Hamlet is one of the central texts of Western civilization, and Hamlet is the most self-conscious literary figure ever created. A. C. Bradley commented that Hamlet is the only Shakespearean character who could have written Shakespeare's plays. His most famous soliloquy explores the power of the mind to overcome mortality, juxtaposing human unbounded imagination—"how infinite in faculties" (2.2.304)—with the physical limitations of the flesh. That contrast informs the entire play. Gertrude speaks of Ophelia's floating "mermaid-like" until she sinks "to muddy death" (4.7.176, 183). The Player King observes, "Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own" (3.2.208). Therein lies the human triumph and tragedy: Infinite mind trapped in finite being.

The play's own infinitude has prompted more discussion than any other piece of secular literature. In 1992 alone, 479 books and articles were written about it. It is a work that inspires superlatives. In Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, Harold Bloom calls Hamlet "the most intelligent character in all of literature" and "the most aware and knowing figure ever conceived" (388, 404). According to Roland Mushat Frye, Hamlet displays "the finest mind of any literary character in our tradition"; the prince is "Shakespeare's most interesting [and] his most admirable protagonist" (177, 280). For Harry Levin, the work is "the most problematic play ever written by Shakespeare or any other playwright" (105).

William Wordsworth wrote that Shakespeare unlocked his heart in his sonnets, but the playwright may have been even more autobiographical in this play. Great artists, however, do not express only themselves; they express us, as well. Hamlet is not just Shakespeare but everyone. C. S. Lewis observed:

I believe that we read Hamlet's speeches with interest chiefly because they describe so well a certain spiritual region through which most of
us have passed and anyone in his circumstances 
might be expected to pass, rather than because 
of our concern to understand how and why 
this particular man entered it (15).

Hamlet says that acting should "hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (3.2.22), and his play reflects the image of each 
other. Emily Dickinson wryly maintained: "Hamlet wavered for all of us". Samuel Taylor Coleridge noted: "I have a 
smack of Hamlet myself if I may say so" (volume 6, 285). William Hazlitt wrote: "It is we who are Hamlet" (260).

Harold C. Goddard wrote that the various spectators of The Murder of Gonzago, the play within the play, see the piece 
differently depending on their perspectives (331). Perspective informs much of Renaissance art, as famously exemplified 
Hans Holbein's Ambassadors, in which the skull in the painting is discernible only from a particular, eccentric angle. 
Hamlet, too, serves as a study in perspective and hence inspires so much critical debate. The title character embodies all 
that Shakespeare had created up to 1600: the poetic sensibility and introspection of Richard II, the skeptical wit of Falstaff, Brutus's idealism, Jaques's melancholy, Prince Hal's charm, and Hotspur's devotion to honor. Hamlet also 
anticipates Shakespeare's future protagonists, such as Othello, with his nobility, love, and jealousy, and Prospero, with his 
desire for revenge and love of stagecraft. Hamlet epitomizes the complexities, the vices and virtues of Shakespeare's 
characters, Shakespeare's audiences, and, perhaps, Shakespeare himself.

Background

The story of Hamlet dates from at least the 1100s. At the end of the 12th century, Archbishop Absalon of Lund asked 
Saxo Grammaticus to write the history of the Danes. The result was his Historiae Danicae, first printed in 1514. Hamlet —here called Amleth—appears in Books 3 and 4.

According to this account, the brothers Horwendil and Feng are joint governors of Jutland, serving under the Danish king Rorik. Horwendil is married to Rorik's daughter, Gerutha, and they have a son, Amleth. Feng privately kills Horwendil, claiming that he acted to protect Gerutha, whom he then marries.

Amleth feigns madness to survive until he can avenge his father's death; in fact, the name Amleth means "foolish" or 
"stupid." This story of Amleth may owe something to the Roman historian Livy, who wrote that Lucius Junius Brutus, 
nephew of King Tarquin, feigned stupidity (Brutus, like Amleth, means "stupid") until he could expel the ruler and 
establish the Roman Republic.

Amleth's uncle suspects that his nephew may have merely assumed an antic disposition, so he tests him with a woman. If 
Amleth has sex with her, as any sane Danish man would, then Feng will know that the young man is only pretending to be 
mad. The woman Feng chooses turns out to have known Amleth when they were children. Amleth has sex with her but 
asks her to deny that he did so. Hence, when Amleth claims that he has slept with her, no one believes him. One of Feng's 
courtiers spies on a conversation between Amleth and Gerutha. Amleth discovers him, kills him, chops him up, and feeds 
him to the pigs.

Feng does not know what has become of his spy, but he still sends his nephew to England, a Danish tributary, in the 
company of two men bearing an order to the English king to kill Amleth. During the journey, Amleth changes the 
commission to order the immediate death of his two companions. Also, according to this altered document, the English 
king is to give his daughter to Amleth as his wife.

At the end of a year, Amleth returns to Denmark, burns down Feng's palace, kills Feng with Feng's own sword, and 
becomes ruler. Subsequently, Amleth marries the queen of Scotland, in addition to the English princess. Before Amleth 
leaves for his last battle, his second wife pledges eternal fidelity to his memory, but she quickly marries Amleth's killer.

