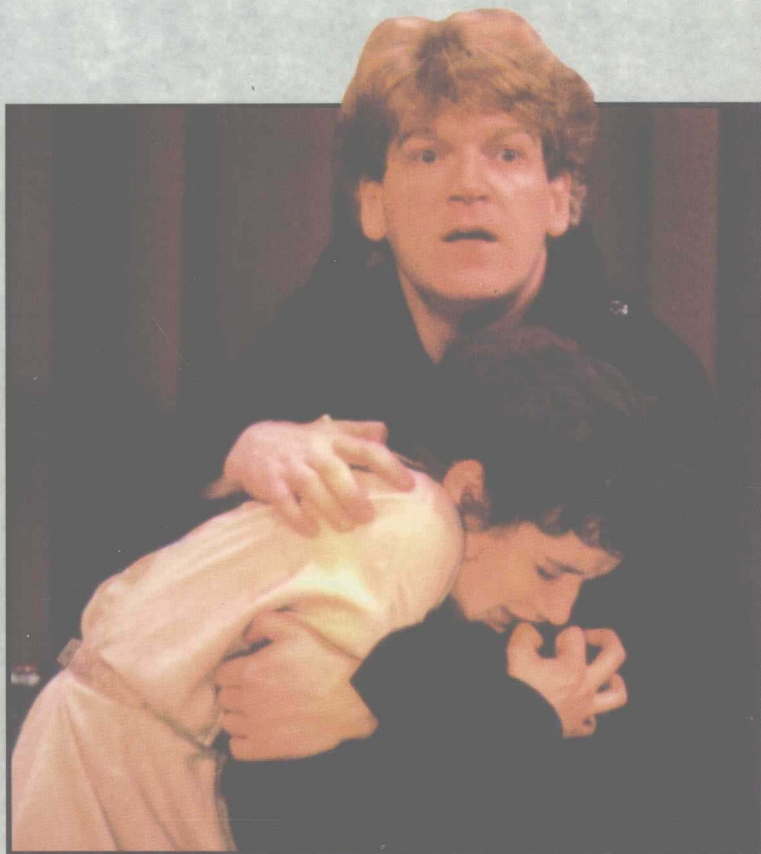


OXFORD SCHOOL

# *Shakespeare*



## HAMLET

哈姆雷特

外语教学与研究出版社

Oxford School Shakespeare

# Hamlet

## 哈姆雷特

edited by

Roma Gill

M.A. *Cantab.* B.Litt. *Oxon.*



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# Revenge!

or

## Getting Your Own Back

It's only natural—you hit me, I hit you back! It doesn't matter whether we are children quarrelling in the playground, or mighty nations fighting global warfare. The impulse to retaliate, to give tit for tat, is strong, and primitive, and human.

Most societies make rules to control this natural urge. In the Bible, we can read how the Jews of the Old Testament were instructed under the law of Moses to exact strict penalties for injuries: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life (Exodus, chapter 26). In the New Testament, however, Jesus taught Christians to love their enemies, and to 'turn the other cheek' to their assailants (St Luke, chapter 6).

For the well-being of any community, hidden injuries must be revealed, and wrongs must be punished. And there is in all of us, surely, a desire to see that justice is done, and that everyone gets what they deserve? In real life, of course, this does not always happen; but sometimes in the imaginary world of fiction we can have the satisfaction of seeing the crime disclosed, the criminal unmasked, and the forces of good triumphing over evil. Even if the victims cannot always be recompensed—the murdered cannot be restored to life—at least their suffering is avenged.

Such fiction, sometimes based on fact, has always been popular: today there is no shortage of 'whodunnit' detective novels and television plays. In times past, the theatre was the place to find this kind of entertainment.

Revenge drama has a very long history, going back at least as far as the time of Aeschylus (c. 500 BC) and his great Oresteian trilogy. About five centuries later, the Greek plays were adapted for Roman audiences by the dramatist Seneca—and in the sixteenth century Seneca's plays, translated from Latin into English, became the model for the English playwrights.

