Hamlet's objective of killing Claudius fuels dramatic action

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HAMLET'S OBJECTIVE OF KILLING CLAUDIUS FUELS DRAMATIC ACTION

by

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ABSTRACT

*Hamlet's Objective of Killing Claudius Fuels Dramatic Action* proves that Hamlet's overall objective fuels the dramatic action of the play. The overall objective of Hamlet, for the purposes of this thesis, is to avenge his father's murder. The thesis also examines the structural elements of *Hamlet*, such as the delay aspects of Hamlet's behavior, and determines how these elements affect the audience. The paper investigates Shakespeare's skillful strategy of scene construction, transition, and the use of juxtaposition and parallelism. The thesis shows how these elements contribute to the movement of dramatic action as Hamlet attempts to achieve his objective. Furthermore, a chapter of the thesis examines the structural content of Olivier's film version of *Hamlet*. Finally, the paper analyzes Hamlet's behavior toward Gertrude, Ophelia, the Ghost, and Horatio.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This master's thesis examines the play *Hamlet*. More specifically, the paper will prove that the title character's overall objective fuels the dramatic action of the play. The term "dramatic action" refers to the mental and physical events in the play that take the audience on a journey from scene to scene, from act to act. Obviously, critics have different opinions about what Hamlet is trying to do throughout the play. The position of this thesis is that Hamlet's overall objective is to avenge his father's murder by killing Claudius, restoring order and, hopefully, peace to Denmark. In testing that position, the thesis also examines the structural elements of *Hamlet*, and determines how these elements affect the audience. The thesis also investigates Shakespeare's strategy of scene construction and transition.

It should be mentioned that the author of this thesis has always been intrigued by the popularity of *Hamlet*—even today—given the fact that the play runs longer than most people's tastes usually prefer. David Grote points out the obvious in *Script Analysis: Reading and Understanding the Playscript for Production*: "The longer a play continues, the more likely the
audience is to tire of watching it."¹ More often than not, when successful productions of Hamlet are done, even the most impatient member of the audience holds his or her attention until the final blood bath is completed in Act Five. This is a credit to Shakespeare's mastery of play construction; he gives the audience a continual progression of dramatic action as Hamlet attempts to fulfill his primary objective of avenging his father's murder.

Despite the beauty of the written play, there are nevertheless many poor stage productions of Hamlet. Consequently, this thesis examines productions which were not held in high critical esteem, and points out the potential pitfalls of those productions in question. Often at fault in a poor Hamlet production is the director, and one of the most important elements an audience brings to an interpretation of a play rests in the hands of the director. Author Hardie Albright turns this notion around a bit. According to Albright, "nothing is quite as important to a director as an audience."² In either case, this thesis scrutinizes the directors of the productions in question and discusses the various interpretations each brings to their own Hamlet—good and bad.

¹Grote, David, Script Analysis: Reading and Understanding the Playscript for Production (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1985) 153.

Review of Literature

Many different sources were examined to find a conclusive answer to the question of Hamlet's main dramatic action. Michael Cohen, in *Hamlet in My Mind's Eye*, argues that much of the movement of dramatic action in the play is the result of Oedipal drives; he notes that this is particularly evident in Laurence Olivier's film version of *Hamlet*. Inga-Stina Ewbank, in an article written for *Shakespeare Survey*, examines the movement of dramatic action in terms of language. Alex Newell, in *The Soliloquies in Hamlet*, argues that Hamlet's bitterness toward Gertrude fuels the dramatic action of the play. Also, reviews which commented on successful productions and examined highly regarded performances of Hamlet were scrutinized in terms of dramatic action. These, along with the investigation of other authors, helped to prove my thesis: that Hamlet's overall objective of avenging his father's murder fuels the dramatic action of the play.

Chapter Layout

Perhaps of equal or greater importance than a director in a production of *Hamlet* is the actor playing the title role. Many critics believe that a production can only be as good as the actor playing Hamlet. Chapter Two examines the protagonist in *Hamlet*, 
and scrutinizes the performances of some of the actors playing the Prince of Denmark. The thesis proves that a talented actor playing Hamlet will successfully drive the dramatic action of the play, moving him closer to the final objective of killing Claudius. The chapter analyzes the delay elements in *Hamlet*, and explains that the dramatic action of the play is still moved despite the delays.

Chapter Three investigates Hamlet's behavior toward other characters; the impact these relationships have on the movement of dramatic action in the play is looked at in greater detail. For the most part, Hamlet's behavior toward Gertrude, Ophelia, and Horatio is scrutinized in the chapter. A portion of the chapter is devoted to Hamlet's relationship with the Ghost; the thesis proves that the appearances of the Ghost bring Hamlet closer to his objective of killing Claudius. As with other ideas already discussed, there are many critical interpretations of the specter in *Hamlet*. For instance, critics differ as to whether the Ghost is an agent of divine providence. Some critics believe a demand of personal revenge is anti-Christian, whereas others believe that Hamlet's actions are divinely inspired. Both of these theories are looked at in greater detail. In any case, Hamlet's relationship with the Ghost is a pivotal step in Hamlet's achievement of his overall objective. Chapter Three examines Hamlet as true successor of the throne, and proves that the element of successor brings him closer to his quest of killing Claudius. This theory puts forth the notion
that Hamlet not only seeks revenge against the murderer of his father, but also against the usurper of the throne that rightfully belongs to him. Chapter Three proves that the use of paradoxes and juxtapositions in *Hamlet* furthers the dramatic action of the play and moves the Prince of Denmark closer to his final objective of killing Claudius. The chapter investigates the character of Osric; the thesis determines that he is purposely used as an advancer of the plot, moving the dramatic action, and bringing Hamlet closer to his final objective of killing his uncle. Finally, the chapter examines the parallelism of Act Five with Act One. This parallelism occurs near the end of play, which is when Hamlet fulfills his objective of killing Claudius. Denmark's future and leadership are pivotal elements at the beginning of the play, and when Hamlet kills Claudius in the final blood bath in Act Five, the question of Denmark's future has begun all over again.

