GUTHRIE THEATER

60 YEARS

Play Guide

2022–2023 SEASON

Hamlet

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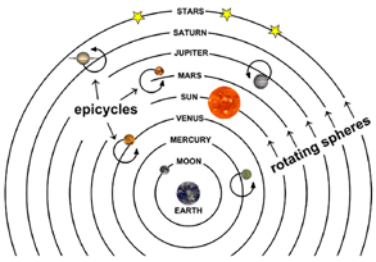

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Hamlet

by **WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**
directed by **JOSEPH HAJ**
April 8 – May 21, 2023
Wurtele Thrust Stage

THE PLAY

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GUTHRIE THEATER

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The Guthrie creates transformative theater experiences that ignite the imagination, stir the heart, open the mind and build community through the illumination of our common humanity.

Guthrie Theater Play Guide
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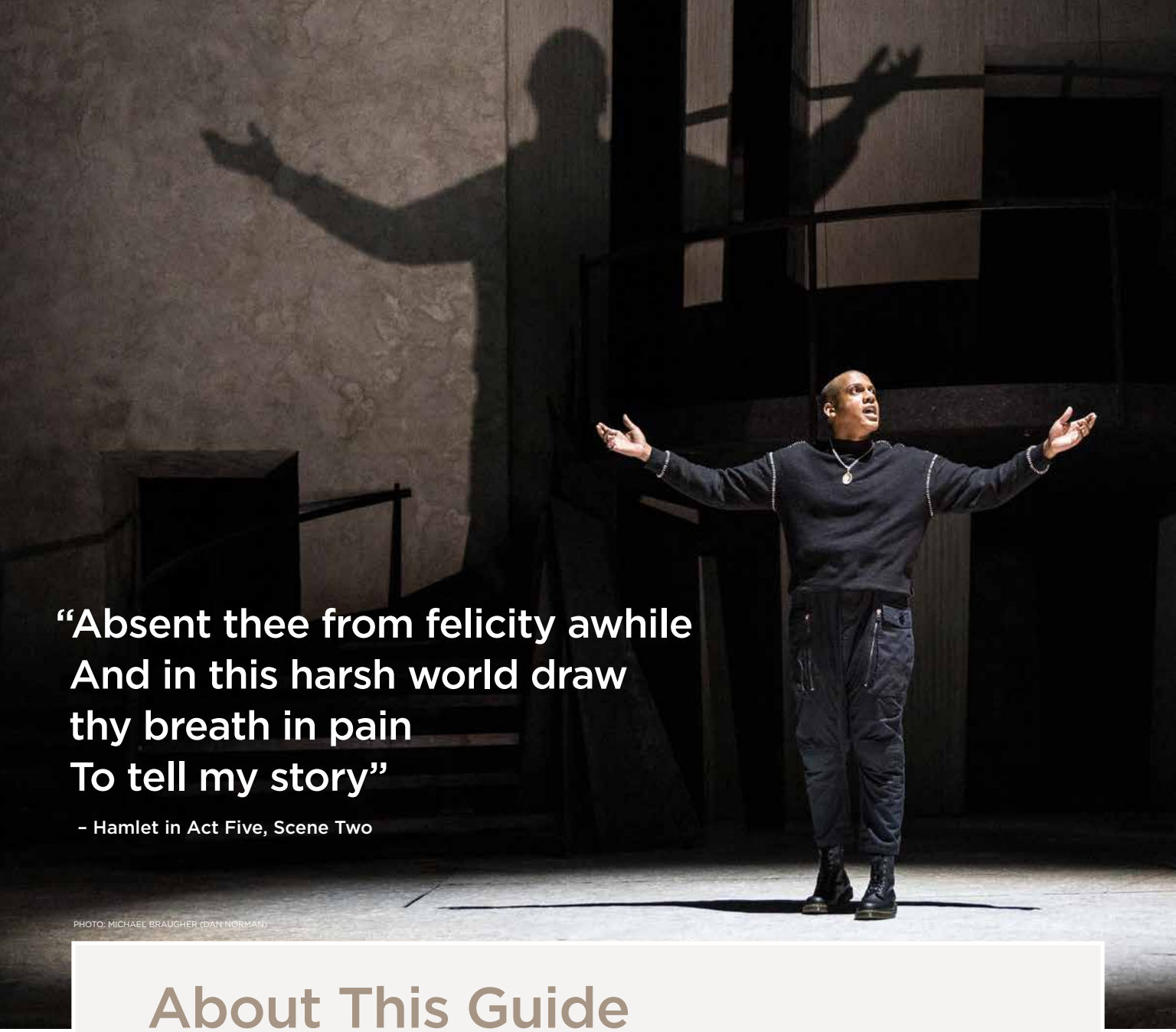


"Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw
thy breath in pain
To tell my story"

– Hamlet in Act Five, Scene Two

PHOTO: MICHAEL BRAUGHER (DAN NORMAN)

About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show's history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you're a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We're glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Portions of this play guide are reprinted from play guides created for previous productions of *Hamlet* at the Guthrie. Content may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for more information.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Thanks for your interest in *Hamlet*. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.

PHOTOS: MICHAEL BRAUGHER; JOHN CATRON AND REGINA MARIE WILLIAMS; REGINA MARIE WILLIAMS AND ANYA WHELAN-SMITH (DAN NORMAN)

Synopsis

Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, mourns the recent death of his beloved father and questions the hasty remarriage of his mother, Gertrude, to his uncle Claudius, his father's brother. But it's not until the ghost of Old Hamlet appears early one morning to reveal he was murdered and implore revenge that Hamlet sets out to get justice for the late king.

First, however, Hamlet needs more evidence than a supernatural — and possibly evil — entity's word for it. Distrusting nearly everyone around him except his friend Horatio, Hamlet feigns madness and distances himself from Ophelia, with whom he's been romantically linked. But Hamlet's behavior draws the notice of Claudius and his advisor, Polonius (Ophelia's father), who work together to uncover the cause of Hamlet's "madness." When the opportunity presents itself, Hamlet sets a trap in the form of a play to be performed at court to finally confirm the circumstances of his father's murder.

The play successfully reveals Claudius' guilt, but as events spin out of control, Claudius takes action to protect himself and Gertrude by ridding Denmark of its erratic prince. Hamlet proves too smart for the plan, and a final showdown is set in motion that leaves the country's royal family devastated and the Danish kingdom vulnerable to an invasion by Norway.

SETTING

The royal palace in Elsinore, a city in Denmark

CHARACTERS

Hamlet, prince of Denmark

Gertrude, his mother, the queen and new wife to Claudius

Claudius, king of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle and brother to the late king

Ghost, of Hamlet's father, the late king

Polonius, advisor to Claudius

Ophelia, his daughter and romantic interest of Hamlet

Laertes, his son

Voltemand, a Danish ambassador sent to Norway

Osric, a courtier

Fortinbras, nephew to the king of Norway

Horatio, a loyal friend of Hamlet

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, school friends of Hamlet

Barnardo, Marcellus and Francisco, soldiers and members of the watch

Player King, Player Queen, Players and Lucianus, who enact *The Mousetrap*

Gravediggers

Priest

Nobles, Soldiers and Attendants

PHOTO: THE CAST OF *HAMLET* (DAN NORMAN)

Scene by Scene

ACT ONE

Scene One

In Denmark, a watch is kept because Fortinbras is a threat to invade from Norway. Soldiers Barnardo and Francisco have invited Horatio to join them because they've seen a supernatural entity the past two nights. The Ghost appears, bearing the appearance of the late king, and they decide to tell the former king's son, Hamlet.

