

# Hamlet

by **William Shakespeare**

Presented by Paul W. Collins

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## Chapter One Returnings

**D**arkness surrounds the battlement high atop the King of Denmark's massive castle at Elsinore, as a bleak autumn night wears away near the close of the first thousand-year span of the Christian Lord's dominion.

An aging sentinel paces steadily in silence, occasionally peering out over the strait, then down toward roads into shadowed land beyond the stone fortress. Francisco is finishing his long watch. The royal court has been much troubled, he knows, by the king's death, the queen's remarriage—and a rumor of war.

As he approaches a tower, another soldier comes up to relieve him. "Who's there?" asks the dim figure, emerging from a torch-lit arch.

"Nay, answer *me!*" says the sentry. "Stand, and unfold yourself!" he challenges.

"Long live the king!" says Barnardo.

"You come most carefully upon your hour."

"Get thee to bed, Francisco."

"For this relief much thanks; 'tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart."

"Have you had quiet guard?"

"Not a mouse stirring."

"Well, good night. If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus, th'arrivals on my watch, bid them make haste," says Barnardo, walking away to begin his own set of rounds.

Francisco, weary, is already leaving. "I think I hear them," he grumbles. "*Stand, ho!* Who's there?"

Two young gentlemen are climbing the narrow steps into the flickering light. "Friends to this ground," says Horatio, a visitor at the palace. "And liegemen to the Dane," adds Marcellus, an officer of that king's guard.

"Give you good night," says Francisco, starting down.

"Farewell, honest soldier. Who hath relieved you?" asks Marcellus.

"Barnardo has my place. 'Give you good night." He disappears into the gloom below.

Marcellus calls, "*Holla!* Barnardo!"

As he hurries back, the sentinel asks, eagerly, "Say: what, is *Horatio* there?"

"A piece of him," the student answers dryly as they shake hands; he questions the value of their dead-of-night visit.

"Welcome, Horatio!" says Barnardo. "Welcome, good Marcellus."

"Well, has this thing appeared again tonight?" asks the lieutenant.

"I have seen nothing," Barnardo admits.

"Horatio says 'tis but our *fantasy*, and will not let belief take hold of him touching this dreaded sight, twice seen by us," says Marcellus. "Therefore I have entreated him along with us to watch the minutes of this night, so that if again the apparition come, he may approve our eyes, and speak to it."

Horatio is visiting from Germany, where he pursues advanced university studies in philosophy. "'Twill not appear," says the skeptic.

"Sit down a while," says Barnardo, "and let us once again assail your ears, that are so fortified against our story, what we have two nights *seen*."

"Well, sit we down," says Horatio, moving to a stone bench near the torch by the tower, "and let us hear Barnardo speak of this."

The soldier pulls his cloak closer, then begins. "Last night of all, when yond same star that's westward from the pole had made his course t'illuminate that part of heaven where now it burns, Marcellus and myself, the bell then beating one—"

“Peace! Break thee off!” cries the officer. They rise, amazed, as the faint image of a man in regal armor appears, hovering at the edge of the wavering light. “Look, where it comes again!”

“In the same figure, like the king that’s dead!” whispers Barnardo.

As the vision moves nearer, the lieutenant prompts his younger friend: “Thou art a scholar—speak to it, Horatio!”

“Looks it not like the *king*?” asks Barnardo. “Mark it, Horatio!”

“Most like!” breathes the student. “It harrows me with fear and wonder!”

Barnardo stares, wide-eyed. “It would be spoken to.”

“Question it, Horatio!” urges Marcellus.

Horatio steps forward. “What art thou, that usurp’st this time of night, together with that fair and warlike form in which the majesty of buried Denmark did sometimes march?”

“By heaven I charge thee, *speak!*”

At the word *heaven* the figure recoils. “It is offended,” Marcellus says. “See,” says Barnardo, “it stalks away!”

“Stay! Speak, *speak!*” demands Horatio. “I charge thee, *speak!*”

But the ghostly monarch vanishes into the darkness.

“’Tis gone, and will not answer,” says Marcellus.

“How now, Horatio!—you tremble and look pale! Is not this something more than *fantasy*?” demands Barnardo, his tale confirmed. “What think you on’t?”

“Before my God,” says Horatio, “I might not this believe without the sensible and true avouch of mine own eyes!”

“Is it not like the king?” asks Marcellus.

“As thou art to thyself! Such was the very armour he had on when he the ambitious Norway combated; so frowned he once, when, in an angry parle, he smote the sledded Pole on the ice. ’Tis strange!”

“Thus twice before, and just at this dead hour, with martial stalk hath he gone by our watch,” Marcellus tells him.

Horatio’s expression is grave. “In what particular thought to work I know not; but in the gross and scope of my opinion, this bodes some strange eruption to our state!”

Marcellus concurs. “Now, sit down and tell me, he that knows, why this same strict and most observant watch so nightly toils the subject of the land.” Vigilant horsemen ride along the shore, and soldiers at guard posts continually observe the main highways—sentinels all. “And why such daily cast of brazen *cannon*, and foreign mart for implements of *war*?—why such impress of *shipwrights*, whose sore task does not divide the Sunday from the week?”

“What might be toward, that this sweaty haste doth make the night joint-labourer with the day? Who is’t that can inform me?”

“That can I,” says Horatio. The soldiers lean closer. “At least, as the whisper goes.

“Our last king, whose image even but now appeared to us, was, as you know, by King Fortinbras of Norway dared to the *combat*,”—a challenge in chivalry, “thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride.

“In which our valiant King Hamlet—for so this side of our known world esteemed him—did *slay* this Fortinbras, who, by a sealèd compact well ratified by law and heraldry, did *forfeit* with his life all those his lands which he stood seized of to the conqueror.

“But now, sir, *Prince* Fortinbras, of unprovèd mettle hot and full, hath in the skirts of Norway here and there sharked up a list of landless resolute, for food and diet, to some enterprise that hath a *stomach*”—daring—“in’t. Which is no other, as it doth well appear unto our state, but to *recover* from us, by strong hand and terms compulsory, those foresaid lands so by his father lost!

“And that, I take it, is the main motive of our preparations, the source of this our watch, and the chief head of this *post* haste and *rummage* in the land!”

Barnardo nods. "I think it be no other but e'en so! It may well sort that this portentous figure, that comes armèd through our watch so like the king, *was* and *is* the question of these wars!"

"A mote it is to trouble the *mind's* eye," says Horatio. He thinks. "In the most high and palmy state of Rome, a little ere the mightiest Julius fell, the graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted *dead* did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets!—at stars with *trains of fire*, and dews of *blood*, disasters in the *sun!* And the moist star upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands"—the moon—"was sick almost as doomsday with *eclipse!*"

"And even like the precurse of fearèd events, as harbingers preceding still the Fates, and prologue to the omen coming on, have heaven and earth remonstrated together unto our climates and countrymen—

"But, soft—*behold!*" He jumps to his feet. "*Lo*, where it *comes again!*"

As the royal warrior approaches, Horatio steels himself. "I'll cross it, though it blast me!" He confronts the figure. "*Stay*, illusion! If thou hast any sound or use of voice, speak to me! If there be any *good* thing to be done that may do ease to thee, and grace to me, *speak* to me!"

Silence.

Horatio tries again: "If thou art privy to thy country's *fate*, which perhaps foreknowing may avoid, *oh, speak!* Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life extorted treasure in the womb of earth, for which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death, *speak* of it! *Stay*, and *speak!*"

The men hear, faintly, the crowing of a distant rooster. The ghost again retreats along the battlement.

Horatio points. "*Stop* it, Marcellus!"

"Shall I strike at it with my partisan?" asks the soldier, brandishing his spear.

"*Do*, if it will not stand!"

The men hurry along the parapet. "*'Tis here!*" shouts Barnardo. "*'Tis here!*" cries Horatio.

"*'Tis gone,*" says Marcellus, looking around. "We do wrong it, being so majestic, to offer it the show of violence; for it is, as the air, invulnerable, and our vain blows malicious mockery!"

"It was about to *speak*, when the cock crew," says Barnardo.

"And then it *started*—like a *guilty* thing upon a fearful summons," notes Horatio. "I have heard that the cock, trumpet to the morn, doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat awake the god of day—and at his warning, the fugitive and erring *spirit*, whether in sea or fire, in earth or air, hies to its confine—and of the truth herein, this present object made probation!"

Marcellus nods. "It faded on the crowing of the cock. Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated, the bird of dawning singeth *all night long*; and then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad! The nights are wholesome then: no planets strike, no fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm, so hallowed and so gracious is the time."

"So have I heard, and do in part believe it," says Horatio; whatever it should be, Christmastide has hardly been free of crime. "But, look, the morn in russet mantle clad walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.

"Break we our watch up, and by my advice, let us impart what we have seen tonight unto young Hamlet—for, upon my life, this spirit, silent to us, will speak to *him!* Do you consent we shall acquaint him with it, as needful in our loves, fitting our duty?"

"Let's do't, I pray!" says Marcellus. "And I this morning know where we shall find him most conveniently."

The prince, who intends to return to college in Germany, has been summoned to the king's council.

**I**n the throne room just after daybreak, Prince Hamlet, son of the late King Hamlet, stands among the nobles, courtiers and attendants assembled before Claudius, recently crowned as Danish sovereign, and his bride, Queen Gertrude—the prince's mother. With them on the dais are the king's chief counselor, Lord Polonius, and his son, Laertes.

“Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s death the memory be green,” the king begins, “and though it us befitted to bear our hearts in *grief*, and our whole kingdom to be contracted in one brow of woe, yet *discretion* hath fought with nature so far that we with *wisest* sorrow think on him together with remembrance of *ourselves*.

“Therefore our sometime sister-in-law, now our *queen*, the imperial jointress to this warlike state, have we—as ’twere with a defeated *joy*, with an auspicious yet a *dropping* eye, with *mirth* in funeral and with *dirge* in marriage, in equal scale weighing delight and dole—taken to *wife*.” He smiles at the court. “Nor have we herein barred your better wisdoms, which have freely gone with this affair along. For all, our thanks!

“Now follows what you know: young *Fortinbras*—holding a weak supposal of our worth, or thinking by our late, dear brother’s death our state to be disjoint and out of frame—co-leaguèd with a dream of his advantage!—hath not failed to pester us with messages importuning the *surrender* of those lands lost by his father, with all bonds of law, to our most-valiant brother.

“So *much!* For *him!*” he says, scornfully.

He turns to Polonius, who hands him a document. “Now, as for ourself, and for this time of meeting, thus much the business is: we have here written to the uncle of young Fortinbras, the *King* of Norway, who, impotent and bed-ridden, scarcely *hears* of this, his nephew’s purpose, to *suppress his further gait*—as the levies, the lists and full proportions are all made out of his subjects.

“And we here dispatch you, good Cornelius, and you, Voltemand, as bearers of this greeting to old Norway. Farewell, and let your *haste* commend your duty!”

The courtiers bow. “In that and all things will we show our duty,” says Cornelius, taking the written demand.

“We doubt it nothing; heartily fare well!” says Claudius, as they depart.

“And now, *Laertes*,” he says, beaming, “what’s the news with you? You told us of some suit; what is’t, Laertes? You cannot speak in reason to the *Dane* and *waste* your voice! What wouldst thou beg, Laertes, that shall not be my *offer*, not thy asking? The head is not more native to the heart, the hand more instrumental to the mouth, than is the throne of Denmark to thy father! What wouldst thou have, Laertes?”

The proud young gentleman answers, “My dread lord, your leave and favour to return to *France*, from whence willingly I came to Denmark to show my duty in your coronation. Yet now, I must confess, that duty done, my thoughts and wishes bend again toward France—but bow them to your gracious leave and pardon.”

“Have you your father’s leave? What says Polonius?”

“He hath, my lord, wrung from me my slow leave by laboursome petition,” Lord Polonius replies, “and at last upon his will I sealed my hard consent. I do beseech you, give him leave to go.”

“*Take* thy fair hour, Laertes!—time be thine,” says the king, “and thy best graces spend it at thy will!” Laertes smiles and bows, eager to resume the pleasures of Paris.

The king turns to the prince. “But now, my nephew Hamlet, and my *son*,—”

- *A little more than kin—and less than kind*, thinks the prince, who is clad in black mourning clothes.

“—how is it that the clouds still hang on you?” asks Claudius.

Hamlet shakes his head. “Not so, my lord; I am too much i’ the *sun*.”

Queen Gertrude sees his irritation—especially at *son*. “Good Hamlet, cast thy *nighted* colour off, and let thine eye look like a *friend* on Denmark! Do not for ever with thy veiled lids seek for thy noble father in the dusk! Thou know’st ’tis common: all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity.”

“Aye, madam, it is *common*.”

The queen, ignoring the implied comment on her facile reasoning, asks, “If it be, why seems it so particular with thee?”

“Seems, madam? Nay, it *is*; I know not ‘*seems*.’ ’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother, nor customary suits of solemn black, nor windy suspiration of forcèd breath—no, nor the fruitful river in the eye, nor the dejected ’havior of the visage, together with all *forms, moods, shapes* of grief, that can denote me truly. Those indeed *seem*, for they are actions that a man might *play*. But I have that within which *surpasseth* show, those but the trappings and the suits of woe.”

The new king is annoyed. “’Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet, to give these mourning duties to your father,” says Claudius. “But, you must know, your *father* lost a father; that father lost *his*, and the survivors bowed in filial obligation to do obsequious sorrow for some term. But to *persevere* in obstinate condolment is a course of impious *stubbornness*—’tis *unmanly* grief! It shows a will most incorrect to heaven, a heart unfortified, a mind impatient, an understanding simple and unschooled! For what we know *must be*, and is as common as any of the most vulgar things to sense—why should we in our peevish opposition take it to heart?

“*Fie!* ’Tis a fault to Heaven, a fault against the dead, a fault to Nature!—to Reason *most* absurd, whose common theme is death of fathers, and who hath crièd, from the first corpse till he that died today, ‘This must be so!’

“We pray you, throw to earth this unavailing woe,” says the king, shifting to kindly warmth, “and think of us as of a *father!* For let the world take note: you are the most immediate to our throne, and with no less nobility of love than that which father bears his dearest son do I impart toward *you!*”

“As for your intent in going back to school in Wittenberg, it is most retrograde to our desire, and we beseech you: bend you to remain *here*, in the cheer and comfort of our eye, our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our *son!*”

The prince’s glowering stare is not encouraging. The queen quickly intervenes. “Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet, I pray thee!” says Gertrude. “Stay with *us*; go not to Wittenberg!”

Hamlet bows—to his mother. “I shall in all my best obey you, Madam.”

“Why, ’tis a loving and a fair reply,” says the pragmatic king. “Be as *ourselves* in Denmark!” he tells the prince. “Madam, come! This gentle and unforcèd accord of Hamlet sits smiling to my heart! In grace whereof, no jocund health that *Denmark* drinks today but the great *cannon* to the *clouds* shall toll!—and the king’s rouse may the heavens all bruit *again*, re-speaking earthly thunder!” He takes her by the hand. “Come, away!”

Soon the royal party and court have departed in high spirits, leaving Hamlet alone to contend further with his grief—and his angry thoughts.

*Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!—or that the Everlasting had not fixèd his canon ’gainst self-slaughter!*

*Oh, God! God! how weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world! Fie on’t! Ah, fie!—’tis an unweeded garden that grows to seed: things rank and gross in nature possess it merely!*

*That it should come to this! But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two!—so excellent a king that was, to this, Hyperion to a satyr!*

*And so loving to my mother that he might not beteem the winds of heaven visit her face too roughly!*

*Heaven and earth, must I remember? Why, she would hang on him as if increasing appetite had grown by what it fed on! Yet within a month—let me not think on’t; frailty, thy name is woman!—a little month, or ere those shoes were cold with which she followed my poor father’s body, like Niobe all tears—why she, even she—oh, God, a beast that lacks discourse or reason would have mourned longer!—married with my uncle!—my father’s brother, but no more like my father than I to Hercules!*

*Within a month, ere yet the salt in most unrighteous tears had left off flushing her gallèd eyes, she married! Oh, most wicked speed, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets!*

*It is not, nor it cannot come to good!*

*But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.*

As the prince broods, three men enter the hall. "Hail to Your Lordship!" calls Horatio.

Hamlet turns to greet them. "I am glad to see you well! *Horatio*, or I do forget myself."

"The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever."

"Sir, my good *friend*—I'll exchange that name with you!" says Hamlet, smiling. "And what make you from Wittenberg, Horatio?" He nods to the lieutenant. "Marcellus?"

"My good lord," the officer confirms, bowing.

"I am very glad to see you," says the prince, adding, to Barnardo, "Good day, sir.

"But what, in faith, takes you from Wittenberg?"

"A *truant* disposition, good my lord."

Hamlet chuckles. "I would not hear your enemy say so; nor shall you do mine ear that violence, making it truster of your own report against yourself! I know you are no *truant*. But what is your affair in Elsinore? We'll teach you to *drink deep* ere you depart!" They have shared good times, and many a heady discussion, in Germany.

"My lord, I came to see your father's funeral."

"I pray thee, do not mock me, fellow student," says Hamlet. "I think it was to see my mother's *wedding*."

"Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon."

"Thrift, *thrift*, Horatio!—the funeral's baked meats did coldly furnish forth the *marriage* tables!

"Would I had met my direst foe in heaven ere ever I had seen that day, Horatio." He looks toward the throne. "My *father*," he says sadly. "Methinks I see my father."

The others exchange glances. "Where, my lord?"

"In my mind's eye, Horatio."

The visiting student looks around the room, remembering. "I saw him here. He was a goodly king."

"He was a *man*, take him for all in all! I shall not look upon his like again," says Hamlet.

Horatio moves closer. "My lord, I think *I* saw him *yesternight*!"

"Saw? Who?"

"My lord, the *king*—your father!"

"The king my *father*!"

"Season your admiration for a while with an attent ear, till I may deliver, upon the witness of these gentlemen, this marvel to you!"

"For God's love, let me *hear*!"

"Two nights together had these men, Marcellus and Barnardo, on their watch in the dead waste at the middle of night been thus encountered: a figure like *your father*, armored by point exactly, *cap-à-pé*,"—head to foot, "appears to them, and with solemn march goes slow and stately by them!" says Horatio. "Thrice he walked before their surprised and fear-oppressed eyes, within his truncheon's length, whilst they—distilled almost to jelly by the action of *fear*!—stand silent, and speak not to him!

"This to me in dreadful secrecy they did impart; and I *with* them the third night kept the watch—where *the apparition comes*!—as they had delivered, both time and *form* of the thing, each word made true and good!"

"But where was this?" asks Hamlet.

"My lord, upon the platform where we watchèd," says Marcellus.

"Did you not *speak* to it?"

"My lord, I *did*," says Horatio, "but answer made it none. Yet once methought it lifted up its head, and did address itself to motion like as it *would* speak; but just then the morning cock crew loud, and at the sound it shrunk in haste away, and vanished from our sight."

Hamlet frowns. "'Tis very strange!"



“As I do live, my honoured lord, ’tis *true!*” says Horatio, “and we did think it writ down in our duty to let you know of it.”

“Indeed, *indeed*, sirs!” says Hamlet. “But this troubles me. Hold you the watch tonight?”

“We do, my lord,” says the soldier.

Hamlet thinks, picturing the specter. “*Armored*, say you?”

“My lord, from head to foot.”

“Then saw you not his *face?*”

“Oh, *yes*, my lord,” says Horatio. “He wore his visor up.”

“What, looked he frowningly?”

“A countenance more in *sorrow* than in anger.”

“Pale, or red?”

“Nay, very *pale*.”

“And fixed his eyes upon you?”

“Most constantly!”

“I would *I* had been there!” says Hamlet earnestly.

“It would have much amazed you!”

“Very like, very like. Stayed it long?”

“While one with moderate haste might tell out a hundred.”

“Longer, *longer*,” says Barnardo.

“Not when I saw’t,” Horatio insists.

“His beard was grizzled, no?”

“It was as I have seen it in his life,” says Horatio, “a sable silvered.”

Hamlet has decided. “*I* will watch tonight. Perchance ’twill walk again.”

“I warrant it *will!*” says Horatio.

“If it assume my noble father’s person, I’ll *speak* to it, though *Hell itself* should gape and bid me hold my peace! I pray you all, if you have hitherto concealed this sight, let it be tenable in your silence still; and whatsoever else shall hap *tonight*, give it an understanding, but no tongue. I will requite your loves.

“So, fare you well. Upon the platform ’twixt eleven and twelve I’ll visit you.”

“Our duty to Your Honour,” says Horatio, bowing.

“Be your loves as mine to you,” replies the prince. “Farewell.”

The others depart; and again Hamlet is left alone with his thoughts.

*My father’s spirit—in armor! All is not well—I suspect some foul play!*

*Would the night were come! Till then sit still, my soul!*

*Foul deeds will rise, though all the earth o’erwhelm them, to men’s eyes!*

## Chapter Two Partings

That afternoon in a room of Lord Polonius’s quarters in the castle, his son is preparing to sail for France, and the resumption of his sensual student life. “My necessaries are embarkèd. Farewell! And, Sister, as the winds give benefit, and convoy is assistant, do not sleep but let me hear from you!” he tells Ophelia, who is two years younger.

“Do you doubt that?” she asks, smiling.

Laertes regards her with concern. “As for Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour, hold it as but a *fashion*, a *toy* in the blood—a *primary* violet in the youth of *nature*: forward, not *permanent*; sweet, not *lasting*—the perfume and suppliance of a *minute*, no more.”

“No more but so?”

“*Think* it no more. For nature, ascendant, does not grow alone in *thews* and *bulk*, but as this temple waxes,”—body grows, “the inward service of the *mind and soul* grows wide withal.

Perhaps he loves you *now*, and now no soil nor cautel doth besmirch the virtue of his will; but you must *fear*—his *greatness* weighed, his will is not his own! For he himself is subject to his birth: he may not, as unvalued persons do, carve for himself; for on his choice depends the safety and health of this *whole state*, and therefore must his choice be circumscribed unto the voice and yielding of that body whereof he is the head.

“And if he says he *loves* you, it befits your wisdom to believe it only so far as he in his particular act and place may give his saying *deed*—which is no further than the main voice of *Denmark* goes withal.

“Then weigh what loss your *honour* may sustain, if with too credent ear you hear his songs, or lose your heart—or your chaste treasure open to his unmastered importunity! *Fear* it, Ophelia, *fear* it, my dear sister, and keep you in the rear of your affection, out of the shot and danger of desire! The *chariest* maid is prodigal enough if she unmask her beauty to the *moon*!

“*Virtue itself*’scapes not calumnious strokes! The canker galls the infants of the spring”—buds, “too oft before their buttons be disclosed, and in the morn and liquid dew of *youth*, contagious blastments are most imminent!

“Be *wary* then; best safety lies in fear! Youth to *itself* rebels, though none else near!”

“I shall the effect of this good lesson keep, as watchman to my heart,” Ophelia promises. “But, good my brother,” she adds, raising an eyebrow, “do not, as some ungracious *pastors* do, show me the steep and thorny way to heaven, whiles, like a puffed and reckless *libertine*, himself the primrose path of dalliance treads, and recks not his own rede!”

“Oh, fear me not,” says Laertes glibly, buckling the straps of a travel case. He looks to the door. “I stay too long—and here my father comes.” He sighs. “‘A *double* blessing is a double *grace*’ . . . ‘Occasion *smiles* upon a second leave.’” Ophelia laughs; they must hear another round of fatherly counsel.

Lord Polonius hurries in. “Yet *here*, Laertes? *Aboard, aboard*, for shame!” he chides. “The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail, and you are stayed for!” He kisses his son’s cheek. “There—my blessing with thee!