Chapter Four surveys one of the better known film adaptations of the play: the 1948 Laurence Olivier *Hamlet*. The film is examined for its structural content, for its movement of dramatic action, and for its ability to live up to the original play while successfully translating to another medium. In this chapter, the thesis proves that Hamlet's overall objective of killing Claudius fuels the dramatic action of the film in much the same way it does on the stage.

Chapter Five summarizes the culmination of dramatic action in *Hamlet*; the chapter examines the element of loudness at the
end of the play, and proves that, within Hamlet's silence, the
dramatic action of the play is advanced before and after the
Prince fulfills his objective of killing Claudius. This concluding
chapter restates the thesis, and reiterates the points proven in the
previous chapters.

While the aforementioned topics are the major points of
examination, other areas of the play are also looked at. For
instance, the delay aspects of Hamlet's behavior are analyzed, and
the theory of Hamlet's oedipal drives are studied. Both of these
elements further the dramatic action of the play and bring Hamlet
closer to his overall objective of killing Claudius.
CHAPTER 2

HAMLET'S OBJECTIVE FUELS DRAMATIC ACTION

There are many moments in the play where Hamlet explicates his thoughts and feelings at the end of a scene. By doing this, the dramatic action of the play is advanced. As viewers of the play (or as readers), our curiosity is stimulated, and we greatly await the upcoming action. For Hamlet, he moves closer to fulfilling his objective of killing Claudius, and drives the dramatic action forward. In Act Two of the play, Hamlet finishes the scene and the act by saying:

Out of my weakness and melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.3

This speech sets up the next set of events in the play; the audience is left anticipating what will happen next.

This setting up of events at the scene's end is one of the more overt strategies Shakespeare uses in fueling the dramatic

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action in *Hamlet*. This essential structural element of the play, despite seemingly endless delays, carefully moves the Prince of Denmark from scene to scene, from act to act, on a course of fulfilling his overall objective.

In the aforementioned scene, Hamlet wishes to "catch the conscience" of Claudius in order to prove that the Ghost's claim about Claudius killing his brother (Hamlet's father) is indeed true. Hamlet is not sure whether the Ghost is an evil spirit or not, so he decides to put on a play in order to see how Claudius will react to the play's haunting, familiar plot. Hamlet says, "I know my course. The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil, and the devil hath power / T' assume a pleasing shape." Finding out Claudius's reaction to the play is Hamlet's next step in achieving his overall objective.

**Delay Elements in *Hamlet***

Unfortunately, even with a talented actor playing the title role, many modern productions of *Hamlet* leave audiences restless—anticipating what's on television rather than awaiting the upcoming scenes. For instance, in the Roundabout Theater Company's April 1992 production, reviewer Greg Evans points out that "after three and a half hours, the actor's [Stephan Lang's]"
pitch has also robbed the great play of any nuance and will no doubt leave tired, impatient audiences relieved to have arrived at the final blood bath."

This restlessness of the audience through seemingly endless delays throughout the play is thought to be, by many critics, an intentional structural strategy of Shakespeare. Edward Pechter writes, in a 1986 article written for *Shakespeare Survey*, that the delay elements of *Hamlet* far exceed the normal delays seen in comparable revenge tragedies written prior to Shakespeare's play. Pechter notes that "it seems demonstrably to be a strategy of *Hamlet* throughout to frustrate us with delay, to withhold us from the sense of a coherently complete action, to *seem* to long."

Similarly, some of these delay elements along with the incredible amount of text have dissuaded some well-known actors from performing the role for many years. In an article written by Alexis Greene for *American Theatre*, the author notes that popular actor Tom Hulce balked on performing the title role of *Hamlet* for over seven years. Hulce believed that the Dane simply talked too much, and that the character took too much time to accomplish anything. Eventually, however, Hulce agreed to do the role and found it to be very fulfilling.

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successful, Hulce had to find a way to fuel the dramatic action. The author of this thesis maintains that the best way an actor playing Hamlet can avoid the problems of seemingly endless delays in the action is to concentrate on the overall objective of killing Claudius. By doing this, the dramatic action will be advanced, and the production in question will not get bogged down.

Stage Productions: Success Depends on Actor Playing Hamlet

In production, much of the play's success rests on the shoulders of the actor playing Hamlet. In the American Conservatory Theater's not so successful 1991 production directed by John C. Fletcher, the Variety reviewer notes that Byron Jennings as Hamlet "tends to rush dismissively through his speeches as if too embarrassed to take the quote marks off them; he's not convincing with either Hamlet's youthful impulsiveness or his anguish."8 Jennings probably did not focus on his overall objective of killing Claudius. By doing that, the actor could have fueled the dramatic action without needless rushing, and the anguish of the character would most likely have been more apparent.

Kevin Kline's successful performance of Hamlet in 1990 at the New York Shakespeare Festival was very well received. Critic Richard Hummler: "Kline hits all chords, ranging with intense panache from grief to rage to witty cunning to self-disgust to a final touching epiphany of regret." This favorable review is of an uncut Hamlet production directed by Kline himself, lasting an incredible four and a half hours. Hummel goes on to say that "Kline reads the soliloquies as someone who’s actually working out his thoughts, and the result is fresh illumination of these great speeches."9 As mentioned before, the best way an actor playing Hamlet can avoid the problems of seemingly endless delays in the action is to concentrate on the overall objective of killing Claudius. By doing this, the dramatic action will be advanced, and the production will not become tiresome. Kline was obviously aware of this during his successful performance of the Dane.

Hamlet: A Play of Inaction?

One of the main points of investigation in this thesis has been the examination of the unfolding dramatic action in Hamlet. This has been difficult at times due to the vast amount of apparent inaction in the play. The prospect of Hamlet seeking revenge for the wrongful murder of his father is brought up early

in the play, but it takes quite a long time for him to actually go through with the deed. For this reason, more than one critic throughout the years has labeled *Hamlet* as being a play of inaction. Not only is this a rather simplistic reading of a very complex play, it is also a misnomer. Edward Hubler, who wrote the introduction to the 1963 Signet version of *Hamlet*, agrees:

> Hamlet has on-stage action in God's plenty. A ghost walks the stage; people are killed by stabbing and poisoning; a young woman runs mad, is drowned offstage, and is buried on stage; two skeletons are dug up and scattered over the stage; armies march, and there is a fencing match that ends in general slaughter.

