SHAKESPEARE MADE EASY

Hamlet

MODERN ENGLISH VERSION
SIDE-BY-SIDE WITH FULL ORIGINAL TEXT

BARRON'S
The characters

Hamlet  Prince of Denmark
Claudius  King of Denmark, and Hamlet's uncle
Gertrude  the Queen; Hamlet's mother, and recently remarried
The ghost of the late King, Hamlet's father
Polonius  an elderly Councillor of State
Laertes  his son
Ophelia  his daughter
Horatio  Hamlet's friend
Rosencrantz  courtiers, and formerly fellow students of
Guildenstern  Hamlet
Fortinbras  Prince of Norway
Voltemand  Danish councillors and ambassadors to Norway
Cornelius  members of the King's guard
Marcellus
Barnardo
Francisco  a fashionable courtier
Oseic  Polonius's servant
A gravedigger
A gravedigger's mate
A captain  in Fortinbras's army
Players  members of a touring company
Ambassadors  from England
A gentleman  of the Danish court
A priest
Sailors
Lords, Ladies, Soldiers, Messengers and Attendants

Scene: Elsinore
In and around the Court of the King of Denmark
Act one

Scene 1

Elsinore in Denmark: a platform on the castle walls. It is midnight, and Francisco, a sentry, is waiting to go off duty. Barnardo approaches him in the dark.

Barnardo Who's there?
Francisco [raising his spear] No: answer me! Halt and identify yourself!
Barnardo [giving the password] Long live the King!
Francisco [lowering his weapon] Barnardo?
Barnardo Yes.
Francisco You're on the dot.
Barnardo It's turned twelve. Off to bed, Francisco.
Francisco Many thanks for coming. It's bitterly cold. I'm fed up.
Barnardo All quiet tonight?
Francisco Not so much as a mouse.
Barnardo Well, good night. If you should meet Horatio and Marcellus, the other men on duty, tell them to hurry. [He starts his patrol]
Francisco I think I can hear them.
[Horatio and Marcellus enter]
Halt! Who goes there?
Horatio Friends.

Marcellus And loyal subjects of the King of Denmark.
Francisco [preparing to leave] Good night to you.
Marcellus Good night, worthy soldier. Who relieved you?
Francisco Barnardo took my place. Good night.

[He goes]

Marcellus [calling] Hello, Barnardo!
Barnado [replying from a short distance] Hey, what? Is Horatio there?
Horatio [offering his hand to shake] Some of him!
Barnardo Welcome, Horatio. Welcome, Marcellus.
Horatio Well, has this thing appeared again tonight?
Barnardo I've seen nothing.

Marcellus Horatio says it's only our imaginations, and won't believe in the scary sight that we've seen twice. That's why I've got him to join us on tonight's watch, so that if this ghost comes again he can confirm that our eyes haven't deceived us, and speak to it.

Horatio [scornfully] Really, now! It won't appear.

Barnardo Sit down a moment, and let's tell you again, in spite of your skepticism, what we've seen these past two nights.

Horatio Well, sit then, and let's hear Barnardo tell his story.

Barnardo Last night, when the star that's to the west of the
North star had moved to where it's shining now, Marcellus and myself - the bell having struck one -

[The Ghost enters]

**Marcellus** Sh! Say no more. Look - here it comes again!

**Barnardo** As before, looking like the dead King!

**Marcellus** You know what to say; speak to it, Horatio.

**Barnardo** Doesn't it look like the King? See, Horatio!

**Horatio** Very like. It chills me with fear and astonishment.

**Barnardo** It wishes to be spoken to.

**Marcellus** Ask it something, Horatio.

**Horatio** Who are you, to intrude upon us at this time of night, dressed in the armor the late King used to wear? In heaven's name: reply!

[The Ghost turns to go]

**Marcellus** It has taken offense.

**Barnardo** Look - it's walking stiffly away.

**Horatio** Stop! Reply! Reply! I demand a reply!

[The Ghost leaves]

**Marcellus** It's gone and won't answer.

**Barnardo** Well, Horatio? You are trembling, and look pale. Isn't this something more than mere imagination? What do you think about it?

**Horatio** As God's my witness, I wouldn't have believed this without seeing it for myself.

**Marcellus** Isn't it like the King?

**Horatio** As you are to yourself. That was exactly the armor he was wearing when he fought old Fortinbras of Norway. He wore that very frown when, after fierce fighting, he defeated the Polish soldiers on their sledges as they crossed the ice. It's strange.

