KEY PASSAGES IN Hamlet

Act I, ii, 133–163

Hamlet: O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve it selse into a dewe,
Or that the everlasting had not fixt
His canon 'gainst Self-slaughter, O God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seeme to me all the uses of this world?
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That growes to seede, things rancke and grose in nature,
Posseste it merely. That it should come to this:
But two months dead, nay not so much, not two,
So excellent a King, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother,
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visite her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had growne
By what it fed on, and yet within a month
(Let me not thinke on't; frailty thy name is woman),
A little month or ere those shooes were old
With which she followed my poore father's bodie
Like Niobe all teares, why she, even she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourn'd longer—married with my Uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous teares
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes
She married. O most wicked speede; to post
With such dexteritie to incestuous sheets.
It is not, nor it cannot come to good,
But breake my hart, for I must hold my tongue.

Here the Danish king and queen have just departed, leaving Hamlet alone onstage. There have been signs of his discontent: Though festivity reigns at the court and his mother and uncle have just married, Hamlet is dressed in mourning, and his few words reveal a bitter humor. In this lengthy speech, his first soliloquy, Hamlet is free to reveal more fully the extent of his grief and disappointment.

The speech begins with a wish for annihilation, though its wording is a matter of dispute among editors. “Sullied” is the reading of the second quarto, and this suggests a young man disgusted with the taint of human sinfulness and imperfection—his own, but also humanity’s in general. Subsequent lines confirm this attitude. The very reliable folio edition, however, has the more material word “solid,” which clearly communicates Hamlet’s wish for dissolution. Further complicating matters, the actual spelling of “sullied” in the quarto is “sallied.” This word may sound odd to modern ears, but in Shakespeare’s era it was a common military term for the besieging of a town. The implied military metaphor is consistent with other figurative language in the play and makes narrative sense: Hamlet has just been hearing the king discuss diplomatic and martial matters with his men, and the play itself opens on the ramparts.

Regardless of word choice, Hamlet wishes simply to dissolve. This wish may have reminded early audiences of The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus (1592), a popular play whose title character, in the harrowing final scene, wishes to become senseless “water drops” rather than face damnation. His first wish being impossible, Hamlet next considers suicide, but he regretfully acknowledges that God’s law forbids the action. This theme of self-extinction and its consequences recurs throughout the play. Hamlet’s interjection (“O God . . .”) explains these opening wishes: The world seems stale; it is worthless to someone as despondent as he. The image he next uses to describe the world—an unweeded garden overrun by “things rancke and grose in nature”—reflects his disgust with the natural world, with its penchant for rampant fruitfulness, with the human body, and specifically with his mother’s newly married body. Notice how, after this image, Hamlet reflects first on his dead father and then on the obscenity of his uncle’s marrying his mother. To him this marriage is another case of a rank, gross thing possessing something “merely,” which does not mean “only” as it does today, but rather its opposite—“entirely.” Claudius fully possesses Gertrude as her king and husband, and Hamlet cannot fathom the fact.

As Hamlet laments his father’s death, he criticizes Claudius and Gertrude. The new king is dismissed by comparison: Hamlet’s father was like Hyperion—a sun god of Greek mythology—beside Claudius, who resembles a “satyr,” a lecherous, goat-footed creature of the woods. (Later in this passage Hamlet
includes himself in a similar comparison: Claudius is no more like Hamlet’s father than Hamlet himself is like Hercules.) He castigates his mother, remembering her affection for his father (which verged on the indiscriminate, “As if increase of appetite had growne / By what it fed on”) and recoiling from her brief mourning and quick second marriage. How could she have felt such grief initially yet recover so quickly? Her haste, Hamlet thinks, is irrational and thoughtless; Gertrude is like a beast with no true emotional capacity. By identifying her with an animal, Hamlet also reveals his revulsion toward his mother’s physical, clearly sexual nature.

