

a study guide

compiled and arranged by
the Education Department of
The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

HAMLET: A Study Guide

a support packet for studying the play and attending
The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's 2009 Main Stage production

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The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is an independent, professional theatre located on the Drew University campus.

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CLASSROOM

FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

What we hear most from educators is that there is a great deal of anxiety when it comes to Shakespeare; seeing it, reading it and especially teaching it. One of the principal goals of The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's education programs is to demystify Shakespeare, take him "off the shelf" and re-energize his work for students and teachers alike. Toward these goals, this Study Guide provides educators with tools to both allay their own concerns and to expand the theatre-going experience for their students beyond the field trip to The Shakespeare Theatre.

The information included in this study guide will help you expand your students' understanding of Shakespeare in performance, as well as help you meet many of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. We encourage you to impart as much of the information included in this study guide to your students as is possible. The following are some **suggestions from teachers** on how you can utilize elements of the study guide given limited classroom time.

- Many teachers have found that distributing or reading the one-page "BRIEF SYNOPSIS" has greatly increased students' understanding and enjoyment of the production. It provides the students with a general understanding of what they will be seeing and what they can expect. Some teachers have simply taken the last five minutes of a class period to do this with very positive results.
- When more class time is available prior to your visit, we recommend incorporating the background information on William Shakespeare and the play itself. One teacher divided her class into groups and assigned each group research topics based on the divisions found in the study guide. Using a copy of the corresponding study guide page as a launch pad, the students had one week to research the topics. The students then presented their information to the class in three- to five-minute oral reports. Including the questions that evolved from the presentations, the entire project took only one class period. I am told that the reading of Old English and Middle English texts was "quite entertaining and very informative."
- Using the questions found in the "TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION," many teachers will opt to take a class period after the trip to The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey to discuss the play with their students. The questions help keep the comments focused on the production, while incorporating various thematic and social issues that are found in the play.
- One school spent two days working through performance-based activities (a few of which are suggested in the "FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES" section) with a particularly "difficult and rowdy" class. They were astounded with the results. Their students took the opportunity to "ham it up," and discovered a great joy and understanding from performing Shakespeare.

To learn more about these and many other suggestions for engaging your students, I encourage you to join us next summer for our acclaimed summer professional development institute for teachers, *ShakeFest*. Again, we hope you will incorporate as many portions of this study guide as you are able into your classroom experience. If you have any suggestions for activities or topics not already found in the study guide, please contact our education department. We are always interested in hearing new ways to excite young people (and teachers) about Shakespeare and live theatre.

"What's My Line?" Promoting Active Listening

Teacher-tested, student-approved! Try this exercise with your students:

Before attending the production, give each student one line from the play to listen for. Discuss the meaning of the line and encourage their input in deciphering what Shakespeare meant by the line. How would the student perform the line? Why is the line important to the play? Does it advance the plot, or give the audience particular insight into a character or relationship?

Following the production, discuss the line again. Did the actor present the line in the way your student expected? If not, how was it different?

Happy Teaching,



Brian B. Crowe, Director of Education



The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's Main Stage

ACTIVITIES

Shakespeare: Helpful Tips For Exploring & Seeing His Works

“Just plunge right in

(to Shakespeare). See a play, read it aloud, rent a video, listen to a tape. It’s up to you. When you look at Shakespeare close up, he’s not as intimidating as when he’s seen from afar.”

Norrie Epstein
The Friendly Shakespeare

Tragedy can have humor, and
great comedy always has
elements of the tragic.

18th-century critics complained that Shakespeare’s tragedies weren’t consistently serious enough. According to the classic rules, tragedy should be uniformly somber. Shakespeare’s use of humor in his tragedies prevents us from becoming washed away in a dense fog of emotion. Rather, it forces us out of the “tragic” long enough to appreciate the level to which the play’s passions have taken us.

“Some of the plays have taken on mythic proportions. By myths, I mean we grow up knowing certain things about [Shakespeare’s] characters but we don’t know how we know them.

There are lots of
SHAKESPEAREAN MICROCHIPS
lodged in our brains.”

Charles Marowitz, director

“It was Olivier’s *Henry V*
that made me realize that

Shakespeare is
about real
people
and that his language
wasn’t simply beautiful
poetry.”



Robert Brustein, director

“My advice to anyone seeing Shakespeare:

**Don’t worry so
much!**

Just make sure your ears are clean and your eyes are sharp. Listen and look and watch. Look at the distance people stand from each other; look at the relationships being developed.

Stay with it.

Don’t negate the move that Shakespeare will make toward your gut, toward your soul— because he will touch you there, if you allow yourself to be touched.”

David Suchet, actor

“There are some parts of the plays you’ll never understand. But excuse me, I thought that’s what great art was supposed to be about.

**DON’T
FREAK
OUT
OVER
IT!”**

*Peter Sellars,
Director*

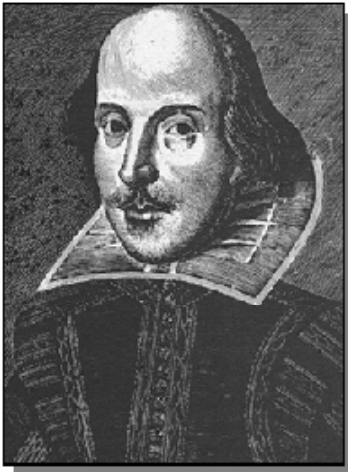
Don’t be afraid to
LISTEN, WATCH AND REACT:

laugh, cry, and be moved.

Shakespeare wrote for
a live and active audience.

Both audience and actor
must be involved to create
a truly winning performance.

The Life of William



William Shakespeare, recognized as the greatest English dramatist, was born on April 23, 1564. He was the third of eight children born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire, England. Shakespeare's father was a prominent local merchant, and Shakespeare's childhood, though little is known about it for certain, appears to have been quite normal. In fact, it seems that the young Shakespeare was allowed considerable leisure time because his

writing contains extensive knowledge of hunting and hawking. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer.

She was eight years his senior, and the match was considered unconventional.

It is believed that Shakespeare left Stratford-on-Avon and went to London around 1588. By 1592 he was a successful actor and playwright. He wrote 38 plays, two epic poems, and over 150 sonnets. His work was immensely popular, appealing to members of all social spheres including Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. While they were well-liked, Shakespeare's plays were not considered by his educated contemporaries to be exceptional. By 1608 Shakespeare's involvement with theatre began to dwindle, and he spent more time at his country home in Stratford. He died in 1616.

Most of Shakespeare's plays found their first major publication in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, when two of his fellow actors put the plays together in the First Folio. Other early printings of Shakespeare's plays were called quartos, a printer's term referring to the format in which the publication was laid out. These quartos and the First Folio texts are the sources of all modern printings of Shakespeare's plays.

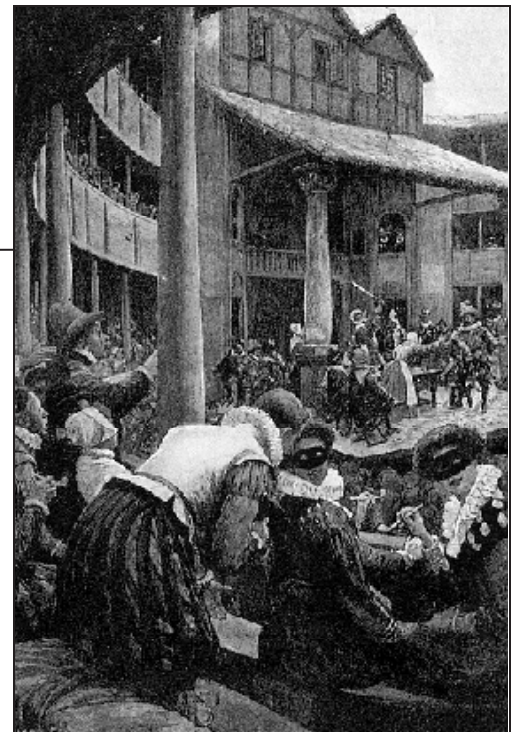
Shakespeare's London

London, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, was a bustling urban center filled with a wide variety of people and cultures. Although most life centered around making a living or going to church, the main source of diversion for Londoners was the theatre. It was a form of entertainment accessible to people of all classes. The rich and the poor, the aristocrats and the beggars all met at the theatre. Though often appeasing the church or the monarchy, theatre at this time did experience a freedom that was unknown in previous generations. Evidence of this can be found in the numerous bawdy and pagan references found in Shakespeare's plays. This relative artistic license and freedom of expression made theatre extremely unpopular among certain members of society, and it was later banned entirely by the Puritans. Not until the reign of Charles II (1660-1685) was the theatre restored to the status it held in Shakespeare's day.

