Gertrude and Claudius Study Guide

Gertrude and Claudius by John Updike

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

This story is a prequel to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The King of Denmark marries his bright, lively daughter to the beefy, self-righteous Horwendil the Jute. She wants more from a husband than to be his political prize, but she knows her duty and submits to the marriage. Horwendil becomes King, when her father dies. She bears him a son, Amleth/Hamlet. She is a gracious and dutiful Queen and tries to love her husband and son, who are both remote. She feels empty, that her life is passing her by.

At forty-seven, Gertrude is seduced into a passionate affair by the King's brother, Feng/Claudius, who has loved her devotedly for many years. The King discovers the affair and confronts Claudius. Claudius, threatened with estrangement from Gertrude, conspires with Corambus/Polonius to murder the King. He and Gertrude marry. Claudius wants Hamlet at Elsinore, but Gertrude thinks him a danger to her husband. Claudius prevails. The story ends, as Hamlet agrees to remain at the castle, while a contented King Claudius thinks that he has gotten away with it and all will be well.

Gerutha/Gertrude is a bright, sunny girl of sixteen, daughter of Rorik, King of Denmark, and a mother who died many years ago. Her father has betrothed her to Horwendil/Claudius the Jute, a beefy, self-satisfied warrior, co-governor of Jutland (with his absentee brother, Feng/Claudius). Rorik loves his daughter deeply, as she loves him, and believes that Horwendil will make her happy. He also believes that Horwendil will make Denmark a fine king after him. She objects to being the plunder with which Horwendil is rewarded, thinks he loves her for what she is, not who she is, and that he could love any other woman in her place.

Although she resists, she knows her duty and marries Horwendil. They return to his manor after the wedding celebration. She undresses by the fire in their bedchamber, aroused by her nakedness in front of him. He has fallen asleep, however, and they don't consummate their marriage until the morning. She feels snubbed from the night before, however, and that snub will fester for many years to come, a symbol of all the ways he does not see her. Gerutha is a good and compliant wife, gracious and clever. She is soon pregnant. As the baby grows inside her, illness grows inside her father. He is dead, even before her son is born. She plans to name him for her father, but her husband names him "Amleth" to commemorate a military victory.

In due time, the four provincial assemblies confirm Horwendil as King. Amleth is a cranky, sickly baby. Gerutha's milk is sour to him, and he takes no comfort from her. He becomes a sickly boy, who argues with everyone, makes everything a joke, and who enjoys the company of only Yorik, the disreputable jester. He is very much his father's son, Jutish, gloomy and abstracted, with a nobleman's affected manners. Gerutha longs to bear more children but cannot. Amleth and his father spend much time together. Gerutha tries to love her husband and son, but they are remote. She feels empty and that life is passing her by.

Her husband's brother, Feng, returns from his adventures on behalf of the Holy Roman Emperor, when she is thirty-five. They spend much time together in conversation. She has always thought him more attractive and more interesting than his brother. He tells her wonderful stories and, most importantly, he listens to her and takes her seriously. He takes leave of her, and the story becomes his, as well as hers, as the reader learns of the obsessive love he holds for her. He knows that staying and being with her would hurt his brother. He would never harm his brother and leaves Denmark again. Amleth leaves the next year, off to Wittenberg to continue his education.

When Feng returns, he declares his love for Geruthe. She is swept away by his passion and asks Corambis/Polonius for use of his lakeside lodge for a rendezvous with Feng. They prove to be an excellent match, and Geruthe feels that he has given her back to herself. The King discovers the affair and confronts Feng. Feng, threatened with estrangement from Geruthe, conspires with Polonius to murder the King in a way that suggests a natural death. Feng is crowned King Claudius. He convinces Gertrude to marry him, despite her husband's very recent death. Claudius wants Prince Hamlet at Elsinore, but Gertrude thinks he's a danger to her husband. Claudius prevails. The story ends, as Hamlet agrees to remain at the castle, while a contented King Claudius thinks that he has gotten away with it, and that all will be well.

About Names

About Names Summary and Analysis

The names in Part 1 are taken from the account of the ancient Hamlet legend in the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus, a late-twelfth-century Latin text, first printed in Paris in 1514. The spellings in Part 2 come from an adaptation of Saxo printed in Paris in 1576. The names in Part 3 are from the source used by Shakespeare, probably a German work printed in 1781 from earlier manuscripts. The names used in the summaries correspond to the names used in the book.

The names of the major characters are:

Gerutha/Geruthe/Gertrude

Horwendil/Horvendile/Hamlet

Feng/Fengon/Claudius

Amleth/Hamblet/Hamlet

Corambus/Corambis/Polonius

Part 1 Section 1 (through page 19)

Part 1 Section 1 (through page 19) Summary

This story is a prequel to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The King of Denmark marries his bright, lively daughter to the beefy, self-righteous Horwendil the Jute. She wants more from a husband than to be his political prize, but she knows her duty and submits to the marriage. Horwendil becomes King, when her father dies. She bears him a son, Amleth/Hamlet. She is a gracious and dutiful Queen and tries to love her husband and son, who are both remote. She feels empty, that her life is passing her by.

At forty-seven, Gertrude is seduced into a passionate affair by the King's brother, Feng/Claudius, who has loved her devotedly for many years. The King discovers the affair and confronts Claudius. Claudius, threatened with estrangement from Gertrude, conspires with Corambus/Polonius to murder the King. He and Gertrude marry. Claudius wants Hamlet at Elsinore, but Gertrude thinks him a danger to her husband. Claudius prevails. The story ends, as Hamlet agrees to remain at the castle, while a contented King Claudius thinks that he has gotten away with it and all will be well.

Gerutha is sixteen when the story opens. She is the only child of King Rorik and Ona, his wife, who died when Gerutha was only three. She is an "ample, serene, dewy and sensible" girl with coppery red hair and skin that radiates warmth, just as she, herself, seems to radiate happiness. King Rorik is irate at his daughter's reluctance to marry Horwendil, the man to whom she is promised. Horwendil has proven his valor in war on behalf of King Rorik, and is much loved by the people whom he rules with his brother, Feng (although Feng spends much more time on mercenary campaigns in the south than he spends ruling Jutland with Horwendil).

Gerutha thinks that his bravery is irrelevant. She believes that the qualities that bring him public love - his detached politeness, his interest in people for how they can improve his position - may impede him in an intimate relationship. She tells Rorik that "...no woman wants to be a mere piece of furniture, to be bartered for and then sat upon." Rorik must stop himself from laughing at her defiance and cleverness, in which he has indulged her all her life. He must be stern. Horwendil has always given him the tribute and plunder a liege-lord is due. Now, the pledge of his daughter's hand must be honored. This pledge will also probably include Rorik's crown, when he dies. (Royal blood carries inheritance, but a new king has to be confirmed by four provincial *thing* - the assemblies that judge and govern provincial affairs.)

Rorik tells Gerutha that love between men and women is so natural that, given good health and similar backgrounds, it follows inevitably from living together and sharing married life. He speaks of himself and Ona to illustrate his point. Ona was a Wendish princess brought to Denmark as plunder by Rorik's father. Rorik confides to Gerutha that Ona hated him, the son of the man who killed her father. She fought Rorik off for six months after they married, and tried to kill herself after he took her one night when she

was weak from an illness. It was another six months until he turned her hatred to love. If she could come to love him, Rorik is sure that Gerutha will come to love as fine a man as Horwendil. He, in turn, will come to love her, the sunny girl whom all at Elsinore have loved all her life.

Horwendil comes from Jutland to woo Gerutha. Rorik has given him and Feng adjoining manors in Jutland, about a two hours' ride from Elsinore, in acknowledgment of their service to him. Although their service was equal, Feng's manor is lesser. Feng, like his brother, is still unmarried. Gerutha is somewhat surprised by this, remembering Feng's glances some years ago, and the passion and longing she saw there. She thinks younger brothers must be like daughters, in that no one takes them as seriously as they desire. Horwendil has brought her a pair of songbirds. When they are silent, he shakes the cage to scare them into singing. He suggests that she, too, will soon sing of mated happiness. She responds that the birds may be singing about their imprisonment, rather than their happiness.

Gerutha is unable to rouse him; her ripostes merely amuse him. He is strong and confident, and something about his dismissive tolerance arouses her. She wonders if this arousal leads to the submission that she sees in the women around her, women who grow "sodden" when mated. Horwendil insists that she protests too much, that he is a fine and noble man, and that all desire their alliance. Gerutha thinks that, even as he declares his love, he does not focus on her. He takes her in his arms but does not kiss her. He speaks, instead, of how to feed the birds.

Part 1 Section 1 (through page 19) Analysis

Gerutha is very modern for a medieval princess. She has grown up without a mother, and her father has always been amused by the opinions that she was free to voice. She wants a husband who can be a good king, but who can love her enough to deserve the woman she is, as well as the title she brings him. By the time we meet her, however, the choice has been made. She is promised to Horwendil, a man who cannot even pretend to understand what she wants \and needs from him.

Even Rorik can hardly understand her. The reader sees Gerutha kneeling at Rorik's feet. As he bends to kiss her head, her pose gives him pause, because it is so slavish. He has a moment of doubt. Is he making her a slave, as she seems to be suggesting? He thought he was making her a queen. He thinks that he does not know what women want. He never knew how to reach Ona, and he cannot see what Gerutha could want that Horwendil cannot give her.

Rorik describes Horwendil's deeds, and Gerutha says that they might have been nice in the old days, when the deeds of the sagas were done. Those days are still recent to these people, for Christianity has come to Denmark within memory. Gerutha is ambivalent about her faith. She was raised as a Christian, but Christianity is not taken seriously at her father's court. She does not like being in the chapel at Elsinore. It

frightens her and makes her feel accused. The service makes her feel that her body is a sin that must someday be avenged.

Part 1 Section 2 (page 20 to 38)

Part 1 Section 2 (page 20 to 38) Summary

Horwendil and Gerutha marry in the winter, when neither war nor harvest prevent the guests from traveling a week and staying at Elsinore for two. Gerutha is seventeen, so weighted down with gold and jewels, velvet and brocade, that her back hurts. Dancing and wine "free her body to an animal heedlessness," and her hair flies all around her. This is the last time that she can wear it down in public. Gerutha and Horwendil were taught the steps of the stately, processional dances. Formal dancing is new to Denmark, and the Church has not yet taken a stand on whether or not it is a sin. As Rorik offers Gerutha a parting blessing, she sees the age in him for the first time. He is tired and does not look well.

Gerutha and Horwendil board the sleigh that takes them to Odinsheim, Horwendil's estate. Horwendil's talk of who was and was not there - his brother, Feng, was not - lulls Gerutha to sleep. She awakens when they arrive, and Horwendil leads her to their bedchamber. A woman helps her undress down to her chemise, which Gerutha takes off when she is alone with Horwendil. She is aroused by her own nakedness. However, when she turns to her husband, he is asleep in a chair. When they awake in the morning, he deflowers her. The bloody sheet is displayed to confirm her virginity, thereby ensuring that her son may be king. Horwendil proves to be a lusty and vigorous husband, but Gerutha will always feel that she was snubbed that first night.

Gerutha is a good and compliant wife, gracious and clever. By springtime, she is pregnant. As her pregnancy advances, her father's health fails. In her sixth month, he tells her that he is dying. He asks Gerutha about her marriage, and if he misled her in pressing her to marry Horwendil. He had known that he was sick even then, he admits, and Gerutha understands that Rorik is apologizing. There is no need. Gerutha believes that her marriage is in excellent shape.

Rorik dies, and Horwendil's prospects are favorable. Gerutha had moved back to Elsinore to take care of her father, and Horwendil moves there after Rorik's burial to be with his wife, even though he is not yet king. Corambus, Rorik's Lord Chamberlain, is the only person who resents Horwendil's premature move to Elsinore. The day Gerutha gives birth is the same day that Horwendil defeats and kills Fortinbras of Norway, who has been leading incursions into Jutland. Gerutha's son is named Amleth, by his father, to commemorate his victory, although Gerutha had hoped to name him for her father.

Amleth is a sickly and disagreeable baby, then child, who appears to like only Yorik, the court jester. Gerutha thinks Amleth uses joking to keep both duty and intimacy at bay. She feels that something holds back her love from Amleth, and she wonders at the source of her inadequacy. Amleth is very Jutish like his father, gloomy and abstracted, with a nobleman's affected manners and skills. Gerutha is unable to bear more children, although she and Horwendil want more and have not stopped trying.

Part 1 Section 2 (page 20 to 38) Analysis

Horwendil is gentle, as promised, which is fortunate, because his preoccupation with other things is apparent from the first. Gerutha discovers in herself a great capacity for love, as she watches Horwendil sleeping. She experiences her own lust for him - also newly discovered - thwarted by his exhaustion. He professes to be Christian, but she knows that Christianity does not deter "that old warrior ethic of plunder and self-careless ecstasy" that reasserts itself when Horwendil takes to the long ships for raids. The Danes are still adapting to their new religion, brought to them by Harald Bluetooth, whose conversion "deprived the German emperor of his favorite excuse for invasion, the conquest of pagans." The Danes still revere their god Tyr, god of war, sports, and fertility.

Despite Gerutha's protests to her father, despite her independence and thoughtfulness, she proves to be a submissive and dutiful wife. She knows exactly how to behave and does so, to her great credit in the eyes of those around her. When her child is born, she discovers in herself even more of a capacity to love. It is a terrible puzzle for her that she cannot share that love with Amleth. She will always wonder why that is so, whether she was too young to be a mother, whether by losing her so young she never learned how to mother, or whether the fault was somehow Amleth's. He is so difficult for her to love. Even her milk is sour to him. When he starts to speak, it is only to argue. When he starts to play, his games seem designed to repel her, all in imitation of war and unlike any games in her girlhood. She knows that love is there in her, waiting, and it is a great tragedy for her that she has no more children. Why she bears no more is an issue that nags at her and Horwendil throughout her childbearing years.

Part 1 Section 3 (page 39 to 78)

Part 1 Section 3 (page 39 to 78) Summary

Gerutha is now thirty-one, and Hamlet is thirteen. Gerutha feels ever more detached from the things that should give her pleasure, her husband and son. One day, she asks Corambus to come speak with her. She asks his opinion of Amleth. He reports that Amleth's skills with swords and horses are excellent. She worries about Amleth's moodiness, fears that he is "hard-hearted," and that she has been a failure as a mother. Corambus tries to reassure her, saying that his moodiness may be no more than his trying on different roles, like the actors who interest him so much, and even Yorik. He says that Amleth will answer the call of duty, when it comes. She unburdens herself to him about Horwendil. He's all the man that her father promised, but not her choice. He's a man who cherishes her, but only as one of his public duties. Corambus, startled by her candor, recommends that she read less and exercise more. The days go on. Gerutha feels that her life is being carried away with them. Horwendil grows more remote, as he becomes more accomplished a king.

