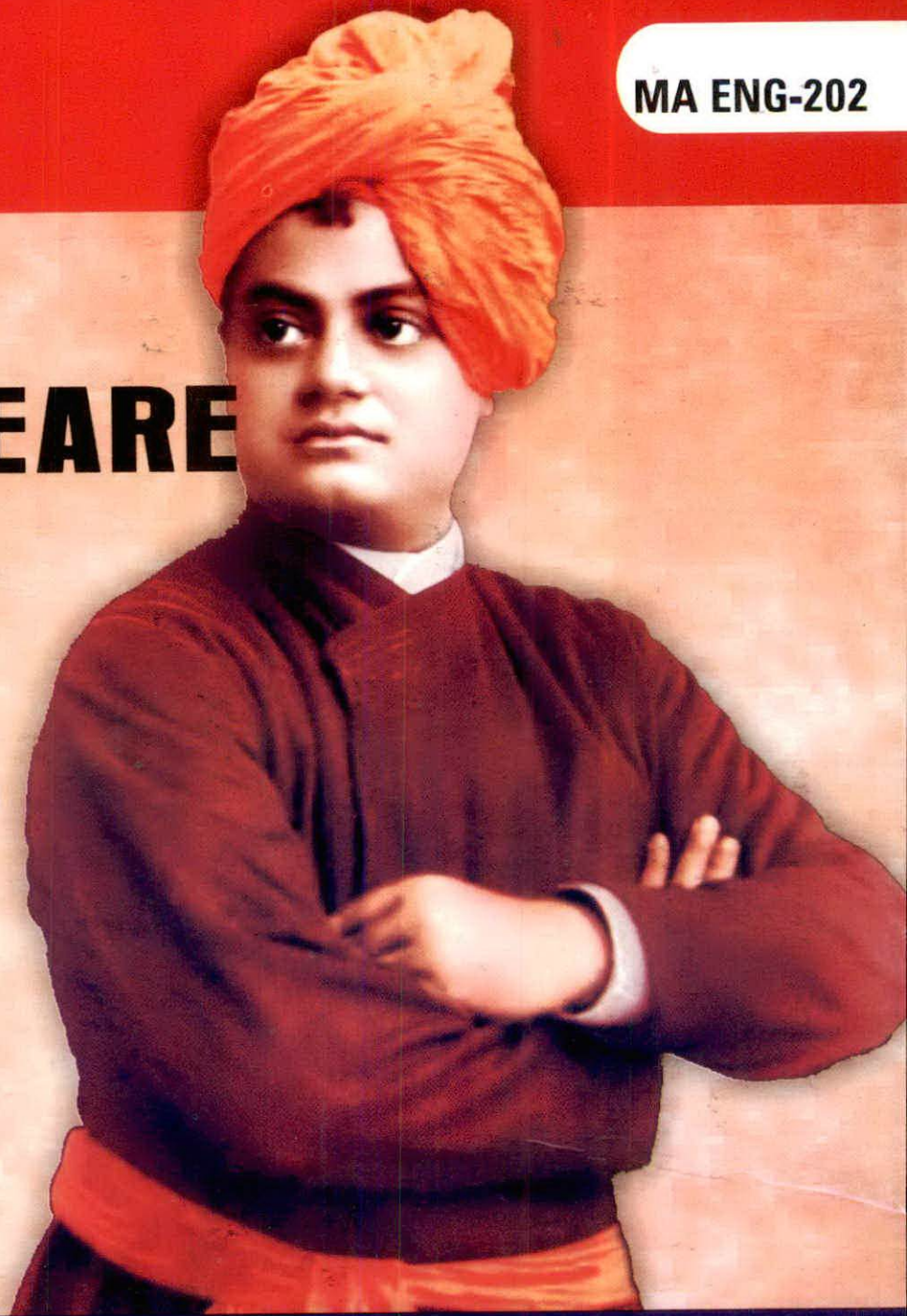


SHAKESPEARE



DIRECTORATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

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PREFACE

In this course, we shall deal with various aspects of Shakespeare

- MID SUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM
- KING LEAR
- THE TEMPEST
- HAMLET

SYLLABUS

Semester-I

SHAKESPEARE

(MA-ENG-202)

Course Content

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Unit-III : The Tempest

Unit-IV : Hamlet

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UNIT

1

Mid Summer Night's Dream

MID SUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

STRUCTURE

This chapter shall cover the following main points:

- Learning objectives
- Overview
- Justification of title
- Introduction of the play
- Plot
- Biography of the author
- Themes and symbols and motifs
- Characters
- Analysis of main characters
- Summary and analysis of scenes
- Quotes
- Summary
- Key words
- Review questions
- Further reading

• LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Understand a comedy.
- Summarize *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- Analyze, in-depth, the meaning and role of a character in the play.
- Identify the conflicts in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- Understand the significance of the resolutions of those conflicts.
- Appreciate conflict in its relationship to character and plot.

- Elucidate the ideals and nuances of romance as shown within the play.
- Analyze the presence of illusions within and outside of the enchanted forest.
- Analyze the characters in the play.
- Discuss the themes and symbols in the play. Discuss Shakespeare's treatment of women in the play.

OVERVIEW

Play- Mid Summer's Night Dream

Writer- William Shakespeare

Written- between 1595-96

Published- in 1600

Genre- Comedy

JUSTIFICATION OF TITLE

The title of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has both literary and social significance. The title tells the audience right away that the play is going to deal in some way with a sort of dream on a summer night. ... He also suggests to the audience that the play itself was merely a dream. Right away, the title *A Midsummer Night's Dream* makes us think that this play by William Shakespeare will embody an ethereal or a fantasy-like quality. The title also tells us that the story is likely to take place on a summer night that may or may not be the product of a character's dream. Much can be learned about this play by studying its name.

The act of speaking to the audience creates the possibility that the play was nothing more than a dream, for how could Puck speak directly to members of an audience if he was actually a fairy in the forest? The line between waking and dreaming is blurred within the play itself, as well as between the actors and the audience.

Some of the characters in the play are also led to believe that what they experienced was nothing more than a dream. Demetrius and Lysander, two men who are both in love with Hermia, are given a love potion by Puck. While Lysander is supposed to receive the potion, Demetrius is not. Toward the end of the play, Puck casts a magical fog to put all of the humans asleep so that he can fix his mistake. Like Puck's suggestion to the audience, he convinces his fellow characters that the events of the evening are nothing

more than a dream. Hence, the title 'Mid summer Night's Dream' is suitable for this play.

Mid Summer Night's Dream

INTRODUCTION OF THE PLAY

A Midsummer Night's Dream is first mentioned by Francis Meres in 1598, leading many scholars to date the play between 1594 and 1596. It is likely to have been written around the same period **Romeo and Juliet** was created. Indeed, many similarities exist between the two plays, so much that A Midsummer Night's Dream at times seems likely to degenerate into the same tragic ending that befalls Romeo and Juliet.

The play was first printed in quarto in 1600, following its entry into the Stationer's Register on October 8, 1600. This quarto is almost surely taken directly from a manuscript written by Shakespeare. A second quarto was printed in 1619 and falsely backdated to 1600 and attempted to correct some of the errors in the first printing, but also introduced several new errors. It is the second quarto which served as the basis for the First Folio in 1623.

There is a myth that A Midsummer Night's Dream was first performed for a private audience after an actual wedding had taken place. The play's three wedding and play-within-a-play Pyramus and Thisbe certainly would seem to fit the scene, with all the newlyweds retiring to their respective chambers at the end. However, no evidence of this imagined performance exists. Rather, A Midsummer Night's Dream was definitely performed on the London stage by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and the title page of the first Quarto indicates it was written by William Shakespeare.

The title draws on the summer solstice, Midsummer Eve, occurring June 23 and marked by holiday partying and tales of fairies and temporary insanity. Shakespeare cleverly weaves together not only fairies and lovers, but also social hierarchies with the aristocratic **Theseus** and the "rude mechanicals," or the artisans and working men. This allows the play to become infinitely more lyrical, since it is able to draw on the more brutal language of the lower classes as well as the poetry of the noblemen.

One of the more interesting changes which Shakespeare introduces is the concept of small, kind fairies. Robin Goodfellow, the spirit known as Puck, is thought to have once been feared by villagers. History indicates the prior to Elizabethan times, fairies were considered evil spirits who stole children and sacrificed them to the devil. Shakespeare, along with other writers, redefined fairies during this time period, turning them into gentle, albeit mischievous, spirits.

The final act of the play, completely unnecessary in relation to the rest of the plot, brings to light a traditional fear of the Elizabethan theater,

namely that of censorship. Throughout the play the lower artisans, who wish to perform *Pyramus and Thisbe*, try to corrupt the plot and assure the audience that the play is not real and that they need not fear the actions taking place. This culminates in the actual ending, in which Puck suggests that if we do not like the play, then we should merely consider it to have been a dream. One of the most remarkable features of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is that at the end members of the audience are unsure whether what they have seen is real, or whether they have woken up after having shared the same dream. This is of course precisely what Shakespeare wants to make clear, namely that the theater is nothing more than a shared dream. Hence the constant interruption of that dream in the *Pyramus and Thisbe* production, which serves to highlight the artificial aspect of the theater. Bottom and his company offer us not only *Pyramus and Thisbe* as a product of our imagination, but the entire play as well.

Puck's suggestion hides a more serious aspect of the comic fun of the play. There is deep underlying sexual tension between the male and female characters, witnessed by Oberon's attempts to humiliate *Titania* and Theseus' conquest of *Hippolyta*. This tension is rapidly dissipated by the sure solution which the play assumes, making it seem less real. However, the darker side of the play should not be ignored, nor the rapid mobility with which the actors transfer their amorous desires from one person to the other.

PLOT

A story of order and disorder, reality and appearance and love and marriage. Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons are to be married and great celebrations are planned.

INTO THE FOREST

Egeus brings his rebellious daughter Hermia in front of the Duke. Egeus wants her to marry Demetrius but Hermia refuses, because she's in love with Lysander. The Duke orders Hermia to obey her father or, according to Athenian law, she must face a death penalty or enter a convent.

Hermia and Lysander decide to elope that night. They confide in their friend Helena. However, she's secretly in love with Demetrius so, hoping to win his affection, she tells him of Hermia's plan. That night, all four lovers set out into the forest.

Meanwhile, a group of Athenian tradesmen known as the Mechanicals, led by Peter Quince, are planning to perform a play in celebration of the Duke's wedding. They rehearse *The Tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe* in the same forest.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Mid Summer Night's Dream

Elsewhere in the forest, the fairy king and queen, Oberon and Titania, argue over Titania's refusal to give up her page-boy to Oberon. He sends his servant Puck to find a magic plant to cast a spell on Titania.

The juice of the plant, when squeezed onto the eyes of someone asleep, causes them to fall in love with the first creature they see when they wake up. Oberon uses the juice on Titania as she sleeps in her bower.

Puck overhears the tradesmen rehearsing and magically transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass. The other men are terrified and flee the forest. When Titania wakes, the first creature she sees is Bottom and she falls rapturously in love with him.

Helena chases Demetrius in the forest and their fighting disturbs Oberon. He tells Puck to use the magic plant on Demetrius too, so that he will fall in love with Helena. However Puck muddles up the two Athenian men and uses it on Lysander instead, who promptly falls in love with Helena. Both women are confused and Hermia furiously attacks her friend.

Stop reading now if you don't want to know how it ends...

Eventually, Oberon lifts all the enchantments and puts the humans to sleep. Titania is horrified that she's been enamoured of an ass and is reconciled with Oberon. On waking, the lovers decide the night's events must have all been a dream. Lysander and Hermia are back to normal, and Demetrius admits he does love Helena after all. Bottom wakes up and recounts his 'strange dream'.

The wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta becomes a triple celebration as the other human couples marry too. Quince and Bottom's troupe amuses the couples with their amateur performance of the play.

As the couples retire, Oberon, Titania and the fairies perform a blessing, and Puck asks the audience to applaud if they enjoyed the performance.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Family Background

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, a small town of about 1,500 people northwest of London. John Shakespeare, William's father, made his living primarily as a tanner and a glover but also traded wool and grain from time to time. John Shakespeare also served although not at one time as the town ale taster inspector of bread and malt, a petty constable, city chamberlain, alderman, and high bailiff like a mayor, the city's highest public office. Mary Arden, William Shakespeare's mother, brought a long and impressive family lineage to her

marriage to John, one that traces itself back to William the Conqueror. In the mid-1570s, John Shakespeare's fortune began to decline mysteriously some say it was because of his wife's Catholicism, although that claim is unsubstantiated, and it was largely mortgages made on properties Mary brought to the marriage that helped to sustain the family.

Education and Marriage

Shakespeare attended school in Stratford-upon-Avon. Although there are no records to prove his enrollment, critics accept it with considerable certainty. At school, Shakespeare would have studied reading and writing in English as well as in Latin and Greek and Roman writers including Horace, Aesop, Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, and Plautus. The extent to which he would have been familiar with the works of such ancient classics is unknown, but studying Shakespeare's plays and long poems suggests he had at least a degree of knowledge about them in their original forms, not merely translations.

In November 1582, at age 18, William Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, 26. Their first child, Susanna, was born the following May; twins, Hamnet and Judith, followed in 1585. Little information is available regarding Shakespeare's life from the time of the twins' birth until 1592 when he received his first public recognition as an upcoming young dramatist and actor in London. We know that at some point he left his family in Stratford, but we know few specifics. Critics hold several theories. One asserts that during the mysterious seven-year period Shakespeare worked as an assistant master of a grammar school. Another popular theory maintains Shakespeare worked as a butcher's apprentice during this time but ran away to London where he was received into the theater. Another theory holds that during the seven-year period, Shakespeare made a living as a deer poacher who was eventually sent away from Stratford as punishment. Other theories contend Shakespeare was a moneylender, a gardener, a sailor, a lawyer, or even a Franciscan. Unfortunately, though, none of these theories is any more likely than another; no one knows with complete certainty what Shakespeare did between 1585 and 1592. All we know for sure is that by 1592 he had arrived in London, leaving his family behind, and had begun what is perhaps the most successful literary career the world has ever known.

Life in London

Before the Great Plague of 1592-1593, in the time when Shakespeare first came to London, the city boasted several acting troupes. In 1558, when Queen Elizabeth I ascended the throne, any gentleman could maintain a troupe of actors. By 1572, it became illegal for any nobleman below the rank of baron to maintain a troupe, although other companies could perform by

obtaining a special license, which had many performance restrictions. Although this arrangement severely restricted the number of acting troupes, it extended governmental sanction to the remaining licensed companies.

When the Great Plague of 1592-1593 hit, closing the theaters and decimating the population of England, many acting companies dissolved, while others were forced to amalgamate with other troupes for survival. Two preeminent companies emerged in 1593, and they would rival each other for years. One company, The Lord Admiral's Men, was headed by Edward Alleyn with financial backing from Philip Henslowe. The other dominant troupe, The Lord Chamberlain's Men the troupe in which Shakespeare was actor, dramatist, and shareholder, later renamed The King's Men when James I took the throne in 1603, was run by the Burbage family.

Acting troupes were organized under a shareholding plan wherein financial risk and profits were divided among those actors who had become part owners of the company by buying shares in it. The troupes, comprised entirely of men and young boys, employed about 25 actors. Roughly fewer than half of a troupe's actors were shareholders and not all owned equal shares, but those considered especially valuable to the company were encouraged to become shareholders since this ensured their continued service and loyalty. To become a shareholder, an actor had to put up a considerable sum of money; when he retired or died, the company paid the actor or his heirs for his share. Non-shareholding adult members of a company, however, were considered hirelings of the shareholders and worked under contracts promising them a weekly wage of about 5-10 shillings, although they were frequently paid less.

Shakespeare became a shareholding member of The Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1599. Scholars estimate that until about 1603 the average payment for a play was £6 six pounds; by 1613 the price had risen to £10 or £12. In addition to his fee, the playwright was given all the receipts minus company expenses at the second performance but remember, if the show was bad, there may not be a second performance. Once these fees were paid, however, the play was considered property of the troupe. Printers often pirated more popular works, and troupes sometimes sold publication rights during times of financial stress. Such publishing practices, combined with the fact playwrights, including Shakespeare, didn't write with the intention of preserving their plays but with the goal of making money, makes it difficult for scholars to pinpoint definitive texts. In Shakespeare's case, only about half of his plays were published during his lifetime.

In fact, it wasn't until 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death in 1616, that all his plays were assembled into one volume. This collection, referred to as *The First Folio* because it was printed in folio format, the largest, most expensive, and most prestigious kind of book, included previously published plays as well as plays never before published. Some of the works in *The First Folio* can be traced to the author's original version of the text including blotted lines and revisions, yet some were recreated from prompt books annotated versions of the play script that contain detailed directions for the action, settings, etc. or even the memories of the actors themselves helping to explain some of the inconsistencies found in different editions of the plays.

Shakespeare's Work

Between the years of 1588 and 1613, Shakespeare wrote 38 plays. His dramatic work is commonly studied in four categories: comedies, histories, tragedies, and romances. In addition, Shakespeare wrote several Ovidian poems, including *Venus and Adonis* 1593 and *The Rape of Lucrece* 1594. Shakespeare is also well known for his sonnet sequence written in the early 1590s, which is composed of 154 interconnected sonnets dealing with issues such as love, fidelity, mortality, and the artist's power and voice.

Although we commonly single out Shakespeare's work as extraordinary and deserving of special attention, at the time of the plays' performances they were typically dismissed as popular entertainment. Whereas Shakespeare's works are studied today as timeless masterpieces, the original audiences knew the plays were good but did not recognize them as exhibiting the apex of the dramatic art form. In fact, Shakespeare, despite all the attention his name has generated since the late eighteenth century, was not the most popular dramatist of his time. Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's contemporary and Britain's first Poet Laureate, and Christopher Marlowe, a slight predecessor to Shakespeare, were both commonly held in higher esteem than the man whose reputation has since eclipsed both of his competitors.

In fact, Shakespeare's reputation as Britain's premier dramatist did not begin until the late eighteenth century. His sensibility and storytelling captured people's attention, and by the end of the nineteenth century his reputation was solidly established. Today Shakespeare is more widely studied and performed than any other playwright in the Western world, providing a clear testament to the skills and timelessness of the stories told by the Bard.

A. THEMES

Explore the different themes within William Shakespeare's comedic play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Themes are central to understanding *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a play and identifying Shakespeare's social and political commentary.

(i) Love

The dominant theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is love, a subject to which Shakespeare returns constantly in his comedies. Shakespeare explores how people tend to fall in love with those who appear beautiful to them. People we think we love at one time in our lives can later seem not only unattractive but even repellent. For a time, this attraction to beauty might appear to be love at its most intense, but one of the ideas of the play is that real love is much more than mere physical attraction.

At one level, the story of the four young Athenians asserts that although "The course of true love never did run smooth," true love triumphs in the end, bringing happiness and harmony. At another level, however, the audience is forced to consider what an apparently irrational and whimsical thing love is, at least when experienced between youngsters.

2. Marriage

A Midsummer Night's Dream asserts marriage as the true fulfillment of romantic love. All the damaged relationships have been sorted out at the end of Act IV, and Act V serves to celebrate the whole idea of marriage in a spirit of festive happiness.

The triple wedding at the end of Act IV marks the formal resolution of the romantic problems that have beset the two young couples from the beginning, when Egeus attempted to force his daughter to marry the man he had chosen to be her husband.

The mature and stable love of Theseus and Hippolyta is contrasted with the relationship of Oberon and Titania, whose squabbling has such a negative impact on the world around them. Only when the marriage of the fairy King and Queen is put right can there be peace in their kingdom and the world beyond it.

3. Appearance and Reality

Another of the play's main themes is one to which Shakespeare returns to again and again in his work: the difference between appearance and reality. The idea that things are not necessarily what they seem to be is at the heart of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in the very title itself.

A dream is not real, even though it seems so at the time we experience it. Shakespeare consciously creates the plays' dreamlike quality in a number of ways. Characters frequently fall asleep and wake having dreamed "Methought a serpent ate my heart away"; having had magic worked upon them so that they are in a dreamlike state; or thinking that they have dreamed "I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was". Much of the play takes place at night, and there are references to moonlight, which changes the appearance of what it illuminates.

The difference between appearances and reality is also explored through the play-within-a-play, to particularly comic effect. The "rude mechanicals" completely fail to understand the magic of the theatre, which depends upon the audience being allowed to believe for a time, at least that what is being acted out in front of them is real.

When Snug the Joiner tells the stage audience that he is not really a lion and that they must not be afraid of him, we and they laugh at this stupidity, but we also laugh at ourselves — for we know that he is not just a joiner pretending to be a lion, but an actor pretending to be a joiner pretending to be a lion. Shakespeare seems to be saying, "We all know that this play isn't real, but you're still sitting there and believing it." That is a kind of magic too.

4. Order and Disorder

A Midsummer Night's Dream also deals with the theme of order and disorder. The order of Egeus' family is threatened because his daughter wishes to marry against his will; the social order to the state demands that a father's will should be enforced. When the city dwellers find themselves in the wood, away from their ordered and hierarchical society, order breaks down and relationships are fragmented. But this is comedy, and relationships are more happily rebuilt in the free atmosphere of the wood before the characters return to society.

Natural order — the order of Nature — is also broken and restored in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The row between the Fairy King and Queen results in the order of the seasons being disrupted:

The spring, the summer,
The chiding autumn, angry winter change
Their wonted liveries, and the mazèd world
By their increase knows not which is which.

Only after Oberon and Titania's reconciliation can all this be put right. Without the restoration of natural order, the happiness of the play's ending could not be complete.

B. MAJOR SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Explore the different symbols and motifs within William Shakespeare's comedic play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Symbols and motifs are key to understanding *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and identifying Shakespeare's social and political commentary.

(i) The Moon

The dominant imagery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* revolves around the moon and moonlight. The word moon occurs three times in the play's first nine lines of the play, the last of these three references in a most striking visual image: "the moon, like to a silver bow / New bent in heaven." One reason for repeating such images is to create the atmosphere of night.

Shakespeare's plays were mostly performed by daylight, and he had to create the idea of darkness or half-light in the imagination of his audience — there were no lights to turn off or to dim. In addition, these repeated moon references work upon the audience by creating a dreamlike atmosphere. Familiar things look different by moonlight; they are seen quite literally in a different light.

The moon itself is also a reminder of the passage of time, and that all things — like its phases — must change. The more educated people in Shakespeare's audience would have also understood the mythological significance of the moon. The moon-goddesses Luna and Diana were associated with chastity on the one hand and fertility on the other; two qualities that are united in faithful marriage, which the play celebrates.

(ii) Animals

Animal images also appear many times in the play, reminding us of the wildness of the woods in which most of the play's action takes place, where an unaccompanied female would be at "the mercy of wild beasts" in a setting where "the wolf howls the moon." But this is a comedy; these dangers are not really threatening. The animal references are stylized and conventional. The only physical animals encountered by the characters apart from Starveling's dog are the less-than-half-ass Nick Bottom and the totally artificial Lion played by Snug.

The animal references are included in the many images of the natural world that are associated with the fairy kingdom. These details emphasize the pretty delicacy of the fairies themselves and make the wood seem more real in the imagination of the audience. Oberon's "I know a bank" speech in Act II, Scene I is just one example of this.

(iii) Seeing

A Midsummer Night's Dream also contains many references to seeing, eyes, and eyesight. These images serve a double purpose. The repetition

reminds the audience of the difference between how things look and what they are, reinforcing the theme of appearance vs. reality, and that love is blind and beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

CHARACTERS

Puck

Also known as Robin Goodfellow, Puck is Oberon's jester, a mischievous fairy who delights in playing pranks on mortals. Though *A Midsummer Night's Dream* divides its action between several groups of characters, Puck is the closest thing the play has to a protagonist. His enchanting, mischievous spirit pervades the atmosphere, and his antics are responsible for many of the complications that propel the other main plots: he mistakes the young Athenians, applying the love potion to Lysander instead of Demetrius, thereby causing chaos within the group of young lovers; he also transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass.

Oberon

The king of the fairies, Oberon is initially at odds with his wife, Titania, because she refuses to relinquish control of a young Indian prince whom he wants for a knight. Oberon's desire for revenge on Titania leads him to send Puck to obtain the love-potion flower that creates so much of the play's confusion and farce.

Titania

The beautiful queen of the fairies, Titania resists the attempts of her husband, Oberon, to make a knight of the young Indian prince that she has been given. Titania's brief, potion-induced love for Nick Bottom, whose head Puck has transformed into that of an ass, yields the play's foremost example of the contrast motif.

Lysander

A young man of Athens, in love with Hermia. Lysander's relationship with Hermia invokes the theme of love's difficulty: he cannot marry her openly because Egeus, her father, wishes her to wed Demetrius; when Lysander and Hermia run away into the forest, Lysander becomes the victim of misapplied magic and wakes up in love with Helena.

Demetrius

A young man of Athens, initially in love with Hermia and ultimately in love with Helena. Demetrius's obstinate pursuit of Hermia throws love out of balance among the quartet of Athenian youths and precludes a symmetrical two-couple arrangement.

Hermia

Egeus's daughter, a young woman of Athens. Hermia is in love with Lysander and is a childhood friend of Helena. As a result of the fairies' mischief with Oberon's love potion, both Lysander and Demetrius suddenly fall in love with Helena. Self-conscious about her short stature, Hermia suspects that Helena has wooed the men with her height. By morning, however, Puck has sorted matters out with the love potion, and Lysander's love for Hermia is restored.

Helena

A young woman of Athens, in love with Demetrius. Demetrius and Helena were once betrothed, but when Demetrius met Helena's friend Hermia, he fell in love with her and abandoned Helena. Lacking confidence in her looks, Helena thinks that Demetrius and Lysander are mocking her when the fairies' mischief causes them to fall in love with her.

Egeus

Hermia's father, who brings a complaint against his daughter to Theseus: Egeus has given Demetrius permission to marry Hermia, but Hermia, in love with Lysander, refuses to marry Demetrius. Egeus's severe insistence that Hermia either respect his wishes or be held accountable to Athenian law places him squarely outside the whimsical dream realm of the forest.

Theseus

The heroic duke of Athens, engaged to Hippolyta. Theseus represents power and order throughout the play. He appears only at the beginning and end of the story, removed from the dreamlike events of the forest.

Hippolyta

The legendary queen of the Amazons, engaged to Theseus. Like Theseus, she symbolizes order.

Nick Bottom

The overconfident weaver chosen to play Pyramus in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Bottom is full of advice and self-confidence but frequently makes silly mistakes and misuses language. His simultaneous nonchalance about the beautiful Titania's sudden love for him and unawareness of the fact that Puck has transformed his head into that of an ass mark the pinnacle of his foolish arrogance.

Peter Quince

A carpenter and the nominal leader of the craftsmen's attempt to put on a play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Quince is often shoved aside

by the abundantly confident Bottom. During the craftsmen's play, Quince plays the Prologue.

Francis Flute

The bellows-mender chosen to play Thisbe in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Forced to play a young girl in love, the bearded craftsman determines to speak his lines in a high, squeaky voice.

Robin Starveling

The tailor chosen to play Thisbe's mother in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. He ends up playing the part of Moonshine.

Tom Snout

The tinker chosen to play Pyramus's father in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. He ends up playing the part of Wall, dividing the two lovers.

Snug

The joiner chosen to play the lion in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Snug worries that his roaring will frighten the ladies in the audience.

Philostrate

Theseus's Master of the Revels, responsible for organizing the entertainment for the duke's marriage celebration.

Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed

The fairies ordered by Titania to attend to Bottom after she falls in love with him.

ANALYSIS OF MAIN CHARACTERS

HERMIA

Critics often recognize the similarity between Hermia and Helena because both represent the difficulties of adolescent love. But these two young women are more different than their male counterparts, Lysander and Demetrius, who are, indeed, indistinguishable. Not only do these two young women show the trials and tribulations of young love, but their interactions emphasize the importance of female friendship and the gender expectations that often make women's lives difficult. As the play opens, Hermia is under trial. Her father insists she marry Demetrius, the man he prefers, rather than Lysander, the man she loves. Her father reminds the audience that Hermia has no choice in this matter: Hermia is his property, and the laws declare he can dispose of her as he wishes, even if this means sending her to her death. Theseus agrees: According to him, Hermia's father should be a god to her. She is merely a form in wax that has been

imprinted with her father's power. Even though Theseus offers her the choice of living in a nunnery rather than dying, he won't allow her to make her own decision about a husband. Her "fancy" conflicts with her father's "will," emphasizing that an adolescent girl has no power against the will of law.

Later in the play, Hermia is criticized for her being "dark," an Ethiopie, in contrast with "light" Helena's bloneness. Hermia's "darkness" is significant, reminding us of the racial slurs that continue to plague our culture. Similarly, her fears that Lysander has abandoned her because she's shorter than Helena show that body image issues aren't a recent problem for women: Even in the sixteenth century, women equated build with desirability, often discovering themselves on the short end of this stick. Hermia's belief that Lysander has deserted her because of her body type also emphasizes the fickleness of love, which is often based not on deep features of character, but on trivial aspects of appearance.

HELENA

Obsessed over Demetrius, Helena's character emphasizes the capriciousness of love and its excesses. Even though she knows she is making a fool of herself by pursuing Demetrius, Helena cannot stop the chase. She reminds us that love is blind, declaring that she is as beautiful as Hermia, so there is no logical explanation for Demetrius' sudden shift in affection. This point is further emphasized by the two men's love potion-induced attraction for her. Through these interactions, we learn that love is blind, illogical, seemingly produced by magic's sleight-of-hand, rather than reason's honesty. Like a child, lovers are often beguiled by trivial trinkets rather than deep character traits. This message is further heightened by the blandness of Lysander and Demetrius. As Lysander makes clear in his conversation with Egeus in Act I, no noticeable differences exist between the two men, so Helena could just as easily love one as the other.

Besides emphasizing love's arbitrary nature, Helena also highlights the gender differences that vex women. Unlike men who can woo whomever they please, women are not allowed to fight for love; instead, they must passively wait for the man of their dreams to notice them. In chasing Demetrius through the woods, Helena is breaking the rules of her sex, becoming the pursuer rather than the pursued. She likens herself to Apollo who chased the unwilling huntress Daphne through the woods. Helena's choice of examples is significant because it emphasizes the violence men or gods in this case have often perpetrated against women: Apollo wanted not only to capture Daphne, but to rape her. In chasing Demetrius, Helena claims to have appropriated Apollo's role, yet Demetrius is still the one who threatens violence when he vows to "do [her] mischief in the wood" if she doesn't stop following him. Not only must woman patiently wait for her

chosen lover to call, but she is also constantly threatened by male sexual violence if she resists unwanted male attentions.

What recourse do women have? Banding together. Thus, Helena is upset when she believes Hermia has betrayed her by joining Demetrius and Lysander. Childhood friendships between women should be stronger than the fickle love of men. Her comments make us question the position of all women in the play. For example, what is the source of Hippolyta's passivity in the play? Like Daphne, she has been captured and ravished by a male warrior. Did she lose her power when she lost the society of other women? And what about Titania? Why isn't she angry upon discovering that Oberon has charmed her and stolen her precious Indian boy? By focusing on these instances of male violence, the play implicitly suggests that women should become more active. Notice that Helena, who has actively pursued Demetrius, is rewarded for her proactive pursuit.

BOTTOM

Probably created as a showcase for one of Shakespeare's favorite actors, Bottom's role involves dancing, singing, and laughter. From his first introduction, Bottom is presented as courageous and outgoing. He is confident in his ability to play any, even all, roles in "Pyramus and Thisbe." For example, he says his performance of Pyramus will cause the audience to cry a stormload of tears. As the audience realizes, this confidence is misplaced, and Bottom is little more than a swaggering fool — indeed, an ass, as Puck's prank makes apparent.

Bottom's language adds to his comic appeal. For example, he claims that if he performed the role of Thisbe, he would speak her lines in a "monstrous little voice," an obviously contradictory statement. Then he would "aggravate" his voice if he played the lion's role so that the ladies in the audience would not be frightened; once again, Bottom's word choices show his silliness, while adding a comic element to the play. Similarly, rather than worry about his acting performance, Bottom wonders which beard would be most effective for the role of Pyramus.

Although Bottom is the locus of comedy in the play — he's a traditional Shakespearean clown — he also draws the audience's attention to serious themes, such as the relationship between reality and imagination. In preparing for the performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe," Bottom continually draws his fellow players' attention back to the question of the audience's gullibility: Will the ladies be upset when Pyramus kills himself; will they realize that the lion is not a lion but an actor? To remedy the first problem, Bottom asks Quince to write a prologue, explaining Pyramus is not really dead, and that Pyramus is not, in fact, Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. In this instance, Bottom focuses the audience's attention on the difficulty of

differentiating reality and perception; his solution suggests his belief that the players' acting will be too convincing, that they will fully realize the goal of theater. Similarly, to keep the ladies from being afraid of the lion, he suggests the actor playing the lion show half of his face and explain that he's really a man, not an animal. This belief in the power of theater extends to his solutions for bringing moonshine and a wall into the play. In creating a wall for the set, he believes covering a man with plaster and some loam will sufficiently convince an audience. Always ready to be surprised, to accept the world's wonder, Bottom believes his audience will be equally susceptible to the powers of art.

Bottom's openness to the world's oddities extends to his visit to the fairy realm, which could be viewed as simply another fantasy, much like the theater. It is ironic that Bottom, the most down-to-earth character in the play, is the only mortal who meets any of the fairies. When Titania falls in love with him, Bottom isn't surprised. But he does recognize that Titania's statements about him aren't true, for example that he is an angel or that his looks inspire confidence. At bottom, he knows love and reason don't often work at the same level. Once again, his comments focus on a key, recurring theme of the play: How do love and reason relate? Should love be based on reason or on fantasy? In addition, Bottom's interactions with Titania emphasize the class differences between the characters in the play; as a member of the artisan class, Bottom was literally in a different realm from the regal Queen of the Fairies.

When he returns to the real world, following his stay in the fairy world, Bottom would like to discuss his experiences. He can't. Although he usually is full of language, he is unable to speak about his fairy-inspired visions. Instead, he wants Peter Quince to write a ballad about these experiences; what ordinary language cannot accommodate, poetic language can. Unlike Theseus, Bottom has complete faith in the power of art to capture visionary experiences. Through him, Shakespeare implicitly validates the vision of the artist.

PUCK

Oberon's jester and lieutenant, Puck is a powerful supernatural creature, capable of circling the globe in 40 minutes or of enshrouding unsuspecting mortals in a deep fog. Also known as Robin Goodfellow, Puck would have been familiar to a sixteenth-century English audience, who would have recognized him as a common household spirit also often associated with travelers. But he's also a "puck," an elf or goblin that enjoys playing practical jokes on mortals. Although he is more mischievous than malevolent, Puck reminds us that the fairy world is not all goodness and generosity.

Another definition of his name aligns him with a Norse demon, sometimes associated with the devil. Perhaps it isn't surprising that he brings a somewhat more dangerous element to Titania and Oberon's seemingly benevolent fairy realm. He invokes the "damned spirits" that wander home to graveyards after a night of evil doing, while Oberon reminds him that his band of fairies are aligned with the morning dew, with sunlight and joy. Unlike Oberon who genuinely tries to create human happiness, Puck seems indifferent to human suffering. When he has accidentally caused both Lysander and Demetrius to fall in love with Helena, Puck enjoys the pleasure their folly brings him. Although he restores the proper lovers to each other, he does so only at Oberon's request, not out of any feelings of remorse. Similarly, Oberon feels repentance for Titania's idiotic love for Bottom, but Puck doesn't. While Oberon and Titania bless the newlyweds in Act V, Puck reminds the audience of the dangers of the night, graves gaping open and wolves howling at the moon. As a traditional Shakespearean fool, Puck makes us aware of the darker side of life, the underworld realm of shadows and magic and, ultimately, death.

OBERON

The King of the Fairies, Oberon's personality has two sides. On the one hand, he ensures that the proper lovers end up together by the end of the play. He sympathizes with the sorely abused Helena and causes Demetrius to fall madly in love with her. As a benevolent ruler of the spirit world, he also brings blessing of peace and health to the future families of the newlyweds. But his personality is not all kindness; Oberon shows a more malicious side in his dealings with Titania.

Their initial interaction in the play begins with a fight. The dual has been brought about by Titania's possession of an Indian boy. While Titania appears to be legitimately raising this child, the only son of one of her votresses who died in childbirth, Oberon has decided he wants the boy as a servant. Why? Shakespeare never tells us. Perhaps Oberon wants to prove his male authority over Titania; perhaps he feels Titania is overindulging the boy and would like to bring discipline into his life. Any explanation the audience comes up with must be based in conjecture, because Shakespeare does not explain Oberon's motivation. No explanation, though, would seem to justify the cruelty Oberon uses in winning the boy away from Titania. Oberon casts a spell upon her, a trick that leaves her in love with Bottom, the ass. Many critics recognize Oberon's kindness in releasing her from this spell as soon as he has gotten what he wanted from her — the boy — but his treachery must still be acknowledged.

THESEUS

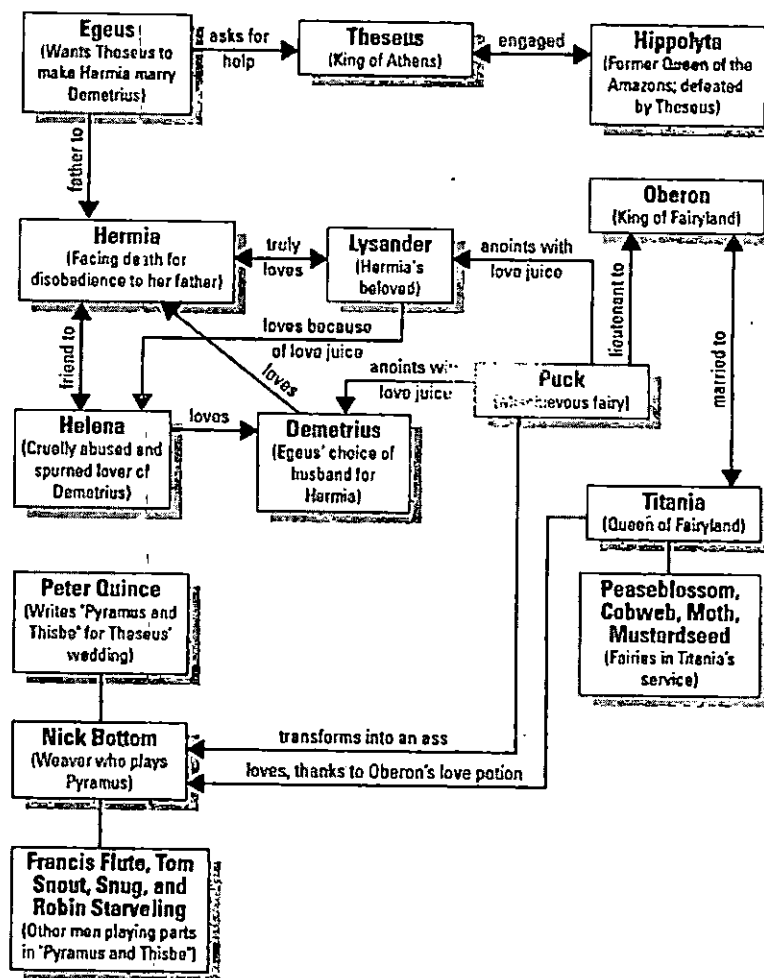
Mid Summer Night's Dream

Like Oberon, Theseus is a contradictory character. On the one hand, he is the ruler of Athens and represents the voice of law and authority in the mortal realm, paralleling Oberon's similar position in the fairy world. His duty as dispenser of justice is seen early in the play through his interaction with Hermia and Egeus. Although Theseus is more understanding of Hermia's situation than her father, he still vows to sentence her to death if she won't accept one of his two alternatives: marrying Demetrius or entering a convent. Even when Hippolyta is noticeably upset with his verdict, Theseus insists that a daughter's first goal must be to obey her father. As upholder of authority in Athens, Theseus' first duty is to support the city's laws, even when they appear unfair.

Based on this example, Theseus' view of love would seem to fit within the boundaries of law and reason. This notion is supported by his speech at the beginning of Act V, in which he famously announces that the imaginations of poets, madmen, and lovers are all the same: All are prone to excesses beyond the realm of reason. But isn't Theseus also a lover? His statement seems to discount his own position as lover of Hippolyta; as a reasonable man, does he qualify as a lover? Yet even the rational Theseus claims time moves too slowly as he anticipates his wedding day, showing his unreasonable longing. But his love for Hippolyta is not the pure, fresh, freely chosen affection of Hermia and Lysander. As Theseus reminds his bride, he won her by doing her harm: She was part of the spoils of war. In their quarrel, Oberon and Titania tell us this is not the first relationship for either Hippolyta or Theseus. Not only has Theseus' name been linked with Titania's, but he has supposedly ravished and deserted Perigouna, Ariadne, and Antiope, among others. Similarly, Hippolyta has been the "buskin'd mistress" of Oberon and has spent time with Hercules and Cadmus. Not lovers in their first bloom, Theseus and Hippolyta offer a picture of more mature love.

Theseus' famous speech from Act V also appears to denigrate the poet's imaginative faculty by aligning him with lovers and madmen. He argues that the poet "gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name," a trick performed by strong imaginations. His theory denies the importance of craft and discipline in the creation of art, casting artistic talent as little more than airy fantasy. In choosing a play for the wedding festivities, he does not select the most skillful performers, but those who present their art with simplicity, duty, and modesty. While Hippolyta dislikes the silly performance of the players, Theseus argues that both good and bad actors create but "shadows," and the audience must flesh out the performances through their own imaginations. Overall, Theseus' view of imagination

minimizes the work of the artist, placing more responsibility on the audience.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF SCENES

Act I: Scene 1

Summary

This scene opens in Theseus' palace in Athens. It is four days before his wedding to Hippolyta, the former queen of the Amazons, and Theseus is impatient with how slowly time is moving. Hippolyta assures him that the wedding day will soon arrive.

As Theseus and Hippolyta plan their wedding festivities, Egeus and his daughter, Hermia, arrive on the scene with Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus is angry because his daughter refuses to marry Demetrius, the man of his choice, but is instead in love with Lysander. Egeus accuses Lysander of bewitching his daughter and stealing her love by underhanded means. Agreeing with Egeus, Theseus declares that it is a daughter's duty to obey her father. Hermia demands to know the worst punishment she will receive

for disobedience. Death or spending her life in a nunnery comprise Hermia's choices. Lysander joins the argument, arguing that he is Demetrius' equal in everything and is, indeed, more constant in his affection than Demetrius, who was recently in love with Helena. These proceedings upset Hippolyta, because the prospect of Hermia's death upsets her plans for a happy, festive wedding day.

Finally, everyone except Lysander and Hermia leave the stage. Lysander reminds Hermia that the course of true love has never run smoothly, so they must view their difficulties as typical for lovers. He has a plan for eluding Athenian law: The two lovers will run away from Athens and live with his childless widow aunt to whom he has always been a surrogate son. Living with her, they will be outside of Athenian jurisdiction so that Hermia can avoid Theseus' death sentence and can marry. Having few other options, Hermia is enthusiastic about Lysander's idea and declares her undying love for him.

Just as the lovers have completed their plan for escape, Helena enters the scene. What charms does Hermia possess, Helena wonders, that have so completely captivated Demetrius? Hermia swears that she has no interest in Demetrius, that he actually seems to thrive on her hatred of him. Hermia and Lysander confess their intention of fleeing Athens, and Helena decides to tell Demetrius about it in a final attempt to win his love.

Analysis

From the outset, Shakespeare subtly portrays the lovers as a group out of balance, a motif that creates tension throughout the play. For the sake of symmetry, the audience wants the four lovers to form two couples; instead, both men love Hermia, leaving Helena out of the equation. The women are thus in nonparallel situations, adding to the sense of structural imbalance. By establishing the fact that Demetrius once loved Helena, Shakespeare suggests the possibility of a harmonious resolution to this love tangle: if Demetrius could only be made to love Helena again, then all would be well. By the end of the play, the fairies' intervention effects just such an outcome, and all *does* become well, though it is worth noting that the restoration of Demetrius's love for Helena is the result of magic rather than a natural reawakening of his feelings.

The genre of comedy surrounding the Athenian lovers is farce, in which the humor stems from exaggerated characters trying to find their way out of ludicrous situations. Shakespeare portrays the lovers as overly serious, as each is deeply and earnestly preoccupied with his or her own feelings: Helena is anxious about her looks, reacting awkwardly when Lysander calls her "fair"; Hermia later becomes self-conscious about her short stature; Demetrius is willing to see Hermia executed to prevent her from marrying

another man; and Lysander seems to have cast himself as the hero of a great love story in his own mind III.ii.188, III.ii.247. Hermia is stubborn and quarrelsome, while Helena lacks self-confidence and believes that other people mock her. The airy world of the fairies and the absurd predicaments in which the lovers find themselves once in the forest make light of the lovers' grave concerns.

Act I: Scene 2

Summary

In this scene, the action shifts to the cottage of Peter Quince, the director of a band of amateur actors who are planning a play to perform for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. The play enacts the tragic story of Pyramus and Thisbe, two young lovers who die during a clandestine meeting. Quince is in the process of assigning roles to the various players but meets with many objections to his casting efforts.

Nick Bottom, the weaver who is an entertaining but foolish man, usurps Quince's authority as director and claims he would like to play all of the roles in the drama. He is cast as lover Pyramus. Flute, the bellows mender, is assigned the role of the heroine, Thisbe. Not happy to play a female role because he wants to let his beard grow, Flute is pleased to learn that he can wear a mask for the performance so he won't need to shave. Snug, the joiner, is cast in the role of the lion.

Bottom wants to appropriate this role as he wanted to appropriate the others, claiming his roar could make the ladies shriek. His statement makes the players nervous. They worry that if the lion is too authentic, the women in the audience will be frightened, literally, to death: They fear that Theseus might have them hanged for scaring the ladies. Bottom agrees to temper his roar, making it gentle as a "sucking dove," but Quince flatters him by insisting that Snug must keep the part of the lion because only Bottom can play the leading role of Pyramus. When the casting is finally finished, Quince sends the players off to learn their lines and tells them to meet for a rehearsal the following evening at the Duke's oak.

Analysis

The most important motif in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and one of the most important literary techniques Shakespeare uses throughout the play, is that of contrast. The three main groups of characters are all vastly different from one another, and the styles, moods, and structures of their respective subplots also differ. It is by incorporating these contrasting realms into a single story that Shakespeare creates the play's dreamlike atmosphere. Almost diametrically opposite the beautiful, serious, and love-struck young nobles are the clumsy, ridiculous, and deeply confused

craftsmen, around whom many of the play's most comical scenes are centered.

Where the young lovers are graceful and well spoken—almost comically well suited to their roles as melodramatically passionate youths—the craftsmen often fumble their words and could not be less well suited for acting. This disjunction reveals itself as it becomes readily apparent that the craftsmen have no idea how to put on a dramatic production: their speeches are full of impossible ideas and mistakes Bottom, for example, claims that he will roar “as gently / as any sucking dove”; their concerns about their parts are absurd Flute does not want to play Thisbe because he is growing a beard; and their extended discussion about whether they will be executed if the lion's roaring frightens the ladies further evidences the fact that their primary concern is with themselves, not their art.

The fact that the workmen have chosen to perform the Pyramus and Thisbe story, a Babylonian myth familiar to Shakespeare's audiences from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, only heightens the comedy. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is highly dramatic, with suicides and tragically wasted love themes that Shakespeare takes up in *Romeo and Juliet* as well. Badly suited to their task and inexperienced, although endlessly well meaning, the craftsmen are sympathetic figures even when the audience laughs at them—a fact made explicit in Act V, when Theseus makes fun of their play even as he honors their effort. The contrast between the serious nature of the play and the bumbling foolishness of the craftsmen makes the endeavor all the more ridiculous. Further, the actors' botched telling of the youthful love between Pyramus and Thisbe implicitly mocks the melodramatic love tangle of Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander.

Act II: Scene 1

Summary

This scene transports its viewers from Athens into the woods outside of the city, the dwelling place of Oberon, Titania, and their band of fairies. The scene begins with a conversation between Oberon's mischievous elf Robin Goodfellow, also known as Puck, and one of Titania's attendants. Puck warns her to keep Titania away from this part of the woods because Oberon will be reveling here, and if the two meet there will certainly be a serious quarrel. Oberon is angry with Titania because she refuses to give him a sweet Indian boy upon whom she dotes. Titania's attendant suddenly recognizes Puck, accusing him of being the hobgoblin who is blamed for roguish acts in the village, such as frightening young women or misleading night travelers. Puck admits that he is this “merry wanderer of the night.”

Suddenly Oberon and Titania enter the scene from opposite directions. Their bickering begins. Each accuses the other of having had affairs, and

Titania says Oberon's persecution of her has caused the current chaos in the world: The rivers are flooding, the corn is rotting, and people are plagued by "rheumatic" diseases. Oberon blames Titania; if she would simply relinquish the Indian boy, peace would be restored. Titania refuses to let the boy go because his mother was a close friend of hers, and when she died in childbirth, Titania agreed to raise her son.

Hatching a plan to win the Indian boy, Oberon sends Puck in search of a flower called love-in-idleness. When the juice of this magical flower is poured on sleepers' eyelids, it makes them dote crazily on the first live creature they see upon awakening. In this way, Oberon plans to make Titania fall in love with some wild beast; he won't release her from this unpleasant spell until she gives him the Indian boy.

After Puck has left in search of the powerful flower, Oberon sits scheming. Demetrius and Helena unknowingly stumble into his bower, but he is invisible to them. Helena actively pursues her beloved, but Demetrius vows to hurt her if she doesn't leave him alone. After they have left, Puck returns. Taking pity on Helena, Oberon tells Puck to anoint the eyes of the Athenian man Demetrius so that he will fall in love with this jilted woman. Puck promises to fulfill Oberon's order, though Puck hasn't seen Demetrius, so he doesn't know which Athenian Oberon is talking about.

Analysis

Act II serves two main functions: it introduces the fairies and their realm, and it initiates the romantic confusion that will eventually help restore the balance of love. The fairies, whom Shakespeare bases heavily on characters familiar from English folklore, are among the most memorable and delightful characters in the play. They speak in lilting rhymes infused with gorgeous poetic imagery. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play dominated by the presence of doubles, and the fairies are designed to contrast heavily with the young lovers and the craftsmen. Whereas the lovers are earnest and serious, Puck and the other pixies are merry and full of laughter; whereas the craftsmen are bumbling, earthy, and engage in methodical labor, the fairies are delicate, airy, and indulge in effortless magic and enchantment.

The conflict between Oberon and Titania imports into the fairy realm the motif of love being out of balance. As with the Athenian lovers, the eventual resolution of the tension between the two occurs only by means of magic. Though the craftsmen do not experience romantic confusion about one another, Bottom becomes involved in an accidental romance with Titania in Act III, and in Act V two craftsmen portray the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe, who commit suicide after misinterpreting events.

A Midsummer Night's Dream was probably performed before Queen Elizabeth, and Shakespeare managed to make a flattering reference to his monarch in Act II, scene i. When Oberon introduces the idea of the love potion to Puck, he says that he once saw Cupid fire an arrow that missed its mark:

*That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,
Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid, all armed.
A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal thronèd by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon,
And the imperial vot'ress passèd on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free
II.i.155-164.*

Queen Elizabeth never married and was celebrated in her time as a woman of chastity, a virgin queen whose concerns were above the flesh. Here Shakespeare alludes to that reputation by describing Cupid firing an arrow "at a fair vestal thronèd by the west"—Queen Elizabeth—whom the heat of passion cannot affect because the arrow is cooled "in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon." Shakespeare celebrates how Elizabeth put affairs of state before her personal life and lived "in maiden meditation, fancy-free." He nestles a patriotic aside in an evocative description, couching praise for the ruler on whose good favor he depended in dexterous poetic language. Audiences in Shakespeare's day would most likely have recognized this imaginative passage's reference to their monarch.

Because many of the main themes and motifs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are very light, even secondary to the overall sense of comedy and the dreamlike atmosphere, it is perhaps more important to try to understand not *what* the play means but rather *how* Shakespeare creates its mood. One technique that he uses is to embellish action with a wealth of finely wrought poetic imagery, using language to work upon the imagination of the audience and thereby effect a kind of magic upon the stage: "I must go seek some dewdrops here," one fairy says, "And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear" II.i.14-15. The fairies conjure many of the play's most evocative images: Oberon, for instance, describes having heard

a mermaid on a dolphin's back

Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath

That the rude sea grew civil at her song

And certain stars shot madly from their spheres

To hear the sea-maid's music

II.i.150-154

and seen

a bank where the wild thyme blows,

Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,

Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,

With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine.

There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,

Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight

II.i.249-254.

This technique extends even to the suggestive names of some of the characters, such as the craftsmen Snug, Starveling, Quince, Flute, and Snout, and the fairies Cobweb, Mustardseed, Mote, and Peaseblossom.

Act II: Scene 2

Summary

Titania's fairies sing her a soothing lullaby as she prepares for sleep. While she rests, Oberon creeps up, squeezes the potion onto her eyelids and utters a spell to make her awaken when something vile is near.

When Oberon leaves, Lysander and Hermia wander into Titania's bower, but she is invisible to them. The lovers are lost, and Lysander suggests they stop to sleep for the night. Hermia agrees but won't let him sleep too close to her, even though Lysander claims that, because they are engaged, they can sleep innocently side by side. But Hermia insists on separation, so they sleep a short distance apart. After they have fallen asleep, Puck enters, searching for the Athenian whose eyes Oberon wanted him to anoint with the love juice. Seeing Lysander and Hermia lying apart from each other, he mistakes them for Demetrius and Helena and erroneously applies the magical juice to Lysander.

After Puck exits, Demetrius and Helena run into the bower. Helena is in frantic pursuit of her beloved, but he manages to flee his pursuer and sprints into the woods. Depressed and exhausted, Helena stops to rest and notices Lysander asleep on the ground. She wakes him and, thanks to Puck's potion, he immediately falls in love with her. When he claims to have abandoned Hermia, who he now describes as dull and unattractive, Helena assumes he is teasing her so she runs away. Lysander chases after her, and Hermia awakens. She has been dreaming about a fearful snake that ate her heart awake. Frightened that Lysander has disappeared, she, too, rushes into the woods.

Analysis

Act II, scene ii introduces the plot device of the love potion, which Shakespeare uses to explore the comic possibilities inherent in the motif of love out of balance. Oberon's meddling in the affairs of humans further disrupts the love equilibrium, and the love potion symbolizes the fact that the lovers themselves will not reason out their dilemmas; rather, an outside force—magic—will resolve the love tangle.

The ease with which characters' affections change in the play, so that Lysander is madly in love with Hermia at one point and with Helena at another, has troubled some readers, who feel that Shakespeare profanes the idea of true love by treating it as inconstant and subject to outside manipulation. It is important to remember, however, that while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains elements of romance, it is not a true love story like *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare's aim is not to comment on the nature of true love but rather to mock gently the melodramatic afflictions and confusions that love induces. Demetrius, Helena, Hermia, and Lysander are meant not to be romantic archetypes but rather sympathetic figures thrown into the confusing circumstances of a romantic farce.

Like much farce, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* relies heavily on misunderstanding and mistaken identity to create its humorous entanglements. Oberon's unawareness of the presence of a second Athenian couple—Lysander and Hermia—in the forest enables Puck's mistaken application of the flower's juice. This confusion underscores the crucial role of circumstance in the play: it is not people who are responsible for what happens but rather fate. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, oppositely, Shakespeare forces his characters to make crucial decisions that affect their lives.

Much of the comic tension in this scene and throughout the rest of the play, as the confusion wrought by the love potion only increases stems from the fact that the solution to the love tangle seems so simple to the reader/audience: if Demetrius could simply be made to love Hermia, then the lovers could pair off symmetrically, and love would be restored to a point of balance. Shakespeare teases the audience by dangling the magic flower as a simple mechanism by which this resolution could be achieved. He uses this mechanism, however, to cycle through a number of increasingly ridiculous arrangements before he allows the love story to arrive at its inevitable happy conclusion.

Act III: Scene 1

Summary

Comedy returns to the play in the opening of this scene. Peter Quince and his company are rehearsing their rendition of Pyramus and Thisbe.

Bottom has serious reservations about the play: Pyramus kills himself with a sword, and the lion is frightening, both factors that are sure to terrify the women in the audience. The other players agree, wondering if the play should be abandoned, but Bottom has a solution. A prologue needs to be written to explain that Pyramus is only an actor, and the actor playing the lion must show half of his face during his performance and tell the audience his true identity. With these problems successfully solved, Quince mentions two other difficulties with the upcoming performance: It requires moonshine and a wall. After consulting a calendar, they discover that the moon will be shining on the night of the performance, so they can simply leave a window open. The wall is a greater dilemma for these silly men. Finally, Bottom discovers a solution: An actor covered in plaster will play the role of the wall. Everyone agrees, and the rehearsal begins.

Puck eavesdrops on the performance, amused by the way these actors butcher their lines. The egotistical Bottom sits in the bushes, waiting his cue, and Puck can't resist playing a joke on him: He gives Bottom an ass' head. When Bottom enters, declaring his love for Thisbe, the other terrified actors dash into the woods. Unaware of his transformation, Bottom has no idea what has frightened them. As he walks singing through the woods, Titania, with the love juice on her eyes, awakens and falls immediately in love with the beastly Bottom. She appoints four fairies — Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed — to serve the needs of her new lover.

Analysis

The structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is roughly such that Act I introduces the main characters and the conflict; Act II sets up the interaction among the Athenian lovers, the fairies, and the craftsmen the lovers wander through the forest, the fairies make mischief with the love potion; and Act III develops the comical possibilities of these interactions. As Act III is the first act in which all three groups appear, the fantastic contrasts between them are at their most visible.

The craftsmen's attempt at drama is a comedy of incongruity, as the rough, unsophisticated men demonstrate their utter inability to conceive a competent theatrical production. Their proposal to let the audience know that it is night by having a character play the role of Moonshine exemplifies their straightforward, literal manner of thinking and their lack of regard for subtlety. In their earthy and practical natures, the craftsmen stand in stark contrast to the airy and impish fairies.

The fairies' magic is one of the main components of the dreamlike atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it is integral to the plot's progression. It throws love increasingly out of balance and brings the farce into its most frenzied state. With the youths' love tangle already affected by

the potion, Shakespeare creates further havoc by generating a romance across groups, as Titania falls in love with the ass-headed Bottom. Obviously, the delicate fairy queen is dramatically unsuited to the clumsy, monstrous craftsman. Shakespeare develops this romance with fantastic aplomb and heightens the comedy of the incongruity by making Bottom fully unaware of his transformed state. Rather, Bottom is so self-confident that he finds it fairly unremarkable that the beautiful fairy queen should wish desperately to become his lover. Further, his ironic reference to his colleagues as asses and his hunger for hay emphasize the ridiculousness of his lofty self-estimation.

Act III: Scene 2

Summary

Encountering Oberon in another part of the forest, Puck explains the outcome of his experiments with the love potion. Oberon is pleased to learn that Titania has fallen in love with the monstrous Bottom and that Puck has also fixed the disdainful Athenian. Just after Puck assures him that Demetrius must now love Helena, Demetrius and Hermia enter the scene. Oberon recognizes Demetrius, but Puck realizes this is not the same Athenian he bewitched with the potion. Because her darling Lysander has mysteriously disappeared, Hermia accuses Demetrius of murdering him and hiding the body. Demetrius insists that he didn't kill his enemy, but Hermia refuses to believe him. Giving up the argument in despair, Demetrius sinks to the ground and falls asleep, while Hermia continues her search for the missing Lysander.

Oberon reprimands Puck for anointing the wrong Athenian with the love juice. To correct the situation, Oberon sends Puck in search of Helena and then squeezes the magic potion into the cold-hearted Demetrius' eyes. Lysander and Helena enter the scene, still bickering because Helena thinks he is mocking her. Their voices wake Demetrius, who falls in love with Helena at first sight, compliments of Oberon's potion. Hearing what she believes are Demetrius' phony declarations of love, Helena is furious: Both Lysander and Demetrius are now making fun of her. When Hermia enters, the situation gets even worse.

Not knowing about the potion-induced change in Lysander's feelings for her, Hermia is shocked when he declares he no longer loves her. Of course, Helena thinks that Hermia is also in on the farce and can't believe her closest childhood friend could be so nasty. After the lovers have all fought and fled the scene, Oberon forces Puck to fix the problem before the men kill each other. He advises Puck to create a deep fog in which the lovers will get lost and, finally, fall asleep in exhaustion. When they awake in the morning, the night's crazy events will seem like a dream except that

Demetrius will be in love with Helena. Oberon then rushes to Titania's bower to beg for the Indian boy.

Analysis

Shakespeare's parody of love reaches its peak in this scene. Although Hermia claims Lysander's love is truer than the sun onto the day, previous scenes have shown that his love was easily altered with the application of a little love juice. When Oberon criticizes Puck for turning a true love false, rather than a false love true, Puck replies, "one man holding troth, / A million fail, confounding oath on oath" 92-93, suggesting only one man in a million is actually able to be true to his vows of love; all others break oath on oath, including the seemingly true Lysander. The comedy of the situation appeals to Puck, who muses on what fools "mortals be."

In declaring his love for Helena, Demetrius focuses first on her eyes, which he believes are clearer than crystal. Her lips are luscious fruit, like ripe and tempting cherries, but, more interestingly, he emphasizes her "whiteness." She is a pure white, like the snow on top of some high summit; indeed, in his eyes she is a "princess of pure white." The emphasis on white links her with purity, with innocence, with the dazzling, blinding light of a snow-covered field. But it also has a racial overtone. As whiteness becomes associated with purity, darkness becomes linked with its opposite, with evil. This creates a hierarchical dichotomy in which whiteness is prized and darkness is denigrated. As a result, dark-skinned people are also maligned, as happens here with Hermia. Lysander critiques her by labeling her an "Ethiope" and a "tawny Tartar" and implying that her darkness makes her somehow inferior to Helena.

Not surprisingly, Helena is angered by what she views as her friends toying with her, so she adds to the criticism by commenting on Hermia's stature. Indeed, height seems to play a role in love, and Hermia seems to believe that Lysander loves Helena simply because she is the taller of the two women. This exchange emphasizes the arbitrariness of the factors that create or repel love: eye color, hair color, height.

Like Helena earlier in the play, Hermia is here pushed beyond the limits of "maiden's patience" 66; when dealing with love, women forget the gender limits that have been imposed upon them, perhaps because they are judged by such seemingly ridiculous standards. Retaliating against suggestions that she is small, even dwarfish, Hermia calls Helena a "painted maypole." This comment implies a double critique: not only is Helena as skinny as a pole, but she is "painted," suggesting she is sexually knowledgeable. The fight that ensues between the two women puts them both beyond the limits of supposedly feminine gentleness. Helena further

critiques Hermia by calling her "keen," "shrewd," and a "vixen." A short shrew, Hermia is not the ideal woman.