Hamlet quickly turns into accusation: Perhaps Gertrude was merely performing an exaggerated grief, as the comparison with the mythical figure Niobe insinuates. With tears still in her eyes, he says, she rushed with “wicked speede” and “such dexterity to incestuous sheets” in Claudius’s bed. The t and x sounds in that last phrase memorably capture Hamlet’s volatile spite—as do the many outbursts (“Fie!”, “O God,” and so on) and rhetorical questions in the passage. The nineteenth-century French critic Hippolyte Taine memorably observed the “terrible tension in the whole nervous machine” evident in this speech. In Taine’s opinion, Hamlet was here already halfway to madness.

The penultimate line (“It is not, nor it cannot come to good”) ominously reminds the audience that they are watching a tragedy. But moments of tenderness ennoble the passage: Hamlet’s memory of his father’s care of his mother, who would not let the winds “Visite her face too roughly”; the exquisite focus on the shoes of the mourning Gertrude; and Hamlet’s final line, like a helpless cry: “But breake my hart, for I must hold my tongue.” Realizing he must remain silent, Hamlet reveals an awareness of the sinister goings-on at Elsinore.

**Act I, iii, 55–81**

*Polonius*: Yet heere *Laertes*? aboard, aboard for shame,  
The wind sits in the shoulder of your saile,  
And you are stayed for; there, my blessing with thee,  
And these fewe precepts in thy memory  
Looke thou character, give thy thoughts no tongue,  
Nor any unproportion’d thought his act,  
Be thou familiar, but by no meanes vulgar,  
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
Grapple them unto thy soule with hoopes of steele,  
But doe not dull thy palme with entertainment  
Of each new hatched, unfledg’d Comrade. Beware  
Of entrance to a quarrell, but being in,  
Bear’t that th‘opposed may beware of thee,  
Give every man thy eare, but fewe thy voyce,  
Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgement,
Costly thy habite as thy purse can buy,
But not exprest in fancy; rich not gaudy,
For the apparrrell oft proclaimes the man
And they in France of the best rank and station,
Are of a most select and generous, chiefe in that:
Neither a borrower nor a lender be,
For lone oft looses both it selfe, and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry;
This above all, to thine owne selfe be true
And it must followe as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man:
Farewell, my blessing season this in thee.

The interlude with Polonius and his family presents a domestic atmosphere
that is relatively normal. It is thus a foil for the broken ties of Hamlet’s royal
family, in which the king is dead but reportedly haunts the castle, the queen
has married hastily, and the prince is despondent. In Polonius’s room all seems
well enough, if somewhat tiresome for his children, Laertes and Ophelia.
Laertes has just delivered a tedious speech of warning to his sister when their
father arrives. In fitting comeuppance, Laertes now finds himself as auditor to
a lengthy advisory speech.

Polonius urges Laertes to his ship, which will return him to his studies in
Paris, and gives his paternal blessing. He also offers a “fewe precepts.” Polonius
entreats his son to show the qualities that may have earned his own enviable,
influential situation as the king’s adviser (though his buffoonish behavior casts
doubt on this conclusion). Overall, he instructs Laertes in the discretion and
poise essential to a successful young gentleman and courtier.

What are readers to make of Polonius’s precepts? The very length of his
speech is comical. It suggests that Polonius, like most parents, is prone to
excessive concern—the kind of preaching that makes adolescent children roll
their eyes. Polonius invokes conventional wisdom throughout this speech, and
the speech’s strongly proverbial nature allows Shakespeare to maintain a tonal
openness here, as if he is inviting the actor or reader to conceive of Polonius more
or less sympathetically. Proverbs may imply experience and wisdom, but they
may also imply that these virtues are shallowly held or even poorly understood.
Someone who speaks only in proverbs does not seem to have his own voice but
rather speaks in the dusty language of clichés. This is the traditional view of
Polonius in this speech.

Nonetheless, some of his lines possess a vigor and polish that should not be
overlooked, such as his advice to grapple friends “unto thy soule with hoopes
of steele,” and yet not to overdo it—not to “dull” one’s palm in glad-handing
mere acquaintances. He advises prudence (“reserve thy judgment”), sensitivity
to context (avoid quarrels, but once involved in one, be impressive), and a careful moderation (clothes should be “costly” but not “gaudy”). Polonius tells his son neither to borrow nor lend money; the former may cause financial loss or loss of friendship, while the latter encourages fiscal irresponsibility.

