

HAMLET

BY

William Shakespeare



STUDY GUIDE

BEFORE THE SHOW

SYNOPSIS:

Act 1

The protagonist of *Hamlet* is Prince Hamlet of Denmark, son of the recently deceased King Hamlet, and nephew of King Claudius, his father's brother and successor. Claudius hastily married King Hamlet's widow, Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, and took the throne for himself. Denmark has a long-standing feud with neighboring Norway, which culminated when King Hamlet slew King Fortinbras of Norway in a battle years ago. Although Denmark defeated Norway, and the Norwegian throne fell to King Fortinbras's infirm brother, Denmark fears that an invasion led by the dead Norwegian king's daughter, Princess Fortinbras, is imminent. On a cold night on the ramparts of Elsinore, the Danish royal castle, the sentries Bernardo and Marcellus and Hamlet's friend Horatio encounter a ghost that looks like the late King Hamlet. They vow to tell Prince Hamlet what they have witnessed.

As the court gathers the next day, while King Claudius and Queen Gertrude discuss affairs of state with their elderly adviser Polonius, Hamlet looks on glumly. After the court exits, Hamlet despairs of his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage. Learning of the ghost from Horatio, Hamlet resolves to see it himself.

As Polonius's son Laertes prepares to depart for a visit to France, Polonius gives him contradictory advice that culminates in the maxim "to thine own self be true". Polonius's daughter, Ophelia, admits her interest in Hamlet, but both Polonius and Laertes warn her against seeking the prince's attention. That night on the rampart, the ghost appears to Hamlet, telling the prince that Claudius murdered him and demanding that Hamlet avenge him. Hamlet agrees and the ghost vanishes. The prince confides to Horatio and the sentries that from now on he plans to "put an antic disposition on" and forces them to swear to keep his plans for revenge secret. Privately, however, he remains uncertain of the ghost's reliability.

Soon thereafter, Ophelia rushes to her father, telling him that Hamlet arrived at her door the prior night half-undressed and behaving crazily. Polonius blames love for Hamlet's madness and

resolves to inform Claudius and Gertrude. As he enters to do so, the king and queen finish welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two student acquaintances of Hamlet, to Elsinore. The royal couple has requested that the students investigate the cause of Hamlet's mood and behavior. Additional news requires that Polonius wait to be heard: messengers from Norway inform Claudius that the King of Norway has rebuked Princess Fortinbras for attempting to re-fight her father's battles. The forces that Fortinbras conscripted to march against Denmark will instead be sent against Poland, though they will pass through a portion of Denmark to get there.

Polonius tells Claudius and Gertrude his theory regarding Hamlet's behavior, and speaks to Hamlet in a hall of the castle to try to uncover more information. Hamlet feigns madness but subtly insults Polonius all the while. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive, Hamlet greets his friends warmly, but quickly discerns that they are spies. Hamlet becomes bitter, admitting that he is upset at his situation but refusing to give the true reason why, instead commenting on "what a piece of work" humanity is. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Hamlet that they have brought along a troupe of actors that they met while traveling to Elsinore. Hamlet, after welcoming the actors and dismissing his friends-turned-spies, plots to stage a play featuring a death in the style of his father's murder, thereby determining the truth of the ghost's story, as well as Claudius's guilt or innocence, by studying Claudius's reaction.

Polonius forces Ophelia to return Hamlet's love letters and tokens of affection to the prince while he and Claudius watch from afar to evaluate Hamlet's reaction. Hamlet is walking alone in the hall as the King and Polonius await Ophelia's entrance, musing whether "to be or not to be". When Ophelia enters and tries to return Hamlet's things, Hamlet accuses her of immodesty and cries "get thee to a nunnery," though it is unclear whether this, too, is a show of madness or genuine distress. His reaction convinces Claudius that Hamlet is not mad for love. Shortly thereafter, the court assembles to watch the play Hamlet has commissioned. After seeing the

Player King murdered by his rival pouring poison in his ear, Claudius abruptly rises and runs from the room: proof positive for Hamlet of his uncle's guilt.

ACT 2

Gertrude summons Hamlet to her room to demand an explanation. Meanwhile, Claudius talks to himself about the impossibility of repenting, since he still has possession of his ill-gotten goods: his brother's crown and wife. He sinks to his knees. Hamlet, on his way to visit his mother, sneaks up behind him, but does not kill him, reasoning that killing Claudius while he is praying will send him straight to heaven while his father's ghost is stuck in purgatory.