François de Belleforest, in volume five of his Histoires tragiques (1570), alters this account in some ways. Here Fengon 
kills his brother openly, though with the same pretext. In Belleforest's account, Fengon and Geruth were lovers while 
Horwendil still lived. Geruth, however, denies any involvement with Horwendil's death, promises not to reveal Amleth's 
sanity, and wishes him success in avenging Horwendil's murder.

Sometime in the late 1580s, this story came to the English stage. In the preface to Robert Greene's romance Menaphon 
(1589), "To the Gentlemen Students of Both Universities," Thomas Nashe described the play in this passage: "yet English
Seneca [Seneca His Tenne Tragedies was published in 1581, edited by Thomas Newton] read by Candlelight yields many good sentences, as Blood is a beggar, and so forth; and if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, he will afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls of tragicall speeches" (315). This play, known as the Ur-Hamlet, held the stage for some years. In June 1594 it was performed at Newington Butts outside London; both troupes, the Lord Admiral's Men and Shakespeare's Lord Chamberlain's Men, shared this venue. Thomas Lodge referred to this work in his 1596 Wit's Miserie, in which he writes of a devil who looks "as pale as the visard of the ghost which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster-wife, Hamlet, revenge." The Theatre was where the Lord Chamberlain's Men regularly performed in the mid-1590s.

The text of the Ur-Hamlet does not survive, nor is its authorship known. Bloom argues in Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human that Shakespeare himself wrote the piece. Nashe's comments imply that it was written by Thomas Kyd, author of one of the most famous and popular revenge tragedies of the period, The Spanish Tragedy (ca. 1589). Geoffrey Bullough found 20 parallels between Kyd's play and Shakespeare's Hamlet. Among these are a ghost calling for revenge, a secret crime that must be confirmed, an avenger who feigns madness and a woman who in fact goes mad, revenge delayed and an avenger who berates himself for procrastination, the avenger's comments on the theater, the use of a play within a play, and a character named Horatio (16–17). It seems likely that Shakespeare inherited these elements from the Ur-Hamlet, though he could have borrowed them from The Spanish Tragedy or Seneca's works themselves.

Hamlet draws on classical as well as Scandinavian literature. The Roman emperor Claudius was the second husband of Agrippina, who was Claudius's niece. Nero thus became Claudius's great-nephew and stepson. Agrippina poisoned Claudius to ensure the succession of Nero to the throne; Nero later killed his mother. On his way to visit his mother after The Murder of Gonzago, Hamlet declares: "let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom, / ... / I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (3.2.393–396). Virgil influenced the play. The speech that the First Player delivers in Act II, Scene 2 is based on Aeneas's account of the fall of Troy in Book 2 of the Aeneid. Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, killed Priam to avenge the death of his father. The concluding lines of the player's speech are a fair rendition of the Aeneid's "sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt" (1.462). Hamlet's promise to remember the ghost "whiles memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe" (1.5.96–97) is a translation of Aeneas's promise to Dido to remember her "dum memor ipse mei" (Aeneid, 4.336). The First Player's speech also recalls Christopher Marlowe and Nashe's Dido, Queen of Carthage (1594). In both, Priam is knocked down by the wind from the sword of Pyrrhus. Hamlet's "To be or not to be" (3.1.55) translates Aristotle's "on kai me on," probably by way of the first scene of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus (performed ca. 1593; printed in 1604), though both Abraham Fraunce's The True History of Richard the Third (ca. 1594–97), John Marston's Antonio's Revenge (ca. 1600), George Chapman's Bussy D'Ambois (ca. 1604), and Cyril Touneur's The Revenger's Tragedy (1606–07).

Hamlet's speech "What a piece of work is a man" (2.2.303–307) echoes Pico della Mirandola's Oration on the Dignity of Man (1486). When Hamlet urges Lucianus to "leave thy damnable faces and begin / Come, the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge" (3.2.253–254), he is repeating (or parodying) a line from The True History of Richard the Third, a source for Shakespeare's play about that king: "The screeking Raven sits croaking for revenge." Hamlet's observation that "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.219–220) recalls Matthew 10:29: "Are not two sparrows sold / For a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father." In the same speech, Hamlet declares, "the readiness is all" (5.2.222), perhaps referring to Matthew 24:44, "Therefore be ye ready: for in the hour that ye think not, wil the sonne of man come." More generally, revenge tragedy was popular on the Elizabethan stage. In addition to Kyd's Spanish Tragedy, examples include Marlowe's The Jew of Malta (1589–90), Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany (ca. 1594–97), John Marston's Antonio's Revenge (ca. 1600), George Chapman's Bussy D'Ambois (ca. 1604), and Cyril Touneur's The Revenger's Tragedy (1606–07).