The Globe Theatre, the resident playhouse for Shakespeare's company of actors, was easily accessible to Londoners and an active social center. Actors and performers were also regularly brought to court or to private homes to entertain. Despite their social popularity, actors maintained a relatively low status, sometimes no better than a common beggar or rogue. Most performers were forced to earn a living doing trade work. The aristocracy's desire for entertainment, however, did spur the development of numerous new theatre pieces. Often a nobleman would become a patron to an artist or company of actors, providing for their financial needs and sheltering them to some degree from official sanctions. In return, the company would adopt the name of the patron. Shakespeare's acting company was originally named "Lord Chamberlain's Men" after their patron, Henry Carey, Lord Chamberlain. Later, under

the patronage of King James I, they were known as "The King's Men," an unprecedented honor at the time.

Despite the flourishing of the arts at this time, London was sometimes a desolate place. Outbreaks of the Black Plague (the bubonic plague) frequently erupted, killing thousands of citizens. Theatres, shops, and the government were all shut down during these times in hopes of preventing the spread of the disease. Elizabethans were unaware that the disease was being spread by the flea and rat populations, which well outnumbered the human population of London at that time.



The Sonnets

You might have thought that Shakespeare wrote the sonnets earlier in his career, as a type of "stepping stone" to his plays. However, Shakespeare actually penned most of his sonnets during the various outbreaks of the plague in London, when the theatres were closed.

Are You SURE This Is English?

Contrary to popular belief, Shakespeare and his contemporaries did not write in Old English, or even Middle English. **PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE 16TH AND EARLY 17TH CENTURIES WROTE IN MODERN ENGLISH.** Shakespeare spoke (and wrote in) the same language which we speak today. It is possible to be thrown a bit by grammatical “carry-overs” from earlier English [“thee” and “thou” instead of “you”] and the poetic liberties that Shakespeare took, but there is no doubt that the words and syntax used in his plays can be understood today without any “translation.” To help clarify this point, here are some examples of Old, Middle and Modern English.

What did Shakespeare sound like?

While we may associate Shakespeare with the “refined” British accent of an Ian McKellen or Judi Dench, linguistic scholars suggest that the closest approximation to the London accent of Shakespeare’s day is the accent heard nowadays in the Appalachian region of the United States.

Old English (500 - 1150 CE)

When Julius Caesar invaded Britain in BCE 55-4, the Celtic (pronounced KEL-tic) tribes lived in the British Isles. Their languages survive today in the forms of Gaelic (Scotland and Ireland), Welsh (Wales) and Manx (Isle of Man). The Romans brought Latin to Britain. However, early English developed primarily from the language of tribes which invaded and settled England from what is now Germany. This language, known as Old English, was also influenced by the Latin spoken by Catholic missionaries from Rome as well as the Scandinavian dialects of Viking raiders and settlers.

selection from *Beowulf* author unknown, ca 800 CE

Oft Scyld Scefing sceaðena prëstum,
monegum mægðum meodo-setla oftëah,
egsode eorlas. Syððan ærert wearð
fëasceaft funden, hë þæs frofre gebåd,
wëox under wolcnum, weorð-myndum þäh,
oð-þæt him aeghwylc ymb-sittendra
ofer hron-råde hýran scolde,
gomban gylðan. þæt wæs god cyning!

IN MODERN ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

*Often Scyld the Scefing from squadroned foes,
from many a tribe, the mead-bench tore,
awing the earls. Since first he lay
friendless, a foundling, fate repaid him:
for he waxed under welkin, in wealth he throve,
till before him the folk, both far and near,
who lived by the whale-path, heard his mandate,
gave him gift: a good king he!*

Middle English (1150 - 1450 CE)

The conquest of England by the Norman army in 1066 brought great changes to English life and the English language. The Old French spoken by the Normans became for many years the language of the Royal Court and of English literature. Over time, the spoken English still used by the lower classes borrowed about 10,000 words from French, as well as certain grammatical structures. By the time English reappeared as a written, literary language in the 14th century, it only distantly resembled Old English. This German-French hybrid language is known as Middle English.

selection from *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, ca 1390 CE

But natheless / while I haue tyme and space
Er that I ferther / in this tale pace
Me thynketh it acordant to resoun
To telle yow / al the condiciun
Of eeche of hem / so as it seemed to me
And whiche they weere / and of what degree
And eek in what array / that they were inne
And at a knyght thanne wol I first bigynne.

IN MODERN ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

*But nonetheless, while I have time and space
Before I continue in this story
I think it appropriate to speak of,
To tell you, the condition
Of each of them, as it seemed to me.
And who was who, and of what degree,
And in what fashion each was dressed.
And with a knight then I will begin.*

Modern English (1450 - present day)

With the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, the English language began to develop and mutate at an unprecedented rate. Books, previously a precious and expensive commodity, were now widely available to anyone with basic literacy. Works in Latin, Italian, Spanish, French and Portuguese were being translated by the hundreds, and the translators found it necessary to borrow and invent thousands of new words. English trade and exploration fueled even more cultural and linguistic exchange. The early Modern English of Shakespeare and his contemporaries has been referred to as “English in its adolescence”: daring, experimental, innovative and irreverent.

selection from *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, ca 1595 CE

Well, you have made a simple choice; you know not how to choose a man: Romeo! No, not he; though his face be better than any man’s, yet his leg excels all men’s; and for a hand, and a foot, and a body, though they be not to be talked on, yet they are past compare...

Simplifying “The World’s Greatest Dramatic Work”

William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has been often dubbed the greatest dramatic work in the English language and one of the most important. There are more essays, dissertations and books which explore the many aspects of *Hamlet* than any other work in the English language, save the Bible. Some scholars have gone so far as to call the tragic Danish prince a hero (and sometimes an anti-hero) for every generation. The play is, everyone seems to agree, a masterwork.

Where does one begin to tackle the “world’s greatest tragedy?” How can one possibly begin to fathom even a fraction of the scope of the work? It sounds about as daunting as attempting to define, in detail, the universe. For one moment forget all the controversy that accompanies this play, and consider the fact that Shakespeare wrote it for the general public. By modern standards, it would have been a hot summer release at the box-office, or a much anticipated mini-series event during “Sweeps Week.” He did not write it for all the literary and dramatic scholars, but for the common, everyday Joe down on Main Street.

Still a little daunted? Think of the play broken down into its three basic stories, which run congruent throughout the work: the captivating murder mystery, the edge-of-your-seat revenge-story, and the compelling psychological drama.

THE MURDER MYSTERY: Probably when you sit down to watch *Hamlet*, you have already read or been told that Claudius killed Hamlet’s father and that the prince spends the play seeking revenge. Remember that on one very important level, this play is intended to be a mystery. No one, save Claudius, knows that a murder has even been committed until the ghost tells Hamlet in the end of the first act. Once Hamlet is told, he is determined to act, but somewhere in the back of his mind, though he wants to believe what the ghost has told him, he doubts. Would you immediately believe a spirit that makes his murder known to no one but you? It is not until Hamlet devises a method by which to test (and prove) the ghost’s accusation, that he can act. Add to this all the scenes in which characters (sometimes unknowingly) are used as pawns in deception, and the numerous scenes which are secretly watched by other characters, and you’ve got a play ripe with intrigue. Much of the mystery (and the fun) of the play comes in attempting to discover the truth that lies within the “prison” of Elsinore. Keep this in mind, and permit yourself to watch the production from the point of view of an unsuspecting audience member.

