

HAMLET

By William Shakespeare



STUDY GUIDE



GABLESTAGE

1200 Anastasia Ave
Coral Gables, FL 33134

Directed and Adapted By: **Paul Tei**

Cast of HAMLET

Pete Rogan:, Horatio, Claudius, the Ghost (Dead King, Hamlet's father) and Polonius

Todd Durkin: Hamlet

Yvonne Gougelet: Ophelia and Gertrude

Scott Genn: Laertes

Ken Clement: Fight Coordinator

***HAMLET* for an Action Driven Audience**

This one hour version of *Hamlet* focuses on the action of the main characters. While we have omitted portions of the play, the main issues still remain. Hamlet deals with concerns such as suicide, depression, deceit, betrayal and ultimately revenge.

Although this play is over 400 years old, the conflicts of these characters are still relevant today. Hopefully our approach will prompt students to do further reading and open their eyes to the world of Shakespeare (and theatre in general) and help them to realize that it isn't as "stuffy" as they might have thought.

HAMLET: An Introduction



TO BE OR NOT TO BE, THAT IS THE QUESTION...

Hamlet is without question the most famous play in the English language. Probably written in 1601 or 1602, this tragedy is a milestone in Shakespeare's dramatic development; the playwright achieved artistic maturity in this work through his brilliant depiction of the hero's struggle with two opposing forces: moral integrity and the need to avenge his father's murder.

Shakespeare's focus on this conflict was a different from contemporary revenge tragedies, which tended to graphically dramatize violent acts on stage, by emphasizing the hero's dilemma rather than actually

showing the bloody deeds. Shakespeare created *Hamlet* from several sources, creating a rich and complex literary work that continues to delight both readers and audiences with its myriad meanings and interpretations.

In the words of Ernest Johnson, the dilemma of Hamlet is to disentangle himself from the temptation to wreak justice for the wrong reasons and in evil passion, and to do what he must do at last for the pure sake of justice and from that dilemma of wrong feelings and right actions, he ultimately emerges, solving the problem by attaining a proper state of mind. **Hamlet endures as the object of universal identification because his central moral dilemma transcends the Elizabethan period, making him a man for all ages.** In his difficult struggle to somehow act within a corrupt world and yet maintain his moral integrity, Hamlet ultimately reflects the fate of all human beings, **even in this day and age.**

The 3,700 lines that we read as **HAMLET** today were probably never read as such by an Elizabethan (not even by Shakespeare himself). The modern version combines materials from three sources. In Shakespeare's day, this "full text" would never have been performed. By contrast, Kenneth Branagh's recent film version of the "complete" text runs about four hours, far too long for an Elizabethan audience, only a portion of whom were seated (the so-called "**groundlings**" paid a penny for the privilege of standing in the yard in front of the stage; see the diagram of an Elizabethan theater distributed as a handout.)

Shakespeare himself tells us what was a more standard Elizabethan performance time at line 12 of the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, where he refers to "the two hours' traffic of our stage."



Hamlet: Study Questions

1) To what extent does *Hamlet* correspond to **classical notions of tragedy**? What (if anything) is Hamlet's **fatal flaw**? Why does he hesitate to act after promising his father's ghost that he will avenge his murder?

2) Note the various **familial relationships** in *Hamlet*. Compare and contrast the family unit of Polonius / Laertes / Ophelia with Hamlet's relationships to the Ghost of Hamlet Sr., to Gertrude and to Claudius. Like Hamlet, **Laertes** and **Fortinbras** are sons confronted with a father's death. To what extent do they function as **foils** to Hamlet? What do they have in common? How do

A **dramatic foil** is a minor character who resembles a central figure in the play but different enough that the comparison is meaningful: they enhance our understanding of the main character's personality traits or actions

they differ?

3) Why does Hamlet wait so long to kill Claudius? What are the reasons for his **hesitation**? How valid are they? How many times does he have the opportunity to attack Claudius? What are his reasons for not doing so?

