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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.

The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

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William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

Dramatis Personae

HAMLET, Prince of Denmark.

CLAUDIUS, King of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle.

GERTRUDE, Queen of Denmark, Hamlet's mother.

The GHOST of the late King Hamlet, Hamlet's father.

POLONIUS, a lord of the court.

OPHELIA, daughter of Polonius.

LAERTES, son of Polonius.

HORATIO, friend to Hamlet.

FORTINBRAS, Prince of Norway.

ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN, former friends of Hamlet.

MARCELLUS and BARNARDO, officers on the watch.

FRANCISCO, a soldier.

REYNALDO, servant to Polonius.

VOLTEMAND and CORNELIUS, courtiers.

OSRIC, a courtier.

The Players.

A Priest.

Two Gravediggers.

A Captain.

English Ambassadors.

Lords, Ladies, Soldiers, Sailors, Messengers, and Attendants.

ACT I

Scene 1. Elsinore. A platform before the castle. It is midnight. The air is bitterly cold. Two sentries change places on the dark wall.

[Enter FRANCISCO and BARNARDO.]

BARNARDO. Who is there? Speak first and make yourself known. This is no night for careless answers.

FRANCISCO. No, you answer me first. Stop where you are and tell me your name. I will not trust a shadow in this cold darkness.

BARNARDO. Long live the King. It is Barnardo, coming to take the watch. Midnight has struck, so you may go and rest.

FRANCISCO. Thank you for that. The cold goes into my bones tonight, and my heart feels heavy. Nothing has moved on the watch, not even a mouse.

BARNARDO. Good night, then. If you meet Horatio and Marcellus, tell them to come quickly. They are late for the watch.

[Enter HORATIO and MARCELLUS.]

FRANCISCO. I think I hear them now. Stand there and say who you are. Do not come nearer before you answer.

HORATIO. Friends of this ground. We are loyal men of Denmark. You may let us pass.

MARCELLUS. Good night, Francisco. Who has taken your place? We came as

fast as we could.

FRANCISCO. Barnardo is here. Good night to you all. I leave the wall to colder men than I am.

[Exit FRANCISCO.]

MARCELLUS. Barnardo, has that thing appeared again tonight? We brought Horatio because he would not believe us. He said our eyes were full of fear and night, not truth.

BARNARDO. I have seen nothing yet. But sit down, all the same, and hear the story again. We have seen it on two nights already, and the hour is near.

HORATIO. I still think it is only fear and talk. Yet I will sit and listen, since you ask it. Tell me again what happened.

BARNARDO. Last night, when the same star stood in that part of the sky, Marcellus and I were here. The bell had just struck one. Then—

MARCELLUS. Be quiet. Stop speaking and look there. It comes again.

[Enter GHOST.]

BARNARDO. There it is. It has the very shape of the dead King. Look at it, Horatio, and judge with your own eyes.

MARCELLUS. You are a scholar, Horatio. Speak to it. Ask it what it wants.

HORATIO. It is like the King indeed, and the sight fills me with fear. What are you, that walk in this hour of night in the form of buried Denmark? I command

you, speak.

MARCELLUS. It is offended. See how it turns away. It will not answer us.

HORATIO. Stay. Speak. I command you again, speak.

[Exit GHOST.]

BARNARDO. It is gone. You are shaking, Horatio, and your face is pale. Do you still call this a dream?

HORATIO. Before God, I would never have believed it without my own eyes. It looked exactly like the late King. The armor, the face, the warlike step, all were his.

MARCELLUS. It has come to us twice before at this same dead hour. Tonight you saw what we saw. Now you know we did not lie.

HORATIO. I do not yet know what it means, but I fear it means danger for the state. Such signs do not come for nothing. Heaven does not send armed spirits to walk for sport.

MARCELLUS. Then tell us why Denmark is so restless. Why are men working day and night? Why are new cannon being made, ships being prepared, and soldiers called to duty?

HORATIO. I can answer that. The late King Hamlet once fought old Fortinbras of Norway and killed him in fair combat. By law, those lands passed to our King, but now young Fortinbras wants them back by force.

HORATIO. He has gathered wild men for war and hopes to strike at Denmark

while our court is weak from the old King's death. That is why we keep watch so carefully. That is why the whole land is in haste.

BARNARDO. Then perhaps this spirit comes because of war. It walks in armor because war stands near. The dead King may be warning us.

HORATIO. It troubles my mind deeply. Before great falls in history, strange signs have appeared in heaven and earth. Perhaps this is such a sign for us.

[Re-enter GHOST.]

HORATIO. Look, it comes again. I will stand before it, even if fear breaks me. If you can speak, speak to me.

HORATIO. If there is some good thing we may do for you, tell us. If you know danger coming to Denmark, speak now. If you walk because of some hidden cause, reveal it.

[The cock crows.]

HORATIO. It is leaving. Marcellus, stop it if you can. No, it is gone again.

MARCELLUS. We do wrong even to raise a hand against it. It is too noble in its look, and our blows would be foolish. We cannot strike the air and hope to wound it.

BARNARDO. It seemed ready to speak, but the cock crowed. That sound drove it away. It vanished at once.

HORATIO. I have heard that spirits flee at the call of morning. The cock wakes the day and sends wandering things back to their place. This night has proved that

old story true.

MARCELLUS. Dawn is coming now. The east is growing pale, and the cold night is ending. We should break up the watch.

HORATIO. Yes, but first we must tell young Hamlet what we have seen. This spirit would not speak to us, yet I think it may speak to him. He is the dead King's son, and perhaps that bond will open its mouth.

MARCELLUS. Then let us find Hamlet this morning. We owe him the truth. We must not keep this from him.

[Exeunt.]

Scene 2. Elsinore. A room of state in the castle. The new King holds court. Mourning and celebration stand together uneasily.

[Enter CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, HAMLET, POLONIUS, LAERTES, VOLTEMAND, CORNELIUS, Lords, and Attendants.]

CLAUDIUS. Though the death of my brother is still fresh in memory, the business of life does not wait. We have mourned him, yet we have also thought of the good of Denmark. So, with mixed sorrow and joy, we have taken our former sister-in-law as our queen. At the same time, young Fortinbras of Norway thinks our state is weak after my brother's death. He has sent demands for lands his father lost. Therefore we send Voltmand and Cornelius to the old King of Norway to stop this danger before it grows.

VOLTEMAND and CORNELIUS. We will carry out this duty faithfully. We go with full obedience to your command. We ask only your blessing for a quick journey.

CLAUDIUS. You have it, and our thanks as well. Go with speed and return with good news. Denmark must not sleep while enemies stir.

[Exit VOLTEMAND and CORNELIUS.]

CLAUDIUS. And now, Laertes, what do you ask of us? You spoke before of a request. Tell us what you want.

LAERTES. My lord, I ask leave to return to France. I came willingly for your coronation, but now that duty is done, my thoughts turn back there. I ask your favor and pardon to go.

CLAUDIUS. Has your father agreed to this? What says Polonius? I will not stand between father and son.

POLONIUS. My lord, he pressed me long and strongly, and at last I gave my slow consent. Since I have yielded, I ask that you also grant him leave. He longs to go.

CLAUDIUS. Then take your time, Laertes, and go with our good wishes. Use your youth well. But now, Hamlet, my cousin and my son—

HAMLET. [Aside.] A little more than kin, and less than kind.

CLAUDIUS. Why do clouds still hang over you? Why does your face remain turned toward grief? Must sorrow sit forever on your brow?

GERTRUDE. My dear Hamlet, put off this dark look. Do not keep seeking your father in the dust. All who live must die, and all must pass through nature to eternity.

HAMLET. Yes, madam, that is common. Death is the common road. I know that as well as any man.

GERTRUDE. If you know it, why does your grief seem so special? Why do you carry it as if no one has suffered before you? Why does it cling to you so strongly?

HAMLET. “Seems,” madam? No, it is. I do not know “seems.” My black clothes, my sighs, my tears, my bowed face, all these may be signs that others can act, but there is something in me deeper than these shows. What I feel inside cannot be dressed like a part in a play.

CLAUDIUS. It is good in you to honor your dead father, but you must remember that your father also lost a father, and that father lost his before him. Such grief is natural for a time, but to remain in it too long becomes stubborn and unwise. It shows a heart too weak against what heaven has made common to all men. Death comes to every father and every son. Therefore we ask you to cast this useless sorrow to the earth and think of us as a father. Let the world also know that you stand nearest to our throne. As for your wish to return to school in Wittenberg, it goes against our desire. Stay here with us in Denmark, as our chief joy in the court.

GERTRUDE. Do not let your mother beg in vain, Hamlet. Stay with us. Do not go back to Wittenberg.

HAMLET. I shall obey you in all I can, madam. I will remain.

CLAUDIUS. That is a loving answer, and it pleases me. Come, my queen. This agreement from Hamlet sits warmly on my heart.

[Exeunt all but HAMLET.]

HAMLET. O, if this solid flesh could melt and pass away like dew. If heaven had not forbidden self-killing, how easy it would seem to leave this tired world. Everything in it feels worn out, dirty, and without use. It is like an untended garden full of wild and rotten growth. My father has not been dead even two full months, and yet all has changed. He was a great king, noble and bright, while this new king is nothing beside him. My mother seemed to love my father so deeply that even the wind was too rough for his face if it touched him. Yet within a month she married my uncle, my father's brother. He is no more like my father than I am like Hercules. The shoes she wore to follow my father's body were hardly old before she entered another marriage bed. Such speed is shameful. It cannot lead to good. But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

Part 2

[Enter HORATIO, MARCELLUS, and BARNARDO.]

HORATIO. My lord, I greet you. It is good to see you again in Elsinore. We hoped to find you and speak with you in private.

HAMLET. Horatio, is it really you? Then I still know my own eyes well. You are always welcome to me, my good friend.

HORATIO. I am the same man, my lord, and always your loyal servant. I came from Wittenberg and have reached the court only now. I wished to see you, though I did not expect to find such sorrow here.

HAMLET. Do not call yourself my servant. I would sooner call you my friend, and keep that better name between us. But tell me, what brought you here from Wittenberg?

MARCELLUS. My lord, we are glad to see you well enough to stand before us.

We came with Horatio because there is something we thought you must hear. It is not a small matter, and it is not easy to say.

HAMLET. I am glad to see you too, Marcellus, and you, Barnardo. Yet first I would hear Horatio answer me. Why did you come from Wittenberg?

HORATIO. My lord, I came to attend your father's funeral. That was my first purpose, and I thought it only right.

HAMLET. I beg you, do not mock me, fellow student. It seems to me you came rather for my mother's wedding. The one followed so close upon the other that a man could hardly separate them.

HORATIO. It did follow very quickly, my lord. I cannot deny that. One sorrow had not cooled before the feast of joy was ready.

HAMLET. Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The cold meats baked for the funeral were set again upon the marriage tables. I would rather have met my worst enemy in heaven than have lived to see that day. My father was such a man that I think I shall never look upon his equal again. Even now I seem to see him before me. The image rises clearly in my mind, as if memory itself had given him shape.

HORATIO. I saw him once, my lord, and I thought him every inch a king. He had greatness in his face and calm strength in his bearing. Few men carry such authority without effort.

HAMLET. He was a man in the fullest sense, take him in all things together. I shall not see his like again. The world feels poorer now that he is gone.

HORATIO. My lord, if you can bear a strange report, I think I saw him last night. I would not say these words lightly, and I would not trust them to rumor. Yet I

believe I saw the King your father.

HAMLET. Saw whom? My father? The dead King? Speak clearly, Horatio, for that name shakes me.

HORATIO. Yes, my lord, the King your father. Hold your wonder a little, and let me tell the matter in order. These gentlemen stand with me as witnesses, and they can make every word good.

HAMLET. For God's love, let me hear it at once. Keep nothing back. My heart is already beating ahead of your story.

HORATIO. For two nights these officers have stood watch in the middle of the night on the castle platform. At that dead hour a figure in full armor appeared before them, and its form was exactly like your father's. It walked slowly past them, solemn and silent, within the length of a weapon. They were struck almost numb with fear and could not speak. After they told me, I joined them on the third night, and everything happened as they had said. The shape came again, same hour, same face, same armor, same silent march.

HAMLET. Where did you see this? Was it truly upon the platform above the castle? Tell me the place exactly.

MARCELLUS. Yes, my lord, upon the platform where we keep the watch. The night was sharp and black, and there was no mist to deceive the eye. We were all awake and looking toward the same place.

HAMLET. Did you speak to it? Did none of you try to stop it or ask its purpose? A silence like that would be harder to bear than fear itself.

HORATIO. I spoke, my lord. I called to it and asked what it was, and why it

walked at that hour in that shape. It made no answer, though once it seemed to lift its head as if it would speak. At that very moment the morning cock cried out loudly, and the spirit started in haste. It withdrew at once and vanished from our sight. That is the truth of it, as I live.

HAMLET. It is very strange. There is something in it that pulls the mind toward dark thoughts. I do not know whether to fear it more as wonder or as warning.

HORATIO. We also thought it our duty to tell you. The matter touched you more than any man living, and we dared not keep it from you. A secret like this grows heavier the longer it is carried.

HAMLET. Indeed, it troubles me deeply. Tell me this now: do you still hold the watch tonight? I would know whether the same hour may bring the same sight.

