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theme

posted Aug 2, 2013, 7:44 AM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 12, 2013, 10:12 PM]**

Hamlet theme

Death

Death has been considered the primary theme of *Hamlet* by many eminent critics through the years. G. Wilson Knight, for instance, writes at length about death in the play: "Death is over the whole play. Polonius and Ophelia die during the action, and Ophelia is buried before our eyes. Hamlet arranges the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The plot is set in motion by the murder of Hamlet's father, and the play opens with the apparition of the Ghost." And so on and so forth. The play is really death-obsessed, as is Hamlet himself. As as A.C. Bradley has pointed out, in his very first long speech of the play, "Oh that this too solid flesh," Hamlet seems on the verge of total despair, kept from suicide by the simple fact of spiritual awe. He is in the strange position of both wishing for death and fearing it intensely, and this double pressure gives the play much of its drama.

One of the aspects of death which Hamlet finds most fascinating is its bodily facticity. We are, in the end, so much meat and bone. This strange intellectual being, which Hamlet values so highly and possesses so mightily, is but tenuously connected to an unruly and decomposing machine. In the graveyard scene, especially, we can see Hamlet's fascination with dead bodies. How can Yorick's skull be Yorick's skull? Does a piece of dead earth, a skull, really have a connection to a person, a personality?

Hamlet is unprecedented for the depth and variety of its meditations on death. Mortality is the shadow that darkens every scene of the play. Not that the play resolves anything, or settles any of our species-old doubts and anxieties. As with most things, we can expect to find very

difficult and stimulating questions in *Hamlet*, but very few satisfying answers.

Intrigue

Elsinore is full of political intrigue. The murder of Old Hamlet, of course, is the primary instance of such sinister workings, but it is hardly the only one. Polonius, especially, spends nearly every waking moment (it seems) spying on this or that person, checking up on his son in Paris, instructing Ophelia in every detail of her behavior, hiding behind tapestries to eavesdrop. He is the parody of a politician, convinced that the truth can only be known through the most roundabout and sneaking ways. This is never clearer than in his appearances in Act Two. First, he instructs Reynaldo in the most incredibly convoluted espionage methods; second, he hatches and pursues his misguided theory that Hamlet is mad because his heart has been broken by Ophelia.

Claudius, too, is quite the inept Machiavellian. He naively invites Fortinbras to march across his country with a full army; he stupidly enlists Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as his chief spies; his attempt to poison Hamlet ends in total tragedy. He is little better than Polonius. This political ineptitude goes a long way toward revealing how weak Denmark has become under Claudius' rule. He is not a natural king, to be sure; he is more interested in drinking and sex than in war, reconnaissance, or political plotting. This is partly why his one successful political move, the murder of his brother, is so ironic and foul. He has somehow done away with much the better ruler, the Hyperion to his satyr (as Hamlet puts it).

It's worth noting that there is one extremely capable politician in the play -- Hamlet himself. He is always on top of everyone's motives, everyone's doings and goings. He plays Polonius like a pipe and evades every effort of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to do the same to him. He sniffs out Claudius' plot to have him killed in England and sends his erstwhile friends off to die instead. Hamlet is a true Machiavellian when he wants to be. He certainly wouldn't have been as warlike as his father, but had he gotten the chance he might have been his father's equal as a ruler, simply due to his penetration and acumen.

Language

In Act Two scene two Polonius asks Hamlet, "What do you read, my lord?" Hamlet replies, "Words, words, words." Of course every book is made of words, every play is a world of words, so to speak, and *Hamlet* is no different. *Hamlet* is distinguished, however, in its attentiveness to language within the play. Not only does it contain extremely rich language, not only did the play greatly expand the English vocabulary, *Hamlet* also contains several characters who show an interest in language and meaning in themselves.

Polonius, for instance, is often distracted by his manner of expressing himself. In Act Two scene two, for example, he says, "Madam, I swear I use no art at all. / That he is mad, 'tis true: 'tis true

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'tis pity, / And pity 'tis 'tis true. A foolish figure, / But farewell to it, for I will use no art." Of course this is typical Polonius -- absurdly hypocritical, self-enamored, dull-witted. Just as he is extremely windy in recommending brevity, here he is fussy and "artful" (or affectedly artificial) in declaring that he is neither of those things. Polonius' grasp of language, like his political instinct, is quite shallow -- he gestures toward the mastery of rhetoric that seems like a statesman's primary craft, but he is too distracted by surfaces to achieve any real depth.

Another angle from which to consider language in the play -- *Hamlet* explores the traditional dichotomy between words and deeds. In Act Four, when talking to Laertes, Claudius makes this distinction explicit: "what would you undertake, / To show yourself your father's son in deed / More than in words?" Here deeds are associated with noble acts, specifically the fulfillment of revenge, and words with empty bluffing. The passage resonates well beyond its immediate context. Hamlet himself is a master of language, an explorer of its possibilities; he is also a man who has trouble performing actual deeds. For him, reality seems to exist more in thoughts and sentences than in acts. Thus his trouble fulfilling revenge seems to stem from his overemphasis on reasoning and formulating -- a fault of over-precision that he acknowledges himself in the speech beginning, "How all occasions do inform against me."

Hamlet is the man of language, of words, of the magic of thought. He is not fit for a play that so emphasizes the value of action, and he knows it. But then, the action itself is contained within words, formed and contained by Shakespeare's pen. The action of the play is much more an illusion than the words are. *Hamlet* invites us to consider whether this isn't the case more often than we might think, whether the world of words doesn't enjoy a great deal of power in framing and describing the world of actions, on stage or not.

Madness

By the time *Hamlet* was written, madness was already a well-established element in many revenge tragedies. The most popular revenge tragedy of the Elizabethan period, *The Spanish Tragedy*, also features a main character, Hieronymo, who goes mad in the build-up to his revenge, as does the title character in Shakespeare's first revenge tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*. But *Hamlet* is unique among revenge tragedies in its treatment of madness because Hamlet's madness is deeply ambiguous. Whereas previous revenge tragedy protagonists are unambiguously insane, Hamlet plays with the idea of insanity, putting on "an antic disposition," as he says, for some not-perfectly-clear reason.

Of course, there is a practical advantage to appearing mad. In Shakespeare's source for the plot of *Hamlet*, "Amneth" (as the legendary hero is known) feigns madness in order to avoid the suspicion of the fratricidal king as he plots his revenge. But Hamlet's feigned madness is not so simple as this. His performance of madness, rather than aiding his revenge, almost distracts him from it, as he spends the great majority of the play exhibiting very little interest in pursuing the ghost's mission even after he has proven, via "The Mouse Trap," that Claudius is indeed guilty

as sin.

