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The Meaning of Death in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Jeffrey Wilson

The “common theme” of nature, Claudius says in *Hamlet*, is “death of fathers” (1.2.103–04). All who live must die, but death always feels, in Gertrude’s words, “so particular” (1.2.75). Since death is also a “common theme” in *Hamlet*, this essay asks what the “particular” way characters die reveals about Shakespeare’s artistry.

King Hamlet dies off-stage, poisoned by his ambitious brother. Polonius dies at the threshold between the front- and back-stage, stabbed by a vengeful Prince Hamlet, who mistakenly thinks Polonius is Claudius. Ophelia dies off-stage, committing suicide by drowning herself. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die off-stage, executed on Hamlet’s orders. Gertrude dies on-stage, accidentally poisoned by Claudius. Laertes dies on-stage, stabbed by his own poisoned blade. Claudius dies on-stage, stabbed and poisoned by a vengeful Hamlet (the stabbing seems to be the fatal blow, since he dies immediately). Hamlet dies on-stage, stabbed by Laertes with a blade poisoned by Claudius (it seems to be the poison that kills him, since he takes a while to die). Are there any patterns here—in on-stage versus off-stage deaths? in purposeful versus accidental deaths? in poisonings versus stabbings? in men’s versus women’s deaths? in royals’ versus nobles’ deaths? Do the ways Shakespeare’s characters die relate to the ways they lived? Is the reason a character dies related to the manner of death? Does the form these characters’ deaths take suggest anything about what Shakespeare understood tragedy to be, and how he went about writing it?

In response to these questions, this essay presents two central ideas. First, Shakespeare disseminated the Aristotelian notion of tragic necessity—a causal relationship between a character’s *hamartia* (fault or error) and the catastrophe at the end of the play—from the protagonist to the other characters, such that, in *Hamlet*, those who are guilty must die, and those who die are guilty. Second, there exists in *Hamlet* a positive correlation between the severity of a character’s *hamartia* and the “spectacularity” of his or her death—that is, the extent to which it is presented as a visible and visceral spectacle on-stage.

I came to these conclusions through a mixture of qualitative and quantitative reasoning. First I listed out all the deaths in the play, noting that 9 of the 11 central characters die (in order, King Hamlet, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius, and Prince Hamlet all die, while Horatio and Young Fortinbras do not). To be sure, this is a subjective determination of what counts as a “central character”: the First Player has more lines (96 lines) than the Ghost (95 lines), and the First Clown has more (94 lines) than Guildenstern (53 lines). Young Fortinbras has even fewer lines (27 lines). Yet, in considering the central plot—with Norway threatening Denmark, King Hamlet’s assassination and return from the grave sends his son in search of vengeance—King Hamlet and Young Fortinbras are central to the tragic (in contrast to comic) elements of the play.

Then I started looking for patterns, identifying a series of relevant considerations: the order in which the deaths occur, the gender of the characters who die (male or female?), the class of those who die (royal or noble?), the place of the death (on-stage or off-stage), the manner of death (stabbed, poisoned, etc.), the person responsible for the death (brother, friend, son-in-law, etc.), the deliberateness of the death (accidental or purposive), the gender of the responsible party, the class of the responsible party, and the *hamartia* of the character who dies. Most of these categories are straight-forward, self-explanatory, and not really open to interpretation, but the final consideration—*hamartia*—merits some discussion.

The term *hamartia* comes from the theory of tragedy developed in Aristotle's *Poetics*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "the fault or error which entails the destruction of the tragic hero" (*hamartia*, n.). A "fault" involves *who someone is*, a bad personality trait or personal weakness. In contrast, an "error" involves *what someone does*, a mistaken or miscalculated action. Whether a fault or an error, the protagonist's *hamartia*, Aristotle said, should cause the catastrophe that comes at the end of the play, resulting in death and the downfall of nations. That catastrophe creates pity in the audience because it is disproportionately large compared to the minuteness of the *hamartia*, yet the audience still sees how the protagonist's *hamartia* did in fact bring about his or her own death.