The most famous of early English revenge plays is *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1588), written by Thomas Kyd. Other notable plays are Shakespeare's own *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1590), *Antonio's Revenge* (c. 1599), by John Marston, *The Revenger's Tragedy* (c. 1607), attributed to Cyril Tourneur, and John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1614).

*Hamlet* is the finest of all the plays in the English revenge tradition. It is the most serious, because it asks so many questions; and it is also the most understandable. Shakespeare's characters are like real people—people of today—even though the action of the play belongs to a remote past. Later writers tried to follow Shakespeare's example, copying his ideas and theatrical devices just as he had copied those of his predecessors. But no one—even today—could imitate the character of Shakespeare's Prince. *Hamlet* is unique.

## Leading characters in Shakespeare's play

**Hamlet**      The Prince of Denmark, son of Gertrude and nephew of Claudius. He is presented with a terrible problem when the Ghost of his dead father accuses Claudius of murder and demands revenge. Doubt makes him indecisive, and for a time he pretends to be mad. But when he knows the truth he is resolute and fearless.

### *Two Brothers*

**King Hamlet**      Father of the Prince. He is now dead, and we see only his Ghost. But other characters, and especially Prince Hamlet, speak of his courage and virtues.

**Claudius**      Brother to the dead King, and now King of Denmark. He is newly married to Gertrude, his dead brother's wife. At first he seems to be courteous and efficient, but the play reveals him as a 'smiling, damned villain'.

### *Victims of the disaster*

**Gertrude**      Hamlet's mother, and the Queen of Denmark. She married Claudius as soon as her first husband was dead, and now acquiesces in all his plans.

**Ophelia**      The daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes. She loves Hamlet, and is distressed by his treatment of her.

**Polonius**      The King's trusted councillor, whose interference triggers off the action of the play. He is the father of Laertes and Ophelia, and takes himself very seriously.

**Laertes**      Son to Polonius, and brother of Ophelia. He is passionate in defence of the family honour, and (unlike Hamlet) does not scruple to avenge his injuries.

**Rosencrantz and Guildenstern**      Said to be schoolfriends of Hamlet. They are summoned to court by the King (Claudius), and used as his instruments.

*The Survivors*

- Fortinbras** Prince of Norway. Headstrong and (as his name—French *fort* = strong—suggests) physically active. He is the complete opposite of Hamlet, although their situations are alike: Fortinbras's uncle has also succeeded to his brother's throne.
- Horatio** Hamlet's friend. He is a model of friendship and can always be trusted to give sensible advice and an honest opinion. Sometimes he is not so much a *character* as a choric figure, giving necessary information to the audience.

# The Action

## Act 1

Scene 1 'Who's there?'—The play opens with a challenge. The scene is set on the gun-platform outside the castle of Elsinore, and the soldiers on guard-duty must be professionally suspicious. Tonight they are more than usually tense, because they have been frightened by something which they dare not even name—a 'thing', 'a dreaded sight', an 'apparition'.

They are joined by a civilian, Horatio, who makes light of their fears, just as a father might comfort a nervous child: 'Tush, tush, 'twill not appear'. Sitting in a huddle on the ground, they listen as Barnardo begins his ghost story. And we, the play's audience, listen too, sharing in the suspense.

The Ghost startles us all when it suddenly appears, and then vanishes in an instant. It makes no sound, although (as we learn in Scene 2) it is clad in full armour. The frightened soldiers discuss what we have *all* witnessed, turning to Horatio to confirm the Ghost's identity: 'Is it not like the King?' Horatio was once sceptical, and dismissed the soldiers' fears as 'fantasy'. But now he has seen the Ghost himself, and he must believe 'the sensible and true avouch' of his own eyes.

Because Horatio is convinced of the Ghost's reality, we—Shakespeare's audience—are also persuaded to believe in it, no matter what we may think of ghosts. Like Horatio, though, we may question its nature and the reason for its appearance at this time.

There was a very old superstition that ghosts would return from the dead in order to give some kind of warning to the living. This is Horatio's first thought, especially now that the whole country of Denmark is getting ready for war and expecting trouble from Young Fortinbras of Norway. All this is explained (like a lesson in modern history) to the soldiers—but really for the benefit of the audience! And Horatio recalls a historic precedent for such supernatural manifestations: he describes the ghosts that were seen in ancient Rome when Julius Caesar was murdered.