> Yet one scarcely thinks of *Hamlet* as a play of action.10

Hubler speaks directly to the heart of this thesis; a lot of action occurs in *Hamlet* as the Prince attempts to fulfill his objective of killing Claudius. The attempt to reach this objective drives the dramatic action throughout the entire play.

This disparity between the perceived action on stage and the actual action throughout the play is one reason *Hamlet* is such a powerful tragedy. During the passive moments, Hamlet ponders life and death. He battles with himself about when and how to avenge his father's death, and he attempts to rationalize his mother's relationship with his uncle. Still, during all of these passive moments, the dramatic action of the play is advanced;

Shakespeare skillfully balances the inaction with action, the passive moments with the active ones. *Hamlet* is not just a play of inaction. It is also a play of revenge; of filial duty; of occasional comedy; it is a play of relationships, politics, families and war; *Hamlet* is a play of illusions, death, secrets, and time; of ghosts, villains, and possible adulterers. *Hamlet* is a play of action and inaction; of growing dramatic action, and . . . much more. *Hamlet* is a play about attempting to achieve a goal. An objective.

Hamlet's objective is to avenge the murder of his father by killing Claudius. By attempting to achieve this goal, the dramatic action of the entire play is driven forward.
CHAPTER 3

HAMLET'S BEHAVIOR

As is evident in the play, Hamlet's fulfillment of his objective stems from the action that Hamlet takes in response to the love that he has for his father, and in response to his appreciating the love that his father had for his mother, Gertrude. For instance, Hamlet says, "So excellent a king, that was to this/ Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother/ That he might not beteem the winds of heaven/ Visit her face too roughly."11 Furthermore, it is Hamlet's love for his father that makes him seek revenge on Claudius for his father's death. It very well may be Hamlet's love for his father, and the overall grief due to the loss of his father (as well as the abhorrent circumstances under which he was killed) that drives Hamlet to treat Ophelia so harshly.

This chapter is divided into the following areas: (1) Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia; (2) the Ghost as an agent of divine providence; (3) Hamlet's treatment of Gertrude moving the dramatic action; (4) Hamlet as the true successor of the throne; (5)

the use of paradoxes and juxtapositions to move the dramatic action; (6) Osric as an element to advance the plot; (7) the parallelism in Hamlet. Each area will help prove that Hamlet's overall objective of killing Claudius fuels the dramatic action of the play.

Hamlet's Treatment of Ophelia Fuels Dramatic Action

Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia may be interpreted as being feigned madness that he uses as a tool to help him achieve his overall objective of killing Claudius. Consequently, the feigned madness is another element that moves the dramatic action of the play. Many critics believe it is solely Hamlet's feigned madness that causes him to treat Ophelia so harshly. Samuel Johnson writes:

Of the feigned madness of Hamlet there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing that he might have done with the reputation of sanity. He plays the madman most when he treats Ophelia with so much rudeness, which seems to be ruthless and wanton cruelty.¹²

J. Dover Wilson is not so quick to jump on the feigned madness bandwagon. He maintains that Hamlet's behavior cannot

be adequately defended. Wilson believes Hamlet's behavior goes too far, actually jeopardizing the integrity of the play itself. Wilson writes that "Hamlet's treatment of [Ophelia] remains inexcusable on the ordinary reading of the story, and as such it endangers the very life of the play." Wilson does contend, however, that Hamlet's mixed-up state of mind and the Elizabethans' cruder and more direct speech, as compared to our own contemporary speech, do offer some reasons for Hamlet's behavior. Nevertheless, Wilson does not support the interpretation of feigned madness on the part of the young Dane. Feigned madness or not, one thing is certain: Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia brings him closer to his objective of killing Claudius, driving the dramatic action of the play forward.

According to Matt Wolf, this harsh treatment of Ophelia was performed quite well by Alan Rickman's Hamlet in Robert Sturua's 1992 London production.

Whereas some of Rickman's recent work has recycled proven tricks, his Hamlet is an original. Pinning Ophelia to the floor as he snarls, 'Get thee to a nunnery,' the actor inevitably recalls his similarly brutal gesture towards Mme. de Tourvel in his career-making performance in 'Les Liaisons Dangereuses.'

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Rickman's Hamlet was considered a success because the actor had a clear idea of the character's overall objective of killing Claudius. Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia is just one step closer toward the realization of this objective.

Other critics believe that Hamlet's behavior is simply a reflection of Ophelia's own behavior. For instance, David Leverenz points out that Hamlet's changing acts of aggression and need "are Hamlet's nasty mirroring of what he perceives to be her mixed signals too him: her loving talks, then her inexplicable denial and silence." Leverenz goes on to say that Hamlet's double messages indicate a denunciation of all women, and that this miscommunication eventually leads to the apparent madness. Eventually, most likely due in part to Hamlet's behavior, Ophelia herself makes an undisputed "break" into madness.

A much more humanistic view of Hamlet's behavior is made by Lu Gu-Sun in an article written for Shakespeare Survey in 1983. Gu-Sun believes that Hamlet's moments of virtue and vice make him a more "three-dimensional man" that most people can relate to, and not just a dramatis persona. "As a result, a modern man, be he an agnostic, a disillusioned cynic, a probing thinker . . . or an ordinary person, grappling with day-to-day stressful

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situations in life, still feels, as Coleridge did, 'a smack of Hamlet' in him."\textsuperscript{16}

Inga-Stina Ewbank examines the issue of feigned madness and his behavior towards Ophelia in terms of language. More specifically, she investigates Hamlet's contradiction of language. Ewbank believes that it is precisely Hamlet's contradiction of language that makes his character so powerful. "He listens and he does not listen; his speech is built on sympathy and on total disregard of other selves."\textsuperscript{17}

However, once again, it is Hamlet's love for his father, not his feelings for Ophelia, that gives him the impetus to run his sword through the prying Polonius lurking behind the arras, thereby further moving the dramatic action of the play. At first, Hamlet believes the person to be the King. The Queen asks, "O me, what hast thou done?" And Hamlet replies, "Nay, I know not. Is it the King?"\textsuperscript{18} Although this action by Hamlet may seem to be accidental, it is very deliberate on the part of Shakespeare's structuring of the drama. From this point of the play on, Hamlet appears to be more decisive, despite the delays, than he had been in the previous acts.