“And these few precepts in thy memory look thou character,” the old counselor tells his son. “Give thy thoughts no tongue, nor any unproportioned thought its act.

“Be thou *familiar*, but by no means vulgar. Those friends thou hast in their adoption tried, grapple them to thy soul with hoops of *steel*; but do not dull thy palm with entertainment of each new-hatched, unfledged comrade.

“Beware of entrance to a quarrel; but being *in*, bear’t so the opposèd may *beware* of thee!

“Give every man thine *ear*, but few thy voice; take each man’s opinion, but reserve thy judgement.”

Polonius raises a forefinger for emphasis. “Costly be thy habit as thy purse can buy, but not expressed in fancy—*rich*, not gaudy. For the *apparel* oft proclaims the man—and they in France of the best rank and station are most of all selective, and chiefly generous in *that*.

“Neither a borrower nor a lender be: for loan oft loses both itself *and* friend, and borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.

“This above all: to thine own self be *true*! Then it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not be false to *any* man.

“*Fare* well!”—eat well. “My blessings *season* this in thee!”

Laertes smiles at the homely jest. “Most humbly do I take my leave, my lord.”

Polonius feels tears welling. “The time invites you. Go . . . your servants ’tend!”

“Farewell, Ophelia,” says Laertes, “and remember well what I have said to you!”

“’Tis in my memory *lockèd*,” she replies, “and you yourself shall keep the key of it!”

“*Farewell!*” he says, and leaves them, bound for Paris.

Polonius asks, as they watch him go, “What is’t, Ophelia, he hath said to you?”

“So please you, something touching the Lord Hamlet.”

“Marry, well bethought! ’Tis told me he hath very oft of late given *private* time to you, and you have of your audience been most *free* and *bounteous*. If it be so—as so ’tis put to me, and that by way of *caution*—I must tell you: you do not understand yourself so clearly as it behoves my daughter, and your honour!

“What is between you? Give me up the *truth*.”

Ophelia flushes; she may not tell everything, but she does not lie. “He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders of his affection to me.”

“*Affection!* You speak like a green girl, unsifted in such perilous circumstance! Do you *believe* his ‘tenders,’ as you call them?”

“I do not know, my lord, what I should think.” Her brother’s warnings surprised her.

“Marry, I’ll *teach* you! Think yourself a *baby*, that you have ta’en for *true pay* these tenders which are *not sterling!* Tender *yourself* more dearly, or—not to crack the winding of the poor phrase, running it thus—you’ll tender me a fool!”

Ophelia protests, “My lord, he hath importuned me with love in *honourable* fashion,—”

“*Aye—‘fashion’* you may call it!—go to, *go to!*”

“—and hath given *countenance* to his speech, my lord, with almost all the holy vows of heaven!”

“*Aye, springes*”—traps—“to catch woodcocks!” The graybeard’s eyes narrow. “I do know, when the blood burns, how prodigally the soul lends a tongue *vows!* These *blazes*, daughter—giving more *heat* than light, extinct in *both* even as their promise is a-making—you must not take for *fire!* From this time on be somewhat *scanter* with your maiden presence; set your entreatments at a higher rate”—price—“than a command to *parley!*”

“As for Lord Hamlet, believe so much in him as that he is *young*, and with a longer tether may *he* walk than may be given you!

“In few, Ophelia, do not believe his *vows!*—for they are brokers not of that dye which their vestment shows, but mere implorators of *unholy* suits, breathing like *sanctified* and *pious* bawds, the better to beguile!

“This is for all: in plain terms, I would not, from this time forth, have you so squander any moment’s leisure as to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet!

“*Look to ’t*, I charge you; come your ways!”

“I shall obey, my lord,” says Ophelia dutifully—and doubtfully.

Late that night, Hamlet walks along the castle’s high, dark battlements with Horatio and Marcellus. “The air bites shrewdly,” he notes. “It is very cold!”

“It is a nipping and an eager air,” says Horatio, rubbing his arms for warmth.

“What hour now?”

“I think it lacks of twelve,” says Horatio.

“No, it is struck.”

“Indeed? I heard it not. Then it draws near the season wherein the spirit held his wont to walk.” They hear, echoing from the open courtyard below, a blaring of trumpets and the resonant boom of a cannon. “What does this mean, my lord?” Horatio is from Copenhagen, ten leagues south.

“The king doth wake tonight, and takes his rouse, keeps wassail and the swaggering up-spring reels,” says Hamlet, of the drinking and dancing. “And, as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down, the kettledrum and trumpet thus bray out the *triumph* of his *pledge*,” he adds sourly.

“Is it a custom?”

“Aye, marry, is’t; but to my mind, though I am native here and to the manner born, it is a custom more honoured in the *breach* than the observance,” says the prince. “This heavy-headed revel makes us traduced east and west, and taxed by other nations: they clepe us *drunkards*, and

with swinish phrase soil our addition. And indeed it takes from our achievements, though performed at height, the *pith and marrow* of our attribute.”

He muses, looking down into the torchlighted enclosure. “So it oft chanceth in particular *men*: by some vicious mode of nature in them—some o’er-growth of perplexity breaking down the pales and forts of reason, or some habit that too much o’er-leavens from plausible matter—these men—carrying the stamp of *one defect*, bearing Nature’s livery, or Fortune’s star, for all their virtues else—be they as pure in grace as finite Man may undergo, shall in the general censure”—popular estimation—“take corruption from that particular fault.

“The *dram of evil* doth all the noble substance endowt, often to its own disgrace.”

The men listen to the revelry, and hear the cannon fire again.

Then—“*Look, my lord—it comes!*” cries Horatio.

The others turn to stare, as an ominous form emerges from the gloom.

“Angels and ministers of grace *defend* us!” murmurs Hamlet. But he steps forward and challenges the apparition: “Be thou a spirit of *health* or *goblin damned*—bring with thee airs from *heaven* or blasts from *hell*—be thy intents wicked or charitable—thou comest in such a questionable shape that I will speak to thee!

“I’ll call thee *Hamlet!*—*king, father, royal Dane!*

“Oh, *answer* me!”

But the armored king, eyes fixed on the prince, is silent.

“Let me not burn in ignorance,” says Hamlet, “but tell why thy canonized bones, inured in death, have burst their cerements!—why the sepulchre wherein we saw thee quietly hallowed hath opened its ponderous and marble jaws to cast thee up again!

“What may this *mean*, that thou, dead corpse again in complete steel, revisit’st thus the glimpses of the moon, making night hideous, and we fools of nature so horribly to shake our disposition with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?

“*Say!*—why *is* this? *Wherefore?*” he implores. “What should we *do?*”

Horatio whispers: “It beckons you to go away with it, as if it some impartment did desire to *you alone!*”

Says Marcellus, “Look with what courteous action it waves you to a more removed ground! But do not go with it!” he warns.

Horatio concurs. “No, by no means!”

“It will not speak here,” Hamlet realizes. “Then I will follow it.”

“Do *not*, my lord!” cries Horatio, alarmed.

“Why, what should be the fear? I do not set my *life* at a *pin’s* fee!—and as for my soul, what can it do to *that*, being a thing immortal as itself? It waves me forth again. I’ll follow it.”

“What if it tempt you toward the *flood*, my lord?” asks Horatio, “to the dreadful summit of the cliff that beetles o’er its base into the sea, and there assumes some other, *horrible* form which might deprive your sovereignty of reason, and draw you into *madness?*”

“Think of it!” he pleads. “The very *place*, without more motive, puts toys of *desperation* into every brain that looks down so many fathoms to the sea, and hears it roar beneath!”

“It waves me still! *Go on,*” Hamlet tells the ghost, “I’ll follow thee.”

Marcellus tries to restrain him. “You shall not go, my lord!”

“Hold off your hands!” the prince commands.

“Be *ruled!*—you shall not *go!*”

“My fate cries out, and makes each petty artery in this body as hardy as the Nemean *lion’s* sinew!” says Hamlet defiantly. “Still am I called... *Unhand me*, gentlemen!—by heaven, I’ll make a ghost of him that frets me! I say *away!*”

“*Go on,*” he tells the spirit, “I’ll follow thee.”

The two move away along the dark parapet, and soon are out of the others’ sight and hearing. Horatio peers after his friend, dismayed. “He waxes desperate with imagination!”

“Let’s follow! ’Tis not *fit* thus to obey him!”

“Have after! To what issue will this come?”

“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” mutters Marcellus.

“Heaven will direct it,” says the young philosopher; but he starts forward, warily, along the stone’s well worn path.

“Aye, let’s follow him,” says the stalwart soldier, as they edge along, slowly and carefully, after the prince.

A way from torches, on a ramp of the sentinels’ high, moonlit platform, Hamlet again addresses the luminous figure. “Where wilt thou lead me? *Speak*; I’ll go no further!”

“*Mark* me!” demands the specter.

“I will!”

“My hour is almost come when I to sulphurous and tormenting *flames* must render up my self—”

“Alas, poor ghost!”

“*Pity* me not, but lend thy serious *hearing* to what I shall unfold!”

“*Speak*; I am bound to hear.”

“So art thou to *revenge*, when thou shalt hear!”

“What?”

“I am thy father’s *spirit*, doomed for a certain term to walk the night—and for the day confinèd to *fast in fires* till the foul crimes done in my days of nature are *burnt and purged away!*”

“But that I am forbid to tell the secrets of my prison-house, I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would *harrow up thy soul!*—*freeze* thy young blood!—make thy two eyes, like stars, *start from their spheres!*—thy knotted and combinèd locks to part, and each particular hair to *stand on end*, like quills upon the fretful porpentine! But this eternal blazing must not be to ears of flesh and blood.

“*List*, Hamlet, oh, *list!* If thou didst ever thy dear father love,—”

“Oh, God!”

“—*revenge* his foul and most unnatural *murder!*”

“*Murder!*”

“Murder most foul, as in the best it is—but this *most* foul, *strange* and *unnatural!*”

“Haste me to know’t,” cries Hamlet, “that I, with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love may sweep to my *revenge!*”

“I find thee apt,” says the ghost. “And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed that roots itself in ease on *Lethe’s* wharf, wouldst thou not stir in *this!*”

“Now, Hamlet, *hear*: ’tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard, a *serpent* stung me; so, the whole ear of Denmark is by a forgèd process of my death *rankly abused!*”

“But *know*, thou noble youth: the serpent that did sting thy father’s life *now wears his crown!*”

“Oh, my prophetic soul! My *uncle!*”

“*Aye*, that *incestuous*, that adulterate *beast*, with witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—*oh*, *wicked* wit and gifts, that have the power so to *seduce!*—won to his shameful *lust* the will of my most *seeming*-virtuous queen!

“Oh, Hamlet, what a falling-off was there from *me*, whose love was of such dignity that it went hand in hand even with the *vow* I made to her in marriage! And to *decline* upon a wretch whose natural gifts were but *poor* to those of mine!

“*Virtue* will never be movèd, though lewdness court it in a *shape* of heaven; but *lust*, though to a radiant *angel* linked, will sate itself in a celestial bed, and prey on *garbage!*”

“But, *soft!*—methinks I scent the *morning* air! *Brief* let me be!

“Sleeping within my orchard, my custom always of the afternoon—upon my secure hour *thy uncle* stole with juice of cursèd hebenon in a *vial*, and in the porches of my ears did pour the leprous distilment!—whose effect holds such an enmity with blood of man that, swift as

quicksilver, it courses through the natural gates and alleys of the body, and with a sudden vigour doth *posset* and *curdle*, like vinegar dropping into milk, the thin and wholesome *blood!* So did it *mine!* And almost instantly, *tetter*”—a skin eruption—“most *leper*-like, with vile and loathsome *crust*, barked all my smooth body!

“Thus was I, sleeping, by a *brother*’s hand from life, from *crown*, from *queen* at once *dispatchèd!*—*cut off* even in the blossoming of my *sin*, unhouseled, unaneled,”—without last rites, “*dis-anointed!* No reckoning made, but sent to my account *with all my imperfections on my head!*”

“Oh, *horrible!* Oh, *horrible!*—*most horrible!*”

“If thou hast *nature* in thee, *bear it not!*—let not the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for *luxury* and *damnèd incest!*”

The ghost moves closer to issue stern warnings. “But howsoever thou pursuest this act, taint not thy *mind*—nor let thy soul contrive against thy *mother* aught! Leave her to Heaven, and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge, to prick and sting her!

“Fare thee well, *at once!*—the glow-worm shows the matin to be near, and ’gins to pale his uneffectual fire! Adieu, *adieu!*”

“*Hamlet, remember me!*” the fading ghost implores. And with that it dissolves into the deep of night.

The prince staggers back, his fingers pressing against the reassuring hardness of cold, damp stone.

*Oh, all you host of heaven! Oh, earth! What else?—and shall I couple hell?*

*Oh, fie! Hold, hold, my heart!—and you, my sinews, grow not instantly old, but bear me stiffly up!*

*Remember thee! Aye, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat in this distracted globe! Remember thee! Yea, from the table of my memory I’ll wipe away all trivial, foolish records, all sayings from books, all forms, all precepts past, that youth and observation copied there! And thy commandment alone shall live within the book and volume of my brain, unmixed with baser matter! Yes, by heaven!*

He ponders.

*Oh, most pernicious woman!*

*Oh, villain! Villain!—smiling, damnèd villain!* Severely shaken, the sometime student thinks wryly of his academic wisdom, recorded on pages of careful notes. *My tables—meet it is I set it down that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain! So, Uncle, there you are!*

Hamlet looks out at the night sky. ‘*Adieu, adieu! Remember me!*’

*Now to my charge!* he thinks grimly. *I have sworn ’t!*

The prince is deep in thought when Horatio and Marcellus find him.

“Heaven secure him!” cries Horatio, approaching.

Hamlet nods solemnly: *So be it!*

“How is’t, my noble lord?” says Marcellus.

“What news, my lord?” asks Horatio.

“Oh, *wonderful,*” Hamlet replies.

“Good my lord, tell it!” urges Horatio.

“No, you’ll *reveal* it.”

“Not *I*, my lord, by heaven!”

“Nor *I*, my lord,” says Marcellus.

Hamlet, doubting that they could believe what he’s learned, pauses. “But you’ll be secret?”

“*Aye*, by heaven, my lord!” says Horatio.

The prince’s mind is seared again with a vision of Claudius committing the crime. “There’s ne’er a villain dwelling in all Denmark but *he’s an arrant knave!*”

Despite his concern, Horatio smiles at the seeming tautology. “There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave to tell us this!”

Hamlet's laugh is harsh. "Why, right!—you are in the *right*," says the distraught prince. "And so, without more circumstance at all, I hold it fit that we shake hands and part—you, as your business and desire shall point you, for every man has business and desire, such as it is." He pauses, still thinking. "As for mine own poor part, look you, I'll go *pray*...."

Horatio is watching him closely. "These are but *wild* and *whirling* words, my lord," he says softly.

"I'm sorry they offend you—*heartily!*" But as he wipes his forehead, Hamlet realizes he's with friends. "Yes, 'faith heartily."

"There's no offence, my lord," Horatio assures him.

Hamlet steps away, murder again stirring his anger. "But *yes*, by Saint Patrick, *there is*, Horatio!—and *much* offence, too!

"Touching this *vision* here, it is an *honest* ghost—that let me tell you! As for your desire to know what is between us, o'ermaster 't as you may.

"And now, good friends, as you *are* friends, scholar and soldier, give me one poor request."

"What is't, my lord? We *will*."

"Never make known what you have seen tonight."

"My lord, we will not," says Horatio.

"Nay, but *swear*'t."

"In *faith*, my lord, not I!" promises Horatio.

"Nor *I*, my lord, in faith!" adds Marcellus.

"Upon my *sword*."

"We *have* sworn, my lord, already," protests Marcellus.

"Indeed upon my *sword!*—*in deed!*" He holds it out, point down; the hilt's bar forms a cross with the blade.

From the darkness about them, a deep, hollow voice commands: "Swear!"

"Propose the oath, my lord," says Horatio.

"Never to speak of this that you have seen; swear by my sword."

Again the ghost demands, "*Swear!*"

"*Oh*, day and night but this is *wondrous strange!*" gasps Horatio.

"And therefore as a stranger give it *welcome*," insists Hamlet. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your *philosophy!*"

"But come; swear, as before: that *never*, so help you Mercy, however strange or odd I bear myself... as I perchance hereafter shall think meet to put an *antic* disposition on...

"That you, at such times seeing me, shall never—with arms encumbered, thus, or this headshake, or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase, as 'Well, well, we know...', or 'We could, an if we would,' or 'If we list to speak,' or 'There be, an if they might,' or such ambiguous giving out—note that you know *ought* of me!

"*That* not to do, so help you Grace in mercy at your *utmost need*, *swear!*"

Again the unseen presence urges, "*Swear!*"

Horatio and Marcellus touch the hilt and swear themselves to secrecy.

"Rest, *rest*, perturbèd spirit!" calls Hamlet. "So, gentlemen, with all my love I do commend me to you; and what so poor a man as Hamlet is may do to *express* his love and friending to you, God willing, shall not lack!

"Let us go in together—and still, *your fingers on your lips*, I pray!"

His glance sweeps the dark land beyond. *The time is out of joint! Oh cursèd spite, that ever I was born to set it right!*

He motions to the others. "*Aye*, come, let's go together."

This morning, Lord Polonius is sending one of his attendants to follow Laertes to the University of Paris. “Give him this money and these notes, Reynaldo.”

“I will, my lord.”

“You shall do marvelous wisely, good Reynaldo, before you visit him, to make inquiry of his behavior—”

“My lord, I did intend it.”

“Marry, well said, very well said! Look you, sir, inquire ye first what Danskers are in Paris; and how, and who, what means, and where they keep, what company, at what expense. And finding, by this encompassment and drift of question that they do know *my son*, come you more *nearer*, so that your *particular* demands will touch it. Take you on, as ’twere, some *distant* knowledge of him, as thus: ‘I know his *father* and his friends, and in *part*, him....’

“Do you *mark* this, Reynaldo?”

The servant suppresses a yawn. “Aye, very well, my lord.”

“...and in *part*, him.’ And you may say, ‘Not *well*—but if’t be he I *mean*, he’s very *wild!*—*addicted*’ to so, and such! And there put on him what forgeries you please—marry, none so rank as may *dishonour* him, take heed of that!—but, sir, such wanton, wild and usual slips as are companions noted for, and *most* known to, youth in liberty.”

“As gaming, my lord?”

“Aye, or drinking, fencing, swearing, quarrelling, drabbing”—whoring. “You may go so far.”

“My lord, that *would* dishonour him!”

“Faith, *no*, as you may *season* it in the charge! You must not put *another* scandal on him—that he is open to *incontinency*; that’s not my meaning,” says Polonius, who urges moderation in all things. “But breathe his faults so quaintly that they may seem the *taints* of liberty, the *flashing* outbreak of a fiery mind, a savageness of unreclaimed blood in *general* assault—”

“But, my good lord!—”

“Wherefore should you do this?”

Reynaldo frowns. “Aye, my lord; I would know *that!*”

“Marry, sir, here’s my drift—and I believe it is a fetch of warrant!”—an effective ruse. “You having laid these *slight* sullies on my son—as ’twere of a thing a little soiled i’ the working, mark you—your party in converse, whom you would sound, having ever seen him *guilty* in the prenominate crimes of youth you breathe of—be assured he’ll close with you in *this* consequence: ‘Good sir,’—or ‘Friend,’ or such. Or ‘Gentleman,’ according to the phrase or the addition of man and country.”

“Very good, my lord.”

“And then, sir, does he that, he does...”

“What was I about to say...? By the mass, I was about to say *something!* Where did I leave?”

“At ‘closes in the consequence,’ at ‘friend’ or such, and ‘gentleman.’”

“At ‘closes in the consequence’.... Aye, marry! He closes thus: ‘I *know* the gentleman!—I saw him *yesterday*,’—or t’other day, or then, or *then*, with such, or *such*—‘and, as you say, there was he *gaming*,’ ‘there o’ertook in’s *rouse*,’ ‘there falling out at *tennis*.’ Or, perchance, ‘I saw him enter such a *house of sale*’—namely, a brothel, or so forth.

“See you now?—your *bait* of falsehood catches this carp of *truth!* And thus do we wisdom often reach: with windlasses, and with assays of bias, by *indirections* find *directions* out! So, by my former lecture and advice, shall *you* my *son!*”

“You have me, have you not?”

Says the man dryly. “My lord, I have.”

Lord Polonius, pleased at having taught, smiles. “God be wi’ you; fare ye well!”

“Good my lord,” says Reynaldo, bowing.

“Observe his inclination in *yourself!*” *Witness* it, he means.

But the young man can recognize opportunity. “I *shall*, my lord.”



“And let him *ply* his music!”

“*Well*, my lord!”

“Farewell!” And so Reynaldo sets off, smiling, on his Parisian adventure.

As Polonius straightens papers on his desk, his daughter enters the room, much distraught.

“How now, Ophelia? what’s the matter?”

“Oh, my lord, my lord, I have been so *affrighted!*”

“With what, i’ the name of God?”

“My lord, as I was sewing in my chamber, Lord Hamlet—with his doublet all *unbracèd*; no *hat* upon his head; his stockings *fouled*, ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle; pale as his *shirt*; his *knees* knocking each other, and with a look so *piteous* in purport as if he had been loosed out of Hell to speak of *horrors!*—he comes *before* me!”

“Mad over thy *love?*”

“My lord, I do not know—but truly, I do *fear* it!”

“What *said* he?”

“He took me by the wrist and held me, *hard!* Then goes he to the length of all his arm, and, with his other hand thus o’er his brow, he falls to such perusal of my face as if he would *draw* it! Long stayed he so. At last—a little shaking of mine arm, and thrice his head thus waving up and down—he raised a *sigh* so piteous and profound as it did seem to shatter all his bulk, and end his *being!*”

“That done, he lets me go. And, with his head over his shoulder turned, he seemed to find his way without his eyes!—for out o’ doors he went without their help, and to the last bended their sight on *me!*” She looks to her father for explanation.

“Come, go with me. I will go seek the king,” says Polonius. “This is the very ecstasy of *love*, whose violent property *fordoes* itself, and leads the will to *desperate* undertakings as oft as any passion under heaven that does afflict our natures!”

“What, have you given him any hard words of late?”

“No, my good lord,” she says, “but, as you did command, I did repel his letters, and denied his access to me.”

“That hath made him *mad!*” concludes Polonius, highly perturbed. “I am sorry that with better heed and judgment I had not quoted him!—I feared he did but *trifle*, and meant to *wreck* thee. But beshrew my jealousy!—by heaven, it is as proper to our *age* to cast *beyond* ourselves in our opinions as it is common for the *younger* sort to lack *discretion!*”

“Come, go we to the king! This must be *known!*”

### Chapter Three More Spies

**I**n the throne room, King Claudius and Queen Gertrude greet two young gentlemen, just arrived after coming north from the University of Wittenberg, where they are students.

“*Welcome*, dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern!” says the king. “Moreover than we much did long to *see* you, the need we have to use you did provoke our hasty sending.

“Something have you heard of Hamlet’s *transformation*—so call it, sith neither the exterior nor the inward man resembles what it was! What it could be, more than his father’s death, that thus hath put him so much from the understanding of himself, I cannot dream of!”

“I entreat you both, being from so young days brought up with him, and so neighbored to his youth and humour, that you vouchsafe your rest here in our court some little time. Then, by your companies, draw him on to pleasures, and so gather as much as you may glean from occasion—whether aught to us unknown *afflicts* him—which thus opened, lies within our *remedy.*”

“Good gentlemen,” says the queen, “he hath talked *much* of you, and I am sure there are not two men living to whom he more adheres. If it will please you to show us so much gentry and

good will as to expend your time with *us* awhile, for the supply and profit of our hope, your visitation shall receive such thanks as 'fits a *king's* remembrance!"

