

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

*Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest, most popular play, developing his most complex character. It was written in 1601 (after *Romeo and Juliet*, 1595; *Merchant of Venice*, 1596; and after *Julius Caesar*, 1599; but before *Macbeth*, 1606.)

The story of *Hamlet* is based on a very old Scandinavian story from the seventh century. It appeared in *Historia Danica* by Saxo Grammaticus, which was published between 1180-1208. It was printed in 1514.

Another man, Francois de Belleforest, wrote the story in *Histoires Tragique* in 1582. Shakespeare may have read either of these works, in Latin or in French. Proof of his familiarity with the story is that he named his son Hamnet, a variant of Hamlet, when he was born in 1585.

Writings exist which make references to a play called Hamlet, assumed to be written by Thomas Kyd in 1590, and performed between 1594-1596. It is likely that Shakespeare not only saw the play but acted in it, since his group performed it. It has been lost. Most likely Shakespeare based his play on Thomas Kyd's, but Shakespeare's version shows knowledge of all three sources.

The time of Shakespeare's story could be the ninth or tenth century (1000-1100 AD). In the play, King Claudius speaks of Denmark collecting tribute from England, which puts it in this time period. However, Characters in the play dress and act as people in Shakespeare's time (1601), and the play makes references to happenings in England during that period.

## PARALLELS BETWEEN HAMLET AND FORTINBRAS

### In Denmark

1. The present king is Claudius, uncle of Prince Hamlet
2. The former king was Hamlet, brother of Claudius, and father of Prince Hamlet. King Hamlet returns as a ghost in the play
3. King Hamlet and King Fortinbras, both soldier kings, duelled to the death. King Hamlet killed King Fortinbras. Both kings had wagered land on the outcome. Since Fortinbras lost, Denmark gained the wagered land.
4. Princes Hamlet and Fortinbras both have their fathers' names. Both are approximately the same age, in their twenties.
5. Hamlet seeks to revenge the murder of his father. (He was killed by the king's brother, Claudius.)

### In Norway

The present king is Old Norway, uncle of Prince Fortinbras

The former king was Fortinbras, brother of Old Norway and father of Prince Fortinbras.

Fortinbras seeks revenge on Denmark by trying to get back the land his father lost in the wager

Princes Hamlet and Fortinbras are character foils. A foil is a character whose behaviour, attitudes and/or opinions contrast with those of the protagonist.

## ACT 1 SCENE 1

Act 1 is the exposition of the play. It gives background information, introduces the main characters and sets forth the basis of the action. The theme or subject of the play is presented, and the political and dramatic background is outlined. The stage is set for the major conflict. It is revealed that the rightful king of Denmark has been murdered and that the duty to revenge the murder falls on Hamlet, the king's son.

The opening scene of the play sets the atmosphere. The setting of the first scene is impressive. High upon the frowning battlements of Elsinore castle, a lone sentry paces in the bitter cold of midnight. The ramparts are isolated, lonely, and bleak, suggesting a sense of foreboding and gloom.

As the scene opens, the nightly change of sentries is proceeding. Agitation shows itself in the words of the relieving sentry, Bernardo, who glimpses a moving figure in the darkness, and, caught in the grip of momentary terror, shouts, "Who's there?" Bernardo should have waited, according to military practice, until the man on guard had challenged him. Bernardo's unsoldierly conduct does not pass unnoticed by the sentry on duty. Francisco pulls him up sharply: "Nay, answer me...". This makes us aware that for some reason, the guards are under stress.

Examine the conversation of the guards as the play gets under way. Much of it is spoken in brief, staccato speeches, revealing their agitation; they are obviously uneasy. They speak in "bated breath" of some "Thing", some "dreaded sight", of "this apparition" without actually naming it. Francisco, who has been standing solitary guard, complains of the "bitter cold" and confesses himself to be "sick at heart". The very stillness of the watch is apprehensive. There is not a mouse stirring.

Shakespeare has been preparing us for the coming of the Ghost. Before too long, we hear of its having already appeared on the ramparts of Elsinore castle.

Shakespeare uses several means to establish the reality of the Ghost:

- 1) It is seen at the same time by more than one person.
- 2) It is seen more than once by the same person.
- 3) Its actuality is admitted even by Horatio, a scholar whom we come to regard highly as a man of common sense. He is obliged to concede that the "Thing" does walk. Shakespeare intends us to recognize that the ghost is not the figment of any one disordered or fear-crazed mind. No one person imagined the spectre. Nor is it the creation of Hamlet's mind. For the purposes of the play, it is a real, objective ghost.
- 4) The Ghost's story later proves to be true. In Act 3 we hear Claudius admit his guilt as he utters the prayer soliloquy.

Horatio tries to discover the reason for the Ghost's walking. He asks the Ghost if it appears for any of three reasons:

- 1) to induce someone to do a good deed so that its torment may be eased. Horatio believes that he may win favour in the sight of heaven if he helps to ease the Ghost's torture.
- 2) to reveal some danger that threatens Denmark. If the nature of the danger is revealed to them, the disaster may be averted.
- 3) to revisit some buried treasure wrested unfairly from another in its lifetime, for which reason spirits often are said to walk in death.

The Ghost does not speak when accosted in this way, but stalks away as if offended.

While Bernardo and Horatio wait for the ghost to appear, Horatio opines, "This bodes some strange eruption to our state." To fill in the background, Marcellus asks the reason for the nightly watch and the warlike preparations in Denmark. Prince Fortinbras comes into the picture because his father, King Fortinbras of Norway, had earlier challenged King Hamlet to single combat and had wagered land belonging to Norway on the outcome. King Hamlet met the challenge by wagering an equal area of land, the winner to take all. King Hamlet won, King Fortinbras died in the combat, and the wagered Norwegian territory became Denmark's. Later, hearing of King Hamlet's death and supposing Denmark to be weakly ruled, Prince Fortinbras demands the return of the land that previously had belonged to Norway. Unless the land is returned forthwith, Prince Fortinbras threatens to recover it by force of arms.

## ACT 1 SCENE 2

We view now, a room of state within Elsinore castle. There is a fanfare of horns and trumpets, a "flourish", as the royal pair enter. Queen Gertrude, who is Hamlet's mother, is Queen in her own right by lineal descent. Claudius acknowledges that fact when he speaks of her as "imperial jointress of this warlike state". King Claudius, who is Hamlet's uncle and step-father, rules by consent of the Council which has elected him to succeed his dead brother.

Notice that the protagonist and antagonist are introduced in this scene.

**Lines 87 - 112:** At great length, Claudius protests Hamlet's prolonged mourning over his father's death. His public rebuke to the Prince puts Hamlet in fault on many points. Observe how each adjective doubles the weight of its noun. All Claudius says here is a little too measured, a little too calculated, just as the silky kindness to Laertes a moment before has been a tone too smooth.

**Lines 112 - 117:** Claudius is wary of Hamlet because the murderer knows very well that if his crime ever should come to light, then Hamlet will be bound to undertake the vindication of his murdered father by killing the man who had committed the crime.

Upon Hamlet will fall the task of proving, beyond question, the guilt of Claudius, and it will be the Prince's duty to deal the criminal the retribution that is his due. The practice of the day was for the nearest male relative of the wronged man to kill the murderer, usually by duel.