In calling Demetrius a serpent, an adder, Hermia creates continuity with Act II, Scene 2, in which she dreamed that a serpent ate her heart out. But in this instance, Hermia mistakes the snake; Demetrius has not killed Lysander, but her heart will soon be pierced with an even greater shock. Hermia's hatred of Demetrius parallels his loathing of Helena, again adding continuity to the text. Notice how carefully Shakespeare has structured his play; by repeating key images, such as the moon or the serpent or Cupid's arrow, and key relationships and feelings, he has created a fluid, continuous text.

The relationship of Hermia and Helena is also parallel with that of Titania and her Indian votress. Like Titania and her friend, Helena and Hermia are as close as sisters. Together they sang with one voice, often working as if their hands and minds were united. Indeed, Helena compares them to a "double cherry" that seems to be parted, yet is united at the stem. Close friendship is another form of love exalted in this play. Helena chides her friend for destroying this ancient bond for the sake of a man; not only is this action a treachery against Helena, but it is an injury against all women. Of course, Helena here forgets that she has also done Hermia wrong; she told Demetrius about her friend's plan of elopement as a ploy to win his love, despite the fact that such knowledge might not be beneficial to Hermia. The play shows the conflicts that often ensue between love and friendship. For women in particular, friendship appears to be a vital part of life. Both Titania's actions with the Indian boy and Helena's comments in this scene suggest that women need to stick together, supporting each other, rather than letting their love for a man destroy their bonds of friendship. While the tides of love are forever ebbing and flowing, the waves of true friendship are calm and constant.

Such a friendship does not exist between Lysander and Demetrius. Although the text presents enough detail about the women's appearances and personalities for the reader to differentiate them, the two male lovers are basically indistinguishable. Both Lysander and Demetrius are critiqued for their fickle, faithless ways, and Helena criticizes them further for their unmanly behavior toward her. Suggesting that they are men only "in show," Helena argues that real men would not mock a lady, would not pretend to love her when they actually hate her. Making a woman cry does not qualify as "a manly enterprise" in Helena's opinion. What are the attributes of a gentleman? For Helena, honesty and faithfulness seem to be the two primary requirements. Neither she nor Hermia provides any explanation for their love of Demetrius and Lysander, respectively. No mention is made of either man's appearance or of any special aspects of his

personality, so there seems to be no reason for either woman's love. Indeed, the similarities in Demetrius' and Lysander's personalities become pronounced as they run through the fog Puck creates to keep them from fighting. Puck speaks with both their voices, so together the three generate a melange of voices in which individual identities are completely lost.

Do we see changes in the personalities of Puck or Oberon in this scene? From the beginning of the play, Puck has been presented as a mischievous elf, toying with the people in the surrounding villages to create entertainment for Oberon. His playful side is also emphasized here. As the scene opens, he revels in relating to Oberon the effects of his transformation of Bottom into an ass. Not only did Titania fall in love with the monstrous fellow, but Bottom's friends were so frightened by the change that they felt the entire woods had been transformed into something malevolent, so that even the briars and branches maliciously tore their clothing. When he realizes that he's placed the love potion into the wrong Athenian's eyes and that soon two men will be chasing after Helena, he is excited by the "sport," preferring things that happen "prepost'rously" 121. In addition, he does not accept the blame for this mistake but labels it an act of fate. Similarly, he blames Cupid, rather than himself, for making "poor females mad" 441. Mischief and chaos are Puck's domain.

Oberon, on the other hand, is a more responsible fairy. The ruler of the fairy world, Oberon is not pleased to learn that Puck has charmed the wrong Athenian. On the one hand, Oberon's behavior towards Titania is imperious and self-serving: He is delighted that she has fallen for an ass. Yet he is not interested in creating havoc solely for his own amusement, as is Puck. Instead, he would like to make false loves turn true, promoting joy and love in the world. Oberon also reveals that he is not one of the "damned spirits" who haunts the world by night. He is a different type of spirit, one that enjoys the morning, the fiery-red sun. While literature abounds with malevolent fairies who vex humanity, Oberon and his crew are benevolent creatures, promoting peace and happiness in the human realm.

Act IV: Scene 1

Summary

Bottom is enjoying his sojourn in Titania's bower: Peaseblossom amiably scratches his head, while Cobweb goes off in search of honey for him. As Bottom sleeps in Titania's arms, Oberon walks in. Feeling pity for Titania's pitiful love for this ass, Oberon squeezes an herb on her eyes to release her from the spell. Titania awakens, telling Oberon about her strange dream of being in love with an ass. Oberon has Puck remove the ass' head from Bottom. Now that Oberon has won the Indian boy from

Titania, he is willing to forget their argument, and the two, reunited, dance off together so they can bless Theseus' marriage.

Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus are walking through the woods when Theseus suddenly spies the sleeping lovers. Egeus recognizes them but wonders how they ended up together because Demetrius and Lysander are enemies. Theseus imagines they woke early to observe the rite of May and remembers this is the day Hermia needs to make a choice about her future. When the lovers are awakened, Demetrius confesses that he now loves Helena. No one really understands what has happened. Theseus decides the lovers should be married along with him and Hippolyta.

As the lovers return to the palace, the scene shifts to Bottom. Just awakening from his dream, Bottom declares he'll have Quince write a ballad about it, called "Bottom's Dream," because it has no bottom.

Analysis

Barely 300 lines long, Act IV is the shortest and most transitional of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* five acts. The first three serve respectively to introduce the characters, establish the comic situation, and develop the comedy; Act IV ends the conflict and leads to the happy ending in Act V. What is most remarkable, perhaps, is the speed with which the conflict is resolved and the farce comes to an end; despite the ubiquity of chaos in Act III, all that is necessary to resolve matters is a bit of potion on Lysander's eyelids and Oberon's forgiveness of his wife. The climactic moment between Titania and Oberon, during which she agrees to give him the Indian boy, is not even shown onstage but is merely described.

Though Demetrius's love of Helena is a by-product of the magic potion rather than an expression of his natural feelings, love has been put into balance, allowing for a traditional marriage ending. As is often the case with Shakespeare, the dramatic situation is closely tied to the circumstances of the external environment; just as the conflict is ending and a semblance of order is restored among the characters, the sun comes up. There is no real climax in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; rather, as soon as the scenario has progressed to a suitable degree of complication and hilarity, Shakespeare simply invokes the fairies' magic to dispel all conflict. As the sun comes up, the reappearance of Theseus and Hippolyta, who symbolize the power and structure of the outside world, begins to dispel the magical dream of the play.

Theseus and Hippolyta bookend the play. They are extremely important figures both at its beginning and at its end, but they disappear entirely during the main action in the magical forest. The duke and his Amazon bride are romanticized in the play, but they belong solely to the nonmagical waking world, where they remain wholly in control of their own

feelings and actions. An important element of the dream realm, as the lovers come to realize upon waking in a daze, is that one is in control of neither oneself nor one's surroundings. In this way, the forest and fairies contribute to the lovers' sense of their experience as a dream, even though the action happens largely while they are awake.

Act IV: Scene 2

Summary

In this short scene, Quince and Flute are searching for their missing friend, Bottom. They worry that "Pyramus and Thisbe" won't be performed without him. Theseus is known for his generosity, and the actors believe they will potentially be rewarded with a lifelong pension for their stellar performance of this play. As they lament this lost opportunity, Bottom suddenly returns. His friends want to hear his story, but Bottom tells them there isn't time for that now: They must prepare for the play. He warns them to avoid onions and garlic so their breath will be sweet for the "sweet comedy" they will perform.

Analysis-

This brief comic scene returns the focus of the play to the subplot of the Athenian craftsmen. Structurally, Act IV, scene ii represents something of a new beginning for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the main conflict of the play has been resolved, but rather than ending with the weddings of the lovers, as is customary in an Elizabethan comedy the weddings do not even occur onstage here, Shakespeare chooses to include an extended epilogue devoted to sheer comedy. The epilogue takes up all of Act V and centers around the craftsmen's performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* for the Athenian crowd. Act IV, scene ii transfers the focus of the play from magic and unbalanced love to a play-within-a-play, in which the themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not too heavy to begin with, are recycled into a form so ridiculous and garbled that the play draws to a wholly untroubled conclusion.

Though the preceding events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been far from tragic, many of the characters have experienced unpleasant emotions, such as jealousy, lovesickness, and insecurity. Act IV, scene ii makes a basic transition from sadness to joy as Bottom's return transforms his fellow craftsmen's sorrow and confusion into delight and eagerness. It is no coincidence that Bottom's reappearance occurs almost simultaneously with the audience being told that the lovers have been married. Just as the marriages dispel the romantic angst of the play, so does Bottom's return dispel the worry of his comrades. Similarly, the arrival in the forest of Theseus and Hippolyta, representatives of order, coincides with the

Athenian lovers' waking from their chaotic, dreamlike romp of the previous night.

Act V: Scene 1

Summary

The play has come full circle, and the cast has now returned to the palace where Theseus and Hippolyta discuss the strange tale the lovers have told them about the events of the previous evening. The joyous lovers enter, and Theseus decides it is time to plan the festivities for the evening. Of all the possible performances, the play "Pyramus and Thisbe" turns out to be the most promising. Theseus is intrigued by the paradoxical summary of the play, which suggests it is both merry and tragical, tedious and brief. Philostrate tries to dissuade Theseus from choosing this play, but Theseus thinks its simplicity will be refreshing.

In the remainder of the scene, the players present "Pyramus and Thisbe," accompanied by the lovers' critical commentary. Hippolyta is disgusted by this pathetic acting, but Theseus argues that even the best actors create only a brief illusion; the worst must be assisted by an imaginative audience. Following the performance, Bottom arises from the dead, asking Theseus if he'd like to hear an epilogue or watch a rustic dance. Theseus opts for the dance, having lost patience with the players' acting.

The play concludes with three epilogues. The first is Puck's poetic monologue, delivered while he sweeps up the stage. Oberon and Titania offer their blessing on the house and on the lovers' future children. The play ends with Puck's final speech, in which he apologizes for the weakness of the performance and promises that the next production will be better.

Analysis

The structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is somewhat compacted in that the first four acts contain all of the play's main action, with the height of conflict occurring in Act III and a happy turn of events resembling a conclusion in Act IV. Act V serves as a kind of joyful comic epilogue to the rest of the play, focusing on the craftsmen's hilariously bungling efforts to present their play and on the noble Athenians' good-natured jesting during the craftsmen's performance. The heady tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe* becomes comical in the hands of the craftsmen. The bearded Flute's portrayal of the maiden Thisbe as well as the melodramatic "Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall" and nonsensical "Sweet moon, I thank thee for thy sunny beams" language of the play strips the performance of any seriousness or profound meaning V.i.174, V.i.261.

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which comes from an ancient Babylonian legend often reworked in European mythology, would have been

familiar to educated members of Shakespeare's audiences. The story likely influenced *Romeo and Juliet*, although Shakespeare also pulled elements from other versions of the Romeo and Juliet tale. In both stories, two young lovers from feuding families communicate under cover of darkness; both male lovers erroneously think their beloveds dead and commit suicide, and both females do likewise when they find their lovers dead.

Insofar as the fifth act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has thematic significance the main purpose of the play-within-a-play is to provide comic enjoyment, it is that the Pyramus and Thisbe story revisits the themes of romantic hardship and confusion that run through the main action of the play. Pyramus and Thisbe are kept apart by parental will, just as Lysander and Hermia were; their tragic end results from misinterpretation—Pyramus takes Thisbe's bloody mantle as proof that she is dead, which recalls, to some extent, Puck's mistaking of Lysander for Demetrius as well as Titania's misconception of Bottom as a beautiful lover. In this way, the play-within-a-play lightheartedly satirizes the anguish that earlier plagued the Athenian lovers.

Given the title *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is no surprise that one of the main themes of the play is dreams, particularly as they relate to darkness and love. When morning comes, ending the magical night in the forest, the lovers begin to suspect that their experience in the woods was merely a dream. Theseus suggests as much to Hippolyta, who finds it strange that all the young lovers would have had the *same* dream. In the famous final speech of the play, Puck turns this idea outward, recommending that if audience members did not enjoy the play, they should assume that they have simply been dreaming throughout. This suggestion captures perfectly the delicate, insubstantial nature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: just as the fairies mended their mischief by sorting out the romantic confusion of the young lovers, Puck accounts for the whimsical nature of the play by explaining it as a manifestation of the subconscious.

QUOTES

1. *For ere Demetrius looked on Hermia's eyne,
He hailed down oaths that he was only mine;
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,
So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt.* I.i.

After Hermia and Lysander depart Athens for the forest, Helena expresses her jealousy of the lovers' happiness and particularly of Hermia's beauty. These lines come late in Helena's speech, and they serve at once to reiterate her jealousy of Hermia and to demonstrate the pain she feels at

having lost the affections of Demetrius, the man who had promised himself to her and whom she still loves. Helena's language is suggestive. Her mention of heat and melting invokes the heat of both attraction and anger, yet her emphasis on eyes and showers also conjures figurative tears of pain.

2. *How canst thou thus for shame, Titania,*

Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,

Knowing I know thy love to Theseus? II.i.

Oberon speaks these words to Titania after she has just implied that he wastes his time writing pointless poems and chasing after women. In particular, she mentions Oberon's lust for Hippolyta, whom Titania refers to as "the bouncing Amazon, / Your buskined mistress and your warrior love" II.i.. Titania clearly feels jealous, and Oberon's touchy response in these lines shows that he is equally jealous of Titania, who has a thing for Theseus. Despite the undertone of jealousy, Oberon's point here is that Titania has no right to dishonor him by complaining about his actions when she is guilty of the same.

3. *What wicked and dissembling glass of mine*

Made me compare with Hermia's spheroyne? II.ii.

Once again, Helena dwells on her jealousy of Hermia's beauty. Unlike her previous expressions of jealousy, however, here Helena turns her focus back on herself. She does this through her rhetorical question. By asking what "wicked" mirror compelled her to compare herself to Hermia, Helena is effectively inquiring, "Why am I so obsessed with comparing myself to Hermia?" Although Helena does not have time to reflect further before she stumbles upon a sleeping Lysander, her moment of self-questioning is important because it resists the logic of female conflict over men.

4. *Are you not he*

That frights the maidens of the villagery,

Skim milk, and sometimes labor in the quern,

And bootless make the breathless housewife churn,

And sometime make the drink to bear no barm,

Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm? II.i.

An anonymous fairy speaks these lines upon recognizing the infamous Puck, a puckish spirit who is well known in English folklore for performing various pranks on unsuspecting villagers. The tone of the unnamed fairy approximates that of an adoring fan. The awe with which he lists Puck's most typical pranks suggests just how much delight the fairy realm takes in promoting mischief. Puck makes this point explicitly in Act III when he

declares, "And those things do best please me / That befall prepost'rously" III.ii..

5. *What thou see'st when thou dost wake,
Do it for thy true love take.*

Love and languish for his sake.

Be it ounce or cat or bear,

Pard or boar with bristled hair,

In thy eye that shall appear

When thou wak'st, it is thy dear.

Wake when some vile thing it near. II.ii.

This is the spell Oberon utters while squeezing the liquid from an enchanted flower onto Titania's eyelids. Two things are worth noting here. First, Oberon's verse is made up of rhyming couplets in iambic tetrameter. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fairies often speak in this meter rather than the more usual iambic pentameter of the Athenian nobles. Thus the very meter of the language is associated in this play with mischief. Second, this particular enchantment stands as the play's primary act of mischief, which comically amplifies the discord among the play's lovers in anticipation of eventual resolution

6. *Up and down, up and down,
I will lead them up and down.*

I am feared in field and town.

Goblin, lead them up and down.

Here comes one. III.ii.

Puck utters these lines at the height of the chaos in the forest. The singsong quality of Puck's verse links it to the theme of fairy mischief, and the repeated motif of "up and down" expresses the fairy's delight in leading the unsuspecting Athenians astray. On the other hand, Puck's repetition of this motif may convey his frustration at having to obey Oberon's commands. Puck utters these lines immediately after the fairy king has instructed him to use the flower potion to restore order among the lovers, in which case they may indicate surliness.

7. [Snout] *O Bottom, thou art changed! What do I see on thee?*
[Bottom] *What do you see? You see an ass head of your own, do you?*
[Quince] *Bless thee, Bottom; bless thee. Thou art translated.* III.i.

Chaos and fear ensue immediately after Puck casts a spell that exchanges Bottom's human head for that of a donkey. Although Bottom's "translation" is the only physical metamorphosis in the play, it echoes the

many transformations that take place in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Latin poem that Shakespeare drew on heavily in writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Despite alluding to classical mythology, however, Bottom's metamorphosis actually results from fairy magic, and his companions humorously misinterpret the event as a demonic curse—hence Quince's impulse to issue blessings. This mishmash of references amplifies the humor.

8. *Why are you grown so rude? What change is this,
Sweet love? III.ii.*

After Hermia wakes from her sleep to find Lysander gone, she tracks him down, only to be met with harsh insults from her betrothed. In these lines she asks Lysander what has turned his “sweet love” so bitter. Lysander's emotional transformation is, of course, the result of fairy mischief. His transformation is also metaphorically linked to the many other changes in affection that occur in the play, including Demetrius' shift from Helena to Hermia and back to Helena as well as Titania's shift from Bottom back to Oberon.

9. *But all the story of the night told over,
'And all their minds transfigured so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images
And grows to something of great constancy,
But, howsoever, strange and admirable. V.i.*

As against Theseus' skepticism regarding the lovers' story of their night in the forest, Hippolyta utters these lines to express her belief in their story. She cites as evidence of the story's truthfulness the fact that “all their minds [have been] transfigured so together.” Hippolyta's use of the word “transfigured” is significant, since it indicates not just transformation, but transformation into something better, more elevated. Thus, the lovers' minds have all undergone a metamorphosis that has brought them to a higher, nobler place. The positive valence of this transformation clearly indicates that “something of great constancy” has transpired.

10. *Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that [i.e., to love me], and yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays. III.i.*

Bottom addresses these words to Titania after she swears her love to him. Though Bottom's head has been transformed into that of a donkey, he is not under the same love enchantment as Titania, and thus does not understand why she would have to love him. In spite of this, Bottom reasons that love and logic don't always go together. Amusingly, Titania

responds to Bottom's illogic with an equally unreasonable conclusion: "Thou are at wise as thou art beautiful" III.i..

11. *You speak not as you think. It cannot be.* III.ii.

Hermia speaks these words in response to Lysander, who has just asked her why she persists in following him: "Could not this make thee know / The hate I bear thee made me leave thee so?" III.ii.. The sudden and complete reversal of Lysander's affections strikes Hermia as an impossible turn of events that cannot stand to reason. She conveys this feeling of unreason by pointing to the apparent contradiction between what Lysander says and what he thinks.

12. *More strange than true. I never may believe
These antique fables nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.* V.i.

After the lovers have returned to Athens and told the story of their wild night in the forest, Theseus expresses his skepticism. The strangeness of the events recounted strain his sense of reality, and so he attributes the lovers' belief in their own story to the idea that they, like madmen, suffer from "seething brains." This condition has diluted their mental faculties, allowing them to "apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends."

13. *Run when you will, the story shall be changed.
Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase.
The dove pursues the griffin; the mild hind
Makes speed to catch the tiger—bootless speed,
When cowardice pursues and valor flies.* II.i.

As Helena follows Demetrius and continues to swear her love for him, he responds less than kindly, telling her, "I'll run from thee and hide me in the brakes" II.i.. Helena retorts with these lines, observing how her pursuit of Demetrius reverses the usual state of affairs, in which the strong man pursues the weak woman. Helena couches this idea of reversal in a reference to the myth of Apollo and Daphne. This myth involves the virgin nymph Daphne turning into a laurel tree to escape from the lustful god Apollo, who chases after her. Here, however, "Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase."

14. *You do advance your cunning more and more.
When truth kills truth, O devilish holy fray!
These vows are Hermia's. Will you give her o'er?* III.ii.

When the fairy enchantment shifts Lysander's affections from Hermia to Helena, Helena suspects that he, along with Demetrius, is trying to humiliate her with a prank. Lysander's love for Helena is not a strict reversal, since he did not previously hate her. Nevertheless, Helena understands this turn of events in terms of a negation in which "truth kills truth." Here, the truth of Lysander's vow to Helena negates his previous vow to Hermia. This negation has the effect of instigating conflict between Helena and Hermia, thereby reversing their relationship from friends to rivals.

15. *I know you two are rival enemies.*

How comes this gentle concord in the world,

That hatred is so far from jealousy

To sleep by hate and fear no enmity? IV.i.

Theseus addresses this question to Lysander and Demetrius, who have reconciled their differences. The reversal of rivalry into friendship clearly surprises Theseus, and the duke's surprise indicates his general failure of imagination. This failure of imagination returns at the top of Act V, when Theseus refuses to believe the lovers' account of the previous night. Despite Theseus' surprise at the reversal in Lysander and Demetrius' relationship, the entire play has been orchestrated to anticipate the eventuality of just such a reversal of discord into concord.

SUMMARY

A Midsummer Night's Dream takes place in Athens. Theseus, the Duke of Athens, is planning his marriage with Hippolyta, and as a result he is planning a large festival. Egeus enters, followed by his daughter Hermia, her beloved Lysander, and her suitor Demetrius. Egeus tells Theseus that Hermia refuses to marry Demetrius, wanting instead to marry Lysander. He asks for the right to punish Hermia with death if she refuses to obey.

Theseus agrees that Hermia's duty is to obey her father, and threatens her with either entering a nunnery or marrying the man her father chooses. Lysander protests, but is overruled by the law. He and Hermia then decide to flee by night into the woods surrounding Athens, where they can escape the law and get married. They tell their plan to Helena, a girl who is madly in love with Demetrius. Hoping to gain favor with Demetrius, Helena decides to tell him about the plan.

Some local artisans and workmen have decided to perform a play for Theseus as a way to celebrate his wedding. They choose Pyramus and Thisbe for their play, and meet to assign the roles. Nick Bottom gets the

role of Pyramus, and Flute takes the part of Thisbe. They agree to meet the next night in the woods to rehearse the play.

Robin Goodfellow, a puck, meets a fairy who serves Queen Titania. He tells the fairy that his King Oberon is in the woods, and that Titania should avoid Oberon because they will quarrel again. However, Titania and Oberon soon arrive and begin arguing about a young boy Titania has stolen and is caring for. Oberon demands that she give him the boy, but she refuses.

Oberon decides to play a trick on Titania and put some pansy juice on her eyes. The magical juice will make her fall in love with first person she sees upon waking up. Soon after Puck is sent away to fetch the juice, Oberon overhears Demetrius and Helena in the woods.

Demetrius deserts Helena in the forest, leaving her alone. Oberon decides that he will change this situation, and commands Robin to put the juice onto Demetrius's eyes when he is sleeping. He then finds Titania and drops the juice onto her eyelids. Robin goes to find Demetrius, but instead comes across Lysander and accidentally uses the juice on him.

By accident Helena comes across Lysander and wakes him up. He immediately falls in love with her and starts to chase her through the woods. Together they arrive where Oberon is watching, and he realizes the mistake. Oberon then puts the pansy juice onto Demetrius's eyelids, who upon waking up also falls in love with Helena. She thinks that the two men are trying to torment her for being in love with Demetrius, and becomes furious at their protestations of love.

The workmen arrive in the woods and start to practice their play. They constantly ruin the lines of the play and mispronounce the words. Out of fear of censorship, they decide to make the play less realistic. Therefore the lion is supposed to announce that he is not a lion, but only a common man. Bottom also feels obliged to tell the audience that he is not really going to die, but will only pretend to do so. Puck, watching this silly scene, catches Bottom alone and puts an asses head on him. When Bottom returns to his troupe, they run away out of fear. Bottom then comes across Titania, and succeeds in waking her up. She falls in love with him due to the juice on her eyes, and takes him with her.

Lysander and Demetrius prepare to fight one another for Helena. Puck intervenes and leads them through the woods in circles until they collapse onto the ground in exhaustion. He then brings the two women to same area and puts them to sleep as well.

Oberon finds Titania and releases her from the spell. He then tells the audience that Bottom will think is all a dream when he wakes up. He further releases Lysander from the spell. Theseus arrives with a hunting

party and finds the lovers stretched out on the ground. He orders the hunting horns blown in order to wake them up.

The lovers explain why they are in the woods, at which point Egeus demands that he be allowed to exercise the law on Hermia. However, Demetrius intervenes and tells them that he no longer loves Hermia, but rather only loves Helena. Theseus decides to overbear Egeus and let the lovers get married that day with him. Together they return to Athens.

Bottom wakes up and thinks that he has dreamed the entire episode. He swiftly returns to Athens where he meets his friends. Together they head over to Theseus's palace. Theseus looks over the list of possible entertainment for that evening and settles on the play of Pyramus and Thisbe. Bottom and the rest of his company perform the play, after which everyone retires to bed.

Puck arrives and starts to sweep the house clean. Oberon and Titania briefly bless the couples and their future children. After they leave Puck asks the audience to forgive the actors if they were offended. He then tells the audience that if anyone disliked the play, they should imagine that it was only a dream.

KEY WORDS

- **abridgement** pastime.
- **aby** to pay the penalty for.
- **Acheron** a river in Hades; often identified as the river across which Charon ferries the dead.
- **adamant** lodestone, a hard stone or substance that was supposedly unbreakable.
- **Aegles** the woman for whom Theseus abandoned Ariadne.
- **Antiopa** Queen of the Amazons, often identified with Hippolyta, but here they are viewed as separate women.
- **Antipodes** the opposite side of the earth.
- **Apollo** the god of music, poetry, prophecy, and medicine, represented as exemplifying manly youth and beauty.
- **Ariadne** King Minos' daughter, who gives Theseus the thread by which he finds his way out of the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur.
- **Aurora's harbinger** the morning star, precursor of the dawn.
- **Bacchanals** worshippers of Bacchus, the god of wine and revelry.

- **barm** the yeast foam that appears on the surface of malt liquors as they ferment.
- **Bergomask dance** a rustic dance, named for Bergamo a province ridiculed for its rusticity.
- **beshrew** to curse, usually mildly.
- **Beteem** grant.
- **bootless** in vain.
- **bottle of hay** bundle of hay.
- **brow of Egypt** face of a gypsy.
- **buskin'd** wearing boots reaching to the calf or knee.
- **Byrlakin** by your ladykini.e., the Virgin Mary.
- **Cadmus** a Phoenician prince and founder of Thebes: he killed a dragon and sowed its teeth, from which many armed men rose, fighting each other, until only five were left to help him build the city.
- **cankerblossom** a worm that destroys the flower bud.
- **Carthage queen** Dido; founder and queen of Carthage: in the Aeneid she falls in love with Aeneas and kills herself when he leaves her.
- **childing** pregnant.
- **coil** commotion; turmoil.
- **collied** blackened, as with coal dust.
- **conn'd** to peruse carefully; to study; fix in the memory.
- **Corin, Phillida**, conventional names of pastoral lovers.
- **coy** caress.
- **Daphne** a nymph who is changed into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's unwanted advances.
- **dewlap** a loose fold of skin hanging from the throat of cattle and certain other animals, or a similar loose fold under the chin of a person.
- **Diana's altar** the altar belonging to the virgin goddess of the moon and of hunting: identified with the Greek Artemis.
- **disfigure** Quince's blunder for "figure."
- **dowager** an elderly woman of wealth and dignity.
- **eglantine** European rose with hooked spines, sweet-scented leaves, and usually pink flowers.

- **enforced** violated by force.
- **Ercles** Hercules.
- **Ethiope** a black person; a reference to Hermia's relatively dark hair and complexion.
- **exposition of** Bottom's malapropism for "disposition to."
- **eyne** eye.
- **faining voice** desirous voice.
- **false Trojan** Aeneas, son of Anchises and Venus, and hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*: escaping from ruined Troy, Aeneas wanders for years before coming to Latium: he is considered the forefather of the Romans.
- **fancy-sick** lovesick.
- **filch'd** to steal, pilfer.
- **Furies** the three terrible female spirits with snaky hair Alecto, Tisiphone, and Megaera who punish the doers of unavenged crimes.
- **gambol** frolic.
- **gauds** cheap, showy trinkets, playthings.
- **gleek** jest.
- **hight** named; called.
- **hind** the female of the red deer.
- **hounds of Sparta** dogs famous for their hunting skill.
- **humours** inclinations.
- **idle gaud** useless trinket.
- **imbrue** stain.
- **Limander, Helen** , blunders for the lovers Hero and Leander; Leander swims the Hellespont from Abydos every night to be with her; when he drowns in a storm, Hero throws herself into the sea.
- **lob** a big, slow, clumsy person.
- **lode-stars** stars by which one directs one's course.
- **love-in-idleness** pansy, heartsease.
- **Marry** [Archaic] interjection used to express surprise, anger, etc., or, sometimes, merely to provide emphasis; here, a mild oath, referring to the Virgin Mary.
- **mazed** bewildered.
- **mew'd** to confine in or as in a cage; shut up or conceal.
- **mimic** burlesque actor.

- **minimus** petite person.
- **misgraffed** ill-matched.
- **mispris'd** mistaken.
- **the Morning's love** Cephalus, a beautiful boy loved by Aurora.
- **Mote** a speck of dust.
- **mote** a speck of dust or other tiny particle.
- **muskroses** Mediterranean roses with fragrant, usually white, flowers.
- **neaf** fist.
- **neeze** sneeze.
- **nine-men's morris** pattern cut in the turf when this game was played outside with nine pebbles.
- **Ninny/Ninus** mythical founder of Ninevah.
- **noll** head.
- **old Hiems** the winter god.
- **ounce** snow leopard.
- **ouzel cock** male blackbird.
- **oxlips** a perennial plant of the primrose family.
- **Pard** leopard, or panther.
- **patched** wearing motley many-colored garments.
- **patches** clowns.
- **Peascod** the pod of the pea plant.
- **peck of provender** one-quarter bushel of grain.
- **Perigouna** one of Theseus' lovers.
- **Phibbus' car** the chariot of Phoebus Apollo as god of the sun.
- **Philomel** the nightingale Philomela was a princess of Athens raped by Tereseus; the gods change her into a nightingale.
- **Phoebe** Artemis as goddess of the moon: identified with the Roman Diana.
- **preferred** presented for acceptance.
- **quern** a primitive hand mill, especially for grinding grain.
- **quill** the bird's piping song.
- **recreant** cowardly, craven.
- **reremice** bats.
- **roundel** round dance.

- **russet-pated choughs** reddish brown-headed crows.
- **scrip** script.
- **Shafalus and Procrus** blunders for "Cephalus" and "Procris," famous lovers.
- **Sisters Three** the Fates, the three goddesses who control human destiny and life.
- **spotted** morally stained.
- **St. Valentine** birds were supposed to choose mates on St. Valentine's Day.
- **stand upon points** pay attention to details.
- **stepdame** stepmother.
- **strings to your beards** the actors used strings to tie their false beards on.
- **Taurus** mountain range along the S coast of Asia Minor, Turkey.
- **That's all one** It makes no difference.
- **Thessalian** inhabitant of Thessaly, a region of E Greece, between the Pindus Mountains and the Aegean Sea.
- **Thracian** belonging to an ancient region in the E Balkan Peninsula.
- **thread and thrum** everything, both good and bad.
- **throstle** a songbird.
- **'tide** betide; happen.
- **tiring-house** attiring house.
- **tong & bones** instruments for rustic music.
- **translated** transformed.
- **transported** carried off by the fairies, or transformed.
- **triple Hecate's team** Hecate, a goddess of the moon Luna, earth Diana, and underground realm of the dead Hecate, later regarded as the goddess of sorcery and witchcraft.
- **troth** faithfulness; loyalty.
- **vaward** vanguard.
- **videlicet** that is, namely.
- **waggish** playful.
- **wasted brands** burned-out logs.
- **welkin** the vault of heaven, the sky, or the upper air.

- **wonted liveries** accustomed attire.
- **wood** insane.
- **woodbine** a European climbing honeysuckle with fragrant, yellowish-white flowers.
- **wot** to know.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the settings of the play? What are the major characteristics of each setting the Duke's palace, Quince's cottage, and the fairy-enchanted woods? What significance do forests have in other literary works you're familiar with? What about urban settings? What rules and values apply in the different settings? Why is the story set in ancient Greece — would it have been as effective in contemporary England?
2. Discuss the meanings of the play's title, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In addition to the title, what other references do you find to dreaming in the play? What relationship is created between dreaming and theater look, for example, at Puck's final speech? Why is Midsummer important to the themes of the play?
3. The play presents several different couples: Theseus and Hippolyta,; Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, Titania and Bottom, and Titania and Oberon. What aspects of love are explored in each of these relationships?
4. Gender issues are significant in this drama. What differences are there in the roles and behaviors appropriate to men and women? Do these gender differences still exist today, or are they examples of outdated stereotypes?
5. Many contemporary productions of the play cast the same actor in the role of Theseus and Oberon, and also of Hippolyta and Titania. What does this suggest about the functions of these characters in the play? How are the Hippolyta and Titania similar and/or different? Theseus and Oberon?
6. The adventures of the four young lovers — Demetrius, Lysander, Helena and Hermia — are a necessary aspect of the play, yet many critics have suggested that these four characters are "indistinguishable." Do you agree? What similarities and differences do you find among their personalities? Do you have a favorite among this group?
7. Much has been written about the darker side of this play, its savage, erotic aspects and its violence. For example, the critic Jan Kott finds

the eroticism of the play "brutal." On the other hand, the critic Hartley Coleridge says this drama is "all poetry, and sweeter poetry was never written." Which of these critics do you agree with — if either? Overall, is this a sinister, violent, erotic play or a lighthearted, romantic comedy? Support your answer with references from the text.

8. Discuss the role of the play-within-a-play in Act V of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Does the Pyramus and Thisbe story have any relevance to the main story, or is it simply a comical interlude? What effect does the craftsmen's production of their play have on the tone of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole?
9. How does the play's broad frame of reference heighten its use of contrast as an atmospheric device? More generally, how does Shakespeare use contrasting tones and characters in the play?

FURTHER READING

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UNIT 2 KING LEAR

This chapter shall cover the following main points:

STRUCTURE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Learning objectives
- Introduction of the play
- Plot
- Themes, symbols and motifs
- Characters
- Analysis of main characters
- Summary and analysis of scenes
- Quotes
- Summary of the play
- Key words
- Review questions
- Further reading

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Discuss about the summary.
- Explain the plot of the play.
- Discuss and analyze the main characters
- Explain the summary act-wise
- Explain the main quotes.
- Discuss the theme of the play.

King Lear was first printed in 1608. This initial printing is now referred to as the First Quarto. Another Quarto version was printed in 1619, and *King Lear* appeared again in a 1623 Folio edition. The First Quarto contains 300 lines not found in the Folio, and the Folio contains 100 lines not found in the First Quarto. Because many differences exist between the Quarto and Folio editions, some recent anthologies of Shakespeare's works contain play text from both editions, and may also include a conflated edition derived from a combination of both the First Quarto and Folio versions.

Although the text was not printed until 1608, the play was performed in December 1606. The exact date of composition is not known, so scholars often try to base the point in time on references in the play itself. Because of this uncertainty and the textual references, the composition of *King Lear* may have taken place anywhere from 1604 to 1606.

The story of King Lear and his daughters was a familiar tale in Elizabethan England, where it was generally believed to be based on historical fact, having been taken from ancient British history. A legal case of the times also may be due credit for contributing to the drama. In an act that generated extensive publicity, two daughters attempted to have their father declared insane so that they might seize his estate. The younger daughter, Cordell, objected.

This similarity of name and plot might have sparked some interest in resurrecting a familiar plot. However, accounts of King Lear surface in several texts; so, Shakespeare may have turned to other sources as well in exploring this ancient story.

Lear's story appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, published about 1135. This text includes insights into the kings of the ancient, pre-Christian Britain. Years later, Lear's story is repeated in Raphael Holinshed's 1577 book, *Chronicles of England*, which includes an ending in which Cordelia and Lear both survive her sisters' treachery. Cordelia succeeds her father to the throne, upon his death; but she is later imprisoned and commits suicide. The John Higgins 1574 edition of *Mirror for Magistrates* introduces the name of Albany and includes a story of Cordelia, in which she commits suicide — something that does not occur in the older play. The Lear story is also retold in Edmund Spenser's 1590 epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*, where Cordelia commits suicide by hanging. The Gloucester plot may have been taken from Sir Philip Sidney's 1590 poem, *Arcadia*, in which an old prince is blinded by his illegitimate son, but is ultimately saved by his legitimate son. Much of the events that occur to Gloucester are derived from this source.

The True Chronicle of King Leir is first entered into the Stationers's register in 1594, although there is no record of its publication until the 1605 edition appears. This source, while containing the basic Lear story, is grounded in Christianity, something not contained in the story of the ancient Leir or in Shakespeare's *Lear*. Many scholars do find ample evidence of Christian ideology in *King Lear*, but no overt emphasis on Christianity, as there is in Shakespeare's principle source. The old play has a happy ending, where evil is punished and good is rewarded, thus reinforcing the Christian belief in divine justice. Instead of proposing such easy answers, Shakespeare leaves his audience to ponder the role of God and divine justice. As he did so often in borrowing from sources, Shakespeare wove threads of historical accounts and original writings to create the fabric of his own *King Lear*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By the time Shakespeare was writing *King Lear*, the English had survived years of civil war and political and religious upheaval. Considerable turmoil followed the death of Henry VIII, and under his oldest daughter's rule (Mary I), the country experienced both civil and religious chaos, with the conflict between Catholicism and the Church of England resulting in much bloodshed.

After Mary's death, Elizabeth I assumed the throne, leading to a period of extended peace. In spite of their contentment with Elizabeth's rule, the populace worried significantly about England's future because Elizabeth was unmarried, and she refused to select a possible heir. No citizen wanted a repeat of the events that marked the earlier transfer of power. Thus, the lack of an heir created fears about a possible successor to her throne, which were finally resolved in 1603 when Elizabeth appointed James IV of Scotland to be her heir, and eventually, the new king of England.

The English understood that a strong country needed an effective leader to protect it from potential invasion. Elizabeth's powerful leadership had saved England when the Spanish attempted an invasion in 1588, and much of the credit for her success was attributed to her earlier efforts to unite England and to end the dissention that was destroying the country. No ruler would have deliberately chosen to divide a kingdom, not after having witnessed the conflicts that had marked England's recent history. The division of a country would have weakened it, leading to squabbles between petty lords and the absence of an effective central government, and thus, the absence of an effective defense. After this long period of uncertainty, Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience would have been horrified at Lear's choice to divide his kingdom and so, create disunity.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a five-act tragedy. Most Elizabethan theatre adheres to the five-act structure, which corresponds to divisions in the action. The first act is the Exposition, in which the playwright sets forth the problem and introduces the main characters.

In *King Lear*, Act I establishes the nature of the conflict between Cordelia and Lear, among Goneril and Regan and Lear, and between Gloucester and Edgar. This first act also establishes the duplicitous, or treacherously twofold, nature of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, while demonstrating that Cordelia and Edgar are good characters. The remainder of the play's central characters also make an appearance in this act.

Act II is the Complication, in which the entanglement or conflict develops further. The erosion of Lear's power begins, the depth of the conflict between Lear and his daughters is revealed, and the conspiracy that unites Goneril, Regan, and Edmund is established.

Act III is the Climax; and as the name suggests, this is when the action takes a turning point and the crisis occurs. In this act, Lear has been cast adrift in the storm, and his words reveal that his mind is also now lost. Likewise, the extent of Regan and Cornwall's depravity is revealed as they torture Gloucester, ultimately gouging out his eyes.

Act IV is called the Falling Action, which signals the beginning of the play's resolution. In this act, Edgar reunites with his father, although Gloucester is still unaware that Edgar is his son, and Cordelia returns to Lear, who begins to emerge from his madness. In action that indicates the approaching downfall of the conspirators, Cornwall's death is revealed, and Edgar kills Oswald. The audience sees in Act IV the tragedy overtaking the hero, as well as the efforts in progress to aid the hero.

Act V is called the Catastrophe, wherein the conclusion occurs. As the name suggests, this act brings closure to the play, a resolution to the conflict, and death to the hero. As the play draws to a close, Regan and Goneril die, Edmund is killed in a duel with his brother, Lear and Cordelia die, and Edgar is chosen to restore peace to the kingdom.

LITERARY DEVICES

Students of Shakespeare's plays quickly come to appreciate the literary devices that the playwright employs in constructing his tragedy. For example, most Shakespearean tragedy contains elements of comic relief, designed to provide a sort of catharsis, a chance for the audience to "catch its breath." But in this case, no comic relief relieves the tension as Lear plays out the drama that his decision has set in motion. Characters, who in

other tragedies might contain comedic elements — such as the Fool — are far removed from comedy. The Fool's purpose is to make Lear laugh, but instead, he functions largely as a Greek Chorus, commenting on the action and pointing out to Lear subtleties of his behavior and dangers that he faces. But his compassion, tinged with sarcasm, is never funny.

Shakespeare also uses soliloquy as an important literary device in his plays. Most Shakespearean tragedies contain soliloquies, because they offer a way for the playwright to divulge a character's inner thoughts. The soliloquy requires that the character must think that he is alone on stage, as he reveals what he is thinking for the benefit of the audience. *King Lear* contains eleven soliloquies, with Edmund using this device most often to explain his plotting to the audience. Edgar also uses this device several times, most notably when he explains the reasons he will henceforth be known as Tom. A soliloquy is different from a monologue, in which a character speaks aloud his thoughts, but with other characters present. Shakespeare also frequently employs the aside, in which the character addresses the audience, but other characters are not supposed to hear. The aside allows the audience to learn details that most of the characters on stage do not know. For example, Goneril uses an aside to reveal that she has poisoned Regan.

The double plot is another important literary device in this play. *King Lear* is the only Shakespearean tragedy to employ two similar plots, each functioning in an almost exact parallel manner. With two plots, perfectly intertwined and yet offering parallel lessons, Shakespeare is able to demonstrate the tragic consequences that result when man's law is given precedence over natural law. Eventually, Gloucester and Lear learn the importance of natural law with both finally turning to nature to find answers for why their children have betrayed them. Their counterparts, Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall, represent the evil that functions in violation of natural law.

The double plot serves an important function, emphasizing natural law as an essential facet of both plots. Shakespeare then uses the two plots to point to how essential an acknowledgment of natural law is in a moral society. In both plots, the absence of natural law is destructive, and ultimately even those who are good cannot act to save Cordelia or the other good characters from the ravages of evil and tyranny.

Shakespeare's use of doubling appears throughout *King Lear*. For example, Kent's true loyalty to the king is paralleled by Oswald's corrupt loyalty to Goneril. Lear also has two sons-in-law. Regan's husband is the cruel Cornwall, whose only interest is in furthering his own ambitions. He has no real interest in the well-being of the kingdom, and sacrificing Lear is an acceptable price to pay to gain the power he desires. Cornwall's parallel

is Goneril's husband, Albany, who has no personal ambitions or thoughts of personal glory. Albany's goal is to preserve the kingdom and save Lear's life.

Still another set of doubles is France and Burgundy, whose response to Cordelia's loss of dowry differs in drastic ways. Where Burgundy has no use for a Cordelia who lacks money, land, and rank, France is willing to take Cordelia, even if she has no material possessions. Thus, France who sees Cordelia as representing the greatest riches that her father possesses, is a contrasting double for the self-serving Burgundy.

Shakespeare wrote most of this play in verse, using iambic pentameter, which sometimes intimidates the playwright's audiences. Iambic pentameter is a literary term that defines the play's meter and the stresses placed on each syllable. In iambic pentameter, each complete line contains ten syllables, with each pair of syllables containing both an accented syllable and an unaccented syllable. Many Renaissance poets used iambic pentameter because the alternating stresses create a rhythm that contributes to the beauty of the play's language. Shakespeare also includes prose passages in his plays, with prose lines being spoken by characters of lower social rank. In *King Lear*, Edgar speaks prose when he is disguised as Tom; when he reemerges as Edgar, he resumes speaking in verse.

A Shakespearean glossary can help in understanding the language, but the biggest assist comes with practice. Reading and listening to Shakespeare's words becomes easier with repeated exposure. Reading aloud also helps in becoming familiar with Early Modern English. Over time, the unfamiliar language and the rhetorical devices that Shakespeare employs in writing his texts will cease to be strange, and the language will assume the beauty that was always hidden within it.

PLOT

Lear, the aging king of Britain, decides to step down from the throne and divide his kingdom evenly among his three daughters. First, however, he puts his daughters through a test, asking each to tell him how much she loves him. Goneril and Regan, Lear's older daughters, give their father flattering answers. But Cordelia, Lear's youngest and favorite daughter, remains silent, saying that she has no words to describe how much she loves her father. Lear flies into a rage and disowns Cordelia. The king of France, who has courted Cordelia, says that he still wants to marry her even without her land, and she accompanies him to France without her father's blessing.

Lear quickly learns that he made a bad decision. Goneril and Regan swiftly begin to undermine the little authority that Lear still holds. Unable

to believe that his beloved daughters are betraying him, Lear slowly goes insane. He flees his daughters' houses to wander on a heath during a great thunderstorm, accompanied by his Fool and by Kent, a loyal nobleman in disguise.

Meanwhile, an elderly nobleman named Gloucester also experiences family problems. His illegitimate son, Edmund, tricks him into believing that his legitimate son, Edgar, is trying to kill him. Fleeing the manhunt that his father has set for him, Edgar disguises himself as a crazy beggar and calls himself "Poor Tom." Like Lear, he heads out onto the heath.

When the loyal Gloucester realizes that Lear's daughters have turned against their father, he decides to help Lear in spite of the danger. Regan and her husband, Cornwall, discover him helping Lear, accuse him of treason, blind him, and turn him out to wander the countryside. He ends up being led by his disguised son, Edgar, toward the city of Dover, where Lear has also been brought.

In Dover, a French army lands as part of an invasion led by Cordelia in an effort to save her father. Edmund apparently becomes romantically entangled with both Regan and Goneril, whose husband, Albany, is increasingly sympathetic to Lear's cause. Goneril and Edmund conspire to kill Albany.

The despairing Gloucester tries to commit suicide, but Edgar saves him by pulling the strange trick of leading him off an imaginary cliff. Meanwhile, the English troops reach Dover, and the English, led by Edmund, defeat the Cordelia-led French. Lear and Cordelia are captured. In the climactic scene, Edgar duels with and kills Edmund; we learn of the death of Gloucester; Goneril poisons Regan out of jealousy over Edmund and then kills herself when her treachery is revealed to Albany; Edmund's betrayal of Cordelia leads to her needless execution in prison; and Lear finally dies out of grief at Cordelia's passing. Albany, Edgar, and the elderly Kent are left to take care of the country under a cloud of sorrow and regret.

THEMES AND SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

THEMES

Themes are central to understanding *King Lear* as a play and identifying Shakespeare's social and political commentary.

Justice

King Lear is a brutal play, filled with human cruelty and awful, seemingly meaningless disasters. The play's succession of terrible events raises an obvious question for the characters—namely, whether there is any possibility of justice in the world, or whether the world is

fundamentally indifferent or even hostile to humankind. Various characters offer their opinions: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport," Gloucester muses, realizing it foolish for humankind to assume that the natural world works in parallel with socially or morally convenient notions of justice (4.1.37–38). Edgar, on the other hand, insists that "the gods are just," believing that individuals get what they deserve (5.3.169). But, in the end, we are left with only a terrifying uncertainty—although the wicked die, the good die along with them, culminating in the awful image of Lear cradling Cordelia's body in his arms. There is goodness in the world of the play, but there is also madness and death, and it is difficult to tell which triumphs in the end.

Authority versus Chaos

King Lear is about political authority as much as it is about family dynamics. Lear is not only a father but also a king, and when he gives away his authority to the unworthy and evil Goneril and Regan, he delivers not only himself and his family but all of Britain into chaos and cruelty. As the two wicked sisters indulge their appetite for power and Edmund begins his own ascension, the kingdom descends into civil strife, and we realize that Lear has destroyed not only his own authority but *all* authority in Britain. The stable, hierarchal order that Lear initially represents falls apart and disorder engulfs the realm.

The failure of authority in the face of chaos recurs in Lear's wanderings on the heath during the storm. Witnessing the powerful forces of the natural world, Lear comes to understand that he, like the rest of humankind, is insignificant in the world. This realization proves much more important than the realization of his loss of political control, as it compels him to re-prioritize his values and become humble and caring. With this newfound understanding of himself, Lear hopes to be able to confront the chaos in the political realm as well.

Power

Important is the notion of power — who has it, how one obtains it, how one defines it, and how it plays into *King Lear*. With this look at power should also come an investigation of issues such as age and gender. Consider, for example, the treatment of the elderly by their offspring. And think about the power and placement of women in Shakespeare's time as compared with the position of women in society and the home today.

Nature's Law

Nature, in varying forms, is another theme prevalent in *King Lear*. Lear's view of nature is one that holds certain values, such as respect for one's parents and loyalty to one's king, to be important regardless of circumstance.

Edmund, however, believes it's natural to be a repository of sensuality and self-advancement. To Edmund, as well as to several other characters in the play, the natural impulse of humanity is to better oneself at the expense of others.

Doubling

Doubling (to create either oppositions or parallels) adds tremendously to the *King Lear* experience. At various times, fools are contrasted with wise men, reason is set opposite to nature, the upper class is set apart from the beggar, and the family is paralleled with by society.

False service, as in the case of Oswald, is contrasted with true service, represented by Kent. The selfish and false love of Regan and Goneril is a foil for the honest devotion of Cordelia.

Parent-Child Relationship

Throughout the audience is privy to the conflicts between father and child, and to fathers easily fooled by their children. Each father demonstrates poor judgment by rejecting a good child and trusting a dishonest child(ren).

The actions that follow Act I, Scene I illustrate how correct Regan's words will prove to be. It will soon be obvious to the characters and audience alike how little Lear knows and understands his daughters as Goneril and Regan move to restrict both the size of his retinue and power.

Reconciliation

Darkness and unhappiness pervade *King Lear*, and the devastating Act 5 represents one of the most tragic endings in all of literature. Nevertheless, the play presents the central relationship—that between Lear and Cordelia—as a dramatic embodiment of true, self-sacrificing love. Rather than despising Lear for banishing her, Cordelia remains devoted, even from afar, and eventually brings an army from a foreign country to rescue him from his tormentors. Lear, meanwhile, learns a tremendously cruel lesson in humility and eventually reaches the point where he can reunite joyfully with Cordelia and experience the balm of her forgiving love. Lear's recognition of the error of his ways is an ingredient vital to reconciliation with Cordelia, not because Cordelia feels wronged by him but because he has understood the sincerity and depth of her love for him. His maturation enables him to bring Cordelia back into his good graces, a testament to love's ability to flourish, even if only fleetingly, amid the horror and chaos that engulf the rest of the play.

Nihilism

King Lear presents a bleak vision of a world without meaning. Lear begins the play valuing justice, the social order, and the value of kingship,

but his values are undermined by his experiences. Lear ends up believing that justice, order and kingship are just flattering names for raw, brutal power. Cornwall confirms Lear's view when he admits that even though punishing Gloucester without a trial is unjust, his power gives him the freedom to act as he wants: "our power / Shall do a courtesy to our wrath" (III.vii). Gloucester, too, comes to see life as random, violent and cruel, claiming the gods treat people with the same level of care as schoolboys with flies. Nowhere does *King Lear* suggest life offers meaning or the possibility of redemption. The play's tragic ending offers no lesson. Cordelia dies for no reason; the order for her execution has been reversed. The few characters left alive express despair at what they have seen.

Self-knowledge

King Lear shows that a lack of self-knowledge can cause chaos and tragedy, but the play also suggests that self-knowledge is painful, and perhaps not worth the effort it takes to achieve it. Lear's tragic flaw is a lack of self-knowledge. His daughter Regan identifies this flaw in the play's opening scene: "he hath ever but slenderly known himself." (I.i.). Lear achieves self-knowledge, but at the cost of his wealth, power and sanity. What he learns about himself is not a pleasant discovery: "I am a very foolish, fond old man" (IV.vii.). Achieving self-knowledge does not allow Lear to escape his tragic fate. In fact, self-knowledge makes his suffering worse. He realizes that his daughter Cordelia loves him after all, which only makes her death more painful. Edmund's story also suggests that self-knowledge is of limited value. Unlike Lear, Edmund sees himself clearly from the beginning of the play, but his self-knowledge doesn't do him much good: he dies before Lear does.

The Unreliability of Speech

King Lear suggests that people's speeches and words are not always reliable and trustworthy. The tragic events of *King Lear* are set in motion because Lear believes the loving speeches Goneril and Regan make, even though they are obviously deceitful. Goneril claims her love makes "speech unable" (I.i.) which is emptied of meaning because she is in the middle of a long speech. Kent argues that simple speech, like Cordelia's, is trustworthy: "Nor are those empty-hearted, whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness" (I.i.), but Cornwall argues that simple speech can be just as unreliable as elaborate flattery. Edgar suggests that language can never reliably express suffering. At the end of the play, Lear's behavior suggests that Edgar is correct. When he finds his daughter Cordelia dead, Lear abandons language altogether: "Howl, howl, howl, howl" (V.iii.).

The Storm

As Lear wanders about a desolate heath in Act 3, a terrible storm, strongly but ambiguously symbolic, rages overhead. In part, the storm echoes Lear's inner turmoil and mounting madness: it is a physical, turbulent natural reflection of Lear's internal confusion. At the same time, the storm embodies the awesome power of nature, which forces the powerless king to recognize his own mortality and human frailty and to cultivate a sense of humility for the first time. The storm may also symbolize some kind of divine justice, as if nature itself is angry about the events in the play. Finally, the meteorological chaos also symbolizes the political disarray that has engulfed Lear's Britain.

Blindness

Gloucester's physical blindness symbolizes the metaphorical blindness that grips both Gloucester and the play's other father figure, Lear. The parallels between the two men are clear: both have loyal children and disloyal children, both are blind to the truth, and both end up banishing the loyal children and making the wicked one(s) their heir(s). Only when Gloucester has lost the use of his eyes and Lear has gone mad does each realize his tremendous error. It is appropriate that the play brings them together near Dover in Act 4 to commiserate about how their blindness to the truth about their children has cost them dearly.

MOTIFS

Madness

Insanity occupies a central place in the play and is associated with both disorder and hidden wisdom. The Fool, who offers Lear insight in the early sections of the play, offers his counsel in a seemingly mad babble. Later, when Lear himself goes mad, the turmoil in his mind mirrors the chaos that has descended upon his kingdom. At the same time, however, it also provides him with important wisdom by reducing him to his bare humanity, stripped of all royal pretensions. Lear thus learns humility. He is joined in his real madness by Edgar's feigned insanity, which also contains nuggets of wisdom for the king to mine. Meanwhile, Edgar's time as a supposedly insane beggar hardens him and prepares him to defeat Edmund at the close of the play.

Betrayal

Betrayals play a critical role in the play and show the workings of wickedness in both the familial and political realms—here, brothers betray brothers and children betray fathers. Goneril and Regan's betrayal of Lear

raises them to power in Britain, where Edmund, who has betrayed both Edgar and Gloucester, joins them. However, the play suggests that betrayers inevitably turn on one another, showing how Goneril and Regan fall out when they both become attracted to Edmund, and how their jealousies of one another ultimately lead to mutual destruction. Additionally, it is important to remember that the entire play is set in motion by Lear's blind, foolish betrayal of Cordelia's love for him, which reinforces that at the heart of every betrayal lies a skewed set of values.

CHARACTERS

Lear, King of Britain

An old king, he originally divides the kingdom among his three daughters but ends up refusing it to Cordelia as she will not flatter him like her sisters. He banishes her, though regretting this action once living with Regan and Goneril who are ungrateful and treat him horribly. He escapes to the woods and encounters poor Tom, a madman, with whom he sympathizes. He wishes to reduce himself to essential man. He then goes mad. Kent and Gloucester help him to Dover where he is reunited with Cordelia. They lead the battle with France against Albany and Edmund, but lose and Cordelia and Lear are taken prisoner. After Cordelia's death, Lear grieves and dies.

King of France

A suitor for Cordelia, France is not turned away by Cordelia's lost inheritance but finds her more attractive. He marries her and helps her try to avenge the maltreatment of Lear. He is absent for the large battle at the end.

Duke of Burgundy

The other suitor for Cordelia, he refuses to accept her without the promised inheritance.

Duke of Cornwall

Regan's husband, Cornwall matches her for cruelty and vileness. He puts Kent in the stocks and places his trust in Edmund once Edmund betrays his father. Most cruelly, he blinds Gloucester. He receives a fatal blow from a servant who defends Gloucester.

Duke of Albany

Goneril's husband, he appears at first to be similar to Cornwall. We soon learn that there is a conflict, likely for land, between the two of them. Once Albany learns of Goneril and Regan's harsh treatment of Lear, he becomes highly moral and is enraged with Goneril, calling her a monster. He leads the fight versus France but intends to take mercy on Cordelia and

Lear. He aids Edgar in killing Edmund and tries to right some of the wrongs at the end by reinstating Lear's absolute power. After Lear dies, he names Kent and Edgar as joint rulers.

Earl of Kent

Outraged by Lear's disinheritance of Cordelia, he steps in to support her decision. He too is banished. Ever loyal, he returns in disguise as a servant named Caius and aids Lear in this position. He exchanges communication with Cordelia and accompanies Lear to Dover. He reveals himself finally but the King is too mad to realize who Kent is and thus may never know. Kent is dying at the end and thus does not accept Albany's offer to rule jointly with Edgar.

Earl of Gloucester

The parallel character to Lear in the subplot, Gloucester is tricked by his bastard son Edmund into thinking that Edgar wishes to kill him. He trusts Edmund with his secrets until it is revealed that Edmund has betrayed him. He is blinded for being a traitor and helping Lear escape to Dover. Edgar, as poor Tom, leads him to Dover where he is tricked out of committing suicide. He sees Lear in his madness and wishes it upon himself. The news of Edgar's true identity overwhelms him, cracking his heart.

Edgar, son to Gloucester

Hunted by Gloucester's men due to Edmund's trickery, Edgar disguises himself as poor Tom of Bedlam, a demonic madman, who believes the foul fiend is torturing him. He provides a character for Lear to sympathize with during his encroaching madness and leads his blinded father to Dover where he saves him from suicide. Using many different disguises, he kills Oswald, alerts Albany to Goneril's adultery, and slays Edmund. Once his identity is revealed, he informs the audience of the events they missed and becomes King at the end.

Edmund, bastard son to Gloucester

Resentful of his illegitimacy and having a cruel drive for power, he plots against his brother and father and succeeds. Once Cornwall dies, he gains even more power and Goneril and Regan vie for his hand. He plans to kill Cordelia and Lear after beating them in battle so that he can rule over a united Britain. He is forced to confess his crimes by Albany and killed by Edgar.

Old Man, tenant to Gloucester

A faithful attendant to Gloucester, he leads him through the woods after he is blinded. Gloucester chooses poor Tom to continue leading him but asks the old man to meet them later with clothes for Tom.

Doctor

Cordelia's physician, he gives Lear a sleeping pill in an attempt to restore him to sanity.

Lear's Fool

The hired court Fool, he attends Lear regularly and points out the truths which are missed or ignored. Upset by Cordelia's banishment, he ridicules Lear for being foolish enough to banish the good daughter and trust the evil ones. He further mocks his decision to give up his authority so fully. Once Lear goes mad, the Fool seems incredibly sane, making Lear remain dressed and playing along with his ideas of a trial versus Goneril and Regan.

Oswald, steward to Goneril

Loyal to Goneril, Oswald helps her insult Lear. As a result, Kent's argument with him at Gloucester's castle lands Kent in the stocks. He acts as messenger between Goneril and her sister and Edmund. He alerts Goneril that Albany has changed and he carries her love letter for Edmund. Edgar intercepts it and kills him.

A Captain under Edmund's command

He is given instructions by Edmund to hang Cordelia and then is killed by Lear when he is in the process of doing so.

Gentleman loyal to Lear

Kent sends him to Dover with news of Lear's condition and a ring to identify him to Cordelia. Kent later finds him in Dover and he reports to Kent on Cordelia's reaction to the information which he had brought earlier in the play.

Goneril, daughter to Lear

The eldest daughter, she contrives to strip Lear of his power from the beginning, flattering him and leading her sister in how to act. She drives Lear from her house with coldness and then aids Regan in rejecting him and throwing him out into the storm. Disgusted by her husband's weakness, she tries to persuade Edmund to kill him so they can marry. Her letter allows Albany proof against Edmund and herself. She poisons Regan out of jealousy and then stabs herself when she realizes that Albany knows of her intentions.

Regan, daughter to Lear

The other evil daughter, Regan conspires with Goneril to strip Lear of his power. She assists in sending Lear out in the storm and also helps Cornwall punish Gloucester. She herself grabs the sword and kills the servant who defends Gloucester. She wants Edmund for her husband after

Cornwall's death and is very jealous that he is intimate with Goneril. She is poisoned by Goneril and dies.

Cordelia, daughter to Lear

The good daughter, Cordelia refuses to insincerely flatter her father with false estimations of love and is disinherited. France marries her and she becomes Queen. We hear of her knowledge of Lear's mistreatment and her movement to Dover with the French army through Kent. She takes Lear to a doctor to treat his madness. She and Lear are captured by Edmund when the French lose the war. Lear hopes to spend quality time with her, but she is hanged by Edmund before Albany can send help. Lear carries her body into the final scene and dies with her in his arms.

ANALYSIS OF MAIN CHARACTERS

King Lear

Lear is the protagonist, whose willingness to believe his older daughters' empty flattery leads to the deaths of many people. In relying on the test of his daughters' love, Lear demonstrates that he lacks common sense or the ability to detect his older daughters' falseness. Lear cannot recognize Cordelia's honesty amid the flattery, which he craves. The depth of Lear's anger toward Kent, his devoted follower, suggests excessive pride — Lear refuses to be wrong. Hubris leads Lear to make a serious mistake in judgment, while Lear's excessive anger toward Kent also suggests the fragility of his emotional state. Hubris is a Greek term referring to excessive and destructive pride. In the ancient Greek world, hubris often resulted in the death of the tragic, heroic figure. This is clearly the case with Lear, who allows his excessive pride to destroy his family.

Throughout the play, the audience is permitted to see how Lear deals with problems. He is shocked when people do not obey as they have in the past, since Lear is king and he expects to be obeyed. However, instead of dealing with issues, Lear looks to the Fool to distract him with entertainment, to help him forget his problems. He has been insulted and demeaned as king, but he is not prepared to face those who are responsible. Instead, Lear often responds to problems with anger and outbursts of cursing, even a physical attack when provoked. When confronted with insults, Lear is helpless, at the mercy of his daughter and her servants, and he often succumbs to despair and self-pity. The once-omnipotent king struggles to find an effective means of dealing with his loss of power.

Eventually, the king reveals that he is frightened and apprehensive for his future, but he refuses to submit to another's decisions. Lear wants to remain in charge of his destiny, even though the choices he makes are poor or filled with danger. Thus, Lear chooses to go out into the storm because

he must retain some element of control. The only other choice is to acquiesce to his daughters' control, and for Lear, that option is not worth considering. Lear is stubborn, like a willful child, and this is just one additional way in which he tries to deal with the events controlling his life. Lear flees into the storm, as a child flees a reality too harsh to accept.

