



## William Shakespeare

### *Hamlet*

#### CONTEXT

*Hamlet* was registered in the summer of 1602 but was possibly performed as early as 1598. As he did for most of his plays, Shakespeare drew on a number of older sources for his story line: the 12th century *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus, the *Histories Tragiques* of Francois de Bellforest, and an older English play, now lost to posterity, which the critics have named *Ur-Hamlet*. *Hamlet* is a play about revenge, but more than that it is a play about the effects of doubt and of the prudential necessity of testing one's experience with a healthy scepticism. Underneath all of these concerns, however, is the far greater one the play seems to have been created to answer: the question of how a spiritual revelation is translated into political act.

#### SUMMARY

The play opens with the changing of the guard on the ramparts of Elsinore Castle, the royal house of Denmark. Bernardo takes up his post and waits for Marcellus, a fellow officer, to arrive with Horatio, a friend to Prince Hamlet. They have told Horatio that for the last two nights they had seen a ghost on the ramparts that greatly resembled the Prince's father, the old King Hamlet, who recently died. Horatio does not believe them, but he comes with Marcellus to see for himself. The ghost appears but is offended by Horatio's demand that it speak to him, and it vanishes at the cockcrow. Shaken by what they have seen, the three agree to tell Hamlet.

Scene ii introduces Claudius, the new king and brother of old Hamlet. He has taken his brother's wife as his own and now turns to matters of state. Fortinbras, the Prince of Norway, has laid claim to lands captured by the old king, and Claudius is sending letters to the King of Norway asking him to reign in his nephew. Queen Gertrude gently chides her son on his persistent melancholy over the death of his father and asks him to give up his plans for returning to Wittenberg and remain in Denmark instead. Hamlet acquiesces, and as they leave, he expresses the anguish he cannot say out loud that his mother had mourned her husband barely a month before she wed his brother. Horatio enters along with Marcellus and Bernardo and tells Hamlet of seeing the ghost. Hamlet questions him

and pledges all to silence, saying he will meet them on the ramparts that night. Laertes, son of Polonius, the King's counselor, is preparing to return to France. As he bids his sister Ophelia farewell, he warns her not to fall in love with Hamlet. Polonius arrives to give Laertes his blessing and fatherly advice. Laertes departs and Polonius turns to question Ophelia on her feelings for Hamlet. She tells him that Hamlet has confessed his love for her; Polonius does not trust Hamlet and forbids her to spend any more time with him.

Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus await the appearance of the ghost. When it appears, Hamlet addresses it as King and father and begs it to speak to him. The ghost beckons Hamlet to come away by himself. Once they are alone, the ghost confirms that he is the spirit of his father, doomed to walk the night for a time. He goes on to tell Hamlet that he was poisoned by his own brother, who by one act took life and crown and wife from him, and calls on Hamlet to avenge his murder.

Act II opens with Polonius sending his serving man off to Paris with money and letters for his son Laertes and giving him instructions on how to spy on his son before giving them to him. Ophelia comes in distressed by Hamlet's strange behavior. Polonius assures her that it is Hamlet's love for her that causes him to act as he does. Claudius speaks with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet's friends from childhood, and asks them to seek out the causes of Hamlet's behavior. Polonius enters, and reading from a letter which Hamlet sent to Ophelia, he tells the King he is convinced that Hamlet's apparent madness is the result of being in love. He offers to orchestrate a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia so that the two of them may spy on the couple and judge for themselves.

Hamlet greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In answer to his questioning, they admit that they have been summoned by the King and Queen to be with Hamlet. He confesses his great melancholy of late and they tell him of a favorite group of touring actors that is even now approaching the city. Hamlet greets the players and asks for a speech from the *Aeneid*. He begins the speech, which they in turn pick up. As they are leaving for their quarters, he quietly asks them if they can perform a particular play and learn some extra lines that he will give them. They are most willing, and he sends them off. Left alone, Hamlet berates himself for playing a part instead of taking action himself by killing his uncle. He ends his musings with plans to put on a mousetrap play—a play within the players' play reenacting his father's murder—to determine once and for all whether the ghost was telling the truth and his uncle is guilty or innocent.

Ophelia is set up to "accidentally" encounter Hamlet so that Claudius and the King may observe what happens between them and decide if it is Hamlet's love for Ophelia that is causing his strange behavior. Hamlet questions Ophelia's honesty and then tells her to go to a nunnery rather than wed and be a "breeder of sinners." Claudius detects something more than simple madness in Hamlet's behavior and determines to send him to England.

