

UNIT

4

HELMET

STRUCTURE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This chapter shall cover the following main points:

- Learning objectives
- Introduction of the play
- Plot
- Themes and symbols and motifs
- Characters
- Analysis of main characters
- Summary and analysis of scenes
- Quotes
- Summary of the play
- Key words
- Review questions
- Further reading

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Understand the summary of the play *Hamlet*.
- Analyze the characters.
- Understand the relations of various characters.
- Explain the quotes.
- Discuss the themes in the play

INTRODUCTION OF THE PLAY

Introduction

The first clear reference to what we know as William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* appears in the Stationers' Register, 26 July 1602, as a play called *The Revenge of Hamlet Prince [of] Denmark*. In that article, the author says the play was "lately acted by the Lord Chamberlain his

servants" . In his list of London plays published in 1598, Francis Meres makes no mention of any play called *Hamlet*, but a note in Gabriel Harvey's edition of Speght's *Chaucer* (published in 1598) does mention the play *Hamlet*. Since scholars question the date of the actual writing of that note, most of them agree that Shakespeare published *Hamlet* after 1601 and before 1603. *The First Folio*, in 1623, categorized Shakespeare's plays as Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. Shakespeare wrote the great tragedies — excluding *Romeo and Juliet*, which is not, strictly speaking, a true tragedy — between 1601 and 1606, and apparently *Hamlet* was written first. Shakespeare closely followed *Hamlet* with *Othello* (1604), *King Lear* (1605/6), and *Macbeth* (1606), but a number of experts in Bardology (the study of Shakespeare, who is known as The Bard of Avon) believe that *Hamlet* represents the best of Shakespeare's work. It is the perfect play.

PLOT

On a dark winter night, a ghost walks the ramparts of Elsinore Castle in Denmark. Discovered first by a pair of watchmen, then by the scholar Horatio, the ghost resembles the recently deceased King Hamlet, whose brother Claudius has inherited the throne and married the king's widow, Queen Gertrude. When Horatio and the watchmen bring Prince Hamlet, the son of Gertrude and the dead king, to see the ghost, it speaks to him, declaring ominously that it is indeed his father's spirit, and that he was murdered by none other than Claudius. Ordering Hamlet to seek revenge on the man who usurped his throne and married his wife, the ghost disappears with the dawn.

Prince Hamlet devotes himself to avenging his father's death, but, because he is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, he delays, entering into a deep melancholy and even apparent madness. Claudius and Gertrude worry about the prince's erratic behavior and attempt to discover its cause. They employ a pair of Hamlet's friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to watch him. When Polonius, the pompous Lord Chamberlain, suggests that Hamlet may be mad with love for his daughter, Ophelia, Claudius agrees to spy on Hamlet in conversation with the girl. But though Hamlet certainly seems mad, he does not seem to love Ophelia: he orders her to enter a nunnery and declares that he wishes to ban marriages.

A group of traveling actors comes to Elsinore, and Hamlet seizes upon an idea to test his uncle's guilt. He will have the players perform a scene closely resembling the sequence by which Hamlet imagines his uncle to have murdered his father, so that if Claudius is guilty, he will surely react. When the moment of the murder arrives in the theater, Claudius leaps up

and leaves the room. Hamlet and Horatio agree that this proves his guilt. Hamlet goes to kill Claudius but finds him praying. Since he believes that killing Claudius while in prayer would send Claudius's soul to heaven, Hamlet considers that it would be an inadequate revenge and decides to wait. Claudius, now frightened of Hamlet's madness and fearing for his own safety, orders that Hamlet be sent to England at once.

Hamlet goes to confront his mother, in whose bedchamber Polonius has hidden behind a tapestry. Hearing a noise from behind the tapestry, Hamlet believes the king is hiding there. He draws his sword and stabs through the fabric, killing Polonius. For this crime, he is immediately dispatched to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, Claudius's plan for Hamlet includes more than banishment, as he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed orders for the King of England demanding that Hamlet be put to death.

In the aftermath of her father's death, Ophelia goes mad with grief and drowns in the river. Polonius's son, Laertes, who has been staying in France, returns to Denmark in a rage. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet is to blame for his father's and sister's deaths. When Horatio and the king receive letters from Hamlet indicating that the prince has returned to Denmark after pirates attacked his ship en route to England, Claudius concocts a plan to use Laertes' desire for revenge to secure Hamlet's death. Laertes will fence with Hamlet in innocent sport, but Claudius will poison Laertes' blade so that if he draws blood, Hamlet will die. As a backup plan, the king decides to poison a goblet, which he will give Hamlet to drink should Hamlet score the first or second hits of the match. Hamlet returns to the vicinity of Elsinore just as Ophelia's funeral is taking place. Stricken with grief, he attacks Laertes and declares that he had in fact always loved Ophelia. Back at the castle, he tells Horatio that he believes one must be prepared to die, since death can come at any moment. A foolish courtier named Osric arrives on Claudius's orders to arrange the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes.

The sword-fighting begins. Hamlet scores the first hit, but declines to drink from the king's proffered goblet. Instead, Gertrude takes a drink from it and is swiftly killed by the poison. Laertes succeeds in wounding Hamlet, though Hamlet does not die of the poison immediately. First, Laertes is cut by his own sword's blade, and, after revealing to Hamlet that Claudius is responsible for the queen's death, he dies from the blade's poison. Hamlet then stabs Claudius through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies, and Hamlet dies immediately after achieving his revenge.

At this moment, a Norwegian prince named Fortinbras, who has led an army to Denmark and attacked Poland earlier in the play, enters with

ambassadors from England, who report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Fortinbras is stunned by the gruesome sight of the entire royal family lying sprawled on the floor dead. He moves to take power of the kingdom. Horatio, fulfilling Hamlet's last request, tells him Hamlet's tragic story. Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be carried away in a manner befitting a fallen soldier.

THEMES AND SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

THEMES

Explore the different themes within **William Shakespeare's** tragic play, *Hamlet*. Themes are central to understanding *Hamlet* as a play and identifying Shakespeare's social and political commentary.

The Impossibility of Certainty

What separates *Hamlet* from other revenge plays (and maybe from every play written before it) is that the action we expect to see, particularly from Hamlet himself, is continually postponed while Hamlet tries to obtain more certain knowledge about what he is doing. This play poses many questions that other plays would simply take for granted. Can we have certain knowledge about ghosts? Is the ghost what it appears to be, or is it really a misleading fiend? Does the ghost have reliable knowledge about its own death, or is the ghost itself deluded? Moving to more earthly matters: How can we know for certain the facts about a crime that has no witnesses? Can Hamlet know the state of Claudius's soul by watching his behavior? If so, can he know the facts of what Claudius did by observing the state of his soul? Can Claudius (or the audience) know the state of Hamlet's mind by observing his behavior and listening to his speech? Can we know whether our actions will have the consequences we want them to have? Can we know anything about the afterlife?

Many people have seen *Hamlet* as a play about indecisiveness, and thus about Hamlet's failure to act appropriately. It might be more interesting to consider that the play shows us how many uncertainties our lives are built upon, how many unknown quantities are taken for granted when people act or when they evaluate one another's actions.

The Complexity of Action

Directly related to the theme of certainty is the theme of action. How is it possible to take reasonable, effective, purposeful action? In *Hamlet*, the question of how to act is affected not only by rational considerations, such as the need for certainty, but also by emotional, ethical, and psychological factors. Hamlet himself appears to distrust the idea that it's even possible to act in a controlled, purposeful way. When he does act, he prefers to do it blindly, recklessly, and violently. The other characters obviously think

Hamlet is portrayed as a strong, forthright ruler under whose guard the state was in good health, while Claudius, a wicked politician, has corrupted and compromised Denmark to satisfy his own appetites. At the end of the play, the rise to power of the upright Fortinbras suggests that Denmark will be strengthened once again.

Performance

Hamlet includes many references to performance of all kinds – both theatrical performance and the way people perform in daily life. In his first appearance, Hamlet draws a distinction between outward behavior—“actions that a man might play”—and real feelings: “that within which passeth show” (I.ii.). However, the more time we spend with Hamlet the harder it becomes to tell what he is really feeling and what he is performing. He announces in Act One scene five that he is going to pretend to be mad (“put an antic disposition on”.) In Act Two scene one, Ophelia describes Hamlet’s mad behavior as a comical performance. However, when Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that “I have lost all my mirth,” he seems genuinely depressed. Generations of readers have argued about whether Hamlet is really mad or just performing madness. It’s impossible to know for sure – by the end of the play, even Hamlet himself doesn’t seem to know the difference between performance and reality.

Hamlet further explores the idea of performance by regularly reminding the audience that we are watching a play. When Polonius says that at university he “did enact Julius Caesar” (III.ii), contemporary audiences would have thought of Shakespeare’s own *Julius Caesar*, which was written around the same time as *Hamlet*. The actor who played Polonius may have played Julius Caesar as well. The device of the play within the play gives Hamlet further opportunities to comment on the nature of theater. By constantly reminding the audience that what we’re watching is a performance, *Hamlet* invites us to think about the fact that something fake can feel real, and vice versa. Hamlet himself points out that acting is powerful because it’s indistinguishable from reality: “The purpose of playing [...] is to hold as ’twere the mirror up to Nature” (III.ii.). That’s why he believes that the Players can “catch the conscience of the King” (II.ii.). By repeatedly showing us that performance can feel real, *Hamlet* makes us question what “reality” actually is.

Madness

One of the central questions of *Hamlet* is whether the main character has lost his mind or is only pretending to be mad. Hamlet’s erratic behavior and nonsensical speech can be interpreted as a ruse to get the other characters to believe he’s gone mad. On the other hand, his behavior may be a logical response to the “mad” situation he finds himself in – his father has been murdered by his uncle, who is now his stepfather. Initially,

Hamlet himself seems to believe he's sane – he describes his plans to “put an antic disposition on” and tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he is only mad when the wind blows “north-north-west” – in other words, his madness is something he can turn on and off at will. By the end of the play, however, Hamlet seems to doubt his own sanity. Referring to himself in the third person, he says “And when he's not himself does harm Laertes,” suggesting Hamlet has become estranged from his former, sane self. Referring to his murder of Polonius he says “Who does it then? His madness.” At the same time, Hamlet's excuse of madness absolves him of murder, so can also be read as the workings of a sane and cunning mind.

Doubt

In *Hamlet*, the main character's doubt creates a world where very little is known for sure. Hamlet thinks, but isn't entirely sure, his uncle killed his father. He believes he sees his father's Ghost, but isn't certain he should believe in the Ghost or listen to what the Ghost tells him: “I'll have grounds / More relative than this.” In his “to be or not to be” soliloquy Hamlet suspects he should probably just kill himself, but doubt about what lies beyond the grave prevents him from acting. Hamlet is so wracked with doubt he even works to infect other characters with his lack of certainty, as when he tells Ophelia “you should not have believed me” when he told her he loved her. As a result, the audience doubts Hamlet's reliability as a protagonist. We are left with many doubts about the action – whether Gertrude was having an affair with Claudius before he killed Hamlet's father; whether [Hamlet is sane or mad](#); what Hamlet's true feelings are for Ophelia.

Mortality

The weight of one's mortality and the complexities of life and death are introduced from the beginning of *Hamlet*. In the wake of his father's death, [Hamlet](#) can't stop pondering and considering the meaning of life — and its eventual ending. Many questions emerge as the text progresses. What happens when you die? If you're murdered, then will you go to heaven? Do kings truly have a free pass to heaven?

In Hamlet's mind the idea of dying isn't so bad. It's the uncertainty of the afterlife that frightens Hamlet away from suicide, even though he's obsessed with the notion.

A turning point for Hamlet occurs in the graveyard scene in Act V. Before, Hamlet has been appalled and revolted by the moral corruption of the living. Seeing Yorick's skull (someone Hamlet loved and respected) propels Hamlet's realization that death eliminates the differences between people.

The sheer number of bodies at the end of *Hamlet* can be misleading. Even though eight of the nine primary characters die, the question of

mortality is not fully answered. The questions about death, suicide, and what comes after are left unanswered. What *Hamlet* presents in an exploration and discussion without a true resolution.

Women

The presence of only two named female characters says something about the role of women within *Hamlet*. The death of both women also indicates a social commentary.

Hamlet is at his most agitated state when talking to either female character. Although he cares for both, he's suspicious, as well. In the case of his mother, Gertrude, *Hamlet* feels she remarried too quickly and that her remarriage means she didn't love her first husband all that much. The idea freaks *Hamlet* out.

Then there's Ophelia. From the way the characters talk, we know *Hamlet* has been wooing Ophelia for some time. But after *Hamlet* starts to act mad, it doesn't take long for him to assume that Ophelia is in cahoots with Gertrude, Claudius, and Polonius. In reality, Ophelia obeyed her father and her monarch.

In both cases, *Hamlet* feels as if each woman has let him down, respectively. He's critical and quick to point out flaws through puns and backhanded comments. Ophelia is usually viewed as a true victim, while Gertrude's role is interpreted with more flexibility. In either case, the role and treatment of women in *Hamlet* is essential to discuss with an open mind.

Political Livelihood

The state of the nation in Denmark is deteriorating. The death of a king throws any nation into political turmoil. With a new king on the throne and the deceased king's son acting erratically, something's clearly off.

When the guard Marcellus famously says "[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark" (Act I, Scene IV), he's not being ironic about *Hamlet*'s bathing habits. Marcellus's words refer to how something evil and vile is afoot. This moment could be interpreted as foreshadowing of the impending deaths of most of the principle characters. But it also refers to the political unrest Denmark is feeling as a nation. The political livelihood of Denmark can be directly linked back to the mental state of *Hamlet* at many points throughout the play.

SYMBOLS

Yorick's Skull

In *Hamlet*, physical objects are rarely used to represent thematic ideas. One important exception is Yorick's skull, which *Hamlet* discovers in the

graveyard in the first scene of Act V. As Hamlet speaks to the skull and about the skull of the king's former jester, he fixates on death's inevitability and the disintegration of the body. He urges the skull to "get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come"—no one can avoid death (V.i.178–179). He traces the skull's mouth and says, "Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft," indicating his fascination with the physical consequences of death (V.i.174–175). This latter idea is an important motif throughout the play, as Hamlet frequently makes comments referring to every human bo

MOTIFS

Incest and Incestuous Desire

The motif of incest runs throughout the play and is frequently alluded to by Hamlet and the ghost, most obviously in conversations about Gertrude and Claudius, the former brother-in-law and sister-in-law who are now married. A subtle motif of incestuous desire can be found in the relationship of Laertes and Ophelia, as Laertes sometimes speaks to his sister in suggestively sexual terms and, at her funeral, leaps into her grave to hold her in his arms. However, the strongest overtones of incestuous desire arise in the relationship of Hamlet and Gertrude, in Hamlet's fixation on Gertrude's sex life with Claudius and his preoccupation with her in general.

Misogyny

Shattered by his mother's decision to marry Claudius so soon after her husband's death, Hamlet becomes cynical about women in general, showing a particular obsession with what he perceives to be a connection between female sexuality and moral corruption. This motif of misogyny, or hatred of women, occurs sporadically throughout the play, but it is an important inhibiting factor in Hamlet's relationships with Ophelia and Gertrude. He urges Ophelia to go to a nunnery rather than experience the corruptions of sexuality and exclaims of Gertrude, "Frailty, thy name is woman" (I.ii.146).

Ears and Hearing

One facet of *Hamlet's* exploration of the difficulty of attaining true knowledge is slipperiness of language. Words are used to communicate ideas, but they can also be used to distort the truth, manipulate other people, and serve as tools in corrupt quests for power. Claudius, the shrewd politician, is the most obvious example of a man who manipulates words to enhance his own power. The sinister uses of words are represented by images of ears and hearing, from Claudius's murder of the king by pouring poison into his ear to Hamlet's claim to Horatio that "I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb" (IV.vi.21). The poison poured in the

- **Laertes**

Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother, a young man who spends much of the play in France. Passionate and quick to action, Laertes is clearly a foil for the reflective Hamlet.

- **Fortinbras**

The young Prince of Norway, whose father the king (also named Fortinbras) was killed by Hamlet's father (also named Hamlet). Now Fortinbras wishes to attack Denmark to avenge his father's honor, making him another foil for Prince Hamlet.

- **The Ghost**

The specter of Hamlet's recently deceased father. The ghost, who claims to have been murdered by Claudius, calls upon Hamlet to avenge him. However, it is not entirely certain whether the ghost is what it appears to be, or whether it is something else. Hamlet speculates that the ghost might be a devil sent to deceive him and tempt him into murder, and the question of what the ghost is or where it comes from is never definitively resolved.

- **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern**

Two slightly bumbling courtiers, former friends of Hamlet from Wittenberg, who are summoned by Claudius and Gertrude to discover the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior.

- **Osric**

The foolish courtier who summons Hamlet to his duel with Laertes.

- **Voltimand and Cornelius**

Courtiers whom Claudius sends to Norway to persuade the king to prevent Fortinbras from attacking.

- **Marcellus and Bernardo**

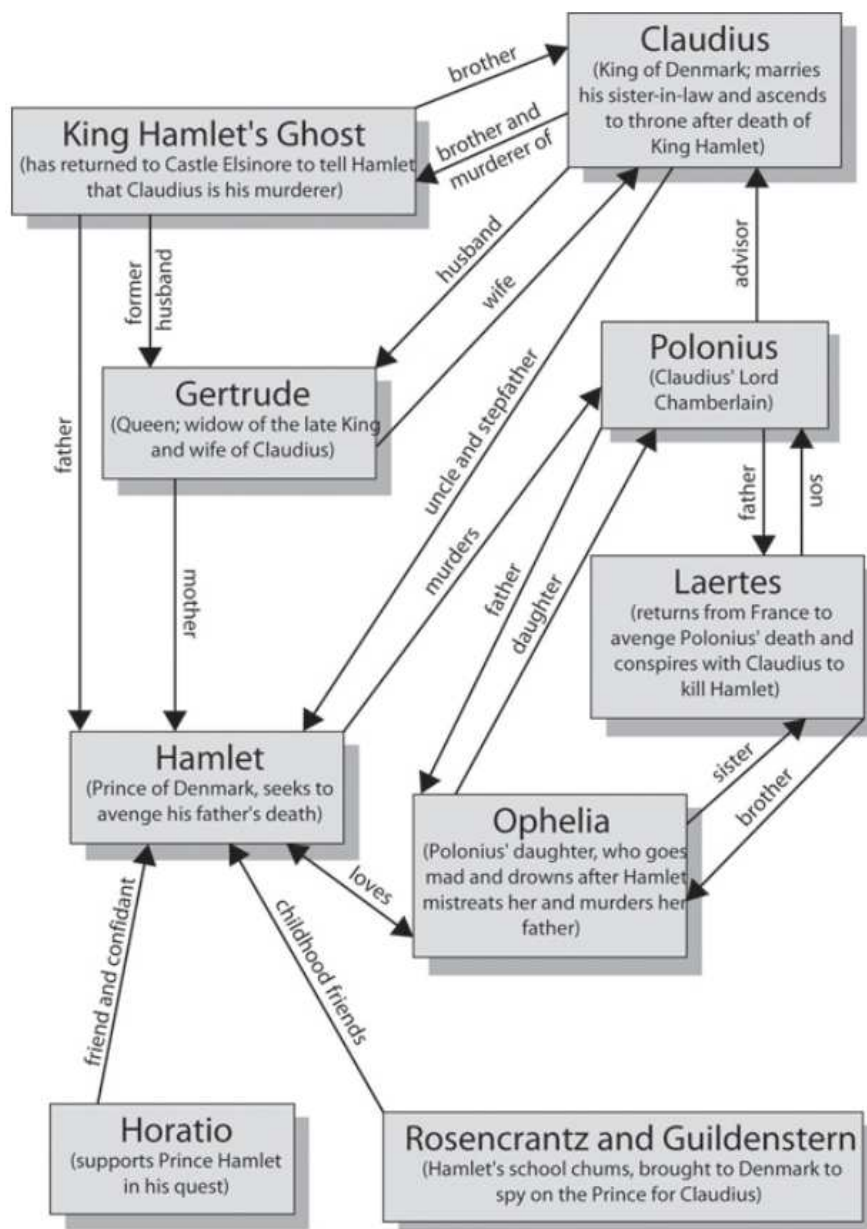
The officers who first see the ghost walking the ramparts of Elsinore and who summon Horatio to witness it. Marcellus is present when Hamlet first encounters the ghost.

- **Francisco**

A soldier and guardsman at Elsinore.

- **Reynaldo**

Polonius's servant, who is sent to France by Polonius to check up on and spy on Laertes.



