***Hamlet, Prince of Denmark***

1. i. Before we meet “young Hamlet,” we learn of his father’s warlike history and of the threat “young Fortinbras” poses to Denmark; we also learn much of the nature of spirits.

ii. We next meet a politic King Claudius, settling young Fortinbras, and Prince Hamlet, who comprehends the difference between appearance and reality; in his first soliloquy, we find a rejection of life based on disgust at corruption. Then he leaps to suspicions, easily.

iii. Laertes warns Ophelia off Hamlet; Polonius gives Laertes his parting advice; then Polonius warns Ophelia off Hamlet, even more sternly than Laertes did.

iv. We hear of Danish drunkenness and dangerous ghosts.

v. And now at last the much-anticipated Ghost speaks, and we see immediately negative effects on Hamlet’s mind, followed by negative responses at court to Hamlet’s new manner, and finally Hamlet promising to feign insanity.

1. i. Polonius sets a spy upon Laertes and learns from Ophelia of insane behavior on Hamlet’s part; Polonius ascribes that behavior to love, but the audience understands it is due to new disgust.

ii. Claudius sets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy upon Hamlet, learns he did settle young Fortinbras, hears from Polonius that love for Ophelia has made Hamlet mad, and exits. Hamlet enters, puzzles Polonius, and is left by him in the company of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet sees through them but confides in them anyway, and they tell him of the players’ arrival. Polonius returns, ushers in the players, and listens as Hamlet sets the lead actor to a speech about a King’s murder and a Queen’s mourning. Finally alone, Hamlet delivers a soliloquy that is a masterpiece of self-loathing mixed with much sane reasoning.

1. i. A report from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Claudius; the setting of a trap, with Ophelia as bait, for Hamlet; our first hint of Claudius’ remorse; Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy; his verbal attack upon Ophelia, followed by Claudius’ and Polonius’ diverse reactions to having spied it.

ii. Hamlet’s instructions to the players; his instructions to Horatio; his banter with Ophelia; the playing of the Mousetrap; reactions of Claudius, Hamlet, Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern to the play; Hamlet teases Polonius and, finally alone, delivers a soliloquy.

iii. Claudius empower Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to constrain Hamlet; then he tries in vain to repent. Hamlet forbears to kill him while he seems penitent.

iv. Queen Gertrude fears Hamlet, so Polonius (in hiding) calls for help, and Hamlet kills him. Then Hamlet compares his late father to his uncle, the Ghost appears, Hamlet counsels his mother to forsake his uncle’s bed, and he leaves her pledged not to repeat what he has said.

1. i. The Queen tells the King that Polonius is dead.

ii. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern unsuccessfully demand Polonius’ corpse of Hamlet.

iii. The King demands Polonius’ corpse of Hamlet, orders him to England, and lets the audience know that the English king has orders to kill Hamlet.

iv. We meet Fortinbras; Hamlet meets his Captain, learns how trivial the war is, and soliloquizes upon honor.

v. The Queen and then the King encounter mad Ophelia; Laertes confronts Claudius about his father’s death, sees Ophelia re-enter, quite mad, and resolves revenge; Claudius blames Hamlet.

vi. Horatio gets a letter about pirates from Hamlet.

vii. Claudius having convinced Laertes of Hamlet’s guilt, they plot his murder, designed to look like an accident because the Queen loves him and the people adore him; then the Queen bears to them the news of Ophelia’s death, a kind of accidental suicide.

1. i. The gravediggers dispute; Hamlet and Horatio come to the grave; they speak with the gravedigger; Ophelia’s funeral arrives; Laertes leaps into her grave, followed by Hamlet, and they are kept apart by force, with Laertes increasingly angry.

ii. Hamlet tells Horatio about sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to die; Osric enters, gradually unfolds the challenge, and exits in puzzlement. The match is prepared, prefaced by a sincere apology from Hamlet to Laertes, who responds hypocritically. During the match, the Queen drinks poison that the King had prepared for Hamlet, both fencers are wounded by Laertes’ poisoned foil, the Queen dies, the King dies from being stabbed by Hamlet with the same foil, Laertes dies, Hamlet prevents Horatio from committing suicide and casts his vote for Fortinbras as king, and Hamlet dies. The deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are announced (for which Horatio absolves Claudius). Fortinbras enters and has the last word, and Denmark.

Overviews

It is a play which raises more questions – about human nature, human sexuality, the nature of action, and the possibility of judging others and their actions – than it answers. The first scene sets the mood for this interrogative aspect of the play and symbolizes the uncertainties of the human condition.

It is a play which constantly explores the discrepancies between appearance and reality, in Hamlet, Laertes, Claudius, Gertrude, and almost all the other characters. (Horatio is certainly an exception; Ophelia may also be one.) The players and their Mousetrap play epitomize this theme.

It is a play obsessed (or about a man obsessed?) with mortality as the life-long human condition, with growth as a form of decay, appetite as disease, and life itself as death. The gravediggers’ scene is the most explicit discussion of this theme; the last scene is the culmination of it.

Contexts

*The humors*

Prince Hamlet is said and shown to be suffering from melancholy. It is one of the four humors, cold and dry like earth. The others are phlegm, cold and moist like water; blood, hot and moist like air; and choler, hot and dry like fire. These four humors were supposed to be balanced in every human body. An excess of one produces the melancholic or phlegmatic or sanguine or choleric individual, sad or withdrawn or happy or angry. Each humor had an associated color; black was the color of melancholy.

