

Hamlet **Study Guide**

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for

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at The New American Shakespeare
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Original Practice and Playing Shakespeare

The Shakespeare Tavern on Peachtree Street is an Original Practice Playhouse. Original Practice is the active exploration and implementation of Elizabethan stagecraft and acting techniques.

For the Atlanta Shakespeare Company (ASC) at The New American Shakespeare Tavern, this means every ASC production features hand-made period costumes, live actor-generated sound effects, and live period music performed on period instruments in our Elizabethan playhouse. Our casts are trained to speak directly to the audience instead of ignoring the audience through the modern convention of acting with a “4th wall.”

You will experience all of this and more when you see ASC’s [Hamlet](#).

Who’s Who in Hamlet

King Hamlet: Dead when the play starts, he appears as a ghost.

Horatio: He is Hamlet’s school friend.

Hamlet: Son of King Hamlet recently returned from college for his father’s funeral and his mother’s marriage.

Claudius: The new King. His brother died and he married his sister-in-law rather hastily.

Gertrude: She wants her son to stop mourning his father and visit awhile.

Polonius:
Claudius’s closest advisor at court. Father of Laertes and Ophelia.

Laertes: At the beginning of the play he wants to go to France.

Ophelia: Hamlet’s girlfriend and obedient to her father.

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern: Friends of Hamlet in his youth.

Young Fortinbras: Son of the King of Norway, he is decisive and wants to invade Poland.

Osric: He has a very nice hat.

Other characters: Soldiers, pirates, a priest, gravediggers, Ambassadors, Captains, Players and courtiers



The Story

It is the middle of a very cold night on the battlements of Elsinore. Bernardo relieves a fellow soldier on guard. For two nights he and another soldier have seen a ghost while on their watch. They’ve asked Horatio, a scholar who has returned from the University at Wittenberg, to join them and to confront it. As they talk, the ghost appears again, and they recognize the recently deceased King Hamlet, dressed for war. It stalks away without responding. We discover that Denmark is preparing for war. King Fortinbras of Norway had earlier challenged King Hamlet to single combat. Not only did King Hamlet kill King Fortinbras, he seized his lands, which should have been inherited by his son, Young Fortinbras. We also learn that Young Fortinbras has raised an army of mercenaries to recover what his father had forfeited.

The ghost returns while they are talking, and Horatio tries to speak with it. Before the ghost might answer, a rooster crows, and it hastily leaves. They decide to tell Prince Hamlet, the King’s son, believing that the ghost will surely speak to him.

Inside the castle the following day, Claudius, dead King Hamlet’s brother, addresses an assembly. Although Denmark has been in mourning for King Hamlet’s death, Claudius has

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become King and married the recently widowed Queen Gertrude, his sister-in-law. Claudius thanks everyone who has “freely gone with this affair along.” He then dispatches ambassadors to the new King of Norway, who is Young Fortinbras’ uncle. Claudius allows Laertes, the son of court counselor Polonius, to return to France. Both Gertrude and Claudius try to persuade Hamlet to end mourning his father’s death, and remain at Elsinore rather than return to University at Wittenburg. Hamlet acquiesces. Claudius decides to celebrate Hamlet’s decision with toasting and cannon fire.

Alone, Hamlet shares his feelings with the audience. The guards interrupt Hamlet, who tell him of their ghostly encounter of the night before. Hamlet questions them closely and asks them to keep the encounter secret. He agrees to join them that night to speak to the ghost, whose presence indicates all is not well.

Ready to depart for France, Laertes bids his sister Ophelia farewell. He advises her not to lose her heart to Hamlet, whose affections she may not trust. She agrees to follow her brother’s advice but challenges him to practice what he preaches. Their father, Polonius, enters and hurries Laertes aboard ship with copious advice. He then asks Ophelia what she and Laertes were talking about and forbids Ophelia from talking to Hamlet. She promises to obey.

That night, Hamlet does indeed see his father’s ghost. The ghost beckons to Hamlet and he follows. When Hamlet is alone with the ghost, King Hamlet reveals that while everyone believes he died of natural causes while sleeping, he was actually poisoned by his brother, Claudius. He fades away, asking Hamlet to remember him. Horatio and the guards find Hamlet and all are sworn to secrecy.

