
The Danish Court

GHOST of Hamlet, late King of Denmark
Claudius, his brother, now KING of Denmark
Gertrude, QUEEN of Denmark, widow of the late King and now wife of his brother Claudius
HAMLET, son of the late King Hamlet and of Gertrude

POLONIUS, counsellor to the King
LAERTES, son of Polonius
OPHELIA, daughter of Polonius
REYNALDO, servant of Polonius
HORATIO, friend of Prince Hamlet

Members of the Danish court
VOLTEMAND
CORNELIUS
ROSENCRANTZ
GUILDERNSTERN
OSRICK
A LORD
GENTLEMEN

The Norwegian Army
FORTINBRAS, Prince of Norway
A CAPTAIN, a Norwegian

The Graveyard
First CLOWN, a gravedigger
Second CLOWN, his companion

The Players
FIRST PLAYER, who leads the troupe and takes the part of a king
SECOND PLAYER, who takes the part of a queen
THIRD PLAYER, who takes the part of Lucianus, nephew of the King
FOURTH PLAYER, who speaks a Prologue

Two MESSENGERS, A SAILOR, A PRIEST

English AMBASSADORS
Lords, attendants, players, guards, soldiers, followers of Laertes, sailors

ONLINE RESOURCES HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

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Hamlet

Hamlet is one of four revenging sons in the play. The other three, Laertes, Fortinbras and Pyrrhus (the play within the play) are sworn to avenge their father’s deaths and set out to do so with absolute conviction. They function as a series of counterpoints to our procrastinating hero, each offering a slightly different perspective – the bloodthirsty savagery of Pyrrhus, the pragmatic ruthlessness of Fortinbras and the thoughtless action of Laertes, set against thoughtful inaction of Hamlet. But it is too simple to say their easy access to violence is the reason Hamlet seems to us more humane. His extraordinary sense of three-dimensional humanity reveals itself in countless ways, not least in his inherent contradictions.

We do not always like Hamlet and at times he alienates us deeply but every one of us recognises our feelings, doubts, pressures and impulses in him. We attach ourselves to him because he is funny, daring, frank and has that rarest ability to witness his own mind at work, to ‘overhear’ himself and expose his conscience to us.

Shakespeare’s play expands the genre of ‘revenge tragedy’ well beyond its natural bounds and explores the moral, political and social mood of his entire age. The title character is the vehicle for this epic exploration. Academic Harold Bloom argues Hamlet can’t kill his uncle because he simply bursts the seams of such a simple story – “Avenging a father does not require a Hamlet” (Bloom, 1990). So Hamlet’s story occupies itself with more interesting ideas. His focus is at least as much on the women in his life and on the concept of death as it is on his father and the crime he must avenge.

Hamlet’s identity as a student of Germany’s Wittenberg University is carefully defined by Shakespeare early in the play, laying the ground for the depth of his philosophical contemplation as the saga unfolds. Wittenberg was the seat of ‘humanist’ thought. The ‘humanist’ is optimistic that human understanding has endless scope and that the power of thought can be developed toward a full understanding of the purpose of life. Thought can therefore become action as we learn ‘how to act’ in our daily lives to benefit society. Hamlet is usually blindly referred to as a humanist but this may be a fundamental misunderstanding of the character. He vigorously debates ethics, metaphysics and human behaviours throughout the play but it can be argued that he grows to reject humanism. He replaces his search for wisdom and insight with the thought that life in fact has no purpose, and an acceptance that death cannot be understood, only experienced. Bloom says that Hamlet comes to recognise that “no act but suicide is rational” (1990, p4). In his most famous speech he debates the merits of “thought” and “action” and finds that the former poisons the latter, turning it “awry”.

