



The Plays of William Shakespeare



Hamlet

Study Guide by Bethine Ellie



CD Version



Progeny Press

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Hamlet Study Guide

A Progeny Press Study Guide

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Synopsis

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. Two night watchmen at the castle at Elsinore have seen a ghost they believe to be the former king of Denmark, the father of Prince Hamlet. The soldiers entreat Horatio, Hamlet's confidant, to wait with them for the ghost's appearance during the night watch. Horatio is horrified by its resemblance to the dead king. The men ask Hamlet to join the watch, and when the ghost appears, it reveals to Hamlet that it is, indeed, the spirit of his father. The ghost informs Hamlet that his father was murdered by Claudius, the current king of Denmark. Claudius, Hamlet's uncle and brother of the former king, has not only usurped the throne of Denmark, but has also taken Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, as his wife. Hamlet vows to avenge the death of his father and says he will put on an "antic disposition" to distract others from his genuine purpose.

Meanwhile, Claudius and Gertrude try desperately to help cure Hamlet's melancholy. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's classmates from Wittenberg, are invited to the palace by the king and queen to see if they can discover why Hamlet is depressed. Lord Chamberlain Polonius suggests the cause of Hamlet's increasingly bizarre behavior is Hamlet's love for Ophelia, his daughter.

Traveling actors arrive at the castle and Hamlet employs them to perform an Italian play that he adapts to depict the murder of his own father. During the performance of the play, Hamlet and Horatio watch Claudius's response to the play to judge if he is truly guilty or not. As the scene of the murder is played out the king runs from the room, and Hamlet believes the ghost's words are confirmed.

The queen calls Hamlet to her chambers. As Hamlet goes, he happens upon Claudius in confession. Hamlet considers killing Claudius at that moment, but he hesitates to kill the king while he is in confession because then, he reasons, Claudius would go to heaven. Hamlet confronts his mother for her weak-willed behavior and hasty marriage to Claudius. Polonius, who is hiding behind an arras in the queen's chamber, stirs and Hamlet, perhaps thinking it is Claudius, runs his sword through the screen and kills Polonius.

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The king, wanting to be rid of Hamlet, sends him to England accompanied by his disloyal classmates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They carry orders from the king that Hamlet is to be killed upon arrival. Hamlet discovers the treachery and changes the orders so that it is his classmates who are killed. He returns to Denmark aboard a pirate ship.

Meanwhile, Polonius's son Laertes returns from his studies in France and, hearing rumors about his father's death, confronts the king. The king informs Laertes that it was Hamlet who killed Polonius. Claudius then encourages Laertes to face Hamlet in a duel. To make sure Hamlet dies, they plan to put poison on Laertes' sword and have a poisoned drink nearby should Hamlet become thirsty.

Ophelia, who has become completely unhinged since the death of her father, has fallen in a stream and drowned. As Hamlet returns to Elsinore, he passes a churchyard where he encounters Ophelia's funeral procession. Hamlet, swearing love for Ophelia, jumps in her grave, challenging Laertes.

The duel between Laertes and Hamlet is attended by the king and queen. During the swordplay, Gertrude drinks to Hamlet from the poisoned cup and dies. Hamlet is wounded by Laertes' poisoned foil, and then, in a scuffle, Hamlet wounds Laertes with the poisoned foil. As he dies, Laertes confesses to Hamlet the plot he devised with Claudius. Hamlet wounds Claudius and forces him to drink the poison. Dying, Hamlet asks Horatio to tell the whole story to clear his name and says that the throne of Denmark shall pass to Fortinbras of Norway.

Act IV

“One woe doth tread upon another’s heel.”

Vocabulary:

Explain the meaning of the underlined word in each sentence below based on how that word is used in the sentence. You may need to use a dictionary.

1. In his lawless fit, . . . whips out his rapier, [and] cries “A rat, a rat!”
2. [A sponge] that soaks up the king’s countenance, his rewards, his authorities.
3. A certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him.
4. Tell him that by his license Fortinbras craves the conveyance of a promised march over his kingdom.
5. ‘O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!
6. I’ll be with you straight. Go a little before me.
7. She is importunate, indeed distract; her mood will needs be pitied.
8. Follow her close; give her good watch, I pray you.
9. Tell me, Laertes, why thou art thus incensed?

