



What a piece of work is a man

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Hamlet:

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me—nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

Rosencrantz:

My lord, there was no such stuff in my thoughts.

[Hamlet Act 2, scene 2, 303–312](#)

This passage has provoked bitter scholarly battles—over its punctuation. Is Hamlet saying that man is like an angel in apprehension (understanding), or like a god in apprehension? The different placement of commas in the early texts of the play makes all the difference.

We're not going to settle the argument here; you probably get the drift of Hamlet's speech anyway. Man is the noblest of all God's pieces of work, the "quintessence of dust" (the fifth, or purest, extract from the dust of which all things are compounded). But despite the nobility, the reason, the grace, and the beauty of man, Hamlet cannot be delighted. At least, so he tells the king's parasites, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as he explains his melancholia. This is one of the moments where Hamlet's sincerity is genuinely in question. Like his claim that Denmark seems to him a prison [*see* [THERE IS NOTHING EITHER GOOD OR BAD, BUT THINKING MAKES IT SO](#)], Hamlet's disgust here seems more than an act, though perhaps he exaggerates for the benefit of the king's spies.

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