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## Conceited Souls and Renaissance Cures: Sympathetic Magic Between Bodies in Shakespeare's Hamlet

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Conceited Souls and Renaissance Cures: Sympathetic Magic  
Between Bodies in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Conceited Souls and Renaissance Cures: Sympathetic Magic  
Between Bodies in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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Using the sixteenth-century theories of sympathies to examine the inter-character relationships in *Hamlet*, I argue for a period reading that offers insight into Hamlet's delay and the basis for his problematic relationships with Gertrude and Ophelia. Asserting Hamlet's character as an observer in the play with the ultimate goal of healing the infected state of Denmark, this examination of *Hamlet* explores how sympathetic healing would function between the characters of Hamlet, the Ghost, Gertrude, and Ophelia. Such a reading would present these characters as vulnerable bodies capable of directly affecting each other over a physical distance. *Hamlet's* ultimate tragedy then would arise from his failures to engage with these sympathetic forces effectively, resulting in his inability to find the proper cure for his state.

Keywords: *Hamlet*, Gertrude, Ophelia, Claudius, The Ghost, affect, sympathy, antipathy, magic, sixteenth-century medicine, Paracelsus, *The Murder of Gonzago*

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Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come, if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. *The readiness is all*. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

*Hamlet* 5.2.189-193

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## **Sympathetic Magic in *Hamlet***

From the beginning of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to its tragic end the play is haunted by the Ghost of the old King. Throughout the course of the play, most of Hamlet's actions occur as attempts to discern and react to this supernatural force and obtain justice for the unnatural death of Denmark's head of state. The appearance of the Ghost acts as a catalyst for the first act of the play as well as a catalyst for Hamlet's journey, setting up a world where the supernatural is not only possible but must be confronted. Hamlet is unable to obtain justice for this crime by appealing to the courts or the current king, so he must appeal to a higher power and as such, *Hamlet* functions as a warning to rulers and potential usurpers regarding the limits and hazards of unnatural actions. *Hamlet's* third line focusing on this theme of natural rule, "Long live the King!" appears at the beginning as an insignificant platitude but by the bloody end of the play can be seen as a disturbingly ironic forewarning of the events already enacted and yet to come. Denmark's old King has just died, and the new King is not long for this world. Yet, more than that, the entire state of Denmark appears to be falling apart. The country is defending its borders against the imminent threat of Norway and something even more uncommon than war has disrupted the air of Denmark.

At the appearance of the Ghost of the old King, Horatio's assertion emphasizes that something is out of order when he voices, "But in the gross and scope of mine opinion,/ This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (1.1.70-71). This assertion can have two meanings, first that the "state" of the Kingdom is out of order and second that the very state of nature itself is out of order. Both of these meanings serve to highlight the importance of the Ghost in the play. A great deal of scholarship has been devoted to the figure of the Ghost itself, in order to determine the extent of its supernatural influence. Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory*

attempts to make a definitive claim that Shakespeare invokes the Catholic purgatory in his play. While he recognizes that the Ghost clearly claims it is from purgatory, Greenblatt's final analysis refuses to take that claim at face value, rather asserting that the Ghost's request for revenge shows that the spirit is instead from Hell: "Such a call for vengeance—and Hamlet understands that it is premeditated murder, not due process, that is demanded of him—could come only from the place in the afterlife where Seneca's ghosts reside: Hell" (212). Yet this reading of *Hamlet* only considers the extra sin that the Ghost's purgatorial soul would be unable to commit through inciting murder. What Greenblatt fails to consider in this assertion against the Ghost residing in the Catholic Purgatory, is a worldview that would allow the force of murder to act as a repentance for the Kingdom rather than a sinful and personal request from the Ghost. Where legal appeals hold no power for Hamlet to correct the injustice of regicide, violence appears to be the only action left for him to set the world right. While many critics have correctly pointed out that the action of revenge is always immoral, Hamlet's character certainly concludes that the violence of revenge is necessary for curing his state of the influence of Claudius and approaches his cure of the state with this in mind. Reading *Hamlet* with the sixteenth-century medical theories of sympathetic forces and humoral theory not only offers explains for why Hamlet considers this request as a potentially valid treatment for his ailing Kingdom, but can also offer explanations for Hamlet's mistake in his delay in dealing with Claudius and Hamlet's ambivalent and often confusing relationships with the women in his personal life.

These two pervasive questions: "Why does Hamlet delay in killing his uncle?" and "Why does Hamlet conflate his lover and his mother?" (showing invested attention to his mothers' sexual activity and contempt towards his so-called lover) have received their fair share of attention and explanations over the years. Several scholars have explored answers to these

questions such as Jeremy Venema's comparison of Hamlet to the Earl of Essex as a real world Catholic comparison of delay, Errol B. Dendy arguing for a new psychoanalytical reading of the play reexamining Freud's original Oedipal assertion, Robert Cardullo's assertion that Polonius's delay acts as a comic foil for Hamlet's tragic delay and many others in recent years who have examined Hamlet's delay as a character fault. A great deal of attention has also been given to the women in the play and their lack of development and insightful action. Yet for all the treatment *Hamlet* has received, it has still not been examined from the perspective of the sixteenth-century theories concerning a sympathetic natural and supernatural world. The theories of sympathy and antipathy can therefore offer potential insight into Hamlet's actions and the play's ultimate tragedy.

While it was not the only explanation for ordering the natural world, the Renaissance concepts of "sympathy" and "antipathy" functioned as major paradigms for understanding the world. The concepts were first developed in the philosophies of Greece and Rome, then evolved further under Christian influence through the Middle ages. The scholar Eric Schlisser even traces instances of the sympathetic theory in Newton's concept of gravity. The paradigm of sympathetic influence emerged from the observation of the effect one thing exerts upon another from a distance. In the case of Newton, it isn't difficult to see how the basis of gravity might be understood as the influence of one object upon another from a distance. As Seth Lobis explains in his book *The Virtue of Sympathy*, which traces the change in perspectives on the concept of sympathy as a force of the natural world to ideas more closely associated with compassion,

We need to think of sympathy less in narrowly sentimental terms and more in broadly spatial terms. Distance and difference are its preconditions, and it acts to attract and connect, to bridge spatial gaps. Standardly affiliated with ethics, sympathy, I want to



argue, needs to be understood more generally in terms of dynamics, as a principle of mobility, communication, and exchange, of matter and spirit as well as of thought and feeling. (11)

Lobis explains that at the heart of the term “sympathy” is the exchange between two independent objects. While “sympathy” in terms of exchanging feelings and thought between two beings has remained relevant into the modern day, the communication of mobility, exchange, and other ways of bridging spatial gaps (such as infection) are less common to modern readers of the word. A common metaphor for the effect one object exerts upon another in spatial terms frequently used in the Renaissance is the observed attraction of one magnet to another or a piece of metal. The idea of magnetic unseen influence from one source upon another developed within the school of natural philosophy to include the human body as Heinz Schott explains:

That all bodies, including the human organism, are connected by networks of magnetic influence. This concept of magnetism, especially the concept of sympathetic interaction, covers the energetic problem: the transference of vital powers within the body or from one body to another. (310)

In a sympathetic model such as this, the individual human bodies themselves are interconnected with each other and the world around them. Indeed, for many in the Early Modern period, the universe and our understanding of our place in it were heavily colored by the harmony and discord that could occur within this web of interconnected bodies, and contagious elements could jump from one body to another across these sympathetically connected bodies.