The players put on the play that Hamlet has devised to test the King. As the scene depicting the actual murder is performed, the King rises from his seat and demanding

light, stops the play and sends everyone away. Hamlet and Horatio remain and between themselves confirm the King's guilt. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter with a request from the Queen that Hamlet see her in her chambers. Hamlet makes it clear he sees that his two childhood friends have become spies for the King.

The King engages Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet to England, and Polonius tells the King he is on his way to hide in the Queen's rooms so that he can eavesdrop on the conversation between mother and son. Finding himself alone, Claudius laments his guilt and kneels to pray. Hamlet comes on him at prayer, and convinced now that Claudius is guilty and that the ghost spoke the truth, he draws his sword to take his revenge. He is about to kill the King when he is stopped by a sudden realization. Claudius kills his father, and he kills Claudius at prayer and so sends him to heaven: that would be a fine revenge of his father. He puts his sword back in its sheath and decides to wait to kill the King when he is whoring and gambling so he can send him to Hell.

Hamlet then goes to his mother in her chambers. Hearing a noise behind the curtain and thinking it is the King, he thrusts his sword through and kills the hiding Polonius. Then, in a fury, he rails against his mother for so little honoring his father that she could marry Claudius.

When Claudius hears of the death of Polonius, his fear for his own life increases, and anxious about the unsettling effect Hamlet is having on people, he decides to send him to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with secret orders for the King to take his life when he gets there. On his way to the ship, Hamlet meets a captain of Fortinbras' army and learns that the Prince of Norway is taking his troops to do battle over an insignificant piece of land in Poland. The encounter is another goad to Hamlet, who sees the Prince as willing to risk his life for practically nothing while he has every reason to act and has not. Hamlet vows to think of little else except the death of his uncle.

Meanwhile, in the Danish court the Queen receives Ophelia, who has slipped into madness. A messenger brings Claudius news that Laertes, enraged at his father's death, has returned from France leading a revolt against him. Claudius confronts Laertes, and seeming to sympathize with him for his grief, he encourages his desire for vengeance. When a messenger arrives with a letter from Hamlet saying he has returned and will be at Elsinore the following day, Claudius proposes to Laertes that he challenge Hamlet to a fencing match in which Laertes could inadvertently pick up an unblunted sword and so deliver a mortal thrust. Laertes' desire for Hamlet's death goes the King one better: he declares he will tip his sword with poison so that even just a touch will be fatal. As further insurance, Claudius determines to have the cup that Hamlet will drink from during the match poisoned as well. The Queen comes in to give Laertes the news that Ophelia has drowned.

Hamlet returns as the gravedigger finishes digging Ophelia's grave but does not know who it is that has died. The funeral procession approaches, and he and Horatio hide themselves to watch. When Laertes jumps into the grave to bid his sister farewell, Hamlet realizes who is being buried and in his grief jumps into the grave as well, crying

that Laertes' love could never have equaled his for Ophelia. The two men would fight each other, but the King's command separates them.

Hamlet gives Horatio an account of his channel crossing, which was full of wonders. He recalls being overcome by some strange feeling prompting him to go below while Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern were sleeping and open the packet the two had been carrying. What he discovered was a commission for his death. He substituted the names of his two friends on the commission and then resealed the envelope with his father's signet ring. The following day their ship was accosted by pirates, who managed to take only Hamlet prisoner and who were then willing to release him in return for a favor.

While they are talking, a courtier approaches Hamlet and Horatio to say that the King has wagered on Hamlet in a fencing match with Laertes. Hamlet agrees to the match, and while privately expressing some misgivings to Horatio, he becomes philosophic for a moment and declares that there is "providence in the fall of a sparrow," that whatever is to come, "the readiness is all" (V, ii, 208-13). The fencing begins in front of the King and Queen and the court. Hamlet scores the first touch but refuses the cup the King offers him. The Queen takes it instead to drink to Hamlet. The fencing continues, and in a scuffle Hamlet and Laertes exchange swords and both are wounded by the poisoned blade. The Queen staggers and after crying out that she had been poisoned dies. Laertes confesses to Hamlet that it is the King's doing; telling him that both he and Hamlet are dying from the poisoned blade. Hamlet forces the King to drink from the poisoned cup. Horatio, who is overcome by the holocaust, wants to drink from the poisoned cup himself, but Hamlet begs him to not be an "antique Roman" and follow his friend in death but to bear with life awhile so that he can tell his story. Fortinbras enters and is stunned to see the royal family lying dead. Horatio speaks up, saying he can answer all of the Prince's questions. Fortinbras takes command and orders Hamlet's body to be given the rites of an honorable soldier who died in battle.