Feng returns to Denmark when he is forty-seven, and Gerutha is thirty-five. Gerutha finds him attractive and entertaining, especially in comparison with her husband, and spends much time with him. Feng is fond of feasting, drinking and chasing serving-girls at Elsinore, but with Gerutha, he is always on his best behavior, perhaps even shy, pulling away from her touch. They spend much time in close conversation. He tells her stories about exotic places and people. He is a good listener, as well, genuinely interested in what Gerutha has to say. Horwendil tells her that Amleth is disturbed by her friendship with Feng. Gerutha suggests that she is the only company available to Feng, since Horwendil and Amleth are always off together. She and Horwendil argue. She objects to her only child going away next year to study. They blame each other for having no more children. She accuses him of coolness. He protests. She relents and then apologizes, saying that she can imagine no man who could serve her more lovingly. However, she can imagine such a man. She does this whenever she looks up, while in bed beside him, from one of the romances she reads, as he sleeps.

The King is away, when Feng invites Gerutha to visit his estate. They speak about Horwendil's stodgy "goodness" and his ignorant Christianity, the result of priests their father had allowed into Jutland because of the craze then for conversion. He speaks fleetingly of a sadness he carries. It's a sadness that abates, when he sees a new city or a certain lady is in his eyes, but he will not name its source. Later, after a meal, Feng leads Gerutha to the mews, where his falcons live in their cages. Gerutha does not care for falconry. She thinks it cruel to turn wildness into sport. He introduces her to Bathsheba, one of his birds, whose eyes are sewn shut. Feng says the procedure is for her protection, so she is not made frantic by the possibilities of freedom that she would otherwise see around her. Her eyes will be unsealed, when she is tamed and trained to eat only from a human hand. He offers Bathsheba to Gerutha as a parting gift. He must leave Denmark, again.

Feng is hopelessly in love with Gerutha. He imagines her with her hair down, her feet bare. He thinks Amleth is a rude, foppish brat, and Horwendil is a bragging pig. He adores every part and aspect of Gerutha. His desire for her is like a blow. It makes him weak. He could have her, and she is still young enough to bear him a son. With her, he could have Denmark. For that, she could make him a king. As the wave of desire for her subsides, his hatred for his brother dissolves and turns to pity. Horwendil has no idea of his brother's lovesick envy. How could Feng lash out against him? Feng feels his father's ghost watching him. It is his conscience. He leaves Denmark for more years of travel and adventure.

Part 1 Section 3 (page 39 to 78) Analysis

Corambus is Gerutha's last link to her father and happy childhood. She turns to him, ostensibly, to ask about Amleth, but takes the opportunity to confess how empty she feels. She has been suffering silently for so long with the husband her father chose, but she never wanted. Now, she wants to vent just a little about Horwendil. She knows that Corambus' loyalty is to her. It is relatively safe to talk to him, and he will even be pleased to hear her speak ill of Horwendil. Indeed, they are not friends. Updike conveys the dull weight of the days that go by, and how Gerutha feels robbed of her life by them, despite their being filled with all the duties of queen, wife and mother.

Horwendil is close to fifty and has aged, unattractively. Gerutha finds everything about Feng pleasing, however, especially in comparison to his brother. He is lean and weathered, darker, with a deeper voice in which humor is always apparent. He tells her wonderful stories that interest her and make her laugh. Most seductively of all, he listens to her. Amleth has often seen them alone together and has mentioned this to his father. (Shakespeare's Hamlet is a perceptive man, one who notices detail of character - a trait common among the actors the child Amleth admires.) This leads to an argument in which they blame each other for having no other children, a sore point and topic of sadness to both. Gerutha accuses him of coolness towards her, a coolness that he demonstrated when he fell asleep on their wedding night. It's a grievance that Gerutha has nurtured. (The grudges the King and Queen compare have been saved for now, but they could possibly be arguing about the same things, time and time again. Gerutha's life has been a quest to reconcile herself to her fate. She's married to a man, who has no real passion for her. She has a son that she does not like. She's unable to bear more children to occupy her time and love her. She has entered into middle age and feels that life is passing her by.

Gerutha is disturbed by Feng's birds, and truly horrified at Bathsheba's sealed eyes. She thinks falconry no less cruel for the passion and expertise Feng and his falconer demonstrate, however. It smacks of play to her, albeit the play of men who "...must play with death, to make it less terrible when it comes." When Fengon takes his leave of Gerutha, the story becomes his for the first time. Suddenly, his thoughts are revealed. His love of her is "eating him alive." He knows he is just one step away from having her and being king. It's everything that he wants. His desire is palpable. It all but knocks him down. He does not wish to harm his brother, but he cannot see Gerutha without wanting

desperately to have her for himself. He does the only thing he can. He takes himself far away from Gerutha and her husband, far away from his heart's desire and its greatest temptation.

Part 2 Section 1 (page 79 to 92)

Part 2 Section 1 (page 79 to 92) Summary

King Horvendile is now sixty, and Queen Geruthe forty-seven. They are discussing Prince Hamblet, who is twenty-nine and still a student at Wittenberg. Horvendile feels his age and wants Hamblet home to study kingship. He wants his son close for another reason. Fengon has returned to live in his manor in Jutland, and Horvendile worries that he covets his throne. Geruthe has some knowledge of Hamblet from Corambis, whose son, Laertes, is Hamblet's friend. She describes that Hamblet is learning the scientific method, and man as the measure of all things. To Horvendile, they smack of mockery and blasphemy, rather than the piety and order in which he believes. He worries that Hamblet spends his nights as a wanton. Gertrude thinks not. She sees him as passive and fastidious about women and sex. She thinks that a very delicate girl might be a good match for him, and suggests that Corambis' daughter, Ophelia, is just such a girl, and one for whom Hamblet demonstrated affection last summer. Horvendile thinks Ophelia not merely shy, however, but that "her brain holds a crack any ill circumstance might jar agape." He is also loathing to do Corambis the honor of making his daughter a queen. He has been considering ways to retire Corambis, not empower him.

Geruthe and Fengon are talking together in Elsinore, when he asks what became of Bathsheba. Geruthe is reminded that Bathsheba was the falcon he gave her before he left Denmark twelve years ago. Gertrude had tried to return her to Lokisheim, but Thord had died, and Fengon's birds were sold, per his instructions when he left. Fengon explains that he had thought to be away longer, because he had made a vow of renunciation. It was a vow to renounce the sight, sound and scent of Geruthe. Geruthe tries to treat his words as a jest, but he will not allow it. She stands abruptly, insisting that they not speak of love. He also stands. She concludes her story, telling him that she set Bathsheba free and did not miss her until she was gone. Her value was eclipsed by the trouble her care required. Fengon sends his man from the room, then goes to Geruthe and kisses her. She welcomes the embrace but breaks it, overwhelmed by desire, overwhelmed by the sin that it represents. Fengon says that this is not a sin against the laws of love. Their sin has been denying their natures for all these years. She whispers to him that they may speak of these things, but not in the royal palace, where nothing goes unobserved.

Part 2 Section 1 (page 79 to 92) Analysis

Although Hamlet is not a major presence in this story, Geruthe's descriptions of Hamblet's education and state of mind presage the man at the center of the play. He is learning scientific principles, based on deductive reasoning, rather than on faith from priests and the Bible. He is learning that man, not God, is the measure of things. Ophelia's eventual suicide is foreshadowed, as well, in Horvendile's observation that her brain is cracked. He does not take Geruthe seriously and has no faith in her judgment.

He thinks that she suggests Ophelia for Hamblet, because she sees herself in the girl, even though Geruthe protests. Geruthe is increasingly aware that she no longer speaks freely and spontaneously to her husband. She guards and directs what she says.

Fengon finally confesses his love in a way that Geruthe cannot pretend is mere flirtation. She tells him that he presumes in thinking her equally in love with him, but he believes he could not love her if she did not love him. Is it possible that she has not loved him until now? Fengon's passion and the passion that he awakes in her are something very big, and very threatening. She pulls back from her physical desire, regaining control of herself, considering the implications of giving in. The scene ends with her laughing at herself and at him, her "adorable villain." She observes that the priests keep telling a woman that her lower parts are bad, so perhaps, she must take a bad man as a lover.

Part 2 Section 2 (page 93 to 128)

Part 2 Section 2 (page 93 to 128) Summary

Geruthe summons Corambis on a day when the King is away. She confides that Elsinore's walls press in on her. She needs a place to be alone. Does he, perhaps, know of any place that she could make her own a few afternoons a week? It must be someplace in nature, where she can take the exercise that he once recommended to her. Someplace within a half hour's ride of the castle. He resists understanding her. She says that she knows that he has a hunting lodge. He must be persuaded to offer it to her, and he is. He will tell the caretakers to expect her. He does not wish to keep a secret from the King, however, as it would be treason. Geruthe assures him that this is a domestic arrangement only. She will go to this place to learn Christianity better. This will please Horvendile, a much better Christian than Geruthe. Corambis suspects Geruthe's real intentions, but he will do as she asks, whatever the risk to him. He remembers the girl that she once was, before she was "tied to that plumb weight," Horvendile.

Geruthe has been regularly visiting the lakeside lodge. Her handmaiden, Herda, waits by a fire in the lodge hearth room. Two mute guards are at the entryway, while Geruthe passes the time in a bedchamber in the tower. Fengon joins her there one day, entering awkwardly through the room's only window, boosted by Sandro, his squire, who then enters by the front door to join Herda. Fengon's entrance is not smooth. He is not young, and Geruthe appears flustered and apprehensive. He knows that he must move slowly, that any initiative must be hers to take. He kisses her hand, gently, courtly. He tells her stories, today about Byzantium. She asks about the women there. His knowledge is second-hand, he says, for he was pledged to an unattainable lady. Fengon thinks that love is ethereal. An old argument between them is renewed. Geruthe thinks it is ridiculous to call something ethereal that they share with animals. He is "skyey." She is "earthy," and becoming angry with him. She wants what is tangible from him, starting with the presents that he protests he could not bring through the window with him. Fengon departs.

They meet again the next week. He brings her a beautiful cloisonny pendant. He fastens it on her neck, where his lips linger. They kiss. These kisses are more tentative than at the castle. Geruthe pulls away; the struggle inside her between guilt and desire makes her weary. The next time they meet, Fengon brings her a silver chalice. They drink wine from it, eventually falling fully clothed into the bed together. They grapple together, but still do not consummate their affair.

The next day, she leaves on a state visit with Horvendile to Sk?ne. The visit goes well, and Horvendile is more attentive to her in his buoyant mood. Horvendile "the Hammer" hammers her in bed. Her memory of Fengon dims with distance, and Geruthe determines to end their meetings. Fengon is rarely in attendance when she returns, however, except on business with the court or the King. Corambis pulls her aside to comment on the glow that her trip has given her. Geruthe is uncomfortable with his

intimacy, and feels demeaned that they share a secret. She saw him as her only friend at court. Now, she sees something grabby in him, something that convinces her that Horvendile is right to want him retired. She struggles to remain aloof. She tells Corambis that she no longer needs his lodge. Corambis presses her. He carries a message from Fengon, who has one more present. She agrees to a meeting the next day to get rid of the Lord Chamberlain.

Fengon is late, slowed and drenched by rain. Geruthe has always found it difficult to think of one man when in another's company, and now has trouble maintaining her new detachment from Fengon. His final present is a tunic in peacock colors, fashioned from a shimmering cloth. Silk is something that she has never seen before. The touch of it is her undoing. She undresses down to her linen chemise, and then puts on the sheath. Fengon is stunned at the sight of her. She calls him to her side and tells him that what he robed, he may now disrobe. At last, they make love.

Part 2 Section 2 (page 93 to 128) Analysis

Geruthe turns to Corambis for two reasons. He does actually have a country place that would serve her needs. Plus, his loyalty is to her, rather than the king. So, she can trust him. He makes her work for the favor she asks, however, and she will have to suffer his intimacy in exchange for his favor and keeping her secret. He will consider himself a co-conspirator. Corambis is unable to speak without lecturing, and demonstrates his self-satisfaction with each lecture. Even so, Corambis is not yet Shakespeare's Polonius.

Geruthe loses patience with Fengon during their first meeting. He insists that his love for her is spiritual and ethereal. She has no interest in a love that seeks to exalt her. She is a woman. She is earthy, and the love she desires is earthy. She says, "You call ethereal what in truth we share with animals." She is clearly talking here about sex, rather than love. She knows the difference, but she needs Fengon to come down to earth. She reconsiders Fengon while traveling with her husband, and rethinks the wisdom of faithlessness. Horvendile is at his best when being feted and paraded on state visits, and kinder to Geruthe. How can she betray him? She is grateful that she can still break it off with Fengon. Geruthe tells us time and time again that she cannot keep one man in her head while in another's company, and there is no reason to doubt her.

When she meets Fengon after her return from Sk?ne, she means to break off the affair, as Fengon suspects from what he has seen of her in the past week. Fengon comes in late, sopping wet and stinking of wet horse, wet wool and wet leather. It should be easy for her to end it. Yet, she is undone and finally seduced by the unfamiliar touch of a silk dress, dramatically proving the earthiness that she has claimed all along (as well as the boredom and dissatisfaction). As on her wedding night, she has stripped down to her chemise. Feng is unsure, a sixty-year old man hopelessly in love with his brother's wife. He waits across the room, while she undresses and pulls the silk tunic on. She has to summon him to her side. She is not a virgin bride any more. If this brother needs encouragement to take her, she will give it to him.

Part 2 Section 3 (page 129 to 162)

Part 2 Section 3 (page 129 to 162) Summary

Geruthe gives herself fully to the pleasure she finds with Fengon. "All her unclean places came alive, and came clean." Horvendile skulks off after sex with her, seemingly ashamed of his natural desires (an aspect of his particular take on Christianity). Fengon, on the other hand, lingers, touching and tasting her. The passion they share informs her whole life. She is aroused by Horvendile, now, who responds by coming to her bed more often. Fengon grows more unwilling to share her. Their affair began in the spring. It has turned cold now, and Horvendile leaves Elsinore less often as winter closes in. The lovers have less chance to meet, and their risk increases.

