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| **Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia**  **Om El Qura’s University** | **https://uquweb.uqu.edu.sa/uqu/images/log.jpg** | **The Elizabethan Drama**  **Instructor: Eman Al-Hazmi**  **1436/1437** |

**Course description**

**Introduction :** The Elizabethan drama is a course that focuses primarly on highlighting the role played by the latter as a turning point in the history of English Literature. At the stage, the student should be able to distinguish between the various dramatic periods and their features.

The emphasis is going to be directed towards an overview of the Elizabethan drama, its characteristics and themes, and its influence on other dramatic ages. As Shakespeare’s works are viewed as canons during the Elizabethan era, we will refer to *Hamlet* as a case study.

**Objective:** The course’s main purpose is to enrich the student’s literary background and to introduce him/her to one of the most remarkable eras in English Drama.

**Outline:**

1. An introduction to the Elizabethan Age and Renaissance.
2. A close reading of the Elizabethan Drama and its features.
3. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a case study:

**Exam:** The students will sit for a test based on answering 100 questions. The latter will be divided into 50 questions True or False and other 50 circling the right alternative.

**Overview:**

English Renaissance theatre, also known as [early modern](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_modern) English theatre, or (commonly) as Elizabethan theatre, refers to the theatre of [England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England) between 1562 and 1642.

This is the style of the plays of [William Shakespeare](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Shakespeare), [Christopher Marlowe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Marlowe) and [Ben Jonson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Jonson). It is considered to be the most brilliant period in the history of English theatre

*English Renaissance theatre* encompasses the period between 1562 and 1642. The phrase *Elizabethan theatre* is used at times improperly, especially in languages other than Englishto mean *English Renaissance theatre*, even though in a strict sense this only applies to 1603. Strictly speaking one distinguishes within *English Renaissance theatre* between [*Elizabethan*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_I_of_England)*theatre* from 1562 to 1603, [*Jacobean*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_VI_and_I)*theatre* from 1603 to 1625 and [*Caroline*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_I_of_England)*theatre* from 1625 to 1642

**Politics and Religion**  
  
Elizabeth began her reign in a fast changing and dangerous period for the English nation. Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII, had broken off from the Catholic Church and established the Protestant Church of England. After the death of Henry and his sickly son Edward the throne had passed on to Elizabeth’s older sister Mary, a Catholic - who had brought England back into the Church of Rome, and had married the firmly Catholic King of Spain.

When Mary died without children the Protestant Elizabeth inherited the throne and England became a Protestant Nation once more. Each stage in this process involved bloody trials and executions of those following the wrong religion - and Elizabeth had to consider the fact that a large proportion of her population had been or still was Catholic. While some Catholics continued their religion secretly and otherwise supported Elizabeth, others were openly rebellious.

Elizabeth was excommunicated by the Pope who encouraged all Catholic Kings and subjects to work to assassinate Elizabeth and overthrow her regime. Elizabeth managed to resist the Northern Rebellion - where Catholic Lords and subjects in the North rose up against her - and escaped a number of planned assassination attempts. She also fought off the Spanish Armada, an invasion force blessed by the Pope.  
  
In times such as these, plays, which gathered huge crowds and exposed them to a particular view of the world - which could be an excellent form of propaganda - were viewed with a great deal of concern. This is hardly surprising since a single performance at a playhouse could attract 3000 spectators when the population of London was only 200,000. This meant that one and a half percent of the London population were gathered in one place and exposed to the same influence at every performance - enough people to begin a riot or even a rebellion. To protect against these threats, the Elizabethan authorities imposed a range of laws and systems to ensure that they could control just about every word that was spoken onstage.  
  
More typical of the censorship of Elizabethan plays was the suppression of *Sir Thomas More* - a play which was written and then amended by a large group of different playwrights, possibly including Shakespeare - who may have written scenes in his own handwriting in the manuscript. It was an odd choice of a subject for a play, since Thomas More was a Catholic Martyr who had been executed by Elizabeth’s father for opposing his divorce and establishment of the Church of England.