In spite of his despair and self-pity, Lear is revealed as a complex man, one whose punishment far exceeds his foolish errors, and thus, Lear is deserving of the audience's sympathy. Eventually, Lear displays regret, remorse, empathy, and compassion for the poor, a population that Lear has not noticed before. Lear focuses on the parallels he sees to his own life, and so in a real sense, his pity for the poor is also a reflection of the pity he feels for his own situation.

Lear is the anointed king, God's representative, and thus, he shares the responsibility for dispensing justice on earth. He recognizes that he bears responsibility for both his own problems and for those of others, who suffer equally. His understanding of his complicity in the events that followed is a major step in accepting responsibility and in acknowledging that he is not infallible. Because of his own suffering, Lear has also learned that even he is not above God's justice.

Goneril

Goneril is Lear's eldest daughter. After professing her deep love for her father and receiving half of his kingdom, she betrays him and plots his murder. Goneril's expressions of love are extreme and reveal the inherent dishonesty of her nature. Goneril reveals her true character when she defies the hierarchy of nature, which calls for daughters to respect and honor their fathers, and lays the groundwork for the torment she will set in motion for the remainder of her father's life.

Goneril leads her father to believe that her love for him extends beyond any evidence of poor behavior, and so ultimately, she is responsible for Lear's actions, having earlier endorsed them. Later, both Goneril and Regan are depicted as especially cruel and bloodthirsty, as they call for Gloucester's punishment. Throughout most of the play, having power has been most important to Goneril, but by its conclusion, she is willing to lose the battle, and thus the kingdom, rather than lose a man.

Regan

Regan is Lear's second daughter. Regan is as villainous as Goneril. In the beginning, both Regan and Cornwall appear to be conscientious and reasonable people. Regan appears genuinely upset to learn of Edgar's betrayal. Thus, Regan initially appears as the more sympathetic and gentler sister. She greets her father with politeness, but her deportment is deceptive. Regan has no real reverence for her father and king, as her

subsequent actions reveal, but Regan is more competent than Goneril at deception, more easily assuming the mantle of deference and politeness that a gracious daughter is expected to exhibit.

Like Goneril, Regan also proves herself to be unyielding and cruel. Regan's plucking of Gloucester's beard reinforces the point that she has no respect for age or rank. In contrast to her basic inhumanity, Regan shows some real humanity, though briefly, when Cornwall is wounded. Regan's concerns that Gloucester should be relieved of his misery indicates that she is cognizant of public opinion and concerned that her subjects support her actions.

Cordelia

Cordelia genuinely loves her father, but her refusal to flatter him leads to the tragedy that unfolds. Cordelia's tears at the news of her father's treatment prove her compassion and establish that she is, indeed, the opposite of her sisters. Cordelia has no desire for revenge, nor any need to make her father suffer for having misjudged her. Her virtue and purity make it easy to see why she is often described as Christ-like or representative of God's goodness. Her response to her father's capture, and her own capture, evokes the stoicism of kings, and reveals that Cordelia is as royal as her father is.

Fool

The Fool assumes the role of Lear's protector when Cordelia is banished. The Fool functions much as a Chorus would in a Greek tragedy, commenting upon events and the king's actions and acting, in some ways, as the king's conscience. The Fool is the king's advocate, loyal and honest, but he is also able to point out the king's faults, as no one else can. The Fool's use of irony, sarcasm, and humor help to ease the truth, and allows him to moderate Lear's behavior. The Fool shares his master's fate, and this reinforces the impression that the Fool's purpose is to protect Lear until Cordelia can arrive to help her father. Both Cordelia and the Fool are caretakers for Lear, and when one is present, the other need not be.

Earl of Gloucester

Gloucester is depicted as a foolish old man, whose inability to see through Edmund's lies parallels Lear's own difficulties. By mistaking Edmund's motives, Gloucester is blind to the events occurring around him, even before Cornwall gouges out his eyes. Clearly, he is not intuitive or quick enough to understand the plotting or undercurrents present around him. Gloucester blames events on the stars, and thus, he absolves himself of any responsibility for his actions.

Later, Gloucester is willing to sacrifice his own life for the king. This heroic behavior sets Gloucester apart from his youngest son, Edmund, who

is merely an opportunist. Like Lear, Gloucester feels despair and questions a god, and like Lear, Gloucester finds his humanity in the midst of his tragedy. The blinded old man who asks that clothing be brought, so that Bedlam Tom might be covered, is a very different man from the Gloucester of Act I, who in the play's opening scene, bragged of the good sport to be had at Edmund's conception. Instead of a thoughtless braggart, Gloucester is filled with compassion for Poor Tom. This compassion for his fellow man indicates that Gloucester regrets the behavior of his past, as he seeks to make amends by sharing with those he never noticed before the recent events.

Earl of Kent / Caius

Although banished, Kent disguises himself in an effort to stay close to his king. Kent is honest — he will not lie to his king — and he is truly selfless, devoted to Lear. When his attempts to protect Lear from his own impetuous nature fail, Kent assumes the guise of an ordinary man and resolves to protect his king. When queried by Lear as to his identity, Kent replies that he is "a man" (I.4.10). Thus, he is no one special, and yet, he stands apart from many other men. Kent is a man defined by integrity, whose goodness is immeasurable, as is his love for his king. Kent's destiny is irrevocably connected to that of the king's, as the final scene of the play reveals. In rejecting Albany's offer to rule the kingdom with Edgar, Kent reveals that he will soon join his king in death. Clearly, Kent feels that his job on earth is to serve his king, and with that job now ended, he anticipates his own death.

Edmund

Gloucester's younger illegitimate son is an opportunist, whose ambitions lead him to form a union with Goneril and Regan. The injustice of Edmund's situation fails to justify his subsequent actions. Edmund rejects the laws of state and society in favor of the laws he sees as eminently more practical and useful — the laws of superior cunning and strength.

Edmund's desire to use any means possible to secure his own needs makes him appear initially as a villain without a conscience. But Edmund has some solid economic impetus for his actions, and he acts from a complexity of reasons, many of which are similar to those of Goneril and Regan. To rid himself of his father, Edmund feigns regret and laments that his nature, which is to honor his father, must be subordinate to the loyalty he feels for his country. Thus, Edmund excuses the betrayal of his own father, having willingly and easily left his father vulnerable to Cornwall's anger. Later, Edmund shows no hesitation, nor any concern about killing the king or Cordelia. Yet in the end, Edmund repents and tries to rescind

his order to execute Cordelia and Lear, and in this small measure, he does prove himself worthy of Gloucester's blood.

Edgar / Poor Tom

Edgar is Gloucester's only legitimate heir, but he must flee and hide from his father when he comes under suspicion. Edgar's innate honesty and dignity lets him believe that his brother, Edmund, would never lie to him, since Edgar would not lie to his brother. Edgar's stoic belief that he has survived the worst that fortune can throw at him is tested when Edgar discovers his father, now blinded. The manner in which Edgar addresses his father indicates compassion, understanding, and an acceptance of his father's flaws.

Duke of Albany

As Goneril's husband, Albany grows in stature during the play and ultimately finds the strength to resist his wife's efforts to have Lear killed. Early in the play, Albany lacks the strength to stand up to his wife, and thus, he cannot control her. Albany is Goneril's opposite, gentle and kind to his wife's cruel and self-serving demeanor. But later, Albany's attack on Goneril's integrity demonstrates that Albany is a highly moral and humane individual, the antithesis of his wife.

Where Goneril has created chaos, Albany endorses nature's design and a view of nature's work within an organic framework. Albany accepts that nature's pattern is essential for survival. Early on, Albany hesitates to confront Goneril when he thinks she's wrong, but he is not the willing participant in evil that Cornwall is. Albany is genuinely shocked when he learns of Gloucester's blinding, while Cornwall easily succumbs to this depravity.

With a new resistance to his wife, Albany joins the ranks of characters who undergo dramatic change during the course of the play; he grows and evolves into a stronger and more compassionate individual by the end of the drama. Albany leads his army in defense of the kingdom, although with great reluctance. The audience witnesses his personal growth, and the culmination of change is clear when he assumes control of the kingdom following the battle's conclusion.

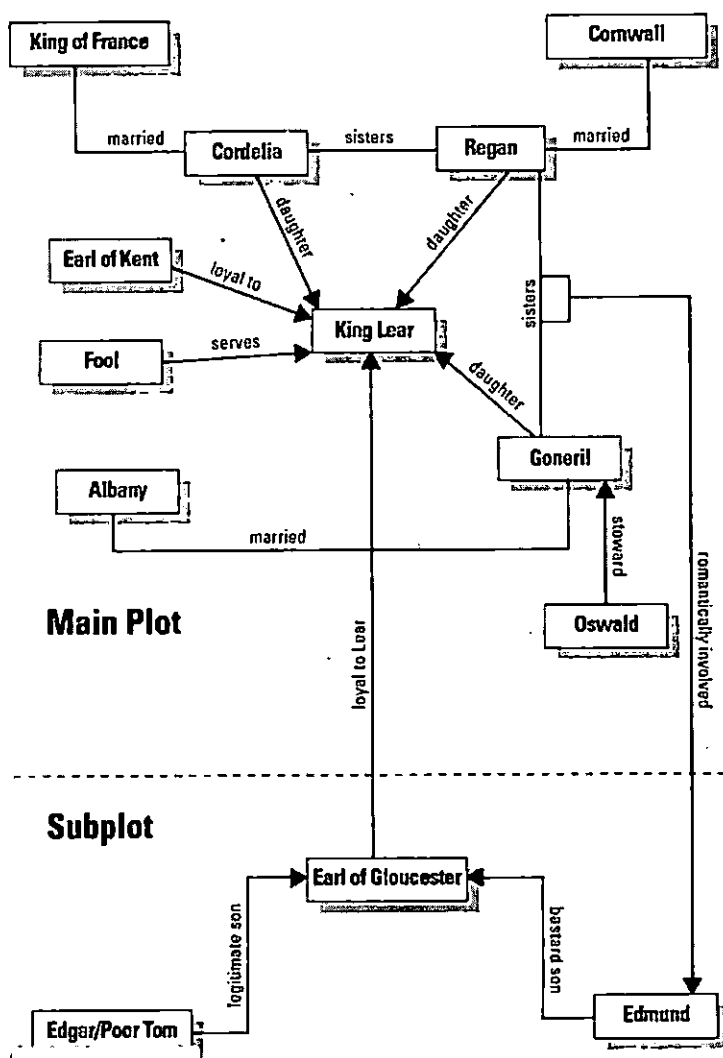
Duke of Cornwall

Cornwall is Regan's brutal husband, vicious and savage when thwarted in his efforts to seize ambition. Cornwall's easy acceptance of Edmund's story and his welcoming of Edmund into his clique foreshadows the evil that will later emerge from Cornwall and provides a hint to the audience that Cornwall is not what he appears. Cornwall responds to Kent's truthful declarations by placing Kent in the stocks. This action indicates that Cornwall, who himself uses artifice as a substitute for honesty in his own

speech, cannot recognize truth when he hears it. Later in the play, Cornwall will make no attempt to control his actions or behave in a civilized manner as he gouges out Gloucester's eyes and grinds them under the heel of his boot.

Oswald

Oswald, Goneril's steward, is a willing accomplice to Goneril's plotting and a henchman without honor. Oswald adds to this negative perception by failing to defend himself against Kent's attack and by lying that he spared Kent's life because Kent is an old man. These events paint Oswald as weak and dishonest. Oswald is, as Kent suggests, a parasite who thrives off Goneril's evil machinations and who makes her deceit easier to maintain. As Goneril's servant, he accepts her orders without question. Although he is warned, he refuses to abandon his orders to murder Gloucester, since obedience and position are everything to this servant. Oswald's sense of obedience is so great that he even asks the man who has killed him to deliver Goneril's letter to Edmund.



King of France

France is honorable and willing to support Cordelia's efforts to rescue her father. France points out that she is a prize as great as any dowry. France's support of Cordelia reveals that he is, indeed, worthy of Cordelia's love.

Duke of Burgundy

Burgundy rejects Cordelia when he discovers that she will bring him no dowry or inheritance. Burgundy, who cannot love Cordelia without her wealth, is guilty of selfish motivations.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS (SCENEWISE)

Act 1, scene 1

Summary

The play begins with two noblemen, Gloucester and Kent, discussing the fact that King Lear is about to divide his kingdom. Their conversation quickly changes, however, when Kent asks Gloucester to introduce his son. Gloucester introduces Edmund, explaining that Edmund is a bastard being raised away from home, but that he nevertheless loves his son dearly.

Lear, the ruler of Britain, enters his throne room and announces his plan to divide the kingdom among his three daughters. He intends to give up the responsibilities of government and spend his old age visiting his children. He commands his daughters to say which of them loves him the most, promising to give the greatest share to that daughter.

Lear's scheming older daughters, Goneril and Regan, respond to his test with flattery, telling him in wildly overblown terms that they love him more than anything else. But Cordelia, Lear's youngest (and favorite) daughter, refuses to speak. When pressed, she says that she cannot "heave her heart into her mouth," that she loves him exactly as much as a daughter should love her father, and that her sisters wouldn't have husbands if they loved their father as much as they say (1.1.90–91). In response, Lear flies into a rage, disowns Cordelia, and divides her share of the kingdom between her two sisters.

The earl of Kent, a nobleman who has served Lear faithfully for many years, is the only courtier who disagrees with the king's actions. Kent tells Lear he is insane to reward the flattery of his older daughters and disown Cordelia, who loves him more than her sisters do. Lear turns his anger on Kent, banishing him from the kingdom and telling him that he must be gone within six days.

The king of France and duke of Burgundy are at Lear's court, awaiting his decision as to which of them will marry Cordelia. Lear calls them in and

tells them that Cordelia no longer has any title or land. Burgundy withdraws his offer of marriage, but France is impressed by Cordelia's honesty and decides to make her his queen. Lear sends her away without his blessing.

Goneril and Regan scheme together in secrecy. Although they recognize that they now have complete power over the kingdom, they agree that they must act to reduce their father's remaining authority.

Act 1, scene 2

Summary

Edmund enters and delivers a soliloquy expressing his dissatisfaction with society's attitude toward bastards. He bitterly resents his legitimate half-brother, Edgar, who stands to inherit their father's estate. He resolves to do away with Edgar and seize the privileges that society has denied him.

Edmund begins his campaign to discredit Edgar by forging a letter in which Edgar appears to plot the death of their father, Gloucester. Edmund makes a show of hiding this letter from his father and so, naturally, Gloucester demands to read it. Edmund answers his father with careful lies, so that Gloucester ends up thinking that his legitimate son, Edgar, has been scheming to kill him in order to hasten his inheritance of Gloucester's wealth and lands. Later, when Edmund talks to Edgar, he tells him that Gloucester is very angry with him and that Edgar should avoid him as much as possible and carry a sword with him at all times. Thus, Edmund carefully arranges circumstances so that Gloucester will be certain that Edgar is trying to murder him.

Analysis: Act 1, scenes 1–2

The love test at the beginning of Act 1, scene 1, sets the tone for this extremely complicated play, which is full of emotional subtlety, conspiracy, and double-talk, and which swings between confusing extremes of love and anger. Lear's demand that his daughters express how much they love him is puzzling and hints at the insecurity and fear of an old man who needs to be reassured of his own importance. Of course, rather than being a true assessment of his daughters' love for him, the test seems to invite—or even to demand—flattery. Goneril's and Regan's professions of love are obviously nothing but flattery: Goneril cannot even put her alleged love into words: "A love that makes . . . speech unable / Beyond all manner of so much I love you" (1.1.59); Regan follows her sister's lead by saying, "I find she names my very deed of love; Only she comes too short" (1.1.70–71).

In contrast to her sisters, whose professions are banal and insincere, Cordelia does not seem to know how to flatter her father—an immediate reflection of her honesty and true devotion to him. "Love, and be silent," she says to herself (1.1.60). When her father asks her the crucial question—

what she can say to merit the greatest inheritance—she answers only, “Nothing, my lord,” and thus seals her fate (1.1.86). Cordelia’s authentic love and Lear’s blindness to its existence trigger the tragic events that follow.

The shift of the play’s focus to Gloucester and Edmund in Act 1, scene 2, suggests parallels between this subplot and Lear’s familial difficulties. Both Lear and Gloucester have children who are truly loyal to them (Cordelia and Edgar, respectively) and children who are planning to do them harm (Goneril and Regan, and Edmund, respectively); both fathers mistake the unloving for the loving, banishing the loyal children and designating the wicked ones their heirs. This symbolic blindness to the truth becomes more literal as the play progresses—in Lear’s eventual madness and Gloucester’s physical blinding.

Moreover, Gloucester’s willingness to believe the lies that Edmund tells him about Edgar seems to reflect a preexisting fear: that his children secretly want to destroy him and take his power. Ironically, this is what *Edmund*, of course, wants to do to Gloucester, but Gloucester is blind to Edmund’s treachery. Gloucester’s inability to see the truth echoes the discussion between Goneril and Regan at the end of Act 1, scene 1, about Lear’s unreliability in his old age: the “infirmity of his age” (1.1.291) and his “unconstant starts” (1.1.298) evoke images of senility and suggest that his daughters ought to take control from him, just as Edmund is taking control from Gloucester.

Edmund is significantly more complicated than the other major villains in the play, Regan and Goneril. He schemes against his father’s life, but not just because he wants to inherit his wealth and land; indeed, his principal motive seems to be desire for *recognition* and perhaps even the love denied him because of his bastard status. The first time we see Edmund, at the beginning of Act 1, scene 1, his own father is mocking him because he is illegitimate. Edmund’s treachery can be seen as a rebellion against the social hierarchy that makes him worthless in the eyes of the world. He rejects the “plague of custom” (1.2.3) that makes society disdain him and dedicates himself to “nature” (1.2.1)—that is, raw, unconstrained existence. He will not be the only character to invoke nature in the course of the play—the complicated relationships that obtain among the natural world, the gods above, and fate or justice pervade the entire play.

Summary: Act 1, scene 3

Lear is spending the first portion of his retirement at Goneril’s castle. Goneril complains to her steward, Oswald, that Lear’s knights are becoming “riotous” and that Lear himself is an obnoxious guest (1.3.6).

Seeking to provoke a confrontation, she orders her servants to behave rudely toward Lear and his attendants.

Summary: Act 1, scene 4

Disguised as a simple peasant, Kent appears in Goneril's castle, calling himself Caius. He puts himself in Lear's way, and after an exchange of words in which Caius emphasizes his plainspokenness and honesty, Lear accepts him into service.

Lear's servants and knights notice that Goneril's servants no longer obey their commands. When Lear asks Oswald where Goneril is, Oswald rudely leaves the room without replying. Oswald soon returns, but his disrespectful replies to Lear's questions induce Lear to strike him. Kent steps in to aid Lear and trips Oswald.

The Fool arrives and, in a series of puns and double entendres, tells Lear that he has made a great mistake in handing over his power to Goneril and Regan. After a long delay, Goneril herself arrives to speak with Lear. She tells him that his servants and knights have been so disorderly that he will have to send some of them away whether he likes it or not.

Lear is shocked at Goneril's treasonous betrayal. Nonetheless, Goneril remains adamant in her demand that Lear send away half of his one hundred knights. An enraged Lear repents ever handing his power over to Goneril. He curses his daughter, calling on Nature to make her childless. Surprised by his own tears, he calls for his horses. He declares that he will stay with Regan, whom he believes will be a true daughter and give him the respect that he deserves. When Lear has gone, Goneril argues with her husband, Albany, who is upset with the harsh way she has treated Lear. She says that she has written a letter to her sister Regan, who is likewise determined not to house Lear's hundred knights.

Summary: Act 1, scene 5

Lear sends Kent to deliver a message to Gloucester. The Fool needles Lear further about his bad decisions, foreseeing that Regan will treat Lear no better than Goneril did. Lear calls on heaven to keep him from going mad. Lear and his attendants leave for Regan's castle.

Analysis: Act 1, scenes 3–5

In these scenes, the tragedy of the play begins to unfold. It is now becoming clear to everyone that Lear has made a mistake in handing over his power to Goneril and Regan. Lear's major error is that, in stepping down from the throne, he has also given up all of his formal authority to those who do not actually love him. He no longer has the power to command anyone to do anything, even to give him shelter or food—his daughters,

each of whom is now a queen over half of Britain, wield special authority over him.

Goneril and, as we soon discover, Regan enjoy being in power and conspire to destroy Lear's remaining influence. Their plan to whittle down Lear's retinue from a hundred knights to fifty may not seem devious, but they will soon purge his knights altogether. This gradual diminishment of Lear's attendants symbolizes the gradual elimination of his remaining power. Knights and servants are part of the pomp that surrounds a powerful king, and Lear rightly sees his loss of them as representative of his daughter's declining respect for his rank.

Goneril, of course, says that the reason she demands this reduction is that the knights have been loud and destructive in her castle—they are, she claims, “men so disordered, so deboshed and bold” (1.4.217). To be fair, it is difficult for us, as readers, to know how true this assertion is. Lear claims, “My train are men of choice and rarest parts, / That all particulars of duty know,” yet we have already seen Lear make imperious demands and lose his temper in a seemingly unjustified way (1.4.240–241). At this point in the play, the audience may still be unsure about whether or not to sympathize with Lear, especially given his capricious decision to banish Cordelia. Still, we know that Goneril has been talking, in private, about how best to control her aging father.

Lear seems to begin to question his own identity. When he realizes that Goneril plans to frustrate his desires, he asks, “Doth any here know me? This is not Lear. / . . . / Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (1.4.201–205). It is as if Goneril's insistence that Lear is now senile makes Lear himself wonder whether he is really himself anymore or whether he has lost his mind. Driven to despair at the end of Act 1, scene 5, he says, “O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!”—a foreshadowing of his eventual insanity (1.5.38).

In Act 1, scene 4, we meet Lear's Fool. Many of Shakespeare's plays feature a clown of some sort, and *King Lear* arguably has two such clowns: the Fool himself and Edgar in his later disguise as Tom O'Bedlam. Many kings and queens during the Renaissance had court fools to amuse them. However, in addition to wearing funny costumes, singing, performing acrobatic tricks, and juggling, fools also made puns and rude jokes and offered their take on matters to their sovereigns.

Lear's Fool cleverly combines this sort of foolishness with a deeper wisdom. The license, traditionally granted to official “fools,” to say things to their superiors that anybody else would be punished for enables him to counsel Lear, even though he seems only to prattle nonsensically. Moreover, Lear seems to have a very close relationship with his Fool: the

Fool calls Lear “nuncle” and Lear calls the Fool “boy.” He is always speaking in riddles and songs, but in these scenes his meaning can be understood: he advises Lear to be wary of his daughters. In telling Lear, “I / am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing,” he hints at the dangerous situation in which Lear has put himself (1.4.168–169). His ostensibly silly singing—“The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long / That it had it head bit off by it young”—clearly warns the king that his daughters, each like a traitorous “cuckoo,” plan to turn against the father who raised them (1.4.190–191).

Summary: Act 2, scene 1

In Gloucester’s castle, Gloucester’s servant Curan tells Edmund that he has informed Gloucester that the duke of Cornwall and his wife, Regan, are coming to the castle that very night. Curan also mentions vague rumors about trouble brewing between the duke of Cornwall and the duke of Albany.

Edmund is delighted to hear of Cornwall’s visit, realizing that he can make use of him in his scheme to get rid of Edgar. Edmund calls Edgar out of his hiding place and tells him that Cornwall is angry with him for being on Albany’s side of their disagreement. Edgar has no idea what Edmund is talking about. Edmund tells Edgar further that Gloucester has discovered his hiding place and that he ought to flee the house immediately under cover of night. When he hears Gloucester coming, Edmund draws his sword and pretends to fight with Edgar, while Edgar runs away. Edmund cuts his arm with his sword and lies to Gloucester, telling him that Edgar wanted him to join in a plot against Gloucester’s life and that Edgar tried to kill him for refusing. The unhappy Gloucester praises Edmund and vows to pursue Edgar, sending men out to search for him.

Cornwall and Regan arrive at Gloucester’s house. They believe Edmund’s lies about Edgar, and Regan asks if Edgar is one of the disorderly knights that attend Lear. Edmund replies that he is, and Regan speculates further that these knights put Edgar up to the idea of killing Gloucester in order to acquire Gloucester’s wealth. Regan then asks Gloucester for his advice in answering letters from Lear and Goneril.

Summary: Act 2, scene 2

Outside Gloucester’s castle, Kent, still in peasant disguise, meets Oswald, the chief steward of Goneril’s household. Oswald doesn’t recognize Kent from their scuffle in Act 1, scene 4. Kent roundly abuses Oswald, describing him as cowardly, vain, boastful, overdressed, servile, and groveling. Oswald still maintains that he doesn’t know Kent; Kent draws his sword and attacks him.

Oswald's cries for help bring Cornwall, Regan, and Gloucester. Kent replies rudely to their calls for explanation, and Cornwall orders him to be punished in the stocks, a wooden device that shackles a person's ankles and renders him immobile. Gloucester objects that this humiliating punishment of Lear's messenger will be seen as disrespectful of Lear himself and that the former king will take offense. But Cornwall and Regan maintain that Kent deserves this treatment for assaulting Goneril's servant, and they put him in the stocks.

After everyone leaves, Kent reads a letter that he has received from Cordelia in which she promises that she will find some way, from her current position in France, to help improve conditions in Britain. The unhappy and resigned Kent dozes off in the stocks.

Analysis: Act 2, scenes 1–2

Edmund's clever scheming to get rid of Edgar shows his cunning and his immorality. His ability to manipulate people calls to mind arguably the greatest of Shakespeare's villains, Iago, from *Othello*, who demonstrates a similar capacity for twisting others to serve his own ends. There is a great deal of irony in Edmund's description to his father of the ways in which Edgar has allegedly schemed against Gloucester's life. Edmund goes so far as to state that Edgar told him that no one would ever believe Edmund's word against his because of Edmund's illegitimate birth. With this remark, Edmund not only calls attention to his bastard status—which is clearly central to his resentful, ambitious approach to life—but proves crafty enough to use it to his advantage.

Gloucester's rejection of Edgar parallels Lear's rejection of Cordelia in Act 1, scene 1, and reminds us of the similarities between the two unhappy families: Edgar and Cordelia are good children of fathers who reject them in favor of children who do not love them. When Gloucester says, "I never got him"—that is, he never begot, or fathered, him—he seems to be denying that he is actually Edgar's father, just as Lear has disowned Cordelia (2.1.79). On the other hand, when he praises Edmund as a "loyal and natural boy," he seems to be acknowledging him as a true son (2.1.85).

It is somewhat difficult to know what to make of Kent's attack on Oswald. Oswald's eagerness to serve the treacherous Goneril in Act 1, scene 4, has established him as one of the play's minor villains, but Kent's barrage of insults and subsequent physical attack on Oswald are clearly unprovoked. Oswald's failure to fight back may be interpreted as cowardice, but one can also interpret it as Oswald does: he says that he chooses not to attack Kent because of Kent's "gray beard"—at nearly fifty, Kent is an old man and thus no longer suited for fighting (2.2.55). Kent's attack seems to be rooted in his anger at Goneril's treatment of Lear—"anger hath a

privilege" is the excuse that he gives Cornwall and Regan—and his rage at the hypocrisy surrounding Lear's betrayal by his daughters (2.2.62).

Cornwall's and Regan's decision to put Kent in the stocks reinforces what we have already seen of their disrespect for their father. The stocks were a punishment used on common criminals, and their use on Lear's serving man could easily be interpreted as highly disrespectful to Lear's royal status. Gloucester announces as much when he protests, "Your purposed low correction / Is such as basest and contemned'st wretches / . . . / Are punished with" (2.2.134–137). Regan, however, ignores his pleas; she almost seems to welcome the idea of inviting Lear's anger.

Summary: Act 2, scene 3

As Kent sleeps in the stocks, Edgar enters. He has thus far escaped the manhunt for him, but he is afraid that he will soon be caught. Stripping off his fine clothing and covering himself with dirt, he turns himself into "poor Tom" (2.3.20). He states that he will pretend to be one of the beggars who, having been released from insane asylums, wander the countryside constantly seeking food and shelter.

Summary: Act 2, scene 4

Lear, accompanied by the Fool and a knight, arrives at Gloucester's castle. Lear spies Kent in the stocks and is shocked that anyone would treat one of his servants so badly. When Kent tells him that Regan and Cornwall put him there, Lear cannot believe it and demands to speak with them. Regan and Cornwall refuse to speak with Lear, however, excusing themselves on the grounds that they are sick and weary from traveling. Lear insists. He has difficulty controlling his emotions, but he finally acknowledges to himself that sickness can make people behave strangely. When Regan and Cornwall eventually appear, Lear starts to tell Regan about Goneril's "sharp-toothed unkindness" toward him (2.4.128). Regan suggests that Goneril may have been justified in her actions, that Lear is growing old and unreasonable, and that he should return to Goneril and beg her forgiveness.

Lear asks Regan to shelter him, but she refuses. He complains more strenuously about Goneril and falls to cursing her. Much to Lear's dismay, Goneril herself arrives at Gloucester's castle. Regan, who had known from Goneril's letters that she was coming, takes her sister's hand and allies herself with Goneril against their father. They both tell Lear that he is getting old and weak and that he must give up half of his men if he wants to stay with either of his daughters.

Lear, confused, says that he and his hundred men will stay with Regan. Regan, however, responds that she will allow him only twenty-five men. Lear turns back to Goneril, saying that he will be willing to come down to

fifty men if he can stay with her. But Goneril is no longer willing to allow him even that many. A moment later, things get even worse for Lear: both Goneril and Regan refuse to allow him any servants.

Outraged, Lear curses his daughters and heads outside, where a wild storm is brewing. Gloucester begs Goneril and Regan to bring Lear back inside, but the daughters prove unyielding and state that it is best to let him do as he will. They order that the doors be shut and locked, leaving their father outside in the threatening storm.

Analysis: Act 2, scenes 3–4

In these scenes, Shakespeare further develops the psychological focus of the play, which centers on cruelty, betrayal, and madness. Lear watches his daughters betray him, and his inability to believe what he is seeing begins to push him toward the edge of insanity. This movement begins with Lear's disbelief when he sees how Regan has treated his servant Kent. By putting Kent in the stocks, Regan indicates her lack of respect for Lear as king and father. When Lear realizes how badly Regan is treating him, he reacts with what seems to be a dramatically physical upwelling of grief: he cries out, "O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! / *Hystericapassio*, down, thou climbing sorrow" (2.4.54–55). "The mother" was a Renaissance term for an illness that felt like suffocation; characterized by light-headedness and strong pain in the stomach, its symptoms resemble those of emotional trauma, grief, and hysteria.

Regan clearly tries to undercut Lear's rapidly waning authority. As her subversion becomes clearer, Lear denies it in ways that become more and more painful to watch. Regan and Cornwall refuse his demands to speak with them, and Lear forgets that, since he has given up his power, he can no longer give them orders. Goneril and Regan eventually insult Lear by telling him that he is senile: "I pray you, father, being weak, seem so" (2.4.196). These barbed words from Regan skirt the issue of Lear's loss of authority and point to something that he can neither deny nor control—that he is growing old.

The sisters' refusal to allow Lear to keep his hundred knights and Regan's polite but steadfast refusal to allow him to stay with her instead of Goneril finally begin to make Lear understand that he can no longer command like a king. But he stands in fierce denial of this loss of authority; being forced to this realization causes him to alternate between grief and an anger so powerful that it seems to be driving him mad. We see flashes of this anger and madness when he curses Goneril, and then, later, when he declares that instead of returning to Goneril's house without servants, he will flee houses entirely and live in the open air.

The servants that Lear wants to keep with him are symbols of more than just his authority. When Regan asks why he needs even one attendant, Lear bursts out, "O, reason not the need!" (2.4.259). Human nature, he says, would be no different from that of animals if humans never needed more than the fundamental necessities of life. Clearly, Lear needs his servants not because of the service that they provide him but because of what they represent: his authority and his importance—in essence, the identity that he has built for himself. Regan and Goneril, in denying Lear his servants, deny their father that which he needs the most: not what he needs to be a king, but what he needs to be a human being.

Lear's cry of "O fool, I shall go mad!" foreshadows the fate that soon befalls him (2.4.281). His words also recall the earlier scene in which Edgar dons a disguise and assumes the identity of a "Bedlam beggar" (2.3.14). "Bedlam" was a nickname for the Bethlehem hospital in Elizabethan London where the mentally ill were housed. When Edgar rips his clothes to shreds and smears himself with dirt, he is taking on the disguise of a "poor Tom" (2.3.20), one of the insane Bedlam beggars who roam the countryside sticking themselves with pins and begging "with roaring voices" (2.3.14). Thus, in these scenes, both Lear and Edgar flee from civilization, leaving the safety of walls and roofs behind in favor of the chaos and confusion of the natural world.

Summary: Act 3, scene 1

A storm rages on the heath. Kent, seeking Lear in vain, runs into one of Lear's knights and learns that Lear is somewhere in the area, accompanied only by his Fool. Kent gives the knight secret information: he has heard that there is unrest between Albany and Cornwall and that there are spies for the French in the English courts. Kent tells the knight to go to Dover, the city in England nearest to France, where he may find friends who will help Lear's cause. He gives the knight a ring and orders him to give it to Cordelia, who will know who has sent the knight when she sees the ring. Kent leaves to search for Lear.

Summary: Act 3, scene 2

Meanwhile, Lear wanders around in the storm, cursing the weather and challenging it to do its worst against him. He seems slightly irrational, his thoughts wandering from idea to idea but always returning to fixate on his two cruel daughters. The Fool, who accompanies him, urges him to humble himself before his daughters and seek shelter indoors, but Lear ignores him. Kent finds the two of them and urges them to take shelter inside a nearby hovel. Lear finally agrees and follows Kent toward the hovel. The Fool makes a strange and confusing prophecy.

Summary: Act 3, scene 3

Inside his castle, a worried Gloucester speaks with Edmund. The loyal Gloucester recounts how he became uncomfortable when Regan, Goneril, and Cornwall shut Lear out in the storm. But when he urged them to give him permission to go out and help Lear, they became angry, took possession of his castle, and ordered him never to speak to Lear or plead on his behalf.

Gloucester tells Edmund that he has received news of a conflict between Albany and Cornwall. He also informs him that a French army is invading and that part of it has already landed in England. Gloucester feels that he must take Lear's side and now plans to go seek him out in the storm. He tells Edmund that there is a letter with news of the French army locked in his room, and he asks his son to go and distract the duke of Cornwall while he, Gloucester, goes onto the heath to search for Lear. He adds that it is imperative that Cornwall not notice his absence; otherwise, Gloucester might die for his treachery.

When Gloucester leaves, Edmund privately rejoices at the opportunity that has presented itself. He plans to betray his father immediately, going to Cornwall to tell him about both Gloucester's plans to help Lear and the location of the traitorous letter from the French. Edmund expects to inherit his father's title, land, and fortune as soon as Gloucester is put to death.

Analysis: Act 3, scenes 1–3

The information that Kent gives the knight brings the audience out of the personal realm of Lear's anguish and into the political world of Lear's Britain. Throughout the play, we hear rumors of conflict between Albany and Cornwall and of possible war with France, but what exactly transpires at any specific moment is rarely clear. The question of the French is not definitively resolved until Act 4. Kent's mention of Dover, however, provides a clue: Dover is a port city in the south of England where ships from France often landed; it is famous for its high white cliffs. As various characters begin moving southward toward Dover in the scenes that follow, the tension of an inevitable conflict heightens. Whatever the particulars of the political struggle, however, it is clear that Lear, by giving away his power in Britain to Goneril and Regan—and eventually Edmund—has destroyed not only his own authority but *all* authority. Instead of a stable, hierarchical kingdom with Lear in control, chaos has overtaken the realm, and the country is at the mercy of the play's villains, who care for nothing but their own power.

This political chaos is mirrored in the natural world. We find Lear and his courtiers plodding across a deserted heath with winds howling around them and rain drenching them. Lear, like the other characters, is unused to such harsh conditions, and he soon finds himself symbolically stripped bare. He has already discovered that his cruel daughters can victimize him; now

he learns that a king caught in a storm is as much subject to the power of nature as any man.

The importance of the storm, and its symbolic connection to the state of mind of the people caught in it, is first suggested by the knight's words to Kent. Kent asks the knight, "Who's there, besides foul weather?"; the knight answers, "One minded like the weather, most unquietly" (3.1.1-2). Here the knight's state of mind is shown to be as turbulent as the winds and clouds surrounding him. This is true of Lear as well: when Kent asks the knight where the king is, the knight replies, "Contending with the fretful elements; / . . . / Strives in his little world of man to out-scorn / The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain" (3.1.4-11). Shakespeare's use of pathetic fallacy—a literary device in which inanimate objects such as nature assume human reactions—amplifies the tension of the characters' struggles by elevating human forces to the level of natural forces.

Lear is trying to face down the powers of nature, an attempt that seems to indicate both his despair and his increasingly confused sense of reality. Both of these strains appear in Lear's famous speech to the storm, in which he commands, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! / You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!" (3.2.1-3). Lear's attempt to speak to the storm suggests that he has lost touch with the natural world and his relation to it—or, at least, that he has lost touch with the ordinary human understanding of nature. In a sense, though, his diatribe against the weather embodies one of the central questions posed by *King Lear*: namely, whether the universe is fundamentally friendly or hostile to man. Lear asks whether nature and the gods are actually good, and, if so, how life can have treated him so badly.

The storm marks one of the first appearances of the apocalyptic imagery that is so important in *King Lear* and that will become increasingly dominant as the play progresses. The chaos reflects the disorder in Lear's increasingly crazed mind, and the apocalyptic language represents the projection of Lear's rage and despair onto the outside world: if his world has come to a symbolic end because his daughters have stripped away his power and betrayed him, then, he seems to think, the real world ought to end, too. As we have seen, the chaos in nature also reflects the very real political chaos that has engulfed Britain in the absence of Lear's authority.

Along with Lear's increasing despair and projection, we also see his understandable fixation on his daughters: "Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters: / I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness" (3.2.14-15). Lear tells the thunder that he does not blame it for attacking him because it does not owe him anything. But he does blame his "two pernicious daughters" for their betrayal (3.2.21). Despite the apparent onset

of insanity, Lear exhibits some degree of rational thought—he is still able to locate the source of his misfortune.

Finally, we see strange shifts beginning to occur inside Lear's mind. He starts to realize that he is going mad, a terrifying realization for anyone. Nevertheless, Lear suddenly notices his Fool and asks him, "How dost my boy? Art cold?" (3.2.66). He adds, "I have one part in my heart / That's sorry yet for thee" (3.2.70–71). Here, Lear takes real and compassionate notice of another human being for the first time in the play. This concern for others reflects the growth of Lear's humility, which eventually redeems him and enables him to win Cordelia's forgiveness.

Summary: Act 3, scene 4

Kent leads Lear through the storm to the hovel. He tries to get him to go inside, but Lear resists, saying that his own mental anguish makes him hardly feel the storm. He sends his Fool inside to take shelter and then kneels and prays. He reflects that, as king, he took too little care of the wretched and homeless, who have scant protection from storms such as this one.

The Fool runs out of the hovel, claiming that there is a spirit inside. The spirit turns out to be Edgar in his disguise as Tom O'Bedlam. Edgar plays the part of the madman by complaining that he is being chased by a devil. He adds that fiends possess and inhabit his body. Lear, whose grip on reality is loosening, sees nothing strange about these statements. He sympathizes with Edgar, asking him whether bad daughters have been the ruin of him as well.

Lear asks the disguised Edgar what he used to be before he went mad and became a beggar. Edgar replies that he was once a wealthy courtier who spent his days having sex with many women and drinking wine. Observing Edgar's nakedness, Lear tears off his own clothes in sympathy.

Gloucester, carrying a torch, comes looking for the king. He is unimpressed by Lear's companions and tries to bring Lear back inside the castle with him, despite the possibility of evoking Regan and Goneril's anger. Kent and Gloucester finally convince Lear to go with Gloucester, but Lear insists on bringing the disguised Edgar, whom he has begun to like, with him.

Summary: Act 3, scene 5

Inside Gloucester's castle, Cornwall vows revenge against Gloucester, whom Edmund has betrayed by showing Cornwall a letter that proves Gloucester's secret support of a French invasion. Edmund pretends to be horrified at the discovery of his father's "treason," but he is actually delighted, since the powerful Cornwall, now his ally, confers upon him the title of earl of Gloucester (3.5.10). Cornwall sends Edmund to find

Gloucester, and Edmund reasons to himself that if he can catch his father in the act of helping Lear, Cornwall's suspicions will be confirmed.

Analysis: Act 3, scenes 4–5

When Kent asks Lear to enter the hovel at the beginning of Act 3, scene 4, Lear's reply demonstrates that part of his mind is still lucid and that the symbolic connection between the storm outside and Lear's own mental disturbance is significant. Lear explains to Kent that although the storm may be very uncomfortable for Kent, Lear himself hardly notices it: "The tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling else" (3.4.13–14). Lear's sensitivity to the storm is blocked out by his mental and emotional anguish and by his obsession with his treacherous daughters. The only thing that he can think of is their "filial ingratitude" (3.4.15).

Lear also continues to show a deepening sensitivity to other people, a trait missing from his character at the beginning of the play and an interesting side effect of his increasing madness and exposure to human cruelty. After he sends his Fool into the hovel to take shelter, he kneels in prayer—the first time we have seen him do so in the play. He does not pray for himself; instead, he asks the gods to help "poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm" (3.4.29–30). Reproaching himself for his heartlessness, Lear urges himself to "expose thyself to feel what wretches feel" (3.4.35). This self-criticism and newfound sympathy for the plight of others mark the continuing humanization of Lear.

Lear's obsessive contemplation of his own humanity and of his place in relation to nature and to the gods is heightened still further after he meets Edgar, who is clad only in rags. Lear's wandering mind turns to his own fine clothing, and he asks, addressing Edgar's largely uncovered body, "Is man no more than this? Consider him well" (3.4.95–96). As a king in fact as well as in name, with servants and subjects and seemingly loyal daughters, Lear could be confident of his place in the universe; indeed, the universe seemed to revolve around him. Now, as his humility grows, he becomes conscious of his real relationship to nature. He is frightened to see himself as little more than a "bare, forked animal," stripped of everything that made him secure and powerful (3.4.99–100).

The destruction of Lear's pride leads him to question the social order that clothes kings in rich garments and beggars in rags. He realizes that each person, underneath his or her clothing, is naked and therefore weak. He sees too that clothing offers no protection against the forces of the elements or of the gods. When he tries to remove his own clothing, his companions restrain him. But Lear's attempt to bare himself is a sign that he has seen the similarities between himself and Edgar: only the flimsy

surface of garments marks the difference between a king and a beggar. Each must face the cruelty of an uncaring world.

The many names that Edgar uses for the demons that pester him seem to have been taken by Shakespeare from a single source—Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostors*, which describes demons in wild and outlandish language to ridicule the exorcisms performed by Catholic priests. Edgar uses similarly strange and haunting language to describe his demons. The audience assumes that he is only feigning madness; after all, we have seen him deliberately decide to pose as a crazed beggar in order to escape capture by his brother and father. But Edgar's ravings are so convincing, and the storm-wracked heath such a bizarre environment, that the line between pretending to be mad and actually *being* mad seems to blur.

Summary: Act 3, scene 6

Gloucester, Kent, Lear, and the Fool take shelter in a small building (perhaps a shed or farmhouse) on Gloucester's property. Gloucester leaves to find provisions for the king. Lear, whose mind is wandering ever more widely, holds a mock trial of his wicked daughters, with Edgar, Kent, and the Fool presiding. Both Edgar and the Fool speak like madmen, and the trial is an exercise in hallucination and eccentricity.

Gloucester hurries back in to tell Kent that he has overheard a plot to kill Lear. Gloucester begs Kent to quickly transport Lear toward Dover, in the south of England, where allies will be waiting for him. Gloucester, Kent, and the Fool leave. Edgar remains behind for a moment and speaks in his own, undisguised voice about how much less important his own suffering feels now that he has seen Lear's far worse suffering.

Summary: Act 3, scene 7

Back in Gloucester's castle, Cornwall gives Goneril the treasonous letter concerning the French army at Dover and tells her to take it and show it to her husband, Albany. He then sends his servants to apprehend Gloucester so that Gloucester can be punished. He orders Edmund to go with Goneril to Albany's palace so that Edmund will not have to witness the violent punishment of his father.

Oswald brings word that Gloucester has helped Lear escape to Dover. Gloucester is found and brought before Regan and Cornwall. They treat him cruelly, tying him up like a thief, insulting him, and pulling his white beard. Cornwall remarks to himself that he cannot put Gloucester to death without holding a formal trial but that he can still punish him brutally and get away with it.

Admitting that he helped Lear escape, Gloucester swears that he will see Lear's wrongs avenged. Cornwall replies, "See 't shalt thou never," and

proceeds to dig out one of Gloucester's eyes, throw it on the floor, and step on it (3.7.68). Gloucester screams, and Regan demands that Cornwall put out the other eye too.

One of Gloucester's servants suddenly steps in, saying that he cannot stand by and let this outrage happen. Cornwall draws his sword and the two fight. The servant wounds Cornwall, but Regan grabs a sword from another servant and kills the first servant before he can injure Cornwall further.irate, the wounded Cornwall gouges out Gloucester's remaining eye.

Gloucester calls out for his son Edmund to help him, but Regan triumphantly tells him that it was Edmund who betrayed him to Cornwall in the first place. Gloucester, realizing immediately that Edgar was the son who really loved him, laments his folly and prays to the gods to help Edgar. Regan and Cornwall order that Gloucester be thrown out of the house to "smell / His way to Dover" (3.7.96-97). Cornwall, realizing that his wound is bleeding heavily, exits with Regan's aid.

Left alone with Gloucester, Cornwall's and Regan's servants express their shock and horror at what has just happened. They decide to treat Gloucester's bleeding face and hand him over to the mad beggar to lead Gloucester where he will.

Analysis: Act 3, scenes 6-7

In these scenes, Shakespeare continues to develop Lear's madness. Lear rages on against his daughters and is encouraged by comments that Edgar and the Fool make. We may interpret the Fool's remark "He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf" as referring to Lear's folly in trusting his two wolflike daughters (3.6.16). Edgar, for his part, speaks like a madman who sees demons everywhere; since Lear has started to hallucinate that he sees his daughters, the two madmen get along well. For instance, when Lear accosts his absent daughters ("Now, you she foxes!"), Edgar scolds them likewise (3.6.20). Animal imagery will be applied to Goneril and Regan again later in Lear's mock trial of his daughters: "The little dogs and all, / Tray, Blanch, and Sweet-heart, see, they bark at me" (3.6.57-58). Having reduced his sense of himself to a "bare, forked animal," he now makes his vicious daughters animals as well—but they, of course, seem like predatory, disloyal creatures to him (3.4.99-100).

Act 3, scene 6, is the Fool's last scene, and Edgar continues to take over the Fool's function by answering Lear's mad words and jingles. When Lear declares, "We'll go to supper i' the morning" (3.6.77), thus echoing the confusion of the natural order in the play, the Fool answers, "And I'll go to bed at noon" (3.6.78). This line is the last we hear from him in the play. One can argue that since Lear is sliding into madness, he can no longer

understand the nonsense of the Fool, who actually is sane, but rather can relate only to Edgar, who pretends to be mad. One can also argue that Lear has internalized the Fool's criticisms of his own errors, and thus he no longer needs to hear them from an outside source. In any case, the Fool, having served Shakespeare's purpose, has become expendable.

Edgar's speech at the end of Act 3, scene 6, in which he leaves off babbling and addresses the audience, gives us a needed reminder that, despite appearances, he is *not* actually insane. We are also reminded, yet again, of the similarities between his situation and Lear's. "He childed as I fathered," says Edgar, suggesting that just as Lear's ungrateful daughters put Lear where he is now, so Gloucester, too willing to believe the evil words of Edmund, did the same to Edgar (3.6.103).

The shocking violence of Act 3, scene 7, is one of the bloodiest onstage actions in all of Shakespeare. Typically, especially in Shakespeare's later plays, murders and mutilations take place offstage. Here, however, the violence happens right before our eyes, with Cornwall's snarl "Out, vile jelly!" as a ghastly complement to the action (3.7.86). (How graphic our view of the violence is depends on how it is staged.) The horror of Gloucester's blinding marks a turning point in the play: cruelty, betrayal, and even madness may be reversible, but blinding is not. It becomes evident at this point that the chaos and cruelty permeating the play have reached a point of no return.

Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the sheer cruelty that Regan and Cornwall perpetrate, in ways both obvious and subtle, against Gloucester. From Cornwall's order to "pinion him like a thief" (3.7.23) and Regan's exhortation to tie his arms "hard, hard" (3.7.32)—a disgraceful way to handle a nobleman—to Regan's astonishing rudeness in yanking on Gloucester's white beard after he is tied down, the two seem intent on hurting and humiliating Gloucester. Once again, the social order is inverted: the young are cruel to the old; loyalty to the old king is punished as treachery to the new rulers; Regan and Cornwall, guests within Gloucester's house, thoroughly violate the age-old conventions of respect and politeness. Cornwall does not have the authority to kill or punish Gloucester without a trial, but he decides to ignore that rule because he can: "Our power / Shall do a courtesy to our wrath, which men / May blame, but not control" (3.7.25–27).

This violence is mitigated slightly by the unexpected display of humanity on the part of Cornwall's servants. Just as Cornwall and Regan violate a range of social norms, so too do the servants, by challenging their masters. One servant gives his life trying to save Gloucester; others help the injured Gloucester and bring him to the disguised Edgar. Even amid the increasing chaos, some human compassion remains.

Summary: Act 4, scene 1

Edgar talks to himself on the heath, reflecting that his situation is not as bad as it could be. He is immediately presented with the horrifying sight of his blinded father. Gloucester is led by an old man who has been a tenant of both Gloucester and Gloucester's father for eighty years. Edgar hears Gloucester tell the old man that if he could only touch his son Edgar again, it would be worth more to him than his lost eyesight. But Edgar chooses to remain disguised as Poor Tom rather than reveal himself to his father. Gloucester asks the old man to bring some clothing to cover Tom, and he asks Tom to lead him to Dover. Edgar agrees. Specifically, Gloucester asks to be led to the top of the highest cliff.

Summary: Act 4, scene 2

Goneril and Edmund arrive outside of her palace, and Goneril expresses surprise that Albany did not meet them on the way. Oswald tells her that Albany is displeased with Goneril's and Regan's actions, glad to hear that the French army had landed, and sorry to hear that Goneril is returning home.

Goneril realizes that Albany is no longer her ally and criticizes his cowardice, resolving to assert greater control over her husband's military forces. She directs Edmund to return to Cornwall's house and raise Cornwall's troops for the fight against the French. She informs him that she will likewise take over power from her husband. She promises to send Oswald with messages. She bids Edmund goodbye with a kiss, strongly hinting that she wants to become his mistress.

As Edmund leaves, Albany enters. He harshly criticizes Goneril. He has not yet learned about Gloucester's blinding, but he is outraged at the news that Lear has been driven mad by Goneril and Regan's abuse. Goneril angrily insults Albany, accusing him of being a coward. She tells him that he ought to be preparing to fight against the French invaders. Albany retorts by calling her monstrous and condemns the evil that she has done to Lear.

A messenger arrives and delivers the news that Cornwall has died from the wound that he received while putting out Gloucester's eyes. Albany reacts with horror to the report of Gloucester's blinding and interprets Cornwall's death as divine retribution. Meanwhile, Goneril displays mixed feelings about Cornwall's death: on the one hand, it makes her sister Regan less powerful; on the other hand, it leaves Regan free to pursue Edmund herself. Goneril leaves to answer her sister's letters.

Albany demands to know where Edmund was when his father was being blinded. When he hears that it was Edmund who betrayed Gloucester and that Edmund left the house specifically so that Cornwall could punish

Gloucester, Albany resolves to take revenge upon Edmund and help Gloucester.

Analysis: Act 4, scenes 1–2

In these scenes, the play moves further and further toward hopelessness. We watch characters who think that matters are improving realize that they are only getting worse. Edgar, wandering the plains half naked, friendless, and hunted, thinks the worst has passed, until the world sinks to another level of darkness, when he glimpses his beloved father blinded, crippled, and bleeding from the eye sockets. Gloucester, who seems to have resigned himself to his sightless future, expresses a similar feeling of despair in one of the play's most famous and disturbing lines: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.37–38). Here we have nihilism in its starkest form: the idea that there is no order, no goodness in the universe, only caprice and cruelty. This theme of despair in the face of an uncaring universe makes *King Lear* one of Shakespeare's darkest plays. For Gloucester, as for Lear on the heath, there is no possibility of redemption or happiness in the world—there is only the "sport" of vicious, inscrutable gods.

It is unclear why Edgar keeps up his disguise as Poor Tom. Whatever Edgar's (or Shakespeare's) reasoning, his secrecy certainly creates dramatic tension and allows Edgar to continue to babble about the "foul fiend[s]" that possess and follow him (4.1.59). It also makes him unlikely to ask Gloucester his reasons for wanting to go to Dover. Gloucester phrases his request strangely, asking Tom to lead him only to the brim of the cliff, where "from that place / I shall no leading need" (4.1.77–78). These lines clearly foreshadow Gloucester's later attempt to commit suicide.

Meanwhile, the characters in power, having blinded Gloucester and driven off Lear, are swiftly becoming divided. The motif of betrayal recurs, but this time it is the wicked betraying the wicked. Cornwall has died, and Albany has turned against his wife, Goneril, and her remaining allies, Regan and Edmund. Albany's unexpected discovery of a conscience after witnessing his wife's cruelty raises the theme of redemption for the first time, offering the possibility that even an apparently wicked character can recover his goodness and try to make amends. Significantly, Albany's attacks on his wife echo Lear's own words: "O Goneril! / You are not worth the dust which the rude wind / Blows in your face," Albany tells her after hearing what she has done to her father (4.2.30–32). Like Lear, Albany uses animal imagery to describe the faithless daughters. "Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?" he asks (4.2.41). Goneril, for her part, is hardly intimidated by him; she calls him a "moral fool" for criticizing her while France invades (4.1.59). Goneril equates Albany's moralizing with foolishness, a sign of her evil nature.

When Albany hears that Cornwall is dead, he thanks divine justice in words that run counter to Gloucester's earlier despair. "This shows you are above, / You justicers," he cries, offering a slightly more optimistic—if grim—take on the possibility of divine justice than Gloucester's earlier comment about flies, boys, and death (4.2.79–80). His words imply that perhaps it will be possible to restore order after all, perhaps the wicked characters will yet suffer for their sins—or so the audience and characters alike can hope.

Summary: Act 4, scene 3

Kent, still disguised as an ordinary serving man, speaks with a gentleman in the French camp near Dover. The gentleman tells Kent that the king of France landed with his troops but quickly departed to deal with a problem at home. Kent's letters have been brought to Cordelia, who is now the queen of France and who has been left in charge of the army. Kent questions the gentleman about Cordelia's reaction to the letters, and the gentleman gives a moving account of Cordelia's sorrow upon reading about her father's mistreatment.

Kent tells the gentleman that Lear, who now wavers unpredictably between sanity and madness, has also arrived safely in Dover. Lear, however, refuses to see Cordelia because he is ashamed of the way he treated her. The gentleman informs Kent that the armies of both Albany and the late Cornwall are on the march, presumably to fight against the French troops.

Summary: Act 4, scene 4

Cordelia enters, leading her soldiers. Lear has hidden from her in the cornfields, draping himself in weeds and flowers and singing madly to himself. Cordelia sends one hundred of her soldiers to find Lear and bring him back. She consults with a doctor about Lear's chances for recovering his sanity. The doctor tells her that what Lear most needs is sleep and that there are medicines that can make him sleep. A messenger brings Cordelia the news that the British armies of Cornwall and Albany are marching toward them. Cordelia expected this news, and her army stands ready to fight.

Summary: Act 4, scene 5

Back at Gloucester's castle, Oswald tells Regan that Albany's army has set out, although Albany has been dragging his feet about the expedition. It seems that Goneril is a "better soldier" than Albany (4.5.4). Regan is extremely curious about the letter that Oswald carries from Goneril to Edmund, but Oswald refuses to show it to her. Regan guesses that the letter concerns Goneril's love affair with Edmund, and she tells Oswald plainly that she wants Edmund for herself. Regan reveals that she has

already spoken with Edmund about this possibility; it would be more appropriate for Edmund to get involved with her, now a widow, than with Goneril, with whom such involvement would constitute adultery. She gives Oswald a token or a letter (the text doesn't specify which) to deliver to Edmund, whenever he may find him. Finally, she promises Oswald a reward if he can find and kill Gloucester.

Analysis: Act 4, scenes 3–5

In these scenes, we see Cordelia for the first time since Lear banished her in Act 1, scene 1. The words the gentleman uses to describe Cordelia to Kent seem to present her as a combination idealized female beauty and quasi-religious savior figure. The gentleman uses the language of love poetry to describe her beauty—her lips are “ripe,” the tears in her eyes are “as pearls from diamonds dropped,” and her “smiles and tears” are like the paradoxically coexisting “sunshine and rain” (4.3.17–21). But the gentleman also describes Cordelia in language that might be used to speak of a holy angel or the Virgin Mary herself: he says that, as she wiped away her tears, “she shook / The holy water from her heavenly eyes” (4.3.28–29). Cordelia’s great love for her father, which contrasts sharply with Goneril and Regan’s cruelty, elevates her to the level of reverence.

The strength of Cordelia’s daughterly love is reinforced in Act 4, scene 4, when Cordelia orders her people to seek out and help her father. We learn that the main reason for the French invasion of England is Cordelia’s desire to help Lear: “great France / My mourning and importuned tears hath pitied,” she says (4.4.26–27). The king of France, her husband, took pity on her grief and allowed the invasion in an effort to help restore Lear to the throne. When Cordelia proclaims that she is motivated not by ambition but by “love, dear love, and our aged father’s right,” we are reminded of how badly Lear treated her at the beginning of the play (4.4.29). Her virtue and devotion is manifest in her willingness to forgive her father for his awful behavior. At one point, she declares, “O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about” (4.4.24–25), echoing a biblical passage in which Christ says, “I must go about my father’s business” (Luke 2:49). This allusion reinforces Cordelia’s piety and purity and consciously links her to Jesus Christ, who, of course, was a martyr to love, just as Cordelia becomes at the play’s close.

The other characters in the play discuss Lear’s madness in interesting language, and some of the most memorable turns of phrase in the play come from these descriptions. When Cordelia assesses Lear’s condition in Act 4, scene 4, she says he is

As mad as the vexed sea; singing aloud;
Crowned with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,

With hordocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,
Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow. (4.4.2–5)

Lear's madness, which is indicated here by both his singing and his self-adornment with flowers, is marked by an embrace of the natural world; rather than perceiving himself as a heroic figure who transcends nature, he understands that he is a small, meaningless component of it. Additionally, this description brings to mind other famous scenes of madness in Shakespeare—most notably, the scenes of Ophelia's flower-bedecked madness in *Hamlet*.

These scenes set up the resolution of the play's tension, which takes place in Act 5. While Lear hides from Cordelia out of shame, she seeks him out of love, crystallizing the contrast between her forgiveness and his repentance. Regan and Goneril have begun to become rivals for the affection of Edmund, as their twin ambitions inevitably bring them into conflict. On the political and military level, we learn that Albany's and Cornwall's armies are on the march toward the French camp at Dover. The play is rushing toward a conclusion, for all the characters' trajectories have begun to converge.

Summary: Act 4, scene 6

Still disguised, Edgar leads Gloucester toward Dover. Edgar pretends to take Gloucester to the cliff, telling him that they are going up steep ground and that they can hear the sea. Finally, he tells Gloucester that they are at the top of the cliff and that looking down from the great height gives him vertigo. He waits quietly nearby as Gloucester prays to the gods to forgive him. Gloucester can no longer bear his suffering and intends to commit suicide. He falls to the ground, fainting.

Edgar wakes Gloucester up. He no longer pretends to be Poor Tom but now acts like an ordinary gentleman, although he still doesn't tell Gloucester that he is his son. Edgar says that he saw him fall all the way from the cliffs of Dover and that it is a miracle that he is still alive. Clearly, Edgar states, the gods do not want Gloucester to die just yet. Edgar also informs Gloucester that he saw the creature who had been with him at the top of the cliff and that this creature was not a human being but a devil. Gloucester accepts Edgar's explanation that the gods have preserved him and resolves to endure his sufferings patiently.

Lear, wandering across the plain, stumbles upon Edgar and Gloucester. Crowned with wild flowers, he is clearly mad. He babbles to Edgar and Gloucester, speaking both irrationally and with a strange perceptiveness. He recognizes Gloucester, alluding to Gloucester's sin and source of shame—his adultery. Lear pardons Gloucester for this crime, but his thoughts then follow a chain of associations from adultery to copulation to

womankind, culminating in a tirade against women and sexuality in general. Lear's disgust carries him to the point of incoherence, as he deserts iambic pentameter (the verse form in which his speeches are written) and spits out the words "Fie, fie, fie! pah! pah!" (4.6.126).

Cordelia's people enter seeking King Lear. Relieved to find him at last, they try to take him into custody to bring him to Cordelia. When Lear runs away, Cordelia's men follow him.

Oswald comes across Edgar and Gloucester on the plain. He does not recognize Edgar, but he plans to kill Gloucester and collect the reward from Regan. Edgar adopts yet another persona, imitating the dialect of a peasant from the west of England. He defends Gloucester and kills Oswald with a cudgel. As he dies, Oswald entrusts Edgar with his letters.

Gloucester is disappointed not to have been killed. Edgar reads with interest the letter that Oswald carries to Edmund. In the letter, Goneril urges Edmund to kill Albany if he gets the opportunity, so that Edmund and Goneril can be together. Edgar is outraged; he decides to keep the letter and show it to Albany when the time is right. Meanwhile, he buries Oswald nearby and leads Gloucester off to temporary safety.

Summary: Act 4, scene 7

In the French camp, Cordelia speaks with Kent. She knows his real identity, but he wishes it to remain a secret to everyone else. Lear, who has been sleeping, is brought in to Cordelia. He only partially recognizes her. He says that he knows now that he is senile and not in his right mind, and he assumes that Cordelia hates him and wants to kill him, just as her sisters do. Cordelia tells him that she forgives him for banishing her.

Meanwhile, the news of Cornwall's death is repeated in the camp, and we learn that Edmund is now leading Cornwall's troops. The battle between France and England rapidly approaches.

Analysis: Act 4, scenes 6–7

Besides moving the physical action of the play along, these scenes forward the play's psychological action. The strange, marvelous scene of Gloucester's supposed fall over the nonexistent cliffs of Dover, Lear's mad speeches to Gloucester and Edgar in the wilderness, and the redemptive reconciliation between Cordelia and her not-quite-sane father all set the stage for the resolution of the play's emotional movement in Act 5.

