

Since the examination of the text concentrated on the character of Hamlet, these notes will be on the other characters

Hamlet's character can be additionally studied through the **soliloquies**, which are to be found as follows:

*Act 1 sc 2 "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt..."*

*Act 2 sc 2 "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I..."*

*Act 3 sc 1 "To be, or not to be..."*

*Act 3 sc 3 "'Tis now the very witching time of night..."*

*Act 4 sc 4 "How all occasions do inform against me..."*

I have not given line reference for these, since there are a number of different texts in use.

## Claudius

Although he has committed several grave crimes, not least of which is the murder of his own brother, it must also be remembered that Claudius is a competent statesman and an accepted King. The people of Denmark are not in rebellion against him, nor is the court. Indeed the court has "*freely gone with this affair along*" and supported both his accession and his marriage to Gertrude. He also averts an invasion by Young Fortinbras by clever statesmanship and diplomatic intervention through Fortinbras's uncle, the King of Norway and we also see that he is skilled in manipulating his courtiers, amongst whom the only dissenting voice is that of Hamlet. His love for the Queen, also, is deep and all-consuming. Hamlet's condemnation of it as "incest" is not, it seems, the general opinion of the court and Claudius himself confesses to Laertes that "*As the star moves not but in his sphere...I could not but by her.*"

Condemned as a drunkard by Hamlet, we never see Claudius in a state of confusion, or in anything other than a controlled, sober state. He is intelligent and perceptive and is willing to test out the hypothesis of Polonius, (that Hamlet is mad for love of Ophelia) and equally quick to realise that there is something else at the root of his stepson's erratic behaviour.

Claudius is also quick to act, when he sees a threat to his security. He sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and decides on Hamlet's exile long before Hamlet kills Polonius. After the murder he loses no time in removing Hamlet from the court, leaving himself blameless for Hamlet's "accidental" death in England.

He shows genuine regret for the death of Polonius and also is quick to realise the effect of the hasty burial. When Ophelia's madness becomes apparent it is Claudius who expresses what seems to be genuine sadness and, by implication it is the King who overrules the church and ensures at least the semblance of a Christian burial for the suicide. His treatment of Laertes shows an acute perception of human nature and also a skilful manipulation of passionate youth and we must never forget that he shows nothing but courtesy to Hamlet in all his encounters with him. Given the nature of his initial crime, we must assume a genuine remorse, as well as giving credit for the attempt at repentance, which Hamlet observes on the way to visit Gertrude for the closet scene.

Claudius is evil, but not a monster. He has committed murder (fratricide) and killed a King (regicide) and is guilty, by a Biblical rule, of incest in sleeping with his brother's wife who is, "one flesh" with her dead husband. (Man and wife are one flesh, therefore he sleeps with his brother in the body of Gertrude) He is obviously driven by a combination of ambition and desire and although the audience cannot condone what he has done, they must understand his motives.

His weakness, of course, is the driving ambition which motivates him to seize power and also the apparently uncontrollable love he feels for Gertrude – a deadly combination which fuels his actions and ultimately loses the whole kingdom to a foreign power.

As we can see when Claudius faces Laertes on his return from France, the King has an absolute belief in the Divine Right of monarchy

*"There's such divinity doth hedge a king*

*That treason can but peep to what it would*

*Acts little of its will."* (Act 4 sc. 5 ll. 124-6)

This makes him believe himself to be invulnerable, as God's representative earth. Ironically of course he has committed the most heinous crime against an anointed King and consequently he is damned. Like the serpent in the Garden, Claudius brings discord and evil into the state of Denmark.

## Gertrude

As with Claudius, it is tempting to condemn Gertrude as evil, but it is probably more sensible to consider her as weak and inconstant. Hamlet's heartfelt line "*Frailty, thy name is woman*" sums up his view of her actions early in the play. Like many of Shakespeare's women characters, she is "sketched in" rather than drawn in detail. We know that she has a deep affection for her son, which is commented on by Claudius in Act 4 "*The Queen, his mother, lives almost by his looks.*" and we may assume that she has not gone to Claudius's bed unwillingly, although there is a tantalising lack of evidence that she returns the King's obsession with her.