**Features:**

Along with the economics of the profession, the character of the drama changed towards the end of the period. Under [Elizabeth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_I_of_England), the drama was a unified expression as far as social class was concerned: the Court watched the same plays the commoners saw in the public playhouses. With the development of the private theatres, drama became more oriented towards the tastes and values of an upper-class audience. By the later part of the reign of [Charles I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_I_of_England), few new plays were being written for the public theatres, which sustained themselves on the accumulated works of the previous decades.

Costumes were often bright in colour and visually entrancing. Costumes were expensive, however, so usually players wore contemporary clothing regardless of the time period of the play. Otherwise, costumes would be recycled and used in multiple different plays multiple times until it was too worn to be used. Occasionally, a lead character would wear a conventionalized version of more historically accurate garb, but secondary characters would nonetheless remain in contemporary clothing.

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The men (no women were professional dramatists in this era) who wrote these plays were primarily self-made men from modest backgrounds. Some of them were educated at either [Oxford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Oxford) or [Cambridge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Cambridge), but many were not. Although [William Shakespeare](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Shakespeare) and [Ben Jonson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Jonson) were actors, the majority do not seem to have been performers, and no major author who came on to the scene after 1600 is known to have supplemented his income by acting.

[**Genres**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre) of the period included the [history play](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_play), which depicted English or European history. [Shakespeare](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Shakespeare)'s plays about the lives of kings, such as [*Richard III*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_III_(play)) and [*Henry V*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_V_(play)), belong to this category, as do [Christopher Marlowe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Marlowe)'s [*Edward II*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_II_(play)) and [George Peele](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Peele)'s [*Famous Chronicle of King Edward the First*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famous_Chronicle_of_King_Edward_the_First). History plays dealt with more recent events, like [*A Larum for London*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Larum_for_London) which dramatizes the sack of [Antwerp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antwerp) in 1576.

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[**Comedies**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy_(drama)) were common, too. A sub-genre developed in this period was the [city comedy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_comedy), which deals satirically with life in London after the fashion of [Roman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_ancient_Rome) [New Comedy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Comedy). Examples are [Thomas Dekker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Dekker_(poet))'s [*The Shoemaker's Holiday*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Shoemaker%27s_Holiday) and [Thomas Middleton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Middleton)'s [*A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Chaste_Maid_in_Cheapside).

Though marginalised, the older genres like [pastoral](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pastoral) ([*The Faithful Shepherdess*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Faithful_Shepherdess), 1608), and even the [morality play](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morality_play) ([*Four Plays in One*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Plays_in_One), ca. 1608-13) could exert influences. After about 1610, the new hybrid sub-genre of the [tragicomedy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragicomedy) enjoyed an efflorescence, as did the [masque](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masque) throughout the reigns of the first two [Stuart](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_Stuart) kings, [James I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_I_of_England) and [Charles I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_I_of_England).

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**Theatrical Conditions in Elizabethan England**

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**The British Renaissance:**

\*It was a [cultural](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_movement) and [artistic movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_movement) in England dating from the late 15th and early 16th centuries to the early 17th century. It is associated with the pan-European [Renaissance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaissance) .

\*As a cultural movement, it encompassed innovative flowering of Latin and vernacular literatures, beginning with the 14th-century resurgence of learning based on [classical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_antiquity) sources, which contemporaries credited to [Petrarch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrarch), the development of linear [perspective](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perspective_(graphical)) and other techniques of rendering a more natural reality in [painting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Painting), and gradual but widespread [educational](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_education) reform.

\*In all, the Renaissance could be viewed as an attempt by intellectuals to study and improve the [secular](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular) and worldly, both through the revival of ideas from antiquity, and through novel approaches to thought.

\*The characteristics of Renaissance were humanism, nationalism, a new approach to life, and a new spirit in art, architecture, literature and learning, the growth of the vernaculars, and scientific investigation.

\*The Renaissance stood for humanism, the sympathetic and devoted study of mankind, instead of the theological devotion of the Middle Age. The Renaissance scholars were known as "humorists" and their subjects of study, came to be called the "humanities

\*The rise of the rational spirit and of scientific investigation gave rise to a new approach to life. Whereas the medieval approach was one of absolute conformity and obedience, the new approach was based on reason. It laid emphasis on the importance of critical examination and evaluation of ideas and principle.

