**Hamlet – Themes and Issues**

**Love and Sexuality**

Hamlet cannot easily contemplate the world around him, or its inhabitants, without weighing and measuring what he sees against his own most demanding moral standards.

Given his experiences of human nature, as represented by the conduct of his mother and uncle mediated to him by the ghost, it is scarcely surprising that he finds humanity in general deeply flawed and other people’s standards and moral choices defective.

His strict morality leads him to despise the drunken revels which enliven the court of Claudius.

He finds it incomprehensible that Gertrude should be the happy wife of Claudius, and tells her in considerable detail why her choice of husband has been so misguided, and why her relationship with him is immoral and disgusting (3:4, 49-197).

Hamlet’s selective moral sense can not tolerate the spying activities Polonius carries out in the interests of the state as well as of Claudius.

His unfavourable view of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arises mainly from the fact that they value their loyalty to the security of the state and to the monarchy above the claims of their former friendship with him: their association with Claudius, whether they are acting in good faith or not, is enough to make them villains in his eyes.

His moral estimate of Ophelia is partly based on his assumption that she is somehow associated with Claudius.

In the Closet scene (3:4) he adopts an air of absolute moral superiority towards his mother as he attempts to dislodge her from Claudius, clearly feeling that his own freedom from sexual vice and his contempt for it gives him the right to condemn it in others.

In times when there is little or no respect for moral codes, he tells her, good people like himself are obliged to beg leave of sinners like her to help them reform:

For in the fatness of these pursy times

Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,

Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good. (3:4, 154-6)

When they are trying to probe his mind and motives on behalf of Claudius and Gertrude, Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he is “but mad north-worth west”, being perfectly sane when the wind is blowing from any other direction (2:2, 372-3).

This is another way of saying that his mind becomes disturbed only in relation to a limited range of related topics: his mother’s marriage, her adulterous relationship with Claudius while her husband still lived (1:5, 42-6) and his own consequent distrust of female virtue, extending even to the innocent Ophelia.

Hamlet’s obsession with his mother’s lapse from virtue, and his tendency to include all women in his disgust at what she has done, is a recurring theme of his discourse.

Even before he learns from the Ghost of the true extent of his mother’s immortality, he is revolted at the thought of her marriage to Claudius within two months of King Hamlet’s death (“O most wicked speed, to post/ With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” 1:2, 156-7).

Not only has she dishonoured her late husband, Hamlet’s idol, by marrying with indecent haste a man totally inferior to King Hamlet: she has also violated moral and eccleiastical law by marrying so close a relative as Claudius.

The Ghost’s revelations make this situation worse in Hamlet’s eyes.

While King Hamlet still lived, Gertrude was pursuing an adulterous affair with Claudius:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,

With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts.............- (1:5, 42-6)

Before he even hears these details, his mother’s hasty marriage to a man he regards as lustful and repulsive has caused him to despair of female virtue (“fraility, thy name is woman!” 1:2, 146)

It is most significant that after the Ghost’s departure, Hamlet’s first terrible outburst of anger is inspired by his mother’s conduct “O most pernicious woman”, 1:4, 105), just as his earlier depressive state clearly had its origin in her marriage to Claudius (1:2, 129-57).

The Ghost’s tendency to generalise from his own individual experience becomes a central feature of Hamlet’s outlook on women and their relation to men.

Hamlet’s obsession with what he regards as female sexual frailty is brought to the surface whenever he encounters Gertrude of Ophelia.

It reaches a terrifying climax during the Closet scene (3:4) where Hamlet assumes the roles of preacher, moral reformer, and scourge of his mother’s sexual habits as exemplified in her relationship with Claudius.

Gertrude’s adultery has stained the original beauty of her love for King Hamlet, contaminated his own love for Ophelia (“takes off the rose/ From the fair forehead of an innocent love” 3:4, 43-4), and turned the solemn vows of marriage into a meaningless formula (3:4, 45-6). P.96