OUTLINE OF INTRODUCTORY LECTURE: SHAKESPEARE’S HAMLET

Sources:
Saxo Grammaticus, Historica Danica, late 12th 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