

insight SHAKESPEARE PLAYS



Second edition

Hamlet

William Shakespeare



Shane Barnes, Aidan Coleman & Abbie Thomas

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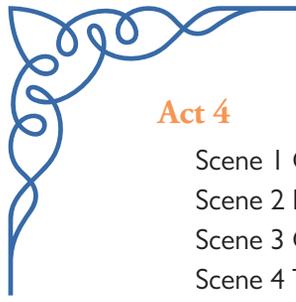
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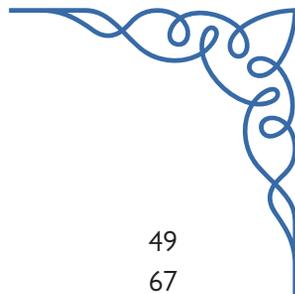
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Introduction

Who was Shakespeare?



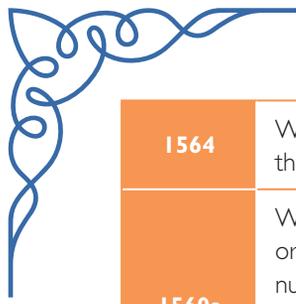
The Chandos Portrait of William Shakespeare

Shakespeare was neither a king nor a lord, and this is the reason we know little about him. While historians and writers made an effort to record the details of the lives of those born into noble families (kings, queens, ladies and lords), they were not generally interested in the important details of other people's lives. In his time Shakespeare was a famous playwright, but perhaps no more famous than some other London playwrights such as Ben Jonson or Christopher Marlowe. Little effort was made to record the details of Shakespeare's life until some 50 years after his death.

Did Shakespeare write Shakespeare?

Nearly all scholars agree that we have enough evidence to confirm that William Shakespeare, the man born in Stratford-upon-Avon, was the author of the plays and poems attributed to him. However, a few other theories exist as to who wrote the plays. Some authors who have been suggested include Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford; Christopher Marlowe (a talented playwright who died in 1593 but who conspiracy theorists claim may have faked his own death); Francis Bacon (a philosopher and scientist); and even Queen Elizabeth I.

There are a number of problems with all of these theories and very little evidence to support them. No-one doubted Shakespeare was the author of the plays and poems until 200 years after his death and these theories are usually based on the argument that Shakespeare was not university-educated.



1564	William Shakespeare was baptised on 26 April 1564; it is likely that he was born three days before this on 23 April (St George's Day).
1560s	<p>William's parents, John and Anne, were possibly both illiterate (they couldn't read or write). His father, John Shakespeare, was a glove maker and was involved in a number of other business activities. He became a member of the town council when Shakespeare was very young.</p> <p>William was John and Anne's third child. He had seven brothers and sisters but only five of them survived to adulthood.</p>
1571	It is believed that Shakespeare entered the King's New Grammar School in Stratford around the age of seven. School days would have begun at six in the morning in summer and seven in winter and they would have finished at five in the evening (Monday to Saturday). The school would have been very strict and students could have expected to be beaten for misbehaving or showing any signs of laziness.
1578	Shakespeare probably left school at 14 or 15. His father owed quite a few people money by this time, and, for this reason, William was unable to attend university.
1582	At age 18, he married 26-year-old Anne Hathaway. They had three children – Susanna, and twins Judith and Hamnet (Hamnet died when he was only 11).
1590s	<p>We are unsure what Shakespeare did in his early twenties. There are stories of his being employed by a rich landowner in the north of England. It is possible that he joined a travelling company of actors. We do know that by the early 1590s he was a popular playwright in London; in 1594 he invested in the acting company of which he was a member (the Lord Chamberlain's Men), becoming a part-owner.</p> <p>Through the 1590s Shakespeare wrote a number of poems and many of his most popular plays, including <i>Richard III</i>, <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> and <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>. He acted in some of his own plays and those of other playwrights.</p> <p>In 1596 Shakespeare obtained a coat of arms for his father, which meant that he would be officially regarded as a gentleman. In the following year, Shakespeare bought New Place, the second-largest house in Stratford-upon-Avon.</p>
1600s	<p>The first decade of the 1600s was his most productive period, when he wrote most of his greatest plays, including <i>Hamlet</i>, <i>Othello</i>, <i>Macbeth</i> and <i>King Lear</i>.</p> <p>In 1603 Shakespeare's company became the King's Men and regularly performed at Court before King James from this time. During this decade he bought more properties around London and the Stratford area and became very wealthy.</p>
1613	In 1613 Shakespeare returned to Stratford-upon-Avon but still travelled to London occasionally to look after his business interests.
1616	He died on his 52nd birthday (23 April 1616) and was buried at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford.

Elizabethan England

Shakespeare arrived in London some time between 1585 and 1592. The city had a population of about 200 000 and was growing fast. It was an exciting time to live there as the city was full of foreign merchants and explorers, who were returning with spices and stories of exotic countries. It was also a time when the modern scientific method was being developed and many new discoveries were made, particularly in the areas of anatomy, mathematics and astronomy.

Unlike today, when the people of England vote for a government, England was ruled by a monarch, Elizabeth I, and her advisers. She had been Queen since 1558, six years before Shakespeare's birth. She was very popular with the people and was celebrated for her knowledge of literature and art.

Elizabethan society was divided into two broad groups: the 'gentle' population who governed the country (including earls, lords, ladies and gentlemen), and the 'base' or 'knaves' who made up most of the population. People were born into a certain class and marriages between people of different classes were reasonably rare. Occasionally the Queen knighted or even ennobled a person of lesser rank. While the 'gentle' were generally wealthy, some businessmen of lower rank were also beginning to make their fortunes during this time.

In the 1500s, virtually everyone believed in a God who created and controlled the universe. Elizabethans believed in a divine order called the Great Chain of Being. In this way of seeing the world, God ruled the universe and below Him were a number of angels. The Queen was the highest earthly rank in the Chain of Being; beneath her were nobles and lesser lords, and below them the rest of the population. This chain extended further to the animal and then the plant kingdoms. Such an idea was



The Damley Portrait of Elizabeth I, c. 1570



Illustration from 1579 of the Great Chain of Being

used to reinforce the class system: everything had its place in the chain and people believed that upsetting this order in any way would cause chaos. People's class was even made clear through the clothing they wore, which was governed by strict laws.

Elizabethans were quite superstitious. Many of them believed in fairies and witches whom they blamed for unexplained mishaps. Elizabethans would worry if a black cat crossed their path, and avoid walking beneath ladders because this was considered bad luck. It was generally believed that the Earth was the centre of the universe and that, in their motion around the Earth, the planets made musical notes that together formed a perfect harmony. Elizabethans believed that the constellations and other heavenly bodies, including the moon, influenced human events and held clues for the future. Even Queen Elizabeth I consulted an

astrologer before deciding on the date for her coronation.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, England, like most other European countries, was Roman Catholic. Under Queen Elizabeth's father, King Henry VIII, the country broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and formed the Protestant Church of England. Although England briefly became Catholic again under Queen Mary, the country remained Protestant from the time of Elizabeth onwards. This meant Elizabeth I, instead of the Pope, ruled over the English Church. English priests were allowed to marry and services were carried out in English rather than Latin.

In the early 1500s there was very little confidence in the English language. Latin, the language of the Roman Catholic Church, was used for scholarship and most serious literature. However, as the century progressed, there emerged a new confidence that the English language could express important thoughts and feelings. A translation of the Bible into English by William Tyndale became a bestseller and was widely distributed, thanks to the reasonably recent technology of the printing press. There was also a rise in patriotism as England became an important world power. In 1588 the Royal Navy won a famous victory over the Spanish Armada, which was regarded as the greatest naval power in the world at the time.



The New Globe Theatre

This period in history is often described as the English Renaissance (rebirth) because it was a time not only of great advances in science, but also of great achievements in art. At the centre of this achievement was the growth of the English theatres. Before 1570, acting companies had toured the country, looking for work where they could find it and performing in marketplaces or the inn yards at local taverns. However, during the latter part of the sixteenth century, a number of theatres were built across London to service a new population that was hungry for entertainment. By the time Shakespeare arrived in London, there were numerous theatres catering to audiences of thousands. If he had arrived in London at a different time, he might never have become the famous playwright we know him as today.

A day at the theatre, London 1601

Imagine you could go back to London on a Saturday afternoon in September 1601. It is a warm sunny day with a slight breeze blowing in from the country. You decide to avoid the crowds flowing over London Bridge, choosing instead to be rowed across the River Thames (pronounced *Temz*) in one of the many water taxis. There are dozens of similar boats making their way across the river from the main city to Southwark (pronounced *Suth-uk*).

Southwark is a poor, overcrowded suburb filled with hastily built houses and flats. This is where immigrants from other parts of England or overseas come to live when they first arrive in London because it's cheap and no-one asks questions. It is full of workshops and young apprentices and you notice a large number of beggars. It is also the location of five of London's prisons, including that most notorious prison: the Clink.



A panorama of London by Claes Van Visscher, 1616

More importantly, Southwark is London's entertainment district. This is largely because it is outside the control of the city officials and their strict laws. The streets are packed with bowling alleys, brothels and taverns, where you can drink, or gamble illegally on dice, backgammon or cards. Here you can see all sorts of professional entertainers, from acrobats and clowns to musicians and puppeteers. You can also see some sickeningly violent entertainment. In the bear-baiting rings you are likely to see a bear or bull being attacked by vicious dogs. But you haven't crossed the river to see any of these things. You are here to see a play.

As you near the theatre, it is the smells you notice: roasting meats and pies mingle with the ever-present stench of horse dung, human sweat and sewage. Then you turn a corner, and there it is, standing 30 metres high: the Globe Theatre. The building is almost round in shape and white, crisscrossed with timbers. Above the brown thatched roof a white flag ripples in the breeze.

Today's play is *Hamlet*. It costs just a penny to enter. This is about a tenth of the average worker's daily wage, which makes it cheaper than a movie today. As you pass beneath the entrance you read the words *Totus mundus agit histrionem*: the whole world is a playhouse.

Inside, three tiers of gallery seating wrap around the stage. If you pay another penny, you can buy yourself a seat in one of the lower tiers, or for

sixpence you can purchase one of the best seats in the upper galleries. This is where the upper classes sit: the gentlemen, lords and ladies.

The stage is raised about 1.5 metres above the ground. Like the seats in the galleries, the performance area is covered. The ceiling, which they call the heavens, is painted with stars. You notice there are very few props of any sort and no backdrops or scenery: just a curtain at the back of the stage and, above this, three balcony areas that face the audience. These are the most expensive seats in the house, where people sit to be seen.

The Globe is now almost full with 3000 noisy people. You find a place off to the side of the stage. You'll have to stand for two or three hours but you've done that before at plenty of concerts. There are no toilets, and you will need to keep a careful eye on your bag.

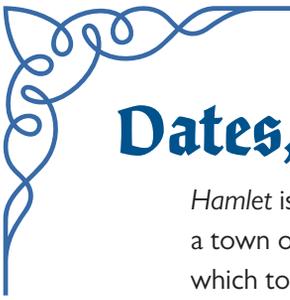
The audience around you are poorer Londoners, the groundlings. You'll find they're a lot like a crowd at the football but rougher. They will eat, drink and talk throughout the performance and will shout out or boo if they don't like what's happening.

When the actors come on you'll find they speak very quickly, but you'll be able to hear them clearly where you are. If you look very closely you may even notice something strange about the female characters. All of the parts are played by men, and female characters, such as Gertrude and Ophelia, are played by boys whose voices have not yet broken. Theatre companies are considered too dangerous for women, and they won't be permitted onstage for another 60 years.

Anyway, it's almost 2 o'clock and the performance is about to begin ...



Interior of the New Globe Theatre



Dates, sources and setting

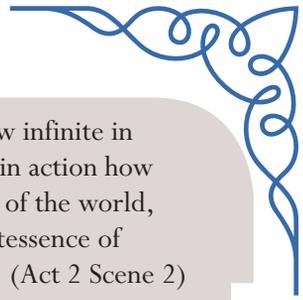
Hamlet is set in the late Middle Ages (fourteenth or fifteenth century) in Elsinore, a town on the eastern side of the island of Zealand, Denmark. Kronborg Castle, which tourists visit today, is popularly believed to be the immediate setting, and the play has been performed many times in the castle's courtyard. It is highly unlikely that Shakespeare ever visited Elsinore, and the play sheds more light on politics in Elizabethan England than anywhere else.

As with many of his other works, Shakespeare borrowed material from historical and literary sources to create *Hamlet*. The tale of *Amleth*, written by twelfth-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, was published in 1514. This Norse legend shares many similarities with Shakespeare's play, but it is more likely that Shakespeare would have read Francis de Belleforest's French translation of this story, published in 1570.

Grammaticus' legend tells the tale of Amleth, whose father, the King of Denmark, is murdered by his brother, Feng. Amleth's Uncle Feng subsequently marries Gerutha, Amleth's mother. Fearful of Feng, Amleth feigns madness to escape him. Amleth is sent to England, but escapes death and returns to Denmark to kill Feng.

There is also believed to have been a play known as *Ur-Hamlet* ('Ur' meaning 'early'), which was written ten years before Shakespeare's version, but the author of the play is unknown as there is no surviving copy. There is speculation that it may have been written by Elizabethan playwright Thomas Kyd, or even by Shakespeare himself. Whoever the author was, the play was reputed to be of poor quality. Kyd's popular revenge play *The Spanish Tragedy*, written between 1582 and 1592, is also said to be a possible source for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Inspired by the tragic dramas of Roman philosopher Seneca, Kyd's play includes key aspects of *Hamlet*, such as the dramatic device of a play-within-the-play, as well as a ghost who is set on seeking revenge.

The first published version of *Hamlet*, entitled *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet*, was the First Quarto edition of 1603. This was labelled the 'bad' quarto because it was probably reconstructed from actors' memories. An interesting difference between the First Quarto version and later versions can be seen in Hamlet's famous speech: 'To be, or not to be; I, there's the point'. The versions of *Hamlet* in print today are made up largely from the Second Quarto (1604) and the First Folio (1623).



HAMLET What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, 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? (Act 2 Scene 2)

In many of Shakespeare's plays, prose indicates a character is of a lower class (for example, the grave-digging clowns at the beginning of Act 5) or is engaging in 'low' or casual behaviour. In the passage above, prose seems appropriate for Hamlet enjoying a casual conversation with his old schoolfriends. Also note that Hamlet speaks in prose in many of the scenes in which he feigns madness; yet all his soliloquies are in blank verse.

This contrast in the language highlights Hamlet's deception of the other characters.

h. Dramatic pauses

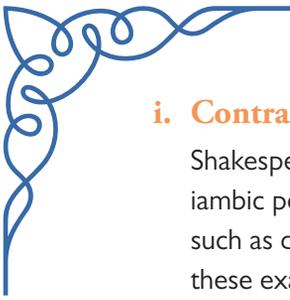
As we have seen in our discussion of trochees, Shakespeare does not always adhere strictly to iambic pentameter. Another way he departs from the conventional rhythm of blank verse is by leaving a line of iambic pentameter incomplete, thereby breaking the rhythm of the text.

GHOST Mark me.
HAMLET I will.
GHOST My hour is almost come,
 When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
 Must render up myself. (Act 1 Scene 5)

These irregular line lengths help to increase the dramatic tension at this key moment in the play. Leaving a line with fewer than the usual ten beats allows time for the characters to pause, or perhaps to do something during the moment of silence. There are eight-beat pauses after 'Mark me' and 'I will', and it is likely that either Hamlet is covering or the Ghost is performing some action during these pauses.

HAMLET Now might I do it pat, now he is praying,
 And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;
 And so am I revenged. That would be scanned:
 A villain kills my father, and for that,
 I, his foul son, do this same villain send
 To heaven.
 O, this is hire and salary, not revenge. (Act 3 Scene 3)

Here we see Hamlet thinking through the process of killing Claudius. It is likely that he has drawn his sword, but by the time he arrives at the word 'heaven' he has resolved that he will not use it. The lengthy pause after 'heaven' allows the actor to make it clear, through some action, that he has changed his mind.



i. Contractions and accents

Shakespeare frequently uses contractions in order to preserve the rhythm of iambic pentameter. Contractions are shortened words. You use contractions such as don't (do not) and haven't (have not) in everyday speech. In each of these examples an apostrophe indicates that a letter is missing:

'tis (it is) upon't (upon it) o'er (over) i' (in) 'gainst (against)

At other times, Shakespeare adds a syllable or a beat to a word to make it fit the iambic pentameter. This is indicated in the text by an accent mark to create an extra syllable:

cursèd [CURS-ed] (two beats instead of one)

preparèd [pre-PAR-ed] (three beats instead of two)

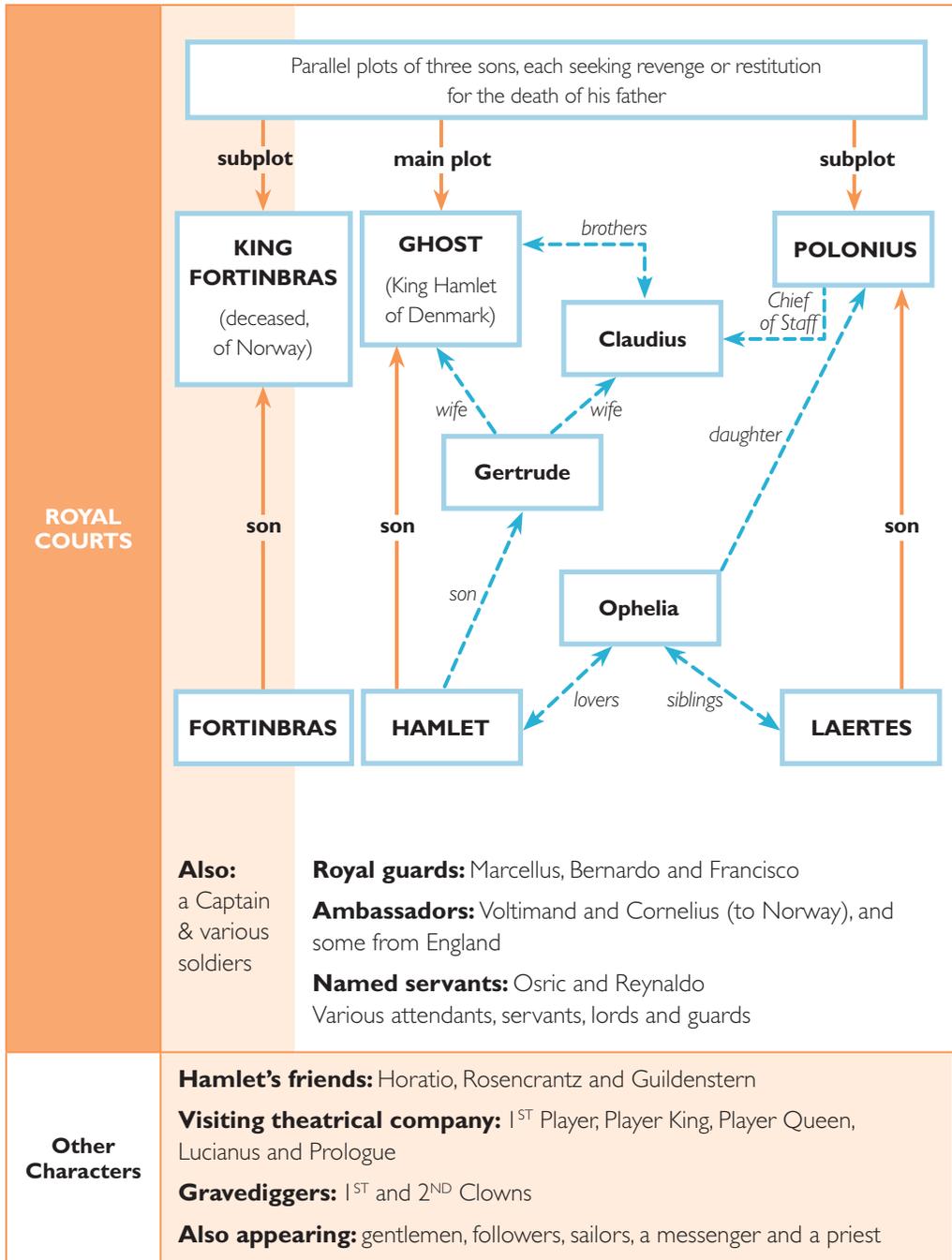
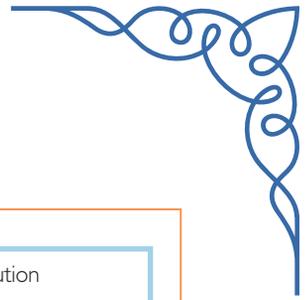
Be on the lookout for a variety of language forms throughout the play: blank verse, rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter, the occasional trochee, prose and songs. And remember, the rich variety of language is used by Shakespeare to show the range of characters, the shifting relationships and the often complex emotions that make up the world of *Hamlet*.

Essential vocabulary

Shakespeare's works include an immense vocabulary; some scholars have estimated that his plays and poems make use of up to 15 000 different words. You can enjoy Shakespeare without understanding every word, but it is still a good idea to learn the words that are used regularly throughout the play. You might like to begin a vocabulary list of your own. Here are some examples of words that occur frequently throughout *Hamlet*.

Anon: Soon
Arras: A tapestry or wall hanging
Aught: Anything
Ay (pronounced eye): Yes
Closet: Private retreat or bedroom
Ere (pronounced air): Before
Hence: Away from here
Rapier: Light, sharp-pointed sword
Thou: You Thy: Your
Wherefore: Why

The characters





Act summaries

Act 1

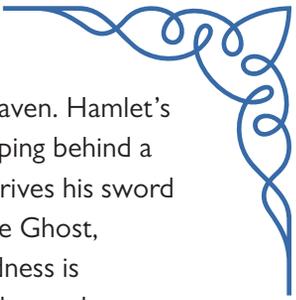
Having witnessed a ghost whose appearance resembles that of the late King Hamlet, guards of Denmark's royal castle, Elsinore, summon Horatio to confirm its likeness. Unsettled by his father's death and his mother's recent marriage to his uncle, Claudius, Prince Hamlet is intrigued when the ghost of his father tells of being murdered by Claudius, and subsequently urges Hamlet to avenge the murder without harming his mother. As the new king, Claudius is told of threats by Norway's army, led by young Fortinbras, and in a separate matter permits Laertes, his chief officer Polonius' son, to return to university in France. Polonius cautions his son about living away from home and instructs his daughter, Ophelia, to resist the advances of Hamlet, whom Laertes and Polonius believe to be untrustworthy.

Act 2

Hamlet acts strangely as a way of disguising his search for the truth about his father's murder. Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on his son in Paris. When Polonius hears from Ophelia of Hamlet's bizarre behaviour, he reports this to the King and Queen, and Claudius plans to bring Ophelia and Hamlet together in order to spy on them. In another act of deception, Claudius employs Hamlet's childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to secretly observe his stepson, but Hamlet later extracts this strategy from them. Hamlet requests a group of players to perform 'The Murder of Gonzago'. Its plot includes a murder similar to his father's murder, and Hamlet hopes that the King's reaction to the death scene will expose Claudius' guilt. In political news, Voltimand reports that the King of Norway has prevented his nephew Fortinbras from invading Denmark, and after Fortinbras has foresworn revenge for the death of his father, the King gives him permission to lead an army against Poland.

Act 3

Claudius and Polonius hide to observe a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia, and they witness Hamlet treating her harshly. During the performance of 'The Murder of Gonzago', Claudius stops the action during the murder scene by calling for light, which provides Hamlet with evidence of Claudius' guilt. Believing Hamlet to be a dangerous threat, Claudius arranges to send him to England. Later, Hamlet discovers Claudius praying, but chooses not to kill him for fear



that Claudius will obtain forgiveness for his crime and so go to heaven. Hamlet's harsh treatment of his mother causes Polonius, who is eavesdropping behind a tapestry, to cry out, and Hamlet, suspecting this to be Claudius, drives his sword through the tapestry, killing Polonius. Hamlet's interaction with the Ghost, whom Gertrude cannot see, causes his mother to believe his madness is genuine. Hamlet informs his mother that he is only pretending to be mad, and begs her to refrain from intimate contact with Claudius.

Act 4

Protecting her son, Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet has killed Polonius because he is mad. Hamlet refuses to tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern where he has hidden Polonius' body. Brought before the King, Hamlet behaves insanelly and Claudius informs him that he is to go with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to England, where Claudius has secretly arranged for Hamlet to be killed. A letter later reveals that Hamlet has returned safely to Denmark after pirates attacked his ship. Meanwhile, a Norwegian military expedition, led by Fortinbras, passes through Denmark to fight Poland over a small piece of land.

Ophelia has been driven mad as a result of her father's death and Hamlet's rejection of her. In an act of self-interest, Claudius provokes Laertes to seek revenge for Polonius' death by arranging a sword fight between Laertes and Hamlet. Laertes' sword tip will be poisoned and there will be a cup of poison from which Hamlet will drink during the fight. Gertrude announces that Ophelia has drowned in the river, further fuelling Laertes' desire to kill Hamlet.

Act 5

As Horatio and Hamlet talk while hiding in a graveyard, they are interrupted by a funeral procession that they soon realise is for Ophelia. When Laertes leaps into her grave, Hamlet makes his presence known, and the two fight and exchange insults. Back at the castle, Hamlet informs Horatio of his miraculous escape and his new belief that God is guiding events. Hamlet accepts the challenge to a fencing match with Laertes. During the match, Claudius poisons Hamlet's drink, Hamlet fights well and the Queen, in celebration of Hamlet's success, drinks from his cup and dies. Laertes and Hamlet accidentally exchange swords and they are both wounded with the poisoned tip of the blade. The two make their peace before Laertes dies. Hamlet kills Claudius before dying himself, just before Fortinbras arrives from the recent war in Poland. He and Horatio praise the dead Prince Hamlet, and Horatio explains the carnage to Fortinbras, who assumes control of Denmark.



Quick questions



QUESTIONS

Spend a few minutes answering these questions in pairs or as a class.

- 1 What do the guards of Elsinore castle witness late at night in Act 1?
- 2 What does the Ghost tell Hamlet to do?
- 3 Who is the new King of Denmark and what is his relationship to Hamlet?
- 4 Who is returning to university in France?
- 5 About whom do Polonius and Laertes warn Ophelia?
- 6 Why does Hamlet begin to behave insanely?
- 7 Whom does Claudius employ to spy on Hamlet?
- 8 What is the play that Hamlet requests the group of players perform and what is his reason for doing so?
- 9 How does Hamlet treat Ophelia when he meets with her at the beginning of Act 3?
- 10 What is Claudius' reaction to the play's murder scene?
- 11 Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius in Act 3 when he is given an opportunity?
- 12 Who hides himself to eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with his mother, Gertrude?
- 13 Whom does Hamlet stab through the tapestry?
- 14 Where does Claudius attempt to send Hamlet so that he will be killed?
- 15 Who leads the Norwegian military expedition that fights Poland for a small piece of land?
- 16 Why is Ophelia believed to have gone mad?
- 17 Whose funeral procession does Hamlet realise he is witnessing and what is his reaction?
- 18 Who drinks from the cup of poison during the fencing match?
- 19 Which characters die in the final scene?
- 20 Who takes over the leadership of Denmark?

Freeze-frames

The recommended time allocation for this task (preparation and performance) is approximately 50–60 minutes in total.

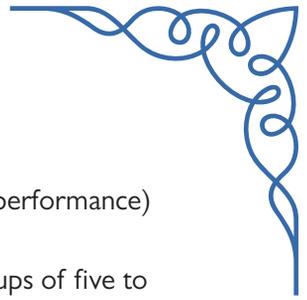
Present the play in five freeze-frames (one for each act) in groups of five to seven students.

Instructions

- Read carefully through the act summaries.
- Work out how you will present the action of each act in a single ‘frozen’ pose.
- You may choose to represent a character, an event or even an idea. You may strike a pose in which you are doing two things at once.
- When instructed, present Act 1. Your teacher will then ask you to CHANGE and then FREEZE for your representation of Act 2. This will continue until you have represented all five acts.
- You shouldn’t take longer than 15 seconds between acts, so make sure you practise your changeovers before you present your freeze-frames to the class.
- Make sure you can explain what you represent, who you are or what you are doing when you present your freeze-frames.

Optional

- Use a digital camera to photograph your five freeze-frames. Print the photographs and write a caption below each photograph explaining which act is being presented. These can be displayed in your classroom.
- Alternatively, print your photographs but do not label them. Display them in your classroom and ask students from other groups to organise your photographs into what they think is the correct order of the five-act play.



Act 1

Act 1 Scene 1

CHARACTERS

Horatio
Marcellus
Bernardo
Francisco
[Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]

IN A NUTSHELL

It is a cold, dark night in Elsinore and on the castle battlements Bernardo and Francisco are uneasy and anxious as they change guard. In recent times there has been a series of strange events, including the appearance of a ghost. Horatio, who does not believe in such things, is urged by Marcellus to witness the apparition. During the watch it is revealed that Denmark is preparing for war with Norway. The Ghost appears twice in the form of the late King Hamlet, but does not speak. Horatio resolves to tell Hamlet about this, believing the Ghost will speak to the Prince.

Before you read

- *Hamlet* opens with a question, and the first 13 lines contain three more; you might say that the play begins in the interrogative mood. This is appropriate for a play in which conspiracy, suspicion and deception feature prominently. The opening lines of the play also quickly establish that it is cold, dark and late.
- Horatio's two speeches in this scene are quite difficult. His first (lines 79–107) responds to Marcellus' concern about the Danish preparations for war that continue through the night. Horatio also informs his companions of recent political developments in Norway. The important thing to note is that Hamlet's father (King Hamlet in this speech), whose ghost has recently appeared, killed King Fortinbras in a fair fight on the battlefield, and in doing so lawfully conquered his lands. King Fortinbras' son (whom Horatio calls 'young Fortinbras') has since raised an army to avenge his father's death and win back the lands his father lost.
- Horatio's second long speech (lines 112–26) compares the recent strange events (omens) to the situation on the night before Julius Caesar was

assassinated. Shakespeare's company was still performing *Julius Caesar* at the time *Hamlet* debuted, and many critics consider this speech an advertisement for *Julius Caesar*.



A word about pathetic fallacy and foreshadowing

The key theatrical devices of stage directions and dialogue combine to indicate that *Hamlet* begins in a state of chaos or disorder; the mood is one of extreme tension.

Pathetic fallacy

Pathetic fallacy is the attribution of human emotions to nature or inanimate objects. It is also said to occur when the weather reflects or parallels the atmosphere of a scene or the mood of the characters. 'Pathetic' derives from the Greek word *pathos*, which refers to a quality that evokes pity or sadness. For example, Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* opens with thunder and lightning, establishing an atmosphere of chaos and foreboding that is reinforced by the entrance of the Witches.

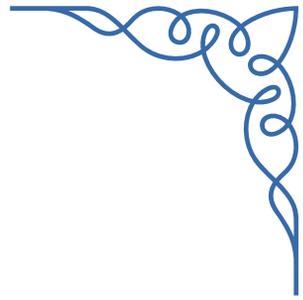
In the opening scene of *Hamlet*, it is dark (the guards have difficulty identifying each other), it is after midnight (line 7), and Francisco reports that it is 'bitter cold', which reflects his feeling of being 'sick at heart' (lines 8–9). We can see that the cold and darkness both contribute to and mirror the tension felt by the characters.

Foreshadowing

When the creepy music starts in a movie, you know something frightening or terrible is about to happen. It is as though the music is sending out a warning or a signal. In a similar way, authors give us hints or warnings about what will happen later in the text, and this is known as **foreshadowing**.

For example, in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the appearance of rats in the central character's apartment not only creates a feeling of unease but also hints at events later in the novel when rats are used to torture him. Likewise, in his poem 'Journey of the Magi', TS Eliot describes how the three wise men, on their way to see the newborn Jesus, see 'three trees on the low sky', and this foreshadows Jesus' death on the cross between two criminals.

As well as evoking a cold and dark setting, the dialogue in the opening scene of *Hamlet* establishes a foreboding atmosphere, foreshadowing the major themes and ideas of the play. The wartime setting (lines 47–49, 60–61, 70–107) foreshadows not only further military engagements, but also the intense relational and psychological conflicts of the central characters. Likewise, the presence of a ghost, described as 'strange' and 'portentous', is a Shakespearean device signalling that the natural order has been overturned, that 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (Act I Scene 4, line 90).



FRANCISCO Give you good night.
 MARCELLUS O, farewell, honest soldier.
 Who hath relieved you?
 FRANCISCO Bernardo has my place.
 Give you good night.

[FRANCISCO exits]

MARCELLUS Holla! Bernardo!
 BERNARDO Say,

What, is Horatio there? A piece of him. 20

BERNARDO Welcome, Horatio. Welcome, good Marcellus. 20

MARCELLUS What, has this thing appeared again tonight? 20

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; 25

Therefore, I have entreated him along 25

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. 30

BERNARDO Sit down awhile; 30

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, 35

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 –

[GHOST enters]

MARCELLUS Peace! Break thee off. Look where it comes again! 40

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.

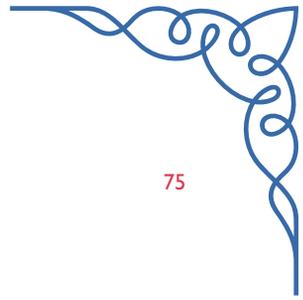


29 **Approve our eyes:** Prove what we are seeing is real.

31 **Assail:** Attack.

36 **Yond same star ... the pole:** The star over there that lies west of the pole star (North Star).

44 **Harrows:** Distresses; fills.



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?

75

HORATIO

That can I;

At least the whisper goes so. Our last King,
 Whose image even but now appeared to us,
 Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,
 Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride,
 Dared to the combat, in which our valiant Hamlet
 (For so this side of our known world esteemed him)
 Did slay this Fortinbras; who by a sealed 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 gagèd by our King, which had returned
 To the inheritance of Fortinbras,
 Had he been vanquisher; as, by the same covenant,
 And carriage of the article designed,
 His fell to Hamlet. Now, sir, young Fortinbras,
 Of unimproved mettle hot and full,
 Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there

80

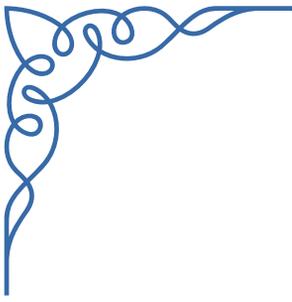
85

90

95



-
- 73 **Cast of brazen cannon:** Manufacturing of brass weapons.
 - 74 **Foreign mart for implements of war:** Trading weapons to foreign countries.
 - 75 **Such impress of shipwrights:** Forced service of ship manufacturers.
 - 75–76 **Whose sore task ... from the week:** Whose distressing or extreme task does not allow the kingdom's subjects to rest on Sunday (the Lord's Day, a day of rest).
 - 78 **Make the night joint-labourer with the day:** Preparations for war are occurring day and night.
 - 83 **Pricked on by a most emulate pride:** Stirred on to action by a particularly ambitious pride.
 - 86–87 **A sealed compact ... heraldry:** An official agreement confirmed legally and announced publically by the royal herald (official proclaimer of royal decrees).
 - 90 **Moiety competent:** Sufficient portion.
 - 91 **Gagèd:** Pledged or promised.
 - 94 **Carriage of the article designed:** Fulfillment of a specific clause in the agreement.
 - 96 **Unimproved mettle:** Young Fortinbras has not had his temperament ('mettle') tested.



Sharked up a list of lawless resolute,
 For food and diet, to some enterprise
 That hath a stomach in't, which is no other 100
 (As it doth well appear unto our state)
 But to recover of us, by strong hand
 And terms compulsatory, those foresaid lands
 So by his father lost. And this, I take it,
 Is the main motive of our preparations, 105
 The source of this our watch and the chief head
 Of this post-haste and romage in the land.

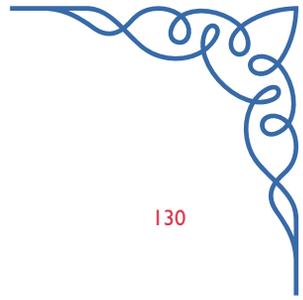
BERNARDO I think it be no other but e'en so.
 Well may it sort that this portentous figure
 Comes armed through our watch, so like the King 110
 That was and is the question of these wars.

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 115
 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; 120
 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 – 125
 But soft, behold! Lo, where it comes again!

[GHOST re-enters]



-
- 98–99 **Sharked up ... food and diet:** A troop of those resolved to stir up trouble was gathered like a shark catches its prey; some soldiers (particularly the poor) used to be paid with food.
- 106–07 **Chief head ... in the land:** Main reason for this great speed and bustle in Denmark.
- 113 **The most high and palmy state of Rome:** Ancient Rome was the most powerful empire of its time, flourishing like a healthy palm tree.
- 113–20 **The most high ... with eclipse:** Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC. A little before this time, he chose to ignore the warnings of prophets (e.g. 'Beware the Ides of March'), as well as signs that were considered supernatural warnings, such as bodies disappearing from graves (standing 'tenantless'), a fiery comet appearing in the sky ('with trains of fire') and a lunar ('moist star') eclipse.
- 121–23 **The like precurse ... omen coming on:** Horatio uses three words ('precurse' = act as a precursor; 'harbinger' = forerunner; 'prologue' = introduction to a play) to suggest that the appearance of the Ghost is a supernatural sign ('omen') that predicts bad things for the region ('climature') of Denmark.



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.

130

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! *[A cock crows]* – Stop it, Marcellus.

135

MARCELLUS Shall I strike at it with my partisan?

HORATIO Do, if it will not stand.

BERNARDO 'Tis here!

HORATIO 'Tis here!

140

[GHOST exits]

MARCELLUS 'Tis gone!

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.

145

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.

150

155

MARCELLUS It faded on the crowing of the cock.
 Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
 Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,

127 **Blast:** Destroy.

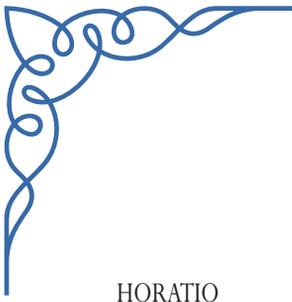
133 **Privy:** Knowledgeable of any secret.

135–36 **If thou hast ... womb of earth:** If you have hoarded stolen treasure underground somewhere.

140 **Stand:** Stop or stand still.

153–55 **The extravagant ... probation:** This current sighting (of the Ghost) is strong proof ('probation') of the theory (that ghosts hurry back to their place of confinement at dawn, when they hear the rooster crow, as outlined by Horatio in lines 148–54).





The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
 And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad; 160
 The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
 No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
 So hallowed 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, 165
 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 tonight
 Unto young Hamlet; for, upon my life,
 This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him. 170

MARCELLUS

Do you consent we shall acquaint him with it,
 As needful in our loves, fitting our duty?
 Let's do't, I pray; and I this morning know
 Where we shall find him most conveniently.

[All exit]



159 The bird of dawning: Cock or rooster.

165–66 The morn ... eastward hill: The sky is turning reddish-brown over the eastern hill; dawn is near.



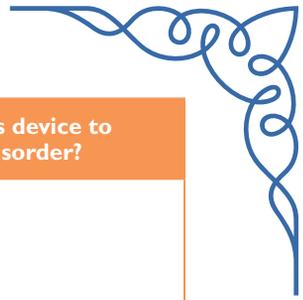
QUESTIONS

- 1 What evidence is there in the opening scene that the guards are in a state of extreme tension?
- 2 What do we learn about the political situation of Denmark from the characters' dialogue in this scene?
- 3 What do we learn about 'young Fortinbras' from this scene? Include at least three dot points.



EXTEND

- 1 Given that the play opens at night-time, how does Shakespeare create a sense of realism for the audience? That is, what devices does he use to signify night?
- 2 What clues are there in the dialogue that the guards are seeing a ghost?
- 3 How is the appearance of a ghost presented using non-verbal devices?
- 4 Draw up and complete a table like the one on the following page to show your understanding of the ways in which Shakespeare creates a sense of chaos or disorder in this opening scene.



Device or technique	How does Shakespeare use this device to create a sense of chaos or disorder?
Language devices <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Short, urgent sentences• Asking questions	
Setting <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cold, dark night• Time of war	
Characters <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Soldiers• Appearance of a ghost	

Branagh: DVD (opening scene)



View the Kenneth Branagh (1996) film version of this scene and discuss the following questions in groups and/or as a class.

- 1 What cinematic conventions (e.g. camera work, sound and lighting) does Branagh use to reinforce the chaos or disorder that is present in the opening of the story?
- 2 To what extent do Branagh's cinematic conventions reinforce Shakespeare's language devices? You might like to revisit Extend Question 4 at this point.

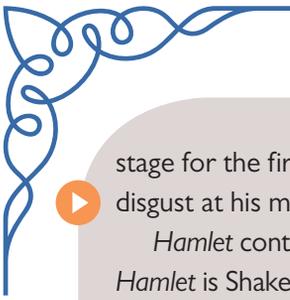
A word about soliloquies and asides

Picture this: you don't go to school one day and you end up watching a daytime soap opera. Besides the rather predictable plot and the abundance of cosmetic surgery, you notice that sometimes the characters express their thoughts aloud when nobody else is around. Actually, this is not as strange as it sounds – Shakespeare had his characters doing this hundreds of years ago and it is known as a **soliloquy** (*so-ll-lo-kwee*).

A soliloquy involves a character speaking when he or she is alone on stage (solo). Shakespeare uses this theatrical device to help the audience understand the thoughts of the character who is speaking, and to reveal the motives behind what they are doing or planning to do. We talk to ourselves all the time as we think – try thinking without language! – and soliloquies reflect this. The device was used by some playwrights before Shakespeare, but he is generally considered the first writer to capture on the stage the inner workings of the human mind; *Hamlet* is often cited as the best example of this.

Act I Scene I contains some significant speeches, but they are monologues – spoken to other characters – not soliloquies. Claudius' long speech that opens Act I Scene 2 is also a monologue. The play's first soliloquy occurs when Hamlet finds himself alone on





stage for the first time (Act 1 Scene 2, lines 129–59). Here the audience learns of his disgust at his mother’s remarriage so soon after the death of her husband.

▶ *Hamlet* contains a total of 12 soliloquies – more than any other Shakespearean play. As *Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s longest play, soliloquies provide the audience with brief moments of pause to reflect on characters’ actions. Additionally, the soliloquy is a theatrical convention that seems highly appropriate to the character of Hamlet: by drawing attention to Hamlet’s thoughts and motivations, a soliloquy enables an audience to more clearly perceive Hamlet as a character who thinks so much about action that he actually fails to engage in any. Indeed, Hamlet himself admits to ‘some craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on the event’ (Act 4 Scene 4, lines 41–42). This is especially evident in Act 3 Scene 3 when he has the opportunity to kill Claudius but stops short to think about his actions, launching into yet another soliloquy (lines 73–96). Finally, Hamlet’s abundant use of soliloquies highlights his sense of isolation or alienation in the textual world of a morally contaminated Denmark, powerfully conveyed in lines 129–59 of Act 1 Scene 2.

Similar in some ways to soliloquies, **asides** (indicated by [*Aside*] in the stage directions) also occur in *Hamlet*. Whereas soliloquies are lengthy and are delivered with no-one else on the stage, asides are usually brief and allow a character to speak his or her thoughts without the other characters hearing. Hamlet, in Act 1 Scene 2, speaks the play’s first aside: ‘A little more than kin, and less than kind’ (line 65). This is Hamlet’s first line and it reveals his hostility towards his new stepfather.

Act 1 Scene 2

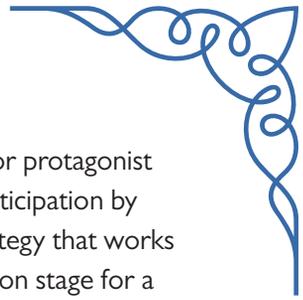
CHARACTERS

Hamlet
Claudius
Horatio
Gertrude
Laertes
Marcellus
Polonius
Bernardo
Voltimand
Cornelius

IN A NUTSHELL



In his council chamber, the new King, Claudius, deals with state affairs: he sends his ambassadors with letters to the old King of Norway, asking him to prevent his nephew’s invasion, and gives Laertes permission to return to France. Although Claudius declares Hamlet his successor, he denies him permission to return to university. Deeply unsettled by his father’s death, once alone, a despondent and distressed Hamlet speaks scathingly about his mother marrying so soon after his father’s funeral. When Horatio tells him about the Ghost, Hamlet agrees to join the watch, hoping to speak to it. Alone again, Hamlet remarks that his father’s ghost could suggest foul play.



Before you read

- The audience knows by the play's title that Hamlet is the hero or protagonist of the play. Shakespeare deliberately creates excitement and anticipation by delaying the central character's first appearance on stage, a strategy that works to similar effect in *Macbeth* and *Othello*. In this scene, Hamlet is on stage for a considerable length of time before he speaks, further heightening the audience's expectations.
- An Elizabethan audience would have regarded Gertrude's marriage to Claudius, her dead husband's brother, as incestuous. Only 75 years before *Hamlet* was written, Queen Elizabeth I's father, King Henry VIII, divorced his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, ostensibly (outwardly) because she had been formerly married to his brother. It was customary for Elizabethans to wear black when they were grieving and Gertrude would have been expected to dress in black and mourn for a longer time than she has. Hamlet's black costume (implied by the dialogue) presents a further contrast with Claudius, Gertrude and the courtiers, who have recently celebrated a wedding.

V

Green:	Fresh
Dirge:	Sad funeral song
Dole:	Sorrow
Impious:	Disrespectful
Vulgar:	Ordinary, insignificant
Beaver:	Helmet visor
Grizzled:	Sprinkled with grey hair
Tenable:	Held or kept

A room of state in the castle.

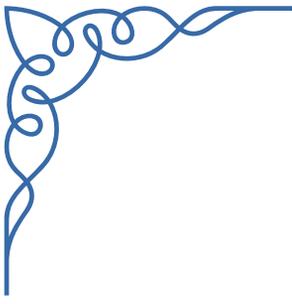
[CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, HAMLET, POLONIUS, LAERTES, VOLTIMAND and CORNELIUS enter, together with Lords and Attendants]

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

5



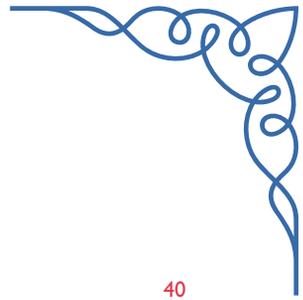
- 2 **Befitted:** Was appropriate.
- 3-4 **Our whole kingdom ... brow of woe:** All of Denmark is joined together ('contracted') in mourning.



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 10
 (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 barred
 Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone 15
 With this affair along. For all, our thanks.
 Now follows, that you know, young Fortinbras,
 Holding a weak supposal of our worth,
 Or thinking by our late dear brother's death
 Our state to be disjoint and out of frame, 20
 Colleaguèd with the dream of his advantage,
 He hath not failed to pester us with message,
 Importing the surrender of those lands
 Lost by his father, with all bonds of law,
 To our most valiant brother. So much for him. 25
 Now for ourself and for this time of meeting,
 Thus much the business is: we have here writ
 To Norway, uncle of young Fortinbras
 (Who, impotent and bed-rid, scarcely hears
 Of this his nephew's purpose), to suppress 30
 His further gait herein; in that the levies,
 The lists and full proportions, are all made
 Out of his subject. And we here dispatch
 You, good Cornelius, and you, Voltimand,
 For bearers of this greeting to old Norway, 35



-
- 8 **Our sometime sister:** Previously my sister (in-law).
 - 9 **Imperial jointress to this warlike state:** Queen Gertrude is the widow dowager (she inherited the royal rights and properties from her husband) in this powerful nation.
 - 11 **With an auspicious and a dropping eye:** With one eye looking expectantly to the future and one eye looking down in sorrow.
 - 14 **Barred:** Ignored or shut out.
 - 21 **Colleaguèd with the dream of his advantage:** Together with the fact that he imagines he has an advantage over us.
 - 23 **Importing:** Concerning.
 - 31 **Gait:** Proceeding, referring to how he will walk or proceed from this point on.
 - 31–33 **The levies ... his subject:** The full number of troops gathered comes from his subjects.



Giving to you no further personal power
 To business with the King, more than the scope
 Of these delated articles allow.
 Farewell, and let your haste commend your duty.

CORNELIUS &
 VOLTIMAND In that and all things will we show our duty. 40
 CLAUDIUS We doubt it nothing; heartily farewell –

[VOLTIMAND and CORNELIUS exit]

And now, Laertes, what's the news with you?
 You told us of some suit; what is't, Laertes?
 You cannot speak of reason to the Dane,
 And lose your voice? What wouldst thou beg, Laertes, 45
 That shall not be my offer, not thy asking?
 The head is not more native to the heart,
 The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
 Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.
 What wouldst thou have, Laertes?

LAERTES My dread lord, 50
 Your leave and favour to return to France,
 From whence, though willingly I came to Denmark,
 To show my duty in your coronation;
 Yet now, I must confess, that duty done,
 My thoughts and wishes bend again toward France 55
 And bow them to your gracious leave and pardon.

CLAUDIUS Have you your father's leave? What says Polonius?
 POLONIUS He hath, my lord, wrung from me my slow leave
 By laboursome petition, and at last
 Upon his will I sealed my hard consent. 60

I do beseech you, give him leave to go.
 CLAUDIUS Take thy fair hour, Laertes; time be thine,
 And thy best graces spend it at thy will! –
 But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son ...

HAMLET [Aside] A little more than kin, and less than kind. 65



36–38 **Giving to you ... articles allow:** You may not have any dealings with the King of Norway beyond that which is written in this document.

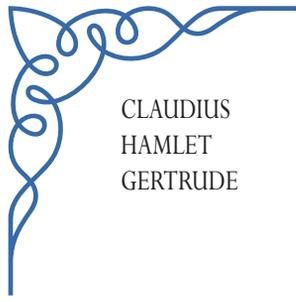
43 **Suit:** Formal request.

50 **Dread:** Most respected and honoured, thus filling with fear or dread.

58–59 **My slow leave / By laboursome petition:** My reluctant permission to leave, as a result of his continual asking it of me.

64 **Cousin:** Relative (a term of endearment).

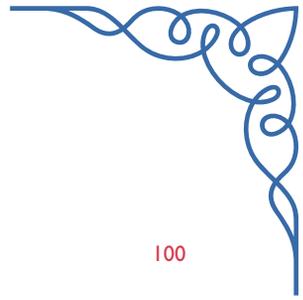
65 **A little more than kin, and less than kind:** Hamlet plays on the sound of the words 'kin' (family) and 'kind' (love) to suggest that he is closer in family than he would prefer and certainly not interested in showing Claudius any love.



