

Silly Shakespeare for Students



HAMLET

PAUL LEONARD MURRAY

with help from

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

ISBN: 978-1-956159-70-7 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-956159-71-4 (ebook)

Copyright 2024 by Paul Murray

All rights reserved. Our authors, editors, and designers work hard to develop original, high-quality content. Please respect their efforts and their rights under copyright law.

Do not copy, photocopy, or reproduce this book or any part of this book for use inside or outside the classroom, in commercial or non-commercial settings. It is also forbidden to copy, adapt, or reuse this book or any part of this book for use on websites, blogs, or third-party lesson-sharing websites.

For permission requests or discounts on class sets and bulk orders contact us at:

Alphabet Publishing
29 Milo Drive
Branford, CT 06405 USA

info@alphabetpublishingbooks.com

www.alphabetpublishingbooks.com

For performance rights, please contact Paul Murray at paulplaying@gmail.com

Interior Formatting and Cover Design by Melissa Williams Design

The Story Behind Shakespeare's Hamlet

Imagine a play so powerful and timeless that it has captivated audiences for over 400 years. That's exactly what *Hamlet*, written by William Shakespeare, represents. First performed around 1600, this tragic play remains one of the most studied and celebrated works in literature. Let's dive into the history of *Hamlet*, explore its origins, and see why it continues to be so relevant today.

Origins of the Play

Hamlet is based on a legendary Danish prince whose story dates back to ancient Scandinavia. The earliest versions of the Hamlet legend come from Norse sagas and medieval stories. One of the primary sources for Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was a 16th-century play by a writer named Thomas Kyd, called *The Spanish Tragedy*. Kyd's play was a popular revenge tragedy, a genre where the hero seeks vengeance for a wrong. Shakespeare borrowed elements from this and other sources to create his own version.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was likely influenced by the works of earlier playwrights and storytellers, including the 12th-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, whose *Gesta Danorum* (Deeds of the Danes) included a tale of a prince who sought revenge for his father's murder. Additionally, another important source was the *Histories Tragiques* by François de Belleforest, which also featured a story about Prince Hamlet.

The Plot

Hamlet is set in Denmark, a kingdom dealing with political unrest and personal tragedy. The play kicks off with the ghost of King Hamlet (the old king) appearing on the battlements of the castle. He reveals to his son, Prince Hamlet, that he was murdered by his own brother, Claudius, who has since taken the throne and married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. The ghost demands that Hamlet avenge his death.

Prince Hamlet is deeply troubled by this revelation. He's grieving his father's death and is disgusted by his mother's hasty remarriage. Overwhelmed by the ghost's command, Hamlet struggles with feelings of doubt and uncertainty. He wonders if he can trust the ghost's story and is concerned about the morality of seeking revenge.

To test Claudius's guilt, Hamlet arranges for the staging of a play that mirrors the murder described by the ghost. During the performance, Claudius reacts with guilt and panic, suggesting that he is indeed the murderer. However, Hamlet's mission for revenge is complicated by his own inner turmoil and hesitation.

To gather more information and possibly discredit Hamlet, Claudius and Polonius, a court advisor, spy on Hamlet. Polonius's daughter, Ophelia, who is also Hamlet's love interest, becomes a pawn in their schemes. Hamlet's erratic behavior is interpreted as madness by those around him, though it's unclear if he's truly insane or just putting on an act.

The play takes a dark turn when Hamlet accidentally kills Polonius thinking he is Claudius spying behind a tapestry. This mistake leads to Ophelia's mental breakdown and eventual suicide. Her brother, Laertes, returns from France and seeks revenge for his father's death, leading to a deadly duel with Hamlet.

The climax of the play comes during the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Unbeknownst to Hamlet, Laertes has poisoned the tip of his sword, and Claudius has also prepared a poisoned drink for him. During the duel,

both Hamlet and Laertes are wounded by the poisoned blade. Queen Gertrude accidentally drinks the poisoned wine and dies.

In the final moments, Hamlet confronts Claudius, forcing him to drink the poisoned wine and stabbing him with the poisoned sword. With everyone around him dying, Hamlet succumbs to his own wounds. In his last breath, Hamlet declares Fortinbras, a Norwegian prince, as the next king of Denmark, bringing the play to a tragic close.

