

Getting Started

Once you get past the minor difficulties posed by the language, you'll probably enjoy "Hamlet" -- and not just for its action.

"Hamlet" is the first work of literature to look squarely at **the stupidity, falsity and sham of everyday life**, without laughing and without easy answers. In a world where things are not as they seem, Hamlet's genuineness, thoughtfulness, and sincerity make him special.

Hamlet is no saint. But unlike most of the other characters (and most people today), **Hamlet chooses not to compromise with evil.**

Dying, **Hamlet reaffirms the tragic dignity of a basically decent person in a bad world.**

"Hamlet" is the first work of literature to show an ordinary person looking at the futility and wrongs in life, asking the toughest questions and coming up with honest semi-answers like most people do today. Unlike so much of popular culture today, **"Hamlet" leaves us with the message that life is indeed worth living, even by imperfect people in an imperfect world.**

Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is full of talk about death, dead bodies, murder, suicide, disease, graves, and so forth. And there is no traditional Christian comfort or promise of eventual justice or happiness for the good people. **But the message is ultimately one of hope. You can be a hero.**

[Aristotle](#) wrote that in a tragedy, the protagonist by definition learns something. Whatever you may think of Aristotle's reductionist ideas about serious drama, Shakespeare's heroes all develop philosophically. (You may not agree with everything they decide.)

As you read the play, **watch how Hamlet -- who starts by wishing he was dead -- comes to terms with life, keeps his integrity, and strikes back successfully at what's wrong around him.**

So far as I know, it's the first time this theme -- now so common -- appeared in world literature.

Scene by Scene

"Revenge should know no bounds." -- Claudius

Hamlet, our hero, is the son of the previous king of Denmark, also named Hamlet ("Old Hamlet", "Hamlet Senior" as we'd say), who has died less than two months ago. Hamlet remembers his father as an all-around good guy, and as a tender

husband who would even make a special effort to shield his wife's face from the cold Danish wind. The day Hamlet was born, Old Hamlet settled a land dispute by killing the King of Norway in personal combat.

How old is Hamlet? We have contradictory information. The gravedigger mentions that Hamlet is thirty years old, and that the jester with whom Hamlet played as a child has been dead for twenty-three years. A thirty-year-old man might still be a college student. However, Ophelia is unmarried in an era when girls usually married in their teens, and several characters refer to Hamlet's "youth". So we might prefer to think that Hamlet is in his late teens or early twenties. And many people have seen Hamlet's bitter, sullen outlook at the beginning of the play as typical of youth. You'll need to decide that one for yourself. (I think "thirty" might be a mistake for "twenty". Richard Burbage, who played Hamlet first, was older than twenty, and perhaps the editor thought "Hamlet was a college student at Wittenberg when his father died. (Of course the historical Hamlet, who lived around 700, could not have attended Wittenberg, founded in 1502). The monarchy went to his father's brother, Claudius. (Shakespeare and the other characters just call him "King".) Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, married Claudius within less than a month.

Old Hamlet died during his after-lunch nap in his garden. The public was told that Old Hamlet died of snakebite. The truth is that Claudius murdered Old Hamlet by pouring poison in his ear. Old Hamlet died fast but gruesomely.

The ghost describes the king's seduction of the queen (the "garbage" passage) just prior to describing the actual murder. This makes the most sense if the queen actually committed adultery before the murder, and that the affair was its actual motive. Even in our "modern" age, if a twenty-plus-year marriage ends with the sudden death of one partner, and the survivor remarries four weeks later, I'd believe that there had probably been an adulterous affair. And everybody at the Danish court must have thought the same thing. If you don't know this, you're naive. It's not clear that Gertrude actually knew a murder was committed, and we never get proof that anyone else knew for certain, either. But everybody must have been suspicious. And nobody was saying anything.

Young Hamlet is very well-liked. He is a soldier, a scholar, and a diplomat. We learn that he's "the glass of fashion and the mould of form", i.e., the young man that everybody else tried to imitate. He's also "loved of the distracted multitude", i.e., the ordinary people like him, and if anything were to happen to him, there would be riots.

twenty" must be wrong. You decide.)

Exactly why Claudius rather than Hamlet succeeded Old Hamlet is not explained. Hamlet refers (V.ii) to "the election", i.e., the choosing of a new king by a vote of a small number of warlords (as in [Macbeth](#)). (By Shakespeare time, it was the

Danish royal family that voted.) Interestingly, the Norwegian king is also succeeded by his brother, rather than by his own infant son Fortinbras.

Or the royal title may have gone to Claudius simply because he married the royal widow, who he calls "our imperial jointress". Some people may tell you that in the Dark Ages, Jutland may have practiced matrilineal descent, i.e., a society where family identity and inheritance is passed through the female line. Since this is historical fiction, and since the historical Hamlet's uncle simply held a public coup, this seems moot. Matrilineal descent is known among some primitive people in our own century, and is attested to by ancient writers on various cultures. The advantage of this system is that the best men tend to get picked for hereditary positions of power. With male-line succession, the old king is followed by his oldest son, who may be stupid and get himself killed quickly. Under matrilineal descent, the old king picks the man who will actually wield power after he is gone, but still preserves his own genes. In spite of what anybody else may tell you, we know of no human culture where the men, who are physically stronger and do the fighting, let the women make the laws and the big decisions (a [matriarchy](#)). You may decide this is unfortunate.

A real anthropologist, Eric J. Smith [link is now down] at U. Wash., points out that its checks-and-balances system made the Iroquois government the "closest thing to a matriarchy ever described".

I.i.

The play opens on the battlements of the castle. It's midnight. (Shakespeare anachronistically says "'Tis now struck twelve.") Francisco has been keeping watch, and Bernardo comes to relieve him. Neither man recognizes the other in the darkness, and each issues a tense challenge. Francisco remarks, "It's bitter cold... and I am sick at heart." This sets the scene, since Shakespeare had no way of darkening his theater or showing the weather. The fact that each guard suspects the other of being an intruder indicates all is not well, even though Francisco does not say why he is "sick at heart".

Francisco leaves, and Marcellus arrives to share Bernardo's watch. Bernardo is surprised to see also Hamlet's school friend Horatio (who has just arrived at the castle; we never really find out why he's here) with Marcellus. Marcellus and Bernardo think they have twice seen the ghost of "Old Hamlet". Horatio is skeptical. The ghost appears, the men agree it looks like the old king, and Horatio (who is a "scholar" and thus knows something of the paranormal) tries to talk to it. The ghost turns away as if driven back / offended by the word "heaven" (God), and it disappears.

The men talk about Old Hamlet. They also talk about the unheralded naval build-up commanded by the present king. This is in response to an expected military invasion by the Norwegian prince Fortinbras, who wishes to regain the territories lost by his father's death. The men wonder whether the ghost is returned to warn

about military disaster. The ghost reappears. The men try to talk to it to find out what it wants. They try to strike it. It looks like it is about to speak, but suddenly a rooster crows (the signal of morning) and the ghost fades away. (As usual, Shakespeare is telescoping time.) Marcellus relates a beautiful legend that during the Christmas season, roosters might crow through the night, keeping the dark powers at bay.

I.ii.

Claudius holds court. This is apparently his first public meeting since becoming king. Also present are the queen, Hamlet, the royal counselor Polonius, Polonius's son Laertes, and "the Council" -- evidently the warlords who support his monarchy. Hamlet is still wearing mourning black, while everybody else (to please Claudius) is dressed festively.

Claudius wants to show what a good leader he is. He begins by talking about the mix of sorrow for his brother's death, and joy in his new marriage. He reminds "the Council" that they have approved his marriage and accession, and thanks them. Claudius announces that Fortinbras of Norway is raising an army to try to take back the land his father lost to Old Hamlet. Claudius emphasizes that Fortinbras can't win militarily. Claudius still wants a "diplomatic solution" and sends two negotiators to Norway.

