TENSION/Questions/ghost-At line 138 the Ghost returns and Horatio in a foolhardy move seeks to stop and question him. He does this by “crossing” the Ghost, that is physically confronting him but also, perhaps, standing with his arms held out to his sides to make a cross as a religious symbol to protect himself from evil. Horatio asks the Ghost four questions.

1.) Can you speak?

2.) Is there anything that we can do to bring you peace? (Perhaps there was something amiss in the burial ceremony or some loose end that needs attention.)

3.) Do you know something about your country’s fate that you can warns us about?

4.) Did you hide some treasure somewhere that you’re trying to protect?

Now everybody in the audience, acquainted with ghost lore, knew the next question Horatio should ask, “Have you returned to this world to point out your murderer?” But before he can ask that, the rooster crows, signaling the dawn. Under the work rules for ghosts, they have to return to the world of the dead when it’s day time. Even though this ghost was the victim and not the perpetrator of a crime, he is considered “a guilty thing.” So the question about who was responsible for his death goes unasked. The men try and physically restrain the Ghost with their long “partisans,” a combination of spear and battle axe, but they are unable to control a spirit. (On Shakespeare’s stage the disappearance was probably accomplished by the actor dropping through a trapdoor on the stage and covering his action with stage smoke.) Immediately afterwards they regret their show of force which they call “malicious mockery.”

CLAUDIUS POLITICAL SPEECH-audius’ long speech at lines 90 –121 is a brilliant piece of argumentation. On the surface it is an attempt to persuade Hamlet not to feel the way he does. It is really aimed at the whole court to show everyone that their King can do clever puns, rhetorical flourishes and philosophical debate just as well as this perpetual graduate student. Claudius’ list of reasons why Hamlet shouldn’t feel that way begins at line 96 and ends at line 110. Altogether, Shakespeare has the King bring up 11 separate arguments, some of them just quick little zingers, others more fully extended points. How many of the 11 can you identify? A couple of my favorites are “An understanding simple and unschooled (line 101).” That’s a great insult to use on somebody who’s been away at the university for years. “’Tis unmanly grief (line 98)” is a good one to use on a guy. Also a good one for Hamlet, who is making such a big deal about mourning his dead father, is at line 106: “A fault against the dead.” (What would your father say if he saw you acting this way?) Notice at line 102 Claudius picks up on Hamlet’s snotty answer to his mother when he says, “For what we know must be and is as common/ As any the most vulgar thing to sense….” And he touches it again at line 107 “whose common theme.” This catalogue of reasons why Hamlet should cheer up and quit being so passive/aggressive now brings us to Claudius’ final and most important objective.

The tenth objective Claudius has in this section is to keep Hamlet at the palace where he can keep an eye on him.

I said earlier Claudius’ first political task is to call an end to the period of national morning. The visual effect of the opening shots of this scene could not make that point any more clearly. The court is crowded, everyone in bright, colorful costumes. The music is martial and in keeping with the pomp of the moment. The Queen appears to be in her wedding dress, as if the ceremony had just taken place. In contrast to visual tone of the moment, Claudius’ solemn opening lines about his “late dear brother’s death” seem almost the play-acting of a skill performer, which is exactly what a good politician is. Then he turns his attention to the letter from Fortinbras demanding the return of the lands. Note Claudius’ actions when he declares “So much for him!” Why is that also a piece of performance in political theater? Who is it intended to impress? Notice how Branagh, the director, uses cuts to “Old Norway” and “Fortinbras” to make Claudius’ strategy more clear Notice how Laertes makes his pitch to get the king’s permission to return to France, making it seem the most important in the world. He too is skilled in the art of political theater where you go through the motions of delivering a message to the onlookers. And notice how the King makes a big deal out of checking with Polonius, flattering the old man in front of the court. It too is pure theater.

