HAMLET
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PREFACE

This is the eighth year of The Shakespeare Review for senior cycle students. Our formula revolves around a presentation of the key scenes of the prescribed text and an enlightening commentary interwoven into the performance. The Shakespeare Review is very much focused on the themes within the play which the students are studying for the Leaving Cert, while at the same time ensuring they understand that a play is more than a literary text and only truly comes alive when it is performed on the stage. A corollary of this is that any great text is open to many different interpretations and as long as any interpretation is supported by the text, it can be deemed valid. For the third year we are also delighted to add an additional element to our offering by way of the booklet of essays prepared by faculty in the School of Humanities at Waterford Institute of Technology. We hope this offering will be stimulating and informative, enjoyable and helpful.

Ben Barnes, Artistic Director,
Theatre Royal

The School of Humanities at WIT is delighted once more to support the Theatre Royal’s wonderful Shakespeare Review, now an important fixture on the regional theatre calendar. Shakespeare was, first and foremost, a playwright and his works were written for performance; we know your understanding of the play will greatly improve through witnessing scenes from the play on stage, as your feeling for the play will deepen through your experience of it in the company of a live audience.

We are very pleased to publish this booklet, gathering together not only information on the production that you will find useful but also some essays on Hamlet by English and Theatre Studies faculty at Waterford Institute of Technology. We hope the essays, and indeed the production, will whet your appetite for the study of literature and theatre into the future, whether at WIT or beyond.

It is appropriate that you are encountering Hamlet at this point in your life, for it is a play that speaks directly to young people. Hamlet is a student who struggles with many of those same struggles you will be familiar with: romance; his relationship with his parents, and particularly his growing awareness that his mother has an identity separate to his own and to his family’s; his sense of his own calling in the world; and of course the nature and meaning of the universe which he wrestles with throughout. We hope our contribution to your encounter with the play, in the form of this booklet, helps you make sense of Hamlet and that in turn your encounter with the play reverberates through your life.

Dr Richard Hayes, Head of the School of Humanities,
Waterford Institute of Technology
PRODUCTION CREDITS

Theatre Royal

Actors

Mark Lambert
Julia Lane
Andrew Macklin
Sadhbh Barrett Coakley

Facilitator

Edward Denniston

Creative Team

Director     Ben Barnes
Designer     Dermot Quinn
Lighting     Pip Walsh
Costume      Claire Walsh
Sound        Rachel Corcoran
Stage Director Lisa Heffernan

Waterford Institute of Technology

Booklet editor

Dr Richard Hayes

Essays

Dr Clare Gorman
Dr Fiona Ennis
Dr Christa DeBrun
Dr Jenny O’Connor
Dr Richard Hayes
THE AIM OF THE SHAKESPEARE REVIEW

The aim of the Shakespeare Review at the Theatre Royal is governed by some words in the Department of Education's Guidelines for Teachers of English:

Drama-script has a performance presence, a three dimensional quality, which is essential ... if it is to be appreciated. Therefore, opportunities should be created whereby students can try to create interpretative presentations of parts (or all) of the drama text for themselves.

Whether you are an Ordinary or Higher Level student, this Review is an opportunity to encourage you, to remind you, to “see” and imagine the play happening live, in a theatre space, and to envisage or imagine your own version “live” as you sit at a desk rereading the script for revision. Try to imagine the characters on the page speaking to each other in a space. See the play, read the play three dimensionally.

This Review doesn't retell the plot; instead, the director and cast have selected key scenes that should help you to decide how you understand and respond to the play’s central characters—what they say and why they say it, what they do and why they do it. Each scene you see is an interpretation by the director and cast. That interpretation—of the lines and the action that's put to the lines—may surprise you or irritate you. It may present you with a version of a character you didn't expect. Either way, it is a small challenge for you to consider how you would present key moments in the play and what you understand to be the motives of each central character.
THE SHAKESPEARE REVIEW: *HAMLET*, SCENE SUMMARY

Edward Denniston

What follows are the scenes or part of scenes performed in this Hamlet Review. Hopefully, this will help you recall your theatre experience. As you re-read the play for revision, consider what struck you about how these scenes were performed. Remember, in an essay you can refer to your theatre experience or your DVD viewing to help you explain your response to a drama question on Shakespeare's full text. Also, it might be helpful to identify what has been omitted. For example, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s contribution has not been performed. The famous opening scene of the Ghost’s appearance has also been omitted. Remember: this is not a full performance.

Act 1

The King’s public relations exercise

We begin with the King's speech to the courtiers. This is a public occasion complicated by private, domestic bad feeling. The main characters of high status in this scene are on public show and behave accordingly, except Hamlet. Hamlet reacts to his mother in a way that demonstrates his disapproval. There's evidence to suggest that Gertrude feels uneasy in this public situation. The King reminds the courtiers that they have freely gone along with his marriage to the dead King’s wife, Gertrude—and so soon after the funeral. There are a number of manuscript versions of Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet. One of them tells us that Ophelia enters with all the rest to listen to what the King has to say to the Court. If she is in the scene she must make some kind of non-verbal contact with Hamlet given what we're soon to learn. It’s worth thinking about those who listen as the King speaks to his subjects, all of whom have their own reasons for listening.

Hamlet’s first soliloquy

Hamlet is distraught, depressed. He grieves for his dead father and is finding it difficult to accept that his mother has married the King. Shakespeare's audience would have been well aware that the Church, Protestant or Catholic, forbade marriage between a man and his brother's widow. Listening to a soliloquy can affect us in different ways. We can feel like accidental eavesdroppers, finding ourselves listening to a character express his/her inner thoughts and feelings, unaware that someone is listening in. Or, we can feel as if the character is addressing us directly, treating us as a confidant. He wants to tell us what he can’t, or won’t tell anyone else on stage; in public, he must hold his tongue.
Horatio tells Hamlet about the Ghost

When Horatio agrees with Hamlet that the wedding came very soon after the funeral it gives the soliloquy we've just heard some credibility and justification. To some extent Horatio represents public perception of the royal household. Horatio seems to serve two functions here: he plays the role of trusted, close friend and he is a credible witness to a supernatural event that will affect Hamlet's thinking and behaviour.

Ophelia's and Hamlet

We are justified in imagining some kind of relationship between the two, before that action of the play. Hamlet, the royal prince, has given an ordinary member of the court "private time" and she, in return, "has been most free and bountiful." Laertes and Polonius do not trust Hamlet's motives and remind her Hamlet isn't free to choose because he has to act out of royal not personal interest. Polonius forbids her from further contact with Hamlet. The young man who has lost his father and gained a step-father doesn't want now to be jilted by a woman under parental instruction.

Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost of his father

The ghost asks that Hamlet do three things: undertake an act of revenge, "taint not his own mind" and not “contrive” against his mother. So, he has to kill his uncle, his mother's husband, leave himself with a clear conscience and not harm his mother, leaving her to her own conscience. When the Ghost exits Hamlet speaks his thoughts to himself—and to the audience. He says he’ll think of nothing else but the Ghost’s commandment. He also curses that he is the one that has to put things right.

