Hamlet

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare was born in 1564. His father was a glove-maker and assemblyman in Stratford-upon-Avon, and his mother was the daughter of a well-to-do landowner. At 18, Shakespeare wed a woman eight years his senior, Anne Hathaway; just six months after their marriage, Hathaway gave birth to a daughter. She later bore two more children—one of whom, Hamnet, died at the age of 11. There is a gap in the historical record between the birth of Shakespeare's twins and his first recorded appearance on the London theater scene in 1592. His theatrical career likely began in the mid-1580s, and between then and 1613, he composed such works as *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *The Henriad*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, and many more. In 1609, he published a book of sonnets, and released other long poems in the mid-1590s when London's theaters were closed due to the plague. Shakespeare died in 1616 of a rumored "fever" just a month after creating a will in which he declared himself to be in good health. His surviving writings include nearly 40 plays and over 150 sonnets, and his body of work is widely performed, analyzed, studied, and reinterpreted to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hamlet is in many ways a product of the Reformation—a religious revolution in which Protestants broke away from the Catholic Church—as well as the skeptical humanism of the late Renaissance, which held that there were limits on human knowledge. Hamlet's constant anxiety about the difference between appearance and reality, as well as his 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 influenced by humanist thought. In the centuries since it was first written, *Hamlet* has been staged and set in different eras of history, from the late Middle Ages to the confines of a modern-day psych ward. Truncated and full-text versions alike have been produced on stage and screen, and 20th and 21st-century casts and directors have launched interpretations of the text which examine Hamlet as an Oedipal figure, as an individual suffering from mental illness, and even as the illegitimate son of King Claudius.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

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. Many scholars believe that Shakespeare was not the first person to adapt this story—Thomas Kyd, one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, is largely believed to have written a play known as the *Ur-Hamlet*. Though the text has been lost, scholars believe Shakespeare was directly inspired by Kyd's work. Tom Stoppard's 1966 play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* reimagines the world of Hamlet with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—Hamlet's doomed courtiers—as the main characters. Their own existential discussions, which take place "in between" the scenes of the original text (which are briefly interwoven throughout the play) rival Hamlet's discursive monologues. Hailed as an absurdist tragicomedy, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is widely regarded as one of the greatest plays of the 20th century and has been adapted for radio and film, with Gary Oldman and Tim Roth leading the 1990 movie adaptation.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark
- **When Written:** Likely between 1599 and 1602
- **Where Written:** Stratford-upon-Avon or London, England
- **When Published:** First Quarto printed 1603; Second Quarto printed 1604; First Folio printed 1623
- **Literary Period:** Renaissance
- **Genre:** Tragic play; revenge play
- **Setting:** Elsinore Castle, Denmark, during the late Middle Ages
- **Climax:** After seeing Claudius's emotional reaction to a play Hamlet has had staged in order to make Claudius face a fictionalized version of his own murder plot against the former king, Hamlet resolves to kill the Claudius without guilt.
- **Antagonist:** Claudius
- **Point of View:** Dramatic

EXTRA CREDIT

The Role of a Lifetime. The role of Hamlet is often considered one of the most challenging theatrical roles ever written, and has been widely interpreted on stage and screen by famous actors throughout history. Shakespeare is rumored to have originally written the role for John Burbage, one of the most well-known actors of the Elizabethan era. Since Shakespeare's time, actors John Barrymore, Laurence Olivier, Ian McKellen, Jude Law, Kenneth Branagh, and Ethan Hawke are just a few actors who have tried their hand at playing the Dane. When Daniel Day-Lewis took to the stage as Hamlet in London in

1989, he left the stage mid-performance one night after reportedly seeing the ghost of his real father, the poet Cecil Day-Lewis, and has not acted in a single live theater production since.

Shakespeare or Not? There are some who believe Shakespeare did not actually write many—or any—of the plays attributed to him. The most common "Anti-Stratfordian" theory is that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and used Shakespeare as a front man, as aristocrats were not supposed to write plays. Others claim Shakespeare's contemporaries such as Thomas Kyd or Christopher Marlowe may have authored his works. Most contemporary scholarship, however, supports the idea that the Bard really did compose the numerous plays and poems which have established him, in the eyes of many, as the greatest writer in history.

PLOT SUMMARY

A ghost resembling the recently-deceased King of Denmark stalks the ramparts of Elsinore, Denmark's royal castle, over the course of several nights, setting all the castle's guardsmen on edge. The terrified sentinels Marcellus, Francisco, and Barnardo convince a skeptical nobleman, Horatio, to watch along with them one night. When Horatio sees the ghost, he decides they should tell prince Hamlet—his closest friend and 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 the king's widow, Gertrude. Claudius seems to be an able king, easily handling the threat of the Norwegian prince Fortinbras, who is seeking to take back the lands his own father lost in battle with Hamlet's father. Hamlet, however, cannot accept his uncle's rule, furious as he is about Gertrude's marriage to Claudius, and resentful of both his mother and his uncle for besmirching his father's memory with their union. Hamlet agrees to meet the ghost, and as he speaks with it, it claims to be the spirit of his father. The ghost reveals that he did not die of natural causes, but rather was poisoned by Claudius. Hamlet, newly enraged, quickly accepts the ghost's command to seek revenge.

As the days go by, however, Hamlet is uncertain if what the ghost said is true, and struggles to decide whether he should actually kill his uncle. He delays his revenge and begins to act half-mad, contemplates suicide, and becomes furious at all women. He tells himself that his madness is a front which will allow him to investigate his uncle without the king realizing Hamlet is onto him, but as Hamlet investigates his own existential and moral center, his thoughts begin to tend toward serious distress, if not full-blown madness. The king's obsequious old councilor, Polonius, begins to believe that Hamlet's behavior is tied to his affections for Ophelia, Polonius's daughter. Claudius and Gertrude, unsatisfied with Polonius's assessment, summon two of Hamlet's old school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to try to find out what's wrong with him. As Polonius develops a plot to spy on a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia—using Ophelia as a knowing pawn—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 King Hamlet, and watch Claudius's reaction. Hamlet decides that if Claudius reacts in a way that marks him as truly guilty, he will be able to avenge his father's death without any moral doubts—in other words, he'll have no excuse not to act decisively and kill the king.

Polonius and Claudius successfully spy on the meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet, during which Ophelia attempts to return gifts and letters Hamlet has given her over an undetermined amount of time—suggesting that Ophelia and Hamlet have had a romantic and perhaps sexual relationship for a while. Hamlet flies into a rage against women and marriage, claiming that women only breed sinners and ordering Ophelia to get herself to a nunnery and hide herself away from men. Claudius concludes Hamlet neither loves Ophelia, nor is he mad. Seeing Hamlet's increasing instability as a threat, Claudius decides to send him away to England, where he will be less of a nuisance. At the play that night, however, as the actors perform a scene which mirrors the events of King Hamlet's murder, Claudius runs from the room and thus proves his guilt in Hamlet's eyes. Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, angry with Hamlet's embarrassing behavior at the play, summons him to her quarters to talk to him about what's going on. Hamlet nearly gets his chance for revenge when, on the way to see Gertrude, he comes upon Claudius, alone and praying in a chamber. Hamlet holds off, however—if Claudius is praying as he dies, then his soul might go to heaven. Even after determining Claudius's guilt through his intricate plot, Hamlet is unable to take action. In Gertrude's room, Hamlet berates his mother for marrying Claudius so aggressively that she thinks he might kill her. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to Hamlet again, but Gertrude claims not to be able to see it, and cries out that her son is truly mad. Polonius, who is spying on the meeting from behind a tapestry, calls for help. Hamlet thinks Polonius is Claudius and stabs him through the tapestry, killing him.

Claiming that he wants to protect Hamlet from punishment for killing Polonius, Claudius sends Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Claudius's real motivation, however, is to have Hamlet killed—he sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern onward with a letter asking the King of England, Denmark's ally, to execute Hamlet on sight. Meanwhile, Polonius's son, Laertes, returns to Denmark from his studies in France to avenge his father's death. He finds that his sister, Ophelia, has gone insane with grief over her father's death (and Hamlet's rejection of her), and watches as she puts on a macabre and yet spellbinding display of singing old nursery rhymes alongside bawdy barroom songs, all the while passing

out invisible "**flowers**" to the members of court. Claudius convinces Laertes that Polonius's death—and Ophelia's madness—are both Hamlet's fault. When news arrives that a pirate attack has allowed 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—Laertes's rapier will be poisoned. As a backup, Claudius will also poison some wine that he'll give to Hamlet if he wins.

Ophelia drowns in an apparent suicide, and a funeral is arranged for her. Even though suicides are not supposed to be given proper Christian burials, according to a pair of gravediggers preparing her grave, Ophelia will be buried with a limited set of rites since she is a noblewoman. Hamlet arrives back at Elsinore to find the gravediggers at work. As he observes them doing their morbid tasks merrily, he watches as they casually toss out the **skull** of Yorick, his father's old court jester. Hamlet's existentialism—and nihilism—reach new peaks as he looks at the skull, realizing that all living souls (be they great or common, good or evil) reach the same ends. When Hamlet realizes that it is Ophelia being buried, he bursts onto her memorial service, arguing that he loved her best of anyone—even as Laertes, stricken with grief, throws himself into his sister's grave.

Back at the castle, Hamlet tells Horatio of his exploits on the ocean, revealing that he discovered Claudius's plot and forged a letter in Claudius's handwriting ordering the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead of him, ensuring that the pair will be killed on sight when they reach England. When a courtier named Osric brings news of Laertes's challenge to a duel, Hamlet bravely accepts. Horatio warns Hamlet that he has a bad feeling about the match, but Hamlet tells Horatio that he no longer cares whether he lives or dies—he wants to leave his fate up to God. 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, realizing that he, too, is doomed by his own poison, reveals Claudius's treachery. Hamlet kills Claudius by stabbing him with the poisoned sword and pouring wine down the man's throat, poisoning him just as Claudius poisoned Hamlet's father. Hamlet and Laertes forgive each another just before Laertes collapses and dies. As Hamlet dies, he hears the drums of Fortinbras's army marching through Denmark after a battle with the Polish, and tells Horatio, with his dying breath, that Fortinbras should be the one to ascend to the throne as the next King of Denmark. Looking around at the mess of spilled wine and bloody bodies, Hamlet charges Horatio with telling the world the full truth of Hamlet's story. He dies, and Horatio bids the "sweet prince" goodbye. Fortinbras enters with a pair of ambassadors from England, who announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio begins to tell Hamlet's story, and Fortinbras orders Hamlet's body to be lifted up on a bier and displayed with the due honor and glory of a soldier.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Hamlet – Prince of Denmark, son of the late King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude, and nephew and stepson to Claudius. Hamlet is one of the most famous figures in Western literature, and, in the world of the theater, one of the most complicated, difficult, and yet sought-after roles ever created. Hamlet's existentialism, immaturity, and layered, constructed personality make him an odd leading man—a protagonist in a revenge play that is less about the revenge itself and more about tearing down notions of whether vengeance is ever justified (or ever enough). Hamlet, a university student, delivers several long monologues and soliloquies throughout the play which plunge the depths of his psyche—or at least seem to—as he tries to figure out the difference between what society has led him to believe and what his own core beliefs truly are. For instance, though Hamlet's father's ghost charges him with securing vengeance for Claudius's brutal act of regicide, Hamlet isn't sure whether there is truly any honor in revenge—and his inability to decide one way or the other results in his halting, hobbling inaction, his endless musings on the nature of life and death, and his festering inability to tell the difference between what is real and what is perceived. Shakespeare uses Hamlet to explore the nihilism that takes over once one begins to see life and death as arbitrary and meaningless, and to imagine what cruelties, betrayals, and charades one might resort to as a result of that nihilism. Hamlet's despicable treatment of his lover Ophelia and his mother Gertrude, his slaying of Polonius, and his public humiliation of Claudius are all consequences of his inability to act simply and decisively—and yet with every day that Hamlet refuses to take action, kill his murderous stepfather, and claim the throne for himself, the "rotten" core of Denmark grows more and more unstable, and vulnerable to foreign interference. Anxious, poetic, brooding, and yet oftentimes rebellious and playful, Hamlet's contradictory personality, convoluted speeches, and tragic fate make him one of Shakespeare's best-known characters, and one of theater's greatest enigmas of all time.

Claudius – Hamlet's uncle and stepfather, and the new King of Denmark. After the death of Hamlet's father and Claudius's brother, the former king, Claudius married his brother's wife, Gertrude, and assumed the throne of Denmark—much to Hamlet's chagrin and suspicion. Early on in the play, the ghost of Hamlet's father appears to Hamlet and tells him that Claudius murdered him for the throne, then charges Hamlet with avenging the murder. Hamlet's hatred of Claudius intensifies after speaking with the ghost—but still, Hamlet is

unable to take the action needed to get revenge for his father. Claudius, meanwhile, interprets Hamlet's suspicion and anger as madness, and endeavors to find out the cause by recruiting Hamlet's friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Claudius fears that Hamlet is onto him, and when Hamlet arranges a performance of a play whose events mirror the manner of King Hamlet's murder, Claudius at last confesses, in a lengthy soliloquy, to his dark, dastardly deeds. Alone on stage, Claudius tries to pray for forgiveness for his actions—but admits that he knows that without truly repenting in deed as well as in word, he will never be saved or absolved. Claudius, for all his words of regret, doesn't actually *feel* regret about what he's done—he's happy to be on the throne, to be married to Gertrude, and to have power over Denmark. However, Claudius's illegitimate rule is the "rotten" core of the country, and as relationships within Elsinore splinter and fall apart, Claudius's bogus claim to the throne begins to threaten Denmark's political viability against its rivals in Norway. Self-serving, cool, and relentlessly ambitious, Claudius's arc ties in with several of the play's major themes, including action and inaction, appearance versus reality, and poison, corruption, and death.

Gertrude – Hamlet's mother, Claudius's wife, and the Queen of Denmark. One of only two female characters in the play (along with Ophelia), Gertrude's arc throughout the drama is perhaps most representative of the theme of women. Gertrude marries her brother-in-law, Claudius, very shortly after the death of her husband—an action perceived as cruel, obscene, lustful, and opportunistic by her son, Hamlet. In reality, this choice is one of the few options available to a woman of Gertrude's time: a woman whose political safety and social standing is entirely dependent on her connection to and protection from a powerful man. Gertrude, then, is one of the play's most complex characters, and one whose motives and truest nature are often obscured. For instance, when Hamlet confronts Gertrude about her choices, she admits that looking inward at her own choices—and considering the idea that her new husband murdered her old one—is too painful. Whether Gertrude is aware of Claudius's murderous ambition on any level remains up for debate, but what is clear is that no matter how much she knows, she is willing to tamp it down in order to selfishly secure her own sociopolitical safety. Gertrude's arc also ties in with the play's theme of action and inaction—if, as the text overwhelmingly suggests, Gertrude knew that her husband was murdered by his brother and married Claudius anyway, then that choice is perhaps the play's most profound example of how both action and inaction can have complex moral implications.

Polonius – A councilor, or advisor, to Claudius, and the father of Ophelia and Laertes. Polonius is a verbose, faltering old man whose servile devotion to Claudius renders him slimy, untrustworthy, and pathetic in the eyes of Hamlet. Polonius is determined to do whatever it takes to stay in the good graces of the king and queen, and invents many different ways of spying on Hamlet in an attempt to win the monarchs' continued favor. Petty, meddling, and hypocritical, Polonius meets his end when, hiding behind a tapestry in Gertrude's chambers in order to listen in on a conversation between the queen and Hamlet, he lets out a noise—and Hamlet stabs his sword through the tapestry, not knowing who is behind it but furious at being spied upon by a "rat." While Hamlet is a character crippled by inaction, Polonius is a character whose constant scheming and devising—in other words, his inability to stop taking new actions—is what ultimately kills him. Polonius's arc also ties in with the plays' theme of appearance versus reality—with all of his two-faced plotting and fawning deference in pursuit of political strength and favor, it's impossible to tell who Polonius truly is or what he truly wants.

Ophelia – Polonius's daughter, Laertes' sister, and Hamlet's lover. Along with Gertrude, Ophelia is the only other female character in the play, Ophelia's actions and trajectory are unfortunately defined by the men around her. At the start of the play, Ophelia—who has been in a relationship of undetermined seriousness with Hamlet for an unspecified amount of time—is used as a pawn in her father Polonius's attempt to help Claudius and Gertrude ascertain the source of Hamlet's madness. Polonius believes a burgeoning rift between Ophelia and Hamlet is the cause—in reality, Hamlet is, unbeknownst to the others at Elsinore, affecting madness in order to seem less suspicious or threatening as he investigates his father's murder. Ophelia, however, is ignorant of Hamlet's plan—and as she interacts with him in service of her father's plot, Hamlet becomes so hurt by her transparent betrayal that he begins acting like even more of a lunatic towards Ophelia, cruelly suggesting she become a nun and making lewd sexual remarks towards her at every available opportunity. Between Hamlet's abuses—and his murder of Polonius—Ophelia eventually loses her own mind, succumbing fully to the madness at which Hamlet has only been playing. Ophelia eventually commits suicide, and though Hamlet claims to grieve her, no one—least of all Ophelia's furious brother, Laertes—believes him. A tragic figure whose life and death alike are coopted by the men around her, Ophelia is nonetheless able to do the one thing Hamlet, for all his musings on his desire to take his own life, is never able to do: she kills herself, reclaiming through a tragic action the only measure of agency she's had over her own life for as long as she's lived it.