Themes and Characters

- 1. Hamlet:** The protagonist of the play, Hamlet is known for his philosophical reflections and his famous soliloquy “To be, or not to be”. He is a complex character, torn between his duty to avenge his father’s death and his own uncertainties about life and death.
- 2. Claudius:** The antagonist and Hamlet’s uncle, Claudius is the new King of Denmark who has a dark secret. He is ambitious and manipulative, and his guilt over the murder drives much of the play’s conflict.
- 3. Gertrude:** Hamlet’s mother and Claudius’s new wife. Her relationship with Hamlet is strained, and her role in the play reflects themes of betrayal and familial loyalty.
- 4. Ophelia:** A young woman who loves Hamlet, Ophelia’s tragic fate adds to the play’s themes of madness and loss. Her relationship with Hamlet and her eventual breakdown are central to the play’s emotional impact.
- 5. Polonius:** Ophelia’s father and Claudius’s advisor. He is a meddling and somewhat foolish character whose death is a turning point in the play.

6. **Laertes:** Ophelia's brother, who seeks to avenge his father Polonius's death. His quest for revenge parallels Hamlet's and adds to the play's theme of retribution.
7. **Horatio:** Hamlet's loyal friend who provides a contrast to Hamlet's introspective nature. Horatio survives the play and represents a sense of order amidst the chaos.

The Play's Impact and Legacy

Hamlet premiered at the Globe Theatre in London, where Shakespeare's plays were performed. The play was an instant success and quickly became a staple of English theatre. Shakespeare's use of language, complex characters, and deep philosophical themes set *Hamlet* apart from other plays of the time.

One reason *Hamlet* has remained so influential is its exploration of universal themes. Hamlet's struggles with identity, mortality, and ethical dilemmas are relatable to people across different cultures and eras. The play's famous lines and soliloquies, such as "To be, or not to be," have entered the common cultural lexicon, often quoted and referenced in various contexts.

Modern Adaptations

The enduring nature of *Hamlet* has led to numerous adaptations and reinterpretations over the centuries. Filmmakers, playwrights, and other artists have reimagined the play in different settings and formats. From Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation, which presents the play in its entirety, to modern retellings like the film *The Lion King*, *Hamlet* has been adapted to fit various tastes and eras.

In contemporary culture, *Hamlet* is often explored through different lenses, such as psychological analysis, feminist critique, and political commentary. The play's

themes are examined in various educational settings, and its impact on literature, theatre, and popular culture continues to be profound.

Why Hamlet Still Matters

So, why does *Hamlet* continue to resonate today? The play delves into the complexities of human nature and the challenges of decision-making and morality. Hamlet's internal struggle with his duty to avenge his father's death versus his philosophical doubts about life and death mirrors the struggles many people face in their own lives.

The play's rich language, memorable characters, and deep themes offer a window into the human experience, making it relevant across generations. Whether you're interested in drama, literature, or the exploration of complex emotions and situations, *Hamlet* provides a compelling and thought-provoking experience.

In summary, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is more than just a play; it's a profound exploration of the human condition that has captivated audiences for centuries. Its story, themes, and characters continue to inspire and challenge us, making it a timeless masterpiece in the world of literature.

Playing Style

This version of Hamlet, although reduced to around a one-hour and fifteen minutes playing time, remains true to the original's plot, characters (with some small exceptions), and structure. When performed, this production should maintain a lively pace and exaggerated style.

Technically, the production, as with the original, has a very low level of technical requirements. The sets can be very minimal and the costumes simple. A musical score may be used between scenes to cover changes where necessary.

Of course, one of the major differences between this version and the original is the simplification of the text. On some occasions, in performance, you will find the rhyming scheme helpful to the playing, in which case the actors should just 'stand back', enjoy the words and help the audience do the same. On other occasions, the rhyming scheme will seem stifling and restrictive, in which case do not be afraid to improvise a little, add your own occasional lines or do not emphasise the rhymes so much.

Overall, this version should be fun to play and watch. It can be produced with a small budget and should be done 'over the top' which can give you a chance to play with your own ideas of theatricality.

Cast of Characters

KING CLAUDIUS:	<i>King of Denmark</i>
QUEEN GERTRUDE:	<i>Queen of Denmark, mother of Hamlet</i>
GHOST:	<i>of Hamlet's Father</i>
HAMLET:	<i>son to the late King, and nephew to Claudius, the present King</i>
OPHELIA:	<i>daughter of Polonius</i>
HORATIO:	<i>friend of Hamlet</i>
POLONIUS:	<i>Lord Chamberlain, advisor to Claudis</i>
LAERTES:	<i>son of Polonius</i>
VOLTIMAND:	<i>courtier</i>
CORNELIUS:	<i>courtier</i>
ROSENCRANTZ:	<i>courtier</i>
GUILDENSTERN:	<i>courtier</i>
OSRIC:	<i>courtier</i>
A Gentleman:	<i>cortier</i>
A Priest	
MARCELLUS:	<i>an officer</i>
BERNARDO:	<i>an officer</i>
FRANCISCO:	<i>a soldier</i>
REYNALDO:	<i>servant to Polonius</i>
FORTINBRAS:	<i>Prince of Norway</i>
Players:	
• First Player	
• King Gonzago	
• Queen	
• Lucianus	
<i>Two Clowns, gravediggers</i>	
<i>A Norwegian Captain</i>	
<i>English Ambassadors</i>	
<i>Lords, Ladies, Officers, Soldiers, Sailors, Messengers, Attendants</i>	

Act I

SCENE I.

