

Introduction

Shakespeare on the Double! Hamlet provides the full text of the Bard's play side by side with an easy-to-read modern English translation that you can understand. You no longer have to wonder what exactly "To be or not to be" means! You can read the Shakespearean text on the left-hand pages and check the right-hand pages when Shakespeare's language stumps you. Or you can read only the translation, which enables you to understand the action and characters at an even pace. You can also read both, referring easily between the original text and the modern translation. Any way you choose, you can now understand every line of the Bard's masterpiece!

We've also provided you with some additional resources:

- **Brief synopsis** of the plot and action provides a broad-strokes overview of the play.
- **Comprehensive character list** covers the actions, motivations, and characteristics of each major player.
- **Visual character map** displays who the major characters are and how they relate to each other.
- **Cycle-of-death** pinpoints the sequence of deaths in the play, including who dies, how they die, and why they die.
- **Reflective questions** help you delve even more into the themes and meanings of the play.

Reading Shakespeare can be slow and difficult. No more! With *Shakespeare on the Double! Hamlet*, you can read the play in language that you can grasp quickly and thoroughly.



Hamlet Synopsis

ACT I

Scene 1

Two months after a state funeral for King Hamlet at Elsinore Castle in Denmark, Prince Hamlet remains at home. Horatio, his fellow student at Wittenberg, investigates a late-night apparition reported two consecutive nights by the watch, Bernardo and Marcellus. Shortly before cock-crow, the spirit of King Hamlet returns decked out in the battle armor he wore during his war with Old Fortinbras of Norway. Horatio ponders the unrest of the former king's spirit.

Scene 2

Hamlet, dressed in funereal black, appears in the council hall in low spirits. His uncle Claudius, King Hamlet's successor, has married the old king's wife Gertrude. Hamlet chooses not to return to school. He suppresses his dismay at the widow's remarriage only one month after her husband's death. Horatio, Bernardo, and Marcellus inform Hamlet about the spirit's pacing on the battlements. Hamlet promises to join the trio that night to await the ghost's return.

Scene 3

Laertes, son of Polonius, the lord chamberlain, packs to attend school in Paris. Laertes warns his sister Ophelia to guard her reputation by avoiding Hamlet's courtship. Laertes suspects that Hamlet is merely toying with Ophelia. Polonius gives parental advice on a young man's behavior, then warns Ophelia about encouraging Hamlet's interest in her.

Scene 4

Around midnight, Hamlet joins Horatio and Marcellus on the castle battlements. The ghost appears. Hamlet recognizes the disturbed spirit and inquires about its return to earth. The ghost beckons Prince Hamlet to one side.

Scene 5

In private, the spirit of King Hamlet confides to his son the necessity of expiating sins in purgatory. The ghost tells Prince Hamlet how Claudius, the brother of King Hamlet, poured yew sap in his ear and killed him with his sins unforgiven. Claudius then seized the crown and married Gertrude, King Hamlet's widow. Prince Hamlet swears to avenge his father's murder. On his sword, Hamlet pledges Horatio and Marcellus to secrecy while the prince investigates the truth of the ghost's accusations.



ACT II

Scene 1

Several weeks later, Polonius instructs Reynaldo on how to spy on Laertes and learn about his behavior in Paris. Ophelia reports to her father that Hamlet's behavior is bizarre. Polonius diagnoses Prince Hamlet's strangeness as love-sickness rather than insanity.

Scene 2

Claudius and Gertrude question Guildenstern and Rosencrantz about their schoolmate Hamlet's peculiarities. Polonius informs Claudius on the effrontery of young Fortinbras, whom the king of Norway scolds for raising an army. Set to attack Poland, young Fortinbras requests permission to march peacefully through Denmark on his way to war. Claudius grants the request. Polonius offers Hamlet's love letters as proof that the prince is love-sick. Claudius and Polonius plot to hide behind an arras to eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia.



