Sigma Alpha Elsinore

The Culture of Drunkenness in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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Abstract Claudius likes to party—a bit too much. He frequently binge drinks, is arguably an alcoholic, but is not an aberration. Hamlet says that Denmark is internationally known for heavy drinking. That's what Shakespeare would have heard in the sixteenth century. By the seventeenth, English writers feared that Denmark had taught their own nation its drinking habits. Synthesizing criticism on alcoholism as an individual problem in Shakespeare's texts and times with scholarship on national drinking habits in the early modern age, this essay asks what the tragedy of alcoholism looks like when located not on the level of the individual but on the level of a culture, as Shakespeare depicts in *Hamlet*. Our window into these early modern cultures of drunkenness is sociological studies of American college fraternities plus social-learning theories that explain how one person—one culture—teaches another its habits. For Claudius's alcoholism is both culturally learned and culturally significant. And, as in fraternities, alcoholism in *Hamlet* is bound up with ethnicity, wealth, masculinity, and tragedy. Thus alcohol imagistically reappears in key moments of *Hamlet*—the vial of "cursed hebona," Ophelia's liquid death, and the poisoned cup in the final scene—that stand out in recent performances and adaptations with alcoholic Claudiuses and Gertrudes.

Keywords alcoholism, *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare

A pack of drunk assholes stumbles onstage—Danish royalty looking like American frat boys. The alpha, King Claudius, just married, slurs through the affairs of state. Upstage, resentful staff stock the bar, rolling their eyes at these rich-kid antics. Annoyed waiters circulate trays of cold meats. Like them, Prince Hamlet is disgusted. Gertrude can tell. Claudius tries to help but makes things worse. *A toast!* Claudius climbs atop the bar, loses his balance, steadies himself, chuckles about it with a nearby chump, hiccups, raises his glass, and through a burp says to Hamlet, "You are the most immediate to our throne" (1.2.109).[1] Hamlet concedes a smile and hurries to end the scene, but not before Claudius declares—to cheers—that tonight they will rage:

> No jocund health that Denmark drinks today
> But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,

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> And the King's rouse the heaven shall bruit again,
> Re-speaking earthly thunder. (1.2.125–28)[2]

They're going to get drunk and shoot off their guns. What could go wrong?

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Denmark is a culture of drunkenness. I'm not talking about happy hours, your evening glass(es) of wine, or one too many on nights out with friends. In Elsinore, blackout drinking is the goal and the norm. Think American frat houses and high schools. As in those settings, Claudius's binge drinking is both culturally prompted and culturally consequential.

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"The King's intemperance is very strongly impressed," Samuel Johnson wrote of Claudius's "rouse" in 1765. "Every thing that happens to him gives him occasion to drink."[3] Thomas Davies disagreed in 1784, emphasizing culture over individual: "I cannot think, with Dr. Johnson, that these lines particularly mark the King's fondness for drinking. Drunkenness was the national vice, as Hamlet himself afterwards confesses."[4] These readings are not opposed; they are inextricable. Both then and now, in literature and in life, binge drinking involves an interplay between individual and culture. Social customs contribute to alcohol abuse. Alcoholics affect the worlds they live in.

Shakespeare's Elizabethan audiences may have seen Claudius as a Tamburlaine. "Then wil we triumph, banquet and carouse," Marlowe's tragic hero announces after one conquest.[5] Shakespeare and Marlowe both associated binge drinking with cultural competition, upper-class self-congratulation, and the performance of masculinity. Similarly, American fraternities, to borrow Gina Bloom's description of upper-class early modern English drinking cultures, "rewrite unruly drunkenness as proper recreation for the gentleman."[6]

Danes of Shakespeare's day would have recognized Claudius as their King Christian IV.[7] During an English embassy to Denmark in 1603, "the king went aboard the English ship, and had a banket prepared for him upon the upper decks. . . . Every health reported sixe, eight, or ten shot of great Ordinance, so that during the kings abode, the ship discharged 160. shot."[8] Christian—whose older sister Anne married King James I—came to England in 1606 and, like a senior to a freshman pledge during rush, taught James to party:

> King James, Queene Anne, Prince Henry, with certaine other Brytaine princes and peeres, about ten a clocke in the fore noone, went a boord the King of Denmarkes greatest shippe . . . and as they sat at Banquet, greeting each other with kindness and pledges of continuing amity, and hearts desire of lasting health, the same was straightwayes knowne, by sound of Drumme, and Trumpet, and the Cannons lowdest voyce.[9]

For European royals and American college students alike, binge drinking is learned behavior. Early modern Danes, their English contemporaries, citizens of Shakespeare's Elsinore, audiences of *Hamlet*, and analysts of American colleges all confront

the same questions: Why is binge drinking central to leading cultural institutions? How does a culture of binge drinking affect the lives and minds of its population? How are cultures of drunkenness passed from one society to another, from older generations to younger? Where does responsibility lie for tragedies that arise out of drunkenness—with the individual or with the culture?

In *Shakespeare and Alcohol* Buckner B. Trawick counts seventeen allusions in *Hamlet*, "an indication that the subject is of great significance to the play."[10] Yet alcohol only surfaces in hints and glimpses, obscured behind the ghosts, murders, and madnesses more readily visible in *Hamlet*. How does Denmark's drunkenness connect with the play's more prominent lines, scenes, and themes—crime, ambition, revenge, despair, and tragedy?

Imagine, for instance, in act 1, scene 2, as Claudius's party stumbles offstage like college kids parading to the pub, Hamlet alone with his wineglass, swirling it, raising it up, slowly pouring its contents to the floor, where it splatters down as he says, "Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew" (1.2.127–28 in folio).[11] The liquor of Claudius's "rouse" sloshes into the liquid imagery of Hamlet's first soliloquy, with all its "tears" (1.2.149, 154). That association of imagery creates questions about how Claudius's culture of binge drinking relates to Hamlet's depression, the rottenness he sees in Denmark, and the tragedy that awaits.

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Hi, my name is Jeff, and I'm a Shakespeare scholar. The first step was admitting I had a problem. I spend a lot of time making amends. I'm also a recovering alcoholic, which is why I flinch at gimmicks like Shit-Faced Shakespeare, where actors see how far into their benders they can remember their lines.[12] Good fun, but Shakespeare thought alcohol was a major social problem. Many examples support this argument—Christopher Sly, Falstaff, Bardolph, Claudius, Cassio, the Porter in *Macbeth*, Barnadine, Lepidus, Trinculo, Stephano, and Caliban—and not many stand against it ("Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" [*Twelfth Night*, 2.3.106–7]).

Studies of Shakespeare and alcohol filter into two lines of thought. The first—older and more prominent—is about individuals and the morality of excessive consumption. Shakespeare presented moderate drinking as "a sign of hospitality or friendship," Trawick wrote, but "excessive drinking often leads to unhappiness, disaster, even death," and "alcohol is associated with murder in a significant number of instances."[13] Stephen Greenblatt worked up Shakespeare's frequently tragic scenes of alcohol into the observation that he "depicted heavy drinkers from close-up—he noted the unsteadiness of their legs, the broken veins in their nose and cheeks, their slurred speech," and then into the conjecture that Shakespeare's father, John, may have fallen from grace as an alcoholic.[14] Alcohol suggestively surfaced in Shakespeare's own life, at least in apocryphal recollections. One story from John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* (1669–96)—though disputed—gives an abstemious Shakespeare avoiding the party scene: he was not a "company keeper . . . wouldn't be debauched, and if invited to, writ: he was in pain."[15] Another story—also dubious—from the diary of

John Ward, vicar of Stratford from 1662 to 1681, offers the counterimage of Shakespeare drinking himself to death: "Shakespeare, Drayton, and Ben Jonson had a merry meeting, and it seems drank too hard, for Shakespeare died of a fever there contracted."[16] Scholars looking at Shakespeare's texts and times have shown that his antipathy to alcohol was consistent with and influenced by contemporary moral entrepreneurs, from religious homilies and prose satires to King James and contemporary dramatists.[17] Breakthroughs in this line of thought came in 2009 when David Houston Wood argued that Shakespeare represented excessive drinking as "a disabling disease that should properly be termed alcoholism," and in 2013 when Rebecca Lemon identified challenges to English law in Shakespeare's depiction of alcoholic criminals.[18] Since then, critics have emphasized the sympathetic, rather than judgmental, aspects of Shakespearean characters associated with alcohol, like Falstaff and Mistress Quickly.[19]

