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## HAMLET–WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

### STRUCTURE

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- Major characters—an intensive study
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### LEARNING GOALS

After reading this lesson, you will be able to :

- Know the English poet and playwright, "William Shakespeare"
- Have a broad understanding of the works of Shakespeare
- Narrate the story of the play, "Hamlet"
- Understand and discuss the themes that occur in the play, "Hamlet"

### INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare, baptized on 26 April 1564; died 23 April 1616 was an English poet and playwright. He is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's most pre-eminent dramatist. He is fondly referred to as the "Bard of Avon". His surviving works, including some collaborations, consist of about 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems. Such is his wide and universal appeal that his plays have been

translated into every major language of the world and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon. At the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children: Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith. Between 1585 and 1592, he is believed to have moved to the big city of London where he began a successful career as an actor, writer, and part owner of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men. He appears to have retired to Stratford around 1613, where he died three years later. Few records of Shakespeare's private life survive, and there has been considerable speculation about such matters as his physical appearance, sexuality, religious beliefs, and whether the works attributed to him were composed by his contemporaries.

Shakespeare produced most of his known work between 1589 and 1613. His early plays were mainly comedies and histories, genres he raised to the peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the 16th century. He then wrote mainly tragedies until about 1608, including *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, which are regarded as some of the finest works in the English language. In his last phase, he wrote tragicomedies, also known as romances, and collaborated with other playwrights too.

Many of his plays were published in editions of varying quality and accuracy during his lifetime. In 1623, two of his former colleagues from theatre published the *First Folio*, a collected edition of his dramatic works that included all but two of the plays now recognized as Shakespeare's.

Shakespeare had built a formidable reputation in his time, but his reputation did not soar to its present heights until the 19th century. The Romantics, in particular, commended Shakespeare's genius, and the Victorians worshipped Shakespeare with a reverence that George Bernard Shaw called "bardolatry". In the 20th century, with the resurgence of new movements in scholarship and performance, Shakespeare's works were read and rediscovered with renewed earth version.

His plays remain highly popular today and are constantly studied, performed and reinterpreted in diverse cultural and political contexts throughout the world.

## **Early Life**

William Shakespeare was the son of John Shakespeare, a successful glover and alderman originally from Snitterfield, and Mary Arden, the daughter of an affluent landowning farmer. He was born at Stratford-upon-Avon and baptised there on 26 April 1564. His actual birthdate remains unknown, but is traditionally observed on 23 April, St George's Day. This date, which can be traced back to an 18th-century scholar's mistake, has proved appealing to biographers, since Shakespeare died 23 April 1616. He was the third of eight children and the eldest surviving son.

Although no attendance records for the period survive, most biographers agree that Shakespeare was probably educated at the King's New School in Stratford, a free school chartered in 1553, some distance from his home. Grammar schools varied in quality during the Elizabethan era, but the curriculum was dictated by law throughout England, and the school would have provided an intensive education in Latin grammar and the classics.

At the age of 18, Shakespeare married the 26-year-old Anne Hathaway. The consistory court of the Diocese of Worcester issued a marriage license 27 November 1582. The next day two of Hathaway's neighbours posted bonds guaranteeing that no lawful claims impeded the marriage. The ceremony may have been arranged in some haste, since the Worcester chancellor allowed the marriage banns to be read once instead of the usual three times, and six months after the marriage Anne gave birth to a daughter, Susanna, baptised 26 May 1583. Twins, son Hamnet and daughter Judith, followed almost two years later and were baptised 2 February 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes at the age of 11 and was buried 11 August 1596.

Nothing much is known about Shakespeare after the birth of the twins until he is mentioned as part of the London theatre scene in 1592, with scholars referring to the years between 1585 and 1592 as Shakespeare's "lost years". Biographers attempting to account for this period have reported many apocryphal stories. Nicholas Rowe, Shakespeare's first biographer, recounted a Stratford legend that Shakespeare fled the town for London to escape prosecution for deer poaching. Another 18th-century story has Shakespeare starting career in the world of theatre minding the horses of theatre patrons in London. John Aubrey reported that Shakespeare had been a country schoolmaster. Some 20th-century scholars have suggested that

company was awarded a royal patent by the new king, James I, and changed its name from Lord Chamberlain's Men to the King's Men.

In 1599, a group of company members built their own theatre on the south bank of the Thames, and named it. The Globe in 1608, the partnership also took over the Black friars indoor theatre. Records of Shakespeare's property purchases and investments indicate that Shakespeare accumulated a lot of wealth through this company. In 1597, he bought the second-largest house in Stratford, New Place, and in 1605, he invested in a share of the parish tithes in Stratford.

Some of Shakespeare's plays were published in quarto editions from 1594. By 1598, his popularity had soared and his name began to appear on the title pages. Shakespeare continued to act in his own plays as well as others after his success as a playwright. The 1616 edition of Ben Jonson's Works names him on the cast lists for *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) and *Sejanus, His Fall* (1603). The absence of his name from the 1605 cast list for Jonson's *Volpone* is taken by some scholars as a sign that his acting career was nearing its end. The First Folio of 1623, however, lists Shakespeare as one of "the Principal Actor in all these Plays", some of which were first staged after *Volpone*, although it is not known for certain which roles he played. In 1610, John Davies of Hereford wrote that "good Will" played "kingly" roles. In 1709, Rowe says that Shakespeare played the ghost of Hamlet's father. Later traditions maintain that he also played Adam in 'As You Like It and the Chorus in *Henry V*, though scholars doubt the sources of the information.

Shakespeare divided his time between London and Stratford during his career. In 1596, the year before he bought New Place as his family home in Stratford, Shakespeare was living in the parish of St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, north of the River Thames. He moved across the river to Southwark by 1599, the year his company constructed the Globe Theatre there. By 1604, he had moved north of the river again, to an area north of St Paul's Cathedral with many fine houses. There he rented rooms from a French Huguenot called Christopher Mountjoy, a maker of ladies' wigs and other headgear.

## **Later Years and Death**

Rowe was the first biographer of Shakespeare who herded down the information that Shakespeare retired to Stratford some years before his death; but retirement as it means today from all work was uncommon at that time, and Shakespeare continued to visit London. In 1612 he was called as a witness in a court case concerning the marriage

settlement of Mountjoy's daughter, Mary. In March 1613, he bought a gatehouse in the former Blackfriars priory; and from November 1614 he was in London for several weeks with his son-in-law, John Hall.

After 1606–1607, Shakespeare's productivity declined and these are no plays attributed to him after 1613. His last three plays were collaborations, probably with John Fletcher, who succeeded him as the in house playwright for the 'King's Men'.

Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616 and was survived by his wife and two daughters. His elder daughter Susanna had married a physician, John Hall, in 1607, and Judith, the younger had married Thomas Quiney, a vintner, two months before Shakespeare's death.

In his will, Shakespeare left the bulk of his large estate to his elder daughter Susanna. The terms instructed that she pass it down intact to "the first son of her body". The Quineys had three children, all of whom died without marrying. The Halls had one child, Elizabeth, who married twice but died without children in 1670, ending Shakespeare's direct line. Shakespeare's will scarcely mentions his wife, Anne, who was probably entitled to one third of his estate automatically. He did make a point, however, of leaving her "my second best bed", a bequest that has led to much speculation. Some scholars see the bequest as derogatory to Anne, whereas others believe that the second-best bed would have been the matrimonial bed and therefore rich in significance.

Shakespeare was buried in the chancel of the Holy Trinity Church two days after his death. The epitaph carved into the stone slab covering his grave includes a curse against moving his bones, and it seems the same which was carefully avoided during restoration of the church in 2008:

Sometime before 1623, a funerary monument was erected in his memory on the north wall, with a bust of him in the act of writing. Its plaque compares him to Nestor, Socrates, and Virgil. In 1623, in conjunction with the publication of the First Folio, the Droeshout engraving was published.

Shakespeare has been commemorated in many statues and memorials around the world, including funeral monuments in Southwark Cathedral and Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey.

## **Plays**

In the period of study, it was the norm for playwrights to collaborate with others at some point, and critics agree that Shakespeare did the same, mostly early and towards the end of his

career. Some attributions, such as 'Titus Andronicus' and the early history plays, remain controversial, while 'The Two Noble Kinsmen' and the 'Lost Cardenio' have well-attested contemporary documentation. Textual evidence also supports the view that several of the plays were revised by other writers after their original composition.

The first recorded works of Shakespeare are Richard III and the three parts of Henry VI, written in the early 1590s when historical drama was in vogue. Shakespeare's plays are difficult to date, however, and studies of the texts suggest that 'Titus Andronicus', "The Comedy of Errors", "The Taming of the Shrew" and "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" may also belong to Shakespeare's earliest period of creativity. His first histories, which draw heavily on the 1587 edition of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, dramatise the destructive results of weak or corrupt rule and have been interpreted as a justification for the origins of the Tudor dynasty. The early plays were also influenced by the works of other Elizabethan dramatists, especially Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe, by the traditions of medieval drama, and by the plays of Seneca. The 'Comedy of Errors' was also based on classical models, but "The Taming of the Shrew" has not been found, to be based on any such source though it is related to a separate play of the same name and may have derived from a folk story. "The Two Gentlemen of Verona", in which two friends appear to approve of rape and the Shrew's story of the taming of a woman's independent spirit by a man draw flak from modern critics for their content and gender insensitivity.

Shakespeare's early classical and Italianate comedies, containing tight double plots and precise comic sequences, give way in the mid-1590s to the romantic atmosphere of his greatest comedies. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is a witty and delightful mixture of romance, fairy magic, pastoral simplicity and comic lowlife scenes. Shakespeare's next comedy, the equally romantic *Merchant of Venice*, contains a portrayal of the vengeful Jewish moneylender Shylock, which reflects Elizabethan views but is again out of step with the modern audience. The wit and wordplay of "Much Ado About Nothing", the charming rural setting of "As You Like It", and the lively merrymaking of "Twelfth Night" complete Shakespeare's sequence of great comedies. After the lyrical Richard II, written almost entirely in verse, Shakespeare introduced prose comedy in "Henry IV, parts 1 and 2", and "Henry V" the histories written in the late 1590s. His characters assume more complex and varied range as he switches deftly between comic and serious scenes, prose and poetry, and achieves tremendous maturity in his work. This period begins and ends with two

Some commentators have seen this change in mood as evidence of a more serene view of life on Shakespeare's part, but it may merely reflect the theatrical fashion of the day. Shakespeare collaborated on two more plays, "Henry VIII" and "The Two Noble Kinsmen", probably with John Fletcher.

## Poems

In 1593 and 1594, when the theatres were closed because of plague, Shakespeare published two narrative poems on erotic themes, "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece". He dedicated them to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. In "Venus and Adonis", an innocent Adonis rejects the sexual advances of Venus; while in "The Rape of Lucrece", the virtuous wife Lucrece is raped by the lustful Tarquin. Influenced by Ovid's "Metamorphoses", the poems focus the remorse and moral confusion that result from uncontrolled lust. Both proved popular and were often reprinted during Shakespeare's lifetime. A third narrative poem, 'A Lover's Complaint', in which a young woman laments her seduction by a persuasive suitor, was printed in the first edition of the Sonnets in 1609. Most scholars now concur that Shakespeare wrote 'A Lover's Complaint'. Critics opine that its fine qualities are marred by leaden effects. 'The Phoenix and the Turtle', printed in Robert Chester's 1601 'Love's Martyr', mourns the deaths of the legendary phoenix and his lover, the faithful turtle dove. In 1599, two early drafts of sonnets 138 and 144 appeared in 'The Passionate Pilgrim', published under Shakespeare's name but without his permission.

## Sonnets

Published in 1609, the Sonnets were the last of Shakespeare's non-dramatic works to be printed. Scholars are not certain when each of the 154 sonnets was composed, but evidence suggests that Shakespeare wrote sonnets throughout his career for a private readership. Even before the two unauthorised sonnets appeared in "The Passionate Pilgrim" in 1599, Francis Meres had referred in 1598 to Shakespeare's "sugred Sonnets among his private friends". Few analysts believe that the published collection follows Shakespeare's intended sequence. He seems to have planned two contrasting series: one about uncontrollable lust for a married woman of dark complexion (the "dark lady"), and one about conflicted love for a fair young man (the "fair youth"). It remains unclear if these figures represent real individuals, or if the authorial "I" who addresses them represents Shakespeare himself, though Wordsworth believed that with the sonnets "Shakespeare unlocked his

heart". The 1609 edition was dedicated to a "Mr. W.H.", credited as "the only begetter" of the poems. It is not known whether this was written by Shakespeare himself or by the publisher, Thomas Thorpe, whose initials appear at the foot of the dedication page; nor is it known who Mr. W.H. was, despite numerous theories, or whether Shakespeare even authorised the publication. Critics are unanimous in their opinion that the Sonnets are a profound meditation on the nature of love, sexual passion, procreation, death, and time.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate..."

Lines from Shakespeare's Sonnet 18.

The creation of Shakespeare's Sonnets was in some way influenced by the Italian sonnet: it was popularised by Dante and Petrarch and refined in Spain and France by DuBellay and Ronsard. Shakespeare probably had access to these last two authors, and read English poets as Richard Field and John Davies. The French and Italian poets gave preference to the Italian form of sonnet—two groups of four lines, or quatrains (always rhymed a-b-b-a-b-b-a) followed by two groups of three lines, or tercets (variously rhymed c-c-d e-e-d or c-c-d e-d-e)—which created a sonorous music in the vowel rich Romance languages. However, it did not have the desired effect in English. To overcome this problem derived from the difference of language, Shakespeare chose to follow the idiomatic rhyme scheme used by Philip Sidney in his 'Astrophel and Stella' (published posthumously in 1591), where the rhymes are interlaced in two pairs of couplets to make the quatrain.

