

## Hamlet

### Hamlet as an Actor

- Hamlet acts to deceive those he perceives as his enemies in his quest to revenge his father. He acts mad to cover up his behavior and avert suspicion while he is investigating his uncle.

- Hamlet acts to conceal his true emotions, or lack thereof, about his father's death and his mother's remarriage, from others.

- However, he does unburden himself to the people he trusts.

- Hamlet acts in order to shield himself from his own insecurity about his emotions; that is, he puts on different personas to cover up his fear that he is not experiencing the correct emotions for a situation.

Hamlet's acting is also important to the play because by seeing Hamlet's false masks that he puts on for others, it is easier for the audience to discern the true Hamlet when he takes off the masks. Hamlet later gets into trouble with his performance, because he begins to lose the ability to take the mask off and discern where the line between acting and reality exists.

### Hamlet's Acting

- He dresses very oddly and scares Ophelia in one of her private chambers as referred to in Act II, scene i. (*ll. 78-84 "Lord Hamlet ... With a look so piteous in purport ... he comes before me."*) In Act III, scene i Hamlet acts mad while talking to Ophelia to continue his charade. (*line 153 "O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown."*)

- In Act I, scene ii, Hamlet conceals his true emotions from his mother and uncle about their marriage. (*line 159 "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue."*)

- In Act I, scene v Hamlet trusts Horatio with the knowledge that he will act insane in order to discover the truth behind his father's death. He tells him what he's heard from the ghost. (*line 182-183 "So, gentlemen,/With all my love I do commend me to you"*) In private with his mother in Act III, scene iv, he tells her his true feelings about the death of his father and her remarriage. (*l. 29-30 "A bloody deed-- almost as bad, good Mother/As kill a king, and marry with his brother."*)

- In Act II, scene ii, he curses himself for not being able to feel as great grief for his father as the players can for someone they never knew. (*ll. 570-573 "What would he do/Had he the motive and the cue for passion/That I have?"*)

## Polonius & Claudius

### Polonius and Claudius as Actors

Polonius sees acting purely as entertainment; ironically enough, he is a politician who by the nature of his career must be an actor.

### Polonius' and Claudius' Acting

In Act II, scene ii when Hamlet asks to "see the players well bestowed" Polonius, thinking them as lower-class subjects, replies "*My lord, I will use them according to their desert.*" (ll. 538-539)

Polonius once played Julius Caesar (in Act III, scene 2), an allusion to another play by Shakespeare. Ironically, Julius Caesar and Polonius are both politicians who are stabbed to death by someone they know and then have someone close to them revenge their deaths (Laertes for Polonius and Marc Antony for Julius Caesar).

Claudius acts to conceal his guilt concerning the murder of his brother.

He also acts to conceal his murderous intentions toward Hamlet, his nephew.

In Act III, scene iii Claudius confesses his difficulty with concealing his guilt "*My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent.*" (line 40)

In Act IV, scene vii Claudius plots with Laertes to murder Hamlet; however, he toasts Hamlet in Act V, scene ii to conceal his true intentions.

Claudius acts to conceal his guilt and murderous intentions by not only orchestrating others against Hamlet but by representing a false sense of concern. Perhaps Claudius can be considered a better actor than Hamlet, for Claudius' acting may have succeeded unsuspected if the Ghost had not intervened to inform Hamlet of Claudius' treachery.

## Contrasting & Comparing Claudius' and Hamlet's Performance

### Claudius

"Cast" of Polonius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Laertes, and Ophelia, whose actions he directs.

### Hamlet

As a **DIRECTOR** they direct the actions of others for the purposes of deception.

"Cast" of the Players; also Horatio, to some extent, whose actions he directs.

### Purpose of their actions

Claudius acts in order to conceal his guilt.

**Actors** used by Claudius

Polonius: Claudius uses him to spy on Hamlet. (II, ii; III, i, III, ii; III, iii, III, iv)

Laertes: Claudius uses him to kill Hamlet. (IV, vii; V, ii)

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern: used to interrogate Hamlet under the guise of friends. (II, ii; III, i; III, ii; IV, ii,)

**Actors** used by Hamlet & Claudius

Gertrude: used by Polonius and Claudius to observe Hamlet's reactions. (III, iv) She's also used by Hamlet to continue to conceal Hamlet's true objective. (III, iv; IV, i)

Ophelia: used by Polonius and Claudius to reveal Hamlet's true objective behind his insanity. (III, i) She's used by Hamlet to witness his insanity and spread the concern to others in the court, particularly Claudius, Polonius, and Gertrude. (II, i; III, i, III, ii)

Hamlet acts to conceal his knowledge of his uncle's guilt and his own emotions.

**Actors** used by Hamlet

the Players: used to reveal the King's guilt providing evidence for Hamlet's actions. (II, ii; III, ii)

Horatio: used to provide critical analysis of Claudius' reactions to Hamlet's and the Players' performance. (III, ii)

Hamlet and Claudius are parallel characters; the play uses both to provide a contrast. While Claudius' actions are used to evil ends, Hamlet uses acting and actors as tools to uncover Claudius' evil. This is also a possible reason why Hamlet takes so long to kill Claudius. Both are similar, and Hamlet realizes they use similar means to achieve different results. Because they are using the same tool (acting), the ultimate plan is ineffective.

### To Thine Own Self Be True

The play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare has a great deal to do with acting and actors. Throughout the play, the principle characters put on different personas, or masks; however, the major statement of the play is to be true to one's self. *Hamlet* demonstrates how important this is by showing the downfall of many people who do not

remain true to themselves. Ultimately, all the characters in the play who do not remain true to themselves die.

