

Act IV scene 6

Sailors give Horatio a letter from Hamlet telling of his capture by pirates and imminent return.

Commentary: **The letter reports a battle at sea and the unexpected doubling back of Hamlet, an arrow returned to plague the inventor, a current turned awry, which proves heaven is ‘ordinant’ (V.2.48).**

Act IV scene 7

Claudius receives a letter from Hamlet notifying him of his impending return. Claudius persuades Laertes not only to believe that Hamlet is his enemy but to fight a dishonourable duel with him using an ‘unbated’ and poisoned rapier. Gertrude tells of Ophelia’s death by drowning.

Commentary: **Claudius answers all Laertes’ charges, giving two reasons why he could not punish Hamlet directly for the murder of Polonius. Neither should be believed, since the claim that Hamlet was ‘envenomed’ by envy against Laertes after the report of Lamord is unlikely to be true on several counts. The Frenchman’s name means ‘death’, which is coming to the three men who know of him. Hamlet is in double danger by having a joint adversary in Claudius and Laertes, who both wish him dead, and Claudius easily manipulates the credulous Laertes into taking on the task of disposing of Hamlet by making his willingness to murder a test of his love for Polonius. Claudius does not mention that he has already arranged for Hamlet’s death, but was perhaps going to do so at line 35, before yet another interruption.**

Gertrude’s narrative elegy to Ophelia beautifies her death. She speaks as though she witnessed it, and someone must have done — in keeping with all the other scenes in the play that have spectators. Ophelia’s descent from air (‘pendent boughs’) to water (‘weeping brook’) to earth (‘muddy death’), caused by her heaviness (waterlogged garments), is a paradigm of the play’s use of the elemental and chain-of-being hierarchies and of Hamlet’s view of the downward course of humankind. The willow was traditionally the tree from which girls who had lost their lovers made mourning garlands. Tragically, Ophelia was unknowingly making her own burial wreath while singing her own funeral hymn.

Task 6

Laertes has received a bewildering series of shocks in the past few scenes. If Shakespeare had allowed him a soliloquy at this point, what do you think he would have said? Write in prose, but try to adopt an appropriate style and idiom.



Act V scene 1

Context

The body of a suicide or murderer could not be buried within hallowed ground, hence the priest's reluctance to give Ophelia a proper burial. The bizarre legal paradox is that she is entitled to a Christian burial only if she drowned herself in self-defence.

This is a parody of a philosophical debate, but the verbs 'to act, to do, and to perform' (line 12) are central to the play.

Two locals question whether Ophelia should have been granted a Christian burial. Hamlet is discussing mortality with the gravedigger when the funeral procession for Ophelia arrives in the churchyard. Hamlet and Laertes fight until they are parted.

Commentary: **It is only a tradition — but a long one — that both Clowns are gravediggers, although line 14 suggests not, and one leaves as Hamlet arrives. 'Clown' in Elizabethan could simply mean 'rustic', but the additional sense of comedian is useful for irony in a tragic scene. They are instrumental in reminding the audience of Adam, the first digger ('Delver') and fallen man, and in reinforcing the play's language (puns, quibbles, questions) and themes (doubt, ambiguity, equivocation). This pair of entertainers, cod philosophers and barrack-room lawyers performs for the unseen audience of Hamlet and Horatio until line 115. Their questioning of the legal and Christian acceptability or otherwise of Ophelia's cause of death makes the audience aware of the difficulty of establishing the truth about anything, and furthers the debate of salvation versus damnation. Hamlet's conversation with the Clown is interrupted by the funeral procession, as death interrupts life.**

The sentiment of the scene is firmly on the side of Ophelia's having gone to her grave a virgin, evoking a sense of tragic loss and waste, and reduces the credibility of the critical argument for her having been seduced, made pregnant, abandoned, and forced to commit suicide.