Act 2

Ophelia reports on her encounter with Hamlet

Ophelia's gesture-filled description of Hamlet's behaviour is so vivid that it is often mistakenly referred to as a separate scene in the play. Ophelia's description has all the ingredients of what Shakespeare's audience would have recognised as love-sick, “mad” behaviour or an exaggerated form of it, which they might have thought humorous. What we don't know is whether or not Hamlet's behaviour is feigned. Perhaps he's acting the fool in order to mock and demean Ophelia as a way of getting back at her? Polonius is convinced Hamlet is genuinely lovesick and this in turn is evidence of his genuine affection for his daughter.
Act 3

A famous soliloquy and the “nunnery” scene

At this stage Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bidden by the King, are in the court trying to befriend Hamlet and find out the reasons for his strange behaviour, although Polonius is convinced he has found the reason. Also, the Players are in the court. Their arrival prompts Hamlet’s soliloquy, “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I”. The King and Polonius decide to set-up an accidental encounter between Ophelia and Hamlet on which they’ll eavesdrop, to prove the lovesick theory. They hide, and Ophelia pretends to walk and read, knowing that Hamlet is likely to appear. To live or not to live Hamlet asks, because he must know that the logical conclusion of killing the King is that he becomes a regicide and may be executed for murdering the legitimate monarch, though some might feel he was the legitimate successor to old Hamlet in the first place. What we witness here is the cumulative effect of what’s happened to Hamlet so far in the action. He is angry with Ophelia for doing the bidding of her father, but he’s also angry at his mother and is also driven by what he resents having to do, but has promised to do: kill the King. Hamlet’s intention here is to hurt Ophelia, emotionally and psychologically. Also, at the point where he asks, “Where is your father?” we become aware that he’s aware that this might be a set up. This of course has the potential to crank up his anger even more. So when he says “Those that are married already, all but one, shall live” it is really for the benefit of the King who just might be one of the eavesdroppers. It’s a bit like saying “I’m coming to get you.” Following Hamlet’s exit the King may have received this message as he says of Hamlet’s words, “though it lacked form a little,/Was not like madness.”

The King’s confession

Shakespeare gives the King a soliloquy in which the King talks to himself—and us—about the problem he has with confessing his crime to God: he cannot give up what he has gained from his actions. This is a theological nicety which Shakespeare’s audience would have well understood. We listen, or listen in, and become aware that the king has a conscience. He just doesn’t act on it. Does this affect how we judge him at this moment in the action? Earlier, in an aside, he has already said that Polonius’ words about how “pious action” can “sugar o’er/ The devil himself” is like a lash of a whip to his conscience. The King is on stage alone when Hamlet, on his way to his mother’s closet, happens upon him. This is a chance encounter and an opportunity to do what the Ghost wants. Hamlet’s reasons for not acting are theological. If he kills the King now, his praying soul might go to heaven.
The closet scene

Hamlet has been summoned by the Queen so that she might confront him about his insult to the King during the play-within-a-play scene. And he goes to her wanting to confront her about her insult to her dead husband. Thus, we end up being witnesses to an intensely real human conflict between a mother and son. Both want different outcomes from this encounter. Both want to have an effect on the other. And something for a student of the play and viewer of a performance to consider: in the midst of the physical action of killing whoever is eavesdropping behind the arras, when Hamlet says, “as bad, good mother, as kill a king and marry with his brother”, is he accusing her of being an accomplice to the King? And when she responds, “As kill a king?”, how aware is she of the import of what he’s saying? Immediately after this the attention goes to the dead Polonius and some lines later she asks, indignantly, “What have I done that thou dar’st wag thy tongue/In noise so rude against me?” Is there any evidence in the play to suggest that Gertrude knows the new king committed regicide, or that she was an accomplice? The Ghost intervenes in this scene because Hamlet isn’t leaving Gertrude to her own conscience, as requested when he first appeared to Hamlet to communicate his three requests.

Act 4

Ophelia’s madness

Here we witness the behaviour of real madness, in someone who has lost complete control of her thought processes because of the “poison of deep grief”. This is a stark contrast to Hamlet, who feigns madness, who consciously knows what he wants, even though his actions are emotionally charged. Consider how this affects an audience. We might laugh and simultaneously feel sympathy for Ophelia. Or we might feel slightly threatened by being so close to such madness. In this scene, by way of explanation, Claudius gives a summary of the action to the Queen, beginning with, “First her father slain / Next your son gone” (to England, by royal command). Of course, he’s not beginning at the beginning because it doesn’t suit him. His act of regicide is the source of the tragic sequence of events, scene by scene, to which we are eavesdroppers.

Act 5

The Gravedigger Scene

Hamlet has returned. By hearing him talk to Horatio we glean something of his state of mind. He is aware of death as a leveller. The compost of a body, no matter how important of high in status, might be used to block a hole in a beer-barrel.
Laertes’ return

The man of action, Laertes, returns from France. He is motivated to avenge his father’s death. He sees his sister’s madness. We see a man that is a foil to Hamlet, yet Hamlet has now acted: he has devised and plotted, with good fortune, his return to Denmark. Unlike Hamlet though Laertes can be taken advantage of and used without knowing he is being used.

Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s drowning

The Queen’s description of Ophelia’s death is another “scene” mistakenly thought of as being part of the action. Ophelia, like Gertrude, is a victim of forces more powerful than herself. From listening to this speech we’re never quite sure whether this was an accident of someone in madness or a deliberate, pre-meditated act. The description suggests the former. The final image is of her clothes pulling her down “from her melodious lay”.

The final scene

Horatio is obliged to live, and as a trustworthy witness, tell Hamlet’s story. We are left feeling that unlike the King, Horatio might just tell the full story and do justice to the play’s hero, Hamlet the Dane.

READING THE PLAY AS DRAMA

Edward Denniston

Though out the play Macbeth, (substitute ‘Hamlet’) Shakespeare makes effective use of a variety of dramatic techniques that evoke a wide range of responses from the audience.


The above statement more than hints at what the examiners would like a student to focus on as she/he writes a drama response. Over the last four years or so, either directly or indirectly, the words ‘dramatic technique’ and/or ‘audience’ have been in at least one of the two Shakespeare questions on Paper 2. And here’s a tip: even if it’s a ‘character’ or ‘theme question’, as you respond, try to bring in dramatic technique to demonstrate you understand the play as theatre. This idea of being aware of the play as drama is also vital at Ordinary Level, where the candidate is given an extract from the play.
What is meant by ‘dramatic technique’?

Dramatic technique refers to techniques used by a playwright, in her/his text, to provoke an audience into reacting to the events and characters they witness on stage, live in a theatre. The following are some common dramatic techniques.

- The Soliloquy: Shakespeare employs this device to its fullest in Hamlet. A soliloquy is taken to be the true thoughts of the character, alone on stage, expressing thoughts not shared with any other character in the play. Depending on the actor’s approach, during a soliloquy you might feel like an eavesdropper on someone speaking aloud, or you might feel like the character is speaking to you directly. Not all the soliloquies in the play are given to Hamlet.

- Character Likeness or Contrast: when we become aware of two characters that seem to be in some ways very opposite, or connected in obvious or subtle ways. These differences or connections might be highlighted when both characters appear on stage together. For example, in Hamlet, Laertes and Hamlet in the Court scene (A1Sc2).

- Dramatic Irony: when we in the audience know and understand more than one of the characters on stage as she/he interacts with other characters, or, when we share the disguised feelings and thoughts of a character on stage as he/she hides those feelings from others. Irony can rely on gesture, action or words. Moments in a play can be ironic because we know the outcome of events but key characters don’t. Or, we feel a sense of irony when we hear a character speaking as if everything is going to turn out the way they want it to; as observers, we know this won’t be the case.

- Confrontation/Conflict: physical, mental or emotional. When this happens on stage our sympathy is drawn toward one character which means we’re less sympathetic towards another. As we watch and listen, we constantly make judgments in response to what characters do and say. In every confrontation listen out for the language and tone used. There are many scenes in Hamlet when two characters are having good go at each other, each wanting to achieve something - to ‘do’ or achieve something with their words and actions, and this affects our sympathy.
• Stage Presence: having a character in a scene who doesn’t say much but who, in the theatre, is a presence on stage for an audience, watching, listening. He/she has a presence as a listener. A director uses stage space, position and gesture to draw our attention to such characters. Think of a scene in Hamlet when one character is on stage, saying little but exerting an influence on others, or on an audience.

• Humour: think of the scenes in Hamlet where there’s the potential to make an audience laugh - however inappropriate - as they watch and listen to the play.