## A Paraphrase of Hamlet's Soliloquy, Pages 31 - 32, Lines 129 - 159

I wish that this too substantial body might soften, dissolve, become as dew and disappear entirely. Or (I wish) that God had not made the law against suicide. O God! O God! How tiring, stale, uninteresting and useless all the things we do in this life seem to be. Fie on it all! Fie! Denmark is like a garden full of weeds and these flourish unchecked. That things should turn out this way! My father has been dead two months. No, not even two. He was so excellent a king. Compared with my uncle, he was as the god of the sun is to an unnatural beast; my father was so loving to my mother he could not allow the winds of heaven blow too roughly on her face. Heaven and earth! I wish that I could forget it! Why, she would cling to him, as though her desire for him were insatiable. Yet, in less than two months—how the thought of it sickens me. Woman is weak!—A brief month, before the shoes in which she followed my father's body to its burial had grown old, when like Niobe she wept bitterly and ceaselessly; why she, even she—O God! a beast that lacks the power of reason is more faithful to its dead mate, and mourns longer—but she married my uncle, my father's brother; yet he is no more like my father than I am like Hercules. In less than a month, even before the false tears had stopped flowing from her reddened eyes, she married. O such wicked haste! to run so quickly into an incestuous marriage. It is not good; it can come to no good. But my heart must break for I must bear this in silence. I cannot speak of my mother's shame at the court.

From what he says, we learn that Hamlet has suffered a profound moral shock and is unable to reconcile himself to the shameful fact of his mother's marriage, contracted before she had had time to properly mourn the father and king, whom Hamlet had dearly loved, and whom he, up to now, had every reason to suppose that his mother had also fondly loved. In Hamlet's sight his mother had defiled herself in marrying a brother-in-law, and to have done so with such palpable haste makes her action doubly reprehensible. Is Hamlet's malaise at his

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mother's unwomanliness an unnatural thing? Is he unduly perturbed by a marriage which another man might take in stride? Do we, in good conscience, expect Hamlet to take up the course of his life as though his father's death has not been a severe blow? As though his mother's infidelity has not been a rude shock? As though the depravity of Denmark's court has not sickened and disillusioned him? What Hamlet finds at the court is totally unacceptable to him. Is he to be wholly condemned on this count? Is he more upset than you are liable to have been in the same circumstances?

It is imperative to remember that the sickness of Hamlet's soul was there before he hears anything of the Ghost, or of the murder of his father. We know from what he says that Hamlet at this point is heartsick at his mother's indecent marriage. He has yet to learn that the man she has married had murdered his father.

The Ghost's revelation to Hamlet is the spark that sets the elements of tragedy in motion, and for this reason the Ghost is the strongest motive-agent of the play.

### WHY HAMLET NEEDS MORE SUBSTANTIAL PROOF OF CLAUDIUS' GUILT THAN THE WORDS OF A GHOST

Hamlet, although he trusts the ghost, has no concrete proof that the ghost is genuine nor that he speaks the truth. Hamlet is a moral and noble man: If he is to kill a man to revenge a crime, he must be morally certain that a crime has been committed and that Claudius has committed it. Hamlet, being noble, must not kill the king out of hatred for the man, but in order to bring him to justice. Justice must be the wellspring, the courage, required to perform the horrible task of killing a man.

The custom of the day placed the duty of revenge on the nearest male relative of the wronged party. As a matter of practical necessity, the person upon whom this duty fell also had to prove that he was, in fact, the agent of justice, that the alleged criminal was, in fact, guilty. If it were otherwise, a suspicious man could kill whom he pleased, whether the defendant were guilty of the crime or not. Hamlet must find such proof of Claudius' crime as is acceptable to Denmark.

What could occur if Hamlet accused or killed Claudius having insufficient proof of guilt? Certainly Hamlet's motives would be suspect: Hamlet may have killed his own father, knowing that Claudius would be elected king and that he need only frame Claudius for the murder in order to sit on the throne himself. Perhaps Hamlet has even manufactured evidence for this purpose. Denmark could assume also that King Hamlet had died a natural death, but that Hamlet is falsely accusing Claudius in order to get him out of the way of his own ambition.

Another fact to consider is Hamlet's love of this mother, who has disgraced herself by an incestuous marriage. He still loves her and feels obliged not to shame her any more than is necessary. The act of revenge must be swift if he is to accomplish this. Insufficient evidence of guilt will generate rumors and argument amongst the populace and in court circles, certainly having the effect of spotlighting his mother's shame.

Hamlet knows Claudius to be an intelligent, a wily, and a formidable foe. Hamlet must hide the fact that he is gathering evidence from Claudius to avoid having Claudius defend himself. Inconclusive evidence would be contested and would give Claudius a chance to bring all his powers as an elected monarch to the defence. He has the power to bribe witnesses and even to have Hamlet killed by hired assassins. Hamlet cannot afford to act on the insubstantial evidence provided by the ghost's words. If he accuses Claudius with less than a prime facie case (believable at first sight), he fails in his revenge and places himself in mortal danger.

The arguments above seem reasonable at this point; however, as will be seen later, there are counter arguments, stating that Hamlet need not have waited for public evidence before proceeding to his revenge.

## ACT 2 SCENE 1

Two months have elapsed between Act 1 and Act 2. To open Act 2, Shakespeare provides a scene essential to the play and which also affords relief from the intensity of the previous action.

Shakespeare provides us with an early opportunity to view Polonius in a revealing interchange with his agent, Reynaldo. The interview takes place in the home of the Lord Chamberlain, who is sending money to his son, Laertes, in Paris. Reynaldo is directed to spy out, by a sly procedure, how Laertes is conducting himself while beyond the range of the parental eye. A characterizing scene is an incident which is introduced to show character, and to advance the plot. Act 2 Scene 1 reveals the character of Polonius.

Polonius' moral standards are not very high if he can send an informer after his son. The old man seems unable to resist an opportunity to pry and connive. There is in him a measure of cunning, and he betrays a sly relish in the prospect of Laertes' probable misconduct, which hardly indicates genuine fatherly concern for his son's welfare.

Polonius' displays a shallow tediousness as he suffers a lapse of memory and loses track of what he is saying. Here the opinionated old man appears a trifle pathetic. Perhaps shame at his own despicable thought makes him hesitate? Or, perhaps, the lapse is a mark of encroaching senility. Reynaldo takes leave of Polonius, and Ophelia comes to her father to bring a report of Hamlet whom, it seems, she has found quite unlike himself. He has come, disheveled in attire and distraught in manner, to call upon Ophelia, who for some time has been denying him her company. Is Hamlet's distress on the occasion of his visit to Ophelia entirely assumed? Are we to suppose that Hamlet here begins to put his "antic disposition" on? It seems likely that Hamlet visited Ophelia in the recognized garb of the rejected lover because he expected the news to be told. Hamlet may have supposed that Ophelia would, as she did, report his visit to Polonius, who would carry word of it to Claudius. Hamlet may want Claudius to believe that he is mad for the love of Ophelia in order to lull the suspicions of the King in the hope of keeping him from guessing that Hamlet knows of his treachery.

Polonius regarded the call Hamlet paid on Ophelia not as a severance of Hamlet's affection for her, but as complete proof that Hamlet was mad for love of her. Having jumped to the hasty conclusion, Polonius never relinquished it. He now became its chief advocate. Confident that he had found the cause of Hamlet's strange behaviour, Polonius hastened to tell all to the king.

Had Polonius prevented the lovers from meeting until he learned whether Hamlet would find favour with Claudius? Or did he genuinely fear, as he said, that Hamlet was trifling with Ophelia? Did he now entertain the hope that Hamlet may be permitted by the Council to marry beneath his station? Whatever the motive, Polonius persisted in believing that Ophelia was indispensable to Hamlet's happiness and sanity; whereas her gentleness of heart and docility of disposition, while they made her sweet and appealing, left her incapable of giving Hamlet the understanding and moral support he needed.

## ACT 2 SCENE 2

Scene 2 may be divided as follows:

1. The second meeting of the court (to line 168)
2. Hamlet and Polonius (to line 218)
3. Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (to line 417)
4. Hamlet and the players (to line 544)
5. Hamlet's soliloquy

### 1. The Second Meeting of the Court

The King greets two courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, boyhood friends of Hamlet. What is Shakespeare's purpose in introducing them? They are studiously alike and characterless. They are made two to represent society; that is, they are presented in duplicate to show that their type is common. The King asks

them to spy on Hamlet. He had heard of Hamlet's "transformation" and wishes to discover its reason. The king cannot afford to be easily convinced of Hamlet's madness.