At the climax of his speech the Ghost returns, and Horatio challenges it boldly. But he gets no response. The cock crows, and the Ghost disappears. Dawn breaks, life returns to normal, and Horatio takes Barnardo and Marcellus in search of Young Hamlet. Perhaps the Ghost will speak to *him*.

Scene 2 After the eerie silence of the guards' midnight watch and its mysterious happenings, we are taken into the daytime activity of the royal court. The sound of trumpets heralds the entry of Claudius, the new King of Denmark, with his Queen and all the members of his Council. Prince Hamlet follows, at the end of the royal procession.

From the tone of his address, it sounds as though Claudius is making his first public appearance as the king; he delivers a well-prepared speech, calculated to make a good impression. He speaks of grief for his brother's death, and pleasure at his own marriage—sorrow has been mixed with joy, there has been 'mirth in funeral' and 'dirge in marriage'. He thanks the counsellors, who have guided him with their 'better wisdoms'. And then he moves on to talk of less embarrassing matters, demonstrating his efficiency in handling the Norwegian threat, and dispatching ambassadors with his official letter to the King of Norway.

He turns now to Laertes, speaking more naturally and showing some affection to the young man, the son of his most valued counsellor: 'What wouldst thou have, Laertes?' Laertes asks permission to leave Denmark and go back to Paris. His wish is granted. But no such graciousness is extended to Hamlet, whose request to go back to his university is flatly refused: 'It is most retrograde to our desires'.

The Prince is marked off from the rest of the courtiers by the 'nighted colour' of his clothes—his 'inky cloak' and 'suits of solemn black'. Hamlet is still in mourning for his father, and he refuses to accept the trite words of consolation offered by Claudius and the Queen. In public, Hamlet's grief and bitterness are controlled, hidden behind the sardonic wit when he tells Claudius that he is 'A little more than kin, and less than kind'. In private, however, his anger bursts out in passionate reproaches—and we now learn that his mother's hasty remarriage has almost broken Hamlet's heart.

Sorrow has a moment's respite when Hamlet recognizes Horatio, and finds a much-needed friend. Horatio comes, with Marcellus and Barnardo, to recount the experience of the previous night; Hamlet is convinced that they have indeed seen his father's spirit—and he too suspects the worst. He is impatient—'Would night were come'.



Scene 3 But we must allow for a little time to pass. The suspense is slackened as the mood and pace of the play change once again. The scene is now domestic, showing an intimate glimpse of a loving and close-knit family. The brother, Laertes, is going away to Paris, but he does not want to lose touch with his sister—‘let me hear from you’. He worries about her boyfriend—perhaps Prince Hamlet *says* he loves her—and perhaps he does love her *now*—but she must remember that a prince is not like ordinary men, who are free to choose wives for themselves. Ophelia must be careful to protect her good name—and her virginity.

Their father adds some of his store of worldly wisdom, first counselling Laertes about his behaviour in Paris—the sort of friends he should make, how he should dress, and how to handle his money. When his son has left, Polonius turns his attention to his daughter, lecturing Ophelia about her friendship with Prince Hamlet. He scoffs at the idea of love, because he is afraid that Hamlet will seduce his daughter, and he orders Ophelia to end their friendship.

Scene 4 Midnight has come at last, and Hamlet waits with the guards on the gun-platform outside the palace. From the banqueting hall within, they can hear the sound of revelry. Guns are fired in celebration when the King drinks a toast. With some disgust, Hamlet describes how the heavy drinking of the Danes lowers their reputation in the eyes of other nations.

His moralizing breaks off when the Ghost appears, startling Hamlet so that he invokes divine protection: ‘Angels and ministers of grace defend us’. He is determined to speak to this apparition, regardless of whether it is a good spirit or an evil one, because he recognizes its likeness to his father. The tone of his demands becomes almost hysterical, but the Ghost speaks no word—only indicating that Hamlet should follow where it leads. His companions try to restrain Hamlet, fearing that an evil spirit might be trying to lead him into suicidal madness. But Hamlet’s grim wit threatens to ‘make a ghost’ of anyone who holds him back.

