

Dear Participants,

In advance of the workshop, we're sending you some things to think about. First: let's think about the back story. King Hamlet is dead, killed by a snake (so it's reported) while he slept in his orchard. Prince Hamlet is mourning. His mother has remarried within weeks of his father's funeral – and married Claudius, the king's brother and the prince's uncle. Then something incredible happens. A Ghost purporting to be the spirit of the dead king tells Hamlet what really happened. What assignment does this Ghost give the prince? And how does the prince respond? Look carefully at the 1.5 extract. Pay attention to narrative structure – the way the Ghost tells the story and the specific language he uses. Is young Hamlet persuaded? What's he going to do next? Consider the theological contradictions built into the 'belief structure' of this play. Hamlet is at university in Wittenberg, cradle of the Protestant revolution. Protestants don't recognise Purgatory. (Is that a problem for the Ghost?) They also don't hold with revenge -- but Catholics don't either: "'Vindicta mihi", saith the Lord' (Romans 12:19), 'I will repay'.

In the event, Hamlet chooses to question the Ghost's story: 'The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil'. He'll test it. How? Through re-enactment. He'll have the players who've arrived at Elsinore 'Play something like the murder of my father' -- and watch the effect on Claudius: 'The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king'. And sure enough, in 3.2 Claudius does react violently to 'The Mousetrap'. But is the play he watched the one Hamlet thinks he's had performed? Claudius sees not a brother killing a brother but a nephew murdering an uncle. Claudius stops the play crying 'Give me some light, away!' and exits the scene. Hamlet stands around with Horatio, crowing: 'I'll take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound!' Then he's summoned to a conference with his mother. He exits. Our workshop extract begins at this point. The King, clearly disturbed, has just arranged for Hamlet to be shipped off to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern his complicit escorts; Polonius has entered to inform the King that Hamlet is going to Gertrude's closet (where he'll plant himself behind the arras) then exited; Claudius is alone on stage. He begins to speak: 'O, my offence is rank...' He tumbles himself up and down for 72 lines before he orders his 'stubborn knees' to 'bow': he kneels. Then Hamlet enters, sees Claudius 'a-praying' and 'now I'll do it', the revenge. But then he considers. And stops. 'Up sword'. He exits to his mother. Claudius rises. A couplet ends the scene.

We're going to divide the workshop into two groups, 'Penitents' and 'Revenge', one to look hard at Claudius's speech; the other, to concentrate on Hamlet. Of course, you won't know which group you're in before we start so we ask you to do some prep on both extracts in advance (putting yourself in role first as 'penitent' then as 'revenge'). What story does each speech tell? Each speech confronts a problem. What is it? How does each speech move across changing thoughts? What are the rhetorical markers of these changes? What is the linguistic territory of each speech -- the images, the metaphors, the theological references -- and how does language construct character? What words would you pull out of the speech to demonstrate the fight each character is having with himself as he speaks?

What theology is expressed in each speech? Protestants and Catholics think differently about 'confession' and how to perform it. They think differently about intercession. And absolution. Are these ideas problematic here? What is the role of conscience? Of guilt? Mercy? What 'God' space opens up in these two speeches? Both of them 'perform prayer'. Right? Or bizarre versions of what each faith takes for prayer?

We'd also like you to think physically about your speech. What action is built into it? What are Claudius and Hamlet *doing*? Oh -- and where are they????

Carol Rutter (Protestant layperson)  
Ryan Service (Catholic priest)

Looking forward to seeing you in the workshop (and, we hope, meeting you at coffee between conference papers).