ANALYSIS OF MAIN CHARACTERS

Hamlet

Hamlet is an enigma. No matter how many ways critics examine him, no absolute truth emerges. Hamlet breathes with the multiple dimensions of a living human being, and everyone understands him in a personal way. Hamlet's challenge to Guildenstern rings true for everyone who seeks to know him: "You would pluck out the heart of my mystery." None of us ever really does.

The conundrum that is Hamlet stems from the fact that every time we look at him, he is different. In understanding literary characters, just as in

understanding real people, our perceptions depend on what we bring to the investigation. Hamlet is so complete a character that, like an old friend or relative, our relationship to him changes each time we visit him, and he never ceases to surprise us. Therein lies the secret to the enduring love affair audiences have with him. They never tire of the intrigue.

The paradox of Hamlet's nature draws people to the character. He is at once the consummate iconoclast, in self-imposed exile from Elsinore Society, while, at the same time, he is the adulated champion of Denmark — the people's hero. He has no friends left, but Horatio loves him unconditionally. He is angry, dejected, depressed, and brooding; he is manic, elated, enthusiastic, and energetic. He is dark and suicidal, a man who loathes himself and his fate. Yet, at the same time, he is an existential thinker who accepts that he must deal with life on its own terms, that he must choose to meet it head on. "We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow."

Hamlet not only participates in his life, but astutely observes it as well. He recognizes the decay of the Danish society (represented by his Uncle Claudius), but also understands that he can blame no social ills on just one person. He remains aware of the ironies that constitute human endeavor, and he savors them. Though he says, "Man delights not me," the contradictions that characterize us all intrigue him. "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!"

As astutely as he observes the world around him, Hamlet also keenly critiques himself. In his soliloquys he upbraids himself for his failure to act as well as for his propensity for words.

Hamlet is infuriatingly adept at twisting and manipulating words. He confuses his so-called friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — whom he trusts as he "would addersfang'd" — with his dissertations on ambition, turning their observations around so that they seem to admire beggars more than their King. And he leads them on a merry chase in search of [Polonius](#)' body. He openly mocks the dottering Polonius with his word plays, which elude the old man's understanding. He continually spars with Claudius, who recognizes the danger of Hamlet's wit but is never smart enough to defend himself against it.

Words are Hamlet's constant companions, his weapons, and his defenses. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a play that was later adapted into a film, playwright and screenplaywright Tom Stoppard imagines the various wordplays in *Hamlet* as games. In one scene, his characters play a set of tennis where words serve as balls and rackets. Hamlet is certainly the Pete Sampras of wordplay. And yet, words also

serve as Hamlet's prison. He analyzes and examines every nuance of his situation until he has exhausted every angle. They cause him to be indecisive. He dallies in his own wit, intoxicated by the mix of words he can concoct; he frustrates his own burning desire to be more like his father, the Hyperion. When he says that Claudius is " . . . no more like my father than I to Hercules" he recognizes his enslavement to words, his inability to thrust home his sword of truth. No mythic character is Hamlet. He is stuck, unable to avenge his father's death because words control him.

What an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear murdered
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words,
And fall-a-cursing like a very drab,
A scallion!

Hamlet's paradoxical relationship with words has held audiences in his thrall since he debuted in 1603 or so. But the controversy of his sexual identity equally charms and repels people.

Is Hamlet in love with his mother? The psychoanalytic profile of the character supports Freud's theory that Hamlet has an unnatural love for his mother. Hamlet unequivocally hates his stepfather and abhors the incestuous relationship between Claudius and Gertrude. But whether jealousy prompts his hatred, whether his fixation on his mother causes his inability to love Ophelia, and whether he lusts after Gertrude all depend on interpretation. And no interpretation is flawless.

Hamlet's love life could result from his Puritanical nature. Like the Puritans whose presence was growing in England of the time, Hamlet is severely puritanical about love and sex. He is appalled by Gertrude's show of her pleasure at Claudius' touch, and he clearly loathes women. His anger over Claudius' and Gertrude's relationship could as easily result from a general distaste for sexual activity as from desire to be with his mother.

Hamlet could be, at heart, a brutal misogynist, terrified of love because he is terrified of women. He verbally abuses Ophelia, using sexual innuendo and derision, and he encourages her to get to a nunnery. Another play on words, nunnery, in this instance, symbolizes both sexual abstinence and sexual perversity. In a cloister, Ophelia would take a vow of chastity, and in a brothel, she would serve as the basest sexual object.

Can concluding whether Hamlet is mad or merely pretending madness determine all the questions about Hamlet's nature? Could a madman manipulate his destiny as adeptly as Hamlet turns the tables on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Perhaps he is crazy like a fox . . . calculated

and criminal. Or perhaps his own portrayal of madness — his "antic disposition" — that he dons like a mask or a costume actually drives him.

Could Hamlet's madness be his tragic flaw? Or is his flaw that he believes he is pretending to be mad? Are words his tragic flaw? Or could his tragic flaw be that he possesses the same hubris that kills all the great tragic heroes — that he believes he can decide who should live and who should die, who should be forgiven and who should be punished? Then, perhaps, is the ghost a manifestation of his own conscience and not a real presence at all?

Hamlet is our hero because he is, as we are, at once both confused and enticed by endless dilemmas that come from being, after all, merely human.

CLADIUS

Shakespeare's villains are complex. Unlike the earlier antiheroes of the revenge or morality plays that were popular in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, Shakespearean criminals lack the simple clarity of absolute evil. Claudius is a perfect example of a quintessential Shakespearean antagonist.

Claudius is socially adept, and his charm is genuine. He can exhibit deep distress over his "dear brother's death" and admiration for his wife, "Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state." He knows the value of a great funeral, but quickly turns mourning into celebration and moves on "With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage" to whatever lies ahead. He is a decisive man, fair in his politics and commanding — if Gertrude's allegiance is any indication — in his bedroom.

The Queen has chosen to marry Claudius, and she defends him even to her son. In fact, she never opposes Claudius in anything. Were he dark and sinister in all things, she would fear and despise him; she follows him willingly even when he arranges to send her beloved son into the jaws of death. He must be sincere in his love for her. He explains his feelings for her at the end of Act IV, but he has proven these feelings consistently throughout the play

The Queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks, and for myself,
My virtue or my plague, be it either which,
She's so conjunctive to my life and soul
That as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not by her.

A character who loves is not merely a cold-blooded killer. Like Hamlet, his conflicting imperatives tear him apart.

Whereas he recognizes that he his "offense is rank" and "smells to heaven," he also admits that he will not make amends with God because he

refuses to give up what his crime has bought him. He is willing to take the consequences of his actions.

In some ways, Claudius exhibits more heroism than Hamlet. He manipulates fortune and takes what is not rightfully his, but remains unapologetic for his actions; he possesses enough strength to admit that he would do the same again. Hamlet, torn by conscience to smite the morally deficient Claudius, causes the death of six innocent people before he accomplishes his goal. By taking full responsibility for his actions, Claudius mitigates his evil nature.

The mark of a great Shakespearean antagonist is how completely he mirrors the protagonist. Claudius is no more Machiavellian than Hamlet; both ultimately believe that the end justifies the means, and both ultimately sacrifice humanity and humaneness in the acquisition of their goals.

What makes Claudius a villain is that he is wrong, and Hamlet is right. Claudius is a sneak who murdered and lied. Hamlet commits his murders in the open and suffers the pangs of his own conscience. Claudius subverts his conscience and refuses to ask for divine forgiveness. Hamlet seeks contrition and absolves himself of guilt before he dies; Claudius receives no absolution and seeks none. Hamlet will spend eternity in Heaven; Claudius will burn in Hell.

Gertrude

Gertrude is a shadowy character with little substance on which to hang a characterization. We can examine her through what others say about her more than through what she says.

That she is "th'imperial jointress" to the throne of Denmark indicates that she wields some power and suggests that Claudius' decision to marry her had political implications. Yet Hamlet indicts all women by calling her fickle — "frailty, thy name is woman." We see through Hamlet the picture of a woman who one day lived obediently and in the shadow of one king to whom she was devoted. The next day she allies herself in love and politics with the polar opposite of the man she formerly called husband.

The most haunting questions about Gertrude's character revolve around whether she knows that Claudius is a criminal. Is she merely a dependent woman who needs to live through her man? Is she a conniving temptress who used her power to conspire with Claudius to kill King Hamlet and usurp Prince Hamlet's ascendancy?

No textual references are conclusive. The ghost of King Hamlet calls her his "most seeming virtuous queen." He entreats Hamlet to "Leave her to Heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her." These words could imply that she has reason to be guilty, that she is not blameless. Later, the ghost implores Hamlet to comfort her. "But look,

amazement on thy mother sits. / Oh step between her and her fighting soul." Again, he waxes protective of her but implies that she has some reason to be spiritually conflicted.

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive at Elsinore, she tells them that they have been sent for because of the way Hamlet "hath talked of you," and she promises them compensation fit for "a king's remembrance." She exhibits apparent sincerity in her concern for Hamlet, and yet, even after Hamlet has told her what he knows about Claudius, even after he has shared his fears of the trip to England, even after Hamlet has clearly proven that something is rotten in the state of Denmark, she never opposes Claudius to protect Hamlet. Unless, as some critics believe, she drinks the poisoned wine as an act of maternal protectiveness. Does she know the wine is poisoned? When "the Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet" is she deliberately drinking to prevent Hamlet's death?

If Gertrude has overheard Claudius and [Laertes](#) plotting, she would know all. If she is in Claudius' confidence, she would be complicit with all his conspiracies. Though Claudius professes love and admiration for Gertrude, he never confides to anyone the extent of their relationship. Gertrude describes her love for Hamlet when she asks him not to return to Wittenberg. When she shares with Ophelia her hope that the young woman would have married her Hamlet, she divulges her wish for his happiness. However, she never declares any kind of emotion for Claudius, either positive or negative.

Ultimately, Gertrude's character remains malleable. In the hands of an astute actor and a clever director, she can come across as either Claudius' co-conspirator or Hamlet's defender. Either interpretation works, if built substantially.

Polonius

Casting Polonius in a demeaning light is a common danger. While he is a blowhard, and he does spout aphorisms that were, even in the 16th century, clichés, his clichés constitute sound advice and his observations prove themselves prophetic.

Polonius may be elderly and demented, but he must have been at least politically adept. He admits that he is not a man of great prestige, and yet he has risen to be counselor to the King. Presumably, he counseled King Hamlet as well.

An actor portraying Polonius should address the question of whether he is a devoted father or a ruthless politician. Does he sacrifice Ophelia to his ambitions and/or his fear of being discarded by the King? Does he send Reynaldo to spy on [Laertes](#) because he cares about his son, or is he worried about what Laertes' possible behavior might reflect back on his own

character? Is he more concerned with his position in Denmark than with the welfare of his children? Is he then the victim of his own contrivances?

Ophelia

Ophelia is a difficult role to play because her character, like Gertrude's, is murky. Part of the difficulty is that Shakespeare wrote his female roles for men, and there were always limitations on them that restricted and defined the characterizations devised. In the case of an ingenue like Ophelia, a very young and lovely woman, Shakespeare would have been writing for a boy. The extent to which a boy could grasp subtle nuances might have prevented the playwright from fleshing out the character more fully.

We do know that Ophelia is torn between two contradictory poles. Her father and brother believe that Hamlet would use her, that he would take her virginity and throw it away because she could never be his wife. Her heart has convinced her that Hamlet loved her, though he swears he never did. To her father and brother, Ophelia is the eternal virgin, the vessel of morality whose purpose is to be a dutiful wife and steadfast mother. To Hamlet, she is a sexual object, a corrupt and deceitful lover. With no mother to guide her, she has no way of deciphering the contradictory expectations.

Just like Hamlet, the medieval precept that the father's word is unquestionable governs Ophelia. But her Renaissance sense of romantic love also rules her. How can she be obedient to her father and true to her love? When she lies to Hamlet and tells him that [Polonius](#) is home when he is concealed in the room eavesdropping, Ophelia proves she cannot live in both worlds. She has chosen one, and her choice seals her fate.

The dilemma also forces her into madness. She has no way to reconcile the contradictory selves her men demand that she be and still retain an equilibrium. Ophelia's desperation literally drives her crazy, and she has no means with which to heal herself.

Laertes

Hamlet and Laertes presumably grew up together, fencing with one another and confiding in one another. Then Hamlet went away to Wittenberg and Laertes to Paris, parting the friendship. Still, Hamlet refers to Laertes as "a very noble youth."

Hamlet recognizes what Shakespeare has made abundantly clear throughout the play, that Laertes is Hamlet's foil. He mirrors Hamlet but behaves in the opposite manner. Where Hamlet is verbal, Laertes is physical; where Hamlet broods, Laertes blusters. Laertes' love for Ophelia and duty to [Polonius](#) drive him to passionate action, while Hamlet's love for Gertrude and duty to King Hamlet drive him to

passionate inaction. In Laertes resides the picture of what Hamlet could be if the sound of his own words did not mesmerize him.

Horatio

Horatio epitomizes the faithful friend. He only questions Hamlet's judgment once, when Hamlet confides the fates of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Otherwise, Horatio supports every rash decision Hamlet makes.

Horatio is the man Hamlet wants to be. He is intelligent, but not driven by his intellectual creativity. Horatio seems to accept the world as it is handed to him where Hamlet is driven by his impulse question all apparent truths. (What T.S. Eliot calls "the energy to murder and create" in "The Lovesong J. Alfred Prufrock," a poem in which the title character, paralyzed by words and feelings protests, "I will not be Prince Hamlet.") Marcellus and Bernardo Marcellus and Barnardo admire Horatio's intellect enough to want his opinion about the ghost, but no one accuses Horatio of talking or thinking too much. He can follow Hamlet's elaborate wordplays, but he is not inclined to engage in any. He knows enough to value what ignorance he has that can protect him from political ruin, but neither ambition nor deceit determines his loyalties.

Horatio loves Hamlet so much that he would rather impale himself on his own sword than live on after Hamlet's death. Hamlet passionately demonstrates his own deep love and admiration for Horatio in his request that Horatio tell Hamlet's story. Hamlet trusts his friend enough to leave him the task of finding the words that will divine the truth. For Hamlet, entrusting the task to Horatio declares his love better than expressing that love through any of Hamlet's poetry or philosophy. Action has at last spoken louder than words.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS (SCENEWISE)

Act I: Scene 1

Summary

On a gun platform atop the battlements of Castle Elsinore, Officer Barnardo arrives to relieve sentinel Francisco of his watch. Barnardo challenges Francisco to identify himself first, and the two exchange small talk about the weather. Francisco complains, "For this relief much thanks, 'tis bitter cold. / And I am sick at heart."

Horatio and Marcellus enter and greet Francisco, identifying themselves as loyal Danish subjects, and Francisco exits. Marcellus asks Barnardo if he has seen "this thing," "this apparition" tonight, and Barnardo assures him that he has seen nothing. Marcellus tells Barnardo that he has invited Horatio to see the Ghost himself, as he trusts Horatio to

"approve our eyes and speak to it." Horatio doubts the Ghost will appear, but listens intently as Barnardo prepares to retell the tale of the Ghost's previous visitation.

Before Barnardo can say much, however, the Ghost appears, and Marcellus encourages Horatio to address the spirit. Horatio cannot deny that he, too, sees the Ghost. All three men agree that the Ghost is real; in fact, they recognize it as the "majesty of buried Denmark" — the recently dead King Hamlet. They entreat the Ghost to stay and talk, but it dissolves into the night.

Saying he would not believe had he not seen for himself, Horatio is astounded to have seen the Ghost of King Hamlet dressed in the armor he wore when he conquered old King Fortinbras and defeated the Poles. He finds the king's dress ironic because, at that moment, young Fortinbras — the dead Norwegian king's son and namesake — has just declared war on the Danes, seeking to avenge his father's death and take back the land King Hamlet took from old Fortinbras. Because the Danes are preparing for war against the Norwegians, Barnardo wonders if the Ghost portends doom for the Danes. Horatio shudders, recalling the omens that warned Julius Caesar of his imminent demise.

The Ghost reappears, and Horatio entreats it to stay. The crowing cock trumpets the arrival of morning, however, and Horatio realizes that no erring spirit can stay out in the daylight; they watch the Ghost disappear into the dissolving darkness. Certain that they have seen the Ghost of King Hamlet, they decide to inform Prince Hamlet.

Analysis

Hamlet was written around the year 1600 in the final years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who had been the monarch of England for more than forty years and was then in her late sixties. The prospect of Elizabeth's death and the question of who would succeed her was a subject of grave anxiety at the time, since Elizabeth had no children, and the only person with a legitimate royal claim, James of Scotland, was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and therefore represented a political faction to which Elizabeth was opposed. (When Elizabeth died in 1603, James did inherit the throne, becoming King James I.)

It is no surprise, then, that many of Shakespeare's plays from this period, including Hamlet, concern transfers of power from one monarch to the next. These plays focus particularly on the uncertainties, betrayals, and upheavals that accompany such shifts in power, and the general sense of anxiety and fear that surround them. The situation Shakespeare presents at the beginning of Hamlet is that a strong and beloved king has died, and the throne has been inherited not by his son, as we might expect, but by his

Act I, scene ii

The morning after Horatio and the guardsmen see the ghost, King Claudius gives a speech to his courtiers, explaining his recent marriage to Gertrude, his brother's widow and the mother of Prince Hamlet. Claudius says that he mourns his brother but has chosen to balance Denmark's mourning with the delight of his marriage. He mentions that young Fortinbras has written to him, rashly demanding the surrender of the lands King Hamlet won from Fortinbras's father, and dispatches Cornelius and Voltimand with a message for the King of Norway, Fortinbras's elderly uncle.

His speech concluded, Claudius turns to Laertes, the son of the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius. Laertes expresses his desire to return to France, where he was staying before his return to Denmark for Claudius's coronation. Polonius gives his son permission, and Claudius jovially grants Laertes his consent as well.

Turning to Prince Hamlet, Claudius asks why "the clouds still hang" upon him, as Hamlet is still wearing black mourning clothes (I.ii.66). Gertrude urges him to cast off his "nightly colour," but he replies bitterly that his inner sorrow is so great that his dour appearance is merely a poor mirror of it (I.ii.68). Affecting a tone of fatherly advice, Claudius declares that all fathers die, and all sons must lose their fathers. When a son loses a father, he is duty-bound to mourn, but to mourn for too long is unmanly and inappropriate. Claudius urges Hamlet to think of him as a father, reminding the prince that he stands in line to succeed to the throne upon Claudius's death.

With this in mind, Claudius says that he does not wish for Hamlet to return to school at Wittenberg (where he had been studying before his father's death), as Hamlet has asked to do. Gertrude echoes her husband, professing a desire for Hamlet to remain close to her. Hamlet stiffly agrees to obey her. Claudius claims to be so pleased by Hamlet's decision to stay that he will celebrate with festivities and cannon fire, an old custom called "the king's rouse." Ordering Gertrude to follow him, he escorts her from the room, and the court follows.

Alone, Hamlet exclaims that he wishes he could die, that he could evaporate and cease to exist. He wishes bitterly that God had not made suicide a sin. Anguished, he laments his father's death and his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle. He remembers how deeply in love his parents seemed, and he curses the thought that now, not yet two month after his father's death, his mother has married his father's far inferior brother.

O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason,
 Would have mourn'd longer,—married with mine uncle,
 My father's brother; but no more like my father

Than I to Hercules: within a month;
 Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
 Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
 She married:— O, most wicked speed, to post
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

See Important Quotations Explained

Hamlet quiets suddenly as Horatio strides into the room, followed by Marcellus and Bernardo. Horatio was a close friend of Hamlet at the university in Wittenberg, and Hamlet, happy to see him, asks why he has left the school to travel to Denmark. Horatio says that he came to see King Hamlet's funeral, to which Hamlet curtly replies that Horatio came to see his mother's wedding. Horatio agrees that the one followed closely on the heels of the other. He then tells Hamlet that he, Marcellus, and Bernardo have seen what appears to be his father's ghost. Stunned, Hamlet agrees to keep watch with them that night, in the hope that he will be able to speak to the apparition.

Analysis

Having established a dark, ghostly atmosphere in the first scene, Shakespeare devotes the second to the seemingly jovial court of the recently crowned King Claudius. If the area outside the castle is murky with the aura of dread and anxiety, the rooms inside the castle are devoted to an energetic attempt to banish that aura, as the king, the queen, and the courtiers desperately pretend that nothing is out of the ordinary. It is difficult to imagine a more convoluted family dynamic or a more out-of-balance political situation, but Claudius nevertheless preaches an ethic of balance to his courtiers, pledging to sustain and combine the sorrow he feels for the king's death and the joy he feels for his wedding in equal parts.