Scene 5 Alone with Hamlet, the Ghost speaks. It has come from some terrifying purgatory, where it is being punished for the sins of a lifetime. But the Ghost does not ask pity—it demands revenge! Hamlet’s father claims to have been betrayed by his ‘most seeming-virtuous queen’ and murdered by ‘that adulterate beast’, his brother Claudius. The Ghost’s language is violent with hatred, and Hamlet is faint with disgust and horror. The signs of dawn appear, which means

that the Ghost must depart. Hamlet has sworn to avenge his father, and will keep his word.

Now Horatio and Marcellus come on the scene, searching for Hamlet. They find him in a very odd mood, and his words do not make sense: they are 'wild and whirling'. He makes them swear never to reveal what they have seen, and they take their oath on the cross-piece of Hamlet's sword. A ghostly voice speaks from under the ground each time Hamlet—with a strange joke—repeats the oath. He speaks of a madness—an 'antic disposition'—that he means to pretend, and which they are sworn not to disclose. His final words are cryptic: 'The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right'. Hamlet seems to have found a vocation, a purpose for his life.

His friends must be bewildered. They have all seen the Ghost, *but only Hamlet*—and the audience—*knows what the Ghost has said*.

## Act 2

Scene 1    Some time has passed. Laertes is now in Paris, and his father—always suspicious—is sending Reynaldo to spy on him. Although Reynaldo accepts the job, he does not like what he has to do. Ophelia comes to find her father. She has been badly frightened by Prince Hamlet, and she describes how he came into her private room, only half-dressed—his doublet was not buttoned, and his stockings hung loose around his ankles. He did not say anything, but he was obviously upset.

Polonius decides at once that Hamlet is mad with love for Ophelia, and he is even more sure of his diagnosis when he hears that Ophelia (as he had ordered in *Act 1*, Scene 3) has been refusing either to see the Prince, or to receive his letters. Full of his own importance, Polonius hurries his daughter off to see the King.

Scene 2    We find Claudius interviewing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He had commanded the two young men to come to the court, and now he tells them of the distressing change in Hamlet's behaviour; perhaps these two boys, being of Hamlet's own age ('so neighbour'd to his youth'), will be able to find out what is wrong with him. In fact, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are being set to spy on Hamlet, just as Reynaldo was told to spy on Laertes.

Dismissing them, the King listens to the report of the ambassadors who have returned from their successful mission to Norway. They tell Claudius how 'old Norway' has rebuked his nephew, sending him to fight against the Poles (which means, incidentally, that he will need to pass, peaceably, through Denmark). Then at last it is Polonius's turn to speak.

At first, his pompous formality irritates the Queen, but Polonius carries on to tell everything he knows about Hamlet's love for Ophelia. He has found one of the Prince's love-letters, which he reads aloud. He is quick to point out that he has not encouraged this affair, and that he has told his daughter that 'Lord Hamlet is a prince out of thy star'. But, he concludes, Ophelia's rejection of his love must have driven Hamlet out of his mind. The King seems unconvinced, and asks for some proof of what Polonius says. The two men decide that they will hide where they can listen to a meeting (which will be arranged by Polonius) between Hamlet and Ophelia.

The Prince comes in just as they are making their plans. When Polonius tries to talk to him, Hamlet replies with answers that make no sense to Polonius, who seems to accept that it is only another fit of madness. But the audience may suspect that Hamlet is assuming his 'antic disposition' (as he promised in *Act I*, Scene 5) in order to insult Polonius. This suspicion is confirmed by Hamlet himself after Polonius has left the stage; he drops his disguise with an exasperated comment, 'These tedious old fools'.

Hamlet's manner changes when he meets his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He laughs with them—but it is no joke when he tells them 'Denmark's a prison'! He soon becomes suspicious of them, and starts to ask questions. They have to admit that they have come to Elsinore because they were 'sent for'. Hamlet tells them only what he wants them to know—that he is depressed and nothing seems to satisfy him. But news of some travelling players diverts him for a while.

