



Who's Who

in

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

The royal Danish court of Elsinore:

The Ghost appears in the likeness of the late King Hamlet. It reveals to Prince Hamlet the details of King Hamlet's murder and urges Hamlet to take revenge. The ghost is also seen by Marcellus, Bernardo and Horatio, but Hamlet is the only person who hears it speak.

Gertrude was married to King Hamlet and is Prince Hamlet's other parent. Shortly after King Hamlet's sudden death, Gertrude marries the King's sibling Claudius. Gertrude remains the queen and Claudius becomes king.

Prince Hamlet (referred to as 'Hamlet' from now on) is away at university when King Hamlet dies. Returning for the funeral, Hamlet is also in Denmark for Gertrude's wedding to Claudius. A ghost appears to Hamlet in the likeness of the dead King, revealing the murder and urging Hamlet to revenge.

Claudius has committed a secret fratricide (the murder of a sibling). Having killed the King, Claudius has taken the throne and married the queen. Fearing discovery, Claudius sends Hamlet to England as part of a plot to have Hamlet killed. When Hamlet returns to Denmark, Claudius joins Laertes in a second plot.

Polonius is Claudius' closest advisor at court and seems to spy on everyone. Polonius has two children, Ophelia and Laertes.

Ophelia seems to care a lot about Hamlet. Throughout the play other people tell Ophelia what to do, and sometimes characters treat Ophelia harshly. After Laertes leaves the country and Polonius is killed, Ophelia has a mental and emotional breakdown.

Laertes spends most of the play away in France, but upon hearing that Polonius has been killed, Laertes returns to take revenge.

Reynaldo is a servant hired by Polonius to spy on Laertes in France.

Barnardo and **Marcellus** are guards who keep watch on the castle at Elsinore. Before the play begins, they've twice seen the ghost of the dead King.

Francisco makes a brief appearance at the beginning of the play. Another guard on watch outside the castle, Francisco is "bitter cold" and "sick at heart".

Osric is a courtier who plays an important role near the end of the play. Osric delivers the King's invitation to Hamlet for an apparently friendly fencing match. During the match, Osric is the referee.

Voltemand and **Cornelius** are ambassadors, sent to negotiate with Norway. They're often cut from the play in performance.

The court, continued:

A pair of **Gravediggers** jokes around while preparing a grave that turns out to be for Ophelia.

A **Priest** oversees the brief funeral held for Ophelia.

Visitors to Elsinore:

Horatio is Hamlet's friend from university. A stranger at court, Horatio is the only person Hamlet confides in. At the end of the play, Horatio is left to tell Hamlet's story.

Rosencrantz and **Guildenstern** are friends of Hamlet's from childhood. Claudius uses them to discover the cause of Hamlet's troubling behavior and orders them to accompany Hamlet to England.

A traveling troupe of **Players** arrives at Elsinore Castle to perform a play. Hamlet asks them to prepare a special performance that re-enacts the murder of King Hamlet.

Fortinbras is Prince of Norway, passing through Denmark to invade Poland along with a **Captain** and **Soldiers** in the Norwegian army. These characters are sometimes cut from the play in performance.

An **Ambassador** from England brings news about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

There are also **Messengers**, **Servants**, and **Attendants**.

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.

For an overview of what these characters experience in the play, please see our Discovery Zone resource, *What Happens in Hamlet*.

Questions for you to consider

- Which characters are most interesting to you? Who do you want to know more about? What makes you want to know more?
- How would you distinguish between the residents of Elsinore and the visitors? What might the characters wear? How might they move? What might they care about? How is each group distinct, and yet part of the same play?
- As you continue to learn about the characters, think about how you might cast actors to play them. You could take a realistic approach, casting people you know. Or you could take a fantasy approach and include famous people. Who would your dream cast be?