

# **HAMLET**

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**PRINCE OF DENMARK**

## WHY NOVELIZE *HAMLET*?

A FOREWORD BY THE AUTHOR

I had many reasons for wanting to write a novelization of *Hamlet*, but the simplest reason was this:

*For my mother.* And people like her.

In 1992, while pursuing my theatre degree from the University of Oklahoma, I was cast in the role of Hamlet in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. For those unfamiliar with this genius stage play, Stoppard took two relatively minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and told the story of the Melancholy Dane from *their* point-of-view. The audience is given a glimpse of what went on "behind the scenes," so to speak. As one would expect, this offered a very different perspective on the Prince of Denmark.

Needless to say, I wanted my parents to be as familiar with *Hamlet* as possible before coming to see the show, so that they might understand and appreciate all of Stoppard's brilliant nuances. I called my mother and advised that she pick up a copy of one of the Hamlet movies – Mel Gibson's being the most recent version at the time, I suggested that it would be the easiest to find.

"No, I can't do that," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Mom, you *really* need to watch 'Hamlet' before coming to see this show."

"I can't," she insisted, "I've always *wanted* to watch 'Hamlet,' but I just can't understand what they're saying. I can't understand Shakespeare."

What ended up happening was that I had to rent the movie myself, drive it to my parents' house, and "translate" the whole movie for them.

The interesting thing was, as the movie played on, I had to do it less and less. They started “getting it” more and more on their own. Once she’d gotten past the difficulty – and *intimidation* – of understanding Shakespeare’s text, my mother thoroughly enjoyed the story, and both of my parents appreciated *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* that much more.

But the whole experience got me to thinking: How many people like my mother are out there? How many people would relish Shakespeare’s works, if only they had *a little help* following the dialogue?

And don’t get me wrong – I remember what it was like. Before I had taken so many Shakespeare-oriented classes at the University, I often could not make heads-or-tails of *Hamlet* ... or *Macbeth* or *Julius Caesar* and so on.

Too many of us only know Shakespeare from Junior High or High School English classes, and therein lies the heart the problem: Most English teachers assign *Hamlet* and other plays to be read as though they were a novel or essay. The fact is, *no* plays are meant to be read – they are meant to be *performed*. Some, more enlightened school teachers have the class read the plays aloud, which inevitably leads to far more “Ah-ha!” moments for their struggling students.

And so, my plan for novelizing *Hamlet* began to take form on two levels:

(1) I would “translate” the language, though not as blatantly as I did for my parents back in college. I would just ... “nudge” the words a bit. Sometimes I had to alter archaic terms simply because their original syntax had changed so drastically in the modern age. A few passages required additional text to identify what could easily be called “jargon” from professions that were more commonplace in Shakespeare’s time; likewise, myths and folklore that was common knowledge to the man on the streets all those centuries ago required a touch more back-story or explanation for the current reader.

But just as often, I found that simply flipping the subject/verb

agreement, or reversing what *now* seems like a misplaced modifier, was often all that was needed to make the phrase or passage clear. And more than once, lines of text required no alteration at all – once the lines immediately preceding and following were clarified, the interjection made perfect sense with no help from me.

(It is also important to note that, whenever the lines are considered “poetry” or “dialogue” or “song” *within the context of the story*, I left those alone as well. When The Player recites his monologue, when Ophelia sings her song, and so on ... even in Hamlet’s “world,” these passages are being rendered as third-party material by the characters themselves – it’s not Shakespeare the playwright “talking to the audience,” per se, but Ophelia the character singing a song to those around her. And so, I left these passages as they were.)

(2) I would elaborate in the prose as to what each character (actor) might have been doing/thinking/feeling at any given point. And thus, the dialogue would become more clear, as the reader would have a greater sense of context. For example, when it came to the Hamlet’s “performance,” sometimes I borrowed from Mel Gibson, sometimes I borrowed from Kenneth Branagh, and sometimes I came up with something completely (to the best of my knowledge) original.