He recognizes the actors, and recalls a particular production that he has seen. The leading actor (flattered, no doubt, by the royal attention) declaims the whole of the speech that Hamlet remembers. And this gives Hamlet an idea! He chooses the programme for the evening's entertainment, asking for a performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*—with an additional speech which he will write himself. The players go off to get ready, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dismissed, and Hamlet is left alone to ponder on what he has seen.

The audience is taken into his confidence as he thinks aloud. The pretended grief of the actor has sharpened Hamlet's sense of his own grief, and spurred him to take some action. He wonders *why* he cannot

get anything done—after all, he has never been frightened of defending himself, and he has a very good cause to fight for now . . . Only at the end of the speech do we find out what is really worrying Hamlet: can he trust the Ghost? It could be an *evil* spirit, which will lead him to damnation. But if the actors could perform ‘something like the murder of my father’, perhaps Claudius will show his guilt by his reaction. And that would be better proof than the word of a ghost!

### Act 3

Scene 1    Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to Claudius. They have nothing much to tell him, since Hamlet, ‘with a crafty madness’, refuses to confide in them. They are dismissed, and Claudius explains his next stratagem to Gertrude—whose concern for Hamlet seems to be genuine. Ophelia is set in position by her father, then Polonius takes the King aside—but not before Claudius has mumbled a few words (overheard only by the audience) about his ‘heavy burden’ of guilt.

Hamlet, meditating on the problems of living and dying, is surprised when he comes upon Ophelia—especially when she hands back to him the little presents (‘remembrances’) that he had given to her in the past. Angered by this, he lets loose on Ophelia all the bitterness he has been feeling since his mother’s marriage to Claudius. He begins to suspect Ophelia too, and seems conscious that there are unseen listeners to this conversation. In his apparent madness, he drops a veiled threat (which Claudius *must* hear): ‘I say we will have no mo marriage. Those that are married already—*all but one*—shall live’.

His departure—with a final insult—leaves Ophelia terribly upset and quite convinced of his madness. Claudius is not so sure about this—he is certain, however, that the cause of Hamlet’s strange behaviour is not love. He says he will send his nephew to England, to collect an unpaid debt; perhaps the change of air will do him good!

Polonius prefers his love-sickness theory, and suggests that the Queen should have a word with her son—and he, Polonius, will be there to listen; he will hide behind the ‘arras’—the great tapestry that hangs in Gertrude’s room.

Scene 2    Hamlet is lecturing to the actors on the theory of drama (‘to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature’) and the art of acting. The professional

actors listen meekly to the royal amateur until they are sent away to get ready for their performance. After a speech in praise of Horatio's friendship, Hamlet explains what he is planning. Apparently Horatio has already been told about the Ghost's accusation, and now he too is to watch the King 'the whilst this play is playing', and look for any tell-tale signs of guilt. Afterwards, they can compare notes.

The idle chatter of an assembling audience (on stage) becomes heavy with insult and irony—from Hamlet—which is only interrupted by the dumb-show. The mime prepares *us*—Shakespeare's audience—for what is to come in the play's main action. Then, like Horatio, we shall probably be watching Claudius.

*The Murder of Gonzago* is written in an obviously 'old-fashioned' style; its heavily regular verse sounds artificial, and contrasts with the language spoken by the 'real' people of Shakespeare's play. Its plot, however, is very relevant to the situation in Elsinore. A king, feeling that death is near, recalls his happy marriage and wonders whether his wife will ever marry again. She insists that she will never think of a second husband. At the end of the first little scene, Hamlet asks his mother for her opinion. Gertrude is evidently uneasy, and Claudius is beginning to feel uncomfortable.

The second scene has hardly started—the murderer has just poisoned his victim—when Claudius brings it to a sudden end. He leaves the hall, and his courtiers follow. The actors disappear. Only Hamlet and Horatio are left behind. Hamlet is triumphant—his plot has worked, and Claudius has convicted himself.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to summon Hamlet: the Queen wishes to speak to her son. But Hamlet must first show his former friends that he understands what they are doing; and he warns them that they will fail: 'though you fret me, you cannot play upon me'. Polonius comes to call Hamlet: the Queen is waiting. Hamlet will come—but before he leaves the stage, he lets the audience see something of his new-found resolution.