## **Style**

Shakespeare's earliest plays were written in the conventional style of the day. He wrote them in a stylised language that does not always spring naturally from the needs of the characters or the drama. The poetry depends on extended, sometimes elaborate metaphors and conceits, and the language is often rhetorical—written for actors to declaim rather than speak. The grand speeches in 'Titus Andronicus', in the view of some critics, often hold up the action, for example; and the verse in 'Two Gentlemen of Verona' has been described as stilted.

Soon, however, Shakespeare began to modify the language to suit his needs. The opening soliloquy of Richard III has its roots in the self-declaration of Vice in medieval drama. At the same time, Richard's vivid self-awareness looks forward to the soliloquies of Shakespeare's mature plays. No single play marks a change from the traditional to the



freer style. Shakespeare combined the two throughout his career, with "Romeo and Juliet" perhaps the best example of the mixing of the styles. By the time of "Romeo and Juliet", "Richard II", and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in the mid-1590s, Shakespeare had begun to write a more natural poetry. He increasingly tuned his metaphors and images to the needs of the drama itself.

Shakespeare's standard poetic form was blank verse, composed in iambic pentameter. In practice, this meant that his verse was usually unrhymed and consisted often syllables to a line, spoken with a stress on every second syllable. The blank verse of his early plays is quite different from that of his later ones. It is often beautiful, but its sentences tend to start, pause, and finish at the end of lines, with the risk of monotony. Once Shakespeare mastered traditional blank verse, he began to interrupt and vary its flow. This technique releases the new power and flexibility of the poetry in plays such as "Julius Caesar" and "Hamlet". Shakespeare uses it, for example, to convey the turmoil in Hamlet's mind:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting  
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay  
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly—  
And prais'd be rashness for it—let us know  
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well...  
Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 2, 4-8

After "Hamlet", Shakespeare varied his poetic style further, particularly in the more emotional passages of the late tragedies. The literary critic A. C. Bradley described this style as "more concentrated, rapid, varied, and, in construction, less regular, not seldom twisted or elliptical". In the last phase of his career, Shakespeare adopted many techniques to achieve these effects. These included run-on lines, irregular pauses and stops, and extreme variations in sentence structure and length. In *Macbeth*, for example, the language darts from one unrelated metaphor or simile to another: "was the hope drunk/ Wherein you dressed yourself?" (1.7.35-38); "...pity, like a naked new-born babe/ Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, hovers upon the sightless couriers of the air..." (1.7.21-25). The listener is challenged to complete the sense. The late romances, with their shifts in time and surprising turns of plot, inspired a last poetic style in which long and short sentences are set against one another, clauses are piled up, subject

and object are reversed, and words are omitted, creating an effect of spontaneity that delights.

Shakespeare's poetic genius and a practical sense of the theatre went hand in hand. Like all playwrights of the time, Shakespeare dramatised stories from sources such as Petrarch and Holinshed. He reshaped each plot to create several centres of interest and show as many sides of a narrative to the audience as possible. This strength of design ensures that a Shakespeare play can survive translation, cutting and wide interpretation without loss to its core drama. As Shakespeare's mastery grew, he gave his characters clearer and more varied motivations and distinctive patterns of speech. He preserved aspects of his earlier style in the later plays, however. In Shakespeare's late romances, he deliberately returned to a more artificial style, which emphasised the illusion of theatre.

## **Influence**

Shakespeare's work has made a lasting impression on later theatre and literature. In particular, he expanded the dramatic potential of characterisation, plot, language, and genre. Until "Romeo and Juliet", for example, romance had not been viewed as a worthy topic for tragedy. Soliloquies had been used mainly to convey information about characters or events; but Shakespeare used them to explore characters' minds. His work heavily influenced later poetry. The Romantic poets attempted to revive Shakespearean verse drama, though with little success. Critic George Steiner described all English verse dramas from Coleridge to Tennyson as "feeble variations on Shakespearean themes."

Shakespeare seems to have exercised considerable influence on novelists such as Thomas Hardy, William Faulkner, and Charles Dickens. The American novelist Herman Melville's soliloquies owe much to Shakespeare; his Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick* is a classic tragic hero, inspired by *King Lear*. Scholars have identified 20,000 pieces of music linked to Shakespeare's works. These include two operas by Giuseppe Verdi, *Othello* and *Falstaff*, whose critical standing compares with that of the source plays. Shakespeare has also inspired many painters, including the Romantics and the Pre-Raphaelites. The Swiss Romantic artist Henry Fuseli, a friend of William Blake, even translated *Macbeth* into German. The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud drew on Shakespearean psychology, in particular that of *Hamlet*, for his theories of human nature.

In Shakespeare's day, English grammar, spelling and pronunciation were less standardised than they are now, and his use of language

helped shape modern English. Samuel Johnson quoted him more often than any other author in his 'A Dictionary of the English Language', the first serious work of its type. Expressions such as "with bated breath" (*Merchant of Venice*) and "a foregone conclusion" (*Othello*) have found their way into everyday English speech.

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## THE ENIGNATIC SHAKESPEARE

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### **Authorship**

Around 150 years after Shakespeare's death, doubts began to emerge about the authorship of the works attributed to him. Proposed alternative candidates include Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, and Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. Several "group theories" have also been proposed. Only a small minority of academics believe there is reason to question the traditional attribution, but interest in the subject, particularly the Oxfordian theory, continues into the 21st century.

### **Religion**

Some scholars claim that members of Shakespeare's family were Catholics, at a time when Catholic practice was against the law. Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, certainly came from a pious Catholic family. The strongest evidence to this effect might be a Catholic statement of faith signed by John Shakespeare, found in 1757 in the rafters of his former house in Henley Street. The document is now lost, however, and scholars differ on its authenticity. In 1591, the authorities reported that John had missed church "for fear of process for debt", a common Catholic excuse. In 1606, William's daughter Susanna was listed among those who failed to attend Easter communion in Stratford. Scholars also find evidence both for and against Shakespeare's Catholicism in his plays, but the truth may be impossible to validate either way.

### **Portraiture**

There is no written description of Shakespeare's physical appearance and no evidence that he ever commissioned a portrait, so the Droeshout engraving, which Ben Jonson approved of as a good likeness, and his Stratford monument provide the best evidence of his appearance. From the 18th century, the desire for authentic Shakespeare portraits fuelled claims that various surviving pictures depicted Shakespeare. That demand also led to the production of

several fake portraits, as well as mis attributions, repaintings and relabelling of portraits of other people.

## **Classification of the Plays**

Shakespeare's works include the 36 plays printed in the First Folio of 1623, according to their folio classification as comedies, histories and tragedies. Two plays not included in the First Folio, "The Two Noble Kinsmen" and "Pericles, Prince of Tyre", are now accepted as part of the canon, with scholars agreed that Shakespeare made a major contribution to their composition. No Shakespearean poems were included in the First Folio.

In the late 19th century, Edward Dowden classified four of the late comedies as romances, and though many scholars prefer to call them tragicomedies, his term is often used. These plays and the associated Two Noble Kinsmen are marked with an asterisk (\*). In 1896, Frederick S. Boas coined the term "problem plays" to describe four plays: 'All's Well That Ends Well', 'Measure for Measure', 'Troilus and Cressida' and 'Hamlet'. "Dramas as singular in theme and temper cannot be strictly called comedies or tragedies", he wrote. "We may therefore borrow a convenient phrase from the theatre of today and class them together as Shakespeare's problem plays." The term, much debated and sometimes applied to other plays, remains in use, though Hamlet is definitively classed as a tragedy.

Plays thought to be only partly written by Shakespeare are marked with a dagger (†). Other works occasionally attributed to him are listed as apocrypha.

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## **HAMLET**

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### **Plot**

One 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. Urging Hamlet to seek revenge on the man who betrayed in and 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 behaviour and try to ascertain 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 travelling actors comes to Elsinore, and Hamlet seizes upon an idea to test his uncle's guilt. He organizes have the players to 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 theatre, 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 is now frightened of Hamlet's madness and fears fearing for his own safety. Hence, he 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 hatches a conspiracy to in orange 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.

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAL

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### **Hamlet**

Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, the title character, and the protagonist of the play. About thirty years old at the start of the play, Hamlet is the son of Queen Gertrude and the late King Hamlet, and the nephew of the present king, Claudius. Hamlet is melancholy, bitter, and cynical, full of hatred for his uncle's scheming and disgust for his mother's sexuality. A reflective and thoughtful young man who has studied at the University of Wittenberg, Hamlet is often indecisive and hesitant, but at other times prone to rash and impulsive acts.

### **Claudius**

Claudius is the King of Denmark. He is Hamlet's uncle, and the play's antagonist. Claudius is a calculating, ambitious politician, driven

by his sexual appetite and his lust for power, but he occasionally shows signs of remorse and human feeling—his love for Gertrude, for instance, seems sincere.

## **Gertrude**

Gertrude is the Queen of Denmark, Hamlet's mother, recently married to Claudius. Gertrude loves Hamlet deeply, but she is a shallow, weak woman who seeks affection and status more urgently than moral rectitude or truth.

## **Polonius**

Polonius is the Lord Chamberlain of Claudius's court, a pompous, conniving old man. Polonius is the father of Laertes and Ophelia.

## **Horatio**

Horatio is Hamlet's close friend, who studied with the prince at the university in Wittenberg. Horatio is loyal and helpful to Hamlet throughout the play. After Hamlet's death, Horatio remains alive to tell Hamlet's story.

## **Ophelia**

Ophelia is Polonius's daughter, a beautiful young woman with whom Hamlet has been in love. Ophelia is a sweet and innocent young girl, who obeys her father and her brother, Laertes. Dependent on men to tell her how to behave, she gives in to Polonius's schemes to spy on Hamlet. Even in her lapse into madness and death, she remains maidenly, singing songs about flowers and finally drowning in the river amid the flower garlands she had gathered.

## **Laertes**

Laertes is 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**

Fortinbras is 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 honour, making him another foil for Prince Hamlet.

## **The Ghost**

Ghost is the spectre 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**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are 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**

Osric is the foolish courtier who summons Hamlet to his duel with Laertes.

## **Voftimand and Cornelius**

Voltimand and Cornelius are the two courtiers whom Claudius sends to Norway to persuade the king to prevent Fortinbras from attacking.

## **Marcellus and Bernardo**

Marcellus and Bernardo are 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**

Francisco is a soldier and guardsman at Elsinore.

## **Reynaldo**

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

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## **MAJOR CHARACTERS—AN INTENSIVE STUDY**

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### **Hamlet**

Hamlet has fascinated audiences and readers for centuries. The first thing that draws attention to his personality is that he is enigmatic. There is always more to him than the other characters in the play can



figure out; even the most careful and clever readers come away with the sense that they don't know everything there is to know about this character. Hamlet actually tells other characters that there is more to him than meets the eye—notably, his mother, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—but his appeal and fascination involves much more than this. When he speaks, he sounds as if there's something important he's not saying, may be something even he is not aware of. Shakespeare's ability to write soliloquies and dialogues that create this effect is one of his most impressive achievements.

A university student whose studies are interrupted by his father's death, Hamlet is extremely philosophical and contemplative. He is particularly drawn to difficult questions or questions that cannot be answered with any certainty. Faced with evidence that his uncle murdered his father, evidence that any other character in a play would believe, Hamlet becomes? obsessed with proving his uncle's guilt before trying to act. The standard of "beyond a reasonable doubt" is simply unacceptable to him. He is equally plagued with questions about the afterlife, about the wisdom of suicide, about what happens to bodies after they die—the list is extensive.

But even though he is thoughtful to the point of obsession, Hamlet also behaves rashly and impulsively. When he does act, it is with surprising swiftness and little or no premeditation, as when he stabs Polonius through a curtain without even checking to see who he is. He seems to step very easily into the role of a madman, behaving erratically and upsetting the other characters with his wild speech and pointed innuendos.

It is also important to note that Hamlet is extremely melancholy and discontented with the state of affairs in Denmark and in his own family—indeed, in the world at large. He is extremely disappointed with his mother for marrying his uncle so quickly, and he repudiates Ophelia, a woman he once claimed to love, in the harshest terms. His words often indicate his disgust with and distrust of women in general. At a number of points in the play, he contemplates his own death and even the option of suicide.

But, despite all the things with which Hamlet\* professes dissatisfaction, it is remarkable that the prince and heir apparent of Denmark should think about these problems only in personal\* and philosophical terms. He spends relatively little time thinking about the threats to Denmark's national security from without or the threats to its

stability from within (some of which he helps to create through his own carelessness).

## **Claudius**

Hamlet's major antagonist is a shrewd, lustful, conniving king who stands in stark contrast to the other male characters in the play. Whereas most of the other important men in *Hamlet* are preoccupied with ideas of justice, revenge, and moral balance, Claudius is bent upon maintaining his own power. The old King Hamlet was apparently a stern warrior, but Claudius is a corrupt politician whose main weapon is his ability to manipulate others through his skilful use of language. Claudius's speech is compared to poison being poured in the ear—the method he used to murder Hamlet's father. Claudius's love for Gertrude may be sincere, but it also seems likely that he married her as a strategic move, to help him snatch the throne away from Hamlet after the death of the king. As the play progresses, Claudius's mounting fear of Hamlet's insanity leads him to still greater self-preoccupation; when Gertrude tells him that Hamlet has killed Polonius, Claudius does not remark that Gertrude could have been in danger, but that he would have been in danger had he been in the room. He tells Laertes the same thing as he attempts to soothe the young man's anger after his father's death. Claudius is ultimately too crafty for his own good. In Act V, scene ii, rather than allowing Laertes only two methods of killing Hamlet, the sharpened sword and the poison on the blade, Claudius insists on a third, the poisoned goblet. When Gertrude inadvertently drinks the poison and dies, Hamlet is at last able to bring himself to kill Claudius, and the king is felled by his own cowardly machination.