The causal relationship between *hamartia* and catastrophe is especially significant in *Hamlet*, where Shakespeare extrapolated the treatment of the protagonist's *hamartia* in classical tragedy to apply it to other characters. Many in the play, not just the protagonist, are "hoist with his [or her] own petard," to quote Hamlet (3.4.207). For instance, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die "by their own insinuation" (5.2.58). And Laertes is "justly killed with [his] own treachery" (5.2.290). The play is filled, as Horatio summarizes it at the end, with "purposes mistook / Fall'n on th' inventors' heads" (5.2.365–368). This is Shakespeare's dissemination of tragic necessity in *Hamlet*. And here the logic of a necessary connection between an error or fault and a character's downfall opens up the possibility of reasoning in reverse: if a character in *Hamlet* dies, he or she is guilty of something.

I classified King Hamlet's *hamartia* as pride based on Horatio's description of King Hamlet's "emulate pride" in dueling with Old Fortinbras (1.1.83). Pride is a common *hamartia* in tragedy, and Horatio's word, "emulate"—from the Latin *aemulāri*, "to rival"—throws "pride" upon both Old Fortinbras (in proposing the duel) and King Hamlet (in accepting it) alike. Polonius's *hamartia* is deception, specifically his effort to investigate Hamlet's madness and "by indirections find directions out" (2.1.65). Thus, there is a conceptual affinity between Polonius's *hamartia* and his death while hidden behind a curtain spying on Hamlet, who calls Polonius an "intruding fool" (3.4.31) and chides the dead man, "Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger" (3.4.33). She is often seen as guiltless, but Ophelia's *hamartia* could be deception based on her role in the investigation of Hamlet. This, at least, is how Hamlet characterizes her when he scolds, "God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" (3.1.143–44). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also guilty of deceit, Hamlet seeing "a kind of confession in [their] looks" when they first meet (2.2.249).

But the *hamartia* of the other four characters who die is not as easily settled. Like Ophelia, Gertrude is guilty of going along with the investigation of Hamlet, but when she speaks of the "black and grained spots" in her "soul," it is in response to Hamlet's complaint that she married her dead husband's brother (3.4.89–90). She's guilty of deception, yes, but also what the ghost calls "damned incest" (1.5.83). As a "foil" for Hamlet (5.2.237), Laertes is clearly guilty of revenge, each son seeking justice for the murder of his father. "I'll be revenged / Most thoroughly for my father," Laertes cries upon coming back to Denmark. But in conspiring with Claudius to rig the duel against Hamlet by poisoning his blade—"I will work him," Claudius says of Hamlet, "to an exploit now ripe in my device" (4.7.61–62)—Laertes also parallels the *hamartia* of his father and sister, deception. Hamlet has the exact same double *hamartia*, both revenge and deceit. Each theme is marked out in Act I, Scene v, where first the Ghost tells Hamlet to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25), then Hamlet declares his plan "to put an antic disposition on" (1.5.175). Claudius too has a double *hamartia*, not revenge-and-deceit, but ambition-and-deceit. In his soliloquy of repentance, Claudius refers to "[his] own ambition" in killing his brother (3.3.55). That was Claudius's initial deceit—"the forged process of [King Hamlet's] death" (1.5.37)—which is compounded when Claudius concocts the plan for himself, Polonius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern to work as "lawful espials" on Hamlet (3.1.32).

Hamartia-hunting is a dangerous game, filled with questions open to interpretation, but the determinations I've made are represented in [Table 1](#), which also lays out the factors I considered when searching for patterns related to the deaths that occur in *Hamlet*.

No significant patterns in gender emerged: the two women die in very different ways, Ophelia committing suicide off-stage, Gertrude poisoned on-stage. Some of the males die off-stage (King

Table 1. The deaths in *Hamlet*.

Character	Order	Gender	Class	Place	Manner	By whom?	Gender of Killer	Deliberateness	Hamartia
King Hamlet	1	Male	Royal	Off-Stage	Poisoned	By his brother	Male	Purposive	Pride
Polonius	2	Male	Noble	In-Between	Stabbed	By his daughter's lover	Male	Accidental	Deceit
Ophelia	3	Female	Noble	Off-Stage	Suicide	By herself	Female	Purposive	Deceit
Gertrude	4	Female	Royal	On-Stage	Poisoned	By her husband	Male	Accidental	Deceit
Laertes	5	Male	Noble	On-Stage	Stabbed and Poisoned	By his friend	Male	Accidental	Revenge, Deceit
Claudius	6	Male	Royal	On-Stage	Stabbed and Poisoned	By his son-in-law	Male	Purposive	Ambition, Deceit
Hamlet	7	Male	Royal	On-Stage	Stabbed and Poisoned	By his friend and his father-in-law	Male	Purposive	Revenge, Deceit
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern	8	Male	Noble	Off-Stage	Executed	By a friend	Male	Purposive	Deceit

Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern); some die on-stage (Hamlet, Claudius, and Laertes); and Polonius dies in a liminal space at the edge of the stage, neither fully on nor fully off. No patterns there.