The Ghost – An otherworldly presence that visits Hamlet early on in the play. The ghost appears to Hamlet as his father, though alternate readings of the play allow for the possibilities that the ghost may be a figment of Hamlet's imagination, a malevolent demon seeking to derail Hamlet's life, or even an actor working on Claudius's behalf in an attempt to drive Hamlet mad and exclude him from the line of succession to the throne. Hamlet, however, believes that the ghost is truly his

father. When the ghost tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius and charges the prince with seeking vengeance, Hamlet takes the ghost's words to heart. Though Horatio, Marcellus, Barnardo, and Francisco can all see the ghost, it's possible that the spirit can choose to whom it is visible. When the ghost reappears to Hamlet in Gertrude's chambers, for example, Gertrude claims she can't see the apparition—whether she is truly blind to it or is simply pretending to be is a matter of interpretation. The ghost is, in this way, at the center of several of the play's themes: appearance versus reality; action and inaction; religion, honor, and revenge; as well as poison, death, and corruption. The ghost orders Hamlet to act and becomes frustrated with him when he doesn't—at the same time, the ghost itself speaks of being trapped in a kind of purgatory, unable to move on to either heaven or hell until its will is done. The ghost serves as a constant reminder of death's omnipotence and the possibility that the afterlife for which all souls are destined is not a particularly good place, regardless of one's actions while living.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – A pair of Hamlet's old school friends whom Claudius summons to Elsinore in order to help determine the source of Hamlet's madness. After Rosencrantz and Guildenstern admit to Hamlet's suspicions that they were recruited by the king and queen to spy on him, Hamlet accuses them of being "sponge[s]" who let themselves be taken advantage of by doing Claudius's dirty work. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are killed after Hamlet learns that Claudius is trying to have him executed, and forges a letter in Claudius's handwriting ordering the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead.

Laertes – Ophelia's brother and Polonius's son. A student at a university in France, Laertes is gallant, worldly, hotheaded, and obsessed with his family's honor. In hopes of avenging Polonius and Ophelia's deaths, Laertes conspires with Claudius to murder Hamlet, challenging Hamlet to a duel armed with a poison-tipped sword. He succeeds in stabbing Hamlet with the sword, but their weapons are switched during the fight, and Hamlet fatally stabs Laertes with the poisoned sword as well. As he dies, Laertes is remorseful over the deaths of Hamlet and Ophelia (who unknowingly drank from a cup of poisoned wine, Claudius's backup plan should the duel fail), and calls out to Hamlet that "the king's to blame," implicating Claudius in their murders. Hamlet, realizing the sword is poisoned, stabs Claudius and forces him to drink the poisoned wine. Just before Laertes perishes, he cries out that Claudius has gotten the fate he deserves, and that he forgives Hamlet.

Horatio – Hamlet's closest friend and most trusted confidant. Horatio wants to help Hamlet get to the root of his father's loss and take vengeance upon his murderer, but as Hamlet descends into inaction, volatility, and apparent madness, Horatio worries that Hamlet is getting in too deep and tries to warn his friend against risking his reputation and safety. Horatio urges Hamlet not to go through with the duel against Laertes, a warning that proves to be legitimate in the end, as Laertes's plot with Claudius ends up killing Hamlet along with Ophelia and Laertes and Claudius themselves. While Hamlet is dying after Laertes stabs him with a poisoned sword, Horatio contemplates committing suicide by drinking from the same cup of poisoned wine Hamlet used to kill Claudius, demonstrating the deep loyalty he feels for Hamlet and his despair over losing his friend. However, Hamlet prevents Horatio from doing so, urging him to live on and share the truth of Hamlet's story with the world.

Fortinbras – The Prince of Norway. A young leader motivated to conquer foreign lands, make a name for himself, and avenge his father's death at the hands of Hamlet's own father, Fortinbras is Hamlet's opposite in every way. Fortinbras's actions—heard of consistently throughout the play, even though Fortinbras himself is not seen on stage until the final act—serve as barbed reminders to Hamlet of his own stultifying inaction.

Yorick – The deceased royal jester, whose remains Hamlet cradles and plays with after a pair of gravediggers exhume his **skull**. Hamlet recalls Yorick, in one of the play's most famous lines, as "a fellow of infinite jest," and yet the prince's macabre handling of the remains of the jester of his youth reflects the play's darker themes of poison, corruption, and death.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Osric – A foppish courtier whose irritating demeanor and fawning praise of the Danish nobility render him annoying to Hamlet and Horatio.

First Player – The leading player of a troupe of actors who come to Elsinore to perform a play which mirrors the circumstances of Hamlet's father's murder. Hamlet hopes this play will provoke a reaction from Claudius and thus allow him to determine his uncle's guilt (or innocence) in the king's death.

Gravediggers – A pair of gravediggers who unceremoniously exhume Yorick's **skull**. Their quippy but deep exchanges about the nature of death, the fate of dead souls and bodies, and the ridiculousness of funerary rites further the play's existential themes of corruption and death and appearance versus reality.

Marcellus – A Danish soldier and sentinel at the castle of Elsinore.

Barnardo – A Danish soldier and sentinel at the castle of Elsinore.

Francisco – A Danish soldier and sentinel at the castle of Elsinore.

Voltemand – A courtier and ambassador to Norway.

Cornelius – A courtier and ambassador to Norway.

Reynaldo – Servant to Polonius.

Captain – A captain 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 is part of a literary tradition called the revenge play, in which a person—most often a man—must take revenge against those who have wronged him. *Hamlet*, however, turns the genre on its head in an ingenious way: Hamlet, the person seeking vengeance, can't actually bring himself to take his revenge. As Hamlet struggles throughout the play with the logistical difficulties and moral burdens of vengeance, waffling between whether he should kill Claudius and avenge his father once and for all, or whether to do so would be pointless, cruel, or even self-destructive, William Shakespeare's unique perspective on action versus inaction becomes clear. Ultimately, as the characters within the play puzzle, pontificate, and perish, Shakespeare suggests that there is no inherent morality in either action or inaction, insofar as each option is tied to vengeance: whether one acts or does not, death inevitably comes for everyone.

There are two major arenas in which Hamlet's ability to take decisive action are played out: the first being the question of whether or not he will kill Claudius and avenge his father, and the second being the question of whether Hamlet will take his own life in order to avoid making the former decision. When Hamlet's father's ghost appears to him and charges him with taking vengeance upon Claudius for murdering him, Hamlet is determined to do the ghost's bidding—but as Hamlet (often purposefully) misses opportunity after opportunity to kill Claudius, he begins to wonder what his own inability to act says about him, and whether he is as weak and mad as he has led everyone to believe. Hamlet has faked madness as a cover for his investigations into Claudius, taking one small action in order to stall having to take a larger, riskier one. However, as Hamlet languishes in indecision, even that small action becomes too frightening, and he begins contemplating suicide, asking, in a famous line, whether it is better "to be or not to be." On the matter of suicide, even, Hamlet cannot make a decision—to take his own life would be to fail his father, but to stay alive means reckoning with his own inaction day after day. Ultimately, Hamlet resolves too late to kill Claudius—Claudius and Laertes have already put a plan to kill Hamlet as revenge for the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia into action. Hamlet succeeds in killing Claudius—but not before realizing that his own death from being slain by Laertes's poisoned rapier is imminent. Hamlet has acted at last, but has staved off his actions for so long that Shakespeare seems to be using Hamlet's idleness to suggest that neither action nor inaction has any bearing on morality, or any influence on the ultimate outcome of one's life.

It is also significant that in the background of the main drama of *Hamlet*, Elsinore swirls with rumors of the approach of Fortinbras, the young prince of Norway who has succeeded his father (also named Fortinbras), on the Norwegian throne. Fortinbras is determined to take back lands his father lost in battle—including Denmark—and marches relentlessly across Europe as he sets his eyes on lands in Poland and beyond. Hamlet overhears these murmurings of Fortinbras's campaign, and though he never comes face-to-face with his foil and opposite, the audience (and Hamlet himself) recognize Fortinbras's decisive action on his late father's behalf as all that Hamlet is unable to bring himself to do. In the end, when Fortinbras arrives at Elsinore to find a massacre before him, he accepts Horatio's (and the late Hamlet's) nomination to the Danish throne. For his decisive action, Fortinbras is rewarded with the one thing Hamlet partly longed for but could never take the action necessary to secure: political and social control of his country—and yet other characters who have taken the same decisive actions as Fortinbras, such as Claudius and Laertes, have met their deaths as well.

By the end of the play, all of the major characters are dead, and a new leader has come to Denmark to seize the throne. While Hamlet's great inner moral struggles—"to be or not to be," to take revenge or to stay his hand, to ascend to the throne or to languish in obscurity—have been slowly unfolding, the wheels of the world have kept turning. Death has come for all the major players, and while some have been slain as a result of Hamlet's actions, others have been killed by his inaction. Death is humanity's great equalizer, and Shakespeare shows that it does not discriminate between the valiant and the cowardly, the motivated and the fearful, or the good and the wicked.

APPEARANCE VS. REALITY

Hamlet is full of references to the wide gulf that often exists between how things appear and how they really are. From Hamlet's own "craft[ed]" madness to Claudius's many schemes and plots involving Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern to the very foundation of Denmark's political stability (or lack thereof), things within Elsinore castle are hardly ever as they seem. *Hamlet*'s characters' collective desire to make sense of the difference between what's real and what's not drives them to deception, cruelty, and indeed even madness. In acting mad, Hamlet succeeds in driving himself mad; in pretending to spurn Hamlet's affections, Ophelia actually creates a searing rift between them; in trying to ignore the fact that her new

husband murdered her old one, Gertrude forgets the truth and abandons her moral compass. Ultimately, Shakespeare makes the slightly metaphysical argument that the desire to determine which aspects of a person's character or actions are "real" or intentional actually serves to expose the fact that there is, perhaps, sometimes no difference between what is real and what is perceived; the identities people perform and the choices they make, even in jest, become their realities.

Throughout the play, many of the major characters find themselves confounded by the gulf between how things appear to be and how they really are—even as they themselves engage in subterfuge and masquerades in repeated attempts to present themselves other than as they are, or deliberately mislead one another. Hamlet is the most egregious example of this behavior—he pretends to be mad in order to confuse the members of court at Elsinore and make them believe he's crazy or blind to what's going on at the castle, so that he can more sneakily investigate Claudius and come to a conclusion about whether or not his uncle really did murder his father. In his attempts to pass himself off as mad, Hamlet spurns, denigrates, and verbally harasses Ophelia and his mother, Gertrude; entangles two of his old school friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a wild goose chase that leads to their deaths; and berates, offends, and condemns Gertrude as he attempts to ascertain her complicity (or lack thereof) in King Hamlet's demise. Even as Hamlet deceives those around him in an attempt to save his own skin, he worries incessantly about the guises others adopt to survive at court. He lambasts Ophelia—and, by proxy, all women—for wearing makeup on their faces, accusing them of presenting themselves other than as they are. He makes fun of Polonius's wormy, fawning obsequiousness to the king and queen, even though he knows it is the job of courtiers and councilors to serve the monarchy. He calls out Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as players in his mother and uncle's plot to get to the root of his own (false) madness, even though he knows they, too are at the mercy of royalty, unable to refuse the demands of their rulers. Hamlet's constant anxiety about being lied to, or merely shown a version of reality that runs counter to the truth, is the subject of several length monologues and soliloquies—but ultimately, Hamlet's endless inquiries into the morality of constructed appearances lead nowhere: at the end of the day, he is complicit in his own worst fears.

Other characters who bring into question the gulf between appearance and reality include the ghost of Hamlet's father, Hamlet's mother Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia. The ghost of Hamlet's father claims to be the late King Hamlet—but Hamlet himself has reservations about the ghost's true nature which are further called into question when the ghost appears to Hamlet a second time inside of Gertrude's chambers. Gertrude claims to not be able to see the ghost, allowing for several possibilities: the ghost may indeed be a figment of Hamlet's own imagination, or Gertrude may be pretending not to be able to see the ghost for fear of admitting to her complicity in his murder (or simply her indifference to marrying his killer to retain her own political position). The ghost itself tampers with the denizens of Elsinore's ideas about "reality," inspiring awe and fear in Horatio, Marcellus, and other watchmen and sentinels. Gertrude, meanwhile, appears innocent and ignorant of her husband's murder—but she may, in reality, be affecting innocence just as Hamlet affects madness as a cover for a darker motive. Polonius, too, is guilty of presenting a version of himself that runs counter to the truth of who he is: he makes claims about himself and offers advice that contradict his own actions, such as when he tells Laertes "to thine own self be true," contradicting his own behavior as a fawning courtier loyal to the whims of his superiors, or when he claims that "brevity is the soul of wit" before embarking on several lengthy, long-winded monologues. Ophelia claims to be pure, honest, and undesirous of Hamlet's sexual or romantic attention—and yet their interactions seem to suggest that she and Hamlet have a long (and lurid) history, making her desperate attempts at purporting her purity all the more pathetic when seen through Hamlet's eyes. Ultimately, Hamlet, who has been pretending to be mad for so long, drives himself to the edge of sanity, adopting a kind of nihilism when it comes to questions of life and death, morality, and reality itself. Gertrude, who pretends to be an innocent victim, becomes one when she unwittingly drinks poisoned wine intended for Hamlet. Polonius, who sacrificed his moral compass in service to a corrupt crown, is held up as a tragic loss for the court after his death, revered and mourned by the king. Ophelia, who denied her love for Hamlet in an attempt to appease her father, is buried as a virgin, in spite of the play's suggestion that she was not pure when she died. All of these characters become the things they once merely pretended to be—and the line between appearance and reality grows blurrier and blurrier as the play progresses.

Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's most complex plays, noted throughout history for its ambiguous moral center, deep existentialism, and deft exploration of appearance versus reality. As Shakespeare shows how fine the line between appearance and reality really is, he transforms the play into a cautionary tale about the dangers of adopting behaviors, traits, and ways of moving through the world that obscure or corrupt the truth of who one really is.

WOMEN

Though there are only two traditionally female characters in *Hamlet*—Ophelia and Gertrude—the play itself speaks volumes about the uniquely painful, difficult struggles and unfair fates women have suffered throughout history. Written in the first years of the 17th century, when women were forbidden even from appearing onstage, and set in the Middle Ages, *Hamlet* exposes

the prejudices and disadvantages which narrowed or blocked off the choices available to women–even women of noble birth. Hamlet is obsessive about the women in his life, but at the same time expresses contempt and ridicule for their actions—actions which are, Shakespeare ultimately argues, things they're forced to do just to survive in a cruel, hostile, misogynistic world.

Gertrude and Ophelia are two of *Hamlet*'s most misunderstood—and underdeveloped—characters. Hamlet himself rails against each of them separately, for very different reasons, in misogynistic rants which accuse women of being sly seductresses, pretenders, and lustful schemers. What Hamlet does not see—and what men of his social standing and his time period perhaps could not see if they tried—is that Gertrude and Ophelia are products of their environment, forced to make difficult and even lethal decisions in an attempt to survive and stay afloat in a politically dangerous world built for men, not for women. When Gertrude's husband, King Hamlet, dies, she quickly remarries his brother, Claudius—who actually murdered him. There are two possibilities: the first is that Gertrude knew about the murder, and the second is that she didn't. The text suggests that while Gertrude was likely not directly involved in the murder, she was aware of the truth about Claudius all along—and chose to marry him anyway. While Hamlet accuses his mother of lusting after her own brother-in-law, killing her husband, and reveling in her corrupted marriage bed with her new spouse, he fails to see that perhaps Gertrude married Claudius out of fear of what would happen to her if she didn't. Gertrude, as a woman, holds no political power of her own—with her husband dead, she might have lost her position at court, been killed by a power-hungry new or foreign king, or forced into another, less appealing marital arrangement. Marrying Claudius was perhaps, for Gertrude, the lesser of several evils—and an effort just to survive.

Ophelia's trajectory is similar to Gertrude's, in that she is forced into several decisions and situations which don't seem to be of her own making, but rather things she must do simply to appease the men around her and retain her social position at court. When Ophelia is drawn into her father Polonius and Claudius's plot to spy on Hamlet and try to tease the reason behind his madness out of him, she's essentially used as a pawn in a game between men. Polonius wants to see if Hamlet's madness is tied to Ophelia, and so asks Ophelia to spurn Hamlet's advances, return gifts and letters he's given her in the past, and refuse to see or speak with him anymore to see test his hypothesis. Ophelia does these things—and incurs Hamlet's wrath and derision. Again, as with his mother, he is unable to see the larger sociopolitical forces steering Ophelia through her own life, and has no sympathy for her uncharacteristic behavior. After the death of her father—at Hamlet's hands—Ophelia loses her sanity. Spurned by Hamlet, left alone by Laertes (who is off studying in France, pursuing his future while his sister sits at court by herself) and forced to reckon with the death of her father—after Hamlet, her last bastion of sociopolitical protection—she goes mad. Even in the depths of her insanity, she continues singing nursery songs and passing out invisible **flowers** to those around her, performing the sweet niceties of womanhood that are hardwired into her after years of knowing how she must look and behave in order to win the favor of others—specifically men. Indeed, when Ophelia kills herself, it is perhaps out of a desire to take her fate into her own hands. A woman at court is in a perilous position already—but a madwoman at court, divorced from all agency and seen as an outsider and a liability, is even further endangered. Though Ophelia kills herself, she is perhaps attempting to keep her dignity—and whatever shreds of agency she has left at the end of her life—intact.