• Energy and Action: when what’s happening on stage between characters builds up to something very physical and active. Energy has to do with pace too – when you feel the action speeds up or slows down. High energy scenes create contrast with quieter scenes that follow or precede them. We can consider emotional language as energy or an energized act with which the character wants to achieve something.

• Image and Metaphor: these can cause an audience response. In Hamlet there are some powerfully vivid images that remind us about the play’s themes. It’s a good idea to recall the images in the play not only the literal words. Images are made from the language spoken by characters. Also, the images we hear on stage make their mark on us. Hamlet says: ‘there is something rotten the state of Denmark’ and later, he says to his mother: ‘do not thrown the compost on the weeds’. This garden or plant imagery reinforces Shakespeare’s theme of corruption in the state. An effective revision exercise is to make a list of the language pictures in the play.

• Language: strong language is also a dramatic technique. Strong language jumps out at us as we listen and watch; it is ‘pushed’ at us with a strong feeling. For example when Hamlet uses the phrase ‘incestuous sheets’ in the Nunnery scene.

• Mood Contrast – between scenes or within a scene. Mood is created by elements within the text: status (indicated by costume), language, imagery, movement; and by elements introduced by a director/producer: music, lighting, set design.
How do I write to show I understand the play as drama, in three dimensions?

- Discuss play in the present tense.
- Utilise observations in ‘Dramatic Effect’ - see notes above.
- Mention the feelings and thoughts evoked in you by a particular scene. See L.C question above. Try to use the verb ‘evoke’ for its precise meaning (‘bring to the conscious mind’).
- If relevant, comment on the character listening to the lines, as well as the speaker of the lines.
- Mention motive. In any one scene mention what’s motivating a character to speak and use the language they use. Mention what a character wants out of the conversation or confrontation. What do they want to ‘do’ in the conversation?
- Mention, based on evidence, what reactions Shakespeare wants to evoke from an audience - shock, laughter, sympathy, empathy, suspense.
- Refer to DVD versions of key moments in the play to help you explain your ideas in response to the exam question or statement.
- At some stage refer to where, when and why you feel ‘sympathy’. The more precise you are, the more convincing.
- Discuss the play as a series of moments and interactions, one following the other, to which you are witness, not as a vague story. These moments are made by the playwright to happen on a stage in front of an audience.
- Mention entries and exits if they have the potential to make an impact on an audience.
- Refer to status, position, rank and how it might be relevant to what you imagine on stage.
- As you comment, envisage the play going on in a stage space in your head.
- To write something like, ‘Hamlet is annoyed with himself’ is not writing dramatically. Instead, say something like: this is the moment the audience feels that Hamlet is (present tense) annoyed. Of course, the killer blow is (for you) if you can give a detailed quote or reference to demonstrate his annoyance.
- http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/search/search-results.php gives you a full word and phrase search facility on the text of Hamlet and is very helpful if you’re revising imagery or themes or are in search of a quote.
CHARACTERISATION THROUGH IMAGERY IN HAMLET

Dr Christa DeBrun

The Renaissance is considered a period of rebirth for culture and learning with a particular focus on exploring man's place in the world. Hamlet is presented to us in the play as a learned man with the capacity to reference philosophy, science, politics and classical antiquity. Such knowledge establishes Hamlet as a Renaissance character, in contrast to the medieval characters of, for example, Fortinbras and Laertes in the play. Hamlet's imagery reveals the hero's wide educational background, his multi-dimensional character and the extraordinary range of his experience. Metaphors taken from natural sciences are especially frequent in Hamlet's language, again emphasising his powers of observation. But Hamlet is also at home in Greek mythology, in the terminology of law, he is familiar with theatre and with acting, with the fine arts, with falconry and hunting, and the courtier's way of life. In Ophelia's words, Hamlet is a “courtier, soldier and scholar”, he is the vision of an ideal Renaissance man. The Renaissance was at its height in England during Shakespeare's lifetime so this was a very intentional characterisation through imagery and, through Hamlet, Shakespeare illustrates the existential struggle of Renaissance man.

Imagery is one of the keys to Hamlet; like the five soliloquys in the play which help us gain entrance into Hamlet's mental being and understand his isolation, the imagery, with the wealth of realistic observations, shows us that Hamlet is not just an abstract thinker and dreamer, rather he is a man gifted with greater powers of observation than the others. He is capable of scanning reality with a keener eye and of penetrating the veil of semblance to the very core of things; “I know not seems”, he says early in the play ((1.ii.76). Hamlet commands so many levels of expression that he can attune his words as well as his imagery to the situation and to the person to whom he is speaking. It is this adaptability and versatility that makes Hamlet so universally popular, the man who encounters his father's ghost is also the man who greets Marcellus and Barnardo—unknown and junior officers— with instant and total courtesy, this is instinctual behaviour rather than put on and it endears Hamlet to us. These images of the humane Hamlet are important as they enable us to remain sympathetic to Hamlet despite his cruelty to Ophelia and Gertrude, his killing of Polonius and disrespect towards Laertes because we understand that he is human and he is flawed.

Hamlet's use of imagery reflects his ability to penetrate to the real nature of men and things. Many of his images seem in fact designed to unmask men; to strip them of their fine appearances and to show them up in their true nature. The play starts with a question ‘Who's there’ and, if we look at this question metaphorically, it is perhaps this question that Hamlet seeks to answer through his use of imagery as he navigates the deception that is all around him. There is an emphasis on seeming one thing and being quite another and this concealment is a key theme in the play. Thus, by means of the simile of fortune's pipe, Hamlet shows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he has seen through their intent and thus
he unmasks Rosencrantz when he calls him a ‘sponge that soaks up the king’s countenance’. Reflecting on the short time between his father’s death and his mother’s remarriage to Claudius, Hamlet employs a series of images that reveal his repulsion at the thought of his mother married to him and in such haste:

A little month, or ere those shoes were old  
With which she follow’d my poor father’s body  
Like Niobe, all tears  
[...]  
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears  
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,  
She married. (1.ii.147ff)

A little later, he says to Horatio:

the funeral baked meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables. (1.ii.180-1)

These are not poetic similes but keen observations of reality. He splits his mother’s heart in twain because he tells her the truth from which she shrinks and which she conceals from herself. And again, it is by means of images that he seeks to lead her to recognition of the truth. He renews the memory of his father in her by means of his forceful description of his father’s outward appearance which he compares with Hyperion, Mars and Mercury. He uses another series of comparisons to bring home to his mother the real nature of Claudius – who is really there: he refers to him as “a mildew’d ear,/Blasting his wholesome brother”, “a vice of kings” and “a king of shreds and patches” (3.iv). So Hamlet sees through men and things. He recognises what is false, visualising his recognition through imagery. But why does he use all these images? Remember, Hamlet begins the play as an unaffectedly open and candid person, he is naturally “most generous and free from all contriving” as he is described later (4.vii.135). So, for Hamlet to have to hold his tongue is a real penance and the feeling that he must do so, in spite of his own nature, makes for the charged atmosphere of the first court scene. But, Hamlet would betray himself if he used open, direct language. So, he conceals his real meaning under images and, under the protection of that mask of ‘antic disposition’, Hamlet reveals more shrewd things than all of the rest of the courtiers put together.