Next, Laertes asks permission to return to France. The king calls on Polonius. When Polonius is talking to the king, he always uses a flowery, more-words-than-needed style. Polonius can be played either for humor, or as a sinister old man. (Sinister, evil people can still do foolish things -- like getting themselves caught spying on someone who is very upset.) Either fits nicely with the play's theme of phoniness. Polonius says he is agreeable, and the king gives permission. This was rehearsed, and Claudius is taking advantage of the opportunity to look reasonable, especially because he is about to deal with Hamlet, who wants to return to college.

Claudius calls Hamlet "cousin" (i.e., close relative) and "son" (stepson), and asks why he is still sad. Hamlet puns. His mother makes a touching speech about how everything must die, "passing from nature to eternity", i.e., a better afterlife. She asks him why he is still acting ("seems") sad. Hamlet replied he's not acting, just showing how he really feels. Claudius makes a very nice speech, asks that Hamlet stay at the court, and reaffirms that Hamlet is heir to his property and throne. Hamlet's mother adds a nice comment, and Hamlet agrees to stay. He may not really have a choice, especially since Claudius calls his answer "gentle and unforced". Does Claudius really care about Hamlet? Maybe. The meeting is over, and Claudius announces there will be a party, at which he'll have the Hamlet is left alone. He talks to himself / the audience. Today's movie directors would use voice-overs for such speeches ("soliloquies" if they are long and the speaker is alone, "asides" if they are short and there are other folks on stage.)

He talks about losing interest in life and how upset he is by his mother's remarriage and its implications. (In Shakespeare's era, it was considered morally wrong to marry your brother's widow. Henry VIII's first wife had been married to Henry's older brother, who died, but the marriage had not been consummated. This puzzle sparked the English reformation.) Hamlet is trapped in a situation where things are obviously very wrong. Like other people at such times, Hamlet wishes God hadn't forbidden suicide. Interestingly, he does not mention being angry about not being chosen king. Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo come in. Hamlet is surprised to see his school buddy. Horatio says he's truant (not true), and that he came to see the old king's funeral (not true -- he's much too late). Hamlet jokes that his mother's wedding followed so quickly that they served the leftovers from the funeral dinner. (I think Horatio probably came to Elsinore out of concern for Hamlet, spoke with the guards first, and was invited at once to see the ghost. Some guys don't say to another guy, "I came to see YOU" even when it's obvious.) You'll need to decide what Hamlet means when he says that he sees his father "in his mind's eye". Sometimes, bereaved people notice their eyes fooling them -- shadows forming themselves in the mind into an image of the deceased. Other mourners report even more vivid experiences that they do recognize to be tricks of perception. Or perhaps Hamlet is simply thinking a lot about his father, or holding onto his good memories. The friends tell Hamlet about the ghost. Hamlet asks what the ghost looked like -- skin color and beard colors -- and agrees they match his father. Hamlet asks the men to keep this a secret and to let him join them the next night, hoping the ghost will return and talk. Afterwards he says he suspects foul play. Everybody else probably does, too, even without any ghost.

I.iii.

Laertes says goodbye to Ophelia, his sister. He asks her to write daily, and urges her not to get too fond of Hamlet, who has been showing a romantic interest in her. At considerable length, he explains how Hamlet will not be able to marry beneath his station, and explicitly tells her not to have sex ("your chaste treasure open") with him. Ophelia seems to be the passive sort, but she has enough spunk to urge him to live clean too, and not be a hypocrite. Laertes suddenly realizes he has to leave quickly (uh huh).

Polonius comes in and lays some famous fatherly advice on Laertes. It's today's self-centered worldly wisdom. "Listen closely, and say less than you know. Think before you act. Don't be cold, but don't be too friendly. Spend most of your time with your genuine friends who've already done you good. Choose your battles carefully, and fight hard. Dress for success. Don't loan or borrow money. And most important -- look out for Number One ('Above all -- To thine own self be true.')

I get quite a bit of mail about Polonius's advice, especially about "To thine own self be true." Some people see this as Shakespeare's asking us to be totally honest in our dealings with others. Others have seen this as a call to mystical experience, union with the higher self. I can't see this.



The key is "to thine own self." In Shakespeare's time, the expression "true to" meant "be loyal" or "look out first for the interests of..."; it also meant fidelity to a romantic relationship. This usage recurs in the Beatles' song "All My Loving". "To be false" implies making a promise or a pretense and not delivering. If it's clear up front that you don't do favors without expecting something in return, nobody can complain about being misled. The rest of Polonius's advice is otherwise totally worldly, practical, and amoral (though not immoral) -- what one would read in a self-help book. Polonius is not the model for scrupulous honesty. Polonius tells Reynaldo to lie. Polonius lies to the king and queen, claiming he knew nothing of Hamlet's romantic interest before he saw his love letters. And Polonius tells his daughter that everybody puts on a false front. Hearing this actually makes the king feel ashamed.

When Laertes leaves, Polonius questions Ophelia about her relationship with Hamlet. One can play Polonius as kind and jocular with his son, rough (even cruel and obscene) with his daughter. He calls her naïve, orders her not even to talk to Hamlet, and demands to see his love letters to her. Contemporary readers who are puzzled by this should remember that in Hamlet's era (and Shakespeare's), a father would probably get less money from his future son-in-law if his daughter was not a virgin. Polonius, of course, pretends he cares only about Ophelia's well-being.

guards shoot off a cannon every time he finishes a drink.

I.iv.

Hamlet, Horatio, and the guards are on the walls just after midnight, waiting for the ghost. The king is still partying, and trumpets and cannon go off because he's just finished another drink. Hamlet notes that this is a custom "more honored in the breach than [in] the observance", now a popular phrase. (This was a Danish custom in Shakespeare's time too. The Danish people's neighbors make fun of them for this. Old Hamlet may not have engaged in the practice, hence the "breach".)

This fact inspires Hamlet to make a long speech, "So, oft it chances...", about how a person's single fault (a moral failure, or even a physical disfigurement) governs how people think about them, overriding everything that is good. Of course this doesn't represent how Hamlet thinks about Claudius (who he detests for lots of reasons), and it's hard to explain what this is doing in the play -- apart from the fact that it's very true-to-life. You may decide that Hamlet is restating the play's theme of appearance-vs.-reality.

The ghost enters. Hamlet challenges it. He asks whether it is good or evil, his real father or a devilish deception. He asks why it has returned, making us think about the unthinkable and unknown ("so horribly to shake our disposition / with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls").



The ghost beckons Hamlet. Horatio warns him not to follow, because the ghost might drive him insane. Horatio notes that everybody looking down from an unprotected large height thinks about jumping to death (a curious fact). Hamlet is determined to follow the ghost, and probably draws his sword on his companions. (So much for

the idea that Hamlet is psychologically unable to take decisive action.) Hamlet says, "My fate cries out", i.e., that he's going to his destiny. He walks off the stage after the ghost. Directors often have Hamlet hold the handle of his sword in front of his face to make a cross, holy symbol for protection. Marcellus (who like everybody else surely suspects Claudius of foul play) says, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (usually misquoted and misattributed to Hamlet himself.) Horatio says God will take care of Hamlet ("Heaven will direct it"). "Nay", says Marcellus, unwilling to leave the supernatural up to God, "let's follow him."

I.v.

The scene change is to indicate that the place has changed, i.e., Hamlet and the ghost are higher up. Hamlet demands that the ghost talk, and he does. He claims to be Old Hamlet. Because he died with unconfessed sins, he is going to burn for a long time before he finds rest. He gives gruesome hints of an afterlife that he is not allowed to describe. (Even the more fortunate dead returning to earth are "fat weeds".) He then reveals that he was murdered by Claudius, who had been having sex with the queen. (At least the ghost says they were already having an affair. Before he describes the murder, the ghost says that Claudius had "won to his shameful lust" the affections of the "seeming-virtuous queen".)