## **Gertrude**

Few Shakespearean characters have caused as much uncertainty as Gertrude, the beautiful Queen of Denmark. The play seems to raise more questions about Gertrude than it answers, including: Was she involved with Claudius before the death of her husband? Did she love her husband? Did she know about Claudius's plan to commit the murder? Did she love Claudius, or did she marry him simply to keep her high station in Denmark? Does she believe Hamlet when he insists that he is not mad, or does she pretend to believe him simply to protect herself? Does she intentionally betray Hamlet to Claudius, or does she believe that she is protecting her son's secret?

These questions can be answered in numerous ways, depending upon one's reading of the play. The Gertrude who does emerge clearly in *Hamlet* is a woman defined by her desire for station and affection, as

well as by her tendency to use men to fulfill her instinct for self-preservation—which, of course, makes her extremely dependent upon the men in her life. Hamlet's most famous comment about Gertrude is his furious condemnation of women in general: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.II. 146). This comment is as much indicative of Hamlet's agonized state of mind as of anything else, but to a great extent Gertrude does seem morally frail. She never exhibits the ability to think critically about her situation, but seems merely to move instinctively toward seemingly safe choices, as when she immediately runs to Claudius after her confrontation with Hamlet. She is at her best in social situations (I.II and V.II), when her natural grace and charm seem to indicate a rich, rounded personality. At times it seems that her grace and charm are her only characteristics, and her reliance on men appears to be her sole way of capitalizing on her abilities.

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## IMPORTANT THEMES, MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

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### Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

### 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 be sure about the existence of ghosts? Is the ghost really what it appears to be, or is it actually 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 the audience/reader be certain about a crime that has no witnesses? Can Hamlet judge accurately the state of Claudius's soul by watching his behavior? 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? Do 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 much about "action" in the abstract than Hamlet does, and are therefore less troubled about the possibility of acting effectively. They simply act as they feel is appropriate. But in some sense they prove that Hamlet is right, because all of their actions prove to be misadventures. Claudius possesses himself of queen and crown through bold action, but his conscience torments him, and he is beset by threats to his authority (and, of course, he dies). Laertes resolves that nothing will distract him from acting out his revenge, but he is easily influenced and manipulated into serving Claudius's ends, and his poisoned rapier is turned back upon himself.

## **The Mystery of Death**

In the aftermath of his father's murder, Hamlet is obsessed with the idea of death, and in the course of the play he regards death with great interest and from a great many perspectives.

He ponders both the spiritual aftermath of death, embodied in the ghost, and the physical remainders of the dead, such as by Yorick's skull and the decaying corpses in the cemetery. Throughout, the idea of death is closely tied to the themes of spirituality, truth, and uncertainty in that death may bring the answers to Hamlet's deepest questions, ending once and for all the problem of trying to determine truth in an ambiguous world. And, since death is both the cause and the consequence of revenge, it is intimately tied to the theme of revenge and justice—Claudius's murder of King Hamlet initiates Hamlet's quest for revenge, and Claudius's death is the end of that quest.

It is also the question of his death that torments him continually as he broods over the idea of suicide being a morally legitimate action in an unbearably painful world. Hamlet's grief and misery is such that he frequently longs for death to end his suffering, but he fears that if he commits suicide, he will be consigned to eternal suffering in hell because his religion (Christianity) prohibits suicides. In his famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy (III.i), Hamlet philosophically concludes that no one would choose to endure the pain of life if he or she were not

afraid of what will come after death, and that it is this fear of the positive sufferings of the afterlife which causes complex moral considerations to interfere with the capacity for action.

## **The Nation as a Diseased Body**

Hamlet showcase a royal family in serious trouble and with its is associated the health or otherwise of the state as a whole. The play's early scenes explore the sense of anxiety and dread that surrounds the transfer of power from one ruler to the next. Throughout the play, characters draw explicit connections between the moral legitimacy of a ruler and the health of the nation. Denmark is frequently described as a physical body made ill by the moral corruption of Claudius and Gertrude, and many observers interpret the presence of the ghost as a supernatural omen indicating that "[Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.67). The dead King Hamlet is portrayed as a strong, forthright ruler under whose guard the state was in good health, while Claudius, a wicked politician, has brought is health to Demark as he is always in pursuit of the satisfaction of his own unholy appetites. At the end of the play, the rise to power of the upright Fortinbras suggests that Denmark will be restored to good health again.

## **Motifs**

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform about the text's major themes.

## **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, former brother-in-law and sister-in-law who are now man and wife. 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 concentration on Gertrude's sex life with Claudius and his preoccupation with her in general which is somewhat uncommon and rather strange.

## **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" (LET. 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 which will make thee dumb" (IV.VI.21). The poison poured in the king's ear by Claudius is used by the ghost to symbolize the corrosive effect of Claudius's dishonesty on the health of Denmark. Declaring that the story that he was killed by a snake is a lie, he says that "the whole ear of Denmark" is "Rankly abused ... " (I.V.36-38).

## **Symbols**

Various objects, characters, figures, and colors are used as symbols through out the play to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

## **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 gravitates 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 body's eventual decay, noting that Polonius will be eaten by worms, that even kings are

eaten by worms, and that dust from the decayed body of Alexander, the Great might be used to stop a hole in a beer barrel.

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## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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### Act I, Scene I Summary

On a dark winter night outside Elsinore Castle in Denmark, an officer named Bernardo comes to relieve the watchman Francisco. In the heavy darkness, the men cannot see each other. Bernardo hears a footstep near him and cries, "Who's there?" After both men ensure that the other is also a watchman, they relax. Cold, tired, and apprehensive from his many hours of guarding the castle, Francisco thanks Bernardo and prepares to go home and go to bed.

Shortly thereafter, Bernardo is joined by Marcellus, another watchman, and Horatio, a friend of Prince Hamlet. Bernardo and Marcellus have urged Horatio to stand watch with them, because they believe they have something shocking to show him. In hushed tones, they discuss the apparition they have seen for the past two nights, and which they now hope to show Horatio: the ghost of the recently deceased King Hamlet, which they claim has appeared before them on the castle ramparts in the late hours of the night.

Horatio is skeptical, but then the ghost suddenly appears before the men and just as suddenly vanishes. Terrified, Horatio acknowledges that the specter does indeed resemble the dead King of Denmark, that it even wears the armor King Hamlet wore when he battled against the armies of Norway, and the same frown he wore when he fought against the Poles. Horatio declares that the ghost appearance is a warning of impending misfortune for Denmark, perhaps in the form of a military attack. He recounts the story of King Hamlet's conquest of certain lands once belonging to Norway, saying that Fortinbras, the young Prince of Norway, now seeks to reconquer those forfeited lands.

The ghost materializes for a second time, and Horatio tries to speak to it. The ghost remains silent, however, and disappears again just as the cock crows at the first hint of dawn. Horatio suggests that they tell Prince Hamlet, the dead king's son, about the apparition. He believes that though the ghost did not speak to him, if it is really the ghost of King Hamlet, it will not refuse to speak to his beloved son.

### 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*, deal with the issue of transfer of power from one monarch to the next. These plays focus particularly on the uncertainties, conspiracies, betrayals, and upheavals that accompany such shifts in power, and the general sense of nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome 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 brother. Still grieving the old king, no one knows yet what to expect from the new one, and the guards outside the castle are fearful and showing a cautious distrust of the new one.

The supernatural appearance of the ghost on a chilling, hazy, foggy night outside Elsinore Castle indicates immediately that something is wrong in Denmark. The ghost serves to extensive the shadow King Hamlet casts across Denmark, indicating that something about his death has upset the stability of nature. The appearance of the ghost also gives physical form to the fearful anxiety that surrounds the transfer of power after the king's death, seeming to imply that the future of Denmark is a dark and frightening one. Horatio in particular sees the ghost as an ill omen boding violence and turmoil in Denmark's future, comparing it to the supernatural omens that supposedly presaged the assassination of Julius Caesar in ancient Rome (and which Shakespeare had recently represented in *Julius Caesar*). Since Horatio proves to be right, and the appearance of the ghost does presage the later tragedies of the play, the ghost functions as a kind of internal warning of future event implying a disaster not only to but to the spectators but to an individual as well.

The scene is an introduction of the character of Horatio, who, with the exception of the ghost, is the only crucial character in the scene. Without sacrificing the onward course of action or breaking the atmosphere great apprehension, Shakespeare demonstrates that Horatio is a good-humored man who is also educated, intelligent, and dubious of paranormal events. Before he sees the ghost, he insists, "Tush, tush,



'twill not appear" (I.i.29). Even after seeing it, he is reluctant to give full credence to stories of magic and mysticism. When Marcellus says that he has heard that the crowing of the cock has the power to dispel evil powers, so that "[n]o fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm," Horatio replies, "So have I heard, and do in part believe it," emphasizing the "in part" (I.i. 144-146).

But Horatio is not a pessimist, either, and when he sees the ghost, he does not deny its existence—on the contrary, he is submerged with terror. His ability to accept the truth at once even when his prophecy have been proved wrong indicates the fundamental trustworthiness of his character. His reaction to the ghost functions to overcome the audience's sense of disbelief, since for a man as skeptical, intelligent, and trustworthy as Horatio to believe in and fear the ghost is far more impressive and convincing than if its only witnesses had been a pair of superstitious watchmen. In this subtle way, Shakespeare uses Horatio to represent the audience's perspective throughout this scene. By overcoming Horatio's dubious resistance, the ghost gains the audience's suspension of disbelief as well.

## **Act I, Scene II Summary**

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 grieves his brother death he has picked out best of the alternatives but to balance Denmark's mourning to please greatly with his marriage. He mentions that young Fortinbras has written to him, daringly 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 as comes to an end, Claudius turns to Laertes, the son of the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius. Laertes communicates his fancies to return to France, where he was staying before his return to Denmark for Claudius's mauguration. 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 (I.ii.66). Gertrude urges him to cast off his "nocturnal 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 if all fathers die, it means 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 per Hamlet's desire. Gertrude echoes her husband's sentiments, 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 months 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!

Hamlet clamors up 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. Astonished, Hamlet agrees to keep watch with them that night, in the hope that he will be able to speak to the ghost-like image of his father.

## **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 surrounding the castle is

due to thick mist with the aura of great apprehension and jittery, 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 notwithstanding preaches a code 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 apparent. 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 inconsistent 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 succeeded the throne had Claudius not snatched it from him.

The result of all this flagrant 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 worsening relationship with his mother.

His monologue about suicide ("O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!" [I.ii.129-1301]) 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 everlasting suffering in hell. The question of the moral soundness of suicide in an under ably 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 unwedded 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 monologue, religion has failed him, and his twisted family situation can offer him no consolation in this time of great distress when he has completely lost his family: his father died and his mother remarried.

## **Act I, Scenes III - IV Summary**

In Polonius's house, Laertes prepares to leave for France. Bidding his sister, Ophelia, farewell, he cautions her against falling in love with Hamlet, who is, according to Laertes, too far above her by birth to be able to love her honorably. Since Hamlet is responsible not only for his own feelings but for his position in the state, it may be impossible for him to marry her. Ophelia agrees to keep Laertes' advice as a "watchman" close to her heart but urges him not to give her advice that he does not practice himself. Laertes reassures her that he will take care of himself.

Polonius enters to bid his son farewell. He tells Laertes that he must hurry to his ship but then delays him by giving him a great deal of advice about how to behave with integrity and practicality. Polonius

urges Laertes to keep his thoughts to himself, restrain himself from acting on rash desires, and treat people with familiarity but not with inebriety. He advises him to hold on to his old friends but be slow to embrace new friends; to be slow to quarrel but to fight boldly if the need arises; to listen more than he talks; to dress richly but not gaudily; to refrain from borrowing or lending money; and, finally, to be true to himself above all things.

Laertes leaves, bidding farewell to Ophelia once more. Alone with his daughter, Polonius asks Ophelia what Laertes told her before he left. Ophelia says that it was "something touching the Lord Hamlet" (I.ii.89). Polonius asks her about her relationship with Hamlet. She tells him that Hamlet claims to love her. Polonius' facial expressions were that of unrelenting echoes of Laertes' advice, and outflow Ophelia to associate with Hamlet anymore. He tells her that Hamlet has hoaxed her in blaspheming his love, and that she should see through his false vows and repudiate his affections. Ophelia vows to obey.

### **Summary: Act 1, Scenes iv**

It is now night. Hamlet keeps watch outside the castle with Horatio and Marcellus, waiting in the cold for the ghost to appear. Shortly after midnight, trumpets and gunfire sound from the castle, and Hamlet explains that the new king is spending the night overindulging, as is the Danish custom. Nauseated, Hamlet declares that this sort of custom is better broken than kept, saying that the king's merrymaking makes Denmark a stooge among other nations and assuages the Danes' otherwise impressive achievements. Then the ghost appears, and Hamlet calls out to it. The ghost gesticulates Hamlet to follow it out into the night. His companions urge him not to follow, begging him to consider that the ghost might usher him toward harm.

Hamlet himself is unassertive whether his father's bodach is truly the king's spirit or an Beelzebub demon, but he declares that he cares nothing for his life and that, if his soul is perpetual, the ghost can do nothing to harm his soul. He follows after the bodach and disappears into the darkness. Horatio and Marcellus, stupefied, declares that the event bodes ill for the nation. Horatio manifests that heaven will oversee the upshot of Hamlet's come up against with the ghost, but Marcellus says that they should follow and try to fortify him themselves. After a moment, Horatio and Marcellus follow after Hamlet and the ghost.