The Ghost: An Agent of Divine Providence?

Perhaps the closest the audience comes to viewing Hamlet's father, the former King of Denmark, is through the Ghost. It should be clear, however, that there are many critical interpretations of the Ghost in *Hamlet*. The idea a modern audience has toward ghosts is often different than the Elizabethan audience's idea of specters. This difference can be easily identified by juxtaposing the beliefs of Catholics during the Elizabethan era with the beliefs of most modern Catholics in terms of ghosts. For example, most Catholics during Shakespeare's time believed that ghosts were probably spirits of the dead, allowed to come back from Purgatory for some sort of special purpose. Many modern Catholics have a similar notion, but today's audiences simply don't take ghosts as seriously as the audiences of Shakespeare's day.

Most Elizabethan Protestants, on the other hand, had a slightly different take on ghosts. Protestants were readily able to accept ghosts as part of everyday life, but they did not believe specters were spirits of the dead returning from Purgatory. Protestants believed that when a person died, he or she went to "bliss in heaven or to prison in hell."\(^{19}\) Needless to say, during Shakespeare's day there were many heated debates about

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whether ghosts were angels or devils. One matter is certain: the Ghost in *Hamlet* aids in the play's movement of dramatic action.

Many productions of *Hamlet* have omitted the opening scene of the play which includes the first appearance of the Ghost. This is done for many reasons, not the least of which is to cut about ten minutes off an already long play. Michael Cohen notes that a director may have fears about the Ghost scene, inducing the audience into laughter rather than proving and building suspense. Cohen points out that if the Ghost does not appear at the beginning, it is very possible—from the audience's point of view—that the specter is part of Hamlet's own mind, not an actual outside spirit. "Each time it appears subsequently, young Hamlet is present. Without the first scene, it is wholly possible to consider the ghost a creature or a projection of young Hamlet's mind, invisible and inaudible to others."20 Since Francisco, Bernardo, Marcellus, and Horatio see the Ghost in the first scene, it is quite clear that the specter is a real outside entity. This scene sets up Hamlet's future objective of killing Claudius, and begins to move the dramatic action of the play.

Another important aspect of the first scene, with the introduction of the Ghost, involves the mood it creates; the scene also gets the dramatic action started in a unique and interesting way. The Ghost causes Francisco and Bernardo to take action.

They consult with Horatio, who then tells Hamlet about the Ghost. The scene is described as being dark and cold, and when the Ghost appears, in most productions of the play, the elements of fear and mystery are presented along with the appearance of the specter. Cohen concurs: "There is mystery and also discomfort: it is bitter cold, so dark . . . that Francisco and Bernardo cannot immediately recognize each other, and, of course, it is frightening, as we are shortly to discover." 21

Marcellus and Bernardo eventually bring in Horatio to speak to the Ghost; he is a scholar and, in their minds, should be able to successfully communicate with it. Also, they wish to bring in an outside party to prove to themselves that the Ghost is not some figment of their imaginations. A very important piece of information about the Ghost is passed along to the audience in the first scene: it resembles the dead King, Hamlet's father.

Horatio suggests by the scene's end--after unsuccessfully trying to communicate with the Ghost--that Hamlet should be informed about the strange events that have transpired. The Ghost is, after all, the shape and likeness of the deceased King. Cohen questions the notion that neither Horatio, Marcellus, or Bernardo ever consider consulting Claudius about the Ghost; as far as they know, the specter may wish to discuss important state business. "Claudius's name is not mentioned in the scene. He is

simply left out of consideration here, as if the 'posthaste and romage in the land' had ordered itself."\(^{22}\)

The first scene nevertheless gets the so-called ball of dramatic action rolling. It provides Hamlet impetus to meet the Ghost, and begin to ponder the request of the spirit to fulfill his filial duty; that is, to kill Claudius and restore order to Denmark. At the same time, the opening scene creates the aforementioned mood of mystery and fear, a mood that exists throughout most of the rest of the play. To cut the scene undoubtedly saves time, but it also arguably sacrifices one of the most engaging beginnings drama has ever known.

Many critics have looked at the Ghost in *Hamlet* as being a possible agent of divine providence, but this notion is disregarded by some critics who feel that the Ghost's demand of personal revenge is anti-Christian. As Alex Newell succinctly puts it:

> A passion-driven act of revenge cannot be rationalized critically or theologically into a notion of heaven's way of punishing Claudius. In this regard, turning as it does on the Ghost's own desire for revenge, Hamlet's situation as an incited revenger is not comparable to the role of someone like Richmond at the end of Richard III, where Richmond prays to God of support and fights in His service.\(^{23}\)

In contrast to Newell, R. W. Desai believes that Hamlet's actions are divinely inspired. As Desai puts it, Hamlet's actions fulfill "the Biblical injunction against the murderer and usurper that Claudius is." The main support for Desai's argument is the fact that Hamlet talks about and commits his acts of vengeance in public. Conversely, Claudius's admission of guilt comes while he's on his knees in the privacy of his own chamber. Ultimately, Hamlet kills Claudius in court, in public, in Act Five. The notion that Hamlet's actions are divinely inspired fits right into the substance of this thesis. It can be argued that divine inspiration leads to Hamlet fulfilling his objective of killing Claudius thereby fueling the dramatic action of the entire play.

Newell goes on to say that this idea of providence in the play is presented more clearly toward the play's end. Newell suggests that Shakespeare intentionally structured the play to include soliloquies in the first two-thirds of the drama to illustrate the "inner state of a character." Approximately the last third of Hamlet is free of soliloquies. According to Newell, this design in the structure "quickens the tempo by eliminating the pauses created by such speeches, but, more importantly, it helps render the change in Hamlet's outlook upon his return to Denmark."
And upon his return to Denmark, Hamlet eventually fulfills his objective of killing Claudius. Therefore, as the idea of providence is presented more clearly toward the end of the play, the dramatic action moves more swiftly and efficiently.