The psychological motivations behind Gloucester's attempted suicide and Edgar's manipulation of it are complicated and ambiguous. Gloucester's death wish, which reflects his own despair at the cruel, uncaring universe—and perhaps the play's despair as well—would surely have been troubling to the self-consciously Christian society of Renaissance

England. Shakespeare gets around much of the problem by setting *King Lear* in a pagan past; despite the fact that the play is full of Christian symbols and allusions, its characters pray only to the gods and never to the Christian God.

Clearly, Edgar wants his father to live. He refuses to share in Gloucester's despair and still seeks a just and happy resolution to the events of the play. In letting Gloucester think that he has attempted suicide, Edgar manipulates Gloucester's understanding of divine will: he says to Gloucester after the latter's supposed fall and rebirth, "Thy life's a miracle. . . / . . . / The clearest gods . . . / . . . have preserved thee" (4.6.55, 73–74). Edgar not only stops Gloucester's suicidal thoughts but also shocks him into a rebirth. He tells his father that he should "bear free and patient thoughts": his life has been given back to him and he should take better care of it from now on (4.6.80).

In these scenes, King Lear's madness brings forth some of his strangest and most interesting speeches. As Edgar notes, Lear's apparent ramblings are "matter and impertinency mixed! / Reason in madness!" (4.6.168–169). This description is similar to Polonius's muttering behind Hamlet's back in *Hamlet*: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (*Hamlet*, 2.2.203–204). Some of Lear's rambling does indeed seem to be meaningless babble, as when he talks about mice, cheese, and giants. But Lear swiftly moves on to talk of more relevant things. He finally understands that his older daughters, in Act 1, scene 1, and before, were sweet-talking him: "They flattered me like a dog. . . . To say 'aye' and 'no' to everything that I said!" (4.6.95–98).

Lear has realized, despite what flatterers have told him and he has believed, that he is as vulnerable to the forces of nature as any human being. He cannot command the rain and thunder and is not immune to colds and fever (the "ague" of 4.6.103). Just as, during the storm, he recognizes that beneath each man's clothing is "a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.99–100), Lear now understands that no amount of flattery and praise can make a king different from anyone else: "Through tattered clothes small vices do appear; / Robes and furred gowns hide all" (4.6.158–159).

Armed with this knowledge, Lear can finally reunite with Cordelia and express his newfound humility and beg repentance. "I am a very foolish fond old man" (4.7.61), he tells her sadly, and he admits that she has "some cause" to hate him (4.7.76). Cordelia's moving response ("No cause, no, cause") seals their reconciliation (4.7.77). Love and forgiveness, embodied in Lear's best daughter, join with humility and repentance, and, for a brief time, happiness prevails. But the forces that Lear's initial error unleashed—Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, with all their ambition and appetite for destruction—remain at large. We thus turn from happy

reconciliation to conflict, as Cordelia leads her troops against the evil that her father's folly has set loose in Britain.

Summary: Act 5, scene 1

In the British camp near Dover, Regan asks Edmund if he loves Goneril and if he has found his way into her bed. Edmund responds in the negative to both questions. Regan expresses jealousy of her sister and beseeches Edmund not to be familiar with her.

Abruptly, Goneril and Albany enter with their troops. Albany states that he has heard that the invading French army has been joined by Lear and unnamed others who may have legitimate grievances against the present government. Despite his sympathy toward Lear and these other dissidents, Albany declares that he intends to fight alongside Edmund, Regan, and Goneril to repel the foreign invasion. Goneril and Regan jealously spar over Edmund, neither willing to leave the other alone with him. The three exit together.

Just as Albany begins to leave, Edgar, now disguised as an ordinary peasant, catches up to him. He gives Albany the letter that he took from Oswald's body—the letter in which Goneril's involvement with Edmund is revealed and in which Goneril asks Edmund to kill Albany. Edgar tells Albany to read the letter and says that if Albany wins the upcoming battle, he can sound a trumpet and Edgar will provide a champion to defend the claims made in the letter. Edgar vanishes and Edmund returns. Edmund tells Albany that the battle is almost upon them, and Albany leaves. Alone, Edmund addresses the audience, stating that he has sworn his love to both Regan and Goneril. He debates what he should do, reflecting that choosing either one would anger the other. He decides to put off the decision until after the battle, observing that if Albany survives it, Goneril can take care of killing him herself. He asserts menacingly that if the British win the battle and he captures Lear and Cordelia, he will show them no mercy.

Summary: Act 5, scene 2

The battle begins. Edgar, in peasant's clothing, leads Gloucester to the shelter of a tree and goes into battle to fight on Lear's side. He soon returns, shouting that Lear's side has lost and that Lear and Cordelia have been captured. Gloucester states that he will stay where he is and wait to be captured or killed, but Edgar says that one's death occurs at a predestined time. Persuaded, Gloucester goes with Edgar.

Analysis: Act 5, scenes 1–2

In these scenes, the battle is quickly commenced and just as quickly concluded. The actual fighting happens offstage, during the short Act 5, scene 2. Meanwhile, the tangled web of affection, romance, manipulation, power, and betrayal among Goneril, Regan, Albany, and Edmund has

finally taken on a clear shape. We learn from Edmund that he has promised himself to both sisters; we do not know whether he is lying to Regan when he states that he has not slept with Goneril. Nor can we deduce from Edmund's speech which of the sisters he prefers—or, in fact, whether he really loves either of them—but it is clear that he has created a problem for himself by professing love for both.

It is clear now which characters support Lear and Cordelia and which characters are against them. Albany plans to show Lear and Cordelia mercy; Edmund, like Goneril and Regan, does not. Since all of these characters are, theoretically, fighting on the same side—the British—it is unclear what the fate of the captured Lear and Cordelia will be.

Ultimately, the sense that one has in these scenes is of evil turning inward and devouring itself. As long as Lear and Gloucester served as victims, Goneril and Regan were united. Now, though, with power concentrated in their hands, they fall to squabbling over Edmund's affections. Edmund himself has come into his own, taking command of an army and playing the two queens off against each other. It is suddenly clear that he, more than anyone else, will benefit from Lear's division of the kingdom. Gloucester's bastard may, indeed, shortly make himself king. Summary: Act 5, scene 3

Edmund leads in Lear and Cordelia as his prisoners. Cordelia expects to confront Regan and Goneril, but Lear vehemently refuses to do so. He describes a vividly imagined fantasy, in which he and Cordelia live alone together like birds in a cage, hearing about the outside world but observed by no one. Edmund sends them away, giving the captain who guards them a note with instructions as to what to do with them. He doesn't make the note's contents clear to the audience, but he speaks ominously. The captain agrees to follow Edmund's orders.

Albany enters accompanied by Goneril and Regan. He praises Edmund for his brave fighting on the British side and orders that he produce Lear and Cordelia. Edmund lies to Albany, claiming that he sent Lear and Cordelia far away because he feared that they would excite the sympathy of the British forces and create a mutiny. Albany rebukes him for putting himself above his place, but Regan breaks in to declare that she plans to make Edmund her husband. Goneril tells Regan that Edmund will not marry her, but Regan, who is unexpectedly beginning to feel sick, claims Edmund as her husband and lord.

Albany intervenes, arresting Edmund on a charge of treason. Albany challenges Edmund to defend himself against the charge in a trial by combat, and he sounds the trumpet to summon his champion. While Regan, who is growing ill, is helped to Albany's tent, Edgar appears in full armor to

accuse Edmund of treason and face him in single combat. Edgar defeats Edmund, and Albany cries out to Edgar to leave Edmund alive for questioning. Goneril tries to help the wounded Edmund, but Albany brings out the treacherous letter to show that he knows of her conspiracy against him. Goneril rushes off in desperation.

Edgar takes off his helmet and reveals his identity. He reconciles with Albany and tells the company how he disguised himself as a mad beggar and led Gloucester through the countryside. He adds that he revealed himself to his father only as he was preparing to fight Edmund and that Gloucester, torn between joy and grief, died.

A gentleman rushes in carrying a bloody knife. He announces that Goneril has committed suicide. Moreover, she fatally poisoned Regan before she died. The two bodies are carried in and laid out.

Kent enters and asks where Lear is. Albany recalls with horror that Lear and Cordelia are still imprisoned and demands from Edmund their whereabouts. Edmund repents his crimes and determines to do good before his death. He tells the others that he had ordered that Cordelia be hanged and sends a messenger to try to intervene.

Lear enters, carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms: the messenger arrived too late. Slipping in and out of sanity, Lear grieves over Cordelia's body. Kent speaks to Lear, but Lear barely recognizes him. A messenger enters and reveals that Edmund has also died. Lear asks Edgar to loosen Cordelia's button; then, just as Lear thinks that he sees her beginning to breathe again, he dies.

Albany gives Edgar and Kent their power and titles back, inviting them to rule with him. Kent, feeling himself near death, refuses, but Edgar seems to accept. The few remaining survivors exit sadly as a funeral march plays.

Analysis

This long scene brings the play to its resolution, ending it on a note of relentless depression and gloom. Almost all of the main characters wind up dead; only Albany, Edgar, and Kent walk off the stage at the end, and the aging, unhappy Kent predicts his imminent demise. Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and Lear lie dead onstage, and Edmund and Gloucester have passed away offstage. Albany philosophizes about his merciless end when he says, "All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their deserving" (5.3.301–303). One can argue that these words suggest that, in some sense, order and justice have triumphed over villainy and cruelty, and that the world is a just place after all.

But one can also argue that Albany's words ring hollow: most of the virtuous characters die along with the villains, making it difficult to

interpret the scene as poetic justice. Indeed, death seems to be a defining motif for the play, embracing characters indiscriminately. We may feel that the disloyal Goneril and Regan, the treacherous Edmund, the odious Oswald, and the brutal Cornwall richly deserve their deaths. But, in the last scene, when the audience expects some kind of justice to be doled out, the good characters—Gloucester, Cordelia, Lear—die as well, and their bodies litter the stage alongside the corpses of the wicked.

This final, harrowing wave of death raises, yet again, a question that has burned throughout the play: is there any justice in the world? Albany's suggestion that the good and the evil both ultimately get what they deserve does not seem to hold true. Lear, howling over Cordelia's body, asks, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?" (5.3.305–306). This question can be answered only with the stark truth that death comes to all, regardless of each individual's virtue or youth. The world of *King Lear* is not a Christian cosmos: there is no messiah to give meaning to suffering and no promise of an afterlife. All that *King Lear* offers is despair.

The play's emotional extremes of hope and despair, joy and grief, love and hate, are brought to the fore as well in this final scene. Lear's address to Cordelia at the beginning of the scene is strangely joyful. He creates an intimate world that knows only love: "We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage. / When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down, / And ask of thee forgiveness" (5.3.9–11). This blissful vision, however, is countered by the terrible despair that Lear evokes at Cordelia's death: "Thou'lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never." (5.3.306–307). Yet, despite his grief, Lear expires in a flash of utterly misguided hope, thinking that Cordelia is coming back to life. In a sense, this final, false hope is the most depressing moment of all.

Similarly, Gloucester, as Edgar announces, dies partly of joy: "his flawed heart— / . . . / 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, / Burst smilingly" (5.3.195–198). Even Edmund, learning of Goneril's and Regan's deaths, says, "Yet Edmund was beloved. / The one the other poisoned for my sake, / And after slew herself" (5.3.238–240). Even the cruel Edmund thinks of love in his last moments, a reminder of the warmth of which his bastard birth deprived him. But for him and the two sister queens, as for everyone else in *King Lear*, love seems to lead only to death. In perhaps the play's final cruelty, the audience is left with only a terrifying uncertainty: the good and the evil alike die, and joy and pain both lead to madness or death.

The corpses on the stage at the end of the play, of the young as well as the old, symbolize despair and death—just as the storm at the play's center symbolizes chaos and madness. For Lear, at least, death is a mercy. As Kent says, "The wonder is, he hath endured so long" in his grief and

madness (5.3.315). For the others, however, we are left wondering whether there is any justice, any system of punishment and reward in the "tough world" of this powerful but painful play (5.3.313).

QUOTES

1. nhappy that I am, I cannot heave

My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty

According to my bond; no more nor less.

Cordelia speaks these words when she address her father, King Lear, who has demanded that his daughters tell him how much they love him before he divides his kingdom among them (1.1.90–92). In contrast to the empty flattery of Goneril and Regan, Cordelia offers her father a truthful evaluation of her love for him: she loves him "according to my bond"; that is, she understands and accepts without question her duty to love him as a father and king. Although Cordelia loves Lear better than her sisters do, she is unable to "heave" her heart into her mouth, as her integrity prevents her from making a false declaration in order to gain his wealth. Lear's rage at what he perceives to be her lack of affection sets the tragedy in motion. Cordelia's refusal to flatter Lear, then, establishes her virtue and the authenticity of her love, while bringing about Lear's dreadful error of judgment.

- 2 Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law

My services are bound. Wherefore should I

Stand in the plague of custom, and permit

The curiosity of nations to deprive me,

For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines

Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?

...

Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.

Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund

As to the legitimate. Fine word—"legitimate"!

Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,

And my invention thrive, Edmund the base

Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper.

Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

Edmund delivers this soliloquy just before he tricks his father, Gloucester, into believing that Gloucester's legitimate son, Edgar, is plotting against him (1.2.1–22). "I grow; I prosper," he says, and these

words define his character throughout the play. Deprived by his bastard birth of the respect and rank that he believes to be rightfully his, Edmund sets about raising himself by his own efforts, forging personal prosperity through treachery and betrayals. The repeated use of the epithet "legitimate" in reference to Edgar reveals Edmund's obsession with his brother's enviable status as their father's rightful heir. With its attack on the "plague of custom," this quotation embodies Edmund's resentment of the social order of the world and his accompanying craving for respect and power. He invokes "nature" because only in the unregulated, anarchic scheme of the natural world can one of such low birth achieve his goals. He wants recognition more than anything else—perhaps, it is suggested later, because of the familial love that has been denied him—and he sets about getting that recognition by any means necessary.

3 O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars

Are in the poorest thing superfluous.

Allow not nature more than nature needs,

Man's life's as cheap as beast's . . .

...

You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!

...

If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts

Against their father, fool me not so much

To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,

And let not women's weapons, water-drops,

Stain my man's cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,

...

No, I'll not weep.

I have full cause of weeping, but this heart

Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,

Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad!

Lear delivers these lines after he has been driven to the end of his rope by the cruelties of Goneril and Regan (2.4.259–281). He rages against them, explaining that their attempts to take away his knights and servants strike at his heart. "O, reason not the need!" he cries, explaining that humans would be no different from the animals if they did not need more than the fundamental necessities of life to be happy. Clearly, Lear needs knights and attendants not only because of the service that they provide him but because of what their presence represents: namely, his identity, both as a

king and as a human being. Goneril and Regan, in stripping Lear of the trappings of power, are reducing him to the level of an animal. They are also driving him mad, as the close of this quotation indicates, since he is unable to bear the realization of his daughters' terrible betrayal. Despite his attempt to assert his authority, Lear finds himself powerless; all he can do is vent his rage.

- 4 As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport.

Gloucester speaks these words as he wanders on the heath after being blinded by Cornwall and Regan (4.1.37–38). They reflect the profound despair that grips him and drives him to desire his own death. More important, they emphasize one of the play's chief themes—namely, the question of whether there is justice in the universe. Gloucester's philosophical musing here offers an outlook of stark despair: he suggests that there is no order—or at least no *good* order—in the universe, and that man is incapable of imposing his own moral ideas upon the harsh and inflexible laws of the world. Instead of divine justice, there is only the “sport” of vicious, inscrutable gods, who reward cruelty and delight in suffering. In many ways, the events of the play bear out Gloucester's understanding of the world, as the good die along with the wicked, and no reason is offered for the unbearable suffering that permeates the play.

- 5 Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones:
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever!
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth.

Lear utters these words as he emerges from prison carrying Cordelia's body in his arms (5.3.256–260). His howl of despair returns us again to the theme of justice, as he suggests that “heaven's vault should crack” at his daughter's death—but it does not, and no answers are offered to explain Cordelia's unnecessary end. It is this final twist of the knife that makes *King Lear* such a powerful, unbearable play. We have seen Cordelia and Lear reunited in Act 4, and, at this point, all of the play's villains have been killed off, leaving the audience to anticipate a happy ending. Instead, we have a corpse and a howling, ready-for-death old man. Indeed, the tension between Lear as powerful figure and Lear as animalistic madman explodes to the surface in Lear's “Howl, howl, howl, howl,” a spoken rather than sounded vocalization of his primal instinct.

King Lear opens with a conversation between the earls of Kent and Gloucester, in which the audience learns that Gloucester has two sons: Edgar, who is his legitimate heir, and Edmund, his younger illegitimate son. This information will provide the secondary or subplot. Next, King Lear enters to state that he intends to remove himself from life's duties and concerns. Pointing at a map, Lear tells those in attendance that he has divided his kingdom into three shares, to be parceled out to his three daughters, as determined by their protestations of love. The two elder daughters, Goneril and Regan, exaggerate their love by telling their father that their affection for him exceeds all reasonable expectations. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, tells Lear that she loves him, but only as a daughter should love a father. Lear, angry and disappointed at what he deems a lack of devotion on Cordelia's part, divides his kingdom equally between Goneril and Regan, and banishes Cordelia. Later, France agrees to marry the now dowerless and banished Cordelia. When Kent attempts to defend Cordelia, Lear banishes him as well. Meanwhile, Goneril and Regan decide that if Lear becomes too much of a nuisance, they will have to decide what disciplinary actions to take.

In the developing subplot, Edmund complains of his unhappiness at being an illegitimate — and thus, disinherited — son. As part of his plot to claim what is not his, Edmund gives a false letter to his father, Gloucester, declaring that Edgar is proposing that they kill their father and split the wealth between them. The cunning Edmund easily convinces his father that Edgar cannot be trusted.

Within a short time, Lear moves to Goneril's palace. Goneril tells Lear that he needs a smaller troop, more decorous in behavior and better suited to the king's rank and age. The king is very angry and says he will pack up his people and move to Regan's palace. Lear's anger continues to build, and he calls upon nature to curse Goneril's womb. In response, Goneril turns out 50 of Lear's retinue.

As the subplot develops, Edmund wounds himself slightly, pretending that Edgar has attacked him. Certain that Edgar will also try to kill him, Gloucester promises to find the means to make Edmund his heir. After his escape into the woods, Edgar decides that he will disguise himself as a Bedlam beggar, who will be known as Poor Tom. Meanwhile, Cornwall orders an impassioned Kent placed in the stocks. Lear arrives and quickly realizes that Regan has joined Goneril in seeking to reduce Lear's authority. Lear reminds his daughters that he gave them all that they now

enjoy, but they are unmoved. An angry Lear calls for his horse, and rides into the storm with his Fool for protection. Exposed to the storm, the Fool attempts to reason with his king, but Lear will have no part of submission, especially before his daughters. Soon the king and Fool are joined by Edgar disguised as Poor Tom.

Gloucester tells Edmund of the plot to save the king, unaware that he is divulging the plans to a traitor. Edmund immediately resolves to tell Cornwall of the plan. Edmund soon receives his reward: Gloucester's title and lands. The captured Gloucester is tortured by Regan, who fiendishly plucks at his beard, and Cornwall, who gouges out Gloucester's eyes, but not before one of Cornwall's servants draws a sword and stabs Cornwall, who soon dies of his wounds.

Later, Edgar is both shocked and dismayed when a blinded Gloucester is led in by one of his tenants. The disguised Edgar agrees to take Gloucester to the cliff he seeks, where he dupes Gloucester into thinking that he is at the edge of a precipice. After Gloucester jumps and loses consciousness, Edgar easily convinces his father that he has somehow survived a fall from the cliffs. Oswald arrives and attempts to kill Gloucester but is, instead, slain by Edgar. As he lays dying, Oswald gives Edgar a letter from Goneril instructing Edmund to murder Albany so that she will be free to wed Edmund.

Goneril and Edmund soon learn that Albany is a changed man, one who is pleased to learn of the proposed invasion by France and displeased when he learns that Gloucester has been replaced by his younger son, Edmund. Meanwhile, Cordelia learns of her father's deteriorated mental condition and returns to England with an army to defend her father. Within a short time, Cordelia and her father reunite.

In spite of Albany's intent to save Lear and Cordelia's lives, Edmund resolves that they will die. Edmund orders that Lear and Cordelia be imprisoned. Albany, Goneril, and Regan join Edmund, and a confrontation erupts between all four characters. Edmund's treachery is revealed, and he is wounded in a fight with Edgar, whom Edmund does not recognize as his brother. Soon, Regan dies, poisoned by Goneril, who then kills herself. Since he is now dying, Edmund admits that the charges against him are truthful, and he seeks to know the identity of his killer. Edgar confesses his lineage as brother and shares the news that their father, Gloucester, has died.

Edmund, who says he wants some good to come from so much death, reveals his and Goneril's plan to have both Lear and Cordelia murdered and to have Cordelia's death appear a suicide. Efforts to rescind these orders are too late, and soon Lear enters with a dead Cordelia in his arms. Unable to accept Cordelia's death, the king also dies, his body covering that

of his youngest daughter. Albany informs Kent and Edgar that they must now rule the kingdom together, but Kent replies that he will soon leave the world to join his master. Edgar is left to speak of the sad weight of these events, which everyone must now endure.

KEY WORDS

- alteration change (of mind).
- answer any act in response or retaliation.
- apprehension capture or arrest.
- arbitrement an absolute and final decision.
- attain to prove guilty.
- avouched asserted; affirmed.
- ballow a short, thick stick or club.
- bandy to give and take; specifically, to exchange (words) in an angry or argumentative manner.
- bans curses.
- belike quite likely; probably.
- bemadding maddening.
- bend 1 to turn or direct. 2 to cause to have a fixed purpose; determine; aim.
- bending overhanging; prominent.
- bending to turn or direct.
- benison a blessing; benediction.
- besort to be suitable to.
- blood parental heritage; family line; lineage.
- bourn a limit; boundary; a domain.
- braz'd 1 made of, or coated with, brass or a brasslike substance. 2 made hard like brass.
- briefness sudden action; a short duration or length.
- cadent falling.
- carbonado to cut gashes in; slash; hack.
- cataracts floodgate (of heaven).
- century a military unit, originally made up of 100 men.
- character style of printing or handwriting.
- clipp'd inaccurate through omission.

- cock a small boat propelled by oars, esp. one used as a ship's tender.
- conceit a flight of imagination; fancy.
- convenient appropriate; suitable.
- cope to meet, encounter, or have to do (*with*).
- cowish timid; cowardly.
- coxcomb a cap topped with a notched strip of red cloth like a cock's comb, formerly worn by jesters.
- cullionly low, contemptible.
- curious highly detailed, as in workmanship; elaborate.
- daub it further disguise it further.
- dearn gloomy; bleak.
- defuse 1 complicate. 2 to render harmless.
- descent the lowest point; here, the sole of a shoe.
- dog-hearted ferocious; cruel; pitiless.
- faith'd approved; endorsed.
- felicitate made happy.
- festinate hurried.
- fetches tricks; dodges.
- finical finicky.
- fire extreme suffering or distress that tries one's endurance; tribulation or ordeal.
- first cock midnight.
- fitchew lewd woman; prostitute.
- flesh to begin; activate.
- footed secured.
- fordome destroyed, killed, ruined, etc.
- forfended prohibited; forbidden.
- gauntlet 1 a medieval glove, usually of leather covered with metal plates, worn by knights in armor to protect the hand in combat. 2 throw down the gauntlet to challenge, as to combat.
- goatish lustful; lecherous.
- good host shelterer, entertainer.
- green mantle a surface covered with scum or froth.
- greet the time hurry; meet the emergency.
- horse-way horse path,

- idle frivolous; silly.
- idle having no value, use, or significance; worthless.
- ill affected unfaithful.
- imports to mean; signify.
- jakes an outdoor toilet; privy.
- joint-stool a stool made with jointed parts.
- justicers legal officials; judges.
- kibes a chapped or ulcerated chilblain especially on the heel.
- lendings things that one has let another have use of temporarily and on condition that they, or equivalents, be returned.
- list a wish; a craving, desire, or inclination.
- long-engrafted firmly established.
- make from to stay away from; avoid.
- maugre in spite of.
- meiny attendants, collectively; retinue or household.
- minikin very small and delicate; diminutive.
- moiety 1 a half; either of two equal, or more or less equal, parts. 2 an indefinite share or part.
- more composition the act of composing, or putting together a whole by combining parts.
- nether-stocks tights or stockings.
- nighted made dark; black.
- of her bosom have her trust or confidence.
- offices the function or characteristic action of a particular thing.
- opposeless irresistible.
- out wall outside; exterior.
- out-paramour'd having more lovers or mistresses.
- pawn anything given as security, as for a debt, performance of an action, and so on; pledge; guaranty.
- plackets pockets, especially in a woman's skirt or a petticoat.
- plain to complain.
- portable bearable; enduring.
- pricks any of various pointed objects, as a thorn, goad, and so on.
- proper fine; good; handsome.
- propinquity nearness of relationship; kinship.

- ponder confusion; excitement.
- quarrels a cause for dispute.
- question communication; an asking; inquiry.
- questrists seekers; pursuers.
- rank growing vigorously and coarsely; overly luxuriant.
- recreant failing to keep faith; disloyal; traitorous; apostate.
- remotion 1 the act of removing. 2 inaccessibility.
- rings the outer edge or border of something circular; rim, as of a wheel.
- roundest outspoken; plain and blunt; straightforward.
- ruffle to disturb, irritate, or annoy; to take away the smoothness of; wrinkle; ripple.
- silly-ducking submissive.
- simples a medicinal herb; a medicine made from a plant.
- sliver to cut or break into slivers.
- smilets small smiles; half-smiles.
- snuffs disputes; squabbles.
- sovereign above or superior to all others; chief; greatest; supreme.
- speed to have good fortune; prosper; succeed.
- squiny to squint.
- straight immediately.
- strain ancestry; lineage; descent.
- superfluous extravagant; prodigal.
- take upon be interested in.
- taking contagious; infectious.
- tranc'd a stunned condition; daze; stupor.
- trick a personal habit or mannerism.
- trundle-tail a dog with a curled tail.
- unpriz'd precious to be unimportant to one person, but appreciated or valued highly by another.
- vaunt-couriers a forerunner; precursor.
- welk'd r idged or twisted.
- white flakes white hair.
- wide-skirted vast; extensive.
- yokefellow a companion, partner, or associate.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Examine the specific ways that Lear contributes to his fall.

2. A tragic hero moves the reader to pity, since his misfortune is greater than he deserves, and he also creates fear, since his tragedy might easily befall one of us. To what extent does Lear fit the definition of a tragic hero?
3. Discuss either Lear or Gloucester's movement toward a greater knowledge of himself and his world.
4. The play raises important questions about divine justice. All those who are evil are dead, but so are several of the characters who represent good. Does God see to it that good people are rewarded and evildoers are punished? Write an essay that responds to the question of whether or not divine justice is served in this play.
5. Focus on the repetition of several words, such as nothing, bond, nature, and natural. Choose two of these words and discuss the ideas that their use suggests.

FURTHER READING

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UNIT

3

THE TEMPEST

STRUCTURE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This chapter shall cover the following main points:

- Learning objectives
- Introduction of the play
- Plot
- Biography of the author
- Themes, symbols and motifs
- Characters
- Analysis of main characters
- Summary and analysis of scenes
- Quotes
- Summary
- Key words
- Review questions
- Further reading

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Explain the summary of the play.
- Analyze the main characters in the PLAY.
- Discuss about the supernatural elements in the play.
- Write about the themes in the play.

INTRODUCTION OF THE PLAY

Introduction

Records indicate that *The Tempest* was performed before James I on November 1, 1611, but there may also have been earlier performances. *The Tempest* was again performed during the winter of 1612-13 to celebrate the

marriage of Princess Elizabeth, the daughter of King James I. But this play was not printed until it appeared for the first time in the 1623 Folio.

It is relatively easy to date *The Tempest's* composition, since Shakespeare used material that was not available until late 1610: letters from the new Virginia colony in Jamestown and an account of a 1609 shipwreck off Bermuda. Unlike many of Shakespeare's other plays, *The Tempest*, is not drawn from another, earlier literary work. There is no formal source, except for the ideas that the author might have found in reading accounts of the Bermuda shipwreck or the stories emerging from the new colonies, which had been recently established in the New World.

The Tempest as a Romance

The Tempest is a difficult play to categorize. Although it ends in a wedding and thus might be defined as a comedy, there are many serious undertones that diminish the comedic tone. Instead, most modern anthologies of Shakespeare's works list this play as a romance. This separate division of romances includes what are generally labeled as "the problem plays." Along with *The Tempest*, the romances include *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, plays of Shakespeare's later years. These plays were written between 1604 and 1614, just prior to his retirement, when Shakespeare was composing plays that combined romance with some of the darker aspects of life. The romances are plays with the potential for tragedy but in which these tragic elements are resolved.

With *The Tempest*, Shakespeare turns to fantasy and magic as a way to explore romantic love, sibling hatred, and the love of a father for his child. In addition, *The Tempest* examines many of the topics that Shakespeare had focused on in his earlier plays, topics such as the attempts to overthrow a king (*Macbeth*, *Richard II*, and *Julius Caesar*), nature versus nurture (*The Winter's Tale* and *King Lear*), and innocence (*Twelfth Night*).

Although *The Tempest* provides the first masque within a play, the idea of a play within a play had occurred in earlier works, such as *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. In many ways *The Tempest* serves as a culmination of Shakespeare's earlier work, since in this play, he brings many of these earlier ideas together in one work.

Historical and Cultural Context

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the threat of the Black Death (the plague) was diminishing, but it still continued to be a seasonal problem in London, which was overcrowded and suffered from poor sanitation and too much poverty.

A hundred years earlier, Henry VII had formed alliances with neighboring countries and trade was flourishing in London. But the coming

of trade changed the face of England. Instead of a country composed largely of an agrarian culture, England, and especially London, became an important center of trade. There was more wealth, and the newly rich could now afford to escape the congestion of the city. There was a need for large country estates, and so more and more farm land was enclosed.

Displaced rural families fled to the larger cities, where crowding, unemployment, and disease increased with the increase in population. As city life flourished, there was a resulting nostalgia for the loss of country life. In response to this sentimentality, England's poets began to compose poetry recalling the tranquility of rustic life.

Early in the seventeenth century, the masque that comprises much of the fourth act of *The Tempest* was becoming a regular form of court entertainment. Masques were elaborate spectacles, designed to appeal to the audience's senses and glorify the monarch. Furthermore, their sheer richness suggested the magnificence of the king's court; thus they served a political purpose as well as entertained.

It is important to remember that the masque fulfilled another important function, the desire to recapture the past. As is the case with most masques, Prospero's masque is focused on pastoral motifs, with reapers and nymphs celebrating the fecundity of the land.

The masques, with their pastoral themes, also responded to this yearning for a time now ended. The country life, with its abundance of harvests and peaceful existence, is an idealized world that ignores the realities of an agrarian life, with its many hardships. The harshness of winter and the loss of crops and animals are forgotten in the longing for the past.

Elaborate scenery, music, and costumes were essential elements of earlier masques, but during the Jacobean period, the masque became more ornate and much more expensive to stage. Eventually the cost became so great — and the tax burden on the poor so significant — that the masques became an important contributing cause for the English Revolution, and ultimately, the execution of Charles I.

Structure of *The Tempest*

There is really very little plot in *The Tempest*. There is the love story, and then there is the story of two younger brothers who covet their older brothers' titles and possessions. And finally, there is the story of Caliban's plot to murder Prospero. But none of these plots are given much attention or substance; instead, the play is about the complexities of human nature and about reminding the audience that the division between happiness and tragedy is always fragile and must be carefully maintained.

Although *The Tempest* ends with the promise of a wedding, it could just as easily have ended with tragedy. In this play, there are two murder plots and a betrayal to resolve. In a tragedy, these might have ended with the stage awash in blood, as in *Hamlet*, but in *The Tempest*, Prospero's careful manipulation of all the characters and their plans also controls the direction of the action. Prospero's avoidance of tragedy reveals his character's decency and contradicts some critics' arguments that he is an amoral demigod exploiting the natural inhabitants of this island.

The Tempest is unique in its adherence to the three unities. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle argued that *unity of action* was essential for dramatic structure. This meant that a dramatic work should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. The *unity of time* is derived from Aristotle's argument that all the action should occur within one revolution of the sun — one day. The *unity of place* developed later and is a Renaissance idea, which held that the location of the play should be limited to one place. These unities added verisimilitude to the work and made it easier for the audience to believe the events unfolding on stage.

Shakespeare rarely used the three unities, but he uses them in this play, something he has only done in one other play, *The Comedy of Errors*. All the events occur on the island and within one brief three-hour period. Shakespeare needed the three unities, especially that of time, to counter the incredulity of the magic and to add coherence to the plot.

The Tempest, although it is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays, still maintains the integrity of the five-act structure. In fact, most Elizabethan theatre adheres to the five-act structure, which corresponds to divisions in the action. The first act is the Exposition, in which the playwright sets forth the problem and introduces the main characters. In *The Tempest*, the first act establishes the nature of Antonio's betrayal of Prospero, and it explains how Prospero and Miranda came to live on the island. This first act also opens with a violent storm, which establishes the extent of Prospero's power. Most of the play's remaining characters also make an appearance in this act.

The second act is the Complication, in which the entanglement or conflict is developed. In *The Tempest*, the conspiracy to murder Alonso is developed, which establishes that Antonio is still an unsavory character. In addition, the audience learns more about Caliban, and Stefano and Trinculo appear, allowing the groundwork for a second conspiracy to be formed.

The third act is the Climax; and as the name suggests, this is when the action takes a turning point and the crisis occurs. In a romance, this is the point at which the young lovers assert their love, although there may be complications. It is important that the way to love not be too easy, and so

in *The Tempest*, Prospero has forbidden contact between Miranda and Ferdinand, although the audience knows this is only a pretense. In this act, the conspiracy to murder Prospero is developed, although the audience knows that Ariel is listening, and so there is no real danger. And finally, the essential climactic moment occurs in this act when Prospero confronts his enemies at the ghostly banquet.

The fourth act is called the Falling Action, which signals the beginning of the play's resolution. In this act, the romance between Ferdinand and Miranda is acknowledged and celebrated with a masque, and Prospero deals with the conspiracy to murder him by punishing Caliban, Stefano, and Trinculo.

The fifth act is called the Catastrophe; wherein the conclusion occurs. As the name suggests, this act brings closure to the play, a resolution to the conflict, and the plans for a wedding. As the play draws to a close, Prospero is victorious over his enemies, Ferdinand is reunited with his father, Antonio and Sebastian are vanquished, and Caliban regrets his plotting.

Literary Devices in *The Tempest*

Students of Shakespeare's plays quickly come to appreciate the literary devices that the playwright employs in constructing his plays. For example, most Shakespearean plays contain *soliloquies*, which offer a way for the playwright to divulge a character's inner thoughts. The soliloquy requires that the character must think that he is alone on stage, as he reveals to the audience what he is really thinking. In *The Tempest*, the soliloquy is not used as often as it would be in a tragedy, because the dramatic moments are not as intense. However, Prospero still uses this device, most notably in Act V, when he tells the audience what he has accomplished with the help of magic and that soon he will no longer have need for such devices.

A soliloquy is different from a *monologue*, in which a character speaks aloud his thoughts, but with other characters present. Shakespeare also frequently employs the *aside*, in which the character addresses the audience, but other characters do not hear these words. There is a suggestion of conspiracy in the aside, which allows the audience to learn details that most of the characters on stage do not know. For example, Miranda uses an aside in Act I, Scene 2, when she confides to the audience her concern for her father. The aside is usually assumed to be truthful.

Shakespeare's Language

Shakespeare's Elizabethan language can sometimes intimidate his audience. Shakespeare wrote most of *The Tempest* in verse, using iambic pentameter. *Iambic pentameter* is a literary term that defines the play's meter and the stresses placed on each syllable. In iambic pentameter, each complete line contains ten syllables, with each pair of syllables containing

both an accented syllable and an unaccented syllable. Many Renaissance poets used iambic pentameter because the alternating stresses create a rhythm that contributes to the beauty of the play's language.

Shakespeare also included prose passages in his plays, with prose lines being spoken by characters of lower social rank. Shakespeare uses this device to reveal the complexity of Caliban. In *The Tempest*, Caliban speaks prose when he is conspiring with Stefano and Trinculo, but when Caliban speaks of the beauty of the island, he speaks in verse.

Shakespeare's Elizabethan language can be difficult to understand at first. Use of a Shakespearean glossary and the *Oxford English Dictionary* are two sources that can help in understanding the language, but the biggest assist comes with practice. Reading and listening to Shakespeare's words becomes easier with practice. Reading aloud also helps in becoming familiar with early modern English. With time, the unfamiliar language and the rhetorical devices that Shakespeare employed in writing his texts cease to be strange, and the language assumes the beauty that is hidden within it.

PLOT

A storm strikes a ship carrying Alonso, Ferdinand, Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo, Stephano, and Trinculo, who are on their way to Italy after coming from the wedding of Alonso's daughter, Claribel, to the prince of Tunis in Africa. The royal party and the other mariners, with the exception of the unflappable Boatswain, begin to fear for their lives. Lightning cracks, and the mariners cry that the ship has been hit. Everyone prepares to sink.

The next scene begins much more quietly. Miranda and Prospero stand on the shore of their island, looking out to sea at the recent shipwreck. Miranda asks her father to do anything he can to help the poor souls in the ship. Prospero assures her that everything is all right and then informs her that it is time she learned more about herself and her past. He reveals to her that he orchestrated the shipwreck and tells her the lengthy story of her past, a story he has often started to tell her before but never finished. The story goes that Prospero was the Duke of Milan until his brother Antonio, conspiring with Alonso, the King of Naples, usurped his position. Kidnapped and left to die on a raft at sea, Prospero and his daughter survive because Gonzalo leaves them supplies and Prospero's books, which are the source of his magic and power. Prospero and his daughter arrived on the island where they remain now and have been for twelve years. Only now, Prospero says, has Fortune at last sent his enemies his way, and he has raised the tempest in order to make things right with them once and for all.

After telling this story, Prospero charms Miranda to sleep and then calls forth his familiar spirit Ariel, his chief magical agent. Prospero and Ariel's discussion reveals that Ariel brought the tempest upon the ship and set fire to the mast. He then made sure that everyone got safely to the island, though they are now separated from each other into small groups. Ariel, who is a captive servant to Prospero, reminds his master that he has promised Ariel freedom a year early if he performs tasks such as these without complaint. Prospero chastises Ariel for protesting and reminds him of the horrible fate from which he was rescued. Before Prospero came to the island, a witch named Sycorax imprisoned Ariel in a tree. Sycorax died, leaving Ariel trapped until Prospero arrived and freed him. After Ariel assures Prospero that he knows his place, Prospero orders Ariel to take the shape of a sea nymph and make himself invisible to all but Prospero.

Miranda awakens from her sleep, and she and Prospero go to visit Caliban, Prospero's servant and the son of the dead Sycorax. Caliban curses Prospero, and Prospero and Miranda berate him for being ungrateful for what they have given and taught him. Prospero sends Caliban to fetch firewood. Ariel, invisible, enters playing music and leading in the awed Ferdinand. Miranda and Ferdinand are immediately smitten with each other. He is the only man Miranda has ever seen, besides Caliban and her father. Prospero is happy to see that his plan for his daughter's future marriage is working, but decides that he must upset things temporarily in order to prevent their relationship from developing too quickly. He accuses Ferdinand of merely pretending to be the Prince of Naples and threatens him with imprisonment. When Ferdinand draws his sword, Prospero charms him and leads him off to prison, ignoring Miranda's cries for mercy. He then sends Ariel on another mysterious mission.

On another part of the island, Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo, and other miscellaneous lords give thanks for their safety but worry about the fate of Ferdinand. Alonso says that he wishes he never had married his daughter to the prince of Tunis because if he had not made this journey, his son would still be alive. Gonzalo tries to maintain high spirits by discussing the beauty of the island, but his remarks are undercut by the sarcastic sourness of Antonio and Sebastian. Ariel appears, invisible, and plays music that puts all but Sebastian and Antonio to sleep. These two then begin to discuss the possible advantages of killing their sleeping companions. Antonio persuades Sebastian that the latter will become ruler of Naples if they kill Alonso. Claribel, who would be the next heir if Ferdinand were indeed dead, is too far away to be able to claim her right. Sebastian is convinced, and the two are about to stab the sleeping men when Ariel causes Gonzalo to wake with a shout. Everyone wakes up, and Antonio and Sebastian concoct a ridiculous story about having drawn their

swords to protect the king from lions. Ariel goes back to Prospero while Alonso and his party continue to search for Ferdinand.

Caliban, meanwhile, is hauling wood for Prospero when he sees Trinculo and thinks he is a spirit sent by Prospero to torment him. He lies down and hides under his cloak. A storm is brewing, and Trinculo, curious about but undeterred by Caliban's strange appearance and smell, crawls under the cloak with him. Stephano, drunk and singing, comes along and stumbles upon the bizarre spectacle of Caliban and Trinculo huddled under the cloak. Caliban, hearing the singing, cries out that he will work faster so long as the "spirits" leave him alone. Stephano decides that this monster requires liquor and attempts to get Caliban to drink. Trinculo recognizes his friend Stephano and calls out to him. Soon the three are sitting up together and drinking. Caliban quickly becomes an enthusiastic drinker, and begins to sing.

Prospero puts Ferdinand to work hauling wood. Ferdinand finds his labor pleasant because it is for Miranda's sake. Miranda, thinking that her father is asleep, tells Ferdinand to take a break. The two flirt with one another. Miranda proposes marriage, and Ferdinand accepts. Prospero has been on stage most of the time, unseen, and he is pleased with this development.

Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban are now drunk and raucous and are made all the more so by Ariel, who comes to them invisibly and provokes them to fight with one another by impersonating their voices and taunting them. Caliban grows more and more fervent in his boasts that he knows how to kill Prospero. He even tells Stephano that he can bring him to where Prospero is sleeping. He proposes that they kill Prospero, take his daughter, and set Stephano up as king of the island. Stephano thinks this a good plan, and the three prepare to set off to find Prospero. They are distracted, however, by the sound of music that Ariel plays on his flute and tabor-drum, and they decide to follow this music before executing their plot.

Alonso, Gonzalo, Sebastian, and Antonio grow weary from traveling and pause to rest. Antonio and Sebastian secretly plot to take advantage of Alonso and Gonzalo's exhaustion, deciding to kill them in the evening. Prospero, probably on the balcony of the stage and invisible to the men, causes a banquet to be set out by strangely shaped spirits. As the men prepare to eat, Ariel appears like a harpy and causes the banquet to vanish. He then accuses the men of supplanting Prospero and says that it was for this sin that Alonso's son, Ferdinand, has been taken. He vanishes, leaving Alonso feeling vexed and guilty.

Prospero now softens toward Ferdinand and welcomes him into his family as the soon-to-be-husband of Miranda. He sternly reminds

Ferdinand, however, that Miranda's "virgin-knot" (IV.i.15) is not to be broken until the wedding has been officially solemnized. Prospero then asks Ariel to call forth some spirits to perform a masque for Ferdinand and Miranda. The spirits assume the shapes of Ceres, Juno, and Iris and perform a short masque celebrating the rites of marriage and the bounty of the earth. A dance of reapers and nymphs follows but is interrupted when Prospero suddenly remembers that he still must stop the plot against his life.

He sends the spirits away and asks Ariel about Trinculo, Stephano, and Caliban. Ariel tells his master of the three men's drunken plans. He also tells how he led the men with his music through prickly grass and briars and finally into a filthy pond near Prospero's cell. Ariel and Prospero then set a trap by hanging beautiful clothing in Prospero's cell. Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban enter looking for Prospero and, finding the beautiful clothing, decide to steal it. They are immediately set upon by a pack of spirits in the shape of dogs and hounds, driven on by Prospero and Ariel.

Prospero uses Ariel to bring Alonso and the others before him. He then sends Ariel to bring the Boatswain and the mariners from where they sleep on the wrecked ship. Prospero confronts Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian with their treachery, but tells them that he forgives them. Alonso tells him of having lost Ferdinand in the tempest and Prospero says that he recently lost his own daughter. Clarifying his meaning, he draws aside a curtain to reveal Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess. Alonso and his companions are amazed by the miracle of Ferdinand's survival, and Miranda is stunned by the sight of people unlike any she has seen before. Ferdinand tells his father about his marriage.

Ariel returns with the Boatswain and mariners. The Boatswain tells a story of having been awakened from a sleep that had apparently lasted since the tempest. At Prospero's bidding, Ariel releases Caliban, Trinculo and Stephano, who then enter wearing their stolen clothing. Prospero and Alonso command them to return it and to clean up Prospero's cell. Prospero invites Alonso and the others to stay for the night so that he can tell them the tale of his life in the past twelve years. After this, the group plans to return to Italy. Prospero, restored to his dukedom, will retire to Milan. Prospero gives Ariel one final task—to make sure the seas are calm for the return voyage—before setting him free. Finally, Prospero delivers an epilogue to the audience, asking them to forgive him for his wrongdoing and set him free by applauding.

THEMES**The Illusion of Justice**

Prospero is expelled from his own dukedom when his elder brother rises against him and usurps his powers. The rest of the play is about Prospero plotting on taking the powers back from Alonso. This shows that justice is done if Prospero gets back his throne. However, he keeps Caliban and Ariel his slaves and does not release Ariel despite promises. Prospero uses exploitation and manipulates the situations in his favor, which is contrary to his idea of justice. He uses Ariel against his enemies, as well. When he becomes a merciful monarch, he releases slaves, forgives his enemies, and even abandons using magic. It shows that justice means the happy ending that Prospero establishes by the end of the play.

Superiority of Human Beings

The play revolves around the happy ending and shows the superiority of human beings in a bleak way. When Prospero and his daughter Miranda are stranded on the island, they live there for almost twelve years. Yet, they know how to exploit other humans and creatures for their ends. Ariel is at the beck and call of Prospero, while Miranda deals with Caliban, who tries to attack her. Though Ariel remains faithful, Prospero does not trust him. He believes that he should keep him until they have the means to escape or leave the island.

Allurement of Rule

Human nature loves the romance of allurement in the shape of barren land for adventure as well as an island for the allurement of infinite power. Prospero finds it very easy to rule the island when he has magical powers. Prospero has infinite possibilities of ruling the island all by himself without having resisting subjects. He successfully educates Miranda, his daughter, and exploits Ariel. Caliban protests against Prospero, but this allurement of the rule does not happen. Gonzalo also imagines setting up a utopia over the island for his own rule. Caliban's proposals lights imaginations of Stephano to set up his own government, having full power too. Even his wishful thinking of marrying Miranda brings laughter when he states Trinculo as his future viceroy, along with Caliban.

Power and Exploitation

In the first instance, Antonio exploits power given by Prospero. When Prospero delegates him Milan to him, he uses it to expel the same person from the dukedom. Prospero goes into exile to save his life. When Prospero learns about Ariel, a sprite, he starts exerting his own power on him. This unique magical power gives him opportunities to take revenge from his

enemies. This is another show of power and exploitation. With Ariel, Prospero, also becomes the master of Caliban, the son of a witch, having subhuman nature. Prospero continues exploiting both of these spirits with his magical powers until he changes his heart and learns to forgive his enemies.

Magic

Prospero uses magic to keep himself and Miranda safe using magic. He also controls sprites like Ariel and half-witch, Caliban. The incident of tempest and ship tossed during the storm shows is also magic. In the end, he leaves magic as he learns to forgive and sets Ariel free.

Revenge and Forgiveness

At first, Prospero is shown ruling an island, keeping Ariel and Caliban as a slave. He learns magic from books to exact revenge on his enemies. He is determined to seek justice by taking the rightful place of the duke from which he was overthrown by his brother. This revenge takes him too far as he exploits sprite, Ariel, and witch's son, Caliban. Prospero succeeds in exacting revenge, and he finally forgives his brother. Similarly, when Caliban, too, follows the same path for wrongs and maltreatment by swearing allegiance to Stephano as his new master. Although Prospero shows him the way by the end. Almost all the characters either have conscience or remorse.

Power of Language

Most characters in the play use the power of language to seize power, confuse, confound, convince or manipulate. Prospero stands tall among other characters as he uses superior language. He is good at speaking because he reads books. Through his wit and words, he uses Ariel for his ulterior motives. This even becomes prominent in the case of Caliban, who has not only learned the language but also tries to use it against the mentor Prospero. He clearly curses Miranda telling her that he understands; her father as well as the daughter. When Prospero and Caliban battles for power using language, their speech becomes rhythmic. Caliban tells Prospero that all others hate him for his power of language.

Colonization

When Prospero and his daughter Miranda lands on the island after they are exiled, Caliban and Ariel are the real inhabitants. However, Prospero uses his power and knowledge to display his superiority on the original inhabitants. Due to this colonization, Ariel laments losing his freedom, and Caliban curses that he has learned language from Prospero. They consider Prospero and his daughter as settlers who have colonized

their land. Prospero does not see Caliban fit to rule his island. Caliban also conspires to throw him out of his land to end his rule.

The Supernatural

The existence, power, and use of supernatural powers and supernatural entities are seen in the play. The first sign of the power of the supernatural emerges when Prospero is exiled to the island, and he finds magic. He uses magic to enslave a sprite, Ariel, and then the son of a witch, Caliban. Ariel's presence is entirely supernatural. First, when he brings tempest in the sea, and second is when he causes Ferdinand to fall in love with Miranda at the request of Prospero.

Slavery

Slavery is shown in two ways in the play. At first, Ariel is shown working as a slave under Prospero. He is promised freedom once Prospero achieves justice. He bears through the discomfort and helps Prospero to cause havoc on his enemies. Caliban is also a slave doing other chores for him and Miranda.

SYMBOLS

The Tempest

The tempest that begins the play, and which puts all of Prospero's enemies at his disposal, symbolizes the suffering Prospero endured, and which he wants to inflict on others. All of those shipwrecked are put at the mercy of the sea, just as Prospero and his infant daughter were twelve years ago, when some loyal friends helped them out to sea in a ragged little boat (see I.ii.144–151). Prospero must make his enemies suffer as he has suffered so that they will learn from their suffering, as he has from his. The tempest is also a symbol of Prospero's magic, and of the frightening, potentially malevolent side of his power.

The Game of Chess

The object of chess is to capture the king. That, at the simplest level, is the symbolic significance of Prospero revealing Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess in the final scene. Prospero has caught the king—Alonso—and reprimanded him for his treachery. In doing so, Prospero has married Alonso's son to his own daughter without the king's knowledge, a deft political maneuver that assures Alonso's support because Alonso will have no interest in upsetting a dukedom to which his own son is heir. This is the final move in Prospero's plot, which began with the tempest. He has maneuvered the different passengers of Alonso's ship around the island with the skill of a great chess player.

Caught up in their game, Miranda and Ferdinand also symbolize something ominous about Prospero's power. They do not even notice the others staring at them for a few lines. "Sweet lord, you play me false," Miranda says, and Ferdinand assures her that he "would not for the world" do so (V.i.174–176). The theatrical tableau is almost too perfect: Ferdinand and Miranda, suddenly and unexpectedly revealed behind a curtain, playing chess and talking gently of love and faith, seem entirely removed from the world around them. Though he has promised to relinquish his magic, Prospero still seems to see his daughter as a mere pawn in his game.

Prospero's Books

Like the tempest, Prospero's books are a symbol of his power. "Remember / First to possess his books," Caliban says to Stephano and Trinculo, "for without them / He's but a sot" (III.ii.86–88). The books are also, however, a symbol of Prospero's dangerous desire to withdraw entirely from the world. It was his devotion to study that put him at the mercy of his ambitious brother, and it is this same devotion to study that has made him content to raise Miranda in isolation. Yet, Miranda's isolation has made her ignorant of where she came from (see I.ii.33–36), and Prospero's own isolation provides him with little company. In order to return to the world where his knowledge means something more than power, Prospero must let go of his magic.

MOTIFS

Masters and Servants

Nearly every scene in the play either explicitly or implicitly portrays a relationship between a figure that possesses power and a figure that is subject to that power. The play explores the master-servant dynamic most harshly in cases in which the harmony of the relationship is threatened or disrupted, as by the rebellion of a servant or the ineptitude of a master. For instance, in the opening scene, the "servant" (the Boatswain) is dismissive and angry toward his "masters" (the noblemen), whose ineptitude threatens to lead to a shipwreck in the storm. From then on, master-servant relationships like these dominate the play: Prospero and Caliban; Prospero and Ariel; Alonso and his nobles; the nobles and Gonzalo; Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban; and so forth. The play explores the psychological and social dynamics of power relationships from a number of contrasting angles, such as the generally positive relationship between Prospero and Ariel, the generally negative relationship between Prospero and Caliban, and the treachery in Alonso's relationship to his nobles.

Water and Drowning

The play is awash with references to water. The Mariners enter “wet” in Act I, scene i, and Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo enter “all wet,” after being led by Ariel into a swampy lake (IV.i.193). Miranda’s fear for the lives of the sailors in the “wild waters” (I.ii.2) causes her to weep. Alonso, believing his son dead because of his own actions against Prospero, decides in Act III, scene iii to drown himself. His language is echoed by Prospero in Act V, scene i when the magician promises that, once he has reconciled with his enemies, “deeper than did ever plummet sound / I’ll drown my book” (V.i.56–57).

These are only a few of the references to water in the play. Occasionally, the references to water are used to compare characters. For example, the echo of Alonso’s desire to drown himself in Prospero’s promise to drown his book calls attention to the similarity of the sacrifices each man must make. Alonso must be willing to give up his life in order to become truly penitent and to be forgiven for his treachery against Prospero. Similarly, in order to rejoin the world he has been driven from, Prospero must be willing to give up his magic and his power.

Perhaps the most important overall effect of this water motif is to heighten the symbolic importance of the tempest itself. It is as though the water from that storm runs through the language and action of the entire play—just as the tempest itself literally and crucially affects the lives and actions of all the characters.

Mysterious Noises

The isle is indeed, as Caliban says, “full of noises” (III.ii.130). The play begins with a “tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning” (I.i.1, stage direction), and the splitting of the ship is signaled in part by “a confused noise within” (I.i.54, stage direction). Much of the noise of the play is musical, and much of the music is Ariel’s. Ferdinand is led to Miranda by Ariel’s music. Ariel’s music also wakes Gonzalo just as Antonio and Sebastian are about to kill Alonso in Act II, scene i. Moreover, the magical banquet of Act III, scene iii is laid out to the tune of “Solemn and strange music” (III.iii.18, stage direction), and Juno and Ceres sing in the wedding masque (IV.i.106–117).

The noises, sounds, and music of the play are made most significant by Caliban’s speech about the noises of the island at III.ii.130–138. Shakespeare shows Caliban in the thrall of magic, which the theater audience also experiences as the illusion of thunder, rain, invisibility. The action of *The Tempest* is very simple. What gives the play most of its hypnotic, magical atmosphere is the series of dreamlike events it stages, such as the tempest, the magical banquet, and the wedding masque.

Accompanied by music, these present a feast for the eye and the ear and convince us of the magical glory of Prospero's enchanted isle.

CHARACTERS

Prospero

The play's protagonist, and father of Miranda. Twelve years before the events of the play, Prospero was the duke of Milan. His brother, Antonio, in concert with Alonso, king of Naples, usurped him, forcing him to flee in a boat with his daughter. The honest lord Gonzalo aided Prospero in his escape. Prospero has spent his twelve years on the island refining the magic that gives him the power he needs to punish and forgive his enemies.

Miranda

The daughter of Prospero, Miranda was brought to the island at an early age and has never seen any men other than her father and Caliban, though she dimly remembers being cared for by female servants as an infant. Because she has been sealed off from the world for so long, Miranda's perceptions of other people tend to be naïve and non-judgmental. She is compassionate, generous, and loyal to her father.

Ariel

Prospero's spirit helper. Ariel is referred to throughout this SparkNote and in most criticism as "he," but his gender and physical form are ambiguous. Rescued by Prospero from a long imprisonment at the hands of the witch Sycorax, Ariel is Prospero's servant until Prospero decides to release him. He is mischievous and ubiquitous, able to traverse the length of the island in an instant and to change shapes at will. He carries out virtually every task that Prospero needs accomplished in the play.

Caliban

Another of Prospero's servants. Caliban, the son of the now-deceased witch Sycorax, acquainted Prospero with the island when Prospero arrived. Caliban believes that the island rightfully belongs to him and has been stolen by Prospero. His speech and behavior is sometimes coarse and brutal, as in his drunken scenes with Stephano and Trinculo (II.ii, IV.i), and sometimes eloquent and sensitive, as in his rebukes of Prospero in Act I, scene ii, and in his description of the eerie beauty of the island in Act III, scene ii (III.ii.130-138).

Read an in-depth analysis of Caliban.

Ferdinand

Son and heir of Alonso. Ferdinand seems in some ways to be as pure and naïve as Miranda. He falls in love with her upon first sight and happily submits to servitude in order to win her father's approval.

Alonso

King of Naples and father of Ferdinand. Alonso aided Antonio in unseating Prospero as Duke of Milan twelve years before. As he appears in the play, however, he is acutely aware of the consequences of all his actions. He blames his decision to marry his daughter to the Prince of Tunis on the apparent death of his son. In addition, after the magical banquet, he regrets his role in the usurping of Prospero.

Antonio

Prospero's brother. Antonio quickly demonstrates that he is power-hungry and foolish. In Act II, scene i, he persuades Sebastian to kill the sleeping Alonso. He then goes along with Sebastian's absurd story about fending off lions when Gonzalo wakes up and catches Antonio and Sebastian with their swords drawn.

Sebastian

Alonso's brother. Like Antonio, he is both aggressive and cowardly. He is easily persuaded to kill his brother in Act II, scene i, and he initiates the ridiculous story about lions when Gonzalo catches him with his sword drawn.

Gonzalo

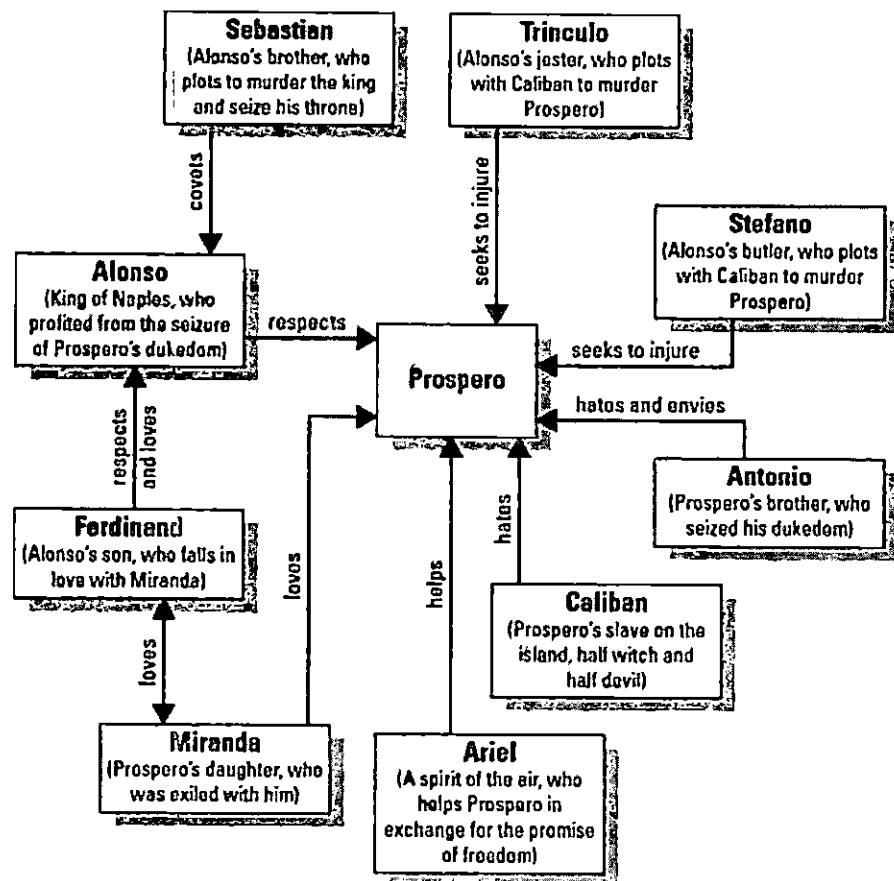
An old, honest lord, Gonzalo helped Prospero and Miranda to escape after Antonio usurped Prospero's title. Gonzalo's speeches provide an important commentary on the events of the play, as he remarks on the beauty of the island when the stranded party first lands, then on the desperation of Alonso after the magic banquet, and on the miracle of the reconciliation in Act V, scene i.

Trinculo & Stephano

Trinculo, a jester, and Stephano, a drunken butler, are two minor members of the shipwrecked party. They provide a comic foil to the other, more powerful pairs of Prospero and Alonso and Antonio and Sebastian. Their drunken boasting and petty greed reflect and deflate the quarrels and power struggles of Prospero and the other noblemen.

Boatswain

Appearing only in the first and last scenes, the Boatswain is vigorously good-natured. He seems competent and almost cheerful in the shipwreck scene, demanding practical help rather than weeping and praying. And he seems surprised but not stunned when he awakens from a long sleep at the end of the play.



ANALYSIS OF MAIN CHARACTERS

Prospero

Prospero is the rightful duke of Milan. Twelve years earlier, he found refuge on this island after his younger brother, Antonio, seized Prospero's title and property. Prospero functions as a god on the island, manipulating everyone within his reach. He is helpless against his enemies until they appear on a ship nearby; but when they are close enough, he can use his magic to create a storm and bring them under his control.

Prospero's magic is the white magic of nature, not the black magic of evil men. This former duke of Milan is a complex personality. Although he refuses to free Ariel and enslaves Caliban, Prospero is really a beneficent ruler, never intending to injure even his enemies. Early in the play, Prospero appears callous and cruel, especially in his treatment of Ariel and Caliban. He is also autocratic in his treatment of Ferdinand, but Prospero realizes that Ferdinand and Miranda will value one another more if there are a few impediments to their courtship.

Prospero's humanity is clearly obvious in his treatment of Antonio, whom he calls traitor but whom he declines to treat as a traitor. Another example of Prospero's goodness is when he stops Alonso from apologizing to Miranda, telling him that there is no need for more amends. By the play's conclusion, it is clear that Prospero is just and fair, in addition to intelligent.

Prospero's dark, earthy slave, frequently referred to as a monster by the other characters, Caliban is the son of a witch-hag and the only real native of the island to appear in the play. He is an extremely complex figure, and he mirrors or parodies several other characters in the play. In his first speech to Prospero, Caliban insists that Prospero stole the island from him. Through this speech, Caliban suggests that his situation is much the same as Prospero's, whose brother usurped his dukedom. On the other hand, Caliban's desire for sovereignty of the island mirrors the lust for power that led Antonio to overthrow Prospero. Caliban's conspiracy with Stephano and Trinculo to murder Prospero mirrors Antonio and Sebastian's plot against Alonso, as well as Antonio and Alonso's original conspiracy against Prospero.

