

Hamlet review

Here are three of the passages, answered, to give you an idea:

1. Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not “seems.”

Speaker: Hamlet

Context: This is in the first court scene where we are getting to know Hamlet and his situation. Claudius has suggested that Hamlet has been grieving too long (we later learn it has been four months) and that “’tis unmanly grief.” When Queen Gertrude, his mother, says that everyone who lives must die and asks why it “seems so particular with” him, he makes this reply.

Significance: This passage hits the theme of appearances vs. reality. In this case, Hamlet says what seems to be so with him actually is so. This situation will not be universal among the characters, esp. Polonius, who pays a spy (Reynaldo) to watch Laertes, for example, and Polonius and Claudius who will hide in order to hear Hamlet. Even the ending duel isn’t just a straight-up fight; there are secret alliances, poisoned swords, poisoned drinks, etc. Indeed, the inciting incident of the play, the murder of Old Hamlet, occurs by secret, and Hamlet’s test of Claudius uses subterfuge as well.

2. Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral bak'd meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

Speaker: Hamlet

Context: The reunion of Horatio and Hamlet at the beginning of the play. Next, Horatio will tell Hamlet about the ghost.

Significance: The passage is significant in its tone as well as in its content. The tone is clever, light, characteristic of Hamlet and lightening the overall mood of the play as well as indicating the friendship of Hamlet and Horatio. In style, the use of antithesis here brings together the death of Old Hamlet and the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius. In content, the closeness of death and marriage (the source of life) suggests that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

3. This above all — to thine own self be true;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Speaker: Polonius

Context: Polonius is giving advice to Laertes before L goes back to France. This is early in the play, just after Laertes advises Ophelia to give Hamlet up.

Significance: This is sound advice: being true to oneself means avoiding hubris, knowing one’s place, and the next idea, not lying. It’s ironic for a couple of reasons. First, Polonius lies, and the play is full of lying and hiding. Laertes absolutely does not follow this advice when he joins Claudius in his plot to cheat and poison Hamlet.