Maegan Sugrue

Judgment, Authority, and the Morality of Justice in *Hamlet*

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a complex and moving text, asks difficult questions: Is it right to commit an evil act in order to rid the world of a worse evil? Is it damnation to allow evil to remain because one desires to abstain from committing evil? What is the cost of justice? What knowledge can be trusted when determining when to pursue justice? How does one decide when to act? How does one decide when to hold back? These questions are further complicated by the many variants of the text. Quarto 1 (Q1) from 1603 is notoriously known as the “bad quarto.” Because of the many perceived corruptions that exist in the text, it is thought that Q1 is perhaps a reconstruction of the play from memory by some of the members of Shakespeare’s company. Quarto 2 (Q2) from 1604 was likely prepared from Shakespeare’s own handwritten manuscript, but the folio version from 1623 (F) has been accepted by scholars as the control text because it is likely the most true to how the play would have been performed while Shakespeare was alive and active in the company. Although most scholars agree that both Q2 and F come from Shakespeare himself, the two texts differ in many ways confronting editors with the questions of what to keep and what to cut. Two such instances are in 4.4 and 4.7.

At the heart of these scenes specifically lie the following questions: Is justice only attainable at the expense of morals and ethics? If it is only attainable at the expense of morals and ethics, is it still justice? Is it revenge instead? In exploring these questions, one must also consider what knowledge should be trusted in making such important decisions. The variants in these scenes (4.4 and 4.7) add to the development of these important themes throughout the play, as we compare how Hamlet and Laertes both deal with the deaths of their fathers, must decide who to trust, when to act, and what must be sacrificed in the process. By closely examining the
nuance of meaning added to the play by including the Q2 variants for 4.4 and 4.7, we can see the dangers and consequences of misplaced trust in authority. Hamlet and Laertes don’t fail in finding justice because their causes aren’t just; they fail because they appeal to the wrong authority.

To set up for the important questions that are explored in act 4 and come to a head in act 5, we must first consider what source Hamlet trusts as he tries to make his decisions. When Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus first tell Hamlet of the ghost’s appearance and their belief that it is Hamlet’s father, Hamlet says, “All is not well. / I doubt some foul play” (F I.ii.254-255). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, during Shakespeare’s time “doubt” also meant, “to suspect or have suspicions about.” Hamlet exercises good judgment here by suspending his belief in the ghost until he can see it for himself rather than rashly accepting the ghost based on Horatio’s and the others’ beliefs. However, once Hamlet does see the ghost, he exclaims

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin (demon) damned,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou com’st in a questionable shape
> That I will speak to thee. I’ll call thee Hamlet,
> King, father, royal Dane.” (F I.iv.21–26)

Hamlet abandons judgment and reason; he recognizes that he doesn’t know the ghost’s intentions yet, but he says that even if the ghost’s intentions are wicked and the ghost is really a demon from hell, Hamlet will still listen to the ghost. Hamlet continues to plead with the ghost for answers: “O answer me! . . . What may this mean / . . . / What should we do?” (F I.iv.25, 32, 38). When the ghost beckons to Hamlet as if to offer answers to Hamlet’s pleas, Horatio steps in and
tries to reason with Hamlet, but Hamlet won’t listen: “Unhand me, gentlemen. / By heav’n I’ll make a ghost of him that lets (hinders) me” and then bids the ghost, “Go on, I’ll follow thee” (F I.iv.61–63). By accepting that the ghost is his father, importuning the ghost for answers, and then committing to follow the ghost thereby showing that he expects that the ghost even has answers, Hamlet accepts the ghost as an authority figure who can be trusted. This is directly against the better judgment that Hamlet exercises when he initially says that all was not well and when he acknowledges that the ghost’s intentions could be malicious. Hamlet’s trust in the ghost lends credibility to what the ghost says, and now Hamlet feels a duty and responsibility to fulfill the ghost’s mandate because by believing that the ghost real, Hamlet makes the assumption that what the ghost says is true.