No wonder, then, that Hamlet's madness has been a resilient point of critical controversy since the seventeenth century. The traditional question is perhaps the least interesting one to ask of his madness -- is he really insane or is he faking it? It seems clear from the text that he is, indeed, playing the role of the madman (he says he will do just that) and using his veneer of lunacy to have a great deal of fun with the many fools who populate Elsinore, especially Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Perhaps this feigned madness does at times edge into actual madness, in the same way that all acted emotions come very close to their genuine models, but, as he says, he is but mad north-nothwest, and knows a hawk from a handsaw. When he is alone, or with Horatio, and free from the need to act the lunatic, Hamlet is incredibly lucid and self-aware, perhaps a bit manic but hardly insane.

So what should we make of his feigned insanity? Hamlet, in keeping with the play in general, seems almost to act the madman because he knows in some bizarre way that he is playing a role in a revenge tragedy. He knows that he is expected to act mad, because he thinks that that is what one does when seeking revenge -- perhaps because he has seen *The Spanish Tragedy*. I'm joking, of course, on one level, but he does exhibit self-aware theatricality throughout the play, and if he hasn't seen *The Spanish Tragedy*, he has certainly seen *The Death of Gonzago*, and many more plays besides. He knows his role, or what his role should be, even as he is unable to play it satisfactorily. Hamlet is beautifully miscast as the revenger -- he is constitutionally unfitted for so vulgar and unintelligent a fate -- and likewise his attempt to play the madman, while a valiant effort, is forced, insincere, anxious, ambiguous, and full of doubts. Perhaps Hamlet himself, if we could ask him, would not know why he chooses to feign madness any more than we do.

Needless to say, Hamlet is not the only person who goes insane in the play. Ophelia's madness serves as a clear foil to his own strange antics. She is truly, unambiguously, innocently, simply mad. Whereas Hamlet's madness seems to increase his self-awareness, Ophelia loses every vestige of composure and self-knowledge, just as the truly insane tend to do.

Subjectivity

Harold Bloom, speaking about *Hamlet* at the Library of Congress, said, "The play's subject massively is neither mourning for the dead or revenge on the living. ... All that matters is Hamlet's consciousness of his own consciousness, infinite, unlimited, and at war with itself." He added, "Hamlet discovers that his life has been a quest with no object except his own endlessly burgeoning subjectivity." Bloom is not the only reader of *Hamlet* to see such an emphasis on the self.

Hamlet's soliloquies, to take only the most obvious feature, are strong and sustained investigations of the self -- not only as a thinking being, but as emotional, bodily, and

paradoxically multiple. Hamlet, fascinated by his own character, his turmoil, his inconsistency, spends line after line wondering at himself. Why can't I carry out revenge? Why can't I carry out suicide? He questions himself, and in so doing questions the nature of the self.

Aside from these massive speeches, Hamlet shows a sustained interest in philosophical problems of the subject. Among these problems is the mediating role of thought in all human life. "For there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so," he says. We can never know the truth, he suggests, nor the good, nor the evil of the world, except through the means of our thoughts. Certainty is not an option. And the great realm of uncertainty, the realm of dreams, fears, thoughts, is the realm of subjectivity.

Suicide

Like madness, suicide is a theme that links Hamlet and Ophelia and shapes the concerns of the play more generally. Hamlet thinks deeply about it, and perhaps "contemplates" it in the more popular sense; Ophelia perhaps commits it. In both cases, the major upshot of suicide is religious. In his two "suicide soliloquies," Hamlet segues into meditations on religious laws and mysteries -- "that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter"; "For in that sleep of death what dreams may come." And Ophelia's burial is greatly limited by the clergy's suspicions that she might have taken her own life. In short, *Hamlet* appears to suggest that were it not for, first, the social stigma attached to suicide by religious authorities, and second, the legitimately "unknown" nature of whatever happens after death, there would be a lot more self-slaughter in this difficult and bitter world. In a play so obsessed with the self, and the nature of the self, it's only natural to see this emphasis on self-murder.

It's worth mentioning one of the major interpretive issues of *Hamlet*: was Ophelia's death accidental or a suicide? According to Gertrude's narration of the event, Ophelia's drowning was entirely accidental. However, some have suggested that Gertrude's long story may be a fabrication invented to protect the young woman from the social stigma of suicide. Indeed, in Act Five the priest and the gravediggers are fairly certain that Ophelia took her own life. One might ask oneself -- why does it make such a difference to us whether she died by her own hand or not? Shakespeare seems, in fact, to inspire this very sort of self-interrogation. Are we, like the characters in the play, so invested in protecting Ophelia from the stigma of suicide?

Theater

Which is the star of this play, Hamlet or *Hamlet*? T.S. Eliot, for one, unequivocally endorses the latter: "Few critics have ever admitted that *Hamlet* the play is the primary problem, and Hamlet the character only secondary." In effect, *Hamlet* is a play about plays, about theater. Most obviously, it contains a play within a play, detailed instructions on acting technique, an extended conversation about London theater companies and their fondness for boy troupes, several references to other theater (including to Christian mystery plays, and to Shakespeare's own

Julius Caesar), and still more references to the stage on which it is being performed, in the globe theater with its ghost "in the cellarage."

But what is the point of this constant metatheatrical winking? *Hamlet*, among other things, is an extended meditation on the nature of acting and the relationship between acting and "genuine" life. It refuses to obey the conventional restrictions of theater and constantly spills out into the audience, as it were, pointing out the "real" surroundings of the "fictional" play, and thus incorporating them into the larger theatrical experience.

Most specifically, *Hamlet* is an exploration of a specific genre and its specific generic conventions. It is the revenge tragedy to end all revenge tragedies, both containing and commenting on the elements that define the genre. Modern audiences are quite comfortable with this sort of "meta-generic" approach. Think of modern westerns, heist movies, or martial arts movies. All of these genres have become almost obligatorily self-aware; they contain references to past milestones in their respective genres, they gleefully and ironically embrace (or alternatively reject) the conventions that past films treated with sincerity. *Hamlet*, in its relationship to revenge tragedy and to theater more generally, is one of the first dramas of this kind and perhaps still the most profound example of such post-modern concerns.

To put it cutely, *Hamlet* itself is the main character of the play, and Hamlet merely the means by which it explores its own place in the history of theater. To make things yet dizzier, Hamlet seems, deep down, to know that he is in a play, to know that he is miscast, to understand the theatrical nature of his being. And who's to say that we aren't all merely actors in our own lives? Surely, from a philosophical perspective, this is one of the basic truths of modern human life

Family

Family is a significant theme in *Hamlet*. The play is notorious for the way it dwells on the issue of incest – Gertrude's marriage to her dead husband's brother, Hamlet's fixation on his mother, and even Laertes's obsession with Ophelia's sexuality. It's also important to note how the play is particularly concerned with the way politics impact the dynamics of family relationships, especially when domestic harmony is sacrificed for political gain. Also of importance is the fact that *Hamlet* involves three revenge plots that all hinge on sons avenging the deaths of their fathers.