**Major Features of the Elizabethan Drama**

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***The Tragedy of Hamlet***

**Interpretation of Act 1 Scenes 1+2**

**Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1602)**

**The Genre:**

 \*Hamlet isn't just any tragedy, it's a classic [revenge tragedy](http://research.uvu.edu/mcdonald/britquestions/revenget.html).

\*The play introduces a new understanding to tragedy in Drama.

\*The genre goes beyond being stylistic to be cognitive.

\**Hamlet* celebrates the Shakespearean invention: The duality of thought and action.

\*Tragedy in *Hamlet* uses revenge to reveal the complexity and the intersection between the inner world and the out world.

## The tone: Dark, Uncertain, Introspective, Tortured

Aside from the oh-so-hilarious gallows humor of the gravediggers and a few other really-not-so-funny moments, Hamletis a dark play full of uncertainty and suspicion. From the very first line, "Who's there?" (1.1), we're dumped into a world of uncertainty, anxiety, and the very real possibility of ghosts.

When Hamlet delivers all those introspective and tortured soliloquies about mortality, betrayal, and the futility of life, he brings us into his tortured world view—and only lets us out with his death. Nice.

***Hamlet and the Elizabethan theatre:***

*Hamlet* especially incorporated all revenge conventions in one way or another, which truly made *Hamlet* a typical revenge play. "Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one of many heroes of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage who finds himself grievously wronged by a powerful figure, with no recourse to the law, and with a crime against his family to avenge."

During the time of Elizabethan theater, plays about tragedy and revenge were very common and a regular convention seemed to be formed on what aspects should be put into a typical revenge tragedy.

In all revenge tragedies first and foremost, a crime is committed and for various reasons laws and justice cannot punish the crime so the individual who is the main character, goes through with the revenge in spite of everything.

The main character then usually had a period of doubt , where he tries to decide whether or not to go through with the revenge, which usually involves tough and complex planning.

Other features that were typical were the appearance of a ghost, to get the revenger to go through with the deed. The revenger also usually had a very close relationship with the audience through soliloquies and asides.

The original crime that will eventually be avenged is nearly always sexual or violent or both. The crime has been committed against a family member of the revenger. " The revenger places himself outside the normal moral order of things, and often becomes more isolated as the play progresses-an isolation which at its most extreme becomes madness."

The revenge must be the cause of a catastrophe and the beginning of the revenge must start immediately after the crisis. After the ghost persuades the revenger to commit his deed, a hesitation first occurs and then a delay by the avenger before killing the murderer, and his actual or acted out madness.

The revenge must be taken out by the revenger or his trusted accomplices. The revenger and his accomplices may also die at the moment of success or even during the course of revenge. It should not be assumed that revenge plays parallel the moral expectations of the Elizabethan audience.

**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](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=A64F1342D10240F59012ECD2EB97D126&_z=z) 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](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=1AEF0B834E6F45E0A558BF3B4698FAEC&_z=z).

Analysis:

The spooky cold that Francisco describes as he and Barnardo exchange posts thoroughly sets the mood of the play, which Yale Professor Maynard Mack describes as "mysterious and equivocal, a mixture of bright surfaces and dark forces where what seems both is and is not."

This scene shows very clearly the problem of discerning between appearance and reality. The Ghost appears, but is it really there? If it is there, is it really a devil assuming the king's regal shape and garments? Distinguishing between truth and illusion is the focal dilemma of Act I and will challenge Hamlet right up to the play's turning point in Scene 4 of Act IV. Barnardo's questioning of Francisco introduces the idea that Hamlet's world is upside-down. Protocol dictates that Francisco should question the newcomer, but here the interloper questions the guard. Francisco's response reinforces the sense of malaise. His "sickness at heart" prefigures the tension of the ensuing tragedy, while the changing of the guard mirrors the tenuousness of the political climate of Denmark — the transition from one king to another and the arrival of the Prince whose rightful place on the throne has been usurped.