But despite Claudius's efforts, the merriment of the court seems superficial. This is largely due to the fact that the idea of balance Claudius pledges to follow is unnatural. How is it possible to balance sorrow for a brother's death with happiness for having married a dead brother's wife? Claudius's speech is full of contradictory words, ideas, and phrases, beginning with "Though yet of Hamlet our late brother's death / The memory be green," which combines the idea of death and decay with the idea of greenery, growth, and renewal (I.ii.1–2). He also speaks of "[o]ur sometime sister, now our queen," "defeated joy," "an auspicious and a dropping eye," "mirth in funeral," and "dirge in marriage" (I.ii.8–12). These ideas sit uneasily with one another, and Shakespeare uses this speech to give his audience an uncomfortable first impression of Claudius. The negative impression is furthered when Claudius affects a fatherly role toward the bereaved Hamlet, advising him to stop grieving for his dead

father and adapt to a new life in Denmark. Hamlet obviously does not want Claudius's advice, and Claudius's motives in giving it are thoroughly suspect, since, after all, Hamlet is the man who would have inherited the throne had Claudius not snatched it from him.

The result of all this blatant dishonesty is that this scene portrays as dire a situation in Denmark as the first scene does. Where the first scene illustrated the fear and supernatural danger lurking in Denmark, the second hints at the corruption and weakness of the king and his court. The scene also furthers the idea that Denmark is somehow unsound as a nation, as Claudius declares that Fortinbras makes his battle plans "[h]olding a weak supposal of our worth, / Or thinking by our late dear brother's death / Our state to be disjoint and out of frame" (I.ii.18–20).

Prince Hamlet, devastated by his father's death and betrayed by his mother's marriage, is introduced as the only character who is unwilling to play along with Claudius's gaudy attempt to mimic a healthy royal court. On the one hand, this may suggest that he is the only honest character in the royal court, the only person of high standing whose sensibilities are offended by what has happened in the aftermath of his father's death. On the other hand, it suggests that he is a malcontent, someone who refuses to go along with the rest of the court for the sake of the greater good of stability. In any case, Hamlet already feels, as Marcellus will say later, that "[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.67). We also see that his mother's hasty remarriage has shattered his opinion of womanhood ("Frailty, thy name is woman," he cries out famously in this scene [I.ii.146]), a motif that will develop through his unraveling romantic relationship with Ophelia and his deteriorating relationship with his mother.

His soliloquy about suicide ("O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!" [I.ii.129–130]) ushers in what will be a central idea in the play. The world is painful to live in, but, within the Christian framework of the play, if one commits suicide to end that pain, one damns oneself to eternal suffering in hell. The question of the moral validity of suicide in an unbearably painful world will haunt the rest of the play; it reaches the height of its urgency in the most famous line in all of English literature: "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (III.i.58). In this scene Hamlet mainly focuses on the appalling conditions of life, railing against Claudius's court as "an unweeded garden, / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (I.ii.135–137). Throughout the play, we watch the gradual crumbling of the beliefs on which Hamlet's worldview has been based. Already, in this first soliloquy, religion has failed him, and his warped family situation can offer him no solace.

Act I: Scene 3

Helmet

Summary

In [Polonius](#)' chambers, [Laertes](#) prepares to return to school in Paris. He counsels his sister Ophelia to spurn the advances of her suitor, Prince Hamlet. He explains that, to Hamlet, she can never be anything more than a plaything. Hamlet, Laertes tells Ophelia, is of a higher rank than she and cannot choose with whom he will spend his life. To protect her heart and to safeguard her honor, Laertes asserts that Ophelia should reject Prince Hamlet before he deflowers her. Ophelia jokingly chides her brother to be careful lest he be one of those "libertines" who "recks not his own rede" (does not take his own advice).

Polonius enters, and offers Laertes lengthy advice on how to live in Paris; he spouts a string of aphoristic clichés enumerating the shoulds and shouldn'ts of a young man's life. Laertes agrees, telling Polonius that he really must be going, and reminding Ophelia of his directive to her. She promises to take his advice and to lock it safely in her heart. Polonius asks Ophelia what she and Laertes were discussing, and she tells him that Laertes advised her about Prince Hamlet. Polonius launches into his own diatribe on the subject, saying that Hamlet is a red-blooded male who wants her for only one purpose and that she must spurn his advances. Ophelia promises to obey her father and break off her relationship with the Prince.

Analysis

Laertes offers his overprotective advice genuinely, but his tone is that of a prepared speech, and he shows neither real awareness of nor consideration for, Ophelia's feelings. In fact, he never consults her but rather speaks at her in metaphorical posturing that underscores her feminine inferiority. Shakespeare's choice of blank verse over iambic pentameter for Laertes' speech serves as a stage direction for the actor playing the role. This character is not a man of deep thought or fancy language but rather a pragmatist — a careful courtier more concerned with being correct than with emotional depth. Shakespeare aptly underscores the fact that Laertes is the perfect foil for Hamlet. His rehearsed, political-sounding speech patterns oppose Hamlet's emotional, flowery, and heart-heavy ruminations. He has memorized his speech as if it were taken from his schoolboy copybook, and he shows that he is vain and ordinary with limited intellectual capabilities. This scene begins to reveal how Laertes might be similar to Hamlet — and decidedly different.

Polonius lives in a world of show. His instructions in social etiquette may have ethical substance but lack practical soundness for Laertes. When he speaks to Ophelia, he treats her the way one would expect a man of his time and stature to treat a daughter, as property. A woman should bring

honor and fortune to her family, and the image Ophelia projects for him very much concerns Polonius. He is sure that Hamlet would never choose Ophelia to wife. Hence, he amuses himself with off-color allusions to Hamlet's intentions and dashes any hopes she might have that her father would help her make a match. Through Polonius and Laertes, Shakespeare introduces another motif of the play: that self-indulgence and vanity often obscure familial devotion.

Ophelia's dilemma is salient in this scene. Both Laertes and Polonius tell her that the man that she loves is using her, that he will discard her, and that she should not trust her own heart. She is a dutiful daughter. Because her father has taught her to be seen and not heard, she listens and promises to honor the men's wishes. No choice remains to her now but to break off all relations with Hamlet. But what if they have already consummated their love? What if he has already sworn to her that he loves her and would never forsake her? Whom should she believe? Though Shakespeare tells us nothing to help us see into her heart, the actress playing Ophelia must know what she feels about Hamlet. Most critics agree that Ophelia and Hamlet have already been intimate, that Ophelia is deeply smitten with true love for the Prince, and that her father and brother's words hurt her deeply. Were this conjecture not true, Ophelia's motivation for her subsequent actions would be questionable.

Act I: Scene 4

Summary

In accordance with their plan, Horatio and Marcellus meet Hamlet on the battlements of the castle. A trumpet sounds, and the Prince bitterly comments on the King's propensity for wine and revelry. He disapproves of this behavior as it reflects badly on all Danes and gives them a reputation for drunkenness that makes them the butt of jokes. He points out that people often judge a man of great stature by his smallest "mole of nature" and not by his strength. Before the discussion can go further, Horatio notices the Ghost's arrival.

Despite his uncertainty as to whether the Ghost "airs from heaven or blasts from hell," or whether the Ghost harbors "wicked or charitable" intentions, Hamlet immediately identifies the apparition as his father. He empowers the Ghost to explain the purpose of his visit and charges the spirit to speak and make things clear. The Ghost beckons Hamlet to follow, and, despite the entreaties of his comrades to beware, Hamlet follows the spirit into the night.

Analysis

Again Hamlet reveals his preoccupation with the disparity between appearance and reality. Claudius appears to be a powerful man, yet harbors a decided weakness for wine and revelry. Thus, says Hamlet, Claudius

makes all Danes seem drunkards to their critics and attracts disrespect from both allies and enemies. Just as an individual's weaknesses can overshadow all virtue, so one "swinish" man, especially a swinish leader, can overshadow all virtuous compatriots. Hamlet completes his critique of the new king/satyr the very moment before the old king, the great Hyperion himself, appears. Claudius' evil habits garner more suspicions than the Ghost's motives. The true evil lies in the heart of the successor, and the degeneracy of the court reflects the necessary outcome of foul deeds.

Hamlet's speech about Claudius' carousing is important on a number of levels. Critics refer to this speech as the "dram of evil" speech because Hamlet ends it by saying, "The dram of evil / Doth all the noble substance of a doubt, / To his own scandal." In this speech, Hamlet indicts the Danish people, including himself — he is, after all, "to the manner born" — for their hedonism. Large appetites for wine and revelry indicate the kind of dissipation that weakens cultures and usurps nations. The fact that "swinish" behavior characterizes the Danish collective reputation embarrasses Hamlet.

Critics have viewed *Hamlet* as a latter-day morality play in which Hamlet, a sort of Renaissance Everyman, must navigate through moral depravity toward the light of reason and good deeds to find his way to righteousness. His sense of honor drives him to do the right thing, but the right thing actually contradicts God's law. Hamlet is torn between right and right rather than right and wrong. Hamlet's definition of the subjective "right" differs drastically from Claudius' definition. As A.C. Bradley points out, Hamlet cares for nothing so much as he cares for "human worth," and Hamlet has an "aversion to evil." In fact, Bradley suggests that we might consider the play a "tragedy of moral idealism as much as a tragedy of reflection."

Act I: Scene 5

Summary

Back on the parapet — the outer walls of Castle Elsinore — Hamlet follows the Ghost, who admits that he is the spirit of King Hamlet and tells his son to hear him out. His time is short before he must return to Purgatory. He cannot share any of the secrets of life in Purgatory, but he has a tale of woe he desperately needs to pass on to his son. Before he will give Hamlet any details, however, he charges the Prince to avenge his murder. The words of the Ghost horrify Hamlet, for they confirm his fears. Hurrying because he can "scent the morning," King Hamlet tells his son that Claudius seduced his seemingly virtuous queen, and then crept to where his brother lay napping and poured a lethal poison in King Hamlet's ear. The poison quickly curdled King Hamlet's blood, robbing him of both his life and the opportunity for absolution.

The Ghost tells Hamlet to "Remember me," but only after he instructs him to leave Gertrude alone. So Hamlet must wrest retribution only from Claudius. The Ghost exits, leaving Hamlet incensed. Hamlet answers the worried calls of Horatio and Marcellus, telling them nothing specific but demanding that they both take an oath to tell no one what they have seen and heard. In confidence, Hamlet tells Horatio that he will pretend to be mad so that he may spy on his mother and uncle. After Horatio has sworn allegiance, Hamlet bids the departed Ghost to rest and then curses his fate before exiting with the other men.

Analysis

King Hamlet's ghost introduces himself in a way that most certainly evoked the sympathy of the Elizabethan audience. He tells Hamlet that his brother robbed him of everything he was, all that he owned, including his everlasting soul. In the same way that the Bible engenders sympathy for Abel and condemns Cain for the fratricide, Shakespeare favors the murdered brother.

Hamlet is quick to believe the Ghost because the spirit's words confirm his worst fear: Claudius murdered King Hamlet. For the Elizabethan/Jacobean audience who attended the first performances of *Hamlet*, murder of a king was in itself cause for alarm. Consider that the English people believed that their monarchs ruled by Divine Right, that God Himself appointed them to rule the land. The Church of England went so far as to attribute to the monarch the highest order of executive power in the church as well. In all ways, the English monarch represented God on earth. King Hamlet's murder makes the Ghost a most sympathetic figure to Shakespeare's audiences. No one would have questioned the existence of that Ghost, and few would have believed — even for a moment, as Hamlet does — that the Ghost could be a devil.

The fact that his mother's lover is also her husband's murderer exacerbates Gertrude's crime of incest. Hamlet is bereft of choice. He may have an aversion to violence, and he may live by strict Christian principles, but he must avenge his father's honor. Hamlet sees no way to honor his father except by killing Claudius. Doubly impelled by his father's orders and by tradition, Hamlet becomes a prisoner of his obligation for revenge.

The major conflict here is obvious. Christianity negated the Hebraic notion of "an eye for an eye"; the notion seemed barbaric to the Renaissance population. Further, the medieval custom of a blood feud wherein the closest relative of a murdered man must avenge the death had become passé. Society more often supported the notion of mercy and forgiveness, concepts Shakespeare explored in an earlier play, *Merchant of Venice*. In *Merchant*, the audience despises the antagonist precisely because he insists on a blood feud. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare asks the audience to

empathize with Hamlet's desire for redress. Hamlet is a sympathetic character precisely because the notion of revenge drives him while his Christian morality and inclination simultaneously exhort him to be charitable.

The major issues of the play are now out in the open and conjoined: By marrying Claudius, Gertrude has committed incest and has failed to carry out her duties to her slain husband. In Claudius, because of his duplicity, these sins are unforgivable. How his people perceive him concerns Claudius more than making things right with Hamlet, Gertrude, or the people of Denmark. On the other hand, Gertrude is a woman who has been led by her weakness and frailty to follow the charismatic devil of a king to his bed.

Hamlet swears Horatio and Marcellus to secrecy and garners further support from his audience. His genuine leadership capability and honest friendship for Horatio inspire great loyalty from the two men, and that loyalty is clearly Hamlet's earned reward for his strength of character.

Hamlet tells Horatio that he plans to feign madness before the King and the court. The madness will render him invisible so that he might observe and discern the best way and time for his revenge. Hamlet's meaning here remains ambiguous. Is his madness a mask? A costume? A lie? The answer to this question provides the key to Hamlet's characterization, and an actor playing the role must decide what that "putting on" signifies. In some portrayals, Hamlet pretends to be mad; in others, while he may believe he is pretending, he is quite mad. In still others, Hamlet's madness grows as he develops. In others again, Hamlet is a child who can't grow up and accept the burdens of adulthood, which include his duties to his slain father. Shakespeare seems to have deliberately left Hamlet's ruse ambiguous enough so that the performances of the role may vary.

Act II: Scene 1

Summary

[Polonius](#) meets with his sly servant Reynaldo and tells him to go to Paris and spy on [Laertes](#). He charges the servant to find any Danes living in Paris and to question them as to Laertes' whereabouts and reputation. Polonius even goes so far as to give Reynaldo permission to use lies to entrap Laertes. After Reynaldo exits in pursuit of his mission, Ophelia enters and tells Polonius that she has been horrified by the Prince. Hamlet came to her in her sewing room with his jacket askew and unfastened, and wearing no hat; his stockings were filthy and unfastened, drooping at his ankles; and he was pale and trembling, looking "piteous." Polonius diagnoses Hamlet's condition as madness due to his love of Ophelia, brought about because Ophelia obeyed her father and spurned Hamlet's advances. Polonius decides to take his information to the king.

Analysis

Many critics, including T.S. Eliot, believe this scene is irrelevant to the play. However, the scene actually mirrors themes that are central to the play's purpose. Appearance and reality are disparate entities that contradict one another.

In Act II, Scene 1, the apparently caring, nurturing father Polonius hires the shady Reynaldo (The Fox) to spy on Laertes. Polonius tells Reynaldo that he suspects the worst of Laertes and wants reports of all his dirtiest deeds gleaned from the most deceptive spying. He tells Reynaldo to look into Laertes' life in Paris even if he needs to accuse his son falsely — "What forgeries you please." Polonius will pay Reynaldo to discredit Laertes with negative reports — both real and imagined — in order to teach his son the importance of reputation. The duplicity of this encounter foreshadows the behavior that will characterize Polonius throughout the play.

In the second part of the scene, Ophelia enters and reports that Hamlet has been acting incomprehensibly. She describes with painter's language the way Hamlet is attired:

Lord Hamlet with his doublet unbraced
 No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
 Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle
 Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
 And with a look so piteous in purport
 As if he had been loosèd out of hell
 To speak of horrors — he comes before me.

The description is one that Polonius immediately recognizes — "Mad for thy love?" — because Hamlet's appearance embodies the contemporary stereotype of the spurned lover, indicating that his main objective in visiting Ophelia is to use Ophelia to convince others that his insanity was not due to any mysterious unknown cause, but to this disappointment, and so to allay the suspicions of the King. Thus, Ophelia's purpose in this scene seems to be to give credence to the notion that Hamlet never loved Ophelia at all, but merely used her. If so, then Hamlet is as guilty of deceptiveness as are those he judges.

Act II: Scene 2

Summary

The King and Queen enter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and others. King Claudius has summoned Hamlet's two school chums to Elsinore to have them spy on the Prince and report back to Claudius, recounting Hamlet's every move. The Queen promises them handsome compensation for their spying and assures them that Hamlet's own good requires the service. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree. The two leave to

seek Prince Hamlet, and the King and Queen turn their attention to [Polonius](#), who claims to have the answer to Prince Hamlet's affliction. He promises to elaborate further after Claudius receives his newly arrived ambassadors from Norway.

When Polonius exits, Gertrude scoffs at the old man's intimations. She remains certain that Hamlet's woes are caused by the old king's death and her hasty remarriage. Polonius returns with Ambassadors Voltmand and Cornelius. They bring news from Norway that the old and ailing king, brother to the slain King Fortinbras, has managed to restrain his nephew, young Fortinbras, from invading Denmark. In return, however, the old man asks that Denmark provide some assistance in Fortinbras' campaign against Poland — that Claudius allow Fortinbras to pass through Denmark on his way to Poland.

As soon as the ambassadors leave, Polonius launches into an elaborate discussion on the meaning of life and duty, promising to be brief and then launching into further wordiness. Finally, Polonius asserts that Hamlet is mad. Having no patience for Polonius, Gertrude admonishes him. Again promising to be less loquacious, Polonius makes showy, wavy motions with his arms and then reads a letter he confiscated from his daughter, written in the Prince's hand. Polonius criticizes the highly dramatic, artificial prose with random rhymes in which Hamlet has written the note and tells Claudius and Gertrude that he has forbidden Ophelia to accept any advances from the Prince. That is the order, Polonius claims, that has led poor Hamlet into madness.

Polonius then suggests that he and Claudius hide themselves behind a needlework wall hanging so they can eavesdrop on the couple when Ophelia meets with Hamlet to return his love gifts. Claudius agrees, just as Hamlet enters reading. Polonius asks the King and Queen to leave them so that he may speak to Hamlet himself.

In the encounter that follows between Hamlet and Polonius, Hamlet warns Polonius to watch his daughter carefully and then toys with Polonius' limited wit. The exchange convinces Polonius that Hamlet is lovesick when, in actuality, Hamlet's responses have done little but ridicule Polonius. Polonius leaves, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter. Hamlet greets them as his "excellent good friends" and asks why they have come to his prison. They grouse at his choice of words, but he tells them, "Denmark's a prison." Rosencrantz wittily replies, "Then is the world one." Hamlet breaks through his friends' resistance, and the two finally admit that the King and Queen sent them to observe Hamlet and provide them with details of his behavior. Hamlet's melancholy then erupts in a blank verse complaint that he has lately "lost all my mirth." He laments that a foul and sickening fog now besmirches the heavens, which he once saw as a

canopy "fretted with golden fire." Hamlet then indicts the very nature of mankind.

Rosencrantz seizes the opportunity to announce the arrival of the players, and Hamlet's mood shifts yet again. Ecstatic at the opportunity for diversion, Hamlet asks who the players are and why they are on the road. Rosencrantz answers that they are on the road because a company of child actors has usurped the London stage. Hamlet responds by saying that he welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as he welcomes the actors and hopes he can be a worthy host. Polonius enters to announce the arrival of the players.

When the players enter, Hamlet requests that the lead player perform a speech from Virgil's *Aeneid* in which Aeneas tells Queen Dido the story of Phryrus, whose father Achilles was killed at Rome. The player performs the speech and moves himself to tears over Hecuba's horror at seeing her husband dismembered. Hamlet asks Polonius to see to the players' lodging, and, as soon as the Lord Chamberlain has left, he tells the small group of players remaining on-stage his plans for their performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*. He tells them that he will provide them with twelve to sixteen original lines that he wants them to add to the play. They agree, and they leave.

Hamlet then reveals his real intentions for *The Murder of Gonzago*. The players will perform the play with an enhanced scene, which will enact the murder the Ghost has described. Hamlet hopes that seeing his crime reenacted in front of the assembled audience will make Claudius act guilty and reveal that he murdered King Hamlet. Such an admission will prove to Hamlet, once and for all, that the Ghost is real and not simply a devil or the figment of his imagination.

Analysis

Gertrude implies in her opening words to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that she and Claudius have invited the pair to Denmark for Hamlet's benefit. Although Claudius may have ulterior motives, Gertrude is the person who insisted on contacting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and bringing them to court because of the friendship and respect that Hamlet bears for them. At this point in the play, one can reasonably assume that both Claudius and Gertrude had Hamlet's welfare in mind when they summoned the two Germans to court.