4) *Hamlet* is a play in which nothing can be taken at face value: appearances are frequently deceptive, and many characters engage in play-acting, spying and pretense. What deliberate attempts are made at **deception**? Are the intended audiences deceived? While some deceptions are perpetrated in order to conceal secrets, others aim to uncover hidden truths. Which are which? To what extent are they

successful? Note references to appearances, disguises, pretense, seeming, masks, acting, etc.

5) Hamlet claims that his madness is feigned, an "antic disposition" which he puts on for his own purposes (I.v.172). Why would Hamlet want to feign **madness**? How can an **appearance of insanity** help him achieve his ends? Is he really sane throughout the play, or does he ever cross the line into madness? What about Ophelia's mad scene? Is it real or feigned? Is there "method in her madness" as well, or is she entirely irrational? Why has she gone mad?

6) Hamlet famously declares that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark." What other **natural imagery** is used to describe the corruption of the Danish court? What **"unnatural"** events or behaviors preceded the events recounted in the play? What "unnatural" events or behaviors occur during the play?

Fatal flaw: The tragic hero errs by action or omission; this brings about his ruin-- the tragedy lies less in the fact that the characters "deserve" their fates than in how much more they suffer than their actions (or flaws) suggest they should.

During a Performance, Watch and Listen for This:

Honor and *Revenge*:

How many times in the play does Hamlet have the chance for revenge? How many times does he act honorably?

After a Performance, Talk About This:

Oaths, Obedience and Swearing:

There is an unusual amount of swearing, formal promises and obeying in this play. Why does this happen so often in this play? What does it mean to give one's word? To swear? To formally state your obedience?

Words Invented by Shakespeare and Used for the First Time in This Play:

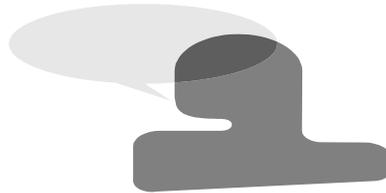
Amazement

Buzzer

Film

Outbreak

Remorseless



Besmirch

Excitement

Hush

Pander

Find for yourself where they appear in the play! Can you spot them in performance? Do they mean what you thought they meant?

NOTES:

Who's Who in *HAMLET*

King Hamlet: Dead when the play starts, he appears as a ghost.

Horatio: He is Hamlet's school friend.

Hamlet: Son of King Hamlet recently returned from college for his father's funeral and his mother's marriage.

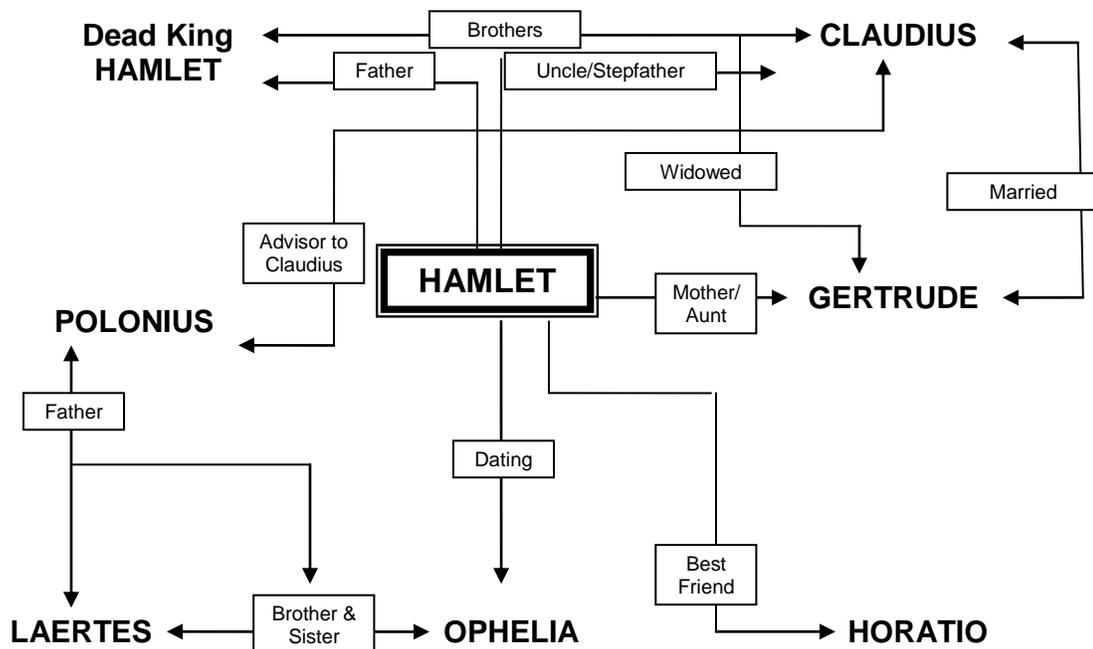
Claudius: The new King. His brother died and he married his sister-in-law rather hastily.

