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## SAMPLE SECTION

### Act Four Scene Two

#### *Commentary*

There’s more fun in this scene, most of it had by Hamlet. His opening phrase, with its alliteration and the disrespectful *‘stowed’* (outdoing Claudius’ *‘shipped’* in the previous scene) sets the tone.

Is there an opportunity for the actor, in the opening lines (*‘But soft!...Hamlet?’*), to start as if Hamlet fears the Ghost may be about to reappear? If so there’ll be an opening for comic anticlimax in *‘O, here they come’*; and his pursuers could *enter* comically (thus preparing us for one of the possible endings to the scene). 1-2

The fun in this scene for the audience lies in watching how Hamlet deals with these over-zealous lackeys of Claudius. Analyse his methods.

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| o Rosencrantz’ question is bald and direct, all monosyllables; Hamlet’s tri-syllabic <i>‘Compounded’</i> , followed by a touch of philosophising, is designed to stop Rosencrantz in his tracks.  | 4     |
| o Rosencrantz persists, however (still largely in monosyllables) and Hamlet comes at him from a different direction, with the ambiguous <i>‘it’</i> , which forces Rosencrantz onto the back foot: he has to ask what Hamlet is talking about.  | 7     |
| o He threatens them, subtly, implying that he knows their secrets ( <i>‘counsel’</i> – perhaps referring back to their forced confession that they were <i>‘sent for’</i> , <i>Act Two Scene Two line 292</i> )...and rebuffs them (he will keep his <i>‘own’</i> counsel).   | 9     |
| o He insults them, not so subtly ( <i>‘sponge’</i> ), and reminds them of his status (partly in the formality of <i>‘replication’</i> ).  | 12    |
| o When Rosencrantz, incensed, unwisely asks for an explanation, he gives one, accusing them directly of greed (they ‘sponge off’ Claudius – soak up his favours).   |       |
| o <i>‘Such officers’</i> : Disparaging in tone  | 14    |
| o <i>‘In the end’</i> : Implies they will come to a bad one: once the king has squeezed them dry of the information they have gleaned for him, he will also squeeze them dry of the favours they have taken <i>from</i> him (ie he’ll take them back). There’s also a possible reference to the digestive process: the ape king (Claudius, who is ‘aping’ Hamlet’s father) will swallow them and when he has taken all their goodness will excrete them <i>‘in the [through his] end’</i> | 15    |
| o He now mocks their lack of understanding, and he does it with an ambiguity ( <i>‘a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear’</i> ) which will further confuse them: either<br>- ‘sarcasm is wasted on fools like you’, or   | 20-21 |

- 'it would be a bad (*'knavish'*) speech which was comfortable in a fool's ear'
- o Rosencrantz tries plainness (*'My lord, you must...to the King'*); Hamlet responds with a riddle (solve it for yourself – if you can).

22-25

*'Hide, fox, and all after'*: (The reference is missing in some editions.) Who might the fox be, and how would Hamlet exit in each case? 27-28

- o Claudius: Hamlet will lead them off enthusiastically in pursuit of the fox he has driven from its hole.
- o Polonius: Hamlet in leaving will call out to the body wherever it is hidden (presuming that's somewhere on stage).
- o Hamlet himself: He will run off (cackling again?), forcing them to give chase.

### **Overview: other things to note**

#### Setting

- o Rottenness (corruption) in Denmark again

#### Character

- o Hamlet: His irrepressible urge to philosophise, satirise, riddle. His pretended madness is also real self-indulgence.
- o Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Hamlet is harsher towards them than hitherto. Has he gained some inkling of their part in a plot against him? He has just described them as *'adders fang'd'*.

#### Action

- o The pace (brevity) of this scene. Hamlet is on the move verbally throughout it; is he on the move physically?

#### Style

- o Two opposite uses of language – to clarify and to obscure.

#### Ideas

- o The transience of Man's life (*'kin'* to dust)
- o How we use each other.

### **Student Response**

'Why did Hamlet hide the body anyway? Did he think Gertrude wouldn't tell anybody what he'd done?' (Edward)

'Maybe it's because there's no sense in doing it that he did it.' (Andrew). Good answer.

\*\*\*\*\*

'How can anyone enjoy being mad?' (Aneesha).

'We haven't decided that he's *really* mad. That's for later. And even if he were...*"There is a pleasure sure in being mad which none but madmen know."*

\*\*\*\*\*

The scene, short though it is, could be useful in answering two essay questions. One is *about* madness, the other deals with the concept of comic relief (in tragedy).

The comic relief one first:

*'Comedy is both a theatrical device and a way in which we try to deal with our hopelessness.'*

*Discuss both of those aspects of comedy, using material from plays you have studied.*

The question on madness:

*'The representation of madness is one of the greatest challenges a playwright may face; and it is one of the most chilling theatrical experiences a playgoer can be subjected to.'*

*Discuss a play or novel in which the derangement of a major character plays an important part.*

As it stands that's more of an **Advanced Placement** question. The **IB Drama** equivalent would be more general in its second part:

*Discuss two or three plays in which characters, in one way or another, lose a sense of reality, and show how that can be a 'chilling experience' for the audience.*

The second part of a GCE A Level essay would be more precise:

*Consider Shakespeare's dramatisation of Hamlet's and Ophelia's madnesses in light of the above comment.*

**END OF SAMPLE SECTION**