Claudius, however, is once again aware that all eyes are on him as he solicitously welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and expresses his grave concern for "Hamlet's transformation." Although Shakespeare gives no suggestion that Claudius had anything but Hamlet's welfare in mind when he summoned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to court, the reader knows that Claudius does nothing without self-promotion in mind. His

suggestion that they report back any affliction of Hamlet's echoes Polonius' instructions to Reynaldo in Scene 1 regarding [Laertes](#). Both Polonius and Claudius exhibit distrust and deception when dealing with their heirs. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern heartily agree to do the King's and Queen's bidding, Gertrude promises they will receive "such thanks / As fits a king's remembrance." Claudius has successfully deceived Gertrude as well, convincing her that he loves Prince Hamlet.

When Polonius ushers in Cornelius and Voltemand — Claudius' ambassadors to Norway — the old man entices the King with a promise that he knows something about the Lord Hamlet that Gertrude and Claudius cannot know. He refuses to divulge any information until after the ambassadors have left, but he creates excitement over his "find." Gertrude, motivated only by her deep, even overprotective, love for her son, remains skeptical about Polonius' ability to help.

The ambassadors bring good news for Claudius, which cheers the King, and he plans a celebratory party. Shakespeare presents here another mirror. Young Fortinbras, a dutiful nephew whose uncle has ascended to the throne that might have been his, obeys his uncle/sovereign's request to show Denmark leniency. Claudius knows of no reason that his nephew/subject would be less cooperative or less charitable, and he is more than willing to toy with Hamlet's good nature.

Gertrude expresses her concern for and sensitivity toward Hamlet. She fully understands the trauma he has experienced in returning to Denmark to find his world shattered and reordered. Polonius' plan to spy on Hamlet, to trap him, as it were, by exposing a private letter the old man has impounded from his daughter, does not please Gertrude. Her son's welfare concerns her far more than affairs of state. However, Gertrude agrees to Polonius' plan because it affords her the hope that Hamlet's madness merely results from unrequited love, which can be easily remedied. The old man clearly agitates Gertrude, who urges him to disclose something substantive: "More matter and less art." However, Polonius' report finally wins her over, and she agrees to Polonius' plan to spy on Hamlet. Another deception is premeditated and prearranged, another of Polonius' "springs to catch woodcocks."

That both Gertrude and Ophelia are complicit with the entrapment is a key to Hamlet's distrust of women and of his inability to allow himself to love either of them. Hamlet enters in his state of apparent madness. Yet, mad with despair as he may seem on the surface, Hamlet remains sharp enough to volley artfully with words that confound Polonius' limited wit. Hamlet calls the old man a fishmonger, a term rife with double entendre. Because "fish" was an off-color allusion to women, "fish sellers" were those who sold women's favors — in other words, pimps.

Hamlet demonstrates his acute sense of wordplay with his sad cynicism on the subject of honesty. "To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked in ten thousand." But he clearly convinces Polonius that he is not rational. "How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of." Then again, as soon as Polonius exits, Hamlet reveals his true level of reason: "These tedious fools." He understands that Polonius is not the only old man he needs to worry about.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern return, and Hamlet elucidates his astuteness once more. He manipulates his "excellent good friends" into admitting they have been sent for. He calls fortune a whore, suggesting that one can buy luck and fate . . . like friendship. He proves that he understands the duplicitous nature of their visit. He further clarifies his presence of mind through his lucid discourse on the nature of dreams and the paradox of human existence.

Prison imagery surrounds this scene. "Denmark's a prison," he says. In answer to Rosencrantz's retort that "then the world must be one," Hamlet assents but asserts that Denmark is "One o' the worst." The brooding clarity with which Hamlet perceives his predicament reminds us that he has announced that he will wear an antic disposition — that he is faking his madness.

When Polonius announces the arrival of the players and Hamlet again plays with what he perceives as Polonius' meager intelligence, however, Polonius again concludes that Ophelia's rejection is the cause of Hamlet's madness.

After the player's rendition of Hecuba's horror, Hamlet expounds to himself on the crux of his dilemma. He compares himself to an actor playing out the drama of his own life, but he cannot find the motivation to move beyond his immobilized state of melancholy. He is stuck in words, in the idea of action, terrified to move forward. The actor playacting as Phyrrus, a fictional character, is moved to kill his father's killer; the actor relating a fairytale about a woman's woes is capable of real emotion. Hamlet is an actor prompted by heaven and hell to seek revenge for his murdered father but is unschooled in his art and hesitates for fear of the consequences. His judgmental conscience stifles his emotions. He cannot sympathize with Gertrude or follow the Ghost's instructions to defend her honor because his fears blind him. His incessant pandering to words emasculates him. "That I . . . must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words." But because he is a man of words, he uses first the words of the play in his plan to strike at the king.

Hamlet ends the scene by revealing his plan to entrap the King by manipulating the play to force the King's conscience to incriminate him.

This time the premeditated duplicity belongs to Hamlet. Surrounded by false friends and dubious love, Hamlet recognizes an opportunity to use the honest deception of the stage to illuminate the truth.

Act III: Scene 1

Summary

The King and Queen enter with Rosencrantz, Guildenstern [Polonius](#), Ophelia, and members of the court. Claudius questions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Hamlet's madness, asking if they have found a reason for Hamlet's behavior. Rosencrantz answers that the Prince has admitted to being distracted but will not say from what. Guildenstern says that Hamlet has been crafty in disguising his motivations. The two report that Hamlet is very excited about the play to be presented, and Claudius asks them to encourage him in this regard. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave.

Claudius orders Gertrude to leave so that he and Polonius can spy on Hamlet, who has an imminent meeting with Ophelia. Ophelia enters, and the Queen, in a moment of maternal affection, tells Ophelia that she hopes that Hamlet and Ophelia will patch up their broken romance so that Hamlet can get on with his life. Gertrude exits. Polonius greets Ophelia and instructs her to pretend to read a book so that her being alone will not seem unusual to Hamlet. Ophelia complies and waits with a book while the two men hide. Hamlet enters, speaking his "To be or not to be" soliloquy. He ponders the nature of being and nothingness, and then notices Ophelia reading. Hamlet, assuming that she is reading prayers, asks her to pray for him. She tells him she wishes to return to him gifts he has given her. He responds that he has given her no gifts. She insists that he did give her gifts, and she claims that he gave the gifts to her with words that made them seem symbols of great love. Again he denies having given her the gifts at all and further denies having ever loved her. He questions her honesty and, in response to her bewilderment, tells her that all men are untrustworthy knaves and that she would be better off in a nunnery.

To Ophelia's further consternation, Hamlet then abruptly demands that she disclose the current whereabouts of her father. She lies and says that he is at home. Enraged, Hamlet curses her, predicting a disaster for her dowry. He tells her again to go to a nunnery. As Ophelia frets over his apparently fled sanity, he says that he knows that women are two faced and cannot be trusted; they all deserve to be cast aside. Then he leaves.

Left alone, Ophelia bemoans what she considers to be Hamlet's descent into complete insanity. Claudius and Polonius join her and assess what they have overheard and seen. The King doubts that love has ruined Hamlet's mind; he tells Polonius that he will send Hamlet to England. Polonius, still convinced that love afflicts Hamlet, urges Claudius to make

are intangible; the present is all that humans can be sure of. For humans, being — what IS — is the only truth; everything else is nothing.)

In this soliloquy, Hamlet explores the ideas of being and nothingness by asserting a basic premise: We are born, we live, and we die. Because no one has returned from death to report, we remain ignorant of what death portends. Hence, Hamlet's dilemma encapsulates several universal human questions: Do we try to affect our fate? Do we take action in the face of great sorrow, or do we merely wallow in the suffering? Can we end our troubles by opposing them? How do we know? What is the nature of death? Do we sleep in death, or do we cease to sleep, thereby finding no rest at all?

Hamlet hopes that death is nothingness, that death will "end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to," that death will end thinking, knowing, and remembering. But he fears that, in death, he will be haunted interminably by bad dreams of life itself, by dreams heavy with the memory of fear and pain. Ultimately, he says, that's why humans dread death. We fear that our consciences will torment us forever. Thus, human beings choose life, with its torment and burdens, chiefly to avoid death, the great unknown. However, death is, like life, inescapable, and Hamlet curses his luck for having been born at all.

Hamlet's dilemma underlies the entire soliloquy. If he kills Claudius, he will assuredly be killed himself. Hamlet is not sure he is ready for death; life is all he knows, and he fears the unknown. Further, he is not yet ready to take responsibility for sending another human being into the throes of death. He understands his duty to avenge the murder that is now disclosed, and he accepts responsibility for the Ghost's torment, but he knows that by killing Claudius he could be consigning himself to his father's fate for all eternity. Hamlet ends his reverie when he sees Ophelia enter, engrossed in her book. He entreats her to remember him in her prayers. His words startle her, and she responds by inquiring after his health. Immediately, she recovers and launches into her assigned speech:

My lord, I have remembrances of yours

That I have longèd long to redeliver.

I pray you now receive them.

Aware that they are being watched, Hamlet stages his own response and argues that he gave her nothing and that he has never loved her. He tells her to go to a nunnery, assaulting her with another double entendre insult. In the Protestant Elizabethan world, people used the word "nunnery" as a euphemism for "brothel." Knowing that she is working for her father and Claudius, Hamlet accuses Ophelia of prostitution. Hamlet now asks a question on which turns the entire remaining action of the play: "Where is your father?" He earlier asked her, "Are you honest? Are you fair?" To which she gave no direct reply. Now he asks her where her father

is, knowing full well that he is in the room. She lies, "At home, my lord." Hamlet flies into a rage. He calls her two-faced and accuses her and all women of painting a false face. His accusations leave her aghast and certain that his madness is complete and completely destructive.

Ophelia's response to Hamlet's question serves as the force that propels Hamlet's story to its tragic ends. If Ophelia had answered truthfully, if she had disclosed her father's whereabouts, if she had allied herself with Hamlet rather than with Claudius, if she had truly believed in her love for Hamlet, Ophelia might have saved Hamlet from his burden. The play could have been a romance rather than a tragedy. However, by confirming his belief in women's basic dishonesty — "frailty thy name is woman" — Ophelia seals her fate and Hamlet's at the same time.

Claudius and Polonius emerge from hiding, astounded. Claudius still finds Polonius' case for Hamlet's love of Ophelia dubious. Furthermore, Claudius questions Hamlet's madness. A master of deception, Claudius suspects that Hamlet is not as he seems and, as such, is a danger. He hatches his plan to exile the Prince to England. Perhaps to save Hamlet or perhaps to buy favor with the Queen, Polonius suggests yet another trap. Send Hamlet to see Gertrude, and instruct her to beg Hamlet to leave well enough alone. Polonius will spy as Hamlet confides in his mother. The old man expects that Hamlet will confess his love for Ophelia. For reasons he does not disclose, Claudius agrees to the plan. Hamlet knows that his elders are ganging up on him. He is furious and skittish, and his judgment is entirely impaired. Polonius' plot cannot help but backfire.

Act III: Scene 2

Summary

Hamlet meets with the actors and instructs them as to the nature of proper acting. He tells them not to overact, and not to use large gestures. He wishes them to be honest; he asks them to mirror nature, to be entirely realistic in their portrayals. [Polonius](#) enters and announces the arrival of the King and Queen to hear the play.

While the court assembles for the performance, Hamlet explains to Horatio how the play will help prove the Ghost's honesty and reveal Claudius' perfidy. He asks Horatio to watch the King and note his reaction to a specific speech in *Murder of Gonzago*. If the play does not reveal Claudius as the killer, Hamlet promises Horatio that he will admit to having seen a "damned ghost" rather than the honest spirit of his late father. Horatio, Hamlet's faithful friend, assures his Prince that he will follow Hamlet's instructions to the letter.

As the courtiers enter the hall, Claudius greets his nephew and asks how Hamlet is, and Hamlet gives a cryptic response. Then Hamlet and Polonius exchange a few words, and Polonius brags about having been

murdered by Brutus when he played Julius Caesar in his student days. Hamlet derides Polonius, but Gertrude interrupts to invite her son to sit beside her. Hamlet chooses instead to lie down at Ophelia's feet. He converses a bit with Ophelia before the dumb show — a pantomime — begins, and she mistakes his manic behavior for merriness. The dumb show mimes the following: A man murders a king while he is sleeping in his garden, and his loving wife, initially inconsolable over the king's death, marries the usurper, who has crowned himself king.

When the dumb show ends, the players perform the actual play, which depicts the same plot as the pantomime. An intermission follows the Player Queen's declaration that she will never remarry should the Player King die. Hamlet seizes the moment to ask Gertrude what she thinks of the play, and Gertrude answers that she is enjoying the play but that the "Lady doth protest too much."

Claudius asks Hamlet for the play's title, to which Hamlet replies, *The Mousetrap*. He says that the play presents the true story of a murder carried out in Vienna. He explains the action of the play, and Ophelia congratulates Hamlet for his story-telling skill. Hamlet makes a crude pun, suggesting that he could interpret the actions of Ophelia and her lover if he could watch them. Ophelia accuses him of being keen (cruel), and Hamlet responds with another sexual innuendo. Hearing the word keen to mean sexually eager, he tells her she would have to work hard to relieve his sexual urges. Ophelia laughs that he is wittier than she, but more indecent. Hamlet says that women take their husbands for better or worse but then they deceive them.

As Lucianus, the Player King's nephew, pours poison in the ears of the sleeping Player King, Hamlet explains that the murderer will presently win the love of the dead Player King's widow. Claudius rises and calls for lights to be lit. Polonius repeats the order for the lights and stops the play. The King and his court exit, leaving Hamlet and Horatio to debrief. The two agree that the King's reaction implicates him in the murder of King Hamlet, and Hamlet says he is now convinced of the Ghost's trustworthiness.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter and tell him that the King is displeased and the Queen wants Hamlet to join her in her quarters. Hamlet promises to obey. When a Player enters carrying a recorder, Hamlet seizes the opportunity to make an off-color allusion to Guildenstern's manhood and to chide him for being manipulative. Polonius enters and instructs Hamlet to visit his mother. Hamlet toys with Polonius, pretending to see shapes that do not exist, and then he asks that everyone leave him alone.

Hamlet observes that the dark time of night has come, when spirits and goblins rise from hell to spread their "Contagion to this world."

Incensed by the hour and the events of the evening, Hamlet claims that he is ready to perform the task that duty demands — to "be cruel." First he will go to his mother and rebuke her, but he will not harm her. He then chides himself because his words are at war with his soul.

Analysis

Critics traditionally regard Scene 2 as more of a glimpse into Shakespeare's theatrical world than insight into *Hamlet*. Indeed, the first 50 lines do relate how Shakespeare interpreted an actor's job, and what he expected of his actors. We know that he advocated a natural style of acting rather than the declamatory style — a style of acting in which players use large gestures such as "sawing the air" and exaggerated motion in conjunction with consistently loud line readings. We also know that he advocated that actors take their direction from the script.

In addition to a primer on acting, however, Scene 2 reveals a great deal about Hamlet's psycho-emotional makeup. Still imprisoned by words and surrounded by staging, acting, and seeming, Hamlet now directs his own world, if only for a moment. Ensuring that the play be "as 't were the mirror up to nature" is critical so that Claudius will not miss seeing his own reflection in the Player King's murderous nephew. Were the actors to fail to "suit the actor to the word," were they "too tame" or too cruel, then Claudius might dismiss the tragedy as mere melodrama. The "whirlwind of passion" would negate true feeling, and Claudius' conscience would miss its examination.

Hamlet's instructions to the actors also serve to demonstrate how well Hamlet is prepared to play his role, to put on his antic disposition. Hamlet clearly possesses an actor's sensibility and understands that, in order to sell a performance an actor must become his role. This insight into Hamlet's psyche may provide one answer to the question that people most often raise concerning Hamlet's character: Is he truly mad, or is he truly acting? This scene confirms the possibility that Hamlet represents an actor who plays his role so well that he loses himself in the role and becomes what he pretends to be. What begins as an antic disposition becomes his hopeless, true self.

We can see Hamlet's instructions to the actors from a third angle as well. In his world of deception and betrayal, Hamlet recognizes the need to exercise reason and caution, and to remain aloof from blind passion. Thus he can again justify his inaction and validate his slow approach to avenging his father's murder. He must assure himself once more that this is his father's spirit and not a demon from hell. Hence, he informs Horatio of the plan so that he has a man who is "not passion's slave" to observe the King and confirm his reactions. Identifying the Ghost's validity is critical. Should

it prove itself a demon, Hamlet's worst fears would be warranted, and Claudius may be blameless.

While waiting, Claudius asks after Hamlet's health, and Hamlet answers in seeming madness: "Excellent, i'faith, of the chameleon's dish: I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so." Claudius is nearly speechless in response to Hamlet's answer. Hamlet has accused him of having emasculated (capon) and disinherited his nephew, and all he can say is, "I have nothing with this answer Hamlet, these words are not mine." He has all but said a childish, "Oh, shut up."

Polonius then diverts all attention with tales of his fleeting career as an actor playing Julius Caesar while at the university.

Besides the obvious thematic threads illuminated by the literary allusion to Shakespeare's earlier play, the reference to *Julius Caesar* contains theatrical historical merit. An allusion to a play often provides a glimpse into the season during which a play was premiered. The actor playing Polonius was undoubtedly playing Julius Caesar at the same time in a concurrent production of *Julius Caesar*. By studying the character of Julius Caesar, an actor can extrapolate information helpful for Polonius' character development, and we can learn that Polonius is not merely the buffoon that he is conventionally portrayed to be.

Hamlet sits by Ophelia and asks to put his head in her lap, a request that is demeaning in public while at the same time indicating that the two have a far more intimate relationship than has been indicated thus far. Ophelia seems pleased with his attention and says, "You are merry, my lord." Hamlet's cynicism reemerges, and he again casts aspersions at his mother. Once again he convinces everyone that he is mad.

Ophelia's question, "What means this, my lord?" reflects the fact that the guests did not expect a dumb show. Dumb shows no longer preceded tragedies by the time of *Hamlet's* first production, and Shakespeare's desire to include one baffles critics. Perhaps Shakespeare thought it clarified elements of the story that he needed in order to heighten the intensity of contrast between the play and the play within the play.

Whatever the reason for the dumb show, the actual speaking play follows, and Claudius remains unperturbed until the Player King actually pours the poison in his brother's ear. He then jumps up in a moment of heightened drama and, after his courtiers notice him, he shouts, "Give me some lights." The King has sprung Hamlet's *Mousetrap*; Claudius' own revulsion to *The Murder of Gonzago* catches him. Hamlet's mission now becomes obligatory. Not only does he know he must avenge his father's death, but Horatio also knows — and the entire court may now suspect foul play in the death of their former king, so that no his inaction is unmanly. Hamlet must act decisively and immediately.

And yet, Hamlet keeps talking. He volleys words about his unlikely succession to Claudius' throne with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Finally he agrees to visit Gertrude. Before he goes, however, he postures yet again with words. He says that he has reached another midnight and that the dark nature of that witching hour makes him bloodthirsty and makes him desire to decisively take action. But the audience knows better. Hamlet is still not ready to commit to action.

Hamlet's short soliloquy is often used to support the Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's relationship to his mother. Here he speaks of going to her softly, worried that he will not be strong enough to speak his piece. "O heart, lose not thy nature. . . ." Having just assessed his feelings in the language of a traditional revenger in Elizabethan melodrama, Hamlet turns his attention to Gertrude whom he goes to confront as though she were an offending wife to his cuckold.

Act III: Scene 3

Summary

Fearing that Hamlet is a threat to his life and throne, the King summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and instructs them to hurry and take Hamlet to England. The men agree, acknowledging that any threat to Claudius is a threat to the people of Denmark, so they will keep Denmark safe by removing Hamlet from its shores. They leave, and [Polonius](#) enters to inform the King that Hamlet is on his way to Gertrude and that Polonius plans to hide there and eavesdrop on the conversation. Promising to report back to Claudius before Claudius retires to bed, Polonius leaves.

Claudius then prays at his private altar, although he says his sin is so great that it renders him incapable of praying. He admits before God that he has committed the "primal eldest curse" by carrying out his "brother's murder." He admits that his contrition is unforgivable since he is unwilling to give up the spoils of his ill-won battles. He begs instead that some divine assistance might bow his knees and soften his heart so that he can ask for forgiveness.

Hamlet enters and sees Claudius in prayer. He recognizes his perfect opportunity to kill Claudius, but stops himself. He remembers that Claudius killed King Hamlet without allowing him any opportunity to make amends for his sins, and that King Hamlet now languishes in purgatory awaiting entry to heaven. Believing that Claudius is praying for forgiveness, Hamlet knows that by killing Claudius now, he would send the King straight to heaven. Claudius would escape the eternal punishment that is his due.

