

THE PLOT OF HAMLET

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

A ghost has been seen walking the battlements of the castle of Elsinore in Denmark. It has the appearance of the King who has recently died, father of Hamlet. Horatio, Hamlet's closest friend, joins the watchmen who have reported the apparition and, while waiting to see if the specter reappears, Horatio explains something of the current political situation: the dead King, Hamlet's father defeated in battle and killed the King of Norway whose son, young Fortinbras is now mustering another army to attack Denmark and recover their lost territory.

Horatio is interrupted by the appearance of the ghost. Horatio confronts the specter. But before the ghost answers, the cock is heard crowing. The ghost vanishes.

Horatio decides that Hamlet must be told.

SCENE TWO

The court. We are introduced to Claudius, brother to the late King and now married to his widow, Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. King Claudius is sending ambassadors to Fortinbras, trying to prevent the imminent war. He also grants permission to Laertes, the son of Polonius, chief counsellor to the throne. Laertes means to return to France to continue his studies.

Hamlet appears. He wears mourning and both Gertrude and Claudius urge him to discontinue this prolonged display of grief at the death of his father.

Hamlet is left alone; soliloquizing, he expresses his bitterness at Gertrude's marriage to his uncle so soon after the death of her first husband. Hamlet's contempt for his uncle, his anger at his mother's unfeeling behaviour, has driven him to such despair that he feels disillusioned with life itself.

Horatio, entering with the soldiers who were members of the watch, reports the vision of the ghost. Hamlet, reacting, agrees to join them so that he himself can challenge the ghost.

SCENE THREE

Laertes is taking leave of Ophelia, his sister, to whom Hamlet has been paying court. Laertes is concerned, warning her against Hamlet whom he considers unstable and not to be trusted. Their father, Polonius joins them and offers heavy handed advice to his son as Laertes departs for France.

Alone with Ophelia, Polonius also urges his daughter to break off with

SCENE FOUR

Horatio, Hamlet and Marcellus, one of the other soldiers of the watch, are waiting for the ghost. When it appears again, Hamlet deeply disturbed, recognizes it as the spirit of his dead father. The ghost beckons him. Hamlet's friends try to prevent him from following but he turns on them in violence, breaking away.

SCENE FIVE

On another part of the battlements, the ghost finally speaks to Hamlet. To the consternation of the Prince, the ghost reveals that he was the victim of a murder. Claudius, who first seduced Gertrude, then poured poison in the ear of the elder Hamlet while he slept in the garden. Calling on Hamlet to avenge him, the ghost pleads that Hamlet have mercy for his mother's weakness.

When Horatio and Marcellus return they find Hamlet alone, in a state of extreme emotion. Hamlet refuses to tell them what has happened. Instead, he insists on swearing them to an oath of secrecy: he demands their silence, no matter how strangely they think Hamlet may behave hereafter.

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

Polonius has heard that his son Laertes is said to be behaving in a disreputable fashion in France: he sends a servant to spy on Laertes and report.

Ophelia appears. She is distressed. Hamlet's behaviour to her is savage and incomprehensible. He seems to have taken leave of his senses. Polonius diagnoses this as madness -- probably the result of unrequited love. He will consult Claudius.

SCENE TWO

Claudius and Gertrude have summoned two friends of Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Describing the irrational behaviour of the Prince, Claudius instructs them to see if they can find the reason for Hamlet's attitudes.

Meanwhile the ambassadors to Norway have returned with news that they have managed to discourage Fortinbras who is now preparing to attack Poland instead of Denmark. Fortinbras asks only that Claudius permits his troops to cross Denmark as he makes war on the Poles. Claudius agrees.

Polonius enters with his report of Hamlet's demented insults to Ophelia and assures Claudius that the Prince has lost his wits. Sceptical, Claudius encourages the old man to find a way to spy on his daughter with Hamlet, when they are alone.

Hamlet, meeting Polonius, clearly suspects that the old man is acting on behalf of Claudius and is deliberately sarcastic. Polonius is confirmed in his view that Hamlet is mad.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive as Polonius leaves. At first pleased to see them, Hamlet soon guesses that they too have been recruited as spies of his uncle. The two bring news that a group of actors, travelling players, have come to Elsinore and Polonius presently returns, bringing the players with him.

Hamlet welcomes them. He asks them to perform a play called 'The Murder of Gonzago' but to arrange some special business and insert in the text some additional dialogue which Hamlet will write. They readily agree -- without understanding his purpose: it is, of course, a trap through which Hamlet plans to confirm his suspicions of Claudius, watching the King as he witnesses a reenactment of the murder of Hamlet's father.

Alone once more, Hamlet reveals his plan and comments upon the irony of the actor who is trained to express emotions which are entirely fictitious while he, in the grip of his own private and personal agony, must contrive to conceal his feelings.

ACT THREE
SCENE ONE

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have nothing to report to Claudius, except that Hamlet has become interested in the player's presentation.

Polonius instructs Ophelia to contrive a meeting with Hamlet in some situation where Polonius and Claudius can secretly observe. In an 'aside', Claudius now admits to the audience that he is indeed the murderer of Hamlet's father.

Hamlet appears again, alone and in deep depression again. He is considering suicide. He broods on the question of life after death; self-destruction may be no escape from his torment.

When Ophelia reenters, insisting on returning to him the gifts he has given her, Hamlet realises that she has been persuaded to betray him and attacks her savagely both personally and as a member of the sex that must always be betrayers of men. Insulting her father and making veiled threats against Claudius, Hamlet leaves her, having convinced her also that he is insane.

Claudius and Polonius emerge from their concealment. Claudius, increasingly afraid of Hamlet's activities, tells his counsellor that it will be best for Hamlet if he is sent abroad, to England. Polonius, still convinced that Hamlet's reactions are those of a rejected lover, advises Claudius to urge his wife to talk to her son.

SCENE TWO

Hamlet gives the players a lecture on the subject of acting. (Probably Shakespeare expressing his own views through Hamlet). Then he asks Horatio to help him by studying the reactions of Claudius at a critical moment in the play.

The court assembles for this performance. It starts with a scene of pantomime and then with dialogue which reenacts the murder as described to Hamlet by the ghost. Claudius is unable to conceal his dismay and bursts out of the hall, confirming for Hamlet and Horatio the truth of Hamlet's suspicions.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern return to describe the fury of Claudius. Gertrude is also demanding that Hamlet join her and make some explanation. Polonius also urges Hamlet to join his mother.

He agrees to do so, though, as he addresses the audience again, he confesses that he may be unable to control his feelings and may do her physical injury.

SCENE THREE

On his way to his mother's room, Hamlet comes upon his step-father. Claudius is praying, confessing his guilt in private.

Tempted to kill his father's murderer and his mother's seducer, Hamlet finds himself unable to do so while Claudius is in the act of prayer. Ironically, as Hamlet leaves, Claudius admits to himself that he has never been able to pray with any real sense of repentance for his sins.

SCENE FOUR

Hamlet's denunciation of his mother is so cruel, so violently hysterical, that Gertrude is afraid for her life. She calls for help. Polonius, who has been hiding behind the wall tapestries, is about to come to her aid when Hamlet, assuming that it is Claudius, stabs him through the fabric, killing the old man.

He continues his denunciation of Gertrude who is in abject terror and shame. But before Hamlet comes to the direct accusation of his mother's complicity in the murder of his father, the ghost - visibly only to Hamlet - makes another appearance. It warns him that vengeance against Claudius should take precedence over any punishment of Gertrude.