We don’t see Hamlet in the opening minutes of this scene, and the camera finally finds him, dressed all in black and hiding back behind the happy members of the court. When he approaches Claudius after he has been called, notice that he sits insolently on the throne that the King had occupied. Members of the court look on with disfavor, realizing it is a direct insult. At this point the director does something very interesting: he takes what had been in the text a very public scene that everyone in the throne room could see and hear and he turns it into a very private conversation among just Hamlet, his mother and the King. She pleads with him to “cast thy nighted color off” and he answers, “’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother….” but with a barely suppressed rage and almost palpable sense of sorrow. When Claudius tries to reason with him, Hamlet refuses to look at the King for most of his speech. At the end of his long counter-argument, Claudius suddenly speaks out for all the court to hear, “For let the world take note, you are the most immediate to our throne,” making the private once again public. This is followed by applause from everyone, signaling that Claudius has the support of the court and revealing that Hamlet will find no allies in the palace. Branagh visually shows us the truth of his statement at line164, “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.”

Claudius makes his pitch for Hamlet not to return to Wittenberg, and Hamlet has his moment where he ignores the King and says he will obey his mother. The King quickly whisks the Queen away, signaling the beginning of the celebration with the pre-arranged dropping of confetti. The moment that Hamlet is covered with a snowfall of paper is incongruous and heightens his sense of frustration with his situation. In that flurry Ophelia tries to comfort him, only to be intercepted by her brother and steered out of the room. During his soliloquy – “O, that this too sullied flesh” – Hamlet walks away from the throne but keeps looking back, as if he could still see his mother and is disgusted by her behavior

This soliloquy provides an explanation of Hamlet’s bad behavior earlier in this scene – his snotty answer to his mother, his sarcasm to his uncle. We see that the young man is profoundly upset, mostly by what his mother has done. This is one of the ongoing themes of the play – Hamlet’s anger and even obsession over his mother’s sexuality. Look at the negative things he says about her: “frailty, thy name is woman”; “a beast, that wants discourse of reason /Would have mourned longer”; “Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears/ Had left the flushing in her galled eyes”; “O, most wicked speed, to post /With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” These angry pronouncements show us the extent of his rage, coupled with the unflattering comparison of how Gertrude’s former husband treated her and the way she repaid his memory, plus the sarcastic comparison to Niobe, the figure from Greek mythology who wept so much from genuine grief that the gods turned her into a spring. About his uncle, Hamlet says only that he is more like a satyr (half-goat/half-man) than a god and is nothing like his father. Notice that it is not only what his mother has done in marrying his uncle; it is the deception of her emotional response to his father’s death.

Hamlet’s overwhelming grief for his father and disgust with his mother affect the way he views the world. At line 139 it is “an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature/ Possess it merely.” We have all had the experience of having a neglected garden full of weeds that eventually blossom and produce seeds for even more weeds after the next rain. He describes it as “rank,” a word which is used several times in the play. It conveys the sense of something overgrown and negative, while at the same time it has a connotation of sexual excess; female animals that are in heat are said to be “rank.” This powerful image of futility reveals the extent of Hamlet’s despair, and we can see how it might lead him to contemplate suicide. The first line of the soliloquy, taken from Quarto 2, reads “sullied flesh” as if the sin and disgust with his mother had tainted or “sullied” his own flesh, flesh that he wishes would evaporate into a mist, that is, cease to exist. The word in the Folio text is even more suggestive of suicide:” O. that this too, too solid flesh would melt.” The next lines make this suggestion of suicide even clearer: “Or that the Everlasting had not fixed/ His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter.” Even before he learns of the Ghost of his father, Hamlet is predisposed to think about killing himself.

Another way we can see tangible evidence of the turmoil in Hamlet’s mind is the way he constructs his sentences. Look at any sentence in Claudius long speech at lines 90 – 121. It may be long and involved, but it flows in a natural sequence. Now look at the long sentence which Hamlet utters at lines 149 –157. The basic structure of the sentence is “she married with my uncle,” but Shakespeare shows us how Hamlet is unable to convey this relatively simple statement without a number of interruptions, repetitions and false starts, as if the mental agony he suffers was reflected in the twisted syntax of his language:

 Adverbial phrase And yet, within a month

 Interruption(Let me not think on 't;

Interruption within interruption frailty, thy name is woman!) Repetition A little month,

Interruption or ere [before] those shoes were old

 With which she followed my poor father's body,

 Interruption within interruption Like Niobe, all tears:

Subject of sentence why she,

Repetition even she

 Interruption (O, God, a beast, that wants discourse of reason/ Would have mourned longer!),

Predicate of sentence married with my uncle,

 Modifying phrase My father's brother, Negative comparison but no more like my father/ Than I to Hercules.