Historical events would have heightened interest in such works and particularly in the story of Hamlet. In 1538, the duke of Urbino was killed by a barber-surgeon, bribed by two of the duke's relatives, who poured poisoned lotion in his ears. Titian painted a portrait of the duke, frequently reproduced in engravings, showing him in full armor with his visor up, his hair curled, and his beard grizzled. He was the model for the ghost that Bernardo, Marcellus, and Horatio give to Hamlet in Act I, Scene 2. The court of Urbino would have been familiar to Elizabethans through Baldassare Castiglione's Il Cortegiano (translated to English in 1561); Hamlet is modeled on Castiglione's ideal courtier. Closer in time and space to Shakespeare's London, in 1567, James Hepburn, earl of Bothwell, lover of Mary, Queen of Scots, killed her second husband, Henry Darnley, and then married the queen three months later. Darnley's parents commissioned Livinus de Vogelaere to paint a memorial urging Darnley's son, James VI of Scotland, to avenge his father's death. James married Anne of Denmark, and Bullough notes correlations between revivals of the Ur-Hamlet and notable events in the Scottish court. James's first son was born in February 1594; Ur-Hamlet was staged in June. A daughter, Elizabeth, was born to him.
Polonius may have been modeled on William Cecil, first baron Burghley, Elizabeth's chief adviser, noted for prolixity, and Hamlet might be drawn at least in part from Cecil's chief rival, Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex. Essex and the third earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare dedicated Venus and Adonis (1593) and The Rape of Lucrece (1594), were allies; Shakespeare's only direct reference to contemporary events praises Essex in the Chorus before Act V of Henry V (1599). On the eve of Essex's uprising against Elizabeth, the earl arranged for Shakespeare's company to perform Richard II, showing the deposition of a king. Ophelia calls Hamlet "Th' expectation and the rose of the fair state" (3.1.152). John Hayward dedicated The First Part of the Life and Reign of King Henry IV (1599) to Essex. The dedication, in Latin, reads "You are great in hope, greater in the expectation of future time." Upon his unauthorized return from Ireland in September 1599, Essex broke into Elizabeth's closet, as Hamlet visits Ophelia's. In a possible example of life's imitating art, when Essex was executed in February 1601, he wore all black.

The War of the Theatres, in which children's acting companies threatened their adult counterparts in the summer of 1601, is discussed in the First Folio version of the play. This contemporary issue is referenced in a scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in an obvious effort to lampoon the controversy. Shakespeare also drew on his own experiences in creating this work. In December 1579, a Katherine Hamlet drowned in the Avon near Stratford, and in 1596, Shakespeare's 11-year-old son, Hamnet (a variant of Hamlet) died. This play could be seen as living monument to him.

Date and Text of the Play

In his copy of the 1598 edition of Geoffrey Chaucer's works, Gabriel Harvey wrote, "The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeares Venus, & Adonis: but his Lucrece, & his tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke, have it in them, to please the wiser sort." This statement is part of a longer note that includes a reference to the earl of Essex, who apparently is still alive. Essex was executed in February 1601, so the play appears to have been produced before early 1601. Francis Meres's 1598 Palladis Tamia does not mention the work in his list of Shakespeare's plays. In Hamlet, Polonius says that in college he played Julius Caesar and was killed by Brutus in the Capitol (3.2.102–103), an allusion to Shakespeare's play on this subject, which appeared in 1599. The reference is an in-joke: John Heminge played both Caesar and Polonius, while Richard Burbage played both Brutus and Hamlet. Burbage, in these roles, therefore, stabbed Heminge in both plays. Hamlet likely was first staged about 1600, with the reference to the War of the Theatres added in 1601.

On July 26, 1602, John Roberts entered in the Stationers' Register "A booke called the Revenge of Hamlett Prince Denmarke as yt was latelie Acted by the Lo: Chamberleyne his servants." The first version of the play appeared in print the next year. Since its title page states the work was "acted by his Highnesse seruants," it must have been printed after May 19, 1603, the day the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men (with James VI's ascension to the English throne as James I). Roberts had nothing to do with this edition. It was printed by the shady Valentine Simmes for Nicholas Ling and John Trundle. This version, which contains some 2,200 lines, is known in only two copies, the first of which was found by Sir Henry Bunbury in 1823 and the other acquired (or perhaps stolen from his father-in-law, the bibliomaniac Sir Thomas Phillipps) by James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps in 1856. One copy now resides in the British Library, the other at the Huntington Library.

The text of this version is carelessly printed, and it is evidently a memorial reconstruction by the actor who played Marcellus and perhaps Lucianus and Voltemand. The first act, the only one in which Marcellus appears, is less garbled than the remainder of the play. Despite its flaws, though, this particular text, known as Q1, has been staged successfully in modern times, first by William Poel at St. George's Hall in 1881 and more recently in 1982 at University College, Swansea, and in 1985 at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond. The text is clearly based on a performed work, and some of its stage directions are unique. It names Polonius Corambis and Reynaldo Montano. The nunnerly scene, now in Act III, Scene 1, is brought forward (perhaps more logically) to Act II, Scene 2. A German version of the play, Der Bestrafte Brudermord (Fratricide revenged), acted in the early 1600s, shares these elements.

