

THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET,
PRINCE OF DENMARK

William Shakespeare



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTIONvii
DRAMATIS PERSONAExxv

ACT I

SCENE I I
SCENE II 8
SCENE III 18
SCENE IV 23
SCENE V 27

ACT II

SCENE I 35
SCENE II 40

ACT III

SCENE I 61
SCENE II 68
SCENE III 82
SCENE IV 86

ACT IV

SCENE I 95
SCENE II 97
SCENE III 98
SCENE IV 101
SCENE V 104
SCENE VI 112
SCENE VII 114

ACT V

SCENE I 122
SCENE II 133

ANSWERS TO REVIEW QUESTIONS 148



INTRODUCTION

“**W**hat’s Shakespeare’s greatest accomplishment?” the wise old professor asked.

“His characters,” said an eager student in the front of the class, who went on to offer a list of his favorites.

“Very good. He surely did create larger-than-life characters. But actually,” said the old teacher, “his greatest achievement is his language. No one ever used the English language as creatively as did Shakespeare.”

The student nodded and said, “The greatest play then must be *Hamlet*, since in it Shakespeare created the roundest character who speaks the most eloquent, golden English.”

“You are correct,” said the professor, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

The World Around

In Shakespeare’s day, during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and King James I (1603-1625), the Bible saturated England. Erasmus had published the Greek New Testament for the first time in history in 1516. The next year, Luther kicked off the Reformation.

In these two actions we have the coming together of renaissance and reformation, a renewal of scholarship leading to a renewal in Christian doctrine and life in the church.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) imbibed the fruit of the Christian humanist scholarship in Europe: the Geneva Bible, Thomas North's popular translations of Plutarch, the essays of Michel Montaigne, William Golding's *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, to name some of his favorites.

Shakespeare published *Hamlet* around 1600, giving the world a theologically minded and wickedly eloquent student from Luther's Wittenberg. Shakespeare doesn't explain Hamlet's connection to Luther in the play, yet *Hamlet* contains all the linguistic, theological, and artistic sophistication of the age.

About the Author

William Shakespeare probably attended grammar school in Stratford, where he would have learned Latin and studied the great Roman authors like Cicero, Virgil, Plautus, Terence, and especially Ovid. At eighteen William married Anne Hathaway, who gave him three children. Early in his career we encounter seven "lost years." When we next hear of Will, it's 1592, and he's successful enough as a dramatist to provoke fellow London playwright Robert Greene's ire for being a jack-of-all trades, "an upstart Crow," a "Shake-scene."

Around 1594 Shakespeare was both actor and playwright for the elite Lord Chamberlain's Men. These same men went on to build and own the Globe Theatre (Shakespeare divided half of the ownership with five other actors). When James came to the throne in 1603, the new king took this premiere troupe into his patronage, renaming them the King's Men. As a playwright, Shakespeare devoted a decade

* Quoted in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*, ed. Russ MacDonald (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 15.

pirates and is returning to Denmark. Claudius plans a deadly fencing match between Laertes (with a poisoned rapier) and Hamlet; Claudius also says that he will offer Hamlet a poisoned cup, just in case Laertes cannot wound Hamlet with the poisoned rapier. Before this, however, news comes that Ophelia has drowned, further incensing Laertes against Hamlet.

Hamlet returns to Denmark, and at a graveyard, he and Horatio meditate on death as Ophelia's funeral procession enters. Laertes and Hamlet are so grief-stricken that they both leap into her grave and grapple with one another.

In the last scene, Hamlet tells Horatio that on his way to England he discovered the king's death sentence hidden in the baggage of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet switched their letters with a forgery of his own, damning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death. Despite knowing the king's duplicity, Hamlet accepts the duel and apologizes to Laertes. In the match, Hamlet does well and Claudius offers him the poisoned cup. Hamlet refuses, but his mother drinks instead. During the duel, Laertes hits Hamlet with the poisoned foil, and in the confusion that follows, Hamlet strikes Laertes with the poisoned foil.

When the Queen dies, Laertes accuses the king of treachery, and Hamlet stabs Claudius with the foil and forces him to drink from the cup, killing him. Laertes and Hamlet exchange forgiveness before dying. Hamlet prevents Horatio's suicide; he must tell Hamlet's story. As Fortinbras arrives, Hamlet gives his consent for Fortinbras to ascend the Danish throne.

Worldview Analysis

"To be or not to be—that is the question" is no doubt the most famous line in *Hamlet*, and probably in the world. And it reminds us that the play is a play of questions. The play's first line is a question; the play is suffused with questions. These questions are more significant than

we might think. One of the greatest literary minds of the twentieth century put it this way:

There's no other play in Shakespeare, which probably means no other play in the world that raises so many questions of the 'problem' type. It's quite clear that problems, genuine or phony, *are a part of the texture of the play, and central to its meaning.* I'm not saying we get the 'real meaning' of the play by figuring out answers to its problems: I'm saying quite the opposite. Insoluble problems and unanswerable questions meet us everywhere we turn, and make *Hamlet* the most stifling and claustrophobic of plays. Not for us, because we're outside it, but for the characters caught up in its action.*

If the questions are “unanswerable,” why read the play? We do so because great literature requires interpretation. A great work of art like *Hamlet* is subtle; it leaves room for the imagination. As Noah Lukeman notes, the subtle writer “will often leave things unsaid, may even employ a bit of confusion, and often allow you to come to your own conclusions.”† We the readers (or viewers) have to, in a sense, finish the story.

