Hamlet

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hamlet is in many ways a product of the Reformation, in which Protestants broke away from the until-then dominant Catholic Church, as well as the skeptical humanism of late Renaissance Northern Europe, which held that there were limits on human knowledge. Hamlet's constant anxiety about the difference between appearance and reality, as well as his concerns about and difficulties with religion (the sinfulness of suicide, the unfairness that killing a murderer while the murderer is praying would result in sending the murder to heaven) can be seen as directly emerging from the breaks in religion and thought brought on by the Reformation and Renaissance humanist thought.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hamlet falls into the tradition of revenge tragedy, in which the central character's quest for revenge usually results in general tragedy. This tradition existed from Roman times (the Roman playwright Seneca was well known for writing revenge tragedies). The most famous revenge tragedy of Shakespeare's day before Hamlet was Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and some believe that Kyd wrote an earlier play of Hamlet, now lost, which scholars call the *Ur-Hamlet*. The story of Hamlet is based on a Danish revenge story first recorded by Saxo Grammaticus in the 1100s. In these stories, a Danish prince fakes madness in order to take revenge on his uncle, who had killed the prince's father and married his mother. But Shakespeare modified this rather straightforward story and filled it with dread and uncertainty—Hamlet doesn't just feign madness; he seems at times to actually be crazy.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*
- **When Written:** Between 1599 - 1601
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1603 (First Quarto), 1604 (Second Quarto).
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance (1500 - 1660)
- **Genre:** Tragic drama; Revenge tragedy
- **Setting:** Denmark during the late middle ages (circa 1200), though characters in the play occasionally reference things or events from the Elizabethan Age (circa 1500).
- **Climax:** The climax of *Hamlet* is a subject of debate. Some say it occurs when Hamlet kills Claudius, others when Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius while Claudius is praying, others when Hamlet kills Polonius, and still others when Hamlet vows to focus on revenge at the end of Act 4.

EXTRA CREDIT

Shakespeare or Not? There are some who believe Shakespeare wasn't educated enough to write the plays attributed to him. The most common anti-Shakespeare theory is that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and used Shakespeare as a front man because aristocrats were not supposed to write plays. Yet the evidence supporting Shakespeare's authorship far outweighs any evidence against. So until further notice, Shakespeare is still the most influential writer in the English language.

PLOT SUMMARY

A ghost resembling the recently deceased King of Denmark stalks the ramparts of Elsinore, the royal castle. Terrified guardsmen convince a skeptical nobleman, Horatio, to watch with them. When he sees the ghost, he decides they should tell Hamlet, the dead King's son. Hamlet is also the nephew of the present King, Claudius, who not only assumed his dead brother's crown but also married his widow, Gertrude. Claudius seems an able King, easily handling the threat of the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras. But Hamlet is furious about Gertrude's marriage to Claudius. Hamlet meets the ghost, which claims to be the spirit of his father, murdered by Claudius. Hamlet quickly accepts the ghost's command to seek revenge.

Yet Hamlet is uncertain if what the ghost said is true. He delays his revenge and begins to act half-mad, contemplate suicide, and becomes furious at all women. The Lord Chamberlain, Polonius, concludes that Hamlet's behavior comes from lovesickness for Ophelia, Polonius's daughter. Claudius and Gertrude summon two of Hamlet's old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to find out what's wrong with him. As

Polonius develops a plot to spy on a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia, Hamlet develops a plot of his own: to have a recently arrived troupe of actors put on a play that resembles Claudius's alleged murder of Old Hamlet, and watch Claudius's reaction.

Polonius and Claudius spy on the meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet, during which Hamlet flies into a rage against women and marriage. Claudius concludes Hamlet neither loves Ophelia nor is mad. Seeing Hamlet as a threat, he decides to send him away. At the play that night, Claudius runs from the room during the scene of the murder, proving his guilt. Hamlet gets his chance for revenge when, on the way to see Gertrude, he comes upon Claudius, alone and praying. But Hamlet holds off—if Claudius is praying as he dies then his soul might go to heaven. In Gertrude's room, Hamlet berates his mother for marrying Claudius so aggressively that she thinks he might kill her. Polonius, who is spying on the meeting from behind a tapestry, calls for help. Hamlet thinks Polonius is Claudius, and kills him.

Claiming that he wants to protect Hamlet from punishment for killing Polonius, Claudius sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But Claudius sends with the three men a letter asking the King of England to execute Hamlet. Meanwhile, Polonius' son, Laertes, returns to Denmark from France to get revenge for his father's death. Claudius convinces Laertes the death is Hamlet's fault. When a pirate attack allows Hamlet to escape back to Denmark, Claudius comes up with a new plot in which a supposedly friendly duel between Hamlet and Laertes will actually be a trap, because Laertes's blade will be poisoned. As a backup, Claudius will also poison some wine that he'll give to Hamlet if he wins.

Meanwhile, grief drives Ophelia insane, and she drowns in what seems to be a suicide. Hamlet arrives just as the funeral is taking place. He claims to love Ophelia and scuffles with Laertes. Back at the castle, Hamlet tells Horatio he switched the letter sent to England: now Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will be executed. He also says he is ready to die, and agrees to participate in the fencing match.

During the match, Gertrude drinks to Hamlet's success from the poisoned glass of wine before Claudius can stop her. Laertes then wounds Hamlet with the poisoned blade, but in the scuffle they exchange swords and Hamlet wounds Laertes. Gertrude falls, saying the wine was poisoned, and dies. Laertes reveals Claudius's treachery. Hamlet kills Claudius, and exchanges forgiveness with Laertes. Laertes dies. As Hamlet dies, he hears the drums of Fortinbras's army marching through Denmark after a battle with the Polish, and says Fortinbras should be the next King of Denmark. Fortinbras enters with the Ambassadors from England, who announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio tells Hamlet's story as Hamlet's body is taken offstage with the honors due a soldier.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Hamlet — The prince of Denmark, son of Gertrude, nephew of Claudius, and heir to the throne. Hamlet is a deep thinker, focusing on impossible to answer questions about religion, death, truth, reality, and the motivations of others. He even obsessively contemplates the fact that he obsessively contemplates. He loves Ophelia and his mother, but his mother's marriage to Claudius makes him mistrust and even hate all women. He detests all forms of deception, yet plots and pretends to be insane. At times he even seems to *be* insane. Despite his obsessive thinking, he can act impulsively, as when he kills Polonius. Hamlet is an enigma, a man so complex even he doesn't completely know himself. In other words, he seems like a real person—which has made Hamlet the most well known character in English literature.

Claudius — Hamlet's uncle, and Gertrude's second husband. Power-hungry and lustful, Claudius murders his brother in order to take the throne of Denmark and marry his wife. Claudius is a great talker and schemer. He easily charms the royal court into accepting his hasty marriage to his brother's widow, and comes up with plot after plot to protect his ill-gained power. He is the consummate politician, yet his hold on power is always slightly tenuous. At various times he does show guilt for killing his brother, and his love of Gertrude seems genuine.

Gertrude — Hamlet's mother. After Hamlet's father dies, Gertrude quickly marries Hamlet's uncle, Claudius. Though she is a good woman and loving mother, she is weak-willed and unable to control her personal passions. Whether because of lust, love, or a desire to maintain her status as queen, she marries Claudius, though this is clearly a breach of proper morals. Though some critics have argued that Gertrude might have been involved in Claudius's plot to kill Old Hamlet, evidence in the text suggests that she is unaware of and uninvolved in the plot.

Polonius — The Lord Chamberlain of Denmark, and the father of Laertes and Ophelia, whom he loves deeply and wishes to protect, even to the point of spying on them. Polonius is pompous and long-winded, and has a propensity to scheme, but without Hamlet's or Claudius's skill. He is very aware of his position and role, and is always careful to try to be on the good side of power.

Ophelia — Polonius's daughter, Laertes's sister, and Hamlet's love. As a woman, Ophelia must obey the men around her and is forced by her father first to stop speaking to Hamlet and then to help spy on him. Ophelia's loyalty to her father and resulting estrangement from Hamlet ultimately causes her to lose her mind. Though Laertes and Fortinbras are the characters usually seen as Hamlet's "doubles," Ophelia functions as a kind of

female double of Hamlet—mirroring Hamlet's half-madness with her own full-blown insanity, and takes his obsession with suicide a step further and actually commits it.

The Ghost — The spirit that claims to be Hamlet's dead father, forced to endure the fires of Purgatory because he was murdered by Claudius in his sleep without being able to ask forgiveness for his sins. The Ghost orders Hamlet to get revenge against Claudius, but spare Gertrude. Evidence in the play suggests that the Ghost really is the spirit of Hamlet's father, though Hamlet himself wonders at times if the Ghost might be a demon in disguise.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — Friends of Hamlet's from Wittenberg who help Claudius and Gertrude try and figure out the source of Hamlet's melancholy. Hamlet sees that the two are, essentially, spying on him, and turns on them. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern aren't the smartest fellows, but they do seem to mean well, and the announcement of their deaths at the end of the play helps to drive home the absurd and bloody lengths to which vengeance can extend once it is unleashed.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Laertes — Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother. Laertes is hotheaded and passionate, and loves his family deeply. As a man prone to action rather than thought who also seeks to revenge the death of his father, he serves as a "double" to Hamlet, providing numerous points of comparison.

Horatio — A university friend of Hamlet's at Wittenberg, Horatio becomes Hamlet's confidant in his effort to take revenge against Claudius. Hamlet values Horatio's self-restraint: Horatio is the character in *Hamlet* least moved by passion.

Fortinbras — A prince of Norway, whose father, Old Fortinbras, died in battle with Old Hamlet and lost lands to Denmark. Fortinbras seeks to revenge his father's death and retake the lost lands. As another son seeking revenge for his father, Fortinbras offers another "double" of Hamlet.