The final four lines rise in diction, making for a touching conclusion (“This above all, to thine owne selfe be true . . .). That said, one might read Polonius’s lines with more suspicion. After all, any speech giver ends on a high note. How genuine are the father’s words, really?

Polonius’s own behavior invites a strongly ironic reading: Is this yes man of the king ever really true to himself? That question aside, Polonius certainly plays false with others. At the beginning of the next act, for example, Polonius bids Reynaldo to spy on his son, undermining his credibility in the current scene. Still, perhaps these later actions cannot fully invalidate a father’s tender blessing—the wish that the virtues cataloged here may grow fruitful in his son.

**Act II, ii, 576–633**

_Hamlet:_ O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dreame of passion,
Could force his soule so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With formes to his conceit; and all for nothing,
For Hecuba!
What’s Hecuba to him, or he to her,
That he should weepe for her? What would he doe
Had he the Motive and the Cue for passion
That I have? He would drowne the stage with teares,
And cleave the generall eare with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty, and appale the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeede
The very faculties of eyes and eares; yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreames, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no not for a King,
Upon whose property and most deare life
A damn’d defeate was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me “villaine”? Breakes my pate acrosse?
Pluckes off my beard, and blowes it in my face?
Tweeks me by the nose? Gives me the lie in the throate
As deepe as to the lunges? Who does me this?
Hah, 'Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave’s offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorsesse, trecherous, lecherous, kindlesse villain!
Oh Vengeance!
Why what an Asse am I. This is most brave,
That I the sonne of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpacke my heart with words,
And fall acursing like a very drabbe,
a Scullion—fie upon’t! Foh!
About my braines; hum. . . . I have heard,
That guilty creatures sitting at a play,
Have by the very cunning of the scene,
Beene struck so to the soule, that presently
They have proclaim’d their malefactions:
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speake
With most miraculous organ. I’ll have these Players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine Uncle. I’ll observe his lookes,
I’ll tent him to the quicke. If he but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seene
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T’assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damne me. I’ll have grounds
More relative than this. The play’s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.

Hamlet the character, as well as *Hamlet* the play, is obsessed with acting—its concealment of reality, its moving expression of emotion, the skills it requires, its ability to bring forth something so seemingly genuine in the absence of actual interior motivation. This is the topic that amazes Hamlet in his soliloquy concluding the long second scene of Act II.

The players have just performed a scene at Hamlet’s request, “Aeneas’ tale to Dido when he speaks of Priam’s slaughter.” Hamlet’s choice of scene is significant: In it Pyrrhus prepares to avenge his dead father, Achilles, by slaying the Trojan king, Priam. His task clearly parallels the filial duty of Hamlet (and later, that of Laertes and of Fortinbras). Even more specifically, Pyrrhus’s
pause as he stands over the fallen Priam, before “Aroused vengeance sets him new a-work,” mirrors Hamlet’s own delayed duty. Was he, by requesting this scene, trying to find in Pyrrhus his own model for furious action? Alternatively, Hamlet’s goal may have been to witness a kind of reenactment of his uncle Claudius (a killer like Pyrrhus) murdering his father, who, like Priam, was a true king. In this respect the scene of Pyrrhus and Priam is quite similar to The Murder of Gonzago, the play that Hamlet envisions in the second half of this soliloquy.

Hamlet is already in a scolding mood as the players are dismissed. “My lord,” says Polonius, “I will use them according to their desert.” (He will treat them as visitors of their social stature deserve.) “Much better!” Hamlet exclaims. “Use every man after his desert and who shall ‘scape whipping?” In this soliloquy, which immediately follows, Hamlet berates himself, calling himself a “rogue and peasant slave,” and the fact that his punishment is only spoken fills him with further self-loathing. He feels chastened by the players’ exquisite control over their whole persons—all despite having no actual motivation. Thinking of the situations of the characters they represent, the players feign emotions, and these thoughts affect their very souls, causing physical transformations: a broken voice, tears, a face that grows pale. All this, Hamlet bitterly reflects, is “. . . for nothing, / For Hecuba!” He contrasts the players’ motiveless activity with his lack of action despite great motive. If a player were in his situation, says Hamlet, he would weep uncontrollably and “cleave the generall eare with horrid speech, / Make mad the guiltie,” and so forth. Imagining the performer’s great, revealing effects on an audience, Hamlet plants the first seed of his plan later in the soliloquy.

