrest) O, I could tell you- / But let it be'" (5. 2. 3994-96). In his dying, Hamlet understands that even if he had the time to further contemplate the acts that had brought him to this point in time, it would not matter either way—his fate is sealed, and perhaps his very nature and the imbalance of the rational thought that he had loved so much versus the impulsive acts that he had committed caused it to be so. However, there is nothing more that he can do now and the clock cannot be turned back, so he must accept

his fate.

If we are to live harmonious lives, there must always be a delicate balance of thought and action. As creatures of rational thought and free will, the actions that we take must always be tempered with the forethought of their consequences. However, if the scales tip to far in one way or another, then the results can be disastrous for everyone involved in those decisions, and they can affect not only individuals, but families and even nations. Nowhere else in literature is this more apparent than in Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet; because thoughts and actions were not balanced in the minds of Prince Hamlet and his stepfather, King Claudius, their delaying in some situations and acting rashly in others caused the deaths of their family members and friends before eventually bringing about the downfall and destruction of the royal family. While it is difficult to understand how much we should think upon our actions before we actually set events into motion, there are two things that remain constant in our daily lives: a lack of action causes emotional, physical, and spiritual stagnation, and acting rashly results in unwanted consequences. Because both Hamlet and Claudius failed to learn these lessons, they paid with not only their own lives but also caused the deaths of half a dozen other people, including their country's own queen and allowed another ruling power to take control of the country in the aftermath of the chaos. While some may argue that our fates are predestined and that we have no hand in the paths that we take and that some higher power rules our everyday fortune, we should always remember that we must nurture this kind of harmony in every area of our lives to stave

off chaos, unhappiness, and the kind of tragedy that is the hallmark of Shakespeare's Hamlet.

## Works Cited

Edwards, Philip. "Tragic Balance in Hamlet." *Shakespeare Survey*. 36 (1983): 43-52. Web. 16 Nov. 2012.

Ferguson, Francis. "Hamlet: The Analogy of Action." *The Hudson Review*. 2. 2 (1949): 165-210.

JSTOR. Web. 16 Nov. 2012.

Mckloskey, John. "Hamlet's Quest of Certainty." *College English*. 2. 5 (1941): 445-451. JSTOR.

Web. 17 Nov. 2012.

Tannenbaum, Samuel. "Hamlet Prepares for Action." *Studies in Philology*. 14. 3 (1917): 237-

242. JSTOR. Web. 17 Nov. 2012.

Taylor, Michael. "The Conflict in Hamlet." *Shakespeare Quarterly*. 22. 2 (1971): 147-161.

JSTOR. Web. 17 Nov. 2012.