Polonius reports that Voltimand and Cornelius have returned from Norway with good news. They relate how the King of Norway has prevented Fortinbras from attacking Denmark, and has, instead, commissioned him to send his forces against the Poles. The King requests that Fortinbras' forces be allowed to pass through Denmark.

The next piece of good news Polonius delivers Claudius is that Hamlet is mad for the love of Ophelia. Notice that the Queen intuitively knows what troubles her son:

"I doubt it is no other but the main  
His father's death and our o'er hasty marriage (lines 56 - 57).

What does this utterance reveal about the Queen? To prove Hamlet is in love with Ophelia, Polonius reads one of Hamlet's love letters to her. (The letter is of the conventional Elizabethan type with a complimentary address, a verse and a humble conclusion.)

Speeches uttered by the King after Polonius has read the love letter show Claudius to be doubting and critical of the old man's theory. Claudius does not find Hamlet mad for love. To supply further proof, Polonius plans to arrange a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia while he and the King watch, hidden behind the arras.

## 2. Hamlet and Polonius

The scene between Hamlet and Polonius is amusing. Thoroughly convinced Hamlet is mad for love, Polonius foolishly enters a verbal fencing-match with him in which the old fellow comes off second best. "Do you know me, my lord?" says Polonius with the idiotic indelicacy of those who consider this a reliable test of insanity.

"Excellent well; you are a fishmonger," Hamlet replies. By "fishmonger" Hamlet may mean one who has come to fish for news or one who sells his daughter's virtue, a pimp. Under cover of antic disposition, Hamlet mocks the old man, using sufficient references to Ophelia to keep up Polonius' delusion that Hamlet is mad for love. Then Hamlet pretends to read from his book a literal description of the fool before him.

Polonius realizes that there is more to what Hamlet says than appears on the surface: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in it". The method is to use whatever situation comes up as a starting point for bitter remarks on the state of the World.

## 3. Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Hamlet warmly greets his two friends. Notice that he is not feigning madness as he speaks to them, exchanging wit and repartee. Once he realizes his friends have come to spy on him, his manner changes. He asks them were they sent for? After, some evasion, they admit it. The two men come to sound out Hamlet, but are sounded out by their better.

After line 295 Hamlet again feigns madness. But there is nothing in the least mad in his speech in lines 295 - 303. It is a natural expression of his pessimistic mood. In the *Apostrophe on Man* speech (lines 303-310), Hamlet speaks in noble language of the grandeur and majesty of the human being. The exalted conception of man is an ideal that came with the Renaissance and is indicative of Shakespeare's interest in the great spiritual awakening of the times. (This speech is eminently suitable for memory work.)

## 4. Hamlet and the Players

When Hamlet speaks to the-players, he drops all traces of antic disposition and melancholy. He shows both a close knowledge of the players' affairs and keen interest in them. A new side of his nature shows itself.

To Hamlet the scholar, the lover, and the wit, is added Hamlet, the patron of drama. Through Hamlet Shakespeare gives himself an opportunity to criticize the drama and the acting of the time.

Lines 421 ff.: When Hamlet addresses the young actor as "lady and mistress," remember, that boys played the parts of ladies in the plays of the time. Hence "cracked" in line 425 refers to the boy's changing voice.

Hamlet asks the first player to say a few lines from Greek tragedy. Notice that Hamlet quotes the first thirteen lines from memory. Notice also how appropriate the Pyrrhus speech is to Hamlet's underlying preoccupation. In it the collapse of a state (Troy) follows upon the slaughter of its King (Priam); but special note is taken of the faithfulness in grief of the Queen (Hecuba).

As the players leave, Hamlet intercepts the leader to ask if he knows the play The Murder of Gonzago. The first player knows the play and they decide to stage it. Hamlet will insert a dozen or so lines of his own. Hamlet has hit upon the idea of using a play adapted to the murder of his father to test the guilt of the King. He hopes to unmask Claudius by betraying him into a admission of guilt. In earlier times the guilt of accused criminals was tested by their behaviour after their crimes. The question is, has the ghost told the truth? Is he an evil apparition come to tempt Hamlet to lure him into a crime that is dammed? Hamlet cannot allow himself to be misled by a tale that may be false. He will test the King and see. He calls the scheme the "Mouse Trap". He will "have" the King to witness the reaction. He does not divulge the scheme to anyone else.

## 5. Hamlet's Soliloquy, Pages 125-126

In his second lengthy soliloquy, Hamlet reviews the whole case as it stands in his mind before he has made a test of the King's guilt. He refers to the actor's lines (the Pyrrhus speech) and says that the actor is more real in pretended grief than he, Hamlet, finds himself in his vital cause. The player's moving speech strikes Hamlet as a reproach to himself since he has made no move to avenge the murder of his father. The player is more convincing in a mere "act" than Hamlet is in a great cause, in which he has not yet been able to act. Hamlet's soliloquy runs something like this:

O! What a miserable, lowly wretch I am! Does it not seem absurd that this actor, in an imaginary scene, can enter into a part so well that he becomes pale, agitated, his eyes full of tears and his voice broken, and his entire manner suited to the role he is playing! And he does this for no real sorrow! What would he do if he had the reasons I have to grieve and to take action? He would drown the stage with tears, and speak with such force that he would drive the guilty person insane and frighten the innocent. He would astound the ignorant and so affect everyone, that those who hear him would scarcely be able to believe their eyes and ears. Yet I—such a dull and sluggish fellow, mope around like a dreamer, without plans for revenge, and can say nothing. No, even to revenge a king, who was so foully robbed of his possessions and his life. Am I a coward then? What if someone called me a villain, struck me on the head, pulled my beard and blew it in my face, pinched my nose, called me emphatically a liar? If anyone dared, I would take it! Must I be chicken-hearted and lacking the spirit to feel this bitter wrong? Long before this I would have given my uncle's body to the vultures of the air to feed upon. He is such a murderous fool—cruel, terrible and unnatural villain! But what a fool I am! It is despicable that I, the son of a murdered man, who was so dear to me, am prompted by so many things to revenge and yet can do nothing but talk and curse, as a low and loathsome creature might do. I must set my brain to work. I have heard that guilty people who see an act resembling their crime have been so affected that they betray their wrongdoing. For murder will reveal itself even though no actual confession is uttered. I'll have these actors perform before my uncle a scene resembling the murder of my father. I'll watch him. I'll probe his inmost soul. If he but flinch, I will know what to do. The Ghost I saw may have been the devil, who has the power to tempt us. Perhaps he took advantage of my weakness and my melancholy, since he wins us so easily when we are depressed. I'll seek conclusive proof. The play will be the means by which I shall prove the King's guilt or innocence.

## ACT 3

In a Shakespearean play the crisis of the play, or turning point, occurs in the third act. The climax of Hamlet occurs in Act 3 Scene 3, when Hamlet comes upon the murderer at prayer but postpones killing him lest the King be in a state of grace and ready for heaven.

### Scene I

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been summoned by the king to disclose what they have found out as to what troubles Hamlet. Since they fear for their own skins as ineffectual spies, they do not reveal they have been found out by Hamlet. They report that Hamlet is interested in a troop of Players presently on its way to the court, and that Hamlet begs their Majesties to attend the performance.

Claudius bids the courtiers and the queen to leave. He and Polonius plan to observe a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia. Polonius arranges the meeting so that Hamlet finds Ophelia reading her prayers. Polonius observes that we often hide our sins by a semblance of piety (3, 1, 46-49). The remark strikes sharply at the King's guilt; and his words, "How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!" give us the first evidence that his guilty conscience bothers him.