ACT III

Scene 1

Hamlet paces the foyer reading a book. Polonius speaks to him, but misunderstands the prince's nonsensical replies. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to diagnose their boyhood friend's mental illness. Hamlet realizes that Claudius has enlisted his schoolmates to spy on him. The prince confuses the men with daft oratory. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report that Hamlet's favorite acting troupe is approaching Elsinore castle.

Scene 2

Hamlet welcomes the players and asks for a recitation of his favorite passage about Pyrrhus's slaughter of King Priam during the Trojan War. Hamlet assigns Polonius to aid the troupe while they set up their evening performance. To the company's manager, Hamlet requests a performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*. In solitude, Hamlet reveals his doubts that the ghost on the battlements was really his father. He suspects that a demon misleads him. To substantiate King Hamlet's charges against Claudius, Prince Hamlet plans to observe Claudius's reaction to the dramatization of his crime against his brother.

Claudius questions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about the prince's insanity. The king and Polonius lurk behind a curtain to spy on Hamlet's wooing of Ophelia. Hamlet ponders suicide as the best solution to his dilemma. When Ophelia enters, the prince charges her with immodesty. After Hamlet departs, Claudius fears that he can't allow an insane prince to endanger others. Claudius decides to send Hamlet on an embassy to the king of England to collect a tax owed to Denmark. Polonius urges Gertrude to question her son about his mental unrest.

The next night, the acting troupe discusses with Hamlet the correct delivery of dramatic lines. After the players depart for the stage, Hamlet assigns Horatio to watch Claudius for proof that he is guilty of poisoning King Hamlet. The court assembles for the play, which Hamlet calls "The Mousetrap." He plops his head in Ophelia's lap and pretends to summarize the play while complaining of the court's disrespect for King Hamlet.

The players perform a pantomime of Baptista's loving relationship with King Gonzago. After a nephew poisons Gonzago, Baptista allows the killer to console her. Immediately after Gonzago's corpse is carried away, the murderer seduces Baptista. Claudius asks Hamlet if the rest of the play is offensive. Hamlet assures him that anyone with a clear conscience has no reason to object to the story. Nonetheless, Claudius is so guilt-ridden that he rushes out. The play comes to an abrupt end as the court follows him.

Hamlet confers with Horatio and exults that Claudius displayed guilt by bolting from the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carry a summons from Gertrude to her son. When Polonius delivers a similar command, Hamlet resolves not to harm the queen for her disloyalty to King Hamlet. Polonius hurries to get in position behind the drape to eavesdrop on the queen's conversation with the prince.

Scene 3

Claudius attempts to ease his guilty conscience by praying for forgiveness. Hamlet observes the king at prayer, but decides against stabbing Claudius

to death. Because Claudius killed his brother without giving him an opportunity to confess his sins, Hamlet chooses to wait until Claudius has damned himself through drunkenness, quarreling, or adultery with Gertrude.

Scene 4

In her chamber, Gertrude scolds Hamlet for willful behavior. He upsets her by retaliating with charges against Claudius for killing his brother. At Gertrude's outcry, Polonius replies from behind the drape. Hamlet, who suspects that Claudius is hiding in the room, thrusts his rapier through the drape and kills Polonius. Without pause, Hamlet continues berating the queen for adultery. The ghost appears to remind Hamlet not to harm his former wife. The queen grows agitated at Hamlet's apparent discussion with an invisible person. Hamlet drags Polonius's remains from the room in preparation for an embassy requiring a sea voyage to England.



ACT IV

Scene 1

Gertrude, trembling with the night's events, reports them to Claudius, who is conferring with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Claudius realizes that Hamlet thought he was stabbing the king when he unintentionally killed Polonius. Claudius sends the two spies to locate Polonius's corpse.

Scene 2

Hamlet pretends to help the spies search for Polonius's body. The prince tells his old friends that Claudius is using them in a plot against Hamlet.