## Things to Think About

1. The historical Prince Hamlet (Amleth) lived sometime between 700-900 AD, but the play is filled with the realities of Reformation Europe: the almost unbearable problems and perplexities that one faces in having to take political action on the basis of one's conception of revelation; the pervasiveness of a kind of anxious, nervous doubt; the need for certainty; the use of experimentation to produce certainty; the difficulties of moving from an older code of justice to a newer one; the gradual learning to trust in God and His providence as perhaps the ultimate answer to all these

problems. These are all themes that place the play on the edge of modernity. Be aware of the complexities of these themes and their place in the action as you read.

2. Give the ghost as well as the supernatural order it represents its full weight in the play. So often critics minimize its role or importance. Everything that happens in the play takes place, in one sense, as a result of the burden of truth that the ghost places on Hamlet. It's almost impossible to read the play well if we don't carry the ghost with us, even when it's out of sight.
3. Be aware of difficulties people face because of a failure to separate Church from State, or the concerns of the soul from those of the body and the temporal order. Notice the totalitarian tendencies of Denmark as presented in the play. Those in power seek to maintain their control through ruthless realpolitik and the employment of spies and treachery. Consider the effects of this spirit on relationships, especially in the family (Hamlet with his mother, and Polonius with his children) but also between lovers (Hamlet and Ophelia).
4. Be aware of the *language* of doubt and certainty that runs through the play; be aware also of the presence of supratemporal powers, the ghost in the beginning and some providential power at the end: "there's a divinity that shapes our ends...." (V, ii, 10); and, "Why, even in that was heaven ordain" (V, ii, 48).
5. Hamlet is a true Renaissance man: as the son of a warrior king he is a skilled swordsman; he is a scholar who can quote Virgil at length as well as sections of the *Bible*. He is a theologian who understands the spiritual order—agonizing over whether the ghost is really an "honest" messenger from purgatory or a deceiving demon from hell. He is a statesman as well (albeit a reluctant one) who can express himself in the language and thinking of kings when he has need. Keep in mind Hamlet's multifaceted character and the burdens its complexity places upon him.
6. Be aware of the thematic relationships between doubt and certainty, and reason and madness, humans working at odds with a divine providence and humans working *with* it.



## Study Questions

1. Who says, "Who's there?" to open the play and under what circumstances?
2. There are indications that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I, iv, 90) at the beginning of the play. Francisco says, "I am sick at heart" (I, i, 9); there are preparations for war (I, i, 70ff.); Hamlet speaks of Denmark as "an unweeded garden" (I, ii, 134). What are the hidden problems behind all of these signs or omens?

3. Who says, "Remember me," to whom and under what circumstances?
4. The appearance of the ghost is essential to the action of the play. All that happens after Hamlet's meeting with him stems from this meeting. This fact raises a number of important questions about the ghost. Who is he? Why are a number of characters involved with him (Marcellus, Bernardo, Horatio) before Hamlet? Why is the ghost still connected with this world instead of going on to the next? Why does the ghost reveal his purposes to Hamlet *alone*? And what is the ghost's charge to Hamlet?
5. The ghost calls on Hamlet to take vengeance on Claudius who had stolen life and crown and wife from him. What instructions does he give Hamlet regarding his mother (I, v, 84-88)?
6. Laertes warns Ophelia off from Hamlet (I, iii, 1ff.). Why, do you suppose? How does he look at the state and state powers ("his will is not his own"—I, 17)? What do we learn about Laertes from these warnings to his sister? Do we learn anything about the state and the extent of its powers from Laertes words? Do we learn anything about Hamlet's duty to his country and the way that this might affect his relationship with Ophelia?
7. What do we learn about Polonius from his warnings to his son (I, iii, 55ff.) and his warnings to his daughter about Hamlet (I, iii, 86ff.)? Recall in the context of his words to Ophelia his lines, "And truly in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this" (II, ii, 190).
8. What do we learn about Polonius from the scene in which he sends Reynaldo off to spy on his son (II, i, 1-74)? Do his actions shed any light on his place in the state and the power the state has over him or are the two, his private and public lives, really separate?
9. Polonius seems aware of reaching too far—he reconsiders his original mistrust of Hamlet and thinks not only that his madness may be a symptom of "the very ecstasy of love" (II, i, 102) but that his own carelessness in the matter of Hamlet and his daughter's affections may have brought the madness on (II, 110-13). He says, "it is as proper to our age/To cast beyond ourselves in our opinion/As it is common for the younger sort/To lack discretion" (II, 114-115). But even this sense of possibly reaching too far doesn't deter him later. He says shortly after this scene, "I will find where truth is hid" (II, ii, 157-59). What image begins to take shape of both Polonius and Denmark when we begin to put together these actions centered around Polonius?
10. In Act II, scene ii, a complication is introduced into the action when Claudius asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet. What does this tactic reveal about Claudius and his understanding of the scope and limits of political power? Does he make a distinction between private and public realms? Should he? What picture of the political character of Denmark is gradually forming?