Osric — A foppish nobleman who flatters everyone more powerful than him and speaks in very flowery language.

First Player — The leader of the troupe of actors who come to Elsinore.

Gravediggers — Two commoners employed to dig the graves in the local churchyard.

Marcellus — A guardsman of Elsinore.

Barnardo — A guardsman of Elsinore.

Francisco — A guardsman of Elsinore.

Voltemand — A Danish ambassador to Norway.

Cornelius — A Danish ambassador to Norway.

Reynaldo — A servant of Polonius.

Yorick — A jester at Elsinore in Hamlet's youth.

Captain — An officer in Fortinbras's army.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ACTION AND INACTION

Hamlet fits in a literary tradition called the revenge play, in which a man must take revenge against those who have in some way wronged him. Yet *Hamlet* turns the revenge play on its head in an ingenious way: Hamlet, the man seeking revenge, can't actually bring himself to take revenge. For reason after reason, some clear to the audience, some not, he delays. Hamlet's delay has been a subject of debate from the day the play was first performed, and he is often held up as an example of the classic "indecisive" person, who thinks to much and acts too little. But *Hamlet* is more complicated and interesting than such simplistic analysis would indicate. Because while it's true that Hamlet fails to act while many other people do act, it's not as if the actions of the other characters in the play work out. Claudius's plots backfire, Gertrude marries her husband's murderer and dies for it, Laertes is manipulated and killed by his own treachery, and on, and on, and on. In the end, *Hamlet* does not provide a conclusion about the merits of action versus inaction. Instead, the play makes the deeply cynical suggestion that there is only one result of *both* action and inaction—death.

APPEARANCE VS. REALITY

In Act 1, scene 2 of *Hamlet*, Gertrude asks why Hamlet is still in mourning two months after his father died: "Why seems it so particular with thee?" Hamlet responds: "Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not 'seems.'" (1.2.75-76). The difference between "seems" (appearance) and "is" (reality) is crucial in *Hamlet*. Every character is constantly trying to figure out what the other characters think, as opposed to what those characters are *pretending* to think. The characters try to figure each other out by using deception of their own, such as spying and plotting.

But Hamlet takes it a step further. He not only investigates other people, he also peers into his own soul and asks philosophical and religious questions about life and death. Hamlet's obsession with what's real has three main effects: 1) he becomes so caught up in the search for reality that he ceases to be able to act; 2) in order to prove what's real and

what isn't Hamlet himself must hide his "reality" behind an "appearance" of madness; 3) the more closely Hamlet looks, the less real and coherent *everything* seems to be. Many analyses of *Hamlet* focus only on the first effect, Hamlet's indecisiveness. But the second two effects are just as important. The second shows that the relationship between appearance and reality is indistinct. The third suggests that the world is founded on fundamental inconsistencies that most people overlook, and that it is this *failure* to recognize inconsistencies that allows them to act. Hamlet's fatal flaw isn't that he's wrong to see uncertainty in everything, but that he's right.

WOMEN

There are two important issues regarding women in *Hamlet*: how Hamlet sees women and women's social position. Hamlet's view of women is decidedly dark. In fact, the few times that Hamlet's pretend madness seems to veer into actual madness occur when he gets furious at women. Gertrude's marriage to Claudius has convinced Hamlet that women are untrustworthy, that their beauty is a cover for deceit and sexual desire. For Hamlet, women are living embodiments of appearance's corrupt effort to eclipse reality.

As for women's social position, its defining characteristic is powerlessness. Gertrude's quick marriage to Claudius, though immoral, is also her only way to maintain her status. Ophelia has even fewer options. While Hamlet *waits* to seek revenge for his father's death, Ophelia, as a woman, *can't* act—all she can do is wait for Laertes to return and take *his* revenge. Ophelia's predicament is symbolic of women's position in general in Hamlet: they are completely dependent on men.

RELIGION, HONOR, AND REVENGE

Every society is defined by its codes of conduct—its rules about how to act and behave. There are many scenes in *Hamlet* when one person tells another how to act: Claudius lectures Hamlet on the proper show of grief; Polonius advises Laertes on practical rules for getting by at university in France; Hamlet constantly lectures himself on what he should be doing. In *Hamlet*, the codes of conduct are largely defined by religion and an aristocratic code that demands honor and revenge if honor has been soiled.

But as Hamlet actually begins to pursue revenge against Claudius, he discovers that the codes of conduct themselves don't fit together. Religion actually opposes revenge, which would mean that taking revenge could endanger Hamlet's own soul. In other words, Hamlet discovers that the codes of conduct on which society is founded are contradictory. In such a world, *Hamlet* suggests, the reasons for revenge become muddy, and the idea of justice confused.

POISON, CORRUPTION, DEATH

In medieval times people believed that the health of a nation was connected to the legitimacy of its king. In *Hamlet*, Denmark is often described as poisoned, diseased, or corrupt under Claudius's leadership. As visible in the nervous soldiers on the ramparts in the first scene and the commoners outside the castle who Claudius fears might rise up in rebellion, even those who don't know that Claudius murdered Old Hamlet sense the corruption of Denmark and are disturbed. It is as if the poison Claudius poured into Old Hamlet's ear has spread through Denmark itself.

Hamlet also speaks in terms of rot and corruption, describing the world as an "unweeded garden" and constantly referring to decomposing bodies. But Hamlet does not limit himself to Denmark; he talks about all of *life* in these disgusting images. In fact, Hamlet only seems comfortable with things that *are* dead: he reveres his father, claims to love Ophelia once she's dead, and handles Yorick's skull with tender care. No, what disgusts him is *life*: his mother's sexuality, women wearing makeup to hide their age, worms feeding on a corpse, people lying to get their way. By the end of the play, Hamlet argues that death is the one true reality, and he seems to view all of life as "appearance" doing everything it can—from seeking power, to lying, to committing murder, to engaging in passionate and illegitimate sex—to hide from that reality.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

YORICK'S SKULL

Hamlet is not a very symbolic play. In fact, the only object that one can easily pick out as a symbol in the play is the skull of Yorick, a former court jester, which Hamlet finds with Horatio in the graveyard near Elsinore in Act 5, scene 1. As Hamlet picks up the skull and both talks to the deceased Yorick and to Horatio about the skull, it becomes clear that the skull represents the inevitability of death. But what is perhaps most interesting about the skull as a symbol is that, while in most plays, a symbol means one thing to the audience and another to the characters in the novel or play, in *Hamlet* it is Hamlet himself who recognizes and explains the symbolism of Yorick's skull. Even this symbol serves to emphasize Hamlet's power as a character: he is as sophisticated as his audience.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Hamlet* published in 1992.

Act 1, scene 2 Quotes

Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not "seems."

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker), Gertrude

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.79

Explanation and Analysis

Hamlet says this line to his mother Gertrude when she inquires why he "seems" to be so dismayed. He corrects her word choice and points out that his sadness is an accurate reflection of his emotional state after his father's death—rather than an external performance of mourning.

The difference between the truth of interior emotions ("is") and exterior presentations in a social context ("seems") is a critical theme throughout Hamlet. Many of the characters hide their true intentions in order to plot against others, and Hamlet's actions, in particular, are the subject of much skepticism. As he becomes increasingly irrational and distraught, both the other characters and the audience of Shakespeare's work are tasked to determine whether these behaviors are appearances or realities.

Hamlet has encapsulated this central concern of the play, here, within the correction of a single verb. The passage points out that while other characters may be more likely to attribute actions to displays of emotion, Hamlet holds a commitment to actual sentiment. Of course, we also must be skeptical of such a line: Perhaps Hamlet's insistence on the "is" actually reveals just how carefully he coordinates his speeches. But regardless of whether we trust him, it is clear that he and Shakespeare have put high stakes on linguistic precision and the coherence between belief and act.

O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew.

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.33-34

Explanation and Analysis

Hamlet is left alone at this point and enters into his first soliloquy. He discourses on the spite he feels for the other characters and ponders the merits of suicide.

Though the question of suicide is most famously explored in Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech, it appears already at this early moment in the play. Shakespeare, then, does not present Hamlet's depressive rumination as so much the result of specific plot elements, but rather as an inherent component of his personality. In this case, the language remains more metaphorical and less assertive than it will be later.

What Hamlet desires is not to actively destroy his flesh but rather to let it passively become liquid through some process: It does not matter to him how this is done—melting, thawing, or inexplicable transformation—are all acceptable routes. He simply bids the natural world to allow this to occur in some way. (Associating suicide with water imagery also foreshadows Ophelia's drowning later in the play.) The use of the interjection "O," the conditional construction with "would," and the repetition of "too too" all give the line a mournful and apathetic tone. Thus the passage positions the limits of human life as an important thematic conceit, while giving us a starting point of relative passivity toward the idea—which will come to contrast with Hamlet's more assertive musings.

Frailty, thy name is woman!

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker), Gertrude

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.150

Explanation and Analysis

In his soliloquy, Hamlet expresses disgust for Gertrude's actions in the wake of King Hamlet's death. The protagonist complains of her lustful nature and her moral weakness.

Shakespeare develops in this phrase a clever rhetorical strategy—one that has endured and been used in texts that range from James Joyce's *Ulysses* to a Supreme Court dissension to a Pokémon episode. The literal meaning of the sentence is that woman are frail, but by inverting the order of the sentence, he forefronts the accusative quality. Then by making the subject the "name" of the quality, he implies that frailty is epitomized and embodied by the female character. According to this logic, it is not just that some

women are frail, but rather that they are synonymous with frailty.

