

### Sample 1.3

Sample introduction number three highlights the references in *Hamlet* to the Biblical stories of the first couple, Adam and Eve, and two of their sons, Cain and Abel.

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In depicting the character of King Claudius in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare draws on two stories from the first book of the Bible with which his London audience would have been familiar: the fall of Adam and Eve; and the motivated-by-jealousy murder of one of their sons by another.

When the Ghost reveals to Prince Hamlet that “*The serpent that did sting thy father’s life / Now wears his crown*” (1.5), I believe the playwright is inviting us to compare Claudius with Satan, who appeared in the Garden of Eden in the form of a snake. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet despairs that the Denmark previously ruled by his late father (“*so excellent a king*”) has under Claudius descended into a fallen kingdom, “*an unweeded garden / That grows to seed*” (1.2). Later, Claudius will plot the prince’s execution using Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as his “*adders fanged*” (3.4) accomplices.

In his private chapel, a conscience-stricken Claudius acknowledges that his *brother’s murder ... hath the primal eldest curse upon’t*” (3.3). This is a reference to the tale of Cain and Abel, two sons of the Bible’s first couple. Motivated by envy, the elder son Cain killed his younger brother, Abel. In the play’s graveyard scene, Hamlet will imagine a skull to be “*Cain’s jawbone, that did the first murder!*” (5.1).

In the era of the play, it would have been typical for the firstborn son to succeed to his father’s position. Was Claudius, as Cain was to Abel, an elder brother to the prince’s father, old King Hamlet? If so, why was he passed over for Denmark’s kingship? Whatever the reason, it is not difficult to imagine Claudius’ resentment, accumulating over three decades, tempting him to repeat Cain’s brother-murdering crime.