Gertrude and Ophelia are subject to paternalistic condescension, sexual objectification, and abuse. They are also subject to the constant psychological and emotional weight of knowing that no matter how dehumanizing and cruel the treatment they must face at court may be, things are even worse for women of lower social standings—and if the two of them don't keep in line, lose their positions at court and face far worse fates. Gertrude and Ophelia make the decisions they make out of a drive simply to survive—and yet Hamlet never stops to imagine the weighty considerations which lie behind both women's actions.

RELIGION, HONOR, AND REVENGE

Every society is defined by its codes of conduct—its rules about how to act and behave. 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. As the play unfolds and Hamlet (in keeping with his country's spoken and unspoken) rules) seeks revenge for his father's murder, he begins to realize just how complicated vengeance, justice, and honor all truly are. As Hamlet plunges deeper and deeper into existential musings, he also begins to wonder about the true meaning of honor—and Shakespeare ultimately suggests that the codes of conduct by which any given society operates are, more often than not, muddy, contradictory, and confused.

As Hamlet begins considering what it would mean to actually get revenge—to actually commit murder—he begins waffling and languishing in indecision and inaction. His inability to act, however, is not necessarily a mark of cowardice or fear—rather, as the play progresses, Hamlet is forced to reckon very seriously with what retribution and violence in the name of retroactively reclaiming "honor" or glory actually accomplishes. This conundrum is felt most profoundly in the middle of Act 3, when Hamlet comes upon Claudius totally alone for the first time in the play. It is the perfect opportunity to kill the man uninterrupted and unseen—but Claudius is on his knees,

praying. Hamlet worries that killing Claudius while he prays will mean that Claudius's soul will go to heaven. Hamlet is ignorant of the fact that Claudius, just moments before, was lamenting that his prayers for absolution are empty because he will not take action to actually repent for the violence he's done and the pain he's caused. Hamlet is paralyzed in this moment, unable to reconcile religion with the things he's been taught about goodness, honor, duty, and vengeance. This moment represents a serious, profound turning point in the play—once Hamlet chooses not to kill Claudius for fear of unwittingly sending his father's murderer to heaven, thus failing at the concept of revenge entirely, he begins to think differently about the codes, institutions, and social structures which demand unthinking vengeance and religious piety in the same breath. Because the idea of a revenge killing runs counter to the very tenets of Christian goodness and charity at the core of Hamlet's upbringing—regardless of whether or not he believes them on a personal level—he begins to see the artifice upon which all social codes are built.

The second half of the play charts Hamlet's descent into a new worldview—one which is very similar to nihilism in its surrender to the randomness of the universe and the difficulty of living within the confines of so many rules and standards at one time. As Hamlet gets even more deeply existential about life and death, appearances versus reality, and even the common courtesies and decencies which define society, he exposes the many hypocrisies which define life for common people and nobility alike. Hamlet resolves to pursue revenge, claiming that his thoughts will be worth nothing if they are anything but "bloody," but at the same time is exacting and calculating in the vengeances he does secure. He dispatches with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, charged with bringing him to England for execution, by craftily outwitting them and sending them on to their own deaths. He laments to Horatio that all men, whether they be Alexander the Great or a common court jester, end up in the same ground. Finally, he warns off Horatio's warning about dueling Laertes by claiming that he wants to leave his fate to God. Hamlet's devil-may-care attitude and his increasingly reckless choices are the result of realizing that the social and moral codes he's clung to for so long are inapplicable to his current circumstances—and perhaps more broadly irrelevant.

Hamlet is a deeply subversive text—one that asks hard, uncomfortable questions about the value of human life, the indifference of the universe, and the construction of society, culture, and common decency. As Hamlet pursues his society's ingrained ideals of honor, he discovers that perhaps honor means something very different than what he's been raised to believe it does—and confronts the full weight of society's arbitrary, outdated expectations and demands.

POISON, CORRUPTION, DEATH

When the sentinel Marcellus speaks the line "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" after seeing the ghost of the former King Hamlet, he is speaking to a broadly-held societal superstition. In medieval times and the Middle Ages—the era in which *Hamlet* is set—the majority of people believed that the health of a nation was connected to the legitimacy of its king. As Hamlet endeavors to discover—and root out—the "rotten" core of Denmark, he grows increasingly disgusted and perturbed by literal manifestations of death as well as "deaths" of other kinds: those of honor, decency, and indeed the state of Denmark as he once knew it. Ultimately, Shakespeare suggests a connection between external rot and internal, systemic rot, arguing that physical corruption portends and even predicts the poisoning of spiritual, political, and social affairs.

An atmosphere of poison, corruption, and death lingers over *Hamlet* from the play's very first moments. The citizens of Denmark—both within the castle of Elsinore and beyond its walls—know that there is something "rotten" in their state. Marcellus, Barnardo, and Francisco—three watchmen at Elsinore—greet one another as they arrive for their nightly watch with hesitation, suspicion, and even skittishness, and soon the source of their anxiety becomes clear: an apparition of the recently-deceased King Hamlet has appeared on the castle walls several times in the last week. The ghost can hardly portend anything good, and as Hamlet and Horatio decide to investigate the apparition and its purpose, they learn that there is indeed a deep corruption at the heart of Denmark's throne: Claudius, King Hamlet's brother, murdered him and took his throne. The political corruption which has overtaken Denmark so disturbs Hamlet that he develops, as the play goes on, an obsession with physical corruption—with rot, decay, and the disgusting nature of death.

Throughout the play, Hamlet's fixation with rot and corruption—both of the body and of the soul—reflects his (and his society's) conflation of the spoilage of the outside with the deterioration of the inside. In Act 2, Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he sees the beauty of the world around him as nothing but a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapors," demonstrating his inability to look past the nasty, foul truths which have recently been exposed to him. Thinking so much about his father's death has given Hamlet's thoughts an existential bent, but there is a deeper, darker pessimism that has overtaken his mind, as well—one which manifests as a preoccupation with disease and foulness. When confronting his mother Gertrude about her marriage to Claudius, his father's murderer, he calls Claudius a "mildewed" man and refers to the "rank sweat" of their "enseamèd [marriage] bed." Pestilence, rot, mold, and decay are never far from Hamlet's mind—and this obsession reflects his larger anxieties about the deteriorating health not just of himself or his family, but of their very nation.

After killing Polonius, Hamlet hides the man's body in a place where, he warns Claudius, it will soon become food for the worms and begin to stink up the castle. Hamlet knows that just as bodies putrefy and grow rancid, so too does subterfuge and foul play. His obsession with rotting things shows that he truly believes Claudius's "foul deeds" will soon reveal themselves—with or without Hamlet's own help.

When Hamlet finds the **skull** of Yorick, a former court jester, while paying a visit to the graveyard just beyond the walls of Elsinore, he is flung into an existential despair—and one of the play's most profound moments of reckoning with the finality (and the foulness) of death and decay unfolds. As Hamlet laments that all the parts of Yorick he knew in life—the man's "infinite jest," warmth, and geniality, but also his physical attributes, such as his tongue and his flesh—are gone forever, he realizes that all men, be they formidable leaders like Alexander the Great or a lowly fool, return to "dust." Hamlet is both disturbed and soothed by the specifics of the body's process of decay, and even asks the gravediggers working in the yard for detailed descriptions of how long, exactly, it takes for flesh to rot off of human bones. Hamlet's continued fixation on the undignified but inescapable process of dying and decay shows that he feels incapable of stopping whatever is festering at the heart of Denmark—and indeed, in the end, a foreign leader named Fortinbras is the only one left to take over the Danish throne after Hamlet, Claudius, Laertes, and Gertrude all perish. Denmark had to rot in order to flourish—just as human flesh decays and fertilizes the ground beneath which it lies.

Shakespeare creates a gloomy, poisonous atmosphere throughout *Hamlet* in order to argue that there is a profound connection between internal rot and external decay. As the state of Denmark suffers political corruption, Shakespeare invokes another kind of corruption—rotting, fouling, and putrefying—to suggest that a corrupt state is just as odious as a decaying corpse.

SYMBOLS

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

YORICK'S SKULL

The skull of Yorick, the former jester of Hamlet's late father, represents the inevitability of death and the existential meaninglessness of life in light of this fact. When Hamlet and Horatio come upon a pair of gravediggers working merrily in spite of their morbid task in the first scene of Act 5, Hamlet finds himself drawn to a skull one of the gravediggers has found and blithely tossed aside. As Hamlet examines the skull, he laments how death comes for everyone, stripping people of their dreams and personalities, annihilating all they were while they lived. When Hamlet asks the gravedigger who the skull belonged to, the gravedigger replies that it once belonged to Yorick. Hamlet remembers Yorick well, and laments to his friend Horatio that the same man who used to tell him jokes and give him piggy-back rides through the castle is now rotting in the ground. Horatio's skull, then, is a symbol of Hamlet's ever-deepening existentialism and indeed nihilism in the wake of his father's death. When Hamlet encounters Yorick's skull, it represents a point of no return in his inner intellectual and spiritual journey throughout the play. Hamlet is filled with a kind of nihilism as he realizes that all humans return to dust, no matter how they live their lives on Earth—whether a man is good or evil, joyful or plaintive, common or noble, he will wind up in the ground. Yorick's skull and the revelation it inspires lead Hamlet to at last resolve firmly to kill Claudius in the following scene. However, Hamlet's plans for securing vengeance will go awry and he himself is killed, an ironic confirmation of the inescapability of death.

OPHELIA'S FLOWERS

In Act 4, following the death of Polonius, his daughter Ophelia goes mad. Spurned by her lover Hamlet, who himself seems to have lost his mind, and left alone in a castle with no one to trust, Ophelia loses her grip on reality. As she prances through the halls of Elsinore singing songs that range from childish to bawdy to macabre, she passes out invisible "flowers" to those she meets, the eclectic variety of which symbolize her own complex personality. She passes out rosemary (traditionally carried by mourners at funerals), pansies (whose name is derived from the French word *pensie*, meaning "thought" or "remembrance"), fennel (a quick-dying flower symbolizing sorrow), columbines (a flower symbolizing affection, often given to lovers), and daisies (symbols of innocence and purity, and the flower of the Norse fertility goddess Freya). But Ophelia states that she has no violets left—they all withered when her father died. Violets are symbols of modesty, often tied to the Virgin Mary, implying that Ophelia no longer cares about upholding shallow social norms in the wake of such a devastating tragedy. Ophelia's "bouquet" is contradictory: there are flowers associated with sorrow and mourning, but also happy remembrances; there are flowers that denote purity and chastity alongside flowers given as tokens of sexual or romantic love between partners. Ophelia's flowers, then, symbolize her many-faceted personality and desires, which have been stripped, squashed, and corrupted by society's expectations. Ophelia's imaginary flowers tie in with the thematic representation of women's issues throughout the play: Ophelia has had to change so much to survive in the world of men that she's literally driven herself mad. It is significant that later on in the play, after her suicide by drowning, Ophelia's body is found covered in "fantastic garlands" of flowers. In her

final moments, Ophelia chooses to ring herself in emblems of all that she was and all that she could have been, had the world around her not shrunken and shriveled her until hardly anything was left.

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 speaks 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 play are tasked to determine whether these behaviors are false appearances or genuine realities.

Here, Hamlet has encapsulated this central concern of the play through 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, the audience must also be skeptical of such a line: Perhaps Hamlet's insistence on the "is" actually reveals just how carefully he coordinates his speeches. Regardless of whether or not the audience can trust Hamlet, it is clear that both he and Shakespeare have put high stakes on linguistic precision and the coherence between belief and action.

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

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.133-134

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hamlet, alone in the hall of Elsinore, enters into his first soliloquy of many he'll deliver throughout the play. He delves into 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 (his life), 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 concern, while giving the audience 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. He complains of his mother's lustful nature and her moral weakness.

In this phrase, Shakespeare develops a clever rhetorical strategy—one that has endured and been used in works that

range from James Joyce's *Ulysses* to legal terminology to popular culture. 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. The audience sees, then, that the playwright is giving linguistic power to his characters, even as he also displays their shortcomings in rationality and sensibility.

Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

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

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.187-188

Explanation and Analysis

Hamlet continues to rant about Claudius and Gertrude's marriage. Here, he complains to his close friend 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. The baked meats served at his father's funeral 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 a shallow and 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, Polonius 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 "own self" 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 unspoken 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), Horatio, The

Ghost, Hamlet

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, Marcellus 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 (or what) exactly is "rotten." The line also notably brings a political element to bear on the actions of the characters, 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 ways in which it is slowly becoming vulnerable to foreign encroachment.

Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

O, villain, villain, smiling, damnèd villain!

Related Characters: Hamlet (speaker), Claudius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.5.113

Explanation and Analysis

As Hamlet converses with the ghost of his father, he curses both Gertrude and Claudius. Here, Hamlet 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 audience only sees the specific qualities of Claudius's behavior after they have been told repeatedly that they are evil.

Those specific qualities hearken back 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's 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. The audience 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), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.268-270

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 predetermined. 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.

> O God, 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), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

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 faculties, 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), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

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 and 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." In other words, 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 people 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 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), Claudius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.633-634

Explanation and Analysis

As Act 2 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 uncle's guilt or innocence.

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 metafictional 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 the audience's interpretive abilities—they 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 (and 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 of 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 lives.

❝ 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 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 sent by his mother and Claudius. 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: 3.3.102-103

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 or actions.

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), Polonius

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 only 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 is 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), Horatio

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 winning 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 inevitability 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 who 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 is the audience 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

Late at night, on the ramparts of Elsinore, Barnardo arrives to relieve his fellow sentinel Francisco of his post. As Barnardo approaches Francisco in the dark, both men are suspicious of one another, even though Francisco assures Barnardo his watch has been uneventful. As Francisco prepares to leave and go to bed, Barnardo urges him to tell Marcellus, another sentinel, and Horatio, a nobleman, to join him at his post. Right at that moment, Horatio and Marcellus arrive, announcing themselves as they enter as friends of Denmark and the king. They ask Francisco—slightly jealously—if he's done for the night, then bid him goodbye as he exits.

From the very opening moments of the play, Shakespeare establishes an atmosphere of fear, distrust, and apprehension. It is clear that the nightly watch has become a fearsome endeavor, and that something—or someone—is frightening the very men charged with keeping Elsinore secure.

Marcellus and Horatio sleepily greet Barnardo before asking him if the "thing" has "appeared again." Marcellus says that even though he and Barnardo have seen the "dreaded sight twice," Horatio refuses to believe it's real. Marcellus explains that's why he's brought Horatio along tonight—to see the "apparition" that has plagued the nightly watch. Horatio is skeptical that anything will appear, and so Barnardo begins telling him the story of the ghost. He has barely begun his tale when, surely enough, the ghost appears.

Hamlet *is a play in which ghosts are real. By establishing that several characters can see the ghost, Shakespeare shows that it is not a figment of any one person's imagination, and should be taken extremely seriously.*

Marcellus and Barnardo marvel at the apparition, which is "in the same figure like the king that's dead." Marcellus urges Horatio, an educated "scholar" to speak to the ghost. Horatio confesses that he is full of "fear and wonder" as he gazes upon the ghost, which he, too, believes looks just like the dead King of Denmark. Horatio begins shouting at the apparition, demanding to know who—or what—it is, and ordering it to speak for itself. The ghost, however, begins moving away from the men wordlessly. Barnardo and Marcellus lament that Horatio has offended the ghost.

The fact that the ghost appears to be the recently-deceased King of Denmark is an ill portent—which all these men immediately recognize. In a world where the health of the country is tied to the health of its king, the appearance of an undead monarch predicts decay, unrest, and perhaps even evil at the heart of Denmark.

After the ghost exits, Barnardo remarks upon how pale Horatio looks, and asks the man if he's all right. Horatio admits that he is shaken. He says that if he hadn't seen the ghost with his own two eyes, he wouldn't have believed it. He is mesmerized and perturbed by how much the ghost looks like the king—even down to his armor. Horatio says he believes the ghost's appearance "bodes some strange eruption to our state." In other words, he believes something bad is about to happen in Denmark.

Horatio's reaction in this passage confirms that the ghost's appearance bodes ill for the kingdom of Denmark. This scene foreshadows all the unrest—both spiritual and political—that will develop over the course of the play.

Marcellus says he agrees with Horatio—he and the other sentinels have noticed how strict their schedule of nightly watches has become and have seen the forces within Elsinore building cannons, buying weapons, and readying ships. Horatio confesses that he has heard rumors swirling around the castle. He talks of how the deceased King Hamlet killed the King of Norway, Fortinbras, in a duel—which meant that, according to an agreement between the kings, Denmark absorbed certain Norwegian lands. Now, Horatio says, he has heard that Fortinbras's son—also named Fortinbras—has gathered up an army and plans to sail for Denmark, retake his father's lost lands, and restore glory to Norway. Horatio says that they should all take the portent of the ghost very seriously and heed its warnings.

