**HAMLET - THE THEME OF POWER**

**The Theme of POWER in Hamlet.**

POLITICAL POWER:  The play unfolds amid political intrigue—inside the Court and outside. Claudius is a powerful figure who dominates the Court at Elsinore. He is clever, cool-headed, diplomatic. He gets what he wants. After his brother’s death, the  threat from young hot-headed Fortinbras in neighbouring Norway is a concern. But Claudius wins the day, not by rushing into battle, but by sending his ambassadors to negotiate successfully.

As he addresses the Court in the opening scenes, he skilfully deflects attention away from “**our dear brother’s death**” by dwelling on the threat from Norway, and the arrangements he has made to solve the crisis.

He is engaged in a psychological battle of wits with Hamlet, whom he regards as a threat to his new kingship. **(“Now Hamlet, where’s Polonius?”  “At supper!”)**  Hamlet is clever enough to know what Claudius is up to, but Claudius has power on his side—his commands will be obeyed. He quickly removes Hamlet from the Court, sending him to England. (”**Thou know’st our purposes” “I see a cherub that sees them”)**

Claudius quickly and skilfully uses Rosancrantz and Guildenstern as his spies. He uses Laertes in his battle against Hamlet, quickly converting this dangerous enemy into a useful instrument of revenge. “**Laertes, was your father dear to you**?”

He commands his wife, Gertrude “**Good Gertrude, set some watch over your son**”.

We see Claudius’ power in commanding that Ophelia, whose death seemed like suicide, should nevertheless be buried in consecrated ground. The priest at her burial says “**her death was doubtful**” and that it was the King’s “great command” that forced him to disobey orders.

THE POWERLESSNESS OF WOMEN

Ophelia is at the mercy of the men in her life—her father Polonius, her brother Laertes, her lover Hamlet. Her brother, on his way to France, gives her advice on how she should conduct herself **--“Best safety lies in fear**”---although as she points out to him, he does not feel that he has to follow this advice himself. Polonius is quite clear about this double-standard “**Lord Hamlet…is young, and with a larger tedder may he walk than may be given you”**. As a woman she must accept her narrower, more supervised life. She is powerless to change anything. But she is obedient, following Polonius’ advice and agreeing to participate in his schemes, as he spies on her meeting with Hamlet “**I shall obey, my Lord”**

Hamlet has already expressed his contempt for women “**Frailty thy name is woman**” and he heaps more angry abuse on the innocent Ophelia as the play progresses “**I loved you not…You should not have believed me….Get the to a nunnery, go”**

Ignoring her distress and fear, he launches into an attack on women in general “**God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another”**

Ophelia is sacrificed to this male egotism. Her breakdown and drowning are heart-breaking, as she wanders through the Court, singing, pathetically handing out flowers and herbs “**There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance, and there is pansies, that’s for thoughts”**Gertrude, a fellow sufferer from Hamlet’s insults, poetically describes her death by drowning “**There is a willow grows aslant a brook**…” And it is Gertrude who sprinkles flower petals on the grave of the flower-like Ophelia “**Sweets to the** **sweet, farewell…I thought thy bride bed to have decked, sweet maid, and not have strewed thy grave**”

It is ironic then to see Hamlet and Laertes fighting in Ophelia’s newly-dug grave in a wrestling match to prove who loved her the most “**I’ll rant as well as thee**”

Gertrude is also at the mercy of Hamlet’s rage, and we see his extraordinary power over her in the boudoir scene. He is obsessed with female sexuality “**honeying and making love”**Gertrude’s “sin” in marrying Claudius haunts him. She has stepped out of her proper, passive female role, and has made a choice of which he deeply disapproves: “**Such an act that blurs the grace and blush of modesty**”. Hamlet is like the parent in this scene as he lectures his mother “**Confess yourself to Heaven, repent what’s past”**

He causes such distress and fear in Gertrude that Polonius becomes alarmed as he hides behind the arras, and is attacked and killed. His arrogant dominance is clear from the beginning “**Leave wringing of your hands…sit you down and let me wring your heart”**

Gertrude cannot understand what has provoked Hamlet’s terrible rage” **What have I done that thou dares wag thy tongue in noise so rude against me?”.**Eventually Gertrude breaks, begging Hamlet **“Oh speak to me no more. These words like daggers enter in mine ears. No more, sweet Hamlet**” but Hamlet continues his attack “**Assume a virtue if you have it not**..”