**Marcellus** Likewise twice before, at the dead of night - this time precisely - he has passed us on our watch, walking with that military gait.

**Horatio** I don't know what to think. But overall, this points to some violent disorder in our society.

**Marcellus** Right then: sit down and tell me - whoever can - why this strict and careful guard duty burdens our fellow countrymen every night. Why is there so much manufacturing of brass cannons, and international trade in armaments? Why are shipwrights being conscripted to work strenuous seven-day weeks? What's the threat that accounts for all this feverish round-the-clock activity?

**Horatio** I can explain. At any rate, this is how it's rumored. Our previous King, whose ghost has just appeared to us, was, as you know, dared to single combat by Fortinbras of Norway, who was prompted by an arrogant pride. Our valiant King Hamlet - for such the western world regarded him - killed this Fortinbras, who thereby forfeited to his conqueror (according to the terms of a formal legal agreement) all the lands he possessed. Our King had
matched this with a territory of equal size, which would have reverted to Fortinbras had he won: just as, on the same contractual basis, Fortinbras’s stake fell to Hamlet. Now, sir, his son, young Fortinbras, as yet untested but spoiling for a fight, has recruited a gang of desperadoes from various places in the Norwegian provinces: cannon fodder for an enterprise of some daring, which is obviously nothing less than the recovery by armed force of the aforesaid lands lost by his father. And this, as I understand it, is the main reason for our preparations, the explanation for our guard duty, and the origin of all this hectic activity throughout the country.

Barnardo I’m sure you are right. It’s consistent with this specter visiting us on sentry duty dressed in armor, and looking very like the King who was, and still is, the central issue of the war.

Horatio It nags the mind. When Rome was at its greatest, just before the mighty Julius Caesar was assassinated, graves opened and corpses in their shrouds shrieked dementedly in the streets of Rome. Comets with fiery blood-red tails came as omens from the sun; and the moon, which governs the tides, was almost totally extinguished. Similar dire warnings predicting future calamities have been given to our country and our fellow countrymen, both in the heavens and here on earth.

[The Ghost enters]

But shy! Look! See where it comes again. I’ll confront it, even though it might destroy me.

[The Ghost spreads its arms wide, but Horatio addresses it boldly]

Stop, ghost! If you can talk, speak to me! [The Ghost makes no reply] If there’s some good deed you’d like done that might bring peace to you and grace to me, speak! [Again the Ghost is silent] If you know of something that may befall your country that can, perhaps, be avoided, oh speak! [The Ghost does not respond] Or if you’ve buried a hoard of ill-gotten treasure during your life, the reason (so they say) why you spirits often cannot rest after death, speak about it! Stay and speak! [A cock crows, signifying the approach of day. The Ghost turns away] Stop it, Marcellus!

Marcellus Shall I strike out at it with my spear?

Horatio Do, if it won’t stay put.

Barnardo [pointing in one direction] It’s here.

Horatio [pointing in another] No, it’s here.

[The Ghost departs]

Marcellus It has gone. It’s wrong of us to threaten so regal a figure. It is like the air: you cannot hurt it. Our ineffective blows only demonstrate our hostility.
Scene 2

The King of Denmark's Court. A flourish of trumpets heralds the entry of Claudius, the new King, and his wife Gertrude, widow of the late King Hamlet. They have recently married. They are followed by the Council, including Voltimand, Cornelius, and Polonius, who is accompanied by his son Laertes. Hamlet (son of King Hamlet and Gertrude) enters last. He is dressed in mourning black.

King Though the death of Hamlet, our dear brother-in-law, is still a memory fresh in our minds – and though we rightly mourned for him, with the entire kingdom sharing a common grief – nevertheless, common sense has overcome our natural feelings to the extent that we sorrow for him level-headedly, remembering at the same time our own interests and responsibilities. Therefore, we have married our former sister-in-law, who is now our Queen and joint ruler of our warlike country. We did so with (as it were) a downcast sort of happiness; with one eye cheerful, the other sad: bringing joy to the funeral, and sorrow to the marriage; delight and misery were equally balanced. Nor have we disregarded your wise counsel; it has been fully supportive and freely given. Thank you for everything. Next, something you already know. Young Fortinbras, holding us in low esteem – or thinking our country is disordered and disorganized because of our dear brother’s death – in furtherance of his ambitious dreams, has not failed to pester us with messages, demanding the surrender of the lands which his father lost (all quite legally) to our most valiant brother. So much for the deeds of Fortinbras. As for our own response, and the reason for summoning this meeting, this is how things are right now. [He shows a letter to the Council] We have written to the King of Norway, young Fortinbras's uncle – who,
powerless and bedridden, hardly knows of his nephew’s intentions – to stop him from proceeding further, because the conscripts, the regulars, and all the military forces consist entirely of his subjects. We here dispatch you, good Cornelius, and you, Voltemand, as the bearers of this greeting to the old King of Norway, giving you no further personal powers to negotiate with the King beyond what is described at length in these terms of reference. [He hands them an official document] Farewell, and make haste.