Shakespeare introduces in this passage the struggle between Norway and Denmark—a struggle in which a son, determined to regain his father's honor, sets in motion plans and actions to avenge him. Fortinbras's journey seems to mirror the one being set up for Hamlet—but of course, as the play unfolds, Shakespeare will show how Hamlet's approach to and perspective on revenge is much more complicated than young Fortinbras's.

Just then, the ghost reappears. As it heads for Horatio, Horatio orders it to stop. The ghost stops short and spreads his arms wide. Horatio begs the ghost to use its voice—if it has one—and warn them about what is to befall Denmark. He asks it to communicate any other unfinished business it might have, even if it's not warning the men of war, so that they might help it achieve peace. A rooster crows, and Marcellus and Barnardo get worried that the approaching dawn will drive the ghost away. They talk about how they might stop the ghost from leaving, but their plans are no good—the ghost departs again.

Though the men are all afraid of the ghost—and what it might portend—Horatio knows that he must confront it head-on and accept its presence if he is to appease it. Horatio, like Fortinbras, is a man of action—and stands in stark contrast to the character of Hamlet, who struggles to take decisive action and ascertain what's right.

All three men lament having lost the chance to communicate with the ghost. Horatio urges Marcellus and Barnardo to accompany him to Hamlet's quarters to tell the prince of what they've seen. Though the ghost of King Hamlet would not talk to them, Horatio bets it will talk to its son.

Horatio knows he must get Hamlet involved if the ghost's presence is to be resolved—but doesn't know what kind of journey he's setting his friend the prince on just yet.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Inside the walls of Elsinore, Claudius—the new king of Denmark—is holding court. With him are his new wife Gertrude, Hamlet's mother and the queen; Hamlet himself; Claudius's councilor Polonius; Polonius's children Laertes and Ophelia; and several members of court. Claudius delivers a long monologue in which he laments the death of his brother, King Hamlet—but states that it is high time to move on and start focusing on the future. In this spirit, Claudius says, he has married his former sister-in-law Gertrude and become the new king. He tells the court that he is aware of Fortinbras's designs on Denmark but is not planning on kowtowing to the Norwegians' demands—Claudius is determined to keep Denmark strong.

This scene shows how quickly everyone else at Elsinore has recovered from the former king's death—everyone, that is, except for Hamlet. Claudius's swift ascension to the throne—which has cut Hamlet's place in line, so to speak—is indeed suspicious. Though Claudius has taken to his role like a fish to water, there's something almost too perfect about his ease holding court, engaging in diplomatic matters, and serving as husband to his brother's former wife.

Two courtiers, Voltemand and Cornelius, enter the room to take a letter from Claudius. Claudius announces that he has written to the new King of Norway—Fortinbras's uncle, an "impotent and bedrid" man who has no idea of what his nephew is planning—to make sure that Fortinbras is put to a stop. Claudius charges Voltemand and Cornelius with hastily delivering the letter to the King of Norway. The courtiers leave, promising the demonstrate their loyalty through the speed of their journey.

Claudius wants to publicly demonstrate how well-prepared he is to handle any foreign threats—again, because the health of the nation is tied to the health of the king, Claudius wants to show that compared to "impotent" foreign leaders, he's capable, decisive, and strong in body and mind.

Claudius says that he knows Laertes has a request for him, and tells the young man to ask for anything he wishes—Polonius is so important to Claudius that Claudius will do whatever Laertes asks. Laertes asks the king's permission to return to France. After making sure that Laertes has his father's permission, as well, Claudius grants Laertes leave to go back to France.

There are complicated social codes at court which mirror the complex codes of religion, honor, and revenge which Hamlet will soon have to navigate.

Claudius then turns his attention to his "cousin" and "son" Hamlet, asking why "the clouds [of grief] still hang" on him. Hamlet cheekily retorts that he is, on the contrary, "too much in the sun." Gertrude speaks up and urges Hamlet to stop dressing in black and begin treating Claudius like a "friend" and father. It is "common," Gertrude says, for loved ones to die. Hamlet stonily replies that "it is common."

This passage introduces Hamlet as sulky and cheeky—but justifiably so in many ways. His comment that he is "too much in the sun" is a play on words which demonstrates how unhappy he is about Claudius's marriage to his mother. "It is common" is another play on words which implies his mother's marriage to Claudius is beneath her. Hamlet is angry that his mother has stooped so low as to marry her husband's brother, and furious at the idea of being called Claudius's son. He has no proof, at this point, of any violence or foul play—he has only his disgust for what he perceives as madness and disorder within his own family.

Claudius speaks up and accuses Hamlet of mourning out of "impious stubbornness." Such outward displays of grief, Claudius says, are "unmanly" and undignified. Claudius echoes Gertrude, assuring Hamlet that death is normal, and to mourn it so is a kind of crime against nature. He urges Hamlet to stay in Denmark as a high-ranking member of court rather than return to Wittenberg to resume his studies. Gertrude, too, begs Hamlet to stay. Hamlet replies to Gertrude that he will obey her. Claudius remarks upon how wonderful it is that Hamlet has chosen to stay, and asks Gertrude to come drink with him in celebration. Claudius, Gertrude, and the other members of court all exit to go be merry—except Hamlet, who stays behind.

Everyone wants to move on from the death of the king and walk forward into a new era—but Hamlet is unable to stop mourning his father, even as his "new" father tries to tell him how unbecoming (and emasculating) such persistent sadness is. Hamlet has no interest in revelry or togetherness—he is completely isolated within his own grief. Hamlet has a depressive, ruminative personality to begin with—and things are only headed downhill as he is forced to confront and contemplate issues of mortality, evil, and vengeance.

In a lengthy monologue, Hamlet laments how "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" life has become for him since his father's death two months ago. He is furious that his mother has remarried so quickly and deems her new marriage to his father's brother "incestuous." Though Hamlet is tormented by the strange twists and turns his family's lives has taken, he knows he must "hold [his] tongue" and not make any trouble.

Hamlet is clearly in a state of agony over what to do. He knows he cannot submissively accept the current state of affairs, but isn't sure how he can change the events that have recently taken place within his fractured family.

Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo enter and greet Hamlet. Hamlet clearly hasn't seen Horatio, his friend from Wittenberg, in a while, and is surprised and overjoyed at the sight of him. He asks Horatio what he's doing in Elsinore, and Horatio replies that he came to attend King Hamlet's funeral. Hamlet retorts that if Horatio was here for the funeral, he must have seen the wedding, too. Hamlet again laments how quickly his mother remarried, and sadly states that the world will never again see a man like his father. Horatio states that he saw Hamlet's father just last night.

Hamlet is eager to voice his displeasure over the current state of affairs at Elsinore to anyone who will listen. He makes his grievance known not just to Horatio, but the sentinels as well. Though Hamlet is indecisive and cannot yet make sense of how he should deal with his suspicions of Claudius, it's clear he knows that something must be done to remedy the injustice of his father's death.

Horatio begins telling Hamlet about how a ghost which bears a striking resemblance to Hamlet's father has appeared to Marcellus and Barnardo three nights in a row, and assures Hamlet that the men are correct in what they've seen. Hamlet is amazed by the news and asks to know more details about the ghost. The men tell him that the king was dressed in full armor—but had his visor up and looked very pale. Hamlet says he wants to join the men on their watch tonight, and thanks them for their friendship as they exit the room. Alone, Hamlet wonders what the ghost has to tell him—and whether it will bring word of "foul play" and "foul deeds."

The sentinels' description of the ghost looking "very pale" further suggests that something is wrong in Denmark. Not only has the ghost of the king come back—but it is looking ill, even as it is dressed for war. Its paleness hearkens to the Pale Rider, one of the biblical Four Horsemen of the apocalypse, who rides the horse of Death and thus serves as a symbolic omen of darkness and suffering. The ghost's external appearance of sickness, then, signals a parallel sense of social disease and political decay within the kingdom.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

As Laertes prepares to sail back to France, he bids goodbye to his sister, Ophelia, and warns her not to gamble her "honor" by falling in love with Hamlet—a broody man bound to the will of his country. Laertes condescendingly advises Ophelia to mind her reputation, keep her virginity intact, and stay far away from Hamlet and the "danger of desire." Ophelia says she'll keep Laertes's words close to her heart—but cheekily urges him to follow his own advice upon returning to France.

This passage establishes that Ophelia and Hamlet have some sort of relationship. Though Shakespeare keeps the details of their romantic and sexual history ambiguous, Laertes's anxiety about Ophelia losing sight of herself (and her honor) shows that he believes she is already head over heels for Hamlet, and establishes her sexual purity as a chief social concern.

Polonius enters to give Laertes's departure his blessing. He gives his son some fatherly advice, warning the young man to make many new friends—but not to let anyone get too close without proving their trustworthiness—and also urging him to stay out of quarrels, to dress well, to never borrow nor lend money, and, "above all: to thine own self be true." Laertes bids his father and sister goodbye one final time, reminding Ophelia to remember the things he told her before heading down to the docks.

Polonius is submissive and sycophantic when it comes to his dealings with the monarchy. But with his own children, he spews platitudes and attempts to appear knowledgeable and self-assured, revealing a gap between the image he projects to the world and his true inner motivations.

After Laertes leaves, Polonius asks Ophelia what her brother told her. Ophelia tells him that Laertes gave her some advice about Hamlet. Polonius says he's noticed that Hamlet and Ophelia have been spending a lot of time together, then asks Ophelia to tell him what's going on between the two of them. Ophelia says that Hamlet has "made many tenders of his affection" to her. Polonius scoffs at Hamlet's "tenders," and tells Ophelia that she would be a fool to believe Hamlet cares for her. Ophelia insists that Hamlet is true to her, but Polonius warns his daughter that Hamlet is too young—and has too much freedom—to be true. Polonius urges Ophelia not to waste any more of her time with the prince. Ophelia promises to obey her father.

This passage shows that Ophelia is bound to the whims and orders of the men in her life. Her father and brother attempt to control her very feelings and sexuality, while she feels tugged in the other direction by Hamlet's promises and affections. The fact that so many men are attempting to govern Ophelia means that, by necessity, she must stifle certain aspects of herself in order to meet their expectations—a stressful and dishonest way of living that will cause her to become increasingly unstable as the play moves forward.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

That night, Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus stand on the ramparts of Elsinore in the bitter cold, waiting for the ghost to appear. Sounds of Claudius and his courtiers feasting and drinking merrily echo from inside the castle, and Hamlet tells his friends that Claudius's constant revelry is "soil[ing]" Denmark's reputation, blotting out all that is good in the country.

Hamlet's suspicion and hatred of his uncle grow with each day as he bears witness to the king's obnoxious revelry. It's clear that Claudius has quickly gotten over the recent death of his brother, while Hamlet still mourns him sorrowfully.

The ghost suddenly appears, and Horatio urges Hamlet to address it. Hamlet begins speaking to the apparition, begging to know if it truly is the ghost of his father. He asks the ghost to tell him why it has chosen to leave its tomb and wander the grounds of Elsinore in full armor. In response, the ghost motions for Hamlet to follow it. Though Marcellus and Horatio urge Hamlet not to go with the ghost, Hamlet says he will follow it—he doesn't value his life in the first place, he says, and thus has nothing to lose.

This passage introduces Hamlet's seemingly suicidal bent. This casual disregard for his own life persists throughout the play as Hamlet contemplates suicide, risks execution, and engages in other reckless behaviors. It seems that losing his father has caused Hamlet to question the meaning of his own life, since even a powerful, beloved king can be unceremoniously killed.

Horatio begs Hamlet at length not to follow the ghost, as it may have devious designs on Hamlet's life and might try to lead him into the sea. When Horatio and Marcellus try to physically restrain Hamlet, he orders them to unhand him—then draws his sword when they refuse to listen. He threatens to turn them into ghosts themselves if they don't let him follow the apparition where it leads. Marcellus and Horatio stand down and let Hamlet follow the ghost away—but resolve to follow close behind just in case danger befalls their prince. Marcellus remarks that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

Marcellus and Horatio are frightened of the ghost—they lack Hamlet's disregard for his own life, and are actively worried about their friend getting into danger. The blindness and rage the ghost inspires in Hamlet furthers Marcellus's belief that there is something very wrong not just within the royal family, but in the country as a whole.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

Hamlet follows the ghost as it leads him along, but soon grows tired. He orders the ghost to speak to him, refusing to follow it any farther. The ghost assents and turns to speak to Hamlet. The ghost tells the prince that it is nearly time for it to return to purgatory, but before it goes, it has something important to say. Hamlet promises to listen well. The ghost makes Hamlet swear to seek revenge for what the ghost is about to tell him, and Hamlet urges the ghost to go on.

Before the ghost makes clear its identity or its purpose, even, it demands vengeance from Hamlet—and Hamlet agrees. This underscores the important of revenge and honor in Hamlet's society: it comes before anything else.

The ghost tells Hamlet that it is indeed the spirit of his father. He begins speaking of the horrors of purgatory, but laments that everything he wants to say cannot be told to "ears of flesh and blood." The horrified Hamlet listens, rapt, as the ghost urges him to seek revenge for the late king's "foul and most unnatural murder." Hamlet urges the ghost to tell the tale of the king's murder as quickly as it can, so that he can immediately go and get revenge.

Hamlet seems determined to get vengeance for the ghost of his father as quickly as he can—an impulse that will soon be flattened as Hamlet starts actually reckoning with the demands and moral implications of revenge.

The ghost tells Hamlet that though everyone at court has been told that the king died after being bitten by a serpent while sleeping in the orchard, in reality, "the serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown." In other words, the ghost confirms that the "incestuous" and "traitorous" Claudius killed the king by pouring poison in his ears while he slept in the garden. The ghost begs Hamlet not to let Claudius get away with murder—or turn the throne of Denmark into "a couch for luxury and damnèd incest." The ghost charges Hamlet to avenge him before vanishing. Though the ghost is gone, Hamlet vows aloud to do all the ghost has asked of him.

The ghost uses strong language as it rails against Claudius's lustful and obscene designs on both the throne and Gertrude, wholeheartedly confirming Claudius's immorality. It uses an image of a traitorous serpent which invokes the biblical association of snakes with Satan, thus hinting at the Christian morality that underpins Elsinore. This religious undertone is important because it adds deeper context to Hamlet's struggle to parse out the morality of revenge throughout the play. Hamlet will parrot this specific language later on, as his fury with both Claudius and the queen continues to grow.

Horatio and Marcellus at last catch up with Hamlet and breathlessly ask him what the ghost had to say. Hamlet is reluctant to tell them, though, for fear that they'll betray his secret. Hamlet tells Horatio and Marcellus not to ask him any more about what the ghost said—and not to tell anyone in Denmark about what they've seen the last several nights. Both men swear their secrecy. Hamlet asks them to swear upon his sword. When Marcellus protests that they've already sworn, the voice of the ghost calls out, demanding the men swear secrecy again. Horatio and Marcellus hastily agree to lay their hands upon Hamlet's sword and swear.

Just as the ghost has demanded blind allegiance and swift action from Hamlet, so too does Hamlet demand total loyalty and secrecy from his friends. As the ghost reappears to back up Hamlet's demands, it becomes clear that the ghost can show up any time it likes—and wants to reinforce just how hungry it is for vengeance.

Hamlet invites Horatio and Marcellus to touch his sword and swear that no matter how strangely Hamlet acts in the coming days—and he may, he predicts, begin acting very strangely—they must not let on that they know anything about the ghost or his visit with Hamlet. The ghost calls out again for the men to swear to Hamlet's demands. Hamlet urges the ghost to rest, and laments that he must be the one to set his father's unfinished business right. Satisfied with Marcellus and Horatio's vows of loyalty, Hamlet urges them to follow him back to the castle.

Hamlet's madness is, and has long been, the subject of much scrutiny as the play has been studied throughout the years. This passage shows that Hamlet may already be planning to play up the existential unrest he's already feeling in order to disguise his investigation of Claudius and his hunger for vengeance—proving that Hamlet's madness begins, at least, as a cover.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Inside Elsinore, Polonius gives his servant Reynaldo money and notes to take France. Polonius tells Reynaldo what he expects him to do on his mission abroad—Reynaldo is to gather information on what Laertes is up to in Paris by infiltrating the fringes of Laertes's social scene and finding out, from young Danes and Parisians in his orbit, what kind of man Laertes is turning out to be.

Polonius is clearly uncomfortable with his son living abroad and unobserved. From Laertes having to secure Claudius's blessing to leave Denmark to Polonius's longwinded advice to Laertes in the last act to his plan to spy on him now, it is clear that Polonius is both untrusting and devious.

Polonius suggests that Reynaldo pretend to be a casual acquaintance of Laertes and try to gossip with his friends about Laertes's problems with drinking, gambling, and women in order to gauge their responses to these assertions and discern whether Laertes really does have problems with these vices. Polonius is proud of his clever scheme to spy on his son, though the old man seems to have trouble keeping track of his own logic as he lays out the plan for Reynaldo.

Polonius is a schemer, and this passage makes it clear that there's no one he won't spy on or plot against—even his own family. This foreshadows his use of Ophelia as a pawn in a scheme against Hamlet, as well as Polonius's own fatal nosiness later on in the play.

Just as Reynaldo exits to board a ship to France, Ophelia enters looking pale and in a state of fright. Polonius asks her what has happened, and she tells him that just now, as she was sewing alone in her room, Hamlet entered unannounced and uninvited with his shirt unbuttoned and his stockings hanging around his ankles. Ophelia remarks that Hamlet looked "as if he had been loosed out of hell."