Scene Two

The new king of Denmark, Claudius, has married his former sister-in-law, Gertrude. He dispatches Voltemand to Old Norway to stop Fortinbras and grants Laertes' leave to go back to Paris. The royal couple discuss Hamlet's melancholy and mourning. Claudius names Hamlet his successor and asks him to stay at Elsinore instead of going back to Wittenberg. When alone, Hamlet reveals he's upset at his father's death and his mother's quick remarriage. Horatio and the soldiers tell him about the Ghost. He agrees to watch with them that night.

Scene Three

Laertes advises his sister, Ophelia, to be wary of Hamlet's affections given Hamlet's position as prince. Their father, Polonius, enters to hurry Laertes along, impart some words of advice and tell Ophelia to avoid Hamlet.

Scene Four

Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus keep the watch. The Ghost appears and beckons Hamlet to follow him.

Scene Five

The Ghost confirms it is the spirit of Hamlet's father. He shares how he was murdered by Claudius, notes his wife's adultery and asks Hamlet to avenge him. Hamlet swears the others to secrecy about what they've seen.

ACT TWO

Scene One

Ophelia tells Polonius that Hamlet visited her and frightened her. Polonius assumes Hamlet is not himself because she's spurned his advances. They go to tell Claudius.

Scene Two

Claudius and Gertrude welcome Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, longtime friends of Hamlet, hoping they can learn what is bothering Hamlet. Voltemand reports that Old Norway has redirected Fortinbras' military efforts against Poland. Polonius reveals Ophelia's romance with Hamlet and theorizes that lovesickness is the cause of Hamlet's distemper. He and Claudius will test the theory. Everyone else leaves when Hamlet arrives so Polonius can talk with him, and Hamlet appears to speak nonsense. Rosencrantz

and Guildenstern greet Hamlet. He's suspicious about their arrival. Some traveling Players arrive and give a marvelous speech, after which Hamlet broods on his own lack of feeling and action compared to this actor. Hamlet plans to use a play to prove Claudius' guilt.

ACT THREE

Scene One

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet seemed cheered by the Players. Polonius sets Ophelia up to run into Hamlet while he and Claudius hide and watch. Hamlet is harsh to her and realizes he's being spied on. Ophelia laments his loss of wits. Polonius still thinks it's lovesickness, but Claudius is wary. Hamlet returns to meditate again on suicide.

Scene Two

Hamlet advises the Players and asks Horatio to watch Claudius carefully during the play. Everyone arrives, and the play unfolds. Claudius gets upset and leaves. Hamlet is triumphant. He calls out Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for trying to play him. Polonius tells Hamlet that Gertrude wants to talk with him.

Scene Three

Claudius determines Hamlet is a risk and plans to send him to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Polonius will spy on Hamlet and Gertrude and report back to the king. As Claudius prays, Hamlet sees his chance for revenge but doesn't kill him because Claudius would go to heaven. After Hamlet leaves, Claudius reveals he can't really pray.

Scene Four

Polonius hides in Gertrude's room. Hamlet comes in angry, and Gertrude fears for her life. Polonius responds, and Hamlet stabs him. Hamlet chides Gertrude for marrying Claudius. When he gets too angry, the Ghost appears (seen by Hamlet, not Gertrude) to calm him down. Hamlet tells Gertrude to avoid Claudius and takes away Polonius' body.

ACT FOUR*

Scene One

When Gertrude tells Claudius what happened, he recognizes he could have been killed. He tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet and the body.

Scene Two

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet, who agrees to see the king.

Scene Three

Hamlet eventually reveals where to find Polonius' body, and Claudius ships Hamlet off to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When alone, Claudius implores England to agree to kill Hamlet.

Scene Five

Gertrude refuses, then agrees, to see Ophelia, who enters singing and talking nonsense focused on her father's death. Claudius tells Horatio to keep an eye on her. Claudius reveals that an angry Laertes has returned just as Laertes enters demanding revenge for his father's death. Claudius calms Laertes when they are interrupted by Ophelia, and Laertes is heartbroken.

Scene Four

On his way back to Denmark, Hamlet encounters Fortinbras preparing to invade Poland. Hamlet meditates on his own inaction.

Scene Seven

Claudius explains his actions to Laertes. Osric brings a letter from Hamlet saying he's returned to Denmark. Claudius proposes a means for revenge using a fencing match, and Laertes ups the ante with poison: They'll poison Laertes' sword and a cup of wine. Gertrude reports Ophelia's death by drowning.

ACT FIVE

Scene One

Hamlet informs Horatio how he escaped. They encounter some Gravediggers preparing a fresh grave. Hamlet talks with one of them and is given the skull of the former jester, Yorick. Hamlet and Horatio hide as people enter, and Hamlet learns it's Ophelia's funeral. He reveals himself, grapples with Laertes and declares that he loved Ophelia.