### A Paraphrase of the "To Be Or Not To Be" Soliloquy

Hamlet, lost in sombre reflection and unaware that others are present, speaks his third long soliloquy, "To be, or not to be..." in lines 57-89, on pages 137-138. He broods over the nobility of enduring the humiliations and injustices of life. A paraphrase might go like this:

To live or not to live, that is the question to be debated. Is it nobler to patiently endure the hurts and blows of a cruel fate than to boldly attack a flood of troubles and, by fighting back, end them? Death is nothing more than a sleep. If we could assure ourselves that to die meant no more than to sleep and to be completely released from the anguish and the shocking blows that are part of our human condition, then death would be a final ending earnestly to be hoped for. Death is a sleep indeed: but when we sleep, we sometimes dream: there is the obstacle. For the dreams that may come to trouble us after we have cast off this mortal body, which like a coil of rope binds us to earthly existence, cause us to hesitate. There is the consideration that causes us to live through a long life filled with affliction. If this were not true, who would endure the harsh experiences of life, the tyrant's wrongdoing, the proud man's scornful rudeness, the torments of rejected love, the slowness of legal proceedings, the insolent behaviour of officials, and the insults that quiet, worthy people have to patiently endure from the less worthy, when he could obtain release from it all with a naked dagger? Who would bear the burdens, groaning and sweating during a tedious existence, were it not that the fear of something after death, that unknown land from which no wanderer has ever come back, obstructs our ability to act, and makes us bear the troubles we have, rather than rush into others of which we know nothing. Thus reflection about the consequences prevents us from taking action, and the natural colour of courage is dimmed by the pale tinge of thought, and under this influence lofty and momentous issues are diverted from their course and never put into action.

The words of the passage probe Hamlet's feeling about death and lead him to the conclusion that, although life may bring impossible tasks and problems, it seems wiser for a man to endure than in an impetuous act to liberate himself from them, lest he plunge himself into worse hazards. Fear that man may face a worse fate in the hereafter predisposes him to endure his earthly lot.

### The Nunnery Scene: Lines 89-151

As Hamlet completes his reflections, he comes upon Ophelia reading from her prayer book. Perhaps he is touched by her purity and beauty. Ophelia has brought with her some love tokens Hamlet has given her in the past, and tries to return these. Hamlet sees this as the final rejection of his love and grows sharply hostile. He tells her she is acting dishonestly and that she thinks she'll get away with the deceit because he finds her beautiful. If she is honest and beautiful, her honor should not trade her beauty (3, 1, 106-114). He somehow perceives that Claudius and Polonius are within earshot and that she is their decoy. "Where's your father?" Hamlet asks in derision, knowing full well he is nearby. Hamlet proceeds to direct his remarks to his eavesdropper. He feels both bitterness



and tenderness to Ophelia. He bids her flee the world and the corrupt court. Why should she help to propagate the vile human race? Better for her to enter a nunnery.

In Lines 152-163 Ophelia indicates she genuinely believes Hamlet is mad. She gives us a picture of Hamlet before the play—the Renaissance ideal of the perfect prince.

Claudius in Lines 164-177, shrewdly guesses what is troubling Hamlet. He sees too that Hamlet's suspicion has already fallen upon him ("all but one shall live"). Claudius quickly decides to send Hamlet to England on the pretext of collecting from England money owed as a result of war with Denmark. (However, Claudius does not act on this decision until Hamlet has killed Polonius in 3, 4). Polonius clings to the idea that Hamlet is mad for love and proposes that Hamlet be sent to the Queen to see if his mother can find out from him the reason for his hostility. Polonius intends to hide behind the arras (tapestry) to overhear the conversation.

## ACT 3 Scene 2

Scene 2 of the third act is an important plot scene because in it Claudius' guilt of the murder is proved beyond any reasonable doubt.

Why is Hamlet so anxious to have the words of the mousetrap well spoken? He gives careful instructions to the players not merely because he is interested in the arts, but chiefly because he wishes to make sure that the King will get the full substance of the play of murder so that its effect on him may then be clearly ascertained. No flaw in the acting is to prevent the exposure of Claudius' guilt.

Using Hamlet as his mouthpiece, Shakespeare takes this opportunity to criticize the acting of this own day, for he could criticize the acting and express his opinions to a larger segment of the population more easily through the medium of a popular play than he could by any other means.

As Hamlet and Horatio walk before the play, Hamlet pays tribute to Horatio's sterling worth. He admires Horatio's fine balance of character, for whatever comes, Horatio endures with patience and fortitude, maintaining his outward composure. He accepts the reverses of fortune as calmly as he takes her smiles. He is blessed in that he is stable and steadfast. His judgment and moderation save him from being misled by the vagaries of fortune; Horatio does not act on momentary impulse, is not swayed unwisely by strong feeling, but is self-controlled; he is not driven by blind unreasoned feeling but is a master of his passions. Hamlet admires in Horatio what is opposite to his own character. Does Hamlet face his lot with composure?

Having revealed implicit trust in Horatio, Hamlet discloses that he intends to test the King's conscience by having the players do a scene resembling the murder of King Hamlet, as reported by the ghost. Hamlet plans to face the King openly with the fact of his crime and asks the aid of Horatio in observing Claudius closely for signs of guilt.

Prior to the play there was a dumb show or pantomime, wherein the *Murder of Gonzago* is mimed without words. The mime played, the main action begins as two chief players, a king and a queen, enter. Lucianus, the killer, represents whom? The player king is in poor health; he seems unlikely to live over-long. The player queen swears vehemently that she will never marry another. Hamlet, his nervous tension betraying itself in every word he speaks and in every move he makes, gazes intently at Claudius the while. Claudius, who has been watching the play in silence becomes uneasy: "Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?" he asks, beginning to see the significance of what is taking place. "It doesn't touch our lives; we are innocent" is the meaning of Hamlet's answer. "Let the blistered horse wince; we carry no load; that is, we have nothing on our conscience. Let the guilty recoil: there is no reason for this to bother us".

Then come the lines that some suppose Hamlet has inserted. Lucianus pours poison into the sleeping King's ear. Hamlet can restrain himself no longer. He rapidly tells what comes next. Keeping his eye on the king, Hamlet discloses that Lucianus, the sleeping king's nephew, intends to kill the king.

King Claudius cannot mistake the point. He rises crying for light and reveals his guilt to Hamlet.

As the scene closes, Hamlet makes his way to his mother. Since first learning of his father's murder, Hamlet has had no way of knowing whether his mother has actually been party to the murder of the father or

whether she had any knowledge of it. The brief soliloquy Hamlet speaks as he goes to his mother is Shakespeare's way of preparing us for the showdown now imminent and inevitable between Hamlet and his mother.

Hamlet means to be severe and unrelenting with his mother, but we are told that although he will be pitiless, Hamlet will not take his mother's life: "... let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom."

Is it fair to assume that Hamlet is here more intent upon sifting his mother's guilt and facing her with defection than he is upon punishing Claudius for his crime? There are those who hold that Hamlet postpones the killing of Claudius in view of the more pressing need of finding out what part his mother had played in the murder of her first husband.

## ACT 3 SCENE 3

Scene 3 opens with Claudius arranging an escort to conduct Hamlet out of Denmark. The King, who intends to preserve his royal safety at whatever cost, justifies the removal of Hamlet from Denmark on the claim that his "madness", in which Claudius does not actually believe, is too dangerous to be allowed to run loose.

Let us examine the **King at prayer**. In the soliloquy on pages 181-182, we learn without a shred of doubt that Claudius did murder King Hamlet. As he tries to pray, the guilty man petitions that only the evil-doer needs merciful dealing. What scope has mercy save in the very face of sin? he asks. Notice the two-fold force Claudius attributes to prayer. Prayer keeps us from falling into sin and helps us gain pardon for sins we have committed. Some words of the soliloquy resemble those of the Lord's prayer. "To be forestalled ere we come to fall" means the same thing as "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," while "or pardon'd being down" and "forgive me my foul murder" are not unlike "forgive us our trespasses". Claudius wants relief from torture and fear, but to get it he is unwilling to relinquish what he has gained through murder.