Despite the rhetorical power of the statement, it is also a gross generalization—something of which Shakespeare would have certainly been aware. Hamlet rapidly switches from examining the specific case of Gertrude to making a general comment on her entire sex, which points to his tendency for rash action and totalizing language. We see, then, the playwright giving linguistic power to his characters, even as he also displays their shortcomings in rationality and sensibility.

> Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral bak'd meats
> Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker), Claudius, Gertrude, Horatio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.87-88

Explanation and Analysis

Hamlet continues to rant about Claudius and Gertrude's marriage. Here, he complains to Horatio about how rapidly their wedding took place after his father's death.

To do so, Hamlet uses a grotesque image of the same food being served at the funeral and the marriage. What were "bak'd meats" (baked meats) at his father's death are allowed to chill and then be repurposed for Hamlet's father's widow and brother. This is, of course, not a literal description of what occurred with the meals at each ceremony, but rather a rhetorical way for Hamlet to stress the speed and discourtesy of his mother's actions. That Hamlet chooses the exclamation "thrift, thrift" brings a darkly economic dimension into the text. The term indicates that Gertrude and Claudius reused the meats in order to save expenses—which would be an offensive choice in the wake of her husband's death. Thus it is not just speed that falls under critique here, but rather the casual and desensitized way they have acted. The passage stresses both the importance of social norms in Hamlet's world, but also how flagrantly they have been violated in the specific events of the play.

Act 1, scene 3 Quotes

> This above all — to thine own self be true;
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Related Characters: Polonius (speaker), Laertes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.84-86

Explanation and Analysis

As Laertes departs for France, his father Polonius gives an extensive speech on how he should comport himself abroad. Here, he discusses how Laertes should represent his interior beliefs to others.

These lines are actually some of the most commonly misinterpreted from all of Shakespeare's work. Looked at in isolation, they seem to recommend that Laertes act with integrity toward others and represent himself perfectly in accord with his interiority. Polonius contends that if he is faithful to his "ownself" internally, then his outward nature "to any man" will be equally honest and correct. Yet earlier in the same speech Polonius tells Laertes, "Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue"—which advises extensive self-control, in which a "character" is monitored and "thoughts" are left un-vocalized when it suits the thinker. Polonius, then, is speaking these later lines with a deep sense of irony: one should be true only in so far as one is in control of one's thoughts and actions.

It is essential to be on the lookout throughout Hamlet for these types of ironies, particularly when characters are reflecting on questions of performance and integrity. Quite often a few lines in isolation will seem earnest, but when given more context will actually present the speaker as lying or jesting. Thus by professing that there is an internal self to whom Laertes could be true, Polonius only complicates the stakes of identity—and shows even more so how the self is the result of performance and ever-changing construction.

Act 1, scene 4 Quotes

> Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Related Characters: Marcellus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.4.100

Explanation and Analysis

Marcellus says this line after watching Hamlet run after the Ghost of his father. He observes, darkly, the negative state of both Hamlet's mind and the corresponding political situation of Denmark.

Though the line is said in response to Hamlet's emotional outburst and irrational behavior, it does not place blame on him directly. Rather, it presents his action to be the result of an environmental factor: it is the general "state of Denmark" that holds the "rotten" quality. Yet at the same time Mercellus leaves the source entirely ambiguous with the subject "Something." That something could be a person like Claudius, or perhaps Hamlet's madness, or perhaps the Ghost itself, who is driving Hamlet to ruinous action.

Thus Shakespeare's work leaves undisclosed the precise source of the tragedy: if a more conventional tale would give us specific heroes and villains who are deemed either good or "rotten," the triumph of *Hamlet* is to leave uncertain who exactly is "rotten." The line also notably brings a political element to bear on the actions, drawing attention to how Hamlet and his father both have a direct effect on the "state." Though this is a less-often analyzed strain of the play, it is important to recall the geopolitical developments that form the backdrop of the text. Here, we see foreshadowed the decay of Denmark and the way it will be vulnerable to foreign encroachment.

Act 1, scene 5 Quotes

O, villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker), Claudius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.5.113

Explanation and Analysis

As Hamlet converses with the Ghost, he curses both Gertrude and Claudius. Here, he exclaims on how Claudius is deceptive and presents an aura of goodwill despite his evil intent.

It's worthwhile to track some of Hamlet's repeated speech formations: once more he uses the interjection "O" to stress the emotional intensity of the phrase, and his triple invocation of "villain" is also characteristic of how he will often repeat words many times to build emphasis. Here, "villain" is first said twice to doubly-inscribe the role to Claudius, after which it is qualified with the mixed descriptor "smiling, damned." Thus the reader only sees the specific qualities of Claudius behavior after we have been told repeatedly that they are evil.

Those specific qualities return us to the question of how one separates interior identity from exterior presentation. Though Claudius is externally "smiling" and thus presenting a positive, friendly image, he is internally still a "villain." The term "damned" also adds important information: Claudius is ethically accountable for his actions and fated to a negative fate as a result of them. This term implies, then, that Hamlet believes in a system of moral justice, be it religious or secular, and furthermore stresses that this justice will be imposed based on interior identities, not on the external performance of how one comforts with smiles.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker), Horatio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.5.187-188

Explanation and Analysis

After speaking to the Ghost, Hamlet expresses a skepticism with Horatio's observation that the ghost is "strange." Hamlet points out here that Horatio's way of viewing the world has excluded certain phenomena and experiences and thus has caused him to limit his idea of reality.

To assert this claim, Hamlet notes that Horatio is limited in his perceptions of what exists. This limitation exists in both "heaven and earth," implying that Horatio is blind to not only things in a different realm ("heaven") but also to what he could presumably see on "earth," such as the Ghost. Hamlet implies that a given way of viewing the world prevents us from perceiving even those things all around us. He uses the term "philosophy" rather loosely then—not as a set of metaphysical concepts on, say, the existence of free will or God, but rather something more like a personal philosophy that dictates what is considered "strange" in the world.

The phrase "dreamt of," after all, positions "philosophy" not as a rational body of thought, but rather something pseudo-scientific or even mystical. Hamlet could very well have said "Than *exist* in your philosophy," but instead he chooses to present belief systems as akin to one's dreams. Thus Hamlet can justify both his own somewhat erratic behavior by rendering it equally valid as a dreamt-of philosophy, and more broadly call into question any reader's assumptions of the arbitrary separation of normal and strange.

Act 2, scene 2 Quotes

> Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
> And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
> I will be brief.

Related Characters: Polonius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.97-99

Explanation and Analysis

After completing his diplomatic relations with Claudius and Gertrude, Polonius begins to speak about Hamlet's madness. He introduces the speech with this construction that cherishes and promises concise language.

The phrase "brevity is the soul of wit" is another example of how Shakespeare will invert sentence structures for emphatic and rhetorical effect. Most simply this means, "it is important to be brief in order to be witty"—but Polonius instead makes "brevity" a central, constitutive aspect of "wit," as opposed to a common feature. Just as Hamlet called women the name of frailty, here Polonius has rendered brevity to be wit's soul. "Tediousness," on the other hand, is associated with the external parts of the body—the material that is superficial and extraneous. Polonius uses this phrase to justify and introduce his "brief" speech.

As with many of Polonius' statements, however, these lines are deeply ironic. Polonius is always a verbose character, and this speech is particularly rambling: he discourses extensive about the nature of Hamlet's madness without making any particularly useful or incisive contributions. These lines themselves serve to elongate the position—adding "an outward flourish" in the very act of denouncing such a gesture. We should note, furthermore, that Polonius is not interested in "truth" per say, but rather just "wit"—which itself a type of "outward flourish." On the simplest level, this irony further undermines Polonius's character, presenting him ever more as an unaware fool. But it also offers a broader comment on how people's promises and intentions often differ from their actions: One may claim brevity to be the soul of wit while failing to be either brief or witty.

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

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.68-70

Explanation and Analysis

Here Hamlet speaks to his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They have tried to express that Denmark is not as bad as Hamlet presents it to be, and in response he notes that the merit in things lies less in their actual existence and more in how they are subjectively experienced.

In the broadest sense, Hamlet is offering a brilliant metaphysical claim about the nature of reality: he is denying that external events are ever "good or bad," but rather become so based on how one is "thinking." It is not clear, in this case, whether Hamlet believes one can actively will via "thinking" for something to become positive or negative—or if he fatalistically believes that whatever one's mental state is will determine if something is "good or bad." Most likely, the second option is the case here, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have tried to shift his "thinking," but Hamlet presents his interpretation of reality as pre-determined. This sort of nihilistic explanation may seem commonplace now, but it was certainly not widespread in Shakespeare's time—and it is part of the reason for *Hamlet*'s lasting legacy as an early account of modern human psychology. Furthermore, this comment stresses that while Hamlet may seem to be descending increasingly into madness, that process has also given him a certain type of insight into the reality of the world.

> I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.273-275

Explanation and Analysis

Hamlet continues to reflect on whether his happiness is primarily based on his disposition or events occurring in the external environment. Here, he points out that joy would come easily to him except for the psychic baggage of negative dreams.

What exactly Hamlet means by "bad dreams" is, however, far from clear. Hamlet is often fixated on his and others'

dreams, for they exist on the borderline of reality. They thus seem to introduce foreign or irrational concepts into daily life—here ones that prevent one from living peacefully. Were Hamlet not to have these invasive thoughts, he implies, he would live ignorantly but at peace. "Bounded in a nutshell" functions as a metaphor for a closed and secluded world with no stream of information—and without being tempted by anything exterior, Hamlet would be able to redefine his reality as "a king of infinite space." His mind could set its own limits and be content and empowered even with an objectively negative situation. Dreams, however, allow one access beyond one's own reality—so they become a metaphor for escaping the nutshell and then becoming dissatisfied with its cramped surroundings.