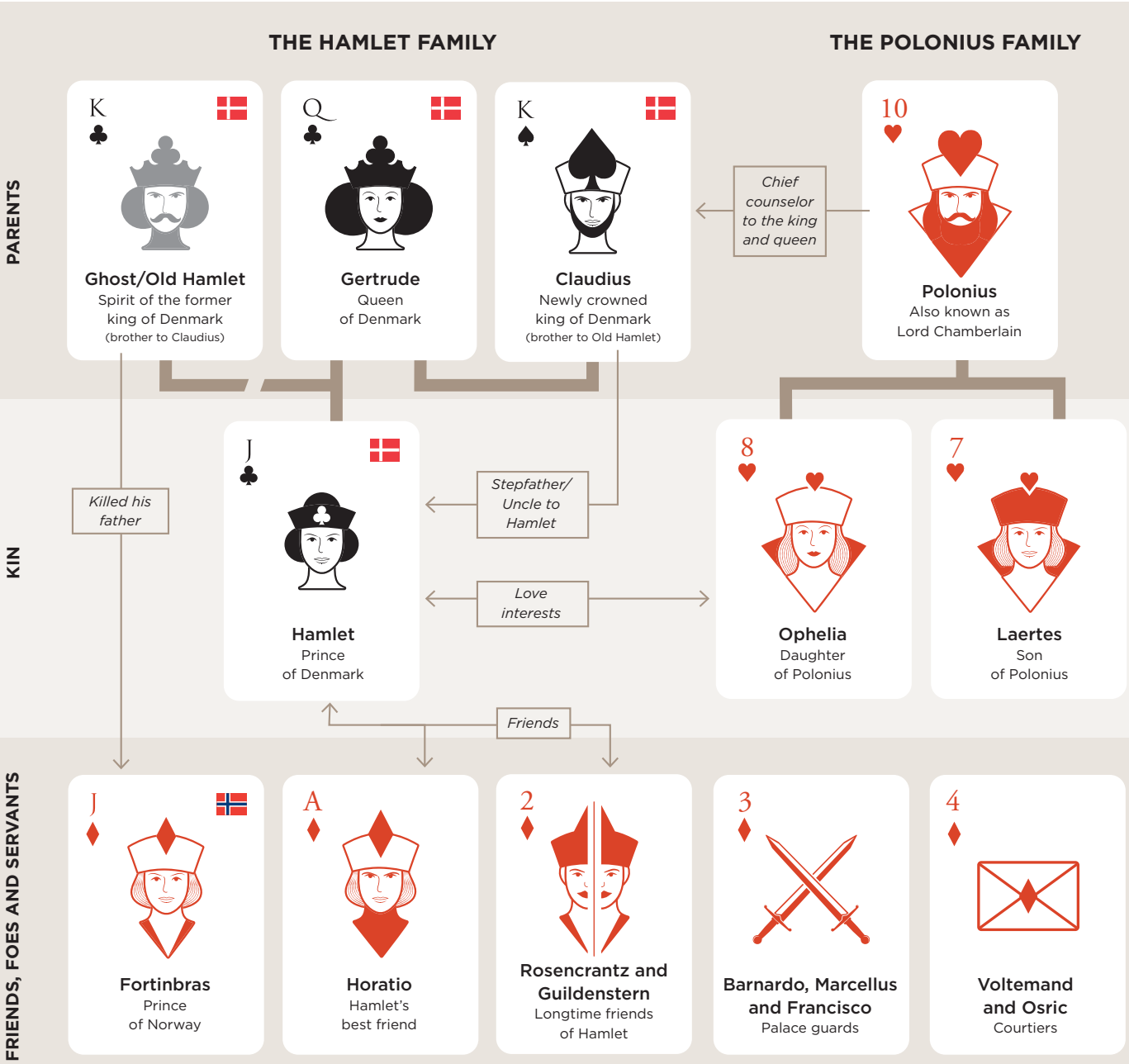
Scene Two

As Hamlet and Horatio talk, Osric delivers Claudius' proposal for the fencing match. Horatio has misgivings, but Hamlet is philosophical. Hamlet apologizes to Laertes for his behavior. Claudius makes a show of putting a (poisoned) pearl in the cup. They fence. Hamlet gets the first two hits, and Gertrude drinks in his honor. Laertes purposely wounds Hamlet, and Hamlet wounds him in return. When Gertrude says she's been poisoned, he reveals the treachery. Hamlet stabs Claudius and exchanges forgiveness with Laertes. Hamlet asks Horatio to tell his story. Fortinbras walks in on a bloodbath.

*In this production of *Hamlet*, the scenes in Act Four have been reordered and Scene Six has been omitted.

All Hail the Key Players

A royal family. Members of the court. Citizens of Denmark. Guards, courtiers and a jester (rather, the skull of a jester). Shakespeare's longest play includes an equally long list of characters with countless familial and relational ties. Use this handy character map to follow Hamlet's quest to avenge his father's death.



"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

Marcellus

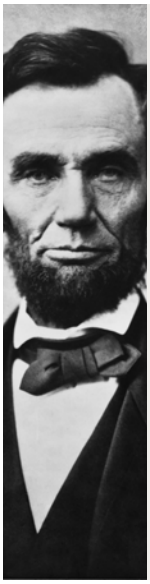
Responses to *Hamlet*

Hamlet is singular in its kind: a tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, and calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectators.

Critic and poet August Wilhelm von Schlegel
A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, 1815

The tragedy of *Hamlet* is a coarse and barbarous piece, which would not be tolerated by the basest rabble in France or Italy. Hamlet goes mad in the second act, and his mistress goes mad in the third; the prince kills his mistress's father, supposing him to be a rat, and the heroine throws herself in the river. Her grave is dug on the stage; gravediggers utter gibes appropriate to their calling, holding skulls in their hands; Prince Hamlet replies to their gross language with jests not less disgusting. During this time, one of the actors is conquering Poland. Hamlet, his mother and his step-father tipple together on stage; people sing, squabble, fight among themselves and kill each other; one would think that this work was the fruit of the imagination of a drunken savage.

Writer and philosopher François-Marie Arouet Voltaire
"Dissertation on Ancient and Modern Tragedy" (from the introduction to his tragedy *Semiramis*), 1748



Some of Shakespeare's plays I have never read; while others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are *Lear*, *Richard Third*, *Henry Eighth*, *Hamlet* and especially *Macbeth*. I think nothing equals *Macbeth*. It is wonderful. Unlike you gentlemen of the profession, I think the soliloquy in *Hamlet* commencing "Oh my offense is rank" surpasses that commencing "To be or not to be." But pardon this small attempt at criticism.

President Abraham Lincoln
From a letter to James H. Hackett, August 17, 1863

And when the ghost has vanished, who is it that stands before us? A young hero panting for vengeance? A prince by birth, rejoicing to be called to punish the usurper of his crown? No! Trouble and astonishment take hold of the solitary young man; he grows bitter against smiling villains, swears that he will not forget the spirit and concludes with the significant ejaculation:

> The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
> That ever I was born to set it right!

In these words, I imagine, will be found the key to Hamlet's whole procedure. To me it is clear that Shakespeare meant, in the present case, to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. In this view, the whole piece seems to me to be composed. There is an oak-tree planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shivered.

A lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away. All duties are holy for him; the present is too hard. Impossibilities have been required of him; not in themselves impossibilities, but such for him. He winds, and turns, and torments himself; he advances and recoils; is ever put in mind, ever puts himself in mind; at last does all but lose his purpose from his thoughts; yet still without recovering his peace of mind.

Playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, 1795–1796

On the one side stand the Hamlets — reflective, conscientious, often all-comprehensive, but as often also useless and doomed to immobility; and on the other, the half-crazy Don Quixotes, who help and influence mankind only to the extent that they see but a single point — often nonexistent in the form they see it. Unwillingly the questions arise: Must one really be a lunatic to believe in the truth? And must the mind that has obtained control of itself lose, therefore, all its power?

Novelist Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev
Hamlet and Don Quixote, 1860

Suppose you were to describe the plot of *Hamlet* to a person quite ignorant of the play, and suppose you were careful to tell your hearer nothing about Hamlet's character, what impression would your sketch make on him? Would he not exclaim: "What a sensational story! Why, here are some eight violent deaths, not to speak of adultery, a ghost, a mad woman and a fight in a grave! If I did not know that the play was Shakespeare's, I should have thought it must have been one of those early tragedies of blood and horror from which he is said to have redeemed the stage?" And would he not then go on to ask: "But why in the world did not Hamlet obey the Ghost at once, and so save seven of those eight lives?" This exclamation and this question both show the same thing, that the whole story turns upon the peculiar character of the hero. For without this character, the story would appear sensational and horrible; and yet the actual *Hamlet* ... certainly has been the subject of more discussion than any other in the whole literature of the world.

Literary scholar A.C. Bradley
Shakespearean Tragedy, 1904

The burden of Hamlet is less rigid than that of Orestes, but more undulating; Orestes carries predestination, Hamlet carries fate.

Novelist Victor Hugo
William Shakespeare, 1864

The greatest mystery plays, like the greatest plays of any kind, somehow, almost magically, have resonances to other, deeper layers of meaning. Take the greatest mystery play ever written, *Hamlet*. It begins with the line "Who's there?" and it spends the rest of the night exploring that question. Who's there? Who am I? Who is the ghost? Who is Claudius? And in the midst of these questions, it manages to be (if it's possible to see it objectively anymore) an edge-of-the-seat mystery-thriller where the victim's son tries to figure out whether to trust a ghost who tells him to kill his own uncle in revenge for the brutal murder of his father.

As *Hamlet* above all others reminds us, mysteries speak to something central to us all. We try to find out who the killer is just the way we question other, deeper questions of identity. We want answers to vital questions that can make the world more rational and sensible because answers give us peace of mind.