So if Hamlet accepts that what the ghost says is true and believes that the ghost is a source of authority to be trusted, why does Hamlet agonize over fulfilling what he perceives as a duty from an authorized source? The only source of knowledge that Hamlet has for believing Claudius to be a murderer is the ghost, so Hamlet’s trust in the ghost is essential to his trusting the information that the ghost provides. If the written entrances are strictly followed in F III.iii, Hamlet never hears Claudius himself admit to the murder. When Claudius confesses to the audience, he is supposedly on stage alone. As written, Hamlet’s entrance into the scene isn’t until after line 72 when Claudius finishes his solitary confession. This creates tension in the play because the audience now knows for certain that Claudius is the murderer because they’ve heard it from his own lips. But Hamlet, despite his supposed trust in the ghost and the authority that his trust lends to the ghost, doesn’t have that certainty, and therefore still struggles over his decision.

Act IV scene iv highlights this struggle as Hamlet considers the cost of what he considers justice. It takes place just after Hamlet is sent to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In
F, act IV scene iv is a mere nine lines long, featuring young Fortinbras commanding his captain to greet the Danish king in order to make good on a promise that Fortinbras and his army will have safe passage through Denmark as they march against Poland. In Q2, the scene is expanded to just over 60 lines and includes an appearance from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and a long soliloquy from Hamlet as he berates himself for his lack of action up to this point. In F, the scene seems to simply function as a means to move the plot forward by informing the audience of Fortinbras’s intentions so that it makes sense when he shows up at the king’s castle at the end of the play. In contrast, the variants in Q2 function not so much to advance the plot but to advance Hamlet’s development as he ponders the cost of justice and by extension the authority of knowledge and judgment in making decisions. This development informs many of his decisions throughout the rest of the play.

In Q2 act VI scene iv, Hamlet’s exchange with Fortinbras’s captain reveals that the captain doesn’t think the piece of land that Norway is fighting for is worth the fight: “We go to gain a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name” (Q2 IV.iv.9.8-9). Hamlet then assumes that Poland won’t even try to defend such a worthless piece of land, but the captain replies that it is already garrisoned. It is at this point that Hamlet starts to see his own dilemma reflected in Norway’s endeavors. He is in awe that so much, “two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats” (Q2 IV.iv.9.15), would be spent to gain so little, a worthless piece of ground. He questions himself:

How stand I, then,

That have a father killed, a mother stained,

Excitements of my reason and my blood,

And let all sleep while, to my shame, I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men
That, for a fantasy and a trick of fame,
Go to their graves like beds. . . (Q2 IV.iv.9.46–52)

Hamlet chastens himself for standing by even though he has so much more reason to fight (“a father killed, a mother stained”) than the Norwegian soldiers who are willing to die for a trifle, a piece of land that won’t even profit them anything, as if dying is as normal as going to bed. If these soldiers can afford such a great cost for so little gain, why does Hamlet hesitate when he stands to gain so much more for what could be considered a smaller cost? Many Norwegian lives will likely be lost in the battle against the Polish, and Hamlet’s endeavor will only cost him one life: the King’s. This marks a change in Hamlet’s character, and he vows, “O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!” (Q2 IV.iv.9.55-56). After considering the cost, Hamlet is ready to pay the price to gain what he sees as justice for his father.

Hamlet continues to ponder the cost of justice, which eventually evolves to not only include the physical cost but the spiritual cost as well. After Ophelia’s funeral, Hamlet confides in Horatio regarding the real reason for his being sent to England. Hamlet recounts all of Claudius’s crimes and asks,

Does it not, think’st thee, stand me now upon—

. . . Is’t not perfect conscience

To quit him with his arm? And is’t not to be damned

To let this canker of our nature come

In further evil? (F V.ii.68-71)

Hamlet not only believes that he is justified in killing Claudius, but he now feels that he has some kind of duty and responsibility to stop Claudius’s evil from spreading like a canker, and
that ridding the kingdom of such an evil is worth the price of committing an evil act in the process—murder. Now his responsibility for stopping Claudius isn’t just one of authority given to him by the ghost; it’s a moral duty, and he’s willing to commit what he originally considered an evil act in exchange for what he now sees as a larger gain and therefore what he sees as a greater good.