In many ways, Hamlet is the story of a young man we never get to know. When we meet him, his natural personality has already been eclipsed by circumstance and he will only plummet further into disillusionment as the play continues. He is a man of disappointed hopes and unrealised potential, as is recognised by many around him. Many scholars go so far as to say his life, and even his revenge, is a failure. Ophelia paints him in her memory as the very model of a courtier, soldier and scholar, “the glass of fashion and the mould of form, the observed of all observers” (3:1:147-8). Claudius knows he is “loved of the distracted multitude” (4:3:4). He is the “noble youth” (1:5:38) of his father. Even Fortinbras believes he would have “proved most royal” (5:2:390) on the throne of Denmark. Unfortunately the man we meet is “quite, quite down” (3:1:151). But we do see glimpses of this ‘former Hamlet’ – loving, full of humour and zest for life. His initial reaction to seeing his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his sheer joy in welcoming the players to court and his
egalitarian fascination with the gravedigger’s trade remind us of how much this young man has been transformed by his ordeal. He can no longer be who he was because he no longer believes in what “man” can be. He has lost faith in the image of people as being “noble in reason, infinite in faculty...in action, how like an angel, in apprehension, how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals...” (2:2:290-309). He, with the rest of us, is merely a “quintessence of dust” (2:2:306) and this bleak instinct reveals itself to him very early in the play. He has lost faith in women through his mother’s “frailty”; he has lost faith in the “stale and unprofitable uses of this world” (1:2:134) and he argues that an individual will “take corruption” from the mere “stamp of one defect” (1:4:35).

His great contradictions, such as his paralysis in revenging his father as opposed to his wild rashness at the ‘wrong’ moments, are what give the play its eternal appeal. He sets out to prove the word of a ghost — that in itself reveals a great deal about the problem of being ‘Hamlet.’

**Claudius**

Typical of Shakespeare’s great villains, Claudius is a thoroughly human, flawed, interesting, three-dimensional character and, we like him against our better judgment and are excited in his presence.

Claudius is Hamlet’s antagonist who, through a combination of his lust for power and his love for his brother’s wife, has committed “the primal eldest” crime, “a brother’s murder.” (3:3:38) He is contrasted starkly with his noble warrior brother as a shrewd and cunning political animal, and according to Hamlet he is a drunk and a man at the mercy of sensual impulses.

Claudius is a worthy opponent for Hamlet through his intelligence, his power of perception and his ability to manipulate language. Shakespeare gives him sophisticated rhetorical speeches that charm, persuade and overwhelm those around him. His first speech (1:2:1-39) to the court magnificently deals with a major personal controversy (his marriage), a major political threat (Norway) and the requests of two significant courtiers (Laertes and Hamlet) with effortless skill. He charismatically greets and employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He instinctively recognises Hamlet is not mad. He holds a personal discourse of forgiveness with God in the chapel that shows a very honest self-knowledge and his easy manipulation of the furious Laertes makes him seem impenetrable. What panache must he have displayed to woo Gertrude, still in mourning for his own brother! His charms are given extraordinary emphasis by Shakespeare.

He stifles all attempts at maternal feeling from his wife toward her son and is profoundly selfish, disregarding the danger Gertrude was in when he hears of Polonius’ murder. And again, offering only a feeble “Gertrude, do not drink” (5:2:268) when she picks up the poisoned goblet during the duel. But his affection for Gertrude and desire to preserve her feelings also sees him make the mistakes that condemn him. He tells Laertes that Gertrude is “so conjunctive to my life and soul, that as the star moves not but in his sphere, so I could not but by her” (4:7:14-16) and some of his actions reflect a truth in that. He could have disposed of Hamlet legally and publicly for the murder of Polonius, but Gertrude’s desperate pleas will not allow it. Instead he tries an underhand political machination with the English King which fails. Again to ensure “that even his mother shall uncharge the practice and call it accident” (4:7:66), he hatches a complex revenge for Laertes to carry out, rather than let him simply attack and kill Hamlet. Again the margin for error exposes him and destroys him.
Gertrude

Gertrude is the enigma at the heart of Hamlet. For a character that is so central to the entire action, she has comparatively little to say and reveals so little about herself. We cannot be certain about any of her relationships. Was she happy with her former husband, the warrior and empire builder? Is she part of the reason Claudius killed old Hamlet or did he marry her purely for the political safety it offers him? Was she an adulteress? Do her loyalties shift away from Claudius to Hamlet in the final scenes of the play? We do know that this fascinating woman is deeply loved by three very different and very remarkable men.