She is protected by the ghost, too, who commands Hamlet not to punish her and intervenes in the closet scene when Hamlet's attack on Gertrude is at its height. The ghost's instructions to his son are specific:

*"But howsoever thou pursuest this act*

*Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive*

*Against thy mother aught."* (l. v. 84-6)

Hamlet, too reminds the audience twice how Gertrude behaved in the presence of his dead father, which serves to emphasise the fickleness she has shown since the King's death.

At no time, though, is there evidence that Gertrude was aware of the murder. Her reaction to the play-within-the-play is irritation that Hamlet "*hast thy father (Claudius) much offended*" and the disclosure he makes to her in the closet scene provokes what seems like genuine horror. Her remorse is for the incestuous nature of her marriage and not for any part in the killing of the King.

There is a possibility that her actions after her husband's death were prompted by self preservation. A convenient marriage to a known protector would, after all, ensure her safety and that of her beloved son, whom she may have considered too green to take on the responsibility of ruling a threatened country. She does show that she is easily persuaded to act in the way others want her to act. Polonius, for example, has no problem making her agree to let him hide in her room when she sees Hamlet and she is very quick to report her findings to Claudius after the murder.

She also shows compassion for the plight of Ophelia when she loses her mind, and later it is Gertrude who reports the death in some of the most poetic lines in the play. She obviously approved of the affection which existed between Hamlet and Ophelia, but this only becomes apparent after Ophelia's death.

Like Ophelia, Gertrude is a victim of circumstance. She is not completely guiltless, but there seems to be no evidence that there is any desire in her to do evil to others. Indeed she is aware that her actions, her "*o'er hasty marriage*", may even be the cause of her son's apparent madness. If she commits a crime at all it is the crime of immorality, and, like everyone who is drawn in to the evil which Claudius begins, she pays the price by dying of poison intended for her son. Shakespeare's message is uncompromising – defiance of Heaven and God's laws leads to retribution.

## Ophelia

Ophelia is gentle, loving and beautiful. She is also obedient to her father and loyal to her family and it is this which draws her into the circle of disaster and leads to her "untimely death". She is deeply in love with Hamlet and believes his "tenders" to be

sincere, but her obedience to both her father and her brother must come first. Laertes tells her to beware of Hamlet's interest as it is driven by lust, not love. He also points out the difference in their background and rightly concludes that Hamlet is not in a position, as heir to the throne to choose freely who he will marry. Polonius is also scornful of Hamlet's motives and concerned that he will be discredited by Ophelia's conduct. His command to her not to see Hamlet again is brutal, as is his decision to use her as a decoy to sound out the reason for Hamlet's eccentric behaviour. The fact that she obeys would be quite understandable to Shakespeare's audience, if not to a present day one, since filial obedience was a fundamental part of the life of the time. Note also how differently Laertes is treated by his father, compared to the lack of regard shown to Ophelia by Polonius. Women had little status, and Ophelia's wishes are not considered at any time. Torn apart as she is by divided loyalty it is no wonder that the strain on her eventually leads to her madness and subsequent death.

That she loves Hamlet is without question. She is distraught when she observes his behaviour before the nunnery scene, and after his savage rejection of her in that scene she laments his "*noble mind...here o'erthrown*" She also grieves for herself, "Oh woe is me, t'have seen what I have seen, see what I see." She is sophisticated enough to understand the ways of the world, too, as we see in her dialogue with Hamlet before the mousetrap play, when she obviously understands the meaning of his bawdy remarks, and also in her quick understanding of her brother's likely conduct when he is away at school.

Her madness is triggered by loss of her father, murdered by Hamlet, whom she also believes to be mad. The pathos of the mad scene is emphasised by the language of loss in some of the songs she sings and the overt sexuality of others. In fact the sentiments of Ophelia for Hamlet in the nunnery scene, are, ironically applicable to herself later in the play.