THE REVENGE-STORY: Who can walk away from a great tale of cold justice served up to an evil-doer? We relish in it as we watch Chuck Norris, “Dirty Harry” and most Kung-fu movies, *The Princess Bride*, *Kill Bill (Vol 1 & 2)*, *Inglourious Basterds* and other box-office favorites. The source of *Hamlet* and its core story are no different. Hamlet’s father was killed by his uncle, who then blocked Hamlet’s succession to the throne and married Hamlet’s mother. He did all this in full view of the unsuspecting eyes of Denmark. What drives this play is Hamlet’s overwhelming need for revenge, restrained by his doubts and his reason. Not enough for you? Well, it wasn’t enough for Shakespeare either. Not content with one son seeking revenge for his father’s murder, Shakespeare throws Laertes into the mix in Act III vowing bloody vengeance for the death of Polonius. Once again, look at the play with new eyes and sit back and watch the excitement unfold. Who will get whom first?



Gareth Saxe as Hamlet, 2009.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DRAMA: This third aspect of *Hamlet* is the most important. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare has created one of the most complex characters in classical drama. In doing so, he has also left his character open for many diverse interpretations. Some see Hamlet as a young man barely capable of controlling his venomous desire to destroy Claudius. Others see him as a lazy and irresolute thirty-something spoiled playboy. This production portrays Hamlet as an extraordinary, decisive man, who for the first time in his life is presented with a dilemma he cannot resolve. Is he trapped in his depression? Is he a coward? Is he the reluctant hero? All these are supportable interpretations of Shakespeare’s prince of Denmark. Don’t worry about what everyone else has said. Sit back and watch and see what YOU think about the young prince.

Remember, you may not understand everything all at once. Don’t worry about it. That’s not the point. Some of it may come to you an hour later while talking with peers, or at lunch next week, or even a few years down the line while you’re standing in a check-out line at the grocery store. After all, THAT is what makes *Hamlet* one of the world’s greatest dramatic works; its ability to linger long after it has been experienced.

HAMLET: A Short Synopsis

The play opens on a dark watchtower outside the castle of Elsinore, where Horatio and two soldiers see a ghost which looks exactly like the recently deceased King Hamlet. The Ghost will not speak to them and the men decide to tell Prince Hamlet what they have seen. The next morning presents a state affair following the marriage of Queen Gertrude to Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, the newly crowned King of Denmark. Despite the protestations of his mother and Claudius, Hamlet remains in mourning for his father, who died within the past month. Horatio and Bernardo arrive and tell Hamlet of the Ghost. He agrees to join them on the night's watch in hopes of discovering the reason for the Ghost's appearance.

Elsewhere in the palace, Ophelia bids farewell to her brother, Laertes. Laertes warns her not to believe Hamlet's romantic advances towards her. After Laertes departs, Polonius, their father, forbids Ophelia to see Hamlet ever again.

That evening, Hamlet and the watchmen once again encounter the Ghost. Hamlet follows it to a secluded location, and the Ghost tells him that his father was murdered by Claudius. Hamlet vows revenge for his father's murder, and plans to put on an "antic disposition" (pretend to be insane) until he can discover the means by which he can expose and kill Claudius.

The court endeavors to discover the cause of Hamlet's "madness." Polonius believes that the madness has been brought on by Ophelia's rejection of Hamlet's love. Gertrude believes that it is caused by her "over-hasty marriage" and his father's death. Claudius sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet's childhood friends, and orders them to discover the true cause of Hamlet's "distemper." When the young men meet the prince, he quickly realizes that they are spying for his uncle. They tell Hamlet that a troupe of actors is on its way to the castle. When the players arrive, Hamlet instructs the performers to present a play similar to the murder of his father before the King, believing that Claudius' guilt will thereby be exposed.

Elsewhere, Polonius and Claudius attempt to test Polonius' "mad for love" theory by spying on an encounter between Ophelia and Hamlet. When Ophelia tries to return his love letters, Hamlet quickly turns on her and denies that he ever loved her and says "get thee to a nunnery." After Hamlet leaves, Claudius states that his madness is not caused by scorned love and may in fact be merely an act. Fearing some danger, he decides to send the prince to England. Polonius convinces Claudius to delay the departure until Gertrude has an opportunity to question her son after the play scheduled to be performed later that evening. At the performance of the play, Hamlet instructs Horatio to keep a sharp eye on the King. At the moment of the player-king's murder, Claudius stops the play and rushes out, proving to Hamlet that the Ghost has spoken the truth. Claudius then orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort Hamlet to England immediately. Alone in the chapel, Claudius attempts to pray for forgiveness for the murder he has committed.

Hamlet discovers Claudius, but despite his desire to kill his uncle, he refuses to kill him while he is in prayer, for he does not want his soul to go to heaven.

Polonius hides behind a tapestry in Gertrude's chamber so that he may overhear her conference with Hamlet. Upon entering, Hamlet frightens his mother. Her calls for help are echoed by the hidden Polonius. Hamlet hears the voice behind the tapestry and kills the old man, believing him to be the King. Hamlet verbally attacks his mother for marrying Claudius, then leaves with the body of Polonius. After finding Hamlet, Claudius sends him off to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He also sends orders that Hamlet should be executed immediately upon reaching England.

After the death of their father, Ophelia falls into madness and Laertes rushes back to Denmark seeking revenge. Claudius wins Laertes as an ally and, after hearing that Hamlet has somehow escaped execution and is returning to Denmark, they plot to kill him. Gertrude enters and announces that Ophelia has drowned in a brook.

Returning home from England, Hamlet enters a graveyard with Horatio. As the funeral procession approaches, Hamlet and Horatio realize that it is Ophelia's funeral. A scuffle ensues between Hamlet and Laertes, which is quickly broken up. Hours later, Hamlet receives word that Claudius has placed a wager on a fencing match between the Prince and young Laertes. Hamlet agrees to the match, despite his own misgivings and Horatio's warnings. At the start of the match, Hamlet is winning. Gertrude drinks a toast to Hamlet from a cup intended for her son and poisoned by Claudius. In the next pass of the contest, Laertes mortally wounds the unsuspecting Hamlet with a poisoned blade. In a fury, Hamlet forces an exchange of weapons and mortally wounds Laertes. As Gertrude dies, Laertes confesses his crime and the plot devised by Claudius. Hamlet kills Claudius. Before dying, Hamlet asks Horatio make known to all the events that led to these deaths.

Accessing the Bard

"In many instances, (Shakespeare's characters') lives are our own, magnified. Most of us will never, like Macbeth, assassinate a king, but many of us are ambitious and tortured by conscience."

Charles Marowitz
Director



Hamlet (Gareth Saxe) stalks Claudius (Robert Cuccioli) in the chapel.

Sources and History of the Play

Though Shakespeare added tangential references and numerous personal political commentaries into *Hamlet*, this play primarily originates from a singular source. The original tale comes from the Norse tradition; “a barbaric narrative of murder and revenge” found in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Historiae Danicae* (12th Century). Grammaticus was a historian who wrote and published the dim recollections of the Viking feuds. His work was updated by François de Belle-forest in a work entitled *Histoires Tragiques TRAGIQUES* (ca. 1570), which included “Histoire Tragique of Hamlet.” Grammaticus’ original history included a bloody story concerning a Prince Amlthus, a dead father, a usurping uncle, and feigned madness used to mask revenge. Despite the fact that *Hamlet* contains no provable historical facts, characters, or events, many parallels can be drawn to the Canute Empire of Denmark of the eleventh century. Though the story is from an earlier tale, many literary historians place *Hamlet* in 1050 AD.

The story was not adapted into English until around 1580 in the *Ur-Hamlet*. This play, credited to Thomas Kyd, was never published, and unfortunately is now lost to us. What we know of it comes from various reviews and commentaries of the period. We know that Kyd had a penchant for melodrama. It is believed that, if he did indeed write the *Ur-Hamlet*, it was a vehicle that honed his skills for his later and more successful work, *The Spanish Tragedy*. It was this telling of the story which introduced the ghost and the play-within-the-play as plot devices. Despite its less than favorable reviews [one dramatist, Thomas Lodge, spoke of the ghost crying out “Hamlet, revenge!” like an oysterwife], the *Ur-Hamlet* held the stage for nearly two decades.