Gertrude: She wants her son to stop mourning his father and visit awhile.

Polonius: Claudius's closest advisor at court. Father of Laertes and Ophelia.

Laertes: At the beginning of the play he wants to go to France.

Ophelia: Hamlet's girlfriend and obedient to her father.



HAMLET: The Whole Story

It is the middle of a very cold night on the battlements of Elsinore. Bernardo relieves a fellow soldier on guard. For two nights he and another soldier have seen a ghost while on their watch. They've asked Horatio, a scholar who has returned from the University at Wittenberg, to join them and to confront it. As they talk, the ghost appears again, and they recognize the recently deceased King Hamlet, dressed for war. It stalks away without responding. We discover that Denmark is preparing for war. King Fortinbras of Norway had earlier challenged King Hamlet to single combat. Not only did King Hamlet kill King Fortinbras, he seized his lands, which should have been inherited by his son, Young Fortinbras. We also learn that Young Fortinbras has raised an army of mercenaries to recover what his father had forfeited.

The ghost returns while they are talking, and Horatio tries to speak with it. Before the ghost might answer, a rooster crows, and it hastily leaves. They decide to tell Prince Hamlet, the King's son, believing that the ghost will surely speak to him.

Inside the castle the following day, Claudius, dead King Hamlet's brother, addresses an assembly. Although Denmark has been in mourning for King Hamlet's death, Claudius has become King and married the recently widowed Queen Gertrude, his sister-in-law. Claudius thanks everyone who has "freely gone with this affair along." He then dispatches ambassadors to the new King of Norway, who is Young Fortinbras' uncle. Claudius allows Laertes, the son of court councilor Polonius, to return to France. Both Gertrude and Claudius try to persuade Hamlet to end mourning his father's death, and remain at Elsinore rather than return to University at Wittenburg. Hamlet acquiesces. Claudius decides to celebrate Hamlet's decision with toasting and cannon fire.

Alone, Hamlet shares his feelings with the audience. The guards interrupt Hamlet, who tell him of their ghostly encounter of the night before. Hamlet questions them closely and asks them to keep the encounter secret. He agrees to join them that night to speak to the ghost, whose presence indicates all is not well.

Ready to depart for France, Laertes bids his sister Ophelia farewell. He advises her not to lose her heart to Hamlet, whose affections she may not trust. She agrees to follow her brother's advice but challenges him to practice what he preaches. Their father, Polonius, enters and hurries Laertes aboard ship with copious advice. He then asks Ophelia what she and Laertes were talking about and forbids Ophelia from talking to Hamlet. She promises to obey.

That night, Hamlet does indeed see his father's ghost. The ghost beckons to Hamlet and he follows. When Hamlet is alone with the ghost, King Hamlet reveals that while everyone believes he died of natural causes while sleeping, he was actually poisoned by his brother, Claudius. He fades away, asking Hamlet to remember him. Horatio and the guards find Hamlet and all are sworn to secrecy.

Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo to France to spy on Laertes. A very frightened Ophelia enters and tells her father about a distressing encounter with Hamlet.

Polonius decides that Hamlet is mad over being in love with Ophelia and resolves to tell the King.