The second line of thought—newer and less developed—shifts attention from the individual to the cultural aspects of alcohol in Shakespeare's plays. Nations came to be associated with their alcohols and drinking habits. "The characterization of the Englishman as a beer-drinker reflects a growing sense of national identity and racial stereotyping," Charlotte McBride wrote in 2004.[20] Alcohol imported from foreign countries signified an emergent globalization, and the alcohol trade brought opportunities to exchange cultural traditions of alcoholism, as illustrated in the 2016 collection *Culinary Shakespeare*.[21] "Every time wine appears in Shakespeare's plays," Karen Raber argues, "it activates 'England' and 'Englishness' as concepts—at once newly revivified yet still fluid—that rely on a body/state analogy."[22]

Mixing these two lines yields a new question. What does the tragedy of alcoholism look like when identified not in an individual but in an entire culture? Shakespeare's emphasis on culture contrasts with the focus on an individual's thirsty adventures and psychological despair in the modern literature and film of alcoholism.[23] Yet our question is not only one Shakespeare asked in *Hamlet* but one sociologists ask about American teenagers.

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Sociological studies of American fraternities can round out the picture of the culture of drunkenness that is suggested—but not fully developed—in *Hamlet*, providing depth and detail to a frequently overlooked aspect of this frequently studied text. While not exact, the analogy between Claudius's binge drinking and frat boys is tight enough that an analysis of the social structures of American fraternities helps us imagine life in Elsinore—not only the adolescence of Claudius, but also life behind the scenes of Shakespeare's play. This approach challenges some conventional readings of *Hamlet*, such as Claudius as a sinister villain, and Elsinore as a dark, dank, gloomy, enclosed, claustrophobic, haunted, mysterious—in a word, Gothic—place, whether that view comes from Hamlet himself ("How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" [1.2.133]), from the moody productions of Burbage, Garrick, Kean, Olivier, and Cumberbatch, or from recent scholarship with brooding titles like *Hamlet in Purgatory*, *Hamlet's Negativity*, and *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness*.[24]

Recognizing Elsinore as party central adds feeling to Hamlet's isolation while creating new understandings of the origin, operation, and outcome of the catastrophe at the end of the play.

There are many forms of Greek life on American college campuses. Binge drinking is mostly associated with historically white fraternities on predominantly white campuses in the American Midwest and South.[25] They don't publish demographic data, but fraternities involve largely homogeneous populations of males in their late teens and early twenties, typically white, wealthy, straight, and Christian.[26] "Top-tier fraternities" are even less diverse. In America and Elsinore alike, binge drinking is bound up with race and ethnic—specifically white—customs.

Might these fraternities take us into Claudius's adolescence? Boys who join fraternities usually party hard and play sports. Their friends' fathers may be lawyers able to get them out of trouble when they run afoul of the law. Peers from high schools join the military or go straight to work; not them. These boys are young and insecure, just want to fit in, long for acceptance. Fraternities are a place to make friends, build networks for future careers, and open up pathways to leadership, success, and fortune, with traditions of money and power perpetuating these social systems, plus histories of racial discrimination. Imagine the privilege of growing up in Elsinore.

Students join fraternities while transitioning from their parents' households, where there was much oversight, to independent living. With the lack of adult supervision comes increased opportunities to drink. Many students, like adults, drink to relax, loosen up, and become more sociable.[27] Fraternity members drink more frequently and more heavily than nonfraternity college students.[28] Most binge drink—*party 'til you puke.* It's a performance of masculinity.[29] Excessive consumption is seen as a sign of virility. *I can drink more, party harder, go crazier than you.* The masculinity performed in binge drinking is not for women (who often find it repulsive) but for the other men in the fraternity. Since fraternity life is about male fellowship, binge drinking is one way to show you belong. These fraternities therefore invite Phil Whitington's analysis of early modern England: "For many educated and relatively affluent men, drinking and smoking were normative and stylized aspects of their social identity."[30] Fraternity life suggests, like the "cultures of intoxication" Withington describes, that "to be able to retain demonstrable levels of self-discipline and stamina in the midst of both immanent and purposeful intoxication distinguishes (usually male) elites from the incontinent and indiscriminate masses."[31] Imagine a young Claudius just trying to fit in, trying to prove himself, cup in hand.

Sociologists offer two additional theories about the centrality of binge drinking in fraternities. The first is the predisposition argument: because of their reputation for partying, fraternities attract heavy drinkers to join their ranks.[32] You partied hard in high school, and a fraternity is the best venue to continue. The second is the social-learning model: fraternities create binge drinkers.[33] They teach binge drinking to people who may have joined for fellowship and future career opportunities. Here binge drinking is learned behavior. Impressionable young members see how established elders drink and model their behavior on them—again, imagine Claudius coming of age.

Because alcohol is so central to fraternity life, social bonds are based around drinking. Binge drinkers flock together. They create a community and a culture of drunkenness.[34] It is not unhinged, random chaos. Themed party nights and pledge initiation rituals evoke Gina Bloom's reading of binge drinking as "disciplined play" in early modern England, "as an organized and measured activity, subject to rules."[35] The group's informal mechanisms of social control show a high tolerance for binge drinking. It is excused and justified. The fraternity offers members protection when drinking creates problems with the school or the police. Or the school looks the other way. Historian Alexandra Shepard could be describing today's colleges and universities when explaining excessive consumption by upper-class students at early modern English schools: "At times youthful misrule was tolerated and even implicitly condoned by those in authority over them."[36] Claudius's alcoholism implicates Elsinore's institutional neglect during his formative years. Positive reinforcement for binge drinking makes it normative.[37] Younger members feel pressure to conform to the binge drinking habits of the group, literalized in hazing rituals where group members force rushes to drink as part of their initiation. These American fraternities exhibit the "compulsory conviviality" that Rebecca Lemon identifies in early modern cultures of drunkenness: "At risk of 'abuse,' 'disgrace,' and indeed violence, the health drinker might stay in the ritual even against his own will and to the point of endangering his health."[38] The civilizing process of early modern England and American fraternities alike involves initiation to the culture of drunkenness.

There are consequences for individuals, the group, and society at large. Drinkers can experience the escalating consequences of blackouts, hangovers, fights, risky sex, alcohol poisoning, traffic accidents, and arrests, along with poor academic performance and problems at work. In the longer term, heavy drinkers can develop dependencies and depression, plus other diseases and mental illnesses.[39] Meanwhile friends, family, and bystanders are subjected to verbal abuse, sexual harassment, vandalism, violence, and sexual assault, along with the stress and frayed relationships that result from repeated experience with these outcomes. Consider how much more complex an adolescent Claudius now becomes. And then there are the tragic deaths we read about in the news—of the binge drinkers themselves, those around them, and complete strangers caught in their path. Alcohol brings the community both to life and to death—which is also true of the play *Hamlet*.[40]

Because Greek organizations often set the tone for campus life, their cultures of drunkenness become models for nonmembers. On a larger scale, the wealth, power, and prestige of fraternities make binge drinking normative in American society, normalizing in turn the concomitant features of this subculture: toxic masculinity, elitism, exclusion, sexual misconduct, academic dishonesty, aggression, violence, homophobia, glib racism, and variously covert, unconscious, and in-your-face white supremacy. We can imagine the same in the hallways of Elsinore. In America, college administrators fret but seem helpless to curb binge drinking on campus. They create intervention and education programs, while critics call for the abolition of fraternities.[41] That's the position of Prince Hamlet.