The ghost's account now becomes very picturesque. Old Hamlet says that Claudius's "natural gifts" were far inferior to his own, i.e., that Old Hamlet was much better looking, smarter, nicer, and so forth. Claudius was a smooth talker ("wit") and gave her presents. Old Hamlet says that "lust, though to a radiant angel linked / Will sate itself in a celestial bed / And prey on garbage." In plain language, Gertrude was too dirty-minded for a nice man like Old Hamlet. She jumped into bed with a dirtball.

Claudius poured poison in the king's ear. Old Hamlet tells the grisly effects of the poison. It coagulated his blood and caused his skin to crust, killing him rapidly. His line "O horrible, O horrible, most horrible!" is probably better given to Hamlet. The ghost calls on Hamlet to avenge him by killing Claudius. He also tells him not to kill his mother. ("Taint not thy mind..." doesn't mean to think nice thoughts, which would be impossible, but simply not to think of killing her.) The ghost has to leave because morning is approaching.



Hamlet says he'll remember what he's heard "while memory holds a seat [i.e., still functions] in this distracted globe." By "distracted globe",



Hamlet probably means both "my distraught head" and "this crazy world." (The name of the theater, too.) Hamlet already has made up his mind about Claudius and his mother, without the ghost's help. So before considering whether the ghost is telling the truth, Hamlet calls his mother a "most pernicious woman", and says of Claudius "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain." We all know that from experience -- most really bad people pretend to be nice and friendly.

When Hamlet's friends come in, he says, "There's never a [i.e., no] villain in all Denmark..." He probably meant to say, "...as Claudius", but realizes in midsentence that this isn't the thing to say. He finishes the sentence as a tautology ("Villains are knaves.") Hamlet says he thinks the ghost is telling the truth, says he will feign madness ("put an antic disposition on" -- he doesn't explain why), and (perhaps re-enacting a scene in the old play) swears them to secrecy on his sword and in several different locations while the ghost hollers "Swear" from below the stage. It's obvious that Hamlet's excitement is comic, and the scene is funny. Hamlet calls the ghost "boy", "truepenny", and "old mole", and says to his friends, "You hear this fellow in the cellarage." It seems to me that Shakespeare is parodying the older play, and even making fun of the idea of ghosts, and that he's saying, "Don't take this plot seriously, but listen to the ideas."

Horatio comments how strange this all is, and Hamlet (who likes puns) says that they should welcome the ghost as a stranger in need. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." (Ethan Hawke has "our philosophy". I wonder if this might be what Shakespeare actually wrote.) In Shakespeare's era, "philosophy" means what we call "natural science". Notice that Horatio, who is skeptical of ghosts, is the one who suggests trusting God when the ghost appears, and who will later talk about "flights of angels" carrying Hamlet's soul to heaven. Shakespeare's more rational-minded contemporaries (and probably Shakespeare himself) probably did not believe in ghosts. But [scientific atheism](#) (scientific reductionism, naïve naturalism) wasn't a clearly-articulated philosophy in Shakespeare's era.

II.i.

Some time has passed. From Ophelia's remarks in III.ii. (which happens the day after II.i), we learn that Old Hamlet has now been dead for four months. Shakespeare telescopes time. We learn (in this scene) that Ophelia has (on Polonius's orders) refused to accept love letters from Hamlet and told him not to come near her. We learn in the next scene (which follows soon after) that the king and queen have sent to Wittenberg for Hamlet's long-time friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (two common Danish surnames), and that they are now here. Hamlet has been walking around aimlessly in the palace for up to four hours at a time.



Polonius, in private, sends his servant Reynaldo to spy on Laertes. Polonius reminds him of how an effective spy asks open-ended questions and tells little suggestive lies. Polonius likes to spy.

Ophelia comes in, obviously upset. She describes Hamlet's barging into her bedroom, with "his doublet all unbraced" (we'd say, his shirt open in front), his dirty socks crunched down, and pale and knock-kneed, "as if he had been loosed out of hell / to speak of horrors." Or, as might say, "as if he'd seen a ghost." Hamlet grabbed her wrist, stared at her face, sighed, let her go, and walked out the door backwards.

What's happened? Hamlet, who has set about to feign mental illness, is actually just acting on his own very genuine feelings. Hamlet cares very much about Ophelia. He must have hoped for a happy life with her. Now it is painfully obvious that they are both prisoners of a system that will never allow them to have the happiness that they should. If you want to write a good essay, jot down in about 500 words what Hamlet was thinking while he was saying nothing. Here's where we really see him starting to be conflicted. Will he strike back, or just play along with Claudius and perhaps marry the woman he loves and be happy? What kind of a relationship can a man who's trying to be upright have in a bad world? Hamlet says everything and says nothing, just as the skull will do later.

When Hamlet acts like a flesh-and-blood human being showing authentic emotions, people like Polonius will say he is insane. And Polonius suggests Hamlet is lovesick. Maybe Polonius really believes this. Maybe he just realized that perhaps his daughter might be the next Queen of Denmark.

II.ii.

The king and queen welcome Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Claudius says that except for the death of Hamlet's father, he's clueless as to why Hamlet is upset. (Uh huh.) He asks them very nicely to try to figure out what's wrong so Claudius can help. (Now Claudius might well be sincere.) Gertrude says she wants them to make Hamlet happy, and that the good and generous king will reward them well. Both say how much they appreciate the opportunity, and Claudius thanks them. Often a director will have Claudius call each by the other's name, and Gertrude point out which is which (lines 33-34). They go off to find Hamlet.

Polonius comes in and announces that the ambassadors from Norway have returned, and that after their report he will tell them why Hamlet is acting strange. Gertrude thinks that Hamlet is simply distressed over his father's death (which Claudius thought of) and her remarriage (which Claudius pretended he couldn't think of.)

The ambassadors are back from Norway. Fortinbras was indeed mounting an army to attack Claudius's Denmark. The King of Norway was sick and



supposedly thought Fortinbras was going to invade Poland instead. (Uh huh.) When he "learned the truth", the King of Norway arrested Fortinbras, made him promise not to invade Denmark, and paid him to invade Poland instead. The King of Norway now requests that Claudius let Fortinbras pass through Denmark for the invasion. (Denmark is on the invasion route from Norway to Poland if the Norwegian army is to cross the sea to Denmark. And we know a sea-invasion was expected from the amount of shipbuilding mentioned in I.i.) This all seems fake and for show, and probably Claudius (who doesn't seem at all surprised) and the King of Norway had an understanding beforehand.

As before, Polonius can be a foolish busybody or a sinister old man. (Foolish busybodies do not usually become chief advisors to warrior-kings.) Polonius launches into a verbose speech about finding the cause of madness, prompting the queen to tell him to get to the point ("More matter with less art"; the queen actually cares about Hamlet.) He reads a love letter from Hamlet. It's about the genuineness of his love. Polonius asks the king, "What do you think of me?" The king replies, "[You are] a man faithful and honorable." Now Polonius tells a lie. He emphasizes that he had no knowledge of Hamlet's romantic interest in Ophelia until she told him and gave him the love letter. Polonius then truthfully tells how he forbade Ophelia to see or accept messages from Hamlet. However, Polonius does not mention the wrist-grabbing episode. He then reminds the king of how reliable an advisor he has always been, and says "Take this from this" (my head off my shoulders, or my insignia of office from me; the actor will show which is meant) "if this be otherwise." He finishes, "If circumstances lead me [i.e., allow, the actor could say "let"], I will find / Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed / Within the center [of the earth]." He suggests he and the king hide and watch Ophelia and Hamlet. Polonius likes to spy.