He wants his Queen, the throne—and God's pardon, to boot! But he knows that God judges justly, that he must truly repent the evil he has done before he can be absolved of the crime and receive forgiveness. Of what use is repentance to the sinner who cannot repent? Claudius fails to bring himself to the point of actual repentance. He cannot make restitution, for he finds the price of repentance too high.

The crisis of the play occurs as Hamlet finds the guilty man on his knees. Entirely convinced of Claudius' guilt, Hamlet now has a chance to take the guilty man's life; but he looks the chance over and passes it up, without the king so much knowing that he was there. So favourable a chance does not come Hamlet's way again. Had he been able to summon the will to destroy the murderer as he prayed, only the guilty man would have died. But because Hamlet doesn't kill Claudius here, many disasters follow. Polonius, Ophelia, Queen Gertrude, Laertes, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern all die because Hamlet fails to take revenge on the King at prayer. Hamlet himself will also die for this reason. Had Hamlet, like Laertes, been a man of precipitant action, he could have taken the moment when it served, killed the king as he prayed, and left to a later moment the justification of his action to the Council of Denmark and the court.

Hamlet is now in peril, for the mouse-trap play has disclosed to Claudius that Hamlet knows all there is to know about his crime and the usurpation of Denmark's throne. His guilt unmasked, Claudius is now fully aroused to his danger and will take action against Hamlet.

As yet Claudius has done little more than keep Hamlet under surveillance, holding in reservation a scheme to send him to England to be executed upon arrival there, should the Prince prove a danger to him in Denmark. Since Hamlet has full knowledge of Claudius' treason, the king is now bent on his nephew's destruction and ultimately succeeds in destroying him simply because Hamlet did not take his chance for revenge when it offered, and because he failed to be sufficiently wary of the personal danger he ran in letting the murderer live. Omitting to kill Claudius at prayer proves eventually fatal to Hamlet, for through the subsequent mad slaying of Polonius he loses the initiative, which in that rash act passes to Claudius.

There are many possible explanations for Hamlet's delay. The problem has challenged scholars for over three hundred years. You need not hastily conclude why Hamlet delayed the revenge, but try to take a reasonable position on the problem.

## Act 3, Scene 4

Hamlet leaves Claudius to his tentative devotions and goes to the Queen. She means to take him to task for having offended the King with the play of murder. Polonius has hidden himself behind the tapestry. The Queen knows this and makes no protest at the Lord Chamberlain's presence there, but Hamlet does not know that a third party is present. Perhaps the high excitement he experienced at his success in exposing the guilty King has not altogether subsided. Hamlet means to stage a showdown with his mother with a view to finding out what share she had in the murder of his father.

The Queen makes an attempt to deal roundly with Hamlet, but Hamlet will have none of this and turns the tables upon her, chiding her for her unfaithfulness to his father. The Queen is not prepared to be scolded by her son and moves to summon the King to discipline the unruly prince. But Hamlet prevents her going. Afraid of him, she cries out in alarm. Polonius cries out too from behind the curtain. Polonius, concealed behind the arras, may have been killed by Hamlet in mistake for the King. Outraged, Hamlet moves on swift impulse, and in the act of killing the unseen eavesdropper makes the revenge of his father, for the time being, a lost cause. In the same rash act, as it turns out, Hamlet seals his own fate. Polonius' death is the first disaster which follows upon Hamlet's failure to kill Claudius at the crisis. In the fierce white heat of outraged indignation, Hamlet has done a rash and reckless thing. Polonius may be foolish and even contemptible, but he had done nothing worthy of death.

When the Queen exclaims, "O what a rash and bloody deed is this!" Hamlet strikes back, accusing her of complicity in the murder of his father. His mother's shocked, "As kill a king!" satisfies Hamlet that she is innocent of complicity in the murder.

Hamlet confronts his mother with having married a man like Claudius, a man who would commit stealthy murder upon a brother, steal his throne, and marry his wife. When Hamlet continues remorselessly, the Ghost of his father appears to scold him. Hamlet had been forbidden to take action of any kind against his mother. He was to leave her to heaven and her conscience. The Ghost is not visible to the Queen, for by her incestuous marriage she has forfeited the right to be included in the inner circle. His failure to kill Claudius at prayer and his relentless tirade upon his mother has brought the Ghost back "to whet" Hamlet's "almost blunted purpose" and to protect the Queen who is in mortal fear of her "mad" son.

The Queen cries in remorse at her culpable action: "O Hamlet thou hast cleft my heart in twain." There is in Hamlet a sudden outburst of love and regard for his mother when the Queen repents. His noble fury spent at last, Hamlet bids his mother goodnight several times, as if loth to leave her now that they have at last reached an understanding. He assures her that he is not mad, but mad only "in craft"; that is, his madness is put on, and for a purpose. He speaks of his proposed banishment to England, which the killing of Polonius now makes inevitable. "There's letters sealed," he tells her and hints that he will meet the perilous prospect when it comes. Hamlet seems to be holding something in reserve and suggests that he will have to follow his course as the way opens to him.

## Act 4 Scene 1

Claudius, who has come to the Queen, asks what she has learned from her talk with Hamlet. Why does his mother say that Hamlet is "Mad as the sea and wind" The Queen's little subterfuge about Hamlet's madness is practised to shield her son and shows that his appeal to her better nature has had some effect. When the Queen reports that Hamlet has slain Polonius, Claudius sees that he himself has narrowly escaped death. The King's next thought is also for himself. He fears that he will be held accountable for the death of Polonius and wonders how he will explain the mishap to the people of Denmark. Claudius will hush up Hamlet's deed. He will send the Prince away. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to escort Hamlet to England to his death.

## Act 4 Scene 2

Apparently, Hamlet has stowed the body of Polonius in some unlikely place, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to locate it. In the conversation that ensues, Hamlet gets the better of them in evasive chatter. He turns their words back upon them, despising the shallow pair for their subservience to his evil uncle, yet seeming to feel some measure of concern for their ultimate safety, since he warns them that when the King is done with them, he will destroy them. Curiously enough, Hamlet, himself, is the agent of their death. He speaks to them, in this scene, in terms they may not clearly understand. He rates them as servile and has little patience with their kind. Human nature is a weak thing.

### Act 4 Scene 3

Aware that it would be extremely hazardous for him to punish Hamlet in Denmark, Claudius says here that it was impossible to do so because Hamlet is loved by the masses of the people who do not see deeply and whose feelings are easily swayed. Hamlet has the love and affection of the general public; and people base their love not on the justice of a matter but on visible qualities in Hamlet which appeal to them. They will question the severity of Hamlet's punishment, but will not enquire too closely into the nature of his offence. Claudius has no wish to fan the embers of revolt in the people.

Hamlet dares to taunt his antagonist because Hamlet knows him to be a traitor and a murderer, and does not feel accountable to him for the rash killing of the intrusive Polonius. Hamlet also knows that the King must walk warily lest he place his own case in jeopardy, lest word of the murder of Denmark's king be spread. As Hamlet baits the King, Claudius is no match for him.

### Act 4 Scene 4

This is an outdoor scene on a plain in Denmark. Shakespeare probably brings Fortinbras in again, at this point, to remind us that we are already acquainted with the Prince of Norway. In this way he makes Fortinbras' return from Poland by way of Denmark at the end of the play incidental and natural enough. We accept Fortinbras as king at the last because he is not a complete stranger, and also because he is commanding and assured in bearing. Fortinbras, the strong practical man, strikes a sharp contrast with the reflective, delaying Hamlet. As he appears here Fortinbras seems a rebuke to Hamlet, who at sight of the young Norwegian's enterprise feels remiss at having delayed the revenge observing how little it takes to prompt Fortinbras into daring action. Shakespeare again presents Prince Fortinbras as a foil to Hamlet. Hamlet takes Fortinbras' march as a reproach because he has failed to accomplish the revenge. After a few words with the captain of Fortinbras' army, Hamlet, as is his habit, becomes absorbed in his private thoughts. He speaks these in the fourth of the long, reflective soliloquies. More than one previous circumstance has stirred Hamlet's slumbering vengeance and some of these remind him that he is delaying the revenge.