The thorniest problems of the play, the same problems readers of *Hamlet* have always wrestled with, include: Is Hamlet mad? Does Gertrude know of Claudius's fratricide? Is the Ghost really Hamlet's father? Should Hamlet act now on the Ghost's word or delay? All the fun is in forming our own readings of particular lines and scenes and then sharpening our own interpretative blade on the opinions of others, whether professional productions of the play, scholarly articles, or our classmate's argument across the table from us.

* Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 84; emphasis added.

† *The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 159.

The Ghost

As we've seen, Hamlet himself lives in a stifling, claustrophobic world, a world he calls an "unweeded garden" (1.2.139). And if that isn't bad enough, *Enter Ghost*. When Hamlet sees the Ghost, he sees (or thinks he sees) his Father, and he's so unhinged he fails to discriminate between good and evil:

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee "Hamlet,"
"King," "Father," "Royal Dane." (1.4.44-50)

Hamlet's worldview includes Heaven and Hell and a ghost. Is the Ghost real? Even the skeptical young scholar Horatio thinks so. And Horatio, like Hamlet, thinks he can identify the apparition: the Ghost, he says, is "our last king" (1.1.92), "the King your father" (1.2.197, 199). This "father" claims to be from Purgatory, and claims to reveal the truth to Hamlet, refuting King Claudius's spin:

Now, Hamlet, hear.
'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forgèd process [a false story][‡] of my death
Rankly abused [grossly deceived]. But know, noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown. (1.5.41-47, emphasis added).

Hamlet responds as if he suspected avuncular treachery: "O, my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (48). If we go back to the second scene of Act 1, we see Hamlet nauseated by his mother's and uncle's hasty marriage, and the speed with which the whole court "moved on." For

[‡] Any glosses in brackets I've taken from the Folger Shakespeare Library's edition of *Hamlet*.



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Claudius: king of Denmark

Hamlet: son to the late, and nephew to the present king

Polonius: lord chamberlain

Horatio: friend to Hamlet

Laertes: son to Polonius

Voltimand, Cornelius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Osric: courtiers

A Gentleman

A Priest

Marcellus, Bernardo: Officers

Francisco: a soldier

Reynaldo: servant to Polonius

Players

Two Clowns: grave-diggers

Fortinbras: prince of Norway

A Captain

English Ambassadors

Gertrude: queen of Denmark, and mother to Hamlet

Ophelia: daughter to Polonius

Lords, Ladies, Officers, Soldiers, Sailors, Messengers, and other **Attendants**

Ghost of Hamlet's Father



ACT I

SCENE I

Elsinore. A platform before the castle.

FRANCISCO at his post. Enter to him BERNARDO

Bernardo. Who's there?

Francisco. Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

Bernardo. Long live the king!

Francisco. Bernardo?

Bernardo. He.

Francisco. You come most carefully upon your hour.

Bernardo. 'Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco.

Francisco. For this relief much thanks: 'tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.

Bernardo. Have you had quiet guard?

Francisco. Not a mouse stirring.

Bernardo. Well, good night.

If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

Francisco. I think I hear them. Stand, ho! Who's there?

Enter HORATIO and MARCELLUS

Horatio. Friends to this ground.

Marcellus. And liegemen to the Dane.

Francisco. Give you good night.

Marcellus. O, farewell, honest soldier:
Who hath relieved you?

Francisco. Bernardo has my place.
Give you good night.

Exit

Marcellus. Holla! Bernardo!

Bernardo. Say,
What, is Horatio there?

Horatio. A piece of him.

Bernardo. Welcome, Horatio: welcome, good Marcellus.

Marcellus. What, has this thing appear'd again to-night?

Bernardo. I have seen nothing.

Marcellus. Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him
Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us:
Therefore I have entreated him along
With us to watch the minutes of this night;
That if again this apparition come,
He may approve our eyes and speak to it.

Horatio. Tush, tush, 'twill not appear.

Bernardo. Sit down awhile;
And let us once again assail your ears,

That are so fortified against our story
What we have two nights seen.

Horatio. Well, sit we down,
And let us hear Bernardo speak of this.

Bernardo. Last night of all,
When yond same star that's westward from the pole
Had made his course to illumine that part of heaven
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
The bell then beating one,—

Enter GHOST

Marcellus. Peace, break thee off; look, where it comes again!

Bernardo. In the same figure, like the king that's dead.

Marcellus. Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.

Bernardo. Looks it not like the king? mark it, Horatio.