Many fine actors have seen these negotiations as opportunities rather than obstacles and created wonderfully interesting visions of the Danish Queen. In many cases, that involves making bold decisions early in the play where she actually doesn't say a great deal. Part of the challenge is that she only has three brief moments alone with her husband in the entire play, and these are generally moments of crisis. Otherwise they are always on public display, so as actor Michael Pennington points out, demonstrating her sexual appetite for him usually means “having them jump on each other in public in a most unstatesmanlike way”. (Pennington, 1996)

The words of other characters often provide signposts to understanding. In Gertrude’s case, the descriptions we receive of her come primarily from the bitter and jaundiced views of the son and husband she has betrayed. Shakespeare does not give us first hand evidence of her sexual licentiousness or lack of virtue.

It is what is unsaid that intrigues us. She has chosen to suppress a great deal of personal agony and shame in her remarriage, storing it away in her soul as “black and grained spots that will not leave their tinct” (3:4:90). Hamlet’s verbal daggers drag them mercilessly to the surface through his attack in the ‘closet scene’. It is from this moment that her journey of self-knowledge begins. This may manifest itself in productions of the play through a shifting of loyalties and trust away from Claudius, “so we invent gestures of physical rejection, around and across the lines”.(Pennington, 1996)

She is an experienced regal figure with natural authority, as she demonstrates in her easy diplomacy with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, her quip at Polonius for “more matter with less art” (2:2:95), and her quick and accurate explanation of Hamlet’s wildness at Ophelia’s grave. So her public display is convincing. Privately however, she continues to suppress life’s more difficult emotions, refusing to acknowledge pain in herself or others, as she shows in refusing to speak with the mad Ophelia. But again, after the tragic drowning, her poise and control are remarkable, rendering a lyrical and moving account of Ophelia’s death that breaks Laertes. Her own death, often played as if she knows the cup is poisoned, again without support from the text, displays some sense of heroism and loyalty to her son. She uses her last breaths to warn Hamlet of the poisoned cup.

The Ghost

The third figure in the royal love triangle is the Ghost of the old king, Hamlet. Introduced as a terrifying figure “in arms”, he lives up to his aura in his first blunt exchange with Hamlet on the battlements. “Mark me…pity me not…so art thou to revenge” (1:5:2-7) are the words of a man on a mission, refusing to admit any sentiment or paternal feeling to the situation. But the spectral warrior’s mask soon slips away to reveal a flesh and blood human being, frail, flawed and “honest” (1:5:138).

The audience, through some of the most revealing and thrilling language in the play, like Hamlet, is exposed to a vision of utter torment. The fires of purgatory seem to hurt this man less than his brother’s crime and his wife’s decision to move on after his death – “o Hamlet
what a falling off was there” (1:5:47). He seems to soften as we learn of his emotional agony and perhaps is ignorant of the effect of the poisoning images of Gertrude’s incest in his son’s mind.

The Ghost urgently fulfils his objective to secure a promise of revenge from Hamlet. By the end of the scene there is a powerful and utterly convincing relationship between a father and son. The reality of their former living relationship or their family life is never made clear. Hamlet paints it as idyllic – “so loving to my mother that he might not beteem (permit) the winds of heaven visit her face too roughly” (1:2:142). But Gertrude interestingly offers no opinion whatsoever of her former life, not even responding to Hamlet’s long list of his father’s virtues in the closet scene. We get two other portraits of him. One of his militarism and skill – the “valiant” (1:1:84) warrior defeating old Fortinbras in battle and slaying the “sleaded Polacks on the ice” (1:1:63), takes us back to the Viking saga world from which the original play sprang. Hamlet carefully constructs the image of the loving, empathetic and wise King Gonzago, murdered in the Mousetrap.

Most academics argue that Shakespeare deliberately creates a medieval father giving his ‘modern’ philosopher son a task too thoughtlessly simple and primitive for him to carry out. The father and son, the armoured soldier and the student in desperate conversation on the misty battlements is one of the theatre’s great images.

Polonius
“We may act very foolishly and talk very sensibly, and there is no inconsistency in that.” (Hazlitt in Bloom, 1990). Polonius is an interesting paradox. He fits the comic caricature of the petulant old busy body, the self-interested and foolish ‘pantaloons’, jealous of his daughter’s sexuality and his family name. In this guise, he provides some of the play’s best comedy, but he also explodes such clichés through his moments of humanity and the genuine danger he poses. He is not a harmless figure, he hurts others and is spectacularly hurt himself, and the destruction of his family is essential to play’s tragic shape.