Softening, Hamlet pleads with his mother to discontinue her cohabitation with Claudius. Having killed Polonius, Hamlet realises that Claudius may use this as an excuse to arrest him, so he must dispose of the corpse: he also decides to accept Claudius's suggestion that he leave for England until Polonius's disappearance is forgotten - though Hamlet already suspects Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are to accompany him to England, may be a party to Claudius' scheme to be sure that Hamlet never returns alive.

ACT FOUR
SCENE ONE

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to Claudius, telling him Gertrude's account of the death of Polonius whose corpse has disappeared. Claudius calls a meeting of his counsellors.

SCENE TWO

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern question Hamlet but he will not disclose where he has hidden the body. He mocks them, tries to escape but is pursued.

SCENE THREE

Bringing Hamlet before Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are ordered to escort Hamlet as he is ordered to leave for England. Claudius explains to Hamlet that this is for his own safety.

SCENE FOUR

As they begin the journey to England, Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet Fortinbras and his army on their way to wage war against the Poles. Soliloquising, Hamlet expresses admiration for the qualities in Fortinbras that he feels lacking in himself: why does he lack the courage and determination necessary to avenge his father ?

SCENE FIVE

Some weeks later, the King and the Queen discover that Ophelia, after the departure of Hamlet and her brother and her father's death, has lost her reason. Her pitiful condition and distracted behaviour shakes Gertrude and Claudius.

Laertes, who has heard of his father's violent death and suspects Claudius of responsibility, has returned from France. Confronting Claudius and his counsellors, Laertes is appalled when he discovers his sister's crazed condition. Claudius, appearing to console the young man, gives him his own version of the death of Polonius.

SCENE SIX

Sailors bring a report, a letter from Hamlet whose ship was attacked by pirates on its passage to England. Hamlet is returning and urges Horatio to come and meet him.

SCENE SEVEN

Claudius, explaining to Laertes that he could not take action against Hamlet because of Gertrude's feelings for her son and because of Hamlet's popularity among the people, is dismayed when news is brought to him that Hamlet is alive and is returning.

Claudius at once initiates a plot: Laertes is to challenge Hamlet to a duel in which Claudius will appear to wager on the Prince. But Laertes rapier is to be poisoned. And, to make quite certain of his death, Claudius will also prepare a poisoned drink that will be offered to Hamlet during the contest. They are interrupted by the entrance of Gertrude who brings news that Ophelia is dead: she has drowned herself.

ACT FIVE

SCENE ONE

Hamlet, accompanied by Horatio on his return to Elsinore, comes upon two clownish peasants, grave diggers preparing for a burial. Without revealing to them his identity, Hamlet listens to them as they describe his own madness and his banishment. Finding a skull in the open grave, Hamlet recognizes it as belonging to Yorick, a jester in his father's court of whom Hamlet was fond.

The funeral party which brings the body includes Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes and Hamlet learns that the corpse is that of Ophelia. Hamlet, revealing himself, leaps into the open grave in his passionate grief. Laertes, infuriated at what he believes hypocritical behaviour by Hamlet, is prevented from an immediate attack on the Prince by the intervention of Claudius. Privately, Claudius reminds Laertes that the time to settle with Hamlet will come quickly.

SCENE TWO

Alone with Horatio, Hamlet discloses that on board the ship bound for England he discovered evidence that Claudius had arranged to kill him through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as soon as he landed in that country. Turning the tables on his treacherous escorts, Hamlet forged new orders so that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would be executed instead.

Osiric, an effeminate courtier, brings to them the challenge by Laertes and the invitation to Hamlet by Claudius who is wagering on the victory of Hamlet. Horatio is uneasy, apprehensive. But Hamlet, in a fatalistic mood, accepts the challenge.

The duel is to take place before the full court. Hamlet begins by offering apologies to Laertes for his recent behaviour, and his apologies are accepted. As the duel begins, Hamlet makes two successful hits. In a pause, Claudius offers Hamlet the poisoned cup but Hamlet refuses it. To the horror of Claudius, Gertrude herself takes the cup, drinking to the success of her son. At this moment, Laertes takes Hamlet off guard, wounds him slightly, and in a scuffle that follows, Hamlet picks up Laertes's weapon instead of his own.

Gertrude is dying. Laertes, himself wounded by Hamlet who has now the poisoned weapon, collapses. In his death throes, Laertes begs forgiveness of Hamlet and denounces Claudius, revealing the conspiracy. Hamlet turns on Claudius and stabs him.

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SOURCES OF HAMLET

Hamlet is not 'an original story' We are told that Shakespeare tended to 'borrow' his plots from 'histories' or the tales of other writers.

According to scholars, the immediate source for Hamlet is 'Histoires Tragiques' by Belleforest (c 1750), which is taken from 'Historia Danica' (1180 - 1208) by Saxo Grammaticus. But this, in turn was probably a reworked version of a much older story about Junius Brutus who was one of the two consuls who founded the city of Rome in 509 BC.

In fact, the tale is probably more a 'myth' or legend than it is 'real history'. 'Brutus' in Latin means 'heavy', 'stupid' or 'foolish'. In translating the story into Scandanavian, Saxo uses 'Amleth', or 'Amleth', which also means 'dull' or 'stupid' - a type, rather than a particular individual. And, in both versions, the plot hinges on a figure who deliberately pretends to be dim-witted or lunatic in order to deceive a King who has murdered the father of the hero, setting spies to watch him and planning his death as well.

As told by an early Roman historian, (Dionysius of Halicarnus, who wrote in the period of the Emperor Augustus, 63 BC to 14 AD) the figure of the evil uncle is Tarquin who has murdered both the father and the brother of 'Brutus':

"Brutus, being young and wholly without support...from that time continually kept up the pretence of being stupid, whence he received this surname, and this saved him from suffering at the hands of the tyrant..."

It would seem that the legend was then

brought to Scandanavia by the traders who bartered with Byzantium and incorporated into the so-called 'history' of the Kings of Denmark. In Saxo's version, the villain is 'Feng', uncle of 'Hamblet' and brother of 'Horvendile', Hamblet's father. The mother is 'Geruth' (Gertrude in Shakespeare's play). Coveting his brother's wife as well his throne, 'Feng' murders his brother and marries the widow.

Saxo's version relates that:-

"...Feng murdered Horwendil and married Gerutha. To cover up his crime, Feng gave out that he had murdered his brother because Horwendil had maligned Gerutha, his innocent wife, and Feng was defending her honour.

Amleth, Gerutha's grown son, was not fooled by any of this, but fearing that Feng might kill him also, pretended an utter lack of wits to save his life. Some people led by Feng, however, protested that Amleth only played the simpleton to cover up his wiliness, his answers often being too clever for madness. They would show, they said, that Amleth was sane by tempting him with a woman (the prototype of Ophelia) in a remote part of the forest. But Amleth, warned by a foster-brother, evades this trap set by his uncle to kill him.

This plot failing, Feng set up another trap to best his nephew. So that Amleth would drop feigned madness and talk freely with his mother, Feng gave out that he was going on a long state journey, secretly leaving a man to evesdrop on Amleth.