Com., Volt. In that, as in all things, we will perform our duty.

King We do not doubt it. Our hearty farewell!

[Voltemand and Cornelius bow and leave hurriedly. The King turns to Polonius’ son]

And now, Laertes, what’s your news? You mentioned some request. What is it, Laertes? You cannot ask anything reasonable of the King of Denmark and waste your breath. What would you beg, Laertes, that I will not freely grant you without your asking? The head could not be more closely related to the heart, nor the mouth more indebted to the hand, than the throne of Denmark is to your father. What is your wish, Laertes?

Laertes My reverend lord: your leave and permission to return to France. Though I willingly came to Denmark to show my loyalty at your coronation, I must now confess that, my duty done, my thoughts and wishes incline towards France again, subject to your gracious indulgence and consent.

King Have you your father’s permission? What does Polonius say?

Polonius He has, my lord, extracted from me my grudging consent through constant pleading. In the end, I reluctantly endorsed his wishes. I beseech you to give him leave to go.

King Enjoy yourself while you are young, Laertes; have your fling and use your talents as you think best. [Laertes bows gratefully. The King turns to Hamlet, who has been wrapped in his own thoughts since his arrival] But now my nephew Hamlet, and my son –

Hamlet [aside] Closely related in one sense, but not so in another . . .

King Why are you still under a cloud?

Hamlet Not so, my lord. I’m suffering from too much sun. [It is no accident that “sun” and “son” sound the same]

Queen Hamlet, dear; throw off your black mood, and look upon the King with a more friendly eye. Don’t go round forever with downcast looks, as if you were seeking for your noble father in the dust. You know it’s normal: everything that lives must die, passing through the stages of life to eternity.

Hamlet Yes, madam. It’s normal.

Queen If it is, how come it seems so special in your case?

Hamlet Seems, madam? No, it is. I don’t understand your seems. It’s not simply my black mood, mother dear, or my traditional mourning clothes, or heavy sighs – no, nor is it copious tears, miserable looks, and all the related forms, expressions and appearances of grief – that can accurately convey my true feelings. These do indeed seem, because they are actions that a man can falsify. But I have something inside me that is beyond pretense. Those other things are only the frills and the formal dress of mourning.

King It’s very sweet-natured and commendable of you, Hamlet, to mourn your father in this dutiful way.
But you must know that your father lost a father; that lost father in turn lost his; and the survivor was duty-bound as a son to go into a period of deep mourning. But to persist in obstinate grieving is a stubborn, irreligious course. It shows a willful disrespect to heaven; a weakness of will; an impatient mind; an ignorant and untrained intellect. Why should we, in our foolish perversity, take to heart what we know to be inevitable, and the most obvious thing there is? Tush: it’s an offense against heaven, an offense to the dead, an offense to the natural order of things; an absurd contradiction to reason! Nature takes the death of fathers as a norm, and has consistently declared – from the first to die till the one who passed away today: “This must be so!” We beg you to bury your purposeless grief, and to think of us as you would a father. Let the world take note: you are next in succession to the throne and, with a love no less profound than that which a devoted father bears towards his son, I shall deal liberally with you. As for your intention of returning to Wittenberg University, that’s the opposite of what we would wish. We entreat you to stay here, in the hospitality and comfort of our royal presence, as the highest-ranking member of our court, our kinsman, and our son.

Queen Don’t let your mother’s prayers be in vain, Hamlet. I pray that you’ll stay with us. Don’t go to Wittenberg.

Hamlet I shall obey you, madam, to the best of my ability.

King Why, that’s a loving and a courteous reply. Act royally in Denmark. [To the Queen] Madam, come. Hamlet’s
gentle and voluntary consent cheers my heart. To celebrate it, I’ll drink no health today without firing a mighty cannon to inform the clouds; and the heavens will proclaim the King’s toast again, reechoing the thunder from the earth below. Come, let’s away.