Rosencrantz bows deeply. "*Both* Your Majesties might, by the sovereign power you have of us, put your dread pleasures more into *command* than to entreaty."

Says his very close companion, "But we both *obey*, and here freely give up ourselves in the full bent, to lay our service at your feet to be commanded."

"Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern!" says Claudius.

"And I beseech you instantly to visit my too-much-changed son," says Gertrude. "Go, some of you," she tells attendants, "and bring these gentlemen where Hamlet is."

"Heaven make our presence and our practises pleasant and helpful to him!" says Guildenstern.

"Aye, *Amen!*" says the queen, as the men bow and leave.

Lord Polonius hurries into the hall, and he approaches the king. "The ambassadors, my good lord, are *joyfully* returned from *Norway!*"

"Thou ever hast been the father of good news!" says Claudius.

"Have I, my lord? I assure my good liege I hold my duty as I hold my soul, both to my God and to my gracious king!" He adds: "And I do think—or else this brain of mine hunts not the trail of policy so sure as it hath used to do—that I have found the very *cause* of Hamlet's lunacy!"

"Oh, *speak* of that!" says the king. "That do I long to hear!"

"Give first admittance to the ambassadors; *my* news shall be the *fruit* to that great feast!"

"Thyself do grace to them, and bring them in," says Claudius. Polonius goes to the diplomats who have met with the Norwegian king.

Claudius turns to the queen. "He tells me, my dear Gertrude, he hath found the head and source of all your son's distemper!"

"I doubt it is no other but the *main*: his father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage."

"Well, we shall sift him."

Polonius returns, with the emissaries.

"Welcome, my good friends!" says Claudius. "Say, Voltemand, what from our brother"—fellow king—"Norway?"

"Most fair *return* of greetings and desires!"

"Upon *our* first, he sent out to suppress his nephew's levies—which to him had *appeared* to be a preparation 'gainst the *Polish!* But he found it, better looked into, truly *was* against Your Highness!"

"Whereat he *grieves* that his sickness, age and impotence were falsely borne in hand!—sends out to *arrest* Fortinbras!"

"At which *he*, in brief, *obeys*, *receives rebuke* from Norway, and, in fine, makes vow before his uncle never more to give the assay of arms against Your Majesty!"

"Whereupon old Norway, overcome with joy, gives him three thousand crowns in annual fee, and his commission to *employ* those soldiers so levied as *before—against the Poles!*—with an *entreaty* for that enterprise, herein further shown," he says, handing a document to the king, "through *your* dominions, on such regards of safety and allowance as therein are set down."

"It likes us *well!*" says King Claudius. "And at our more considered time we'll read, think upon, and answer this business. Meantime we thank you for your well-took labour! Go to your rest; at night we'll *feast* together! Most welcome home!"

The ambassadors bow and withdraw.

"This business is well ended," says Polonius. He sees that the king and queen are eager to hear about Hamlet. "My liege, and madam," he begins, "to expostulate what majesty should be, what duty is, why day is day, night night, and time is time, were nothing but to waste night, day and time. Therefore, since brevity is the *soul* of wit, and tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, I will be brief: your noble son is *mad!*"

“Mad I *call* it; for, to define true madness, what is’t but to be nothing else but... *mad*. But let that go....”

“More *matter*,” says the queen, “with less art.”

“Madam, I swear I use no art at all! That he is mad, ’tis true; that ’tis true ’tis *pity*; and pity ’tis ’tis *true*.” He sees her frown. “A foolish figure—but farewell, it, for I will use no art.

“Mad let us grant him, then; and now it remains that we find out the *cause* of this effect—or rather say, the cause of this *defect*, for this effect becomes defective by *cause*.

“Thus it remains; and the remainder thus perpend: I have a daughter—have while she is mine—who, in her duty and obedience, mark, hath given me *this*.” He pulls a letter from his robes of office.

“Now gather and surmise.” He reads aloud: “*To the celestial—and my soul’s idol!—the most beautified Ophelia!*” That’s an *ill* phrase, a vile phrase; ‘beautified’ is a vile phrase—but you shall hear. Thus: ‘*In her excellent white bosom, these—*’” He blushes. “*Et cetera....*”

“Came this from *Hamlet* to her?” asks Gertrude.

“Good madam, stay awhile,” says Polonius. “I will be faithful.” He reads more:

“*Doubt thou the stars are fire,  
Doubt that the sun doth move,  
Doubt truth to be a liar,  
But never doubt I love!*”

“*Oh, dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers!*” —lines of poetry. “*I have not art to reckon my groans! But that I love thee best, O most best, believe it!*”

“*Adieu!*”

“*Thine, evermore, most dear lady, whilst this corporeal machine is his, Hamlet.*”

“This, in obedience, hath my daughter shown me—and, moreover, hath his solicitings, as they fell out by time, by means and place, all given to mine ear.”

“But how hath she *received* his love?” asks Claudius.

Polonius regards the king. “What do you think of me?”

“As of a man faithful and honourable.”

“I would fain prove so! But what might you think if, when I had seen this hot love *on the wing*—and I had perceived it, I must tell you that, before my daughter told me—what might you, or my dear majesty your queen, here, think, if I had played the *desk*, or *table-book*; or given my art a *winking*,”—closed his eyes, “mute and dumb, or looked upon this love with idle sight? What might you *think*?”

“*No!*—I went round to *work*, and my young mistress thus I did bespeak: ‘Lord Hamlet is a *prince*, beyond *thy* star; this must not be!’ And then I precepts gave her, that she should *lock herself from his resort*—admit no messengers, receive no tokens.

“Which done, she *took* the fruits of my advice; and he, repulsèd—a short tale to make—fell into a sadness, then into a fast, thence to a watch, thence into a weakness, thence to a lightness, and, by this declension, into the *madness* wherein now he raves, and *we* all mourn for.”

“Do you think ’tis this?” Claudius asks Gertrude.

“It may be; very likely.”

Asks Polonius, “Hath there been such a time that I have positively said ‘’Tis so,’ when it proved otherwise?—I’d fain know that.”

“Not that I know,” the king allows.

Polonius points to his own head, then to his neck; “Take this from *this* if this be otherwise. If circumstances lead me, I will find where *truth* is hid, though it were hid indeed within the *centre!*”

“How may we try it further?” asks the king.

Polonius has already been scheming. “You know that sometimes he walks for hours together here....”

“So he does indeed,” says the queen.

“At such a time I’ll loose my daughter to him,” says the counselor, looking at Claudius. “Be you and I behind an arras then, to mark the encounter! If he love her not, and be not from his reason fallen thereby, let me be no assistant for a *state*, but keep a *farm* and *carters!*”

Claudius nods. “We will try it.”

The queen points. “But, look, where sadly the poor wretch comes reading...”

“*Away!* I do beseech you, both *away*,” says Polonius. “I’ll board him presently!” The king and queen rise and go to their chambers.

Soon Hamlet, absorbed, apparently, in his book, walks toward Polonius.

“How does my good Lord Hamlet?”

“Well, God-’a’-mercy.”

“Do you know me, my lord?”

“Excellent well; you are a *fishmonger*.” In crude conversation, *fish* can suggest *pudenda*.

“Not I, my lord.”

“Then I would you were so *honest* a man.”

“Honest, my lord?”

“*Aye*, sir. To be honest, as *this* world goes, is to be one man picked out of *ten thousand!*”

“That’s very true, my lord.”

“For if the sun breed *maggots* in a *dead dog*, it being a good *kissing* carrion—” He snaps the book closed. “Have you a daughter?”

“I have, my lord.”

“Let her not walk by the *son!*—conception is a blessing, but not as *your* daughter may conceive. Friend, look to ’t.” He opens the book and resumes reading.

*How say you by that?* thinks Lord Polonius. *Still harping on my daughter! Yet he knew me not at first; he said I was a fishmonger! He is far gone, far gone! And, truly, in my youth I suffered much extremity for love—very near this. I’ll speak to him again.* “What do you read, my lord?”

“Words, words, words.”

“What is the matter, my lord?”

“Between whom?”

“I mean, the matter that you *read*, my lord.”

“*Slanders*, sir! For the satirical rogue says here that old men have *grey beards*, that their faces are *wrinkled*, that their *eyes* purge thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful *lack of wit*, together with *weak hams*—all of which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently *believe*, yet I hold it not charity to have *set it down* thus! For yourself, sir, should be as old as *I* am, if like a crab you could go *backward*”—through time.

*Though this be madness, yet there is method in ’t*, thinks Polonius. He motions toward a door; the sunlit outdoors is healthier. “Will you walk ‘out of the air,’ my lord?”

“Into my grave.”

“Indeed, that *is* out o’ the air.” *How pregnant sometimes his replies are!*—a coincidence that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of.

*I will leave him, and suddenly contrive the means of meeting between him and my daughter.* “My lord, I will take my leave of you.”

“You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will *more* willingly *part* withal—except my life. Except my life.” He ignores the advisor, and stares downward, musing. “Except my life.”

“Fare you well, my lord,” says Polonius, bowing.

The prince sees him hasten away. *These tedious old fools!*

In the corridor, Polonius encounters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “You go to seek the Lord Hamlet; there he is.” They head toward the door.

“My honoured lord!” says Guildenstern, coming to Hamlet.

“My most dear lord!” says Rosencrantz.

“My excellent good friends!” says the prince. “How *dost* thou, Guildenstern? *Ah*, Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do ye both?”

Rosencrantz shrugs. “As the indifferent children of the earth.”

“Happy,” says Guildenstern, “in that we are not *over*-happy; on Fortune’s cap we are not the very button.”

“Nor the sole of her *shoe*,” notes Hamlet, smiling.

“Neither, my lord,” says Rosencrantz.

“Then you live about her waist, or in the *middle* of her favours.”

Guildenstern grins. “Faith, her *privates*, we!”

Hamlet laughs. “The *secret* parts of Fortune! Oh, most *true!*—she *is* a strumpet! What’s the *news?*”

“None, my lord, but that the world’s grown *honest*,” says Rosencrantz blithely.

“Then is *doomsday* near!” The two young gentlemen laugh. “But your news is not true; let me question more in particular. What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?”

“*Prison*, my lord?” Guildenstern seems taken aback.

“Denmark’s a prison.”

Rosencrantz counters, “Then is the *world* one.”

Hamlet nods. “A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o’ the *worst*.”

“We think not so, my lord,” says Rosencrantz.

“Why, then, ’tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad but *thinking* makes it so. To *me* it is a prison.”

“Why then, your ambition *makes* it one,” says Rosencrantz; the students think the prince craves the crown. “’Tis too narrow for your *mind*.”

“Oh, *God*, I could be bounded in a *nutshell* and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad *dreams!*”

“Which dreams indeed are *ambitious*,” Guildenstern tells him, “for the very *substance* of ambition is merely the *shadow* of a dream.”

Hamlet shrugs. “A dream *itself* is but a shadow.”

“Truly,” says Rosencrantz, “and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow’s *shadow!*”

“Then are *our* bodies beggars, and our monarchs and outstretchèd heroes the *beggars*’ shadows,” says Hamlet. He perceives a clandestine mission; their academic sophistry no longer amuses him. “Shall we to the court? For, by my fay, I cannot *reason!*”

“We’ll wait upon you,” offers Guildenstern; they want to stay close.

“No such matter!” says Hamlet. “I will not sort *you* with the rest of my servants; for, to speak to you like an honest man, I am most *dreadfully* attended.” He offers them another chance. “But, in the beaten way of *friendship*, what make you at Elsinore?”

“To visit you, my lord; no other occasion,” claims Rosencrantz.

“Beggard that I am, I am even poor in *thanks*; yet I thank you. But surely, dear friends, my thanks are too *much* by a halfpenny!—were you not *sent for?* Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation?”

“Come, deal justly with me,” he urges. “Come, come; nay, speak!”

“What should we say, my lord?” asks Guildenstern.

“Why, anything, but to the *purpose!*” says Hamlet. “You *were* sent for!—there is a kind of confession in your looks which your modesties have not craft enough to colour. And I trow the good king and queen have sent for you.”

“To what end, my lord?” asks Rosencrantz.

“That you must teach me. But let me conjure you—by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preservèd love—and by whatever more

dear a *better* proposer could charge you withal: be *even* and *direct* with me whether you were *sent for* or no!”

Rosencrantz’s glance asks his comrade, *What say you?*

Thinks Hamlet: *Nay, then, I have an aye from you!* “If you love me, hold not off.”

“My lord, we were sent for,” Guildenstern concedes.

“I will tell you why,” says Hamlet, looking quite sad. *So shall my anticipation prevent your stating it; then your secrecy for the king and queen shall moult no feather!*—will continue, but ineffectually. “I have of late—but *wherefore* I know not—lost all my *mirth*, forgone all its customary exercise.

“And indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the *earth* seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy, the *air*, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours!”

He ponders. “What a piece of work is a *man*: how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty!—in moving and form, how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world—the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this?—quintessence of *dust*! Man delights not *me*.”

He glances at the students. “No, nor *woman* neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.”

“My lord, there was no such stuff in my thoughts!” protests Rosencrantz.

“Why did you laugh then, when I said man delights me not?”

“To think, my lord, that if you delight not in Man, what a Lenten reception the *players* shall receive from you! We passed them on the way, and hither are they coming, to offer you service!”

Hamlet, who much enjoys theater, considers. “He that *plays* a king shall be well come; *his* majesty shall have tribute of me.

“The ‘adventurous knight’ shall employ his foil and shield; the ‘lover’ shall not sigh *gratis*; the ‘moody man’ shall end his part in peace; the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are *always* so primèd; and the ‘lady’ shall say her mind freely—and the blank verse shall *limp* for’t! What players are they?”

“Even those you were wont to take *delight* in, the tragedians of the *city*!”

“Do they grow rusty? How chances it they travel? *Residence* there in reputation and profit was better, both ways.”

“Their endeavour keeps in the wonted place,” Rosencrantz reports, “but *there*, sir, is an aery of *children*, little eaglets that *cry out* most *tyrannically* on the topic in question—and are *clapped for’t*! These are now the fashion, and so *berattle* the common *stages*, as they call them, that many wearing *rapiers* are afraid of *goose-quills*,”—authors’ pens, “and scarce dare come thither!”

“It is not so very strange,” says Hamlet. “For mine *uncle* is *King of Denmark*!—and those that would *make faces* at him while my *father* lived now give twenty, forty, fifty, an hundred ducats apiece for his *picture* in *little*!”—miniature portraits. He shakes his in disgust. “*Sblood*, there is something in *this* more than natural, if philosophy could find it out!”

They hear a flourish of horns. “There are the players!” says Guildenstern.

The band of ten actors enters the hall; their leader bows before the smiling prince.

“Gentlemen, you are welcome to Elsinore,” says Hamlet cordially. “Your *hands*!—come then!” he says, giving each a warm handshake as they file past, on their way to the visitors’ quarters in the castle.

The prince turns to the two spies—and shakes their hands. “The *appurtenance* of welcome is fashion and *ceremony*; let me comply with *you* in that garb, lest by extending it to the players—who, I tell you, *must* show fairly outward—I should appear to like *their* entertainment more than *yours*.”

“*You* are welcome,” he tells them, “but my *uncle*-father and aunt-*mother* are deceived.”

“In what, my dear lord?” asks Guildenstern.

“I am mad but north-north-west; when the wind is *southerly* I know a hawk from a handsaw.”  
The gentlemen exchange doubtful glances.

All three spot Lord Polonius approaching. The portly counselor waves, and calls ahead to them: “We’ll be with you, gentlemen!”

“Hark you, Guildenstern, and you, too,” says Hamlet. *At each ear, a hearer*, he thinks; the agents are staying close—and attentive. He nods toward Polonius. “That great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling-clouts!”

“Perhaps he’s come to them the *second* time,” says Rosencrantz, “for they say an old man is twice a child.”

Says Hamlet sourly, “I will prophesy he comes to tell me of the players; mark it. ‘*You say right, sir!*’” he chirps brightly in advance sarcasm. ““On *Monday morning* ’twas so indeed!””

Old Polonius puffs, just now reaching them. “My lord, I have *news* to tell you!”

Hamlet mimics: ““My lord, I have *news* to tell you: when *Roscius*”—a famous comedian of antiquity—“was an actor in Rome...!””

Polonius persists: “The *actors* are come hither, my lord!”

The reply is weary: “Yes, yes.”

The graybeard rubs his hands together happily. “Upon mine honour—“

- “Then came each actor on his ass,” mumbles the prince, anticipating a tedious accounting.

“—the best actors in the *world*, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited! *Seneca* cannot be too heavy, nor *Plautus* too light! For the law of *wit* in the liberty,”—land outside city-council suppression, “*these* are the only men!”

Hamlet regards the pompous pedant. “Oh, *Jephthah*, judge of Israel,” he mocks, “what a treasure hadst *thou!*”

Polonius, nonplussed by the biblical allusion, asks, “What treasure had he, my lord?”

“Why, ‘One fair *daughter*, and no more, the which he loved surpassing well,’” says Hamlet, speaking lines from a popular song about one who foolishly sacrificed his child. Ophelia’s sudden estrangement—compelled, he suspects—has been painful and disheartening.

Polonius’s eyes narrow. *Still on my daughter!*

“Am I not i’ the right, old Jephthah?”

Polonius shrugs. “If you *call* me Jephthah, my lord, I have a daughter that I love surpassingly well...”

“Nay, *that follows not*”—the nobleman has a daughter regardless of what Hamlet calls him.

“*What* follows, then, my lord?”

Hamlet recites the ballad’s next lines: “Why, ‘As by lot, God wot,’—and then, you know, ‘It came to pass as most likely it *was*’—”

He interrupts himself, pointing as the players approach. “The first line of the pious *chanson* will show you more; for look where my abridgement comes!”

Three of the traveling actors have come to find Polonius, who serves as supervisor of palace entertainments.

“You are *welcome*, masters, *welcome all!*” Hamlet tells the performers. “I am glad to see thee well! *Welcome*, good friends!

“Oh, my *old* friend!” he tells the eldest. “Thy face is *valenced* since I saw thee last; comest thou to *beard* me in Denmark?” he jests. He smiles at a boy who plays women’s roles: “*What*, my young lady and mistress! By’r Lady, Your Ladyship is nearer to heaven than when I saw you last, by the altitude of a chopine!”—a high-heeled shoe. “Pray God your *voice*, like a piece of uncurrent gold,”—a coin clipped of some metal, “be not cracked within the ring!”—lowered by puberty.

“Masters, you are all welcome. We’ll *go to’t* e’en like French falconers!—*fly at anything we see!* We’ll have a *speech* straight! Come, give us a taste of your quality. Come, a passionate speech!”

The veteran player bows, smiling. "What speech, my lord?"

"I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never *acted*—or, if it was, not *above* once; for the play, I remember, pleased not the million. 'Twas caviare to the general populace,"—beyond their appreciation. "I remember that one said there were no spices in the lines to make the *manner* savoury, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author for *affectation*; he called it an *honest* method—as *wholesome* as sweet, and, by *very* much, more *handsome* than fine.

"But as *I* received it, and others whose judgments in such matters cried on top of mine, it was an *excellent* play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning!

"One speech in it I chiefly loved: 'twas *Aeneas*' tale to *Dido*—and of it, especially thereabout where he speaks of *Priam*'s slaughter. If it live in your memory, begin at this line... let me see, let me see. 'The rugged Pyrrhus, like the Hyrcanian beast'...." He squints, trying to recall. "'Tis not so—it begins with Pyrrhus...."

Hamlet declaims with ferocity: "*The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms, black as his purpose, did the night resemble when he lay couchèd in the ominous horse, hath now his dread and bleak complexion smeared with heraldry more dismal: head to foot now is he total gules!—horridly tricked with blood, of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons! Baked and impasted in the parching streets, he bent a tyrannous and damnèd sight to their lord's murder!*

*"Roasted in wrath and fire, and thus o'er-sized with coagulate gore, with eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus old grandsire Priam seeks!"*

He says, lightly: "So, proceed you."

"Fore God, my lord, well *spoken!*" says Polonius, "with good accent and good discretion!"

The chief player takes up the powerful passage: "*Anon he finds him!—striking too short at Greeks!*

*"His antique sword, rebellious to his arm, lies where it falls, repugnant to command!*

*"Pyrrhus at unequal-matchèd Priam drives!—in rage strikes wide! But with the whiff and wind of his fell sword, the unnervèd father falls!*

*"Then senseless Ilium, seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top, stoops to its base!—and with a hideous crash takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear!—for, lo, his sword, which was declining on the milky head of reverend Priam, seems i' the air to stick!*

*"So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood, and—like one neutral to his will and matter—did nothing!*

*"And as we often see before some storm, in silence the heavens' rack stands still!—the bold winds speechless, and the orb below as hushed as death!*

*"Anon a dreadful thunder doth rend the region! So after Pyrrhus' pause, aroused vengeance sets him newly a-work!—and never did the Cyclops' hammers fall on Mars's armour, forgèd for proof eterne, with less remorse than Pyrrhus' bleeding sword now falls on Priam!*

*"Out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune!" cries the actor. "All you gods, in general synod take away her power!—break all the spokes and rims from her wheel, and bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven, as low as to the fiends!"*

Polonius frowns. "This is too long."

"It shall go to the *barber's* with your *beard!*" gibes Hamlet. "Prithee, *say on!*" he tells the player, adding, with a tilt of his head toward Polonius: "*He's* for a *jig* or a tale of *bawdry*, or he sleeps.

"Say on!—come to *Hecuba!*"

The player nods and resumes: "*But who, oh who, had seen the mobbled queen—*"

Hamlet interrupts. "The *mobbled* queen...."—her face *concealed*.

"That's good," judges Polonius. "'Mobbled queen' is good."

"—*runs barefoot up and down, threatening the flames with copious tears, a clout upon that head where late the diadem stood, and for a robe, about her lank and all o'er-teemèd loins, a blanket, in the alarm of fear caught up!*



*“Who this had seen, with tongue in venom steeped ’gainst Fortune’s state would ‘Treason!’ have pronounced!*

*“And if the gods themselves did see her then, when she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport in mincing with his sword her husband’s limbs, the instant burst of clamour that she made, unless things mortal move them not at all, would have made weep the burning eyes of heaven—and stirred passion in the gods!”*

Polonius is surprised by the player: “Look whether he has not turned his colour, and has *tears* in’s eyes! Prithee, no more!”

“’Tis well,” Hamlet tells the actor. “I’ll have thee speak out the rest soon.” He turns to Polonius. “Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear: let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time; after your death you were better have a bad epitaph, than their ill report while you live!”

“My lord, I will use them according to their desert.”

“*God’s bodkins*, man!—much *better!* Use every man after his *desert*, and who should ’scape *whipping?*” demands the prince. “Use them after your *own* honour and dignity; the less they deserve, the more merit is in your *bounty!*”

“Take them in.”

“Come, sirs,” says Lord Polonius.

“Follow him, friends. We’ll hear a *play* tomorrow!” says Hamlet. He holds back the first player, and speaks to him privately. “Dost thou hear me, old friend: can you play *The Murder of Gonzago?*”

“Aye, my lord.”

“We’ll ha’t tomorrow night. You could, for a need, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in’t, could you not?”

“Aye, my lord.”

“Very well. Follow that lord, and,” he says with a wink, “look you mock him not!”

Hamlet turns to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “My good friends, I’ll leave you till night. You are welcome to Elsinore.”