Ophelia's frightful encounter with Hamlet shocks and upsets her. This seems to be the first instance of Hamlet acting mad in order to throw the courtiers at Elsinore off the scent of his plan—but given the passion of Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship, Shakespeare also allows for the possibility that Hamlet really is unable to control himself when it comes to his love and lust for Ophelia.

Ophelia goes on to state that Hamlet grabbed her by the wrist and stared at her for a long while before gently releasing her with a sigh and departing her room without dropping his eyes from her face. Ophelia says she fears Hamlet really is in love with her. Polonius suggests Ophelia go with him to see Claudius, so that they can inform him of the "violent" affection Hamlet has developed for Ophelia.

Polonius loves drama, schemes, and plots—so he takes the bait Hamlet has laid and begins developing a plan of his own. Polonius stands as a contrast to Hamlet's hesitance and inaction, as Polonius is eager to scheme and manipulate in order to achieve the outcome he wants.

Polonius asks if Ophelia has done anything to upset or offend Hamlet, and she replies that she took Polonius's earlier advice to heart—for the last several days, she has been sending back Hamlet's letters and refusing to speak with him. Polonius fears that being rejected by Ophelia has driven Hamlet mad. Polonius curses his own advice and hurries Ophelia away to go meet with the king.

This passage adds yet another layer of complexity into what's happening, effectively obscuring the difference between appearance and reality. If Ophelia really has been spurning Hamlet, it's possible he really is distraught—and that his madness is genuine, not for show. Shakespeare leaves things ambiguous, further blurring the line between what's real and what's not.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Claudius and Gertrude warmly welcome Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet's childhood friends, to Elsinore. Claudius explains that in light of Hamlet's recent "transformation" in the time since his father's death, the purpose of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's visit is to spend time with Hamlet, "draw him on to pleasures," and report back to Claudius and Gertrude about whether there's anything more sinister bothering Hamlet. Gertrude speaks up and promises to reward the two friends handsomely for helping her and Claudius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to help the king and queen, and say they hope they'll be able to be "pleasant and helpful" to Hamlet. An attendant escorts them from the room to go find the prince.

Though Gertrude and Claudius insist they have brought Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore in hopes of cheering Hamlet up, it's clear that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are pawns in Claudius's paranoid attempts to figure out whether Hamlet is onto him. The fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern eagerly agree to this bribery suggests that they are not Hamlet's true friends, after all.

Polonius enters with two pieces of good news. He tells Gertrude and Claudius that the ambassadors from Norway, Voltemand and Cornelius, have returned safely and in good spirit—and then goes on to tell them he has "found the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy." Claudius asks for Polonius to tell them both what's wrong with Hamlet, but Polonius suggests they meet with the ambassadors first.

Polonius knows how to keep Claudius wrapped around his finger, and this passage shows that Polonius is good at securing the king's attention in pursuit of his own designs. It's clear that, unbeknownst to Claudius, the company he keeps is just as underhanded and dishonest as he has proven to be in his schemes to find out what's wrong with Hamlet.

Polonius fetches Voltemand and Cornelius and brings them into the hall. Claudius asks them for the latest news from Norway. Voltemand reports that the king has put a stop to Fortinbras's schemes. Fortinbras has sworn to keep the peace with Denmark, and as a reward for his loyalty, Fortinbras's uncle has rewarded him with money—and the opportunity to use the soldiers he originally gathered against Denmark to invade Poland instead. Voltemand produces a letter from the king of Norway asking Claudius to allow Fortinbras's army to pass through Denmark on the way to Poland. Claudius thanks Voltemand and Cornelius for their service and sends them away, promising to read the letter, consider it, and reply.

Claudius has successfully stopped Fortinbras from invading Denmark, but it's clear from Cornelius and Voltemand's report that Fortinbras does not stop moving when he meets an obstacle. He is a man of action through and through, determined to conquer lands for his kingdom and make use of himself.

With Voltemand and Cornelius gone, Polonius moves onto the next topic at hand: Hamlet's madness. Polonius produces a letter given to him by his daughter. In the letter written by Hamlet, the young prince professes his intense love for Ophelia. Polonius admits that when he discovered the affair between Hamlet and Ophelia he grew worried, and ordered Ophelia to reject Hamlet's advances. Polonius confesses to the king and queen that he fears he himself has brought on Hamlet's madness by urging Ophelia to deny him.

Polonius is willing to prey upon his own daughter's unhappiness and suffering in order to appease the king and queen. He is only interested in his own social advancement—and will do whatever it takes to secure the favor of the monarchs.

Claudius asks if there's a way they can test Polonius's theory. Polonius suggests "loos[ing]" Ophelia onto Hamlet during one of the prince's long, pensive walks through the main hall of the castle—while Polonius and Claudius watch from behind a tapestry to see how the two interact. As Hamlet approaches, reading a book, Polonius hurries the king and queen from the hall, telling them he'll talk with Hamlet alone right now.

Polonius knows that nothing bonds people together like a common enemy—and by aligning himself with the king and queen and against Hamlet, he can maneuver his way even further into their good graces.

Claudius and Gertrude leave, and Polonius greets Hamlet. Hamlet's demeanor towards Polonius is cool and removed, and in response, Polonius asks Hamlet if he knows who he is. Hamlet replies that Polonius is a fishmonger. Polonius says he is not, and Hamlet retorts that he wishes Polonius were as honest a man as a fishmonger. Polonius agrees that honest men are rare in the world. Hamlet asks Polonius if he has a daughter, and Polonius says he does. Hamlet urges Polonius to keep an eye on his daughter, lest she "walk i' th' sun" and "conceive."

Hamlet's wordplay in this scene is meant to prove his intellectual superiority over Polonius, and remind the man that if he's going to toy with Hamlet, things will not be easy for him. Hamlet also gets in a dig at Ophelia, again using the play on the words "sun" and "son" he used in the last act to suggest that if Polonius doesn't keep a close eye on Ophelia, she might get too close to the "sun" (or the "son" of the king) and wind up pregnant.

Polonius is puzzled by Hamlet's strange demeanor and aggressive conversational style, and decides to try asking him what he's been reading. Hamlet takes the opportunity to talk about how the "satirical rogue" who wrote the book he's reading writes about the irrelevance and physical repulsiveness of old men. Hamlet says though he believes everything written in the book, he doesn't necessarily agree with it being written down—if time flowed backwards, he says, Polonius could be just as young as Hamlet himself. In a brief aside to the audience, Polonius remarks that though he is startled by Hamlet's madness, he can't deny that "there is method in't."

Hamlet continues to toy with Polonius, mocking his age and his inferior intellect. Polonius seems genuinely bewildered by Hamlet's words, even as he tries to parse them to determine just how "mad" Hamlet has really become.

Polonius continues trying to talk with Hamlet, asking if he plans to walk through the gardens or inside "out of the air." Hamlet replies that he will walk out of the air and "into [his] grave." Polonius, in another aside, theorizes that Hamlet's obscure and macabre answers are symptoms of his madness. Polonius resolves to leave Hamlet, and go off to find Ophelia so that he can put the plan he formulated with Claudius earlier into action. Polonius bids Hamlet farewell and exits. As he does, Hamlet calls him a "tedious old fool."

Hamlet's responses to Polonius's questions serve as reminders that Hamlet does not value his own life—and perhaps actively yearns for death. This attitude is synonymous with madness in Elsinore—however, Hamlet's existential bent and gloomy demeanor are, Shakespeare suggests, the only natural response to a true reckoning with all the intricacies, absurdities, and obscurities of life.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter and greet Hamlet. He receives them happily, seemingly excited by their presence, and the old friends catch up and discuss how their lives have been going. Both Hamlet's old friends state that while they aren't as well off as they could be, neither are they faring as poorly as some fare, either. Hamlet asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern what has landed them back in the "prison" that is Denmark. The men say Denmark isn't a prison, but Hamlet insists it feels like one to him—they suggest that his ambitions and dreams are what make Denmark feel small.

Hamlet acts happy to see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at first—but as the scene progresses, it becomes clear that he wants to confuse, mislead, and toy with them just as he did to Polonius. Hamlet is onto them, and refuses to be made a fool of by any of the courtiers at Elsinore.

Hamlet asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to answer him plainly, as friends, and tell him why they have returned to Elsinore. Rosencrantz they have come for no reason other than to visit Hamlet. Hamlet asks them if they were sent for, urging them to be honest—he says the two of them are not "craft[y]" enough to lie about having been summoned by the king and queen. Rosencrantz attempts to play dumb, but Hamlet begs him to answer him with the "even and direct" truth. Guildenstern quickly caves and admits that the two of them were sent for.

Hamlet knows what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are really here for—and is just as disgusted by their fealty and loyalty to the king and queen as he is by Polonius's. Whereas Hamlet is motivated by his search for the truth of his father's death, it seems that everyone else around him is driven by dishonesty and hidden agendas. Hamlet, then, may have to resort to schemes of his own in order to guard himself against the duplicity of others.

Hamlet cheekily offers to tell the men the reason for which they've been sent. Dramatically and sarcastically, he begins describing what the king and queen have no doubt told Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about him: that he has "lost all [his] mirth," fallen into a depression, lost all interest in socializing, and become unable to see the gorgeous halls of Elsinore and even the majesty of the natural world beyond it as anything other than a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapors." As Hamlet waxes poetic, he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that, judging by the smiles on their faces, he's hit the nail on the head.

Hamlet's florid speech in this passage seems to overdramatize his own existentialism and misery—but at the same time, there is a seed of truth in everything Hamlet is saying. He has actually lost his mirth in the midst of his grief over his father's death, and thus he is having trouble seeing the beauty around him or the point of living on in the first place.


Rosencrantz suggests that if Hamlet has lost the ability to enjoy the company of real people, he might be charmed and brightened by a troupe of actors. Rosencrantz says that he and Guildenstern passed a troupe of players on their way to Elsinore, and have invited them to come perform at the castle. Hamlet says the actors will be welcomed—if they play their parts well. Rosencrantz tells Hamlet the troupe is one that Hamlet used to love and visit often in the city.

The impending arrival of a troupe of actors foreshadows a deepening of the play's theme of appearance versus reality—with hired players on the scene, the lines between what's real and false stand to blur even further.

Hamlet wonders aloud why they're traveling when the pay is better in the city, but Rosencrantz implies the group has fallen on hard times and slid backwards in terms of popularity as child actors have begun to win the public's favor. Hamlet says he thinks it's ridiculous that child actors have become popular—but laments that just as the children have surpassed the professionals, so too has Claudius surged in popularity within the walls of Elsinore now that he is the King. His uncle's popularity is "more than natural," or unnatural, just as that of the child actors.

This passage serves a dual purpose: in Shakespeare's time, it would have served as a commentary on the state of modern theater, but it also works in service of Hamlet's mounting anger over Claudius's ascension to the throne in place of the rightful king. Both child actors and Claudius as king are unnatural in Hamlet's view.

A trumpet sounds—the players are arriving. Hamlet exuberantly shakes the hands of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, insisting on giving them as warm a welcome as he's about to give the players. Before the troupe enters, Hamlet warns Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they can expect to see Hamlet's "uncle-father and aunt-mother deceived" and confused to boot. Hamlet cheekily suggests that he is only mad on occasion—in other words, his craziness and melancholy are an act.

Hamlet continues to toy with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—but also seems to suggest that they are not intelligent or bright enough to interpret his braggadocious claims about his abilities to deceive those around him.

Polonius enters and greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet introduces Polonius to his friends as a "great baby" still in "swaddling-clouts." Polonius tells Hamlet that the actors have arrived. Hamlet mocks everything Polonius says as Polonius formally introduces the troupe as "the best actors in the world," capable of handling any kind of material. Hamlet continues teasing Polonius and engaging him in obscure wordplay until the players make their way into the hall.

Hamlet knows that because he is royalty, he can, for the most part, say and do what he wants with impunity—plus, he has the added advantage of being naturally good with wordplay, able to quickly outwit those around him.

Hamlet graciously welcomes the players, and as he greets them it becomes clear that he knows several of them individually by their appearances. He invites the company to perform a speech that will give him "a taste" of what they've been working on lately. The First Player—the leader of the troupe—asks Hamlet what speech he'd like to hear. Hamlet says he remembers, years ago, hearing the First Player recite a speech from an obscure play based on a Greek myth that was poorly-received by the masses. As Hamlet struggles to remember the speech, he ends up piecing it together and reciting it most of it himself.

Hamlet's ambitions as an actor—and his skill with remembering and delivering long pieces of text—further lend to the play's examination of appearance versus reality. Hamlet is skilled in being able to appear other than as he is, and put on a believable front for other people.

The First Player commends Hamlet on his good memory and then starts reciting the rest of the speech. The monologue tells of young warrior Pyrrhus attacking the elderly King of Troy, Priam, whom Hamlet refers to as "grandsire Priam"—pointedly mocking Polonius's age. In the tale, Pyrrhus kills the old Trojan king while the king's wife, stripped of her crown and robes, watches and screams in horror. The First Player delivers the monologue with such emotion that Polonius comments on how pale the man has gone.

As Hamlet has the First Player recite a monologue which tells of circumstances that echo what's happening in Elsinore—one king usurping another's throne, and taking the first man's wife—Shakespeare shows Hamlet getting the idea to use the actors in his plot against Claudius.

Hamlet tells the First Player he can stop, then charges Polonius with finding comfortable rooms for the entire troupe and making sure they're treated well. Hamlet bids the players to follow Polonius to their lodgings, and asks the First Player to ready a performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* for the following evening. The First Player agrees to do so. Hamlet asks if the First Player would insert an additional short speech into the play—a speech written by Hamlet himself. The First Player tells Hamlet he'll do whatever the prince asks. Polonius and the players leave, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern follow them out of the hall.

Hamlet begins putting his plan into motion. He has the good favor of the actors, and knows that they'll unwittingly help him in putting on a play that will, perhaps, expose Claudius's true motives and help Hamlet determine whether the man is truly guilty of the crimes of which the ghost has accused him.

Alone, Hamlet begins a lengthy monologue in which he laments that while even an actor reciting a work of drama could rouse in himself such emotion and feeling, Hamlet himself can feel—and do—nothing in the face of his own father's murder. Hamlet calls himself names, curses himself, and berates his own cowardly inaction. He resents himself for being unable to stir up the anger and vengefulness he would need to man up and murder Claudius.

Hamlet knows that he's stalling, and hates himself for it. He is too lost within his own mind in order to take decisive action against Claudius—it's not in his nature to act promptly and brashly, even though he told the ghost he was committed to swiftly securing vengeance.

As Hamlet calms down a bit, he is struck with an idea. He decides that perhaps, if the actors "play something like the murder of [his] father before [his] uncle," he'll be able to judge, by Claudius's reaction to the material, whether the man is really guilty of murder. Hamlet is worried that the ghost he saw may have been the devil trying to tempt him into evil—but the play could be "the thing" that "catch[e]s the conscience of the king" and allows Hamlet to determine whether his father was indeed murdered—and whether that murder must be avenged.

In these famous lines, Hamlet finishes devising a plan that will allow him to feel as if he's taking action, even as he allows others to do all the work for him. This is another tactic by which he can stall making a decision about what to do with Claudius—even as he tells himself that he's still following the ghost's orders.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern gather in the hall of Elsinore. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Claudius that though they've tried to talk to Hamlet about the root of his madness, he's unwilling to answer them and remains "aloof." Gertrude asks if the two of them have at least been able to engage Hamlet in some fun, and Rosencrantz happily says that they've brought a group of players to the castle to give a performance later that evening. Claudius says he's happy to hear that Hamlet is excited about something—and urges Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to make sure he stays that way. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hurry off to find Hamlet.

Everyone is concerned about Hamlet—though whether they are genuinely concerned or merely affecting concern changes from person to person. The constant scheming and plotting in the play underscores the theme of appearance versus reality—with everyone pretending all the time, it's impossible to tell who's really thinking what, and who's responsible for which actions.

Claudius tells Gertrude to leave so that he and Polonius can enact their plan of getting Hamlet to meet with Ophelia while Claudius and Polonius hide to observe the young lovers. Gertrude bids the rest of the group goodbye, telling Ophelia that she hopes the young woman can help Hamlet find his way back to sanity.

This passage again underscores how Ophelia and Gertrude must exist only as pawns controlled by the men around them, made to do their bidding and heed their orders.

Polonius hands Ophelia a prayer book and orders her to pretend to read it while he and Claudius hide. Polonius notes that pretending to do "pious action" is something of a sin, but should be okay just this once. In an aside, Claudius remarks that he is familiar with pretending to be something other than what he is—he is carrying a "heavy burden" of lies. Polonius pulls Claudius off to the side of the hall to hide.

This passage marks Claudius's first admission of guilt in the play—he is clearly triggered or affected by the piles of lies building up all around him. Polonius's comment about false displays of piety again underscores the Christian morality in Elsinore that makes the dishonest, manipulative, and even murderous actions of its inhabitants all the more dishonorable.

Hamlet enters, pontificating to himself. "To be, or not to be," he asks—he is pondering suicide aloud. In a lengthy monologue, Hamlet wonders whether it is "nobler" for one to fight against what life throws at them, or to refuse to fight off such troubles and instead die. Hamlet is worried that in death's "sleep" he might dream, but he longs for complete oblivion from all the horrible things in life: pain, oppression, corruption, and exhaustion. He laments that his fear of all the unknowns of death has made a "coward" of him. Hamlet stops himself, however, when he sees Ophelia. Observing her with her prayer book, he asks her to absolve him of his sins through her prayers.