Another, slightly narrower, interpretation could see his communication with the Ghost as a sort of dream, for the specter appears only at night and does not speak with any other characters. In that case, Hamlet implies that the Ghost is his "bad dream": for he introduces the ethical imperative to avenge his father by killing Claudius. In both cases, Hamlet seems nostalgic for a state of lesser awareness in which he could still be that ignorant "king of infinite space."

> What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.327-332

Explanation and Analysis

Hamlet continues to soliloquize to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about human nature. He first lauds mankind's many incredible characteristics in accomplishments before tempering his praise by pointing out human mortality.

At first, Hamlet seems to have strikingly changed his tone from his previous condemnations of human nature. Man's reason is "noble" or honorable and just, while the "infinite" nature of his "faculty" means it can extend beyond mundane occurrences. He then appreciates the external appearance and behaviors of humanity, likening them first to an "angel" and then "a god." Indeed, at the time humans are considered the most beautiful thing in the world and deemed the "paragon" or best of all animals. The turn comes when Hamlet says that despite all these remarkable characteristics, humans are just "this quintessence of dust": Their essential quality is neither noble nor beautiful, but just basic material of the earth.

Yet even before the chilling last line, the phrases glimmer with a negative bent. Hamlet shouts with a seemingly ecstatic air, but the obsessive repetition of exclamation marks grows hollow by the eighth repetition—putting the emphasis more on the phrase's desperation than any sense of real excitement. Likening men to angels or a god may just seem laudatory, but it is also implausible, and so it comes off as parodic or shrill. Hamlet thus pokes fun at the way that humanity has built up a conceited vision of itself, and points out that they are all fundamentally dust: they have come from nothing and, being mortal, will eventually return to that state.

> What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
> That he should weep for her?

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker), First Player

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.586-587

Explanation and Analysis

Here Hamlet responds to having watched one of the actors perform a speech from the Trojan War, in which Hecuba grieves for her husband Priam. He struggles with his own emotional apathy at his father's death, considering how intensely the player could exhibit emotion for a fictional grief.

Hamlet's anxiety here occurs on several levels. First, he is confronting the fact that he has not yet avenged his father. He is distraught that someone who is merely performing grief would seem capable of serious action, whereas he himself deliberates and talks endlessly without having acted. There is thus a disjunction between the "him" of the actor and the historical figure of Hecuba that has caused him to weep—in a way that makes Hamlet feel he should be more capable of weeping.

But the passage also returns us to the questions of performance that have occupied Hamlet throughout the text. After all, he does not presumably believe that the player actually identifies fully with Hecuba—and thus his

concern over the weeping has more to do with the fact that humans are able to craft their emotions so effectively. This ability calls into the question anyone's emotional responses—even his own—for they seem less predicated on actual feelings, if Hamlet's request that the player take on a role allows him to do so with ease. Hamlet will, of course, make use of this exact quality in the next act, when he puts on a mock play to test Claudius's response, so he is far from dispensing with the performative aspect of emotions. Rather, Shakespeare shows us a character struggling to make sense of the disconnect between interior and exterior—here with the artifice of theater itself.

> The play's the thing,
> Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.633-634

Explanation and Analysis

As Act Two ends, Hamlet's settles on a plan to determine whether Claudius is guilty: he proposes to stage an altered version of The Murder of Gonzago, which will have much in common with the story the Ghost recounted of his murder. Thus by watching Claudius's response, Hamlet hopes to ascertain his guilt.

That Hamlet sees theater as the way to best access human truth is somewhat ironic. The art form would seem to epitomize performance and deceit, for it shows just how easily people can take on alternate identities and emotions. Yet this is the exact quality of theater that Hamlet seeks to exploit, for staging the play in a certain way will allow it to function as a trap for "the conscience." Artificiality, he implies, can serve as a route to honesty if properly exploited.

The comment also has meta-textual implications for the play, for if Hamlet is using The Murder of Gonzago to his advantage, he is himself on trial within Shakespeare's tragedy. Yet things are not so clear cut in Shakespeare's work: in a sense, the characters remain caught in his artifice, displaying their "conscience" for the viewer. But at the same time their mixed motives and allegiances resist our interpretive abilities—we remain uncertain whether Hamlet is mad or whether Claudius is fully guilty—thus questioning the limits of an artwork to reveal the truth of a conscience.

Act 3, scene 1 Quotes

> To be, or not to be, —that is the question:—
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them?

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.1.64-68

Explanation and Analysis

While Polonius and Claudius hide and eavesdrop, Hamlet breaks into this most famous soliloquy, perhaps the best-known speech in the English language. Hamlet returns to the question of suicide, wondering if it would be preferable to end his life or not.

Though Hamlet's language has grown more direct from its earlier references to "dew," it still speaks to his passivity in the face of desperation. He phrases the question of death in the abstract with the infinitive verb forms "to be, or not to be"—and makes it "the question" of humanity, as opposed to a personal matter. These choices imply that the decision whether or not to exist is a constant struggle for each person, a struggle that Hamlet tries to mediate through the metric of what is "nobler in the mind." This phrase implies that death is evaluated based on perceived correctness or social value, as opposed to, say, a universal ethical system.

For the two options themselves, Hamlet chooses evocative images: "To be" is put in relatively more passive terms as a continuous process of "suffering" an onslaught of external attacks from "outrageous fortune"—that is to say, the constant influx of events that cannot be shifted in one's destiny. Suicide, on the other hand, is presented as an active fight that wages war on "a sea of troubles" and, indeed, is successful in the endeavor. The phrase "by opposing end them" seems noble or glorious, but what it literally means is to vanquish one's "outrageous fortune" by ending one's life. Thus Hamlet presents his lack of suicide not as the result of insufficient desperation, but rather his apathy from wishing to take on such a fight. Life becomes, for him, a constant decision of whether he will finally arrive at sufficient motivation to shift course and end his and/or Claudius's life.

> Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me.

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker), Ophelia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.1.131-134

Explanation and Analysis

After Ophelia tries to return a set of gifts Hamlet has given her, he renounces their relationship. He first disparages Ophelia for her lack of honesty, and then implicates himself as the cause of moral wrongdoing.

This passage is another striking example of how Hamlet's apparent insanity covers up complex reflections on human nature and society. His general claim is that Ophelia should not continue to propagate the species, for all men are sinners even if they are generally honest and well-intentioned. Yet instead of expressing this statement directly, Hamlet couches it in the lunatic demand that Ophelia enter a "nunnery": a place where should would be celibate and therefore unable to "be a breeder of sinners," or give birth to more children.

Though this passage might be interpreted in passing as chastising Ophelia for her sins, Hamlet's claim is actually based on his own transgressions. He notes, in a somewhat roundabout manner, that others could consider his actions reprehensible despite his "indifferent honest" behavior: "indifferent" in that he remains relatively passive, and "honest" in that any sins are supposedly driven by a strong moral compass. Yet, Hamlet reasons, if even his disposition makes him worthy of accusation, then presumably other similar men are sinners, and Ophelia should not risk giving birth to one of them. Shakespeare, here, shows how Hamlet's nihilistic images of the world are a fascinating mixture of compelling and irrational. The logic makes sense and carries deep philosophical weight, while being simultaneously insensitive and outrageous. The two, Shakespeare shows us, can quite easily coexist.

Act 3, scene 2 Quotes

❝ Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery ... 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.393-402

Explanation and Analysis

Hamlet responds angrily to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern here, believing correctly that they are agents from his mother. He rejects their support as manipulative and asserts his own autonomy.

To criticize his friends' actions, Hamlet uses a series of images of instruments, each of which position Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as seeking to "play upon" Hamlet. "My stops" refers to the holes in a recorder or flute, also called a "fret," while "pluck" calls up a stringed instrument such as a lute (which also has "frets"). By mixing a variety of different instruments, Hamlet points out that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's tactics are lacking in specificity. It does not matter which metaphor they select, or which type of instrument they imagine Hamlet to be. They may "fret" him—a pun on playing an instrument, but also provoking frustration or angst—but he refuses to produce the corresponding music.

Hamlet demonstrates with these images his understanding of the game being played by his friends: he resists manipulation by pointing out that their effects are foolhardy. And his references to art are striking, considering the way that theater has been used to make sense of human duplicity and manipulation. Shakespeare thus present the arts as a way for the characters to conceptualize human interaction—to theorize, grasp, and fight against the way we try to control each other.

Act 3, scene 3 Quotes

❝ My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

Related Characters: Claudius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.102-103

Explanation and Analysis

Hamlet enters into Claudius's chambers, intending to kill him, but decides against it when he sees him praying. Yet after Hamlet exits, Claudius reveals here that his prayers were in vain, for they were mere words without the associated repentant thoughts.

These lines return to the theme of external presentation and internal identity, here by approaching the question of language. Claudius points out that "words" and the "thoughts" they convey are not necessarily linked, for the language may "fly up" with the intent to access the heavens, while their contents "remain below" in an earthly, or even hellish, realm. This is a clever explanation of what it means to lie, and Claudius points out that while such a separation of word and meaning might be effective in human interactions, it does not at all function in prayer. When he says "Words without thought never to heaven go," he repeats the exact same words from the previous line to show that while his language may "fly up," it will not actually reach its destination in "heaven." Thus a repenting prayer is deemed to require a higher truth-value than human communication, because divinities are able to correctly recognize when content and language—interior and exterior—have been divorced.

Beyond rendering ironic Hamlet's decision to not kill the praying Claudius, this passage also gives us important information about the spiritual belief systems of the characters. Even the sinner Claudius, who does not repent, is shown to be aware of the consequences of his actions. Thus the characters hold a continued belief in divine destiny that can see through performances to some kind of interior truth.

Act 4, scene 3 Quotes

Claudius: What dost thou mean by this?
Hamlet: Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

Related Characters: Hamlet, Claudius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.3.33-35

Explanation and Analysis

When Claudius asks Hamlet where he has put Polonius's body, Hamlet offers an expectedly indirect response that Polonius is food for worms. He adds, here, that this is the eventual fate of all men.

