Hamlet, Act Iii, Sc. Iii Essay, Research Paper

This scene is a dramatic peak in which both Claudius and Hamlet acknowledge their respective dilemmas. The King faces the question of how to repent and so save himself, at least, from spiritual damnation. Hamlet?s theological problem with killing Claudius becomes yet another hurdle and he becomes increasingly trapped by his own indecision.

Claudius makes his first admission of regicide in this soliloquy. He uses disease imagery, continuing the motif, heightening our awareness of the terrible thing he has done. The King refers to the ?primal eldest curse?, an allusion to the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. This parallel is apt, not only because they were brothers, it represents a terrible sin against God — in this case because the natural order has been violated. There is no evidence to suggest Claudius was particularly pious prior to this crime, but the need for Grace in the eyes of God would have been very important to him. Ironically he is unable to pray, for forgiveness, because his ?stronger guilt defeats my [Claudius?] strong intent?. His intent could also be his original desire for kingship, meaning that his guilt is so severe he can?t appreciate the rewards.

Curiously the strength of his language, regarding his crime, is only matched by Hamlet. Claudius is under pressure, both from his conscience and Hamlet?s cloak of madness which threatens to unmask him. Just prior to this soliloquy he was arranging for the removal of Hamlet to England, this erases one of the threats to him. Forgiveness is also important to him to safe guard his spiritual future. However it seems unlikely he is as calculating as this and he may well be sincere.

The King?s apparently acute sense of guilt helps him to realise that it is impossible to ?be pardoned and [still] retain th?offence?. He is aware that in worldly terms he can survive, using his power to ?shove by justice?. His inability to pray troubles him deeply and he is, at first, unable even to kneel. His cries to heaven allude to the Biblical idea of sin causing a separation between man and God.

Both Hamlet and the King are involved with acting r?les. The former pretends to be insane and the latter lives the lie of his brother?s death. Claudius seems to have absorbed this pretence and has become so conditioned to it that he is unable to feel anything for his dead brother. Hamlet is similarly frustrated that his passionate desire for revenge has ebbed away, again this links the two characters.

Hamlet also faces a theological dilemma. To his eyes the King is silent in prayer and to kill him at that point would probably send him to heaven — the last thing Hamlet wants. Hamlet is also only too aware that his own father is in Purgatory because he wasn?t prepared for death. The concept of being in a state of Grace was very important to Shakespeare?s audience and they would have been familiar with Hamlet?s logic in delaying the act.

This is the closest Hamlet has come to avenging his father?s death. He presumably has his sword drawn and this, combined with their actual proximity, is a dramatic peak in the play. The audience would also be aware of the deep dramatic irony, in that Claudius is actually failing to pray and is therefore not in a state of Grace.

Strangely Hamlet?s logic appears flawed. As a double irony he has overlooked the distinct possibility that, since Claudius is still King, any prayer for forgiveness would be somehow invalid. The pondering Hamlet should have realised this point, yet he doesn?t dare think it because then he would have to act. Characteristically his thoughts lead to doubt, and that in turn to an impotence of action.

In planning his next action, Hamlet uses emotive language to attempt to rekindle his rage. He needs that emotional energy in order to kill Claudius. The audience is reminded of the crimes and the ?incestuous… bed?. Technically Claudius has not committed incest, however Hamlet uses the phrase to evoke an emotional reaction in himself. The audience is reminded of the actor who cries over the fictitious death of a father. Hamlet is trying to act out a r?le which represents what he believes he should do and how he should feel. Similarly Claudius is doing exactly the same, he has become cold to his crime and cannot repent.

Hamlet lists possible crimes that Claudius may commit in order to intensify the negative image of the King. He imagines Hell as it might be and then as an after thought excludes his mother. This is the instruction of his father?s ghost but also represents his own love for her.

In a final couple of lines Claudius confirms his ?thoughts remain below? and he failed to pray. This concludes the scene and with it the last chance for a satisfactory result, from here on only tragedy can result.

Neither man has achieved his aim in this scene primarily because of what it would cost them. The King would have to sacrifice his position in order to be forgiven. Hamlet would have to move into unknown territory, an action unfamiliar to a thinker such as he. The passage shows the marked similarities between the two men as each considers regicide from opposed perspectives.