Polonius sends his servant Reynaldo to France to spy on Laertes. A very frightened Ophelia enters and tells her father about a distressing encounter with Hamlet. Polonius decides that Hamlet is mad over being in love with Ophelia and resolves to tell the King.

Claudius and Gertrude welcome Hamlet’s old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore. They ask for help finding out the cause of Hamlet’s odd behavior. Polonius enters and announces he knows the cause of Hamlet’s

madness, but waits to tell the news until the ambassadors returning from Norway report that Fortinbras’ aggressive plan has been checked. Polonius then reports that Hamlet is mad from his rejected love of Ophelia. He and Claudius decide to hide behind an arras to watch the next encounter between the two. Hamlet and Polonius talk. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (R&G) enter and Hamlet gets them to admit they have been sent to visit him. They announce the coming of the Players, touring the countryside.

Hamlet knows the group and welcomes them heartily. He also asks them to prepare “The Murder of Gonzago” for performance that night, and to include a special speech he has written for the occasion. Left alone, Hamlet compares the players acting ability and sense of commitment to his own performance and inability to act against Claudius, as the ghost has commanded him to do. Because the ghost might be an evil spirit, tempting him to greater evil, he decides to test his theory by provoking Claudius that night at the play.

R & G cannot discover the source of Hamlet’s madness and tell his parents. Claudius and Polonius hide behind an arras when Hamlet enters, leaving Ophelia to encounter him alone. Hamlet turns on her and leaves her amazed and undone. Claudius decides to send him to England and Polonius advises him to have Gertrude confront her son that night.

Hamlet gives the players acting advice and talks about the function of theatre. At the play, Hamlet is in his element, speaking oddly to the King, refusing to join his mother, and speaking very crudely to Ophelia. The play begins and bears a remarkable resemblance to the events surrounding King Hamlet’s murder. King Claudius suddenly stands and hastily exits. Hamlet takes this as strong evidence of Claudius guilty conscious.

R&G are ordered to follow Hamlet to England. Polonius warns Claudius that Hamlet is going to visit his mother. Left alone, Claudius attempts to pray for forgiveness. Hamlet overhears and decides to kill him. He immediately has second thoughts and postpones his revenge until a time when Claudius is more vulnerable to damnation. Claudius reveals that he is unable to experience forgiveness and exits.

Polonius hides in Gertrude’s bedroom, to spy on Gertrude and her son. Hamlet enters and they

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argue. When Hamlet hears someone behind the arras, he acts impulsively and kills Polonius.

Hamlet then wildly praises his dead father and chastises his mother for marrying Claudius. The ghost reappears and tells Hamlet to be merciful to Gertrude, who cannot see the ghost. She thinks Hamlet is insane. Hamlet, bound for England, drags the dead body off, and hides it. Claudius enters and sends R&G to find Hamlet. Hamlet jokes about Polonius' death and cleverly reveals the whereabouts of his corpse. Left alone, Claudius reveals that his letters to the King of England request the immediate death of Hamlet.

Hamlet, presumably on his way to the ship bound for England, encounters a Norwegian Captain under Fortinbras' command. We discover that Fortinbras and his army are passing through Denmark on their way to invade Poland. Hamlet muses about the nature of war, and unfavorably compares himself and his predicament to Fortinbras and his firm purpose.

Her father slain by her now-estranged lover, Ophelia sings songs and behaves very oddly. Laertes, at the head of a mob, returns to avenge their father's death. He witnesses his sister's breakdown and Claudius agrees to help Laertes gain revenge against Hamlet.

Pirates give Horatio letters from Hamlet that reveal he is on his way back from England. He has also sent a letter to Claudius, who, with Laertes, is planning Hamlet's "accidental" death. Gertrude arrives with the sad news of Ophelia's death by drowning.

Two gravediggers are joking about politics and religion. Hamlet and Horatio enter, talk with them and muse about mortality and decay. A funeral procession enters and a priest explains why the funeral service for Ophelia was abbreviated. When Hamlet discovers that the corpse is Ophelia, he fights with Laertes over whose grief is greatest.