Hamlet's comment functions simultaneously as an evasive maneuver, an indirect threat, and an existential comment on humanity. First, it allows him to avoid giving a specific location for the body—stressing that it does not matter where Polonius is located, for his fate in all places is the same. Second, he implies through the reference to "a king" that Claudius may soon meet a similar fate as Polonius. And third, Hamlet points out how humans of all social statuses find equal ground in their death. Since the worms now feasting on Polonius are transforming his flesh into soil, his body may soon be feeding someone of lowly status like "a beggar."

This point returns to Hamlet's earlier anxieties about how humans, despite their nobility and pretenses, are never anything more than "dust." Here, he takes this same comment and makes it a weapon against the pomp of a kingly figure like Claudius. Once more Shakespeare has housed this compelling reflection on human mortality in a multi-layered comment that encapsulates Hamlet's madness, manipulation, and jesting nature in a single line.

Act 5, scene 1 Quotes

Alas! poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest.... Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker), Horatio, Yorick

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.1.190-198

Explanation and Analysis

As Hamlet speaks to the gravediggers, he comes across a skull and learns it is from the court jester Yorick. This shock causes Hamlet to wonder about the distance between Yorick's behavior in life and his current decaying state.

This passage mixes Hamlet's characteristic philosophical rumination with an intense dark humor. He offers a series of apostrophe-questions addressed to Yorick, which point out how the dead man will remain ever unable to respond. And the jocular disposition of Yorick reiterates the lack of humor in the current situation. Thus Hamlet is able to take a positive set of terms—"jest," "gibes," "gambols," "songs," and "merriment"—and turn them all into bleak descriptions of what has been lost. The lines recall his earlier description of how man's nobility only served to cover an essence of dust. Yet here it is not only great deeds that fade into non-existence, but even small moments of laughter. Shakespeare thus channels the grave scene to point out how the most impressive accomplishments—be they the creation of

kingdoms or of “infinite jest”—ultimately end in an empty and absent skull.

Act 5, scene 2 Quotes

❝ We defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all.

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5.2.233-237

Explanation and Analysis

Before the play’s final duel commences, Horatio and Hamlet discuss his chances of wining the fight. Hamlet expresses confidence in his abilities, as well as a fatalistic belief that death will come to all at some point.

Here, Hamlet stakes out a direct claim against a deterministic viewpoint with the phrase “We defy augury.” (Augury was a means of predicting the future through observing the actions of birds.) Though Hamlet's resulting language takes its cues from prophecy—with the term “providence,” the image of a “sparrow.” which is often interpreted as a portent, and the “will be” future verb tense—Hamlet firmly denies the value of such pseudo-mystic beliefs. Instead, he points out that this “special providence” is actually just a sign of a fate that must transpire at some point, no matter what. Death, for him, will either come “now” in the moment of the duel, or it will arrive at some future point. When he says, “yet it will come,” Hamlet reiterates his point on the eventuality of death.

Yet whereas before this conclusion might have crippled Hamlet from acting, here he finds in it a source of empowerment. Human mortality shows him that one need not pay attention to “augury,” for the expectation of death will be manifested at one point or another—and thus Hamlet finally decides to take up arms against his demons. Shakespeare shows, then, a decisive change in Hamlet's character, in which existential despair can now actively motivate action instead of paralyzing it.

❝ Now cracks a noble heart. Good-night, sweet prince; And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Related Characters: Horatio (speaker), Hamlet

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5.2.397-398

Explanation and Analysis

As Hamlet dies, Horatio speaks these emotional words of farewell. With them, he sanctifies Hamlet’s character and actions in the final moments of the play.

First Horatio stresses both Hamlet’s royal heritage and his moral goodness through the term “noble heart.” Next, he reasserts Hamlet’s social position by referring to him as “sweet prince.” And finally he gives him a religious and ethical pass by claiming that “flights of angels” will accompany his death. Each of these moves is significant for a friend that has, throughout the play, often expressed mixed beliefs with respect to Hamlet’s actions. Yet here, Horatio ignores such skepticisms and decides to fully vindicate Hamlet on his deathbed.

What are we to make of how these final judgments are positioned in Horatio’s character? After all, he is presumably quite biased toward his friend, and thus cannot be trusted as the main moral judge of the play. Yet at the same time, he is tasked by Hamlet with carrying on the legacy of the events that have thus transpired—which renders him the author of the tragedy, and thus the closest representative of Shakespeare himself. Perhaps Horatio returns here to Claudius’s earlier explanation of how his words would not rise to heaven because they were divorced from his actual sentiments. Here, Horatio contends that Hamlet is indeed responded to by the heavens—indicating that Hamlet's language *has* been a truthful representation of his intentions. Whether or not one believes this to be accurate, it reiterates the characters’ belief in a (religious) moral compass for the play that could sense the real significance of actions, and determine who deserved to rise to heaven.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

On the ramparts of the Danish castle Elsinore, the guardsman Barnardo relieves Francisco. The men are nervous, calling out "Who's there?" Marcellus, another guard, and Horatio, a nobleman, arrive.

Nervous cries of "who's there?" builds dread and develops theme of uncertain reality.

A Ghost appears. It looks like the recently deceased Old Hamlet, King of Denmark. Horatio tries to speak to it, but it disappears.

The appearance of the ghost confirms something is not right in Denmark.

Horatio says the ghost might be warning of an attack. After all, the prince of Norway, Fortinbras, is raising an army to retake lands that Old Hamlet won in battle from Fortinbras' father.

The ghost is connected immediately to the theme of revenge—Fortinbras's revenge.

The Ghost reappears but disappears again without speaking when the cock crows to greet the dawn. Horatio decides they should tell Hamlet, the dead King's son, about the ghost.

Every father/son relationship in the play leads to revenge.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

The next morning, King Claudius, the brother of the dead king, holds court. He uses pretty language to make his recent marriage to Gertrude, his brother's widow, sound perfectly normal. He says it is possible to balance "woe" and "joy."

Claudius uses language as a tool to smooth over actions that are immoral. He uses language to create the appearance of propriety.

Claudius then says he has received a message from Fortinbras demanding Denmark give up the lands Old Hamlet won from Old Fortinbras. He sends Cornelius and Voltemand with a message to Fortinbras' elderly uncle, the King of Norway.

Fortinbras is a son looking to avenge his father. He takes action, however seemingly foolish, to achieve his ends.

Claudius turns to Laertes, the son of the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius. Laertes asks to be allowed to return to his studies in France. Claudius agrees.

Laertes/Polonius is another father/son relationship.

Next, Claudius turns to Hamlet, and asks why he is still dressed in mourning clothes. Gertrude wonders why he "seems" so upset. Hamlet says he "is" upset, and that his clothes can't capture his true mourning.

By emphasizing that how he "is" is more important than how he "seems," Hamlet implies that his interior reality is more powerful than any appearance.

Claudius chides that it's natural for fathers to die and for sons to mourn, but that mourning for too long is unnatural and unmanly. He asks Hamlet to see him as a father, since Hamlet is first in line to the throne. He asks Hamlet not to return to Wittenberg, Germany to study.

Claudius lectures Hamlet on what's natural, but Claudius murdered his own brother! Appearance vs. reality. Also, Wittenberg was where the Reformation, a schism in religion, started.

Gertrude seconds the request. Hamlet promises to obey his mother.

But, tellingly, he doesn't promise to obey Claudius.

All exit but Hamlet. In a soliloquy, Hamlet wishes he could die and that God had not made suicide a sin. He condemns the marriage between his mother and uncle. He says Claudius is far inferior to Old Hamlet, and, in anguish, describes Gertrude as a lustful beast.

It's important to note that Hamlet's death wish exists even before he learns of his father's murder. Fury at his mother's marriage to Claudius is enough to make him contemplate suicide.

Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo enter. Hamlet, who studied with Horatio at Wittenberg, is happy to see his friend, and pleased when Horatio agrees that Gertrude and Claudius's marriage was hasty.

Horatio proves he is willing to speak honestly about reality by noting the speed of the wedding.

Horatio tells Hamlet about the ghost. Hamlet, troubled, decides to watch with the men that night.

Hamlet learns his internal feelings of unease are mirrored by spiritual unease in Denmark.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

As he prepares to leave for France, Laertes warns his sister Ophelia not to fall for Hamlet, a young man whose passions will change, and a prince who must marry to preserve the "sanity and health" of the state.

Laertes worries about Ophelia's honor just as Hamlet worries about Gertrude's.

Ophelia promises, but sassily tells Laertes to listen to his own advice.

Inequality between men and women.

Polonius enters, scolds his son for taking so long, then immediately starts giving him long-winded advice about how to act: be sociable, but not vulgar; do not lend or borrow money; to your own self be true, and on and on... Finally, he lets Laertes leave.

Father/son talk here mirrors Claudius's with Hamlet—except Polonius isn't just trying to hide a secret.

Polonius asks Ophelia what she was talking about with Laertes. Ophelia answers: Hamlet. After Polonius asks her to explain, she says that Hamlet has expressed his love for her. Polonius tells her that Hamlet is pretending to love her in order to sleep with her, and forbids her to talk to him.

Polonius gave Laertes advice, but gives Ophelia orders: women in Denmark are expected to obey.

Ophelia promises to obey.

Just as Hamlet promised Gertrude.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

On the bitter cold ramparts, Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus keep watch. Meanwhile, from inside the castle they hear the roar of revelry. Hamlet condemns Claudius's constant merry-making, saying that it makes the noble Danes look "swinish" and corrupt.

Hamlet connects indulgence of desires to corruption. What looks like enjoyment only hides internal corruption.

