Claudius And Hamlet Essay, Research Paper

Claudius & Hamlet, would the inhumane and sick character please step forth.Upon reading the sampling of “Hamlet” criticisms in John Jump’s “Hamlet (Selections)” I disagreed with a few of the critics, but my analysis was the most different from Wilson Knight’s interpretation. He labels Hamlet as “a sick, cynical, and inhumane prince” (Jump, 124) who vitiated a Denmark which was “one of healthy and robust life, good-nature, humor, romantic strength, and welfare.” In his book, The Wheel of Fire, he continues this line of thought to conclude that Claudius is “a good and gentle king, enmeshed by the chain of causality linking him with his crime. And this chain he might, perhaps, have broken except for Hamlet” (Jump, 125).Although Knight’s views of Hamlet and Claudius are almost the extreme opposite of my interpretation, I understand how he developed this interpretation. Hamlet becomes sick and cynical after the death of his father, whom he greatly admired, and the hasty remarriage of his mother to his uncle. Hamlet thinks his father was an “excellent king,” who loved his mother so much “that he may might not beteem the winds of heaven/ Visit her face to roughly” (I, ii, 140-141). However, his mother mourned for “a little month” and then she married a man who was “no more like [his] father/ Than [he] to Hercules” (I, ii, 153-152). These extraordinary events cause him to launch into a state of melancholy and depression in which he desires “that this too too solid flesh would melt” (I, ii, 129). In this melancholy, Hamlet loses becomes disenchanted with life, and to him the world seems “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable” (I, ii, 133). Later in the most famous of his soliloquy’s, Hamlet contemplates committing suicide because he is troubled by “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (III, i, 58). His disinterest for life, and his wishes for death are a definite indications of Hamlet’s sickness.Hamlet’s sickness is also shown through his strong relationship, bordering on obsession, with his mother. Throughout the play he constantly worries about her, and becomes angry when thinking of her relationship with Claudius. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet becomes enraged when he thinks about her “incestuous sheet,” and in frustration he makes the irrational generalization that, “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (I, ii, 146). In the closet scene, Hamlet treats his mother cruelly, and he accuses her of being involved in the plot to kill his father. Once again, he dwells on her “enseam’d bed/ Stew’d in corruption” (III, iv, 92-93). In his parting words to Gertrude, Hamlet instructs her to not “let the bloat king tempt you again to his bed.” (III, iv, 182). He is overly concerned with his mother’s relationship with Claudius, and this is just a part of his complex sickness.Wilson Knight also claims that Hamlet is “inhumane.” This is clearly demonstrated through his relationship with the fair Ophelia. Hamlet originally professes his love for Ophelia during his visitations to her closet, and through the love letter which he writes to her. However, during the nunnery scene, when Ophelia tries to return Hamlet’s gifts, he retorts “I never gave you aught,” (III, i, 97) and he goes on to tell her, “I loved you not” (III, i, 119). Later in this scene he tells Ophelia that she should go to a nunnery. He viciously insults the women whom he said he loved, and this greatly disturbs her. During The Mousetrap, Hamlet once again has no regard for Ophelia’s feelings, and he mocks her by putting his head in her lap and bantering with her. Hamlet is also responsible for the death of Ophelia’s father, Polonius. In the closet scene, Hamlet mistook her father for the king, and he fatally stabbed him. Gertrude called this “a rash and bloody deed” (III, iii, 27). He later shows that he has no remorse for this inhumane actions when he tells Claudius that Polonius is “at supper?not where he eats, but where he is eaten” (IV, ii, 18-20). Hamlet’s harsh and cruel treatment of Ophelia and his murder of her father lead to the madness which eventually overtook her. She became distraught by Hamlet’s rejection and the death of her father. This madness caused her to commit suicide by jumping from the bridge. Therefore, Hamlet can be held responsible for her death. If he hadn’t treated her in such a cruel manner, her life would not have ended so soon.Hamlet also reveals an inhumane and cynical side at the grave scene. When Laertes proclaims his love for Ophelia and his sorrow for her death, Hamlet rushes from his concealment and jumps into the grave after Laertes. Hamlet insults Laertes when he states, “Forty thousand brothers/ Could not, with all their quantity of love,/ Make up my sum” (V, i, 234-236). He is so cynical that he doubts that Laertes is sincere, even though there is no proof that Laertes is not being perfectly honest. His concern for his sister was shown when he gives her brotherly advice before he goes away. At the funeral when the priest implies that Ophelia should be buried “in ground unsanctified have log’d,” (V, i, 239) Laertes protests, and he claims that Ophelia shall become a “ministering angel” (V, i, 251). Hamlet had no right to doubt Laertes and to challenge him at this time of great grief, but Hamlet has become so cynical that he has no regards for Laertes, and he intervenes and causes a fight.Wilson Knight also states that Denmark was place of “healthy