There was a pattern with class: all the royals (King Hamlet, Queen Gertrude, King Claudius, and Prince Hamlet) are poisoned, which speaks, no doubt, to the theme of decay and rot Shakespeare used to characterize the Danish royalty: “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.4.90). At the same time, Laertes is also poisoned, which disrupts the pattern, since he’s merely noble, not royal. Arguments could be mustered to explain what’s going on here, but it’s not the clean pattern I was hoping to find.

Other patterns have similar asterisks. Looking at the order of the deaths, the earlier ones occur off-stage, and most of the later deaths occur on-stage, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern disrupt that pattern. Looking at gender, most of the males are stabbed (Claudius, Hamlet, Polonius, and Laertes, while with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern some similarly violent form of execution, such as beheading, seems likely), but King Hamlet is poisoned. Looking at class, Claudius, Queen Gertrude, King Claudius, and Prince Hamlet—all royals—die on-stage, but King Hamlet—also a royal—dies off-stage. Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern—all nobles—die off-stage, but Laertes—also a noble—dies on-stage. Looking at manner of death, King Hamlet and Gertrude were poisoned; Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern were stabbed (or encountered some other violent death); Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet were each stabbed and poisoned; and Ophelia stands alone in suicide. Nor were there any patterns in the relationship of the deceased to the killer, or in the gender or class of the killer. There were no correlations between the deliberateness of the deaths, some accidental, some purposeful, and any other category.

The one thing that jumped out to me was that three of the characters with a double *hamartia*—Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet—also had doubled manners of death, both stabbed and poisoned. In these three cases, it seems reasonable to conclude that Shakespeare connected more severe crimes (ambition, revenge) with stabbing, and less severe sins (deceit) with poison. There are certainly conceptual parallels between the violent, external, public, political crimes of ambition and revenge and a violent, external, public, political death by stabbing. The same is true for the secret, hidden, internal, private, moral crime of deceit and the way poison kills from the inside out. The pattern connecting deceit and poison holds with Gertrude, but not with Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern (who were deceitful yet violently killed). At the same time, those three characters—Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern—each die off-stage, which, like poisoning, is a less visceral and visible death than stabbing on-stage. Similarly, Ophelia is deceitful and dies off-stage. King Hamlet also dies off-stage, which feels like a fittingly far-removed death in light of his personal rather than political *hamartia* of pride.

At this point, I developed a hypothesis about the relationship between the severity of a character’s *hamartia* and the “spectacularity” of his or her death. The term *spectacle* also comes from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. It refers to the visuals in a work of drama, the things we see on stage. Significantly, drama is the only kind of literature—not prose, not verse—that includes spectacle. And spectacle is only

present when plays are performed in the theater, not when read in a book. The “spectacularity” of a moment is the extent to which it exploits the visual medium of theater. A death occurring on-stage has a higher spectacularity than one off-stage. A stabbing with lots of blood and guts has a higher spectacularity than a poisoning.

To test my hypothesis, I created a system for scoring the spectacularity of a death and the severity of a *hamartia*. First I scored the place of death according to its visibility: +1 for off-stage and +2 for on-stage. Then I scored the manner of death according to its brutality: +1 for suicide, +2 for poisoning, +3 for stabbing or any other weaponed assault. Then I combined the scores for visibility and brutality to generate a score for the spectacularity of a character’s death. Next I scored each character’s *hamartia* according to its severity: +1 for pride, +2 for incest, +3 for deceit, +4 for revenge, and +5 for ambition. The results of this analysis appear in [Table 2](#) and are charted in [Figure 1](#).