Medieval Christianity contributed the Christian God to the Stoic sympathetic theory as the key source of universal connection and order between the independent bodies. The Christian God takes the place of the Universal Soul posited by the Stoics. Indeed, it is clear from

demonology and religious treatises, along with the medical and philosophical works, that this worldview extends beyond the individual human body and soul: each individual belongs to the larger “Body” of Christ. “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and [that] there be no divisions among you,” wrote Paul, “but [that] ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). This metaphor functions in the obvious sense, to implore people to live in harmonious community with each other; but for Renaissance sympathetic theorists, it had a literal meaning as well: all bodies were connected by the unseen force of sympathetic bonds. The Reformation exposed fractures in this “body,” with extensive inter-Christian conflict, yet the sentiment to remain or create one unified body in Christ was a source of both great debate and anxiety in the period.

This view of the Renaissance body (both collectively and individually) as vulnerable to sympathetic or antipathetic influences opens the door for a plethora of anxieties about each body: various potentially contagious influences in the world might infect the communal body on the one hand and the individual human entity on the other. As observers of the natural world, it was the duty of natural philosophers to observe the sympathetic connections: recording the influences one body extended upon another and utilizing those observations for curative purposes. The renowned medical philosopher Paracelsus advocated for sympathetic diagnosis and cures in the early to mid-sixteenth century advising for “not only the careful study of nature but also thoughtful attention to trade and craft practices and even to popular beliefs as sources of information” (Moyer 86). While we cannot be certain that Shakespeare was either acquainted with Paracelsus’s work or the sympathies in general, the popularity of Paracelsus and the spread of his medical treatises make it possible that Shakespeare interacted with sympathetic theories.

Shakespeare's relationship with his son-in-law John Hall, a physician of note in Stratford (Mitchell 6), could have certainly afforded him opportunities to interact with the theories of Paracelsus. All of which is to say that while Shakespeare's personal interest in sympathy may be in question, there is no doubt at all that many audience members were inclined to think of themselves as being part of a system of linked bodies through the means of sympathetic connection. This is not to say that Shakespeare unequivocally meant for the characters in *Hamlet* to be sympathetically interconnected, but it does suggest that we may gain greater insight into the likely contemporary reception of the play given the credence of sympathetic thought in the period. Hamlet's obsessions and observations, after all, seem very similar to the Paracelsian school of observation and treatment.

It is no secret that Hamlet represents one of the more philosophical characters in Shakespeare's corpus, often given the title of "philosopher prince." Indeed, Hamlet's careful study of nature—and human interaction within the natural world—seems to be of the utmost importance to the prince, especially in relation to his own family's connections, his concern with others at court, and his preoccupation with the possibility of universal punishment or reward after death. Ultimately, Hamlet takes it upon himself to observe these interactions between the different bodies around him and attempts to use this information to mend the broken state of Denmark. For Hamlet this attempt to purge the contagious influence of his uncle through murder appeals to what he sees as the higher "natural" justice because he will be unable to obtain justice through the means of courtly trial.

With Hamlet's inclinations in mind, a pause to consider Paracelsian theory in more detail will yield useful insights for understanding additional implications in key scenes. Paracelsus is especially well known for practicing sympathetic medicine by utilizing its magnetic properties

for cures. Andrea Tenzelius translates the treatise *Sympatheticall Mumie* into English in the mid seventeenth century to say:

All are contagious, even health it self, if we consider it only according to its proper active faculty, or its perfection (as the Philosophers terme it) : for every thing naturally is endued with a power of affecting another thing with its own qualities, although every operation is not equally effectuall; for *Sanity* is a certain quiescency, temperament and serenity favorable to Nature. (Paracelsus 18)

Tenzelius's assertion that both health and sickness are contagious elements communicates the vulnerability to both beneficial and harmful influences that is central to sympathetic medical practices. All things within the natural world are naturally inclined towards health and the proper influence of one object or action upon a body. By properly developing these sympathetic influences one can restore health where there is sickness, just as sickness may be the result of an improper action or influence. Not only does Paracelsus assert that all things can have contagious properties according to the interaction of natural sympathies, but his medical view becomes even more complex as J.R.R. Christie explains: "It is quite clear that the Paracelsian body is a far broader entity than the notion of matter itself, it is not a subset of matter. Even the breath of God in man, the 'soul', was for Paracelsus a body" (277). Therefore, for Paracelsus, the soul, body, and mind can be understood as connected and separate entities, influencing each other and sympathetically linked to the bodies of the natural world. The bodies in Paracelsus sympathetic worldview are therefore inherently connected but can also be broken down to their constituent parts for the purpose of healing. These constituent bodies are not themselves separate and isolated but rather help the healer in understanding the effects of an interconnected world. As such, the planets, the nation, the physical body, the soul, the mind, and a great many other things

can be appropriately described as “bodies,” even though they are all separately interconnected within a unified whole. While the predominance of Descartes mind-body dualism began to break down these connections in subsequent centuries, sympathetic theory continued well into the seventeenth century. The seventeenth century scholar Robert Burton describes this essential connection between body and soul for Paracelsus as the “medium betwixt the body and the soul, as some will have it; or, as Paracelsus, a fourth soul of itself” (129) beyond the three described by Aristotle as vegetative, sensitive, and rational. For Paracelsus the entire human form is subject to the influences of sympathy and antipathy and the force of sympathy functions as the unifying force between all natural and supernatural objects. As Heinz Schott explains in his essay on imagination and magnetism in Paracelsian practice, the “natural powers which correlate the individual organism with the whole organism of nature [is sympathy]. This we may call the correlation between microcosm and macrocosm” (309). The individual human body and soul functions as a microcosm (a miniaturized version) of the macrocosm (the expanded and universal body and soul) of the natural world. These two bodies (microcosm and macrocosm) are linked together, each affecting the other through its actions and its influence upon the other and each has its spiritual and physical properties.

As the body and soul are closely linked in this model all actions either physical or spiritual have the ability to influence the human mind, body, or soul. This made diagnosis in the Paracelsian model very difficult as the possible causes of disease required to formulate a diagnosis included the influence of the planetary bodies, any type of harmful substance (poisons), improper physical habits, a mental or emotional infirmity, and/or spiritual disobedience to God’s laws and natural order (Hall 17-21). Through proper analysis of the cause of the disease and proper treatment regarding its sympathetic influence to harmonize the human

body and soul, Paracelsian healers would participate in a combination of magic and medicine, using the “intimate relationship by which whatever affects one affects, in a similar way, others in whom this sympathy exists” to treat their patients (Hall 16). With close ties to the magical influences of the day, and to the performance of white magic, Paracelsian theory functions as an interesting bridge between science and sorcery. These Paracelsian healers would have considered the models of humors and sympathies as compatible explorations of the natural world. Mary Floyd-Wilson explains the relationship between humoral theory and sympathetic theory: “As manifest qualities, humors served as the basis for understanding passions, disposition, and temperament; however, people also attributed certain behaviors to the hidden sympathetic and antipathetic potencies coursing through the natural world” (7). This explains why evidence of a sympathetic world view bleeds into the humoral discourses that surrounded Shakespeare’s England as Floyd-Wilson traces Francis Bacon’s connection to sympathetic theory in *Sylva Sylvarum*. The sympathetic model also appears in the relationship between the body and soul in Timothy Bright’s 1586 precursor to Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy—A Treatise on Melancholy*—claiming, “first it shall be necessarie for you to understand, what the familiaritie is betwixt mind and bodie: howe it affecteth it, and how it is affected of it againe” (33-34). Burton as well takes up theories of sympathy in his work, showing the extent to which sympathetic theory influenced English medical practice.

