

# HAMLET

## SYNOPSIS

The play is set in Elsinore, Denmark, at the royal court of the newly crowned King Claudius. With the throne, Claudius inherits an imminent threat of attack from neighbouring Norway, whose young Prince Fortinbras is seeking to avenge the defeat of his father by the former King, Prince Hamlet's father.

Prince Hamlet is deeply depressed by the sudden death of his father, old Hamlet, and the hasty remarriage of his mother, Queen Gertrude, to his uncle Claudius.

When the ghost of his father appears to Hamlet informing him that he was murdered by Claudius, and calling upon him to avenge his death, Hamlet is locked into a dangerous mission he would rather not have been given. Instead of immediately obeying the father he loved and killing the murderer promptly, Hamlet initially chooses to feign madness in order to conceal his intentions and steadily becomes paralysed by inaction. He intellectualises the task and seeks further proof of Claudius' guilt to the point where he himself is exposed to the murderer and has virtually signed his own death warrant.

Hamlet is disgusted by the relationship between his mother and uncle. He allows his jaundiced view of what he considers his mother's infidelity to taint his attitude to women in general. Consequently, Hamlet abandons his girlfriend, Ophelia, who later loses her mind and drowns. He accidentally kills her father, the King's Councillor, Polonius, when he mistakes him for Claudius.

Claudius now frightened of Hamlet's madness and fearing for his own safety, convinces Polonius' son (and Ophelia's brother), Laertes, to kill Hamlet.

Finally a duel between Hamlet and Laertes, ends in the deaths of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet himself. The rule of the kingdom of Denmark passes to Fortinbras of Norway.

# HAMLET

## BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

*Hamlet*, unlike any other text of its kind, has stood the test of time because of its remarkably modern exploration of the deep concerns of humanity. Despite this, the play is very much an object of its time and reflects a period of great change and uncertainty. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was written and performed in the final years of Elizabeth I's reign. Just as the play ends with the death of the Hamlet family line, Elizabeth was the last of the Tudors and she was dying without an heir. Elizabeth's upcoming death could throw the country into political upheaval, as it was feared that with her death, the religious war between Catholicism and Protestantism would be reignited.

#### Dating

*Hamlet* has had a long publishing and performance history which complicates the dating of the play. Although the text is lost, references from the period have allowed scholars to determine the existence of what is called the *Ur-Hamlet* (meaning early or primitive), which would have been performed during the 1590s. Despite this, *Hamlet* (as we know it today) was probably written during 1599-1600 and then first performed in the following year.

#### The text

The *Hamlet* that we have today is a mixture of the various versions of the text that have come down to us through history. The play was first printed in quarto in 1603. However, this version is known as the 'bad quarto' as it only contains half the text. Also, famously, instead of asking, 'To be or not to be, that is the question', the Hamlet of the bad quarto says, 'To be, or not to be, aye there's the point'. The next version of the play was the second quarto, published in 1604-5. It is the longest version of the play and what most modern editions are based on. Finally, *Hamlet* was again published in the Folio of 1623 in the collected edition of Shakespeare's works.

# INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

## Theatrical

While Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet*, the new Globe Theatre was being built to house the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the theatre company Shakespeare wrote for. The theatre itself becomes a presence within the play, with constant meta-theatrical references to acting, costumes, a play-within-a-play, and watching theatre. Much of *Hamlet* is a meditation on life being like a play that we have to perform a role in. Hamlet, however, does not want to play his given role of the avenger.

Generically, *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy. In the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, this genre was extremely popular. These sorts of plays would mix gruesome violence with black comedy, telling the story of an avenger who ultimately dies in his pursuit of revenge. This type of plot was used by playwrights to explore the themes of political absolutism and corruption. Shakespeare, however, developed the genre further. He uses violence as a way to create moral ambiguity and to question the results of violent action.

## Theological

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* at the end of a century ridden with religious upheaval. In the 70 years before the staging of the play, England went from Catholic to Protestant to Catholic and finally back to Protestantism again with Queen Elizabeth. Protestantism had finally been cemented by the reign of Elizabeth. However, Catholicism was still part of the English psyche (Shakespeare's father was himself a Catholic). This religious debate was at the heart of England's political development during the sixteenth century, and Shakespeare draws upon this for his play.

It is significant that Hamlet hails from Wittenberg, the city where Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Church, a catalyst for Protestantism sweeping through Europe. When the Ghost appears to Hamlet, he says that he has come from purgatory, which is a Catholic belief. Hamlet initially distrusts the Ghost as to believe him would mean to accept the truth of the Catholic doctrine. Despite Hamlet's trust in the Ghost, he still questions religion at every turn. As a character, Hamlet is ultimately unable to find any consolation in religion. Despite this, Hamlet looks back with some nostalgia towards Catholicism and with some hope that the two religions could exist side by side in the same world.

## Philosophical

Although the philosophical questions posed in *Hamlet* are ones eternally faced by humanity, the process of answering them are a reflection of Shakespeare's time. The characterisation of Hamlet as a university student allows the play to explore the humanist philosophy of the period, which Hamlet would be studying. Humanism in the Renaissance aimed to understand the full capabilities of humanity and lead to the betterment of society. Humanists believed in the importance of education and the concept of the individual. However, by the end of the Renaissance, humanist thinking became more sceptical, arguing that human knowledge was flawed and limited. This scepticism is reflected in the play as Hamlet is unable to see humanity as good, but evil. Furthermore, sceptical humanism argued that truth is not easily found nor understood. In the play, Hamlet's understanding of the world is shown to be opaque, despite his skills of rhetoric and reasoning.



# KEY CHARACTER PROFILES

## Hamlet

Hamlet is the son of the late King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude, and Prince of Denmark.

Hamlet is one of four revenging sons in the play. The other three, Laertes, Fortinbras and Pyrrhus (the play within the play) are sworn to avenge their father's deaths and set out to do so with absolute conviction. They function as a series of counterpoints to our procrastinating hero, each offering a slightly different perspective – the bloodthirsty savagery of Pyrrhus, the pragmatic ruthlessness of Fortinbras and the thoughtless action of Laertes, set against thoughtful inaction of Hamlet. But it is too simple to say their easy access to violence is the reason Hamlet seems to us more humane. His extraordinary sense of three-dimensional humanity reveals itself in countless ways, not least in his inherent contradictions.

We do not always like Hamlet and at times he alienates us deeply but every one of us recognises our feelings, doubts, pressures and impulses in his. We attach ourselves to him because he is funny, daring, frank and has that rarest ability to witness his own mind at work, to 'overhear' himself and expose his conscience to us.

Shakespeare's play expands the genre of 'revenge tragedy' well beyond its natural bounds and explores the moral, political and social mood of his entire age. The title character is the vehicle for this epic exploration. Academic Harold Bloom argues Hamlet can't kill his uncle because he simply bursts the seams of such a simple story – "Avenging a father does not require a Hamlet" (Bloom, 1990). So Hamlet's story occupies itself with more interesting ideas. His focus is at least as much on the women in his life and on the concept of death as it is on his father and the crime he must avenge.

Hamlet's identity as a student of Germany's Wittenberg University is carefully defined by Shakespeare early in the play, laying the ground for the depth of his philosophical contemplation as the saga unfolds. Wittenberg was the seat of 'humanist' thought. The 'humanist' is optimistic that human understanding has endless scope and that the power of thought can be developed toward a full understanding of the *purpose* of life. *Thought* can therefore become *action* as we learn 'how to act' in our daily lives to benefit society. Hamlet is usually blindly referred to as a humanist but this may be a fundamental misunderstanding of the character. He vigorously debates ethics, metaphysics and human behaviours throughout the play but it can be argued that he grows to reject humanism. He replaces his search for wisdom and insight with the thought that life in fact has no purpose, and an acceptance that death cannot be understood, only experienced. Bloom says that Hamlet comes to recognise that "no act but suicide is rational" (1990, p4). In his most famous speech he debates the merits of "thought" and "action" and finds that the former poisons the latter, turning it "awry".