In this scene Hamlet is seen as a man of the people, able to share their concerns and speak to them as an equal. He has the common touch, and more in common with the honesty and wit of the Clowns/grave-diggers than with the pomposity and affectation of corrupt courtiers. Hamlet is in a sense attending his own funeral in that he is identifying with Ophelia and Yorick, and by revealing his presence to Claudius and Laertes he is signing his own death warrant. Claudius appears to be threatening to turn him into that paradoxical thing, a 'living monument' (line 293) for Ophelia's grave. In the interim, however, he will pluck the mantle of the ruler from the usurper Claudius, and for however brief a moment he will be 'Hamlet the Dane' (line 254), King of Denmark.

The graveyard is the place where Hamlet must face ‘Goodman Delver’, the figure of Adam who was the first man to bear arms with which to dig and to fight battles, the man of clay who must return to clay by being ‘shipped into the land’ (line 73). The ghost rose from his grave here in this earth to summon his son to join him. But the convergence of the twain, twin lines of fate, can be traced further back: since old Fortinbras was killed by old Hamlet on the same day that young Hamlet began his life, so it is fitting that on the day of young Hamlet’s death, young Fortinbras can avenge his dead father by taking over the throne of Denmark.

Hamlet recognises the truly fallen state of man, whether he be Yorick the fool or Alexander the Great, and the power of nature and destiny, stronger than any human, hero or god. He foresees his fate in that of Yorick, the beloved former jester at the court of Elsinore whose role he has been playing. It answers Hamlet’s question of ‘What is a man’ (IV.4.33) to see what he must inevitably become, and to realise that the only thing to distinguish one from another is his reputation, his honour that lives on, beyond his interment, in the memories of those who live to tell the tale. Words and rank are transient and worthless in the face of the skull, the undeniable physical proof of mortality and decomposition.

Laertes’ hollow rhetoric, bombastic diction and melodramatic delivery (lines 243–50) provoke Hamlet to parody his speech as worthless ranting. This is the first time Hamlet and Laertes meet face to face, though their fates have been converging all the while. Their duel to the death begins here, in a grave, each claiming the right to the patch of ground for having loved Ophelia more than the other.

This graveyard scene has no equal in Shakespeare for its range of pathos, wit, irony, comedy, psychology, legal debate, political topicality, metaphysical speculation — and possibly biographical references to Shakespeare’s father, who was a tanner/glovesmaker. In a play full of plays, this is another self-contained drama that contains the full range of verse and prose styles, touches on all the major themes of the play and also provides a visual paradigm of all its imagery. The two doomed sons engage in battle, verbally and physically, in a ‘pit of clay’ and surrounded by skulls, as departed loved ones and the mythically and historically mighty hover as a reminder of the lowly and decomposed state to which we shall all inevitably be reduced.

Taking it Further

At this time the skull was frequently employed as a memento mori; see, for example, the celebrated elongated skull in the foreground of Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* in the National Gallery in London, at www.nationalgallery.org.uk. Click on Paintings and search on Hans Holbein the Younger.

Context

It has been said that the play is obsessed with death, and setting a scene at a grave is quite strong evidence for this. See the discussion of the theme of death in *Themes*, p. 38 of this guide.



Act V scene 2

Hamlet explains to Horatio how he switched letters on the ship and substituted an order for the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for his own. He mocks Osrick but accepts his stepfather's invitation to a duel with Laertes, in which the foils are exchanged by mistake and both parties are fatally wounded. Gertrude drinks the poisoned wine intended for Hamlet and dies. Hamlet kills Laertes with the poisoned sword, then Claudius with the sword and the wine. As Hamlet dies, he names Fortinbras as successor to the throne and persuades Horatio to live to tell his tale rather than join him in death. The English ambassadors arrive to announce the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Fortinbras arrives with his army to claim Denmark and orders a hero's funeral for Hamlet.

