

## Plot of *Hamlet*

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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. Denmark has a long-standing feud with neighboring Norway, and an invasion led by the Norwegian prince, Fortinbras, is expected.

The play opens on a cold winter midnight on "a platform before the castle" 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. When it declines to talk to them they attack it with daggers, but it escapes. Marcellus admits: "We do it wrong... to offer it the show of violence / For it is... invulnerable." They vow to tell Prince Hamlet that his father's ghost has been seen.

The scene shifts to a "room of state in the castle." Various royal figures come in. Claudius and Gertrude talk with Laertes about his upcoming journey to France. Laertes's father Polonius admits that he has agreed to his son's trip. The King and Queen then turn to Hamlet. Perturbed by Hamlet's continuing deep mourning for his father and his increasingly erratic behavior, Claudius and Gertrude try to persuade him to be more cheerful. Claudius tells him that it is normal for fathers to die, but the prince is not comforted by this.

When they leave, Hamlet complains in his first soliloquy ("O that this too too solid flesh would melt") that his mother has jumped into "incestuous sheets" with her brother-in-law too quickly after the death of Hamlet's father. Horatio and the sentries come in and Hamlet warmly greets his friend, who has recently returned to court from the university at Wittenberg. The three tell Hamlet about the ghost they have seen at the castle and the prince resolves to see the apparition himself.

Claudius and Gertrude send two student friends of his—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—to discover the cause of Hamlet's mood and behavior. Hamlet greets his friends warmly, but quickly discerns that they are spies. That night, the Ghost appears to Hamlet and tells him that Claudius murdered him by pouring "juice of cursed hebenon" in his ear, which caused his blood to "curd" and his skin to be covered with a "vile and loathsome crust." The Ghost demands that Hamlet avenge him. "Well said, old mole!" replies the prince, and he tells Horatio and the rest of his crew that he is going to "put on an antic disposition" from this point on and that if they run into him around the castle they should not say such things as "Well, we know," or "We could, an if we would," Or "If we list to speak," or "There be, an if they might,"<sup>[7]</sup> that would give him away. He is, however, uncertain of the Ghost's reliability.

Polonius is Claudius's trusted chief counselor; his son, Laertes, is about to resume studies in France; and his daughter, Ophelia, is courting Hamlet. Neither Polonius nor Laertes approves of the match, and both warn her off. Shortly afterwards, Ophelia meets Hamlet secretly but is so alarmed by his strange antics that she tells her father of Hamlet's state. Polonius blames an "ecstasy of love"<sup>[8]</sup> for Hamlet's madness and informs Claudius and Gertrude. At their next tryst, Hamlet rants at Ophelia, accusing her of immodesty and dismissing her to a nunnery.

Hamlet remains unconvinced that the Ghost has told him the truth, but the arrival of a troupe of actors at Elsinore presents him with a solution. He will stage a play, re-enacting his father's murder, and determine Claudius's guilt or innocence by studying his reaction. The court assembles to watch the play; Hamlet provides a running commentary throughout. After seeing the Player King murdered with poison in the ears, Claudius abruptly rises and leaves the room: proof positive for Hamlet of his uncle's guilt. Gertrude summons Hamlet to her bedchamber to demand an explanation. On his way, Hamlet passes Claudius in prayer. Claudius has just been talking to himself about the impossibility of repenting since he still had possession of the ill-gotten goods: state power, "my ambition," and sleeping with the queen he married. "There is no shuffling," he points out, "He talks to the state ('O wretched state!'), to his bosom ('O bosom black as death!'), to his soul ('O limed soul, that, struggling to be free, Art more engaged!'), to angels ('Help, angels! Make assay!'), and finally to his knees ('Bow, stubborn knees!')". Hamlet then sneaks up behind them, but hesitates to kill him, reasoning that killing Claudius right after Claudius prayed and cleansed himself of his sins would send Claudius straight to heaven while his father is stuck in purgatory. After Hamlet unsheathes his sword and leaves, Claudius mutters that his praying doesn't seem to be getting anywhere.

In the bedchamber, a furious row erupts between Hamlet and Gertrude. Polonius, spying on the conversation and hidden behind a tapestry, makes a noise; Hamlet, believing it is Claudius, cries "Dead, for a ducat, dead!" and stabs wildly, killing Polonius. Hamlet then pulls aside the curtain and sees his mistake. He does not feel too sorry about this, saying only "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!" He then berates his mother for marrying Claudius for the sex. He claims her "sense" was "thrall'd" to her "ecstasy," and observes that "rebellious hell... can mutine in a matron's bones." The castle ghost suddenly pops his head in and gripes that Hamlet still hasn't killed Claudius yet and that he is annoying his mother even though he was instructed not to. Unable to see or hear the Ghost herself, Gertrude takes Hamlet's conversation with it as further evidence of madness. Hamlet leaves, begging the queen to stop having sex with Claudius, and suggesting that she can get used to this if she makes it a habit to abstain. Hamlet hides Polonius's corpse in "the lobby," and Claudius, fearing for his life, sends Hamlet along with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to England with a note to the King ordering Hamlet to be executed immediately.