Following is a paraphrase of Hamlet's last long soliloquy:

How everything that happens, such as Fortinbras' marching on Poland, serves as a reproach to my inaction and spurs me on to my long-delayed revenge! What good is man if he only eats and sleeps? He is no better than an animal. Surely God did not endow us with the capacity to remember the past and envision the future, the power to reason, for nothing. Now, whether I am like an animal, lacking the power of thought, or whether I think too carefully upon the actual deed of revenge—which is more cowardly than it is wise—I do not know why I still have the revenge to perform, since I have the reason, the will, the strength and the means to do it. (No obstacle prevents me from doing the deed, and still I do not get it done.) There are many things to spur me on. This great army, for instance, led by a delicate prince whose ambitious spirit mocks at the unpredictable outcome and is willing to risk all for practically nothing. True greatness is to refrain from action unless the provocation is great, but when honour is at stake, true greatness acts even on slight provocation. How do I look then, who have a father murdered, a mother stained, two things to excite my reason and my emotions to action, and yet I let things take their course, while to my shame I see twenty thousand men going to death, and these for a little fame go to their graves as if to bed, fighting for a piece of land not large enough to accommodate the fighters or to bury the slain? O, from now on, I must think of the actual killing of the guilty king, or my thinking will be futile.

In the last long soliloquy Hamlet contrasts himself with Fortinbras, reviling himself for his delay in the revenge. With infinitely better reason for action than Fortinbras, Hamlet does nothing. Fortinbras risks all for a mere eggshell, while Hamlet, who has the revenge of a father upon his soul, remains inactive in the specific act of killing Claudius.

Should Hamlet, at this point, be giving a little thought to the likelihood that a chance to mete out punishment to Claudius may not come his way again? How can Hamlet know at this moment that he will ever return to Denmark? And is he the sort of man to allow himself to be passively conducted to his death?

Some scholars feel that having proved to his own satisfaction that Claudius is guilty and having set his mother clear on the matter of her transgression is sufficient for Hamlet, and he is, for the present, content to let the

matter lie. He conducts himself as though he will have forever to get the revenge done, and he will do the deed in his own good time; yet once on board ship for England, he may well be a "lost man and his revenge a lost cause!" To get into action in the revenge instead of boarding the ship apparently does not strike Hamlet as imperative. To hurry to the palace, to strike his sword into Claudius' breast, to appeal to Horatio, to the Players and to the people while the events of the last few months are fresh in their minds would be the impulse of a man of action.

## Act 4 Scene 5

Between scenes 4 and 5 several weeks have elapsed. Polonius has been secretly buried. Denmark may soon begin to ask questions and the King fears that he will become the object of general querulous unrest. Laertes has returned from Paris bent upon revenging his father's murder. Hamlet's ship has gone on to England without him, and Fortinbras is on his way back to Norway after a conquest of Poland.

Overcome by grief at her father's death and bewildered at the slaying of her father by her lover, Ophelia has come to madness. Claudius at first claims that her madness "springs all from her father's death" but later tells the Queen that the cause of Ophelia's stress is twofold, "First, her father slain; / Next, your son gone...." Horatio advises Hamlet's mother who does not want to see the girl, that neglect of Ophelia, if she is left to wander unattended, may make the Danish people wonder what goes on at court. Still smarting from the tirade to which Hamlet had subjected her, and no doubt upset by his precipitant killing of a harmless old man, the Queen is unwilling to face the unexpected calamity of Ophelia's madness. Perhaps consciousness of her own guilt as well as distress at her son's banishment troubles Queen Gertrude and keeps her from feeling for the poor mad creature. The Queen seems disturbed by a premonition of still greater evil to come.

How are we to account for Ophelia's madness? C.E. Lewis reminds us that Ophelia is an utterly lonely girl without a soul in the world in whom to confide her troubles. Ophelia's safe and secluded little world has suddenly collapsed about her in her father's death at her lover's hand. The violent death of the father to whom she is devotedly attached is all the more shocking since she believes that Hamlet has done the fearful deed out of the madness into which her rejection has cast him.

The genuine madness suffered by Ophelia is a contrast to the antic disposition assumed by Hamlet. It is ironic that Ophelia, who feared that she had driven her lover mad, came to real madness through his action.

Claudius rues the error in judgment which had prompted him to bury the old man "huggermugger", (that is, secretly). As Claudius turns over in his mind the fact that it would have been wiser not to have tried to conceal Polonius' death, Laertes forces entry to demand redress. That such heady rebellion can spring up overnight shows the restless state of the Danish kingdom.

Confronted with this new and unexpected show of enmity, Claudius handles the moment to great advantage. He is a man of undoubted ability and the Danes selected a man of capable and powerful resource when they accepted him as their king. His imperial dignity contrasts well with the rude impetuosity of Laertes. In kingly fashion Claudius braves the insurgents as they crowd his presence. Unruffled, he does not permit the Queen to restrain the fiery rebel, and as Laertes, demanding his father, casts his allegiance in the King's face with the words, "To hell allegiance", Claudius replies that a king is so protected by heaven that in his presence treason comes to naught, a curious allegation to be made by the man who had murdered Denmark's rightful king! Claudius deals ably with the rebel, calming his rashness, deftly directing against the absent Hamlet Laertes' headlong anger at the murder and secret burial of his father.

## Act 4 Scene 6

Scene 6 is the letter scene. Read Hamlet's letter to Horatio. What does it tell us of Hamlet? Who set him ashore in Denmark? Why need he summon Horatio to him?

## Act 4 Scene 7

We find the King and Laertes in conference. Laertes demands to know why Hamlet, upon whose head Claudius lays Polonius' death, had not been punished for the offence. Claudius alleges that he could not hurt the Queen who loves her son fondly and that he could not run the risk of arousing the people who love Hamlet out of

all sense and reason. As the conversation proceeds, letters to the King and Queen arrive from Hamlet, who announces that he will confront the King on the morrow. Hamlet's message to the King is substantially, "Here I am unprotected. Do your worst. I shall present myself to you tomorrow."

Claudius needs to rid himself of Hamlet and in such a way that he will not be blamed. Notice how careful Claudius is not to manipulate Laertes too openly. He is devious and roundabout, for he does not wish to betray that he has reasons of his own for disposing of Hamlet.

Laertes may have sensed Claudius' urgency in the matter but he gave the King's motives scant attention just then. Laertes is too full of his own wrongs and his mad desire for revenge to care about much else. He is thoroughly overwrought and Claudius takes advantage of this.

Like Fortinbras, Laertes serves as a foil to Hamlet but the contrast is not entirely in Laertes' favour. Laertes' vigour in revenge is Shakespeare's intentional contrast to the delaying tactics of Hamlet. The hero's motives in revenge are quite as genuine and sincere as those of Laertes but the latter is more impetuous and less scrupulous than Hamlet. Laertes storms the King's very door in the heat of vengeful impulse, while Hamlet dallies in leisurely fashion to exchange commonplaces with a gravedigger who did not so much as recognize him, instead of hastening to demand audience with the King. Laertes, of course, is in the first heat of revenge while Hamlet's fires have banked for some time. Laertes' naturally impetuous temper, snatches at even an ignoble chance of revenge, seeking no proof of guilt in Hamlet beyond the King's word. Hamlet's need to prove the guilt of Claudius shows him to be the soul of honour, and eminently Laertes' superior.

Because the railing Laertes proves an easy tool for the King's infamous villainy, he forfeits our good opinion. Shakespeare makes a villain of Laertes to reserve our sympathy for Hamlet, the hero of the play. Hamlet does not practise treachery and is being dealt foul play.