CLAUDIUS ... How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
 HAMLET Not so, my lord; I am too much i' th' sun.
 GERTRUDE Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,
 And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
 Do not forever with thy vailèd lids 70
 Seek for thy noble father in the dust:
 Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,
 Passing through nature to eternity.
 HAMLET Ay, madam, it is common.
 GERTRUDE If it be,
 Why seems it so particular with thee? 75
 HAMLET 'Seems', madam? Nay it is. I know not 'seems'.
 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
 Nor customary suits of solemn black,
 Nor windy suspiration of forced breath, 80
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
 Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
 Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
 That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
 For they are actions that a man might play;
 But I have that within which passeth show; 85
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
 CLAUDIUS 'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
 To give these mourning duties to your father.
 But, you must know, your father lost a father;
 That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound 90
 In filial obligation for some term
 To do obsequious sorrow. But to persevere
 In obstinate condolement is a course
 Of impious stubbornness; 'tis unmanly grief;
 It shows a will most incorrect to heaven, 95



-
- 66 **The clouds still hang on you:** You are still gloomy.
 - 68 **Cast thy nighted colour off:** Stop wearing dark clothes ('inky cloak' in line 77).
 - 70 **Vailèd lids:** Lowered eyes.
 - 72 **Common:** Natural or universal; something that every person experiences.
 - 79 **Windy suspiration of forced breath:** Noisy sighing.
 - 81 **Dejected haviour of the visage:** Downcast facial expressions.
 - 86 **Trappings and the suits of woe:** Trappings are costumes worn in a play; Hamlet is suggesting that his mother is pretending to mourn her husband's death.
 - 90–92 **The survivor bound ... obsequious sorrow:** It is natural for the child whose father has died to engage in appropriate funeral rites ('obsequious sorrow'), as part of family duty ('filial obligation').



A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
 An understanding simple and unschooled.
 For what we know must be and is as common
 As any the most vulgar thing to sense;
 Why should we in our peevish opposition 100
 Take it to heart? Fie! 'Tis a fault to heaven,
 A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
 To reason most absurd; whose common theme
 Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
 From the first corpse till he that died today, 105
 'This must be so'. We pray you, throw to earth
 This unprevailing woe, and think of us
 As of a father; for let the world take note,
 You are the most immediate to our throne,
 And with no less nobility of love 110
 Than that which dearest father bears his son,
 Do I impart toward you. For your intent
 In going back to school in Wittenberg,
 It is most retrograde to our desire.
 And we beseech you, bend you to remain 115
 Here, in the cheer and comfort of our eye,
 Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.

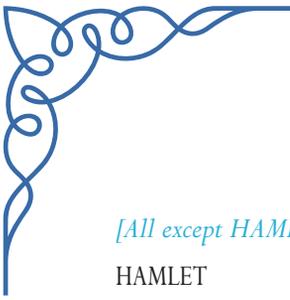
GERTRUDE Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet:
 I pray thee, stay with us; go not to Wittenberg.

HAMLET I shall in all my best obey you, madam. 120

CLAUDIUS Why, 'tis a loving and a fair reply:
 Be as ourself in Denmark – Madam, come;
 This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet
 Sits smiling to my heart: in grace whereof,
 No jocund health that Denmark drinks today, 125



-
- 96 **A heart unfortified:** An emotional weakness (thus 'unmanly' in line 94).
 - 99 **Vulgar:** Ordinary, insignificant.
 - 100 **Peevish:** Stubborn.
 - 101 **Fie:** An expression of distaste or disgust, in this case probably delivered sympathetically.
 - 106–07 **Throw to earth / This unprevailing woe:** Drop this ineffectual mourning that achieves nothing.
 - 109 **The most immediate to our throne:** Hamlet is next in line to the throne in Denmark.
 - 114 **Retrograde:** Contrary or fighting against.
 - 115 **Bend:** Strive or be determined; perhaps also meaning to bow ('bend') to Claudius' wishes.
 - 117 **Our chiefest courtier:** Hamlet is the highest-ranking member of the King's court.
 - 125 **Jocund health:** A merry toast.

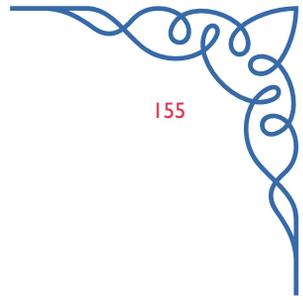


But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
And the King's rouse the heavens all bruit again,
Re-speaking earthly thunder. Come away.

[All except HAMLET exit]

HAMLET O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew! 130
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! Ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden, 135
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead – nay, not so much, not two –
So excellent a king, that was, to this
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother 140
That he might not betwixt the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on; and yet, within a month – 145
Let me not think on't – Frailty, thy name is woman! –
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears. Why she, e'en she –
O, God! A beast, that wants discourse of reason, 150
Would have mourned longer – married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules – within a month –
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears

- 
- 127 **Rouse:** A full draft of alcohol; **bruit:** to celebrate or thunder (thus resembling cannon fire).
128 **Re-speaking earthly thunder:** The heavens will echo the noise of Claudius' wild celebrations.
129 **Sullied:** Impure or soiled.
130 **Resolve:** Dissolve.
131–32 **Or that the Everlasting ... self-slaughter:** That God had not written laws (in Scripture) against suicide.
140 **Hyperion to a satyr:** Hamlet contrasts his father to Claudius (Hyperion was the Greek god of the sun; a satyr is a mythical creature that is half-man and half-goat).
141 **Beteem:** Permit.
149 **Like Niobe, all tears:** In Greek mythology, Niobe, the Queen of Thebes, wept inconsolably and was turned into a stone from which tears continued to flow after her children were slain by Apollo and Artemis.
150 **A beast, that wants discourse of reason:** An animal that lacks the faculty of reason.



Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,
 She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
 It is not nor it cannot come to good –
 But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

155

[HORATIO, MARCELLUS and BERNARDO enter]

HORATIO Hail to your lordship!

HAMLET I am glad to see you well –
 Horatio, or I do forget myself.

160

HORATIO The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.

HAMLET Sir, my good friend; I'll change that name with you.
 And what make you from Wittenberg, Horatio? Marcellus?

MARCELLUS My good lord.

165

HAMLET I am very glad to see you. Good even, sir.
 But what, in faith, make you from Wittenberg?

HORATIO A truant disposition, good my lord.

HAMLET I would not hear your enemy say so,
 Nor shall you do mine ear that violence,
 To make it truster of your own report
 Against yourself. I know you are no truant.
 But what is your affair in Elsinore?

170

We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart.

HORATIO My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

175

HAMLET I pray thee, do not mock me, fellow-student;
 I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

HORATIO Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.

HAMLET Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral baked meats
 Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.
 Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
 Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio!
 My father! Methinks I see my father.

180

HORATIO Where, my lord?

HAMLET In my mind's eye, Horatio.

HORATIO I saw him once; he was a goodly king.

185



155 **The flushing in her gallèd eyes:** The redness in her irritated eyes, caused by weeping.

156–57 **To post ... incestuous sheets:** To rush with such physical skill (perhaps implying that she had practice) to the bed of your brother-in-law.

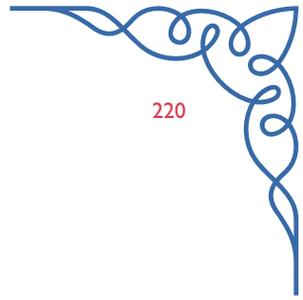
168 **A truant disposition:** A lazy state of mind.

174 **Ere:** Before.

178 **It followed hard upon:** It followed very closely.

179–80 **Thrift ... marriage tables:** To save money, leftovers from the funeral were served at the wedding.

185 **Goodly:** Magnificent, fine looking.



HORATIO As I do live, my honoured lord, 'tis true; 220
 And we did think it writ down in our duty
 To let you know of it.

HAMLET Indeed, indeed, sirs, but this troubles me.
 Hold you the watch tonight?

MARCELLUS &
 BERNARDO We do, my lord.

HAMLET Armed, say you?

MARC. & BERN. Armed, my lord.

HAMLET From top to toe? 225

MARC. & BERN. My lord, from head to foot.

HAMLET Then saw you not his face?

HORATIO O yes, my lord; he wore his beaver up.

HAMLET What, looked he frowningly?

HORATIO A countenance more in sorrow than in anger. 230

HAMLET Pale or red?

HORATIO Nay, very pale.

HAMLET And fixed his eyes upon you?

HORATIO Most constantly.

HAMLET I would I had been there.

HORATIO It would have much amazed you.

HAMLET Very like, very like. Stayed it long? 235

HORATIO While one with moderate haste might tell a hundred.

MARC. & BERN. Longer, longer.

HORATIO Not when I saw't.

HAMLET His beard was grizzled, no?

HORATIO It was, as I have seen it in his life,
 A sable silvered.

HAMLET I will watch tonight; 240
 Perchance 'twill walk again.

HORATIO I warrant it will.

HAMLET If it assume my noble father's person,
 I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape
 And bid me hold my peace. I pray you all,
 If you have hitherto concealed this sight, 245



-
- 224 **Hold you the watch tonight?** Are you on guard tonight?
 - 230 **Countenance:** Facial expression.
 - 236 **While one ... hundred:** About as long as it takes someone to count fairly quickly to 100.
 - 240 **Sable silvered:** Black hair mixed with silver. A sable is a small creature with dark brown or black fur.
 - 241 **Warrant:** Imagine or am certain.



EXTEND

- 1 How does Shakespeare use various language devices to reflect the contrast between the grandness of the state ceremony (lines 1–39) and Hamlet’s internal condition (lines 129–59)?
- 2 Re-read lines 9–15. What do you think Claudius’ use of a series of oxymorons (see page 65) might reveal about his character?
- 3 Some critics believe that Shakespeare is already presenting Claudius as a hypocrite in this scene. Can you see any evidence of insincerity, falseness or hypocrisy in Claudius’ opening speech? Consider the language and content in your response.
- 4 How does Hamlet convey his disgust with his mother’s behaviour in the sound of the following lines: ‘O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets’ (lines 156–57)?
- 5 Explain Hamlet’s joke about the funeral catering being a matter of ‘thrift’ or penny-pinching (lines 179–80).
- 6 In what ways does this scene establish a tension between appearance and reality?



DISCUSS

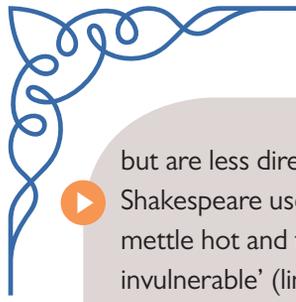
- 1 From the evidence shown in this scene, do you believe Claudius to be a capable ruler?
- 2 Hamlet does not speak until line 65 of this scene. If you were directing this scene, how would you advise the actor playing Hamlet to act for the first 64 lines and why? Discuss blocking (the position and movement of actors) and possible gestures, actions and facial expressions.

A word about metaphors, personification and conceits

If you have ever called someone hot, a pig, a gun, a dog or even a legend, then you have used a **metaphor**. A metaphor is not literally true but it makes a powerful comparison that is true in a deeper sense. If, for example, you call your brother a *pig*, you know that he is not actually a pig, but you might be communicating something about his manners or perhaps how much he eats. If you describe a shot on the soccer pitch as a *rocket*, you know it’s not literally a rocket, but you are saying something about the shot’s speed and power.

Similes work in much the same way, but where a metaphor is a direct statement of equivalence (my brother *is* a pig), similes make clear that one thing is being compared to another (my brother *is like* a pig). Similes make the nature of the comparison clear





but are less direct than metaphors. In the opening scene of this play (line 96), Shakespeare uses a metaphor when Horatio describes Fortinbras as ‘of unimproved mettle hot and full’, but employs a simile when Marcellus says the Ghost is ‘as the air, invulnerable’ (line 144). Likewise, in Scene 2 Hamlet employs a metaphor when he describes the world as ‘an unweeded garden’ (line 135), but a simile when he uses the word ‘like’ to compare his mother’s initial grief to that of Niobe, a woman from Greek mythology whose 14 children were killed by the gods (line 149).

Personification is a special kind of metaphor in which human feelings or qualities are attributed to non-human or inanimate things. Poets often use personification, but we also use it in everyday speech. Perhaps you have heard such phrases as ‘a lonely road’, ‘a biting wind’ or ‘a welcoming fire’, and never considered the metaphorical strangeness of these expressions. Horatio’s speeches in the opening scene are replete with personification: he describes ‘dews of blood’ (line 117), and towards the end of the scene he describes the morning as ‘walk[ing] o’er the dew of yon high eastward hill’ (line 166).

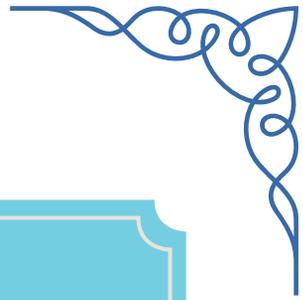
Conceits are extended metaphors that were very popular with poets and playwrights in Shakespeare’s time. Shakespeare regularly employs them in his plays and sonnets. The metaphysical poets, including John Donne, whose career began towards the end of Shakespeare’s career, filled their poetry with conceits, and they remain popular with contemporary poets and songwriters. The Ben Lee song ‘Cigarettes Will Kill You’ is a popular example. The song compares a bad relationship to cookery: ‘You throw me in a pan / You cook me in a can ... You love to watch me bake / You serve me up with cake ... You left me burned and seared.’ This extended metaphor or conceit is explored throughout the entire song.

In Act 1 Scene 3, lines 86–87, Ophelia employs a metaphor when she states that what Laertes has said is ‘locked’ in her memory but she extends the metaphor or makes it a conceit in the line that follows:

*’Tis in my memory locked,
And you yourself shall keep the key of it.*

Polonius also employs a conceit in this scene when he uses financial language to discuss Ophelia’s relationship with Hamlet (lines 106–32). This reveals a little about his character and the way he thinks of romantic love.

Act 1 Scene 3



CHARACTERS

Polonius
Laertes
Ophelia
[Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]



IN A NUTSHELL

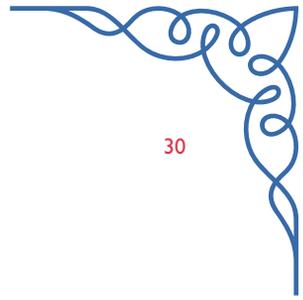
Polonius' son, Laertes, gives his sister, Ophelia, some brotherly advice before he leaves for France. He warns her not to give in to Hamlet's sexual advances. She accepts this advice but reminds him to practise what he preaches. Polonius advises Laertes about friendships and living away from home. After Laertes leaves, Polonius adds his warning against Hamlet, and forbids his daughter to see him again. Ophelia agrees to obey her father.

Before you read

- You will learn in this scene that Polonius is a character who likes the sound of his own voice. While various aphorisms or sayings that he employs, such as 'neither a borrower nor a lender be' and 'to thine own self be true', are often quoted simply as Shakespearean, there is no evidence to suggest these are the playwright's personal views. Polonius' character is generally presented as comical and his behaviour as questionable; nevertheless, even the speech of foolish characters can contain wisdom.
- Both Laertes and Polonius are concerned that Hamlet is flirting with Ophelia merely to seduce her. Laertes makes the point that, because Hamlet is heir to the throne, he lacks the freedom to marry whom he likes. Polonius is perhaps more cynical about Hamlet, presenting him as a seducer who will try to trap the naive or 'green' Ophelia.



Trifling:	Making trivial or insignificant
Chariest:	Most modest
Prodigal:	Lavish, extravagant
Husbandry:	Good economy, careful management
Marry:	A mild oath in Elizabethan times, short for 'by the Virgin Mary'
Behoves:	Is necessary or appropriate for
Green:	Inexperienced or naive
Importuned:	Begged insistently
Charge:	Command



Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain,
 If with too credent ear you list his songs,
 Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
 To his unmastered importunity.

30

Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,
 And keep you in the rear of your affection,
 Out of the shot and danger of desire.

35

The chariest maid is prodigal enough,
 If she unmask her beauty to the moon.
 Virtue itself 'scapes not calumnious strokes:
 The canker galls the infants of the spring,
 Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,
 And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
 Contagious blastments are most imminent.

40

Be wary then; best safety lies in fear:
 Youth to itself rebels, though none else near.

OPHELIA

I shall the effect of this good lesson keep
 As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother,
 Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
 Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
 Whiles, like a puffed and reckless libertine,
 Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
 And recks not his own rede.

45

50

LAERTES

O, fear me not.

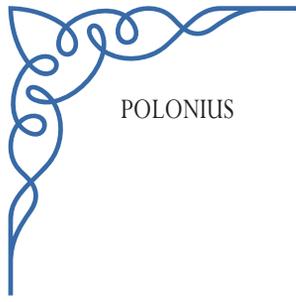
I stay too long – but here my father comes.

[POLONIUS enters]

A double blessing is a double grace:
 Occasion smiles upon a second leave.



-
- 30 **If with too credent ear you list his songs:** If you believe everything he sings to you.
 - 31–32 **Your chaste treasure ... importunity:** If you lose your virginity ('chaste' = sexually pure) to his uncontrolled persistence.
 - 34 **Keep you in the rear of your affection:** Keep yourself behind your desires (as if marching in battle); stay out of reach of danger.
 - 36–37 **The chariest maid ... to the moon:** Even the most modest (sexually pure) girl can become sexually reckless. The moon is commonly associated with love and chastity.
 - 38 **Virtue itself 'scapes not calumnious strokes:** Even moral people cannot escape malicious gossip.
 - 39–40 **The canker ... be disclosed:** The canker worm (used metaphorically here for a moral disease) destroys new flowers before they have a chance to mature.
 - 41–42 **Liquid dew ... most imminent:** Out-of-control emotions in young people are like fast-spreading destructive diseases in soil or plants; youth is the time that people are most susceptible to corruption.
 - 47–51 **Do not ... his own rede:** Do not behave like wicked priests who tell me to travel the difficult way to heaven but, like fat, out-of-control, indulgent people, go via the easy road, failing to heed ('recks') their own advice ('rede'). Ophelia criticises Laertes' hypocrisy, and insists his actions need to match his words.

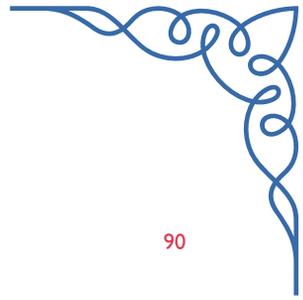


POLONIUS Yet here, Laertes! Aboard, aboard, for shame! 55
 The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail,
 And you are stayed for. There; my blessing with thee!
 And these few precepts in thy memory
 Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,
 Nor any unproportioned thought his act. 60
 Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
 Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
 Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel,
 But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
 Of each new-hatched, unfledged comrade. Beware 65
 Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,
 Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.
 Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;
 Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement.
 Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, 70
 But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy;
 For the apparel oft proclaims the man,
 And they in France of the best rank and station
 Are of a most select and generous chief in that.
 Neither a borrower nor a lender be, 75
 For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
 And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.
 This above all: to thine own self be true,
 And it must follow, as the night the day,
 Thou canst not then be false to any man. 80
 Farewell: my blessing season this in thee!

LAERTES Most humbly do I take my leave, my lord.
 POLONIUS The time invites you. Go, your servants tend.
 LAERTES Farewell, Ophelia, and remember well
 What I have said to you. 85
 OPHELIA 'Tis in my memory locked,
 And you yourself shall keep the key of it.



-
- 57 **You are stayed for:** The ship is waiting for you.
- 59 **Look thou character:** Make sure you write these down ('character' is used as a verb in this case, meaning to write characters).
- 62–63 **Adoption tried ... hoops of steel:** Once their friendship is proven, tightly bind them to you like steel rings ('hoops') hold a barrel together.
- 64–65 **But do not ... unfledged comrade:** But do not greet or shake hands with so many new people ('unfledged' = like newly born birds with no feathers) that it wears your palm away.
- 69 **Censure:** Criticism or opinion.
- 70 **Costly thy habit ... purse can buy:** Dress according to your budget (implied meaning: dress well).
- 77 **Borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry:** Borrowing money from others reduces your capacity to manage your own finances.
- 83 **Tend:** Wait for you.



LAERTES Farewell.

[LAERTES exits]

POLONIUS What is't, Ophelia, he hath said to you?
OPHELIA So please you, something touching the Lord Hamlet. 90

POLONIUS Marry, well bethought.
'Tis told me, he hath very oft of late
Given private time to you, and you yourself
Have of your audience been most free and bounteous.

If it be so, as so 'tis put on me, 95
And that in way of caution, I must tell you,
You do not understand yourself so clearly
As it behoves my daughter and your honour.
What is between you? Give me up the truth.

OPHELIA He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders 100
Of his affection to me.

POLONIUS Affection? Puh! You speak like a green girl,
Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.
Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?

OPHELIA I do not know, my lord, what I should think. 105

POLONIUS Marry, I'll teach you: think yourself a baby,
That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay,
Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly,
Or (not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,
Running it thus) you'll tender me a fool. 110

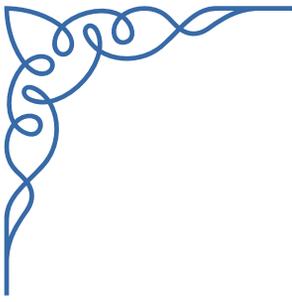
OPHELIA My lord, he hath importuned me with love
In honourable fashion.

POLONIUS Ay, fashion you may call it. Go to; go to.
OPHELIA And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord,
With almost all the holy vows of heaven. 115

POLONIUS Ay, springes to catch woodcocks. I do know,
When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows. These blazes, daughter,
Giving more light than heat, extinct in both,
Even in their promise, as it is a-making, 120
You must not take for fire. From this time



- 100 **Tenders:** Offers. Polonius puns on this word in lines 107–10, implying Hamlet is offering Ophelia money for sexual favours.
- 103 **Unsifted:** Untested, in this case by life's hardships ('perilous circumstance').
- 108 **Not sterling:** Not true currency (that is, his love is counterfeit).
- 109 **Not to crack the wind of the poor phrase:** Not to wear out the pun like a horse that has been ridden too hard.
- 113 **Go to:** An expression of impatience, similar to 'that's enough' or 'go away'.
- 116 **Springes to catch woodcocks:** Traps to catch stupid, easily caught birds (implying Ophelia is gullible).
- 118–21 **These blazes ... must not take for fire:** Don't confuse his shallow emotions (like little 'blazes') for real love ('fire').



Be somewhat scater of your maiden presence;
 Set your entreatments at a higher rate
 Than a command to parley. For Lord Hamlet,
 Believe so much in him, that he is young 125
 And with a larger tether may he walk
 Than may be given you. In few, Ophelia,
 Do not believe his vows, for they are brokers,
 Not of that dye which their investments show,
 But mere implorators of unholy suits, 130
 Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds,
 The better to beguile. This is for all.
 I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth,
 Have you so slander any moment leisure,
 As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet. 135
 Look to't, I charge you. Come your ways.
 I shall obey, my lord.

OPHELIA

[All exit]



- 122 Be somewhat scater of your maiden presence:** Appear in public less often.
- 123–24 Set your entreatments ... to parley:** Make your conversations more valuable ('at a higher rate') by not responding to Hamlet's every request to talk.
- 126 A larger tether:** Hamlet has greater freedom (a longer leash).
- 128 Brokers:** Go-betweens or pimps.
- 129–32 Not of that dye ... to beguile:** Polonius claims Hamlet's words are like a person of a certain quality ('dye' = literally colour but implies worth or quality) who dresses like a priest as a show of holiness or purity, but is actually deceptive. 'Suits' = both clothing and courting; 'bawd' = someone who runs a brothel.



QUESTIONS

- 1 Outline the similarities and differences between Polonius' and Laertes' views on the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet.
- 2 Lines 78–80 are key lines in the play.
 - a Write out a modern-day translation of Polonius' advice to Laertes.
 - b As you go through the rest of the play, take note of the ways in which Polonius' advice is ironic – consider the extent to which he actually abides by his own advice.
- 3 Do you think Laertes and Polonius are justified in advising Ophelia as they do? Why or why not?



EXTEND

- Shakespeare employs numerous images in this scene. How are the following images used to make comparisons with human behaviour?
- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| a Birds (lines 64–65 and 116) | c Fire (lines 118–21) |
| b Flowers/plants (lines 7–8, 39–42) | d Clothes (lines 70–72, 129–32) |



DISCUSS

- 1 Imagine you are given the task of directing this scene.
 - a How would you have Polonius deliver his advice?
 - b How would you have Laertes and Ophelia responding?
- 2 How might Ophelia deliver the final line of this scene? Consider two possible interpretations, and be prepared to discuss aspects such as voice, blocking, gestures and actions.



It harrows me with fear and wonder ...

Beliefs about ghosts

It is not possible for us to know what Shakespeare actually believed about ghosts but he uses them in some of his plays for dramatic purposes. These ghosts are not generally consistent in their qualities.

While the ghost in *Hamlet* may be the most famous of Shakespeare's, another prominent example is Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth*, which speaks no lines, is only seen by Macbeth and appears as a recently murdered, bloody corpse. In contrast, the ghost of Hamlet's father is witnessed by many characters, including Hamlet, and delivers some long, informative speeches. Julius Caesar's ghost is different again, with few lines and no revelations. Whatever the playwright's beliefs, ghosts were popular with the audience in Shakespeare's day and beyond, and their appearance was, although chilling, eagerly anticipated.

There were many different attitudes to ghosts in Elizabethan England. A Protestant belief, which Horatio expresses in Act I Scene 4, held that ghosts were demons sent to tempt people into sins that would endanger their souls. Other Protestants and Catholics were more sceptical about ghosts and some suggested they could be hallucinations induced by melancholy or extreme sadness. Before he sees the ghost in the opening scene, Horatio seems to be of this more sceptical opinion.

Catholic attitudes concerning ghosts were affected by a belief in purgatory (a place people went after death to be purged or cleansed of their sins in preparation for heaven). Many believed that ghosts could return from purgatory, especially in situations where something needed to be set right. Hamlet chooses to believe this about his father's ghost, but is wracked by doubts throughout most of the play.



Act 1 Scene 4

CHARACTERS

Hamlet
Horatio
Marcellus



IN A NUTSHELL

During another cold night on the gun platform, Marcellus, Hamlet and Horatio await the appearance of the Ghost (Hamlet's father). Hearing trumpets and cannon from Claudius' celebrations, Hamlet condemns the Danes for their drunkenness and speaks of the corrupt state of Denmark, apparent since Claudius assumed power. The Ghost appears and beckons Hamlet, who, unsure whether it is good or evil, decides to follow it, despite the others' efforts to restrain him.

Before you read

- In Shakespeare's tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, one important theme is the notion of a character's **personal weakness** leading to ruin. Because the end result is usually death and destruction, some authors call these personal weaknesses **fatal flaws**. They have also been given the label **base emotions** (the lowest or most negative human qualities).

Examples of base emotions or personal weaknesses in Shakespeare's plays are jealousy (in *Othello*) and ambition (in *Macbeth*). In a speech delivered early in this scene, Hamlet describes people's flaws as 'vicious mole[s] of nature'. As the play continues you might reflect on the 'fatal' flaws of the other characters.



Shrewdly:	Sharply
Wassail:	Drinking party
Clepe:	Call
Plausive:	Acceptable
Censure:	Opinion
Cerements:	Grave clothes
Sepulchre:	Tomb
Wherefore:	Why

The platform.

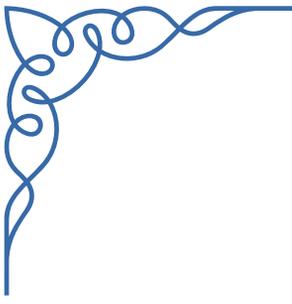
[HAMLET, HORATIO and MARCELLUS enter]

HAMLET The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold.
HORATIO It is a nipping and an eager air.
HAMLET What hour now?
HORATIO I think it lacks of twelve.
HAMLET No, it is struck.
HORATIO Indeed? I heard it not; then it draws near the season 5
 Wherein the spirit held his wont to walk.

[A flourish of trumpets, and ordnance shot off, within]

HAMLET What does this mean, my lord?
 The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse,
 Keeps wassail, and the swaggering up-spring reels;
 And, as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down, 10
 The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
 The triumph of his pledge.
HORATIO Is it a custom?
HAMLET Ay, marry, is't,
 But to my mind, though I am native here
 And to the manner born, it is a custom 15
 More honoured in the breach than the observance.
 This heavy-headed revel east and west
 Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations:
 They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase
 Soil our addition; and indeed it takes 20
 From our achievements, though performed at height,
 The pith and marrow of our attribute.

- 
-
- 2 **Eager:** Hungry (a play on the concept of a biting wind in line 1).
3 **Lacks of twelve:** Just before midnight.
6 **Held his wont:** Was accustomed.
8–10 **Takes his rouse ... Rhenish:** Drinks heavily, drinks toasts ('keeps wassail') and drunkenly tries to dance the up-spring (a German dance), as he binges on his German wine ('Rhenish').
11–12 **The kettle drum ... pledge:** Musical instruments sound out ('bray' like a donkey) to celebrate Claudius' victory in drinking as much as he promised he would ('pledge').
15–16 **And to the manner born ... the observance:** I have observed this sort of wild drinking since birth, but it is a custom better neglected.
17–20 **This heavy-headed ... our addition:** This drunken partying everywhere ('east and west') causes other countries to slander and criticise us; they call us drunken pigs and stain ('soil') our good name ('addition').



So oft it chances in particular men,
 That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
 As, in their birth (wherein they are not guilty, 25
 Since nature cannot choose his origin)
 By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,
 Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
 Or by some habit that too much o'er-leavens
 The form of plausible manners, that these men, 30
 Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
 Being Nature's livery, or Fortune's star
 (Their virtues else), be they as pure as grace,
 As infinite as man may undergo,
 Shall in the general censure take corruption 35
 From that particular fault. The dram of eale
 Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
 To his own scandal.

HORATIO Look, my lord, it comes!

[GHOST enters]

HAMLET Angels and ministers of grace defend us! –
 Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned, 40
 Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
 Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
 Thou comest in such a questionable shape
 That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,
 King, father, royal Dane! O, answer me! 45
 Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell
 Why thy canonised bones, hearsèd in death,
 Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre,
 Wherein we saw thee quietly inurned,
 Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws, 50



24–36 **That for some vicious mole ... particular fault:** The 'vicious mole' refers to a harmful or destructive skin blemish. Hamlet compares it to negative qualities or personal weaknesses of human nature, which spread and corrupt others, as a skin disease would spread and corrupt the rest of the body.

36–38 **The dram of eale ... own scandal:** A small amount (a 'dram' is approximately 18 ml) of poison ('eale') will spread throughout the entire body and blot out nobility.

40–42 **Be thou a spirit ... wicked or charitable:** Hamlet is unsure of the origin of the Ghost ('questionable shape'), whether it is from heaven or hell, its motives evil or helpful.

47 **Thy canonised bones, hearsèd in death:** Buried according to Christian funeral rites; placed in a tomb.

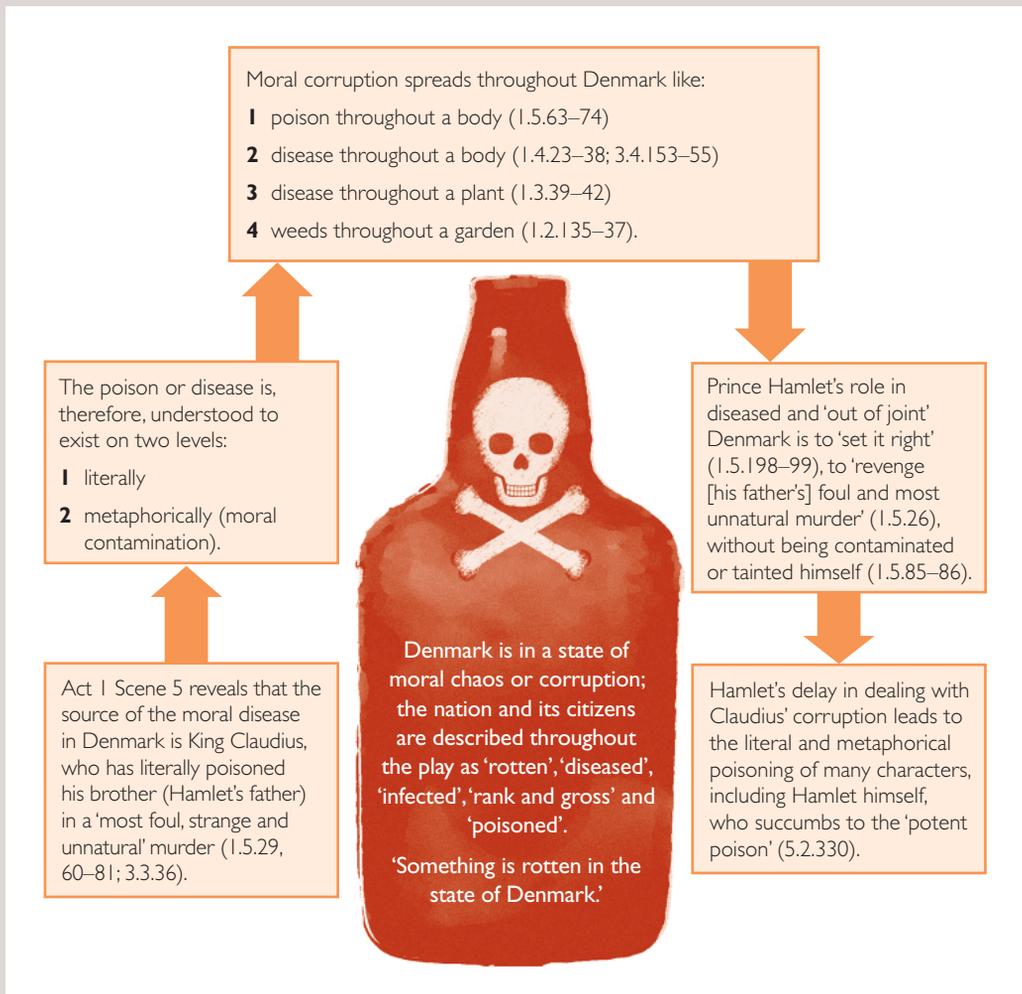
49 **Inurned:** Enclosed.

50 **Ponderous:** Heavy.

Introducing imagery: poison and disease

Shakespeare's plays contain an abundance of powerful images. In *Hamlet*, these images gain their power through frequent repetition and from the way in which they are woven in distinct patterns throughout the play. The imagery of *Hamlet* is strongly connected with the central themes of the play.

Imagery associated with poison or disease is a prominent feature of most Shakespearean tragedies, and none more so than *Hamlet*. The following diagram provides a useful visual representation of poison and disease imagery in the play.



As you read the rest of *Hamlet*, watch for the way Shakespeare masterfully conveys the central idea of moral corruption by weaving distinct images of poison and disease through every plot and subplot of the play.



Act 1 Scene 5

CHARACTERS

Hamlet
Ghost
Horatio
Marcellus
[Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]



IN A NUTSHELL

The Ghost, claiming to be the spirit of Hamlet's father, tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered him by pouring poison in his ear. He urges Hamlet to seek revenge for his murder without harming Gertrude. After the Ghost leaves, Hamlet speaks violently against his uncle and mother, revealing his intention to fulfil the Ghost's request. When Marcellus and Horatio join him, they are confused by Hamlet's strange words. Hamlet makes them swear they will not speak of what they have seen.

Before you read

- Horatio can be defined as a stoic, one who practises the philosophy of Stoicism. The adherents to this ancient Greek philosophy valued reason over the emotions and taught the importance of endurance in the face of suffering. Stoics believed in an impersonal god but were sceptical about many other things; Horatio, for example, is sceptical about the Ghost. In this scene, Hamlet makes it clear that he is *not* a stoic, rebuking Horatio with the comment, 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (lines 177–78).

Bound:	Ready
Porpentine:	Porcupine
Soft:	Wait
Secure:	Unsuspecting
Eager:	Sour, acid
Luxury:	Lust
Fond:	Foolish
Pernicious:	Destructive or ruinous
Tables:	Writing tablets or slates
Encumbered:	Bound or folded
Perturbèd:	Agitated or disturbed

Another part of the platform.

[GHOST and HAMLET enter]

HAMLET Where wilt thou lead me? Speak; I'll go no further.
GHOST Mark me.
HAMLET I will.
GHOST My hour is almost come,
 When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
 Must render up myself.

HAMLET Alas, poor Ghost!
GHOST Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing 5
 To what I shall unfold.

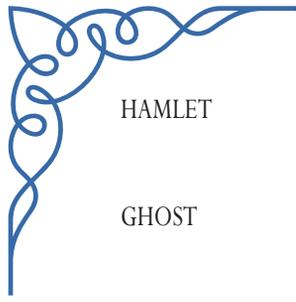
HAMLET Speak; I am bound to hear.
GHOST So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.
HAMLET What?
GHOST I am thy father's spirit, 10
 Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
 And for the day confined to fast in fires,
 Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
 Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
 To tell the secrets of my prison-house, 15
 I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
 Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
 Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
 Thy knotted and combinèd locks to part,
 And each particular hair to stand on end, 20
 Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.
 But this eternal blazon must not be
 To ears of flesh and blood. List, list, O, list!
 If thou didst ever thy dear father love –

HAMLET O God! 25
GHOST Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
HAMLET Murder!
GHOST Murder most foul, as in the best it is,
 But this most foul, strange and unnatural.

2 **Mark me:** Pay attention to me.

11–14 **Doomed for a certain ... purged away:** It was believed by some in Shakespeare's time that those who died before being able to confess their sins to God were caught between heaven and hell (in purgatory) until their sins were cleansed ('purged away').

22 **This eternal blazon:** The revealing of the secrets of the afterlife.



HAMLET Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift 30
 As meditation or the thoughts of love,
 May sweep to my revenge.

GHOST I find thee apt;
 And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
 That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
 Wouldst thou not stir in this. Now, Hamlet, hear: 35
 'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
 A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of Denmark
 Is by a forgèd process of my death
 Rankly abused; but know, thou noble youth,
 The serpent that did sting thy father's life 40
 Now wears his crown.

HAMLET O my prophetic soul! My uncle!
 GHOST Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
 With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts
 (O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power 45
 So to seduce!) won to his shameful lust
 The will of my most seeming-virtuous Queen.
 O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there!
 From me, whose love was of that dignity
 That it went hand in hand even with the vow 50
 I made to her in marriage, and to decline
 Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
 To those of mine!
 But virtue, as it never will be moved,
 Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven, 55
 So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
 Will sate itself in a celestial bed,
 And prey on garbage.
 But, soft! Methinks I scent the morning air;
 Brief let me be. Sleeping within my orchard, 60
 My custom always of the afternoon,
 Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,



-
- 32 **Apt:** Able or ready.
- 34 **Lethe wharf:** Pronounced *LEE-thi*, in Greek mythology Lethe is the river in the underworld (or Hades) whose water caused forgetfulness.
- 37–39 **The whole ear ... Rankly abused:** A false story of how I died is foully misleading Denmark (this deception is compared with the spreading of an ear infection).
- 44–46 **With witchcraft ... So to seduce:** The Ghost claims Queen Gertrude was seduced or even bewitched by clever words and Claudius' natural abilities ('gifts').
- 55–58 **Though lewdness ... prey on garbage:** Pretending to be an angel from heaven, she (Gertrude) acted like a lust-filled animal that filled itself with filth.

With juice of cursèd hebenon in a vial,
 And in the porches of my ears did pour
 The leperous distilment, whose effect
 Holds such an enmity with blood of man
 That swift as quicksilver it courses through
 The natural gates and alleys of the body,
 And with a sudden vigour it doth posset
 And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
 The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mine,
 And a most instant tetter barked about,
 Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,
 All my smooth body.
 Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand
 Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatched;
 Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
 Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,
 No reckoning made, but sent to my account
 With all my imperfections on my head.
 O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible!
 If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;
 Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
 A couch for luxury and damned incest.
 But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
 Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
 Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven
 And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
 To prick and sting her. Fare thee well at once;

65

70

75

80

85

-
- 63 **Juice of cursèd hebenon:** Hebenon is a poisonous plant; also called henbane, of the nightshade family.
- 65 **Leperous distilment:** A liquid substance that causes leprosy-like symptoms, in which the skin corrodes (see text note on lines 72–74).
- 67 **Quicksilver:** Mercury.
- 69–70 **Posset / And curd, like eager droppings into milk:** Clot and curdle (the blood) similar to the effect of adding rennet or citric acid ('eager' = sour, acid) to milk.
- 72–74 **A most instant tetter ... my smooth body:** The Ghost claims that his skin erupted (in a 'tetter') and became crusty like tree 'bark', resembling a leper's skin ('lazar-like').
- 77–80 **Cut off ... on my head:** Adding more details to lines 11–14, the Ghost claims he was unable to receive the 'house' or Holy Communion, nor was he able to receive the last rites ('unaneled' = not anointed with holy oil before his death). As a consequence, he could give no account ('reckoning') of his sin, and died (was 'cut off') while sin flourished ('blossomed') in his life.
- 86 **Taint not thy mind:** Do not allow your mind to be soiled or contaminated (by the moral disease present in Denmark).
- 87–88 **Leave her to heaven ... in her bosom lodge:** Let God and her (your mother's) conscience deal with her ('thorns' relate to a pricking conscience).



The glow-worm shows the matin to be near, 90
And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire.
Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me.

[GHOST exits]

HAMLET O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
And shall I couple hell? O, fie! Hold, hold, my heart;
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old, 95
But bear me stiffly up – Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor Ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, 100
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter: yes, by heaven! 105
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damnèd villain!
My tables – meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark – 110
[Writing] So, Uncle, there you are – Now to my word:
It is 'Adieu, adieu! Remember me.'
I have sworn't.

[HORATIO and MARCELLUS enter, calling]

HORATIO My lord, my lord!
MARCELLUS Lord Hamlet! 115
HORATIO Heavens secure him!
HAMLET [Aside] So be it!
HORATIO Hillo, ho, ho, my lord!
HAMLET Hillo, ho, ho, boy! Come, bird, come.



90–91 **The glow-worm ... uneffectual fire:** The glow-worm is becoming more difficult to see, indicating that morning ('matin') is approaching.

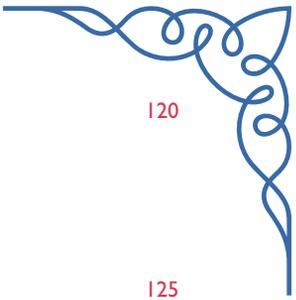
95 **My sinews, grow not instant old:** Sinews relate to muscles, thus Hamlet is saying something like, 'Give me strength!'

98 **Distracted globe:** Agitated head. Perhaps Shakespeare is also referring to the Globe Theatre and the audience experiencing the drama or tension of the scene.

101 **Saws:** Sayings; **pressures:** impressions made by the stamps of a printing press.

105 **Baser:** Worthless.

118–19 **Hillo, ho, ho ... bird, come:** Pretending to be mad, Hamlet responds to Horatio by copying the call of a falconer calling his birds to return.



MARCELLUS	How is't, my noble lord?	120
HORATIO	What news, my lord?	
HAMLET	O, wonderful!	
HORATIO	Good my lord, tell it.	
HAMLET	No; you'll reveal it.	
HORATIO	Not I, my lord, by heaven.	125
MARCELLUS	Nor I, my lord.	
HAMLET	How say you, then; would heart of man once think it? But you'll be secret?	
HOR. & MARC.	Ay, by heaven, my lord.	
HAMLET	There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark But he's an arrant knave.	130
HORATIO	There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave To tell us this.	
HAMLET	Why, right; you are i' th' right; And so, without more circumstance at all, I hold it fit that we shake hands and part: You, as your business and desire shall point you; (For every man has business and desire, Such as it is), and for mine own poor part, Look you, I'll go pray.	135
HORATIO	These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.	140
HAMLET	I'm sorry they offend you, heartily; Yes, 'faith heartily.	
HORATIO	There's no offence, my lord.	
HAMLET	Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio, And much offence too. Touching this vision here, It is an honest Ghost, that let me tell you: For your desire to know what is between us, O'ermaster't as you may. And now, good friends, As you are friends, scholars and soldiers, Give me one poor request.	145
HORATIO	What is't, my lord? We will.	150
HAMLET	Never make known what you have seen tonight.	
HOR. & MARC.	My lord, we will not.	
HAMLET	Nay, but swear't.	
HORATIO	In faith, my lord, not I.	
MARCELLUS	Nor I, my lord, in faith.	155
HAMLET	Upon my sword.	

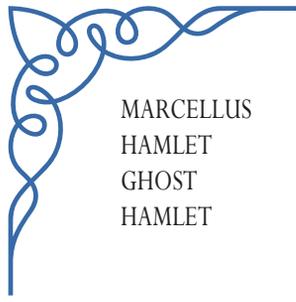
131 **Arrant knave:** Utter or complete fool.

143 **Saint Patrick:** Said to be the keeper of purgatory (see text note on lines 11–14).

154 **Not I:** Horatio is not refusing to swear; instead he is promising he will not tell.

156 **Upon my sword:** Oaths were often made on the hilt of a sword (where the blade joins the handle), which was in the shape of a cross.





MARCELLUS We have sworn, my lord, already.
 HAMLET Indeed, upon my sword, indeed.
 GHOST *[Beneath the stage]* Swear.
 HAMLET Ah, ha, boy! Say'st thou so? Art thou there, truepenny? 160
 Come on, you hear this fellow in the cellarage:
 Consent to swear.
 HORATIO Propose the oath, my lord.
 HAMLET Never to speak of this that you have seen,
 Swear by my sword. 165
 GHOST *[Beneath the stage]* Swear.
 HAMLET *Hic et ubique?* Then we'll shift our ground.
 Come hither, gentlemen,
 And lay your hands again upon my sword:
 Never to speak of this that you have heard, 170
 Swear by my sword.
 GHOST *[Beneath the stage]* Swear.
 HAMLET Well said, old mole! Canst work i' th' ground so fast?
 A worthy pioneer! Once more remove, good friends.
 HORATIO O day and night, but this is wondrous strange! 175
 HAMLET And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
 There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
 Than are dreamt of in your philosophy – But come:
 Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
 How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself, 180
 As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
 To put an antic disposition on,
 That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
 With arms encumbered thus, or this headshake,
 Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase, 185
 As 'Well, we know', or 'We could, if we would',
 Or 'If we list to speak', or 'There be, if they might',
 Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
 That you know aught of me: this not to do,
 So grace and mercy at your most need help you. Swear! 190



-
- 160 **Truepenny:** A genuine coin, rather than a counterfeit, metaphorically used to describe an honest person.
- 161 **Cellarage:** A deliberate reference by Shakespeare to the workings of the theatre. The cellar was an area under the stage, which was accessed by a trapdoor. While Hamlet refers here to purgatory, it is also perhaps a reminder to Shakespeare's audience of the artificial nature of the play they are viewing.
- 167 ***Hic et ubique:*** Latin for 'here and everywhere'.
- 174 **Worthy pioneer:** A soldier whose task it was to dig tunnels.
- 182 **To put an antic disposition on:** To engage in bizarre behaviour. Hamlet is going to pretend to be mad.

GHOST
HAMLET

[Beneath the stage] Swear! *[They swear]*
Rest, rest, perturbèd spirit! – So, gentlemen,
With all my love I do commend me to you,
And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
May do, to express his love and friending to you,
God willing, shall not lack. Let us go in together,
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint: O cursèd spite,
That ever I was born to set it right –
Nay, come, let's go together.

195

200

[All exit]



198 **The time is out of joint:** Current circumstances are in a state of disorder or chaos.



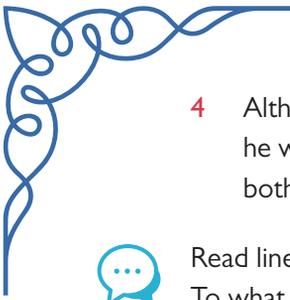
QUESTIONS

- 1 According to the Ghost, how did Claudius kill King Hamlet?
- 2 What effect did the poison have on King Hamlet?
- 3 Describe the comparison that is made between the body of King Hamlet and Denmark in lines 36–41.
- 4 What does the ghost of Hamlet's father demand of his son (line 26)? Explain Hamlet's response.
- 5 Throughout this scene, numerous words and phrases are repeated. List these patterns of repetition and write a couple of sentences describing the effect created by them.
- 6 Both Hamlet and his father (the Ghost) use numerous harsh-sounding words to describe Claudius and Gertrude. List several of them and explain how these harsh sounds contribute to our understanding of the characters of Claudius and Gertrude.



EXTEND

- 1 The Ghost refers to Gertrude as 'my most seeming-virtuous Queen' (line 47). What is he implying? How does this echo Hamlet's earlier harping on the word 'seems' (Act I Scene 2, lines 75–86)?
- 2 Note how the rhyming couplet in lines 198–99 focuses on Hamlet's role of restoring order in Denmark. What effect is created by deliberately ending the scene not on the rhyming couplet but on an incomplete line (line 200) that is missing several beats of iambic pentameter?
- 3 What does Hamlet plan to do, according to line 182? What does this mean and what is the purpose of doing so? Do you think this is obeying the Ghost's commands?

- 
- 4 Although Hamlet speaks of immediate revenge upon meeting the Ghost, he will delay this murder in the scenes that follow. How do lines 30–32 both convey his desire for revenge and foreshadow his inaction?



DISCUSS

Read lines 85–87 again. What two instructions does the Ghost give Hamlet? To what extent do you think it is possible for Hamlet to follow these instructions?

Zeffirelli and Branagh: DVD (Hamlet and the Ghost)



PRESS
PLAY

Watch this scene in the Franco Zeffirelli (1990) and Branagh (1996) film versions and discuss the following in groups and/or as a class.

- 1 Compare the way each film version uses a range of cinematic devices to relate the ‘horrible’ murder of King Hamlet. In your response, consider camera work, sound (music and sound effects), lighting (including colour) and editing (changing from one shot to another). Discuss which interpretation you believe is more effective.
- 2 Compare the way each film version characterises the Ghost (e.g. a terrifying creature or a weary figure). Which do you think is more accurate and why?

A word about antithesis

A feature of *Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s creation of a series of contrasts that repeat themselves throughout the play. Another term for contrast is **antithesis** (anti = opposite; thesis = idea). *Hamlet* is replete with sustained oppositions that manifest themselves on multiple levels.

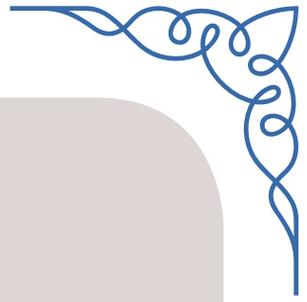
Contrasting ideas or concepts

Shakespeare creates antithesis by using the frequent clash of opposing ideas, most often manifest in *Hamlet* as:

- innocence versus corruption
- external appearance versus internal reality
- truth versus falsity or deception
- action versus words and delay.

Antithesis seen in language devices and characters

- Verse versus prose (see Act 3 Scene 2, especially the contrast between Hamlet’s unadorned prose and the heightened artificiality of the Players’ language).



- Contrasting statements, including:
 - Hamlet's soliloquy 'To be, or not to be' (3.1.56–65)
 - Hamlet's clash with his mother (3.4.9–13)
 - Hamlet's description of his father and Claudius (3.4.56–68)
 - Polonius' lists of dos and don'ts (1.3.59–81)
 - Hamlet's questioning of the Ghost's origin (1.4.40–42).
- Character foils – a prominent notion that permeates the play is the fundamental contrast between Hamlet's delay and the speedy action of Laertes and Fortinbras in seeking revenge for their fathers' deaths (see box on page 221).
- Oxymoron – created when a writer places contradictory words next to each other in order to create a powerful contrast. An everyday example is 'bittersweet'.

Q Re-read Act I Scene 2, lines 10–13. List various oxymorons that Claudius uses in these lines.

Q Why do you think Claudius uses so many oxymorons in such a short space of time? What might Shakespeare be showing us about the character of Claudius?