A common criticism of Hamlet is that his over-developed intellect makes it impossible for him to act: “And thus the native hue of resolution/ Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought” (3.i.84-5). However, Hamlet’s agony of mind and indecision is precisely what distinguishes him from the smooth plotter Claudius and the coarse, unthinking Laertes, ready to “dare damnation” (4.v.133) and cut his enemy’s throat in a graveyard. Hamlet will never have a better opportunity to kill Claudius than when he comes upon him on his knees but do we really expect or want to see Hamlet stab a defenceless, kneeling man? Hamlet uses the image of the leprous ailment, emphasising the malignant, disabling, slowly disintegrating nature of the disease to reflect his agony. It is not by chance that Hamlet employs this image.
If we think about the description which the ghost of Hamlet's father gives of his poisoning by Claudius, we cannot help being struck by the vividness with which the process of poisoning, the malicious spreading of the disease is portrayed:

And in the porches of mine ears did pour
The leprous distilment; whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body,
And with a sudden vigour it doth posset
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,

The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mine;
And a most instant tetter bark'd about,
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust
All my smooth body (1.v.63ff)

This real event described at the beginning of the drama exercises a profound influence upon the whole imagery of the play. The picture of the leprous skin disease, described by Hamlet's father in the first act, has buried itself deep in Hamlet's imagination and continues to reappear in metaphorical form.

The imagery in Shakespeare's tragedies often shows how a number of other images are grouped around the central symbol which expresses the same idea in different forms. In Hamlet, the idea of an ulcer dominates the imagery, infecting and fatally eating away the whole body; on every occasion repulsive images of sickness make their appearance. Hamlet's father describes how the poison invades the body during sleep and how the healthy organism is destroyed from within, not having a chance to defend itself against attack. And this now becomes the leitmotif, or leading image of the play. The corruption of land and people throughout Denmark is understood as an imperceptible and irresistible process of poisoning. The poisoning reappears as a leitmotif in the action as well – as a poisoning in the dumb-show and finally, as the poisoning of all the major characters in the last act. Thus imagery and action continually play into each other's hands and we see the term “dramatic imagery” gaining a new significance.

The image of weeds is related to the imagery of sickness in Shakespeare's work and it appears three times in Hamlet. Hamlet declares in the first act how the world appears to him: “Ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden/That grows to seed” (1.ii.135ff). The ghost says to Hamlet: “And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed/ That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf” (1.v.33-5). And in the dialogue with his mother, this image immediately follows upon the image of the ulcer: “And do not spread the compost on the weeds,/To make them ranker” (3.iv.152-3). Continuing the atmosphere of rot and decay, Hamlet feels himself sullied by his mother's incest, which, according to the conception of the time, she committed in marrying Claudius. For him this is a poisoning idea which finds expression in his language: “O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,/Thaw and resolve itself into a dew” (1.ii.129-30). Hamlet's imagery centres around decay throughout the play from
Yorick’s skull to the maggots which the sun breeds in a dead dog. These images of rot, sickness and decay leave us with the certainty that something is indeed rotten in the state of Denmark.

In his four great tragedies (Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth) Shakespeare relates his beginnings to his ends particularly closely. Hamlet ends with the image of a soldier’s funeral and opens with sentries at their watch being relieved. The soldier on guard, who cannot leave his post until he is relieved or given permission from above, is a metaphor for the soul in this world. Hamlet cannot leave voluntarily, that is, he cannot commit suicide, he must bear whatever anguish life brings. The play continually returns to thoughts of suicide, and the temptation to give up the battle of life. Hamlet's first soliloquy opens with the lament that the Almighty has “fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter” (1.ii.132) and Hamlet’s last action is to snatch the poisoned cup from the lips of Horatio. Hamlet believes that man is “ordained to govern the world according to equity and righteousness with an upright heart” and not to renounce the world and leave it to its corruption. The images of rot, decay and corruption throughout the play test Hamlet and reveal the moral anguish which moral responsibility brings. Ultimately, though, Hamlet is a noble character and he is fittingly borne “like a soldier to the stage” (5.ii.398) at the end of the play because in the secret war he has fought, he has displayed the virtues of the ideal Renaissance Man.

WILL THE REAL KING OF DENMARK PLEASE STAND UP: THE NOTION OF KINGSHIP IN SHAKESPEARE’S HAMLET

Dr Clare Gorman

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the unity and coherence that prevailed through the Middle Ages began to break down. What began to emerge was an explosion of creativity and thought that we now know of as the Renaissance. It was a period that saw a marked shift in the way people thought about the world and specifically about the structure of class in society. The system that was in place deemed the King as the ruler of the land and he obtained his power from God. The nobles advised the king, knights protected the king, and the peasants, merchants and farmers occupied the lower levels of society. This was known as the feudal system and during the Renaissance it was slowly replaced by a world in which the individual subject felt empowered to challenge the notion of kingship and the law. This essay will analyse the principles of hereditary monarchy, and the laws that govern succession to the throne, within Hamlet. It will firstly speak about the English model of succession verses the Danish model and then go on to show how the Danish monarchy within the world of Hamlet was an elective one. Finally, out of this examination of inheritance, Hamlet’s revenge will be considered.

Catherine Belsey, in her book, The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in
Renaissance Drama (1985), states that “the change from an essentially medieval world – ruled by God – to a modern world in which the individual subject feels able to challenge the authority of the King, and take actions on his/her own behalf and also on that of the law”, was indeed a political problem. This shift of thinking was one that the English monarchy did not champion as England since 1272 practiced automatic succession by the eldest son. That is, the eldest son had always become King after his father’s death. What was beginning to occur within society was that individuals gave themselves authority and they now felt empowered to act as they saw fit rather than within the confines of the King’s laws and powers. Shakespeare in Hamlet highlights this shift within society and plays out the consequence of this crisis, in that the play involves a person being elected King rather than inheriting the title. Shakespeare does not choose to upset or question the English system; rather, he creates a distinctly different Danish world, one that sees an elective person, Claudius, comes into power. He is Hamlet’s uncle and after Hamlet’s father died, Claudius married Hamlet’s Mother, Gertrude and thus Claudius holds kingship over Denmark.

In Act 1 scene 2 we see Shakespeare display the Danish monarchy as an elective one in that we learn that Claudius’s succession into power and his marriage to Gertrude was approved by the Council, an electing body, that was used to advise with the running of the country. Claudius speaks of great times ahead for the country and how the country must rejoice with a party. Claudius exclaims, “No jocund health that Denmark drinks to-day,/But the great cannon to the cloud shall tell,/ And the King’s rouse, the heavens shall bruit again,/ Re-speaking earthly thunder. Come away” (1.ii:125-8). The idea of Kings choosing their successors is also evident in this speech. Claudius announces Hamlet as his successor and attempts to flatter him by insisting that, “you are the most immediate to our Throne” (1.ii:109). All but Hamlet celebrates this news. This message of natural rightfulness is further reinforced in Act 3, scene 2, when Rosencrantz reminds Hamlet that he is the natural heir to the throne by insisting that, “you have the voice of the king himself for your succession in Denmark” (3.ii.349). Finally, in Act 5, scene 2, Hamlet comes to the conclusion that Claudius partook in unscrupulous election tactics and got himself elected king before Hamlet could properly make his claim. Claudius has “popp’d in between th’ election and my hopes” (5.ii.65).

The concept of the Danish monarch being an elective one is further developed when Hamlet at the end of the play makes a plea for Fortinbras to become the next king. He insists:

But I do prophesy th’ election lights
On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice. (5.ii.356)

The words “dying voice” are of paramount importance, as they suggest that the next king of Denmark is being decided by a vote or appointment as there is no natural succession. Fortinbras communicates with the rest of the population Hamlet’s dying plea for him to hold the throne of Denmark. In support of this Horatio states that Hamlet’s dying election will be very favourable in encouraging others to vote for him: “Of that I shall have also cause to speak./ And from his mouth whose voice will draw more” (5.ii.392).
These examples show how the society of Denmark plunges into chaos when the laws, which govern succession, become more about being elected. Indeed by the end of the play this chaos leads to societal collapse. Shakespeare places this plain revenge story into a revolutionary Renaissance setting, where the eldest son did not succeed his father and the idea of succession, the belief in the divine right of the king, has been overthrown. What occurs in Hamlet is a period of turmoil, a scramble for power and revenge, as the Danish monarch evolves into one that is elected rather than one that holds a direct bloodline to the monarchy. This questioning of kingship raises the most debated theme within Hamlet, that of revenge. The Ghost of Hamlet’s dead father initially fuels Hamlet’s desire for revenge on Claudius.