But first he berates himself further, using a colorful array of vulgar insults. He pains himself by remembering his father, the wrongly deposed king. And he imagines himself being abjectly humiliated. His imaginary tormentors hit him, pluck his beard, and thump his nose. Even if Hamlet were mocked in all possible ways, he admits he “should take it” and not react to the abuse. He fears he lacks something constitutionally that would make such oppression unendurable, that would stir him to action. Otherwise he would already have killed his uncle and fed his corpse to the “kites” (carrion birds).

The second half of the soliloquy emphasizes the language of performance. The climax of Hamlet’s curse—“O vengeance!”—appears only in the folio text, but its presence is perfectly sensible. It is the cry of the conventional avenger. “Vindicta mihi!” (“Vengeance is mine!”) cries a character in Thomas Kyd’s contemporaneous play The Spanish Tragedy (1592). Elizabethan audiences would have enjoyed Hamlet’s less-than-convincing effort to parrot this declaration; he fails to convince even himself. Hamlet knows he is not that powerful avenger, and so he feels foolish having merely playacted the role. “What an Asse am I,” he says with disgust.
Hamlet says he is prompted to revenge “by heaven and hell.” Critics often blame him for his continued procrastination, all the more shameless because he has just condemned it. Yet the same statement explains his delay: Hamlet associates the ghost with hell. The ghost that visited him may be diabolical, merely in the “pleasing shape” of his father. Hamlet worries that it is actually a demon intent on tricking him into an unjust regicide of Claudius, an act by which Hamlet would damn himself. Hamlet thinks that his weakness and melancholy would make him an attractive target for such a devil.

In the soliloquy’s final few lines, Hamlet escapes this cycle of self-condemnation and concocts his plan. He suddenly recalls stories of criminals cut to the core by the vivid events of a play they were watching, such that they “proclaim’d their malefactions.” He resolves to have the players enact his father’s murder in front of Claudius; all the while Hamlet will watch his uncle’s reaction for signs of guilt: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.”

Act III, i, 64–98

*Hamlet:* To be, or not to be, that is the question,
Whether ’tis nobler in the minde to suffer
The slings and arrowes of outrageous fortune,
Or to take Armes against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing, end them. To die, to sleepe,
No more, and by a sleepe, to say we end
The heartache and the thousand naturall shocks
That flesh is heire to; ’tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wisht. To die to sleepe,
To sleepe, perchance to dreame, aye there’s the rub,
For in that sleepe of death what dreames may come
When we have shuffled off this mortall coil
Must give us pause. There’s the respect
That makes calamitie of so long life:
For who would beare the whips and scornes of time,
Th’oppressor’s wrong, the proude man’s contumely,
The pangs of dispriz’d love, the law’s delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurnes
That patient merit of th’unworthy takes,
When he himselfe might his *quietus* make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a wearie life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover’d country from whose bourn
No traveler returnes, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
Than fly to others that we know not of.
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hew of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turne awry,
And lose the name of action. Soft you now,
The faire Ophelia, Nymph in thy orisons
Be all my sinnes remembered.

Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” speech is among the most famous passages of Western literature. It has been endlessly analyzed and parodied. “To be or not to be—” recited the comedian Milton Berle, “and that’s a question?” For centuries playgoers have recited the speech along with the actor, causing Peter O’Toole to say that playhouses should put the “old number” on a song sheet, so audiences can at least get the words right. Nevertheless Hamlet’s best-known soliloquy retains its mystery, in part because certain questions—about Hamlet’s motivation and meaning, and about the speech’s position in the play and which other characters hear the speech—have never been sufficiently answered.