In many ways, *Hamlet* is the story of a young man we never get to know. When we meet him, his natural personality has already been eclipsed by circumstance and he will only plummet further into disillusionment as the play continues. He is a man of disappointed hopes and unrealised potential, as is recognised by many around him. Many scholars go so far as to say his life, and even his revenge, is a failure. Ophelia paints him in her memory as the very model of a courtier, soldier and scholar, "the glass of fashion and the mould of form, the observed of all observers" (Act 3, Scene 1). Claudius knows he is "loved of the distracted multitude" (Act 4, Scene 3). He is the "noble youth" (Act 1, Scene 5) of his father. Even Fortinbras believes he would have "proved most royal" (Act 5, Scene 2) on the throne of Denmark. Unfortunately the man we meet is "quite, quite down" (Act 3, Scene 1). But we do see glimpses of this 'former Hamlet' – loving, full of humour and zest for life. His initial reaction to seeing his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his sheer joy in welcoming the players to court and his egalitarian fascination with the gravedigger's trade remind us of how much this young man has been transformed by his ordeal.

He can no longer be who he was because he no longer believes in what "man" can be. He has lost faith in the image of people as being "noble in reason, infinite in faculty...in action, how like an angel, in apprehension, how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals..." (Act 2, Scene 2). He, with the rest of us, is merely a "quintessence of dust" (Act 2, Scene 2) and this bleak instinct reveals itself to him very early in the play. He has lost faith in women through his mother's "frailty"; he has lost faith in the "stale and unprofitable uses of this world" (Act 1, Scene 2) and he argues that an individual will "take corruption" from the mere "stamp of one defect" (Act 1, Scene 4).

His great contradictions, such as his paralysis in revenging his father as opposed to his wild rashness at the 'wrong' moments, are what give the play its eternal appeal. He sets out to prove the word of a ghost – that in itself reveals a great deal about the problem of being 'Hamlet.'

## Claudius

Claudius is Hamlet's uncle, the brother of the late King Hamlet, and the new King of Denmark.

Typical of Shakespeare's great villains, Claudius is a thoroughly human, flawed, interesting, three-dimensional character; we like him against our better judgment and are excited in his presence.

Claudius is Hamlet's antagonist who, through a combination of his lust for power and his love for his brother's wife, has committed "the primal eldest" crime, "a brother's murder." (Act 3, Scene 3) He is contrasted starkly with his noble warrior brother as a shrewd and cunning political animal, and according to Hamlet he is a drunk and a man at the mercy of sensual impulses.

Claudius is a worthy opponent for Hamlet through his intelligence, his power of perception and his ability to manipulate language. Shakespeare gives him sophisticated rhetorical speeches that charm, persuade and overwhelm those around him. His first speech (Act 1, Scene 2) to the court magnificently deals with a major personal controversy (his marriage), a major political threat (Norway) and the requests of two significant courtiers (Laertes and Hamlet) with effortless skill. He charismatically greets and employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He instinctively recognises Hamlet is not mad. He holds a personal discourse of forgiveness with God in the chapel that shows a very honest self-knowledge and his easy manipulation of the furious Laertes makes him seem impenetrable. What panache must he have displayed to woo Gertrude, still in mourning for his own brother! His charms are given extraordinary emphasis by Shakespeare.

He stifles all attempts at maternal feeling from his wife toward her son and is profoundly selfish, disregarding the danger Gertrude was in when he hears of Polonius' murder. And again, offering only a feeble "Gertrude, do not drink" (Act 5, Scene 2) when she picks up the poisoned goblet during the duel. But his affection for Gertrude and desire to preserve her feelings also sees him make the mistakes that condemn him. He tells Laertes that Gertrude is "so conjunctive to my life and soul, that as the star moves not but in his sphere, so I could not but by her" (Act 4, Scene 7) and some of his actions reflect a truth in that. He could have disposed of Hamlet legally and publicly for the murder of Polonius, but Gertrude's desperate pleas will not allow it. Instead he tries an underhand political machination with the English King which fails. Again to ensure "that even his mother shall uncharge the practice and call it accident" (Act 4, Scene 7), he hatches a complex revenge for Laertes to carry out, rather than let him simply attack and kill Hamlet. Again the margin for error exposes him and destroys him.

## Gertrude

Gertrude is Hamlet's mother, the wife of the late King Hamlet, and new wife of Claudius. She is the Queen of Denmark.

Gertrude is the enigma at the heart of *Hamlet*. For a character that is so central to the entire action, she has comparatively little to say and reveals so little about herself. We cannot be certain about any of her relationships. Was she happy with her former husband, the warrior and empire builder? Is she part of the reason Claudius killed old Hamlet or did he marry her purely for the political safety it offers him. Was she an adulteress? Do her loyalties shift away from Claudius to Hamlet in the final scenes of the play? We do know that this fascinating woman is deeply loved by three very different and very remarkable men.

Many fine actors have seen these negotiations as opportunities rather than obstacles and created wonderfully interesting visions of the Danish Queen. In many cases, that involves making bold decisions early in the play where she actually doesn't say a great deal. Part of the challenge is that she only has three brief moments alone with her husband in the entire play, and these are generally moments of crisis. Otherwise they are always on public display, so as actor Michael Pennington points out, demonstrating her sexual appetite for him usually means "having them jump on each other in public in a most unstatesmanlike way". (Pennington, 1996)

The words of other characters often provide signposts to understanding. In Gertrude's case, the descriptions we receive of her come primarily from the bitter and jaundiced views of the son and husband she has betrayed. Shakespeare does not give us first hand evidence of her sexual licentiousness or lack of virtue.

It is what is unsaid that intrigues us. She has chosen to suppress a great deal of personal agony and shame in her remarriage, storing it away in her soul as "black and grained spots that will not leave their tinct" (Act 3, Scene 4). Hamlet's verbal daggers drag them mercilessly to the surface through his attack in the 'closet scene'. It is from this moment that her journey of self-knowledge begins. This may manifest itself in productions of the play through a shifting of loyalties and trust away from Claudius. "so we invent gestures of physical rejection, around and across the lines" (Pennington, 1996).

She is an experienced regal figure with natural authority, as she demonstrates in her easy diplomacy with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, her quip at Polonius for “more matter with less art” (Act 2, Scene 2), and her quick and accurate explanation of Hamlet’s wildness at Ophelia’s grave. So her public display is convincing. Privately however, she continues to suppress life’s more difficult emotions, refusing to acknowledge pain in herself or others, as she shows in refusing to speak with the mad Ophelia. But again, after the tragic drowning, her poise and control are remarkable, rendering a lyrical and moving account of Ophelia’s death that breaks Laertes. Her own death, often played as if she knows the cup is poisoned, again without support from the text, displays some sense of heroism and loyalty to her son. She uses her last breaths to warn Hamlet of the poisoned cup.

## The Ghost

The third figure in the royal love triangle is the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, the late King Hamlet.

Introduced as a terrifying figure “in arms”, he lives up to his aura in his first blunt exchange with Hamlet on the battlements. “Mark me...pity me not...so art thou to revenge” (Act 1, Scene 5) are the words of a man on a mission, refusing to admit any sentiment or paternal feeling to the situation. But the spectral warrior’s mask soon slips away to reveal a flesh and blood human being, frail, flawed and “honest” (Act 1, Scene 5).

The audience, through some of the most revealing and thrilling language in the play, like Hamlet, is exposed to a vision of utter torment. The fires of purgatory seem to hurt this man less than his brother’s crime and his wife’s decision to move on after his death – “O Hamlet what a falling off was there” (Act 1, Scene 5). He seems to soften as we learn of his emotional agony and perhaps is ignorant of the effect of the poisoning images of Gertrude’s incest in his son’s mind.