Analysis

From the top of the scene, any ambiguity concerning Claudius' character disappears. He identifies Hamlet as his enemy and plots to have him dispatched to England. He conspires with Polonius to spy on Hamlet yet again. Then, kneeling in prayer before sleeping, the King confesses the depth and severity of his crime. He likens himself to Cain, the primal or first murderer, and admits that he cannot bring himself to ask for God's mercy. "But oh, what form of prayer / can serve my turn?" Claudius knows that he will never abdicate the throne, nor will he give up Gertrude and all "those effects for which I did murder," such as his power and position. He expects to spend eternity in hell.

Hamlet enters as the King kneels with his back toward Hamlet. Hamlet reaches for his sword, and the ambiguity shifts to Hamlet. His Christian morality informs him that because the King appears to pray, he is probably confessing. By ending his life in mid-confession, Hamlet would allow the King to go straight to heaven by virtue of his cleansed soul. Hamlet would prefer to send the King to hell. He has no problem with the immorality of robbing a man of his salvation. Hamlet is capable of imitating King Claudius' cruelty.

Some critics believe that Hamlet vacillates yet again in yet another self-deception of word play. In fact, this moment represents the pivotal point in the play — the moment of truth. Had Hamlet taken charge and acted rather than retreating into his words, he would have prevented the six deaths that follow. Most importantly, the tragic hero might not have met his inevitable end. Then, of course, the play would have been cut short, and no tragedy would exist. Had Hamlet killed Claudius here, he would have more closely resembled Macbeth who murdered innocence — in Macbeth's own words, "Macbeth hath murdered sleep" — by taking the life of an unprotected, unaware King. The action would label Hamlet a villain, not a hero. Claudius survives in order to preserve Hamlet's character.

Act III: Scene 4

Summary

As promised, [Polonius](#) arrives in Gertrude's room before Hamlet and hides himself behind an arras. He instructs Gertrude to be entirely blunt with her son. Hamlet enters challenging, "Now, Mother, what's the matter?" Gertrude tells him he has badly offended his father, meaning Claudius; Hamlet answers that she has badly offended his father, meaning King Hamlet. Hamlet intimidates Gertrude, and she cries out that he is trying to murder her. Polonius reacts from behind the curtain and yells for help. Hamlet draws his sword and thrusts it through the tapestry, killing Polonius. When Hamlet lifts the wallhanging and discovers Polonius' body, he tells the body that he had believed he was stabbing the King. He

then turns his attention to punishing Gertrude. He presses contrasting pictures of Claudius and his brother in Gertrude's face. He points out King Hamlet's godlike countenance and courage, likening Claudius to an infection in King Hamlet's ear. He accuses Gertrude of lustfulness, and she begs him to leave her alone.

King Hamlet's Ghost reappears to Hamlet, but only Hamlet can see him. Hamlet believes that the Ghost has come to chide his tardy son into carrying out the "dread command," but Hamlet then perceives the Ghost as his mother's protector. The Ghost tells his son to be kinder to her. Gertrude is utterly convinced now that her son is hallucinating from a devil-inspired madness, but Hamlet tells her that it is not madness that afflicts him. He begs her to confess her guilt to him and to heaven. At the very least, he begs her, don't sleep with Claudius or let him "go paddling in your neck with his damned fingers."

He asks if she knows that Claudius is sending him to England; she had forgotten. He tells her that he distrusts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and that they are undoubtedly taking him to England to do some foul bidding for Claudius. She confesses that she knows about the exile. He bids his mother good night and exits, pulling Polonius' body behind him.

Analysis

Although a closet was a private room in a castle, and a bedroom was meant for receiving visitors, the convention since the late 19th century has been to stage the scene between Hamlet and Gertrude in Gertrude's bedroom. Staging the scene in the closet rather than in a bedroom is more in line with the Freudian psychoanalysis of an Oedipal Hamlet — a man resembling the Greek character Oedipus who bedded his mother and killed his father. If Gertrude received him in her closet, she treated him more as an intimate than as a son.

Up until this scene, one can dismiss the notion that Shakespeare envisioned a prince whose love for his mother was unnatural and itself incestuous. One can rationalize Hamlet's hysteria over Gertrude's marriage to Claudius in light of the Renaissance notion of family honor and the prevailing definitions of incest, which implicated Gertrude and Claudius. But in Act III, Scene 4, no better way exists for the modern thinker to justify Hamlet's behavior than to suppose that he has a Freudian attachment to Gertrude.

Though not the first to cast Hamlet in an Oedipal light, Laurence Olivier popularized the notion of an untoward love between Hamlet and his mother in the 1947 Royal Shakespeare Company production and again in the 1948 film version. In the film, Olivier, playing Hamlet opposite his wife in the role of Gertrude, staged the scene so that it was stripped of all its ambiguities. He dressed Gertrude's bed in satin, and he dressed the Queen,

awaiting her son's arrival, in the same suggestively folded satin and silk. The two engage in a verbal exchange that possesses the breathless engagement of foreplay, and Hamlet then presses himself onto his mother in an overtly sexual way. The scene is believable played this way, especially given that Claudius will tell us shortly that Gertrude "lives almost by his looks," and because Hamlet's melodramatic reaction to his father's passing seems so wooden without that underpinning of deep emotion.

Polonius, obscured by the tapestry, has prophetically and ironically placed himself to "silence me e'en here" and quietly observes what transpires between Gertrude and her son. In a passionate outburst, Hamlet threatens his mother, holding up a mirror and saying, "You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you." Gertrude, terrified, assumes that her son intends to murder her and calls for help, to which the hidden Polonius reacts without revealing himself. Still impassioned by his encounter with Gertrude, still inflamed with his sexual tension, Hamlet stabs Polonius. In a grandly impulsive moment, Hamlet has finally acted on his bloodlust, a bloodlust he has sublimated until this moment. According to the post-Freudian interpretation, the need to expiate his misplaced sexual feelings has caused him to stop thinking and act for a change. The irony all belongs to Polonius; he is there to trap Hamlet and finds himself trapped instead. He has said he will silence himself, and he is indeed silenced. There is both simple irony and dramatic irony.

The Ghost's invisibility to Gertrude raises the question of Hamlet's sanity. We can interpret Shakespeare's choice to blind Gertrude to the Ghost's presence and to deafen her ears to her son's insistence that the Ghost exists to mean that Shakespeare fashioned Hamlet as a madman, no longer merely acting the part. Of course, one can also make a case for interpreting the scene as an indictment of Gertrude. She refuses to see the Ghost because of her own guilt. Gertrude's black heart impedes her vision, refusing her the sight of her loving husband. On the other hand, perhaps she does see the Ghost and only pretends not to. Then again, you may interpret the scene as being another proof of Gertrude's innocence.

Up until this scene, judging the extent of Gertrude's complicity in the murder of King Hamlet has been difficult. She now implies that she is entirely innocent. Hamlet counters her horror at Polonius' death with his own accusation

A bloody deed! Almost as bad, good mother

As kill a king, and marry his brother.

She answers in innocent surprise, "As kill a king?" Then she asks him, "What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?"

If she is guilty, she is also an accomplished actor. According to all appearances, the Ghost was right when he told Hamlet earlier that she was only a follower — a weak woman brainwashed by her need to be loved and cared for. She can discern no other reason for Hamlet to behave in such a way except to hurt her. Gertrude remains incredulous as Hamlet perseveres with his indictment of Claudius as a "murderer and a villain." She does not agree to end Claudius' advances. Hamlet asks her to "prevent the "bloat King" from tempting her to bed again, but she never promises to confess herself and leave the King, and she never tries to convince Hamlet that Claudius is innocent. Nor does she plead for herself or try to make Hamlet see why she chose to marry Claudius.

At the scene's end, as if in a test of his mother's devotion, Hamlet tells Gertrude that Claudius is sending him to England and that he suspects foul play in his uncle's having hired Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take him there. He says he does not trust them and he confides his fear. Gertrude offers no argument and provides no reassurance. She simply tells him in effect that she'll think about it and lets him leave. In a world where seeming, acting, and playing predominate, judging any character's honesty is difficult. The ambiguities enhance the character, and shroud her in mystery. These characteristics pose a formidable challenge for an actor, making Gertrude a choice role.

Hamlet's immediate acquiescence to his father's will here is significant. Whether the Ghost is real or a figment of his imagination, the old king has successfully yanked Hamlet from the preoccupation with Gertrude that has distracted his quest for retribution. Hamlet leaves Gertrude affectionately. He repeats "Good night" five times and progressively wishes for her peace. He asks her rather than ordering her to keep clear of the king's advances, and he confides his fears about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He then takes Polonius' body as a favor to her, not as obligation to the murdered good old man.

Act IV: Scene 1

Summary

Claudius, flanked by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, finds Gertrude and questions her as to Hamlet's whereabouts. She asks to be left alone with the King and, after Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave, she agitatedly tells him that she has seen a horror. Claudius wants to know what happened and asks after her son's welfare. She answers that Hamlet is madder than a storm at sea, and she describes the killing of Polonius. Realizing that he himself might have been the person hiding behind the tapestry, Claudius deplors Hamlet's violence, but he blames himself for not having been sterner with Hamlet from the beginning. He worries what he will tell his subjects; Gertrude tells him that Hamlet is contrite and has promised to dispose of the body. The King resolves to banish Hamlet

quickly and calls to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He tells them what has happened and bids them bring Hamlet to him. He tells Gertrude that they must together confide in their wisest friends and find a way to disclose Polonius' death without raising suspicions against themselves.

Analysis

Gertrude explains what has happened in a manner that exemplifies her own ambivalence and ambiguities. Does she really believe Hamlet has lost all reason? Or is she protecting the secret he has just revealed regarding Claudius' guilt — the secret she has promised to keep about King Hamlet's murder? Whether she knew anything about the crime beforehand or if she participated in the plot to take the throne remains unclear. Gertrude's protectiveness toward Hamlet is dubious. She never attempts to shield her son in any meaningful way and describes in inflammatory detail how he killed "the unseen good old man." Even knowing what Hamlet believes about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern does not cause her to entreat the King to find an alternative to sending her son to England with the pair.

Claudius is clearly aware of all the ramifications that attend his reactions to the report. He inquires after Hamlet's health but clearly remains primarily concerned with his own well being. "My soul is full of discord and dismay," he says. He will act quickly on the news, but he is clearly fearful. "His [Hamlet's] liberty is full of threats to all." He hides his fears behind the apparent concern of an uncle, who has been protecting Hamlet out of love but who will protect Hamlet no longer. He will send him to England, and they will tell the people that he is mad. Hamlet's having murdered Polonius will ultimately work to Claudius' advantage. Hamlet must receive punishment, and, although all in Denmark love him as their rightful crown prince in whom rests all hope, the King may now exile the Prince with impunity and without upsetting Gertrude, as even she sees the need to get Hamlet away.

Act IV: Scene 2

Summary

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern finally find the Prince and ask him for Polonius, he bewilders them with answers that seem to be riddles. He tells them that sharing information with mere sponges and parasites of the court is beneath him, the son of a king.

Analysis

Hamlet finally reveals his full disdain for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, saying that he has neither love nor respect for them or their King, to whom he refers as a "thing." Hamlet calls his classmates the worst kind of parasites. The King, Hamlet suggests, keeps Rosencrantz and Guildenstern around "as an ape doth nuts, and in the corner of his jaw; first

mout'd to be last swallowed." As long as Claudius needs what the pair can glean of Hamlet's intentions, he will continue to use them; however, Claudius is squeezing them as he would any sponge and will eventually leave them dry again.

Shakespeare uses this as an opportunity to demonstrate Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's shallow wit. "I understand you not, my lord." Hamlet answers with an outright insult to their collective intelligence by commenting, "a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear." Their inferior intelligence fails to discern his ironic, sarcastic language.

Act IV: Scene 3

Summary

In a public show of concern, Claudius explains to his assembled courtiers that he cannot jail his nephew because Hamlet remains too popular with the people. A riot would inevitably occur if he punished Hamlet for his part in [Polonius'](#) death, so instead he will send the young man into exile.

Rosencrantz enters to report that Hamlet will not reveal Polonius' whereabouts. Guildenstern and the Guards then bring Hamlet in, and Claudius demands to know where Hamlet has put Polonius. Hamlet engages in yet another word play with Claudius, taunting him with images of rotting flesh and the corruption of death. He pointedly tells Claudius that just as a fisherman eats a fish that has eaten a worm that was in the grave eating at a king, every man can progress through the guts of beggar. Then he tells Claudius that even if a messenger was sent to heaven, the messenger could not find the old man. He says that Claudius should seek Polonius in hell, even though the old man would not have arrived there yet either. Instead, Hamlet tells him that, within a month's time, the smell "up the stairs into the lobby" will reveal to them the whereabouts of the body. As attendants go to retrieve Polonius' body, Claudius tells Hamlet that a boat waits to take the Prince to England.

As soon as Hamlet and the guards leave, the King soliloquizes a plea to England to finish the Prince quickly and cleanly. The king of England owes him a favor, and he's calling it in by asking the death of Hamlet.

Analysis

Critics puzzle endlessly over the reason for Hamlet's cat and mouse game with Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Claudius over the whereabouts of Polonius' body. Hamlet's apparent madness is both amusing and disturbing. Hamlet is cruel and heartless. He seems to enjoy meting out his measure of torture. His perverse and cruel behavior wholly departs from the heroic figure Hamlet should be. In fact, Hamlet displays characteristics far from heroism in this scene. He exhibits, yet again, a fascination with and terror of death. Unready to face death himself, he imprisons himself

more deeply in words and avoids having to kill Claudius. Having murdered Polonius, he has at least been active and need not push himself. Hamlet seems confused, terrified, conflicted; he is coming undone.

The courtiers assemble to learn of Polonius' death, and Claudius maps out the consequences for Hamlet's actions. Hamlet expounds on his worm's meat motif, a repetition of language that Shakespeare uses several times in the play, and that apparently preoccupies Hamlet's mind. The images are gross, troubling, and rife with Hamlet's biting satirical wit. In his rant about the physical realities of death, Hamlet explains is that the fact that all men feed the earth and are, therefore, worm's meat is the great equalizer. The King inquires after Polonius' whereabouts, and Hamlet answers that Polonius is at supper — not supping but rather being supped upon: "*Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat King and your lean beggar is but variable service — two dishes but to one table. That's the end.*"

The moral of his rambling is that, because a man may fish with a worm that has eaten the body of a king, and afterwards eat the fish he has caught, that man has, in essence, devoured a king. Thus, the king passes through the stomach of a beggar and only the worm reigns supreme. Even so, the worm, the king, and the beggar are equal now — they are all dead. Elaborately, Hamlet has called the King a worm.

Hamlet's horror and amusement over death underscore his ambivalence toward his duty. He will reiterate several more times his paradoxical will to die and fear of death before he finally commits his act of vengeance. Yet, he never fails to show his love for the feel of the words he prattles. He allows the words to linger on his tongue; he swills them around and savors them, even when seemingly out of his mind.

Claudius responds by banishing Hamlet to England, and Hamlet tells Claudius that he knows the King's purpose in sending him away. Claudius apparently misses or overlooks the warning and chooses instead to respond to Hamlet's insulting, "Farewell, Mother." Claudius corrects him, offering him an opportunity to apologize. Hamlet then completes the insult by explaining that because man and wife are of one flesh, Claudius is indeed Hamlet's mother. With this insult, Hamlet digs another barb into Claudius about the incest, which always weighs on Hamlet's mind. Claudius finally perceives the depth of the danger Hamlet poses and entreats Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to hurry him to England to get him out of the way. Although unknown to everyone but the audience, Claudius now sees that he must instruct the king of England to kill Hamlet. The lines between good and evil appear clearly now as the gray areas that have masked Claudius'

dark purposes vanish. Claudius' evolution into the consummate villain is complete.

Act IV: Scene 4

Summary

On his way to England, Hamlet observes Fortinbras leading his troops through Denmark toward Poland. He questions a captain and learns that the Norwegians plan to wage war over a worthless patch of land in Poland. Hamlet lingers behind Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to reflect on the fact that these Norwegians and Poles are willing to die over land worth virtually nothing to anyone. They have left their homes and committed themselves to a principle no more substantive than an eggshell. Yet, he ponders, he possesses sufficient reason to take action against his enemy, but remains paralyzed.

Analysis

Hamlet's soliloquy as he observes the Norwegian soldiers heading for Poland represents *Hamlet's* turning point: "What is a man / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? Now, whether it be Bestial oblivion or some craven scruple Of thinking too precisely on th'event — a thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom and three parts coward — I do not know Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do,' Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means to do't."

Hamlet finally realizes that his duty to revenge is so great that the end must justify the means. He can no longer escape the necessity for action. Up until now, the consequences of the murder he must commit worried him, and he thought "too precisely on th'event." In weighing the willingness of the Norwegian soldiers to lay down their lives for a worthless piece of land against his own inability to act though motivated by sacred filial duty, he sees that he has stalled long enough. This soliloquy represents Hamlet's last flirtation with words. From here on, he will shed his attachment to the words that cause a deed's "currents to turn awry and lose the name of action."

You can divide the soliloquy into five thematic sections:

The first section identifies Hamlet's mission: revenge. Hamlet says that everything he encounters prompts him to revenge: "How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge!"

The second section exhorts him to act. Hamlet must stop over-thinking events and recognize in himself the strength, and means to complete the required act

The third section sets Fortinbras' example of how Hamlet should act. "Led by this army of such mass and charge, / Led by a delicate and tender Prince . . . to all that fortune, death and danger dare, / Even for an

eggshell." Once again Fortinbras holds up a mirror to his Danish counterpart.

The fourth section specifies Hamlet's perplexity over the Poles' and Norwegians' willingness to die for so little in contrast to his own inability to act on so much.

The fifth section provides resolution. Hamlet resolves to avenge his father at last.

Oh from this time forth

My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.

Act IV: Scene 5

Summary

A court gentleman reports that Ophelia has become pitifully insane. Gertrude refuses to see the girl, but Horatio points out that Ophelia's mental state may attract undue attention to herself and the crown. Gertrude then agrees to speak with Ophelia.

Ophelia enters singing fragments of songs about chaos, death, and unrequited love. The King and Queen both try to speak with her, but she replies only unintelligibly. Claudius comments that her father's death has undoubtedly driven her mad. He asks Horatio to follow and watch her. Then he turns to Gertrude and sums up the troubles that plague Elsinore of late. He recounts his torment over the slaying of Polonius, the secret burial to avoid uprising, the madness of Ophelia, and the arrival of her brother, Laertes, who means to incite rioting over his father's death.

The courtiers hear Laertes and a mob outside attempting to break into the castle. Laertes tells his followers to keep watch at the door, and he angrily asks Claudius to give him his father. Gertrude tries to calm Laertes, but Claudius tells her to let him rail, that they have nothing to fear from the young man. Claudius manages to placate Laertes until Ophelia returns, singing incoherent snippets of a song about a dead old man. Laertes comments that a "young maid's wits" are as fragile and "as mortal as an old man's life." Ophelia distributes flowers to the assembled people, and exits. Laertes, distraught over his sister's condition, finally pays complete attention to what Claudius has to say. The King promises Laertes satisfaction in avenging Polonius' death.

Analysis

Earlier in the play (Act III, Scene 1), Gertrude told Ophelia "And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish / That your good beauties be the happy cause of ">Hamlet's wildness." Yet now, when Horatio and the gentleman announce Ophelia's request for an audience with Gertrude, Gertrude flatly refuses to see the girl. Gertrude reluctantly agrees to see her only after

Horatio and the gentleman explain the piteousness of Ophelia's condition and the danger of Ophelia's behavior to the State.

The question of Gertrude's character again arises. Gertrude's demeanor in relation to Ophelia possibly signifies her complicity with Claudius. She seems here to share his preoccupation with the appearance of power. However, Gertrude has presumably served as Queen all of her adult life, and affairs of state would matter to her. Perhaps the fact that her son's treatment of Ophelia played a part in the girl's downfall merely embarrasses the Queen. Another entirely justifiable explanation may be that, as a woman of unusual strength, Gertrude despises the weak. Gertrude reveals a clue to her avoiding Ophelia when she says, "So full of artless jealousy is guilt, / It spills itself in fearing to be spilt." The guilt remains ambiguous. Is it Gertrude's? For what? Is it Hamlet's? Is it Ophelia's? But clearly the Queen is not moved by any maternal thoughts toward the girl who could have become her daughter-in-law. Ophelia's distracted behavior confounds the Queen. The older woman cannot respond in any meaningful way to Ophelia's desperation.