*Revenge tragedies*

A revenge tragedy has three essential characters: victim, murderer, and avenger. Usually the audience sympathizes with the avenger, who is seen as righting a wrong or doing justice. Two kinds of avenger can be distinguished: the scourge of God, who is usually a damned person (think Richard III), and the minister of the divine vengeance, who is clearly a positive person (think Henry Tudor in *Richard III*). Sometimes the avenger is willing to outdo the murderer in horror, usually losing our sympathy in the process, unless we consider the avenger to have been driven mad; other times the avenger wonders whether it is right to take revenge and considers leaving the murder unpunished. In no other revenge tragedy in Shakespeare’s lifetime do we spend half the play trying to determine whether or not a murder has been committed in the first place.

*Problem plays*

For a long time, *Hamlet* was not thought to be a masterpiece but a problem play, along with *Troilus and Cressida*, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure.* Part of its problem was the fact that Prince Hamlet combined disillusionment (with his mother, in soliloquy, I.ii.135-146; with women in general, in conversation with Ophelia, III.i.111-149; and with his mother again, in conversation with her (III.iv.92-95, 145-153, 160, 183-187) with awareness that Nature and Man can be viewed differently from the way he views them (in conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, II.ii.292-306). Its length, the time it takes for the prince to make up his mind, and the subsequent time it takes for him to act are other aspects of the play that were viewed as problematic.

*History*

According to *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus (the first history of Denmark), which is Shakespeare’s primary source for this play, King Fortinbras of Norway challenged King Hamlet of Denmark to single combat. Fortinbras lost his life and all the lands he personally held (as opposed to the kingdom of Norway). His brother rather than his son succeeded him. At the beginning of the play (I.i), that son, young Fortinbras, hopes to recover the lost lands by force. King Claudius (in I.ii) writes the King of Norway asking him to destroy young Fortinbras’ hope. The King of Norway rebukes and fines his nephew, and then he sends young Fortinbras and his armed followers to Poland. Prince Hamlet (in IV.iv) reflects on the smallness of the Polish goal. We might see justice done if young Fortinbras were to oust his uncle from the throne of Norway and reign himself, or if Prince Hamlet were to oust his uncle from the throne of Denmark and reign himself, but instead young Fortinbras will become King of Denmark.

Hamlet’s Character

Consider Hamlet’s attitudes toward the human body – toward eating, drinking, having sex, and dying – in Act I (scenes ii and iv). He is predisposed to disgust and easily aroused to brood on evil. Are these attitudes healthy ones? Does Hamlet have real as well as feigned madness? His intention to appear mad (I.v) complicates our judgment of his subsequent actions.

We can tease apart real and feigned melancholy in Ophelia’s report of Hamlet (II.i) and the prince’s interactions with Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern (II.ii.). Whether his scenes with Ophelia (III.i) and his mother (III.iv) reveal a mix of real and feigned madness depends on how they are played, but they are preceded (in III.i and ii) by soliloquies that sound depressed, and the soliloquy traditionally tells the truth to the audience. Nevertheless, Hamlet’s playful treatment (in IV.ii and iii) of his killing Polonius looks feigned. Subsequently, a soliloquy in IV.iv also sounds depressed, and his obsession with death and the loss of meaning for him in life appear clearly in V.i. Yet, perhaps because of Ophelia’s death from real madness, he begins the final scene entirely in possession of himself and willing to re-enter society.

How much responsibility should we assign Hamlet for the deaths he causes in this play? He kills Polonius; that death and/or his treatment of Ophelia drives her mad and then to her own death; he sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be killed (in his place) by the King of England; he kills Laertes by accident when he switches foils with him, not knowing Laertes is using a poisoned foil; and he stabs Claudius with full knowledge of the king’s responsibility for the deaths of his father and his mother as well as for his own impending death. We can pardon or blame him to different extents (and in various proportions) for the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Laertes, but Claudius needs to take some of the blame for the deaths of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Laertes, as well as all the blame for Gertrude’s death; they all came about as a result of his failed attempts to kill Prince Hamlet. Only the death of Queen Gertrude is wholly not Hamlet’s fault; only the death of King Claudius is wholly Hamlet’s direct and deliberate action – a just one, if revenge is just.

Critics’ Views

Lewis, in Kernan, says it is a play in which death – the state of being dead – is the subject, and in which Hamlet’s speeches interest us not as revelations of his character but as expressions of our feelings about our own mortality and loss.

Gardner, in Dean, says the revenge tragedy is initiated by the action of a villain, whose downfall is always brought about by some action of his own; the avenging hero always awaits an opportunity which the villain will provide. Hamlet is unusual not in delaying vengeance but in his nature: he experiences moral anguish over his assigned task and refuses to stoop to the villain’s level; the fitting image for him is the opening and closing one of him as a soldier.

Mack, in Dean, says three attributes of the play are (1) its sense of mystery, its interrogative mode (see esp. I.i); (2) its posing the problem of the relationship between reality and appearance; and (3) its theme of mortality, including the infirmity of man, the infection of disease, the poison of evil, and a sense of loss and of decline. [The overviews with which I started these notes are deeply indebted to this article.]