[Trumpets sound. Everyone leaves except Hamlet]

Hamlet If only my too solid flesh would melt, thaw, and turn itself into dew; or that the Almighty had not prohibited suicide! Oh, God, God! [He sighs heavily] How weary, stale, boring and purposeless everything on this earth seems to be! A blight upon it! It’s a neglected garden that’s gone to seed; it’s overwhelmed with repulsive weeds. That it should come to this! Only two months dead – no not so much, not two! Such an excellent King! He was to this one [he nods in the direction of the departed Claudius] as the sun god is to a lascivious beast. He was so loving to my mother that he wouldn’t allow the wind to blow too roughly on her face. Heaven and earth, must I remember? Why, she would cling to him as if she had an insatiable appetite for him. And yet, in less than a month... I mustn’t think about it! Weakness and womanhood go together! A mere month: even before the shoes were old in which she followed my poor father’s corpse, sobbing incoherently, like Niobe – why, she, she of all women! [He breaks off, distractedly] Oh, God! a brainless beast would have mourned longer! She married my uncle! My father’s brother, but no more like my father than I am to Hercules! Within a month, before those
deceitful tears had ceased to flow from her eyes red with weeping, she married! Oh, such wicked speed! To hop so nimbly into an incestuous bed! [In Hamlet's day, incest included marriage with a husband's brother] It's not right, and no good comes of it. But let my heart break: I must hold my tongue.

[Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo enter]

Horatio Greetings to your lordship.

Hamlet [absently] I'm glad to see you well. [Recognizing his visitors and cheering up] Horatio, if I'm not mistaken?

Horatio Indeed, my lord; and your humble servant ever.

Hamlet Sir, my good friend; your servant too. [They embrace] And what are you doing away from Wittenberg, Horatio? [He notices Horatio has companions] Marcellus!

Marcellus [bowing] My good lord.

Hamlet I'm very glad to see you. [To Barnardo] Good evening, sir. [To Horatio again] But whatever brings you here from Wittenberg?

Horatio A tendency to truancy, my good lord!

Hamlet I wouldn't take that from your enemy — so I won't offend my ears by hearing you speak ill of yourself! I know you are no truant. What's your business in Elsinore? We'll teach you to drink deep before you depart!

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

Hamlet Please don't make fun of me, fellow student. I think it was to see my mother's wedding . . .

Horatio [embarrassed] Indeed, my lord, it took place very soon afterwards.

Hamlet Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The leftover meat pies from the funeral were served up cold for the wedding breakfast. Would that I'd met my worst enemy in heaven, Horatio, rather than that I'd seen that day. My father — I think I can see my father —

Horatio [startled] Where, my lord?

Hamlet [pointing to his own head] In my mind's eye, Horatio.

Horatio I saw him once. He was a fine King.

Hamlet He was a man, altogether perfect — I'll never see anyone like him again.

Horatio My lord, I think I saw him last night.

Hamlet Saw? Who?

Horatio My lord, your father the King.

Hamlet My father the King?

Horatio Restrain your amazement and listen carefully till I've described this marvel to you, with these gentlemen as witnesses.

Hamlet For the love of God, let me hear!

Horatio For two nights in succession these gentlemen, Marcellus and Barnardo, while on their watch in the middle of the night, have been confronted thus: a figure like your father, armed correctly in every detail from head to foot, appears before them, and walks
past them solemnly at a slow and steady pace. Three
times he walked in front of their spellbound and
awe-struck eyes, as close to them as the length of his
martial baton. Dissolved almost to a jelly with fear,
they stand dumb, and don’t speak to him. They told
me about this in absolute secrecy, and I joined them
on watch on the third night, where, just as they’d
described—both in terms of time, and the appearance
of the thing, down to the last letter—the apparition
comes. I recognized your father. These hands are not
more similar. [He spreads his own out to show how
alike they are]

Hamlet    But where was this?

Marcellus  My lord, upon the battlement where we
               watched.

Hamlet     Didn’t you speak to it?

Horatio   My lord, I did, but it didn’t reply. But once, I
               thought, it lifted up its head and made as if to speak.
               Just then the morning cock crowed loudly, and at the
               sound it shrank away in haste, and vanished from our
               sight.

Hamlet     It’s very strange.

Horatio   Upon my life, my honored lord, it’s true. We
               thought it our duty to let you know of it.

