

HAMLET | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! *Go at your own pace, and have fun!*



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

Hamlet is having a day. He grew up pretty comfortable: his father was the king of Denmark, and apparently an all-around good guy. Hamlet was going to college in Germany, making friends and having fun. It's nice to be the prince. But then, a couple of months ago (nay, not so much, not two!) his father died, and his mother got speedily married to his uncle—his father's brother!

Which brings us to today. Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, called a big meeting of everyone in the palace because—well, it's not totally clear why he called the meeting, except that he apparently enjoys calling meetings and throwing parties. It's good to be the king. At the meeting, Claudius announced that Hamlet would not be returning to college, or even really leaving the palace. Boooo!

Just then, Hamlet's college buddy, Horatio, shows up with a very strange story. Just yesterday evening, Horatio says, he saw the ghost of Hamlet's dad (who was also named Hamlet) wandering around the walls of the castle. Spooky! Hamlet decides to confront his father's ghost, so he heads out after dark with Horatio and Marcellus, a guard who saw the ghost with Horatio.

ACT I Scene IV

MY FATHER'S SPIRIT IN ARMS! ALL IS NOT WELL... -HAMLET

Enter Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus.

Enter Ghost.

HAMLET
The air bites shrewdly*; it is very cold.

HORATIO
It is a nipping and an eager air.

HAMLET
What hour now?

HORATIO
I think it lacks of twelve.*

MARCELLUS
No, it is struck.

HORATIO
Indeed, I heard it not. It then draws near the season
Wherein the spirit held his wont to walk.*

A flourish of trumpets and two pieces goes off.*

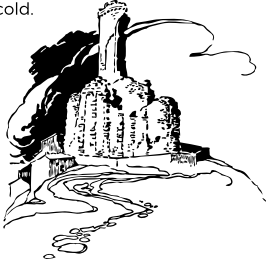
What does this mean, my lord?

HAMLET*
The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail, and the swagg'ring upspring reels;
And, as he drains his draughts of Rhenish* down,
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge.

HORATIO
Is it a custom*?

HAMLET*
Ay, marry, is 't.
But, to my mind, though I am native here
And to the manner born, it is a custom
More honored in the breach than the observance.
This heavy-headed revel east and west
Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations.
They clepe us drunkards and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition. And, indeed, it takes
From our achievements, though performed at height,
The pith and marrow of our attribute.
So oft it chanceth in particular men
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth (wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin),
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion
(Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason),
Or by some habit that too much o'erleavens
The form of plausive manners—that these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery or fortune's star,
His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. The dram of evil
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
To his own scandal.

We'll talk about this section on the next page!



HORATIO
Look, my lord, it comes.

HAMLET
Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,*
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee "Hamlet,"
"King," "Father," "Royal Dane." O, answer me!
Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell
Why thy canonized* bones, hearsed in death,
Have burst their cerements*; why the sepulcher*,
Wherein we saw thee quietly interred*,
Hath oped* his ponderous and marble jaws*
To cast thee up again. What may this mean
That thou, dead corse*, again in complete steel*,
Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous, and we fools of nature
So horribly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?
Say, why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?

Ghost beckons.

HORATIO
It beckons you to go away with it
As if it some impartment* did desire
To you alone.

MARCELLUS
Look with what courteous action
It waves you to a more removed* ground.
But do not go with it.

HORATIO
No, by no means.

HAMLET
It will not speak. Then I will follow it.

HORATIO
Do not, my lord.

HAMLET
Why, what should be the fear?
I do not set my life at a pin's fee*,
And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?
It waves me forth again. I'll follow it.

HORATIO
What if it tempt you toward the flood*, my lord?
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles o'er* his base into the sea,
And there assume some other horrible form
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason*
And draw you into madness? Think of it.
The very place puts toys of desperation,
Without more motive, into every brain

That looks so many fathoms to the sea
And hears it roar beneath.*

HAMLET
It waves me still.—Go on, I'll follow thee.

MARCELLUS
You shall not go, my lord.

HAMLET
Hold off your hands.

HORATIO
Be ruled. You shall not go.

HAMLET
My fate cries out
And makes each petty arture* in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve*.
Still am I called. Unhand me, gentlemen.
By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!
I say, away!—Go on. I'll follow thee.