The purpose of antithesis in *Hamlet*

Shakespeare's use of binary opposites first of all emphasises the central characters' hypocrisy. For example, Claudius only pretends to be innocent, and the constantly hiding and spying Polonius fails to abide by his own advice: 'This above all: to thine own self be true' (1.3.78). Of course, the most significant conflict between illusion and reality is in the character of Hamlet, who fails to put his 'wild and whirling words' (1.5.140) into action, thus drawing our attention to his inaction, in stark contrast to the decisive actions of Laertes and Fortinbras.

Contrast in *Hamlet* also increases the effectiveness of dramatic irony in the play. The audience's knowledge of Hamlet's 'antic disposition' or his pretence of madness adds to the humour of some scenes, and to the dramatic tension of others.

Finally, antithetical ideas, characters and language devices contribute to the creation of the key element of ambiguity in the play. We are left wondering, with the play's characters: is the Ghost good or evil? Is Gertrude virtuous or was she complicit in her husband's murder? And is Hamlet only pretending to be mad or is he actually losing his mind?

Be on the lookout for the repeated use of antithesis throughout *Hamlet*. Take particular note of how these clashes of opposites add to our understanding of the principal themes or ideas of the play.

Act 2

Act 2 Scene 1

CHARACTERS

Polonius
Ophelia
Reynaldo



IN A NUTSHELL

Polonius sends a servant, Reynaldo, to spy on Laertes in Paris. A distressed Ophelia tells her father of Hamlet's bizarre behaviour towards her, not realising Hamlet's strange moods are part of an act to disguise his search for the truth behind his father's murder. Polonius interprets Hamlet's madness as the result of Ophelia's rejection of him, and decides to inform Claudius about it.

Before you read

- This scene gives us further insight into how much Polonius likes the sound of his own voice. His speeches are long-winded or verbose and he spends so long introducing a point that he loses the thread of what he is saying. It is interesting to note how little dialogue Reynaldo speaks as he struggles to get a word in edgeways.

V

Marry:	A mild oath, meaning truly or indeed
Dankers:	Citizens of Denmark
Drabbing:	Engaging with prostitutes
Closet:	Private chamber or bedroom
Purport:	Meaning
Ecstasy:	Madness
Foredoes:	Destroys



Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth ...

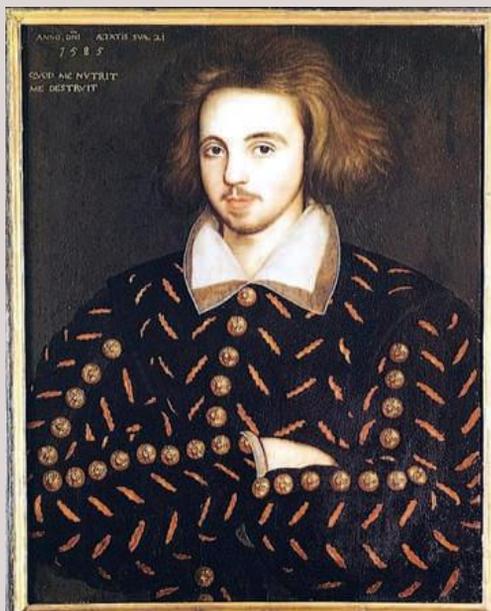
Elizabethan spies

Many individuals and groups in Shakespeare's England were suspicious of each other. It was illegal to practise Catholicism and those who did, including plenty of high-ranking nobles, were forced to pay fines. This was because Queen Elizabeth I was a Protestant who did not recognise the authority of the Pope. Soon after Elizabeth became Queen, the Pope absolved Catholics from any ties of loyalty. As a consequence, the Queen's rule was illegitimate in the eyes of many Catholics, which subsequently increased the danger of military rebellion or political assassination.

Elizabeth's government responded to these dangers by creating the first modern spy network. The chief architect, or spymaster, of this new agency was Francis Walsingham, a highly intelligent, quiet and shadowy figure, who was fiercely loyal to the Queen. Walsingham was Principal Secretary to Queen Elizabeth from 1573 until his death in 1590, and had considerable influence over domestic and foreign policies.

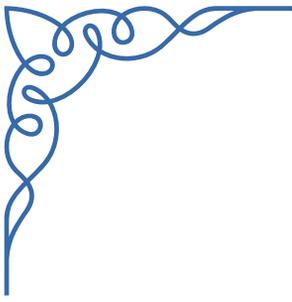
Walsingham recruited spies and informers throughout Europe, often paying for information from his own pocket. He famously said, 'It is better to fear too much than too little' and 'No knowledge is too dear'. Walsingham foiled a number of plots to overthrow Elizabeth's rule, and gathered information about the Spanish Armada in order to help prepare England for the potential Spanish invasion. Unfortunately for Walsingham, the Queen was particularly thrifty with her spending and he died leaving substantial debts for his family.

It has often been speculated that the famous playwright Christopher Marlowe, who was born in the same year as Shakespeare, worked for the government as a spy. There is good circumstantial evidence for this claim. Marlowe and Walsingham were both in France in the mid-1580s and had at least one mutual



Portrait dated 1585, widely thought to be of Christopher Marlowe





Mark you:
 Your party in converse, him you would sound,
 Having ever seen in the prenominate crimes
 The youth you breathe of guilty, be assured
 He closes with you in this consequence: 45
 ‘Good sir’, or so, or ‘friend’, or ‘gentleman’,
 According to the phrase or the addition
 Of man and country.

REYNALDO Very good, my lord.
 POLONIUS And then, sir, does he this – he does – what was I about to say?
 By the mass, I was about to say something. Where did I leave? 50

REYNALDO At ‘closes in the consequence’, at ‘friend or so’, and ‘gentleman’.
 POLONIUS At ‘closes in the consequence’, ay, marry.

He closes thus: ‘I know the gentleman;
 I saw him yesterday’, or ‘t’other day’,
 Or then, or then, with such, or such; ‘and, as you say, 55
 There was he gaming’; ‘there o’ertook in’s rouse’;
 ‘There falling out at tennis’; or perchance,
 ‘I saw him enter such a house of sale’,
Videlicet, a brothel, or so forth.

See you now: 60
 Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth;
 And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
 With windlasses and with assays of bias,
 By indirections find directions out.

So by my former lecture and advice, 65
 Shall you my son. You have me, have you not?
 My lord, I have.

REYNALDO God be wi’ you; fare you well.
 POLONIUS

REYNALDO Good my lord!

POLONIUS Observe his inclination in yourself.

REYNALDO I shall, my lord. 70



42 Your party in converse: The person with whom you are having a conversation.

43 Prenominate crimes: Previously named or mentioned faults.

50 By the mass: A mild oath in Elizabethan times, referring to Mass or Holy Communion.

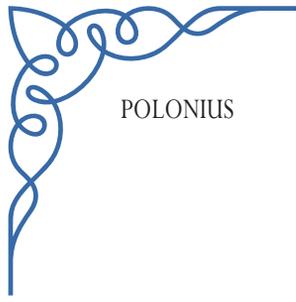
56 There o’ertook in’s rouse: There he was so drunk that he passed out.

59 Videlicet: A Latin phrase meaning ‘that is to say’.

61 Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth: Polonius uses a fishing metaphor here to suggest that Reynaldo can catch the truth (as if it were a carp) by using deception (‘falsehood’) as bait.

62–64 Thus do we ... directions out: Wise and perceptive people (‘of reach’) can use roundabout, indirect means to find out the truth.

69 Observe his inclination in yourself: See for yourself what his behaviour is like.



POLONIUS Come, go with me: I will go seek the King.
 This is the very ecstasy of love, 100
 Whose violent property fordoes itself
 And leads the will to desperate undertakings
 As oft as any passion under heaven
 That does afflict our natures. I am sorry.
 What, have you given him any hard words of late? 105

OPHELIA No, my good lord, but, as you did command,
 I did repel his letters and denied
 His access to me.

POLONIUS That hath made him mad.
 I am sorry that with better speed and judgement
 I had not quoted him: I feared he did but trifle, 110
 And meant to wreck thee; but, beshrew my jealousy!
 By heaven, it is as proper to our age
 To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions
 As it is common for the younger sort
 To lack discretion. Come, go we to the King; 115
 This must be known, which, being kept close, might move
 More grief to hide than hate to utter love.
 Come.

[All exit]



-
- 110 **Quoted:** Observed.
- 111 **Beshrew my jealousy:** Curse my suspicions.
- 112–15 **By heaven ... lack discretion:** It is just as typical ('proper') for old men to be suspicious as it is for youth to lack clear judgement ('discretion').
- 116–17 **This must be known ... to utter love:** If we keep Hamlet's madness a secret ('kept close' or closed), it might cause more trouble or pain than the awful feelings that will be created by telling the King the truth, as our love for him obliges us to do.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What does Polonius ask Reynaldo to do in this scene?
- 2 Do you think Polonius' behaviour in this scene in any way contradicts the fatherly advice he gave his son in Act I Scene 3?
- 3 What signs of Hamlet's madness or 'antic disposition' does Ophelia report to Polonius (lines 75–98)?
- 4 Write a brief paragraph or draw a simple diagram to show your understanding of how deception is leading to misunderstanding in this scene. Be on the lookout for the way this **motif** (a recurring image or idea) is repeated throughout the play.
- 5 How does Polonius interpret Hamlet's signs of madness (see Question 3)?



- 1 What is the purpose of Polonius' plan? How might this plan be seen as a parallel narrative strand to Hamlet's 'antic disposition'?
- 2 Read the last three lines of this scene closely. How does the combination of a rhyming couplet and an incomplete line (of iambic pentameter) draw the reader's attention to the growing sense of chaos or disorder in the play?
- 3 How might the information Ophelia shares about Hamlet's behaviour in this scene heighten the audience's anticipation of Hamlet's next appearance?



Do you think Polonius' actions in this scene present him as a caring father? Why or why not?

Act 2 Scene 2 (Part 1)

CHARACTERS

Polonius
Claudius
Gertrude
Voltimand
Guildenstern
Rosencrantz
[Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]

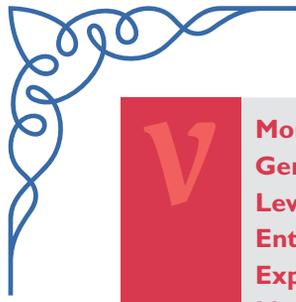


IN A NUTSHELL

Claudius employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, former school friends of Hamlet, to spy on his stepson. The ambassador Voltimand reports that the King of Norway has prevented Fortinbras from attacking Denmark, and Fortinbras swears never again to take arms against Claudius. Polonius tells Claudius and Gertrude about his theory that love is the reason for Hamlet's madness, after which he suggests staging a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia to spy on their behaviour. Claudius agrees to this.

Before you read

- In this scene we see Claudius very much in control and ruling his kingdom efficiently. He behaves courteously towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern before launching into how he wishes to 'use' them. In his conversation with the ambassadors he is also considered and does not rush into hasty decisions.
- A **pun** is a play on words. Many puns play on a word having a double meaning; for example, 'lie' can mean lying down but it can also mean not telling the truth. A pun may also play on two words sounding similar, such as 'made' and 'marred'. Watch out for puns in the scenes that follow.



V

- Moreover:** Besides the fact
- Gentry:** Courtesy
- Levies:** Troops raised via conscription
- Entreaty:** Official request
- Expostulate:** Discuss or explain
- Machine:** Body
- Solicitations:** Sexual advances
- Fast:** Refuse to eat
- Arras:** A tapestry or wall hanging

A room in the castle.

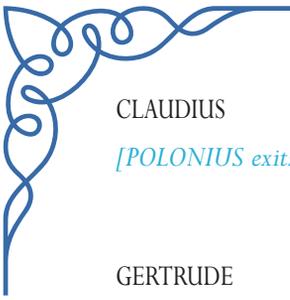
[CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, ROSENCRANTZ, GUILDENSTERN and Attendants enter]

CLAUDIUS Welcome, dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
 Moreover that we much did long to see you,
 The need we have to use you did provoke
 Our hasty sending. Something have you heard
 Of Hamlet's transformation; so call it, 5
 Since not the exterior nor the inward man
 Resembles that it was. What it should be,
 More than his father's death, that thus hath put him
 So much from the understanding of himself,
 I cannot dream of. I entreat you both, 10
 That, being of so young days brought up with him,
 And since so neighboured to his youth and haviour,
 That you vouchsafe your rest here in our court
 Some little time, so by your companies
 To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather 15
 So much as from occasion you may glean,
 Whether aught, to us unknown, afflicts him thus,
 That, opened, lies within our remedy.

GERTRUDE Good gentlemen, he hath much talked of you,
 And sure I am two men there are not living 20
 To whom he more adheres. If it will please you

-
- 11 **Being of so young days brought up with him:** Having grown up with him since you were youngsters.
 - 13 **Vouchsafe your rest:** Agree or promise to stay.
 - 16 **From occasion:** Using every opportunity.
 - 18 **Opened:** Revealed.
 - 21 **More adheres:** Is more attached.





CLAUDIUS Thyself do grace to them, and bring them in –

[POLONIUS exits]

GERTRUDE He tells me, my dear Gertrude, he hath found
The head and source of all your son's distemper. 55

I doubt it is no other but the main:
His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage.

CLAUDIUS Well, we shall sift him –

[POLONIUS re-enters, this time with VOLTIMAND and CORNELIUS]

WELCOME, my good friends!
Say, Voltimand, what from our brother Norway? 60

VOLTIMAND Most fair return of greetings and desires.
Upon our first, he sent out to suppress

His nephew's levies, which to him appeared
To be a preparation 'gainst the Polack;

But, better looked into, he truly found
It was against your Highness; whereat grieved, 65

That so his sickness, age and impotence
Was falsely borne in hand, sends out arrests

On Fortinbras; which he, in brief, obeys,
Receives rebuke from Norway, and in fine

Makes vow before his uncle never more
To give the assay of arms against your Majesty. 70

Whereon old Norway, overcome with joy,
Gives him three thousand crowns in annual fee,

And his commission to employ those soldiers,
So levied as before, against the Polack, 75

With an entreaty, herein further shown,

[He gives CLAUDIUS a document]



53 **Grace:** Honour; also a pun on saying a prayer before a meal, thus continuing the metaphor begun by Polonius in the previous line.

55 **Head and source:** The origin (of a river), referring to the cause of Hamlet's madness.

56 **Doubt:** Suspect; **main:** major point.

58 **Sift:** Interrogate or question closely; an image relating to removing impurities so only truth remains.

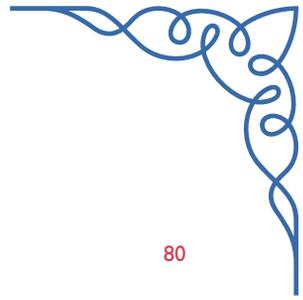
61 **Upon our first:** At the first opportunity, or as soon as the matter was raised.

63 **The Polack:** The King of Poland.

66–67 **Impotence / Was falsely borne in hand:** The deceptive Fortinbras took advantage of Norway's frailty.

69 **In fine:** In the end (*finè* is a Latin word from which the word 'final' derives).

71 **To give the assay of arms:** To attempt to raise an army.



That it might please you to give quiet pass
Through your dominions for this enterprise,
On such regards of safety and allowance
As therein are set down.

CLAUDIUS

It likes us well,

80

And at our more considered time we'll read,
Answer, and think upon this business.
Meantime we thank you for your well-took labour.
Go to your rest; at night we'll feast together.
Most welcome home!

[VOLTIMAND and CORNELIUS exit]

POLONIUS

This business is well ended.

85

My liege, and madam, to expostulate
What majesty should be, what duty is,
Why day is day, night night, and time is time,
Were nothing but to waste night, day and time.
Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
I will be brief: your noble son is mad.
Mad call I it, for, to define true madness,
What is't but to be nothing else but mad?
But let that go.

90

GERTRUDE

More matter, with less art.

95

POLONIUS

Madam, I swear I use no art at all.
That he is mad, 'tis true; 'tis true 'tis pity;
And pity 'tis 'tis true: a foolish figure.
But farewell it, for I will use no art.
Mad let us grant him, then: and now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect,
Or rather say, the cause of this defect,
For this effect defective comes by cause.

100



77 **Quiet pass:** Safe passage or thoroughfare.

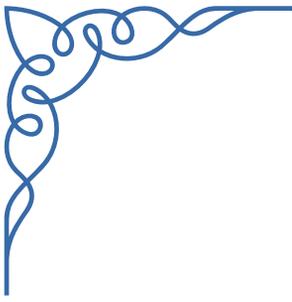
80 **Likes:** Pleases.

81 **At our more considered time we'll read:** I will read this (document) when I have time to consider it in more detail.

90–91 **Brevity is the soul of wit ... outward flourishes:** Here Polonius ironically claims that being brief is the central characteristic or heart ('soul') of intelligence ('wit'), while waffling on for a long time ('tediousness') is more like the extremities ('limbs') or the decorations on clothes ('flourishes').

98 **Figure:** Figure of speech.

103 **This effect defective comes by cause:** Polonius suggests, by playing on the sound of words here, that Hamlet's defective behaviour has a cause.



Thus it remains, and the remainder thus. Perpend:
 I have a daughter – have while she is mine – 105
 Who, in her duty and obedience, mark,
 Hath given me this. *[Shows a letter]* Now gather, and surmise:
[Reads] *To the celestial and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia –*

That's an ill phrase, a vile phrase; 'beautified' is a vile phrase, but
 you shall hear. Thus: 110
[Reads] *In her excellent white bosom, these –*

GERTRUDE Came this from Hamlet to her?
 POLONIUS Good madam, stay awhile; I will be faithful.
[Reads] *Doubt thou the stars are fire;*
Doubt that the sun doth move; 115
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love.

*O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers; I have not art to reckon
 my groans: but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu.*

Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him. Hamlet. 120

This, in obedience, hath my daughter shown me,
 And more above, hath his solicitings,
 As they fell out by time, by means and place,
 All given to mine ear.

CLAUDIUS But how hath she
 Received his love? 125

POLONIUS What do you think of me?

CLAUDIUS As of a man faithful and honourable.

POLONIUS I would fain prove so. But what might you think,
 When I had seen this hot love on the wing –
 As I perceived it, I must tell you that,
 Before my daughter told me – what might you, 130



104 **Perpend:** Consider this.

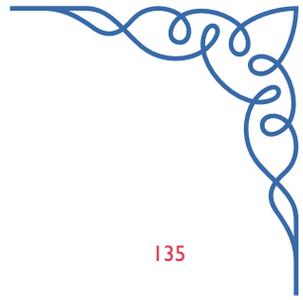
106 **Mark:** Take note of.

113 **Stay awhile; I will be faithful:** Wait a moment; I will be true to my word (referring to his previous promise of being brief).

118–19 **I am ill ... my groans:** Hamlet claims that he lacks the talent to write rhyming verse, that he is not skilful at converting his emotional longings to poetry. 'Reckon' is an accounting or mathematical term meaning to count or calculate, while 'groans' has an obvious sexual overtone.

127 **Fain:** Willingly or hopefully, perhaps with an ironic pun on 'feign' (to pretend).

128 **On the wing:** In full flight.



Or my dear Majesty your Queen here, think,
 If I had played the desk or table-book,
 Or given my heart a winking, mute and dumb,
 Or looked upon this love with idle sight?
 What might you think? No, I went round to work, 135
 And my young mistress thus I did bespeak:
 'Lord Hamlet is a prince out of thy star;
 This must not be.' And then I precepts gave her,
 That she should lock herself from his resort,
 Admit no messengers, receive no tokens. 140
 Which done, she took the fruits of my advice,
 And he, repulsed – a short tale to make –
 Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
 Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
 Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension, 145
 Into the madness wherein now he raves,
 And all we mourn for.

CLAUDIUS Do you think 'tis this?
 GERTRUDE It may be, very like.
 POLONIUS Hath there been such a time – I'd fain know that –
 That I have positively said, 'Tis so', 150
 When it proved otherwise?

CLAUDIUS Not that I know.
 POLONIUS *[Pointing from head to shoulder]* Take this from this, if this be otherwise:
 If circumstances lead me, I will find
 Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed
 Within the centre.

CLAUDIUS How may we try it further? 155



-
- 132 Played the desk or table-book:** Passed messages back and forth, as if in a message book.
 - 133 Given my heart a winking:** Ignored or overlooked my suspicions; 'winking' refers to closing one's eyes briefly.
 - 134 Idle sight:** Indifference.
 - 137 Out of thy star:** A reference to the Great Chain of Being (see pages 3–4), in which stars move within their own spheres or fixed orbits; Polonius suggests that Hamlet and Ophelia are orbiting on different trajectories, that they are not meant for each other.
 - 138 Precepts:** Advice or commands.
 - 139 Resort:** Access.
 - 140 Tokens:** Love tokens, which are special objects of romantic value.
 - 144 Watch:** Failing to sleep.
 - 145 Declension:** To 'decline' means both to deteriorate and to list the various forms of a noun or adjective (as Polonius lists the forms of Hamlet's behaviour in lines 143–45); he also puns on Ophelia declining or refusing to see Hamlet.
 - 155 Within the centre:** At the Earth's core; **try:** test.



- 1 How does the Fortinbras narrative strand (lines 61–80) echo Polonius' spying on Laertes?
- 2 Choose a word that Polonius puns or plays on in this scene, and discuss its various shades of meaning.
- 3 In what ways does Polonius' line 'Madam ... I use no art' (line 96) potentially have an ironic meaning for the audience?
- 4 Draw up and complete a table like the one below to show your understanding of how Shakespeare uses aspects of Polonius' language to highlight his hypocrisy or avoidance of the truth.

Language device	Example from this scene	How does this language device highlight Polonius' hypocrisy or avoidance of the truth?
Excessive use of puns		
Repetition of words or phrases		
Becoming sidetracked (shown by dashes in the dialogue)		
Long, complex sentences		



How might the actors playing Claudius and Gertrude convey their impatience or frustration with Polonius' long-winded speeches?



O, there has been much throwing about of brains ...

Children's companies and the War of the Theatres

Perhaps more than any of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* is concerned with the theatre. Much of the play's vocabulary relates to the theatre and many characters play theatrical roles. Hamlet, for example, puts on an 'antic disposition' and Claudius plays the part of benevolent ruler and kindly father to Hamlet. In his comedy *As You Like It*, probably written immediately prior to *Hamlet*, Shakespeare places the following immortal words in the mouth of his character Jacques:





... All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.
(*As You Like It*, Act 2 Scene 7)

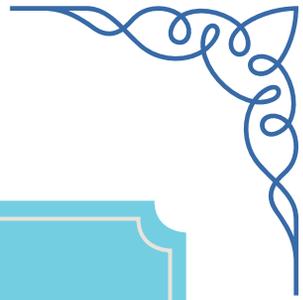
Here Shakespeare presents a metaphor to which he often returned, and in no play more than *Hamlet*. Many critics have noted *Hamlet's* self-consciousness as theatre, and the play has sometimes been described as 'theatre about theatre' or meta-theatre.

Act 2 Scene 2 (Part 3) introduces a visiting acting company. Hamlet arranges for them to add to their performance some lines he has devised that will trap Claudius into betraying his guilt. In Act 3 Scene 2, the enactment of this play-within-the-play (embedded narrative) reveals that Hamlet is a keen student of the theatre: he instructs the actors how to deliver their lines, famously advising them to 'hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature' (line 17).

Also addressed in Act 2 Scene 2 are issues relevant to Elizabethan theatre. Elizabethan companies often toured regional areas, visiting inns, town halls and the homes of important nobles. Often theatre companies would refrain from travelling in times of plague, but Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that this company has been forced to travel due to the popularity of 'the new innovation': a group of boy actors, whom he calls young hawks ('little eyases'). The new 'fashion' of boy actors was very popular in Shakespeare's time. The two most successful companies of boy actors were the Children of St Paul's and the Children of the Chapel, both of whom developed from boys' choirs and performed at Blackfriars Theatre in London. Playwrights such as Ben Jonson seemed to prefer writing for these companies because it was easier than working with opinionated adults. Hamlet points out that their success as child-stars might deprive these boys of an income when they grow to adult 'common players'.

Hamlet's conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (lines 314–19) also alludes to what is known as the War of the Theatres or the Poets' War. From 1599 until 1601, the playwrights Ben Jonson, on one side, and John Marston and Thomas Dekker, on the other, wrote stinging satires ridiculing each other. Both sides employed rival companies of child actors. Despite its name, the Poets' War was confined to the stage and some critics have speculated that the 'war' may have been a publicity stunt as a few years later Jonson collaborated with both Dekker and Marston. The companies of boy actors soon fell out of favour during the reign of King James.

Act 2 Scene 2 (Part 2)



CHARACTERS	IN A NUTSHELL
Hamlet Rosencrantz Polonius Guildenstern [Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]	<i>Hamlet continues to act strangely. He ridicules Polonius and later speaks of the futility of life to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who, after some pressing, admit they have been sent to spy on him. Hamlet becomes excited when he is told that a company of actors has arrived in Elsinore.</i>

Before you read

- Whoever reads the part of Hamlet should keep the dialogue moving at a fast pace and enjoy the verbal wit of his lines. Keep in mind that he is still putting on an ‘antic disposition’ or pretending to be mad.

V	God-a-mercy:	Colloquial for ‘God have mercy’ or ‘thank you’
	Pregnant:	Full (of meaning); meaningful
	Strumpet:	Prostitute
	Conjure:	Appeal to
	Coted:	Overtook or passed
	Escoted:	Paid
	Tarre:	Incite or provoke

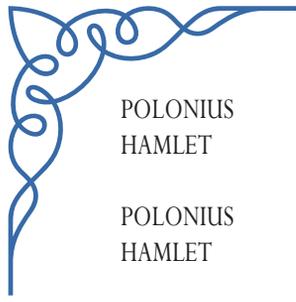
A room in the castle.

[HAMLET enters, reading]

POLONIUS	How does my good Lord Hamlet?	
HAMLET	Well, God-a-mercy.	
POLONIUS	Do you know me, my lord?	
HAMLET	Excellent well: you are a fishmonger.	170
POLONIUS	Not I, my lord.	
HAMLET	Then I would you were so honest a man.	
POLONIUS	Honest, my lord?	
HAMLET	Ay, sir; to be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.	175



170 **Fishmonger:** Someone who sells fish; also a slang term for a pimp.



POLONIUS That's very true, my lord.
 HAMLET For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion –
 Have you a daughter?
 POLONIUS I have, my lord.
 HAMLET Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your 180
 daughter may conceive, friend, look to 't. [*Returns to reading his book*]
 POLONIUS [*Aside*] How say you by that? Still harping on my daughter. Yet he
 knew me not at first; he said I was a fishmonger. He is far gone, far
 gone; and truly in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very 185
 near this. I'll speak to him again – What do you read, my lord?
 HAMLET Words, words, words.
 POLONIUS What is the matter, my lord?
 HAMLET Between who?
 POLONIUS I mean, the matter that you read, my lord.
 HAMLET Slanders, sir, for the satirical rogue says here that old men have 190
 grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick
 amber and plum-tree gum and that they have a plentiful lack of wit,
 together with most weak hams: all which, sir, though I most
 powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it
 thus set down; for yourself, sir, should be old as I am, if like a crab 195
 you could go backward.
 POLONIUS [*Aside*] Though this be madness, yet there is method in't – Will you
 walk out of the air, my lord?
 HAMLET Into my grave.
 POLONIUS Indeed, that is out o' th' air. [*Aside*] How pregnant sometimes 200
 his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason
 and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of. I will leave
 him, and suddenly contrive the means of meeting between him and
 my daughter – My honourable lord, I will most humbly take my
 leave of you. 205



-
- 177 **For if the sun ... carrion:** In medieval times, popular belief held that the sun created new life ('maggots') from dead matter ('carrion'). Hamlet's point, as strange as it sounds, compares the sun kissing a dead dog with kissing a whore; both a prostitute and carrion are corrupt: one physically and one morally.
- 180–81 **Conception is a blessing ... may conceive:** Hamlet puns on the words 'conception' and 'conceive', which can be taken to mean understanding and understand, as well as becoming pregnant.
- 182 **Harping:** Constantly talking about.
- 187 **Matter:** Here the word refers to the content of a book, but in line 188 Hamlet plays on the meaning of the word and deliberately interprets Polonius as asking about a dispute or argument.
- 192 **Plentiful lack of wit:** A great lack of intelligence.
- 193 **Most weak hams:** Very weak legs.
- 194–95 **I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down:** I do not think it is proper for this sort of content to be written in books.
- 203 **Suddenly contrive:** Immediately invent or create.

HAMLET You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal – except my life, except my life, except my life.

POLONIUS Fare you well, my lord.

HAMLET *[Aside]* These tedious old fools!

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN enter]

POLONIUS You go to seek the Lord Hamlet; there he is.

210

ROSENCRANTZ *[To POLONIUS]* God save you, sir!

[POLONIUS exits]

GUILDENSTERN My honoured lord!

ROSENCRANTZ My most dear lord!

HAMLET My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern?

Ah, Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do ye both?

215

ROSENCRANTZ As the indifferent children of the earth.

GUILDENSTERN Happy, in that we are not over-happy;

On Fortune's cap we are not the very button.

HAMLET Nor the soles of her shoe?

ROSENCRANTZ Neither, my lord.

220

HAMLET Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favours?

GUILDENSTERN 'Faith, her privates we.

HAMLET In the secret parts of Fortune? O, most true; she is a strumpet.

What's the news?

ROSENCRANTZ None, my lord, but that the world's grown honest.

225

HAMLET Then is Doomsday near, but your news is not true. Let me question more in particular. What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?

GUILDENSTERN Prison, my lord?

HAMLET Denmark's a prison.

230

ROSENCRANTZ Then is the world one.

HAMLET A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o' the worst.

ROSENCRANTZ We think not so, my lord.

216 **Indifferent:** Average.

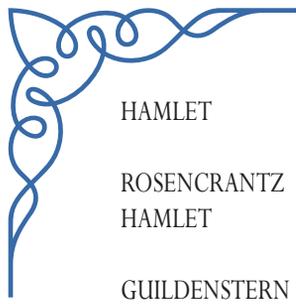
217 **Happy:** Fortunate.

218 **On Fortune's cap we are not the very button:** We are not the highest point ('button') on Fortune's cap; we are not the most fortunate of men.

221 **In the middle of her favours:** Moderately fortunate. This phrase begins a series of puns with strong sexual connotations.

222 **Privates:** Ordinary people (low-ranked); again, an obvious sexual pun.

232 **Confines, wards and dungeons:** Places of imprisonment or confinement.



HAMLET Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison. 235

ROSENCRANTZ Why then, your ambition makes it one; 'tis too narrow for your mind.

HAMLET O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

GUILDENSTERN Which dreams indeed are ambition, for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream. 240

HAMLET A dream itself is but a shadow.

ROSENCRANTZ Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow.

HAMLET Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretched heroes the beggars' shadows. Shall we to the court? For, by my fay, I cannot reason. 245

ROS. & GUILD. We'll wait upon you.

HAMLET No such matter. I will not sort you with the rest of my servants, for, to speak to you like an honest man, I am most dreadfully attended. 250
But, in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?

ROSENCRANTZ To visit you, my lord; no other occasion.

HAMLET Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks; but I thank you, and sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear a halfpenny. Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, deal 255
justly with me; come, come; nay, speak.

GUILDENSTERN What should we say, my lord?

HAMLET Why, anything, but to the purpose. You were sent for, and there is a kind of confession in your looks which your modesties have not craft enough to colour: I know the good King and Queen have sent for you. 260

ROSENCRANTZ To what end, my lord?



-
- 237 **Your ambition:** Hamlet's desire or right to be King.
- 238 **Bounded:** Bound, imprisoned.
- 242 **Shadow:** Insubstantial, not real.
- 245–46 **Then are our beggars bodies ... shadows:** An approximate paraphrase might be, 'If a king or a hero is only a shadow as a result of his ambition, then a beggar is the real body'.
- 246 **By my fay:** A mild oath, meaning 'truly' or 'honestly'; 'fay' is an obsolete word for faith.
- 249 **Sort:** Classify.
- 251 **In the beaten way of friendship:** Along the well-used path; familiar or open, thus honest.
- 254 **Too dear a halfpenny:** Not even worth a halfpenny; worthless. Hamlet links back to the previous line's reference to being poor or a beggar: he is far from poor, and they are not telling the truth.
- 258 **Anything, but to the purpose:** Anything except the truth.
- 259–60 **Your modesties have not craft enough to colour:** Hamlet suggests that his friends' sense of decency does not allow them to disguise the truth; he knows they are lying but are not clever enough to hide it.

HAMLET That you must teach me. But let me conjure you, by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preservèd love, and by what more dear a better proposer could charge you withal, be even and direct with me, whether you were 265 sent for, or no?

ROSENCRANTZ [*Aside to GUILDENSTERN*] What say you?

HAMLET [*Aside*] Nay, then, I have an eye of you – If you love me, hold not off.

GUILDENSTERN My lord, we were sent for.

HAMLET I will tell you why; so shall my anticipation prevent your discovery, 270 and your secrecy to the King and Queen moult no feather. I have of late – but wherefore I know not – lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging 275 firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: 280 the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

ROSENCRANTZ My lord, there was no such stuff in my thoughts.

HAMLET Why did you laugh then, when I said, ‘Man delights not me’? 285

ROSENCRANTZ To think, my lord, if you delight not in man, what Lenten entertainment the players shall receive from you. We coted them on the way, and hither are they coming, to offer you service.

263 **Consonancy of our youth:** Fellowship or harmonious relationship we have had since we were young.

268 **I have an eye of you:** I can see what you are up to.

270–71 **So shall my anticipation ... moult no feather:** My guessing will stop you from having to reveal your secret, and, as a result, your secret arrangement with the King and Queen will not lose anything or will not diminish (like a bird moulting its feathers).

272–73 **Foregone all custom of exercises:** Stopped engaging in my customary activities.

273–78 **It goes so heavily ... congregation of vapours:** Hamlet claims he is so depressed that all the beautiful and majestic features of the earth are perceived as barren and lifeless, while he views the sky as a diseased (‘foul and pestilent’) collection of gases (‘congregation of vapours’).

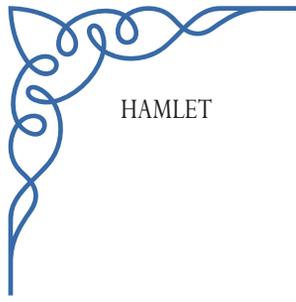
278–79 **How infinite in faculty:** How limitless in his intelligence; this was the view of ‘Renaissance man’, a creature capable of unlimited rational creativity; **express:** well designed.

280 **In apprehension how like a god:** God-like (unlimited) in understanding.

281 **The paragon of animals:** The highest form of the animal kingdom.

282 **The quintessence of dust:** The purest physical formation or element.

286–87 **Lenten entertainment:** Meagre or stingy entertainment. In Shakespeare’s time, people typically ate only very small serves of food during Lent (the 40 days leading up to Easter).



HAMLET He that plays the King shall be welcome; his Majesty shall have tribute of me; the adventurous knight shall use his foil and target; the lover shall not sigh *gratis*; the humorous man shall end his part in peace; the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickled o' th' sere; and the lady shall say her mind freely, or the blank verse shall halt for't. What players are they? 290

ROSENCRANTZ Even those you were wont to take delight in, the tragedians of the city. 295

HAMLET How chances it they travel? Their residence, both in reputation and profit, was better both ways.

ROSENCRANTZ I think their inhibition comes by the means of the late innovation.

HAMLET Do they hold the same estimation they did when I was in the city? 300
Are they so followed?

ROSENCRANTZ No, indeed, are they not.

HAMLET How comes it? Do they grow rusty?

ROSENCRANTZ Nay, their endeavour keeps in the wonted pace; but there is, sir, an eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapped for't. These are now the fashion, and so berattle the common stages – so they call them – that many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills and dare scarce come thither. 305

HAMLET What, are they children? Who maintains 'em? How are they escoted? Will they pursue the quality no longer than they can sing? Will they 310
not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players – as it is most like, if their means are no better – their writers do them wrong, to make them exclaim against their own succession?



-
- 291–92 **Gratis:** Free of charge, for nothing; **the humorous man shall end his part in peace:** the one controlled by anger or violence ('humour') will finish acting ('his part') peacefully.
- 292–93 **Tickled o' th' sere:** Referring to a gun that is easily set off by the trigger ('sere'), implying that some people laugh particularly easily.
- 293–94 **The lady shall ... halt for't:** If the audience interrupts the actor – a male playing a female character – the rhythm of the play ('blank verse' or unrhymed iambic pentameter) will also be interrupted.
- 295 **Tragedians:** Those who act in tragedies.
- 299 **Late innovation:** The growing trend of using child actors; see 'Children's companies and the War of the Theatres' (pages 81–82).
- 304–05 **An eyrie of children ... top of question:** A nest full of little children, like baby hawks, who noisily drown out the other actors.
- 307 **Berattle the common stages:** Make fun of the regular theatre.
- 307–08 **Many wearing rapiers ... come thither:** Many noblemen (who are carrying swords or 'rapiers' as symbols of their class) are afraid of what the playwrights will write (with 'goose-quills') in their plays about them, thus they do not attend the plays. Shakespeare is making fun of the noblemen in his audience.
- 310 **No longer than they can sing:** Until their voices break.
- 313 **Exclaim against their own succession:** Mock what they will become, which is adult actors.

ROSENCRANTZ 'Faith, there has been much to do on both sides, and the nation holds it no sin to tarre them to controversy. There was, for a while, no money bid for argument, unless the poet and the player went to cuffs in the question. 315

HAMLET Is't possible?

GUILDENSTERN O, there has been much throwing about of brains.

HAMLET Do the boys carry it away? 320

ROSENCRANTZ Ay, that they do, my lord; Hercules and his load, too.

HAMLET It is not very strange, for mine uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mows at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, an hundred ducats a-piece for his picture in little. 'Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out. 325

[A flourish of trumpets sounds offstage]

GUILDENSTERN There are the players.

HAMLET Gentlemen, you are welcome to Elsinore. Your hands, come then: the appurtenance of welcome is fashion and ceremony. Let me comply with you in this garb, lest my extent to the players, which, I tell you, must show fairly outward, should more appear like entertainment than yours. You are welcome: but my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived. 330

GUILDENSTERN In what, my dear lord?

HAMLET I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw. 335

320 **Carry it away:** Win the day or get away with it.

321 **Hercules and his load:** The Globe Theatre's emblem featured Hercules carrying the world on his shoulder. Shakespeare is referring to his own theatre here to entertain his audience.

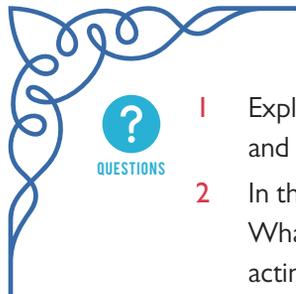
323–24 **Make mows ... his picture in little:** The kingdom's subjects (like an audience) are fickle; whereas they used to pull faces at Claudius, they now pay a lot of money for a souvenir portrait of him as King.

324 **'Sblood:** An oath in Elizabethan times, short for 'by His (Christ's) blood'.

329 **Appurtenance ... ceremony:** Appropriate behaviour associated with greeting each other.

329–32 **Let me comply ... than yours:** Hamlet claims that he does not want his welcoming of the players (which needs to be quite showy) to outdo his welcoming of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

335–36 **I am but mad ... from a handsaw:** This statement is ambiguous. Hamlet could be suggesting that his madness depends on the weather, or that he is only slightly mad (like a compass that doesn't read true north, but north-north-west instead), or that he is in control of his faculties and is only pretending. Many editors read 'handsaw' as 'hernshaw' or heron, which were hunted by hawks, implying that Hamlet knows who is hunting and who is being hunted.



QUESTIONS

- 1 Explain Hamlet's treatment of Polonius and how it is reflected in his actions and language (see especially lines 167–211).
- 2 In this scene, Shakespeare playfully mocks Elizabethan theatrical conventions. What aspects does he criticise? And how does Hamlet then compare these acting conventions with the situation in Denmark?
- 3 How is the idea or motif of acting, so prominent in this scene, relevant to some of the broader themes of the play?



EXTEND

- 1 In what ways is it ironic that Hamlet insists that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stop pretending and be truthful?
- 2 Explain Hamlet's argument about Denmark being a 'prison' (lines 226–36). In what ways is it a prison and what point does Hamlet make about thinking in this scene?
- 3 Why do you think Hamlet describes Fortune as a 'strumpet' or prostitute? How does this metaphor reflect his attitude towards women in general?
- 4 Explain what you think Hamlet means when he says, 'I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw' (lines 335–36).



DISCUSS

- 1 What do you think were Shakespeare's reasons for including a contemporary event like the Poets' War in *Hamlet*?
- 2 Consider what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should be doing as Hamlet recites his 'What a piece of work is a man' speech (lines 270–83). Discuss this, in small groups and then as a class, in terms of actions and blocking.

Zeffirelli and Branagh: DVD (Hamlet's 'antic disposition')



PRESS
PLAY

- Compare the ways in which Zeffirelli (1990) and Branagh (1996) present Hamlet's character in this scene. Specifically, how do they present his 'antic disposition'? And how do they make it obvious to the viewer that he is only pretending? Consider a range of cinematic or theatrical conventions in your response.



Thou strumpet, Fortune!

The power of Fortune

Hamlet searches for a theory to explain the nature of suffering (or the way things are). In Act 1, he describes life in pessimistic terms as ‘weary, stale, flat and unprofitable’ (Scene 2, line 133), and considers Aristotle’s notion of the ‘tragic flaw’ as one way of explaining the nature of evil (see pages 181–82).

Act 2 Scene 2 introduces the workings of Fortune as an explanation for suffering. In Hamlet’s dialogue with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he describes Fortune as a ‘strumpet’, or prostitute, and later requests that one of the players deliver a speech that decries the power of fortune:

*Out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune! All you gods,
In general synod take away her power;
Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel,
And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven,
As low as to the fiends!* (Act 2 Scene 2, lines 433–37)

The philosopher Boethius (c. 480–525 AD), whose thinking combined elements of Christian belief and pagan philosophy, reflected on the fleeting nature of worldly honour and the capricious (quickly changing) nature of Fortune in his most famous work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, written while he was imprisoned for treason by the Roman authorities. He represents Fortune as a goddess who turns a wheel by which men and nations rise and fall. In his book, Boethius is comforted by the Spirit of Philosophy, who reminds him that the greatest gifts, such as the laws of God and nature, are due to forces other than Fortune. *The Consolation of Philosophy* was very popular in Shakespeare’s time and was translated by a number of authors, including Queen Elizabeth I herself.



Detail, Philosophy Consoling Boethius and Fortune Turning the Wheel, possibly by Henri de Vulcop, from a fifteenth-century manuscript



Act 2 Scene 2 (Part 3)

CHARACTERS

Hamlet
1ST Player
Polonius
Rosencrantz



IN A NUTSHELL

Hamlet is pleased to catch up with some old friends from a visiting theatrical company. After the main actor in this troop delivers a stirring rendition of the tale of Pyrrhus' slaying of Priam, Hamlet asks the actors to perform 'The Murder of Gonzago', which involves a murder similar to Claudius' murder of the King. Hamlet plans to observe Claudius during the play's performance to see if it exposes his uncle's guilt.

Before you read

- The speech Hamlet requests the player deliver in this scene is taken from the *Aeneid*, an epic poem by the Roman poet Virgil that alludes to the Trojan War. It relates how the Greek army, feigning retreat from a ten-year siege, presented the city of Troy with the gift of a great wooden horse which was drawn into the city. That night, the armed men concealed within the horse emerged to let the Greek army in to sack and burn the city.
- In the speech delivered by the 1ST Player, Aeneas tells Dido, his lover, of the slaughter that followed. The grand, formal language of the speech makes an interesting contrast to the dialogue of the other characters.

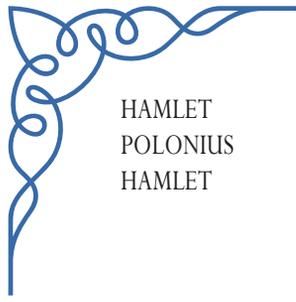
Prophesy:	Predict
Lot:	Chance
Wot:	Knows
E'en to't:	Get straight to it
Digested:	Arranged or structured
Repugnant:	Rebellious
Diadem:	Crown
Clamour:	Passionate outrage
Bounty:	Generosity
Cunning:	Skill

A room in the castle.

[*POLONIUS enters*]

- POLONIUS Well be with you, gentlemen!
- HAMLET Hark you, Guildenstern, and you, too; at each ear a hearer: that great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling-clouts.
- ROSENCRANTZ Happily he's the second time come to them, for they say an old man is twice a child. 340
- HAMLET I will prophesy he comes to tell me of the players; mark it. – You say right, Sir, a Monday morning; 'twas so indeed.
- POLONIUS My lord, I have news to tell you.
- HAMLET My lord, I have news to tell you. When Roscius was an actor in Rome – 345
- POLONIUS The actors are come hither, my lord.
- HAMLET Buzz, buzz!
- POLONIUS Upon mine honour –
- HAMLET Then came each actor on his ass –
- POLONIUS The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, 350
pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical,
tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem
unlimited. Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light. For
the law of writ and the liberty, these are the only men.
- HAMLET O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou! 355
- POLONIUS What a treasure had he, my lord?
- HAMLET Why,
*One fair daughter and no more,
The which he loved passing well.*
- POLONIUS [*Aside*] Still on my daughter. 360
- HAMLET Am I not i' the right, old Jephthah?
- POLONIUS If you call me Jephthah, my lord, I have a daughter that I love passing well.

-
- 339 **Swaddling-clouts:** Long strips of cloth wrapped around a baby to keep it from moving about.
- 345 **Roscius:** A well-known actor in the time of Julius Caesar.
- 349 **Ass:** A deliberate pun on 'arse'.
- 350–53 **The best actors ... poem unlimited:** Polonius lists numerous genres of plays that were performed in Elizabethan times, as well as some exaggerated and even nonsensical ones.
- 353 **Seneca:** A writer of tragedies in ancient Rome; **Plautus:** ancient Roman writer of comedies.
- 354 **The law of writ and the liberty:** Some plays were written according to dramatic rules or conventions ('law of writ'), and others disregarded convention in favour of 'liberty'.
- 355 **Jephthah:** Biblical reference to a judge (ruler) of Israel who made the foolish vow to God that, if he triumphed in battle, he would sacrifice the first creature he met after the war. He actually met his daughter, and kept his vow (Judges 11:30–40).



HAMLET

Nay, that follows not.

POLONIUS

What follows, then, my lord?

365

HAMLET

Why,

As by lot, God wot

and then, you know,

It came to pass, as most like it was –

the first row of the pious chanson will show you more, for look where my abridgement comes.

[A group of four or five PLAYERS enters]

You are welcome, masters, welcome all. I am glad to see thee well. 370

Welcome, good friends – O, my old friend! Thy face is valencèd since

I saw thee last. Comest thou to beard me in Denmark? – What, my

young lady and mistress! By'r lady, your ladyship is nearer to heaven

than when I saw you last, by the altitude of a chopine. Pray God, your

voice, like a piece of uncurrent gold, be not cracked within the ring – 375

Masters, you are all welcome. We'll e'en to't like French falconers,

fly at anything we see. We'll have a speech straight. Come, give us a

taste of your quality; come, a passionate speech.

1ST PLAYER

What speech, my lord?

HAMLET

I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never acted; or, if it 380

was, not above once; for the play, I remember, pleased not the million;

'twas caviare to the general. But it was – as I received it, and others,

whose judgements in such matters cried in the top of mine – an

excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much

modesty as cunning. I remember, one said there were no sallets in 385

the lines to make the matter savoury, nor no matter in the phrase



368–69 The first row ... abridgement comes: Hamlet refers to the first line of a holy song, then puns on the word 'abridgement', which carries the meaning of both a piece of music that links or interrupts two verses (bridge) and a form of entertainment.

371 Valencèd: A valance is a decorative border or fringe of a bed, thus Hamlet refers here to the player's beard.

373–74 Nearer to heaven ... chopine: Taller, as his (women's roles were played by boy actors) 'altitude' or height had increased due to his platform-sole shoes ('chopines').

374–75 Pray God, your voice ... within the ring: Hope to God that your voice has not cracked; this would make him unfit to play the female roles, rendering him a counterfeit ('uncurrent' or fake currency).

381–82 Pleased not the million; 'twas caviare to the general: A high-quality play, thus too good for the common population.

383 Cried in the top of mine: Superior to mine.

385–86 No sallets in the lines: No salads or spices, referring to spicy comments in the dialogue.

that might indict the author of affectation; but called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine. One speech in it I chiefly loved: 'twas Aeneas' tale to Dido, and thereabout of it especially, where he speaks of Priam's slaughter. 390
If it live in your memory, begin at this line: let me see, let me see –

The rugged Pyrrhus, like the Hyrcanian beast –

It is not so; it begins with Pyrrhus –

*The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,
Black as his purpose, did the night resemble 395
When he lay couchèd in the ominous horse,
Hath now this dread and black complexion smeared
With heraldry more dismal; head to foot
Now is he total gules; horridly tricked
With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, 400
Baked and impasted with the parching streets,
That lend a tyrannous and damnèd light
To their lord's murder. Roasted in wrath and fire,
And thus o'er-sized with coagulate gore,
With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus 405
Old grandsire Priam seeks.*

So, proceed you.

387–88 **An honest method:** Natural, realistic acting, as opposed to 'affectation' (line 387) or unnatural, artificial acting.

389–90 **Aeneas' tale to Dido ... Priam's slaughter:** After the sacking of Troy, Aeneas escaped to Carthage, where he met the Queen, Dido. He told her the story of the slaying of the frail King of Troy (Priam) by the brutish Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles. Upon hearing Aeneas' tale, Dido fell in love with him.

392 **Rugged:** Cruel, harsh; **Hyrcanian beast:** tiger from Hyrcania, a vicious and cruel animal.

394–95 **Sable arms, / Black as his purpose:** A sable is a dark-furred animal; the word 'black' plays on the colour of either his hairy arms or black armour, as well as the moral corruption of his heart.

396 **Lay couchèd in the ominous horse:** Hidden in the Trojan Horse (see **Before you read**, page 92).

397–98 **Smeared / With heraldry more dismal:** Smeared with blood as his coat of arms.

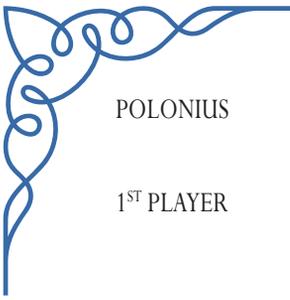
399 **Total gules:** Entirely red; gules were neckpieces of red fur, and here it refers to Pyrrhus being covered in blood; **horridly tricked:** disgustingly decorated with blood.

401 **Baked and impasted with the parching streets:** The city of Troy was burned to the ground, and many innocent people were burnt to a crust ('baked and impasted').

404 **O'er-sized with coagulate gore:** Pyrrhus was covered in so much thick, congealed blood that it made him look larger.

405 **Eyes like carbuncles:** Carbuncles are red gems that glow in the dark, thus Pyrrhus looks 'hellish'.

406 **Old grandsire Priam seeks:** Pyrrhus seeks to kill the old 'grandsire' (grandfather) Priam, King of Troy.



POLONIUS

'Fore God, my lord, well spoken, with good accent
And good discretion.