and robust life, good-nature, humour, romantic strength, and welfare” (Jump, 125). The two clowns of act five, scene one display the general welfare of the state. The clowns, as in most Shakespearean plays, are symbols of the common people of the land. When we first encounter the clowns they are discussing the circumstances of Ophelia’s death, but they soon begin to joke with each other in a merry fashion, and the First Clown tells the Second Clown a joke. Later in the scene, the First Clown engages into his work and he sings an amusing song. This indicates that the common people are relatively satisfied, and they are in the position where they can appreciate humor and find some enjoyment from their lives.Another indication of the “good-nature” of the state is the drinking custom of Claudius’ court. In his melancholy state, Hamlet can only see this as something which “makes [them] traduc’d and tax’d of other nations” (I, iii, 18). However, this custom reveals that the country is prosperous enough so that they can “bray out.” The fact that the people have something to celebrate shows that at least the court is content with their lives, and they are taking time to enjoy the prosperity of Denmark. Perhaps this custom was not followed in the times of Old Hamlet because his reign was not as prosperous as Claudius’ or perhaps the court is more content now that Claudius has the thrown.The renewal of the drinking custom may expose a positive side of Claudius’ reign. This fits Knight’s observation that Claudius is “a good and gentle king” (Jump, 125). Claudius is a skilled diplomat who seems to be well liked by his people. His diplomatic skills can be seen in his good relationship with the king of England. They are on such close terms that the British king is willing to host Hamlet for a recovery period. Claudius also demonstrates his skills through his dealings with Cornelius and Voltimand. He wisely advises them to go to Norway to negotiate peace with Fortinbras. This is in sharp contrast to Old Hamlet who plunged Denamrk into war with Norway. The people are also rather fond of Norway. Their fondness of Claudius is indicated through the actions of Rosencratz and Guildenstern. Claudius employs them to find the cause of Hamlet’s “antic disposition.” This shows how Claudius is truly concerned with his step-son’s well being. Rosencratz and Guildenstern take an immediate liking to Claudius, and they are “give up [themselves] in the full bent,/ To lay [their] services freely at [his] feet” (II, ii, 30-31). This is a clear illustration of how Claudius’ subject support him. Another indication of the people’s support of Claudius is that he was elected by the people to become king. Hamlet was the heir apparent, but Claudius was elected by the people. This might be an indication that the people desired a change in the way that the country was governed, so they elected Claudius instead of Old Hamlet’s son. Old Hamlet was also stuck in purgatory, and he was unable to go to heaven “till the foul crimes done in m days of nature/ are burnt and purg’d away” (I, iv, 12-13). This indicates that Old Hamlet may not have been as pure as the reader is led to believe, and perhaps Claudius truly was the better king.Although I see the validity of Wilson Knight’s interpretation of the play, I disagree with his views. Hamlet is not the “sick, cynical, and inhumane prince” which Knight describes. His sadness is great, but under the circumstances it is not excessive. His father, who he looked up to was recently killed, and his mother married his uncle within a month. To add to his troubles, he receives a visit from the ghost of his father which urges him to “revenge [Claudius'] foul and most unnatural murder” (I, V, 24) of old Hamlet. It is only logical that under these circumstances, Hamlet would be under great duress, and it would not be abnormal for him to express grief or appear to be “sick.”Wilson Knight also overlooks the positive sides of Hamlet. At the end of the nunnery scene, Ophelia laments the that “a noble mind is here overthrown:/ The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword” ( III, i, 153-154). Hamlet is the renaissance man who is well rounded in all areas. He has a tremendous acting abilities, and he is a scholar who analyzes everything and is very philosophical, as was shown in his assessment of life in the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy. Hamlet’s philosophical side is also brought to light in the prayer scene. At this point he has the opportunity to kill Claudius while he is attempting to repent. However, Hamlet does not take action because he desires kill Claudius “when he is drunk asleep, or in his rage/ Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,” so that “his soul will be as damn’d and black/ As hell, whereto it goes” (III, iii, 90-96). Here, Hamlet’s honor code and Christian code are in sharp conflict. If Hamlet did not debate the murder, and he instantly killed Claudius without hesitation, then he would be “sick and inhumane.” However, his contemplation of the ramifications of his actions show that he is thinking clearly, and he has not turned into a sick and cynical prince who is obsessed with revenge.One of the points which Wilson Knight may use to prove his interpretation is the exchange between Ophelia and Hamlet in the nunnery scene. At this point Hamlet is rather cruel to her, but there is “method to his madness.” In the middle of the scene he asks Ophelia, “Where’s your father?” (III, i, 131). This