Given the influence of such theories in the period it is worth considering whether Hamlet and Claudius function—in one way or another—as practitioners of magic, through the use of sympathetic and antipathetic connection and observation. If so, then the influence of sympathy upon the Kingdom of Denmark is, paradoxically, both natural and supernatural. Insofar as Hamlet can be read as a practitioner of sympathetic magic, I suggest that his misreading of

sympathies cause him to misdiagnose and mistreat the people around him. This misdiagnosis and mistreatment cause Hamlet to mistreat the infectious influence of Claudius and make false correlations between the women in his life. In this way *Hamlet's* great tragedy is focused not upon inaction or upon a sexual desire for his mother, but rather upon a misreading of the sympathetic forces of an interconnected natural and supernatural world.

### **Claudius as Sorcerer**

While natural magic is a larger part of the Renaissance worldview, James Baumlin makes a compelling case that Claudius functions essentially as a sorcerer in the play. In his essay "Hamlet's Sorcery," he breaks down the references to sorcery that occur within the play and how they function as black magic. In describing the murder, Baumlin notes:

The ghost accuses Claudius not of murder simply, but of sorcery: "Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole, / With juice of curs'd hebona in a vial" (1.5.61-62), which he proceeded to pour into the sleeping Dane's ear. To this accusation of "natural magic" the ghost adds a second form of sorcery, declaring Gertrude's seduction by "witchcraft" of Claudius's "wit" (1.5.44). (40)

Baumlin's focus upon the words "curs'd" and "witchcraft" make a compelling case for a magical reading of Claudius from the Ghost's perspective. It is clear the Ghost makes much of the natural magic it took to procure the poison, as well as the potentially magical influence that wit and rhetoric may have in seducing Gertrude. The sorcery itself is clearly established if the testimony of the Ghost can be taken seriously. Yet Baumlin's analysis of the means of these two types of black magic fails to recognize the potential connection between the acts of the poisoning and the seduction of Gertrude. By reading the actions of the murder and the seduction as magical actions based upon a sympathetic world view, the manner in which the poison is administered carries an

additional significance in that it could function as the inciting incident of Gertrude's seduction by Claudius.

If the bodies and minds of Gertrude and Old Hamlet are connected sympathetically to one another as Moyer explains, in that "sympathy" in the sixteenth century developed into "a word with medical or learned connotations that might be used to describe human character and the relations between people and their environment, or between one another," then the administration of the poison into Old Hamlet's ear carries great significance (101). Whether or not Claudius is actually a sorcerer in the play, studying natural magic and the sympathetic connections of the world, his choice to poison Old Hamlet in the ear carries the potential to exploit a connection between the bodies of Gertrude and Old Hamlet. This action works on the magical linking between the bodies to the same effect whether Claudius is indeed a practitioner of the dark magics or not. As a married couple, heads of state, and—if Hamlet's description is to be trusted—true lovers, then the evidence for a close relationship on several levels (physically, emotionally, and mentally) could establish a significant sympathetic connection between the two individuals.

For Claudius this sympathetic connection can be turned to antipathy for his benefit, allowing him to affect Gertrude over a distance, poisoning her mind and turning her away from her husband. By administering the poison in Old Hamlet's ear (a bizarre orifice for poisoning a body) Claudius begins his seduction of Gertrude, later to be followed by the rhetorical action of his "wicked wit and gifts that have the power/ So to seduce" (1.5.44-45). The Ghost suggests that along with the rhetorical action of "wicked wit" Claudius possesses other forms of manipulation in "power" and "gifts." These "gifts" could be perceived as sexual prowess, but given the connection to "witchcraft" earlier in this passage, it seems more likely that these are magical



gifts and powers. Although Sir Kenelm Digby was not a direct contemporary of Shakespeare the two seem to share a similar view of the effect of rhetoric upon the imagination. As Seth Lobis explains, for Digby both “magic and rhetoric” were principles of human imagination: “Magic is what the unenlightened imagine to be behind the marvelous, and rhetoric works on the imagination to persuade them that this is so” (32). Rhetoric itself could influence the imagination just as magic could. As such, Claudius’s action of seduction first exploits the connected bodies of Old Hamlet and Gertrude through sympathies and continues through his use of rhetoric. Through the ear of the old King the new King paves his way to the throne; through the ear of the Queen and the court Claudius finally completes this task. While rhetoric in one sense can be seen as merely the influence one person is trying to exert upon another person, it becomes magical when the effect is direct instead of indirect. Magical rhetoric effects the hearer directly causing a negative reaction in the person against their own will, while normal indirect rhetoric must work upon the logic and reason of the individual.

As such, the poisoning of Old Hamlet through the ear is the first act of seduction to be followed by words which carried no less significant power for magic in the Renaissance. Baumlin expands upon a quote from Scot to display that the power of rhetorical action could just as easily have been seen as a magical influence in the Shakespeare’s time. Words in the Renaissance could have “infeebled and killed children [...] made women with child miscarrie [...] made men pine awaie to death” (Scot 237). Baumlin then goes on to state that:

Throughout the play, hearing is described as an audial wounding, violation, and poisoning. Ears are themselves “assail[ed]” (1.1.31), “split” (3.2.10), and “cleaved” (2.2.563); “words like daggers enter” them (3.4.95) and “do . . . violence” to them

(1.2.171); they are “abused” (1.5.37), “take[n] prisoner” (2.2.477), “infect[ed]” (4.5.90), and “poison[ed]” (3.2.359). (41)

In *Hamlet* ears thus play an important role in the process of being wounded and acted upon. Claudius’s administration of poison into the “porches of my ears” therefore carries special significance in the play as it utilizes the sympathetic connection between the married couple for the sorcerer’s antipathetic purposes (1.5.63). Other Renaissance sources also allow for a sympathetic reading between bodies in similar fashions to display the antipathetic influence one object or body can have upon another from a distance.

Both the theatre and medicinal practices of the sixteenth century have examples of an object causing an antipathetic reaction in a human body. A theatrical example of the antipathetic connection between human bodies can be found in *Arden of Faversham*, while a medical example can be found in the process of sympathetic weapon salves. Sympathetic weapon salves were used to heal a body from a wound by treating the weapon used to inflict the wound. Although this practice was highly criticized it was often performed by healers in Paracelsian circles. “Cruentation” on the other hand, was authorized by many individuals in the Renaissance as the means of determining a murderer through antipathy. Moyer notes that:

Andreas Libavius, a physician and educator at Jena and Coburg [...] suggested a murdered corpse would indeed bleed anew in the presence of the murderer. In this instance, he drew on arguments from both Pliny and Fracastoro. Francis Bacon concurred on the bleeding corpse, and the principle was invoked in English practice. (91-92)

This process known as “cruentation” can be observed in the Elizabethan theatre. Cruentation operates fundamentally on the antipathetic relationship the murderer would have towards the

body of the murdered individual. The body of the murdered person when approached by the murderer begins to bleed afresh due to the violation of the laws of God and nature.