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Commentary: **Hamlet is now convinced that 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends' (line 10), a design in the ordering of the universe that renders human intentions futile. By chance (but 'even in that was heaven ordinant', line 48) he had his father's signet ring on him and, doubling for Claudius, was thus able to forge the substitute letter.**

Osrick is the new Polonius, a sycophantic and shallow show-off with a place at court based merely on the ownership of land. His role here, with his farcical 'bonnet', is comic, as an ironic prologue to the tragedy to follow. It seems painfully unjust that the worthless Osrick, replacement for Polonius in stupidity, pomposity and prosiness, should live while Hamlet must die. Critics have been much exercised by the problematical maths of the wager, but it is not necessary to understand the exact terms, only that Claudius is ironically supporting Hamlet and betting on him to not allow Laertes to exceed him by more than three hits.

Hamlet's refusal to 'peruse the foils' (IV.7.135) cannot be attributed to his trusting nature, since he has had a premonition of something 'ill'. It must therefore be interpreted as an abdication of free will in the service of providence: what must happen will happen, sooner or later.

When Hamlet apologises to Laertes it may not be as hypocritical as some critics (including Dr Johnson) have claimed. Although he was not genuinely mad, Hamlet may genuinely regret the frenzy of ungovernable 'passion' that made him a murderer, and it is possible that he really did weep for what he did, knowing his mood changes. We know Hamlet has regard for Laertes as

a ‘noble youth’ (V.1.220), and the word ‘brother’ is a strong indication that Hamlet feels a bond with Laertes — as a fellow mourner of Ophelia and picture of his own loss — and wishes to be reconciled to him before death. Laertes would have become Hamlet’s brother if a marriage with Ophelia had taken place.



Laertes (Michael Maloney, left) and Hamlet (Kenneth Branagh) in the 1996 film version

The duel scene is the manifestation of the metaphorical battle of good versus evil conducted on every level: Prince Hamlet is fighting for his father, for Denmark, and for Christianity; Laertes is surrogate for the evil Claudius in this battle of ‘mighty opposites’ (line 62). Hamlet’s thinking has come full circle: he now fears damnation if he continues to allow ‘this canker of our nature come/In further evil’ (lines 69–70). So he dispatches his stepfather — ‘incestuous, murderous, damnèd Dane’ (line 319) — with a double dose of poison, doubly requiting his father.

The story is left incomplete, and needs a Horatio to fill in the gaps for those who remain; those who are dead have departed in a state of ‘bestial oblivion’ (IV.4.40). Horatio’s eulogy for Hamlet seems to be cut short by the entrance of Fortinbras.

Gertrude’s refusal to obey Claudius over the drink suggests that she is finally choosing her son over her new husband. Some commentators think she is deliberately killing herself as a punishment or in order to join her former husband, but for it to be suicide she would need to know of the poison plot against Hamlet, and there is no evidence for this.

Hamlet speaks as one who has learnt to embrace the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and ‘recognizes the folly and



pretension of humanistic aspiration, and acknowledges the controlling power of God' (introduction to Penguin edition, p. xxxvi). As C. S. Lewis points out, this is where the Hamlet who lost his way before the play began finds it again, and knows his true direction (Lerner 1970, p. 72). 'Ripeness is all' is a philosophical conclusion that accepts the notion of a higher power, and one worthy of respect. What is important to Hamlet the intellectual is the ability to discern a pattern in the workings of the universe, for otherwise there is only chaos and nothing has any purpose or meaning. Any pattern is better than no pattern, and by the end Hamlet has ceased to doubt or question, and seems at peace with himself. By seeming to succumb to God's will he has achieved his own. Alternatively, it could be argued that Hamlet's capitulation at the end to the whims of providence is a betrayal of all his former rational principles. Horatio advises him 'If your mind dislike anything, obey it' (line 211), so this could be seen as a kind of suicide after all. Hamlet has even less reason to wish to live now, with Ophelia gone. The third interpretation is that Hamlet's error is in having delayed: had he dispatched Claudius earlier he might not have had to die to do so now, so he is paying the price of procrastination.