Gender

"Frailty, thy name is woman," so says Hamlet in his first scene (1.2.6). Hamlet's attitude toward women is notoriously sexist and stems from his disgust at his mother's sexuality and seeming

unfaithfulness to his dead father. This outlook eventually spills over to include *all* women, especially the hapless Ophelia, who has virtually no power or control, even over her own body. To some extent, the play also considers notions of masculinity (or lack thereof). Claudius warns Hamlet that his grief is "unmanly" and Hamlet notoriously refers to himself as a promiscuous woman when he finds himself unable to avenge his father's death, which, again, circles back to Hamlet's association between women and deception. Yet, the play does not share Hamlet's furious dismissal of women. Hamlet's mother's final guilt is left ambiguous, and his lover ultimately inspires pity. Hamlet's attitude toward women reveals something about *him* more than it reveals women's true nature.

Sex

Hamlet's preoccupation with female sexuality seems to dominate much of the play. The young prince is disgusted by his aging mother's sexual appetite and his attitude eventually infects his relationship with Ophelia and his attitude toward all women in general. In the play, sexuality is frequently associated with deception, sin, and a seemingly fallen world. According to Hamlet, female sexuality makes the entire world seem like an "unweeded garden."

Lies and Deceit

Hamlet, more than almost any character in literature, hates deception and craves honesty. It is one of the brilliant ironies of the play that Hamlet, an absolutist in his quest for truth, is trapped in a seamy political world where deception is a necessary part of life and political "spin" rules the day. This contrast, fascinating to the audience, is a torment to Hamlet. Deception is necessary for and used by every character in *Hamlet*, for every purpose ranging from love to parenting to regicide.

Art and Culture

Literary critics consider *Hamlet* to be one of Shakespeare's most "self-reflexive" plays, which is to say that *Hamlet* self-consciously refers to the workings of the theater and also draws the audience's attention to the fact that the play is a theatrical production. In the play, Hamlet frequently takes on various theatrical roles (he famously plays an "antic," tries on the role of a typical "revenge hero," and so on), which allows the play to explore ideas about human nature and character. Shakespeare's also interested in contemplating the power of the theater. When

Hamlet organizes a group of traveling players to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* (a.k.a. *The Mousetrap)*, a play that mimics Claudius's murder of Old Hamlet, he hopes that such a device will reflect the truth or, "hold a mirror up to nature."

Religion

Hamlet is not necessarily a play about "religion" but it does register many of religious ideologies and spiritual anxieties of the 16th century. Here we're talking about the effects of the Protestant Reformation, and Christian ideas about "Mortality" and the afterlife, all of which have major implications for the play's portrayal of the ghost. *Hamlet* is also interesting for the way it weaves together Christian attitudes toward murder, suicide, and revenge, which don't necessarily square with the basic tenets we typically find in the "Genre" of Revenge Tragedy.

Mortality

Hamlet's musings on suicide, especially the "to be or not to be" speech, are legendary and continue to direct discussions of the value of life and the mystery of death. But Hamlet himself never commits suicide. It is Ophelia, who never mentions the possibility of taking her own life, who drowns, seemingly as a result of some combination of madness and despair. Death threads its way through the entirety of *Hamlet*, from the opening scene's confrontation with a dead man's ghost to the bloodbath of the final scene, which leaves almost every main character dead. Hamlet constantly contemplates death from many angles. He is both seduced and repelled by the idea of suicide, but, in the famous gravedigger scene, he is also fascinated by the physical reality of death. In a way, *Hamlet* can be viewed as extended dialogue between Hamlet and death.

Revenge

Hamlet gears up to be a traditional bloody revenge play – and then it stops. The bulk of the play deals not with Hamlet's ultimately successful vengeance on his father's murderer, but with Hamlet's inner struggle to take action. The play concludes with a bloodbath that's typical of revenge tragedy, but *Hamlet's* infamous delay sets it apart from anything that's come before it. *Hamlet* is also notable for the way it weaves together three revenge plots, all of which involve sons seeking vengeance for their fathers' murders. Ultimately, the play calls into question the validity and usefulness of revenge.

Symboles

posted Aug 2, 2013, 7:43 AM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 2, 2013, 8:59 AM]**

Yorick's Skull

In *Hamlet*, physical objects are rarely used to represent thematic ideas. One important exception is Yorick's skull, which Hamlet discovers in the graveyard in the first scene of Act V. As Hamlet speaks to the skull and about the skull of the king's former jester, he fixates on death's inevitability and the disintegration of the body. He urges the skull to "get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come"—no one can avoid death (V.i.178–179). He traces the skull's mouth and says, "Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft," indicating his fascination with the physical consequences of death (V.i.174–175). This latter idea is an important motif throughout the play, as Hamlet frequently makes comments referring to every human body's eventual decay, noting that Polonius will be eaten by worms, that even kings are eaten by worms, and that dust from the decayed body of Alexander the Great might be used to stop a hole in a beer barrel.

summary

posted Aug 2, 2013, 7:42 AM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 2, 2013, 7:42 AM]**

Hamlet summary

Act I.

Shakespeare's longest play and the play responsible for the immortal lines "To be or not to be: that is the question:" and the advise "to thine own self be true," begins in Denmark with the news that King Hamlet of Denmark has recently died.

Denmark is now in a state of high alert and preparing for possible war with Young Fortinbras of Norway. A ghost resembling the late King Hamlet is spotted on a platform before Elsinore Castle in Denmark. King Claudius, who now rules Denmark, has taken King Hamlet's wife, Queen Gertrude as his new wife and Queen of Denmark.

King Claudius fearing Young Fortinbras of Norway may invade, has sent ambassadors to Norway to urge the King of Norway to restrain Young Fortinbras. Young Hamlet distrusts King Claudius. The King and Queen do not understand why Hamlet still mourns his father's death over two months ago. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet explains that he does not like his mother marrying the next King of Denmark so quickly within a month of his father's death...

Laertes, the son of Lord Chamberlain Polonius, gives his sister Ophelia some brotherly advice. He warns Ophelia not to fall in love with Young Hamlet; she will only be hurt. Polonius tells his daughter Ophelia not to return Hamlet's affections for her since he fears Hamlet is only using her...

Hamlet meets the Ghost of his father, King Hamlet and follows it to learn more...

Hamlet learns from King Hamlet's Ghost that he was poisoned by King Claudius, the current ruler of Denmark. The Ghost tells Hamlet to avenge his death but not to punish Queen Gertrude for remarrying; it is not Hamlet's place and her conscience and heaven will judge her... Hamlet swears Horatio and Marcellus to silence over Hamlet meeting the Ghost.

Act II.

