

## Character Analysis of Hamlet

### Hamlet

The character of Hamlet dominates Shakespeare's tragedy of the same name, yet Hamlet at the start of the play is not a commanding figure. Indeed, when we first see the Prince, his posture is defensive, Hamlet taking a passive, if resentful, stance toward the events that have befallen him. Slow to the conviction that the ghost is his dead father and that Claudius is guilty of regicide, Hamlet does not go straight to the task at hand. Hamlet's delay or procrastination is something about which critics have wondered and that the character himself agonizes, his self-reproach reaching an apex in Act IV, scene iv, which concludes with the words "O, from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (lines 65-66). The question remains: Why doesn't Hamlet act? One response to this question stresses Hamlet as a man of thought and words, as opposed to deeds. Shakespeare's Danish prince is one of the most intelligent protagonists in tragic drama. Unlike many other Elizabethan revenge tragedy heroes, Hamlet is given to philosophy and abstraction. At times, it seems that the play is less about Hamlet taking action in the external world, than it is about his grappling with the key existential problems of human existence. From this standpoint, Hamlet does not act immediately because he is too preoccupied with analyzing his situation and himself in the broadest terms imaginable. Hamlet is also a melancholy figure, given to depression, who is victimized by a cruel fate and compelled to undertake a revenge mission for which he is not prepared. Not only are Hamlet's musings about life extensive, they are uniformly dark—. Seen in this light, Hamlet does not act because he lacks the emotional fortitude to do so, depression and courage being difficult to reconcile. There are, however, good reasons for Hamlet to avoid acting precipitously. The story of Old Hamlet's murder is known to him only through the agency of a ghost, and killing the king on the word of an apparition is plainly a problematic (and possibly mistaken) act. Claudius explains his exile of Hamlet to England by referring to the Prince's popularity among the Danish people. But the Danish people are a fickle lot; many of them come to Laertes' cause against the Prince. Killing a king is a weighty matter, and many modern critics have argued that, in his particular circumstances, Hamlet is wise to defer action. In the end, Hamlet does act, defying augury in accepting the challenge to duel with Laertes. But the change in Hamlet's character takes place in scene i of Act V, and is expressed in his self-assertion that he is "Hamlet the Dane." It is not in the final scene, but in the graveyard scene immediately proceeding it that a "new," self-defined Hamlet appears on the stage, ready for action however it may be directed by divine will or by chance. A complex personality at the play's start, Hamlet is all the more fascinating because he undergoes dramatic character development.

The reasons for Hamlet's delay have led to various critical interpretations of his character. One critical perspective treats the prince as a tragic hero having three prominent characteristics: a willpower that surpasses average human beings, an extraordinarily intense power of feeling, and an unusually high level of intelligence. Each of these traits can be found in Hamlet, but the ambiguity surrounding his tragic flaw, or the defect in his character that leads to his downfall, remains the subject of critical debate. One argument is that the prince's fatal error which causes him to delay killing Claudius is his preoccupation with moral beauty and, with its loss in Denmark, his desire to die. Hamlet's obsession with death and suicide thus demonstrates that even before he encounters the Ghost, he has lost the will to involve himself in worldly affairs.

This notion corresponds to another important reading of the prince as a victim of excessive melancholy, or of an abnormal state of depression. Hamlet's melancholy is initially attributed to his father's death and his uncle's hasty marriage to his mother. The appearance of the Ghost, however, intensifies his grief, and the spirit's demand that his son remember him arrests the natural progression of Hamlet's mourning and recovery. Further, the prince is grieved by a mounting sense of loss—not only does he lose his father, but he is betrayed by his mother, he loses Ophelia's affections, and he is confronted with deception by his two friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet dwells on these problems in periods of brooding inaction that reveal the full extent of his pain and suffering. Another, more controversial, reading of the hero's character is that he suffers from an Oedipus Complex. This psychological disorder reflects the unconscious desire of a son to kill his father and replace him as the object of the mother's love. Viewed in this light, Hamlet delays killing Claudius because he subconsciously identifies with his uncle's crime and shares his guilt. According to some critics, Hamlet's Oedipal impulse also explains why he speaks to Gertrude like a jealous lover, why he dwells on his mother's sexual relations with Claudius, and why he treats his uncle as a rival throughout the play.