Hamlet accuses his mother of committing incest in marrying her former brother-in-law. It was a point of contention in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that was debated by legal scholars and religious authorities. King Henry VIII had sought a divorce from his first wife on the grounds that she had been previously married to his brother; it was a controversy that eventually split England from the Catholic Church. But in this play the only two people who ever say anything about it are Hamlet and his father. That is bad enough, but Hamlet asserts that his mother was in a rush – “to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets.” The fastest means of communications in Shakespeare’s day was the post horse, the official message service used by the king; this is the basis for our modern word “postage” and “post office.”

Finally the last line of the soliloquy reveals Hamlet’s sense of isolation. He has no one with whom he can share his sense of frustration. Because his uncle so thoroughly dominates the court at Elsinore, Hamlet cannot turn to or trust anyone. This desperation may explain a lot about what happens in the final sequence of this scene between Hamlet and Horatio.

To understand the dynamics of the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio in this scene, we need to keep in mind the last thing Hamlet said in his previous soliloquy: “But break my heart for I must hold my tongue.” The thing Hamlet needs most at this juncture is a friend whom he can trust, and on cue in comes someone that he knew back in Wittenberg, someone who may not be tainted by Claudius’ political control. It doesn’t really matter how well Hamlet knew Horatio back at the university. In fact I argue that they were probably not close friends; they would have been socially far apart. When Horatio greets him at line 165, it is not as if they were good buddies; “Hail to your lordship.” (Remember, at the end of the first scene it was Marcellus, not Horatio, who knew where Hamlet was that morning, so they obviously haven’t been hanging out.) In acknowledging this greeting Hamlet does not at first seem to recognize Horatio: “I am glad to see you well” – almost an automatic answer. It is only then that he recognizes this guy that he knows from another world: “Horatio – or I do forget myself!” Here is someone he might be able to trust, to share his powerful emotions with, and he just remembered his name!

Laertes’ concern for his sister is very real. In the world of courtly gentlemen and ladies, the most valuable possession of both men and women was a spotless reputation. Women were judged by their chastity; it was one of the reasons why the rules of social intercourse, with chaperones and guardians, were so strict. Laertes, however, is not sure about Ophelia’s ability to resist Hamlet’s temptations. He tries to convince her that as a royal prince, he cannot choose a marriage partner for himself. He must marry whoever will serve the larger political interests of the Danish state, perhaps the daughter of a neighboring king. So while he promises Ophelia eternal love and even marriage, she must be wary. He will try to sleep with her, and as a woman, she is morally weak and may give in to his “unmastered importunity (l. 36)”. In the sequence at lines 38 – 48 we see something about Laertes’ way of looking at the world. In a series of general statements about the relations between men and women, we see Laertes echoing his father’s rather cynical view of love and youth, articulated in the second half of this scene. Laertes, at lines 38 –39, compares romance to a battlefield where the smart person stays out of the danger of desire. Next he asserts that no matter how careful a girl is, under the proper circumstances she will “unmask her beauty to the moon,” that is, get naked. Thirdly, he compares the idea of love to a cankerworm that destroys the first buds of the spring, leading to a general blight. The only course is to be afraid of love, because youth will fall even without anyone around to tempt it. These very clever-sounding short remarks, generalizations about how all kids will behave, are called aphorisms. Polonius is full of them, but they are appropriate for an old man his age, not for a young 20-something like Laertes.

Polonius has no sooner given his son the profound injunction to be “true to yourself” than he turns around and forces Ophelia to violate the principle. She has assured her brother that she will keep his advice to her locked in her memory, “And you yourself shall keep the key of it,” that is, it’s just between the two of us. Her father demands to know what is between the two of them. When she answers that it is something concerning Hamlet, trying to honor her promise to her brother, to keep some of her own integrity intact and to obey her father, Polonius tells her that he has been spying on her at line 99: “'Tis told me, he hath very oft of late/ Given private time to you, and you yourself/ Have of your audience been most free and bounteous.” Having brushed aside her attempts to be true to herself, the old man demands that she tell him everything. Ophelia now tells her father that Hamlet has made “many tenders [offers] of his affection.” Look at how Polonius puts his daughter down at line 110: “Affection, pooh! You speak like a green girl/ Unsifted in [naïve about] such perilous circumstance.” He dismisses her emotional state, chastises her for being “green” or unsophisticated and reminds her that falling in love is extremely dangerous. Again at line 121 he is dismissive of her emotional integrity, “Go to, go to,” or “You’ve got to be kidding.” Polonius drives home his point by doing a series of serious puns on the word “tender”: the word goes from meaning “offers” to “payment” (line 115) to “value” (line 116) to “present me with” (line 118). Polonius is the kind of speaker who gets on a verbal tangent and runs it into the ground, or as he would say, “cracks the wind of a poor phrase.”