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After his first soliloquy, Hamlet cynically welcomes Horatio to Denmark: "We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart" (1.2.173 in folio). Three points. First, Denmark's national reputation for heavy drinking was well established in England by a string of writers including Barnabe Rich in 1578 ("Goe to the dronken contries of *Denmarke* and *Swethen*"),[42] Thomas Nashe in 1591 ("The Danes shall this yeere bee greatlye giuen to drincke"),[43] Ben Jonson in 1603 ("The Danes that drench / Their cares in wine"),[44] and Samuel Rowlands in 1604 ("The Dane, that would carowse out of his Boote").[45] Nashe also voiced this sentiment in *Pierce Penilesse* (1592), which would become a key source for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "The Danes are burstenbellied sots, that are to bee confuted with nothing but Tankards or quart pots."[46]

Second, as E. H. Seymour wrote in 1805, "Hamlet would intimate that drunkenness was the only thing that could be learned at the usurper's court."[47] Hamlet's word *teach* evokes social learning theory. Adapting the sociologist Edwin Sutherland's first three statements on "differential association," we could say that (1) binge drinking in Denmark "is learned," (2) binge drinking in Denmark "is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication," and (3) "the principal part of the learning of [binge drinking in Denmark] occurs within intimate personal groups."[48] Just as American fraternity members learn more in college than what they study in their classes, early modern Englanders such as Thomas Young described drinking cultures as educational institutions: "There are in London drinking schooles: so that drunkennesse is professed with vs as a liberall Arte and Science."[49] As Withington argues, "The early seventeenth century was an especially significant moment in this learning process."[50] If "drink[ing] deep" is culturally learned in Shakespeare's Denmark, and is widespread, however, Hamlet stands against it.

Third, the binge drinking Hamlet fears Horatio will learn in Elsinore reflects the culture of drunkenness Elizabethans saw England learning from Denmark and the Low Countries. "We doo so much exceede al those that haue gone before vs," George Gascoigne wrote in *A Delicate Diet, for Daintiemouthde Droonkardes* (1576): "In this accusation, I doo not onely summon the Germaines (who of auncient tyme haue beene the continuall Wardens of the Droonkards fraternitye and corporation,) but I would also cyte to appeare our newfangled Englyshe men."[51] In 1592 Nashe's *Pierce Penilesse* said "superfluitie in drinke" was "a sinne, that euer since we haue mixt our selues with the Low-countries, is counted honourable: but before we knew their lingring warres, was held in that highest degree of hatred that might be."[52] The Germans were famous for their binge drinking, as B. Ann Tlusty illustrates, quoting Fynes Moryson, an Englishman who traveled in Germany between 1591 and 1597, anticipating something Prince Hamlet will say about Denmark a few years later: "All of the Germans haue one National vice of drunckenness in such excesse . . . as it staynes all theire nationalle vertues."[53] At the same time, as Bloom records, a German visitor to England in the 1590s could insist, "I have never seen more taverns and alehouses in my whole life than in London."[54] The culture of drunkenness was migrating.

In 1598 the Elizabethan philosopher Richard Barkley sounded like a modern sociologist, or maybe a college president:

> Vahappie are they and farre from felicitie, that think it a glorious thing to contend for the superioritie in carowsing: and to carrie away the victory in such a *Bacchanalian* combat: which pestiferous disease beginneth so to creepe into our Nation by the infection of our neighbours, that if it be not prevented by authoritie or lawes, it is to bee feared, lest it will grow to bee habituall, and take such roote, that it will bee impossible to bee removed, and so consequently that they which last received it will goe beyond them from whom they first had it. For, the imitation of evill alwayes exceedeth the example.[55]

That same year Barnabe Rich wrote of a fellow English soldier complaining of "Low country Captains, who vnder the pretence of the excellency of the weapons of fire, would bring in carowsing and drunkennesse"; his Continental interlocutor replies, "And for carowsing it was new christned in England from a carowse to a hearty draught, I thinke before the most of our Low country Captaines were borne."[56] Written around the turn of the seventeenth century, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* came at a turning point when drunkenness was shifting from the national trait of Denmark to that of England.

Shakespeare's play captures that trajectory, as does the movement in a 1609 line from Thomas Dekker, where the word *teach* again invokes a social learning model of cultural drunkenness: "Awake thou noblest drunkerd Bacchus, thou must likewise stand to me (if at least thou canst for réeling) teach me (you soueraigne Skinker) how to take the Germanies vpsy freeze; the Danish Rowsa, the Switzers stoap of Rhenish, the Italians Parmizant: the Englishmans healthes." Around that time, Beaumont and Fletcher called Englishmen "stubborn drinkers" who could "knocke a Dane downe."[57] This transmission of the culture of drunkenness informed a note on English merriment in William Camden's *Remaines* (1614): "This good cheare causeth the Germans to recharge vs with gluttony when we charge them with drunkenness which as we receiued from the Danes."[58] By the time of Henry Peacham's *The Complete Gentleman* (1622), the transfer of drinking from Denmark to England was fully formalized with reference to the Elizabethan soldier John Norris (ca. 1547–97) and his involvement in the Dutch war for independence from Spain (1566–1609):

> Within these fiftie or threescore yeares it was a rare thing with vs in *England*, to see a Drunken man, our Nation carrying the name of the most sober and temperate of any other in the world. But since we had to doe in the quarrell of the *Netherlands*, about the time of Sir *Iohn Norrice* his first being there, the custome of drinking and pledging healthes was brought ouer into *England*: wherein let the Dutch bee their owne Iudges, if we equall them not; yea I thinke rather excell them.[59]

On this war more generally, Camden wrote, "Our Englishmen who of all the Northerne Nations haue beene most commended for sobrietie, haue learned since these

Low-Country warres so well to fill their cups, and to wash themselues with Wine, that whilest they at this day drinke others healths, they little regard their owne."[60]

Then England's Charles I became a Christian IV, as courtier historian James Howell recorded in a letter from October 9, 1632: "The King feasted my Lord once, and it lasted from eleven of the clock, till towards the Evening, during which time, the King began thirty five healths; the first to the Emperour, the second to his Nephew of England, and so went over all the Kings and Queens of Christendom. . . . The King was taken away at last in his Chair."[61] As Rebecca Lemon has illustrated, "Whereas Elizabethan writers found national solidarity in satirizing healthing as a foreign and villainous practice, later Jacobean and Caroline poets instead frame health drinking as a means of establishing political allegiances."[62] Drunken English royalist revelry culminated in the restoration of Charles II, as in broadside ballads like *England's Royall Conquest* (1666): "The bells did ring and bone-fires shine, / and healths caroused in beer and wine."[63] In a ballad called *England's Triumph*, "Our drinking shall him tribute bring."[64]

Decades earlier Shakespeare portrayed a similar scene of royalist revelry in *Hamlet*'s most extended meditation on the culture of drunkenness in Denmark—act 1, scene 4. In this scene, by characterizing royal binge drinking as a problem for international politics, Shakespeare anticipated the early seventeenth-century histories of the transmission of the culture of drunkenness from Denmark to England. Shakespeare represented (a) what his countrymen had been saying about Danish drunkenness, (b) what others would soon be saying about English drunkenness, and (c) the logic of social learning by which (a) became (b).

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It's midnight at the start of the scene—the witching hour when ghosts appear. It would make sense for Shakespeare to follow that exposition with the appearance of King Hamlet's ghost. But that's not what happens. "*A flourish of trumpets and two pieces* [*go*] *off*," reads the stage direction in the second quarto (1.4.6s.d.). Maurice Charney glosses this sound effect:

> There is more cannonading in this play than in any other play of Shakespeare. It is, in fact, a conspicuously noisy and active play. This cannonading is especially associated with Claudius and his "rouses," or drinking of healths. The whole sound effect consists of a roll on the kettle-drums, followed by an elaborate trumpet fanfare, and concluded by the firing of the theater cannon or "chambers."[65]

Readers today are likely to pay the stage direction little mind, Bruce Johnson writes: "For the modern eye scanning the printed page, the stage direction is so innocuous as to be scarcely noted. Yet what we have here is the sound of trumpet and ordnance suddenly blasting the tense, midnight silence, as represented in the enclosed space of the Elizabethan theatre."[66] Imagine the clamor of a fraternity house on Friday night.