Horvendile summons Fengon to him at the end of October. The King speaks, at first, of domestic matters. He tells Fengon that Geruthe thinks him foolish, loving Denmark too possessively, and describes his notion that goodness flows from God through the King to the people. If this flow is disrupted, the people suffer. Feng is bemused by the self-importance the King displays. Then, he comes to the point that he knows about the affair. Fengon's squire has betrayed Fengon and Geruthe in exchange for passage back to his warmer homeland. Sandro was not his only source, of course. They were seen by many at court. Horvendile had suspicions on his own, as "there was something, it would be too rude to say rotten, but overripe about [Geruthe] and her attentions." He rants at Fengon, who has been always his inferior, a "filthy skulking shadow." "You were always foul at heart," the King says, accusing Fengon of envy and depravity. He asks why Fengon has always hated him. Fengon replies that he does not hate him, but finds him "strangely negligible." Horvendile intends to execute his traitorous chamberlain, and will seize Fengon's assets and banish him. Fengon pleads for the Corambis' life, but Horvendile is adamant. He refuses to discuss Geruthe's punishment with Fengon, but he believes she loves him still and is clearly convinced that her treachery was Fengon's doing. He curses Fengon and charges him to await his return from other business of state.

Fengon is transformed, as he departs the audience chamber. He resolves that Geruthe must be his, and he doesn't know how. Corambis emerges beside him from the arras, which concealed him. He has heard everything and is already thinking ahead of Fengon. He tells Fengon that Horvendile will be three hours at lunch, stuck with a group that speaks at length and drinks much wine. He will then take his usual nap in the gazebo of his orchard. He describes the access to the orchard, and gives Fengon a key. Fengon exacts from him a promise not to tell the Queen about the day's events. He dashes to the stables and mounts his black Arabian, then races to Lokisheim to retrieve what he needs there. From the arm of a hidden jade cross, he retrieves a vial of poison. It's a souvenir from his travels. The poison kills quickly, when introduced into the mouth or the ear.

Fengon whips the horse mercilessly, as he speeds back to the castle. He follows the route Corambis has described, and is in place when his brother enters the orchard. Horvendile stretches out on his couch. Fengon pries the stopper from the vial, imagining his fate if he is caught, while he waits for his brother to fall asleep. He hears Horvendile's snores and pauses, thinking of their childhood together, of the fraternal love they shared. It does not matter now. Fengon pours the hebona juice into Horwendil's ear. Horwendil dies, his skin with the appearance of marble from the action of the poison. Fengon must crawl down the stone privy to make his escape, emerging in a closet before the chute empties into the moat. He feels no guilt yet, although he will feel it in days to come. The corpse is found an hour later, when the Queen sends a man to wake her husband. Fengon and Corambis take charge, and speculate publicly that a venomous serpent must have made its way into the orchard and bitten the King. Or, perhaps he had been ill, for he had appeared "joyless and brooding of late." Naturally enough, the King's brother takes over while Hamblet is sent for.

Part 2 Section 3 (page 129 to 162) Analysis

Horvendile's response to Fengon's betrayal is beyond anger. Truly, he could never have even imagined such an insult. The offense is so heinous, because it's not merely against him, the man Horvendile, but against the Church and State personified in his person. Horvendile is reduced to accusing Fengon of having always been jealous of him. It's the cry of a wounded child. We cannot know for sure that his accusations to his brother are untrue, but Geruthe would certainly have heard some rumor at court if Fengon's behavior had been all that Horvendile says. (The reader knows that it was Horvendile, in fact, who raped and executed a vanquished warrior's wife.)

When Fengon leaves the King, his world, too, is transformed in ways that he has imagined before now. His romantic notions are gone. He knows simply that he must have Geruthe. Corambis' presence spares him the need to form a plan. Corambis lays out all the details for him. He tells him about the King's lunch, the nap that follows, and an access route to where he sleeps. Corambis includes unnecessary detail and speculation. He has finally become the Polonius of *Hamlet*. Fengon has only to provide the means of killing the King, which he does without much trouble.

Horvendile is outraged at the violation of his trust and sovereignty. Yet, he is not sufficiently disturbed to let it all interfere with his lunch and his nap. The punishment that he hands down to Fengon is dire, on Corambis more so. Yet, he is not sufficiently imaginative to think his life could be at risk. His murder falls into place so easily that Fengon sees the "hand of Heaven" in his perfect timing. Fengon has been a warrior all his life and has killed before. He is killing now, not in the heat of passion or the moment, but with a cold clarity of purpose. He considers the cost of failure, accepts the risks and succeeds completely.

Part 3 Section 1 (page 163 to 187)

Part 3 Section 1 (page 163 to 187) Summary

This section ends with "...the two women perfumed the closet with the stir of their embrace." Feng has taken the name Claudius upon his coronation, inspired by the Latin. Corambis has followed suit, and is now called Polonius. The King before Claudius is Hamlet, as is his son. It is now two weeks since King Hamlet's death in the orchard. Gertrude is surprised at how quickly Claudius has taken on the habits of a king, speaking to her at great length and with great pomp, as if courtiers are listening even when the two are alone in their chambers.

Claudius is irate with Prince Hamlet. He was late to his father's funeral and left almost immediately thereafter. Claudius thinks Hamlet's absence an insult to him, while Gertrude thinks it is because Hamlet blames her for not loving his father enough, and not grieving sufficiently at his death. Claudius finds Hamlet alert, bright and engaged. He thinks that he understands Hamlet and can make him a friend. Gertrude thinks Hamlet should stay in Wittenberg, that he will bring unhappiness if he comes home. Claudius suggests that he and Gertrude marry, despite King Hamlet's recent death. He believes it will consolidate his power. It might also bring Hamlet home and eliminate any chance of his raising an army to challenge him. By example, it could strengthen Hamlet's courtship of Ophelia. Gertrude finally agrees, despite the impropriety. She thinks that their marriage will obscure their affair and make it respectable.

Gertrude had taken to her bed when King Hamlet died, for the first time since she was a girl. Her grief had been shallow, mixed with relief that "his weight had rolled off her." He had never seen her as she was. She should have asserted her son's right to the throne, but by the time she emerged, everything was already settled. Her wedding to Claudius is a restrained affair, only one month after Hamlet's death. However, its consummation is much more triumphant.

Some time after the wedding, the Queen summons Ophelia to her chambers to ask about her relationship with Hamlet. Ophelia is eighteen and lovely, if a little wan. Gertrude worries, as do Polonius and Laertes, that Ophelia not yield "that which cannot be bartered back." She has not. She loves Hamlet deeply, although his changeability confuses her. She says that in one moment he is tender, the next he slips from "good-natured flamboyance to near-disgust," and can be "obscurely ornate and crudely frank in successive utterances." He seems to despise women collectively, although he says that he loves her. The women express great affection for each other before they part.

Part 3 Section 1 (page 163 to 187) Analysis

Claudius changes in much more than name. Gertrude is trying to become accustomed to Claudius the King, while holding on to Fengon her lover. She is unprepared for the

extent to which the office evidently makes the man. She sees surprising similarities between Claudius and his brother in the things they say, the way they say them, their political views, even their assessments of Hamlet's education. She prefers to think that Claudius did not seek the throne. It's a naive notion, as if wanting her and wanting the throne can be entirely separate things.

Hamlet comes to center stage in Part 3, even though we see him only through other eyes. His character is discussed at great length. Claudius wants him in Denmark, so he can keep him on a short leash. He worries that Hamlet will challenge his right to the throne. However, since Hamlet is never there, and never expresses interest in the job, Claudius sees no serious threat in him. Besides, he genuinely likes him. (He thought him a rude, foppish brat at thirteen.) Like his father before him, Hamlet makes his mother feel guilty and ashamed, as if Hamlet knows that his father's death is a relief to Gertrude and that she should be punished for it. To her, Hamlet is a reproach. He makes her feel stupid, shallow and bad. She does not want him there. Gertrude now has a chance at the life that she thinks she's wanted all along, a life with a man and King, who sees and loves her for what he sees. She wants a chance to find out if this can make her happy.

Gertrude sees Hamlet much more truly than Claudius. Updike gives her all the insights a particular, rather harsh view of Shakespeare's character could yield. Gertrude does not forget that he is his father's son, moreover, if with a more subtle and sophisticated gloss. Claudius sees the subtlety and sophistication and forgets the character over which they lay. Ophelia gives her nothing new except Hamlet's vast distrust of women, which Gertrude recognizes as his vast distrust of her.

Part 3 Section 2 (from page 187)

Part 3 Section 2 (from page 187) Summary

This section begins with "Polonius encountered the Queen in the pillared lobby...." Polonius and Gertrude cross paths. Polonius says that Ophelia was comforted and cheered up by their talk. He has advised his daughter to curtail her availability to Hamlet. He fears ever more for her virtue, virtue being "all of a woman's worth." Ophelia is innocent, and he believes Hamlet toys with her. He thinks Hamlet is too sophisticated, haughty and caustic. Ophelia is to await more solid tokens of affection. He believes, as do others, that Hamlet is spoiled, having grown up with no discipline. Gertrude's long-dormant love for her son rises to his defense. She says that he needed little discipline, and was smarter than either of his parents. In fact, he was his father's constant companion. The King has high hopes for him, she tells the old man. Polonius refers to a secret that he shares with Claudius. It's a secret to which he has alluded before, about which Gertrude is ignorant. He reminds her of the long-ago day when he skied twelve leagues to bear witness to her bloody bridal sheets. She responds that bleeding "surely is among the lesser of a woman's accomplishment." He disagrees. As he babbles on, Gertrude considers how easy it is to ignore him. He was once a man who was once great in her esteem.

Gertrude roams through the castle, reminiscing and letting her mind wander. She thinks of King Hamlet more since her marriage to Claudius, rather than less. She feels him as a pained presence throughout the castle. She cannot turn to her trusted Herda for comfort, for Herda is in her eighth month with child and disconsolate from the father's abandonment. Sandro is the father, and Gertrude cannot understand why he disappeared as he did. She asks Claudius, but he offers no explanation. Why won't he tell her the truth? He is shutting her out, keeping secrets from her. What does Polonius know that he will not tell her? Claudius dismisses Polonius as an old man, babbling (realizing that he will eventually need to be silenced). She chooses to believe him. He asks her to embrace Hamlet's return to Elsinore, and make him feel loved. She agrees, despite all her misgivings, to keep peace between them. She trusts Claudius. "She had feared, of herself and Claudius, that their passion might not survive the transition from adultery's fearful wilderness to the security of proclaimed marriage; but it had." Claudius loves her. He adores her. She makes him feel whole.

It is two months since King Hamlet's death, St. Stephen's Day, and Claudius has scheduled an official audience. His prepared remarks to the court will mention his brother's death and his widow's hasty marriage, dealing adroitly with both so as to put them in the past. He will soothe Hamlet, who makes no secret of his displeasure with his mother. As Claudius and Gertrude ascend to the throne, he looks over at her. At the sight of her, he realizes, as he often does, what is "simply, real, all else being an idle show of theatrical seeming." He delivers his speech perfectly, finally imploring Hamlet, before all assembled there, to remain at Elsinore. Gertrude plays the part he gave her, adding her plea to his own. Hamlet agrees to stay. King Claudius is filled with

benevolent satisfaction. He stands to make his exit. Gertrude stands beside him. As he takes her hand, he sees his future before him, the Age of Claudius, eventually succeeded by Hamlet. "He has gotten away with it. All would be well."

Part 3 Section 2 (from page 187) Analysis

Polonius has evolved in the span of this story from a councilor at the right hand of a king to Shakespeare's not-quite fool. He pays no attention to what Gertrude says, wishing only to press his analysis on her. In earlier days, he would have known not to share with a mother a very negative assessment of her son's character. (It is a lesson that we all learn early on. Even one's closest friends cannot insult one's family.) He harps on virtue, that it is a woman's only measure, oblivious to the insult to Gertrude.

Gertrude senses the dead King haunting Elsinore. Does she know or does some small part of her suspect that his death was not innocent? She believes that Claudius perceives the unquiet spirit, too. What is the secret that he shares with Polonius? Why did Sandro leave so suddenly, just when the King died? Herda says that he loved her. How could he just abandon her? Gertrude makes the decision to accept Claudius' explanations when she confronts him. "She seizes the opportunity to agree, not wanting the gulf between them to grow."

King Claudius is at peace on the last day of this story, the day he makes his speech and holds court. Love for Gertrude made him an unhappy wanderer for most of his life. Could he be human, if he had never imagined what might have been but for an accident of birth? He has always shared Gertrude's opinion that he was the better of the brothers. He knows that he would have been a better husband and king. Now, finally, he can claim the life of which he can make so much more than his brother. He is husband to the woman he so loves, and King of the land he loves. His future is before him, as certain as the ground beneath his feet. The last lines deliver a jolt, a black joke, because we know that they will all soon be dead.

Characters

About Names

The names in Part 1 are taken from the account of the ancient Hamlet legend in the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus, a late-twelfth-century Latin text, first printed in Paris in 1514. The spellings in Part 2 come from an adaptation of Saxo printed in Paris in 1576. The names in Part 3 are from the source used by Shakespeare, probably a German work printed in 1781 from earlier manuscripts. The names used in the summaries correspond to the names used in the book.

Gerutha is sixteen when the story begins, an "ample, serene, dewy and sensible" girl, whose mother died when she was three. She has long, copper-colored hair and a small gap between her two front teeth, "as if too broad a smile had once pulled the space forever open." She feels the warrior blood that runs in her veins, setting her apart from all the other children in the castle with whom she plays. She is much loved at Elsinore for her warmth, which extends even to the temperature of her skin. Her father has indulged her, and she has perceptions and opinions that are insightful and clear. They do not serve her well, however, because she is a woman and daughter of the King. Her future is as a tool of dynasty and alliance. Her husband will probably be the next king, as will the son she bears him. She does not care much for Horwendil, the man to whom her father has betrothed her. He sees what she is, but not who she is. He could love equally well any woman who would make kings of him and his sons, and Gerutha sees it clearly. She protests the match to her father, even to Horwendil, but the promise was made. Gerutha is a loyal daughter, who knows her duty. She submits to her father, then to her husband.

Gerutha makes herself into the perfect Queen. She's reasonable, gracious, and strives to be useful. She bears Horwendil a son, whom she hopes to name for her newly dead father. Horwendil instead names him "Amleth" to commemorate a victory. Amleth is fussy and sickly. Her milk is sour to him. She cannot comfort him. The great love that she had for him at his birth is thwarted. She thinks the fault must be hers. Perhaps, she was too young, or perhaps by being motherless, she never learned mothering properly. It is possible that Amleth bears some of the blame, as if her love can't be absorbed by him, like water on wax. He is very much his father's son, besides. She is unable to conceive again, to her great sorrow. The reason why is a mystery.

Horvendile's brother, Feng, returns from his travels, briefly and infrequently, in her thirty-fifth year. She was always intrigued by him. He is very different from his brother in ways that appeal to her. He speaks with a freedom that thrills and challenges her. What makes him most attractive to her is the way that he listens to her, as if he cares what she says. It makes her feel that he sees her, the real her. She's Geruthe, not the Queen.

