

# A Guide to HAMLET

*by William Shakespeare*



Alistair McCallum

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# Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in or around 1600. He was in his mid-thirties, a successful dramatist and actor, and a member – and shareholder – of the most prestigious theatre company in London.

This was a prolific time in Shakespeare's career, particularly in the production of comedies; *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* all date from this period. What prompted Shakespeare at this point in his life to turn to tragedy, a form he had so far handled relatively infrequently, we can only guess. Whatever the motivation, the result was staggering; a vast, complex, disturbing drama, wildly imaginative in its plot and ravishing in its language. The play, which draws on ancient Norse legend for its central events, was an immediate and enduring success.

*Hamlet* occupies a central position in world literature. It has been translated into most of the world's languages, and over the centuries has provoked more comment, analysis and argument than any other single work of drama. It has been staged, filmed and televised more than any other Shakespearean play: for example, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, the age of the silent movie, no fewer than seventeen film versions of *Hamlet* were made. The role of the Prince is regarded by many actors – and, for the last two hundred years, many actresses – as the greatest challenge of their careers.

And yet this play, Shakespeare's longest, so many of whose phrases have become a familiar part of the English language, remains, at heart, a mystery:

*“Hamlet is Shakespeare's most frequently performed play. Over the past four centuries of its rich and uninterrupted stage history, every generation has attempted to reinterpret the tragedy in terms of its own values and concerns. Audiences have been attracted to the drama not only because of the interpretive opportunities afforded by Shakespeare's provocatively ambiguous hero, but also because of the sheer beauty and insight of the poet's sublime verse ... while most critics have acknowledged the impossibility of reconciling Hamlet's disparate, often conflicting traits into a coherent whole, performers and audiences continue to embrace the endeavour.”*

Joseph C. Tardiff, *Shakespearean Criticism*

## **A death brings disquiet to Elsinore**

Hamlet, King of Denmark, is dead. His brother Claudius has succeeded to the throne. Shortly after becoming King, Claudius married his brother's widow, Gertrude.

Prince Hamlet, son of the dead King, has returned from his studies at Wittenberg university to be present at the funeral of his father, and the coronation of his uncle; and, to his dismay, the unexpected remarriage of his mother.

At the royal court in Elsinore, Prince Hamlet's sullen, unpredictable behaviour is giving cause for concern. Meanwhile, a far more sinister development has been witnessed by the King's watchmen: in the depths of the night, the ghost of the old King, stern and warlike, has been seen marching in sombre silence outside the castle walls.



**Curtain up**

## A disturbing vision

I, i

In the dark, cold night, high on the walls of the King's castle at Elsinore, a lone sentry is keeping watch. Suddenly the silence is broken by a voice calling through the gloom. The sentry challenges the intruder: but then the approaching figure reveals himself as Barnardo, the officer due to take over on guard duty.

The sentry is grateful for the punctual arrival of his fellow-officer, revealing that he is troubled both in body and spirit:

*Francisco:* You come most carefully upon your hour.

*Barnardo:* 'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.

*Francisco:* For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold,  
And I am sick at heart.

As Francisco leaves, two others, Horatio and Marcellus, come to join Barnardo for the night watch. Their conversation immediately turns to the subject of the ghost that the two guards Barnardo and Marcellus have seen, during their watch, for the last two nights. Horatio is sceptical, believing that the ghost is nothing more than a product of his friends' imagination. For their part, Barnardo and Marcellus are determined to convince Horatio, a man of great learning, that they are telling the truth; they want him to see the ghost with his own eyes.

The discussion between Horatio and the two guards is interrupted as the ghost itself appears. Clad in royal armour, its resemblance to the dead King is beyond question. Horatio is shaken to the core, and for a few seconds is too terrified to speak. Urged on by the others, he raises the courage to address the spirit, and commands it to speak: but the ghost drifts silently away.

Horatio's scepticism has vanished, and the experience has left him profoundly uneasy. He is sure that the ghost's nightly appearance is, in some mysterious way, an omen of misfortune for the kingdom of Denmark.



## Denmark prepares for conflict

Marcellus now raises another subject. He has noticed that there has been intense military activity in Denmark: weapons are flooding into the country, and shipbuilders are working day and night to strengthen the Danish fleet.

