

Synopsis

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is home from school to mourn the death of his father, King Hamlet, who died two months earlier. Only a month after his death, Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, married the late king's brother, Claudius, and the two continue to reign in Denmark.

Shortly after, the ghost of the late King Hamlet appears to the soldiers and Hamlet's friend Horatio but disappears without speaking. Horatio describes the Ghost to Hamlet, who insists on seeing it for himself. When he is alone with Hamlet, the Ghost reveals that Claudius killed him. Hamlet promises to avenge his father's murder.

Meanwhile, Laertes, son of the King's advisor Polonius, is about to return to France. He bids farewell to his sister, Ophelia, warning her not to be swayed by Hamlet's attempts to woo her. Polonius gives Laertes a long-winded good-bye and orders Ophelia to cease all contact with Hamlet.

Hamlet begins acting strangely towards everyone in the castle. Claudius and Gertrude are greatly alarmed by this, but Polonius insists that the cause of Hamlet's apparent madness is Ophelia's rejection of him. Claudius and Polonius plot to spy on Hamlet in discussion with Ophelia. The conversation between the two is bitter, ending with Hamlet renouncing any love he ever had for Ophelia.

The King and Queen then ask Hamlet's friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to determine what is wrong with him. Hamlet quickly realizes that the royal couple set up the pair to spy on him. His friends confess to their assignments. In passing, they mention that a troupe of actors is at the palace. Hamlet decides to have the troupe stage a play similar to his father's murder. He will observe Claudius' reaction in order to determine his guilt.

The court watches the play, which depicts a murderer poisoning the king and marrying the queen. Enraged, Claudius orders the play to cease and everyone to leave. Once alone, Claudius kneels to pray, consumed

by guilt for his crime. Hamlet almost kills him but decides against it, afraid that if Claudius dies mid-prayer he will go to heaven.

Hamlet meets Gertrude in her room and an argument ensues. Hidden behind a curtain and afraid for Gertrude's well-being, Polonius shouts for help. Hamlet, thinking the hidden figure is Claudius, stabs Polonius. The Ghost reappears to Hamlet to refocus him on the task of killing Claudius.

On the King's command, Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern leave for England. While at sea, Hamlet learns that Claudius has sent a letter to the King of England with orders to kill Hamlet. Hamlet replaces these orders with letters requesting the executions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet then returns to Denmark.

Back at the palace, Ophelia goes mad with grief. Laertes returns and learns that Hamlet killed his father, Polonius. Claudius, determined to kill Hamlet, convinces Laertes to avenge Polonius' death by dueling Hamlet with a poisoned blade. Claudius will also poison Hamlet's wine. Gertrude arrives and announces that Ophelia has drowned.

Hamlet agrees to duel Laertes, thinking it is only for sport. Gertrude mistakenly drinks the poisoned wine and dies. Hamlet is struck by Laertes' poisoned sword, but manages to cut Laertes with the same blade. Laertes reveals Claudius' plot. Hamlet kills Claudius and, knowing he is dying, asks Horatio to tell his tale. Hamlet and Laertes reconcile. Prince Fortinbras of Norway enters and conquers Denmark, but honors the dead Hamlet.

William Shakespeare.
Hamlet, Prince of Denmark: A Tragedy. As it is now acted at the Theatres-Royal in Drury-Lane and Covent-Garden. London, 1776. Folger Shakespeare Library.