Hamlet     Of course, sirs. But this worries me. Are you on
               watch tonight?

All       We are, my lord.

Hamlet    [referring to the Ghost] Did you say armed?

All       Armed, my lord.

Hamlet     From top to toe?

All        From head to foot, my lord.

Hamlet     Then you didn’t see his face?

Horatio   Oh yes, my lord. He wore his visor up.

Hamlet    How did he look? Fiercely, like a warrior?

Horatio   His face showed more sorrow than anger.

Hamlet     Pale or red?

Horatio   Oh, very pale.

Hamlet     And looked hard at you?

Horatio   Throughout.

Hamlet     I wish I’d been there.

Horatio   It would have astounded you.

Hamlet     Very probably. Did it stay long?

Horatio   While you could count a hundred reasonably
               quickly.

Mar., Bar. Longer, longer!

Horatio   Not when I saw it.

Hamlet    His beard was streaked with gray, hm?

Horatio   It was like I’d seen it during his life: black
               streaked with silver.

Hamlet    I’ll watch tonight. Perhaps it will walk again.

Horatio   I’m sure it will.

Hamlet    If it comes looking like my noble father, I’ll
               speak to it even if hell itself should open wide, and
show the penalty for speaking. I would ask you all, if you have kept this watching secret up to now, to continue to say nothing about it. And whatever else should happen tonight, take it all in but don’t report it. I shall repay your loyalty. So, goodbye. I’ll visit you on the platform between eleven and twelve.

All Be assured of our duty to your honor.

Hamlet * Your love even, as you have mine. Goodbye.

[Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo leave]

The spirit of my father — in armor! All is not well. I suspect foul play. I wish it were evening. Till then, be patient, my soul. Evil deeds will surface, however deeply they are buried.

[He goes]

Scene 3

The house of Polonius. Laertes and his sister Ophelia enter.

Laertes My luggage is on board. Farewell. And sister, whenever there’s a ship ready to sail, don’t rest till you’ve written to me.

Ophelia Can you doubt it?

Laertes As for Hamlet, and his interest in you: regard it as of no significance — as a youthful flirtation; an early flowering of nature in its springtime; fast-blooming, therefore not enduring; pleasing, but not lasting; the fragrance of a passing moment’s fancy. Nothing more.

Ophelia Nothing more than that?

Laertes Regard it as nothing more. Because maturity is not merely a matter of physical development; as we grow, so too does responsibility in the mind and the soul. Perhaps he loves you now, and his intentions are entirely honorable. But you must bear in mind, taking his high rank into account, that he is not his own master. He is subject to the responsibilities of his birth. He cannot please himself like ordinary folk. The safety and well-being of the whole country depends upon his choice. Therefore he can only act with the approval and consent of those whom he rules. So if he says he loves you, you would be wise to believe it only to the extent that a man of his rank can turn his words into deeds — which is no further than what popular opinion would approve of. So measure the loss to your honor if you put too much faith in his love songs, or if you fall in love with him, or if you yield your virginity to his self-indulgent entreaties. Fear it, Ophelia; fear it, my dear sister, and stay out of harm’s way by controlling your affections. A good girl keeps herself to herself. Virtue is no protection against scandal-mongering. Too often beauty is
ruined in its early stages: the bright promise of youth is particularly prone to corruption. So beware: safety lies in fearing the worst. Young people are hot-blooded by nature.

Ophelia  I'll take the significance of this worthy lesson to heart. But, dear brother, don't be like one of those ungodly preachers: showing me the hard and uncomfortable way to heaven while like a bloated and reckless sinner you yourself take the easy path of wanton pleasure, disregarding your own advice.

Laertes Don't worry about me.

[Polonius, their father, enters]

I should be off. Here comes my father. Two farewell blessings are twice as good as one: a fortunate opportunity for a second leave-taking!

Polonius Still here, Laertes? Get aboard, aboard: shame on you! The wind's just right and they are waiting for you. [He places his hands on Laertes' head] There, take my blessing with you, and see that these few maxims are imprinted in your memory... Never say what you are thinking, nor put hasty thoughts into action. Be friendly but don't cheapen yourself. Those friends you have who've proved themselves by experience, grasp them to your soul with bands of steel. But don't offer the hand of friendship to every new-made, unproven, back-slaught acquaintance. Beware of starting a quarrel, but once you are involved, see that your opponent gets more than he bargained for. Hear all, but say little. Take each man's opinion, but keep your own judgment to yourself. Dress as well as you can afford; but don't go to extremes of fashion - good quality rather than loudness - because you can usually tell a man by the style of his clothes, and French nobles are particularly discriminating in this respect. Be neither a borrower nor a lender. A loan often loses both the money and the friend, and borrowing makes a man a spendthrift. This above all else: be consistent; then it follows as surely as night follows day that you cannot deceive any man. Farewell. May my blessing help you accomplish all this.