Amleth, shut up with his mother, suspected foul play and acted the imbecile by crowing like a cock and jumping in the

straw on the floor. Feeling a lump in the straw, Amleth struck Feng's evesdropper through with a sword and fed his body to the pigs. Gerutha upbraided her son. But Amleth, relating to his mother how his father had been foully slain by his uncle and how he, Amleth, must finally have revenge, finally won his mother over to his side.

After his return, Feng suspected his nephew of foul play but did not dare openly to punish him because of Gerutha and grandfather Rorick. Therefore Feng sent Amleth off to England guarded by two of Feng's retainers, who carried a sealed letter to the English king to put the youth to death. Before he left Jutland, Amleth gave his mother secret orders to hang the hall with woven knots and to perform pretended funeral rites for her son a year hence, at which time Amleth promised to return.

Aboard ship, Amleth suspected treachery on the part of Feng's retainers and while they were asleep, found the death letter they carried and changed it to read that the retainers were to be put to death instead of Amleth...

Staying one year in England... Amleth, wearing his filthy rags, visited his own funeral, throwing the great hall into consternation... Then Amleth went about with the cupbearers, serving drinks. After Feng had retired and everyone else in the hall was drunk, Amleth bound up the drunken nobles and set fire to the place so that they all perished. Then he went to Feng's bedroom and killed him, thus avenging his father's murder."

HAMLET

Step Outline

Main Characters

CLAUDIUS, King of Denmark.

HAMLET, the Prince, son of the former King, nephew of Claudius.

GERTRUDE, Queen of Denmark, mother of Hamlet, now married to Claudius.

OPHELIA, betrothed to Hamlet, sister of -

LAERTES, son of -

POLONIUS, Lord Chamberlain to the King.

Others

HORATIO, a friend of Hamlet's.

ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN. Courtiers and fellow conspirators of Claudius.

The PLAYER KING, friend of Hamlet's, leader of a troop of travelling Players.

The GRAVEDIGGER, comic character.

The GHOST (Hamlet's father)

FORTINBRAS, Prince of Norway.

The Setting

Almost all of the action is set in the Castle of Elsinore in Denmark. There are a couple of scenes on the 'platform', the battlements of the Castle. One scene in an adjoining graveyard. The others are in the Main Hall or various chambers. One scene is outside the Castle, on an open moor where Hamlet and his escort encounter some of the forces of the Norwegian army led by Fortinbras.

HAMLET

ACT I. Scene I The platform (battlements
of the Castle of Elsinore in Denmark)

Two sentinels are on guard in the early hours before dawn. Another arrives to relieve one of them and presently two other members of the court appear, HORATIO and a friend.

They have come to investigate a report that an 'apparition' has been seen, a ghost.

HORATIO is sceptical. But, as one of the sentinels begins to describe what he has seen, the GHOST materialises...

HORATIO is much shaken - recognising it as the spirit of the late King of Denmark. His companions urge him to question the ghost, but as HORATIO challenges it, the figure retreats without uttering a word.

The little group discuss what the phenomenon can mean. Disturbed, HORATIO describes how the King, when he was alive, led an army against the forces of the King of Norway, Fortinbras, challenging him in combat and killing him. Since then a son of that King, the younger Fortinbras, is said to be making plans to attack Denmark and seek revenge. Reminding his companions of the terrifying events that took place in Rome just before Julius Caesar was assassinated, HORATIO expresses his fear that this may be a similar visitation that foreshadows some kind of tragedy....

He is interrupted by a return of the Ghost. Greatly daring, HORATIO once again confronts it, demanding that it speak to him.

For a moment, it seems that the GHOST will answer. But, at this moment, the crowing of a cock is heard, a sign of approaching dawn. The GHOST moves away. Although they try to obstruct it, it escapes them again.

After further debate, it is decided that they must report what they have witnessed to Hamlet, the Prince, son of the late king.

Scene II. A room of State in the castle. The court enters, led by CLAUDIUS, the King and GERTRUDE the Queen. In attendance are POLONIUS with his son LAERTES and his daughter OPHELIA. Among the other courtiers is the Prince, HAMLET who is in mourning dress.

Addressing the court, CLAUDIUS explains that, on the death of his brother (the elder Hamlet, son of the present HAMLET), he has married GERTRUDE, HAMLET's mother. Reporting also that he has news that Norway is planning to attack Denmark, CLAUDIUS explains that he is sending to Fortinbras ambassadors who will negotiate with the Norwegian forces.

CLAUDIUS turns to LAERTES, son of the King's Chamberlin, the elderly POLONIUS. LAERTES, who has returned from France to attend the Coronation, is now anxious to resume his studies in France. After confirming that POLONIUS approves of this, CLAUDIUS gives his permission - and now addresses his own stepson, HAMLET. Expressing his concern that HAMLET is still in such distress over the death of his father, CLAUDIUS is joined by GERTRUDE in an appeal that HAMLET should accept his bereavement and make some attempt to control his emotions.

HAMLET

The court retires, leaving HAMLET alone. In soliloquy, HAMLET expands on his private sorrow and his thoughts of suicide ("O that this too solid flesh would melt...and that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon against self-slaughter! O God! God!...") Savagely, he complains of his mother's behaviour in marrying his uncle so soon after his father's death. He is interrupted by the arrival of HORATIO with two of the other guards.

Presently, after some discussion of the late king, HAMLET's father, they tell him of the Ghost. HAMLET is much disturbed. He questions them in detail about what they say they have seen. He promises that he will join them in case the Ghost should again appear, expressing his fear - "All is not well - I doubt some foul play..."

Scene III. A room in the house of Polonius. LAERTES, preparing to leave, questions OPHELIA about her relationship with Hamlet. LAERTES is doubtful of Hamlet's sincerity and warns his sister that men take advantage of women's gullibility.

As OPHELIA promises to heed her brother's warnings, they are joined by their father. It is POLONIUS' turn to lecture LAERTES in a long speech full of paternal advice about his future conduct.

LAERTES leaves. Asking what his son was saying to her, POLONIUS adds his own comment, supporting Laertes. OPHELIA protests that Hamlet's behaviour has been honourable, but her father continues to warn her against the Prince who, like other men, may take advantage of her innocence.

Scene IV The battlements again at night. HAMLET appears with two of his companions. From inside the castle come the sounds of Claudius and his court in drunken celebration. And, while HAMLET expresses his bitterness at his uncle - the GHOST once more abruptly materialises.

Much shaken, HAMLET recovers and challenges it directly. The figure does not speak - but, as it vanishes, beckons him to follow.

Hamlet's companions urge him not to leave them, but he fiercely repulses them, He draws his sword, threatening to kill any who tries to stand in his way.

As HAMLET exits after the Ghost, HORATIO and his companion express their anxiety and, after a moment, go after the Prince...

Scene V. Another part of the fortifications. The GHOST leads HAMLET to a remote spot where he at last speaks, warning him that the time is near when he is condemned to return to the purgatory that he must suffer. Here the GHOST explains to HAMLET the reason for his return from the grave: his death was not, as has been reported, from the sting of a poisonous snake while he was asleep in his orchard - the poisoner was human: the murderer was Claudius. Hamlet's father was killed while he slept - by a lethal drug pored into his ear. Now Claudius has not only usurped the throne but has also moved into his bed, having married Hamlet's mother. The GHOST is now demanding that HAMLET take revenge.

Daylight is dawning. The GHOST vanishes. HAMLET gives way to an emotional outburst,

HAMLET

(4)

promising to himself that he will follow the Ghost's command.