Moreover, Newell says that it is in about the final third of the play when the "providential process" begins to become more clear; he claims that the movement away from soliloquy allows Hamlet to reflect on the events of Denmark and humanity, not just on his own self-absorption. When the idea of providence becomes clearer towards the end of the play (Hamlet succeeds in the Ghost's wish of killing Claudius) the many soliloquies that preceded are given added dramatic effect. With this intentional, skillful structuring of the play's events, Shakespeare sets the tone for the play's final movement and concluding action.26 This theory of divine providence is yet another element the playwright uses to fuel the dramatic action of the play as Hamlet attempts to achieve his goal of killing Claudius.

Hamlet's Treatment of Gertrude Moves the Dramatic Action

En route to the concluding action, Hamlet becomes increasingly bitter and insolent toward his mother while

continuing to move closer to his final objective of killing Claudius. And even though the reasons for Hamlet's bitterness towards Gertrude may be debated, many critics agree that, in part, Hamlet is upset at his mother's lack of sympathy for him. Other critics note that Gertrude often speaks of her concern for her son, but she is actually more worried about her own life and her own happiness with Claudius, the Queen's new husband. As Arthur Kirsch points out, Gertrude doesn't seem to care about her son's grief. "She is clearly sexually drawn and loyal to her new husband, and she is said to live almost by Hamlet's looks, but she is essentially inert, oblivious to the whole realm of human experience through which her son travels."27

According to Alex Newell in *The Soliloquies in Hamlet*, Hamlet's bitterness towards Gertrude stems primarily from the realization that his mother has married his uncle. To Hamlet, this is a betrayal to himself as well as a betrayal of his father. To most Elizabethans of the time, the marriage of a widow to her deceased husband's brother was considered an abomination of matrimony. As Newell puts it, Gertrude is "guilty of an adulterous and incestuous profanation of the marriage sacrament."28 Incidentally, this "profanation of the marriage" is also the popular interpretation for the reason Gertrude cannot see or hear the

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Ghost in the closet scene, and is also consistent with the Elizabethan belief that a ghost may be visible to one person and invisible to another. "Shakespeare doubtless expected his audience to assume [the notion of Gertrude not seeing the Ghost] without explicit statement on his part." 29

The often asked questions of whether Gertrude actually played any part in her husband's murder and engaged in adultery are never resolved in Act Three, Scene Four. Hamlet states: "A bloody deed--almost as bad, good mother,/As kill a king, and marry with his brother." 30 With that sole exception, the matter is not taken up in the scene; Hamlet seems to be more interested in finding out whether his mother will choose to live with him or with Claudius.

Some may argue that when Gertrude admits having shame and guilt as she turns her eyes towards her soul, she is admitting to knowledge of Old King Hamlet's murder. Gertrude says:

O Hamlet, speak no more.  
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,  
And there I see such black and grainèd spots  
As will not leave their tinct. 31

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But Michael Cohen warns there are several possible interpretations of Gertrude's remark. He notes: "The stains Gertrude sees on her soul might well be the lust that Hamlet is taxing her with, or the ease with which she had been persuaded to marry Claudius, the fact of the marriage's technical incest, or something worse."\(^{32}\) To assume that Gertrude is admitting guilt about the knowledge of her husband's death is merely speculation.

Perhaps the lack of resolution in the scene helps further the movement of dramatic action in the play. As stated before, Hamlet's primary objective is to kill Claudius, seeking revenge for his father's wrongful murder. The confrontation Hamlet has with Gertrude in Act Three, Scene Four provides ample conflict and, as a result, high drama; but it does little to resolve any answers Hamlet (or the audience for that matter) may have concerning Gertrude's culpability in her husband's murder.

The scene does, however, seem to spring forth a more probing Hamlet— one who seeks answers— in contrast to the Hamlet who has considerable difficulty making up his mind. In addition, the Hamlet seen in Act Three, Scene One, whether feigning madness or truly being upset with Ophelia, appears much further removed from his objective of killing Claudius than does the Hamlet presented a mere two scenes later. In short, Act

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Three, Scene Four provides a pivotal step in the movement of dramatic action in the entire play. It is a rather important domino that topples over in the scene, falling into and knocking over the line of other "plot-laced" dominos that eventually bring Hamlet closer toward his overall objective—as well as his final silence—in Act Five.

Moreover, textually, the scene is at more than the halfway point of the entire play, and Hamlet, up to this point, has been relatively inactive. The killing of Polonius (who is hiding behind the arras) is the first legitimate attempt Hamlet makes at killing Claudius; in Act Three, Scene Two, Hamlet refrains from murdering the praying Claudius for fear that his uncle may go to heaven. Most commentators believe that Hamlet mistakenly thought Polonius was Claudius. Michael Cohen notes: "That he has killed the king is his first thought. When Gertrude calls it a rash and bloody deed, he retorts that this regicide is almost as bad a regicide and incest together." The murder of Polonius is perhaps the first sign in the play that shows Hamlet's seeking of revenge is for real. He is serious. And we, the audience, are gripped by the dramatic action; we greatly anticipate the rest of the play.

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Hamlet as True Successor of the Throne

Another element involved in the movement of dramatic action in the play is the notion that Hamlet is the true successor of his father's throne—not Claudius. This knowledge may drive Hamlet to kill his uncle; not only does this display a love for his father, but it shows a love for the State of Denmark as well. In addition to Hamlet's love for his father is the love he has for the State of Denmark. R. W. Desai in an article written for *English Language Notes* argues that Hamlet is driven by his knowledge that he is the true successor of his father's throne. He is not just a "private revenger, but a representative of the State . . . Hamlet's revenge is directed against not only a murderer but a usurper."34

David Thatcher argues there is no overt textual evidence supporting the theory that Hamlet kills Claudius because he usurped the throne--the throne that rightfully belongs to Hamlet. He notes that Hamlet gives Horatio several reasons for killing Claudius, "including the conviction that Claudius killed his father, but, oddly, his father's injunction is not mentioned as a supplementary or compelling motive."35 Therefore, Hamlet's primary motive for killing Claudius cannot be proven conclusively from the information gleaned in the play's text.