Audiences are asking the same question as Horatio: "What does this mean?" (1.4.7). Hamlet explains that, here at midnight, the king is awake, partying, binge

drinking. He's pounding wine. Whenever he finishes a cup, the trumpets and drums clamor:

> The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse,
> Keeps wassail and the swaggering upspring reels,
> And as he drains his drafts of Rhenish down
> The kettledrum and trumpet thus bray out
> The triumph of his pledge. (1.4.8–12)

The irony of Hamlet's word *wassail*, from the Old English *wes hel*, "be in good health," is that Claudius's wassailing, which comes from a place of merriment, signifies his poor health—his alcoholism, to the extent that Shakespeare understood it as a disease—and contributes to his country's decline.[67] The trumpets "bray[ing] out" his binge turn Claudius into a donkey, or jackass if you like. Imagine his court around him chanting, *Chug! Chug!*

Just as Claudius's lighthearted revelry is embedded within tragedy, the danger of catastrophe lies hidden beneath the carnivalesque atmosphere of fraternities. Shakespeare's Denmark might be envisioned by asking what would happen if a fraternity were to position as president not the most responsible leader but the drunkest brother. If, as Lemon argues, "the audience would know precisely what it meant for a king to be drunk on healths"—he's a lush, a buffoon, a Lord of Misrule, "a king of shreds and patches" (3.4.102)—then we need to think beyond the standard view of Elsinore as a tragic den of corruption, deceit, crime, treason, melancholy, hypocrisy, and isolation.[68] Bringing comedy into the tragedy, as *Hamlet* so powerfully does elsewhere, Claudius's Elsinore shows what happens when the drunken Carlo Buffone of Ben Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour*—acted in 1599 by the Lord Chamberlain's Men a year or two before they did *Hamlet*—becomes king.

This Danish custom of heavy drinking is well known in other nations, Hamlet says—at least in the folio edition. It mars Denmark's reputation, troubling Hamlet because he sees his country as virtuous. Others see the Danes as "drunkards." The *-ard* ending embeds the concept designated by the root word, *drunk*, in a person's identity, as in *dullard* or *bastard*. A specific—and minor—habit of the Danes has come to define them in the eyes of others:

> This heavy-headed revel east and west
> Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations:
> They clepe us drunkards and with swinish phrase
> Soil our addition, and indeed it takes
> From our achievements, though performed at height,
> The pith and marrow of our attribute. (1.4.17–22)

The "swinish phrase[s]" are the common early modern comparisons of heavy drinkers to swine, picturing King Claudius now as a pig.

In 1916 Walter Raleigh thought these lines "have little dramatic value, and illustrate Shakespeare's habit of making room in his plays for any topic that is uppermost in his mind."[69] Albert Tolman agreed in 1919: "The passage has no vital relation

to the action."[70] That is why, they think, the lines were cut from the quartos. In contrast, Elisabeth Winkler notes that "the common Danish and especially Claudius' (over)indulgence in alcohol have a political facet," making Claudius "a weak and possibly even irresponsible ruler."[71] The passage also challenges the conventional view of Claudius as an evil antagonist. His carousing suggests he should be understood—and performed—with an air of frat-boy frivolity, if not clownish ineptitude.

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In the folio, Hamlet's reflection on Denmark's international reputation spills into one of the most powerful speeches in the play. Did Shakespeare imagine the "mole of nature" idea (1.4.23–36), and then work backward to the Danish revelry to set it up? Or did he start with the scene of Danish drunkenness and work it up into a philosophical idea? How does our understanding of this passage change when we recognize it is grounded in alcoholism?

With "so oft it chances in particular men" (1.4.23), Shakespeare created an analogy between the binge-drinking state and the socially marked individual. He explains that ancillary aspects of people's births and behaviors can be, in the eyes of others, definitive qualities. Consider my use of frat houses as shorthand for cultures of drunkenness: many different things happen in fraternities, much of it "pure as grace" (1.4.33), but for outside observers binge drinking is often their defining feature. The same happens in individuals, Hamlet says, as those with alcoholism know intimately. "From that particular fault," which often involves a genetic predisposition for which the individual bears no moral responsibility, "since nature cannot choose his origin," our entire identity is often defined—by ourselves and by others (1.4.26–36).

Peter Stallybrass describes the "mole of nature" as a "defect, taint, a 'particular fault' which can corrupt the whole," which Lemon attaches to Claudius's alcoholism, "rendering the subject corrupt, incapacitated, and as a result unable to control his drinking."[72] But that's not quite what Hamlet says. The pathway from "particular fault" to "general censure" is not so direct. Hamlet's reading of American fraternities would not be that their binge drinking is a tragic flaw that may bring these great institutions crashing down. Hamlet sees the transgression impacting not the institution but the interpretation of it by onlookers. Hamlet would say that binge drinking has led cultural commentators to define fraternities too exclusively in terms of a "particular fault," obscuring their many virtues. Here Hamlet sounds like American investigative journalist Alexandra Robbins, whose book *Fraternity: An Inside Look at a Year of College Boys Becoming Men* chronicles a year of interviews with two fraternity guys. "Jake," a freshman pledge, shifts from *aw-shucks* introvert looking for friends to toxic masculinity during his initiation, illustrating the social-learning model of cultures of drunkenness. But Robbins avoids the easy reading of fraternities as swamps of awfulness. "Oliver," a fraternity president fighting to preserve a campus service in the face of fraternities' bad reputation, represents the value fraternities can offer to college boys navigating the uncertainties of American masculinity. Like the "mole of nature" idea, Robbins shows how the public image of cultures of drunkenness is formed from "particular fault[s]," how that image gets

in the way of potential virtues of the underlying institutions, and how a Jake can become a Claudius, an Oliver a Hamlet. Like Oliver, Hamlet critiques the culture of drunkenness from the inside. He believes in Denmark's greatness, but sees its virtue eclipsed by a "particular fault" that consumes the attention of outside observers. How many fraternity members must feel the same?

Shakespeare modeled his passage on "The Complaint of Drunkenness" in Nashe's *Pierce Penilesse*:

> A mightie deformer of mens manners and features, is this vnnecessary vice of all other. Let him bee indued with neuer so many vertues, and haue as much goodly proportion and fauour as nature can bestow vppon a man: yet if hee be thirstie after his owne destruction, and hath no ioy nor comfort, but when he is drowning his soule in a gallon pot, that one beastly imperfection, will vtterlie obscure all that is commendable in him: and all his good qualities sinke like lead down to the bottome of his carrowsing cups, where they will lie like lees and dregges, dead and vnregarded of any man.[73]

Like Nashe, Shakespeare emphasized the effect of alcoholism on reputation. Yet Nashe attends to the individual. Shakespeare goes to the level of culture. Claudius may be an alcoholic who is, to quote Nashe, "thirstie after his owne destruction," and here alcoholics may recognize the desire to drink yourself into oblivion. Taking the Shakespearean step and extrapolating to the whole culture, all of Claudius's Elsinore may be "thirstie after [its] owne destruction." Yet modern fraternity members may also recognize, to adapt Nashe to Shakespeare's cultural emphasis, "that one beastly imperfection, will vtterlie obscure all that is commendable in [them]: and all [their] good qualities sinke like lead down to the bottome of [their] carrowsing cups."

...

Hamlet's thoughts on reputation formation flow into some of the most confusing lines in all of Shakespeare's plays.[74] The folio reads:

> the dram of eale
> Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
> To his own scandal. (1.4.36–37)

What is a "dram of eale"? How do you "do . . . a doubt"? Because of these questions, editors often amend the lines to say:

> the dram of evil
> Doth all the noble substance overdaub
> To his own scandal.

A *dram* was originally a small coin. *Dram* came to signify a small amount of liquid, about one-eighth of a fluid ounce. The sense of *dram* as "a small draught of cordial, stimulant, or spirituous liquor" dates to around 1590, about ten years before

Hamlet.[75] Shakespeare used *dram* in that sense in *Romeo and Juliet* (5.1.60), written about two years before *Hamlet*. A "dram of evil" would be a tiny drop, reminiscent of a "mole of nature." In this edit, the dram of evil "overdaub[s]" nobility: blots it out, like "the stamp of one defect" becoming "corruption" in the "general censure." This overdaubing of nobility "scandal[izes]" the dram of evil: discredits it, or "soils its additions," as Hamlet might say. Beyond the benefit of making sense, this edit has the virtue of consistency with the imagery of alcohol and the logic of reputation presented in the scene up to this point. It also carries the prospect of connecting, imagistically, the "dram of evil" with both the "juice of cursed hebona in a vial" that Claudius uses to kill King Hamlet (1.5.62) and the "poisoned cup" that kills Queen Gertrude (5.2.269). Pushed to its utmost limit, the "dram of evil," given its origins in Hamlet's comments on his uncle's binge drinking, holds the possibility that Claudius's alcoholism is what is rotten in the state of Denmark.