Her story parallels Hamlet's. They think they have both been deserted by one they love; both lose a father through murder and both go to an untimely death; both are sensitive, caring souls whose innocence is exploited by others. No character has anything evil to say about Ophelia at any time and of all the deaths which occur in the play as a result of Claudius's original murder, hers is perhaps the most pathetic.

## Polonius

Polonius is the chief counsellor to Claudius, and although there is no evidence, it is possible that he had held a position at court under Hamlet's father, the old King. He is certainly trusted and held in high regard by Claudius, who tells Laertes that his father is extremely important to Denmark:

*"The head is not more native to the heart*

*The hand more instrumental to the mouth*

*Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father."*

It is tempting to dismiss Polonius as a fool and, as Hamlet calls him a "*prating knave*", because of his pomposity and his tedious pedantry, but to do so would be unwise. He is indeed irritating, but he is not stupid. Foolish, perhaps, in his stubborn belief that he knows best what is the cause of Hamlet's madness, but it is an astute guess, given what he knows about the love affair between Ophelia and the prince, and the evidence of the letter which he shows to the King. He is not, however, always likeable and it is unclear as to whether his children love him, or just accord him healthy respect. There seems to be evidence that it is Laertes to whom Ophelia feels closer than to her father, as it is he whom she tells about Hamlet's affections and there is a terse note in Polonius's dialogue with his daughter, especially after the nunnery scene, when her evident distress is curtly dismissed by her father. Polonius is clearly unscrupulous about setting spies on his children, as we see when Reynaldo is sent to Paris to check Laertes' behaviour. It is also obvious that Polonius is well aware of Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet and that he has been reported to about it, so presumably his spies are at work in the court all the time. He is quick to suggest that Ophelia is used as a decoy to observe Hamlet's "madness" and as we have seen, seems unmoved by her distress when Hamlet renounces her. It is at his suggestion that all the eavesdropping takes place and fittingly it is as a result of this that he is accidentally killed by Hamlet in the closet scene. His death is dismissed by Hamlet, who is consistently critical of Polonius and shows no respect for him at all.

## Horatio

Hamlet's trusted friend is sincere and honestly loved by the prince. (see Act 3 sc. 2 53-8 and 61-4 ) He is practical, and a

realist, as we see at the beginning of the play when he displays a hard headed scepticism about the appearance of the ghost on the battlements. Once convinced of its existence, though, he displays courage in his decision to “*cross it, though it blast me*” and his support of his friend when Hamlet, too has seen the ghost is quick and loyal. His constancy is rewarded with confidence. It is to Horatio that Hamlet confides his suspicions of Claudius and Horatio who is commanded to watch the mousetrap play and observe the King’s reaction to it. Horatio, too, is the one who persuades Gertrude to see the mad Ophelia, rightly pointing out that not to do so would be to encourage rumour.

When Hamlet dies Horatio plans to die with him, intending to drink what is left of the poison wine, but Hamlet trusts his friend to be his dying voice and gives Horatio the task of telling the story of what happened and setting the record straight.

## Fortinbras

Although he does not appear often, Fortinbras is used by Shakespeare as the third side of the revenge triad of characters; the “good” prince, who heeds advice to turn away from personal revenge at the bidding of a trusted elder statesman ( his uncle Norway) Note the parallel between Fortinbras’s circumstances and those of Hamlet, and note also the difference in their fates.

His decision to rally his troops and attack Poland, confirms him in Hamlet’s eyes as a man of action and honour ( see 5th soliloquy) and spurs Hamlet to his own destiny. As a reward for his obedience, Fortinbras is named by Hamlet as the successor to the Danish crown. He actually proves to be a prince “most royal”, unlike Hamlet, whose destiny is not to inherit and whose tragedy is not to act.

## Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

These two school fellows of Hamlet are always referred to in the plural, giving the impression that they are interchangeable. Perhaps Shakespeare intends them as “stock” characters and deliberately presents them in an anonymous light to emphasise their shallow actions. They are, after all disloyal and fickle, used by Claudius as spies and quickly identified as such by Hamlet. They are not evil, merely opportunists, and like other opportunists in the play, they do not prosper, being outwitted by Hamlet and sent on to their deaths in England instead of him.