

Shakespeare's hamlet – the personal and political corruption of the state

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William Shakespeare's play Hamlet investigates the intrigue that occurs in Denmark after a ghost tells Prince Hamlet that his uncle, King Claudius, killed Hamlet's father, the true king.

Claudius secretly murders his brother so that he can obtain power, which is the root of deception and evil from which all succeeding events emanate.

The guard Marcellus states that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1. 4. 90), which refers not only to Claudius' crime but to the conspiracies that the characters execute. In order to buy himself time while he decides whether to kill Claudius, Hamlet acts like madman.

Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's friends, exact different methods of spying on the prince, because they seek rewards from the royal court. This causes Hamlet to instrument the murders of all three characters in order to protect the advancement of his own quest for vengeance. Finally, in his final effort to retain power, Claudius exacts a plan to murder Hamlet by using Laertes, who wants to avenge Hamlet for his father's death. The characters all use deception in order to obtain what they want, which demonstrates their greed and mistrust of each other. The royal court and its affiliates seek power, while Hamlet pursues self-fulfillment in the form of justified vengeance.

Laertes represents both desires, because in his thirst for vengeance, he joins with Claudius. Through the characters' self-imposed obligation to duty, they link their souls to the state. Each character's mask reaches a breaking point and results in the character's death, which suggests that a deception of one's essential identity cannot last. The plights of these characters show that

without a fundamental basis of honesty or altruism, no person or government can survive. Interestingly, every one of these actions stems from Claudius' initial murder of his own brother.

In the beginning of the play, the only source of this information is the ominous ghost of Hamlet's father, who tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered him. The ghost asserts that "the serpent that did sting [Hamlet's] noble father's life now wears his crown" (1. 5. 46-47). The description of Claudius as a snake paints an evil, deceptive picture of the false king.

This implied metaphor and symbol also references Christianity. In the same way that the serpent tempted Eve to obtain infinite knowledge by eating an Apple off a tree, the thirst for power consumed Claudius. Just how Eve's mistake brought on the eternal fall of paradise, Claudius' action causes conspiracy and chaos in the state of Denmark. Not only does Claudius forgo his relationship with his brother and take away his life, but he deceptively disrupts the royal line of Denmark. The foreshadowing ghost commands Hamlet to "revenge [King Hamlet's] foul and most unnatural murder" (1. 5. 31). Hamlet decides that he owes his father this; he vows that the ghost's "commandment all alone shall live within the book and volume of [his] brain" and that he will "wipe away" all else from his mind (1. 5. 109-110).

In this implied metaphor, Hamlet declares that he will remove all the trivial words, or ideas, that are written in the book of his mind, so that only one sentence, or thought, remains: the ghost's order to kill Claudius. In this way, Claudius' underhanded murder of King Hamlet causes Hamlet to lose all

sense of balance in his life: the prince decides that his only remaining purpose in life is to achieve vengeance for his father. But can Hamlet believe the ghost? In order to discover whether the ghost's claim is legitimate, Hamlet decides that he " hereafter shall think meet to put an antic disposition on" (1. 5. 191-192). He suggests that he will pretend to be a madman, thereby beginning his master plan for how he will exact his revenge.

By acting crazy, Hamlet will buy time so that he can investigate whether Claudius is truly guilty. Hamlet will also protect himself from his self-proclaimed enemies, Claudius and Gertrude, discovering his true motives. He may also appear harmless, when he is actually finding a way to murder the false king. Hamlet makes Horatio and Marcellus swear that they will never " note that [they] know aught of [him]" (1. 5.

200-201). In this way, Hamlet will deceive the entire court. Earlier on, in the first court meeting, Hamlet had deceived the court by hiding his true sadness. He had declared that his " solemn black" clothes could not express the extent of " woe" that he was eating away at him. After everybody had left the court and could no longer hear him, Hamlet had erupted into sadness, lamenting that " self-slaughter" is prohibited by God. Now, from the moment that Hamlet decides to behave like a madman, he cuts himself off emotionally from everybody in the royal circle of Denmark.

From now on, the people with whom he previously had genuine relationships, including Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, will never again interact with the true Hamlet. In addition, by behaving with such falseness, Hamlet

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tarnishes his future as king, for no erroneous ruler, such as Claudius, is a fair and just ruler. Therefore, Hamlet's scheming inhibits him from connecting to people in an honest way and endangers his integrity as the succeeding king of Denmark. Hamlet's successful masquerade puzzles Queen Gertrude and Claudius, but at the cost of their convincing Hamlet's friends to spy on him. Claudius tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of Hamlet's "' transformation'", proclaiming that "nor th' exterior nor the inward man resembles that it was" (2.