1ST PLAYER

Anon he finds him

*Striking too short at Greeks; his antique sword,
Rebellious to his arm, lies where it falls, 410
Repugnant to command. Unequal matched,
Pyrrhus at Priam drives; in rage strikes wide,
But with the whiff and wind of his fell sword
Th' unnervèd father falls. Then senseless Ilium,
Seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top 415
Stoops to his base, and with a hideous crash
Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear. For, lo! His sword,
Which was declining on the milky head
Of reverend Priam, seemed i' th' air to stick;
So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood, 420
And like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing.
But, as we often see, against some storm,
A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still,
The bold winds speechless and the orb below 425
As hush as death, anon the dreadful thunder
Doth rend the region, so, after Pyrrhus' pause,
Arouse'd vengeance sets him new a-work;
And never did the Cyclops' hammers fall
On Mars's armour forged for proof eterne 430
With less remorse than Pyrrhus' bleeding sword
Now falls on Priam.*



409–10 **Striking too short ... to his arm:** Priam was too old and weak to control his sword, and he continually missed the Greeks he was aiming at.

412 **Drives:** Lunges.

413–14 **With the whiff ... father falls:** 'Whiff and wind' refers to the sound effect of slicing the air with his cruel ('fell') sword, which eventually kills the weakened ('unnervèd') old Priam.

414–17 **Senseless Ilium ... Pyrrhus' ear:** The city of Troy (also called 'Ilium'), rendered useless, begins to burn, then crashes to the ground ('base'), the sound of which captures Pyrrhus' attention.

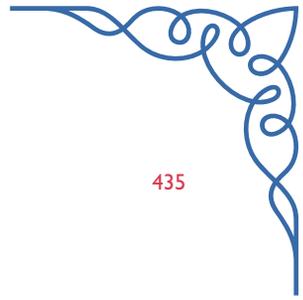
417–22 **His sword ... Did nothing:** As his sword was swishing down towards honourable Priam's white-haired ('milky') head, Pyrrhus froze, as in a painting, unable to carry out his desire ('will') or plan ('matter').

424 **Rack:** Clouds, as if hanging in a rack.

425 **The orb below:** The Earth.

427 **Doth rend the region:** Tears through the sky.

429–30 **Never did the ... proof eterne:** According to ancient Roman mythology, the Cyclopes (plural) were one-eyed giants employed by Vulcan, the god of metalworkers, to make armour for the gods. Mars was the Roman god of war, whose armour was made of eternally impenetrable material ('forged for proof eterne').



*Out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune! All you gods,
In general synod take away her power;
Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel,
And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven,
As low as to the fiends!*

435

POLONIUS

This is too long.

HAMLET

It shall to the barber's with your beard – Prithee, say on. He's for a jig or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps. Say on; come to Hecuba.

1ST PLAYER

But who, O, who had seen the moblèd queen –

440

HAMLET

'The moblèd queen'?

POLONIUS

That's good; 'moblèd queen' is good.

1ST PLAYER

*Run barefoot up and down, threat'ning the flames
With bisson rheum. A clout upon that head
Where late the diadem stood, and for a robe,
About her lank and all o'er-teemèd loins,
A blanket, in the alarm of fear caught up.
Who this had seen, with tongue in venom steeped,
'Gainst Fortune's state would treason have pronounced.
But if the gods themselves did see her then
When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport
In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs,
The instant burst of clamour that she made,
Unless things mortal move them not at all,
Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven,
And passion in the gods.*

445

450

455



433–37 Out, out ... to the fiends: The poet implores the gods to break off the spokes and the 'fellies' (wooden sections of the wheel's rim) from the wheel of Fortune and to roll its hub ('bowl the round nave') from the heights of heaven down to the depths of malignant enemies.

438–39 He's for a jig or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps: Hamlet mocks Polonius, claiming he cannot appreciate fine drama, but would prefer to sleep or watch a lighthearted, raunchy ('bawdy') tale with singing and dancing (a 'jig').

439 Hecuba: Wife of Priam.

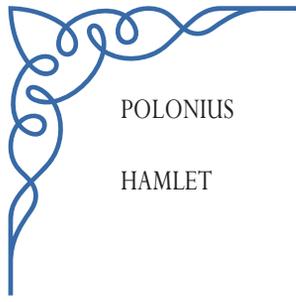
440 Moblèd: An ornate word for veiled, as in mourning; or perhaps muffled.

444 With bisson rheum: With blinding tears; **clout:** cloth.

446 About her lank and all o'er-teemèd loins: About her shrunken and worn-out hips (exhausted with childbearing).

448–49 With tongue ... have pronounced: Anyone's tongue saturated in poison would have cried 'Treason!' against the rule of Fortune.

454–56 Unless things ... passion in the gods: Unless human affairs do not affect them, the blazing stars ('eyes') in the sky would produce tears ('milch' or milk) and the gods would weep with grief ('passion').



POLONIUS Look where he has not turned his colour and has tears in's eyes. Pray
you, no more.

HAMLET 'Tis well; I'll have thee speak out the rest soon – Good my lord, will
you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear? Let them be well 460
used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After
your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report
while you live.

POLONIUS My lord, I will use them according to their desert.

HAMLET God's bodykins, man, much better. Use every man after his desert, 465
and who should 'scape whipping? Use them after your own honour
and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty.
Take them in.

POLONIUS Come, sirs.

HAMLET Follow him, friends; we'll hear a play tomorrow – 470

[POLONIUS and all the PLAYERS except 1ST PLAYER exit]

Dost thou hear me, old friend? Can you play 'The Murder of
Gonzago'?

1ST PLAYER Ay, my lord.

HAMLET We'll ha't tomorrow night. You could, for a need, study a speech of
some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in't, 475
could you not?

1ST PLAYER Ay, my lord.

HAMLET Very well. Follow that lord, and look you mock him not –

[1ST PLAYER exits]

My good friends, I'll leave you till night. You are welcome to Elsinore.



-
- 457 **Turned his colour:** Polonius notes that the actor is so realistic that he has turned his face pale.
- 460 **Bestowed:** Lodged.
- 461 **Used:** Treated; **they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time:** those in the theatre
reflect the history and culture of the time ('abstract' = summaries; 'chronicles' = historical records).
- 461–63 **After your death ... while you live:** Hamlet suggests it is better to have a critical gravestone
(‘a bad epitaph’) than to have actors say unkind things about you while you are alive.
- 464 **Desert:** Worth; that which they deserve.
- 465 **God's bodykins:** A mild oath in Elizabethan times meaning ‘By God's Body’; probably a reference
to the Communion Host.
- 474 **We'll ha't:** We'll have it; **for a need:** if necessary.

ROSENCRANTZ Good my lord!
HAMLET Ay, so, God be wi' ye.

480

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN exit]

Now I am alone.

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.
Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing; no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain? Breaks my pate across?

485

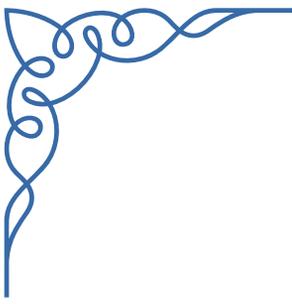
490

495

500

505

- 
-
- 482 **Rogue:** Dishonest scoundrel.
484 **In a fiction:** In a story or a fictitious piece; **dream of passion:** imaginary feeling.
486 **From her working all his visage wanned:** From the workings of his imagination, he made his face ('visage') pale ('wan').
487 **Distraction in's aspect:** Distress in his facial expression.
489 **Forms to his conceit:** Actions to suit his thoughts or imagination.
493 **Cue:** Stimulus; also a theatrical term for a prompt.
495 **Cleave the general ear with horrid speech:** Tear apart or penetrate the audience's ear with terrifying words.
496 **Appal the free:** Shock innocent people.
500–01 **A dull ... my cause:** Stupid and dull-spirited, moping around ('peak') as if in a dream, with no idea of how to fulfil my cause (taking revenge on Claudius).
503 **Property:** Kingdom, crown and wife.
505 **Pate:** Head.



Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? Gives me the lie i' th' throat,
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
Ha!

'Swounds, I should take it, for it cannot be 510

But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O, vengeance!

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave, 515

That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion!

Fie upon't! Foh! About, my brain. I have heard 520

That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene 525

Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions;

For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players

Play something like the murder of my father 530

Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;
I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen



507–08 Gives me the lie ... to the lungs: To give someone the lie in the throat was a very insulting way of calling someone a liar to their face.

511 Pigeon-livered and lack gall: Pigeons, like doves, are generally thought to be gentle, even fearful birds, lacking courage because they lack bile ('gall') secreted by the liver. Thus, Hamlet is calling himself weak and lacking in courage, similar to someone calling himself a chicken today.

513 All the region kites: All the sky's kites, which are hunting birds.

514 Offal: Guts or intestines.

515 Lecherous, kindless: Lust-filled and unnatural.

521 Drab: Prostitute or slut.

522 Scullion: The lowest of servants, who washed the dishes in the scullery or kitchen.

523 About: Turn around or wake up or get to work.

527 Proclaimed their malefactions: Confessed their faults or evil-doings.

532 I'll tent him to the quick: A metaphor that compares making someone feel the pain of guilt with probing an object deeply into an open wound; **blench:** turn pale (blanch) or flinch.

May be the devil, and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this: the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

535

540

[HAMLET exits]



534–35 The devil hath power ... a pleasing shape: A common belief in Shakespeare's time was that the devil appeared as the ghost of loved ones.

536 Melancholy: Depression or extreme sadness.

538 Abuses: Deceives.

538–39 Grounds / More relative: Evidence more relevant.

540 Catch: Trap.



QUESTIONS

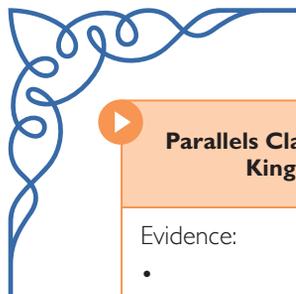
- 1 What language devices does Shakespeare use in this scene to show that Hamlet is pretending to be mad?
- 2 Why do you think Hamlet wants to hear the tale of Pyrrhus' slaying of Priam? What might he think he has in common with Pyrrhus?
- 3 What is the name of the play (another embedded narrative) that Hamlet wishes to have performed in front of Claudius? How does this parallel the main plot of *Hamlet*?
- 4 One personal characteristic for which Hamlet has been widely criticised is his indecision. Read the soliloquy at the end of the scene again (lines 481–540). Identify as many poetic devices (e.g. metaphors, similes) as you can and explain whether they make Hamlet appear more or less decisive.



EXTEND

- 1 Hamlet's discussion with the players (lines 370–91) adds to Shakespeare's previous critique of theatrical conventions. What does he criticise in this section and how is this an appropriate (if not ironic) criticism for the character of Hamlet to make?
- 2 The embedded narrative (play-within-the-play) that the 1ST Player performs is a powerful parallel of the central narrative, yet there are also important differences. Draw up and complete a table like the one on the following page to show your understanding of this comparison.





 Parallels Claudius' killing of King Hamlet	EMBEDDED NARRATIVE:	Mirrors (and foreshadows) Hamlet's inaction or delay in killing Claudius
Evidence: <ul style="list-style-type: none">••••	  <p>Pyrrhus' slaying of Priam</p>	Evidence: <ul style="list-style-type: none">••••

Revisit this question when you have finished reading *Hamlet*.

- 3 Note the language of the Pyrrhus/Priam narrative.
 - a What language devices does Shakespeare employ in lines 394–456?
 - b How does the language of the 1ST Player compare with Hamlet's language in this scene?
- 4 See lines 457–58. How does the 1ST Player's performance provide an ironic contrast with the other characters we have seen so far?
- 5 Read again Hamlet's third soliloquy (lines 481–540).
 - a What do you notice about lines 490, 499, 509, 516 and 522? What dramatic effect does this create in the soliloquy?
 - b What imagery does Shakespeare include to highlight the notion of illusion versus reality?
 - c Describe two ways in which Hamlet compares himself with the 1ST Player. What do these comparisons reveal about the character of Hamlet?
 - d Hamlet describes himself as 'pigeon-livered' and a 'coward'. To what extent do you agree with his self-assessment?
 - e Note the use of animal images in Hamlet's speech. What animals are mentioned? What are their characteristics? And how do they contrast with humanity?
 - f How does Hamlet's language change in lines 510–22? What does this reveal about his character? Is he melancholic? Bitter? Or something else?
 - g Read lines 523–40, during which Hamlet's plan evolves. What does he plan to do now and why? Is he obeying his father? Is he merely acting?



What should the actor who plays Hamlet be doing while the 1ST Player delivers his speech about Hecuba (lines 440–56)? Discuss this in small groups, and then as a class, in terms of actions, gestures and blocking.

Zeffirelli and Branagh: DVD ('What a rogue and peasant slave am I')



Watch Hamlet's soliloquy in the Zeffirelli (1990) and Branagh (1996) film versions and discuss the following in groups or as a class.

- 1 Compare the way each film version uses a range of cinematic devices to present the speech. In your response, consider camera work, sound (music and sound effects), lighting (including colour) and editing (the transition from one shot to another).
- 2 Compare the ways that each film version characterises Hamlet. Which version do you think is more effective and why?

A word about dramatic irony

Imagine your friend is making fun of someone and does not know (but you do!) that your teacher is standing right behind him or her. How would you feel? Tense? Amused? This is what **dramatic irony** is all about. Sometimes while viewing a play, we are placed in the position of knowing more than the characters on stage. For example, we might know that around the corner is someone with a gun, but the characters, unaware of this, proceed to walk around the corner. This creates dramatic tension between the characters' limited knowledge and our greater knowledge.

Shakespeare's tragedies such as *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *King Lear* contain a great deal of dramatic irony. We (the audience) often know things that the characters don't and this can create a sense of tension, as well as a desire to stop the characters from saying or doing things that might lead to harm.

An early example of dramatic irony in *Hamlet* occurs in Act 1 Scene 2 when Horatio approaches Hamlet to tell him that he has seen the ghost of Hamlet's dead father. He is amazed when Hamlet says: 'My father! Methinks I see my father' (line 183). Horatio immediately assumes that Hamlet has seen the ghost but Hamlet instead means that he sees his father 'in [his] mind's eye' (line 184).

The tension of dramatic irony is palpable in Act 2 Scene 2. Earlier in this scene (lines 153–55), we are made aware of Polonius' plan to spy on Hamlet but Hamlet is possibly unaware of this conversation; Polonius is also unaware of Hamlet's decision to act mad (put on 'an antic disposition'). That the audience has knowledge of these plot details creates elements of humour and tension.

Act 3

Act 3 Scene 1

CHARACTERS

Hamlet
Claudius
Ophelia
Polonius
Rosencrantz
Gertrude
Guildenstern
[Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]

IN A NUTSHELL

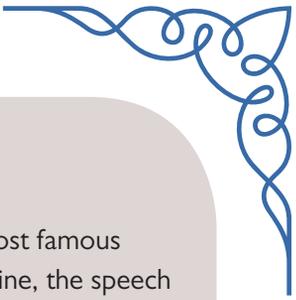
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report Hamlet's strange behaviour to Claudius. Learning of Hamlet's excitement about the play, Claudius agrees to attend the performance. Claudius and Polonius hide themselves so they can observe the meeting they contrive between Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet enters and, in a soliloquy, reflects on the purpose of life and his own situation. Perhaps suspecting his meeting with Ophelia to be a set-up, he speaks harshly to her; the listening King, doubting that Hamlet is really mad, decides that he must be sent to England. Claudius agrees to the suggestion that Polonius will eavesdrop on another conversation – between Hamlet and Gertrude.

Before you read

- In this scene there is an example of dramatic irony (see page 103), creating tension between the characters' limited knowledge and the audience's superior knowledge. Although Hamlet suspects his uncle to be guilty of his father's murder, he is still not entirely certain. An audience seeing the play for the first time might share Hamlet's uncertainty until, in an aside, Claudius reveals his feelings of guilt.

V

Grating:	Dwelling or harping on
Assay:	Tempt
O'er-raught:	Overtook
Contumely:	Contemptuous insults
Quietus:	Settlement
Bourn:	Region or realm
Beck:	Command
Calumny:	Slander



The problem of action

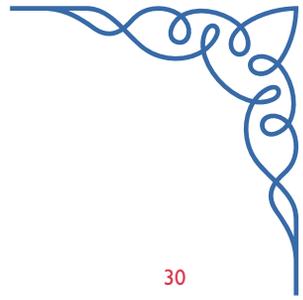
Act 3 Scene 1 contains the ‘to be, or not to be’ soliloquy, perhaps the most famous speech in any work of English literature. Beyond the renowned opening line, the speech is packed with other now-famous phrases such as: ‘there’s the rub’ and ‘this mortal coil’. It has been said that one of the most revolutionary aspects of Shakespeare’s writing was his ability to capture the inner workings of the mind. We can observe in this soliloquy how one thought leads naturally to the next, as in the progression of ideas in lines 64–65: ‘to die, to sleep – / To sleep, perchance to dream’. The nineteenth-century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky made the bold claim (in a letter to his brother Michael written in 1838) that in Hamlet’s speech ‘resounds the groaning of the whole numbed universe’.

In this soliloquy, Hamlet contemplates the meaning of action. He reflects that merely being – ‘to be’ – is to suffer or endure the oppression and various trials Fortune casts in one’s way. On the other hand, he considers that taking action against such troubles is hopeless: one would be overcome by them, die, and thus ‘not be’. In this sense, the image of a ‘sea of troubles’ makes the thought of ‘taking arms’ seem like a futile venture.

It is often said that in this soliloquy Hamlet contemplates suicide. ‘Self-slaughter’ is certainly raised in earlier soliloquies and Hamlet does reflect here upon the notion that fear of ‘something after death’ (perhaps a fear of hell) prevents a person from ending their life with an unsheathed dagger (‘a bare bodkin’), either through an attack by others or killing himself. However, the broader point is that this fear prevents people from taking action against oppression. You might note that the soliloquy ends (or is interrupted by Ophelia) at a point where Hamlet has not yet resolved to take action.

Note also how Hamlet resists the personal pronoun ‘I’, employing instead ‘we’, ‘us’, and ‘who’. The speech does not reflect on Hamlet’s particular circumstances: neither the Ghost, nor Claudius, nor revenge, nor the play that will occur in the next scene is considered. The absence of the Ghost is particularly interesting because Hamlet reflects in this speech that no ‘traveller’ returns from death’s country. Whether it is better to exist or not was a popular topic for debate in Renaissance universities, and it may be that Hamlet is considering arguments he has heard at his own university in Wittenberg. The generic or general nature of the speech has certainly added to the speech’s fame, and it is more widely quoted than any other of Shakespeare’s soliloquies.

Before reading Act 3 Scene 1, read through this soliloquy (lines 56–88) several times and look at the text notes. It might be helpful to go round the class with each student reading up to the next punctuation mark (e.g. student 1: ‘To be’; student 2: ‘or not to be’; student 3: ‘that is the question’).



ROSENCRANTZ We shall, my lord.

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN exit]

CLAUDIUS Sweet Gertrude, leave us too,

For we have closely sent for Hamlet hither,
That he, as 'twere by accident, may here
Affront Ophelia:

30

Her father and myself, lawful espials,
Will so bestow ourselves that, seeing unseen,
We may of their encounter frankly judge,
And gather by him, as he is behaved,
If't be the affliction of his love or no
That thus he suffers for.

35

GERTRUDE I shall obey you –

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
That your good beauties be the happy cause
Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your virtues
Will bring him to his wonted way again,
To both your honours.

40

OPHELIA Madam, I wish it may.

[GERTRUDE exits]

POLONIUS Ophelia, walk you here – Gracious, so please you,
We will bestow ourselves – [To OPHELIA] Read on this book,

That show of such an exercise may colour
Your loneliness. We are oft to blame in this –
'Tis too much proved – that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.

45

CLAUDIUS [Aside] O, 'tis too true!

How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
O heavy burden!

50



29 **Closely:** Secretly.

31 **Affront:** Meet face to face.

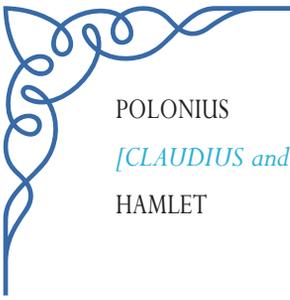
32 **Espials:** Spies.

41 **Wonted way:** Usual way of behaving.

45 **Colour:** Provide a reason.

47–49 **With devotion's visage ... devil himself:** By putting on a face ('visage') of holy behaviour, we conceal the devil beneath.

50 **How smart a lash:** A sharp sting caused by being whipped, in this case referring to the sharp sting of Claudius' guilty conscience.



POLONIUS I hear him coming: let's withdraw, my lord. 55

[CLAUDIUS and POLONIUS hide, as HAMLET enters]

HAMLET To be, or not to be: that is the question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die, to sleep – 60
No more – and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep –
To sleep, perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub, 65
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life,
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, 70
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of disprizèd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make 75
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will 80
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?



58 **The slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune:** Fortune is described as being cruel ('outrageous'), using weapons ('slings and arrows') to inflict suffering on people.

62–63 **Shocks / That flesh is heir to:** Violent blows that are part of the human condition.

63 **Consummation:** Ending.

65 **Rub:** Hindrance or obstruction; a bowling term for the pin that obstructs the path of the ball.

67 **Shuffled off this mortal coil:** Unsatisfactorily rid ourselves of life's turmoil.

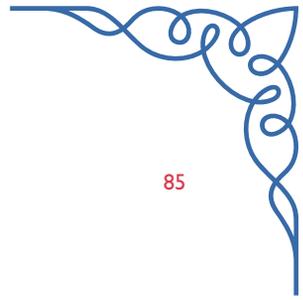
69 **Calamity of so long life:** A long life filled with trouble ('calamity').

72 **The pangs of disprizèd love:** The sharp pains of having your love unvalued.

73 **The insolence of office:** The rudeness of those in power ('office').

73–74 **The spurns / That patient merit of the unworthy takes:** The insults that patient, worthy people ('merit') take from low lives ('the unworthy').

76 **A bare bodkin:** An unsheathed dagger; **fardels:** burdens.



Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pith and moment
 With this regard their currents turn away,
 And lose the name of action – Soft you now!
 The fair Ophelia! – Nymph, in thy orisons
 Be all my sins remembered.

85

OPHELIA Good my lord,
 How does your honour for this many a day?

90

HAMLET I humbly thank you; well, well, well.

OPHELIA My lord, I have remembrances of yours
 That I have longèd long to re-deliver.
 I pray you now, receive them.

HAMLET No, not I;

95

I never gave you aught.

OPHELIA My honoured lord, you know right well you did,
 And, with them, words of so sweet breath composed
 As made the things more rich. Their perfume lost,
 Take these again, for to the noble mind
 Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.

100

There, my lord. *[OPHELIA tries to give HAMLET some love tokens]*

HAMLET Ha, ha! Are you honest?

OPHELIA My lord?

HAMLET Are you fair?

105

OPHELIA What means your lordship?

HAMLET That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no
 discourse to your beauty.

OPHELIA Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?



84–85 The native hue ... thought: The natural colour of strength and courage looks sick with a pale tinge when the action is thought about.

86 Great pith and moment: Great substance and importance.

89–90 Nymph ... remembered: Beautiful lady (a 'nymph' could also be poetically referring to Ophelia as a goddess), remember my sins in your prayers ('orisons'). Most critics assume the book Ophelia is reading is a prayer book due to Hamlet's statement here.

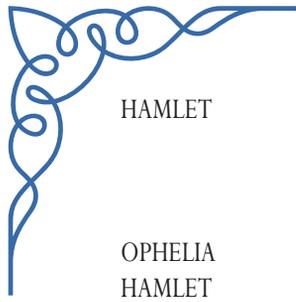
93 Remembrances: Keepsakes or love tokens.

99 Their perfume lost: Like perfume that loses its aroma, these gifts (see line 93) have lost their value.

103 Are you honest: Are you telling the truth, but also implied is 'Are you sexually pure?'

107–08 Your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty: Your sexual purity should not allow anyone to converse with your beauty.

109 Commerce: Association with; business dealings.



HAMLET Ay, truly, for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty 110
 from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate
 beauty into his likeness. This was sometime a paradox, but now the
 time gives it proof. I did love you once.

OPHELIA Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

HAMLET You should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our 115
 old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.

OPHELIA I was the more deceived.

HAMLET Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?
 I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such
 things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very 120
 proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than
 I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or
 time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling
 between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all; believe none
 of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where's your father? 125

OPHELIA At home, my lord.

HAMLET Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere
 but in's own house. Farewell.

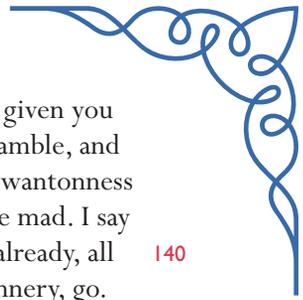
OPHELIA *[Aside]* O, help him, you sweet heavens!

HAMLET If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou 130
 as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get
 thee to a nunnery. Go, farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry
 a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of
 them. To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell.

OPHELIA *[Aside]* O heavenly powers, restore him! 135



-
- 110–12 **The power of beauty ... his likeness:** Beauty will taint chastity more easily than chastity will make beauty pure.
- 112 **Sometime:** Previously; **paradox:** two apparently contradictory statements that are both (at least in part) true.
- 115–16 **Virtue cannot ... relish of it:** A new branch ('virtue') cannot be grafted ('inoculated') onto an old tree (the original sinful nature) without being infected (having the same flavour or 'relish') by it.
- 118 **Nunnery:** A convent or place where nuns live, where her chastity will be protected. Hamlet also uses it in a vulgar sense, as 'nunnery' was slang for a brothel in Elizabethan times.
- 119 **Indifferent honest:** Moderately chaste or sexually pure.
- 124 **Arrant knaves:** Downright fools or rascals.
- 130 **Dowry:** Possessions or money that a wife brings to her husband at marriage.
- 133 **Monsters:** Cuckolds, or men with unfaithful wives, were said to grow horns like monsters.



HAMLET I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another; you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nick-name God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't: it hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriages: those that are married already, all but one, shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go. 140

[HAMLET exits]

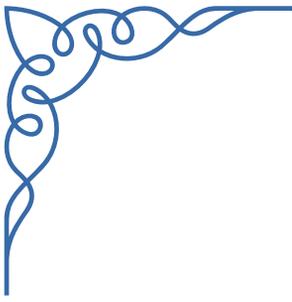
OPHELIA O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
 The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword;
 Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state;
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form; 145
 Th' observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
 And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
 That sucked the honey of his music vows,
 Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
 Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh; 150
 That unmatched form and feature of blown youth
 Blasted with ecstasy. O, woe is me,
 To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!

[CLAUDIUS and POLONIUS come out from hiding]

CLAUDIUS Love? His affections do not that way tend,
 Nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little, 155
 Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
 O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
 And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
 Will be some danger, which for to prevent,
 I have in quick determination 160



-
- 136 **Paintings:** Cosmetics or make-up.
 - 137 **You jig, you amble:** Sexually suggestive dance movements.
 - 138 **Lisp:** Speak in an affected (artificial or fake) manner.
 - 143–46 **The courtier's ... quite down:** Ophelia describes Hamlet as the ideal man of the time (Renaissance), with all the positive qualities of someone in the King's court ('courtier'), a soldier and a scholar; he is also described as a symbol of perfection ('rose'), and the reflection ('glass') and model ('mould') of fashion and behaviour.
 - 148 **Sucked the honey of his music vows:** She has tasted his sweet-sounding promises.
 - 150–52 **Like sweet bells ... Blasted with ecstasy:** Hamlet's mind is now out of tune and harsh-sounding; his young, unmatched mind in full bloom has been destroyed by the disease (has been 'blasted') of madness ('ecstasy').
 - 155 **Lacked form a little:** Was not up to his usual standard.
 - 157–58 **His melancholy ... disclose:** His sadness sits like a bird on its eggs: Claudius fears that what Hamlet will 'hatch' will be the discovery of the truth.



Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England
 For the demand of our neglected tribute.
 Haply the seas and countries different
 With variable objects shall expel
 This something-settled matter in his heart, 165
 Whereon his brains still beating puts him thus
 From fashion of himself. What think you on't?
 It shall do well. But yet do I believe
 The origin and commencement of his grief
 Sprung from neglected love – How now, Ophelia? 170
 You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said:
 We heard it all – My lord, do as you please,
 But if you hold it fit, after the play
 Let his queen mother all alone entreat him,
 To show his grief. Let her be round with him, 175
 And I'll be placed, so please you, in the ear
 Of all their conference. If she find him not,
 To England send him, or confine him where
 Your wisdom best shall think.

CLAUDIUS It shall be so.
Madness in great ones must not unwatched go. 180

POLONIUS

CLAUDIUS

[Both exit]

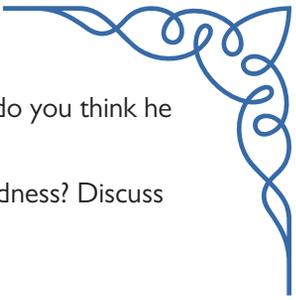


- 162 For the demand of our neglected tribute:** He will act as an ambassador and will demand the war payment ('tribute') that they have neglected to pay.
- 166–67 Puts him thus / From fashion of himself:** He is not behaving like he normally does.
- 173 If you hold it fit:** If you consider it appropriate.
- 175 Round:** Honest or true.



QUESTIONS

- 1** How accurate is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's assessment of Hamlet's behaviour? Use some quotations to support your answer.
- 2** Explain the dramatic irony in Claudius' enthusiasm to see the play (line 24).
- 3** In Elizabethan times, 'a nunnery' not only meant a house inhabited by nuns; it was also slang for a brothel. Why do you think Hamlet insists he does not love Ophelia and that she should go to a 'nunnery' (line 118)? What does he seem to be implying?

- 
- 4 Quote a line that shows Hamlet's disgust with women. Why do you think he feels this way?
 - 5 How does Polonius plan to uncover the truth of Hamlet's madness? Discuss how this mirrors other narrative events of the play.
 - 6 Explain how Shakespeare creates dramatic irony in this scene.



EXTEND

- 1 Claudius describes himself and Polonius, in line 32, as 'lawful espials' (spies). What does this phrase suggest about Claudius' court, and which of the play's main themes are reinforced through this phrasing?
- 2 Shakespeare uses various forms of **antithesis** (contrasting of opposites) in this scene to highlight the contrast between reality and illusion, or between truth and deception. List several examples and explain how they contribute to this thematic element of the play.
- 3 The language in this scene shifts from verse to prose (line 102), then back to verse (line 142). What dramatic purpose do you think Shakespeare has in mind by doing this?
- 4 Read lines 57, 100, 142 and 149. With what other word(s) is Hamlet's 'nobility' frequently associated? How does this juxtaposition of words (placing them beside each other) add to your understanding of the character of Hamlet? How does Ophelia's brief soliloquy (lines 142–53) reinforce these notions?
- 5 In what way are Ophelia's thoughts in lines 152–53 ironic?
- 6 What do you think Polonius means when he says of Hamlet, 'To England send him, or confine him where / Your wisdom best shall think' (lines 178–79)? What do these lines suggest about Polonius' character?



DISCUSS

- 1 How might a director stage the part of the scene when Hamlet delivers his famous soliloquy? Consider two different ways and comment, in particular, on blocking.
- 2 Many directors have Hamlet overhearing Polonius instructing Ophelia. Do you believe that assuming Hamlet knows he is being spied upon justifies his treatment of Ophelia?

Zeffirelli, Branagh and Almereyda: DVD ('To be, or not to be')



Watch this scene in the Zeffirelli (1990), Branagh (1996) and Almereyda (2000) film versions and discuss the following in groups or as a class.

- 1 Compare the way each film version uses a range of cinematic devices to convey Hamlet's state of mind. Consider camera work, sound (music and sound effects), lighting (including colour) and editing (changing from one shot to another).
- 2 Which version do you think is most effective and why?
- 3 Discuss the visual symbolism of Almereyda's Hamlet walking down the 'action' aisle of a video store while presenting this famous soliloquy.
- 4 Does Hamlet *know* he is being observed? How do Zeffirelli and Branagh indicate this? What evidence is there in the text that these are faithful interpretations of the play?

Act 3 Scene 2 (Part 1)

CHARACTERS

Hamlet	Polonius
Player King	Rosencrantz
Player Queen	1 ST Player
Ophelia	Guiltenstern
Lucianus	[Optional:
Claudius	Narrator to
Horatio	read stage
Gertrude	directions]
Prologue	

IN A NUTSHELL

Hamlet offers the players some final tips for their performance and reminds Horatio to observe the King closely for signs of guilt. Seated beside Ophelia, Hamlet speaks loudly and inappropriately about his mother and the inconstancy of women. When the murder is performed in the play, Claudius stands and calls for light, causing the play to be abandoned.

Before you read

- In the opening act of the play, Hamlet appeared to mock Horatio's stoicism as narrow-mindedness, proclaiming, 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (Act 1 Scene 5, lines 177–78). In Act 3 Scene 2, though, Hamlet praises Horatio's stoicism, asserting that, because he is not 'passion's slave' (line 60), he can be a loyal and constant friend.

- The language of the play-within-the-play is high-flown or lofty, and is written in rhyming couplets. It contrasts with the dialogue of the characters in *Hamlet* and, in doing so, reinforces the artificiality or fictional nature of the performance that Hamlet arranges. This may, in turn, heighten an audience's sense of the characters in *Hamlet* being 'real'. Another interesting feature of this play-within-the-play is the slow pace of the action. It takes the first six lines (lines 132–37) to establish the idea that the couple have been married for 30 years. In this sense, the static nature of the language could be said to mirror Hamlet's inaction.

V

Lief:	Gladly, willingly
Beget:	Obtain
Occulted:	Hidden
Hither:	Here, to this place
Marry:	A mild oath (short for 'by the Virgin Mary') meaning truly

A great hall in the castle.

[HAMLET and Players enter]

HAMLET Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. 5
O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings,

- 1–2 **Trippingly on the tongue:** Hamlet wants the words to be pronounced smoothly, nimbly or naturally, not in a forced or exaggerated manner (to 'mouth' it).
- 2–3 **As lief:** As soon, or rather.
- 3–4 **Do not saw the air too much with your hand:** Do not wave your arms stiffly about as if you are sawing wood; do not use an unnatural or exaggerated gesture.
- 6 **Temperance:** Moderation; restrained or controlled action.
- 7 **A robustious periwig-pated fellow:** A loud-mouthed, wig-wearing actor.
- 8 **Groundlings:** Low-paying audience members who stood in the 'yard' in front of the stage.



1ST PLAYER
HAMLET

who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-
shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o’erdoing 10
Termagant: it out-Herods Herod; pray you, avoid it.

I warrant your honour.

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor.
Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special 15
observance: that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything
so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the
first and now, was and is to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature,
to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very
age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone,
or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but 20
make the judicious grieve, the censure of the which one must in your
allowance o’erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that
I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak
it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait
of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I 25
have thought some of nature’s journeymen had made men and not
made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

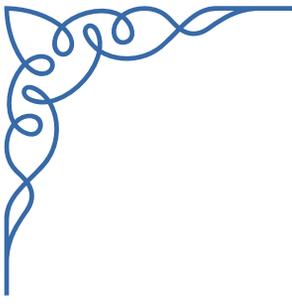
1ST PLAYER
HAMLET

I hope we have reformed that indifferently with us, sir.

O, reform it altogether. And let those that play your clowns speak 30
no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will



-
- 9 **Inexplicable dumb-shows:** Mimes that do not make any sense (Shakespeare is gently mocking his audience’s taste in theatre).
 - 11 **Termagant ... Herod:** In medieval mystery plays, Termagant was a Muslim deity who was represented as a violent and overbearing person. Likewise, Herod (the biblical king who, at the time of the birth of Christ, ordered the slaying of Israel’s firstborn) was conveyed as a raging tyrant. Again Hamlet criticises actors who exaggerate words and gestures rather than act naturally.
 - 15–17 **O’erstep not ... up to nature:** Act naturally or realistically, presenting a reflection of life as it is.
 - 20 **Or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh:** Do not perform poorly, even though the dim-witted (‘unskilful’) might find it humorous.
 - 21 **Censure:** Judgement.
 - 22 **Allowance:** Opinion.
 - 24–25 **Nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man:** The way actors walk and talk is so unnatural that it is barely human.
 - 28 **Indifferently:** Fairly well.
 - 29 **Clowns:** Actors who ad lib (improvise), thus distracting the audience from the play’s main ideas. Perhaps criticising William Kemp, the company’s leading comic actor, who was notorious for adding his own lines.



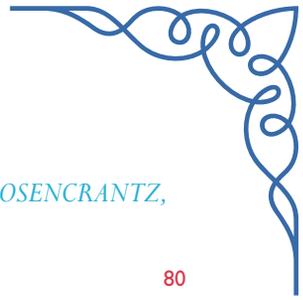
Hath sealed thee for herself; for thou hast been
 As one in suffering all that suffers nothing,
 A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards 55
 Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
 Whose blood and judgement are so well commingled
 That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
 To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
 That is not passion's slave and I will wear him 60
 In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
 As I do thee – Something too much of this.
 There is a play tonight before the King:
 One scene of it comes near the circumstance
 Which I have told thee of my father's death. 65
 I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,
 Even with the very comment of thy soul
 Observe mine uncle: if his occulted guilt
 Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
 It is a damnèd ghost that we have seen, 70
 And my imaginations are as foul
 As Vulcan's stithy. Give him heedful note,
 For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
 And after we will both our judgements join
 In censure of his seeming. 75

HORATIO Well, my lord.

If he steal aught the whilst this play is playing,
 And 'scape detecting, I will pay the theft.



-
- 53–56 For thou has been ... equal thanks:** You have been someone who endures both the good ('rewards') and the bad ('buffets') in life equally and without being fazed.
- 56–59 Blest are those ... stop she please:** Hamlet claims Horatio's passion ('blood') or emotions, and his mind or reasoning ('judgement'), are so well mixed that Fortune cannot play her tune on him ('pipe' = recorder; 'stop' = holes in a recorder that produce different notes).
- 60–61 I will wear him / In my heart's core:** Hamlet plays on the Latin word for heart (*cor*), which is similar to the French *coeur*.
- 66 Afoot:** About to occur.
- 67 The very comment of thy soul:** Deep insight, going to the very core of your being.
- 69 Unkennel:** Reveal or unravel, like forcing a fox out of its burrow ('kennel').
- 71–72 As foul / As Vulcan's stithy:** As dirty ('foul') as the Roman god of fire's anvil ('stithy').
- 73 Rivet:** Fasten or nail.
- 75 In censure of his seeming:** In judgement of his pretence or pretending.
- 76 If he steal aught:** If he gets away with anything.



HAMLET They are coming to the play: I must be idle.
Get you a place.

[Danish march. A flourish. CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, POLONIUS, OPHELIA, ROSENCRANTZ, GUILDENSTERN and Lords enter, followed by Guards carrying torches]

CLAUDIUS How fares our cousin Hamlet? 80

HAMLET Excellent, i' faith, of the chameleon's dish. I eat the air, promise-crammed: you cannot feed capons so.

CLAUDIUS I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet; these words are not mine.

HAMLET No, nor mine now – *[To POLONIUS]* My lord, you played once i' th' university, you say? 85

POLONIUS That did I, my lord, and was accounted a good actor.

HAMLET What did you enact?

POLONIUS I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i' th' Capitol; Brutus killed me.

HAMLET It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there – Be the players ready? 90

ROSENCRANTZ Ay, my lord; they stay upon your patience.

GERTRUDE Come hither, my dear Hamlet. Sit by me.

HAMLET No, good mother: here's metal more attractive.

POLONIUS *[Aside, to CLAUDIUS]* O, ho! Do you mark that?

HAMLET *[Lying down at OPHELIA's feet]* Lady, shall I lie in your lap? 95

OPHELIA No, my lord.

HAMLET I mean, my head upon your lap?

OPHELIA Ay, my lord.

HAMLET Do you think I meant country matters?

OPHELIA I think nothing, my lord. 100

HAMLET That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

OPHELIA What is, my lord?

HAMLET Nothing.



78 **I must be idle:** I must pretend again to have an empty mind.

81 **The chameleon's dish:** The air; in medieval times chameleons were thought to eat air; Hamlet responds to 'fares' as if Claudius were asking how he had eaten.

82 **Capons:** Cockerels that had been castrated, apparently to make them taste better.

84 **You played once:** You used to perform.

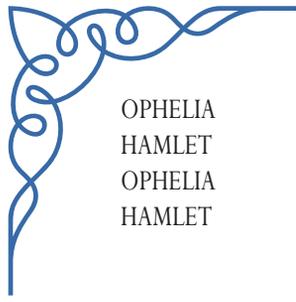
88 **Capitol:** The temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill in ancient Rome where, led by Brutus, a group of conspirators assassinated Julius Caesar in 44 BC.

89 **So capital a calf:** Hamlet puns on the word Capitol (line 88) as well as capital (meaning top quality and also relating to a capital crime such as murder); 'calf' = fool.

93 **Metal more attractive:** Referring to Ophelia, Hamlet plays on the meaning of the word 'attractive', meaning both good-looking and metal that is magnetic or that attracts iron.

99 **Country matters:** A strong sexual connotation, and the origin of a modern swearword.

103 **Nothing:** This ('no thing') is an obscure pun for the vagina.



OPHELIA You are merry, my lord.
 HAMLET Who, I? 105
 OPHELIA Ay, my lord.
 HAMLET O God, your only jig-maker. What should a man do but be merry?
 For, look you, how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died
 within these two hours.
 OPHELIA Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord. 110
 HAMLET So long? Nay then, let the devil wear black, for I'll have a suit of sables.
 O heavens! Die two months ago, and not forgotten yet? Then there's
 hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year; but, by'r
 Lady, he must build churches then, or else shall he suffer not thinking
 on, with the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is 'For, O, for, O, the hobby- 115
 horse is forgot'.

[Hautboys play. Those performing the dumb-show enter]

[A King and a Queen enter, affectionately embracing each other. She kneels and her actions suggest a declaration of love to him. He lifts her up and rests his head upon her neck. He lies down on a bank of flowers and she, seeing him asleep, leaves him. Soon thereafter, another man sneaks in, removes the King's crown, kisses it, pours poison in the King's ears, and then exits. The Queen returns, finds the King dead, and appears greatly distressed. The Poisoner, with two or three other characters, comes in again, pretending to mourn with her. The dead body is carried away. The Poisoner woos the Queen with gifts; she seems reluctant awhile, but in the end accepts his love.]

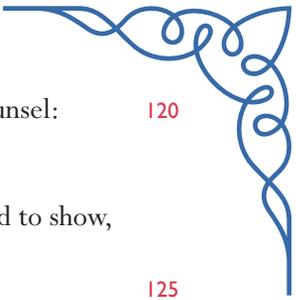
[The dumb-show exits]

OPHELIA What means this, my lord?
 HAMLET Marry, this is miching mallecho: that means mischief.
 OPHELIA Belike this show imports the argument of the play.

[PROLOGUE enters]



-
- 107 Jig-maker:** Writer of bawdy or sexually suggestive plays.
 - 111 A suit of sables:** An expensive suit lined with dark ('sable') fur; traditionally worn in mourning.
 - 114–15 Suffer not thinking on:** Don't worry about it; forget it.
 - 115–16 Hobby-horse:** An artificial horse fastened around the waist of a morris dancer, which was banned by Puritans for its unnaturalness; this formed the basis of a popular song in Shakespeare's time.
 - 116 Hautboys:** Instruments similar to oboes, which produced a haunting sound; **dumb-show:** a performance that is wholly mimed, without dialogue.
 - 118 Miching mallecho:** A phrase of obscure origin that relates to being sneaky or crafty, which Hamlet translates for us as 'mischief'.
 - 119 Belike this show imports the argument of the play:** Presumably ('belike') this dumb-show or mime presents or mirrors the main idea of the play.



HAMLET We shall know by this fellow. The players cannot keep counsel: 120
 they'll tell all.

OPHELIA Will he tell us what this show meant?

HAMLET Ay, or any show that you'll show him. Be not you ashamed to show,
 he'll not shame to tell you what it means.

OPHELIA You are naught, you are naught. I'll mark the play. 125

PROLOGUE *For us, and for our tragedy,*
 Here stooping to your clemency,
 We beg your hearing patiently.

[PROLOGUE exits]

HAMLET Is this a prologue or the posy of a ring? 130

OPHELIA 'Tis brief, my lord.

HAMLET As woman's love.

[Two PLAYERS enter, as King and Queen]

Player King *Full thirty times hath Phoebus' cart gone round*
 Neptune's salt wash and Tellus' orbèd ground,
 And thirty dozen moons with borrowed sheen
 About the world have times twelve thirties been, 135
 Since love our hearts and Hymen did our hands
 Unite commutual in most sacred bands.

Player Queen *So many journeys may the sun and moon*
 Make us again count o'er ere love be done!
 But, woe is me, you are so sick of late, 140
 So far from cheer and from your former state,
 That I distrust you. Yet, though I distrust,
 Discomfort you, my lord, it nothing must,
 For women's fear and love holds quantity,
 In neither aught, or in extremity. 145

120 **Counsel:** A secret.

123 **To show:** A sexually suggestive pun meaning to show her private parts.

125 **Naught:** Naughty or disgusting; **mark:** pay attention to.

127 **Clemency:** Leniency.

129 **Posy of a ring:** Engraving on a ring, implying the prologue was particularly brief.

132–35 **Full thirty times ... twelve thirties been:** Several poetic metaphors appear here to suggest the characters have been married for 30 years: 'Phoebus' cart' = the sun's chariot – Phoebus is another name for Apollo, the sun god; 'Neptune's salt wash' = the ocean – Neptune was the ancient Roman god of the sea; 'Tellus' orbèd ground' = the round Earth – Tellus was an ancient Roman earth goddess; 'borrowed sheen' = reflected light from the sun; 'Hymen' = the Roman god of marriage, who united lovers in marriage.

142 **Distrust you:** Fear for you.





Player King *Now, what my love is, proof hath made you know,
And as my love is sized, my fear is so:
Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear;
Where little fears grow great, great love grows there.
'Faith, I must leave thee, love, and shortly too:
My operant powers their functions leave to do.
And thou shalt live in this fair world behind,
Honoured, beloved, and haply one as kind
For husband shalt thou –* 150

Player Queen *O, confound the rest!
Such love must needs be treason in my breast:
In second husband let me be accurst!
None wed the second but who killed the first.* 155

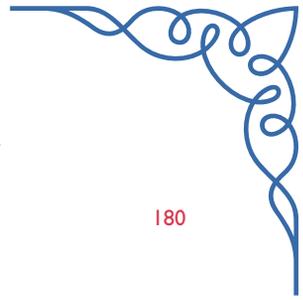
HAMLET That's wormwood.

Player Queen *The instances that second marriage move
Are base respects of thrift, but none of love.
A second time I kill my husband dead,
When second husband kisses me in bed.* 160

Player King *I do believe you think what now you speak,
But what we do determine oft we break.
Purpose is but the slave to memory,
Of violent birth, but poor validity,
Which now, like fruit unripe, sticks on the tree,
But fall, unshaken, when they mellow be.
Most necessary 'tis that we forget
To pay ourselves what to ourselves is debt.
What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.
The violence of either grief or joy
Their own enactures with themselves destroy.
Where joy most revels, grief doth most lament;
Grief joys, joy grieves, on slender accident.* 165
170
175



-
- 151 **Operant:** Vital or relating to life.
- 154 **Confound:** Damn.
- 158 **Wormwood:** A bitter plant, thus Hamlet is suggesting that what the Player Queen is saying is bitter or biting (for Claudius and Gertrude).
- 159 **Instances:** Motives.
- 160 **Base respects of thrift:** Low quality motives of profit or gain.
- 165–68 **Purpose is but ... mellow be:** Our intentions are strong to begin with but do not last ('validity' = endurance) and eventually fall like ripened ('mellow') fruit from a tree.
- 173–74 **The violence ... themselves destroy:** The extreme nature of our emotions hinders us from acting upon ('enactures') our intentions.
- 176 **Grief joys ... accident:** The slightest change in circumstances creates extreme mood swings in emotionally intense people.



*This world is not for aye, nor 'tis not strange
That even our loves should with our fortunes change;
For 'tis a question left us yet to prove,
Whether love lead fortune, or else fortune love.* 180

*The great man down, you mark his favourite flies;
The poor advanced makes friends of enemies.
And hitherto doth love on fortune tend;
For who not needs shall never lack a friend,
And who in want a hollow friend doth try,* 185
Directly seasons him his enemy.

*But, orderly to end where I begun,
Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown;
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.* 190

Player Queen

*So think thou wilt no second husband wed,
But die thy thoughts when thy first lord is dead.
Nor earth to me give food, nor heaven light;
Sport and repose lock from me day and night!
To desperation turn my trust and hope;* 195

*An anchor's cheer in prison be my scope!
Each opposite that blanks the face of joy
Meet what I would have well and it destroy!
Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife,
If, once a widow, ever I be wife!* 200

HAMLET

If she should break it now!

Player King

*'Tis deeply sworn. Sweet, leave me here awhile:
My spirits grow dull, and fain I would beguile
The tedious day with sleep.*

[Player King sleeps]



-
- 177 **For aye:** Forever.
 - 181 **Mark his favourite flies:** The meaning of this phrase is obscure.
 - 183 **Tend:** Attend or serve.
 - 186 **Seasons:** Ripens or matures.
 - 189 **Devices still are overthrown:** Plans continually fail to be fulfilled.
 - 194 **Sport and repose:** Recreation (during the day) and rest (at night).
 - 196 **Anchor's cheer:** A hermit's (also known as an anchorite in Shakespeare's time) lifestyle.
 - 197 **Blanks:** Blanches or makes pale.
 - 199 **Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife:** In this life and the next, may everlasting punishment follow me.
 - 200 **Wife:** Remarried.



Player Queen

*Sleep rock thy brain
And never come mischance between us twain.* 205

[Player Queen exits]

HAMLET Madam, how like you this play?
GERTRUDE The lady doth protest too much, methinks.
HAMLET O, but she'll keep her word.
CLAUDIUS Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?
HAMLET No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i' th' world. 210
CLAUDIUS What do you call the play?
HAMLET *The Mousetrap*. Marry, how? Tropically. This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna: Gonzago is the Duke's name; his wife, Baptista. You shall see anon: 'tis a knavish piece of work, but what o' that? Your Majesty and we that have free souls, it touches us not. 215
Let the gallèd jade wince, our withers are unwrung.

[Lucianus enters]

OPHELIA This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King.
OPHELIA You are as good as a chorus, my lord.
HAMLET I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying. 220
OPHELIA You are keen, my lord; you are keen.
HAMLET It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge.
OPHELIA Still better, and worse.

- 
-
- 207 **Protest:** Promise.
209 **Argument:** Themes or main ideas of the play.
210 **Jest:** Pretend or act.
212 **Tropically:** Metaphorically or figuratively; **image:** reflection or parallel of something that occurred in real life.
213 **Duke:** King.
214 **Knavish:** Rascally, mischievous.
215 **We that have free souls:** We who are innocent (our souls are free of guilt).
216 **Let the gallèd jade wince, our withers are unwrung:** Let the saddle-sore horse kick in pain, my shoulder blades aren't pinched. Hamlet uses this metaphor to suggest his conscience is not pricked, unlike the conscience of Claudius.
218 **Chorus:** A commentary on, or someone who interprets, the play.
219–20 **I could interpret ... dallying:** Hamlet takes Ophelia's reference to commenting on the play and transforms it into a rude sexual pun relating to being engaged in sexual activity.
221 **Keen:** Quick or cutting; sharp-tongued.
222 **A groaning to take off my edge:** More vulgar puns relating to Hamlet losing his erection, hence Ophelia's response.
223 **Still better, and worse:** Cleverer, but more disgusting.