Playwright Ken Ludwig
"Why Do Mysteries Grab Us?" from *Thoughts on Comedy*, www.kenludwig.com, July 24, 2020

The tragedy is, of course, the more moving if you realize that Hamlet is a young fellow, that, when he is summoned from school by his dear father's death, not so many years have passed since Yorick bore him packaback about the halls of Elsinore. It is infinitely the more poignant if, from time to time, it is borne in upon you what a gay and charming Prince is that for whom — O, cursed spite! — the times are out of joint, what an insatiable curiosity, relish for life and capacity for dalliance reveal themselves even in the hours of his greatest woe and irresolution. When you and Fortinbras look your last upon him, it must come over you with a rush that here lies one for whom Fate has perversely ruined and cut short a life that would have been most beautiful could it have gone its unmolested way at Wittenberg.

Drama critic Alexander Woollcott
"Second Thoughts on First Nights," *The New York Times*, October 26, 1919

It is true that Shakespeare asks us to sympathize with Hamlet, but his greatness lies precisely in that he asks us to sympathize with every single man and woman in the play, not excluding the clown in the churchyard. The historical fact to which we can turn is that Shakespeare did not invent the plot of *Hamlet*. He chose, presumably because it in some way appealed to his imagination, to remake an older play. And, although this older play no longer exists, there exist other plays on the same kind of subject. A study of these ... [may help] to understand the masterpiece which Shakespeare created in this genre. ... The essence of any tragedy of revenge is that its hero has not created the situation in which he finds himself and out of which the tragedy arises.

Literary critic Helen Gardner
"The Historical Approach to *Hamlet*," *The Business of Criticism*, 1959

Watching or reading *Hamlet* for the first time or the twentieth, an observer cannot help being struck, I think, by how much of the play has passed into our common language. Indeed, as many commentators have observed, the experience of *Hamlet* is almost always that of *recognition*, of recalling, remembering or identifying some already-known phrase or image. It could be said that in the context of modern culture — global culture as well as Anglophone culture — one never does encounter *Hamlet* "for the first time."

Scholar Marjorie Garber
Shakespeare After All, 2004

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to John and Mary Arden Shakespeare and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, in England's West Country.

Much of the information about him comes from official documents such as wills, legal documents and court records. There are also contemporary references to him and his writing. While much of the biographical information is sketchy and incomplete, for a person of his class and as the son of a town alderman, quite a lot of information is available.

Young Shakespeare would have attended the Stratford grammar school, where he would have learned to read and write not only English, but also Latin and some Greek. In 1582, at age 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, and the couple had three children: Susanna in 1583 and twins Hamnet and Judith in 1585.

After an eight-year gap where Shakespeare's activity is not known, he appeared in London by 1592 and quickly began to make a name for himself as a prolific playwright. He stayed in London for about 20 years, becoming increasingly successful in his work as an actor, writer and shareholder in his acting company. Retirement took him back to Stratford to lead the life of a country gentleman. His son Hamnet died at age 11, but both daughters were married: Susanna to Dr. John Hall and Judith to Thomas Quiney.

Shakespeare died in Stratford in 1616 on April 23, which is thought to be his birthday. He is buried in the parish church, where his grave can be seen to this day. His known body of work includes at least 37 plays, two long poems and 154 sonnets.

A Legacy That Continues To Inspire

If one takes those thirty-seven plays with all the radar lines of the different viewpoints of the different characters, one comes out with a field of incredible density and complexity; and eventually one goes a step further, and one finds that what happened, what passed through this man called Shakespeare and came into existence on sheets of paper, is something quite different from any other author's work. It's not Shakespeare's view of the world, it's something which actually resembles reality. A sign of this is that any single word, line, character or event has not only a large number of interpretations, but an unlimited number. Which is the characteristic of reality. … An artist may try to capture and reflect your action, but actually he interprets it — so that a naturalistic painting, a Picasso painting, a photograph, are all interpretations. But in itself, the action of one man touching his head is open to unlimited understanding and interpretation. In reality, that is. What Shakespeare wrote carries that characteristic. What he wrote is not interpretations: it is the thing itself.

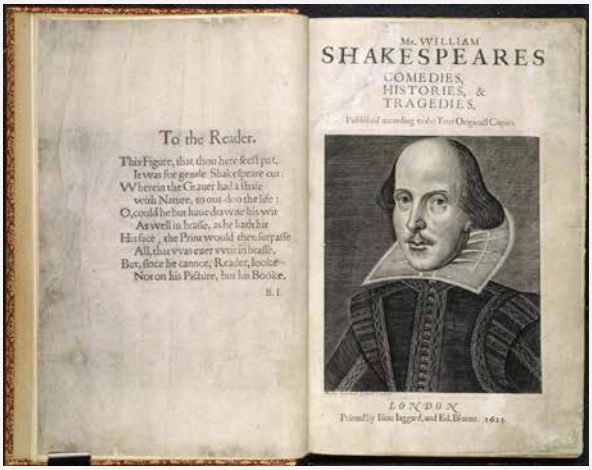
Peter Brook
"What is Shakespeare?" (1947) in *The Shifting Point*, 1987

The Poetry of Shakespeare was Inspiration indeed: he is not so much an Imitator as an Instrument of Nature; and 'tis not so just to say that he speaks from her, as that she speaks through him.

Alexander Pope
Preface to *The Works of Shakespeare*, 1725

We do not understand Shakespeare from a single reading, and certainly not from a single play. There is a relation between the various plays of Shakespeare, taken in order; and it is a work of years to venture even one individual interpretation of the pattern in Shakespeare's carpet.

T.S. Eliot
"Dante," *Selected Essays*, 1929



[A]lthough each play is a separate and individual work of art, they all generally illuminate one another, and taken together they form an impressive achievement in which each individual play acquires more weight and dignity when placed against the background of the whole corpus. Each play is more or less a landmark in the road along which Shakespeare the artist traveled, or, to change the metaphor, each play is a variation on a number of themes that recur in the poet's work.

M.M. Badawn
Background to Shakespeare, 1981

Every age creates its own Shakespeare. … Like a portrait whose eyes seem to follow you around the room, engaging your glance from every angle, [his] plays and their characters seem always to be "modern," always to be "us."

Scholar Marjorie Garber
Shakespeare After All, 2004

Shakespeare's mind is the type of the androgynous, of the man-woman mind. … It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.

Virginia Woolf
A Room of One's Own, 1929

His characters are intimately bound up with the audience. That is why his plays are the greatest example there is of a people's theater; in this theater the public found and still finds its own problems and re-experiences them.

Jean-Paul Sartre
On Theater, 1959

Shakespeare's Plays

EARLY PERIOD

ca. 1587–92 *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
ca. 1589–90 *Titus Andronicus*
ca. 1590 *Henry VI, Part II*
ca. 1590–91 *Henry VI, Part III*
ca. 1591 *The Taming of the Shrew*
ca. 1592 *Henry VI, Part I*; *Richard III*
ca. 1594 *The Comedy of Errors*; *Love's Labour's Lost*

MIDDLE PERIOD

ca. 1595 *Richard II*; *Romeo and Juliet*
ca. 1596 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *King John*; *The Merchant of Venice*
ca. 1598 *Henry IV, Part I*; *Henry IV, Part II*; *Much Ado About Nothing*
ca. 1599 *Henry V*; *Julius Caesar*
ca. 1600 *As You Like It*; *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
ca. 1601 *Twelfth Night*
ca. 1602 *Troilus and Cressida*
ca. 1602–04 *Hamlet*
ca. 1604 *Othello*; *Measure for Measure*
ca. 1605–06 *All's Well That Ends Well*; *King Lear*; *Macbeth*

LATE PERIOD

ca. 1606 *Timon of Athens*; *Antony and Cleopatra*
ca. 1608 *Pericles*; *Coriolanus*
ca. 1609–11 *The Winter's Tale*
ca. 1610 *Cymbeline*
ca. 1611 *The Tempest*
ca. 1613 *Henry VIII*
ca. 1613–14 *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

Authorship and dating of Shakespeare's plays is a subject of much academic debate. These dates are speculative but the "most probable" dating from *The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*.