HORATIO and his companion discover HAMLET, finding him in a state of near hysteria. To their dismay, he refuses to explain what has happened, except to declare that the spectral figure is 'an honest ghost' and to demand of them both that they swear to say nothing of what has occurred. Calling on them to draw their swords and lay their hands on the swords as they repeat the oath, HAMLET hears the voice of the Ghost speak to him again from inside the stones under his feet, "Swear!" repeats the voice three times...

End of Act One.

ACT II: Scene I. The room in Polonius's house. POLONIUS is giving money to a Messenger whom he is sending to Laertes in France - with more admonitions. The old man is also asking that the man make enquiries among his sons' friends about Laertes' behavior, in effect to act as a spy, finding if Laertes is gambling, or fighting duels or visiting brothels.

As the man departs, OPHELIA joins POLONIUS. She tells her father that Hamlet has come to her room where she was sewing in what seemed to be an extremely disturbed state, his clothes in disarray and his manner wild "- as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors..."

POLONIUS assumes at once that Hamlet has become deranged - because of Ophelia!

OPHELIA admits that it could be so and goes on to describe Hamlet's strange and clearly unstable behaviour. Declaring that they must instantly report all this to Claudius, POLONIUS asks OPHELIA if she has provoked this reaction: has Ophelia rejected Hamlet. OPHELIA reminds her father that he himself was the one urging that she was not to accept gifts from the Prince and, in obedience, she returned his letters, refused to see Hamlet. POLONIUS is confirmed in his belief that "that hath made him mad" POLONIUS must go to the King and explain that unrequited love is the reason for Hamlet's obvious insanity.

Scene II. A Room in the Castle. The King and the Queen are attended by two courtiers, ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN. CLAUDIUS, welcoming them to Elsinore, promises that they will be rewarded if they do him a private favor: he wants them to keep close watch on his son Hamlet. If they make friends with the Prince, they may be able to find out just what is troubling the Prince.

As ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN retire, POLONIUS appears, bringing news that the ambassadors that were sent to Norway have returned - and that they bring good news.

POLONIUS also reports that he believes he has discovered the cause of Hamlet's 'lunacy'. When POLONIUS goes to fetch the ambassadors, GERTRUDE tells CLAUDIUS that she believes Hamlet's distress is the result of the shock of his father's death which was then followed by the 'o'erhasty'

HAMLET

marriage of his mother to **CLAUDIUS**. Without accepting this, **CLAUDIUS** promises her that he will find out.

The Norwegian intermediaries return. They are able to reassure **CLAUDIUS** that there will be no invasion of Denmark by the armies of Norway. The older Fortinbras has managed to discourage his son from the idea of another attack on Denmark. Instead young Fortinbras is preparing an invasion of Poland and, in return for a guarantee of safe passage through Denmark, is offering a peace treaty with **CLAUDIUS**.

The King congratulates them on this success. When they have gone, **CLAUDIUS** returns to the subject of Hamlet. Pompously, and with much elaboration, **POLONIUS** proceeds to a lengthy discussion of what he has learned about Hamlet from Ophelia. She has given **POLONIUS** some of Hamlet's letters and the old man reads them aloud to the King and the Queen - as evidence of Hamlet's mental decline. **POLONIUS** proposes that he will make it his duty to keep watch on the unhappy young man, hiding behind the arras (the fabric wall-coverings in the Castle) to observe Hamlet's behaviour.

As they speak, **HAMLET** is seen approaching. **GERTRUDE** and **CLAUDIUS** leave, but **POLONIUS** remains to accost **HAMLET**.

Plainly aware of the motives of the old man, **HAMLET** deliberately pretends to be deranged, talking in elaborately ambiguous and obscure language. **POLONIUS** is both bewildered and puzzled, confessing in an 'aside' "...Though this be madness, yet there is method in't..."

ROSENCRANTZ and **GUILDENSTERN** now join them and **POLONIUS** leaves so that the two spies of Claudius continue the attempt to explore the eccentric behaviour of the Prince. Well aware of their intentions, **HAMLET** is deliberately incomprehensible in his responses, indulging in elaborately confusing wordplay designed to confirm the impression that he has lost his sanity. (The complicated punning and fanciful verbal imagery were probably more amusing to Elizabethan theatergoers than they are to modern audiences) **ROSENCRANTZ** and **GUILDENSTERN** are clearly bewildered.

From offstage there is a sound of music, a flourish of trumpets. **GUILDENSTERN** explains that it signals the arrival at the castle of a group of travelling players. **HAMLET** appeals to them to help in welcoming the performers and ends the interview with the advice that, "...my uncle/father and my mother are deceived ...I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw."

POLONIUS reappears to inform **HAMLET** of the visit by the Players. Long-winded and self-important as always, **POLONIUS** is anxious to establish himself as an authority on theatrical matters, but **HAMLET** cuts him short in order to give welcome to the visitors.

They are a company of five. **HAMLET** knows them and greets them warmly. He teases the youngest of them, the boy who plays

HAMLET

the women's roles, remarking that he has grown considerably since Hamlet saw him last, hoping that the boy's voice has not yet broken and noting that there are signs of a moustache on his face.

Appealing to the oldest of the troupe, the FIRST PLAYER, HAMLET begs that he recite a speech, one of his favorites, a description of the death of King Priam of Troy. (The version that is used in Shakespeare's play is, in fact, from a play by Shakespeare's contemporary, Marlow, called 'Dido Queen of Carthage', and it has been suggested that Shakespeare is making fun of its overblown language): The FIRST PLAYER plays it for all its worth - moving himself to tears if not his listeners.

When it is finished, HAMLET instructs POLONIUS to see that the PLAYERS are well looked after. POLONIUS promises to "use them according to their deserts". HAMLET protests. "God's bodykins, man, much better. Use every man according to his needs and who should 'scape whipping?"

While POLONIUS leads the others offstage, HAMLET detains the FIRST PLAYER. HAMLET asks the actor if he knows a play called 'The Murder of Gonzago'. HAMLET would like it to be performed next evening and also asks if the actor can learn a short speech that Hamlet will write, a dozen or sixteen lines, which he wants to him to insert into one of the scenes. When the FIRST PLAYER agrees, HAMLET sends him off after Polonius, warning him not to make fun of the old man.

When he is alone, HAMLET once more expresses his private feelings in soliloquy. He notes that the Player, while he recited the scene describing the sorrow of the fictional widow of King Priam, was actually moved to tears that were real. "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?", HAMLET wonders. How, he asks, would a man react if he had the kind of reasons that Hamlet has to feel grief? Does this mean that Hamlet is a coward? Hamlet works himself into a fit of bitter self contempt and rage against his inability to turn his doubts into positive action against Claudius. Presently, however, he explains to us that he believes that he has found a way to prove to himself whether his uncle is guilty or innocent. He has heard it said "that guilty creatures, sitting at a play, have by the very cunning of the scene, been struck so to the soul that presently they have proclaimed their malefactions: for murder, though it have no tongue, will speak..." HAMLET has, by writing into the play that will be soon presented, laid a trap: "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King...."

End of Act II

ACT III, scene I. A Room in the Castle.
CLAUDIUS and GERTRUDE receive the report from ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN who say that Hamlet admits to feelings of distress but has given them no clue as to the cause of them. They have remarked, however, that Hamlet's spirits seem to have revived at the visit of his friends, the Players.