Hamlet makes these decisions based on the ghost’s supposed authority and Fortinbras’s moral example. So why does it all backfire? If Hamlet is acting with authority and with moral intentions, but his endeavors are foiled, what is the audience to learn? In order for there to be true justice, there must be true authority. This brings the ghost’s authority into question. Was Hamlet truly working under real authority or just perceived authority based on his own faulty judgment? Fortinbras’s endeavors are successful: he and his army travel through Denmark with the intention of going against Poland. But Fortinbras operates based on real, mortal, lawful authority. Hamlet operates based on a supernatural, questionable form of authority. The ghost’s authority doesn’t come from the law. Fortinbras is able to find justice because he acts based on the law. The only difference between revenge and justice is that justice comes from a place of authority and revenge is exacted through an individual who takes authority into their own hands. The irony is that Hamlet should have some kind of authority as Prince of Denmark, and the person who does have lawful authority in Denmark is the very person who Hamlet believes needs to be punished and brought to justice. Hamlet accepts the authority of the ghost not because the ghost has any real authority but because the ghost’s authority allows Hamlet to pursue what he really wants: revenge. And in order for Hamlet to find revenge, he must operate outside of the limits of the law because the law itself has become corrupt. This is a complex issue, and one that cannot be easily or neatly defined, especially because the audience knows that Claudius is in fact guilty
and therefore deserving of being brought to justice. The error in Hamlet’s judgment is not his desire for revenge or justice; his error in judgment is that he appealed to the wrong authority to find it.

The Q2 variants for act IV scene iv are essential in following the development of this contrast between justice and revenge as well as the question of true authority and its part in finding justice. The variants also show a development in Hamlet’s character through to the lines in act V scene ii where he continues to consider the cost of justice and if it means sacrificing his morals. Including the Q2 variants allows for a productive discussion of justice, how to determine the cost, and how to know when the cost is worth the gain. Excluding these variants, while not detrimental to the plot, deprives readers of a more personal look into Hamlet’s character as well as some of the most beautiful and memorable lines from the play. These variants also set up a similar discussion for Laertes as he must also decide who to trust as he seeks justice or revenge for his own father’s death.

After hearing of his father’s death, Laertes returns to Denmark to attend to the family situation and finds that not only has his father been murdered but that his sister, Ophelia, is losing her mind. The Q2 variants that occur in act IV scene vii are important for continuing the discussion of the cost of justice, the sacrifice of morals, where authority comes from, and revenge versus justice from Laertes’s perspective. Claudius conspires with Laertes to kill Hamlet and makes the case to Laertes against Hamlet outlining Hamlet’s crimes. Most of the scene is focused on action, which is an interesting contrast to how Hamlet has thus far considered his options; Hamlet mostly focuses on reason, as shown in the Q2 variants of act IV scene iv when Hamlet says, “Sure, he that made us with such large discourse, / Looking before and after, gave us not / That capability and god-like reason / To fust in us unused” (Q2 IV.iv.9.26-29). Hamlet
believes that reason should lead to action, otherwise, there’s no point in having the ability to reason. This is evident in Hamlet’s development in that scene, which ends with his vow to finally take action against Claudius. Now Laertes must go through the same process that Hamlet has. Just as Hamlet is confronted with the decision of whether or not to trust the ghost, Laertes is confronted with a situation where he must exercise judgment in making the decision of who to trust and how to act based on that trust, but because Laertes focuses so much more on action over reason, his development happens much faster.

The Q2 variants show Laertes as a willing and active participant in the plot to kill Hamlet. Claudius initiates the plotting by suggesting that they make a plan to kill Hamlet “and call it accident” (F IV.vii.66). This is not a surprising move for Claudius to make. He is guilty of murder and he knows that Hamlet poses a real threat to his getting away with it. The audience knows that Claudius is guilty of murder, but Laertes does not. Laertes doesn’t know that Claudius has ulterior motives, so Laertes puts his trust in Claudius and by giving Claudius his trust, Laertes has also accepted his authority: “I will be ruled” (Q2 IV.iv.66.1). So when Claudius suggests that they kill Hamlet and make it look like an accident, Laertes jumps at the opportunity to be involved: “The rather if you could devise it so / That I might be the organ,” (Q2 IV.vii.66.2-3).