In this first scene of Hamlet, [Shakespeare](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=73EEE95E63F542ABA101A7E7F5FED1A5&_z=z) introduces a set of mirrors that will pervade throughout. Fortinbras, a young man whose father has been defeated by a foe and whose obligation is to avenge that father's death and reclaim the conquered properties, serves as a foil for Hamlet. Several characters will reflect Hamlet, but Fortinbras is the first to be named in the play in whom we see a likeness to the Prince of Denmark.

Fortinbras has another significance to the play. The first scene presages an important thematic thread in Hamlet, that the passing of the torch from old to young inevitably carries the duty of the young to live up to their elders' expectations. A son must obey a father's instruction, no matter how unreasonable the directive might seem — even if the directive necessitates murder, war, or mayhem. In Scene 1, Horatio explains that, because Young Fortinbras is bent on avenging his father's defeat at Old King Hamlet's hand, all of Denmark prepares for war. A single covenant inexorably propels the events of the play and is the medieval truth that rules Hamlet's life.

Horatio's fear of the Ghost mirrors the prevailing attitude toward witches and ghosts among Elizabethans and Jacobeans. Shakespeare's contemporaries believed in ghosts and closely linked apparitions with their religious fears of the devil's power and hell's dominion on earth. Like witches, ghosts were believed to be agents of an afterlife; unlike witches, however, they were not universally dreaded. While witches always represent the devil, ghosts might actually represent the spirit of God. A ghost could represent angel or devil to the Shakespearean sensibility.

According to the religious precepts of the time, anyone seeing a ghost must identify the ghost's purpose and form. A ghost could be: (1) a hallucination, which was dangerously apt to be engendered by the devil, (2) a restless spirit returned to perform a deed left undone in life, (3) a specter seen as a prediction or warning sent as a gift from God, (4) a spirit returned from beyond the grave by divine permission, or (5) a devil disguised as a dead person. Characters in Hamlet test each of these possibilities within the course of the play.

The dead king's armor suggests that the Ghost could be a soldier returned to finish a job left undone, an omen for the troubled country he once ruled and a spirit roaming with divine permission. Horatio dwells on the idea of portents, thus shedding another light on the play to illuminate several other motifs.

Horatio's worrying about the impending attack on Denmark by Fortinbras and his Norwegians reveals another of the many mirrors that layer the play. Fortinbras' honor compels him to attack the established Danes in order to avenge his father, despite the fact that he lacks the funds to pay his warriors. Old Fortinbras and Young Fortinbras, Old Hamlet and Young Hamlet, and Old [Polonius](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=4E0A0BD466014336BEA56EB7E9D64396&_z=z) and Young [Laertes](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=ABA2721C413541BF85959092BBF206F2&_z=z)continually exemplify Shakespeare's preoccupation with filial duty and devotion.

Marcellus' reference to Christianity establishes the very Christian context of Hamlet. Marcellus notes that the Ghost stalks away when Heaven is invoked, and also mentions Christmas and "our savior's birth." These comments clearly define the religious perspective of the characters in the play, which reflect Shakespeare's own reputedly Catholic point of view.

Act I, Scene 1, introduces imagery suggesting that Elsinore is itself a prison where impending war and disaster are inevitable, that forces beyond human control threaten all hope of happiness or well-being.

**Scene 2**

In a trumpet flourish, [Claudius](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=AC0858429A204F80BC2520B4354D2042&_z=z), the new King of Denmark, and his wife [Gertrude](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=4A2A617189194A8EB96A522AEBEE054E&_z=z) enter their stateroom in the company of various courtiers, including Prince [Hamlet](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=1AEF0B834E6F45E0A558BF3B4698FAEC&_z=z), Claudius' aide[Polonius](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=D6838DA8865F43B0A27A56BBA81BD121&_z=z), Polonius' son [Laertes](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=ABA2721C413541BF85959092BBF206F2&_z=z), and the ambasadors to Norway Voltemand and Cornelius. Claudius explains that he and Gertrude have chosen to marry immediately after his brother's death because, in light of the encroaching Danish army, the court could not afford excessive grief lest young Fortinbras mistake their mourning for weakness. He dispatches Voltemand and Cornelius to inform young Fortinbras' uncle of the young man's campaign against the Danes. As Claudius is himself, Fortinbras' uncle is brother to the recently dead king and currently controls the throne. Claudius hopes that the old man has the power to stop Fortinbras from carrying out his mission.