Scene 3 Claudius is now sure that his secret is known, and he proceeds with his plan to send Hamlet to England, guarded by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet's former friends appreciate the importance of their job to the national security. They go to pack for the journey. Polonius drops in for a moment—he is on his way to hide behind the arras in the Queen's room

For the very first time, we see Claudius alone and hear what *he* thinks about the whole business. He is a very unhappy man, trapped in a horrible dilemma—of his own making. He admits his guilt (to

himself), but feels that he cannot pray, or repent, or ask for God's forgiveness, since he is still in possession of the rewards of his crime—his queen and his throne. But he tries to pray, forcing himself to kneel. In this position he is discovered by Hamlet, who draws his sword—but fails to act. Hamlet argues with himself that this would not be true revenge for his father's murder: the Ghost had told him of its sufferings in Purgatory, but Claudius would avoid these if he were to die just now, when he is in a state of grace. So Hamlet will wait, until he can find a more suitable occasion.

Ignorant of the danger he has just missed, Claudius gets to his feet. He has not been able to pray, after all.

Scene 4 Another trap is being set. Gertrude is prepared for the part that she is to play, and Polonius conceals himself behind the arras. The interview starts well enough—a mother scolding her son: 'Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended'. But her son immediately takes control of the situation: 'Mother, you have my father much offended'. His passion alarms Gertrude, and her call for help is echoed by the unseen listener hidden behind the arras. Hamlet runs his sword through the tapestry, thinking that this must be the King. But he has killed Polonius.

His passion undiminished, Hamlet forces his mother to look at two portraits, 'the counterfeit presentment of two brothers'. He describes them to her—though his description tells us more about Hamlet himself than about the brothers. One is idealized, and given all the attributes of the Greek gods: 'Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, An eye like Mars . . .' The other receives nothing but contempt: he is 'a mildew'd ear'—Hamlet's scorn lacks words!

His disgust speaks out, however, when he talks of his mother's relationship with Claudius. He loathes the very idea of her lust, and dwells on its physical aspects with horrified fascination as he contemplates Gertrude and Claudius 'honeying and making love Over the nasty sty'. The Queen pleads with him to stop, but Hamlet has got carried away by his own emotion, and he will not hear her. He stops only when he sees the Ghost which seems to have come (as Hamlet understands it) to urge Hamlet on to some action. Gertrude sees and hears nothing but her son's strange behaviour, and she worries even more about his sanity. After the Ghost has left them, Hamlet speaks once more to his mother. He is calmer now, but he continues to exhort her to repent of her marriage to Claudius, and to put an end to their sexual relationship.

Hamlet turns to the body of Polonius, which has been lying on stage throughout this scene. His death was regrettable, and Hamlet

## The Action

repents of the murder. But by this deed, Hamlet himself has become a murderer—and will now become the object of another revenge plot.

Before he parts from his mother, Hamlet refers to the King's decision to send him to England. All preparations have been made, and Hamlet is ready to go.

## Act 4

Scene 1 The King comes to Gertrude's room to find out about her interview with Hamlet. He is accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but these are quickly dismissed by the Queen. She confirms that her son is completely mad, and tells of the murder of Polonius. Claudius is quick to realize that *he* was the intended victim: 'It had been so with us had we been there'. He says that Hamlet's madness is a threat to *everyone*, and it must be dealt with immediately: Hamlet must be sent to England, and Claudius himself must devise some kind of cover-up story. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sent off to find the Prince, and to get the body of Polonius.

From this point the action of the play moves quickly; the conventional—and useful—division into 'scenes' can seem an interruption.

Scene 2 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern encounter Hamlet. He evades their questions—but he lets them know that he understands their roles as the King's informers.

