

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* insists that life is messy. Those who proclaim it otherwise are actors. King Hamlet's ghost tasks his son with cleaning up the 'unweeded garden' of life, even though when living he too had moments 'full of bread, /With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May'. But revenge is not up to the task. It too is messy – as uncontrollable for Hamlet as for Laertes. So are the appearances and words of ghosts. So are weddings and funerals, sea voyages and diplomatic treaties. In *Hamlet*, almost the only thing that goes according to plan is the Players' unwitting 'mousetrap' – and that is because Hamlet helped to write the script. Real life, Shakespeare insists, is a 'distracted globe', not an attentive one. The best we can do is make our 'readiness' for the end.

Essentially, *Hamlet* is a play about an imposter king that needs to be overthrown, resulting in the "rotten" state of Denmark. This breakdown of the division between public and private affairs in *Hamlet* was true of Elizabethan England at the time. It seeps into the two-edged language of Claudius, whose antitheses like "defeated joy" and "mirth in funeral and dirge in marriage" fail to entirely mask Denmark's embedded anxiety. These imposter words are contrasted by Hamlet's genuine description of the world as "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable" in his Act 1 soliloquy. The rhythm of this speech, with its almost parenthetical interruptions and misplaced iambs, like in the phrase "Hyperion to a satyr", imitates Hamlet's anguish and challenges the ear of the audience, creating a dramatic tension. His existential vision of decay becomes the only authentic response to Denmark's recent state. Thus, when the "words words words" of everyday imposters cannot be trusted, the only "safe" language is in deliberate fiction.

Additionally, Denmark's corrupted state is in part due to the fact that boundaries are continually being transgressed in the world of *Hamlet*. The ghost's return from the "undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns" shifts the fundamental boundary between life and death. Consequently, the ghost's inexpressible purgatory has come to earth, resulting in Hamlet's totalizing vision of the whole world as a "prison" and "sterile promontory". Therefore, there is a strong parallelism between the mind of Hamlet and the world of Denmark, underscored by the triple meaning of Hamlet's metaphor of "this distracted globe": his head, his world, and the Elizabethan theatre stage he walks on. Moreover, it is this uncertainty that Hamlet attempts to take action against.

Subsequent manifestations of Hamlet's frustration with pretence are his perceptions of women as lustful and treacherous. Ophelia becomes a classic Elizabethan victim of masculine governance. Polonius puns on the word 'tender' transforming Ophelia's "tenders / Of his affection to me" into "tender yourself more dearly...you'll tender me a fool" to identify her feelings of love with naivety and ignorance. Similarly, Hamlet's punning in the phrase "country matters" reflects a masculine world vision that Shakespeare exploits. But, ironically, the tragedy is Hamlet's as Ophelia's maiden purity confutes Hamlet's perceptions through the final combination of epithets – "fair and unpolluted". Kenneth Branagh explores the modern potential of Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship in his 1996 movie epic. By creating a sexual past between Hamlet and Ophelia through flashbacks, a

visual element that undermines Shakespeare's dialogue, Branagh connects the masculine world of the theatre with the private, feminine world of the bedroom, appealing to the values of a modern audience, while also managing to keep Ophelia a victim of masculine control. Thus, textually unsupportable production decisions here prove visually feasible.

Therefore, the essential difference of sexual experience between Ophelia and Gertrude is eliminated in Branagh's interpretation. In Shakespeare's text, Gertrude symbolizes what Ophelia is destined to become in Hamlet's eyes. His frustration engenders an intense desire for purity, for which the only solution is to give human frailty the name of 'woman' directing his profound loathing of pretence upon women in general. Janet Adelman in her 1992 feminist, critical response to *Hamlet* explores how profoundly Hamlet is affected by his mother's frailties which leave him to perceive the world as a place "where boundaries cannot hold". In doing so, Adelman provides an alternate reason for Hamlet's delay: Hamlet's concern with reclaiming his mother's purity distracts him from pursuing his father's revenge. Moreover, Hamlet's intense preoccupation with pretence itself prevents him from fulfilling his task.

Furthermore, the cosmic scope of Hamlet's melancholy indicates that pretence also begets his desire to make his mission mean something. The purpose of life is to get ready for death, thereby avoiding King Hamlet's purgatory. However, if life is like purgatory, death needs to be a "consummation" instead. This results in a contradictory, oscillating character that is a product of his time. He takes his father's ghost's orders seriously enough to say that he will die carrying them out, and yet does not execute them. He declares theatre is a lie and then uses it to reveal truth. Evidently, Hamlet is torn between two ways of thinking: the archaic, revenge logic and humanist, Renaissance reason, which are theatrically held in suspense. Shakespeare's dual role models for Hamlet – Young Fortinbras and Laertes – adopt the former, taking immediate action toward their vocation while Hamlet neglects his. Therefore, in this context, we understand Hamlet's failure to act not as procrastination, but his attempt to give his action integrity, to avoid being "passion's slave" which caused the death of Polonius.

This, in turn, means that, ironically, Hamlet is pushed into falsehoods. His methods of action are to put on an act, both through feigning mad and his play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, underlining the play's fundamental preoccupation with theatre, the very act of acting. For instance, in Hamlet's famous "advice to the players", he warns against overacting and counsels to instead "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action", exemplifying the acting and action dichotomy. Additionally, Hamlet's theatrical mind assumes an "antic disposition" in the role of the fool. However, this entire pretence is terribly ironic because of what he is trying to ultimately reveal, that is, the two-faced nature of humanity. Furthermore, Hamlet, to an extent, attempts to stage-manage the entire revenge act.

Therefore, death becomes as significant as a rehearsed work of theatre. However, the meaning Hamlet tries to apply to revenge – death as a “consummation” based on Wittenberg principles of new rationality – turns out to be false as all other outlets of control transpire to be. Because knowledge is power, human beings who cannot know “the undiscovered country” are ultimately powerless. This anguishing moment of full consciousness is expressed through the relentless string of monosyllables in Hamlet’s Act 3 soliloquy. Shakespeare’s soliloquies in general are not only a theatrical symbol for alienation, but here depict a kind of verbalized thinking. Moreover, death in this soliloquy and in *Hamlet* becomes a Shakespearean symbol for our perpetual lack of control over life.

Therefore, what is left is to surrender to the mystery. This paradoxically becomes a form of empowerment, because if falsehood can’t be eliminated, and meaning can’t be made through actions, the only peace left is in accepting the inscrutable. Thus, by Act 5, in a world not of fathers but of sons, what is left is quite simply the common destiny of men that Hamlet accepts in the undemanding line “If it be now, ‘tis not to come; . . . if it be not now, yet it will come.” In this final scene of pure theatre, mimicking King Hamlet’s duel with Old Fortinbras thirty years earlier, Shakespeare cleverly employs the sport of fencing, the theatrical imitation of the action of battle. The reality that even with death, Hamlet’s actions have achieved nothing, is indicative of *Hamlet*’s truly tragic reality, reinforced by the emphatic, monosyllabic simplicity of Hamlet’s line, “I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing’s to do, / Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do’t.” These lines of perfect iambic pentameter and one syllable vocabulary imitate the strikingly simple reality that Hamlet’s mission remains unachieved.