MARCELLUS and BARNARDO. We do, my lord. We are set for the watch again tonight. We will be there as before.

HAMLET. You say it wore armor. Was it armed from head to foot? Did the shape stand ready for war, like a king called out of battle?

HORATIO. It was armed, my lord, from top to toe. Nothing was lacking in the soldier's shape. It looked not like a weak shadow, but like a man prepared for combat.

HAMLET. Then you did not see his face clearly? Armor may hide what grief wishes to imagine. I must ask every small detail.

HORATIO. We saw his face, my lord. The visor was raised. His countenance seemed more full of sorrow than anger, though there was sternness in it too.

HAMLET. Was he pale? Did he fix his eyes upon you? I would know whether the look was wild or steady.

HORATIO. He was very pale, and he held his eyes upon us most steadily. The gaze did not wander. It was as if he looked through us and yet judged us.

HAMLET. I wish I had been there. No matter how fearsome the sight, I would rather have seen it with my own eyes than hear of it from any man. My soul feels left outside its own business.

HORATIO. It would have amazed you deeply, my lord. Even to see it once was enough to trouble the strongest heart. Yet I think it wished to be seen, not to hide.

HAMLET. Did it remain long? A little time can hold much meaning on such a night. I ask as if the measure of moments could make the thing more real.

HORATIO. It stayed while a man might count to a hundred at a moderate pace, though these gentlemen thought it longer. In fear, each second seems stretched. Still, it did not vanish at once.

HAMLET. His beard was mixed with black and silver, was it not? I remember it so in life. Even small truths can steady the mind.

HORATIO. It was, my lord, just as you remember. Dark, yet touched with gray. That likeness persuaded me more than anything else.

HAMLET. Then I will watch tonight. If it takes again the shape of my noble father, I will speak to it, though hell itself should open and command me to keep silent. I must know why it walks. And now I ask you all, if you have so far kept this sight secret, keep it secret still. Whatever happens tonight, give it thought, but do not give it words. I will repay your love and faith as best I can.

HORATIO. Our duty is yours, my lord. We will wait for you upon the platform. No careless tongue shall betray what we have seen.

HAMLET. Your friendship is as dear to me as my own to you. I will come between eleven and twelve. Until then, farewell.

[Exeunt HORATIO, MARCELLUS, and BARNARDO.]

HAMLET. My father's spirit in armor. All is not well. I fear some foul crime lies hidden under the smooth face of this court. I wish the night would come at once, yet part of me fears what it may bring. Still, let my soul be still until the hour arrives. Dark deeds rise to light in the end, even if the whole earth tries to cover them.

[Exit.]

Part 3

Scene 3. A room in Polonius's house. Laertes is ready to leave for France. Before he goes, he gives his sister a serious warning.

[Enter LAERTES and OPHELIA.]

LAERTES. My things are already on the ship, and I must say farewell. Sister, while the wind is kind and the way is open, remember to write to me. Do not let time pass in silence between us.

OPHELIA. You need not fear that. I will not forget you so quickly. But I think there is more in your face than a brother's simple goodbye.

LAERTES. There is, and it concerns Hamlet. Do not trust too much in his sweet words or in the favor he has shown you. At his age such love may be no more than a spring flower, lovely for a moment, but gone almost at once.

OPHELIA. No more than that? Do you think so little of what he has said? You speak as if all his feeling were light and passing.

LAERTES. Think of it carefully. Even if he loves you now, he cannot choose for himself as common men do. He is born for the state, and his life belongs partly to Denmark. Because of that, his choice in love may be limited by his rank and by the needs of the kingdom. So if he says he loves you, believe only as far as a prince may truly act on his own words. Guard your heart, dear sister, and keep yourself at a safe distance from desire.

OPHELIA. I will remember your lesson and keep it close. Yet, brother, do not be like those men who show others the hard path to heaven and then walk for themselves on the easy road of pleasure. I hope your own life will follow the good advice you give me.

LAERTES. Do not fear for me. I know the danger well enough, and I do not mean to forget myself. But here comes our father, and now I must hear another lesson before I go.

[Enter POLONIUS.]

POLONIUS. What, still here, Laertes? On board, on board, for shame. The wind is ready, your servants are waiting, and your ship will not stay for your slow feet. Here is my blessing, and with it a few rules. Keep your thoughts to yourself until they are ready. Be friendly, but do not become cheap and common with every new companion. Hold fast to the true friends you have already tested, but do not waste yourself on every fresh young man who offers his hand. Listen much, speak little,

and hear each man's opinion before you give your own. Keep your clothes as rich as your purse allows, but do not make them foolish or loud. Do not borrow, and do not lend. Loans often lose both money and friendship, and borrowing makes a man careless with his own means. Above all, be true to yourself, and then you cannot be false to any other man.

LAERTES. I take your leave with all respect, my lord. I will remember these words and carry them with me. Farewell, Ophelia, and do not forget what I have said to you.

OPHELIA. It is locked in my memory, and you shall keep the key of it. Go safely, brother. May the sea be kinder to you than your warning has been to me.

[Exit LAERTES.]

POLONIUS. What was it that Laertes said to you? I could see by your faces that the talk was not light. Tell me plainly what passed between you.

OPHELIA. He spoke of the Lord Hamlet. He warned me not to trust his love too easily. He thinks Hamlet's promises may not last.

POLONIUS. A wise warning, and one that comes not too late. I have heard that Hamlet has often found private time with you, and that you have been free in listening to him. If that is so, you do not yet understand well enough either yourself or your honor.

OPHELIA. My lord, he has made many offers of affection to me. He has spoken tenderly and with respect. I did not know what I ought to think.

POLONIUS. Affection? You speak like a green girl who has not yet learned how dangerous such matters are. Do you take his offers for true gold? Then I must

teach you better than that. Think of yourself more dearly, or you will make a fool of me as well as of yourself. These holy vows young men speak are often only traps. From this time forward, do not give Hamlet your time, your talk, or your ear.

OPHELIA. My lord, he has asked for my love in an honorable way. He has supported his words with many serious promises. I thought there was truth in them.

POLONIUS. When blood is hot, the tongue lends itself many bright promises that give more light than heat. Believe this once for all: his vows are not what they seem. I command you from this time to keep yourself away from him.

OPHELIA. I shall obey, my lord. Whatever I feel, I will put your order above it. I will do as you say.

[Exeunt.]

Scene 4. The platform before the castle. It is late at night again. Hamlet comes to wait with Horatio and Marcellus for the spirit.

[Enter HAMLET, HORATIO, and MARCELLUS.]

HAMLET. The air bites sharply tonight. It feels as if the cold itself had teeth. What hour is it now?

HORATIO. I think it is not yet twelve. The night seems slow because we are waiting. Still, the hour cannot be far off.

MARCELLUS. No, it has already struck. Listen, the sound has passed. The time is close upon us now.

[A flourish of trumpets and the sound of drinking within.]

HORATIO. What is that noise, my lord? The whole castle seems awake at this black hour. It does not sound like mourning.

HAMLET. The King drinks deep tonight and keeps his noisy custom of feast and wine. Each time he empties his cup, trumpets and drums announce it like some great victory. It is a practice of our court, though I think it brings us more shame than honor. Other nations laugh at us for it and call us drunkards. Often one fault, even in a noble man, can stain all his other good parts. So it is with Denmark itself, and I hate that this ugly habit should speak louder than our better deeds.

HORATIO. Look, my lord. It comes. There is the shape again.

[Enter GHOST.]

HAMLET. Angels of mercy defend us. Whatever you are, spirit of health or spirit of evil, you come in a form that forces me to speak. I call you father, king, royal Dane. Answer me. Why do you come again in armor out of the grave? Why do your buried bones break their rest? Tell me why the dead return to trouble the moonlit night and shake the minds of the living with such terror.

[The GHOST beckons to HAMLET.]

HORATIO. It beckons you to go apart with it, as if it wishes to speak to you alone. See how it calls you away from us. I do not like that silent gesture.

MARCELLUS. It wants to draw you to some more distant place. Do not go with it, my lord. The dark ground beyond the wall is dangerous enough even without a spirit.

HORATIO. No, by no means. It may tempt you toward the sea cliff or into some mad act. Fear can take hold of the mind in such places.

HAMLET. Why should I fear? My life is of little value to me now, and as for my soul, what can this thing do to that? It calls me again, and I will follow.

HORATIO. Think, my lord. It may put on another horrible shape when it has you alone. It may drive you toward madness.

HAMLET. My fate cries out to me stronger than your fear. Let go of me. By heaven, I will make a ghost of any man who tries to hold me back.

[HAMLET follows the GHOST. HORATIO and MARCELLUS remain.]

HORATIO. He has become desperate under the power of this wonder. I do not like to let him go alone. His mind is too full of grief and dark thought.

MARCELLUS. Then let us follow after him. It is not fit that he should obey such a call without a friend near him. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

HORATIO. Heaven guide the end of this. Come, let us keep as near him as we can. We may still be needed.

[Exeunt.]

Scene 5. A more distant part of the castle grounds. The Ghost stops at last and turns to Hamlet. The night is near its end, and the truth now begins to open.

[Enter GHOST and HAMLET.]

HAMLET. Where will you lead me? Speak now, for I will go no further in silence.

If you have something to reveal, say it plainly.

GHOST. Mark me. My time is short, and I must return soon to fire and suffering. Give me your full attention.

HAMLET. I will listen. My whole heart is turned toward your words. Say what you came to say.

GHOST. I am your father's spirit, forced for a time to walk the night and to suffer in fire by day until the crimes of my life are burned away. I cannot tell you the secrets of that prison, for such knowledge would freeze your blood and tear your soul with horror. But I can tell you enough, and when you hear it, you must revenge me.

HAMLET. Revenge? What do you mean? Speak quickly, for every word drives deeper into me. If you were ever my father in life, I am bound to hear you now.

GHOST. I was murdered. The story given out in Denmark is false. People say a serpent stung me while I slept in my orchard, but the serpent that stung your father now wears his crown.

HAMLET. O my soul, I knew it. My uncle. My dark guess has run before your words.

GHOST. Yes, that wicked and false man won your mother through lust and clever deceit. In my orchard, while I slept at my usual hour in the afternoon, he came secretly with poison and poured it into my ear. At once it ran through my body and killed me, and so by a brother's hand I lost at once my life, my crown, and my queen. I was cut off suddenly, unprepared, with my sins still upon me. That is the horror of it. If you have love for me, do not let the royal bed of Denmark remain a place of shame and incest. Yet do not set your mind on harming your

mother. Leave her to heaven and to the sharp pain that already lives within her heart. Remember me now, and do not forget what you have heard.

[Exit GHOST.]

HAMLET. O all you powers of heaven and earth, what else remains for me to call upon? Remember you? Yes, poor spirit, while memory still lives in me, I will remember nothing else above your command. All easy learning, all old sayings, all light thoughts shall be wiped away, and only this order will remain written in my mind. O most false woman. O smiling villain, villain, damned villain. One may smile and smile, and yet be a villain, and I know now that it is so in Denmark.

[Voices are heard from a distance.]

HORATIO and MARCELLUS. My lord, my lord. Lord Hamlet. Heaven keep him safe.

HAMLET. So be it. Come, bird, come. I hear you.

[Enter HORATIO and MARCELLUS.]

HORATIO. What news, my lord? Tell us what has happened. Your face is changed.

HAMLET. Wonderful news, if a man could call such knowledge wonderful. Yet you would only reveal it. How can I trust even good men with such a secret?

HORATIO. Not I, my lord, by heaven. We will keep silence if you ask it. Say only what you wish to say.

HAMLET. There is not a villain in Denmark who is not a complete rogue. Yet

no more of that. Swear to me that you will never make known what you have seen tonight.

MARCELLUS. We have already promised silence. Still, if you require more, we will swear again. We will do what you ask.

GHOST. [From beneath.] Swear.

HAMLET. Ah, you hear him too. Put your hands upon my sword and swear never to speak of this night. However strangely I may act from now on, you must never suggest by word or sign that you know anything of me.

GHOST. [From beneath.] Swear.

HORATIO. This is truly strange beyond all measure. Day and night seem broken apart. Yet I will swear, and so will he.

HAMLET. Good. Rest now, troubled spirit. Come, my friends, let us go in together, and keep your fingers on your lips. The time is out of joint, and I was born into a cruel duty to set it right.

[Exeunt.]

Part 4

ACT II

Scene 1. A room in Polonius's house. Morning has come, but the house does not feel calm. Polonius is already at work, using caution and suspicion as if they were tools he trusts more than truth.

[Enter POLONIUS and REYNALDO.]

POLONIUS. Take this money and these letters to Laertes in Paris. But do not go straight to him at once. Before you visit him, ask questions and learn how he lives.

REYNALDO. I will do so, my lord. Yet I would be glad to know how far you wish me to go. I do not want to mistake your meaning.

POLONIUS. Find out first what Danes are in Paris, where they live, with whom they spend their time, and how they behave. Then, if they seem to know my son, speak of him as one you know only partly. Do you understand me so far?

REYNALDO. Yes, my lord, I follow you. You would have me move toward the matter slowly. You do not wish me to ask too plainly at first.