HAMLET

Hamlet is one of the great roles in the Western canon, and some of the world's most acclaimed actors have aspired to play the role. In Hamlet's relentless pursuit of the truth, Shakespeare shows the prince playing detective, testing assumptions, pretending to be mad, contemplating suicide, puzzling over dark suspicions and even devising his own play. Nothing escapes Hamlet's scrutiny while he descends inescapably into tragedy. The role of Hamlet is also the longest in Shakespeare's plays.

Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's mature tragedies, followed by *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and it is often dated around the same period as *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.

Shakespeare's sources for *Hamlet* include a history of Denmark written by Saxo Grammaticus circa 1200. Among its 60 legendary kings is the tale of Amlethus. That story has no real historical basis, but through time, it would become associated with Saxo's own time period, taking on elements of medieval Denmark. In 1576, using Saxo, François de Belleforest wrote *Amleth*, a version of the story that includes an adulterous affair between Gertrude and Claudius before Old Hamlet's murder. A play that served as Shakespeare's direct source appeared circa 1589; whether Shakespeare had a hand in writing that earlier play is disputed.

THE GUTHRIE HAS PREVIOUSLY PRODUCED *HAMLET* FOUR TIMES:

1963

PHOTO: THE CAST OF *HAMLET* (MARTY NORDSTRUM)

Directed by Tyrone Guthrie

1978

PHOTO: RANDALL DUK KIM (BOYD HAGEN)

Directed by Stephen Kanee

1988

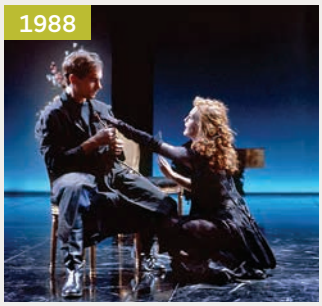


PHOTO: ŽELJKO IVANEK AND JULIANNE MOORE (MICHAL DANIEL)

Directed by Garland Wright

2006

PHOTO: KEVIN K. O'DONNELL, SANTINO FONTANA AND STEPHEN YOAKAM (MICHAL DANIEL)

Directed by Joe Dowling

Ophelia's Herbs and Flowers

Previously perceived as bearers of complex meanings, [Ophelia's] references to these herbs and flowers may be better read as a shocking enumeration of well-known abortifacients and emmenagogues. The suggestion is not made here that these methods were or are effective in provoking abortion or inducing menses, or that Ophelia was meant to have used them, but that they were widely known and subjects of commonly held belief to author and audience alike.

Lucile F. Newman
"Ophelia's Herbal," *Economic Botany*, April/June 1979

ROSEMARY

A perennial evergreen shrub with green leaves and a pungent, piney aroma. Depending on the climate, it might produce small white or blue flowers. Rosemary, which blooms twice a year, was medicinally considered good for colds and thought to stimulate the brain and help restore speech and memory. Rosemary could also promote menstruation. It was used at funerals and to remember the dead. Rosemary can also symbolize remembrance of romantic love, perhaps because its fragrance lingers, and was often worn at weddings.

PANSY

A flower of the viola family with large, heart-shaped, brightly colored petals. Its name comes from the French *pensée* ("thought" or "reflection") and symbolizes thinking, pensiveness and grief. Pansies are also connected to romantic love (alternate names: heartsease and love-in-idleness). Medicinally, pansies could be used against syphilis.

FENNEL

A sweet-smelling herb and a relative of dill, fennel has large, flat, yellow flowers that produce seeds used for seasoning food. In Britain during the Middle Ages, fennel was hung over the door to ward off evil spirits on Midsummer's Eve. It was used to help treat many disorders, including kidney trouble, venereal disease, digestive complaints, lung and liver ailments, worms in the ears and defective eyesight. Like rosemary, it could also promote menstruation. Fennel symbolizes flattery, insincerity, dissembling and fickleness.

COLUMBINE

A perennial wildflower with horn-shaped, spur-like petals on the bottom of the bell-shaped flower. Because of its flowers with horns, it came to be connected with adultery and ingratitude.

RUE

Also known as herb-of-grace, this plant has blue-green leaves and tiny yellow flowers. Rue was once grown in monastery gardens as a medicinal herb and used to ward off evil spirits. Its bitter leaves make a good insect repellent, and it can also be a mental stimulant and good for eyesight. On Sundays, churchgoers would dip it in holy water when entering a church in hope of obtaining God's grace. Rue is a symbol of repentance and regret as well as sorrow, and it could be used to abort a fetus. While it might sharpen eyesight in men, pregnant women were warned away from it. Rue was also known for suppressing sexual desire and called the "chaste herb."

DAISY

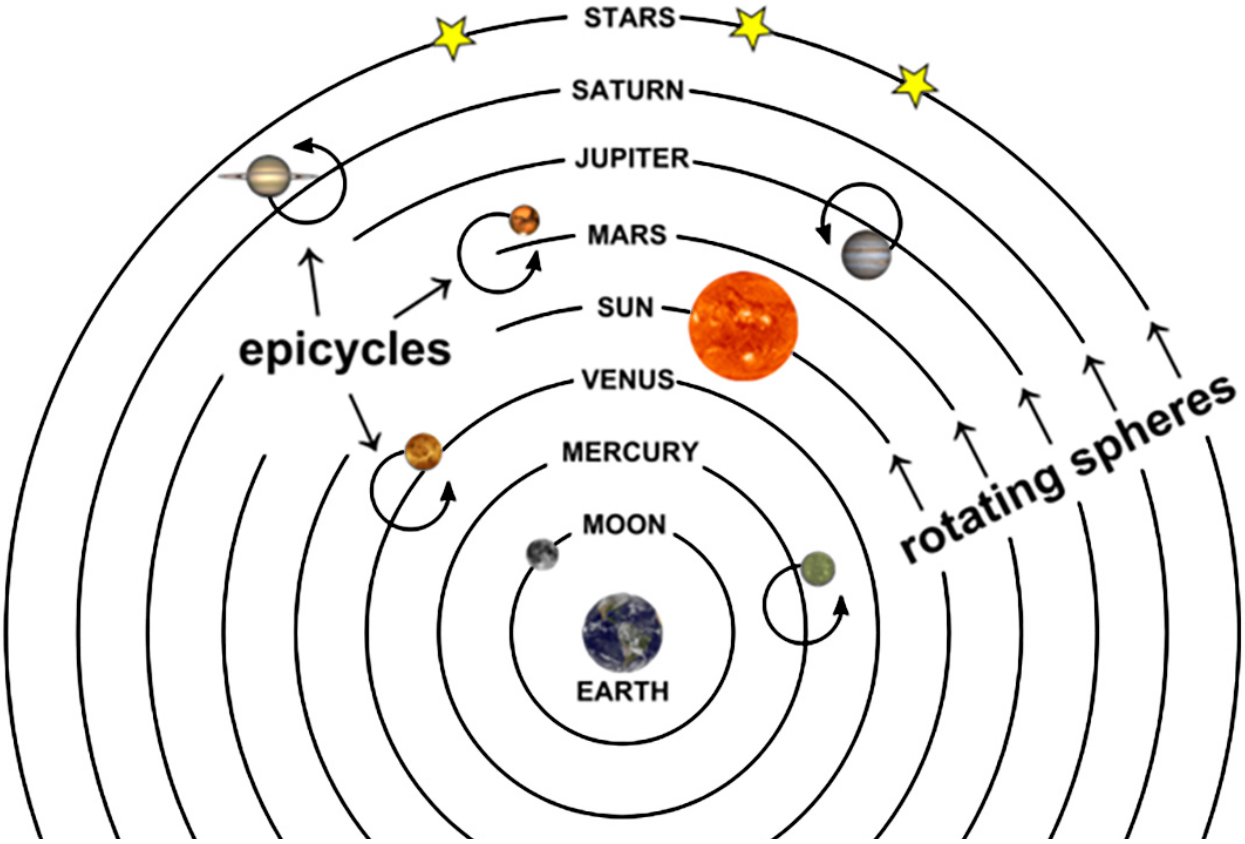
A perennial of the aster/chrysanthemum families that may represent dissembling but is often connected to romantic or forsaken love.