At this time, Hamlet (who may have been eavesdropping), walks in reading a book. Polonius questions him, and Hamlet pretends to be very crazy by giving silly answers. They are pointed, referring to the dishonesty of Polonius ("To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.") Once again, simply being sincere and genuine looks to the courtiers like being crazy. Hamlet is well-aware that Polonius has forbidden Ophelia to see him, and he refers obliquely to this. Polonius notes in an aside (a movie director would use a voice-over), "Though this be madness, yet there is method in it" -- another famous line often misquoted. The speech of the insane, as Polonius notes, often makes the best sense.

Why is Hamlet pretending to be comically-crazy? He said he would "put an antic disposition on" just after he saw the ghost. You'll have to think hard about this, or suspend your judgement. Shakespeare was constrained by the original Hamlet story to have Hamlet pretend to be comically insane, and for the king to try to find whether he was really crazy or just faking. But Hamlet is also distraught, and the



play is largely a study of his emotional turmoil while he is forced to endure a rotten environment. You might decide that Hamlet, knowing that his behavior is going to be abnormal because he is under stress, wants to mislead the court into thinking he is simply nuts rather than bent on revenge. (Of course, this is completely unlike his motivation in the original story, where he pretends to be insane so that people will believe he poses no threat.) I've never been able to decide for myself.

Polonius leaves, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (who have been watching) enter. Hamlet realizes right away that they have been sent for. They share a dirty joke about "Lady Luck's private parts" that would have been very funny to Shakespeare's contemporaries, and Hamlet calls Denmark a prison. When they disagree ("Humor a madman"), Hamlet says "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison." Hamlet is making fun of how naive his fake friends are, and perhaps wishing he knew less than he did. (Note that Hamlet is obviously not referring to the idea that there are no moral standards common to the whole human race -- as do certain contemporary "multiculturalists". The theme of right and wrong pervades the play.) The idea that attitude is everything was already familiar from Montaigne, and from common sense. Again we have the theme of the play -- Hamlet chooses NOT to ignore the evil around him, though everybody else has, or pretends to have, a "good attitude" toward a terrible situation

The spies suggest Hamlet is simply too ambitious. This is ironic, since they are the ones who are spying on their friend for a king's money. Hamlet replies, "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." The friends continue to play on the idea that Hamlet's ambitions are being thwarted, sharing some contemporary platitudes about the vanity of earthly ambitions. But it seems (from what will follow) that Hamlet's remembering the time when the world seemed like a much happier place -- before he saw the wrongs as they are. Hamlet then questions the men again about the purpose of their visit. If they actually cared, they would say, "Your family asked us to come. We are all very worried about you." Instead, they pretend they just dropped by to visit, which is stupid. Only when Hamlet asks them "by the rites of our fellowship" (i.e., by our secret fraternity ritual) do they have to tell the truth. (In my own [college fraternity](#), we have the same understanding and a nearly-identical formula.)

Hamlet levels with his friends. There was a time when the beauty of the earth, the sky, and the thoughts and accomplishments of the human race filled him with happiness. (All of this is good Renaissance thought, and familiar from many times and places -- and I hope you've felt this as well.) Now he has lost his ability to derive enjoyment, though he knows the earth, sky, and people should still seem wonderful. They seem instead to be "the quintessence of dust". Anyone who's experienced depression knows the feeling. "Quintessence" ("fifth



made of.

essence"; compare Bruce Willis's "Fifth Element") was an idea from prescientific thought -- a mystical substance that made fire, air, water, and earth work together, and supposedly what the planets and stars were

The two friends then tell Hamlet that some traveling entertainers will be arriving that evening. They used to have their own theater, but some child-actors became more popular (a contemporary allusion by Shakespeare to the late summer of 1600), and the adult actors took to the road. Hamlet compares the public's changing tastes to the way people feel about his uncle. (Q2 omits the reference to the child actors, but without it, the transition between the actor's losing popularity and the new king gaining popularity makes no sense, so it cannot be an interpolation.) Hamlet quickly and obliquely tell his friends he is only faking ("I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.")

The players arrive, heralded by Polonius, who Hamlet calls a big baby. Hamlet fakes madness for Polonius's benefit. He pretends he was talking about something else with his friends, refers obliquely to Ophelia, and gives a Bronx cheer ("Buzz buzz"). When the players arrive, Hamlet drops the pretense of madness, and greets old friends. One actor repeats a bombastic speech on the fall of Troy, overacting with tears in his eyes.

Hamlet asks Polonius to treat the actors well. Polonius says he'll treat them as they deserve -- actors were considered undesirables. Hamlet says, "[Treat them] better. Use every man after his desert [i.e., deserving], and who shall [e]scape whipping?" Hamlet gets an idea. He asks for a performance of "The Murder of Gonzago", with a short speech by Hamlet himself added. (Don't try to figure out what happened to this speech.) Everybody leaves.

Hamlet soliloquizes. He calls himself a "rogue" and a "peasant slave". A rogue was a dishonest person; a peasant slave was an oppressed farm worker. He talks about how the actor got himself all worked-up over something about which he really cared nothing (the fall of Troy). Hamlet contrasts this with his own passiveness in both word and deed. What does Hamlet really mean? He reminds us, at the end of the soliloquy, that even though he thinks the ghost is telling the truth, he needs to be sure this is not a demonic deception. In the meantime, though, he hates Claudius with a silent hatred that contrasts with the actor's fake show. Hamlet calls himself "gutless" ("I am lily-livered and lack gall").

Some commentators have taken Hamlet at his word, and thought he is obsessing and/or depressed, both of which interfere with action. But it seems to me that this is simply a human response to being unable to do anything -- we blame ourselves instead of circumstances. Especially, Hamlet is upset that he needs to

make compromises with the world in which he finds himself. Perhaps this is confusing -- since Hamlet still doesn't know for sure that the king is guilty. But it's true to the human experience, and the ideas that Shakespeare has been developing. I hope you'll think about this, and decide for yourself.

III.i.

The next day, the two spies visit with the king and queen, as well as Polonius, who has brought Ophelia. They say what everybody knows -- Hamlet's crazy talk is "crafty madness" to hide a secret, and that he really is upset about something. They invite the royal couple to the play, and the king seems genuinely glad that Hamlet's found something he will enjoy.

The king sends the queen and the spies away. Polonius gives his daughter a book, plants her where Hamlet will find her, and tells her to pretend she is reading. Polonius tells her (or to the king?), "It's all right, dear, everybody pretends." ("With devotion's visage / and pious action we do sugar o'er / the devil himself.") The king sees the application to himself, and says, "No kidding." ("How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!") This is powerful -- we suddenly learn that the king feels horrible about his own crime. Maybe this surprises us. If Polonius is a sinister old man and knows all about the murder, the king says this directly to him as they are out of earshot of Ophelia. Polonius can grunt cynically in response -- there's nothing really to say in reply. If Polonius is a foolish old man, the king says this as an aside. We have just learned that the king really does hate his crime, and suffers under a "heavy burden".

Hamlet's famous speech on whether it's worthwhile living or doing anything needs little comment. He says it seems to him that life is not worth living, mostly because people treat each other so stupidly and badly. We also suffer from disease and old age -- even living too long is a "calamity". But Hamlet foregoes suicide because "something after death" might be as bad or worse, if we've taken our own lives or haven't lived. He's saying what many people have felt, especially those who do not assume that the Christian account of the afterlife is true -- or even that there is any afterlife. Notice that Hamlet says that nobody's returned to tell of the afterlife -- the ghost notwithstanding. Shakespeare seems to be saying, loud and clear, "Don't focus on the story. Focus on the ideas." Some people have been puzzled by the lines "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all; / And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, / And enterprises of great pitch and moment / With this regard their currents turn awry / And lose the name of action." Not only is Hamlet talking about actual suicide -- he's also talking about "lifelong suicide" by doing nothing, choosing the easy passive approach to life. Compare this to Hamlet's calling himself gutless merely because



he can't kill the king until he has all the facts and a good opportunity. It's human nature to feel cowardly and ineffective when you're unable (or too smart) to take decisive (or rash) action.