Michael Cohen notes that Hamlet's speech in Act Five, Scene Two is "the closest Hamlet ever gets to questioning whether his purpose in revenging his father is subject to conscience."36 In the speech, Hamlet asks Horatio about his justification in killing Claudius:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon--
He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother,
Popped in between th' election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such coz'nage--is't not perfect conscience,
To quit his with this arm? And is't not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?37

Horatio's response is far from direct, and is subject to varied interpretations. He says that "It must be shortly known to him from England / What is the issue of business there."38 Horatio could mean that he thinks Hamlet should seek revenge, but that he'd better do it quickly because there is little time; or, possibly, he is avoiding the question altogether, not wasting time answering when he is convinced that Hamlet has already made up his mind.


In any case, the notion that Hamlet is the true successor of the throne is a pivotal element in the movement of dramatic action in the play. This knowledge contributes to Hamlet's attempt to kill his uncle, and helps to explain that the title character's overall objective fuels the dramatic action of the play.

**Paradoxes, Juxtapositions, and Dramatic Action**

Not only does Shakespeare cleverly move the dramatic action in *Hamlet*, but he also skillfully uses paradoxes throughout the play. A good example of this can be seen in Act Two, Scene Two. Between the end of the player's speech and the beginning of his soliloquy, Hamlet is very animated and busy; in the soliloquy, however, Hamlet censures himself for being inactive. Juxtapositions such as this make *Hamlet* a play of paradoxes, according to Michael Cohen:

Just before Hamlet proceeds to chastise himself for being dull, cowardly, and inactive, has been at his most active, clear-headed, charitable, quick-thinking, and decisive—charging Polonius to care for the players . . . taking the chief players aside and planning for the morrow a play which he knows to be like his father's murder (if the Ghost was telling the truth) and . . . instructing the player not to make fun of Polonius, and
reiterating his welcome to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.\textsuperscript{39}

The soliloquy at the end of Act Two is the longest in the entire play, and Hamlet's self-critique is very extreme. He describes himself as being muddy-mettled, pigeon-livered, and dull. Cohen argues that the actor's reading of the soliloquy will strongly influence the audience's interpretation of the troubled Prince of Denmark. A decisive Hamlet will "remind us of his clarity of mind, his courage and resolution," whereas a weaker reading of the speech "will take emphasis away from any appearance of decisiveness in the preceding action," and show the audience a Hamlet closer to the one that Hamlet himself sees as he looks inward.\textsuperscript{40} In any case, the soliloquy at the end of Act Two furthers the dramatic action of the play and moves Hamlet closer to his final objective of killing Claudius.

\textbf{Osric: To Clown, or to Advance the Plot? That is the Question}

Toward the end of Act Five, Scene Two, Osric enters and summons Hamlet to the contest set up by Claudius and Laertes. Clearly, Shakespeare's uses for the messenger Osric are twofold:


first, he is presented in most productions as being quite foppish, clown like, an unknowing conspirator in the plot to combat Hamlet; secondly, he is cleverly used to advance the plot, taking the audience from Horatio and Hamlet debating to the final blood bath at the end of the scene. Once again, Shakespeare finds a way to end the conversation between Horatio and Hamlet while simultaneously moving the dramatic action of the play. Michael Cohen, in *Hamlet in My Mind's Eye*, agrees: "Osric advances the plot in summoning Hamlet to the contest set up by the king and Laertes; he is also a conspirator himself . . . but he is first a clown who engages unwillingly and apparently unknowingly in wit-combat with Hamlet."\(^{41}\)

Cohen goes on to compare the function of Osric to that of the gravedigger in Act Five, Scene One. He explains that both the gravedigger and Osric are unknowingly and unwittingly engaged in "wit-combat" with Hamlet, but that the characters are nevertheless antithetical. He argues that the gravedigger is an older man of a lower class; he's a plain fellow who seems to verbally get the best of Hamlet. Conversely, Osric is referred to (on more than one occasion) as being very young; he uses fancy language and is usually staged in fancy dress. Osric seems to be verbally bested by Hamlet and Horatio without ever knowing

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exactly what is happening. Clearly, however, the most important use of the character, Osric, is as a tool to advance the plot. Soon after Osric delivers the message to Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark achieves his overall objective of killing Claudius, driving the dramatic action to the very end of the play.

Parallelism in Hamlet

The unique parallelism the final scene in Act Five has with Act One, Scene Two is another element brought up at the end of Hamlet. Michael Cohen notes:

In [Act One, Scene Two], a new king assumed his throne "with wisest sorrow" for the death of the previous one. [In Act Five, Scene Two], Fortinbras assumes the throne by saying "with sorrow I embrace my fortune" (377). In both scenes Claudius makes a point of the cannon announcing his toasts to heaven and heaven echoing them back to earth, but here the king's last "carouse" is forced and poisoned, and the last cannon salutes Hamlet.  

