

An Introduction to *Hamlet*



A Brief Introduction to *Hamlet*

- ⌘ Hamlet is a play that has fascinated audiences and readers since it was first written in around 1601-1604
- ⌘ The play centers around Hamlet's decision whether or not to avenge the murder of his father, the King of Denmark. This weight of this decision drives all the other action and relationships in the play.
- ⌘ Hamlet is part of an old tradition of revenge plays, and is based on an old oral legend about Amleth, a prince whose father was killed by his uncle, who then married his mother.

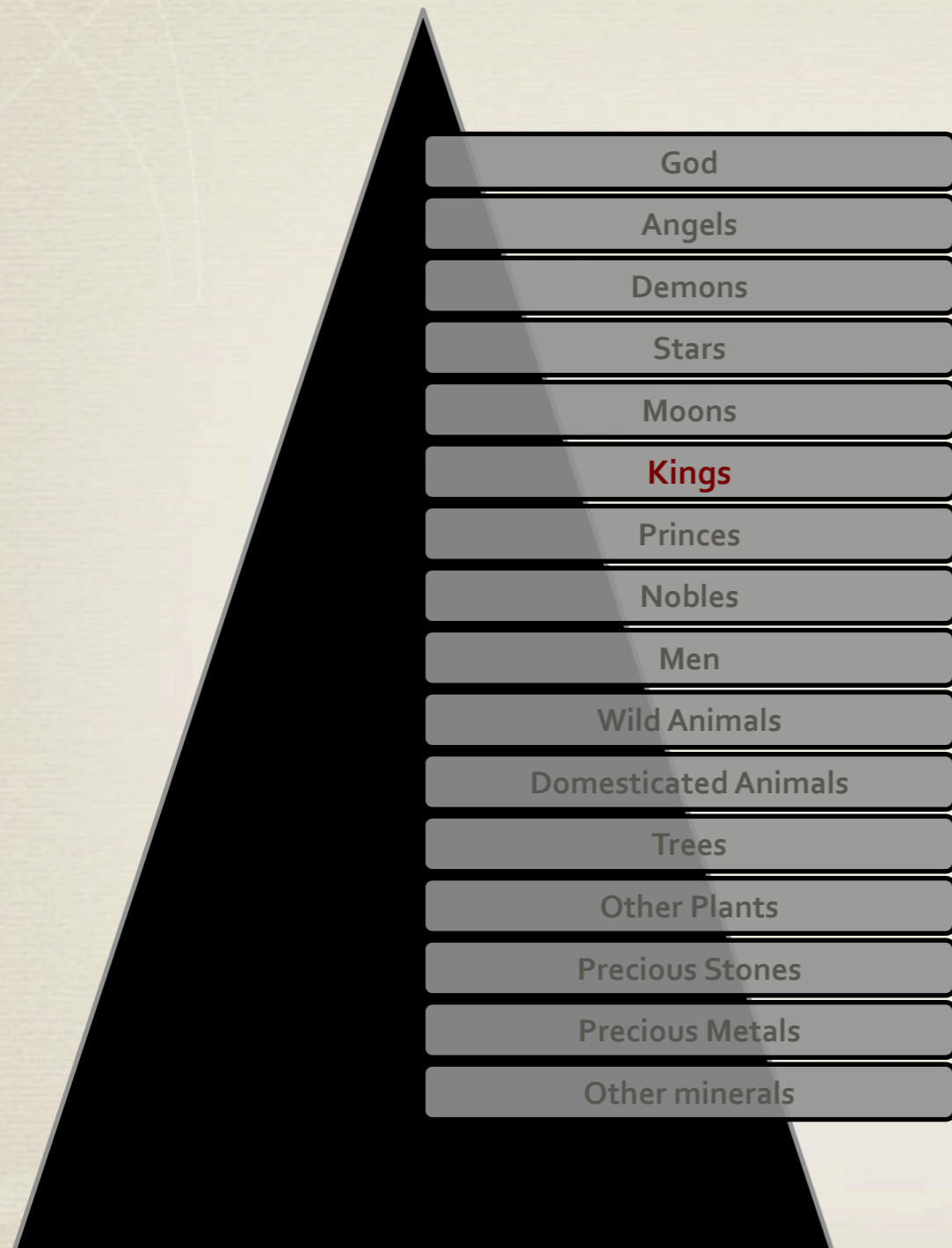
Historical Setting: Elizabethan England

- * World was opening up to new ideas
- * Old concepts being questioned: Divine Right of Kings, Chain of Being, Divine Providence
- * Individuality and notions of free will gaining momentum

Divine Right of Kings

- * Political and religious doctrine of political absolutism
- * Assures authority and legitimacy of monarch
- * Monarch derives right to rule from the will of God
- * Monarch accountable only to God
- * As a result, killing a king = eternal damnation

The Great Chain of Being



- Shakespeare's audience believed in a great Chain of Being that determined the natural order of events.
- The chain was a series of hierarchical links with God at the top.
- Each level of the chain had its own hierarchy, with the king at the top of the human level.
- Disruptions in the chain could also disrupt the laws of nature and cause bizarre events to occur.

