

English E-130: Shakespeare and Modern Culture
Midterm Exam, grade: A
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Part One: Passage identifications (approx. 20 minutes)

Please identify and provide a context for the following passages. You should identify not only the title of the play but also who is speaking to whom about what. For context, you might explain the passage's function in the plot and its thematic relevance to the play as a whole, or perhaps even the way it illustrates a particular tendency of its author. Make your answers as detailed as possible. Please write in prose (not bullet points) and with as much coherence as you can manage in the short space you have.

1) X: Nay, but hear me.

Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear
I never more will break an oath with thee.

Y: I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which but for him that had your husband's ring
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will ne'er more break faith advisedly.

Z: Then you shall be his surety: give him this,
And bid him keep it better than the other.

This is a conversation between Bassanio, Antonio, and Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*. Bassanio (X) is the one, who swears to Portia (Z) that he will never again break an oath. This conversation takes place at the end of *MoV*, after the trial in which a disguised Portia had rescued Antonio from Shylock, who had insisted on getting a pound of flesh from Antonio, because he was not able to pay back the money Antonio had lend from him in order to give it to Bassanio for his future with Portia. Bassanio says (to Portia) that he will not break an oath *again*, because he had given the ring to Antonio's defender after they had succeeded in court, which indeed was already a break of an oath. What Bassanio does not know yet, is that in fact Portia herself was the defender (in disguise), and that it is actually her to whom he had given the ring as acknowledgement of his gratitude after the successful trial. Antonio (Y) here vouches for his friend Bassanio again, as he haddone before in his business dealings with Shylock. Portia, who already knows how hard it was for Bassanio to give the ring away, then "pardons" Bassanio. By handing over the ring (shortly after this conversation), the whole "hide and seek" comes to an end, and Portia exposes her (and also Nerissa's) disguise, which introduces the happy ending of the whole play.

2) I prithee take thy fingers from my throat;
For, though I am not splenative and rash,
Yet have I something in me dangerous,
Which let thy wiseness fear. Away thy hand.

These phrases are from *Hamlet*, spoken by Hamlet himself. Hamlet utters them during a fight with Laertes, who seeks for revenge for the death of his sister Ophelia, as well as for the death of his father Polonius. Polonius had been accidently killed by Hamlet (he had presumed that it was Claudius), and Ophelia had committed suicide after Hamlet's rejection (Ophelia did not know that Hamlet was pretending to be mad). When Hamlet utters these phrases, he has been just informed about Ophelia's death. The self-given attributes "splenative" and "rash", as symptoms of self-reflection, point to the key problem in *Hamlet* and of Hamlet himself: he cannot make up his mind, he cannot become active in order to revenge his father, who has been killed by Claudius. The fact that Hamlet speaks of himself as being "dangerous", can probably be explained by the fact that he, with Polonius' death in mind, just got knowledge of Ophelia's suicide, which makes him think of

himself as an uncanny murderer (which he in fact is, since he had killed Polonius earlier in the play), and that he is not able to trust himself anymore, after causing so much "evil". Laertes and Hamlet will later again have a fight, ending with the death of both of them.

3) X: Have you not had enough?

Y: Yes!

(Pause.)

Of what?

X: Of this . . . this . . . thing.

Y: I always had.

(Pause.)

Not you?

X (*gloomily*): Then there's no reason for it to change.

Y: It may end. (Pause.) All life long the same questions, the same answers.

This is a dialogue from Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. Hamm (X), the self-absorbed "king" in the wheelchair who cannot get up, is talking to Clov (Y), who is unable to sit down. They are talking about their daily routine from which there is no way out. They are trapped in a status between life and death which implicates existential ideas: the meaningless of life itself, without eschatologic ideas, a life just defined by (physical) existence. Beckett reduced Shakespeare's *King Lear* and focused on absurdity, existential cruelty and endless struggle, which corresponds with the 'nothing' as a key theme in *King Lear*. The plot's strand in *King Lear* is also absurd, in terms of causes of the characters' behaviour (mainly that of Lear) and the development of action, as well as its cruel and barbaric elements until the end of the play. One example for the absurdity in *King Lear* would be the Dover cliff scene, in which Edgar seems to lead his blind father Gloucester up a hill, from which his father "falls" and – not surprisingly – survives. The characters in *Endgame*, doomed to be trapped in something that is whether life nor death, similar to Sisyphos, who had to roll a rock up a hill over and over again, just as Hamm and Clov have to repeat their daily routines over and over again, where they always have to face "the same (old) questions" and "the same (old) answers". This kind of endlessness is also a topic in *King Lear*, where it is called the 'wheel of fortune'. Since *Endgame* deals with the pure nature of mankind (also true for *King Lear*, who discovers the very nature of mankind in the storm scene), with the absence of eschatologic concepts, it corresponds with the (modern) philosophical idea of existentialism, represented also by Sartre or Camus.

4) Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body the extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself,; unaccommodated man is no more than such a bare, poor, forked animal as thou art. Off, off you lendings! come unbutton here.

This is uttered by Lear in *King Lear*, while he is in the storm scene, which represents his inner constitution, after finding out that he had completely misjudged his daughters, with Cordelia being in fact the only grateful and loving one. He says these words to Edgar (Gloucester's son), here disguised as a madman. It is in this scene, where Lear "changes" from a heartless stubborn person into someone who is able to feel some sort of compassion for fellow people. Here he understands the pure nature of man in his unaccommodated (= pure) condition. He literally takes off his clothes in order to be only left with what belongs to the pure nature of man, which is his body and nothing but.