“*Good*, my lord,” says Rosencrantz, as he and Guildenstern bow.

As the spies walk away, already whispering, he murmurs, “Aye—so God be wi’ ye.”

Now *I* am *alone*, he thinks grimly. Hamlet paces, his ruminations deepening.

He stops.

*Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I! Is it not monstrous that this player here, in but a fiction, in a dream of passion, could so force his own soul to his concept that from its working all his visage wann’d?—tears in his eyes, distraction in’s aspect, a broken voice, and his whole function suiting with forms!*

*And all for nothing! For Hecuba! What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her? What would he do had he the motive and the cue for passion that I have? He would drown the stage with tears, and cleave the general ear with horrid speech!—make mad the guilty, and appal the free, confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed the very faculties of eyes and ears!*

*Yet I, a dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peek like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, and can say nothing—no, not for a king, upon whose property and most dear life a damnèd defeat was made!*

*Am I a coward? Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across, plucks from my beard and blows it in my face, tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i’ the throat, as deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?*

*Hah! ’Swounds, I should take it! For it cannot be but that I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall to make oppression better, or ere this I should have fatted all the region’s hawks with this slave’s offal!*

*Bloody, bawdy villain! Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!*

*Oh, vengeance!*

*Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave!—that I, the son of a dear father murderèd, prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words, and fall a-cursing like a very drab, a scullion!*

*Fie upon 't! About, my brain!*

He thinks—and develops a scheme.

*I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play have, by the very cunning of the scene, been struck so to the soul that presently they have proclaimed their malefactions; for murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ!*

*I'll have these players play something like the murder of my father before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks; I'll tent him to the quick! If he but blench, I know my course!*

*The spirit that I have seen may be the Devil; the Devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps out of my weakness and my melancholy, as he is very potent with such spirits, abuses me to damn me! I'll have grounds more relevant than his!*

*The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king!*

## Chapter Four Command Performances

Late that afternoon, the king and queen, attended by their chief counselor and his daughter, question Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

“And can you, by no drift or circumstance, get from him why he puts on this confusion, *grating* so harshly all his days of quiet with turbulent and dangerous *lunacy*?” demands Claudius.

“He does confess he feels himself distracted,” says Rosencrantz, “but from what cause he will by no means speak.”

“Nor do we find him toward to be sounded, but with a *crafty* madness he keeps aloof when we would bring him on to some confession of his true state,” adds Guildenstern.

“Did he receive you well?” asks the queen.

“Most like a gentleman,” says Rosencrantz.

“But with much forcing of his disposition,” notes Guildenstern.

“Niggard on the *question*; but, as to our demands, most free in his reply,” Rosencrantz explains.

“Did you assay him to any pastime?” Gertrude asks.

“Madam, it so fell out that we rode past certain *players* on the way. Of these we told him, and there did seem in him a kind of joy to hear of it,” says Rosencrantz. “They are about the court, and, as I think, they have already order *this night* to play before him.”

“’Tis most true,” Polonius confirms, “and he beseeched me to entreat Your Majesties to hear and see the matter.”

“With all my heart!” says Claudius. “And it doth much content me to hear him so inclinèd! Good gentlemen, give him a further edge, and drive his purpose on to these delights.”

“We shall, my lord,” says Rosencrantz. He and Guildenstern bow and go.

“Sweet Gertrude, leave us, too,” says the king, “for we have closely sent for Hamlet hither, that he, as ’twere by accident, may here find Ophelia. Her father and myself, lawful espials, will so bestow ourselves so that, seeing unseen, we may of their encounter frankly judge, and gather by him, as he is behaved, if ’t be the affliction of his *love* that thus he suffers for, or no.”

“I shall obey you,” says the queen, rising. “As for your part, Ophelia, I do wish that your good beauties *be* the happy cause of Hamlet’s wildness; so shall I hope your virtues will bring him to his wonted way again, to both your honours.”

“Madam, I wish it may!” says Ophelia with a curtsy, as Gertrude goes.

“Ophelia, walk you here,” says Polonius, pointing to a dim area of the room that is lighted by tall windows onto the courtyard. “Gracious, so please you, we will bestow ourselves,” he says to Claudius.

“Read on this Book,” Polonius tells Ophelia, handing it to her, “that *show* of such an exercise may colour your being alone.”

He tells the king, “We are oft to blame in this—’tis much proven—that with *devotion’s* visage and *pious* action we do sugar o’er the Devil himself!”

Thinks Claudius, *Oh, ’tis too true! How smart a lashing that speech doth give my conscience! The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plaster art, is not more ugly compared to the thing that helps it than to my deed is my most painted word! Oh heavy burden!*

“I hear him coming!” warns Polonius. “Let’s withdraw, my lord.” They step behind thick drapery near a shadowed wall.

From the corridor, Hamlet has slowly entered the hall’s far end; looking down, and deep in thought, he stops, musing.

*To be, or not to be, that is the question—whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a siege of troubles, and by opposing end them!*

*To die, to sleep—no more!—and by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. ’Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished!*

*To die, to sleep. To sleep—perchance to dream! Aye, there’s the rub! For in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil —when the soul has left the body— must give us pause!*

*There’s the respect that makes calamity of prolongèd life; for who would bear the whips and scorns of time—the oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely, the pangs of disprized love, the law’s delay, the insolence of office, and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes—when he himself might his quietus make with a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear, to grunt and sweat under a weary life, but that the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler is returnèd, puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of!*

*Thus doth conscience make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought. And enterprises of great pith and moment, with this regard, their currents turn awry, and lose the name of action!*

Hearing a page being turned, he glances up. *Soft you now! The fair Ophelia!* He can see that she is reading from a black-bound Bible. *Nymph, in thy orisons—prayers—be all my sins remembered.*

As he nears the light, she closes the property. “Good my lord, how does Your Honour for this many a day?”

“I humbly thank you, well.” He looks away. “Well. Well.”

“My lord, I have remembrances of yours, that I have longèd long to re-deliver; I pray you, now receive them.” She proffers a thin wooden box of gifts she had accepted.

Harshly wrung by his fate, Hamlet again feels the sting of her distancing; the changed man replies: “No, not I; I never gave you aught.”

“My honoured lord, you know right well you did!—and, with them, words of so sweet breath composèd as made the things more rich! Their perfume lost, take these again; for to the noble mind, rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind. There, my lord.”

Hamlet looks at the lacquered container. “Are you honest?”

“My lord?”

“Are you fair?”

“What means Your Lordship?”

“That if you be *honest* and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse of your *beauty*.”

“Could Beauty, my lord, have *better* converse than with Honesty?”

“Aye, truly!—for the power of beauty will sooner *transform* honesty from what it is to a *bawd* than the force of honesty can translate beauty into *its* likeness! This has been a paradox—but now the time gives it *proof*.”

Sadly, he regards her young face. “I did love you, once.”

She says, looking down, “Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.”

The irony of her implicit accusation—that *he* has been deceitful—again spurs anger. “You should *not* have believed me, for *virtue* cannot so inculcate our old stock but we shall *relinquish* it! *I* loved you *not*.”

“I was the more deceived.”

Hamlet’s tolerance for duplicity—especially faithlessness in females—has been exhausted. “Get thee to a nunnery!” he cries. “Why wouldst thou be a breeder of *sinners*?”

“I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me! I am very proud, vengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have *thoughts* to put them in, *imagination* to give them shape, or *time* to *act* them in! What should such fellows as I do, crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant *knaves*, all!—believe *none* of us!

“Go thy ways, to a *nunnery*!”

But she stands motionless; the prince looks around the room. “Where’s your father?”

A beat. “At home, my lord.”

Hamlet glares at her. “Let the doors be *shut* upon him!” he says—loudly enough to be heard through the arras, “that he may play the *fool* nowhere but in’s *own* house!

“Farewell.” He starts away.

Ophelia stares. *Oh, help him, you sweet heavens!*

Hamlet turns, his indignation mounting. “If thou *dost* marry, I’ll give thee *this* plague for thy *dowry*: be thou as chaste as *ice*, as pure as *snow*, thou shalt not escape *calumny*!

“Get thee to a nunnery, go! Farewell!

”Or, if thou wilt *needs* marry, marry a *fool*!—for wise men know well enough what *monsters* you make of them!

“To a *nunnery* go—and *quickly*, too! Farewell.”

Ophelia is in tears. *O heavenly powers, restore him!*

But the prince continues his rant: “I have heard of your *paintings*, too, well enough! God has given you *one* face, and you make yourselves *another*! You *jig*, you *amble*, you *lisp*—and nickname God’s creatures, and make from your *ignorance* your *wantonness*!

“Go to, I’ll no more on’t!—it hath made me *mad*!

“I say we will have *no more marriages*! Those that are married already—all but *one*—shall *live* so; the rest shall keep as they are.

“To a *nunnery*! Go!” he cries, storming away.

Ophelia watches after him, stunned. *Oh, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!—the courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s tongue, sword, eye; the expectancy and rose of the fair state; the mirror of fashion, and the pattern of form, observed by all observers—quite, quite down!*

*And I, of ladies most deject and wretched, who sucked the honey of his music vows, now see that noble and most sovereign reason, like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh!—that unmatched form and feature of ripe youth shriveled with frenzy!*

“Oh, woe is me, to have seen what I have seen, see what I see!” she says, as Claudius and Polonius emerge.

“Love?” mutters the king scornfully. “His affections do not *that* way tend!

“Nor was what he spake, though it lacked form a little, like *madness*,” he tells Polonius.

“There’s something in his soul o’er which his melancholy sits *brooding*—and I do fear the *hatch*! In the disclosure will be some *danger*!

“Which for to prevent, I have in quick determination thus set it down: he shall with speed to *England*, for the demand of our neglected tribute.” The English, conquered years ago by imperial

Denmark, owe such payments; Hamlet will be sent to confront their king. “Haply the seas and countries, different with variable objects, shall *expel* this somewhat unsettled matter in his heart, whereon his brain ever beating puts him thus from fashion of himself.

“What think you on ’t?”

The counselor concurs. “It shall do well. But *yet* do I believe the origin and commencement of his grief is sprung from neglected *love*.” He motions his daughter forward. “How now, Ophelia; you need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said; we heard it all.

“My lord, do as you please,” says Polonius, “but, if you hold it fit, after the play let his queenly mother entreat him, alone, to show his *grief*! Let her be *round* with him!

“And I’ll be placèd, so please you, in the ear of all their conference. If *she* find him not, to England send him, or confine him where your wisdom best shall think.”

“It shall be so,” says Claudius. “Madness in great ones must not unwatchèd go!”

**A**t the front of the spacious hall where a play is soon to be performed this evening, servants are placing iron stands affixed with multiple candlebeams; at the back, brackets hold torches already lighted. Courtiers smile and bow to Hamlet as they come to find seats; two large chairs have been set on a dais for the king and queen.

Soon, their wicks touched by a taper’s smoky flame, wax candles shine before gleaming squares of silvered glass, while, near the entrance, Hamlet advises the itinerant actors.

“Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, *trippingly* on the tongue; if you mouth it as many of your players do, I had as lief the *town crier* spoke my lines!

“And do not *saw the air* too much with your hand, thus,”—the actors smile at his exaggerated gestures, “but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the *whirlwind* of passion, you must aspire to beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.

“*Oh*, it offends me to the *soul*” he says, voice rising, “to hear a *robustious*, periwig-pated fellow tear a *passion* to *tatters*, to *very rags*!—to *split the ears* of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable *dumbshows* and *noise*! I would have such a fellow *whipped* for *o’erdoing Termagant*! *It out-Herods Herod*!” he roars.

He adds, calmly, “Pray you avoid it.”

The leading player, laughing, nods to assure him. “I warrant Your Honour.”

“Be not too *tame*, either,” Hamlet cautions, “but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action—with this special observance: that you o’erstep not the modesty of *nature*; for anything so overdone is against the *purpose* of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold a *mirror*, as ’twere, up to Nature—to show *Virtue* her own feature, *Scorn* her own image, and the very age and body of the time its form and pressure. Now, this overdone or come tardy off, though it make the unskillful clap, cannot but make the *judicious* grieve!—the censure of *one* of whom,” their patron notes pointedly, “must, in your allowance, o’erweigh a whole *theatre* of others.

“*Oh*, there be players that I have seen—and heard others *praise*, and highly—that, not to speak it profanely, having neither the accent of *Christians*, nor the *gait* of Christian, pagan, nor *man*, have so bellowed and strutted that I have thought some of Nature’s *journeymen* had made them!—and not made them *well*, they imitated humanity so abominably!”

The actors understand. “I hope we have reformed that indifferently with us, sir.”

“Reform it *altogether*!” urges Hamlet. “And let those that play your *clowns* speak no more than is *set down* for them! For there be some of them that will *themselves* laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh, too—though in the meantime some necessary question of the play is then being considered. That’s *villainous*, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it!”

Most of the chairs, he sees, are occupied. “Go, make you ready.” The actors head toward a side chamber to prepare for their performance.

Hamlet meets Polonius, coming into the hall with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “How now, my lord. Will the king hear this piece of work?”

“And the *queen*, too; and that presently!”

“Bid the players make haste,” says Hamlet. “Will you two help to hasten them?” he asks—tells—the collegians, to get rid of the spies.

“We will, my lord.” They bow and follow Polonius to the actors’ attiring room.

A gentleman arrives as requested, and the prince smiles. “What *ho!*—*Horatio!*!”

The visitor bows. “Here, sweet lord, at your service.”

Hamlet wants an impartial observer. “Horatio, thou art e’en as *just* a man as e’er my conversation coped withal.”

“Oh, my dear lord—”

“Nay, do not think I *flatter*. For what advancement may I hope from thee, who no revenue hast but thy good spirits to feed and clothe thee? Why would the *poor* be flattered? No, let the candied tongue lick absurd *pomp*, and crook the hinge of the knee where pregnant *gain* may follow fawning.

“Dost thou hear: since my dear soul was master of its choice, and could among men distinguish, its election hath sealèd thee for itself! For thou hast been as one who, in suffering *all*,”—hearing diverse argument, “*suffers* nothing—a man who hast ta’en Fortune’s buffets and rewards with equal thanks. And *blest* are those whose blood and judgment are so well commingled that they are not as *fifes*, for Fortune’s finger to sound what stop she please! Give me that man who is not *passion*’s slave, and I will wear him in my heart’s core—aye, in my *heart* of heart—as I do thee!”

Hamlet sees that his friend is quite moved. He says, softly, “Something too much of this.”

He turns, surveys the hall, and speaks briskly. “There is a play tonight before the king. One scene of it comes near the circumstance, which I have told thee, of my father’s death.

“I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot, even with the very content of thy soul *observe mine uncle!* If his occulted guilt do not itself unkennel in *one* speech, it is a *damned* ghost that we have seen, and my imaginings are as foul as Vulcan’s stithy! Give him heedful note; for I *mine* eyes will rivet to his face, and after we will both our judgments join in censure of his seeming.”

“*I will*, my lord!” vows Horatio. “If he steal *ought* the whilst this play is playing, and ’scape detecting, I will pay for the theft!”

Hamlet sees royal attendants at the double doors. “They are coming to the play. I must be idle. Get you a place.” Horatio moves to chair at the side of the playing area, one facing the dais.

After a cornet’s regal call, musicians at the back play a march, with hautboys, tabor and flute, and King Claudius and Queen Gertrude make their entrance, followed from the throne room by their train.

As Lord Polonius, Lady Ophelia and other nobles seat themselves on cushioned chairs, the king asks “How fares our cousin Hamlet?”

“*Excellent*, i’ faith!—on the *chameleon*’s dish: I eat the *air*, *promise*-crammed!” says the prince—a lilting jest, taking *fares* to mean *dines*; the changeable lizard is thought to swallow almost nothing. “You cannot feed *capons* so!”

Claudius frowns. “I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet; those words are not mine.” He turns away.

“No—nor *mine*, now.” As the king and queen seat themselves, Hamlet addresses Polonius. “My lord, you played once i’ the university, you say?”

“That did I, my lord, and was accounted a good actor.”

“What did you enact?”

“I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i’ the Capitol; Brutus killed me.”

“It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf *there!*” says Hamlet glibly. “Be the players ready?”

“Aye, my lord; they stay upon your patience,” says Rosencrantz, standing with Guildenstern.

“Come hither, my dear Hamlet,” calls the queen. “Sit by me!”

“No, good mother; here’s metal more attractive,” he says, and sits beside the dais, next to Ophelia.

- Polonius, conferring with Claudius, sees. “*Oho!*—do you mark that?” he whispers to the king.

“Lady, shall I lie in your lap?” Hamlet asks Ophelia.

“No, my lord!”

“I mean, my head *upon* your lap.”

“Aye, my lord.”

“Do you think I meant *country* matters?”

“I think nothing, my lord.”

“That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ *legs!*”

“What is, my lord?”

“*Nothing!*”—a space.

“You *are* merry, my lord!”

“Who, I?”

“Aye, my lord.”

The prince’s smile is tight. “Oh, God, your only *jig-maker!*” He glances toward the dais. “What should a man *do* but be merry? For look you how cheerfully my *mother* looks—and my father died within these two hours!”

“Nay, ’tis twice two *months*, my lord,” says Ophelia, aware, amid the colorfully clad courtiers, of his mourning attire.

“So *long?* Nay then, let the *Devil* wear black—for *I’ll* have a suit of *sables!*”—dark, but very costly. “Oh, heavens! Died two *months* ago, and not *forgotten* yet!—then there’s hope a *great* man’s memory may outlive his life *half a year!*”

“But, by’r Lady, he must build *churches*, or else shall he by then suffer not thinking on,” Hamlet adds.

He looks to the musicians; at his nod they begin to play, softly now, a lute joining the hautboys. Attention shifts to the front, as the actors come forward to present a graceful pantomime.

The characters they portray are a King and a Queen. She embraces him, and he her. She kneels and makes show of protesting her love for him. He takes her up and inclines his head upon her neck. Then he lies on a wide bench and closes his eyes; seeing that he sleeps peacefully, she leaves him.

Soon another man enters the scene, removes the King’s crown—and kisses it. From a vial, he pours something into the King’s ear, then exits as the King shudders violently—and dies.

The Queen returns, discovers that the King is dead, and portrays passionate grief.

The Poisoner, with three other men, returns and pretends to lament with her. The corpse is carried away. The Poisoner woos the Queen with gifts. For a while she seems unwilling, but finally she accepts his love.

The players come forward, bow to acknowledge the polite but restrained applause, and step away.

“What means this, my lord?” asks Ophelia.

“Marry, this is miching *mallecho*,” says Hamlet. “It means *mischief!*”

“Belike this show imports the argument of the play....”

An actor enters in the character of Prologue, to introduce the drama.

“We shall know by this fellow,” Hamlet tells Ophelia. “The players cannot keep counsel; they’ll tell all!”

“Will he tell us what that show meant?”

“*Aye*—or *any* show that *you’ll* show him!” says Hamlet. “Be not you ashamed to *show*, he’ll not shame to tell you *what it means!*”

“You are *naught*, you are *naught*! I’ll mark the play.”

Says Prologue: “*For us, and for our tragedy, here stooping to your clemency, we beg your hearing patiently.*” He bows and exits.

“Is this a *prologue* or the poem on a *ring*?” complains Hamlet.

Ophelia nods. “’Tis *brief*, my lord.”

“As woman’s love.”

In the playing area before them, two actors playing a graying ruler and his wife enter.

“*Full thirty times hath Phoebus’ cart gone round Neptune’s salt wash and Tellus’ orbèd ground,*” the Player King begins, “*and thirty dozen moons with borrowed sheen about the world have times twelve thirties been, since Love and Hymen did unite our hearts and hands, commutual in most sacred bands.*”

Says the Player Queen, “*So many journeys may the sun and moon make us again count o’er ere love be done!*”

“*But, woe is me, you are so sick of late, so far from cheer and from your former state!*”

“*Yet though I fear, and worry, too, my lord, it nothing must discomfort you! For women’s fear and love share quantity: neither is nought nor extremity.*”

“*Now, what my love is, proof hath made you know; and as my love is sizèd, my fear is so! Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear; where little fears grow great, great love grows there!*”

He regards her sadly. “*Faith, I must leave thee, love, and shortly, too, my operant powers their functions loath to do! But thou shalt live, in this fair world behind, honoured, belovèd. And haply one as kind for husband shalt thou—*”

“*Oh, confound the rest!*” she protests. “*Such love must needs be treason in my breast! In second husband let me be accurst! None weds the second but one who killed the first!*”

Hamlet’s mother, he sees, is biting her lip. *Wormwood!* he thinks, *Wormwood!*

The Player Queen continues: “*Impulsion that a second marriage moves is base respect of thrift, but none of love; a second time I kill my husband dead, when second husband kiss me in bed!*”

“*I do believe you think what now you speak,*” says the Player King, “*but what we do determine, oft we break. Purpose is but a slave to memory: of violent birth, but poor validity— which now like fruits unripe stick on the tree, but fall unshaken when they mellow be.*”

“*Most necessary ’tis that we forget to pay ourselves what to our selves is debt: what to ourselves in passion we propose, the passion ending, the purpose doth lose.*”

“*The violence of either grief or joy their own enactures will themselves destroy. Where joy most revels, grief doth most lament; grief joys, joy grieves, on slender accident. This world is not forever, nor ’tis not strange that even our loves should with our fortunes change; for ’tis a question left us yet to prove, whether Love lead Fortune, or else Fortune, Love.*”

“*The great man down, you’ll mark his favourite flies; the poor, avancèd, makes friends of enemies! And further too doth love on fortune tend: for who not needs shall never lack a friend, and who in want a hollow friend doth try, directly seasons him enemy!*”

“*But, orderly to end where I’d begun: our wills and fates do so contrary run that our devices are ever overthrown—our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own. So think thou no second husband wilt wed; that thought will die, when thy first lord is dead.*”

The Player Queen disagrees—adamantly. “*Nor earth to me give food, nor heaven light! Sport and repose lock from me day and night! To desperation turn my trust and hope! An anchor’s cheer, and prison be my scope! Each opposite that blanks the face of joy, meet what I would have well—and it destroy! Both here and hence, pursue me lasting strife, if once a widow ever I be wife!*”

Hamlet is watching Gertrude’s grave demeanor. *If she should break out now!*



“’Tis deeply sworn!” says the Player King, touching her hand. He stretches and yawns. “Sweet, leave me here awhile; my spirits grow dull, and I would fain beguile the tedious day with sleep.” He lies down on the bench and closes his eyes.

“Sleep rock thy brain; and never come mischance between us twain!” says she, leaving.

Hamlet asks Queen Gertrude, “Madam, how like you this play?”

“The lady protests too much, methinks.”

“Oh, but *she* ’ll keep *her* word.”

King Claudius leans down to ask Hamlet, quietly, about the drama: “Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in’t?”

“No, no!—they do but *jest*—*poison* in *jest*!—no offence i’ the *world*!” says the prince.

“What do you call the play?”

“*The Mousetrap*. Marry, how? By *topic*: this play is the image of a murder done in Vienna—Gonzago is the duke’s name; his wife’s, Baptista. You shall see anon. ’Tis a knavish piece of work, but what o’ that? Your Majesty and we that have free souls, it touches *us* not! Let the gallèd *jade* wince; *our* withers are unwrung.”

He turns to the performance area as a character enters. “This is one Lucianus... *nephew* to the king.”

“You are as good as a Chorus, my lord,” says Ophelia.

Offers Hamlet archly, “I could interpret between *you* and your *love*—if I could *see* the puppets *dallying*!”

“You are keen, my lord, you are *keen*,” she chides.