It is fitting that Hamlet's final utterance should be incomplete, as words are ultimately inadequate and imperfect: '— the rest is silence' (line 352). He dies an honourable death as a man of action and on a battlefield — as recognised by Fortinbras — a Christian soldier who has proved himself obedient and no coward, who has done his appointed duty, and who has put time back in joint. That Horatio, the stoic and Aristotelian, offers to kill himself is testimony to the exceptional qualities of Hamlet, the 'sweet Prince', and to the strength of their friendship. Unlike Laertes, Horatio is not 'passion's slave' and therefore his being overcome by emotion has the greater impact. However, his simplistic, conventional summary of the events shows that he hasn't really understood. Hamlet briefly becomes King of Denmark, entitled to a royal send-off and to nominate his successor. He is granted a soldier's funeral as the gun salute releases his soul to fly to heaven.

Task 7

Horatio does not appear to have understood fully the carnage he has just witnessed. Nor, presumably, does Fortinbras. Write the newspaper headline and article that appeared the next day in the *Elsinore Times*, attempting to make sense of what has happened.

Themes

Melancholy, madness and memory

The modern psychological label of bipolar disorder (manic depression) fits Hamlet very well: it was a mental state recognised, if not so called, at the time, and blamed on melancholy caused by excessive introspection. Melancholy (the word means 'black bile') was considered an unnatural state, a physical disease caused by an imbalance between the four elemental fluids or bodily humours composing the human body.

It was in the tradition of revenge tragedy that the aggrieved character should become mad with rage. Madness is a response to two opposing and irreconcilable forces which the mind cannot cope with, therefore the temporary or permanent escape from intolerable shock or pressure. Mad individuals no longer have to feel guilty or responsible for their actions, which, even if they are aware of them, can be attributed to another self (as with Hamlet when excusing himself to Laertes in Act V scene 2). It was believed that madness fluctuated with the weather and wind direction, southerly breezes being the more wholesome to the afflicted mind, hence Hamlet's comment of II.2.377–78. It was also thought that moods of madness were affected by the moon's cycle and were especially prevalent and violent at full moon, hence the word 'lunacy'. Fits and remissions in the hero's lunacy were a feature of the source play, *The Spanish Tragedy*, also called *Hieronimo's Mad Again*.

Forms of madness in Hamlet

Passion was considered to be both a manifestation and a cause of madness, a kind of delirium called an 'ecstasie' (which means, literally, standing outside oneself), because it meant a loss of control by the rational mind. Ophelia's madness is a classic case of the mind being overloaded with passion (literally 'suffering') and throws into relief Hamlet's method of coping with the similar anguish of grief and betrayal.

On the other hand, the 'divine idiot', the fool who in his childlike innocence is actually closer to God and has greater insight than ordinary mortals, has a respected place in the history of literature and cinema. It was a particular feature of the medieval romance that sensitive young noblemen were driven mad by unrequited or rejected love. Polonius is certain that this is the cause of Hamlet's lunacy. Grief, however, is an

Context

The name 'Amlodi' in Norse referred to a fool or weak-minded person.



extreme emotion that can present itself as physical or mental breakdown, and Gertrude attributes her son's madness to 'His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage' (II.2.57). Suicide occurs, at least as a discussion topic, in the play and has been traditionally regarded as evidence of being of unsound mind.

Madness also has a comic mask, however, as displayed by Hamlet when playing the fool as the court jester while in 'antic disposition' mode. This links with the play's themes of performing for an audience and wearing a false face. Fools (who wore 'motley', a half-and-half, two-toned costume) were masters of the pun and *double entendre* (as self-protection against their employers' taking offence). Madness, real or affected, disguised a person's thoughts and intentions, and could therefore be a threat to others; Claudius is certain that 'Madness in great ones must not unwatched go' (III.1.189).

'This distracted globe'

The theme of satirists has always been that a madman is no madder than anyone else, and is arguably saner, since the true madness is that of the world itself. Madness gives Hamlet an *alter ego* that reinforces the doubleness motif in the play, and which makes him a microcosm of out-of-joint Denmark. The poison has spread outwards from Claudius, and everyone with whom he is in contact becomes corrupted. Therefore it is fitting that Hamlet appears to have been infected too. Madness is an actualisation of the metaphor of sickness in the play: 'My wit's diseased' (III.2.329–30). It supports the recurring imagery of decline and fall, conveyed by the downward movements within the play, that his mind should appear to have been 'o'erthrown'. It adds further doubt for the audience, who cannot be absolutely certain how feigned Hamlet's madness is. Some critics claim that he does become truly mad when the mask becomes the reality.

