



HAMLET (1600-1601)

Considered by many to be Shakespeare's boldest and most profound play. Questions over the succession of Elizabeth I's throne had created many uncertainties in England that are reflected in this play. Hamlet is a scholar and a melancholic, which, to the Elizabethans, meant someone who was very introspective and world-weary. The play is a revenge tragedy, a type of play that was especially popular with the Elizabethans. Characteristic qualities:

1. revenge of a relative's murder
2. appearance of a ghost
3. hesitancy or delay of the hero
4. the use of real or pretended insanity
5. Sensational use of horror (murder and gore onstage)

[Also: 6. Political intrigue in the court 7. tricks or devices to achieve revenge; 8. Suicide; 9. an able, scheming villain; 10. philosophical soliloquies]

All of these qualities are present in *Hamlet*. Hamlet's hesitation is linked to his melancholy. For example, even though the Ghost says that he is Hamlet's father, Hamlet worries that the ghost might actually be a trick of the devil.

There are three kinds of scenes: 1. Big, ceremonial scenes, 2. Domestic scenes concerning parents and their children, 3. Scenes in which the primary characteristic is Hamlet's philosophizing about life. The domestic scenes present the important theme of the relations of parents and children. Three parallel but contrasted families make up this strand of action: the Polonius group, the Fortinbras group, and the Hamlet group. In both F.'s and H.'s case, an uncle has filled the father's role. Both Fortinbras and Laertes serve as foils to Hamlet.

As the play opens, Hamlet is at the Danish court mourning the death of his father and trying to decide what to do. Fortinbras, whose father has also died is taking action to regain his father's lost honor (at defeat at H.Sr.'s hands)--his plan to attack Denmark has been foiled by Claudius. F.'s uncle is king now--Claudius told Norwegian king of F.'s plan. F. now decides to attack Poland. H. meets F. while F's army is crossing Denmark to Poland. F. Conquers Poland. At the end of the play as he is dying, Hamlet leaves Denmark to Fortinbras. Hamlet, Sr. had defeated Fortinbras, Sr. in F. Sr.'s greatest defeat. Ironically, by naming Fortinbras his successor, Hamlet not only restored the two Fortinbras' honor, but he also buried his own father's honor, which he had sworn to avenge.

As soon as Laertes hears of his father's death, he immediately returns from Paris to the court to avenge it. Laertes, however, is only concerned with outer appearances. His main complaint is that his father has had such a small funeral, without the proper honors. Once the king explains Hamlet's part in Polonius' death, Laertes volunteers to put poison on the tip of his sword for his duel with Hamlet. Laertes is not above dishonorably vindicating his honor.

CHARACTER IDENTIFICATION	
Hamlet	Prince of Denmark
Horatio	Hamlet's Friend

Claudius	King of Denmark, Hamle's uncle and stepfather
Ghost of Hamlet's father	(Hamlet, Sr.)
Gertrude	Hamlet's mother, now married to Claudius
Fortinbras	Prince of Norway
Polonius	Principal Secretary of State
Laertes	Polonius' son
Ophelia	Polonius' daughter
Rosencrantz, Guildenstern	Hamlet's school friends
Voltimand, Cornelius	Ambassadors to Norway
Reynaldo	Polonius' servant
Osric	a Fop (arranges duel between Laertes and Hamlet)
Grave digger	
Bernardo	Officer
Marcellus	Officer
Traveling players	
Francisco	Guard

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