Horatio reveals that there is currently a threat of invasion from Norway. He explains that old King Hamlet, whose ghost they have just seen, was once challenged to single combat by Fortinbras, King of Norway. King Hamlet defeated and killed the Norwegian King, and duly took possession of the land that Fortinbras had put at stake. Now young Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, is determined to regain the territory forfeited by his father, and has gathered together a band of warriors with the intention of invading Denmark: this, explains Horatio, is why such urgent military preparations are under way.

The ghost of the dead King now reappears. Horatio is determined to find out why the spirit has returned from the grave, and tries to communicate with it:

*Horatio:* I'll cross it though it blast me.<sup>1</sup> Stay, illusion:  
If thou hast any sound or use of voice,  
Speak to me.  
If there be any good thing to be done  
That may to thee do ease, and grace to me,  
Speak to me;  
If thou art privy to thy country's fate,  
Which, happily,<sup>2</sup> foreknowing may avoid,  
O speak ...

<sup>1</sup> *I'll cross its path and confront it, even if it destroys me*

<sup>2</sup> *perhaps*

But the ghost still refuses to speak. When the cock crows, it starts to drift away: Horatio urges the guards to hold it back with their spears, but their efforts are in vain.

Day is dawning, and the men reflect that the traditional belief that spirits must return to their graves at daybreak seems to be true. Returning to the castle, they decide that Prince Hamlet must be told about the ghost of his dead father.

## The new King addresses his subjects I, ii

Claudius, King of Denmark, is holding court. Amongst those in attendance are Polonius, the King's chief adviser, and his son Laertes; Voltemand and Cornelius, two state officials; and, dressed all in black, the young Prince Hamlet, son of the dead King and nephew to Claudius. Accompanying Claudius is Gertrude, widow of the dead King and mother of the young Prince.

Addressing his subjects, Claudius is careful to emphasise the sadness that they have all felt at his brother's death. Nevertheless, he suggests, grieving for the dead must not allow the concerns of the living to be neglected:

*King:*     Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death  
              The memory be green,<sup>1</sup> and that it us befitted  
              To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom  
              To be contracted in one brow of woe,  
              Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature<sup>2</sup>  
              That we with wisest sorrow think on him  
              Together with remembrance of ourselves.

<sup>1</sup> *fresh, unfaded*

<sup>2</sup> *good sense and wisdom have struggled with our natural feelings of grief*

*"It is difficult to praise the poetry of Hamlet. Nearly all the play is as familiar by often quotation as the New Testament. The great, wise, and wonderful beauty of the play is a part of the English mind for ever. It is difficult to live for a day anywhere in England (except in a theatre) without hearing or reading a part of Hamlet."*

John Masefield, *William Shakespeare*, 1911

The King refers diplomatically to his marriage to Gertrude, his sister-in-law, which took place shortly after King Hamlet's death:

*King:* Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,  
Th'imperial jointress<sup>1</sup> to this warlike state,  
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy ...  
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,  
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,  
Taken to wife.

<sup>1</sup> *heiress*

Claudius now raises the issue of Prince Fortinbras of Norway, and his desire to recover the lands forfeited by his father. He realises that, with the death of King Hamlet, Fortinbras may well consider this an opportune moment to launch an attack.

The present King of Norway, uncle of the young Prince Fortinbras, is old and bedridden, and knows little or nothing of his nephew's intentions. Claudius has decided to inform the King of Fortinbras's military preparations, emphasising that all the money, arms and manpower for his nephew's adventure are being supplied by the Norwegian state. Cornelius and Voltemand are dispatched to Norway to deliver the message to the King.

Now Claudius turns to Laertes, who has a request to make. The King assures the young man that he will always give generous consideration to any appeal from the son of his closest adviser. Laertes, who has been living in France for some time, explains that he was glad to come back to Denmark for the King's recent coronation; now, however, he wishes to return to France. Claudius, once he has established that Polonius has no objection to his son's departure, graciously grants him leave to return.

## The Prince remains in mourning

The King's attention now turns to Prince Hamlet, the son of his dead brother. Both Claudius and Gertrude are concerned about Hamlet's continuing state of dejection. They urge him to come to terms with his father's death, to shake off his mood of despondency, and to abandon his black mourning clothes. Hamlet's response is cool and cryptic:

*King:* But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son<sup>1</sup> –

*Hamlet:* A little more than kin, and less than kind.<sup>2</sup>

*King:* How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

*Hamlet:* Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun.<sup>3</sup>

*Queen:* Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.<sup>4</sup>  
Do not for ever with thy veiled lids  
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.  
Thou know'st 'tis common: all that lives must die,  
Passing through nature to eternity.