Geruthe feels the weight of years passing, taking her life, giving her nothing. Fengon returns, this time evidently to stay. She is forty-seven, and he is sixty. He declares his

love for her, and suddenly, she is alive to the world again. When she is with him, she forgets Horvendile. When she is with Horvendile, she forgets Fengon. She has always been like this, able to see only the man in front of her. Bored, middle-aged, loving but with no one to love, she falls into a passionate affair with him. The man adores her, and she begins to love him. She wonders if he can love the real, every day woman she is. She knows how dangerous this is, but at last, she feels alive. She's now so aroused and responsive that even her husband returns to her bed.

One day, her husband is bitten by a snake and dies. She becomes so lethargic that she cannot leave her bed. She is relieved that he is dead, but feels guilty that she's relieved. She knows that she should be fighting for Hamlet to succeed his father, but she wants Hamlet to stay in Wittenberg. She is afraid of him, afraid of the accusation in his eyes, afraid that he will harm his uncle, afraid that he will destroy this life that she has only just started. When she finally leaves her room, everything is already settled. Fengon will be King Claudius. They will marry. She can pretend there was no affair, no betrayal. This Claudius is a different man, now that he is King. She is amused at how much more seriously he takes himself. He speaks as if courtiers are in attendance, even when they are alone. She tells him about Hamlet, but he does not take her seriously. This is something with which she is familiar. She had the power in the relationship before; now the power is his. She thinks that she is in love with this man. She makes a choice and puts her misgivings and suspicions about the King's death and Hamlet aside. She does this to please Claudius. When he takes her hand after his speech, she knows that he will make everything all right.

Feng/Fengon/Claudius

Feng is eighteen months younger than Horwendil, a little shorter, darker and wirier. He ages well into middle age, while Horwendil grows fat, with a deeper voice and a better sense of humor. King Rorik talked about him a little with his daughter. He described him as less prepossessing than his brother. He had mortgaged his lands to fight on behalf of the Holy Roman Emperor or "whoever else trusts his arm and his agile tongue." Fengon was good at languages and served the King of France. His lance had taken him even beyond the Pyrenees, into the hot, dry lands there that have been besieged by infidels with curved swords and fast horses. He was smooth and charming, and Geruthe thought he must be an easy liar. He was married, briefly, soon after his brother. However, his wife, Lena of the Orkney Isles, died young. He stayed far away from Denmark, because, he tells Geruthe, it "has been my fate always to be seen as a lesser version of my brother. Accordingly I have traveled to where the comparison could not be made." Horwendil describes him to his wife as gifted and charming, but someone who believes in shortcuts to the prizes of life, ways to circumvent patient labor and fidelity to obligation. He suggests that he loves him only because he must, "by the blood-bonds God has forged."

Feng returns to Denmark, when he is forty-seven, to reverse the decay of his Jutland estates. At Elsinore, he is a great "convivialist," feasting and drinking and chasing serving-girls. His behavior is always above reproach with Gerutha, however, with whom

he spends much time in conversation. He is even a little shy with her, she thinks, pulling back whenever she inadvertently touches him. She had wondered about him, even while his brother was courting her. When the brothers had first come to claim her father's gratitude, when she was just a child, she noticed him and his "dark-eyed, watchful demeanor" which spoke to her of longing. This lingered on her with more than casual interest. She visits Feng's manor now, and when she leaves, *Gertrude and Claudius* becomes his story, as well as hers, as he thinks, "*Lord Christ...this love of her is eating me alive*."

Feng has developed an obsessive love for this woman, his brother's wife. He has skirted around the edges of telling her so many times, but she pretends, he thinks, not to understand. He cannot bear to imagine his brother with her. The notion of having her himself, to "bathe daily in the radiance from which he now must keep averting his eyes...," is so exquisite that it hurts him. Thinking about her leads inevitably to thinking about having her, which leads to thinking about how to have her. This, in turn, leads to thinking about killing his brother and taking his crown with his wife. Feng knows that to spend more time with her is madness for him. He may fantasize about the way to have her, but he would never kill his brother. He leaves Denmark again. He stays away for many years. He declares his love for Geruthe, unambiguously, when he returns. He is certain that she loves him, too. He couldn't possibly feel so strongly about her if his love were not returned.

While he may very well see Geruthe more truly than Horvendile does, he has spent much more time with the woman in his imagination than with the real woman. She is so very bored when he comes back, so ready for adventure. She grows impatient with Fengon's sublime vision of her. She wants him to see the woman, not the dream. He comes to her time and time again at the lakeside lodge, bringing present after present, not understanding what she wants from him, adoring her so. He thinks that he has lost her when she returns from Sk?ne, but he cannot let her go without one last attempt, without giving her one final gift. He brings her the silk dress. Did he know the power it would have over her? Finally, she relents, and they discover themselves well-matched in every way.

When he leaves the King after being confronted about their affair, everything is absolutely clear to him. He will not give up the woman he loves. Nothing else matters. Nothing else bears thought. He is handed a plan by Corambis (most conveniently) and takes the required action. He murders the King to take the crown and the Queen, even as, perhaps, he had always imagined. He becomes King Claudius, transformed by his new responsibilities. He values his wife's opinions, but he sees things more clearly than she does. He knows that he is right. He will be a fine and just King, as Hamlet will be after him.

Horwendil/Horvendile/Hamlet

Horwendil the Jute is the warrior and co-governor (with his absentee brother) of Jutland. He is promised the daughter and crown of King Rorik. He is husband to

Gerutha/Gertrude, brother to Feng/Claudius, father to Amleth/Hamlet, King to Denmark. He is nicknamed "the Hammer" by his brother, because "he is dull, but he hits you square on the head."

Horwendil is considered handsome, with pale skin, curly flaxen hair, icy blue eyes "long as minnows in his wide face," a soft jaw, and a thin-lipped, tight mouth. He courts Gertrude like a man on a mission. Marrying her is the next step to his destiny. He cannot understand why Gertrude balks, when he knows that he's a prize. He tells her outright, "...my person has been admired, my brow considered noble....Our alliance is desired on all sides." If it is true that his love of her is founded in politics, based on what she is rather than who she is, it is also true that he will love her as well as he can. He will be a gentle husband to her.

Horwendil is a Christian, something relatively new in Denmark at this time. Feng thinks it reinforces his tendency to moroseness. While courting Gerutha, the only time she sees his passion is when he speaks of mankind's misfortune in living on this earth among beasts and filth. (His focus is often sin and damnation when he speaks to his faith.) He believes that his faith can connect him to his people, because the peasants are Christian, as are the priests who tell him what they think. He professes a desire to be good through his faith, good to his subjects and his peers. When he goes back to raiding on long ships, however, he behaves less Christian and more like his companions, devotees of Tyr, the Norse god of war, sports and fertility. Feng says that he is good, a good boy and a good man. Feng has seen another side to him, however. He calls his personality "a rambling licentiousness...as his tongue could not forbear touching his mind's underparts." He knows the Horwendil who rapes women whose husbands he has just killed, who is aroused by his triumphs over the fair and helpless, and who raped and murdered the heroic Sela, although Feng begged him to exile or ransom her.

He ages in the way of many fair, thin-skinned men. His nose tip becomes pink, his eyelids droop, and his face and throat become puffy in a way that his thin beard cannot hide. Gerutha observes that his public persona has become wearisomely hollow, that kingship "had gutted the private man even in his nightgown." He and his wife are polite to each other, and their familiarity grows over the years they share, although he comes less and less often to her bed. He loves his son very much.

Horvendile comes unglued during his last meeting with his brother, when he confronts him over his affair with Geruthe. He toys with Fengon a while before getting to the point. He describes how much more ardent Geruthe has been with him since the affair began, as if encouraging Fengon to confess all in sordid detail. He rants at Fengon, accusing him of being always inferior, "a filthy skulking shadow," and eventually accuses Fengon of life-long jealousy before asking him why he hates him. (Fengon replies that he does not, that he finds him "strangely negligible," but the King does not respond.) He tells Fengon his fate, but does not decree it just then, as he must first (we discover) attend a meeting, have lunch and take a nap. He is calm enough to take his customary nap after lunch and fall asleep immediately, without a care, and with no suspicion that he is about to be murdered by the men whom he has just threatened to destroy. Horvendile is as

self-confident at the time of his death, as at any time in his life. He's just as oblivious to the true hearts of those closest to him.

Corambus/Corambis/Polonius

Corambus is Rorik's Lord Chamberlain, then Horwendil's. He is in his forties and slim when Gerutha is first married. By his mid-fifties, he has become fat from too much feasting and sitting. "He spoke in the twinkling, rounded gestures - a gracefully upheld forefinger, a deftly dropped wink - of a man whose physical substance confidently seconded his sense of his station." He wears a green hat in the shape of a sugarloaf, from which greasy yellow-gray hair falls, and has a wet lower lip that sprays sometimes as he speaks. He loved King Rorik and adored the young Gerutha. He still cherishes her as an adult for the girl she once was, and is possibly even a little jealous of her husband. He is a valued councilor when the story begins, a little given to preaching and self-satisfaction, but trustworthy and sound. He is a good friend to Gerutha.

He and Horvendile are never friends. He lends Geruthe his cabin knowing why she wants it. He enjoys conspiring with her, enjoys the intimacy engendered by his favor, and even acts as Claudius' messenger to her. He is oblivious to the offense his growing familiarity gives to Gertrude. His character changes dramatically during this story, as he ages. By the end, he is the long-winded, self-absorbed and preoccupied Polonius of *Hamlet*, clearly apparent when he emerges from the arras after overhearing Horvendile confront Fengon and decree his own execution.

Amleth/Hamblet/Hamlet

As an infant, Amleth is fussy and colicky. He finds his mother's milk sour, and he can take no comfort from her. As soon as he starts to speak, his intelligence is obvious, as he argues with everyone about everything. The only person he seems to like is the disreputable, possibly deranged jester, Yorik. He loves jokes, and seems to think everything is a joke. His games are the usual boy's games, games that mimic war and sport. Even while he is still a child, he is very much his father's son. He's Jutish and gloomy at the core, but with regal, affected manners. He is very dramatic. As a youth, he seems to affect different attitudes in succession, as if he's trying on different characters, like the actors who enthrall him when they perform at court. He acquires the skills of a young man, skills with horses and weapons. He is often with his father, who loves him dearly. In his mid-teens, he leaves Elsinore to study in Wittenberg, after which he rarely comes home and stays only briefly.

He returns to the story after his father's death. He is twenty-nine and still a student. His displeasure with his mother is obvious, especially when she marries his uncle only one month after she is widowed. He toys with Ophelia, whom he claims to love. However, his anger at his mother taints his behavior with her. His mother fears him as a threat to her happiness and to the welfare of her new husband. His uncle, in contrast, sees much of himself in Hamlet, his need to escape the confines of provincial Denmark, and his

being overshadowed by King Hamlet. He thinks that he can make Hamlet his friend. He asks Gertrude to help him convince Hamlet to stay. By the end of the story, both King Claudius and his mother are pressing him to stay. He agrees.

Rorik/Roderick

Rorik is Gerutha's father and King of Denmark. He has half-gray eyebrows, a droopy red mustache, a grizzled, uncombed red beard and a large, porous, hooked nose with a translucent wart above one nostril. His skin is thick, browned from the salt and sun of youthful sea raids. Gerutha knows that he is probably ugly, but he is her father, and she loves him. He chooses Horwendil for her, because he truly believes that his virtues will make him a good husband and Denmark a good king. Gerutha realizes that he is unwell, when she departs after her wedding. He is ill, and it compelled him to arrange her wedding sooner than he might have. He has doubts about his choice after the wedding, and before he dies, he asks Gerutha if he has done badly by her. She reassures him that she understands his reasons and his obligations, as she has reassured herself. He dies soon after, just before her son is born.

Ona

Ona was Gerutha's mother, a Wendish princess captured by Rorik's father in a raid and brought back to Denmark to marry him. (Wends are an old Slavic tribe whose homeland is Lusatia, a region in the east of Germany.) She died when her daughter was three. She hated Rorik and fought him off for six months after they were married. The marriage was consummated one day, when she had been sick and was weak. It took Rorik another six months to win her affections. Their marriage was passionate, but some part of her was always held back unto herself. Rorik was never able to understand what she needed from him that she did not have.

Magrit

Magrit is the wife of Corambus, "so fair as to be transparent" and delicate, perhaps a little addled. She is mother of Laertes and Ophelia, with many stillbirths in between. She dies while Ophelia is still young.

Laertes

Laertes is Polonius' son, Ophelia's older brother and Hamlet's friend. He's also a fellow student at Wittenberg.

Ophelia

Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius and Magrit. She is eighteen during Part 3. She's a lithe, luminous beauty, with perfect, pale skin and a womanly figure. She's a bit wan, with lank hair and no color in her cheeks. Her posture suggests a kind of expectation mingled with a fragile wariness. She is in love with Hamlet, although he confuses her. Hamlet's father does not approve the match, in part because he thinks that she is addled the way her mother was.

Herda

Herda is Gerutha's handmaiden. She marries Svend, Horwendil's squire, with whom she has four children before Svend is killed. Gerutha suspects that Herda was bitter towards Horwendil because of her husband's death, which happened during a skirmish in which Horwendil mistakenly expected no opposition. She becomes pregnant again by Fengon's man, Sandro, who disappears, before his child is born and without a word to her, despite having professed his love.

Svend

Svend is Horwendil's squire. He married Herda, Gerutha's handmaiden, with whom he had four children before he was killed in a skirmish between Horwendil's troops and a Norwegian fishing port. Horwendil had expected no opposition, but the port had hired a guard of Scottish swordsman to defend it.

Thord and Ljot

Thord is Feng's falconer. Ljot is Thord's grandson at Lokisheim.

Gerwindil

Gerwindil is the father of Horwendil and Feng.

Sandro

Sandro is the slender, honey-skinned Calabrian (from Calabria in southern Italy) whom Fengon brings to Denmark to serve him when he returns to stay. He and Herda, Gertrude's handmaiden, have an affair while their masters do the same, and Herda becomes pregnant. He tells her that he loves her, then suddenly disappears without a word. He has betrayed Fengon and Geruthe to the King, in exchange, the King says, for passage home. Neither Herda nor Geruthe know of his betrayal, and cannot understand his disappearance.

Objects/Places

Elsinore

Elsinore is the castle inhabited by the King and court of Denmark. It is the home where Gerutha/Gertrude grew up. It's also to where she returns to care for her father. She then stays as Queen, when her husband is crowned King. The stone castle undergoes perpetual renovations, additions and reconfigurations. The upper chambers are devoted to private residences. The floors are usually cold, especially in the depths of winter. Some of the private residences have wood floors. The castle contains a chapel, an unheated room with a high roof and a glazed window high above the altar. The castle surrounded by a moat, which protects the castle and receives all the waste that is generated by its inhabitants.

