Discipline is a method of control for those in power, utilized to reinforce the authoritative image. In the case of *Hamlet*, the person who should wield disciplinary power is Claudius, being the ruling monarch of Denmark. However, Claudius’ reign is muddied with the stain of fratricide and incest, which weakens his own position and thus, weakens the entire political and social stability. Removing Claudius as the representational figure for the social order necessitates another candidate for the role, Polonius, on whom this responsibility is given. Polonius acts as the symbol for a societal order that inflicts discipline, whose death releases the characters from the political and social façade.

A couple years prior to the first performance of *Hamlet*, there was an infamous event where Robert Devereaux, 2nd Earl of Sussex, was beheaded for attempting a revolution against Queen Elizabeth I. Before 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. The latter incident was particularly egregious, for: “the monarch’s identity depended upon the uniformity of obedience, as Elizabeth well understood: ‘I am no Queen. That man is above me.’” (Coddon 383). 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.

For Karin Coddon, social discipline and identity is at the heart of Robert Devereaux’s life. She compares various actions of Devereaux to Hamlet, noting how both 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 how certain powers repress the individual identity to a mere subject:

Hamlet’s crisis of subjectivity, then, is Hamlet’s crisis of authority; the ideological constructs that shape power and subjection as mutually constitutive, specifically, the ideology of inward obedience designed to bolster the pales and forts of reason, are scrutinized and exposed as ineffectual. The disintegration of subjective identity—madness—corresponds to the airy nothing of ghostly authority” (395).

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. Everything that Devereaux does in relation to the Queen is a struggle between recognition and uprooting her authority. Conversely, everything that Elizabeth does in response to Devereaux is an attempt to uphold that social order.

Another key model for discipline is in 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: “The arrangement of [a prisoner’s] room…imposes on him an axial visibility; but in the divisions of the ring, those separated cells,
imply a lateral invisibility. And this invisibility is a guarantee of order” (200). 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. 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: “Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth…there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces;” (217). 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.
One of the crucial elements to an effective discipline is that the people in power and the people underneath play into their respective roles as ruler and subject. The individual social identity must be clear and rational, allowing each party to accept certain positions. But as Coddon illustrates in her essay, as soon as somebody steps out of bounds from the expected and assumed social role, both members in this ruler-subject relationship are affected negatively. With Hamlet, the person who should be the expected and assumed authority is the King of Denmark, Claudius. The immediate remarriage and the revelation to the murder create a sharp paradox for Hamlet where the ruler and disciplinary are not the same. In one of his soliloquys, this problem is at the forefront of Hamlet’s troubles:

Am I a coward?

Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,

Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,

Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie I’ th’ throat

As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?

…

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,

That I, the son of a dear [father] murdered,

Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,

Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words

And fall a-cursing like a very drab,

A stallion (3.1.551-555, 562-567).

With the breakdown in the presumed political and societal roles, it sparks an identity crisis within Hamlet. He needs the disciplinary measures and the power roles of king-subject and
father-son in order to understand his own position. Before his father’s death, he could clearly define himself as the “Prince”, “My father’s son,” and “Successor”. But Claudius has bypassed him in all of these regards, and so Hamlet is forced to contemplate new, troubling labels as “coward”, “villain”, and “whore”.

While Claudius destroys the fragile social identity, his foil, Polonius, serves as the watchman and symbol for discipline. 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’ role is comparable to that of the Panopticon’s unseen guard. He keeps a constant surveillance over the rest of the characters, and attempts to police their actions. And like the veil that shields the prisoners from seeing the guard in the tower, Polonius and his relationship to the other characters also has a strong sense of illusion. With Laertes, though he sends Reynaldo to be his spy, Polonius is limited by physical distance and is unable to personally see to it that Renaldo follows what he has been instructed. With Ophelia, there is a discourse between how Polonius views his daughter and how Hamlet views her, most notably with strong sexual tension and an ambiguous understatement that questions Ophelia’s virginity. And with Gertrude, Polonius advises the Queen on how to properly fix Hamlet’s depression and provides explanation for his demeanor, but Polonius is not privy to Old Hamlet’s murder nor do the unsettling nature of Gertrude’s
remarriage seem to affect him. Polonius, as the foil to Claudius and the character to whom the role of watchman is given, represents this image of societal discipline, wherein those in power attempt to control the behaviors of those beneath them. However, the fact that he is unaware of much of the interrelations between those around him indicates that his symbolism is a mere shadow of reality, shifting his representation to that of illusion.

And yet, despite Polonius’ symbolic nature being illusory, he still is the only figure of the societal discipline that Hamlet tries in vain to attach himself to. As long as the fantasy that Hamlet’s identity can be linked to the political and social system that Old Hamlet once represented, then Hamlet can justify the disciplinary power of the monarchy. But Polonius’ death shatters the delusion, and the fact that the murder happened in the Queen’s bedchambers solidifies the end of the social discipline onto which Hamlet clung. Gertrude’s bedchamber is the epitome of corruption and defilement:

…Nay, but to live

In the ranks sweat of an enseamed bed,

Stew’d in corruption, honeying and making love

Over the nasty sty!

…

A murtherer and a villain!

A slave that is not twentieth part the [tithe]

Of your precedent lord, a Vice of kings (3.4.91-94, 96-98).

For Hamlet, the bedchamber is first a place of figurative bloodshed, where Gertrude has killed Old Hamlet twice over in the consummation of her marriage to Claudius. It is second a place of literal bloodshed once Hamlet stabs Polonius through the arras: “Thou wretched, rash, intruding
fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune; / Thou find’st to be too busy is some danger” (3.4.31-33). Killing Polonius in Gertrude’s bedchambers effectively ends Hamlet’s ability to justify the current social discipline. It destroys the illusion and last figure that stood for the political and moral image of a Panoptic order, in which people guard themselves and each other. With the death of Polonius, it drastically alters Hamlet’s personal identity. Before, he struggled with understanding who he was in relation to this social order he was at once desired and rejected. Now, without a veil obscuring his sight, he has a clear picture: “I do repent; but heaven hath pleas’d it so / To punish me with [Polonius’ death], and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister” (3.4.173-175). Hamlet has transformed into something other. He is no longer merely the “Prince” or the “villain”, but has become the “scourge”. He is the bearer of justice, the revolutionary—the executioner.

The social discipline in Hamlet is one of illusory control. Given that Claudius is morally incapable to carry the symbol of the standing social order, Polonius stands in as the representation, albeit a fragile one at that. But when Hamlet murders Polonius, it erases the last image of the social discipline, radically transforming Hamlet’s social identity from Prince to revolutionary.
Works Cited

