



What Happens in *Hamlet*

A tragedy by William Shakespeare

Outside the Danish castle at Elsinore, soldiers see a ghost that resembles their recently deceased King. They resolve to tell the King's heir, Hamlet. The dead King's brother Claudius has not only become the new King but has also married his brother's widow (and Hamlet's mother), Gertrude. After thanking everyone at court for going along with this unusual sequence of events, Claudius sends ambassadors to Norway to stop a planned invasion by young Fortinbras.

Outside the castle, Hamlet encounters the ghost of their dead King, who reveals that his death was a murder: he was secretly poisoned by his brother Claudius. The ghost tells Hamlet to take revenge. Hamlet, however, is not sure whether the ghost is real and to be trusted or is an invention of a troubled brain.

Polonius, an adviser to Claudius, has two children, Laertes and Ophelia. Laertes has secured permission to return to France. The family exchanges advice before Laertes leaves: Laertes tells Ophelia to be careful about pursuing a relationship with Hamlet, and Polonius shares many quotable words of wisdom with Laertes. Before leaving, Laertes offers Ophelia a final reminder to "remember well what I have said to you." This prompts Polonius to ask what this was about. Believing in the wisdom of Laertes' advice, Polonius instructs Ophelia to break things off with Hamlet.

Troubled by Hamlet's eccentric behaviour, Claudius sends for two of Hamlet's school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to try to find out what's the matter. Polonius believes the reason for Hamlet's strange behaviour is unrequited love for Ophelia. Polonius and Claudius decide to spy on a conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia. This conversation quickly turns into an emotional confrontation, with Hamlet speaking harshly to Ophelia who is left "most deject and wretched."

A troupe of players arrives at the court, and Hamlet asks them to perform a play in which a murder similar to that of Hamlet's father will be acted out onstage. Upon seeing the murder scene, Claudius abruptly ends the performance and storms off. This convinces Hamlet to believe the ghost. Distressed by this embarrassing scene, Gertrude sends for Hamlet for a confrontation. On the way to see Gertrude, Hamlet finds Claudius alone, apparently praying. Although this might seem a good opportunity to take revenge, Hamlet hesitates, not wanting to send Claudius to heaven. After Hamlet leaves, Claudius confesses a lack of sincerity that prevented genuine prayer.

Before Hamlet arrives in Gertrude's room, Polonius hides behind a tapestry to overhear the conversation. Realizing someone is there, Hamlet stabs Polonius through the fabric, mistakenly believing it to be Claudius; Hamlet's blow kills Polonius. Claudius decides to send Hamlet away to England, accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carry a secret request from Claudius to the English ruler: when Hamlet arrives, Hamlet is to be executed.

Ophelia has a breakdown because of Polonius' murder and Hamlet's banishment. Laertes returns, demanding revenge for Polonius's death, and sees Ophelia's state. Ophelia doesn't recognize Laertes and wanders off. Gertrude soon arrives with the news that Ophelia has drowned.

Horatio hears about Hamlet's escape and return to Denmark, while Claudius and Laertes plot Hamlet's death: they will invite Hamlet to a friendly fencing match with Laertes, who will secretly fence with a sword that is sharp instead of blunted. To ensure Hamlet's death, Laertes will put a powerfully lethal poison on the tip of the blade. Claudius also decides to put poison onto a pearl, to drop into a cup of wine for Hamlet.

Hamlet expresses some misgivings about the fencing match but accepts the challenge. When it looks like Hamlet will win the match, Gertrude raises a toast and then drinks from the cup that was meant for Hamlet. Laertes strikes with the poisoned sword while Hamlet's back is turned. Hamlet and Laertes fight in earnest, and during the scuffle, Hamlet wounds Laertes with the poisoned sword. Gertrude falls, and before dying realizes that Claudius poisoned the wine. Laertes confesses all to Hamlet, including the King's role in the plot. Laertes dies. Hamlet uses both the poisoned sword and the remains of the poisoned wine to kill the King. Hamlet dies after telling Horatio, "The rest is silence."

Questions for you to consider

- What sort of setting do you imagine for the play? Think about time, place, and stylistic qualities.
- Choose a character you find especially interesting. What part of their story do you want to explore? How do you imagine the character feels about the different events in the story?
- What did you find surprising about the events in the play? Which parts would you find most interesting to see on stage? Which events would you want to bring to life?

A note about our style

In the Discovery Zone resources, we've done our best to provide descriptions of the plays' characters and events that are as open as possible to your interpretations. We hope this will make room for you to identify with more characters and imagine the stories in ways that resonate for you.

To learn more about the characters in the play, see our Discovery Zone resource, *Who's Who in Hamlet*.