It is believed that Shakespeare began work on his adaptation of the tale around 1599. It is likely that, as he had done with other works, he had set out merely to polish a tarnished favorite. It is, however, impossible not to note that Shakespeare made many improvements to the work, and introduced many personal commentaries on war, court politics, and death into his version. At the time it was noted for its striking originality, adding suspenseful twists to what had been a straightforward narrative. Shakespeare introduced the notion of mystery into the plot. In all other tellings of the story, it was known that the newly crowned king had murdered his brother in order to gain the throne. By leaving this information secret (even to the audience until late in Act III), Shakespeare was able to present the perplexed interior struggle of his hero.

The first recorded performance of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was in 1602. The text of the play has been the source of much debate over the years. It was first published in 1603, in what has been dubbed the “Bad Quarto”, which was assembled from the actors’ memories of the piece. This version is approximately 2,200 lines long. In 1604, James Roberts published another version, which he described as “newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much again as it was, according to the true and perfect copy.” This is the longest version of the play; about 3,800 lines long. In 1623, *Hamlet* was published once again, this time as part of the First Folio text of the works of William Shakespeare. Though approximately 230 lines shorter than the 1604 text, it differs

on several points, and incorporates 70 previously unknown lines. Many literary historians believe that the 1604 script represents the original work, and the 1623 edition represents revisions incorporated by Shakespeare himself. This theory has been the subject of much debate, as Shakespeare was famed for not revising his works once written.

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has been claimed by virtually every generation as a play “for our times.” It has been translated into every major language and most minor languages, adapted into films and operas, been banned for its deeply metaphysical debates and for its notions of revenge, and has been the springboard for many spin-offs and spoofs. The title role remains one of the most coveted by serious actors and actresses, having been played by the likes of Sir John Gielgud, Sir Laurence Olivier, Stacy Keach, Kenneth Branagh, Kevin Kline, and Mel Gibson to name only a few.

Quotable Shakespeare

These phrases all find their origins in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

- “For this relief, much thanks.”
- “A little more than kin and less than kind.”
- “In my mind’s eye.”
- “The primrose path of dalliance.”
- “Neither a borrower nor a lender be.”
- “This above all: to thine own self be true.”
- “There are more things in heaven and earth...
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”
- “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.”
- “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”
- “To be or not to be, that is the question.”
- “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”
- “What a piece of work is a man.”
- “Frailty, thy name is woman.”
- “Sweets to the sweet.”
- “Good night, sweet prince.”
- “The time is out of joint.”
- “Brevity is the soul of wit.”

Banned Bard

Stalin banned *Hamlet* in the Soviet Union because he claimed that “Hamlet’s indecisiveness and depression were incompatible with the new Soviet spirit of optimism, fortitude, and clarity.” *Hamlet* was also banned in Israeli detention camps because the play was believed to suggest that it was better to “take up arms” rather than to suffer in silence.

What’s in a Name?

“Amlth” or “Amlthus” (depending on the translation source) was the name give to the Prince in Grammaticus’ original telling of the tale. A translation of either name means “dim-witted.” It is believed this was a reference to the Prince’s feigned madness.

Commentary and Criticism of HAMLET

ON THE PLAY

“*Hamlet* is a sponge that absorbs the needs and feelings of each generation. (The prince) is one of the Shakespearean characters, or the only Shakespearean character, who is a hero for every generation.”

Jan Kott

“Then there’s these lines. I know them. I’ve read them so many times. I go to sleep thinking about them, but the character is so confusing. It doesn’t matter how many times you nail him or think you’ve nailed him. It’s the most &%%\$* elusive thing. Every time you go back to [the play] there’s something else which completely negates what you were thinking about before.”

Mel Gibson

“*Hamlet* has always registered as a mysteriously personal play: the sort of work an author composes primarily to please himself.”

Anne Barton

In the Beginning

The first book delving into Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was published in 1736. It was entitled *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet*. One could fill a small library with the books and articles written on *Hamlet* since then.

“To be or not to be” in Hollywood

In addition to the numerous versions of *Hamlet* set on film, the words of Shakespeare have been the inspiration for many [film titles](#). Here are a few inspired by *Hamlet*:

- TO BE OR NOT TO BE (Jack Benny, and later remade by Mel Brooks)
- THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY (the 6th in the Star Trek film series)
- WHAT DREAMS MAY COME (starring Robin Williams)
- ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD (with Tim Roth and Gary Oldman)

ON THE PRINCE OF DENMARK

“Hamlet is loathsome and repugnant. The fact that he is eloquent has nothing to do with him being obnoxious. He’s an aging playboy.”

Charles Marowitz

“(Hamlet’s) pretty upset about the whole family thing...(He) doesn’t care if he bites the dust. He’s dangerous. He’s a human time-bomb.”

Mel Gibson

“What Hamlet is, before he is anything...is an authentic tragic hero who is himself a man of genius. And once Shakespeare had written him he never wrote [about] a man of any genius at all again...Once he’d written [*Hamlet*] and discovered that there was no actor who could play him...he turned to something else.”

Orson Welles

“Hamlet is an Anglo-Saxon bore who talks too much.”

Henry Miller

A Brief History of Denmark

For modern audiences, it is difficult to imagine the martial state of Denmark that Shakespeare presents in *Hamlet*. We see Denmark as an unassuming country. In recent history, Denmark has remained a peaceful nation, entering conflicts only in a defensive stance. The last time Denmark initiated a war was in 1700 when it joined with Poland and Russia against Sweden. At the time that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* (ca. 1600), Denmark was still a strong imperial nation. It is a far older Denmark, however, which Shakespeare depicts; a bloodier and more threatening nation than even the Denmark of Shakespeare’s day.

In its early development as a nation (ca. 800), Denmark (along with Norway) was the home-base for raiding Vikings, and was renowned for its numerous brutal attacks on the British Isles and the Frankish kingdoms on the European continent. Little is known for certain about Denmark at this period. The history is shrouded in darkness and told only through legends of the Vikings, many of which raised the Danish rulers to the status of Norse gods.

Around 950AD, Denmark succumbed to Christianity. This did not lessen their aggression, but merely transformed the aggression into a national and not an individual movement. Sven I, also known as Sven the Forked-Beard, was Denmark’s first great leader. He established Danish dominance over Norway, reduced Sweden to near impotence, and successfully invaded England. It was, however, Canute, Sven’s son, who brought the Danish Empire to its height. During his rule (1014-1035), Denmark was supreme in Northern Europe. After Canute’s death, England broke away as an independent state, though for many years it was ruled by Canute’s sons. The Danish Empire continued expansion in other directions for many decades afterwards.

It is the period of Danish prosperity led by Canute which many literary historians believe is depicted in Shakespeare’s *HAMLET*. Without a doubt, it is a far different nation than the Denmark we see today.



Shakespeare's Common Tongue

alack- expression of dismay or shock
anon- soon, right away
ought- nothing
ere- before
hath- has
hence- away (from here)
henceforth- from now on
hither- here
lest- or else
naught- nothing
oft- often
perchance- by chance, perhaps, maybe
sirrah- [pronounced SEER-uh] "hey, you" as to someone of lower status
thee- you
thence- away, over there
thine- yours
thither- there
thou- you
thy- your
whence- where
wherefore- why [literally: "where is the 'for' or 'reason?'"]
whither- where

... and the "thys" have it

Often Shakespeare will alternate his usage of "thou" for "you", or "thy" for "your", or "thine" for "yours". Though the words are synonymous, there is a great deal of information that can be obtained by looking closely at these choices.

The different uses of these pronouns have to do with status, relationship, degrees of intimacy and shifting attitudes. "You" is used in formal situations and conveys respect from the speaker. It is used when addressing royalty and parents. "Thou," used in more informal settings, also can suggest contempt or aggression from the speaker. The use of "thou" places the speaker above the status of the person to whom s/he is speaking. Children are addressed using "thou," "thee" or "thy." In a conversation between two people of equal status, the use of "you" suggests that everything is going along smoothly, whereas "thou" would suggest that there is some kind of upset or unrest in the relationship.

