Ophelia is most wise when she is mad. During her madness she no longer represses the ideas and realities that she had seen before, but kept silent; madness finally frees her tongue. And, once being freed, she makes perhaps the most true and profound statement in the play, separate from her lover’s great soliloquies and her father’s trite aphorisms: “We know what we are, but not what we may be.”

She summarizes the whole of the play. Every major character, with the exception of the true Horatio, possesses at least two surfaces, the facade and the reality. The play functions and thrives by stripping these surfaces away, exposing the characters, their realities, totally, or at least indicating them. Of course, some of these facades are more than obvious; Claudius is obviously not the good king he pretends to be and Polonius not the wise advisor. Claudius, however, possesses two facades, that of the good king and that of the unrepentant uncle. Only late in the play does this intensely private character reveal his repentance, that his murder weights heavily on him, and his paranoia, that he knows retribution for his sins is approaching. None of the play’s characters, least of all the brilliant Hamlet, take note of these faces of Claudius.

His wife, of course, is also more than she seems. Like Ophelia, she seems to be one more pawn-like female character at the mercy of the men. But the realization of her true power and importance parallels Ophelia’s growing madness. That is, the reports of Ophelia’s madness and subsequent suicide are reported to her, not the king. If she is simply another woman, this sudden recognition of power seems, at the least, odd. Even Claudius refers to he and Gertrude as co-rulers during his coronation. Having been in power for the lives of two kings, she doubtless has cultivated a base of power and support all her own, which only grows as the regents shift quickly.
Obviously these characters are more than they seem. However an even larger issue exists in the play. Virtually every character in the play has a mirror, a doppelganger, an equal and often opposed twin. Hamlet and Claudius are perhaps the most poignant example. Certainly the reader sees them opposed, if not distinct opposites. However, from the perspective of the play’s characters, they are not highly different. If the reader takes the point of view of Laertes, he sees a Hamlet who has killed his father and intends to marry his sister. Essentially Claudius is to Hamlet what Hamlet is to Laertes. The play-within-a-play confirms this perception, as instead of a brother killing a brother as it might seem, a nephew kills an uncle. So Hamlet, the nephew, kills Claudius, the uncle, just as Claudius, the uncle, killed Hamlet, the father. The other side of this situation, though, makes Hamlet and Laertes not enemies, but a pair, as they both have experienced the same sort of tragedy. And, by the play’s end, both of them realize this, as they finally ally and salute one another shortly before they die at each other’s hands in the final scene. As an afterthought, the perceptive critic might add that Claudius killed Hamlet’s father while Hamlet the Younger was in Germany, while Hamlet the Younger killed Polonius, Laertes’s father, while Laertes was in France.

Of course, though, Hamlet, Laertes, and Claudius are no the only unlikely group. Other pairings, too, are much more than they seem. Yorrick and Osric provide an obvious example. Besides possessing a striking similarity in nomenclature, they fulfill the same role with respect to Hamlet and Claudius, Yorrick as the clown whom Hamlet loves and Osric as the fool in Claudius’s employ.

Not only are the play’s characters more than they seem, but its structure, too, provides more than a handful of striking, but hidden, parallels between seemingly opposed characters. We know easily what the relationship between Hamlet and Claudius is, but the play, without
dissection, leaves only the faintest hint of what it may be. And the play, in its characters and structure, thrives on this same multi-layeredness. Without realizing the true depth of these characters and the true intricacy of the relationship between them, the play is, at best, over-long and confusing. We must realize not only what this play is, but what it may be.