Laertes [bowing] I take my leave of you most humbly, my lord.

Polonius Time is pressing. Go, your servants are waiting.

Laertes Farewell, Ophelia, and don't forget what I have said to you.

Ophelia It's locked in my memory, and you yourself shall keep the key.

Laertes Farewell. [He goes]

Polonius What has he said to you, Ophelia?

Ophelia With respect, something concerning the Lord Hamlet.

Polonius Indeed. A timely thought. I'm told he has often seen you privately lately, and that you yourself have been liberal and generous in your availability. If this is so - as people are keen to tell me by way of warning - I must tell you that you
ACT ONE  Scene 3

don't understand yourself as clearly as is becoming to my 
daughter, and your honor. What's between you? Tell me 
the truth.

Ophelia  He has, my lord, tendered his affection for me 
frequently of late.

Polonius  Affection? Pooh, you speak like an immature girl, 
   inexperienced in such dangerous matters! Do you believe his 
tenders, as you call them?

Ophelia  I don't know what I should think, my lord.

Polonius  Well then, I'll teach you. Consider yourself a baby to 
have taken these tenders for real currency, when they're 
counterfeit. Tender yourself at a higher rate or -- at the risk 
of straining the expression, using it like this -- you'll tender 
me a love child.

Ophelia  [shocked] My lord, he has wooed me in an 
   honorable fashion.

Polonius  [scornfully] Yes, fashion you may well call it! 
        Really, now!

Ophelia  And he has backed his words, my lord, with almost 
        all the holy vows of heaven.

Polonius  Yes. Traps to catch stupid birds! I know how glibly 
      promises are made when passion is roused. You mustn't 
      mistake these flare-ups, daughter, that give more light than 
      heat, and that disappear the very moment the promises are 
      made, for fire. From now on, be more sparing of your 
      maidenly presence. Don't yield at the first request for a 
      meeting. As for Lord Hamlet, believe him only inasmuch as 
      he is young, with greater freedom of action than you have. 
      In short, Ophelia, do not believe his vows. They are not 

Scene 4

The castle walls. Enter Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus.

Hamlet  The wind bites keenly. It's very cold.

Horatio  It's a sharp and bitter wind.

Hamlet  What's the time?

Horatio  Not yet midnight.

Marcellus  No, it has struck.

Horatio  Indeed? I didn't hear it. It's approaching the time 
      when the Ghost usually walks.

[A flourish of trumpets is heard from inside the castle. Two 
cannon are fired]

What does this mean, my lord?

Hamlet  The King is celebrating tonight: drinking deep, making
merry, and rollicking to wild dances. And as he drains his
tankards of Rhenish wine, kettledrums and trumpets blare
out in celebration of his toasts.

Horatio Is it a custom?

Hamlet It certainly is. But in my opinion, though I’m a Dane
and born to it, it’s a tradition far better broken than
observed. This drunken revelry makes us maligned and put
to shame by other nations. They call us drunkards, and
besmirch our reputation by alluding to us as swine. Indeed,
it diminishes our considerable achievements and loses us
esteem. Particular individuals are often affected in the same
way. Because of some constitutional defect (such as
something inherited, which isn’t their fault, since one
cannot choose one’s ancestors; or some dominant
character trait that leads to irrational conduct; or some
behavior-pattern that offends convention) these men
(suffering as I say from being marked by one defect, a
blemish of Nature or bad luck), no matter what their other
virtues (even if they are pristinely pure and as plentiful as is
humanly possible), will be corrupted, as far as public opinion
is concerned, by that one single fault. That small speck of
evil often outweighs all the good in a man, to his own
discredit.

[The Ghost enters]

Horatio Look, my lord. Here it is.
something as immortal as itself? It waves me on again. I'll follow it.

Horatio What if it tempts you towards the ocean, my lord, or to the fearful precipice that overhangs the sea, and there assumes some other horrible form that could deprive you of your reason, and make you mad? Think of it. The very situation in itself puts desperate thoughts into every brain that sees the sea from such a height, and hears it roar below.

