

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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These study materials are produced for use with the
Bob Jones University Classic Players production.

AN EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH OF BOB JONES UNIVERSITY



David Schwingle as Hamlet, Classic Players 2016.

Hamlet & Revenge

When Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in 1600, he already enjoyed a reputation as a successful playwright in a type of popular drama known as revenge tragedy. His first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, is one of theater's most intense forays into the genre. Evidence suggests that it was also one of the playwright's most popular and financially successful ventures during his lifetime.

Hamlet, like *Titus Andronicus*, is a conventional revenge tragedy in several senses. The main character is confronted with the command to enact vengeance against an enemy. He delays and feigns madness before taking on the challenge. In most cases it is incumbent upon him not only to kill his enemy's body but also to send his soul to hell.

But *Hamlet* is also an innovative work. Shakespeare's protagonist retains a thoughtful cast of mind and a concern for his own soul throughout the action. By contrast, the typical revenger becomes progressively more embittered and violent, eventually abandoning all moral principle and forfeiting all audience sympathy.

Hamlet's personal motives for revenge are weighty. He deeply loved and idealized his dead father. He is concerned for the soul of his mother, whose marriage to her former brother-in-law was considered incestuous in Shakespeare's age.

His dilemma is political as well as personal. His enemy has killed the former king and now occupies the throne of Denmark. Hamlet has been cheated out of a crown, and the whole of Denmark has become a moral abyss.

Hamlet & Revenge

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Most importantly, while Hamlet may at first cynically embrace a code of behavior that consigns him to murdering, he grows and matures in his struggle with evil. By the final act, Shakespeare's unique revenger becomes morally enlightened.

Hamlet returns from England serene about his fate, affirming the Christian view of life and death. Before the duel/finale begins, Hamlet admits his guilt and asks pardon of Laertes, who at the very moment ironically intends to kill him by treacherous means.

Shakespeare creates a character who is ultimately accountable for his response to a dilemma not of his own making. A single bungled and bloody deed, Hamlet's slaying of Polonius after "The Mousetrap," produces untold suffering for the prince and for the one he once loved.

Although Hamlet later learns his lesson and repents, justice still must be served upon the prince. Hamlet dies fully accepting his role and his destiny. He actually achieves revenge in his death, but through none of his own devising.

Hamlet becomes instead a passive instrument in the hands of Providence, and his killing of Claudius, an act of public justice. Indeed Shakespeare well demonstrates through Hamlet, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will."

Shakespeare's examination of revenge is more gripping than that of the simplistic and bloodier revenge plays typical of his age. Yet it is a drama of highly engaging action as well. By the final lines, eight characters have suffered violent deaths; two entire families have been destroyed.

Shakespeare scholars point out that Elizabethan Christians would likely have viewed with skepticism Hamlet's assumption that revenge is a sacred duty he owes to his father's memory.

It is true that many revenge tragedies of the period assume a Christian moral framework. The point is also well-taken in view of Shakespeare's treatment of the revenge code in his other plays.

The Biblical injunction against retribution was oft quoted by ethical writers and preachers in Shakespeare's day. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay," saith the Lord" was understood as both a promise to victims of wrongdoers and a threat against the enemies of God.

The apostle Paul's admonition on vengeance in Romans 12 ends, "Be not overcome [of the evil one], but overcome evil with goodness."

Fearing his own damnation should he kill an innocent man, Hamlet seeks to determine if the Ghost is an agent of hell by testing its accusations against Claudius.

Yet he never questions the morality of its command that he avenge his father's murder; nor does he consider, as Macbeth does, that "oftentimes, to win us to our harm,/The instruments of darkness tell us truths,/Win us with honest trifles, to betray's/In deepest consequence."

Our own moral response to Hamlet and his dilemma will be conditioned to a large extent by whether we believe that revenge is ever justifiable under any circumstances.

Some argue that as son of the murdered king, Hamlet is a minister of the state whose duty it is to kill Claudius and re-establish order in the state. Others regard the prince as a minister of God who may kill Claudius in an act of private revenge without sinning.

The issues that aroused the interests of the play's first audiences still intrigue us today. ∞

HAMLET & The Ghost

In Shakespeare's age the prevailing religious view was that ghosts were demons masquerading as loved ones who return from the dead. Their purpose was to ensnare souls by coaxing bereaved family members to pursue vengeance. At the end of Act II, Hamlet explains why he is reluctant to follow the Ghost's commands:

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil: and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me.



Ron Pyle as the Ghost, *Classic Players* 2016.

What's *Hamlet* All About?

Interpretation in a Nutshell

Hamlet is a rich, intriguing, and appealing play that has been the subject of more tomes than any other work of literature. So what is *Hamlet* about?

