

Intermediate



B2 (Vantage)

R A I N B O W S

# Hamlet

William Shakespeare



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William Shakespeare

# Hamlet

Adaptation, dossiers and activities  
by Jole Pignet



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# Hamlet

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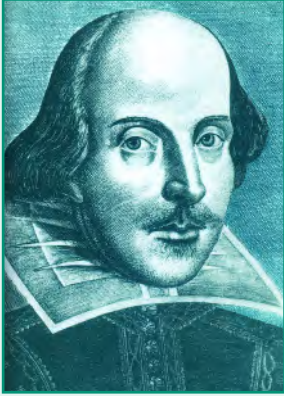
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# The author

## William Shakespeare



Many things have been said of William Shakespeare, mixing fact and legend. The recorded<sup>1</sup> facts are his baptism (26<sup>th</sup> April 1564) and his burial<sup>2</sup> (25<sup>th</sup> April 1616) in Stratford-upon-Avon.

His mother's family was related to Thomas More, one of the first victims of Henry VIII's Reformation. His father, John Shakespeare, was a merchant in skins, wool and corn and held important offices in the local town council.

It is reasonable to assume that young Shakespeare attended Stratford Grammar School, where he learnt reading and arithmetic, some history and a lot of Latin rhetoric, logic and literature. On 27<sup>th</sup> November 1582 a marriage license was issued<sup>3</sup> to William Shakespeare, then eighteen, and Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior. In May 1583 the couple had a child, a daughter called Susanna, and in 1585 twins were born, Hamnet and Judith.

According to legend, the young man was one day found poaching<sup>4</sup> deer and rabbits on the lands of the local landlord, Sir Thomas Lucy, and decided to flee<sup>5</sup> to London both to avoid prison and to lead a more exciting life.

In London Shakespeare presumably started working with a company of actors, first as an errand boy<sup>6</sup>, then as an actor. It is certain that by 1592 he was famous, because a rival playwright<sup>7</sup>, Robert Greene (c. 1558-1592), accused him of being "*an upstart<sup>8</sup> crow<sup>9</sup>, beautified with our feathers<sup>10</sup>*". Between 1592 and 1594 the theatres were closed down due to the plague<sup>11</sup> and Shakespeare devoted himself to poetry. He wrote two long poems (*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*), some of his 154 *Sonnets*, and dedicated them to his patron and friend Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton.

In 1594 Shakespeare became a member of the theatrical company called the *Chamberlain's Men*, later the *King's Men*, on James I's ascent

1. *recorded*: documented.
2. *burial*: entombment, funeral.
3. *issued*: given.
4. *poaching*: catching and killing animals without permission.
5. *flee*: run away.
6. *errand boy*: a young man employed by a shop or business to take messages, deliver goods, etc...
7. *playwright*: writer of theatrical pieces.
8. *upstart*: parvenu.
9. *crow*: large black bird.
10. *feather*: plume.
11. *plague*: pestilence, infectious disease.

to the throne (1603). The company acted mainly at the Globe Theatre, a public playhouse built in Shoreditch<sup>12</sup> and owned in part by Shakespeare.

From his acting, playwriting and theatre profits, Shakespeare certainly made a considerable amount of money, and in 1596 his family was granted a coat of arms<sup>13</sup>; the following year Shakespeare bought New Place, the second largest house in Stratford, where he retired in 1611 and where he died on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1616.

Shakespeare started his career as a playwright with a trilogy on the reign of Henry VI and continued dealing with English history, from the reign of Richard II to the reign of Richard III (1383-1485). Following Christopher Marlowe's example, Shakespeare moved from chronicle plays to historical tragedies, and gradually evolved a more personal form of drama which also included comical scenes and characters (e.g. Falstaff in *Henry IV*). His source was Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577), but he offered his own interpretation of history based on the concept that the State can survive only through the reciprocal loyalty of king and subjects.

With Falstaff (*Henry IV*) Shakespeare's conception of comedy matured, moving from the courtly<sup>14</sup> atmosphere of *Love's Labours Lost* to the romantic humanity of *The Taming of the Shrew*. All these early experiments combined to produce the magic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare's most original and perfectly designed play. His later comedies, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night* show a world in which reality and laughter often clash<sup>15</sup>, and the romantic story risks becoming too serious.

Shakespeare's best production is mostly connected to his great tragedies, all composed between 1600 and 1608, beginning with *Hamlet* and including *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. Shakespeare had already worked on romantic tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet*; in *Julius Caesar* he had combined Roman history with the study of the personal tragedy of Brutus, a son turned murderer. In his great tragedies, vision, characters and motives are so well organized and balanced, expressed in powerful verse and imagery, that they appeal to all sorts of audiences.

In Shakespeare's last romances, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, the characters are half-allegorical and the theme of pardon and reconciliation is dominant.

Shakespeare's plays were collected and published in 1623, in the first *In Folio*<sup>16</sup>, by John Heminges and Henry Condell.

12. *Shoreditch*: area outside the City walls, along the right bank of the Thames.

13. *coat of arms*: family emblem.

14. *courtly*: set at court.

15. *clash*: conflict, fight.