In discussing his daughter’s love life, he presents a cynical portrait of sexual pursuit and gamesmanship in which all displays of affection are a calculated power contest. At line 130 he makes love sound like a business decision, at 131 he shifts the metaphor to love as a military conquest. Most devastating at 124 love is no more than a trap for catching stupid birds, a pursuit he tells us he did often with great success when he was younger. What is at stake is his daughter getting pregnant and delivering an illegitimate baby (“a fool”) which would make him look bad. He orders her not to waste any more time with Hamlet. It is the tragedy of Ophelia that she is not true to herself or the love she obviously feels for Hamlet. She dutifully acquiesces in her own destruction at line 145, telling her father she will obey. Ask yourself why she makes this choice.

Hamlet’s long speech here is characteristic of how he likes to philosophize. He begins with a specific example, the Danish custom of drinking too much. He points out the consequences, the bad reputation the Danes have because of it, the fact that it takes away from their other achievements. At line 26 he then generalizes from this concrete example to very broad statement about the human condition, that we are often ruined by one small flaw, something over which we may have no control. The lines from 26 – 41 are among the most difficult in all of Shakespeare’s plays to fully comprehend. Nevertheless, the general sense is clear. It is a paraphrase of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle’s definition of the “tragic flaw,” the single human failing that leads to human tragedy. Why should Shakespeare have his hero think of this just before the appearance of the Ghost?

On cue the Ghost appears. Look at Hamlet’s reactions at lines 43 – 62. His first response is to call out for heavenly protection as the vision frightens him: “Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!” He then asks what kind of a spirit it is, good or evil. In how many different ways does he ask this? His third response is to identify it as someone he knows. How many different titles does he give the Ghost? Why does he select these titles? His fourth response is to ask why the Ghost has left the grave; notice how Hamlet emphasizes the finality of the burial of his father’s body: the elaborate grave has “oped its ponderous and marble jaws.” Once again Hamlet waxes philosophical, asking why the Ghost has reappeared thereby raising “thoughts beyond the reaches of our soul.” The Ghost has shaken Hamlet’s ability to understand and rationally to explain. Finally he asks what the Ghost wants them to do. And finally the Ghost communicates, bidding Hamlet to follow him for a private conversation.

he Ghost at line 5 gives Hamlet a tantalizing hint at what life is like beyond the grave: “My hour is almost come,/ When I to sulph’rous and tormenting flames/ Must render up myself.” He is condemned to suffer the pains of Hell in a kind of half-state of damnation called Purgatory. We have all the familiar landscape of Hell, the flames, the smell of sulphur, the sense of torment beyond the ability of humans to imagine (lines 20 – 26). We learn the Ghost has to serve a prescribed sentence in this anteroom of the underworld because of sins committed in his lifetime. He has the opportunity to purge away his sins. Purgatory was a theological construct of the Catholic Church, a place where it was possible for the living to help shorten the sentence of suffering on their loved ones by prayers, good works and donations. The Protestants and the Church of England had rejected this belief as too closely identified with the old faith of Rome, but here is Shakespeare bringing it back as a dramatic device in his most famous drama. Scholars have found this a provocative element of the play and one which suggests that Shakespeare had more than a passing interest in Catholicism. Later in the famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy Hamlet will refer to death as “the country from whose undiscovered bourn [border]/ No traveler returns.” Well, the appearance of the Ghost and his scary description of the afterlife certainly provide some hints about “the undiscovered country.”