HAMLET

(7)

OPHELIA and her father are also present, and as ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN are dismissed, GERTRUDE appeals to the girl to do what she can to restore Hamlet to his former condition. To himself, CLAUDIUS comments on his own private feelings and the burden of concealing them from others (- our first real hint that Claudius is indeed guilty):

As they exit, HAMLET once again appears on his own. He is once more in the grip of suicidal despair. The soliloquy, "To be or not to be..." is an internal debate on the meaning of life, a challenge to the view that it is more 'noble' to suffer than to put an end to all of one's miseries in suicide. Death - a permanent sleep is attractive as an escape. But is it really an escape? Is there an after-life? The great doubt, comments Hamlet, is what condemns men to the sufferings and the humiliations of life - and these thoughts result in one's inability to take decisive action. Conscience makes one cowardly and reduces one to useless inaction.

HAMLET is interrupted by the return of OPHELIA. He treats her harshly and challenges her honesty - clearly because he suspects her of being, like the others, acting on behalf of Claudius. His manner is violent, sarcastic attacking all of her sex and telling her "Get thee to a nunnery. Go, farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool: for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them". HAMLET leaves. OPHELIA is

deeply hurt at what she takes to be more evidence of Hamlet's paranoid condition.

POLONIUS and CLAUDIUS have been in hiding, listening to the exchange. To POLONIUS, the King declares that he fears that Hamlet's melancholia may lead him into danger and, for Hamlet's own sake, he ought to be sent away from Elsinore - perhaps to England, where he will be removed from whatever it is that has so unsettled him that he is a danger to himself.

POLONIUS does not disagree. But he pleads that they give the boy one more chance: let his mother talk to him - if GERTRUDE is unable to bring him to his senses, then the Prince should indeed be sent away.

Scene II. A Hall in the Castle. The PLAYERS are preparing for their performance before the court. HAMLET, joining them, offers them advice on acting (the speech, it has been assumed, is Shakespeare's own warning against exaggerated histrionics and bombast)

The court assembles, POLONIUS, ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN appear and also HORATIO. As he takes HORATIO aside it is clear that this is HAMLET's closest friend, a confidant. HAMLET confides in HORATIO that, in the play that is to be performed, there will be a scene in which there is a reenactment of the circumstances in which, if HAMLET's suspicions are correct, his father died. He begs HORATIO that, when this scene is played, he should very closely watch the King, see how Claudius reacts. HORATIO promises to do so.

HAMLET

Now, to a ceremonial fanfare of trumpets, the whole court enters the hall. They are carrying torches. As they arrange themselves to watch the play, CLAUDIUS asks after HAMLET's health. HAMLET's reply, as in previous scenes, is framed in equivocal double-edged language and CLAUDIUS, confessing that he does not understand, is obviously uneasy.

Taking a place beside OPHELIA, HAMLET is also ambiguous as he addresses her. He invites her to admire how cheerful his mother looks, remarkably so since her previous husband died only a couple of hours before. OPHELIA, uncomfortable, corrects him: it is two months at least. HAMLET again pretends to be confused and comments on the brevity of human memory and reputation.

Trumpets announce the start of the play which begins with a short sketch played in mime, without words. It shows a King and Queen fondly embracing but, when she induces him to lie down and sleep, she leaves and another figure enters. Taking off the crown of the sleeping King, the figure kisses the crown - but then pours into the ear of the sleeping man a liquid, a poison. The Queen reappears, finds her husband dead. The body is removed and the Poisoner returns, woos the Queen and, after a while, seduces her.

OPHELIA asks HAMLET to explain the scene to her. HAMLET tells her that the play that follows will make it clear.

Now two PLAYERS appear again to recite a

long scene in which the KING reminds his QUEEN that, if he outlives her, she must feel free to take a second husband, and she passionately promises him that her love is so great that she cannot bear to think of taking a second husband.

HAMLET invites his mother to say what she feels about the play. GERTRUDE remarks: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" CLAUDIUS seems under control as he asks HAMLET the name of the play. It's called 'The Mousetrap', says the Prince, and is about a murder done in Vienna - not, says HAMLET, a very interesting piece of work and "we that have free souls, it touches us not...". HAMLET explains that the next figure coming on stage is a nephew of the King.

Once more, there is a reenactment of the death of the King as poison is poured into the ear of the sleeping man. HAMLET provides more commentary: "He poisons him i' th' garden for's estate. His name's Gonzago. The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murtherer gets the love of Gonzago's wife."

CLAUDIUS can no longer maintain his self composure and seems to be taken ill - getting up from his chair, calling for lights to be brought. POLONIUS quickly orders the performance to be stopped. As CLAUDIUS exits, the rest of the court are dismayed. They break up and disperse, leaving HORATIO and HAMLET.

HAMLET is elated, recognising that HORATIO

has seen what he has seen, demanding that musicians continue the entertainment.

ROSENCRANTZ and GUIDENSTERN return. They report that the King is greatly angered and that GERTRUDE has sent them to bring HAMLET at once to her room.

As the PLAYERS return with musical instruments, HAMLET is still in high spirits, mischievously insisting that GUILDENSTERN try to play on one of the recorders. GUILDENSTERN protests that he has no musical skills. HAMLET is sarcastic; then what makes him think that he can manipulate Hamlet as one does a flute, "Do you think I am easier to be play'd on than a pipe?"

They are joined by POLONIUS who also insists that HAMLET come to Gertrude as quickly as he can.

They leave him. Alone, HAMLET's mood is suddenly changed. He has become savage and bitter, promising himself that, though he will do no physical harm to her, he will 'speak daggers...' to his mother.

Scene III. A Room in the Castle

CLAUDIUS is sufficiently recovered to instruct GUILDENSTERN and ROSENCRANTZ on his decision that Hamlet must leave at once for England and that they are to be his escort. Hamlet's mental condition makes it essential, he has become dangerous.

As they leave, POLONIUS enters, telling CLAUDIUS that Hamlet is on his way to see his mother in her room. POLONIUS plans to follow and will hide behind the wall curtains, the arras, in order to listen

to what they say and report to the King. POLONIUS leaves.

When he is on his own, CLAUDIUS at last reveals to us his hidden feelings and his thoughts. He has indeed murdered Hamlet's father, his own brother, and has been tortured by guilt. But, having committed the crime, what is there to do but go on? In his room there is the crucifix at which, as a devout man, the King should say prayers - but, as he attempts to kneel, CLAUDIUS is honest enough to realize that he is beyond God's mercy.

While the King kneels, we see HAMLET enter. With CLAUDIUS unprotected by his guards, it would be easy for HAMLET to cut him down - now that he is at last certain of the murder. Ironically, however, the fact that CLAUDIUS is on his knees and praying, makes HAMLET hesitate: if he is to die now, at such a moment, his crimes may be more easily forgiven. HAMLET promises himself that there will come a better moment for his revenge. He leaves.

Alone, we hear CLAUDIUS' confession that "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to Heaven go"

Scene IV The Queen's closet.

POLONIUS announces to GERTRUDE that HAMLET is on his way, begging her to be very firm with the young man. As Hamlet is heard approaching, GERTRUDE urges the Chancellor to leave.

GERTRUDE makes an attempt to scold her

son for his behaviour to Claudius. But HAMLET is no longer the same melancholy and insecure boy that he was: the change in him frightens her, and, thinking that he is about to kill her, she calls out for help...