HAMLET So you mistake your husbands – Begin, murderer; pox, leave thy damnable faces and begin. Come: *‘the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge’*. 225

Lucianus *Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing;
Confederate season, else no creature seeing;
Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
With Hecate’s ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,* 230
*Thy natural magic and dire property,
On wholesome life usurp immediately.*

[Lucianus pours poison into the sleeping Player King’s ears]

HAMLET He poisons him i’ th’ garden for his estate. His name’s Gonzago; the story is extant, and writ in choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago’s wife. 235

OPHELIA The King rises!

HAMLET What, frightened with false fire?

GERTRUDE How fares my lord?

POLONIUS Give o’er the play.

CLAUDIUS Give me some light. Away! 240

ALL Lights, lights, lights!

[All except HAMLET and HORATIO exit]

224 **Mistake:** Lie during one’s wedding vows; **pox:** a mild oath, roughly equivalent to saying, ‘A plague on it.’

225–26 **The croaking raven doth bellow for revenge:** In this line that seems quite out of place, Shakespeare mocks the stylised language of the players, reminds us of Hamlet’s task (‘revenge’) from which he seems to have strayed, and makes fun of an anonymous, poorly written and repetitive revenge tragedy from the time, known as the *True Tragedy of Richard III*.

227 **Apt:** Ready.

228 **Confederate season:** A suitable time.

230 **Hecate’s ban:** The curse of Hecate, goddess of witchcraft; **thrice blasted:** three times more deadly.

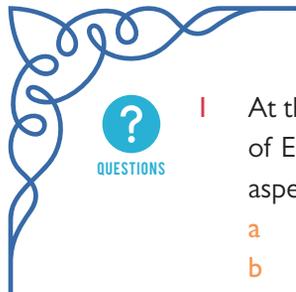
231 **Dire property:** Dreadful nature.

232 **Usurp:** In this instance, meaning to take possession of or seize.

234 **Extant:** Still exists.

237 **Frighted with false fire:** Frightened by a gun that shot blanks.

239 **Give o’er:** Stop.



QUESTIONS

- 1 At the beginning of this scene (lines 1–34), Hamlet criticises various aspects of Elizabethan theatrical conventions. How does Hamlet claim the following aspects should be performed on stage?
 - a Dialogue (speaking parts)
 - b Hand movements or gestures
 - c The part of clowns
- 2 In what ways does Shakespeare gently poke fun at his audience in this scene?
- 3 How does line 14 ('Suit the action to the word, the word to the action') summarise Shakespeare's preferred acting style, and how is this ironic coming from Hamlet?
- 4 What does Hamlet wish Horatio to observe during the play that is being performed before Claudius and Gertrude?
- 5 How does Hamlet's dialogue in this scene reinforce his obsession with his mother's 'o'erhasty marriage' and his disgust at women in general?



EXTEND

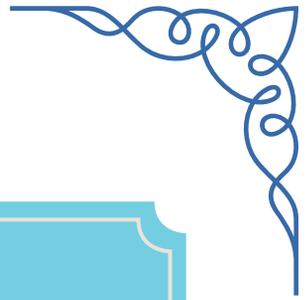
- 1 Hamlet uses many puns in this scene. What does this reveal about his character? Do you find his use of vulgar puns makes him more likeable or less so? Why?
- 2 How do the embedded narratives (the plays-within-the-play, including the dumb-show and 'The Murder of Gonzago') reinforce or parallel the central narrative of *Hamlet*? Draw a diagram to illustrate your understanding of the relationship between the various narrative strands and embedded narratives that have appeared in the play so far.



DISCUSS

- 1 What do you think the 1ST Player should be doing while Hamlet is advising him in lines 1–34? Discuss at least two possibilities in terms of facial expressions, stance, gestures etc.
- 2 List some difficulties a director might encounter in staging this scene. Draw a diagram to explain to the rest of the class how you would stage this scene.

Act 3 Scene 2 (Part 2)



CHARACTERS

Hamlet
Guildenstern
Rosencrantz
Polonius
Horatio
[Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]



IN A NUTSHELL

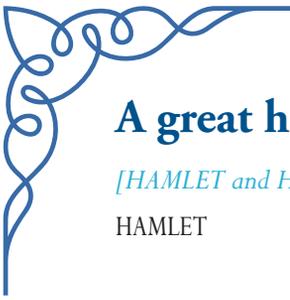
Hamlet tells Horatio that he is now certain of Claudius' guilt. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern inform Hamlet that the King has retired to his chamber, angry after viewing the play. This fuels Hamlet's excitement that his plan to draw out Claudius' guilt has worked. He baffles Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with riddling conversation and accuses them of trying to manipulate him, before dismissing them. Polonius passes on Gertrude's request to see Hamlet, which he agrees to, but confesses when alone that he is going to speak harshly to her.

Before you read

- This scene sees Hamlet in a state of extreme excitement, now wholly convinced that his plan has revealed Claudius' guilt. However, that Claudius reacts strongly to the content of the play is not necessarily because of his guilt. It is possible that Claudius interprets the nephew poisoning his uncle on stage as Hamlet signalling his intention to murder him.



Belike:	It is likely
Perdy:	By God (French <i>par Dieu</i>)
Vouchsafe:	Permit
Choler:	Anger
Start:	Jump or swerve off track
Tame:	Calm
Closet:	Private chamber or bedroom
Contagion:	Referring here to an infectious moral disease



A great hall in the castle.

[HAMLET and HORATIO are alone on stage]

HAMLET *Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play;
For some must watch, while some must sleep:
So runs the world away.* 245

Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers – if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me – with two Provincial roses on my razèd shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?

HORATIO Half a share.

HAMLET A whole one, I – 250
*For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself, and now reigns here
A very, very ... peacock.*

HORATIO You might have rhymed. 255

HAMLET O good Horatio, I'll take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound.
Didst perceive?

HORATIO Very well, my lord.

HAMLET Upon the talk of the poisoning?

HORATIO I did very well note him. 260

HAMLET Ah, ha! – Come, some music! Come, the recorders! –
For if the King like not the comedy,
Why then, belike, he likes it not, perdy –
Come, some music!

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN re-enter]

GUILDENSTERN Good my lord, vouchsafe me a word with you. 265

HAMLET Sir, a whole history.

GUILDENSTERN The King, sir –

HAMLET Ay, sir, what of him?

GUILDENSTERN Is in his retirement marvellous distempered.

HAMLET With drink, sir? 270

GUILDENSTERN No, my lord, rather with choler.

242–43 **Let the stricken ... play:** The wounded deer will weep but the uninjured male ('hart') is free to play; refers to Claudius' running away guiltily.

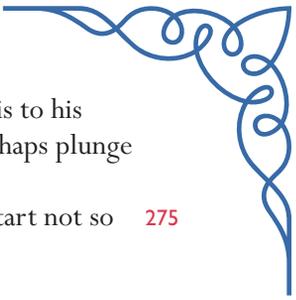
246 **A forest of feathers:** A decorated actor's hat.

247 **Turn Turk with me:** Renounce Christianity to become a Muslim (implying a drastic change).

247–48 **Two Provincial roses on my razèd shoes:** Hamlet describes his French-styled ('Provincial' = from Provence) shoes decorated with rosettes.

251–54 **For thou dost know ... peacock:** A classical allusion to the tale of Damon and Pythias, known for their close friendship ('Jove' = Jupiter, the King of the Roman gods).

269 **Is in his retirement marvellous distempered:** Claudius has retired to his private chamber extremely angry.



HAMLET Your wisdom should show itself more richer to signify this to his doctor; for, for me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into far more choler.

GUILDENSTERN Good my lord, put your discourse into some frame and start not so wildly from my affair. 275

HAMLET I am tame, sir: pronounce.

GUILDENSTERN The Queen, your mother, in most great affliction of spirit, hath sent me to you.

HAMLET You are welcome. 280

GUILDENSTERN Nay, good my lord, this courtesy is not of the right breed. If it shall please you to make me a wholesome answer, I will do your mother's commandment; if not, your pardon and my return shall be the end of my business.

HAMLET Sir, I cannot. 285

GUILDENSTERN What, my lord?

HAMLET Make you a wholesome answer: my wit's diseased. But, sir, such answer as I can make, you shall command; or, rather, as you say, my mother. Therefore, no more, but to the matter: my mother, you say –

ROSENCRANTZ Then thus she says: your behaviour hath struck her into amazement and admiration. 290

HAMLET O wonderful son that can so astonish a mother! But is there no sequel at the heels of this mother's admiration? Impart.

ROSENCRANTZ She desires to speak with you in her closet, ere you go to bed.

HAMLET We shall obey, were she ten times our mother. Have you any further trade with us? 295

ROSENCRANTZ My lord, you once did love me.

HAMLET So I do still, by these pickers and stealers.

ROSENCRANTZ Good my lord, what is your cause of distemper? You do, surely, bar the door upon your own liberty, if you deny your griefs to your friend. 300

HAMLET Sir, I lack advancement.

273–74 For me to ... more choler: Hamlet plays on the word 'purge' here. While a 'purgation' can mean a moral cleansing via confession of sin, Hamlet suggests that if he helped purge or cleanse Claudius' body of toxins (done via bloodletting or a herbal enema in Elizabethan times), that would make him even angrier.

282 Wholesome: Healthy; rational.

287 My wit's diseased: My mind has been infected.

293 Admiration: Wonder (hinting at confusion).

296 Trade: Business.

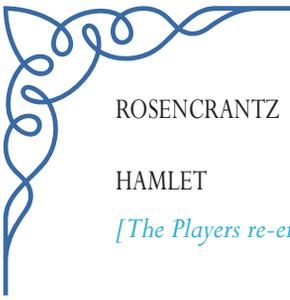
297 Once: Previously or at one time.

298 Pickers and stealers: Hands.

300 Deny: Refuse to tell.

302 Advancement: Access to the King or a pathway to promotion.





ROSENCRANTZ How can that be, when you have the voice of the King himself for your succession in Denmark?

HAMLET Ay, but sir, '*While the grass grows*' – the proverb is something musty. 305

[The Players re-enter, with recorders]

O, the recorders! Let me see one. To withdraw with you – why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?

GUILDENSTERN O, my lord, if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly.

HAMLET I do not well understand that. Will you play upon this pipe?

GUILDENSTERN My lord, I cannot. 310

HAMLET I pray you.

GUILDENSTERN Believe me, I cannot.

HAMLET I do beseech you.

GUILDENSTERN I know no touch of it, my lord.

HAMLET 'Tis as easy as lying: govern these ventages with your fingers and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops. 315

GUILDENSTERN But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony; I have not the skill.

HAMLET Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! 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. 320

'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, yet you cannot play upon me – 325



305 **While the grass grows:** The proverb finishes 'the horse starves' but the meaning is unclear here.

306–07 **Why do you ... into a toil:** Hamlet uses a hunting metaphor here. Sometimes a hunter would position himself downwind from the prey, allowing the animal to smell him and be tricked into running the other way into a net ('toil'). Hamlet does not appreciate being lied to and tricked as if he were an animal.

309 **Pipe:** Recorder.

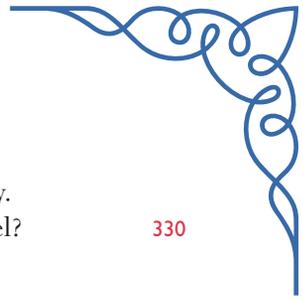
315–17 **Govern these ventages ... the stops:** Hamlet shows Guildenstern how a recorder works. The holes in the recorder, alternatively called 'ventages' or 'stops', when covered with the fingers and thumb sound out ('discourse') various musical pitches.

322 **Mystery:** Skill in playing a musical instrument.

323 **Compass:** A range of notes.

325 **'Sblood:** A mild oath in Shakespeare's time, short for 'By His (Christ's) blood'.

326 **Fret:** A play on words, meaning to produce various sounds according to the arrangement of fingers on the recorder, and to annoy.



[POLONIUS enters]

God bless you, sir!

POLONIUS My lord, the Queen would speak with you, and presently. 330

HAMLET Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

POLONIUS By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.

HAMLET Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET Or like a whale?

POLONIUS Very like a whale. 335

HAMLET Then I will come to my mother by and by. *[Aside]* They fool me to the top of my bent – I will come by and by.

POLONIUS I will say so.

HAMLET By and by is easily said –

[POLONIUS exits]

Leave me, friends. 340

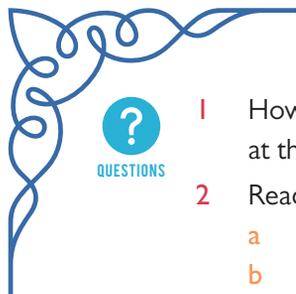
[All except HAMLET exit]

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
 When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
 Contagion to this world: now could I drink hot blood,
 And do such bitter business as the day
 Would quake to look on. Soft! Now to my mother. 345
 O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
 The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
 Let me be cruel, not unnatural:
 I will speak daggers to her, but use none;
 My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites; 350
 How in my words soever she be shent,
 To give them seals never, my soul, consent!

[HAMLET exits]



-
- 331 **By the mass:** Another mild oath, swearing by the Mass or Holy Communion.
 - 336–37 **They fool me to the top of my bent:** They make me play the fool (act mad) to the limit of my ability. Hamlet refers metaphorically to an archer exerting all his might to bend the bow back to its limit.
 - 341 **The very witching time of night:** Midnight, when witches were said to be active.
 - 347 **Nero:** The Roman Emperor who murdered his mother. Hamlet does not want to become like him by killing Gertrude and thus will 'speak daggers' rather than use them (line 349).
 - 351 **Shent:** Punished.
 - 352 **Give them seals never:** Not put them (his hard words) into action.



QUESTIONS

- 1 How does Shakespeare use language to make clear Hamlet's excitement at the success of his plan?
- 2 Read Hamlet's soliloquy in lines 341–52.
 - a What are the main ideas in this short soliloquy?
 - b How does Shakespeare create a sense of purpose in this soliloquy?



EXTEND

When Hamlet speaks with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (lines 265–327), the tone of his conversation changes midway. Complete the following table to show your understanding of the way Hamlet speaks to them.

	Lines 265–305	Lines 306–27
Tone		
Primary language device used		
Examples of this device		



DISCUSS

What do you think Hamlet should be doing (e.g. using facial expressions, gestures and movements) during his dialogue with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (lines 265–327)? Justify your choices.

Zeffirelli and Branagh: DVD ('I'll take the Ghost's word')

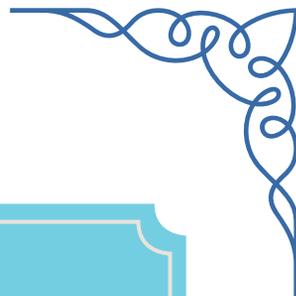


PRESS PLAY

Watch the Zeffirelli (1990) and Branagh (1996) versions of this scene and compare the way Hamlet is characterised by each director.

- 1 Upon which aspects of Hamlet's character or emotions does each director focus?
- 2 What cinematic devices does each director use to highlight these aspects or emotions? Consider camera work, lighting and music in your discussion.
- 3 Which version do you think is more appropriate to the text and why?
- 4 If you were given the task of directing this scene, what would you do differently? Why?

Act 3 Scene 3



CHARACTERS

Claudius
Hamlet
Rosencrantz
Polonius
Guildenstern



IN A NUTSHELL

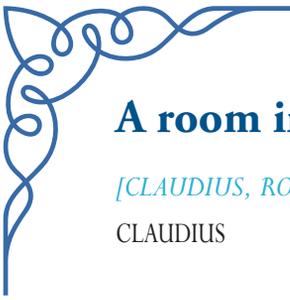
Believing Hamlet to be a dangerous threat, Claudius arranges to send him to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Polonius plans to hide behind the tapestry in Gertrude's room so that he can report to Claudius her conversation with Hamlet. Claudius attempts to confess his guilt by praying. Hamlet, overhearing, chooses not to murder him because he does not wish a forgiven Claudius to go to heaven.

Before you read

- Hamlet does not know Claudius' thoughts in this scene. Claudius knows that even the most heinous sins can be forgiven if he can truly repent; however, to truly repent, Claudius must regret (and by implication renounce) his acquisition of the crown and the Queen, which were obtained by murdering his brother. It is likely that Claudius already has in mind a strategy to dispose of Hamlet and this would be a further barrier to true repentance.



Hazard:	Risk
Noyance:	Harm
Weal:	Welfare
Massy:	Heavy or of great mass
Mortised:	Fastened
Liege:	Lord, sovereign
Visage:	Face
Limèd:	Trapped like a bird in lime, a sticky substance
Pat:	Conveniently
Physic:	Medicine



A room in the castle.

[CLAUDIUS, ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN enter]

CLAUDIUS I like him not, nor stands it safe with us
To let his madness range. Therefore, prepare you:
I your commission will forthwith dispatch,
And he to England shall along with you.
The terms of our estate may not endure 5
Hazard so dangerous as doth hourly grow
Out of his lunacies.

GUILDENSTERN We will ourselves provide:
Most holy and religious fear it is
To keep those many many bodies safe
That live and feed upon your Majesty. 10

ROSENCRANTZ The single and peculiar life is bound
With all the strength and armour of the mind,
To keep itself from noyance, but much more
That spirit upon whose weal depend and rest 15
The lives of many. The cease of majesty
Dies not alone, but, like a gulf, doth draw
What's near it with it: it is a massy wheel,
Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortised and adjoined, which, when it falls, 20
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
Did the king sigh, but with a general groan.

CLAUDIUS Arm you, I pray you, to this speedy voyage,
For we will fetters put upon this fear, 25
Which now goes too free-footed.

ROS. & GUILD. We will haste us.

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN exit, after which POLONIUS enters]



2 **Range:** Wander about freely.

3 **Dispatch:** Send away speedily.

5 **The terms of our estate:** The conditions of my rule as King.

11 **Peculiar:** Private.

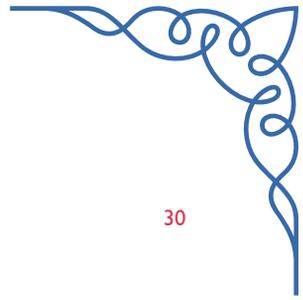
14–15 **That spirit ... lives of many:** The health or welfare of a nation depends on the health of its king.

16 **Gulf:** Whirlpool.

22 **Attends:** Accompanies.

24 **Arm you:** Prepare yourselves.

25 **Fetters:** Chains or shackles placed on the ankles.



POLONIUS My lord, he's going to his mother's closet:
 Behind the arras I'll convey myself
 To hear the process: I'll warrant she'll tax him home,
 And, as you said, and wisely was it said, 30
 'Tis meet that some more audience than a mother,
 Since nature makes them partial, should o'erhear
 The speech, of vantage. Fare you well, my liege;
 I'll call upon you ere you go to bed,
 And tell you what I know.

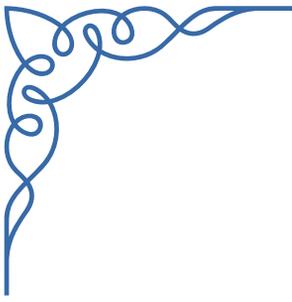
CLAUDIUS Thanks, dear my lord – 35

[POLONIUS exits]

O, my offence is rank; it smells to heaven;
 It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
 A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
 Though inclination be as sharp as will:
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent, 40
 And, like a man to double business bound,
 I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
 And both neglect. What if this cursèd hand
 Were thicker than itself with brother's blood:
 Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens 45
 To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
 But to confront the visage of offence?
 And what's in prayer but this two-fold force,
 To be forestallèd ere we come to fall,
 Or pardoned being down? Then I'll look up: 50
 My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer
 Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
 That cannot be, since I am still possessed
 Of those effects for which I did the murder:
 My crown, mine own ambition and my Queen. 55



-
- 28 **Arras:** Tapestry or wall hanging from the French city of Arras, behind which there is an alcove or place to hide.
 - 29 **I'll warrant she'll tax him home:** I'll guarantee she'll rebuke him or tell him off severely.
 - 31 **Meet:** Appropriate.
 - 32 **Partial:** Biased or leaning in his (Hamlet's) favour.
 - 36 **Rank:** Rotten and decayed, foul smelling.
 - 37 **It hath the primal eldest curse upon't:** Claudius alludes to the biblical account of Cain being cursed by God for killing his brother, Abel.
 - 41–43 **Like a man ... both neglect:** Like a man who has two jobs to do, I neglect both because I cannot make up my mind where to begin.
 - 46–47 **Whereto serves mercy / But to confront the visage of offence:** What is the point of mercy but to confront sin face to face ('visage')?



May one be pardoned and retain the offence?
 In the corrupted currents of this world
 Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
 And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
 Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above: 60
 There is no shuffling; there the action lies
 In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled,
 Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
 To give in evidence. What then? What rests?
 Try what repentance can. What can it not? 65
 Yet what can it when one cannot repent?
 O wretchèd state! O bosom black as death!
 O limèd soul, that, struggling to be free,
 Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay!
 Bow, stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel, 70
 Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe!
 All may be well.

[CLAUDIUS moves to the side of the stage and kneels; HAMLET enters]

HAMLET Now might I do it pat, now he is praying,
 And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;
 And so am I revenged. That would be scanned: 75
 A villain kills my father, and for that,
 I, his foul son, do this same villain send
 To heaven.
 O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
 He took my father grossly, full of bread, 80



-
- 56 **Retain the offence:** Keep the benefits gained as a result of the offence.
 - 57 **Currents:** Practices.
 - 58 **Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice:** Bribery (having a 'hand' 'gilded' or decorated with gold) pushes justice to one side.
 - 61 **Shuffling:** Deceit or evading the system.
 - 63 **To the teeth and forehead of our faults:** In the very face of our sins.
 - 69 **Make assay:** Attempt.
 - 70–71 **Heart with ... newborn babe:** Soften my hard heart ('strings' and 'sinews' refer to arteries and muscles).
 - 75 **Scanned:** Examined in more detail.
 - 79 **This is hire and salary:** It is as if I am hiring and then paying Claudius (to kill my father).
 - 80 **Full of bread:** Literally a glutton, but also referring to living in greedy, worldly pleasures, rather than being right with God.

With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May,
And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?
But in our circumstance and course of thought
'Tis heavy with him: and am I then revenged,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?
No!

85

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays:
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

90

95

[HAMLET exits]

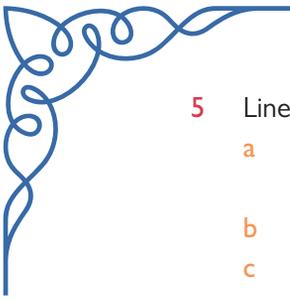
CLAUDIUS [Standing up] My words fly up; my thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

[CLAUDIUS exits]

-
- 81 **As flush as May:** In full bloom, like flowers in late spring (May in the northern hemisphere).
- 82 **How his audit stands:** How his account before God stands, before the scales of justice.
- 84 **Heavy:** Serious or gloomy.
- 86 **Seasoned for his passage:** Ready for his journey to the afterlife to see God.
- 88 **Know thou a more horrid hent:** Grasp at a more horrifying plan or idea.
- 92 **Relish:** Trace or flavour.
- 95 **Stays:** Waits.



- 1 Why is Claudius sending Hamlet to England?
- 2 Lines 22–23 remind us that the moral health of a nation depends on the health of its king. How is this ironic in this instance?
- 3 How and why does Polonius plan to spy on Hamlet in this scene?
- 4 In this scene, Claudius tries to pray but finds that he cannot.
 - a Why do you think he finds it difficult to pray? Quote some phrases or lines from the text as evidence for your answer.
 - b In what ways does Claudius' difficulty praying (even though he wants to) parallel some aspects of Hamlet's character?

- 
- 5 Lines 73–96 act as an extended aside for Hamlet.
 - a Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius, even though this is a perfect opportunity?
 - b What does he plan to do instead?
 - c Which aspects of Hamlet's language highlight his disgust at Claudius and himself?



- 1 In this scene, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern flatter the King and elevate the importance of monarchy and good order. Can their speeches be seen in any way as ironic?
- 2 How does Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius parallel Pyrrhus' 'pause' in killing Priam (see Act 2 Scene 2, lines 406–30)? Note how this acts as another parallel in the narrative strands running through the play.
- 3 In what ways is Claudius' rhyming couplet that ends this scene an example of dramatic irony?



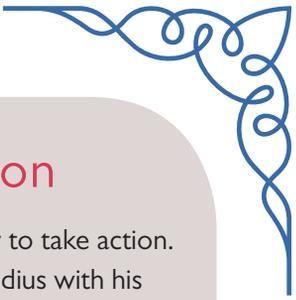
- 1 As a director, how would you handle the blocking for the section of the scene where Claudius is at prayer and Hamlet contemplates killing him?
- 2 Line 87 is a single syllable: 'No'. What do you think Hamlet should be doing for the nine-beat pause following the syllable?

Zeffirelli and Branagh: DVD (Hamlet and Claudius)



Watch the Zeffirelli (1990) and Branagh (1996) interpretations of this scene.

- 1 Make brief notes comparing the interpretations of the characters of Hamlet and Claudius.
- 2 What cinematic devices does each director use to present the two characters?
- 3 Which interpretation do you find more believable or satisfactory? Why?
- 4 What would you change? Be specific in terms of conventions such as camera work, lighting, sound, editing, voice, blocking and actions.



Thinking about Hamlet's procrastination

One issue that *Hamlet* raises is the Prince's procrastination or his inability to take action. It is not until the final scene of the play that Hamlet finally confronts Claudius with his crime and, of course, there would not be a play if Hamlet had done this in Act 2. Throughout the play Hamlet presents reasons for delaying his revenge on Claudius. In the first two acts he makes it clear that he cannot be sure of Claudius' guilt. But even once Claudius' guilt is established in Hamlet's mind, he continues to delay his revenge.

Various critics, whom we would label Romantic, have suggested that Hamlet's personality is unsuited to the role of avenger. In the late eighteenth century, the German poet Goethe advanced the theory that Hamlet, despite his noble qualities, lacks the emotional strength to take the decisive action required. English literary critic William Hazlitt, writing in the early nineteenth century, saw Hamlet's 'powers of action' as 'being eaten up by thought'. The Romantic poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge also saw Hamlet as being excessively given to thought and therefore unsuited to action. In the early twentieth century the literary scholar AC Bradley thought Hamlet's delay to be caused by excessive 'melancholy' and found Hamlet unsuited to that which his circumstances required.

In a practical sense, Hamlet does not have a suitable opportunity to kill Claudius until Act 3 Scene 3, because Claudius as King is too well protected. In Act 3 Scene 3, though, Hamlet has a clear opportunity to kill the King but he delays because he does not wish to send Claudius to heaven. In fact, in Shakespeare's time even the most heinous criminals were given the opportunity to confess and to ask forgiveness for their sins before their execution. Therefore, Hamlet's delay here can be seen as reflecting an obsessive hatred or disproportionate desire for revenge.

In the twentieth century, under the influence of the famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, many critics have seen another reason for Hamlet's delayed action. Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex attempted to explain the rivalry between sons and fathers. According to Freud, every son harbours an unconscious desire to murder his father (the competing source for his mother's affection) and replace him as the primary object of his mother's love. British psychoanalyst Ernest Jones applied Freud's theory to *Hamlet* and this had a profound influence on many productions of *Hamlet* from the mid-twentieth century. In Laurence Olivier's 1948 film, in particular, Claudius is portrayed as old and ugly, while the actor playing Hamlet's mother is beautiful and younger than the actor playing Hamlet. Freudian critics explain Hamlet's procrastination in terms of Claudius fulfilling Hamlet's fantasy of murdering his father and sleeping with his mother; Hamlet finds himself unable to kill someone who has done what he has subconsciously desired to do himself. Like any of the theories above, this works well for certain scenes but fails to consistently explain Hamlet's actions.



Act 3 Scene 4

CHARACTERS

Hamlet
Gertrude
Polonius
Ghost
[Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]

IN A NUTSHELL



Before hiding, Polonius advises the Queen to be strict with her son. Hamlet enters and begins criticising his mother; Gertrude, feeling threatened, cries for help, causing the concealed Polonius to cry out. Thinking this to be Claudius, Hamlet drives his dagger through the tapestry and kills Polonius. Hamlet then abuses his mother over her actions but calms when the Ghost appears. Hamlet's interaction with the Ghost, whom Gertrude cannot see, causes her to believe her son really is mad. However, Hamlet explains he is only pretending to be mad, and implores her to keep herself sexually pure by staying away from Claudius.

Before you read

- *Hamlet* is not only full of deception but misunderstanding as well. When Hamlet tells Gertrude, 'You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you' (lines 20–21), his desire is to show his mother her conscience or 'soul', but she interprets his statement as a threat to literally reveal her insides by cutting her open.
- This scene takes place in Gertrude's closet. While many modern productions have Gertrude's bed on stage, for Elizabethans the closet was simply a private room.



V

Be round:	Be honest and true, to the point of being blunt
By the rood:	A mild oath, meaning 'by the Cross'
Heyday:	High point
Mutine:	Rebel
Cutpurse:	Pickpocket
Diadem:	Crown

The Queen's private chambers.

[GERTRUDE and POLONIUS enter]

POLONIUS He will come straight. Look you lay home to him:
Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with,
And that your grace hath screened and stood between
Much heat and him. I'll silence me even here.
Pray you, be round with him.

5

HAMLET [Within] Mother, mother, mother!

GERTRUDE I'll warrant you, fear me not.
Withdraw, I hear him coming.

[POLONIUS hides behind the arras, as HAMLET enters]

HAMLET Now, mother, what's the matter?

GERTRUDE Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

10

HAMLET Mother, you have my father much offended.

GERTRUDE Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

HAMLET Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.

GERTRUDE Why, how now, Hamlet!

HAMLET What's the matter now?

GERTRUDE Have you forgot me?

HAMLET No, by the rood, not so:

15

You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,
And – would it were not so – you are my mother.

GERTRUDE Nay, then, I'll set those to you that can speak.

HAMLET Come, come, and sit you down; you shall not budge;

You go not till I set you up a glass

20

Where you may see the inmost part of you.

GERTRUDE What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?

Help, help, ho!

POLONIUS [Behind the arras] What, ho! Help, help, help!

HAMLET [Drawing his sword] How now? A rat? Dead for a ducat, dead!

[HAMLET thrusts his sword through the arras]

1 **Straight:** Straight away or immediately; **lay home:** speak frankly.

2 **Broad:** Extreme in nature.

3 **Screened:** Protected or filtered.

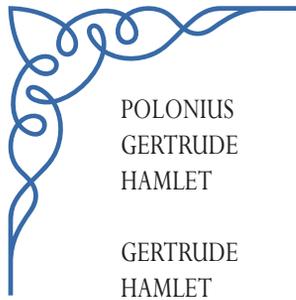
4 **Heat:** Passion; in this case, anger.

12 **Idle:** Silly.

20 **Glass:** A looking glass or mirror.

24 **Dead for a ducat, dead:** I'd kill the rat for a gold coin ('ducat').





POLONIUS *[Behind the arras]* O, I am slain! *[POLONIUS falls and dies]* 25
 GERTRUDE O me, what hast thou done?
 HAMLET Nay, I know not.

Is it the King?

GERTRUDE O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!
 HAMLET A bloody deed! Almost as bad, good mother,
 As kill a King, and marry with his brother. 30

GERTRUDE As kill a King!
 HAMLET Ay, lady, 'twas my word –

[HAMLET lifts up the arras and discovers POLONIUS]

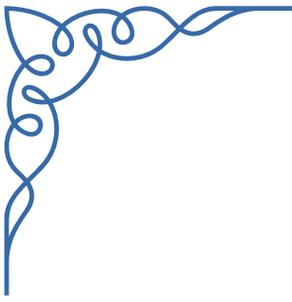
Thou wretchèd, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
 I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune;
 Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger –
 Leave wringing of your hands. Peace! Sit you down 35

And let me wring your heart; for so I shall,
 If it be made of penetrable stuff,
 If damnèd custom have not brassèd it so
 That it is proof and bulwark against sense.
 GERTRUDE What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue 40
 In noise so rude against me?

HAMLET Such an act
 That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
 Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
 From the fair forehead of an innocent love
 And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows 45
 As false as dicers' oaths: O, such a deed
 As from the body of contraction plucks
 The very soul, and sweet religion makes



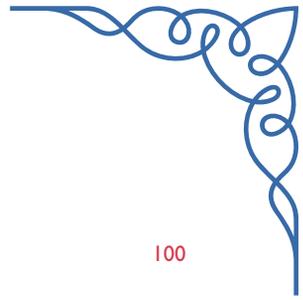
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- 28 **Rash and bloody:** Acting without thought, and violent.
 - 33 **I took thee for thy better:** I thought you were your superior (the King).
 - 34 **Busy:** Interfering.
 - 38 **Brassèd:** Hardened or strengthened.
 - 39 **Proof and bulwark against sense:** Strengthened against natural feelings ('proof' = armour).
 - 41 **Rude:** Violent.
 - 43–45 **Takes off the rose ... blister there:** The rose is a symbol of beauty and perfection; in medieval times, prostitutes were sometimes branded ('blistered') on the forehead as a sign of moral (and possibly physical) contagion.
 - 46 **As false as dicers' oaths:** To be trusted as much as the promises of gambling addicts.
 - 47 **The body of contraction:** Marriage contract.



And waits upon the judgement; and what judgement
 Would step from this to this? Sense, sure you have,
 Else could you not have motion, but sure that sense
 Is apoplexed; for madness would not err,
 Nor sense to ecstasy was ne'er so thrall'd 75
 But it reserved some quantity of choice
 To serve in such a difference. What devil was't
 That thus hath cozened you at hoodman-blind?
 Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
 Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all, 80
 Or but a sickly part of one true sense
 Could not so mope.
 O shame! Where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
 If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
 To flaming youth let virtue be as wax, 85
 And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
 When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
 Since frost itself as actively doth burn
 And reason panders will.
 GERTRUDE O Hamlet, speak no more: 90
 Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
 And there I see such black and grainèd spots
 As will not leave their tinct.
 HAMLET Nay, but to live
 In the rank sweat of an enseamèd bed,
 Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love 95
 Over the nasty sty –



- 74 **Apoplexed:** Paralysed or crippled by a stroke.
- 75–77 **Nor sense ... such a difference:** Your ability to perceive ('sense') was never so enslaved ('thrall'd') to madness ('ecstasy') that it was unable to tell the difference between things.
- 78 **Cozened you at hoodman-blind:** Hamlet implies that the devil, while playing blind-man's bluff with Gertrude, has tricked her into picking diseased Claudius instead of her healthy husband.
- 80 **Sans:** French word meaning without.
- 82 **Mope:** Move sluggishly around, in a daze.
- 84–86 **If thou canst ... her own fire:** If an old lady can be sexually active (with such an evil man), then morality in passionate youth will melt like wax.
- 87–89 **When the compulsive ... panders will:** The meaning of this passage is obscure.
- 92–93 **Black and grainèd spots / As will not leave their tinct:** Dark, indelible stains that are unable to be cleaned or rubbed off, and that will not lose their colour ('tinct').
- 94 **Enseamèd:** Greasy or saturated with animal fat; stained from sexual activity.
- 95 **Stewed:** A pun here referring to a brothel.



GERTRUDE O, speak to me no more!
 These words, like daggers, enter in mine ears.
 No more, sweet Hamlet!

HAMLET A murderer and a villain,
 A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
 Of your precedent lord, a vice of kings,
 A cutpurse of the empire and the rule
 That from a shelf the precious diadem stole
 And put it in his pocket –

100

GERTRUDE No more!

105

HAMLET A king of shreds and patches –

[GHOST enters]

Save me and hover o'er me with your wings,
 You heavenly guards! – What would your gracious figure?

GERTRUDE Alas, he's mad!

HAMLET Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
 That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by
 The important acting of your dread command?

110

GHOST O, say! Do not forget: this visitation
 Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.
 But, look, amazement on thy mother sits.
 O, step between her and her fighting soul:
 Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.
 Speak to her, Hamlet!

115

HAMLET How is it with you, lady?

GERTRUDE Alas, how is't with you,
 That you do bend your eye on vacancy
 And with th' incorporal air do hold discourse?
 Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep.
 And, as the sleeping soldiers in the alarm,

120



100 **Tithe:** One-tenth.

101 **Precedent:** Previous; **vice:** a villain from medieval morality plays.

106 **Shreds and patches:** Scraps of material used to make a fool's (clown's) clothing; here, a criticism of Claudius.

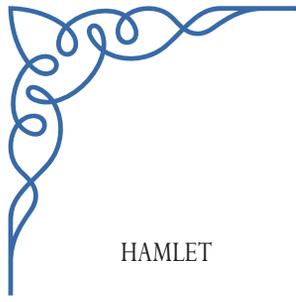
110 **Tardy:** Late or delayed (in fulfilling the Ghost's commands); **chide:** rebuke or tell off.

114 **Whet:** Sharpen, like sharpening a blunted sword.

117 **Conceit:** Imagination.

120 **Vacancy:** Emptiness.

121 **Incorporal:** Non-physical or insubstantial.



Your bedded hair, like life in excrements,
Starts up, and stands on end. O gentle son, 125
Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper
Sprinkle cool patience. Whereon do you look?
HAMLET On him, on him! Look you, how pale he glares!
His form and cause conjoined, preaching to stones,
Would make them capable – Do not look upon me, 130
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects: then what I have to do
Will want true colour, tears perchance for blood.

GERTRUDE To whom do you speak this?
HAMLET Do you see nothing there? 135
GERTRUDE Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.
HAMLET Nor did you nothing hear?
GERTRUDE No, nothing but ourselves.
HAMLET Why, look you there! Look how it steals away!
My father, in his habit as he lived! 140
Look where he goes, even now, out at the portal!

[GHOST exits]

GERTRUDE This the very coinage of your brain:
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in.

HAMLET Ecstasy! 145
My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,
And makes as healthful music: it is not madness
That I have uttered. Bring me to the test
And I the matter will re-word, which madness



124–25 **Your bedded hair ... stands on end:** Your hair is standing up in the air as if it had life of its own, like soldiers who leap from their beds ready for action.

129 **His form and cause conjoined:** His appearance and the reason for it (lines 113–14) have combined.

131–32 **Convert / My stern effects:** Change my mind from carrying out what I am strongly resolved to do.

133 **Want:** Lack.

139 **Steals:** Sneaks.

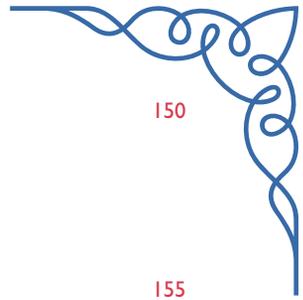
140 **In his habit as he lived:** Wearing what he had worn when he was alive.

141 **Portal:** Door or gate.

142 **The very coinage of your brain:** The invention or creation of your mind.

144 **Cunning:** Crafty.

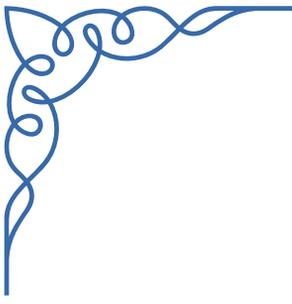
149 **Re-word:** Repeat.



Would gambol from. Mother, for love of grace, 150
 Lay not that mattering unction to your soul,
 That not your trespass, but my madness speaks:
 It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
 Whilst rank corruption, mining all within,
 Infects unseen. Confess yourself to heaven; 155
 Repent what's past; avoid what is to come;
 And do not spread the compost on the weeds,
 To make them ranker. Forgive me this my virtue,
 For in the fatness of these pury times
 Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg, 160
 Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good.
 GERTRUDE O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
 HAMLET O, throw away the worser part of it
 And live the purer with the other half.
 Good night. But go not to mine uncle's bed: 165
 Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
 That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,
 Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
 That to the use of actions fair and good
 He likewise gives a frock or livery, 170
 That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight
 And that shall lend a kind of easiness
 To the next abstinence; the next more easy,
 For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
 And either curb the devil or throw him out 175
 With wondrous potency. Once more, good night,
 And when you are desirous to be blessed,



-
- 150 **Gambol:** Run wildly and spring like a foal.
 - 151 **Lay not that mattering unction to your soul:** Don't try to provide ointment ('unction') to your wounded soul by merely thinking about it.
 - 153–55 **It will but skin ... Infects unseen:** A layer or a scab ('skin and film') will form over the infection in your soul ('ulcerous place') while the disease still spreads underneath.
 - 159 **Pury times:** Fat or bulky, like a purse full of coins; a lot is happening in a short space of time.
 - 161 **Curb and woo:** Bow and beg.
 - 162 **Thou has cleft my heart in twain:** You have torn or broken my heart in two.
 - 166 **Assume:** Pretend, echoing the characterisation of Gertrude as the 'seeming-virtuous Queen' (see Act I Scene 5, line 47).
 - 167–71 **That monster, custom ... is put on:** Habit ('custom') is like a monster that destroys good and strengthens evil in us, but it can also strengthen good behaviour, like becoming used to wearing new clothes.
 - 174 **For use almost can change the stamp of nature:** New habits ('use') can almost change human nature.



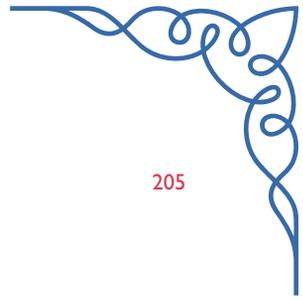
I'll blessing beg of you. For this same lord
 [Pointing to *POLONIUS*] I do repent, but heaven hath pleased it so
 To punish me with this and this with me, 180
 That I must be their scourge and minister.
 I will bestow him and will answer well
 The death I gave him. So, again, good night.
 I must be cruel, only to be kind:
 Thus bad begins and worse remains behind. 185
 One word more, good lady.

GERTRUDE
 HAMLET

What shall I do?
 Not this, by no means, that I bid you do:
 Let the bloat King tempt you again to bed;
 Pinch wanton on your cheek; call you his mouse;
 And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses, 190
 Or paddling in your neck with his damned fingers,
 Make you to ravel all this matter out,
 That I essentially am not in madness,
 But mad in craft. 'Twere good you let him know,
 For who, that's but a Queen, fair, sober, wise, 195
 Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib,
 Such dear concernings hide? Who would do so?
 No, in despite of sense and secrecy,
 Unpeg the basket on the house's top.
 Let the birds fly and, like the famous ape, 200
 To try conclusions, in the basket creep
 And break your own neck down.



-
- 181 **Scourge and minister:** The one who punishes by justice.
 - 182 **Bestow:** Hide.
 - 185 **Remains behind:** Still lies ahead or is still coming.
 - 188 **Bloat:** Fat with self-indulgence.
 - 189 **Pinch wanton on your cheek:** Pinch your cheeks so that you look flushed with sexual desire.
 - 190 **Reechy:** Squalid or filthy.
 - 191 **Paddling in:** Stroking or caressing.
 - 192 **Ravel ... out:** Unravel or explain.
 - 193–94 **That I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft:** That I am not in reality mad but only crafting or manufacturing madness.
 - 196 **A paddock, from a bat, a gib:** A toad ('paddock'), bat and tom-cat ('gib') were, in Elizabethan times, spirits or 'familiars' associated with witches.
 - 199–202 **Unpeg the basket ... own neck down:** A medieval story was told of an ape that tried to imitate birds that had been released from a basket. The ape leapt from the basket, trying to fly, and broke its neck. 'Conclusions' = experiments.



GERTRUDE Be thou assured, if words be made of breath,
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me. 205

HAMLET I must to England: you know that?

GERTRUDE Alack,
I had forgot. 'Tis so concluded on.

HAMLET There's letters sealed, and my two schoolfellows,
Whom I will trust as I will adders fanged,
They bear the mandate; they must sweep my way, 210
And marshal me to knavery. Let it work,
For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petard; and 't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines,
And blow them at the moon: O, 'tis most sweet, 215
When in one line two crafts directly meet.
This man shall set me packing.
I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.
Mother, good night. Indeed this counsellor
Is now most still, most secret and most grave, 220
Who was in life a foolish prating knave –
Come, sir, to draw toward an end with you –
Good night, mother.

[GERTRUDE exits, followed by HAMLET, who drags the body of POLONIUS]

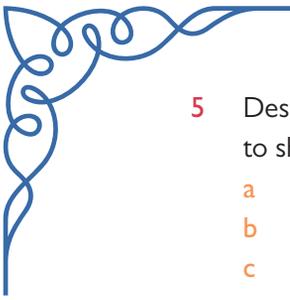


- 210–11 **They must sweep my way, / And marshal me to knavery:** They (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) must clear my path and officially lead me in their foolish task.
- 217 **This man shall set me packing:** Hamlet judges that the death of Polonius will speed up his departure to England.
- 220 **Most grave:** A pun on the word 'grave' here, meaning both serious and dead.
- 222 **Draw toward an end:** Finish my dealings, perhaps with an added pun on 'draw', which can also mean drag (Polonius' body).



QUESTIONS

- 1 How are Polonius' opening lines (1–5) in this scene ironic?
- 2 For what reason does the Ghost appear in this scene?
- 3 In lines 93–106, how does Shakespeare use various language devices to highlight Hamlet's disgust? With what or whom is Hamlet disgusted?
- 4 Read again the section in which Hamlet pleads with his mother to change her ways (lines 145–202).
 - a How clearly do you think Hamlet explains his 'antic disposition' to his mother?
 - b What does Hamlet ask his mother (not) to do? Why does he ask this of her?

- 
- 5 Describe how Shakespeare employs the following images in lines 145–202 to shape the reader’s understanding of his thematic concerns:
- a plants or weeds
 - b animals
 - c poison or disease.



- 1 Read lines 22–33, especially noting the animal imagery used.
- a Whom does Hamlet hope to catch (kill) hiding behind the tapestry?
 - b How does the ‘rat’ motif here create a narrative link back to Hamlet’s plan to ‘catch ... the King’ (Act 2 Scene 2, lines 539–40) and to the performance of the play-within-the-play, *The Mousetrap* (Act 3 Scene 2, lines 211–41)?
- 2 When Gertrude pleads with Hamlet to stop his verbal assault, she says that his words ‘like daggers, enter in [her] ears’ (line 98). In Act 3 Scene 2, Hamlet stated his intention to ‘speak daggers to her but use none’ (line 349). What might Shakespeare be suggesting by using this deliberate echo? Has Hamlet stayed true to his original intention?
- 3 Explain Hamlet’s metaphor in lines 211–16. What is his plan? How is this yet another example of hiding the truth (and/or conflict between Hamlet’s words and actions)?



Consider how the section where the Ghost appears (lines 107–41) might be performed on stage.

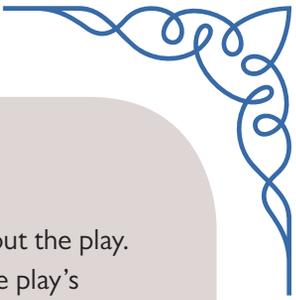
- 1 Can Gertrude see the Ghost? What textual evidence is there for your view?
- 2 Discuss how you might use various theatrical conventions (e.g. blocking, gestures, facial expressions, lighting and sound) to present your interpretation.
- 3 In one early version of the text, the Ghost appears attired for bed. To what extent would this costuming decision affect your interpretation of this scene?

Zeffirelli and Branagh: DVD (*Hamlet and Gertrude*)



Watch this scene in the Zeffirelli (1990) and Branagh (1996) film versions and discuss the following in groups or as a class.

- 1 In what ways do the two films present contrasting interpretations of the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude?
- 2 Which reading of the text do you prefer and why?



More about imagery: animal images

We have already seen how images of poison and disease occur throughout the play. Animal (or bestial) imagery is also employed in *Hamlet*, particularly by the play's protagonist.

In Act 2 Scene 2 Hamlet speaks of man in glorified terms as being 'noble in reason', 'like an angel' in action, 'in apprehension ... like a god' and 'the paragon of animals' (lines 278–81). Many today would see humanity's ability to reason as that which separates us from the animal kingdom. Most Elizabethans believed in the Great Chain of Being (see pages 3–4), in which humans were positioned between angels and animals, and viewed bestial or animal-like behaviour as undesirable.

In Act 1 Scene 2, Hamlet criticises his mother's hasty marriage, reflecting that 'a beast, that wants [lacks] discourse of reason, / Would have mourned longer' (lines 150–51). Hamlet's more particular target when he uses bestial imagery is the lust of his mother and Claudius. In his opening soliloquy he compares Claudius to 'a satyr' – a mythical half-man and half-beast (Act 1 Scene 2, line 140). Likewise, the Ghost describes Claudius as an 'adulterate beast' (Act 1 Scene 5, line 43) and, in Act 3 Scene 4, Hamlet criticises his mother for 'honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty' (lines 95–96). The assumption behind the imagery is that animals are lustful or promiscuous, with no self-control or tempering reason.

Animal imagery is also employed to reinforce the theme of deception in *Hamlet*. The Ghost refers to Claudius as a 'serpent' that 'stung' him while he was in his orchard (Act 1 Scene 5, lines 36–37) – perhaps an allusion to the original serpent (Satan) in the Garden of Eden. Hamlet echoes this imagery in Act 3 Scene 4 when he says that he will trust his 'schoolfellows' Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as much as he would trust 'adders fanged' (lines 208–09).

Additionally, before Hamlet kills Polonius in this scene, he exclaims, 'How now? A rat?' (line 24). The rat is another animal associated with dishonesty and secretive behaviour and, much like the imagery of disease, it is a fitting emblem for corruption.

Act 4

Act 4 Scene 1

CHARACTERS

Claudius
Gertrude



IN A NUTSHELL

Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet has gone mad and killed Polonius. The King realises he himself could have been the victim and thus fears for his safety. He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet and bring Polonius' body into the chapel.

Before you read

- As you read this scene you might consider the extent to which you think Gertrude is covering for Hamlet, and if, in fact, she really does believe her son is mad.

V

Arras: Tapestry
Rapier: Sword
Laid: Blamed
Short: Under control
Ore: Precious metal

A room in the castle.

[CLAUDIUS and GERTRUDE enter, talking with ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN]

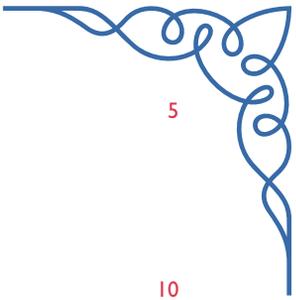
CLAUDIUS There's matter in these sighs, these profound heaves
 You must translate: 'tis fit we understand them.
 Where is your son?

GERTRUDE Bestow this place on us a little while –

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN exit]



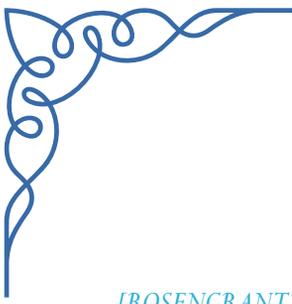
Matter: Significance or importance.