In 1604, Roberts printed a second quarto, nearly twice as long as Q1, at some 3,800 lines. The title page describes Q2 as "Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppie." This edition was apparently printed from Shakespeare's foul papers, his first draft, with some reliance on Q1 for the first act. The title page does not claim that this version was ever acted, and many scholars believe that it would have been too long to stage, requiring some five hours. It contains some 220 lines that do not appear elsewhere.
The third important text of the play, printed in the First Folio (1623), is known as F. It is shorter than Q2 by about 130 lines, since 220 lines from Q2 are absent, but 70 new lines appear only here. F’s stage directions suggest that it also was an acting version, though it is hardly shorter than Q2. All the cuts that F makes from Q2 are also made in Q1, supporting the view that Q1 derives from actual performance.

Neither quarto marks act and scene divisions; F notes only Act I, Scenes 1–3 and Act II, Scene 2. Most modern editions conflate Q2 and F, making Shakespeare’s longest play even longer and introducing some added difficulties to an already complicated work. For example, in Act V, Scene 2, Q2 introduces a lord who tells Hamlet that Gertrude suggests the prince "use some gentle entertainment to Laertes" to patch up their quarrel in the graveyard (5.2.206–207). In F, this lord does not appear, but Hamlet regrets his behavior to Laertes and promises to "court his favors" (5.2.78). This pledge is absent in Q2. The Riverside edition, a conflated text, includes both speeches and, so, offers two differing motivations for Hamlet’s apology to Laertes before the duel.

**Synopsis**

**Brief Synopsis**

Thirty years before the play opens, on the very day that young Hamlet was born, Old Hamlet, king of Denmark, killed Old Fortinbras, king of Norway, in single combat and thereby won from him all the lands that the vanquished ruler had conquered. Old Hamlet has died recently, supposedly of a snake bite, and young Fortinbras has taken advantage of the occasion to assemble an army to recapture the lands his father lost.

Denmark therefore is on a war footing. As the play begins, Bernardo and Marcellus relieve Francisco, who has been guarding the battlements of the castle of Elsinore. They have brought with them the scholar Horatio because they have seen a ghost who resembles Old Hamlet. They want Horatio to confirm their sighting and speak to the spirit. Horatio expresses skepticism, but his doubts fade when the ghost appears. It will not, however, speak to him. The men resolve to inform young Hamlet of what they have seen. They believe that the ghost will speak to him.

The next day, King Claudius, who has succeeded to his brother's throne and married his brother's wife, Gertrude, holds court. He dispatches Voltemand and Cornelius to Norway to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the dispute between that country and his, and he grants permission to Laertes, son of the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius, to return to his studies in Paris. Claudius and Gertrude urge Hamlet to abandon his mourning for his father and his plans to return to Wittenberg University.

Hamlet's caustic comments reveal his hatred for Claudius, but he agrees to obey his mother. After the court departs, Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio tell Hamlet about the ghost. Hamlet agrees to join them on the battlements that night.

In another part of the castle, Laertes, preparing to return to Paris, warns his sister, Ophelia, not to believe Hamlet's professions of love for her. Their father echoes this advice and forbids her to see the prince.

That night, the ghost of Old Hamlet appears again. Leading Hamlet away, he reveals that Claudius killed him. The ghost demands revenge but insists that Hamlet leave Gertrude to her conscience.

Two months elapse between the first and second acts. Hamlet has been acting strangely but has not avenged his father's death. When Ophelia tells Polonius that a disheveled Hamlet has visited her in her bedroom and frightened her with his odd manner, Polonius believes that the young man has gone mad for Ophelia's love and hastens to tell the king.

After Voltemand and Cornelius report the successful conclusion of their mission, Polonius tells Claudius about Hamlet's love madness, which he and the king will test further. Meanwhile, Claudius has summoned to court two of Hamlet's former friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in the hope that they will learn the cause of the prince's curious behavior. Hamlet easily discovers their intent and deflects their inquiries, but he is delighted with their news that a troupe of players has arrived. Hamlet will use the actors to determine whether the ghost spoke the truth.

The next day, Polonius and Claudius stage a meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet to test Polonius's theory. Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia explodes the notion. That night, the visiting actors perform *The Murder of Gonzago*, which depicts the murder of a king in the manner Old Hamlet claims he was killed. When Claudius sees the staged murder, he rushes from the performance.
Gertrude summons Hamlet to her room. On his way there, Hamlet encounters Claudius at prayer. Hamlet could kill the king but refrains, claiming that he wants to be certain that Claudius's soul will be damned.

In his interview with Gertrude, Hamlet condemns her remarriage. Fearing violence, she calls for help. Polonius, who has been spying on the conversation from behind a curtain, joins her cries, thus exposing himself. Hamlet, thinking that the voice is that of Claudius, runs his sword through the tapestry and kills the Lord Chamberlain.

Claudius had already resolved to send Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He puts this plan into effect immediately. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz bear letters ordering the English king to kill Hamlet.