**Ghost:** Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
**Hamlet:** Murder!
**Ghost:** Murder most foul, as in the best it is; But this most foul, strange and unnatural. (1.v.25-8)

Throughout the play Hamlet understands he must avenge his father’s death. His anger over Claudius marrying his mother and the added discontent of kingship drives Hamlet to kill Claudius. Hamlet expresses his disdain at waiting for kingship by insisting that, “I eat the air, promise-crammed; you cannot feed capons so?” (3.i.100) This can be interpreted as Hamlet being tired of promises of succession, and that he wants the crown! Hamlet believes he has a moral right to the throne when he exclaims to his mother, “a cutpurse of the empire and the rule/That from a shelf the precious diadem stole/And put it in his pocket” (3.iv.100-2). Hamlet sees himself as being entitled to assume the royal prerogatives of his dead father and Claudius’s craftiness and scheming defrauded him from holding this highest position.

Hamlet’s final justification for revenge is contained within two important speeches. Firstly, in Act 5 scene 2 he insists:

Does it not, think’st thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill’d my king and whored my mother,
Popp’d in between the election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage--is’t not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm? and is’t not to be damn’d,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil? (5.ii.129)

This explains the primal act of killing “my king”, which paves the way to the whoring of “my mother”, that brings into focus Hamlet the son who holds his father’s name through a blood (and therefore direct) line which fixes Hamlet’s revenge. The second speech of great importance is when Hamlet insists at Ophelia’s grave side, “This is I,/ Hamlet the Dane” (5.i.259).
Here Hamlet names himself as an individual: he is “I”, “Hamlet” and “Dane”—that is, he is “self”, “son”, and “prince”. Hamlet insists here on a direct bloodline through the process of naming and ultimately becomes by the end of the play a blood avenger. In order to secure the faith in the idea of hereditary monarchy the concept of revenge on Claudius's life is secured. Claudius appointment as king puts into question the fabric of automatic succession of kingship and therefore it can be concluded that the idea of natural succession secures Hamlet’s revenge.

WOMEN IN HAMLET
Dr Jenny O’Connor

The role of women in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* must be understood in relation to the degree of power and autonomy that women of the time would have held in society. Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne but, paradoxically, women's rights were limited. Female roles on the stage were played by men, women did not have the right to choose who they wished to marry, and when married, they had to obey their husband's wishes. It is important to consider the behaviour of Gertrude and Ophelia from this historical perspective.

It is also interesting to note that neither of these women have plots of their own but are rather inserted into the plots of the men around them (see Curti 1998). Nor do we learn much about their natures, desires or thoughts through their own words; instead, we learn about them mainly through the words of their fathers, husbands, or sons. Both Gertrude and Ophelia are bound to the political machinations of the men who drive the action of the play: King Hamlet, Claudius, young Hamlet, Laertes and Polonius. As such, they do not have any power to improve their own lot in life; their only power is to protect and serve the men who ultimately restrict their freedoms and exploit them.

Gertrude: the quandary of ambivalence

Gertrude is a very interesting and complex character. She is often described as shallow, fickle, lascivious and unfaithful, but we have no way of knowing whether these characterisations are accurate. All we have to go on are her words and her actions, both of which can be construed in a variety of ways. When we first meet her, Gertrude expresses concern over *Hamlet’s* demeanour: “Cast thy nighted colour off,/And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark” (1.ii.68ff) but she shows no remorse over the death of *Hamlet’s* father, or shame about marrying his brother. Considering that she must be aware that her son would likely not approve of her hasty marriage (regardless of whether she knew Claudius had murdered her husband), it is perhaps surprising that she does not seek to make amends with *Hamlet* here.
Her instruction to him to adopt a more pleasant demeanour suggests that she has nothing to hide, and nothing to be ashamed about. Of course, it might also suggest that she feels she is above reproach due to her position as queen, so we must dig a little deeper before we reach a decision on the nature of her character.

Later, King *Hamlet*’s ghost pronounces,

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\begin{align*}
Ay, & \text{ that incestuous, that adulterate beast,} \\
& \text{With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,--} \\
& \text{O wicked wit, and gifts that have the power} \\
& \text{So to seduce!--won to his shameful lust} \\
& \text{The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen. (1.v.42-6)}
\end{align*}
\]

It is Claudius who is the “adulterate beast” here, while Gertrude is cast as the “seeming-virtuous queen”. The ghost of the King verbalises the concern that either the relationship between Claudius and Gertrude began while she was already married, or that the union between a newly-widowed queen to her dead husband’s brother-in-law was inappropriate. If a ghost from the afterlife cannot tell us with authority which one it is, then it is clear that Shakespeare does not wish us to truly know. We are left with a quandary: do we simply trust what the men (real and spectral) of the play tell us, or do we offer Gertrude the benefit of the doubt?

**Gertrude’s sexuality**

The question of Gertrude’s sexuality is one that causes her son great anxiety, so much so that, in the closet scene, he collapses the notion of murder with that of infidelity. In the aftermath of Polonius’ murder by *Hamlet*, Gertrude remarks, “Oh, what a rash and bloody deed is this” and *Hamlet* responds,

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{A bloody deed? Almost as bad, good mother,} \\
& \text{As kill a king and marry with his brother. (3.iv.29-30)}
\end{align*}
\]

Notice how the weight of guilt shifts from Claudius to Gertrude in this sentence. *Hamlet* has never directly accused his mother of murdering his father, but here, he seems to do just that (Adelman 1992). The implication is that Gertrude’s lust and infidelity is as great a sin as murder. Gertrude is surprised and dismayed at the outrage *Hamlet* feels towards her and cannot seem to reconcile the crimes of which she is accused with her own behaviour. It is important too to note that Gertrude never discusses her own sexual behaviour in the play; it appears that she is oblivious to the connections that others make between it, and the unravelling of political and moral order. *Hamlet*, to the contrary, seems to torture himself with envisaging her in bed with his uncle, and the imagery he conjures perhaps says more about his decaying mind than the supposedly rancid state of his mother’s soul,
Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamèd bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty— (3.iv.93-5)

As Adelman (1992) notes, “Gertrude’s is the only fully sexualised female body in the play” and “we experience her sexuality largely through the imagination of her son” (p.27). It is clear then the sexuality associated with the maternal body is seen as a dangerous and corrupting force, but the site of this corruption is best located in Hamlet’s own mind.

The equivocality of Gertrude’s death

Like her sexuality and her involvement in King Hamlet’s murder, Gertrude’s death takes place in equivocal circumstances. In Act V, Scene II, she prepares Hamlet for his fencing match against Laertes, wiping his brow to keep him cool. She takes a drink from the poisoned chalice but again, we are not privy to her motivations for doing so. It is possible that she drinks the poison by accident but considering her devotion to Hamlet throughout the rest of the play (even accepting the advice he gives to her in the closet scene, despite the harsh nature of his delivery and the accusations he makes against her, which offend her) there is enough evidence to suggest that she drinks the poison to protect Hamlet from certain death. Thus, Gertrude’s effective suicide is a reclamation of agency at the end of the play, her way of demonstrating her abiding loyalty to her son. However, it is a brief and inert type of agency that is reclaimed: if she is defined through the words of men throughout the play, her death is merely a reaffirmation of her loyalty to one of these men who demarcate her existence. Like Ophelia, Gertrude highlights the inequality between the male and female characters in the play: men enjoy freedom, power and agency, while women must conform to male expectations of loyalty, desire, and morality.

The tragedy of Ophelia

Ophelia is a relatively minor, but very important, character in the play of Hamlet. She is only in five scenes of the play, and can be seen as a tragic, one-dimensional figure. However, through the various portrayals of her, she in fact details for us the changing view of women and madness throughout history. The main thing to remember about this character is that there is no one, true Ophelia. Her significance may shift and change depending on the era, the performance by the actress, and the interpretation of the audience.