Odinsheim

Odinsheim is Horwendil's manor in Jutland, given to him by King Rorik as a reward for service to the crown. It is a two-hour ride from Elsinore, and near to the estate of his brother, Feng. The manor has no moat. The rooms are lower and smaller than those of Elsinore.

Odinsheim means "Odin's home." Odin is the chief divinity of the Norse gods (comparable to Zeus in Greek mythology.) He is god of war, death and wisdom.

Lokisheim

Lokisheim is Feng's manor in Jutland, adjacent to Odinsheim. It was given to him by King Rorik as a reward for service to the crown. It is a lesser manor, although their service to Rorik was equal. The facade is as wide as Odinsheim but lower by one story, and of exposed timber instead of yellow brick. The house has a somewhat military feel inside, and is filled with objects and souvenirs that Feng acquires on his travels.

Lokisheim means Loki's home. Loki is the cunning trickster among the Norse gods, god of fire, magic, and most notably of mischief.

Thing

Thing is the singular and plural for assemblies of freedmen that judge and govern the affairs of municipalities, and, above municipalities, of provinces. The confirmation of four provincial thing is necessary to be king.

The Mews

The Mews is a long, thatched-roof building on Feng's estate with one low door and a floor of sand and gravel. It is a cramped and dingy place in which Feng keeps his caged falcons.

Bathsheba

Bathsheba is a young falcon that Feng gives to Gerutha. When Gerutha first sees the bird, its eyes have been sewn shut for her protection. Its eyes are unsealed, before it is sent to her. Gerutha does not approve of falconry, thinking it cruel to make sport of such beautiful, wild creatures. Bathsheba is too demanding a gift, and Gerutha tries to return it. Feng's birds are sold, as Feng has expected to be away longer than their lives. His falconer is dead, so Gerutha sets Bathsheba free.

Gur Forrest

Gur Forrest is the location of Corambis' lakeside hunting lodge, and the site of Geruthe's rendezvous with Fengon.

Cloisonny Peacock Pendant

The cloisonny peacock pendant is the first of Fengon's presents to Geruthe, all acquired in his travels. This is a cloisonny pendant on a gold chain, like a peacock in shape and color. The spread tail is a fan in whose center the neck and body of shimmering blue stand out against the spread of green feathers with eyes in yellow and black. Each segment of enamel is outlined in fine gold thread. The peacock is a symbol of immortality to its maker.

Silver Chalice

The silver chalice is the second of Fengon's presents. This is a chalice of silver, worked so thinly it could cut a lip. Its stem is thickly jeweled with knobs of green chryosprase, rose quartz and carnelian. The bowl of the goblet in incised with lacy designs that are revealed to be trees on one side, with nested snakes, apples and birds too large for the branches on which they rest, their heads outstretched towards bunches of grapes. On the other side are beasts with the bodies of horses, feet of talons, forelegs that thicken into wings at the shoulder, and faces of women. These are *chimaira* (chimeras).

Silk Tunic

The silk tunic is the third and final gift from Fengon's. This is a silk tunic woven of interlocking and wavering peacock colors, green and blue and yellow with black and red

specks, stiffened at the collar, cuffs and hem with rows of tiny sewn pearls. This is the gift that finally seduces the Queen. She is seduced by its touch.

Vial of Poison

Fengon has a coffer (a strongbox) with carved-rope handles and fish-shaped clasps. It holds folded silks, worked leather, carvings of ivory and cedar and, beneath them all, a thick jade cross in the Greek fashion, with arms of equal length. One of the cross' arms is hollow, sealed with red wax. It contains a slender, stoppered vial of Venetian glass that contains juice of hebona, which disfigures the body, causing it to look like marble, and brings quick death when introduced into a mouth or ear.

Social Sensitivity

Long recognized as one of the most acute observersoftheAmericansceneduring the last half of the twentieth century, John Updike's special strength has been novels set in the immediate present, in which the manners, styles, and sexual mores of American culture are dissected under the microscope of his fiction. The four novels concerning the life and times of ex-athlete Harry Angstrom (Rabbit, Run, 1960; Rabbit Redux, 1971; Rabbit Is Rich, 1981; Rabbit at Rest, 1990) constitute a chronicle of a man whose best years ended when he was eighteen years old; but they also tell with uncanny prescience the narrative of an America increasingly consumed by media superficialities, racial tensions, sexual revolutions, and a credo of material success that legitimates greed and self-interest as a way of life.

Similarly, his novels Couples (1968), A Month of Sundays (1975), and Marry Me (1976) along with the powerful collection of short stories, Too Far to Go (1979), explore from a variety of perspectives evolving preoccupations with sex, marriage, religion, and failed relationships. Finally, his stories about growing up in the American depression and thereafter, collected in Pigeon Feathers (1962) and The Olinger Stories (1964) add to the sense that Updike has served his country well as one of its most astute and observant cultural commentators.

During the final decade of the twentieth century, however, Updike modified his habitual contemporary perspective, emphasized in Rabbit, Run by the use of the present rather than the past tense for the narrative voice. Memories of the Ford Administration (1992) looks at events from twenty years before the time of the novel's publication and In the Beauty of the Lilies (1996) traces the lives of four generations of an American family. Toward the End of Time (1997) is set in the year 2020, but includes narratives about Egyptian grave-robbers and an important section narrating a Viking invasion and slaughter of an English monastery sometime in the medieval era. This seeming digression anticipates the subject matter of Updike's nineteenth novel, Gertrude and Claudius (2000).

With his first novel published during the new millennium, Updike has moved further back into history than ever before.

Even his under-appreciated play, Buchanan Dying (1974), which imaginatively chronicles the final months in the life of a minor president whose bad historical luck it was to precede Abraham Lincoln, seems recent by comparison with Gertrude and Claudius, Updike's "prequel" to William Shakespeare's Hamlet. Set at a transitional if undefined moment in Danish history, this novel daringly tells the story of the adultery and murder that constitute the situation for England's best-known play, a staple of American high-school and college curricula. As filmmaker George Lucas told the opening chapter of his Star Wars saga in the fourth film, America's foremost cultural observer deploys modern perspectives to tell, 400 years after Shakespeare's play was first produced, his story of passion, lust, intrigue, and regicide/fratricide in a Denmark that is, as is Updike's America, evolving through transformations in manners,

technology, religion, and politics. As Shakespeare's Elsinore Castle resembled a feudal British duchy more than a medieval Danish monarchy, so Updike's Elsinore, while fastidiously medieval in dress and climate, reminds us of modern America in its evolution from one mode of existence into an uncertain future.

In his play Shakespeare nearly eliminates historical time and social conditions to concentrate on one man's relationship(s) with his destiny, so much so that a midtwentieth century production and subsequent film of Hamlet were set in contemporary dress, including v-neck sweaters and worsted slacks, with little negative impact on the timeless power of the story itself (the production starred Richard Burton). Many other productions have set the action in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We may infer that time in Shakespeare's play is "internal"; that is, we as readers or playgoers are concerned with the fact that Hamlet is 30 years old (a detail withheld until Act 5), that his father killed the Norse king on the day of Hamlet's birth, that two months have passed since the king's sudden death, that the queen re-married only a month after her husband's death, that the ghost has been seen on the castle wall for two consecutive nights before the play begins, and so forth. Readers and playgoers alike do not particularly care whether the events take place in the thirteenth, sixteenth, or even nineteenth century. In Hamlet time is internal, a pressure that is felt within the play but not with specific reference to external conditions.

By contrast, Gertrude and Claudius is very much about time and the inevitability of change. Like the end of the century in which Updike penned his story of the Danish throne and the end of the century in which Shakespeare wrote Hamlet, Updike's Denmark is a monarchy in transition. Several crucial social changes are underway, which affect the characters' ability to relate to one another and to the world they occupy. For example, the king's advisor, Polonius, complains that Gertrude gets dangerous ideas from her reading "Gaulish" (French) novels to pass the time while her husband is doing kingly business. By implication, she assimilates Renaissance influences from southern Europe, which proves to be a crucial differentiation between her provincial husband and his cosmopolitan brother.

Shakespeare's Gertrude was probably illiterate (the play does not mention her reading or writing skills); moreover, most literary scholars date the invention of the novel as a literary form to the sixteenth century or even later. Polonius, unlike the character (who boasts that he once played Julius Caesar) in Shakespeare's play, laments the emerging theatrical profession, and especially its impact on Prince Hamlet. The novel's character's positions, that acting companies blaspheme by mimicking God's creative genius, and that acting companies further contribute to a general decline in religious and ethical values, were widely voiced by conservative and moralistic persons in Shakespeare's time. Stephen Gosson, for example, lamented the insidious moral influence of acting companies in a pamphlet influential enough to cause Sir Philip Sidney to respond with his great essay, "An Apology for Poetry" (1595). Minister Thomas White cleverly if illogically proved that plays are a principal cause of plagues in a sermon delivered in 1577. Updike inserts fragments from Shakespeare's play, in which Hamlet and Polonius exchange views of the theater and its role in society (Hamlet offers the classical view that players "hold the mirror up to nature"), but he

wants to make us constantly aware of a civilization in cultural change, whether in its methods of entertainment, its economy, its religion, or its theories of marriage.

In Updike's novel, the transition between King Hamlet and his brother corresponds directly with an important shifting cultural paradigm, the transference of wealth and power from the traditional baronial estates to the new burgher or merchant class. Hamlet senior laments the collapse of the traditional lines of fealty and authority, as do the conservative factions in many of Shakespeare's English history plays, most notably the deposed king in Richard II. Claudius seems to align himself with the less traditional modes of government, perhaps because his journeys into Mediterranean Europe and Constantinople have taught him that authority takes many forms. At any rate, the conflict between the brothers, for a queen's love and a kingdom's throne, is further aligned by Updike with emerging patterns of power and wealth that would lead to the end of the feudal system in Europe and with the beginning of guild and mercantile capitalism that would in turn drive the forces of colonialism, leading to the settlement of the New World and several less fortunate consequences.

It is a convenient model, if nonetheless an oversimplification, to suggest that Updike associates Claudius with forces of progressive thinking and emerging definitions of wealth and power, whereas he aligns the elder Hamlet with traditional forms of loyalty and obligation. Claudius adroitly manipulates the "thing," Updike's playful invention for the assembly of barons and merchants who elect the king, to select him upon his brother's sudden death by creating alliances with the emerging class. Even the election process Updike assesses as a precursor to modern democracy. If Hamlet complains at least twice in Shakespeare's play that Claudius "Popped in between th'election and my hopes," Updike provides an answer to the question that comes up in almost every college discussion of Hamlet, why the hero, at age 30, did not become king upon his father's death. Shakespeare was not interested in the mechanics of succession in Hamlet, even if he was politically obsessed with such themes in his English history plays, but Updike observes that this process of selecting leaders, like the displacement of chain mail by plated armor because of technical improvements in archery, is due to the inevitability of change and perhaps a precursor of modern democracy.

In Updike's narrative, then, Claudius seems to be a man of the future, and Hamlet the elder a man of the past. The senior brother clings to traditions and forms that are slipping away as Denmark grudgingly absorbs influences from Mediterranean and Atlantic nations. But Updike compounds his own irony in that Claudius shows preliminary signs of devolving into a carbon copy of his elder brother once he assumes the royal diadem. He changes his name from Feng (the brother's name in one of Shakespeare's sources) to Claudius to symbolize the new era Denmark is entering. But he becomes increasingly preoccupied with his royal obligations and his shaky claim to the throne. Even though the novel ends with an illusory hope ("The era of Claudius had dawned . . . All would be well, " itself echoing the final line of Claudius's soliloquy after his guilt has been disclosed in Act 3 of the play), Updike depends on his readers' familiarity with Shakespeare's play for one final irony—to remember that within months all the major, and several minor, characters in this novel will become indirect victims of Claudius's regicide. Like so many of Shakespeare's English Kings, notably Henry IV

and Richard III, Claudius learns that power is easier to get than it is to hold and wield. As the cultural paradigms shifted under the elder Hamlet and Gertrude's father before him, they continue to shift during the brief era of Claudius.

Techniques

Symbolism has always been a strength in Updike's writing. His capacity to invest literal images with contextual signification may be unrivaled among the writers of his generation. Many objects and scenes are invested with symbolic association inGertrude and Claudius, but this discussion will limit itself to a brief commentary on the cluster of symbols associated with birds as signifiers for freedom and entrapment. One of the novel's most charming sections concerns a visit Gertrude makes to Claudius's rookery, in which his retainers train falcons.

Gertrude is fascinated and a little troubled by the systematic breaking of these fierce predators' spirits and by the cruelty she witnesses when one is loosed to hunt and kill a crane. Her mixed feelings are well placed; what she is witnessing is a symbolic extension of the process she herself underwent when she was "tamed" by Horwendil to become an obedient wife. She feels this intuitively, thinking even as she watches fascinated as the bird kills and returns to its captor: "What a cruel and boylike business."

Petruchio in Shakespeare's early comedy The Taming of the Shrew explicitly if crudely invokes falconry as the model for his plan to starve, sleep-deprive, bully, and confuse his new bride into total submission. Whether Fengon/Claudius knows he is exhibiting the process of wife-breaking to Gertrude is not completely clear. If he is aware, he may be modeling the mind-control of Horwendil as part of a strategy to disillusion Gertrude with her marriage, thus to set the stage for adultery. If he is not aware, the implication is even more disturbing: as worldly-wise as he may be, he never doubts the notion of bullying and "taming" a natural creature.

This seems the more probable reading.

Updike clusters this association with two gifts Gertrude receives from her two suitors. Before they marry, Horwendil gives her two caged linnets, obviously creatures confined to serve human desires for music.

Updike reinforces this association of the caged linnets with male power by noting that when the linnets fell silent, Horwendil gave "the cage a shake and in alarm, the poor things would run through their song again"—in short, singing not out of joy or natural causes, but out of fear to entertain a man who in this scene is represented as a bully. Similarly, before he leaves for an extended trip to southern Europe, Claudius gives the falcon Bathsheeba (the name itself recalling a Biblical adulteress whom a lusty king coveted enough to have her husband killed) to Gertrude. Unlike most of his gifts, this one brings Gertrude distress. She is annoyed by Bathsheeba's sudden, often destructive, "baiting" or attacking objects in the castle. More importantly, she empathizes with the falcon's cries "lamenting her loss of freedom, as I imagined it." Updike suggests by this comparison of the tamed falcon and the "broken" woman the no-exit situation traditional patriarchy created.

