

HAMLET

Characters

Hamlet

The prince of Denmark, and a student at the University of Wittenberg. At the beginning of the play, Hamlet's father, King Hamlet, has recently died, and his mother, Queen Gertrude, has married the new king, Hamlet's uncle Claudius. Hamlet is melancholy, bitter, and cynical, full of hatred for his uncle and disgust at his mother for marrying him. When the ghost of Hamlet's father appears and claims to have been murdered by Claudius, Hamlet becomes obsessed with avenging his father's death but keeps thinking of reasons why he should wait before killing Claudius—then chastizes himself for failing to act boldly. Hamlet is a character of contradictions. He admires characters like Fortinbras and the Player King, who behave passionately and even violently for no good reason, but is himself thoughtful, reflective, and philosophical. At times Hamlet is indecisive and hesitant, but at other times he is prone to rash and impulsive acts of violence.

Claudius

The king of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle. The villain of the play, Claudius is a calculating, ambitious politician, adept at manipulating others for his own ends and willing to execute, assassinate, or murder to stay in power. He doesn't understand Hamlet or Hamlet's motives, but he is quick to perceive Hamlet as a threat and take decisive action against him. Claudius does occasionally show signs of remorse and human feeling—his affection for Gertrude, for instance, seems sincere.

Gertrude

The queen of Denmark, Hamlet's mother, recently married to Claudius. We never get to observe Gertrude on her own, so we know much more about how Hamlet feels about her than about how she sees herself. She seems clearly to love Hamlet, but Hamlet sees her as a weak, even depraved, woman motivated wholly by lust. Hamlet has such strong feelings about her sex life that he becomes momentarily distracted from his revenge quest, urging her toward a life of chastity.

Polonius

The Lord Chamberlain of Claudius's court, and the father of Laertes and Ophelia. Polonius has good intentions, but he tends to be somewhat conniving and underhanded. He frequently leaps to the wrong conclusions, and his speeches are comically pompous and long-winded. He is completely incapable of figuring out what Hamlet is up to.

Horatio

Hamlet's close friend, who studied with the prince at the University of Wittenberg. Hamlet trusts Horatio above any of the other characters, valuing him for his even temper and equanimity—qualities that Hamlet seems to despise in himself. Horatio is loyal and helpful to Hamlet throughout the play. After Hamlet's death, Horatio remains alive to tell Hamlet's story.

Ophelia

Polonius's daughter, a beautiful young woman with whom Hamlet has been in love. A sweet and innocent young girl, Ophelia dutifully strives to obey her father and her brother, Laertes, allowing Polonius to use her in his scheme to spy on Hamlet. When her father dies, her sanity unravels, and in her madness she paints a scathing picture of young men as sexually exploitative and unfaithful, and her mad speeches about flowers conceal implied condemnations of Claudius and Gertrude.

Laertes

Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother, a young man who spends much of the play in France. Passionate and quick to action, Laertes is a foil for the reflective and agonized Hamlet.

Fortinbras

The young prince of Norway, whose father the king (also named Fortinbras) was killed by Hamlet's father (also named Hamlet). Now Fortinbras wishes to attack Denmark to avenge his father's honor, making him another foil for Prince Hamlet. Hamlet admires Fortinbras for his willingness to fight for no good reason.

The Ghost

The specter of Hamlet's recently deceased father. The ghost, who claims to have been murdered by Claudius, calls upon Hamlet to avenge him. However, it is not entirely certain whether the ghost is what it appears to be. Hamlet speculates that the ghost might be a devil sent to deceive him and tempt him into murder, and the question of what the ghost is or where it comes from is never definitively resolved.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Two slightly bumbling courtiers, former friends of Hamlet from Wittenberg, who are summoned by Claudius and Gertrude to discover the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior.

Osric

The foolish courtier who summons Hamlet to his duel with Laertes. His speeches are pretentious and difficult to understand.

Voltemand and Cornelius

Courtiers whom Claudius sends to Norway to persuade the king to prevent Fortinbras from attacking.

Marcellus and Barnardo

The officers who first see the ghost walking the ramparts of Elsinore and who summon Horatio to witness it.

Marcellus is present when Hamlet first encounters the ghost.

Francisco

A soldier and guardsman at Elsinore.

Reynaldo

Polonius's servant, sent to France by Polonius to check up on and spy on Laertes.