Claudius has neatly evolved a plan using Laertes as the instrument of Hamlet's destruction. There was to be a fencing match between the two. Claudius suggested that Laertes use a naked blade. Thereupon, Laertes decided to use a deadly venom on the point of his weapon, the merest scratch from which would be fatal to Hamlet. Laertes agreed to deliberately murder Hamlet while pretending to take part in a contest of skill in fencing. A fair device to be contemplated by a man of honour! A man who claimed to be vindicating his honour, his sister's honour, and his father's honour! But Laertes cared nothing for the means so long as he might be the agent of Hamlet's death.

Bear in mind that Laertes had had the poisonous unction in his possession before he had reached Denmark, and before he had entered upon the plot with the King. That is, the capacity for villainy was present in Laertes before Claudius sought to mould the young man to his own evil purpose.

Unlike Hamlet, Laertes fails to see his revenge as a matter of conscience and honour. To make doubly sure that Hamlet will die, Claudius plans to prepare for him a cup of poisoned wine lest Laertes fail to deal him a mortal blow. The King will leave nothing to chance this time. Had Hamlet been only half as painstaking in his own defence! But he was content to take the crucial hour when it came. Had his foes been as honourable as he, all would have been well with Hamlet, but then had they been so, no conflict, such as the one in which he became involved, could have arisen. Claudius observes that Hamlet is the soul of honour, and will suspect no evil on their part. Claudius says that Hamlet, careless of his personal safety, large of heart, and not given to plotting evil, will not examine the weapons closely.

By promising Laertes the kingdom (a generous offer, and a safe one!), if the aggrieved young man could prove him guilty of the murder of Polonius, Claudius manages to persuade Laertes that he was not in any way party to the death of the old councillor, and craftily moves Laertes into a plot whereby Claudius will nicely rid himself of the troublesome Prince.

While Laertes and the King are occupied in laying their evil plot, the Queen comes in with word of Ophelia's death. So sad a stroke of fate occurring at a moment when Laertes is already overcharged with grief at his father's death and his sister's madness has dramatic value in that it strengthens, and perhaps in part excuses, Laertes' resolve to kill Hamlet "who is indirectly the author of her death. If there had been any scruples in Laertes' mind they are removed." (C. E. Lewis).

Ophelia had climbed a tree to hang her wreaths upon it; she fell by accident into the water below. She floated awhile, singing her songs of love and death, not realizing the danger that lurked in the placid stream; before long her drenched garments drew her to the bottom of the stream. Her songs ceased.

## Act 5 Scene 1 The Gravediggers' Scene

Act 5 opens in the graveyard. Because of its nature the scene may strike an audience as unusual, unwarranted, perhaps even shocking, since most people do not take death and gravemaking as casually as the gravediggers seem to do. The murder of Polonius in Act 3, scene 4, has removed the comic figure from the play. Since an audience becomes restless and inattentive if there is no comic relief occasionally, Shakespeare knew that he must vary his fare in order to prevent the play from becoming strained and repetitive beyond the tolerance of those who watch it. Aware of the audience's need of relief, Shakespeare introduces the two gravediggers who are very much at home in their grim world. By their clowning they lighten the tension created by the preceding scenes.

Notice the point made in the first speech. The matter of Christian burial touched the gravediggers' professional pride. One who had taken her own life could not be buried in the main section of the churchyard but received a restricted burial ceremony. "Crowner" means *coroner*. There has been a coroner's inquest to determine the nature of Ophelia's death.

The clowns make merry over legal terms. By "offendendo" the clown actually means "defendendo," in defence. The term is used in verdicts of justifiable homicide. By "argal" he means "ergo", which is *therefore*.

The arrival of Hamlet and Horatio at the graveyard brings a note of seriousness to the scene. Hamlet wonders at the levity of the clown in so serious an occupation. Horatio observes the digger is used to his work and takes it as a matter of course.

Hamlet gives his imagination play in thoughts about each skull, the singer, the politician and the courtier—lines 80 - 118. With the digger, Hamlet is shown by Shakespeare as a master of kindly wit, irony and sarcasm.

It is amusing that the gravedigger fails to recognize Hamlet and tells him that the Prince of Denmark has been sent to England because he is mad, that his madness will go undetected there because all England is as mad as he is. We gather from this that Shakespeare considered Hamlet typically, essentially English, and no more mad than the whole English populace, no more mad than most men.

Hamlet's reminiscences of Yorick, the court jester of his childhood, are famous. Yorick was a "fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy" whose jibes, gambols, songs and "flashes of merriment were wont to set the table on a roar." It was a custom, from early times, for the king to have a jester to keep him amused. Hamlet's remarks on Alexander and Caesar are cynical: "To what base uses we may return, Horatio." That is, despite our imagined importance or our station in life, death reduces us to a forgotten and unidentifiable handful of bones. Even Caesar's dust may "stop a hole to keep the wind away."

As the burial procession approaches, Hamlet and Horatio conceal themselves from view. Hamlet takes note that the funeral is for someone of consequence at the court. The maimed rites indicate suicide. "Virgin crants", lines 2 and 3, are white garlands hung in the church at a maiden's funeral. "Shards" are fragments of some brittle substance, scales, or shells. "Her maiden strewments" are flowers strewn upon the grave. The priest's line: "Her death was doubtful", shows that there is nothing really conclusive to indicate that Ophelia's death was voluntary.

Laertes protests the curtailment of the ceremony for his sister's burial to the priest in scornful words. At Laertes' use of the word "sister," Hamlet realizes it is Ophelia who has died and is being buried. The possibility of any such thing had never crossed his mind, and the unexpectedness of her death and burial comes as a rude shock.

In a great show of grief, Laertes jumps into the grave to take Ophelia for a last time in his arms. Not to be outdone, Hamlet leaps into the grave after Laertes, asserting that he is the royal Dane, thus intimating that he should take precedence. They struggle there, and are parted. Shocked at the unexpectedness of what is taking place, Hamlet has no thought of the proprieties here but acts entirely on impulse. The showiness of Laertes' grief

## HAMLET NOTES

has put Hamlet into a "towering passion". He forgets everything else, everything but just the love he had put from him.

Hamlet's parting shot: "The cat will mew, and dog will have his day" is made perhaps because he resents Laertes' usurping his place as chief mourner. Hamlet means by these words that nothing can prevent inferior creatures, such as Laertes, from following their nature, and now and then they get a chance to come to the front. Hamlet's contempt is bitter, and is not likely to placate Laertes' sharp animosity toward him.

However, the encounter of Hamlet and Laertes at the graveside does not advance the action materially, for their quarrel here has not a great deal to do with their subsequent encounter. It serves, chiefly, to bring into contact the opposing characters of the two men, and we need a moment or two of some kind of relief before the breathless rush with which the play closes.

## Act 5 Scene 2

As the last scene opens, Hamlet talks with Horatio of his escape from the ship bearing him to England and to death. In lines 1 - 80 of Scene 2 Hamlet uses the word "rashly" to describe how he had sent his escorts to death. "Rashness is more characteristic of Hamlet than he knows. If he is effective at all, it is always from impulsive action and not from a deep plot carefully planned." (C. T. Fyfe)

There are in the second scene the oft-quoted lines:

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will."

Hamlet says that sometimes our unconventional acts, such as his taking the letters and changing them to save his life, serve us well and that should teach us that God watches over us, for no matter how badly we botch our purposes by our indiscretions, there is a divine providence that brings good out of them. Although we are the "carpenters of our actions in the rough," it is God who shapes them to their ultimate form.

Horatio examines the idea of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern going unwarily to their death in England, and seems to question Hamlet's judgment in the matter, but Hamlet "acquits himself on the plea that they had sought and wooed" their fate: "Why, man, they did make love to this employment." He feels that their action in escorting him to death warranted their own. Horatio points out that through the English ambassadors Claudius will soon know what Hamlet has done with the two escorts. "The interim is mine," Hamlet replies. That is, he will have a little time before that happens.