And that’s my point: *It’s all a matter of interpretation*. There are no (well, few) absolutes when it comes to what a character meant or how a certain line should be delivered. Each actor brings something new; each director has their own vision. And so, by “acting out the story,” I hope to give the reader a taste of what it would be like to actually *see* the play performed, and therefore better understand – and enjoy – the experience. After all, not many of us live within easy reach of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

That pretty much sums up my intentions behind this novelization. Do I hope pleasure-readers will find it more accessible now? Yes! Do I hope that perhaps students – especially those non-theatre majors – might be able to use this text as a learning aide? Sure!

So here it is. My interpretation of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. I

hope you find the Bard's text easier to understand, but at the same time, I *am* asking you to "put your Thinking Caps on." After all, this is still Shakespeare; I'm just hoping to sit alongside you as I did my parents all those years ago, and help you understand the story that much better. I've tweaked, I've rearranged, I've converted ... but *whenever* possible, I've left things as unaltered as I could.

And there are certain phrases that simply *demand*ed to be left alone:

*To thine own self be true.*

*Frailty, thy name is woman.*

*To be or not to be? That is the question.*

Some lines just *had* to stay.

Enjoy!

Christopher Andrews  
June, 2005

**DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

HAMLET, Prince of Denmark, son to the late King, and nephew to the present King

CLAUDIUS, the new King of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle

THE GHOST of the late King Hamlet, Prince Hamlet's father

GERTRUDE, the Queen, Hamlet's mother, now wife of Claudius

POLONIUS, Lord Chamberlain, councillor of the State of Denmark

LAERTES, Polonius' son

OPHELIA, Polonius' daughter

HORATIO, true friend and confidant of Hamlet

ROSENCRANTZ

} courtiers, former schoolfellows of Hamlet

GUILDENSTERN

FORTINBRAS, Prince of Norway

VOLTEMAND

} Danish councillors, ambassadors to Norway

CORNELIUS

MARCELLUS, a Danish officer

BERNARDO

} Members of the King's guard, soldiers on sentry duty

FRANCISCO

OSRIC, a foppish courier

REYNALDO, servant to Polonius

THE PLAYERS, an acting troupe

A GENTLEMAN of the court

A PRIEST

1<sup>ST</sup> RUSTIC, a grave-digger

2<sup>ND</sup> RUSTIC, the grave-digger's companion

A NORWEGIAN CAPTAIN in Fortinbras' army

ENGLISH AMBASSADORS

LORDS, LADIES, SOLDIERS, SAILORS, MESSENGERS, and  
ATTENDANTS

## **LOCATION**

DENMARK, the ROYAL CASTLE OF ELSINORE, and its environs

## PART ONE

### CHAPTER ONE

The frigid night air cut Bernardo to the bone.

He hastened his stride in a vain effort to warm himself. The mist was heavy, dampening his clothing and making him feel colder still. He always dreaded these nighttime shifts guarding the platform of the castle of Denmark's Elsinore, and the bizarre occurrences of the past two nights did nothing to improve his disposition. The echo of his boots against the stone surface made his footsteps sound uncomfortably like a quickened heartbeat, giving him cause to shudder that had nothing to do with the chilled air. Still, the hour drew late, and Francisco required relief; one man could not guard the platform all night.

As he rounded a parapet, he caught a glimpse of movement within the shadows, bringing his step, and his breath, to a sharp pause. All things being equal, he knew it must be Francisco ... but of late, all things were *not* equal.

"Who's there?" he demanded, his hand drifting down to the hilt of his sword.

"Nay, *you* answer *me!*" came the expected – and therefore relieving – response. "Halt and identify yourself!"

Bernardo smiled. "Long live the King!"

"Bernardo?"

"Aye, it's me," Bernardo reassured him. He advanced to join his fellow sentinel upon the upper portion of the platform.

Francisco breathed his own sigh of relief. "You have arrived quite promptly for your duty."