11. Who says, to whom, under what circumstances, and with what meaning: "What a piece of work is 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, thought by your smiling you seem to say so"?
12. In Act II, Hamlet is reunited with his old childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenster, but he senses something is wrong—there is a "confession" in their looks that gives away their betrayal (II, ii, 275). He knows Polonius has been trying to manipulate Ophelia; he now knows he cannot trust his childhood friends. What is happening to Hamlet at this point and is there anyone he can trust?
13. When the players arrive, Hamlet quotes a long speech from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Look at the speech closely—Pyrrhus is Achilleus' son taking vengeance for his father's death. Why does Hamlet choose this speech to recite? Is there any link between what takes place in the speech and his own predicament? How does the speech indicate what he should and should not do?
14. In Act III, i, Hamlet and Ophelia come together under the spying eyes of Polonius and Claudius. It is in this meeting with Ophelia that Hamlet asks if she is honest and then tells her, "Get thee to a nunnery." What do we learn about both pairs from this scene, the lovers and the two statesmen? And how does this scene move the action forward? Keeping in mind this scene, could the reader predict Ophelia's eventual despair? Is Hamlet being unnecessarily unkind or do the circumstances make it impossible for him to be otherwise? Is there anything Ophelia could have done that she didn't?
15. The *Mousetrap Play* is Hamlet's attempt to test out the ghost's claim that Claudius killed him. Hamlet is savvy enough to know the ghost could be lying—and so trying to trick him—or telling the truth. He has to find some way of knowing, of verifying the ghost's claim. What is it that Claudius does that Hamlet takes as "evidence" that the ghost was telling the truth? Is the evidence sufficient, given that what Hamlet is testing is a supernatural pronouncement?
16. In III, iii Claudius suffers under the weight of his conscience and thinks to ask God's forgiveness. What is the personal price that he must pay to receive forgiveness and how does he respond to the realization that the price of pardon is so high?
17. In Act III, iii Hamlet has seen Claudius' reaction to the mousetrap play and now believes he has justifiable grounds for killing the King. He comes upon Claudius in prayer and draws his sword to take his revenge. But he reconsiders and puts away his sword. Why does he stop? What does this moment reveal about the state of his own soul? Is there a danger he faces here? What is the irony of the scene? Is his venomous rage understandable considering the full horror of the situation in which he finds himself?

18. The ghost makes a final appearance later in the play. When is it? Why does it appear? Does anyone else see it?
19. In Act IV as Hamlet is about to embark for England, he is met by a messenger from Fortinbras, who asks permission to cross Denmark in order to pursue their designs on a patch of land in Poland. Hamlet finds in the comparison between himself and Fortinbras a reason for berating himself: Fortinbras has no good reason to fight—he wants to “gain a little patch of ground” (l. 18)—and yet does; Hamlet has every reason to act—to avenge his father’s murder—and yet he does not. In what way is the berating comparison just; in what ways not?
20. What do the clowns of V, i debate as they prepare to dig Ophelia’s grave? What does their banter tell us about the relationship of power between the Church and State in Denmark? What does it tell us about the relationship between temporal actions and eternal consequences, or about the futility of worldliness? The scene represents an extended memento mori, a literary and artistic motif used widely in medieval and renaissance art and literature. What is a memento mori? What is its purpose? Why do you think that Shakespeare places his own memento mori at this particular moment in the play? Compare it with the scene immediately preceding it, and the scene that follows immediately afterwards. What is Shakespeare conveying in placing the memento mori scene between the two scenes either side of it?
21. The scene in which Hamlet and the Gravedigger discuss Yorick may seem morbid; it is important for gathering themes that have been implicit since the beginning as the play moves towards its conclusion. Shakespeare uses the scene to unmask social pretensions and explore aspects of death: he moves from Genesis and Cain’s crime (V, i, 73ff), to businessmen, and women, to the fact that even Caesar and Alexander couldn’t escape time’s worm. But one startling fact stands out among the rest: the Gravedigger came into his office on the same day Hamlet was born (ll. 137-39). Why do you suppose Shakespeare linked the two? Is it possible to see in the scene the beginnings of the resignation or acceptance of death that Hamlet expresses in the “readiness is all” speech?
22. Who dies at the end, and are we to understand the general holocaust as the cost of the crime of regicide that begins the play or should the two events be kept separate? Is everyone implicated in the crime or are some people not?
23. Why does Shakespeare have Fortinbras take over at the end? Is there some political wisdom in that move?
24. Identify the following by some significant action in the play: Fortinbras; Yorick; Osric.