<sup>1</sup> *nephew, and now stepson*

<sup>2</sup> *we may be close relations, but there is no warmth between us, nor the likeness of father and son*

<sup>3</sup> *in the glare of public and royal attention; also, unhappy at the title 'son'*

<sup>4</sup> *your stepfather, the King*

Hamlet assures his mother that his grief is deep and genuine, in contrast, he hints, to the display of mourning that he has observed in court. Claudius becomes increasingly impatient, and his tone of sympathy changes as he launches into a thinly-veiled criticism of Hamlet's wilfulness:

*King:* 'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,  
To give these mourning duties to your father ...

... But to persevere

In obstinate condolment is a course  
Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief,  
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,  
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient ...

The King emphasises that he wants Hamlet to think of him as a father, and announces that he considers Hamlet to be next in line to the throne of Denmark.

Hamlet has been studying at Wittenberg, and had intended to return there after his uncle's coronation: however, the King and his wife now make it clear that they want him to remain with them in Denmark. To their surprise, Hamlet acquiesces at once, without protest.

Claudius is delighted at Hamlet's unexpected obedience: every toast that he drinks today, he announces, will be accompanied by the thundering of cannons in celebration. He leaves in high spirits, followed by his Queen and courtiers.

## Horatio brings alarming news

Hamlet remains behind in the empty state room. His grief over the death of his father, his loathing for his uncle, and his dismay at his mother's hasty remarriage have left him utterly desolate. He is overcome by a sense of pointlessness, and is even tempted by thoughts of suicide, although he knows it is forbidden by the Church:

*Hamlet:* O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,  
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
His canon<sup>1</sup> 'gainst self-slaughter. O God! God!  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses<sup>2</sup> of this world!  
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *law*

<sup>2</sup> *customs, ways*

<sup>3</sup> *completely, utterly*

What disturbs Hamlet above all is the fact that his mother – who, like him, had loved the old King devotedly – has married so soon after the funeral. Her marriage to Claudius, whom Hamlet regards as gross, brutish and debauched, took place only a matter of weeks after King Hamlet's death.

While Hamlet is contemplating his mother's inexplicable weakness and inconstancy, Horatio approaches, along with the two guards, Barnardo and Marcellus, with whom he has just witnessed King Hamlet's ghost.

Horatio and Hamlet are old friends who have studied together at Wittenberg, and they greet each other warmly. Hamlet is keen to know what Horatio is doing in Denmark, and his answer provokes a spark of bitter humour from the Prince:

*Hamlet:* But what is your affair in Elsinore?

We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart.

*Horatio:* My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

*Hamlet:* I prithee do not mock me, fellow-student.

I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

*Horatio:* Indeed, my lord, it follow'd hard upon.

*Hamlet:* Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral bak'd meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

The conversation turns to the subject of Hamlet's father. Horatio cautiously breaks the news of the previous night's events to his friend:

*Horatio:* I saw him once; a<sup>1</sup> was a goodly king.

*Hamlet:* A was a man, take him for all in all:

I shall not look upon his like again.

*Horatio:* My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

<sup>1</sup> *he*

Hamlet immediately demands to know more, and Horatio relates the full story of the previous night's watch, describing how the armed figure had marched slowly and silently past the three of them out on the castle battlements.

Eager to learn every last detail of the episode, Hamlet questions the men closely. Eventually he decides to join them on their watch: if the spirit appears again, and is indeed the ghost of his father, he resolves to speak to it. Urging them to keep their experience absolutely secret, he agrees to meet Horatio and the guards tonight on the castle walls.

Although he is impatient to confront and question the ghost, Hamlet is uneasy. He suspects that its appearance may be a token of some dreadful crime that has not yet come to light:

*Hamlet:* My father's spirit – in arms! All is not well.  
I doubt<sup>1</sup> some foul play. Would the night were come.  
Till then sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will rise,  
Though<sup>2</sup> all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

<sup>1</sup> *fear, suspect*

<sup>2</sup> *even if*

## Some stern words for Ophelia

I, iii

Laertes, his request to return to France granted by the King, is about to set off on his journey. He is bidding a fond farewell to his sister Ophelia, and urges her to write to him at every opportunity.