"The time is midnight," Bernardo said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Get yourself to bed, Francisco."

Francisco smiled, an expression barely visible in the dark of the night. “Much thanks for the relief. It is bitter cold, and my spirits are low.”

Bernardo nodded in understanding. He wished *he* were the one going off watch rather than just starting. “Have you had a quiet night?”

“Not a mouse stirring.”

“Well, good night. If you see Horatio and Marcellus, my partners on this watch, ask them to make haste.”

“I think I hear them,” Francisco told him, peering into the shadows from which Bernardo had just emerged. Bernardo followed his gaze. Two figures slowly became visible as they approached.

“Halt!” Francisco called out. “Who is there?”

“Allies of this land,” came Horatio’s familiar voice.

Immediately after drifted Marcellus’, “And loyal subjects to the King of Denmark.”

Satisfied, Francisco strode forward, speaking as he passed them. “God give you a good night.”

“Oh, farewell, honest soldier,” Marcellus returned. “Who relieved you?”

“Bernardo took my place,” he said, then repeated, “God give you a good night.” And with that, Francisco was gone.

“Hello, Bernardo,” Marcellus greeted him as he and his companion joined the sentinel at his post.

“Is this Horatio with you?” Bernardo asked.

“Oh,” Horatio answered with a short chuckle, “someone like him.”

“Welcome, Horatio. Welcome, good Marcellus.”

Horatio nodded in greeting, then cut back to his chiding. “What, has this thing appeared again tonight?”

Bernardo shook his head. “I have seen nothing,” he answered in all seriousness.

Marcellus cleared his throat briefly. “Horatio says it is nothing

but our *imagination*, and will not believe in this dreaded sight that we have seen *twice*. Therefore, I have convinced him to come along with us to watch the minutes of this night, so that if this apparition again comes, he may pay witness and speak to it.”

Horatio chuckled again, a grin gracing his round face. He waved them away and ran his fingers through his short brown hair. “Tush, tush, it will not appear.”

Bernardo stood straighter. “Sit down a while, and let us again tell you, who are so determined not to believe us, about what we have seen these past two nights.”

Horatio threw his hands up in the air and sighed. “Very well, let us sit down and hear Bernardo tell his tale.”

The three men gathered along a bench against the castle wall. Bernardo began, pointing upward, “Last night, when that star had reached the same point where it is now, Marcellus and I, just after the bell struck one—”

Marcellus suddenly shot his hand up, his eyes cast over Horatio’s shoulder. Bernardo froze. “Please, be quiet,” Marcellus whispered. “Look what comes again.”

Horatio stared at him in confusion for a moment, waiting for him to speak further, then followed his gaze.

Across the platform, the shadows brightened with an unusual light that looked like neither the sun nor a burning torch. In fact, as Horatio continued to study the peculiar sight, he found that it wasn’t as if the darkness were being lighted from an external source so much as the dim seemed to simply grow *less* dim, as if by black magic. Despite the cold, he felt a sheen of perspiration forming upon his body.

“In the same image,” Bernardo observed in a hushed voice, “like the late King.”

From amidst the unearthly glow appeared a figure fully clad in armor. *Royal* armor. The person might have seemed normal, except for the fact that if Horatio narrowed his eyes and stared intently enough, he realized that he could just barely see *through* the image to

the far wall of the castle.

“You are a scholar,” Marcellus said to Horatio, “speak to it.”

“Does it not look like the late King?” Bernardo insisted. “*Look* at it, Horatio.”

Horatio did so, and despite the spectral nature of this phantom, he could not deny the familiarity of that wise, bearded face ... a face he had never expected to see animate again. Not in *this* life. It did indeed appear to be the recently deceased King Hamlet.

“Very much like him,” Horatio agreed, his voice catching in his throat. “It harrows me with fear and wonder.”

“It must be spoken to before it can speak,” Bernardo murmured.

“Speak to it, Horatio.”