This monologue is arguably one of Shakespeare's most well-known soliloquies—and most controversial, as well, considering its levelheaded inquiry into the merits and morality of suicide. Hamlet is tortured by his own existence and longs to escape it—but given the stigmas against suicide at the time (which have endured to the present day), he knows that there are religious, moral, and social risks associated with taking control of his own fate. Hamlet cannot decide whether he should kill Claudius—and can't even decide whether he should kill himself. He is a man of inaction who has been pressed to go against his very nature, and longs to escape the task laid before him—but can't even bring himself to undertake the action that would be required to extricate himself from the situation.

Ophelia greets Hamlet and asks how he's been doing. He tells her he's been well. Ophelia tells Hamlet she has some "remembrances" to give back to him. Hamlet doesn't even see what it is she has to give to him before insisting he never gave Ophelia anything. Ophelia insists that Hamlet gave her many gifts and sweetly-composed letters—but says that the joy they once brought her is gone, and she doesn't want them anymore. Hamlet asks Ophelia if she's being "honest," or pure. Ophelia is taken aback by the invasive question, but Hamlet continues asking Ophelia if she is "honest and fair." She is beautiful, he says, but her beauty has no correlation to her "honesty."

Hamlet has attacked Polonius, Claudius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern with his well-considered and condescending wordplay. Now he turns words, the only weapon at his disposal, against Ophelia as well. His questions about her honesty are really questions about her purity or virginity—questions to which he may or may not already know the answer.

Ophelia retorts that beauty and purity are, in fact, intimately connected. Hamlet suggests that beauty can transform honesty into a "bawd," but honesty cannot make a sinful woman pure once more. "I did love you once," Hamlet tells Ophelia, and she retorts that Hamlet only made her believe that he did. Hamlet recants and says Ophelia's right—he never really cared for her.

Hamlet and Ophelia clearly resent each other, and Hamlet uses sexist and vile language to assault Ophelia's integrity—even though it's possible that he was the one who stripped her of her "honor."

Hamlet tells Ophelia she should get to a nunnery, or convent, quickly—she shouldn't bring any more sinful people into the world. Hamlet states that he himself is a sinner, like all men—it would be better if he had never been born, and even suggests that the world is full of "arrant knaves, all" who should be washed from the earth. Hamlet asks pointedly where Polonius is. Ophelia answers that her father is at home. Hamlet says he hopes Polonius gets locked inside, so that "he may play the fool no where but in 's own house."

Hamlet's existentialism and frustration with the world around him is leading him to believe that all men are sinners—and that there is no point in furthering life on Earth when everything ends in deception, pain, and loss. At the same time as Hamlet airs these thoughts—which would be considered "mad" by many—he shows that he's in control of the situation by indicating that he's aware of Polonius's scheme and knows the old man is listening to every word. This casts into doubt whether anything Hamlet is saying—or has said—in this entire scene is real or false, furthering the play's blurring of appearance versus reality.

Ophelia cries out for God and the "sweet heavens" to help Hamlet. Hamlet, in return, puts a "plague" on Ophelia, predicting that even if she remains "pure as snow," no one will ever believe that she is truly righteous. He urges her, again, to enter a convent and shut herself away from all men. Ophelia cries out to God once again, begging for Hamlet's sanity. Hamlet cruelly retorts that women like Ophelia hide their true faces under makeup, "jig and amble" suggestively, and make sinners and idiots of men. Hamlet says that women's "wantonness" is what has made him mad. He says he wishes there would be "no more marriages" before telling Ophelia, for a third and final time, to get to a convent. He leaves the hall.

Even as Hamlet is, very possibly, engaging in a large spectacle of deceit, he accuses Ophelia—and all women like her—of being the ones conning humanity through false appearances and performances. Hamlet disregards that women of his era are made to behave in ways that conceal or make more attractive their true selves in order to secure the sociopolitical stability necessary for their survival.

Alone, Ophelia laments that Hamlet's "noble mind is here o'erthrown." All of Hamlet's potential as a scholar, a soldier, and the leader of Denmark has been lost. She is devastated that Hamlet has gone mad and fallen so far from grace and nobility. Claudius and Polonius come out of hiding to comfort Ophelia. Claudius states that whatever is going on with Hamlet portends "some danger," and resolves to send him away to England on a diplomatic mission—both to get him away from Elsinore for a while and to hopefully allow him to rest, recover, and see more of the world.

Even though Hamlet has behaved hideously towards Ophelia, she doesn't lament his cruelty towards her—and actually absolves him of it. She instead expresses sadness and pity for Hamlet, demonstrating that in spite of what he believes (or what she has pretended), she does truly have feelings for him.

Polonius obsequiously agrees with Claudius's plan, but suggests that before sending Hamlet to England, Claudius should make one final attempt to get to the root of Hamlet's madness by having Gertrude confront her son. Claudius agrees with Polonius's advice, stating that Hamlet must be closely observed.

Claudius and Polonius know they must be careful—if they upset Gertrude by taking Hamlet away, their plans could backfire on them.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Hamlet enters with the troupe of actors, instructing the First Player on how to deliver the monologue Hamlet has written for him. Hamlet laments the existence of actors who overdo their performances, as well as those who try to get the laughs of the masses rather than create a role genuinely. The First Player assures Hamlet that the troupe will practice hard and deliver a performance that makes Hamlet proud. The players all leave together.

Again, this passage would have been recognizable to Shakespeare's audiences as Shakespeare's tongue-in-cheek expression of frustration with the state of some aspects of the theater of his day. Hamlet's critique of ingenuine actors is ironic, considering it is unclear throughout the play whether Hamlet's own dialogue is rooted in genuine madness or merely a front to get to the truth of his father's death.

Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern enter. Hamlet asks if the king and queen are going to attend the performance, and Polonius says they will. Hamlet urges Polonius to hurry along after the actors and let them know, and then orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to follow Polonius and make sure the actors quickly get ready for their performance. They obey him.

Hamlet delights in ordering around the very people he most hates—he knows they're scheming against him, but also knows they have no choice but to listen to royalty.

Horatio enters, and Hamlet expresses how glad he is to see his true friend. Horatio is overwhelmed by Hamlet's warmth, but Hamlet insists that Horatio is a loyal companion, a level-headed man, and a morally good person. Hamlet tells Horatio that, because of all these things, he is entrusting him with a secret. Tonight, Hamlet reveals, the actors are going to perform a play. Hamlet has written a new scene which mirrors exactly the circumstances of Hamlet's father's murder. Hamlet asks Horatio to keep his eyes carefully on Claudius during that scene to gauge his reaction. If Claudius doesn't seem guilty, then it's possible that he's innocent and the ghost that appeared to Hamlet was a demon—but if he does, action must be taken. Horatio promises to do what Hamlet has asked of him.

Hamlet is excited to share his plot with Horatio. He believes that he has last found an answer to his problems, and will be able to once and for all determine the king's guilt. Hamlet is happy that he doesn't have to decide what to do until later on in the evening—he can linger in inaction for at least a little while longer.

Trumpets sound, and Claudius enters with Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and some other members of court. Claudius greets Hamlet and asks the prince how he's doing. Hamlet gives a roundabout, confusing answer, then asks Polonius if he acted in plays in college. Polonius says he did—he was even good enough to play Julius Caesar. Hamlet laments how brutal Caesar's murder was, and how wrong his murderer, Brutus, was to commit it.

This passage is doubly cheeky, as it references one of Shakespeare's other play, Julius Caesar, and features Hamlet dangling Caesar's brutal murder in front of Claudius's face in order to make him squirm.

Rosencrantz informs Hamlet that the actors are ready. Gertrude asks Hamlet to sit by her during the performance, but Hamlet says he wants to sit next to the "more attractive" Ophelia. As he sidles in next to Ophelia, he begins taunting her with sexually explicit barbs, each of which she coolly deflects, remarking upon Hamlet's good mood this evening. Hamlet says everyone in the room is happy—even his mother, though his father died just "two hours" ago. When Ophelia retorts that Hamlet's father has already been dead for "twice two months," Hamlet sarcastically states that he will cast off his mourning clothes and exchange them for "a suit of sables."

Even though Hamlet and Ophelia have had a huge fight, they must coexist with one another at court. This scene can be interpreted many ways: either Hamlet is preying upon the vulnerable Ophelia, devastating her with his harassment—or Ophelia, cool and capable, spars with Hamlet and matches his wit, proving her strength even in the face of his lack of favor.

A trumpet sounds, and the pantomime preceding the play begins. The players perform a scene in which a king and queen embrace lovingly before the queen leaves the king alone to his nap. While the king is sleeping, another man steals the king's crown, pours poison in the king's ear, and then runs away. The queen returns to find the king dead. She grieves him, and the killer returns, pretending to grieve with her. As the dead body is carried away, the killer presents the queen with gifts, wooing her until she falls in love with him. Ophelia is put off by the pantomime, but Hamlet assures her he's just making some "mischief." As the First Player enters and begins the real play, Hamlet and Ophelia trade more sexually-charged barbs.

The pantomime before the play—a tradition in some forms of Renaissance and Elizabethan theater—exposes the fact that the play will mirror the events of King Hamlet's murder. Ophelia can tell what Hamlet is up to—but Hamlet attempts to distract her from ruining the performance and exposing his plan by further harassing her with lewd comments.

The play begins. Two players, acting as a king and a queen, discuss how long they've been married and how much the love each other. The player king remarks that he has grown old and tired and will soon depart the Earth—but wants his wife to remarry and find happiness again. The player queen remarks that she should be cursed if she marries again—"none wed the second but who killed the first." What's more, the queen says, is that every time she kissed her new husband in her old marital bed, it would be like killing her first husband over and over again. The player king urges his wife to keep an open mind—her feelings may change once he dies—but the queen stubbornly insists that she would be condemned to a life of "lasting strife" if she were ever to marry again.

The player queen's remarks about not even being able to imagine marrying another are meant to make Gertrude squirm. Claudius is not Hamlet's only target—Hamlet wants to use the play to call out the bad behavior of everyone around him and condemn his mother in the same breath as his uncle.

As the player queen leaves the player king alone to his nap, Hamlet turns to Gertrude and asks how she's liking the play. Gertrude responds that the queen "protests too much." Claudius asks if what's coming next in the play is startling or offensive, but Hamlet insists everything is "in jest"—though the play is a little garish, it shouldn't make anyone present feel uncomfortable, since all their consciences are clear.

Hamlet knows that the play is making his mother and uncle uncomfortable—but maintains that it shouldn't, since it's just fiction. Hamlet is blurring the line between appearance and reality, fact and fiction, as he forces the king and queen to look at their own actions head-on.

A player enters the stage, portraying a character called Lucianus. Hamlet tells Ophelia that Lucianus is nephew to the king. She remarks how much Hamlet seems to know about the play, and, again, their conversation devolves into witty sexual barbs, which Ophelia cheekily deflects. Lucianus pours poison in the king's ear, killing him, at which point Claudius stands up from his seat. Gertrude asks Claudius what's wrong, and he announces that he is leaving. Polonius orders the players to stop the performance. Everyone but Hamlet and Horatio follows Claudius out of the hall.

Hamlet's plan has worked—the king, offended or frightened by the actions taking place on stage, has removed himself from the performance—in Hamlet's eyes, this equates to Claudius admitting that he is guilty of his brother's murder.

Hamlet is merry and mischievous as he asks Horatio if he saw how Claudius fled at the sight of his own dirty deeds reflected on stage. Horatio agrees that Claudius seemed very guilty. Hamlet orders the players to make some music since the king didn't care for their drama. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reenter the hall and tell Hamlet that the king is very upset. They add that Hamlet's behavior has greatly angered the queen, and she wants to see Hamlet in her bedroom right away. Hamlet dodges Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's entreaties, and begins messing around with one of the player's flutes.

Hamlet feels victorious, and is sick of being bossed around and dragged about the castle based on the whims of others. He feels he is in control and powerful—he has the upper hand over both Claudius and his mother, and intends to enjoy it.

Hamlet asks Guildenstern to take the flute from his hands and play a tune. Guildenstern insists he doesn't know how to play a flute. Hamlet insists it's an easy thing to do, but Guildenstern is still loath to take the flute from him. Hamlet accuses Guildenstern—and Rosencrantz, too—of trying to play him like a flute. He says he will not be "play[ed] upon" by either of them.

Hamlet is sick of everyone plotting against him and attempting to play him—he can no longer keep his cool, and lashes out at the weak Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for their transparent betrayal.

Polonius enters and tells Hamlet that his mother wants to see him right away. Hamlet tells Polonius to go tell his mother that he'll be with her shortly. Polonius goes off to inform Gertrude of the news, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern follow him. Left alone, Hamlet remarks that it has become "the very witching time of night." Despite the eerie atmosphere in the air, Hamlet hopes aloud that he will not be cruel towards his mother—even if he "speak[s] daggers to her," he hopes to "use none."

Though Hamlet enjoyed seeing his mother squirm, he doesn't actually want to hurt her. Though he condemns Gertrude for marrying Claudius, he doesn't seem to believe she bears any guilt in what happened to her husband. Nevertheless, Hamlet admits that he is feeling reckless and unpredictable—at such an hour, anything could happen.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Claudius talks with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He tells them that he is so disturbed by Hamlet's madness that he is sending him—along with the two of them—on a mission to England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern both state, in obsequious and florid terms, that they will do anything their king asks of them—they want to protect him above everyone else. Claudius thanks the men for their loyalty and urges them to hurry off and read for the journey.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern claim to be Hamlet's friends—but like Polonius, all they want is the favor and approval of the crown. They do not know loyalty, though they affect it.

After Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave, Polonius enters and tells Claudius that Hamlet is on his way to Gertrude's room. Polonius plans to hide himself behind a tapestry—again—and listen in on their conversation so that he can report what transpires to Claudius. Polonius hurries off to put his plan into action.

Polonius, again, devises a scheme that preys upon Hamlet in an attempt to stay in Claudius's good graces—but Polonius doesn't know that his luck is running out.

Alone, Claudius at last admits to having murdered King Hamlet in a lengthy monologue. He describes his "rank" offense, which "smells to heaven"—a brother's murder, he knows, is a "primal [...] curse." Claudius wants God to forgive him and have mercy on him for his past sins, but he fears that if he doesn't renounce the throne and his new queen, he'll never be absolved. Claudius wishes he could make his sins go away without really atoning for them. Overwhelmed and burdened by a "bosom black as death," he kneels to pray.

Claudius speaks of his own dastardly deeds in terms which invoke the stinking, putrefying rot of death. His murder of his brother, he knows, is like a corpse rotting in the ground—soon it will stink and become unbearable and impossible to ignore. Still, even though Claudius worries about being found out, he isn't actually sorry for what he's done—and isn't going to do anything to really repent.

Hamlet enters and sees Claudius praying. He is grateful to at last be alone with the man, believing now is the chance to kill him and take his revenge. Hamlet, however, finds himself in a conundrum—if he kills Claudius while the king is praying, Claudius's soul will go to heaven. To send Claudius to heaven would be the opposite of the revenge Hamlet—and his father's spirit—so desperately crave. Hamlet resolves to wait to kill his uncle until a riper moment, when the man is in the midst of a guilty act—revelry, perhaps, or asleep in his "incestuous" bed. Hamlet hurries off to meet his mother. Claudius laments that his prayers are ineffectual—he worries he will never get to heaven.

Here, Hamlet's one opportunity to kill Claudius, take the throne, and put an end to the corruption at the heart of Denmark makes itself clear—but Hamlet squanders the chance to secure vengeance, paralyzed by the complex social, moral, and religious codes that define his society.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

In Gertrude's chambers, Polonius lays out his plan for the queen, and she agrees to it. As Hamlet approaches, Polonius hides himself behind a tapestry. Hamlet enters and asks his mother what the matter is. Gertrude replies that Hamlet has greatly offended his father; Hamlet retorts that it is Gertrude who has offended his father. Gertrude asks why Hamlet would speak to her so cruelly, wondering aloud if he's forgotten who she is. Hamlet says he knows exactly who she is: her husband's brother's wife, and, unfortunately, his own mother.

Gertrude tries to reason with Hamlet, but cannot get through to him past the resentment he feels towards her for marrying her brother-in-law so quickly after her husband's death. Hamlet holds that because his mother has committed such an egregious offense against his father, he himself cannot be held accountable for any of his own "offenses."

Gertrude tries to leave, but Hamlet begs her to stay. Gertrude asks Hamlet if he plans to murder her, and calls for help. Polonius, hearing Gertrude's cries, also calls out. Hamlet, angered at being spied upon, draws his sword, sticks it through the tapestry, and kills Polonius, who slinks to the ground and calls out that he has been slain. Gertrude curses Hamlet for his "bloody deed," but Hamlet insists his deed is "almost as bad" as her having killed the king and married his brother.

Hamlet doesn't even react to murdering someone—showing that he has no qualms with killing, but that there is something about revenge that makes him hesitate. He has successfully killed someone odious and unlikable—but when it comes to the complex code of revenge, honor, and religion required to take out Claudius, Hamlet cannot bring himself to act decisively.