### **Claudius**

Claudius is the king of Denmark and brother of the dead king, which makes him Hamlet's uncle. Claudius has killed his brother to gain the throne and has married his brother's wife, Gertrude. Throughout the play, the nature of Claudius's kingship is displayed. Because Claudius is shrewd and able, though not always ethical or moral, Hamlet describes the contest of intelligence and will between them as that of "mighty opposites" (V.ii.62). Claudius is clearly the source of the rottenness that pervades Denmark. He is a clever "monster," who is able to devise plots and plans that conceal his intentions and to manipulate others into furthering them. On the other hand, as in the "confession" scene of Act III, Claudius has a conscience, realizing full well that his crime "is rank" and "smells to heaven" (III.iii). Claudius deserves his fate; killed by the very instruments that he (and Laertes) have devised; still, in his remorse and his affection toward Gertrude, Claudius is not completely beyond redemption. Additionally, Claudius's character provides perhaps the best illustration of the theme of appearance versus reality in Hamlet. Initially, Shakespeare depicts Hamlet's uncle as the consummate monarch who justifies his ascent to the throne and his marriage to Gertrude with confident eloquence and who competently handles Fortinbras's threat to Denmark. But as the play progresses, Claudius's villainy becomes more apparent, revealing that he is little more than an evil hypocrite.

Claudius has a number of foreign and domestic problems to contend with. One of the first internal problems is to have the country accept him as king. This is handled by having the Council support his marriage to Gertrude and his kingship, and Claudius refers to their support—that they "have freely gone / With this affair along" (I.ii.15-6)—in his opening remarks as he sits in state. The Danish kingdom is threatened from without by young Fortinbras, son of the old ruler of Norway, who was killed by Hamlet's father. Old Fortinbras's defeat and death resulted in a forfeiture of lands to Denmark; however, young Fortinbras wants the lands returned and thinks to take advantage of the upheaval in Denmark, occasioned by King Hamlet's death, to mount an attack. Claudius sends ambassadors to young Fortinbras's uncle (the brother of that country's dead king and presumably the current king of Norway), asking him to restrain his nephew and make him abide by the heraldic rules of the conflict between old Fortinbras and old

Hamlet. The king has noticed that Hamlet has been depressed since his father's funeral two months ago, and advises him that it is against heaven, the dead, and nature itself to continue immoderate grieving. Claudius names Hamlet as his immediate heir to the throne of Denmark and urges him to remain in Denmark as the "chiefest courtier" (I.ii.117) rather than returning to school in Wittenberg. Meanwhile, the ghost appears to Hamlet, who subsequently vows revenge for the death of his father. Hamlet however avoids acting on this promise. The king sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, friends of Hamlet from his youth, to try to learn what is troubling him. Claudius also listens to Polonius's claim that Hamlet is troubled by lovesickness for Ophelia. He agrees to test this theory by observing Hamlet in conversation with Ophelia. Though Polonius continues to be convinced of his own view, the king alertly dismisses this view after their concealed observation of Hamlet. He says: "Love? his affections do not that way tend" (III.i.162) and realizes "There's something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood" (III.i.164-5). Claudius plans to send Hamlet to England for a change of scene. He even agrees to Polonius's suggested intermediate step of having Hamlet talk to the queen about his changed demeanor. In III.ii, the king witnesses his own crime in a play performed before the royal court. When one of the actors pours poison in another actor's ear, the king rises enraged, calling for lights, and leaves. Alone in his room, Claudius tries to pray for forgiveness for his misdeeds but acknowledges to himself that he is not truly penitent because he still enjoys, "those effects for which I did the murder [murder]: / My crown, my own ambition, and my queen" (III.iii.54-55). Fearing for his own safety, the king commissions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take Hamlet to England as soon as possible. However, he does not tell Gertrude that he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed letters to the English king calling for Hamlet's execution in England. Concern about public opinion regarding the quick burial of Polonius, the removal of Hamlet from the Danish realm, Ophelia's madness, and Laertes's return from France, compound the king's problems. However, the king is adept in handling Laertes, who initially suspects the king's involvement in the death of Polonius. Claudius says very majestically that "divinity doth hedge a king" (IV.v.124) and appears unafraid by the menacing manner of Laertes. He directs an angry, amazed, and grieving Laertes to let Laertes's wisest followers judge whether the king was involved directly or indirectly in Polonius's death. In a gesture of bravado, the king says he will give up his kingdom, crown, life, and all to Laertes if the followers implicate him in Polonius's death. He further explains to Laertes that no public inquiry was possible because the queen loves Hamlet and also because the public regards Hamlet so well. When the king and Laertes discover together that Hamlet is returning to Denmark, Claudius announces his plan to have Hamlet killed, and Laertes expresses his desire to be a part of that plan. As the details are discussed, Claudius persuades Laertes to agree to a plan less straightforward than Laertes's desire to "cut his [Hamlet's] throat i' the' church" (IV.vii.126). In the end, Claudius is tripped up by his own multiple plots against Hamlet; his queen dies by drinking the poisoned wine, intended to be a back-up plan to kill Hamlet, and Claudius himself is killed when Hamlet wounds him with the poisoned sword.