The Ghost now reveals that he was murdered, a murder both “foul and unnatural.” It was doubly bad because it was the murder of a king by his subject and a fratricide. Notice at lines 30 and 32 Shakespeare delays the revelation of the murderer with Hamlet’s interruptions; it isn’t until line 46 that the Ghost finally reveals the identity of his killer. Shakespeare has milked as much suspense as he could out of the situation. Notice Hamlet’s reaction at lines 35 – 37: “Haste me to know 't, that I, with wings as swift/ As meditation or the thoughts of love,/ May sweep to my revenge.” Given the fact that Hamlet will mull, procrastinate, philosophize and postpone for the next four acts before he gets around to “sweeping” to his revenge, the comparison is fairly ironic. (By the way, to “sweep” was a technical term used to describe how a falcon dives on its prey, at that time probably the fastest motion by a living being known.)

The Ghost is pleased that his son agrees to extract revenge on his killer, suggesting at line 39 – 41 that he if he wasn’t stirred to action, he would be “duller than the fat weed/ That roots itself in ease on Lethe’s wharf.” The suggestion with this unusual image is that the only reason a son would not rush to avenge his father’s death would be that he was slow-witted and kept forgetting to do it. The Ghost doesn’t seem to consider the other option: that his son would be too aware and keep over-thinking the event.

After a build-up of suspense for four scenes, we finally get to hear the Ghost speak. What he doesn’t say is almost as important as what he does say. His first words, “Mark me,” mean “listen to me,” but with the added force of “pay attention.” It hardly seems necessary to tell your son to focus on what you have to say when you have returned from the dead, but it will not be the only time in the play the Ghost seems to question his son’s ability concentrate on his message. In his response at line 11, “I am bound to hear,” Hamlet suggests a dual message: he is destined to hear the message, but he is also obligated to act on the information.

he actual poisoning is exotic. People in that time had turned poisoning into a fine art, and they studied all the different ways poison could be ingested besides orally. In the play of one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries a woman was poisoned by her rival who put a deadly poison on the picture of her husband which she used to kiss every night during his absence. A member of Queen Elizabeth’s court was charged with trying to murder her by putting poison on her saddle (probably too much information about Good Queen Bess). Claudius administered the poison through the King’s ear. It is an especially alien-sounding concoction – “henbona” – but after 400 years of research no one has yet been able to identify this particular poison; about the best they have been able to come up with is a toxic weed with the prosaic name “hensbane.” Whatever the poison, it has an instant effect on the body, creating a condition like leprosy. (In Shakespeare’s time lepers would have been a fairly common sight on the streets.) In describing the effect of hebona on the body, the Ghost compares it in appearance to the bark of a tree, a particularly effective image.

Even more terrible than the murder itself is the condition of the old king’s soul when he died. He did not die in a state of grace, according to the Catholic Church, with his sins forgiven; the Ghost uses the technical terms from the old faith at line 84: “Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled [without final rites or forgiveness].” Here again we get a tantalizing hint that Shakespeare has more than a passing acquaintance with Catholicism. The scholar Stephen Greenblatt in his recent work Will in the World argues that Shakespeare was seeking some kind of consolation in the rituals and concepts like Purgatory from the old faith because of his own grief for his recently deceased father and son.

At line 89 the Ghost gives his son his specific charge: “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be/ A couch for luxury [lechery] and damned incest.” Notice that he does not say, “Kill the son-of-a-bitch who poisoned me and messed up my complexion in the process,” nor does he say, “Save the kingdom from this usurping villain.” What he says in effect is “Kill your uncle to stop him from committing incestuous lechery (‘luxury’) in the royal bed.” This will not be the only time in this lecture that I point out the obvious: both father and son are obsessed with Gertrude’s sexual habits.

In his 21-line soliloquy at the beginning of this sequence Hamlet tells us how traumatic the experience with the Ghost has been for him and at the same time reveals to us some important aspects of his character. Remember that I had said earlier that Shakespeare did not rely solely on the ability of his actors to convey their psychological state to an audience of 3,000 spectators. If it was important for us to know, he would reinforce the acting with a verbal message. So it is in the first four lines beginning at line 99 that we know Hamlet is close to a physical and psychological collapse as a result of his ghostly encounter. He calls upon all the forces (“hosts’) of earth, heaven and hell to help him remain standing. He returns to that last line of the Ghost, “remember me,” and repeats it twice to emphasize its impact on his mind. At line 103 he vows to remember the Ghost as long as he has a memory in “this distracted globe.” Hamlet is referring to his own brain here and telling us he is unhinged. At the same time “globe” could refer to the entire world; because of his own psychological state Hamlet perceives everything as disturbed. A third suggestion of “Globe” is, of course, the actual theater in which the play was performed. Shakespeare’s plays often contain references to the specific people and places in London at that time.