Demented by grief at Polonius's death, Ophelia wanders Elsinore singing bawdy songs. Her brother, Laertes, arrives back from France, enraged by his father's death and his sister's madness. Claudius convinces Laertes that Hamlet is solely responsible; then news arrives that Hamlet is still at large. Claudius swiftly concocts a plot. He proposes a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet with a poison-tipped foil, but tacitly plans to offer Hamlet poisoned wine if that fails. Laertes will be given a handicap, and Claudius intends to bet on Hamlet so that if Hamlet dies the murder will not appear staged. Gertrude interrupts to report that Ophelia has drowned.

Two gravediggers discuss Ophelia's apparent suicide, while digging her grave. Hamlet arrives with Horatio and banters with a gravedigger, who unearths the skull of a jester from Hamlet's childhood, Yorick, causing Hamlet to contemplate the universal nature of mortality. Ophelia's funeral procession approaches, led by Laertes. He and Hamlet grapple by Ophelia's graveside, but the brawl is broken up.

Back at Elsinore, Hamlet tells Horatio that he had written fake letters addressed from Claudius to the King of England ordering Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be put to death instead. A courtier, Osric, interrupts to invite Hamlet to fence with Laertes. With Fortinbras' army closing on Elsinore, the match

begins. Laertes pierces Hamlet with a poisoned blade but in the scuffle they switch swords and Hamlet wounds Laertes with his own poisoned sword. Despite a warning from Claudius, Gertrude drinks poisoned wine intended for Hamlet and dies. In his dying moments, Laertes is reconciled with Hamlet and reveals Claudius's murderous plot. In his own last moments, an enraged Hamlet blames Claudius for his mother's death and manages to stab and wound Claudius with the poisoned blade, and finishes him off by forcing him to drink his own poisoned wine. Horatio attempts to commit suicide by drinking the poison but Hamlet swipes the cup from his hands and orders him to live to tell the tale. When Fortinbras arrives, Horatio recounts the story and Fortinbras, seeing the entire royal family dead on the floor, takes the crown for himself.



## Hamlet, Prince of Denmark Characters

**Hamlet Characters** guide studies each character's role and motivation in this play.

**Hamlet:** Son of the late King Hamlet of Denmark and nephew to the present King. Famous for the graveyard scene where holding the skull of deceased jester Yorick, Hamlet realizes man has little lasting control over his fate and also for describing man as the "paragon of animals!" Educated in Wittenburg and introduced to us in Act I, Scene II, Hamlet resents his mother Queen Gertrude marrying King Claudius within two months of his father King Hamlet's death to which she was previously married.

Distrustful of King Claudius, Hamlet is equally weary of the King's spies, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz who attempt to know his true intentions. When Hamlet meets King Hamlet's Ghost and learns that King Claudius murdered his father, Hamlet changes from a distrustful, disillusioned young man to one driven to avenge his father's death. To this end, Hamlet distrusts and rejects all those around him whom he believes are spying on him for King Claudius.

Fearing that his intentions could be revealed, Hamlet invents a madness to distract and hide his true intentions from King Claudius' many spies. This includes Ophelia, the woman he loves whom he bitterly rejects when he learns she has betrayed him.

Cunning and inventive, Hamlet changes the lines of a play performed before King Claudius to divine whether King Hamlet's Ghost told him the truth about his father's death. At the end of the play, Hamlet kills both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (indirectly), Laertes and finally King Claudius before dying himself from a wound inflicted by Laertes.

**Horatio:** Friend to Hamlet and the one person Hamlet truly trusts. Witnesses King Hamlet's Ghost in Act I. At the end of the play, Horatio wishes to commit suicide to join Hamlet in death but Hamlet convinces him to live so he can tell his story, restoring Hamlet's name.

**Claudius:** The present King of Denmark, King Claudius took Queen Gertrude whom he loves as his queen and wife, much to the consternation of Hamlet who believes his mother has betrayed him and his father's memory by doing so. Cautious and suspicious, Claudius has courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Hamlet's love interest Ophelia spying on Hamlet for him since as he says, the great ones must be watched. Distrustful of Hamlet and his "madness", King Claudius has Hamlet deported to England to be killed when he fears he has become a threat.

Instead, Hamlet returns to Denmark, and King Claudius manipulates Laertes into killing Hamlet for him. Unfortunately, King Claudius' plan to poison Hamlet backfires, killing his beloved Queen Gertrude instead. In Act III, Scene III, King Claudius reveals his inner guilt and the knowledge that he cannot avoid God's judgment of him... Dies at the end of the play to the poison tipped sword of Hamlet.