Hamlet sees Ophelia, reading a book. He assumes it's her prayer book (she is evidently not much of a pleasure reader), and asks her to pray for the forgiveness of his sins. Instead, she tries to give him back his love letters, saying he has "prove[d] unkind", which is ridiculous. Hamlet immediately realizes that she has been put up to this. He responds like a thoughtful man of strong feelings. He generalizes his disappointment with the two women in his life to all women -- I think unfairly. (Watch how his attitude toward women matures later in the play.) But the Olivier movie's torrent of loud verbal abuse seems wrong. Showing Hamlet's emotional turmoil and conflict seems better. Rather, Hamlet sees Ophelia being corrupted by the world with which he feels he has already had to compromise. He doesn't want this to happen to the girl about whom he cares so much. Like most men during breaking up, he says "I loved you" and "I didn't love you". More meaningfully, Hamlet talks about fakeness. He asks where her father is, and must know that she is lying. (In Ethan Hawke's version, he finds a wire microphone hidden on Ophelia.) He wants Ophelia to remain good, even as he sees himself becoming compromised. She would have an opportunity to renounce the world by joining a convent, and he urges her to do so. (Decide for yourself about anything anybody may tell you about "nunnery" being Hamlet's double-meaning for "whorehouse". I can't make sense out of this in the present context.) In our world, even being beautiful drives people to be dishonest. Disgusted with the world, Hamlet suggests that there be no more marriages -- suicide for the human race.

Ophelia thinks Hamlet, who she admired so much, is crazy. (Once again, being genuine looks like insanity.) But the king comes out and says that he thinks that Hamlet is neither in love, nor insane, but very upset about something. Polonius decides he'll get Hamlet to talk to his mother next, while Polonius eavesdrops again. Polonius likes to spy. The king decides that he will send Hamlet to England "for the demand of our neglected tribute" (i.e., to ask for protection money.)



III.ii.

Hamlet gives an acting lesson, mostly about being genuine. He wants to show people -- body and mind -- as they are. So does Shakespeare. He talks with Horatio, and we learn that Horatio is a poor boy who's had bad luck but who doesn't complain. He and Hamlet are genuine friends who know they can trust



each other. (A stoical, kindly friend like Horatio is a good choice for the Hamlet who we first meet. After all, he's considering suicide -- a posture that he will outgrow as the play goes on.)

Hamlet says, "Give me that man / That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him / In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart, / As I do thee." Our society doesn't talk as much about male bonding as Shakespeare's did. Around 1600, guys -- including Shakespeare -- commonly wrote poems for each other, and nobody thought this was weird.



Hamlet tells Horatio to watch the king as the players re-enact the murder of Old Hamlet. Hamlet jokes -- first bawdily, then about how his mother looks cheerful despite his father having died only two hours ago. (Ophelia, who is literal-minded and thinks he is crazy, corrects him.)

The play begins with a "dumb show", in which the story is pantomimed. The king and the queen profess love, the king falls asleep, and the villain pours poison in the king's ear and seduces the queen. If Polonius is a sinister old man and Claudius's accomplice, he can glance at the king when the poison is poured in the ear. If Gertrude knows the details of the homicide (the director can decide), she can glance at the king when the poison is poured in the ear, or be outraged herself. Many directors will choose to omit everything after the poison is poured in the dumb show, and have the King get upset and run out right now. Otherwise, the play proceeds, while Hamlet cracks dirty jokes and the king mentions that the story is "offensive". Courtiers who are suspicious or in-the-know can shoot glances at the king during the production. When the villain pours the poison in the victim's ear, and Hamlet shouts "You will see [next] how the murderer gets the love of [the murdered man]'s wife", the king stands up, shouts "Give me some light! Away!", Polonius calls for torches ("Somebody get the lights..."), and everybody runs out.

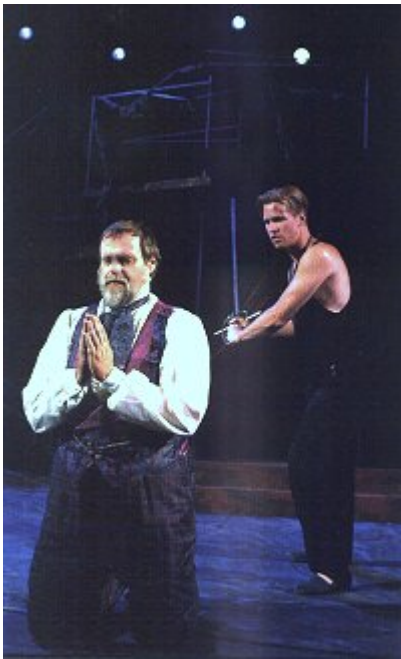
It seems to me that the entire Danish court realizes (or will soon realize) that Old Hamlet was murdered by Claudius, and that Hamlet knows too. (Hamlet is about to break through his own mother's denial.) Hamlet and Horatio congratulate each other.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come back in looking for Hamlet, telling him the king is very angry (duh) and that his mother wants to see him (king's orders). Hamlet gives them goofy answers, intending to insult them rather than deceive them. Guildenstern asks for straight answers. Rosencrantz says, "My lord, you once did love me", and asks why Hamlet is upset. Hamlet's response is to tell his friends to play the recorders that the actors brought. Neither knows how. Hamlet says they should be able to, since "it is as easy as lying". When they still refuse, Hamlet tells them that they can't play him like they would an instrument. Once again, Hamlet's genuineness looks like madness. Polonius comes in, and Hamlet, still talking crazy, gets Polonius to agree that a particular cloud looks like

each of three different animals. (Appearance versus reality.) In an aside, he says to the audience that this is as good a job of acting crazy as he can manage. Alone on stage, Hamlet says, "Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on." (Unfortunately for everyone, he is about to do just that, by stabbing Polonius.) He says that he'll keep his temper and not hurt his mother physically.

III.iii.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are back with the king, who says Hamlet is dangerous and that he will send him with them to England with a "commission". The two spies talk in Elizabethan platitudes about the sacredness of kingship, the importance of stability in a monarchy, being "holy and religious", and so forth. (Uh huh, uh huh.) The spies leave. Polonius enters and tells Claudius he is going to hide in the bedroom. Claudius thanks him.



Now Claudius is by himself. The play has really affected him. He tries to pray. We get to listen. If this were a contemporary action movie (today's "revenge plays"), we would simply hate the bad guy and wait for him to get his just deserts in the end.

Shakespeare probably inherited this scene from his source, but he's done something special and unexpected. By giving Claudius real substance and depth, Shakespeare has at once imitated life, increased Hamlet's own stature by giving him an enemy with real character, and reinforced the theme of appearance against reality. Hamlet wants to take decisive action, but can't. It turns out that Claudius cannot, either. And it's Claudius -- not Hamlet -- who is prevented from acting by his own inner turmoil. He hates his crime. He wants to repent. He realizes he could come clean, confess all, and part with his crown... and his queen. He realizes that until he is

willing to do this, he cannot find forgiveness from God. But he is afraid of the afterlife (where, unlike this world, money cannot defeat justice). And he is disgusted by the murder itself. Claudius is trying hard, and calls on God's angels to help him get up the courage simply to pray for God's grace.