Ophelia's songs all concern unrequited love. The third song, in fact, blatantly indicts a lover who has left his love's bed. "Before you tumbled me, you promised me to wed." This song provides another proof that Ophelia's madness may stem from her having been intimate with Hamlet and then rejected by him. In fact, considering her father's instructions that she not let Hamlet have his way with her, Polonius' death could only exacerbate her guilt. Premarital sex was a sin — a sin compounded by her father's command. If, as some believe, she now carries Hamlet's child, her desperation would be all consuming.

Staging Ophelia's flower distribution with imaginary flowers has become traditional in the modern theater, which generally interpret the flowers as symbolic rather than real. Ophelia gives fennel, symbol of flattery, to King Claudius. She also gives him columbine for ingratitude and infidelity. Rue, for sorrow, she gives to Gertrude; she also offers Gertrude daisy, for springtime and love, and says she lost her own violets, which represent sweetness, when her father died. To Laertes, she gives rosemary, for remembrance, and pansies, for thought, suggesting both their shared history and her lost faculties.

In this scene, Laertes emerges as another foil (opposite) for Hamlet. He, too, has a father to avenge and a woman to protect, but this son wastes no time in thought or word. He threatens the King, only restraining himself when the King promises to assist the younger man in his quest for vengeance. Moral ambivalence does not restrict Laertes, and he willingly risks eternal damnation by acting without hesitation. Laertes, unencumbered by words, ideas, or beliefs, has raised an army against the

King to avenge Polonius' death. The King recognizes that Laertes poses a danger to him potentially as great as that posed by Hamlet. He promises Laertes that Hamlet will be eliminated. "Let the great one fall."

Claudius has consistently orchestrated emotions, and has convincingly played the role of concerned King, friend of Polonius, kindly father figure for Ophelia, and dutiful husband to Gertrude. He is lavish with words in this scene, making a great show of his deep empathy for Gertrude, for Laertes, for Ophelia, even for Hamlet. "O Gertrude, Gertrude/When sorrows come, they come not in single spies/But in battalions." Hyperdramatically, he concludes his litany of sufferings they have all had to bear by saying, "O my dear Gertrude, this,/Like to a murdering-piece, in many places/Gives me superfluous death." No one suffers more than Claudius. Contrasted with his soliloquy of Scene 3, where he vows to have Hamlet executed, the speech proves his insincerity to the audience. Now, in blatant dramatic irony, Shakespeare makes the audience privy to the truth before the characters can discover that truth for themselves.

Still, in the political coup of this scene, he wins Laertes' loyalty by urging Gertrude to "let him go" so that he may speak freely. He then gives Laertes free reign, placing himself in apparent jeopardy:

Make choice of whom your wisest friends you will,
And they shall hear and judge 'twixt you and me:
If by direct or by collateral hand
The find us touch'd, we will our kingdom give,
Our crown, our life, and all that we call ours
To you in satisfaction

In his very public show, he manages to manipulate the trust of everyone present.

Act IV: Scene 6

Summary

Horatio receives letters from a sailor sent by Hamlet. The first letter tells Horatio that pirates beset the ship on which Hamlet was being carried to England. In the ensuing battle, the pirates took Hamlet captive; they treated him well and brought him back to Denmark. He has, in return, promised to do them a favor. The other letters, says Hamlet's first letter, are for Horatio to deliver to the King. After he has made the delivery, Horatio is to come immediately to meet Hamlet; Hamlet tells his friend that he has much news to share.

Analysis

Hamlet's return is a dramatic device providing a *deus ex machina* (a contrived solution to a problem) for the play's plot. Shakespeare uses a problem that seriously threatened Elizabethan/ Jacobean security: the prevalence of pirates. Some critics speculate that Shakespeare means for us

to infer that Hamlet, knowing that pirates lurk in every bay, has arranged for the pirates to subvert Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's mission. It is equally likely that the ship bound for England carrying Hamlet and his treacherous "friends" was beset by pirates, and Hamlet, always the smooth talker, was able to connive his own release. In either case, the outcome is critical to the play's action. Only by returning to the center of the conflict can Hamlet create the forces that drive the climax, denouement, and resolution.

Act IV: Scene 7

Summary

Claudius confirms that Hamlet killed [Polonius](#), though seeking to take Claudius' life. [Laertes](#) can't understand why Claudius didn't punish Hamlet for such capital crimes. Claudius explains that he has restrained himself, even though he has no intention of letting Hamlet get away with his crimes.

At this point, a messenger arrives with the letters Hamlet has sent in Horatio's care. Now knowing that Hamlet is still alive, Claudius offers Laertes an opportunity to show his love for Polonius by joining him in a plot to kill Hamlet by engaging in swordplay with him. Claudius promises to arrange a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet. Hamlet will use a fencing foil, but Laertes' foil will have an unblunted point. Thus, Laertes can kill Hamlet in front of an audience, and it will appear to be an accident; no one will know it is murder. Laertes shares his own plan to dip his sword in a poison so lethal that a minor scratch will cause instant death. Claudius adds yet another safeguard: He will poison a goblet of wine for Hamlet to drink, so that even if Laertes fails to draw blood, Hamlet will die.

Gertrude interrupts their plotting with her report of Ophelia's drowning. She describes the young woman's death graphically, explaining how she had fallen in the brook while weaving flower garlands; the willow tree branch on which she was sitting broke so that she tumbled into the water. Ophelia's clothing carried her afloat for a time, but eventually she sank to her death. Laertes finds his grief uncontrollable, and he runs out in a rage. Claudius and Gertrude follow him, ostensibly to quell his anger.

Analysis

Claudius struts for Laertes in this scene, but, if we believe what he says, he also demonstrates his ability to care. Caring would mitigate his evil and add to the paradox inherent in his character. As shown in his prayer scene in Act III, Claudius has a Christian conscience even if he is incapable of satisfying it. In this scene he demonstrates that he may also be a devoted husband who prizes the emotional well being of his beloved wife. Despite his knowledge that Hamlet is a great danger to him, he tells Laertes that he has chosen not to hurt his "son" because the Queen "lives almost by his looks," and Claudius lives almost for the Queen.

However, Claudius' entirely self-serving evil becomes immediately apparent when he explains to Laertes his second reason for not punishing Hamlet for Polonius' murder: the great love the country has for Hamlet, which would not look kindly on the King who threatened him. Scholars contend that succession to the throne of Denmark was determined by a vote. Knights of the realm chose from candidates who petitioned for the throne. According to the Scandinavian legend, Gertrude's father was the king before King Hamlet. King Hamlet was selected by his predecessor to marry the princess, and the marriage clinched his election to the monarchy. If these conditions exist, Claudius clearly cannot afford to lose face before his knights, and he cannot afford to lose Gertrude; nor can he jeopardize his tenuous popularity by risking a backlash against the throne.

By exercising his skill with posturing emotions, Claudius convinces Laertes that he has restrained his actions toward Hamlet for reasons that make him look like a kind man and a responsible monarch. The speech wins Laertes over, and Claudius gains a powerful ally. Now that his plan to have Hamlet executed by the English king has failed, Claudius needs Laertes' assistance in eliminating Hamlet.

Act IV: Scene 7

The two hatch a grand scheme to ensure that Hamlet will not escape again. As in the murder of King Hamlet, undetectable poison serves as the weapon of choice for Claudius. Like his malicious intentions, which he masks with sweet sentiments, Claudius' penchant for poison proves his insidiousness. Hamlet's statement in his letter that he has returned "naked" to Denmark leads to the conclusion that he will face Claudius alone. The conspirators have every reason to expect success in their plot, especially as Laertes is as renowned for his swordsmanship as is Hamlet.

Once again Laertes serves as the perfect foil for Prince Hamlet. He minces no words and loses no time on regret. His deep anguish over the loss of his father and sister commits itself to murder. Laertes is immediately ready, able, and willing to act. A sympathetic and formidable adversary for the sympathetic and formidable prince, Laertes will garner as much support from the audience as Hamlet will, and the confrontation will be doubly moving as the audience will be torn in its allegiance.

A note on Ophelia's characterization: Although Gertrude reports that Ophelia fell in the stream and drowned, there is evidence that her death is a suicide. The first proof can be found in her present state. Faced with the reality of premarital sex and a manless future — Hamlet did not want her, her father was dead, and her judgmental brother was in France — Ophelia would have recognized no other solution but suicide. Another proof is evident in the circumstances of her death. Some critics believe her drowning proves that she was pregnant and, consequently, committed

suicide. While no concrete evidence of a pregnancy exists, critics point to the fact that in the 16th and 17th centuries, the conventional suicide method for an unmarried pregnant woman was drowning.

Claudius' evil ambition has infected Laertes, despite the fact that Laertes has been in Paris, away from Claudius' influence. Hamlet has returned to put right what he perceives as Claudius' wrongs, but by causing the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia, Hamlet has become an instrument of the evil he opposes. That something is "rotten in the State of Denmark," as Marcellus observed in Act II, is now clear throughout the kingdom.

Act V: Scene 1

Summary

Two gravediggers (called clowns) discuss the burial for which they are digging. An inquest has declared the corpse fit for Christian burial. The First Gravedigger argues that the dead woman deserves no such indulgence, because she drowned herself and is not worthy of salvation. The other gravedigger explains, using misplaced words (malapropisms) and incorrect syntax, that she deserves defending. He reasons that her gentlewoman's rank should earn her a Christian burial. Their dialogue, played for humor, invokes references to the Bible and to the art of gallows-making, where builders build a frame that outlives its tenants. While the Second Gravedigger goes to fetch some liquor, ">Hamlet and ">Horatio enter and question the First Gravedigger.

The gravedigger and Hamlet engage in a witty game of "chop-logic" — repartée composed of a series of questions and answers. The gravedigger tells Hamlet that he has been digging graves since the day Old King Hamlet defeated Old King Fortinbras, the very birthday of Prince Hamlet — "he that's mad, and sent to England" — thirty years ago.

Hamlet drives the comic dialectic (a dialectic is a method of examining an idea in which every question posed poses a new question). He mulls again over the nature of life and death, and the great chasm between the two states. He tosses skulls and parries with the possibilities of what each may have been in life. He asks the gravedigger whose grave he is in, and the gravedigger plays with puns, finally asserting that the grave is one who was a woman. Hamlet has no idea to whom the grave belongs.

When Hamlet finds a particular skull, he asks the gravedigger whose it might be. The gravedigger tells him the skull belonged to Yorick, the King's jester. "I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy." He dwells on the subject of death and the fact that all men are worm's meat, that all that lives will one day die, and that no rank or money can change the equality of death. Death transforms even great kings like Alexander into trivial objects.

Hamlet and Horatio then observe that the Queen, King, and Laertes arrive among a group of mourners escorting a coffin. He asks whose coffin they're following, and hides with Horatio to listen in to what's happening. He notes that the funeral is not a full Christian rite but that the body is being interred in sacred ground.

Laertes argues with the priest over Ophelia's burial. Claudius' command at inquest, he argues, should grant her all the rites of a Christian burial. The priest refuses, saying that, because she committed suicide, he must deny Ophelia the requiem mass and other trappings of a Christian burial, even though Ophelia will be buried on sacred ground. Laertes insults the priest.

When Ophelia's body is placed into the grave, Hamlet watches the Queen strew the coffin with flowers. "Sweets to the sweet," she says; "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife." Hamlet now realizes that it is Ophelia who lies dead in the casket, and he attacks Laertes, who has just cursed Hamlet and thrown himself into the grave. Hamlet and Laertes argue over who loved Ophelia best. Laertes tries to strangle Hamlet, but attendants separate them.

Gertrude decries her son's madness. Claudius asks Horatio to look after Hamlet and promises Laertes immediate satisfaction. He instructs Gertrude to have her son watched, implying that another death will serve as Ophelia's memorial.

Analysis

The most serious act in the play begins with the broadest comedy in Shakespeare's repertory. The tragic conclusion begins with two gravediggers — usually played as country bumpkins — who banter over the circumstances of Ophelia's death. The characters are derived from a tradition of performance called *Commedia del'Arte*, an originally Italian clowning technique that was very popular in Renaissance theater throughout Europe. This dialogue introduces the audience to the notion that Ophelia has killed herself, even though Gertrude's report made the death seem accidental. The gravediggers indulge in a spate of black comedy that culminates in Hamlet's matching wits with the adeptly paradoxical First Gravedigger.

Shakespeare's juxtaposing of lofty concepts such as theological law against the lowliness of the gravediggers' station works as the essence of this scene's comedy. The First Gravedigger employs clever malapropisms and provides yet another foil for Hamlet — a base commoner whose sense of irony and paradox matches Hamlet's own, but amuses rather than tortures the thinker.

Shakespeare reiterates his theme of death as the great equalizer in this scene. He also explores the absolute finality of death. Each of the gravediggers' references to death foreshadows Hamlet's imminent

participation in several deaths, including his own. Hamlet and the gravedigger humorously discuss Hamlet's preoccupation with worm's meat and the destruction of time. The gravedigger mentions Cain and "the first foul murder," which reminds the audience that Claudius, too, is a brother killer.

The question of Ophelia's suicide alludes to a contemporary court case wherein the court barred Sir James Hall from receiving a Christian burial because he killed himself. Shakespeare undoubtedly built this part of the scene deliberately to show his support for the court's decision. The explanation of Ophelia's burial offered in most criticisms is that the grave is on the periphery of the sacred ground, in an area reserved for those whose Christianity might be questionable. Yorick for one. This is supported by the fact that there are so many skulls in the grave; it's a common grave, not an individualized, consecrated resting place.

Laertes and Hamlet's fight symbolizes Hamlet's internal struggle to control his inability to act. Hamlet's challenging Laertes, whom he calls "a very noble youth," is uncharacteristically rash. Faced with his mirror opposite, a man who is all impassioned action and few words, Hamlet grapples to prove that he loved Ophelia though he was unable to demonstrate his feelings for her.

Act V: Scene 2

Summary

A calmer Hamlet recounts the events leading up to his escape from the plot to kill him. He says that he is convinced now more than ever that divine providence governs man's life, and that things happen as they are meant to happen. He tells Horatio that the night before the pirates took him, he found himself unable to sleep. He used this opportunity to investigate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's cabin. Groping about in the darkness, he discovered letters addressed to the English King, which he managed to open with surreptitious skill. To his surprise, he read that Claudius had requested the king of England to imprison and behead Hamlet as quickly as possible. Horatio remains incredulous until Hamlet hands him the letter. While Horatio reads, Hamlet continues. He says that he immediately conjured a brilliant plan. He composed a second set of letters in the flowery style of the original ordering that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be killed. He sealed the letters with his father's State Seal, which he carried in his purse. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not know that Hamlet has replaced the letters, and thus, according to Hamlet, their demise will be due to their own actions in delivering the letters to the English king.

Claudius' behavior horrifies Horatio. "Why what a king is this!" he exclaims. Hamlet reminds him that this same king killed the rightful king,

made Gertrude a whore, and robbed Hamlet of his own birthright, all in one fell stroke. Horatio worries that Claudius will learn the outcome of events in England too quickly, but Hamlet assures him that he will now act expeditiously to eliminate the King.

Hamlet says he is only sorry about one thing now: That he has had to engage Laertes in the business. Osric, a courtier, enters and Hamlet mocks the man's flamboyance. Osric tells Hamlet that Laertes invites the Prince to duel with him. The King has wagered that Hamlet will win, and Osric is to return and report whether Hamlet will accept. He does. After Osric's exit, a lord enters with instructions from the King to see if Hamlet wants more time before meeting Laertes. Hamlet says he is ready whenever the King wants to get started. Then the lord tells Hamlet that the Queen wishes him to extend Laertes a pre-duel overture of friendship. Hamlet agrees, and the lord exits.

Horatio feels uneasy about the duel and suggests that Hamlet could lose. Hamlet shrugs off any possibility of Laertes' winning, but says that, in any event, one cannot avoid one's destiny. Hamlet must do what he must do. All that matters is being prepared for the inevitable. "The readiness is all."

With great flourish, the scene is set for the duel. The King calls Hamlet and Laertes together and has them begin the duel by clasping hands. Hamlet asks Laertes to forgive his earlier acts of madness at Ophelia's grave. He further claims that his madness, not he himself, is responsible for Polonius' death, and he begs pardon for the crime. Laertes remains stiff and suspicious in his response, but says he bears Hamlet no grudge.

Osric brings the swords, and Laertes makes a show of choosing his; Hamlet asks only if the one he has chosen is the same length as the others. The King sets wine out for the duelists to drink and holds up the cup intended for Hamlet. Laertes and Hamlet fence for a moment until Hamlet asks for a judgment call from Osric the referee. Osric proclaims a hit in Hamlet's favor, and Claudius holds up Hamlet's goblet and takes a drink. With high pomp, Claudius drops a pearl, his gift to Hamlet, into the wine.

When Hamlet hits Laertes a second time, Laertes protests that it is a mere touch. Claudius assures Gertrude that, "Our son shall win." Gertrude agrees. She takes Hamlet's wine, wipes his brow, and offers him a drink, which he refuses. She then toasts her son. Claudius asks her not to drink, but she does and then wipes Hamlet's brow one more time.

Laertes tells Claudius that the time has come to hit Hamlet with the poisoned tip. Claudius disagrees. In an aside, Laertes expresses a reluctance to hit Hamlet, but Hamlet accuses him of dallying and presses for a third bout. The two fight again and Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned tip. Both drop their swords and, in the scuffle, Hamlet grabs

Laertes' sword and Laertes picks up Hamlet's. Hamlet hits Laertes with the poisoned sword. Gertrude swoons. Hamlet sees the Queen fall and anxiously asks, "How does the Queen?" The King assures him that she is faint because of the blood, but Gertrude cries out that the drink has poisoned her. Outraged, Hamlet orders the doors locked so that the King cannot escape. Laertes reveals the murder plot to Hamlet and explains that the poisoned sword now rests in Hamlet's hands.

In a fury, Hamlet runs the sword through Claudius, yelling, "Venom to they work." Before Claudius dies, Hamlet pours the poisoned wine down the King's throat. Hamlet then goes to Laertes, who is nearly dead. The two forgive one another so that neither will prevent the other from entering heaven. Laertes dies, and Horatio rushes to Hamlet's side.

Hamlet tells Horatio that he is dead, and asks that Horatio "tell my story." Osric announces the sound of an approaching army, which means that Fortinbras has arrived in Denmark after attacking the Poles. Hamlet tells Horatio to ensure that the Danish crown passes to Fortinbras.

With the words "The rest is silence," Hamlet dies. Horatio wishes him a gentle rest and turns his attention to Fortinbras and the English ambassadors, who have also arrived to announce that the English government has executed Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Fortinbras, appalled by the sight of the mayhem that greets him, "with sorrow" recognizes his right to wear the crown of Denmark, which Horatio will corroborate with Hamlet's words.

Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be given military honors, "with music and rite of war." He orders his soldiers to carry the bodies out, and the play ends.

Analysis

Maynard Mack says that in the last act of the play "Hamlet accepts his world and we discover a different man." He has existed outside of the corrupt system, and yet, he has been unable to resist being drawn in. The Ghost sealed Hamlet's fate when he challenged him to "remember me." In this final scene, the maelstrom finally catches Hamlet stripped of his words, and at the mercy of his "bare bodkin." He maneuvered around the world of "seems" and "acts" and "plays" as long as he could, and tried to beat this world by using its own tactics. He feigned madness and betrayed the woman he ostensibly loves, her father, and his school chums. He committed three cold-blooded murders and sent Ophelia to her death. He had thought he towered above such dirty fighting, but found himself swept into it. He must now face the inevitable. As Mack says, Hamlet has finally "learned, and accepted, the boundaries in which human action, human judgment, are enclosed."

We recognize Hamlet's change in the first part of the scene when he explains to Horatio with complete dismissal how he sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. The calculating premeditation of his actions is a complete reversal of the Hamlet we have come to know. Horatio's next comment indicates that he is horrified. He says, "So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't," meaning that they go to their deaths, to which Hamlet counters

Why man, they did make love to this employment.

They are not near my conscience. Their defeat

Does by their own insinuation grow.

Hamlet has transformed himself from a man who wallows in self-recrimination into one who can blithely justify cold-blooded betrayal and murder. More significantly, Hamlet has become a man who assumes he can take responsibility for righting all the wrongs created by his corrupt uncle's usurpation of the old order by killing Claudius and reclaiming the throne.

Shakespeare juxtaposes Osric's entrance against Hamlet's resolve to act. As the representative of Claudius' court, Osric embodies all that is rotten in the state of Denmark. According to Hamlet, Osric is one of the many superficial fashionable people overrunning Denmark in these frivolous times. This ostentation is the canker of Denmark's nature, and Hamlet is sure that he is ready to obliterate it. Osric, about whom Hamlet says, "'tis a vice to know him," represents the evil Hamlet spoke of in Act II when he observed the court in drunken revel. Speaking about the party going on is the kind that causes the rest of the world to see Denmark as a country of drunken louts. Hamlet presumes it his duty to obliterate the King's evil, and that includes Osric.