Claudius and Gertrude welcome Hamlet's old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore. They ask for help finding out the cause of Hamlet's odd behavior. Polonius enters and announces he knows the cause of Hamlet's madness, but waits to tell the news until the ambassadors returning from Norway report that Fortinbras' aggressive plan has been checked. Polonius then reports that Hamlet is mad from his rejected love of Ophelia. He and Claudius decide to hide behind an arras to watch the next encounter between the two. Hamlet and Polonius talk. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (R&G) enter and Hamlet gets them to admit they have been sent to visit him. They announce the coming of the Players, touring the countryside.

Hamlet knows the group and welcomes them heartily. He also asks them to prepare "The Murder of Gonzago" for performance that night, and to include a special speech he has written for the occasion. Left alone, Hamlet compares the players acting ability and sense of commitment to his own performance and inability to act against Claudius, as the ghost has commanded him to do. Because the ghost might be an evil spirit, tempting him to greater evil, he decides to test his theory by provoking Claudius that night at the play.

R & G cannot discover the source of Hamlet's madness and tell his parents. Claudius and Polonius hide behind an arras when Hamlet enters, leaving Ophelia to encounter him alone. Hamlet turns on her and leaves her amazed and undone. Claudius decides to send him to England and Polonius advises him to have Gertrude confront her son that night.

Hamlet gives the players acting advice and talks about the function of theatre. At the play, Hamlet is in his element, speaking oddly to the King, refusing to join his mother, and speaking very crudely to Ophelia. The play begins and bears a remarkable resemblance to the events surrounding King Hamlet's murder. King Claudius suddenly stands and hastily exits. Hamlet takes this as strong evidence of Claudius guilty conscious.

R&G are ordered to follow Hamlet to England. Polonius warns Claudius that Hamlet is going to visit his mother. Left alone, Claudius attempts to pray for forgiveness. Hamlet overhears and decides to kill him. He immediately has second thoughts and postpones his revenge until a time when Claudius is more vulnerable to damnation. Claudius reveals that he is unable to experience forgiveness and exits.

Polonius hides in Gertrude's bedroom, to spy on Gertrude and her son. Hamlet enters and they argue. When Hamlet hears someone behind the arras, he acts impulsively and kills Polonius.

Hamlet then wildly praises his dead father and chastises his mother for marrying Claudius. The ghost reappears and tells Hamlet to be merciful to Gertrude, who cannot see the ghost. She thinks Hamlet is insane. Hamlet, bound for England, drags the dead body off, and hides it. Claudius enters and sends R&G to find Hamlet. Hamlet jokes about Polonius' death and cleverly reveals the whereabouts of his corpse. Left alone, Claudius reveals that his letters to the King of England request the immediate death of Hamlet.

Hamlet, presumably on his way to the ship bound for England, encounters a Norwegian Captain under Fortinbras' command. We discover that Fortinbras and his army are passing through Denmark on their way to invade Poland. Hamlet muses about the nature of war, and unfavorably compares himself and his predicament to Fortinbras and his firm purpose.

Her father slain by her now-estranged lover, Ophelia sings songs and behaves very oddly. Laertes, at the head of a mob, returns to avenge their father's death. He witnesses his sister's breakdown and Claudius agrees to help Laertes gain revenge against Hamlet.

Pirates give Horatio letters from Hamlet that reveal he is on his way back from England. He has also sent a letter to Claudius, who, with Laertes, is planning Hamlet's "accidental" death. Gertrude arrives with the sad news of Ophelia's death by drowning.

Two gravediggers are joking about politics and religion. Hamlet and Horatio enter, talk with them and muse about mortality and decay. A funeral procession enters and a priest explains why the funeral service for Ophelia was abbreviated. When Hamlet discovers that the corpse is Ophelia, he fights with Laertes over whose grief is greatest.

Later, Hamlet reveals to Horatio how he discovered the plot against his life and turned it against R&G. Osric, a courtier, arrives to tell Hamlet of a wager Claudius has placed on the outcome of a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Hamlet agrees to it and Horatio expresses misgivings.

The fencing match begins with the court in attendance. Hamlet apologizes to Laertes, who remains aloof. The duel begins, but only Laertes and King Claudius know that one of the blades is poisoned. Claudius has also dropped a poisoned pearl into a drinking cup, in case he can get Hamlet to drink from it during the duel. The Queen toasts Hamlet instead, Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword, then Hamlet gets a hold of it and wounds Laertes.