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Questions:

1. Why does Hamlet call Rosencrantz a sponge?
2. Claudius sends Hamlet to England as he had planned. What instruction concerning Hamlet's fate does he put in letters to England. Why?
3. Why has Fortinbras of Norway arrived in Denmark with his army?
4. Horatio and a Gentleman, concerned about Ophelia, ask the queen to speak with her. Why are they concerned about Ophelia?
5. Laertes arrives at the castle with a group of followers. What are his followers shouting? Why? What does the king promise Laertes at the end of scene v?
6. According to the letter delivered to Horatio, what happened to Hamlet? Why do you think he sent the letter to Horatio and not the king and queen?

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7. Laertes asks Claudius why he hasn't done anything to have Hamlet punished for the murder of Polonius. What reason does Claudius give?

8. When the king learns that Hamlet is returning to Elsinore, he and Laertes form a plan. What is their plan?

9. What terrible news does the queen deliver at the end of scene vii?

Analysis:

10. Hamlet has hidden Polonius's body, upsetting everyone. His responses to questions about the body are humorous and grotesque. Read the following passages:

King Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

Hamlet At supper.

King At supper? Where?

Hamlet Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain con-
vocation of politic worms are e'en at him. (scene iii)

King Where is Polonius?

Hamlet In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find
him not there, seek him i' the other place yourself. But indeed, if
you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go
up the stairs into the lobby.

King Go seek him there. [To some attendants]

Hamlet He will stay till you come. (scene iii)

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What do these passages tell you about Hamlet's character? Do you think Hamlet feels any guilt concerning Polonius's death? How would Hamlet's attitude toward Polonius's death support the theory that he is crazy?

11. Notice that both Hamlet and Laertes have lost a father through violence, and have been told about the deaths by questionable messengers (the ghost and Claudius). Compare and contrast these events and Hamlet's and Laertes' reactions.

12. Many critics think Hamlet feels a special kinship with Fortinbras because of the similarities in their circumstances. What are these similarities? How does Hamlet contrast himself with Fortinbras in the soliloquy that begins, "How all occasions do inform against me . . ." (scene iv, lines 34–69)?

13. In this soliloquy, Hamlet speaks about reason and honor. How does Hamlet view reason? How does he judge Fortinbras' honor? Do you agree with Hamlet's statements? Why or why not?

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14. At the end of Hamlet's soliloquy he says, "O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" Hamlet has finally resolved to act on the ghost's command to avenge his death. How has Hamlet been inspired to make up his mind at last?

Dig Deeper:

15. Hamlet says,

We fat all creatures to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots.
Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two
dishes, but to one table. That's the end.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:18–21, Psalm 39:4–7, and Psalm 103:11–18. What do Hamlet and these verses tell us about the *physical* fate of people? Read Matthew 16:24–27 and 1 John 2:15–17. What do these verses tell us about the *spiritual* fate of people? What can people do that will have the greatest effect after death?

16. Read the following passages from the play:

Hamlet . . . What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
to fust in us unused.
(scene iv, lines 35–41)

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King . . . poor Ophelia
Divided from herself and her fair judgment,
Without the which we are pictures or mere beasts, . . .
(scene v, lines 91–93)

What, according to these characters, makes humans more than mere animals?
In what ways do you think we differ from animals? (see Genesis 1:26, 27)

Summary:

Summarize the main action in each scene in Act IV. Use only two or three sentences for each scene.

scene i—

scene ii—

scene iii—

scene iv—

scene v—

scene vi—

scene vii—

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Optional Exercise:

Throughout history plants have had symbolic meaning attached to them. For example, the leaves of an olive tree were symbolic of peace. From this comes the phrase “extending an olive branch” to refer to an offering of peace. The laurel was symbolic of glory. We refer to someone “resting on one’s laurels” or the phrase “crown of laurels” to refer to one’s honored accomplishments.

“Say it with flowers” is more than a marketing slogan. In the 19th century it was common for someone to send a message with flowers that could be as easily read as the written word. The language of flowers was called florigraphy, and enthusiasts assigned meaning to hundreds of plant species. That the rose is a symbol of love is still understood today, but did you know that ivy is a symbol of fidelity, goldenrod means precaution, and basil is an expression of hatred? By sending someone a mixed bouquet one could communicate a whole range of meaning.