### **Gertrude**

Gertrude, queen of Denmark, is the widow of the late King Hamlet and the mother of Prince Hamlet, who is the title character of the play. Gertrude has recently married her brother-in-law. Claudius, the new king, is the brother of the late king and thus Prince Hamlet's uncle. Gertrude

is central to the action of the play, despite the fact that she has relatively few lines. Hamlet's disgust with his mother's marrying less than two months after his father's death and marrying Claudius is one of the main subjects of his agonized reflections in the course of the play. Not only does Hamlet consider Claudius inferior to his father in every respect, but in Shakespeare's time, it was considered a form of incest for a widow to marry her brother-in-law. Just how deeply Gertrude is involved in her second husband's plot to kill Old Hamlet is unclear; by the final scene, it seems that the Queen was ignorant of the crime. Nevertheless, she marries her brother-in-law only a few months after her husband's death. Clearly, while he is directed by the Ghost to refrain from harming his mother, Hamlet views her (and women at large) with contempt. Far more so than her consort, Gertrude has "redeeming" qualities; she appears to be truly concerned by her son's depression and madness, and she displays a deep (if ill-placed) love toward Claudius. In addition, critics generally regard Gertrude as highly dependent on and easily manipulated by Claudius; her chief contribution to the drama is the anger and disillusionment she arouses in Hamlet by marrying his uncle. Some critics have risen to the queen's defense, however, arguing that she often offers concise and pithy remarks in the play which reflect her ability to grasp the magnitude of various situations. Moreover, she demonstrates strong character in the closet scene (Act III, scene iv) by accepting Hamlet's accusation of lust and admitting her sin. Gertrude first appears Act I, Scene ii, where she urges Hamlet not to mourn his father's death excessively. In the soliloquy that follows, Hamlet expresses a general weariness and disgust with life, which he links directly to his feelings about his mother's marriage. Later in Act I, Hamlet encounters the ghost of his father. The ghost accuses Claudius of murdering him and bitterly denounces his brother for seducing Gertrude. Critics continue to dispute whether the ghost's words mean that Gertrude had an adulterous relationship with Claudius before King Hamlet's death, or whether he is referring to their relationship after his death. While demanding that Hamlet avenge his murder, the ghost orders him not to harm Gertrude. While Gertrude says relatively little, some of her comments are insightful and to the point. She cuts short a lengthy explanation from the long-winded Polonius by urging him to produce "more matter with less art" (II.ii.95). Later, during the performance by the players, the player queen makes a long and passionate declaration of devotion to her husband; Gertrude observes, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III.ii.230). Gertrude's most dramatic moments come in the highly emotional "closet scene" (III.iv), which takes place in her private chamber or "closet." Acting on Polonius's advice ("Tell him [Hamlet] his pranks have been too broad [unrestrained] to bear with" [III.iv.2]), the queen calls Hamlet to her chamber, where Polonius is listening behind a curtain. The queen begins by scolding Hamlet for offending Claudius.

Hamlet responds by accusing her of marrying Claudius out of purely sexual desire. Hearing Polonius behind the curtain, Hamlet stabs him through the curtain and kills him, apparently mistaking him for Claudius. He then reveals to Gertrude his belief that Claudius killed his father. Hamlet's tirade against the queen is cut short when the ghost (who is invisible to Gertrude) again appears to Hamlet and reminds him of his mission of revenge. Toward the end of the scene, Gertrude expresses remorse for her behavior. Her lines, however, do not make clear whether she already knew or, indeed, believes that Claudius murdered Hamlet's father, and whether she thinks Hamlet is sane or mad. Stage and film productions of the play have interpreted these questions in many different ways. Although Gertrude does not subsequently

abandon Claudius, neither does she reveal to him Hamlet's suspicions. She dies in the final scene of the play, when she drinks from a cup of poisoned wine prepared by Claudius and intended for Hamlet. In her dying words she tells Hamlet that the wine is poisoned. Critics generally regard Gertrude as weak willed, highly dependent on Claudius and easily manipulated by him. Some critics, however, take a more positive view of her character, arguing that her pointed remarks reveal a perceptive intelligence.