As [Figure 1](#) shows, there is a linearity between the severity of one’s *hamartia* and the spectacularity of one’s death in *Hamlet*. Mathematically speaking, there is a strong linear correlation coefficient. This constant, denoted as “*r*”, describes how perfectly two sets of data can be modeled with a linear relationship. Completely random data would yield $r = 0$. The closer the value of *r* to 1,

Table 2. Severity of *Hamartia* and spectacularity of death in *Hamlet*.

Character	Severity of <i>Hamartia</i>	Spectacularity of Death
King Hamlet	1	2
Polonius	3	3.5
Ophelia	2	2
Gertrude	4	4
Laertes	7	7
Claudius	8	7
Hamlet	7	7
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern	3	4

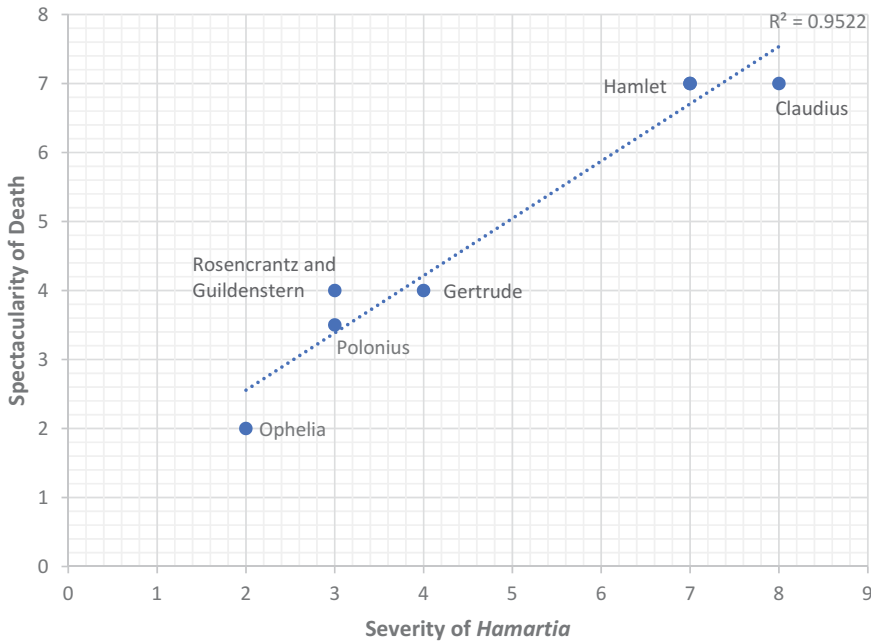


Figure 1. Severity of *Hamartia* and spectacularity of death in *Hamlet*.

the better the linear model can describe the system. The relationship between the severity of *hamartia* and the spectacularity of death in *Hamlet* yields an r value of 0.9522, a very strong correlation.

This analysis reveals the spectacularity of a character's death in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is proportionate to the severity of his or her *hamartia*. The greater a character's faults or errors are, the more visceral his or her death will be. What this means is that Shakespeare found a specifically dramatic way to symbolize character at the intersection between plot and spectacle. Beyond simply confirming that character is destiny in Shakespearean tragedy, this analysis suggests, more specifically, that *hamartia* is catastrophe. Here, instead of Aristotle's emphasis on the difference between the severity of the *hamartia* and that of the catastrophe, Shakespeare created a similarity between the severity of the *hamartia* and the spectacularity of the catastrophe. This argument suggests that, when Shakespeare asked himself the very practical artistic question of how he should write a character's death, he looked back upon the way he wrote that character's life. Or, perhaps even more plausibly, when Shakespeare knew how a character was going to die, he allowed it to inform the way he wrote out the character's life and actions.

While this phenomenon has been shown to govern *Hamlet*, it would require further examination to see if the dissemination of tragic necessity and the spectacularity of death hold in other Shakespearean tragedies. Does it explain all 74 deaths across all of Shakespeare's plays? That's unlikely. Does it explain Romeo poisoning himself and Juliet stabbing herself? Julius Caesar stabbed 23 times? Cinna the Poet torn apart by a mob? The murder of the Macduffs? Cordelia hanged off-stage? Antigonus exiting pursued by a bear? What is the spectrality of Chiron and Demetrius baked into a pie, Othello smothering Desdemona with a pillow, or Cleopatra bitten by a snake?

Disclosure statement

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