So what is the question, exactly? Although countless explanations have been given, most readers and critics think that Hamlet is here contemplating suicide. In introducing his two stark options, Hamlet employs language and imagery that suggests a speaker for whom life itself has become a very demanding, hostile state indeed. Is it preferable to continue living, which for Hamlet feels merely like impassive suffering of the “slinges and arrowes of outrageous fortune”? Or shall he be more active—though ironically so, since his “action” would be self-annihilation? Hamlet now regards suicide as a noble resistance, a defiant brandishing of arms against the many difficulties of life (“sea of troubles”). Of course, the success of this second option (“and by opposing, end them”) is subjective: The suicide would end life’s problems not by solving them; rather the problems would end for him, because he would no longer exist to face them. Hamlet’s use of the phrase “in the mind” is important, because it suggests that he knows this attitude toward life is only his and that it is caused by his weakness and melancholy—those “spirits” he acknowledged in the previous soliloquy.

Hamlet’s outlook has dramatically shifted since the last soliloquy. Then he regarded his ability to endure the situation as a shortcoming: To his shame, he lacked the gall to become sufficiently embittered to react against it. Yet in this soliloquy Hamlet says that suffering the “outrageous fortune” of life is one possible way to act nobly, and his language and imagery further ennoble the sentiment. Moreover, this is not the biggest inconsistency between the two soliloquies. At the end of the previous speech, Hamlet seemingly had turned
the corner of his inaction and self-pity and was planning to develop his course of revenge by determining, with certainty, if Claudius was guilty. So why, less than a hundred lines later, is he more melancholy than ever, making no mention of his plan or his uncle and contemplating suicide? Hamlet’s expression here is much closer in spirit to his opening soliloquy, in which he wishes that God did not forbid “self-slaughter.” This similarity may not be coincidental. In the less authoritative first quarto of *Hamlet* (1603), this speech occurs early in the second scene of act two—just after Polonius has told the king and queen about Hamlet’s strange behavior toward Ophelia—when Hamlet enters “reading on a book.” Hamlet’s desperate meditation at this point in the play would confirm Polonius’s report, and it would also shift easily into Hamlet’s feigned madness in the following “fishmonger” scene. The difference in position between the two versions may be a sign of Shakespeare the playwright at work, weighing plotting options and their effects on action and characterization. That said, one modern editor of *Hamlet*, Philip Edwards, argues that the current position of the speech is of “profound importance for the ultimate meaning of the play.” Hamlet has not forgotten his plan and uncle so quickly but has gained a deeper awareness of life, says Edwards; he realizes that simply killing Claudius and restoring order to Elsinore will not end the “heartache” of living. Accomplishing these daunting tasks will solve only two of the “thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to.” To Edwards, the speech’s traditional placement in Act III demonstrates that Hamlet is no traditional avenger, but a Renaissance philosopher confronting the bleak truths of human existence.

Other readings are possible, and the very disagreement about the most general decisions presented by Hamlet helps to explain why this speech continues to fascinate. For example, Samuel Johnson interpreted the taking up of arms as highly relevant to Hamlet’s situation. The “sea of troubles” may refer directly to Claudius’s usurpation of the Danish crown, and Hamlet’s possible opposition to these troubles means exactly what it says: The prince can either endure the injustice further or actively attempt to end it, “though perhaps with a loss of life.” Claudius will have to die, and maybe Hamlet will die, too. For Johnson, then, the danger and death of the second, more aggressive option is what makes Hamlet pensive. Johnson has thus more or less cleansed the opening of its suicidal element, and he has treated the taking up of arms at face value—as literally taking up arms against an oppressor—at the expense of the more paradoxical, metaphorical meaning (that to defy the misfortunes of life requires one to lay down one’s life). Writing around the same time as Johnson, playwright Oliver Goldsmith argued that Hamlet is clearly contemplating suicide in this passage, yet the speech is overall a “heap of absurdities”—Hamlet has absolutely no reason to contemplate the taking of his life (he seeks revenge, he loves Ophelia, he has royal ambitions, and so on). In any case, the drift of Hamlet’s speech suggests that suicide may be the harder, more counterintuitive
act, especially when his thoughts turn to the uncertainties of the afterlife and of eternal judgment.

