

Hamlet: Plot Summary and Major Characters

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PLOT SUMMARY

When the play begins, the old king Hamlet has been killed by his brother, Claudius, who now sits on the throne. Claudius has also married the old king Hamlet's wife, Gertrude. Young prince Hamlet (the son of the old king) is distraught over his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage.

During a late-night encounter with the Ghost of his dead father, Hamlet learns that his father was poisoned by uncle Claudius. The Ghost commands prince Hamlet to avenge his death. Hamlet agrees, but spends much of the play uncertain of whether to trust the ghost's words and eager to obtain proof of his uncle Claudius's guilt.

To determine Claudius's guilt, prince Hamlet stages a play called *The Mouse-trap* in Act 3. Upon seeing the play (about a man who poisons the king to steal the throne and the king's wife for himself), Claudius is suddenly stricken with guilt and runs out of the room. Hamlet is now convinced of the truth of the ghost's words and he vows to have revenge, but continues to delay the matter.

Late in the play, prince Hamlet is challenged to a fencing match by Laertes, who has ulterior motives of revenge. (Laertes's sister Ophelia has gone mad and drowned herself after being rejected by Hamlet; so, too, Laertes's father Polonius has been accidentally killed by Hamlet.) Conspiring with Claudius (who fears Hamlet may know his guilt), Laertes secretly swaps his blunt-tipped foil with a sharp-pointed rapier dipped in poison. Claudius also poisons a cup of wine which he plans to offer to Hamlet if he wins the fencing match unscathed by the poisoned rapier.

During the fencing match, Laertes wounds (poisons) Hamlet with his sword, but in the ensuing scuffle, the swords are accidentally exchanged and Hamlet wounds (poisons) Laertes in return, winning the match. Hamlet's mother Gertrude unexpectedly drinks from the poisoned cup to toast her son's victory, but soon falls ill from the poison. Realizing what has happened (partly because Laertes confesses to poisoning the rapier), Hamlet forces Claudius to drink from his own poisoned cup and then stabs him with the poisoned rapier. Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes all die. So, too, does Hamlet, but with his dying breath, he bids his best friend Horatio to live and tell his story to others.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS*

Hamlet: Son of a murdered Danish king (who was also named Hamlet) and nephew of the present king, Claudius. Hamlet suffers great mental anguish over the death of his father, the marriage of his mother to the suspected murderer (Claudius), and the clash between his moral sense and his desire for revenge against his father's murderer. To ensnare the killer, Hamlet pretends madness. Some scholars contend that he actually suffers a mental breakdown.

Claudius: The new King of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle. He killed old king Hamlet and married Gertrude.

Gertrude: Queen of Denmark, Hamlet's mother, and widow of the murdered king. Her marriage to Claudius within two months after the late king's funeral deeply disturbs Hamlet.

Ghost of Hamlet's father, old King Hamlet: The Ghost tells Hamlet about Claudius's treacherous murder and commands Hamlet to avenge his death.

Polonius: Bootlicking Lord Chamberlain of King Claudius.

Ophelia: Daughter of Polonius. She loves Hamlet, but his pretended madness—during which he rejects her—and the death of her father (who Hamlet kills by accident) trigger a pathological reaction in her.

Horatio: Hamlet's best friend. Horatio never wavers in his loyalty to Hamlet.

Laertes: Son of Polonius, brother of Ophelia. Circumstances make him an enemy of Hamlet, and they duel to the death in a fencing match at the climax of the play. As a man who reacts to circumstances quickly, with a minimum of reflection on the meaning and possible outcome of his actions, Laertes contrasts sharply with the pensive and indecisive Hamlet and, thus, serves as his foil.

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern Courtiers and friends of Hamlet who attended school with him. They turn against him to act as spies for Claudius and agents in Claudius's scheme to have Hamlet murdered in England. Hamlet quickly smells out their deception and treachery.

Players: Actors who arrive at Elsinore to offer an entertainment. Hamlet asks them to stage a drama called *The Mouse-trap*, about a throne-seeker who murders a king. Hamlet hopes the play will cause Claudius to react in a way that reveals his guilt as the murderer of old King Hamlet.

* Portions of character descriptions are excerpted from <http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xHamlet.html#Characters>