...

Shakespeare went out of his way several times to emphasize Claudius's drinking problem. When Guildenstern says Claudius is "marvelous distempered," Hamlet assumes the king is wasted: "With drink, sir?" (3.279–80). When Hamlet plots to kill Claudius only when the king is marred with sin, he plans to do so "when he is drunk asleep" (3.3.89). What kind of drunk is Claudius? An angry drunk? A happy drunk? Hamlet describing the transition from his father to his uncle as "Hyperion to a satyr" (1.2.140) presents Claudius not as an evil tyrant but as a drunken goat, a fool, a clown, a pleasure seeker. To Charney, "The 'wassail' and reeling 'upspring' of Claudius are literally a satyr's revel."[76] Claudius is a party boy elevated to head of state. He is not fit to govern, which is why the ghost of King Hamlet warns, "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury" (1.5.82–83). Thus, when ambassadors from Norway appear with news of the utmost importance for foreign relations, Claudius just wants to rage: "At night we'll feast together" (2.2.84). Claudius wants to be Marlowe's Tamburlaine, but ends up Benvolio, the butt of the jokes in the expanded *Doctor Faustus*:

> He took his rouse with stopes of Rhennish wine,
> So kindly yesternight to *Bruno's* health,
> That all this day the sluggard keepes his bed."[77]

Filled with food and wine, Claudius is "the bloat King" (3.4.183)—Falstaff as sovereign.

Why did Shakespeare characterize Claudius as an alcoholic? And Hamlet as emphatically not one? For one thing, it establishes the tension between the two, as Trawick writes, "characterizing Hamlet as a man of restraint and moderation and the King as a man of wanton overindulgence."[78] But what happens if we view Claudius's alcoholism as not metaphorical but literal?

It creates a range of interpretive problems and possibilities that audiences, like families and friends of alcoholics, must ask themselves. The first step is admitting that Claudius has a problem. He is powerless over alcohol. His life has become

unmanageable. Perhaps Claudius was drunk when he killed King Hamlet. Perhaps that was a crime of opportunity prompted by an inebriated mind. Such a Claudius evokes Alexander the Great, who, according to Shakespeare's Fluellen, "being a little intoxicates in his prains, did in his ales and his angers, look you, kill his best friend" (*Henry V*, 4.7.31–32). Perhaps the imagery of poison when King Hamlet says, "A serpent stung me" (1.5.36), should be read in light of an earlier toxin, alcohol, working upon Claudius.[79] Perhaps that's why Shakespeare used the imagery of the poison coursing through King Hamlet's body—Claudius "in the porches of [his] ears did pour / The leprous distilment" (1.5.63–64), which then "curd[ed], like eager droppings into milk" (1.5.69)—to later characterize Claudius himself, "like a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" (3.4.64–65). The murder in the orchard certainly reads differently if we view Claudius as one who is himself already stung by a serpent. Claudius's intoxication of himself mirrors his intoxication of his brother.[80]

Claudius's drinking habit, as David Houston Wood writes, "goes to the heart of questions pertaining to alcoholism's status as a disability: should society pity the 'drunkard' as the sufferer of a genetic disease? Alternatively, should society blame the individual for his or her weakness? Is it in fact within that person's scope of willpower to amend such a fault, or sin?"[81] Lemon locates these questions in early modern law, quoting Bacon: "If a drunken man commit a felony, he shall not be excused, because his imperfection came by his owne default."[82] By conceiving of Claudius as an alcoholic with a genetic predisposition, Hamlet's "mole of nature" speech, Lemon points out, "offers a theory of drunkenness that exonerates Claudius, condemning not him but, to use the language of the passage, the unfortunate 'chance' that has plagued him with this involuntary defect."[83] If I think about my own case, there were genetic markers for alcoholism, which I didn't know about. There were personality traits that predisposed me to excessive drinking. There were choices I made about how to drink, to which I must be accountable. There was a drinking problem that grew too large to control. And there are ongoing struggles with how to take personal responsibility for the harm I caused loved ones in light of the allure to create excuses by citing conditioning circumstances. Read as an alcoholic, Claudius calls for a similar calculation. He remains the villain of the play, but his villainy refers to—and reads differently in light of—his alcoholism.

Consider Claudius's first guilty-conscience confession, uttered aside after Polonius comments on the divide between private and public selves, if spoken not by a murderous tyrant but by a damaged alcoholic:

> How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.
> The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
> Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
> Than is my deed to my most painted word.
> Oh, heavy burden! (3.1.49–53)

Imagine those lines punctuated with shots of desperation from a flask. Or imagine Claudius as a broken man, brought to his knees for his crushing soliloquy—"Oh, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven" (3.3.36)—barely able to string a sentence

together as his pain swirls: "Oh, limèd soul that struggling to be free / Art more engaged!" (3.3.68–69). That might be the best description of the experience of alcoholism I've ever read.

...

In 1918 Howard Mumford Jones thought Hamlet was dead wrong about his uncle's alcoholism: "Nowhere in the play do we see, or hear of, Claudius when he thinks or acts or talks like a drunken man."[84] Yet the way Claudius "thinks or acts or talks" depends on different directors and actors in different stagings. Claudius's alcoholism is best captured not in criticism or historicism but in productions and adaptations that bring to life the cycles of pain in and around any alcoholic. In Mario Kuperman's Brazilian adaptation, *O Jogo da Vida e da Morte* (*The Game of Life and Death*, 1971), "Claudio is permanently drunk," taking shots of *cachaça*, vomiting in front of everyone during the play-within-the-play.[85] In Bill Rauch's 2010 production at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, a drunk Claudius "prayed not in a church, but before a toilet as he vomited, creating a cheesy alternative meaning to his lines about his rank-smelling offense."[86] Similarly, in Antoni Cimolino's 2015 production at the Stratford Festival, "even when this Claudius tries to pray—the moment in which he usually appears most human—Cimolino presents him as drunk."[87]

Only by spending little time around functioning alcoholics could one complain, along with J. J. M. Tobin, that "Claudius . . . behaves soberly and quite competently but is described by his hostile nephew as politically incompetent, physically ugly, and morally alcoholic and lecherous."[88] Alcoholism and success in a high-powered career are not mutually exclusive. That fusion of contraries gives Claudius complexity of character, separating him from melodramatic villainy.

In the early modern age, *addicted* and *addiction* did not have the medical meaning they do today, as Jose Murgatrod Cree and Lemon have illustrated.[89] The concept was primarily religious, often with positive overtones. At the same time, Lemon elsewhere shows, it is hard to read Falstaff's famous ode to "sherris sack" as anything other than a Shakespearean acknowledgement of alcoholism as a disease.[90] While presenting alcohol as "addict[tion]," the passage suggests genealogical factors ("sons"), imagines a cultural—not merely individual—phenomenon ("thousand"), and conveys the social-learning model explored in *Hamlet* ("teach"): "If I had a thousand sons, the first human principle I would teach them should be to forswear thin potations, and to addict themselves to sack" (*1 Henry IV*, 4.2.110–13).

If Shakespeare understood alcoholism as a disease, the tropes of the modern alcoholic may extend to Claudius. Imagine a weakened Claudius alert with anxiety after Hamlet kills Polonius: "It had been so with us" (3.5.231). Or a helpless man who doesn't understand himself: "My soul is full of discord and dismay" (3.4.263). Imagine an alcoholic contemplating his bottle when commenting on the chaos Hamlet causes:

> Diseases desperate grown
> By desperate appliance are relieved
> Or not at all. (4.3.9–11)

His mood swings uncontrollably to rage as he orders the prince's execution:

> Do it, England,
> For like the hectic in my blood he rages
> And thou must cure me. (4.3.62–64)

In these lines Hamlet is figured as a disease in Denmark, but Hamlet's actions are a response to Claudius's. If we take Claudius's alcoholism seriously, it is possible that the disease in Denmark flows from the disease in him. Here Elsinore is a "culture of intoxication," to use Withington's term, which is startlingly well suited to the imagistic overlaps between alcohol and poison in *Hamlet*.[91]

In these moments, Claudius is less a frat boy and more the tortured, abusive alcoholic of Eugene O'Neill or Tennessee Williams, who depicts family secrets and disease.[92] At the same time, by showing Claudius's alcoholism as first a cultural and then an individual and familial problem, Shakespeare's play is an ominous reminder that tragic individual suffering exists—hidden—within the carnivalesque revelry of American fraternities.