Hamlet puts on a mask of insanity to hide his true intentions from his uncle and his uncle's allies. But as the play progresses Hamlet begins to lose himself in the role and has trouble separating his unmasked self from his chosen character as he loses control of the times and places he expresses his insanity. Claudius puts on masks of innocence and paternal concern to conceal his guilt for killing King Hamlet and his murderous intentions towards Prince Hamlet, but in living a lie, he spins a web of deception that ultimately ensnares and destroys him. Polonius, ironically enough, is the one who gives the major statement of "This above all, to thine own self be true (I, ii, ll 78);" however, he does not follow his own advice. Instead he plays the fool to Hamlet; spies on him; in order to gather information for Claudius; and is killed for his actions. Laertes is talked into betraying his true self by Claudius so as to kill the Prince. But this ends in Laertes' death when he is stabbed with the very sword he poisoned. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern act like Hamlet's friends, when in reality, they are spying on him under Claudius' orders, and are killed for their deception. Ophelia and Gertrude are both innocent players in the web of deception, who do not have the strength or the ability to remain untouched and above the deception, and so they die.

Of the main characters, Fortinbras alone has the strength to stay true to himself, and he alone survives and triumphs. Fortinbras is the ultimate hero because he does not have to put on a mask, and he is strong enough to be himself and yet still accomplish the things he is compelled to. By placing Fortinbras in the play, Shakespeare provides a contrast to Hamlet, the tragic hero who is unable to remain true to himself, and thus dies.

### **List of Quotes**

1.2. ll 83-86 "These indeed seem,/ For they are actions that a man might play,/ But I have that within which passes show;/ These but the trappings and the suits of woe."  
(Hamlet)

line 159 "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue." (Hamlet)

1.3. ll 78-80 "This above all, to thine own self be true,/ And it must follow, as the night the day,/ Thou canst not then be false to any man." (Polonius)

1.5. ll 171-173 "As perchance hereafter shall think meet/ To put an antic disposition on"  
(Hamlet)

1.5 line 182-183 "So, gentlemen,/With all my love I do commend me to you" (Hamlet)

ll. 78-84 "Lord Hamlet ... With a look so piteous in purport ... he comes before me."  
(Ophelia)

2.2. ll 4-7 "Something have you heard/ Of Hamlet's transformation: so call it,/ Sith nor th'  
exterior nor the inward man/ Resembles that it was." (Claudius)

2.2. ll 328-329 "He that plays the king shall be welcome; his Majesty shall have tribute  
of me;" (Hamlet)

2.2 ll 440-442 "Come, give us a taste of your quality. Come, a passionate speech."  
(Hamlet)

2.2. ll 444-456 "I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it/ was never acted, or if it  
was, not above once ... and by very much more/ handsome than fine." (Hamlet)

2.2. ll 477-478 "Fore God, my lord, well spoken, with good/ accent and good discretion."  
(Polonius)

2.2. ll 533-537 "Good my lord, will you see the players/ well bestowed? Do you hear?  
Let them be well/ used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles/ of the time. After  
your death you were better have/ a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live."  
(Hamlet)

2.2. ll 538-539 "My lord, I will use them according to their desert." (Polonius)

2.2. ll 540-544 "God's bodkin, man, much better! Use every/ man after his desert, and  
who shall scape whipping?/ Use them after your own honor and dignity. The/ less they  
deserve, the more merit is in your bounty./ Take them in." (Hamlet)

2.2. ll 560-580 "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I! / Is it not monstrous that this player here, / But in a fiction... and can say nothing." (Hamlet)

2.2. ll 601-604 "I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play / Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck so to the soul that presently / They have proclaimed their malefactions." (Hamlet)

2.2. ll 616-617 "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." (Hamlet)

3.1 line 153 "O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown." (Ophelia)

3.2. ll 1-15 "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced / it to you, trippingly on the tongue... pray you avoid it." (Hamlet)

3.2. ll 17-37 "Be not too tame, neither... they imitated humanity so abominably." (Hamlet)

3.2. ll 40-47 "O, reform it altogether... go make you ready." (Hamlet)

3.2. ll 101-108 "My lord, you / played once i' th' university, you say?" (Hamlet)  
"That did I, my lord, and was accounted a good actor." (Polonius)  
"What did you enact?"  
"I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i' th' Capitol; Brutus killed me."  
"It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there."

3.2. ll 141- 158 "What means this, my lord? (Ophelia)  
"Marry, this is miching mallecho; it means mischief." (Hamlet)  
... "'Tis brief, my lord."

3.2. ll 246-249 "'Tis a knavish piece of work, but / what of that? Your Majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not. Let the galled jade winch; our withers are unrun." (Hamlet)

3.2. ll 281-284 "Would not this sir... get me a fellowship in a cry of players?" (Hamlet)

3.2. ll 393 "They fool me to the top of my bent." (Hamlet)

3.4 ll 29-30 "A bloody deed--almost as bad, good Mother/As kill a king, and marry with his brother." (Hamlet)

3.4. ll 185-189 "And let him... make you to ravel all this matter out,/ That I essentially am not in madness/ But mad in craft." (Hamlet)

5.2. ll 75-79 "But I am very sorry, good Horatio,/ That to Laertes I forgot myself,/ for by the image of my cause I see/ The portraiture of his... the bravery of his grief did put me/ Into a tow'ring passion." (Hamlet)