Ah, my good lord, what have I seen tonight! 5
 CLAUDIUS What, Gertrude? How does Hamlet?
 GERTRUDE Mad as the sea and wind, when both contend
 Which is the mightier. In his lawless fit,
 Behind the arras hearing something stir,
 Whips out his rapier, cries, 'A rat, a rat!' 10
 And, in this brainish apprehension, kills
 The unseen good old man.
 CLAUDIUS O heavy deed!
 It had been so with us, had we been there.
 His liberty is full of threats to all:
 To you yourself, to us, to everyone. 15
 Alas, how shall this bloody deed be answered?
 It will be laid to us, whose providence
 Should have kept short, restrained and out of haunt,
 This mad young man; but so much was our love,
 We would not understand what was most fit, 20
 But, like the owner of a foul disease,
 To keep it from divulging, let it feed
 Even on the pith of life. Where is he gone?
 GERTRUDE To draw apart the body he hath killed,
 O'er whom his very madness, like some ore 25
 Among a mineral of metals base,
 Shows itself pure: he weeps for what is done.
 CLAUDIUS O Gertrude, come away!
 The sun no sooner shall the mountains touch,
 But we will ship him hence, and this vile deed 30
 We must, with all our majesty and skill,
 Both countenance and excuse – Ho, Guildenstern!

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN re-enter]

- 
-
- 8 **Lawless fit:** Madness that knows no limits, meaning he is out of control.
 - 11 **Brainish apprehension:** Deluded state of mind.
 - 12 **Heavy:** Sad or sorrowful.
 - 16 **Bloody:** Violent.
 - 17–18 **Whose providence ... out of haunt:** Claudius claims he should have had the foresight ('providence') to keep Hamlet on a short leash and away from the company of others ('haunt').
 - 22 **Divulging:** Becoming known to others.
 - 25–27 **His very madness ... Shows itself pure:** Hamlet's madness stands out like a precious metal ('ore') that is found in a mine ('mineral') of low quality ('base') metal.
 - 32 **Countenance:** Face or confront.



Friends both, go join you with some further aid.
 Hamlet in madness hath Polonius slain,
 And from his mother's closet hath he dragged him. 35
 Go seek him out; speak fair, and bring the body
 Into the chapel. I pray you, haste in this –

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN exit]

Come, Gertrude, we'll call up our wisest friends
 And let them know both what we mean to do
 And what's untimely done. O, come away! 40
 My soul is full of discord and dismay.

[Both exit]



40 **What's untimely done:** Polonius' death is premature, before its due time.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What is Claudius' immediate concern when he hears about the stabbing of Polonius? What does this imply about his character?
- 2 Complete the following table to show your understanding of various images used in this scene as comparisons with Hamlet's madness.

Textual reference	With what is Hamlet's madness compared?	Briefly explain the comparison
Lines 7–8		
Lines 21–23		
Lines 25–27		



EXTEND

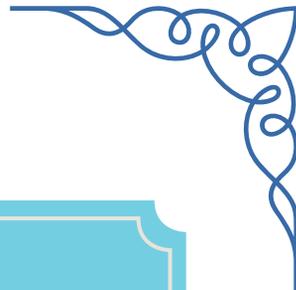
- 1 How does Claudius show his skill as a politician in this short scene?
- 2 This is the only time the audience sees Claudius and Gertrude alone on the stage together. How truthful are they with each other, and what can we determine about the state of their relationship from this?
- 3 Discuss the irony present in lines 30–32, and in lines 40–41.



DISCUSS

To what extent do you think Gertrude believes her son is mad? Provide evidence for your argument.

Act 4 Scene 2



CHARACTERS

Hamlet
Rosencrantz
Guildenstern



IN A NUTSHELL

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet but he refuses to tell them where he has hidden Polonius' body. Hamlet continues to speak in a confusing manner, feigning madness as the two courtiers chase him.

Before you read

- The brief scenes at the beginning of Act 4 give the audience a sense of the chaos Hamlet is creating. You may notice that he speaks in prose and that his short speeches are packed with puns. This is a dramatic contrast to Hamlet's language when he speaks to Gertrude at the close of Act 3.



Whereto:	To which
Counsel:	Secrets
Replication:	Reply
Countenance:	Favour

Another room in the castle.

[HAMLET enters]

HAMLET Safely stowed –

ROS. & GUILD. *[Within]* Hamlet! Lord Hamlet!

HAMLET But soft, what noise? Who calls on Hamlet? O, here they come.

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN enter, with Attendants]

ROSENCRANTZ What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?

HAMLET Compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin. 5

ROSENCRANTZ Tell us where 'tis, that we may take it thence and bear it to the chapel.

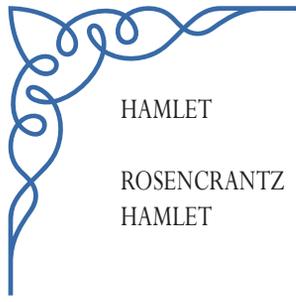
HAMLET Do not believe it.

ROSENCRANTZ Believe what?



1 **Stowed:** Hidden, with a possible meaning of kept quiet.

5 **Compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin:** Joined or combined with dust. 'Kin' here refers to the body of Polonius being related to or returning to the dust (as in the saying 'from dust to dust') upon death.



HAMLET That I can keep your counsel and not mine own. Besides, to be demanded of a sponge! What replication should be made by the son of a king? 10

ROSENCRANTZ Take you me for a sponge, my lord?

HAMLET Ay, sir, that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the King best service in the end: he keeps them, like an ape an apple in the corner of his jaw, first mouthed to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again. 15

ROSENCRANTZ I understand you not, my lord.

HAMLET I am glad of it: a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.

ROSENCRANTZ My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the King. 20

HAMLET The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing—

GUILDENSTERN A thing, my lord?

HAMLET Of nothing. Bring me to him. Hide fox, and all after!

[All exit, chasing HAMLET]



- 18 **Sleeps:** Is wasted.
- 21 **The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body:** The meaning of this saying is unclear. Hamlet could be suggesting that Polonius' body is with the true King – Hamlet's father – as they are both dead, but Claudius (as the false King) does not embody the regal qualities of a true king.
- 24 **Hide fox, and all after:** Perhaps referring to that which is called out in a children's game similar to hide-and-seek.



QUESTIONS

- 1 Despite playing games with words and even hide-and-seek with Polonius' body, there is a vicious undertone in Hamlet's labelling Rosencrantz a 'sponge'.
 - a What literary device is he using here?
 - b What do you think he means by this insult?
- 2 Shakespeare has crafted Act 4 using numerous shorter scenes. What dramatic purpose(s) do you think they serve, coming at this point in the play?



EXTEND

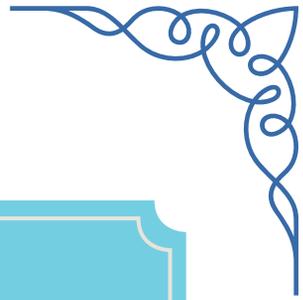
- 1 What do you think Hamlet means when he says, 'A knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear' (line 18)?
- 2 How do the rhymes at the end of this scene contribute to the tone of Hamlet's dialogue?



DISCUSS

If you were given the task of creating a stage production of Act 4, discuss how you would create transitions for some of the rapid scene changes.

Act 4 Scene 3



CHARACTERS	IN A NUTSHELL
Claudius Hamlet Rosencrantz [Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]	 <i>Brought before the King, Hamlet continues to act insane, refusing to tell Claudius of the whereabouts of Polonius' body. Claudius informs Hamlet that he is to be sent to England and, after Hamlet leaves, reveals that he has ordered for Hamlet to be killed there.</i>

Before you read

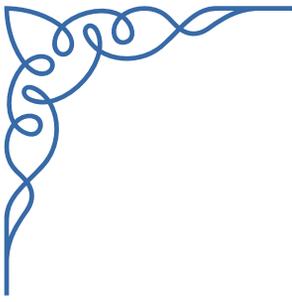
- Look for yet more imagery of sickness and disease in this scene. For example, towards the end of the scene (line 66) Claudius compares Hamlet to a fever ('hectic') that 'rages' in his blood.
- Hamlet often reflects morbidly on the physical details of death and decaying bodies. Through an elaborate conceit (lines 20–30), he asserts, 'your worm is your only emperor for diet', and claims that both kings and beggars, despite their difference in status, are 'dishes' or food for worms. He continues, arguing that a man could fish with a worm or maggot that has been nourished by the body of a king, and a beggar fisherman could then eat that fish and it would pass through his body. Many of Hamlet's reflections on death display this kind of dark humour.

V	Scourge: Punishment
	Weighed: Considered
	Appliance: Remedy
	Without: Outside
	Convocation: Assembly

Another room in the castle.

[CLAUDIUS enters, with Attendants]

CLAUDIUS I have sent to seek him and to find the body.
How dangerous is it that this man goes loose!
Yet must not we put the strong law on him:



He's loved of the distracted multitude,
 Who like not in their judgement but their eyes; 5
 And where 'tis so, th' offender's scourge is weighed,
 But never the offence. To bear all smooth and even,
 This sudden sending him away must seem
 Deliberate pause. Diseases desperate grown
 By desperate appliance are relieved, 10
 Or not at all –

[ROSENCRANTZ enters] How now! What hath befall'n?

ROSENCRANTZ Where the dead body is bestowed, my lord,
 We cannot get from him.

CLAUDIUS But where is he?

ROSENCRANTZ Without, my lord; guarded, to know your pleasure.

CLAUDIUS Bring him before us. 15

ROSENCRANTZ Ho, Guildenstern! Bring in my lord.

[HAMLET and GUILDENSTERN enter]

CLAUDIUS Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

HAMLET At supper.

CLAUDIUS At supper? Where?

HAMLET Not where he eats, but where he is eaten: a certain convocation of 20
 politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for
 diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for
 maggots; your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service:
 two dishes, but to one table. That's the end.

CLAUDIUS Alas, alas! 25

HAMLET A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the
 fish that hath fed of that worm.

CLAUDIUS What dost thou mean by this?

HAMLET Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the
 guts of a beggar. 30



4 **He's loved of the distracted multitude:** Hamlet is popular, well-liked by the many irrational ('distracted') subjects.

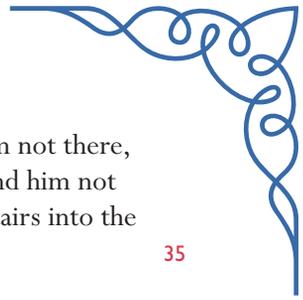
9 **Deliberate pause:** Careful planning.

10 **Appliance:** Remedy (for the 'diseases' mentioned in line 9).

20–21 **A certain convocation of politic worms:** Hamlet uses a pun here, referring to Polonius being eaten by worms, which he describes as wise ('politic') as they create an assembly ('convocation') in Polonius' body. He also refers to the Assembly of Worms: the 'diet' or 'assembly' which took place in the German city of Worms in 1521 addressed the teachings of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation.

23 **Variable service:** Different dishes served in the same meal.

29 **Progress:** A pun on the concept of progress, here referred to being digested, but also referring indirectly to an official state journey undertaken by a ruler.



CLAUDIUS Where is Polonius?
 HAMLET In heaven. Send thither to see: if your messenger find him not there, seek him i' th' other place yourself. But indeed, if you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby.

35

CLAUDIUS *[To some Attendants]* Go seek him there.
 HAMLET He will stay till ye come.

[Attendants exit]

CLAUDIUS Hamlet, this deed, for thine especial safety (Which we do tender, as we dearly grieve For that which thou hast done) must send thee hence With fiery quickness: therefore, prepare thyself; The bark is ready and the wind at help, Th' associates tend, and everything is bent For England.

40

HAMLET For England!

45

CLAUDIUS Ay, Hamlet.

HAMLET Good.

CLAUDIUS So is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.

HAMLET I see a cherub that sees them. But come, for England! Farewell, dear mother.

50

CLAUDIUS Thy loving father, Hamlet.

HAMLET My mother: father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh; and so, my mother. Come, for England!

[HAMLET exits]

CLAUDIUS Follow him at foot. Tempt him with speed aboard; Delay it not: I'll have him hence tonight. Away! For everything is sealed and done That else leans on the affair. Pray you, make haste.

55

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN exit]



42–44 The bark is ready ... For England: The ship ('bark') is ready, the wind favourable ('at help'), those involved in the plan ('associates') await ('tend'), and everything is ready ('bent') for the trip to England.

49 I see a cherub that sees them: A cherub is an angel with the gift of seeing truly, implying that Hamlet has greater knowledge of the situation than Claudius has.

52–53 Man and wife is one flesh: A biblical reference to the unity of husband and wife (Genesis 2:24).

54 At foot: Closely.

57 Leans on: Depends on.

And, England, if my love thou hold'st at aught –
 As my great power thereof may give thee sense,
 Since yet thy cicatrice looks raw and red 60
 After the Danish sword, and thy free awe
 Pays homage to us – thou mayst not coldly set
 Our sovereign process, which imports at full,
 By letters conjuring to that effect,
 The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England, 65
 For like the hectic in my blood he rages,
 And thou must cure me. Till I know 'tis done,
 Howe'er my haps, my joys were ne'er begun.

[CLAUDIUS exits]

- 58 **If my love thou hold'st at aught:** If my love is worth anything to you.
- 60 **Cicatrice:** Scar.
- 61 **Free awe:** Voluntary submission.
- 62 **Coldly set:** View coldly or disregard.
- 63 **Imports at full:** Gives full or detailed instructions.
- 64 **Conjuring:** Demanding or ordering.
- 67–68 **Till I know ... ne'er begun:** I will not begin to be happy until I know Hamlet has been executed.



QUESTIONS

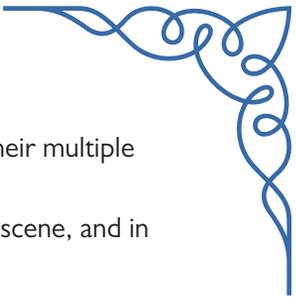
- 1 Why does Claudius say he does not want to appear too harsh in his punishment of Hamlet?
- 2 According to Hamlet, how are a king and a beggar both dishes 'to one table'?
- 3 Illustrate lines 20–30 as a simple diagram or perhaps as a comic strip.
- 4 What do you think Hamlet is implying when he tells Claudius to 'seek [Polonius] i' th' other place yourself' (line 33)?



EXTEND

- 1 Complete the following table to show your understanding of Shakespeare's use of imagery related to disease or infection in this scene.

Textual evidence	Claudius' view of the cause of moral infection in Denmark	Claudius' view of the cure	In what ways are Claudius' views ironic?
Lines 9–11			
Lines 66–68			

- 
- 2 Hamlet makes frequent use of puns in this scene.
 - a Select one or two words on which he puns and explain their multiple meanings.
 - b What dramatic effect does Hamlet's punning have in this scene, and in this section of the play?
 - 3 In Hamlet's parting words of farewell (lines 52–53), to what extent do you think he may be commenting on his mother's complicity in King Hamlet's death?

Act 4 Scene 4

CHARACTERS

Hamlet
Captain
Fortinbras
Rosencrantz

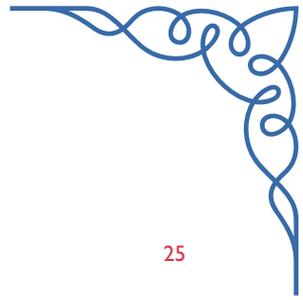


IN A NUTSHELL

A military expedition led by Fortinbras is on its way from Norway to fight Poland for a piece of land worth very little. Inquiring after their purpose, Hamlet considers the enormity of their operation in pursuit of such a trivial thing, reflecting on the serious nature of his father's death, and how little he has done about it.

Before you read

- You might remember that Fortinbras' father was killed by Hamlet's father, making him another fatherless avenger. In this scene Shakespeare reminds the audience that Fortinbras is the nephew of the King of Norway, drawing our attention to other similarities and differences between the young men and setting up a parallel plot. Interestingly, Fortinbras and Hamlet never appear on stage together.
- Hamlet is never further away from avenging his father's death than when he delivers the soliloquy in this scene, but this speech, often omitted from shorter productions of the play, is very much about resolution or taking action. Hamlet asserts that the bravery of Fortinbras and his army, who will risk everything for honour, should spur him to action. He reasons that they are risking their lives for a small, worthless patch of ground ('an egg-shell', line 54), yet he has greater reasons for action: 'a father killed' and 'a mother stained' (line 58).
- His new resolution is undermined, however, by the figurative language in lines 53–66: the battle is a 'quarrel' over 'a straw', in which 20 000 men will 'go to their graves like beds'. We might ask whether Hamlet really believes the logic of his own speech; Hamlet and the play itself ultimately seem to question such action.



Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole
 A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.
 HAMLET Why, then the Polack never will defend it.
 CAPTAIN Yes, it is already garrisoned.
 HAMLET Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats 25
 Will not debate the question of this straw:
 This is the impostume of much wealth and peace,
 That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
 Why the man dies. I humbly thank you, sir.
 CAPTAIN God be wi' you, sir. 30

[CAPTAIN exits]

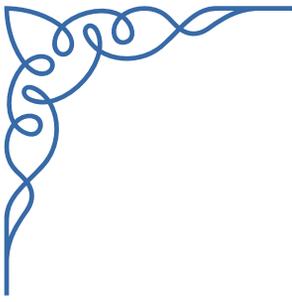
ROSENCRANTZ Will't please you go, my lord?
 HAMLET I'll be with you straight; go a little before.

[All exit, except for HAMLET]

How all occasions do inform against me,
 And spur my dull revenge! What is a man
 If his chief good and market of his time 35
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
 Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and god-like reason
 To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be 40
 Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
 Of thinking too precisely on the event –
 A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
 And ever three parts coward – I do not know
 Why yet I live to say, 'This thing's to do', 45



-
- 22 **A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee:** Legal terminology regarding land ownership, meaning a greater price if it is sold with absolute and perpetual possession.
 - 24 **Garrisoned:** Protected by forts.
 - 26 **This straw:** Worthless piece of land.
 - 27–29 **This is the impostume ... the man dies:** An abscess that bursts inside someone's body, releasing deadly poison, yet no obvious outward signs are present to show why the man dies.
 - 32 **Straight:** Straight away or immediately.
 - 37 **He that made us with such large discourse:** The Creator (God) made us with great powers of reasoning or intelligence.
 - 40 **To fust in us unused:** To grow mouldy from lack of use.
 - 41 **Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple:** Animal-like forgetfulness, or the hesitation of a coward.



Since I have cause and will and strength and means
To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me:
Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed 50
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument, 55
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep? While, to my shame, I see 60
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent 65
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!

[HAMLET exits]



-
- 47 **Gross:** Large.
49 **Delicate and tender:** Gentle and calm; or perhaps youthful and uncorrupted.
51 **Makes mouths at the invisible event:** Makes faces at events that have not occurred yet.
54 **An egg-shell:** A metaphor here meaning a worthless piece of garbage.
55 **Stir:** Act; **argument:** dispute.
56 **A straw:** A trivial or worthless circumstance.
64 **Try the cause:** Settle an argument with a fight.
65 **Continent:** Container.



QUESTIONS

- 1 In what ways does the character of Fortinbras in this scene contrast with the character of Claudius (e.g. see Act 4 Scene 3, lines 38–53)?
- 2 Summarise Fortinbras' military plans that are outlined in this scene.



Re-read Hamlet's soliloquy in lines 33–67.

- 1 In what ways have the tone and focus of Hamlet's language changed from previous scenes?
- 2 What contrasts does Hamlet make between humans and animals?
- 3 What is Hamlet's point in making these contrasts?
- 4 What reasons does Hamlet give for not yet having taken revenge on Claudius?
- 5 In what ways does Hamlet view Fortinbras as his antithesis in this speech?



If you were directing a production of *Hamlet*, would you omit this scene? Why or why not?

Branagh: DVD ('My thoughts be bloody!')



Consider how Branagh (1996) presents the character of Hamlet in this scene, particularly in his soliloquy (lines 33–67). Discuss the following questions in groups or as a class.

- 1 On what aspects of Hamlet's character does Branagh focus?
- 2 What cinematic devices does he employ to present Hamlet this way?
- 3 Do you think Branagh is successful in his characterisation of Hamlet in this scene? Why or why not?
- 4 If you were to direct a film version of this speech, how would you present the character of Hamlet and what cinematic devices would you use to do so?



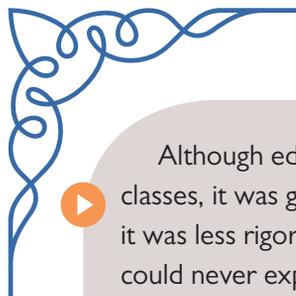
She turns to favour and to prettiness ...

The role of Elizabethan women

Women in Elizabethan England did not enjoy the rights that women in many parts of the world enjoy today. Although the ruler of England at this time was a woman, Elizabethan society was patriarchal, meaning fathers ruled over their households and men occupied most of the positions of power and influence.

A girl needed her father's consent to marry as marriage was, in a legal sense, a transfer of property from one man to another. Arranged marriages were still common among the rich, who were looking to protect their wealth and property. We see these patriarchal attitudes in Polonius' dialogue with and treatment of his daughter, Ophelia, in Acts 1 and 2.





Although education was becoming more widespread and accessible to the middle classes, it was generally only available to girls from upper-class families and even then it was less rigorous than that given to boys. No matter how intelligent a girl was, she could never expect to go to university. *Hamlet* reflects this, with at least six of the male characters attending or having attended university. Ophelia reinforces the idea that she has had an education fitting for an Elizabethan girl when, at the beginning of Act 2, she recounts that Hamlet approached her while she was ‘sewing in [her] closet’ (Act 2 Scene 1, line 75).

Women did not appear on the English stage until 1661, nearly 40 years after Shakespeare’s death; the theatre was considered too dangerous and disreputable a place for a woman to work. Theatre companies in Shakespeare’s day circumvented this problem by using boy actors whose voices had not yet broken to play the parts of female characters, such as Gertrude and Ophelia in *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare’s plays both reflect their time and transcend it. However, it is clear that the Danish court is patriarchal, through the power the male characters wield and through the way they seek to control the women. In Act 1 Scene 3 of *Hamlet* we see the dynamics of Ophelia’s family, when first Laertes then Polonius look to control Ophelia’s romantic choices. Polonius demands absolute obedience and refuses to allow Ophelia even to speak to Hamlet. Likewise, Claudius and Hamlet both seek to control Gertrude, and Hamlet even concerns himself with something as intimate as her sexual behaviour.

The two female characters in *Hamlet* are in many ways conventional – they are generally passive while male characters such as Claudius and Hamlet drive the action of the play. We are given access to Hamlet’s private thoughts through soliloquy, and we are also given Claudius’ inner thoughts in places. Conversely, Gertrude is denied this kind of reflection, and Ophelia, in her only soliloquy, contemplates Hamlet’s position rather than her own situation when she describes him (largely inaccurately) as a noble courtier, poet and soldier who has lost his sanity.

It is ironic that Ophelia, who is denied a public voice through most of the play, gains a voice in Act 4 through her madness. She is finally able to speak some dangerous and unpalatable truths which she would never be able to utter as a courtly lady. One song she sings, in particular, concerns the hypocrisy of men: a man sleeps with his fiancée but then refuses to marry her because she is no longer a virgin. Compare the responses of the characters witnessing Hamlet’s ‘dangerous lunacy’ and their reactions to Ophelia in Act 4 Scene 5. She is described as ‘poor Ophelia’ and her brother dismisses her songs as ‘prettiness’ without ‘matter’ or meaning. It may be said that her death, in which she is again presented as a passive victim, is explained away through ‘pretty’ language.

Recent feminist critics have pointed out how critics of past generations, predominantly men, have often given much more weight to Hamlet's views of women than to the other characters' views, largely failing to differentiate between Hamlet's voice and that of the playwright. Although Hamlet is the central and most compelling character, there is no more reason to hear in his lines the authoritative voice of the play or playwright than there is to hear this voice in the lines of Shakespeare's villainous protagonists such as Richard III or Macbeth. We may, for example, weigh his generalisation about all women ('frailty, thy name is woman', Act I Scene 2, line 146) and his judgement of Gertrude as a 'pernicious woman' against the dialogue and actions of Ophelia and Gertrude.

During the concluding scenes of the play, carefully consider the fates of Ophelia and Gertrude and how the male characters treat them.



The painting Ophelia (c. 1851) by the Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais, showing Ophelia floating and singing in a river shortly before she drowns, as described by Gertrude in Act 4 Scene 7



Act 4 Scene 5

CHARACTERS

Ophelia
Claudius
Laertes
Gertrude
Horatio
Gentleman
Followers
[Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]

IN A NUTSHELL



Horatio brings a mad and distracted Ophelia to the Queen. She talks strangely and sings verses of love songs. Laertes arrives with Danish soldiers, seeking out Claudius, whom he believes has killed his father, and he is greatly perplexed to see his sister Ophelia behaving in such a way. Claudius offers support to Laertes by helping him to avenge Polonius' death.

Before you read

- Ophelia's genuine madness in this scene provides a contrast to Hamlet's feigned madness earlier in the play. Although her behaviour is deemed 'mad' by all the characters with whom she shares the stage, her dialogue and lyrics are rich in allusion. Many of her lines seem to refer to her father's death, and others to the sexual hypocrisy of men; the latter have led many to speculate that she was seduced by Hamlet.
- The flowers Ophelia distributes had symbolic meanings for an Elizabethan audience: rosemary (remembrance), columbines (unfaithfulness), violets (faithfulness), daisies (deception in love), rue (regret or repentance), and fennel (could represent flattery but was also given to ward off evil spirits). As a result of the paucity of stage directions and the ambiguity of her dialogue, a director must decide to whom Ophelia gives each flower, and also whether she distributes actual flowers or her hands are empty.



V

Distract:	Mad
Aim:	Guess
Toy:	Trivial concern
Amis:	Disaster
Shoon:	Shoes
Betime:	Early
By Gis:	By Jesus
Muddied:	Disturbed

Elsinore: A room in the castle.

[GERTRUDE and HORATIO enter]

GERTRUDE I will not speak with her.

HORATIO She is importunate, indeed distract:
Her mood will needs be pitied.

GERTRUDE What would she have?

HORATIO She speaks much of her father, says she hears
There's tricks i' th' world, and hems, and beats her heart, 5

Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt
That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshapèd use of it doth move
The hearers to collection; they aim at it,

And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts, 10
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.

GERTRUDE 'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew
Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds. 15
Let her come in.

[HORATIO goes to the door]

[Aside] To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss:
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt. 20

[HORATIO re-enters, with OPHELIA, who is acting in a deranged way]

2 **Importunate, indeed distract:** Insistent to the point of seeming deranged.

5 **Hems:** Hmms or humming noises.

6 **Spurns enviously at straws:** Lashes out at small, insignificant matters.

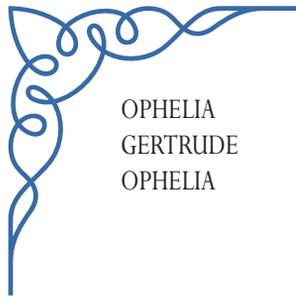
8–9 **The unshapèd use ... to collection:** People are trying to guess at the meaning of Ophelia's disorderly ramblings.

13 **Unhappily:** Ironically close to the truth.

14–15 **She may strew ... ill-breeding minds:** Mischievous thinkers might jump to the wrong conclusions.

19 **Artless jealousy:** Suspicion that is not well hidden.

20 **It spills itself in fearing to be spilt:** Being so afraid of revealing the truth (e.g. spilling the beans or one's guts), the truth is inadvertently revealed.



OPHELIA Where is the beauteous Majesty of Denmark?
 GERTRUDE How now, Ophelia?
 OPHELIA *[Sings] How should I your true love know
 From another one?
 By his cockle hat and staff,
 And his sandal shoon.* 25

GERTRUDE Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?
 OPHELIA Say you? Nay, pray you, mark:
*[Sings] He is dead and gone, lady,
 He is dead and gone;
 At his head a grass-green turf,
 At his heels a stone.* 30

O, ho!
 GERTRUDE Nay, but, Ophelia –
 OPHELIA Pray you, mark: 35
[Sings] White his shroud as the mountain snow –

[CLAUDIUS enters]

GERTRUDE Alas, look here, my lord.
 OPHELIA *[Sings] Larded with sweet flowers,
 Which, bewept, to the grave did not go
 With true-love showers.* 40

CLAUDIUS How do you, pretty lady?
 OPHELIA Well, God 'ild you! They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table!
 CLAUDIUS Conceit upon her father.
 OPHELIA Pray you, let's have no words of this, but when they ask you what it means, say you this: 45
*[Sings] Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
 All in the morning betime,
 And I a maid at your window,
 To be your Valentine.* 50
Then up he rose and donned his clothes,



25–26 **By his cockle hat ... sandal shoon:** Pilgrims wearing sandals and carrying a staff often visited the shrine of St James in Compostella, Spain, and would return with a souvenir cockle shell in the hat.

38 **Larded:** Covered with or decorated.

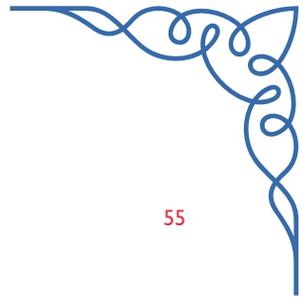
40 **Showers:** Poetic description of tears.

42 **God 'ild you:** An expression of thanks meaning 'God yield or reward you'.

42–43 **They say the owl ... your table:** An allusion to a tale in which a baker's daughter was turned into an owl for her lack of generosity when Christ asked her for bread.

44 **Conceit:** Prolonged thinking.

51 **Donned:** Put on (opposite of doffed or put off).



*And dupped the chamber door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.*

CLAUDIUS Pretty Ophelia! 55

OPHELIA Indeed, la, without an oath, I'll make an end on't:

*[Sings] By Gis and by Saint Charity,
 Alack, and fie for shame!*

*Young men will do't, if they come to't;
 By Cock, they are to blame.*

*Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,
 You promised me to wed.'*

60

He answers:

*'So would I 'a done, by yonder sun,
 An thou hadst not come to my bed.'*

65

CLAUDIUS How long hath she been thus?

OPHELIA I hope all will be well. We must be patient, but I cannot choose but weep, to think they should lay him i' th' cold ground. My brother shall know of it, and so I thank you for your good counsel – Come, my coach! – Good night, ladies; good night, sweet ladies; good night, good night. 70

[OPHELIA exits]

CLAUDIUS *[To HORATIO]* Follow her close: give her good watch, I pray you.

[HORATIO exits]

O, this is the poison of deep grief; it springs
All from her father's death. O Gertrude, Gertrude,
When sorrows come, they come not single spies
But in battalions. First, her father slain;

75

Next, your son gone, and he most violent author
Of his own just remove; the people muddied,
Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers
For good Polonius' death; and we have done but greenly
In hugger-mugger to inter him; poor Ophelia
Divided from herself and her fair judgement,
Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts;

80



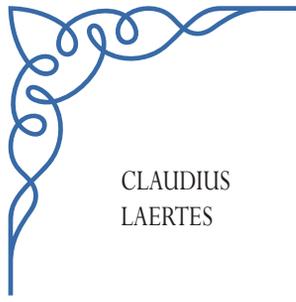
52–54 Dupped the chamber door ... departed more: A sexual pun referring to a virgin ('maid') losing her virginity by opening ('dupped' = opened) her 'door' to her lover.

59–62 Young men ... me to wed: More sexual references. 'Do't' = do it or have sex; 'come to't' = have an erection; 'by Cock' = by the Old Man or God, with an obvious second meaning; 'tumbled' = rolled around in bed with someone.

77 Just remove: Justified removal; **muddied:** stirred up, like muddy water.

79–80 We have done but greenly ... to inter him: We have been immature or unwise in burying him secretly.

81–82 Divided from herself ... mere beasts: It is our ability to reason that divides us from the animals or from paintings.



CLAUDIUS Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged
 LAERTES Most thoroughly for my father.
 Who shall stay you?
 My will, not all the world's,
 And for my means, I'll husband them so well, 135
 They shall go far with little.

CLAUDIUS Good Laertes,
 If you desire to know the certainty
 Of your dear father's death, is't writ in your revenge,
 That, sweepstake, you will draw both friend and foe,
 Winner and loser? 140

LAERTES None but his enemies.
 CLAUDIUS Will you know them then?
 LAERTES To his good friends thus wide I'll ope my arms,
 And like the kind life-rendering pelican,
 Repast them with my blood.

CLAUDIUS Why, now you speak
 Like a good child and a true gentleman. 145
 That I am guiltless of your father's death,
 And am most sensible in grief for it,
 It shall as level to your judgement pierce
 As day does to your eye –

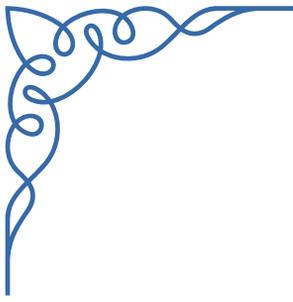
FOLLOWERS [Within] Let her come in.
 LAERTES How now? What noise is that? 150

[OPHELIA re-enters, elaborately dressed with straw and flowers]

O heat, dry up my brains! Tears seven times salt,
 Burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye! –
 By heaven, thy madness shall be paid by weight,
 Till our scale turn the beam. O rose of May!
 Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia! – 155



-
- 133 **Thoroughly:** Thoroughly or completely.
 - 135 **Husband:** Manage.
 - 139 **Sweepstake:** A gambling term, where one person takes ('sweeps') all the stakes or winnings from the table.
 - 142–44 **To his good friends ... with my blood:** A violent image. The pelican was said to have fed its young with its own blood.
 - 147 **Most sensible:** Painfully feeling.
 - 148 **Level:** Obvious or plain.
 - 152 **Virtue:** Power.
 - 154 **Till our scale turn the beam:** Until the crossbar of the scales (of Justice) turns in our favour.



*He never will come again.
His beard was as white as snow,
All flaxen was his poll:
He is gone, he is gone,
And we cast away moan.
Gramercy on his soul!*

190

And of all Christian souls, I pray God. God buy you.

[OPHELIA exits]

LAERTES Do you see this, O God?

CLAUDIUS Laertes, I must commune with your grief,
Or you deny me right. Go but apart, 195

Make choice of whom your wisest friends you will,
And they shall hear and judge 'twixt you and me:
If by direct or by collateral hand

They find us touched, we will our kingdom give,
Our crown, our life, and all that we call ours, 200

To you in satisfaction; but if not,
Be you content to lend your patience to us,
And we shall jointly labour with your soul
To give it due content.

LAERTES Let this be so.

His means of death, his obscure funeral – 205
No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones,
No noble rite nor formal ostentation –
Cry to be heard, as 'twere from heaven to earth,
That I must call't in question.

CLAUDIUS So you shall,
And where the offence is let the great axe fall. 210
I pray you, go with me.

[All exit]

188 **Flaxen was his poll:** His head (hair) was white.

191 **Gramercy:** God have mercy.

192 **God buy you:** Good-bye (literally 'God be with you').

194 **Commune:** Talk together or share something in common.

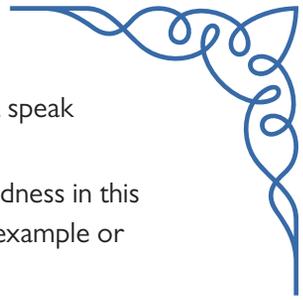
198 **Collateral:** Indirect.

205 **Obscure:** Hidden.

206 **Hatchment:** A stone tablet engraved with the family coat of arms.

207 **Ostentation:** Ceremony.





QUESTIONS

- 1 What is Horatio concerned will happen if Gertrude does not speak to Ophelia?
- 2 How does Shakespeare highlight the severity of Ophelia’s madness in this scene? List several literary and dramatic devices, and give an example or two of each.
- 3 How is Ophelia’s madness similar to, yet different from, Hamlet’s madness?
- 4 Complete the following table to show your understanding of the ways in which Shakespeare characterises Laertes in this scene.

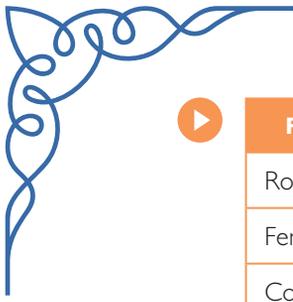
Language devices	Examples from the text	What does the combination of these devices show about Laertes’ character?
Imperative or demanding words		
Imagery relating to darkness and evil		
Harsh-sounding alliteration		
Images of violence		



EXTEND

- 1 According to lines 132–33, what is Laertes’ desire? How does this create a narrative parallel to those of both Hamlet and Fortinbras?
- 2 What does Claudius mean when he says, ‘There’s such divinity doth hedge a king, / That treason can but peep to what it would’ (120–21)? How is this statement ironic?
- 3 Re-read lines 171–78 and the second point under **Before you read** on page 168, then answer the questions below.
 - a Should Ophelia distribute actual flowers or should her hands be empty? Why do you think this?
 - b Complete the table on the next page to show to whom you would have Ophelia give the flowers and why.





Flower (and meaning)	Character	Reason
Rosemary (remembrance)		
Fennel (flattery)		
Columbine (unfaithfulness)		
Violets (faithfulness)		
Daisies (deception in love)		
Rue (regret or repentance)		

4 What dramatic effect is created by the closing words of Claudius in this scene (lines 209–11)?



1 If you were directing the play, in what tone would you have Ophelia deliver her lines in this scene?

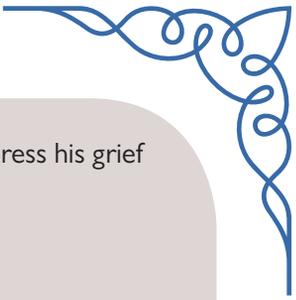
2 Re-read Claudius' lines at the end of the scene. If you were directing the play would you have Gertrude overhear these lines? Why or why not?

A word about hyperbole

Hyperbole (*hy-PER-bo-lee*) involves using a deliberately exaggerated statement to emphasise a point. It is a figure of speech and is not to be taken literally. Imagine something dreadful happens, so you scream, 'It's the end of the world!' It's not literally the end of the world but we know what you mean: you are deliberately exaggerating to let us know you are upset.

In Act 4 Scene 5, Laertes returns at the head of a rioting army and expresses his desire for revenge through hyperbolic language (lines 128–30):

To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!
 Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
 I dare damnation.



In Act 5 Scene 1 (lines 201–04), Laertes will use similar hyperbole to express his grief and anger:

O, treble woe
Fall ten times treble on that cursèd head,
Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense
Deprived thee of!

In the same scene, Hamlet, who goes on to mock Laertes' hyperbolic language, expresses his feelings for Ophelia in similar terms (lines 226–28):

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

Look for more hyperbolic language from Laertes in the play's final scenes and from Hamlet in his dialogue with Laertes.

Act 4 Scene 6

CHARACTERS

Horatio
1ST Sailor
Servant



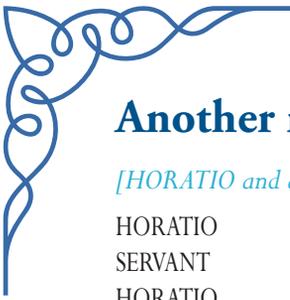
IN A NUTSHELL

In a letter to Horatio, Hamlet explains that, after pirates attacked his ship, he abandoned his crew and boarded the pirate ship. He has now returned to Denmark, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern still bound for England.

Before you read

- This short scene covers a lot of detail and affects our reading of Scene 7, which follows. It serves the purpose of warning the audience of Hamlet's escape, so that his letter to Claudius in Scene 7 does not seem too strange or contrived.

A pirate: A pirate ship
Overlooked: Looked over



Another room in the castle.

[HORATIO and a SERVANT enter]

HORATIO What are they that would speak with me?
SERVANT Sailors, sir: they say they have letters for you.
HORATIO Let them come in.

[SERVANT exits]

I do not know from what part of the world
I should be greeted, if not from Lord Hamlet. 5

[SAILORS enter]

1ST SAILOR God bless you, sir.
HORATIO Let Him bless thee too.
1ST SAILOR He shall, sir, an't please him. There's a letter for you, sir: it comes from
the ambassador that was bound for England, if your name be Horatio,
as I am let to know it is. 10
HORATIO *[Reads]* *Horatio, when thou shalt have overlooked this, give these
fellows some means to the King: they have letters for him. Ere we
were two days old at sea, a pirate of very warlike appointment gave
us chase. Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compelled
valour, and in the grapple I boarded them. On the instant they got
clear of our ship, so I alone became their prisoner. They have dealt
with me like thieves of mercy, but they knew what they did: I am to do
a good turn for them. Let the King have the letters I have sent, and
repair thou to me with as much speed as thou wouldst fly death. I have
words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb, yet are they much too
light for the bore of the matter. These good fellows will bring thee where
I am. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hold their course for England: of
them I have much to tell thee. Farewell. 15
20
He that thou knowest thine, Hamlet.*



12 **Means:** A way to gain access.

13 **Of very warlike appointment:** Equipped with many weapons.

14–15 **Compelled valour:** The necessary or required bravery.

19 **Repair:** Return or come; **as thou wouldst fly death:** as if you are fleeing from death.

20–21 **Yet are they much too light for the bore of the matter:** Hamlet compares his words to
bullets that are too small for the calibre ('bore') of news that he needs to tell Horatio.

Come, I will give you way for these your letters,
And do't the speedier, that you may direct me
To him from whom you brought them.

25

[All exit]



25

Give you way: Provide access for you.



QUESTIONS

Shakespeare uses the device of a letter in this scene. What dramatic or narrative purpose does the letter fulfil?



DISCUSS

If you were directing this scene, how would you justify Horatio's reading out Hamlet's letter?



Carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts ...

Hamlet as revenge tragedy

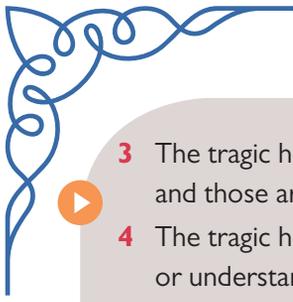
The collection of Shakespeare's plays which we now call the First Folio was published in 1623, a thick book entitled *Mr William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*. *Hamlet* was included in the section marked 'Tragedies', along with such famous plays as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. The book did not offer a definition of tragedy. Many of its histories include tragic elements, many of the tragedies include plenty of historical detail, and all of Shakespeare's plays include some comic elements. So, what did the editors mean by tragedy?

The term tragedy generally suggests an unhappy ending, whereas comedy suggests a happy outcome. While it could be argued that some Shakespearean tragedies, such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, are not entirely tragic (as the respective kingdoms of Scotland and Denmark are each liberated from the rule of a usurping tyrant), the plays generally include many tragic elements.

The term tragedy was first used in ancient Greece. The Greek philosopher Aristotle asserted the following things about tragedy in his work *Poetics*:

- 1 It should be serious and dignified and written in a language more elevated than everyday speech.
- 2 It should focus on a hero or heroes, usually distinguished by their rank or ability.





- 3 The tragic hero should make some error in action, causing suffering for himself and those around him.
- 4 The tragic hero should arrive at some sort of profound moment of recognition or understanding; Aristotle called this *anagnorisis*.
- 5 The audience should feel sympathy for this tragic hero.
- 6 Tragedy should evoke feelings of pity and fear in the audience, challenging their assumptions about human experience and bringing about a change (*catharsis*).
- 7 The plot should involve dramatic reversals or ironies.

In Shakespeare's day the term tragedy was used more loosely, but some elements are common to the majority of his tragedies:

- 1 Shakespeare's tragic heroes (generally men) tend to be elevated above the common person by rank or ability.
- 2 The tragic hero is generally alienated from society through his experiences or the choices he has made.
- 3 The fall of the hero tends to affect the whole community.
- 4 The tragic hero tends to come to recognise his problematic choices or the consequences of his destructive actions, and from this he draws some meaning of potentially universal significance.

At a glance you can see that *Hamlet* includes many of these elements, but *Hamlet* is also influenced by a popular genre called **revenge tragedy**. In the 1580s the revenge tragedies of the Roman playwright Seneca were translated into English. These plays were widely performed and had a significant influence on Elizabethan playwrights, including Shakespeare. Elizabethan revenge tragedies were melodramatic and generally took the following elements from Seneca:

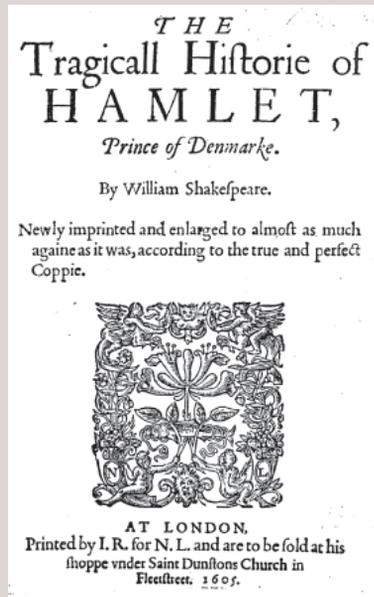
- a great deal of violence
- revenge as the dominant motive
- the use of hyperbolic language, especially by the avenger
- madness
- a ghost calling for revenge
- a play-within-the-play.

We see the avenger from a revenge tragedy in Laertes and, to a smaller extent, Fortinbras. Laertes' bloodthirsty and hyperbolic language in the final two acts characterises him as this sort of avenger. Likewise, Hamlet repeatedly tries to play this role; for example, in Act 3 Scene 2 he delivers the following lines (341–45) before meeting his mother:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world: now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

While Seneca's plays and the original story of *Hamlet* (see page 8) were set in a pagan context, in which revenge was thought fitting, Shakespeare complicates matters by setting his play in a Christian universe, where the act of taking revenge is thought to be sinful. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare often sets up the audience's expectation for a simple revenge tragedy, but then subverts this expectation and complicates matters in a way that makes the drama more human and profound than the works that influenced him.

- Q To what extent does *Hamlet* adhere to Aristotle's model for tragedy?
- Q In what ways do you think this model is potentially inadequate for discussing a play like *Hamlet*?
- Q To what extent does *Hamlet* adhere to the Shakespearean model for tragedy proposed above?
- Q In what ways do you believe Shakespeare's *Hamlet* moves beyond a conventional revenge tragedy?



Title page of the 1605 printing of the Second Quarto version of the play



Act 4 Scene 7

CHARACTERS

Claudius
Laertes
Gertrude
Messenger

IN A NUTSHELL



A messenger arrives with letters for the King and Queen from Hamlet, advising that he has returned to Denmark. Blaming Hamlet for Polonius' death and Ophelia's madness, Claudius manipulates Laertes to seek vengeance against Hamlet in a fencing match. Laertes plans to poison the tip of his sword, which will kill Hamlet if he is cut during the fight. As a back-up plan, Claudius suggests they prepare a cup containing poison for Hamlet to drink during the fight. When Gertrude announces that Ophelia has drowned, this further fuels Laertes' desire to kill Hamlet.

Before you read

- The fourth act in Shakespearean tragedy is often said to be a clarifying movement. The actor playing the protagonist has an opportunity to rest while the other characters move the plot along. In *Hamlet*, Claudius' evil and deceptive actions come to the fore. The audience also witnesses in Ophelia's death the tragic consequences of the chain of events that Claudius' usurpation of the throne has set in motion, and the consequences of Hamlet's reckless actions.
- Claudius' manipulation of Laertes gives insight into how easily unthinking rage can be co-opted by evil. We know from the previous acts that Hamlet could not be so easily deceived.



Count:	Account
Abuse:	Deception
Rapier:	A double-edged sword used in fencing
Play:	Fence
Wager:	Lay bets
Gall:	Scratch
Fain:	Gladly

Another room in the castle.

[CLAUDIUS and LAERTES enter]

CLAUDIUS	Now must your conscience my acquaintance seal, And you must put me in your heart for friend, Since you have heard, and with a knowing ear, That he which hath your noble father slain Pursued my life.	
LAERTES	It well appears. But tell me Why you proceeded not against these feats, So crimeful and so capital in nature, As by your safety, wisdom, all things else, You mainly were stirred up.	5
CLAUDIUS	O, for two special reasons, Which may to you, perhaps, seem much unsinewed, But yet to me they are strong. The Queen his mother Lives almost by his looks, and for myself – My virtue or my plague, be it either which – She's so conjunctive to my life and soul, That, as the star moves not but in his sphere, I could not but by her. The other motive, Why to a public count I might not go, Is the great love the general gender bear him, Who, dipping all his faults in their affection, Would, like the spring that turneth wood to stone, Convert his gyves to graces, so that my arrows, Too slightly timbered for so loud a wind, Would have reverted to my bow again, And not where I had aimed them.	10 15 20 25

6 **Feats:** Wicked deeds.

7 **Capital in nature:** Deserving of capital punishment (the death penalty).

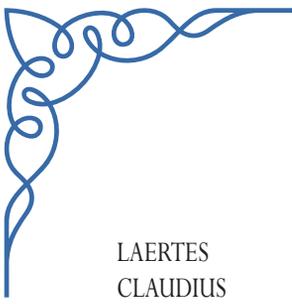
11 **Unsinewed:** Lacking sinew or muscle, hence weak.

15 **Conjunctive:** Closely united or intimately joined.

16 **The star moves not but in his sphere:** An astronomical term referring to the close orbit ('sphere') or proximity of heavenly bodies in relation to each other, referring to being closely joined.

19 **General gender:** Common people.

20–25 **Dipping all his faults ... had aimed them:** Claudius claims the common people are so enamoured of Hamlet that they would change the colour of his faults ('dipping' = in dye) with their love, like turning wood to stone, or chains ('gyves') to decorations ('graces'). He also uses an archery metaphor, implying his plan to deal with Hamlet will turn public opinion against him, like firing a flimsy arrow at a target and having it return to his bow in the strong wind.



As he had been incorpsed and demi-natured
 With the brave beast. So far he topped my thought
 That I, in forgery of shapes and tricks,
 Come short of what he did.

LAERTES A Norman was't? 90

CLAUDIUS A Norman.

LAERTES Upon my life, Lamond.

CLAUDIUS The very same.

LAERTES I know him well: he is the brooch indeed
 And gem of all the nation.

CLAUDIUS He made confession of you,
 And gave you such a masterly report 95
 For art and exercise in your defence,
 And for your rapier most especially,

That he cried out 'twould be a sight indeed
 If one could match you. The scrimers of their nation,
 He swore, had neither motion, guard, nor eye 100
 If you opposed them. Sir, this report of his
 Did Hamlet so envenom with his envy
 That he could nothing do but wish and beg
 Your sudden coming o'er, to play with him.
 Now, out of this –

LAERTES What out of this, my lord? 105

CLAUDIUS Laertes, was your father dear to you?
 Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,
 A face without a heart?

LAERTES Why ask you this?

CLAUDIUS Not that I think you did not love your father,
 But that I know love is begun by time, 110
 And that I see, in passages of proof,
 Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.

There lives within the very flame of love
 A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it,
 And nothing is at a like goodness still, 115



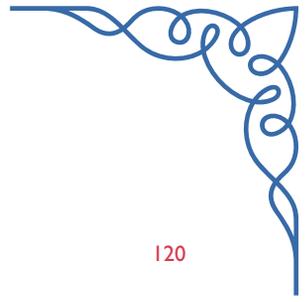
86–87 **Incorpsed and demi-natured / With the brave beast:** The French knight was so skilful on horseback that it was supernatural, as if he and his horse were joined in body ('incorpsed'), perhaps referring to a centaur, which was half-man, half-horse ('demi-natured').

92–93 **The brooch indeed / And gem of all the nation:** An ornament, the most valuable in all of France.

99 **Scrimers:** Fencers, from the French word *escrimeurs*.

102 **Envenom:** Poison.

113–14 **There lives within ... abate it:** A snuff is the burnt wick of a candle, which causes the flame to die out. Claudius suggests that love contains within itself the cause of its own demise, and applies this later to Hamlet's character and the poisoned tip of the rapier.