Her father's death drives Ophelia to madness and her brother, Laertes, to rage. Intent on revenge, he bursts into the castle. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet alone is responsible, and Laertes resolves to kill the prince, a resolution strengthened by the news that Ophelia has drowned herself.

Hamlet returns to Denmark. In a graveyard, he tells Horatio of substituting Claudius's commission with his own, which orders the instant execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He also explains how he was captured by pirates and returned to Denmark. Ophelia's funeral procession enters. As she is laid in the grave, Laertes leaps in after her. Hamlet does so as well, and the two scuffle before separating.

That afternoon, Claudius stages a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. The latter plans to kill Hamlet with an unbated, poisoned foil, and Claudius, who has approved the scheme, will provide a poisoned cup of wine for Hamlet to drink. In the duel, Hamlet and Laertes mortally wound each other. The queen drinks from the poisoned cup and dies, and Hamlet kills Claudius before expiring himself. At the end of the play, Fortinbras arrives with his army to claim the Danish throne.

**Act I, Scene 1**

The play opens on a cold winter's night. A lone sentinel, Francisco, stands guard on the battlements of the castle at Elsinore, Denmark. As the clock strikes 12, Bernardo enters to relieve him. Francisco reports that he has had a quiet watch. He departs as Marcellus and Horatio enter.

Twice before, Bernardo and Marcellus have seen a ghost. Horatio asks whether the Ghost has appeared again. Bernardo says it has not but that it appeared before just at this hour. As Bernardo is speaking, the apparition materializes in the shape of Old Hamlet, the recently deceased Danish king. Horatio speaks to it, but it departs silently.

After the men discuss the Ghost, Marcellus asks why the country is preparing for war. Horatio replies that years ago, Old Hamlet defeated Old Fortinbras, king of Norway, in single combat, thereby winning all the lands that the latter had conquered. Now young Fortinbras, the dead Norwegian king's son, has assembled an army to retake those lost territories.

The Ghost reappears, and Horatio again addresses it. It seems about to respond when a cock crows; it then vanishes. The men agree to inform young Hamlet of what they have seen. The Ghost, Horatio says, surely will speak to his own son.

**Act I, Scene 2**

In the morning, inside the castle, the court assembles, led by King Claudius and Queen Gertrude, with young Hamlet and sundry others bringing up the rear. Claudius thanks his courtiers for supporting his decision to marry his dead brother's wife. He then addresses the Norwegian threat, announcing that he has written to that country's aged, ailing king to restrain his nephew, Fortinbras. Cornelius and Voltemand are dispatched to deliver this letter.

Claudius grants permission to Laertes, son of Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, to return to his studies in Paris. Finally, the king turns to Hamlet. Claudius and Gertrude urge him to cease mourning for Old Hamlet and to abandon his plan to return to the university at Wittenberg. Hamlet replies that he will obey his mother. Ignoring Hamlet's slight to him, Claudius expresses satisfaction with this answer.

The court departs, leaving Hamlet alone to deliver his first soliloquy, a lament for his mother's hasty remarriage. Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo enter to report their sighting of the Ghost. Hamlet agrees to accompany them that night to watch on the battlements and asks them to keep their sighting secret.
Act I, Scene 3

In Polonius's apartment in the castle, Laertes prepares to return to France. He warns his sister, Ophelia, not to trust Hamlet's professions of love because even if they are sincere, he is not free to choose his bride: He will have to marry for reasons of state. Polonius arrives. He urges Laertes to make haste to the ship and then delays him with a series of wise saws and modern instances. At last effecting his departure, Laertes urges Ophelia to remember his advice.

What advice is that, Polonius asks. Something about Hamlet, she replies. Polonius tells her that he, too, distrusts Hamlet's claim that he loves Ophelia and, despite Ophelia's protestations, orders her not to see the prince again. She submits to his command.

Act I, Scene 4

On the battlements of Elsinore that night, Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus hear a flourish of trumpets and the report of cannon. To Horatio's query about the meaning of these noises, Hamlet replies that they customarily accompany the king's drinking. Just as Hamlet concludes his explanation, the Ghost appears. It responds to Hamlet's address by silently summoning him to a secluded spot. Despite his friends' opposition, Hamlet goes with him.

Act I, Scene 5

Alone with Hamlet, the Ghost reveals himself to be the dead king's spirit, condemned to wander the nights and spend his days in Purgatory. He declares that while napping in his orchard, he was poisoned by Claudius, and he urges young Hamlet to avenge his murder. At the same time, Hamlet is not to corrupt his thoughts or harm Gertrude, despite her adultery. As dawn breaks, the Ghost fades while enjoining his son to remember him.

Hamlet promises that he will heed his dead father's words. Horatio and Marcellus join him and ask what the Ghost said. Hamlet evades their questioning but insists they swear not to tell anyone what has happened. The Ghost echoes this request. Hamlet also makes them promise not to expose him should he choose to feign madness. They agree and go off together.