First, it is not a play about a man who cannot make up his mind. It is not a play about a man given a challenge that he is physically and mentally unequal to. It is not a play about an insane or temporarily insane man who goes on a crime spree.

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare depicts the struggle between good and evil on the level of the individual, the family, and the state.

The play portrays men and women who are tempted to make self-serving choices. In the case of Claudius and Gertrude, these choices have been made before the action of the play ever begins.

For Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, such choices seem to have become habitual, a way of life. They have neither murdered nor usurped a throne. But they use family and friends to gain promotion, to “make points” with those whom they wish to impress. Each of them pays with his life.

Ophelia is an innocent victim. So is Laertes—up to a point. Then he chooses the evil option and pays for that choice with his life.

Hamlet is the greatest victim of Claudius’ corruption. The largest question regarding interpretation of the script relates to Hamlet: What should he do about his uncle’s murder of his father? Should he follow the Ghost’s command to seek vengeance?

When Hamlet murders the wrong man, he marks himself for death in the play’s finale. But he learns and grows before he dies. He finally adopts the attitude that if Heaven wants him to pull



The royal Danish family in the 1961 Classic Players production was portrayed by Bob Jones Jr. as Claudius, Elizabeth Edwards as Gertrude, and Bob Jones III as Hamlet with Robert Pratt as Polonius, Jack Buttram as Horatio, and Beneth Peters Jones as Ophelia.

down Claudius and his corrupt court, Heaven will give him the opportunity to do so in an upright manner. The occasion of revenge, however, must be initiated by someone else. And it is.

Everyone finally gets his or her just rewards; and Hamlet legally, with provocation, and in front of the whole court takes vengeance upon Claudius.

Because Hamlet secures Laertes’ forgiveness for the murder of Polonius, “flights of angels” sing the prince to rest. Hamlet’s death is both a punishment and a corrective to a corrupt society.

Fortinbras, who has remained above reproach in the matter of revenge, reigns over a reunited and purified Norway and Denmark in the end. ∞

A Look at *HAMLETS* of the Past



Bob Jones Jr. as Hamlet and Katherine Stenholm as Ophelia, Classic Players 1948.



David Burke as Hamlet and Beneth Peters Jones as Gertrude, Classic Players 1997.

HAMLET¹

Guards on the castle battlements discuss a ghostly figure resembling the dead King Hamlet that has appeared twice recently. As young Hamlet's friend Horatio watches with them, the Ghost reappears.

1

The prince has not succeeded his father as king of Denmark. Instead, his uncle, Claudius, is the new king.

2

Claudius has also recently married Gertrude, his deceased brother's wife and Hamlet's mother.

Hamlet reveals in an embittered soliloquy that his father's sudden death followed by his mother's hasty remarriage to his uncle has left him with little will to live.

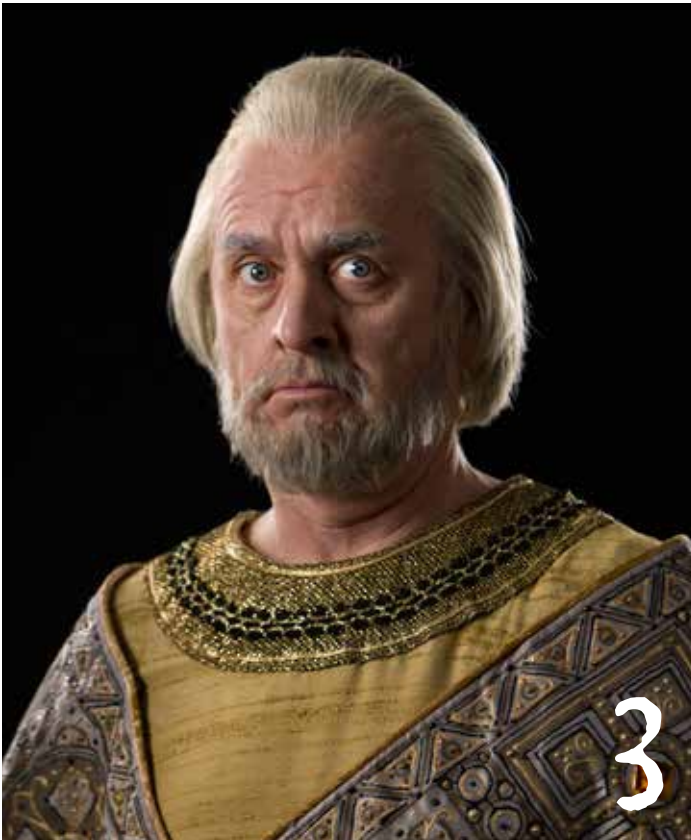
Hamlet encounters the Ghost of old King Hamlet, who says that he was murdered by Claudius and charges the prince to avenge his death. Hamlet decides to feign madness as a means of protecting himself and gathering evidence against his uncle.