Scene 3 Claudius is now very frightened. Hamlet answers his questions with a grim playfulness—but Claudius knows that there is a deadly seriousness behind all that Hamlet says. The letters for England are 'seal'd and done', ready for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to carry them. When everyone has gone, Claudius reveals that his letter 'imports . . . The present death of Hamlet'—he has told the King of England to have Hamlet murdered.

- Scene 4 Young Fortinbras leads his army across the stage. He is going to fight in Poland and needs to cross Denmark. A Captain is dispatched to the Danish court to remind the King—and the audience—that this has all been pre-arranged (in *Act 2, Scene 2*).

The Captain meets Hamlet and his escort, who are on their way to the port, to take ship for England. Questions are asked, and Hamlet learns that Young Fortinbras and his army will be fighting only 'to gain a little patch of ground That hath in it no profit but the name'. The Captain is not enthusiastic, but Hamlet is filled with admiration for the enterprise. The example of Young Fortinbras, engaging in such a battle over a matter of honour, serves as a reproach to Hamlet for his own inactivity, and strengthens his resolve to act.

- Scene 5 Hamlet has left Elsinore to go to England, and Horatio is attending on the Queen. A Gentleman brings news of Ophelia, and almost immediately, the girl herself comes in. She is literally mad with grief. Her father is dead, murdered by the man she loves! Everyone understands her anguish—even Claudius, who also witnesses the scene.

When Ophelia has left the room, Claudius tells Gertrude of a new danger—Laertes has returned from France and, hearing rumours of the suspicious circumstances of his father's death, is threatening rebellion. The threat becomes real when Laertes bursts into the room. The King takes control of the situation, calming Laertes' anger for a moment. But then the appearance of Ophelia, crazily singing of love and death, gives her brother more cause for passion. Claudius seizes his opportunity, and takes Laertes aside to explain his plot.

- Scene 6 There is news from sea. Horatio learns that pirates have captured Hamlet—and rescued him from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He is now back in Denmark.

- Scene 7 Claudius has given *his* account of the events which have taken place while Laertes has been away from Denmark, and is now explaining why he has not been able to do anything about the situation. He seems to have a plan, however, and he is just about to divulge it when Hamlet's letters are brought in.

Claudius thinks quickly. He flatters Laertes with talk of fencing and of Hamlet's jealousy; then he returns to the subject of Polonius's death. A fencing match is arranged—Laertes will fight Hamlet—but



one of the foils will be ‘unbated’: there will be nothing to protect its sharp point. Laertes has bought some poison, and he will put this on the point of the sword, so that the least scratch will prove fatal. In case this fails, the King will have prepared a cup of wine—and this too will be poisoned. Hamlet will not escape!

The Queen interrupts their scheming with news of fresh disaster. Ophelia is drowned. There is a lyrical beauty in Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s death which forbids us to ask how the Queen knew all these details. Laertes weeps—but promises action.

## Act 5

**Scene 1** The pace of the play slows down, and there is even time for a kind of humour as we watch a Gravedigger going about his work, and we listen as he talks to another character (who is not identified). Gradually, we realize that it is Ophelia whose grave is being dug. Was her death accidental, or did she commit suicide? The two characters debate the issues until one goes off to fetch the beer and the other sings to himself as he digs.

Hamlet and Horatio come to the graveyard and watch the man at work. Hamlet speaks his thoughts on death, and starts up a conversation with the Gravedigger. A funeral procession interrupts them, and Hamlet recognizes the mourners. But the funeral is conducted with very little ceremony. A young man questions the priest about this—and Hamlet identifies Laertes, ‘a very noble youth’. The priest will allow no further rites of burial, because there is some doubt about the cause of death.

In his agonized grief, Laertes refers to his ‘sister’ and this, together with Gertrude’s tender farewell, reminds Hamlet that he had once loved Ophelia. He reveals himself to Laertes, who is so enraged that he attacks Hamlet. They start to fight by Ophelia’s open grave. The other mourners separate them. With a strange threat, Hamlet leaves the scene.

**Scene 2** Hamlet tells Horatio the full story of his adventures at sea. It is a story full of accidents, and Hamlet is now convinced that there is a divine power in control of everything that happens: ‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends’.