

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark CHARACTERS Claudius, King of Denmark Hamlet, son of the last king, and nephew of the present one Horatio, friend of Hamlet Polonius, Minister of State Laertes, son of Polonius Marcellus, a guard Ghost of Hamlet's father A group of Actors Gertrude, Queen of Denmark and mother of Hamlet Ophelia, daughter of Polonius Less than two months after the sudden death of King Hamlet, Gertrude, Queen of Denmark, married his brother Claudius. This was judged by everyone at that time to be a strangely unwise or unfeeling act, or even worse. She compared the qualities of his noble mind, now weakened by the deep sadness that troubled him, to sweet bells, which are able to give most beautiful music but which, when played out of tune, produce only a rough and unpleasant sound. Hamlet was angry that she should give such a dear and respectful name as father to the murderer of his true father, and he replied, sharply, 'Mother, you have much offended my father.' But young Hamlet had strong suspicions that Claudius himself was the snake, and that the snake that had bitten his father now wore his crown. He would gladly have put him to death, but he feared the people, who liked Hamlet, and the queen, who, in spite of all her faults, loved her son dearly. Hamlet was a loving and gentle prince, and greatly admired for his many noble and princely qualities. Being of a most honourable character himself, he was greatly troubled by the shame of his mother's marriage; shame, and grief at his father's death, made him fall into a state of deep sadness. Although the loss of the crown was a bitter wound to this young prince, it was not this that troubled him and took away all his cheerful spirits – it was the fact that his mother had shown herself to be so forgetful of his father's memory. This in itself was a very improper and unlawful marriage, as they were such close relations, but it was made much worse by the speed with which it was done and by the unkingly character of the man whom she had chosen. As he was sleeping in his garden, which was always his custom in the afternoon, his faithless brother had stood over him, and poured into his ears a poisonous liquid that quickly killed him. Before Hamlet fell into this sad condition, he had dearly loved a beautiful girl called Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius, the king's chief minister. This made Hamlet realize that while that actor could put such great feeling into a story, and cry for Hecuba who had been dead for hundreds of years, he himself was so emotionless that he had let his revenge lie asleep all this time in dull forgetfulness. But when Lucianus, according to the story, came to poison Gonzago while he was asleep in his garden, Claudius was so nervous that he was unable to sit through the rest of the play. Wishing to know all that happened at this meeting, and thinking that Hamlet's mother might not tell him everything that Hamlet said, the king ordered old Polonius to hide behind the curtains in the queen's room; there, unseen, he could hear all their conversation. When he saw that it was Polonius, the father of Ophelia, whom he so dearly loved, he cried bitterly for what he had done. Knowing that their prisoner was the prince, and hoping that he would speak for them at court, they put Hamlet on shore at the nearest port in Denmark. It was this beautiful lady's funeral, attended by her brother Laertes, the king, the queen and the whole court, which was being performed when Hamlet arrived. He came out from where he stood and jumped into the grave where Laertes was, even madder than he. Laertes thought of Hamlet as the cause of his father's and his sister's death, and seized him by the throat as an enemy, until they were separated. He persuaded Laertes to call on Hamlet to see which of them was more skilful in a friendly sword fight. Hamlet chose a sword; he did not suspect Laertes of being disloyal, so he did not examine Laertes's weapon carefully. Hamlet still did not know the truth, but

he became more violent too and, in the struggle, exchanged his own weapon for Laertes's poisoned one. In this way he was able to prevent young Hamlet, the son of the buried king and his lawful heir, from becoming king. He had not even taken it off on the day his mother was married, and he could not be persuaded to join in any of the celebrations on what seemed to him a shameful day. His father (it seemed to him) looked at him so sadly, and appeared so exactly the same as when he was alive, that Hamlet could not help speaking to him. He said that it had been done by his own brother Claudius, as Hamlet had already suspected, in the hope of winning his wife and his crown. Nothing would live in his brain except the memory of what the ghost had told him and ordered him to do. He told the details of the conversation to no one except his dear friend Horatio, and he commanded both him and Marcellus to keep secret what they had seen that night. He feared that it would continue to have this effect, and that this might make his uncle suspicious, if the king suspected that Hamlet knew more of his father's death than he appeared to do. So from that time he decided to act as if he were really and truly mad. His dress, speech and behaviour became wild and strange, and he pretended to be a madman so excellently that the king and queen were both deceived. From that moment they were sure that the true cause of Hamlet's madness was love. Or if they were not there, Hamlet's mother was usually with her husband, and this stopped him from doing what he wanted to do. Also, the act of putting another creature to death was hateful and terrible to someone whose character was so naturally gentle as Hamlet's, and his sadness made him weak and anxious. He had especially liked to hear one of them make a sad speech describing the death of old Priam, King of Troy, and the grief of Hecuba, his queen. He decided that these actors should play something like the murder of his father in front of his uncle, and he would watch closely to see what effect it might have on the king; he could then make up his mind with more certainty if he were the murderer or not. The play showed how a certain Lucianus, a near relation of the duke, poisoned him in his garden to get his property, and how the murderer soon afterwards won the love of Gonzago's wife. It was the king's wish that the queen should send for Hamlet, so that she could inform her son how much his recent behaviour had displeased them both. Even though the faults of parents should be treated gently by their children, in the case of great crimes a son may speak with some unkindness to his own mother, as long as that unkindness is meant for her good and to turn her from her bad ways. Then Hamlet asked her how she could continue to live with Claudius and be a wife to the man who had murdered her first husband, and stolen his crown ... As he was speaking, the ghost of his father entered the room. Hamlet begged her not to think that it was his madness, rather than her own offences, which had brought his father's spirit to earth again. The death of Polonius gave the king an excuse to send Hamlet out of the kingdom. Pretending to provide for Hamlet's safety, so that he would not be punished for Polonius's death, Claudius put him on a ship to England in the care of two men from his court. He sent letters with these men to the English court (which at that time was ruled by Denmark), giving orders that Hamlet should be put to death as soon as he landed on English ground. Hamlet suspected some dishonesty, and found the letters secretly at night. The king, Hamlet's evil uncle, planned to use Laertes's grief and anger over the death of his father and Ophelia to destroy Hamlet. Instead of a sword without a point, which the laws demanded, Laertes used one with a point, and poisoned. But soon Laertes became angry, cut Hamlet with his poisoned weapon, and gave him his