**We will bring hard copies of the extracts on the day -- so no need to print them out in advance. But having something to write with would be a good idea.**

Extract 1. Backstory for preparation, Act 1 Scene 5 (edited)

*Enter GHOST and HAMLET*

**HAMLET** Where wilt thou lead me? speak; I'll go no further.

**Ghost** Mark me.

**HAMLET** I will.

**Ghost** My hour is almost come,  
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames  
Must render up myself.

**HAMLET** Alas, poor ghost!

**Ghost** Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing  
To what I shall unfold.

**HAMLET** Speak; I am bound to hear.

**Ghost** So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.

**HAMLET** What?

**Ghost** I am thy father's spirit,  
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid  
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,  
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word  
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,  
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,  
Thy knotted and combined locks to part  
And each particular hair to stand on end,  
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine:  
But this eternal blazon must not be  
To ears of flesh and blood. List, list, O, list!  
If thou didst ever thy dear father love--

**HAMLET** O God!

**Ghost** Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

**HAMLET** Murder!

**Ghost** Murder most foul, as in the best it is;  
But this most foul, strange and unnatural.

**HAMLET** Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love,  
May sweep to my revenge.

**Ghost** I find thee apt;  
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed  
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,  
Wouldst thou not stir in this. Now, Hamlet, hear:  
'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,  
A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of Denmark  
Is by a forged process of my death  
Rankly abused: but know, thou noble youth,  
The serpent that did sting thy father's life  
Now wears his crown.

**HAMLET** O my prophetic soul! My uncle! ...

**Ghost** .... But, soft! methinks I scent the morning air;  
Brief let me be. Sleeping within my orchard,  
My custom always of the afternoon,  
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,

With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,  
And in the porches of my ears did pour  
The leperous distilment; whose effect  
Holds such an enmity with blood of man  
That swift as quicksilver it courses through  
The natural gates and alleys of the body,  
And with a sudden vigour doth posset  
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,  
The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mine;  
And a most instant tetter bark'd about,  
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,  
All my smooth body.  
Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand  
Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd:  
Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,  
Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,  
No reckoning made, but sent to my account  
With all my imperfections on my head:  
O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!  
If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;  
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be  
A couch for luxury and damned incest.  
But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,  
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven  
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,  
To prick and sting her. Fare thee well at once!  
The glow-worm shows the matin to be near,  
And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire:  
Adieu, adieu! Hamlet, remember me. *Exit*

**HAMLET**  
O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?  
And shall I couple hell? O, fie! Hold, hold, my heart;  
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,  
But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee!  
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat  
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!  
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,  
Unmix'd with baser matter: yes, by heaven!  
O most pernicious woman!  
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!  
My tables -- meet it is I set it down,  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;  
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark:

## Extract 2. The Workshop: Penitents v. Revengers

**KING CLAUDIUS**

Thanks, dear my lord.

*Exit POLONIUS*

O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven;  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,  
A brother's murder. Pray can I not,  
Though inclination be as sharp as will:  
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent;  
And, like a man to double business bound,  
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,  
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand  
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,  
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens  
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy  
But to confront the visage of offence?  
And what's in prayer but this two-fold force,  
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,  
Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up;  
My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer  
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?  
That cannot be; since I am still possess'd  
Of those effects for which I did the murder,  
My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.  
May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?  
In the corrupted currents of this world  
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,  
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself  
Buys out the law: but 'tis not so above;  
There is no shuffling, there the action lies  
In his true nature; and we ourselves compell'd,  
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,  
To give in evidence. What then? what rests?  
Try what repentance can: what can it not?  
Yet what can it when one can not repent?  
O wretched state! O bosom black as death!  
O limed soul, that, struggling to be free,  
Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay!  
Bow, stubborn knees; and, heart with strings of steel,  
Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe!  
All may be well.

*Retires and kneels*

*Enter HAMLET*

**HAMLET** Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;  
And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;  
And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:  
A villain kills my father; and for that,  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
To heaven.  
O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.  
He took my father grossly, full of bread;  
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;  
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?

But in our circumstance and course of thought,  
'Tis heavy with him: and am I then revenged,  
To take him in the purging of his soul,  
When he is fit and season'd for his passage?  
No!

Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:  
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;  
At gaming, swearing, or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in't;  
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black  
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays:  
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

*Exit*

**KING CLAUDIUS**

[Rising] My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

*Exit*