Act II, Scene 1

Two months after the events shown in the first act, Polonius gives Reynaldo letters and money for Laertes, along with instructions to spy on the young man to discover how he is behaving in Paris. Reynaldo is not, however, to interfere with Laertes' activities.

Reynaldo leaves as Ophelia enters. She reports that as she was sewing in her room, Hamlet, disheveled, pale, and trembling, entered. He took her by the wrist, held her, and stared at her for a long time. Then, shaking her arm, he nodded thrice, sighed, released her, and, with his eyes fixed on her, departed. Polonius ascribes Hamlet's plight to Ophelia's rejection and resolves to inform the king of this occurrence.

Act II, Scene 2

In another part of the castle, Claudius and Gertrude welcome Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, two of Hamlet's former friends, whom the king has summoned to Elsinore to discover the cause of Hamlet's odd behavior. When they go off, Polonius enters to report the return of Cornelius and Voltemand. He adds that he knows the cause of Hamlet's distraction, which he will reveal after the king's ambassadors report their news.

He ushers in the two men. Voltemand announces their success: Old Norway has rebuked Fortinbras, who now intends to direct his army against Poland. The young warrior seeks permission to march peacefully through Denmark.

Promising to consider this request, Claudius dismisses the ambassadors. Polonius now launches into a long disquisition, the burden of which is that Hamlet's madness stems from his thwarted love for Ophelia. To test this theory, Polonius will arrange a meeting between his daughter and the prince, which he and Claudius will secretly observe.
Hamlet enters reading a book. Polonius strikes up a conversation in which Hamlet's speeches are at once rambling and astute. Polonius departs, to be replaced by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Their meeting begins pleasantly, but Hamlet quickly recognizes that Claudius has engaged them to spy on him to discover the cause of his discontent. They conclude that it derives from his ambition to be king.

They inform Hamlet that a troupe of actors has just reached the castle. Polonius enters to repeat this information, followed by the actors themselves. Hamlet welcomes them and asks for a sample of their wares, a speech about Pyrrhus's killing of Priam. The actor becomes so emotionally wrought as he delivers the lines that Polonius stops him. As the actors retire, Hamlet takes the speaker aside to ask whether the next night the company can perform *The Murder of Gonzago*, with certain additions Hamlet will provide. The actor assures him they can undertake it.

Alone, Hamlet again soliloquizes, chastising himself for delaying his revenge. Yet, he states that the Ghost might be a demon seeking to damn him. Hamlet will use *The Murder of Gonzago* to determine Claudius's guilt and the Ghost's veracity.

**Act III, Scene 1**

The next day, Claudius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern gather to discuss Hamlet. The spies report that they have learned nothing but inform the royal couple that Hamlet has arranged a play for their amusement that evening.

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Gertrude leave. Claudius and Polonius now put their plan into practice to test the latter's theory that Hamlet's madness stems from "the pangs of despis'd love" (71). Polonius stations Ophelia where Hamlet, having been summoned, will meet her, while her father and the king spy on them from behind a curtain.

Hamlet enters and delivers his "To be or not to be" soliloquy. As he concludes his speech, he notices Ophelia. She attempts to return the love tokens Hamlet had given her. He refuses them and verbally assaul ts her, shouting that she should withdraw to a nunnery. As he departs, he makes a thinly veiled threat against Claudius.

Lamenting Hamlet's madness, Ophelia withdraws. Claudius and Polonius emerge from hiding. The king is convinced that whatever the cause of Hamlet's mad behavior, love is not it. He resolves to send Hamlet to England to get him out of the kingdom. Polonius still thinks that thwarted love began Hamlet's transformation. The Lord Chamberlain suggests that after the play, Gertrude should try to ferret out the source of Hamlet's discontent, while he, again in hiding, spies on their conversation.

**Act III, Scene 2**

As the players prepare to present *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet instructs them in the art of acting. They then go off to get ready, and Horatio enters. Hamlet tells his friend how much he admires the man's stoicism. He then enjoins Horatio to mark Claudius's reaction to the evening's entertainment, one scene of which will reproduce the assassination of Old Hamlet as the Ghost described it. If Claudius does not blench, then Hamlet will know that the Ghost is demonic.

The court enters. Hamlet converses caustically with Claudius and Polonius. When Gertrude asks Hamlet to sit by her, he replies that he prefers the company of Ophelia, whom he then taunts with sexual innuendoes.

The play begins. Following a dumb show, the Player King and Player Queen enter. He observes that he is aging and soon will die, after which his queen perhaps will remarry. She professes her eternal love for him and pledges never to take another husband. When the Player King reflects that people change their minds, she vows that she will not. The Player King then lies down for a nap.

Claudius, growing uneasy, asks Hamlet whether the play contains anything offensive. Hamlet replies that since he and the king have clear consciences, they have no reason to worry. The play resumes with the entrance of Lucianus, whom Hamlet identifies as the Player King's nephew. As Lucianus pours poison into the king's ear, Hamlet says that the murderer will soon gain the love of the dead man's wife.

