Discipline is a method of control for those in power, where its complementary functions are to prevent further rebellion and demonstrate the consequences of disobedience. In the case of *Hamlet*, the person who theoretically wields the power to lay down such discipline is Claudius, being the ruling monarch of Denmark. However, Claudius’ reign is muddied with the stain of fratricide and incest, which weakens his position and necessitates a secondary enforcer to ensure political and social stability. In the patriarchal system, the next person in line as this great enforcer is Polonius, who serves as the default counselor and watchman to the other characters. Polonius acts as the symbol for a societal order that inflicts discipline, whose murder releases the characters from the fear of political retribution and unleashes an anarchical madness.

A key model for discipline is Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, which he developed in the late 1700s as a prison system to improve efficiency and order. In his architectural structure, prison cells form a circle and at the nucleus is a veiled guard tower. This arrangement allows the guard in the tower to be able to see all the prisoners, but the prisoners, when looking at the tower, are unable to view the watchman though they know the person is there. Because the prisoners cannot see the guard’s movements, they will discipline themselves and obey the rules for fear that the guard may be watching them. Although the prisoners do not monitor the guard, the mysterious figure is still under constant surveillance. Any member of the public can inspect the prison and perceive instantly whether the guard is doing a proper job of discipline, simply by
gauging the prisoners’ penchant for rebellion. Thus, the Panopticon’s functionality directly correlates to the guard’s aptitude for discipline through omnipresence.

The idea behind the Panopticon’s potential to enforce disciplinary measures inspired Michel Foucault to expand the prison model as a philosophy on the structure of society. As Foucault exemplifies, the Panopticon discipline stands in stark contrast to other forms of discipline where a higher authority forces people to bend people to certain customs, drawing comparison to the strict regulations placed upon townsfolk during a plague in the 17th century. Whereas the towns’ leaders instructed people’s actions, the Panopticon takes preemptive measures to manipulate people into disciplining themselves. Self-discipline, to Foucault, is the basis for how every person in society behaves. Every person acts as all three levels of surveillance: the prisoners, the guard, and the public inspectors. We, as members of society, are prisoners who are afraid of not adhering to political and social laws, afraid that someone is watching our actions at any moment. As guards, we watch other people and observe their movements to ensure obedience to written and unspoken rules. And as inspectors, we are able to watch other “guards” and check to see if they are upholding their duty that the societal “prisoners” are not expressing rebellious tendencies.

The Panopticon model strives to prevent further rebellious activity, but discipline also is used to prove to people that there are consequences to actions. An example of such discipline is the execution of Robert Devereaux, 2nd Earl of Sussex, who was beheaded for attempting a revolution against Queen Elizabeth I. Prior to his beheading, Devereaux had unsuccessfully tried courting the English monarch, but his favor was quickly unappreciated due to reoccurring incidents, like drawing his sword after the Queen cuffed him on the ear or barging into her bedchambers while she was half-dressed. Throughout the times of his revolt and his
imprisonment, several people wrote accounts on the nature of Devereaux, citing him to be in a state of “madness”. At his execution, however, Devereaux made a full confession where he admitted fault and praised the fairness of his trial, which was perceived as a victory for the monarchical discipline and order.

Karin Coddon writes about how many academics believe Devereaux was the inspiration for Shakespeare’s title character, Hamlet. She compares various actions of Hamlet and Devereaux, noting how both Hamlet and Devereaux disrupt the Queen in her bedchambers and confess their faults to the audience at their deaths. By drawing these comparisons, Coddon comments on how each figure reflects a repression in the individual identity. The true “madness” in each character is that their individuality is being subjugated to mere subjects, both in terms of a political being and a social study. As a result, they are driven to rebellious action as a commitment to fulfill hidden desires.

Just as the Panopticon and the life of Robert Devereaux represent the idea of discipline being used as a measure of effective power, the same can be found in Hamlet. However, though the Foucault or Coddon methodology link discipline to social identity, discipline is also used in Shakespeare’s play to reflect the fear of anarchy.

Much of Hamlet centers on the idea that the usurpation of the Old King has caused a state of oppression. Hamlet comments as such to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: [insert quote about how Denmark is a prison and yadda yadda yadda. I’m really, really tired right now.] The prison state that Hamlet references calls to mind the Panopticon structure, where Hamlet admits that he lives in a dreaded fear that he is under constant surveillance. The metaphoric prison, then, indicates that there is a guard out there watching over Hamlet. In this case, the guard would be King Claudius. For the first half of the play, Hamlet and Claudius’ relationship is dictated by the
conflict between power and subject. Claudius designs to continuously monitor Hamlet’s behavior, advising him to follow in certain conventions. In one scene [which I’ll find the specific citation for later], Claudius admonishes Hamlet for being so depressed about his father’s death and warns him that his deposition is unbecoming of the Prince. And as referenced to previously, Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern directly to Hamlet in an unsubtle attempt to weed out information from him. In both instances, Claudius is trying to assert his power over Hamlet, both in terms as the physical monarch and the metaphoric guard. He worries about Hamlet’s mental state of being, primarily concerned with if the young Prince harbors any sense of resentment or rebellion to strike against Claudius.