Shakespeare intentionally chose to structure the tragedy by paralleling one of the beginning scenes to the last scene in the

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court—this is cyclical in a sense. Denmark's leadership and future are a key question at the play's beginning; finally, at the play's end, the leadership has changed, and the question of Denmark's future has begun all over again. This paralleling speaks directly to what is proven in this thesis: that Hamlet's overall objective of killing Claudius fuels the dramatic action of the play. While Hamlet is attempting to kill his uncle, the movement of incidents in the play are advanced from scene to scene and from act to act. Before the Prince of Denmark learns of his objective, and after he accomplishes it, Denmark's future remains an important question.
CHAPTER 4

HAMLET ON FILM AND TELEVISION

Obviously, film is a much different medium than theatre, especially in terms of the relationship it has toward the audience. Most notably, films dictate exactly what a viewer sees, including what distances and angles will be used in a particular shot or scene. Nevertheless, film versions of Hamlet contain a progression of dramatic incidents similar to their stage counterparts. The major advantage of a film production versus a stage production is an obvious one: a film provides an accurate, indelible record of the performance whereas many stage presentations (with the exception of those now videotaped for archival purposes) are left to the memories of the audience, or perhaps to the review of a theatre critic. Despite the differences between theatre and film, this chapter proves that Hamlet's overall objective of killing Claudius fuels the dramatic action of Olivier's film in much the same way it does on the stage.
Olivier's *Hamlet*

Laurence Olivier's 1948 film version of *Hamlet* won an Academy Award; it was over two and a half hours long even with the parts of Fortinbras, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern cut completely from the text. Olivier played Hamlet; Basil Sidney, Claudius; Eileen Herlie, Gertrude; Felix Aylmer, Polonius; Jean Simmons, Ophelia; Anthony Quayle, Marcellus; Stanley Holloway, Gravedigger; Terence Morgan, Laertes; and Norman Wooland, Horatio. Many critics cited a Freudian interpretation in Olivier's film when it first opened. Olivier admitted he was much influenced by a Freudian reading of Shakespeare's text. For instance, a shot of Gertrude's curtained bed is returned to many times throughout the film. Author Michael Cohen notes that "Olivier begins the action with a voice-over reading of the speech, 'So oft it chances in particular men,' from the beginning of [Act One, Scene Four], and then announces portentously, 'This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.'"44 J. C. Trewin in *Five and Eighty Hamlets* describes the voice-over as being an "arguable simplification."45

Michael Cohen points out that Olivier adopted Dover Wilson's idea that Hamlet inadvertently overheard Polonius setting up the spy scene in Act Two, Scene Two. "[Hamlet] spies upon the royal

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party . . . (Wilson would have been horrified since his Hamlet is too noble for anything but inadvertent overhearing) and thus knows of the plan." Some critics disagreed with this interpretation at the time, but Olivier was nevertheless interested in it, and most likely thought Wilson's reading gave the film added dramatic effect. This reading of the play by Olivier in his film version also gave the title character plenty of impetus to achieve his objective of killing Claudius, thereby driving forward the dramatic action of the film.

Author and theatre critic J. C. Trewin saw Olivier's *Hamlet* on stage at the Old Vic eleven years before the film version was made. The small changes made in the text of the *Hamlet* film version didn't bother Trewin per se, but he was concerned that superfluous textual changes could be dangerous, blurring the Shakespearian sound of the unfolding drama. Trewin writes:

> The alterations may not have been numerous; they were superfluities, that could fidget one like comparably useless changes in the newest revision of the Bible. Thus, 'like the King that's dead' became 'like the dead king Hamlet.' Claudius urged Hamlet not to 'persist' (instead of 'persever') in obstinate condonelement. We had 'roar' for 'bruit' in the line of the 'King's rouse'; 'suffer' instead of 'beteem,' and

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'minds not his own creed' for 'reeks not his own rede.'

Trewin thought that some of the cuts made in order to trim the film's length--it runs approximately two and a half hours--were "sad." In particular, Trewin points out the example of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, characters whose lines are often cut in many stage versions of *Hamlet*.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern 'went to 't' in the most downright sense; they were removed bodily. So was Fortinbras. So, most seriously, ... was the test for most any Hamlet, 'How all occasions do inform against me!', a twelfth-hour cut that Olivier regretted: 'From a filmmaker's point of view ... I cut it for purely filmic reasons.'

Not everything in the film version was inferior to the original *Hamlet* stage version at the Vic, however. For instance, Trewin enjoyed the "To be or not to be" speech Hamlet makes while contemplating suicide; he gazes down from a tower, high above the sound of a roaring sea below. Also, he liked the duel at the end of the film, citing the "intricate protraction" of the scene by Olivier. Finally, Trewin lauded the film's end, with the four captains carrying the dead Prince to the uppermost tower, calling

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it "a superb processional end to a play that faded in majesty; nothing became it like its close."\textsuperscript{49}

Overall, Trewin preferred the \textit{Hamlet} presentation at the Vic eleven years earlier to the 1948 Olivier film. The venerable theatre critic thought the film version lacked a certain thrill that was present at the Vic and many other stage productions of \textit{Hamlet}. One sentence in particular sums up Trewin's thoughts of the Olivier film: "In spite of moments of needled perception and a few scenes that did snatch us from cinema to the zenith of Shakespearian playing, Olivier rarely struck us to the soul: he was an older Hamlet, not a better."\textsuperscript{50} In any case, Olivier's film version of \textit{Hamlet} successfully moves the dramatic action of the film by uniquely showing the title character's pursuit of achieving his overall objective; that is, to kill Claudius, restoring peace and order to Denmark.

A continuing theme present throughout Olivier's \textit{Hamlet}, according to Michael Cohen in \textit{Hamlet in My Mind's Eye}, is that of Oedipal drives. As mentioned earlier, Gertrude's curtained bed is returned to many times throughout the film. Additionally, in the Olivier film (what is Act Three, Scene Four in the text), Hamlet embraces and kisses Gertrude on the mouth, overtly showing an Oedipal quality as he attempts to distance his mother from


Claudius. Also, in the same scene, Olivier makes use of the ability to crosscut, a convention of film which allows the showing of two places at the same time. "[Hamlet] speaks the line ['Mother, mother, mother!'] in a hesitant and childish fashion while climbing the huge stairs to his mother's bedroom, thus setting up the Oedipal confrontation in which he will range between infant son and dominating lover."\(^{51}\) By crosscutting, Olivier moves forth the dramatic action of the film in a way that is nearly impossible to duplicate on the stage.

To sum up, critics have a wide variety of opinions about Olivier's film. Michael Cohen's comments appear to be strongly influenced by an Oedipal reading of the production, whereas J. C. Trewin bases his examination by contrasting Olivier's film version of *Hamlet* with his earlier stage play. In both cases, each author provides thoughtful, germane ideas that leave little room for argument.\(^{52}\) One matter is clear: Olivier's film version of *Hamlet* shows that the title character's overall objective of killing Claudius fuels the dramatic action of the film in much the same way it does on the stage.