Gertrude asks what she has done to Hamlet to make him talk to her so rudely. Hamlet retorts that she has "pluck[ed] the very soul" out of marriage and rendered covenants and vows meaningless." Gertrude insists she doesn't know what she's done. Hamlet points to the tapestry: it depicts two brothers, side by side. Hamlet accuses Gertrude of forsaking the strong, good, kind king for his "mildewed" brother. Hamlet asks what could possibly have inspired Gertrude to make such a terrible choice, and wonders aloud whether she went mad or was tricked by the devil. Gertrude begs Hamlet to stop forcing her to look into her "black [...] soul." Hamlet continues berating his mother for "liv[ing] in the rank sweat of an enseamèd bed" with "a murderer and a villain," even as Gertrude begs him to stop.

This passage makes it clear that Gertrude knows, on some level, that she is married to a murderer—but Hamlet refuses to consider that perhaps she had no other option but to marry her brother-in-law in order to retain her precarious social position. Gertrude clearly feels guilt and shame over her choices—but cannot do anything to change them, and wants Hamlet to stop berating her for them.

The ghost appears, and Hamlet asks the "heavenly guard" what he should do. Gertrude, who apparently cannot see the ghost, shouts that Hamlet has truly gone mad. Hamlet asks the ghost if he has come to "chide" Hamlet for his inaction—the ghost answers that he has indeed come to remind Hamlet to seek vengeance, but urges Hamlet not to let Gertrude suffer. Hamlet asks Gertrude if she's all right—she says she's fine, but can see that Hamlet himself is clearly unwell as he "hold[s] discourse" with the air. Hamlet tries to point out the ghost to her, but Gertrude is unable to see or hear its presence. The ghost slinks out the door, even as Hamlet calls for his father to stay.

Whether or not Gertrude can see the ghost in this passage is up to audience interpretation. If she truly can't see it, she must really believe Hamlet has gone mad—however, if she can and is simply pretending not to, she's perhaps trying to tamp down her own guilt, stop herself from appearing mad, and keep from confronting her own guilt over her marriage to the murderous Claudius.

Gertrude tells Hamlet he's suffering hallucinations, but Hamlet insists he's perfectly sane and accuses Gertrude of trying to call Hamlet mad as a way of distracting from her own sins. He orders her to repent. Gertrude tells Hamlet he's cleaved her heart in two. Hamlet urges her to "throw away the worser part of it," repent, stay away from Claudius, and "throw [the devil] out" of her life. He begs her not to let Claudius "tempt [her] again to bed"—or get her to tell him anything about what has transpired between Hamlet and Gertrude tonight. Gertrude swears she will try.

Even though Gertrude didn't kill her husband, this passage shows that she knows her marriage to Claudius is wrong. Still, like Hamlet, she is paralyzed by inaction—unable to leave her new husband due to the pain of losing her social position and making herself vulnerable, she can do nothing with the information that she is married to a murderer.

Hamlet tells Gertrude that he is bound for England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—but predicts that the message he is carrying with him is not one of diplomacy, but rather an edict signed by Claudius which orders Hamlet's death. Hamlet says he has a plan to "hoist [Claudius] with his own petard"—in other words, Hamlet plans to outsmart the king. The death of Polonius, Hamlet says, means he will have to leave even sooner. He bids Gertrude goodnight, assuring her he'll deal with Polonius's body, then slowly drags the body from his mother's chambers.

Hamlet tells mother his plans for getting out of the bind Claudius is placing him in—bragging about his ability to outwit the king, even if, deep down, Hamlet is ashamed by his inability to actually kill the man and avenge his father.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Gertrude, Claudius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern are gathered in the hall. Claudius asks Gertrude what's bothering her—she asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to leave, and they do. Gertrude tells Claudius that he wouldn't believe what she's seen tonight: Hamlet is entirely mad, and has slain Polonius in a hallucinatory rage. Claudius remarks that Hamlet's "liberty is full of threats to all"—but he cared for the boy so much that he has put off doing what needed to be done. Hamlet, Claudius says, is like a "foul disease" that has begun to "feed even on the pith of life." Claudius promises Gertrude that by the time the sun comes up, Hamlet will be "ship[ped]" away from Elsinore.

Claudius compares Hamlet to a "foul disease," but while Gertrude takes Claudius's words to implicate Hamlet's madness, Claudius is actually referring to Hamlet as a liability because the young prince knows the truth about Claudius's murderous ascent to the throne.

Claudius calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern back in, and orders them to go find Hamlet and bring Polonius's body to the chapel. They hurry off. Claudius tells Gertrude it's time to "call up [their] wisest friends," tell them all the truth about Hamlet, and ask advice as to what should be done about the boy.

Claudius knows that something must be done to stop Hamlet—but also is in the precarious position of being married to Hamlet's mother, who loves her son very dearly and will not let Claudius simply kill him. Hamlet can't kill Claudius, and Claudius can't kill Hamlet.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

After hiding Polonius's body, Hamlet returns to the castle and runs into Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They ask him what he's done with the body, and Hamlet replies that he has "compounded it with dust." Rosencrantz asks Hamlet again where the body is, and Hamlet shouts that he'd never allow such a "sponge" to get the answer out of him. Rosencrantz angrily asks why Hamlet thinks he is a sponge. Hamlet replies that Rosencrantz—and Guildenstern, too—"soak up the king's countenance," doing his dirty work only to allow Claudius to wring them dry again and again. Rosencrantz asks, a final time, where the body is. Hamlet replies that it is with the king, though "the king is not with the body." He hurries out of the hall, bidding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to try to catch him.

Hamlet has nothing but contempt for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and continues to taunt and mock them for doing the king's bidding so blindly. Hamlet doesn't try to get them to switch allegiances—he doesn't want men of such low moral character on his side anyway.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

Claudius tells some of his advisers that while Hamlet is a dangerous presence in Elsinore, he is beloved by the people—Claudius can't do anything to Hamlet that might upset Denmark's subjects. He plans to make sending Hamlet away to England look like it is something he's been planning for a long time.

Claudius wants to get rid of Hamlet and legitimize his claim to the throne—but he can't kill Hamlet without erasing the latter possibility and so resolves to merely send Hamlet away.

Rosencrantz enters and tells Claudius that while Hamlet refuses to divulge where he has buried Polonius, he is outside under guard. Claudius orders Hamlet be brought inside, and Guildenstern brings him in. Claudius asks Hamlet directly where Polonius is, and Hamlet replies that he is "at supper." Claudius asks where he is eating, and Hamlet replies that Polonius is not eating, but rather being eaten. Claudius, growing even angrier as Hamlet continues to taunt him, demands to know where Polonius is. Hamlet replies that Polonius is in heaven—but if his body isn't found within a month, the residents of Elsinore may begin to smell him in the main hall. Claudius orders his attendants to search for the body.

Hamlet's macabre jokes about Polonius's death and decay lend credence to Claudius's belief that Hamlet is truly mad. At the same time, Hamlet has some merriment about him as he knows, surely, that Claudius can't kill him—he will not face any consequences for murdering Polonius, no matter how irreverently he speaks of the man's death.

Claudius says that he is concerned for Hamlet's "safety," and so has decided to send him away to England. Hamlet bids Claudius farewell, calling him "dear mother." When Claudius tells Hamlet that he is his father, Hamlet insists that in marrying his mother, Claudius joined his flesh with hers. Hamlet hurries away, and Claudius bids his attendants to follow Hamlet and make sure he gets on the ship—he wants Hamlet gone tonight.

Hamlet continues taunting and ridiculing Claudius until the last moment—but doesn't take any decisive action against him. Hamlet is not suited to revenge in the traditional sense—what he does best is chipping away at the man's honor bit by bit.

Alone in the hall, Claudius speaks aloud, hoping that the King of England will follow the instructions in the letter Hamlet is carrying—and kill Hamlet on sight. Claudius states that he will never be joyful again until he is certain of Hamlet's death.

Claudius reveals that he does actually intend to have Hamlet killed, but by cowardly means that will ensure he's not implicated in the murder.

ACT 4, SCENE 4

Fortinbras and his army arrive at Elsinore. Fortinbras orders the captain of his army to go into the castle, bring Norway's greetings to the Danish king, and remind him of the permission he granted Fortinbras to march his troops through their territory. Fortinbras tells his captain to make sure to let Claudius know that if there's anything Claudius wants from them, they will do it for him. Fortinbras and his soldiers return to their camp, leaving the captain alone.

Fortinbras was spurred to action by his desire for revenge. Now, even without that outlet, he is still able to keep his armies marching forward. Where Hamlet has only trepidation, Fortinbras has nothing but resolve.

Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern enter. Seeing the Norwegian army, Hamlet asks the captain what they're doing there and what their purpose is. The captain tells Hamlet that the army is marching on to Poland under the command of Fortinbras, though he admits the piece of land they seek to claim is small and worthless. To himself, Hamlet laments the use of money and violence in such pointless, petty wars. The captain bids Hamlet goodbye and heads on to Elsinore.

Hamlet is shocked by Fortinbras's army's willingness to march onward in pursuit of such a small, petty goal. He feels ashamed that even though he himself has good reason for revenge, he's been unable to muster the action of even Fortinbras's hired mercenaries.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern walk ahead, but Hamlet lags behind. Alone, he states that his encounter with the army is spurring him to sharpen his "dull revenge." Men who don't think and act are no better than beasts, he believes. Seeing Fortinbras exercise "divine ambition" in commanding and leading a massive army in pursuit of something so small and trivial has reminded Hamlet of his inability to take action and get vengeance for his father. Watching 20,000 men march forward on little more than a whim has made Hamlet realize that if his "thoughts be [anything but] bloody," they are "nothing worth."

Hamlet realizes that Fortinbras and his entire army are more decisive—and thus more powerful—than Hamlet, even though they have less motivation, it would seem, to march on Poland. Hamlet resolves to think only of revenge from now on—but whether he's actually able to follow through remains to be seen.

ACT 4, SCENE 5

Gertrude, Horatio, and a member of court are in the hall of Elsinore. The courtier tells Gertrude that Ophelia is demanding to meet with her. Gertrude doesn't want to speak to Ophelia, but the courtier says that Ophelia has gone mad and taken to meaningless babbling. Horatio suggests Gertrude hear Ophelia out, and Gertrude agrees to see her—though, in an aside, she remarks that Ophelia's decline seems, to her "sick soul," like "prologue to some great amiss"—in other words, if Ophelia has lost it, something truly terrible is coming.

Gertrude's reaction to the news of Ophelia's madness—and her desire to avoid witnessing it—shows just how ostracized and reviled those who have lost their minds truly are. This adds weight to the risks Hamlet has taken in feigning his own madness.

Ophelia enters, singing a song about love. Gertrude politely asks Ophelia what her song means, but Ophelia urges the queen to listen as she continues singing about a man who is "dead and gone." Ophelia continues singing on and on about a man shrouded, entombed, and covered in "sweet **flowers**" even as Gertrude asks her to stop. Claudius enters and greets Ophelia calmly, asking how she's feeling; she responds with a confusing tale about a baker's daughter who was turned into an owl—the moral of the tale is that "we know what we are, but know not what we may be." Claudius remarks that Ophelia's grief over her dead father has driven her mad.

Ophelia's seemingly nonsensical tale about the baker's daughter is actually very thematically revealing. People may know who they are in the moment, but can't predict who they'll become or what twists their fate will take: it is impossible to predict the future of one's reality or prepare for it.

Ophelia begins singing more songs about unrequited love and women being "tumbled" and mistreated by unfaithful men. She stops her song to remark that she cannot stop thinking about her father being laid in the "cold ground"—she swears she will inform her brother of what has happened. Bidding Claudius and Gertrude "good night," she leaves the hall. Claudius asks Horatio to follow Ophelia and keep an eye on her. After Horatio leaves, Claudius tells Gertrude that Ophelia has fallen victim to the "poison of deep grief" in the wake of her father's death and Hamlet's departure for England.

Grief is seen as a "poison" in Denmark. It leads to resentment and the desire for revenge, as in the case of Hamlet, and Claudius is worried that Ophelia or her brothers will be "poisoned" toward bloody vengeance by their sadness and anger over their father's death.

There is a loud noise outside, and then a messenger comes into the hall. The messenger reports that Laertes has taken up arms against Claudius—and that he has the support of the Danish people, who cry in the streets "Laertes shall be king!" Gertrude is scandalized. There is another loud noise—Claudius realizes the rebels have broken down the door.

Laertes has taken decisive action against Claudius, believing he is responsible for Polonius's death. Laertes is the opposite of Hamlet, as Hamlet has refused to take action even though he now knows *his uncle is a murderer, rather than just suspecting it.*

Laertes enters with a band of followers but tells them to stand down while he meets with the king. When he lays eyes on Claudius, he tells the man he has come to avenge his father—were he calm in the face of his father's murder, he says, he might as well be his father's "bastard." Claudius tells Laertes that though Polonius is dead, he was not the one to kill the man. Laertes asks how Polonius died, vowing to cast allegiance and loyalty aside in order to serve justice to whoever killed his father. Claudius promises, once again, that he is innocent of Polonius's murder, and warns Laertes not to attack his friends in an attempt to level with his enemies.

Claudius doesn't immediately blame Hamlet for Polonius's murder, suggesting that Claudius doesn't necessarily want to provoke Laertes to seek revenge on the prince. Claudius, like Polonius, enjoys the act of manipulation, and wants to calm Laertes down and talk him out of his vengeance so that his own plan to have Hamlet killed in England can go forth as planned.

Another noise is heard offstage, and Ophelia enters. As Laertes sees what has become of his sister, he swears that he will make sure his revenge is "paid by [the] weight" of her madness. Ophelia continues singing a morbid song about a man being carried to his grave in an uncovered coffin. Laertes listens to Ophelia's troubling songs, noting that her madness says more about the depths of her grief than sane words ever could. Ophelia begins passing out invisible **flowers**—she gives out rosemary, pansies, fennel, and daisies, but states that all her violets withered with the death of her father. Laertes remarks that his sweet sister is still able to turn "hell itself" into "favor and […] prettiness."

Even in the depths of her madness, Ophelia continues doing traditionally womanly or feminine things—passing out flowers and entertaining the others with songs, even if her macabre tunes miss the beat. In this passage, each of the flowers she passes out have different symbolic meanings—for instance, fennel represents sorrow, while daisies represent innocence. In this sense, they seem to represent Ophelia's own inner complexity and multifaceted personality, which has been stifled and controlled by Polonius and other men up until this point.

Claudius says he shares in Laertes's grief over the disintegration of Ophelia's mind. He offers to stand and be judged by Laertes and his wisest, closest friends, and, once he's proved innocent, to help Laertes exact revenge on the one who brought such grief upon his family.

Claudius knows that if he can just keep Laertes from attacking him, he can direct the young man's grief according to his own devices—and hold another pawn in his pocket.

ACT 4, SCENE 6

Elsewhere in the halls of Elsinore, Horatio receives two sailors who come with a letter from abroad—the missive is from Hamlet, and Horatio reads it out loud. The letter states that after only two days at sea, the ship bringing Hamlet to England was set upon by pirates. During the battle with the privateers, Hamlet boarded their ship, and the pirates have kept Hamlet prisoner in exchange for a favor. Hamlet urges Horatio to let the sailors give another letter from the pirates to the king, and then come for him at once. Hamlet says he has a lot to tell Horatio—especially about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are still on their way to England. Horatio hurriedly leads the sailors to meet with the king.

This development is something of a deus ex machina*—a last-minute turn of events that saves a play's protagonist from certain death. Hamlet's return is certainly going to make things interesting—but the ludicrous tale again begs the question of how much of what Hamlet reports is real, and how much of it is not what it seems.*

ACT 4, SCENE 7

Claudius and Laertes discuss Claudius's innocence in Polonius's murder—which Laertes has come to believe. Laertes, however, wants to know why Claudius didn't pursue vengeance or justice against Polonius's true murderer, Hamlet. Claudius says there are two reasons he hasn't killed Hamlet: one being that Gertrude loves him, and the other being that the commoners love him as well. Laertes says that he has no qualms about wounding Hamlet—or his public image—and will soon have revenge.

Claudius admits to being a hypocrite when it comes to Hamlet, and to justice, out of a desire to preserve his own good appearance in the eyes of the public. Laertes claims to have no desire to appear likable—he is one of the few characters in the play who doesn't seem to be pretending or acting when it comes to the truth of who he is.

A messenger enters the hall carrying letters from Hamlet—one for Claudius, and one for the queen. Claudius offers to read them aloud for Laertes. Hamlet's letter to Claudius reveals that he has been "set naked on [Claudius's] kingdom"—in other words, he's returned to Denmark with no money or possessions. Hamlet asks to meet with the king the next day to explain his "sudden and strange return." Laertes says he's looking forward to Hamlet's visit—he wants to look upon the man who killed his father and drove his sister mad.

Hamlet is offering himself up to the king in a vulnerable state, in spite of no doubt having discerned the king's designs on his life. There is always a scheme going on in this play, and Hamlet clearly has a new one up his sleeve.

Claudius asks Laertes to help him in coming up with a new way to get rid of Hamlet that doesn't look too suspicious. Laertes says he'll do whatever Claudius asks, and will even kill Hamlet himself. Claudius agrees that Laertes should be the one to put an end to Hamlet's life. Claudius reveals that since Laertes left for France, the people of Denmark have been talking about a quality of Laertes's that makes him "shine." Laertes asks what quality Claudius speaks of, and Claudius replies that he recently met an acquaintance of Laertes's who remarked on how excellent the young man was at fencing. Claudius claims that hearing of Laertes's talent with a rapier "envenom[ed]" Hamlet with jealousy.