Terms and Phrases Found In *HAMLET*

ACT I

usurp'st- stolen
martial- in a military manner
filial obligation- obligation of child to parent
obsequious sorrow- sorrow appropriate for a funeral
retrograde- against
Elsinore- the royal castle of Denmark
thrift- speedy
inbarqued- placed onboard a boat
cautel- deceit
chaste treasure- virginity
woodcocks- birds which are easily trapped

ACT II

brevity- the state of being brief
prescripts- instructions
declension- deterioration

fishmonger- a fisherman, or one who deals in the sale of fish; also slang for one who oversees prostitutes
sterile promontory- a barren headland
paragon- a model or pattern of perfection or excellence
quintessence- the concentrated essence
malefactions- ill deeds, crimes

ACT III

nunnery- a convent, also Elizabethan slang for a brothel
calumny- a false or malicious statement meant to hurt someone's reputation
chameleon's dish- the air, nothing at all. For some time, chameleons were believed to feed only on air
Phoebus' cart- the sun
wormwood- a bitter herb
batten- to gorge
moor- wasteland
tinct- color
coinage of your brain- a creation of the mind, delusion

ACT IV

sweepstake- indiscriminately, taking all regardless of winner or loser
unsinewed- weak, unstrengthened, untrained
nonce- specific purpose

ACT V

water-fly- a showy trifter
augury- foresight, prediction
foil- an exact opposite
union- a large pearl
antique Roman- the ancient Roman servants were known to kill themselves before they would face the death of their masters.

A Man of Many Words

Shakespeare used over **20,000 different words** in his plays and poems. Of these, 8.5% (1700 words) had never been seen in print before Shakespeare used them.

To give you a sense of just how extraordinary this is, consider that the King James Bible uses only 8,000 different words. Homer is credited with using approximately 9,000 different words in his works. Milton is estimated at using 10,000 different words in his works.

“Pluck Out the Heart of His Mystery”

Probably the best way to begin thinking about and discussing *Hamlet* is to start asking the scores and scores of questions that the play poses, keeping in mind however, that in many cases, there are no definitive answers. The answers to many of the play’s questions remain as elusive as they were when the play was first written over 400 years ago, or the answers are ever-changing as they reflect not only each era that encounters the play, but each individual as well. Many of *Hamlet*’s most important issues and queries are the same ones that philosophers and theologians have been obsessed with since the beginning of time – the essential questions about our existence, its meaning and our place within the universe.

In four and a half hours, Hamlet asks himself the same questions that each of us asks ourselves over the course of our lifetime. In part, the play’s genius lies in its ability to remain as mysterious and eternally transformative as the great cosmos itself. When Hamlet accuses Guildenstern of trying to “pluck out the heart of his mystery” little does the character know that that is essentially what the world has been attempting to do for over four centuries now – to pluck out the heart of Shakespeare’s meaning and all that lies behind the play.

It is by the simple act of listing the many questions posed, that we begin to see the complexity of the play. For example:

- **Why is Hamlet angry to begin with? Is his grief/anger justified?** Put yourself in his place. Is it his grief over his father’s death or his anger at his mother’s very hasty and incestuous marriage to his uncle that causes the most rancor?
- **Is Hamlet a man of action or of words or both?** Different generations have very different views. Ms. Monte, the director of this production, has very definitive views about Hamlet being a man of deeply considered action. A man who thinks before he acts. And she sees him as a man, who for the first time in his life, is presented with a horrifying no-win dilemma, in fact, every course of action seems destined to lead to disastrous consequences. Though there are arguments for both stances, one would hesitate to ultimately define him one way or another. Shakespeare has created one of the most complex heroes in the English language, and taking one side over the other eliminates half of his being. It is possible that the prince is a man of words AND a man of action, like most of us.
- **Is Hamlet’s fate pre-determined? How much does Fate or Fortune control his destiny? Is he just another human subject to the random chaos of the universe, or is there “a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them as we will...?”**
- **How old is Hamlet?**
- **Is Hamlet crazy or just acting mad? What does this buy him if it is indeed a strategy?**
- **Does Gertrude truly love Claudius? Does Claudius truly love Gertrude?**
- **Does Hamlet love Ophelia?**
- **Was Gertrude complicit in the murder of King Hamlet? Was Polonius?**

“How do you remember all those lines”, or “Words, Words, Words”

Hamlet is the the largest role in Shakespeare’s canon, and most prized among actors. As a reference, here is a list of major Shakespearean characters and the number of lines (and words) they speak in the Folio editions of the plays.

Hamlet (HAMLET)	1,507 (11,563)	Duke (MEASURE)	858 (6,536)
Richard (RICHARD III)	1,145 (8,826)	Lear (KING LEAR)	753 (5,592)
Iago (OTHELLO)	1,094 (8,434)	Macbeth (MACBETH)	705 (5,291)
Henry (HENRY V)	1,036 (8,338)	Prospero (TEMPEST)	643 (4,700)
Othello (OTHELLO)	879 (6,237)	Romeo (R&J)	616 (4,677)
Rosalind (AYLI)	721 (5,698)	Beatrice (MUCH ADO)	298 (2,359)
Cleopatra (A&C)	670 (4,686)	Katherina (SHREW)	219 (1,759)
Juliet (R&J)	541 (4,271)	Ophelia (HAMLET)	174 (1,177)

Source: A COMPLETE AND SYSTEMATIC CONCORDANCE TO THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE; Marvin Spevack



Hamlet (Gareth Saxe) and Ophelia (Lauren English), 2009.

- **Is Polonius just a buffoon wind-bag or is he a dangerous man as well? Why? How?**
- **What are we to think of a man who spies on his own children? Is it justified? Why?**
- **Is the Ghost a force of good or evil?**
- **Is the play's orientation Catholic? Protestant? Agnostic? Atheistic? Pagan? Existentialist? Fatalist? Buddhist? Or all of the above?**
- **Does Hamlet want to be king?**
- **How did Claudius assume the throne before Hamlet?**
- **How many revenge plots are in operation in the play? (Four!)**
- **Is the revenge being required of Hamlet by the Ghost legitimate?**
- **Do you believe the Ghost's story?**
- **Why doesn't Hamlet just kill Claudius?**
- **Is it more noble to die heroically or to suffer in silence?** Heroism would require direct action even at the cost of death. Suffering in silence would result in a kind of spiritual death.
- **What does the play say about fathers and sons? Mothers and sons?**
- **Why does Hamlet hesitate to kill Claudius while he is praying?**
- **Is there anything more than a normal mother/son relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude?**
- **What finally drives Ophelia mad?**
- **Does Ophelia kill herself purposely or is it an accident?**
- **Why doesn't Laertes come to Ophelia's side the minute he hears that Polonius has been killed? He lurks in Denmark almost a month before he shows up at Elsinore. What does that say about his priorities and/or his ambitions? What does it say about his feelings about his sister?**
- **Why can Gertrude describe Ophelia's death in such detail, and yet, there is no moment where she recounts having tried to save Ophelia. What does this mean?**
- **Hamlet disappears from the play for most of Act Four. What does this accomplish for the playwright and allow him to do? Is Hamlet a changed man when we see him in Act Five?**
- **Why don't Rosencrantz and Guildenstern just come clean with Hamlet? Why do they betray him? Do they betray him?**
- **Why does Ophelia betray Hamlet and/or would you characterize what she does as such?**
- **How much time passes over the course of the play?**
- **Why does Hamlet seem so fond of the players?**
- **Is Horatio Danish?**
- **Does Hamlet die at peace with himself?**
- **Will Fortinbras be a good ruler? Is there any ray of hope at the end of this play?**
- **Is the play a revenge tragedy? A psychological drama? A philosophical masterwork in the guise of a play? A dramatic tale of domestic dysfunction? A political and social allegory? The tale of a tragic hero? Anti-hero? All of the above?**

On Hamlet's "Antic Disposition"

"Hamlet can scarcely enjoy his role as madman and it must give him some relief to be able to stab at his enemies under the cover of that madness, while they, in turn, so concentrate on the madness that they scarcely realize they are being stabbed."