Ophelia's madness

Hamlet's supposed madness provides an opposite parallel for Ophelia's genuine madness later. Hers is precipitated by a double grief, for both her father's death and her lover's exile, possibly compounded by the knowledge that her ex-lover is her father's murderer. Women's minds were considered weaker than men's and less able to withstand emotional trauma, not only because women were created with inferior intellects but because they were governed by the inconstant moon (because of menstruation) and possessed a womb ('hysteria' comes from the Greek for womb), which was thought to be the seat of extreme emotion.

When Hamlet leaves, the role of mad person in court becomes vacant again, and her assuming it makes her one of Hamlet's many doubles. Furthermore, both lose their father through violence; both find memory, and the comparison between what was and what is, unbearable; both are imprisoned, isolated and watched; both suffer from the diabolical conspiracy of Claudius and Polonius.

Ophelia's situation is worse than Hamlet's, however, in that, having lost her father and been abandoned by her lover, she has no future prospects and would quite likely have ended up in the nunnery that Hamlet has ordered her to. Ophelia's mad songs unwittingly reveal a side of her that has been unsuspected by the other characters (one too shocking for eighteenth-century theatre-goers), whereas Hamlet uses madness to conceal.

The significance of memory

Memory was regarded as a duty, as it is a mental faculty that distinguishes humans from animals, and is a means of respecting the dead. Hamlet therefore takes exception to Claudius's lecturing him on why he should forget his father in Act I scene 2, and to his mother's having forgotten his father so quickly: 'a beast that wants discourse of reason/Would have mourned longer' (I.2.150–51). Memory can also be a painful burden, a weighing down of the spirits that induces melancholy. It is his mother's and uncle's refusal to remember his father (though Claudius claims 'The memory be green', I.2.2) that causes his resentment against them even before he learns of the murder. Memory is all that remains to link the living and the dead. As Hamlet painfully demonstrates, the body rots. The Ghost begs Hamlet to 'Remember me' (I.5.91). Though it can make us melancholy to remember ('Must I remember?', I.2.143), it is unnatural and reprehensible to attempt to forget, as our consciences then become hardened. This is why Hamlet must force his mother to access her memories, and why in Act I scene 5 Hamlet writes down something he has learned ('That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain', line 108) as an aide-memoire, since some things must not be forgotten and memory is fallible.

Plays, players and acting

The cast list includes Players, which at the time meant an itinerant group of performers who, in return for hospitality, provided entertainment at courts and grand houses. *Hamlet* is distinctive not only in using the conceits of acting and putting on a show as intrinsic themes, but also in

Task 8

Collect evidence to compare the feigned madness of Hamlet with the real madness of Ophelia. Do you see similarities in the way the conditions are manifested by the two characters?

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containing a play within a play. Shakespeare uses the stage metaphor in other plays, such as *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*, but more than any other this play investigates the medium of theatre and the nature of performance, as well as making topical mention of the London theatres and their companies. In Act II scene 2 there are puns on their names, Fortune and Globe, in addition to a denunciation of child actors. Extra levels of irony in a work that affects to abhor deception and disguise are that Hamlet's own role involves playacting, and it was Shakespeare's own profession. The round Globe theatre is the setting for the play and the universe in microcosm.

Acting and action

The play within the play is the structural centre of *Hamlet*, with a corresponding symmetry either side of it. It also brings together the entwined actions of revenge and marriage and forces them to a joint crisis. When the Ghost appears to Hamlet after the play and Polonius is killed, the second revenge cycle begins, which reverses the role of Hamlet and turns Laertes into his avenger.