The Ghost urgently fulfils his objective to secure a promise of revenge from Hamlet. By the end of the scene there is a powerful and utterly convincing relationship between a father and son. The reality of their former living relationship or their family life is never made clear. Hamlet paints it as idyllic – “so loving to my mother that he might not betem (permit) the winds of heaven visit her face too roughly” (Act 1, Scene 2). But Gertrude interestingly offers no opinion whatsoever of her former life, not even responding to Hamlet’s long list of his father’s virtues in the closet scene. We get two other portraits of him. One of his militarism and skill – the “valiant” (Act 1, Scene 1) warrior defeating old Fortinbras in battle and slaying the “sleaded Polacks on the ice” (Act 1, Scene 1), takes us back to the Viking saga world from which the original play sprang. Hamlet carefully constructs the image of the loving, empathetic and wise King Gonzago, murdered in *The Mousetrap*.

Most academics argue that Shakespeare deliberately creates a medieval father giving his ‘modern’ philosopher son a task too thoughtlessly simple and primitive for him to carry out. The father and son, the armoured soldier and the student in desperate conversation on the misty battlements is one of the theatre’s great images.

## Polonius

Polonius is a royal advisor to the palace, and the father of Ophelia and Laertes.

Polonius is an interesting paradox – “We may act very foolishly and talk very sensibly, and there is no inconsistency in that.” (Hazlitt in Bloom, 1990). He fits the comic caricature of the petulant old busy body, the self-interested and foolish ‘pantaloon’, wanting to preserve his daughter’s virginity and his family name. In this guise, he provides some of the play’s best comedy, but he also explodes such clichés through his moments of humanity and the genuine danger he poses. He is not a harmless figure, he hurts others and is spectacularly hurt himself, and the destruction of his family is essential to play’s tragic shape.

Shakespeare’s audience would have recognised a clever and topical satirical portrait of William Cecil or Lord Burleigh, a cunning and powerful advisor to Queen Elizabeth. Polonius’ identity is more often equated with that of a prime minister in modern productions, within an elected and governing monarchy. He is certainly a key adviser to Claudius’ court and comes and goes freely from the seat of power. He even feels free to enter the Queen’s private chamber at 2am and tell her to “be round with” (Act 3, Scene 4) her son. Hamlet mercilessly mocks him and Claudius and Gertrude gently do the same, but he appears to have played a key role in the election of the new King. “The head is not more native to the heart...than is the throne of Denmark to thy father”, Claudius tells Laertes (Act 1, Scene 2).

He goes on to make some of the most significant decisions in the play – ending Ophelia’s burgeoning relationship, using her as a pawn to diagnose Hamlet’s madness, encouraging the King and Queen to attend the ‘Murder of Gonzago’, and spying on Hamlet in the closet. His death marks the climactic turning point of the

play. From that moment, the entire arc of revenge is tipped sideways and the subsequent whirlpool leads to the demise of almost every key figure in the play.

Polonius is an impulsive statesman and a bad parent. His dreadful decisions as a father are made more repulsive by his capacity for goodness. He can offer profound wisdom to his son – “to thine own self be true...” (Act 1, Scene 3) but then elaborately spy on him in France. He can recognise Hamlet’s love for Ophelia as deep and genuine, but only after he has sacrificed it brutally to prove his own theories. Does he really believe Hamlet’s role as Prince is ‘out of (Ophelia’s) star’ or was he simply testing the reality of their love? He doesn’t protect Ophelia from humiliation during the ‘play’ scene.

Shakespeare enjoys the dramatic irony of Polonius having played Julius Caesar at university – Shakespeare’s Roman play had been enacted very recently at the new Globe and the same actor surely played both roles. He extends the parallel by having the same actor who played Brutus stab Polonius in the closet scene. And finally, as Caesar’s spirit does, Polonius’ memory haunts the world of the play from that moment, poisoning his daughter’s mind and condemning his son to self-sacrifice.

## Ophelia

Ophelia is Polonius’ daughter and Hamlet’s love interest.

Ophelia is “a talent gasping in an airless household” (Pennington, 1996). She is filled with intelligence, has a keen wit as she shows with Laertes and is perhaps not as devoid of experience as is often suggested. Her songs and sharp cynicism in her mad scenes suggest that life and risk and the capacity for opinion have not entirely passed her by. She is certainly guilty of trusting too easily and of ‘obeying’ even when her instinct tells her not to. But, in the era of the play, what choice does she have?

Like Hamlet, we know we have missed out on something beautiful with Ophelia. She has warmth and tolerant maturity in response to her brother’s fear over her virginity. It is so typically heartbreaking, and in the spirit of tragedy, that a simple innocuous remark seals her destruction. Having already secured a promise from her, Laertes can’t leave it alone – “Ophelia, remember well what I have said to you” (Act 1, Scene 3) Polonius overhears this and asks what he has said and Ophelia’s world begins to collapse. She never has an opportunity to rebuild it. It is little wonder that she has buried so much of her personality in the presence of these men and the absence of a maternal ally. Pennington suggests that “madness is the safest place for Ophelia” (Pennington, 1996).

She falls victim to Hamlet’s profound distrust of women. Not only does he berate her brutally with pleas and orders to hide herself in a nunnery from the inevitable evils of being female; he also fails to trust her with his terrible dilemma. Horatio, his male friend, can share in the information Hamlet carries from the ghost, unfortunately Hamlet does not share this information with his girlfriend as well. Ultimately his pride at her rejection and the effect of his mother’s sexual freedom condemn Ophelia.

Her madness is dangerous and portentous. Her painless death no doubt comes as some relief to a king and queen under extreme pressure. Her insanity is among the greatest challenges to understanding and performance in the play. Its central theme, the death of her father and her handing out flowers with their accompanying meanings, is certainly the ritualisation of his death in place of the funeral he never had. But sexuality and her love for Hamlet appear to displace her grief and take it elsewhere – “young men will do it if they come to it, by cock they are to blame” (Act 4, Scene 5). No certain conclusions can be drawn from much of what she says but great tension and pathos is generated by it. Shakespeare’s skill and insight is revealed in Ophelia’s mental shifts, as she slips between thoughts of father, brother and lover as if they are one man. This offers a powerfully modern vision of a psychological disorder.

“The last we see of her, she is being thrown about in a grave, shouted over by two men” (Pennington, 1996), which fits her arc in the play but should not define it. In the freedom of her madness she says, “we know what we are, but know not what we may be” (Act 4, Scene 5), which seems a reasonable portrait of her story of love and loss in *Hamlet*.



## Laertes

Laertes is Polonius' son.

Laertes is established in immediate opposition to Hamlet from the opening of the play. Both young men have requested leave of the new King to return to their former lifestyles, in France and Wittenberg respectively. Status would suggest Hamlet's bid should be addressed first but Claudius skips him and offers generous and expansive permission to Laertes to let "time be thine and they best graces, spend it at thy will" (Act 1, Scene 2). Such largesse is then buried as he forcefully insists Hamlet remain "here, in the cheer and comfort of our eye" (Act 1, Scene 2).

When we next meet Laertes, the fateful opposition between the two men deepens. From his perspective on the nature of men's sexual appetites, he advises his sister to reject Hamlet's advances, which he calls a "fashion and a toy in blood" (Act 1, Scene 3). Moments later we hear the same controlling and mistrustful voice from his father, rejecting Ophelia's desperate claims that Hamlet's love is of "honourable fashion" (Act 1, Scene 3).

Later, it is Ophelia who re-introduces Laertes to the story. In her madness after Polonius' death, she offers the King and Queen a dangerous premonition – "my brother shall know of it" (Act 4, Scene 5). Almost on cue, Laertes successfully breeches Claudius' court and with huge popular support has the capacity to achieve outright revolution. Claudius' diplomatic entreaties barely manage to calm him before Ophelia's entrance serves to "dry up [his] brains" (Act 4, Scene 5). Her death stalls Laertes' wave of revenge and his passion and affection for his sister is movingly portrayed in his attempts to communicate with her, "O rose of May, dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia" (Act 4, Scene 5). At her graveside he achieves a genuine and heroic passion for her, begging to be buried with her.