Generally, Ophelia has been studied with a view to how she marks the mental decline of Hamlet himself. Through her, we see Hamlet’s view of women becoming more negative, until he believes that all women are deceitful and debased. In one key scene with Ophelia (Act III, Scene I) he taunts her and tells her “I did love you once” and almost in the same breath, “I loved you not”. Due to Polonius’ request of her and Ophelia’s dutiful nature,
Hamlet believes that she, like his mother, has put another man before him and so, she is tainted. To make matters worse, both women have chosen a man from within their own families (Gertrude chose her husband’s brother, while Ophelia chose her father) and so, Hamlet believes both are also incestuous. Contrast with this Hamlet’s speech on men:

> What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! (2.ii.312ff)

According to Hamlet, men are “noble” and “admirable” (2.ii), but women are their downfall: “wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them” (3.i.140). It is no surprise, therefore, that Hamlet is ultimately disappointed by Ophelia. She is a woman, and to Hamlet, women cannot escape their weak and wanton natures:

> I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another: you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God’s creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. (3.i.144ff)

The powerful imagery of femininity

So, if Ophelia only exists to reveal to us Hamlet’s mental decline, why is she one of the greatest muses in popular culture? She is the subject of many paintings, by Sir John Everett Millais, Odile Redon and John W. Waterhouse, is referred to in works of literature (Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, Kurt Vonnegut’s God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater), film (Lars von Trier’s Melancholia, Guillermo del Toro’s Pan’s Labyrinth) and song (Bob Dylan’s Desolation Row). Possibly, one reason why Ophelia is so intriguing to so many artists is because her madness is seen to be linked directly to her femininity (Showalter 1985).

The focus on Ophelia’s weakness, her innocence and her gentle nature often overlooks the powerful symbolism that is associated with her. On the Elizabethan stage, the garlands of flowers that she carried (“There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance; pray, love, remember: and there is pansies, that’s for thoughts.” (4.v.174-6)) her behaviour and her white costume all symbolised the fertility of femininity. Her watery death was associated with female fluidity (“like a creature native and induc’d/Unto that element” (4.vii.179-80), and a natural immersion into the rivers of tears cried by women. Men, including Hamlet, were seen to become overly feminine when they cried or were reduced to melodrama. When Laertes cries over his sister’s insanity, he can only become manly again by drying up his tears and regaining control over himself: “O heat, dry up my brains! Tears seven times salt” (4.v.154ff). Again, when she is dead, he says, “When these are gone,/The woman will be out”, that is, he will purge himself of his own femininity (4.vii.188-9)
Reappraising Ophelia

The portrayal of Ophelia as a romantic young girl, who was driven to a picturesque madness by virtue of her passion became the norm up until 1878. This is when the actress Ellen Terry interpreted Ophelia as a young woman terrified of her father, of Hamlet and of life in general (Showalter 1985). In this portrayal, Ophelia has become mad because she has been bullied by men and has no voice of her own. Feminist criticism, concerned with the representation of women in literature, identifies a role for the character that is neglected in other readings. Ophelia reveals how difficult it is to pinpoint a woman’s place within patriarchal society (that is, a society run by men, with men’s interests at heart). Her madness, although it is romanticised in the play, highlights the way in which schizophrenia (a dividing of the self) may occur. It might be argued that Ophelia’s identity is erased and she is left as a shell by the men around her. Her obedience leads to her downfall, and she fails to recognise this before it is too late. Another reading is that Ophelia’s madness may be the answer to the quandary of how to exist within a man’s world. Her madness may be a form of protest, a way to rebel against her family, against society and ultimately, against patriarchy itself.

Regardless of the interpretation of Ophelia that is taken, she is not a simple, transparent character. Instead, she provides numerous representations of womanhood and of madness. Similarly, Gertrude is not easily pinned down to one, straightforward reading. Therefore, we must acknowledge, in any analysis of the female characters of the play, that femininity is associated here with complexity, paradox and mystery. Importantly, the female characters in Hamlet are also a product of their society. Shakespeare has succeeded in this play in highlighting the strain that patriarchal society places upon women. Both characters are expected to display nothing other than fierce devotion to their families and lovers, and their own thoughts and ambitions must be secondary to that. Neither character can survive under this weight of expectation and this seals their fate in death. Often, the female characters in Hamlet are studied in relation to what they can tell us about the male characters in the play. This is to ignore the important information they convey about the position of men and women in patriarchal, Elizabethan England and to overlook the ways in which female suffering is frequently associated (in literature and in life) with madness and tragedy.
LIFE, DEATH AND MEANING IN *HAMLET*

Dr Fiona Ennis

It is a platitude that people live in the shadow of death. However, as the philosopher Ronald Dworkin (1994) has espoused, people die in the shadow of their lives. Thus, it is important that the way in which a person dies “keeps faith” with the way in which he has lived. Death provides the last scene or frame in the story of one’s life (Dworkin, 1994). Thus, it is important for the person who expires, and for those who value him, that the ending is appropriate, that it is respectful of the life that he has lived. This is important in understanding the context of why Hamlet's father's death needed to be avenged. This need for avenging a death provided the impetus for the action (and also the inaction, in terms of Hamlet’s procrastination) in the play. Hamlet's father's death did not “keep faith” with the way in which he had lived. It was not an appropriate death for a king to be murdered by his brother, before he had a chance to confess and atone for his sins, thus consigning him to the horrors of Purgatory. In death, further insults are heaped upon him, as his wife marries his brother and his death remains unavenged. Death frames the play: it provides the original impetus for action; it pervades the play, and appropriate deaths provide the closing.

Death permeates the play. In particular, dying and being dead are concepts treated in the play. It is important to distinguish between the two. Dying is the process, short or protracted, whereby one comes to be dead. Being dead is the state after death (Rosenbaum, 2004). These two concepts differ while obviously one follows from the other! It is important in the process of dying that it is appropriate, or keeps faith, with the way in which a person has lived. This is a central theme of the play. However, one also sees Hamlet's preoccupation with being dead, in his musings on the afterlife. Thus, in this essay, firstly, the theme of dying, in particular dying a death befitting one's character, will be closely examined. Next, Hamlet's musings on the meaning of life will receive examination. Finally, Hamlet's preoccupation with being dead will be analysed.

Hamlet's father, a great king, was poisoned as he lay indolent and replete with full belly after eating. This was not an appropriate death for a great king. As he lay dying, his appearance changed markedly, becoming covered with scabs akin to those in leprosy. He did not look regal on his death-bed; rather, he took the physical form of those who were deemed pariahs by society. Hamlet's father was poisoned by his brother, Claudius, who added greater insult to the memory of the great king, by marrying his wife so soon after death. When Horatio tells Hamlet that he came to see his father's funeral, Hamlet replies that surely Horatio came instead to see his mother's wedding, so fast it followed on the heels of the funeral. Hamlet sarcastically remarks: “the funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (1.ii. 180-181). The death of Hamlet's father does not “keep faith” with the way in which this great king had lived. It is an ending that is not fitting the narrative of his life. However, while Hamlet's father's death was not an appropriate closing chapter for the life he had lived, and thus sets up the scene of action for the play, Hamlet's death does keep faith, in the way
in which he had lived, and thus provides an appropriate closing for the play. It is important, for example, that Hamlet is not killed at sea, or executed upon disembarking in England. Such deaths would not be befitting a man of his character. Rather, Hamlet avenges his father and dies a noble death. Hamlet’s last words pertain to his concern for Denmark, and who will rule now that the present king is dead and he will soon expire. His death is appropriate to the life he has lived. Thus, Hamlet dies a noble death.