POLONIUS. Just so. Say that you know his father and his friends, and something of him, though not very well. Then you may speak lightly of common young men's faults, such as drinking, fencing, gambling, swearing, quarreling, or visiting places they should avoid.

REYNALDO. My lord, would not such talk dishonor him? It seems dangerous to stain a young man's name, even a little. I fear I may go too far.

POLONIUS. No, no, not if you do it with care. You must not accuse him of deep corruption, only of the small wild habits that often belong to youth and freedom. Such slight faults will sound natural, and by that little bait you may catch the truth. The man you test, if he has seen Laertes act in such ways, will answer at once and add more from his own knowledge. Thus a touch of falsehood draws out hidden fact. This is how wise men often find direction by indirection.

REYNALDO. I see your meaning now. You want me to let others reveal what

they know while thinking they correct me. It is a clever road, though not a straight one.

POLONIUS. A straight road is not always the most useful. By such turns and circles, we learn what plain questions might never bring to light. Now go, watch well, and let Laertes follow his music if he must.

REYNALDO. I shall obey, my lord. I will carry your money and your caution together. Farewell.

[Exit REYNALDO.]

POLONIUS. Good. A little care saves much later trouble. The young think they move unseen, but old eyes know where to look.

[Enter OPHELIA.]

POLONIUS. How now, Ophelia? Your face is pale, and your breath comes quickly. What has frightened you so much?

OPHELIA. Oh, my lord, I have been terribly afraid. I was alone in my chamber, sewing quietly, when Lord Hamlet came in before me. I have never seen him in such a state.

POLONIUS. In what state? Speak clearly and leave nothing out. Fear often makes a story broken.

OPHELIA. His clothes were loose and in disorder, his head was bare, his stockings fallen and unfastened at the ankle, and his face was pale as his shirt. His knees knocked together, and he looked as if he had come out of hell to speak of horror.

POLONIUS. Mad for your love? Is that what you think? Did he speak to you?

OPHELIA. I do not know what to think, but I truly fear it may be so. He took me by the wrist and held me hard. Then he stood back as far as his arm allowed and looked into my face as if he wished to draw my very picture from it. He stayed that way a long time. At last he shook my arm a little, moved his head up and down three times, and gave such a deep and painful sigh that it seemed as if his whole body would break. Then he let me go and walked out without looking where he stepped, yet still kept his eyes turned on me to the very end.

POLONIUS. Come with me at once. I will go to the King. This is the very madness of love, which drives men into desperate acts and destroys itself by its own violence. Have you spoken sharply to him of late? Have you given him any cold answer? I must know whether something has pushed him into this condition.

OPHELIA. No, my good lord. I only did as you ordered me. I refused his letters and denied him access to me.

POLONIUS. That has done it, then. I feared before that he only meant to play with you, but now I think I judged him wrongly. It is common in age to suspect too much, just as it is common in youth to think too little. This must be told. Better to speak of love than to hide a matter that may grow into greater grief. Come, let us go to the King.

[Exeunt.]

Scene 2. A room in the castle. Claudius and Gertrude seek help from men who once knew Hamlet well. Yet behind their warm words lies another purpose: to draw his secret from him.

[Enter CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, ROSENCRANTZ, GUILDENSTERN, and Attendants.]

CLAUDIUS. Welcome, dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. We have long wished to see you, but our need of you has made our message more urgent. You have heard something, no doubt, of Hamlet's strange change. I call it a transformation, for neither his outward manner nor his inward state seems the same as before. What more than his father's death has driven him so far from himself, I cannot guess. Therefore I ask you to stay here for a time and spend your company on him. Since you grew with him in youth and know his old temper well, you may perhaps lead him into pleasure and discover, by chance or talk, what trouble lies hidden in him. If we can learn the cause, we may perhaps cure the pain.

GERTRUDE. Good gentlemen, he has spoken much of you, and I know there are few men living to whom he is more attached. If you will give us this kindness and remain at court for a while, you shall receive thanks fit for royal memory.

ROSENCRANTZ. Your majesties may command us more than ask us. What you call a request already sounds to us like duty. We are ready to serve.

GUILDENSTERN. Yes, we freely place ourselves at your feet to be used as you think best. We will do all we can to be pleasant and helpful to the prince. We hope our presence may do him some good.

CLAUDIUS. We thank you both with all our hearts. Your help may prove of great value. Go now, and let someone bring you to Hamlet.

GERTRUDE. Yes, go to him at once. If some old friendship can reach where a mother's words do not, I will be grateful indeed. Heaven grant that your coming may comfort him.

[Exeunt ROSENCRANTZ, GUILDENSTERN, and some Attendants.]

[Enter POLONIUS.]

POLONIUS. My lord, the ambassadors from Norway have returned with joyful success. And besides that, I believe I have found the true cause of Hamlet's madness.

CLAUDIUS. You always enter with news, Polonius. Yet let the first matter come first. Bring in the ambassadors, and then speak of Hamlet. I am eager for both reports.

POLONIUS. My news of Hamlet shall be the fruit after the main dish. I will fetch the men from Norway at once. Then all shall be set before you in order.

[Exit POLONIUS.]

CLAUDIUS. He tells me, my sweet queen, that he has found the source of your son's disorder. Yet I doubt it is anything other than the two great blows we already know: his father's death and our hasty marriage.

GERTRUDE. I think the same. Those wounds were enough to shake a gentler mind than his. Still, let us hear all before we judge.

[Enter POLONIUS with VOLTEMAND and CORNELIUS.]

CLAUDIUS. Welcome, my good friends. Tell us, Voltemand, what answer comes from our brother Norway. Have you brought peace, delay, or further danger?

VOLTEMAND. We bring fair greetings and a good result. At first the old King of Norway thought his nephew's army was meant against Poland, but when he looked more closely he learned it was aimed against your majesty. Grieved by this misuse of his weakness and age, he immediately stopped Fortinbras. Young Fortinbras obeyed the order, accepted a rebuke, and promised his uncle never again to raise arms against Denmark. In reward, old Norway has given him money each year and allowed him to lead those same soldiers against Poland instead. With that answer, he also sends this request. Since Fortinbras must pass through your lands on that business, Norway asks for quiet passage through Denmark under the terms written here. We place the paper in your hand.

CLAUDIUS. This pleases us well. At a better hour we will read it carefully and give a full answer. For now, we thank you for your good service. Go and rest, and tonight we shall feast together.

VOLTEMAND and CORNELIUS. We thank your majesty. It is enough for us to have served well. We gladly withdraw.

[Exeunt VOLTEMAND and CORNELIUS.]

CLAUDIUS. And now, Polonius, we return to your other news. You said you had discovered the cause of Hamlet's lunacy. Let us hear it without delay.

POLONIUS. My lord, if I were still uncertain, I would not speak so boldly. Yet I believe I have found the very root of the matter. Before I tell it, let me say only this: brevity is the soul of wit, and long speech is only its shadow.

GERTRUDE. More matter, with less art. Come to the point, good Polonius. My patience does not love winding roads.

POLONIUS. Madam, I obey. Your noble son is mad. Mad, I say, for to define

true madness, what is it but to be nothing else but mad? But let that pass. I will show the cause plainly. My daughter Ophelia has been obedient to me. At my command she refused Hamlet's letters and denied him her company. In answer to that, he has fallen into sadness, then sleeplessness, then weakness, then confusion, and at last into this very madness that now troubles him.

CLAUDIUS. How may you prove this? Words alone will not satisfy me. The court is too full of guesses already.

POLONIUS. I have proof, my lord, proof in his own hand. Here is a letter he sent to my daughter. I kept it, as a father should. "To the heavenly and most beautiful Ophelia," so it begins, and then with much tender foolishness it declares his love. He swears that the stars may be fire, the sun may move, and truth itself may prove false, but never that he does not love her. There, my lord, is the heart of it.

GERTRUDE. This may indeed explain much. Love can twist a young man's mind into strange forms. Yet I would still see the thing tested.

POLONIUS. And so it shall be. Send for Hamlet, and I will place my daughter before him while the King and I hide where we may see and hear. If his grief springs from neglected love, the matter will show itself. If not, then let me lose the name of wise man and become a farmer.

CLAUDIUS. We shall try it. There is sense in testing what we suspect. Let Hamlet be brought when the hour is fit.

[They prepare for the next move as the scene continues.]

Part 5

[Enter HAMLET, reading. The King, Queen, and their attendants withdraw, leaving Polonius to face him alone. Hamlet seems buried in the page before him, but his mind is moving in many directions at once.]

POLONIUS. How does my good Lord Hamlet? You seem busy with your book, yet perhaps a word may still reach you. I hope the day finds you in some gentler mood.

HAMLET. Well enough, and I thank God for even that. A man must be content with small mercies in this world. What would you wish with me?

POLONIUS. Do you know me, my lord? I would not willingly trouble you if I came at the wrong time. Yet I think you know me well enough.

HAMLET. Very well indeed. You are a fishmonger. That is the right name for you, if names ever fit men truly.

POLONIUS. Not I, my lord. I am no such thing. You mock me plainly.

HAMLET. Then I wish you were so honest a man. In this world, to be honest is to be one man picked out of ten thousand. You would be rare merchandise indeed.

POLONIUS. That is true enough, my lord. Still, I do not understand where your words are leading. They seem to run one way and point another.

HAMLET. If the sun can breed worms in a dead dog, then a fair face may rot under kind light as easily as a foul one. Have you a daughter? If you do, do not let her walk in the sun too freely.

POLONIUS. I have a daughter, my lord. Your meaning touches me more nearly now. Yet I cannot say I like the shape it takes.

HAMLET. Conception may be a blessing, but not every blessing comes in a safe form. Look well to your daughter, friend. That is all I say.

POLONIUS. [Aside.] Still he returns to my daughter, though he first claimed not to know me. There is madness here, yet it circles around one fixed point. I must press him again and see what rises. What do you read, my lord? Perhaps the book is sad company. Perhaps its matter does not help your mood.

HAMLET. Words, words, words. Nothing more faithful, and nothing more useless. The page is full, yet the world remains empty.

POLONIUS. But what is the matter you read? I ask not who wrote it, but what it says. A reader's face often tells less than the page.

HAMLET. Slanders, sir. It says old men have gray beards, wrinkled faces, watery eyes, weak legs, and little wit. All of which I believe strongly, yet I still think it rude to print such truths so openly. For you yourself, sir, might be as old as I am one day, if you could go backward like a crab. That would be a great journey, though not a noble one. Time does not often grant such favors.

POLONIUS. [Aside.] Though this is madness, there is method in it. His replies strike oddly, yet they strike true more often than wild men usually do. I had better leave him now and move on to the meeting with Ophelia. Will you walk out of the air, my lord? This place is close, and the hall is too full of heavy thoughts. A little movement might help you.

HAMLET. Into my grave? That would indeed be out of the air. It is the one chamber where no man is crowded long.

POLONIUS. Then I will most humbly take my leave of you. I would not trouble

you further. May the day sit more kindly on you than it does now.

HAMLET. You cannot take from me anything I would more willingly part with, except my life, except my life, except my life. Farewell, old fool.

[Exit POLONIUS. Enter ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN.]

ROSENCRANTZ. My honored lord. My dear lord Hamlet. It gives us joy to find you.

GUILDENSTERN. We are glad to see you again. Elsinore seemed colder before we found you. You do not greet old friends with much warmth today.

HAMLET. My excellent good friends, how do you both? You look like men whom Fortune has not yet beaten flat. Tell me, are you happy or only pretending cleverly?

ROSENCRANTZ. We are neither too lucky nor too miserable. We live somewhere in the middle, which may be the safest place. Fortune has not set us high enough to fear a great fall.

HAMLET. Then you live about her waist, not at her feet or on her crown. In her secret favors, perhaps. But tell me the news.

GUILDENSTERN. Little news, my lord, except that the world grows old and strange. Men speak much and mean little. Courts are full and hearts are empty.

HAMLET. Then the end of all things must be near. But enough of that. What have you done to deserve that Fortune should send you to this prison?

ROSENCRANTZ. Prison, my lord? We do not call Denmark that. To us it is a

court, not a cage.

HAMLET. To me it is a prison, and one of the worst. There are many prisons in the world, but a prison changes shape according to the mind inside it. Thought makes the bars.

GUILDENSTERN. Then your ambition makes it one, perhaps. Your mind is too large for this place, and so the walls seem narrow. Another man might walk here freely.

HAMLET. I could be shut in a nutshell and think myself king of infinite space, if I did not have bad dreams. It is not the room but the inward night that traps me. That is why even open ground feels closed.

ROSENCRANTZ. Dreams are often made from ambition and restless thought. A dream is only a shadow, and ambition the shadow of a shadow. We all chase shapes in some fashion.

HAMLET. Then our kings and heroes are but shadows of beggars. But let that pass. Speak honestly now: were you sent for, or did you come by your own free wish?

GUILDENSTERN. What should we say, my lord? Your question leaves little room to hide. You press friendship hard upon us.

HAMLET. By our youth together, by our old affection, and by whatever truth still lives between us, answer me plainly. I know already by your faces that the King and Queen have sent for you. I only ask whether you will confess it.

ROSENCRANTZ. My lord, we were sent for. We came by royal request, not by chance alone. Yet we meant no harm in coming.