## **Ghost**

Of the other major characters in Hamlet, the Ghost is important because his demand for revenge sets the plot into motion. The apparition's ambiguous role in the drama reflects the general confusion about spirits in Shakespeare's day. Throughout the tragedy, the Ghost is alternately viewed as an illusion, a portent foreshadowing danger to Denmark, a spirit returning from the grave because of a task left undone, a spirit from purgatory sent with divine permission, and a devil who assumes the form of a dead person to lure mortals to doom. While Hamlet is chiefly concerned with this last possibility, each of these perspectives are put to the test at some point in the play. Before the play begins, King Hamlet of Denmark has been found dead. His brother Claudius has become king and has married the widowed queen, Gertrude. Prince Hamlet, grieving the loss of his father and his mother's hasty and incestuous (by Elizabethan standards) remarriage, has descended into a deep melancholy. Moreover, on two consecutive nights the ghost has appeared in armor to palace guards on the battlements of the castle. The two guards have told no one about the ghost except Hamlet's friend Horatio, who has agreed to stand guard with them to see if the ghost appears again. In I.i, the ghost appears to the two guards and Horatio. Horatio commands the ghost to speak, but it does not. It then reappears and seems about to speak to Horatio, but when a cock crows, signaling daybreak, the ghost vanishes. Horatio resolves to tell Prince Hamlet about the sighting. Hamlet is startled by Horatio's story and decides to watch for the ghost himself. In I.iv, the ghost reappears in the presence of Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus and beckons Hamlet to withdraw privately with it. When they are alone in I.v, the ghost tells Hamlet that it is the spirit of Hamlet's father, murdered by Claudius. The ghost denounces Claudius for seducing Gertrude and calls for Hamlet to avenge his death but not to harm Gertrude. The ghost then vanishes. When Horatio and Marcellus appear, Hamlet repeatedly orders them to swear that they will not reveal what they have seen. Hamlet vows vengeance, but later expresses doubt about the ghost's identity, speculating that it could be a devil appearing in his father's form to tempt him to sin. This reaction characterizes his attitude toward the ghost until the play scene (III.ii). Hamlet's own uncertainty is mirrored in the critical debate about the nature of the ghost. Most critics agree that Shakespeare intended audiences to accept the apparition as the ghost of Hamlet's father, but some contend that it may be an illusion or a demon. Some critics argue that the ghost is in fact a devil whose object is to lure Hamlet to his own demise by arousing his passion for vengeance. Another interpretation is that the ghost is a hallucination seen by only a few characters. The ghost makes a final appearance in III.iv, shortly after Hamlet stabs Polonius, who has been secretly listening to a confrontation between Hamlet and Gertrude. The ghost reminds Hamlet that he is sworn to vengeance, and as they talk Hamlet expresses his shameful regret that he has not yet acted against Claudius. The ghost then draws Hamlet's attention to Gertrude's "amazement" and urges him to assist her in her moral struggle. Gertrude claims to neither see

nor hear the ghost, and this supports the critical interpretation that the apparition Hamlet describes to her is a symptom of his madness. Gertrude's apparent inability to see the ghost has led some critics to suggest that Shakespeare wanted his audience, too, to interpret the ghost as a hallucination. Most critics, however, agree with the view that prevailed during the first three centuries after the writing of *Hamlet*, that the ghost was meant to be taken literally.