Caliban both mirrors and contrasts with Prospero's other servant, Ariel. While Ariel is "an airy spirit," Caliban is of the earth, his speeches turning to "springs, brine pits" (I.ii.341), "bogs, fens, flats" (II.ii.2), or crabapples and pignuts (II.ii.159–160). While Ariel maintains his dignity and his freedom by serving Prospero willingly, Caliban achieves a different kind of dignity by refusing, if only sporadically, to bow before Prospero's intimidation.

Surprisingly, Caliban also mirrors and contrasts with Ferdinand in certain ways. In Act II, scene ii Caliban enters "with a burden of wood," and Ferdinand enters in Act III, scene i "bearing a log." Both Caliban and Ferdinand profess an interest in untying Miranda's "virgin knot." Ferdinand plans to marry her, while Caliban has attempted to rape her. The glorified, romantic, almost ethereal love of Ferdinand for Miranda starkly contrasts with Caliban's desire to impregnate Miranda and people the island with Calibans.

Finally, and most tragically, Caliban becomes a parody of himself. In his first speech to Prospero, he regretfully reminds the magician of how he showed him all the ins and outs of the island when Prospero first arrived. Only a few scenes later, however, we see Caliban drunk and fawning before a new magical being in his life: Stephano and his bottle of liquor. Soon, Caliban begs to show Stephano the island and even asks to lick his shoe. Caliban repeats the mistakes he claims to curse. In his final act of rebellion, he is once more entirely subdued by Prospero in the most petty way—he is

dunked in a stinking bog and ordered to clean up Prospero's cell in preparation for dinner.

Despite his savage demeanor and grotesque appearance, however, Caliban has a nobler, more sensitive side that the audience is only allowed to glimpse briefly, and which Prospero and Miranda do not acknowledge at all. His beautiful speeches about his island home provide some of the most affecting imagery in the play, reminding the audience that Caliban really did occupy the island before Prospero came, and that he may be right in thinking his enslavement to be monstrously unjust. Caliban's swarthy appearance, his forced servitude, and his native status on the island have led many readers to interpret him as a symbol of the native cultures occupied and suppressed by European colonial societies, which are represented by the power of Prospero. Whether or not one accepts this allegory, Caliban remains one of the most intriguing and ambiguous minor characters in all of Shakespeare, a sensitive monster who allows himself to be transformed into a fool.

Miranda

Characters Miranda

Just under fifteen years old, Miranda is a gentle and compassionate, but also relatively passive, heroine. From her very first lines she displays a meek and emotional nature. "O, I have suffered / With those that I saw suffer!" she says of the shipwreck (I.ii.5-6), and hearing Prospero's tale of their narrow escape from Milan, she says "I, not rememb'ring how I cried out then, / Will cry it o'er again" (I.ii.133-134). Miranda does not choose her own husband. Instead, while she sleeps, Prospero sends Ariel to fetch Ferdinand, and arranges things so that the two will come to love one another. After Prospero has given the lovers his blessing, he and Ferdinand talk with surprising frankness about her virginity and the pleasures of the marriage bed while she stands quietly by. Prospero tells Ferdinand to be sure not to "break her virgin-knot" before the wedding night (IV.i.15), and Ferdinand replies with no small anticipation that lust shall never take away "the edge of that day's celebration" (IV.i.29). In the play's final scene, Miranda is presented, with Ferdinand, almost as a prop or piece of the scenery as Prospero draws aside a curtain to reveal the pair playing chess.

But while Miranda is passive in many ways, she has at least two moments of surprising forthrightness and strength that complicate the reader's impressions of her as a naïve young girl. The first such moment is in Act I, scene ii, in which she and Prospero converse with Caliban. Prospero alludes to the fact that Caliban once tried to rape Miranda. When Caliban rudely agrees that he intended to violate her, Miranda responds with impressive vehemence, clearly appalled at Caliban's light attitude

toward his attempted rape. She goes on to scold him for being ungrateful for her attempts to educate him: "When thou didst not, savage, / Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like / A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes / With words that made them known" (358–361). These lines are so surprising coming from the mouth of Miranda that many editors have amended the text and given it to Prospero. This reattribution seems to give Miranda too little credit. In Act III, scene i comes the second surprising moment—Miranda's marriage proposal to Ferdinand: "I am your wife, if you will marry me; / If not, I'll die your maid" (III.i.83–84). Her proposal comes shortly after Miranda has told herself to remember her "father's precepts" (III.i.58) forbidding conversation with Ferdinand. As the reader can see in her speech to Caliban in Act I, scene ii, Miranda is willing to speak up for herself about her sexuality.

ARIEL

Ariel is a spirit who works in Prospero's service. Prospero first encountered Ariel soon after landing on the island. He found Ariel trapped in a cloven pine tree and freed the spirit from his prison. In return, Ariel promised to serve Prospero faithfully for a year, after which time Prospero would give Ariel back his freedom. We don't know how long Ariel has already worked for Prospero when the play begins. Prospero has been on the island for twelve years, so Ariel might have been in his service for many more years than their agreement required. Then again, possibly Prospero freed Ariel from the tree only a year prior to the events of the play. Either way, Prospero's unwillingness to set Ariel free stems from the fact that Ariel possesses immense power. As the spirit explains in his first lines in the play, not only does he have an impressive range of abilities, but he also commands a host of lesser spirits. Given Ariel's extraordinary magical abilities, Prospero leans heavily on him to execute his complex revenge plot. Ariel has spent a lot of time around humans and he learned a thing or two about them. In Act V, for example, he appears to take pity on the castaways. He tells Prospero that if he were human his "affections" would be "tender," convinces Prospero to stop using magic and reconcile with his enemies. Ariel effectively manipulates Prospero by appealing to his humanity, and in doing so he ushers himself closer to freedom.

Ferdinand

Ferdinand is the son of the king of Naples. During the storm, he is separated from the rest of the king's party. Once ashore, he meets Miranda and falls in love with her. Like Miranda, Ferdinand is honest and kind, a loving son, who will make a loving husband to Miranda. He easily reassures Prospero that he will respect Miranda's chastity and not violate the trust he has been given. Ferdinand also respects and loves his father. He makes a commitment to marry Miranda while thinking that his father is dead.

When he finds that his father is alive, Ferdinand immediately acknowledges his father's authority and informs his father of his obligation to Miranda. Ferdinand is an honorable match for Miranda, sharing many of the same qualities that his innocent bride displays.

Gonzalo

Gonzalo is among the men cast ashore during the tempest that opens the play. He serves as a counselor to Alonso, the King of Naples, though he once worked in Prospero's service, back when he was Duke of Milan. In fact, Gonzalo helped Prospero and Miranda escape Milan. He filled their shabby boat with food, clothing, and prized books on the magic arts from Prospero's library. The care he took to ensure Prospero and Miranda's survival indicates an innate kindness and compassion that he continues to embody throughout the play. Gonzalo attempts to get other characters to act kindly toward one another. In Act II, for instance, Gonzalo chastises Sebastian for blaming the shipwreck on Alonso. "My lord Sebastian," he says: "The truth you speak doth lack some gentleness / And time to speak it in. You rub the sore / When you should bring the plaster" (II.i.). With these lines, Gonzalo articulates his philosophy that kindness is always more productive harshness.

For all that Gonzalo represents a beacon of kindness, he's also somewhat naïve. For instance, when he tries to cheer Alonso up at the top of Act II, his words only offer cold comfort: "Beseech you, sir, be merry. You have cause, / So have we all, of joy, for our escape / Is much beyond our loss" (II.i.). Alonso, who believes he's just lost his son to the sea, doesn't find Gonzalo's cheerful words very consoling, despite their good intentions. Gonzalo's naïveté also provides a source of amusement for Antonio and Sebastian, who talk circles around him and laugh at his expense. Yet Gonzalo may not be as naïve as these two cynics believe. He knows he's an object of ridicule, but he remains steadfast in the face of their inconstancy. At one point, when Antonio tells him not to get upset on account of their jokes, Gonzalo responds maturely: "No, I warrant you, I will not adventure my discretion so weakly" (II.i.). Ultimately, with the reconciliation that concludes the play, Gonzalo's kindness wins out over his companions' cynicism.

Alonso

Alonso is the king of Naples. When he believes that his son has died, Alonso is grief-stricken. Later, he is overjoyed to find Ferdinand still alive. Alonso bears some responsibility for the events in Prospero's life, because Antonio would not have acted without Alonso's agreement. However, when confronted with his responsibility, Alonso is genuinely repentant for the pain he caused Prospero in the past. Alonso's concern for his son's safety

and his deep grief when he thinks his son is dead help to construct an image of Alonso as a good and loving father who has made mistakes in the past. The quickness with which he accepts Miranda as his daughter, as well as his attempts to apologize to her, also reinforce the image of Alonso as a good and just king.

Antonio

As Prospero's younger brother, Antonio is motivated by envy and by a desire to create trouble. He is now the fraudulent duke of Milan and is still actively engaged in plotting rebellion. His actions against Prospero were not sufficient to satisfy his ambitions, and now, Antonio convinces Sebastian to murder his brother. Although he may be frightened when confronted with the spirits and later Prospero, Antonio reveals no sign of remorse for the actions he has committed.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF SCENES

Summary

The Tempest opens in the midst of a fierce storm. The location is a ship at sea, with a royal party on board. As the sailors fight to save the ship, several of the royal passengers enter, and Alonso, the king, demands to know where the master (captain) is to be found. The boatswain, worried that the passengers will interfere, orders them to go below deck. The king's councilor, Gonzalo, reminds the boatswain that he is speaking to the king, but the boatswain points out that if the king really has so much power, he should use it to quell the storm. If he lacks this power, the royal party should go below decks, as the boatswain orders. The royal party exits, presumably to go below deck to seek shelter.

Within moments, however, Antonio, Sebastian, and Gonzalo have returned topside again, much to the boatswain's annoyance. With Sebastian and Antonio cursing him, the boatswain continues in his efforts to save the ship. Soon, however, the sailors enter with laments that the ship is lost. Fearing that they will all soon die, Antonio, Sebastian, and Gonzalo elect to join the rest of the royal party below decks, where they will pray for their survival.

Analysis

The opening confrontation between Gonzalo and the boatswain reveals one of the most important themes in *The Tempest*: class conflict, the discord between those who seize and hold power and those who are often the unwilling victims of power. When confronted by members of the royal party, the boatswain orders that they return below deck. He is performing his job, and to stop in response to Alonso's request for the master would be foolish. The boatswain cares little for Alonso's rank as king and asks, "What cares

these roarers for the name of king?" (15 — 16). The king has no protection from the storm simply because of his rank, because the storm has little care for a man's social or political position. In response, Gonzalo urges the boatswain to remember that the king and his party are the passengers. The implication is that the boatswain should also remember that his social rank makes him subservient to the royal party, regardless of the circumstances. Gonzalo's words are a clear reminder that even in the midst of a storm, class or status remains an important part of life. However, the boatswain is not intimidated and responds that the royal party should "use your authority," to stop the storm (20-21). As far as the boatswain is concerned, all men are equal in a storm and all equally at risk.

Alonso seems to understand that the captain is the ship's final authority, at least initially. His original request for the master reflects his belief that the master is in charge of the ship, and that, as passengers, he (as king) and his retinue fall under the captain's authority. But alarm at the severity of the storm and frustration at the boatswain's order to go below decks causes the king's party to fall back on the rules of land — the king is the final authority. The boatswain's telling Gonzalo that the king should use his authority to stop the storm is a reminder that the king has no authority under these circumstances. Although he can control men (although not always with absolute certainty), even the king cannot control nature.

The storm and the subsequent rebellion on ship is a metaphor for the rebellion occurring in English society. In the Elizabethan and Jacobean world, English society was defined by its class system, in which individuals were born into specific classes by divine right. In the natural order of things (that is, the order defined by God), therefore, the aristocracy is superior. Although the characters of *The Tempest* are depicted as Italian in origin, their experiences and conflicts are English. Indeed, the passengers, who never forget that they are socially superior to the crew, need to be reminded that, during a storm, the captain of the ship is the final authority.

Furthermore, in the period just prior to the composition of *The Tempest*, English society had been rocked by political, social, and religious conflicts. The Gunpowder Plot (1605), for example, serves as an illustration of the conflict between the Protestant James and his Catholic subjects. The goal of the Roman Catholic conspirators was to murder James and kill the members of both houses of Parliament; fortunately for James, the plot failed. The social unrest in England, however, was exacerbated by James' extravagant spending on court entertainment, especially the lavishly staged masques, and the contrast between the poor and the rich became even more evident. Although James subjects lived in severe poverty, their

burden was increased as they were taxed to pay for the king's masques. In response, unrest grew and would erupt several years later into revolution.

There are many tempests to be explored during the course of *The Tempest*. In addition to class conflict, there are also explorations into colonialism (English explorers had been colonizing the Americas) and a desire to find or create a utopian society. The storm scene that opens *The Tempest* establishes nature as an important element of the play and emphasizes the role of nature in society. Other tempests will be revealed in subsequent scenes, such as the emotional tempests that familial conflict creates (consider the conflict between Antonio and Prospero, and the coming conflict between Sebastian and Alonso); the tempests of discord (consider Caliban's dissatisfaction and desire for revenge) and of forbidden love (consider the romance between Miranda and Ferdinand). Finally, there are the tempests caused by the inherent conflict between generations. So, although *The Tempest* might correctly be called a romantic comedy, the title and the opening scene portend an exploration of conflicts more complex than romantic.

Act I: Scene 2

Summary

Scene 2 opens on the island, with Prospero and Miranda watching the ship as it is tossed by the storm. Miranda knows that her father is creating the storm, and she begs him to end the ship's torment and her own, since she suffers as she watches the ship's inhabitants suffer. Prospero reassures his daughter that his actions have been to protect her. He also tells Miranda that she is ignorant of her heritage; he then explains the story of her birthright and of their lives before they came to be on the island.

Prospero begins his story with the news that he is the duke of Milan and Miranda is a princess. He also relates that he had abdicated day-to-day rule of his kingdom to his brother, Antonio. Prospero admits that books held more attraction than duties, and he willingly allowed his brother the opportunity to grasp control. But Antonio used his position to undermine Prospero and to plot against him. Prospero's trust in his brother proved unwise, when Antonio formed an alliance with the king of Naples to oust Prospero and seize his heritage. Prospero and his daughter were placed in a small, rickety boat and put out to sea. A sympathetic Neapolitan, Gonzalo, provided them with rich garments, linens, and other necessities. Gonzalo also provided Prospero with books from his library. Eventually, Prospero and Miranda arrived on the island, where they have remained since that time.

When he finishes the tale, Prospero uses his magic to put Miranda to sleep. The sprite, Ariel, appears as soon as Miranda is sleeping and reports

on the storm, the ship, and the passengers. Ariel relates everyone, except the crew, was forced to abandon ship. Ariel tells Prospero that the passengers have been separated into smaller groups and are on different parts of the island; that the ship, with its sleeping crew, is safely hidden in the harbor; and that the remainder of the fleet, thinking that the king is drowned, has sailed home. Ariel then asks that Prospero free him, as had been promised. But Prospero has more need of his sprite and declares that Ariel's freedom must be delayed a few more days.

When Ariel leaves, Prospero awakens Miranda and beckons Caliban, the son of the witch, Sycorax. Caliban has been Prospero's slave, but he is insolent and rebellious and is only controlled through the use of magic. Caliban claims the island as his own and says that Prospero has tricked him in the past. Prospero is unmoved, claiming that Caliban is corrupt, having tried to rape Miranda. Prospero threatens and cajoles Caliban's obedience, but Caliban's presence makes Miranda uneasy.

After Caliban leaves, Ariel enters with Ferdinand, who sees Miranda, and the two fall instantly in love. Although this is what Prospero intended to have happen, he does not want it to appear too easy for Ferdinand, and so he accuses Ferdinand of being a spy. When Prospero uses magic to control Ferdinand, Miranda begs him to stop.

Analysis

Prospero tells Miranda their history as a way to inform the audience of this important information. In addition, the audience needs to know what events motivate Prospero's decision to stir up the storm and why the men onboard the ship are his enemies — several share responsibility for Prospero's isolation. By sharing this information, Miranda — and the audience — can conclude that Prospero is justified in seeking retribution. At the very least, Prospero must make Miranda sympathetic to this choice. It is also important that Prospero gain the audience's sympathy because his early treatment of both Ariel and Caliban depict him in a less than sympathetic light.

Ariel and Caliban are both little more than slaves to Prospero's wishes, and, in the initial interactions between Prospero and Ariel and Prospero and Caliban, the audience may think Prospero callous and cruel. He has clearly promised Ariel freedom and then denied it, and he treats Caliban as little more than an animal. The audience needs to understand that cruel circumstance and the machinations of men have turned Prospero into a different man than he might otherwise have been. But Prospero's character is more complex than this scene reveals, and the relationship between these characters more intricate also.

During the course of the story, Prospero repeatedly asks Miranda if she is listening. This questioning may reveal her distraction as she worries about the well-being of the ship's passengers. Miranda is loving toward her father, but at the same time, she does not lose sight of the human lives he is placing at risk. However, his questioning is equally directed toward the audience. Prospero also wants to make sure that the audience is listening to his story, since he will return to the audience in the Epilogue and seek their judgment.

It is clear from Prospero's story that he had been a poor ruler, more interested in his books than in his responsibilities. Prospero, therefore, is not entirely blameless in the events that occurred in Milan. Antonio could not so easily seize power from an involved and attentive ruler. This information mitigates Antonio's actions in seizing his brother's place and is important because this play is not a tragedy. In order for the comedic or romantic ending to succeed, none of the villains can be beyond redemption or reconciliation. It is equally important that Prospero not be beyond redemption. Prospero must be heroic, and this he cannot be if he is perceived as vengeful. Ariel reassures the audience (as well as Prospero) that the ship and its crew have been saved and the passengers are safely on the island. No one has been hurt or lost at sea.

In addition to relating the past, this act also helps define the main characters and anticipate the future. Prospero has been injured, and he intends to serve justice on his captives. He delves in magic and has developed powers beyond those of his enemies. He is also intelligent enough and strong enough to control the spirits on the island; for example, he can control Caliban, who is not without power of his own. Prospero uses the magic of nature, a white, beneficent magic that does no harm. He does not use the black magic of evil. Prospero has learned of this magic, not through the use of witches or evil spells (as did the witches in *Macbeth*), but through his studies. Prospero's white magic has supplanted the black, evil magic of Caliban's mother, Sycorax, because Prospero, himself, is good.

Any initial concern that the audience might have because of Caliban's enslavement evaporates at the news that he attempted to rape Miranda. His subsequent behavior will further prove his character, but he can be redeemed, and his redemption is necessary if the play is to succeed. Furthermore, Caliban, who is initially bad and represents the black magic of his mother, serves as a contrast to the goodness of Ferdinand and Miranda. The young lovers are instantly attracted to one another, each one a mirror image of the other's goodness. It is their goodness that facilitates the reconciliation between Prospero and his enemies. In this reconciliation lies Ariel's freedom and Caliban's redemption.

Act II: Scene 1**Summary**

This scene opens with all the passengers from the ship, except for Ferdinand, gathered on stage. Gonzalo begins with a speech celebrating their survival of the storm and their relative safety on the island, but King Alonso cannot be cheered because he is sure that his missing son, Ferdinand, has drowned. In the meantime, Antonio and Sebastian whisper among themselves and belittle both Alonso's grief and Gonzalo's cheer.

When Antonio and Sebastian join the general conversation around the king, they make no attempt to soothe him. Instead, they tell Alonso that he should not have permitted his daughter to marry the African. Sebastian tells Alonso that, had he not permitted the marriage, the royal party would not have been at sea and, thus, never in the storm. In short, Ferdinand would still be alive if Alonso had acted properly. These are harsh words to the grieving father, and Gonzalo gently chastises Sebastian for his insensitivity.

Ariel now enters, unseen by the group on stage, and puts all of them to sleep, except for Sebastian and Antonio. Left awake, Antonio and Sebastian devise a plot in which Sebastian will seize his brother's crown, much as Antonio had years earlier seized his brother's title and property. Although Sebastian has some concerns of conscience, Antonio dismisses such worries and urges action while everyone is asleep. Sebastian needs little convincing, and with Antonio, the two draw their swords and advance on the sleeping king and his party.

At this moment, Ariel takes action. He awakens Gonzalo in time to prevent the murders. Antonio and Sebastian quickly concoct a story to explain their drawn swords, warning of great noise, as if from bulls or lions. Alonso is easily convinced of his brother's sincerity, and the scene ends with the royal party leaving the stage in search of Ferdinand.

Analysis

This act better defines the personalities of the king's party and more clearly establishes the good characters from the bad. Alonso's first thought is for his son's well-being. In Act I, Prospero's tale of Alonso's complicity in his personal tragedy created an image of an uncaring ruler, one who was willing to overlook Antonio's deceit as long as it was beneficial to the king. But now, the picture is that of a grief-stricken father, beyond comfort. Alonso says little, but Gonzalo's efforts to care for and cheer his king, and the efforts of Adrian and Francisco to comfort their king, reflect well on Alonso's character.

Gonzalo's character is also realized in more depth than in Act I, where his attention was focused on the storm and on the boatswain's insolence.

Beyond the efforts to comfort and reassure his king, Gonzalo relates a vision of a utopian society. In this society, he would be king. There would be no commerce or law and no servant class. No one would grow food, and no one would work. Nature would simply create all that men needed. This vision reveals that Gonzalo, too, has some concerns about authority and privilege. In Gonzalo's vision, there would be no inherited wealth, and land would not be enclosed. Thus, there would be no aristocracy and no country estates. In short, the source of many of the conflicts that exist in English society would be eliminated. Gonzalo wants the authority that Alonso holds, since Gonzalo would be king in this visionary world, but he lacks the impetus to put his dreams into actions, as Antonio and Sebastian would do. In spite of his dreams of personal grandeur, Gonzalo is capable of seeing the positive aspects of their situation. He alone realizes that their survival of the storm is an achievement. He is thankful that they have landed on such a lovely island, and he remains hopeful that Ferdinand has survived. Gonzalo's outlook is positive in many ways, but his utopian dream indicates that there is a complexity to his personality. On the surface he appears happy with his situation, but his dreams of being king reveal that he is not completely satisfied with his lot in life.

In contrast, Antonio and Sebastian's characters are developing as unpleasant and arrogant. Their sarcastic asides counter Gonzalo's good humor. They justly point out the flaws in Gonzalo's utopian dream, but they go beyond pointing out the flaws to compete between themselves to see who can devise the cruelest ridicule of both Alonso and Gonzalo. The two are reminiscent of schoolboys, who giggle and whisper in the back of a classroom, in defiance of their teacher. And like schoolboys, Antonio and Sebastian are capable of cruelty, as when they tell Alonso that had he not married his daughter to the African, they would not be on this journey and Ferdinand would not be drowned. They are more than thoughtless and cruel, since they are also capable of forming a conspiracy to murder their king and Sebastian's brother.

Sebastian and Antonio's action hearkens back to the scene between the boatswain and Alonso in Act I. Alonso is king and represents authority. To plot his murder and to seize the crown is to usurp authority given by God. In England, the idea that a king was anointed by god was a crucial point in maintaining authority over the people. To kill God's representative on earth was a rebellion against the highest authority in the heavens. These two conspirators seek greater freedom and power than they are entitled to, and so they plot a coup. However, they forget that they are stranded on this island, with no kingdom to assume. Their plot to make Sebastian king neglects to ask king of what? They are far from Naples, with little expectation of rescue. Indeed, they never mention rescue, and thus, their

plot to murder the king and seize his title would make Sebastian king of nothing.

The blending of illusion and reality, which was created in Act I with the imaginary storm, is carried forward in this scene, with Gonzalo's observation that their clothing is unharmed by the salt water, appearing as it did before the storm occurred. Gonzalo envisions a utopia, but the impossibility of such a thing happening is best illustrated by Antonio and Sebastian's plot. Even when there is no reason to plot a murder, they do so. It is in their nature, and one reason why Gonzalo's vision lacks reality is simply because it neglects to consider human nature, which fails to bow to illusion.

The party's whole existence on the island is an illusion and nothing is as it appears. Behind the scene and watching and manipulating all the action is Prospero. Although he never appears in this scene, he is very much present, functioning as a god-like entity. Antonio and Sebastian's swords are stayed because a higher authority prevents their actions. Prospero functions as a god would, protecting the innocent and guiding the action. However, Prospero is not a god, and that, perhaps, is the greatest illusion of all.

Act II: Scene 2

Summary

The scene opens with Caliban cursing Prospero. When he hears someone approach, Caliban assumes it is one of Prospero's spirits, coming to torture him once again. Caliban falls to the ground and pulls his cloak over his body, leaving only his feet protruding. But instead of Prospero, the king's jester, Trinculo, enters. Trinculo is looking for shelter from the coming storm when he sees Caliban. With his body partially covered with the cloak, Caliban appears to be half man and half fish, or at least that is Trinculo's initial impression. Trinculo immediately sees the possibilities that this find presents. He can take this "monster" back to civilization and display it, charging admission to spectators who want to view this aberration of nature. Yet after touching Caliban, Trinculo decides that his "find" is not half man-half fish, but an islander. With the coming storm, Trinculo decides to seek shelter under Caliban's cloak.

The king's butler, Stefano, enters, clearly drunk. Stefano stops at the sight of the object on the ground, covered with a cloak and with four legs sticking out. Like Trinculo, Stefano immediately sees the financial possibilities that such a creature offers back home. But all of Stefano's poking has alarmed Caliban, who thinks that he is about to experience a new form of torture, beyond what Prospero has provided.

After pulling the cloak from Caliban's head, Stefano begins to pour wine into Caliban's mouth. Trinculo emerges from under the cloak and, happy to find another survivor of the storm on the island, joins Stefano and Caliban in drinking wine.

Caliban drunkenly watches the happy reunion of Stefano and Trinculo and decides that Stefano is a god, dropped from heaven. Caliban swears devotion to this new "god," and the three leave together, amid Caliban's promises to find Stefano the best food on the island.

Analysis

For the first time, the audience is given a close look at Caliban, who appeared only briefly in Act I. He appears now, cursing Prospero, and so, the depth of Caliban's animosity is quickly evident. He is very frightened by Prospero, whom he both cowers before and hates. Prospero has made Caliban his slave. The island was originally Caliban's, and he lived under no man's control.

Although Caliban blames Prospero for all his troubles, it is clear that nature, itself, has turned against him. In his soliloquy that opens this scene, Caliban admits that the animals on the island make faces at him, bite him, and hiss at him. This he blames on Prospero, reasoning that he controls all nature. Every noise is thought to be a spirit, sent by Prospero to torture him. Caliban represents nature, unfettered by man's domesticity — nature, as it appears untouched by corrupt forces. And yet Caliban is not totally innocent. Prospero has already told the audience of Caliban's attack on Miranda. His behavior recalls the undisciplined nature of wild animals rather than that of natural man. He has not been civilized to the rules of social discourse and, instead, functions as the animals in the forest do — obeying the instincts of nature.

If Caliban represents the most basic elements of nature, then Stefano and Trinculo represent how low civilized men can sink without self-control. Both men are opportunists, ready to exploit the new "man" they discover under a cloak. Both Stefano and Trinculo share the same initial thought — how to make money from a being as unusual in appearance as Caliban. They immediately see the potential in exhibiting him as a freak of nature.

Of course, Shakespeare is commenting on a real phenomena in English society: the exhibition of American Indians, transported back to England from the new colonies in Virginia. Elizabethan entrepreneurs quickly saw a profit in the "natural" people who inhabited the Americas. These Native Americans were brought to England and displayed for profit. Most quickly succumbed to diseases for which they had no natural immunity. But more of these natural people were readily available, and so the trade continued

for some time. Stefano and Trinculo's thinking reveals them to be little more than charlatans, out to make a quick profit.

Stefano and Trinculo readily fall into agreement with Caliban and plot to commit murder because they think there is a profit to be made. But there is another reason, as well. Stefano enjoys his new status as Caliban's god. He delights in the adoration, the reversal of fortune. He has gone from butler to god and sees it as a huge improvement in status. Just as Sebastian and Antonio expect power as a reward for violent behavior, the butler and the court jester would like power with a minimal amount of effort. If murdering Prospero will make them kings of the island, they are ready to do Caliban's bidding. Of course, just as Sebastian and Antonio were being watched, so too are these three drunken conspirators.

This scene involves low comedy, the kind of slapstick that depends more on actions than words. Caliban, Stefano, and Trinculo are funny because the audience thinks their efforts ridiculous. Trinculo is dressed as a clown, and Trinculo rode the storm to safety in a wine cask. Although Sebastian and Antonio's plot might represent real danger to Alonso (if Prospero were to permit it), Trinculo and Stefano's plot can only represent impotence. Their plan to murder Prospero and ravish Miranda is doomed from the start, and the audience is always aware of this. In their drunkenness, they are ineffectual and thus can be enjoyed. In Caliban's innocence, he has allied himself with buffoons. He bribes his accomplices with promises of choice foods and is too unsophisticated to realize that these men would also enslave him if given the opportunity. Stefano and Trinculo represent the worst that civilization has to offer — debauchery and absurdity.

Act III: Scene 1

Summary

Ferdinand enters carrying a log, which he claims would be an odious task except that he carries it to serve Miranda. His carrying of the logs is a punishment but one he willingly accepts because thoughts of Miranda make the work seem effortless.

Miranda enters and, when Ferdinand will not rest, offers to take up his chore so that she might force him to rest, but Ferdinand refuses. Although she was instructed not to reveal her name, Miranda impulsively divulges it to Ferdinand. Ferdinand, for his part, has known other beautiful women, but he admits to having never known one as perfect as Miranda. Miranda confesses that she has known no other women, nor any other man, except for her father. Now, she would want no other man except for Ferdinand. At this, Miranda remembers that she has been instructed not to speak to their guest and momentarily falls silent. When Ferdinand avows that he would

gladly serve her, Miranda asks if he loves her. At his affirmative reply, Miranda begins to weep. She tells Ferdinand that she is unworthy of him but will marry him if he wants her. He quickly agrees, and the couple finally touch, taking each other's hands, as they pledge their love.

Prospero has been listening, unseen. He acknowledges Miranda and Ferdinand's natural match as being "Of two most rare affections" (75), but he has other plans that need his immediate attention, and so he turns to his books and other waiting business.

Analysis

This scene leaves no doubt that Prospero is the absolute ruler of his small island. Ferdinand is set to the same task as Caliban, carrying logs. Although he is a prince, Ferdinand must bow to the same authority that Caliban, a slave, observes. Even Miranda is not exempt from Prospero's rule. She is not supposed to speak to Ferdinand. Moreover, she is not permitted to even give him her name, although she does. As part of Prospero's power, he must pretend to oppose the romance between Miranda and Ferdinand; however, the audience knows that Prospero is not opposed to such a union, and in fact, he had hoped that they would love one another. But Prospero must maintain the illusion that he is in absolute control, and so, he imposes rules to guarantee his authority.

In part, Prospero is playing the role that any father must play when his daughter has a suitor. Protecting Miranda's worth is tied to protecting her virginity; thus, he watches the courtship, unseen. Miranda is an obedient daughter, as proved by her dismay when she forgets herself and reveals her name to Ferdinand. But she is also a young woman in love, and when her father is occupied, she immediately looks to release Ferdinand from his labors.

Miranda has no experience with people. She has never seen another woman and does not know that she is beautiful. She has no experience with men, other than her father and Caliban. Because of her isolation, she has developed no artful skills at flirting, and when Ferdinand tells her that he loves her, Miranda weeps. Their love scene is sweet and tender, and without artifice. Prospero watches this exchange, not just to control its outcome, but to protect his only child. Miranda is more vulnerable than most young women, and she needs a strong father to protect her. As such a strong authority figure, Prospero is well suited to protect Miranda from any dangers that this new experience might present. But his watchful observances also recall the godlike control that he has exercised over every other individual being and every action that has occurred on the island.

This loving scene serves as a bridge between two scenes of low comedy. Wedged just before and just after, this romantic interlude reminds

Shakespeare's audience of the contrast between the pure and tender love of Ferdinand and Miranda and the debauchery of Caliban, Stefano, and Trinculo. Ferdinand's labors are willingly accepted, because Miranda's mere presence fills all his work with pleasure. This happy labor contrasts to the cursing that opened the previous scene, when Caliban also carried logs. Ferdinand and Miranda's love embodies an ideal love, one in keeping with the expectations of nature. There is gentle humor and genuine heartfelt feelings, and there are none of the artificial trappings of conventional courtship.

Both Ferdinand and Miranda express their feelings honestly and with dignity. Their encounter adds something important that had been missing — authentic nobility of manner. Their nature, or breeding, has led them to behave with deportment, as would be expected of the children of the aristocracy. Both young lovers behave in a responsible manner that was missing from their fathers' lives. Thus, Ferdinand and Miranda fulfill the promise of reconciliation, which is an important element of this play. The plotting and betrayal of the fathers is atoned for by their children. For this to work successfully, Alonso and Prospero's children must be elevated far above their fathers in both decorum and honor.

Act III: Scene 2

Summary

This scene returns to Stefano, Trinculo, and Caliban — all of whom are now very drunk. Caliban has a plan to kill Prospero and elicits help from his new friends. As Caliban explains that he is the rightful owner of the island, Ariel arrives and listens attentively. Caliban explains that they must burn Prospero's books, and after Prospero is dead, Stefano can marry Miranda, which will make her his queen of the island. Trinculo agrees to the plot.

Ariel resolves to tell Prospero of the plot against him. When the drunken men begin singing, Ariel accompanies them on a tabor and pipe. The men hear the music and are afraid, but Caliban reassures them that such sounds are frequently heard on the island. Stefano finds the idea of free music a strong promise of his success on the island, and three drunken conspirators follow the sounds of the music offstage.

Analysis

Caliban represents untamed nature in conflict with civilization. He intuitively understands that Prospero's power comes from his books; thus the books are to become the first victims of his rebellion. Prospero's books represent oppression to Caliban because all that Prospero's civilization and books have to offer is slavery. Although Caliban might be considered an uneducated savage by Elizabethan accounts (and perhaps by modern

accounts, as well), he existed quite happily on the island before Prospero's arrival. Civilization transformed Caliban from freedom to slavery, and he has received little benefit from Prospero's tutelage; even Caliban's use of language is limited to little more than cursing. Because civilization has failed Caliban, he quickly turns to the first possible source of help to appear: Stefano and Trinculo, the lowest forms of civilized behavior.

Caliban's island paradise is not all that different from Gonzalo's ideal natural world. Both Caliban and Gonzalo see their ideal worlds as untouched by the confinements of civilization. In both visions, nature provides whatever is needed, and mankind has little effect on the island's existence. But there is one substantial difference. Where Gonzalo would make himself king, Caliban dreams of living in peaceful isolation, with no king to abuse him. Yet, to secure his freedom from Prospero, Caliban would subordinate himself to Stefano, who would take Prospero's place as ruler.

Caliban is unable to appreciate that the crass butler, whom he has elevated to a god, would be a worse god than Prospero has been. After all, upon first finding Caliban, Stefano pulled Caliban's head back, forced open his mouth, and poured wine down his throat. His exploitation of Caliban, including the plan to exhibit him as a money-making proposition, reflects little concern for Caliban's well-being. Although Prospero's enslavement of Caliban also raises questions of propriety, his stated reasons are to restore order to the island. However, Prospero's sense of order ignores Caliban's needs. Caliban does not need civilization and its artifacts, education, and language to satisfy his needs. So desperate is Caliban to escape Prospero's oppression, that he would effectively trade one god for another: Prospero for Stefano. But Caliban appears unable or unwilling to comprehend this component of his plot. The murder of Prospero is his immediate concern, and he gives little thought to what might follow.

Caliban's plot to murder Prospero offers a parallel to Antonio's plot to murder Alonso. Caliban enlists the assistance of Stefano and Trinculo, just as Antonio enlists the support of Sebastian. Each group of conspirators ignores reason and logic. At the moment, they are all isolated on the island, with little hope or expectation of rescue. Alonso's murder will render no gain for Antonio or Sebastian, since Sebastian would be king of nothing. In a parody of Antonio's plot, Prospero's murder will provide little benefit for Caliban, except to trade one ruler for another and, perhaps, slavery for worse abuse. But both plots illustrate the potential for violence that exists in all levels of society, whether in the aristocracy of Naples or in the natural beauty of an isolated island.

Caliban, himself, is filled with contradictions. On one hand, he is brutal, instructing Stefano to "Bite him [Trinculo] to death" (32). Caliban also describes in detail his plans to murder Prospero by "knock[ing] a nail

into his head" (59). Later, Caliban gives his co-conspirators many choices of ways to murder Prospero, from striking him on the head to disemboweling him to cutting his throat. Any means is acceptable, and, as a reward, Caliban casually promises them Miranda. The brutality of Caliban's plan is countered with the poetry of his descriptions of the island:

The isle is full of noises,
 Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices
 That if I then had waked after long sleep
 Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming
 The clouds methought would open and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
 I cried to dream again.

The songs that Caliban describes and the beauty of his dreams reveal a humanity that is lacking in his descriptions of the murder plot. Caliban is more than a wild beast of the island, and his personality is more complex than his brief scenes have thus far disclosed. The plot to murder Prospero is Caliban's rejection of civilization. He finds no alternative to brutality, if it will free him of the oppression of civilization. The natural beauty of the island permeates Caliban's world, but he is able to separate this beauty from the violent acts that he plans. In Caliban's world, there is no incongruity in the existence of both poetry and barbarity.

Act III: Scene 3

Summary

The royal party has searched futilely for Ferdinand and collapses, exhausted upon the beach. Unknown to the royal party, Prospero arrives and watches their actions. Within a few moments, a number of ghostly shapes arrive and with them, a lavish banquet. After gesturing to the party that they should approach and eat, the spirit shapes depart. The royal party is incredulous, but they are also hungry and ready to eat. Yet Ariel appears, disguised as a harpy. He makes the banquet disappear and accuses Antonio, Sebastian, and Alonso of being the instruments of sin. Although the men draw their swords, they are frozen in place by magic and unable to lift up their arms. The king is shaken by what he has seen and heard, and he flees, as do Antonio and Sebastian. Worried that they might do themselves harm, Gonzalo sends Adrian and Francisco to watch them.

Analysis

This scene provides the climax of Prospero's plan and the denouement of Antonio's many plots. Antonio, Sebastian, and Alonso are powerless against Prospero's magic. Their plotting against him — and Antonio and

Sebastian's subsequent plotting against Alonso — is ineffectual in the face of Prospero's greater power. This is the moment of revenge that Prospero has awaited for 12 long years, and he offers no clue what form the punishment will take. However, because he has encouraged Miranda and Ferdinand's love, it is clear that any retribution directed toward Alonso will not be severe, since he would not risk his daughter's happiness in such a way. That is not the case, however, for Sebastian and Antonio, who have every reason for concern.

As he has from the beginning, Ariel carries out Prospero's wishes efficiently and effectively. Ariel, who projects delicacy and eagerness in all that he does, is a spirit of the air. He is eager to be free, and his freedom has been promised in two days, at the conclusion of this mission. Ariel is eager to please Prospero, who freed him from Sycorax, the witch who had imprisoned him in a tree for refusing to do her bidding. Although he wants his freedom in exchange, Ariel approaches his tasks with enthusiasm, quickly doing what is asked and reporting promptly any activities that he observes. Earlier, Ariel had reported the plot to murder Prospero, and now he assists in punishing Prospero's enemies. Ariel's obedience is an important symbol of Prospero's humanity because he ameliorates Prospero's role on the island and humanizes the action that he takes against his old adversaries. Finally, Ariel's willing obedience of Prospero's wishes stands in stark contrast to Caliban's cursing and plotting against the same master.

This scene illustrates the deep disparity between what is real and what is imagined. The disappearing banquet was never real, although it briefly appears so to the hungry captives. Ariel appears briefly as a harpy, a mythical creature with a vulture's wings and claws and the face of a woman, yet it is not Ariel's voice that speaks but a deep voice that seems to come from the heavens. Neither the harpy nor the voice is real. None of this is real, and all of it is carefully staged, a theatrical spectacle designed to frighten and punish Prospero's enemies. Prospero is the puppet-master, carefully pulling the strings and manipulating the action. But he remains unseen and, like the deep voice and the banquet, even this scene is illusionary. His victims cannot know that Prospero waits, unseen in the wings. All that is real is the madness that this confrontation has evoked in the three sinners.

Act IV: Scene 1

Summary

Prospero, acknowledging that he has been harsh, now promises a reward that will rectify the young lovers' momentary suffering. Recognizing Ferdinand and Miranda's love for one another — they have passed the

trials that Prospero has set before them — he offers Miranda to Ferdinand as his wife. Prospero next calls Ariel to help stage a celebration of the betrothal. The celebration includes a masque, presented by the spirits of the island.

Suddenly Prospero remembers the three conspirators who have set out to murder him and calls a halt to the masque. He then summons Ariel, who reports that he led the three men, all of whom are very drunk, through a briar patch and into a filthy pond, where he left them wallowing. Prospero instructs Ariel to leave garish clothing on a tree to tempt the men.

Soon Caliban, Stefano, and Trinculo appear, foul smelling and wet. Stefano and Trinculo lament the loss of their bottles but are much cheered when they see the clothing hanging nearby. The two ignore Caliban's pleas to continue on their mission and his warnings that their hesitation will lead Prospero to catch them. At that moment, Prospero and Ariel enter with spirits, disguised as hunters and hounds. The three conspirators flee, with the spirits in pursuit. Prospero, acknowledging the power he now holds over all his enemies, promises Ariel that he shall soon be free.

Analysis

Within a few minutes of the opening of this scene, the betrothal is complete, and Miranda and Ferdinand's future has been determined to Prospero's satisfaction. The virtue and honor of these young people transcends the actions of their fathers and, in this betrothal, lies the redemption of their families. (According to Elizabethan custom, marriages consisted of three separate elements. The first was the betrothal, with it announcement of a promise to wed and the acknowledgement of the family's permission for the union to take place. The second part consisted of the wedding, with a religious ceremony that united the couple and bound them together under church law. The final part to the marriage was the consummation, the physical union of the couple through sexual intercourse.)

For the first time, Prospero can fully reveal his true nature. Finally, there is no need to be punitive or autocratic, and he can simply enjoy his daughter's happiness. For these few moments, the audience can witness what Prospero is like without the weight of revenge or control motivating his actions. Even in his gentleness and goodwill toward Ferdinand, Prospero does not forget that he is still Miranda's father, and as such, he is responsible for her until she is safely wed. Consequently, a significant amount of time is spent warning Ferdinand that he must control his lust until the wedding takes place. Prospero warns the young man that "barren hate, / Sour-eyed disdain, and discord," will be his reward if he cannot control his lust (IV.1, 19-20). All of this is in keeping with the expected

parental role. Miranda is even more innocent than most young women, having had none of the socialization that other young women would experience. Because of her isolation, she is more vulnerable, and her father is aware of her purity of heart. However, he is also a father, facing the imminent loss of his only child, and so his excessive warnings to Ferdinand to control his lust are to be expected.

The betrothal ceremony is sealed with a masque, and, in keeping with the motif of reality and illusion, this masque draws on mythical goddesses and on Greek and Roman mythology. The goddesses are selected for their symbolism and connections to nature and represent the promise of fertility and fecundity, heavenly harmony, and an eternal springtime of love. As the goddess of the rainbow, Iris is the promise of spring rains leading to a bountiful harvest. As a messenger from Juno, she also represents the gods' blessing on this betrothal. When Juno appears, her presence affirms the blessing of the heavens, and since Juno is the goddess of marriage and childbirth, her presence is the promise of a happy union for the couple and a blessing of many children. Finally, Ceres' appearance also promises nature's blessing on this marriage. Together, the goddesses are the promise of celestial harmony, fruitful harvests, and eternal seasons without winter. Venus, with her emphasis on abandon and sexual love is deliberately excluded, since the focus of the masque is on honorable marriage.

The pastoral tradition focuses on a nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting. Pastoral poetry is characterized by a state of contentment and a focus on the contemplative life. As is the case with most masques, Prospero's masque focuses on these pastoral motifs, with reapers and nymphs celebrating the fecundity of the land. The land is green, the harvesters sunburned, and the harvest worth celebrating. Love is innocent and romantic and not sexual. The country life, with its abundance of harvests and peaceful existence is an idealized world that ignores the realities of country life with its many hardships. But a wedding masque is not the time to remind the young couple of the possible hardships that they will face. Instead, Prospero focuses on the blessings of a happy marriage and the contentment that Ferdinand and Miranda will bring one another.

At the conclusion of the masque, Prospero addresses Ferdinand and tells him that "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on" (IV.1, 156-57). This is a reminder that the masque, with all its heavenly creatures, is not real. Like the masque, life, too, will come to its inevitable end. Prospero reminds Ferdinand that each man's life is framed by dreams. The evidence of that life, with its earthly possessions, is only temporary. Again, this points to the role of the young couple as redeemers for their father's sins. Alonso, and through him, Antonio and Sebastian, have placed too much

emphasis on worldly possessions and titles. Even Prospero, with his focus on books, has forgotten that they are also only temporary vestiges in this life. This reminder that corporeal riches are only temporary also seems to be directed toward Stefano and Trinculo.

Many scholars and critics would like to see Shakespeare's autobiographical presence in Prospero's words. Those who think that Shakespeare is allowing Prospero to speak his farewell to the stage find "Our revels now are ended" to be a poignant reminder of the temporal plight of all men's lives. Since *The Tempest* comes near the end of Shakespeare's career and life, it is very tempting to read autobiography into Prospero's words. Still, his words may only be an impassioned reminder for each man to value life and accept its temporal limitations.

At the scene's end, Prospero must shrug off the mantle of fatherhood and assume the cloak of ruler and deal with the three conspirators who plot his death: Caliban, Stefano, and Trinculo. The punishment that Ariel reports is more nuisance than painful, another reminder that Prospero's retribution includes no serious injuries. Aside from a few scratches, the trip through the briar patch and the putrid pond only injure the men's pride. Even the spirit hunters and dogs that give Caliban, Stefano, and Trinculo chase are little more than air, not capable of causing their prey any harm. This mild punishment reflects Prospero's inherent good nature and his willingness to forgive his enemies. He will make them suffer for their plotting, but he will do them no real injury. Although it was not always clear earlier in the play, by this act, Prospero's true nature, his goodness and his humanity, have become clear to the audience.

Act V: Scene 1

Summary

This scene opens with Ariel revealing to Prospero that Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio are remorseful, worried, and desperate. Gonzalo is worried and grief-stricken at his king's pain. Prospero reassures Ariel that he will be compassionate in dealing with his enemies and asks that Ariel bring the group to him. While he is waiting for the king and his party to appear, Prospero soliloquizes about what he has accomplished with magic and, at the soliloquy's end, promises that he will now give up his magic, bury his magic staff, and drown his magic book at sea.

Almost immediately, Ariel enters with the royal party, who appear to be in a trance, and places them within the magic circle that Prospero had earlier drawn. With a few chanted words, the spell is removed. Prospero, clothed in the garments of the duke of Milan — his rightful position — appears before them. In a gesture of reconciliation, Prospero embraces Alonso, who is filled with remorse and immediately gives up Prospero's

dukedom. Gonzalo is also embraced in turn, and then Prospero turns to Sebastian and Antonio. Prospero tells them that he will not charge them as traitors, at this time. Antonio is forgiven and required to renounce his claims on Prospero's dukedom.

While Alonso continues to mourn the loss of his son, Prospero relates that he too has lost his child, his daughter. But he means that he has lost her in marriage and pulls back a curtain to reveal Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess. Ferdinand explains to his father that he is betrothed to Miranda and that this event occurred while he thought his father dead. Alonso quickly welcomes Miranda and says he will be a second father to his son's affianced. At the sight of the couple, Gonzalo begins to cry and thanks God for having worked such a miracle.

Ariel enters with the master of the boat and boatswain. Although the ship lay in harbor and in perfect shape, the puzzled men cannot explain how any of this has occurred. Alonso is also mystified, but Prospero tells him not to trouble his mind with such concerns. Next, Ariel leads in Caliban, Stefano, and Trinculo, who are still drunk. Prospero explains that these men have robbed him and plotted to murder him. Caliban immediately repents and promises to seek grace. The three conspirators, who have sobered somewhat since confronted with Prospero and the king, are sent to decorate Prospero's cell. Prospero invites his guests to spend the night with him, where he will tell them of his adventures and of his life during these past 12 years. Ariel's last duty to Prospero is to provide calm seas when they sail the next morning.

Analysis

This final scene indicates the extent of Prospero's forgiveness and provides an example of humanity toward one's enemies. Before he confronts his enemies, Prospero tells Ariel that "The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" (27-28). That is, it is better to forgive than to hate one's enemies. This is the example that Prospero provides in reuniting everyone in this final scene. When he emerges from his trance, Alonso moves quickly to embrace Prospero, and just as quickly, he renounces his claims to Prospero's dukedom. This is the behavior the audience expects of Ferdinand's father, and it is what Prospero requires to resolve this conflict. Ferdinand is an honorable young man, filled with love and charity, and it is reasonable to expect that he learned these values from his father, even if his father has, on occasion, forgotten them. Alonso is honestly delighted in Ferdinand's engagement and welcomes Miranda with authentic grace. It is to be predicted that he is happy at recovering his son, but he is also clearly pleased to have gained a daughter. These spontaneous actions reveal that Alonso is as humane and honest as Prospero.

It is equally clear that Antonio and Sebastian each lack the humanity of their respective brothers. No apology is forthcoming from Antonio, and Sebastian thinks that Prospero is very likely the devil. Antonio never directly addresses Prospero, not even to justify his previous actions. And although both Prospero and Miranda might have died when cast out on to the sea some 12 years earlier, Antonio has no words for his niece. In spite of the obvious absence of regret from his brother, Prospero is true to his promise and seeks no revenge against Antonio. There is no reason to assume that shame restrains Antonio from speaking, and in all likelihood, he only regrets having been caught. Although Prospero warns his brother that he might still charge him with treason in the future, this warning is unlikely to restrain such a recalcitrant as Antonio.

Prospero's humanity is clearly obvious in his treatment of Antonio, whom he calls traitor but whom he declines to treat as a traitor. Critics and audience might be tempted to label Antonio as an unnatural brother, as would also be true for Sebastian. But their cruelty only indicates that nature provides for both goodness and evil. In the Christian world of the Shakespeare's time, evil is chosen, not destined, and nature provides for all outcomes, those who are virtuous and their counterparts, those who are corrupt. Hence, evil siblings are as natural as good siblings. Although the self-serving behavior of Antonio and Sebastian may be despicable, they are still a part of the natural world.

Caliban is also from the natural world, although as the child of a witch and devil. He is certainly different from the other humans on the island, but in this final scene, he displays more humanity than many of Prospero's "civilized" enemies. Antonio's only remark in this whole scene is to suggest that Caliban provides an opportunity to make money (V.1, 268-69). Antonio and Sebastian echo Stefano and Trinculo's earlier notion of exhibiting Caliban for profit, and in doing so, they reaffirm the impression that even the upper classes can be as lacking in morals as the two examples of the lower class, a butler and a court jester. Caliban, however, has risen above his companions and willingly admits his errors. In admitting his fault, Caliban proves himself more honorable than those who are socially his superior, Antonio and Sebastian.

Caliban is often celebrated as a natural man, one who is unspoiled by civilization. And yet, he easily embraces the worse that civilization has to offer. When exposed to Stefano and Trinculo, Caliban embraces their drunkenness and, in return, entices them to help plan a heinous crime. Many critics justify Caliban's actions by pointing to Prospero's persecution of Caliban. But nowhere in this play does Shakespeare validate this kind of revenge. Prospero may enslave Caliban, but he does not threaten his very existence. Certainly there is no way to justify slavery, and Shakespeare

makes no attempt to do so. In the end, Prospero leaves Caliban to his island and to the natural world that he craves. The conclusion is about redemption, the personal redemption that so many of the participants reach. Caliban's regret during this final scene indicates he, too, has found the way to reconciliation.

Gonzalo is one of the few participants who has no need to ask forgiveness nor any cause to regret his actions. Upon discovering that Ferdinand is alive and that he is betrothed to Miranda, Gonzalo quite properly thanks God, who has "chalked forth the way" (206). Gonzalo also sees the irony in Miranda's offspring inheriting all that was her father's and all that belongs to his enemy. He also observes that there is much that has been restored: Ferdinand to his father, and with him, a wife. But there is more. Prospero's dukedom has been restored, as has the ship and all its missing crew. Yet more important than people or objects, other essential components of civilized society have been restored: authority, harmony, and order.

Even before this reconciliation scene occurs, Prospero has promised to put aside his magic and dispose of his magic book and staff, which are the source of his power. He has used magic to work in concert with nature, not to control or evoke evil. Now that he has his enemies under his control, Prospero permits compassion to replace magic. This putting away of his magic also signifies that Prospero's game is at an end. He has used magic to restore harmony and now needs it no more. The play ends with the promise of Ariel's freedom and the restoration of Prospero to a life filled with all that nature and God intended.

Act V: Epilogue

Summary

Prospero, who is now alone on stage, requests that the audience free him. He states that he has thrown away his magic and pardoned those who have injured him. Now he requires that the audience release him from the island, which has been his prison so that he might return to Naples. The audience's applause will be the signal that he is freed. Prospero indicates that his forgiveness of his former enemies is what all men crave. With the audience's applause, Prospero leaves the stage.

Analysis

The Epilogue is often used to tie up loose ends and clarify any issues that remain unresolved. However, this epilogue does not provide the answers that the audience might expect. For instance, the audience never learns what is to become of Caliban or what will happen to Antonio and Sebastian. Few scholars ponder such questions. Instead, there has been a great deal of speculation on whether Prospero's farewell to magic is

intended to announce Shakespeare's retirement from the stage. When Prospero asks the audience to free him from his imprisonment, is it instead the voice of Shakespeare asking the audience to free him from his craft?

Certainly, there are parallels between Prospero and Shakespeare to consider. Both are manipulators; Prospero manipulates everyone on the island, and Shakespeare manipulates the characters he creates and the plots he devises. Both create entertainment, Prospero the masque and Shakespeare his plays, and both are intent on retiring. It is easy to look at Prospero's words and imagine Shakespeare mouthing them as he retires from the stage. But such parallels do not necessarily reveal how the author was, could be, or wants to be. The words on the page, or now spoken before an audience, do not tell the author's intentions or tone. To attribute Prospero's words to Shakespeare's own life may be a fallacy. After the completion of Prospero's story, Shakespeare did continue to write, composing parts of three more plays. It would be unwise to focus solely on *The Tempest* as somehow representative of Shakespeare's farewell to the stage and thus overlook the many other important strengths of the play.

QUOTES

1. *You taught me language, and my profit on't
Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!* (I.ii.366–368)

This speech, delivered by Caliban to Prospero and Miranda, makes clear in a very concise form the vexed relationship between the colonized and the colonizer that lies at the heart of this play. The son of a witch, perhaps half-man and half-monster, his name a near-anagram of "cannibal," Caliban is an archetypal "savage" figure in a play that is much concerned with colonization and the controlling of wild environments. Caliban and Prospero have different narratives to explain their current relationship. Caliban sees Prospero as purely oppressive while Prospero claims that he has cared for and educated Caliban, or did until Caliban tried to rape Miranda. Prospero's narrative is one in which Caliban remains ungrateful for the help and civilization he has received from the Milanese Duke. Language, for Prospero and Miranda, is a means to knowing oneself, and Caliban has in their view shown nothing but scorn for this precious gift. Self-knowledge for Caliban, however, is not empowering. It is only a constant reminder of how he is different from Miranda and Prospero and how they have changed him from what he was. Caliban's only hope for an identity separate from those who have invaded his home is to use what they have given him against them.

2. *There be some sports are painful, and their labour
Delight in them sets off. Some kinds of baseness
Are nobly undergone, and most poor matters
Point to rich ends. This my mean task
Would be as heavy to me as odious, but
The mistress which I serve quickens what's dead
And makes my labours pleasures. (III.i.1-7)*

Ferdinand speaks these words to Miranda, as he expresses his willingness to perform the task Prospero has set him to, for her sake. *The Tempest* is very much about compromise and balance. Prospero must spend twelve years on an island in order to regain his dukedom; Alonso must seem to lose his son in order to be forgiven for his treachery; Ariel must serve Prospero in order to be set free; and Ferdinand must suffer Prospero's feigned wrath in order to reap true joy from his love for Miranda. This latter compromise is the subject of this passage from Act III, scene i, and we see the desire for balance expressed in the structure of Ferdinand's speech. This desire is built upon a series of antitheses—related but opposing ideas: “sports . . . painful” is followed by “labour . . . delights”; “baseness” can be undergone “nobly”; “poor matters” lead to “rich ends”; Miranda “quickens” (makes alive) what is “dead” in Ferdinand. Perhaps more than any other character in the play, Ferdinand is resigned to allow fate to take its course, always believing that the good will balance the bad in the end. His waiting for Miranda mirrors Prospero's waiting for reconciliation with his enemies, and it is probably Ferdinand's balanced outlook that makes him such a sympathetic character, even though we actually see or hear very little of him on-stage.

3. *[I weep] at mine unworthiness, that dare not offer
What I desire to give, and much less take
What I shall die to want. But this is trifling,
And all the more it seeks to hide itself
The bigger bulk it shows. Hence, bashful cunning,
And prompt me, plain and holy innocence.
I am your wife, if you will marry me.
If not, I'll die your maid. To be your fellow
You may deny me, but I'll be your servant
Whether you will or no (III.i.77-86)*

Miranda delivers this speech to Ferdinand in Act III, scene i, declaring her undying love for him. Remarkably, she does not

merely *propose* marriage, she practically insists upon it. This is one of two times in the play that Miranda seems to break out of the predictable character she has developed under the influence of her father's magic. The first time is in Act I, scene ii, when she scolds Caliban for his ingratitude to her after all the time she has spent teaching him to speak. In the speech quoted above, as in Act I, scene ii, Miranda seems to come to a point at which she can no longer hold inside what she thinks. It is not that her desires get the better of her; rather, she realizes the necessity of expressing her desires. The naïve girl who can barely hold still long enough to hear her father's long story in Act I, scene ii, and who is charmed asleep and awake as though she were a puppet, is replaced by a stronger, more mature individual at this moment. This speech, in which Miranda declares her sexual independence, using a metaphor that suggests both an erection and pregnancy (the "bigger bulk" trying to hide itself), seems to transform Miranda all at once from a girl into a woman.

At the same time, the last three lines somewhat undercut the power of this speech: Miranda seems, to a certain extent, a slave to her desires. Her pledge to follow Ferdinand, no matter what the cost to herself or what he desires, is echoed in the most degrading way possible by Caliban as he abases himself before the liquor-bearing Stephano. Ultimately, we know that Ferdinand and Miranda are right for one another from the fact that Ferdinand does not abuse the enormous trust Miranda puts in him.

4. *If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak
And peg thee in his knotty entrails till
Thou hast howled away twelve winters. (I.ii)*

In response to Ariel's concern that Prospero will not grant him freedom for his faithful service, Prospero reminds Ariel of how he saved him from the witch Sycorax and then issues this threat. The violence of this threat illustrates both Prospero's bad temper and his domineering nature. Clearly, Prospero does not tolerate disobedience from his inferiors, and he relies on threats of cruelty to keep those under his command in line.

5. *If thou neglect'st or dost unwillingly
What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps,
Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar
That beasts shall tremble at thy din. (I.ii)*

Prospero directs these harsh words toward Caliban, who has just resisted his command to fetch sticks for a fire. Prospero once again demonstrates his willingness to use (and perhaps indicates his history of using) magic for cruel purposes. These words also recall something Prospero said earlier in the scene, when he reminded Ariel of the torment

he suffered under Sycorax's rule: "Thy groans / Did make wolves howl and penetrate the breasts / Of ever angry bears" (I.ii.). Prospero's implication that he would make Caliban suffer just as Sycorax made Ariel suffer suggests that little separates Prospero from that "foul witch" (I.ii.).

6. *If thou dost break her virgin-knot before*

*All sanctimonious ceremonies may
With full and holy rite be ministered,
No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall
To make this contract grow, but barren hate,
Sour-eyed disdain, and discord shall bestrew
The union of your bed with weeds so loathly
That you shall hate it both. (IV.i.)*

With this long-winded sentence, Prospero informs Ferdinand as to what will happen should his soon-to-be son-in-law attempt to have sex with Miranda before they get married. Unlike with Prospero's other threats, which indicate just how capable of cruelty he is, this threat illustrates his protective nature. When he says that premarital sex will sow "disdain" and "discord" in their marriage and render their relationship "barren," he does not really mean it. Instead, Prospero uses such strong words so that Ferdinand understands how precious his daughter is to him.

7. *I prithee*

*Remember I have done thee worthy service,
Told thee no lies, made thee no mistakings, served
Without or grudge or grumblings. Thou did promise
To bate me a full year. (I.ii.)*

Ariel addresses these words to Prospero, emphasizing his loyalty in the hopes that his master will at last grant him his freedom. This moment reveals that Ariel has worked for Prospero not of his own will, but rather as an indentured servant. The way in which Ariel phrases his request for freedom so carefully and indirectly also sheds light on the degree to which he fears Prospero. Despite being a spirit with great abilities, Ariel is ultimately no match for Prospero's deep learning in the magic arts and must therefore obey his command.

8. *I'll swear upon that bottle to be thy true*

subject, for the liquor is not earthly. (II.ii.)

Caliban utters this oath to Stephano after enjoying his first taste of alcohol. Filled with amazement and wonder at the "celestial liquor" (II.ii.), Caliban calls Stephano a "brave god" (II.ii.) and swears fealty to the

mysterious newcomer. A subtle irony is at play in this moment, particularly given Caliban's violent rejection of Prospero as a figure of power. With regard to Caliban's previous rejection of a man who wields power of celestial proportions, it seems surprising that he would so quickly kneel to another man simply because that man offers a divine beverage.

9. *I prattle*

Something too wildly, and my father's precepts

I therein do forget. (III.i.)

Miranda says these lines to Ferdinand immediately after confessing her attraction to him. In this confessional moment, she fears that she has disobeyed her father's wishes, and perhaps that she has even betrayed him by claiming that she "would not wish / Any companion in the world but you [i.e., Ferdinand]" (II.ii.). Once again, Miranda's fear indicates her father's power. However, this moment is also ironic, given that Miranda's affection for Ferdinand has actually fulfilled her father's wishes. Though unbeknownst to her, Prospero is eavesdropping on this exchange and he approves of her disobedience.

10 *Mark his [Antonio's] condition and th' event. Then tell me*

If this might be a brother. (I.ii.)

Prospero says these words to Miranda in his account the story of his exodus from Milan. Prospero draws on the language of kinship to emphasize the gravity of Antonio's betrayal. Although Antonio's plotting with Alonso constitutes treason, the fact that Antonio was his brother made the transgression even more devastating. Antonio's act of treason serves as a model on which Shakespeare builds other examples of treasonous behavior in the play.

11. *Th' occasion speaks thee, and*

My strong imagination sees a crown

Dropping upon thy head. (II.i.)