“It would cost you a *groaning* to take off *my* edge!” is the ribald reply.

She blushes. “Still better—and *worse*!”

“So you mis-take your husbands.”

Startled by his sudden, harsh gravity, she is taken aback—and hurt.

A black-clad actor comes forward, stroking his beard. Thinks Hamlet, impatiently, *Begin, murderer!* The assassin pulls a vial from a pocket. *Pox! Leave thy damnable faces and begin! Come!*—this *croaking raven doth bellow for revenge!*

The performer speaks as *Lucianus*, the nephew: “*Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing; confederate season, else no creature seeing! Then mixture rank—of midnight weeds collected, with Hecate’s bane thrice blasted, thrice infected—thy natural magic and dire property a whoreson life usurp immediately!*” He empties the vial into the sleeper’s ear.

Hamlet explains to Ophelia: “He poisons him i’ the garden for’s estate. His name’s Gonzago; the story was extant, and writ in choice Italian!”—like Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. “You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago’s wife.”

Ophelia is startled by sudden movement. “The king rises!”

“What, frightened with false fire?” murmurs Hamlet.

Gertrude, alarmed, asks her husband, “How fares my lord?”

Polonius calls to the company, “*Give o’er the play!*”

“Give me some light!” demands Claudius angrily. “*Away!*”

Polonius calls, “*Lights! Lights! Lights!*” The actors bow and return to their side room, as attendants take up torches, and the royal party moves toward the dark corridor.

Hamlet’s doubts resolved, he exults, dourly triumphant. “Why, let the *stricken* deer go weep; the harts ungallèd *play!*” he says, watching Claudius. “For some must *watch* while some must sleep—so runs the *world* away!”

Soon the court has streamed from the hall, leaving the prince with his sole ally.

Hamlet is pleased with his theatrical foray: “Would not *this*, sir—if the rest of my fortunes forsake me—with a forest of feathers, and two Provincial roses on my raised shoes, get me a *fellowship*?”—part ownership in a theater company. “By *players*’ *acclaim*, sir!”

Horatio grins. “Half a share.”

“A *whole* one, I!” insists the prince proudly. He composes, extempore:

“For thou dost know a *Damon* dear!  
This realm dismantled was  
Of *Jove himself!* And now reigns here  
A very, very— *pajock!*”

“You might have rhymed,” laughs Horatio; he expected “*ass*” instead of the term for a stable knave. But the *Pythias* is pleased that his friend confides in him.

Hamlet paces. “Oh, good Horatio, I’ll *take* the ghost’s word for a *thousand pound!* Didst *perceive?*”

“Very well, my lord!”

“Upon the talk of the *poisoning*—”

“I did very *well* note him!”

Hamlet sees the other Wittenberg students returning. “Come, some *music!*” he calls to the men packing up their instruments. “Come the *recorders!*—for if the king liked not the *comedy,*” he says, with giddy sharpness, “why then belike he’d like it *noted* not, perdie! Come, some *music!*”

Guildenstern returns. “Good my lord, vouchsafe me a word with you,” he says solicitously. “The king, sir—”

“Aye sir, what of him?”

“—is in his retirement marvelous distempered!”

“With drink, sir?”

“No, my lord, rather with *choler!*”

“Your wisdom would show itself more richer to signify this to his doctor,” growls Hamlet, his ire rising, “for *for me* to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into *far more* *choler!*”

The king’s agents back away. “Good my lord, put your discourse into some frame, and start not so wildly from my affair!”

With an effort, Hamlet suppresses his anger. “I am tame, sir. Pronounce.”

“The queen—your *mother*—in most great *affliction of spirit,* hath sent me to you!”

“You are well come!” says the prince, pleased.

Guildenstern frowns. “Nay, good my lord, this courtesy is not of the right breed! If it shall please you to make me a *wholesome* answer, I will do your mother’s commandment; if not, your pardon and my return shall be the end of my business.”

“Sir, I cannot.”

“What, my lord?”

“Make you a wholesome answer; my wit’s *diseased*. But, sir, such answer as I *can* make, you shall command—or, rather, as you say, my *mother*....” He pauses, eyes closed for a moment, as he seeks restraint. “*Therefore* no more.

“But to the matter; my mother, you say—”

Rosencrantz tries another tack. “Then thus she says: your behavior hath struck her into amazement and admiration!”

“Oh *wonderful son,* that can so astonish a mother!” Now the prince glares. “But is there no *sequel* at the heels of this mother’s admiration? *Impart!*”

Says Rosencrantz quickly, “She desires to speak with you in her chambers, ere you go to bed.”

“We shall *obey,* were she but ten times *your* mother.” Hamlet regards the gentleman coldly. “Have you any further *trade* with us?”

“My lord, you once did *love* me,” protests Rosencrantz.

“So do I still, by these *pickers* and *stealers!*” Hamlet wiggles his raised fingers comically.

“Good my lord, what is your cause of distemper? You do surely bar the door upon your own *liberty* if you deny your grief to your friends!”

Hamlet considers his revenge. “Sir, I lack advancement.”

“How can *that* be, when you have the voice of the king himself for your succession in Denmark?”

“*Ah*, but only ‘while the grass grows. . . .’” He shrugs. “The proverb is somewhat musty.” The old saw ends: *the horse is starving*. Hamlet is to be king someday—if he *lives*.

The musicians are heading for their castle quarters.

“Oh, the *recorders!* Let me see one,” says Hamlet, taking a slender, carved-wood instrument in hand and examining it.

He motions to the students. “To withdraw with you,” he says, taking both aside, “why do you go about to recover the wind of me,”—lurk downwind, “as if you would drive me into a toil?”—a game-hunter’s trap.

“Oh, my lord, if my duty be too *bold*, my *love*, too, is unmannerly,” claims the ever-courtly Guildenstern.

“I do not well understand that,” says Hamlet. “Will you play upon this pipe?”

“My lord, I cannot.”

“I pray you.”

“Believe me, I cannot.”

“I do *beseech* you.”

“I know no touch of it, my lord.”

“‘Tis *as easy as lying!* Govern these ventages with your fingers and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will disgorge most eloquent music!” He proffers the instrument. “Look you, these are the stops. . . .”

“But these I cannot command to any utterance of harmony; I have not the skill.”

Hamlet glares. “Why, look you, now, how *unworthy* a thing you make of me!

“You *would* play upon *me!*—you would seem to know my *stops*; you would *sound* me from my lowest note to the top of my compass! You would pluck out the heart of my mystery!”

He angrily thrusts the recorder before the gentleman’s face. “And there is *much* music, *excellent* voice, in *this* little organ, yet you cannot make it speak!

“*Sblood!*—do you think I am easier to be played on than a *pipe*? Call me what instrument you will, though you can *fret* me, yet you cannot play upon me!” The prince, disgusted, turns away and returns the player’s pipe.

Polonius now hurries into the hall and comes to Hamlet. “My lord, the queen would speak with you, and *immediately!*” He regards the prince expectantly, oblivious to his seething anger.

Hamlet points to a tall, moonlit window at the back. “Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?” he asks.

Glancing out at the night sky, Polonius indulges the lunatic. “By the Mass, ’tis like a camel, indeed.”

“Methinks it is like a *weasel*.”

“It *is* backèd like a weasel.”

Hamlet regards the plump nobleman. “Or like a *whale*?”

Polonius nods. “Very like a whale.”

Hamlet shakes his head and sighs. “Then I will come to my mother by and by.” *They ‘fool’ me to the top of my bent!* He tells the waiting lord, “I will come—*by and by*.”

“I will say so. . . .”

“‘By and by’ is *easily* said,” snaps Hamlet.

Polonius, perplexed, bows and returns to the royal quarters.

“Leave me, friends,” says the prince, suddenly quite tired. Horatio and the musicians bow and go, as Hamlet walks, slowly, into the actors’ playing space, and stands there, thinking.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, ignored, return to the throne room.

As servants come to extinguish the candles, Hamlet ruminates.

*'Tis now the very witching time of night, when churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out contagion to this world! Now could I drink hot blood, and do such bitter business as the day would quake to look on!*

*Soft! Now to my mother. O heart, lose not thy nature; let not the soul of Nero ever enter this firm bosom! Let me be cruel, but not unnatural; I will speak daggers to her, but use none. My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites: how in my words soever she be shent, to give them seals, never my soul consent!*

## Chapter Five Confrontations

Claudius is moving to counter the threat. *"I like him not!"*—nor stands it *safe* with us, to let his madness rage!" he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. "Therefore prepare you: I your commission will forthwith dispatch, and he to England shall along with you!

"The terms of our state may not endure hazard so dangerous as doth *hourly* grow out of his lunacies!"

"We will ourselves provide," says Guildenstern. "Most *holy* and *religious* fear it is: to keep those many bodies safe that live and feed upon Your Majesty."

Says Rosencrantz obsequiously, "The single and peculiar life is bound, with all the strength and armour of the mind, to keep itself from noyance; but *much more so* is that spirit upon whose weal depend and rest the lives of *many*. The cease of *majesty* dies not alone, but, like a gulf, doth draw what's near *with* it. It is a massive *wheel*, fixed on the summit of the highest mount, to whose huge spokes *ten thousand* lesser things are mortised and joined!—when which falls, each small annexment, petty consequence, *attends* the boisterous ruin! Never alone did the king sigh, but with a *general* groan!"

"Aim you, I pray you, to this *speedy* voyage!" urges Claudius, "for we will *fetters* put upon this fear, which now goes too free-footed!"

"We will haste us," Guildenstern assures him, as the two bow and set off.

Polonius brings the king news about Hamlet. "My lord, he's going to his mother's bedchamber! Behind the arras I'll convey myself to hear the process. I'll warrant she'll tax him home! And, as you said—and wisely was it said—'tis meet that some more audience than a mother, since Nature makes them partial, should for vantage o'erhear the speech.

"Fare you well, my liege. I'll call upon you ere you go to bed, and tell you what I know!"

"Thanks, dear my lord," says the king, as Polonius hurries away.

Claudius, alone, paces in anguish.

*Oh, my offence is rank!—it smells to heaven! It hath the primal, eldest curse upon't—a brother's murder! Pray can I not, though inclination be as sharp as will: my stronger guilt defeats my strong intent; and, like a man to double businesses bound, I stand in pause where I shall first begin—and both neglect!*

*What if this cursèd hand were thicker than itself with brother's blood?—is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens to wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy but to confront the visage of offence?*

*And what's in prayer but this two-fold force: to be forestallèd ere we come to fall, or pardoned, being down? Then I'll look up; my fault is past.*

*But, oh, what form of prayer can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'? That cannot be, since I am still possessèd of those for which I did the murder: my crown, mine own ambition, and my queen! May one be pardoned and retain the effects? In the corrupted currents of this world offence's gilded hand may shove aside justice; and oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself buys out the law.*

*But 'tis not so above: there is no shuffling; there the action lies in its true nature; and we ourselves are compellèd, even to the teeth and forehead of our faults, to give in evidence!*

*What, then? What rests?*

*Try what repentance can!*

*What can it not?*

*Yet what can it, when one cannot repent? Oh, wretched state! Oh, bosom black as death! O snarèd soul, that, struggling to be free, art more engaged!*

*Help, angels! Make assay! Bow, stubborn knees; and, heart with strings of steel, be soft as sinews of the newborn babe!*

He turns to an alcove, where he kneels, his back to the room, before a crucifix lighted by votive candles. *All may be well....*

Hamlet, passing in the corridor, recognizes the regal figure, and stops.

*Now might I do it pat, now while he is praying! The prince quietly draws his sword. And now I'll do it!*

But he pauses. *And so he goes to heaven!—and so am I revengèd?*

Hamlet lowers the blade. *That would be scanned! A villain kills my father—and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven?*

*Oh, this is hire and salary, not revenge! He took my father grossly, full of bread, with all his crimes broad-blown as flush as May; but how his audit stands, who knows, save Heaven? In our circumstance and course of thought 'tis heavy with him; but am I then revengèd, to take him in the purging of his soul, when he is fit and seasoned for his passage?*

*No!*

*Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent!—when he is drunk asleep, or in his rage, or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed!—at gaming, swearing, or about some act that has no relish of salvation in't! Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven, and that his soul may be as damnèd and dark as hell, whereto it goes!*

*My mother is waiting.* He regards the king angrily. *This physic but prolongs thy sickly days!* He sheaths the weapon and silently strides away.

A while later Claudius groans, and rises, despairing. *My words fly up; my thoughts remain below! Words without thoughts never to heaven go!*

Lord Polonius alerts the queen in her private chambers: “He will come straight! Look you *lay home to him!* Tell him his *pranks* have been too broad to *bear with*, and that Your Grace hath screenèd and stood between *much heat* and him!” He moves toward a thick tapestry. “I’ll ensconce me even here. Pray you, be *round* with him!”

They can hear Hamlet’s voice in the corridor: “Mother!”

Gertrude assures the counselor, “I’ll warrant you; fear me not! *Withdraw!*—I hear him coming!” Polonius hides behind the arras.

Hamlet enters the room and stands before the queen. “Now, Mother, what’s the matter?”

“Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.”

“Mother, you have *my* father much offended!”

“Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.”

“Go, go, you question with a *wicked* tongue!”

The queen is startled—stung by such effrontery. “Why, *how now*, Hamlet?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Have you *forgot me?*”

“No, by the rood, not so!” He scowls. “You are the *queen*—your husband’s *brother’s* wife! And—would it were *not* so—you are *my mother!*” he adds bitterly.

Gertrude, wounded, feels tears. “Nay, then, I’ll set those to you that can speak.”

“Come,” Hamlet cries angrily, grasping her wrist and pulling her roughly to a chair, “come and sit you *down!*—you shall not budge! You’ll go not till I set you up a glass where you may see the inmost part of you!”

His vehemence affrights her. “What wilt thou do?” asks the queen, amazed. “Thou wilt not murder me...! Help... *Help!*”

“*What, ho! Help!*” calls Polonius. “*Help, help!*”

“How now—a *rat?* *Aye*, for a ducat!” Hamlet draws his sword. “*Dead!*” he cries, plunging the blade through the heavy fabric, then pulling it free with a sharp tug.

“*Oh!*” gasps Polonius, “I am *slain!*” He sags, clutching at the arras; he falls, pulling it down over him.

The queen is aghast. “*Oh, me!* What hast thou *done?*”

“Nay, *I* know not,” replies Hamlet sourly. “Is it the *king?*”

“*Oh*, what a *rash* and bloody deed is *this!*”

“A bloody deed?—almost as bad, good mother, as *kill a king* and *marry with his brother!*”

“As *kill* a king?”

“*Aye*, lady, ’twas my word!”

He lifts one end of the tapestry to view the corpse. “Thou *wretched*, rash, intruding *fool*, farewell! I took thee for thy *better!* Take thy fortune!—thou find’st that to be too busy is some danger!

“Leave wringing of your hands,” Hamlet orders his trembling mother. “*Peace!* Sit you down, and let me wring your *heart!*—for so I shall, if it be made of *penetrable* stuff—if damnèd *custom* have not brassèd it so that it is proof and bulwark against sense!”

“What have I *done*, that thou darest wag thy tongue in noise so rude against me?”

“Such an act as blurs the grace and blush of *Modesty*, calls *Virtue hypocrite*, takes off the rose from the fair forehead of innocent *Love* and sets a *blister* there!—makes *marriage* vows as false as *dicers’* oaths!—*oh*, such a deed as from the body of *contrition* plucks the very soul, and sweet *religion* makes a rhapsody of *words!*”

“*Heaven’s* face doth *glow!* Yea, *this* solidity and compound mass,”—the earth, “with visage as tristful as facing the *doom*, is *thought-sick* at the act!”

“*Ay, me!*” cries the frantic lady. “*What* act, that roars so loud, and thunders even in the *index!*”—mention.

From a pocket, Hamlet brings out two ivory miniatures, each with a portrait. “*Look here*, upon this picture, and on this, the counterfeit presentment of two *brothers*.

“See what a grace was seated on *this* brow: *Hyperion’s* curls; the front of *Jove himself*; an eye to threaten and command like *Mars*; in stance like the herald *Mercury*, new-’lighted on a heaven-kissing hill!—a combination and a form, indeed, where *every* god did seem to set his seal, to give the world assurance of a *man!* This was your husband!

“Look you now what *follows*,” he says scornfully. “Here *is* your husband—like a *mildewed ear of corn*, shriveling its wholesome brother!

“Have you eyes? Could you, on *this* fair mountain, *leave* to feed and batten on this *moor?* Have you *eyes?*”

“You cannot call it *love*, for at your age the hey-day in the blood is tame: it’s humble, and waits upon the judgment. And what *judgment* would step from this to *this?*”

“*Sense* surely you have, else could you not have motion; but surely that sense is apoplexed! For *madness* would not so err—no sense was e’er so thrallèd to ecstasy but that it reserved *some* quantity of choice, to serve in such a *difference!*”

“What *devil* was’t that thus hath *cozened* you at *hoodman-blind?*—eyes without *sight*, ears without *hearing*, hands without *feeling!*—all sans *smelling*: nought but a *sickly* part of *that* one true sense could so *cope!*”

“O *Shame*, where is thy *blush?*” rages Hamlet. “Rebellious *Hell*, if thou canst mutiny in a *matron’s* bones, to flaming *youth* let *Virtue* be as *wax*, and melt in her own fire! Declaim not

when compulsive *ardour* gives the charge, since *frost itself* as actively doth *burn*, and *reason panders will!*”

“Oh, Hamlet, speak no more!” sobs Gertrude. “Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul!—and there I see such black, ingrained spots as will not lose their tinct!”

“Nay, but you *lie* in the *rank sweat* of an unseemly *bed!*—*stewed* in *corruption*—honeying and making love over the *nasty sty!*”

She pleads: “Oh, speak to me *no more!* These words like *daggers* enter in mine ears! No *more*, sweet Hamlet!”

“A *murderer* and a *villain!*—a *slave* that is not *twentieth* part the *tithe* of your precedent lord; a *Vice* of kings, a *cutpurse* of the empire and its rule, who from a shelf the precious diadem *stole*, and put it in his pocket!”

“*No more!*”

“A king of *shreds and patches!*” he rasps.

But indictment falters as the feverish prince, suddenly aware of some change, looks about. “*Save me*, and hover o’er me with your wings, you *heavenly* guards!” breathes Hamlet—as the image of his father appears. He kneels, and asks the specter, “What would Your Grace’s figure?”

*Alas, he’s mad!* thinks Gertrude, who sees only her son.

Hamlet looks up at the frowning father; the prosecutor must now defend. “Do you not come your tardy son to *chide*, that, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by the important acting of your dread command? *Oh, say!*”

The deep, sepulchral voice is stern: “*Do not forget!* This visitation is but to *whet* thy almost-blunted *purpose!*” The tone softens. “But, look: amazement on thy mother sits! Oh, step between her and her fighting soul! Imagining in *weakest* bodies strongest works! *Speak* to her, Hamlet!”

The prince turns to the queen. “How is it with you, lady?”

Gertrude quavers. “*Alas*, how is’t with *you*,” she asks, even more fearful now, “that you do bend your eye on *vacancy*, and with the incorporeal *air* do hold discourse?”

“Forth from your eyes your spirits *wildly* peek!—and, as do sleeping soldiers at the *alarm*, your bedded *hair* as if living *starts up* and *stands on end!* Oh, gentle son, upon the *heat and flame* of thy distemper sprinkle cool *patience!*”

“Whereon do you *look?*”

“On *him, on him!*” cries Hamlet, pointing. “Look you, how *pale* he glares! Preaching to *stones, his* form and cause conjoined would make them *capable!*”

He turns away from the sad specter. “Do not *look* upon me, lest with that piteous action you convert my *stern effects!* Then *what I have to do* will lack true colour—*tears*, perchance, for *blood!*”

Asks Gertrude—again afraid of being murdered, “To whom do you speak this?”

“Do you see nothing there?”

“Nothing at all—yet all that *is*, I see!”

“Nor did you nothing *hear?*”

“No, nothing but ourselves. . . .”

“Why, look you *there!*—*look* how it steals away!—my *father*, in his coat as he lived!” The ghost drifts away. “Look, where he goes, even now, out at the portal!”

The queen stares at her son in amazement. “This the very *coinage* of your *brain!*—this bodiless creation *delirium* is very cunning in!”

Hamlet scoffs. “*Delirium?* My pulse, as yours, doth keep time temperately—and makes a *healthful* music! It is not *madness* that I have uttered; bring me to a text, and I will re-word the matter which madness would *gambol* from!”

“Mother, for the love of *Grace!*—lay not a flattering unction to your soul that ’tis not *your trespass* but my madness speaks!—it will but skin with thin film the ulcerous place, whilst *rank corruption*, mining all within, *infects unseen!* *Confess* yourself to *Heaven!*—*repent* what’s past, *avoid* what is to come, and do not spread compost on the *weeds* to make them *ranker!*”

“*Forgive* me this, my virtue; for in the fatness of *these* pury times, Virtue *itself* of Vice must pardon beg!—yea, curb, and *woo* for leave *to do good!*”

“Oh, Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain!” wails Gertrude.

“*Throw away* the *worser* part of it, and live the purer with the other half!”

The prince has expressed his pain; now his fury wanes. “Good night. But go not to mine uncle’s bed—*assume* a virtue, if you have it not.

“That monster, *Custom*—which all sensibility deletes from *devilish* habits—is *angel* yet in *this*: to the use of *fair* and *good* action that is aptly put on it likewise gives a frock or livery! *Refrain* tonight, and that shall lend a kind of easiness to the *next* abstinence, the next, *more* easy!—for *use* can almost change the stamp of Nature, and either *in* the devil, or *throw him out* with wondrous potency!

“Once more, good night. And when you are desirous to be *blessèd*, I’ll blessing beg of *you*.”

Calmer, now, Hamlet looks at the dead counselor. “For this same lord, I do repent. But heaven hath pleased it so—to punish me with *this*, and this with *me*, in that I must be both scourge and minister! I will bestow him, and will answer well the death I gave him.

“So, again, good night. I must be cruel only to be *kind*; the bad *begun* brings worse behind!”

At that the prince pauses for a moment. But soon he speaks again. “One word more, good lady.”

“What shall I *do*?” groans the devastated queen.

“Not *this*, I bid you: by no means let the bloated king tempt you again to *bed*, pinch wantonly on your cheek, call you his *mouse*; nor let him, for a pair of reechy kisses, and patting at your neck with his damnèd fingers, make you to *ravel all this matter out*: essentially that I am not in *madness*, but mad in *craft!*”

“’Twere good for *you*, fair, sober, wise, not to let him know. For who would *not* hide from a *paddock*, from a *bat*, a *gib*, such dear concernings? One that’s but a *quean!*”—a *whore*.

The lady, weeping, is anguished. “Be thou assurèd: if words be made of breath, and breath of life, I have no life to breathe what *thou* hast said to *me!*”

“I must to England. You know that?”

She wipes her eyes. “Alack, I had forgot; ’tis so concluded on.”

“There’s letters—sealèd.” He leans down and grasps the dead lord’s coat collar. “This man shall begin *my* packing: I’ll lug the guts into the neighbour room.”

*And my two schoolfellows, whom I will trust as I would adder’s fangs, bear a mandate: they must sweep my way, and marshal me to knavery! Let it work; for ’tis but sport to have the conniver hoist with his own petard!—blown up by the exploding charge he set. And it shall go hard but I will delve one yard below their mines, and blow them at the moon! Oh, ’tis most sweet, when in one line two schemes directly meet!*

“Mother, good night.”

He looks down at Polonius. “Indeed, this counselor is now most *secret*, most still and most *grave*, who was in life a foolish, prating knave. Come, sir, to draw toward an end with you!” he says wryly, dragging the corpse away from pooled blood.