Hamlet enters, sees the king unguarded. Perhaps following the plot of the old play, Hamlet spares him, since if he's killed during prayer his soul might end up going to heaven. The actor can say, "And so he goes to h.... [long pause, he meant to say "hell"], uh, heaven". Somebody will ask you to say that Hamlet is a very bad person for wanting to wait for his revenge until the king is more likely to end up going to hell. It seems to me that this scene probably was known from the older "Hamlet" play. Whatever you make of it, the King's speech is among my



favorites. Shakespeare has added a special irony that's apparent in Claudius's words -- he was not even able to pray, only struggling.

III.iv.

Polonius hides behind a curtain ("arras") in the bedroom. Hamlet comes in. The queen yells at him. He yells back. She gets frightened and yells "Help!" Polonius behind the curtain yells "Help!" In the stress of the moment, Hamlet stabs him to death through the curtain. (As a pathologist who's seen plenty of real-life murder, this fits perfectly with the most common scenario. Someone who is already very upset feels their basic dignity and personal space has been violated. And Polonius has done this to Hamlet.) Trying to avenge a murder and set things to right, Hamlet has just committed another murder -- this one senseless. But Hamlet is so focused on his mother that he does not even pause to see who he has killed before he accuses his mother of complicity in the murder of his father. (Hamlet doesn't know for sure.) When Polonius's body falls out from behind the curtain, Hamlet remarks he thought it was the king (who he was just with, someplace else), and talks about how being a busybody is dangerous. He turns immediately back to his mother, who is baffled and evidently is just now realizing herself that Claudius is a murderer. (In the quarto version, the queen says something to the effect that she has just now learned of Claudius's guilt. Perhaps some of the original text of the play has been lost from the folio version.)

Hamlet's speech to his mother has less to do with the murder and how it is wrong than with her sexual acting-out and how it is disgusting. Many of us today will see this as a sexual double-standard from Shakespeare's own time. Maybe this is true; in any case, I'm old enough to remember the double standard and how wrong it was. Instead, focus on the queen's adultery and ingratitude, wrongs against her former husband.



The ghost enters, visible to Hamlet but not to the queen. Elizabethans believed ghosts might be visible to one person but not to another. Perhaps the queen is too morally debased to see the ghost, or perhaps Shakespeare didn't want to clutter his story by having the ghost and the queen have it out between themselves. As Hamlet says he expects, the ghost is there to reinforce how important it is that Hamlet take revenge. But the ghost also asks Hamlet to "step between [the queen] and her fighting soul", and help her in this moment of crisis to



make the right choice. The queen thinks Hamlet is crazy. The ghost leaves.

Hamlet tells the queen not to dismiss what he has said about her as the result of madness, and says how ironic it is that virtue (his blunt talk to his mother) has to ask pardon for its bad manners. Hamlet tells his mother to confess herself to heaven and to repent, and not to have sex with the king.

"Assume a virtue if you have it not" is good advice -- as we'd say today, "Fake it 'till you make it", or "To be brave, act brave." Carrying out Polonius's body (as in the sources), Hamlet remarks that he's become "heaven's scourge and minister" against a corrupt world. He also says it has "pleased heaven (God)" -- in his killing of the old man -- to punish Polonius for his mean-minded, foolish spying, and to punish Hamlet, who will have to take the consequences of his nasty-and-stupid act. He tells the queen not to reveal that he's feigning madness. He also indicates that he already knows the spies are going to do him mischief on the English trip, and that he has a counter-plan that will destroy them. Exiting, he remarks that for once, Polonius doesn't have anything to say. We never do figure out why Gertrude cannot see the ghost (if there is a reason). Nor does the scene focus on her realizing that the king is a murderer. Probably Hamlet couldn't persuade her since he still doesn't have the evidence; she'll only realize this at the climax when she drinks the poison. Hamlet talks to her, as he does to others (Ophelia, the spies, Horatio) about not being sullied by a crooked, corrupt world.

Now that Hamlet has killed Polonius, he has become himself a murderer and the object of Laertes's just quest for revenge. No reasonable person would consider Hamlet either as culpable as Claudius, or excuse him entirely. (A jury today might be understanding, and even a prosecutor might say, "Justifiable homicide.") Just recently, we heard Hamlet talk about his own "patient merit". Now Hamlet is all-too-human. But there's something else. In this scene, Hamlet and his mother reaffirm their love for one another. From now on, Hamlet will no longer talk about life not being worth living. Perhaps this is the real turning-point of the play.

IV.i.

The queen tells the king what has happened to Polonius, and that Hamlet is insane. The king says he will need to send Hamlet off immediately, make some kind of excuse for him, and think how to protect the king's own good name (uh huh). Line 40 is defective. It should conclude with something about "slander".

IV.ii.

Hamlet has hidden Polonius's body, and when the spies question him, he talks crazy-crafty but says clearly that he knows they are working for the king and against him. He warns them that this is dangerous. By now the two spies do not even pretend they care about Hamlet.

IV.iii.

The king and "two or three" of his courtiers enter. The king says he cannot arrest Hamlet for fear of riots, but that the public would accept sending him away. The two spies bring Hamlet in. He talks crazy, commenting that everybody ends up dead in the end -- fat kings and lean beggars end up both food for worms, simply different menu items. The king tells Hamlet he just go to England, and gives sealed letters to the two spies. He tells them, "Everything is sealed and done". It sounds as if the spies know the contents of the letters; a director who wishes to make this clear can have the king show the letters to the spies first. The spies leave with Hamlet. The king, alone, tells the audience that the letters instruct the King of England to kill Hamlet upon his arrival.



IV.iv.

Fortinbras's army crosses the stage, and Fortinbras drops a captain off to visit the Danish court. The captain meets Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. Hamlet asks about the army, and the captain says that Norway and Poland are fighting a stupid war over a worthless piece of land. Two thousand people are going to get killed over this nonsense. Hamlet says this is the result of rich people not having enough to do, a hidden evil like a deep abscess rupturing into the blood. Alone on stage, Hamlet contrasts himself to Fortinbras. Hamlet has something worth doing that he hasn't yet done. Fortinbras is busy doing something that isn't worthwhile. Hamlet reaffirms his bloody intentions. You may be asked to comment on this passage. You'll need to decide for yourself exactly what it means. If you've made it this far, you're up to the challenge.

IV.v.

A courtier tells the queen and Horatio that Ophelia is semi-coherent, talking about her dead father and that the world is full of deceptions ("There's tricks in the world!") The queen does not want to talk to her; in an aside, she says it will trouble and expose her own guilty conscience. Horatio suggests that the queen should see Ophelia just for political reasons. Ophelia comes in, singing a song about a dead man, then one about premarital sex. When she leaves, the king talks to the queen about all the wrong things that have happened -- Polonius killed and quietly buried without a state funeral, Hamlet sent ("just[ly]") away, the people confused and upset, and Laertes on his way back, angry. (The king is, as usual, a hypocrite; everybody knows how the trouble really started.)





Just then, Laertes (at the head of a mob) breaks down the castle door. The mob wants Claudius deposed and Laertes crowned king. Laertes runs in, armed, and faces off with Claudius. He is doing exactly what Hamlet considered doing, and didn't do. Gertrude risks her own life by wrestling Laertes down. Claudius tells her to let him go, because God protects kings (uh huh). Laertes yells, and Claudius asks for a chance to explain. Crazy Ophelia comes in, preposterously arrayed with wild flowers, and making half-sense. Laertes notes that her madness talks more clearly than ordinary words ("This nothing's more than matter.") She sings another song about a dead man, and passes out symbolic flowers. You can have fun trying to figure out who gets the rosemary (remembrance, "thinking of you" -- weddings and funerals), who gets the pansies ("thoughts", a pun on pensées), who gets the fennel (flattery / infidelity) and columbines (unchastity), who (with Ophelia) gets the rue (repentance / sorrow; probably Gertrude gets it, as she must "wear her rue with a difference" as to distinguish two coats of arms, since they have different reasons to be sorry), and who gets the daisies (unrequited love; you know the game with the daisy, "She loves me, she loves me not"). Ophelia regrets there have been no violets (faithfulness and friendship) available since her father died. Later, Laertes will ask violets to grow from Ophelia's body.