To emphasize the point about dedicating himself to remembering the Ghost, Hamlet now, in effect, hits the delete button on his own memory. Young men studying to be courtly gentlemen were encouraged to make notes on how others talked, wrote and behaved, to help model themselves upon the best examples of courtship. These “records” were sometimes kept temporarily on wax tablets (or “tables”) that could be easily wiped clean for reuse. Hamlet now dismisses all the information he has accumulated over the years as “trivial” and “fond” (foolish), even the pieces of wisdom (“saws”) he has copied from books. Now the only thing he will remember is the Ghost’s injunction. Given that Hamlet is a long-time scholar and student, a man for whom his books are his most important possessions, it is appropriate that he should, at line 110, speak of the Ghost’s “commandment” living within “the book and volume of my brain.” Hamlet’s choice of images often reveals his values and feelings. This intellectualization of revenge is carried on at line 114 where Hamlet will literally write down that Claudius is a villain. What more significant way is there for a perpetual student to make a declaration than in writing? But how unlike the typical revenge tragedy action hero which I described in the introduction of this lecture! Can you see Rambo or the Terminator stopping to write down a psychological insight before getting out the flame thrower?

Remember that just 20 lines before the Ghost had warned Hamlet not to taint his mind “against thy mother aught” (or at all). Yet what is the first thing he says at line 112 – “O most pernicious woman”? So much for leaving her to heaven! Poor Gertrude’s sexual bad behavior continues to dominate Hamlet’s mind. And at line 113 what really rankles Hamlet about Claudius seems to be less that he murdered his father and more about the fact that he’s a phony, a “smiling, damned villain.” And just as Hamlet had earlier condemned the Danish vice of overdrinking, here he seems to equate deception with the Danish character. I guess grief takes different forms, but Hamlet’s reactions tell us a lot about what’s on his mind. At line 116 he finishes writing down the fact that Claudius is a villain and announces “So, uncle, there you are,” as if the act of the writing had established the reality and fixed his commitment to revenge. He repeats the Ghost’s last words, “Adieu, adieu, remember me,” and tells us he has sworn it after the ritual of wiping his memory clean and writing it down.

The World Comes In

The first 120 lines of this scene have been among the most intense and private in all of the plays. Hamlet has literally forgotten about that outside world. Now that world intrudes in the form of Horatio and Marcellus who come looking for him. Everything has changed for Hamlet, including his relationships with those around him, but his friends don’t know that. They have only Hamlet’s external behavior to go on, and what that strongly suggests is that he’s crazy. Hamlet realizes that what he must do is to commit an act of political assassination against the ruling monarch of a state under threat of external attack. Claudius is heavily protected; in Act IV we hear him call for his “Switzers,” special mercenary security men from Switzerland, the same kind of force that still guards the Pope. (The Swiss were hired for this kind of job by the royalty of Europe for centuries because they less likely to turn against their employers for any kind of political or religious qualms.) Should Hamlet succeed in killing Claudius, his chances of survival would be meager. Furthermore, given what he has learned, he must distrust everyone, even his supposed friend, Horatio, or his alleged girlfriend, Ophelia. And if he does kill the King, those closest to him will be in danger simply by their association with him.

At line 122 a concerned Marcellus hopes that heaven will secure Hamlet, to which Hamlet says, “So be it.” Perhaps he is agreeing that he will be protected by God. Maybe what Hamlet means is that he now has to face the outside world as a changed man. Or it may be that at this point he decides on how he will encounter the world – by “putting on an antic disposition,” that is playing as if he were crazy. Marcellus and Horatio have been calling to Hamlet from offstage, using the term “illo, ho, ho,” in effect shouting “hello” so he will respond. At line 125 he finally does, answering, “Hillo, ho, ho, boy! Come, bird, come!” as if he were a falconer and they were hunting birds he was calling to return to him. Remember that they last time they saw him he was running off after the Ghost in mortal danger. You can see why this response is inappropriate under normal circumstances. But often when people have just received a shock, their responses are not what we would expect. Hamlet is in a state of shock, perhaps a kind of temporary insanity. We know that Hamlet and his friends are extremely tense: we see that from line 120 – 140 they speak in clipped, short lines with a number of questions such as we saw when the Ghost first appeared in Act I, Scene 1 and again when Hamlet learned of the Ghost in scene 2. This is one of the ways Shakespeare used to convey nervous tension