Bathsheeba cannot be placed in the royal mews, because as a half-wild creature the royal falconer fears that she would be "slaughtered" there. She cannot stay in Gertrude's apartments because she is too wild to be among the precious objects, and her incomplete adaptation to domestic situations unconsciously reminds Gertrude of her "broken" role as mother, wife, and queen. Finally, with help from Claudius's servants, she returns Bathsheeba to the wild, seemingly her natural condition. But Updike reminds us, through Claudius's judgment, that Bathsheeba cannot survive there either because she is incompletely wild. In this cluster of symbols Updike adroitly suggests the predicament of a wife in a patriarchal culture.

A final technical device that charms fans of the bard is Updike's inclusion of soundbytes from the play, often in different contexts or even voices from those in Shakespeare. A full list would deprive readers of the fun of discovering unexpected bardphrases in the novel, but one illustration will suggest the cleverness of such a scheme.

Herda, Gertrude's lady-in-waiting, confides to Gertrude when she inquires about her new role as queen, that "There's a shape in things, fiddle and fuss however we will around the edges." Her homely acceptance of destiny parodies Hamlet's greatest single discovery, that a man cannot be the author of, but rather must be an actor in, the drama of his life, as evidenced by his remark that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will."

Themes

Themes

Although Updike has from time to time been charged with being a misogynist blessed with a graceful style by critics of various persuasions, the first characteristic one observes about this novel is the sequence in which the characters' names appear in the title. By contrast, Shakespeare's three plays, named after joint protagonists, consistently exhibit a patriarchal priority characteristic of his age (Romeo and Juliet, Troilus and Cressida, Antony and Cleopatra)., Updike's title, however, gives the privileged position to the woman who drives the male characters in Hamlet: the mother upon whom Hamlet obsesses; the wife Claudius genuinely adores, to the degree that he endangers his throne to keep her beloved son nearby; and the widow whom the Ghost (an ectoplasmic inconsistency that overwhelms young Hamlet) tells young Hamlet to spare while wreaking vengeance on her lover. Although she is the center of three men's universe in the play, Shakespeare's Gertrude is hard to comprehend fully. Is she complicit in her husband's murder? An adulteress who rushed to the altar with her lover after her husband's sudden death? A traditional, weak, woman incapable of living without a strong male presence? Any of these may be true of Shakespeare's character; but none is provable by data or statements within the play. In Updike's novel both the priority and the sympathy are clearly with Gertrude, a lively young woman whose body, love, and loyalty are negotiated by her dynastic father, a man who cares much more about Denmark's future than his daughter's happiness.

Gertrude's victimization, defensible only under patriarchal attitudes characteristic of late medieval and early modern Europe, begins with a father who subdues his captive Wendish princess by forcing himself on her. He actually boasts to Gertrude that Ona, her mother, attempted suicide after Rorik (Gertrude's father) in effect raped her. The captive bride/mother died when Gertrude was three years old, so the theme of maternal nurture, so absent in her own childhood surrounded by carousers and whores in the Danish court, accounts for the mature Gertrude's taking Ophelia under her wing. In Shakespeare's account, the queen's sudden lament at Ophelia's gravesite, "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife. / I thought thy bride-bed to have decked," seems abrupt. Updike fills in the motivation as well as the past in Shakespeare's story by emphasizing Gertrude's own lack of maternal nurturing, her alienation in the macho cultures of her father's court and the one her husband imposes on his son, and her sympathy with Ophelia, whose mother she sees as a sickly victim of old Polonius's patriarchal lusts. According to Gertrude, Polonius continued to impregnate his wife despite her several miscarriages, and she believes this was the cause of Ophelia's mother's unhappiness and early death.

Updike's narrative, however, is not merely a jeremiad about patriarchal authority in late medieval Europe. Gertrude is simultaneously a resenting victim and a contributor to the suppression of women in this novel. Although she sees her own arranged marriage and motherless childhood mirrored in the young woman's vulnerability, her interest in

Ophelia is not solely a matter of feminine sympathy. She sees Hamlet's marriage to Ophelia as a means for her son to settle down and become more princelike. Trying for a second time to persuade Hamlet senior that diplomatic interests are less important than their son's mental health and personal happiness, she professes that marriage might cure the prince of his "sterile egotism" because "marriage ties us to the established order." Thus Gertrude (and Updike) have it both ways: marriage is a trap for women, an institution that robs them of their autonomy and ultimately their spirit, and yet it is very good for the social order—and for their sons.

Moreover, the adultery itself, certainly Updike's critical interest in the Hamlet story and a theme that is both timely and timeless, is in considerable measure an expression of Gertrude's private, if largely unconscious, resentment of the patriarchal system that commodifies her. When her father approaches her with his expectation that she (at age 16) honor his bargaining her hand in exchange for Denmark's dynastic and territorial interests, she expresses resentment of the arrangement and contempt for Rorik's claim that the proposed groom's vicious slaughter of an enemy proves his worthiness as a husband and leader. She refers to herself as "plunder" in the exchange between her suitor and her father, and is resentful of the barbaric custom of a counselor's verification of the broken hymen by inspecting the wedding sheets and presenting the evidence to the court. Yet the rebellious young woman, like many heroines in early Shakespearean comedies, notably Hippolyta in A Midsummer Night's Dream or Kate in The Taming of the Shrew, comes to accept the role of the wife as the help-mate.

She eventually resigns herself to her role as part of the currency in the Danish body politic. She accepts that the power and decisions are appropriately her husband's, now that Rorik has died the month her son was born. Her sole failing is that she cannot conceive another heir, and there is royal concern that Hamlet is both sickly and a little strange.

The language Updike uses to describe the initial stage of Gertrude's settling into the role of wife and queen, moreover, suggests a profound resentment lurking beneath the social adjustment: "A good woman lay in the bed others had made for her and walked in the shoes others had cobbled . . . .

In much of her being she could not help revering the man who possessed her, who housed and protected her and—this the key to all right relations—made use of her" (Updike's emphasis). When her brother-inlaw returns to Denmark a cosmopolitan soldier of fortune who has learned diplomacy in Italy and Provencal poets in France (he mentions Bertrans de Born, a troubadour poet who influenced T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound), her simmering resentment, at age 48, boils over. Courted by a passionate, attentive lover who values her opinion and physical body over her capacity to produce offspring and unite dynasties, the mature Gertrude re-discovers her lost youth and passion. She ultimately comes to believe that the sophisticated Claudius restores the value her father and husband took from her by bartering her. Moreover, she discovers her own libidinal sexuality, long repressed by the demands of a proper Danish court and a husband who values his and his wife's decorum over passion and spontaneity. Updike claims, whereas Shakespeare did not, that Gertrude's adultery expresses an element of

overt political as well as gendered rebellion: "Protest had been lurking in her, and recklessness, and treachery." Shakespeare's Hamlet naively denies the possibility of his mother's sexuality while upbraiding her for not remaining true to his father's memory. "You cannot call it love," he tells his mother, in reference to her feelings for Claudius, "For at your age, / The heyday of the blood is tame, it's humble, / And waits upon the judgment." These remarks assign Gertrude's feelings for Claudius to some innate depravity of the soul. By contrast, Updike, with his modernist sensibility, describes the union of Gertrude and Claudius as a nearly-metaphysical synthesis that recalls the great poet of the generation after Shakespeare, John Donne: "their souls' emissaries, those lower parts so rich in angelic sensation." Thus in Updike's narrative, Claudius liberates, rather than entraps, Gertrude. He is her path to transcending a narrowly dynastic patriarchal system. But his influence predictably creates conflict within Gertrude on a spiritual as well as political level; and that conflict enables Updike to take a fresh look at one of the overriding themes throughout his fiction, the relationship among religion, morality, and passion.

One of the chief social changes in Updike's narrative is the recent introduction of Christianity into Danish culture. Shakespeare's Hamlet, drawing on sources in pagan Scandinavian lore, contains Christian motifs such as the Ghost being freed from Purgatory to walk the night; the Church's refusal to sanction full burial ceremonies for Ophelia because of suspicion that she committed suicide (and its unwillingness to deny burial in sanctified ground to the daughter of a highranking government official no matter how uncertain her death); and Hamlet's reservations about killing Claudius while at prayer because his soul might find heaven rather than hell. For Updike, the transition from a pagan to a Christian culture constitutes a central theme. Long one of America's more controversial self-proclaimed Christian writers, Updike takes in Gertrude and Claudius his most historic look at the origins of several contradictions in modern Christian practices, a look that contrasts with the invasion and slaughter in the monastery in Toward the End of Time.

Inevitably, the themes relating to religion impinge on those dealing with ethics and politics. As has been true since late medieval Christianity, often the line between politics and religion is hard to draw in Gertrude and Claudius. The new religion was introduced to Denmark three generations before Gertrude was born, but its assimilation and combination with the polytheisms of nature and the celebration of the senses create tension for individuals asked to subject the urges of nature to the guidelines of religion. Nothing in the political or personal constitution is unaffected by this new and pervasive element.

Among those elements is Christianity's potential as an ally of the status quo power elite. Gertrude's father, although himself lax in practicing the new religion, sees it as a political asset appealing to peasants and slaves, presumably because, as Marx put it centuries later, religion teaches obedience and endurance as preparations for the reward of a blissful afterlife. At any rate, Rorik feels that although the elite class is under no obligation to submit to the pieties and mortification of the flesh the new Christian culture teaches, it is a valuable instrument for suppressing a potentially restive working class, a

position with which his hand-picked successor, Gertrude's new husband, enthusiastically agrees.

It is a convenient shorthand to one central theme of Gertrude and Claudius to suggest that Hamlet the elder represents the new believer, who adapts Rorik's cynical appreciation for the practical, class-control effects of Christianity to a profound internal belief as well. His younger brother, who with his wider experience in Rome and Constantinople (and thus exposure to Roman and Byzantine forms of Christianity), represents the kind of doubt that would characterize much of Renaissance humanism.

In addition to his embracing Rorik's respect for the Church as a political ally, Hamlet the elder despairs of the enlightened education his son is receiving at a German university.

He worries about Hamlet absorbing pernicious influences from eastern and Mediterranean Europe, but his greatest anxiety is that Hamlet is learning to question the conventional wisdom on which his father governs: "My son is . . . learning how to doubt — learning mockery and blasphemy when I'm trying to instill piety and order into a scheming, rebellious conglomeration of Danes."

Moreover, Updike insinuates that the elder Hamlet has internalized the strict order the new religion has taught him. His brother, who vividly describes contradictions in the pieties and cruelties of Christianity as practiced in Constantinople, believes that he, his brother, and his nephew are victims of "Danish small-mindedness—Viking bloodhunger crammed into the outward forms of Christianity." But the elder Hamlet's piety conflicts with his private identity. Gertrude, after she becomes intimate with his brother, comes to believe that the post-coital tristesse that habitually affects her husband traces to his religion and its teachings concerning the mortification of the flesh: "a naturehating piety, learned in Jutland, had unmanned him."

By contrast, Claudius's interest in religion seems anthropological, rather than internal or exploitative. With his greater worldliness, his wider scope, he feels comfortable with new theories combining the love of the world with the appetites of the flesh, especially variations on the courtly love traditions of late medieval Europe. A key symbol supporting this motif is his second gift to Gertrude, a Byzantine chalice that fuses traditional religious, pantheistic, pagan, and hedonistic motifs—she is delighted to learn that the chalice is a "chimaira." At one level, what Claudius gives her is a representation of himself: a hybrid, part Danish warrior, part European diplomat and soldier of fortune, part courtly lover in the medieval tradition that produced such figures as Bertrans de Born, Chaucer's hero Troilus, the Italian poet Petrarch, the British poetcourtier Sir Philip Sidney, and satirically, Shakespeare's Duke Orsino in Twelfth Night and Orlando in As You Like It. As his politics evolve toward the conservative and authoritarian, however, Claudius leans toward orthodox religion once he becomes king.

Moreover, the "pontificating" that Gertrude silently resented in her late husband becomes evident in the speech of her new one: the rhetoric of power, punctuated, in the tradition of modern politicians, with soundbytes from religion. Moreover, Claudius's piety is not merely a matter of public relations. Although he is a sinner doubly damned by

murdering his king and his brother with one vial, Claudius lectures Gertrude about her "unease of soul," or guilt over Hamlet the elder's death, in language fit for the most pious ecclesiastic: "This unease, this guilt for our first father and mother's original sin, is what calls us to God, out of our unholy pride. It is the sign He has placed within us of His cosmic rule. . . ." Quite a leap backward for a man who brought back to Denmark new ideas about everything from the rationale for the Crusades to the viability of traditional codes of conduct.

Claudius's transformation, whether intended as suggesting his spiritual regression or confirming his political manipulation, is another way in which Updike suggests the possible collusion of religion and political life. Having committed mortal sins, Claudius convinces himself that he can repurchase his soul: "The Church made its intercessions as available as daily bread, and scarcely more expensive." In yet one more way, we are reminded of certain materialistic aspects of early Christianity in the acknowledgment, early in Claudius's brief rule, that the Crusades, in which he participated, were a "long-range failure" and the death knell for the heroic tradition. Taking a post-colonialist stance on the Crusades, Updike implies that these great adventures were really little more than religiouslyendorsed piracy.

As in all things, however, the issue of religion ultimately revolves around Gertrude, who struggles with the austere codes of the new religion and its support for the suppression of women. Even as a child, she felt intuitively that the chapel was an inhospitable place, one that condemned her as a creature of nature and as a woman. To her the space itself felt "doomed," with its otherworldliness and its call toward mortification of the body: "Being in the chapel frightened her, as if her young body were a sin . . . ." The effect on the child was the disconnection of her soul from her body: the "chill, the Latin, the fusty smells made her feel accused; her natural warmth felt chastened." Updike centers here on the practice, not the substance, of medieval Christianity, which produced a patriarchal Mariology—that is, a blanket dismissal of women as the source of sin (daughters of Eve), evidence of which can be traced to their very menstrual cycles; and a profound veneration for the intercession and holiness of the virgin Mother of Christ.

After spending her youth and middle years learning to accept the Church-sanctioned role of mother, wife, and queen—in short, subordinating herself to her lord and master, in his divinely-sanctioned role— Gertrude's rebellion is as much against the established order sanctioned by the Church as it is against political repression. She tells her would-be lover that she repudiates a "duty laid upon the wife by the stiffmouthed priests, to whom we are sinful poor animals." In discovering her love for Claudius and her new-found sexuality, Gertrude once more speaks of a religion of nature, arguably a synthesis of the pagan religions of nature and a rejection of the contempto mundi traditions of late medieval Christianity. Updike risks letting Gertrude stand on a soapbox for him in this marvelous statement of a natural religion: "To waste life in fretful care for the next . . . that, too is a sin. Birth lays upon us the natural commandment to love each day and what it brings."