In *Arden of Faversham*, the culminating sequence of the play functions around the antipathetic principle of “cruentation” as the wife is charged as the murderer when the corpse of her deceased husband begins to bleed afresh: “Arden, sweet husband, what shall I say?/ The more I sound his name, the more he bleeds./ This blood condemns me and in gushing forth/ speaks as it falls and asks me why I did it” (Scene 16 3-6). It is interesting to note that the body bleeds when the name of Arden is mentioned. This implies that while the murderer and the murdered body are linked, it is the action of speech and the specific speech of the individual’s name that causes the antipathetic response in the deceased body for this play. In *Arden of Faversham*, the rhetorical action of speech is what sets off the antipathetic response in the murdered corpse. These examples of antipathetic or harmful sympathetic influence suggest that Claudius’s reversal in turning the connection from sympathy into antipathy could be just as relevant between the bodies in *Hamlet* as it is in *Arden of Faversham*. The classification of *Arden of Faversham* as a domestic tragedy and *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy makes little difference to the overall effect of the negative sympathetic influences in each play. While *Hamlet* is most notably a revenge tragedy it also functions as a domestic tragedy, in that the character relationships in Hamlet’s family are central to the tragic nature of the play. This process of exploiting the sympathy between two bodies and turning it into antipathy would change the nature between the two bodies (Gertrude and Old Hamlet) from a relationship of harmony with each other into a discordant one through Claudius’s influence.

If this change of character in Gertrude is the goal, the administration of the poison through the ear of his brother functions as a small part of Claudius’s ultimate goal in claiming

the throne. The succession of Claudius to the throne—supplanting Hamlet as the rightful heir—depends upon Gertrude and the office she holds. Because of this, one must question how compliant the Queen is in this seduction. With any reading of Gertrude, it is difficult for critics and Hamlet both to process the change in character that would alter the woman Hamlet describes with “she would hang on him/ As if increase of appetite had grown/ By what it fed on” to the woman who has married Claudius so quickly (1.2.143-145). In order to explain this shift in Gertrude’s character, Harmonie Loberg notes that “sex/gender stereotypes seem to persistently plague critical interpretations of Gertrude” (61). These framings of Gertrude into stereotypes about women to explain the change in character have relied upon every stereotype from whore, to loving mother and wife, to intelligent actor in the political situations around her (Loberg 61). Yet, while all of these speculations can offer some insight into possible motivations behind the hasty marriage, each seems eager to blame or exonerate Gertrude for her change in character with underlying offences in sexuality or proper womanly duty. A sympathetic reading of Gertrude’s actions as bewitchment by Claudius through the act of poisoning Old Hamlet through the ear and rhetorical persuasion would offer a far more forgiving depiction of Gertrude. This depiction of Gertrude being influenced by the antipathy that Claudius creates is supported by the Ghost’s communication with Hamlet.

The Ghost suggests to Hamlet that the moment of his death is the moment when he is dispatched of his Queen: “Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother’s hand,/ Of life, of crown, of Queen at once dispatched” (1.5.74-75). One way to understand this, given the invocation of sympathetic magic, is to suggest that Gertrude’s devotion is poisoned at the same instant the Old King dies of poison. Indeed, the Ghost consistently defends Gertrude to some extent, mentioning to Hamlet “Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/ Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven”

(1.5.85-86). The Ghost is clearly trying to direct Hamlet's action against Claudius and not against Gertrude. The blame for the lust is even ascribed to Claudius and not Gertrude by the Ghost when it remarks "won to his shameful lust" (1.5.45). In the Ghost's telling of the events (besides Hamlet's the only one to focus upon Gertrude's actions) his wife is someone who was won or convinced to oppose him. This defense from the Ghost suggests that Gertrude's actions could potentially be forgiven and that she may not be as responsible for them as she would necessarily be in other readings suggesting Gertrude is herself lustful, envious, or murderous. In a sympathetic reading Claudius rather than Gertrude is blamed by the Ghost as the embodiment of all these harmful influences and magical manipulation. Furthermore, Hamlet, along with his uncle and the Ghost, appears quite aware of the sympathetic and antipathetic connections between individuals throughout the play.

### **Hamlet as a Doctor**

Hamlet's interaction with sympathies occurs in two key forms throughout the play. First, Hamlet attempts to remove the influence of the sympathies that plague his emotions through his relationships, which can "fret" or "play upon" him. Second, Hamlet attempts to utilize the sympathetic powers in order to determine the right course for his revenge cure. Along with his successes, Hamlet has one substantial failure in each of his attempts to master the power of sympathy. A "sympathetic" reading of Hamlet's attempts and failures—both understanding his own sympathetic connections and in misreading the results—reveals additional tragedies at the heart of the play. More specifically, Hamlet's attempts to remove himself from the influence of the bonds of sympathetic forces results in his failure to cure his state. Hamlet also fails to recognize his own antipathetic influence over Ophelia which results in her madness and her death. In this way, the tragedy of *Hamlet* is not simply in Hamlet's delay or his negative actions

towards the women in his life, but extends to his inability to cure the state of Denmark of the antipathetic influence of Claudius by purging his sickly influence from the state and the people around him. The tragedy goes much deeper as the infectious influence of Claudius and his antipathetic action is spread to the other characters in the main cast. The vying for power and revenge that ensues around Claudius results in the death of most of characters in the play. In spite of all Hamlet's efforts to cleanse the state and his close family of this influence through his attempts to heal, he implicates himself in the murder and death of several characters.

Hamlet's first decision to engage in action to set the state right again begins with his oath to the ghost. As Baumlin explains, the importance of this action is in the power of the request from the Ghost and what the vow with such an entity represents:

Yet the direst effect of language comes not from a curse or ritual bane, but from a vow: Hamlet's oath to kill, even if in revenge. To compel such an oath (as the ghost does of Hamlet), to make and to keep such an oath (as Hamlet declares himself "bound" to do) expresses a moral and spiritual outrage fully worthy of the name witchcraft. (33)

Hamlet's decision to engage with the Ghost's request binds him to a course of action that he will follow throughout the rest of the play. While this vow does not necessarily function as the act of witchcraft that Baumlin describes it as, it does display the depth and resolve of Hamlet to enact the Ghost's revenge as a cure. While Hamlet decides the means of the cure here, this is not Hamlet's first interaction with the sympathetic nature of the universe. Hamlet's first experiences with these forces occur from the antipathy that exerts itself upon his body and mind at the beginning of the play. Hamlet's sudden change of character—a constant source of anxiety for the people around him—is the first clue that Hamlet is aware of the antipathetic influence of his father's murder. Cures to Hamlet's grief are a topic of frequent discussion by Gertrude and

Claudius in attempts to cast the “knighted color off” of Hamlet (1.2.68). Potential cures and causes for this melancholy range from the appearance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are instructed “To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather,/ So much as from occasion you may glean,/ Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus/ That, opened, lies within our remedy” (2.2.15-19), to the speculation that Hamlet’s unrequited love for Ophelia has led him to madness: “But yet do I believe/ The origin and commencement of his grief/ Sprung from neglected love” (3.2.175-77). The characters that surround Hamlet (excluding Horatio) all attempt to treat Hamlet’s madness as an ailment in need of a cure and engage in an open field of speculation regarding what sources could cause this distemper in the prince and possible cures for his melancholy.