Scene 3

Claudius questions Hamlet about Polonius's death. The prince mocks the investigation and claims that everyone will soon smell the decomposing corpse, which is hidden in the foyer under the steps. The king sends Hamlet on assignment to England. In private, Claudius reveals that the sealed diplomatic pouch that Hamlet carries condemns him to execution.

Scene 4

Before leaving Denmark, Hamlet encounters young Fortinbras. The prince asks about the army that is marching toward Poland. He pities the soldiers who will die for a pointless gesture of honor requiring the seizure of a small plot of land lost in battle. Hamlet then ponders his failure to avenge his father's murder.

Scene 5

Days later, Gertrude learns that Ophelia has suffered an emotional collapse following her father's sudden death. Ophelia wanders into the hall. Disheveled and disoriented, she sings snatches of old songs and ballads. She calls for Laertes, who intends to avenge his father's murder. Danish rebels support Laertes's claim to the throne. Claudius cajoles Laertes to convince him that the king had no part in Polonius's murder.

Scene 6

Hamlet sends a letter to Horatio reporting an attack at sea by pirates. The prince returned to Denmark with the pirates' aid. Horatio carries the letter to the king.

Scene 7

Later, Claudius manipulates Laertes into the role of Hamlet's killer. Laertes is so enraged at Polonius's death and Ophelia's madness that he vows to fight a duel with Hamlet. To assure the prince's death, Laertes produces poison that he bought from a quack. Claudius promises to poison a wine cup to kill Hamlet when he pauses during the duel for a drink. Gertrude interrupts to report that Ophelia has drowned. The king surmises that the news will redouble Laertes's fury at Hamlet.



ACT V

Scene 1

Outside the castle, gravediggers finish Ophelia's burial place and discuss the church's duality in burying aristocratic suicides, but not commoners who take their own lives. Hamlet and Horatio muse on the rapid deterioration of corpses. A gravedigger tosses up the skull of Yorick, the court jester of King Hamlet. The prince learns that the grave awaits Ophelia's remains. When Laertes leaps into the clay pit to embrace his sister's corpse, Hamlet jumps in and grapples with his old friend. Gertrude scolds her son for his rash behavior. Claudius resolves that Laertes must kill Hamlet in the duel.

Scene 2

Hamlet informs Horatio of Claudius's royal dispatch to the king of England to execute Hamlet. The prince exults in stealing the message from the diplomatic pouch, forging a royal order to have Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern executed, and sealing the message with King Hamlet's signet ring. Horatio fears that Hamlet is too over-wrought to commit to a duel. The prince insists that he fight Laertes. Before the face-off begins, Hamlet apologizes for harming Laertes's father and sister. Claudius bets six Arabian horses on his stepson and offers him a pearl in a wine cup. Hamlet scores the first points against Laertes. The Queen mops Hamlet's brow and drinks from the poisoned cup.

At the second round, Laertes stabs Hamlet with the poisoned rapier. The duel continues. After exchanging swords, the prince strikes his opponent with the poisoned tip. When Gertrude collapses and claims that the wine is poisoned, Hamlet orders servants to secure the exits. Laertes admits his guilt and reveals that his opponent, too, is dying. Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned foil and forces him to drink from the wine cup.

As Laertes sinks toward death, he exonerates the prince for the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia. Hamlet, growing weaker, commissions Horatio to remain alive to defend the prince's reputation. Cannon fire alerts the court to young Fortinbras's victory over the Poles. English messengers report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were executed in England. Hamlet supports Fortinbras's claim to the Danish throne. As Fortinbras looks in amazement at the bodies lying in the hall, he is shaken by the carnage that has ended the Danish dynasty. Horatio promises to explain. Fortinbras orders honors and military music for prince Hamlet.



List of Characters

HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK The crown prince of Denmark who returns from the university in Wittenberg, Germany, to find his father dead, his mother married to the king's brother Claudius, and Claudius newly self-crowned King.