“To die, to sleep,” muses Hamlet in an incantatory fashion. At first his consideration of death sounds like a resolution to be welcomed; his heartache will necessarily end. But soon he recognizes that there is a “rub” (an obstacle) to this wish for death. If death is like a more permanent sleep—and the preachers of Shakespeare’s era were fond of this analogy—then will one dream in death? That is, will one have one’s senses and be in a state that resembles consciousness in this world? This possibility, Hamlet says solemnly, “Must give us pause.” Being unknown, “what dreams may come” in the afterlife are potentially terrifying, and such uncertainty is why living beings tolerate for so long the calamities of this world.

Hamlet next catalogs various examples of earthly misfortunes—and one could simply abolish all these miseries by plunging a knife (“bare bodkin”) into one’s chest! (Hamlet’s use of the legal term *quietus* means the “settling of an account,” but he surely means to suggest the “quiet” he longs for amid this troubled sea of life.) What “puzzles the will” to undertake an extreme act such as suicide is the “undiscovered country” of the afterlife.

Hamlet says conscience makes every person cowardly. By speaking of “conscience,” he introduces a new complexity to this great speech. Some modern editions cast the word as “consciousness,” which would make the statement merely a summing up of prior reservations. But his next remark, that the “native hue of resolution” is “sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,” suggests that Hamlet means thinking itself. (As he earlier told Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”) In this way, the uniquely rational abilities of humans create unique anxieties about the afterlife. The word “conscience” also had (and has) religious connotations: Conscience was thought to be God’s gift to help humanity understand right and wrong. Therefore Hamlet may be acknowledging two things near the end of this speech: First, he has been charged with the significant task of killing the king. Second, he fears that taking Claudius’s life may nevertheless bring upon him eternal judgment. And so he does nothing.

In “Letters to an Actor Playing Hamlet,” the English playwright Christopher Fry commented that this “best-remembered” soliloquy “has nothing to do with Claudius at all.” This is not entirely true. Claudius is not named in this speech, but Hamlet appears to be wrestling with the consequences of assuming the role of the avenger. In fact, if Samuel Johnson is correct, the famous opening line may simply be an abbreviated statement: “To be [an avenger], or not to be [an avenger], that is the question.”

The dramatic context of Hamlet’s speech also encourages one to read it less as a separate, purely private meditation and more as a meditation deeply integrated with the play’s ongoing action. When Hamlet cuts off his thought to
acknowledge the “faire Ophelia,” it reminds readers (or viewers) of the element of surveillance in this section of the play: Claudius and Polonius arranged this encounter and are now watching from a distance. The staging presents any director with a host of questions. Do Claudius and Polonius hear Hamlet’s speech? Does Ophelia? Does Hamlet discover the presence of the two men? When? Does he notice Ophelia only at the end of his speech, or is he then simply acknowledging formally her onstage presence? In one production, in which Derek Jacobi directed Kenneth Branagh in the title role, Branagh actually spoke the entire speech to Ophelia directly. Whatever a director decides or a reader determines, this famous speech remains a thought-provoking text whose implications and possibilities are in no danger of being soon exhausted.

**Act IV, iv, 34–67**

*Hamlet:* How all occasions doe informe against me,
And spur my dull revenge. What is a man
If his chiefe good and market of his time
Be but to sleepe and feede, a beast, no more:
Sure He that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capabilitie and god-like reason
To fust in us unus'd. Now whether it be
Bestiall oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th'event
(A thought which quarter'd hath but one part wisdom,
And ever three parts coward), I doe not know
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and meanes
to do't. Examples grosse as earth exhort me:
Witness this Army of such masse and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender Prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puft
Makes mouthes at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortall, and unsure,
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an Eggshell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stirre without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrell in a straw
When honour's at the stake. How stand I, then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleepe, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That for a fantasie and tricke of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slaine? O from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.

Hamlet is being dispatched to England, a consequence of having incidentally killed Polonius. Gertrude says her son is “Mad as the sea and wind when both contend / Which is the mightier,” and the king has lost all patience, declaring “His liberty is full of threats to all.”