Shakespeare uses Claudius to demonstrate the different capacities for revenge in the play's two young heroes. Hamlet could not cut a man's throat in the church. Laertes can do so without hesitation. Hamlet can instinctually recognise when someone is playing games with him. Laertes, consumed by emotional fury, is easily manipulated by the King to kill Hamlet against his conscience and his natural instinct for honour.

Productions can do much with the question of why Laertes, apparently the far superior swordsman, is so easily defeated by Hamlet in early rounds of the fight. Is his mind made hazy with the ugly deception he is practising on Hamlet? Is he allowing Hamlet to win in order to ensure he gets to drink early in the fight and seal his fate? Either way, the "unbated and envenomed" (Act 5, Scene 2) sword does the trick but at the cost of Laertes' conscience. He is easily disarmed, struck and, in dying, desperately begs Hamlet's forgiveness, placing the blame squarely with Claudius. Shakespeare is at pains to reinforce the young man's essential goodness.

## Horatio

Horatio is Hamlet's closest friend.

"Without Horatio, Hamlet is forbiddingly beyond us." (Bloom, 1990) Traditionally, Laertes and Fortinbras serve as contrasts to Hamlet. Horatio's importance to the story is often neglected. He introduces and finishes the story. He matches Hamlet's intelligence and humanist philosophical cynicism. We trust him and disbelieve and then believe in the Ghost through his eyes. He brings his friend the news with the sincerity and sensitivity that comes to mark every aspect of his behaviour. From the outset then, Horatio's rational thinking and action, his stoic emotional balance and his cool-headed appreciation of justice superbly counterweight Hamlet's capacity for rashness, emotional overstatement and cruelty.

Horatio is the unflinchingly loyal and self-sacrificing best friend that Shakespeare uses in so many of his plays.

Horatio's attitude to Hamlet reflects ours undergoing a subtly complex series of changes. His dialogue with the audience is highly personal without an actual soliloquy. We gauge so much through Horatio's silent observation and delicate intrusion into events.

His radar for danger peaks whenever Hamlet's "wild and whirling" (Act 1, Scene 5) passions start to consume him. He warns his friend that the Ghost may "tempt him toward the flood" (Act 1, Scene 4), he is bewildered that Hamlet will not trust him with the Ghost's words (eventually, he clearly does tell Horatio all). Horatio promises to observe Claudius' guilt during *the Mousetrap* and no doubt watches with some despair as a crazed Hamlet almost sabotages the whole event. It is an exquisitely judged piece of writing when Hamlet assumes Claudius' guilt has been revealed to all at the climax of the play-within-a-play'. He asks Horatio if he saw it – "Very well my lord...I did very well note him, my lord" (Act 3, Scene 2) is the entirely ambiguous response. Horatio's methodical instinct is wary of trusting an experiment where the scientist's hands deliberately contaminate the sample in order to achieve preconceived results.

Horatio brings Ophelia's agony to the audience. He administers Hamlet's return from sea and is aware that although his friend seems more controlled that there is something morbidly amiss with him. Hamlet's new fascination with the dead and physical decay troubles Horatio – "it is to consider too curiously to consider so my lord" (Act 5, Scene 1). He is no doubt appalled by Hamlet's outburst at Ophelia's funeral but is probably not surprised. Hamlet has already movingly expressed to Horatio that he holds him "in his heart's core" because he is "not passion's slave" (Act 3, Scene 2). In contrast, it is not difficult to recognise that Hamlet is "a pipe for fortune's finger to sound what stop she please" (Act 3, Scene 2). The news that Hamlet has left Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to a cunning slaughter shocks and splinters the pair momentarily as Horatio's instinct for restraint and justice kicks in. As always, he says little ("So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to't" – Act 5, Scene 2) but two things give away his attitude here. One is Hamlet's reaction to Horatio's restraint – "why man they did make love to this employment" (Act 5, Scene 2). The other the exceedingly rare moment of judgemental anger that bursts from Horatio – "Why what a king is this?" (Act 5, Scene 2).

The ugliness of the whole drama appals and bewilders Horatio, finally forcing his momentary loss of control when he attempts to drink the poison. Talked down from the ledge, he becomes the custodian of Hamlet's story. "In this harsh world", he will draw his "breath in pain" (Act 5, Scene 2) to tell Hamlet's tale. We can be certain of Horatio's faith in this respect by the knowledge that we are hearing Hamlet's story.

### Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Hamlet's school friends are an interesting tale in themselves. Often dismissed by directors and critics as selfish sycophants or comic stooges, they certainly display elements of both behaviours. They don't appear to be Wittenberg colleagues as is often assumed. They are school friends from a younger age and certainly lack Horatio's philosophical university intelligence. But the journey Shakespeare creates for them makes remarkable psychological sense. As always, even his smaller characters are real human beings and to reduce them beyond that is to damage the play.

Understanding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern basically means considering their actions from two different perspectives – theirs and Hamlet's. They are ordered by the King and Queen of Denmark to come to Elsinore, where after an enthusiastic welcome, Hamlet's mother and step-father offer an utterly convincing portrait of parental concern for a desperately unhappy son. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have heard Hamlet is mad – his parents confirm this for them and they are given the opportunity, indeed, the honour and trust, of trying to help. What is their crime so far? They approach a man in a deep depression, considered mad, and within moments he is speaking of Elsinore as a prison and of "bad dreams" (Act 2, Scene 2). They know nothing of murder or ghosts or revenge. Hamlet asks if they have been sent for and they falter. Why? They do not wish their friend to think they are only here under orders. There is no reason to believe they do not care for Hamlet and they do not want him to read the situation as a set-up. After all, it is not a set-up of theirs and they do not know Claudius is a villain. We also never see any evidence of them craving or spending a reward. But their initial lie condemns them.

It is a beautifully and absurdly constructed tragedy of misunderstanding. Hamlet expected solidarity from them, to side with him and do in the King. But they, quite rightly, think the King is kind and caring and that Hamlet is losing it. What can they do? Hamlet then behaves with savage bitterness toward them and with brutal ugliness to Ophelia and his mother at *the Mousetrap* forcing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to align themselves with the family and give the rude Prince a ticking off. Then he murders his girlfriend's father, confirming their fears of madness and they agree to take him to England. It is absurd to argue they know the letter is a death-warrant. Shakespeare would ensure that we know they know. Hamlet, who has been operating from an entirely self-centred perspective, decides they are guilty and kills them. Their deaths are significant, hence they are reported to us twice, shocking Horatio particularly. It is supposed to hurt us too. Their confused, very human journeys are examples of the innocent collateral damage of great tragedy.

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 1

### ANTITHESIS

#### Reading and Writing

Antithesis is one of Shakespeare's favourite dramatic devices. It refers to the use of words or phrases that are the opposite of each other. Antithesis is the key to understanding Hamlet and his struggle in this play.

Shakespeare presents opposites or contradictions by balancing opposing words and statements in a sentence, by building strongly contrasting images in the audience's mind, and by establishing characters and situations that directly oppose each other.

Consider the following:

- Fortinbras' and Laertes' actions of revenge are the antithesis of Hamlet's inaction.
- Old King Hamlet in contrast to Claudius
- The honesty of Hamlet's grief over his father's death contrasts with the fake grief of the court.
- Death for Hamlet is both a consummation devoutly to be wish'd and a place of dread.
- His distrust of women produces an antithetical argument, that beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd, than honesty can transform beauty into his likeness.
- His mother's marriage vows are false as dicer's oaths.

Antithesis is the device in the play to create conflict and drive the action of the plot.

Elsinore should be a civil world, but it is filled with horror. It is little wonder that Hamlet's fundamental question – "To be or not to be" – is one of antithesis and that the only solution he can find is also one of antithesis – "I must be cruel only to be kind".

#### Read through the following passages:

1. Claudius' speech to court and his speech to Hamlet (Act 1 Scene 2)
2. Hamlet's first soliloquy (Act 1 Scene 2)
3. Polonius can barely speak without revelling in antithesis, a clue to us that he sees the world in black and white, rather than in complex, human terms. Examine his scene with the King and Queen (Act 2 Scene 2)
4. Ophelia's speech (Act 3 Scene 1)

In each excerpt highlight the words and phrases used to create antithesis.