Shakespeare’s audience would have recognised a clever and topical satirical portrait of William Cecil, Lord Burleigh, a cunning and powerful advisor to Queen Elizabeth. Polonius’ identity is more often equated with that of a prime minister in modern productions, within an elected and governing monarchy. He is certainly a key adviser to Claudius’ court and comes and goes freely from the seat of power. He even feels free to enter the Queen’s private chamber at 2am and tell her to “be round with” (3:4:5) her son. Hamlet mercilessly mocks him and Claudius and Gertrude gently do the same, but he appears to have played a key role in the election of the new King. “The head is not more native to the heart…than is the throne of Denmark to thy father”, Claudius tells Laertes (1:2:48-49).

He goes on to make some of the most significant decisions in the play – ending Ophelia’s burgeoning relationship, using her as a pawn to diagnose Hamlet’s madness, encouraging the King and Queen to attend the ‘Murder of Gonzago’, and spying on Hamlet in the closet. His death marks the climactic turning point of the play. From that moment, the entire arc of revenge is tipped sideways and the subsequent whirlpool leads to the demise of almost every key figure in the play.

Polonius is an impulsive statesman and a bad parent. His dreadful decisions as a father are made more repulsive by his capacity for goodness. He can offer profound wisdom to his son – “to thine own self be true…” (1:3:78) but then elaborately spy on him in France. He can recognise Hamlet’s love for Ophelia as deep and genuine, but only after he has sacrificed it brutally to prove his own theories. Does he really believe Hamlet’s role as Prince is ‘out of
(Ophelia's) star' or was he simply testing the reality of their love? He doesn't protect Ophelia from humiliation during the 'play' scene.

Shakespeare enjoys the dramatic irony of Polonius having played Julius Caesar at university – Shakespeare's Roman play had been enacted very recently at the new Globe and the same actor surely played both roles. He extends the parallel by having the same actor who played Brutus stab Polonius in the closet scene. And finally, as Caesar's spirit does, Polonius' memory haunts the world of the play from that moment, poisoning his daughter's mind and condemning his son to self-sacrifice.

**Ophelia**

Ophelia is “a talent gasping in an airless household” (Pennington, 1996). She is filled with intelligence, has a keen wit as she shows with Laertes and is perhaps not as devoid of experience as is often suggested. Her songs and sharp cynicism in her mad scenes suggest that life and risk and the capacity for opinion have not entirely passed her by. She is certainly guilty of trusting too easily and of ‘obeying’ even when her instinct tells her not to. But, in the era of the play, what choice does she have?

Like Hamlet, we know we have missed out on something beautiful with Ophelia. She has warmth and tolerant maturity in response to her brother's fear over her virginity. It is so typically heartbreaking, and in the spirit of tragedy, that a simple innocuous remark seals her destruction. Having already secured a promise from her, Laertes can't leave it alone – “Ophelia, remember well what I have said to you” (1:3:83) Dad (Polonius) overhears it, asks what he has said and Ophelia’s world begins to collapse. She never has an opportunity to rebuild it. It is little wonder that she has buried so much of her personality in the presence of these men and the absence of a maternal ally. Pennington suggests that “madness is the safest place for Ophelia” (Pennington, 1996).

She falls victim to Hamlet's profound distrust of women. Not only does he berate her brutally with pleas and orders to hide herself in a nunnery from the inevitable evils of being female; he also fails to trust her with his terrible dilemma. Horatio, his male friend, can share in the information Hamlet carries from the ghost, unfortunately Hamlet does not share this information with his girlfriend as well. Ultimately his pride at her rejection and the effect of his mother's sexual freedom condemn Ophelia.

Her madness is dangerous and portentous. Her painless death no doubt comes as some relief to a King and Queen under extreme pressure. Her insanity is among the greatest challenges to understanding and performance in the play. Its central theme, the death of her father and her handing out flowers with their accompanying meanings, is certainly the ritualisation of his death in place of the funeral he never had. But sexuality and her love for Hamlet appear to displace her grief and take it elsewhere – “young men will do it if they come to it, by cock they are to blame” (4:5:61). No certain conclusions can be drawn from much of what she says but great tension and pathos is generated by it. Shakespeare's skill and insight is revealed in Ophelia's mental shifts, as she slips between thoughts of father, brother and lover as if they are one man. This offers a powerfully modern vision of a psychological disorder.