### **Analysis: Act I, Scenes iii-iv**

"Neither a borrower nor a lender be: For loan oft loses both itself and friend; And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry".

The active, unruly, and unselfish Laertes demarcates powerfully with the introspective Hamlet, becoming one of Hamlet's most important thwarts foils in the play. (A thwart is a character who by demarcation emphasizes the distinct characteristics of another character.) As the plot headways, Hamlet's hesitancy to undertake his father's vengeance will blatantly contrast with Laertes' furious willingness to avenge his father's death (III.iv). Act I, scene iii serves to introduce this contrast. Since the last scene portrayed the bitterly fractured state of Hamlet's family, by comparison, the bustling normalcy of Polonius's household appears all the more striking. Polonius's long speech advising Laertes on how to behave in France is self-consciously paternal, almost excessively so, as if to hammer home the contrast between the fatherly love Laertes enjoys and Hamlet's state of loss and estrangement. Hamlet's conversation with the ghost of his father in Act I, scene v will be a gnarled enumeration of the father-to-son speech, with vastly darker content.

As in the previous scene, when Claudius and Gertrude advised Hamlet to stay in Denmark and fling off his mourning, the third scene develops through a emblem of family members giving one another recommendation, or orders masked as recommendations. While Polonius and Laertes seem to have a relatively normal father-son relationship, their relationships with Ophelia seem somewhat troubling. They each conclude a position of unquestioned authority over her, Polonius treating his daughter as though her feelings are irrelevant ("Affection! pooh! you speak like a green girl") and Laertes treating her as though her judgment is suspect (I.iii.101). Further, Laertes' speech to Ophelia is laced with authorities sexual imagery, referring to her "chaste treasure open" to Hamlet's "unmaster'd importunity" (I.iii.31-32). Combined with the extremely affectionate reciprocity between the brother and sister, this sexual imagery creates an incestuous undertone, echoing the inbreeding of Claudius's marriage to his brother's wife and Hamlet's fervent, conflicting feelings for his mother.

The short interim scene that follows serves a number of important purposes, as Shakespeare begins to construct a amalgamated world out of the various abodes of the play. Whereas the play up to this point has been divided into a number of separate settings, this scene begins to mingle together elements of different settings. Hamlet, for instance, has been analogous with the world inside Elsinore, but he now makes his appearance in the darkness outside it. Likewise, the trepidation outside

the castle so far has been quite separate from the merrymaking inside, but now the sound of Claudius's overruling leaks through the walls and reaches Hamlet and his companions in the night.

Act I, scene iv also continues the development of the motif of the ill health of Denmark. Hamlet views the king's overindulging as a further sign of the state's corruption, commenting that booze makes the bad strands of a person's character inundate all of his or her good qualities. And the appearance of the ghost is again seen as a sign of Denmark's putrefy, this time by Marcellus, who famously declares, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.67).

Finally, the reappearance of the still-silent ghost brings with it a return of the theme of spirituality, truth, and precariousness, or, more specifically, the precariousness of truth in a world of ethereal equivocacy. Since Hamlet does not know what lies beyond death, he cannot tell whether the ghost is truly his father's spirit or whether it is an Beelzebub come from hell to tempt him toward destruction. This uncertainty about the ethereal world will lead Hamlet to tugging considerations of moral truth. These considerations have already been raised by Hamlet's desire to kill himself in Act I, scene ii and will be explored more directly in the scenes to come.

### **Act I, Scene V - Act II, Scene I Summary :**

In the darkness, the ghost speaks to Hamlet, avowing to be his father's spirit, come to rouse Hamlet to revenge his death, a "foul and most unnatural murder" (I.v.25). Hamlet is distressed greatly at the revelation that his father has been murdered, and the ghost tells him that as he slept in his garden, a villain poured poison into his ear—the very villain who now wears his crown, Claudius. Hamlet's worst fears about his uncle are confirmed. "O my prophetic soul!" he cries (I.v.40). The ghost exhorts Hamlet to seek revenge, telling him that Claudius has suborned Denmark and corrupted Gertrude, having taken her from the pure love of her first marriage and depraved her in the foul lust of their lowed union. But the ghost hankers. Hamlet not to act against his mother in any way, telling him to "leave her to heaven" and to the scruples of her own ethics (I.v.86).

As dawn breaks, the ghost disappears. Intensely moved, Hamlet blasphemes to remember and obey the ghost. Horatio and Marcellus arrive upon the scene and deucedly ask Hamlet what has happened. Shaken and extremely perturbed he refuses to tell them, and insists that they swear upon his sword not to divulge what they have seen. He tells them further that he may pretend to be a madman, and he makes them

swear not to give the slightest hint that they know anything about his motives. Three times the ghost's voice echoes from beneath the ground, manifesting. "Swear." Horatio and Marcellus take the oath upon Hamlet's sword, and the three men exit toward the castle. As they leave, Hamlet bewails the responsibility he now carries: "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I.v. 189-190).

### **Summary: Act II, Scene i**

Polonius dispatches his servant Reynaldo to France with money and written notes for Laertes, also ordering him to inquire about and spy on Laertes' personal life. He gives him explicit directions as to how to pursue his investigations, then sends him on his way. As Reynaldo leaves, Ophelia enters, visibly upset. She tells Polonius that Hamlet, scruffy and wild-eyed, has waylaid her. Hamlet grabbed her, held her, and suspired heavily, but did not speak to her. Polonius says that Hamlet must be mad with his love for Ophelia, for she has distanced herself from him ever since Polonius ordered her to do so. Polonius conjectures that this lovesickness might be the cause of Hamlet's moodiness, and he hurries out to tell Claudius of his idea.

### **Analysis: Act I, Scene v-Act II, Scene i**

The ghost's demand for Hamlet to seek revenge upon Claudius is the swilled event of Act I. It sets the main intrigue of the play into motion and leads Hamlet to the idea of feigning madness, which becomes his primary mode of interacting with other people for most of the next three acts, as well as a major device Shakespeare uses to develop his character. Most important, it introduces the idea of retributive justice, the whim that sin must be returned with punishment. Claudius has obligated a sin, and now, to reimpose balance to the kingdom, the sin must be punished. The idea of *namesis* spooks and prods goads characters throughout the play, functioning as an important motivation for action, galvanizing Claudius to guilt, Hamlet to the avoidance of suicide, and Laertes to murderous rage after the deaths of Ophelia and Polonius.

While Hamlet fits a genre called revenge tragedy, loosely following the form popularized by Thomas Kyd's earlier Spanish Tragedy, it is unlike any other revenge tragedy in that it is more concerned with thought and moral questioning than with bloody action. One of the central tensions in the play comes from Hamlet's inability to find any certain moral truths as he works his way toward revenge. Even in his first confront with the ghost, Hamlet questions the appearances of



things around him and worries whether he can trust his sapience, doubting the veracity of his father's ghost and its tragic claim. Because he is ruminative to the point of obsession,' Hamlet's decision to shun madness, intents and purposes in order to keep the other characters from guessing the motive for his behavior, will lead him at times precariously close to actual madness. In fact, it is impossible to say for certain whether or not Hamlet actually does go mad, and, if so, when his act becomes reality. We have already seen that Hamlet, though thoughtful by nature, also has an excitable fleck, which makes him erratic, nervous, and unpredictable. In Act I, scene v, as the ghost disappears, Hamlet seems to have too much nervous energy to deal competently with the curious Horatio and Marcellus. He is already unsure of what to believe and what to do, and the tension of his uncertainty comes out in sprawling wordplay that makes him seem already slightly mad, calling the ghost names such as "truepenny" and "old mole" as it rumbles, "Swear," from beneath the ground H.v.152, I.v. 164).

The short scene that begins Act II is divided into two parts, the first of which involves Polonius's conversation with Reynaldo about Laertes and the second of which involves Polonius's conversation with Ophelia about Hamlet. The scene serves to develop the character of Polonius, who is one of the most man oeuvre figures in Hamlet. Polonius can be interpreted as either a doddering fool or as a cunning puppet master, and he has been portrayed onstage as both. In this scene, as he carefully instructs Reynaldo in the art of poking around, he seems more the puppet master than the fool, though his obvious love of hearing his own voice leads him into some comical misphrasings ("And then, sir, does a this — a does — / what was I about to say? By the mass, I was about to say some / thing. Where did I leave?" [II.i.49-51]).

In his advice to Reynaldo, Polonius unequivocally develops one of the themes of Hamlet, the idea that words can be used to bend and amend the truth. He explains to Reynaldo how to ask leading questions of Laertes' allys and how to phrase questions in a way that will seem innocuous. As with Claudius, who exploited the royal court with his speech in Act I, scene ii, words become a tool for influencing the minds of others and controlling their perception of the truth. Remember that Claudius killed King Hamlet by pouring poison into his ear. Shakespeare continually illustrates that words can function as poison in the ear as well. As the ghost says in Act I, scene v, Claudius has poisoned "the whole ear of Denmark" with his words (I.v.36). The

running imagery of ears and hearing serves as an important symbol of the power of words to exploit the truth.

Polonius's conversation with Ophelia is important for several reasons. First, it illustrates how Hamlet has been behaving since his running up into the ghost : he has made good on his promise to Horatio and is behaving as a madman. Though we learn about it only through her description, his emotional scene with Ophelia may stem in part from his general plan to shanlunacy, and in part from real distress at seeing Ophelia, since she has recently repudiated him. In addition, his mother's marriage to Claudius seems to have shattered his opinion of women in general. The conversation also informs the audience that she has obeyed her father's . orders and broken off her relationship with Hamlet, confirming her deferential nature and dependence on her father to tell her how to behave. And finally, the conversation on genders an important moment for the intrigue of the play: Polonius's sudden idea ; that Hamlet's desolation and strange behavior may be due to his lovesickness for Ophelia. Though Polonius's overly simple theory is obviously insufficient to explain Hamlet's behavior, it does lead to several plot developments in the next few scenes,: including Hamlet's catastrophic face-off with Ophelia and Gertrude and; Claudius's decision to spy on Hamlet.

## **Act II, Scene II Summary**

Within the castle, Claudius and Gertrude welcome Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet's friends from Wittenberg. Increasingly concerned about Hamlet's behavior and his inability to recover from his father's death, the king and queen have his friends to Elsinore in the hope that they might be able to cheer Hamlet out of his or at least discover the cause of it.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to investigate, and the queen orders attendants to take them to her "too much changed" son (II.ii.36).

Polonius enters, announcing the return of the ambassadors whom Claudius sent to Norway. Voltimand and Cornelius enter and describe what took place with the aged and king of Norway: the king Fortinbras for attempting to make war on Denmark, and Fortinbras swore he would never again attack the Danes. The Norwegian king, overjoyed, upon Fortinbras a large, and hankered him to use the army he had assembled to attack the Poles instead of the Danes. He has therefore sent a request back to Claudius that Prince Fortinbras's armies be allowed safe passage through Denmark on their way to attack the Poles.

Relieved to have a war with Fortinbras's army, Claudius declares that he will see to this business later. Voltimand and Cornelius leave.

Turning to the subject of Hamlet, Polonius declares, after a wordy, that the prince is mad with love for Ophelia. He shows the king and queen letters and love poems Hamlet has given to Ophelia, and proposes a plan to test his theory. Hamlet often walks alone through the lobby of the castle, and, at such a time, they could hide behind an arras (a curtain or wall hanging) while Ophelia Hamlet, allowing them to see for themselves whether Hamlet's madness really from his love for her. The king declares that they will try the plan. Gertrude notices that Hamlet is approaching, reading from a book as he walks, and Polonius says that he will speak to the prince. Gertrude and Claudius exit, leaving Polonius alone with Hamlet.

Polonius attempts to converse with Hamlet, who appears; he calls the old man a and answers his questions. But many of Hamlet's seemingly statements hide observations about Polonius's and his old age. Polonius comments that while Hamlet is clearly mad, his replies are often "pregnant" with meaning (II.ii.206). He hurries away, determined to arrange the meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia.

As Polonius leaves, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter, and Hamlet seems pleased to see them. They discuss Hamlet's unhappiness about recent affairs in Denmark. Hamlet asks why they have come. Sheepishly, the two men claim they have come merely to visit Hamlet, but he declares that he knows that the king and queen sent for them. They confess this to be true, and Hamlet says that he knows why: because he has lost all of his joy and descended into a state of in which everything (and everyone) appears and worthless.

Rosencrantz smiles and says he wonders how Hamlet will receive a theatrical that is currently traveling toward the castle. The blow, announcing the arrival of the actors (or "players"). Hamlet tells his friends they are welcome to stay at Elsinore, but that his "uncle-father and aunt-mother" are in his madness. He is mad only some of the time and at other times is.

Polonius enters to announce the arrival of the players, who follow him into the room. Hamlet welcomes them and one of them to give him a speech about the fall of Troy and the death of the Trojan king and queen, Priam and Hecuba. Impressed with the player's speech, Hamlet orders Polonius to see them to guestrooms. He announces that the next night they will hear *The Murder of Gonzago* performed, with an

additional short speech that he will write himself. Hamlet leaves Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and now stands alone in the room.

He immediately begins cursing himself, bitterly commenting that the player who gave the speech was able to a depth of feeling and expression for figures who mean nothing to him, while Hamlet is unable to take action even with his far more powerful motives. He resolves to a for Claudius, forcing the king to watch a play whose intrigue closely resembles the murder of Hamlet's father; if the king is guilty, he thinks, he will surely show some visible sign of guilt when he sees his sin on stage. Then, Hamlet reasons, he will obtain definitive proof of Claudius's guilt. "The play's the thing," he declares, "wherein I'll catch the of the king" (II.ii.581-582).