In the queen's bedchamber, Hamlet and Gertrude fight bitterly. Polonius, spying on the conversation from behind a tapestry, makes a noise. Hamlet, believing it is Claudius, stabs wildly, killing Polonius, but pulls aside the curtain and sees his mistake. In a rage, Hamlet brutally insults his mother for her apparent ignorance of Claudius's villainy, but the ghost enters and reprimands Hamlet for his inaction and harsh words. Unable to see or hear the ghost herself, Gertrude takes Hamlet's conversation with it as further evidence of madness. After begging the queen to stop sleeping with Claudius, Hamlet leaves, dragging Polonius's corpse away. Hamlet jokes with Claudius about where he has hidden Polonius's body, and the king, fearing for his life, sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet to England with a sealed letter to the English king requesting that Hamlet be executed immediately.

Demented by grief at Polonius's death, Ophelia wanders Elsinore. Laertes arrives back from France, enraged by his father's death and his sister's madness. Claudius convinces Laertes that Hamlet is solely responsible, but a letter soon arrives indicating that Hamlet has returned to Denmark, foiling Claudius's plan. Claudius switches tactics, proposing a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet to settle their differences. Laertes will be given a poison-tipped foil, and Claudius will offer Hamlet poisoned wine as a congratulation if that fails. Gertrude

interrupts to report that Ophelia has drowned, though it is unclear whether it was suicide or an accident exacerbated by her madness.

Horatio has received a letter from Hamlet, explaining that the prince escaped by negotiating with pirates who attempted to attack his England-bound ship, and the friends reunite offstage.

Hamlet arrives from England and while walking with Horatio they come across a gravedigger with whom they banter. The gravedigger unearths the skull of a jester from Hamlet's childhood, Yorick. Hamlet picks up the skull, saying "alas, poor Yorick" as he contemplates mortality. Ophelia's funeral procession approaches, led by Laertes. Hamlet and Horatio initially hide, but when Hamlet realizes that Ophelia is the one being buried, he reveals himself, proclaiming his love for her. Laertes and Hamlet fight by Ophelia's graveside, but the brawl is broken up.

Back at Elsinore, Hamlet explains to Horatio that he had discovered Claudius's letter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's belongings and replaced it with a forged copy indicating that his former friends should be killed instead. A foppish courtier, Osric, interrupts the conversation to deliver the fencing challenge to Hamlet. Hamlet, despite Horatio's pleas, accepts it. Hamlet does well at first, leading the match by two hits to none, and Gertrude raises a toast to him using the poisoned glass of wine Claudius had set aside for Hamlet. Claudius tries to stop her, but is too late: she drinks, and Laertes realizes the plot will be revealed. Laertes slashes Hamlet with his poisoned blade. In the ensuing scuffle, they switch weapons and Hamlet wounds Laertes with his own poisoned sword. Gertrude collapses and, claiming she has been poisoned, dies. In his dying moments, Laertes reconciles with Hamlet and reveals Claudius's plan. Hamlet rushes at Claudius and kills him. As the poison takes effect, Hamlet, hearing that Fortinbras is marching through the area, names the Norwegian princess as his successor. Horatio, distraught at the thought of being the last survivor and living whilst Hamlet does not, says he will commit suicide by drinking the dregs of Gertrude's poisoned wine, but Hamlet begs him to live on and tell his story. Hamlet dies in Horatio's arms,

proclaiming, "The rest is silence". Fortinbras, who was ostensibly marching back from Poland with her army, arrives at the palace, along with an English ambassador bringing news of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths. Horatio promises to recount the full story of what happened, and Fortinbras, seeing the entire Danish royal family dead, takes the crown for herself.