Isaac Asimov, ASIMOV'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE

"It is with this nonsense-sense that Hamlet amuses himself and makes up to himself the disgraceful part which, in his own eyes, he is forced to play."

Michael Neill, "HAMLET: A Contemporary Perspective"

Considered Questions

Listed on the previous pages are just a few of the hundreds and hundreds of questions that emanate from the pages of *Hamlet*. Comparing thoughts, debating and doing the detective work to come up with some of the answers can be the easiest way to start to explore the play in depth. Here are a few thoughts on some of the questions posed:

Do the offstage events of Act Four produce a marked change in Hamlet?

When he re-enters in Act V, Hamlet is a strikingly different man. Having narrowly escaped the plot laid out to kill him, he is a calmer, more focused individual, more in control of his passions. He determines to play no further games from this point on. He will simply await the moment when Providence gives him opportunity. Until then he will not plot or manipulate but bide his time. There is a kind of stoic acceptance with which he approaches the final moments of the play, and indeed, during those moments, he does get what he has been seeking all along. Claudius' treachery is publicly announced to the court by the dying Laertes. Hamlet stands with a poisoned blade in his hand. Without thought, he acts. This is the revenge for which he has waited four acts. He achieves revenge, however, without any possibility of succession to the throne or even life. The last thing he can hope for is that his honor will be secure. In hopes of this end, he tells Horatio to relay the true story of this bloody event.

Why Isn't Hamlet Crowned King?

Shakespeare's play never truly addresses the issue of why Claudius was crowned king over Hamlet. It is important to note, however, that the European idea of automatic succession in accordance to strict orders of blood relations is a rather recent notion and only appears in restricted governments of the world. In the Middle Ages the successor king was often chosen from the royal family, but it was not necessarily the eldest or only son. At that time it was more important to select a mature member of the family to lead the country. It was common in medieval times for a king to die young, leaving a child or infant son behind as his only heir. This child would obviously be unable to rule during such a war driven period. In these situations the younger brother of the king seemed the most logical choice. In Denmark, elections were held, and those high up in the political cabinet or those from the nobility were the only voters.

The great dilemma of "sideways succession" occurred when a prince, after maturing to early manhood, rose up to stake his "rightful" claim on the throne. Often he was willing to fight or kill for it. For this reason, often a prince would be imprisoned, exiled or even executed while still a child. This happened often enough that the archetype of the "wicked uncle" became a stock character, second only to the "wicked stepmother."

Though these historical facts follow some sense of logic, the question still remains "Why was Prince Hamlet (certainly NOT an infant) not crowned king after his father's death?" The simple answer may be that he wasn't there when the decision was made.

When King Hamlet died, Hamlet was away at school. It would have taken time for news of the death to reach him, and then more time for him to return home. It is easy to consider the possibility that Claudius might have even delayed the news to the prince. When Hamlet did arrive home, he found the succession already decided against him.

Claudius and Hamlet both are acutely aware of the fact that the mere existence of one is a mortal danger to the other. The logical question that follows is "Why doesn't one simply kill the other?" In this, we find king and prince in the same predicament. Both are popular and beloved by the general population of Denmark. If Claudius kills Hamlet, he may lose the throne and would most certainly lose Gertrude. If Hamlet kills Claudius (without tangible proof of Claudius' assassination of King Hamlet) he would be imprisoned or executed, and would never be able to take the throne. The suspense increases as we wait to see who will find the opportunity to destroy the other first.

The Wicked Uncle

Stories of "wicked uncles" killing or imprisoning their rival nephews abound in European history. Shakespeare addressed two famous historical "wicked uncles" in *Richard III* and *King John*. Richard had his child nephew, Prince Edward V, executed in the Tower of London to maintain the throne, and John ordered the execution of his nephew, young Arthur of Brittany.



Claudius (Robert Cuccioli) attempts to harness Laertes' (Daniel Stewart) rage, 2009.

Young and Old Alike

The youngest actor ever known to play Hamlet was a five year old prodigy, dubbed "Master Betty: the Infant Phenomenon of the Regency Period."

The oldest actor to take to the boards as the prince of Denmark was Sir Johnson Forbes-Robertson, who was over eighty when he last played the role.

How Old is Hamlet?

Like so many other questions surrounding this play, the issue of Hamlet's age has sparked great debate over the years. With some variations, the debaters come down to two basic camps; "The Early College Hamlet" and "The Thirty-something Hamlet."

The "early college" camp notes that Hamlet is a student at the university in Wittenberg as its greatest reason. By modern standards this would certainly place the young prince in his late-teens or early twenties. Historically speaking, Hamlet would need to be young to still be attending school rather than dealing with state affairs. This camp also cites the manner in which Hamlet deals with the death of his father, his relationship with his mother, and his courtship of Ophelia to back their argument.

The "thirty-something" camp cites information directly from Shakespeare's text. The clearest examples of this come in the gravedigger scene. The old man states that he started at his job on the very day that prince Hamlet was born, which was thirty years ago. The gravedigger also states that Yorick, the court jester to King Hamlet, has been dead for twenty-three years. Hamlet then goes on to recollect fond memories of the jester, which implies that he had to have been at least five or so at the time when Yorick died.

What Does Hamlet Look Like?

There is strikingly little physical description of the prince found in Shakespeare's text, and the role has been played by a wide variety of actors (and actresses) of all ages, shapes and sizes.

It is interesting to note, however that one of Gertrude's lines during the duel between Hamlet and Laertes describes Hamlet as "fat and scant for breath." Most literary scholars, actors and directors have taken "fat" in this context to mean flushed. This line, however takes on a strikingly different tone when one considers that the first actor to ever perform the role of Hamlet was Richard Burbage. Burbage was a leading star in Shakespeare's company. At the time in which he originated the role, he was 37 years old and weighed approximately 235 pounds. This is certainly a far different Hamlet that is commonly seen today.

The Language of Flowers

Ophelia, in her last moments on stage, speaks in a language of flowers. For centuries, specific flowers have held certain meanings. Some of these carry through to modern times. Here are a few of the meanings found in the flowers of which Ophelia speaks.

Rosemary - "fidelity in love" - because their fragrance lingers over long periods of time.
 Pansies - "thought" -the name comes from the French "pensee," meaning "thought."
 Fennel - "success" -used by the ancient Greeks as symbol of success
 Columbine - "folly" - the purple Columbine symbolizes a resolve to win
 Rue - "health" - medicinal herb used to ward off contagion, malevolent spirits & fleas.
 Daisies - "innocence and loyalty"
 Violets - "faithfulness"

Ophelia, Let Down Your Hair

The Folio text of *Hamlet* states that Ophelia enters her final scene with "her hair downe," an Elizabethan shorthand for grieving or dementia. It was fashionable and proper for Elizabethan women to wear their hair tightly bound and pulled up. For Elizabethans, letting one's hair down, represented a liberation from the constraints of proper civility and thus

Method and Madness

Throughout history, the role and treatment of the "madman" has altered greatly. According to Viking lore, killing a madman would release his soul and allow it to fly into your own. In pagan times, a madman was believed to be "touched by the Divine", and was respected and even feared by those around him. Any attack on or murder of a madman during this period was believed to bring about retaliation from the gods. Early Christian beliefs stated that madmen were possessed by evil spirits, as punishment for sins they had committed. Often these people were beaten and tormented viciously in hopes of "curing" them of their madness.

Hamlet takes on the "antic disposition" to allow himself opportunity to act and speak in safety while planning his revenge on Claudius. One might ask why (since *Hamlet* was written for a Christian audience) Hamlet is not beaten or tormented as was common during this period. There was actually a historical account well-known to the Elizabethans that allowed the Pagan and not the Christian treatment of madmen to hold in this situation. In the 5th century B.C. Lucius Junius Brutus feigned a "harmless madness" which kept him from being executed by King Tarquin, a vicious tyrant. When the time was right, Brutus dropped his façade, overthrew Tarquin, and helped establish the Roman Republic.