## **Analysis**

If Hamlet is merely pretending to be mad, as he suggests, he does an astounding job. His is so convincing that many critics contend that his already shatters at the sight of his dead father's ghost. However, the acute and cutting observations he makes while being supposedly mad support the view that he is only pretending. Importantly, he declares, "I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw" (II.ii.361-362). That is, he is only "mad" at certain calculated times, and the rest of the time he knows what is what. But he is certainly confused and upset, and his confusion translates into an extraordinarily state of mind of madness.

This scene, by far the longest in the play, includes several important and furthers the development of some of the play's main themes. The scene contains four main parts: Polonius's conversation with Claudius and Gertrude, which includes the discussion with the; Hamlet's conversation with Polonius, in which we see Hamlet consciously shaming madness for the first time; Hamlet's reunion with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and the scene with the players, followed by Hamlet's concluding on the theme of action. These separate intrigue developments take place in the same location and occur in rapid succession, allowing the audience to compare and contrast their thematic elements.

We have already seen the developing contrast between Hamlet and Laertes. The section involving the Norwegian ambassadors develops another important contrast, this time between Hamlet and Fortinbras. Like Hamlet, Fortinbras is the grieving son of a dead king, a prince whose uncle inherited the throne in his place. But where Hamlet has sunk into and indecision, Fortinbras has devoted himself to the pursuit

of. This contrast will be explored much more thoroughly later in the play. Here, it is important mainly to note that Fortinbras' uncle has forbidden him to attack Denmark but has given him permission to ride through Denmark on his way to attack Poland. This at least suggests the possibility that the King of Norway is trying to trick Claudius into allowing a army into his country. It is notable that Claudius appears indifferent to the fact that a powerful enemy will be riding through his country with a large army in tow. Claudius seems much more worried about Hamlet's madness, indicating that where King Hamlet was a powerful warrior who sought to expand Denmark's power abroad, Claudius is a politician who is more concerned about from within his state.

The arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of the most mystifying figures in *Hamlet*, is another important development. These two characters are explored by all of the members of the royal family and seem to exist in a state of fear that they will go astray the wrong person or give away the wrong secret at the wrong time. One of the strangest qualities of the two men is their extraordinary similarity. In fact, Shakespeare leaves Rosencrantz and Guildenstern almost entirely undifferentiated from one another. "Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern," Claudius says, and Gertrude replies, "Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz," almost as though it does not matter which is which (II.ii,33-34). The two men's questioning of Hamlet is a satire of a Socratic dialogue. They propose possibilities, develop ideas according to impartial argument, and find their attempts to understand Hamlet's behavior entirely baffled by his disobliging replies.

"What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how unbounded in aptitudes in form and moving, how express and praiseworthy in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty; of the world! the perfect example of animals! And yet, to me, what is this expectance of dust?"

The other important event in this scene is the arrival of the players. The presence of players and play-acting within the play points to an important theme: that real life is in certain ways like play-acting. Hamlet to be by the player king's ability to engage with the story he is telling even though it is only an imaginative recreation. Hamlet is prevented from responding to his own situation because he doesn't have certain knowledge about it, but the player king, and theater audiences in general, can respond feelingly even to things they know to be untrue. In fact, most of the time people respond to their real-life situations with

feelings and actions that are not based on certain knowledge. This is what Hamlet refuses to do. His to act like he knows what he's doing when he really doesn't may be as heroic and, or quixotic and impossible. In either case, Hamlet's plan to trap the king by eliciting an emotional response is highly unsound: Claudius's feelings about a play could never be construed as an index of its truth.

## **Act 111, Scene I Summary**

Claudius and Gertrude discuss Hamlet's behavior with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who say they have been unable to learn the cause of his. They tell the king and queen about Hamlet's for the players. Gertrude and Claudius agree that they will see the play that evening. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave, and Claudius orders Gertrude to leave as well, saying that he and Polonius intend to on Hamlet's with Ophelia. Gertrude exits, and Polonius directs Ophelia to walk around the lobby. Polonius hears Hamlet coming, and he and the king hide.

Hamlet enters, speaking thoughtfully and to himself about the question of whether to commit suicide to end the pain of experience: "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (III.i.58). He says that the of life are such that no one would willingly bear them, except that they are afraid of "something after death" (III.i.80). Because we do not know what to expect in the afterlife, we would rather "bear those ills we have," Hamlet says, "than fly to others that we know not of (III.i,83-84). In mid-thought, Hamlet sees Ophelia approaching. Having received her orders from Polonius, she tells him that she wishes to return the tokens of love he has given her. Angrily, Hamlet denies having given her anything; he the dishonesty of beauty, and claims both to have loved Ophelia once and never to have loved her at all, Bitterly commenting on the wretchedness of humankind, he urges Ophelia to enter a rather than become a "breeder of sinners" (III.i. 122-123). He criticizes women for making men behave like monsters and for contributing to the world's dishonesty by painting their faces to appear more beautiful than they are. Working himself into a rage, Hamlet denounces Ophelia, women, and humankind in general, saying that he wishes to end all marriages. As he storms out, Ophelia mourns the "noble mind" that has now into madness (III.i.149).

The king and Polonius from behind the Claudius says that Hamlet's strange behavior has clearly not been caused by love for Ophelia and that his speech does not seem like the speech of. He says that he fears that sits on something dangerous in Hamlet's soul like a bird sits on her egg, and that he fears what will happen when it hatches. He declares

that he will send Hamlet to England, in the hope that a change of scenery might help him get over his troubles. Polonius agrees that this is a good idea, but he still believes that Hamlet's agitation comes from loving Ophelia. He asks Claudius to send Hamlet to Gertrude's chamber after the play, where Polonius can hide again and watch unseen; he hopes to learn whether Hamlet is really mad with love. Claudius agrees, saying that "[n]adness in great ones" must be carefully watched (III.i.187).

## Analysis

"To be, or not to be" is the most famous line in English literature. What does it mean? Why are these words and what follows special?

One reason is that they are an example of Shakespeare's ability to make his characters seem three-dimensional. The audience senses that there is more to Hamlet's words than meets the ear—that there is something behind his words that is never spoken. Or, to put it another way, the audience witnesses signs of something within Hamlet's mind that even he isn't aware of. Hamlet is a fictitious character who seems to possess a mind. How does Shakespeare manage to accomplish this?

In the first place, Hamlet doesn't talk directly about what he's really talking about. When he questions whether it is better "to be, or not to be," the obvious, "Should I kill myself?" The entire strongly suggests that he is toying with suicide and perhaps trying to work up his courage to do it. But at no point does he say that he is in pain or discuss why he wants to kill himself. In fact, he never says "I" or "me" in the entire speech. He's not trying to "express" himself at all; instead, he poses the question as a matter of debate. When he claims that everybody would commit suicide if they weren't uncertain about the afterlife, it sounds as if he's making an argument to convince an imaginary listener about an abstract point rather than directly addressing how the question applies to him. Now, it's perfectly ordinary for characters in plays to say something other than what they mean to other characters (this suggests that they are consciously hiding their true motives), but Hamlet does it when he's talking to himself. This creates the general impression that there are things going on in Hamlet's mind that he can't think about directly.

While we're on the subject of what's going on inside Hamlet's mind, consider his encounter with Ophelia. This conversation, closely watched by Claudius and Polonius, is, in fact, a test. It's supposed to establish whether Hamlet's madness stems from his lovesickness over Ophelia. Before we, the audience, see this encounter, we already think

we know more than Claudius does: we know that Hamlet is only acting crazy, and that he's doing it to hide the fact that he's plotting against (or at least investigating) his uncle. Therefore, it can't be true that he's acting mad because of his love for Ophelia. But witnessing Hamlet's encounter with her throws everything we think we know into question.

Does Hamlet mean what he says to Ophelia? He says that he did love her once but that he doesn't love her now. There are several problems with concluding that Hamlet says the opposite of what he means in order to appear crazy. For one thing, if he really does love her, this is unnecessarily self-destructive behavior. It's unnecessary because it doesn't very much; that is, it doesn't make Claudius suspect him less. His professions of love make him appear fickle, or emotionally withdrawn, rather than crazy.

Is Hamlet really crazy or just pretending? He announced ahead of time that he was going to act crazy, so it's hard to think that he (coincidentally) really went mad right after saying so. But his behavior toward Ophelia is both self-destructive and with emotional intensity. It doesn't obviously further his plans. Moreover, his bitterness against Ophelia, and against women in general, with his general discontentedness about the state of the world, the same discontentedness that he expresses when he thinks no one is watching. There is a passionate intensity to his unstable behavior that keeps us from viewing it as fake.

Perhaps it is worthwhile to ask this question: if a person in a rational state of mind decides to act as if he is crazy, to abuse the people around him regardless of whether he loves those people or hates them, and to give free expression to all of his most thoughts, when he starts to carry those actions out, will it even be possible to say at what point he stops pretending to be crazy and starts actually being crazy?

## **Act III, Scene II Summary**

That evening, in the castle hall now doubling as a theater, Hamlet anxiously lectures the players on how to act the parts he has written for them. Polonius shuffles by with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Hamlet dispatches them to hurry the players in their preparations. Horatio enters, and Hamlet, pleased to see him, praises him heartily, expressing his affection for and high opinion of Horatio's mind and manner, especially Horatio's qualities of self-control and reserve. Having told Horatio what he learned from the ghost—that Claudius murdered his father—he now asks him to watch Claudius carefully during the play so that they might compare their impressions of his



behavior afterward. Horatio agrees, saying that if Claudius shows any signs of guilt, he will detect them.

The trumpets play a Danish march as the audience of lords and ladies begins streaming into the room. Hamlet warns Horatio that he will begin to act strangely. Sure enough, when Claudius asks how he is, his response seems quite insane: "Excellent, i' faith; of the chameleon's dish: I eat the air, promise" (III.ii.84—86), Hamlet asks Polonius about his history as an actor and Ophelia with a string of puns.

The players enter and act out a brief, silent version of the play to come called a "dumbshow." In the dumbshow, a king and queen display their love. The queen leaves the king to sleep, and while he is sleeping, a man murders him by pouring poison into his ear. The murderer tries to seduce the queen, who gradually accepts his advances.

The players begin to enact the play in full, and we learn that the man who kills the king is the king's nephew. Throughout, Hamlet keeps up a running commentary on the characters and their actions, and continues to Ophelia with sexual references. When the murderer pours the poison into the sleeping king's ear, Claudius rises and cries out for light. Chaos ensues as the play comes to a sudden, the torches are lit, and the king flees the room, followed by the audience. When the scene quiets, Hamlet is left alone with Horatio.

Hamlet and Horatio agree that the king's behavior was telling. Now extremely excited, Hamlet continues to act and, speaking glibly and inventing little poems. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive to tell Hamlet that he is wanted in his mother's chambers. Rosencrantz asks again about the cause of Hamlet's "distemper," and Hamlet angrily accuses the pair of trying to play him as if he were a musical pipe. Polonius enters to escort Hamlet to the queen. Hamlet says he will go to her in a moment and asks for a moment alone. He steels himself to speak to his mother, resolving to be brutally honest with her but not to lose control of himself: "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (III.ii.366).

## Analysis

In the first two scenes of Act III, Hamlet and Claudius both traps to catch one another's secrets: Claudius spies on Hamlet to discover the true nature of his madness, and Hamlet attempts to "catch the of the king" in the theater (III.i.582). The play-within-a-play tells the story of Gonzago, the Duke of Vienna, and his wife, Baptista, who marries his murdering nephew, Lucianus. Hamlet believes that the play is an

opportunity to establish a more reliable basis for Claudius's guilt than the claims of the ghost. Since he has no way of knowing whether to believe a member of the spirit world, he tries to determine whether Claudius is guilty by reading his behavior for signs of a psychological state of guilt.

Although Hamlet at the success of his interpreting Claudius's interruption isn't as simple as it seems. In the first place, Claudius does not react to the dumbshow, which exactly mimics the actions of which the ghost accuses Claudius. Claudius reacts to the play itself, which, unlike the dumbshow, makes it clear that the king is murdered by his nephew. Does Claudius react to being confronted with his own crimes, or to a play about uncle-killing sponsored by his crazy nephew? Or does he simply have indigestion?

Hamlet appears more in control of his own behavior in this scene than in the one before, as shown by his effortless manipulations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and his frank conversation with Horatio. He even expresses admiration and affection for Horatio's calm level-headedness, the lack of which is his own weakest point: "Give me that man / That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him / In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart, / As I do thee" (III.ii. 64-67). In this scene he seems to prove that he is not insane after all, given the effortlessness with which he alternates between wild, erratic behavior and focused, sane behavior. He is excited but coherent during his conversation with Horatio before the play, but as soon as the king and queen enter, he begins to act, a sign that he is only pretending. His only questionable behavior in this scene arises in his crude comments to Ophelia, which show him capable of real cruelty. He has crossed rational bounds, and his every comment is laced with sexual. For instance, she comments, "You are keen, my lord, you are keen," complimenting him on his sharp intellect, and he replies, "It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge" (III.ii.227-228). His interchange with Ophelia is a mere to the passionate rage he will unleash on Gertrude in the next scene.

### **Act III, Scene III Summary**

Elsewhere in the castle, King Claudius speaks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Badly shaken by the play and now considering Hamlet's madness to be dangerous, Claudius asks the pair to escort Hamlet on a voyage to England and to depart immediately. They agree and leave to make preparations. Polonius enters and reminds the king of his plan to hide in Gertrude's room and observe Hamlet's confrontation with her.