Furious, Claudius rises and leaves, followed by the rest of the court, leaving Hamlet and Horatio behind. Hamlet rejoices at the success of his plot. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter to report that the king is enraged and that Gertrude wants to see him in her room. Hamlet condemns the king's agents for spying on him. Polonius joins the group to summon Hamlet.
to Gertrude. After teasing the old man, Hamlet replies that he will go to her. On his way to her room, Hamlet promises himself that he will speak harshly to her but will eschew violence.

**Act III, Scene 3**

Claudius tells Guildenstern and Rosencrantz that Hamlet is to be sent to England in their company forthwith. When they depart, Polonius passes through to say that he is on his way to Gertrude's chamber.

Alone, Claudius confesses his guilt. He considers praying but acknowledges that he cannot expect to be forgiven as long as he retains the fruits of his sin: his crown and queen. Still, he will try what prayer can do.

As he kneels in devotion, Hamlet enters. The prince recognizes that here is the perfect opportunity to dispatch Claudius. Then he considers that if Claudius dies while praying, his soul will go straight to heaven, whereas Hamlet's father, having died without extreme unction, is suffering in Purgatory. Hamlet sheathes his sword, determined to wait until he can kill the king while engaged in an activity that will assure Claudius's damnation. After Hamlet departs, Claudius rises, admitting that his supplications are futile.

**Act III, Scene 4**

In Gertrude's apartment, Polonius urges the queen to reprimand Hamlet; he then hides behind a tapestry. Hamlet enters and begins arguing with his mother. She tries to leave, but he prevents her. She calls for help, and Polonius joins in her cries, thereby exposing his presence. Hamlet, thinking that Claudius is concealed in the room, thrusts his sword through the tapestry, killing the eavesdropper.

Undaunted by this murder, Hamlet rebukes Gertrude for marrying Claudius. As he is railing against the couple, the Ghost materializes to remind Hamlet of his mission and to urge him to comfort Gertrude. The Ghost then vanishes. Gertrude, who cannot see or hear the Ghost, believes that Hamlet is truly mad. Hamlet assures her that he is as sane as she. He implores her to stop sleeping with Claudius and to conceal from the king that Hamlet is only pretending to be mad.

Gertrude promises to keep her son's secret safe. He reminds her that he must leave for England, accompanied by Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, whom he does not trust and whose plot he will undermine. He then leaves, dragging Polonius.

**Act IV, Scene 1**

Claudius asks Gertrude about Hamlet. She replies that her son is mad, and in his madness, he has killed Polonius. Claudius recognize himself as the intended victim and announces that Hamlet will be sent to England at sunrise. He dispatches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet and Polonius. Claudius leaves with Gertrude to consider how he can escape blame for the old man's death.

**Act IV, Scene 2**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet and inquire as to the whereabouts of Polonius's body. Hamlet responds by warning them that Claudius will use and then discard them. They again ask about the corpse. Hamlet offers a riddling answer and runs off, pursued by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

**Act IV, Scene 3**

Rosencrantz tells Claudius that Hamlet has been apprehended, but the prince has not revealed the location of the body. Hamlet enters in the custody of Guildenstern. After taunting Claudius, Hamlet tells him where to find Polonius. Claudius dispatches Hamlet to England with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz. Alone, the king reveals that his agents bear letters to the king of England ordering the immediate execution of Hamlet.

**Act IV, Scene 4**
As Hamlet goes to his ship, Fortinbras passes by and sends a captain to Claudius to request peaceful passage through Denmark for the Norwegian army. Hamlet meets the captain and asks about the soldiers. The two discuss Fortinbras's impending attack on a worthless piece of Polish territory. Alone, Hamlet delivers his final soliloquy, in which he again condemns himself for delaying his revenge and resolves that henceforth his thoughts will be bloody.

**Act IV, Scene 5**

Gertrude, distraught, initially refuses to see the mad Ophelia, but Horatio counsels her to do so. The girl enters and sings about her dead father and then her lost lover, Hamlet. As she leaves, she vows to inform Laertes about recent events.

Laertes already knows about his father's death. With a band of supporters he breaks into the royal chambers. Dismissing his followers, Laertes demands his father of Claudius. Gertrude tries to hold Laertes back, but Claudius insists that the young man be allowed to ask whatever he wants.

Ophelia reenters, carrying various herbs and again singing about her father. She aptly distributes her plants and then, with another song, departs. Claudius invites Laertes to go with him to discuss his (Laertes') grievances.

**Act IV, Scene 6**

A sailor gives Horatio a letter from Hamlet announcing the prince's return to Denmark.

**Act IV, Scene 7**

Claudius has convinced Laertes that Hamlet alone is to blame for Polonius's death. When a messenger gives Claudius letters reporting Hamlet's return, the king and Laertes plot the prince's death. Claudius will arrange a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. The latter will use an unblunted foil, and with it he will kill his opponent. Laertes declares that he will poison the tip, and Claudius adds that he will poison a cup of wine for Hamlet to drink during the bout. Just as the plotters complete their plans, Gertrude enters to announce the drowning of Ophelia.