HAMLET. I knew it. Then hear me before you carry anything away. I have lately lost all my joy, left off all exercise, and find this beautiful earth no better than a barren rock, while the great sky above me seems only a foul and sickly cloud. Man is a noble creature in reason and action, almost angelic in power, almost godlike in understanding, the beauty of the world and the wonder of living things. Yet to me he is only dust. Man does not delight me, nor woman either.

ROSENCRANTZ. I had no secret smile about women in my mind, my lord. If I smiled, it was at your sudden turn of thought. Your words move fast and strike oddly.

HAMLET. Then why did you laugh? But no matter. Since man does not delight me, what welcome will the players find from me? Surely not a cheerful one.

ROSENCRANTZ. They are near already, my lord. We met them on the road and they come here now to offer you their service. They are the same tragedians you once loved well.

HAMLET. Good. The king-player shall have tribute from me, the lover may sigh freely, the clown may make the dull laugh, and the lady may speak her heart without fear. I will welcome them all.

GUILDENSTERN. Their trade has suffered lately, and they travel more now than before. New fashions have pushed them aside, especially companies of boy actors who draw the crowd and stir foolish arguments. Still, they remain skillful men.

HAMLET. It is no wonder. Since my uncle became king, many things once mocked are now praised and paid for. There is more in that than nature alone can explain.

[A flourish within. Enter POLONIUS with the PLAYERS.]

HAMLET. Here come the players. Welcome to Elsinore, masters, welcome all. My uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived in one thing only: I am mad only north-north-west; when the wind is from the south, I know a hawk from a handsaw.

POLONIUS. My lord, the players have arrived. They are said to be the best in the world for all kinds of play. I thought the news would please you.

HAMLET. You say well. Come, friends, give us a taste of your art. I remember an old speech about Priam and Hecuba that pleased me greatly. Let one of you speak it.

[A FIRST PLAYER speaks. HAMLET listens closely. POLONIUS grows restless at the length, but Hamlet urges the player onward. The speech moves from Priam's slaughter to Hecuba's grief, and the player becomes deeply stirred.]

POLONIUS. This is too long. The speech runs on and on. A shorter piece might better fit the room.

HAMLET. It may go to the barber's with your beard. Let him continue. There is more truth in such passion than in many short wise sayings.

POLONIUS. Look, my lord, he has changed color and has tears in his eyes. The man is carried away by his own speech. It is strange to see.

HAMLET. Good. That is the power of playing. See that these players are well housed and kindly used, for they are the brief history of the age. A bad report from them can wound a man more than a poor epitaph after death.

POLONIUS. I will use them according to their worth. They shall have what they deserve. I know my duty in such matters.

HAMLET. Better than that. Use them according to your own honor, not only theirs. The less they deserve, the more praise there is in your generosity.

[POLONIUS exits with the PLAYERS, all but the FIRST PLAYER.]

HAMLET. Old friend, can you play The Murder of Gonzago tomorrow night? And if I add some twelve or sixteen lines of my own, can you learn them in time?

FIRST PLAYER. Yes, my lord, I can do that. Give me the lines, and I will fit them into the play. I will not fail you.

HAMLET. Very well. Follow that lord and take care not to mock him. He is a man who deserves more patience than laughter.

[Exit FIRST PLAYER. ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN take their leave.]

HAMLET. Now I am alone. What a low slave I am. This player, working only from fiction, could summon tears, a broken voice, and true passion for Hecuba, who is nothing to him, while I, who have a murdered father and a guilty uncle before me, do nothing but speak and delay. Am I a coward, then? I curse and talk instead of striking. Yet perhaps the spirit I saw may be a devil who takes a pleasing shape to trap me through my weakness and sadness. No, I must have surer proof. I will make these players perform something like my father's murder before my uncle and watch his face closely. The play will catch what the tongue hides. The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

[Exit.]

Part 6

ACT III

Scene 1. A room in the castle. The King and Queen still seek the cause of Hamlet's disorder. Yet by now their concern has turned into fear, and fear into spying.

[Enter CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, POLONIUS, OPHELIA, ROSENCRANTZ, and GUILDENSTERN.]

CLAUDIUS. Can you not discover by any skill or chance why Hamlet has put on this troubled confusion? It breaks harshly into all his former quiet and turns his days toward danger. I would know what hidden cause drives him so far from himself.

ROSENCRANTZ. He admits that he feels himself disturbed, my lord, but he will by no means tell us the cause. He keeps that locked away. We could not draw it from him.

GUILDENSTERN. Nor will he be sounded easily. With a kind of crafty madness he holds himself back whenever we try to bring him to confession. He answers, but never where we want him to answer.

GERTRUDE. Yet did he receive you kindly? Was there still some sign of the old Hamlet in his manner? I would know whether friendship can still reach him at all.

ROSENCRANTZ. Yes, madam, he received us like a gentleman. There was courtesy in him still, though it came with effort. He did not throw us off at once.

GUILDENSTERN. He was not eager to ask us much, but he was free enough in replying to what we asked him. His words came readily, though often by strange turns. The mind behind them was quick, if not open.

GERTRUDE. Did you move him toward any pastime? A distracted mind may sometimes be led into ease by art or play. Was there anything that pleased him?

ROSENCRANTZ. By good chance, some players came on the road, and we told him of them. At that, he seemed to take a kind of joy. They are already about the court, and as I understand it, they will play tonight before him.

POLONIUS. That is true, my lord. He himself asked me to persuade your majesties to hear and see the matter. His wish in that point seemed warm enough.

CLAUDIUS. With all my heart. It pleases me greatly to hear him inclined toward such delight. Good gentlemen, continue to encourage that turn in him and guide him further toward these entertainments.

ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN. We shall, my lord. We will do all that lies within our power. We take our leave.

[Exeunt ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN.]

CLAUDIUS. Sweet Gertrude, leave us too. We have privately arranged that Hamlet will come here, and that he may seem by accident to meet Ophelia. Her father and I will place ourselves where, seeing unseen, we may judge their meeting truly.

GERTRUDE. I shall obey. And for your part, Ophelia, I hope your beauty may prove the happy cause of Hamlet's wildness. Then I may also hope that your goodness will bring him back to his former self.

OPHELIA. Madam, I wish it may be so. I would gladly be the cause of his healing, not of his pain. Yet I fear this meeting more than I can say.

[Exit GERTRUDE.]

POLONIUS. Ophelia, walk here. Take this book in your hand, so that the show of reading may give a natural color to your being alone. We are often to blame in this world, for with the face of devotion and good action we hide darker things beneath.

CLAUDIUS. [Aside.] It is too true. That word strikes my conscience like a whip. My painted speech is uglier against the deed behind it than a false woman's face under her paint.

POLONIUS. I hear him coming, my lord. Let us withdraw. The rest must be learned by watching.

[Exeunt CLAUDIUS and POLONIUS.]

[Enter HAMLET.]

HAMLET. To live, or not to live, that is the question. Is it nobler to bear the blows and arrows that cruel fortune throws at us, or to rise and fight against a sea of troubles and end them by resistance? To die, to sleep, and by that sleep end heartache and the thousand hurts that belong to flesh, that seems a thing much to be wished. To die, to sleep. To sleep, perhaps to dream. There is the trouble, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have left this mortal life behind must make us pause. That is what keeps misery so long alive. Who would bear the whip of time, the proud man's wrong, rejected love, the slow law, the insults of office, and the kicks that patient worth receives from the unworthy, if

he could settle all with a bare knife? Who would carry heavy loads and sweat under a weary life, except for the fear of something after death, that undiscovered country from which no traveler returns? That fear confuses the will and makes us bear the evils we know rather than fly to others we do not know. Thus thought makes cowards of us all, and the strong color of action fades into the pale shade of reflection. Soft now. The fair Ophelia. Nymph, in your prayers remember all my sins. If prayer can still rise cleanly in this house, let it rise for me.

OPHELIA. Good my lord, how have you been these many days? I have not had the comfort of speaking with you. Time has gone heavily in that silence.

HAMLET. I thank you well, well, well. My health is what it is, and my mind runs where it runs. But why do you ask after me now?

OPHELIA. My lord, I have reminders of yours that I have long wished to return. They were once given with sweet words, and those words made them dear. Since their perfume has left them, take them back again.

HAMLET. No, not I. I never gave you anything. Gifts do not live once the kindness that gave them dies, and I will not claim what is dead.

OPHELIA. My honored lord, you know well enough that you gave them, and with them such gentle words as made poor things rich. Their sweetness is gone now, and so I return them. Rich gifts grow poor when the giver proves unkind.

HAMLET. Ha, ha. Are you honest? Are you fair? I ask because beauty and honesty do not often stay at peace together in this world.

OPHELIA. My lord, what should a woman wish for more than to be both? If beauty has no honesty beside it, it is dangerous. If honesty has no beauty, it is often left unheard.

HAMLET. Beauty will sooner change honesty into a go-between for desire than honesty will turn beauty into its own likeness. I loved you once. At that time I believed what I felt.

OPHELIA. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so. Your words entered my heart before I knew how to defend it. I trusted what you said.

HAMLET. You should not have believed me. We are all mixtures of fault, and virtue does not grow straight in us. I loved you not.

OPHELIA. I was the more deceived. Then my trust was built on air. I have been taught a bitter lesson.

HAMLET. Get thee to a nunnery. Why would you be a breeder of sinners? I am myself only moderately honest, yet I could accuse myself of such things that it would be better my mother had never borne me. I am proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at hand than I have thoughts to name them, imagination to shape them, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant rogues, all of us. Believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where is your father? Answer me that plainly.

OPHELIA. At home, my lord. He is at home, where he often is. Why do you ask with such sharpness?

HAMLET. Let the doors be shut upon him then, so that he may play the fool nowhere but in his own house. Farewell. If you marry, I will give you this plague for your dowry: be as chaste as ice and as pure as snow, yet you shall not escape slander. Get thee to a nunnery. Go, farewell. Or if you must marry, marry a fool, for wise men know too well what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go, and quickly too.

OPHELIA. O help him, you sweet heavens. His mind is broken before my eyes. The man I once knew stands there and yet is gone.

HAMLET. I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God gives you one face, and you make yourselves another. You dance, you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and make your foolishness seem ignorance. No more of it. It has driven me to madness. I say we will have no more marriages. Those already married may live, all but one; the rest shall stay as they are. To a nunnery, go.

[Exit HAMLET.]

OPHELIA. O what a noble mind is overthrown here. The courtier's eye, the soldier's sword, the scholar's tongue, the fair hope and flower of this state, all broken and shaken. I, most miserable of women, who drank the music of his sweet vows, now see that noble reason out of tune like bells harshly rung. That unmatched form and grace of youth is blighted by madness. I have seen what he was, and now I see what he has become, and that sight breaks my heart. No sorrow is sharper than to remember brightness while standing in ruin.

[Re-enter CLAUDIUS and POLONIUS.]

CLAUDIUS. Love? No, his affections do not move in that direction. What he spoke, though it lacked full form, was not like madness born of love. There is something else in his soul, and I fear what may hatch from brooding over it. Therefore I have resolved: he shall go at once to England to demand the tribute that is owed us there. Perhaps the sea, new lands, and different sights may shake loose what sits so heavily upon his heart. This thing within him grows dangerous.

POLONIUS. It may be so, my lord. Yet I still think the root of his trouble began in love. Even so, let the Queen speak with him after the players have performed

tonight. Let her be round with him, while I hide nearby and hear all. If she cannot discover the cause, then send him to England, or else confine him where your wisdom judges best. A mother may sometimes reach what kings cannot.

CLAUDIUS. It shall be so. Madness in great ones must not go unwatched. A dangerous mind under a princely name cannot be left to wander free.

[Exeunt.]

Part 7

Scene 2. A hall in the castle. The players prepare to perform before the court. Hamlet uses the play not for pleasure, but as a trap.

[Enter HAMLET and certain PLAYERS.]

HAMLET. Speak the speech as I said it to you, lightly and clearly, not with too much noise. If you shout and tear the feeling to pieces, I would rather have the town-crier speak my lines. In the strongest passion there must still be control, so that the action stays true and natural. Do not wave your hands too much, and do not be dull either. Fit the action to the word, and the word to the action, but never go beyond the modest truth of nature. The purpose of playing is to hold a mirror up to life, to show goodness its own face, shame its own shape, and the very time we live in its true form.

FIRST PLAYER. I hope we have corrected such faults among ourselves, my lord. We understand what you ask. We will do our best to please your judgment.

HAMLET. Correct them completely, then. And let the clowns speak only what is written for them, for some of them will laugh at their own foolishness just to make empty-headed people laugh too, even while an important matter of the play

is being spoken. That is a poor and ugly ambition. Go now, and make yourselves ready.

[Exeunt PLAYERS.]

[Enter POLONIUS, ROSENCRANTZ, and GUILDENSTERN.]

POLONIUS. My lord, the King and Queen will hear this piece at once. The whole court is preparing to sit. The time has come.

HAMLET. Then bid the players make haste. We must not let the great ones grow impatient before the trap is set. Will you two help move things forward?

ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN. We will, my lord. The business shall be done quickly. All will be in readiness.

[Exeunt POLONIUS, ROSENCRANTZ, and GUILDENSTERN.]

HAMLET. What ho, Horatio. Come near, for I would speak with the one man in this court whose judgment I trust. I need your eyes tonight almost as much as my own.