Topics for Discussion:

ABOUT THE PLAY

1. Throughout history, young prince Hamlet has been seen in many different ways. Look back on the play and consider the various “roles he plays.” How would you describe him when he is first presented? In what way is he transformed after the visitation of the ghost? Consider his many “performances” as the “mad prince.” How are each unique? Is Hamlet different when alone than when surrounded by others? How so? Is he changed after returning from England? In what way? Be specific and site examples from the text to support your answers when possible.
2. What do you think Denmark was like under the rule of King Hamlet? What clues does the text provide to inform us about Hamlet’s father as a king and a ruler? How different do you think Claudius’ regime is than his brother’s? Be specific.
3. Virtually everyone in this play has some secret that they hide or information they are told not to reveal. How does this play into the story of the Danish royal court? How would the play be different if even one person revealed something they’ve kept hidden?
4. Shakespeare is famed for creating complex characters. The villains are not pure evil, and the heroes are not all good. Pick three major characters in the play and attempt to balance their good and bad qualities.
5. Ophelia refers to Hamlet at the “observed of all observers.” What does she mean by this? In what ways do characters observe events in this play? Do any events go unwatched? If so, which?

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

1. Describe the world that the director and the designers have created for this play. What types of materials are used? How do colors and visual images help to define the atmosphere of the play? What lines from the play do you think the design team used as inspiration for this world? Be specific.
2. What part does sound play in this production? Consider the musical choices used as well as any sound effects. What type of world do they create? How would the play be different if no music was used or if different music were chosen?
3. How did this production compare to your expectations? If you have read the play, was anything strikingly different from the images you saw in your mind while reading it? What images were the same? Were there any issues that you had not considered that were presented in this production?
4. Do the scenic elements represent a literal, realistic landscape or environment, or do they portray a more evocative, symbolic setting? Provide examples that support your conclusion.
5. Do the costume elements represent a literal, realistic world or time period, or do they portray a more evocative, symbolic setting? Provide examples that support your conclusion.

Follow-up Activities

1. **“Critics’ Corner”** Write a review of this production of *Hamlet*. Be sure to include specific information and your own reactions to both the acting and the design elements (lights, set, costumes and sound). Explain what you liked and disliked, and support your opinions. Then submit your review to The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey’s Education Department, or see if it can be published in your school newspaper.
2. **“Alert the media!”** This play would certainly pack a news ticker: the death of a beloved king, the appointment of a new leader, a royal wedding, the strange “madness” that has taken over the prince, a murder of a prominent advisor to the royal family, the threat of an outside invasion, etc. Assign these and other big events of the play to members of the class and create appropriate television or newspaper coverage. How do you think the people of Denmark felt about these events?
3. **“I learn by this letter...”** Write a letter or diary entry from the point of view of one of the characters, discussing an event or situation in the play. For example, a letter from Gertrude to her son that explains why she married so soon after King Hamlet’s death, a letter from Rosencrantz or Guildenstern to friends back home that tells of the excitement in the court, a letter to Laertes telling of his father’s death, etc.
4. **“15-minute Shakespeare”** Divide into five groups, and have each group take one act of the play. Your task is to create a three-minute version of your act, using only Shakespeare’s words. Choose carefully the lines from your act that carry the most important information and advance the story. When each group is done, you will have a 15-minute version *Hamlet* which you can perform for one another. Afterwards, discuss both the process of adaptation and how your “abridgement” compared to the much more modest cuts which director Bonnie J. Monte made for this production.
5. **“A Director Prepares”** *Hamlet* has long captured the imaginations of directors and designers for stage and screen. Individually or in small groups, come up with your own scenic or costume designs for the play. Find a line or image expressed in the play as your “launch pad.” You can use drawings and collage as well as writing to explain and justify your design to the class.
6. **“Speak the Speech...”** In small groups, work to present a small piece of the text (any one of Hamlet’s soliloquies, for example) to the class. Each group should come up with its own unique presentation: different rhythms, echoing or underscoring key words or phrases, simple props, movement, etc. After each group has presented its interpretation of the text, discuss what was successful about each one. From this, you can develop a rubric for what makes a good performance.

Teachers:

Do you have activities or exercises to suggest for this play? We are always looking for new ideas to inspire students (and teachers). Send your suggestions to info@ShakespeareNJ.org and we will share them with other teachers, and maybe even include them in future study guides.

What Did He Say?

This is an opportunity to test your comprehension of Shakespeare's language. Below you will find passages from *Hamlet*. Answer the questions for each passage as specifically as possible.

CLAUDIUS

O, for [one] special [reason,]
Which may to you perhaps seem much unsinewed,
And yet to me [`tis] strong. The Queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks; and for myself—
My virtue or my plague, be it either which—
She's so conjunctive to my life and soul
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her.

1. To whom is Claudius speaking?
2. What is the purpose of this speech?
3. Whose looks does Claudius say the Queen lives by?
4. What is Claudius' "virtue or [his] plague?" Why does he describe it in this manner?
5. When does this speech come in the play? Does it alter the audience's interpretation of Claudius in any way? Be specific.

GERTRUDE

There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down the weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like a while they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress.

1. To whom is Gertrude speaking?
2. In what part in the play does this speech come?
3. About whom is she speaking?
4. What are the "weedy trophies?"
5. Consider the words Shakespeare has chosen for this speech. How do the sounds of the words help create the tone? Are they sharp and crisp? Are they long and soft? Be specific.

HAMLET

Look here upon this picture, and on this,
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
See what a grace was seated on this brow —
This was your husband. Look you now what follows.
Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear
Blasting his wholesome brothers. Have you eyes?
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed
And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes?

1. To whom is Hamlet speaking?
2. In what part of the play does this speech come?
3. Based on the words Shakespeare uses in this speech, describe the mood and manner of Hamlet when he speaks it.
4. On whose brow does Hamlet claim grace sits?
5. What does Hamlet mean by "like a mildewed ear/ Blasting his wholesome brother?"
6. What is the "fair mountain?" What is the "moor?"

Who Said That?

Match the spoken line to the character who speaks it. Two characters have two quotes each. Three characters have none of the quotes listed below.

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| A. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." | BARNARDO |
| B. "Remember me." | CLAUDIUS |
| C. "This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man." | GERTRUDE |
| D. "Rich gifts wax poor when the giver proves unkind." | THE GHOST |
| E. "Good night, sweet prince." | GUILDENSTERN |
| F. "The lady protests too much, methinks." | HAMLET |
| G. "O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven." | HORATIO |
| H. "Leave wringing of your hands. Peace, sit you down,
And let me wring your heart." | LAERTES |
| I. "...like a hectic in my blood he rages,
And thou must cure me. Till I know `tis done,
Howe'er my haps, my joys were ne'er begun." | OPHELIA |
| | POLONIUS |
| | ROSENCRANTZ |

Meeting the Core Curriculum Content Standards

In 1996, the New Jersey State Board of Education adopted Core Curriculum Content Standards that set out to clearly define what every New Jersey student should know and be able to do at the end of his/her schooling. The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is committed to supporting teachers by ensuring that our educational programs are relevant to standards-based teaching and learning. Viewing a performance at The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey and participating in the post-performance discussion can serve as a powerful springboard for discussion, writing, and other outlets for higher-order thinking. On this page you will find suggestions for ways to align your study of our production to each standard.

LANGUAGE ARTS LITERACY STANDARDS

As a theatre dedicated to the classics, we are continually engaged in exploring some of the world's greatest literature, and the relationship between the written text and performance. Our philosophy and practice follow the four underlying assumptions of the Language Arts Literacy CCCS: that "language is an *active process* for constructing meaning," that "language develops in a *social context*," that language ability increases as learners "engage in texts that are *rich in ideas and increasingly complex in language*," and that learners achieve mastery not by practicing isolated skills but by "*using and exploring language* in its many dimensions." In the practice of theatre, we merge all areas of the language arts, as the standards suggest, "in an integrated act of rehearsal, reflection, and learning." Below, you will find just a few of the possibilities for aligning your study of our productions to each of these standards.

