Hamlet
Study Guide
Compiled by Laura Cole,
Director of Education
Laura@ShakespeareTavern.com
for
The Atlanta Shakespeare Company
at The New American Shakespeare
Tavern
499 Peachtree Street, NE
Atlanta, GA 30308
Phone: 404-874-5299
www.shakespearetavern.com

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
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 councilor 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 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 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 cruelly 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
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?
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?

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:

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: gossiper 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