

Corruption- an incurable disease

[Government](#), [Corruption](#)



An incidental comment from a minor character lays down, in the opening moments of Shakespeare's Hamlet, the theme which is to pin together all its aspects. Francisco the guard says, 'I am sick at heart.' [Act I. Sc. I, 29]. Francisco's sick melancholy is in keeping with the atmosphere of corruption and decay which permeates the play; unexplained, difficult to define, but with a clear component of dread. And, typically, his expression of misgivings is misinterpreted, perhaps even underestimated. Barnardo, seeking palpable reasons for Francisco's distraction, asks whether Francisco has had a quiet watch. Perhaps he wonders if the ghost has disturbed Francisco, but whatever is ailing Francisco remains secret, simply becoming a part of the anxious atmosphere. We are constantly reminded of the pervading atmosphere of decay through the imagery used in the play. It is a significant point that the ghost, the only character that could arguably be termed an outside observer, and who is certainly qualified to make some form of prophetic judgement, should be one of the prime sources of imagery of decay, poison and rotting. Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole With juice of cursed hebona in a vial, And in the porches of my ears did pour The leperous distilment doth posset And curd, like eager droppings into milk, the thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine. And a most instant tetter barked about, Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust All my smooth body [Act I, Sc. v, 66 - 78] A graphic description, especially since only moments before the ghost had instructed Hamlet not to pity it! Throughout the play we can trace a progression of corruption, that leads to death, through 'disease' in the characters of Polonius, Claudius and Hamlet. Polonius is perhaps the most obviously corrupt character in Hamlet. His corruption has occurred long

before the play begins; the progression is in the extent to which it is revealed to us. From this courteous, almost comically long-winded member of the court, emerges a personality that is first dominating (as he instructs Laertes: 'These few precepts in thy memory/ Look thou character.' [Act I, Sc. iii, 63]), clearly abusive towards Ophelia: Affection? Pooh! You speak like a green girl, Unsifted in such perilous circumstance, Do you believe his tenders, as you call them? . . . I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth, have you so slander and moment leisure As to give works or talk with the Lord Hamlet. Look to't, I charge you. Come your ways. [Act I, Sc. iii 106 - 140] then meddling and subversive, as he sets spies on his own son, and finally irredeemably and ultimately fatally corrupt and subversive, as he schemes and plots around Hamlet. His death - physical corruption - is a precursor, signifying to the audience the ultimate fate of all those characters exhibiting signs of corruption. Polonius may be the most obviously corrupt character, but the centre of evil of the play's plot and of the kingdom is Claudius. When Marcellus states, 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.' [Act I, Sc. iv, 90], it could be interpreted that he is speaking of a threat of war, but when looked at as symbolic, nothing could better sum up Claudius' corrupting effect on the kingdom which is brought on by his unpunished crime. His evil deeds carry him to the throne and pollute the people around him causing chaos, sorrow and death. The image of rotting along with the released odour permeating far and wide symbolizes the infectious quality of sin. The suggested transformation of a beautiful human into a disgusting, purposeless mass symbolizes the effect of sin on the human soul. Hamlet himself strives to separate his noble qualities, which we

have seen throughout the play, from the circumstance and treachery against which he has struggled, and in which he has been entangled. As a prince Hamlet cannot not rule, but he too has become corrupted, not in mind, but by history, by becoming the focus of the ancient revenger's dilemma. Any action he takes will be morally dubious. Not taking revenge will reduce him and make him unfit for rule by his own standards, and taking revenge will do the same. Though Hamlet retains our sympathy at the end of the play, he has murdered five people and caused the suicide of one. But Hamlet can still decide Denmark's future, by effectively appointing a successor. Thus, the corruption dies with him; all the inevitable justice is carried out; and Hamlet's legacy remains. From a morally dubious situation, Hamlet is able to wrest an honourable death, and the chance of stability for the future of his country. From the fates of Polonius, Claudius and Hamlet we see that corruption originating from 'disease' leads to death. Hamlet and Polonius' emotions clouded their judgement and led them to their death. Furthermore we see that those who killed others in the play were motivated by the stagnant disease that infected their minds and bodies. Hamlet, for example, was overcome by the disease and unintentionally killed Polonius, mistaking him for Claudius. Killing another character was clearly not the correct path to solving problems; there was no clear judgement behind rash behaviour that included secrecy, lies, deceit, and murder. Corruption such as this could only lead to death. As an aside, we can note that Fortinbras was an intelligent young man who made his mark through the play quietly and honourably because he was a character whose mind was never infected with the

'disease'. A stagnant disease, with no cure, that inevitably leads to death: corruption.