In scene v, Ophelia enters the room and begins distributing flowers and herbs, (real or imagined in her madness) to the people within. Audiences of Shakespeare’s time understood the symbolic meaning of each plant. Ophelia tells us that rosemary is a symbol for remembrance and pansies are for thoughts. Research the traditional meanings of each of the flowers or herbs she mentions listed below. Your local library may be able to help you find appropriate sources.

rosemary— remembrance

pansies— thoughts

fennel—

columbines—

rue—

daisies—

violets—

Do the symbolic meanings of these plants relate to anything in the play, or is Ophelia’s act simply an expression of a confused mind? Explain your answer.

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speak of a cleansing fire. Other denominations do not find enough evidence in these verses to support the idea of an interim judgment or purification. *Hamlet*, then, reflects a viewpoint which includes Purgatory in its theology.

3. Answers will vary. In this short section, Jesus tells his disciples of the following signs of the end times: the destruction of the temple (v. 6); wars and rumors of wars and revolutions (v. 9, 10); “earthquakes, famines and pestilences,” “fearful events,” and “great signs from heaven” (v. 11); persecution of Christians (v. 12–19); Jerusalem surrounded by armies (v. 20); “signs in the sun, moon and stars,” and the “roaring and tossing of the sea” (v. 25); “heavenly bodies will be shaken” (v. 26); and finally “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (v. 27).

Act II

Vocabulary:

Part 1:

1. n; 2. e; 3. i; 4. c; 5. d; 6. b; 7. a; 8. f; 9. m; 10. g; 11. h; 12. j; 13. k; 14. l.

Part 2:

Jephthah—A judge of Israel who sacrificed his daughter in fulfillment of a vow. (See Judges 11:30–40)

Dido—(Roman Mythology) The queen of Carthage who fell in love with Aeneas and killed herself when Aeneas abandoned her.

Priam—(Greek Mythology) The king of Troy who was killed when the city was conquered by the Greeks.

Cyclops—(Greek Mythology) A one-eyed giant supposedly inhabiting the island of Sicily.

Pyrrhus—The King of Epirus (319–272 B.C.) who, against great odds, defeated the Romans at Asculum and Heraclea.

Mars—(Roman Mythology) The god of war.

Hecuba—(Greek Mythology) The wife of Priam.

Questions:

1. Reynaldo was sent to France to bring a package to Laertes from Polonius. Polonius also wanted Reynaldo to spy on Laertes and find out how he has been behaving. He instructs Reynaldo to hint at indiscretions or liberties Laertes might take. Polonius hopes that this will encourage someone to talk about Laertes' bad behavior, if there is any. It may be effective, but it might also encourage one to think of Laertes in a more negative light than is justified. As Reynaldo points out, it could taint a person's perception of Laertes.

2. Polonius thinks Hamlet is acting strange because of his love for Ophelia. Polonius suggests that he and Claudius could spy on Hamlet and Ophelia while they talk together to see if his theory is correct.

3. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to Elsinore at the request of the king and queen. The king and queen hope Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can find out what is wrong with Hamlet. They tell Hamlet they have come to Elsinore only to visit him. Hamlet does not believe it is the only reason. When they admit they were sent for, Hamlet tells them exactly why they were sent for.

4. Voltmand and Cornelius tell Claudius that the king of Norway has commanded Fortinbras to stop his preparations for war against Denmark. Fortinbras has obeyed the king. The king of Norway then asks if Fortinbras can cross Danish territory to go to war against Poland.

5. Hamlet will have the visiting players perform a play that will depict his father's murder. Hamlet and Horatio will watch his uncle during the play to determine from his reaction if he is guilty of the murder. Hamlet wants to be sure that the ghost told the truth. He considers that it may have been an evil spirit out to spread falsehoods to lead him astray. “The spirit I have seen may be a devil; and the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps . . . abuses me to damn me.”

Analysis:

6. Gertrude is telling Polonius to get to the point and tell her more information with less empty babble.

7. Answers will vary. Polonius seems well-intentioned, but is not a deep thinker. He loses his train of thought often and gets side-tracked by minor issues and words. Polonius gives out good platitudes at times (to Laertes, for example), but he tends to judge things by their appearance and not look to the deeper substance. He also seems distrustful of people (Hamlet and Laertes) and is not a good judge of character.

8. Answers will vary. Whether she agrees with her father or not, she is dutifully obeying him.

9. Answers will vary. Ophelia is young and obedient, but confused by the contradictory signals and advice she gets from those around her. She is sincere and honest.