Updike is, however, more interested in the conflict between such a position and the orthodox teachings of the medieval Church than in the validity of any of these positions.

Gertrude's religion of nature serves her quite well while she seeks a sanction for moving toward adultery with a man who has fascinated her since she was "bargained" to his elder brother. But after that brother dies unexpectedly, the superstitious element of religion re-asserts itself for her. She feels that her infidelity somehow caused her husband's death, as if some cosmic cause-effect machine were set into motion by her betrayal. As the novel ends, and the play Hamlet begins, Gertrude feels the presence of her husband's ghost within the castle and raises a question central to the first act of Hamlet (one raised not by Gertrude but by Hamlet and Horatio in Shakespeare's account): What Shakespearean theological position does the ghost represent?

Does the existence of the ghost suggest some purgatorial penance, as the Ghost subsequently suggests? The question beneath the issue of Hamlet's ghost has to do ultimately with the nature of God, the afterlife, and the fate of a virtuous person dying without last rites. Moreover, in act 4 of the play, Gertrude cannot see the ghost when he comes to chide Hamlet's delay in getting revenge; but in Updike's story her guilt in betraying her spouse causes her to feel the presence of a "perturbed spirit." And although her new husband finds comfort in the outward forms of a corrupt clergy, Gertrude cannot reconcile a religion of nature with one that condemns women, yet seems to be right about the inevitability of guilt and punishment.

On the whole, therefore, Updike does something more than provide history and context for the behavior of the characters in this drama, which we all know will unfold in near-universal disaster by the end of Shakespeare's play. He also develops two themes that are implicit, but hardly fleshed out, in Hamlet: the roles of women and the role of religion in the lives of the ruling class of a transitional culture, moving from an age of paganism to one of Christianity and reacting to enormous changes in culture and even technology. He brings a modern perspective to these issues, and tries to learn by writing the history behind the play the origins of certain tensions that remain central to our twenty-first century.

Shakespeare's Hamlet

Hamlet, the play, is the overarching theme of *Gertrude and Claudius.* Without the play, the book would not exist. *Hamlet* is both the premise and the outcome of *Gertrude and Claudius*. The language of the book is in the style of the play, and lines and ideas from the play are scattered throughout the book. As events unfold in this story, they refer ever more specifically to events in the play. Finally, at the story's end, the action of the story and the play converge. *Gertrude and Claudius* repeatedly compels the reader into *Hamlet* and back.

Unlike *Gertrude and Claudius*, *Hamlet* is a play, a very different medium. Its author intended the public to know it from performance, as words said aloud and interpreted by actors. Its language is beautiful, its speeches are deeply philosophical, and its action is exciting. The crux of the difference is that its characters are wide open to interpretation. This allows actors and directors to decide who the characters are during rehearsals. *Hamlet* is exciting for both actors and audiences, because each new production can find

and present its own answers. Neither actor nor director, John Updike uses this fiction, *Gertrude and Claudius*, to present his own set of answers to all the questions Shakespeare left for others.

He summarizes his answers explicitly in the book's Afterword (p. 212):

"Putting aside the murder being covered up, Claudius seems a capable king, Gertrude a noble queen, Ophelia a treasure of sweetness, Polonius a tedious but not evil counsellor [sic], Laertes a generic young man. Hamlet pulls them all into death."

What Gertrude Wants

Although this story is set in medieval Denmark, Gertrude at sixteen, still Gerutha, could easily be someone in the present. She has a very modern sensibility, and modern notions about what a woman is. She takes umbrage at her father's description of Sela as someone who deserved a man's death. She wonders, "Is a woman's death less than a man's...?" Much later, in conversation with Polonius, she is offended by his notion that a woman's virtue "is all of a woman's worth." She submits to her father by marrying the man he chooses, and she makes him an excellent wife. "A good woman lay in the bed others had made for her and walked in the shoes others had cobbled." She is gracious, compliant, and tries to stay busy, but she has little to do and little to think about. This is medieval Denmark, after all. A woman can be a serf or a nun. Being a Queen is probably better, but it does not fill her days or satisfy her soul.

Gertrude's emptiness and dissatisfaction is a persistent theme of this story. What is it that she wants? Her father did not know what she wanted, or what her mother had wanted, either. He married one warrior-woman and raised another, never recognizing their restlessness. She wants a husband who cares who she is and who takes her seriously, but she has Horwendil. If she cannot have a husband to love, then she wants children to love. Amleth is not a child that fulfills that need. She feels empty, and that her life is passing by without her.

Then, Fengon professes his love. Suddenly, Geruthe has something to think about besides what needlepoint to work on next. Fengon is an excellent distraction. Geruthe comes into her own in the course of their affair, free to plot, free to imagine and free to speak what she thinks, the way she was so long ago before her marriage. She has the power now with Fengon, as she did with men as a girl. She has the freedom to be romantic and sexual with a man who enjoys her physically, and whom she enjoys, as well. She is free to love, and is so exhilarated that her husband becomes part of the zest that she's found. She doesn't get to hold onto most of it, though. Claudius becomes King, and she finds herself speaking more carefully to him and being taken less seriously.

Shakespeare's Gertrude offers an actress limited options. She can be played as weak and pathetic, manipulated into loving the man who murdered her husband, or devious and manipulative, loving the man and conspiring with him to murder her husband.

Updike sees much more in her. He creates a Gertrude who is serious and substantial, a good and capable woman with no place in her world big enough to use her. In a different world, her father's crown would have come to her. However, she lives in a time when few people could choose their lives, and the ones who do are entirely men.

Denmark's Christianity

The spread of Christianity is part of the backdrop of this story, part of the time in which it is set. It reaches Denmark later than the rest of Europe, when Harald Bluetooth introduces it to Denmark to preempt a German invasion. The heathen altars still stand, although Rorik says that the peasants, who were the first to embrace the faith, no longer know what they mean. Gertrude was baptized and raised knowing something about the creed, but there was little faith at her father's court. The castle's chapel frightened her, and made her feel that her body was a sin that would one day be avenged.

Feng and Horwendil were both instructed by the priests their father allowed into Jutland. However, their father really understood none of what his sons learned. Feng grew up to earn a living from Christianity, as a mercenary for the Holy Roman Emperor. His association had nothing to do with faith, however. Feng thinks the religion should have remained a Mediterranean cult. He thinks that no one in Denmark has ever understood it, and that the Vikings took their hunger for blood and gave it the shape of Christianity. Horwendil is the only Christian in the book who does take his faith seriously. He seeks in his faith to be good, to his subjects as well as his peers. The first time young Gerutha sees passion in him is when he laments mankind's banishment to this earth, to live among beasts and filth. Horwendil does seem more interested in damnation than absolutely necessary, however, more conviction that his body's pleasures are sordid and un-Christian. Even Horwendil does not let his Christianity interfere with his raids, however. In the long ships, the warriors still love the Norse gods. Horwendil does not deny himself when taking plunder or when aroused by women whose husbands he has slain.

The Public Person and the Private Person

The Horwendil that Gerutha knows before they marry has a reedy voice and a preoccupied manner, despite his evident cockiness. Not until the night of their wedding, as he reviews the day's events, does Gerutha discover the public man. His voice is relaxed and confident in a way that she never heard before. He speaks comfortably at great length. With her, as with everyone at Elsinore, he is measured and polite, only occasionally curt. Over many years, she becomes familiar with "the aggravating grave calm he assumed when placing himself on a higher level of authority." It is part of his persona as King. He is at his best when on state visits, adored and entertained by his subjects who know him at a distance, who know him only as a public man. Gradually, the man within is grown hollow. Being King has "gutted" the private man. She spends much more time in easy conversation with Feng, it seems, than with her husband during their whole marriage. He listens to her, while her son and husband both tend to drift

away when she talks. She listens to him, as well, and they share hours of time in each other's company before he becomes her husband and King.

He has been a private man for sixty years, yet he is transformed very quickly by his office. Mere weeks after his brother's death, Claudius already speaks at length with great pomp, as if courtiers and emissaries were present even when he and Gertrude are alone in their chambers. She thinks that he even appears somehow bulkier and more majestic. He speaks to her in a way very like Horwendil's, as if he occupies a much higher place from which he sees and knows more than she does. Many people have a public persona, a way of behaving among people who are neither friends nor family. The larger the public role, the greater the difference is likely to be between the public and private person. The private persona is easily lost by the brothers. If Gertrude has been surprised by this twice, it is probably because her father did not lose his private self.

Style

Points of View

This is predominately Gerutha/Gertrude's story. It is about her and her life, seen through the eyes of a narrator who is not she, but who knows her thoughts. The author does not hold to this strictly. The reader is with Rorik when he worries if he has sold his daughter into a kind of slavery. The reader is with Fengon/Claudius when we learn of his love for Gerutha, when his brother accuses him, and until soon after he kills him. The reader is led into the perspective only of sympathetic characters, characters whom the author likes and expects the reader to like. Information that might affect the reader's sympathy for Feng is revealed, but only in the context of dialogue, words spoken aloud by a character whom we do not like (Horwendil), or by someone whose knowledge may be tainted (Rorik).

Setting

The story is set in medieval Denmark, predominately at Elsinore castle, the seat of the Danish kings. The story leaves the castle only for brief visits to Odinsheim and Lokisheim, the manors of Horwendil and Feng, respectively, and to the lakeside lodge where Feng and Gertrude conduct their affair. The story is concerned with people of the uppermost class of the Danish world, people who are well fed, well clothed, and completely protected from the harsh, cold winter. The vast majority of the people outside the castle are serfs, who endure backbreaking work all day. It's on account of their work that the royalty live in such comfort, although they are no more present in this story than they are in *Hamlet*.

Updike provides extensive, specific detail about the world of the story's here and now. It's a setting that can be smelled and tasted as it is seen. For example, he does not just describe clothing. He describes how the burning of the torches scents the clothing, and whether this is clothing for receiving subjects at court or for being comfortable in private chambers. He describes current events in Europe and prevailing philosophies. He talks about how they change during the thirty years of the story. This background offers insights into the forces that drive Christianity across Europe, and the new standards for reasoning and analysis taught at Wittenberg

Language and Meaning

The language of this story is heavily influenced by the Elizabethan style characteristic of Shakespeare, although its vocabulary is entirely modern and easy to understand. The language is poetic, in that it's flowery, courtly and ornate. Few nouns are unmodified, and few adjectives are simple. Sentences are often long, laden with very specific description and extensive use of metaphor.

Lines and ideas from *Hamlet* are sprinkled throughout. It's a source of sly humor, because they are usually not spoken by someone else. Horwendil tells Gerutha that she protests too much, for example, a minor variation on the familiar line that Gertrude delivers to Hamlet in the play. These references add unexpected depth to the story, magnifying the meaning in both texts. The reader is pulled slightly out of the story, into the play, and back again.

Structure

The story is told in three parts, with breaks within the parts denoted by additional space between the lines, rather than by actual chapters. Part 1 describes events between Gerutha's sixteenth year and her thirty-fifth. It introduces us to the important people in the story and their relationships, and establishing the rhythm of their lives over time. Part 2 begins when Geruthe is forty-seven, and Fengon has returned to Denmark to stay. It covers the critical and dramatic events that fundamentally alter the lives of the characters, like Geruthe and Fengon's affair, Fengon's confrontation by his brother, King Horvendile, and the murder of the King. These are all events whose consequences are dealt with in *Hamlet*. Part 3 commences after King Hamlet's funeral. It is the most domestic of the book's parts, concerned primarily with the relationship between Gertrude and Claudius, and their conversations about Hamlet. Part 3 culminates and converges with events that begin *Hamlet*.

Quotes

"No woman wants to be a mere piece of furniture, to be bartered for and then sat upon." Part 1, p. 5

"*It is hard*, Gerutha thought, *to consider one man when another is present*." Part 1, p.9

"Being in the chapel frightened her, as if her young body were a sin, to be avenged some day, pierced from underneath even as she sipped the rasping wine, the caustic blood of Christ, from the jewel-beknobbed chalice. The chill, the Latin, the fusty smells made her feel *accused*; her natural warmth felt chastened." Part 1, p. 13

"There was no escape. This man, this fate, was hers." Part 1, p. 19

"Horwendil was a Christian....The Christian creed reinforced Horwendil's tendency to moroseness but would not countervail, once he was on a raid in a long ship, the old warrior ethic of plunder and self-careless ecstasy. Christ was on all lips but in their hearts the Danes still adored Tyr, god of sport and war and fertility." Part 1, p.27

"...the days passed, and Gerutha felt them stealing away with her life, all the while that she moved through such activities and engagements as befitted a Scandinavian queen, helpmate to a handsome blond king who with the years grew ever more admirable and remote, as if enlarging as he receded from her." Part 1, p. 47

"*What a cruel and boy-like business*, Gerutha thought, *what a cumbersome charade*, at the same time admiring a certain honed passion in [falconry], this expertise passed like a much-sharpened scythe down the generations. Men must play with death, to make it less terrible when it comes." Part 1, p.69

"*Lord Christ*, Feng thought, *this love of her is eating me alive*." Part 1, p.72

"You had burdened me, it seemed, with a representative of yourself, that I dare not neglect, so to keep you alive, whether in the hazards of your travels or in my cherishing memory was unclear." Part 2, p.89

"Geruthe had noticed before how hard it was to hold one man in mind while confronting another." Part 2, p. 125

"All her unclean places came alive, and came clean. Did she not carry in her veins the warrior blood of Rodericke and of his father, Hother, the vanquisher of Guimon, who had betrayed Gevare and whose live body Hother burned in revenge? Protest had been lurking in her, and recklessness, and treachery, and these emerged in the sweat and contention of adulterous coupling." Part 2, p. 129

"I have been heedless....I was more indignant than I knew. Thirty years of lofty restriction gave intensity to my appetites and released them without a proper thought of consequences. Or if there was thought, it paled before a queen's habituated belief in her

entitlements. I was idly impulsive and selfish when you and I began, and now it would be death to let you go." Part 2, p. 133

"My father and future husband together bargained me away, and you have given me back my essential value, the value of that little girl you so belatedly dote upon." Part 2, p. 138

"The King is the sun which warms the land. If something is amiss with him, his beams are bent. Crops fail, and rot infects the grain that is gathered and stored." Part 2, p. 141

"Even my own instincts, which I know you and Geruthe think are hopelessly dulled by my ponderous crown, told me something was amiss - or, rather, something had been added. She was different with me - more expressive, as if to make up in lesser confidences and gifts of attention the great secret she must withhold. She was, will it wound you to hear?, more ardent, rather than less as common decency might predict. There was something, it would be too rude to say rotten, but overripe about her and her attentions." Part 2, p. 144-5