Polonius tells Reynaldo to spy on his son Laertes in Paris. Polonius learns from his daughter Ophelia that a badly dressed Hamlet met her, studied her face and promptly left. Polonius believes that Hamlet's odd behaviour is because Ophelia has rejected him. Polonius decides to tell King Claudius the reason for Hamlet's recently odd behaviour.

King Claudius instructs courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out what is causing Hamlet's strange "transformation," or change of character. Queen Gertrude reveals that only King Hamlet's death and her recent remarriage could be upsetting Hamlet.

We learn more of Young Fortinbras' movements and Polonius has his own theory about Hamlet's transformation; it is caused by Hamlet's love for his daughter Ophelia. Hamlet makes his famous speech about the greatness of man. Hamlet plans to use a play to test if King Claudius really did kill his father as King Hamlet's Ghost told him...

Act III.

The King's spies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to King Claudius on Hamlet's behaviour. Hamlet is eager for King Claudius and Queen Gertrude to watch a play tonight which Hamlet has added lines to.

King Claudius and Polonius listen in on Hamlet's and Ophelia's private conversation. Hamlet suspects Ophelia is spying on him and is increasingly hostile to her before leaving.

King Claudius decides to send Hamlet to England, fearing danger in Hamlet since he no longer believes Hamlet is merely lovesick. The King agrees to Polonius' plan to eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with his mother after the play to hopefully learn more from Hamlet. The play Hamlet had added lines to is performed. The mime preceding the play which mimics the Ghost's description of King Hamlet's death goes unnoticed.

The main play called "The Murder of Gonzago" is performed, causing King Claudius to react in a way which convinces Hamlet that his uncle did indeed poison his father King Hamlet as the Ghost previously had told him... Hamlet pretends not to know that the play has offended King Claudius. Hamlet agrees to speak with his mother in private...

King Claudius admits his growing fear of Hamlet and decides to send him overseas to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in order to protect himself. Alone, King Claudius reveals in soliloquy his own knowledge of the crime he has committed (poisoning King Hamlet) and realizes that he cannot escape divine justice...

Queen Gertrude attempts to scold her son but Hamlet instead scolds his mother for her actions. Queen Gertrude cries out in fear, and Polonius echoes it and is stabbed through the arras (subdivision of a room created by a hanging tapestry) where he was listening in. Hamlet continues scolding his mother but the Ghost reappears, telling Hamlet to be gentle with the Queen. For her part, Queen Gertrude agrees to stop living with King Claudius, beginning her redemption....

Act IV.

King Claudius speaks with his wife, Queen Gertrude. He learns of Polonius' murder which shocks him; it could easily have been him. Queen Gertrude lies for her son, saying that Hamlet is as mad as a tempestuous sea. King Claudius, now scared of Hamlet, decides to have Hamlet sent away to England immediately... He also sends courtiers and spies Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern to speak with Hamlet to find out where Hamlet has hidden Polonius' body so they can take it to the chapel.

Hamlet refuses to tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern where Polonius' dead body is hidden. He calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lapdogs revealing his true awareness that they are not his friends. Hamlet agrees to see King Claudius.

Hamlet continues to refuse to tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern where Polonius' body is. Hamlet is brought before the King. The two exchange words, clearly circling each other, each aware that the other is a threat. Hamlet tells King Claudius where Polonius body is. King Claudius ominously tells Hamlet to leave for England supposedly for Hamlet's own safety. With Hamlet gone, King Claudius reveals his plans for Hamlet to be killed in England, freeing King Claudius from further worry from this threat...

Young Fortinbras marches his army across Denmark to fight the Polish. Hamlet laments that he does not have in him the strength of Young Fortinbras, who will lead an army into pointless fighting, if only to maintain honor. Hamlet asks himself how he cannot fight for honor when his father has been killed and his mother made a whore in his eyes by becoming King Claudius' wife.

The death of Polonius leaves its mark on Ophelia who becomes mad from the grief of losing her father. Laertes storms King Claudius' castle, demanding to see his father and wanting justice when he learns that his father, Polonius has been killed. King Claudius remains calm, telling Laertes that he too mourned his father's loss...

Horatio is greeted by sailors who have news from Hamlet. Horatio follows the sailors to learn more... King Claudius explains to Laertes that Hamlet killed his father, Polonius. Deciding they have a common enemy, they plot Hamlet's death at a fencing match to be arranged between Laertes and Hamlet. Laertes learns of his sister Ophelia's death by drowning...

Act V.

Hamlet and Horatio speak with a cheerful Clown or gravedigger. Hamlet famously realizes that man's accomplishments are transitory (fleeting) and holding the skull of Yorick, a childhood jester he remembered, creates a famous scene about man's insignificance and inability to control his fate following death.

At Ophelia's burial, the Priest reveals a widely held belief that Ophelia committed suicide, angering Laertes. Hamlet fights Laertes over Ophelia's grave, angered by Laertes exaggerated

emphasis of his sorrow and because he believes he loved Ophelia much more than her brother.

Hamlet explains to Horatio how he avoided the death planned for him in England and had courtiers' Rosencrantz and Guildenstern put to death instead. Hamlet reveals his desire to kill King Claudius.

Summoned by Osric to fence against Laertes, Hamlet arrives at a hall in the castle and fights Laertes. Queen Gertrude drinks a poisoned cup meant for Hamlet, dying but not before telling all that she has been poisoned.

Hamlet wins the first two rounds against Laertes but is stabbed and poisoned fatally in the third round. Exchanging swords whilst fighting, Hamlet wounds and poisons Laertes who explains that his sword is poison tipped.

Now dying, Hamlet stabs King Claudius with this same sword, killing him.

Hamlet, dying, tells Horatio to tell his story and not to commit suicide. Hamlet recommends Young Fortinbras as the next King of Denmark. Young Fortinbras arrives, cleaning up the massacre. Horatio promises to tell all the story we have just witnessed, ending the play.

Motifs

posted Aug 2, 2013, 7:41 AM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 2, 2013, 7:41 AM]**

Motifs

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

Incest and Incestuous Desire

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

strongest overtones of incestuous desire arise in the relationship of Hamlet and Gertrude, in Hamlet's fixation on Gertrude's sex life with Claudius and his preoccupation with her in general.

Misogyny

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

Ears and Hearing

One facet of *Hamlet*'s exploration of the difficulty of attaining true knowledge is slipperiness of language. Words are used to communicate ideas, but they can also be used to distort the truth, manipulate other people, and serve as tools in corrupt quests for power. Claudius, the shrewd politician, is the most obvious example of a man who manipulates words to enhance his own power. The sinister uses of words are represented by images of ears and hearing, from Claudius's murder of the king by pouring poison into his ear to Hamlet's claim to Horatio that "I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb" (IV.vi.21). The poison poured in the king's ear by Claudius is used by the ghost to symbolize the corrosive effect of Claudius's dishonesty on the health of Denmark. Declaring that the story that he was killed by a snake is a lie, he says that "the whole ear of Denmark" is "Rankly abused. . . ." (I.v.36–38).

