

Everyone Lies: An Analysis of *Hamlet*

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Shakespeare's masterfully written tragedy, *Hamlet*, is wrought with tragedy and themes of revenge, but it is equally notable for the deception and lies that the players have towards each other. Throughout the play, characters hatch plans and spy on each other, creating a high tension mood. Shakespeare does this in order to add dramatic tension, but also to convey the human truth that everyone lies. Character development, play structure and the nature of the play are used to show how the only way to achieve truth is to accept the lies of others.

Shakespeare uses duality of characters extensively in order to reveal the deceitful dynamics at play throughout this play. As Tom Stoppard writes in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, these pairs of characters "... are two sides of the same coin... or being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins (54)". Shakespeare uses themes of madness between Hamlet and Ophelia, accusation of guilt between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the masks of Polonius and Claudius to demonstrate that not only is there "something rotten in the state of Denmark", but there is also something rotten in human nature (I.5.100).

The central act of deceit in the play is Hamlet's madness, but the lines of reality and insanity are blurred, especially when Ophelia commits suicide due to perceived madness, in order to question the intent of madness. Although Hamlet makes it clear to Horatio and Marcellus that he is "to put such an antic disposition on", his actions present true madness (I.5.192). The audience is left to question whether if Hamlet's command for Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery" is his own candid thoughts or is merely a result of real madness (III.1.131). There is dramatic conflict created by this ambiguity, which is evidently left to the audience to judge if the deceit was so **convoluted** that he deceived himself. In addition, the rash murder of Polonius does not seem to correspond with Hamlet's previous actions. The juxtaposition of Hamlet's deliberation in Act 3 Scene 4, as Claudius is praying, with the "rash and bloody deed" in Act 3

Scene 5 questions the integrity of Hamlet's sanity (III.5.33). Shakespeare begins to question the extent to which a lie may become truth if acted on for long enough, creating a forwards for the audience and dramatic tension in Hamlet's fate. Acting as a foil to the pretend insanity of Hamlet is Ophelia's true madness, which drives her to suicide. Her madness can be directly traced to Hamlet, as Claudius remarks that it is because Ophelia is "divided from herself and her true judgment" that she loses her mind (IV.5.92). That division was clearly caused by Hamlet's actions and implies that the line between truth and lies is not very clear.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are despised by Hamlet as two-faced ignorant fools, but their dual character reveals confusion that reveals Hamlet to be victim of his own prejudices. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are never seen apart from each other and take a very minor role as courtiers, but Hamlet despises them for colluding with Claudius and acting as spies. However, this accusation is unfounded, particularly because the audience never perceive the two beyond "[making] our presence and our practices/Pleasant and helpful to him!" (II.2.40) Therefore, Hamlet's indigenous remark of "you cannot play upon me" is Hamlet deceiving himself as to the nature of the characters (III.2.402). The two innocent – although hopelessly confused – characters are used together to reveal the distress that a deceiving mind will cause to itself.

Although Polonius rambles on and can be considered to be comic relief, the contrast of his sly wit with Claudius' methodical planning reveals that the members of the court are putting on a dumbshow for the others. In his dictation to Reynaldo, one of the few scenes where action is sacrificed for characterization, Polonius reveals his brilliance in manipulating the truth. Amid half started sentences, he mutters for "your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth; And thus do we of wisdom and of reach... By indirections find directions out" (II.1.70-73). This pivotal statement embraces one of the primary themes of the play, that the only way to uncover the truth

is to embrace deceit. Similarly, Claudius exhumes a kingly presence when with people of the court, but in the soliloquy in Act 3, he breaks down and reveals a different aspect of his character. By exclaiming “O wretched state! O bosom black as death!”, Claudius is embracing emotions that have been suppressed in the presence of others (III.3.71). Both Claudius and Polonius embrace the tense relationship of the court, and respect that the only way to function is to put on masks for others to see. Their actions correspond with inner desire and needs which can only be accomplished through delusions and trickery. Therefore, Shakespeare seems to imply that in society, people customarily put on facades to shield themselves from others.

