

## OUTLINE OF INTRODUCTORY LECTURE: SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

### Sources:

Saxo Grammaticus, *Historica Danica*, late 12<sup>th</sup> century

Amleth's father is murdered by his brother, who marries the widow. For protection, Hamlet pretends to be mad; he is sent to England with two companions, who are killed by his stratagem.

Returning to Denmark, he kills his uncle's henchmen and his uncle.

François de Belleforest, *Histoires Tragiques*, 1582

*Hamlet (Ur-Hamlet)*, author unknown, performed by 1589

### Publication:

First quarto (the "bad" quarto), 1603

Second quarto, 1604-5

Folio, 1623

### Genre=Tragedy:

Greek tragedy (Aristotle)

Tragic hero

Tragic flaw or error

Catharsis

The tragic vision

The catastrophic ending seems inevitable.

The hero's limitations cause the final catastrophe.

The hero's suffering seems disproportionate to his/her actions or culpability.

The suffering is usually redemptive, with the hero enlarged by learning and/or accepting moral responsibility.

Revenge tragedy

### Mystery of *Hamlet*

The play is full of questions (play opens with a question)

Ghost truthful or evil?

Appearance and reality

Surface (family, court), underneath (murder, incest, betrayal)

Single blemish undermines virtuous man

Is Hamlet mad?

Is Gertrude an adulterer? A murderer?

### Themes:

Human world and spiritual world

Appearance and reality

Belief v. doubt

Honor v. treachery

Revenge

Love

Family

Friendship

Romantic-sexual

Country

Honor and reputation

Revenge a duty

Hamlet dying

## Death

End of life, of love, and of sanity

Ghost

Hamlet's focus on death

Graveyard scene

Ending (4 corpses on stage)

## Politics

The welfare of the state and the king's subjects

Fortinbras

Denmark is a prison.

Watching & spying

Denmark is morally corrupted/diseased

Hamlet: the ideal Renaissance prince?

## Hamlet:

Hamlet's nature and situation

Delay?

External obstacles, internal obstacles, or both?

Unable to act by nature?

Oedipus Complex?

Melancholic?

Neurotic?

Crippled by grief and/or disillusionment?

Man of action or introspective intellectual?

Sensitive soul overwhelmed by task of revenge?

Mad? (Moral responsibility if mad?)

Are his soliloquies mad or illogical?

If mad, is he morally responsible?

If mad, can he be a tragic hero?

Duty of revenge comes when he is emotionally low/disillusioned with mother

Sacrifices self for welfare of others

Change after his return from England?

Passive fatalism or faith in Providence?

Murderer, corrupted by revenge and/or Ghost? (He kills 7 people.)

His language

Plays with language, riddling speech, quibbles

Repetition of phrases

## Imagery

Poison

Disease

Corruption, garbage, decay

Prison