...

When Polonius speaks of youth's excesses, Reynaldo asks, "As gaming, my lord?"; Polonius responds, "Ay, or drinking" (2.1.24–25). Shakespeare then returned to the word used for Claudius's binge drinking to have Polonius imagine Laertes "o'ertook in 's rouse" (2.1.56). The association of drinking with youth highlights how dangerous it is to place a binge drinker as head of state. Yet clearly Claudius is not the only party animal in Elsinore. Alcohol use extends from Claudius and Laertes to the gravediggers ("Fetch me a stoup of liquor" [5.1.53–54]) and Yorrick ("'A poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once" [5.1.161–62]).

Shakespeare diffusing alcohol throughout Denmark strengthens the likelihood that alcoholism is not an individual problem unique to Claudius but a cultural problem. His drinking is a group activity, and Claudius's court surely feels the pressure of what Lemon calls "compulsory conviviality." As in the Restoration England she describes, "inebriation, through healthing, is a sign of loyalty to king and country."[93] We might imagine Shakespeare's Elsinore filled with the Cavalier poets of the seventeenth century, who registered their loyalty to royalty through toast after toast to the king's health.[94] A culture of drunkenness emanates from Claudius, as with the man Henri Estienne described in 1607, "who hauing taken his preparatiues ouer euening, when all men cry (as the manner is) *The King drinketh*; chanting his Masse the next morning, fell asleepe in his memento: and when he awoke, added with a loud voice, *The King drinketh*."[95]

If all of Elsinore is as drunk as Claudius, perhaps, at the start of the play, the sentinels are uncertain if they see a ghost because they are drunk. That's how a 2001 satire by Eric C. Brown starts out: "*Ber.* [*Belches*] Who's there?"[96] Perhaps those trusted to watch Ophelia were drunk or hungover as she was swallowed by "the weeping brook" (4.5.174). That imagery, with the repetition of "drowned" in the scene

(4.5.163, 164, 182, and 183), emphasizes Ophelia's liquid death. She undergoes the liquefaction Hamlet longs for in the "dew" of his first suicidal soliloquy (1.2.130), while her drowning also points forward to "the drink, the drink" in the final scene (5.2.288).

Similarly, the examples of the gravediggers and Yorrick—his skull in Hamlet's hand—associate drinking with death. That connection deepens when Hamlet then imagines dead and decomposed humans returning to dust, made a plug to "stop a beer barrel" (5.1.191). Yorrick's skull points to the possibility of tragic alcoholism—which the final scene of *Hamlet* takes to its conclusion. And Yorrick's drunkenness brings binge drinking into the court of King Hamlet.

...

Perhaps King Hamlet partied like his brother—a fraternity. Perhaps King Hamlet was drunk when, during parley, he smote the Pollacks on the ice. Perhaps King Hamlet wasn't napping in his orchard: he was passed out.

Associating alcoholism with death and with King Hamlet—in light of Shakespeare placing the "They clype us drunkards" set piece just before the appearance of King Hamlet's spirit—creates the possibility that alcohol is haunting Elsinore. The first recorded use of the word *spirit* to refer to alcohol came from Shakespeare's friend Ben Jonson in 1612, about ten years after *Hamlet* was written.[97] It is not inconceivable that Jonson, Shakespeare, and others used "spirit" in this sense conversationally, perhaps over drinks. In *Othello* Shakespeare wrote of the "invisible spirit of wine" (2.3.258). Richard III asks for wine when he has an "alacrity of spirit" (*Richard III*, 5.2.73). Hamlet's asking if the ghost is "a spirit of health or goblin damned" (1.5.40) recalls Claudius announcing the "jocund health that Denmark drinks." And the "juice of cursed hebona in a vial" (1.5.62) recalls the "dram of evil" in the preceding scene.

I don't think Jonson had King Hamlet's ghost in mind when using this term for alcohol, but these two "spirits" work similarly. The Spirit's description of the poison "cours[ing] through / The natural gates and alleys of the body" (1.5.66–67), overtaking the blood, sounds like alcohol. And viewing King Hamlet's spirit as a symbol of alcohol accords with Hamlet's description:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be a dev'l, and the dev'l hath power
> T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me. (2.2.517–22)

Where King Hamlet's Ghost is a "potent . . . spirit," Iago says the English are most "potent in potting" (*Othello*, 2.3.68). Today, as in Shakespeare's time, "potent . . . spirits" can abuse melancholy people and be abused by them, especially in moments of "weakness." Recalling Hamlet's uncertainty about his father's spirit, alcohol can be a devil in disguise.

Coleridge thought Hamlet's "mole of nature" speech flowed nicely into the appearance of the Ghost—Hamlet's contemplative response to Claudius's alcoholism carrying over into his contemplative, not shocked, response to the Ghost, a quality absent from the quartos.[98] But how, more directly, are we to understand the Ghost arising, as it were, out of Claudius's party? In Joan Fitzpatrick's words, "While Claudius consumes white wine, Old Hamlet is released from the mouth of death."[99] Does the unnatural disruption signified by the Ghost's appearance grow, in some way, out of the behavior signified by Claudius's binge drinking?

Yet King Hamlet, like his son, opposes the culture of drunkenness in Denmark, as when he laments "the royal bed of Denmark" becoming "a couch for luxury" (1.5.82–83). Perhaps King Hamlet could drink socially just fine, while Claudius couldn't control himself (that was the situation with my older brother and me, and it strained our relationship). Or maybe King Hamlet was a stick in the mud, turning Gertrude off, turning her to the fun-loving Claudius. Maybe Claudius and Gertrude hooked up in a drunken evening. Maybe that's why Gertrude feels guilty.

...

Alcoholic Gertrudes are popular in performance. In David Giles's 1970 production, Faith Brooks was "increasingly weepy and alcoholic."[100] Such stagings cite Gertrude's fatal drink in act 5 which, given the cluster of ideas associated with alcohol in *Hamlet*—from the performance of masculinity to the possibilities of hidden backstories—reflects Gertrude's increased complexity in the second half of the play.[101] To say that there is no other evidence for alcoholism in Gertrude is really to ask what counts as evidence for alcoholism. Both alcoholics and their families know the swampy difficulty of this question. Campbell Scott and Eric Simonson's 2000 film featured Blair Brown "drinking alone, her hair and manner unkempt."[102] Are these productions projecting Claudius's alcoholism onto Gertrude? If so, is that misogyny, repositioning a man's failings as a woman's? Or, is it empowerment, granting Gertrude complexity of character where Shakespeare did not?

These productions amplify traces of alcoholism in the text while recognizing in Gertrude the lifestyle of the older alcoholic woman of the modern age. This Gertrude is an Elizabeth Taylor: extraordinarily powerful and talented, the woman who has everything, including an addiction that creates a chasm between the public image and the private struggle. In Gregory Doran's 2008 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Penny Downie "harrowingly charts Gertrude's decline from high society lady to abject terror and exhausted, alcoholic remorse."[103] In Nicholas Hytner's 2010 production for the National Theatre, Clare Higgins "plays Gertrude as a sensual, raddled alcoholic, drinking to forget her own guilt."[104] One reviewer noted that "alcohol is nourishment to Claudius and Gertrude. They are rarely without shot glass in hand, tipped to lips, although only Gertrude exhibits tipsiness."[105]

Or does Gertrude's fatal drink at the end of the play encourage us to backdate her participation in the culture of drunkenness in Elsinore—an aging sorority sister, not disgusted but enthralled by blackout drinking? Karla Hendrick's Gertrude in Hamilton Clancy's 2014 production was "an alcoholic party girl."[106] Clancy described Hamlet as "a textbook case of adult children of alcoholics": "The ghost of his

play—proclaim coming catastrophe. The tragedy of alcoholism in *Hamlet* culminates in the poisoned cup.[112]

