The Role of Decalogue in William Shakespeare's Hamlet and Macbeth

Holly J. Braun
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol2/iss1/3

Copyright ©Winter 1998 by the authors. McNair Scholars Journal is reproduced electronically by ScholarWorks@GVSU.
The Role of the Decalogue in William Shakespeare's 
*Hamlet* and *Macbeth*

Holly J. Braun  
*McNair Scholar*

Kathleen Blumreich, Ph.D.  
*Faculty Mentor*

**ABSTRACT:**  
The Decalogue, the collective term for the Ten Commandments, plays a major role in both character development and plot structure in two of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. In these two works, nine of the Ten Commandments are broken through the course of each play. The Decalogue serves as a plot device; because the Ten Commandments are embedded in the subconscious of most of Shakespeare's audience members and, as moral rules, they are used as a paradigm of what is right or wrong, good or evil. In this way, Shakespeare's audiences, although not consciously aware, use the Ten Commandments as a means of judge the characters.

Shakespeare's characters Hamlet and Macbeth both confront the internal transition from human to superhuman or deity status. These transitions result from different sets of circumstances, but the outcome for both characters is essentially the same: each sees himself as acquiring God-like qualities. In both cases, the first step for the protagonist is the breaking of the First Commandment, “I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt not have strange gods before me.”

Hamlet makes a transition to seeing himself as a deity in Act II. Although in the first two acts of the play, he has been reverent in his attitude towards God, when his father is killed, Hamlet becomes angry with God. He doesn't understand why God doesn't punish Claudius immediately. Hamlet reveals that he is motivated to seek revenge by heaven; that is, since Heaven has not taken control of the situation, he must, “Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell” (II.ii.569).

In Act I of *Macbeth*, the witches greet Macbeth as King. When this occurs, he sees it as a sign that he should take matters into his own hands, and truly attempt to usurp the throne. Macbeth does not feel that his situation is prompted by Heaven, but by a moral manifestation of fate embodied in the Apparition that appears to him in Act IV. The Apparition states:

> Be Bloody; bold, and resolute! Laugh to scorn  
> The pow'r of man, for none of woman born  
> Shall harm Macbeth. (IV.i.79-81)

Macbeth is told that he cannot be harmed by anyone “of woman born,” which suggests that Macbeth himself has “become” God. If no one can kill him, he reasons, he must be immortal, just like God.

The instance of Hamlet breaking the Second Commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain,” is not obvious, but visible nonetheless. In Hamlet, prior to his “conversion” to believing himself a deity (in Act II, scene ii), when he speaks of God his tone is reverent. An example of his irreverence is found later in Act III: “‘S blood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?” (III.ii.355) After his turning point in Act II, scene ii, Hamlet no longer sees any reason to hold the idea and name of God sacred.

The breaking of the Second Commandment is clearly defined in *Macbeth*. After Macbeth commits his first murder, he speaks with Lady Macbeth and the following dialogue occurs:

**MACBETH:**  
One cried ‘God bless us!’ and ‘Amen!’ the other  
As they had seen me with these hangman’s hands,  
List’ning their fear. I could not say ‘Amen!’  
When they did say ‘God bless us!’ (II.ii.26-29)

**LADY MACBETH:**  
Consider it not so deeply.

**MACBETH:**  
But wherefore could not I pronounce ‘Amen’?  
I had most need of blessing, and ‘Amen’  
Stuck in my throat. (II.ii.30–33)

Here Macbeth is trying to say a blessing to himself and repent to God by saying “Amen,” but he is not able to utter the word. If he were able to, it would certainly be breaking the Commandment, which he truly desires, but is unable to do.

