



Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, has multiple woes. The ghost of his father haunts Elsinore; his uncle, Claudius, has married Queen Gertrude, his mother, and assumed the throne; and Fortinbras of Norway threatens Denmark with an invading army. When Hamlet meets the ghost, his dead father reveals that Claudius poisoned him—and the ghost demands that Hamlet exact revenge. In order to carry this out, Hamlet feigns madness; as part of his insanity, he scorns the affections of Ophelia, daughter of Polonius, to whom he had made romantic overtures. Polonius grows concerned over the apparent insanity that has beset Hamlet and reveals it to the King and Queen. Meanwhile, Hamlet struggles to convince himself that Claudius is the murderer of his father, and in an attempt to “catch the king’s conscience,” Hamlet convinces a traveling troupe of actors to perform a play in which the action closely resembles the events related to him by the ghost.

While Hamlet, judging the reaction of Claudius, is convinced of the new king’s guilt, he can’t bring himself to slay him outright. Instead, Hamlet rebukes Gertrude with the news that she is sleeping with the killer of her husband. Unfortunately, Polonius—who is hidden behind a tapestry in the Queen’s chamber, eavesdropping—panics and cries for help; Hamlet stabs him, thinking it is Claudius. Of course, when this news is given to Claudius, the King sends Hamlet to England with the ostensible purpose of securing Hamlet’s safety and the recovery of his senses. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two childhood friends of Hamlet’s who are now little more than spies for Claudius, are to accompany him. The trick is that Hamlet will bear a letter to the King of England in which Claudius asks England to sentence Hamlet to death.

In the midst of these events, Ophelia loses her own sanity; she is driven to madness by Hamlet’s condition and the death of Polonius. Laertes, her brother, returns to Elsinore from his studies and vows his vengeance upon Hamlet for what the prince has done to his family. News is brought that Hamlet has returned to Denmark, much to the surprise of Claudius, and that Ophelia has drowned herself in a river. Claudius now plots with Laertes to kill Hamlet upon his return to Elsinore. Meanwhile, Hamlet meets Horatio, his best friend, and tells how he altered the letter so that the execution order was for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead of him. At the end of Hamlet’s tale, Ophelia’s funeral procession enters, and Laertes and Hamlet confront one another. Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel.

This is all part of Claudius’s plot; instead of dull blades, Laertes will select a sharp one. In addition, Laertes is to poison the tip of his blade so that a wound will kill the prince. And, just in case the

previous measures are not enough, Claudius will keep a poisoned chalice from which Hamlet will drink. The plan goes awry from the beginning; Laertes is unable to wound Hamlet during the first pass. Between rounds, Gertrude raises a toast to Hamlet with the poisoned chalice. Then, in the heat of the duel, Laertes manages to wound Hamlet but loses the poisoned rapier to him, and Laertes himself is poisoned as well. Gertrude swoons to her death; Laertes falls and reveals the plot against Hamlet, telling him he has “not a half-hour’s life” in him. Enraged, Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned foil, then makes him drink from the chalice that slew Gertrude. This done, Hamlet collapses and dies in Horatio’s arms as Fortinbras enters the castle. Fortinbras is left to rule Denmark, as the entire royal family is dead, and he bids his men give Hamlet and the rest a proper funeral.

Dramatis Personae

Claudius, King of Denmark
Hamlet, Prince of Denmark; nephew of Claudius
Fortinbras, Prince of Norway
Horatio, friend of Hamlet
Polonius, Lord Chamberlain
Laertes, his son
Voltemand, a courtier
Cornelius, a courtier
Rosencrantz, a courtier
Guildenstern, a courtier
Osrice, a courtier
A Gentleman
A Priest
Marcellus, an officer
Bernardo, an officer
Francisco, a soldier
Reynaldo, servant to Polonius
A Captain
English Ambassadors
Players
Two Clowns, gravediggers
Gertrude, Queen of Denmark and mother of Hamlet
Ophelia, daughter of Polonius
Lords, Ladies, Officers, Soldiers, Sailors
Messengers, and Attendants
Ghost of Hamlet’s father