He promises to tell Claudius all that he learns. When Polonius leaves, the king is alone, and he immediately expresses his guilt and grief over his sin. A brother's murder, he says, is the oldest sin and "hath the primal eldest curse upon't" (III.iii.37). He longs to ask for forgiveness, but says that he is unprepared to give up that which he gained by committing the murder, namely, the crown and the queen. He falls to his knees and begins to pray.

Hamlet slips quietly into the room and steels himself to kill the unseeing Claudius. But suddenly it occurs to him that if he kills Claudius while he is praying, he will end the king's life at the moment when he was seeking forgiveness for his sins, sending Claudius's soul to heaven. This is hardly an adequate revenge, Hamlet thinks, especially since Claudius, by killing Hamlet's father before he had time to make his last confession, ensured that his brother would not go to heaven. Hamlet decides to wait, resolving to kill Claudius when the king is sinning—when he is either drunk, angry, or lustful. He leaves. Claudius rises and declares that he has been unable to pray sincerely: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below" (III.iii.96).

## Analysis

Thus ethics does make cowards of us all; And thus the native tinge of aspiration. Is frailed o'er with the pale cast of thought; And enterprises of great pith and moment, With this regard, their currents turn awry, And lose the name of action.

In Act III, scene iii, Hamlet finally seems ready to put his desire for revenge into action. He is satisfied that the play has proven his uncle's guilt. When Claudius prays, the audience is given real certainty that Claudius murdered his brother: a full, spontaneous confession, even though nobody else hears it. This only heightens our sense that the climax of the play is due to arrive. But Hamlet waits.

On the surface, it seems that he waits because he wants a more radical revenge. Critics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge have been horrified by Hamlet's words here—he completely oversteps the bounds of Christian morality in trying to damn his opponent's soul as well as kill him. But apart from this ultraviolent posturing, Hamlet has once again avoided the imperative to act by involving himself in a problem of knowledge. Now that he's satisfied that he knows Claudius's guilt, he wants to know that his punishment will be sufficient. It may have been difficult to prove the former, but how can Hamlet ever hope to know the fate of Claudius's immortal soul?

Hamlet poses his desire to damn Claudius as a matter of fairness: his own father was killed without having cleansed his soul by praying or confessing, so why should his murderer be given that chance? But Hamlet is forced to admit that he doesn't really know what happened to his father, remarking "how his audit stands, who knows, save heaven?" (III.iv.82). The most he can say is that "in our circumstance and course of thought / 'Tis heavy with him" (III.iv.83-84). The Norton Shakespeare paraphrases "in our circumstance and course of thought" as "in our indirect and limited way of knowing on earth." Having proven his uncle's guilt to himself, against all odds, Hamlet suddenly finds something else to be uncertain about.

At this point, Hamlet has gone beyond his earlier need to know the facts about the crime, and he now craves metaphysical knowledge, knowledge of the afterlife and of God, before he is willing to act. The audience has had plenty of opportunity to see that Hamlet is fascinated with philosophical questions. In the case of the "to be, or not to be" monologue, we saw that his phantificating can be a way for him to avoid thinking about or acknowledging something more immediately important (in that case, his urge to kill himself). Is Hamlet using his speculations about Claudius's soul to avoid thinking about something in this case? Perhaps the task he has set for himself—killing another human being in cold blood—is too much for him to face. Whatever it is, the audience may once again get the sense that there is something more to Hamlet's behavior than meets the eye. That Shakespeare is able to convey this sense is a remarkable achievement in itself, quite apart from how we try to explain what Hamlet's unacknowledged motives might be.

### **Act III, Scene IV Summary**

In Gertrude's chamber, the queen and Polonius wait for Hamlet's arrival. Polonius plans to hide in order to shoop on Gertrude's skirmish with her son, in the hope that doing so will enable him to determine the cause of Hamlet's bizarre and threatening behavior. Polonius urges the queen to be harsh with Hamlet when he arrives, saying that she should berate him for his recent behavior. Gertrude agrees, and Polonius hides behind a drapery, or dossier.

Hamlet storms into the room and asks his mother why she has sent for him. She says that he has offended his father, meaning his stepfather, Claudius. He interrupts her and says that she has offended his father, meaning the dead King Hamlet, by marrying Claudius. Hamlet accosts her with an almost violent intensity and declares his

intention to make her fully aware of the profundity of her sin. Fearing for her life, Gertrude cries out. From behind the drapery, Polonius calls out for help. Hamlet, realizing that someone is behind the drapery and suspecting that it might be Claudius, cries, "How now! a rat?" (III.iv.22). He draws his sword and stabs it through the dosser, killing the unseen Polonius. Gertrude asks what Hamlet has done, and he replies, "Nay, I know not: / Is it the king?" (III.iv.24). The queen says his action was a "rash and bloody" deed, and Hamlet replies that it was almost as rash and bloody as murdering a king and marrying his brother (III.iv.26-28). Disbelieving, the queen exclaims, "As kill a king!" and Hamlet replies that she heard him correctly (III.iv.29).

Hamlet lifts the drapery and discovers Polonius's body: he has not killed the king and achieved his revenge but has murdered the relatively innocent Polonius. He bids the old man farewell, calling him an "intruding fool" (III.iv.30). He turns to his mother, declaring that he will wring her heart. He shows her a picture of the dead king and a picture of the current king, bitterly comments on the superiority of his father to his uncle, and asks her furiously what has driven her to marry a rotten man such as Claudius. She pleads with him to stop, saying that he has turned her eyes onto her soul and that she does not like what she sees there. Hamlet continues to boycott her and rail against Claudius, until, suddenly, the ghost of his father again appears before him.

Hamlet speaks to the dialect, but Gertrude is unable to see it and believes him to be mad. The ghost intones that it has come to remind Hamlet of his purpose, that Hamlet has not yet killed Claudius and must achieve his revenge. Noting that Gertrude is amazed and unable to see him, the ghost asks Hamlet to utter monotonously and repetitively with her. Hamlet describes the ghost, but Gertrude sees nothing, and in a moment the ghost disappears. Hamlet tries desperately to convince Gertrude that he is not mad but has merely counterfeited madness all along, and he urges her to forsake Claudius and regain her good moral sense. He urges her as well not to reveal to Claudius that his madness has been an act. Gertrude, still shaken from Hamlet's furious excoriation of her, agrees to keep his secret. He bids her goodnight, but, before he leaves, he points to Polonius's corpse and declares that heaven has "punished me with this, and this with me" (III.iv.158). Hamlet reminds his mother that he must sail to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he says he will regard with suspicion, as though they were poisonous snakes, since he assumes that their loyalties are with Claudius, not with him. Dragging Polonius's body behind him, Hamlet leaves his mother's room.

## Analysis

What is Hamlet trying to do in his confrontation with his mother? It is possible that he wants her to confirm her knowledge of Claudius's crime, to provide further proof of his guilt. Or it may be that Hamlet wants to know whether she was complicit in the crime. Or he may feel that he needs her on his side if he is to achieve justice. While all of these are possibilities, what Hamlet actually does is urge his mother to repent choosing Claudius over his own father. More specifically, he repeatedly demands that she avoid Claudius's bed. Actually, he's much more specific: he tells her not to let Claudius arouse her by fondling her neck, not to stay within his semen-infested sheets, and other shockingly graphic details.

This is another point in the play where audiences and readers have felt that there is more going on in Hamlet's brain than we can quite put our fingers on. Sigmund Freud wrote that Hamlet harbors an unconscious desire to sexually enjoy his mother. Freud maintained that all men unconsciously desire their mothers in this way, and he called this the "Oedipus Complex," after the character in Sophocles' play who unwittingly murders his father and has several children by his own mother. Whether or not Freud was right about this is as difficult to prove as any of the problems that Hamlet worries about, but his argument in regard to Hamlet is quite remarkable. He says that while Oedipus actually enacts this fantasy, Hamlet only betrays the unconscious desire to do so. Hamlet is thus a quintessentially modern person, because he has repressed desires.

Though Gertrude's speech in this scene is largely limited to brief reactions to Hamlet's lengthy indictment of her, it is our most revealing look at her character. As the scene progresses, Gertrude goes through several states of feeling: she is haughty and accusatory at the beginning, then afraid that Hamlet will hurt her, shocked and upset when Hamlet kills Polonius, overwhelmed by fear and panic as Hamlet detains her, and disbelieving when Hamlet sees the ghost. Finally, she is apologetic toward her son and apparently willing to take his part and help him. For Gertrude, then, the scene progresses as a sequence of great shocks, each of which weakens her resistance to Hamlet's condemnation of her behavior. Of course, Gertrude is convinced mainly by Hamlet's insistence and power of feeling, illustrating what many readers have felt to be her central characteristic: her tendency to be dominated by powerful men and her need for men to show her what to think and how to feel.

wonders aloud how he will be able to handle this public crisis without damaging his hold on Denmark. He tells Gertrude that they must ship Hamlet to England at once and find a way to explain Hamlet's misdeed to the court and to the people. He calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, tells them about the murder, and sends them to find Hamlet.

### **Summary: Act IV, Scene ii**

Elsewhere in Elsinore, Hamlet has just finished disposing Polonius's body, commenting that the corpse has been "safely stowed" (IV.ii.1). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear and ask what he has done with the body. Hamlet refuses to give them a straight answer, instead saying, "The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body" (IV.ii.25-26). Feigning offense at being questioned, he accuses them of being spies in the service of Claudius. He calls Rosencrantz a "sponge... that soaks up the king's countenance, his rewards, his authorities," and warns him that "when he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again" (IV.ii.1 1-19). At last he agrees to allow Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort him to Claudius.

### **Analysis: Act IV, Scenes i-ii**

The short first scene of Act IV centers around Gertrude's treachery of her son, turning him in to the king after having promised to help him. While she does keep her promise not to reveal that Hamlet was only pretending to be insane, the immediate and frank way in which she tells Claudius about Hamlet's behavior and his murder of Polonius implies that she sees herself as cognate to the king rather than to her son. Whether Gertrude really believes Hamlet to be mad, or has simply recognized that her best interest lies in allying herself with Claudius regardless of what she believes, is impossible to determine from this scene and is largely a matter of one's personal interpretation of the events. Whatever the case, it is Gertrude's speech to Claudius that cements the king's secret plan to have Hamlet electorated in England.

As brief as it is, Act IV, scene i is a glorious example of Shakespeare's skill at developing characters, illustrated by the subtle development of Claudius. Where most of the other male characters in the play, including Hamlet, King Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras, are infatuated with themes of honor, moral balance, and chastening justice, Claudius is a selfish, ambitious king who is more concerned with maintaining his own power and staving off political danger than achieving justice through his rule. His response to Gertrude's revelation that Hamlet has killed Polonius is extremely telling. Rather than

considering that Gertrude might have been in danger, he immediately remarks that had he been in the room, he would have been in danger. Hamlet must be sent away from Denmark, he thinks, not as punishment for committing murder but because he represents a danger to Claudius. And as soon as he hears of the murder, Claudius's mind begins working to find a way to characterize the killing so that it does not seem like a political crisis to his court and to the people of Denmark. To do this, he says, will require all his "majesty and skill" (IV.i.30). In this scene and the scenes to follow, Shakespeare creates in Claudius a convincing depiction of a conniving, ambitious politician. In this way, Claudius emerges as a figure of powerful contrast to the more outspoken men in the play, including Laertes, Fortinbras, and Horatio, and the far more morally conscious Prince Hamlet.

Hamlet's murder of Polonius at the end of Act III is one of the most disturbing moments in the play. If it was previously possible to consider Hamlet a "hero" or an idealized version of a human being, it is no longer possible after he kills Polonius. His sensitive, reflective nature—the trait that constantly interfered with his ability to take revenge on Claudius—now disappears in the vigil of its violent opposite: a impetuous, murderous explosion of activity. Hamlet leaps to the conclusion that Claudius is behind the dossier, or else he simply lashes out thoughtlessly. In any case, Hamlet's moral superiority to Claudius is now thrown into question. He has killed Polonius just as Claudius killed Hamlet's father, the only differences being that Hamlet's murder was not contrived and was not committed out of jealousy or ambition. Hamlet also eases his conscience with the fact that Polonius was dishonestly spying on Hamlet at the moment when he was killed. But the result of Hamlet's deed is very similar to that of Claudius's: Laertes and Ophelia have lost a father, just as Hamlet himself did.

Now, Hamlet hides the body. But rather than being overwhelmed with contrition, as we might expect of a hero who has committed such a terrible mistake, he seems craze, desperate, and self-righteous, especially in his censure of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Throughout Act IV, scene ii, as in the play-within-a-play scene (Act III, scene ii), Hamlet's biting, ironic wit is combined with his rash, brash trace, and his feigned madness seems very close to the real thing. Though Hamlet has many admirable qualities, scenes such as this one serve as powerful reminders that we are not meant to take the prince as an unqualified hero.



## **Act IV, Scenes III- IV Summary: Act IV, Scene iii**

The king speaks to a group of attendants, telling them of Polonius's death and his intention to send Hamlet to England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear with Hamlet, who is under guard. Pressed by Claudius to reveal the location of Polonius's body, Hamlet is by turns insane, coy, and clever, saying that Polonius is being eaten by worms, and that the king could send a messenger to find Polonius in heaven or seek him in hell himself. Finally, Hamlet reveals that Polonius's body is under the stairs near the castle lobby, and the king dispatches his attendants to look there. The king tells Hamlet that he must leave at once for England, and Hamlet fervently agrees. He exits, and Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to ensure that he boards the ship at once. Alone with his thoughts, Claudius states his hope that England will obey the sealed orders he has sent with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The orders call for Prince Hamlet to be put to death.