Later, Hamlet reveals to Horatio how he discovered the plot against his life and turned it against R&G. Osric, a courtier, arrives to tell Hamlet of a wager Claudius has placed on the outcome of a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Hamlet agrees to it and Horatio expresses misgivings.

The fencing match begins with the court in attendance. Hamlet apologizes to Laertes, who remains aloof. The duel begins, but only Laertes and King Claudius know that one of the blades is poisoned. Claudius has also dropped a poisoned pearl into a drinking cup, in case he can get Hamlet to drink from it during the duel. The Queen toasts Hamlet instead, Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword, then Hamlet gets a hold of it and wounds Laertes.

All is revealed when Gertrude dies, so Hamlet wounds Claudius and forces him to drink the poisoned wine. As Hamlet dies, he asks Horatio to tell the world his story. The rest is silence as Fortinbras enters with his army and takes charge.

Before a Performance, Think About This:

Theatergoing Then and Now:

Find out what the typical Elizabethan audience was like and imagine what a performance might have been like back then. What is different about theatre going nowadays? The answers may surprise you! Clue: What would this play be like to watch outside, in the light of day?

During a Performance, Watch and Listen for This:

Honor and Revenge:

How many times in the play does Hamlet have the chance for revenge? How many times does he act honorably?

After a Performance, Talk About This:

Oaths, obedience and Swearing

There is an unusual amount of swearing, formal promises and obeying in this play. Why does this happen so often in this play? What does it mean to give one's word? To swear? To formally state your obedience?

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Look at Act I, sc 1, Act I, sc 3, and Act V, sc 2 for instances of formal oaths sworn, obedience and promises.

Original Practice Theatre:

Does directly addressing the audience affect how you think or feel about the characters? Does it affect your understanding of what is going on onstage? Does it interfere? Why do you think Shakespeare wrote his plays this way? What are the benefits to the actor and/or audience? What are the risks?

Words Invented by Shakespeare and Used for the First Time in This Play:

Amazement
Besmirch
Buzzer
Excitement
Film
Hush
Outbreak
Pander
Remorseless

Find for yourself where they appear in the play! Can you spot them in performance? Do they mean what you thought they meant?

For Further Information/Exploration:

Websites:

Our website has a great “ask Jeanette” section-email us questions about the show you saw, and get an answer back!!<http://www.shakespearetaVERN.com/BTC/btcaskjeanette.html>

Mr. William Shakespeare and The Internet: <http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/> this site contains excellent resources and is a great metasite.

The Shakespeare Globe Centre USA: <http://www.shakespeareglobeusa.org/>

Books:

Hamlet Arden Edition

Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human by Harold Bloom

Asimov’s Guide to Shakespeare by Isaac Asimov

Staging In Shakespeare’s Theatres by Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa

Shakespeare A to Z by Charles Boyce

Spark Notes

Our performance text is:

The Applause First Folio of Shakespeare in Modern Type, Neil Freeman

For more information on the First Folio of Shakespeare go to:

<http://web.uvic.ca/shakespeare/Annex/DraftTxt/index.html>

Movie Versions: There are tons!!

The four-hour plus version with Kenneth Brannagh is amazing, although no Elizabethan audience would ever stand or sit still for such a long time. The text Mr. B used is a conflation of all the different versions the Globe players ever used.

Lots of folks like the Mel Gibson/Zeffirelli directed version- Mel is very cute as Hamlet.

I like the old PBS version with a young Derek Jacobi as Hamlet. Mr. Jacobi plays a terrific Claudius opposite Mr. Brannagh in the long version, above, whom he mentored in real life.

There are more papers, books, studies, movies and works of fiction written about, or on Hamlet than any other play in the world, so you have a lot to choose from when studying the play!

Definitions

Amazement: bewilderment; wonder or astonishment
Besmirch: to soil or stain
Buzzer: gossip or noisemaker
Excitement: enthusiasm, stimulation
Film: to coat with a thin or transparent coating
Hush: quiet
Outbreak: sudden occurrence
Pander: to cater to base desires
Remorseless: merciless; devoid of regret