"The last we see of her, she is being thrown about in a grave, shouted over by two men" (Pennington, 1996), which fits her arc in the play but should not define it. In the freedom of her madness she says, “we know what we are, but know not what we may be” (4:5:44), which seems a reasonable portrait of her story of love and loss in *Hamlet*. 
Laertes
Laertes is established in immediate opposition to Hamlet from the opening of the play. Both young men have requested leave of the new King to return to their former lifestyles, in France and Wittenberg respectively. Status would suggest Hamlet's bid should be addressed first but Claudius skips him and offers generous and expansive permission to Laertes to let "time be thine and they best graces, spend it at thy will" (1:2:63). Such largesse is then buried as he forcefully insists Hamlet remain "here, in the cheer and comfort of our eye" (1:2:116).

When we next meet Laertes, the fateful opposition between the two men deepens. From his perspective on the nature of men's sexual appetites, he advises his sister to reject Hamlet's advances, which he calls a "fashion and a toy in blood" (1:3:6). Moments later we hear the same controlling and mistrustful voice from his father, rejecting Ophelia's desperate claims that Hamlet's love is of "honourable fashion" (1:3:111).

Later, it is Ophelia who re-introduces Laertes to the story. In her madness after Polonius' death, she offers the King and Queen a dangerous premonition – "my brother shall know of it" (4:5:69). Almost on cue, Laertes successfully breaches Claudius' court and with huge popular support has the capacity to achieve outright revolution. Claudius' diplomatic entreaties barely manage to calm him before Ophelia's entrance serves to "dry up [his] brains" (4:5:151). Her death stalls Laertes' wave of revenge and his passion and affection for his sister is movingly portrayed in his attempts to communicate with her, "O rose of May, dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia" (4:5:155). At her graveside he achieves a genuine and heroic passion for her, begging to be buried with her.

Shakespeare uses Claudius to demonstrate the different capacities for revenge in the play's two young heroes. Hamlet could not cut a man's throat in the church. Laertes can do so without hesitation. Hamlet can instinctually recognise when someone is playing games with him. Laertes, consumed by emotional fury, is easily manipulated by the King to kill Hamlet against his conscience and his natural instinct for honour.

Productions can do much with the question of why Laertes, apparently the far superior swordsman, is so easily defeated by Hamlet in early rounds of the fight. Is his mind made hazy with the ugly deception he is practising on Hamlet? Is he allowing Hamlet to win in order to ensure he gets to drink early in the fight and seal his fate? Either way, the "unbated and envenomed" (5:2:309) sword does the trick but at the cost of Laertes' conscience. He is easily disarmed, struck and, in dying, desperately begs Hamlet's forgiveness, placing the blame squarely with Claudius. Shakespeare is at pains to reinforce the young man's essential goodness.

Horatio
"Without Horatio, Hamlet is forbiddingly beyond us." (Bloom,1990) Traditionally Laertes and Fortinbras serve as contrasts to Hamlet. Horatio's importance to the story is often neglected. He introduces and finishes the story. He matches Hamlet's intelligence and humanist philosophical cynicism. We trust him and disbelieve and then believe in the Ghost through his eyes. He brings his friend the news with the sincerity and sensitivity that comes to mark every aspect of his behaviour. From the outset then, Horatio's rational thinking and action, his stoic emotional balance and his cool-headed appreciation of justice superbly counterweight Hamlet's capacity for rashness, emotional overstatement and cruelty.

Horatio is the unflinchingly loyal and self-sacrificing best friend that Shakespeare uses in so many of his plays.
Horatio’s attitude to Hamlet reflects ours undergoing a subtly complex series of changes. His dialogue with the audience is highly personal without an actual soliloquy. We gauge so much through Horatio’s silent observation and delicate intrusion into events.