## **Summary: Act IV, Scene iv**

On a nearby plain in Denmark, young Prince Fortinbras marches at the head of his army, traveling through Denmark on the way to attack Poland. Fortinbras orders his captain to go and ask the King of Denmark for permission to travel through his lands. On his way, the captain encounters Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern on their way to the ship bound for England. The captain informs them that the Norwegian army rides to fight the Poles. Hamlet asks about the basis of the conflict, and the man tells him that the armies will fight over "a little patch of land / That hath in it no profit but the name" (IV.iv.98-99). Boggle by the thought that a bloody war could be fought over something so insignificant, Hamlet marvels that human beings are able to act so violently and purposefully for so little gain. By comparison, Hamlet has a great deal to gain from seeking his own bloody revenge on Claudius, and yet he still delays and fails to act toward his purpose. Loathed with himself for having failed to gain his revenge on Claudius, Hamlet declares that from this moment on, his thoughts will be bloody,

## **Analysis: Act IV, Scenes iii-iv**

As we saw in Act IV, scene ii, the murder of Polonius and the subsequent atrocious encounter with his mother seem to leave Hamlet in a panic-stricken, unstable frame of mind, the mode in which his excitable nature seems very similar to actual madness. He taunts Claudius, toward whom his hostility is now barely disguised, and makes light of Polonius's murder with word games. He also pretends to

be thrilled at the idea of sailing for England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

At some level he is prepared for what is to come. His farewell to his mother proved as much, when he told her that he would trust his old schoolfellows as if they were "adders fang'd," that is, poisonous snakes (III.iv.185.2). But although Hamlet suspects his friends' perfidy, he may not fully realize the maliciousness of Claudius's designs for him. Claudius's intrigue in asking the English to execute Hamlet reveals the extent to which he now fears Hamlet: whether Hamlet is sane or mad, he is a danger to Claudius, and Claudius wishes him to die. It is also revealing that one of Claudius's considerations in seeking to have Hamlet murdered in far-off England, rather than merely executing him in Denmark, is that he is beloved by the common people of Denmark—"loved of the distracted horde," as Claudius says (IV.iii.4). Again, where King Hamlet was a brave warrior, King Claudius is a guileful politician, constantly working to strengthen his own power, elude threats to his throne, and manipulate those around him to his own advantage.

Act IV, scene iv restores the focus of the play to the theme of human action. Hamlet's encounter with the Norwegian captain serves to remind the reader of Fortinbras's presence in the world of the play and gives Hamlet another example of the will to action that he lacks. Earlier, he was amazed by the player's evocation of powerful feeling for Hecuba, a legendary character who meant nothing to him (II.ii). Now, he is awestruck by the willingness of Fortinbras to devote the energy of an entire army, probably wasting hundreds of lives and risking his own, to reclaim a worthless scrap of land in Poland. Hamlet considers the moral ambiguity of Fortinbras's action, but more than anything else he is impressed by the forcefulness of it, and that forcefulness becomes a kind of ideal toward which Hamlet decides at last to strive. "My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" he declares (IV.iv.9.56). Of course, he fails to put this exclamation into action, as he has failed at every previous turn to achieve his revenge on Claudius. "My thoughts be bloody," Hamlet says. Tellingly, he does not say "My deeds be bloody."

### **Act IV, Scenes V-VI Summary: Act IV, Scene v**

Gertrude and Horatio discuss Ophelia. Gertrude does not wish to see the melancholy girl, but Horatio says that Ophelia should be pitied, explaining that her grief has made her disordered and incongruous. Ophelia enters. Adorned with flowers and singing strange songs, she

seems to have gone mad. Claudius enters and hears Ophelia's ravings, such as, "They say the owl was a baker's daughter" (IV.v.42). He says that Ophelia's grief stems from her father's death, and that the people have been suspicious and disturbed by the death as well: "muddied, / Thick and insalubrious in their thoughts and whispers / For good Polonius' death" (IV.v.77-79). He also mentions that Laertes has secretly sailed back from France.

A loud noise echoes from somewhere in the castle. Claudius calls for his guards, and a gentleman enters to warn the king that Laertes has come with a mob of common people. The mob calls Laertes "lord," according to the gentlemen, and the people whisper that "Laertes shall be king" (IV.v. 102-106). A furious Laertes storms into the hall, outraged in his desire to avenge his father's death. Claudius attempts to mitigate him by frankly acknowledging that Polonius is dead. Gertrude nervously adds that Claudius is innocent in it. When Ophelia reenters, obviously insane, Laertes sprints again into rage. Claudius claims that he is not responsible for Polonius's death and says that Laertes' desire for revenge is a credit to him, so long as he seeks revenge upon the proper person. Claudius convinces Laertes to hear his version of events, which he says will answer all his questions. Laertes agrees, and Claudius seconds his desire to achieve justice in the aftermath of Polonius's death: "Where th' offence is, let the great axe fall" (IV.v.213).

### **Summary: Act IV, Scene vi**

In another part of the castle, Horatio is introduced to a pair of sailors bearing a letter for him from Hamlet. In the letter, Hamlet says that his ship was captured by pirates, who have returned him to Denmark. He asks Horatio to escort the sailors to the king and queen, for they have messages for them as well. He also says that he has much to tell of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Horatio takes the sailors to the king and then follows them to find Hamlet, who is in the countryside near the castle.

### **Analysis: Act IV, Scenes v-vi**

As we have seen, one of the important themes of *Hamlet* is the connection between the health of a state and the moral lawfulness of its ruler. Claudius is rotten, and, as a result, Denmark is rotten too. Here, at the beginning of Act IV, scene v, things have palpably darkened for the nation: Hamlet is gone, Polonius is dead and has been buried in secret, Ophelia is raving mad, and, as Claudius tells us, the common people are disturbed and murmuring among themselves. This baleful

turn of events leads to the abridged, miniature rebellion that accompanies Laertes' return to Denmark. Acting as the wronged son operating with open fury, Laertes has all the moral lawfulness that Claudius lacks the lawfulness that Hamlet has mulct through his murder of Polonius and his delay in avenging his father's death.

Laertes is Hamlet's best foil throughout the play, and in this scene the contrast between the two, each of whom has a dead father to avenge, reaches its peak. (A third figure with a dead father to avenge, Fortinbras, lurks on the horizon.) Whereas Hamlet is reflective and has difficulty acting, Laertes is active and has no use for thought. He has no interest in moral concerns, only in his consuming desire to avenge Polonius. When Claudius later asks Laertes how far he would go to avenge his father, Laertes replies that he would slit Hamlet's throat in the church (IV.vii.98). This statement, indicating his willingness to murder Hamlet even in a sacred place of worship, brings into sharp relief the contrast between the two sons: recall that Hamlet declined to kill Claudius as the king knelt in prayer (III.iii).

As befits a scene full of anger and dark thoughts, Act IV, scene v brings a repetition of the motif of insanity, this time through the character of Ophelia, who has truly been driven mad by the death of her father. Shakespeare has demonstrated Ophelia's chaste dependence on the men in her life; after Polonius's sudden death and Hamlet's subsequent exile, she finds herself abruptly without any of them. Ophelia's lunatic ravings reveal a great deal about the nature of her mind at this stage in her young life. She is obsessed with death, beauty, and an ambiguous sexual desire, expressed in startlingly frank imagery:

"Young men will do't, if they come to't, By Cock, they are to blame. Quoth she 'Before you tumbled me, You promised me to wed.'" (IV.v.59-62)

Some readers have interpreted passages such as these, combined with Hamlet's sexually crystal-clear deride of Ophelia in Act III, scene ii, as evidence that Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet was sexual in nature. Of course, this is impossible to conclude with any certainty, but from these lines it is apparent that Ophelia is scuffle with sexuality and that her sexual feelings, discouraged by her father, her brother, and her society, are close to the vanguard of her mind as she slips into insanity. But, most important, Ophelia's insanity is designed to contrast strongly with Hamlet's, differing primarily in its lawfulness: Ophelia does not dissimulate madness to achieve an end, but is truly driven mad by external pressures. Many of the worst elements in Denmark, including madness, fear, and rebellion, so far have been kept hidden under

various disguises, such as Hamlet's falsification and Claudius's court revelry, and are now beginning to emerge into the open.

After exiling Hamlet to England in Act IV, scene iv, Shakespeare now returns him to Denmark only two scenes later through the unorthodox contrivance—an improbable or unexpected device or character introduced to resolve a situation in a work of fiction or drama—of the pirate attack. The short Act IV, scene vi is primarily devoted to plot development, as Horatio reads Hamlet's letter narrating his adventure. The story of the pirate attack has little to do with the main themes of the play, but it does provide an interesting variation on the idea of retributive justice, since instead of punishing someone for doing something wrong, Hamlet states his intention to reward the pirates for the right they have done in returning him to Denmark. "They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy," he says, "but they knew what they did: I am to do a good turn for them" (IV.vi. 17-19). Additionally, Hamlet's letter features a return of the motif of ears and hearing, as the prince tells Horatio that "I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb," an open reference to the poison poured into King Hamlet's ear by the murderous Claudius (IV.vi.21).

## **Act IV, Scene VII Summary**

As Horatio speaks to the sailors, Claudius and a calmer Laertes discuss Polonius's death. Claudius explains that he acted as he did, burying Polonius secretly and not punishing Hamlet for the murder, because both the common people and the queen love Hamlet very much. As a king and as a husband, he did not wish to upset either of them. A messenger enters with the letter from Hamlet to Claudius, which informs the king that Hamlet will return tomorrow. Laertes is pleased that Hamlet has come back to Denmark, since it means that his revenge will not be delayed.

Claudius agrees that Laertes deserves to be revenged upon Hamlet, and he is disposed to encourage Laertes to kill Hamlet, since Hamlet's turbulent behavior has made him a threat to Claudius's reign. The disreputable king begins to think of a way for Laertes to ensure his revenge without creating any appearance of foul play. He recalls that Hamlet has been jealous in the past of Laertes' gallantry with a sword, which was recently praised before all the court by a Frenchman who had seen him in combat. The king speculates that if Hamlet could be tempted into a duel with Laertes, it might provide Laertes with the chance to kill him. Laertes agrees, and they settle on a plan. Laertes will use a sharpened sword rather than the customary dull fencing

blade. Laertes also proposes to poison his sword, so that even a scratch from it will kill Hamlet. The king concocts a backup plan as well, proposing that if Hamlet succeeds in the duel, Claudius will offer him a poisoned cup of wine to drink from in celebration.

Gertrude enters with tragic news. Ophelia, mad with grief, has drowned in the river. Anguished to have lost his sister so soon after his father's death, Laertes flees the room. Claudius summons Gertrude to follow. He tells her it was nearly impossible to quiet Laertes' rage, and worries that the news of Ophelia's death will reawaken it.

## Analysis

The scheming Claudius encounters Laertes at approximately the same moment as he learns that Hamlet has survived and returned to Denmark. Claudius's behavior throughout this scene, as in Act IV, scene v, shows him at his most devious and calculating. Shakespeare shows Claudius's mind working overtime to derail Laertes' anger, which is thus far the greatest challenge his kingship has faced. In Act IV, scene v, Claudius decided that the way to appease Laertes was by appearing frank and honest. When Laertes asked furiously where his father was, Claudius replied, "Dead" (IV.v. 123). Additionally, in a masterful stroke of characterization, Shakespeare has the nervous Gertrude, unable to see Claudius's plan, follow this statement with a quick insistence on Claudius's innocence: "But not by him" (IV.v.123).

In this scene, Claudius has clearly decided that he can appease Laertes' anger and dispense with Hamlet in a single stroke: he hits upon the idea of the duel in order to use Laertes' rage to ensure Hamlet's death. The resulting plan brings both the theme of revenge and the repeated use of traps in the plot to a new height—Laertes and Claudius concoct not one but three covert mechanisms by which Hamlet may be killed.

Ophelia's tragic death occurs at the worst possible moment for Claudius. As Laertes flees the room in, Claudius follows, not to console or even to join him in mourning but because, as he tells Gertrude, it was so difficult to appease his anger in the first place. Claudius doesn't have time to worry about the victims of tragedy—he is too busy dealing with threats to his own power.

The image of Ophelia drowning amongst her garlands of flowers has proved to be one of the most images in the play, represented countless times by artists and poets throughout the centuries. Ophelia is associated with flower imagery from the beginning of the play. In her

first scene, Polonius presents her with a violet; after she goes mad, she sings songs about flowers; and now she drowns amongst long streams of them. The delicate beauty of the flowers resembles Ophelia's own delicate beauty, as well as her sexuality and her, doomed innocence.

## **Act V, Scene I Summary**

In the churchyard, two gravediggers shovel out a grave for Ophelia. They argue whether Ophelia should be buried in the churchyard, since her death looks like a suicide. According to religious doctrine, suicides may not receive Christian burial. The first remains, who speaks cleverly and mischievously, asks the second remains a riddle: "What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?" (V.i.46-47). The second gravedigger answers that it must be the gallows-maker, for his frame outlasts a thousand tenants. The first gravedigger corrects him, saying that it is the gravedigger, for his "houses" will last until Doomsday.

Hamlet and Horatio enter at a distance and watch the gravediggers work. Hamlet looks with wonder at the skulls they shovel to make room for the fresh grave and speculates darkly about what occupations the owners of these skulls served in life: "Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his mannerisms now... ?" (V.i.90-91). Hamlet asks the gravedigger whose grave he digs, and the gravedigger spars with him verbally, first claiming that the grave is his own, since he is digging it, then that the grave belongs to no man and no woman, because men and women are living things and the occupant of the grave will be dead. At last he admits that it belongs to one "that was a woman sir; but, rest her soul, she's dead" (V.i. 146). The gravedigger, who does not recognize Hamlet as the prince, tells him that he has been a gravedigger since King Hamlet defeated the elder Fortinbras in battle, the very day on which young Prince Hamlet was born. Hamlet picks up a skull, and the remains tells him that the skull belonged to Yorick, King Hamlet's jester. Hamlet tells Horatio that as a child he knew Yorick and is appalled at the sight of the skull. He realizes forcefully that all men will eventually become dust, even great men like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Hamlet imagines that Julius Caesar has disintegrated and is now part of the dust used to patch up a wall.