From behind the arras, POLONIUS answers her - also calling for guards. HAMLET acts instantly - thinking that the man in hiding is Claudius, drawing his sword and stabbing it through the fabric. POLONIUS is stone dead by the time HAMLET identifies him.

GERTRUDE is hysterical. HAMLET shows a minimum of remorse for "the bloody deed - almost as bad, good mother, as kill a king and marry his brother."

"As kill a king?", appeals GERTRUDE. With little sign of pity, HAMLET confronts his mother with a violence that reduces her to helpless sobbing. His fury is so great that it summons to him the figure of his dead father, the GHOST.

The apparition is visible only to HAMLET: GERTRUDE is dismayed to see her son who seems to be addressing someone she cannot see. But the visitation brings HAMLET back to reality - and some measure of pity for his mother. All that he begs of her is that she should no longer sleep with the man who assassinated her husband.

HAMLET inspects the corpse, and at last shows some sign of feeling for "this counsellor (who) is now most still, most secret, and most grave, Who was in life a foolish prating knave..."

Dragging out of her room the body which he proposes to hide, HAMLET advises her

that he must indeed now leave for England and bids her goodbye.

End of Act III

ACT IV. Scene I. Elsinore. A Room in the Castle. GERTRUDE, finding CLAUDIUS with ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN, asks them to leave her alone with the King.

She tells CLAUDIUS how Hamlet has killed Polonius. CLAUDIUS asks her if she knows where Hamlet has gone. To dispose of the body, declares the Queen, assuring CLAUDIUS that Hamlet regrets what he has done.

Promising her that he will take care that he will find some way to see that her son escapes the consequences of his action, and that he will be safe if sent abroad, CLAUDIUS summons back his two henchmen.

To ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN, the King gives instructions to find Hamlet, treat him courteously - but see that he brings back the body to the chapel.

Scene II. A Passage in the Castle

Finding him, ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN ask HAMLET where he has taken the body of Polonius, Without denying that he has killed the old man, HAMLET refuses to say what he has done with the corpse.

Scene III. A Room in the Castle.

Privately, CLAUDIUS admits to himself his dilemma. He must recover the body, in order to provide evidence of Hamlet's violence and instability, but he dare not demand too severe punishment because his young nephew has too many friends and sympathisers.

ROSENCRANTZ returns to explain that they have been unable to recover the body. CLAUDIUS instructs that Hamlet be brought to him.

As HAMLET appears with GUILDENSTERN and some other attendants, HAMLET again will not say where he has hidden the body - though he hints that he has buried it. Ordering his men to search for it, CLAUDIUS talks privately to HAMLET, Affecting much concern for HAMLET, CLAUDIUS advises him that his departure for England must be as soon as possible - at once.

HAMLET is dispatched in company of ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN, urged to leave Denmark that night.

Alone again, CLAUDIUS reveals to us that he will use this chance to be rid of Hamlet altogether: he will send with Hamlet some secret instructions, letters to people in England who are in Claudius's service and who will see to it that Hamlet is killed when he arrives in England.

Scene IV. Near Elsinore.

FORTINBRAS, the leader of Norwegian forces who have been given promises by the Danes to pass through Danish territory on their way to attack the Poles, comes in sight of the small party escorting Hamlet out of the country. FORTINBRAS instructs one of his commanders, a CAPTAIN to meet the Danes and to let Prince Hamlet know that they mean no harm.

The CAPTAIN remains, waits till HAMLET appears with ROSENCRANTZ and the others, To HAMLET, the CAPTAIN gives his message

and the Norwegian intentions. Privately, the CAPTAIN admits to HAMLET that he thinks the territory that they are planning to seize from the Poles is hardly worth the cost of battle. HAMLET, agreeing, comments that, in that case, the Poles are not likely to fight very fiercely to defend their rights to it.

HAMLET is alone once more. And, once more he muses on his own unhappy state. He contrasts himself with the Prince of Norway, the younger Fortinbras. Here is a prince who has seized on some very insignificant issue, exaggerating it in order to provide an excuse for a military campaign in which he hopes to find glory. How different is Fortinbras' behaviour from that of Hamlet - whose motives for revenge are a thousand times more serious, but who is now, humiliatingly, banished from Elsinore in dishonour!

Scene V. Elsinore. A Room in the Castle.

One of the GENTLEMEN of the Court comes to GERTRUDE with the request that the Queen receive Ophelia. He reports that the girl is in a state of mental collapse, plainly brought on by the unexplained mystery of her father's disappearance and Hamlet's equally strange departure.

OPHELIA is admitted. Her appearance is pitiful and she is quite incoherent, babbling insanely as repeats snatches of meaningless childish verse.

CLAUDIUS joins them. He too is appalled at the girl's condition. He gives to HORATIO instructions that he is to follow OPHELIA and look after her.

CLAUDIUS has other bad news. He has just received a report that the other child, Laertes, has secretly returned to Denmark from France. Hearing of the unexplained fate of his father, Laertes has recruited a group of rebellious army officers who are holding Claudius responsible and are proposing that he should be deposed so that Laertes be declared King.

Even as he says this, there is the sound of disturbances outside. A Messenger hurries in to announce that Laertes and his group have broken down the doors of the castle and insist on meeting CLAUDIUS at once.

LAERTES enters. He instructs his men to leave him to confront CLAUDIUS and GERTRUDE by himself, but to wait outside the doors as guard. Belligerent, LAERTES demands of CLAUDIUS that he account for the disappearance of his father, Polonius.

GERTRUDE begs LAERTES to be calm. But LAERTES will not be put off. CLAUDIUS asserts his authority - informing the young man bluntly that his father is dead. But he was not killed by any command of Claudius, nor was Claudius in any way responsible.

While LAERTES is still shaken by this confirmation of his worst fears, there is a new shock in store for him. His sister appears. Stunned, LAERTES sees that OPHELIA is insane.

The tragedy of this moment provides CLAUDIUS with the opportunity to express

sympathy, convincing LAERTES that it is not the King who has done him wrong. When CLAUDIUS promises LAERTES that he will see that whoever is responsible (it is implied that it may be Hamlet) is brought to justice, LAERTES swears an oath of vengeance.

Scene VI. Elsinore. A Room in the Castle

A Servant announces to HORATIO that some 'sea-faring men' have arrived, that they are carrying letters and asking to see him. HORATIO receives them and, when he is presented with a letter from Hamlet, reads it aloud.

In the letter, Hamlet describes how, when his ship had been two days at sea, it was attacked by a pirate vessel with which, since it was faster, they had to do battle. Hamlet himself led the attack and was thus captured by the pirates, though his companions, including Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, managed to get away and continue the voyage to England. However, Hamlet has been well treated by the pirates who have now returned him to his own country and have set him free. Hamlet is on his way back to Elsinore, but has sent the sailors on ahead to give letters to Claudius - but also to make contact with Horatio for whom he has news that he cannot trust to anyone else.

Scene VII. Another Room in the Castle

CLAUDIUS is now in private conference with LAERTES and it is plain that they have become friends. LAERTES is now assured that the King is in no way

guilty of Polonius' death. But what LAERTES still does not understand is why CLAUDIUS did not bring Hamlet to a public accounting of the affair.

CLAUDIUS explains. Assuring LAERTES that his father was a dear friend, the King explains that Gertrude was, and is so devoted to her son, that he could not bring Hamlet to justice. But, insists CLAUDIUS, LAERTES should not assume that Hamlet, who has so often insulted Claudius himself, will escape punishment.