They hold back Hamlet.

Ghost and Hamlet exit.

HORATIO
He waxes desperate with imagination*.

MARCELLUS
Let's follow. 'Tis not fit thus to obey him.

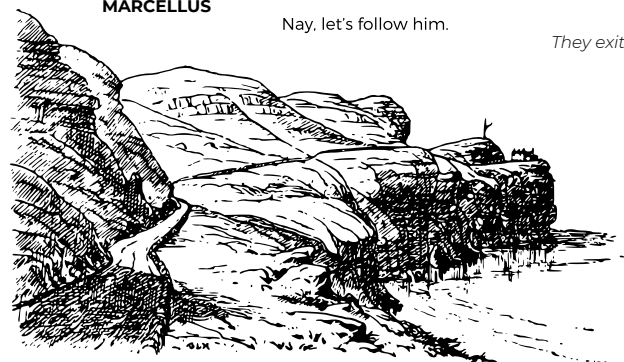
HORATIO
Have after. To what issue will this come?

MARCELLUS
Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

HORATIO
Heaven will direct it.

MARCELLUS
Nay, let's follow him.

They exit.



- **shrewdly** - cleverly; in other words, the cold air is good at making them feel cold
- **it lacks of twelve** - it's not yet midnight
- **the season wherein...wont to walk** - the time of night when the ghost was seen walking
- **two pieces** - cannons, firing in celebration
- **HAMLET: the King doth...triumph of his pledge** - in other words, Claudius is still awake because he's throwing a big, noisy party with lots of wine (Rhenish)
- **a custom** - a tradition
- **HAMLET: Ay, marry...to his own scandal** - it's a tradition, one that was more often skipped than celebrated. All of these parties being thrown by the king are part of why other nations make fun of us, calling us drunkards and insulting us with sarcastic praise. And, to be honest, they're not wrong about us, even though they do exaggerate. It often happens that way: People get marked by one particular negative characteristic, like the social position they were born into (which isn't their fault, after all, since you can't choose your family), or by some mental problem (often something that makes them seem unreasonable), or by some habit that makes them seem rude or disrespectful—these people, who are

"stamped" by a single problem, regardless of whether that problem was something they inherited or happened to them by chance, even if every other part of them is as totally perfect as a person can be, they will be hated by the general public for their one fault. A tiny amount of evil can cover up all of the noble things a person has done, and cause them to live in shame.

- **spirit of health or goblin damned** - an angelic being or a devil
- **canonized** - sacred
- **hearsed** - placed in a coffin that was pulled by a hearse
- **cerements** - the clothes someone is buried in
- **sepulcher** - grave (usually with a large monument)
- **interred** - buried
- **oped** - opened
- **ponderous and marble jaws** - the heavy marble doors of the royal sepulcher
- **corse** - corpse
- **complete steel** - full armor
- **disposition** - mental foundations
- **impartment** - communication
- **removed** - distant
- **a pin's fee** - a very small value (the cost of a pin)

the **sepulcher**
wherein we
saw thee
quietly
interred

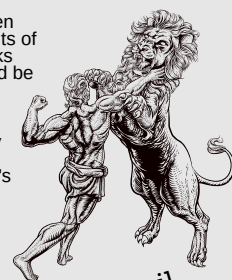


the **dram of evil**
1 dram = 1/8 ounce



hardy as the **Nemean lion's nerve**

- **flood** - probably refers to a river
- **beetles o'er** - overhangs
- **sovereignty of reason** - sanity
- **toys of desperation** - ideas of self-harm
- **the very place...hears it roar beneath** - even just going to the cliffs at night can put thoughts of self-harm into the mind of someone who looks over the edge and sees how far the fall would be into the ocean below
- **petty arture** - little blood vessel
- **as hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve** - the Nemean lion was a legendary beast killed by Hercules, so its nerves were strong, indeed
- **he waxes desperate with imagination** - he's starting to lose his mind, and it's making him reckless





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You can respond to these in any way you choose:

Write

ACT IT OUT

Talk about it

Draw

THINK ABOUT IT

... up to you!



"Why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?"

So, it turns out that Old Hamlet was murdered by Claudius, who wanted to be king—and Claudius wanted to marry Gertrude, Hamlet's mother.

