

Hamlet: the Prince of Denmark, the title character, and the protagonist. About thirty years old at the start of the play, Hamlet is the son of Queen Gertrude and the late King Hamlet, and the nephew of the present king, Claudius. Hamlet is melancholy, bitter, and cynical, full of hatred for his uncle's scheming and disgust for his mother's sexuality. A reflective and thoughtful young man who has studied at the University of Wittenberg, Hamlet is often indecisive and hesitant, but at other times prone to rash and impulsive acts.

Hamlet has fascinated audiences and readers for centuries, and the first thing to point out about him is that he is enigmatic. There is always more to him than the other characters in the play can figure out; even the most careful and clever readers come away with the sense that they don't know everything there is to know about this character. Hamlet actually tells other characters that there is more to him than meets the eye—notably, his mother, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—but his fascination involves much more than this. When he speaks, he sounds as if there's something important he's not saying, maybe something even he is not aware of. The ability to write soliloquies and dialogues that create this effect is one of Shakespeare's most impressive achievements.

A university student whose studies are interrupted by his father's death, Hamlet is extremely philosophical and contemplative. He is particularly drawn to difficult questions or questions that cannot be answered with any certainty. Faced with evidence that his uncle murdered his father, evidence that any other character in a play would believe, Hamlet becomes obsessed with proving his uncle's guilt before trying to act. The standard of "beyond a reasonable doubt" is simply unacceptable to him. He is equally plagued with questions about the afterlife, about the wisdom of suicide, about what happens to bodies after they die—the list is extensive.

But even though he is thoughtful to the point of obsession, Hamlet also behaves rashly and impulsively. When he does act, it is with surprising swiftness and little or no premeditation, as when he stabs Polonius through a curtain without even checking to see who he is. He seems to step very easily into the role of a madman, behaving erratically and upsetting the other characters with his wild speech and pointed innuendos.

It is also important to note that Hamlet is extremely melancholy and discontented with the state of affairs in Denmark and in his own family—indeed, in the world at large. He is extremely disappointed with his mother for marrying his uncle so quickly, and he repudiates Ophelia, a woman he once claimed to love, in the harshest terms. His words often indicate his disgust with and distrust of women in general. At a number of points in the play, he contemplates his own death and even the option of suicide.

But, despite all of the things with which Hamlet professes dissatisfaction, it is remarkable that the prince and heir apparent of Denmark should think about these problems only in personal and philosophical terms. He spends relatively little time thinking about the threats to Denmark's national security from without or the threats to its stability from within (some of which he helps to create through his own carelessness).

Claudius: the King of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle, and the play's antagonist. The villain of the play, Claudius is a calculating, ambitious politician, driven by his sexual appetites and his lust for power, but he occasionally shows signs of guilt and human feeling—his love for Gertrude, for instance, seems sincere.

Hamlet's major antagonist is a shrewd, lustful, conniving king who contrasts sharply with the other male characters in the play. Whereas most of the other important men in *Hamlet* are preoccupied with ideas of justice, revenge, and moral balance, Claudius is bent upon maintaining his own power. The old King Hamlet was apparently a stern warrior, but Claudius is a corrupt politician whose main weapon is his ability to manipulate others through his skillful use of language. Claudius's speech is compared to poison being poured in the ear—the method he used to murder Hamlet's father. Claudius's love for Gertrude may be sincere, but it also seems likely that he married her as a strategic move, to help him win the throne away from Hamlet after the death of the king. As the play progresses, Claudius's mounting fear of Hamlet's insanity leads him to ever greater self-preoccupation; when Gertrude tells him that Hamlet has killed Polonius, Claudius does not remark that Gertrude might have been in danger, but only that he would have been in danger had he been in the room. He tells Laertes the same thing as he attempts to soothe the young man's anger after his father's death. Claudius is ultimately too crafty for his own good. In Act V, scene ii, rather than allowing Laertes only two methods of killing Hamlet, the sharpened sword and the poison on the blade, Claudius insists on a third, the poisoned goblet. When Gertrude inadvertently drinks the poison and dies, Hamlet is at last able to bring himself to kill Claudius, and the king is felled by his own cowardly machination.

Gertrude: the Queen of Denmark, Hamlet's mother, recently married to Claudius. Gertrude loves Hamlet deeply, but she is a shallow, weak woman who seeks affection and status more urgently than moral rectitude or truth.

Few Shakespearean characters have caused as much uncertainty as Gertrude, the beautiful Queen of Denmark. The play seems to raise more questions about Gertrude than it answers, including: Was she involved with Claudius before the death of her husband? Did she love her husband? Did she

know about Claudius's plan to commit the murder? Did she love Claudius, or did she marry him simply to keep her high station in Denmark? Does she believe Hamlet when he insists that he is not mad, or does she pretend to believe him simply to protect herself? Does she intentionally betray Hamlet to Claudius, or does she believe that she is protecting her son's secret?

These questions can be answered in numerous ways, depending upon one's reading of the play. The Gertrude who does emerge clearly in *Hamlet* is a woman defined by her desire for station and affection, as well as by her tendency to use men to fulfill her instinct for self-preservation—which, of course, makes her extremely dependent upon the men in her life. Hamlet's most famous comment about Gertrude is his furious condemnation of women in general: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.ii.146). This comment is as much indicative of Hamlet's agonized state of mind as of anything else, but to a great extent Gertrude does seem morally frail. She never exhibits the ability to think critically about her situation, but seems merely to move instinctively toward seemingly safe choices, as when she immediately runs to Claudius after her confrontation with Hamlet. She is at her best in social situations (I.ii and V.ii), when her natural grace and charm seem to indicate a rich, rounded personality. At times it seems that her grace and charm are her *only* characteristics, and her reliance on men appears to be her sole way of capitalizing on her abilities.

Polonius: the Lord Chamberlain of Claudius's court, a pompous, conniving old man. Polonius is the father of Laertes and Ophelia.

Horatio: Hamlet's close friend, who studied with the prince at the university in Wittenberg. 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. Ophelia is a sweet and innocent young girl, who obeys her father and her brother, Laertes. Dependent on men to tell her how to behave, she gives in to Polonius's schemes to spy on Hamlet. Even in her lapse into madness and death, she remains maidenly, singing songs about flowers and finally drowning in the river amid the flower garlands she had gathered.

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 clearly a foil—a dramatic term for a character being the anti-thesis for another character—for the reflective 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.

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, or whether it is something else. 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.

Voltimand and Cornelius: courtiers whom Claudius sends to Norway to persuade the king to prevent Fortinbras from attacking.

Marcellus and Bernardo: 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, who is sent to France by Polonius to check up on and spy on Laertes.