Character

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Hamlet

The son of Old Hamlet and Gertrude, thus Prince of Denmark. The ghost of Old Hamlet charges him with the task of killing his uncle, Claudius, for killing him and usurping the throne of Denmark. Hamlet is a moody, theatrical, witty, brilliant young man, perpetually fascinated and tormented by doubts and introspection. It is famously difficult to pin down his true thoughts and feelings -- does he love

Ophelia, and does he really intend to kill Claudius? In fact, it often seems as though Hamlet pursues lines of thought and emotion merely for their experimental value, testing this or that idea without any interest in applying his resolutions in the practical world. The variety of his moods, from manic to somber, seems to cover much of the range of human possibility.

Hamlet has fascinated audiences and readers for centuries, and the first thing to point out about him is that he is enigmatic. There is always more to him than the other characters in the play can figure out; even the most careful and clever readers come away with the sense that they don't know everything there is to know about this character. Hamlet actually tells other characters that there is more to him than meets the eye—notably, his mother, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—but his fascination involves much more than this. When he speaks, he sounds as if there's something important he's not saying, maybe something even he is not aware of. The ability to write soliloquies and dialogues that create this effect is one of Shakespeare's most impressive achievements.

Old Hamlet

The former King of Denmark. Old Hamlet appears as a ghost and exhorts his son to kill Claudius, whom he claims has killed him in order to secure the throne and the queen of Denmark. Hamlet fears (or at least says he fears) that the ghost is an imposter, an evil spirit sent to lure him to hell. Old Hamlet's ghost reappears in Act Three of the play when Hamlet goes too far in berating his mother. After this second appearance, we hear and see no more of him.

Claudius

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

Gertrude

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

These questions can be answered in numerous ways, depending upon one's reading of the play. The Gertrude who does emerge clearly in *Hamlet* is a woman defined by her desire for station and affection, as well as by her tendency to use men to fulfill her instinct for self-preservation—which, of course, makes her extremely dependent upon the men in her life. Hamlet's most famous comment about Gertrude is his furious condemnation of women in general: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.ii.146). This comment is as much indicative of Hamlet's agonized state of mind as of anything else, but to a great extent Gertrude does seem morally frail. She never exhibits the ability to think critically about her situation, but seems merely to move instinctively toward seemingly safe choices, as when she immediately runs to Claudius after her confrontation with Hamlet. She is at her best in social situations (I.ii and V.ii), when her natural grace and charm seem to indicate a rich, rounded personality. At times it seems that her grace

and charm are her *only* characteristics, and her reliance on men appears to be her sole way of capitalizing on her abilities.

Horatio

Hamlet's closest friend. They know each other from the University of Wittenberg, where they are both students. Horatio is presented as a studious, skeptical young man, perhaps more serious and less ingenious than Hamlet but more than capable of trading witticisms with his good friend. In a moving tribute just before the play-within-the-play begins, in Act Two scene two, Hamlet praises Horatio as his soul's choice and declares that he loves Horatio because he is "not passion's slave" but is rather good-humored and philosophical through all of life's buffets. At the end of the play, Hamlet charges Horatio with the task of explaining the pile of bodies to the confused onlookers in court.

Surviving to Tell Hamlet's Story

Hamlet insists, however, that Horatio live to tell the tragic story, and he does. Critics often note that Horatio's name recalls the Latin term "orator," (meaning "speaker"), which is fitting given that Horatio promises to put the dead bodies up on a "stage" while he tells Prince Fortinbras and the rest of the world what went down in Elsinore:

And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about: so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' reads: all this can I
Truly deliver. (5.2.18)

Hmm….that's interesting. This is sort of what Shakespeare the playwright does, isn't it? Wonder if it has anything to do with the play's overall obsession with the workings of the theater. Check out our discussion of "Art and Culture" for more thoughts about this.

Horatio's Skepticism

Aside from Horatio's survival at the play's end, the character is also notable for the way he's introduced at the play's beginning. When we first see Horatio, he's been called to the castle by the guards. But why? As Marcellus notes, Horatio is a "scholar" (he goes to school in Wittenberg with Hamlet), and therefore, is in a position to judge whether or not the apparition that's been appearing on the battlements is in fact a ghost. According to Marcellus, Horatio chides 'tis but [the guards'] fantasy, / And will not let belief take hold of him" (1.1.5).

Horatio, then, seems to be the embodiment of the Elizabethan skeptic, one who is well educated and doubtful of the legitimacy of ghosts. (Though many Elizabethans did believe in spirits, some viewed it as a superstitious and outdated belief. Check out our discussion of "Religion" for more on this.) Horatio is convinced of the spirit's legitimacy soon enough, but his initial skepticism introduces the first note of doubt in the play, one that will haunt his friend Hamlet for several acts. (Remember, Hamlet says he believes the ghost is his father's spirit but his delay in carrying out the ghost's orders for revenge suggests he's uncertain.)

Polonius

The father of Ophelia and Laertes and the chief adviser to the throne of Denmark. Polonius is a windy, pedantic, interfering, suspicious, silly old man, a "rash, intruding fool," in Hamlet's phrase. Polonius is forever fomenting intrigue and hiding behind tapestries to spy. He hatches the theory that Ophelia caused Hamlet to go mad by rejecting him. Polonius' demise is fitting to his flaws. Hamlet accidentally kills the old man while he eavesdrops behind an arras in Gertrude's bedroom. Polonius' death causes his daughter to go mad.

Ophelia

The daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes. Ophelia has received several tributes of love from Hamlet but rejects him after her father orders her to do so. In general, Ophelia is controlled by the men in her life, moved around like a pawn in their scheme to discover Hamlet's distemper. Moreover, Ophelia is regularly mocked by Hamlet and lectured by her father and brother about her sexuality. She goes mad after Hamlet murders Polonius. She later drowns.

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Being a "Good" Girl

Ophelia is the quintessential obedient daughter, a role demanded of all young women in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. When her father orders her to quit seeing Hamlet, she complies – "I shall obey my Lord" (1.4.10). Later, when Polonius uses her as bait to spy on Hamlet for King Claudius, she has no choice but to do as she's told (3.1.4). As long as she's unmarried, she must live by her father's rules. (Of course, if she were to marry, she'd then have to live by her husband's rules.) Essentially, Ophelia has no control over her body, her relationships, or her choices. We think she definitely could have used the services of ImperialMatch.com.