Shakespeare also uses fundamental structural aspects of *Hamlet* in order to reveal the common theme of deceit as the road to the truth. The play was intentionally written to clue the reader towards inconsistencies between the characters actions and thoughts, implying that there are subtexts for all of their actions. This is most vibrantly seen in the “play within a play” and the wordplay that Hamlet creates. Each of these topics reveals more about the effectiveness of deceit to obtain truths from unwilling people, which was intended to reveal human nature.

In the pre-climax scene of “The Mousetrap”, the structure of the play is fully exploited in order to use deceit to reveal Claudius’ lies, which connects to the theme of using deceit to obtain truth. Taking place roughly halfway through the full play, *The Murder of Gonzago* is a clever device to force action and to lead the audience into questioning what they are watching. To see actors on stage, fooling other actors, is to see a meta-play, leading audience members to consider the truths that have been spoken. In addition, the “play within a play” concept is used structurally to convey meaning in regards to deceit. The subtext that actors could be hired to reveal Claudius alludes to how Shakespeare’s plays are intended to reveal a facet of human truth. Although the

play is made-up, the audience members react towards it in some fashion, revealing their own preferences and truths that mere accusations would not achieve.

In addition, Hamlet is a master of wordplay, punning even when insane, which calls into question the double meaning of language in this play, implying that even the words that the characters speak is fraught with meaning. Hamlet is able to respond to questions with such wit that Polonius misinterprets his genius as madness, remarking that it is such “happiness ... which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of” (II.2.227-229). In fact, all of the wordplay is intentional, which is a forward for the audience to note of. The subtext of using puns immediately draws in attention, as it uses humor to clue the audience that there is more at stake than what might appear. If the language used by the actors has multiple meanings, it goes without saying that those actors must stand for different ideas as well. Wordplay, as well as misinterpretation of words, is therefore used in order to gain a better understanding of who the players wish to be.

On a higher level, the idea of what a play should be is manipulated to reveal truth in lies. *Hamlet* could be interpreted as a commentary on what a play should reveal to the audience and is a masterpiece of psychological analysis. Shakespeare takes the traditional model of a play and twists the interpretation of theatrical techniques in order to reach a greater understanding of what is truth. He achieves this through turning the ideas of soliloquies and common truths around to mean something completely different.

Even the asides and soliloquies that are perceived to be raw truth through the medium of the play are called into question of honesty. Typically, the audience can rely on these theatrical devices to understand the play better, but in *Hamlet*, even these functions are not assumed to be true. One example of this is that most of Hamlet’s “soliloquies” actually have Horatio standing

besides, nodding along. Although Horatio provides a character that Hamlet can talk to, it also provides a pair of watching eyes on Hamlet's character, which he must then adapt to. For instance, in the soliloquy on death that he delivers with poor Yorick's skull, Hamlet seems more reserved in emotion than during the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy in Act 3, where a true flood of emotion is poured out. Forcing the audience to doubt their ears is a technique that Shakespeare may have used in order to emphasize the idea of deception. Everyone is deceiving one another in this play, and perhaps the actors are trying to deceive the audience.

However, if everyone is known to lie, then the lie is accepted and is part of the social contract that is built up on stage. To understand this primal concept, Shakespeare implies, is to understand what human nature really is. There is no escape from the watchful eyes of others, nor is there escape from their misleading words, but if one accepts this to be true, they are able to understand a greater truth. Alas, the realization of deception comes too late, as it is Horatio who remarks on the "purposes mistook fall'n on th' inventor's heads" after everyone had died (V.2.426-427). His closing speech implies that if the actors understood the deceit of others, they would be able to navigate it properly and not have to reach such tragic endings.

In conclusion, Shakespeare masterfully exploited traditional elements of the play to reveal a lesson about deceit and lies. He creates an immensely enjoyable play that allows for the audience to ponder their realities. The usage of dual characters, specialized play structure and twists on common play techniques convey the meaning that there can be truth to be found if one accepts the lies of others.

Works Cited

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