16. *In Folio*: volume with pages half a sheet.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

<i>Hamlet:</i>	Prince of Denmark, son of the dead King Hamlet
<i>Gertrude:</i>	Hamlet's widowed mother; now married to Claudius
<i>Claudius:</i>	the present king of Denmark and Hamlet's uncle
<i>Ghost:</i>	of Hamlet's father
<i>Polonius:</i>	Lord Chamberlain and Claudius's main counsellor
<i>Laertes:</i>	Polonius's son, a student in Paris and a fine swordsman
<i>Ophelia:</i>	Polonius's daughter; once courted by Hamlet
<i>Horatio:</i>	Hamlet's loyal friend
<i>Marcellus, Bernardo, Francisco:</i>	officers of the Guard
<i>Rosencrantz, Guildenstern:</i>	spies and Hamlet's former fellow-students
<i>Fortinbras:</i>	Prince of Norway
<i>Players, Two Grave-diggers, a Priest, Courtiers.</i>	

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*Setting:* Denmark (Elsinore Castle, Elsinore Churchyard)

*Action:* it begins some months (from three to four) after King Hamlet's murder and continues for another consistent period of time (certainly more than two months).





**BEFORE READING**

1 What do you know about Hamlet, the protagonist of Shakespeare's play? Tick the right answer.

- a. Hamlet was  a king.  a prince.  a singer.
- b. He lived in  England.  Scotland.  Denmark.
- c. He was mourning  his mother.  his father.  his sister.
- d. His father's ghost revealed that  
 the country was in danger.  
 he had been murdered by his own brother.  
 the new king wanted to kill him.
- e. Hamlet died  in a duel.  during a tempest.  
 murdered.

2 How do you imagine Hamlet physically?

Age: .....

Hair: .....

Build: .....

Height: .....

3 What do Hamlet's famous words "To be or not to be, that is the question" mean? Choose the best suggestion. They

- express the desire to die.
- reveal an inclination to suicide.
- show that Hamlet is analysing the situation carefully.
- imply the presence of serious doubts.
- describe the torments of an obsessed mind.

View of Kronborg Castle, Elsinore  
(G. Braun, ca. 1590)





# An Unweeded<sup>1</sup> Garden

Chapter 1 • (Act 1, Scenes 1-2, 4-5)



A distant bell struck<sup>2</sup> midnight in Elsinore Castle and Francisco sighed<sup>3</sup> gratefully. He had been on guard duty on the eastern battlements<sup>4</sup> for six hours and was now freezing in the bitter cold. His eyes were burning after he had kept close watch on the waters of the strait<sup>5</sup>.

He heard some footsteps and then a voice inquired: “Who’s there?”

“Stop and give the password!” challenged Francisco.

“Long live the King!” was the reply, and Francisco recognized Bernardo, his officer, who had come to relieve<sup>6</sup> him.

“Has all been calm tonight?” asked Bernardo, and Francisco confirmed that not a mouse had stirred<sup>7</sup>.

“If you meet Horatio and Marcellus while going down to the barracks, tell them to join me here without delay!” Bernardo continued.

Shortly after, Bernardo, Marcellus and Horatio started patrolling the area silently until Marcellus broke the silence: “Has the thing appeared again tonight? I have invited Horatio to come and see with his own eyes... what, er, what we have already seen twice...”

“Ha, ha, it’s just your imagination!” laughed Horatio. “The thing will not appear!”

Just then Marcellus pointed his spear<sup>8</sup> towards the wall, signalling, and whispered: “Look, look! Here it comes again!”

Horatio and Bernardo turned rapidly and stared<sup>9</sup>: a ghost which looked exactly like the dead King of Denmark, the same imposing figure and the same armour<sup>10</sup> he used to wear in his glorious battles.

1. *unweeded*: not cleaned.
2. *struck* (*strike – struck – struck*): sounded.
3. *sighed*: took a long breath.
4. *battlement*: fortified wall.
5. *strait*: narrow passage of water between two coasts.

6. *relieve*: take his place on duty.
7. *stirred*: moved.
8. *spear*: long stick with metal point.
9. *stared*: looked for a long time with the eyes wide open.
10. *armour*: metal coat.



Elsinore Castle. (W. Telbin Sr., 1864)



Hamlet sees his father's ghost. (W. Telbin Sr., 1864)

Horatio addressed the vision: “Stay, illusion! And if you have a voice, speak to me! Why are you here at this time of night? Speak!”



But the ghost turned away and disappeared.

Horatio was shocked: “Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it! King Hamlet, the very<sup>11</sup> King Hamlet!... What is the meaning of all this?”

Marcellus, who was calmer by now, pressed<sup>12</sup> his companions to explain why the guard had been increased at night, and cannons and military preparations were made every day.

“I wonder whether there is any connection with the apparition...” began Horatio, “but it is most likely that young Fortinbras of Norway will attack us soon.”

“What for?” enquired Marcellus.

“Well, I heard he wants to get back some lands lost by his father to King Hamlet. Fortinbras accuses Denmark of treason<sup>13</sup>, but it was a loyal man-to-man combat...” Horatio stopped speaking. The ghost had appeared again.

“Stop, illusion!” he cried. “If you have a voice, speak to me and reveal the destiny of your country...!”

Just then the cock crowed<sup>14</sup> and, as the first pale light of dawn appeared on the horizon, the ghost rapidly disappeared.

Horatio and Marcellus decided it was time to inform Prince Hamlet of the strange apparition.



The next morning King Claudius and his Council held a meeting. Claudius entered the Great Hall accompanied by his Queen, Gertrude, and followed by Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, and various attendants and members of the court.

Laertes, Polonius’ son, and Prince Hamlet were present, too. The Prince was dressed in black and still mourning<sup>15</sup> his father’s recent death.

Claudius and Queen Gertrude sat on the royal chairs, the King looked thoughtfully at the people standing in front of him and

11. *very*: in person.

12. *pressed*: invited insistently.

13. *treason*: disloyalty.

14. *crowed*: cried.

15. *mourning*: lamenting.