IV.vi.

Horatio gets a letter from Hamlet. Supposedly he boarded a pirate ship during a sea scuffle. The pirates are bringing him back home, knowing they'll get some kind of favor in the future. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on their way to England and Hamlet will have more to say about them.

IV.vii.

The king explains to Laertes that he couldn't arrest or prosecute Hamlet because the queen loves him and he's popular with the common people. He's about to tell Laertes that his revenge is imminent ("Don't lose any sleep over that" -- l. 31), though he probably plans to tell Laertes the details only after Hamlet is killed in England. Just then a letter comes from Hamlet announcing he's back in Denmark. The king already has "Plan B". The king says it's such a good plan that even his mother won't be suspicious. (Uh huh. The plot that Shakespeare inherited has some credibility problems, and Shakespeare does not seem to care.)



He will have Laertes have a fencing match with Hamlet. Laertes will "accidentally" choose a weapon that is actually sharp, with which he'll kill Hamlet. (Hamlet is "most generous, And free from all contriving", so he won't check the swords.) Laertes mentions that he has some blade poison. He must have bought it to use on Claudius (who he thinks is the murderer of Polonius). Even a scratch will kill. (Uh huh, nobody will be



will have
some



suspicious?) Now the king decides that for backup (in case Laertes is unable to stab Hamlet and make it look like an accident), he has a poisoned drink ready, and Hamlet will want to drink when he's thirsty. (Uh huh, nobody will be suspicious?)

Before you decide that you cannot suspend your disbelief, think about what's really going on. The king knows that the court knows that he's already a murderer, and that they don't care. So nobody will do anything even when the king and Laertes kill Hamlet treacherously in plain view.

The queen comes in, crying. Ophelia was hanging chains of flowers on trees. She climbed a willow that hung out over a river. She fell into the river, simply continued singing, and drowned when her clothes waterlogged. Please note that this is obviously an accident, not a suicide -- just as when a crazy person walks in front of a bus nowadays. I think Claudius gives it out as a suicide just to inflame Laertes. We don't know who saw Ophelia drown, or why nobody tried to save her. Perhaps an observer from the castle battlements, or perhaps her last acts were reconstructed from the scene, or perhaps we are asking the wrong question.

V.i.

Two men are digging Ophelia's grave. One asks whether someone who tries to go to heaven by the short route (suicide) can be given Christian burial. In Shakespeare's time (as Hamlet already mentioned in I.ii.), suicide was considered a sin, and sometimes even unforgivable. Suicides would ordinarily be buried in unconsecrated ground without a Christian service. Sometimes they'd be buried at a crossroads (as a warning to everybody not to do the same), and sometimes with a stake through the heart (to prevent them from rising as undead, of course.)



The men joke about how politics has influenced the coroner's decision to allow Christian burial. They parody lawyer talk ("Maybe the water jumped on her, instead of her jumping into the water. Or maybe she drowned herself in her own defense.") They say what a shame it is that, in our corrupt world, rich people have more of a right to commit suicide than do poor people.

Hamlet and Horatio walk in. The gravedigger sings a contemporary song about having been in love and making love, and thinking it was great, but now being dead and in a grave as if he'd never lived at all. The marks "-a-" signify his grunting as he shovels. He tosses up a skull. Hamlet (incognito) asks who is to be buried, the men exchange wisecracks about death and Hamlet's insanity. The gravedigger says he has been working at this trade since the very day that



Hamlet was born. (Thus the gravedigger comes to stand for Hamlet's own mortality.) Hamlet asks about dead bodies, makes a four-way pun on the word "fine", and jokes about "chop-fallen" (in the living it means frowning, but the skull has lost its "chop", i.e., jawbone.) Loggits is the game we call horseshoes. "Let her paint an inch thick" is a reference to the new fashion of women wearing make-up. Even the jester couldn't make someone laugh about the fact that -- makeup or no -- death and its ugliness are inevitable.

The gravedigger tells him which skull belonged to the court jester, Yorick. Hamlet also remembers Yorick's jokes and his kindness. But there is more.

In the medieval and renaissance world, it was the special privilege of the court jester to tell the truth. He could do this without fear of reprisals. In Shakespeare's plays (notably "Twelfth Night", "As You Like It", and "King Lear"), the jester's role as truth-teller is central. "Hamlet" has dealt with the themes of honesty, dishonesty, and truth-telling. In this most famous scene of all, **Yorick tells the truth without saying a word. We all end up in the same place, dead.**

The funeral party comes in, and Hamlet recognizes "maimed rites", i.e., much of the era's normal Christian burial service is eliminated because of the suspicion of suicide. Hamlet and Horatio hide. Laertes protests the fact that the service is limited. The pastor's reply is organized religion at its worst. Laertes says the priest is the one who will go to hell. He jumps into the grave, picks up the corpse and embraces it, and launches into a bombastic speech. Hamlet comes out and jumps into the grave too. He calls himself "Hamlet the Dane", claiming the royal title. (In Shakespeare's era, a monarch was called by the name of his country for short.) Shakespeare's heroes all develop as people, and many people (myself included) dislike Hamlet's attitude toward women as evidenced in the first half of the play. But in striking contrast to the "nunnery" scene, he now proclaims boldly, "I loved Ophelia." Laertes drops the corpse and starts choking Hamlet. Separated, Hamlet parodies Laertes's bombastic speech. Horatio takes Hamlet off and the king says to Laertes, "Good. Now we have an excuse for a duel right away."

V.ii.

Hamlet is explaining to Horatio about how he substituted his own letter to the King of England, ordering the execution of the spies. (He used flowery language, though he hated doing it -- he even mentions that he was trained to write like that, and worked hard to forget how. Again, this is the theme of sincerity.) Hamlet already had a pretty good idea of what the English trip was all about, so his having a copy of the royal seal, and some wax and paper, is no surprise (as he already indicated at the end of the bedroom scene.) Surprisingly, Hamlet talks about reading and changing the letters on an impulse, and has a famous line, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will." Rough-hew was to carve the basics of a woodcarving or sculpture, with the fine-shaping to follow. Horatio (who seems more inclined to faith in God than do the other



characters) agrees: "That is most certain." Since this doesn't make perfect sense with the plot, Shakespeare probably placed it here for philosophic reasons, especially given what is about to happen -- coincidences ("Providence"?) are going to work events out for Hamlet's cause. **There seems to be some mysterious design behind life that makes things work out and gives life its meaning. Unfortunately for Hamlet and other decent people, it doesn't always bring about altogether happy endings. Still, it's grand being part of things.** One can find similar ideas in Montaigne, Proverbs 16:9, and the modern Christian saying, "A person proposes, God disposes."

Horatio remarks that it'll only be a short time before the king finds out about the execution of the spies. Hamlet says life itself is short ("The interim is mine, / And a man's life's no more than to say 'One'.")

Osric brings Laertes's challenge, Hamlet accepts. The king has bet heavily on Hamlet, probably to divert suspicion. Don't try to figure out the terms of the bet -- the two accounts contradict each other. Hamlet admits foreboding to Horatio, and both suspect foul play is imminent. But Hamlet decides to go forward anyway. "We defy augury" -- Hamlet is not going to let his apprehensions interfere with his showing courage and doing what he must. "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow." This is an allusion to the gospel. God knows every sparrow that falls. Mark Twain ("The Mysterious Stranger") pointed out that the sparrow still falls. Hamlet is about to die, too, although God is watching. Hamlet notes that death is going to come, sooner or later. **"The readiness is all" -- being ready to live and die with courage and integrity is all the answer that Hamlet will find for death.** Hamlet points out that nobody really knows what death is, so why be afraid to die young? "Let be" -- don't fight it. Is "Let be" the answer to "To be or not to be?" (!).