For goodness, growing to a plurisy,
 Dies in his own too much. That we would do
 We should do when we would, for this 'would' changes
 And hath abatements and delays as many
 As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents;
 And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift sigh,
 That hurts by easing. But, to the quick o' th' ulcer:
 Hamlet comes back; what would you undertake
 To show yourself your father's son in deed
 More than in words?

120

LAERTES To cut his throat i' th' church.

125

CLAUDIUS No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarise;
 Revenge should have no bounds. But, good Laertes,
 Will you do this? Keep close within your chamber:
 Hamlet returned shall know you are come home;
 We'll put on those shall praise your excellence
 And set a double varnish on the fame
 The Frenchman gave you, bring you in fine together
 And wager on your heads. He, being remiss,
 Most generous and free from all contriving,
 Will not peruse the foils, so that, with ease
 Or with a little shuffling, you may choose
 A sword unbated, and in a pass of practice
 Requite him for your father.

130

135

LAERTES I will do't,
 And, for that purpose, I'll anoint my sword.
 I bought an unction of a mountebank,
 So mortal that, but dip a knife in it,
 Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare,

140



116 **Plurisy:** Excess.

117–22 **That we would do ... by easing:** Claudius observes that there should be no delay between desires or words and actions, otherwise it will die out or 'abate'. According to medieval belief, sighing stole blood from the heart, and slowly but ultimately harmed the one sighing.

122 **To the quick o' th' ulcer:** To the heart or cause of the infection.

126 **Sanctuarise:** Provide refuge. In medieval times, the church was a place of refuge or temporary protection, even for criminals.

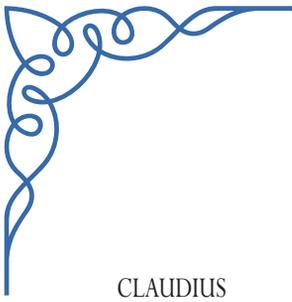
131 **Set a double varnish:** Make to shine twice as brightly.

133 **Remiss:** Careless.

135 **Peruse the foils:** Examine the rapiers before the fencing tournament.

140–41 **I bought an unction of a mountebank, / So mortal:** I purchased a deadly ('mortal') ointment ('unction') from a travelling doctor ('mountebank').

142 **Cataplasm:** A poultice or bandage to provide a cure.



Collected from all simples that have virtue
 Under the moon, can save the thing from death
 That is but scratched withal. I'll touch my point 145
 With this contagion, that, if I gall him slightly,
 It may be death.

CLAUDIUS

Let's further think of this,
 Weigh what convenience both of time and means
 May fit us to our shape. If this should fail,

And that our drift look through our bad performance, 150
 'Twere better not assayed. Therefore this project
 Should have a back or second, that might hold,
 If this should blast in proof – Soft! Let me see ...

We'll make a solemn wager on your cunnings ...
 I ha't. 155

When in your motion you are hot and dry –
 As make your bouts more violent to that end –
 And that he calls for drink, I'll have prepared him
 A chalice for the nonce, whereon but sipping,
 If he by chance escape your venom'd stuck, 160
 Our purpose may hold there –

[GERTRUDE enters]

How now, sweet Queen?

GERTRUDE One woe doth tread upon another's heel,
 So fast they follow: your sister's drowned, Laertes.

LAERTES Drowned! O, where?

GERTRUDE There is a willow grows aslant the brook, 165
 That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.
 There with fantastic garlands did she come
 Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
 That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
 But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them. 170



146 Contagion: A deadly, infectious disease; **gall him slightly:** graze him.

149–51 If this should fail ... not assayed: If this scheme ('drift' = purpose) is made known because we failed to carry it out correctly ('bad performance'), it would be better not to have begun in the first place.

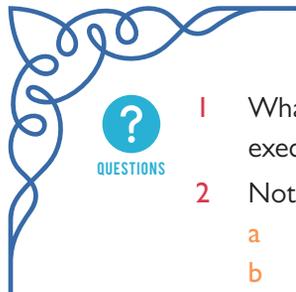
152 Back: A back-up plan.

154 Cunnings: Skills.

159 A chalice for the nonce: A wine goblet for the occasion.

165–66 There is a willow ... glassy stream: The willow is a symbol of lost love, hence the term 'weeping willow', and is often found alongside ('aslant') water. The underside of its leaves are white or grey ('hoar leaves') in colour.

167 Fantastic: Elaborately decorated.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What two reasons does Claudius give Laertes for not having publicly executed Hamlet (lines 10–25)?
- 2 Note Claudius' plan to kill Hamlet.
 - a What is Claudius' initial scheme?
 - b What does Laertes add to the plan?
 - c Claudius invents a back-up plan. What does he come up with?
- 3 Laertes wants to 'cut [Hamlet's] throat i' th' church' (line 125).
 - a What does this reveal to us about Laertes' character?
 - b How is this statement an example of dramatic irony if you consider Hamlet's opportunity to kill Claudius in Act 3 Scene 3?
- 4 Give an example of personification Gertrude uses when she describes Ophelia's death. Do you find this image appropriately emotive? Why or why not?



EXTEND

- 1 What do you think Hamlet means when he says to Claudius, 'I am set naked on your kingdom' (lines 44–45)? Claudius' reaction in line 50 might give you some idea.
- 2 Note that throughout the play there has been a combination of metaphorical poison or disease, and literal poison.
 - a Describe the metaphorical or moral poison.
 - b List the instances of literal or physical poison.
 - c How do these types of poison mirror, parallel or reinforce each other?
- 3 What view of revenge does Claudius express in this scene? How is this ironic?



DISCUSS

- Re-read Gertrude's elegiac speech about Ophelia's death (lines 165–82).
- 1 How does Gertrude claim Ophelia died? Does this seem likely?
 - 2 Is there any evidence from the text that Ophelia did not die accidentally?
 - 3 Do you think the speech is a fitting tribute to Ophelia?

Thinking about the conflict between illusion and reality

At the heart of *Hamlet* is the conflict between illusion and reality. However, it is not so much a dichotomy of what is real and what is not, but a blurring of the boundary between what seems to be true and what is *actually* true. Shakespeare's characters deceive and are deceived when reality is hidden beneath words or appearances, and this contributes significantly to the ambiguity that exists in the play.

REALITY

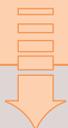
Claudius has poisoned Hamlet's father and is the source of the moral contagion infecting Denmark.



ILLUSION

Claudius hides behind an outward appearance of order and justice; Hamlet pretends to be mad; Polonius hides behind tapestries (literally) and words (metaphorically); Laertes secretly plans to poison Hamlet.

Q Why do Polonius and Hamlet hide the truth or deceive others (2.1.61–64; 2.2.539–40)?



DRAMATIC IRONY

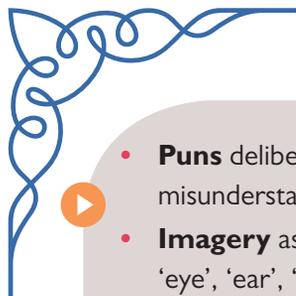
The audience is typically in the privileged position of being able to see what is real and what is not, but ambiguity is created when the distinction between reality and illusion is not so clear.

Q For example, by the end of Act 4, is Hamlet still pretending to be mad or is it more than pretending? Is Gertrude innocent or was she complicit in her husband's death? Did Ophelia really drown accidentally?

Shakespeare uses the following language and theatrical devices to emphasise the conflict between illusion and reality:

- **Stage directions (and dialogue)** indicate that the characters often 'hide' (see especially Act 3 Scene 1).
- **Soliloquies** and **asides** grant the audience a glimpse beneath characters' outward appearance and into the reality of their thoughts and motivations. A good example is Act 3 Scene 1, lines 49–88. Note, however, the ambiguity created in Hamlet's soliloquies by his use of contrasts, oxymorons, puns and questioning.
- **Repetition** of words and phrases such as 'seem', 'honest', 'true', 'fain' and 'lie' (e.g. 1.2.76–86 and 3.2.306–27), as well as theatrical terms such as 'show', 'play' and 'act' (most frequent in Act 3 Scenes 1 and 2).





- **Puns** deliberately blur the meaning of Hamlet's words, creating confusion and misunderstanding (e.g. 3.2.306–27).
- **Imagery** associated with seeing and hearing permeates the play. Words such as 'eye', 'ear', 'watch', 'hear', 'see' and 'look' appear 265 times throughout *Hamlet*, often in clusters (e.g. 1.2.175–94 and 3.4.65–82, 90–92).
- **Images** that contrast outward appearance and inward reality are numerous. By way of illustration, make-up on a prostitute's face hides skin blemishes (3.1.51–52), an ulcer hides an infection beneath the skin (3.4.153–55), and disease is secretly at work beneath the beautiful exterior of a flower (1.3.39–42 and 4.3.9–11).
- **Plays-within-the-play (embedded narratives)** are a typical Shakespearean structural feature (Act 3 Scenes 1 and 2). Although deliberately artificial constructs, these performances are, ironically, more realistic than the deceptive characters (2.2.457–58, 481–522), and reflect the reality of Claudius' murderous actions (3.2.206–41).

Finally, the narrative or dramatic structure of *Hamlet* is similar to other Shakespearean tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. Moral corruption spreads like poison or disease (see box on page 55) to other characters – and throughout Denmark in *Hamlet* – by means of deception. Moreover, this deception, or the blurring of the boundary between illusion and reality, leads first of all to misunderstanding then ultimately to death and destruction: the hidden Polonius is stabbed by Hamlet; and Ophelia believes Hamlet's lies, descends into madness, then drowns.

Look in Act 5 for how Shakespeare concludes *Hamlet* with further acts of deception, references to literal and metaphorical poison, and instances of misunderstanding; and how the ambiguous distinction between illusion and reality ultimately results in tragedy.

Act 5

Act 5 Scene 1

CHARACTERS

Hamlet
1ST Clown
Laertes
2ND Clown
Priest
Gertrude
Horatio
Claudius
[Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]

IN A NUTSHELL

Two clowns joke around while digging Ophelia's grave. Horatio and Hamlet watch the gravediggers retrieve old skulls, including that of Hamlet's childhood court jester, Yorick. Hamlet speaks fondly of his late friend, and of the inevitability of death. It is not until the funeral procession begins that Hamlet realises it is Ophelia who is being mourned. A distressed Laertes throws himself into his sister's grave, and when Hamlet, who is also passionate with grief, follows, they fight. After Hamlet departs, Claudius reminds Laertes of their murderous plan against Hamlet.

Before you read

- Both the debate between the clowns and Laertes' argument with the priest can be difficult to understand without considering the context of Elizabethan theatre. The idea of suicide was horrific to Elizabethans. Those who committed suicide were not granted Christian funeral rites and were widely believed to be damned to hell, although some thought this would not apply in cases of insanity. If the one who committed suicide were proven to be sane, their goods were confiscated by the state.
- The 1ST Clown in this scene has been said to 'out-Hamlet Hamlet' and his witty answers might remind you of Hamlet's dialogue with Claudius and Polonius earlier in the play. The Clown tells Hamlet that he has been a gravedigger since the day Hamlet's father defeated Fortinbras' father in battle – the same day that Hamlet was born – and also that he has worked at his job for 30 years. This means that Hamlet, who most scholars believe to be in his teens at the beginning of the play, is now 30 years old.


H

How absolute the knave is!

Clowns and gravediggers

Modern editions of *Hamlet* sometimes describe the two characters at the beginning of Act 5 Scene 1 as gravediggers, although the oldest editions simply list them as clowns. Clowns would not necessarily be dressed differently from the other characters on stage, but might take a few liberties with the script and add some physical comedy – a practice Hamlet himself criticises in Act 3.

The principal comic actor was among the stars of any company and very popular with the audience. In the early years of Shakespeare's company (the Lord Chamberlain's Men), William Kemp was the main comic actor, but he left the company in 1599 (perhaps only months before *Hamlet* was written) and, the following year, famously Morris-danced almost 150 km from London to Norwich to win a bet. He later wrote about this event in the book, *Nine Days of Wonder*. By the 1590s, Kemp's more physical style of comedy was becoming unfashionable in the theatres and audiences were ready for a new kind of comic actor.

Robert Armin replaced William Kemp, and it is likely that he played the part of the 1ST Clown, who sings and has all the best lines. While Kemp was renowned for dancing and physical comedy, Armin had a famous singing voice, more suited to the comic roles Shakespeare began to write at this time, such as Feste in *Twelfth Night* and Touchstone in *As You Like It*.



*Illustration from William Kemp's
Nine Days of Wonder
showing him Morris-dancing
from London to Norwich*



V

- Straight:** At once
- Crowner:** Coroner
- Argal:** Therefore
- Hold up:** Carry on
- Unyoke:** Finish work
- Pate:** Head
- Equivocation:** Double meanings
- Picked:** Redefined
- Gorge:** Stomach
- Maimed:** Incomplete

A churchyard.

[Two CLOWNS enter, carrying spades and other equipment]

1ST CLOWN Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?

2ND CLOWN I tell thee she is, and therefore make her grave straight: the crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial.

1ST CLOWN How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defence? 5

2ND CLOWN Why, 'tis found so.

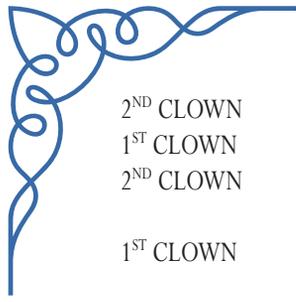
1ST CLOWN It must be *se offendendo*; it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches: it is to act, to do, to perform: *argal*, she drowned herself wittingly.

2ND CLOWN Nay, but hear you, Goodman Delver – 10

1ST CLOWN Give me leave. Here lies the water: good; here stands the man: good; if the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he, nill he, he goes – mark you that – but if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself: *argal*, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life. 15



- 3 **Crowner:** Coroner.
- 4 **Sat on her:** Held an inquest.
- 7 **Se offendendo:** A humorous malapropism here. The Clown says 'self-offence' instead of 'se defendendo', a legal term meaning 'in self-defence'.
- 8 **Wittingly:** Knowingly.
- 9 **Argal:** A variant form of the Latin *ergo*, meaning therefore, which typically introduced the conclusion of an argument.
- 10 **Goodman Delver:** 'Goodman' was the title for a person just below the rank of gentleman, typically followed by the person's occupation. A 'delver' is a digger, thus 'Goodman Delver' is similar to calling him Mr Digger.
- 12 **Will he, nill he:** Willy-nilly; willing or not.



2ND CLOWN But is this law?
 1ST CLOWN Ay, marry, is't: crowner's quest law.
 2ND CLOWN Will you ha' the truth on't? If this had not been a gentlewoman, she
 should have been buried out o' Christian burial.
 1ST CLOWN Why, there thou say'st, and the more pity that great folk should have 20
 countenance in this world to drown or hang themselves, more than their
 even Christian. – Come, my spade. – There is no ancient gentleman but
 gardeners, ditchers and grave-makers: they hold up Adam's profession.
 2ND CLOWN Was he a gentleman?
 1ST CLOWN He was the first that ever bore arms. 25
 2ND CLOWN Why, he had none.
 1ST CLOWN What, art a heathen? How dost thou understand the Scripture? The
 Scripture says, 'Adam digged'. Could he dig without arms? I'll put
 another question to thee: if thou answerest me not to the purpose,
 confess thyself – 30
 2ND CLOWN Go to.
 1ST CLOWN What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright
 or the carpenter?
 2ND CLOWN The gallows-maker, for that frame outlives a thousand tenants.
 1ST CLOWN I like thy wit well, in good faith; the gallows does well. But how does 35
 it well? It does well to those that do ill: now thou dost ill to say the
 gallows is built stronger than the church: *argal*, the gallows may do
 well to thee. To't again, come.
 2ND CLOWN Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright or a carpenter?
 1ST CLOWN Ay, tell me that, and unyoke. 40
 2ND CLOWN Marry, now I can tell.
 1ST CLOWN To't.
 2ND CLOWN Mass, I cannot tell.

[HAMLET and HORATIO enter, in the distance]



-
- 17 **Crowner's quest law:** Law according to the coroner's inquest.
 - 18 **Gentlewoman:** Upper-class woman.
 - 20 **There thou say'st:** You are right; you said it.
 - 21 **Countenance:** In this case, the word means permission.
 - 22 **Even Christian:** Fellow Christians.
 - 23 **Ditchers:** Ditch-diggers.
 - 32 **Mason:** A builder who works with stone; **shipwright:** a shipbuilder.
 - 34 **Gallows-maker:** One who constructed the wooden frames from which criminals were hanged.
 - 35 **Wit:** Intelligence.
 - 40 **Unyoke:** Have a rest, referring to removing the harness from the shoulders of working oxen.
 - 43 **Mass:** Short for 'by the Mass', a mild oath in Elizabethan times.

1ST CLOWN Cudgel thy brains no more about it, for your dull ass will not mend his pace with beating; and, when you are asked this question next, say, 'A grave-maker: the houses that he makes last till doomsday.' 45
Go, get thee to Yaughan: fetch me a stoup of liquor.

[2ND CLOWN exits; 1ST CLOWN digs and sings]

*In youth, when I did love, did love,
Methought it was very sweet,
To contract – O – the time, for – ah – my behove – 50
O – methought there – ah – was nothing meet.*

HAMLET Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that he sings at grave-making?

HORATIO Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.

HAMLET 'Tis e'en so: the hand of little employment hath the daintier sense.

1ST CLOWN [Sings] *But age, with his stealing steps, 55
Hath clawed me in his clutch,
And hath shipped me intil the land,
As if I had never been such.*

[1ST CLOWN throws up a skull from the grave]

HAMLET That skull had a tongue in it and could sing once. How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if it were Cain's jaw-bone, that did the first murder! It might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'er-reaches, one that would circumvent God, might it not? 60

HORATIO It might, my lord.

HAMLET Or of a courtier, which could say, 'Good morrow, sweet lord! How dost thou, good lord?' This might be my Lord Such-a-one, that praised 65
my Lord Such-a-one's horse, when he meant to beg it, might it not?

HORATIO Ay, my lord.

44 **Cudgel:** Bash with a cudgel or short stick.

47 **Yaughan:** Probably Vaughan, the name of an innkeeper located near the Globe Theatre; **stoup:** a large drinking glass.

48–51 **In youth ... nothing meet:** The Clown's song is roughly based on a popular poem written by Thomas Vaux in 1537, 'The Agèd Lover Renounceth Love'. It is thought that the 'O' and 'ah' sounds are the gravedigger's groans as he digs.

54 **The hand of little employment hath the daintier sense:** Hamlet assumes he is more sensitive because he doesn't engage in physical labour like the gravedigger.

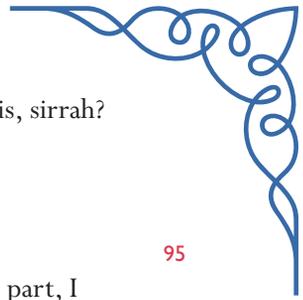
57 **Shipped me intil the land:** Transported me into the ground (into a grave).

60 **Jowls:** Throws carelessly, with a pun on the word referring to the jaw; **Cain:** biblical reference to Cain, who murdered his brother, Abel.

61 **Pate of a politician:** Head of a schemer.

62 **Circumvent:** Outsmart.

64 **Courtier:** A member of the King's court, who would be known for his flattery.



1ST CLOWN speak to this fellow – [To 1ST CLOWN] Whose grave's this, sirrah?
 Mine, sir.
 [Sings] *O, a pit of clay for to be made
 For such a guest is meet.*

HAMLET I think it be thine, indeed, for thou liest in't. 95

1ST CLOWN You lie out on't, sir, and therefore it is not yours. For my part, I
 do not lie in't, and yet it is mine.

HAMLET Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say it is thine: 'tis for the dead,
 not for the quick; therefore thou liest.

1ST CLOWN 'Tis a quick lie, sir; 'twill away gain, from me to you. 100

HAMLET What man dost thou dig it for?

1ST CLOWN For no man, sir.

HAMLET What woman, then?

1ST CLOWN For none, neither.

HAMLET Who is to be buried in't? 105

1ST CLOWN One that was a woman, sir, but, rest her soul, she's dead.

HAMLET How absolute the knave is! We must speak by the card, or equivocation
 will undo us. By the Lord, Horatio, these three years I have taken a note
 of it: the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so
 near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe – How long hast thou 110
 been a grave-maker?

1ST CLOWN Of all the days i' th' year, I came to't that day that our last King Hamlet
 overcame Fortinbras.

HAMLET How long is that since?

1ST CLOWN Cannot you tell that? Every fool can tell that: it was the very day that 115
 young Hamlet was born, he that is mad and sent into England.

HAMLET Ay, marry, why was he sent into England?

1ST CLOWN Why, because he was mad. He shall recover his wits there, or, if he
 do not, it's no great matter there.

HAMLET Why? 120

1ST CLOWN 'Twill not be seen in him there: there the men are as mad as he.

HAMLET How came he mad?

1ST CLOWN Very strangely, they say.

HAMLET How strangely?

1ST CLOWN Faith, e'en with losing his wits. 125



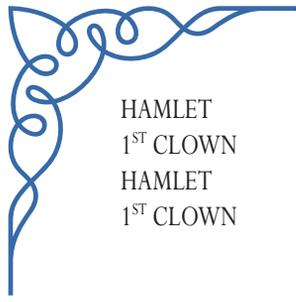
91 **Sirrah:** Similar to sir, but spoken to those of a lower class.

99–100 **Quick:** Meaning both living and fast.

107 **Absolute:** Exact or pedantic.

107–08 **We must ... undo us:** We need to speak precisely or ambiguity ('equivocation') will cause us to fail.

109–10 **The age is grown ... his kibe:** Hamlet comments that the peasants try so hard to follow (i.e. to imitate the manners of) the courtiers that they chafe ('gall') the chilblains ('kibe') of the one walking in front.



HAMLET Upon what ground?

1ST CLOWN Why, here in Denmark. I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years.

HAMLET How long will a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?

1ST CLOWN I' faith, if he be not rotten before he die – as we have many pocky corpses now-a-days, that will scarce hold the laying in – he will last 130
you some eight year or nine year; a tanner will last you nine year.

HAMLET Why he more than another?

1ST CLOWN Why, sir, his hide is so tanned with his trade that he will keep out water a great while; and your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body. Here's a skull now: this skull has lain in the earth three and 135
twenty years.

HAMLET Whose was it?

1ST CLOWN A whoreson mad fellow's it was. Whose do you think it was?

HAMLET Nay, I know not.

1ST CLOWN A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! He poured a flagon of 140
Rhenish on my head once. This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the King's jester.

HAMLET This?

1ST CLOWN E'en that.

HAMLET Let me see. *[HAMLET takes the skull]* Alas, poor Yorick! – I knew him, 145
Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft – Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a 150
roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chap-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that! – Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing.

HORATIO What's that, my lord? 155



129–30 **Pocky corpses:** Corpses that are diseased with the pox or syphilis.

130 **Scarce hold the laying:** They (the corpses that are diseased) will barely hold together for long enough to be buried.

131 **Tanner:** Someone whose occupation involves preserving animal hides, typically using various chemicals (preservatives).

134 **Sore:** Very effective; **whoreson:** a light-hearted insult meaning the son of a whore, implying he is wretched or worthless.

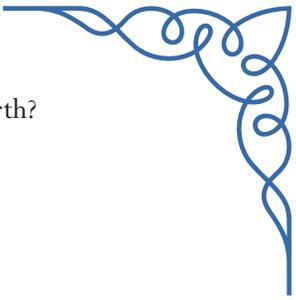
140–41 **A flagon of Rhenish:** A bottle of German wine, originating from the Rhineland.

146 **A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy:** A man of great fun and imagination.

148 **My gorge rises at it:** My stomach contents are rising; that is, I am about to vomit.

149 **Gibes:** Jokes; **gambols:** jumping or somersaults.

151 **Chap-fallen:** He has no lower jaw, so he is down in the mouth.



HAMLET Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?
 HORATIO E'en so.
 HAMLET And smelt so? Pah!

[HAMLET puts down the skull]

HORATIO E'en so, my lord.
 HAMLET To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why, may not imagination 160
 trace the noble dust of Alexander, till he find it stopping a bung-hole?
 HORATIO 'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so.
 HAMLET No, faith, not a jot; but to follow him thither with modesty enough,
 and likelihood to lead it, as thus: Alexander died, Alexander was
 buried, Alexander returneth into dust, the dust is earth, of earth we 165
 make loam, and why, of that loam whereto he was converted, might
 they not stop a beer-barrel?
 Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
 Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
 O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe, 170
 Should patch a wall t' expel the winter flaw! –
 But soft, but soft awhile: here comes the King.

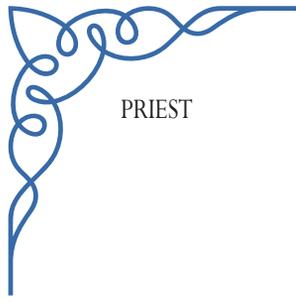
[PRIEST and other officials enter, in procession, followed by LAERTES and Mourners who surround the corpse of OPHELIA; CLAUDIUS and GERTRUDE, with their trains, follow]

The Queen, the courtiers: who is this they follow?
 And with such maimèd rites? This doth betoken
 The corpse they follow did with desperate hand 175
 Fordo its own life: 'twas of some estate.
 Couch we awhile, and mark.

[HAMLET and HORATIO hide]

LAERTES What ceremony else?
 HAMLET That is Laertes, a very noble youth. Mark.
 LAERTES What ceremony else? 180

- 
-
- 156 **Alexander:** Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), the famous Macedonian King who conquered most of the known world by the age of 30. Here Hamlet implies that even the greatest of humans ends up the same way as everyone else: dead, in a grave.
- 160 **Base:** Low or worthless.
- 161 **The noble dust ... bung-hole:** The remains of Alexander the Great could be used to fill a hole in a wine barrel.
- 166 **Loam:** Mortar made from sand, clay and straw.
- 168 **Imperious Caesar:** Imperial Julius Caesar, famous Roman leader assassinated in 44 BC.
- 176 **Fordo:** Destroy.
- 177 **Couch we awhile, and mark:** Let us hide, and pay attention to what is going on.



PRIEST Her obsequies have been as far enlarged
 As we have warrantise: her death was doubtful,
 And, but that great command o'ersways the order,
 She should in ground unsanctified have lodged
 Till the last trumpet. For charitable prayers,
 Shards, flints and pebbles should be thrown on her,
 Yet here she is allowed her virgin crants,
 Her maiden strewments and the bringing home
 Of bell and burial. 185

LAERTES Must there no more be done?
 PRIEST No more be done. 190
 We should profane the service of the dead
 To sing a requiem and such rest to her
 As to peace-parted souls.

LAERTES Lay her i' th' earth,
 And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
 May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest,
 A ministering angel shall my sister be,
 When thou liest howling. 195

HAMLET What? The fair Ophelia?
 GERTRUDE Sweets to the sweet. Farewell! [*Scatters flowers*]
 I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife;
 I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,
 And not have strewed thy grave. 200

LAERTES O, treble woe
 Fall ten times treble on that cursèd head,
 Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense
 Deprived thee of! Hold off the earth awhile,
 Till I have caught her once more in mine arms. 205

[*LAERTES leaps into the grave*]



181–82 **Her obsequies ... we have warrantise:** Her funeral rites are as significant as was permitted by the authority of the Church.

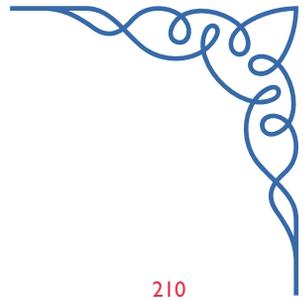
182 **Doubtful:** Unclear (whether her death was natural or by suicide).

186–89 **Shards, flints ... bell and burial:** Pieces of broken pottery and worthless rocks are placed on top of a corpse for an unsanctified burial, yet Ophelia is permitted flower wreaths ('crants') strewn on the grave ('strewments'), as well as the ringing of church bells and a Christian burial.

192 **Requiem:** Music for the dead.

195 **Violets:** Flowers associated with purity or chastity; **churlish:** rude.

197 **Howling:** That is, in hell.



Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead,
 Till of this flat a mountain you have made,
 To o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head
 Of blue Olympus.

HAMLET *[Advancing from hiding]* What is he whose grief
 Bears such an emphasis? Whose phrase of sorrow
 Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand
 Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
 Hamlet the Dane.

210

[HAMLET also leaps into the grave]

LAERTES The devil take thy soul!

[LAERTES and HAMLET grapple with each other]

HAMLET Thou pray'st not well.
 I prithee, take thy fingers from my throat,
 Sir: though I am not splenitive and rash,
 Yet have I something in me dangerous,
 Which let thy wiseness fear. Away thy hand.

215

CLAUDIUS Pluck them asunder.

GERTRUDE Hamlet, Hamlet!

220

ALL Gentlemen!

HORATIO Good my lord, be quiet.

[The Attendants part LAERTES and HAMLET, and they climb out of the grave]

HAMLET Why, I will fight with him upon this theme
 Until my eyelids will no longer wag.

GERTRUDE O my son, what theme?

225

HAMLET I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
 Could not, with all their quantity of love,
 Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?

CLAUDIUS O, he is mad, Laertes.

GERTRUDE For love of God, forbear him.

230



208–09 **Pelion ... Olympus:** High mountains in Greece; Olympus was the home of the gods in Greek mythology.

211–12 **Conjures the wandering ... wonder-wounded hearers:** Casts a spell on the movement of the planets ('wandering stars') so that they stand still in amazement ('wonder-wounded').

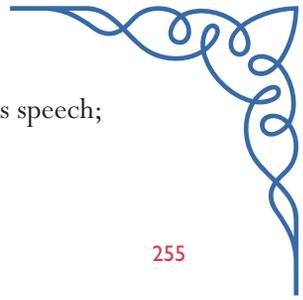
216 **Splenitive and rash:** Hotheaded and reckless; 'splenitive' relates to the spleen, which was said to be the source of anger and bitterness (hence the phrase 'venting your spleen').

219 **Pluck them asunder:** Remove them from the grave and separate them.

224 **Wag:** Move or blink.

225 **What theme:** What is the meaning of this?

230 **Forbear him:** Leave him alone.



[To LAERTES] Strengthen your patience in our last night's speech;
 We'll put the matter to the present push –
 Good Gertrude, set some watch over your son –
 This grave shall have a living monument.
 An hour of quiet shortly shall we see;
 Till then, in patience our proceeding be.

255

[All exit]



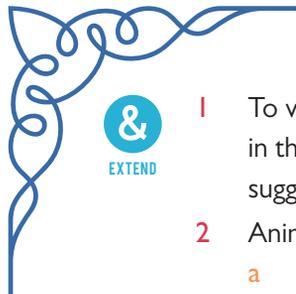
252 **Present push:** Immediate action.



QUESTIONS

- 1 How does the gravediggers' description of Ophelia's death (lines 1–22) differ from Gertrude's description (Act 4 Scene 7, lines 165–83)? Which do you think is likely to be more accurate?
- 2 Placed at the beginning of this scene, what dramatic function does Shakespeare's use of low comedy perform (placed between the previous scene and Ophelia's funeral)?
- 3 Excessive punning is used in this scene to contribute to the comic effect. List and explain several puns used by the characters.
- 4 The skull of Yorick is one of the most famous symbols in all of Shakespeare's plays.
 - a What is the significance of Yorick's skull for Hamlet?
 - b How does his discussion of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar (lines 156–72) reinforce the point he makes?
- 5 Throughout lines 201–49, Laertes and Hamlet could be said to compete with each other using **hyperbole** (deliberate exaggeration) to express the intensity of their grief. At a funeral, this was known as a 'rant' (line 241). Complete the table below to show your understanding of how images used by Laertes and Hamlet are in direct competition with each other.

Characters' use of imagery to convey descriptions of grief	
Laertes	Hamlet



- 1 To what extent do you think Hamlet's use of language (e.g. puns) changes in this scene in comparison with earlier acts of the play? What might this suggest about his character? Pay particular attention to lines 52–172.
- 2 Animal images appear in the latter part of this scene (lines 233–49).
 - a List the animals mentioned.
 - b How are these images used to make comparisons with various elements of human behaviour? You might like to create a table to show these comparisons.
- 3 In this scene both Claudius and Gertrude accuse Hamlet of being 'mad' (lines 229–45). Do you think Hamlet is actually mad? To what extent does he display the characteristics of his earlier 'antic disposition'?



- 1 Why does Hamlet interrupt Ophelia's funeral? Discuss the pros and cons of the following possibilities:
 - He is overcome by intense guilt for causing her death.
 - He is angered by Laertes' insincere ranting.
 - He has truly gone mad as a result of guilt and regret.
 - He wishes to reconcile with Laertes as one who shares both his pain of loss and his desire for revenge.
- 2 The First Folio edition of *Hamlet* does not include a stage direction to indicate that Hamlet and Laertes leap into Ophelia's grave. Why do you think other editors might have included this stage direction? Is it appropriate or necessary?

Zeffirelli and Branagh: DVD (Yorick's skull)



Compare the Zeffirelli (1990) and Branagh (1996) presentations of Hamlet's contemplation as he holds the skull of Yorick.

- 1 Which interpretation do you think better captures the emotional intensity of Hamlet?
- 2 What cinematic and dramatic devices are used to achieve this?
- 3 If you were given the task of directing a film version of this scene, what would you do differently?

Thinking about the theme of death

Literary critic G Wilson Knight considers death, or mortality, to be the main theme of *Hamlet*; he argues that Shakespeare presents Hamlet as ‘the ambassador of death walking amid life’, whose cynicism ultimately infects everything. As evidence for Knight’s line of reasoning, by Act 5 of the play Hamlet’s actions have already killed Polonius, which indirectly causes Ophelia’s death, and in this final act Hamlet’s actions account for one of the highest body counts in Shakespearean plays.

While Knight’s argument about Hamlet’s character is rejected by most, the notion of mortality is undeniably central to *Hamlet*. Act 5 Scene 1 opens with clowns digging a grave, an action that arguably foreshadows the play’s tragic ending. The First Quarto and some later editions of the play enhance this sense of foreboding with stage directions indicating that both Hamlet and Laertes leap into Ophelia’s grave.

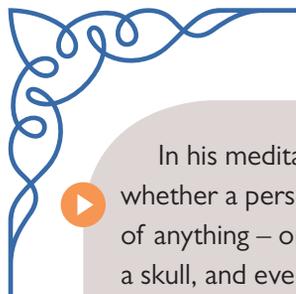
Hamlet seems fascinated by the gravediggers’ occupation and the scene provides an opportunity for him to meditate upon death. You might also remember Hamlet’s previous reflection that both beggars and kings are ultimately food for worms (Act 4 Scene 3, lines 20–30). Moreover, many of his speeches about death consider religious questions, especially questions about what happens after death.

Late medieval art often reminds us of the fleeting nature of earthly glory, conveying the view that status in this world will not matter in the next. Double-decker (or cadaver)

tombs display an upper level of splendour, while the level beneath houses a bare skeleton or shrouded representation of the person, rotten and being consumed by worms. Representations of the skull also feature in Renaissance art to remind us of the inevitability of death, most famously in *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger. Hamlet’s speeches in this scene are almost certainly the best-known literary equivalent of these works of art.



The Ambassadors by Hans Holbein the Younger (1498–1543)



In his meditation on death, Hamlet ponders on the belief that it does not matter whether a person is an important lord, a lawyer – who in life could talk his way out of anything – or a jester: all people come to the same end. The flesh decays, leaving a skull, and eventually that skull returns to the earth. He reflects that even Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar suffered this fate, a thought made darkly comic through a rhyming couplet:

*Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.* (Act 5 Scene 1, lines 168–69)

The skull is perhaps the most important symbol in the entire play. The image of Hamlet staring directly into the empty eye sockets of Yorick’s skull has become an iconic image that crosses generational and cultural boundaries. In this scene, it could be said that Hamlet is staring death in the face, and it seems he has returned to Denmark with a new purpose, now unafraid of death, and prepared to say, at the end of Act 5 Scene 2: ‘what will be, will be’.

Act 5 Scene 2 (Part 1)

CHARACTERS

Hamlet
Horatio
Osric
Lord

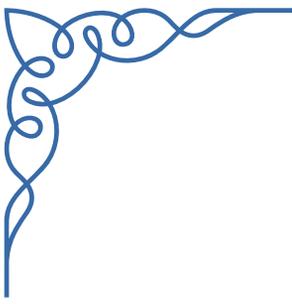


IN A NUTSHELL

Hamlet explains to Horatio how he escaped death by replacing the letter from Claudius that ordered his execution with one requesting the deaths of its bearers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. A servant, Osric, informs him that Claudius wishes Hamlet to participate in a fencing match with Laertes, and that the King has placed a bet on the result. Despite his misgivings, Hamlet agrees to fight, telling Horatio that death should not be something to fear.

Before you read

- In the early part of this scene, Hamlet’s dialogue makes his transformation clear. He believes ‘heaven ordinant’ in his miraculous escape and speaks of a ‘divinity that shapes our ends’. Gone is the Hamlet of earlier doubts, replaced by a Hamlet of action and purpose. Horatio acknowledges that this new Hamlet has the ability to command decisively when he says: ‘Why, what a King is this!’ (line 63).



Fingered their packet, and in fine withdrew 15
 To mine own room again, making so bold,
 My fears forgetting manners, to unseal
 Their grand commission; where I found, Horatio –
 O royal knavery! – an exact command,
 Larded with many several sorts of reasons 20
 Importing Denmark's health and England's too,
 With, ho! Such bugs and goblins in my life,
 That, on the supervise, no leisure bated,
 No, not to stay the grinding of the axe,
 My head should be struck off.

HORATIO Is't possible? 25

HAMLET Here's the commission: read it at more leisure.

[HAMLET hands HORATIO some papers]

HORATIO But wilt thou hear me how I did proceed?
 I beseech you.
 HAMLET Being thus be-netted round with villainies –
 Ere I could make a prologue to my brains, 30
 They had begun the play – I sat me down,
 Devised a new commission, wrote it fair.

I once did hold it, as our statistes do,
 A baseness to write fair, and laboured much
 How to forget that learning, but, sir, now 35
 It did me yeoman's service. Wilt thou know
 The effect of what I wrote?

HORATIO Ay, good my lord.



-
- 15 **Fingered their packet:** Stole their documents (ordering Hamlet's death).
 - 17–18 **Unseal / Their grand commission:** Open the royal seal (with a secondary meaning of cancelling Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's important task).
 - 20 **Larded with many several sorts of reasons:** Garnished or enriched with added details, like a meat dish is decorated with vegetables.
 - 22 **Such bugs and goblins in my life:** As if I were a bogeyman (a threat) or a malevolent demon.
 - 23 **On the supervise, no leisure bated:** Having read the document, without delay (Hamlet should be executed).
 - 29 **Be-netted round with villainies:** Surrounded by enemies, as if captured in a net.
 - 32 **Wrote it fair:** Wrote it beautifully, as if it were from the King.
 - 33 **Statists:** Politicians.
 - 34 **Baseness:** A low or menial task.
 - 36 **It did me a yeoman's service:** Learning calligraphy, which Hamlet had previously considered useless or menial, has allowed him to pretend to be a loyal servant of the King ('yeoman').



'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensèd points
Of mighty opposites. 60
Why, what a King is this!
HORATIO Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon –
HAMLET He that hath killed my King and whored my mother, 65
Popped in between the election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage – is't not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned,
To let this canker of our nature come 70
In further evil?
HORATIO It must be shortly known to him from England
What is the issue of the business there.
HAMLET It will be short: the interim is mine, 75
And a man's life's no more than to say 'One'.
But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself,
For, by the image of my cause, I see
The portraiture of his. I'll count his favours.
But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me 80
Into a towering passion –
HORATIO Peace! Who comes here?

[OSRIC enters]

OSRIC Your lordship is right welcome back to Denmark.
HAMLET I humbly thank you, sir – Dost know this water-fly?
HORATIO No, my good lord.



- 60–62 **'Tis dangerous ... mighty opposites:** Hamlet uses swordplay or fencing terminology here, suggesting that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were killed by being inferior ('base') people who were caught between the sword thrust ('pass') of angry ('fell incensèd') opponents ('opposites').
- 67 **Thrown out his angle for my proper life:** Tried to catch me with a fishing line ('angle').
- 68 **Cozenage:** Deception, with an obvious pun on the word 'cousin', which Claudius has used numerous times to describe Hamlet.
- 70 **Canker:** Spreading disease, or a sore.
- 74 **It will be short:** Time is short.
- 78–79 **By the image of my cause, I see / The portraiture of his:** Hamlet claims that he and Laertes have identical causes: to avenge a father's death.
- 80–81 **The bravery ... passion:** The exaggerated state of Laertes' grieving has made Hamlet extremely angry (with a 'towering passion').
- 83 **Water-fly:** A flitting, buzzing (thus annoying) insect.

HAMLET Thy state is the more gracious, for 'tis a vice to know him. He hath much land, and fertile. Let a beast be lord of beasts, and his crib shall stand at the King's mess. 'Tis a chough, but, as I say, spacious in the possession of dirt. 85

OSRIC Sweet lord, if your lordship were at leisure, I should impart a thing to you from his Majesty. 90

HAMLET I will receive it, sir, with all diligence of spirit. Put your bonnet to his right use; 'tis for the head.

OSRIC I thank your lordship, 'tis very hot.

HAMLET No, believe me, 'tis very cold; the wind is northerly.

OSRIC It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed. 95

HAMLET But yet methinks it is very sultry and hot for my complexion.

OSRIC Exceedingly, my lord; it is very sultry, as 'twere, I cannot tell how. But, my lord, his Majesty bade me signify to you that he has laid a great wager on your head: sir, this is the matter –

HAMLET I beseech you, remember – 100

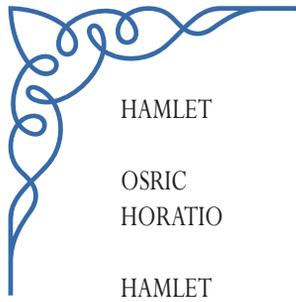
[HAMLET motions to OSRIC to put on his hat]

OSRIC Nay, in good faith; for mine ease, in good faith. Sir, here is newly come to court, Laertes; believe me, an absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences, of very soft society and great showing; indeed, to speak feelingly of him, he is the card or calendar of gentry, for you shall find in him the continent of what part a gentleman would see. 105

HAMLET Sir, his definement suffers no perdition in you, though I know to divide him inventorially would dizzy the arithmetic of memory, and yet but yaw neither, in respect of his quick sail. But in the verity of extolment I take him to be a soul of great article, and his infusion of such dearth and rareness, as to make true diction of him, his semblable is his mirror; and who else would trace him, his umbrage, nothing more. 110

OSRIC Your lordship speaks most infallibly of him.

-
- 85–87 **The state is more gracious ... King's mess:** Hamlet insults Osric, implying any animal with money can eat at the King's table ('mess'); 'gracious' = fortunate, 'crib' = trough.
- 87 **Chough:** A jackdaw, a bird known for stealing objects and for its incessant noise.
- 91 **Bonnet:** Hat.
- 95 **Indifferent:** Moderately, a little.
- 103 **Differences:** Distinctive qualities that make him stand out from others; **of very soft society:** having pleasant manners.
- 104 **The card or calendar of gentry:** The model of a perfect gentleman. 'Calendar' here refers to the standard by which others are measured.
- 105 **Continent:** Epitome or summary.
- 107–12 **Sir, his definement ... nothing more:** Laertes' qualities are such that they are impossible to list: Hamlet uses a lengthy and wordy paragraph to mock, by exaggeration, Osric's pretentious language.



HAMLET The concernancy, sir? Why do we wrap the gentleman in our more
rawer breath? 115

OSRIC Sir?

HORATIO Is't not possible to understand in another tongue? You will do't, sir,
really.

HAMLET What imports the nomination of this gentleman?

OSRIC Of Laertes? 120

HORATIO [*Aside*] His purse is empty already. All's golden words are spent.

HAMLET Of him, sir.

OSRIC I know you are not ignorant –

HAMLET I would you did, sir; yet, in faith, if you did, it would not much
approve me. Well, sir? 125

OSRIC You are not ignorant of what excellence Laertes is –

HAMLET I dare not confess that, lest I should compare with him in excellence,
but to know a man well were to know himself.

OSRIC I mean, sir, for his weapon; but in the imputation laid on him by them,
in his mead he's unfellowed. 130

HAMLET What's his weapon?

OSRIC Rapier and dagger.

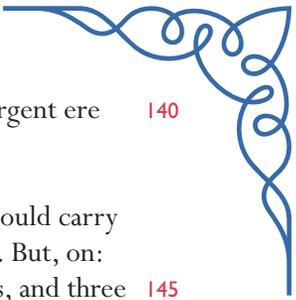
HAMLET That's two of his weapons – but well.

OSRIC The King, sir, hath wagered with him six Barbary horses, against the
which he has imponed, as I take it, six French rapiers and poniards, 135
with their assigns, as girdle, hangers or so. Three of the carriages,
in faith, are very dear to fancy, very responsive to the hilts, most
delicate carriages, and of very liberal conceit.

HAMLET What call you the carriages?



-
- 114 **The concernancy, sir:** What is the point, sir (of praising Laertes)?
- 114–15 **More rawer breath:** Imprecise, inexact words.
- 117–18 **Is't not possible ... really:** Can't you comprehend that Hamlet is using or mimicking your own language? You can if you try.
- 119 **What imports the nomination:** What is the importance of mentioning.
- 129 **Weapon:** Fencing style.
- 129–30 **In the imputation ... unfellowed:** Those in his service ('mead') say his reputation is unequalled.
- 134 **Barbary horses:** Valuable horses from the Barbary Coast of Africa.
- 135 **Imponed:** Bet; **poniards:** daggers.
- 136–38 **Assigns, as girdle ... liberal conceit:** 'Assigns' are accessories, and Osric lists a sword belt ('girdle') and straps to hold the sword to the girdle ('hangers', also known as 'carriages'); the straps are beautifully crafted ('most delicate') and richly decorated ('very liberal conceit'), and match ('are responsive to') the handle of the swords ('hilts').



HORATIO *[Aside to HAMLET]* I knew you must be edified by the margent ere you had done. 140

OSRIC
HAMLET The carriages, sir, are the hangers.
The phrase would be more germane to the matter if we could carry cannon by our sides. I would it might be hangers till then. But, on: six Barbary horses against six French swords, their assigns, and three liberal-conceited carriages: that's the French bet against the Danish. 145
Why is this 'imponed', as you call it?

OSRIC The King, sir, hath laid that, in a dozen passes between yourself and him, he shall not exceed you three hits; he hath laid on twelve for nine, and it would come to immediate trial if your lordship would vouchsafe the answer. 150

HAMLET How if I answer 'no'?

OSRIC I mean, my lord, the opposition of your person in trial.

HAMLET Sir, I will walk here in the hall. If it please his Majesty, 'tis the breathing time of day with me. Let the foils be brought, the gentleman willing, 155
and the King hold his purpose: I will win for him an I can; if not, I will gain nothing but my shame and the odd hits.

OSRIC Shall I re-deliver you e'en so?

HAMLET To this effect, sir, after what flourish your nature will.

OSRIC I commend my duty to your lordship. 160

HAMLET Yours, yours – *[OSRIC exits]* He does well to commend it himself; there are no tongues else for's turn.

HORATIO This lapwing runs away with the shell on his head.



140–41 **I knew you must ... had done:** I thought you would need a note in the margin ('margent') to explain the word 'carriages'.

143 **Germane:** Relevant.

148–51 **The King, sir ... vouchsafe the answer:** The King has placed a condition on the fight that Laertes must win three more hits than Hamlet to win the 12-bout competition; 'vouchsafe the answer' = accept the challenge. The precise meaning of this convoluted challenge is ambiguous.

154 **Breathing:** Exercise.

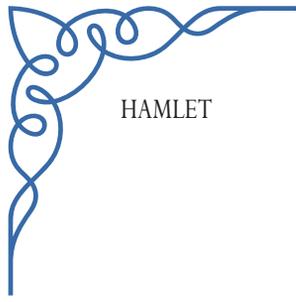
155 **Foils:** Fencing swords or rapiers that have blunted tips.

158 **Re-deliver:** Deliver your message.

159 **After what flourish your nature will:** No doubt trying to use complex, affected vocabulary ('flourish'), as you tend to do.

161–62 **Yours, yours ... for's turn:** Hamlet mockingly dismisses Osric, after which he says that Osric can finish his own salutation ('commend it himself'), claiming he has not words left to do it for him.

163 **This lapwing ... its head:** The lapwing is a bird known for leaving the nest soon after birth, sometimes with pieces of shell still stuck to its head. Hamlet claims Osric is as precocious as a lapwing, and possibly makes punning references to Osric's decorated hat as well.



HAMLET He did comply with his dug before he sucked it. Thus has he – and many more of the same bevy that I know the drossy age dotes on – 165 only got the tune of the time and outward habit of encounter, a kind of yeasty collection, which carries them through and through the most fond and winnowèd opinions, and do but blow them to their trial, the bubbles are out.

[A LORD enters]

LORD My lord, his Majesty commended him to you by young Osric, who 170 brings back to him that you attend him in the hall. He sends to know if your pleasure hold to play with Laertes or that you will take longer time.

HAMLET I am constant to my purposes: they follow the King's pleasure. If his fitness speaks, mine is ready, now or whensoever, provided I be so able as now. 175

LORD The King and Queen and all are coming down.

HAMLET In happy time.

LORD The Queen desires you to use some gentle entertainment to Laertes before you fall to play.

HAMLET She well instructs me. 180

[LORD exits]

HORATIO You will lose this wager, my lord.

HAMLET I do not think so: since he went into France, I have been in continual practice: I shall win at the odds. But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart, but it is no matter.

HORATIO Nay, good my lord – 185

HAMLET It is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gain-giving, as would perhaps trouble a woman.

HORATIO If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.



164 **He did comply with his dug before he sucked it:** He engaged in correct social behaviour (e.g. conversation) before sucking on his mother's nipple.

164–69 **Thus has he ... bubbles are out:** Hamlet harshly criticises Osric for being superficial ('the tune of the time') in conversation, like froth or bubbles in beer ('yeasty collection'), which are empty. 'Bevy' = a group of birds (or animals); 'drossy', = silly or worthless – dross is scum formed on the top of molten metal.

178 **Use some gentle entertainment:** Show some sign of courtesy (before you fight).

186 **Gain-giving:** Anxiety, a misgiving or feeling of apprehension.

188 **I will forestall their repair hither:** I will stop them from coming here.

Not a whit, we defy augury: there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? 190



190 **We defy augury:** I do not take any notice of superstition or omens.

191–93 **If it be now ... leave betimes:** Hamlet is calmly accepting his fate, claiming that no-one knows when they will die, but that he is ready.



QUESTIONS

- 1 In your own words, list the reasons Hamlet gives to justify his killing of Claudius.
- 2 Consider Hamlet's act of revenge on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. To what extent does it seem consistent with his change in character (especially line 58)?
- 3 In what ways does Hamlet mock Osric and why does he do so? Do you think Osric deserves to be treated this way by Hamlet?
- 4 How does Hamlet's speech in lines 190–93 (which alludes to Matthew 10:29 in the Bible) convey a sense of calm through the language he uses?



