

Warfare and spying play

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“ It is not the object of war to annihilate those who have given provocation for it, but to cause them to mend their ways; not to ruin the innocent and guilty alike, but to save both” (Polybius). From the start of man’s political awareness, war has become almost a necessity to mankind, and therefore, part of its nature, and although it is not the object to kill, it is an immediate mechanism of it. In Shakespeare’s 17th century work, Hamlet, the writing not only employs themes of tragedy and indecision, but also themes of revenge, espionage, mystery, and death. In this sense, Hamlet can also be defined as a play on war, whether war themes are literal or metaphorical. In fact, they are both literal and metaphorical, and the metaphorical civil war plotted within the royal family is possibly the largest aid in the plot development and mystery of Hamlet. Between the first and last death of this tragic revenge play, a critique on the nature of man is obvious as neither the guilty nor the innocent are saved, and the foremost objective of annihilation on the part of each character is granted in one horrible, unnecessary bloodshed.

In the opening scenes of the play, allusion to war is already evident, as the plot focuses on a recent change in kingship, and most know that change in royal power is a possible outcome of battle. In this case, the first metaphorical battle is between the former King Hamlet and the new King Claudius, over the crown of Denmark and the marriage to Queen Gertrude, in which Claudius wins. This battle so begins the plot of the entire play, as Hamlet arrives back to Denmark, the ground “ in which all his sufferings and all other sufferings will be buried” (Kerrigan), and what will become his own metaphorical battleground. Furthermore, the introduction of the idea that his

uncle Claudius murdered his father further complicates the plot, bringing forth in Hamlet a sense of hatred and need for revenge. Early in the story, the reader becomes knowledgeable of a secret vengeance between Claudius and Hamlet, which makes lies, deception, and espionage almost inevitable factors toward either of their success.

In his attempt to gain recognition by royalty through his advisory to Claudius, Polonius becomes an important character to the themes of spying and deceiving. Nothing more than a naïve meddler, Polonius chooses to become acquainted with royal business by spying on Hamlet for the king, and in the end pays the price of death for something that he himself was not even fighting for. For example, in order to prove Hamlet's mad love for Ophelia, Polonius hides himself and the king and queen behind the tapestry to spy on Hamlet during his encounter with Ophelia (III, ii). While this act of espionage had relevance to Polonius' daughter, giving him reason to partake in it, in a later scene his spying goes to an extreme, and for this he is punished. As he hides behind a curtain in Gertrude's room to listen in on her and Hamlet's conversation, he clumsily gives away his presence to Hamlet and is mistaken for Claudius, therefore killed on instinct without mercy (III, iv). While most of Polonius' spying deals with his advisory to Claudius, he even shows distrust for his own son by sending a servant, Reynaldo, to secretly keep watch over Laertes when he is away (II, I). Therefore, while Polonius represents the innocent busybody within the main plot, in his own family he takes a more traitorous role. Furthermore, his death represents the eminent point where Hamlet takes dissolution past its metaphorical terms, and how he ultimately becomes fixated on the facts of death (Kerrigan).

Hamlet himself partakes in investigations and trickery to discover the truth behind his father's murder, and to take revenge on those who try to inflict harm on him. In order to find truth in his father's murder, he resorts to trapping his uncle in his own guilt. By forcing Claudius to watch a play that closely resembles his murder of King Hamlet, Hamlet decides he can "catch the conscience of the King" (II, ii, 634). He succeeds in bringing out the King's guilt with this trap, but this proof is not enough to bring Hamlet to act upon his instinct for revenge. Soon after the incident, Hamlet catches Claudius vulnerably preying to God, but he refuses to kill him while he is in a state of grace, because Hamlet feels Claudius is unworthy of going to heaven while his own father is abandoned in a state of purgatory (III, ii). This is a fine example of the art of revenge, according to Kerrigan, who states that the vengeance must far surpass the original crime, a characteristic that often turns the genre's heroes into vindictive villains. This could also be considered a characteristic of war itself. Further into the play, Hamlet exceeds killing for his original purpose when he orders the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (IV, vi); a punishment for their betrayal of his friendship, and their devotion to Claudius' proposal of Hamlet's murder.

The final battle and the last bloodshed occur in the fast paced final scene of mass annihilation. This scene is preceded by extremely deceitful actions on Claudius' part, who embraces the mournful and revenge-seeking Laertes in order to carry out his own arrangement of Hamlet's death. The plan between the two is to trick Hamlet into a one-on-one duel with Laertes, whose sword will be laced with poison, so that "where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare? can save the thing from death" (IV, vii, 163). The backup is a cup of

poison, which Hamlet should be asked by Claudius to drink to his victory (IV, vii). However, not even this entirely deceitful plan can bring Hamlet successfully to death (or at least not alone.) In the final scene of Act V, the duel occurs, and a number of backfires result from the plan. First of all, Gertrude drinks the poison that Hamlet turns down, thinking it is only a glass of wine. Next, Hamlet is scratched with Laertes' sword, however, he returns by stabbing Laertes with the tip of his own poisoned blade. Laertes, "justly kill'd with [his] own treachery" (V, ii, 337), informs Hamlet that they have both been poisoned, bringing Hamlet to the instinct to murder Claudius within seconds. The war ends here, with death not only to the guilty and the responsible, but also to the innocent and the unknowledgeable. In some sense, Shakespeare could be critiquing the victimization of war in his written homicides of seven major characters. In addition to Shakespeare's metaphorical war analogy is a literal war threatening Denmark. The threat is instigated by Fortinbras, who is rashly demanding from Claudius the lands that King Hamlet took from his father in battle (I, ii). This is only a risk to Denmark during the early part of the play, because in Act II, Claudius hears that Fortinbras has declared peace with the Danes, as long as he may use their land as a passage to enter Poland (II, ii). Although this seems like a miniscule part of the plot, Fortinbras' attack on Poland induces a powerful reaction from Hamlet, regarding the ability and willingness for soldiers to go to battle over "a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name" (IV, iv, 18), while he cannot even act on avenging the murder of his own father. In Hamlet's relevant soliloquy, there is a possible message against the measurement of character and masculinity by ability to murder

and destroy over belief, without definite gain. According to the end of the story, Fortinbras is rewarded with succession to the throne after the death of both the King and Hamlet. The man who had once wished battle to gain a land won it much more respectably through peace.

Whether intended by Shakespeare or not, Hamlet leaves today's more insightful readers with a powerful message on warfare. The plot is laced with the advice that much of the death and destruction of war is unnecessary, and many of those who die for a country's violent causes are not only innocent, but also unknowing of what they are actually dying for (such as Ophelia in Hamlet.) Although the play has certain intended thematic purposes, there are infinite lessons that a reader can learn from such a versatile and contemplative writer as Shakespeare. One of these timeless lessons is not to ruin both the guilty and the innocent with war when they can both be saved with peace.

Works Cited:

Kerrigan, William. "The Last Mystery," in *Hamlet's Perfection*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1994, pp. 122-51, 169-71.

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