Polonius dies as he spies, the manner of his death being reflective of the life that he lived. Hamlet shows his disdain for him when he says, “I’ll lug the guts into the neighbour room” (3.iv.14). Hamlet’s mother Gertrude dies because Claudius fails to warn her of the peril of the wine goblet, so concerned he is at not revealing his murderous intent. The attitude of Claudius stands in sharp relief to the fact that she was much beloved by Hamlet’s father and that he, while much wronged by her, never wished her ill and would never have stood idly by, by inaction being complicit in her death. Thus, her death also is appropriate to the life she has lived and the choices she has made. She who once forsook the love of a great king is now herself forsaken. Also, Claudius is slain in the midst of his evil crimes without the possibility of atoning for his sins. Thus, he is consigned to a damned fate, a fate worse than death. Hamlet’s character is deeply philosophical about death. Philosophy is concerned with what are often called the “big questions”. Among the biggest questions are questions pertaining to life and whether it has meaning, about mortality and whether one’s response to one’s mortal condition should be cheery or morose (Benatar, 2004). These questions are particularly examined in the branch of philosophy called Existentialism, which examines the nature of being and the meaningfulness of life. Hamlet’s musings are often described as existentialist in nature, because he is consumed by the question of the meaning of life. As the philosopher David Schmidtz notes; however, “if you ask for the meaning of all ‘Life’ then your question is like asking for the (singular) meaning of all words. There is no such thing. It is particular words and particular lives that have or can have meanings” (2004, p. 93). But by what standard does Hamlet view his life as having meaning?

Hamlet’s view of the meaningfulness of his life is tied to a religious conception of meaning. He sees his life through a religious lens. As the philosopher Nietzsche (1996) posits, there is a fundamental human need to impose meaning, most notably on suffering. People can endure anything, provided they can impose or find a meaning for it. A religious perspective can provide people with such meaning. People who subscribe to religious conceptions of meaning, particularly Christian conceptions, may find their crosses in this life more bearable because of the prospect of the afterlife. This prospect of the afterlife is of great importance to Hamlet. This is evident in particular when he expresses his yearning to bring about his own death, a desire that cannot be realised as God has prohibited suicide:

‘O that this too too sullied flesh would melt.
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter’ (1.ii. 129-132).
However, while Hamlet views his life through this religious lens, this does not satisfy him in terms of trying to find meaning in his life. In keeping with his questioning Renaissance spirit, he ponders upon the meaningfulness of life and of the nature of death. “To be, or not to be, that is the question” (3.i. 56). He ponders is it better to exist or not to exist? In perhaps the most celebrated soliloquy of all of Shakespeare’s works, he ponders whether it is better to suffer “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” or to rail against them, dying in the struggle (3.i. 58). To answer this though, one must question what happens in death. If as Hamlet says, “to die” is “to sleep”, then that would be welcome release from the struggles of life. But Hamlet worries about what lies beyond the grave. He ponders who would “grunt and sweat under a weary life”, were it not for the “dread of something after death, the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns” (3.i. 77-80). Hamlet argues that it is preferable to exist in this life than to perish, as one does not know what awaits one in the after-life. It is more prudent to go on living, than to try to hasten death. Hamlet’s musings on life and death are situated in a philosophical tradition that ponders what lies before people in death. The philosopher Epicurus, for example, stated that death is not harmful: as a person can never experience his being dead, death cannot harm him (Benatar, 2004). In one sense Hamlet acts as though one can be harmed in death: Hamlet believes that even in death, his father is being harmed by not having his death avenged. This of course raises the philosophical question: can one harm the interests of the dead if they are not alive to experience such interests? Yet Hamlet’s father, while not alive, is still capable of a form of feeling. For example, he feels great anger and disgust at his wife’s behaviour and he feels the scorching heat of the fires of Purgatory.

While Hamlet ponders the meaningfulness of life in his “To be or not to be” soliloquy, after he returns from his sea-faring adventures, Hamlet has a much greater sense of purpose. Philosophers such as Lomasky (1987) have spoken of the importance of “projects” for conferring meaning on one’s life. The philosopher Nozick has espoused the belief that pursuing projects, a plan, “would give my existence meaning and point” (Nozick, 1981, p.589). While one may view Hamlet’s slaying of Claudius to be morally abhorrent or justified, depending on one’s moral viewpoint; for Hamlet, avenging his father was a noble project. This “project” of avenging his father has provided him with a purpose in life. It is now the standard by which he views his life as having purpose, as having meaning, by his own lights. He will either triumph or fail, in his own eyes, to the extent that he achieves this purpose of avenging his father. Hamlet will judge how meaningful his life is by the extent to which he fulfils this purpose, which is to him a noble aim.

While in the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, Hamlet ponders that one cannot know what befalls one after death, he does not consider what the ghost of his father has told him of the afterlife. His father is consigned to Purgatory, until he has purged his soul of the foul crimes that he committed while on Earth. While Hamlet’s father is forbidden from relaying what happens in Purgatory, he alludes to its horrors. He states:

I could tell a tale whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,  
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,  
And each particular hair to stand on end  
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine. (1.v. 15-20).

While at the time Shakespeare wrote the play, England was officially Protestant, many of the populace still cherished Catholic beliefs. One such Catholic belief pertains to the state of Purgatory, a state that souls are consigned to upon their death, a murky place that they must inhabit while atoning for their sins committed while upon this Earth. In Shakespeare's time, if a person had not confessed to sins while during his time on Earth, he would be sent to Purgatory to purge his sins. This is important when considering the death of Hamlet's father: he died before he could confess and atone, thus consigning himself to the harrowing state of Purgatory. In poisoning him, Claudius not only extinguished his life on this Earth, he also sentenced Hamlet's father to a fate worse than death, by consigning him to Purgatory. Hamlet abstains from killing Claudius while he is at prayer precisely because if Claudius was murdered while at prayer, Claudius would not have to suffer Purgatory because he was at prayer when killed. Rather than kill Claudius at this point and allow his safe passage into Heaven, Hamlet decides to wait. Hamlet's desire for vengeance is so strong that it is not enough for him that Claudius will die by his hand: for Hamlet, Claudius must also be damned in the hereafter. In the close of the play Claudius dies, unprepared for death, being complicit in the deaths of others.

In the graveyard scene, when holding Yorick's skull, Hamlet ponders if Alexander the Great degenerated to such an appearance, after he had been in the Earth for some time. He says to Horatio that it is possible to imagine that Alexander's dust could have been used at a later point to stop a bung-hole in a beer-keg. He also speculates that the clay produced from Julius Caesar's remains could have been used to stop a hole in a wall to keep out the wind. In such ruminations, he is noting that all ultimately return to the Earth, no matter how powerful or great one was in one's life-time. Yet, what is important about this part of the scene, which connects it to the closing scene, is that Alexander the Great and Caesar, while returned to the dust, are immortal in the sense that their great stories have been told and re-told over time. They live on in people's memories and are spoken of as great figures of history.

Against this context, it is then evident how important it is that Horatio, desperate with grief, does not kill himself in the final scene of the play. It is of great importance in terms of the meaningfulness of Hamlet's life, that his story and a true account of what has happened can live on after the main protagonists have all expired. In this sense, Hamlet can persist beyond his bodily death, and thus transcend death. He can live on in people's memories as his story is re-told. Thus, in the final scene, the themes of dying an appropriate death, Hamlet's preoccupation with what happens after death, and questions pertaining to the meaning of life, all come together. The chief protagonists, especially Hamlet, die in a manner that 'keeps faith,' is appropriate to the lives that they have lived. Hamlet will persist after death, in a way that matters. His story through being re-told will mean that he will live on in people's memories and thus become, in a sense, immortal. He died fulfilling his project, the project of avenging his father's death, so his life, like his death, had meaning.
THE OPENING OF *HAMLET*

Dr Richard Hayes

The castle at Elsinore. It is late at night. It is very dark. Through the gloom we pick out a figure. Suddenly, there is a shout: “Who’s there?”