"Why have you hated me, Fengon?" "I do not hate you. I find you...strangely negligible." Part 2, p. 147

"You have misjudged me, my incestuous, covetous brother, if you think that I am second to you even in the love of Geruthe. But my love is as firm and pure as yours has been wanton and rootless. Though base, you have no base; mine is as wide as Denmark. *Ha*." Part 2, p. 149

"I tell you I *feel* for him. We're both victims of Danish small-mindedness - Viking blood-hunger crammed into the outward forms of Christianity, which no one up here has ever understood, from Harald Bluetooth on; for him it was just a way to preempt a German invasion. Christianity turns grim in lands of frost; it is a Mediterranean cult, a religion of the grape. Truly, I can make the Prince love me. I appointed him successor on my own impulse." Part 3, p. 167

"Though she had been bold and brazen enough in placing herself at a lover's disposal while still wedded to the King, when the ruthless irregularity of her behavior could be lightly scanned by her conscience as the enactment of a romance such as had beguiled her betranced days of married boredom, her escapade took on a live soreness since the King's death: she felt her fall had somehow caused the adder in the orchard to sting the sleeping cuckold." Part 3, p. 169

"[Claudius'] touch was rigid and tense with his new responsibilities. She had loved, when they had met dangerously in the Gurre Forest, his relaxation into lawlessness, his abandon to the moment once he had achieved his goal - conquest of her, regardless of the consequences. Now they were living into an aftermath of consequences, treading in time to the timbrel, trying to survive the extinction of the adulterous, rapturous couple who had existed outside Elsinore's walls. The seducer had become a public man, his far-off beloved a daily presence." Part 3, p. 171

"She trembled in fear for her husband [Claudius], drawing close to her son. Her son was his enemy, she could feel in her loins." Part 3, p. 172

"Gertrude did not like to think that Claudius had, like his brother, sought the throne. She preferred to think it had fallen to him by happy accident." Part 3, p. 173

"[Hamlet] is cold. You are not, Claudius. You are warm, like me. You crave action. You want to live, to seize the day. To my son, everything is mockery, a show. He is the only man in his universe....Hamlet wants to feel, I believe, and to be an actor on a stage outside his teeming head, but he cannot as yet. In Wittenberg...his lack - even madness of a sort, the madness of detachment - is not revealed; he should be a student forever. Here, amid earnest interests, he is challenged, and turns all to words and scorn." Part 3, p. 178

"Men are beautiful enemies we are set down among. Without female compliance, the world would not get on, and yet they distrust our compliance, seeing in it the seeds of disorder, of random paternity. If we have been compliant with one man, they reason, we may be also with another. The wish to be agreeable we take in with our mother's milk, alas." Part 3, p. 185

"Virtue is all of a woman's worth....Virtue is what she takes to market." Part 3, p. 188

"Gertrude impatiently heard in all this the doddering Lord Chamberlain's faith that human affairs could all be managed, manipulated with cogs and ratchets like millwheels and clocks, by a clever enough puppeteer. Her own sense was of tides, natural and supernatural, to which wisdom submits, seeking victory in surrender....But in these opinions she knew Polonius and Claudius both would call her sentimental and irrational, yielding up all initiative to God, like a benighted peasant woman or infidel Muhammadan." Part 3, p. 189

"Putting aside the murder being covered up, Claudius seems a capable king, Gertrude a noble queen, Ophelia a treasure of sweetness, Polonius a tedious but not evil counsellor [sic], Laertes a generic young man. Hamlet pulls them all into death." Afterward, p. 212

Key Questions

Much spirited conversation might center on the audacity of Updike's narrative. How do readers feel about the contemporary author's appropriation of one of literature's most cherished texts, and his re-casting the roles of villain and heroine? Is this heresy of a sort? Do modern authors breach some kind of literary decorum by amending stories by great authors of the past? Or is Updike doing what Shakespeare did, adding his culture's vision and variety to a story that has become nearly archetypal?

Do such models as James Joyce's Ulysses, John Gardner's Grendel, or Jean Rhys's The Wide Sargasso Sea, which re-tell traditional narratives from a new perspective, apply to Updike's telling this classic story? Here are other questions upon which groups might focus.

1. Are Gertrude's transformations, from spirited girl to Horwendil's wife, to Fengon's mistress, to his wife and the grieving widow, fully motivated?

2. Does Updike overstate the arrogance and aloofness of Hamlet? Is this representation consistent with that character's role in the play? Should it be?

3. One of Shakespeare's great strengths is his creation of minor characters. Do Updike's come to life for you? Are these characters merely names from the play, or do they take on motives and habits of their own? If not, is that due to the novel's focus on three powerful characters' perspectives?

4. Are Updike's original characters, who do not appear in Shakespeare's or his predecessors' accounts, such as King Rorik, Sandor and Herda, fully realized? Has Updike succeeded in bringing these characters to life?

5. Is Updike's account of the Church's support of the suppression of women too harsh? Is it historically accurate (several recent books study early modern history and the place of women, and such studies might cast perspective on Gertrude and Claudius)? Can the harshness of this account be reconciled with Updike's public profession of his role as a believing Christian?

6. Did you like the murder scene itself, as told from Claudius's point of view? Or is this better a story indirectly told (by the victim) as in Shakespeare?

7. Do Claudius's efforts to establish common bond with Hamlet, as victims of "the Hammer's" assumed superiority and male modeling, establish sympathy for this character after he has committed a murder?

8. Does Updike's switching of names from the Icelandic narrative through Shakespeare's version, amuse or annoy you? Why?

Topics for Discussion

Why does Updike use different character names from different sources in each of the book's three sections?

Gerutha says to her father, "The very qualities that make for public love...may impede love in private." What does she mean?

Why does Gerutha feel so empty? What does she want?

Fengon declares that he believes Geruthe loves him, too. Does she?

Geruthe describes Fengon as "skyey" and herself as "earthy." What does she mean?

Does Geruthe find happiness or an end to feeling empty in her affair with Fengon?

Does Gertrude's marriage to Claudius make her happy?

Does Gertrude know that the King was murdered?

Gertrude makes distinctions throughout the book between what is "natural" and what is not. What does she mean?

P SCH ng. She is surprised by how much Claudius has in common with his brother that Fengon did not. This might be true of any king, or of any President or Prime Minister. Do you think the office makes the person, or does the person make the office?

There are lines and ideas from *Hamlet* scattered throughout *Gertrude and Claudius*. Horwendil thinks that Ophelia's brain is cracked, presaging her later madness. Horwendil says to Gerutha, "You protest too much," which Gertrude says to Hamlet in the play. Cite other examples. How do they connect the novel and the play?

Compare the major characters in *Gertrude and Claudius*, particularly Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius and Hamlet, to the same characters in *Hamlet*.

Does *Gertrude and Claudius* change your perception of any of the characters in *Hamlet*?

Hamlet is a classic, but if you had read *Gertrude and Claudius* before you read or saw *Hamlet*, you might have a completely different understanding of the play than if you had read or seen it first. Is it fair for Updike to influence your understanding of so important a work? Should authors and playwrights protect the integrity and original intent of great literature?

Literary Precedents

Throughout this discussion it has been necessary to associate Updike's novel with Shakespeare's play as well as Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, a play that depends on the audience's knowledge of Hamlet for much of its effect. While Shakespeare's tragedy is one of the most important works in the western literary tradition, it is not in itself an original narrative. Upon examination of the known and surmised sources Shakespeare drew upon to craft his great play, we may infer that Updike has staked out a position similar to that which Shakespeare took in the creation and refinement of an existing narrative. In fact Updike calls attention to the continuity of authorship he implies by appropriating and modernizing the Hamlet narrative. His Foreword acknowledges his debts to two of the sources many scholars believe Shakespeare drew upon. That acknowledged debt accounts for the three-part structure of Updike's narrative as well as a certain pedantry that pervades the text.

The earliest probable source, direct or indirect, is the Historica Danica of Saxo Grammaticus. In Part I of Updike's story, concerning the youth and marriage of the queen and her growing attraction to the brother-in-law recently returned to Denmark, Updike uses the names of characters in Saxo's version. Thus Gertrude is "Gerutha," Claudius is "Feng," and the husband-to-be is "Horwendil," who names his son "Amelth."

Appropriating the names in the original version, however, Updike holds generally to the narrative data of Shakespeare's play, ignoring the profound changes Shakespeare, or one of his lost sources, made. For example, the king in Saxo was a "rower," or a pirate chieftain, and his murder by Feng was no secret. Amelth feigned madness to keep from getting himself killed and to buy time to plot his revenge. Updike adapts the names while ignoring the substantive changes Shakespeare and his probable predecessor, Thomas Kyd, made in a crude and violent tale of murder and revenge.

Having established these archaic names for the central characters, Updike changes them twice, to indicate both the maturation of the Hamlet plot in the early Renaissance and his own characters' evolutions and transformations. In Part II, the section dealing with the courtship, decision to reform, and eventual seduction, as well as "Geruthe's" transformation because of her love for "Fengon," Updike uses names from Francois Belleforest's Histoires Tragiques, a play printed in French in 1576 and translated into English after Shakespeare's play was performed.

Part III of Gertrude and Claudius treats the events of the first act of Hamlet and in that section the characters are assigned the names with which we are familiar. Updike cleverly explains Fengon's changing his name to Claudius and Corambis's simultaneous adoption of Polonius as politically motivated. The characters' decisions reflect the Latin and Renaissance humanism that was taking hold in southern Europe and thereby reinforce the culture-clash issues discussed in the "Social Concerns" section of this essay. He does not offer comparable explanations for the updating of other characters' names.

Throughout all three sections, Updike moreover casts a perspective on the literal physical space of the play. Elsinore is a work in progress; rooms are added and their purposes change constantly between the time of Rorik's ancestors and Claudius's coronation. As playgoers or readers, we tend to think of Elsinore as "static space," an unchanging place, very much like the story with which it is associated. Updike reminds us that places, persons, events, and even stories are dynamic rather than static.

A final element of Updike's narrative technique is his effective use of landscape and symbolism. As we have seen, the iceworld of Denmark is represented as harsh, cruel, indifferent, a test to the body and the spirit. Despite the inevitable association of the cold world with rationalism, decorum, and iron codes of duty, Updike's description of the Danish spring, which is traditionally associated with the blossoming love of the adulterers, is lush and evocative.

Much like his descriptions of seasonal change in Toward the End of Time, his description of the coming of spring in a northern climate powerfully evokes the association of natural and human rebirth that animates traditional English texts back as far as The Canterbury Tales and many middle English lyrics.

By contrast, the world of Mediterranean Europe, primarily evoked in Fengon/ Claudius's stories for Gerutha/Gertrude but also mentioned in connection with Laertes's Paris education, associates with new ideas, a more lax moral code, the dawning of the modern age. In fact, Fengon's servant Sandor misses the opulent Mediterranean world, from which he was exiled when his master chose to follow his heart back to Denmark, so much so that he betrays Fengon to his brother in return for safe passage back to Italy. With this small event, Updike not only reinforces his paradigm associating locale with culture, but he also reminds us that in an hierarchical society, the governing class may be so callused to the feelings of the lesser classes that they forget that such persons may have rights and may also have the will to act upon them.

Related Titles

Several of Updike's novels, and his play Buchanan Dying, speak to his growing interest in the literary and cultural history that contributes to our modern experience. He has never, however, reached so far back into literary history, and only a few writers have had the audacity to re-write the narratives of the masters. His retrospective narratives have generally been confined to the American experience of the past two centuries, except for the fragments of historical narrative about Egyptian grave-robbers and the Norse invasion of an English monastery in Toward the End of Time (1997). Two additional literary and cinematic phenomena provide a context for Updike's approaching Shakespeare to re-cast and reinterpret one of our culture's widely-accepted core narratives.

First, the final decade of the twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of Shakespearean drama adaptations into commercial films. Kenneth Branagh (to whose 1996 "four-hour film" version of Hamlet Updike attributes a "revivified image of the play" in his "Afterword") also produced critically and commercially successful films of Henry V, Much Ado about Nothing, and Othello during the decade. Other important films of the 1990s include the Mel Gibson and Glenn Close Hamlet, Trevor Nunn's Twelfth Night, Ian McKellan's Richard III, and Michael Hoffman's A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Sir Anthony Hopkins' adaptation of the revenge play Titus Andronicus, while a commercial as well as critical failure, gives convincing evidence that the 1990s were the Shakespearean decade on film. In no other time period would anyone have put up capital to produce a play that has never been popular, and has occasionally been the object of claims that it was not the work of the bard. The Shakespeare revival was also reflected in stage performances in national, regional, and local theaters. Shakespeare in Love, a film about the bard's life and love, contained several references to lines and events from Shakespeare's plays, as well as the ubiquitous theme of androgyny in his golden comedies, as the heroine, with whom the young Shakespeare falls in love, disguises herself as a young man in order to break into the exclusively male profession of acting.

In addition to film interest in Shakespeare and especially his plays, several of Updike's predecessors and contemporaries had begun to re-visit established narratives, both literary and cultural, from a contemporary perspective. The ground-breaking text is of course James Joyce's Ulysses (1922), in which a day in the life of a modern Dublin Jew resembles, or in some ways parodies, events in The Odyssey. Updike also emulated Joyce's appropriation of classical narrative in his third novel, TheCentaur (1963), which superimposes the story of the centaur Chiron on the life of a Pennsylvania high school teacher.

Several of Updike's contemporaries also built upon this model of re-telling a classic story from a contemporary perspective. Playwright Tom Stoppard tells the Hamlet story from the perspective of the fated and very limited school chums in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1967). American novelist John Gardner re-told the epic Beowulf

from the monster's point of view in Grendel (1971). Adapting less distinctly literary sources to explore past events from contemporary perspectives, William Styron in The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) and Toni Morrison in Beloved (1987) explore the origins and effects of slavery in America, whereas Thomas Pynchon re-examines the establishment of the surveyor's line that would eventually distinguish between slave and free states in Mason and Dixon (1997), along the way creating portraits of the founding patriarchs that challenge our general historical view of these individuals. Finally, Joseph Heller and Norman Mailer take us even further into our cultural past, Mailer's Ancient Evenings (1983) telling the story of all four lives of his protagonist, who in one incarnation is the Egyptian pharaoh Menenhetet, and Heller's God Knows (1984) narrating from a complex temporal perspective the ancient Hebrew warrior-king David's quarrel with God. Like these fellow writers, Updike revitalizes old narratives, literary, sacred, or cultural, with the modern or even postmodern imagination to explore their continued relevance to the modern human condition.

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