indicates that he has become aware of Polonius’ presence. It is after this point that Hamlet launches his most vicious attack upon Ophelia when he criticizes that she ” jigs, ambles lisps, and “make[s] [her] wantonness [her] ignorance” (III, i, 147). Hamlet is not being “inhumane.” He is cruel to Ophelia because he believes that she is collaborating with Polonius to spy on him, and is trying to deceive Polonius into thinking that he is mad. Knight also claims that he treats Getrude cruelly, but he “must be cruel only to be kind” (III, iv, 178). He is concerned that his mother will die in sin, and be stuck in purgatory along with his true father. In order to prevent this, Hamlet tries to make her see her wrong doings, and the only way to go about this was to act harshly.Another point to counter Knight’s claim that Hamlet is inhumane is the Prince’s relationship with the scholar Horatio. Horatio is Hamlet’s friend from Wittenberg who comes to Elsinore to see Old Hamlet’s funeral. He is a noble stoic who is by far the most pure character in the play. Horatio is one of the few characters who never tries to deceive anyone, and who doesn’t get involved in any crooked plots. Before the Mousetrap, Hamlet calls Horatio “as just a man/ As e’er [his] conversation cop’d withal” (III, ii, 55-56). This connection between Hamlet and Horatio is so strong that at the end of the play when Hamlet is dying, Horatio is moved to attempt suicide because he is “more an antique Roman than a Dane” (V, ii, 345). The strong connection between Horatio and Hamlet is important because the pure and wise Horatio would not associate himself with a “a sick, cynical, and inhumane prince.” This is further evidence which casts doubt upon Knight’s analysis of Hamlet.Wilson Knight also suggests that the state of Denmark is “one of healthy and robust life, good-nature, humor, romantic strength, and welfare.” (Jump, 125). However, there are a great deal of textual evidence which indicates that this is an incorrect conclusion. When Bernardo and Francisco are keeping guard, Francisco notes that “tis bitter cold,/ And I am sick at heart” (I, i, 7-8). The guards are representative of the common people of Denmark, and his comment can be interpreted that the entire state of Denmark is sick at heart due to the recent death of Old Hamlet and Claudius’ ascension to the thrown. Upon seeing the ghost of Old Hamlet, Horatio comments, “This bodes some strange eruption to our state” (I, i, 69). Even the scholar who was hesitant to believe in ghosts is now convinced that Denmark is headed for trouble. After the ghost makes his second appearance, Marcellus notes, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (I, iv, 90). Theses observations in the first act are clear indications that Denmark has transformed into a state of chaos.The most glaring weakness of Wilson Knight’s interpretation of Hamlet is his conclusion that Claudius is “a good and gentle king, enmeshed by the chain of causality linking him with his crime” (Jump, 125). Knight dismisses the murder of Old Hamlet too easily. As John Jump states, “Claudius was no impulsive offender, suddenly acting our of character. He deliberately and treacherously poisoned his mistress’s husband, a man who was his brother and his king” (Jump, 125). Claudius is saddled with the responsibility for the murder of Old Hamlet, but he does not even consider repenting until the he realizes that Hamlet is planning to seek revenge. However, when he thinks about repent, he wonders “May one be pardon’d and retain the offence?” (III, iii, 67). Claudius sees the benefits of repenting, yet he does not want to give up the prizes of his sin. Ultimately, Claudius rises and his “thoughts remain below” even though his “words fly up” (III, iii, 98-99). The King is unable to repent because his prayers are insincere. Is this a good and gentle king?Not only is Claudius unable to repent, but throughout the play he is extremely manipulative of many of the other characters. When Laertes challenges that Claudius is responsible for the madness of his sister and the death of his father, Claudius deftly avoids the situation, and he forms an alliance with Laertes. Claudius suggests that Laertes uses, “A sword unbated, and, in a pass of practice/ Requite [Hamlet] for your father” (IV, vii, 137-138). Cladius further thickens the plot by adding that he will prepare a “chalice for the nonce, where on but sipping/ If he by chance escapes [Laertes'] venom’d stuck,/ [their] purpose may hold there” (IV, vii, 159-161). Claudius engineers this vicious plot, and it results in the death of Laertes, Hamlet, and Gertrude. During his reign the “kind and gentle” King concocted a plot which resulted in the death of three members of the Danish royalty, he murdered his brother, the former King of Denmark, and entered into an incestuous relationship with his brothers wife.While constructing Wilson Knight’s argument, I gained a full understanding of how he derived his interpretation of the play, and I began to support his interpretation. However, as I began to deconstruct his argument, I realized that there are many weaknesses to his interpretation, and I realized the strengths of my interpretation. This is the challenge of literature. It can be interpreted in so many different manners, and at times the vastly different interpretations can greatly confuse students. It is the students responsibility to take criticisms into consideration, but to derive their own unique interpretation based upon their studies.