Hamlet It's still waving me on.  [To the Ghost] Go on. I'll follow you.

Marcellus  [restraining him] You shall not go, my lord!

Hamlet Take your hands away!

Horatio Do as we say. You shall not go!

Hamlet  [struggling] My fate cries out, and the smallest artery in my body has the courage of the lion slain by Hercules!  [He turns to the Ghost again] Still it calls me! Let me go, gentlemen! By heaven, I'll make a ghost of anyone who tries to stop me!  [Reaching for his sword] Get away, I say!  [To the Ghost] Go on — I'll follow you!

[The Ghost leaves, followed by Hamlet]

Horatio He's going crazy in his fantasies!

Marcellus Let's follow. It wouldn't be right to obey him.

Horatio Let's pursue him. What will come of this?

Marcellus There's something foul going on in the state of Denmark.

Horatio  [resignedly] Heaven will sort it out.

Marcellus No — let's follow him!

[They leave in pursuit]

Scene 5

At a distance along the battlements. Enter the Ghost and Hamlet.

Hamlet Where are you leading me? Answer — I'll go no further.

Ghost Listen.

Hamlet I will.

Ghost Daybreak is almost here, when I must give myself up to the infernal and tormenting flames.  [He refers to purgatory]

Hamlet Alas, poor ghost!

Ghost Don't pity me, but give your full attention to what I shall reveal.

Hamlet Speak. I have no choice but to hear.

Ghost So are you also bound to revenge, when you shall hear.

Hamlet What?

Ghost I am your father's ghost; doomed for a certain period to walk at night, and during the daytime to fast in fires, till the wicked sins done during my lifetime are burnt and purged away. If I were not forbidden to reveal the secrets of my prison, I could tell you a tale whose simplest word
would terrify your soul, freeze your young blood, make your two eyes protrude from their sockets, your tousled hair to straighten out, and every individual hair to stand on end like quills upon a frightened porcupine. But this revelation of the afterlife is not for ears of flesh and blood. Listen, listen, oh, listen! If you ever loved your father —

Hamlet  Oh, God!

Ghost   — revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

Hamlet  Murder!

Ghost  Murder most foul, as it always is: but this one exceptionally foul, remarkable, and against nature.

Hamlet   Tell me quickly, so that with speed swifter than thinking or the thoughts of love I may sweep to my revenge!

Ghost  Well said. You'd be as languid as the drowsy poppies that root in comfort on the banks of Lethe [the legendary river of forgetfulness] if this did not arouse you. Now, Hamlet, listen. The official story is that, sleeping in my garden, a snake bit me: so everyone in Denmark is vilely misled by a lying account of my death. Know this, noble youth: the serpent that stung your father's life away now wears his crown!

Hamlet  As I suspected! My uncle!

Ghost  Yes: that incestuous, that adulterous beast, with clever witchcraft, with traitorous skills — oh, such wicked cleverness, and such seductive skills! — he satisfied his

shameful lust by infatuating my apparently virtuous Queen. Oh, Hamlet, what a fall from grace that was! To go from me, whose love was of such high quality that it kept total faith with the vow I made to her in marriage — and to descend to a wretch whose merits were poor compared to those of mine. But just as virtue can never be seduced, even when tempted by lewdness in a saintly disguise, so lust — though it takes on the form of a radiant angel — will gratify its appetite in a holy bed, finding its victims amongst the depraved. But stay: I think I can smell the morning air. Let me be brief. Sleeping in my garden, my custom always in the afternoon, during my hour of relaxation your uncle stole upon me, with poisonous sap in a vial. In my ears he poured the leprous essence, whose effect is so injurious to man's blood that swift as quicksilver it runs through the veins, and with a sudden force it thickens and curdles the healthy blood like acid dropping into milk. It did this to mine, and immediately my skin erupted like that of a leper, with a vile and loathsome crust all over my smooth body. Thus, as I slept, I was deprived by my brother of my life, my crown, and my queen, all at once; slain in the midst of my daily trespasses; without benefit of the last rites; totally unprepared; sent to my final reckoning with all my sins upon
my head. Oh, how horrible, horrible, most horrible! If you have any natural feelings in you, do not tolerate it. Do not let the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for lust and damnable incest! But however you decide to proceed, do not poison your mind nor take any action against your mother. Leave her to heaven and to the stings of her own conscience. A quick farewell. The glowworm's ineffective fire begins to fade, showing that morning is near. Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me!