CLAUDIUS, KING OF DENMARK Dead Hamlet's brother who has usurped the throne and married his sister-in-law.

GERTRUDE, QUEEN OF DENMARK Prince Hamlet's mother, King Hamlet's widow, King Claudius's wife.

THE GHOST Spirit of the late King Hamlet, condemned to walk the earth until his soul is cleansed of its sins.

POLONIUS The elderly Lord Chamberlain, chief counselor to Claudius.

HORATIO A commoner, who went to school with Hamlet and remains his loyal best friend.

LAERTES A student in Paris, who is Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother. He returns from school because of King Hamlet's death, leaves to go back to Paris, and then returns again after his own father's murder.

OPHELIA Daughter of Polonius, sister of Laertes, who is beloved of Hamlet.

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN Classmates of Hamlet's in Wittenberg whom Claudius summons to Elsinore to spy on Prince Hamlet.

FORTINBRAS King of Norway, who is bound to avenge his father's death by Danish forces.

OSRIC Affected courtier who plays a minor role as the King's messenger and as umpire of the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes.

VOLTIMAND AND CORNELIUS Danish courtiers who are sent as ambassadors to the court of Norway.

MARCELLUS AND BERNARDO Danish officers who guard the castle of Elsinore.

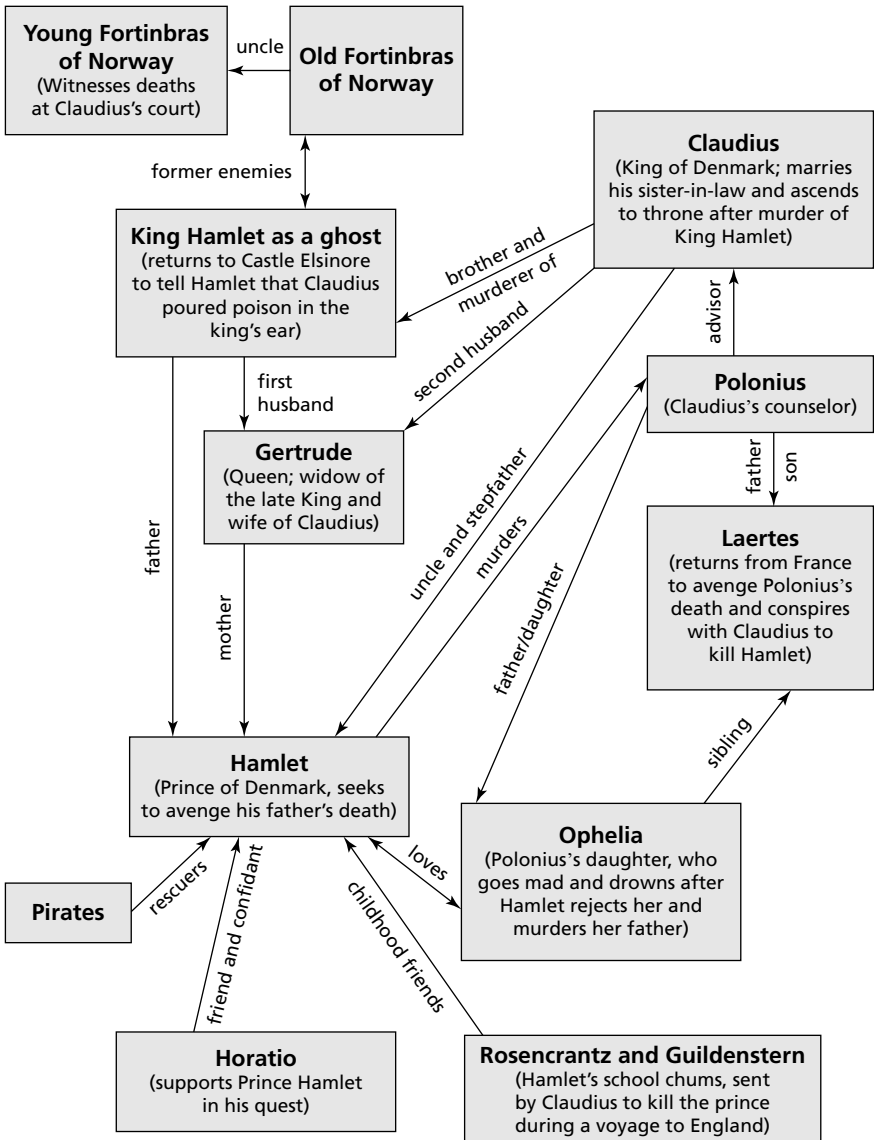
FRANCISCO Danish soldier who guards at the castle of Elsinore.