VIOLET

Violets, like pansies, are in the viola family and often look like small pansies. The purple-flowered violets are good to eat and good for medicine. Violets represent faithfulness, and the seeds were believed to have both abortive and contraceptive qualities.

Cosmology, Ghosts, Physiology and Monarchy in *Hamlet*

Our understanding of the world isn't the same as Shakespeare's, so what follows is a brief breakdown of some basic worldviews during the Elizabethan era and how they are manifested in the *Hamlet* text.



THE UNIVERSE: PTOLEMY'S SYSTEM

During Medieval and Renaissance times, people's understanding of the universe came from Ptolemy's work in the 2nd century, which put the Earth at the center of everything. The Earth was composed of only four elements (earth, water, fire and air), and it stood stationary, surrounded by a series of concentric circles along which the planetary bodies moved. The moon was closest to Earth and changeable; everything past the moon was unchanging. The final circle contained the stars and beyond it was the First Mover.

The moving spheres created sound, or "the music of the spheres," which was too perfect to be heard on earth, in most circumstances.

Sourced from C.W.R.D. Moseley
Shakespeare's History Plays: Richard II to Henry V, The Making of a King, 1988

EXAMPLES FROM THE TEXT

"Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres."
– Ghost, Act One, Scene Five

"Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers?"
– Hamlet, Act Five, Scene One

GHOSTS

The spirit of a dead person had overtones of soulfulness and holiness on the one hand and fears of demonic imitation on the other. Demonologists of the Elizabethan era feared that devils could imitate the forms of deceased people in order to lure the living into damnation. This would be a pertinent consideration if one had just been asked by a ghost to commit murder, as often happened in revenge tragedy, especially those imitating the work of the Roman playwright Seneca.

As well as bringing temptations, ghosts could be delusions — imagined as a result of melancholy and madness. Some spirits could be good ghosts, bringing advice or revealing truths. But even when discussing more positive notions of haunting, a demonologist still insisted that the ghost was not actually the dead person, but only a representation of the person. Such a visitation could be either good or bad, depending upon the advice that the ghost might offer to the living. …

In *Hamlet*, all the characters' concerns about appearance and reality are informed by demonological and theological speculations about devilish trickery and the fate of the soul immediately after death. The ghost may have appeared in an earlier or lost dramatization of the Hamlet story, but Shakespeare's version seems informed by some of his recent work in *Julius Caesar* (circa 1599) on Caesar's ghost and thus very much his own.

Marion Gibson and Jo Ann Esra
"Ghost," *Shakespeare's Demonology: A Dictionary*, 2014

EXAMPLES FROM THE TEXT

"What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,
Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march?"
– Horatio, Act One, Scene One

"A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets."
– Horatio, Act One, Scene One

PHYSIOLOGY AND THE HUMORS

Elizabethans had the same understanding as the ancients that the body contained four principal humors or fluids, which correlated with the four elements and affected emotions and temperament: phlegm (cold and moist like water): slow, stolid, phlegmatic; blood (hot and moist like air): jovial, lusty, sanguine; yellow bile (hot and dry like fire): angry, hot-tempered, choleric; black bile (cold and dry like earth): maudlin, languid, melancholic. Ideally, a person had a mixture of all four that determined their temperament. An imbalance of any would throw their temperament out of balance, leading to a diagnosis and treatment (bloodletting, diet, medicine) based on the imbalance.

EXAMPLES FROM THE TEXT

"For me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into more choler."
– Hamlet, Act Three, Scene Two

"Out of my weakness and my melancholy"
– Hamlet, Act Two, Scene Two

"The heyday in the blood is tame"
– Hamlet, Act Three, Scene Four

ELECTED MONARCHY

Denmark originally had an elective monarchy, and though in practice an eldest son usually succeeded his father, it wasn't unheard of for a brother to succeed with the support of the council. In times past, marrying the former king's wife may have helped shore up one's legitimacy to the throne and provide a little continuity in rule.

During the early Middle Ages, it was common that the king's successor would be chosen from the royal family but not necessarily the most direct descendant, as it might be better for the country to choose a mature younger brother than an infant son, for instance. Another point known to Shakespeare's original audience is that there were times in their own history when an uncle seized the throne (dramatized in *Richard III* and *King John*, in which tween sons were excluded from the throne), and then the nephew's life was often in danger.

However common or not this brother-to-brother succession was, it's exactly the succession that takes place in Norway, too: The current king is an uncle to Fortinbras, the son of the late king of Norway who lost lands (and his life) to the late Old Hamlet.

EXAMPLES FROM THE TEXT

"Popped in between th'election and my hopes"
– Hamlet, Act Five, Scene Two

"But I do prophesy th'election lights
On Fortinbras; he has my dying vote."
– Hamlet, Act Five, Scene Two

Selected Glossary of Terms

Aeneas' tale to Dido — Aeneas was a Trojan hero who escaped the fall of Troy to lead survivors to establish Rome. Virgil's epic poem the *Aeneid* recounts Aeneas' travel from Troy to the Italian peninsula. Along the way, he is shipwrecked in Carthage, where he tells the widowed queen Dido his story. Troy had been ruled by Priam, husband to Hecuba and father of Troy's greatest hero (Hector) and its greatest twerp (Paris). Pyrrhus was the son of the great Greek hero Achilles, who joined the siege of Troy late in the decade after a Trojan seer declared the city could only fall if a descendant of its wall builder helped. Pyrrhus was that descendant. He avenged his father, who was killed when an arrow shot by Paris and guided by Aphrodite hit his vulnerable heel. Pyrrhus was considered a brutal fighter, and his killing of Priam at the altar was a sacrilege.

antic disposition — Foolish, grotesque manner

antique Roman — Ancient Romans believed suicide to be an act of honor preferable to disgrace, as opposed to Christian society in which suicide was a sin

argument — Plot, story

arras — Tapestry, wall hanging

assay — Test inclination, to try by suggesting

avouch — Guarantee, assure

calumny — Slander, defamation

carouses — Drinks freely

censure — Opinion, judgment

changeling — Child substituted by fairies for the one they steal

cozenage — Deception, fraud

distemper — Disorder, malady

even-Christian — Fellow Christians

gambols — Capers, antics

groundlings — Audience members who stood in front of the stage in the yard of the theater, in the cheapest section

hebona — Deadly poison derived from a plant, the specifics of which are obscured

Hecuba — Queen of Troy, Priam's wife, recognized as an example of extreme sorrow

Hercules — From mythology: Roman name for the greatest of the Greek heroes (Heracles), a demi-god known for his strength and wild temperament