Here, as Hamlet is escorted out of his homeland, he encounters Fortinbras’s army. He quickly learns from a captain that the Norwegians are bound for a battle against Poland “to gain a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name.” Hamlet fully understands the absurdity of the situation: This dispute over a worthless piece of land will incur a heavy cost, both to the nations’ treasuries and in human life. The soldiers will die for no visible cause. Hamlet’s discovery of their hollow mission is important to recall when one considers this soliloquy.

Traditionally this speech is interpreted as presenting yet another model of action, embodied by Fortinbras and his army, that serves to chastise Hamlet and the less-than-promising circumstances he is presently facing. The opening sentence suggests as much: Fortinbras’s martial activity seems a fitting tribute to his own dead father, the more so by contrast with Hamlet’s own “dull revenge.” Hamlet fully understands the absurdity of the situation: This dispute over a worthless piece of land will incur a heavy cost, both to the nations’ treasuries and in human life. The soldiers will die for no visible cause. Hamlet’s discovery of their hollow mission is important to recall when one considers this soliloquy.

Here, in fact, he equates the mindlessness of animals with the cerebral paralysis that afflicted him (which he admits was three parts cowardice to one part prudent wisdom): Neither permits the proper use of human capability and reason. Though unsure of his exact shortcoming, Hamlet is frankly puzzled. Why has he not yet been able to carry out his revenge? He has a reason, the desire, and the physical ability to do so.
Now, as he encounters yet another spurring example, his description of the scene is a little satirical at Fortinbras’s expense. Being called an example “grosse as earth” is hardly complimentary; and since when has Fortinbras appeared anywhere in the play as a “delicate and tender prince”? Hamlet credits him with “divine” ambition, which seems to recall the “god-like reason” praised earlier in this speech, but this characterization actually sets up a deflating series of contrasts. Fortinbras seems far less than divine when he “makes mouths at the invisible event.” (The enigmatic phrase “this invisible event” probably means the actual significance or worthiness of an action, which Hamlet has been so willing to analyze throughout this play.) Furthermore, Fortinbras’s “divine” ambition drives him to expose what is “mortal, and unsure” for the sake of gaining a worthless patch of soil. So far Hamlet seems less than impressed with his Norwegian counterpart.

Hamlet’s attitude, however, becomes more complex when his reflections turn to the question of honor. One cannot be great simply by fighting for nothing (“without great argument”), but Hamlet seems to concede that part of greatness is to risk everything, even for the barest benefit, when honor is at stake—perhaps including the honor of a dead father. In a by-now-familiar gesture, Hamlet rehearses his far more serious motivations for risking everything. But almost immediately he returns to the army marching before him. He may be put to “shame” by its activity, yet Hamlet is fully aware of, and disdainful for, the present situation: Twenty thousand men will soon die for a “fantasie and tricke of fame.” The plot of land is so small that it will accommodate neither all those who will fight over it nor all those who will soon need to be buried. Hamlet sounds as if he has successfully punctured the heroic dimensions of the scene before him. But even this scene, he hopes, will motivate him: “O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!”

Hamlet’s supposed change of personality upon his return from England in the next act has been a longstanding point of critical contention. The earlier fretting seems far behind this “new” Hamlet, who (in Act V, scene 1) can exclaim unflinchingly when beholding Yorick’s skull, “To what base uses we may thus return, Horatio!” The Hamlet who tells his friend (in Act V, scene 2), “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” no longer sounds like a metaphysician in crisis. Readers and critics wonder what has occurred to instill in Hamlet his haunting resignation to his tragic fate. Arguably, this new spirit is heard much earlier, even before Hamlet departs for England, in his speech as he witnesses Fortinbras’s army marching across the plain.