Filled with liquor, the "chalice for the nonce" (4.4.159) is lethal even before Claudius poisons it. His order, "Set me the stoups of wine upon that table" (5.2.238), recalls the association of alcohol and death in the previous scene—through the repetition of the gravedigger's word *stoup*—and the liquid imagery flowing throughout the play, from the *dew* in Hamlet's opening soliloquy to Ophelia's death. Then the rouse accompanied with cannon fire in Claudius's final toast recalls his antics that set off Hamlet's "dram of evil" speech:

> If Hamlet give the first or second hit,
> Or quit in answer of the third exchange,
> Let all the battlements their ordnance fire.
> The King shall drink to Hamlet's better breath
> And in the cup an union shall he throw
> Richer than that which four successive kings
> In Denmark's crown have worn. Give me the cups,
> And let the kettle to the trumpet speak,
> The trumpet to the cannoneer without,
> The cannons to the heavens, the heaven to earth:
> Now the King drinks to Hamlet. (5.2.239–49)

Shakespeare is asking audiences to remember Claudius's binge drinking as the catastrophe approaches. "*Flourish. Drum [and] trumpets. A piece goes off*," after Hamlet's first hit on Laertes (5.2.256s.d.). Like the cascading swell of drums, trumpets, and cannons, Claudius's alcoholism amplifies into a culture of drunkenness that then turns tragic. For a bit, he might be the happy drunk of the second scene of the play. "Give me drink," he says (5.2.258), bustling around the stage. His words recall the "jocund health" that inaugurated the play's symbolism of alcohol: "Here's to thy health. Give him the cup" (5.2.259).

Then Gertrude joins Denmark's culture of drunkenness: "The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet" (5.2.265). Or maybe a production like Thomas Bradic's from 1992 builds up to this moment: "After watching her take a stiff drink simply to survive the chatter of Polonius, it's not surprising when she insists on her inadvertently fatal quaff as she watches her son fight Laertes. Nowadays, one could picture this queen checking into Betty Ford or saying to herself: 'My name is Gertrude, and I am an alcoholic.'"[113] Gertrude "carours[ing]" brings her into the cloud of tragedy cast around alcohol. She is no longer Ophelia-like, an innocent bystander—the random person walking down the street struck by a drunk driver on his way home from Hawaiian night at a frat house.

Claudius becomes the helpless drunk recognizing the effects of his actions on others. "Gertrude, do not drink," he exclaims (5.2.267). This was a key moment for Imogen Stubbs in Trevor Nunn's 2004 Royal Shakespeare Company production: "'I will, my lord, I pray you pardon me' (5.2.244) really said 'Don't humiliate me by telling the whole court you think I'm an alcoholic!'"[114]

"It is the poisoned cup," Claudius says to himself (5.2.269). *The cup is poisoned*: that is the conceit Shakespeare's treatment of alcohol has been building to throughout the play. Hamlet abstains: "I dare not drink yet, madam" (5.2.270). He remains outside the culture of drunkenness.

Alcohol has been killing Denmark from the inside, as it does to Gertrude. "The drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet," she cries. "The drink, the drink—I am poisoned" (5.2.288–89). Laertes then becomes the alcoholic having a moment of clarity: "The foul practice / Hath turned itself on me" (5.2.296–97). He admits the exact nature of his wrongs—"Thy mother's poisoned. . . . The King, the King's to blame" (5.2.298–99)—and makes amends. Hamlet stabs Claudius, then feeds the king his own poisoned liquor: "Drink of this potion" (5.2.304). Claudius dying from alcohol poisoning symbolizes the tragic quality of the culture of drunkenness in Denmark. Laertes's acerbic commentary imagines Claudius having ordered a drink—"He is justly served" (5.2.305)—then glosses the alcoholic who drinks himself to death: "It is a poison tempered by himself" (5.2.306).

Two moments punctuate the tragedy of alcohol in the play. First, an overwhelmed Horatio reaches for the poisoned cup: "Here's yet some liquor left" (5.2.319). Symbolically, Horatio is poised to become the next victim of Denmark's culture of drunkenness—the alcoholic drinking to cope with loss and depression. As ever, Hamlet stands against alcohol: "Give me the cup" (5.2.321). In Lemon's astute gloss, "The survival of Horatio depends entirely on his abstinence."[115] With any alcoholic, there will be Horatios who survive the path of destruction and Hamlets, Ophelias, and Gertrudes taken down by it. If, in act 1, Shakespeare obliquely connected alcohol with the "potent . . . spirit," that figure is reiterated in Hamlet's final moments: "The potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit" (5.2.331).

Second, the folio concludes with uncharacteristically precise stage directions, indicating the play's end on the early modern stage. Just before Hamlet dies, the folio reads, "*March afar off, and shout within*" (5.2.294s.d.). Perhaps Shakespeare demanded these sound effects because he had woven together a thread of concepts throughout the play—alcohol, drums, cannons, and tragedy. "Go, bid the soldiers shoot," Fortinbras declares (5.2.381), entering the cluster of symbols surrounding binge drinking in *Hamlet*. Polish dissident Janusz Glowacki envisioned Elsinore's drunkenness continuing in *Fortinbras Gets Drunk* (1985).[116] As for Shakespeare's original text, the folio stage direction reads, "*Exeunt marching, after the which a peal of ordnance are shot off*" (5.2.350). Those cannon shots ringing out through the cold night air of the Elizabethan playhouse could only recall, for an early modern audience, the cannons repeatedly shot as Claudius downed his drinks earlier in the play. Those cannons closing the play convey how much of this tragedy can be traced back to Claudius's alcoholism and the culture of drunkenness in Denmark.

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Notes

1 All citations of Shakespeare's plays refer to Greenblatt, *Norton Shakespeare*. Unless otherwise noted, references to *Hamlet* are to the combined text.

2 According to Albert E. Egge: "The word [*rouse*] is common in all the Scandinavian languages in the form *rus*, which means 'a carouse, a fit of intoxication.' For example in Danish, *at tage sig en rus* or *at faa sig en rus*, 'to indulge in a spree'; *at sove rusen ud*, 'to sleep off one's debauch, sleep oneself sober.' The word must have been borrowed from the Danish" ("Note on Shakespeare," 244).

3 Johnson, *Hamlet*, 1.4.n3.

4 Davies, *Dramatic Miscellanies*, 3.11.

5 Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*, G3.

6 Bloom, "Manly Drunkenness," 31.

7 Srigley, "'Heavy-Headed Revel East and West.'"

8 Stow, *Annales of England*, 1436.

9 Stow, *Annales, or a Generall Chronicle of England*, 887.

10 Trawick, *Shakespeare and Alcohol*, 17.

11 There is a textual inconsistency in the earliest editions: *too sullied* in quarto editions, *too solid* in folio. The folio version is more resonant with the liquid imagery in my reading.

12 See Holl, "'Now 'mongst This Flock of Drunkards.'"

13 Trawick, *Shakespeare and Alcohol*, 50. Beyond Trawick's appendix, see Thomas, "Shakespeare's Alcoholics"; *Boozy Bard*; and Dalrymple, "Shakespeare on Alcohol."

14 Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 70.

15 Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 70. But see Matusiak, "Was Shakespeare 'Not a Company Keeper'?"

16 Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 387.

17 See Earnshaw, "Falstaffian State"; Kezar, "Shakespeare's Addictions"; Smyth, "'It Were Far Better Be a Toad, or a Serpant, Then a Drunkard'"; and Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare*.

18 See Wood, "'Fluster'd with Flowing Cups'"; and Lemon, "Incapacitated Will."

19 See Nguyen, "Dressed in Drunk Hope"; Lemon, "Sacking Falstaff"; and Romanelli, "Sour Beer at the Boar's Head."

20 McBride, "Natural Drink for an English Man," 180–81.

21 See esp. Parolin, "'Poor Creature Small Beer'"; Sebek, "'Wine and Sugar of the Best and the Fairest'"; and Raber, "Fluid Mechanics."

22 Raber, "Fluid Mechanics," 76.

23 See Malone, *Writing under the Influence*; Jamison, *Recovering*; Klepuszewski, "Drink and Alcohol Literature"; Klepuszewski, "'From Jubilation to Despair'"; and Klepuszewski, "'Delightful Logic of Intoxication.'"