## **Horatio**

Horatio is Hamlet's closest friend, a former fellow-student at Wittenberg. Horatio has come to Elsinore from Wittenberg for the funeral of old King Hamlet. He is described by Marcellus as a "scholar" (I.i.42). Horatio enjoys the absolute trust of those who know him: it is Horatio whom the guards ask to witness the appearance of the ghost, it is Horatio with whom Hamlet trusts his suspicions regarding Claudius, and even Claudius trusts Horatio to look after and further restrain Hamlet after Hamlet attacks Laertes at Ophelia's funeral. In III.ii.54-87 Hamlet professes his faith in Horatio and praises his qualities of judiciousness, patience, and equanimity. Horatio is initially skeptical about the ghost. He believes it is a "fantasy" (I.i.23) of the watch. After seeing and attempting to communicate with the ghost, Horatio speculates that its appearance might be related to possible impending war with Norway. In speaking to the ghost, Horatio implores it to tell him if he can do anything to help it, or to avoid trouble befalling his country. Noting that the ghost looks like the dead King Hamlet and seemed about to speak when it vanished with the dawn, Horatio resolves to tell Hamlet about the apparition. Horatio worries that the ghost may lead Hamlet to suicide or madness, so he and Marcellus try unsuccessfully to prevent Hamlet from meeting with the ghost. After Hamlet's private conference with the ghost, Horatio tells Hamlet that he is speaking in "wild and whirling words" (I.v.132-33), and even jokes grimly that some of what Hamlet claims the ghost has told him is common knowledge: "There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave / To tell us this" (I.v.125). Hamlet does not reveal the true substance of the ghost's claims—that he is the ghost of Hamlet's father, murdered by Claudius—to Horatio until later in the play. Hamlet asks Horatio to watch King Claudius during the staging of a play that will recreate a similar murder in order to judge, by the king's responses, whether he seems guilty. He and Hamlet compare notes on the king's behavior afterwards. Horatio is one of the few fixed points in the play: he remains from first to last a loyal friend to Hamlet, trusted by all. He attempts suicide when Hamlet is dying, but Hamlet asks him to remain alive to give a full account of the tragic events at the Danish court. The least complicated "good" character in the play, Horatio is calm and stoical. He furnishes Hamlet with an anchor, and his allegiance to the prince is so great that he offers to die alongside his friend.

## **Laertes**

Laertes is Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother. He has come to Denmark for King Claudius's coronation. In his first appearance in I.ii, he seeks permission to return to France. When he appears again in I.iii, Laertes bids his sister Ophelia farewell and warns her about Hamlet. He advises her that Hamlet can't choose a mate for himself alone, but, being the prince, must think of the state. Thus, he cautions Ophelia to protect her virtue. Polonius then enters and advises his son on how to conduct himself while in France. When his father is finished, Laertes leaves for France. Laertes returns to Denmark after Polonius's death, bursting into the room with a group of followers and addressing Claudius, "O thou vile king" (IV.v.116), and vowing revenge

for his father's death. Claudius assures Laertes that he played no role in the death of Polonius and asks him if he is prepared to know the truth, if in his desire for vengeance he will look to both "friend and foe" (Iv.v.143). Ophelia then enters, and Laertes realizes that his sister has gone mad. The king then tells Laertes that he will give up the kingdom, his crown and his life if Laertes and his followers find that he was involved in Polonius's death. Later, Claudius explains to Laertes that there was no formal inquiry into Polonius's death due to the queen's love for Hamlet and due to the high regard the people have for the prince. During this scene (IV.vii) a messenger arrives bearing a letter from Hamlet; Laertes and Claudius learn that the prince has returned to Denmark. The king speaks of a plot to kill Hamlet, and Laertes expresses his wish to be a part of it. When Claudius asks Laertes "What would you undertake / To show yourself indeed your father's son / More than in words?" Laertes replies that he would cut Hamlet's throat in the church (IV.vii.124-26). After further discussion, a plan evolves in which Laertes will fight Hamlet with a poisoned rapier; and, as an additional measure, Claudius will offer a cup of poisoned wine to Hamlet, if it appears as though Hamlet might be winning the match. After Ophelia's funeral, during which Laertes and Hamlet leap into Ophelia's grave, Laertes and Hamlet prepare to duel. In the course of the duel, just before Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned rapier, Laertes says in an aside "And yet it is almost against my conscience" (V.ii.296). After a scuffle the two change rapiers. Laertes is then wounded with the poisoned rapier by Hamlet. At the same moment, the queen, who has drunk from the cup of poisoned wine, falls and warns Hamlet that the drink is poisoned. Laertes then tells Hamlet the truth about the king's layered plots. He asks Hamlet for forgiveness and in turn forgives Hamlet for his own and his father's death. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes is rash and bold, crashing his way into Elsinore. Laertes is not, however, an admirable character; he actively conspires with Claudius to determine the outcome of his duel with Hamlet. On the other hand, it is at Laertes' behest that he and Hamlet forgive each other before dying.