This is the opening of Hamlet. The opening line is spoken by Barnardo, an officer and a minor character in the drama. “Who’s there?” is an interesting way to begin a play. First of all, from a practical point of view, it draws us into the action, for we are compelled to stay on in the theatre to solve the mystery. Moreover, our response to mystery may well be to ask additional questions: to “Who’s there?” we might ask, “Why is he inquiring into who is there?”, “What is he doing on the battlements in the first place?”, “What is he guarding?”, “Is he keeping something in or something out?” In other words, secondly, the question at the beginning of Hamlet helps create an atmosphere of mystery because the question spawns a multitude of other questions. The third thing we can say about the “Who’s there?” at the beginning of the play is that not only does the question create an atmosphere of mystery but it also creates an atmosphere of suspicion, perhaps even paranoia. We know from the beginning that we are in a militarised world, a world at war, populated by sentries and soldiers. It is part of these people’s jobs to be suspicious, to ask questions.

Perhaps there is more fundamental importance to the opening question however—that is, beyond simply creating a particular atmosphere. The question the opening line asks is a very important one, for it asks a question of identity: to ask “Who’s there?” is to ask “Who are you?” For the soldiers, the answer to the question should be a password or a name. However the question can have a more fundamental meaning. It can be seen as a variation on the most fundamental question humans can ask of themselves and each other: “who am I?” This is, to use the language of existential philosophy, a question of being.

A name is not a sufficient answer to this question. Rather, the answer to this question is an answer which humans have not yet been able to give; in many ways, all human inquiry has been centred on the question “Who am I?” since humans began to think; all branches of science, mechanical or human or chemical or technological, find their roots in this question of identity. Hamlet begins, then, with a variation of that question. This perhaps propels the play in the direction of more fundamental mysteries and problems. The opening question perhaps prompts us to consider that this play will be a play which will also inquire into these fundamental questions of human being on earth. The play will ask, perhaps, of all its characters, but particularly of the man at the centre of the action, Prince Hamlet, “Who are you?”, or, more precisely, will prompt him to ask that question of himself: “Who am I?”
The critic, Maynard Mack, in a 1952 essay “The World of Hamlet”, declares that the play is “pre-eminently in the interrogative mode”, that is, that Hamlet is a play that works by asking questions. The play, Mack notes, “reverberates with questions, anguished, meditative, alarmed”. The first words of the play make up a question, but questions abound if you look carefully through the rest of the text. This is a play where nothing seems certain, where everyone seems puzzled. This is a play where everyone seems lost, where everyone seems at odds with the world. Indeed, Laertes says at one point in the play, when asked by Claudius about a letter written by Hamlet: “I’m lost in it, my lord” (4.vii.54). This could be taken as the motto of many of the characters in the play: they are lost in everything that is going on. And perhaps this is also the case for the reader of Hamlet. The questions the play continually asks are directed as much at us the audience as they are at the characters of the play. Perhaps it is the case that Hamlet is a play in which we also get lost, in which we also are baffled and puzzled and at sea.

The question of being, the question of identity, is of course directly addressed in the famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy in Act 3. “To be or not to be,” Hamlet muses, “that is the question” (3.i.56): his thought are, as Mack says, “in the interrogative”, that is, his thoughts form themselves around questions. That great speech is composed of a range of questions, of ideas that are not fully formed and are pursued by Hamlet’s questioning mind until they reach unpalatable though tentative conclusions. The play indeed may be seen to feature an intelligent, questing mind seeking to impose itself on the world. It is commonplace to speak of Hamlet as a procrastinator whose failure is his indecisiveness. What the play perhaps shows is that it is human nature precisely to be indecisive. Our indecisiveness, our questioning, is what makes us who we are. Certainty, clarity, determination: paradoxically, these things in the play are signs of weakness, of simplicity, of lack.

The final lines of the play also reverberate with questions. Immediately following Hamlet’s death there follow a series of questions:

Horatio

Now cracks a noble heart.--Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!
Why does the drum come hither?

[March within.]

[Enter Fortinbras, the English Ambassadors, and others.]

Fortinbras

Where is this sight?

Horatio

What is it you will see?
If aught of woe or wonder, cease your search.

Fortinbras

This quarry cries on havoc.--O proud death,
What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,
That thou so many princes at a shot
So bloodily hast struck?
Ambassador The sight is dismal;
And our affairs from England come too late:
The ears are senseless that should give us hearing,
To tell him his commandment is fulfill'd
That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead:
Where should we have our thanks?
(5.ii.360-373)

There are a number of things of note about these questions here. First of all, the very fact that there are still questions, even after the death of the Prince, is interesting. We might expect that, once the Prince had died and the tragedy happened, so to speak, then stability should re-enter the kingdom. However, the fact that questions continue to be asked even after the Prince has died seems to indicate that that expected stability has not materialised. The second thing that is interesting about these questions is the difference between them and the opening question of the play. The opening question of the play, as we have seen, is “Who’s there?”. The questions that are asked at the end of the play, however, are not “who” questions but “where”, “what” and, most interestingly, “why” questions. These kinds of questions are not centred on the individual human, like a “who” question is. “What” presumes an object outside the observer: “what is that?” or, in the case of Hamlet,

O proud Death,
What feast is toward in thine eternal cell
That thou so many princes at a shot
So bloodily hast struck?
(5.ii.365-368)

“Where” also presumes an outside—it is a question that seeks a location outside the observer: “where is that?” or, as in Hamlet, when Fortinbras says “Where is this sight?” (V.ii.362). “Why” is perhaps the most interesting of all. The person asking the “why” question seeks a reason, an explanation for something, thus seeking something outside himself: “why is this?” or, as in Hamlet, when Laertes asks “Why does the drum come hither?” (V.ii.362).

Hamlet, in interesting ways, reflects on itself as a play. It features, most famously of course, a “play within a play”, the acting of which is Hamlet’s strategy for flushing out his father’s murderer: “the play’s the thing,” he says, “Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king” (2.ii.616-7); the act of performance becomes a mechanism for bringing matters to some kind of resolution, in that case identifying the culprit for the murderer once and for all and giving Hamlet permission to act. The ending of the play repeatedly makes reference to the stage, audiences, and performances. For instance, Fortinbras insists that Horatio tells him all that has happened, to which Horatio replies, “Let this same be presently performed,/Even while men’s minds are wild, lest more mischance/On plots and errors happen” (5.ii.394-6),
while Hamlet's body is to be borne “like a soldier to the stage” (5.ii.397), which is ironic since he is already on a stage. We might say that the act of performance is a means of answering questions, a means of bringing forth resolution even to the most difficult of problems. In this context, we may reflect back on the play’s opening. The darkness that envelopes Elsinore at the start of the play is, literally, part and parcel of the darkness in the theatre itself. When the guard calls out, “Who’s there?”, the obvious answer is, “We are!” The play suggests, in subtle ways perhaps, that the way to answer life’s fundamental questions is to act them out, to perform them. One is reminded of a moment in Samuel Beckett’s masterpiece Waiting for Godot. At one point in the play, a character, Estragon, is scolded by his companion, Vladimir. “I wasn’t doing anything,” says Estragon, defending himself. Vladimir says, “Perhaps you weren’t. But it’s the way of doing it that counts, the way of doing it if you want to go on living.” Hamlet, the character, “doesn’t do anything” insofar as his procrastination is seen by many as his weakness. Hamlet the play, similarly, “doesn’t do anything” for it is merely a play, of little consequence, a mere entertainment. But, as Waiting for Godot says, that’s all very well, but “it’s the way of doing nothing that counts” and that makes us human. Hamlet validates the act of theatre as a way of life, as in itself a means, through play-acting, magically to restore certainty to an uncertain mind and in uncertain times.
FURTHER READING/REFERENCES