[Enter HORATIO.]

HORATIO. Here, my sweet lord, at your service. You called, and I came at once. What would you have of me?

HAMLET. Horatio, you are one of the most just men I have ever known. Do not think I flatter you, for what could I hope to gain from a poor man except the honesty he already carries? My soul chose you long ago because you bear both Fortune's blows and her favors with the same calm mind. Blessed are those whose

blood and judgment are so well mixed that they are not pipes for Fortune's fingers to play on. Tonight there will be a play before the King, and one scene in it comes very near the story the Ghost told me of my father's murder. When that scene begins, watch my uncle with all the power of your soul. If his hidden guilt does not show itself when that act is played, then perhaps the spirit I saw was some devil sent to deceive me. I will fix my eyes on his face, and afterward we will join our judgments together. I want your truth beside mine.

HORATIO. I will watch him closely, my lord. If he steals even the smallest sign while the play is moving, I will catch it. He shall not escape my notice.

HAMLET. Good. They are coming now. I must put on a lighter manner. Go and take your place where you can see well.

[Danish march. A flourish. Enter CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, POLONIUS, OPHELIA, ROSENCRANTZ, GUILDENSTERN, and others.]

CLAUDIUS. How fares our cousin Hamlet? You seem full of strange life tonight. I hope the coming play pleases you.

HAMLET. Excellent, in faith. I feed on air and promises, which is a rich meal in courts, though it would starve fat birds. Such food suits the times.

GERTRUDE. Come here, my dear Hamlet, and sit by me. A son should not stand so far from his mother. Let us look at the play together.

HAMLET. No, good mother, here is metal more attractive. Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

[He lies down at OPHELIA'S feet.]

OPHELIA. No, my lord. That is too bold. You grow merry at a dangerous speed.

HAMLET. I mean, shall I lay my head in your lap? Do not fear, I ask only a smaller boldness. You must not make all words worse than they are.

OPHELIA. Yes, my lord, if that is all you mean. I think nothing beyond your words. Or at least I try not to.

HAMLET. That is a fair thought to lie between a maid's legs. Nothing, my lady. You are merry too, if you can answer me so.

OPHELIA. You are very merry, my lord. Yet there is pain under it, and I can hear that much. Your laughter cuts.

HAMLET. What should a man do but be merry? Look how cheerful my mother looks, and my father died only a short time ago. If grief can vanish so quickly, why should I not laugh?

OPHELIA. It has been twice two months, my lord. Time has moved further than your words allow. Yet some wounds do remain.

HAMLET. So long? Then let the devil wear black, for I will wear bright fur. If a man is forgotten after two months, only churches can keep his memory alive. The world has a short heart.

[Trumpets sound. A dumb show enters.]

[Enter a KING and a QUEEN with loving gestures. She embraces him and kneels as if making a vow. He lifts her and rests against her. He lies down among flowers and falls asleep. She goes out. A POISONER enters, takes the crown, kisses it, pours poison into the sleeping king's ear, and leaves. The QUEEN returns, finds

the KING dead, and shows great sorrow. The POISONER returns with others, seems to mourn, then offers the QUEEN gifts. She resists at first, but at last accepts his love.]

OPHELIA. What does this mean, my lord? This silent show looks like dark business. I do not like the shape of it.

HAMLET. It is hidden mischief. Soon the words will come and explain what the show has already told us. Players can never keep counsel.

[Enter PROLOGUE.]

PROLOGUE. We bow to you and beg your patient hearing for our tragedy. We ask your mercy before we ask your judgment. Listen kindly.

HAMLET. Is that a prologue, or only a small line fit for a ring? It is brief enough to vanish before it lands. Short things often hide sharp points.

OPHELIA. It is brief, my lord. Not every gate needs to be large. Sometimes the shortest opening leads to the darkest room.

HAMLET. As woman's love.

[Enter PLAYER KING and PLAYER QUEEN.]

PLAYER KING. Thirty times has the sun gone round since our marriage joined our hearts and hands. Long years have passed over us with moon after moon. Yet our love has held.

PLAYER QUEEN. And may the sun and moon count many more such journeys before love ends for us. But you are sick now, my lord, and changed from what

you were. That change fills me with fear.

PLAYER KING. I must leave you soon, my love. My strength is failing, and you will remain in this fair world after me, honored and loved, and perhaps take another husband—

PLAYER QUEEN. Never. Let me be cursed if ever I take a second husband. She who marries the second kills the first again in her heart.

HAMLET. [Aside.] Bitter medicine. Let it work where it may. The words strike home.

PLAYER QUEEN. Women marry again not for love, but for gain or comfort. When a second husband kisses me in bed, it would be as if I killed the first once more. Let all joy leave me if I ever do it.

PLAYER KING. You truly mean that now, but human purpose often breaks. We decide one thing in passion and do another when time has cooled the heart. Our thoughts belong to us, but their ends do not always obey us. The world changes, and love often changes with it. When fortune falls, friends fall away; when fortune rises, strangers become close. Therefore swear as you will, yet fate may still undo your oath.

PLAYER QUEEN. Then let earth give me no food and heaven no light if I, once a widow, should ever be a wife again. Let trouble follow me both here and after death. That is my vow.

HAMLET. [To OPHELIA.] If she breaks that promise later, the world will still clap at her wedding. Oaths are thin clothes in warm rooms. They do not last long.

PLAYER KING. Sweet, leave me now. My spirits grow dull, and I would sleep

awhile. Rest comes where strength no longer can.

[PLAYER KING sleeps. PLAYER QUEEN exits.]

GERTRUDE. The lady speaks too strongly, I think. Such large vows often call doubt upon themselves. She protests too much.

HAMLET. O, but she will keep her word.

CLAUDIUS. Have you heard enough of the matter to know the shape of it? Is there no offence in this? The thing seems pointed.

HAMLET. None at all. They only jest with poison, poison in jest. It touches no one whose conscience is free. What should innocence fear from shadows?

CLAUDIUS. What do you call this play? I would know its name. Names sometimes tell more than faces.

HAMLET. The Mousetrap. It is the image of a murder done in Vienna. The duke is called Gonzago, and his wife Baptista. It is a wicked little story, but that need not trouble any honest soul.

[Enter LUCIANUS.]

HAMLET. This is Lucianus, nephew to the King. Begin, murderer. Why hide behind long faces? The raven already cries for revenge.

LUCIANUS. Dark thoughts, ready hands, fit poison, and a midnight hour unseen by others, work with me now. Deadly herbs, gathered under cursed stars, seize at once upon healthy life. Let the deed be quick and sure.

[He pours poison into the sleeper's ear.]

HAMLET. He poisons him in the garden for his estate. Soon you will see how the murderer wins the love of Gonzago's wife. The pattern is clear enough now.

OPHELIA. The King rises. My lord, look there. He cannot remain seated.

CLAUDIUS. Give me some light. Away. Stop the play.

ALL. Lights, lights, lights.

[Exeunt all but HAMLET and HORATIO.]

HAMLET. Let the struck deer go and weep, while the unwounded stag may play. So the world runs: some must watch while others sleep. O Horatio, did you see him?

HORATIO. Very well, my lord. I marked him closely. The change in him was plain.

HAMLET. Upon the poisoning? Upon that very word and action? Tell me I did not dream it.

HORATIO. I noted him most carefully then. He could not bear the image before him. His guilt rose faster than his dignity.

HAMLET. Then I will take the Ghost's word for a thousand pounds. Come, some music. If the King does not like the comedy, then perhaps the comedy likes him too well.

Part 8

[Enter ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN.]

ROSENCRANTZ. Good my lord, the Queen your mother wishes to speak with you. She desires it before you go to bed. Her request is serious and should not be delayed.

HAMLET. We shall obey, even if she were ten times our mother. What further business would you press upon me? You both look as if another message sits behind the first.

GUILDENSTERN. My lord, you once loved me well. I ask that old kindness now. What is the cause of your trouble? You shut your grief away from your friends, and that is not the way of health.

HAMLET. Sir, I lack advancement. That is enough to sour a man. Court air is thin food for those who wait.

ROSENCRANTZ. How can that be, when the King himself has spoken of you as heir to Denmark? Your future stands high above other men's hopes. You cannot truly mean what you say.

HAMLET. Ay, but "while the grass grows," as the old saying goes. Promises are long roads, and many feet grow tired before the end. But enough of that. You would play upon me more than speak with me.

[POLONIUS enters.]

POLONIUS. My lord, the Queen would speak with you at once, and in a private room. I am sent to urge haste. She is not in a mood to wait.

HAMLET. Do you see that cloud there, almost in the shape of a camel? It drifts very slowly, as if it were thinking.

POLONIUS. By the mass, and it is like a camel indeed. I see the long back of it plainly. Your eye in such matters is very quick.

HAMLET. I think it is like a weasel now. The shape has changed under our eyes. Such things do not hold steady for long.

POLONIUS. It is backed like a weasel, very true. I should not have noticed it without your word. Yet now I cannot unsee it.

HAMLET. Or like a whale. That broad part there might be the head. The whole sky seems full of changing beasts.

POLONIUS. Very like a whale. You have turned the cloud three times and made me follow each shape. But still, my lord, the Queen waits.

HAMLET. Then I will come by and by. Leave me, friend. I am not made swifter by being pressed.

[Exit POLONIUS.]

ROSENCRANTZ. My lord, you must go to your mother. That much is certain. Yet before you go, let us speak as friends.

HAMLET. Friends? Come, come, let me question you. Can you play upon this pipe? It lies there ready.

GUILDENSTERN. My lord, I cannot. I know nothing of that instrument. My hands are untrained.

HAMLET. I pray you, play upon it. It is as easy as lying. Put your fingers here, your mouth there, and it will give music.

GUILDENSTERN. I cannot make it speak, my lord. I have not the skill. I would only shame myself.

HAMLET. Why, then, see what a poor thing you make of me. You would sound my deepest note, pull out the heart of my secret, and play upon me from my lowest stop to the top of my range, yet you cannot command a little pipe. Do you think I am easier to play than a reed? Call me what instrument you will, you may fret me, but you cannot play upon me. Remember that when you carry messages for the King. I know more than you think.

[Exit ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN.]

[Enter POLONIUS again.]

POLONIUS. My lord, the Queen waits most anxiously. She will not thank delay. I speak only what I am told.

HAMLET. I will come to her presently. Do you hear? Presently. Go before me.

[Exit POLONIUS.]

HAMLET. It is now the very witching time of night, when graves yawn and hell itself breathes disease into this world. Now I could drink hot blood and do bitter things that daylight would shake to look upon. Yet I must go to my mother. Let me be cruel, but not unnatural. I will speak daggers to her, but use none. My tongue and soul shall be hypocrites if they must, but my hand shall not join their work.

[Exit.]

Scene 3. A room in the castle. Claudius is alone with the weight of what he has done. He has seen enough to fear Hamlet, and fear now pushes him toward a quicker cure.

[Enter CLAUDIUS, with attendants.]

CLAUDIUS. I have sent to find Hamlet and the dead body too. How dangerous it is to let this man go free. Yet we cannot lay strong law upon him, for the common people love him with their eyes, not with judgment. Therefore his offence weighs less with them than the punishment would. So all must seem smooth and careful. He must be sent away at once, for desperate sickness asks either desperate remedy or none at all.

[Enter ROSENCRANTZ.]

CLAUDIUS. Well, what has happened? Have you learned where Polonius lies? Speak quickly.

ROSENCRANTZ. My lord, we could not get that from him. He would only twist words around us and make sport of our asking. Yet he is outside and waits your pleasure.

CLAUDIUS. Bring him before us. We will waste no more time. This matter grows heavier every moment.

[Enter HAMLET and GUILDENSTERN.]

CLAUDIUS. Now, Hamlet, where is Polonius? Answer directly. This is no time

for sport.

HAMLET. At supper.

CLAUDIUS. At supper? Where? Speak plainly. I will have no riddles.

HAMLET. Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A gathering of political worms is at him now. We fat all creatures for ourselves, and ourselves for worms. A fat king and a thin beggar go at last to the same table.

CLAUDIUS. Alas, alas. Where is Polonius? You turn death into mockery.

HAMLET. In heaven. Send there and see. If your messenger does not find him there, seek him in the other place yourself. But if you fail both ways, within a month you shall smell him as you climb the stairs.

CLAUDIUS. [To attendants.] Go seek him there. Lose no time.

[Exeunt attendants.]

CLAUDIUS. Hamlet, this deed, which we grieve for deeply, forces us for your own safety to send you away with speed. The ship is ready, the wind is fair, and all things are prepared for England. You must go.

HAMLET. For England?

CLAUDIUS. Ay, Hamlet, for England. The matter allows no delay. Your good lies in obedience.

HAMLET. Good. I see some angel already that sees your purpose too. Come then, for England. Farewell, dear mother.

CLAUDIUS. Thy loving father, Hamlet.

HAMLET. My mother. Father and mother are man and wife, man and wife are one flesh, and so my mother. Come, for England.

[Exit HAMLET.]

CLAUDIUS. Follow him at once. Hurry him aboard, and let nothing slacken this business. What has been written must be done in England without delay. I pray your speed.

[Exeunt all but CLAUDIUS.]