1. David Schwingle as Hamlet
2. Philip Eoute as Claudius and Erin Naler as Gertrude
3. Jeffrey Stegall as Polonius
4. Christina Yasi as Ophelia
6. John Cox as Laertes
8. Nathan Young as Fortinbras.

THE TRAGEDY OF **HAMLET**, PRINCE OF DENMARK

SETTING: ELSINORE CASTLE DENMARK



3-4

The meddling court counselor Polonius concludes that Hamlet is mad with unrequited love for Ophelia, his daughter, whom Hamlet has professed to love.

5

To prove this, Polonius arranges for Ophelia to converse with Hamlet while he and the king hide behind a tapestry.

Hamlet coaches a troupe of strolling players to perform an old play he has amended to depict the murder of his father. The king becomes increasingly anxious during "The Mousetrap" and finally breaks up the performance. Hamlet is convinced that the Ghost has told him the truth.

The Tragedy of *Hamlet*

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Hamlet therefore resolves he will immediately pursue revenge against Claudius. But when he encounters the king alone in prayer, he decides to postpone the murder until he finds his enemy engaged in a sin that will plunge him directly into hell.

While Hamlet chides his mother about her disgraceful relationship to Claudius, he hears a noise behind a tapestry and thrusts his sword into it, believing that the king is there. But rather than Claudius, it is the eavesdropping Polonius whom Hamlet slays. Knowing that Hamlet is aware of the truth about his father's death, Claudius sends the prince abroad, intending to have him killed in England.



6

After Hamlet murders her father and then disappears from Denmark, Ophelia goes mad. Her brother, Laertes, who has been in France, returns in anger over Polonius' death. When Ophelia drowns, Laertes becomes even more inflamed against Hamlet, who coincidentally returns to Denmark on the day of Ophelia's burial.

Hamlet explains to his friend Horatio that his own cleverness and the aid of divine Providence enabled him to escape death in England.

7

Claudius manipulates the distraught Laertes, and they plot Hamlet's demise during a fencing match.

8

Their plans succeed only up to a point. Hamlet meets his end bravely and appoints the young Norwegian prince, Fortinbras, to rule the purged kingdom of Denmark. ♡





YORICK'S Skull

The most famous of all props in Shakespeare's plays is Yorick's skull in *Hamlet*. Skulls were the most popular of all memento mori, or objects which served as reminders that all of us must die. During the Renaissance meditation on man's mortality was a typical devotional exercise. A skull reminds us not only of the transience of life but also of sin, which, in turn, makes us think on accountability. In some instances a skull may also be an emblem of penitence.

David Schwingle as Hamlet, Classic Players 2016.

The **Play** and the **Prince**: "Not of an Age, but for All Time"

Hamlet was written over 400 years ago. Scholars, critics, actors, and audiences alike have been so fascinated by the play that it is easily the most discussed drama of all time.

Similarly, the character Hamlet has aroused the interest of more commentators than any other character in all imaginative literature. Although critics reach radically different conclusions about the Prince of Denmark, very few have disputed Shakespeare's genius in creating him.

Hamlet was first performed at London's Globe Theatre in 1602 by Shakespeare's own company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Richard Burbage, the troupe's principal tragedian, played the title role. He was 35 years old, not far from the age of 30 the Gravedigger establishes for Hamlet. Tradition, as recorded first by Nicholas Rowe in 1709, holds that Shakespeare himself appeared as the Ghost.

After its premiere, *Hamlet* was played at court in 1619 and 1637 before disappearing from sight until 1661.

In one of the first stage performances after the Restoration, Thomas Betterton played the role of the prince. This actor, who reportedly turned white with fear when the Ghost appeared, continued to enact Hamlet until he was 75 years old.

Theater fashions changed once more, and Hamlet was not performed again until 1708, when it was revived at Drury Lane by Robert Wilks.

During the 300 years since then, *Hamlet* has held the stage in every generation, and virtually every great actor has attempted the title role—with, of course, varying degrees of success.

At the end of the 18th century, Stephen Kemble established the tradition of a gloomy, melancholy Hamlet who had spent too much time in his studies. Unfortunately this image of the prince

as a thinker unfit for the task the Ghost assigns him would prevail well into the 20th century.

Perhaps never again, however, was the prince's ineptness so effectively tied to the inactive life of scholars: Kemble reportedly weighed 300 pounds.

Some of the most unusual *Hamlet* performances have featured children and females in Shakespeare's most famous role. In 1804-05, a 13-year-old, William Henry West Betty, drew critical acclaim for enacting the role of the prince.