Hamlet's Abuse

Ophelia's filial obedience leaves her vulnerable to the abuse of Hamlet, who accuses her of being unfaithful and deceptive. (Hamlet seems to know that Ophelia is a participant in her father's spying.) He accuses her (and all women) of being a "breeder of sinners" and orders Ophelia to a "nunnery" (3.1.9). Hamlet also says that if Ophelia were to marry, she'd turn her husband into a "monster" or, a cuckold (cuckolds were thought to have horns like monsters) because she would inevitably cheat on him (3.1.10). Ophelia is crushed by Hamlet's harsh behavior, especially when he says, "I loved you not" (3.1.8). She's also devastated that Hamlet, the man who once spoke to her with "words of so sweet

breath" (3.1.4) seems to have lost his mind and turned on her:

And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That sucked the honey of his music vows
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason [...]
out of tune and harsh (3.1.13).

Ophelia and Chastity

Hamlet's not the only one who defines Ophelia by her sexuality. Even her brother has something to say about it. In Act I Laertes dispenses advice to Ophelia on the pitfalls of pre-marital sex (for *women*, not men) in a lengthy speech that's geared toward instilling a sense of "fear" into his sister. In fact, he tells Ophelia no less than three times that she should "fear" intimacy with Hamlet.

Is Laertes just looking out for his little sister's best interests? Maybe, but his speech is also full of vivid innuendo, as when he compares intercourse to a "canker" worm invading and injuring a delicate flower before its buds or, "buttons" have had time to open (1.3.3). This graphic allusion to the anatomy of female genitalia turns his sister into an erotic object while insisting, at the same time, on Ophelia's chastity. Laertes takes a typically Elizabethan stance toward female sexuality – a "deflowered" woman was commonly seen as damaged goods that no man would want to marry.

Ophelia and Madness

That's *a lot* of pressure to put on a young woman and, as we know, Ophelia eventually cracks. When Ophelia goes mad, she sings a bawdy song about a maiden who is tricked into losing her virginity with a false promise of marriage (4.5.7), which you can read about by going to "Quotes" on "Gender." This is part of the reason why many literary critics see Ophelia's madness as a result of patriarchal pressure and abuse (when men hold all the power in society and abuse women). Shakespeare's portrayal of Ophelia is incredibly sympathetic and seems to register the unfairness of the way Ophelia is treated. It also seems that Ophelia's very real mental breakdown (which results in her drowning) serves as a point of contrast to Hamlet's feigned insanity or "antic disposition," which we talk about in "Madness."

Suicide?

Ophelia's death, like just about everything else in the play, is mysterious. Her drowning occurs off-stage and we're given an account by Gertrude, who may or may not have been present at the time.

When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up:
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes;
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element: but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,

Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death. (4.7.2)

Regardless of whether or not Gertrude was an eyewitness, the story of Ophelia's death is striking in a number of ways. First, her death seems to be *passive*: rather than straight-up committing suicide, as Gertrude tells us, she accidentally falls in the water and then simply neglects to save herself from sinking. This seems to be a metaphor for the way Ophelia lives her life toward the end of the play – going with the *flow*, doing what her father tells her to do, rather making decisions for herself. Ophelia's "garments" "pull" her down, as if they had a mind of their own.

We also notice that Ophelia is described as being "mermaid-like" with her "clothes spread wide." Even in death, Ophelia is figured as an erotic creature. Gertrude also suggests that Ophelia's drowning was natural when she describes Ophelia as being like a "native" creature in the water. This seems like a pretty dangerous and destructive way to describe a young woman's tragic death, don't you think?

Laertes

Polonius' son and Ophelia's brother. Laertes is an impetuous young man who lives primarily in Paris, France. We see him at the beginning of the play at the celebration of Claudius and Gertrude's wedding. He then returns to Paris, only to return in Act Four with an angry entourage after his father's death at Hamlet's hands. He and Claudius conspire to kill Hamlet in the course of a duel between Laertes and the prince.

Foil to Hamlet

Laertes's character is, perhaps, best known for being an obvious foil to that of Prince Hamlet. After Hamlet kills Polonius, Laertes faces the same problem that Hamlet does – a murdered father. Yet, Laertes's reaction to his father's death is very different from Hamlet's response to news of his own father's murder. While Hamlet lollygags and broods over the murder for much of the play, Laertes takes *immediate* action. He storms home from France as soon as he hears the news, raises a crowd of followers, and invades the palace. *Then* he starts asking questions – unlike Hamlet, who asks a whole lot of questions *before* he finally gets around to avenging his father's death. Laertes, of course, is manipulated by Claudius into a deadly duel with the prince and ultimately comes to the same tragic end as Hamlet. For more on Laertes's relationship to the play's theme of "Revenge," check out our "Quotes."

Big Brother: A little more than kin?

Laertes is also notable for his excessive "love" for Ophelia. So, what's the deal with Laertes and his little sis? Recall that Laertes makes a huge deal about Ophelia's "unpolluted flesh" at her funeral – that is, just before he screams at the priest to rot in hell and leaps into Ophelia's grave while shouting "Hold off the earth a while, / Till I have caught her once more in mine arms" (5.1.5). This, of course, happens just before Laertes fights with his dead sister's ex-boyfriend about who loved Ophelia the most. Clearly, there are traces of incestuous desire at work

here, which isn't *so* surprising in a play that revolves around a young man (Hamlet) who's consumed with his mother's sexuality and marriage to her brother-in-law. Check out our discussion of "Family" for more on this.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Friends of Hamlet's from the University of Wittenberg. Claudius invites them to court in order to spy on Hamlet. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often treated as comic relief; they are sycophantic, vaguely absurd fellows. After Hamlet kills Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are assigned to accompany Hamlet to England. They carry a letter from Claudius asking the English king to kill Hamlet upon his arrival. Hamlet discovers this plot and alters the letter so that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are put to death instead. We learn that they have indeed been executed at the very close of the play.

Fortinbras

Fortinbras is a Norwegian prince who seeks revenge for his father's death. (Old Fortinbras, former King of Norway, made a bet with Old Hamlet and wound up losing his life and some important Norwegian territory in the process.) In the play, young Fortinbras attempts to reclaim the land his father lost.

Sounds like a familiar scenario, right? Fortinbras is an important foil for Prince Hamlet, who has also lost a father and now finds himself seeking revenge. But, while Hamlet sits around contemplating life and death, Fortinbras takes clear and immediate action by raising an army to reclaim Norway's lost territories. Though his uncle (the current king of Norway) diverts Fortinbras from attacking Denmark, in the end, prince Fortinbras helps himself to the Danish throne. (Remember, he conveniently arrives at the court in Elsinore immediately after the

bloodbath in Act V, Scene ii.)

Lurking behind the stories of both Fortinbras and Hamlet is the question of why their uncles are wearing the crowns that should, in the normal pattern of who-gets-to-be-king, go to them (the sons). Fortinbras seems to be dealing with his impatience by going out and conquering other countries.