All is revealed when Gertrude dies, so Hamlet wounds Claudius and forces him to drink the poisoned wine. As Hamlet dies, he asks Horatio to tell the world his story. The rest is silence as Fortinbras enters with his army and takes charge.





SHAKESPEARE: THE BARD

Shakespeare, William (1564-1616), was an English playwright and poet. He is generally considered the greatest dramatist the world has ever known and the finest poet who has written in the English language. Shakespeare has also been the world's most popular author. No other writer's plays have been produced so many times or read so widely in so many countries.

Many reasons can be given for Shakespeare's broad appeal. But his fame basically rests on his understanding of human nature. Shakespeare understood people as few other artists have. He could see in a specific dramatic situation the qualities that relate to all human beings. He could thus create characters that have meaning beyond the time and place of his plays. Yet his characters are not symbolic figures. They are remarkably individual human beings. They struggle just as people do in real life, sometimes successfully and sometimes with painful and tragic failure.

Shakespeare wrote at least 37 plays, which have traditionally been divided into comedies, histories, and tragedies. These plays contain vivid characters of all types and from many walks of life. Kings, pickpockets, drunkards, generals, hired killers, shepherds, and philosophers all mingle in Shakespeare's works.

In addition to his deep understanding of human nature, Shakespeare had knowledge in a wide variety of other subjects. These subjects include music, the law, the Bible, military science, the stage, art, politics, the sea, history, hunting, woodcraft, and sports. Yet as far as scholars know, Shakespeare had no professional experience in any field except the theater.

Shakespeare was born to what today would be called middle-class parents. His birthplace was the small market town of Stratford-upon-Avon. Shortly after he married at the age of 18, Shakespeare apparently left Stratford to seek his fortune in the theatrical world of London. Within a few years, he had become one of the city's leading actors and playwrights. By 1612, when he seems to have partially retired to Stratford, Shakespeare had become England's most popular playwright.

Shakespeare has had enormous influence on culture throughout the world. His works have helped shape the literature of all English-speaking countries and of such countries as Germany and Russia. Shakespeare also contributed greatly to the development of the English language. He freely experimented with grammar and vocabulary and so helped prevent literary English from becoming fixed and artificial.

Shakespeare's influence on language has not been limited to writers and scholars. Many words and phrases from Shakespeare's plays and poems have become part of our everyday speech. They are used by millions of people who are unaware that Shakespeare created them. For example, Shakespeare originated such familiar phrases as ***fair play, a foregone conclusion, catch cold, and disgraceful conduct.*** As far as scholars can tell, Shakespeare also invented such common words as ***assassination, bump, eventful, and lonely.***

Many people can identify lines and passages as Shakespeare's even though they have never seen or read one of his plays. Examples include **"To be, or not to be," "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears,"** and **"A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!"**



Shakespeare's genius as a poet enabled him to express an idea both briefly and colorfully. In his tragedy *Othello*, for example, he described jealousy as "the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on." In the tragedy *King Lear*, Shakespeare described a daughter's ingratitude toward her father as "sharper than a serpent's tooth."

Besides influencing language and literature, Shakespeare has affected other aspects of culture in the English-speaking world. His plays and poems have long been a required part of a liberal education. As a result, Shakespeare's ideas on such subjects as heroism, romantic love, and the nature of tragedy have helped shape the attitudes of millions of people. His brilliant portrayals of historical figures and events have also influenced our thinking. For example, many people visualize Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Cleopatra as Shakespeare portrayed them, not as they have been described in history books.

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The play will be presented at GableStage in January and February 2006 for our regular audience, as well as for thousands of students from Miami-Dade County Public High and Middle Schools.

SCHOOL TOUR

Our Annual Shakespeare 'Page-to-Stage' School Tour will present student audiences with the opportunity to see an on-campus production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This one-hour version focuses on the action of the main characters. Our goal is to prompt students to do further reading and open their eyes to the world of Shakespeare.

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