CLAUDIUS. O, my offence is foul. It smells to heaven. It has upon it the first old curse, a brother's murder. I would pray, but I cannot, though I want to. My stronger guilt defeats my stronger wish. What can prayer do for me? It might ask pardon for the sin I have done. But can I be forgiven and still keep what I gained by it, my crown, mine own ambition, and my queen? In the corrupted ways of this world, a man may buy justice with gold, and the wicked hand may push aside the law. But it is not so above. There, the action lies open in its true nature. My words fly upward, but my thoughts stay below. Words without thoughts never rise to heaven. I kneel, but I do not move.

[He kneels. Enter HAMLET.]

HAMLET. Now might I do it, now while he prays, and now I would do it. Yet if I kill him now, he goes to heaven, and so revenge would be paid with reward. That is no payment for my father, who was sent away with all his sins still fresh upon him. No. I will wait for a darker hour, when he is drunk, asleep, raging, in bed with incest, or in some act that has no smell of grace about it. Then his soul may

fall where it deserves. My mother waits. This medicine would only keep you living longer.

[Exit HAMLET.]

CLAUDIUS. My words rise, but my thoughts remain below. Empty prayer cannot climb. I am still where I was.

[Exit.]

Scene 4. Another room in the castle. Gertrude waits in fear and anger. Polonius hides behind the curtain so that he may hear all. Hamlet enters with the heat of the play and the prayer still on him.

[Enter GERTRUDE and POLONIUS.]

POLONIUS. Speak sharply to him, madam. Tell him his conduct has gone too far. I will hide behind the curtain and hear the whole matter.

GERTRUDE. I shall be plain enough. His wildness has wounded all our peace. Go now, and keep yourself still.

[POLONIUS hides. Enter HAMLET.]

GERTRUDE. Hamlet, you have greatly offended your father. Your behavior tonight has shaken the whole court. You stand on dangerous ground.

HAMLET. Mother, you have greatly offended my father. If there is offence to count, yours rises first. I only hold the glass up to what is there.

GERTRUDE. Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue. I did not send for

riddles. You forget yourself before your mother.

HAMLET. Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue. Sit down. You shall not leave till I set a mirror before you where you may see the deepest part of yourself.

GERTRUDE. What will you do? Help, help! You will not murder me? What is this rage?

POLONIUS. [Behind.] What, ho! Help, help, help!

HAMLET. How now, a rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead!

[HAMLET stabs through the curtain.]

POLONIUS. O, I am slain!

[POLONIUS falls and dies.]

GERTRUDE. O me, what have you done? This is a fearful deed. Blood answers blood in this room.

HAMLET. I do not know. Is it the King? I thought the hidden life behind the curtain belonged to a greater rat than this. You see now what spying earns.

GERTRUDE. O, what a rash and bloody act is this. One death has bred another in a breath. You have crossed into horror.

HAMLET. A bloody act indeed, almost as bad, good mother, as to kill a king and marry with his brother. That is the measure by which I speak. I did not begin the foulness in this house.

[HAMLET draws back the curtain and sees POLONIUS.]

HAMLET. Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell. I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune. Thou wilt find that being too busy is dangerous. Now sit you down and let me wring your heart, for I will make it feel if it be made of flesh that can still suffer truth. I will not leave the wound covered.

[The scene continues.]

Part 9

HAMLET. Look here upon this picture, and on this. Here is your first husband, and here your second. See what grace lived in the one, and what corruption sits in the other. My father stood like a true king, noble and bright, while this man is like mildew spreading over fair grain. Could you leave such a man as my father and choose this? Have your eyes lost all judgment? Is there no sense in you that can still tell good from evil? If desire rules so completely, then even old age is no protection from shame.

GERTRUDE. O Hamlet, speak no more. Your words turn my eyes inward, and there I see such black and wounded spots that no washing can make them white. You force me to look where I most fear to look.

HAMLET. No, but to live in the foul sweat of an unclean bed, steeped in corruption and making love over the memory of a murdered king. That is the truth you must hear. I will not smooth it for you.

GERTRUDE. O, do not say such things. You turn sharp knives in my ears. No more, dear Hamlet. I cannot bear the sound of my own guilt when your tongue gives it shape.

[Enter GHOST.]

HAMLET. Save me and hover over me with your wings, you heavenly guards. What would your gracious figure ask of me now? Why do you come again in this room?

GHOST. Do not forget. I come only to sharpen your almost-blunted purpose. But look, your mother is struck with fear and weakness. Speak to her, Hamlet. Stand between her soul and despair.

HAMLET. How is it with you, lady? Why do you start and look about so wildly? Do you see nothing there?

GERTRUDE. Nothing at all, yet you stare into emptiness and answer the air. To whom do you speak? Your eyes are fixed where no living thing stands.

HAMLET. There, there. Look how pale and sorrowful he is. My father, in the very form I knew, stands before us. If stones themselves could move, that look would soften them.

GERTRUDE. Alas, he speaks only to his own imagination. This is the very shape and color of madness. I see no spirit, only a son burning in fevered thought.

HAMLET. It is not madness. Feel my pulse, and you will find it keeps true time. My words are not wild, though they may sound terrible. Confess to heaven what has been done, repent what can be repented, and do not add more evil to old sin. Above all, do not go again to my uncle's bed. Habit may make vice seem easier, but even habit can be broken. Use this night as the beginning of a better life.

GERTRUDE. O Hamlet, you have cleft my heart in two. One half is black and stained, and the other trembles to see it. What shall I do?

HAMLET. Throw away the worse half and live the purer with the other. Good night, but not to my uncle's bed. Assume a virtue if you have it not. I must be cruel only to be kind. One thing more. I must go to England, as you know. The letters are sealed, and my two old schoolfellows carry them, men whom I trust as I would a snake with open fangs. They must clear my road toward knavery, but let them work. It is sweet when one trapper is blown up by another's mine. This prating fool here shall help send me packing. I must drag this body away. Mother, good night. This counsellor is now most still, most secret, and most grave, who in life was a foolish talking knave. Good night once more.

[Exit HAMLET, dragging POLONIUS.]

ACT IV

Scene 1. A room in the castle. Gertrude has come straight from the closet shaken and breathless. Claudius now hears what his fear had already half believed.

[Enter CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, ROSENCRANTZ, and GUILDENSTERN.]

CLAUDIUS. There is heavy matter in these sighs. We must understand what has passed. Where is your son?

GERTRUDE. Leave us a little. I would speak to the King first. What I have seen tonight has struck me harder than any dream of danger.

[ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN withdraw.]

GERTRUDE. Hamlet was mad as sea and wind when both struggle to be strongest. Hearing something stir behind the curtain, he cried out, drew his sword, and in blind haste killed the hidden old man. It was a fearful deed.

CLAUDIUS. O heavy act. Had we been there, it might have fallen on us. His liberty threatens you, me, and everyone near him. Yet our own soft love allowed this sickness to feed instead of being checked.

GERTRUDE. Afterward, even in madness, there was some touch of sorrow in him. He wept over what he had done. Yet that grief did not undo the blood upon the floor.

CLAUDIUS. No, and now we must answer for it with all our skill. The sun shall not touch the mountains before he is shipped away. This vile deed must be carried with countenance and excuse, else it may fall back upon the crown itself.

[Re-enter ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN.]

CLAUDIUS. Friends, Hamlet in madness has killed Polonius and dragged him from his mother's chamber. Go seek him out, speak fairly to him, and bring the body to the chapel. Haste in this.

ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN. We will, my lord. The task is ugly, but it shall be done. We go at once.

[Exeunt ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN.]

Scene 2. Another room in the castle. Hamlet has hidden the body. He waits only a little before the King's servants find him.

[Enter HAMLET.]

HAMLET. Safely stowed. A man who spent his life hiding behind curtains now keeps silence in a darker place. That is an end fit enough for such a spy.

[Enter ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN.]

ROSENCRANTZ. My lord, what have you done with the dead body? We ask in the King's name. You must answer us and come away.

HAMLET. The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing—

GUILDENSTERN. A thing, my lord? What strange answer is that? We cannot carry riddles back.

HAMLET. Of nothing. Take me to him. Hide fox, and all after. If the hunters want their game, let them lead it home.

[Exeunt.]

Scene 3. Another room in the castle. Claudius waits, no longer merely angry now, but resolved. He sees Hamlet not as a grieving prince, but as a fever that must be cut out.

[Enter CLAUDIUS, attended; then ROSENCRANTZ, GUILDENSTERN, and HAMLET.]

CLAUDIUS. Now, Hamlet, where is Polonius? Speak plainly for once. We have had enough crooked answers.

HAMLET. At supper. Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. Worms have gone to him, and worms are the great rulers of diet in the end. We fat all other creatures to fat ourselves, and then we fat ourselves for maggots. A fat king and a lean beggar are only two dishes on one table. That is the end of human greatness.

CLAUDIUS. Alas, alas. But where is he? These bitter jokes do not lighten murder. Tell us the place.

HAMLET. In heaven. Send there and see. If your messenger fails there, seek him in the other place yourself. Yet if you do not find him within a month, you shall smell him as you go upstairs.

CLAUDIUS. Go seek him there.

[Attendants go.]

CLAUDIUS. Hamlet, for your own safety, and because we grieve for what you have done, you must away to England with fiery quickness. The ship is ready, the wind serves, and all is bent for that journey.

HAMLET. For England?

CLAUDIUS. Ay, Hamlet, for England. It is decided. There is no more to say.

HAMLET. Good. I see a cherub that sees your purpose too. But come, for England. Farewell, dear mother.

CLAUDIUS. Thy loving father, Hamlet.

HAMLET. My mother. Father and mother are man and wife, and man and wife are one flesh, and so my mother. Come, for England.

[Exit HAMLET.]

CLAUDIUS. Follow him at foot. Delay him not. Everything is sealed and done.

England, if you hold our favor dear, you must not fail us now. Hamlet rages in my blood like a fever, and only his death there can cure me.

[Exit.]

Scene 4. A plain in Denmark. Fortinbras leads his soldiers across Danish ground. Hamlet, on his way under guard, meets the force and sees in others the action he has lacked in himself.

[Enter FORTINBRAS and a CAPTAIN.]

FORTINBRAS. Go to the Danish King and give him our greeting. Tell him we claim the promised passage through his kingdom. If he wishes anything further of us, we will show him our duty face to face.

CAPTAIN. I will do so, my lord. The men shall move gently on. We lose no order by losing speed.

[Exeunt all but the CAPTAIN. Enter HAMLET, ROSENCRANTZ, and GUILDENSTERN.]

HAMLET. Good sir, whose forces are these? They march with purpose, though the ground seems poor enough. I would know what business fills this plain.

CAPTAIN. They are the forces of Norway, sir, led by Fortinbras. We go against a part of Poland. That is our present road.

HAMLET. Against the heart of Poland, or only for some frontier patch? Speak truly. I ask not from idle curiosity.

CAPTAIN. Truly, to gain a little piece of ground that has in it no profit but the

name. I would not farm it for five ducats. Yet it is already garrisoned, and both sides will spend men for it.

HAMLET. I thank you, sir. Go with God. Your answer carries more weight than you may think.

[Exit CAPTAIN. ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN move aside.]

HAMLET. How all occasions speak against me and urge my dull revenge. What is a man if his chief use of time is only to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. I have cause, and will, and strength, and means to do my deed, yet I still delay, while twenty thousand men march to their deaths for a fantasy and trick of fame over a little patch of ground not worth the graves that will cover them. From this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.

[Exeunt.]

Part 10

Scene 5. Elsinore. A room in the castle. Trouble now breaks openly through the court. Ophelia's mind has given way, and Laertes returns to Denmark in anger.

[Enter GERTRUDE, HORATIO, and a GENTLEMAN.]

GENTLEMAN. Madam, she will not be put off. She is urgent, distracted, and full of broken speech. She speaks of her father, beats at her breast, and drops half-made words that trouble everyone who hears them. Nothing she says stands complete, yet people gather meaning from her fragments and fit them to their own fearful thoughts. Her nods, her looks, and her broken songs stir dangerous guesses in restless minds. I think it would be best to let her in.

GERTRUDE. Let her come. My guilty heart makes every small disorder feel like the beginning of a greater fall. Fear teaches a stained soul to expect more wounds.

[Exit GENTLEMAN. Enter OPHELIA.]

OPHELIA. Where is the fair Majesty of Denmark? Where is the bright queen? I have songs for ladies and old stories for cold rooms.

GERTRUDE. How now, Ophelia? What is this sad music? Your face and voice carry me toward pity before I understand a word.

OPHELIA. [Sings.] How shall I know your true love from another one? By his pilgrim hat and staff, and by his sandals. There are signs, but signs fail too.

GERTRUDE. Sweet lady, what does that song mean? Why do you sing of love and loss together? Your words go into the heart like cold rain.

OPHELIA. Mark me well. [Sings.] He is dead and gone, lady, he is dead and gone. At his head there is green grass, and at his heels a stone. That is how they lay men down.

[Enter CLAUDIUS.]

GERTRUDE. Alas, look here, my lord. She has slipped away from herself. Her grief now speaks only in song.

OPHELIA. [Sings.] White was his shroud as mountain snow, covered with sweet flowers. Yet true-love tears did not go with him to the grave. People weep too late.