His radar for danger peaks whenever Hamlet’s “wild and whirling” (1:5:133) passions start to consume him. He warns his friend that the Ghost may “tempt him toward the flood” (1:4:69), he is bewildered that Hamlet will not trust him with the Ghost’s words (eventually, he clearly does tell Horatio all). Horatio promises to observe Claudius’ guilt during the Mousetrap and no doubt watches with some despair as a crazed Hamlet almost sabotages the whole event. It is an exquisitely judged piece of writing when Hamlet assumes Claudius’ guilt has been revealed to all at the climax of the play-within-a-play. He asks Horatio if he saw it – “Very well my lord…I did very well note him, my lord” (3:2:282-4) is the entirely ambiguous response. Horatio’s methodical instinct is wary of trusting an experiment where the scientist’s hands deliberately contaminate the sample in order to achieve preconceived results.

Horatio brings Ophelia’s agony to the audience. He administers Hamlet’s return from sea and is aware that although his friend seems more controlled that there is something morbidly amiss with him. Hamlet’s new fascination with the dead and physical decay troubles Horatio – “it is to consider too curiously to consider so my lord” (5:1:200). He is no doubt appalled by Hamlet’s outburst at Ophelia’s funeral but is probably not surprised. Hamlet has already movingly expressed to Horatio that he holds him “in his heart’s core” because he is “not passion’s slave” (3:2:70-71). In contrast, it is not difficult to recognise that Hamlet is “a pipe for fortune’s finger to sound what stop she please” (3:2:68-69). The news that Hamlet has left Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to a cunning slaughter shocks and splinters the pair momentarily as Horatio’s instinct for restraint and justice kicks in. As always, he says little (“So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to’t” – 5:2:56) but two things give away his attitude here. One is Hamlet’s reaction to Horatio’s restraint – “why what a king is this?” (5:2:62).

The ugliness of the whole drama appals and bewilders Horatio, finally forcing his momentary loss of control when he attempts to drink the poison. Talked down from the ledge, he becomes the custodian of Hamlet’s story. “In this harsh world”, he will draw his “breath in pain” (5:2:340) to tell Hamlet’s tale. We can be certain of Horatio’s faith in this respect by the knowledge that we are hearing Hamlet’s story.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
Hamlet’s school friends are an interesting tale in themselves. Often dismissed by directors and critics as selfish sycophants or comic stooges, they certainly display elements of both behaviours. They don’t appear to be Wittenberg colleagues as is often assumed. They are school friends from a younger age and certainly lack Horatio’s philosophical university intelligence. But the journey Shakespeare creates for them makes remarkable psychological sense. As always, even his smaller characters are real human beings and to reduce them beyond that is to damage the play.

Understanding Ros and Guil basically means considering their actions from two different perspectives – theirs and Hamlet’s. They are ordered by the King and Queen of Denmark to come to Elsinore, where after an enthusiastic welcome, Hamlet’s mother and step-father offer an utterly convincing portrait of parental concern for a desperately unhappy son. Ros and Guil have heard Hamlet is mad – his parents confirm this for them and they are given the opportunity, indeed, the honour and trust, of trying to help. What is their crime so far? They approach a man in a deep depression, considered mad, and within moments he is
speaking of Elsinore as a prison and of “bad dreams” (2:2:240). They know nothing of murder or ghosts or revenge. Hamlet asks if they have been sent for and they falter. Why? They do not wish their friend to think they are only here under orders. There is no reason to believe they do not care for Hamlet and they do not want him to read the situation as a set-up. After all, it is not a set-up of theirs and they do not know Claudius is a villain. We also never see any evidence of them craving or spending a reward. But their initial lie condemns them.

It is a beautifully and absurdly constructed tragedy of misunderstanding. Hamlet expected solidarity from them, to side with him and dob in the King. But they, quite rightly, think the King is kind and caring and that Hamlet is losing it. What can they do? Hamlet then behaves with savage bitterness toward them and with brutal ugliness to Ophelia and his mother at the Mousetrap forcing Ros and Guil to align themselves with the family and give the rude Prince a ticking off. Then he murders his girlfriend’s father, confirming their fears of madness and they agree to take him to England. It is absurd to argue they know the letter is a death-warrant. Shakespeare would ensure that we know they know. Hamlet, who has been operating from an entirely self-centred perspective, decides they are guilty and kills them. Their deaths are significant, hence they are reported to us twice, shocking Horatio particularly. It is supposed to hurt us too. Their confused, very human journeys are examples of the innocent collateral damage of great tragedy.