Now that Laertes has chosen a source and an authority to trust, he must consider the cost of his justice just as Hamlet did. The OED entry for “organ” reveals even more about this exchange between Laertes and Claudius and when understood in its historical context, gives additional meaning and significance to Laertes’s request. One entry in the OED defines “organ” as, “A means of action or operation, an instrument,” and gives examples of “organ” being used this way in 1548, 1568, and 1602. In every example cited, “organ” is used negatively. In Edward
Hall’s book *Chronicles: Containing the History of England* originally published in 1548 and then again in 1809, Hall refers to Joan of Arc as an “orgayne” saying, “this woman was not inspired with the holy ghost, nor sent from God, (as the Frenchmen beleue) but an enchanteresse, an orgayne of the deuill, sent from Sathan” (157). So it’s not just that Laertes trusts Claudius’s authority and wants to participate in killing Hamlet in order to find justice for his father; if we take the historical context of what an “organ” as an agent is into account, it’s that Laertes acknowledges that he will be participating in something that is immoral and unethical. The cost of Laertes’s justice is his morals just as Hamlet recognizes his own justice (or revenge) has a moral cost. The difference is that Laertes isn’t making the sacrifice for the greater good the way that Hamlet convinces himself that he is seeking revenge for the greater good. Laertes’s motives are selfish, as are Hamlet’s, but Laertes fully admits it whereas Hamlet convinces himself that he’s seeking the revenge for a greater good.

Including the variants from Q2 for act IV scene vii not only creates a clearer comparison between Laertes and Hamlet in the process for developing judgment, identifying authority, and seeking justice, it also shows Laertes as more of a willing participant in the plot to kill Hamlet. Claudius is certainly manipulative and he uses Laertes’s anger to his advantage to convince Laertes to participate, but Laertes implores the king to allow him to be the “organ” or agent in the plot in the Q2 variant lines IV.vii.66.1-3. Just before Laertes dies in F V.ii.263, Laertes says, “The King, the King’s to blame.” This brings to question Laertes’s character. Not only has Laertes sacrificed his morals in willingly participating in something that he acknowledged was unethical, now he has sacrificed his integrity by claiming to be a victim. If Q2’s variant passages are included in act IV scene vii, it is difficult to see Laertes as a victim of Claudius’s manipulation. If the variant passages are excluded, there are still plenty of lines to create the
comparison between Laertes and Hamlet, but now it is easier, although still not completely believable, to see Laertes as another victim in Claudius’s plot against Hamlet. Including the variant passages almost condemns Laertes when seen in relation to his placing blame on Claudius. Just as Hamlet appeals to the wrong source of authority in seeking justice, Laertes’s appeal to Claudius’s authority is ultimately ineffective because Claudius’s authority was wrongfully gained through murder. Claudius doesn’t have true authority any more than Hamlet’s ghost does.

The Q2 variants for both scenes, IV.iv and IV.vii, help answer some of the bigger questions of the text as presented at the beginning of this essay. In act IV scene iv, Hamlet contemplates the cost of justice, and has to decide how to judge if the cost is worth the gain, and what authority to trust. As Hamlet deals with how to develop this judgment, it becomes clear that the process of making decisions is complicated by this question of justice, authority, and morals. Hamlet’s options are not just good versus evil. He has to choose between an evil and a greater evil and the variants for act IV scene iv in Q2 show his thought process as he works through those questions. Act IV scene vii also relates to the importance of judgment and the issue of authority. Laertes must decide when and how to make judgment in regards to what has happened with his father and his sister. He must also decide who to trust, and he ends up trusting Claudius, which doesn’t end well for anyone. Many of Shakespeare’s plays focus on the importance of developing good judgment and deal with the question of knowledge and where to place trust. Through the inclusion of the Q2 variants, it ultimately becomes clear that in the search for justice, true authority is vital to successfully attaining justice. This need for true authority underscores the need for developing good judgment and being able to decide which sources of knowledge to trust.
This is an incredibly applicable topic in today’s world. Information on virtually any subject is readily available, almost literally at our fingertips; it’s on social media, on news sites, whether it’s fake news, doctored images, video and audio deceivingly cut together, or alternative facts. Developing the judgment to be able to decide which sources of information to trust, which sources have true authority and which ones masquerade false authority, is vital in making important decisions that will determine our future the way that Hamlet’s and Laertes’s decisions determined theirs.
Works Cited


https://archive.org/details/hallschronicleco00halluoft.