Antonio utters these words to Sebastian when the other members of their retinue have fallen asleep due to Ariel's charm. Although Antonio appears simply to be reminding Sebastian of his noble heritage, he is in fact implying that Sebastian should expedite his ascendance to the throne by killing his brother in his sleep, thereby becoming the King of Naples. Sebastian initially seems aghast at Antonio's suggestion, but he quickly grows amenable to the idea and joins the treasonous plot.

12. *Yea, yea, my lord. I'll yield him [Prospero] thee asleep*

Where thou mayst knock a nail into his head. (III.ii.)

Caliban speaks these words to Stephano, whom he has convinced to assassinate Prospero and take control of the island. Although Caliban's desire to "knock a nail" into Prospero's head echoes the other plots of treason in the play, it differs in the sense that Prospero and Caliban are not related. Thus, Caliban and Stephano's plot does not constitute a familial betrayal. However, the basic motivation for the murder plot remains the same as the others, since Caliban maintains that Prospero has unjustly laid claim to the island over which he—Caliban—should rule.

13. *Admired Miranda!*

Indeed the top of admiration, worth

What's dearest to th' world! (III.i.)

Ferdinand exclaims these words after Miranda tells him her name, which is also a Latin word that means "admirable" or "wonderful." As someone who has received the education of a noble, Ferdinand would know Latin, so it's not surprising that he comments on the meaning of Miranda's name. Yet his phrase "Admired Miranda" turns out to be more than just a pun, as he goes on to proclaim her supreme virtue in comparison to other women he has known: "But you, O you, / So perfect and so peerless, are created / Of every creature's best!" (III.i.).

14. *I perceive these lords*

At this encounter do so much admire

That they devour their reason and scarce think

Their eyes do offices of truth, their words

Are natural breath. (V.i.)

In these lines, Prospero comments on the sense of wonder that has affected Alonso and his retinue during their time on the island. The basic sense of these lines is that Alonso and company have seen so much to "admire" (i.e., to wonder at) that they have lost the ability to think clearly. This is why they seem unable to believe their eyes when they seem to see Prospero in the flesh in the final act of the play. In this quote, "wonder" appears to have a negative effect, concealing truth (or at least obscuring it) rather than revealing it.

15. *O wonder!*

How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world

That has such people in 't! (V.i.)

Miranda declares these words near the end of the play, just after Prospero draws back the curtain to reveal Miranda and Ferdinand playing chess. In this moment Alonso sees that his son is still alive, and Ferdinand

has the same revelation about his father. Uttered in the midst of this highly emotional moment, Miranda's words embody the kind of optimism that characterizes her role in the play. In addition to the fact that her name means "wonder" in Latin, Miranda's marriage to Ferdinand represents optimism about new beginnings and the possibility of a more prosperous future.

SUMMARY

Act I

The play begins on a ship, with a ship-master and a boatswain trying to keep the ship from wrecking in a tempest. Alonso, King of Naples, is on board, as are his brothers Antonio and Sebastian. Alonso comes above deck merely to give the mariners an unnecessary order; the boatswain begs the nobles to keep below deck during the storm, so that the men can do their jobs without distraction. However, Antonio and Sebastian take the opportunity to make rude and sarcastic remarks to the good boatswain, and can do nothing to help. A spell comes over all on board, and the mariners all flee in desperation; the nobles on deck decide that all is lost without the sailors, and go below deck to say goodbye to their king.

Miranda and Prospero are revealed on the island; Miranda laments that a shipful of men must have died in the tempest, but her father reassures her that none were hurt, and that the tempest was of his own doing. Upon Miranda's request, Prospero begins to tell her of his history, and how they came upon the island; Miranda was very young when she left the island, and cannot remember anyone but her father, not even her dead mother. Prospero tells her how his kingdom was usurped by his brother Antonio, while Prospero was distracted by his studies, and how the king of Naples supported Antonio's rule. Antonio then cast Prospero and Miranda out of Milan, and ordered both of them killed; however, Prospero tells his daughter how the good councilor Gonzalo arranged for them not to be killed, which led to their landing on the island.

Prospero declares his intention of reclaiming his dukedom, and that the tempest and his brothers' shipwreck on the island are part of this plan. Ariel makes his first entrance, and declares that Prospero's bidding has been perfectly performed, and none of the party are harmed; the sailors are still upon the ship, while the King and his companions have been scattered about the island. Ariel reminds Prospero of his promise to free Ariel, and Prospero impresses upon him how much more generous a master he believes himself to be than Sycorax.

Caliban enters, stating his claim to the island that comes through his mother Sycorax; Prospero's teachings, for whatever reason, have failed

upon Caliban, and Caliban retains his more primitive nature, for which Prospero and Miranda despise him. Ferdinand stumbles upon Miranda, and they immediately fall in love, due to Ariel's magic; but Prospero decides to make him a servant, and will put him to hard tasks about the island.

Act II

King Alonso has landed on the island, with his brothers Sebastian and Antonio, noblemen Adrian and Francisco, and the councilor Gonzalo. Gonzalo tries to console Alonso upon their good fortune of surviving the shipwreck - but Alonso is grieved - not only because his son Ferdinand is missing and presumed dead, but because he was returning from his daughter's wedding in Africa, and fears he will never see her again because of the distance. Antonio and Sebastian show great skill with mocking wordplay, and use this skill to stifle Gonzalo and Adrian's attempts to speak frankly to the rest of the party. Ariel's magic makes the party fall asleep, with the exception of Antonio and Sebastian.

A strange seriousness, of Ariel's doing, falls upon Antonio and Sebastian. Antonio begins to concoct a plan to get his brother the kingship, which will be much easier if Ferdinand, the current heir, really is dead; and since Alonso's daughter is very far away in Tunis, Sebastian might be able to inherit the crown with only two murders, those of Alonso and Gonzalo. Ariel, however, hears to conspirators plan, and wakes Gonzalo with a warning of the danger he is in. Ariel intends to let Prospero know that the conspiracy has indeed been formed as he wished, and Prospero in turn will try to keep Gonzalo safe, out of appreciation for his past help in preserving the lives of Prospero and Miranda.

Caliban curses Prospero, as another storm approaches the island; he takes the storm as a sign that Prospero is up to mischief, and hides at the approach of what he fears is one of Prospero's punishing spirits. Trinculo, Alonso's court jester, finds Caliban lying still on the ground and covered with a cloak, and figures him to be a "dead Indian"; but, the storm continues to approach, so he also hides himself, using Caliban's cloak as a shelter, and flattening himself on the ground beside Caliban's prostrate form.

Alonso's drunken butler, Stephano, enters, drunk and singing, and stumbles upon the strange sight of the two men under the cloak; he figures, in his drunken stupor, that Trinculo and Caliban make a four-legged monster. Caliban, in his delirium, thinks that Stephano is one of Prospero's minions, sent to torment him; Stephano thinks a drink of wine will cure Caliban of what ails him, and bit by bit, gets Caliban drunk as well. It takes Stephano a while to recognize his old friend, Trinculo, whom Caliban seems to be ignoring. Because of Stephano's generosity with his "celestial

liquor," Caliban takes him to be some sort of benevolent god; much to Trinculo's disbelief, Caliban actually offers his service to Stephano, forsaking the "tyrant" Prospero. Stephano accepts the offer.

Act III

Ferdinand has been made to take Caliban's place as a servant, despite his royal status; and though he does not like Prospero, he does the work because it will benefit his new love, Miranda. Ferdinand and Miranda express their love for each other, and both express their desire to be married - though they have known each other for less than a day.

Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban are drinking; Trinculo and Sebastian continue to insult Caliban, though Caliban only protests against Trinculo's remarks, and tries to get Stephano to defend him. Caliban begins to tell the other two about the tyranny of his old master, Prospero, and how he wants to be rid of Prospero forever; Ariel enters, causes further discord among the group, and gets Caliban to form a murder plot against Prospero. Caliban promises Stephano that if Prospero is successfully killed, he will allow Stephano to be ruler of the island, and will be his servant. He also promises that Stephano will get Miranda if the plot is successful - Ariel leaves, to tell Prospero of these developments.

Alonso, Adrian, Francisco, Sebastian, Antonio, and Gonzalo are still wandering about the island, and Alonso has finally given up any hope of his son Ferdinand being alive. Antonio and Sebastian decide to make their murderous move later that night, but their conspiracy is interrupted by Prospero sending in a huge banquet via his spirits, with he himself there, but invisible. They are all amazed, but not too taken aback that they will not eat the food; but, as they are about to eat, a vengeful Ariel enters, taking credit for their shipwreck, and makes the banquet vanish. Alonso recognizes Ariel's words as being of Prospero's pen, and the great guilt of Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian begins to take them over, at the thought of Prospero being alive, and so nearby.

Act IV

Prospero stops Ferdinand's punishment, and decides to finally give Miranda to him, since he has proven his love for her through his service. Prospero accepts the union, but issues them a warning; if Ferdinand takes Miranda's virginity before a ceremony can be performed, then their union will be cursed. Ferdinand swears to Prospero that they shall wait until the ceremony to consummate their marriage, and then Prospero calls upon Ariel to perform one of his last acts of magic. A betrothal masque is performed for the party by some of Prospero's magical spirits; Juno, Ceres, and Iris are the goddesses who are represented within the masque, and the play speaks about the bounties of a good marriage, and blesses the happy

couple. This act of magic so captivates Prospero that he forgets Caliban's plot to kill him; for a moment, he almost loses control, but manages to pull himself out of his reverie and take action.

Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo come looking for Prospero, and swipe a few garments of Prospero's on their way. Caliban still wants very much to kill Prospero, and carry out this plot; however, Trinculo and Stephano are very drunk, as usual, and prove completely incapable of anything but petty theft. Prospero catches them - not difficult, since they are making a huge amount of noise--and sends Ariel after them as they flee.

Act V

Prospero finally has all under his control; Ariel has apprehended Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio, and they are all waiting for Prospero's judgment. Finally, Prospero makes up his mind against revenge, and makes a speech that signifies his renunciation of magic; the accused and the other nobles enter the magic circle that Prospero has made, and stand there, enchanted, while he speaks. Prospero charges Alonso with throwing Prospero and his daughter out of Italy, and Antonio and Sebastian with being part of this crime. Prospero announces Ariel's freedom after Ariel sees the party back to Naples, and Ariel sings a song out of joy. Alonso and Prospero are reconciled after Alonso declares his remorse and repents his wrongs to Prospero and Miranda, and Prospero finally wins back his dukedom from Antonio. Prospero, perhaps unwillingly, also says that he forgives Antonio and Sebastian, though he calls them "wicked" and expresses his reservations about letting them off the hook.

After despairing that his son is dead, Alonso finds out that his son Ferdinand is indeed alive, and the two are reunited; then, Ferdinand and Miranda's engagement is announced, and is approved before the whole party by Alonso and Prospero. Gonzalo rejoices that on the voyage, such a good match was made, and that the brothers are reunited, and some of the bad blood between them is now flushed out. Ariel has readied Alonso's boat for their departure, and the boatswain shows up again, telling them about what happened to all of the sailors during the tempest.

Caliban apologizes to Prospero for taking the foolish Stephano as his master, and Prospero, at last, acknowledges Caliban, and takes him as his own. Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban's plot is exposed to the whole group, and is immediately forgiven. Prospero invites everyone to pass one last night in the island at his dwelling, and promises to tell the story of his and Miranda's survival, and of the devices of his magic. The play ends with Prospero addressing the audience, telling them that they hold an even greater power than Prospero the character, and can decide what happens next.

- **abstemious** moderate, especially in eating and drinking; temperate. Prospero is warning Ferdinand once again about resisting lust before the wedding occurs.
- **amain** at or with great speed; here, Miranda's peacocks fly quickly.
- **bark** any boat, but especially a small sailing ship.
- **bass my trespass** Here, meaning that the condemnation (my trespass) was uttered in a deep bass voice. The thunder proclaimed his sin, according to Alonso, like a noise from the heavens.
- **Bermoothes** refer to the Bermudas, a common word to describe tempests and enchantments.
- **betid** happened or befell; here, it means that nothing has happened to the boat's inhabitants.
- **boatswain** the ship's petty officer, in charge of the deck crew, the rigging, anchors, boats, and so on.
- **bombard** a large leather container meant to hold liquor.
- **bound** a limit; boundary. Here used to mean that no land would be divided among landowners.
- **bring a corollary** here, meaning to bring too many spirits rather than not enough.
- **Br'rlakin** "By your ladykin"; a reference to the Virgin Mary.
- **case** here, prepared.
- **chaps** jaws. Stefano is telling Caliban to open his jaws and drink more.
- **coragio** take courage (Italian).
- **dowle** small feather.
- **dropsy** a disease characterized by the accumulation of fluid in the connective tissues, resulting in swelling.
- **drowning mark** refers to a mole, located on the boatswain's face, the appearance of which was thought to portend a person's manner of death. In this case, the boatswain's mole appears to be the type that predicts a death by hanging.
- **extirpate** to pull up by the roots. The reference here is to Prospero and Miranda's being forced from their home and country.
- **feater** more graceful. Here, Antonio's new rank — and clothes that befit it — looks graceful on him.
- **foil** to keep from being successful; thwart; frustrate.

- **foison** plenty; here, specifically, an abundance of produce.
- **frippery** here, an old clothing shop.
- **furtherer** an accomplice.
- **genius** either of two spirits, one good and one evil, supposed to influence one's destiny.
- **hereditary sloth** the natural inclination of a younger brother to be lazy, according to Sebastian, who sees the lack of a hereditary title as a reason to achieve nothing on his own.
- **hest** [Archaic] a behest; a bidding; an order. Miranda was commanded not to reveal her name.
- **hollowly** here, insincerely.
- **inch-meal** inch by inch. Here, Caliban hopes for Prospero's fall.
- **inveterate** firmly established over a long period.
- **jerkin** a short, closefitting jacket, often sleeveless.
- **kibe** a chapped or ulcerated sore, esp. on the heel. If Antonio's conscience were a sore on his foot, Antonio might put on a slipper.
- **a living drollery** probably a puppet-show with live actors.
- **long spoon** alluding to an old proverb that a man must have a very long spoon to eat with the devil. Stefano thinks that Trinculo is a ghost.
- **maid** here, handmaiden, a woman or girl servant or attendant.
- **mantle** to enclose or envelop.
- **merely** [Obs.] absolutely; altogether; here, it means that they are completely cheated of their lives by drunkards.
- **moon-calf** [Obs.] a monstrosity; a misshapen creature born under the moon's influence.
- **murrain** a disease of cattle.
- **patch** [Archaic] a court jester; any clown or fool
- **Phoebus' steeds** the mythological horses that drew the chariot of the sun. Here, the suggestion is that they are lame from the long day and overriding.
- **pie** a fool.
- **rapier** a slender two-edged sword used chiefly in thrusting.
- **rate** opinion.
- **requite** to make return or repayment to for a benefit, injury, and so on; reward.

- **roarers** noisy and unruly waves; here so called because they care little for royal rank.
- **Scamels** The meaning is uncertain but thought to be either shellfish or rock-inhabiting birds.
- **sickle** reference to nymphs disguised as harvesters.
- **Signories** domains or city-states in Northern Italy, subject to the rule of a lord or signior.
- **subtleties** here, the illusions.
- **surety** a person who takes responsibility for another. Miranda will be Ferdinand's guarantee.
- **swabber** the sailor who washes the ship and keeps the decks clean.
- **tawny** brownish-yellow; here used to mean that the sun has turned the ground a parched brown color.
- **teen** injury or harm. Prospero worries about the trouble that he has created for Miranda.
- **tight and yare** sound and ready. The ship is ready to sail.
- **too massy** unable to move. Here, through magic, the men are paralyzed.
- **trident** a three-pronged spear used by a gladiator in ancient Roman gladiatorial combats and by the Greek god of the sea, Neptune.
- **troll the catch** to sing the round lustily or in a full, rolling voice
- **trumpery** something showy but worthless; here, the gaudy clothing designated as bait for the three conspirators.
- **twain** two. Ferdinand refers to himself and his father as but two of the victims of the storm.
- **unbacked** not broken to the saddle: said of a horse.
- **vanity** reference to an illusion or trick that Prospero has created.
- **Wallets** here, meaning wattle, the fleshy, wrinkled, often brightly colored piece of skin that hangs from throat of a turkey.
- **wezand** windpipe.
- **wooden slavery** being compelled to carry wood.
- **yarely** briskly or smartly. Here the boatswain is instructing the sailors to move quickly or the ship will be pushed aground by the storm.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- Who is Miranda?

- Who is Prospero? How does he know that everyone has survived the storm?
- How did Prospero and Miranda come to be on the island?
- Who is Ariel? Why should he be grateful to Prospero, and just do what he's told?
- Who was Sycorax? How does Prospero feel about her? Are there any parallels between Sycorax's story and Prospero's?
- Who is Caliban? What is his attitude towards Prospero's control of the island?
- What event led Prospero to start treating Caliban as his slave?
- Why does Miranda think that Ferdinand might be a "spirit"?
- How does Prospero treat Ferdinand? How is this treatment like and unlike the treatment of Caliban?
- What kind of society would Gonzalo like to found on the desert island? What is the reaction of his companions?
- What do Antonio and Sebastian want to do to Alonso and Gonzalo? Why? What does Antonio mean when he says, "What's past is prologue" (II.i.254)?
- The Harpies are characters from classical mythology who punish a bad king by always destroying his meals with their filth. What role do the Harpies play in III.iii? Why is Gonzalo the only character who doesn't see and hear the speech given by Ariel in the form of a Harpy?
- What is Prospero's major admonition to Ferdinand and Miranda? Why do you think he is so concerned about this?
- What makes Prospero interrupt the masque?
- How does Ariel get the best of the low-life plotters?
- Does Prospero plan to continue to practice magic when his plan is brought to completion (V.i.33-57)?
- Who first asks Prospero for forgiveness? Who might you expect to ask Prospero for forgiveness?
- What does Miranda mean by the phrase, "Brave new world" (V.i.185)?
- What do you think happens on the island once the Italians leave? What kind of community, society, or form of life can you imagine Ariel and Caliban forming either together or alone?

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UNIT

4

HAMLET

STRUCTURE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This chapter shall cover the following main points:

- Learning objectives
- Introduction of the play
- Plot
- Themes and symbols and motifs
- Characters
- Analysis of main characters
- Summary and analysis of scenes
- Quotes
- Summary of the play
- Key words
- Review questions
- Further reading

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Understand the summary of the play *Hamlet*.
- Analyze the characters.
- Understand the relations of various characters.
- Explain the quotes.
- Discuss the themes in the play

INTRODUCTION OF THE PLAY

Introduction

The first clear reference to what we know as William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* appears in the Stationers' Register, 26 July 1602, as a play called *The Revenge of Hamlet Prince [of] Denmark*. In that article, the author says the play was "lately acted by the Lord Chamberlain his

servants". In his list of London plays published in 1598, Francis Meres makes no mention of any play called *Hamlet*, but a note in Gabriel Harvey's edition of Speght's *Chaucer* (published in 1598) does mention the play *Hamlet*. Since scholars question the date of the actual writing of that note, most of them agree that Shakespeare published *Hamlet* after 1601 and before 1603. *The First Folio*, in 1623, categorized Shakespeare's plays as Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. Shakespeare wrote the great tragedies — excluding *Romeo and Juliet*, which is not, strictly speaking, a true tragedy — between 1601 and 1606, and apparently *Hamlet* was written first. Shakespeare closely followed *Hamlet* with *Othello* (1604), *King Lear* (1605/6), and *Macbeth* (1606), but a number of experts in Bardology (the study of Shakespeare, who is known as The Bard of Avon) believe that *Hamlet* represents the best of Shakespeare's work. It is the perfect play.

PLOT

On a dark winter night, a ghost walks the ramparts of Elsinore Castle in Denmark. Discovered first by a pair of watchmen, then by the scholar Horatio, the ghost resembles the recently deceased King Hamlet, whose brother Claudius has inherited the throne and married the king's widow, Queen Gertrude. When Horatio and the watchmen bring Prince Hamlet, the son of Gertrude and the dead king, to see the ghost, it speaks to him, declaring ominously that it is indeed his father's spirit, and that he was murdered by none other than Claudius. Ordering Hamlet to seek revenge on the man who usurped his throne and married his wife, the ghost disappears with the dawn.

Prince Hamlet devotes himself to avenging his father's death, but, because he is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, he delays, entering into a deep melancholy and even apparent madness. Claudius and Gertrude worry about the prince's erratic behavior and attempt to discover its cause. They employ a pair of Hamlet's friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to watch him. When Polonius, the pompous Lord Chamberlain, suggests that Hamlet may be mad with love for his daughter, Ophelia, Claudius agrees to spy on Hamlet in conversation with the girl. But though Hamlet certainly seems mad, he does not seem to love Ophelia: he orders her to enter a nunnery and declares that he wishes to ban marriages.

A group of traveling actors comes to Elsinore, and Hamlet seizes upon an idea to test his uncle's guilt. He will have the players perform a scene closely resembling the sequence by which Hamlet imagines his uncle to have murdered his father, so that if Claudius is guilty, he will surely react. When the moment of the murder arrives in the theater, Claudius leaps up

and leaves the room. Hamlet and Horatio agree that this proves his guilt. Hamlet goes to kill Claudius but finds him praying. Since he believes that killing Claudius while in prayer would send Claudius's soul to heaven, Hamlet considers that it would be an inadequate revenge and decides to wait. Claudius, now frightened of Hamlet's madness and fearing for his own safety, orders that Hamlet be sent to England at once.

Hamlet goes to confront his mother, in whose bedchamber Polonius has hidden behind a tapestry. Hearing a noise from behind the tapestry, Hamlet believes the king is hiding there. He draws his sword and stabs through the fabric, killing Polonius. For this crime, he is immediately dispatched to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, Claudius's plan for Hamlet includes more than banishment, as he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed orders for the King of England demanding that Hamlet be put to death.

In the aftermath of her father's death, Ophelia goes mad with grief and drowns in the river. Polonius's son, Laertes, who has been staying in France, returns to Denmark in a rage. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet is to blame for his father's and sister's deaths. When Horatio and the king receive letters from Hamlet indicating that the prince has returned to Denmark after pirates attacked his ship en route to England, Claudius concocts a plan to use Laertes' desire for revenge to secure Hamlet's death. Laertes will fence with Hamlet in innocent sport, but Claudius will poison Laertes' blade so that if he draws blood, Hamlet will die. As a backup plan, the king decides to poison a goblet, which he will give Hamlet to drink should Hamlet score the first or second hits of the match. Hamlet returns to the vicinity of Elsinore just as Ophelia's funeral is taking place. Stricken with grief, he attacks Laertes and declares that he had in fact always loved Ophelia. Back at the castle, he tells Horatio that he believes one must be prepared to die, since death can come at any moment. A foolish courtier named Osric arrives on Claudius's orders to arrange the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes.

The sword-fighting begins. Hamlet scores the first hit, but declines to drink from the king's proffered goblet. Instead, Gertrude takes a drink from it and is swiftly killed by the poison. Laertes succeeds in wounding Hamlet, though Hamlet does not die of the poison immediately. First, Laertes is cut by his own sword's blade, and, after revealing to Hamlet that Claudius is responsible for the queen's death, he dies from the blade's poison. Hamlet then stabs Claudius through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies, and Hamlet dies immediately after achieving his revenge.

At this moment, a Norwegian prince named Fortinbras, who has led an army to Denmark and attacked Poland earlier in the play, enters with

ambassadors from England, who report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Fortinbras is stunned by the gruesome sight of the entire royal family lying sprawled on the floor dead. He moves to take power of the kingdom. Horatio, fulfilling Hamlet's last request, tells him Hamlet's tragic story. Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be carried away in a manner befitting a fallen soldier.

THEMES AND SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

THEMES

Explore the different themes within William Shakespeare's tragic play, *Hamlet*. Themes are central to understanding *Hamlet* as a play and identifying Shakespeare's social and political commentary.

The Impossibility of Certainty

What separates *Hamlet* from other revenge plays (and maybe from every play written before it) is that the action we expect to see, particularly from Hamlet himself, is continually postponed while Hamlet tries to obtain more certain knowledge about what he is doing. This play poses many questions that other plays would simply take for granted. Can we have certain knowledge about ghosts? Is the ghost what it appears to be, or is it really a misleading fiend? Does the ghost have reliable knowledge about its own death, or is the ghost itself deluded? Moving to more earthly matters: How can we know for certain the facts about a crime that has no witnesses? Can Hamlet know the state of Claudius's soul by watching his behavior? If so, can he know the facts of what Claudius did by observing the state of his soul? Can Claudius (or the audience) know the state of Hamlet's mind by observing his behavior and listening to his speech? Can we know whether our actions will have the consequences we want them to have? Can we know anything about the afterlife?

Many people have seen *Hamlet* as a play about indecisiveness, and thus about Hamlet's failure to act appropriately. It might be more interesting to consider that the play shows us how many uncertainties our lives are built upon, how many unknown quantities are taken for granted when people act or when they evaluate one another's actions.

The Complexity of Action

Directly related to the theme of certainty is the theme of action. How is it possible to take reasonable, effective, purposeful action? In *Hamlet*, the question of how to act is affected not only by rational considerations, such as the need for certainty, but also by emotional, ethical, and psychological factors. Hamlet himself appears to distrust the idea that it's even possible to act in a controlled, purposeful way. When he does act, he prefers to do it blindly, recklessly, and violently. The other characters obviously think

much less about “action” in the abstract than Hamlet does, and are therefore less troubled about the possibility of acting effectively. They simply act as they feel is appropriate. But in some sense they prove that Hamlet is right, because all of their actions miscarry. Claudius possesses himself of queen and crown through bold action, but his conscience torments him, and he is beset by threats to his authority (and, of course, he dies). Laertes resolves that nothing will distract him from acting out his revenge, but he is easily influenced and manipulated into serving Claudius’s ends, and his poisoned rapier is turned back upon himself.

The Mystery of Death

In the aftermath of his father’s murder, Hamlet is obsessed with the idea of death, and over the course of the play he considers death from a great many perspectives. He ponders both the spiritual aftermath of death, embodied in the ghost, and the physical remainders of the dead, such as by Yorick’s skull and the decaying corpses in the cemetery. Throughout, the idea of death is closely tied to the themes of spirituality, truth, and uncertainty in that death may bring the answers to Hamlet’s deepest questions, ending once and for all the problem of trying to determine truth in an ambiguous world. And, since death is both the cause and the consequence of revenge, it is intimately tied to the theme of revenge and justice—Claudius’s murder of King Hamlet initiates Hamlet’s quest for revenge, and Claudius’s death is the end of that quest.

The question of his own death plagues Hamlet as well, as he repeatedly contemplates whether or not suicide is a morally legitimate action in an unbearably painful world. Hamlet’s grief and misery is such that he frequently longs for death to end his suffering, but he fears that if he commits suicide, he will be consigned to eternal suffering in hell because of the Christian religion’s prohibition of suicide. In his famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy (III.i), Hamlet philosophically concludes that no one would choose to endure the pain of life if he or she were not afraid of what will come after death, and that it is this fear which causes complex moral considerations to interfere with the capacity for action.

The Nation as a Diseased Body

Everything is connected in *Hamlet*, including the welfare of the royal family and the health of the state as a whole. The play’s early scenes explore the sense of anxiety and dread that surrounds the transfer of power from one ruler to the next. Throughout the play, characters draw explicit connections between the moral legitimacy of a ruler and the health of the nation. Denmark is frequently described as a physical body made ill by the moral corruption of Claudius and Gertrude, and many observers interpret the presence of the ghost as a supernatural omen indicating that “[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark” (I.iv.67). The dead King

Hamlet is portrayed as a strong, forthright ruler under whose guard the state was in good health, while Claudius, a wicked politician, has corrupted and compromised Denmark to satisfy his own appetites. At the end of the play, the rise to power of the upright Fortinbras suggests that Denmark will be strengthened once again.

Performance

Hamlet includes many references to performance of all kinds – both theatrical performance and the way people perform in daily life. In his first appearance, Hamlet draws a distinction between outward behavior—“actions that a man might play”—and real feelings: “that within which passeth show” (I.ii.). However, the more time we spend with Hamlet the harder it becomes to tell what he is really feeling and what he is performing. He announces in Act One scene five that he is going to pretend to be mad (“put an antic disposition on”). In Act Two scene one, Ophelia describes Hamlet’s mad behavior as a comical performance. However, when Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that “I have lost all my mirth,” he seems genuinely depressed. Generations of readers have argued about whether Hamlet is really mad or just performing madness. It’s impossible to know for sure – by the end of the play, even Hamlet himself doesn’t seem to know the difference between performance and reality.

Hamlet further explores the idea of performance by regularly reminding the audience that we are watching a play. When Polonius says that at university he “did enact Julius Caesar” (III.ii), contemporary audiences would have thought of Shakespeare’s own *Julius Caesar*, which was written around the same time as *Hamlet*. The actor who played Polonius may have played Julius Caesar as well. The device of the play within the play gives Hamlet further opportunities to comment on the nature of theater. By constantly reminding the audience that what we’re watching is a performance, *Hamlet* invites us to think about the fact that something fake can feel real, and vice versa. Hamlet himself points out that acting is powerful because it’s indistinguishable from reality: “The purpose of playing [...] is to hold as ’twere the mirror up to Nature” (III.ii.). That’s why he believes that the Players can “catch the conscience of the King” (II.ii.). By repeatedly showing us that performance can feel real, *Hamlet* makes us question what “reality” actually is.

Madness

One of the central questions of *Hamlet* is whether the main character has lost his mind or is only pretending to be mad. Hamlet’s erratic behavior and nonsensical speech can be interpreted as a ruse to get the other characters to believe he’s gone mad. On the other hand, his behavior may be a logical response to the “mad” situation he finds himself in – his father has been murdered by his uncle, who is now his stepfather. Initially,

Hamlet himself seems to believe he's sane – he describes his plans to “put an antic disposition on” and tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he is only mad when the wind blows “north-north-west” – in other words, his madness is something he can turn on and off at will. By the end of the play, however, Hamlet seems to doubt his own sanity. Referring to himself in the third person, he says “And when he's not himself does harm Laertes,” suggesting Hamlet has become estranged from his former, sane self. Referring to his murder of Polonius he says “Who does it then? His madness.” At the same time, Hamlet's excuse of madness absolves him of murder, so can also be read as the workings of a sane and cunning mind.

Doubt

In *Hamlet*, the main character's doubt creates a world where very little is known for sure. Hamlet thinks, but isn't entirely sure, his uncle killed his father. He believes he sees his father's Ghost, but isn't certain he should believe in the Ghost or listen to what the Ghost tells him: “I'll have grounds / More relative than this.” In his “to be or not to be” soliloquy Hamlet suspects he should probably just kill himself, but doubt about what lies beyond the grave prevents him from acting. Hamlet is so wracked with doubt he even works to infect other characters with his lack of certainty, as when he tells Ophelia “you should not have believed me” when he told her he loved her. As a result, the audience doubts Hamlet's reliability as a protagonist. We are left with many doubts about the action – whether Gertrude was having an affair with Claudius before he killed Hamlet's father; whether Hamlet is sane or mad; what Hamlet's true feelings are for Ophelia.

Mortality

The weight of one's mortality and the complexities of life and death are introduced from the beginning of *Hamlet*. In the wake of his father's death, Hamlet can't stop pondering and considering the meaning of life – and its eventual ending. Many questions emerge as the text progresses. What happens when you die? If you're murdered, then will you go to heaven? Do kings truly have a free pass to heaven?

In Hamlet's mind the idea of dying isn't so bad. It's the uncertainty of the afterlife that frightens Hamlet away from suicide, even though he's obsessed with the notion.

A turning point for Hamlet occurs in the graveyard scene in Act V. Before, Hamlet has been appalled and revolted by the moral corruption of the living. Seeing Yorick's skull (someone Hamlet loved and respected) propels Hamlet's realization that death eliminates the differences between people.

The sheer number of bodies at the end of *Hamlet* can be misleading. Even though eight of the nine primary characters die, the question of

mortality is not fully answered. The questions about death, suicide, and what comes after are left unanswered. What *Hamlet* presents in an exploration and discussion without a true resolution.

Women

The presence of only two named female characters says something about the role of women within *Hamlet*. The death of both women also indicates a social commentary.

Hamlet is at his most agitated state when talking to either female character. Although he cares for both, he's suspicious, as well. In the case of his mother, Gertrude, Hamlet feels she remarried too quickly and that her remarriage means she didn't love her first husband all that much. The idea freaks Hamlet out.

Then there's Ophelia. From the way the characters talk, we know Hamlet has been wooing Ophelia for some time. But after Hamlet starts to act mad, it doesn't take long for him to assume that Ophelia is in cahoots with Gertrude, Claudius, and Polonius. In reality, Ophelia obeyed her father and her monarch.

In both cases, Hamlet feels as if each woman has let him down, respectively. He's critical and quick to point out flaws though puns and backhanded comments. Ophelia is usually viewed as a true victim, while Gertrude's role is interpreted with more flexibility. In either case, the role and treatment of women in *Hamlet* is essential to discuss with an open mind.

Political Livelihood

The state of the nation in Denmark is deteriorating. The death of a king throws any nation into political turmoil. With a new king on the throne and the deceased king's son acting erratically, something's clearly off.

When the guard Marcellus famously says "[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark" (Act I, Scene IV), he's not being ironic about Hamlet's bathing habits. Marcellus's words refer to how something evil and vile is afoot. This moment could be interpreted as foreshadowing of the impending deaths of most of the principle characters. But it also refers to the political unrest Denmark is feeling as a nation. The political livelihood of Denmark can be directly linked back to the mental state of Hamlet at many points throughout the play.

SYMBOLS

Yorick's Skull

In *Hamlet*, physical objects are rarely used to represent thematic ideas. One important exception is Yorick's skull, which Hamlet discovers in the

graveyard in the first scene of Act V. As Hamlet speaks to the skull and about the skull of the king's former jester, he fixates on death's inevitability and the disintegration of the body. He urges the skull to "get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come"—no one can avoid death (V.i.178–179). He traces the skull's mouth and says, "Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft," indicating his fascination with the physical consequences of death (V.i.174–175). This latter idea is an important motif throughout the play, as Hamlet frequently makes comments referring to every human bo

MOTIFS

Incest and Incestuous Desire

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

Misogyny

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

Ears and Hearing

One facet of *Hamlet's* exploration of the difficulty of attaining true knowledge is slipperiness of language. Words are used to communicate ideas, but they can also be used to distort the truth, manipulate other people, and serve as tools in corrupt quests for power. Claudius, the shrewd politician, is the most obvious example of a man who manipulates words to enhance his own power. The sinister uses of words are represented by images of ears and hearing, from Claudius's murder of the king by pouring poison into his ear to Hamlet's claim to Horatio that "I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb" (IV.vi.21). The poison poured in the

king's ear by Claudius is used by the ghost to symbolize the corrosive effect of Claudius's dishonesty on the health of Denmark. Declaring that the story that he was killed by a snake is a lie, he says that "the whole ear of Denmark" is "Rankly abused. . . ." (I.v.36–38).

CHARACTERS

Hamlet

The Prince of Denmark, the title character, and the protagonist. About thirty years old at the start of the play, Hamlet is the son of Queen Gertrude and the late King Hamlet, and the nephew of the present king, Claudius. Hamlet is melancholy, bitter, and cynical, full of hatred for his uncle's scheming and disgust for his mother's sexuality. A reflective and thoughtful young man who has studied at the University of Wittenberg, Hamlet is often indecisive and hesitant, but at other times prone to rash and impulsive acts.

Claudius

The King of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle, and the play's antagonist. The villain of the play, Claudius is a calculating, ambitious politician, driven by his sexual appetites and his lust for power, but he occasionally shows signs of guilt and human feeling—his love for Gertrude, for instance, seems sincere.

Gertrude

The Queen of Denmark, Hamlet's mother, recently married to Claudius. Gertrude loves Hamlet deeply, but she is a shallow, weak woman who seeks affection and status more urgently than moral rectitude or truth.

Polonius

The Lord Chamberlain of Claudius's court, a pompous, conniving old man. Polonius is the father of Laertes and Ophelia.

Horatio

Hamlet's close friend, who studied with the prince at the university in Wittenberg. Horatio is loyal and helpful to Hamlet throughout the play. After Hamlet's death, Horatio remains alive to tell Hamlet's story.

Ophelia

Polonius's daughter, a beautiful young woman with whom Hamlet has been in love. Ophelia is a sweet and innocent young girl, who obeys her father and her brother, Laertes. Dependent on men to tell her how to behave, she gives in to Polonius's schemes to spy on Hamlet. Even in her lapse into madness and death, she remains maidenly, singing songs about flowers and finally drowning in the river amid the flower garlands she had gathered.

- **Laertes**

Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother, a young man who spends much of the play in France. Passionate and quick to action, Laertes is clearly a foil for the reflective Hamlet.

- **Fortinbras**

The young Prince of Norway, whose father the king (also named Fortinbras) was killed by Hamlet's father (also named Hamlet). Now Fortinbras wishes to attack Denmark to avenge his father's honor, making him another foil for Prince Hamlet.

- **The Ghost**

The specter of Hamlet's recently deceased father. The ghost, who claims to have been murdered by Claudius, calls upon Hamlet to avenge him. However, it is not entirely certain whether the ghost is what it appears to be, or whether it is something else. Hamlet speculates that the ghost might be a devil sent to deceive him and tempt him into murder, and the question of what the ghost is or where it comes from is never definitively resolved.

- **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern**

Two slightly bumbling courtiers, former friends of Hamlet from Wittenberg, who are summoned by Claudius and Gertrude to discover the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior.

- **Osric**

The foolish courtier who summons Hamlet to his duel with Laertes.

- **Voltimand and Cornelius**

Courtiers whom Claudius sends to Norway to persuade the king to prevent Fortinbras from attacking.

- **Marcellus and Bernardo**

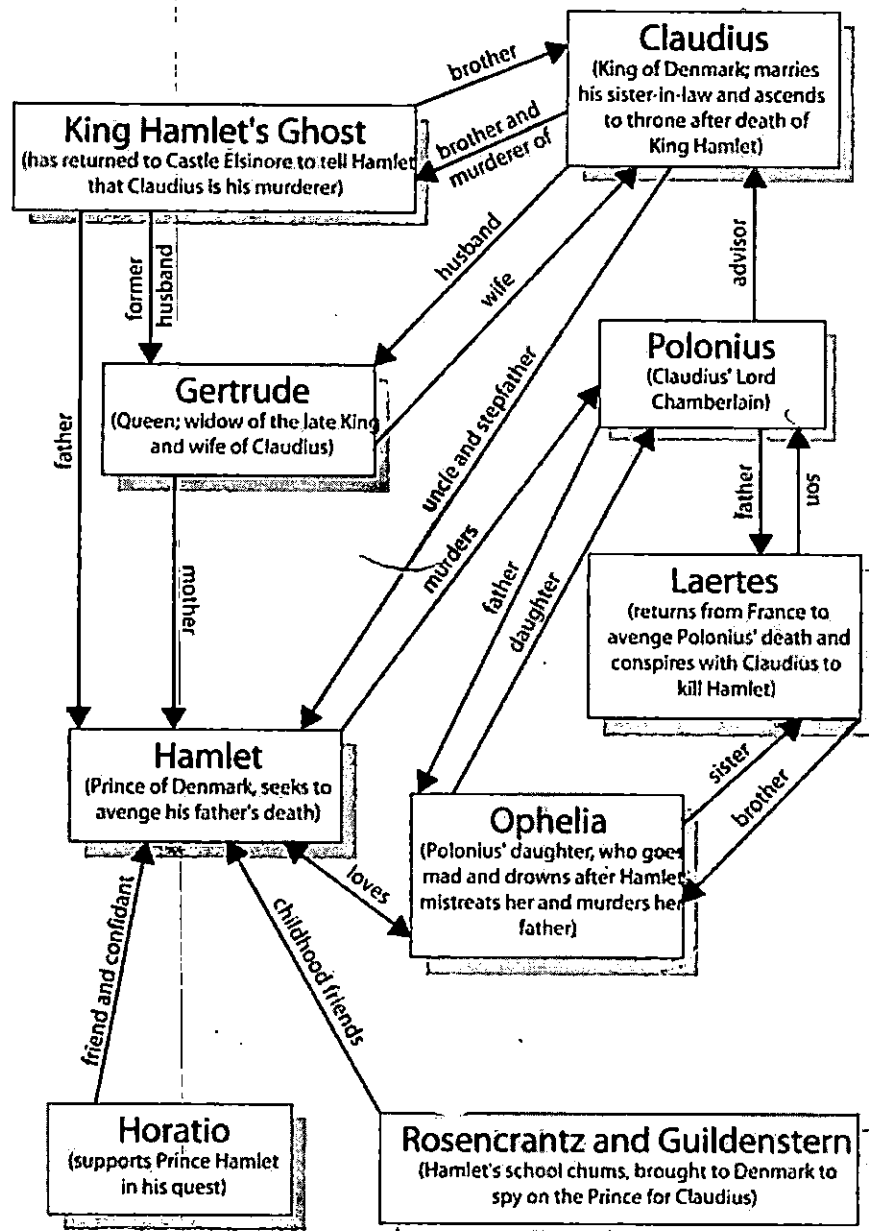
The officers who first see the ghost walking the ramparts of Elsinore and who summon Horatio to witness it. Marcellus is present when Hamlet first encounters the ghost.

- **Francisco**

A soldier and guardsman at Elsinore.

- **Reynaldo**

Polonius's servant, who is sent to France by Polonius to check up on and spy on Laertes.



ANALYSIS OF MAIN CHARACTERS

Hamlet

Hamlet is an enigma. No matter how many ways critics examine him, no absolute truth emerges. Hamlet breathes with the multiple dimensions of a living human being, and everyone understands him in a personal way. Hamlet's challenge to Guildenstern rings true for everyone who seeks to know him: "You would pluck out the heart of my mystery." None of us ever really does.

The conundrum that is Hamlet stems from the fact that every time we look at him, he is different. In understanding literary characters, just as in

understanding real people, our perceptions depend on what we bring to the investigation. Hamlet is so complete a character that, like an old friend or relative, our relationship to him changes each time we visit him, and he never ceases to surprise us. Therein lies the secret to the enduring love affair audiences have with him. They never tire of the intrigue.

The paradox of Hamlet's nature draws people to the character. He is at once the consummate iconoclast, in self-imposed exile from Elsinore Society, while, at the same time, he is the adulated champion of Denmark — the people's hero. He has no friends left, but Horatio loves him unconditionally. He is angry, dejected, depressed, and brooding; he is manic, elated, enthusiastic, and energetic. He is dark and suicidal, a man who loathes himself and his fate. Yet, at the same time, he is an existential thinker who accepts that he must deal with life on its own terms, that he must choose to meet it head on. "We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow."

Hamlet not only participates in his life, but astutely observes it as well. He recognizes the decay of the Danish society (represented by his Uncle Claudius), but also understands that he can blame no social ills on just one person. He remains aware of the ironies that constitute human endeavor, and he savors them. Though he says, "Man delights not me," the contradictions that characterize us all intrigue him. "What a piece of work is a 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!"

As astutely as he observes the world around him, Hamlet also keenly critiques himself. In his soliloquys he upbraids himself for his failure to act as well as for his propensity for words.

Hamlet is infuriatingly adept at twisting and manipulating words. He confuses his so-called friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — whom he trusts as he "would addersfang'd" — with his dissertations on ambition, turning their observations around so that they seem to admire beggars more than their King. And he leads them on a merry chase in search of Polonius' body. He openly mocks the dottering Polonius with his word plays, which elude the old man's understanding. He continually spars with Claudius, who recognizes the danger of Hamlet's wit but is never smart enough to defend himself against it.

Words are Hamlet's constant companions, his weapons, and his defenses. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a play that was later adapted into a film, playwright and screenplaywright Tom Stoppard imagines the various wordplays in *Hamlet* as games. In one scene, his characters play a set of tennis where words serve as balls and rackets. Hamlet is certainly the Pete Sampras of wordplay. And yet, words also

serve as Hamlet's prison. He analyzes and examines every nuance of his situation until he has exhausted every angle. They cause him to be indecisive. He dallies in his own wit, intoxicated by the mix of words he can concoct; he frustrates his own burning desire to be more like his father, the Hyperion. When he says that Claudius is "...no more like my father than I to Hercules" he recognizes his enslavement to words, his inability to thrust home his sword of truth. No mythic character is Hamlet. He is stuck, unable to avenge his father's death because words control him.

What an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear murdered
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words,
And fall-a-cursing like a very drab,
A scallion!

Hamlet's paradoxical relationship with words has held audiences in his thrall since he debuted in 1603 or so. But the controversy of his sexual identity equally charms and repels people.

Is Hamlet in love with his mother? The psychoanalytic profile of the character supports Freud's theory that Hamlet has an unnatural love for his mother. Hamlet unequivocally hates his stepfather and abhors the incestuous relationship between Claudius and Gertrude. But whether jealousy prompts his hatred, whether his fixation on his mother causes his inability to love Ophelia, and whether he lusts after Gertrude all depend on interpretation. And no interpretation is flawless.

Hamlet's love life could result from his Puritanical nature. Like the Puritans whose presence was growing in England of the time, Hamlet is severely puritanical about love and sex. He is appalled by Gertrude's show of her pleasure at Claudius' touch, and he clearly loathes women. His anger over Claudius' and Gertrude's relationship could as easily result from a general distaste for sexual activity as from desire to be with his mother.

Hamlet could be, at heart, a brutal misogynist, terrified of love because he is terrified of women. He verbally abuses Ophelia, using sexual innuendo and derision, and he encourages her to get to a nunnery. Another play on words, nunnery, in this instance, symbolizes both sexual abstinence and sexual perversity. In a cloister, Ophelia would take a vow of chastity, and in a brothel, she would serve as the basest sexual object.

Can concluding whether Hamlet is mad or merely pretending madness determine all the questions about Hamlet's nature? Could a madman manipulate his destiny as adeptly as Hamlet turns the tables on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Perhaps he is crazy like a fox . . . calculated

and criminal. Or perhaps his own portrayal of madness — his "antic disposition" — that he dons like a mask or a costume actually drives him.

Could Hamlet's madness be his tragic flaw? Or is his flaw that he believes he is pretending to be mad? Are words his tragic flaw? Or could his tragic flaw be that he possesses the same hubris that kills all the great tragic heroes — that he believes he can decide who should live and who should die, who should be forgiven and who should be punished? Then, perhaps, is the ghost a manifestation of his own conscience and not a real presence at all?

Hamlet is our hero because he is, as we are, at once both confused and enticed by endless dilemmas that come from being, after all, merely human.

CLAUDIUS

Shakespeare's villains are complex. Unlike the earlier antiheroes of the revenge or morality plays that were popular in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, Shakespearean criminals lack the simple clarity of absolute evil. Claudius is a perfect example of a quintessential Shakespearean antagonist.

Claudius is socially adept, and his charm is genuine. He can exhibit deep distress over his "dear brother's death" and admiration for his wife, "Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state." He knows the value of a great funeral, but quickly turns mourning into celebration and moves on "With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage" to whatever lies ahead. He is a decisive man, fair in his politics and commanding — if Gertrude's allegiance is any indication — in his bedroom.

The Queen has chosen to marry Claudius, and she defends him even to her son. In fact, she never opposes Claudius in anything. Were he dark and sinister in all things, she would fear and despise him; she follows him willingly even when he arranges to send her beloved son into the jaws of death. He must be sincere in his love for her. He explains his feelings for her at the end of Act IV, but he has proven these feelings consistently throughout the play

The Queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks, and for myself,
My virtue or my plague, be it either which,
She's so conjunctive to my life and soul
That as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not by her.

A character who loves is not merely a cold-blooded killer. Like Hamlet, his conflicting imperatives tear him apart.

Whereas he recognizes that he his "offense is rank" and "smells to heaven," he also admits that he will not make amends with God because he

refuses to give up what his crime has bought him. He is willing to take the consequences of his actions.

In some ways, Claudius exhibits more heroism than Hamlet. He manipulates fortune and takes what is not rightfully his, but remains unapologetic for his actions; he possesses enough strength to admit that he would do the same again. Hamlet, torn by conscience to smite the morally deficient Claudius, causes the death of six innocent people before he accomplishes his goal. By taking full responsibility for his actions, Claudius mitigates his evil nature.

The mark of a great Shakespearean antagonist is how completely he mirrors the protagonist. Claudius is no more Machiavellian than Hamlet; both ultimately believe that the end justifies the means, and both ultimately sacrifice humanity and humaneness in the acquisition of their goals.

What makes Claudius a villain is that he is wrong, and Hamlet is right. Claudius is a sneak who murdered and lied. Hamlet commits his murders in the open and suffers the pangs of his own conscience. Claudius subverts his conscience and refuses to ask for divine forgiveness. Hamlet seeks contrition and absolves himself of guilt before he dies; Claudius receives no absolution and seeks none. Hamlet will spend eternity in Heaven; Claudius will burn in Hell.

Gertrude

Gertrude is a shadowy character with little substance on which to hang a characterization. We can examine her through what others say about her more than through what she says.

That she is "th'imperial jointress" to the throne of Denmark indicates that she wields some power and suggests that Claudius' decision to marry her had political implications. Yet Hamlet indicts all women by calling her fickle — "frailty, thy name is woman." We see through Hamlet the picture of a woman who one day lived obediently and in the shadow of one king to whom she was devoted. The next day she allies herself in love and politics with the polar opposite of the man she formerly called husband.

The most haunting questions about Gertrude's character revolve around whether she knows that Claudius is a criminal. Is she merely a dependent woman who needs to live through her man? Is she a conniving temptress who used her power to conspire with Claudius to kill King Hamlet and usurp Prince Hamlet's ascendancy?

No textual references are conclusive. The ghost of King Hamlet calls her his "most seeming virtuous queen." He entreats Hamlet to "Leave her to Heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her." These words could imply that she has reason to be guilty, that she is not blameless. Later, the ghost implores Hamlet to comfort her. "But look,

amazement on thy mother sits. / Oh step between her and her fighting soul." Again, he waxes protective of her but implies that she has some reason to be spiritually conflicted.

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive at Elsinore, she tells them that they have been sent for because of the way Hamlet "hath talked of you," and she promises them compensation fit for "a king's remembrance." She exhibits apparent sincerity in her concern for Hamlet, and yet, even after Hamlet has told her what he knows about Claudius, even after he has shared his fears of the trip to England, even after Hamlet has clearly proven that something is rotten in the state of Denmark, she never opposes Claudius to protect Hamlet. Unless, as some critics believe, she drinks the poisoned wine as an act of maternal protectiveness. Does she know the wine is poisoned? When "the Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet" is she deliberately drinking to prevent Hamlet's death?

If Gertrude has overheard Claudius and Laertes plotting, she would know all. If she is in Claudius' confidence, she would be complicit with all his conspiracies. Though Claudius professes love and admiration for Gertrude, he never confides to anyone the extent of their relationship. Gertrude describes her love for Hamlet when she asks him not to return to Wittenberg. When she shares with Ophelia her hope that the young woman would have married her Hamlet, she divulges her wish for his happiness. However, she never declares any kind of emotion for Claudius, either positive or negative.

Ultimately, Gertrude's character remains malleable. In the hands of an astute actor and a clever director, she can come across as either Claudius' co-conspirator or Hamlet's defender. Either interpretation works, if built substantially.

Polonius

Casting Polonius in a demeaning light is a common danger. While he is a blowhard, and he does spout aphorisms that were, even in the 16th century, clichés, his clichés constitute sound advice and his observations prove themselves prophetic.

Polonius may be elderly and demented, but he must have been at least politically adept. He admits that he is not a man of great prestige, and yet he has risen to be counselor to the King. Presumably, he counseled King Hamlet as well.

An actor portraying Polonius should address the question of whether he is a devoted father or a ruthless politician. Does he sacrifice Ophelia to his ambitions and/or his fear of being discarded by the King? Does he send Reynaldo to spy on Laertes because he cares about his son, or is he worried about what Laertes' possible behavior might reflect back on his own

character? Is he more concerned with his position in Denmark than with the welfare of his children? Is he then the victim of his own contrivances?

Ophelia

Ophelia is a difficult role to play because her character, like Gertrude's, is murky. Part of the difficulty is that Shakespeare wrote his female roles for men, and there were always limitations on them that restricted and defined the characterizations devised. In the case of an ingenue like Ophelia, a very young and lovely woman, Shakespeare would have been writing for a boy. The extent to which a boy could grasp subtle nuances might have prevented the playwright from fleshing out the character more fully.

We do know that Ophelia is torn between two contradictory poles. Her father and brother believe that Hamlet would use her, that he would take her virginity and throw it away because she could never be his wife. Her heart has convinced her that Hamlet loved her, though he swears he never did. To her father and brother, Ophelia is the eternal virgin, the vessel of morality whose purpose is to be a dutiful wife and steadfast mother. To Hamlet, she is a sexual object, a corrupt and deceitful lover. With no mother to guide her, she has no way of deciphering the contradictory expectations.

Just like Hamlet, the medieval precept that the father's word is unquestionable governs Ophelia. But her Renaissance sense of romantic love also rules her. How can she be obedient to her father and true to her love? When she lies to Hamlet and tells him that Polonius is home when he is concealed in the room eavesdropping, Ophelia proves she cannot live in both worlds. She has chosen one, and her choice seals her fate.

The dilemma also forces her into madness. She has no way to reconcile the contradictory selves her men demand that she be and still retain an equilibrium. Ophelia's desperation literally drives her crazy, and she has no means with which to heal herself.

Laertes

Hamlet and Laertes presumably grew up together, fencing with one another and confiding in one another. Then Hamlet went away to Wittenberg and Laertes to Paris, parting the friendship. Still, Hamlet refers to Laertes as "a very noble youth."

Hamlet recognizes what Shakespeare has made abundantly clear throughout the play, that Laertes is Hamlet's foil. He mirrors Hamlet but behaves in the opposite manner. Where Hamlet is verbal, Laertes is physical; where Hamlet broods, Laertes blusters. Laertes' love for Ophelia and duty to Polonius drive him to passionate action, while Hamlet's love for Gertrude and duty to King Hamlet drive him to

passionate inaction. In Laertes resides the picture of what Hamlet could be if the sound of his own words did not mesmerize him.

Horatio

Horatio epitomizes the faithful friend. He only questions Hamlet's judgment once, when Hamlet confides the fates of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Otherwise, Horatio supports every rash decision Hamlet makes.

Horatio is the man Hamlet wants to be. He is intelligent, but not driven by his intellectual creativity. Horatio seems to accept the world as it is handed to him where Hamlet is driven by his impulse question all apparent truths. (What T.S. Eliot calls "the energy to murder and create" in "The Lovesong J. Alfred Prufrock," a poem in which the title character, paralyzed by words and feelings protests, "I will not be Prince Hamlet.") Marcellus and Bernardo Marcellus and Barnardo admire Horatio's intellect enough to want his opinion about the ghost, but no one accuses Horatio of talking or thinking too much. He can follow Hamlet's elaborate wordplays, but he is not inclined to engage in any. He knows enough to value what ignorance he has that can protect him from political ruin, but neither ambition nor deceit determines his loyalties.

Horatio loves Hamlet so much that he would rather impale himself on his own sword than live on after Hamlet's death. Hamlet passionately demonstrates his own deep love and admiration for Horatio in his request that Horatio tell Hamlet's story. Hamlet trusts his friend enough to leave him the task of finding the words that will divine the truth. For Hamlet, entrusting the task to Horatio declares his love better than expressing that love through any of Hamlet's poetry or philosophy. Action has at last spoken louder than words.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS (SCENEWISE)

Act I: Scene 1

Summary

On a gun platform atop the battlements of Castle Elsinore, Officer Barnardo arrives to relieve sentinel Francisco of his watch. Barnardo challenges Francisco to identify himself first, and the two exchange small talk about the weather. Francisco complains, "For this relief much thanks, 'tis bitter cold. / And I am sick at heart."

Horatio and Marcellus enter and greet Francisco, identifying themselves as loyal Danish subjects, and Francisco exits. Marcellus asks Barnardo if he has seen "this thing," "this apparition" tonight, and Barnardo assures him that he has seen nothing. Marcellus tells Barnardo that he has invited Horatio to see the Ghost himself, as he trusts Horatio to

"approve our eyes and speak to it." Horatio doubts the Ghost will appear, but listens intently as Barnardo prepares to retell the tale of the Ghost's previous visitation.

Before Barnardo can say much, however, the Ghost appears, and Marcellus encourages Horatio to address the spirit. Horatio cannot deny that he, too, sees the Ghost. All three men agree that the Ghost is real; in fact, they recognize it as the "majesty of buried Denmark" — the recently dead King Hamlet. They entreat the Ghost to stay and talk, but it dissolves into the night.

Saying he would not believe had he not seen for himself, Horatio is astounded to have seen the Ghost of King Hamlet dressed in the armor he wore when he conquered old King Fortinbras and defeated the Poles. He finds the king's dress ironic because, at that moment, young Fortinbras — the dead Norwegian king's son and namesake — has just declared war on the Danes, seeking to avenge his father's death and take back the land King Hamlet took from old Fortinbras. Because the Danes are preparing for war against the Norwegians, Barnardo wonders if the Ghost portends doom for the Danes. Horatio shudders, recalling the omens that warned Julius Caesar of his imminent demise.

The Ghost reappears, and Horatio entreats it to stay. The crowing cock trumpets the arrival of morning, however, and Horatio realizes that no erring spirit can stay out in the daylight; they watch the Ghost disappear into the dissolving darkness. Certain that they have seen the Ghost of King Hamlet, they decide to inform Prince Hamlet.

Analysis

Hamlet was written around the year 1600 in the final years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who had been the monarch of England for more than forty years and was then in her late sixties. The prospect of Elizabeth's death and the question of who would succeed her was a subject of grave anxiety at the time, since Elizabeth had no children, and the only person with a legitimate royal claim, James of Scotland, was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and therefore represented a political faction to which Elizabeth was opposed. (When Elizabeth died in 1603, James did inherit the throne, becoming King James I.)

It is no surprise, then, that many of Shakespeare's plays from this period, including Hamlet, concern transfers of power from one monarch to the next. These plays focus particularly on the uncertainties, betrayals, and upheavals that accompany such shifts in power, and the general sense of anxiety and fear that surround them. The situation Shakespeare presents at the beginning of Hamlet is that a strong and beloved king has died, and the throne has been inherited not by his son, as we might expect, but by his

brother. Still grieving the old king, no one knows yet what to expect from the new one, and the guards outside the castle are fearful and suspicious.

The supernatural appearance of the ghost on a chilling, misty night outside Elsinore Castle indicates immediately that something is wrong in Denmark. The ghost serves to enlarge the shadow King Hamlet casts across Denmark, indicating that something about his death has upset the balance of nature. The appearance of the ghost also gives physical form to the fearful anxiety that surrounds the transfer of power after the king's death, seeming to imply that the future of Denmark is a dark and frightening one. Horatio in particular sees the ghost as an ill omen boding violence and turmoil in Denmark's future, comparing it to the supernatural omens that supposedly presaged the assassination of Julius Caesar in ancient Rome (and which Shakespeare had recently represented in *Julius Caesar*). Since Horatio proves to be right, and the appearance of the ghost does presage the later tragedies of the play, the ghost functions as a kind of internal foreshadowing, implying tragedy not only to the audience but to the characters as well.

The scene also introduces the character of Horatio, who, with the exception of the ghost, is the only major character in the scene. Without sacrificing the forward flow of action or breaking the atmosphere of dread, Shakespeare establishes that Horatio is a good-humored man who is also educated, intelligent, and skeptical of supernatural events. Before he sees the ghost, he insists, "Tush, tush, 'twill not appear" (I.i.29). Even after seeing it, he is reluctant to give full credence to stories of magic and mysticism. When Marcellus says that he has heard that the crowing of the cock has the power to dispel evil powers, so that "[n]o fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm," Horatio replies, "So have I heard, and do in part believe it," emphasizing the "in part" (I.i.144-146).

But Horatio is not a blind rationalist, either, and when he sees the ghost, he does not deny its existence—on the contrary, he is overwhelmed with terror. His ability to accept the truth at once even when his predictions have been proved wrong indicates the fundamental trustworthiness of his character. His reaction to the ghost functions to overcome the audience's sense of disbelief, since for a man as skeptical, intelligent, and trustworthy as Horatio to believe in and fear the ghost is far more impressive and convincing than if its only witnesses had been a pair of superstitious watchmen. In this subtle way, Shakespeare uses Horatio to represent the audience's perspective throughout this scene. By overcoming Horatio's skeptical resistance, the ghost gains the audience's suspension of disbelief as well.

Act I, scene ii

The morning after Horatio and the guardsmen see the ghost, King Claudius gives a speech to his courtiers, explaining his recent marriage to Gertrude, his brother's widow and the mother of Prince Hamlet. Claudius says that he mourns his brother but has chosen to balance Denmark's mourning with the delight of his marriage. He mentions that young Fortinbras has written to him, rashly demanding the surrender of the lands King Hamlet won from Fortinbras's father, and dispatches Cornelius and Voltimand with a message for the King of Norway, Fortinbras's elderly uncle.

His speech concluded, Claudius turns to Laertes, the son of the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius. Laertes expresses his desire to return to France, where he was staying before his return to Denmark for Claudius's coronation. Polonius gives his son permission, and Claudius jovially grants Laertes his consent as well.

Turning to Prince Hamlet, Claudius asks why "the clouds still hang" upon him, as Hamlet is still wearing black mourning clothes (I.ii.66). Gertrude urges him to cast off his "nightly colour," but he replies bitterly that his inner sorrow is so great that his dour appearance is merely a poor mirror of it (I.ii.68). Affecting a tone of fatherly advice, Claudius declares that all fathers die, and all sons must lose their fathers. When a son loses a father, he is duty-bound to mourn, but to mourn for too long is unmanly and inappropriate. Claudius urges Hamlet to think of him as a father, reminding the prince that he stands in line to succeed to the throne upon Claudius's death.

With this in mind, Claudius says that he does not wish for Hamlet to return to school at Wittenberg (where he had been studying before his father's death), as Hamlet has asked to do. Gertrude echoes her husband, professing a desire for Hamlet to remain close to her. Hamlet stiffly agrees to obey her. Claudius claims to be so pleased by Hamlet's decision to stay that he will celebrate with festivities and cannon fire, an old custom called "the king's rouse." Ordering Gertrude to follow him, he escorts her from the room, and the court follows.

Alone, Hamlet exclaims that he wishes he could die, that he could evaporate and cease to exist. He wishes bitterly that God had not made suicide a sin. Anguished, he laments his father's death and his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle. He remembers how deeply in love his parents seemed, and he curses the thought that now, not yet two month after his father's death, his mother has married his father's far inferior brother.

O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourn'd longer,—married with mine uncle,
My father's brother; but no more like my father

Than I to Hercules: within a month;
 Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
 Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
 She married:— O, most wicked speed, to post
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

See Important Quotations Explained

Hamlet quiets suddenly as Horatio strides into the room, followed by Marcellus and Bernardo. Horatio was a close friend of Hamlet at the university in Wittenberg, and Hamlet, happy to see him, asks why he has left the school to travel to Denmark. Horatio says that he came to see King Hamlet's funeral, to which Hamlet curtly replies that Horatio came to see his mother's wedding. Horatio agrees that the one followed closely on the heels of the other. He then tells Hamlet that he, Marcellus, and Bernardo have seen what appears to be his father's ghost. Stunned, Hamlet agrees to keep watch with them that night, in the hope that he will be able to speak to the apparition.