Claudius and Laertes's newest scheme preys upon Hamlet's own insecurities. They know that Hamlet loves appearing superior and in control, and are planning to extort that weakness in order to get to him.

Claudius tells Laertes that if he truly still loves his father—and still wants to avenge him—he must "show [him]self in deed [to be his] father's son," not just in words. Laertes says he would cut Hamlet's throat even in the middle of a church.

Laertes is hellbent on revenge—but so far he's all talk, no action. Whether he is a man of action like Fortinbras or one of inaction, like Hamlet, remains to be seen.

Claudius tells Laertes that when Hamlet arrives home, Laertes should keep a distance from him rather than jumping straight at him. In the meantime, Claudius will have the people of Elsinore talk up Laertes's fencing skills so that Hamlet wants to challenge him to a duel. Then, Laertes will be able to pick a rapier with a sharp point and kill Hamlet during the practice duel, making it look like an accident. Laertes agrees to this plan, but wants to take it one step further—he decides to dip the tip of his rapier in poison so that even if Laertes merely scratches Hamlet, the prince will die. Claudius devises a backup plan in which the drinks at the match will be poisoned, so that when Hamlet reaches for a refreshment, he'll die no matter what the outcome of the duel.

Claudius and Laertes clearly have no qualms at all about killing Hamlet—Laertes says he'd even do the deed in a church, pointing to his positioning of revenge over spirituality or religion, unlike Hamlet himself. Laertes and Claudius want there to be no opportunity for failure, and devise complex actions to ensure that their plan is rock-solid.

Gertrude enters and announces that she has even more woeful news: Ophelia has drowned in nearby brook. Her body was found covered in "fantastic garlands" of **flowers** and cloaked in gorgeous garments, though she died a "muddy death." Laertes bids Claudius and Gertrude goodbye and goes off to mourn his sister—when he's finished, he says, he'll be ready to take his revenge.

The news of Ophelia's death further inspires Laertes's fury and desire to kill Hamlet. The manner of Ophelia's death—suicide—shows that even she was more able to take action against her own life than Hamlet, whose endless musings on the value of suicide have led him nowhere.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

A pair of gravediggers are at work in a patch of land outside the walls of Elsinore. The first gravedigger asks the second if an unnamed woman—understood to be Ophelia—is going to receive a "Christian burial" even though she committed suicide. The second gravedigger says she is, and orders the first to hurry up and dig the grave. The two debate whether Ophelia willingly took her own life or simply drowned. The second gravedigger believes Ophelia did kill herself, and is only being given a proper burial because of her noble status. The first gravedigger tacitly agrees, lamenting the privileges granted to the upper classes.

The gravediggers are in the minority within Hamlet, *as they are commoners forced to work for the nobility and the monarchy rather than members of the upper classes themselves. They lament that the rich are hypocrites—even if they betray the social and religious codes that govern society in life, they're afforded a pass in death.*

The gravediggers continue bantering about the origin of human life and telling macabre riddles. When one of the gravediggers forgets the answer to a joke he has posed, the other suggests he go inside and fetch them both some liquor to drink while they work. Soon, Hamlet and Horatio approach the graveyard to find the first gravedigger singing as he digs. Hamlet is amazed by the man's merriment in the face of such a morbid task.

Though Hamlet has spoken rather blithely about suicide and death himself, he's disgusted by the facts of death and the stink of corruption and rot. Seeing men who work among the dead behaving so merrily thus puzzles him.

When the gravedigger throws a **skull** out of the ground, Hamlet is further offended by the man's casual handling of human remains. Hamlet approaches the skull and wonders that once it "had a tongue in it and could sing." He ponders who the skull could have belonged to—a politician, a courtier, or a lawyer. As Hamlet monologues at length about the skull's possible origins, he laments how death steals everything, erasing all that people were, all they loved, and all they accomplished while they still lived.

Hamlet has spent a lot of the play talking and thinking about death—but coming face-to-face with actual human remains affects him differently than even facing his father's own ghost. Hamlet begins to reckon with what it really means for a life to come to an end, begin to decompose, and fade from both physical and emotional memory.

Hamlet decides to ask the gravedigger whose grave he's digging. The gravedigger cheekily replies that the grave is his own. Hamlet says it should indeed be the gravediggers'—he "liest" in it, a play on words. Hamlet asks the gravedigger to be serious and tell him what man—or woman—the grave is for. The gravedigger insists it's for no man or woman, but instead someone who once "was a woman" before her death. Hamlet is both impressed and slightly annoyed by the gravedigger's verbal gymnastics and affinity for puns.

The gravediggers are unique in that they represent commoners—but this gravedigger is also unique in that he's the first character in the play who can really spar verbally with Hamlet on the prince's level. This is a subtle commentary on the class divide between noblemen and commoners—although Hamlet is socially superior to the gravedigger, they are clearly intellectual equals.

Hamlet asks the man how long he's been a gravedigger, and the gravedigger answers that he started work on the day that King Hamlet defeated Fortinbras—the same day that the young Prince Hamlet was born. The gravedigger states that though the young prince was recently sent to England to "recover his wits"—but even if he doesn't the gravedigger says, insanity is "no great matter" in England. Hamlet asks "upon what ground" the prince lost his wits—in other words, why he went mad. The gravedigger replies that the prince went mad "here in Denmark."

The gravedigger continues to spar verbally with Hamlet, appearing not to recognize the man as the prince of whom he speaks. It's also possible that the gravedigger does *recognize Hamlet and is just toying with him out of his contempt for the upper classes.*

Hamlet asks how long it takes for a body to begin rotting in the ground, and the gravedigger estimates that decomposition takes about eight or nine years. Pointing out the **skull** on the ground, the gravedigger estimates that it has been in the ground for about 23 years. Hamlet asks who the skull belonged to, and the gravedigger answers that it was the skull of Yorick, the king's jester. Hamlet picks up the skull and examines it more closely, then cries out to Horatio that he once knew Yorick—in life, "a fellow of infinite jest" who used to entertain Hamlet and give him piggy-back rides. Hamlet laments that all of Yorick's defining characteristics are gone.

Realizing that he is holding the skull of Yorick—a man he once knew and loved—sends Hamlet into an even deeper spiral as he ruminates on the nature of life, death, and decay. The fact that all of Yorick's unique and likeable characteristics have been erased by death adds an additional layer of nihilism to Hamlet's existential musings. It begs the question of why one should value one's own life or the lives of others, or why one should act morally (or act at all, for that matter) if death renders all of these variables irrelevant in the end.

Hamlet asks Horatio if he thinks even Alexander the Great came to look—and smell—like the poor Yorick after being buried, and Horatio says that he probably did. "To what base uses we may return," Hamlet laments.

Hamlet is devastated to realize in such plain terms that all humans wind up anonymous and rotted in the ground. This difficult moment only confirms his feelings throughout the play that his life is meaningless.

Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, a group of courtiers, and a priest approach bearing a coffin. Noticing the plainness of the procession, Hamlet tells Horatio that whomever the group is burying must have committed suicide, but was still of noble rank. Hamlet asks Horatio to hide with him and watch the burial.

Hamlet does not yet know Ophelia is dead—but he is about to witness her funeral. Hamlet can tell from the appearance of the procession what kind of funeral it is—but doesn't yet know the reality of who's being buried.

Laertes asks the priest what rites will be performed. The priest says that he's already "as far enlarged" the service as he can for someone who committed suicide—but because the woman who died (Ophelia) was a noble, the priest has made sure she was allowed to be buried made up like a virgin, with **flowers** strewn on her grave. Laertes asks the priest if anything more can be done, but the priest says that to do more for this woman would be to "profane the service of the dead." Laertes says he hopes that violets spring from Ophelia's grave—while the priest "liest howling" in hell.

The priest seems to imply that Ophelia was not a virgin when she died—but was allowed to be buried as one, just as she was allowed to receive funeral rites in spite of the fact that she took her own life. The appearance of Ophelia's burial obscures the reality of the circumstances of her death.

Hamlet, realizing that Ophelia is the one who has died, cries out in pain. He watches as Laertes, distraught, jumps into his sister's grave and continues loudly weeping for her. Hamlet comes forward, insisting that his grief is more intense than Laertes's, and also dives into Ophelia's grave. Laertes curses Hamlet, and the two of them begin fighting. Claudius, Gertrude, and Horatio all beg for the men to stop fighting, and a pair of courtiers separate them. Hamlet vows to fight Laertes until his last breath—his love for Ophelia, he says, is greater than that of "forty thousand brothers." Claudius and Gertrude lament that Hamlet is truly mad. Hamlet leaves the gravesite, and Horatio follows him. Claudius begs Laertes to be patient—he'll soon have his chance to avenge his sister.

Hamlet and Laertes try to one-up each another—rather ridiculously—in an attempt to prove that they each loved Ophelia best. Neither of them seem able to accept her death, and each believe the other is somehow to blame. This morbid graveside scene demonstrates how woefully ill-prepared both men are to deal with the realities of death—even as they crave one another's demise.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Inside Elsinore, Hamlet tells Horatio the story of his escape from the ship bound for England. Even though Hamlet was not a prisoner, per se, on the first leg of his journey, he felt like one, and was determined to get free. One night, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern slept, he snuck into their cabin and stole the papers they were carrying. When he opened the letters, he realized that Claudius was trying to order Hamlet's execution. Hamlet tells Horatio that he wrote a new letter, copying Claudius's handwriting, ordering the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on sight. After sealing the letter with his father's signet, Hamlet returned it to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's chambers. In the encounter with the pirates the following day, Hamlet escaped the ship and sent his old friends on to their death.

Hamlet brags about his cunning actions against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even as it remains clear that Hamlet hasn't actually done anything to them. He has secured revenge upon them through an absence of action, and by fleeing the situation rather than acting directly against the men who betrayed him.

Horatio is stunned by Claudius's cunning and cruelty. Hamlet says he is more determined than ever to kill the man who killed his father, "whored [his] mother," and stole Hamlet's own throne. Horatio urges Hamlet to do the deed quickly, as news of what Hamlet has done to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will soon arrive from England.

Even though Hamlet says he's ready at last to kill Claudius, it is worth nothing that he's still standing around talking to Horatio about his anger rather than acting upon it, suggesting that Hamlet may be feeling more ambivalent about the act than he is letting on.

A young courtier named Osric enters and greets Hamlet. Hamlet quietly tells Horatio that Osric is a "water-fly" and a fool in spite of the great parcels of land he owns—and his resulting political power. Osric says he has a message for Hamlet from the king. He uses florid language to compliment Laertes and praise the man's good, strong nature, then states that Claudius has bet on Hamlet in a fencing match against Laertes. Osric asks if Hamlet accepts the terms of the bet and will agree to a duel. Hamlet says he does, and Osric runs off to give Claudius the news. Hamlet cheekily advises him to deliver Hamlet's "yes" with the same "flourish" Osric used to beseechingly describe Laertes.

Just as Hamlet has expressed contempt for and superiority towards Polonius, Claudius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern throughout the play, so too does he feel superior to this new character, Osric. Despite his status as a prince, Hamlet knows that the throne is a corrupt institution, and has no respect for anyone who benefits from proximity to it or swears fealty to the king who sits upon it.

As Osric runs off, Horatio and Hamlet mock him—but then Horatio tells Hamlet he has a bad feeling about the outcome of the wager. Hamlet insists he's prepared to fight Laertes—even as he admits that he, too, has an "ill [...] about [his] heart." Horatio urges Hamlet to back out of the fight, but Hamlet is determined to participate and leave his fate to God.

After everything that's happened to him and all the death he's witnessed and mourned, Hamlet no longer feels particularly precious about his own life, or particularly attached to it.

Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, Osric, and many lords and courtiers bearing trumpets, fencing rapiers, and wine enter the hall. Claudius urges Hamlet and Laertes to come together and shake hands. As Hamlet approaches Laertes, he apologizes for the pain he's caused Laertes and his family—but says that he cannot be held accountable for the actions he took under the spell of madness. Laertes assures Hamlet he "receive[s his] offered love" with gratitude, "and will not wrong it."

Laertes appears to forgive Hamlet and accept his apology, but in reality, he is designing an attempt on Hamlet's very life. Whereas Hamlet has been paralyzed with inaction in regards to seeking revenge for his father's murder, it's clear that Laertes is prepared to actively seek justice for the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia.

Osric hands Hamlet and Laertes their swords, and they prepare to duel. Claudius says that he will blast the castle's cannons in honor of the winner, and reward him, whoever he may be, with a delicious wine. He orders the fight to begin, and Hamlet and Laertes start fencing. Hamlet hits Laertes in the first round, and Claudius offers him poisoned wine to drink in celebration. Hamlet refuses it, stating he'll drink it later. In the second round, Hamlet hits Laertes again. Gertrude, thrilled, picks up Hamlet's cup and drinks to his success. Claudius, in an aside, laments that he has been unable to stop his queen from drinking the poisoned wine.

Gertrude is a casualty of a scheme devised by the very man who should have been able to protect her. Claudius seems sad that Gertrude has been swept up in his plan—but doesn't step in to save or comfort her in her final moments before the poison seizes her.

As the third round begins, Hamlet challenges Laertes to give it his all. The men are evenly matched—but Laertes at last lands a hit on Hamlet. Both men drop their swords—and pick up one another's in the scuffle. As the fight resumes, Hamlet hits Laertes with Laertes's poisoned sword. Claudius asks for the fight to stop, but Hamlet is determined to keep dueling. Gertrude collapses, to everyone's horror, and Laertes quickly follows, lamenting that he is "a woodcock to [his] own springe"—in other words, a bird caught in his own trap.

As Laertes's plan begins to backfire and people start dying, he admits that his scheme has failed. So many plots, schemes, and ploys have failed already in this play—and Laertes is almost angry with himself for failing to see how this one, too, could have floundered.

Though Claudius insists the queen has just swooned at the sight of such action, Gertrude insists the poisoned wine is what has felled her—she warns Hamlet not to drink it. Hamlet calls out for Osric to lock the doors—there has been "treachery" in the hall, and they must find out who is responsible. Laertes, however, speaks up and confesses that he is the traitor. He tells Hamlet that Hamlet has been poisoned and will soon die—there is "no medicine in the world" which can save him. As Laertes dies, he calls out that "the king's to blame." Hamlet, realizing the swords are poisoned, stabs Claudius, then forces him to drink from the poisoned cup of wine. Claudius dies. With his dying breath, Laertes cries out that Claudius has gotten what he deserves, and tells Hamlet he forgives him.

Laertes regrets joining up with Claudius against Hamlet—his quickness to action has backfired, and now the blood of the entire royal family is on his hands. He feels guilty and remorseful—showing that action is not necessarily preferable to inaction, as death comes for everyone in the end, regardless of whether they act or do not act.

As Hamlet himself collapses and dies, he bids goodbye to the "wretched queen," and laments that "Death is strict in his arrest." He begs Horatio to tell his story. Horatio picks up the poisoned cup of wine, seemingly desiring to die and follow Hamlet—but Hamlet takes the cup from Horatio, urging him to live on, tell Hamlet's tale, and exonerate him to the world.

For all the pondering Hamlet has done about death over the course of the play—his father's murder, his own suicide, his desire to kill his uncle—he is shocked by how "strict" and swift death really is.

Before Hamlet dies, the sounds of war trumpets come through the door. Hamlet asks what's happening. Osric enters and informs Hamlet that Fortinbras has returned successfully from Poland. Hamlet says, with his dying breath, that Fortinbras should be the one to bear the Danish crown. "The rest is silence," Hamlet says, and dies. Horatio bids Hamlet "Good night, sweet prince."

Hamlet never wanted the throne, and perhaps on some level knew that as a man of inaction, he was not suited to it. He suggests that Fortinbras, who has proven himself to be a capable man of action, be the one to succeed the Danish rulers.

Fortinbras enters the hall with an English ambassador. He is shocked and confused by the bloody, messy scene around him, and laments the deaths of "so many princes." The English ambassador says he's come to announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead—but there is no one important left to hear the news. Horatio points to Claudius and says that even if he were still alive, he would not thank the ambassador, as he was not the one who ordered their deaths. Horatio offers to tell Fortinbras and the ambassador "of [the] carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts" that have led to this terrible scene. Fortinbras laments the sorry state of Denmark, but says he's ready to make his claim upon the throne. Horatio says that he will support Fortinbras even in the midst of such chaos.

Most of the main characters of the play are dead—and the ones left to clean up the pieces represent a new guard led by Fortinbras. Death has come for most everyone, regardless of their morality, action, or inaction—and someone foreign, without all the baggage of Denmark's recent struggle and corruption, has risen to take the throne.

Fortinbras orders four of his captains to carry Hamlet's body to a viewing platform. He laments that the prince would have made a great king. He orders the rest of his soldiers to remove all the dead bodies from the hall—though "such a sight […] becomes the field," it looks wrong within the walls of such a stately castle.

Though most of Hamlet *is about inaction and the failures of vengeance, it ends, surprisingly, with a bloody spectacle fitting of war. Fortinbras is perturbed by how these people have slaughtered one another—even with his impressive battle record. This shows that sometimes, intimate human struggles are more violent than even the goriest wars.*

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