Ophelia has been spending a great deal of time with Prince Hamlet lately, and his affection for her is clear. Laertes warns his sister not to take Hamlet's attentions seriously; he is young and impulsive, and his feelings for her will soon change. Besides, explains Laertes, as heir to the throne Hamlet is not free to choose his future wife, so she must not put too much faith in any promises he makes. Laertes urges Ophelia to keep any feelings of affection or desire for the Prince strictly under control, and to stay well away from temptation.

Ophelia is disappointed to hear that Hamlet's love is likely to prove short-lived. She promises to remember her brother's advice, but hopes that he too will be restrained and virtuous in his conduct:

*Ophelia:* ... good my brother,  
Do not as some ungracious pastors do,  
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,  
Whiles like a puff<sup>d</sup> <sup>1</sup> and reckless libertine  
Himself the primrose path of dalliance<sup>2</sup> treads,  
And reck<sup>s</sup> not his own rede.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *proud*

<sup>2</sup> *the path of amorous pleasure, leading to damnation*

<sup>3</sup> *takes no heed of his own warnings*

Polonius now comes in, telling his son to make haste; his ship is ready to depart. However, he wishes to offer a few words of advice to the young man before he sets off on his travels. Despite the hurry, Polonius takes his time, and his few words develop into a lengthy and wide-ranging lecture:

*Polonius:* Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;  
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.  
... Neither a borrower nor a lender be,  
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,  
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.<sup>1</sup>  
This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow as the night the day  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

<sup>1</sup> *thrift*

Finally Laertes takes his leave, telling Ophelia to remember his advice. Polonius is curious: when Laertes has gone, he asks his daughter what advice he was referring to. When Ophelia tells him that it concerned Hamlet, Polonius is glad; he has been worried recently that she has been spending too much time alone with the Prince, and welcomes this opportunity to discuss the matter.



Like Laertes, Polonius is deeply uneasy about the close relationship developing between Ophelia and the Prince. Hamlet's declarations of love are worthless, he maintains:

*Polonius:* What is between you? Give me up the truth.

*Ophelia:* He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders<sup>1</sup>  
Of his affection to me.

*Polonius:* Affection? Pooh, you speak like a green girl,  
Unsifted<sup>2</sup> in such perilous circumstance.

Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?

*Ophelia:* I do not know, my lord, what I should think.

*Polonius:* Marry, I will teach you. Think yourself a baby  
That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay  
Which are not sterling.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *expressions; offers*

<sup>2</sup> *inexperienced*

<sup>3</sup> *not valid currency*

Ophelia insists that Hamlet has so far been both sincere and honourable, but Polonius refuses to change his mind. In fact the more he talks about the young man's fickleness, the more he convinces himself that Hamlet's real aim is nothing more than a brief sexual conquest. Finally he orders his daughter to stay away from the Prince entirely. Ophelia promises to obey.

*“Ophelia’s modest Replies, the few Words she uses, and the virtuous Caution she gives her Brother after his Advice to her are inimitably charming. This I have observed in general in our Author’s Plays, that almost all his young Women ... are made to behave with a Modesty and Decency peculiar to those Times, and which are of such pleasing Simplicity as seem too ignorant and unmeaning in our well taught, knowing Age ...”*

*George Stubbes, Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, 1736*

## The ghost summons Hamlet

I, iv

It is midnight. Hamlet has joined Horatio and Marcellus on the platform, high up on the castle walls, where the ghost has appeared for the last three nights.

The sound of cannon-fire suddenly bursts through the cold night air. Horatio is alarmed, but Hamlet explains that the King is indulging in a late-night drinking spree, and is ordering cannons to be fired to accompany his toasts. It is a tradition in Denmark, he says, although not one of which he approves:

*Hamlet:* ... as he drains his draughts of Rhenish<sup>1</sup> down,  
The kettle-drum and trumpet<sup>2</sup> thus bray out  
The triumph of his pledge.

*Horatio:* Is it a custom?

*Hamlet:* Ay marry is't,  
But to my mind, though I am native here  
And to the manner born, it is a custom  
More honour'd in the breach<sup>3</sup> than the observance.

<sup>1</sup> wine

<sup>2</sup> signals for the cannon to fire

<sup>3</sup> by being ignored

Hamlet reflects sadly on the widespread drunkenness, typified in his uncle, that gives his country such a bad reputation. Other nations associate the Danes with heavy drinking, and disregard their achievements, just as an individual's good qualities can be tainted by some particular flaw in his character.

The Prince is suddenly shaken out of his contemplation by the arrival of the ghost. He immediately decides to question the armed figure, desperate to know why his father's spirit has come back from the dead. The ghost does not speak, but beckons Hamlet to leave his companions and follow him away from the platform.