Performing a deed, performing to spectators, pretending, or just taking initiative as opposed to being passive, are all forms of acting in the play. The word 'act' and its derivatives and synonyms are ubiquitous: the words 'play', 'cue', 'prompted', 'performance', 'audience', 'prologue', 'stage', 'show', 'trappings' and 'applaud' all contribute to the theatrical image cluster. 'Act' is also a legal term, discussed by the Clowns in Act V scene 1, that relates to the judgement theme of the play and brings up again the question of active versus passive, with the paradox of Ophelia deserving a Christian burial only if 'she drowned herself in her own defence' (V.1. 6–7). A more general irony is that an actor appears to be the spontaneous author of his words and actions, but they are in fact scripted by someone else, have been rehearsed and reiterated many times, and are therefore false. This is the point Hamlet makes when reflecting on the First Player's acting — 'What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,/That he should weep for her?' (II.2.556–57) — and when he tells his mother that outward shows of grief 'are actions that a man might play' (I.2.84).

Playing a part

Claudius, the showman and demagogue, performs continuously from his first grand entrance in procession on to the stage. His affected and prolix utterances use the royal plural and overuse characters' names in a style that sounds insincere. Though he pretends to care about the welfare of others, it is really self-interest and political expediency he is considering

Performing a deed, performing to spectators, pretending, or just taking initiative... are all forms of acting in the play

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whenever he speaks, even when praying, and when at the end Gertrude drops dead and he lies that 'She swoonds to see them bleed' (V.2.302).

Gertrude seems to be pretending that the situation at court and within the family is better than it is, as if she prefers to bury her head in the sand. Though she does not know her new mate killed her previous husband, she guesses how Hamlet feels about the 'o'erhasty marriage' but does not attempt to talk to him about it.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are forced to play the role of spies, which means everything they say to Hamlet is contrived and duplicitous. They are, as Tom Stoppard shows in his play based on their experiences, players in someone else's play.

Polonius is playing a parody of himself, which would be more amusing if it were not that he bears some blame for the marriage and total blame for Ophelia's betrayal of Hamlet. Hamlet awards him the dunce's cap because he plays the fool throughout his short life in the play, while fancying himself to be a serious actor. He also appropriates the role of director whenever he gets a chance: he gives instructions to Ophelia and Gertrude on how to play their rendezvous with Hamlet, and to Laertes on how to act his way through Paris and life.

Laertes seems to be overacting at Ophelia's funeral, adopting the actions and speech mode of the stereotypical ranting revenger. This prevents him from coming across as sincere in his grief for his sister, seemingly more incensed by the damage done to his family's honour, or rather his own.

Hamlet's main objection to women is that they are all actors: they paint their faces and 'jig', 'amble' and 'lisp' to deceive men. He believes honour demands that one should 'Suit the action to the word, the word to the action' (III.2.17–18). The combined effect of all the playacting is that Hamlet and the audience feel that only Horatio stands out as someone who is what he appears to be, has no affectations, and can therefore be trusted.

This play has many would-be kings: old Hamlet still stalks the battlements dressed as a warrior king; Claudius, 'a king of shreds and patches', usurps the royal title; Gertrude is now 'imperial jointress to this warlike state' (1.2.9) and would not give up her regal position; Polonius once played the emperor Julius Caesar, and dies in mistake for 'his better'; the Player King tells the tragic tale of King Priam of Troy and in the Mousetrap represents old Hamlet as Duke Gonzago; Laertes has raised a mob of followers who cry: 'Laertes shall be king!'; Hamlet the Dane, a shadow king who 'was likely, had he been put on,/To have proved most royal' (V.2.391–92), is denied the succession but is able to cancel the edicts of Claudius with his father's signet ring and assume the



role of King of Denmark for a matter of minutes; Fortinbras, the king-in-waiting, claims his 'rights of memory' in the kingdom and takes over the throne of Denmark.