A platform in front of the castle

[FRANCISCO is standing at his post. BERNARDO enters.]

FRANCISCO

Who's there?

BERNARDO

It's Bernie. Evening Frank!

How was your night?

FRANCISCO

Pretty rank!

Nothing to report and freezing cold.

BERNARDO

You can go home now.

[Pause] Go on, do as you're told!

FRANCISCO

Are you on your own?

BERNARDO

I'm here with Marcellus.

He's coming up now; that's him by the terrace

FRANCISCO

[Looking]

Who is he with? Someone I know?

BERNARDO

Looks like young Horatio!

FRANCISCO

Horatio? Here? At this time of night?

Do you think we're in trouble?

BERNARDO

No! It's alright.

He comes up here to meditate.

Now sling your hook¹; it's getting late!

[Exit FRANCISCO]

[Enter HORATIO and MARCELLUS]

HORATIO

... I need to see it with my own eyes!

1 Go away, leave me alone

BERNARDO

Horatio! What a nice surprise

MARCELLUS

[Referring to the GHOST]

I told him . . . you know . . .

HORATIO

You must be mistaken!

MARCELLUS

Two nights in a row!

BERNARDO

I'm still pretty shaken!

HORATIO

I've come up to see, but I doubt it will show.

MARCELLUS

It first showed up two nights ago.

Bernie, you tell him.

BERNARDO

We were sat around here

About this time of night when the ghost did appear.

[Enter GHOST]

MARCELLUS

And would you believe it? It's just come back!

BERNARDO

It's going to give me a heart attack!

MARCELLUS

You see? I told you; it looks like the King!

[Pause]

[Addressing HORATIO] Well, don't just stand there! Say something!

HORATIO

[Addressing the GHOST] What are you that appears this night

And looks like the king? You gave us a fright!

Speak, you spirit of the dim!

[Pause]

MARCELLUS

[To HORATIO] I think you have offended him.

BERNARDO

Yes, you have, he's fading away.

[Exit GHOST]

MARCELLUS

You believe me now? What did I say?

HORATIO

Such a cruel and hideous sight.

Something in Denmark's not quite right!

BERNARDO

It's funny you should mention that,
Cos me and the lads were having a chat.
They're recruiting soldiers on the double.
Should we be expecting trouble?

HORATIO

The rumour is that Fortinbras . . .

MARCELLUS

The Norwegian king?

BERNARDO

He is very low class!
We knocked him off and took his pad.

HORATIO

And now his son is really mad.
Young Fortinbras wants everything back.
We think he's planning an attack!
And Denmark's really past its prime.

BERNARDO

So that's why we're on overtime!

HORATIO

We've started getting similar omens
That finished off the mighty Romans:
Apocalyptic horsemen
Warning us of Norsemen.

[Pause]

MARCELLUS

Maybe the ghost came to the fort
To offer us some moral support?

HORATIO

If he was the King, that would make sense.

[The GHOST returns]

MARCELLUS

It's back again: Look! By the fence.

HORATIO

[Addressing GHOST]

If you know something of our fate,
Please tell us now before it's too late!

*[The cock crows and GHOST moves to the other
side of the stage.]*

It's gone again.

BERNARDO

It's over here!

MARCELLUS

Shall I hit it with my spear?

HORATIO

Only if it will not stand.

[The GHOST moves again.]

BERNARDO

This is getting out of hand!

HORATIO

Here it is!

MARCELLUS

[Trying unsuccessfully to hit the GHOST]

I missed!

[Exit GHOST]

BERNARDO

It's gone!

Oh, what a bloody carry on!

HORATIO

I think the spear was a mistake.

He was the King, for goodness sake!

MARCELLUS

He was going to speak when the cock did crow.

BERNARDO

They scare ghosts off, didn't you know?

HORATIO

I'm a bit ashamed of what we've done.

Let's go down and find his son.

All things being equal, he should hear about this.

MARCELLUS

Follow me, lads, I know where he is!

[Exeunt]

SCENE II.