Before long Osric appears. His only business in the plot is to bring to Hamlet word that the King is interested in a test of fencing skill between Hamlet and Laertes. Later Osric counts the score in the fencing match. Grebanier thinks that Osric is more than likely aware of Laertes' intended treachery in the fencing bout.

Osric is counterfeit in several respects. He is a shallow creature, a "curled darling of the court" who lisps, the language of euphuism, the high-flown manner of speech used by courtiers of Shakespeare's day. The appearance of the court dandy briefly diverts Hamlet from serious thought on the legitimacy of his case against Claudius to his favorite amusement of bandying words.

Osric's desire to separate himself from the common run has led him to imitate the elegant speech and manners of the scholarly world; but, as imitators often do, Osric misunderstands what contemporary scholars were doing with language and he confuses ridiculous formality with true courtliness. In him Shakespeare mocks the affected style of conversation fashionable during the Elizabethan age, which style was marked by antithesis and alliteration, far-fetched similes and other forms of affected elegance.

Osric comes in for a bit of nice sarcasm even from Horatio, who asks the Osric, whom Hamlet has bewildered, if he cannot speak his mother tongue, "another tongue" from the one he affects—You are capable of it, are you not? What! You can chatter in another jargon that is certainly not English. Can't you understand in English, too? Pray try.



Did Hamlet recognize the fencing match to be no trivial pastime? To Horatio the challenge is suspect, and he warns the Prince that he will lose the wager; but Hamlet, who has been careful to keep in constant practice with the sword, feels sure that he will better Laertes in the test of skill. Nonetheless, he does have misgivings: "But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart." Hamlet has a premonition of ill. Horatio soberly advises Hamlet to plead indisposition and decline to play at swords with Laertes, but Hamlet will not be dissuaded. What is to come, will come, "The readiness is all." The "when" is of no great matter. There is a new and settled security in this speech from a heart so long at war with itself and destiny.

Before the fencing match begins, Hamlet in the face of the whole court asks forgiveness for the wrong he has done Laertes. Hamlet's apology is sincere and confirms what he said to Horatio in 5, 2, 74 - 79. Does Hamlet suppose that an apology will put him right with Laertes? With reservations, Laertes accepts the apology:

"I do receive your offered love like love,  
And will not wrong it." (5, 2, 254 - 255)

Laertes' wish to be right with public opinion is characteristic of him. Is he making a gallant public show with venom in his heart? Or is what he says a natural response to Hamlet's appeal which Laertes hasn't the nobility to meet when the test comes?

As the match is about to begin, Laertes changes his weapon saying that the first one is too light. Notwithstanding his courtly speech to Hamlet a moment before, he takes up the naked rapier, the point of which, presumably, he has already envenomed, while Hamlet, asking only if the weapons are all of equal length, accepts, without objection, the sword offered him by Osric. Using a blunted sword, Hamlet enters what turns out to be a fatal bout. Before the start Claudius reminds Hamlet that the odds are that Laertes will win, "since he is better'd," that is, has the better reputation as a fencer. This is the King's sly way of undermining Hamlet's confidence in his fencing ability.

The match opens. The theatre audience watches the scene intently. Hamlet gets the first hit. The Queen, concerned for her son, who is scant of breath and apparently not in top form, gives him her handkerchief to wipe his brow and drinks to his success. In alarm the King cries out to prevent the Queen from drinking the poisoned wine, but she does not listen: "I will, my lord", she insists and drinks the poisoned wine.

As the bout continues, Laertes has trouble getting a thrust at Hamlet, who is more skillful with the sword than either Laertes or the King had supposed. In a fair way Hamlet is winning. Taunted by Claudius and taking Hamlet off guard, Laertes strikes the mortal blow during a brief lull when Osric gives a judgment on the play. On being unexpectedly wounded, Hamlet is stung into instant, fiery action. In the scuffle that follows, he gets possession of the sharp weapon and wounds Laertes with the fatal point. Now that his own death is certain, Laertes exposes the King.

After Laertes has been deprived of the naked, envenomed blade the Queen falls; the poison in the wine has done its work. The King, who loves the Queen after his fashion, tries to cover the fact that she is poisoned. He attempts to divert attention from her by saying that she has merely fainted, but as she dies, the Queen's concern is for her son and she means Hamlet to know the truth. So she warns him that the drink is poisoned.

The King's game is played out. With but a bare half-hour to live, Hamlet at last completes the task the Ghost had set for him at the outset of the play. It is his mother's revelation of the King's treachery that at last spurs Hamlet to action in the revenge. The real significance of the fencing-match is now clear to Hamlet. His death was intended by Laertes and the King. His mother has fallen victim to the foul plot; and Laertes warns him that his own life is swiftly ebbing. At long last Hamlet is geared to action. He stabs the evil King and forces him to drink the poisoned wine.

With but a few moments to live, Hamlet turns to the one loyal friend he has had, and entreats Horatio to report him and his "cause aright / To the unsatisfied." Hamlet's dying wish is that the circumstances of his death be made known to those in Denmark who will call the whole matter into question. Horatio is to tell how Denmark and the royal house had been wronged by Claudius, and how Hamlet had been thrust into a task not of his choosing.

In the first shock of Hamlet's approaching death Horatio would, like the "antique Roman," drink off what remains of the poisoned wine and die with him. His life's energy all but drained, Hamlet strikes the cup from

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Horatio's hand, dashing its contents to the floor. In lines of exquisite poetry, he asks Horatio to live and tell his story to the world and so clear his name wounded by so much slaughter, 5, 2, 345 - 353. As always, Horatio does as Hamlet asks.

In Hamlet's last speeches his words are fraught with tragedy and they reveal his innate nobility. There is a wealth of suggestion in his last words: "The rest is silence." The fearful conflict is over, and Hamlet finds peace at last.

There is a wonderful beauty and dignity in Hamlet as he meets death. His duty is done. As life ebbs, he forgives Laertes and bids his mother farewell. No word of lamentation, no reproach, no recrimination escapes him. He has just time and strength to think of the future, to forestall Horatio's death in words that are pathetic and moving, and to take thought for the welfare of the kingdom which he himself would have ruled most royally.

While he lived Hamlet had had occasion to condemn Denmark's corruption. In a state so poisoned, reform is unlikely to come from within. The failure of Hamlet to cope with his task is said to be a part of his corrupt surroundings. New blood is needed, and it is to be had in Fortinbras of Norway, who with Horatio's support will set Denmark back on course and open a new era in Denmark's history.

The last few lines of the play deal with the re-ordering of Denmark's affairs. The English ambassadors come to report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have suffered death. Horatio will tell Hamlet's story to Denmark and will proclaim Fortinbras successor to the throne.

As in all his tragedies, Shakespeare diffuses the intensity of the tragic emotion before dismissing his audience, for it is not his practice to leave a tragic theme until he has shown how life continues, and so Fortinbras enters to pay Hamlet fitting tribute, and to remain to rule the kingdom which stands in need of a king. Fortinbras states that he has "some rights of memory" in Denmark. These are claims which he has kept in mind.

The play ends with a speech from Fortinbras, who is to be King of Denmark and who orders a soldier's funeral for the noble and heroic Hamlet. The closing words are spoken by the Prince of Norway in requiem for Denmark's Prince.

And so Hamlet, who fought on the side of goodness, disappears from the scene. But then so have those who lined up on the side of evil. And now that the major conflict is closed, those who remain to direct the affairs of Denmark are on the side of the forces for good. The stable, judicious Horatio and the courageous, realistic Fortinbras have taken matters in hand. In this "Shakespeare seems to be saying that although the good man may go down to defeat, goodness itself cannot ... be extinguished. This is the peculiarly Shakespearean version of catharsis." (Grebanier)

Fortinbras' presence in Denmark as the play ends restores a positive feeling. He is firm and practical, and Denmark is obviously in good hands. Shakespeare leaves Fortinbras to order Hamlet's burial march, to arrange royal military honours for Denmark's Prince. And so we leave Denmark to the direction of a commanding, decisive, daring and competent soldier.