#### **Extension Activity**

What would be the effect if you re-wrote these words or phrases using the opposite first. For example: I must be kind to be cruel.

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 2

### THE PLAY'S THE THING

#### Creative Writing

Shakespeare borrowed most of his plots from existing plays, novels or stories, fusing them with real events happening in his world – political change, religious division, war, morality. Consequently hundreds of modern scripts have built directly on Shakespeare's plays, adapting, reworking and commenting on them. Approaching a scene from a Shakespeare play and rewriting or adapting it is a very effective way to develop a deeper understanding of how the scene works. In this task, you will analyse and re-imagine one of the most dramatic scenes in *Hamlet* and produce a contemporary script that captures the central tensions and ideas of the original scene.

Choose and carefully read ONE of the following scenes using only the section prescribed:

- Act 1 Scene 5      The Ghost and Hamlet
- Act 2 Scene 2      Hamlet meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
- Act 3 Scene 1      Hamlet and Ophelia
- Act 3 Scene 4      Hamlet with Gertrude and Polonius
- Act 4 Scene 5      Ophelia's madness

#### Makes notes on the following:

- What is the major conflict? Be specific about what each character 'wants'.
- How does the relationship between the characters change by the scene's end?
- In what moments does Shakespeare use strong imagery and antithesis. Why? What effect might he wish to have on the audience in that moment?
- What is the setting of the scene and what possibilities does that offer you?
- Who drives the pace of the scene and does the driver change?
- What is unsaid? What important information do they conceal from each other
- What's at stake for the characters?
- What excites you about the scene? Why does it interest you?

#### The Task

Write a contemporary version of the scene.

This does not mean you have to simply paraphrase it line by line.

Be creative and tackle the overall scene completely anew, reshaping it as you please.

#### Your freedoms:

You may use any setting, any length, any style, any additional support characters

#### Your restrictions:

You must maintain the central conflict and relationship, find an interesting balance between poetic images and colloquial language, avoid swearing unnecessarily, create a logical and effective structure to the storytelling.

#### Tips:

Be dramatic but write truthfully. Get to the heart of what the scene is about. Keep your audience interested and don't create predictable action.

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 3

### USING THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA IN PERFORMANCE

#### Practical Drama

The opening scene of *Hamlet* is a brilliant example of Shakespeare's manipulation of the elements of drama to create conflict, tension, atmosphere and engagement for the audience.

In your small group (3-4 students), read Act 1 Scene 1.

Work together to answer the following questions:

#### Tension

Look at these moments to identify how Shakespeare establishes tension:

1. Francisco is on stage first but doesn't speak first. How does Shakespeare jolt the audience right from the outset?
2. Two opposing opinions are expressed before The Ghost appears. What are they and how does Shakespeare use Horatio to create conflict?
3. What different types of characters are we watching and how does the difference aid the tension?
4. The Ghost's appearance comes mid-sentence – why is that good stagecraft?
5. How do the characters raise the stakes when The Ghost appears a second time?
6. How does the tension finally break for the characters?

#### Focus

The scene exists to frighten and unsettle the audience. The physical appearance of The Ghost may achieve some of that. Whether you use a visible or imagined ghost, what or who must be the focus to help the audience truly empathise and feel the terror of the scene?

#### Mood/atmosphere and language

What mood is Shakespeare trying to create and how does he do it? Examine the language and stagecraft carefully for evidence.

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 3 (CONTINUED)

### Movement

Shakespeare gives you almost every necessary movement in the scene.

1. Why does he contrast stillness with action?
2. Mark in your script where characters sit and where they stand. How does the stillness and sitting help the acting of the scene?
3. Identify and track the movements and actions of The Ghost from the language.

### Pace and rhythm

1. How and why does Shakespeare change the pace of the scene?
2. Identify where the pace accelerates rapidly and slows down. (Hint: Lines 1-22 are a rapid-fire rhythm – how is that made clear to the actors? Then what happens next?)

### Symbolism

1. The Ghost's return has symbolic meaning for the state of Denmark, what does it represent?
2. Its costume, in full 'warlike' armour, is also symbolic, how?

### Extension activity – Performance

Using your evidence, set up a space and perform the scene, making sense of its dramatic elements. Francisco may double as The Ghost or you may simply imagine The Ghost. You may also make any cuts necessary to Horatio's long speeches. Be bold and clear.

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 4

### SPEAKING FOR YOURSELF

#### Analysis

A soliloquy is a speech made by a single character, conveying their innermost thoughts directly to an audience. Recognising how these speeches work is critical to your understanding of *Hamlet*.

A soliloquy is effective in conveying information about characters because:

- it provides an audience with an emotional x-ray of the character
- it is an inclusive experience for an audience, it invites us into the world of the play
- it deconstructs for us what has just happened or is about to happen

Working initially in pairs, read the following soliloquies and choose the one that interests you most:

1. Hamlet – Act 1 Scene 2: *O that this too too solid flesh would melt ...*
2. Hamlet – Act 2 Scene 2: *O what a rogue and peasant slave am I ...?*
3. Hamlet – Act 3 Scene 1: *To be or not to be, that is the question ...*
4. Claudius – Act 3 Scene 3: *O my offence is rank, it smells to heaven ...*

With your partner, note and identify the use of the following techniques in every soliloquy:

- **Situation**

Use your 'fundamental questions' to identify the given circumstances.

- **What is the central argument of the speech?**

Every speech is a debate. It offers a central statement or question early on, then sets about arguing and debating it from a number of points of view, finally settling on some sort of conclusion. Clearly mark in your speech these different 'beats'. These define the conflict of the speech.

- **Questions**

The character asks him/herself, and therefore the audience, a series of questions that allow the speech to keep moving on to new ideas. Mark them.

- **Lists**

Every speech involves a listing of ideas that build logically on each other. They help drive the energy and rhythm of the speech. Note how lists are used.

- **Images**

Circle and create a mental (or even a drawn) picture of the images the character describes in the speech. There will be many powerful thought-pictures.

- **Stakes**

How much does it matter? What is at stake for the character? Play the stakes.

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 5

### PIRATES A'HOY!

#### *Creative Thinking and Practical Drama*

Shakespeare is perhaps the only writer who, with the possibility of having a scene with pirates, decides to push the action offstage. Hamlet comes into contact with the pirates after he has been exiled from the court by Claudius to England in order to have him killed. Hamlet, however, manages to escape the ship bound for England by jumping ship in a battle with the pirates. In the following passage, Hamlet details to Horatio his experience with the pirates in a letter:

*[Reads.] Horatio, when thou shalt have overlooked this, give these fellows some means to the King. They have letters for him. Ere we were two days old at sea, a pirate of very warlike appointment gave us chase. Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compelled valour, and in the grapple I boarded them. On the instant, they got clear of our ship; so I alone became their prisoner. They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy, but they knew what they did: I am to do a turn for them. Let the King have the letters I have sent, and repair thou to me with as much speed as thou wouldst fly death. I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb; yet are they much too light for the bore of the matter. These good fellows will bring thee where I am. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hold their course for England; of them I have much to tell thee. Farewell. He that thou knowest thine,  
Hamlet.*

Act 4 Scene 7

Students should take time to read the above passage, making sure that they know the meaning of all the words and the sense of all the phrases.

1. Have the students consider the possibilities why Shakespeare decided to have this action offstage.
2. Place students in groups of four and have them go through the passage, and discuss how Hamlet comes to escape the ship and then what happens with the pirates.
3. Have students write their own five minute scene depicting Hamlet's experience.
4. Have the groups perform their scene to the class.