The throne room in the castle

*[Enter KING CLAUDIUS, QUEEN GERTRUDE, HAMLET,
POLONIUS, LAERTES, VOLTIMAND, CORNELIUS]*

KING CLAUDIUS

Although the death of my brother is raw,
I've gone and married my sister-in-law.
His demise was a shock, I have to admit,
But it's high time we got over it.
And now I am the ruling class
It's time to deal with Fortinbras.
His Uncle's now king; he's old and he's barmy.
But still, he's in charge of the Norwegian army.
I've written to ask him if he can
Restrain his nephew's battle plan.
Voltimand, Cornelius,
I want you two to deal with this.

[He hands them a letter.]

CORNELIUS AND VOLTIMAND

We'll take this straight to Oslo town.

KING CLAUDIUS

Make sure you do. Don't let me down!

[Exeunt VOLTIMAND and CORNELIUS]

What's next upon my list, perchance?

LAERTES

I'd like to travel back to France.

KING CLAUDIUS

Laertes, lad! Have you asked your old man?

POLONIUS

He has that, sire, and I said that he can.

He came back for your coronation,

But now he's lacking stimulation.

It's best if we just let him go.

KING CLAUDIUS

My loyal friend, I won't say no.

And so to Hamlet, who's now my son

And my nephew all in one!

HAMLET

[Aside] More than kin and less than kind!

KING CLAUDIUS

Have you got something on your mind?

HAMLET

You could say that.

QUEEN GERTRUDE

[To HAMLET] You miserable git!

It's been two months, get over it!

Stop wearing black and get on board.

You can start by being nice to Claud!

Life always seems a big deal for you!

HAMLET

It 'seems' it, Mum, because it's true!

The clothes I wear they may be dark,

But the pain I feel is far more stark.

KING CLAUDIUS

I understand you feel alone,

But it's time to 'man up', you're still heir to the throne.

Now I'm your dad, so stop your mourning.

Consider this your final warning!

QUEEN GERTRUDE

And forget your University.

You're staying here; we're family!

HAMLET

Whatever you say, I'll try it, Mum.

KING CLAUDIUS

Well, that's all our court business done.

[to HAMLET] You've dropped some of your attitude

And put your mother in a better mood.

We're off for a drink.

GERTRUDE

[To HAMLET] Goodnight, dear, thanks!

[Exeunt all but HAMLET]

HAMLET

I'm full of existential angst.
My father died so suddenly,
And took away a piece of me.
Within a month, my mother wed.
His brother Claud now shares her bed.
Daddy Hamlet was a wonderful King,
But they've forgotten everything.
Am I the only one to mourn?
I wish that I had never been born!

[Enter HORATIO, MARCELLUS, and BERNARDO]

HORATIO

Hail the Prince!

HAMLET

Horatio?

I thought that you had plans to go
To Wittenberg.

HORATIO

That's where I was heading.
I came to the funeral and stayed for the wedding.
I was on my way out.

HAMLET

And what stopped you from leaving?

HORATIO

[Hesitant] I came here to say *[apologetic]* and I know that
you're grieving

For your mighty dad!

HAMLET

A man amongst men;
We will never see his like again!

HORATIO

That I saw him last night!

HAMLET

Saw who?

HORATIO

The old king!

HAMLET

I think you must be imagining!

MARCELLUS

He wasn't alive

BERNADO

but wasn't quite dead.

HORATIO

These fellows got me out of bed.

HAMLET

Marcellus, Bernardo, what is this show?

BERNARDO

We saw this strange figure two nights in a row.

HORATIO

They woke me up on night number three
And said that I should go and see
Up on the castles' pinnacle.

MARCELLUS

At first, he was quite cynical!

HORATIO

But sure enough, the ghost appeared
With your father's eyes, his nose, his beard.

HAMLET

And what did he wear?

HORATIO

His battle gear.

HAMLET

You sure it was him?

HORATIO

It was really quite clear!

HAMLET

Did he speak?

HORATIO

He had a go
But flew off when the cock did crow.

HAMLET

That is just extraordinary.

MARCELLUS

And that is why we are here. You see?

HORATIO

We thought you'd like to know.

HAMLET

You're right!
Are you on watch again tonight?

MARCELLUS AND BERNARDO

We are, my lord.

HAMLET

I'll join you then.
In case he comes to walk again.

BERNARDO

You'll speak to it?

HAMLET

I'll do my best,
Now keep this quiet and get some rest.

ALL

We will, my lord!

HAMLET

Farewell, Goodnight,
I'll come and see you around midnight.

[Exeunt all but HAMLET]

My father's ghost is on the prowl?
I get the sense of something foul.
Hours, minutes, seconds fly,
Darkness comes and fills the sky.
But no matter how they are concealed,
Evil deeds will be revealed.

[Exit]