24 On the performance tradition, see Bevington, *Murder Most Foul*. The books cited are Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*; Cutrofello, *All for Nothing*; and Lewis, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness*.

25 See Wechsler and Wuethrich, *Dying to Drink*; DeSantis, *Inside Greek U.*; Biddix, et al., "Influence of Fraternity and Sorority Involvement"; Hechinger, *True Gentlemen*; and Robbins, *Fraternity*.

26 See Hughey, "Paradox of Participation: Nonwhites in White Sororities and Fraternities"; Joyce, "Perceptions of Race and Fit"; and Gillon, Beatty, and Salinas, "Race and Racism in Fraternity and Sorority Life."

27 Chauvin, "Social Norms and Motivations."

28 Wechsler, Kuh, and Davenport, "Fraternities, Sororities, and Binge Drinking"; Larimer et al., "Individual in Context."

29 McCready, "Relationships between Collective Fraternity Chapter Masculine Norm Climates and the Alcohol Consumption of Fraternity Men."

30 Withington, "Intoxicants and Society in Early Modern England," 632.

31 Withington, "Introduction," 15.

32 See Capone et al., "Fraternity and Sorority Involvement."

33 Durkin, Wolfe, and Clark, "College Students and Binge Drinking"; Park, Sher, and Krull, "Risky Drinking in College Changes"; Capece and Lanza-Kaduce, "Binge Drinking among

College Students"; DeMartino, Rice, and Saltz, "Applied Test."

34 Sudhinaraset, Wigglesworth, and Takeuchi, "Social and Cultural Contexts of Alcohol Use."

35 Bloom, "Manly Drunkenness," 25.

36 Shephard, *Meanings of Early Modern Manhood*, 94.

37 Byrd, "Binge Drinking in and out of College."

38 Lemon, "Compulsory Conviviality in Early Modern England," 390.

39 See Sher, Bartholow, and Nanda, "Short- and Long-Term Effects of Fraternity and Sorority Membership on Heavy Drinking"; McCabe et al., "Selection and Socialization Effects of Fraternities and Sororities on U.S. College Student Substance Use"; and McCabe, Veliz, and Schulenberg, "How Collegiate Fraternity and Sorority Involvement Relates to Substance Use."

40 I take this point from Britland, "Circe's Cup."

41 Borsari, Hustad, and Capone, "Alcohol Use in the Greek System."

42 Rich, *Allarme to England*, Fiii.

43 Foulweather, *Wonderfull, Strange, and Miraculous Astrologicall Prognostication*, B3.

44 Jonson, "Ode."

45 Rowlands, "Drunkard."

46 Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse*, C3.

47 Seymour, *Remarks*, 2.148.

48 Sutherland, *Principles of Criminology*, 6.

49 Young, *Englands Bane*, D2.

50 Withington, "Intoxicants and Society," 656.

51 Gascoigne, *Delicate Diet*, Cii.

52 Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse*, C4.

53 Tlusty, *Bacchus and Civic Order*, 3.

54 Bloom, "Manly Drunkenness," 25.

55 Barckley, *Discourses on the Felicities of Man*, 25–26.

56 Rich, *Martial Conference*, H3.

57 Beaumont and Fletcher, *Captaine*, 57.

58 Camden, *Remaines*, 17.

59 Peacham, *Complete Gentleman*, 194.

60 Camden, *Annales*.

61 Howell, "To My Lord Viscount S. from Hamburgh."

62 Lemon, "Compulsory Conviviality," 384.

63 *England's Royall Conquest*, quoted from McShane, "Roaring Royalists and Ranting Brewers," 75.

64 *England's Triumph*, quoted from McShane, "Roaring Royalists," 79.

65 Charney, "Hamlet without Words," 459.

66 Johnson, "*Hamlet*: Voice, Music, Sound," 261.

67 The etymology of *wassail* appears in Drayton, *Poly-Olbion*, 153–54; and Slatyer, *History of Great Britanie*, 165.

68 Lemon, "Compulsory Conviviality," 402.

69 Raleigh, *Shakespeare's England*, 17.

70 Tolman, "Shakespeare Studies," 87–88.

71 Winkler, "Alimentary Metaphors and Their Political Context," 97.

72 Stallybrass, "'Well Grubbed, Old Mole,'" 11; Lemon, "Incapacitated Will," 113.

73 Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse*, F1.

74 See Haley, "'Cause of This Defect.'"

75 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "dram," n. 1, *OED Online*, def. 3 (accessed August 13, 2021).

76 Charney, "Hamlet without Words," 460.

77 Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, E3.

78 Trawick, *Shakespeare and Alcohol*, 18.

79 On the imagery of poison as the dominant metaphor of the play, see Mahalik, "Rising Gorge."

80 As Withington notes, "Robert Cawdrey listed 'intoxicate' as 'poisoned' in his 1604 dictionary of 'hard words'" ("Cultures of Intoxication," 13).

81 Wood, "'Fluster'd with Flowing Cups.'"

82 Lemon, "Incapacitated Will," 106, quoting Bacon, *Elements*, 34.

83 Lemon, "Incapacitated Will," 113.

84 Jones, *King in Hamlet*, 60.

85 Kuperman, *O jogo da vida e da morte*. See Resende, "Shakespeare on the Screen." Thanks to Mark Thornton Burnett for this reference. See also Burnett, "*Hamlet* and the Moment of Brazilian Cinema."

86 Kolkovich, "Review of *Hamlet*, dir. Bill Rauch," 225. Thanks to Elizabeth Kolkovick for this reference.

87 Fischer, "Ranking the Plays at Stratford Festival 2015." Thanks to Joseph Kidney for this reference.

88 Tobin, *Hamlet*, 33.

89 See Cree, "Protestant Evangelicals and Addiction in Early Modern English"; and Lemon, *Addiction and Devotion in Early Modern England*.

90 Lemon, "Sacking Falstaff."

91 Withington, "Cultures of Intoxication."

92 See Wedge, "Mixing Memory with Desire."

93 Lemon, "Compulsory Conviviality," 406.

94 See Brown, "Sons of Beer and Sons of Ben"; Kublesek, "Wine for Comfort"; and McShane, "Roaring Royalists and Ranting Brewers."

95 Estienne, *Apology for Herodotus*, 189.

96 Brown, "'Your Only Emperor for Diet,'" 10.

97 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "spirit," n., def. 21.b.

98 Coleridge, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, 151.

99 Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare*, 106.

100 Giles, *Hamlet*; O'Connor, *Ian McKellen*, 86.

101 I take this point on the political significance of gendered binge drinking from Owen, "Drink, Sex, and Power in Restoration Comedy."

102 Scott and Simonson, *Hamlet*; Henderson, "Artistic Process," 84.
103 Doran, *Hamlet*; Spencer, "David Tennant."
104 Hytner, *Hamlet*; Spenser, "Hamlet, National Theatre, Review."
105 Breuer, "HD Hamlet."
106 Clancy, *Hamlet*; Collins-Hughes, "Hanging in a Park with Danish Royalty."
107 Shakespeare in the Parking Lot, "Bryant Park Inaugurated a New Shakespeare Program."
108 McEwan, *Nutshell*. Thanks to Varsha Panjwani for this reference.
109 See Gledhill, "Was Hamlet a Drunkard?"; Thomas and Strassberger, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*; and Hill, *Hamlet*.
110 Al-Assadi and Diyab, *Insū Hāmlit*. Al-Assadi's play is available in Litvin, Arab, and Carlson, *Four Arab Hamlet Plays*.
111 Hennessey, *Shakespeare on the Arabian Peninsula*, 274.
112 Drunkenness is connected to the catastrophe in Shakespeare's main source, Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae*. Amleth exacts his revenge by getting his uncle and his followers blackout drunk, then setting fire to the palace. See McGlone, "Poisoned Chalice."
113 Bradac, *Hamlet*; Shirley, "Splendid Prince."
114 Nunn, *Hamlet*; Stubbs, "Gertrude," 38. Thanks to Varsha Panjwani for the Nunn reference.
115 Lemon, "Compulsory Conviviality," 401.
116 Glowacki, "*Fortinbras Gets Drunk*."

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