

The Crisis of Trust in *Hamlet*

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They are commonplace occurrences nowadays: cheating, lying, beguiling, and self-interest have all come to the forefront of a modern society in which the stakes are higher, the rewards larger, and the competition stiffer. Modern culture promotes doing whatever it takes to get ahead, no matter whom one has to take advantage of or kick down along the way. It seems that in a cutthroat economy with new scientific studies and technological advances taking place daily, the only people whom one can trust are one's friends and family members. However, can even they be fully trusted? Can one even trust oneself? In an atmosphere of self-promotion, where everyone is trying to get ahead by any means necessary, it is easy for one to lose hope and trust in others. The ethical dilemmas that plague modern people are similar to the ones that Shakespeare was experiencing during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, finding himself on the borderline between the Medieval and the modern worlds. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare dramatizes the crisis of trust by creating a world much like our own. He contrasts trustworthy and untrustworthy characters in order to create an aura of suspicion in which self-promotion takes precedence over integrity and love. Shakespeare emphasizes the limitations and downfalls of a universe driven by scientific method and self-interest, as well as the importance of trust and suspicion in a world in which one cannot tell friends from enemies. He portrays the effect of truth and suspicion on the polis as it changes from the Medieval to the modern worldview, showing that a polis characterized by too much deception is ultimately unstable and liable to collapse in ruin. From this precarious instability can arise an internal conflict of the soul, embodied by Hamlet, who is searching for order in a seemingly unordered world.

The concepts of trust and suspicion are important in *Hamlet* for after the suspicious death of his father, Hamlet finds that he does not know whom to trust or suspect. Educated at Wittenberg, the university where Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses, Hamlet was obviously well in touch with the new teaching of doubt that was characteristic of the time. Upon the hasty marriage of his uncle and mother, he finds himself compelled to doubt the existence of true love and friendship. In his first soliloquy Hamlet states,

O God, God,
 How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
 seem to me all the uses of the world!
 Fie on't, ah, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
 That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature
 Possess it merely. (1.2 133-137)

Hamlet is in absolute despair over his mother's situation and has lost trust in the world. He whole-heartedly believed that his mother was truly in love with his father, so this hasty marriage is only the catalyst to Hamlet's suspicion. Not only is he unable to trust his family, but he is unable to trust his friends as well. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, old school friends of Hamlet, introduce themselves in the play as pawns in King Claudius' search for the cause of his nephew's madness. After the king implores them to spy on Hamlet, Guildenstern states, "But we both obey, And here give up ourselves in the full bent To lay our service freely at your feet, To be commanded" (2.2 29-32). It is no wonder that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern easily acquiesce to the wishes of Claudius; they are selfishly looking out for their own social status and self-interest. These are only a few examples of the many situations in the play in which people sacrifice their integrity in order to gain favor with the king. Hamlet, already in a state of mistrust, easily

figures out his former friends' intentions. Suspicion allows him to avoid looking like a credulous fool in the eyes of the other characters and to avoid the exposure of his clandestine plot of revenge. Thus, it is easy to see why truth and suspicion are so important to Hamlet; in his world, characterized by self-interest and social status, people will not stop at sacrificing their love, friendship, or family in order to better their own image in the polis. While Shakespeare is aware of the instability of living a life of distrust and suspicion, in *Hamlet* he shows that characters need to learn how to cope with a world of false appearances in order to survive. He is not glorifying the importance of suspicion but is rather criticizing the fundamental elements of a modern world that promotes getting ahead by any means necessary.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare dramatizes the lack of trust by creating a kingdom, obtained by murder, which only increases in tension and disorder until it culminates in collapse and ruin, on which order is then meant to restore itself. Ostentatious self-promoters, fickle friends, and opportunistic family members surround the enigmatic Hamlet, who finds himself caught between the dogmatic Medieval world and the doubting Renaissance world. Shakespeare uses many subplots within the framework of the play to illustrate various levels of trust and deception. Polonius spying on Laertes, Ophelia's mistrust of Hamlet's love, the precarious political situation with Norway and young Fortinbras, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's betrayal of Hamlet's friendship, and many other situations, all give the play an atmosphere of instability and inevitable destruction. For example, Shakespeare clearly dramatizes trust and suspicion in Act 2 scene 1, in which Polonius orders his servant Reynaldo to slander Laertes in order to circuitously discover what he has been doing while in France. Polonius, unable to trust his son, is himself the quintessential untrustworthy man. The paradox between what he says and does is obvious, and he has no problem in sacrificing his daughter (3.1) or himself (3.4) in order to gain favor with the

king. In this way, it becomes clear that suspicion has run rampant in Denmark after the death of King Hamlet. If Polonius is unable to trust his own son, can anyone be trusted?

Act 1, scene 5, in which King Hamlet recounts his death, marks the exchange between the Medieval and the modern worlds. This scene, taking place in an orchard and full of biblical imagery, recreates the fall of man. The medieval kingship, represented by King Hamlet, involves the notion of the king possessing two “bodies”: his physical body and his symbolic kingship or body politic. Hence, the kingdom was liable to collapse as a result of any misdeeds to the king. The Renaissance kingdom, represented by Claudius, is a Machiavellian power seat, where kingship establishes and retains itself only by means of force and power. The former kingdom is characterized by faith and belief, whereas the latter by doubt and suspicion. The murder of King Hamlet symbolizes the movement into a world of suspicion. Shakespeare shows that while scientific method in the new world has obvious benefits and improves intellectual accuracy, when fickle human nature is not taken into account, it is severely limited. Shakespeare shows the instability of doubt and the inevitable destruction of the polis in the last scene, where Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet are killed, allowing Fortinbras to take the kingship and a new arbitrary power to establish itself. These tragic events all stem back to the death of King Hamlet and represent the effect on the polis after the king’s physical and political “body” has been harmed.

Throughout the play, Hamlet searches for some sort of order and truth in the world. His characteristic suspicion has led him to doubt the existence of a higher power and the presence of order in the universe. His famous speech in Act 3 scene 1 displays the profound internal struggle for truth that Hamlet goes through during the course of the play. He states,

Who would fardels bear,

To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
 No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
 than fly to others we know not of? (3.1 76-82)

This speech represents an internal struggle of the soul that all humans experience at some point in their lives. Like Hamlet, most people struggle to do the right thing in a world where the right thing is not always obvious. However, Shakespeare shows that whether or not there is a higher power, committing serious sins is not conducive to happiness and order in this life. By showing the soulful regret of Claudius, the internal search for truth of Hamlet, and the tragic culmination of the plot, Shakespeare demonstrates that living a just and upright life increases the chances of happiness in this life and perhaps the next.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare foresees all of the potential benefits and downfalls of a new era characterized by doubt and scientific method. While many benefits have arisen from the Renaissance, the tendencies to self-promotion and suspicion have not been advantageous. The belief that one can master the world by scientifically explaining phenomena is often helpful; however, as Shakespeare shows in *Hamlet*, consequences beyond the scope of science often influence events in unexpected ways. The downfalls of modernity, such as lack of faith and trust, ostentation, hypocrisy, backstabbing, and self-promotion, are all visible in this play and in modern society. Shakespeare shows that one must be careful in choosing friends and in considering the intentions of one's potential friends. He shows that when one chooses to love, the love should be genuine; that when one chooses to trust others, the trust should be carefully

placed, and that above all, one should always be true to oneself since the truthfulness of others is rarely apparent.

Work Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. New York: Signet Classics, a Division of Penguin Group, 1986.