Hamlet, in contrast, only mentions the fact that Claudius has "popped in between the'election and [his] hopes" (in other words, his hopes of becoming the King of Denmark). Hamlet distracts himself with thinking, not with conquering. Our prince compares himself explicitly to Fortinbras when he passes Fortinbras's armies in the fields and he sees Fortinbras as a model for how he should behave. "To be great / is not to stir without great argument / but greatly to find quarrel in a straw / when honor's at the stake" (4.4.52-55). In other words, Hamlet realizes that Fortinbras doesn't have very good reasons for leading an army against Poland – but he concludes that reasons are unimportant. To be a great man is to act for any reason to preserve honor. Fortinbras, like Laertes, is an example of action with little thought – precisely the opposite of Hamlet..

Osric

The ludicrous, flowery, stupid courtier who invites Hamlet to fence with Laertes, then serves as referee during the contest.

The gravediggers

Two "clowns" (roles played by comic actors), a principal gravedigger and his assistant. They figure only in one scene -- Act Five scene one -- yet never fail to make a big impression on readers and audience members. The primary gravedigger is a very witty man, macabre and intelligent, who is the only

character in the play capable of trading barbs with Hamlet. They are the only speaking representatives of the lower classes in the play and their perspective is a remarkable contrast to that of the nobles.

The players

A group of (presumably English) actors who arrive in Denmark. Hamlet knows this company well and listens, enraptured, while the chief player recites a long speech about the death of Priam and the wrath of Hecuba. Hamlet uses the players to stage an adaptation of "The Death of Gonzago" which he calls "The Mousetrap" -- a play that reprises almost perfectly the account of Old Hamlet's death as told by the ghost -- in order to be sure of Claudius' guilt.

A Priest

Charged with performing the rites at Ophelia's funeral. Because of the doubtful circumstances of Ophelia's death, the priest refuses to do more than the bare minimum as she is interred.

Reynaldo

Polonius' servant, sent to check on Laertes in Paris. He receives absurdly detailed instructions in espionage from his master.

Bernardo

A soldier who is among the first to see the ghost of Old Hamlet.

Marcellus

A soldier who is among the first to see the ghost of Old Hamlet.

Francisco

A soldier.

Voltemand

A courtier.

Cornelius

A courtier.

A Captain

A captain in Fortinbras' army who speaks briefly with Hamlet.

Ambassadors

Ambassadors from England who arrive at the play's close to announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

Critical essay

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Critical essay about hamlet

Revenge and Hamlet's delay

Within *Hamlet*, the stories of five murdered father's sons are told: Hamlet, Laertes, Fortinbras, Pyrrhus, and Brutus. Each of them faces the question of revenge in a different way. For example, Laertes moves quickly to be "avenged most throughly of [his] father", while Fortinbras attacks Poland, rather than the guilty Denmark. Pyrrhus only stays his hand momentarily before avenging his father, Achilles, but Brutus never takes any action in his situation. Hamlet is a perfect balance in the midst of these stories, neither acting quickly nor being completely inactive.

Hamlet struggles to turn his desire for revenge into action, and spends a large portion of the play waiting rather than doing. Scholars have proposed numerous theories as to why he waits so long to kill Claudius. Some say that Hamlet feels for his victim, fearing to strike

because he believes that if he kills Claudius he will be no better than him. The story of Pyrrhus, told by one of the acting troupe, for example, shows Hamlet the darker side of revenge, something he does not wish for. Hamlet frequently admires those who are swift to act, such as Laertes, who comes to avenge his father's death, but at the same time fears them for their passion, intensity, and lack of logical thought

Hamlet's speech in act three, where he chooses not to kill Claudius in the midst of prayer, has taken a central spot in this debate. Scholars have wondered whether Hamlet is being totally honest in this scene, or whether he is rationalizing his inaction to himself. Critics of the Romantic era decided that Hamlet was merely a procrastinator, in order to avoid the belief that he truly desired Claudius' spiritual demise. Later scholars suggested that he refused to kill an unarmed man, or that he felt guilt in this moment, seeing himself as a mirror of the man he wanted to destroy. Historical discoveries, however, assert that Elizabethan ideas of revenge required spiritual and physical destruction for complete justice. Thus, for Hamlet to truly keep the oath he made to his father, he must wait for the right moment, as he explains.[42] The physical image of Hamlet stabbing to death an unarmed man at prayer, from behind, would have been shocking to any theatre audience. Similarly, the question of "delay" must be seen in the context of a stage play - Hamlet's "delay" between learning of the murder and avenging it would be about three hours at most - hardly a delay at all.

The play is also full of constraint imagery. Hamlet describes Denmark

as a prison, and himself as being caught in birdlime. He mocks the ability of man to bring about his own ends, and points out that some divine force molds men's aims into something other than what they intend. Other characters also speak of constraint, such as Polonius, who orders his daughter to lock herself from Hamlet's pursuit, and describes her as being tethered. This adds to the play's description of Hamlet's inability to act out his revenge.

Madness

Hamlet has been compared to the Earl of Essex, who was executed for leading a rebellion against Queen Elizabeth. Essex's situation has been analyzed by scholars for its revelations into Elizabethan ideas of madness in connection with treason as they connect with *Hamlet*. Essex was largely seen as out of his mind by Elizabethans, and admitted to insanity on the scaffold before his death. Seen in the same context, Hamlet is quite possibly as mad as he is pretending to be, at least in an Elizabethan sense.

Protestantism

Hamlet was a student at Wittenberg or so is thought. Wittenberg is "one of only two universities that Shakespeare ever mentions by name," and "was famous in the early sixteenth century for its teaching of ... Luther's new doctrine of salvation."[31] Furthermore, Hamlet's

reference to "a politic convocation of worms" has been read as cryptic allusion to Luther's famous theological confrontation with the Holy Roman Emperor at the Diet of Worms in 1521.

However, the more influential Reformer in early seventeenth century England was John Calvin, a strong advocate of predestination; many critics have found traces of Calvin's predestinarian theology in Shakespeare's play. Calvin explained the doctrine of predestination by comparing it to a stage, or a theater, in which the script is written for the characters by God, and they cannot deviate from it. God, in this light, sets up a script and a stage for each of his creations, and decrees the end from the beginning, as Calvin said: "After the world had been created, man was placed in it, as in a theater, that he, beholding above him and beneath the wonderful work of God, might reverently adore their Author." Scholars have made comparisons between this explanation of Calvin's and the frequent references made to the theatre in *Hamlet*, suggesting that these may also take reference to the doctrine of predestination, as the play must always end in its tragic way, according to the script.