2. 5-7). He suggests that Hamlet's unkempt appearance and demeanor are a far cry from their previously sane state. Because Claudius doesn't know that Hamlet is aware of his crime, one can presume that Claudius is genuinely confused by Hamlet's behavior. Claudius asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to "draw [Hamlet] on to pleasures and to gather whether aught, unknown to [them], afflicts him thus" (2.

2. 15). Claudius and Guildenstern put their own desire to understand Hamlet's thoughts above his right to privacy. Gertrude promises Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that their "visitation shall receive such thanks as fits a king's remembrance" (2. 2. 25-26).

Like the king and queen, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern choose the approval of the royal family over their friendship with Hamlet. The plotting of these four royal characters disrupts the respect and honesty that they once shared with Hamlet. Furthermore, because these characters use deception in order to fulfill their goals, they further pollute the honor of the royal crown.

Because these characters are driven by self-interest, they corrupt their

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relationships with Hamlet and further foul the rectitude of Denmark's monarchy. However, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's masquerade fails to fool Hamlet, so Claudius and Polonius take matters of spying into their own hands. Hamlet sternly tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that "there is a kind of confession in [their] looks which [their] modesties have not craft enough to color" (2.

2. 301-303). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, unsuccessful in their pursuit, tell Claudius and Gertrude that they are unable to learn the cause of Hamlet's melancholy. Therefore, Claudius and Polonius decide to spy on Hamlet when he is speaking to Ophelia. In this way, they disregard Hamlet's privacy so that they can obtain the information that they want. Hamlet continues his facade as a madman, telling Ophelia both that he "did love [her] once" and that he "loved [her] not" (3.

1. 125-129). Hamlet's deception ruins his relationship with Ophelia, because he confuses her as to whether he ever loved her. He then commands her to "get [herself] to a nunnery" so that she does not become a "breeder of sinners" (3. 1. 131-132).

In a patriarchal and sexist manner, Hamlet suggests that as a woman, the most that Ophelia can do in her life is bring evil people into the world. Hamlet also further harms his potential as king; although Ophelia was not of noble birth, she was, as Hamlet's lover, the most eligible woman to become queen. Ironically, Ophelia winds up becoming truly mad and dying, whereas Hamlet's madness is a fabrication. This in turn infuriates Laertes, who, when

he witnesses Ophelia's gibbering, declares that " thoughts and afflictions, passion, hell itself she turns to favor and to prettiness" (4. 5. 211-212).

When Ophelia drowns in the river, whether by suicide or not, Laertes is further anguished. Because Hamlet angers Laertes in this way, he indirectly causes Laertes to kill him. In these ways, Hamlet's pretense both disrupts his relationship with his lover and further fouls his future as the ruler of Denmark. Unsatisfied with the little information that he has gained about Hamlet's strange behavior, Polonius spies on Hamlet again when the prince goes to speak to Gertrude. This results in Polonius' death.

Claudius' thirst for power influences Polonius to spy on Hamlet in the first place. Both men disrespect Hamlet's privacy in order to fulfill their thirst for the upper hand on the prince. They watch Hamlet verbally attack Gertrude, telling her that since she does see the wrong in her marrying the incompetent brother of her noble, late husband, he will " set [her] up a glass where [she] may see the inmost part of [her]" (3. 4. 24-25). Gertrude cries out in fear, and Polonius in turn calls out for help.

Hamlet rashly stabs through the curtain that Polonius is hiding behind and kills the old man. Polonius' loyalty to corrupt King Claudius thus leads to his own death. Because of Polonius' death, Ophelia's insanity intensifies. She raves in the royal hall, singing strange songs about things such as " Gis and Saint Charity" (4. 5.

63). Laertes sails back from France and storms into the hall, accompanied by a mob of commoners who exclaim that now, "' Laertes shall be king!" (4. 5.

116). Further riled up because of his sister's madness and death, Laertes vows that he'll " be revenged most thoroughly for [his] father" (4. 5.

153-154). Laertes and Hamlet's common goal makes them clear foils for each other. In his sadness and fury, Laertes seeks revenge against the true son of Denmark - Hamlet. Polonius' attempt at deception leads not only to the end of his own life and his relationships with his children but to his son's anguish and his daughter's death. In a moment of passion, Hamlet loses control of himself and irrationally murders a great accomplice to the Danish throne.