REYNALDO Young man whom Polonius instructs and sends to Paris to observe and report on Laertes's conduct.

PLAYERS (actors) A troupe of actors who put on a play at Hamlet's command at Elsinore Castle.

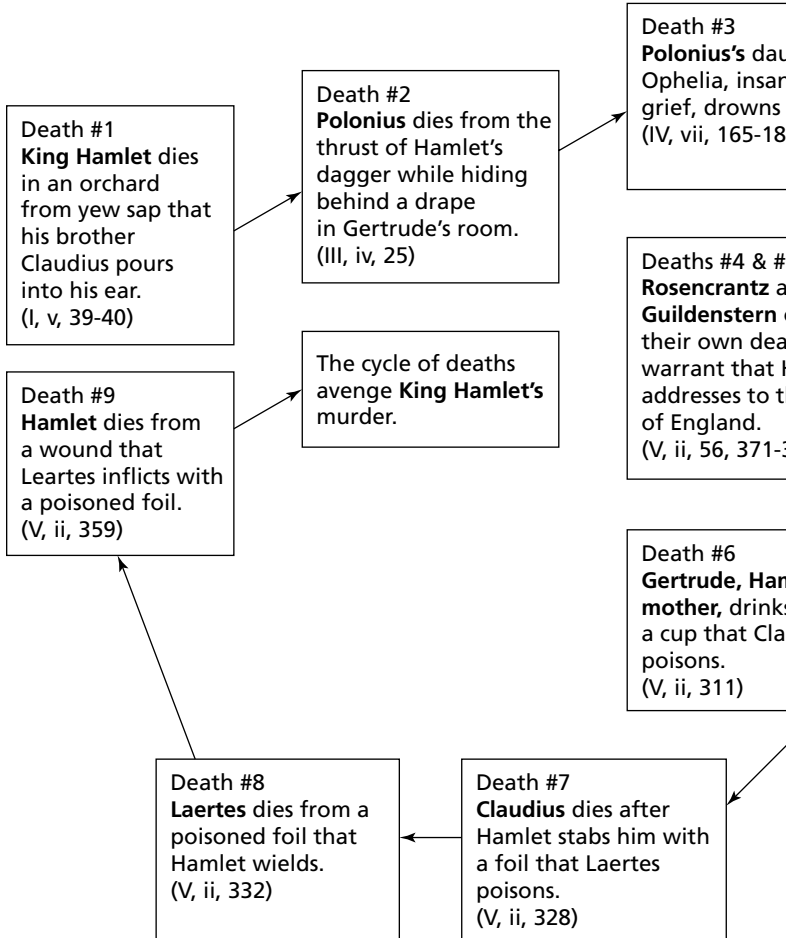
TWO CLOWNS (the Gravediggers) Two rustics (identified as clowns) who dig Ophelia's grave.

Character Map



Cycle of Death

One of Prince Hamlet's main motives is to avenge his father's murder, which causes the ensuing cycle of death. The graphic below outlines the sequence of deaths that spur the play's plot.





**Shakespeare's
Hamlet**