However, another aspect to this Panopticon approach is that the guard (Claudius) only has power if the subjects under observation are too afraid of the consequences of that power. The watchman is theoretically able to strike fear into the hearts of the prisoners and there is no need to force discipline upon them when the disciplinary measures are already undertaken from within. Claudius fails as the guard in two ways: the first is his corrupt rise to power and the second is his own unmasking. In killing his brother and marrying his sister, Claudius has stripped away the veil that covers the guard tower. He is no longer able to hide behind the façade of superior authority, when his authority is built upon deceit and manipulation. [Insert quote about something somewhere here? I have no idea.] The basic idea behind any position of power is that one willingly takes on extra moral responsibility for those who rest under their authority, and in falling from this idealistic image, Claudius has become a prisoner in his own right through his sinful actions. Being a prisoner means that he is on the same level as Hamlet, and therefore, it erases the fear within Hamlet to discipline himself to appease an unknown watchman. But there
is a third element to the Panopticon that still needs mentioning, and that is the public inspector who examines the guard’s effectiveness and reports the findings to other people.

With *Hamlet*, the role of public inspector is designated to Polonius, the third father figure and the character who polices the actions more than any other person. In Act 2, Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on his son, Laertes: “Inquire me first what Danskers are in Paris, / And how, and who, what means, and where they keep, / What company, at what expense” (2.1.7-9). With his daughter Ophelia, Polonius sets up her and Hamlet at a specific time so that Polonius and Claudius can spy on them: “Ophelia, walk you here. —Gracious, so please you, / [Claudius and I] will bestow ourselves…/ I hear [Hamlet] coming. Withdraw, my Lord” (3.1.42-43, 54). And once more, he spies on Hamlet’s conversation with Queen Gertrude: “My lord, he’s going to his mother’s closet. / Behind the arras I’ll convey myself / To hear the process” (3.3.27-29).

Polonius observes people with vigilant surveillance, but he can only act as a weak form of a guard. Whereas as the true guard is able to be in the tower at all times, Polonius is forced to either work through intermediaries or submit to a higher authority. With Laertes, Polonius cannot physically travel to France himself, and must rely on outside aid. With Ophelia, he serves as the advisor to Claudius, who is also watching the proceedings, and not as the main executive. With Gertrude, he is again surveying with the intention in mind to report to Claudius what he has found. All of these examples draw parallels toward Polonius serving as the inspector in this Panopticon construction. His interests in the other characters’ lives can be seen as an “inspector” investigating the efficiency in the system, Polonius’ death is symbolically the destruction of the Panopticon structure in *Hamlet*. There is nobody to watch the guard and with the guard being ineffective, subsequently, there is nobody to attend to the prisoners. As a result, Hamlet is freed from the confines of his own self-
discipline, and no longer is confounded with fears of consequence. The revolution he sparks in the act of killing Polonius brings about a state of anarchy where the figures in authority no longer are capable of enforcing their control. The anarchical political state reflects an individual madness that is defined by the release of repressed desires.

For Claudius, he is caught between ensuring his own political position while upholding his stature as the moral figure for the metaphoric institutional prison, Denmark. Monitoring the balance between these two conflicting ideals is Polonius, and with his death, Claudius is freed from the feeling of being watched. Once the inspector is gone, the King throws away moral inhibitions, attempting on two separation occasions to have Hamlet killed to protect his position: once when he sends Hamlet to [England?] to be executed there and the other when he arranges a fixed duel between Laertes and Hamlet.

With all of these characters, the question of anarchy and individuality forces characters to question their power functions in this state of anarchy. The anarchical flux levels out the field and disseminates ideas between authoritative figures and subjects. In their confined roles, the problem for the disciplinarians and the subjects is that their desires and their new positions do not correlate with their idea of what they should be.

Drawing upon the ideas of the Panopticon and the life of Robert Devereaux sets the stage for Hamlet in the context of discipline. Whereas the two historical sources refer to discipline as a measure for social identity, they can be applied to Hamlet as an understanding of individual power in a state of political anarchy.
Works Cited