Much like Paracelsus, Hamlet’s closest friends and relatives devote themselves to “a practical therapy depend[ing] upon a continuous exploration of the invisible side of nature—a search for causes—and the realization that man was not simply a physical creature, but a living soul whose internal attitude could profoundly impact his health” (Hall 2). As such, many potential avenues for understanding Hamlet’s melancholy are explored as the play progresses and treatment options are considered. The invisible sides of nature are considered, and emotional cures are explored. Yet Hamlet is the only one able to formulate a proper diagnosis for the antipathy. After meeting with the Ghost, Hamlet’s negative feelings are justified and the immorality of Claudius and Gertrude’s actions are confirmed, which causes the prince to exclaim, “Touching the vision here,/ It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you” (1.5.143-44). Hamlet’s words, “it is an honest ghost”, has a dual meaning here. First, Hamlet asserts that the vision he and his companions have seen that night is indeed a ghost and not any other form of spiritual entity and second, he asserts that the story the Ghost has related to him is an honest tale

confirming his own antipathetic feelings towards the unlawful events that are occurring in Denmark. Hamlet has diagnosed the cause of his distemper, but instead of disclosing that information to his friends and family he decides to utilize it to create distance between himself and the people around him. Now that he is aware of his vulnerability to the sympathetic connections around him, Hamlet seeks to free himself from the influences of his friends and relatives.

Hamlet seeks to free himself from these sympathies through his determination to “put an antic disposition on” (1.5.179). Hamlet utilizes his “antic disposition” as a means of separating himself from the direct effects his friends and relatives could have upon his body, mind, and soul. In his apparent madness Hamlet applies distance between himself and those around him as they attempt to diagnose his madness, allowing him the space to carefully observe their causes and motivations. Hamlet’s purpose in this distance is to help him diagnosis whether he can trust the Ghost or not and to separate himself from the influence of the people around him. Hamlet directly asserts the nature of what he is trying to accomplish to Guildenstern when he states:

Why, look you now how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery. You would sound me from my lowest note to my compass, and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. ‘Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, you cannot play upon me. (3.2.339-46)

In this passage, Hamlet not only asserts the ability of individuals to affectively influence each other, but he states his resolve to place himself above this type of sympathetic influence. The metaphor Hamlet employs, comparing himself to the “pipe” could be interpreted as Hamlet



disregarding the influence of his friends upon him, but by calling upon a musical metaphor Hamlet suggests the subtler sympathetic metaphor of musical harmony.

Giuseppe Gerbino points out that in the Renaissance music was used as an important metaphor for understanding sympathetic connection:

In such a world, the two strings respond to each other's motion because of a mysterious affinity that can be conceived by the mind but cannot be directly perceived by the senses. Thus, the notion of sympathy, especially in the Ficinian-Platonic version, provided an explanation for an otherwise incomprehensible wonder of nature, while sympathetic resonance in its turn provided evidence of the existence of universal sympathy. (102)

Hamlet's metaphor of the pipe follows this same course of logic. First, Hamlet employs the sympathetic metaphor of music in relationship to the "heart of my mystery." By stating that his two friends will be unable to make him reveal his true thoughts. In this way, Hamlet recognizes a how friendship too can be similar to the affinity on the mind but not perceived by the senses which Gerbino describes. Hamlet denies himself the sympathy and trust of his former friends because he distrusts whether they are loyal to himself or to Claudius. Hamlet denies the relationship between them and removes himself from the influence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet also shows that he is disconnecting with the sympathies here in that the metaphor rests upon an obvious discordance. As Guildenstern relates "But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony; I have not the skill" he unwittingly acknowledges his own inability to influence Hamlet into revealing the method behind his madness (3.2.37-38). Hamlet's sharp rebuke of Guildenstern's intent to make him reveal himself acknowledges that he will feel the effect of these actions upon him, but that he will not respond to them "though you fret me, you cannot play upon me" (3.2.46). In this way Hamlet is showing that he is unable to

truly separate himself from the feelings and the effects of these relationships, but that he will refuse to let them reveal anything about himself. Hamlet's madness therefor acts as a mask that will keep him from revealing his true intent, but it comes at a price, Hamlet closes himself off to the connections of close family and friends.

While aware of the vulnerability he has towards the influence of his family and friends Hamlet chooses to employ these vulnerabilities in determining the guilt or innocence of his uncle. Upon watching the player's first informal performance Hamlet notices the ability of the player to use his voice and body to affect his soul. Hamlet comments to himself after the performance:

Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!

Is it not monstrous that this player here,

But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,

Could force his soul so to his own conceit

That from her working all the visage wanned,

Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,

A broken voice, and his whole function suiting

With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing. (Hamlet, 2.2.72-78)

Hamlet has just observed the deep effect acting out this passage has had on the player and an idea presents itself to him. Hamlet's focus on the relationship between the mind and the body is of utmost importance here. Hamlet's interest in conceit of the player's mind focuses upon the effect such conceit can have upon the soul. This effect of the mind upon the soul inspires the prince to develop a play-test. After observing the power of theater upon the actor and the audience, Hamlet decides to use the power of acting to his own advantage and pull a confession unwillingly from his uncle. This goes beyond just the hope to influence his uncle in that Hamlet

is particularly interested in the relationship a soul has with a performance. Imagination for Hamlet here will be the means by which he can directly access his uncle's soul. It is significant that Hamlet's analysis of the player's performance focuses greatly on the effect that the physical performance had upon the player's body ("tears," "broken voice," "whole function") but the true power behind the player's performance comes from the force the imagination exerts directly onto the "soul." This performance inspires Hamlet to use theater to discern the guilt or innocence of Claudius, with the intent to utilize the sympathetic relationship between the soul, mind, and body in order to determine the guilt or innocence of Claudius's soul. Due to the sympathetic connection between the several parts of the human (soul, emotion, mind, and body) Hamlet constructs a test that should reveal Claudius's guilt. Hamlet decides to set a scene similar to the murder of Old Hamlet that the Ghost related to him in order to determine what effect it might have upon his uncle.

Hamlet seeks to represent the real-life murder in his uncle's mind through the play *The Murder of Gonzago*. By exploiting the sympathetic nature between the imagination and the body, Hamlet uses the play as a weapon to determine Claudius's guilt, forcing Claudius to relive the murder in his imagination. While this exploitation from Hamlet may appear obvious, the Paracelsian concept of imagination contributes to this reading as imagination functions as "a most useful but dangerous faculty or power" capable of causing "morbid imagination, such as fear, worry, doubt, confusion, and uncertainty of purpose" to display that in the sixteenth-century, imagination could itself cause disease and require a cure (Hall 19). In this way the play-actors perform a magic of their own, affecting Claudius from a distance to reveal his conscience, or as Schott explains of Paracelsus's diseases of the imagination: "Belief can produce all diseases. Paracelsus compares it with a weapon. Disease will be produced when the weapon is

active against its own originator” (315). Hamlet is using the Mousetrap play to produce this disease of the mind in his uncle and observe the physical manifestations that will display themselves if his uncle’s conscience is not wholesome.