Claudius then turns his attention to Laertes, who petitions the King for permission to return to school in France. Claudius confers with Polonius who answers verbosely that he consents to Laertes' wish.

Having dismissed Laertes, the King and Queen both notice Hamlet's dark demeanor, and Hamlet sneers at the King's loving posture. Gertrude and Claudius encourage him to cease grieving and to get on with life. Gertrude asks Hamlet why he seems so particularly affected by his father's death, and Hamlet snaps at her that, unlike his mother and her husband, he has no pretenses. "Seems, Madam? Nay, it is." Hamlet accuses Gertrude of pretending grief and rejoicing in the old king's death. Claudius reminds Hamlet that he is next in line to the throne, and asks him not to return to school in Wittenberg, a request that Gertrude reiterates. Hamlet acquiesces without enthusiasm. Satisfied that they have had their way, Claudius and Gertrude leave Hamlet to his own thoughts.

In his first soliloquy, Hamlet bemoans the fact that he cannot commit suicide. He wishes that his physical self might just cease to exist, "melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew." He complains that his religion prohibits suicide and claims that he would sooner die than continue watching his mother engage in her vile incest. These thoughts torment him, but he knows that he can't speak them aloud to anyone.

[Horatio](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=A64F1342D10240F59012ECD2EB97D126&_z=z), Marcellus, and Barnardo enter, and Hamlet, unguarded with Horatio as with no one else, snidely jokes that King Claudius has sought to save money by using the funeral refreshments to feed his wedding guests. He tells Horatio that his father's memory haunts him. Horatio seizes the opportunity to tell Hamlet about his encounter with the Ghost of the old king. Hamlet agrees to watch that night in case the Ghost walks again.

**Analysis**

It is significant that Claudius admonishes Hamlet as he addresses him for the first time in the play. Claudius is clearly the antagonist, and he begins his hour upon the stage in a blatantly adversarial role. Were Claudius' demeanor not enough to tell the audience that the two are rivals, Hamlet underscores the discomfort of their relationship by asserting his disgust for the man with his own opening statement.

The key words that exemplify the critical purpose of this scene include "show," "seem," and "play." Cornelius and Voltemand say they will "show our duty." Laertes "came to Denmark to show" his allegiance to King Claudius. Gertrude asks Hamlet, in reference to his "nighted color," "Why seems it so particular with thee?" Hamlet responds to her question by using the word "seems" twice in a single sentence, and he says he cannot pretend, but rather, must be what he is. He then goes on to say that the moods and shapes of grief are true for him. Though his emotions may seem to be those of an actor, he is not acting. Everything in this scene points to the challenge of discerning appearance from reality, a challenge that becomes more pronounced when Horatio tells Hamlet about the appearance of the Ghost.

Claudius' calculating nature becomes immediately apparent. Always conscious of appearances — of what seems to be — he speaks of Gertrude as "our sometime sister, now our queen, / Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state," and then addresses Hamlet as his "cousin Hamlet and my son." He has considered his relationships to the state, to Gertrude, and to Hamlet in all the ways people might perceive them, and manages to cover himself entirely.

He has prepared explanations for both his hasty marriage to Gertrude and for the fact that, though fewer than two months have elapsed, the country no longer mourns King Hamlet's passing, and not even the grieving widow misses him. When Claudius turns on Hamlet and accuses him of "impious stubborness," he is clearly asserting his position of power over the younger man as well as over his kingdom. He scolds Hamlet in a manner befitting a concerned parent and a responsible monarch. The act fails to impress Hamlet, but Claudius remains unaware that his ruse proved itself ineffective.

Claudius further invalidates Hamlet by demeaning the young man's self-image. Accusing Hamlet of possessing "a heart unfortified," "a mind impatient," and an "understanding simple and unschool'd," Claudius defines Hamlet as inadequate to the task of being king. This accusation justifies his own ascension to his brother's throne, despite the fact that the kingship rightfully belongs to the old king's true heir, Hamlet. Every word Claudius chooses, including the condescension implied in his calling Hamlet "my cousin, and my son," reiterates his superiority and complete control.