Analysis

Having established a dark, ghostly atmosphere in the first scene, Shakespeare devotes the second to the seemingly jovial court of the recently crowned King Claudius. If the area outside the castle is murky with the aura of dread and anxiety, the rooms inside the castle are devoted to an energetic attempt to banish that aura, as the king, the queen, and the courtiers desperately pretend that nothing is out of the ordinary. It is difficult to imagine a more convoluted family dynamic or a more out-of-balance political situation, but Claudius nevertheless preaches an ethic of balance to his courtiers, pledging to sustain and combine the sorrow he feels for the king's death and the joy he feels for his wedding in equal parts.

But despite Claudius's efforts, the merriment of the court seems superficial. This is largely due to the fact that the idea of balance Claudius pledges to follow is unnatural. How is it possible to balance sorrow for a brother's death with happiness for having married a dead brother's wife? Claudius's speech is full of contradictory words, ideas, and phrases, beginning with "Though yet of Hamlet our late brother's death / The memory be green," which combines the idea of death and decay with the idea of greenery, growth, and renewal (I.ii.1–2). He also speaks of "[o]ur sometime sister, now our queen," "defeated joy," "an auspicious and a dropping eye," "mirth in funeral," and "dirge in marriage" (I.ii.8–12). These ideas sit uneasily with one another, and Shakespeare uses this speech to give his audience an uncomfortable first impression of Claudius. The negative impression is furthered when Claudius affects a fatherly role toward the bereaved Hamlet, advising him to stop grieving for his dead

father and adapt to a new life in Denmark. Hamlet obviously does not want Claudius's advice, and Claudius's motives in giving it are thoroughly suspect, since, after all, Hamlet is the man who would have inherited the throne had Claudius not snatched it from him.

The result of all this blatant dishonesty is that this scene portrays as dire a situation in Denmark as the first scene does. Where the first scene illustrated the fear and supernatural danger lurking in Denmark, the second hints at the corruption and weakness of the king and his court. The scene also furthers the idea that Denmark is somehow unsound as a nation, as Claudius declares that Fortinbras makes his battle plans "[h]olding a weak supposal of our worth, / Or thinking by our late dear brother's death / Our state to be disjoint and out of frame" (I.ii.18–20).

Prince Hamlet, devastated by his father's death and betrayed by his mother's marriage, is introduced as the only character who is unwilling to play along with Claudius's gaudy attempt to mimic a healthy royal court. On the one hand, this may suggest that he is the only honest character in the royal court, the only person of high standing whose sensibilities are offended by what has happened in the aftermath of his father's death. On the other hand, it suggests that he is a malcontent, someone who refuses to go along with the rest of the court for the sake of the greater good of stability. In any case, Hamlet already feels, as Marcellus will say later, that "[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.67). We also see that his mother's hasty remarriage has shattered his opinion of womanhood ("Frailty, thy name is woman," he cries out famously in this scene [I.ii.146]), a motif that will develop through his unraveling romantic relationship with Ophelia and his deteriorating relationship with his mother.

His soliloquy about suicide ("O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!" [I.ii.129–130]) ushers in what will be a central idea in the play. The world is painful to live in, but, within the Christian framework of the play, if one commits suicide to end that pain, one damns oneself to eternal suffering in hell. The question of the moral validity of suicide in an unbearably painful world will haunt the rest of the play; it reaches the height of its urgency in the most famous line in all of English literature: "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (III.i.58). In this scene Hamlet mainly focuses on the appalling conditions of life, railing against Claudius's court as "an unweeded garden, / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (I.ii.135–137). Throughout the play, we watch the gradual crumbling of the beliefs on which Hamlet's worldview has been based. Already, in this first soliloquy, religion has failed him, and his warped family situation can offer him no solace.

Act I: Scene 3

Hamlet

Summary

In Polonius' chambers, Laertes prepares to return to school in Paris. He counsels his sister Ophelia to spurn the advances of her suitor, Prince Hamlet. He explains that, to Hamlet, she can never be anything more than a plaything. Hamlet, Laertes tells Ophelia, is of a higher rank than she and cannot choose with whom he will spend his life. To protect her heart and to safeguard her honor, Laertes asserts that Ophelia should reject Prince Hamlet before he deflowers her. Ophelia jokingly chides her brother to be careful lest he be one of those "libertines" who "recks not his own rede" (does not take his own advice).

Polonius enters, and offers Laertes lengthy advice on how to live in Paris; he spouts a string of aphoristic clichés enumerating the shoulds and shouldn'ts of a young man's life. Laertes agrees, telling Polonius that he really must be going, and reminding Ophelia of his directive to her. She promises to take his advice and to lock it safely in her heart. Polonius asks Ophelia what she and Laertes were discussing, and she tells him that Laertes advised her about Prince Hamlet. Polonius launches into his own diatribe on the subject, saying that Hamlet is a red-blooded male who wants her for only one purpose and that she must spurn his advances. Ophelia promises to obey her father and break off her relationship with the Prince.

Analysis

Laertes offers his overprotective advice genuinely, but his tone is that of a prepared speech, and he shows neither real awareness of nor consideration for, Ophelia's feelings. In fact, he never consults her but rather speaks at her in metaphorical posturing that underscores her feminine inferiority. Shakespeare's choice of blank verse over iambic pentameter for Laertes' speech serves as a stage direction for the actor playing the role. This character is not a man of deep thought or fancy language but rather a pragmatist — a careful courtier more concerned with being correct than with emotional depth. Shakespeare aptly underscores the fact that Laertes is the perfect foil for Hamlet. His rehearsed, political-sounding speech patterns oppose Hamlet's emotional, flowery, and heart-heavy ruminations. He has memorized his speech as if it were taken from his schoolboy copybook, and he shows that he is vain and ordinary with limited intellectual capabilities. This scene begins to reveal how Laertes might be similar to Hamlet — and decidedly different.

Polonius lives in a world of show. His instructions in social etiquette may have ethical substance but lack practical soundness for Laertes. When he speaks to Ophelia, he treats her the way one would expect a man of his time and stature to treat a daughter, as property. A woman should bring

honor and fortune to her family, and the image Ophelia projects for him very much concerns Polonius. He is sure that Hamlet would never choose Ophelia to wife. Hence, he amuses himself with off-color allusions to Hamlet's intentions and dashes any hopes she might have that her father would help her make a match. Through Polonius and Laertes, Shakespeare introduces another motif of the play: that self-indulgence and vanity often obscure familial devotion.

Ophelia's dilemma is salient in this scene. Both Laertes and Polonius tell her that the man that she loves is using her, that he will discard her, and that she should not trust her own heart. She is a dutiful daughter. Because her father has taught her to be seen and not heard, she listens and promises to honor the men's wishes. No choice remains to her now but to break off all relations with Hamlet. But what if they have already consummated their love? What if he has already sworn to her that he loves her and would never forsake her? Whom should she believe? Though Shakespeare tells us nothing to help us see into her heart, the actress playing Ophelia must know what she feels about Hamlet. Most critics agree that Ophelia and Hamlet have already been intimate, that Ophelia is deeply smitten with true love for the Prince, and that her father and brother's words hurt her deeply. Were this conjecture not true, Ophelia's motivation for her subsequent actions would be questionable.

Act I: Scene 4

Summary

In accordance with their plan, Horatio and Marcellus meet Hamlet on the battlements of the castle. A trumpet sounds, and the Prince bitterly comments on the King's propensity for wine and revelry. He disapproves of this behavior as it reflects badly on all Danes and gives them a reputation for drunkenness that makes them the butt of jokes. He points out that people often judge a man of great stature by his smallest "mole of nature" and not by his strength. Before the discussion can go further, Horatio notices the Ghost's arrival.

Despite his uncertainty as to whether the Ghost "airs from heaven or blasts from hell," or whether the Ghost harbors "wicked or charitable" intentions, Hamlet immediately identifies the apparition as his father. He empowers the Ghost to explain the purpose of his visit and charges the spirit to speak and make things clear. The Ghost beckons Hamlet to follow, and, despite the entreaties of his comrades to beware, Hamlet follows the spirit into the night.

Analysis

Again Hamlet reveals his preoccupation with the disparity between appearance and reality. Claudius appears to be a powerful man, yet harbors a decided weakness for wine and revelry. Thus, says Hamlet, Claudius

makes all Danes seem drunkards to their critics and attracts disrespect from both allies and enemies. Just as an individual's weaknesses can overshadow all virtue, so one "swinish" man, especially a swinish leader, can overshadow all virtuous compatriots. Hamlet completes his critique of the new king/satyr the very moment before the old king, the great Hyperion himself, appears. Claudius' evil habits garner more suspicions than the Ghost's motives. The true evil lies in the heart of the successor, and the degeneracy of the court reflects the necessary outcome of foul deeds.

Hamlet's speech about Claudius' carousing is important on a number of levels. Critics refer to this speech as the "dram of evil" speech because Hamlet ends it by saying, "The dram of evil / Doth all the noble substance of a doubt, / To his own scandal." In this speech, Hamlet indicts the Danish people, including himself — he is, after all, "to the manner born" — for their hedonism. Large appetites for wine and revelry indicate the kind of dissipation that weakens cultures and usurps nations. The fact that "swinish" behavior characterizes the Danish collective reputation embarrasses Hamlet.

Critics have viewed *Hamlet* as a latter-day morality play in which Hamlet, a sort of Renaissance Everyman, must navigate through moral depravity toward the light of reason and good deeds to find his way to righteousness. His sense of honor drives him to do the right thing, but the right thing actually contradicts God's law. Hamlet is torn between right and right rather than right and wrong. Hamlet's definition of the subjective "right" differs drastically from Claudius' definition. As A.C. Bradley points out, Hamlet cares for nothing so much as he cares for "human worth," and Hamlet has an "aversion to evil." In fact, Bradley suggests that we might consider the play a "tragedy of moral idealism as much as a tragedy of reflection."

Act I: Scene 5

Summary

Back on the parapet — the outer walls of Castle Elsinore — Hamlet follows the Ghost, who admits that he is the spirit of King Hamlet and tells his son to hear him out. His time is short before he must return to Purgatory. He cannot share any of the secrets of life in Purgatory, but he has a tale of woe he desperately needs to pass on to his son. Before he will give Hamlet any details, however, he charges the Prince to avenge his murder. The words of the Ghost horrify Hamlet, for they confirm his fears. Hurrying because he can "scent the morning," King Hamlet tells his son that Claudius seduced his seemingly virtuous queen, and then crept to where his brother lay napping and poured a lethal poison in King Hamlet's ear. The poison quickly curdled King Hamlet's blood, robbing him of both his life and the opportunity for absolution.

The Ghost tells Hamlet to "Remember me," but only after he instructs him to leave Gertrude alone. So Hamlet must wrest retribution only from Claudius. The Ghost exits, leaving Hamlet incensed. Hamlet answers the worried calls of Horatio and Marcellus, telling them nothing specific but demanding that they both take an oath to tell no one what they have seen and heard. In confidence, Hamlet tells Horatio that he will pretend to be mad so that he may spy on his mother and uncle. After Horatio has sworn allegiance, Hamlet bids the departed Ghost to rest and then curses his fate before exiting with the other men.

Analysis

King Hamlet's ghost introduces himself in a way that most certainly evoked the sympathy of the Elizabethan audience. He tells Hamlet that his brother robbed him of everything he was, all that he owned, including his everlasting soul. In the same way that the Bible engenders sympathy for Abel and condemns Cain for the fratricide, Shakespeare favors the murdered brother.

Hamlet is quick to believe the Ghost because the spirit's words confirm his worst fear: Claudius murdered King Hamlet. For the Elizabethan/Jacobean audience who attended the first performances of *Hamlet*, murder of a king was in itself cause for alarm. Consider that the English people believed that their monarchs ruled by Divine Right, that God Himself appointed them to rule the land. The Church of England went so far as to attribute to the monarch the highest order of executive power in the church as well. In all ways, the English monarch represented God on earth. King Hamlet's murder makes the Ghost a most sympathetic figure to Shakespeare's audiences. No one would have questioned the existence of that Ghost, and few would have believed — even for a moment, as Hamlet does — that the Ghost could be a devil.

The fact that his mother's lover is also her husband's murderer exacerbates Gertrude's crime of incest. Hamlet is bereft of choice. He may have an aversion to violence, and he may live by strict Christian principles, but he must avenge his father's honor. Hamlet sees no way to honor his father except by killing Claudius. Doubly impelled by his father's orders and by tradition, Hamlet becomes a prisoner of his obligation for revenge.

The major conflict here is obvious. Christianity negated the Hebraic notion of "an eye for an eye"; the notion seemed barbaric to the Renaissance population. Further, the medieval custom of a blood feud wherein the closest relative of a murdered man must avenge the death had become passé. Society more often supported the notion of mercy and forgiveness, concepts Shakespeare explored in an earlier play, *Merchant of Venice*. In *Merchant*, the audience despises the antagonist precisely because he insists on a blood feud. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare asks the audience to

empathize with Hamlet's desire for redress. Hamlet is a sympathetic character precisely because the notion of revenge drives him while his Christian morality and inclination simultaneously exhort him to be charitable.

The major issues of the play are now out in the open and conjoined: By marrying Claudius, Gertrude has committed incest and has failed to carry out her duties to her slain husband. In Claudius, because of his duplicity, these sins are unforgivable. How his people perceive him concerns Claudius more than making things right with Hamlet, Gertrude, or the people of Denmark. On the other hand, Gertrude is a woman who has been led by her weakness and frailty to follow the charismatic devil of a king to his bed.

Hamlet swears Horatio and Marcellus to secrecy and garners further support from his audience. His genuine leadership capability and honest friendship for Horatio inspire great loyalty from the two men, and that loyalty is clearly Hamlet's earned reward for his strength of character.

Hamlet tells Horatio that he plans to feign madness before the King and the court. The madness will render him invisible so that he might observe and discern the best way and time for his revenge. Hamlet's meaning here remains ambiguous. Is his madness a mask? A costume? A lie? The answer to this question provides the key to Hamlet's characterization, and an actor playing the role must decide what that "putting on" signifies. In some portrayals, Hamlet pretends to be mad; in others, while he may believe he is pretending, he is quite mad. In still others, Hamlet's madness grows as he develops. In others again, Hamlet is a child who can't grow up and accept the burdens of adulthood, which include his duties to his slain father. Shakespeare seems to have deliberately left Hamlet's ruse ambiguous enough so that the performances of the role may vary.

Act II: Scene 1

Summary

Polonius meets with his sly servant Reynaldo and tells him to go to Paris and spy on Laertes. He charges the servant to find any Danes living in Paris and to question them as to Laertes' whereabouts and reputation. Polonius even goes so far as to give Reynaldo permission to use lies to entrap Laertes. After Reynaldo exits in pursuit of his mission, Ophelia enters and tells Polonius that she has been horrified by the Prince. Hamlet came to her in her sewing room with his jacket askew and unfastened, and wearing no hat; his stockings were filthy and unfastened, drooping at his ankles; and he was pale and trembling, looking "piteous." Polonius diagnoses Hamlet's condition as madness due to his love of Ophelia, brought about because Ophelia obeyed her father and spurned Hamlet's advances. Polonius decides to take his information to the king.

Analysis

Many critics, including T.S. Eliot, believe this scene is irrelevant to the play. However, the scene actually mirrors themes that are central to the play's purpose. Appearance and reality are disparate entities that contradict one another.

In Act II, Scene 1, the apparently caring, nurturing father Polonius hires the shady Reynaldo (The Fox) to spy on Laertes. Polonius tells Reynaldo that he suspects the worst of Laertes and wants reports of all his dirtiest deeds gleaned from the most deceptive spying. He tells Reynaldo to look into Laertes' life in Paris even if he needs to accuse his son falsely — "What forgeries you please." Polonius will pay Reynaldo to discredit Laertes with negative reports — both real and imagined — in order to teach his son the importance of reputation. The duplicity of this encounter foreshadows the behavior that will characterize Polonius throughout the play.

In the second part of the scene, Ophelia enters and reports that Hamlet has been acting incomprehensibly. She describes with painter's language the way Hamlet is attired:

Lord Hamlet with his doublet unbraced
 No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
 Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle
 Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
 And with a look so piteous in purport
 As if he had been loosèd out of hell
 To speak of horrors — he comes before me.

The description is one that Polonius immediately recognizes — "Mad for thy love?" — because Hamlet's appearance embodies the contemporary stereotype of the spurned lover, indicating that his main objective in visiting Ophelia is to use Ophelia to convince others that his insanity was not due to any mysterious unknown cause, but to this disappointment, and so to allay the suspicions of the King. Thus, Ophelia's purpose in this scene seems to be to give credence to the notion that Hamlet never loved Ophelia at all, but merely used her. If so, then Hamlet is as guilty of deceptiveness as are those he judges.

Act II: Scene 2

Summary

The King and Queen enter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and others. King Claudius has summoned Hamlet's two school chums to Elsinore to have them spy on the Prince and report back to Claudius, recounting Hamlet's every move. The Queen promises them handsome compensation for their spying and assures them that Hamlet's own good requires the service. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree. The two leave to

seek Prince Hamlet, and the King and Queen turn their attention to Polonius, who claims to have the answer to Prince Hamlet's affliction. He promises to elaborate further after Claudius receives his newly arrived ambassadors from Norway.

When Polonius exits, Gertrude scoffs at the old man's intimations. She remains certain that Hamlet's woes are caused by the old king's death and her hasty remarriage. Polonius returns with Ambassadors Voltemand and Cornelius. They bring news from Norway that the old and ailing king, brother to the slain King Fortinbras, has managed to restrain his nephew, young Fortinbras, from invading Denmark. In return, however, the old man asks that Denmark provide some assistance in Fortinbras' campaign against Poland — that Claudius allow Fortinbras to pass through Denmark on his way to Poland.

As soon as the ambassadors leave, Polonius launches into an elaborate discussion on the meaning of life and duty, promising to be brief and then launching into further wordiness. Finally, Polonius asserts that Hamlet is mad. Having no patience for Polonius, Gertrude admonishes him. Again promising to be less loquacious, Polonius makes showy, wavy motions with his arms and then reads a letter he confiscated from his daughter, written in the Prince's hand. Polonius criticizes the highly dramatic, artificial prose with random rhymes in which Hamlet has written the note and tells Claudius and Gertrude that he has forbidden Ophelia to accept any advances from the Prince. That is the order, Polonius claims, that has led poor Hamlet into madness.

Polonius then suggests that he and Claudius hide themselves behind a needlework wall hanging so they can eavesdrop on the couple when Ophelia meets with Hamlet to return his love gifts. Claudius agrees, just as Hamlet enters reading. Polonius asks the King and Queen to leave them so that he may speak to Hamlet himself.

In the encounter that follows between Hamlet and Polonius, Hamlet warns Polonius to watch his daughter carefully and then toys with Polonius' limited wit. The exchange convinces Polonius that Hamlet is lovesick when, in actuality, Hamlet's responses have done little but ridicule Polonius. Polonius leaves, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter. Hamlet greets them as his "excellent good friends" and asks why they have come to his prison. They grouse at his choice of words, but he tells them, "Denmark's a prison." Rosencrantz wittily replies, "Then is the world one." Hamlet breaks through his friends' resistance, and the two finally admit that the King and Queen sent them to observe Hamlet and provide them with details of his behavior. Hamlet's melancholy then erupts in a blank verse complaint that he has lately "lost all my mirth." He laments that a foul and sickening fog now besmirches the heavens, which he once saw as a

canopy "fretted with golden fire." Hamlet then indicts the very nature of mankind.

Rosencrantz seizes the opportunity to announce the arrival of the players, and Hamlet's mood shifts yet again. Ecstatic at the opportunity for diversion, Hamlet asks who the players are and why they are on the road. Rosencrantz answers that they are on the road because a company of child actors has usurped the London stage. Hamlet responds by saying that he welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as he welcomes the actors and hopes he can be a worthy host. Polonius enters to announce the arrival of the players.

When the players enter, Hamlet requests that the lead player perform a speech from Virgil's *Aeneid* in which Aeneas tells Queen Dido the story of Phryrus, whose father Achilles was killed at Rome. The player performs the speech and moves himself to tears over Hecuba's horror at seeing her husband dismembered. Hamlet asks Polonius to see to the players' lodging, and, as soon as the Lord Chamberlain has left, he tells the small group of players remaining on-stage his plans for their performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*. He tells them that he will provide them with twelve to sixteen original lines that he wants them to add to the play. They agree, and they leave.

Hamlet then reveals his real intentions for *The Murder of Gonzago*. The players will perform the play with an enhanced scene, which will enact the murder the Ghost has described. Hamlet hopes that seeing his crime reenacted in front of the assembled audience will make Claudius act guilty and reveal that he murdered King Hamlet. Such an admission will prove to Hamlet, once and for all, that the Ghost is real and not simply a devil or the figment of his imagination.

Analysis

Gertrude implies in her opening words to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that she and Claudius have invited the pair to Denmark for Hamlet's benefit. Although Claudius may have ulterior motives, Gertrude is the person who insisted on contacting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and bringing them to court because of the friendship and respect that Hamlet bears for them. At this point in the play, one can reasonably assume that both Claudius and Gertrude had Hamlet's welfare in mind when they summoned the two Germans to court.

Claudius, however, is once again aware that all eyes are on him as he solicitously welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and expresses his grave concern for "Hamlet's transformation." Although Shakespeare gives no suggestion that Claudius had anything but Hamlet's welfare in mind when he summoned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to court, the reader knows that Claudius does nothing without self-promotion in mind. His

suggestion that they report back any affliction of Hamlet's echoes Polonius' instructions to Reynaldo in Scene 1 regarding Laertes. Both Polonius and Claudius exhibit distrust and deception when dealing with their heirs. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern heartily agree to do the King's and Queen's bidding, Gertrude promises they will receive "such thanks / As fits a king's remembrance." Claudius has successfully deceived Gertrude as well, convincing her that he loves Prince Hamlet.

When Polonius ushers in Cornelius and Voltemand — Claudius' ambassadors to Norway — the old man entices the King with a promise that he knows something about the Lord Hamlet that Gertrude and Claudius cannot know. He refuses to divulge any information until after the ambassadors have left, but he creates excitement over his "find." Gertrude, motivated only by her deep, even overprotective, love for her son, remains skeptical about Polonius' ability to help.

The ambassadors bring good news for Claudius, which cheers the King, and he plans a celebratory party. Shakespeare presents here another mirror. Young Fortinbras, a dutiful nephew whose uncle has ascended to the throne that might have been his, obeys his uncle/sovereign's request to show Denmark leniency. Claudius knows of no reason that his nephew/subject would be less cooperative or less charitable, and he is more than willing to toy with Hamlet's good nature.

Gertrude expresses her concern for and sensitivity toward Hamlet. She fully understands the trauma he has experienced in returning to Denmark to find his world shattered and reordered. Polonius' plan to spy on Hamlet, to trap him, as it were, by exposing a private letter the old man has impounded from his daughter, does not please Gertrude. Her son's welfare concerns her far more than affairs of state. However, Gertrude agrees to Polonius' plan because it affords her the hope that Hamlet's madness merely results from unrequited love, which can be easily remedied. The old man clearly agitates Gertrude, who urges him to disclose something substantive: "More matter and less art." However, Polonius' report finally wins her over, and she agrees to Polonius' plan to spy on Hamlet. Another deception is premeditated and prearranged, another of Polonius' "springes to catch woodcocks."

That both Gertrude and Ophelia are complicit with the entrapment is a key to Hamlet's distrust of women and of his inability to allow himself to love either of them. Hamlet enters in his state of apparent madness. Yet, mad with despair as he may seem on the surface, Hamlet remains sharp enough to volley artfully with words that confound Polonius' limited wit. Hamlet calls the old man a fishmonger, a term rife with double entendre. Because "fish" was an off-color allusion to women, "fish sellers" were those who sold women's favors — in other words, pimps.

Hamlet demonstrates his acute sense of wordplay with his sad cynicism on the subject of honesty. "To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked in ten thousand." But he clearly convinces Polonius that he is not rational. "How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of." Then again, as soon as Polonius exits, Hamlet reveals his true level of reason: "These tedious fools." He understands that Polonius is not the only old man he needs to worry about.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern return, and Hamlet elucidates his astuteness once more. He manipulates his "excellent good friends" into admitting they have been sent for. He calls fortune a whore, suggesting that one can buy luck and fate . . . like friendship. He proves that he understands the duplicitous nature of their visit. He further clarifies his presence of mind through his lucid discourse on the nature of dreams and the paradox of human existence.

Prison imagery surrounds this scene. "Denmark's a prison," he says. In answer to Rosencrantz's retort that "then the world must be one," Hamlet assents but asserts that Denmark is "One o' the worst." The brooding clarity with which Hamlet perceives his predicament reminds us that he has announced that he will wear an antic disposition — that he is faking his madness.

When Polonius announces the arrival of the players and Hamlet again plays with what he perceives as Polonius' meager intelligence, however, Polonius again concludes that Ophelia's rejection is the cause of Hamlet's madness.

After the player's rendition of Hecuba's horror, Hamlet expounds to himself on the crux of his dilemma. He compares himself to an actor playing out the drama of his own life, but he cannot find the motivation to move beyond his immobilized state of melancholy. He is stuck in words, in the idea of action, terrified to move forward. The actor playacting as Phryrus, a fictional character, is moved to kill his father's killer; the actor relating a fairytale about a woman's woes is capable of real emotion. Hamlet is an actor prompted by heaven and hell to seek revenge for his murdered father but is unschooled in his art and hesitates for fear of the consequences. His judgmental conscience stifles his emotions. He cannot sympathize with Gertrude or follow the Ghost's instructions to defend her honor because his fears blind him. His incessant pandering to words emasculates him. "That I . . . must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words." But because he is a man of words, he uses first the words of the play in his plan to strike at the king.

Hamlet ends the scene by revealing his plan to entrap the King by manipulating the play to force the King's conscience to incriminate him.

This time the premeditated duplicity belongs to Hamlet. Surrounded by false friends and dubious love, Hamlet recognizes an opportunity to use the honest deception of the stage to illuminate the truth.

Act III: Scene 1

Summary

The King and Queen enter with Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Polonius, Ophelia, and members of the court. Claudius questions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Hamlet's madness, asking if they have found a reason for Hamlet's behavior. Rosencrantz answers that the Prince has admitted to being distracted but will not say from what. Guildenstern says that Hamlet has been crafty in disguising his motivations. The two report that Hamlet is very excited about the play to be presented, and Claudius asks them to encourage him in this regard. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave.

Claudius orders Gertrude to leave so that he and Polonius can spy on Hamlet, who has an imminent meeting with Ophelia. Ophelia enters, and the Queen, in a moment of maternal affection, tells Ophelia that she hopes that Hamlet and Ophelia will patch up their broken romance so that Hamlet can get on with his life. Gertrude exits. Polonius greets Ophelia and instructs her to pretend to read a book so that her being alone will not seem unusual to Hamlet. Ophelia complies and waits with a book while the two men hide. Hamlet enters, speaking his "To be or not to be" soliloquy. He ponders the nature of being and nothingness, and then notices Ophelia reading. Hamlet, assuming that she is reading prayers, asks her to pray for him. She tells him she wishes to return to him gifts he has given her. He responds that he has given her no gifts. She insists that he did give her gifts, and she claims that he gave the gifts to her with words that made them seem symbols of great love. Again he denies having given her the gifts at all and further denies having ever loved her. He questions her honesty and, in response to her bewilderment, tells her that all men are untrustworthy knaves and that she would be better off in a nunnery.

To Ophelia's further consternation, Hamlet then abruptly demands that she disclose the current whereabouts of her father. She lies and says that he is at home. Enraged, Hamlet curses her, predicting a disaster for her dowry. He tells her again to go to a nunnery. As Ophelia frets over his apparently fled sanity, he says that he knows that women are two faced and cannot be trusted; they all deserve to be cast aside. Then he leaves.

Left alone, Ophelia bemoans what she considers to be Hamlet's descent into complete insanity. Claudius and Polonius join her and assess what they have overheard and seen. The King doubts that love has ruined Hamlet's mind; he tells Polonius that he will send Hamlet to England. Polonius, still convinced that love afflicts Hamlet, urges Claudius to make

one more attempt to ferret out a satisfying reason for Hamlet's behavior. He tells the King to send Hamlet to Gertrude's quarters later that evening. There, while Polonius hides behind the arras, Gertrude should attempt to cajole Hamlet into revealing his innermost thoughts with Polonius as witness. Claudius agrees.

Analysis

Claudius' entrance speech reveals two very significant aspects of his character: (1) that he is aware of the growing threat Hamlet poses for him, and (2) that he is absolutely in control and capable of decisive action. He provides a stark contrast to Hamlet, who becomes entirely incapacitated by the very idea of action. The more Claudius knows, the more he calculates and acts; the more Hamlet knows, the more he thinks and bandies words. Hamlet's "turbulent lunacy" places them both in danger.

The characters enact two more premeditated entrapments. First, Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to continue their spying. Second, Polonius and Claudius hatch their plot to have Ophelia stage a confrontation in which Hamlet will reveal himself to Ophelia while Claudius and Polonius spy.

Claudius appears to care deeply about his tortured nephew but confesses his guilty conscience in an aside. Claudius gradually reveals the depth of his criminality and at the same time engenders sympathy — the paradox of evil — by exposing his human fallibility. He sees his guilt in Polonius' charge that they could sugarcoat the devil. "Oh, 'tis too true," says Claudius. "How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!" Even a whore can look innocent when painted, and so his ugly deed looks honorable when clouded by pretty words. Still he feels the weight of his sin. Claudius presents a formidable foe for Hamlet. Both men have now revealed their cunning and sensitive comprehension of the human condition. They are evenly matched except that Claudius has the advantage of political power — or the moment.

In this scene, Gertrude remains as the Ghost had described her the loving mother caught in Claudius' web. She asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern whether they've tried to amuse her melancholy son, and she tells Ophelia she truly hopes the young woman's virtues can bring Hamlet back to his senses. Ophelia doesn't answer the Queen, and the audience can only surmise that Gertrude has added fuel to the fire of the young girl's consternation.

Hamlet enters, brooding "To be or not to be." In *The Story of English*, Robert MacNeil writes, "When Hamlet says 'To be or not to be: that is the question,' he has summarized in one sentence all that follows." Many scholars consider this speech to be one of several existential manifestos in *Hamlet*. (Existentialism professes that the past and future

are intangible; the present is all that humans can be sure of. For humans, being — what IS — is the only truth; everything else is nothing.)

In this soliloquy, Hamlet explores the ideas of being and nothingness by asserting a basic premise: We are born, we live, and we die. Because no one has returned from death to report, we remain ignorant of what death portends. Hence, Hamlet's dilemma encapsulates several universal human questions: Do we try to affect our fate? Do we take action in the face of great sorrow, or do we merely wallow in the suffering? Can we end our troubles by opposing them? How do we know? What is the nature of death? Do we sleep in death, or do we cease to sleep, thereby finding no rest at all?

Hamlet hopes that death is nothingness, that death will "end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to," that death will end thinking, knowing, and remembering. But he fears that, in death, he will be haunted interminably by bad dreams of life itself, by dreams heavy with the memory of fear and pain. Ultimately, he says, that's why humans dread death. We fear that our consciences will torment us forever. Thus, human beings choose life, with its torment and burdens, chiefly to avoid death, the great unknown. However, death is, like life, inescapable, and Hamlet curses his luck for having been born at all.

Hamlet's dilemma underlies the entire soliloquy. If he kills Claudius, he will assuredly be killed himself. Hamlet is not sure he is ready for death; life is all he knows, and he fears the unknown. Further, he is not yet ready to take responsibility for sending another human being into the throes of death. He understands his duty to avenge the murder that is now disclosed, and he accepts responsibility for the Ghost's torment, but he knows that by killing Claudius he could be consigning himself to his father's fate for all eternity. Hamlet ends his reverie when he sees Ophelia enter, engrossed in her book. He entreats her to remember him in her prayers. His words startle her, and she responds by inquiring after his health. Immediately, she recovers and launches into her assigned speech:

My lord, I have remembrances of yours

That I have longèd long to redeliver.

I pray you now receive them.

Aware that they are being watched, Hamlet stages his own response and argues that he gave her nothing and that he has never loved her. He tells her to go to a nunnery, assaulting her with another double entendre insult. In the Protestant Elizabethan world, people used the word "nunnery" as a euphemism for "brothel." Knowing that she is working for her father and Claudius, Hamlet accuses Ophelia of prostitution. Hamlet now asks a question on which turns the entire remaining action of the play: "Where is your father?" He earlier asked her, "Are you honest? Are you fair?" To which she gave no direct reply. Now he asks her where her father

is, knowing full well that he is in the room. She lies, "At home, my lord." Hamlet flies into a rage. He calls her two-faced and accuses her and all women of painting a false face. His accusations leave her aghast and certain that his madness is complete and completely destructive.

Ophelia's response to Hamlet's question serves as the force that propels Hamlet's story to its tragic ends. If Ophelia had answered truthfully, if she had disclosed her father's whereabouts, if she had allied herself with Hamlet rather than with Claudius, if she had truly believed in her love for Hamlet, Ophelia might have saved Hamlet from his burden. The play could have been a romance rather than a tragedy. However, by confirming his belief in women's basic dishonesty — "frailty thy name is woman" — Ophelia seals her fate and Hamlet's at the same time.

Claudius and Polonius emerge from hiding, astounded. Claudius still finds Polonius' case for Hamlet's love of Ophelia dubious. Furthermore, Claudius questions Hamlet's madness. A master of deception, Claudius suspects that Hamlet is not as he seems and, as such, is a danger. He hatches his plan to exile the Prince to England. Perhaps to save Hamlet or perhaps to buy favor with the Queen, Polonius suggests yet another trap. Send Hamlet to see Gertrude, and instruct her to beg Hamlet to leave well enough alone. Polonius will spy as Hamlet confides in his mother. The old man expects that Hamlet will confess his love for Ophelia. For reasons he does not disclose, Claudius agrees to the plan. Hamlet knows that his elders are ganging up on him. He is furious and skittish, and his judgment is entirely impaired. Polonius' plot cannot help but backfire.

Act III: Scene 2

Summary

Hamlet meets with the actors and instructs them as to the nature of proper acting. He tells them not to overact, and not to use large gestures. He wishes them to be honest; he asks them to mirror nature, to be entirely realistic in their portrayals. Polonius enters and announces the arrival of the King and Queen to hear the play.

While the court assembles for the performance, Hamlet explains to Horatio how the play will help prove the Ghost's honesty and reveal Claudius' perfidy. He asks Horatio to watch the King and note his reaction to a specific speech in *Murder of Gonzago*. If the play does not reveal Claudius as the killer, Hamlet promises Horatio that he will admit to having seen a "damned ghost" rather than the honest spirit of his late father. Horatio, Hamlet's faithful friend, assures his Prince that he will follow Hamlet's instructions to the letter.

As the courtiers enter the hall, Claudius greets his nephew and asks how Hamlet is, and Hamlet gives a cryptic response. Then Hamlet and Polonius exchange a few words, and Polonius brags about having been

murdered by Brutus when he played Julius Caesar in his student days. Hamlet derides Polonius, but Gertrude interrupts to invite her son to sit beside her. Hamlet chooses instead to lie down at Ophelia's feet. He converses a bit with Ophelia before the dumb show — a pantomime — begins, and she mistakes his manic behavior for merriness. The dumb show mimes the following: A man murders a king while he is sleeping in his garden, and his loving wife, initially inconsolable over the king's death, marries the usurper, who has crowned himself king.

When the dumb show ends, the players perform the actual play, which depicts the same plot as the pantomime. An intermission follows the Player Queen's declaration that she will never remarry should the Player King die. Hamlet seizes the moment to ask Gertrude what she thinks of the play, and Gertrude answers that she is enjoying the play but that the "Lady doth protest too much."

Claudius asks Hamlet for the play's title, to which Hamlet replies, *The Mousetrap*. He says that the play presents the true story of a murder carried out in Vienna. He explains the action of the play, and Ophelia congratulates Hamlet for his story-telling skill. Hamlet makes a crude pun, suggesting that he could interpret the actions of Ophelia and her lover if he could watch them. Ophelia accuses him of being keen (cruel), and Hamlet responds with another sexual innuendo. Hearing the word keen to mean sexually eager, he tells her she would have to work hard to relieve his sexual urges. Ophelia laughs that he is wittier than she, but more indecent. Hamlet says that women take their husbands for better or worse but then they deceive them.

As Lucianus, the Player King's nephew, pours poison in the ears of the sleeping Player King, Hamlet explains that the murderer will presently win the love of the dead Player King's widow. Claudius rises and calls for lights to be lit. Polonius repeats the order for the lights and stops the play. The King and his court exit, leaving Hamlet and Horatio to debrief. The two agree that the King's reaction implicates him in the murder of King Hamlet, and Hamlet says he is now convinced of the Ghost's trustworthiness.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter and tell him that the King is displeased and the Queen wants Hamlet to join her in her quarters. Hamlet promises to obey. When a Player enters carrying a recorder, Hamlet seizes the opportunity to make an off-color allusion to Guildenstern's manhood and to chide him for being manipulative. Polonius enters and instructs Hamlet to visit his mother. Hamlet toys with Polonius, pretending to see shapes that do not exist, and then he asks that everyone leave him alone.

Hamlet observes that the dark time of night has come, when spirits and goblins rise from hell to spread their "Contagion to this world."

Incensed by the hour and the events of the evening, Hamlet claims that he is ready to perform the task that duty demands — to "be cruel." First he will go to his mother and rebuke her, but he will not harm her. He then chides himself because his words are at war with his soul.

Analysis

Critics traditionally regard Scene 2 as more of a glimpse into Shakespeare's theatrical world than insight into *Hamlet*. Indeed, the first 50 lines do relate how Shakespeare interpreted an actor's job, and what he expected of his actors. We know that he advocated a natural style of acting rather than the declamatory style — a style of acting in which players use large gestures such as "sawing the air" and exaggerated motion in conjunction with consistently loud line readings. We also know that he advocated that actors take their direction from the script.

In addition to a primer on acting, however, Scene 2 reveals a great deal about Hamlet's psycho-emotional makeup. Still imprisoned by words and surrounded by staging, acting, and seeming, Hamlet now directs his own world, if only for a moment. Ensuring that the play be "as 't were the mirror up to nature" is critical so that Claudius will not miss seeing his own reflection in the Player King's murderous nephew. Were the actors to fail to "suit the actor to the word," were they "too tame" or too cruel, then Claudius might dismiss the tragedy as mere melodrama. The "whirlwind of passion" would negate true feeling, and Claudius' conscience would miss its examination.

Hamlet's instructions to the actors also serve to demonstrate how well Hamlet is prepared to play his role, to put on his antic disposition. Hamlet clearly possesses an actor's sensibility and understands that, in order to sell a performance an actor must become his role. This insight into Hamlet's psyche may provide one answer to the question that people most often raise concerning Hamlet's character: Is he truly mad, or is he truly acting? This scene confirms the possibility that Hamlet represents an actor who plays his role so well that he loses himself in the role and becomes what he pretends to be. What begins as an antic disposition becomes his hopeless, true self.

We can see Hamlet's instructions to the actors from a third angle as well. In his world of deception and betrayal, Hamlet recognizes the need to exercise reason and caution, and to remain aloof from blind passion. Thus he can again justify his inaction and validate his slow approach to avenging his father's murder. He must assure himself once more that this is his father's spirit and not a demon from hell. Hence, he informs Horatio of the plan so that he has a man who is "not passion's slave" to observe the King and confirm his reactions. Identifying the Ghost's validity is critical. Should

it prove itself a demon, Hamlet's worst fears would be warranted, and Claudius may be blameless.

While waiting, Claudius asks after Hamlet's health, and Hamlet answers in seeming madness: "Excellent, i'faith, of the chameleon's dish: I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so." Claudius is nearly speechless in response to Hamlet's answer. Hamlet has accused him of having emasculated (capon) and disinherited his nephew, and all he can say is, "I have nothing with this answer Hamlet, these words are not mine." He has all but said a childish, "Oh, shut up."

Polonius then diverts all attention with tales of his fleeting career as an actor playing Julius Caesar while at the university.

Besides the obvious thematic threads illuminated by the literary allusion to Shakespeare's earlier play, the reference to *Julius Caesar* contains theatrical historical merit. An allusion to a play often provides a glimpse into the season during which a play was premiered. The actor playing Polonius was undoubtedly playing Julius Caesar at the same time in a concurrent production of *Julius Caesar*. By studying the character of Julius Caesar, an actor can extrapolate information helpful for Polonius' character development, and we can learn that Polonius is not merely the buffoon that he is conventionally portrayed to be.

Hamlet sits by Ophelia and asks to put his head in her lap, a request that is demeaning in public while at the same time indicating that the two have a far more intimate relationship than has been indicated thus far. Ophelia seems pleased with his attention and says, "You are merry, my lord." Hamlet's cynicism reemerges, and he again casts aspersions at his mother. Once again he convinces everyone that he is mad.

Ophelia's question, "What means this, my lord?" reflects the fact that the guests did not expect a dumb show. Dumb shows no longer preceded tragedies by the time of *Hamlet's* first production, and Shakespeare's desire to include one baffles critics. Perhaps Shakespeare thought it clarified elements of the story that he needed in order to heighten the intensity of contrast between the play and the play within the play.

Whatever the reason for the dumb show, the actual speaking play follows, and Claudius remains unperturbed until the Player King actually pours the poison in his brother's ear. He then jumps up in a moment of heightened drama and, after his courtiers notice him, he shouts, "Give me some lights." The King has sprung Hamlet's *Mousetrap*; Claudius' own revulsion to *The Murder of Gonzago* catches him. Hamlet's mission now becomes obligatory. Not only does he know he must avenge his father's death, but Horatio also knows — and the entire court may now suspect foul play in the death of their former king, so that no his inaction is unmanly. Hamlet must act decisively and immediately.

And yet, Hamlet keeps talking. He volleys words about his unlikely succession to Claudius' throne with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Finally he agrees to visit Gertrude. Before he goes, however, he postures yet again with words. He says that he has reached another midnight and that the dark nature of that witching hour makes him bloodthirsty and makes him desire to decisively take action. But the audience knows better. Hamlet is still not ready to commit to action.

Hamlet's short soliloquy is often used to support the Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's relationship to his mother. Here he speaks of going to her softly, worried that he will not be strong enough to speak his piece. "O heart, lose not thy nature. . . ." Having just assessed his feelings in the language of a traditional revenger in Elizabethan melodrama, Hamlet turns his attention to Gertrude whom he goes to confront as though she were an offending wife to his cuckold.

Act III: Scene 3

Summary

Fearing that Hamlet is a threat to his life and throne, the King summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and instructs them to hurry and take Hamlet to England. The men agree, acknowledging that any threat to Claudius is a threat to the people of Denmark, so they will keep Denmark safe by removing Hamlet from its shores. They leave, and Polonius enters to inform the King that Hamlet is on his way to Gertrude and that Polonius plans to hide there and eavesdrop on the conversation. Promising to report back to Claudius before Claudius retires to bed, Polonius leaves.

Claudius then prays at his private altar, although he says his sin is so great that it renders him incapable of praying. He admits before God that he has committed the "primal eldest curse" by carrying out his "brother's murder." He admits that his contrition is unforgivable since he is unwilling to give up the spoils of his ill-won battles. He begs instead that some divine assistance might bow his knees and soften his heart so that he can ask for forgiveness.

Hamlet enters and sees Claudius in prayer. He recognizes his perfect opportunity to kill Claudius, but stops himself. He remembers that Claudius killed King Hamlet without allowing him any opportunity to make amends for his sins, and that King Hamlet now languishes in purgatory awaiting entry to heaven. Believing that Claudius is praying for forgiveness, Hamlet knows that by killing Claudius now, he would send the King straight to heaven. Claudius would escape the eternal punishment that is his due.

Analysis

From the top of the scene, any ambiguity concerning Claudius' character disappears. He identifies Hamlet as his enemy and plots to have him dispatched to England. He conspires with Polonius to spy on Hamlet yet again. Then, kneeling in prayer before sleeping, the King confesses the depth and severity of his crime. He likens himself to Cain, the primal or first murderer, and admits that he cannot bring himself to ask for God's mercy. "But oh, what form of prayer / can serve my turn?" Claudius knows that he will never abdicate the throne, nor will he give up Gertrude and all "those effects for which I did murder," such as his power and position. He expects to spend eternity in hell.

Hamlet enters as the King kneels with his back toward Hamlet. Hamlet reaches for his sword, and the ambiguity shifts to Hamlet. His Christian morality informs him that because the King appears to pray, he is probably confessing. By ending his life in mid-confession, Hamlet would allow the King to go straight to heaven by virtue of his cleansed soul. Hamlet would prefer to send the King to hell. He has no problem with the immorality of robbing a man of his salvation. Hamlet is capable of imitating King Claudius' cruelty.

Some critics believe that Hamlet vacillates yet again in yet another self-deception of word play. In fact, this moment represents the pivotal point in the play — the moment of truth. Had Hamlet taken charge and acted rather than retreating into his words, he would have prevented the six deaths that follow. Most importantly, the tragic hero might not have met his inevitable end. Then, of course, the play would have been cut short, and no tragedy would exist. Had Hamlet killed Claudius here, he would have more closely resembled Macbeth who murdered innocence — in Macbeth's own words, "Macbeth hath murdered sleep" — by taking the life of an unprotected, unaware King. The action would label Hamlet a villain, not a hero. Claudius survives in order to preserve Hamlet's character.

Act III: Scene 4

Summary

As promised, Polonius arrives in Gertrude's room before Hamlet and hides himself behind an arras. He instructs Gertrude to be entirely blunt with her son. Hamlet enters challenging, "Now, Mother, what's the matter?" Gertrude tells him he has badly offended his father, meaning Claudius; Hamlet answers that she has badly offended his father, meaning King Hamlet. Hamlet intimidates Gertrude, and she cries out that he is trying to murder her. Polonius reacts from behind the curtain and yells for help. Hamlet draws his sword and thrusts it through the tapestry, killing Polonius. When Hamlet lifts the wallhanging and discovers Polonius' body, he tells the body that he had believed he was stabbing the King. He

then turns his attention to punishing Gertrude. He presses contrasting pictures of Claudius and his brother in Gertrude's face. He points out King Hamlet's godlike countenance and courage, likening Claudius to an infection in King Hamlet's ear. He accuses Gertrude of lustfulness, and she begs him to leave her alone.

King Hamlet's Ghost reappears to Hamlet, but only Hamlet can see him. Hamlet believes that the Ghost has come to chide his tardy son into carrying out the "dread command," but Hamlet then perceives the Ghost as his mother's protector. The Ghost tells his son to be kinder to her. Gertrude is utterly convinced now that her son is hallucinating from a devil-inspired madness, but Hamlet tells her that it is not madness that afflicts him. He begs her to confess her guilt to him and to heaven. At the very least, he begs her, don't sleep with Claudius or let him "go paddling in your neck with his damned fingers."

He asks if she knows that Claudius is sending him to England; she had forgotten. He tells her that he distrusts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and that they are undoubtedly taking him to England to do some foul bidding for Claudius. She confesses that she knows about the exile. He bids his mother good night and exits, pulling Polonius' body behind him.

Analysis

Although a closet was a private room in a castle, and a bedroom was meant for receiving visitors, the convention since the late 19th century has been to stage the scene between Hamlet and Gertrude in Gertrude's bedroom. Staging the scene in the closet rather than in a bedroom is more in line with the Freudian psychoanalysis of an Oedipal Hamlet — a man resembling the Greek character Oedipus who bedded his mother and killed his father. If Gertrude received him in her closet, she treated him more as an intimate than as a son.

Up until this scene, one can dismiss the notion that Shakespeare envisioned a prince whose love for his mother was unnatural and itself incestuous. One can rationalize Hamlet's hysteria over Gertrude's marriage to Claudius in light of the Renaissance notion of family honor and the prevailing definitions of incest, which implicated Gertrude and Claudius. But in Act III, Scene 4, no better way exists for the modern thinker to justify Hamlet's behavior than to suppose that he has a Freudian attachment to Gertrude.

Though not the first to cast Hamlet in an Oedipal light, Laurence Olivier popularized the notion of an untoward love between Hamlet and his mother in the 1947 Royal Shakespeare Company production and again in the 1948 film version. In the film, Olivier, playing Hamlet opposite his wife in the role of Gertrude, staged the scene so that it was stripped of all its ambiguities. He dressed Gertrude's bed in satin, and he dressed the Queen,

awaiting her son's arrival, in the same suggestively folded satin and silk. The two engage in a verbal exchange that possesses the breathless engagement of foreplay, and Hamlet then presses himself onto his mother in an overtly sexual way. The scene is believable played this way, especially given that Claudius will tell us shortly that Gertrude "lives almost by his looks," and because Hamlet's melodramatic reaction to his father's passing seems so wooden without that underpinning of deep emotion.

Polonius, obscured by the tapestry, has prophetically and ironically placed himself to "silence me e'en here" and quietly observes what transpires between Gertrude and her son. In a passionate outburst, Hamlet threatens his mother, holding up a mirror and saying, "You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you." Gertrude, terrified, assumes that her son intends to murder her and calls for help, to which the hidden Polonius reacts without revealing himself. Still impassioned by his encounter with Gertrude, still inflamed with his sexual tension, Hamlet stabs Polonius. In a grandly impulsive moment, Hamlet has finally acted on his bloodlust, a bloodlust he has sublimated until this moment. According to the post-Freudian interpretation, the need to expiate his misplaced sexual feelings has caused him to stop thinking and act for a change. The irony all belongs to Polonius; he is there to trap Hamlet and finds himself trapped instead. He has said he will silence himself, and he is indeed silenced. There is both simple irony and dramatic irony.

The Ghost's invisibility to Gertrude raises the question of Hamlet's sanity. We can interpret Shakespeare's choice to blind Gertrude to the Ghost's presence and to deafen her ears to her son's insistence that the Ghost exists to mean that Shakespeare fashioned Hamlet as a madman, no longer merely acting the part. Of course, one can also make a case for interpreting the scene as an indictment of Gertrude. She refuses to see the Ghost because of her own guilt. Gertrude's black heart impedes her vision, refusing her the sight of her loving husband. On the other hand, perhaps she does see the Ghost and only pretends not to. Then again, you may interpret the scene as being another proof of Gertrude's innocence.

Up until this scene, judging the extent of Gertrude's complicity in the murder of King Hamlet has been difficult. She now implies that she is entirely innocent. Hamlet counters her horror at Polonius' death with his own accusation

A bloody deed! Almost as bad, good mother
As kill a king, and marry his brother.

She answers in innocent surprise, "As kill a king?" Then she asks him, "What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?"

If she is guilty, she is also an accomplished actor. According to all appearances, the Ghost was right when he told Hamlet earlier that she was only a follower — a weak woman brainwashed by her need to be loved and cared for. She can discern no other reason for Hamlet to behave in such a way except to hurt her. Gertrude remains incredulous as Hamlet perseveres with his indictment of Claudius as a "murderer and a villain." She does not agree to end Claudius' advances. Hamlet asks her to "prevent the 'bloat King' from tempting her to bed again, but she never promises to confess herself and leave the King, and she never tries to convince Hamlet that Claudius is innocent. Nor does she plead for herself or try to make Hamlet see why she chose to marry Claudius.

At the scene's end, as if in a test of his mother's devotion, Hamlet tells Gertrude that Claudius is sending him to England and that he suspects foul play in his uncle's having hired Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take him there. He says he does not trust them and he confides his fear. Gertrude offers no argument and provides no reassurance. She simply tells him in effect that she'll think about it and lets him leave. In a world where seeming, acting, and playing predominate, judging any character's honesty is difficult. The ambiguities enhance the character, and shroud her in mystery. These characteristics pose a formidable challenge for an actor, making Gertrude a choice role.

Hamlet's immediate acquiescence to his father's will here is significant. Whether the Ghost is real or a figment of his imagination, the old king has successfully yanked Hamlet from the preoccupation with Gertrude that has distracted his quest for retribution. Hamlet leaves Gertrude affectionately. He repeats "Good night" five times and progressively wishes for her peace. He asks her rather than ordering her to keep clear of the king's advances, and he confides his fears about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He then takes Polonius' body as a favor to her, not as obligation to the murdered good old man.

Act IV: Scene 1

Summary

Claudius, flanked by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, finds Gertrude and questions her as to Hamlet's whereabouts. She asks to be left alone with the King and, after Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave, she agitatedly tells him that she has seen a horror. Claudius wants to know what happened and asks after her son's welfare. She answers that Hamlet is madder than a storm at sea, and she describes the killing of Polonius. Realizing that he himself might have been the person hiding behind the tapestry, Claudius deplores Hamlet's violence, but he blames himself for not having been sterner with Hamlet from the beginning. He worries what he will tell his subjects; Gertrude tells him that Hamlet is contrite and has promised to dispose of the body. The King resolves to banish Hamlet

quickly and calls to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He tells them what has happened and bids them bring Hamlet to him. He tells Gertrude that they must together confide in their wisest friends and find a way to disclose Polonius' death without raising suspicions against themselves.

Analysis

Gertrude explains what has happened in a manner that exemplifies her own ambivalence and ambiguities. Does she really believe Hamlet has lost all reason? Or is she protecting the secret he has just revealed regarding Claudius' guilt — the secret she has promised to keep about King Hamlet's murder? Whether she knew anything about the crime beforehand or if she participated in the plot to take the throne remains unclear. Gertrude's protectiveness toward Hamlet is dubious. She never attempts to shield her son in any meaningful way and describes in inflammatory detail how he killed "the unseen good old man." Even knowing what Hamlet believes about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern does not cause her to entreat the King to find an alternative to sending her son to England with the pair.

Claudius is clearly aware of all the ramifications that attend his reactions to the report. He inquires after Hamlet's health but clearly remains primarily concerned with his own well being. "My soul is full of discord and dismay," he says. He will act quickly on the news, but he is clearly fearful. "His [Hamlet's] liberty is full of threats to all." He hides his fears behind the apparent concern of an uncle, who has been protecting Hamlet out of love but who will protect Hamlet no longer. He will send him to England, and they will tell the people that he is mad. Hamlet's having murdered Polonius will ultimately work to Claudius' advantage. Hamlet must receive punishment, and, although all in Denmark love him as their rightful crown prince in whom rests all hope, the King may now exile the Prince with impunity and without upsetting Gertrude, as even she sees the need to get Hamlet away.

Act IV: Scene 2

Summary

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern finally find the Prince and ask him for Polonius, he bewilders them with answers that seem to be riddles. He tells them that sharing information with mere sponges and parasites of the court is beneath him, the son of a king.

Analysis

Hamlet finally reveals his full disdain for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, saying that he has neither love nor respect for them or their King, to whom he refers as a "thing." Hamlet calls his classmates the worst kind of parasites. The King, Hamlet suggests, keeps Rosencrantz and Guildenstern around "as an ape doth nuts, and in the corner of his jaw; first

mout'd to be last swallowed." As long as Claudius needs what the pair can glean of Hamlet's intentions, he will continue to use them; however, Claudius is squeezing them as he would any sponge and will eventually leave them dry again.

Shakespeare uses this as an opportunity to demonstrate Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's shallow wit. "I understand you not, my lord." Hamlet answers with an outright insult to their collective intelligence by commenting, "a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear." Their inferior intelligence fails to discern his ironic, sarcastic language.

Act IV: Scene 3

Summary

In a public show of concern, Claudius explains to his assembled courtiers that he cannot jail his nephew because Hamlet remains too popular with the people. A riot would inevitably occur if he punished Hamlet for his part in Polonius' death, so instead he will send the young man into exile.

Rosencrantz enters to report that Hamlet will not reveal Polonius' whereabouts. Guildenstern and the Guards then bring Hamlet in, and Claudius demands to know where Hamlet has put Polonius. Hamlet engages in yet another word play with Claudius, taunting him with images of rotting flesh and the corruption of death. He pointedly tells Claudius that just as a fisherman eats a fish that has eaten a worm that was in the grave eating at a king, every man can progress through the guts of beggar. Then he tells Claudius that even if a messenger was sent to heaven, the messenger could not find the old man. He says that Claudius should seek Polonius in hell, even though the old man would not have arrived there yet either. Instead, Hamlet tells him that, within a month's time, the smell "up the stairs into the lobby" will reveal to them the whereabouts of the body. As attendants go to retrieve Polonius' body, Claudius tells Hamlet that a boat waits to take the Prince to England.

As soon as Hamlet and the guards leave, the King soliloquizes a plea to England to finish the Prince quickly and cleanly. The king of England owes him a favor, and he's calling it in by asking the death of Hamlet.

Analysis

Critics puzzle endlessly over the reason for Hamlet's cat and mouse game with Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Claudius over the whereabouts of Polonius' body. Hamlet's apparent madness is both amusing and disturbing. Hamlet is cruel and heartless. He seems to enjoy meting out his measure of torture. His perverse and cruel behavior wholly departs from the heroic figure Hamlet should be. In fact, Hamlet displays characteristics far from heroism in this scene. He exhibits, yet again, a fascination with and terror of death. Unready to face death himself, he imprisons himself

more deeply in words and avoids having to kill Claudius. Having murdered Polonius, he has at least been active and need not push himself. Hamlet seems confused, terrified, conflicted; he is coming undone.

The courtiers assemble to learn of Polonius' death, and Claudius maps out the consequences for Hamlet's actions. Hamlet expounds on his worm's meat motif, a repetition of language that Shakespeare uses several times in the play, and that apparently preoccupies Hamlet's mind. The images are gross, troubling, and rife with Hamlet's biting satirical wit. In his rant about the physical realities of death, Hamlet explains that the fact that all men feed the earth and are, therefore, worm's meat is the great equalizer. The King inquires after Polonius' whereabouts, and Hamlet answers that Polonius is at supper — not supping but rather being supped upon: "*Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat King and your lean beggar is but variable service — two dishes but to one table. That's the end.*"

The moral of his rambling is that, because a man may fish with a worm that has eaten the body of a king, and afterwards eat the fish he has caught, that man has, in essence, devoured a king. Thus, the king passes through the stomach of a beggar and only the worm reigns supreme. Even so, the worm, the king, and the beggar are equal now — they are all dead. Elaborately, Hamlet has called the King a worm.

Hamlet's horror and amusement over death underscore his ambivalence toward his duty. He will reiterate several more times his paradoxical will to die and fear of death before he finally commits his act of vengeance. Yet, he never fails to show his love for the feel of the words he prattles. He allows the words to linger on his tongue; he swills them around and savors them, even when seemingly out of his mind.

Claudius responds by banishing Hamlet to England, and Hamlet tells Claudius that he knows the King's purpose in sending him away. Claudius apparently misses or overlooks the warning and chooses instead to respond to Hamlet's insulting, "Farewell, Mother." Claudius corrects him, offering him an opportunity to apologize. Hamlet then completes the insult by explaining that because man and wife are of one flesh, Claudius is indeed Hamlet's mother. With this insult, Hamlet digs another barb into Claudius about the incest, which always weighs on Hamlet's mind. Claudius finally perceives the depth of the danger Hamlet poses and entreats Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to hurry him to England to get him out of the way. Although unknown to everyone but the audience, Claudius now sees that he must instruct the king of England to kill Hamlet. The lines between good and evil appear clearly now as the gray areas that have masked Claudius'

dark purposes' vanish. Claudius' evolution into the consummate villain is complete.

Act IV: Scene 4

Summary

On his way to England, Hamlet observes Fortinbras leading his troops through Denmark toward Poland. He questions a captain and learns that the Norwegians plan to wage war over a worthless patch of land in Poland. Hamlet lingers behind Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to reflect on the fact that these Norwegians and Poles are willing to die over land worth virtually nothing to anyone. They have left their homes and committed themselves to a principle no more substantive than an eggshell. Yet, he ponders, he possesses sufficient reason to take action against his enemy, but remains paralyzed.

Analysis

Hamlet's soliloquy as he observes the Norwegian soldiers heading for Poland represents *Hamlet's* turning point: "What is a man / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? Now, whether it be Bestial oblivion or some craven scruple Of thinking too precisely on th'event — a thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom and three parts coward — I do not know Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do,' Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means to do't."

Hamlet finally realizes that his duty to revenge is so great that the end must justify the means. He can no longer escape the necessity for action. Up until now, the consequences of the murder he must commit worried him, and he thought "too precisely on th'event." In weighing the willingness of the Norwegian soldiers to lay down their lives for a worthless piece of land against his own inability to act though motivated by sacred filial duty, he sees that he has stalled long enough. This soliloquy represents Hamlet's last flirtation with words. From here on, he will shed his attachment to the words that cause a deed's "currents to turn awry and lose the name of action."

You can divide the soliloquy into five thematic sections:

The first section identifies Hamlet's mission: revenge. Hamlet says that everything he encounters prompts him to revenge: "How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge!"

The second section exhorts him to act. Hamlet must stop over-thinking events and recognize in himself the strength, and means to complete the required act

The third section sets Fortinbras' example of how Hamlet should act. "Led by this army of such mass and charge, / Led by a delicate and tender Prince . . . to all that fortune, death and danger dare, / Even for an

eggshell." Once again Fortinbras holds up a mirror to his Danish counterpart.

The fourth section specifies Hamlet's perplexity over the Poles' and Norwegians' willingness to die for so little in contrast to his own inability to act on so much.

The fifth section provides resolution. Hamlet resolves to avenge his father at last.

Oh from this time forth

My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.

Act IV: Scene 5

Summary

A court gentleman reports that Ophelia has become pitifully insane. Gertrude refuses to see the girl, but Horatio points out that Ophelia's mental state may attract undue attention to herself and the crown. Gertrude then agrees to speak with Ophelia.

Ophelia enters singing fragments of songs about chaos, death, and unrequited love. The King and Queen both try to speak with her, but she replies only unintelligibly. Claudius comments that her father's death has undoubtedly driven her mad. He asks Horatio to follow and watch her. Then he turns to Gertrude and sums up the troubles that plague Elsinore of late. He recounts his torment over the slaying of Polonius, the secret burial to avoid uprising, the madness of Ophelia, and the arrival of her brother, Laertes, who means to incite rioting over his father's death.

The courtiers hear Laertes and a mob outside attempting to break into the castle. Laertes tells his followers to keep watch at the door, and he angrily asks Claudius to give him his father. Gertrude tries to calm Laertes, but Claudius tells her to let him rail, that they have nothing to fear from the young man. Claudius manages to placate Laertes until Ophelia returns, singing incoherent snippets of a song about a dead old man. Laertes comments that a "young maid's wits" are as fragile and "as mortal as an old man's life." Ophelia distributes flowers to the assembled people, and exits. Laertes, distraught over his sister's condition, finally pays complete attention to what Claudius has to say. The King promises Laertes satisfaction in avenging Polonius' death.