# HAMLET

## THEMATIC CONCERNS

### ***Delay and inaction***

Hamlet's (in)action is what spurs the play's plot. Hamlet's quandary arises from his constant fluctuations between deciding to "act" (kill Claudius and avenge his father's murder) or instead, question the implication and meaning of such impulses. As soon as Hamlet is confronted by the ghost, he realises that he is performing the plotline of a revenge tragedy. Unfortunately for Hamlet, all Elizabethan revenge tragedies end in the death of the revenger (such as in *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, a possible source for Hamlet). Hamlet knows that by taking on that role, he won't have a happy ending. Hamlet's hesitancy also arises from moral and religious issues: how can he retain the purity of his soul through murder?

Characterised as the archetypal student, Hamlet understands his world through the context of the university. As Coleridge writes, Hamlet is a "sensitive man paralysed into inaction by the sheer capacity for thought." (in Bate et al, 2007). After the Ghost first speaks to Hamlet, he declares:

*Yea, from the table of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past  
That youth and observation copied there  
And thy commandment all along shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain  
Unmixed with baser matter.*  
(Act 1, Scene 5)

Hamlet can only understand his duty by ordering it within his sense of self as a student. However, Hamlet is still eaten up by guilt for his fecklessness. He chastises himself:

*Why, what an ass am I: this is most brave,  
That I, the son of a dear murdered,  
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words*  
(Act 2, Scene 2)

When Hamlet does take action, however, it is of a very random and rash nature, such as when he mistakenly kills Polonius in the 'Closet Scene'. It is only very late in the play that Hamlet concludes that he must take proper action instead of create useless scenarios (such as *The Mousetrap*) or only philosophise. In his final soliloquy, "How all occasions do inform against me / And spur my dull revenge" (Act 4, Scene 4), Hamlet finally resolves to take action: "O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or nothing worth." (Act 4, Scene 4). Hamlet comes to accept the need for action in order to resolve the revenge tragedy he finds himself living.

### ***Moral corruption***

Along with his many other fixations, Hamlet constantly returns to images of disease and rot, which frames the play's theme of moral corruption. Not only a character study, Hamlet is a meditation upon power's ability to corrupt one's morals. Using pathetic fallacy (the technique of attributing human emotion to aspects of nature), the disfiguring of the natural world comes to represent the rot at the heart of the Danish court. As the famous line goes, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." (Act 1, Scene 4)

In the Elizabethan era, the concept of the 'body politic' (a metaphor denoting the physical body of the monarch as well as the state; also known as "the King's two bodies") meant that a monarch's physical and emotional state was representative of their country. The disruption in Elsinore begins to spread out into the rest of Denmark, and can only be restored once the wound is cleaned by the coming of Fortinbras. This represents the restoration of the moral order. Claudius is the heart of the play's moral corruption, having killed the true king and

married his wife. Claudius will stop at nothing to retain his hold on power – even at the end of the play, Claudius manipulates Laertes into murdering Hamlet. Laertes uses the metaphor ‘contagion’ (Act 4, Scene 7) for the poison he will use to kill Hamlet. The disease of power has rotted away the court so much so that many of the protagonists commit high treason.

Hamlet, too, obsesses over corruption. He is revolted by the world and the people within it:

*‘tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely.  
(Act 1, Scene 2)*

The metaphors connected to this theme dominate the imagery of the play. Hamlet’s desire to cleanse the illness of the state, however, goes awry, as murder only begets murder. The continued corruption only comes to an end with the sad loss of the Hamlet line.

### **The power of the theatre**

*Hamlet* is a play about the theatre and performance, artifice, masks and the truths they conceal. It is worth considering here the significance of the newly built Globe Theatre in Southwark, where *Hamlet* was to be performed. Shakespeare’s plays written at the beginning of the seventeenth century make profound comments about the power of theatre itself, adopting self-reflexive meta-theatrical models as frameworks for the action.

Images of the theatre abound in the play, and lend themselves to questions of identity and action. Hamlet constantly ‘performs’ his identity to the court through his feigned madness. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the word ‘act’ appears 11 times in the play – this plays on Hamlet’s lack of ‘action’. By focussing on acting and performance, the play questions how an individual shows themselves to the world. Do we act as our true self or do we put on a face for an audience?

Early on in the play, Hamlet confronts Gertrude, arguing that his sadness over his father’s death is not a performance, “Seems’, madam – nay it is, I know not ‘seems.” (Act 1, Scene 2) Hamlet tells Gertrude that he is what he appears to be. However, later in the play, Hamlet struggles with not being able to sustain this role and develop it into vengeful action. After working with the actors – a scene filled with meta-theatre – Hamlet wishes he could act like the veteran actor who performed a monologue about the fall of Troy,

*What’s Hecuba to him, or he to her,  
That he should weep for her? What would he do  
Had he the motive and that for passion  
That I have?  
(Act 2, Scene 2)*

The plot of *Hamlet* reflects a faith in the power of theatre – “I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play... have proclaimed their malefactions” (Act 2, Scene 2) – Hamlet uses the players to prove his uncle’s guilt.

This theme also helps to reveal the motifs of role-playing and artifice in the play. Hamlet is aware almost immediately that he, a scholar and Humanist, has been cast in the role of a tragic revenger, a role he feels unfit to play – “O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right”, (Act 1, Scene 5). It is perhaps no surprise then that he chooses to alter his ‘mask’ and “put an antic disposition on” (Act 1, Scene 5) as he prepares to commit regicide. Claudius wears a mask of the caring uncle and generous king. As Hamlet says about him, “That one may smile and smile and be a villain” (Act 1, Scene 5). Finally, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, incapable of the sophisticated roles they are forced to play and operating without seeing a script loaded with subtext, die futile and preventable deaths.

## Gender

The women of *Hamlet* receive the short end of the stick. Hamlet comes to see women as the epitome of immorality and unfaithfulness, and projects upon Gertrude and Ophelia his inner crisis and fears of deception. Even in critical responses to the play, Gertrude is totally condemned for her marriage to Claudius. However, perhaps consider what the implications would have been for a woman who has lost husband and must protect the future of her son the prince.

Hamlet fixates upon the sexuality of his mother, which he links to the corruption of Elsinore. As Knight has written, "Love, in his mind, has become synonymous with sex, and sex with uncleanness." (1930) Hamlet imagines his mother's sexuality and constantly refers back to the marriage bed, "O most wicked speed! To post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets" (Act 1, Scene 2). He also believes that her marriage to Claudius was purely based on lust, "Frailty, thy name is woman" (Act 1, Scene 2). As the play proceeds, Hamlet constantly harangues his mother and crosses the boundaries of appropriateness. Hamlet's treatment of Gertrude, not to mention Ophelia, shows how out of touch he is with his world. However, Hamlet's misogynist tirades also serve to highlight some of the extreme beliefs held about women in the early modern period.

From early on in the play, Ophelia is shown to be a helpless pawn in the corrupt game of men. Ophelia suffers from the start at the hands of the two men closest to her. Polonius and Laertes purport to have her best interests at heart but irrevocably reduce her prospects, her personality, and her freedom through their profound lack of faith in her instinct for love, friendship and happiness. She is forced to deny her love for Hamlet and accede to her father's wishes, "I shall obey my lord" (Act 1, Scene 3). Hamlet too has no empathy for Ophelia's plight, especially seen in his misogynist tirade, "Get thee to a nunnery" in Act 3, Scene 1. Hamlet accuses Ophelia, and women as a whole, of deception, "God hath given you one face and you make yourself another" (Act 3, Scene 1). For Hamlet, women are emblematic of a capacity for lies and artifice. However, Hamlet never takes time to consider that Ophelia and Gertrude are just as trapped within a social hierarchy as himself.

## Mortality

Many philosophical concerns of *Hamlet* are based on questions of religion, spirituality, and the meaning of existence. These ideas weave into each other, creating the complexity of Hamlet's views towards life and death. For Hamlet, life ceases to have meaning which leads him to consider suicide as a way to end his troubles. The contemplation of suicide becomes more complex when one takes into account Shakespeare's religious context: Hamlet is a mix of both Catholic and Protestant doctrines, which problematise Hamlet's response to death.