Horatio and Marcellus are anxious to find out what Hamlet learned from the Ghost, but we can see Hamlet’s reluctance to trust them from the outset. Think about his situation. What would a student home from school and a common foot soldier be able to do to help him kill the King? On the other hand he has to mistrust everyone, although he eventually tells Horatio what the Ghost told him and enlists his aid in the plan. We can envision Hamlet wrestling in his own mind as the two urge him to tell and he repeatedly expresses doubt about their secrecy. At last at line 137 he reveals the great truth the Ghost returned to tell him: “There's never a villain dwelling in all Denmark/ But he's an arrant knave.” Sometimes in production Hamlet pauses at the end of the first line here, as if he were still trying figure out how much he can say. Instead of finishing his thought with something like “But he’s not equal to the one who rules,” Hamlet gives us a nonsense statement of the obvious.

ow Hamlet changes his mind about leaving and instead asks his friends to swear an oath that they will not reveal what they have seen. Despite their assurances that they won’t, Hamlet insists that they take a solemn oath upon the cross formed by his sword’s blade and hilt. Three times they attempt to swear only to be interrupted by the Ghost urging them to “swear” in an eerie voice from beneath the floor. The three men move from one part of the stage to another to escape this ghostly warning. The voice comes, of course, from the actor playing the Ghost who had gone under the raised stage. (According to one tradition from the 17th Century it was Shakespeare himself who played the part of the Ghost.) This little sequence tells us a couple of things about Shakespeare’s stage. First, his audience loved “special effects”; the sound of a disembodied voice coming from the floor was a real crowd pleaser. Secondly, despite the audience of 3,000 people, the spectators were still close enough to the stage to be able to distinguish that the voice was coming from under different parts of the floor. Now we assume that Horatio and Marcellus hear the Ghost’s voice along with Hamlet, but in some productions they don’t give any indication that they do. Their reactions are based on watching Hamlet respond to a voice they don’t hear, and Hamlet’s reactions are pretty odd. At line 170 Hamlet refers to the Ghost as “truepenny” and “this fellow in the cellarage.” In psychological terms this is an “inappropriate affect”: if you encounter a ghostly phenomenon, you’re not supposed to greet him, “like dude!” or joke about how he got locked in the cellar. Of course, Hamlet’s still in a state of shock from his earlier encounter, and often those in such a state have reactions that outsiders don’t understand. There’s nothing more that can scare Hamlet. His jocular response may just be the way he copes with the situation. The next time the Ghost cries out at line 176, Hamlet greets the interruption with a Latin phrase meaning “here and everywhere,” as if he were saying, “Boy, you do get around!” The third time at 182, Hamlet’s response is even more bizarre: “Well said, old mole. Canst work i' th’ earth so fast? / A worthy pioneer [army engineer]! Once more remove [move again] good friends.” The Ghost is moving so quickly, he must be Super Mole! Then Hamlet compares him to a “pioneer,” a term used for the early army engineers who specialized in tunneling under fortifications. We’ll see another reference to the “pioneer” in Act III, Scene 4.

And therefore as a stranger [because it is a stranger] give it welcome./ There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy [course of study].” Hamlet urges his friend who has been skeptical and objective from the beginning of the play to make room in his world view for this remarkable event. Horatio has dedicated his life to study, to attain the heights of knowledge, what in those days was referred to as “philosophy.” (We can still see this equation of the ultimate of knowledge and philosophy in the archaic nomenclature of academia where we worship the Ph. D., the “Doctor of Philosophy.”)

Now we come to the most problematic line in the scene: “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right!” This is clearly Hamlet’s expression of regret that he has to take on the job of straightening up the world morally. We can get a better sense if we see that the comparison here is to a physician setting a broken or dislocated bone which “is out of joint.” Hamlet is saying, in effect, “Why me?”