He turns, and bows facetiously. “*Good night*, Mother.”

She sees tears on his face, despite his mordant mood, as he pulls the body toward the corridor, leaving streaks of scarlet on the stone floor.

Gertrude has hurried to Claudius in the royal quarters, sobbing. Says he, “There’s *matter* in these sighs, these profound heaves! You must *translate*; ’tis fit we understand them! *Where is your son?*”

“Oh, my good lord, what have I *seen* tonight!”

“*What*, Gertrude?—how does *Hamlet?*”



“Mad as the *sea* and *wind* when both contend which is the *mightier!* In his *lawless fit*, hearing something stir behind the arras, he whips out his *rapier*, cries, ‘*A rat, a rat!*’—and, in this brainish apprehension,”—mad fear, “*kills* the unseen good old man!”

“*Oh, heavy deed!*” gasps Claudius. And then he realizes: “It had been so with *us*, had we been there!” He shakes his head. “His liberty is full of threats to all—to us, to *you yourself*, to *everyone!*”

“*Alas*, how shall this bloody deed be *answered?* It will be laid to *us*, whose providence should have kept short, restrained and out of haunt, this *mad young man!* But so much was our love, we would not understand what was most *fit*, but, like the owner of a foul disease, to keep from divulging it, let it *feed*, even on the pith of life!

“Where is he gone?”

“To draw apart the body he hath killed,” says Gertrude, “o’er whom, in his very madness—like some ore of metal that among base minerals shows itself *pure*—he *weeps* for what is done!”

“Oh, Gertrude, come away! The sun no sooner shall the *mountains* touch”—well before the dawn arrives below, “but we will *ship him hence!*”

He frowns, already considering. “And his vile deed we must, with all our majesty and skill, both *countenance* and *excuse.*”

Claudius calls for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “Friends both, go join you with some further aid!”—get more men. “Hamlet in madness hath Polonius *slain*, and from his mother’s chamber hath he dragged him! Go seek him out!—speak fair, but bring the body into the chapel. I pray you, *hasten* in this!”

The students bow and rush away.

“Come, Gertrude, we’ll call up our wisest friends, and let them know both what we mean to do and what’s *untimely done!*”

“Oh, come away!” He heads for the throne room. “My soul is full of discord and dismay!”

**E**merging from a seldom-used room near some back stairs, the prince glances back. *Safely stowed.* He closes the door, and moves down the corridor.

*What noise? Who calls on Hamlet?* The spies hurry into view. *Oh, here they come.* He braces himself.

Rosencrantz approaches, short of breath, followed by three others. “What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?”

“Compounded it with dust, whereto ’tis kin.”

“Tell us where ’tis, that we may take it thence, and bear it to the chapel.”

But Hamlet stares coldly. “Do not *believe* it,” he warns.

“Believe what?”

“That I can keep *your* counsel and not mine *own!*” says the prince angrily. “Besides... to be *questioned* by a *sponge!* What replication”—response—“should be made by the *son of a king?*”

Warily, Rosencrantz inches away from the lunatic. “Take you me for a sponge, my lord?”

“*Aye, sir!*—that *soaks up* the king’s countenance, his *rewards*, his *authorities!* When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but a *squeezing*—and, sponge, you shall be dry again. But such officers do the king *best* service *at the end:* like an ape, he keeps them in a corner of his jaw—first mouthèd, last to be *swallowed!*”

“I understand you not, my lord!”

“I am *glad* of it!—a *foolish* speech sleeps in a *knave’s* ear.”

“My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the king!” says Guildenstern.

Hamlet frowns. “The body is with *the king,*”—dead, as is Hamlet’s father, “but *the king* is not with a *body;* the king is a thing—”

“A *thing*, my lord!”

“—of *nothing.*” The prince regards the two burly men now flanking him. “Bring me to him,” he tells them, with a grim resignation.

Following his false friends, the prince feels deeply estranged from Elsinore. Yet the growing peril oddly emboldens him. “*Hide, fox!—and all after!*”

## Chapter Six New Dangers

I have sent to seek him, and to find the body,” King Claudius tells two lords of his council, who attend him in the throne room. “How *dangerous* is it that this man goes *loose!* “Yet we must not put the strong *law* on him: he’s beloved by the distracted multitude, who like not in their *judgment* but their *eyes*; and where ’tis so, the offender’s *scourging* is weighed, but never the *offence!*

“To bear all, smooth and even, this sudden sending him away must seem a deliberated pause. Diseases *desperate* grown are by desperate *appliance* relieved, or not at all!

“How now?” he asks, as Rosencrantz arrives. “What hath befall’n?”

“Where the dead body is bestowed, my lord, we cannot get from him.”

“But where is *he?*”

“Here without, my lord, guarded, waiting to know your pleasure.”

“Bring him before us.”

“*Ho, Guildenstern!* Bring in my lord.”

That gentleman leads an apparently buoyant prince to the king.

“Now, *Hamlet,*” says Claudius, as if addressing a child, “where’s *Polonius?*”

“At supper,” says the prince lightly.

“At supper? Where?”

“Not where he eats, but where he is *eaten*: a certain convocation of *politic worms* are e’en at him! Your worm is your only emperor, for *diet*: we fatten all creatures else to fatten *us*, and we fatten ourselves for *maggots*. Your fat *king* and your lean *beggar* are but variable *servings*—two dishes, to but one table—that’s their end.”

“Alas, *alas!*” says the king.

“A man may *fish* with the worm that hath eaten of a king, and a *cat* eat of the fish that hath fed on that worm.”

Claudius is affronted. “What dost you *mean* by this?”

“Nothing,” says Hamlet blandly, “but to show you how a king may *parade*: through the guts of a beggar.”

“*Where is Polonius?*” demands Claudius angrily.

“In heaven. Send hither to see; if your messenger find him not there, seek him i’ the *other* place *yourself*.” The prince examines his fingernails. “But indeed, if you find him not within this month, you shall *nose* him as you go up the stairs into the lobby.”

“Go seek him there,” Claudius orders an attendant.

“He will stay till ye come,” the prince tells the man.

“Hamlet,” says Claudius, as the nobles listen, “for thine especial *safety*, which we do tender as dearly as we *grieve* for that which thou hast *done*, that deed must *send thee hence* with fiery quickness! Therefore *prepare* thyself!—the ship is ready and the wind at help, the associates attend, and everything is bent for England!”

“For *England*.”

“*Aye*, Hamlet!”

“Good.”

“So it *is*, if thou knew’st our purposes!”

“I see a *cherub* that sees them. But, come; for *England!* Farewell, dear Mother.”

Claudius corrects. “Thy loving *father*, Hamlet.”

“My *mother!*” insists the prince. “Father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh—and so, my mother.

“Come, for England!” He turns and strides away, with Guildenstern right behind.

“*Follow him at a foot*”—very closely, the king tells Rosencrantz. “Tempt him aboard with *speed!*—delay it not!—I’ll have him hence *tonight! Away!*—for everything is sealed and done that else leans on the affair. Pray you, *make haste!*”

The gentleman is already gone, hurrying after Hamlet.

*England*, thinks Claudius darkly, *if my love thou hold’st at aught—and my great power there may give thee sense, since yet thy scar looks raw and red, after the Danish sword!—and thy free awe pays homage to us, thou mayst not coldly set aside our sovereign process, which imports at full, by letters congruing to that effect, the immediate death of Hamlet!*

His jaws clench as he pictures the island’s king. *Do it, England! For like a septic in my blood he rages, and thou must cure me!*

*Till I know ’tis done, howe’er my haps, my joys were ne’er begun!*

**A**long the windy eastern coast of Denmark, young Prince Fortinbras makes a statesmanlike stop during his journey south toward Poland; he is leading a force of armed Norwegian adventurers toward an impending incursion across the Baltic.

“Go, captain,” says the prince. “From me greet the Danish king. Tell him that, by his licence, Fortinbras craves the conveyance of a promised march over his kingdom. You know the rendezvous; if that his majesty would aught with *us*, we shall express our duty in his eye; and let him know so.”

“I will do’t, my lord,” says the officer, bowing.

“Go softly on,” says Fortinbras, returning to the ships of his disembarking army.

As the captain and his troop of soldiers start away, a party of Danes rides up to intercept them. With Hamlet are Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and attendants—rough-looking ones.

Hamlet asks the captain, “Good sir, whose powers are these?”

“They are of Norway, sir.”

“How purposed, sir, I pray you?”

“Against some part of Poland.”

“Who commands them, sir?”

“The nephew to old Norway, Fortinbras.”

“Goes it against the main of Poland, sir, or for some frontier?”

“Truly to speak, and with no addition, we go to gain a little patch of ground that hath in it no *profit* but the *name*,” says the captain. “For *pay* of *five ducats—five!*—I would not *farm* it! Nor will it yield to Norway a ranker rate from the Pole should it be *sold back* for a fee!”

“Why, then the Poles never will defend it.”

The officer contradicts, but not rudely: “Yes; it is already garrisoned.”

Hamlet watches the force being assembled near the Norwegian prince’s ships. *Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats will now debate the question of this straw! This is the abscess of much wealth, that in peace breaks inside, but shows no outward cause why the man dies!*

He nods to the captain. “I humbly thank you, sir.”

“God be wi’ you, sir,” says the officer, proceeding on his mission to the Danish court.

Rosencrantz asks Hamlet, “Will’t please you *go*, my lord?”

“I’ll be with you straight; go a little before.”

As his stallion noses tough grasses at the edge of the shore, Hamlet muses.

*How all occasions do inform against me, and spur my delayèd revenge!*

*What is a man, if his chief good, and marker of his time, be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more!*

*But surely He that made us with such large discourse—of looking before and after—gave us not that capability and god-like reason to fust in us unused!*

*Now, whether it be bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple of thinking ever too precisely on the event—thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom and three parts coward—I do not know why I live to say ‘This thing’s yet to do,’ sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means to do’t!*

*Examples gross as earth exhort me! Witness this army of such mass and charge, led by a delicate and tender prince whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed, makes mouths at the invisible event, exposing what is mortal and unsure to all that fortune, death and danger dare—even for an egg-shell!*

*Rightly to be great is not to stir without great argument, but greatly to find quarrel in a straw, when honour’s at stake.*

*How stand I then, that have a father killèd, a mother stainèd—incitements of my reason and my blood!—but let all sleep?—while, to my shame, I see the imminent death of a thousand men who, for a fantasy, a trick of fame, go to their graves like beds!—fight for a tract whereon the antagonists’ numbers cannot even try the cause!—which in continent is not tomb enough to hide the slain!*

*Oh, from this time forth my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!*

He spurs his black steed onward toward the waiting Danish ship that is soon to sail for England.

**I**n the throne room at Elsinore, Gertrude has listened as a courtier implores her to receive Ophelia. “I will not speak with her!” insists the miserable queen.

“She is *importunate*—indeed, *distracted!* Her mood will needs be *pitied!*”—by those dwelling in the palace, and others who work there, including many commoners.

“What would she have?”

“She speaks much of her *father*—says she hears there’s *tricks* i’ the world, and *hems,*”—pauses, with dire implication, “beats at her *heart,* spurns testily at *straws!*”—figments.

The gentleman leans closer, to emphasize his political concern. “She speaks things in *doubt* that carry but half sense”—makes sinister allusions. “Her speech is nothing; yet the unshapèd use of it doth move the hearers to *collection:* they *aim* at it, and botch up the words to fit their *own* thoughts—which as her winks and nods and gestures suggest to them, indeed would make one think there *might be* thought!—though nothing *sure,* yet much *unhappily!*”

“’Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew dangerous conjectures in *ill-breeding* minds!”

The queen considers for a moment. “Let her come in.” As the gentleman steps away, Gertrude worries: *To my sick soul, as sin’s true nature is, each toy seems prologue to some great amiss! So full of artless vigilance is guilt, it spills itself in fearing to be spilt!*

The courtier returns, bringing Ophelia. She asks plaintively, looking about, “Where is the beauteous *majesty* of Denmark?”

“How now, Ophelia?” asks the queen quietly.

Lost in her own field of sorrows, the young gentlewoman sings, to herself, part of an old ballad. “*How should I your true love know from another one?’ ‘By its cockle hat and staff, and its sandal shoon!’*”

“Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?”

Ophelia looks up, blinking. “What say you? Nay, pray you, mark,” she says, and sings, with a sad softness, a dirge: “*He is dead and gone, lady, he is dead and gone, at his head the grass-green turf, at his heels a stone.*”

“Nay, but, Ophelia—”

“Pray you, *mark,*” she persists: “*White, his shroud, as the mountain snow—*”

- “*Alas, look here, my lord!*” says Gertrude as Claudius arrives.

“*—laden with sweet flowers, who unbewept to the grave did go, without true love’s showers.*”

The king addresses her. "How do you, pretty lady?"

"Well, God 'ield you," says Ophelia with a thin gaiety; but then she stops. "They say the *owl* was a baker's daughter." A legend makes the night-bird's call a warning. "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may *be!* God be at *your* table."

- Claudius whispers to the queen, "Notions about her father."

"Pray you, let us have no *words* of this," Ophelia tells herself. "But when they ask you what it means, say you *thus*." She sings a song of a virgin:

"*Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day.*

*'All in the morning betimes am I,*

*'A maid at your window to be your valentine!'*

*Then up he rose*

*And doffed his clothes,*

*And oped the chamber door—*

*Let in the maid that out a maid never departed more!"*

- "Pretty Ophelia, ...." says the king soothingly, approaching her.

"Indeed, without an oath,"—an explicit promise, she notes, remembering.

"I'll make an end on't." She sings:

"*By Jesus and by sweet charity—*

*'Alack, and fie, for shame!—*

*'By cock, they are to blame!' quoth she.*

*'Young men will do't, if they come to't!'"* she laughs, as a tear runs down her cheek.

"*Before you tumbled me, you promised me to wed!*

*He answers, 'So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,*

*'Hadst thou not come to my bed!'"*

- "How long hath she been thus?" asks Claudius.

Says Ophelia—brightly at first: "I hope all will be well; we must be patient." Her smile fades. "But I cannot choose but *weep* to think they should lay him i' the cold ground. My *brother* shall *know* of it!

"And so I thank you for your good counsel." She waves airily. "Come!—my *coach!*

"*Good night, ladies; good night, sweet ladies; good night, good night.*" She ambles from the room, lost in disjointed musings.

"Follow her close," Claudius tells the courtier. "Give her good watch, I pray you." The gentleman bows and goes.

"Oh, this is deep, *poisonous* grief!" says Claudius, "and it springs all from her father's death!

"Oh, Gertrude, Gertrude, when *sorrows* come, they come not as single spies but in *battalions!* First, her father *slain*; next, your son *gone*—and he most violent author of his own just remove!—the *people* muddled, thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers about good Polonius's death—and we have done but greenly in hugger-mugger"—unceremonious haste—"to inter him!

"Poor *Ophelia!*—divided from her self and her fair judgment, without the which we are *pictures*, or mere *beasts!*

"Last, and as much containing as all these: her *brother* is in *secret* come from France!—*feeds* on his consternation, keeps himself in clouds!—and lacks not buzzers to infect his ear with pestilent speeches of his father's death, wherein—necessity of *matter* beggared will at nothing stick!—*our person is arraignèd*, in ear and ear!

"Oh, my dear Gertrude, this, like a murdering-piece,"—a cannon that spews much small shot, "gives me *superfluous* deaths in *many places!*"

Just then they hear angry men's voices in a loud disturbance nearby.

The queen is alarmed. "*Alack*, what noise is this?"

"Where are my *Switzers?*" calls the king, for his personal protectors. "Let them guard the door!"

A frightened attendant rushes from the front entrance through the room. “What is the matter?” demands Claudius.

“Save yourself, my lord!” warns the man. “The *ocean*, overpeering of its list, eats not the flats with more impetuous haste than young *Laertes*, in a riotous head, o’erbears your officers!

“The rabble call him *lord*, and—as if the world were to *begin* but *now*—antiquity forgot, *custom* not known as the ratifier and prop of every word—they cry, ‘Choose we! *Laertes* shall be king!’ Caps, hands, and tongues applaud it to the clouds: ‘*Laertes* shall be king, *Laertes king!*’” The servant looks back over his shoulder, bows quickly, and flees to stairs at the back of the hall.

The clamor grows louder. “How cheerfully on the false trail they cry!” says the queen. “Oh, this is *counter*, you false Danish *dogs!*”

They hear a crash and the sound of splintering wood. “The doors are broken!” says the king.

*Laertes* bursts in, accompanied by a dozen armed noblemen—a severe violation of propriety and law. “Where is this king?” he demands harshly. He strides boldly to face Claudius, then turns to his followers. “Sirs, stand you all without.” But the militant lords clearly want to witness this confrontation. “I pray you, give me leave!” he tells them.

The eldest bows. “We will.” He withdraws, followed by the others.

*Laertes* cries, with a fiery glare, “Oh, thou *vile king*, give me my *father!*”

Gertrude moves forward. “*Calmly*, good *Laertes*,” she says, touching his arm.

But the young nobleman is enraged. “That *drop* of blood that’s *calm* proclaims me *bastard!*—cries ‘*Cuckold!*’ to my father, brands ‘*harlot*’ even there, between the chaste, unsmirched brows of my faithful mother!”

“What is the *cause*, *Laertes*, that thy rebellion looks so *giant-like*?” asks Claudius, as the queen grasps the young man’s arm. “Let him go, Gertrude! Do not fear for our person: there’s such divinity doth hedge a king that *treason* can but peep at what it would do!—act little of its *will!*”

“Tell me, *Laertes*, why thou art thus *incensed*. Let him go, Gertrude! *Speak*, man.”

“Where is my *father*?”

“Dead.” says Claudius.

“But not by *him!*” the queen insists urgently.

The king stands firm. “Let him demand his fill.”

“How came he *dead*? I’ll not be juggled with! To *hell*, allegiance!” cries *Laertes*, “vows, to the darkest *devil!*—conscience and grace, to the *profoundest pit!* I *dare* damnation!” He slaps his sheathed sword. “By *this* point only I stand; *both* the worlds I give to negligence! Let come what comes, I’ll be *revenged most thoroughly* for my *father!*”

King Claudius shrugs, spreading his hands apart reasonably: “Who shall stay you?”

“By my *will*, not *all the world!* And as for my *means*, I’ll husband them so well they shall go far with little!”

“Good *Laertes*,” says the king quietly, “in your desire to know the certainty of your dear father’s death, is’t writ that your revenge will draw, *sweepstakes*, winner and loser—*both friend and foe*?”

“None but his *enemies!*”

“Will you *know them*, then?”

*Laertes* thrusts his shoulders back. “To his good *friends* thus wide I’ll ope my arms, and like the kind, life-rendering pelican of fable, repast them with my blood!”

“Why, *now* you speak like a good child, and a true *gentleman!*” says Claudius, smiling. “That I am *guiltless* of your father’s death, and am most sensibly *in grief* for it, shall appear as level to your *judgment* as *day* does to your *eye!*”

From outside the hall, men are heard arguing; then one says, “Let her come in!” The left-hand door opens, and a dazed Ophelia, disheveled and distracted, tiptoes, wide-eyed, toward her brother.

Laertes is appalled by what he sees. “*O heat, dry up my brains!—tears of seven-times salt, burn out the sense and virtue of mine eyes! By heaven, thy madness shall be repaid!—by weight, till our scale bend at the beam!*”

“*O rose of May!—dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!*”

“*O heavens! Is’t possible a young maid’s mind should be as mortal as an old man’s life? Nature confineth love—but it sends some precious instance of itself after the thing it loves, when ’tis gone.*”

Ophelia, alone within her memories, sings sadly. “*They bore him barefaced on the bier, and on his grave rained many a tear.*’ Fare you well, my dove.”

Says Laertes, “Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade for *revenge*, it could not move thus!”

“You must *sing, ‘a-down, a-down,*” Ophelia tells her brother, “if you’d call *him, ‘a-down-a.*’ Oh, how the reel *becomes* it!”—how well the lyric fits. “It is a *false steward* that stole your master’s daughter!”

“This *nothing’s* more than *matter!*” cries Laertes, thinking angrily of the king’s heir—Hamlet.

In Ophelia’s fevered imagination, she holds a basket of flowers. She touches them. “There’s rosemary—that’s for remembrance; pray, love, *remember!* And there is pansies—that’s for thoughts.”

“A *document* in madness—thought and remembrance *fitted!*” says Laertes.

“There’s fennel for you, and columbines,” Ophelia intones. “There’s *rue* for you, and here’s some for me; gracèd on *Sundays*, we may call it an *herb*; but, oh, you must wear *your* rue with a *difference!*”

“There’s a daisy....”

“I would give you some violets, but they withered, all, when my father died. They say he made a good end....” She sings: “*For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy!*”

“*Thought in affliction,*” moans Laertes. “*Passion, hell* itself, she turns to favour and to prettiness!”

Ophelia sings, her eyes downcast: “*And will he not come again? And will he not come again? No, no, he is dead. Go to thy death-bed; he never will come again. His beard was as white as snow; all flaxen was his poll. He is gone, he is gone, and we, cast away, moan, ‘God ha’ mercy on his soul.’*”

“And for *all* Christian souls, I pray, God.” She stops and looks at the others, confused and forlorn. “God be wi’ ye,” she murmurs, and wanders away.

“Do you *see* this, O God?” sobs Laertes. For a moment he is overcome.

“Laertes, I must *commune* with your grief,” says Claudius firmly, “or you deny me *a right!*”

“And then go apart; make choice of your wisest friends whom you will, and *they* shall hear and judge ’twixt you and me! If they find *us* touchèd, by direct or by collateral hand, we will our *kingdom* give—our crown, our life, and all that we call ours—to you, for satisfaction!”

“But if *not*, be you content to lend your patience to us, and we shall *jointly* labour with your soul to give it due content!”

Laertes nods, wiping his eyes. “Let this be so.”

But his anger still simmers; and he smarts to think how Polonius has been dishonored. “His means of death, his obscure funeral—no trophy, sword, nor hatchment o’er his bones, no noble rite nor formal ostentation—so *cry to be heard*, from heaven to earth, as ’twere, that I must call’t in question!”

“So you *shall*,” the king assures him soothingly, “and where the *offence* is, let the great axe fall!”

He wants to confer privately—away from Gertrude. “I pray you, go with me.”

**N**ear the main entrance to the castle, a servant informs Horatio that two men have arrived and are asking to speak with him. “Sailors, sir. They say they have letters for you.”

“Let them come in.” *I do not know from what part of the world I should be greeted, if not from Lord Hamlet*, thinks the visiting student, as the man brings the seamen to him.

“God bless you, sir,” says the mariner.

“Let him bless thee, too.”

“He shall, sir, an’t please him.” He hands over a folded sheet of paper. “There’s a letter for you, sir, if your name be Horatio, as I am led to know it is. It comes from the ambassador that was bound for England.”

The gentleman unseals the message and reads:

*Horatio, when thou shalt have examined this, give these fellows some means to the king; they have letters for him.*

*Ere we were two days old at sea, a pirate of very warlike appointment gave us chase! Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compellèd valour, and in the grapple I boarded them! On that instant they got clear of our ship—so I alone became their prisoner!*

*They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy, but they knew what they did: I am to do a good turn for them.*

*Let the king have the letters I have sent, and repair thou to me with as much speed as thou wouldst fly Death! I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee speechless, yet are they much too light for the core of the matter! These good fellows will bring thee where I am.*

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hold their course for England; of them I have much to tell thee!*

*Fare well! He that thou knowest thine, Hamlet.*

“Come,” Horatio tells the sailors, “I will give you way for those other letters—and do’t the speedier, that you may direct me to him from whom you brought them!”