After Osric and the lord have both been assured that Hamlet will participate in the duel at the King's pleasure, Horatio urges caution. Nevertheless, Hamlet — in a speech that resonates with the resolve he found in Act IV Scene 4 when he watched the Norwegians head toward Poland — states unequivocally how prepared he is to take on all his responsibilities.

His words paraphrase the Biblical passage that no sparrow falls without God's knowledge: "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come — the readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let it be." Here, Hamlet portrays the consummate existentialist, facing his struggle to play out with dignity and honor the part that has been written for him on the stars. He truly exists in the moment, and will seize it.

Having declared his intentions, Hamlet enters the ring amid great fanfare, and begins his journey by making the first move toward

reconciliation with Laertes. He realizes that he must do so at this juncture. Hamlet recognizes himself in Laertes, and needs to release himself from the burden of self-loathing by forgiving and being forgiven by Laertes. He said earlier of Laertes

But I am sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself,
For by the image of my cause, I see
The portraiture of his. I'll court his favours.
But sure the bravery of his grief did put me
Into towering passion.

By reaching out to Laertes, Hamlet reconciles the conflicting aspects of his own nature, freeing himself for what he must do. Some other hurdles still lie ahead of him, but he believes he is ready, which is half the battle for him — if not quite the entire battle.

Laertes' resolve to kill Hamlet as punishment for the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia mirrors Hamlet's perceived newfound freedom from words.

I am satisfied in nature
Whose motive in this case should stir me most
To my revenge; but in my terms of honour
I stand aloof, and will no reconcilment
Till by some elder masters of known honour
I have a voice and precedent of peace
To keep my name ungored.

In the end, the readiness is indeed what matters most. And so, the fight begins.

From the start of the fight, Hamlet is clearly aware that the duel is to the death and not just "play." He recognizes the direness of the situation, and understands that Laertes presents his final challenge. What remains unclear is whether Hamlet knows about Claudius' and Laertes' plot. Does he, for example, refuse the wine that Claudius offers him because he suspects danger? All he says is "I'll play this bout first, set it by awhile." After Gertrude takes her fatal sip, he says, "I dare not drink yet, Madam, by and by." Is Hamlet afraid that the wine will dull his fencing skill? Or does he guess that the wine poses a danger? He does not remark at all when the King says, "Gertrude, do not drink!" Does he not hear the King, or does he choose to ignore the warning? Laertes presents a sympathetic and formidable adversary for the sympathetic and formidable prince. Laertes will garner as much support from the audience as Hamlet will, and the

confrontation will be doubly moving as the audience will be torn in its allegiance.

In production, Claudius' directive becomes a pivotal moment. How the director and actor interpret the four words determine the tenor of the rest of the play. If Claudius mutters the line under his breath, then he has no thought to protect Gertrude or to warn Hamlet. If he cries it out, the director must find a reasonable way for Hamlet to react, one that reflects a commitment to Hamlet's being aware of the poison — does he want Gertrude to die? — or a commitment to his being tunnel-visioned, intent on his mission to "end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." Is Gertrude's death "a consummation devoutly to be wished," or is it a shocking blow that crushes any will Hamlet may have had left to live?

Still another question that must be asked and answered in production: Is Gertrude's death an accident or suicide? Here the answer to the question about how much Gertrude knows concerning King Hamlet's murder is crucial. Does she know that Claudius has poisoned Hamlet's cup, and does she drink from it to save Hamlet? If she was innocent before Hamlet came to her closet and killed Polonius, did she believe Hamlet's raving, mad indictment of her husband? Either way, she dies, and her death spurs Hamlet into finally doing what he has said he will do since the beginning of the play — kill Claudius

Laertes' death and revelation serve as another catalyst to Hamlet's resolve. When Laertes' is cut by his own sword, again he speaks for Hamlet, "Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric. I am justly killed with mine own treachery." Traps from which they cannot extricate themselves catch both Hamlet and Laertes. They must commit murder in order to uphold the blood feud they have sworn, but they are both Christians and bound by Christian morality to abhor violence. Each must fall due to his own treachery, and each must die and leave the greater good to mitigate any consequences he will face in his afterlife.

For all his great rhetoric, Hamlet has still not taken charge of the deed he must perform: Claudius still lives. Now, wading through the bodies of the people whose deaths he has caused by his hesitancy, Hamlet faces the final truth he cannot avoid. Laertes bears the news:

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 of life —
The treacherous instrument is in they 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.

Knowing that he is a dead man, and realizing, at last, exactly what fate the stars hold for him, Hamlet attacks Claudius with the vengeance that has resided in his heart all along. He stabs Claudius and, for extra measure, pours the poison down the King's throat. To heighten the drama as Claudius' death approaches, a chorus of the assembled court cries, "Treason, treason!" and Claudius begs, "Oh yet defend me friends, I am but hurt." A tense moment occurs as Hamlet must consider that his adoring public may perceive him a villain. After all, executing a king who rules by Divine Right constitutes high treason. Yet the court does not stir, and Claudius dies. Hamlet's sense of righteous vengeance fortifies him.

Now Hamlet must face his own death. In order to shuffle off his mortal coil, Hamlet must make peace. He first reconciles with his foil Laertes. The two men exchange pardons, and they consign one another to Christian Heaven by releasing themselves from culpability for the lives they have taken. The one task Hamlet must still complete is to find a conduit for the words that have kept him alive, which have been as much his sustenance as his torture. So he asks the loyal Horatio to tell his story.

Horatio, Hamlet's calmer mirror image, now carries the responsibility of juggling the conflict between thinking and doing, between words and action. Hamlet gives his "dying voice" to Fortinbras, who has arrived in Denmark from fighting in Poland just as Hamlet prepares to take his final breath. In Fortinbras, Hamlet recognizes a kindred spirit who can appreciate the significance of the words and who can restore honor to Denmark as he claims the throne. Hamlet then releases himself to death once and for all. "The rest is silence."

Fortinbras takes immediate charge, listening to the story Horatio tells and immediately ordering his soldiers to clean up the mess. He replaces the confusion with calm by ordering a hero's funeral for Hamlet. He will obliterate the corruption of Claudius' reign, and end what Horatio reported as the "carnal, bloody and unnatural acts" that have ruled Denmark.

We know that all will be well because the last words in the play belong to strong, unequivocal Fortinbras:

Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.

The final scene also completes the revenge triangle. All the sons of the murdered fathers (King Hamlet, King Fortinbras, and Polonius) have seen vengeance served. The sons have appeased the medieval code of honor while satisfying the Christian expectation of forgiveness. Most importantly, Hamlet is finally a warrior. Like Achilles' son Pyrrhus, to whom the First

Player referred in Act II, Hamlet has stopped standing "like a neutral to his will and matter." After his stunned pause, Phyrrus took a "rousèd revenge" and killed King Priam. So Hamlet has overcome his paralysis and has killed King Claudius. And, like Phyrrus, he will be buried with the hero's glory that he has finally earned.

QUOTES

1. "That it should come to this!" (Act I, Scene II)

Just after speaking to his mother Gertrude and uncle (and step-father) King Claudius, Hamlet has his first of five soliloquies. When Hamlet exclaims, "[t]hat it should come to this," he'd just finished describing how the world has gone to fodder. Then Hamlet goes on to say how he cannot believe his mother would marry his father's brother (i.e., Hamlet's uncle). This quote shows Hamlet's fury and shock at his mother's remarriage. In Hamlet's mind, the world is in chaos and the remarriage is the apex of things spiraling out of control. Soliloquies allow the audience to see into a character's inner thoughts. The soliloquy as a whole belays the reasons for Hamlet's initial deep melancholy and confusion that persists for much of the play.

2. "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Act I, Scene II)

Hamlet is still speaking in his first of five soliloquies. The "woman" he specifically refers to is his mother. Hamlet felt she was weak, or not strong enough to mourn his father longer. Hamlet goes on further to say that not even an animal or beast, who has no reasoning skills, would have abandoned the mourning so quickly. All in all, this shows how angry and confused Hamlet is by his mother's remarriage.

3. "Neither a borrower nor a lender be; For loan oft loses both itself and friend, and borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry." (Act I, Scene III)

Here [Polonius](#) is giving his son, [Laertes](#), sound advice before Laertes returns to Paris. Polonius is really saying loaning money to other people is dangerous. Often, people don't pay you back and you use a friend because of the failed transaction. On the flip side, it is distasteful to borrow money because it is impolite and usually indicates you are living outside of your means.

4. "This above all: to thine own self be true." (Act I, Scene III)

Again, Polonius is doling out sage advice to his son, Laertes. Simply put, Polonius is telling his son "be yourself." In the context of the play, Polonius is also telling Laertes to be a gentleman and not "false to any man" (line 80). Overall, Polonius's advice helps reveals a theme of irony that threads throughout the play. Neither Polonius nor Laertes heeds the

advice that Polonius gives in this scene, and both perish due to their lack of adherence.

5. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." (*Act I, Scene IV*)

At the end of Scene IV, a guard, Marcellus, says these famous words to Horatio. After Hamlet follows the ghost, Marcellus and Horatio know they have to follow as well, because Hamlet is acting so impulsively. Marcellus's words are remarking on how something evil and vile is afoot. This moment could be interpreted as foreshadowing of the impending deaths of most of the principle characters.

6. "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." (*Act II, Scene II*)

At this point of the play, Hamlet and Polonius are interacting onstage, but this quote is technically spoken by Polonius to the audience, in an aside. What Polonius is saying is that, even though Hamlet is talking crazy, it actually makes sense, or it has a "method." Polonius's assertion is ironic because he is right and wrong. Polonius believes Hamlet is acting "mad" because Hamlet's love of Ophelia has driven him to such. While Polonius is correct to think that there is reason behind Hamlet's actions, he is incorrect as to the cause. Hamlet is purposefully acting mad to disguise his true mission to avenge his father's murder.

7. "To be, or not to be: that is the question." (*Act III, Scene I*)

As one of Shakespeare's all-time famous quotes, Hamlet's words have stood the test of time and are often quoted even today in both academia and pop culture. In the beginning of his fourth, and best known, soliloquy Hamlet muses about the conundrum of suicide. He wonders if one route is "nobler" than the next. At this point in the play, Hamlet has been unable to act upon his motives for personal revenge, and this frustrates him. Which is better, suffering as he has been or ending it all? The tone of Hamlet's soliloquy is more meditative than angry, but he does seriously consider suicide. He relates his personal struggle to the struggles that all of mankind shares. Given that you don't know what happens after you die, Hamlet realizes that death wouldn't be the ideal escape he craves.

8. "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." (*Act III, Scene II*)

Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, says this famous line while watching *The Mousetrap*. Gertrude is talking about the queen in the play. She feels that the play-queen seems insincere because she repeats so dramatically that she'll never remarry due to her undying love of her husband. The play-queen, in fact, does remarry. It is unclear whether Gertrude recognizes the parallel between herself and the play-queen; Hamlet certainly feels that way. This moment has an irony that is shown throughout the play.

9. *A little more than kin, and less than kind.* (*Act I, Scene II*).

Hamlet says this in response to King Claudius' question that he should not feel sorrow for so long over the death of his father. He is also telling Hamlet that he is his kin and next heir to the throne. However, Hamlet is very sarcastic to King Claudius implying that he is more than a kin to him now. He means that he is now his son, as the king has married his widowed mother after his father's assassination. These words are important, as they show Hamlet's loathing for the king.

10. *Neither a borrower nor a lender be; For loan oft loses both itself and friend, and borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.* (Act I, Scene, III).

These words have been uttered by Polonius, a famous character in Hamlet who is close to King Claudius. His son Laertes is leaving for France. He is advising his son how to live a good life by not lending and borrowing. He is also telling him the harms of borrowing and its impacts on the life of a person. These words are significant, as they give philosophy of living a good and stable social life.

11. *There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*

(Act II, Scene, II).

Hamlet speaks these golden words to his former classmates. King Claudius has appointed them to spy on him to know his thoughts about the murder of his father. When they question him about his bad temper and sorrowful expressions, he says that the thinking makes a thing bad or good. In fact, he refers to Denmark which seems to him bad but to his friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, good. These words are significant in that they show the depth of Hamlet's thinking and the universality of his utterances.

12. *What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!* (Act II, Scene, II).

Hamlet utters these lines in his first soliloquy. He is philosophizing his thoughts about the creature, man. He is saying that man is the "paragon of animals" and crown of all creation. In fact, it is his sense of wonder over the creature, man, as how man seems to be noble and how his faculties have blessed him to be at the top of other creatures.

12. *The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.*

(Act II, Scene II).

Hamlet utters these words to catch the king if his conscience is alive to the actions of the play. Here play means the play staged in Hamlet, the play. Hamlet has arranged a play on the subject of the killing of a king. He speaks these words to Horatio, his friend, to inform him that his objective

in getting the play staged is to catch the king. He wants to see whether the king shows any sign of remorse or prick of conscience for the murder.

13. *The lady doth protest too much, methinks.* (Act III, Scene II).

Queen Gertrude, the mother of Hamlet, utters these lines when she wants to [ask](#) about the protests of the female character of the play staged within Hamlet. She points out the overacting of that character. However, it also shows that she seems to show her own guilt, as she knows that King Claudius has killed her husband. Hamlet wants to verify this by staging that play. However, it does not appear certain to him, the reason of his morose temper.

14. *To be, or not to be: that is the question.* (Act III, Scene I).

This is one of the best quotations of all times. It is also considered the best combination of words used in different contexts. These are the words from second soliloquy of Hamlet occurring in the third act. In this soliloquy, he faces the metaphysical dilemma of man's life. This dilemma is whether he should choose to end his life, or face the sufferings and injustice.

15. *Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?* (Act III, Scene II).

Hamlet speaks these sarcastic words to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern whom King Claudius has appointed to spy on Hamlet. However, Hamlet is alive to all these things. He instantly senses their purpose. He wants to warn them through these sarcastic words that they should none play games with him to know his thinking. He also wants to alert them that he knows their real role.

16. *I will speak daggers to her, but use none.* (Act III, Scene II).

Hamlet uses these words expressing his purpose of speaking to his mother. He means that he would taunt her for her hasty marriage with his uncle, King Claudius. The words used here in metaphorical sense convey his purpose of attacking his mother on emotional front. He is of the view that he should make his mother realize what she has done.

17. *Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince; / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!* (Act V, Scene II)

Horatio speaks these lines by the end of the play in the last scene. Hamlet is dying after injured in the duel with Laertes. These words a tribute to Hamlet's nobility and his sense of purpose. Despite philosophical in nature and a true skeptic, expresses his believe in Hamlet's good intentions. These two lines show that Hamlet's goodness becomes apparent in the end.

SUMMARY

Prince Hamlet is depressed. Having been summoned home to Denmark from school in Germany to attend his father's funeral, he is shocked to find

his mother Gertrude already remarried. The Queen has wed Hamlet's Uncle Claudius, the dead king's brother. To Hamlet, the marriage is "foul incest." Worse still, Claudius has had himself crowned King despite the fact that Hamlet was his father's heir to the throne. Hamlet suspects foul play.

When his father's ghost visits the castle, Hamlet's suspicions are confirmed. The Ghost complains that he is unable to rest in peace because he was murdered. Claudius, says the Ghost, poured poison in King Hamlet's ear while the old king napped. Unable to confess and find salvation, King Hamlet is now consigned, for a time, to spend his days in Purgatory and walk the earth by night. He entreats Hamlet to avenge his death, but to spare Gertrude, to let Heaven decide her fate.

Hamlet vows to affect madness — puts "an antic disposition on" — to wear a mask that will enable him to observe the interactions in the castle, but finds himself more confused than ever. In his persistent confusion, he questions the Ghost's trustworthiness. What if the Ghost is not a true spirit, but rather an agent of the devil sent to tempt him? What if killing Claudius results in Hamlet's having to relive his memories for all eternity? Hamlet agonizes over what he perceives as his cowardice because he cannot stop himself from thinking. Words immobilize Hamlet, but the world he lives in prizes action.

In order to test the Ghost's sincerity, Hamlet enlists the help of a troupe of players who perform a play called *The Murder of Gonzago* to which Hamlet has added scenes that recreate the murder the Ghost described. Hamlet calls the revised play *The Mousetrap*, and the ploy proves a success. As Hamlet had hoped, Claudius' reaction to the staged murder reveals the King to be conscience-stricken. Claudius leaves the room because he cannot breathe, and his vision is dimmed for want of light. Convinced now that Claudius is a villain, Hamlet resolves to kill him. But, as Hamlet observes, "conscience doth make cowards of us all."

In his continued reluctance to dispatch Claudius, Hamlet actually causes six ancillary deaths. The first death belongs to [Polonius](#), whom Hamlet stabs through a wall hanging as the old man spies on Hamlet and Gertrude in the Queen's private chamber. Claudius punishes Hamlet for Polonius' death by exiling him to England. He has brought Hamlet's school chums Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Denmark from Germany to spy on his nephew, and now he instructs them to deliver Hamlet into the English king's hands for execution. Hamlet discovers the plot and arranges for the hanging of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead. Ophelia, distraught over her father's death and Hamlet's behavior, drowns while singing sad love songs bemoaning the fate of a spurned lover. Her brother, [Laertes](#), falls next.

Laertes, returned to Denmark from France to avenge his father's death, witnesses Ophelia's descent into madness. After her funeral, where he and Hamlet come to blows over which of them loved Ophelia best, Laertes vows to punish Hamlet for her death as well.

Unencumbered by words, Laertes plots with Claudius to kill Hamlet. In the midst of the sword fight, however, Laertes drops his poisoned sword. Hamlet retrieves the sword and cuts Laertes. The lethal poison kills Laertes. Before he dies, Laertes tells Hamlet that because Hamlet has already been cut with the same sword, he too will shortly die. Horatio diverts Hamlet's attention from Laertes for a moment by pointing out that "The Queen falls."

Gertrude, believing that Hamlet's hitting Laertes means her son is winning the fencing match, has drunk a toast to her son from the poisoned cup Claudius had intended for Hamlet. The Queen dies.

As Laertes lies dying, he confesses to Hamlet his part in the plot and explains that Gertrude's death lies on Claudius' head. Finally enraged, Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and then pours the last of the poisoned wine down the King's throat. Before he dies, Hamlet declares that the throne should now pass to Prince Fortinbras of Norway, and he implores his true friend Horatio to accurately explain the events that have led to the bloodbath at Elsinore. With his last breath, he releases himself from the prison of his words: "The rest is silence."

The play ends as Prince Fortinbras, in his first act as King of Denmark, orders a funeral with full military honors for slain Prince Hamlet.

KEY WORDS

- adoption tried friendship that has stood the test of time.
- aery nest.
- aim to guess or conjecture.
- angle fishing line.
- an't if it.
- antique Roman The ancient Roman was ever ready to commit suicide when confronted with calamity.
- apoplex'd paralyzed.
- argal therefore.
- arms a coat of arms, being a group of emblems and figures arranged on and around a shield and serving as the special insignia of a person, family, or institution.

- arras a tapestry wall hanging.
- assay of arms try to raise.
- assays of bias This is a metaphor from the game of lawn bowling; the weight in the ball, which causes it to follow a curved line, is called the bias. Hence the meaning of the phrase is "indirect attempts."
- assigns appurtenances.
- assurance a pun on conveyance of property by deed and security.
- batten to grow fat; thrive; to be well fed or wealthy at another's expense.
- Be as ourself in Denmark Claudius is extending to Hamlet all the special privileges and prerogatives belonging to a crowned prince.
- be idle seem crazy.
- beetles o'er overhangs.
- bend you incline yourself.
- berattle abuse.
- beteem permit.
- bilboes long iron bars with sliding shackles, for fettering prisoners' feet.
- bisson rheum blinding tears.
- blank the center spot of a target; bull's-eye.
- blench to shrink back, as in fear; flinch.
- blood and judgment passion and reason.
- bodkin a dagger or stiletto.
- botch a badly patched place or part
- bourn limit; boundary.
- brainish apprehension mad notion (that he heard a rat).
- bray out celebrate.
- breathing time time of exercise.
- broad blown in full blossom.
- brokers people who act as agents or intermediaries in negotiating contracts, buying and selling, and so forth.
- bruit proclaim.
- bugs terrors, nightmares.
- bung-hole a hole in a barrel or keg through which liquid can be poured in or drawn out.