Sarah Bernhardt played Hamlet in 1899 when she was over 50 years old. The response was less than enthusiastic from one New York critic who wrote that Miss Bernhardt looked "exactly like what she was, a thin, elderly woman, somewhat disguised."

Dame Judith Anderson got an even later start in the role of the prince: The Dame toured the United States as the Dane in 1970 at the age of 72. Several critics dismissed her performances as "a trespass against good taste."

The role of Prince Hamlet has become, in the words of Max Beerbohm, "a hoop through which every eminent actor must, sooner or later, jump."

In the same way *Hamlet* the play has never failed to fascinate and entertain. Throughout more than four centuries of performances, it has been staged according to the differing perceptions and tastes of the times.

In the words of Shakespeare editor G. B. Harrison, "*Hamlet* is in every way the most interesting play ever written." Certainly no other play promises greater rewards to the student and theatergoer than Shakespeare's rich, intriguing work of art that has engaged different generations in such a variety of ways. ♡

Fathers and Sons in *Hamlet*

Hamlet includes the stories of three young men who lose their fathers to violent deaths: Fortinbras, Hamlet, and Laertes. At some point in the plot, each purposes to avenge that death.

But in the end of the play the fates of Fortinbras, Hamlet, and Laertes are vastly different. Shakespeare attributes the difference to the individual courses of their revenge.

As described by Horatio in the play's first scene, Old Fortinbras died honorably in chivalric combat against Old Hamlet. Both men were valiant kings who settled their differences by putting themselves at risk to spare their kingdoms from war. They represent a noble, irretrievable past.

Some 30 years later, however, young Fortinbras chafes under his father's loss of lands to Old Hamlet and seeks to reclaim them. This Fortinbras is a ruthless soldier. Thus all Denmark is preparing for war with Norway as the first scene ends.

In scene 2, Claudius addresses the growing Fortinbras threat by dispatching letters to Fortinbras' uncle. The King of Norway is enjoined "to suppress" his nephew's threatened revenge.

Then in Act II, scene 2, Polonius reports that the ambassadors "from Norway . . . are joyfully returned." Thus Fortinbras' rebellion has been quelled by diplomacy, and his revenge plot never develops. In a sense he becomes a type of forbearance.

From this point Fortinbras takes on a new role, that of a successful and upright man of action. He occupies an ideal position that contrasts him to the other two sons in the play, Hamlet and Laertes.

It should be noted that Elizabethans distinguished between private and public, or civic, revenge. It is public vengeance, achieved

through military battle, that Fortinbras initially seeks. He is never associated with private revenge as Hamlet and Laertes are.

In Act IV, Fortinbras passes across the stage with his army, his energies now directed toward Poland. He scorns death and danger, not to achieve vengeance, but to gain "an eggshell" for his country's honor. Hamlet professes admiration for such a man.

Like Fortinbras, Laertes is entreated by an older man concerning his desire for revenge, but with opposite intent. The villain Claudius so manipulates the grieving son and brother that he vows allegiance to hell.

Daring damnation in the manner of a typical Elizabethan revenger, Laertes, under the tutelage of Claudius, lays a perfidious trap for Hamlet. Laertes' attitude toward avenging his father's death stands in stark contrast to both Fortinbras' and Hamlet's.

His treachery misses the mark, however, and he dies from the poison on his own sword. Yet the universe of *Hamlet* offers grace to the penitent, and the hoodwinked Laertes begs forgiveness of Hamlet before they both die.

After the entire Danish royal family lies dead on the stage, Fortinbras arrives in triumph from Poland. The only bereaved son who has completely eschewed private revenge, he presides over the carnage at the end.

Fortinbras learns that he has Hamlet's "dying voice" and will become king of a reunited Denmark and Norway. That which he at first sought, and later held back from seeking, to obtain by vengeance has become his through the workings of divine Providence.

The tragic outcome is less triumphant for Hamlet, who failed for a time to check his rash desire for revenge. Not only is it impossible for him to ascend the throne of Denmark; he must, in fact, pay for blood with blood. Nevertheless, Hamlet comes to a realization of the error of such ways. By the final act of the play, he is a changed man. He expresses his faith in an overruling Providence to Horatio in lines that allude to Matthew 10:29–31.

But as O. B. Hardison points out, the verse in the Geneva Bible preceding these lines on the death of a sparrow is also to the point: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell."

According to Horatio, Hamlet escapes damnation, for he has repented his wrongdoing and embraced a new world view. Hamlet's death, then, is a victory of sorts, and he is borne away honorably, "like a soldier to the stage." ☞



Annette Pait as Ophelia, Gary Weier as Laertes, and William McCauley as Polonius, *Classic Players* 1997

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