**Act V, Scene 1**

Two gravediggers, who are preparing for Ophelia's interment, debate whether she deserves burial in sanctified ground. They express their discontent that the gentry enjoy greater freedom to kill themselves than ordinary folk are allowed. After the First Gravedigger sends his partner to fetch some liquor, Hamlet and Horatio enter and watch as the First Gravedigger shovels skulls out of the ground (graves were reused in Renaissance England). Hamlet asks him whose grave he is digging. The gravedigger replies equivocally and then shows the prince the skull of Yorick, Old Hamlet's jester. Holding the skull, Hamlet reflects on mortality.

A funeral possession enters the cemetery. Hamlet and Horatio hide. Laertes protests the abridged burial rites accorded his sister, thereby informing Hamlet whose grave was being dug. As Ophelia is being laid in the ground, Laertes leaps into the grave and asks to be buried with her. Hamlet, emerging from concealment, joins him, and the two scuffle. Gertrude seeks to part them, and Hamlet departs. Claudius assures Laertes that he will immediately put their plot into practice.

**Act V, Scene 2**

Hamlet tells Horatio how on his voyage to England he learned of Claudius's plot to have him beheaded and how he changed the commission to order the immediate execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, instead.

Oscric, a court fop, enters and in his own overblown idiom, states that Claudius has laid a wager on a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes and would like for the match to occur at once. Hamlet accepts the challenge, though he tells Horatio of his misgivings. Horatio urges the prince to refuse to fence, but Hamlet replies that providence directs all events.

The final court scene ensues. Hamlet asks Laertes' forgiveness, and Laertes pretends to accept his apology. Claudius sets out a stoop of wine, and the bout begins. After Hamlet scores the first point of the match, Claudius drinks to him and then poisons the cup while seeming to drop a pearl into it. When Hamlet scores the next point as well, the queen drinks to
Hamlet and thus poisons herself. Laertes then wounds Hamlet with the envenomed foil. Hamlet, incensed at this treachery, gets Laertes' sword and wounds him with it.

Gertrude collapses. Claudius tries to allay suspicion by saying that she swoons at the sight of blood, but the dying Gertrude declares that the wine has been poisoned. Laertes confesses that the unbated foil is poisoned, too, and blames the king for the plot. Hamlet stabs Claudius and pours some of the poisoned wine down his throat. The king dies. Laertes pardons Hamlet and asks his forgiveness, then dies. Sensing his end, Hamlet asks Horatio to clear his name. Horatio initially refuses; he tries to kill himself by drinking what remains of the poisoned wine, but Hamlet stops him.

Osric announces the return of Fortinbras from Poland and the arrival of ambassadors from England. Before he dies, Hamlet casts his vote for Fortinbras to succeed to the Danish throne. Fortinbras enters with the ambassadors, who report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio asks that the dead bodies be displayed and he be allowed to relate the events that led to this tragedy. Fortinbras agrees and orders a salute of cannon, which sounds as the play ends.

**Character List**

**Hamlet**  Prince of Denmark, grieving for his dead father.

**Old Hamlet/Ghost**  Recently deceased warrior king of Denmark, who returns as a ghost to the castle of Elsinore to demand that his son avenge his murder.

**Claudius**  King of Denmark and brother of Old Hamlet. Claudius killed his brother to get the throne and his brother's wife.

**Gertrude**  Queen of Denmark; now wife of Claudius, she had been married to Old Hamlet. She is young Hamlet's mother.

**Polonius**  Denmark's garrulous, spying Lord Chamberlain, loyal to Claudius.

**Laertes**  Son of Polonius. He is a student at the University of Paris.

**Ophelia**  Daughter of Polonius. She loves Hamlet.

**Horatio**  Hamlet's fellow student and one true friend.

**Voltemand**  Danish ambassador to Norway.

**Cornelius**  Another Danish ambassador to Norway.

**Rosencrantz**  Hamlet's former friend, he has been suborned by Claudius to spy on the prince.

**Guildenstern**  Hamlet's former friend, now in league with Claudius.

**Osric**  A rich fop who hangs about the court of Claudius.

**Marcellus**  A guard at Elsinore.

**Bernardo**  A guard at Elsinore.

**Francisco**  A guard at Elsinore.

**Reynaldo**  Servant of Polonius sent to spy on Laertes in Paris.

**Fortinbras**  Norwegian prince. His uncle is king of Norway. His father was killed by Old Hamlet. Fortinbras has assembled an army to conquer the lands that his father lost to Old Hamlet.

**First Gravedigger**  The wittiest character in the play except for Hamlet.

**Second Gravedigger**  First Gravedigger's assistant.
**Player King** Leading member of a troupe of players who visit Elsinore; he takes the role of the king in *The Murder of Gonzago*.

**Player Queen** A male actor of the visiting acting troupe; he assumes the role of the Player King's wife.

**Lucianus** A member of the troupe. He is supposed to be the Player King's nephew and poisons his uncle in the piece they perform.

**Further Information**


Boas, F. S. *Shakespeare and His Predecessors*.


**Film and Video Productions**