Suddenly, the funeral procession for Ophelia enters the churchyard, including Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and many mourning courtiers. Hamlet, wondering who has died, notices that the funeral rites seem "maimed," indicating that the dead man or woman took his or her own

life (V.i.242). He and Horatio hide as the procession approaches the grave. As Ophelia is laid in the earth, Hamlet realizes it is she who has died. At the same moment, Laertes becomes aggravated with the priest, who says that to give Ophelia a proper Christian burial would lay the dead. Laertes leaps into Ophelia's grave to hold her once again in his arms. Grief-stricken and writhed, Hamlet bursts upon the company, declaring in excruciate fury his own love for Ophelia. He leaps into the grave and fights with Laertes, saying that "forty thousand brothers / Could not, with all their quantity of love, / make up my sum" (V.i.254-256). Hamlet cries that he would do things for Ophelia that Laertes could not dream of—he would eat a crocodile for her, he would be buried alive with her. The antagonists are pulled apart by the funeral company. Gertrude and Claudius declare that Hamlet is mad. Hamlet storms off, and Horatio follows. The king urges Laertes to be patient, and to remember their plan for revenge.

## Analysis

The gravediggers are designated as "clowns" in the stage directions and cue, and it is important to note that in Shakespeare's time the word clown referred to a pastoral or peasant, and did not mean that the person in question was funny or wore a costume.

The gravediggers represent a humorous type commonly found in Shakespeare's plays: the clever commoner who gets the better of his social superior through wit. At the Globe Theater, this type of character may have particularly appealed to the "groundlings," the members of the audience who could not afford seats and thus stood on the ground. Though they are usually figures of happiness, in this scene the gravediggers assume a rather macabre tone, since their jests and jibes are all made in a cemetery, among bones of the dead. Their conversation about Ophelia, however, furthers an important theme in the play: the question of the moral legitimacy of suicide under theological law. By giving this serious subject a darkly comic interpretation, Shakespeare essentially makes a fantastical parody of Hamlet's earlier "To be, or not to be" monologue (III.i), indicating the collapse of every lasting value in the play into uncertainty and absurdity.

Hamlet's confrontation with death, manifested primarily in his discovery of Yorick's skull, is, like Ophelia's drowning, an enduring image from the play. However, his solemn theorizing explodes in grief and rage when he sees Ophelia's funeral procession, and his assault on Laertes offers a glimpse of what his true feelings for Ophelia might



once have been. Laertes' passionate embrace of the dead Ophelia again advances the exquisite motif of oedipal love that hangs over their brother-sister relationship. Interestingly, Hamlet never expresses a sense of guilt over Ophelia's death, which he indirectly caused through his murder of Polonius. In fact, the only time he even comes close to taking responsibility for Polonius's death at all comes in the next and last scene, when he apologizes to Laertes before the duel, blaming his "madness" for Polonius's death. This seems wholly inadequate, given that Hamlet has previously claimed repeatedly only to be feigning madness. But by the same token, to expect moral completeness from a character as troubled as Hamlet might be unrealistic. After all, Hamlet's defining characteristics are his pain, his fear, and his self-conflict. Were he to take full responsibility for the consequences of Polonius's death, he would probably not be able to withstand the psychological torment of the resulting guilt.

A notable minor motif that is developed in this scene is Hamlet's delusion with the physicality of death. Though many of his thoughts about death concern the spiritual consequences of dying—for instance, vex in the afterlife—he is nearly as fascinated by the physical decomposition of the body. This is nowhere more evident than in his preoccupation with Yorick's skull, when he envisions physical features such as lips and skin that have decomposed from the bone. Recall that Hamlet previously commented to Claudius that Polonius's body was at supper, because it was being eaten by worms (IV.iii). He is also fascinated by the equalizing effect of death and decomposition: great men and beggars both end as dust. In this scene, he imagines dust from the decomposed corpse of Julius Caesar being used to patch a wall; earlier, in Act IV, he noted, "A man may fish with the worm that have eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm," a metaphor by which he illustrates "how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (IV.iii.26-31).

## **Act V, Scene II Summary**

The next day at Elsinore Castle, Hamlet tells Horatio how he plotted to overcome Claudius's scheme to have him murdered in England. He replaced the sealed letter carried by the unsuspecting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which called for Hamlet's execution, with one calling for the execution of the bearers of the letter—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves. He tells Horatio that he has no sympathy for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who betrayed him and catered to Claudius, but that he feels sorry for having behaved with such hostility toward Laertes. In Laertes' desire to avenge his father's

death, he says, he sees the mirror image of his own desire, and he promises to seek Laertes' good favor.

Their conversation is interrupted by Osric, a foolish courtier. Osric tries to flatter Hamlet by agreeing with everything Hamlet says, even when he contradicts himself; in the space of seconds, he agrees first that it is cold, then that it is hot. He has come to tell them that Claudius wants Hamlet to fence with Laertes and that the king has made a wager with Laertes that Hamlet will win. Then Osric begins to praise Laertes gushingly, though Hamlet and Horatio are unable to determine what point he is trying to make with his overly elaborate proclamations. Finally, a lord enters and asks Hamlet if he is ready to come to the match, as the king and queen are expecting him. Against Horatio's advice, Hamlet agrees to fight, saying that "all's ill here about my heart," but that one must be ready for death, since it will come no matter what one does (V.ii.222). The court marches into the hall, and Hamlet asks Laertes for forgiveness, claiming that it was his madness, and not his own will, that murdered Polonius. Laertes says that he will not forgive Hamlet until an elder, an expert in the fine points of honor, has advised him in the matter. But, in the meantime, he says, he will accept Hamlet's offer of love.

They select their foils (debilitate swords used in fencing), and the king says that if Hamlet wins the first or second hit, he will drink to Hamlet's health, then throw into the cup a valuable gem (actually the poison) and give the wine to Hamlet. The duel begins. Hamlet strikes Laertes but declines to drink from the cup, saying that he will play another hit first. He hits Laertes again, and Gertrude rises to drink from the cup. The king tells her not to drink, but she does so anyway. In an aside, Claudius murmurs, "It is the poison'd cup: it is too late" (V.ii.235). Laertes remarks under his breath that to wound Hamlet with the poisoned sword is almost against his conscience. But they fight again, and Laertes scores a hit against Hamlet, drawing blood. Wrangling, they manage to exchange swords, and Hamlet wounds Laertes with Laertes' own blade.

The queen falls. Laertes, poisoned by his own sword, declares, "I am justly kill'd with my own treachery" (V.ii.318). The queen moans that the cup must have been poisoned, calls out to Hamlet, and dies. Laertes tells Hamlet that he, too, has been slain, by his own poisoned sword, and that the king is to blame both for the poison on the sword and for the poison in the cup. Hamlet, in a fury, runs Claudius through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies crying out for help. Hamlet tells Horatio

that he is dying and exchanges a last forgiveness with Laertes, who dies after exonerating Hamlet.

The sound of marching echoes through the hall, and a shot rings out nearby. Osric declares that Fortinbras has come in conquest from Poland and now fires a volley to the English ambassadors. Hamlet tells Horatio again that he is dying, and urges his friend not to commit suicide in light of all the tragedies, but instead to stay alive and tell his story. He says that he wishes Fortinbras to be made King of Denmark; then he dies.

Fortinbras marches into the room accompanied by the English ambassadors, who announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio says that he will tell everyone assembled the story that led to the gruesome scene now on display. Fortinbras orders for Hamlet to be carried away like a soldier.

## **Analysis**

In the final scene, the violence, so long delayed, erupts with confusing speed. Characters drop one after the other, poisoned, thrust, and, in the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, executed, as the theme of revenge and justice reaches its conclusion in the moment when Hamlet finally kills Claudius. In the moments before the duel, Hamlet seems peaceful, though also quite sad. He says that he feels ill in his heart, but he seems reconciled to the idea of death and no longer troubled by fear of the supernatural. Exactly what has caused the change in Hamlet is unclear, but his desire to attain Laertes' forgiveness clearly represents an important shift in his mental state. Whereas Hamlet previously was obsessed almost wholly with himself and his family, he is now able to think sympathetically about others. He does not go quite so far as to take responsibility for Polonius's death, but he does seem to be acting with a broader perspective after the shock of Ophelia's death. Hamlet's death at the hands of Laertes makes his earlier declaration over Polonius's corpse, that God has chosen "to punish me with this and this with me," prophetic (III.iv.174). His murder of Polonius does punish him in the end, since it is Laertes' vengeful rage over that murder that leads to Hamlet's death.

That death is neither heroic nor shameful, according to the moral logic of the play. Hamlet achieves his father's vengeance, but only after being spurred to it by the most extreme circumstances one might consider possible: watching his mother die and knowing that he, too, will die in moments.

The arrival of Fortinbras effectively poses the question of political legitimacy once again. In marked contrast to the corrupted and weakened royal family lying dead on the floor, Fortinbras clearly represents a strong-willed, capable leader, though the play does not address the question of whether his rule will restore the moral authority of the state.

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### IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS

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1. O that this too solid flesh would melt, Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God! How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world! Fie on't! O fie! 'tis an unweeded garden, That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature Possess it merely. That it should come to this! But two months dead!— nay, not so much, not two: So excellent a king; that was, to this, Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother, That he might not beteem the winds of heaven Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth! Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him As if increase of appetite had grown By what it fed on: and yet, within a month,— Let me not think on't,—Frailty, thy name is woman!— A little month; or ere those shoes were old With which she followed my poor father's body Like Niobe, all tears;—why she, even she,— 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! It is not, nor it cannot come to good; But break my heart,—for I must hold my tongue.

The above is Hamlet's first important soliloquy, that occurs in Act I, scene ii (129-158). Hamlet speaks these lines after enduring the unpleasant scene at Claudius and Gertrude's court, then being asked by his mother and stepfather not to return to his studies at Wittenberg but to remain in Denmark, presumably against his wishes. Here, Hamlet thinks for the first time about suicide (desiring his flesh to "melt," and wishing that God had not made "self-annihilation" a sin), saying that the world is "disgusted, stale, flat, and unprofitable." In other words, suicide seems like a desirable alternative to life in a painful world, but Hamlet feels that the option of suicide is closed to him because it is prohibited by religion. Hamlet then goes on to describe the causes of his pain, specifically his intense disgust at his mother's marriage to Claudius. He describes the haste of their marriage, noting that the shoes his mother wore to his father's funeral were not worn out before her marriage to Claudius. He compares Claudius to his father (his father was "so excellent a king" while Claudius is a thyroid "satyr"). As he runs through his description of their marriage, he touches upon the

4. I have of late—but wherefore I know not,—lost all my merriment, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my temperament that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a arid jetty; this most excellent awring, the air, look you, this brave overhanging the heaven, this majestically roof agenized with golden fire,—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is 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! the beauty of the world! The epitome of animals! And yet, to me, what is this apotheosis of dust?

In these lines, Hamlet speaks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act II, scene ii (287-298), explaining the melancholy that has afflicted him since his father's death. Perhaps moved by the presence of his former university companions, Hamlet essentially engages in a rhetorical exercise, building up an elaborate and glorified picture of the earth and humanity before declaring it all merely a "apotheosis of dust." He examines the earth, the air, and the sun, and rejects them as "a sterile promontory" and "a foul and contagion gathering of vapors." He then describes human beings from several perspectives, each one adding to his extortion of them. Human beings' reason is noble, their faculties infinite, their forms and movements fast and admirable, their actions angelic, and their understanding godlike. But, to Hamlet, humankind is merely dust. This motif, an expression of his obsession with the physicality of death, recurs throughout the play, reaching its height in his speech over Yorick's skull. Finally, it is also telling that Hamlet makes humankind more impressive in "apprehension" (meaning understanding) than in "action." Hamlet himself is more prone to apprehension than to action, which is why he delays so long before seeking his revenge on Claudius.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Consider Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's role in the play. Why might Shakespeare have created characters like this? Are they there for comic relief, or do they serve a more serious purpose? Why does the news of their deaths come only after the deaths of the royal family in Act V, as if this news were not anticlimactic? Is it acceptable for Hamlet to treat them as he does? Why or why not?

2. Analyze the use of descriptions and images in Hamlet. How does Shakespeare use descriptive language to enhance the visual possibilities of a stage production? How does he use imagery to create a mood of tension, suspense, fear, and despair ?

3. Analyze the use of comedy in *Hamlet*, paying particular attention to the cremains, Osric, and Polonius. Does comedy serve merely to relieve the tension of the tragedy, or do the comic scenes serve a more serious confined purpose as well?

4. Suicide is an important theme in *Hamlet*. Discuss how the play treats the idea of suicide morally, religiously, and beautifully, with particular attention to Hamlet's two important statements about suicide: the "O, that this too solid flesh would melt" soliloquy (I.ii.129-158) and the "To be, or not to be" monologue (III.i.56-88). Why does Hamlet believe that, although capable of suicide, most human beings choose to live, despite the cruelty, pain, and injustice of the world?

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### **SUGGESTED**

1. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* — Harold Bloom
2. *Shakespearean Tragedy* — A.C. Bradley
3. "Hamlet and His Problems" In *the Sacred Wood* — T.S. Eliot
4. *Hamlet in Purgatory* — Stephen Greenblatt

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