UNIVERSITY LECTURE

HAMLET — WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Scene 2: The Court of Denmark

Act I, Scene II | Elizabethan Drama | Third Year

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Subject	Elizabethan Drama
Class	Third Year
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Lecture focus: The court scene introduces Claudius's political authority, Hamlet's grief, the new royal marriage, and the contrast between public celebration and private suffering.

1. Learning Outcomes

- Describe the political situation presented by Claudius at court.
- Explain Hamlet's grief and his conflict with the public expectations of the court.
- Analyse the contrast between appearance and reality.
- Discuss how Shakespeare introduces the major family and political relationships.

2. Background and Context

The setting shifts from the exposed battlements to the royal court inside Elsinore. Claudius has become king after the death of his brother, King Hamlet, and has married Queen Gertrude, the dead king's widow. The court appears orderly, but the language and reactions of the characters reveal tension beneath the public ceremony.

3. Scene Summary

1. Claudius addresses the court. He acknowledges the death of his brother while presenting his marriage to Gertrude as a sensible political and personal decision. He also discusses the threat posed by young Fortinbras and sends ambassadors to Norway.
2. Claudius and Gertrude ask Hamlet to stop wearing mourning clothes and to remain in Denmark rather than return to his studies in Wittenberg.
3. Hamlet speaks aside about his grief and disgust. He is especially disturbed by his mother's rapid marriage to Claudius, whom he regards as inferior to his father.
4. After the court leaves, Hamlet delivers a soliloquy expressing despair and contemplating suicide, while recognising that religious law forbids it.
5. Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo arrive and tell Hamlet about the Ghost. Hamlet agrees to join them that night and watch for the apparition.
6. Laertes asks permission to return to France. Claudius grants it, and Laertes's father, Polonius, also approves.

4. Critical Analysis

Claudius's public performance

Claudius speaks in balanced, formal language. He attempts to show that he can manage grief, marriage, diplomacy, and national security. His speech presents him as a capable ruler, but the audience may question the morality of his rapid marriage and accession.

Appearance versus reality

The court's official language celebrates stability, yet Hamlet sees corruption and emotional dishonesty. The contrast between the public ceremony and Hamlet's private response introduces one of the play's central concerns: appearances can conceal troubling realities.

Hamlet's mourning

Hamlet's black clothing and continued grief distinguish him from the court. Gertrude interprets mourning as something that should end, whereas Hamlet insists that his grief is inward and cannot be removed by changing clothes.

The first soliloquy

A soliloquy allows the audience to hear a character's private thoughts. Hamlet's first soliloquy reveals depression, disgust, disappointment, and moral confusion. His wish that his body could dissolve expresses his desire to escape suffering, but he does not act on it.

The mother-son relationship

Hamlet is deeply troubled by Gertrude's marriage. His criticism is emotional and moral: he compares his father favourably with Claudius and cannot understand how his mother could move on so quickly.

Political and family plots

The Fortinbras threat is handled through official diplomacy, while the Ghost's appearance introduces a secret family crisis. Shakespeare places public politics and private emotion side by side.

5. Important Quotations and Their Significance

Quotation	Interpretation
"A little more than kin, and less than kind."	Hamlet's wordplay expresses his hostility toward Claudius, who is both uncle and stepfather.
"Seems, madam? Nay, it is; I know not "seems.""	Hamlet rejects the idea that his grief is merely an outward performance.
"Frailty, thy name is woman!"	Hamlet generalises from his disappointment in Gertrude; the line reveals his anger and should be read critically.
"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt."	The soliloquy communicates Hamlet's despair and wish to escape the world.
"The time is out of joint."	Hamlet senses that the natural and moral order has been disrupted.

6. Dramatic and Literary Techniques

- Soliloquy gives direct access to Hamlet's private thoughts.
- Wordplay exposes hostility beneath formal court language.

- Clothing and outward appearance become symbols of grief and identity.
- Juxtaposition contrasts Claudius's public confidence with Hamlet's private distress.
- Dramatic irony allows the audience to suspect that the court's apparent stability is fragile.

7. Key Terms

Term	Meaning
Soliloquy	A speech in which a character speaks private thoughts aloud, usually alone on stage.
Mourning	The expression of sorrow after a death.
Usurpation	The unlawful taking of power or authority.
Diplomacy	The management of relations between states.
Legitimacy	The accepted or lawful right to hold power.
Juxtaposition	Placing two contrasting things close together for comparison.

8. Discussion Questions

7. How does Claudius try to present himself as a legitimate and effective king?
8. Why does Hamlet reject the distinction between inward grief and outward signs of mourning?
9. What does Hamlet's first soliloquy reveal about his emotional state?
10. How does the scene develop the theme of appearance versus reality?
11. Why is the news about the Ghost important at the end of the scene?

9. Assignment

Analyse Hamlet's first soliloquy. Explain how its images and language communicate his grief, and connect your discussion to the theme of appearance versus reality.

10. Suggested Study Method

Read the scene in the original text before reviewing this lecture. Mark the speaker and situation for each quotation, then explain how Shakespeare's language contributes to character, theme, and dramatic effect. In written answers, avoid retelling the plot alone: make an interpretive point, support it with textual evidence, and explain the evidence.