death wound. With this he repaid Laertes for the stroke he had given him, so that Laertes was caught by his own dishonesty. Into this the evil king had put a deadly poison, to make sure of Hamlet's death if Laertes failed. Hamlet now suspected some evil, and ordered the doors to be shut while he tried to discover it. Feeling his life leaving him as a result of the wound which Hamlet had given him, Laertes told Hamlet about the poisoned point, and said that Hamlet had less than an hour to live, as no medicine could cure him. When Hamlet understood that his end was near, he suddenly turned on his false uncle and pushed the point of the poisoned sword into his heart. Then, feeling that his breath was failing, Hamlet turned to his dear friend Horatio, who had watched all these sad events. Satisfied, the noble heart of Hamlet stopped beating; and Horatio, with many tears, prayed for the spirit of this sweet prince. Claudius was in no way like her first husband in the qualities of his person or his mind. Some people even suspected that he had killed his brother, the last king, so that he could marry Gertrude and become King of Denmark himself. This unwise action of the queen had a very great effect on the young prince, who loved and honoured the memory of his dead father. He had been so loving and so gentle a husband to her, and she had always appeared to be a loving wife to him. He was most troubled by an uncertainty about the manner of his father's death. Claudius had made it known that a snake had bitten him. Those who saw it (and Hamlet's close friend Horatio was one) agreed about the time and manner of its appearance. It looked pale, with a face more of sorrow than of anger. Its beard was a dark silvery colour. When night came, he took his place with Horatio and Marcellus, one of the guards, in front of the palace where this spirit had been seen to walk. Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by Horatio, who said that the ghost was coming. Gradually he became braver and begged him to explain the reason why he had left his grave, where they had seen him quietly buried, to visit the earth and the moonlight again. Horatio and Marcellus tried to stop the young prince from following the ghost, for they were afraid that it might be some evil spirit which would try to harm him. But their warnings and advice could not change Hamlet's mind. When they were alone together, the spirit broke his silence, and told him that he was the ghost of Hamlet, his father, who had been cruelly murdered. Hamlet promised to obey the ghost's orders in all things, and the ghost disappeared. The terror which Hamlet had experienced at the sight of the ghost almost drove him mad. She, good lady, did not want to blame him for being false to her, so she persuaded herself that it was only the illness in his mind which made him take less notice of her than before. Although the business which Hamlet had in his mind -- the punishment of his father's murderer -- did not allow him to think of love, there were times when kind thoughts of Ophelia came to him. The queen certainly hoped that the beauty of Ophelia was the cause of his strangeness, and that her goodness would bring him back to his former way of life. But Hamlet's illness lay deeper than she thought and it could not be cured by love. While he was in this state of mind, some actors, who had often given Hamlet great pleasure in the past, came to the court. Hamlet welcomed his old friends and asked the actor if he would repeat that speech for him. He described the cruel murder of the weak old king, with the destruction of his people and city by fire; and he told of the mad grief of the old queen, running up and down the palace, with only a simple cloth on her head where a crown had been, and another to cover her body, where she had once worn a royal dress. The duke's name was Gonzago, and his wife's was Baptista. Hamlet sat very near him to watch his expressions. Hamlet saw the king

change colour at these words, and knew that it was hateful both to him and to the queen. Now Hamlet had seen enough to be satisfied that the words of the ghost were true. As soon as Hamlet came, his mother began to speak angrily about his bad behaviour. replied Hamlet. 'I wish I could forget. You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife; and you are my mother. When he pulled out the body, though, he found that it was not the king – it was Polonius, the old minister, who had hidden there as a secret listener. 'A bloody act, mother,' replied Hamlet, 'but not as bad as yours, when you killed a king and married his brother.' And the queen was bitterly ashamed that he was forcing her to look at her own soul, which she now saw was so black and evil. shouted the queen.