In *Hamlet*, the relationship of the hero to the Fourth Commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother,” is twofold. First, there is the matter of Hamlet and his honor toward his dead father; then, there is the matter of his mother Gertrude. The entire play is constructed around Hamlet's desire to honor his dead father by revenging his murder. Yet Hamlet also honors his mother. Although his father's apparition in Act I tells Hamlet to “Leave her to heaven” (I.v.86), in Act III, Hamlet beseeches Gertrude to repent:
Mother, for the love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
It will but skin and film the ulcerous
Whiles rank and corruption, mining all within,
Inflicts unseen. Confess yourself to heaven,
Repent what’s past, avoid what is to come,
And do not spread the compost on the weeds
To make them ranker… (III.iv.145–152)

In spite of what the ghost has said,
Hamlet still feels that he must attempt to
save his mother.

In Macbeth, the Fourth
Commandment is broken by Macduff’s
son, as he speaks to his mother about the
deadth of his father.

SON:
My father is not dead for all your saying.

WIFE:
Yes, he is dead. How wilt thou do for a father?

SON:
Nay, how will you do for a husband?

WIFE:
Why, I can buy me twenty at any market.

SON:
Then you’ll buy ’em to sell again.

(IV ii. 30–41)

The blatant lack of respect that is shown
to Macduff’s wife by his son is the same
argumentative tone that Hamlet takes
with Gertrude in her private closet.

Examples of transgressions of the
Fifth Commandment, “Thou shalt not
kill,” are numerous. However, while
Macbeth openly admits to his acts of mur­
der, Hamlet hardly speaks of them. When
Hamlet stabs Polonius in Gertrude’s clo­
et, he is hardly cognizant of the deed:

QUEEN:
Oh me, what hast thou done?

HAMLET:
Nay, I know not. It is the king?

QUEEN:
Oh, what a rash and bloody deed is this!

HAMLET:
A bloody deed—almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king, and marry with his brother.

Hamlet takes no responsibility for his
actions. For him, his own “bloody deed”
is justified by the murder of his father.
Later, the murder of Claudius is a vindica­
tion for Hamlet, rather than a sin, and he
takes no responsibility for the action.

Conversely, Macbeth makes several
statements acknowledging that he has
committed murder. Before he murders
Duncan, he muses on what he is about
to do:

I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven, or to hell.
(III.i.62–64)

Unlike Hamlet, Macbeth acknowledges
his action: “I have done the deed”
(II.i.13)

The breaking of the Sixth Command­
ment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,”
with the attendant Ninth Commandment,
“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife,”
occur in both plays. In Hamlet, the
Ghost speaks of the adulterous intrigues
of Claudius on Gertrude:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterous beast…
O wicked wits and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen.
(I.v.42–46)

The Ghost believes that Claudius seduced
Gertrude while her husband, the King,
was yet alive, and that this adultery led to
the King’s murder. In Macbeth, adultery is
not so easily recognized. However, Lady
Macbeth schemes to distract Duncan’s
chamberlains from his service by sitting
and drinking with them in his chambers,
et this plan relies on at least the appear­
ance of adultery.

The Seventh Commandment, “Thou
shalt not steal,” is more overtly broken, as
is the Tenth Commandment, “Thou shalt
not covet thy neighbor’s goods.” In
Hamlet, Claudius, the brother of the King,
covets the Queen and the throne.
Ultimately he steals both from his brother.
Macbeth also covets the throne: “…I have
no spur / to prick the sides of my intent,
but only / vaulting ambition…”
(I.vii.25–27). His “vaulting ambition”
makes him feel as if he deserves to be
King, simply because of the magnitude of
his desire for the throne.

The Ten Commandments serve an
important purpose in Hamlet and
Macbeth. They make the characters and
the plot structure of the tragedies accessi­
ble to even the least educated members of
the audience. The Ten Commandments
constitute a common knowledge that
everyone, from royalty to beggars, shares.
Therefore, all members of Shakespeare’s
audiences, regardless of the level of their
education or sophistication, could be
depended on the have much of the same
basic understanding of right and wrong,
good and evil. In Hamlet and Macbeth, the
Ten Commandments serve as signposts,
helping the audience follow the moral
path of the play.
Bibliography


The Role of the Decalogue in William Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Macbeth