Unlike other revenge heroes, Hamlet spends much time considering the implications of his actions and the meaning of death. Hamlet's characterisation in this manner is first revealed to the audience in the opening lines of his first soliloquy:

*O that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,  
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.  
(Act 1, Scene 2)*

It is clear that Hamlet yearns for death, wishing that he would simply melt away from the earth. Furthermore, it seems that Hamlet would commit suicide if it were not considered a religious sin. This idea is further explored in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy (Act 3, Scene 1), where Hamlet puts forward the arguments for and against death. Hamlet has lost a sense of meaning which gives worth to his life, leading him to question the point of existence. Despite his desire for death, he ultimately concludes that suicide isn't worth the risk considering the unknowability of the afterlife:

*But that the dread of something after death  
(The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns) puzzles the will  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of.  
(Act 3, Scene 1)*

Hamlet's search for the meaning of existence is also revealed in the 'Gravedigger' scene (5.1), where Hamlet is made to consider the point of life once confronted with Yorick's skull. Hamlet cuts to the quick when he reveals his nihilistic view of life, "Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam" (Act 5, Scene 1). Hamlet is so concerned with the philosophy of life and death that he is unable to live in the present.

## Revenge

*Hamlet* is self-consciously written as a 'revenge tragedy', an extremely popular genre during Shakespeare's time, which involved the destiny of a hero being mapped out by his need to defeat his opponent. *Hamlet* sets itself apart from the rest of the genre by questioning the implications of the revenge tragedy form. Hamlet's hesitancy to take on the role of the avenger allows Shakespeare to show the effect the threat of violence has upon the human psyche. In reality, the prospect of murder creates a lot more problems than a revenge tragedy purports it solves.

The theme of revenge is very much bound up with family honour and duty. When the Ghost first speaks to Hamlet, he makes it clear that he wants to have his murder avenged, telling Hamlet that it is his filial duty to do so, "If thou didst ever thy dear father love... Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder!" (Act 1, Scene 5). Although Hamlet is quick to throw down the gauntlet and take on the role of avenger, as the play progresses, he cannot bring himself to murder. Hamlet has plentiful opportunity to kill Claudius, such as when he finds him praying. However, he decides not to because if he kills Claudius after his prayers, he will go to heaven instead of hell:

*A villain kills my father, and for that  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
To heaven.  
(Act 3, Scene 3)*

Shakespeare creates a foil to Hamlet's character through Fortinbras and Laertes, two sons who have no inhibitions when it comes to revenge in the names of their fathers. Fortinbras brings his army to Denmark in order to take the throne after it was stolen from his father, and Laertes eventually kills Hamlet in revenge for his father's murder. In *Hamlet*, revenge is not shown to be a noble pursuit or a way to 'wipe clean' the moral slate. Instead, it is problematised to show the ongoing effects of violence.

## Madness

Madness, a major theme in *Hamlet*, is part of the play's representational strategy of creating questions about performance, masks, and the effect of moral corruption and emotional devastation. Hamlet's 'madness' has generated much critical analysis and explanation as viewers of the play ask themselves: what kind of sane person would pretend to be mad?

After Hamlet meets the ghost, he tells Horatio and Marcellus that *he will put an antic disposition on* (Act 1, Scene 5) as a way to buy himself time and conduct his investigations of the court without raising too much suspicion about his true motive. A mad character in early modern theatre is free to speak unbridled truth, to uncover falsehoods in the body politic and in interpersonal relationships.

Hamlet spends much time justifying that he is not actually mad, but only pretending to be so, as he says to Gertrude, "I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft." (Act 3, Scene 4) Despite this, he acts erratically throughout the play such as when he verbally abuses Ophelia during his "Get thee to a nunnery" speech. Furthermore, it is clear that Hamlet is suffering from depression or 'melancholy' as it was known in the Elizabethan era, then thought of as a type of madness in it of itself.

Hamlet's impression of madness is contrasted against the real trauma of Ophelia. After being controlled by her relatives, Hamlet's toying with her and finally, Hamlet's murder of Polonius, she succumbs to emotional and psychological devastation. Ophelia is a "document in madness" (Act 4, Scene 5). In her mad scenes, she ritualises her father's death through word and song and expresses her anxieties about the treatment of women's sexuality. Furthermore, Ophelia's madness allows her to speak her desires and sadness freely, as the court environment previously did not allow her to voice her true emotions. Ophelia's madness generates pathos in the court and she becomes the human face of the effects of the moral corruption which permeates Elsinore.

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## POST-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 1

### ANTIC DEPOSITIONS

#### *Critical Thinking and Speaking*

A recurring question through *Hamlet* is the state of Hamlet's psychological state. Is he, or is he not, mad? Hamlet spends much of the play telling the other characters that he is not mad, just pretending to be mad. Such as when he says to Gertrude, "I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft." (Act 3 Scene 4) However, Hamlet's behaviour continues to be erratic and depressive when he is alone. It may be that Hamlet eventually comes to take on the mad persona that he creates.

It is up to the classroom to finally put the debate to rest and decide whether Hamlet is or is not mad through a mock trial.

#### *Classroom Debate*

1. Divide the class in three groups:
  - Group 1 will act as Hamlet's prosecutors (arguing he is mad)
  - Group 2 will act at Hamlet's defence (arguing he is sane)
  - Group 3 will act as the Judge and Jury
2. Give some time for each group to work on a strong case using evidence from the text in order to convince the Jury. The aim is to prove whether Hamlet is or is not sane.
3. Hold a debate in the classroom, with one member of Group 3 elected to judge the proceedings. Each group will present their case, be questioned by the Jury, and then give a final statement. Encourage all members of the group to speak on the matter.
4. Group 3 will then weigh by the arguments and summarise them for the class. They should put forward the most convincing points of each group. They will then present their findings to the class and announce whether they believe Hamlet to be sane or mad.

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## POST-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 2

### SEEMING IS BELIEVING

#### *Reading and Writing*

*Hamlet* as a play is concerned with the elements that make up a piece of theatre. The play constantly refers back to its status as a play. This is a technique known as 'metatheatre'. This motif helps to expose the play's interest in deception, masks and the performance of identity. This is also perhaps something to do with Shakespeare's career as an actor for the King's Men alongside his playwriting.

The following passage is one of the many instances in *Hamlet* that are metatheatrical. Hamlet is explaining to Gertrude and Claudius that he does not 'seem' to be mourning his father's death, but that this is how he truly feels:

*Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not 'seems.'*  
*'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,*  
*Nor customary suits of solemn black,*  
*Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,*  
*No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,*  
*Nor the dejected 'havior of the visage,*  
*Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,*  
*That can denote me truly: these indeed seem,*  
*For they are actions that a man might play:*  
*But I have that within which passeth show;*  
*These but the trappings and the suits of woe.*  
Act 1 Scene 2

Students should take the time to read the passage above, making sure that they know the meaning of all the words and the sense of all the phrases. Then answer the questions below using textual evidence...

5. What does Hamlet mean when he says 'seems'?
6. What elements of theatre does Hamlet allude to in his speech?
7. From this speech, how do you suppose early modern actors performed their roles?
8. What is the conflict between perceived and real emotion in this passage?

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## POST-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY THREE

### THE WOMEN - LANGUAGE AND INTERPRETATION

#### *Reading and writing*

As you will have recognised through reading and watching the play, Gertrude and Ophelia are absolutely central to Hamlet's tragic journey. They are elusive, enigmatic and fascinating characters, created by a playwright who recognises that people are contradictory, illogical and sometimes their behaviour cannot be easily explained. In this exercise you will closely examine both women as they appear on the page, their language and their motivations, and contrast it with the interpretations you saw on the stage in *Hamlet: Out Of Joint*.

#### **Preparation** (working individually or in pairs initially)

Read Ophelia's scenes and Gertrude's scenes. List the following:

- Within the action of the play, what choices do they make for themselves?
- What choices are made for them by others?
- To what extent or in what ways do they betray Hamlet?
- How does Hamlet betray them?
- List 3 examples of powerful 'imagery' in the language of the women that you believe captures an important aspect of their character and briefly explain why.