Hamlet's roles

Hamlet is reluctant to play the role of the stock avenger, which we see in Laertes, or indeed to conform to any stereotype, a concept he abhors and mocks in Polonius and Osrick. Violence of word and deed do not come naturally to his reflective and moral temperament. What he most aspires to, and saw in his father, is a dignified and worthy playing of the role of man. The ideal Renaissance man was characterised by beauty, wit, and swordsmanship. He should be a poet, a soldier, a courtier and a scholar. That Hamlet was viewed as having achieved this pinnacle of excellence we glean from Ophelia's eulogistic speech about him being the 'rose of the fair state' (III.1.153). He refuses to accept that man should give way to his baser instincts — sex, food, drink and sleep — and play the beast, and he criticises Claudius for having done so, thus bringing Denmark into disrepute. He gives up his role as Ophelia's suitor and refuses to play that of son to his uncle. In his view the former is too frivolous for a time and place 'out of joint' and the latter would be an odious betrayal of his father's memory.

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A role he does take on is holding a mirror up to nature (e.g. when he gets his mother to see the error of her ways), believing it to be his job to discover and reveal the truth about everyone and everything. He hands over this role to Horatio on the point of death. He thinks heaven has appointed him 'scourge and minister', the contradictory roles of punisher and priest, and that he is responsible for the salvation of others. He is finally an avenger, but not one motivated by a personal vendetta (his father has not been mentioned since the closet scene). He is acting as a divine agent to purge Denmark of evil and to restore justice, the job that he recognised was his when he cursed his fate at the end of Act I, and which he finally accepts and performs with grace and, most importantly, without jeopardy to his soul.

Task 9

List all the roles you can find Hamlet playing, or refusing to play, giving one example for each.

Internal audiences

There is not only a play within a play, but there are audiences within the scenes throughout the actual play. The stage audiences are either in public view (such as when the whole court watches the fencing match) or hidden and invisible to the characters doing the performing (such as Polonius hiding behind the arras). In the Mousetrap scene there is a parallel theatre audience watching a play, and within that Hamlet and

Horatio are watching the king's reaction as a member of that audience. The constant element of putting on a performance in *Hamlet* creates uncertainty for the real audience as to whether characters would be saying or doing the same thing if they were aware or not aware of being watched. This is particularly relevant to the nunnery scene, where it is unclear whether Hamlet knows, or at what point he realises, that Polonius and Claudius are eavesdropping on his conversation with Ophelia. Thus the themes of doubling, doubt and spying are made concrete, and an atmosphere of suspicion and treachery is reinforced. Intimate scenes that should be private are not allowed to be so, which disturbs propriety at the court of Elsinore and increases our sympathy for Hamlet as a target of contriving.

Characters watching each other often draw the wrong conclusions (e.g. Hamlet's misreading of Claudius at prayer), which puts the audience on its guard as to its own interpretations. It means that one cannot trust the evidence of one's eyes since, without sufficient knowledge, or as victims of deliberate deception, we cannot be sure of anything.

'The play's the thing'

The Players and their play make a vital contribution to the action and themes of *Hamlet*. Players make use of all human experience in the two modes of comedy and tragedy, and their trade consists of both words and actions. Hamlet's dilemma lies in not knowing which is the more honourable of these contrary forms of expression. His father's legacy is that of a role model for manly military action without asking questions; Fortinbras does not 'unpack his heart with words' (II.2.583); at one point Hamlet scorns words as the expression of not only females but prostitutes ('a very drab'). The stoic Horatio, on the other hand, refuses to be a slave to passion, bases his beliefs on hard evidence, and advises 'If [one's] mind dislike anything, obey it' (V.2.211). Hamlet seems to admire both these characters and their behaviour, but they represent diametrically opposed attitudes to life, and he is torn between action and reflection until he can find a way of reconciling them.

Note: For a discussion on which lines Hamlet added to *The Murder of Gonzago*, go to www.philipallan.co.uk/literatureguidesonline.

Other themes

Binary oppositions are reflected in the themes, as in other aspects of the play, and one could say that opposition is in itself a main theme. Many of the themes are woven into the structure and language of the play: