

UNDERGRADUATE PAPER

**Mirrors: Shakespeare's Use of
Mythology in *Hamlet***

Cayla McCollum
Collin College

French New Wave filmmaker Claude Chabrol once said, "I love mirrors. They let one pass through the surface of things."¹ Mirrors, whether physical or metaphorical, allow people, situations, and ideas to be reflected and examined—they provide a view below the surface and beyond the initial scene. Shakespeare utilizes this idea in his tragedy *Hamlet* by providing mirrors for the characters in the form of myths. Through the myths, Shakespeare reflects, like fraternal twins, situations similar to those experienced by the characters in the play, thereby highlighting the flaws of the characters and often foreshadowing their doom. Though not exact, these copies provide a view of the characters that is deeper than the surface. By the use of mythology, Shakespeare reflects twins, similar to doppelgangers, of Gertrude, Prince Hamlet, and King Hamlet that provide depth and greater understanding in his story.

Shakespeare's first reflection is the twin of Gertrude. Through his use of the Niobe myth, Shakespeare provides a comparison to Gertrude, as well as a foreboding foreshadowing of what is to come. Gertrude finds a twin in Niobe by their good fortune, their response to it, and the result of their response. Niobe, queen of Thebes and mother of fourteen children, has great power and much of which to be proud. As a result, she becomes arrogant, feeling that she deserves as much, if not more, respect than the gods. When Niobe halts the worship ceremony of Leto, she angers the goddess, who punishes her severely. In her wrath, Leto sends Apollo and Athena, her two children, to slay each of Niobe's children. Further repercussions occur when Niobe's husband dies

as a result of the debilitating loss. Stripped of everything, Niobe cries ceaselessly until the gods turn her to stone; but even then she continues to cry, symbolizing “eternal mourning.”²

Likewise, Gertrude is the wife of King Hamlet. She is blessed with a son, Hamlet, and “lives almost by his looks” (4.7.12).³ After her husband's untimely death, Gertrude arrogantly marries her husband's brother, creating an “incestuous relationship between [herself] and Claudius.”⁴ Because this relationship defies nature as Niobe defies the gods, Gertrude, according to D. J. Snider, “[touches] the very core [of] the profound ethical nature of Hamlet.”⁵ Hamlet perceives his mother's fleeting grief as fake and sarcastically describes it as “like Niobe, all tears” (1.2.153). As a result, he stores up anger and hatred towards his mother. In the ensuing chaos, Gertrude's heart is “cleft . . . in twain” (3.4.177) as the “thorns [of her guilt] prick and sting her” (1.5.94-95). She loses her “children”—Ophelia, Laertes, and Hamlet—and her power as queen. Finally, she, like Niobe, becomes as stone in death. In arrogance, Niobe and Gertrude defied a higher power, resulting in insurmountable sorrow, death, and, ultimately, an eternity of mourning. Through the mirroring myth, Shakespeare creates a second, deeper dimension to Gertrude that symbolizes her sorrow in life and her eternal condemnation in death.

The second mirrored image in the tragedy is that of Hamlet. In the mirror, the hero Hercules is reflected. While Hamlet believes he is nothing like Hercules, Shakespeare uses the myth to create for Hamlet a kindred spirit in the hero. He also uses the myth to reinforce Hamlet's perceptions of himself and his life. Hamlet and Hercules are similar in that they are both faced with insurmountable tasks—Hamlet, his father's revenge; and Hercules, his place among the gods. These tasks cannot be completed without a tragic inciting incident. For Hercules, he cannot move towards his immortality until he completes his twelve labors, which may not be started without his rage-induced murder of his family.⁶ Likewise, Hamlet is not able to truly begin his “almost blunted purpose” (3.4.127) until he unwittingly slays Polonius. Shakespeare further uses the Hercules myth to provide a telling description of Hamlet's task by describing it as “hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve” (1.4.93), thereby showing the task's true difficulty. To slay the Nemean lion, a vicious beast, is the first of

Hercules' twelve tasks, and Hercules is able to complete it only because of his superior strength.

Hamlet and Hercules are also similar in parentage. Hercules is the son of a god, Zeus, and a mortal. Similarly, Hamlet is the son of King Hamlet, who, in his son's eyes, surpasses the gods, and the queen, who is only "seeming-virtuous" (1.5.53). Also, both Hercules and Hamlet slay the woman they love: Hercules does so in a fit of rage, while Hamlet indirectly drives Ophelia to insanity, leading to her drowning. Ultimately, both men meet their deaths at the hands of a poison administered by someone close to them. Finally, their tasks are not completed until they are faced with death. Hercules is taken to be with the gods when on his funeral pyre, and Hamlet does not kill Claudius until he is himself pierced with the poisoned blade.

While Shakespeare uses Hercules to mirror Hamlet in many respects, he emphasizes one key flaw in the reflection—Hamlet is paralyzed. While Hercules acts, Hamlet is the "victim of an excess of the reflective faculty."⁷ Hamlet is not "a conventional revenger because he has too many thoughts."⁸ While Hercules will do what he must, Hamlet prolongs his agony by refusing to do his duty, highlighting his view of himself as "pigeon-livered and lack[ing] gall" (2.2.604). Through his use of Hercules, Shakespeare provides a mirror into Hamlet that shows how arduous his task is, as well as emphasizing Hamlet's insecure view of himself as a failure.

Shakespeare's final mirror image is a reflection of the King. However, this reflection differs from the other two because it is an image reflected from a broken mirror. Using several myths, Shakespeare creates a fractured view of King Hamlet—a view that provides insight into the king as well as into his son. To Hamlet, his father had the aspects of many gods, thereby resulting in Hamlet placing him on a pedestal higher than the gods. Using the myths, Shakespeare reflects Hamlet's view of his father as a god by saying he had hair like the "Titan god of light,"⁹ a face like Jove, who was the king of the gods,¹⁰ eyes like the god of war,¹¹ and a "way of standing that is like the winged messenger of the gods."¹² None can compare—especially his mother's new husband, Claudius. As a result of his hero worship, Hamlet's opinions of his mother as an adulteress and himself as a failure are only further solidified. Because of his god-like view of his

father, Hamlet is all the more willing to believe the ghost, though logic cannot confirm whether or not it is a "Catholic spirit from Purgatory or a demonic imposter."¹³ Hamlet "melts all reality into his own subjective shapes."¹⁴ He is often blind to the truth around him, including the truth about the character of his father.

While using a fractured mirror to reflect Hamlet's views of his father, Shakespeare also uses an unbroken mirror to provide a more complete reflection of the king. This reflection is very different from the shattered image in Hamlet's reality. Hamlet describes the king as having "Hyperion's curls" (3.4.66). While Hyperion is the god of light, mythology tells that he helped to castrate his own father and later Zeus threw him into the pit of Tartarus, along with the other defeated Titans.¹⁵ King Hamlet is also described as having "the front of Jove himself" (3.4.66). Jove is described as a god who is constantly unfaithful to his wife, having children with many different women and parenting them from afar.¹⁶ Shakespeare further describes the king as having "an eye like Mars, to threaten and command" (3.4.67). Mars was infamous for his unbridled rage and passion, which caused him to act hotheadedly in battle and flee when he was injured.¹⁷ While Hamlet views his father as a god among men, Shakespeare uses mythology to paint a picture of a cold, unfaithful, evil man, thereby explaining why King Hamlet is tormented in Purgatory. Through the use of mythology, reflected from Hamlet's fractured mirror and the whole mirror, Shakespeare provides a complete view of the king that shows both the surface of the king's character as well as the darker side underneath.

By holding up the myths as mirrors to the characters in the play, Shakespeare reflects a deeper view of each character and a glimpse into their fate. Gertrude, because of her arrogance, lost all she cared about, including her life, which was ended before she could repent. Therefore she will spend eternity mourning, just as Niobe, who also lost everything, is forever a weeping stone. Gertrude defied nature and, in Hamlet's eyes, a god by betraying her husband. Likewise, Niobe defied the gods and paid dearly. Hamlet and Hercules are faced with unimaginable tasks. Both men were the seemingly weak sons of immortal fathers, who were able to complete their missions only after dire tragedies, including the deaths of their lovers. Both men died at the hands of friends,

using poison to perform the dastardly deed. The key difference that the mirror provides between Hamlet and Hercules is that Hercules will act while Hamlet remains paralyzed by his intellect. Finally, Shakespeare uses a fractured mirror as well as an unbroken one to reflect two views of King Hamlet—the shape of a god that influenced his son and the true image of a tyrant.

By the use of the mirroring myths, Shakespeare ingeniously creates images that provide depth and interest to his characters. The depth that the twins provide creates a bridge between the characters in the play and the audience. Most people, like Hamlet, have a fractured view of someone they love or, like Gertrude, cannot see beyond their own desires. Through his use of mirrors, Shakespeare provides a view that penetrates the surface and reflects not only the play's characters, but also the audience—therein lies Shakespeare's genius.

Notes

1. "Mirrors Quotes," <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/mirrors.html> (accessed March 22, 2012).
2. *Encyclopedia Mythica*, s.v. "Niobe" (by Anna Baldwin, May 13, 1997), <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/n/niobe.html> (accessed March 22, 2012).
3. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992). In-text act, scene, and line numbers refer to this edition.
4. Noel Blincoe, "Is Gertrude an Adulteress?" *ANQ* 10, no.4 (1997): 18-24.
5. D. J. Snider, "Hamlet," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (April 1873): 67-88, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25665831> (accessed March 22, 2012).
6. *Encyclopedia Mythica*, s.v. "Hercules" (by Leif Ellingson, April 22, 1997), <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/h/hercules.html> (accessed March 20, 2012).
7. Claude C. H. Williamson, "Hamlet," *International Journal of Ethics* 33, no.1 (1992): 85-100, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2377179> (accessed March 22, 2012).
8. Mary Jo Kietzman, "What Is Hecuba to Him or [S]he to Hecuba? Lucrece's Complaint and Shakespearean Poetic Agency," *Modern Philology* 97, no.1 (1999): 21-45.
9. Aaron J. Atsma, *Theoi Greek Mythology: Exploring Mythology & the Greek Gods in Classical Literature & Art*, s.v. "Hyperion: Greek Titan God of Light," <http://www.theoi.com/Titan/TitanHyperion.html> (accessed March 20, 2012).
10. Carol LeRoy, "The Mythology of Jupiter," <http://avalon100.tripod.com/Jupiter.html> (accessed March 20, 2012).
11. Carol LeRoy, "The Mythology of Mars," <http://avalon100.tripod.com/Mars.html> (accessed March 20, 2012).
12. Barbara A. Mowat, preface to *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 172.

13. John Freeman, "This Side of Purgatory: Ghostly Fathers and the Recusant Legacy in Hamlet," *Shakespeare & the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2003): 222-59.
14. Snider, "Hamlet," 69.
15. Atsma, *Theoi Greek Mythology*, s.v. "Hyperion."
16. LeRoy, "The Mythology of Jupiter."
17. LeRoy, "The Mythology of Mars."