EXTEND

- 1 Explain the image Hamlet uses in lines 60–62 to describe how he dealt with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
- 2 How does the image you identified in the previous question echo Hamlet's earlier image of digging beneath Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's mines and 'blow[ing] them at the moon' (Act 3 Scene 4, lines 208–16)?
- 3 In this scene, Shakespeare shapes the reader's understanding of various ideas by crafting Hamlet's dialogue with images relating to birds (ornithological imagery). What images are presented, and what point is being made about human nature by using these images, in the following lines?
 - a lines 163–65
 - b lines 190–93
- 4 How does the Lord (lines 170–79) contrast with Osric in the language he uses? Why do you think Shakespeare chooses to present this contrast?



DISCUSS

- 1 How could the exchange between Hamlet and Osric be best described? Discuss the merits of the following interpretations:
 - a An unnecessarily long piece of satire at a point when the audience is waiting for action and resolution.
 - b Pure comic relief just prior to the tragic ending.
 - c Relevant in terms of the concerns of the play but not absolutely necessary.
 - d An indispensable part of the total organic unity of the play.

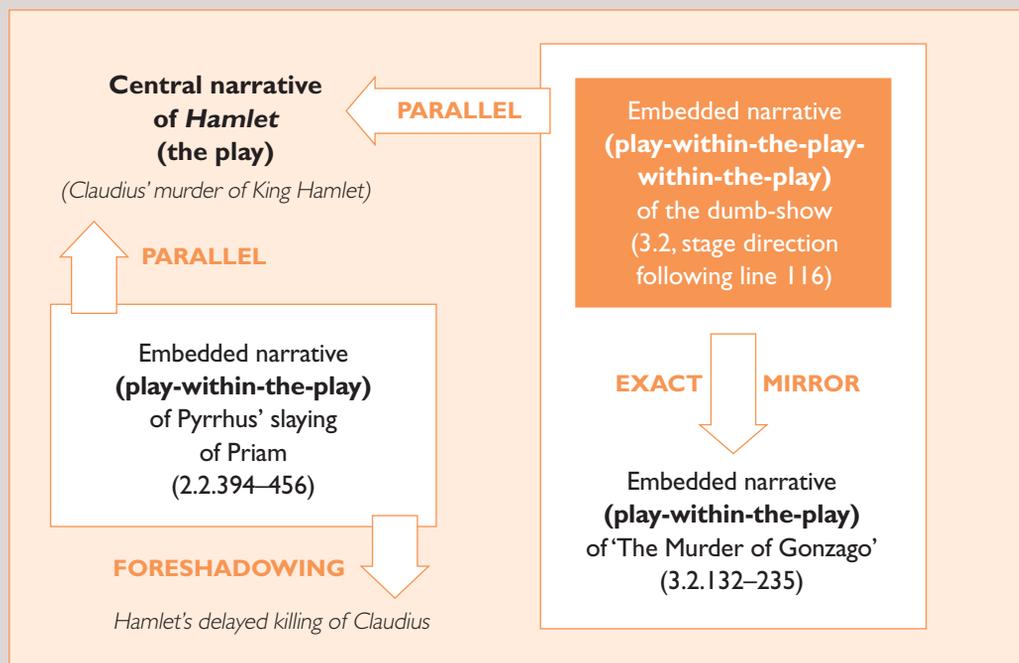
- 2 Horatio says very little in the first part of this scene. Discuss two or more ways an actor playing Horatio could deliver his lines (56 and 63 especially) as Hamlet informs him of the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

A word about narrative structure

A multiple plot structure is a typical Shakespearean convention with ingenious combinations of several stories contained within the one greater narrative.

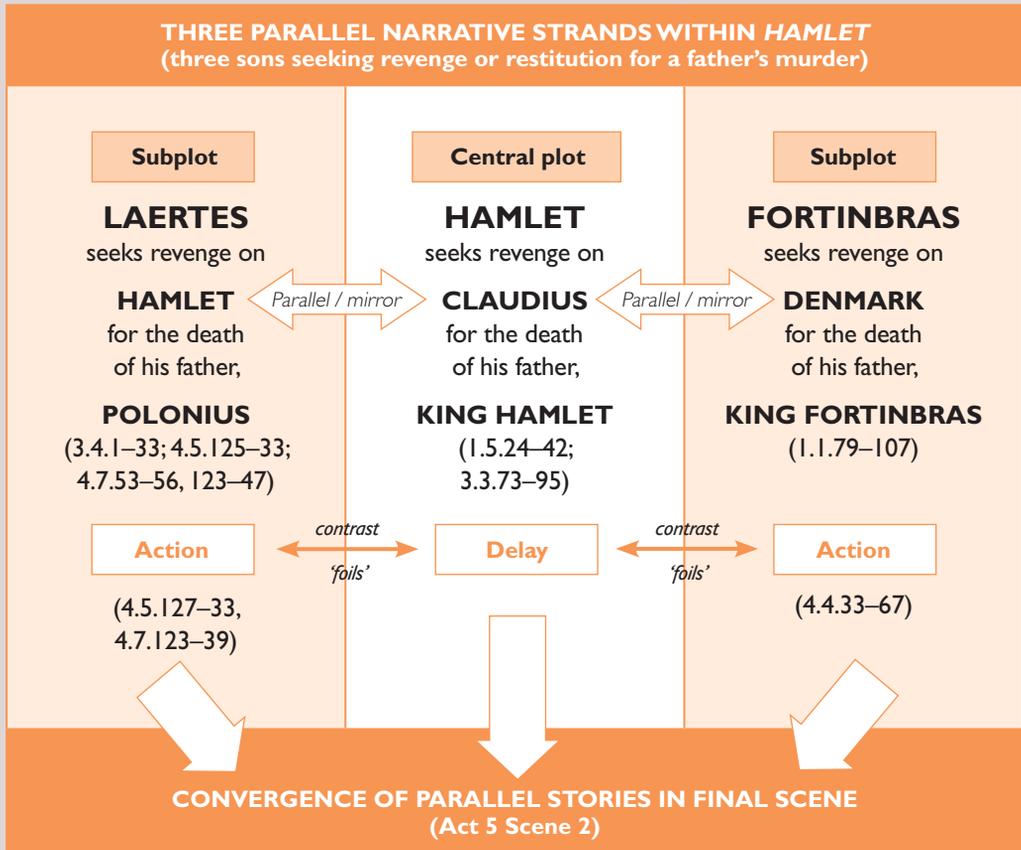
Hamlet has a multidimensional structure within which numerous stories unfold and many characters are revealed. It contains three narrative strands – of sons seeking revenge or restitution for their fathers’ murders – that parallel each other and converge in the final scene. In addition to these stories there are, embedded in Act 3, several plays-within-the-play that mirror the overarching narrative and the central themes of *Hamlet*.

The following diagrams are graphical representations of the relationship between the various narrative strands and layers within the play.



While each play-within-the-play parallels the main storyline, and reflects the play's central themes, it is interesting to note that there is often a strong contrast in the **language** that is used in each embedded narrative:

- Pyrrhus and Priam: deliberately complex and archaic verse
- 'The Murder of Gonzago': archaic form with forced syntax, hyperbole and rhyming couplets
- dumb-show: no words, all action (an ironic contrast with the character of Hamlet).



These parallel narrative strands give the audience an opportunity to compare and contrast the actions of the characters and their consequences. Note that the narrative strands converge in the final scene as all three sons take revenge or make restitution for their fathers' deaths. Watch for multiple poisonings, multiple verbal echoes and repetitions, and multiple violent acts of revenge after the play's many delays.



Act 5 Scene 2 (Part 2)

CHARACTERS

Hamlet
Laertes
Horatio
Claudius
Fortinbras
Osric
Gertrude
Ambassador
[Optional: Narrator to read stage directions]

IN A NUTSHELL

Hamlet and Laertes exchange words before the fencing match and the King places an expensive pearl ('an union') in a cup, poisoning the cup in the process. The match begins well for Hamlet (he scores two hits, without reply), and the Queen, in celebration of Hamlet's success, drinks unknowingly from the poisoned cup. When Hamlet and Laertes fight again, Hamlet is cut with Laertes' poisoned blade; as their fight descends into a reckless brawl, they exchange weapons and Laertes is stabbed with his own poisoned sword.

Gertrude dies and, in making peace with Hamlet, Laertes reveals the King's plot. Hamlet stabs Claudius, then makes him drink from the poisoned cup to be certain of his death. Before Hamlet dies, he persuades Horatio not to commit suicide and states that Fortinbras, who has come in victory from Poland, should be king. An ambassador reports that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been executed, and Horatio promises to tell Fortinbras about the bloody events that have taken place. Fortinbras prepares to take over leadership of Denmark, and speaks honourably of Hamlet, who is carried offstage for a military burial.

Before you read

- Fencing was widely used by men of the upper classes to train for duels. The form of the sport seems very sophisticated and the bets or 'wagers' that the King has laid are complicated. This fencing match is meant to go to 12 bouts but descends into chaos long before this. You should not worry too much about the details of the match, but it is important to see the malicious schemes lurking beneath this civilised surface.
- In this scene the imagery of sickness and poison becomes a literal (or physical) poison. Laertes and Claudius are both killed, fittingly, by their own poison. The Queen drinks the cup in which Claudius places the 'union' pearl. This 'union' is, in fact, poison and could be seen as a metaphor for the deceptive and corrupt nature of Claudius and Gertrude's marriage 'union', which ends in their early deaths.

- Directors have to decide how to portray Fortinbras' entrance. Does he take the throne as a 'delicate and tender prince' (Act 4 Scene 4, line 49) nominated by the dying Hamlet, or is his entrance a violent usurpation of the Danish throne?
- The play ends with Hamlet being given a soldier's burial. Fortinbras' language is measured and gracious as he pays his respects to Hamlet. You might consider whether this is a dignified end for Hamlet – perhaps a salute to the sort of leader he has recently become? Some critics see this ending as incongruous for a person like Hamlet, who was not a soldier and showed scepticism towards military glory.

V

Sore: Severe
Carouses: Drinks a toast
Wanton: Weaking
Felicity: Happiness
Voice: Vote

A hall in the castle.

[HAMLET and HORATIO are talking; CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, LAERTES, Lords and OSRIC enter, followed by Attendants with foils and other fencing equipment]

CLAUDIUS Come, Hamlet, come, and take this hand from me.

[CLAUDIUS puts LAERTES' hand into HAMLET's]

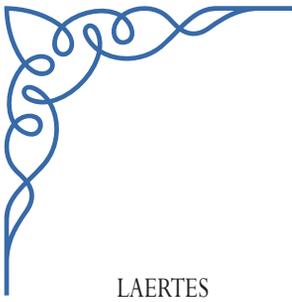
HAMLET Give me your pardon, sir: I've done you wrong. 195
 But pardon't, as you are a gentleman.
 This presence knows,
 And you must needs have heard, how I am punished
 With sore distraction. What I have done,
 That might your nature, honour and exception 200
 Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
 Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
 If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
 And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
 Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it. 205
 Who does it, then? His madness. If't be so,
 Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged;
 His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

197 **This presence:** Those who are present.

200 **Your nature:** Hamlet suggests it is natural or understandable for Laertes to be feeling as he does;
exception: feeling of being wronged, or taking exception.

207 **Faction:** Party or group.





Sir, in this audience,
 Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil 210
 Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
 That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house,
 And hurt my brother.

LAERTES I am satisfied in nature,
 Whose motive, in this case, should stir me most
 To my revenge, but in my terms of honour 215
 I stand aloof, and will no reconciliation,
 Till by some elder masters, of known honour,
 I have a voice and precedent of peace,
 To keep my name ungor'd. But till that time,
 I do receive your offered love like love, 220
 And will not wrong it.

HAMLET I embrace it freely,
 And will this brother's wager frankly play –
 Give us the foils. Come on.

LAERTES Come, one for me.

HAMLET I'll be your foil, Laertes. In mine ignorance
 Your skill shall, like a star i' th' darkest night, 225
 Stick fiery off indeed.

LAERTES You mock me, sir.

HAMLET No, by this hand.

CLAUDIUS Give them the foils, young Osric. Cousin Hamlet,
 You know the wager?

HAMLET Very well, my lord:
 Your Grace hath laid the odds o' th' weaker side. 230

CLAUDIUS I do not fear it; I have seen you both.
 But since he is bettered, we have therefore odds.

LAERTES This is too heavy, let me see another.

HAMLET This likes me well. These foils have all a length?

[They prepare to play]



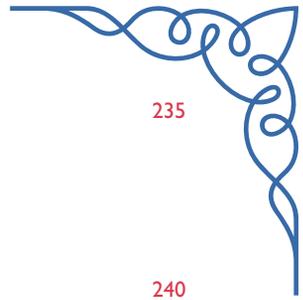
210 **Disclaiming from a purposed evil:** Denial of evil done on purpose.

213–19 **I am satisfied ... name ungor'd:** Laertes claims that, although he has the right to avenge his father's death, he will accept Hamlet's apology. However, as far as his honour and keeping his reputation undamaged ('name ungor'd'), he will leave that to the officials ('elder masters').

224–26 **I'll be your foil ... off indeed:** Hamlet uses a pun here on the word 'foil'. On the one hand, it relates to his rapier; on the other hand, he uses the word in the sense of setting a precious jewel on a cheap, dull metal ('foil') background, which had the effect of making the jewel stand out like a sparkling star in a dark night sky. In this sense, he views Laertes and himself as character foils, or contrasting characters.

232 **Since he is bettered, we have therefore odds:** Since Laertes is the better swordsman, your three-shot advantage makes it even.

234 **Have all a length:** All of equal length.



OSRIC Ay, my good lord. 235
 CLAUDIUS Set me the stoops of wine upon that table:
 If Hamlet give the first or second hit,
 Or quit in answer of the third exchange,
 Let all the battlements their ordnance fire:
 The King shall drink to Hamlet's better breath, 240
 And in the cup an union shall he throw,
 Richer than that which four successive kings
 In Denmark's crown have worn. Give me the cups,
 And let the kettle to the trumpet speak,
 The trumpet to the cannoneer without, 245
 The cannons to the heavens, the heavens to earth,
 'Now the King drinks to Hamlet'. Come, begin –
 And you, the judges, bear a wary eye.

HAMLET Come on, sir.
 LAERTES Come on, sir. 250

[They play]

HAMLET One.
 LAERTES No.
 HAMLET Judgement.
 OSRIC A hit, a very palpable hit.
 LAERTES Well, again. 255
 CLAUDIUS Stay, give me drink – Hamlet, this pearl is thine:
 Here's to thy health –

[Trumpets sound, and cannon are shot offstage]

 Give him the cup.
 HAMLET I'll play this bout first; set it by awhile – Come.

[They play]

 Another hit: what say you? 260
 LAERTES A touch, a touch, I do confess.
 CLAUDIUS Our son shall win.



-
- 238 **Quit in answer of the third exchange:** Pays Laertes back by winning the third round.
 - 239 **Ordnance:** Cannon.
 - 240 **Better breath:** Increased strength.
 - 241 **Union:** Pearl (which is poisoned in this case).
 - 244 **Kettle:** Kettledrum.
 - 248 **Bear a wary eye:** Watch carefully.
 - 254 **Palpable:** Obvious or clearly sensed.



Had I but time – as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest – O, I could tell you.
But let it be – Horatio, I am dead; 315
Thou livest; report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.

HORATIO Never believe it.

I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.
Here's yet some liquor left.

HAMLET As thou'rt a man, 320
Give me the cup. Let go! By heaven, I'll have't.

O good Horatio, what a wounded name –
Things standing thus unknown – shall live behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain 325
To tell my story.

[Distant marching is heard, after which a shot sounds within]

What warlike noise is this?

OSRIC Young Fortinbras, with conquest come from Poland,
To the ambassadors of England gives
This warlike volley.

HAMLET O, I die, Horatio: 330
The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit:

I cannot live to hear the news from England,
But I do prophesy the election lights
On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice,
So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less,
Which have solicited. The rest is silence. 335

[HAMLET dies]



313–14 This fell sergeant, Death, / Is strict in his arrest: Death is a cruel ('fell') commanding officer, taking me into custody.

316–17 Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied: Clear my name and explain to those who are uninformed my reasons for doing what I did.

318 Antique Roman: The ancient Romans viewed suicide as a noble and manly alternative to being captured in battle, and Horatio is contemplating suicide.

324 Absent thee from felicity: Disregard the happiness (of noble suicide).

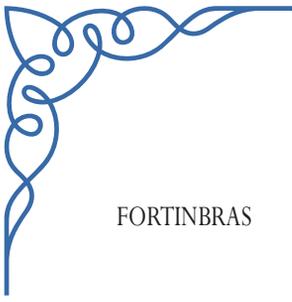
329 This warlike volley: Shooting of cannon.

330 This potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit: The powerful poison triumphs over me and crows like a victorious rooster in a cockfight.

332–33 I do prophesy ... dying voice: Hamlet predicts that Fortinbras will be chosen King of Denmark, and supports the decision.

334 Occurrents: Occurrences; **more and less:** the great and not so great.

335 Solicited: Disturbed.



And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
 Fall'n on the inventors' heads: all this can I
 Truly deliver.

FORTINBRAS

Let us haste to hear it,
 And call the noblest to the audience.
 For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune:
 I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
 Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me.

365

HORATIO

Of that I shall have also cause to speak,
 And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more;
 But let this same be presently performed,
 Even while men's minds are wild, lest more mischance
 On plots and errors happen.

370

FORTINBRAS

Let four captains
 Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
 For he was likely, had he been put on,
 To have proved most royally; and, for his passage,
 The soldiers' music and the rites of war
 Speak loudly for him.
 Take up the bodies: such a sight as this
 Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
 Go, bid the soldiers shoot.

375

380

[A funeral march. All exit, carrying off the dead bodies, after which a peal of ordnance are shot off]



361 **Upshot:** Conclusion or result.

361–62 **Purposes mistook / Fall'n on the inventors' heads:** Misunderstandings leading to those who invented the schemes being killed by their own devices.

369 **Draw on:** Encourage or support.

370 **This same:** The public displaying of the bodies; **presently:** immediately.

372 **On plots and errors:** Resulting from plots and errors.

374 **Put on:** Placed in charge, as King.

375 **Passage:** Journey into the next life; funeral procession.

379 **Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss:** Is appropriate for the battlefield, but here seems particularly out of place.

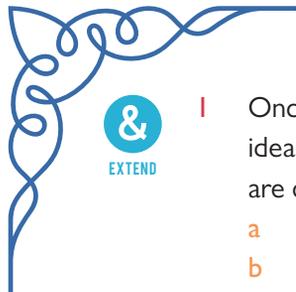
380 **A peal of ordnance are shot off:** a loud, prolonged series of cannon shots are fired.



- 1 Do you think Hamlet is admitting (in lines 195–213) that he was genuinely ‘mad’ prior to this scene, or is he not being entirely honest? Explain your answer.
- 2 Hamlet claims he is Laertes’ ‘foil’ in this scene (line 224; see the accompanying text note for an explanation of the pun). Complete a table like the one below to show your understanding of the ways in which you think the characters of Hamlet and Laertes are opposites, yet also share some similarities.

Ways in which Hamlet and Laertes are ‘foils’ or opposites	Ways in which Hamlet and Laertes are similar
Judgement: Overall, are the characters of Hamlet and Laertes more similar or different?	

- 3 Shakespeare creates a great deal of tension by means of dramatic irony. Write a paragraph describing several examples of dramatic irony in this scene.
- 4 Throughout lines 268–330, the image of poison features frequently and powerfully.
 - a List examples of literal poison in this section of the play.
 - b Discuss how ‘moral poison’ also features in these lines.
 - c In what ways, therefore, is it appropriate that Claudius is doubly poisoned by Hamlet?
- 5 Upon Hamlet’s death, several characters say positive things about him.
 - a How do Laertes, Horatio and Fortinbras similarly describe Hamlet?
 - b Do you agree with their final assessment of the character of Hamlet? Provide evidence from the text agreeing and/or disagreeing with their viewpoint.
- 6 Horatio summarises the recent tragic events in his final speech (lines 357–63). List examples from the play of the following items from Horatio’s list:
 - a carnal acts
 - b unnatural acts
 - c accidental judgements
 - d casual slaughters
 - e deaths put on by cunning and forced cause
 - f purposes mistook fall’n on the inventors’ heads.



- 1 Once again, Shakespeare uses images of animals in this scene to present his ideas to the audience. What images are employed, and what ideas or themes are conveyed by these images, in the following lines?
 - a line 283
 - b lines 341–44
- 2 Note carefully the language devices used by Hamlet in his last words to Claudius (lines 302–04) and to Gertrude (line 310).
 - a What devices are used as Hamlet kills Claudius, and what do they reveal about the character of Hamlet?
 - b What do you think Hamlet’s last words to his mother reveal about their relationship at the end of the play?
- 3 Could you describe the way Hamlet dies as either dramatically satisfying or peaceful? Explain why or why not in both cases.



- 1 The play’s three major narrative strands (all involving sons taking revenge or making restitution for a father’s killer) converge in this final scene. Discuss the similarities and differences between the situations, characters and actions of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras.
- 2 In small groups, discuss the following interpretations of the resolution to the play. Create and complete a table similar to the one below, and then be prepared to share your conclusions with the rest of the class.

INTERPRETATION 1	INTERPRETATION 2
The play ends in a 'chaotic orgy of reciprocal slaughter' (Holderness 1987), in violence and chaos, in a bloodbath rather than a harmonious restoration of order.	<i>Hamlet concludes in a restoration of order; a harmonious resolution, and 'above all we are left with a feeling of peace' (Bradley 1904).</i>
EVIDENCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue concludes on a line of unfinished iambic pentameter • Denmark is ruled by an outsider • • • 	EVIDENCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final stage direction includes a grand military funeral • Repetition of words such as 'noble' • • •
Which interpretation do you favour and why?	
How else might the conclusion of the play be interpreted?	

Zeffirelli and Branagh: DVD (Final scene)



- 1 Note how each director highlights the dramatic tension of this scene, especially with the poisoning of the central characters.
 - a Compare the cinematic devices each interpretation uses.
 - b Which do you believe is more effective and why?
- 2 Consider the contrasting interpretations of the character of Fortinbras.
 - a Upon what aspects of Fortinbras' character does Branagh (1996) focus?
 - b What cinematic and theatrical devices does Branagh use to highlight his interpretation of Fortinbras? Discuss especially the camera work, lighting, costume and music.
 - c Zeffirelli (1990) chooses to end the film at the death of Hamlet, and omits Fortinbras altogether. To what extent does this affect our view of Hamlet?
 - d Which version do you think is more appropriate to the text and why?
- 3 Imagine you are directing a film version of this scene.
 - a What ideas would you emphasise and why?
 - b What cinematic devices would you use to shape the audience's understanding of these ideas?

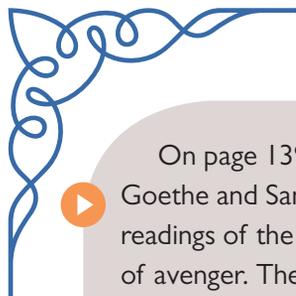


There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow ...

The meaning of *Hamlet*

Hamlet is as long as any play Shakespeare wrote and it is widely considered to be among his most difficult. The complexities of interpretation are further compounded by the different versions of the play. The poet TS Eliot, who was also one of the foremost literary critics of the twentieth century, saw the play as an artistic failure. Eliot thought Shakespeare was unable to fashion the mass of material at hand into a coherent work. Calling *Hamlet* 'the Mona Lisa of literature', he conceded that it was interesting, even mysterious, but he found plays such as *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* 'more assured artistic success[es]'. Eliot and some other critics have charged Shakespeare with retaining seemingly incoherent elements from his sources or earlier written versions of the play (see **Dates, sources and setting** on page 8), such as the strange, unexplainable strategy of the Prince's feigned madness.





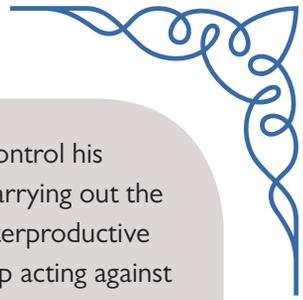
On page 139 we looked at some of the views of Romantic poet-critics, such as Goethe and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, which came to dominate nineteenth-century readings of the play. These critics concentrated on Hamlet as a man unsuited to the role of avenger. The other widely accepted interpretation of *Hamlet* is to see the Prince as heroically triumphing against overwhelming odds, sacrificing his life in the process. This interpretation can agree with Romantic readings to a point but sharply diverges from these positions in the final act.

To engage properly with this interpretation, it is important to understand the Elizabethan worldview. You might like to re-read **Elizabethan England** (pages 3–5) before reading the following.

- The Protestant Reformation and the passing of medieval Christendom ushered in, for some, an age of religious uncertainty.
- Elizabethans believed a legitimate monarch was divinely appointed, and that this monarch created the spiritual weather of his or her kingdom. A good monarch would, with God's blessing, bring justice and prosperity, but a non-legitimate ruler would bring ruin to his or her people.
- In Shakespeare's time, killing a king (regicide) was the most heinous crime imaginable. Claudius is a usurper; he gains the Crown by murdering his brother, the King, and then marries the King's wife. Elizabethans would have believed such an arrangement to be incestuous.
- In the Elizabethan worldview, and in Shakespearean drama, a kingdom ruled by a monarch like Claudius could not be governed justly.

Throughout the play, the accumulation of imagery of poison, sickness and disease reinforces the corruption of Denmark under Claudius' rule. Claudius' usurpation of the throne also turns everything on its head. Whereas obedience to the God-appointed monarch was once morally just, obedience to a usurper brings corruption and ultimately destruction. In this context, Hamlet's mission is almost impossible because Claudius enjoys the trust and obedience of his subjects. Even if Hamlet were to kill him, he would be executed for committing regicide. Hamlet's mission could be compared to 'tak[ing] arms against a sea of troubles'.

Like the other characters, Hamlet is 'infected' by Claudius' rule and is almost overwhelmed by despair, cynicism, disgust and rage. While he is prisoner to these base emotions, Hamlet is ineffective, and even when he is in a position to take action against Claudius, his rage prevents him from doing so because he desires not only to kill him but also to damn him to hell. Hamlet wishes to be both executioner and judge, and



therefore trespasses on the realm of God's judgement. His inability to control his hatred and disgust renders him incapable of focusing on his target and carrying out the task required. The parallel crazed avenger, Laertes, illustrates how counterproductive such behaviour can be. Laertes' rage is easily manipulated and he ends up acting against his own conscience in serving Claudius, a man he realises too late to be the real source of evil in Denmark. For much of the play, Hamlet laments his failure in lacking the decisive and unhesitating characteristics of Laertes, yet the person he becomes transcends the limits of this sort of conventional avenger.

Hamlet's miraculous escape from his planned execution sees him come to believe in 'a divinity that shapes our ends'. Where formerly he was overwhelmed by disgust, cynicism and rage, he can return to Denmark with the right focus. Moreover, where formerly he was consumed with doubt and uncertainty, he returns confident that he can now confront the source of evil in Denmark. Because Hamlet believes 'heaven ordinant' (that God is provident, or in charge of events), he has the resolve to go bravely to that which he suspects will be his death. It is fitting that we do not hear any more soliloquies from Hamlet in the final act; this reinforces his directness and purpose.

Although Hamlet is nervous before the fencing match, he shows a new equanimity (calm). He tells Horatio: 'There's a special Providence in the fall of a sparrow', alluding to Matthew's Gospel in the Bible. Hamlet has stared death in the face and he is ready to embrace his fate. In the final scene, events occur in such a way that Claudius' villainy is exposed before the entire court, thus his execution is seen not as a vile act by a crazed attacker but as the just execution of a corrupt usurper. Before he dies, Hamlet secures the succession of Fortinbras as King.

We hear of Fortinbras foreswearing revenge in Act 2, where he submits to the authority of his uncle, the legitimate ruler of Norway. As an outsider, Fortinbras is uncorrupted by Claudius' court. In this way, his rule would have been seen as the restoration of legitimate (even divinely appointed) authority. In his speech that ends the play, Fortinbras acknowledges that, had Hamlet 'been put on' – that is, had he been King – he would have 'proved most royally'. Hamlet is given a dignified burial. He dies a man of action: a hero and Denmark's liberator.

Nevertheless, there are some details in the final scene that challenge this interpretation. It is quite clear that Hamlet comes to believe in Providence, but some question whether the structure of the play supports Hamlet's belief. This will largely depend on your judgement of the minor character, Fortinbras. Some modern productions and film versions portray him as a tyrant who takes Denmark by force. While nothing in the dialogue necessarily contradicts this, there is not a single line to





support this interpretation either. Nevertheless, we might wonder how just and fair a ruler the warlike Fortinbras would be. We might also wonder at the depth of Hamlet's spiritual transformation. This new Hamlet of action sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths without hesitation. How much did they know of Claudius' schemes? Was it necessary for Hamlet to send them to their deaths? How convinced would an Elizabethan audience have been that they simply paid the price for coming between 'mighty opposites'?

It could be argued, of course, that a play need not have a definitive interpretation to be a dramatic success; life is often messy and art imitates this. Whether they think it an artistic failure, a study of a man unsuited to the challenges of his time, a celebration of heroic action, and/or an affirmation of Providence, audiences will return to this enigmatic play that reminds us that 'there are more things in heaven and earth ... than are dreamt of in [our] philosophy'.

Questions for discussion

- Q What do you think of the largely Romantic theory that Hamlet was unsuited to the circumstances confronting him?
- Q What do you think of the idea that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure?
- Q How might our modern worldview cause us to interpret *Hamlet* differently from Shakespeare's original audience?
- Q What elements of the play seem to support Hamlet's belief in 'a divinity that shapes our ends'?
- Q What do you think of the objections to the 'heroic/providential' reading discussed above? Can you think of any other objections? Do you think these objections disqualify this interpretation altogether?
- Q Why do you think *Hamlet* remains a popular choice for audiences today?

General activities

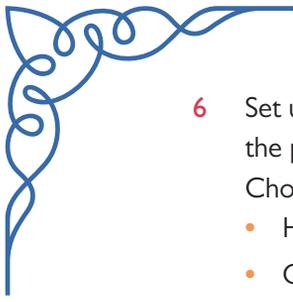


Oral presentations / performance

- 1 Make your own CD soundtrack for a film version of *Hamlet*. Choose at least eight songs that you feel are appropriate for different scenes (or excerpts from scenes) in the film. Specify which eight scenes you have chosen and write at least 50 words on each song to say why it is appropriate for the particular scene you have chosen. Include at least four of the following scenes:
 - Act 1 Scene 1 (The guards' sighting of the Ghost)
 - Act 1 Scene 5 (Hamlet's conversation with the Ghost)
 - Act 2 Scene 1 (Spying on families)
 - Act 2 Scene 2 (Planning a play)
 - Act 3 Scene 1 (To be or not to be)
 - Act 3 Scene 2 ('The Murder of Gonzago')
 - Act 3 Scene 3 (To kill or not to kill)
 - Act 3 Scene 4 (The death of Polonius)
 - Act 4 Scene 3 (Madness and mayhem)
 - Act 4 Scene 5 (Ophelia's madness)
 - Act 4 Scene 7 (Ophelia's death)
 - Act 5 Scene 2 (Sword fights and poison).

You may choose to perform this as an oral presentation, playing short excerpts from each song and explaining your choices.

- 2 Explain what your emphasis would be if you were given the opportunity to direct your own version of *Hamlet*. Cover in particular your choice of costume for five of the main characters. Explain what sort of atmosphere you would aim to create through your set design.
- 3 Record a scene (or an excerpt from a scene) from the play as part of a radio play.
- 4 Perform a scene (or an excerpt from a scene) from the play as a group or perform one of the soliloquies or monologues on your own.
- 5 Produce a one-minute trailer advertising your film version of *Hamlet*. Make sure you consider music, sound effects and voice-over.



- 6 Set up a chat-show style interview with one or more of the characters from the play where you discuss what happened to the particular character(s).

Choose from:

- Hamlet
- Gertrude
- Polonius
- Ghost.
- Claudius
- Ophelia
- Horatio

Make sure you stay in character for the entire length of the interview.

- 7 Cover one of the following scenes as a news report (minimum length of two minutes) based on:

- the first sighting of the Ghost (Act 1 Scene 1)
- a play before the King (Act 3 Scene 2)
- Hamlet kills Polonius (Act 3 Scene 4)
- Ophelia's madness (Act 4 Scene 5)
- Hamlet flees a ship (Act 4 Scene 6)
- the deaths at the end of the play (Act 5 Scene 2)
- Fortinbras assumes power (Act 5 Scene 2).

This can take the form of either a video or a radio news story. Make sure you capture and maintain your audience's attention, and that you include some interviews.

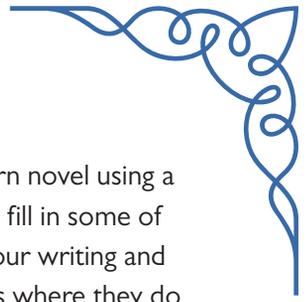
- 8 Memorise a passage from *Hamlet* and perform it for your class. Briefly place it in context before you deliver the lines, and explain your interpretation after your performance.
- 9 Present a talk to your classmates entitled: 'What's so great about Shakespeare?' In your talk, you might like to discuss elements of *Hamlet* such as the characters, themes and language features.

Questions for debate

Debate *one* of the following questions. The Affirmative Team will agree with the statement, while the Negative Team will disagree. Both teams should consist of three members who each speak for two minutes.

- 1 *Hamlet* is a play with no real hero.
- 2 *Hamlet* as a play is an 'artistic failure'. (TS Eliot)
- 3 *Hamlet* is a sexist play.
- 4 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern get what they deserve.
- 5 Hamlet would have made a good ruler.

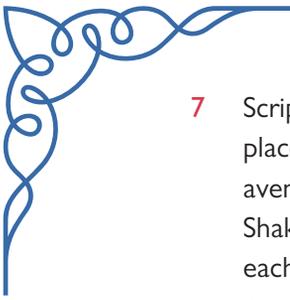
Creative writing



- 1 Try writing part of one of the scenes as a chapter of a modern novel using a third-person perspective. This will mean that you will have to fill in some of the details of setting, incorporate dialogue into the flow of your writing and give some idea of what characters are thinking, even in places where they do not have a soliloquy. Make sure you use modern language, and keep elements such as narrative voice and verb tense consistent.
- 2
 - a Write a letter from Hamlet to Gertrude at the end of Act 3, in which he explains his grievances; or
 - b Write a final letter from Ophelia to Hamlet before she goes mad.Make sure you use correct letter-writing conventions; you can use Shakespearean language or modern English.
- 3 Write an email from a modern Hamlet to Laertes at the conclusion of Act 4, detailing his thoughts. Make sure you use current email conventions.
- 4 Write a 300–500-word newspaper article on one of the following events from the play:
 - Hamlet’s interactions with the Ghost (Act 1 Scene 5)
 - A play before the King (Act 3 Scene 2)
 - Hamlet kills Polonius (Act 3 Scene 4)
 - Ophelia’s behaviour in the royal court (Act 4 Scene 5)
 - Ophelia’s funeral (Act 5 Scene 1)
 - The King is dead (Act 5 Scene 2)
 - Young Prince dies tragically (Act 5 Scene 2)
 - Fortinbras assumes power (Act 5 Scene 2).

Make sure your headline and your opening sentence grab the reader’s attention. Also, include some quotations from the actual play or from fictitious interviews with characters. You might like to present this using ICT (e.g. PowerPoint, Flash, Moviemaker or creating a website).

- 5 Think of three alternative titles for *Hamlet* and write a few sentences (between 80 and a 100 words on each) on why each of these titles would effectively market the play or film to a modern audience.
- 6 Script an additional conversation between Hamlet and Claudius, to take place sometime between Act 5 Scene 1 and Act 5 Scene 2, so that they have the opportunity to reflect on their actions in greater depth. Use the same conventions you have observed Shakespeare using throughout the play. Make sure, for example, that you begin a new line each time a different character speaks, and try to write in character.

- 
- 7 Script a 'conversation' between Hamlet and his father (the Ghost) to take place at the end of Act 5, with Hamlet explaining what he has done to avenge his father's death. Use the same conventions you have observed Shakespeare using throughout the play. For example, begin a new line each time a different character speaks.
 - 8 Give Gertrude a soliloquy at the end of either Act 3 Scene 4 or Act 4 Scene 7, explaining her feelings at that point in the play. Use Shakespearean language and try to write in character.
 - 9 Create a blog in which you write some entries from one character's point of view at different stages in the play, responding to the events that have occurred. Add other characters' comments to your character's blog.

Illustration

- 1 Design a poster for your own film or stage version of *Hamlet*. Include quotations, some phrases that will catch the viewer's attention and a list of the cast for your film.
- 2 Present one of the scenes from *Hamlet* as a comic book or comic strip (e.g. manga).
- 3 Create a PowerPoint, Moviemaker or Flash presentation on five characters in the play, using key quotations, a background that you feel is representative of each character, an appropriate symbol for them and some background music. Write 50 words on each character, explaining why you made these creative choices.
- 4 Create a social media page for one of the characters in *Hamlet*. Make sure you include your character's interests, their interpretation of some of the events of the play, comments from friends etc. See if you can include some links to appropriate music.

Questions and statements for discussion

Discuss the following questions or statements in a group or as a class.

- 1 Does Shakespeare portray Hamlet sympathetically?
- 2 Does Shakespeare portray Ophelia sympathetically?
- 3 Horatio is the most moral character in the play.
- 4 Although we might not like him, Claudius is an excellent ruler.
- 5 Women are denied a voice in *Hamlet*.
- 6 Death is the central theme of *Hamlet*.

- 
- 7 *Hamlet* shows that faith is better than doubt.
 - 8 *Hamlet* should be compulsory reading for anyone wanting a career in psychology.
 - 9 What can a modern-day audience learn from *Hamlet*?

Essay topics

- 1 'When systems are unjust, people of conscience must act.' How does Shakespeare use a range of dramatic and literary conventions to explore this idea?
- 2 How important are soliloquies in *Hamlet*?
- 3 What themes or ideas are emphasised in either the Branagh or the Zeffirelli film interpretation of *Hamlet*?
- 4 What are the consequences of deception in *Hamlet*?
- 5 How does imagery reinforce the main themes of *Hamlet*?
- 6 Explain how one particular scene from *Hamlet* is central to your understanding of the play as a whole.
- 7 How does Shakespeare use language to define character and heighten the drama of certain situations in *Hamlet*?
- 8 Show how Shakespeare uses two or three of the following techniques to present ideas in *Hamlet*:
 - setting
 - dramatic irony
 - parallel plots
 - contrast
 - imagery
 - repetition.
- 9 To what extent does the play *Hamlet* show heroic actions triumphing over obstacles and challenges?
- 10 To what extent does Shakespeare critique a patriarchal society in *Hamlet*?
- 11 To what extent is Hamlet a victim of forces beyond his control?
- 12 How does Shakespeare use interactions between Hamlet and minor characters to emphasise the main ideas of the play?
- 13 Who or what is to blame for the tragic outcome of *Hamlet*?
- 14 To what extent does *Hamlet* fit Aristotle's model of tragedy?



APPENDIX 1

To the teacher

It will not be possible for your students to attempt every activity in this book, but we have given you a wide range of activities and questions so you can determine what best suits the particular needs of your class. Listed below are some of the features of this edition of *Hamlet* and a brief explanation of how they might be useful in your lessons. We have used a range of icons to help you and your students identify different parts of the text.

1. Understanding the narrative

Before you begin reading the text, it is important that your students have a sound grasp of the story. It is a good idea for the class to read through the **Act summaries** on pages 16–17, and complete the **Quick questions** and the **Freeze-frames** activity on pages 18–19.

At the beginning of each scene, we have given a brief outline of what happens, called **In a nutshell**.

2. Reading the text

While it is likely you will read most of the play as a class, you should also read some scenes in smaller groups, and perform some as well.

At the beginning of each scene we have listed the characters in order of importance. It is advisable that, as the teacher, you take a major role and delegate the other major parts to your most confident readers. It is also helpful in some scenes if a student reads the stage directions.

Where possible, try to allocate parts the day before you perform a scene so students have an opportunity to look over and perhaps practise their parts. Encourage students to read loudly and clearly, and be forthcoming with your praise where you can.

Shakespeare's language (pages 9–14) provides some basic reading tips and explanations of key language features. We recommend you look at the reading tips before you begin reading, and explain them to your class. This section also includes a list of key words that recur frequently throughout the play. You might like to familiarise your students with this before you begin reading the play.

It is important you do not overwhelm your students with too many concepts in a short time. Introduce concepts such as iambic pentameter after your students have begun to gain an intuitive feel for the language.



We have also provided general introductions on **Elizabethan England**, **Shakespeare** himself, and the **Dates, sources and setting** of *Hamlet*. These will provide some background and a context in which to read the play. The notes on Elizabethan England and the theatre are the most important of these introductions. You could read these as a class or ask students to read them in their own time.

There is, of course, no substitute for seeing the text performed as a live production, and we recommend you have actors or performance companies visit your school.

3. Understanding the text



We have included a short **Vocabulary** list at the beginning of each scene. All of these words, plus some others from the text and the **Text notes**, are printed at the back of the book so you can find a word without having to remember where it was first introduced.

The **Before you read** section at the beginning of each scene provides reading tips and anticipates problems students may have. Phrases and words that are more secondary to the understanding of a scene are printed as **Text notes** beneath the play text on each page.



Finally, a number of **History boxes** provide useful historical information on Elizabethan England and aspects of historical interpretation. Most of this information we have included to give a historical context for specific scenes. Other information has been provided in order to fire the students' curiosity.

We have included a **Shakespeare reading list** on page 245 in case you wish to read more about Shakespeare and the Elizabethan world.

4. Analysing the text



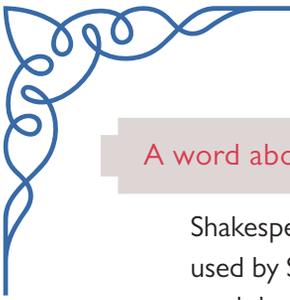
In ordering the **Questions**, we have looked to balance chronology against degree of difficulty. For some scenes you might want to save time by dividing the questions among different groups in the class, or you may simply use them as a springboard for discussion. No teacher should try to use every question in the book.



We have also included challenging **Extend** questions that will allow students to analyse a scene in greater depth. It is important that all students engage with the technical aspects of the play and, for this reason, we have also included questions relating to technique among the general questions.



Finally, some questions have been designed for general discussion of personal responses to the text, as well as possible interpretations for performance. These are indicated by the **Discuss** icon.



A word about ...

Shakespeare's **Themes and techniques** highlight particular ideas and devices used by Shakespeare throughout this play. We recommend that students first read these boxes themselves and that you then explain the concept using the examples.

5. The films (Press play)



It is useful to show excerpts from both Kenneth Branagh's full-text version (1996) and Franco Zeffirelli's abridged film starring Mel Gibson (1990), to reinforce students' understanding of key scenes. These can provide an alternative to reading some scenes if you are running short of time. The **Press play** activities provide opportunities for further analysis and discussion. We recommend watching the four-hour Branagh film in its entirety after you have read through the text. An occasional scene from the Michael Almereyda (2000) or even Laurence Olivier (1948) film interpretations might also be considered.

6. Other activities

There is deliberate overlap between the **Questions for debate**, **Questions and statements for discussion** and the **Essay topics** (pages 238 and 240–41). How you use these will depend largely on the type of class you have. We have generally found that it is better to read through the play before beginning debates, essays or creative activities. Again, this will depend on your personal preference. You could consider breaking up your reading of the play with one of the **Oral presentations / performances** or **Creative writing** activities after Act 2 or Act 3.

7. A note about the text

This text of *Hamlet* includes all the lines found in the First Folio as well as the lines unique to the Second Quarto version of the play. Some of the stage directions and spelling have been modernised, in line with standard editorial practices for preparing editions of Shakespeare's plays. Modern punctuation conventions are followed, with the exception of the dash (–), which we have used to indicate an interruption in the flow or direction of conversation; for example, when a character switches from soliloquising to addressing another character onstage, or when a character switches from addressing one character to addressing another. (See **Shakespeare's language** on pages 9–14 for a more detailed explanation.)

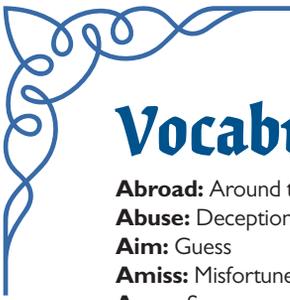
8. Finally ...

No-one could reasonably expect to understand every phrase or allusion in Shakespeare's plays and your students should not expect to either. Making this clear from the outset will foster confidence in students to talk about what they do understand and what they do know: to see the text as a glass half full, rather than a glass half empty. Moreover, this will encourage students to appreciate the subtleties and resonances of the language and to truly understand that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our pedagogy.

APPENDIX 2

A Shakespeare reading list

- Alexander, Catherine MS, *Shakespeare: The Life, the Works, the Treasures*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2007.
- Bate, Jonathan, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, Picador, London, 1997.
- Crystal, David & Ben, *Shakespeare's Words*, Penguin, London, 2002.
- Greenblatt, Stephen, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, Norton, London, 2004.
- Greer, Germaine, *Shakespeare: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.
- Gurr, Andrew, *The Shakespearean Stage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.
- Hussey, SS, *The Literary Language of Shakespeare*, Longman, Harlow, 1982.
- Kay, Dennis, *Shakespeare: His Life, Work and Era*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1991.
- Kermode, Frank, *Shakespeare's Language*, Penguin, London, 2001.
- , *The Age of Shakespeare*, Phoenix, London, 2005.
- Rodenburg, Patsy, *Reading Shakespeare*, Methuen, London, 2002.
- Sandler, Robert (ed.), *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1986.
- Shapiro, James, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*, Faber & Faber, London, 2005.
- Tillyard, EMW, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Vintage Books, New York, 1960.
- Wells, Stanley, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.
- , *Shakespeare & Co.*, Penguin, London, 2007.
- Wilson, Jean, *The Shakespeare Legacy*, Bramley Books, Godalming, 1995.
- Wood, Michael, *In Search of Shakespeare*, directed by David Wallace, Maya Vision International, 2004.



Vocabulary list

Abroad: Around the place
Abuse: Deception
Aim: Guess
Amiss: Misfortune, calamity
Anon: Soon
Appliance: Remedy
Argal: Therefore
Arras: A tapestry or wall hanging
Assay: Tempt or attempt
Aught: Anything
Ay (pronounced eye): Yes

Bark: Ship
Be round: Be honest and true, to the point of being blunt
Beaver: Helmet visor
Beck: Command
Beget: Obtain
Behoves: Is necessary or appropriate for
Belike: It is likely
Beseech: Beg
Betime: Early
Bevy: Flock of birds
Bound: Ready
Bounty: Generosity
Bourn: Region or realm
By Gis: By Jesus
By the rood: A mild oath, meaning 'by the Cross'

Calumny: Slander
Canker: Spreading disease or a sore
Carouses: Drinks a toast
Censure: Opinion
Cerements: Grave clothes
Charge: Command
Chariest: Most modest
Choler: Anger
Cicatrice: Scar
Circumstance: Details
Clamour: Passionate outrage
Clepe: Call
Closet: Private chamber or bedroom
Conceit: Imagination
Conjure: Appeal to
Contagion: A deadly, infectious disease
Contumely: Contemptuous insults
Conveyance: Safe conduct
Convocation: Assembly
Coted: Overtook or passed
Counsel: Secret
Count: Account
Countenance: Favour, permission
Courtier: A member of the King's court

Crowner: Coroner
Cunning: Skill
Cutpurse: Pickpocket

Dally: Play around, not taking it seriously
Danskers: Citizens of Denmark
Debate: Settle
Diadem: Crown
Digested: Arranged or structured
Dirge: Sad funeral song
Distract: Mad
Dole: Sorrow
Drab: Prostitute
Drabbing: Engaging with prostitutes
Ducat: Gold coin

Eager: Sour, acid
Ecstasy: Madness
E'en to't: Get straight to it
Encumbered: Bound or folded
Entreated: Begged
Entreaty: Official request
Equivocation: Double meanings
Ere: Before
Escoted: Paid
Expostulate: Discuss or explain

Fain: Gladly
Fantasy: Imagination
Felicity: Happiness
Fond: Foolish
Foredoes: Destroys
Fust: Go mouldy

Gall: Scratch, graze; or bile produced by liver
Garrisoned: Protected by forts
Gentlewoman: Upper-class woman
Gentry: Courtesy
Gleaned: Collected, scraped together
God-a-mercy: Colloquial for 'God have mercy' or 'thank you'
Gorge: Stomach
Gramercy: God have mercy
Grating: Dwelling or harping on
Green: Fresh; inexperienced or naive

Hazard: Risk
Hectic: Fever
Hence: Away from here
Heyday: High point
Hither: Here, to this place
Hold up: Carry on
Husbandry: Good economy, careful management

Idle: Mad, silly
Impious: Disrespectful
Importuned: Begged insistently
Impostume: Ulcer
In fine: Finally

Knavish: Rascally, mischievous

Laid: Blamed
Levies: Troops raised via conscription
Lief: Gladly
Liege: Lord, sovereign
Liegemen: Sworn servants
Limèd: Trapped like a bird in lime,
a sticky substance
Lot: Chance
Luxury: Lust

Machine: Body
Maimed: Incomplete
Marry: A mild oath, short for 'by the
Virgin Mary', meaning truly or indeed
Massy: Heavy, of great mass
Moreover: Besides the fact
Mortised: Fastened
Mote: Speck of dust
Mutine: Rebel

Noyance: Harm

Occulted: Hidden
O'er-raught: Overtook
Ordnance: Cannon
Ore: Precious metal
Orisons: Prayers

Partisan: A pike or a long-handled spear
Pat: Conveniently
Pate: Head
Perdy: By God (French *par Dieu*)
Pernicious: Destructive or ruinous
Perturbèd: Agitated or disturbed
Physic: Medicine
Plausible: Acceptable
Porpentine: Porcupine
Portentous: Ominous, a bad sign
Prodigal: Lavishly, extravagantly
Purgation: Cleansing, clearing away
Purport: Meaning

Quietus: Settlement

Ranker: Of higher rank
Rapier: Light, sharp-pointed sword

Replication: Reply
Repugnant: Rebellious
Requiem: Music for the dead

Sconce: Head
Scourge: Punishment
Secure: Unsuspecting
Sepulchre: Tomb
Shoon: Shoes
Short: Under control
Shrewdly: Sharply
Sith: Since
Soft: Wait; or gently, slowly
Soliciting: Sexual advances
Sore: Severe
Springe: Snare, trap
Start: Jump or swerve off track
Straight: At once
Strumpet: Prostitute
Subscribed: Signed

Tables: Writing tablets or slates
Tame: Calm
Tarre: Incite or provoke
Temperance: Moderation; restrained
or controlled action
Tenable: Held or kept
Thou: You
Thy: Your
Toy: Trifle; trivial matter
Tribute: Respect or payment
Trifling: Making trivial or insignificant

Unfold: Reveal
Unyoke: Finish work
Usurp'st: Wrongfully occupies

Visage: Face
Voice: Vote
Vouchsafe: Permit
Vulgar: Ordinary, insignificant

Wager: Lay bets
Wanton: Weakling
Wassail: Drinking party
Waxes: Grows
Weal: Welfare
Weighed: Considered
Wherefore: Why
Whereto: To which
Wholesome: Healthy
Wit: Good sense; cleverness or intelligence
Without: Outside
Wot: Knows





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