

Emily Jones
Integrity in Hamlet
The “Drama” Assignment
EN 152, TR 12:30pm
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“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” is one of the most recognized quotes from William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; it sums up the state of Denmark with Claudius as King. Claudius is the root of young Hamlet’s problems. His power and poison eventually spread to virtually every character in the play.

The poison begins in the orchard of the castle when Claudius physically poisons the king, his brother the elder Hamlet. Claudius then not only gets the throne, but also the love of the queen, Gertrude. This new “self made man,” and his minion, Polonius, are doing whatever it takes to keep the power. They eventually get almost everyone to spy on Hamlet. It is their undoing.

The ghost of Hamlet’s father presents himself to Hamlet and tells him of his brother’s deed:

Sleeping within my orchard, my custom always of the afternoon, 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 leprous distillment... Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother’s hand of life, of crown of queen at once dispatched, cut off even in the blossoms of my sin...

Young Hamlet is infuriated, and astonished at the ghost’s accusations. He is not completely convinced that this is the truth, so he too spies to find the truth. He acts crazy so that no one will suspect that he is plotting against the king. He also has everyone who knows about the ghost swear on his sword that they will not tell what they know.

Meanwhile Polonius orders his daughter Ophelia to hand over to him the love letters which Hamlet had given to her. Polonius then reads the letters to the king and queen, using them to explain Hamlet’s new strange behavior as being mad in love with Ophelia.

Madam. I swear I use no art at all. That he’s mad, ’tis true; ’tis true ’tis pity... Mad let us grant him, then, and now remains that we find out the cause of this effect, or rather say, defect... I have a daughter- have while she is mine- who, in her duty and obedience, mark, hath given me this... “To the celestial and my soul’s idol, the most beatified Ophelia...

He also forces her to tell him of her interactions with Hamlet. In a way Ophelia is spying on Hamlet. She is too ignorant to see it, but Hamlet knows, and is very cruel to her best summed up by his statement “get thee to a nunnery.”

The king also brings in two of Hamlet’s childhood friends to spy on him, Rosencratz and

Guildenstern. He summons them to the hall and says:

...That you vouchsafe your rest here in our court some little time, so by your companies to draw him into pleasures, and to gather so much as from occasion you may glean, whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus, that, opened, lies within our remedy.

Basically, he orders them to tell the king and queen what is wrong with Hamlet, but don't let him know you're doing it.

Hamlet is still trying to figure out if the ghost is "honest." The only person he knows he can trust is Horatio. Horatio is the one person outside the reach of the king's power. Everyone else is a suspect, and most often with good reason.

Hamlet does some spying of his own. He has a group of wandering actors perform a reenactment of the murder. He asks Horatio to watch the reaction of the king and queen to the play; he wants to be certain his opinion is not biased. The king reacts exactly as a guilty man would; he stops the show. This test proves that the ghost is "honest."

The spying continues as the poison slowly permeates the whole kingdom. Polonius hides behind one curtain too many, listening to Hamlet's most private conversations. When Hamlet goes to speak with his mother in her bedroom, Polonius hides behind the curtain Hamlet and Gertrude get into a fight. Hamlet wants her to open her eyes and see she left the good brother in the grave and married the evil brother. Polonius cries from behind the curtain, Hamlet draws his sword and stabs Polonius. His mother cries: "O me what has thou done?," to which Hamlet replies Nay, I know not. Is it the king?... A bloody deed-almost as bad, good Mother, as kill a king and marry with his brother." Through this exchange Hamlet discovers his mother wasn't a part of his father's death (although I wouldn't call her innocent).

After the play-within-a-play, Claudius is convinced that Hamlet knows about his father's murder, so, of course, he wants to get rid of him. He sends Hamlet to England with a letter to the king requesting Hamlet's death. Hamlet learns of this plot, and changes the letter to request the murders of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Ophelia goes mad when she learns of her father's death. Her true love is not only mad, but on his way to England. Her brother is away, and her father is dead. Claudius asks Horatio to watch her closely. When they leave Claudius says: "O, this is the poison of deep grief; it springs all from her father's death-and now behold!" Ophelia ends up committing suicide; she drowns in her sorrow.

Laertes, son of Polonius returns secretly from Paris, and swears to avenge his father's murder, not yet knowing that it was committed by Hamlet. He and the king make plans to challenge Hamlet to a duel in which Hamlet can not win. Hamlet accepts the offer, and so the duel will take place.

Hamlet apologizes to Laertes for killing his father, to which Laertes responds

I am satisfied in nature...But in terms of honor I stand aloof, and will no reconciliation till by some elder master of known honor I have a voice and

precedent of peace to keep my name unguored. But till that time, I do receive your offered love like love, and will not wrong it.

And so the duel begins.

The king offers a drink to Hamlet. He first drinks from it himself then drops in a pearl and offers it to Hamlet after his second hit in the duel. He refuses the drink, but the queen does not she will drink to her son. Claudius demands that she not drink, but for once she doesn't listen. The pearl he dropped in the drink was poisoned with the very same kind that killed his predecessor to the throne.

Then the game isn't a game anymore. Laertes wounds Hamlet with his sword which is also dipped in poison. Hamlet manages to separate Laertes and his sword, and switches swords with him. He then wounds Laertes with the poisoned sword. Suddenly the queen says: "No, no, the drink, the drink--O my dear Hamlet-The drink, the drink! I am poisoned." Then Laertes falls and referring to the poison says

It is here, Hamlet, Hamlet, thou art slain. No medicine in the world can do thee good; in thee there is not half an hour's life. The treacherous instrument is in thy hand, unbated and envenomed. The foul practice hath turned itself on me. Lo, here I lie, never to rise again. Thy mother's poisoned. I can no more. The King, the King's to blame

Hamlet responds: "The point envenomed too? Then, venom, to thy work" and he stabs the king.

Laertes sums it up well :

"He is justly served."

"The potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit." Are Hamlet's dying words. The poison was so strong it killed almost everyone. The only one left to tell the story was the ever-faithful Horatio.

The corrupt kingdom of Claudius falls and takes everyone the corruption touched with it.

Instructor Comment: this paper gets too close to organizing by chronology (an outline) rather than organizing by thesis. The most important principle in this paper is not the *time* of events, it is the *poison* theme. Nonetheless, it is an articulate and thoughtful paper.