Hamlet emphasizes in the Mousetrap play his intent to both enact the event of his father’s death and to spiritually affect his uncle in order to reveal the hidden secrets of Claudius. Hamlet voices this intent when he advises Horatio on how they should determine if his uncle did kill his father:

Even with the very comment of thy soul  
 Observe my uncle. If his occulted guilt  
 Do not itself unkennel in one speech,  
 It is a damnèd ghost we have seen,  
 And my imaginations are as foul  
 As Vulcan’s stithy. (3.2.72-77)

Interestingly, Hamlet’s test is equally concerned with the health of his own imagination as it will once and for all inform him of whether or not the Ghost’s account can be trusted. For Hamlet, the play is a spell of its own, with the players’ actions and speeches working to present the imagined murder. Yet, this magic is different from the potential black magic of Claudius, rather than working to influence Claudius into taking part in a sinful action Hamlet is trying to reveal the cause of the sickness in his kingdom. In this way Hamlet is working in the white magical practices that were commonly associated with Paracelsian Doctors. In spite of Claudius’s attempts to conceal the murder he gives himself away, proving to Hamlet that the murder is a reality and solidifying in Hamlet’s mind that revenge will purge his uncle and his cancerous influence from the kingdom. It is Claudius’s “occulted guilt” or hidden guilt that is exposed by

the play. The other definition for the word “occult” associated with the secretive art of magic, seems significant here as well, implying that the mark of Claudius’s black magic could give him away to careful observers.

Hamlet’s advice to Horatio on how to observe the guilt or innocence of Claudius suggests that a sympathetic reading of Claudius will help them to make this judgment as well. The pair of healers should observe Claudius “with the very comment of thy soul” (3.2.72). It is the soul and not the mind that will reveal the guilt in the King for this pair of observers. Because the matter is of a spiritual nature, defying the laws of God, this is a matter to be observed by the soul. It is a soul to soul sympathy that will allow the pair to read the diseased soul of Claudius. Hamlet constructs a test of guilt based on sympathy, similar to the cruentation that occurs in *Arden of Faversham* but using the effect of imagination upon the soul of his uncle instead of the bleeding body of his father to discover the murderer. If Claudius were innocent, the play would proceed with no reaction and he will know the Ghost to be a force of evil mischief. However, when Claudius becomes distraught it proves that the Ghost has been truthful in his account. If there were any doubts as to the success of this test, Shakespeare quashes them with two proofs. The first is, Hamlet’s and Horatio’s recognition of Claudius’s guilt, “O good Horatio, I’ll take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?” (3.2.278-69) to which Horatio confirms “Very well, my lord” (3.2.270). Second, Claudius reveals to the audience the effect the play had upon his soul and his guilt in his prelude to prayer: “Oh, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;/ It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t,/ A brothers murder” (3.3.36-38). However, riding high after his sympathetic confirmation of Claudius’s guilt, Hamlet makes his first great mistake regarding his readings of the sympathies.

After Hamlet asserts to Guildenstern that he is beyond the ability to be played upon, he approaches his uncle in prayer. Having already decided that the cure will be a purgative revenge Hamlet lifts his knife to kill his uncle, but then decides to postpone his revenge for a time of sin due to his fears that his execution will not satisfy the requirements of the revenge vow he has made with the Ghost. Instead of damning Claudius, Hamlet is worried that he will send him “to heaven” and questions, “And so am I revenged?” (3.4.78-79). While it may be difficult to think of revenge as a tool for healing, Hamlet’s motivations are directed towards diagnosing and healing his nation and family by purging the vile influence of his uncle. Hamlet’s resolve towards this method of healing are consistent from the moment he makes his vow. Hamlet’s method of healing through revenge can be justified by the humoral theory of the time in that it functions as a violent purgative action. As Sarah Skwire explains, this was a common practice in Shakespeare’s day for treating human bodies: “bleeding, emetics, and purgatives—alone or in combination—would have been the most commonly prescribed courses of physic. And the general assumption was that the more violently a medicine acted on the patient, the better it worked” (140-41). While Hamlet remains consistent in his approach throughout the play to cure the state through purgation, he misses his greatest opportunity to offer healing to the state in this moment.

By cutting himself off from the influence of the sympathies Hamlet misidentifies the action that could truly heal his kingdom. Although Claudius admits after his prayer that he has not repented, saying, “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below./ Words without thoughts never to heaven go” he is in the action of repentance when Hamlet finds him (3.4.97-98). For Claudius, the bodily and mental action of prayer and the soul’s action of repentance are not in harmony and thus no true repentance comes of this action, but Hamlet’s interference and

confrontation of Claudius over the murder here could have potentially initiated a true repentance. The spiritual disease that Claudius suffers from is all too real and unbeknownst to Hamlet. Claudius has not been healed in the slightest by this brief prayer. Hamlet here misses his chance to take revenge, but he also fails to consider in this moment the potential for a sympathetic cure. Rather than killing his uncle and taking part in the murderous cycle of revenge Hamlet could have potentially reconciled to entire state as well as Claudius to the sinful action of the initial murder. Because Hamlet closes himself off to sympathy in both its affective and its emotional senses, he sees the action of repentance in Claudius as a negative rather than a positive experience for himself and his kingdom.

By committing himself solely to the purgative cure Hamlet involves himself and those around himself in the violent expulsion that will eventually cure the nation. Sure of his course of action and with the resolve that he is right in his treatment of the state, Hamlet does try to initiate a purgative cure in his mother's closet, this however goes wildly awry. Before he recognizes the body behind the arras Hamlet stabs and murders Polonius. By closing himself off to other potentially less violent cures and by restricting his connection to the sympathies around him Hamlet makes his first great mistake, showing that he is not unwilling to enact the revenge, but that he has erred in his approach. Confident in the justice of his action Hamlet gloats over his mother: "A bloody deed—almost as bad, good Mother,/ As kill a king and marry with his brother" (3.4.28-30). By gloating over his mother and attributing the blame to her Hamlet displays that he is unable to correctly identify the cause of the sickness in his kingdom and by mistakenly killing Polonius Hamlet displays that he has severely erred in his cure for Claudius. By unintentionally killing Polonius instead of Claudius Hamlet shows the extent of his second great mistake.

### **Ophelia: Hamlet's Unintended Influence**

Perhaps the most unfortunate of the unintended consequences in *Hamlet* and the prince's second egregious error occurs in the madness and later death of Ophelia. Hamlet's failure to recognize the extent of his connection to Ophelia and the effect of his actions upon Ophelia throughout the play, show the limits of Hamlet's ability to read and control the sympathies. Gertrude's vows of marriage are a constant source of anxiety for Hamlet from the very beginning of the play as he decries the marriage of his mother to his uncle before he is even aware of the Ghost's existence, saying, "Oh, most wicked speed, to post/ With such dexterity to incestuous sheets" (1.2.156-57). Yet even in this monologue Hamlet is already confusing Ophelia with his mother by falsely equating the entire female sex together when he asserts "Frailty thy name is woman!" (1.2.146). In essence Hamlet is blaming womanhood for the frailty of his mother rather than his mother herself. Hamlet's reading of women and the two women in his life as a single entity becomes even more problematic as the play progresses.