Alone again with Laertes, the king continues soothing him. “Now must your awareness my acquittance seal, and you must put me in your heart for *friend*,” says Claudius, “sith you have heard, and with a knowing ear, that he which hath your noble *father* slain pursued *my* life!”

Laertes nods. “It well appears. But tell me why you proceeded not against these feats so *criminal*, and so *capital* in nature!—as by your safety, wisdom, all things else, you mainly were stirrèd up.”

“For two special reasons, which may to you, perhaps, seem much unsinewed, but yet to me they’re strong!”

“The queen, his mother, *lives*, almost, by his looks; and as for myself—my virtue or my plague, be it either which—she is so conjunctive to my life and soul, that, as the star moves not but in its sphere, *I* could not but by *her*.

“The other motive why to a public court I might not go is the great love the general gender bear him—who, dipping all his *faults* in their *affection*, would, like the spring that turneth wood to stone, convert his gibes to *graces*!—and so my arrows, too slightly timbered for so loud a wind, would have reverted to my bow again, and not where I had aimed them.”

“And so have I a noble father lost!” protests Laertes, “a sister driven into desperate terms—whose worth, if praises may go back again, stood challenger on mount of all the age for her perfections!”

“But my *revenge* will come!”

“Break not your sleeps over that,” Claudius tells him. “You must not think that *we* are made of stuff so flat and dull that we can let our beard be shook with danger and think it *pastime*! You shall shortly hear more!” He intends to buy Laertes’ loyalty. “I *loved* your father, and we love *yourself*—and *that*, I hope, will teach you to imagine—” He pauses, as an attendant hurries toward him. “How now! What news?”

“*Letters*, my lord, from Hamlet—this to Your Majesty; this to the queen.”

“From *Hamlet*! Who brought them?”



“Seafaring men, my lord, they say; I saw them not.”

“Laertes, you shall hear,” says the king. He dismisses the messenger, opens his letter, and reads aloud: “*High and Mighty, you should know I am set naked on your kingdom. Tomorrow will I beg leave to see your kingly eyes, when I shall, first asking your pardon, thereunto recount the occasion of my sudden, and more strange, return. Hamlet.*”

“What should this mean?” wonders Claudius. “Are all the rest come back? Or is it some abuse,”—deception, “and no such thing?”

“Know you the hand?” asks Laertes, seeing the precise pen-strokes.

“’Tis Hamlet’s character. ‘Naked!’ And in a postscript, here, he says ‘alone.’ Can you advise me?”

“I’m lost in it, my lord. But *let him come*,” he utters with menace. “It warms the very sickness in my heart that I shall live to tell him to his teeth, ‘*Thus didest thou!*’”

Claudius is thinking. “If it be so, Laertes, will you be ruled by me?”

“Aye, my lord—if you will not o’errule me to a *peace!*”

“To *thine own peace!* If he be now returnèd as balking at his voyage—if he means no more to undertake it—I will work him to an exploit, new-ripe in my devising, under the which he *shall not choose but fall!* And for his death no wind of *blame* shall breathe, but even *his mother* shall uncharge the deception, and call it *accident!*”

“My lord, I will be ruled!—and the better if you could devise it so that *I might be the organ!*”

“It falls right,” nods the king. “You have been talked of, since your travel, *much*—and that in Hamlet’s hearing—for a quality wherein they say you shine. Your *sum* of parts did not together pluck such envy from him as did that *one!*—that, in my regard, of the unworthiest size.”

“And what part is that, my lord?”

“A very *ribbon* in the cap of *youth*; yet needful, too, for the light and careless livery that youth wears no less becomes it than sables and clothes importing health and graveness do settled *age*.

“Two months since, a gentleman of Normandy was here—the *brooch*, indeed, and *gem* of all the French nation! He made confession of you,” says Claudius, “and gave you such a masterly report for art and exercise in *defence*—and for your *rapier* most especially—that he cried out ’twould be a sight indeed if anyone could *match* you. The scrimers of *their* nation, he swore, had had neither motion, guard nor eye, if *you* opposed them!

“Sir, this report of his did so envenom Hamlet with *envy* that he could nothing do but wish and beg your sudden coming o’er, to try against his skill! Now, out of *this...*”

“What out of this, my lord?”

Claudius regards the courtier solemnly. “Laertes, was your father dear to you? Or are you, like the *painting* of a sorrow, a face without a *heart?*”

Laertes flushes. “Why ask you this?”

“Not that I think you did not love your father, but that I know love is begun by *Time*, and I see, in passages of proof, that Time *qualifies* the spark and fire of it; there lives within the very flame of love a kind of wick that will *abate* or *snuff* it. For nothing is at a *like* goodness always; even grievance, growing to a plurality, dies in its own too-much.

“What we *would* do we should do *when* we would!—for this ‘would’ *changes*, and hath debatements and delays—there are as many influences as are tongues and hands! And then ‘*should*’ is like a spendthrift sigh, that *hurts* by *easing*.

“But, to the quick o’ the ulcer—*Hamlet comes back!* What would you undertake to show yourself your father’s son in *deed* more than in words?”

“To *cut his throat* i’ the *church!*”

Claudius approves. “No place, indeed, should sanctuarize murder—*revenge* should have *no bounds!*”

“But, good Laertes, will you do this?—keep close within your chamber. Hamlet, returnèd, shall know *you* are come home; we’ll set on those who shall *praise* your excellence, put a *double*

varnish on the fame the Frenchman gave you, and bring you, in fine, together, and wager on your heads!

“He, being most generous, free from all contriving, and remiss, will not peruse the foils, so that with ease, or with a little shuffling, you may choose a sword *unabated*,”—not dull and tipped with a metal cap to prevent injury, as are students’ rapiers, “and in a pass of *practise*,”—a play on words: a plotted move that seems part of an exercise, “*requite* him for your father!”

“*I will do ’t!*” cries Laertes. “And for that purpose I’ll anoint my sword,” he adds darkly. “I bought, from a mountebank, an unction so mortal that, but dip a knife in it, where it draws blood, no cataplasm so rare as collected from *all* simples that have virtue under the moon can save the thing from death that is but *scratchèd* withal! I’ll touch my point with this contagion, so that if I gall him even slightly it will be *death!*”

Claudius is pleased, but cautious. “Let’s further think on this—weigh what convenience both of time and means may fit us to our shape,” he says carefully. “If it should *fail*, and our drift show through our bad performance, ’twere better not essayed! Therefore the project should have a back, or second, that might hold if this should wither in proof.

“Soft. Let me see.... We’ll make a solemn wager on your cunning.... *I have ’t!* When in your motion you are hot and dry—and make your bouts more *violent* to that end, so that he calls for *drink*—I’ll have prepared him a chalice for the nonce—whereof but *sipping*, if he by chance escape your venom’d prick, our purpose may hold *there!*”

Even as the two reach their blasphemous accord—*anoint, unction, chalice*—the queen arrives, and she interrupts with most unwelcome news. “One woe doth tread upon another’s heel, so fast they follow!” she groans. “Your sister’s drowned, Laertes!”

“*Drowned!*” he gasps, staggered. “*Where?*”

Gertrude has tears in her eyes. “There is a willow grows aslant a brook, that shows its hoary leaves in the glassy stream. There with fantastic garlands did she come—of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and the long purples that liberal shepherds give a grosser name, but our cold maids do ‘dead men’s fingers’ call them. There, on the pendent boughs her crownets”—rings of twined flowers—“clambering to hang, an envious sliver *broke*—and down her weedy trophies and herself fell, into the weeping brook!

“Her clothes spread wide, and mermaid-like a while they bore her up; which time she chanted snatches of old tunes, as one incapable of her own distress, or like a creature native and induèd unto that element.

“But long it could not be till that her garments, heavy with their drink, pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay to muddy death.”

Laertes struggles to believe it: “Alas, then, she is drowned?”

“Drowned,” moans the queen, “*drowned!*”

Laertes tries to master his grief. “Too *much* of water hast thou, poor Ophelia, and therefore I forbid my tears!” *But yet it is our trick: Nature her custom holds, let shame say what it will!* He regards the royals. *When these are gone, the womanly will be out!*

He bows. “Adieu, my lord. I have a speech of *fire* that fain would *blaze*, but that this folly douses it!” He rushes from the room.

“Let’s follow, Gertrude,” says the king, deeply worried. “*How much* I had to do to *calm* his rage! Now fear I this will give it start again!

“Therefore let’s *follow!*”

## Chapter Seven Tales to Tell

Near the castle, as the next afternoon wanes, two graying men, rendered into a mellow mood by drink, totter through the churchyard. The sexton carries a spade to finish a job of digging.

“Is she to be buried in *Christian* burial, that willfully seeks her own salvation?” asks his even-older friend.

“I tell thee she *is*—and therefore I’ll make her grave straight! The crowner hath sat on her, and finds it a *Christian* burial.”

The local tavern’s chief authority questions the coroner’s conclusion. “How can that *be*?” he asks, “unless she drowned herself in her own *defence*....”

“Well, whatever, ’tis found so.”

The old man shakes his head. “It must be *se offendendo*; it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an *act*—and an act hath three branches: it is to *act*, to *do*, to *perform*. Argal, she drowned herself *willingly*.”

The sexton has already been paid to ready a grave; ergo, the grave must soon be ready. “Nay, but hear you—”

“Give me leave, Goodman Delver.” He will explain; standing beside the well-worn path, he points to a puddle. “Here lies the water. Good.

“Here stands the man. Good. If the man go into this water and drown himself, he *goes*—mark you that.

“But if the water *come to him* and drown him,”—he presses a foot into the soft turf beside the puddle; water flows to his boot—“it is ‘*will he, nill he!*’ He drowns himself *not!* Argal, he that shortens not his own *life* is not guilty of his own *death!*”

The sexton demands, sourly, as they walk, “But is this *law*?”

They have reached a fresh grave. “*Aye*, marry, *is* it!—*crowner’s ’quest law*,” claims the companion, his own inquest finished.

The church official drops himself into the hole with a grunt, and resumes work. “Will you ha’ the *truth* on’t? If this had not been a *gentlewoman*, she should have been buried out o’ *Christian* burial.”

“Why, there thou say’st! And ’tis a *pity* that *great* folk should have more countenance in this world to drown or hang themselves than *Christians!*”

The sexton addresses his battered implement: “Come, my spade; there is no *ancient* gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers! They hold up *Adam’s* profession.” He heaves a shovelful of earth to the surface.

“Was *he* a *gentleman*?”

“He was the *first* that ever bore arms!”

A frown. “Why, he had none!”—no escutcheon in heraldry.

“What, art a *heathen*? How dost thou understand the *Scripture*? The *Scripture* says *Adam* *digged*. Could he dig without *arms*?” The sexton pauses as his friend makes a face, but chuckles at the jest anyway. “I’ll put another question to thee; if thou answerest me not to the purpose, *confess* thyself.”

“*Go to!*” is the jocular reply.

“What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?”

The white-haired watcher thinks. “A *gallows-maker*: for *that* frame outlives a thousand tenants!”

The sweating man laughs. “I like thy wit *well*, in good faith! The *gallows* does well; but how *does* it well?—it does well to those that *do in!* Now, thou *dost ill* to say the *gallows* is built stronger than the *church*—*argal*, the *gallows* may do well to *thee!*”

“*To’t again!* Come: who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter? Aye, tell me that.” A few inches deeper and his toil will be done.

The old man smiles shrewdly. “Marry, *now* I can tell!”

“*To’t.*”

But after a moment comes the admission: “By the Mass, I cannot tell.”

Hamlet and Horatio have been walking, deep in conversation, past the cemetery. They pause, a short distance away, unseen, to listen.

“Cudgel thy brains no more about it, for your dull ass will not mend his pace with beating,” the sexton tells his friend wryly. “But when you are asked this question *next*, say: ‘A *grave-maker!*’ The houses that *he* makes last till *doomsday!*”—Judgment Day. He sees that his comrade is drooping. “Go, get thee *away* to yawn! Fetch me a stoup of liquor.”

As the sodden senior rises and stumbles off for fortification, the sexton shovels and sings: “*In youth when I did love, did love, methought it was very sweet, to contract o’ the time for all my loves! Methought there was nothing meet!*”—never any obligation.

Hamlet quietly asks Horatio, “Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that he *sings* at *grave-making?*”

“Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.”

“’Tis e’en so,” says the prince. “The hand of little *employment* hath the daintier *sense.*”

In the grave, the digger, unaware of observers, sings: “‘*But Age, with his stealing hand, hath clawed me in his clutch, and hath shipped me into the land, as if I had ne’er been such!*’” His shovel strikes a buried object; he kicks to loosen it, picks it up, and tosses it out of the hole.

Hamlet is watching thoughtfully. “That skull had a *tongue* in it once, and could *sing.*” He frowns. “How the knave jowls it onto the ground!—as if it were *Cain’s* jaw-bone, who did the first murder!

“It might be the pate of a *politician* which this ass now o’er-offices, one that would *circumvent God,*”—try to talk away moral obligation, “might it not?”

“It might, my lord,” says Horatio.

“Or of a *courtier*, who could say, ‘Good *morrow*, sweet lord! How *dost* thou, good lord?’

“This might be my Lord Such-a-one, that praised my Lord Such-a-one’s horse—when he meant to *beg it*, might it not?”

“Aye, my lord.”

“Why, e’en so. And now he’s *my Lady Worm’s!*—cheekless, and knocked about the mazzard with a sexton’s spade! Here’s a fine revolution, if we had the trick to see’t! Did these bones cost no more to be reared than for playing at *horseshoes* with ’em? *Mine* ache to think on’t!”

The gravedigger, warming to his work, sings out again: “‘*A pick-axe and a spade, a spade, for each in shrouding sheet! Oh, a pit of clay, yet to be made, for such a guest is meet!*’”

Annoyed, he finds a second obstruction, and tosses it up onto the clumps of loam and sod heaped beside the grave.

“There’s another,” says Hamlet. “Why, may it not be the skull of a *lawyer?* Where be his quiddities now—his quilllets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and not tell him of his *action for battery?*”

The prince kneels to regard the soil-encrusted skull. “This fellow might have been, in’s time, a great *buyer* of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries! Is this the fine”—end result—“of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries?—to have his fine *pate* full of fine *dirt!*”

“Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and *double ones*, too,”—property paid for by a client, but deeded to the lawyer, “than the length and breadth of a pair of *indentures?*”—leasing documents. “The very *conveyances* of his lands”—deeds—“will hardly lie in *this* box!—and must the inheritor himself have no more?”

“Not a jot more, my lord.”

“Is not parchment made of sheepskins?”

“Aye, my lord, and of calf-skins, too.”

“They are sheep and calves who seek out assurance in *that!*

“I will speak to this fellow.” Hamlet climbs onto the mound of damp, fragrant earth. “Whose grave’s this, sirrah?”

The digger, surprised, looks up. “Mine, sir,” he replies. He sings: “‘*Oh, a pit of clay, yet to be made, for such a guest is meet!*’”

Hamlet is amused. “I think it *be* thine indeed, for thou liest in it.”

“You lie *out* of it, sir, and therefore it is not *yours*. As for my part, I do not *lie* in’t—and yet it is *mine*.”

“Thou *dost* lie in’t, to be in’t and *say* it is thine,” quips Hamlet. “’Tis for the *dead*, not for the quick; therefore thou liest.”

“’Tis a *quick* lie, sir—’twill *away* again from me to you!”

Hamlet chuckles. “What man dost thou dig it for?”

“For no man, sir.”

“What woman, then?”

“For none, neither.”

“Who is to be buried in’t?”

“One that *was* a woman, sir; but, rest her soul, she’s dead.”

Hamlet laughs. “How *absolute* the knave is!” he says to his friend. “We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us!

“By the Lord, Horatio, in these three years I have taken a note of it: the age is grown so finical that the toe of the *peasant* comes so near the heel of the *courtier* that he galls his kibe!”—chafes his heel-blister.

“How long hast thou been a grave-maker?”

“All the days i’ the year.” He thinks. “I came to’t that day that our last king, Hamlet, overcame Fortinbras.”

“How long is that since?”

“Cannot you figure that?—every *fool* can figure that: it was the very day that *young* Hamlet was born—he that is mad and sent into England.”

“Aye, marry. Why was he sent into England?”

“Why, because he was *mad!* He shall recover his wits there; or, if he do not, it’s no great matter.”

“Why?”

“’Twill not be *seen* in him there: there the men are as mad as he.”

“How became he mad?”

“Very strangely, they say.”

“How, *strangely?*”

“I’ faith, e’en by *losing!* His wits”

“Upon what ground?” The prince wonders what the people have been told.

“Why, here in *Denmark*.” The digger spits down, then looks up proudly. “I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years!”

As the work is completed, Hamlet ponders. “How long will a man lie i’ the earth ere he rot?”

“I’ faith, if he be not rotten *before* he die—and we have many pocky corpses now-a-days, that will scarce hold the laying in—he will last you some eight year or nine year; a tanner will last you nine year.”

“Why he more than another?”

“Why, sir, his hide is so tanned with his trade that he will keep out water a great while; and your water is a sore decayer of your whorson dead body,” he says, climbing out of the pit. He reaches down to grasp an example. “*Here’s* a skull now; this skull has lain in the earth three-and-twenty years.”

“Whose was it?”

“A whoreson mad fellow’s it was!” He rubs dirt from the cheekbones. “Whose do you think it was?”

“Nay, I know not.”

“A *pestilence* on him for a *mad rogue!*—he poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head, once! This same skull, sir, was *Yorick’s* skull, the king’s jester.” He hands it to Hamlet.

“This?”

“E’en that.”

“Let me see.” Hamlet holds up the putrid piece. “Alas, *poor Yorick!*

“I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy! He hath borne me on his back a thousand times!—and now how abhorred it is in my imagination—my gorge rises at it!

“Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft.”

He faces the skull. “Where be your *gibes* now?—your gambols, your songs, your flashes of *merriment* that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not *one*, now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen?

“Now get you to my lady’s chamber, and *tell her*: let her paint an inch thick, to *this* favour she must come! Make her laugh at *that!*”

The sexton is done; he plods away, eager for refreshment.

“Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing.”

“What’s that, my lord?”

“Dost thou think *Alexander* looked o’ this fashion, i’ the earth?”

“E’en so.”

“And *smelt* so? *Pah!*” He sets down the skull.

“E’en so, my lord.”

“To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why, may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till it be found stopping a *bung-hole*?”

“’Twere to consider too curiously to consider *so*.”

“No, ’faith, not a jot!—only follow it thither with necessity enough to lend likelihood—as thus: Alexander died; Alexander was buried; Alexander returneth into dust. The dust is earth; of earth we make loam—and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

“Imperious *Caesar*, dead and turned to *clay*, might stop a hole to keep the *wind* away! Oh, that *that* earth, which kept the world in awe, should patch a wall to expel the winter’s flaw!”

He stops, looking now toward the castle. “But soft, but *soft!* Here come the *king*, the *queen*, the courtiers....”

A small, solemn funeral procession slowly makes its way through the churchyard and cemetery to the new grave. A priest walks with them.

“Who is this they follow,” Hamlet wonders, “and with such maimèd rites? This doth betoken the corpse did with desperate hand fordo its own life.

“’Twas of some estate.... Couch we a while and mark.” He and Horatio move away, and stand among some trees, unnoticed by the mourners and their attendants.

Four men carry the coffin of Ophelia, followed by Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes, and a cluster of courtiers.

The sexton, comes after; wiping his mouth on a sleeve, he waits at a distance with his shovel. Standing before the grave, Laertes asks the cleric, “What ceremony else?”

The priest replies curtly: “Her obsequies have been as far enlarged as we have warrant, as I said.” He sees Laertes’ anger. “Her death was *doubtful*, and, but that great command o’ersways the order, she should in ground *unsanctified*—where *charitable* prayers, shards, flints and pebbles should be thrown on her—have lodged till the last trumpet. Yet here she is, allowed her virgin crants, her maiden strewments, and the bringing-home of bell and burial.”

Laertes pleads. “Must there no *more* be done?”

“No more’s to be done,” says the churchman, adamant. “We should profane the service of the dead to sing sage Requiem and such rest to her as to *peace-parted* souls.”

Laertes says sorrowfully, “Lay her i’ the earth, and from her fair and unpolluted flesh may violets spring.” But his temper rises. “I tell thee, churlish priest, a ministering *angel* shall my sister be when *thou liest howling!*”

- Hamlet is startled. “What, the fair *Ophelia*?”

Queen Gertrude approaches the casket and lays flowers on it. “Sweets to the sweet. Farewell! I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife; I thought thy *bride-bed* to have decked, sweet maid, and not to have strewed thy grave!”

The coffin is lowered into the ground.

Laertes cries out, “Oh, *treble woe* fall *ten times treble* on that cursèd head whose wicked deed thy most ingenuous sense deprived thee of!

“Hold off the earth awhile,” he tells the sexton, “till I have caught her once more in mine arms!”

He jumps down into the grave. “Now pile your dust upon the quick *and* dead, till of this flat a *mountain* you have made to o’ertop old *Ossa!*”—onto which another mythical mountain, Pelion, was thrust by giants, “or the skyish head of blue *Olympus!*”

Still reeling at the revelation, Hamlet approaches the grave. “Who is he whose grief *bears such an emphasis?*” he cries, furious at the display. “Whose *phrase* of sorrow *conjures the wandering stars*, and makes them stand like *wonder-wounded* hearers?”

“This is *I, Hamlet the Dane!*” He drops into the grave.

“The *Devil* take thy soul!” cries Laertes, seizing his neck.

“Thou *pray’st not well,*” rasps Hamlet, grasping his wrists. “I prithee, *take thy fingers from my throat!*—for, though *I* am not splenitive and rash, yet have I something in me *dangerous!*—which let thy wiseness *fear! Hold off thy hand!*”

“*Pluck them asunder!*” orders Claudius.

Horatio and other gentlemen separate Hamlet from Laertes, and they all climb, panting, from the grave.

Horatio would calm the furious prince, but Hamlet tells him, “Why, I will fight with him upon this theme until my eyelids will no longer wag!”

“Oh, my son, *what* theme?” asks Gertrude.

“I *loved* Ophelia! *Forty thousand* brothers could not with all their quantity of love make up *my sum!*” He glares at the libertine back from Paris. “What wilt *thou* do for her?”

“Oh, he is *mad*, Laertes!” says the king.

“For love of God, *forbear* him!” pleads the queen.

“‘*Swounds*, show me what thou’lt *do!*” demands Hamlet, his pain compounded by Laertes’ ostentation. “Would *weep?* Would *fight?* Would *fast?* Would *tear* thyself? Would drink up *vinegar?*—eat a *crocodile?* I’ll do’t!

“Dost thou come here to *whine?*—to outface *me* with leaping into her grave?” he calls scornfully. “*Be* buried alive with her, *and so will I!*—and, if thou prate of *mountains*, let them throw *millions* of acres on us, till our ground, singeing its pate against the *burning* zone, make *Pelion* like a *wart!*”

“Aye, and if thou’lt *mouth,*” he shouts, “I’ll *rant as well as thou!*”

“This is mere madness,” Gertrude tells Claudius, “and thus the fit will work in him a while. Anon, once her golden couplets are disclosed,”—when he learns her last words, “his silence will sit *drooping*, patient as a female dove.”

No longer being held back, Hamlet rubs his chaffed throat and stares at Ophelia’s brother. “Hear you, sir: what is the *reason* that you use me *thus?*” he demands. “I loved you ever!”

His heartache is nearly overwhelming, and Hamlet’s full burden now overtakes him. “But it is no matter; let *Hercules* himself do what he may, the cat will mew, and dog will have his day.” He stalks away toward the palace.