#### **Task: Individual written responses**

Answer the following short response questions, comparing and contrasting your own opinions (based on your personal analysis of the text) with what you perceived to be the interpretations offered by the two actors and their director in *Hamlet: Out Of Joint*. With each question, offer concrete examples of on-stage images and choices made by the actors/designers to reinforce your arguments. Essentially, do you agree with the choices made, based on the personal conclusions you have drawn?

#### **Ophelia**

1. How serious is the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia – have they already become lovers? If so, how does this raise the stakes for both characters? (Offer your personal opinion in comparison with the interpretation on stage)
2. Describe the relationship between Ophelia and her father, before and after her death. (Again compare and contrast interpretations)
3. Is Ophelia a weak heroine or a strong young woman in terrible circumstances?

#### **Gertrude**

1. Is Gertrude callous, selfish and unsympathetic in her treatment of her grieving son in the first court scene of the play (Act 1 Scene 2)? Offer your opinions on her remarriage and treatment of Hamlet in comparison to the choices made on stage by The Players.
2. Describe the love affair between Claudius and Gertrude? What do they want from each other or seem to offer each other? Are they a good couple?
3. Describe Gertrude's journey in the play. Do her loyalties change? If so, when and why?

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## POST-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 4

### THE SECRET LIFE OF HAMLET

#### *Reading and writing*

Shakespeare's characters remain so eternally fascinating to us because beneath the seemingly difficult and flowery language, and the extreme and often supernatural situations, they are simply well-drawn portraits of human beings. They think like us, they react like us, they have our flaws and insecurities, they suffer, they celebrate, their relationships are fuelled by the same emotions as ours, and they are unpredictable, surprising and inconsistent. They seem to have an inner life that extends beyond the page and the stage. In this task, you will empathise with and write from the perspective of a character from *Hamlet*.

What makes us care for the characters in *Hamlet*?

*Hamlet* is an outrageous story about kings, queens and princes, ghosts, swordfights, murders, madness, graveyard fights, pirates, philosophers and war. Most of these things are beyond our daily experience. But these extremes only operate to engage us on a narrative level. Our deeper emotional engagement is with much simpler and profoundly typical human dramas, things many of us have felt or will feel at some time in our lives;

- A boy who loses his father, a brother and sister who lose their father
- A boy angry with his mother for remarrying
- A boy whose friends let him down when he needs them
- A girl told she can't see her boyfriend by a controlling father
- A confusing break up
- A girl trying to express profound grief for her father and lover
- A man whose ambitions have pushed him to commit a crime
- A woman whose sexuality and freedom is continually judged by the men around her
- A loyal friend who can see his mate is 'losing it' but is powerless to stop it
- A boy asking himself if life is worth living and what death might be like
- Jealousy, lust, love, loss, grief, lies and the fragility of life.

Shakespeare observes these fundamental human feelings with such accuracy and they are what carry us along in the theatre. He does this through his control of language.

**Choose ONE character from the following:**

**OPHELIA or GERTRUDE or HAMLET or CLAUDIUS or HORATIO**

1. Write five journal entries (300 words each), charting the most significant aspects of your character's journey in the play. Be detailed, deeply personal in your perspective on the events happening to you. Use language to expose your inner life to the reader.
2. Within your journal, place an unsent letter (300-500 words), written by you to another character in the play, explaining what you wish you could say to them but cannot.



# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## POST-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 5

### THE 'CUNNING OF THE SCENE' (GROUP PERFORMANCE)

#### *Creative Thinking and Practical Drama*

Hamlet uses a 'play-within-a-play' to prove his uncle is guilty of murdering his father. He believes that people sitting at a play can by the very cunning of the scene be struck to the soul. Indeed, that is the very purpose of theatre and film. Actors telling a story have the ability to stir our emotions, shock, teach, appall, frighten and fill us with joy. Every production of *Hamlet* has the wonderful opportunity of devising a new and interesting way to present the play-within-a-play. The following exercise involves scripting, directing and performing your own version of Hamlet's famous *Mousetrap* to catch the conscience of the King.

#### *Preparation*

In groups of 4 to 6, re-read and understand the basic plot-line of *The Murder of Gonzago*, (starting Act 3 Scene 2). It, of course, provides an allegory or mirror to the plot of *Hamlet* itself. Hamlet wants to graphically restage the murder of his father (poisoned in the ear), but he also wants to attack and insult his mother for declaring her love for her first husband and then remarrying so soon after his death. It is pure shock theatre, designed to confront and stir its audience.

Shakespeare deliberately turns to an older form of narrative, poetic theatre to tell the story. You will notice the language is even more poetic and formal and structured than his writing normally is. To us in the 21st Century, Shakespeare's plays are themselves an older form of narrative, poetic theatre. A contemporary production of *Hamlet* can call upon an infinite variety of theatrical styles to present the *Mousetrap* and make it more accessible to a modern audience. As modern writers and directors in this exercise, you are free to completely rewrite *the Mousetrap* in any style, affording you a great opportunity to develop a brilliant script, explore a particular theatrical style, create immense tension and stage it powerfully. One of the major challenges for every production is where to place Claudius watching it – see if you can solve the challenge.

#### *The Task*

Work cooperatively. Your group performance should run between 4 to 6 minutes.

1. Choose the 'style' or 'form' of theatre you think will work most powerfully? Consider some of the theatre styles or practitioners you have studied – i.e. your *Mousetrap* might be Brechtian, Realist, Artaud, Physical Theatre and Dance, Kabuki, Commedia del'Arte, Multi-media, a blend of different styles etc. Brush up on the techniques/conventions of your style.
2. Write or devise a strong working script of your piece
3. Establish the space you need and the setting you are working in. Determine costumes
4. Perform for your peers. Note and evaluate the inventive styles your class presents.

# HAMLET: OUT OF JOINT

## POST-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 6

### OFF STAGE WORLD – THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

#### *Creative Thinking and Practical Drama*

With almost every play he wrote, Shakespeare took other stories, myths and plays that grabbed his imagination and bent them into a new shape. *Hamlet* draws upon older tales, contemporary Elizabethan plays and even local stories he knew of such as the drowning of a young girl (called Katherine Hamlett) near Stratford when he was 16. Shakespeare's plays have become an excellent springboard for new writers to create their own great stories, plays and films scripts. In fact, over 400 films are inspired by these plays, including *The Lion King*, which is based on *Hamlet*. This task offers two ways to use *Hamlet* as a springboard to the creation of your own performance work and can be particularly useful in the development of year group devised work.

#### **Task 1 – Off-Stage Reality**

An excellent way for actors and students to deepen their understanding of a play is to explore the off-stage world of the characters, the scenes we don't get to see that help define the relationships in the play. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead* is an exceptional example of such work. In pairs choose from the following possibilities (or come up with your own) and develop a short scene from it. Always create a strong scene of place or situation for the characters.

1. Hamlet is at Wittenberg. Devise the dramatic situation in which he learns of his father's death.
2. Gertrude has accepted Claudius' proposal of marriage. In this scene she breaks it to her son that she is remarrying and opens up about what her life was like with her previous husband.
3. The play is over and the comic Gravediggers have the entire royal court to bury – the King, Queen, Prince and Laertes. Explore their reaction and how they approach the work, including the epitaphs they devise for each headstone.
4. A young actor in a 2016 production of *Hamlet* is haunted by the ghost of Ophelia, imploring her to behave differently and make new choices. Stage the scene in which they first meet.

#### **Task 2 – Creating a new allegorical story**

In Groups of 3 to 6, devise a short Group Performance exploring a major theme or idea from *Hamlet* but in an entirely new and original context. For example: it may involve a young person's inability to carry out a task; a journey into the afterlife and back; a young woman controlled by her family; a view of madness; a spy operation on a dangerous royal.

You are not performing *Hamlet* but creating a modern story loosely based on *Hamlet's* thematic ideas. Be bold and dramatic.