For Harold Bloom the denunciation Hamlet directs at Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.122), does not answer question of "what broader ambivalence Hamlet harbors toward Ophelia," and for Bloom the separate bodies of Ophelia and Gertrude offer no insight into why Hamlet mistreats Ophelia so: "neither Polonius's exploitation of his daughter as unwitting spy, nor Hamlet's association of Ophelia with Gertrude, can account for the vehemence of this denunciation" (39). In fact, Hamlet's error and his anger with Ophelia do not result from any adverse action she has taken against him, rather the vehemence of Hamlet's denunciation to Ophelia results from his conflating all women together and equally as vulnerable to infidelity as Gertrude. Hamlet does not simply associate the two women in his life together, rather he begins reading them as connected bodies after he first encounters the nature of sympathies in causing



his melancholy. It is this false reading of a sympathy between the two women in the play that results in Hamlet's conflating Ophelia with Gertrude. By extension, the core reasoning behind the old notion of Hamlet's Oedipal complex for his mother can be explained on the same terms. Rather than having any latent attraction to his mother, Hamlet applies attention to the sexual nature and the offense of adultery equally to the two women in his life.

For all of his criticism of Gertrude's "incestuous" activities and what they mean in relation to his parents' marriage, Baumlin points out how "Curiously, Hamlet proves indifferent to his own love vows, which he had made—before the ghost's avenging summons—to Polonius's daughter" (37). These love vows are superseded by Hamlet's oath to the Ghost in promising revenge. Hamlet explicitly announces in his vow to the Ghost that all other memories or records will be considered naught for the purposes of his revenge:

Yea, from the table of my memory  
 I'll wipe away all trivial, fond records,  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past  
 That youth and observation copied there,  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmixed with baser matter. (1.5.98-104)

Once Hamlet has sworn to remember the Ghost, he truly endeavors to put Ophelia behind him. Ophelia for Hamlet now is a trivial record of the past or "baser matter" that will simply distract him from the goal at hand. All of Hamlet's previous endeavors are renounced and he makes himself single to the purpose of revenge. Hamlet's disregard for the "holy vows" that he has made with Ophelia begins after he makes his oath to the Ghost. These two competing and

incongruent vows create a disharmony that will only end badly for the pair of lovers. As Ophelia mentions he has already committed himself to her with “holy vows” when she admits to her father that he “hath given countenance to his speech, my lord,/ With almost all the holy vows of heaven” (1.3.112-13). Excepting the vow that occurs in the union of marriage, Hamlet appears to have already promised and connected himself with Ophelia. As Baumlin explains, Hamlet’s oath appears to be in direct antipathy with the oath Hamlet swears to the Ghost and “In banishing her ‘to a nunnery’ (3.1.122)—refuge for widows and fallen women—Hamlet seems not simply to ignore but to violate his own ‘holy vows,’ which had bound him to Ophelia’s love” (37). Harold Bloom’s observation on the effect of Hamlet’s actions against Ophelia seems fitting, in that Hamlet’s new actions against her compared to his previous vows assign “Ophelia to a life of pious chastity. Yet in effect, he is murdering Ophelia, and starting her on the path to suicide” (41). It is Hamlet’s mistreatment of Ophelia after previously swearing his love to her which leads to her unfortunate end. In his rejection of Ophelia, Hamlet not only rejects the vows he has previously made with Ophelia but also frequently includes her in his rants on the frailty of women in general and his mother specifically “for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them” (3.1.138-139). Hamlet’s misinterpretation of women and his misunderstanding of the connection he has formed with Ophelia converge into a destructive influence upon the young woman. While many characters in the play experience intense emotions and grief, Hamlet and Ophelia are the only two characters to be diagnosed as mad in their behavior.

Whether or not Hamlet is acting or truly mad, the transference of his madness to his former love would suggest such a close connection between the two, even if only from a thematic point. Indeed, Hamlet recognizes the nature and depth of his previous vows to Ophelia

when he renounces her saying, “we will have no more marriage” suggesting that a private proposal had been offered to Ophelia (3.1.146). In prioritizing his oath with the Ghost over his promises to her, Hamlet’s fails to recognize the negative influence his renunciation will have upon Ophelia. Hamlet’s endeavor to find a purgative cure for his family and his Kingdom’s sickness blinds him to the negative affects his actions can have on the people around him. However, Hamlet truly seals Ophelia’s fate through his murder of Polonius. In the heat of his resolve to catch Claudius in sin and certain of his diagnosis of the murder of his father, Hamlet mistakenly kills the father of his former beloved.

When Hamlet meets with his mother in her private chambers, he approaches her with the resolve of a physician healing his country. He wishes to purge the impure actions of the current King and Queen of Denmark. Calling upon the memory of Gertrude’s sympathetic connection to her first husband, Hamlet rails against his mother in much the same way he did with Ophelia, causing his mother to express, “O Hamlet, speak no more./ Thou turn’st my very yes into my soul./ And there I see such black and grained spots/ As will leave there their tinct” (3.4.89-92). Gertrude’s recognition of the “black and grained spots” on her soul suggests that the Mousetrap scene along with Hamlet’s chastisement, has invited self-examination in his mother just as much as it did in his uncle. For Hamlet the Mousetrap scene reveals the conscience of the Queen as well the King. Yet, in the heat of his anger after this confrontation and believing the body behind the curtain to be his uncle, Hamlet impales the body of a hidden Polonius.

While Hamlet’s influence upon Ophelia is negative and her language in their interactions is distraught, Ophelia’s madness really begins after the death of her father. Ophelia’s madness shares important structural parallels to Hamlet’s madness. Where Hamlet contemplates suicide as an end, Ophelia potentially achieves it. Where Hamlet’s madness focuses intently on sexual acts

and marriage, Ophelia's madness focuses highly on the role of female sexual behavior as well. And the underlying cause of both Hamlet's and Ophelia's madness arise from the death (murder) of a father. Ophelia's madness is deeply connected to the two key men in her life, her father and her lover. Both these men obsess over Ophelia's sexual identity in the play and that obsession works its way into Ophelia's madness.

Hamlet's actions are sympathetically transferred onto Ophelia, Ophelia's madness is internalized by this obsession over her sexuality from all sides throughout the play. Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes along with Hamlet and Polonius all speculate over and worry about the sexual relationship (achieved or potential) between Ophelia and Hamlet. Ophelia's sexuality is a point of interest for nearly everyone around her and this seems to work its way into her mad songs. As Alison Chapman explains in "Old Lauds":

Ophelia is thus caught between two models of female behavior: one, embodied by the girl of the song, is both realistic (women widely entered into sexual traffic with men) and tragic (these women are often betrayed, as when the young man of the song refuses to wed the girl precisely because she has had sex with him). The other, represented by St. Charity, is unrealistic (the Reformation had decisively foreclosed the idea of the virgin martyr) and yet ultimately empowering. The misery of this predicament [consists of] being caught between equally untenable options ... (123-24)

As Chapman relates, the expectations placed upon Ophelia from everyone in her life regarding her sexual potential function as an intense point of interest in her madness. The focus placed upon her by her father and brother to remain chaste represents the power of the virginal potential and Hamlet's focus upon her sexuality represents the sexual potential, together these create the conflicting modes of female sexual expression. It matters very little whether Ophelia and Hamlet

actually coupled together sexually, as the tenuous position between the two models of female behavior is repeatedly thrust upon Ophelia throughout the play regardless.