The Ghost appears and beckons Hamlet to follow it. But Horatio and Marcellus hold him back: they think the ghost may be a demon laying a trap for him.

Religion provides no answers: what looks good could be evil.

Hamlet breaks free of them and follows after the Ghost.

Hamlet takes decisive action.

Marcellus says "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90). They run after Hamlet.

The nation suffers for the immorality of its leaders.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

When Hamlet and the Ghost are alone, the Ghost speaks. It claims to be the spirit of Old Hamlet, murdered by Claudius. Though the official story is that Old Hamlet was napping in his garden and was stung by a serpent, in reality Claudius poured poison into the sleeping man's ear, murdering him and sending him to Purgatory because he was not given a chance to confess his sins before he died.

The Ghost reveals reality. Also note that the way Claudius murdered Old Hamlet, by pouring poison into Old Hamlet's ear, is actually a wonderful metaphor for lying, for using language to hide reality.

The Ghost commands Hamlet to seek revenge against Claudius for murder and for corrupting Gertrude. Yet the Ghost also warns Hamlet not to harm his mother. Dawn breaks. The Ghost disappears.

Another command from a father. Another promise to obey.

Hamlet promises to do nothing but seek revenge. He curses first Gertrude, "O most pernicious woman!" (1.5.105), then Claudius, "That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!" (1.5.108).

Hamlet promises to act, yet he curses his mother before Claudius. A "smiling villain" is an example of appearance vs. reality.

Horatio and Marcellus rush in. Hamlet refuses to tell them what happened, saying they'll reveal it. But he does say he may pretend to be insane, and makes them swear to silence on his sword. The Ghost's voice echoes: Swear! They swear.

As soon as reality is revealed, Hamlet hides behind mask of madness. But at times already he seems actually to be mad.

Hamlet despairs at the burden the Ghost has given him: "The time is out of joint. / O cursed spite! That ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.189-190).

A few lines after promising to seek revenge, Hamlet is already cursing his fate.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo to Paris to give Laertes some money and letters, but also to secretly check up on him. Polonius's instructions are so detailed and complicated that they are absurd.

Polonius is established here as a meddler; he instructs Reynaldo in using appearance to hide reality.

Ophelia enters, upset. She tells Polonius that Hamlet burst into her room and held her wrists, studying her face and sighing. Then he left without a word.

Is Hamlet pretending, or is he actually mad? The answer isn't clear.

Polonius concludes that Hamlet has gone mad with love because, on Polonius's orders, Ophelia stopped speaking with him.

Polonius decides Hamlet really did love Ophelia after all, but does not apologize to his daughter.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Claudius and Gertrude greet Hamlet's old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom they summoned to Elsinore to figure out why Hamlet is so melancholy. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern happily agree to help.

R and G are introduced. They never see through the various plots and are manipulated by everyone.

Polonius enters and says that he has figured out the cause of Hamlet's lunacy. But, first, the ambassadors have returned from Norway. He goes to get them. While Polonius is gone, Gertrude remarks that Hamlet's mania probably comes from his father's death and her too-hasty marriage to Claudius.

Some critics wonder at whether Gertrude was complicit in Old Hamlet's murder. But her comment here indicates she's unaware that Claudius murdered Old Hamlet.

Polonius returns with the ambassadors. They report that the King of Norway rebuked Fortinbras, who promised not to attack the Danes. Norway then rewarded Fortinbras by letting him attack the Poles. Now Norway asks that Claudius give Fortinbras' army free passage through Denmark on the way to Poland. Claudius agrees. The ambassadors leave.

Fortinbras agrees to give up his effort to revenge his father and seek honor in another way. Is his promise reality, or appearance? Has Claudius just allowed a hostile army to march into his country?

After a long-winded ramble about Hamlet's madness, Polonius reads love letters Hamlet sent to Ophelia. Claudius and Gertrude agree that lovesickness may be causing Hamlet's behavior. Polonius proposes that they stage a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia and spy on it to test his theory. Claudius agrees.

Polonius comes up with another plot to try to find out what's really bothering Hamlet. Polonius once again is willing to use Ophelia in that plot.

Hamlet enters, reading. The King and Queen leave Polonius alone to talk with him. Polonius speaks with Hamlet, who responds with statements about pregnancy, death, and rot that, though nonsensical, also seem to refer to Denmark, Ophelia, and Polonius. Polonius, perplexed, exits.

Hamlet speaks in prose here, representing his "madness." But Hamlet uses madness only to mock Polonius, not to seek revenge.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter. Hamlet greets his old friends warmly, and tells them that Denmark is a prison. They disagree. Hamlet responds, "then tis none to you; there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.245-246). He launches into a long speech about the beauty of the world and nobility of man, all of which looks to him like dust and fails to delight him.

Hamlet wants the world to delight him, but he knows things (such as the fact that his father was murdered) that make its beauty meaningless, a lie. And if life is pointless, what's the point of seeking revenge?

Hamlet asks why they've come. They say to visit him, but Hamlet angrily demands whether they were summoned by the King and Queen. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern admit they were.

R and G are dupes, acting without any understanding—they're the opposite of Hamlet, who understands too much.

Hamlet cheers up a little when Rosencrantz mentions the arrival of a troupe of players (actors). Hamlet says his "uncle-father and aunt-mother" are wrong: he's only insane some of the time (2.2.359).

Actors make appearance seem like reality for a living.

Polonius enters with the players. Hamlet mocks Polonius, but greets the players warmly. He asks the First player to act a speech about the Trojan queen Hecuba's grief at the death of her husband, Priam. The Player does, with great feeling.

Priam was killed by the Greek Pyrrhus, who was getting revenge because Priam's son, Hector, killed Pyrrhus's son.

Hamlet tells Polonius to treat the players well and give them good lodgings, and privately asks the First Player to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* on the following night, with some extra lines Hamlet will insert himself. The Player agrees.

It's interesting that Hamlet, who is so obsessed with what is real, feels so comfortable with actors, whose job is to make the unreal seem real.

Alone, Hamlet is furious that the Player could get so emotional over long-dead Hecuba, while he can't even bring himself to revenge his murdered father. Hamlet muses on a plan he's come up with: he'll have the players show a scene similar to Claudius's murder of his father: "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.582).

By condemning himself for not acting and then plotting to use the play to determine Claudius's guilt, Hamlet reveals his fear that Claudius might not be guilty, that the Ghost might be lying. Hamlet has a reason for his inaction: lack of evidence.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can't figure out what's behind Hamlet's odd behavior, but tell Claudius and Gertrude that he was excited by the arrival of the players. The King and Queen, hopeful that Hamlet is improving, agree to watch the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exit. Gertrude leaves as well, since Claudius and Polonius have chosen this moment to set up the "accidental" meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia.

While Hamlet is searching for evidence about whether Claudius killed Old Hamlet, Claudius is seeking evidence about what's bothering Hamlet.

Polonius tells Ophelia to walk in the courtyard as if reading a book. He muses that people often use appearances to "sugar o'er the devil" (3.1.47).

Polonius muses on appearance vs. reality, and is sure he can tell one from the other.

Claudius, struck by Polonius's words, mutters an aside about a "deed" that his "painted words" (3.1.52) can't hide from his conscience. They hear Hamlet coming and hide.

Claudius privately admits his guilt, proving that in fact Polonius can't tell appearance from reality.

In a soliloquy, Hamlet agonizes over whether to kill himself: "To be or not to be" (3.1.55). He thinks men would almost always choose suicide over the "slings and arrows" (3.1.57) of experience, except that they fear what might happen in the afterlife. He observes that such thinking turns people into cowards, and action into inaction. Suddenly Ophelia enters and tries to return the gifts Hamlet gave her. He denies having ever given them.

Hamlet tries to think through his wish for death, his fears about the likely unfairness of the afterlife, and his inability to act. But before he can find a solution he sees Ophelia—a woman.

Hamlet asks Ophelia if she's honest, then says beauty corrupts honesty. Becoming angry, he tells Ophelia he loved her once, then says he never loved her. He commands her to go to a nunnery rather than become a "breeder of sinners" (3.1.120), and says all men, including himself, are "arrant knaves" (3.1.127). He condemns women for hiding their faces behind makeup. Then states that there will be no more marriages—and that one person who's married already will die. Hamlet storms off. Ophelia is heartbroken.

Hamlet's hatred of women seems to have made him self-destructively crazy. (Here he reveals his plans to kill someone!) In particular, Hamlet hates that women hide the reality of their faces behind makeup: it makes beauty dishonest, hiding age (and death) behind a pleasant mask.

Claudius, from his hiding place, decides that Hamlet neither loves Ophelia nor is he mad. Instead, he thinks Hamlet is "brooding" on something, and that this brooding will lead to danger. He decides to send Hamlet to England.

Does Claudius suspect Hamlet knows something about the murder? Whether yes or no, he wastes no time in acting.

Polonius still thinks Hamlet loves Ophelia. He requests that after the play Hamlet be sent to talk with Gertrude, where Polonius will once again spy.

Polonius cares more about confirming his theory than comforting Ophelia.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Hamlet lectures three of the players on how to act. His lecture focuses on how to avoid overacting, suiting action to word and word to action. They exit.

Hamlet instructs actors how to bridge the gap between appearance and reality!

Hamlet has already told Horatio what the Ghost said, and now reveals his plan: the play to be put on will mirror the Ghosts' description of Claudius's murder of Old Hamlet. If Claudius looks guilty while watching it, then he is.

Hamlet plans to use the "appearance" of the play to simulate "reality" in order to prove if that reality is really real. Then, he says, he'll take revenge.

Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, and others arrive to watch the play. Hamlet tells Horatio he's now going to act insane.

Hamlet puts on a "play" of his own—he pretends to be insane.