Horatio. Most like: it harrows me with fear and wonder.

Bernardo. It would be spoke to.

Marcellus. Question it, Horatio.

Horatio. What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,
Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march? by heaven I charge thee, speak!

Marcellus. It is offended.

Bernardo. See, it stalks away!

Horatio. Stay! speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!

Exit GHOST

Marcellus. 'Tis gone, and will not answer.

Bernardo. How now, Horatio! you tremble and look pale:

Is not this something more than fantasy?
 What think you on't?

Horatio. Before my God, I might not this believe
 Without the sensible and true avouch
 Of mine own eyes.

Marcellus. Is it not like the king?

Horatio. As thou art to thyself:
 Such was the very armour he had on
 When he the ambitious Norway combated;
 So frown'd he once, when, in an angry parle,
 He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.
 'Tis strange.

Marcellus. Thus twice before, and jump at this dead hour,
 With martial stalk hath he gone by our watch.

Horatio. In what particular thought to work I know not;
 But in the gross and scope of my opinion,
 This bodes some strange eruption to our state.

Marcellus. Good now, sit down, and tell me, he that knows,
 Why this same strict and most observant watch
 So nightly toils the subject of the land,
 And why such daily cast of brazen cannon,
 And foreign mart for implements of war;
 Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task
 Does not divide the Sunday from the week;
 What might be toward, that this sweaty haste
 Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day:
 Who is't that can inform me?

Horatio. That can I;
 At least, the whisper goes so. Our last king,
 Whose image even but now appear'd to us,

Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,
Thereto prick'd on by a most emulate pride,
Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet—
For so this side of our known world esteem'd him—
Did slay this Fortinbras; who by a seal'd compact,
Well ratified by law and heraldry,
Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands
Which he stood seized of, to the conqueror:
Against the which, a moiety competent
Was gaged by our king; which had return'd
To the inheritance of Fortinbras,
Had he been vanquisher; as, by the same covenant,
And carriage of the article design'd,
His fell to Hamlet. Now, sir, young Fortinbras,
Of unimproved mettle hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute,
For food and diet, to some enterprise
That hath a stomach in't; which is no other—
As it doth well appear unto our state—
But to recover of us, by strong hand
And terms compulsory, those foresaid lands
So by his father lost: and this, I take it,
Is the main motive of our preparations,
The source of this our watch and the chief head
Of this post-haste and romage in the land.

Bernardo. I think it be no other but e'en so:

Well may it sort that this portentous figure
Comes armed through our watch; so like the king
That was and is the question of these wars.

Horatio. A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye.

In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
 A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
 The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
 Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets:
 As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
 Disasters in the sun; and the moist star
 Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands
 Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse:
 And even the like precurse of fierce events,
 As harbingers preceding still the fates
 And prologue to the omen coming on,
 Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
 Unto our climatures and countrymen.—
 But soft, behold! lo, where it comes again!

Re-enter GHOST

I'll cross it, though it blast me. Stay, illusion!
 If thou hast any sound, or use of voice,
 Speak to me:
 If there be any good thing to be done,
 That may to thee do ease and grace to me,
 Speak to me:

Cock crows

If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
 Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid, O, speak!
 Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
 Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
 For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death,
 Speak of it: stay, and speak! Stop it, Marcellus.

Marcellus. Shall I strike at it with my partisan?

Horatio. Do, if it will not stand.

Bernardo. 'Tis here!

Horatio. 'Tis here!

Marcellus. 'Tis gone!

Exit GHOST

We do it wrong, being so majestic,
To offer it the show of violence;
For it is, as the air, invulnerable,
And our vain blows malicious mockery.

Bernardo. It was about to speak, when the cock crew.

Horatio. And then it started like a guilty thing
Upon a fearful summons. I have heard,
The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn,
Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat
Awake the god of day; and, at his warning,
Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air,
The extravagant and erring spirit hies
To his confine: and of the truth herein
This present object made probation.

Marcellus. It faded on the crowing of the cock.
Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

Horatio. So have I heard and do in part believe it.
But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,

Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill:
 Break we our watch up; and by my advice,
 Let us impart what we have seen to-night
 Unto young Hamlet; for, upon my life,
 This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him.
 Do you consent we shall acquaint him with it,
 As needful in our loves, fitting our duty?

Marcellus. Let's do't, I pray; and I this morning know
 Where we shall find him most conveniently.

Exeunt

SCENE II

A room of state in the castle.

*Enter CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, HAMLET, POLONIUS, LAERTES,
 VOLTIMAND, CORNELIUS, Lords, and Attendants*

Claudius. Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
 The memory be green, and that it us befitted
 To bear our hearts in grief and our whole kingdom
 To be contracted in one brow of woe,
 Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
 That we with wisest sorrow think on him,
 Together with remembrance of ourselves.
 Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
 The imperial jointress to this warlike state,
 Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,—
 With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
 With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
 In equal scale weighing delight and dole,—
 Taken to wife: nor have we herein barr'd