Specifically, Old Hamlet was napping in his garden, and Claudius poured poison into his ears. The king died almost instantly.

Shakespeare never gives us the backstory here—it's up to you. Based on the situation, what do you think might have happened? Was Old Hamlet a good king? A good father? A good brother? Was Claudius in love with Gertrude? Was she in love with him? Or was the marriage just convenient? How did Claudius prevent Hamlet from becoming king? And did Gertrude help him do it? How do different answers to these questions change the story—or what's at stake?



something is rotten in the state of Denmark

In Shakespeare's time—and Hamlet's—the king or queen was considered to be, in some sense, the same as the country they ruled. This idea, called "the body politic," was beginning to decline in popularity by the time Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, and Shakespeare doesn't always seem to buy it, but it shows up all over his plays. Kings and queens are sometimes called by the name of their nation ("England" or "France" or "Denmark") the way you might call someone "coach" or "buddy" or "boss." If the ruler was healthy, people assumed the nation was strong, too. If the ruler was sick, people assumed there was something wrong with the country as a whole.

- So what do you think it means when the king dies suddenly, then reappears as a ghost?
- How does thinking that Old Hamlet is *literally* the same as Denmark affect the stakes of the scene?
- How might thinking about this scene in terms of the body politic affect the acting, the design, or anything else about a production?

Alas, poor Yorrick. Why did I have to follow Dad's ghost back in Act I? That has not worked out very well for me so far.



Don't ask me. I'm a numbskull!

How do you imagine the ghost portrayed on stage?

The sky is the limit here. Directors have done everything from a giant shadow on the wall to huge puppets to just an actor dressed in armor. What does YOUR ghost of Old Hamlet look, act, and sound like?



Imagine this scene in a movie.

Keeping the words the same (you can cut some out, though!), how would you make this scene fit into the style of...

- a psychological thriller
- an action movie
- a horror film
- a dark comedy
- ...a goofball comedy?!

For each of the three men onstage, the appearance of Old Hamlet's ghost means something different.

- For Marcellus, Old Hamlet was his king and, on some level, also his boss. He has a *political* relationship to the king, and a *professional* relationship to his boss.
- For Horatio, Old Hamlet was his king, and also his friend's father. So he has a *political* relationship and a *personal* one.
- For Hamlet, it's complicated. Old Hamlet was both his father and his king—and, because he is the king's son, he would normally become king when his father died. So, for Hamlet, the *personal* and *political* relationships are tangled up.

How do you think that complicated relationship to his father affects Hamlet? (especially since he *didn't* become king when his father died, for reasons that are never made clear in the play)

If you were an actor playing Hamlet, you would need to find an "as if" to help you get into the role. What's your "as if"?

(what is an experience that might give you insight into Hamlet's feelings on his messy, personal/political relationship to his father?)

IN COMPLETE STEEL

In the first few scenes of the play, characters mention over and over again that Old Hamlet's ghost is dressed in a full suit of armor. Why, do you think?



Why is the armor important? If you haven't read about the body politic (above), read that bit and think about the armor in that way. Does it change your ideas or inform another opinion?

ION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION

my fate cries out!

CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION CAUTION

- What do you think Hamlet wants from this interaction with his father's ghost?
- Why do you think he follows the ghost, rather than staying put?
- Could Horatio and Marcellus say anything to change his mind, or is he going to follow regardless?
- Have you ever felt like you absolutely need to do something, even if it's dangerous, despite warnings about the danger?

As with many of Shakespeare's plays, there are several "original" versions of *Hamlet*.

But where most of the plays have minor variations, the *Hamlets* are really different!

There's only one difference in this scene, but it's a big one:

There are 22 lines in one version (the Second Quarto) that just don't show up in the others.

We've marked those lines with a bracket. They begin "This heavy-handed revel" and end "to his own scandal." Read the scene again and skip those lines. See what happens.

- How does the scene change when you skip those lines? Think about the pace of the scene, the effect on the characters, the meaning of the speech, and anything that might be lost or gained by skipping it.
- Can you cut *part* of the speech, or does the whole thing need to be there? Think about the meaning of the words, but also the rhythm of the poetry, since the speech is in verse.
- If you were directing *Hamlet*, would you keep the speech in? Think about whether the speech's meaning is important to you—and about whether it makes the scene stronger or not.