Claudius asks how Hamlet is faring. Hamlet responds as if Claudius were using the word "fare" to mean food, and says he's eating the air. Hamlet mocks Polonius's attempts to act at university, harasses Ophelia with sexual puns, then makes bitter remarks about Gertrude for marrying Claudius.

Once again, Hamlet's anger at women pushes his pretend madness toward something less pretend.

The players enter and first act out a dumbshow (a short silent play that shows what the longer play is about). The players then begin to act the full play. As the plot becomes clear, Gertrude and Claudius become uncomfortable. Hamlet mocks them, while continuing to launch sexual puns at Ophelia. Claudius asks the name of the play. Hamlet says, "The Mouse-trap."

If Hamlet is using madness only to try to protect himself from suspicion, why does he mock the King and Queen so obviously? And why mock Ophelia at all?

When the villain in the play pours poison into the king's ear, Claudius jumps from his seat, calls for light, and rushes from the room.

Claudius' reaction reveals that he really is guilty.

Hamlet is triumphant. He tells Horatio that this proves the Ghost was telling the truth.

Hamlet's fear that Ghost was lying delayed his revenge.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter and say that his mother wants to see him. Hamlet agrees to go, but furiously tells them they cannot "pluck out the heart of his mystery" or play him like a flute (3.2.336).

R and G try to use the guise of friendship to learn Hamlet's thoughts. Such dishonesty angers Hamlet.

Polonius enters, repeating Gertrude's request to see him. Hamlet pretends to see odd shapes in a non-existent cloud. Polonius also pretends to see the shapes.

Hamlet shows that Polonius will lie to flatter those who are more powerful than he.

All exit but Hamlet, who says to himself that he could "drink hot blood" (3.2.360), but forces himself to remember not to hurt his mother.

Hamlet knows he has no reason to delay revenge now, and shows that he knows his anger at women is out of control.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Claudius says Hamlet is a danger, and orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to prepare to leave for England. They agree that if the King were to die it would be a tragedy for the country, and exit.

R and G echo belief that health of a country is tied to the legitimacy of the King. They don't know that Claudius isn't legitimate.

Polonius enters with news: Hamlet is headed to Gertrude's room, where Polonius will hide behind a tapestry.

Polonius is still stuck in the old plot, while new plots are afoot.

Finally alone, Claudius cries out that his "offense is rank!" (3.3.36). He wants to pray, but doesn't see how he can ask forgiveness when he possesses the spoils of the murder, neither of which he wants to give up: Gertrude and the throne. Yet he kneels to pray.

Now audience knows that Claudius both guilty and unable to repent. In other words, he deserves to be killed by Hamlet...

Hamlet enters. He draws his sword to kill Claudius and be revenged. But it occurs to him that if he kills Claudius as Claudius prays, then Claudius will go to heaven. That isn't real revenge, especially when Claudius murdered Hamlet's father *before* he could pray, sentencing Old Hamlet to torment in purgatory. Hamlet decides to wait until Claudius is sinning to kill him. Hamlet exits.

Why does Hamlet delay again? Because he realizes that Christianity is arbitrary. Getting to heaven is based on when you pray rather than who you are. Religion itself seems to have been duped by appearance. Hamlet waits to get true revenge.

Claudius stops praying. The attempt was useless: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.3.97-87).

The ultimate irony. Hamlet is himself duped by appearance: Claudius only looked like he was praying.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Polonius and Gertrude wait for Hamlet in Gertrude's chamber. Polonius advises her to be tough with Hamlet. Just then they hear Hamlet coming. Polonius hides behind a tapestry.

Polonius has no idea that his spying is now pointless since Claudius already knows Hamlet has found him out.

Hamlet enters. Gertrude says he has offended his father (i.e. Claudius). Hamlet says that *she's* offended his father (i.e. Old Hamlet). Hamlet then furiously says he'll show her the "inmost part" of herself. Gertrude thinks he means he's going to kill her and cries out.

Hamlet suggests his mother is hiding from the truth she knows in her heart.

From his hiding place behind the tapestry Polonius hears Gertrude's cry and calls for help. Hamlet, mistaking Polonius for Claudius, stabs Polonius through the tapestry.

By stabbing Polonius (whom he thinks is Claudius) Hamlet proves it wasn't fear of killing that caused him to delay.

Gertrude shouts, "What a rash and bloody deed!" (3.4.27). Hamlet responds, "As bad… as kill a king, and marry with his brother" (3.4.29). Gertrude is shocked. Hamlet pulls back the tapestry and sees Polonius. He dismisses him as a "rash, intruding fool" (3.4.32).

Hamlet links Claudius's crime of murder with Gertrude's "crime" of marrying Claudius! Is he testing to see if Gertrude was in on the plot?

Hamlet forces Gertrude to look at a picture of his father and compare it to one of Claudius, whom he describes as a "mildewed ear" (3.4.64). Gertrude begs him to stop, but Hamlet can't: "but to live in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, stew'd in corruption…honeying and making love over the nasty sty" (3.4.82-84). She again begs him to stop.

Hamlet's graphic description of Gertrude's lovemaking with Claudius makes it sound dirty and corrupt. Once more his anger at his mother's betrayal takes precedence over his goal of revenge.

The Ghost appears in order, it says, to refocus Hamlet on his duty—revenge against Claudius. Hamlet speaks to it. Gertrude can't see the ghost and thinks Hamlet's mad. The Ghost tells Hamlet to calm her.

The Ghost's visit is ambiguous. Why can't Gertrude see it? Why would it risk making Hamlet look insane? Many directors cut this scene.

Hamlet tries to convince Gertrude that he's sane, and begs her to confess her sins, to be pure and avoid sleeping with Claudius, and to keep secret that he, Hamlet, is not actually mad. Gertrude promises.

Does Gertrude agree to keep silent because Hamlet has convinced her he's right, or because he frightens her?

Hamlet exits, dragging Polonius's body after him.

Quests for vengeance often result in more than the intended death.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Claudius sees that Gertrude is upset. She says Hamlet was acting insane, and in his madness killed Polonius.

It's unclear if Gertrude is keeping Hamlet's secret or really does think he's mad.

Claudius exclaims that if he had been behind the tapestry, he would now be dead. He thinks of how best to explain the murder to the public, and sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet.

Claudius doesn't mourn for Polonius, instead worrying about himself and how to manage the murder politically.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet. They ask where Polonius's body is. Hamlet responds in riddles and insults—he calls Rosencrantz a "sponge" soaking up the king's favor. Hamlet agrees to see Claudius, but then dashes off.

By calling R a "sponge," Hamlet implies that through their foolishness R & G have been taken over by Claudius. They have lost their inner reality.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

Claudius mulls how to deal with Hamlet. The killing of Polonius has convinced him that Hamlet is too dangerous to remain nearby, but at the same time he is unsure how to send Hamlet away because the people of Denmark love Hamlet.

Claudius is always thinking about politics, about appearances.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter with Hamlet. Claudius asks where Polonius is. Hamlet answers that Polonius is feeding worms. He explains that a dead king will do the same and, through the processes of nature, might end up in the "guts of a beggar." Hamlet then says Claudius could send someone to check for Polonius in heaven or go down to check in hell himself. Finally, Hamlet tells them that in a month they may smell Polonius's body rotting beneath the stairs to the castle lobby.

Hamlet's mockery and word play begins to focus on death. He describes how life devours itself in order to live, and explicitly links this idea to the image of worms devouring a king. In doing so, Hamlet is indirectly threatening Claudius.

Claudius sends Rosencrantz to get the body, then tells Hamlet that to protect him he will send him immediately to England. Hamlet agrees, though he continues to insult Claudius. Claudius sends Guildenstern to make sure Hamlet gets on the ship immediately. Finally alone, Claudius writes a letter for the three men to give to the King of England—a letter that asks the King to execute Hamlet.

Claudius doesn't feel the need for evidence to act against Hamlet. As soon as Hamlet seems like a threat, Claudius plots to have him killed, and uses the unknowing R and G to make it happen.

ACT 4, SCENE 4

Near the coast of Denmark, Fortinbras's army marches toward Poland. He sends a captain to Elsinore with a message of greeting for the King of Denmark.

By sending the captain to greet Claudius, Fortinbras shows he means to keep his word not to attack Denmark.

The captain runs into Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, and happily tells them the land about to be fought over is worthless. Hamlet asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to go on ahead. In a soliloquy, he bitterly compares himself to Fortinbras and his soldiers. They go to die just for a chance at honor, while he, with much greater reason to act, has failed to revenge himself on Claudius. Hamlet vows "from this day forward may all my thoughts be bloody," and promises to focus only on revenge.

Fortinbras is willing to act to gain honor. Though Hamlet, as you'd expect, sees such thoughtless action as ridiculous, he also sees the nobility in it.

ACT 4, SCENE 5

Gertrude and Horatio sadly discuss the madness that has taken over Ophelia since Polonius was killed. Ophelia enters, singing mournful songs about her father.

Hamlet's madness is feigned. Ophelia's is real. As a woman, Ophelia can't act, so she goes mad.

Claudius enters. Ophelia's madness upsets and unnerves him. Ophelia's songs change topic, and focus on maids who are seduced. She exits with the comment that her brother shall know of her father's death. Horatio follows her.

Do Ophelia's songs about seduced maids indicate that she had a sexual relationship with Hamlet? This is an unresolved question in the play.

Claudius mentions that the commoners are also angry about Polonius's death, and that Laertes has secretly sailed back to Denmark. A messenger rushes in with news that Laertes is actually marching toward the castle at the head of a mob chanting "Laertes king!"

Contrast with Hamlet: as soon as Laertes hears of his father's murder, he returns to Denmark and nearly starts a revolution!

Gertrude exclaims that the mob and Laertes are blaming the wrong person for the death of Polonius.