“I pray you, good Horatio, wait upon him!” says the king. The gentleman bows and follows the prince.

Laertes stands in sullen silence. As the scandalized courtiers comment among themselves, Claudius approaches him and says, quietly, “Strengthen your patience in our last night’s speech; we’ll put the matter to immediate push!”

The king returns to his wife. “Good Gertrude, set some *watch* over your son.” She nods.

Claudius faces the others. “This grave shall have a living *monument!* An hour of quiet shortly shall we see.” His gaze fixes on Laertes. “Till then, in *patience* our proceeding be.” The king bows his head.

Ten minutes later, the sexton is returning the disturbed earth.

**O**n their doleful return to Elsinore Castle as darkness falls, the prince recounts the tale of his courtship—and of love ended suddenly and cruelly. Horatio describes Ophelia’s recent descent, bereft of brother, lover, and father, into melancholy, then fatal distraction.

The prince has fallen silent; partly to cheer him, Horatio asks what occurred at sea with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

“Sir, in my *heart* there was a kind of fighting that would not let me sleep,” Hamlet tells him. “Methought *I* lay worse than the mutines in the bilboes!”—prisoners shackled below the deck.

“Rashly—and *praisèd* be rashness for it; let us know that our *indiscretion* sometimes serves us well when our deep plots do pall, and it should teach us there’s a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will—”

“That is most certain!”

“—up from my cabin, my sea-gown scarfed about me, in the dark I groped to find out them; had my desire; fingered free their *packet*; and, in fine, withdrew unnoticed to mine own room again! Making so bold as to unseal their grand commission, my fears forgetting *manners*, there I found, Horatio—oh, *royal knavery!*—an exact *command*, larded with many several sorts of reasons importing Denmark’s health and England’s too—and with, *oh*, such bugs and goblins in my living that *on the reading*, no leisure abated—no, not to wait for grinding of the axe—*my head should be struck off!*”

Horatio is appalled: “Is’t *possible?*”

Hamlet pulls the letter from inside his coat. “Here’s the commission; read it at more leisure. But wilt thou hear me how I did proceed?”

“I beseech you!”

“Being thus be-netted round with villains, ere I could make a Prologue to my brains, they had *begun the play!*”

“I sat me down, devised a *new* commission, wrote it *fair!*”—in a formal hand and style. “I once did, as our statisticians do, hold it a baseness to write fair, and laboured much how to *forget* that learning; but, sir, now it did me yeoman’s service!”

“Wilt thou know the *effect* of what I wrote?” teases the storyteller.

“*Aye*, good my lord!”

“An earnest conjuration from the *king*: as England was his *faithful* tributary—as *love* between them like the palm might flourish, as *peace* should still her wheaten garland wear, and stand a comma ’tween their *amities*—and many such-like ‘as’es of great charge—then upon the viewing and knowing of those contents, without further debatement he should *put the bearers to sudden death*, not shriving-time allowed!”

“How was this *sealed?*”

“Why, even in that was heaven ordinated: I had my father’s signet ring with me, for which the model was the Danish seal! I folded up the writ in the form of the other, subscribed it, gave’t the impression—and replaced it safely, the exchange never known!”

“Now, the next day was our sea-fight; what to that was sequent thou know’st already.”

“So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to it?”



“Why, man, they did *make love* to this employment! They are not near my conscience; their defeat does by their own insinuation grow! ’Tis *dangerous* when the baser nature comes passing between the fell, incensèd points of mighty opposites!”

They have reached the tall entrance. Horatio frowns as they pass the wide, carved-wood doors of Claudius’s palace. “Why, what a king is *this!*”

Hamlet stops and faces his friend. “Does it not, think’st thou, now *stand upon me?* He that hath killed my king and whored my mother, popped between the election and my *hopes,*”—Hamlet had been seen as heir to his father’s throne, “thrown out his order for my proper *life!*—and with such *cozenage!*—is’t not perfect conscience to *requite him with this arm?*”

“And is’t not to be *damnèd* to let this canker of nature come to *further evil?*”

Horatio nods—but, as always, he is thinking. “It must shortly be known to him from England what is the issue of the business there.”

“It will be short,” says Hamlet. “The interim is *mine!* And a man’s life’s no more than to say ‘*one....*’

“But I *am* very sorry, good Horatio, that to Laertes I forgot myself; for, by the image of *my* cause, I see the portraiture of his. I’ll court his favours.

“Yet the *audacity* of his grief did put me into a towering passion!”

“Peace,” cautions Horatio, seeing a young courtier approach. “Who comes here?”

Osrice, clad in colorful silk, stops a dozen paces away from the prince. “Your Lordship is right welcome back to Denmark!” he says, sweeping off his large, ostrich-feathered hat, and bowing deeply—very deeply.

“I humbly thank you, sir,” says Hamlet. He asks Horatio quietly, “Dost know this water-fly?”

“No, my good lord.”

“Thy state is the more gracious; for ’tis a vice to know him. He hath much land, and fertile; let a *beast* be *lord* of beasts, and his spoon shall find place at the king’s table”—he will be welcome there. “’Tis a chuff; but, as I say, spacious in the possession of *dirt.*”

Osrice has minced closer. “Sweet lord, if Your Lordship were at leisure, I should impart a thing to you from *his majesty,*” he pronounces, with precise courtesy.

“I will receive it, sir, with all diligence of spirit. Put your bonnet to its right use: ’tis for the head.”

“I *thank* Your Lordship! But it *is* very hot!” he says apologetically.

“No, believe me, ’tis very cold; the wind is northerly.”

“It *is* indifferent cold, my lord, indeed!”

“But yet methinks it is very sultry and hot for *my* complexion.”

“*Exceedingly,* my lord!—it *is* very sultry—as ’twere.... I cannot tell how.

“But, my lord, his majesty bade me signify to you that he has laid a great *wager* on your head! Sir, this is the matter—”

“I beseech you, remember....” Hamlet again prompts Osrice, with a gesture, to put on the hat, which the shallow sycophant holds before him as an emblem of obsequious humility.

“Nay, good my lord—for mine ease, in good faith,” says Osrice. “Sir, here is newly come to court *Laertes!*—believe me, an *absolute gentleman,* full of most excellent differences, of very soft society and great showing!” He blushes. “Indeed, to speak feelingly of him, he is the *card* or *calendar* of gentry, for you shall find in him the *continent* of what parts a gentleman would seem!”

Hamlet, too, can strain rhetorical flourish. “Sir, his *definement* suffers no *perdition* in you, though I know that to divide him *inventorially* would dizzy the *arithmetic* of *memory!*—and yet but *swerve in either,* in respect of his *quick sail!*

“But, in the *verity* of *extolment,* I take him to be a soul of great *artifice,* and his *diffusion* of such dearth and *rareness* as, to make true diction of him, his only *semblable* is his *mirror!* And what else could *trace* him?—his *umbrage!*—nothing *more!*”

Osrice blinks, baffled. “Your Lordship speaks most... infallibly of him.”

The prince loses patience. “The *concernancy*, sir?” he demands. “Why do we wrap the gentleman in our more rawer breath?”

“Sir?”

Horatio frowns at the fop. “Is that not possible to *understand* in thy *mother tongue*? You will *to ’t*, sir, really!”

Hamlet demands brusquely, “What *imports* the nomination of this gentleman?”

“Of... *Laertes*?” asks the confused courtier.

Horatio is exasperated. “His purse is *empty* already!—all his golden words are spent!”

But Hamlet persists. “Of *him*, sir.”

Osric attempts an ornate construction: “I know you are not ignorant—”

“I would you *did*, sir!—yet, in faith, if *you* did, it would not much approve *me*. Well, sir?”

“—you are not ignorant of what excellence Laertes is—”

“I dare not confess *that*, lest I should *compare* with him in excellence; to know a man well were to know one’s *self*.”

“I mean, sir, for his *weapons*! And in the *imputation* laid on him by them, in his meed he’s *unfellowed*!”

“What’s his weapon?”

“Rapier and dagger.”

“That’s *two* of his weapons; but, well.”

“The king, sir, hath wagered with him *six Barbary horses*, against the which *he* has impawned, as I take it, *six French rapiers* and *poniards*, with their assigns, such as girdle, hangers, and so!” Osric beams, awed by Laertes’ costly collection of steel blades. “Three of the carriages, in faith, are *very* dear to the fancy, *very* responsive to their hilts!—most *delicate* carriages, and of *very* liberal conceit!”

“What call you the ‘carriages’?” asks Hamlet.

Horatio, his fellow student, groans. “I *knew* you must be edified by the *margins* ere you had done!”

“The *carriages*, sir, are the hangers,” Osric admits.

“The phrase would be more germane to the matter if we could carry *cannons* by our sides; I would it might be ‘hangers’ till then. But, *on*: against six swords, their assigns, and three liberal-conceited ‘carriages’—that’s the *French* bet against the Dane’s six Barbary *horses*. Why is this ‘impawned,’ as you call it?”

Osric describes the wager on fencing: “The king, sir, hath laid, sir, that, in a dozen passes between yourself and Laertes, he shall not exceed you by *three* hits: he hath laid on at twelve for nine!” Claudius has bet that Laertes will win with fewer than three hits more than Hamlet’s.

Osric motions toward the throne room. “And it would come to immediate trial if Your Lordship would *vouchsafe* the answer!”

“How if I answer ‘no’?”

“I mean, my lord, the opposition of your *person* in trial.”

But Hamlet will not be summoned by Claudius. “Sir, I will walk here in the hall; ’tis the breathing time of day with me. If it please his majesty, let the foils be brought. The gentleman willing, and the *king* holding to his purpose, I will win as I can for *him*; if not, *I* will gain *nothing*—but my shame and the odd hits.”

The prince’s point notwithstanding, Osric is surprised; the flatterer’s own response is always unqualified acceptance. “Shall I re-deliver you e’en so?”

“To that effect, sir—after what flourish your nature will.”

Osric bows, and carefully puts on the elegant chapeau. “I commend my duty to Your Lordship!” He departs, feather flouncing.

“Yours, yours.”

“He does well to commend it *himself*,” says Hamlet. “There are no tongues *else* for’s turn.”

Horatio laughs. “This lapwing”—newly hatched bird—“runs away with the shell on his head!”

“He did *comply* with his dug before he sucked it!”—nodded to the nipple even before nursing. “Thus has he—and many *more* of the same bevy that I know the dressy age *dotes* on—gotten only the *tune* of the time, outward *look* of encounter—and a *yeasty* kind of perception which carries them through—and *through* them: do but blow them to trial, and their bubbles, most fannèd, winnowed *opinions*, are *out!*”

Now a silver-haired gentleman from the royal court comes, tentatively, to Hamlet. “My lord, his majesty commended him to you by young Osric... who brings back to him that you attend him *here*, in the hall. He sends to know if your pleasure *hold* to fence with Laertes, or that you will take longer time.”

Hamlet tells the gentleman, gravely, “I am constant to my purposes; they follow the *king’s fitness*.” The courtier looks ill at ease. “If his pleasure speaks, mine is ready, now or whensoever—provided I be so *able* as now.”

“The king and queen and all are coming down—”

“Just in time.”

“The queen desires you to use some *gentle accommodation* to Laertes, before you fall to play.”

The prince nods. “She well instructs me.”

The tall gentleman bows and returns to the king.

Horatio has heard of Laertes’ skill. “You will lose this wager, my lord.”

“I do not think so; since he went into France, I have been in continual practice. I shall *win*, at the odds.

“But thou wouldst not think how *ill* all is, here about my heart.” He straightens, shaking off misgivings. “’Tis is no matter.”

“Nay, good my lord—”

“It is but foolery; it is such a kind of gainsaying as would perhaps trouble a *woman*.”

“If your mind dislike anything, obey it!” pleads Horatio. “I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.”

“Not a whit! We *defy* augury; there’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow!

“If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all!

“Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is’t to leave betimes?”

**T**orchlight from their procession brightens the dim hall as King Claudius and Queen Gertrude enter it. Laertes is with them, as are various lords and other courtiers—including Osric, who carries a set of fencing foils—and attendants, who cover and prepare a table.

Says the smiling king, drawing Laertes by the right arm to the prince, “*Come*, Hamlet, come and take *this* hand from me!”

Hamlet does so. “Give me your *pardon*, sir,” he says courteously to Laertes. “I’ve done you wrong; but pardon it, as you are a gentleman. This presence knows, and you must needs have heard, how I am punished with *sore distraction*. What I have done that might your nature, honour and exception roughly awaken I here proclaim was *madness*.

“Was’t Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never *Hamlet!* If Hamlet from *himself* be ta’è away, and when he’s *not himself* does wrong Laertes, then Hamlet does it not!—Hamlet *denies* it!

“Who does it, then? His *madness!* If’t be so, *Hamlet* is of the faction that is wrongèd—his madness is poor Hamlet’s *enemy!*”

“Sir, in this audience let my disclaiming from a *purposed* evil free me so far in your most generous thoughts as if I had shot mine arrow *o’er the house* and hurt my *brother!*”

Laertes replies stiffly. “I am satisfied in *Nature*, whose motive in this case should most stir me to avenge. But in terms of *Honour* I stand aloof, and will accept no reconciliation till by some

elder masters of known honour I have a voice,”—ruling, “to keep my *name* ungorèd, proceeding in peace.

“But till that time, I do receive your offered love with *like* love, and will not wrong it.”

“I embrace it freely,” says Hamlet happily, “and will this *brother’s* wager frankly play! Give us the foils! Come on...” Osric hands him a sword.

“Come, one for me,” Laertes tells the gentleman.

“*I’ll* be your foil, Laertes,” jests Hamlet. “In mine ignorance, your skill shall, like a star i’ the darkest night, stick fiery off indeed!”

Laertes frowns. “You mock me, sir.”

“*No*, by this hand!” the prince assures him.

“Cousin Hamlet, you know the wager?” asks Claudius.

“Very well, my lord. Your Grace hath laid the odds o’ the weaker side.”

“I do not fear that; I have seen you both. But since he is *better*, we have therefore odds.” He hopes to provoke the prince.

Laertes returns his foil to Osric. “This is too heavy, let me see another.” From the case, he chooses—carefully—another rapier.

Hamlet raises his sword. “This likes me well,” he says, slicing the air with it. “These foils are all of a length?”

“Aye, my good lord,” says Osric.

The young noblemen prepare to fence.

“Set me a stoop of wine upon that table,” Claudius jovially commands an attendant, as servants bring in flagons of Rhenish. “If *Hamlet* give the first or second hit, or acquit in answer of the third exchange, let all the battlements their ordnance fire!

“The king shall drink to Hamlet’s *better* breath!—and in the cup an *union* shall he throw,” he calls, showing the throng the large pearl, “richer than that which four successive kings have worn in Denmark’s crown!

“Give me the cups. And let the kettledrum to the *trumpet* speak, the trumpet to the *cannoneer* without, the cannons to the *heavens!*—then heaven to *earth*: ‘Now the *king* drinks to *Hamlet!*’

“Come, begin! And you, the judges, bare a wary eye!”

“Come on, sir!” says Hamlet, foil raised, positioned on his guard and ready to fence.

“Come, my lord!” replies Laertes.

They spar, thrusting and blocking, moving back and forth before the smiling, attentive courtiers.

“*One!*” cries Hamlet, claiming a hit.

Laertes frowns. “*No.*”

“*Judgment,*” says the prince.

“A hit, a very palpable *hit,*” rules Osric.

“*Well,*” says Laertes, annoyed. “*Again.*”

“*Stay, give me drink!*” cries Claudius. “*Here’s to thy health,*” he tells Hamlet, and quaffs his wine; the drum pounds, a trumpet sounds, and outside the castle a cannon roars. “*Hamlet, this pearl is thine!*” proclaims the king, dropping it into a goblet. “*Give him the cup,*” he says, handing it to an attendant.

“*I’ll* play this bout first; set it by awhile,” says the prince. He nods to Laertes: “*Come!*”

They fence again, and vigorously. Then: “*Another hit; what say you?*”

“*A touch, a touch, I do confess,*” Laertes mutters.

“*Our son shall win!*” the king tells the queen.

“*He’s hot and scant of breath,*” frets Gertrude. She rises. “*Here, Hamlet, take my kerchief, rub thy brows. The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet!*” she says, picking up the goblet.

He acknowledges, with a curt bow. “*Good madam.*”

“*Gertrude, do not drink!*” cries the king.

“*I will, my lord!*” says Gertrude, mildly annoyed. “*I pray you, pardon me.*” She sips the wine.

Thinks Claudius: *It is the poisoned cup! It is too late!*  
 Hamlet declines the proffered goblet. "I dare not drink yet, madam. By and by."  
 "Come, let me wipe thy face," says Gertrude. He goes to her, and she does so.  
 - Laertes approaches Claudius. "My lord, I'll hit him now," whispers the young man. *And yet,* he thinks, *'tis almost 'gainst my conscience....*  
 "Come for the *third*, Laertes! You do but *dally!* I pray you, pass with your *best* violence," Hamlet taunts. "I am afeard you make a wanton of me!"  
 Laertes' pride is pricked into anger. "Say you so? Come *on!*"  
 Again they fight—and with great energy.  
 "Nothing either way," calls Osric, as the fencers separate, lowering their guard.  
 "*Have at you now!*" cries Laertes. His slash cuts Hamlet's arm.  
 Startled, the prince responds with fury.  
 In an intense, close struggle, both rapiers are wrenched from their hands. They snatch up the blades—and soon Laertes finds that he, too, has been wounded.  
 "*Part them,*" orders Claudius, "*they are incensed!*"  
 "Nay, come, *again!*" cries Hamlet, breathing hard—and angry, realizing that one rapier's sharp steel point was left bare.  
 At that moment, Gertrude falls. "*Look to the queen there!*" calls Osric.  
 "They *bleed* on both sides!" cries Horatio. He rushes to Hamlet. "How is it, my lord?"  
 "How is't, Laertes?" asks Osric.  
 Laertes can feel the poison working. "Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric! I am justly killed with mine own *treachery!*" He drops to his knees on the stone floor.  
 Hamlet looks toward his mother. "How does the queen?"  
 "She swoons to see them bleed!" claims Claudius.  
 "No, *no!*" cries Gertrude, "the drink, the *drink!*—oh, my dear Hamlet—*the drink, the drink!* I am *poisoned!*" she gasps. It is her dying breath.  
 "*Oh, villainy!* Let the doors be locked!" calls the prince. "*Treachery!* Seek it out!"  
 "It is *here*, Hamlet!" says Laertes, falling onto his side. "Hamlet, thou art *slain*; no medicine in the world can do thee good; in thee there is not half an hour of life. The treacherous instrument is in thy hand, unabated and *envenomed*. The foul practise hath turned itself on me: *lo*, here I lie, never to rise again!" He weakens. "Thy mother's *poisoned....* I can no more! The *king*—the *king's* to blame!"  
 "The point envenomed, too!" cries Hamlet, turning. "Then, *venom, do thy work!*" He stabs Claudius in the stomach, pulls the blade free, and casts the foil aside.  
 "Treason! *Treason!*" is the cry among the nobles as they back away.  
 "*Oh, yet defend* me, friends!" calls Claudius, kneeling, now. "I am but *hurt!*"  
 Hamlet staggers to the king with the dead queen's goblet. "*Here*, thou incestuous, murderous, *damnèd* Dane, drink off this potion!  
 "Is thy *union* here?—follow *my mother!*" he cries, as he forces the cup against Claudius's mouth.  
 But even as the wine spills from his lips, the king falls forward, dead.  
 "He is justly served," rasps Laertes. "It is a poison tempered by himself!"  
 "Exchange *forgiveness* with me, noble Hamlet! Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, nor thine on me...." He reaches out, trying to rise—but falls back. He is dead.  
 "*Heaven* make thee free of it," says Hamlet dryly. He is weakening. "I follow thee.  
 "I am dead, Horatio!"  
 The prince peers around. "Wretched queen, adieu!"  
 "You that look pale and tremble at this chance, who are but mute audience to this act, had I but time.... This fell sergeant Death is strict in his arrest! Oh, I could tell you.... But let it be.  
 "Horatio, I am dead; thou livest. Report me and my *cause* aright to these unsatisfied!" He sags to the floor.

“Never believe it,” says the fiercely loyal Horatio. “I am more an antique *Roman* than a Dane! Here’s yet some liquor left,” he says, taking up the goblet of poison.

“As thou’rt a man, give me the cup!” insists Hamlet, grasping it. “*Let go!* By heaven, I’ll have’t!” Horatio yields, and he kneels beside the fallen prince.

“Oh, good Horatio, what a *wounded name*, things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me! If thou didst ever hold me in thy *heart*, absent thee from felicity awhile, and in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain to tell my story!”

From outside the castle, the drumbeat of a military march is heard; then cannon are fired.

“What noise is this?” asks Hamlet.

The tall lord comes forward; he has just been told. “Young *Fortinbras*, come from Poland with conquest, to the ambassadors of England gives this warlike volley.”

“Oh, I *die*, Horatio!” groans Hamlet. “The potent poison quite o’er-crows my spirit! I cannot live to hear the news from England, but I do prophesy the election”—Danish nobles’ choice of a new king—“alights on Fortinbras. He has *my* dying voice; so tell him!” He lies back, closing his eyes. “The rest is silence.”

“Now cracks a noble heart!” says Horatio as tears well up. “Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

The prince shudders; then he is dead.

The martial cadence grows louder. “Why does the drum come hither?” asks Horatio.

The doors swing wide, and Prince Fortinbras arrives, leading a contingent of his troops, and accompanied by the English ambassadors and their attendants.

The Norwegian is appalled by the carnage before him. “Wherefore is *this* sight?” he gasps.

“What is it ye would see?” asks Horatio, drained. He rises. “If aught of *woe* or *wonder*, cease your search.”

“This *quarry*”—heap of hunters’ prey—“cries of *havoc!*” says Fortinbras in dismay. “O proud *Death*, what *feast* is toward in thine eternal cell, that thou so many of the princely at a shot so bloodily hast struck?”

“The sight is dismal,” says a stunned ambassador, “and our affairs from England come too late! The ears are senseless that should give us hearing to tell him his commandment is fulfilled—that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.” He looks around. “Where should we have our thanks?”

“Not from *his* mouth,” says Horatio, looking at the king’s corpse, “had it the ability of life to thank you! *He* never gave commandment for their death.

“But since, so jump upon this bloody question, *you* from the Poland wars, and you from England, are here arrivèd, give order that these bodies high on a stage be placèd to the view!

“And let me speak to the yet-unknowing world how these things came about.

“So shall you hear of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, of accidental judgments, casual slaughters!—of deaths put on by cunning and forcèd cause!—and, in *this* upshot, purposes *mistook*, fallen on the inventors’ heads! All this can I truly deliver.”

“Let us haste to *hear* it,” commands Fortinbras, “and call the nobles to the audience. As for me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune; I have some rights of memory in this kingdom which now to claim my vantage doth invite me.”

Horatio nods. “Of that too I shall have cause to speak,” he says, “and from his mouth whose voice will draw on *more*”—bring others’ support.

“But let this same be immediately performèd, even while men’s minds are wild, lest more mischance of plots and errors happen!”

Prince Fortinbras nods solemnly. “Let four *captains* bear Hamlet like a *soldier* to the stage—for he was likely, had he been put on, to have proved most *royally*.

“And for his passage let soldiers’ music, and the rites of war, speak *loudly* for him!

“Take up the bodies! Such a sight as this *becomes* the field, but here shows much *amiss!*”

“Go, bid the soldiers shoot.”

A march for the dead is played, and troops bear away the bodies.  
A peal of ordnance roars to the heavens.