Herod — In the mystery plays of the Middle Ages, Herod, the king who tried to kill baby Jesus, was usually represented as a tyrant with rages, yelling and grotesque expressions

hoist with his own petard — Blown up with his own explosive

hugger-mugger — Secretly, clandestinely

Hyperion — From Greek mythology: a Titan god identified with the sun

jointress — In joint possession (like co-ruler)

mind's eye — Imagination or memory; a metaphor used since Plato

Niobe — From Greek mythology: a mortal mother of several sons and daughters who boasted of being better than the goddess Leto, who only had one of each. But Leto's children were the gods Apollo and Artemis, who avenged their mother by killing all of Niobe's children. In her sobbing grief, Niobe either turned to stone or was turned to stone, and the stone continually wept tears.

obsequies — Funeral rites, burial ceremony

orisons — Prayers

out of joint — In utter disorder (from carpentry)

quietus — To be done with it, from a legal phrase *quietus est* ("he is quit"); to discharge a debt

quintessence — Fifth essence/element extractable from the other four (water, fire, earth, air)

rapier — Fashionable weapon among gentlemen

requite — Repay

satyr — From Greek mythology: a woodland creature with a goat's characteristics and associated with fertility (or lechery)

springes to catch woodcocks — Proverbial; snares for the easily caught woodcock

toy — Trifle

waterfly — Flighty insect (i.e., a busy trifler)

Sources include notes to the Arden and New Cambridge Shakespeare editions of *Hamlet*; *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion* by David and Ben Crystal; *Shakespeare Lexicon* edited by Alexander Schmidt; *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*; Britannica Encyclopedia; Merriam-Webster Dictionary; and Oxford English Dictionary.

Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities

DOWNLOAD THE SCRIPT
Scan the code or visit https://shakespeare.folger.edu for a free copy of *Hamlet* published by Folger Shakespeare Library.

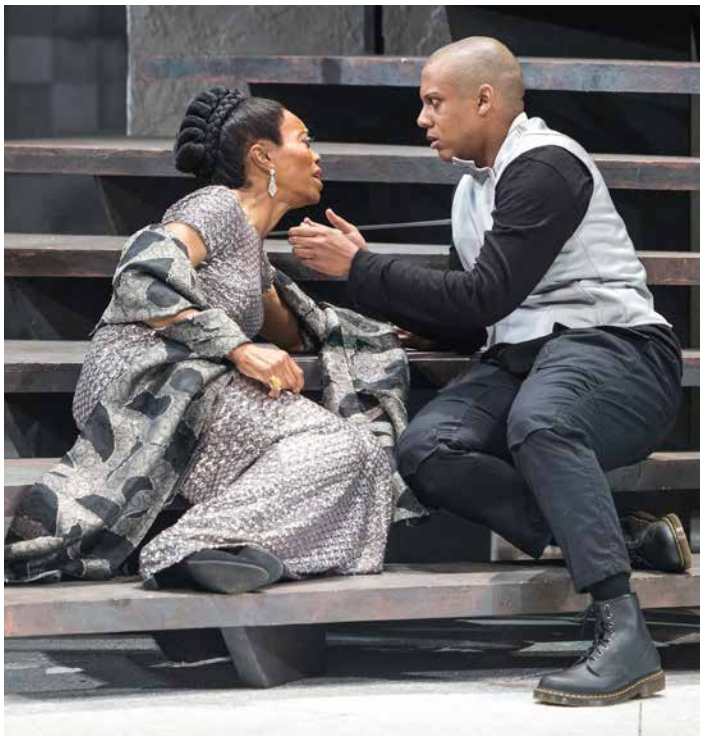


PHOTO: REGINA MARIE WILLIAMS AND MICHAEL BRAUGHER (DAN NORMAN)

***Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare's most famous works and often considered one of the greatest plays in the English language. It has been adapted into other famous media, such as Disney's *The Lion King*, the 1966 Tom Stoppard play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and many novels centered around its main characters. The play's enduring themes of grief, revenge, family, love and taking matters into one's own hands have transcended over 400 years, securing *Hamlet*'s status as one of Shakespeare's most-produced works.**

Before Seeing the Play

THE MELANCHOLY DANE

Prince Hamlet is often nicknamed "The Melancholy Dane," and it's hardly a mystery why. Over the course of the play, Hamlet faces many difficult situations. He is grieving for his father, and his mother swiftly remarries his uncle. Then, his father's ghost appears and tasks him to seek revenge for his "foul and most unnatural murder." Hamlet questions the devotion of his friends, sabotages his romantic relationship and can't seem to commit to the revenge he swore to exact. But Hamlet isn't the only one struggling. Ophelia loses both her romantic relationship and her father, Laertes returns from France to learn his father has been killed and his sister has drowned, Gertrude doesn't know how to help her grieving son and Claudius must live with his own guilt.

Classroom Activity

Assign each corner of the classroom a number from one to four. Read each scenario aloud along with the options. Have the students move to the corner of the room based on the option they would choose for each scenario. If the class hasn't read or seen *Hamlet*, they could then predict which choice gets made in the play.

- **Scenario One:** You are standing guard late at night. A ghost appears, stares at you and walks away. What would you do?
  1. Chase the ghost
  2. Run away to get help
  3. Do nothing
  4. Make your friend investigate

- **Scenario Two:** Your father's ghost returns and tells you to avenge his foul and most unnatural murder! What would you do?
  1. Don't believe the ghost — it could be something evil talking
  2. Decide to go after the person you think killed your father
  3. Ask the ghost some follow-up questions
  4. Spend a long time deciding how to avenge your father's death (like, too long)

- **Scenario Three:** The person you're in love with suddenly starts acting extremely strange. What would you do?
  1. Ask them what's wrong
  2. Avoid them until they sort themselves out
  3. Try to help them with whatever is going on
  4. Go tell your parent

- **Scenario Four:** You are trying to figure out if your uncle killed your father. What would you do?
  1. Ask him
  2. Snoop around his room for clues
  3. Make everyone think you've gone crazy
  4. Hire a theater troupe to recreate the circumstances of the murder, and see how your uncle reacts

Discussion Questions

- Hamlet is known for his indecision — some even say it is his fatal flaw. Have you ever had trouble taking action because you couldn't decide what to do? How did you resolve your inner conflict? Did you ask for help or handle it on your own?
- What does it mean to be crazy? What types of behavior might indicate craziness? Think about Hamlet's circumstances: What behaviors might be a result of his situation? Do you think he is crazy by the end of the play or still pretending?
- Hamlet is prompted by the ghost of his father to avenge his murder. What other revenge stories do you know? In those stories, is the character seeking revenge successful in the end? Do you think Hamlet is successful?
- Ophelia begins the play in love with Hamlet, but she is warned by her brother and father not to believe in Hamlet's professions of love and to guard her heart. What role do men play in the lives and decision-making of young women during the time period of the play? Do you think Hamlet truly loved Ophelia?

After Seeing the Play

SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF DENMARK

Hamlet covers many themes, including revenge, corruption, gender and power, appearance versus reality and taking action (or inaction). Marcellus famously says, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." Many scholars believe this refers to the legitimacy of the nation's new king. However, Claudius is not the only one who is corrupt.

Discussion Questions

- Is Claudius a legitimate king? Why or why not? What do you believe was Claudius' motive in killing his brother and claiming the throne?
- In Act Three, Claudius panics when he sees the performance of the Player King in *The Mousetrap*. Hamlet finds Claudius in prayer, atoning for his crimes. Why do you think Hamlet chooses not to take advantage of this private moment to kill Claudius and avenge his father's death?
- Gertrude immediately remarries after the death of Old Hamlet. Do you think she was disloyal to the former king? Do you think Gertrude was a co-conspirator in Claudius' plot to kill her husband? Do you think Claudius forced her into the marriage? How much agency do you believe Gertrude has in the play?