CLAUDIUS. How do you, fair lady? Can you know us still? I would speak gently if gentleness can reach you.

OPHELIA. Well, God reward you. They say the owl was once a baker's daughter. We know what we are, but not what we may become. God sit at your table kindly.

CLAUDIUS. Her father stands in all her thought. Every broken turn returns to him. Grief has made one wound into many voices.

OPHELIA. Let us have no more words of this. When they ask what it means, say this. [Sings.] Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day, early in the morning, and I a maid at your window, to be your Valentine. Then he rose and put on his clothes and opened the chamber door. He let the maid enter, and she came out no maid again. Men promise quickly and forget quickly.

CLAUDIUS. Poor Ophelia. Her song has turned from death to shame. How long has she been in this condition?

OPHELIA. Indeed, I will end it without an oath. [Sings.] Young men will do it if they come to it. By heaven, they are to blame. He promised to marry me before he came to my bed. We must be patient. Yet I cannot help weeping to think they laid him in the cold ground. My brother shall know everything. Good night, ladies; good night, sweet ladies; good night, good night.

[Exit OPHELIA.]

CLAUDIUS. Follow her closely and keep careful watch over her. She may do harm to herself without knowing it. This is grief made poison.

[Exit HORATIO.]

CLAUDIUS. O Gertrude, when sorrows come, they do not come one by one, but in battalions. First Polonius is slain, then your son is sent away, then the people

mutter darkly over the hidden burial, and now Ophelia is divided from her own judgment. Last of all, and heavy as the rest together, Laertes has returned in secret from France and listens to poisonous talk. Rumor feeds him before truth can reach him. I feel death coming at me from many sides at once.

[Noise within.]

GERTRUDE. What noise is that? The whole house shakes with it. Some new storm is at the door.

CLAUDIUS. Where are my guards? Let them hold the doors. This day gives no space between one danger and another.

[Enter a GENTLEMAN.]

GENTLEMAN. Save yourself, my lord. Young Laertes has come in like a flood, driving your officers before him. The crowd cry that he shall be king, as if the kingdom were beginning fresh today.

[Noise within. Enter LAERTES, armed, with followers.]

LAERTES. Where is this king? Stand aside, all of you. I want no walls between me and the man I seek.

CLAUDIUS. Let him come. Do not fear for us, Gertrude. There is a divinity that guards a king, and treason can do less than it dreams. Speak, Laertes. Why does your anger rise so huge?

LAERTES. Where is my father? Give me my father. I will not be fed with soft words while blood is still warm in memory.

CLAUDIUS. Dead.

GERTRUDE. But not by him. On that point, hear me clearly. The King did not kill your father.

LAERTES. How came he dead, then? I throw allegiance to hell and conscience after it. I care for neither world so long as I may be fully revenged for my father.

CLAUDIUS. Then learn the truth, and draw your sword only against the true enemy. If we are found touched by this death, we will give kingdom, crown, life, and all to satisfy you. But if not, lend us your patience and hear us first.

LAERTES. I will hear. Yet his secret burial, without proper honor, cries out against whoever caused it. I will have the truth, and then the axe may fall where it should.

[Noise within. Re-enter OPHELIA, fantastically dressed with flowers and straws.]

LAERTES. O heat, dry up my brains. O heaven, can a young maid's mind perish as quickly as an old man's life? Sister, sweet Ophelia, what has sorrow made of you?

OPHELIA. [Sings.] They bore him barefaced on the bier, and on his grave it rained many a tear. Fare you well, my dove. The world carries men out and leaves women singing.

LAERTES. If you had your right mind and urged me toward revenge, you could not move me more than this. Your broken song burns hotter than command. I would rather hear curses than this sweetness turned to pain.

OPHELIA. You must sing “Down a-down,” and the wheel turns as it turns. There is rosemary, that is for remembrance; pray, love, remember. And there are pansies, that are for thoughts. There is fennel for you, and columbines. There is rue for you, and here is some for me. There is a daisy. I would give you violets, but they all withered when my father died.

OPHELIA. [Sings.] Will he not come again? No, no, he is dead, and gone to his deathbed. His beard was white as snow, and all his hair like flax. God have mercy on his soul, and on all Christian souls. God be with you.

[Exit OPHELIA.]

LAERTES. Do you see this, O God? Thought, grief, passion, and hell itself she turns into prettiness. No punishment can measure this ruin well enough.

CLAUDIUS. Laertes, go apart with me and choose the wisest of your friends to judge between us. If they find us guilty by direct or indirect hand, we will yield all. If not, then join your patience to our purpose, and we will work with you for full content.

LAERTES. Let it be so. My father’s death and my sister’s fall must be answered. I will hear you, but not forget them.

[Exeunt.]

Scene 6. Another room in the castle. Horatio receives unexpected news. What seemed a finished plan has broken open again.

[Enter HORATIO and a SERVANT.]

HORATIO. Who asks for me? The day has carried strange messages already.

What men are these?

SERVANT. Sailors, sir. They say they have letters for you. They would place them in no hand but yours.

HORATIO. Let them come in. If any voice from the sea has found me, I think it can be from none but Hamlet. My heart runs before the letter.

[Enter SAILORS.]

FIRST SAILOR. God bless you, sir. Here is a letter for you, if your name is Horatio. It comes from the ambassador bound for England.

HORATIO. [Reads.] Horatio, when you have read this, give these fellows some means to the King, for they have letters for him. Before we were two days at sea, pirates chased us, and when we were forced to fight, I boarded them, and so became their prisoner alone. They have dealt with me like merciful thieves, for they knew they would earn a return from me. Come to me with all haste, as fast as if you fled from death. I have things to speak in your ear that will make you dumb, though the matter is still greater than words can hold. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue on to England, and of them I have much to tell. Come, I will speed these letters to the King, and then follow you to the place from which you brought this news. My lord lives, and that changes everything.

[Exeunt.]

Scene 7. Another room in the castle. Claudius now turns Laertes's grief into a weapon. With Hamlet unexpectedly returned, the King gives up hiding and plans a death that will look like sport.

[Enter CLAUDIUS and LAERTES.]

CLAUDIUS. Now your conscience must seal my innocence, since you have heard with a knowing ear that the man who killed your noble father also sought my life. I am not your enemy in this matter, but your injured partner.

LAERTES. It appears so. Yet tell me why you did not openly punish him, when both justice and safety called for it. That silence itself needs an answer.

CLAUDIUS. For two strong reasons. First, the Queen his mother lives almost by his looks, and I myself am so bound to her that I could not move against him without wounding what is joined to my own life. Second, the common people love him beyond reason and wash his faults in their affection. If I had moved publicly, their favor would have turned his chains into honors and sent my arrows back at me. So I waited.

LAERTES. Meanwhile I have lost a father and seen my sister driven out of her mind. If ever there was cause for revenge, it stands before us now. My revenge will come.

[Enter MESSENGER.]

MESSENGER. Letters, my lord. One for your majesty, and one for the Queen. They are said to be from Hamlet.

CLAUDIUS. From Hamlet? Leave us. Laertes, you shall hear them. This return is stranger than the voyage itself.

[Exit MESSENGER.]

CLAUDIUS. [Reads.] You shall know I am set naked on your kingdom. Tomorrow I will beg leave to see your kingly eyes, and after asking pardon will

recount the cause of my sudden and strange return. Hamlet.

LAERTES. It is his hand. Let him come. The very thought warms the sickness in my heart. I will tell him to his face, "Thus die you."

CLAUDIUS. Then be ruled by me, but not toward peace. We will set praise upon your skill with the sword and bring you together in sport. Hamlet, being generous and careless, will not examine the foils too closely, so you may choose an unbated sword and repay him for your father.

LAERTES. I will do it. More than that, I have bought a poison so mortal that if my blade only draws his blood a little, no medicine under the moon can save him. I will anoint my point with it.

CLAUDIUS. Good. Yet if that should fail, we must have a second hold. When you are hot in the bout and he calls for drink, I will prepare a poisoned cup for him. If he escapes your venom, he may still die there.

[Enter GERTRUDE.]

GERTRUDE. One sorrow follows hard upon another. Your sister is drowned, Laertes. She fell from a willow that leans over the brook, where she was hanging wild garlands. Her clothes spread wide and kept her afloat a little while, and she sang old songs as if she did not know her own danger, until at last the heavy water dragged her down.

LAERTES. Drowned? Then she is drowned indeed. Too much water has claimed poor Ophelia, and yet my tears will come whether I forbid them or not. Nature will have her way.

CLAUDIUS. Come, let us follow. This new grief will set his rage on fire again,

and I must keep it burning toward the right mark. We go from one death toward another.

[Exeunt.]

Part 11

ACT V

Scene 1. A churchyard. Two gravediggers are at work. Death, which has filled the court with fear and violence, here appears in rough jokes and common labor.

[Enter FIRST CLOWN and SECOND CLOWN with spades.]

FIRST CLOWN. Is she to be buried in Christian ground when she chose her own death? That seems a strange kind of justice. If a poor woman had done the same, they would not have treated her so gently.

SECOND CLOWN. I tell you she is, and so you had better make the grave straight. The officers have examined the case and declared it Christian burial. That is enough law for us.

FIRST CLOWN. How can that be, unless she drowned herself in self-defense? If I go to the water and drown, that is one thing, but if the water comes to me, that is another. Great folk are allowed more room in law than plain Christians are.

SECOND CLOWN. That is the truth of it. If she had not been a gentlewoman, she would have been buried outside the holy ground. Rank reaches even into death.

FIRST CLOWN. Then the more shame for this world. Come, give me my spade. There is no older gentleman's trade than gardener, ditcher, and grave-maker, for

Adam himself began it with digging.

SECOND CLOWN. Was Adam a gentleman? You make nobility from very old mud. I do not know whether your wit is deep or only dirty.

FIRST CLOWN. He bore arms, did he not? If a man digs from the first father onward, he stands on ancient right. But come, help with the earth, and leave fine questions to those above us.

SECOND CLOWN. Here is another question then. How long will a man lie in the earth before he is rotten enough not to know himself? Since we handle bones, we may claim some learning.

FIRST CLOWN. One that was not hanged may lie eight or nine years before he is fully done. A tanner will last longer, because his hide is so well cured that it keeps the wet out. There is craft even in rotting.

[He throws up a skull.]

FIRST CLOWN. There is a skull now that has lain in the earth three and twenty years. It has served its time and asks no more questions.

SECOND CLOWN. Whose was it? Some lawyer's, perhaps, with his tricks all knocked out of him. He would argue poorly now.

FIRST CLOWN. A mad rogue's skull. It belonged to Yorick, the King's jester. I knew him well enough in his day.

[Enter HAMLET and HORATIO at a distance.]

HAMLET. Has this fellow no feeling for what he does? He sings while he digs

a grave. The work of death sits on him as lightly as common gardening.

HORATIO. Custom has made it easy for him. Hands that handle death every day grow hard to its strangeness. Familiarity teaches a rough peace.

HAMLET. That may be so. The hand that works least with delicate feeling often holds most freely what would shake another man. Yet there is something terrible in such ease.

[HAMLET and HORATIO come nearer.]

HAMLET. Whose grave is this, fellow? Speak honestly, for I would know. The place already feels full of unfinished sorrow.

FIRST CLOWN. Mine, sir.

HAMLET. I think it is yours indeed, for you lie in it. Yet I did not think a man could claim such property before he was fully inside it.

FIRST CLOWN. You lie out on it, sir, and so it is not yours. I say it is mine because I make it, though I do not lie in it yet. A grave may belong first to the man who digs it.

HAMLET. Then it is for no man living, and for no woman living either? You answer in circles and think that wit.

FIRST CLOWN. It is made for one that was a woman, sir, but now is none. So much truth is enough for any grave. The rest the earth keeps to itself.

HAMLET. How absolute the knave is. We must speak by the card with such men, or their plainness will outgo our cleverness. Tell me, how long have you been a

grave-maker?

FIRST CLOWN. Of all the days in the year, I came to it on the day old King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras. That was the same day young Hamlet was born, the one that is now sent away to England because he is mad.

HAMLET. Why sent to England? Is there healing there for madness? Does the sea cure what grief cannot?

FIRST CLOWN. Why, if he is not mad there, none will notice it, for all the men there are as mad as he. That is good enough travel wit for me.

HAMLET. How long will a man lie in the earth before he is gone to dust? I ask as a prince, but I ask with the curiosity of a worm.

FIRST CLOWN. Faith, if he is not rotten before he dies, as many are now, he will last some eight or nine years. A tanner, as I said, will last nine. His skin keeps out water like an old wall.

[He offers another skull.]

HAMLET. Whose skull is this? There is still some shape in it, though the face is long gone. Once it held speech, thought, appetite, and memory.

FIRST CLOWN. A whoreson mad fellow's it was. This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the King's jester. I knew him in the old days.

HAMLET. Let me see. Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest and most excellent fancy. He carried me on his back a thousand times, and now how hateful it is in my imagination. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how often. Where are your jokes now, your songs, your flashes

of laughter that once set the whole table roaring? They have fallen silent into bone.

HORATIO. It is a strange fall, my lord. The skull answers all glory with emptiness. Death levels wit and folly together.

HAMLET. To what base use may we return, Horatio. A great man's dust may stop a beer barrel, and Alexander, who conquered the world, might be found again in earth used to patch a hole against the wind. That is the end of the body's pride.

