

## Introduction

About 500 years ago, Hamlet's father, the king of Denmark, was murdered by his own brother, Claudius. Then Claudius quickly married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. As the play opens, Hamlet's father's ghost appears and tells his son who murdered him. He urges Hamlet to seek revenge. As the play unfolds, Hamlet tries to convince himself that he should murder Claudius.

This is Shakespeare's most famous play, known for the anguished character of Hamlet.



## —Cast of Characters —

**HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK:** Son of the dead King Hamlet, and nephew of the present King of Denmark

**CLAUDIUS, PRINCE OF DENMARK:** Hamlet's uncle

**GERTRUDE:** Queen of Denmark and Hamlet's mother

**GHOST:** The ghost of Hamlet's murdered father

**POLONIUS:** Chief adviser to Claudius

**HORATIO:** A commoner and loyal friend of Hamlet

**LAERTES:** Son of Polonius and the brother of Ophelia

**OPHELIA:** Daughter of Polonius and the sister of Laertes

**ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN:** Former classmates of Hamlet

**VOLTIMAND AND CORNELIUS:** Danish courtiers

**MARCELLUS, BERNARDO, AND FRANCISCO:** Guards at the castle

**REYNALDO:** Polonius's servant

**OSRIC:** A Danish courtier

**GRAVEDIGGERS, LORDS, ATTENDANTS, ACTORS, AND SERVANTS**



# ACT 1

## Summary

Horatio and the guards decide to tell young Hamlet about the appearance of his dead father's ghost outside the castle at Elsinore. Meanwhile, Gertrude and Claudius tell Hamlet that it is time for him to stop mourning his father's death. When they leave the room, Hamlet reveals his thoughts. If not for God's law, he would kill himself out of grief for his father and shame for his mother. He is shocked that she has married such an inferior man as Claudius less than two months after her husband's death!

When Hamlet hears about his father's ghost, he decides to speak to it, swearing the others to secrecy. Before leaving for Paris, Laertes tells Ophelia to be wary of Hamlet's attentions in an effort to protect her virtue and reputation. Polonius then gives Laertes advice about his own conduct and tells Ophelia to avoid Hamlet's company. She promises to do so.

At midnight, old King Hamlet's ghost tells Prince Hamlet that he has been murdered by Claudius. Young Hamlet promises revenge.



## Scene 1



(**Francisco** is at his post before the castle in Elsinore.  
**Bernardo** enters.)

**BERNARDO:** The clock has struck 12.

I'll take over the watch now, Francisco.

**FRANCISCO:** Thank you for relieving me.

It is bitter cold, and I am sick at heart.

**BERNARDO:** Has it been quiet tonight?

**FRANCISCO:** Not a mouse stirring.

**BERNARDO:** Well, good night. Tell my

Partners on watch to hurry.

**FRANCISCO:** I think I hear them now.

(**Horatio** and **Marcellus** enter as **Francisco** exits.)

**MARCELLUS:** Hello, Bernardo!

**BERNARDO:** Welcome, Horatio and Marcellus.

**MARCELLUS:** Has it appeared again—the *thing*?

**BERNARDO:** I have seen nothing.

**MARCELLUS:** Horatio says it is only our fantasy.

He will not believe that we saw it twice!

By standing watch with us tonight, he can

See it for himself.

**HORATIO:** It will not appear.

**BERNARDO:** Sit down awhile,  
And let us once again tell you about  
What we have seen two nights in a row.  
Last night, about this same time,  
The clock was striking one—

**MARCELLUS:** Quiet! It's coming again!

(The **Ghost** enters, dressed in armor.)

**BERNARDO:** It looks just like the dead King!

**MARCELLUS:** Speak to it, Horatio!

**HORATIO** (*to the Ghost*): Who are you?  
Why do you wear the armor in which  
Our buried King did sometimes march?  
By heaven, I order you to speak!

**MARCELLUS:** It seems to be offended.

**BERNARDO:** See, it stalks away!

**HORATIO:** Stay! Speak! I order you, speak!

(The **Ghost** exits.)

**MARCELLUS:** It will not answer. It is gone.

**BERNARDO:** What do you think now, Horatio?  
You tremble and look pale.



Isn't this something more than fantasy?

**HORATIO:** Before my God,  
I would never have believed it  
Unless I saw it with my own eyes.

**MARCELLUS:** Isn't it like the King?

**HORATIO:** As like as you are to yourself!  
That was the very armor he had on when  
He fought the ambitious King of Norway.  
And he frowned just like that once,  
When angry. It is strange.  
I have no idea what to think.  
But it seems like a bad sign.

**MARCELLUS:** Tell me, if you know,  
Why this quiet and watchful ghost  
Has come here these past nights.  
And why does our country seem  
To be preparing for war?

**HORATIO:** I'll tell what I've heard.  
Our last King, whose image just appeared,  
Killed King Fortinbras of Norway.  
Along with his life,  
Fortinbras lost all the lands

He had risked in the battle.  
If Fortinbras had won, our good King  
Would have had to give up his lands.  
That was their agreement, so it was only fair.  
Now, sir, young Fortinbras, his son,  
Rash, hot, and foolish,  
Has raised an army of lawless men  
To recover the land lost by his father.  
This must be why we are preparing for war,  
And the reason we must keep watch at night.

**BERNARDO:** I think you must be right.

**HORATIO:** Quiet! Look! Here it comes again!

(The **Ghost** enters again.)

Stay, illusion! If you have any use of voice,  
Speak to me. If I may help you in any way,  
Speak to me. If you know anything about  
Your country's fate, which,  
By knowing in advance, we may avoid,  
Oh, speak!

(A rooster crows. The **Ghost** exits.)

**BERNARDO:** It was about to speak,  
When the rooster crowed.



**HORATIO:** I have heard that spirits  
Must leave the earth during the day,  
And what we just saw proves that story!  
The sun is rising. Our watch is over.  
Let us report what we have seen tonight  
To young Hamlet. I think that  
This spirit, silent to us, will speak to him.

**MARCELLUS:** Let's do it. I know where he is.

(All exit.)