25. Identify the following quotes by speaker and context or significance:

*"Doubt thou the stars are fire;  
Doubt that the sun doth move;  
Doubt truth to be a liar;  
But never doubt I love."*

*"To be or not to be—that is the question...."*

*"You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me."*

*"O, my offense is rank. It smells to heaven;  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't."*

*"Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well  
When our deep plots do pall. And that should learn us  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will-*

25. The play *Hamlet* is ultimately about justice. What begins with the ghost asking Hamlet to avenge his death isn't completed till Claudius is killed at the end. But what readers take away from the ending is often confused. Some see the killing as the brutal act of a near-madman; others see it as an act of genuine justice. The Hamlet who kills Claudius at the end is not the same Hamlet who stands over the King ready to kill him at prayer; he is a good man who is instrumental in realizing a justice greater than any he could have on his own. Does this interpretation rest on mere faith alone or does the text support it? Is our reading of the ending dependent upon faith simply or are there ways the play supports, really enacts, a bringing of faith and reason together?



## Questions on Language and Form

1. The play opens with a changing of the guard and the words, "Who's there?" (I, i, 1) If we take this opening question and apply it to each of the main characters in the play, the ghost, Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius, Gertrude, Ophelia, what do we learn? Are people really who they *seem* to be or are there spiritual or even

metaphysical aspects to their characters that are hidden or veiled beneath appearances, especially those taking *political* form?

2. Notice Claudius' cunning use of language and even near genius as a statesman. His opening "state of the union" address is a rhetorical masterpiece of Machiavellian politics. Identify the specific purposes of his address and then turn your attention to the various ways he uses language to draw everyone into his scheme and *make them complicit in it*. More specifically with respect to his uses of language: how does his use of oxymorons ("mirth in funeral... dirge in marriage"?) serve his purposes here? Why does he say, "Nor have we herein barred/Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone/With this affair along. For all our thanks"?
3. In Act II, ii, Hamlet and Polonius meet. The exchange between them only reinforces impressions the reader has been taking away from the play all along concerning both men: Polonius lives on the surface of life with very little sense of good or evil in the world. Hamlet, on the other hand, is very nearly overwhelmed by the problems of good and evil. Look at the language both men use. What do we learn about each of them from the words they use, the way they use them? Which of the two characters sees more around a scene and into its depths? How do we know? Pay special attention to Hamlet's use of puns and doubles-entendre. How are they functioning in this scene?
4. How much of what motivates Hamlet's actions comes from his sense of evil in things and in nature, how much from deeply wounded loves, from the fact that he has loved these characters and they have all betrayed him in some way? Given what he faces, are his motives understandable? He seems at times on the verge of madness and suicide. Does the play resolve these tormented feelings, or does it fail to do so?
5. Poison is a recurring theme; it is used and referred to both explicitly and implicitly throughout the play. List the explicit uses of poison and then consider the implicit poison in the play. How does poison exist on both the literal and the metaphorical levels? How does this inform our understanding of the play?
6. *The power of poetry*: as a work about a regime, the play *Hamlet* deals with two orders of power, one temporal or political (the State), the other supernatural and spiritual (the ghost and the divine order he represents). As a work of art, a thing made, the play has an entirely different power *in itself*, one that helps form powers of seeing and feeling in its audience or readers and so powers quite independent of those the characters within the play are concerned with. Which powers are greater, those the play points to in the characters themselves, those political and spiritual forms of power they draw upon for their actions; or the powers which Shakespeare himself as a poet using language awakens in his readers? Or can the two really be separated? What exactly is the relationship of poetry to the political, spiritual world man occupies?



## Reflection Questions

1. Try to imagine *Hamlet* without the ghost. If Shakespeare had written the story and left the ghost out, what kind of a story would it be? What would it lose? How would the removal of the ghost change Hamlet's behavior or would it? How would it change our understanding of Hamlet, the Danes, all of the allusions to providence towards the end? Now, put the ghost back. What does the play gain?
2. Running through the play are numerous instances of one man trying to grasp the inner workings of another: Polonius spies on both Laertes and Hamlet; Claudius sets spies on Hamlet; Polonius sets Ophelia to try to get information out of Hamlet; Hamlet second guesses—incorrectly, as it turns out—the state of Claudius' soul. Why are all these attempts made? Is there some relationship between knowledge of a man and power over him? Using examples from the play, write a reflection on man's ability to know the soul of another.