**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S *HAMLET***

**CLOSE READING 4: “MY OFFENCE IS RANK” ACT III, SCENE iii**

**KING CLAUDIUS**

Thanks, dear my lord.

*Exit POLONIUS*

O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven;

It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,

A brother's murder. Pray can I not,

Though inclination be as sharp as will:

My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent;

And, like a man to double business bound,

I stand in pause where I shall first begin,

And both neglect. What if this cursed hand

Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,

Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens

To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy

But to confront the visage of offence?

And what's in prayer but this two-fold force,

To be forestalled ere we come to fall,

Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up;

My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer

Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?

That cannot be; since I am still possess'd

Of those effects for which I did the murder,

My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.

May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?

In the corrupted currents of this world

Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,

And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself

Buys out the law: but 'tis not so above;

There is no shuffling, there the action lies

In his true nature; and we ourselves compell'd,

Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,

To give in evidence. What then? what rests?

Try what repentance can: what can it not?

Yet what can it when one can not repent?

O wretched state! O bosom black as death!

O limed soul, that, struggling to be free,

Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay!

Bow, stubborn knees; and, heart with strings of steel,

Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe!

All may be well.

*Retires and kneels*

**Discussion questions**

* To what extent does the audience feel some sympathy for Claudius here?
* How does this soliloquy parallel Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy?