Claudius And Hamlet Essay, Research Paper

Why Claudius is King?

When at the beginning of Act I scene ii of Hamlet we find that Claudius, and not young Hamlet is king of Denmark, we are surprised.

Part of this surprise comes from our anticipation that the son of the old king should be the natural heir to the throne. Shakespeare takes advantage of this expectation by naming his prince ‘Hamlet’. So when, after encountering the ghost, Horatio and the others decide to “impart what we have seen tonight/Unto young Hamlet” (I, i,185), we are expecting to meet a young king and not the elder Claudius.

Why old Hamlet did not name his son as successor is not clear, but that he could have is shown strikingly when Claudius makes “the world take note” that Hamlet “is most immediate” to his throne (I, ii, 115). This, coupled with the fact that Hamlet was at Wittenberg when his father died, are the two conditions that enabled Claudius to seize power.

But taking control and remaining in control are two different things Claudius has some explaining to do, and this is precisely what occupies him for most of the second scene.

It is practical concerns, Claudius argues, that have forced him to become king. There is of course the threat of Fortinbras who, thinking Denmark to be vulnerable “by our late dear brother’s death” has been demanding “the surrender of those lands/Lost by his father” (I, ii, 23-24). In a gesture of contemptuous superiority, Claudius simply declares “So much for him” (I, ii, 25). That crisis is over.

The fact is Claudius is in control. He has already acknowledged the moral awkwardness of marrying his “sometime sister” Gertrude but characterizes it as mere political expedience: she is “The imperial jointress to this warlike state”(I, ii, 8-9). He thanks his supporters who have shown their “better wisdoms, which have freely gone/With this affair along” (I, ii, 15) and illustrates, through the brief exchange with Polonius and Laertes, precisely how support of his rule can be rewarded:

What wouldst thou beg Laertes?

That shall not be my offer, not thy asking?

The head is not more native to the heart,

The hand more instrumental to the mouth,

Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.

(I, ii, 46-50)

But Claudius’ rational tone and evident control is also calculated to contrast with Hamlet’s own behavior. According to Claudius, the death of a king ought to be met with “discretion” and “wisest sorrow”, along with “remembrance of ourselves” – that is, the needs of the state (I, ii, 7).

Hamlet, deep in mourning and apparent melancholy, has his faults publically enumerated when Claudius berates him for his behaviour:

Tis unmanly grief,

It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,

A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,

An understanding simple and unschooled.

(I, ii, 100-104)

Remember that all this takes place in front of the assembled court. These are not private exchanges between family members but a very public display between potential rivals and Claudius is tallying the reasons why Hamlet is unfit to rule. And so when Claudius asks Hamlet not to return to Wittenberg it is (beyond the obvious reason of keeping a potential rival close at hand) also to remind everyone that Hamlet’s absence from the court was inappropriate and further shows a disinclination to rule. Moreover, the implication is that the absence contributed to the crisis that made Claudius’ unconventional action necessary.

The subsequent disclosures of the ghost to Hamlet in Act I, scene iv, would seem to make all this moot except that it all remains true nevertheless. Note that in his first soliloquy in scene ii, Hamlet contemplates suicide, mourns his father, laments the incestuous nature of his mother= relationship with Claudius, but never once disputes his uncle=s claim to the throne. When the ghost reveals Claudius’ treachery, Hamlet’s response – after his initial fury – is to lament the “cursed spite” that he “was born to set it right!” (I, v, 216).

Claudius may have engineered events to suit his ambitions, but Hamlet’s nature and behavior has provided him – pun intended – free reign.