**Act IV, vii, 163–184**

*Queen:* One woe doth tread upon another’s heele,  
So fast they follow; your sister’s drown’d, Laertes.  
*Laertes:* Drown’d, oh where?
Queen: There is a willow growes aslant a brooke
That showes his horry leaves in the glassy stremme:
Therewith fantastique garlands did she make,
Of Crowflowers, Nettles, Daises, and long Purples
That liberall Shepheards give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead mens’ fingers call them.
There on the pendant boughes her coronet weedes
Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When downe her weedy trophies and her selfe
Fell in the weeping brooke. Her clothes spread wide,
And Mermaide-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old laudes,
As one incapable of her owne distresse,
Or like a creature native and indewed
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments heavy with their drinke,
Pull’d the poore wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

Laertes: Alas, then is she drown’d?
Queen: Drown’d, drown’d.

Claudius has just spent considerable time calming Laertes, enraged at his father’s death, and has entangled the impulsive son in a murderous plot against Hamlet. The queen’s entrance and her haunting report of Ophelia’s death heighten the tension at this late point in the play. The violent death of Polonius is the first woe Gertrude speaks of, upon whose heel news of this second woe, Ophelia’s drowning, proceeds too quickly.

Gertrude’s speech on Ophelia’s death, because of the mournful subject and her weary, slow narration, feels much more haunting and tragic than anything directly before or after it. The speech begins with natural imagery from the scene of Ophelia’s drowning: a willow that grows crookedly at the bank’s edge so that its silver-gray leaves appear in the water. In a play such as Hamlet, this imagery emphasizing reflection—of what appears real, true, and visible yet is fictional—is suggestive. Ophelia was making a coronet of flowers, thus continuing to express her grief indirectly, in a “floral” language. Gertrude’s catalog of flowers is vigorous, but the descriptive dilation of one type of flower—the blandly named “long purples”—is also telling. The queen says that shepherds call them by a “grosser name,” but “cold maids” (like the drowned Ophelia) more chastely call them “dead men’s fingers.” The figurative connection of the multiple names for this single flower powerfully associates Ophelia with sex and death; indeed, in her previous appearance, these were the two topics that obsessed Ophelia. Her earlier songs were about a fickle “truelove” and a “tumbled” (deflowered)
maid—perhaps referring to her relationship with Hamlet—and the loss of loved ones to death, clearly a sign of her grief for Polonius.

Apparently Ophelia climbed out onto an overhanging branch, which snapped and deposited her in the brook. There she continued to sing “snatches of old laudes” (hymns). Her song is both a metaphor of living and a means of enduring the trials of life. The tableau created by Gertrude’s words is mesmerizing, strangely restful, and deadly. The image of the singing Ophelia, her dress spreading out in the water, is visually arresting, but it also signals a growing danger: Eventually full of water, Ophelia’s heavy garments pull her from her “melodious lay” to “muddy death” in the brook. Everything in the scene becomes animated: the coronet itself “clamb’ring” to hang on the bough, her garments “drink” the water and “pull” their wearer underwater. Only Ophelia, it seems, is inactive, “incapable of her own distress.”

In the ongoing frame of the simile, Gertrude says Ophelia is like a living creature, but one meant for the water, not the earth. (Some editions have “indued / Unto that element,” meaning Ophelia is in harmony with the water. But surely the original spelling, “indewed,” provides a devastating pun that qualifies the more optimistic simile: Ophelia’s clothes literally become full of dew, or water, and she dies.) This incident, though spoken of indirectly rather than shown onstage, is nevertheless one of the most famous moments in *Hamlet*. It inspires a powerful visual life in the imagination, thanks largely to the famous paintings of the scene by Eugene Delacroix and John Everett Millais.

Upon hearing Gertrude’s speech, Laertes weeps. In a rather artificial manner, he defends his tears and promises he will soon show no tender, supposedly feminine behavior. Already he ponders the avenger’s “speech o’ fire, that fain would blaze” for his father were he not shaken at news of his sister’s death. Claudius also hates to learn of this news, but for selfish reasons. Instead of truly mourning for Ophelia, the king regrets that all of his efforts at calming Laertes and directing his rage at Hamlet (rather than himself) have been wasted: “Now fear I this will give it start again.” In some productions this comment marks the moment when Gertrude has a kind of epiphany—when, for the first time, she sees Claudius as a calculating villain. The fourth act ends on notes of both emotional outburst and cold-blooded cunning.