- the burning zone the sun.
- buttons buds.
- Buz, buz a slang expression for "tell me something I don't know."
- buzzers gossipers.
- Cain's jaw-bone the jawbone of an ass, with which Cain is supposed to have killed Abel.
- candied sugared with hypocrisy.
- carbuncles precious stones of fiery red color.
- carve choose.
- cast beyond ourselves look beyond what we know or understand.
- cataplasm a poultice, often medicated.
- cautel craft, deceit.
- cease of majesty death of a king.
- censure opinion
- cerements cloths or sheets wrapped around a dead person; shrouds.
- chameleon's dish The chameleon was supposed to feed on air.
- changeling a child secretly put in the place of another; especially, in folk tales, one exchanged in this way by fairies.
- chapfallen a pun; disheartened, depressed, or humiliated (literally, having one's lower jaw hanging down).
- chapless jawless.
- character a pun on character in the sense of personal qualities.
- chariest most modest and virtuous.
- chaste treasure precious chastity.
- checking at swerving aside from; a term in hawking.
- chopine a woman's shoe with a very thick sole, as of cork.
- chorus in ancient Greek drama, a company of performers whose singing, dancing, and narration provide explanation and elaboration of the main action.
- chough a chatterer.
- cicatrice scar or wound.
- clepe to call or address (a person).
- clout a piece of cloth; a rag.

- Clowns rustics. The word indicates that these roles were played by comic actors.
- Cock corruption for God
- cockle hat a hat adorned with cockle shells and worn by pilgrims.
- collection inference.
- compass the tonal range of a musical instrument.
- compelled valour bravery that stems from necessity.
- complete steel full armor.
- compounded restored, mingled.
- Confederate season suitable opportunity.
- confine prison.
- congruing agreeing.
- conjunctive closely united.
- contagious blastments destructive blights.
- continent containing enough ground.
- contraction the marriage contract.
- contumely haughty and contemptuous rudeness; insulting and humiliating treatment or language.
- conveyance the document by which real property is transferred from one person to another; deed.
- convocation of politic worms a political assembly of worms; an allusion to the Diet of Worms (1521), a convocation held by the Catholic Church to allow Martin Luther to explain his reform of doctrine. He had first set his beliefs forth in Wittenberg, where Hamlet and Horatio have studied.
- convoy is assistant a means of conveyance is available.
- coronet weeds garlands of flowers.
- corse corpse, dead body.
- coted overtook.
- couch lie concealed; to hide.
- counsel secrets.
- counter on the false trail (a hunting term); treason.
- counterfeit presentment portrait.

- cousin kinsman. This word was used for any near relation; here it would refer to nephew.
- cozenage treachery.
- cozen'd cheated.
- crack the wind of overwork. The phrase comes from working a horse so hard that it becomes winded.
- crants wreaths.
- credent credulous.
- crescent increasing, growing.
- crowner coroner.
- Cyclops in Greek mythology, any of a race of giants who have only one eye, in the middle of the forehead; they assisted Vulcan, the god of fire.
- Damon a perfect friend; in classical legend, Damon and Pythias were friends so devoted to each other that when Pythias, who had been condemned to death, wanted time to arrange his affairs, Damon pledged his life that his friend would return. Pythias returned and both were pardoned.
- Danskers Danes.
- delated articles detailed provisions set forth in their instructions.
- Deliberate pause a deliberate step, taken after due consideration.
- digested organized.
- distemper mental disturbance.
- divide distinguish.
- doublet a man's close-fitting jacket, with or without sleeves, worn chiefly from the 14th to the 16th centuries. The coat that was fastened (braced) to the hose (short breeches) by laces. When a man was relaxing or careless of appearance, he "unbrac'd," much like a man today loosens his tie or takes off his suit jacket.
- douts extinguishes; literally, do out.
- down gyved fallen, like fetters, about his ankles.
- drabbing associating with prostitutes.
- The dram of evil / Doth all the noble substance of a doubt, / To his own scandal a much-disputed passage. Perhaps a line is missing. The general meaning seems to be that it takes only a small portion of evil to

bring a scandal on the entire substance, however noble it may otherwise be.

- drift of conference roundabout methods.
- drossy frivolous; worthless stuff; rubbish.
- dug a female animal's nipple or teat; vulgarly, a woman's breast.
- dupp'd opened.
- ecstasy madness
- eisel vinegar.
- enginer engineer.
- enseam'd greasy, with a pun on semen.
- envious silver malicious branch.
- escoted paid.
- expectancy and rose bright hope (as future king).
- extravagant and erring vagrant and wandering (both used in their original Latin sense — a common device used by Shakespeare).
- eyases unfledged birds, especially young hawks taken from the nest for training in falconry.
- fain wish.
- fantasy an odd notion; whim.
- fardels burdens; misfortune.
- fat out of condition, sweaty.
- fay faith, used in oaths (by my fay!); with a pun on fairy.
- fear me not don't be afraid for me.
- fell out occurred.
- fellies the segments forming the rim of a spoked wheel.
- Fie for shame! an interjection expressing a sense of outraged propriety.
- first mout'd put into the mouth first in order that all the goodness may be extracted before swallowing.
- fishmonger a dealer in fish, or someone who sells women.
- flaw a sudden, brief gust of wind, often with rain or snow; a squall.
- flood sea. Elsinore is situated on the Danish coast.
- foil and target fencing rapier and small shield.

- foils long, thin swords with a button on the point to prevent injury, used in fencing.
- fordo destroy.
- fordoes destroys.
- forest of feathers plumed hat much worn by players.
- formal ostentation public ceremony.
- fretted having an ornamental pattern of small, straight bars intersecting or joining one another, usually at right angles, to form a regular design, as for a border or in an architectural relief; decorated like the painted ceiling over the stage at The Globe.
- from occasion by chance.
- fust grow moldy.
- gaged pledged.
- gain-giving misgiving.
- gait progress.
- gall scratch, draw blood.
- galled jade a worn-out horse with sores from the rubbing and chafing of a saddle.
- galls his kibe scrapes his heel.
- gambol wander; frolic.
- general censure public's judgment.
- gentry courtesy.
- gib tomcat; a male cat, especially a castrated male cat.
- gibes jests.
- Gis corruption for Jesus.
- goblin damn'd damned agent of the devil. Hamlet, from the very first, seems to question the authenticity of the ghost as the true spirit of his father.
- gorge stomach (literally, throat or gullet).
- grace to bring honor to, dignify; with a pun on the prayer before meals.
- gross and scope general meaning.
- groundings the poorer and less critical section of the audience who stood in the pit.

- half limp.
- hangers straps by which the rapier was hung from the girdle.
- harbingers persons or things that come before to announce or give an indication of what follows; heralds
- hatchment a diamond-shaped panel bearing the coat of arms of a person who has died.
- hautboys oboes.
- hearsed buried.
- Hecate's ban the curse of Hecate, the Greek goddess of the moon, earth, and underground realm of the dead, later regarded as the goddess of sorcery and witchcraft.
- hectic fever; red or flushed , as with fever.
- Hecuba in Homer's Iliad, the wife of Priam and mother of Hector, Troilus, Paris, and Cassandra.
- heedful note careful observation.
- hent to grasp; in this case, a time for action.
- Hercules in Greek and Roman mythology, the son of Zeus, renowned for his strength and courage, especially as shown in his performance of twelve labors imposed on him.
- Hic et ubique Latin for here and everywhere.
- his greatness weigh'd considering his high position.
- his sables and his weeds dignified robes.
- His virtues else his other virtues.
- hoar gray.
- hoodman-blind blindman's bluff.
- Hugger-mugger secret haste.
- Humorous Man the player of character parts.
- humour behavior.
- husbandry thrift.
- Hymen in Greek mythology, the god of marriage.
- Hyperion a Titan often identified with the sun god.
- Hyrcanian beast tiger from Hyrcania, mentioned in the Aeneid.
- Ilium Latin name for Troy

- impart behave.
- impasted made into a paste (the slain, not Pyrrhus).
- imponed staked; wagered.
- importing concerning.
- imposthume abscess or festering sore.
- imputation reputation.
- in fee outright.
- in fine in the end.
- in one brow of woe Everyone in the kingdom ought to mourn.
- in the full bent completely. Like a bow that is bent as far as it can be bent.
- incontinency without self-restraint, especially in regard to sexual activity.
- incorps'd and demi-natur'd an integral part of the body.
- index prologue.
- indu'd endowed, belonging to.
- inexplicable dumb-shows the unintelligible pantomime preceding the play proper.
- Intil into.
- inurn'd buried; entombed (literally, put the ashes of a dead person into an urn).
- investments garments.
- jealousy suspicion.
- Jephthah a judge in the Bible who sacrificed his daughter in fulfillment of a vow (Judg. 11:30-40).
- jointress a woman who has been given an interest for life in her deceased husband's estate; here, a partner.
- jowls bumps.
- jump precisely.
- keep lodge.
- knotted and combined locks hair lying together in a mass.
- Larded garnished.
- lauds hymns of praise.

- law of writ classical plays.
- lawful espials spies who are justified in their action.
- lawless resolute desperadoes.
- lay song.
- lay you home to him tell him what's what.
- lets hinders.
- liberty modern plays.
- liegemen loyal subjects.
- life-rendering pelican The pelican was supposed to feed its young with its own blood.
- livery the characteristic clothing worn by members of a particular group or trade.
- loggats skittles or ninepins, a British game in which a ball is bowled at nine wooden pins.
- maiden strewments flowers strewn on a girl's grave.
- mark take notice of; heed.
- Marry a Common Elizabethan expletive for Mary, referring to the Virgin Mary.
- mazzard slang for head (literally, drinking bowl).
- meed a merited recompense or reward.
- Mercury in Roman mythology, the messenger of the gods; god of commerce, manual skill, eloquence, cleverness, travel, and thievery.
- merely entirely, absolutely, altogether.
- michingmallecho slinking mischief.
- milch milky, moist.
- mobled wearing ruffled collars popular in Elizabethan England.
- moiety competent sufficient portion.
- moist star moon.
- mole blemish.
- more above moreover.
- mortis'd firmly joined.
- most carefully upon your hour exactly when you were expected.
- mote speck of dust.

- mould of form pattern of manly beauty and behavior.
- mountebank quack doctor.
- mouse a common term of endearment.
- mows grimaces (twistings or distortions of the face).
- muddy-mettled dull-spirited.
- Murdering-piece cannon loaded with grapeshot.
- mutes or audience silent spectators.
- mutines mutineers.
- nature's livery, or fortune's star inborn or the result of bad luck.
- nave rim; the hub of a wheel.
- Nemean in Greek mythology, a reference to a fierce lion from Nemea killed by Hercules as the first of his twelve labors.
- Neptune's belonging to Neptune, the Roman god of the sea.
- Nero (A.D. 37-68); notoriously cruel and depraved emperor of Rome (54-68) who killed his own mother.
- nighted black, signifying deep mourning.
- Niobe in Greek mythology, a queen of Thebes who, weeping for her slain children, is turned into a stone from which tears continue to flow; hence, an inconsolable woman.
- no fairy takes Medieval Europeans believed that fairies stole children.
- nonce occasion.
- Norway king of Norway.
- noyance harm.
- obstinate condolment grief that is contrary to the will of heaven.
- occulted hidden.
- o'er-leavens ferments.
- of by.
- of general assault common to all men.
- operant powers bodily strength.
- orb the earth.
- ordinant provident.
- ourself royal plural, used throughout the King's speeches.

- out of haunt away from others.
- out of thy star beyond your station in life. Stars were believed to govern men's lives.
- outstretched aspiring.
- paddock toad.
- pair of indentures agreements in duplicate.
- pajock peacock.
- palmy flourishing.
- pardon permission.
- partisan a broad-bladed weapon with a long shaft carried by foot soldiers, used especially in the 16th century.
- pass of practice a treacherous thrust or a warming-up exercise.
- passages of proof proven by events.
- peak mope.
- Pelion, Olympus, and Ossa mountains in Greece; in Greek mythology, the Titans (giant deities) piled Pelion on Ossa and both on Olympus in a futile attempt to reach and attack the gods in heaven.
- Perpend ponder.
- Phoebus' cart Phoebus' chariot. In Greek mythology, Phoebus is Apollo as god of the sun.
- physic the art or science of healing.
- pickers and stealers hands.
- pipe a recorder or flute. The stops are the fingerholes.
- pitch and moment height and importance.
- pith marrow.
- Plautus (254?-184 B.C.); Roman writer of comic dramas.
- plurisy excess.
- poem unlimited a play that observed none of the ancient rules.
- pole Polaris, the North Star, long used by navigators as a reliable point of reference.
- politician plotter, schemer.
- poniards daggers.
- porpentine porcupine.

- posy of a ring as brief and silly as the inscription inside a ring.
- precurse sign, indication.
- present immediate; of or at this time.
- Priam legendary king of Troy, who reigned during the Trojan War; he was the father of Hector and Paris.
- prick'd spurred or urged on
- primal eldest curse that is, the one pronounced upon Cain in for the murder of his brother. Primal here means original.
- primy in its prime, youthful.
- probation proof.
- prodigal exceedingly or recklessly wasteful, spendthrift.
- proof eterne everlasting protection.
- Provincial roses rosettes for concealing the laces on shoes.
- purgation the act of purging; Hamlet probably intends a pun — to administer a purgative to get rid of the bile and to purge him of his guilt. The word recalls Hamlet's father, who is in purgatory.
- put on me reported to me.
- Pyrrhus in Greek mythology, the son of Achilles; one of the Greeks concealed in the famous wooden horse.
- quaintly skillfully, ingeniously.
- quarry heap of slain.
- question subject.
- quick living.
- quick o' the ulcer the heart of the matter.
- quiddities trifling distinctions; quibbles.
- quilets quibbles.
- quit in answer score a return hit.
- rack cloud formations, a broken mass of clouds blown by the wind.
- ranker greater.
- razed slashed for ornamentation.
- recks not his own rede doesn't take his own advice.
- recorders a wind instrument with finger holes and a wedgelike part (a fipple) near the mouthpiece; fipple flute.

- recover the wind a hunting phrase — to get to windward.
- reechy smoky, dirty, foul, or rancid.
- the region kites the kites of the air. The kite is a bird of prey in the falcon family.
- Rhenish Rhine wine.
- rivals associates or companions in some duty.
- robustious ranting.
- rood a cross as used in crucifixion; specifically, the cross on which Jesus was crucified.
- Roscius the most famous of ancient Roman actors.
- round Polonius really means straight, but it is his nature to speak indirectly.
- rouse a toast in which all glasses must be drained before lowering.
- rouse draught of liquor, toast.
- rub an obstacle hindrance, difficulty, or impediment.
- russet Now, usually a reddish-brown color, but here the warm gray tone of homespun cloth.
- Saint Valentine's Day February 14. The old belief was that the first man seen by a maid on that day was destined to be her husband, and vice versa.
- sallets tasty bits.
- sanctuarize give sanctuary to a murderer.
- satyr in Greek mythology, a woodland diety usually represented as having pointed ears, short horns, the head and body of a man, and the legs of a goat, and as being fond of riotous merriment and lechery.
- scene individable preserving the unities.
- scholar a person with the necessary knowledge of Latin to exorcise a spirit. This was a common Elizabethan belief.
- sconce a slang word for head (literally, blockhouse).
- scrimers fencers.
- scullion a servant doing the rough, dirty work in a kitchen.
- se offendendo in self-defense.
- sea-gown a skirted garment with short sleeves, worn by seamen.
- season qualify.

- season ripen.
- seized of put in legal possession of a feudal holding; assigned ownership.
- Seneca (c. 4? B.C.3A.D. 65); Roman philosopher, dramatist, and statesman.
- sets a blister In Elizabethan England, prostitutes were sometimes branded with a hot iron.
- Shark'd gathered indiscriminately; got by fraud or stratagems.
- sheeted shrouded.
- shent rebuked.
- shoon shoes.
- shrewdly bitterly.
- silence me hide myself.
- simples medicinal herbs.
- Sith since.
- skirts the outer or bordering parts; outskirts, as of a city.
- sledded Polacks the Polish army traveling on sleighs or sleds.
- snuff accumulation of smoldering wick that caused the candle to smoke and burn less brightly.
- so mope be so stupid.
- solidity and compound mass the earth.
- spirit of health There are two possible meanings. First, a saved (healthy) soul, not a lost one. Second, a healing or beneficent spirit.
- splenetic full of spleen, hot-tempered.
- springes snares consisting of a noose attached to something under tension, as a bent tree branch.
- sterling true currency (with the value of an English silver penny).
- Stick fiery off stand out brightly.
- stoup a drinking cup; tankard.
- sun a pun on son, again indicating Hamlet's dislike of the new relationship between himself and his uncle.
- suppliance of a minute a minute's pastime.
- supply and profit for the fulfillment and profitable conclusion of our hope.

- Switzers Swiss mercenary soldiers; in this case, acting as the royal bodyguard.
- swoopstake in a clean sweep.
- tarre urge.
- tax him home take him to task.
- 'Tellus' in Roman mythology, the goddess of the earth.
- temple body; the temple of the soul.
- tend attend, wait.
- tenures titles to property.
- Termagant Herod favorite characters in the old miracle plays, who were always portrayed as blustering tyrants.
- thieves of mercy merciful thieves.
- this is for all to sum up.
- this slave's offal the entrails of a butchered animal; here, the king's guts.
- thy free awe your submission even after our armies have been withdrawn.
- tickle sere made to laugh easily.
- timber'd made of wood that is too light.
- to the manner born accustomed to it since a child.
- took the fruits of followed.
- total gules completely red.
- toy in blood trifling youthful passion.
- toys of desperation desperate fancies or impulses — referring to the impulse to jump off a high place.
- traduc'd and tax'd defamed and censored.
- trick something trifling.
- tristful sorrowful.
- the triumph of his pledge his drinking ability.
- Tropically the use of a word or words in a figurative sense; figuratively, a trope being a figure of speech.
- truepenny honest fellow.
- tune of the time fashionable jargon.

- turn the beam overbalance the scale.
- turn Turk turn bad.
- Twas Aeneas' tale to Dido the story of the sack of Troy as told to Queen Dido by Aeneas. (Virgil's Aeneid contains the story.)
- twelve for nine In a match of twelve bouts (instead of the usual nine), Laertes will win by at least three up.
- unbated not blunted.
- unction ointment, salve; used for the act of anointing as in medical treatment or a religious ceremony.
- Under the moon To be most effective, herbs are gathered by moonlight.
- unfellowed without equal.
- unfledg'd immature (literally designating a young bird without feathers and thus not able to fly).
- unfold yourself to make known or lay open to view, especially in stages or little by little.
- Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled without the sacraments of communion, penance, and extreme unction.
- unimproved mettle untested strength, courage, or character
- union a large pearl.
- unmaster'd importunity uncontrolled and determined wooing.
- unproportion'd overly emotional, excessive.
- unreclaimed untamed.
- unshaped incoherent.
- unsinew'd weak.
- Up-spring a high-kicking, wild German dance.
- valanced bearded.
- variable service different courses.
- ventages small holes or openings; vents.
- vice of kings caricature of a king. Vice, who represented sin, was a stock character in morality plays.
- videlicet (Latin) that is; namely.
- Vulcan's stithy the workshop of the Roman god of fire and metalworking.

- wassail revelry, carousing.
- watch sleeplessness.
- waterfly an insect without apparent purpose.
- weak supposal poor opinion.
- weal a sound or prosperous state; well-being; welfare.
- what means what their income is.
- wheaten garland a garland made of stalks of wheat; a symbol of prosperity.
- whoreson a scoundrel; knave; a general epithet of abuse (literally, bastard).
- will desire.
- will he, nill he willy-nilly, whether he wishes or not.
- windlasses roundabout means.
- with sight with an indifferent eye.
- withers the highest part of a horse's back, located between the shoulder blades.
- woodcocks birds thought of as being stupid because they are easily caught; hence, a person who is a fool or a dupe.
- Woo't colloquial and familiar form of wilt thou.
- wormwood bitterness. (Wormwood is a plant with bitter qualities.)
- yesty collection frothy collection of catchwords.
- your only jig-maker I am the funniest man alive (ironic).

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What kind of a King is Claudius? What evidence shows the kind of monarch he is and the kind of man he is? Is this his appearance, or is it his true character?
2. What is Hamlet's conflict over the Ghost's existence? Why does he continue to doubt the "honesty" of the Ghost even after Claudius confesses his guilt?
3. Name the various foils Shakespeare has created for Hamlet. Why is each important to the play?
4. Explain the function of the Gravediggers at the beginning of Act V.

5. Look through the text and find five questions that drive the theme, characters, or plot of the play. Explain why the questions are important and why Shakespeare poses them as questions and not as answers.
6. Explain the effect Hamlet's ideas of sin and salvation have on the development of his character and the movement of the plot.
7. Identify the three revenge plots in Hamlet, and explain why each is important to the development of the play.

FURTHER READING

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