**Deception in *Hamlet***

Deception is an essential element of Shakespearean drama, whether it be tragedy, history, or comedy. The deception can be destructive or benign; it can be practiced on others or, just as likely, self-inflicted. On occasion deception becomes the very foundation of a play, as is the case with *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, and, most notably, *Hamlet*.

The following introduction to the many instances of deception in *Hamlet* will help you plan your own essay on the broader topic of how this important theme relates to the play on the whole.

**Hamlet**

**1)** Hamlet's madness is an act of deception, concocted to draw attention away from his suspicious activities as he tries to gather evidence against Claudius. He reveals to Horatio his deceitful plan to feign insanity in 1.5:

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,
As I, perchance, hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on,
That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
With arms encumber'd thus, or this head-shake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
As 'Well, well, we know'; or 'We could, an if we would';
Or 'If we list to speak'; or 'There be, an if they might';
Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
That you know aught of me: this is not to do,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you.
(187-199)

**2)** Hamlet stages *The Murder of Gonzago*, itself an elaborate deception, to try to catch Claudius in his guilt. He again reveals his deceit to Horatio:

Give him a heedful note
For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
And after we will both our judgments join
In censure of his seeming.
(3.2.86-89)

**3)** Hamlet schemes to deceive his mother, Gertrude, at their meeting in her closet. Hamlet will appear to intend her harm; he will channel the cruelty of Nero, said to have murdered his mother, to help him "speak daggers" to Gertrude, but he has no intention of being physically brutal:

Soft! now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom:
Let me be cruel, not unnatural:
I will speak daggers to her, but use none;
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites;
How in my words soever she be shent,
To give them seals never, my soul, consent!
(3.2.384-91)

**4)** When Hamlet discovers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carrying his death warrant on the ship bound for England he changes his name to the names of his unwitting companions, thereby sending them to be executed in his place. This unusually ruthless act of deception shocks and disappoints Horatio:

**Hamlet.** I had my father's signet in my purse,
Which was the model of that Danish seal:
Folded the writ up in the form of the other,
Subscrib’d it, gave’t the impression, plac’d it
safely,
The changeling never known. Now, the next day
Was our sea-flight; and what to this was sequent
Thou know’st already.
**Horatio.** So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't...
Why, what a king is this?
(5.2.47-55,62)

**5)** Hamlet's philosophical reluctance to murder Claudius results in self-deception several times in the play, particularly in his soliloquies. He convinces himself to delay in his [second soliloquy](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/soliloquies/doitpat.html) because the Ghost might be playing false: "The spirit I have seen/May be a devil, and the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape" (2.2.600), and, in his [fifth soliloquy](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/soliloquies/doitpat.html) he tricks himself into believing he should not kill Claudius in his chamber (a perfect opportunity) because he would go to heaven if murdered while praying.