Rulers and religious leaders feared that the doctrine of predestination would lead people to excuse the most traitorous of actions, with the excuse, "God made me do it." English Puritans, for example, believed that conscience was a more powerful force than the law, due to the new ideas at the time that conscience came not from religious or government leaders, but from God directly to the individual. Many leaders at the time condemned the doctrine, as: "unfit 'to keepe subjects in obedience to their sovereigns" as people might "openly

maintayne that God hath as well pre-destinated men to be trayters as to be kings."[46] King James, as well, often wrote about his dislike of Protestant leader's taste for standing up to kings, seeing it as a dangerous trouble to society.[47] In Hamlet's final decision to join the sword-game of Laertes, and thus enter his tragic final scene, he says to the fearful Horatio:

"There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet will it come—the readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is't to leave betimes, let be."[48]

In itself, this line lays the final capstone on Hamlet's decision. The line appears to base this decision on his believed predestination as the killer of the king, no matter what he may do. The potential allusion to predestinarian theology is even stronger in the first published version of *Hamlet*, Quarto 1, where this same line reads: "There's a predestinate providence in the fall of a sparrow." Scholars have wondered whether Shakespeare was censored, as the word "predestined" appears in this one Quarto of Hamlet, but not in others, and as censoring of plays was far from unusual at the time.

Feminist

Ophelia, distracted by grief (4.5). Feminist critics have explored her descent into madness in her defense.

Feminist critics have focused on the gender system of Early Modern England. For example, they point to the common classification of women as *maid, wife or widow*, with only *whores* outside this trilogy. Using this analysis, the problem of Hamlet becomes the central character's identification of his mother as a whore due to her failure to remain faithful to Old Hamlet, in consequence of which he loses his faith in all women, treating Ophelia as if she were a whore also.

Carolyn Heilbrun published an essay on *Hamlet* in 1957 entitled "Hamlet's Mother". In it, she defended Gertrude, arguing that the text never hints that Gertrude knew of Claudius poisoning King Hamlet. This view has been championed by many feminists Heilbrun argued that the men who had interpreted the play over the centuries had completely misinterpreted Gertrude, believing what Hamlet said about her rather than the actual text of the play. In this view, no clear evidence suggests that Gertrude was an adulteress. She was merely adapting to the circumstances of her husband's death for the good of the kingdom.

Ophelia, also, has been defended by feminists, most notably by Elaine ShowalterOphelia is surrounded by powerful men: her father, brother, and Hamlet. All three disappear: Laertes leaves, Hamlet abandons her, and Polonius dies. Conventional theories had argued that without these three powerful men making decisions for her, Ophelia was driven into madness.[54] Feminist theorists argue that she goes mad with guilt because, when Hamlet kills her father, he has fulfilled her sexual desire to have Hamlet kill her father so they can be together. Showalter points out that Ophelia has become the symbol of the

distraught and hysterical woman in modern culture, a symbol which may not be entirely accurate nor healthy for women.

Since this theory, the 'closet scene' in which Hamlet confronts his mother in her private quarters has been portrayed in a sexual light in several performances. Hamlet is played as scolding his mother for having sex with Claudius while simultaneously wishing (unconsciously) that he could take Claudius' place; adultery and incest is what he simultaneously loves and hates about his mother. Ophelia's madness after her father's death may be read through the Freudian lens as a reaction to the death of her hoped-for lover, her father. Her unrequited love for him suddenly slain is too much for her and she drifts into insanity.

In addition to the brief psychoanalysis of Hamlet, Freud offers a correlation with Shakespeare's own life: *Hamlet* was written in the wake of the death of his father (in 1601), which revived his own repressed childhood wishes; Freud also points to the identity of Shakespeare's dead son Hamnet and the name 'Hamlet'. "Just as *Hamlet* deals with the relation of a son to his parents", Freud concludes, "so *Macbeth* (written at approximately the same period) is concerned with the subject of childlessness." Having made these suggestions, however, Freud offers a caveat: he has unpacked only *one* of the many motives and impulses operating in the author's mind, albeit, Freud claims, one that operates from "the deepest layer"

Later in the same book, having used psychoanalysis to explain *Hamlet*, Freud uses Hamlet to explain the nature of dreams: in disguising

himself as a madman and adopting the license of the fool, Hamlet "was behaving just as dreams do in reality [...] concealing the true circumstances under a cloak of wit and unintelligibility". When we sleep, each of us adopts an "antic disposition"

Gothic

Hamlet contains many elements that would later show up in Gothic Literature. From the growing madness of Prince Hamlet, to the violent ending to the constant reminders of death, to, even, more subtly, the notions of humankind and its structures and the viewpoints on women, Hamlet evokes many things that would recur in what is widely regarded as the first piece of Gothic literature, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, and in other Gothic works.[60] Walpole himself even wrote, in his second preference to Otranto:

That great master of nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied. Let me ask if his tragedies of Hamlet and Julius Cæsar would not lose a considerable share of their spirit and wonderful beauties, if the humour of the grave- diggers, the fooleries of Polonius, and the clumsy jests of the Roman citizens, were omitted, or vested in heroics?

Heroic

Paul Cantor, in his short text called simply *Hamlet*, formulates a compelling theory of the play that places the prince at the center of the Renaissance conflict between Ancient and Christian notions of heroism. Cantor says that the Renaissance signified a "rebirth of

classical antiquity within a Christian culture".[62] But such a rebirth brought with it a deep contradiction: Christ's teachings of humility and meekness ("whoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also"[63]) are in direct conflict with the ancient ethos that is best represented by Achilles' violent action in the *Iliad* ("I wish only that my spirit and fury would drive me to hack your meat away and eat it raw for the things that you have done to me"

For Cantor, the character of Hamlet exists exactly where these two worlds collide. He is in one sense drawn towards the active side of heroism by his father's legacy ("He smote the sledded Polaks on the ice"[65]) and the need for revenge ("now could I drink hot blood. And do such bitter business as the day/ Would quake to look on"[66]). Simultaneously though, he is pulled towards a religious existence ("for in that sleep of death what dreams may come"[67]) and in some sense sees his father's return as a ghost as justification for just such a belief.

The conflict is perhaps most evident in 3.3 when Hamlet has the opportunity to kill the praying Claudius. He restrains himself though, justifying his further hesitation with the following lines: "Now might I do it pat, now ‘a is a-praying;/ And now I’ll do it- and so ‘a goes to heaven,/ And so am I reveng’d. That would be scann’d:/ A villain kills my father, and for that/ I, his sole son, do this same villain send/ To heaven.".[68] At this moment it is clear that the prince's single mind and body are being torn apart by these two powerful ideologies.

Even in the famous 3.1 soliloquy, Hamlet gives voice to the conflict.

When he asks if it is "nobler in the mind to suffer",[69] Cantor believes that Shakespeare is alluding to the Christian sense of suffering. When he presents the alternative, "to take arms against a sea of troubles",[70] Cantor takes this as an ancient formulation of goodness.

Cantor points out that most interpretations of Hamlet (such as the Psychoanalytic or Existentialist) see "the problem of Hamlet as somehow rooted in his individual soul" whereas Cantor himself believes that his Heroic theory mirrors "a more fundamental tension in the Renaissance culture in which he lives".[71]