**The First Glance most often lies**

It was a wise man who once uttered, “Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a

persistent one” (Einstein). How oft in society that this paradox is

encountered, everyday, in everyway, such to an extent that whoever thinks

otherwise may be considered naïve. In fact, mankind is so apt in portraying

this detrimental characteristic, that it is considered commonplace, found

in everyday literature and life in general. One of the great masterpieces

that best exemplifies this scornful attribute is the play *Hamlet* by William

Shakespeare. Its interpretation of false appearance and true reality is shown

in the characters Polonius & Claudius, who hide their evil behind a mask

of virtue, Ophelia & Gertrude, who appear less resourceful than they really

are, and Hamlet himself, who uses his veil of insanity for a prominent

purpose.

“This above all: To thine ownself be true, and it must follow, as the

night the day, thou cans’t not then be false to any man” (Shakespeare,

*Hamlet,* I, ii, 77-80) as stated so thoughtfully by a well intentioned Polonius,

who, several scenes later, asks Reynaldo to spy on his son (ibid, II, i). This is

the axiom of Polonius’s character, who *appears* to be a loving father at first,

but in reality, is a suspicious, sardonic individual. Claudius is much the

same. He *seems* to evoke heartfelt emotions for his ‘dear’ brother, before

reverting to the disparaging words “So much for him” (Ibid, I, ii, 25), which

contradicts his previous demeanor, and reveals his false nature. It is perhaps

Polonius who unknowingly sums up both their personalities with the words

“With devoting visage, and pious action, we do sugar’d the devil himself”

(Ibid, III, I, 47-49), which is quite appropriate considering that they are

marred with falsity, like most of the characters in the play.

As devious and sinister as Polonius and his superior might be however,

their deceiving qualities are matched, perhaps even surpassed by their

female counterparts. “Is it not said that behind every successful man, their

is a woman” (Marx)? It most certainly is subject here, as Claudius is quite

influenced by his wife & former sister-in-law; had it not been for Gertrude,

telling him that Hamlet was mad (Ibid, IV, i), Hamlet would most likely

be in a grave situation for feigning madness, especially in front of his father.

Similarly, the character of Ophelia also embodies a woman who lets herself

be controlled, perhaps fooling others into suspecting that she is weak.

Hamlet is no fool however, as he mentions “If thou wilt needs marry, marry

a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them”

(Ibid, III, I, 137-140), signifying that women were indeed the gears behind

the men, and thus even greater deceivers.

It should come as no surprise then, that Hamlet, who is evidently keen on the

line dividing appearance and reality, is a master deceiver himself. He acts

under the guise of insanity, and manipulates this act, using it as an excuse, a

justification, and an instrument of revenge. He first conceives of this act as

a means of revenge (Ibid, I, V, 172-173), hinting subtly throughout of his

ulterior mentality (Ibid, II, ii, 376-377), and even admits to his façade in his

words “That I essentially am not in madness, but mad in craft” (Ibid, III, iv,

189-190). Thus, Hamlet uses this methodical madness like a shield,

preventing others from coercing his ulterior motives, and strikes with it

like a sword, securing his revenge and his fate. In this sense, Hamlet excels

at deception far more than either his male or female contemporaries.

The play *Hamlet* is a play whose purpose, more than anything, is to inquire

into the truths of life & death, appearance vs. reality, the lines separating

them. It inquires Polonius & Claudius, who hide their true intentions with

contrary countenance. It inquires Gertrude and Ophelia, who sit in the back

seat waiting for their chances at the driving seat. And it inquires Hamlet,

who, like a double-edged sword, strikes out at his foes and protects himself

under the semblance of insanity. The play, and humanity in general, is

justly dignified in the quote “Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when we

practice to deceive” (Scott), which suggests that deception will spawn

further deception, and all will succumb to chaos. This is indeed true in

*Hamlet,* in which every one of the deceivers ends up paying their price

in death. The juxtaposition of appearance and reality is a scourge of

humanity, and one that everyone should protect themselves from.