[The Ghost vanishes]

Horatio and Marcellus call him as they approach]

Horatio My lord, my lord!
Marcellus Lord Hamlet!
Horatio Heaven protect him!
Hamlet [to himself] So be it.
Marcellus [calling him like a falconer] Hello, ho, ho, my lord!
Hamlet [responding similarly] Hello, ho, ho, boy! [He whistles] Come, bird, come!
Marcellus Are you all right, my noble lord?
Horatio What news, my lord?
Hamlet [excitedly] Oh, astounding!
Horatio My good lord, tell it.
Hamlet No, you'll reveal it.
Horatio I won't, my lord, I swear by heaven.
Marcellus Nor will I, my lord.
Hamlet [beginning as if he meant to tell] What do you say, then . . . Would anyone ever think that . . . [He breaks off] But you will keep a secret?

Hor., Mar. Yes, by heaven.

Hamlet [he draws them towards him and whispers confidentially] There's not a single villain living in all Denmark who isn't a thoroughlygood rogue . . .

Horatio There's no need for a ghost to come from the grave to tell us that, my lord.

Hamlet How right! You're absolutely right! And so without more ado I think it's best if we shake hands and part; you in
whatever direction your business and pleasure direct
you – because every man has business and pleasure, such
as it is – and for my own poor part, I'll go pray.

Horatio  Your words are wild and hysterical, my lord.

Hamlet  I'm sorry they offend you, really I am. Yes, indeed. I
really ain't.

Horatio  No offense, my lord.

Hamlet  Yes by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio – and much
offense, too. As for this vision here, it's a genuine ghost, let
me tell you that. As for your desire to know what we have
said to each other, suppress it as best you can. And now,
good friends: as you are friends, scholars, and soldiers,
grant me one small request.

Horatio  What is it, my lord? We will.

Hamlet  Never to reveal what you have seen tonight.

Hor., Mar.  My lord, we won't.

Hamlet  No, but swear to it.

Horatio  Honestly, my lord, I won't tell.

Marcellus  Nor I, my lord, in all faith.

Hamlet  Swear upon my sword.  [He raises it]

Marcellus  We have sworn already, my lord.

Hamlet  [insisting]  Indeed. But upon my sword.  [He will not
be denied]  Indeed.

[The Ghost's voice is heard from below]

Ghost  Swear.

Hamlet  Aha, boy. Do you say so too? Are you there, old

faithful?  [To Horatio and Marcellus again]  Come on: you
can hear this fellow down in the cellar. Agree to swear.

Horatio  Propose the oath, my lord.

Hamlet  Never to speak of what you have seen. Swear by my
sword.  [He stretches it out so that they can lay their hands
on it]

Ghost  [from a different area]  Swear.

[Horatio and Marcellus do so]

Hamlet  Here and everywhere? Then we'll shift our ground.
Come here, gentlemen, and lay your hands on my sword
again. Swear by my sword never to speak of what you have
heard.

Ghost  [from a different area]  Swear by his sword.

[They swear]

Hamlet  Well said, old mole! Can you tunnel through the earth
so fast? What a skilful miner! Let's move once more, good
friends.

Horatio  Oh, day and night! This is very strange.

Hamlet  And therefore as it is a stranger, welcome it. There
are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than
philosophy realizes. But come.  [He places the sword again
for them to swear upon]  Here, as before: swear that you
will never, so help you God, however strange or odd I might
sometimes behave – because I may perhaps think it best to
feign insanity – that if you see me at such a time you never
will – by means of arms folded like this  [he demonstrates]
– or a shake of the head like this  [he shows theirs] –
or by uttering some cryptic phrase such as “Well, we
know . . .” or “We could if we so wished . . .”
or "If we chose to speak..." or "There are those who could say more..." or other similar ambiguous hints—give any indication that you know the truth about me. Swear this, upon God's mercy in your hour of need!

Ghost  Swear!

[They swear for the third time]

Hamlet  Rest, rest, troubled spirit!  [To Horatio and Marcellus]  So, gentlemen, my fondest regards to you. And whatever a man may do who's as poor as Hamlet, to show his love and friendship to you, God willing you shall not lack it. Let us go in together. And don't forget—your fingers on your lips, please.  [He makes a "keep mum" sign]  Everything's in a mess. What cursed bad luck that I should be chosen to put things right!  [Horatio and Marcellus stand aside to let him go first]  No. Come, let's go together.

[They go inside]