Great Chain of Being Cont'd

- * Political implications: civil disobedience caused the 'chain to be broken', and would have 'dire consequences in other realms'
- * Disobedience = sin against God
- * The king was believed to have been appointed by God in order to assure the stability of society.
- * Removal of the king disrupted the chain of being and risked the collapse of order and universal disaster.

Divine Providence

- * Belief that God's will controls everything, and everything happens for a reason
- * Attempts to explain natural disasters, and other bad situations as 'God's plan'

Ghosts, The Devil and *Hamlet*

- Shakespeare's audience believed in ghosts and believed that the ghost of a murdered person could return to demand revenge on his murderer.
- Shakespeare's audience also believed in the Devil and believed that he could appear on earth in many forms, including that of a ghost.



Hamlet and the Ghost, Henry Fuseli, 1789

Key Thematic Questions in *Hamlet*

⌘ Revenge vs. Justice

⌘ What is the difference between revenge and justice? Is one more moral than the other?

⌘ Does the act of revenge irrevocably change an individual?

⌘ Action vs. Inaction

⌘ Is action always virtuous?

⌘ Is it possible to take action in a world where nothing is ever certain (i.e. morally black and white)

⌘ Fate vs. Autonomy

⌘ Do we have control over the shape of our own lives?

⌘ Are our roles in life always preordained?

⌘ Appearance vs. Reality

⌘ Is deceit a fundamental part of the way society functions?

⌘ Is life a series of “parts” that we “act” in order to get by?

⌘ Is there a “truth” under all the appearances in our lives?

Key Thematic Questions in *Hamlet*

⌘ Madness

⌘ Is insanity just a sane way of reacting to the madness of the world around us?

⌘ Loyalty and Betrayal

⌘ What constitutes loyalty?

⌘ To whom do we owe loyalty? Family? Lovers? State? Ourselves?

⌘ What happens when loyalties conflict?

⌘ Old Worlds vs. New Worlds

⌘ How does one function when caught between two world views?

⌘ What are the emotional/psychological/physical costs of this struggle?

5 views of *Hamlet*



1. Feminist *Hamlet*

- This is a play about a woman who has no control over her life, goes mad, and kills herself.
- Her problems:
 - Overbearing father, jerk for a boyfriend, hothouse existence, no female companionship or understanding, ignorance about the facts of life.

2. Post-Modern *Hamlet*

- This is a play about the inability of language to tell a coherent story.
- This viewpoint presents the idea that...
 - Words are just marks on a page or vibrations in the air, referring only to other words, because there is no other reality.
 - “What’s the matter, mother?” (pun on mater/matter, mother)
 - “A little more than kin, and less than kind.”
- Gertrude describes Ophelia’s watery death, but no one saw it.

3. Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*

- This is a play about a man who reminds the reader/viewer of Mel Gibson's "Mad Max."
- Zeffirelli begs the question:
 - How can a man remain a hero in a world of random violence?

4. Almereyda's *Hamlet*

- A play about a man whose intentions are thwarted by impersonal forces like an uncurious mother, and a ruthless uncle, and (oddly) corporate capitalism (symbolized by New York high rise money):

5. Coach Peralta's *Hamlet*

- *Hamlet* is a play where appearances, as dictated by custom, do not match reality. A play where there seems to be a *misfit* between traditional roles and reality.
- Customs seem to determine what is right and wrong, not the other way around.
- And in response, Hamlet wonders about his personal purgatory, mourning, dating, fencing, acting, not acting, drinking, questioning life, and believing in a ghost.

Quick Plot Overview

- * Hamlet (the prince of Denmark) is in a funk: his father has mysteriously died, and his mother married his uncle (father's brother) soon after the funeral. Fortunately, Hamlet's dead father's ghost shows up to give Hamlet some bad news: he was murdered. The play revolves around Hamlet's internal struggle with how to avenge his father without damning himself eternally, and on the external struggle to punish his uncle (Claudius) without taking down his mother (Gertrude) as well
- * Throw in a subplot with the Prince of Norway (Fortinbras), a bizarre, possibly-incestuous love triangle between Ophelia, Hamlet, and the male members of Ophelia's family, and you've got a classic tragedy!
- * One of Shakespeare's most frequently quoted soliloquies is in this play: To be / Or not to be?