The incest between Claudius and Gertrude remains at the forefront of Hamlet's mind in this scene. He is most aware of this incest horror, although he suspects other crimes as well. By the end of the play, Hamlet will call Claudius a "murd'rous, damned Dane," and the King will have multiple crimes to answer for. At this moment, however, the medieval English prohibition on sexual intimacy between a brother — albeit a brother-in-law — and sister serves as the primary focus for Hamlet's rage. Though Gertrude's guilt equals Claudius' in this case, Hamlet directs his fury at Claudius and merely mistrusts his mother.

This scene illustrates the actor's challenge in interpreting Gertrude's character. Gertrude's demeanor in this scene is innocent. She genuinely appears to desire happiness for Hamlet, to desire him to stay and be her dutiful son. Seemingly naive and ingenuous, she contrasts starkly with Claudius, who calculates his every word and move to have an effect on his assemblage. If she is less forthright and honest than she appears here, [Shakespeare](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/summary-and-analysis/~/link.aspx?_id=73EEE95E63F542ABA101A7E7F5FED1A5&_z=z) gives no hint. However, as the play unfolds, we increasingly question Gertrude's innocence. In order to make the portrayal believable, the actress must commit to whether Gertrude is playing a role or whether she is genuine. The disparity between appearance and reality becomes a pervasive thematic motif in Hamlet.

The Ghost in Scene l established the lack of clear lines between the real and the perceived, but the web of deceit and bewilderment in this scene casts a shadow that will hover over the breadth of the play. In his response to Gertrude's supplication that he abandon his grief, Hamlet assures her that he is not one to make "shows of grief . . . that a man might play." Hamlet asserts that he is not merely costumed in his black attire, nor is he prone to dramatic sighs or profuse weeping. He is genuinely grieved and honestly critical of Gertrude's and Claudius' callousness toward the loss of their husband and brother. To Hamlet, all others are making show.

Hamlet's preoccupation with hypocrisy surfaces more profoundly in his first soliloquy. The fact that his mother has joined in an incestuous union with her husband's brother less than a month after his father's death overwhelms Hamlet. A simple beast without the reasoning skills of a human being would have shown more respect for a dead mate, moans Hamlet. Worse yet, Hamlet must question her judgment. Hamlet sees Claudius as a satyr — a beast-man driven by his appetites — whereas Old Hamlet was Hyperion, the sun god himself.

How can he trust a woman who would trade a god for a goat? In addition to his cynicism toward women, Hamlet's self-portrait begins to emerge in this soliloquy. When he says that his Uncle Claudius corresponds to his father, King Hamlet, no more "Than I to Hercules," Hamlet discloses his pacifistic demeanor. Hercules was a warrior who acted on impulse and charged enthusiastically into battles without questioning the ideology of the fight. Unlike Hercules, Hamlet drowns in words and perpetually struggles toward understanding.

Knowing his weakness, Hamlet decries his inability to commit suicide, revealing his devotion to the laws of Shakespeare's religion. Hamlet refers to Gertrude's marriage to Claudius as incestuous, though history and cultural practices often encourage marriage between a widow and her brother-in-law. Elizabethan laws had only recently been changed to ban such unions. Hamlet's pain and embarrassment over his mother's incest — a marriage that besmirches her entire culture — is great enough to make him long for the comfort of death but not great enough to allow him to reject "His canon 'gainst self slaughter."

When Barnardo, Marcellus, and Horatio tantalize Hamlet with news of the Ghost, Hamlet excitedly questions them as to the details of the sighting and asserts his absolute surety that the Ghost is "honest" rather than a "goblin dam'd." Horatio contradicts his own earlier observation that the old king was angry by telling Hamlet that the Ghost seemed clothed "More / In sorrow." The Ghost's misery reinforces Hamlet's belief that the Ghost is in earnest. As his interchange with Horatio illustrates, Hamlet's sardonic sense of humor disguises his own aching melancholy and nagging suspicion that some "foul play" is a foot.