HORATIO. It is possible, my lord, if one follows dust far enough. The path from emperor to clay is short once the breath is gone. Earth has patient hands.

HAMLET. Why then, even Caesar, dead and turned to clay, might stop a wall to keep out winter. O, that the dust which kept the world in awe should come at last to hold back a draft. Greatness ends in small service.

[Trumpets are heard at a distance.]

HAMLET. But soft, aside. Here comes the King, the Queen, Laertes, and a funeral train. The rites are incomplete, which tells me the death was doubtful. Let us step back and watch.

[They retire with HORATIO. Enter priests, mourners, LAERTES, CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, and attendants with the body of OPHELIA.]

LAERTES. What ceremony else? Is this all that will be done? Must my sister be sent down with such broken honor?

PRIEST. Her burial has been stretched as far as our authority allows. Her death was doubtful, and without high command she would have lain in unsanctified ground. Even now she receives less than one whose death was clear.

LAERTES. Must there no more be done? Is there no fuller prayer, no greater blessing, no kinder last word? You are cold even to the dead.

PRIEST. No more. We would profane the order of the church if we gave her full service like a soul known to have departed in peace. This is the farthest mercy allowed.

LAERTES. Then lay her in the earth, and from her fair and unpolluted flesh may violets spring. I tell you, hard priest, my sister shall be an angel in heaven while you lie howling where pity does not reach.

HAMLET. What, the fair Ophelia? O, then the whole earth is changed for me. I did not know until this moment whom they carried.

GERTRUDE. Sweets to the sweet. Farewell. I hoped you should have been my Hamlet's wife, and thought to deck your bride-bed, not to scatter flowers upon your grave. My poor child, this is not the end I wished for you.

LAERTES. O, let treble sorrow fall ten times on the cursed head whose wicked act robbed you of your clear mind. Hold off the earth a little while, until I have held her once more in my arms.

[LAERTES leaps into the grave.]

LAERTES. Now pile your dust on the living and the dead together. Raise a mountain over us till it reaches the sky. Let grief have earth enough.

HAMLET. What is he whose grief speaks so violently that even the stars seem to stop and listen? This is I, Hamlet the Dane.

[HAMLET leaps into the grave.]

LAERTES. The devil take your soul. You come too late and too loudly. Your love has done enough already.

HAMLET. You pray badly. Remove your fingers from my throat. I am not naturally rash, yet there is something dangerous in me that you had better fear.

CLAUDIUS. Separate them. Pull them apart at once. This grave needs no second burial today.

GERTRUDE. Hamlet, Hamlet. My son, what madness is this now? Must sorrow turn at once to struggle?

HORATIO. Good my lord, be quiet. This place is too full of death already. Do not add rage to it.

[The attendants part them, and they come out of the grave.]

HAMLET. I will fight with him upon this theme until my eyelids no longer move. I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not with all their love make up my sum.

LAERTES. Your noise dishonors grief. You come to outface me with great words and wild acts. I know not whether pain or madness drives you more.

HAMLET. Show me what you will do for her. Will you weep, fight, fast, tear yourself, drink poison, eat a crocodile? I will do it too. If you speak of mountains, I will answer with mountains.

GERTRUDE. This is mere madness, and soon the fit will pass. He burns fiercely

now, but afterward he will fall still again. My poor son is not master of himself.

HAMLET. Hear me, sir. Why do you use me thus? I loved you always. But it is no matter. Let Hercules himself do what he may, the cat will mew and dog will have his day.

[Exit HAMLET.]

CLAUDIUS. I pray you, good Horatio, follow him. He must not be left alone after such a storm. His grief may turn any way.

[Exit HORATIO.]

CLAUDIUS. [To LAERTES.] Strengthen your patience with what we spoke of last night. We will push the matter soon. Good Gertrude, set some watch over your son. This grave shall yet have a living monument.

[Exeunt.]

Part 12

Scene 2. A hall in the castle. Before the duel, Hamlet speaks privately with Horatio. What looked like chance on the sea now shows his quickness of mind, yet even here the sense of an approaching end hangs over him.

[Enter HAMLET and HORATIO.]

HAMLET. There is one thing more you do not know. On the ship I found that the King's letters, carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, ordered my death in England. Their faces were friendly, but the paper under their hands was sharpened against me. So, while they slept, I opened the packet, read the order, and wrote

another in its place, using my father's signet that I still carried with me. The new command sent them to the death prepared for me. They went forward with the King's own weapon turned back upon them.

HORATIO. Then they are lost by the very service they thought would please the court. It is a hard fate, though they did not deal honestly with you. This world is full of men who walk smiling into traps they help to carry.

HAMLET. They are not near my conscience, for they pressed themselves into this business and made themselves tools between me and my danger. Yet I do not pretend all sits easy in me. A man learns too late how many deaths are hidden under courtly errands. But now, Horatio, I am troubled by the way I dealt with Laertes. In his grief and in his cause I see my own image. His father is dead by my hand, his sister gone, and I met his sorrow with public fury at her grave.

HORATIO. He may yet hear reason from you. Time has not healed him, but a noble word may still reach where rage cannot. If your heart inclines to peace, do not turn from it.

[Enter OSRIC.]

OSRIC. Sweet lord, if your leisure allows, I bring a message from his Majesty. The matter touches your honor and the excellent skill of Laertes.

HAMLET. Sir, your hat suffers if it stays on your head too long. Put it to its proper use. But speak, and let us hear what painted errand has come walking in upon fine legs.

OSRIC. My lord, the King has laid a wager upon you and Laertes. Six Barbary horses stand on one side, and on the other are rich French rapiers, daggers, and belts. The trial is this: in twelve passes between you, Laertes shall not exceed you

by more than three touches.

HAMLET. I understand. The court will call it sport, and skill will wear the face of friendliness. Yet I know well enough that men often lay more than money upon such games.

OSRIC. The King and Queen are already coming, my lord. If you answer now, all may be set in motion. Laertes burns to begin, though he keeps a polished manner.

HAMLET. Very well. Tell them I will walk here in the hall and give answer with my body, if not with my tongue. Sir, you have delivered your message most delicately, though I think another man might have carried it more naturally.

[Exit OSRIC.]

HORATIO. My lord, if your heart misgives you in this matter, do not go on. A man need not step willingly into a net because it is silk instead of rope.

HAMLET. Not a bit. There is a special providence even in the fall of a bird. If it comes now, it is not to come later; if it comes later, it will come now. Readiness is all. Since no man knows what he leaves, what matters it to leave early? Let be. I would rather meet what comes standing than spend my life bent away from it.

[Enter CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, LAERTES, OSRIC, Lords, and Attendants with foils and a cup.]

CLAUDIUS. Come, Hamlet, come, and take this hand from Laertes. The past has run too hot between you. Let this trial stand in the place of bitterness.

HAMLET. Give me your pardon, sir. I have wronged you, Laertes, but if Hamlet

has done it, then Hamlet was not himself. What I did was madness, and if madness did it, then Hamlet is rather the injured man than the injurer. Before all here, I ask your grace. I never meant hatred toward you as a man. Your excellence and your suffering both deserve more honor than I gave them.

LAERTES. I receive your offered love as far as honor allows, though I keep my inward reservation until older men approve a fuller peace. Yet for this present time I accept your hand. Let the trial begin without open malice.

GERTRUDE. Come, Hamlet, and let me wipe your brow before any heat begins. My son, I pray this sport may end more gently than my heart fears. There has been too much blood already in this house.

CLAUDIUS. Give them the foils. Set out the cups of wine. If Hamlet gives the first or second hit, or answers the third with a touch, let all the cannon speak, and let a pearl be dropped into his cup greater than any four kings of Denmark have worn.

[They prepare. LAERTES secretly chooses the sharpened, poisoned foil. CLAUDIUS sets aside the poisoned cup.]

HAMLET. These foils all look alike to me. Yet that is the way of many dangers in life: they shine the same at first. Give me this one.

OSRIC. This is yours, my lord. They are matched for length and show. Nothing in the outward eye gives warning.

LAERTES. Come, my lord. I am ready. We have delayed enough in courtesy.

[They fence.]

HAMLET. One.

OSRIC. A hit, a very palpable hit. My lord Hamlet has the first touch cleanly. The point was true and quick.

CLAUDIUS. Stay, give him drink. Hamlet, this pearl is thine. Here is the cup prepared for you.

HAMLET. I will play this bout first. Set the cup by for me. There is time enough for drink when the arm is hotter.

[They fence again.]

HAMLET. Another hit. What say you now? My hand finds him well enough today.

LAERTES. I confess it is a touch. Yet the game is not done. We still have room for change.

GERTRUDE. He is fat and short of breath. Here, Hamlet, take my napkin. The Queen drinks to thy fortune, Hamlet.

CLAUDIUS. Gertrude, do not drink.

GERTRUDE. I will, my lord. I pray you pardon me. My son shall not lack a mother's blessing in this hall.

[She drinks from the poisoned cup.]

HAMLET. Good madam. I will drink later. For now, let us go on.

LAERTES. And now my chance comes. I almost hesitate, and yet my purpose drives me on. One more pass, my lord.

[They fence. LAERTES wounds HAMLET.]

HAMLET. That is a touch, I think. The point bit deeper than sport requires. There was more edge in it than I expected.

LAERTES. It is a touch, a touch, I say. Yet you press on close. Stand off a little.

[They scuffle. In the struggle, they exchange rapiers. HAMLET wounds LAERTES.]

GERTRUDE. No more. No more. The drink, the drink. O my dear Hamlet, the drink, the drink. I am poisoned.

[GERTRUDE falls.]

CLAUDIUS. She swoons to see them bleed. Women are quickly shaken by such sights. Remove her.

HAMLET. No, it is not so. Treachery, seek it out. Ho, let the doors be shut. There is villainy here.

LAERTES. It is here, Hamlet. Hamlet, thou art slain. No medicine in the world can save you now, for the weapon in your hand is sharpened and poisoned. The foul plot has turned itself upon me, and I lie justly caught in my own snare. Your mother is poisoned too. I can say no more. The King, the King is to blame.

HAMLET. The point poisoned too? Then poison, do thy work.

[HAMLET stabs CLAUDIUS.]

CLAUDIUS. O, yet defend me, friends. I am but hurt. Stand round your king.

HAMLET. Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane, drink off this potion. Is thy pearl here? Follow my mother.

[HAMLET forces the poisoned cup upon CLAUDIUS. CLAUDIUS dies.]

LAERTES. He is justly served. It is a poison prepared by himself. Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet. May my father's death and mine not fall upon you, nor yours upon me.

HAMLET. Heaven make thee free of it. I follow thee. Wretched Queen, farewell. All you that stand pale and trembling at this chance, I could tell you much if death were not strict in his arrest, but now it must be otherwise.

[LAERTES dies.]

HORATIO. Never will I leave you thus. I am more Roman than Dane. Here is still some liquor left, and I will drink after you.

HAMLET. As you are a man, give me the cup. Let go. By heaven, I will have it from you. O good Horatio, what a wounded name I shall leave behind if these things remain unknown. If you ever held me in your heart, stay a while in this hard world and draw your breath in pain to tell my story.

[March afar off, and shot within.]

HAMLET. What warlike noise is this? It comes like the last answer of the world. Even dying, I hear another power at the gate.

OSRIC. Young Fortinbras, returned with conquest from Poland, gives this warlike greeting to the ambassadors from England. The sound is his salute.

HAMLET. O, I die, Horatio. The strong poison overcomes my spirit. I cannot live to hear the news from England, but I prophesy the election will fall on Fortinbras. He has my dying voice. So tell him, and tell him also of all that has happened, the greater and the lesser things that have brought us here. The rest is silence.

[HAMLET dies.]

HORATIO. Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. Why does the drum come nearer?

[Enter FORTINBRAS, the ENGLISH AMBASSADORS, and others.]

FORTINBRAS. What sight is this? If there is any further wonder left in the world, it must stop here among these bodies. Death has made a feast of princes.

FIRST AMBASSADOR. The sight is dreadful, and our business from England comes too late. The ears that should have heard us are senseless now. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, and there is no king left to thank us.

HORATIO. Not from his mouth, even if life remained in it, for he never commanded their deaths. Yet since you from England and you from Poland arrive together upon this bloody question, give order that these bodies be placed high to view, and let me speak to the still unknowing world how all this came about. Then shall be heard of bloody and unnatural acts, of sudden judgments, accidental slaughters, deaths brought on by cunning and forced cause, and in the end, of purposes falling back upon the heads that invented them. All this I can truly deliver.

FORTINBRAS. Let us hear it quickly, and summon the noblest to the audience. For my own part, with sorrow I accept my fortune. I have old rights in this kingdom, and now necessity itself invites me to remember them.

HORATIO. Of that too I shall have cause to speak, and from the mouth of one whose dying voice will draw many after it. But let this be done at once, while men's minds are still wild, lest more mischance grow out of old plots and errors.

FORTINBRAS. Let four captains bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage, for had he been put on, he would likely have proved most royally. For his passage, let the soldiers' music and the rites of war speak loudly for him. Take up the bodies. Such a sight belongs better to a field than to a hall. Go, bid the soldiers shoot.

[Exeunt, bearing off the dead. A dead march is heard.]