

Harvard University Extension School
E-130 Shakespeare and Modern Culture
Midterm Exam
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Part One

- 1.) X: Nay, but hear me.
Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear
I never more will break an oath with thee.
Y: I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will ne'er more break faith advisedly.
Z: Then you shall be his surety: give him this,
And bid him keep it better than the other

This dialogue is an excerpt from *The Merchant of Venice*. The three speakers are Bassanio (X), Antonio (Y) and Portia (Z). Therefore this scene is close the end of the play in Act 5. Portia and Nerissa are just about to reveal that they were the lawyer and the lawyer's assistant in disguise. The ring is Bassanio's (and he thinks that it is lost) and again Antonio wants to act as a guarantor for Bassanio.

- 2.) I prithee take thy fingers from my throat;
For, though I am not splenative and rash,
Yet have I something in me dangerous,
Which let thy wiseness fear. Away thy hand.

This is an excerpt from the play *Hamlet*. The speaker is Hamlet and this is part of a dialogue between Hamlet and Laertes when they struggle in front of and in Ophelia's grave. Both Laertes and Hamlet want to say farewell to Ophelia, but Laertes already suspects Hamlet of causing Ophelia's suicide. Only some people from the entourage are able to separate the two, which foreshadows their final fight.

- 5.) What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appall the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculty of eyes and ears. Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing—no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life

A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?

This paragraph is again from *Hamlet*, Act 2. The speaker is Hamlet himself and this is part of one of the soliloquies. He wants to revenge the murder of his father, yet he stumbles upon his own incapability to act, which clearly distracts him from his original cause. He is discontent with himself and therefore asks himself if he is a “coward”. In the later part of this speech Hamlet decides to test both Claudius and Gertrude with the play.

6.) ‘Conscience,’ say I, ‘you counsel well’; ‘Fiend,’ say I, ‘you counsel well.’

This line is, again, taken from *The Merchant of Venice*. The speaker is Lancelot, who at this time is still the servant of Shylock. He is in a dialogue with himself about which course of action to take. He is unsatisfied by his current position and thinks of becoming Bassanio's servant. In his monologue he contrasts his “conscience” with a “fiend”; the conscience urges him to stay with Shylock, the fiend wants him to change sides. Ultimately he decides to go to Bassanio.

Part Two

2) At 3.2.334-41, Hamlet rails at Guildenstern, ‘Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice in this little organ, yet you cannot make it speak. ’Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played upon than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret upon me, you cannot play upon me.’ How does this brief, yet explosive speech help characterize Hamlet as you know him from the play as a larger whole?

This speech of Hamlet illustrates several character traits: First it illustrates the wit of Hamlet, in which is clearly superior to Guildenstern. He parallels himself with a flute, an instrument Guildenstern claims he cannot play. Yet, Hamlet asserts that Guildenstern tries to “play on” him, meaning that he knows that Guildenstern tries to manipulate him. This knowledge of his position in regard to the other members of the court who try to ignore, harm or get rid of him shows that he is not only fully aware of this but also that he is able to defend himself. In contrast to the other characters he does so by words, not weapons or intrigues, at least not in this dialogue.

3) Shakespeare often makes use of what we might call ‘double plot’ structure, in which one plotline or complex of situations mirrors, or comments upon, or reinterprets events that transpire in other dramatic situations. Often this takes the form of relatively minor characters and plotlines doubling events and situations from the ‘main’ dramatic narrative. How and where have you found this to occur in one of the texts we have read so far?

Two of the most prominent examples of the “double plot” structure can be found in *Hamlet* and in *King Lear*. For the play *Hamlet* the play-within-the-play 'The Moustrap' functions in this way. Hamlet stages a play in which the actors (in the roles of king, queen etc.) portray a story of murder in a royal court and thus this play imitates what really has happened in Elsinore. Gertrude and Claudius are among the spectators as is Hamlet, who does not watch the play for entertainment but in order to observe the reactions of his mother and the king to get hints for their guilt. Another “double plot” can be found in *King Lear*, where it is not limited to a play-within-the-play, but rather accompanies the course of events. The tragic story of King Lear and his daughters is mirrored in the

equally tragic story of Gloucester, Edgar and Edmund. One of the functions of this device is to enhance the main plot and to show its universality as well as the immanent danger of repetition of these events.