Interestingly, Hamlet is only able to take action when he cannot see the true face of his enemy, both figuratively and literally, because that would require him to overcome his fear and indecision and to face the repercussions of his actions. In these ways, Polonius' attempted deception and resulting death lead to Hamlet's further disgrace and his impending death at the hands of resentful Laertes. After Hamlet kills Polonius, Claudius decrees Hamlet to return to England, accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This results in Hamlet's arrangement of the murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As Hamlet tells Horatio, Hamlet found a document in the men's bag, penned by Claudius, that ordered Hamlet's head to be " struck off" (5. 2.

28). Claudius attempts to deceive not only Hamlet but Gertrude, who would never execute her own son. Claudius disregards the anguish that his wife would feel if her son was murdered in the same way that he ignored the pain she must have felt when her first, noble husband was killed. Claudius tries to

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kill his own stepson in order to preserve his power. Similarly, because of their personal ambitions for rewards from the royal family, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to kill their own friend. The lack of individuality of these two men demonstrates their mindless, robotic slavery to the idea of power and to the fouled institution that is the monarchy of Denmark.

When Hamlet finds this document, he writes a new mandate instructing that the king of England “ should the bearers put to sudden death” (5. 2. 51). In order to protect his own life and to continue his quest for his father’s vengeance, Hamlet is forced to instrument the murder of his own friends. Claudius’ evil intentions, which infiltrate also to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, cause the two young men to die.

By attempting to murder the real prince, the three characters attempt to commit the ultimate crime against Hamlet and the veracity of the Danish royal succession. In turn, Hamlet is forced to take away the lives of his own friends and further tarnish the integrity of the Danish crown. Finally, in the ultimate act of deception, Claudius does destroy the lives of all the characters and the integrity of the Danish monarchy. He devises a plan for angry Laertes to avenge his father’s death without the appearance of foul play, which would expose Claudius’ misdeeds. In this way, Claudius fools the entire court, who believes that this will be a fair and playful duel. Through Claudius’ statement that he “ must commune with [Laertes’] grief” (4.

5. 226), Claudius tricks Laertes into thinking that the purpose of the event is to avenge Polonius, when Claudius’ only real desire to is to rid Denmark of Hamlet. Claudius endears Laertes to “ put [him] in [his] heart for a friend”,

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for “[Hamlet] which hath [Laertes’] noble father slain pursued [Claudius’] life” (4. 7. 4-5).

In this way, Claudius steers Laertes away from the fact that Polonius spied on Hamlet in the first place, so that Claudius appears innocent in Laertes’ eyes. Claudius then tells Laertes that he hasn’t yet punished Hamlet because he didn’t want to upset either the general public, who hold Hamlet “ in great love”, or his wife, Gertrude, who is “ so conjunctive to [his] life and soul” (4. 7. 16). However, Claudius lies; the truth is that he didn’t want to kill Hamlet for fear that the public would realize his evil intentions.

Claudius’ lack of care for Gertrude’s emotions is demonstrated by the fact that he does execute this plan to kill her son. Claudius deceives Hamlet by telling him that he believes that Hamlet will win the duel. In these ways, Claudius lies to every character in his effort to maintain power. Claudius’ grand orchestration of deception results in the death of every character present and the destruction of Denmark’s government. Gertrude unknowingly drinks the poisoned wine that Claudius had prepared in order to congratulate Hamlet, in the case that Hamlet won. In this way, Claudius’ deception kills one of the prizes that he had sought after – the queen.

When Laertes and Hamlet wound each other with the poisoned sword, Laertes declares that he is “ justly killed by [his] own treachery” (5. 2. 318) and tells Hamlet the truth about this orchestrated match. Although Laertes and Hamlet die forgiving each other, their quests for vengeance ultimately kill them because they use deception. Laertes’ cooperation with corrupt Claudius and attempt to murder Hamlet results in his own death.

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Hamlet's prolonged madness destroys him, because he waits too long to kill Claudius and essentially allows Claudius to obtain an upper-hand. However, Hamlet is able to stab Claudius and force him to drink from the goblet, which shows how Claudius' evil desire for power ultimately kills him. The characters' attempts at deception obstruct their interpersonal relationships and the government's functionality, shedding truth on Hamlet's statement that "Denmark's a prison" (2. 2. 262).

In Denmark, deception becomes the only way to find truth. Ironically, the characters preserve their interests and honor through scheming against each other. The masks of all the characters are strained throughout the entire play until they crack open and end the characters' lives. The characters' fate demonstrates that deception is not a productive way to obtain truth and spur productive action. The deception of the characters causes chaos in Denmark on an interpersonal and governmental level, preventing both from surviving.