CLAUDIUS is about to continue when they are interrupted by a Messenger who brings the letters from Hamlet addressed to Claudius and to the Queen.

In the note to Claudius, Hamlet asks pardon that he has been forced to return, against the orders of exile, and asks that CLAUDIUS receive him. In a postscript, Hamlet adds that he wants to see his uncle alone.

CLAUDIUS is uneasy. LAERTES, on the other hand, welcomes the chance that he can now confront the man who has killed his father and whom he also holds responsible for Ophelia's lapse into insanity.

CLAUDIUS at once declares support for LAERTES - but warns him to be careful. CLAUDIUS has a suggestion, a proposal: it is well known that Laertes has a reputation as an expert swordsman - also that Hamlet is jealous of this reputation. He has in the past said as much to Claudius and has proposed that he challenge Laertes to a test

of skill in front of the court, a mock duel. CLAUDIUS invites LAERTES to accept the challenge as a means of settling their quarrel.

LAERTES agrees instantly. But he tells CLAUDIUS that he is so determined to revenge himself that he means to use a poison on the blade of his sword that will make sure that, if he is even scratched, Hamlet's wound will be mortal.

CLAUDIUS approves. Indeed, he promises LAERTES that, to make doubly sure, he will also put poison in a drink which, during a pause in the bout, will be offered to Hamlet and make his death more certain.

While the two men are still discussing this treachery, the Queen comes to them, bringing to LAERTES the news that his sister, Ophelia, has been found dead. Whether deliberately, or by accident caused by her insanity, she fell into a river where she became entangled in the long weeds and drowned.

GERTRUDE exits, and LAERTES again promises that he will avenge his sister, knowing that CLAUDIUS will assist him in disposing of Hamlet.

End of Act IV

ACT V. Scene I. Elsinore. A Churchyard.
Two GRAVEDIGGERS (the roles are played for comic relief by Clowns) are engaged in digging Ophelia's grave. They discuss her death, debating the issue of whether it was suicide and if this means that she should not be given a Christian funeral.

While they engage in idiotic argument, HAMLET appears in company of HORATIO. As one of the GRAVEDIGGER exits, HAMLET approaches, amused by the discussion that he has overheard. For the benefit of HORATIO, HAMLET engages the GRAVEDIGGER in playful argument and elicits from him the information that the fellow has been many years at the court - that he even recalls the day when a baby was born, the child that when he grew up, went mad and has recently been sent abroad to England. Why? Because he "will recover his wits there: or, if 'a do not, 'tis no great matter there...the men are all as mad as he!"

While he digs, the GRAVEDIGGER finds a skull and thinks he can identify it. It is the skull of a Court Jester who was in the service of the late King. HAMLET demands to see it. Turning to HORATIO, HAMLET's mood changes as he handles the skull, inviting his friend to inspect it; "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times..."

With a return of his melancholy, HAMLET comments on the irony of life and death, "Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander turneth to dust; the dust is earth: of earth we are made loam: and why of that loam (whereto he was converted) might they not stop a beer barrel? Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, might stop a hole to keep the wind away. O, that that earth which kept the world in awe should patch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw!..."

HAMLET breaks off because he sees the approach of the mourners for the funeral, a procession that includes the King, the Queen, Laertes, attended by a number of Lords and a PRIEST. HAMLET, wearing the clothes of his escape after his sea adventures, is not recognised and he is able to ask the PRIEST who they are burying.

He is told that it is Ophelia.

GERTRUDE, as she places flowers on the grave, comments that she had hoped that Ophelia would marry her son. LAERTES, in an extravagant display of his grief, leaps into the grave pit and once again swears that he will revenge his sister's death "...on that cursed head whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense deprived thee of..."

Unable to control himself, HAMLET is so overcome that he throws himself at LAERTES, grappling with him so that CLAUDIUS has to call on his men to stop their fighting.

With great violence, HAMLET challenges LAERTES right to boast that his distress at Ophelia's suffering and death is any greater than that of Hamlet himself. In the past, declares HAMLET, he was a friend to LAERTES - but he is now ready to meet LAERTES on any terms that he chooses to name.

HAMLET leaves in a state of violent anger. CLAUDIUS urges HORATIO to go after him. But, as he turns back, CLAUDIUS privately reminds LAERTES of their secret plans to deal with Hamlet. Then CLAUDIUS joins

GERTRUDE, suggesting that she ought to keep watch on her son but assuring her that, if they are patient, CLAUDIUS will see that the quarrelling is stopped and peace is made between the young men.

Scene II. Elsinore. A Hall in the Castle

HAMLET enters with HORATIO, telling him more of his experiences during the voyage to England. With more time to think, HAMLET began to feel disturbed about the reasons that Claudius proposed for sending him abroad: he began to distrust his two companions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Getting up in the middle of the night, he went into their room and, in the darkness, came across the sealed instructions that Claudius had provided. Taking it back to his own room. Hamlet decided to break open the letters. Reading them, he discovered that they contained explicit instructions to Claudius' allies at the English court that, on his arrival, Hamlet was to be seized - and immediately beheaded!

HORATIO is incredulous. HAMLET hands to him the actual document, inviting HORATIO to read it for himself.

Continuing, HAMLET tells how he remembered that he was still carrying a ring given to him by his father, a signet ring with the Royal seal. Forging new letters, he altered the instructions to direct that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should be arrested and put to death: then he returned the package to his unsuspecting companions. All this was before the attack by the pirates which further helped Hamlet escape to return to Denmark and settle accounts with Claudius while Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern were left to continue the journey without him.

The only danger now, as HORATIO points out, is that it will not be long before Claudius gets this news from England, hears of the fate of his spies and realises that Hamlet must have somehow discovered the plot.

HAMLET and HORATIO are approached by an emissary from the King, a young courtier of affected manners and ostentatious dress, OSRIC. With much circumlocution OSRIC presents his respects and his message: Claudius, in order to establish that the quarrel between Laertes and Hamlet should be settled in an amicable way, has proposed that the two of them fight a duel - a strictly controlled fencing match - in which the winner will be awarded a handsome prize, six Barbary horses against six French swords. etc. The weapons proposed are rapier and dagger. The rules proposed by the King are a dozen passes and the maximum number of hits should be three.

OSRIC leaves. And after a few moments another Lord returns to ask HAMLET, on behalf of the King, if he has come to a decision - or if he needs more time. The Queen also sends to Hamlet a message, asking that, before their confrontation, Hamlet should speak more respectfully to Laertes. HAMLET promises to do so.

As the Lord exits, HORATIO is clearly anxious, afraid that Hamlet is certain to lose. HAMLET reassures him: since Laertes left for France, Hamlet has had continual practice and is confident that

he can win. But HORATIO persists: he has fears that he cannot define.

HAMLET - in contrast to his feelings on earlier occasions - is much more calm. His reactions are almost fatalistic: "...there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come: if it be not to come: if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all..."

HORATIO is silenced. The Court, with the King, the Queen, LAERTES, OSIRIC, the Lords and other Attendants is now assembling. They bring foils and gauntlets, a table with flagons of wine on it. CLAUDIUS brings the two men together, insisting that they shake hands. As they do so, HAMLET makes a speech, a generous apology for any insult or injury that he may have done to LAERTES in the past and a promise that he means none for the future. Whether sincerely or not, LAERTES is prompted to a similar declaration.