Hamlet himself recommends both of these models of female behavior at different points fluctuating between sexual flirtation, “Lady, shall I lie in your lap?” (3.2.105) and the saintly maintenance of her virginity when he commands “get thee to a nunnery” (3.1.137). Thus, Ophelia’s tenuous position of having expectations placed upon her from all sides and the influence of these forces upon her develop into a madness hyper-focused on her own sexuality unlike Hamlet’s which is obsessed with the sexual behaviors of others. The pressure placed upon Ophelia is accentuated greatly by the importance of progeny for the crown and a royal marriage is even mentioned by Gertrude at Ophelia’s funeral: “I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife. I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid, And not have strewed thy grave” (5.1.222-24).

The pressures Hamlet places upon Ophelia mixed with his sympathetic connection to her serve as an example of Hamlet’s failure to consider how he might contribute to the sickness rather than the health of his kingdom. Upon the death of her father by the hand of Hamlet and rejection by her lover, Ophelia’s actions lead her to a madness that can separate her from the two equally problematic modes of sexual desire. Hamlet’s actions as well as his behavior seem to transfer to Ophelia after this murder. The sane Ophelia, while showing signs of independence, is still close to functioning as Hamlet’s “honest woman” which Gabrielle Dane describes as: “Within Hamlet’s imaginative universe, for a woman to be ‘honest’ means that she be both chaste and loyal. Lacking autonomous desire, Hamlet’s honest woman would serve as an inert mirror, distorted just enough to reflect back his royal image slightly enlarged” (408). When Hamlet kills Polonius, he makes this an untenable option for Ophelia. She can no longer reflect

back his royal image any more than she can further engage in the “chaste and loyal” model for the people around her. At the death of her father any love that she still had for Hamlet is converted into a madness focused on how she tried to navigate the sexual pressures placed upon her. Being rejected by her non-present lover, unable to continue being a chaste daughter—as she has now lost her father—and relegated to the margins of society, Ophelia separates herself with madness from the unbearable influences of the relationships around her. Ophelia still functions as a mirror for Hamlet but in a different sense, reflecting his behavior in madness rather than enlarging his royal image. In this way Ophelia serves as an example of Hamlet implicating himself with the sickness rather than the health of Denmark. Her speculative death mirrors Hamlet’s own contemplations on suicide and her actions are reflected on the community around her and how they treated her to sympathetically cause such a sickness of the mind. By killing the wrong body, Hamlet contributes to the sickness surrounding the state rather than purging the last remnants of it and focuses a great deal of that negative influence directly upon the head of Ophelia. It is his intimate relationships with her that creates such a reaction to the murder of her father. This is Hamlet’s great failure and the true focus of the tragedy. While Hamlet’s delay may postpone a cure for Denmark, Hamlet’s killing of Polonius ensures that none of the implicated parties will live to see order restored to the diseased nation.

Laerte’s threat (directed at Hamlet) during Ophelia’s funeral proves true, “Oh, treble woe/ Fall ten times double on that cursed head/ Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense/ Deprived thee of” (5.1.224-27). Hamlet is responsible for Ophelia’s death and his tragedy is all centered around her. Hamlet’s demise: begins when he prioritizes his oath to the Ghost over his vows to Ophelia, is realized when he murders her father by failing to consider more sympathetic cures for his kingdom, and ends when he is killed by her brother. *Hamlet’s* great tragedy

revolves around the failures of the prince to cure the contagious influence of Claudius from his kingdom and his contributing to the problem with his mishandling of the sympathetic connections.

### **Conclusion**

While Shakespeare may have never intended his characters to have magnetic sympathetic and antipathetic connections amongst themselves, a sympathetic reading of *Hamlet* offers a solution to two prominent problematic actions in Hamlet's character: his delay and approach in dealing with Claudius and his conflating of Ophelia with Gertrude. A sympathetic reading of *Hamlet* therefore also resituates the central tragedy away from Hamlet's delay or his latent sexual desire, toward his misidentifications of the relationships surrounding him. While Hamlet thinks himself a great influencer and above the influence of others, he fails to identify the key sympathetic relationships around him. In attempting to cut himself off from the sympathetic connections in the world around him Hamlet is attempting to effectively remove himself from life. He fails to not only successfully cut himself off from the influence of sympathies, but also fails to recognize his potential moment of redemptive healing with Claudius. By failing to identify his opportunity to bring order to his Kingdom, failing to recognize the effect his negative actions have upon his lover, and failing ultimately to be a healing influence for his nation and close associates, Hamlet dooms himself and the people around him.

In his failures to identify the important connections that occur around him the philosopher prince not only fails to heal the state effectively, but he also implicates himself in the sickness that has infected his Kingdom. Hamlet, rather than rising above the harmful influence of Claudius falls prey to it himself. *Hamlet's* great tragedy rests on this failure to cure the state efficiently, but the state is eventually purged through the death of nearly everyone and the

entrance of Fortinbras. As Fortinbras breaches the castle, the final purging of the usurping King and all the players connected to his vile actions leave the stage and the state of Denmark with a pile of human corpses. Norway acts as the scales of justice, not as a means of purging the Kingdom of its disease, but as a new order for the Kingdom. The purging occurs from within with the body of the state—restoring order to itself through the poisoning of Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet—essentially removing the infected bodies. These harmful influences are expelled from within, and Norway simply represents the new harmony separate from the ungodly characters that have infected Denmark. Those who have been implicated and connected with the crimes that set the state into its upheaval are expelled and health is once more restored to Denmark.

The sympathies are set right once more, and the universe returns to its natural order. The macrocosm of the nation is healthy once more and the play serves as a warning concerning the overriding laws of the natural world. Order will always be restored on the Universal scale and it is the microcosm that we should always be concerned about. While the larger bodies of nation, nature, and universe are vulnerable to the sympathies, it is far more important to focus on the smaller human body and its sympathetic health. It is the vulnerabilities and the potential missteps in recognizing the power of sympathies in the natural world that remain problematic for the individual human beings of the story.

Time is back in joint, but Hamlet, rather than serving as a force to “set it right,” has become one of the many casualties (1.5.196). Therefore, *Hamlet* serves as a warning against overconfidence in understanding the supernatural and natural world. Shakespeare himself, often writing plays in the in-between spaces around beliefs, recognized that the question is often more powerful than a particular answer. In this way he tragically displays Hamlet’s inability to



recognize the limits in his own philosophy. Hamlet's inability to accurately read and interpret the sympathies and relationships around him as well as his failed attempt to remove himself from the influence of these connections highlights ironically just how much he does not know about the natural world. In this way, *Hamlet's* true tragedy rests on the character's inability to recognize that "There are more things in heaven and earth [...] Than are dreamt of in [his] philosophy" (1.5.174-75).

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