**Gertrude:** Queen of Denmark and mother to Hamlet, Queen Gertrude is resented deeply by Hamlet for marrying King Claudius within two months of his father, King Hamlet's death. Hamlet makes this bitterly clear throughout the play especially in his first soliloquy in Act I, Scene II. Queen Gertrude loves her son but when she sees a play mocking her actions, she famously says of the female character who vows never to forget her husband, "The lady doth [does] protest too much, methinks [I think]", (Act III, Scene II, Line 242) in an attempt to justify her own actions in remarrying so quickly. Clearly loving of Hamlet, she realizes her wrong when Hamlet scolds her mercilessly in Act III, Scene V. She agrees to no longer share King Claudius' bed, and aids her son by hiding Hamlet's true mental state from King Claudius. Dies in Act V, Scene II, to a poisoned cup of wine meant for Hamlet.

**Polonius:** Lord Chamberlain. The father of Laertes and Ophelia, Lord Chamberlain Polonius dutifully serves King Claudius. When news of Hamlet's madness circulate, Polonius is certain that his daughter Ophelia is responsible, having made Hamlet lovesick. Worried that Hamlet's intentions for his daughter are dishonorable, Polonius orders Ophelia to keep her distance. Later when King Claudius needs information, Polonius uses his daughter to spy on Hamlet. He even has Reynaldo, a servant spy on his own son Laertes in Paris. An enthusiastic spy for King Claudius, Polonius is killed by Hamlet when he attempts to listen in on a conversation between Hamlet and Queen Gertrude in Act III, Scene IV. His death leads to Ophelia's madness and later drowning brought on by grief and also to Laertes' alliance with King Claudius to kill Hamlet, to avenge Polonius, his father's death.

**Reynaldo:** Servant to Polonius, Reynaldo is instructed to spy on his Laertes in Paris in Act II, Scene I.

**Laertes:** Polonius' son, Laertes is held in high esteem for his fencing skills. Famous for the advice, "to thine own self be true," (be true to yourself) and the advice to "Neither a borrower, nor a lender be;" in Act I, Scene III. Laertes' role in this play is minor until the death of his father Polonius. From this point on,

Laertes emerges as rather more assertive, confronting King Claudius personally to know his father's whereabouts, arguing with a Priest for being disrespectful to his sister, fighting Hamlet above his sister's grave and ultimately conspiring to and killing Hamlet with the help of King Claudius. We see little of Laertes' inner character however since he responds to events continuously. Loving of his sister Ophelia, he must watch his sister's cruel decay into madness helplessly following his father's death. Dies in Act V, Scene II, the victim of a wound inflicted upon him by Hamlet with his own poison tipped sword.

**Ophelia:** The daughter to Polonius, Ophelia is loved by Hamlet. Unfortunately as Queen Gertrude laments at Ophelia's funeral, Ophelia never marries Hamlet. Dutiful to her father, she ignores Hamlet's romantic overtures when instructed to ignore them by her father Polonius. Receives advice on how to live from brother Laertes in Act I, Scene III. Though loved by Hamlet, Ophelia ultimately betrays him by spying on him for King Claudius. As a result Hamlet mercilessly insults her virtue during the play "The Murder of Gonzago" in Act III, Scene II. A dutiful daughter, Ophelia descends into madness from the grief of losing her father Polonius and later drowns in circumstances that suggest a possible suicide. Her funeral is the location of a fight between Hamlet and Laertes that centers on which loved her more; Hamlet believes he did, resenting Laertes exaggerated emphasis of his sorrow...

**Fortinbras:** Prince of Norway. The son of King Fortinbras, who was defeated by King Hamlet, Young Fortinbras has raised an army to reclaim the lands lost by his father to King Hamlet and Denmark. Convinced into attacking the Polish instead, Young Fortinbras displays all the noble, honor driven qualities, Hamlet wishes he had. At the end of the play, Young Fortinbras is recommended by Hamlet to be the next King of Denmark. Parallels Hamlet's character in that like Hamlet his father was a ruler (King of Norway) and that both are now nephews to the current rulers of their lands..

**Rosencrantz, Guildenstern:** Courtiers to King Claudius, both these men grew up with Hamlet. As a result King Claudius recruits them to spy on Hamlet for him. Neither man has a problem trading in their friendship to betray Hamlet; they serve the King. Both die when the instructions they bear from King Claudius are altered by Hamlet to instruct King Claudius' English associates to kill those bearing his commission immediately (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern).

**Voltimand, Cornelius, Osric and a Gentleman:** Courtiers.

**A Priest:** Introduces at Ophelia's funeral, the Priest insults Laertes by expressing his personal opinion that Ophelia does not deserve a proper Christian burial for ending her life by suicide, which was considered a sin unworthy of proper burial.

**Marcellus and Bernardo:** Officers who initially spot King Hamlet's Ghost in Act I, Scene I.

**Francisco:** A soldier. Famous for the lines "'tis [it is] bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart" which sets the tone of this tragedy.

**A Captain, English Ambassadors, Players, Two Clowns (Gravediggers), Lords, Ladies, Officers, Soldiers, Sailors, Messengers, and Attendants.**