Horatio and Marcellus urge Hamlet not to follow the ghost, fearing that it may be an evil spirit that will lead him into danger or madness. Hamlet remains unmoved by their warnings. He is determined to speak with the ghost, and his safety is of no importance. The others try to hold him back, but he fights them off and resolutely sets off into the night after the ghost.

Horatio and Marcellus hesitate for a moment, unsure whether to respect the Prince's wish to be left alone. They decide to follow him, convinced that he is in peril. They are sure that these frightening events do not bode well for the nation:

*Horatio:* He waxes<sup>1</sup> desperate with imagination.

*Marcellus:* Let's follow. 'Tis not fit thus to obey him.

*Horatio:* Have after. To what issue will this come?

*Marcellus:* Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

<sup>1</sup> *grows, becomes*

The first performances of *Hamlet* were probably at the Globe theatre, on the south bank of the Thames, in 1600 or 1601.

Some years later, an amateur production was staged, thousands of miles away, in very different circumstances. It was presented on board the *Dragon*, a ship of the East India Company, becalmed near the equator off the eastern coast of Africa. We can only guess at what props, costumes or scenery, if any, were available. According to his journal, the captain, William Keeling, seems to have regarded his crew's amateur dramatics in a positive light – and certainly as a more wholesome alternative to gambling:

*“1608, Mar. 31. I envited Captain Hawkins to a ffishe dinner, and had Hamlet acted aboard me: which I permitt to keepe my people from idleness and unlawful games, or sleepe.”*

## The truth emerges

I, v

Hamlet, following the ghost through the darkness, appeals to it to speak. Urging him to listen carefully, the ghost reveals that he is indeed the spirit of the old King, destined to suffer in Purgatory until his sins are expiated:

*Ghost:* I am thy father's spirit,  
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purg'd away.

It was believed by everyone, including the Prince, that King Hamlet died from a snakebite while sleeping in his orchard. The ghost now reveals the truth. His death was no accident:

*Ghost:* If thou didst ever thy dear father love –  
*Hamlet:* O God!  
*Ghost:* Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.  
*Hamlet:* Murder!  
*Ghost:* Murder most foul, as in the best it is ...  
... know, thou noble youth,  
The serpent that did sting thy father's life  
Now wears his crown.

Hamlet is devastated. His uncle, driven by lust for power and for his brother's wife, has committed murder: not only has he escaped punishment, but he is enjoying the fruits of his wrongdoing to the full. And the Queen, who had seemed almost to idolise her husband, allowed herself, after his death, to be seduced by the brutish Claudius.

The spirit of the King now discloses the manner of his death. While he was asleep in his orchard one afternoon, his brother Claudius had crept up to him and poured a phial of deadly poison into his ear. The poison spread swiftly through the King's body, and he died soon afterwards, covered in foul scales and blisters. Deprived of the chance to pray or to be absolved of his sins, the King has been suffering in Purgatory since his death.

The ghost implores Hamlet to take revenge on Claudius: as for Queen Gertrude, she should not be harmed, but must be allowed to suffer the pangs of her own conscience.

Daybreak is approaching, and the ghost disappears. Hamlet, overwhelmed by what he has seen and heard, resolves to make his dead father's wish the sole aim of his life from this moment on. All the learning of his student days must be erased, to be replaced with the dreadful knowledge of his uncle's treachery and the determination to avenge his father's death. As a symbol of his resolve, he commits this new-found truth to paper:

*Hamlet:* Yea, from the table<sup>1</sup> of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws<sup>2</sup> of books, all forms, all pressures past ...  
... Meet<sup>3</sup> it is I set it down  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain –  
At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark. [*Writes.*]

<sup>1</sup> *writing-tablet*

<sup>2</sup> *sayings, proverbs*

<sup>3</sup> *fitting, appropriate*

Revenge was a popular theme in Elizabethan theatre, and tumultuous, bloody, and spectacular dramas on this theme attracted large audiences. Shakespeare rarely gave revenge a central position in his plays, with the notable exception of *Hamlet*, where its treatment is far more complex than in most dramas of the time. The morality of taking revenge for a serious crime such as murder was a hotly debated issue. Church and State remained firmly against private acts of revenge, and the Bible was often quoted in this context:

*“Recompense to no man evil for evil ... as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”*

Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans, King James Bible,  
1611