The duel is set up. In Q1 and Q2, they bring foils (long slender swords) and daggers; in Q2 and F foils and gauntlets (metal gloves). Hamlet puns on "foil", a metal backing that made gemstones shine brighter; he will make Laertes look even more the champion fencer. (Thanks to Hamlet, "foil" has come to mean any character who contrasts with the hero, showing up what kind of person the hero is.) Hamlet apologizes to Laertes, and blames his distracted mental state -- he wasn't himself. (There is a parallel in Romans 7-8).





As the king expected, Hamlet is not at all suspicious about the swords, and merely asks whether they're all the same length.

In the first round, Hamlet tags Laertes (who is thinking about the poison and perhaps doesn't have his heart really in it). The king drops the poison in the cup, pretending he thinks it's a pearl. (Okay, this is silly.) Whether the court thinks the pearl is to be dissolved in acidified wine and drunk (occasionally done as conspicuous-consumption), or is a gift to Hamlet, you'll need to decide for yourself. The king probably takes a drink (from another cup, or he drinks before the poison is dissolved, or he just pretends to drink.) The queen mentions that Hamlet is "fat and out of breath". Fat just means "sweating", so she wipes his forehead. In the second round, Hamlet hits Laertes again. The queen grabs the cup and drinks despite the king's warning. We'll never know whether she has just realized what is going on, and wants to save Hamlet's life and maybe end her own miserable existence. (She does realize quickly that the cup is poisoned. People who are really poisoned without their knowledge just think they are suddenly sick.)



Laertes says in an aside that he's having moral qualms about killing Hamlet by treachery. The third round ends in a draw (perhaps locked weapons), then Laertes reaches out and scratches Hamlet illegally when he is not looking. (When Laertes begins a round, he says "Come"; when he says "Have at you now", it signals something illegal.) They scuffle (because of the illegal blow, Hamlet is "incensed"). During the scuffle, they exchange swords. This was a recognized move in fencing. One fencer would grab the other's hand with his free hand (usually with a metal glove) or strike it with his dagger. The right response was for the other fencer to do the same, and swords could then be exchanged. On stage, the exchange is usually done by having Hamlet disarm Laertes with his sword, which flies up. Hamlet puts his foot on the sharp poisoned sword (he knows it's sharp, but not that it's poisoned, and he intended to scratch Laertes back). Hamlet gives his own sword to Laertes, fights again, and inflicts a deeper wound on him, explaining why Laertes dies quicker.

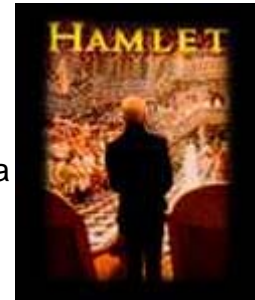
The queen announces the drink is poisoned, and drops dead. Laertes tells everything, and shouts "The king's to blame!" For the first time, Hamlet can kill the king and have people realize he was right. Hamlet stabs the king with the poisoned blade, then forces the poisoned beverage down his throat. Elizabethans pretended to believe that kings were sacred, so Shakespeare had to have everybody shout "Treason", but nobody does anything. (If the director wishes, the guards and court can draw their own weapons and surround the king. Horatio can show the letters to England at this time, too.) Hamlet says he is dying, and Horatio offers to commit suicide like a Roman soldier when his side

was defeated. Hamlet drinks the poison instead, to ensure Horatio won't. If Hamlet saw no reason to live, then Horatio has one -- to tell the truth about Hamlet.

In the final scene, Fortinbras happens by, as do the English with word of the spies' execution. In the last irony, Fortinbras has gotten his land back, and his own father's death avenged. Horatio says he'll tell about "accidental judgments", i.e., people have gotten their just deserts through seeming accidents -- the theme of God working in the world to make things right. Fortinbras calls for military honors to be shown Hamlet's body. Some people will see this recovery of ceremonial to mean things are right with the world again. Others will simply see one more example of power passing in an unfair world -- as it was in the real Dark Ages. In Ingmar Bergman's production of "Hamlet", Fortinbras's words, "Bid the soldiers shoot!" is their signal to pull out their guns and slaughter Horatio and the rest of the surviving Danish court.

The Background

Shakespeare's "Hamlet" was a remake of an already popular play, based in turn on historical fiction, based in turn on an episode from the Dark Ages, the lawless, might-makes-right era that followed the collapse of Roman-era civilization.



The Historical Hamlet was the son of a Danish "King of the Jutes", who lived during the Dark Ages.

- The warlord was assassinated and his crown usurped by his brother. This was a coup, not a secret murder.
- According to current superstition, anyone who killed a crazy person risked acquiring the same disease from the victim's spirit. Therefore, the murdered warlord's son pretended to be crazy, acquiring the nickname "Amlothi", crazy person.
- Eventually he killed his uncle and became "King of the Jutes" in turn. He ruled successfully, and the nickname stuck. The Genealogies [my link is now down] record "Amleth, King of Denmark." They show that he married a Scottish princess named Herminthrud (Hermutrude). He was eventually killed in battle. He is buried in Denmark in a field called "Ammelhede" ("Hamlet's Heath") to this day.
- In a strange twist of fate, Herminthrud married one Viglek, also "King of Denmark", the man whose army defeated and killed Hamlet.

[Michael Skovmand](#), Dept. of English at U. of Aarhus, Denmark, shared this with me:

There is a Frisian runic inscription from about 700 AD to the effect that "On a cliff Amleth put up resistance" (translated from Danish: "På en klint satte Amled sig til væрге"). There is a consensus that Amleth was a local prince in Jutland in the

7th century. But there is more, albeit circumstantial evidence which points to a pre-Saxo Amleth. A report from a vicar north of Aarhus in Jutland from 1623 describes a locality called Ammelhede where according to local legend Amled lies buried. The details of this report shows how Amled existed in popular memory, independent of Saxo which at that time had only existed in Danish a hundred years and had practically no readership beyond the clergy and a few academics. Ammelhede exists to this very day, and in 1933 the local tourist board put up a stone with this memorial inscription: "Amled ypperste / Oldtids-snille / teed sig tåbe / Til H'vnens time / Kaaret paa ting / Af jyder til konge/ H jsat han hviler / Paa Ammel Hede" (= "Amled the greatest / Craftiest of Old / Acted a fool / Until the hour of revenge / Elected at the "Ting" / by Jutes to be king / raised high he rests / at Ammel Heath" [my translation]) So next time you visit Denmark, stop by Ammelhede, a few miles to the south-east of Randers -- don't even think about visiting the bogus 'Hamlet's Grave' between Elsinore and Copenhagen!

In Saxo, Hamlet pretends to think that the beach sand is ground grain. This is ancient, being repeated explicitly in an old Norse saga (the Prose Edda) that refers to the ocean-wave nymphs "who ground Hamlet's grain". (Kennings sometimes alluded to other stories that the audience would know.)

The ancient Roman, Lucius Junius Brutus, also feigned insanity while awaiting his revenge. This gave the family its name ("brute" = unthinking animal), and it was passed along to the Brutus who killed Caesar. David (I Samuel) also once feigned madness to deceive Saul. In our era, organized crime leader Vincente Gigante is said to have feigned madness.

There is a historical novel, now hard to find, about the historical Hamlet entitled "The War of Jutish Succession".

Royal Deceit is a B-movie, not released in theaters, adapted from Saxo. I'd appreciate knowing of any good links.

Amled -- "Viking Theater" play based on Saxo. Link is now down.

[Prince of Jutland](#) -- Danish movie based on Saxo. Christian Bale is Hamlet.