

ACT I

Most of the action of play occurs in and around the castle at Elsinore in Denmark. King Hamlet is dead, and Prince Hamlet has returned to Denmark from school in Wittenberg, Germany, only to discover that Queen Gertrude, his mother, has married his Uncle Claudius. Claudius has had himself crowned king.

Hamlet is informed that what is apparently the ghost of his dead father has appeared to the palace guards (I, ii). When he later confronts the ghost, Hamlet learns that Claudius murdered his father and hastily married Queen Gertrude (I, v).

Throughout the play, the ongoing border disputes and political machinations amongst Denmark, Norway, and Poland serve as a backdrop for the action in the Danish court (I, ii; II, ii; IV, iv; V, ii). Prince Fortinbras, whose father was killed by Hamlet's father, is a man of action, and his character serves as a foil to the contemplative Prince Hamlet.

Polonius (Lord Chamberlain), his son Laertes and daughter Ophelia are also important characters in this drama. Polonius and Laertes are concerned about Ophelia's romantic involvement with Prince Hamlet and caution her against such a relationship. Polonius also provides fatherly advice to Laertes as he leaves for Paris (I, iii).

ACT II

Hamlet's emotional turmoil over his father's murder has left him in a visibly agitated condition, which some members of the court have interpreted as madness. Claudius and Gertrude, concerned for his welfare, summon two of Hamlet's oldest friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in the hopes that they can learn what is troubling him. (II, ii). Hamlet is immediately skeptical about their surprise visit.

Anxious to confirm his own suspicions regarding the source of Hamlet's trouble, Polonius arranges a meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet, as he is convinced that Hamlet's love for Ophelia is the cause of his suffering (II, ii). When Polonius approaches Hamlet, Hamlet answers his questions although he believes Polonius to be a foolish old man.

When a group of players arrives at the Danish court to entertain, Hamlet arranges for them to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* with the addition of lines Hamlet has written. What Hamlet hopes is to prove Claudius's guilt in the murder by watching his reaction to the drama the players will stage (II, ii).

ACT III

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report back to Claudius that they have no explanation for Hamlet's strange behavior, Claudius decides to eavesdrop with Polonius on the meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia. Although Hamlet treats Ophelia irrationally, Claudius is suspicious of his behavior and makes plans to send Hamlet to England (III, i).

The players perform their drama in which the events portrayed, with Hamlet's alterations, almost duplicate the circumstances surrounding King Hamlet's death. Hamlet observes that Claudius is visibly upset by the play. When he leaves abruptly, Claudius confirms his guilt in the eyes of Hamlet and his friend, Horatio (III, ii).

Out of concern for Hamlet's welfare, Queen Gertrude meets privately with her son in her chambers. Polonius, however, is eavesdropping behind a wall tapestry. Hamlet's rebukes cause Gertrude to cry out, and Polonius cries out as well, fearful for her welfare. Believing he has heard Claudius, Hamlet stabs through the tapestry, killing Polonius (III, iv).

ACT IV

Polonius's death provides Claudius with the opportunity to send Hamlet to England, under the false pretense of protecting his life, when in reality, he has asked the King of England to kill Prince Hamlet (IV, iii). Grief-stricken by their father's death, Laertes and Ophelia solicit Claudius's assistance in finding his murderer (IV, v). Meanwhile, Hamlet sends word to Horatio that he has been taken prisoner by pirates who have returned him to Denmark and asks Horatio to join him (IV, vi). In order to remove Hamlet as a threat, Claudius now plans an exhibition duel in which Laertes will use a sword tipped with poison (IV, vii).

ACT V

Ophelia's madness and subsequent drowning (IV, v; IV, vii) precipitate a confrontation between Laertes and Hamlet at her grave (V, i), but Claudius intervenes, privately assuring Laertes that his revenge will come in the duel which has been arranged. Hamlet seals the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by substituting another letter in the envelope which originally contained his own death orders, requesting that the King of England put them to death (V, ii). In spite of Horatio's concern, Hamlet agrees to the duel with Laertes and appears before the court as requested. Not only does Claudius poison the tip of the sword, he also offers Hamlet a drink from a poison cup. Instead, Gertrude drinks from the cup and swoons from the effect of the poison, her dying words warning Hamlet of the plot against him. As the duel progresses, Laertes and Hamlet inadvertently exchange swords during a scuffle; consequently, both are mortally wounded, although Hamlet manages to fatally wound Claudius as well.

As the play closes, Fortinbras arrives, victorious over Poland, and the dying Hamlet names him as the new king. Fortinbras pays tribute to Hamlet and arranges for an appropriate burial.