STANDARD 3.1: All students will apply the knowledge of sounds, letters and words in written English to become independent and fluent readers, and will read a variety of materials and texts with fluency and comprehension.
Read a scene from the play as a class and use context clues to interpret new words and expand vocabulary (3.1.C/F); demonstrate understanding by performing a scene from the play (3.1.G); compare and contrast literary elements in the play with another text being studied (3.1.H).

STANDARD 3.2: All students will write in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.
Write a new ending for the play in blank verse or in modern prose (3.2.D), write a critique of the play which will be workshopped and published in a classroom setting (3.2.A/B/D).

STANDARD 3.3: All students will speak in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.
Participate in a post-show discussion (3.3.A/B), memorize and perform a monologue or scene from the play (3.3.D).

STANDARD 3.4: All students will listen actively to information from a variety of sources in a variety of situations.
Select one speech or line from the play and compare how it was performed in the stage and film version (3.4.A/B).

STANDARD 3.5: All students will access, view, evaluate and respond to print, nonprint, and electronic texts and resources.
Discuss how the play expresses cultural values of the playwright's time (3.5.A); compare and contrast the printed text with its staged version (3.5.B).

VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS STANDARDS

According to both No Child Left Behind and the New Jersey CCCS, the arts (including theatre) are a core subject and "experience with and knowledge of the arts is a vital part of a complete education." In the area of performing arts, performances, workshops and study guide exercises developed by The Shakespeare Theatre address all five state standards.

Below, you will find just a few of the possibilities for aligning your study of our productions to each of these standards.

STANDARD 1.1: All students will use aesthetic knowledge in the creation of and in response to dance, music, theatre and visual art.
Discuss the use of metaphor in both the text and the design of the production; discuss how the play expresses cultural values of its period and/or of today.

STANDARD 1.2: All students will utilize those skills, media, methods, and technologies appropriate to each art form in the creation, performance, and presentation of dance, music, theatre and visual art.
Perform a monologue or scene from the play; participate in a classroom workshop that develops the physical and technical skills required to create and present theatre.

STANDARD 1.3: All students will demonstrate an understanding of the elements and principles of dance, music, theatre and visual art.
Participate in a post-show discussion of elements such as physicality and creating motivated action; discuss the relationship between playtext and production design.

STANDARD 1.4: All students will develop, apply and reflect upon knowledge of the process of critique.
Write a review of the production using domain-appropriate terminology; develop a class rubric for effective theatrical presentations; compare and contrast the play with work by other artists.

STANDARD 1.5: All students will understand and analyze the role, development, and continuing influence of the arts in relation to world cultures, history, and society.
Discuss the representation of social issues (class, political leadership, etc.) in the play; research how the historical period affected the writer's work; compare the play to work from other historical periods.

Sources for this study guide (and other resources):

THE ANNOTATED SHAKESPEARE, Introductions, Notes, and Bibliography by A.L Rowe
 THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE: HAMLET, edited by Harold Jenkins
 ASIMOV'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE by Isaac Asimov
 THE COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE, by Laurie Rozakis
 THE FOLGER LIBRARY EDITION: HAMLET, edited by Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. LaMar
 FREEING SHAKESPEARE'S VOICE by Kristin Linklater
 THE FRIENDLY SHAKESPEARE by Norrie Epstein
 THE MIRACLE OF LANGUAGE by Richard Lederer
 SHAKESPEARE A TO Z by Charles Boyce
 SHAKESPEARE AFTER ALL by Marjorie Garber
 SHAKESPEARE FOR BEGINNERS by Brandon Toropov
 SHAKESPEARE FOR DUMMIES by Doyle, Lischner, and Dench
 SHAKESPEARE'S IMAGERY by Caroline Spurgeon
 SHAKESPEARE IN PERFORMANCE, Consultant Editors Keith Parsons and Pamela Mason
 SHAKESPEARE: THE INVENTION OF THE HUMAN by Harold Bloom
 SHAKESPEARE OUR CONTEMPORARY by Jan Kott
 THEATRE: A WAY OF SEEING, Third Edition by Milly S. Barranger
 THE ESSENTIAL SHAKESPEARE HANDBOOK, by Leslie Dunton-Downer and Alan Riding
 SHAKESPEARE SET FREE, edited by Peggy O'Brien
 SHAKING HANDS WITH SHAKESPEARE, by Alison Wedell Schumacher

Who Said That? Answer Key

- A. Hamlet
- B. The Ghost
- C. Polonius
- D. Ophelia
- E. Horatio
- F. Gertrude
- G. Claudius
- H. Hamlet
- I. Claudius



ABOVE: Gertrude (center, Jacqueline Antaramian) attempts to calm her son, Hamlet (Gareth Saxe) as the Ghost (Robert Cuccioli) watches, 2009.

LEFT: The Player Queen (Pressly Coker) and the Player King (Ames Adamson), 2009.

About The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

The acclaimed Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey (formerly called “New Jersey Shakespeare Festival”) is one of the leading Shakespeare theatres in the nation. Serving nearly 100,000 adults and children annually, it is New Jersey’s only professional theatre company dedicated to Shakespeare’s canon and other classic masterworks. Through its distinguished productions and education programs, the company strives to illuminate the universal and lasting relevance of the classics for contemporary audiences. The longest-running Shakespeare theatre on the east coast, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey marks its 47th season in 2009.

In addition to producing and presenting classic theatre, the Theatre’s mission places an equal focus on education— both for young artists and audiences of all ages. The Theatre nurtures emerging new talent for the American stage and cultivates future audiences by providing extensive student outreach opportunities. Through our work, we endeavor to promote literacy, civilization, community, cultural awareness, the theatrical tradition, and a more enlightened view of the world in which we live and the people with whom we share it.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of 20 professional theatres in the state of New Jersey. The company’s dedication to the classics and commitment to excellence sets critical standards for the field. Nationwide, the Theatre has emerged as one of the most exciting classic theatres in America under the leadership of Artistic Director, Bonnie J. Monte since 1990. It is one of only a handful of Shakespeare Theatres on the east coast, and in recent years has drawn larger and larger audiences and unprecedented critical acclaim. The opening of the intimate, 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in 1998, provided the Theatre with a state-of-the-art venue with excellent sightlines, and increased access for patrons and artists with disabilities.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is a member of ArtPride, The Shakespeare Theatre Association of America, Theatre Communications Group, and is a founding member of the New Jersey Theatre Alliance.

Other Opportunities for Students... and Teachers

SHAKESPEARE LIVE! EDUCATIONAL TOURING COMPANY

Shakespeare LIVE! is the educational touring company of The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey. This dynamic troupe of actors brings exceptional, visually-imaginative abridged productions of Shakespeare’s masterworks and other literary classics directly into schools. Workshops are also available in Stage Combat and Shakespeare in Performance.

JUNIOR AND SENIOR CORPS

The Theatre’s summer acting program for kids ages 11-17, the Junior and Senior Corps combines professional acting instruction, classic literature, and a commitment to developing the individual student’s self-confidence and creativity, all in the setting of an acclaimed theatre company. Each session culminates in an ensemble performance of Shakespeare or another classic play. Admission to this program is through audition and/or interview.

SUMMER PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAM

For graduating high school seniors and for university students, the intensive Summer Professional Training Program offers acting apprenticeships and professional internships, providing academic training and hands-on experience in acting, technical, artistic and arts management areas. For a full brochure of the opportunities available, please contact the Education Department.

SHAKEFEST: SUMMER SHAKESPEARE INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

Designed for elementary and secondary teachers of Shakespeare, *ShakeFest* is a weeklong professional development program filled with myriad practical ways to conquer “ShakesFear” and excite students about the Bard. In hands-on sessions, experienced teaching artists model active and exciting performance-oriented techniques to get students on their feet and “speaking the speech.”

SHAKESPERIENCE: NJ STUDENT SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

This annual festival, developed in partnership with the Folger Shakespeare Library and Rider University, gives middle and high school classes the opportunity to spend a day at the Theatre experiencing Shakespeare together as both actors and audience. The *Shakespeare: NJ* Festival celebrates the power of performance as a teaching tool on a statewide scale.

For more information about these and other educational programs
at The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey,
log onto our website,
www.ShakespeareNJ.org
or call **(973) 408-3278**