Ironic that Gertrude defends the man who killed her husband.

Laertes bursts into the room. Claudius asks for calm. Laertes retorts that to be calm would make him a bastard, that he would dare damnation just to get revenge for the death of his father. Claudius admits that Polonius is dead. Gertrude adds that Claudius did not kill him.

Another point of comparison with Hamlet in terms of willingness to act to get revenge.

Ophelia enters. She is clearly insane, singing songs, speaking in riddles, and handing out flowers (that are perhaps imaginary): rosemary, pansies, fennel, columbines, rue, and daisies. Laertes demands vengeance for her madness. Ophelia exits, wishing God's blessing on everyone.

The flowers held symbolic meaning in Shakespeare's time. In addition, though unmentioned in stage directions, it is traditional for Ophelia to give the flowers to particular characters in symbolic ways: rosemary to an imaginary Hamlet for remembrance. Pansies to Laertes for faithfulness. Fennel for flattery and columbines for infidelity to Claudius. Rue for bitterness and daisies for seduction to Gertrude.

Claudius asks Laertes to let him explain what happened to Polonius, and promises to hand over the crown to Laertes if, after the explanation, his actions still strike Laertes as unjust.

Laertes acts without thinking. Claudius can manipulate those who don't think and turn their actions to his own advantage.

ACT 4, SCENE 6

A sailor gives Horatio letters from Hamlet. The letter says that a pirate attacked Hamlet's ship. Hamlet was taken prisoner and returned to Denmark for a ransom, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue on to England. Horatio is to send the sailors to Claudius, and then to find Hamlet.

The pirate attack is an example of deus ex machina—a device used to further the plot and return Hamlet to Denmark. It doesn't have any real thematic meaning.

ACT 4, SCENE 7

Alone with Claudius, Laertes asks why Claudius didn't punish Hamlet for killing Polonius. Claudius answers: First, he loves Gertrude and she's Hamlet's mother; second, Hamlet is loved by the people, so punishing him might have caused a revolt.

Claudius is always calculating, always careful to manipulate events and perceptions of events. He has already blunted Laertes' purpose.

A messenger enters with letters from Hamlet. Claudius is bewildered at Hamlet's return. Laertes is pleased: now he'll get his chance at revenge. Claudius comes up with a plot. Claudius says Laertes' skill with a sword recently aroused Hamlet's envy, and Claudius thinks they could lure Hamlet into a duel with Laertes. Claudius asks to what length Laertes would go to get revenge on Hamlet. Laertes says: "to cut his throat in a church" (4.7.98).

Claudius uses flattery of Laertes swordsmanship to convince Laertes to join his plot. Claudius doesn't care about Laertes' honor. He just wants to get rid of Hamlet. Compare Laertes willingness to kill Hamlet in church; this is exactly what Hamlet refused to do to Claudius.

Claudius reveals his plan: they will poison Laertes's sword. The slightest scratch will kill Hamlet. As a backup, Claudius decides to poison a glass of wine and offer it to Hamlet during the duel.

Laertes, who prides himself on honor, has been corrupted. He's joined an ignoble plot using deception and poison.

Gertrude rushes in with news that Ophelia has drowned. While gathering flowers she fell into the river and sang songs as her clothes grew heavy and pulled her under.

The male response to tragedy is to seek revenge. Ophelia, who cannot "act" because she's a woman, opts for suicide.

Laertes, weeping, exits. Claudius fears Ophelia's death might reignite Laertes anger and rebellion. He and Gertrude follow Laertes to calm him down.

Claudius only cares about how Ophelia's death might affect him and his power.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

In a cemetery, two gravediggers discuss whether the body to be put in the grave they're digging should receive a Christian burial. The first grave digger argues that because the dead woman did not try to escape the water her death was a suicide. The second says that if she had not been a noblewoman she would not have received a Christian burial. The first grave digger asks a riddle: who builds stronger than the mason, shipbuilder, or carpenter? Answer: The grave-maker, whose "houses" last until doomsday.

By pointing out that nobles receive different treatment from organized religion than poor people do, the gravediggers show religion is unfair and influenced by appearance rather than the "reality" of someone's soul. Religion, that bedrock of human life, can't be trusted, and all of Hamlet's earlier philosophizing about religion and death, all his agonizing, was pointless.

Hamlet and Horatio enter. The second gravedigger exits. The first gravedigger throws up a skull he has found in the grave he's digging, then another. Hamlet wonders what sort of people the skulls belonged to when alive, and comments that their earthly possessions mean nothing to them now. The grave digger says that he became a grave digger on the day that Old Hamlet defeated Old Fortinbras in battle, which was also the same day that Hamlet was born.

Hamlet's continuing fascination with death here comes in contact with the man who knows the most about it: a grave digger.

Hamlet asks the gravedigger how long it takes a body to decompose. The grave digger points to a skull that was once Yorick, a court jester. Hamlet is shocked: he knew Yorick. Hamlet examines the skull. He realizes that death will claim everyone, and says no amount of makeup can hold off the inevitable. Hamlet then wonders if the bodies of great kings like Alexander and Caesar now are dust used to plug holes.

There is one reality that awaits all men: death and decomposition. No matter whether you're Caesar or a beggar, that's your fate. While Horatio says that Hamlet is still thinking too much, Hamlet seems to find the idea freeing.

Horatio says Hamlet is considering "too curiously"—is overthinking things.

Horatio diagnoses Hamlet's "fatal flaw."

Hamlet and Horatio hear a noise and hide. Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, a priest, and other lords enter in a funeral procession with a coffin. The priest refuses to provide further religious services because Ophelia's death seemed like suicide. Laertes says his sister will be an angel while the priest howls in hell.

The priest is unwilling to provide further ceremony because it seemed like suicide. The priest can't tell the difference between appearance and reality, so he plays it safe.

Laertes jumps into Ophelia's grave to embrace her once more. Hamlet, shocked and distraught at Ophelia's death, follows Laertes into Ophelia's grave and claims to have loved Ophelia more than forty-thousand brothers could. They grapple until Hamlet exits in a rage.

Interesting that Hamlet claims to love Ophelia only after she dies.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

In Elsinore, Hamlet tells Horatio that he discovered that the letters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bore to England asked that Hamlet be executed. Hamlet switched the letter with one that requested Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be executed.

R and G are duped again. Their sad fate shows the way plots and deception tend to widen and take the lives of those on the periphery too.

Hamlet says he has no sympathy for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who gave up their honor to curry favor with the king. But he is sorry he fought with Laertes, who only wanted to revenge his own father.

Hamlet identifies with Laertes.

A dandyish nobleman, Osric, enters. Hamlet gets him to agree first that it's cold, then that it's actually hot. Osric announces that Claudius has wagered Hamlet can defeat Laertes in a duel. Hamlet agrees to fight.

Osric is what Hamlet most hates—a man who values appearance over reality.

Horatio says that Hamlet will lose the wager. Hamlet says he'll win a fair fight, but he has a bad foreboding. Horatio urges him to call off the duel. But Hamlet says there's no use trying to escape death: it will come no matter what.

Hamlet is finally at peace. He accepts death. Death comes for everyone, so why not face it now? Note that Hamlet has ceased to plot: he's chosen reality over appearance.

Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and the entire court enter to watch the duel. Hamlet apologizes to Laertes. Laertes won't accept the apology until he can consult an expert on honor. The two men select their foils (swords). Laertes picks the poisoned foil.

Laertes speaks of honor while plotting against Hamlet. He's sold his soul for vengeance.

Claudius announces that if Hamlet gets one of the first three hits he will drink to Hamlet's health and then drop a jewel into the cup and give it to Hamlet. The duel starts. Hamlet scores the first hit. Claudius drops the jewel into the wine. Hamlet, concentrating on the duel, says he'll drink the wine later.

The "jewel" is poison—appearance vs. reality.

Hamlet scores the second hit. Gertrude lifts the poisoned cup to drink in Hamlet's honor. Claudius tries to stop her, but can't tell her why without revealing his plot. She drinks.

Claudius is in so deep that he can't admit reality even to save his wife.

They duel. Laertes wounds Hamlet, drawing blood. They scuffle, and in the scuffle end up exchanging swords. Hamlet wounds Laertes.

Laertes gets his revenge, but it rebounds on himself.

Gertrude falls. Claudius claims Gertrude fainted because she saw Hamlet and Laertes bleeding, but Gertrude says the wine was poisoned. She dies.

Claudius lies right up until the end. But death is a reality that appearance can't hide.

Laertes, who knows he's dying of his wound from the poisoned sword, reveals Claudius's treachery.

Reality revealed.

Hamlet stabs Claudius and then forces him to drink the poisoned wine. Claudius dies.

Hamlet gets his revenge.

Laertes forgives Hamlet and asks for forgiveness. Laertes dies. Hamlet forgives him.

Hamlet and Laertes are honest before they die.

Horatio wants to kill himself, but Hamlet forbids it: Horatio must tell Hamlet's story to the world.

Through Horatio, Hamlet will reveal Claudius's lies.

In the distance a cannon sounds. Fortinbras is returning victorious from Poland, and fired the blast to honor English ambassadors arriving to Denmark. Hamlet says that Fortinbras should be made King of Denmark, then dies.

Fortinbras achieves "vengeance" by not pursuing it. He's the only character who never plots—he always chooses reality over appearance.

Fortinbras and the English ambassadors enter. Amazed at the carnage, the ambassadors announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

The deaths of R and G emphasize absurd and bloody reach of revenge.

Horatio begins to tell the story of what has happened in Denmark. Fortinbras orders Hamlet be honored as a soldier, since he would have made a great king.

Claudius's lies are swept away, and Denmark is "healed" by a legitimate succession from Hamlet to Fortinbras.

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