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\(^{52}\) Incidentally, the author of this thesis has typically been in the school of thought with those critics who have not garnered any textual evidence of an Oedipal relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude. Nevertheless, as has been previously noted, there is little doubt that Olivier uses an Oedipal interpretation in his film version of *Hamlet*. 
CHAPTER FIVE

CULMINATION OF DRAMATIC ACTION

Clearly, it is evident that many elements contribute to the play's movement of dramatic action. Hamlet's love for his father makes him bitter and grief-stricken upon hearing the news of his father's vicious, wrongful murder. During the play, the confirmation of the murder of his father drives Hamlet to fulfill his overall objective of killing Claudius and restoring peace to Denmark. By feigning madness and reassuring himself that the Ghost indeed was telling the truth about the murder, Hamlet brings himself closer to his final objective. In the meantime, Hamlet runs into a lot of conflict—or, rather, it runs into him. This conflict is yet another element that helps drive the dramatic action throughout the entire play, all the way to the last scene in which Hamlet achieves his overall objective of killing Claudius; unfortunately, in doing so, Hamlet dies along with his mother and Laertes. This grief drives him to take action; this dramatic action (the structure of the incidents in the play) is constantly driven by Hamlet from the first time he contemplates death—"O that this too sullied flesh would melt"—until he utters his last words: "On

Fortinbras. He has my dying voice./So tell him, with th'
occurrences, more and less,/ Which have solicited--the rest is silence."54

It is interesting to note that Shakespeare did not choose to end the play at this point; that is, with silence. Actually, the play ends with a lot of noise. The Ambassador announces that the King's commandment has been fulfilled, and that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio goes on to describe "carnal, bloody, unnatural acts"55 and Hamlet's struggle to maintain the integrity of his "noble heart"56. David Leverenz describes this "noise" at the end of the play as being the result of "a sequence of ritual male duties."57

Furthermore, Leverenz goes on to describe the issue of loudness as compared to silence at the end of the play by juxtaposing the women with the men. Leverenz points out that, at the play's end, all the women are dead. As a result, Fortinbras speaks in terms of loudness, not silence.58

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undermines Hamlet's final words that describe the rest—most likely death—as being silence. Fortinbras says:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal; and for his passage
The soldiers' music and the rite of war
Speak loudly for him.
Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss,
Go, bid the soldiers shoot.59

Hamlet's silence after achieving his overall objective of killing Claudius fuels the dramatic action of the play one more time. Even in Hamlet's death, Shakespeare moves the dramatic action forward. The ending puts forth a militaristic attitude; the idea of war is a prevailing theme at the play's conclusion. Not just war in the traditional sense, but wars between members of a family. Leverenz sums it up as follows: "The illegitimate succession instituted by Claudius concludes with the triumph of the son against whom these fathers were at war."60


Perhaps Shakespeare was consciously attempting to juxtapose Hamlet's silence, which is dead, with Fortinbras's loudness, which lives on. No one knows for sure, but many critics, including Leverenz, speculate this is true. One matter is certain: the elements of war and honor brought up at the end of the play are obvious. For instance, Fortinbras points out that Hamlet's death on the battlefield would have been acceptable, but death in the court "shows much amiss." As far as Hamlet is concerned, the rest, after death, is indeed silence--regardless of the manner in which one dies. Whatever the case, as mentioned before, the seemingly false proprieties of war are brought up at the end of the play. More importantly, the end of the play further proves that Hamlet's overall objective of killing his uncle propels the dramatic action action of the play--even after the death of the young Dane.

Chapter Two of this thesis examined the performances of some of the actors playing Hamlet. It proved that a talented actor playing the title character will successfully fuel the dramatic action of the play, moving him closer to the final objective of killing Claudius.

Chapter Three investigated Hamlet's behavior toward other characters in the play, and stated the impact these relationships have on the movement of dramatic action in the play. Part of the

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chapter was devoted to Hamlet's relationship with the Ghost; the thesis proved that the appearances of the specter brought Hamlet closer to his objective of killing Claudius, and fueled the dramatic action of the play. The chapter analyzed Hamlet as true successor of the throne, and proved that the element of successor brought him closer to his quest of killing Claudius. Chapter Three proved that the uses of paradoxes and juxtapositions in *Hamlet* furthered the dramatic action of the play and moved the Prince of Denmark closer to his final objective of killing Claudius. The chapter examined the character of Osric, and determined that he is purposely used as an advancer of the plot; the dramatic action was fueled as Hamlet moved closer toward his final objective of killing Claudius. Finally, the chapter analyzed the parallelism of Act Five with Act One. This parallelism occurred near the end of play when Hamlet fulfilled his objective of killing Claudius. Denmark's future and leadership were pivotal elements at the beginning of the play, and when Hamlet killed Claudius in the final blood bath in Act Five, the question of Denmark's future had begun all over again.

Chapter Four surveyed one of the better known film adaptations of the play: the 1948 Laurence Olivier *Hamlet*. The film was examined for its structural content, for its movement of dramatic action, and for its ability to live up to the original play while successfully translating to another medium. In this chapter, the thesis proved that Hamlet's overall objective of killing
Claudius fueled the dramatic action of the film in much the same way it did on the stage.

Chapter Five summarized the culmination of dramatic action in *Hamlet*. The chapter examined the element of loudness at the end of the play, and proved that, within Hamlet's silence, the dramatic action of the play was advanced before and after the Prince fulfilled his objective of killing Claudius.

In conclusion, all elements, as examined in this thesis, seem to prove that the main dramatic action of this play, the driving force, is Hamlet's objective of avenging the murder of his father. While other arguments exist in regard to the dramatic action and objective, the research conducted in this thesis proved that the majority of successful productions, including films, seemed to center on an avenging action—on Hamlet's objective of killing Claudius. The same seems to be true regarding the performers playing Hamlet; successful performances of the Prince of Denmark focus on Hamlet as his father's avenger. Thus, this thesis provides a solid base for those undertaking the role of Hamlet, or the play as a whole.
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