Analysis

Earlier in the play (Act III, Scene 1), Gertrude told Ophelia "And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish / That your good beauties be the happy cause of >Hamlet's wildness." Yet now, when Horatio and the gentleman announce Ophelia's request for an audience with Gertrude, Gertrude flatly refuses to see the girl. Gertrude reluctantly agrees to see her only after

Horatio and the gentleman explain the piteousness of Ophelia's condition and the danger of Ophelia's behavior to the State.

The question of Gertrude's character again arises. Gertrude's demeanor in relation to Ophelia possibly signifies her complicity with Claudius. She seems here to share his preoccupation with the appearance of power. However, Gertrude has presumably served as Queen all of her adult life, and affairs of state would matter to her. Perhaps the fact that her son's treatment of Ophelia played a part in the girl's downfall merely embarrasses the Queen. Another entirely justifiable explanation may be that, as a woman of unusual strength, Gertrude despises the weak. Gertrude reveals a clue to her avoiding Ophelia when she says, "So full of artless jealousy is guilt, / It spills itself in fearing to be spilt." The guilt remains ambiguous. Is it Gertrude's? For what? Is it Hamlet's? Is it Ophelia's? But clearly the Queen is not moved by any maternal thoughts toward the girl who could have become her daughter-in-law. Ophelia's distracted behavior confounds the Queen. The older woman cannot respond in any meaningful way to Ophelia's desperation.

Ophelia's songs all concern unrequited love. The third song, in fact, blatantly indicts a lover who has left his love's bed. "Before you tumbled me, you promised me to wed." This song provides another proof that Ophelia's madness may stem from her having been intimate with Hamlet and then rejected by him. In fact, considering her father's instructions that she not let Hamlet have his way with her, Polonius' death could only exacerbate her guilt. Premarital sex was a sin — a sin compounded by her father's command. If, as some believe, she now carries Hamlet's child, her desperation would be all consuming.

Staging Ophelia's flower distribution with imaginary flowers has become traditional in the modern theater, which generally interpret the flowers as symbolic rather than real. Ophelia gives fennel, symbol of flattery, to King Claudius. She also gives him columbine for ingratitude and infidelity. Rue, for sorrow, she gives to Gertrude; she also offers Gertrude daisy, for springtime and love, and says she lost her own violets, which represent sweetness, when her father died. To Laertes, she gives rosemary, for remembrance, and pansies, for thought, suggesting both their shared history and her lost faculties.

In this scene, Laertes emerges as another foil (opposite) for Hamlet. He, too, has a father to avenge and a woman to protect, but this son wastes no time in thought or word. He threatens the King, only restraining himself when the King promises to assist the younger man in his quest for vengeance. Moral ambivalence does not restrict Laertes, and he willingly risks eternal damnation by acting without hesitation. Laertes, unencumbered by words, ideas, or beliefs, has raised an army against the

King to avenge Polonius' death. The King recognizes that Laertes poses a danger to him potentially as great as that posed by Hamlet. He promises Laertes that Hamlet will be eliminated. "Let the great one fall."

Claudius has consistently orchestrated emotions, and has convincingly played the role of concerned King, friend of Polonius, kindly father figure for Ophelia, and dutiful husband to Gertrude. He is lavish with words in this scene, making a great show of his deep empathy for Gertrude, for Laertes, for Ophelia, even for Hamlet. "O Gertrude, Gertrude/When sorrows come, they come not in single spies/But in battalions." Hyperdramatically, he concludes his litany of sufferings they have all had to bear by saying, "O my dear Gertrude, this,/Like to a murdering-piece, in many places/Gives me superfluous death." No one suffers more than Claudius. Contrasted with his soliloquy of Scene 3, where he vows to have Hamlet executed, the speech proves his insincerity to the audience. Now, in blatant dramatic irony, Shakespeare makes the audience privy to the truth before the characters can discover that truth for themselves.

Still, in the political coup of this scene, he wins Laertes' loyalty by urging Gertrude to "let him go" so that he may speak freely. He then gives Laertes free reign, placing himself in apparent jeopardy:

Make choice of whom your wisest friends you will,
And they shall hear and judge 'twixt you and me:
If by direct or by collateral hand
The find us touch'd, we will our kingdom give,
Our crown, our life, and all that we call ours
To you in satisfaction

In his very public show, he manages to manipulate the trust of everyone present.

Act IV: Scene 6

Summary

Horatio receives letters from a sailor sent by Hamlet. The first letter tells Horatio that pirates beset the ship on which Hamlet was being carried to England. In the ensuing battle, the pirates took Hamlet captive; they treated him well and brought him back to Denmark. He has, in return, promised to do them a favor. The other letters, says Hamlet's first letter, are for Horatio to deliver to the King. After he has made the delivery, Horatio is to come immediately to meet Hamlet; Hamlet tells his friend that he has much news to share.

Analysis

Hamlet's return is a dramatic device providing a *deus ex machina* (a contrived solution to a problem) for the play's plot. Shakespeare uses a problem that seriously threatened Elizabethan/ Jacobean security: the prevalence of pirates. Some critics speculate that Shakespeare means for us

to infer that Hamlet, knowing that pirates lurk in every bay, has arranged for the pirates to subvert Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's mission. It is equally likely that the ship bound for England carrying Hamlet and his treacherous "friends" was beset by pirates, and Hamlet, always the smooth talker, was able to connive his own release. In either case, the outcome is critical to the play's action. Only by returning to the center of the conflict can Hamlet create the forces that drive the climax, denouement, and resolution.

Act IV: Scene 7

Summary

Claudius confirms that Hamlet killed Polonius, though seeking to take Claudius' life. Laertes can't understand why Claudius didn't punish Hamlet for such capital crimes. Claudius explains that he has restrained himself, even though he has no intention of letting Hamlet get away with his crimes.

At this point, a messenger arrives with the letters Hamlet has sent in Horatio's care. Now knowing that Hamlet is still alive, Claudius offers Laertes an opportunity to show his love for Polonius by joining him in a plot to kill Hamlet by engaging in swordplay with him. Claudius promises to arrange a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet. Hamlet will use a fencing foil, but Laertes' foil will have an unblunted point. Thus, Laertes can kill Hamlet in front of an audience, and it will appear to be an accident; no one will know it is murder. Laertes shares his own plan to dip his sword in a poison so lethal that a minor scratch will cause instant death. Claudius adds yet another safeguard: He will poison a goblet of wine for Hamlet to drink, so that even if Laertes fails to draw blood, Hamlet will die.

Gertrude interrupts their plotting with her report of Ophelia's drowning. She describes the young woman's death graphically, explaining how she had fallen in the brook while weaving flower garlands; the willow tree branch on which she was sitting broke so that she tumbled into the water. Ophelia's clothing carried her afloat for a time, but eventually she sank to her death. Laertes finds his grief uncontrollable, and he runs out in a rage. Claudius and Gertrude follow him, ostensibly to quell his anger.

Analysis

Claudius struts for Laertes in this scene, but, if we believe what he says, he also demonstrates his ability to care. Caring would mitigate his evil and add to the paradox inherent in his character. As shown in his prayer scene in Act III, Claudius has a Christian conscience even if he is incapable of satisfying it. In this scene he demonstrates that he may also be a devoted husband who prizes the emotional well being of his beloved wife. Despite his knowledge that Hamlet is a great danger to him, he tells Laertes that he has chosen not to hurt his "son" because the Queen "lives almost by his looks," and Claudius lives almost for the Queen.

However, Claudius' entirely self-serving evil becomes immediately apparent when he explains to Laertes his second reason for not punishing Hamlet for Polonius' murder: the great love the country has for Hamlet, which would not look kindly on the King who threatened him. Scholars contend that succession to the throne of Denmark was determined by a vote. Knights of the realm chose from candidates who petitioned for the throne. According to the Scandinavian legend, Gertrude's father was the king before King Hamlet. King Hamlet was selected by his predecessor to marry the princess, and the marriage clinched his election to the monarchy. If these conditions exist, Claudius clearly cannot afford to lose face before his knights, and he cannot afford to lose Gertrude; nor can he jeopardize his tenuous popularity by risking a backlash against the throne.

By exercising his skill with posturing emotions, Claudius convinces Laertes that he has restrained his actions toward Hamlet for reasons that make him look like a kind man and a responsible monarch. The speech wins Laertes over, and Claudius gains a powerful ally. Now that his plan to have Hamlet executed by the English king has failed, Claudius needs Laertes' assistance in eliminating Hamlet.

Act IV: Scene 7

The two hatch a grand scheme to ensure that Hamlet will not escape again. As in the murder of King Hamlet, undetectable poison serves as the weapon of choice for Claudius. Like his malicious intentions, which he masks with sweet sentiments, Claudius' penchant for poison proves his insidiousness. Hamlet's statement in his letter that he has returned "naked" to Denmark leads to the conclusion that he will face Claudius alone. The conspirators have every reason to expect success in their plot, especially as Laertes is as renowned for his swordsmanship as is Hamlet.

Once again Laertes serves as the perfect foil for Prince Hamlet. He minces no words and loses no time on regret. His deep anguish over the loss of his father and sister commits itself to murder. Laertes is immediately ready, able, and willing to act. A sympathetic and formidable adversary for the sympathetic and formidable prince, Laertes will garner as much support from the audience as Hamlet will, and the confrontation will be doubly moving as the audience will be torn in its allegiance.

A note on Ophelia's characterization: Although Gertrude reports that Ophelia fell in the stream and drowned, there is evidence that her death is a suicide. The first proof can be found in her present state. Faced with the reality of premarital sex and a manless future — Hamlet did not want her, her father was dead, and her judgmental brother was in France — Ophelia would have recognized no other solution but suicide. Another proof is evident in the circumstances of her death. Some critics believe her drowning proves that she was pregnant and, consequently, committed

suicide. While no concrete evidence of a pregnancy exists, critics point to the fact that in the 16th and 17th centuries, the conventional suicide method for an unmarried pregnant woman was drowning.

Claudius' evil ambition has infected Laertes, despite the fact that Laertes has been in Paris, away from Claudius' influence. Hamlet has returned to put right what he perceives as Claudius' wrongs, but by causing the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia, Hamlet has become an instrument of the evil he opposes. That something is "rotten in the State of Denmark," as Marcellus observed in Act II, is now clear throughout the kingdom.

Act V: Scene 1

Summary

Two gravediggers (called clowns) discuss the burial for which they are digging. An inquest has declared the corpse fit for Christian burial. The First Gravedigger argues that the dead woman deserves no such indulgence, because she drowned herself and is not worthy of salvation. The other gravedigger explains, using misplaced words (malapropisms) and incorrect syntax, that she deserves defending. He reasons that her gentlewoman's rank should earn her a Christian burial. Their dialogue, played for humor, invokes references to the Bible and to the art of gallows-making, where builders build a frame that outlives its tenants. While the Second Gravedigger goes to fetch some liquor, ">Hamlet and ">Horatio enter and question the First Gravedigger.

The gravedigger and Hamlet engage in a witty game of "chop-logic" — repartée composed of a series of questions and answers. The gravedigger tells Hamlet that he has been digging graves since the day Old King Hamlet defeated Old King Fortinbras, the very birthday of Prince Hamlet — "he that's mad, and sent to England" — thirty years ago.

Hamlet drives the comic dialectic (a dialectic is a method of examining an idea in which every question posed poses a new question). He mulls again over the nature of life and death, and the great chasm between the two states. He tosses skulls and parries with the possibilities of what each may have been in life. He asks the gravedigger whose grave he is in, and the gravedigger plays with puns, finally asserting that the grave is one who was a woman. Hamlet has no idea to whom the grave belongs.

When Hamlet finds a particular skull, he asks the gravedigger whose it might be. The gravedigger tells him the skull belonged to Yorick, the King's jester. "I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy." He dwells on the subject of death and the fact that all men are worm's meat, that all that lives will one day die, and that no rank or money can change the equality of death. Death transforms even great kings like Alexander into trivial objects.

Hamlet and Horatio then observe that the Queen, King, and Laertes arrive among a group of mourners escorting a coffin. He asks whose coffin they're following, and hides with Horatio to listen in to what's happening. He notes that the funeral is not a full Christian rite but that the body is being interred in sacred ground.

Laertes argues with the priest over Ophelia's burial. Claudius' command at inquest, he argues, should grant her all the rites of a Christian burial. The priest refuses, saying that, because she committed suicide, he must deny Ophelia the requiem mass and other trappings of a Christian burial, even though Ophelia will be buried on sacred ground. Laertes insults the priest.

When Ophelia's body is placed into the grave, Hamlet watches the Queen strew the coffin with flowers. "Sweets to the sweet," she says; "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife." Hamlet now realizes that it is Ophelia who lies dead in the casket, and he attacks Laertes, who has just cursed Hamlet and thrown himself into the grave. Hamlet and Laertes argue over who loved Ophelia best. Laertes tries to strangle Hamlet, but attendants separate them.

Gertrude decries her son's madness. Claudius asks Horatio to look after Hamlet and promises Laertes immediate satisfaction. He instructs Gertrude to have her son watched, implying that another death will serve as Ophelia's memorial.

Analysis

The most serious act in the play begins with the broadest comedy in Shakespeare's repertory. The tragic conclusion begins with two gravediggers — usually played as country bumpkins — who banter over the circumstances of Ophelia's death. The characters are derived from a tradition of performance called *Commedia del'Arte*, an originally Italian clowning technique that was very popular in Renaissance theater throughout Europe. This dialogue introduces the audience to the notion that Ophelia has killed herself, even though Gertrude's report made the death seem accidental. The gravediggers indulge in a spate of black comedy that culminates in Hamlet's matching wits with the adeptly paradoxical First Gravedigger.

Shakespeare's juxtaposing of lofty concepts such as theological law against the lowliness of the gravediggers' station works as the essence of this scene's comedy. The First Gravedigger employs clever malapropisms and provides yet another foil for Hamlet — a base commoner whose sense of irony and paradox matches Hamlet's own, but amuses rather than tortures the thinker.

Shakespeare reiterates his theme of death as the great equalizer in this scene. He also explores the absolute finality of death. Each of the gravediggers' references to death foreshadows Hamlet's imminent

participation in several deaths, including his own. Hamlet and the gravedigger humorously discuss Hamlet's preoccupation with worm's meat and the destruction of time. The gravedigger mentions Cain and "the first foul murder," which reminds the audience that Claudius, too, is a brother killer.

The question of Ophelia's suicide alludes to a contemporary court case wherein the court barred Sir James Hall from receiving a Christian burial because he killed himself. Shakespeare undoubtedly built this part of the scene deliberately to show his support for the court's decision. The explanation of Ophelia's burial offered in most criticisms is that the grave is on the periphery of the sacred ground, in an area reserved for those whose Christianity might be questionable. Yorick for one. This is supported by the fact that there are so many skulls in the grave; it's a common grave, not an individualized, consecrated resting place.

Laertes and Hamlet's fight symbolizes Hamlet's internal struggle to control his inability to act. Hamlet's challenging Laertes, whom he calls "a very noble youth," is uncharacteristically rash. Faced with his mirror opposite, a man who is all impassioned action and few words, Hamlet grapples to prove that he loved Ophelia though he was unable to demonstrate his feelings for her.

Act V: Scene 2

Summary

A calmer Hamlet recounts the events leading up to his escape from the plot to kill him. He says that he is convinced now more than ever that divine providence governs man's life, and that things happen as they are meant to happen. He tells Horatio that the night before the pirates took him, he found himself unable to sleep. He used this opportunity to investigate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's cabin. Groping about in the darkness, he discovered letters addressed to the English King, which he managed to open with surreptitious skill. To his surprise, he read that Claudius had requested the king of England to imprison and behead Hamlet as quickly as possible. Horatio remains incredulous until Hamlet hands him the letter. While Horatio reads, Hamlet continues. He says that he immediately conjured a brilliant plan. He composed a second set of letters in the flowery style of the original ordering that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be killed. He sealed the letters with his father's State Seal, which he carried in his purse. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not know that Hamlet has replaced the letters, and thus, according to Hamlet, their demise will be due to their own actions in delivering the letters to the English king.

Claudius' behavior horrifies Horatio. "Why what a king is this!" he exclaims. Hamlet reminds him that this same king killed the rightful king,

made Gertrude a whore, and robbed Hamlet of his own birthright, all in one fell stroke. Horatio worries that Claudius will learn the outcome of events in England too quickly, but Hamlet assures him that he will now act expeditiously to eliminate the King.

Hamlet says he is only sorry about one thing now: That he has had to engage Laertes in the business. Osric, a courtier, enters and Hamlet mocks the man's flamboyance. Osric tells Hamlet that Laertes invites the Prince to duel with him. The King has wagered that Hamlet will win, and Osric is to return and report whether Hamlet will accept. He does. After Osric's exit, a lord enters with instructions from the King to see if Hamlet wants more time before meeting Laertes. Hamlet says he is ready whenever the King wants to get started. Then the lord tells Hamlet that the Queen wishes him to extend Laertes a pre-duel overture of friendship. Hamlet agrees, and the lord exits.

Horatio feels uneasy about the duel and suggests that Hamlet could lose. Hamlet shrugs off any possibility of Laertes' winning, but says that, in any event, one cannot avoid one's destiny. Hamlet must do what he must do. All that matters is being prepared for the inevitable. "The readiness is all."

With great flourish, the scene is set for the duel. The King calls Hamlet and Laertes together and has them begin the duel by clasping hands. Hamlet asks Laertes to forgive his earlier acts of madness at Ophelia's grave. He further claims that his madness, not he himself, is responsible for Polonius' death, and he begs pardon for the crime. Laertes remains stiff and suspicious in his response, but says he bears Hamlet no grudge.

Osric brings the swords, and Laertes makes a show of choosing his; Hamlet asks only if the one he has chosen is the same length as the others. The King sets wine out for the duelists to drink and holds up the cup intended for Hamlet. Laertes and Hamlet fence for a moment until Hamlet asks for a judgment call from Osric the referee. Osric proclaims a hit in Hamlet's favor, and Claudius holds up Hamlet's goblet and takes a drink. With high pomp, Claudius drops a pearl, his gift to Hamlet, into the wine.

When Hamlet hits Laertes a second time, Laertes protests that it is a mere touch. Claudius assures Gertrude that, "Our son shall win." Gertrude agrees. She takes Hamlet's wine, wipes his brow, and offers him a drink, which he refuses. She then toasts her son. Claudius asks her not to drink, but she does and then wipes Hamlet's brow one more time.

Laertes tells Claudius that the time has come to hit Hamlet with the poisoned tip. Claudius disagrees. In an aside, Laertes expresses a reluctance to hit Hamlet, but Hamlet accuses him of dallying and presses for a third bout. The two fight again and Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned tip. Both drop their swords and, in the scuffle, Hamlet grabs

Laertes' sword and Laertes picks up Hamlet's. Hamlet hits Laertes with the poisoned sword. Gertrude swoons. Hamlet sees the Queen fall and anxiously asks, "How does the Queen?" The King assures him that she is faint because of the blood, but Gertrude cries out that the drink has poisoned her. Outraged, Hamlet orders the doors locked so that the King cannot escape. Laertes reveals the murder plot to Hamlet and explains that the poisoned sword now rests in Hamlet's hands.

In a fury, Hamlet runs the sword through Claudius, yelling, "Venom to they work." Before Claudius dies, Hamlet pours the poisoned wine down the King's throat. Hamlet then goes to Laertes, who is nearly dead. The two forgive one another so that neither will prevent the other from entering heaven. Laertes dies, and Horatio rushes to Hamlet's side.

Hamlet tells Horatio that he is dead, and asks that Horatio "tell my story." Osric announces the sound of an approaching army, which means that Fortinbras has arrived in Denmark after attacking the Poles. Hamlet tells Horatio to ensure that the Danish crown passes to Fortinbras.

With the words "The rest is silence," Hamlet dies. Horatio wishes him a gentle rest and turns his attention to Fortinbras and the English ambassadors, who have also arrived to announce that the English government has executed Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Fortinbras, appalled by the sight of the mayhem that greets him, "with sorrow" recognizes his right to wear the crown of Denmark, which Horatio will corroborate with Hamlet's words.

Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be given military honors, "with music and rite of war." He orders his soldiers to carry the bodies out, and the play ends.

Analysis

Maynard Mack says that in the last act of the play "Hamlet accepts his world and we discover a different man." He has existed outside of the corrupt system, and yet, he has been unable to resist being drawn in. The Ghost sealed Hamlet's fate when he challenged him to "remember me." In this final scene, the maelstrom finally catches Hamlet stripped of his words, and at the mercy of his "bare bodkin." He maneuvered around the world of "seems" and "acts" and "plays" as long as he could, and tried to beat this world by using its own tactics. He feigned madness and betrayed the woman he ostensibly loves, her father, and his school chums. He committed three cold-blooded murders and sent Ophelia to her death. He had thought he towered above such dirty fighting, but found himself swept into it. He must now face the inevitable. As Mack says, Hamlet has finally "learned, and accepted, the boundaries in which human action, human judgment, are enclosed."

We recognize Hamlet's change in the first part of the scene when he explains to Horatio with complete dismissal how he sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. The calculating premeditation of his actions is a complete reversal of the Hamlet we have come to know. Horatio's next comment indicates that he is horrified. He says, "So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't," meaning that they go to their deaths, to which Hamlet counters

Why man, they did make love to this employment.

They are not near my conscience. Their defeat

Does by their own insinuation grow.

Hamlet has transformed himself from a man who wallows in self-recrimination into one who can blithely justify cold-blooded betrayal and murder. More significantly, Hamlet has become a man who assumes he can take responsibility for righting all the wrongs created by his corrupt uncle's usurpation of the old order by killing Claudius and reclaiming the throne.

Shakespeare juxtaposes Osric's entrance against Hamlet's resolve to act. As the representative of Claudius' court, Osric embodies all that is rotten in the state of Denmark. According to Hamlet, Osric is one of the many superficial fashionable people overrunning Denmark in these frivolous times. This ostentation is the canker of Denmark's nature, and Hamlet is sure that he is ready to obliterate it. Osric, about whom Hamlet says, "'tis a vice to know him," represents the evil Hamlet spoke of in Act II when he observed the court in drunken revel. Speaking about the party going on is the kind that causes the rest of the world to see Denmark as a country of drunken louts. Hamlet presumes it his duty to obliterate the King's evil, and that includes Osric.

After Osric and the lord have both been assured that Hamlet will participate in the duel at the King's pleasure, Horatio urges caution. Nevertheless, Hamlet — in a speech that resonates with the resolve he found in Act IV Scene 4 when he watched the Norwegians head toward Poland — states unequivocally how prepared he is to take on all his responsibilities.

His words paraphrase the Biblical passage that no sparrow falls without God's knowledge: "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come — the readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let it be." Here, Hamlet portrays the consummate existentialist, facing his struggle to play out with dignity and honor the part that has been written for him on the stars. He truly exists in the moment, and will seize it.

Having declared his intentions, Hamlet enters the ring amid great fanfare, and begins his journey by making the first move toward

reconciliation with Laertes. He realizes that he must do so at this juncture. Hamlet recognizes himself in Laertes, and needs to release himself from the burden of self-loathing by forgiving and being forgiven by Laertes. He said earlier of Laertes

But I am sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself,
For by the image of my cause, I see
The portraiture of his. I'll court his favours.
But sure the bravery of his grief did put me
Into towering passion.

By reaching out to Laertes, Hamlet reconciles the conflicting aspects of his own nature, freeing himself for what he must do. Some other hurtles still lie ahead of him, but he believes he is ready, which is half the battle for him — if not quite the entire battle.

Laertes' resolve to kill Hamlet as punishment for the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia mirrors Hamlet's perceived newfound freedom from words.

I am satisfied in nature
Whose motive in this case should stir me most
To my revenge; but in my terms of honour
I stand aloof, and will no reconciliation
Till by some elder masters of known honour
I have a voice and precedent of peace
To keep my name ungored.

In the end, the readiness is indeed what matters most. And so, the fight begins.

From the start of the fight, Hamlet is clearly aware that the duel is to the death and not just "play." He recognizes the direness of the situation, and understands that Laertes presents his final challenge. What remains unclear is whether Hamlet knows about Claudius' and Laertes' plot. Does he, for example, refuse the wine that Claudius offers him because he suspects danger? All he says is "I'll play this bout first, set it by awhile." After Gertrude takes her fatal sip, he says, "I dare not drink yet, Madam, by and by." Is Hamlet afraid that the wine will dull his fencing skill? Or does he guess that the wine poses a danger? He does not remark at all when the King says, "Gertrude, do not drink!" Does he not hear the King, or does he choose to ignore the warning? Laertes presents a sympathetic and formidable adversary for the sympathetic and formidable prince. Laertes will garner as much support from the audience as Hamlet will, and the

confrontation will be doubly moving as the audience will be torn in its allegiance.

In production, Claudius' directive becomes a pivotal moment. How the director and actor interpret the four words determine the tenor of the rest of the play. If Claudius mutters the line under his breath, then he has no thought to protect Gertrude or to warn Hamlet. If he cries it out, the director must find a reasonable way for Hamlet to react, one that reflects a commitment to Hamlet's being aware of the poison — does he want Gertrude to die? — or a commitment to his being tunnel-visioned, intent on his mission to "end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." Is Gertrude's death "a consummation devoutly to be wished," or is it a shocking blow that crushes any will Hamlet may have had left to live?

Still another question that must be asked and answered in production: Is Gertrude's death an accident or suicide? Here the answer to the question about how much Gertrude knows concerning King Hamlet's murder is crucial. Does she know that Claudius has poisoned Hamlet's cup, and does she drink from it to save Hamlet? If she was innocent before Hamlet came to her closet and killed Polonius, did she believe Hamlet's raving, mad indictment of her husband? Either way, she dies, and her death spurs Hamlet into finally doing what he has said he will do since the beginning of the play — kill Claudius

Laertes' death and revelation serve as another catalyst to Hamlet's resolve. When Laertes' is cut by his own sword, again he speaks for Hamlet, "Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric. I am justly killed with mine own treachery." Traps from which they cannot extricate themselves catch both Hamlet and Laertes. They must commit murder in order to uphold the blood feud they have sworn, but they are both Christians and bound by Christian morality to abhor violence. Each must fall due to his own treachery, and each must die and leave the greater good to mitigate any consequences he will face in his afterlife.

For all his great rhetoric, Hamlet has still not taken charge of the deed he must perform: Claudius still lives. Now, wading through the bodies of the people whose deaths he has caused by his hesitancy, Hamlet faces the final truth he cannot avoid. Laertes bears the news:

It is here Hamlet. Hamlet, thou art slain,
No medicine in the world can do thee good,
In thee there is not half an hour of life —
The treacherous instrument is in they hand,
Unbated and envenomed. The foul practice
Hath turned itself on me; lo, here I lie,

Never to rise again. Thy mother's poisoned —

I can no more — the king, the king's to blame.

Knowing that he is a dead man, and realizing, at last, exactly what fate the stars hold for him, Hamlet attacks Claudius with the vengeance that has resided in his heart all along. He stabs Claudius and, for extra measure, pours the poison down the King's throat. To heighten the drama as Claudius' death approaches, a chorus of the assembled court cries, "Treason, treason!" and Claudius begs, "Oh yet defend me friends, I am but hurt." A tense moment occurs as Hamlet must consider that his adoring public may perceive him a villain. After all, executing a king who rules by Divine Right constitutes high treason. Yet the court does not stir, and Claudius dies. Hamlet's sense of righteous vengeance fortifies him.

Now Hamlet must face his own death. In order to shuffle off his mortal coil, Hamlet must make peace. He first reconciles with his foil Laertes. The two men exchange pardons, and they consign one another to Christian Heaven by releasing themselves from culpability for the lives they have taken. The one task Hamlet must still complete is to find a conduit for the words that have kept him alive, which have been as much his sustenance as his torture. So he asks the loyal Horatio to tell his story.

Horatio, Hamlet's calmer mirror image, now carries the responsibility of juggling the conflict between thinking and doing, between words and action. Hamlet gives his "dying voice" to Fortinbras, who has arrived in Denmark from fighting in Poland just as Hamlet prepares to take his final breath. In Fortinbras, Hamlet recognizes a kindred spirit who can appreciate the significance of the words and who can restore honor to Denmark as he claims the throne. Hamlet then releases himself to death once and for all. "The rest is silence."

Fortinbras takes immediate charge, listening to the story Horatio tells and immediately ordering his soldiers to clean up the mess. He replaces the confusion with calm by ordering a hero's funeral for Hamlet. He will obliterate the corruption of Claudius' reign, and end what Horatio reported as the "carnal, bloody and unnatural acts" that have ruled Denmark.

We know that all will be well because the last words in the play belong to strong, unequivocal Fortinbras:

Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this

Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.

The final scene also completes the revenge triangle. All the sons of the murdered fathers (King Hamlet, King Fortinbras, and Polonius) have seen vengeance served. The sons have appeased the medieval code of honor while satisfying the Christian expectation of forgiveness. Most importantly, Hamlet is finally a warrior. Like Achilles' son Pyrrhus, to whom the First

Player referred in Act II, Hamlet has stopped standing "like a neutral to his will and matter." After his stunned pause, Phryrus took a "rousèd revenge" and killed King Priam. So Hamlet has overcome his paralysis and has killed King Claudius. And, like Phryrus, he will be buried with the hero's glory that he has finally earned.

QUOTES

1. "That it should come to this!" (Act I, Scene II)

Just after speaking to his mother Gertrude and uncle (and step-father) King Claudius, Hamlet has his first of five soliloquies. When Hamlet exclaims, "[t]hat it should come to this," he'd just finished describing how the world has gone to fodder. Then Hamlet goes on to say how he cannot believe his mother would marry his father's brother (i.e., Hamlet's uncle). This quote shows Hamlet's fury and shock at his mother's remarriage. In Hamlet's mind, the world is in chaos and the remarriage is the apex of things spiraling out of control. Soliloquies allow the audience to see into a character's inner thoughts. The soliloquy as a whole belays the reasons for Hamlet's initial deep melancholy and confusion that persists for much of the play.

2. "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Act I, Scene II)

Hamlet is still speaking in his first of five soliloquies. The "woman" he specifically refers to is his mother. Hamlet felt she was weak, or not strong enough to mourn his father longer. Hamlet goes on further to say that not even an animal or beast, who has no reasoning skills, would have abandoned the mourning so quickly. All in all, this shows how angry and confused Hamlet is by his mother's remarriage.

3. "Neither a borrower nor a lender be; For loan oft loses both itself and friend, and borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry." (Act I, Scene III)

Here Polonius is giving his son, Laertes, sound advice before Laertes returns to Paris. Polonius is really saying loaning money to other people is dangerous. Often, people don't pay you back and you use a friend because of the failed transaction. On the flip side, it is distasteful to borrow money because it is impolite and usually indicates you are living outside of your means.

4. "This above all: to thine own self be true." (Act I, Scene III)

Again, Polonius is doling out sage advice to his son, Laertes. Simply put, Polonius is telling his son "be yourself." In the context of the play, Polonius is also telling Laertes to be a gentleman and not "false to any man" (line 80). Overall, Polonius's advice helps reveals a theme of irony that threads throughout the play. Neither Polonius nor Laertes heeds the

advice that Polonius gives in this scene, and both perish due to their lack of adherence.

5. *"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."* (Act I, Scene IV)

At the end of Scene IV, a guard, Marcellus, says these famous words to Horatio. After Hamlet follows the ghost, Marcellus and Horatio know they have to follow as well, because Hamlet is acting so impulsively. Marcellus's words are remarking on how something evil and vile is afoot. This moment could be interpreted as foreshadowing of the impending deaths of most of the principle characters.

6. *"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't."* (Act II, Scene II)

At this point of the play, Hamlet and Polonius are interacting onstage, but this quote is technically spoken by Polonius to the audience, in an aside. What Polonius is saying is that, even though Hamlet is talking crazy, it actually makes sense, or it has a "method." Polonius's assertion is ironic because he is right and wrong. Polonius believes Hamlet is acting "mad" because Hamlet's love of Ophelia has driven him to such. While Polonius is correct to think that there is reason behind Hamlet's actions, he is incorrect as to the cause. Hamlet is purposefully acting mad to disguise his true mission to avenge his father's murder.

7. *"To be, or not to be: that is the question."* (Act III, Scene I)

As one of Shakespeare's all-time famous quotes, Hamlet's words have stood the test of time and are often quoted even today in both academia and pop culture. In the beginning of his fourth, and best known, soliloquy Hamlet muses about the conundrum of suicide. He wonders if one route is "nobler" than the next. At this point in the play, Hamlet has been unable to act upon his motives for personal revenge, and this frustrates him. Which is better, suffering as he has been or ending it all? The tone of Hamlet's soliloquy is more meditative than angry, but he does seriously consider suicide. He relates his personal struggle to the struggles that all of mankind shares. Given that you don't know what happens after you die, Hamlet realizes that death wouldn't be the ideal escape he craves.

8. *"The lady doth protest too much, methinks."* (Act III, Scene II)

Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, says this famous line while watching *The Mousetrap*. Gertrude is talking about the queen in the play. She feels that the play-queen seems insincere because she repeats so dramatically that she'll never remarry due to her undying love of her husband. The play-queen, in fact, does remarry. It is unclear whether Gertrude recognizes the parallel between herself and the play-queen; Hamlet certainly feels that way. This moment has an irony that is shown throughout the play.

9. *A little more than kin, and less than kind.* (Act I, Scene II).

Hamlet says this in response to King Claudius' question that he should not feel sorrow for so long over the death of his father. He is also telling Hamlet that he is his kin and next heir to the throne. However, Hamlet is very sarcastic to King Claudius implying that he is more than a kin to him now. He means that he is now his son, as the king has married his widowed mother after his father's assassination. These words are important, as they show Hamlet's loathing for the king.

10. *Neither a borrower nor a lender be; For loan oft loses both itself and friend, and borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.* (Act I, Scene, III).

These words have been uttered by Polonius, a famous character in Hamlet who is close to King Claudius. His son Laertes is leaving for France. He is advising his son how to live a good life by not lending and borrowing. He is also telling him the harms of borrowing and its impacts on the life of a person. These words are significant, as they give philosophy of living a good and stable social life.

11. *There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*

(Act II, Scene, II).

Hamlet speaks these golden words to his former classmates. King Claudius has appointed them to spy on him to know his thoughts about the murder of his father. When they question him about his bad temper and sorrowful expressions, he says that the thinking makes a thing bad or good. In fact, he refers to Denmark which seems to him bad but to his friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, good. These words are significant in that they show the depth of Hamlet's thinking and the universality of his utterances.

12. *What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!* (Act II, Scene, II).

Hamlet utters these lines in his first soliloquy. He is philosophizing his thoughts about the creature, man. He is saying that man is the "paragon of animals" and crown of all creation. In fact, it is his sense of wonder over the creature, man, as how man seems to be noble and how his faculties have blessed him to be at the top of other creatures.

12. *The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.*

(Act II, Scene II).

Hamlet utters these words to catch the king if his conscience is alive to the actions of the play. Here play means the play staged in Hamlet, the play. Hamlet has arranged a play on the subject of the killing of a king. He speaks these words to Horatio, his friend, to inform him that his objective

in getting the play staged is to catch the king. He wants to see whether the king shows any sign of remorse or prick of conscience for the murder.

13. *The lady doth protest too much, methinks.* (Act III, Scene II).

Queen Gertrude, the mother of Hamlet, utters these lines when she wants to ask about the protests of the female character of the play staged within Hamlet. She points out the overacting of that character. However, it also shows that she seems to show her own guilt, as she knows that King Claudius has killed her husband. Hamlet wants to verify this by staging that play. However, it does not appear certain to him, the reason of his morose temper.

14. *To be, or not to be: that is the question.* (Act III, Scene I).

This is one of the best quotations of all times. It is also considered the best combination of words used in different contexts. These are the words from second soliloquy of Hamlet occurring in the third act. In this soliloquy, he faces the metaphysical dilemma of man's life. This dilemma is whether he should choose to end his life, or face the sufferings and injustice.

15. *Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?* (Act III, Scene II).

Hamlet speaks these sarcastic words to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern whom King Claudius has appointed to spy on Hamlet. However, Hamlet is alive to all these things. He instantly senses their purpose. He wants to warn them through these sarcastic words that they should not play games with him to know his thinking. He also wants to alert them that he knows their real role.

16. *I will speak daggers to her, but use none.* (Act III, Scene II).

Hamlet uses these words expressing his purpose of speaking to his mother. He means that he would taunt her for her hasty marriage with his uncle, King Claudius. The words used here in metaphorical sense convey his purpose of attacking his mother on emotional front. He is of the view that he should make his mother realize what she has done.

17. *Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince; / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!* (Act V, Scene II)

Horatio speaks these lines by the end of the play in the last scene. Hamlet is dying after injured in the duel with Laertes. These words a tribute to Hamlet's nobility and his sense of purpose. Despite philosophical in nature and a true skeptic, expresses his believe in Hamlet's good intentions. These two lines show that Hamlet's goodness becomes apparent in the end:

SUMMARY

Prince Hamlet is depressed. Having been summoned home to Denmark from school in Germany to attend his father's funeral, he is shocked to find

his mother Gertrude already remarried. The Queen has wed Hamlet's Uncle Claudius, the dead king's brother. To Hamlet, the marriage is "foul incest." Worse still, Claudius has had himself crowned King despite the fact that Hamlet was his father's heir to the throne. Hamlet suspects foul play.

When his father's ghost visits the castle, Hamlet's suspicions are confirmed. The Ghost complains that he is unable to rest in peace because he was murdered. Claudius, says the Ghost, poured poison in King Hamlet's ear while the old king napped. Unable to confess and find salvation, King Hamlet is now consigned, for a time, to spend his days in Purgatory and walk the earth by night. He entreats Hamlet to avenge his death, but to spare Gertrude, to let Heaven decide her fate.

Hamlet vows to affect madness — puts "an antic disposition on" — to wear a mask that will enable him to observe the interactions in the castle, but finds himself more confused than ever. In his persistent confusion, he questions the Ghost's trustworthiness. What if the Ghost is not a true spirit, but rather an agent of the devil sent to tempt him? What if killing Claudius results in Hamlet's having to relive his memories for all eternity? Hamlet agonizes over what he perceives as his cowardice because he cannot stop himself from thinking. Words immobilize Hamlet, but the world he lives in prizes action.

In order to test the Ghost's sincerity, Hamlet enlists the help of a troupe of players who perform a play called *The Murder of Gonzago* to which Hamlet has added scenes that recreate the murder the Ghost described. Hamlet calls the revised play *The Mousetrap*, and the ploy proves a success. As Hamlet had hoped, Claudius' reaction to the staged murder reveals the King to be conscience-stricken. Claudius leaves the room because he cannot breathe, and his vision is dimmed for want of light. Convinced now that Claudius is a villain, Hamlet resolves to kill him. But, as Hamlet observes, "conscience doth make cowards of us all."

In his continued reluctance to dispatch Claudius, Hamlet actually causes six ancillary deaths. The first death belongs to Polonius, whom Hamlet stabs through a wall hanging as the old man spies on Hamlet and Gertrude in the Queen's private chamber. Claudius punishes Hamlet for Polonius' death by exiling him to England. He has brought Hamlet's school chums Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Denmark from Germany to spy on his nephew, and now he instructs them to deliver Hamlet into the English king's hands for execution. Hamlet discovers the plot and arranges for the hanging of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead. Ophelia, distraught over her father's death and Hamlet's behavior, drowns while singing sad love songs bemoaning the fate of a spurned lover. Her brother, Laertes, falls next.

Laertes, returned to Denmark from France to avenge his father's death, witnesses Ophelia's descent into madness. After her funeral, where he and Hamlet come to blows over which of them loved Ophelia best, Laertes vows to punish Hamlet for her death as well.

Unencumbered by words, Laertes plots with Claudius to kill Hamlet. In the midst of the sword fight, however, Laertes drops his poisoned sword. Hamlet retrieves the sword and cuts Laertes. The lethal poison kills Laertes. Before he dies, Laertes tells Hamlet that because Hamlet has already been cut with the same sword, he too will shortly die. Horatio diverts Hamlet's attention from Laertes for a moment by pointing out that "The Queen falls."

Gertrude, believing that Hamlet's hitting Laertes means her son is winning the fencing match, has drunk a toast to her son from the poisoned cup Claudius had intended for Hamlet. The Queen dies.

As Laertes lies dying, he confesses to Hamlet his part in the plot and explains that Gertrude's death lies on Claudius' head. Finally enraged, Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and then pours the last of the poisoned wine down the King's throat. Before he dies, Hamlet declares that the throne should now pass to Prince Fortinbras of Norway, and he implores his true friend Horatio to accurately explain the events that have led to the bloodbath at Elsinore. With his last breath, he releases himself from the prison of his words: "The rest is silence."

The play ends as Prince Fortinbras, in his first act as King of Denmark, orders a funeral with full military honors for slain Prince Hamlet.

KEY WORDS

- adoption tried friendship that has stood the test of time.
- aery nest.
- aim to guess or conjecture.
- angle fishing line.
- an't if it.
- antique Roman The ancient Roman was ever ready to commit suicide when confronted with calamity.
- apoplex'd paralyzed.
- argal therefore.
- arms a coat of arms, being a group of emblems and figures arranged on and around a shield and serving as the special insignia of a person, family, or institution.

- arras a tapestry wall hanging.
- assay of arms try to raise.
- assays of bias This is a metaphor from the game of lawn bowling; the weight in the ball, which causes it to follow a curved line, is called the bias. Hence the meaning of the phrase is "indirect attempts."
- assigns appurtenances.
- assurance a pun on conveyance of property by deed and security.
- batten to grow fat; thrive; to be well fed or wealthy at another's expense.
- Be as ourself in Denmark Claudius is extending to Hamlet all the special privileges and prerogatives belonging to a crowned prince.
- be idle seem crazy.
- beetles o'er overhangs.
- bend you incline yourself.
- berattle abuse.
- beteem permit.
- bilboes long iron bars with sliding shackles, for fettering prisoners' feet.
- bisson rheum blinding tears.
- blank the center spot of a target; bull's-eye.
- blench to shrink back, as in fear; flinch.
- blood and judgment passion and reason.
- bodkin a dagger or stiletto.
- botch a badly patched place or part
- bourn limit; boundary.
- brainish apprehension mad notion (that he heard a rat).
- bray out celebrate.
- breathing time time of exercise.
- broad blown in full blossom.
- brokers people who act as agents or intermediaries in negotiating contracts, buying and selling, and so forth.
- bruit proclaim.
- bugs terrors, nightmares.
- bung-hole a hole in a barrel or keg through which liquid can be poured in or drawn out.

- the burning zone the sun.
- buttons buds.
- Buz, buz a slang expression for "tell me something I don't know."
- buzzers gossipers.
- Cain's jaw-bone the jawbone of an ass, with which Cain is supposed to have killed Abel.
- candied sugared with hypocrisy.
- carbuncles precious stones of fiery red color.
- carve choose.
- cast beyond ourselves look beyond what we know or understand.
- cataplasm a poultice, often medicated.
- cautel craft, deceit.
- cease of majesty death of a king.
- censure opinion
- cerements cloths or sheets wrapped around a dead person; shrouds.
- chameleon's dish The chameleon was supposed to feed on air.
- changeling a child secretly put in the place of another; especially, in folk tales, one exchanged in this way by fairies.
- chapfallen a pun; disheartened, depressed, or humiliated (literally, having one's lower jaw hanging down).
- chapless jawless.
- character a pun on character in the sense of personal qualities.
- chariest most modest and virtuous.
- chaste treasure precious chastity.
- checking at swerving aside from; a term in hawking.
- chopine a woman's shoe with a very thick sole, as of cork.
- chorus in ancient Greek drama, a company of performers whose singing, dancing, and narration provide explanation and elaboration of the main action.
- chough a chatterer.
- cicatrice scar or wound.
- clepe to call or address (a person).
- clout a piece of cloth; a rag.

- Clowns rustics. The word indicates that these roles were played by comic actors.
- Cock corruption for God
- cockle hat a hat adorned with cockle shells and worn by pilgrims.
- collection inference.
- compass the tonal range of a musical instrument.
- compelled valour bravery that stems from necessity.
- complete steel full armor.
- compounded restored, mingled.
- Confederate season suitable opportunity.
- confine prison.
- congruing agreeing.
- conjunctive closely united.
- contagious blastments destructive blights.
- continent containing enough ground.
- contraction the marriage contract.
- contumely haughty and contemptuous rudeness; insulting and humiliating treatment or language.
- conveyance the document by which real property is transferred from one person to another; deed.
- convocation of politic worms a political assembly of worms; an allusion to the Diet of Worms (1521), a convocation held by the Catholic Church to allow Martin Luther to explain his reform of doctrine. He had first set his beliefs forth in Wittenberg, where Hamlet and Horatio have studied.
- convoy is assistant a means of conveyance is available.
- coronet weeds garlands of flowers.
- corse corpse, dead body.
- coted overtook.
- couch lie concealed; to hide.
- counsel secrets.
- counter on the false trail (a hunting term); treason.
- counterfeit presentment portrait.

- cousin kinsman. This word was used for any near relation; here it would refer to nephew.
- cozenage treachery.
- cozen'd cheated.
- crack the wind of overwork. The phrase comes from working a horse so hard that it becomes winded.
- crants wreaths.
- credent credulous.
- crescent increasing, growing.
- crowner coroner.
- Cyclops in Greek mythology, any of a race of giants who have only one eye, in the middle of the forehead; they assisted Vulcan, the god of fire.
- Damon a perfect friend; in classical legend, Damon and Pythias were friends so devoted to each other that when Pythias, who had been condemned to death, wanted time to arrange his affairs, Damon pledged his life that his friend would return. Pythias returned and both were pardoned.
- Danskers Danes.
- delated articles detailed provisions set forth in their instructions.
- Deliberate pause a deliberate step, taken after due consideration.
- digested organized.
- distemper mental disturbance.
- divide distinguish.
- doublet a man's close-fitting jacket, with or without sleeves, worn chiefly from the 14th to the 16th centuries. The coat that was fastened (braced) to the hose (short breeches) by laces. When a man was relaxing or careless of appearance, he "unbrac'd," much like a man today loosens his tie or takes off his suit jacket.
- douts extinguishes; literally, do out.
- down gyved fallen, like fetters, about his ankles.
- drabbing associating with prostitutes.
- The dram of evil / Doth all the noble substance of a doubt, / To his own scandal a much-disputed passage. Perhaps a line is missing. The general meaning seems to be that it takes only a small portion of evil to

bring a scandal on the entire substance, however noble it may otherwise be.

- drift of conference roundabout methods.
- drossy frivolous; worthless stuff; rubbish.
- dug a female animal's nipple or teat; vulgarly, a woman's breast.
- dupp'd opened.
- ecstasy madness
- eisel vinegar.
- enginer engineer.
- enseam'd greasy, with a pun on semen.
- envious silver malicious branch.
- escoted paid.
- expectancy and rose bright hope (as future king).
- extravagant and erring vagrant and wandering (both used in their original Latin sense — a common device used by Shakespeare).
- eyases unfledged birds, especially young hawks taken from the nest for training in falconry.
- fain wish.
- fantasy an odd notion; whim.
- fardels burdens; misfortune.
- fat out of condition, sweaty.
- fay faith, used in oaths (by my fay!); with a pun on fairy.
- fear me not don't be afraid for me.
- fell out occurred.
- fellies the segments forming the rim of a spoked wheel.
- Fie for shame! an interjection expressing a sense of outraged propriety.
- first mout'd put into the mouth first in order that all the goodness may be extracted before swallowing.
- fishmonger a dealer in fish, or someone who sells women.
- flaw a sudden, brief gust of wind, often with rain or snow; a squall.
- flood sea. Elsinore is situated on the Danish coast.
- foil and target fencing rapier and small shield.

- foils long, thin swords with a button on the point to prevent injury, used in fencing.
- fordo destroy.
- fordoes destroys.
- forest of feathers plumed hat much worn by players.
- formal ostentation public ceremony.
- fretted having an ornamental pattern of small, straight bars intersecting or joining one another, usually at right angles, to form a regular design, as for a border or in an architectural relief; decorated like the painted ceiling over the stage at The Globe.
- from occasion by chance.
- fust grow moldy.
- gaged pledged.
- gain-giving misgiving.
- gait progress.
- gall scratch, draw blood.
- galled jade a worn-out horse with sores from the rubbing and chafing of a saddle.
- galls his kibe scrapes his heel.
- gambol wander; frolic.
- general censure public's judgment.
- gentry courtesy.
- gib tomcat; a male cat, especially a castrated male cat.
- gibes jests.
- Gis corruption for Jesus.
- goblin damn'd damned agent of the devil. Hamlet, from the very first, seems to question the authenticity of the ghost as the true spirit of his father.
- gorge stomach (literally, throat or gullet).
- grace to bring honor to, dignify; with a pun on the prayer before meals.
- gross and scope general meaning.
- groundings the poorer and less critical section of the audience who stood in the pit.

- half limp.
- hangers straps by which the rapier was hung from the girdle.
- harbingers persons or things that come before to announce or give an indication of what follows; heralds
- hatchment a diamond-shaped panel bearing the coat of arms of a person who has died.
- hautboys oboes.
- hearsed buried.
- Hecate's ban the curse of Hecate, the Greek goddess of the moon, earth, and underground realm of the dead, later regarded as the goddess of sorcery and witchcraft.
- hectic fever; red or flushed , as with fever.
- Hecuba in Homer's Iliad, the wife of Priam and mother of Hector, Troilus, Paris, and Cassandra.
- heedful note careful observation.
- hent to grasp; in this case, a time for action.
- Hercules in Greek and Roman mythology, the son of Zeus, renowned for his strength and courage, especially as shown in his performance of twelve labors imposed on him.
- Hic et ubique Latin for here and everywhere.
- his greatness weigh'd considering his high position.
- his sables and his weeds dignified robes.
- His virtues else his other virtues.
- hoar gray.
- hoodman-blind blindman's bluff.
- Hugger-mugger secret haste.
- Humorous Man the player of character parts.
- humour behavior.
- husbandry thrift.
- Hymen in Greek mythology, the god of marriage.
- Hyperion a Titan often identified with the sun god.
- Hyrcanian beast tiger from Hyrcania, mentioned in the Aeneid.
- Ilium Latin name for Troy

- impart behave.
- impasted made into a paste (the slain, not Pyrrhus).
- imponed^d staked; wagered.
- importing concerning.
- imposthume abscess or festering sore.
- imputation reputation.
- in fee outright.
- in fine in the end.
- in one brow of woe Everyone in the kingdom ought to mourn.
- in the full bent completely. Like a bow that is bent as far as it can be bent.
- incontinency without self-restraint, especially in regard to sexual activity.
- incorps'd and demi-natur'd an integral part of the body.
- index prologue.
- indu'd endowed, belonging to.
- inexplicable dumb-shows the unintelligible pantomime preceding the play proper.
- Intil into.
- inurn'd buried; entombed (literally, put the ashes of a dead person into an urn).
- investments garments.
- jealousy suspicion.
- Jephthah a judge in the Bible who sacrificed his daughter in fulfillment of a vow (Judg. 11:30-40).
- jointress a woman who has been given an interest for life in her deceased husband's estate; here, a partner.
- jowls bumps.
- jump precisely.
- keep lodge.
- knotted and combined locks hair lying together in a mass.
- Larded garnished.
- lauds hymns of praise.

- law of writ classical plays.
- lawful espials spies who are justified in their action.
- lawless resolute desperadoes.
- lay song.
- lay you home to him tell him what's what.
- lets hinders.
- liberty modern plays.
- liegemen loyal subjects.
- life-rendering pelican The pelican was supposed to feed its young with its own blood.
- livery the characteristic clothing worn by members of a particular group or trade.
- loggats skittles or ninepins, a British game in which a ball is bowled at nine wooden pins.
- maiden strewments flowers strewn on a girl's grave.
- mark take notice of; heed.
- Marry a Common Elizabethan expletive for Mary, referring to the Virgin Mary.
- mazzard slang for head (literally, drinking bowl).
- meed a merited recompense or reward.
- Mercury in Roman mythology, the messenger of the gods; god of commerce, manual skill, eloquence, cleverness, travel, and thievery.
- merely entirely, absolutely, altogether.
- michingmallecho slinking mischief.
- milch milky, moist.
- mobled wearing ruffled collars popular in Elizabethan England.
- moiety competent sufficient portion.
- moist star moon.
- mole blemish.
- more above moreover.
- mortis'd firmly joined.
- most carefully upon your hour exactly when you were expected.
- mote speck of dust.

- mould of form pattern of manly beauty and behavior.
- mountebank quack doctor.
- mouse a common term of endearment.
- mows grimaces (twistings or distortions of the face).
- muddy-mettled dull-spirited.
- Murdering-piece cannon loaded with grapeshot.
- mutes or audience silent spectators.
- mutines mutineers.
- nature's livery, or fortune's star inborn or the result of bad luck.
- nave rim; the hub of a wheel.
- Nemean in Greek mythology, a reference to a fierce lion from Nemea killed by Hercules as the first of his twelve labors.
- Neptune's belonging to Neptune, the Roman god of the sea.
- Nero (A.D. 37-68); notoriously cruel and depraved emperor of Rome (54-68) who killed his own mother.
- nighted black, signifying deep mourning.
- Niobe in Greek mythology, a queen of Thebes who, weeping for her slain children, is turned into a stone from which tears continue to flow; hence, an inconsolable woman.
- no fairy takes Medieval Europeans believed that fairies stole children.
- nonce occasion.
- Norway king of Norway.
- noyance harm.
- obstinate condolment grief that is contrary to the will of heaven.
- occulted hidden.
- o'er-leavens ferments.
- of by.
- of general assault common to all men.
- operant powers bodily strength.
- orb the earth.
- ordinant provident.
- ourself royal plural, used throughout the King's speeches.

- out of haunt away from others.
- out of thy star beyond your station in life. Stars were believed to govern men's lives.
- outstretched aspiring.
- paddock toad.
- pair of indentures agreements in duplicate.
- pajock peacock.
- palmy flourishing.
- pardon permission.
- partisan a broad-bladed weapon with a long shaft carried by foot soldiers, used especially in the 16th century.
- pass of practice a treacherous thrust or a warming-up exercise.
- passages of proof proven by events.
- peak mope.
- Pelion, Olympus, and Ossa mountains in Greece; in Greek mythology, the Titans (giant deities) piled Pelion on Ossa and both on Olympus in a futile attempt to reach and attack the gods in heaven.
- Perpend ponder.
- Phoebus' cart Phoebus' chariot. In Greek mythology, Phoebus is Apollo as god of the sun.
- physic the art or science of healing.
- pickers and stealers hands.
- pipe a recorder or flute. The stops are the fingerholes.
- pitch and moment height and importance.
- pith marrow.
- Plautus (254?-184 B.C.); Roman writer of comic dramas.
- plurisy excess.
- poem unlimited a play that observed none of the ancient rules.
- pole Polaris, the North Star, long used by navigators as a reliable point of reference.
- politician plotter, schemer.
- poniards daggers.
- porpentine porcupine.

- posy of a ring as brief and silly as the inscription inside a ring.
- precurse sign, indication.
- present immediate; of or at this time.
- Priam legendary king of Troy, who reigned during the Trojan War; he was the father of Hector and Paris.
- prick'd spurred or urged on
- primal eldest curse that is, the one pronounced upon Cain in for the murder of his brother. Primal here means original.
- primy in its prime, youthful.
- probation proof.
- prodigal exceedingly or recklessly wasteful, spendthrift.
- proof eterne everlasting protection.
- Provincial roses rosettes for concealing the laces on shoes.
- purgation the act of purging; Hamlet probably intends a pun — to administer a purgative to get rid of the bile and to purge him of his guilt. The word recalls Hamlet's father, who is in purgatory.
- put on me reported to me.
- Pyrrhus in Greek mythology, the son of Achilles; one of the Greeks concealed in the famous wooden horse.
- quaintly skillfully; ingeniously.
- quarry heap of slain.
- question subject.
- quick living.
- quick o' the ulcer the heart of the matter.
- quiddities trifling distinctions; quibbles.
- quilets quibbles.
- quit in answer score a return hit.
- rack cloud formations, a broken mass of clouds blown by the wind.
- ranker greater.
- razed slashed for ornamentation.
- recks not his own rede doesn't take his own advice.
- records a wind instrument with finger holes and a wedgelike part (a fipple) near the mouthpiece; fipple flute.

- recover the wind a hunting phrase — to get to windward.
- reechy smoky, dirty, foul, or rancid.
- the region kites the kites of the air. The kite is a bird of prey in the falcon family.
- Rhenish Rhine wine.
- rivals associates or companions in some duty.
- robustious ranting.
- rood a cross as used in crucifixion; specifically, the cross on which Jesus was crucified.
- Roscius the most famous of ancient Roman actors.
- round Polonius really means straight, but it is his nature to speak indirectly.
- rouse a toast in which all glasses must be drained before lowering.
- rouse draught of liquor, toast.
- rub an obstacle hindrance, difficulty, or impediment.
- russet Now, usually a reddish-brown color, but here the warm gray tone of homespun cloth.
- Saint Valentine's Day February 14. The old belief was that the first man seen by a maid on that day was destined to be her husband, and vice versa.
- sallets tasty bits.
- sanctuarize give sanctuary to a murderer.
- satyr in Greek mythology, a woodland diety usually represented as having pointed ears, short horns, the head and body of a man, and the legs of a goat, and as being fond of riotous merriment and lechery.
- scene individable preserving the unities.
- scholar a person with the necessary knowledge of Latin to exorcise a spirit. This was a common Elizabethan belief.
- sconce a slang word for head (literally, blockhouse).
- scrimers fencers.
- scullion a servant doing the rough, dirty work in a kitchen.
- se offendendo in self-defense.
- sea-gown a skirted garment with short sleeves, worn by seamen.
- season qualify.

- season ripen.
- seized of put in legal possession of a feudal holding; assigned ownership.
- Seneca (c. 4? B.C.3A.D. 65); Roman philosopher, dramatist, and statesman.
- sets a blister In Elizabethan England, prostitutes were sometimes branded with a hot iron.
- Shark'd gathered indiscriminately; got by fraud or stratagems.
- sheeted shrouded.
- shent rebuked.
- shoon shoes.
- shrewdly bitterly.
- silence me hide myself.
- simples medicinal herbs.
- Sith since.
- skirts the outer or bordering parts; outskirts, as of a city.
- sledded Polacks the Polish army traveling on sleighs or sleds.
- snuff accumulation of smoldering wick that caused the candle to smoke and burn less brightly.
- so mope be so stupid.
- solidity and compound mass the earth.
- spirit of health There are two possible meanings. First, a saved (healthy) soul, not a lost one. Second, a healing or beneficent spirit.
- splenetic full of spleen, hot-tempered.
- springes snares consisting of a noose attached to something under tension, as a bent tree branch.
- sterling true currency (with the value of an English silver penny).
- Stick fiery off stand out brightly.
- stoup a drinking cup; tankard.
- sun a pun on son, again indicating Hamlet's dislike of the new relationship between himself and his uncle.
- suppliance of a minute a minute's pastime.
- supply and profit for the fulfillment and profitable conclusion of our hope.

- Switzers Swiss mercenary soldiers; in this case, acting as the royal bodyguard.
- swoopstake in a clean sweep.
- tarre urge.
- tax him home take him to task.
- Tellus' in Roman mythology, the goddess of the earth.
- temple body; the temple of the soul.
- tend attend, wait.
- tenures titles to property.
- Termagant Herod favorite characters in the old miracle plays, who were always portrayed as blustering tyrants.
- thieves of mercy merciful thieves.
- this is for all to sum up.
- this slave's offal the entrails of a butchered animal; here, the king's guts.
- thy free awe your submission even after our armies have been withdrawn.
- tickle sere made to laugh easily.
- timber'd made of wood that is too light.
- to the manner born accustomed to it since a child.
- took the fruits of followed.
- total gules completely red.
- toy in blood trifling youthful passion.
- toys of desperation desperate fancies or impulses — referring to the impulse to jump off a high place.
- traduc'd and tax'd defamed and censored.
- trick something trifling.
- tristful sorrowful.
- the triumph of his pledge his drinking ability.
- Tropically the use of a word or words in a figurative sense; figuratively, a trope being a figure of speech.
- truepenny honest fellow.
- tune of the time fashionable jargon.

- turn the beam overbalance the scale.
- turn Turk turn bad.
- 'Twas Aeneas' tale to Dido the story of the sack of Troy as told to Queen Dido by Aeneas. (Virgil's Aeneid contains the story.)
- twelve for nine In a match of twelve bouts (instead of the usual nine), Laertes will win by at least three up.
- unbated not blunted.
- unction ointment, salve; used for the act of anointing as in medical treatment or a religious ceremony.
- Under the moon To be most effective, herbs are gathered by moonlight.
- unfellowed without equal.
- unfledg'd immature (literally designating a young bird without feathers and thus not able to fly).
- unfold yourself to make known or lay open to view, especially in stages or little by little.
- Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled without the sacraments of communion, penance, and extreme unction.
- unimproved mettle untested strength, courage, or character
- union a large pearl.
- unmaster'd importunity uncontrolled and determined wooing.
- unproportion'd overly emotional, excessive.
- unreclaimed untamed.
- unshaped incoherent.
- unsinew'd weak.
- Up-spring a high-kicking, wild German dance.
- valanced bearded.
- variable service different courses.
- ventages small holes or openings; vents.
- vice of kings caricature of a king. Vice, who represented sin, was a stock character in morality plays.
- videlicet (Latin) that is; namely.
- Vulcan's stithy the workshop of the Roman god of fire and metalworking.

- wassail revelry, carousing.
- watch sleeplessness.
- waterfly an insect without apparent purpose.
- weak supposal poor opinion.
- weal a sound or prosperous state; well-being; welfare.
- what means what their income is.
- wheaten garland a garland made of stalks of wheat; a symbol of prosperity.
- whoreson a scoundrel; knave; a general epithet of abuse (literally, bastard).
- will desire.
- will he, nill he willy-nilly, whether he wishes or not.
- windlasses roundabout means.
- with sight with an indifferent eye.
- withers the highest part of a horse's back, located between the shoulder blades.
- woodcocks birds thought of as being stupid because they are easily caught; hence, a person who is a fool or a dupe.
- Woo't colloquial and familiar form of wilt thou.
- wormwood bitterness. (Wormwood is a plant with bitter qualities.)
- yesty collection frothy collection of catchwords.
- your only jig-maker I am the funniest man alive (ironic).

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What kind of a King is Claudius? What evidence shows the kind of monarch he is and the kind of man he is? Is this his appearance, or is it his true character?
2. What is Hamlet's conflict over the Ghost's existence? Why does he continue to doubt the "honesty" of the Ghost even after Claudius confesses his guilt?
3. Name the various foils Shakespeare has created for Hamlet. Why is each important to the play?
4. Explain the function of the Gravediggers at the beginning of Act V.

5. Look through the text and find five questions that drive the theme, characters, or plot of the play. Explain why the questions are important and why Shakespeare poses them as questions and not as answers.
6. Explain the effect Hamlet's ideas of sin and salvation have on the development of his character and the movement of the plot.
7. Identify the three revenge plots in Hamlet, and explain why each is important to the development of the play.

FURTHER READING

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