## **Ophelia**

Ophelia is the sister of Laertes and the daughter of the king's councilor, Polonius. As I.iii opens, Ophelia has apparently confided to her brother that Prince Hamlet has declared his love for her. Laertes, who is saying goodbye to his sister as he leaves for France, warns Ophelia not to take Hamlet's professions of love seriously. Pointing out that the weddings of princes are usually arranged for reasons of state rather than for love, he cautions her to guard her virginity. Ophelia promises to take his words to heart but also urges her brother to follow his own advice and to avoid "the primrose path of dalliance" (I.iii.50). Polonius enters and adds his warnings to those of Laertes. He orders Ophelia not to spend time with Hamlet or even to talk to him. Ophelia promises to obey. Ophelia next appears in II.i, when she tells Polonius that Hamlet has frightened her by entering her room and behaving in a bizarre manner. Convinced that Ophelia's refusal to speak to Hamlet has caused the prince to lose his mind, Polonius hurries to Claudius and Gertrude, who have also noted Hamlet's odd behavior and are in the process of instructing Hamlet's old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out the reason for it. Polonius and Claudius arrange to spy on a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia so that they can determine if love for Ophelia is really the cause of his apparent madness. This meeting occurs in III.i, and follows Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Ophelia greets Hamlet and tries to return his gifts to her. Hamlet denies having given her anything and

subjects her to several vehement and disjointed statements commenting on the falseness of women and questioning the nature of marriage. Hamlet tells Ophelia that he "did love [her] once" (III.i.114). To her response, "Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so" (III.i.115), he answers: "You should not have believ'd me" (III.i.116). Because Hamlet repeatedly charges Ophelia to "Get thee to a nunnery" (III.i.120), with the possible double meaning of "brothel," this scene is often referred to as the "nunnery scene." Although Polonius continues to believe that unrequited love has caused Hamlet's madness, Claudius is not convinced, and resolves to send Hamlet to England. During the play "The Mousetrap," Hamlet sits next to Ophelia and responds to her attempts at conversation with angry and sexually suggestive remarks. When Ophelia next appears, in IV.v, Hamlet has killed her father and has himself been sent away to England, and Ophelia has gone mad. She comes before the king and queen singing snatches of songs about death, love, and sexual betrayal. She exits briefly, then returns after the arrival of Laertes and distributes various herbs and wildflowers with symbolic meanings. Two scenes later, Gertrude interrupts a meeting between Claudius and Laertes with the news that Ophelia has drowned, an apparent suicide. Blaming Hamlet for the deaths of both his father and his sister, Laertes plots with Claudius to obtain revenge by killing Hamlet. At the beginning of Act V, two gravediggers discuss the appropriateness of Ophelia being given "Christian burial" even though her death is believed to have been suicide. Hamlet, who has escaped his uncle's plot to have him killed in England and has returned unexpectedly to Denmark, enters with Horatio. Unaware of Ophelia's death, he engages a gravedigger and Horatio in a discussion of mortality. As the funeral procession approaches, Hamlet and Horatio hide. When Laertes shows his grief by leaping into the grave, Hamlet, realizing that the funeral is Ophelia's, follows suit, claiming that his own love for Ophelia was far greater than Laertes's. The two men grapple and have to be separated by the other mourners. A completely innocent and naïve young woman, Ophelia is easily dominated by her father and lapses just as easily into madness after his death. Ophelia is a pathetic character, abused by circumstances and confused by Hamlet's alternating professions of love and disdain for her. Ophelia's character represents the ideals of youth and innocence that are ultimately corrupted by the Danish court in Hamlet. Her descent into madness begins as the result of the "nunnery scene" (Act III, scene i), where she is manipulated by her father and cruelly abused by Hamlet. At the outset, Ophelia trusts both Hamlet's nobility and Polonius's wisdom, but by the end of the episode her emotions are damaged and she loses faith in both men. Ophelia's insanity and tragic drowning thus illustrate how the Danish court has degenerated to the point that it poisons even the purest form of beauty and innocence. Ophelia is sometimes seen as an excessively weak character: first, because she obeys her father so unquestioningly, even to the point of helping him to spy on Hamlet; and second, because she loses her mind. Many critics, however, have defended both Shakespeare's choice of making Ophelia the character that she is, and Ophelia's behavior within the play.