Classroom Activity

Invite the students to choose a character from the play they believe to be corrupt and have them write a series of journal entries from the perspective of that character — at least one journal entry per act in the play. What

actions have they taken? How are they justifying their actions? Encourage them to include the character's inner thoughts, concerns and opinions.

THE MIND'S EYE

Hamlet contains many beautifully written moments, some of which have inspired thousands of pieces of art. This is a testament to how poetically Shakespeare treated his words and his plays.

Discussion Questions

- Gertrude describes Ophelia's death with phrases like "glassy stream," "fantastic garlands," "weeping brook" and "mermaid-like." Why do you think Shakespeare (via Gertrude) uses such beautiful language to describe a death? Take a moment to Google "weeping brook." Do you agree with Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death?
- In the graveyard scene, Hamlet famously holds a skull — an image and symbol often used to represent the play. But the skull belongs to Yorick, the former court jester. Why do you think Shakespeare had the skull belong to an entertainer?
- In Laertes' speech about Ophelia's madness, he cries, "O heat, dry up my brains! Tears seven times salt, burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye!" What kind of imagery can you pull out of this line? Can you imagine bringing this phrase to life? What would that look like?

Classroom Activity

- Choose a few *Hamlet* excerpts for students to engage with (see suggestions below). They do not need to work with an entire scene — a page of lines is sufficient.
  - Hamlet and the Ghost (Act One, Scene Five)
  - Hamlet and Polonius (Act Two, Scene Two)
  - Hamlet and Ophelia (Act Three, Scene One)
  - Hamlet and Claudius (Act Three, Scene Three)
  - Hamlet and Gertrude (Act Three, Scene Four)
  - Ophelia and Gertrude (Act Four, Scene Five)
  - Hamlet, Horatio and Gravediggers (Act Five, Scene One)
  - Hamlet, Laertes, Claudius and Gertrude (Act Five, Scene Two)
- In small groups, have the students read their assigned scenes to identify the key characters, action and plot points. Who is present? What are they doing? What do they want? What is the mood?
- In their groups, instruct the students to create a tableau, or a frozen stage picture, to depict the action of the scene. A tableau could also be described as a snapshot of a moment in the play without using movement or sound. Each character in the scene should be represented, and students may take the form of scenery or other objects to create specificity in the scene. Characters should freeze in the middle of an action and use their entire body and face to convey the action and tone of the scene.
- Have each group present their tableau to the class, who will guess which scene the group has depicted.
- Optional: Invite the students to offer modifications or feedback to the presenting group to make their scene even more recognizable to an audience.

PHOTOS: THE CAST OF *HAMLET*; MICHAEL BRAUGHER AND DANIEL PETZOLD (DAN NORMAN)

For Further Reading and Understanding

EDITIONS OF *HAMLET*

Hamlet edited by Philip Edwards. The New Cambridge Shakespeare.

Hamlet edited by Harold Jenkins. The Arden Shakespeare.

BOOKS (General Shakespeare Studies)

Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare (two volumes) by Isaac Asimov. Avenel Books, 1970.

All the Words on Stage: A Complete Pronunciation Dictionary for the Plays of William Shakespeare by Louis Scheeder and Shane Ann Younts. Smith and Kraus, 2003.

Lectures on Shakespeare by W.H. Auden. Princeton University Press, 2000.

Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America by Ayanna Thompson. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Prefaces to Shakespeare by Harley Granville-Barker. Princeton University Press, 1947.

Shakespeare's Demonology: A Dictionary by Marion Gibson and Jo Ann Esra. The Arden Shakespeare, 2016.

Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion by David and Ben Crystal. Penguin Books, 2002.

Shakespeare After All by Marjorie Garber. Pantheon, 2004.

Understanding Shakespeare's England: A Companion for the American Reader by Jo McMurtry. Archon Books, 1989.

Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare by Stephen Greenblatt. W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

BOOKS (Fiction Based on the Play)

Gertrude and Claudius by John Updike. Random House, 2001.

Nutshell by Ian McEwan. Nan A. Talese, 2016.

FILMS

Hamlet, directed by Robert Icke, Rhodri Huw and Ilinca Radulian. Starring Andrew Scott as Hamlet, Juliet Stevenson as Gertrude, Angus Wright as Claudius, Jessica Brown Findlay as Ophelia and Peter Wight as Polonius. 2018. 195 minutes.

Hamlet, a film version of the Royal Shakespeare Company production, directed by Gregory Doran. Starring David Tennant as Hamlet, Penny Downie as Gertrude, Patrick Stewart as Claudius, Mariah Gale as Ophelia and Oliver Ford Davies as Polonius. 2009. 120 minutes.

Hamlet, directed by Michael Almereyda. Starring Ethan Hawke as Hamlet, Diane Venora as Gertrude, Kyle MacLachlan as Claudius, Julia Stiles as Ophelia and Bill Murray as Polonius. 2000. 180 minutes.

Hamlet, directed by Kenneth Branagh. Starring Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet, Julie Christie as Gertrude, Derek Jacobi as Claudius, Kate Winslet as Ophelia and Richard Briers as Polonius. 1996. 240 minutes.

Hamlet, directed by Franco Zeffirelli. Starring Mel Gibson as Hamlet, Glenn Close as Gertrude, Alan Bates as Claudius, Helena Bonham Carter as Ophelia and Ian Holm as Polonius. 1990. 135 minutes.

Hamlet, directed by Laurence Olivier. Starring Laurence Olivier as Hamlet, Eileen Herlie as Gertrude, Basil Sydney as Claudius, Jean Simmons as Ophelia and Felix Aylmer as Polonius. 1948. 168 minutes.

PODCASTS

Shakespeare Unlimited. A biweekly podcast produced by the Folger Shakespeare Library that features interviews with Shakespeare experts on topics ranging from adapting Shakespeare to what Elizabethans ate to discussions about current productions. Recent episodes include "Ian McKellen on Playing Hamlet," "How Shakespeare Thought About the Mind" and "Pamela Hutchinson on Asta Nielsen's *Hamlet*."

www.folger.edu/podcasts/shakespeare-unlimited

Such Stuff. A now-completed podcast by Shakespeare's Globe in London that explores behind-the-scenes stories at the Globe and the transformative impact of Shakespeare on the world.

www.shakespearesglobe.com/such-stuff-podcast

WEBSITES

Folger Shakespeare Library. A wealth of resources, including lesson plans, study guides and interactive activities.

www.folger.edu

Internet Shakespeare Editions. A collection of materials on Shakespeare and his plays, including an extensive archive of productions and production materials.

internetshakespeare.uvic.ca

Shakespeare Uncovered. A series that goes in-depth into one play per episode. A host with a personal tie to the play investigates the text and its interpretations and visits companies in rehearsal and in performance. Episodes may be available online. *Hamlet* was included in the first season hosted by actor David Tennant. (The episode is not available for streaming but may be available on DVD.)

www.pbs.org/wnet/shakespeare-uncovered

MIT Shakespeare: The Complete Works Online

globalshakespeares.mit.edu/plays

PlayShakespeare.com: The Ultimate Free Shakespeare Resource. After registration, receive access to the full texts of the plays, synopses, the First Folio and study aids. An accompanying smartphone app features full texts of the plays.

www.playshakespeare.com