PRINCIPLE CHARACTERS:

- Hamlet – Son of the late King and nephew of the present king
- Claudius – King of Denmark and Hamlet's uncle
- Gertrude – Queen of Denmark and mother to Hamlet
- Polonius – Chief counselor to the king
- Ophelia – Daughter to Polonius
- Horatio – True friend to Hamlet
- Laertes – Son to Polonius
- Voltimand and Cornelius – Emissaries to Norway
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – Courtiers & friends to Hamlet
- Osric – a Courtier
- Marcellus – an Officer
- Bernardo – an Officer
- Francisco – a Soldier
- Reynaldo – Servant to Polonius
- Ghost of Hamlet's Father
- Fortinbras – Prince of Norway
- Gravedigger - a Sexton
- Player King, Player Queen, Lucianus, Prologue – A Troupe of Players
- A Doctor of Divinity
- A Captain in Fortinbras' army
- English Ambassador
- Messengers, Sailors, Lords, Ladies, Guards, Danes

About The Author:

William Shakespeare was an English poet, playwright, and actor, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He was born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford-on-Avon. The son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, he was probably educated at the King Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford, where he learned Latin and a little Greek and read the Roman dramatists. At eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, a woman seven or eight years his senior. Together they raised two daughters: Susanna, who was born in 1583, and Judith (whose twin brother died in boyhood), born in 1585.

In 1594, Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's company of actors, the most popular of the companies acting at Court. In 1599 Shakespeare joined a group of Chamberlain's Men that would form a syndicate to build and operate a new playhouse: the Globe, which became the most famous theater of its time. With his share of the income from the Globe, Shakespeare was able to purchase New Place, his home in Stratford.

Shakespeare wrote more than thirty plays. These are usually divided into four categories: histories, comedies, tragedies, and romances. His earliest plays were primarily comedies and histories such as *Henry VI* and *The Comedy of Errors*, but in 1596, Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, his second tragedy, and over the next dozen years he would return to the form, writing the plays for which he is now best known: *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In his final years, Shakespeare turned to the romantic with *Cymbeline*, *A Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*.

Sometime after 1612, Shakespeare retired from the stage and returned to his home in Stratford. He drew up his will in January of 1616, which included his famous bequest to his wife of his "second best bed." He died on April 23, 1616, and was buried two days later at Stratford Church.

VOCABULARY:

Shakespeare is credited with inventing thousands of words, often combining or contorting Latin, French, and native roots. A few examples are:

Arch-villain
Birthplace
Bloodsucking,
Courtship
Dewdrop
Downstairs
Fanged
Heart sore
Hunchbacked
Leapfrog
Misquote
Pageantry
Radiance
Schoolboy
Stillborn
Watchdog
Zany

AFTER THE SHOW

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Shakespeare plays are often produced with a "concept." The concept for this version was 19th Century science fiction. Why do you think the director decided to set it that way? Did it work for you? Why or why not?
2. What is the famous "To be or not to be" speech discussing? Why is Hamlet so obsessed with death?
3. Compare and contrast Ophelia and Gertrude. Are they more alike or different? Compare them to some of Shakespeare's other famous women such as Portia (Merchant of Venice) or Cleopatra (Anthony and Cleopatra).

4. Is the ghost real or a figment of Hamlet's imagination? What evidence do you have to support your opinion?

5. What does the play say about a child's duty to their parents? What does it say about the impact of revenge?

QUIZ:

1. Who does Hamlet kill in his mother's chamber?
2. Who appears to the night watch in the opening scene? What does he want?
3. Why does King Claudius send for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What ultimately happens to them?
4. Ophelia's father and brother warn her away from dating Hamlet. Why?
5. Why is Hamlet upset with his mother Gertrude?
6. What is the purpose of the play within the play?
7. What is the controversy between Laertes and the Priest over Ophelia's grave?
8. Who is Fortinbras and what is her relationship to Denmark?
9. Why does Hamlet not kill Claudius when he has the chance?
10. Who is Horatio? What is his function in the play?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES:

Compare and Contrast

In class read the script and /or watch a film version of "Hamlet." Divide the class into study groups. Have each group create a list of how the script or film is like the production they have just seen and a second list of how they are different. Invite a spokesman from each group to share their ideas with the class. Once each group has reported discuss why they think there are differences in the versions?

Create a Graphic Novel

Assign each student a key scene in the play and have him or her draw an illustration of the scene including significant dialogue. Combine all of the individual illustrations to create a classroom graphic novel. Make copies for each student.

Write the Sequel

Have the students create stories picking up the adventure where Shakespeare leaves off. What happens to Horatio now that all of the friends of his generation are dead? With Fortenbras as the regent in Denmark an heir to Norway what is the future of those two countries? What new conflicts might arise?

Review the Show

What did you like? What didn't you like? Did the performances help you understand the story? Did the scenic, costume or lighting elements add to the overall understanding of the show? We'd love to know what you thought! Reviews can be emailed to play@tbatheatre.org or mailed to:



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