The contestants choose their weapons. LAERTES complains that one of them is too heavy. He is given another (the one that is poisoned). HAMLET is quite satisfied with the one offered to him. CLAUDIUS instructs that cups of wine are to be poured out and left on the table so that they may drink to the health of the duellists or the that Hamlet or Laertes may refresh themselves. As an addition to the prize already announced, CLAUDIUS also offers to place the cup a jewel "richer than that which four successive Kings in Denmark's

crown have worn..." - and orders the contest to begin.

HAMLET scores the first hit. LAERTES appeals the decision. But OSIRIC rules it "...a hit, a very palpable hit!" As they are about to start again. CLAUDIUS announces that HAMLET has won the pearl and, throwing it into the cup, invites HAMLET to drink. But HAMLET declines, suggesting that it be put on the table for him until he has played another bout.

They fence again. Once more, HAMLET is the one to score - and this time LAERTES concedes.

Though CLAUDIUS assures her that HAMLET will win, GERTRUDE is concerned, "He's fat and scant of breath", she tells the King and, moving to her son, offers him her handkerchief, "Here, Hamlet, take my napkin, rub thy brows. The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet...", and, to the horror of CLAUDIUS, she picks up the cup of wine waiting for HAMLET.

CLAUDIUS is too late to stop her.

LAERTES, as he starts on the third sally, whispers to CLAUDIUS, "My Lord, I'll hit him now...". But, in the same moment, LAERTES admits to himself in an aside, "Yet it is almost against my conscience."

HAMLET, impatient, goads LAERTES to action. They fight again, but neither has advantage. Then LAERTES attacks before HAMLET is quite ready, wounding him slightly - but colliding with him so that, in the scuffle, both men drop their rapiers....

...and, as they recover, HAMLET picks up LAERTES sword, using it to inflict a wound on LAERTES. (Both have now been wounded by the poisoned weapon)

While CLAUDIUS tries to call a halt to the duel on the grounds that both of the men have lost their tempers, he notices GERTRUDE. So does OSRIC. The poison has begun to take affect.

LAERTES, in this moment, recognises the irony: he has been the victim of his own treachery - the weapon that has now mortally wounded Hamlet as well as himself.

As CLAUDIUS tries to tell HAMLET that the Queen has fainted because of his wound, GERTRUDE denounces CLAUDIUS, pointing to the poisoned cup. And now LAERTES, in his own death throes, explains to HAMLET that he, too, is another victim of the poison - it is the King who is to blame.

In the uproar, HAMLET butchers CLAUDIUS.

GERTRUDE dies. LAERTES also. Facing his own death, HAMLET calls for HORATIO, asking his only friend, "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, absent thee from felicity awhile, and in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, to tell my story..."

From outside the Castle there are sounds - gunfire and marching men. OSRIC explains: it is Fortinbras, returning in celebration of conquest over the Poles. HAMLET confides in HORATIO: though he will not live to see it, Hamlet would

vote that the now empty throne of Elsinore be offered to young Fortinbras.

HORATIO speaks the epitaph over the body of HAMLET, "Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince. And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

With the bodies still lying in the great hall of the castle, the doors are opened for the arrival of FORTINBRAS and the ENGLISH AMBASSADORS, escorted by their STANDARD BEARERS, their GUARDS and accompanied by drummers.

From the ENGLISH AMBASSADORS we hear that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. But only HORATIO remains to receive the Norwegian prince, young FORTINBRAS. Promising that he is eager to hear of the cause of this tragedy, and that he means to receive all of the Lords of the court of Elsinore, FORTINBRAS hints that he has "some rights of memory in this kingdom which now to claim my vantage doth invite me." And HORATIO promises that has support to offer. Gratified, the Norwegian gives instruction to his men, "Let four captains bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage: for he was likely, had he been put on, to have prov'd most royally: and for his passage the soldier's music and the rites of war speak loudly for him..."

Carrying on a stretcher the corpse of Hamlet, the four men exit to the sound of a salute of cannon.

End of Act V

A SYNOPSIS

Hamlet, a Prince of Denmark, is in mourning for his father. He is also distressed because his mother, Gertrude, has so quickly remarried Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, brother of Hamlet's father. Claudius is now the King.

Gertrude and Claudius express concern for Hamlet's state of mind. Polonius, an old man who is counsellor to the King is the father of a young woman, Ophelia, to whom Hamlet is engaged and is inclined to believe that Hamlet's instability is the result of unhappy relations with his daughter.

Presently, however, Hamlet's closest friend, Horatio, comes with some other companions to tell the Prince that they have seen a ghost haunting the castle battlements - a figure in the shape of Hamlet's dead father. Extremely disturbed, Hamlet is taken next night to confront the ghost, escaping from his friends to challenge the ghost who tells him that the father's death was not natural: Hamlet's father was poisoned by Claudius. The ghost urges Hamlet to seek revenge.

Not sure that he should believe the ghost, Hamlet's anxiety and despair increase as he tries to decide what to do. Polonius, convinced that the young Prince has lost his reason, suggests to Claudius that spies be set on Hamlet - who deliberately cooperates with them in pretending insanity.

Meanwhile, however, with the help of some actors, a group of travelling players who are his friends, Hamlet lays a trap for his father's murderer, and when Claudius, by his reactions, betrays his guilt, Hamlet is about to kill him - but during a bitter quarrel with Gertrude, mistakenly kills Polonius who has hidden himself behind the wall hangings in Gertrude's chambers. Hamlet hides the body.

Pretending that he means to help Hamlet escape the consequences of the killing, Claudius persuades Hamlet to leave Denmark and provides for him two companions who are, in reality, provided with papers which will ensure that Hamlet is executed when he arrives in England.

During Hamlet's absence, Ophelia grows sick, loses her mind and is drowned. At the same time, Horatio receives a secret message from Hamlet, which reports on his adventures. On the way to England, their ship was attacked by pirates and Hamlet discovered the treachery of Claudius's spies, turning the tables on them so that they were killed and Hamlet released by the pirates. Hamlet is now returning.

He arrives without warning - in time to be present at Ophelia's funeral. A violent quarrel breaks out between Hamlet and Ophelia's brother, Laertes, who blames Hamlet for Ophelia's death.

Claudius, recognising that he must again contrive to have Hamlet killed, recruits Laertes to help him. On the pretext of organising a friendly fencing match which should lessen the tension between Laertes and Hamlet, Claudius prepares a weapon for Laertes which has been treated with poison. Also a cup of poisoned wine which may be offered to Hamlet in case the Prince escapes in the duel. The challenge is delivered to Hamlet who, despite a clear premonition of death, accepts it, declaring "ripeness is all."

The fencing match is conducted before the assembled court so that wagers may be laid on it. Early in the bout, Hamlet receives a minor wound - a scratch from the poisoned sword. But, as the match continues, the swords are accidentally switched and Laertes suffers a more serious wound. To the dismay of Claudius, there is another mishap when Gertrude, innocent of the plot, drinks from the poisoned cup. Now recognising that his wound is a fatal one, Laertes in the throes of death, regrets his part in the conspiracy and turns on the King, exposing him in front of Hamlet and the rest of the court. Avenging both his father and now his mother, Hamlet stabs Claudius to death before he himself dies in the arms of his friend Horatio to whom he leaves the task of telling the tragic history.