5) *The Merchant of Venice* ruminates throughout upon themes of risk and adventure. Why?

Repeatedly several characters from *MoV* take great risks to achieve their goals. The best example is Antonio who risks his life for Bassanio. Another example is Portia: She takes the risk of getting a “wrong” husband due to the choice of the three caskets, although this is not her idea of doing it this way. In contrast to Antonio's risk this can also be seen as an adventure as the quest for the right husband. Nearly all characters are being rewarded for taking risks, only Shylock remains empty-handed at the end of the play.

Part Three

4) Now I am alone.

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage waned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? (2.2.526-37)

Hamlet's famous speech on playacting provides a core of ideas for thinking about the dilemma he faces and the courses of action—or inaction—available to him. Discuss *Hamlet's* treatment of acting (in all its senses); other key terms for your thinking might be memory, humanness and interiority, loss and grief, or truth and falsehood, but you should feel free to frame your discussion in ways that you find to be fruitful and compelling.

Acting is a dominant topic in the play *Hamlet*. There are lots of different situations in which the play discusses acting and in which acting fulfills different functions for the play. A very important figure for this topic is of course Hamlet himself, who is a near-perfect example for acting in all its different layers. Not only that the character of Hamlet himself is played by an actor (here we have the first, or outer lever of pretending) but also that this character Hamlet himself plays different roles, which constitutes the second level. He is not only just the son of the murdered king but also a very witty and astute observer of the things that are going around him. And he tries to use the course of events for his own aims and goals, though hesitantly. Acting plays a very important part in this

scheme. He is the character who initiates the play-within-the-play in order to demask his mother and Claudius. But it is also subject of a great deal of discussion whether he is more than just the, say, director, of *The Mousetrap*. He becomes a spectator of his own play, thus reaching a third level of acting, one which can be called meta-level. But most importantly he himself puts on the air of a madman in order to fool the characters around him and to give himself more leeway to achieve his goals.

It has to be stated that he in his acting mad is quite consistent as he does not change his mannerisms and attitudes towards Ophelia, whom he loves. In pretending to be someone else he is willing – whether deliberately or by coincidence – to cause pain and suffering for others, such as Ophelia. However, Hamlet is not an evil character by doing so, it is rather a conflict with his interiority. Hamlet does not find a satisfying answer or surrounding to live in the court with all its lies and the people who are actively plotting against him: In order to defend and care for his own feelings, including the feeling of uncertainty and his hesitation, he builds around himself this wall of acting, which allows him to be more free behind this mask. One could argue that this is only human, as nobody wants to allow harm to himself in an unnecessary extent. Therefore this protection of his 'self' through acting mad is a very understandable and humane reaction. It also fulfills the function of protecting him from the loss of his father and the subsequent grief about this. Hamlet takes the task given to him by his father, in the form of the ghost, very seriously and he tries hard to succeed. Although his hesitation has become proverbial, in this case he is rather forceful. But the question of truth and falsehood bother him, as this soliloquy shows: By discussing the art of acting he shows the frailty of this art, best exemplified in the sentence “And all for nothing.” Playacting is a very important device in the course of action in the play Hamlet, yet it is also a moment of nihilism as acting is not a form of art that lasts through times, but has its own function just in the moment it is performed. Therefore he has to be (and he is) consistent in playing his own roles throughout the play.

The volatility of this is also the main instance that makes him susceptible to harm from outside. His devices to protect himself are the same that are used in acting: words.

At the very end of the play where he gives up his acting in different roles he both succeeds and fails at the same time: Though he is able to kill Laertes he gets killed himself.