Horatio swallowed hard against his fear and rose to his feet. The apparition moved toward them slowly, and was still a good distance away. Horatio took two steps toward it, and could make himself move no closer.

“What are you,” he called with false bravado, “that invades our realm this time of night, wearing the face, and the armor in which our buried majesty, the late King of Denmark, did formerly march?” He paused, but the phantom did not respond, except to come to a halt and frown at him with eyes that were terribly frightening because they looked so real, so *alive*. “By Heaven, I charge thee speak!”

With that, the apparition turned quickly and strode away from the three men.

“It is offended,” Marcellus proclaimed.

“See,” Bernardo chimed in, “it stalks away.”

His fear momentarily pushed aside, Horatio took a few more steps toward the retreating form. “Stay!” he called. “Speak, speak, I charge thee *speak!*”

A moment passed, then the strange glow collapsed around the figure, and in a breath ... it had vanished.

“It is gone, and will not answer,” Marcellus observed.

Horatio continued to stare after the dissipated figure, unsure for

what he waited. The sheen of sweat that had covered his body upon the ghost's first appearance had thickened considerably.

"How now, Horatio?" Bernardo spoke with a touch of humor, and vindication, in his voice. "You tremble and look pale. Is that not something *more* than imagination? What do you think of it?"

"Before God," Horatio declared, "I would not have believed had I not seen it with my own eyes."

Not quite as adjusted to the sight as his friend Bernardo, Marcellus paced around them, casting his gaze into the darkness as if expecting the ghost to reappear at any moment. "Is it not like the King?"

Horatio nodded. "As much as you are like yourself. So was the armor like he wore when he battled the ambitious King of Norway. His expression was like that when he defeated the Pollacks on the ice." He breathed deep. "It is very strange."

Marcellus continued to pace. "Twice before, at precisely this hour, it marched this very path by our watch."

"While I have no precise theory to explain this," Horatio told his companions, his fingers running through his hair again, "my feeling is that this bodes some strange trouble within our lands."

Marcellus, finally satisfied that they were again alone, gestured back toward the bench. "Come now, sit down." He paused briefly as Bernardo and Horatio joined him, then turned toward the latter. "Tell me, as you would know, why we have kept this same strict watch, and why we daily deal with the foreign market for weapons of war, why we force service of shipwrights, who are made to work every day of the week, even Sunday. What might be in preparation, that this sweaty haste makes us all work day and night? Can you inform me?"

"That I can, at least as far as the rumors go," Horatio answered him. Bernardo and Marcellus leaned closer as he continued. "Our late King Hamlet, whose image even now appeared to us, was, as you know, challenged to combat by his rival, King Fortinbras of Norway. If our valiant Hamlet slew Fortinbras, by sealed agreement honored by heraldic law, he forfeited with his life all those lands which he

possessed – not his kingdom, but his personal lands – to the conqueror. An equivalent portion was pledged by *our* King, which would have been relinquished to Fortinbras had *he* been the vanquisher. By the agreement made, Fortinbras lost his lands to King Hamlet.” Horatio’s heart swelled with pride at the victory of his late liege, then he pressed on. “Now, *young* Fortinbras, full of hot, untried mettle, has hastily gathered up from the outlying territories of Norway a list of lawless ruffians for some bold enterprise, which we believe is to take back his father’s lands *by force*. This, I take it, is the primary motivation for our preparations, the reason for this very watch, and the chief source of this posthaste bustling activity in the land.”

Bernardo cleared his throat. “I think there can be no other reason. It fits well that this ominous figure comes armed through our watch so like the King that was and is the question of these wars.”

Horatio agreed, “It is a mote of dust to trouble the mind’s eye. In the most high and flourishing sovereignty of Rome, a little before the mighty Julius Caesar fell, the graves stood open and the recently dead appeared in the Roman streets. Astounding sights filled the elements, such as falling stars and dews of blood, ominous signs in the sun and in the moon, upon whose influence Neptune’s sea was almost totally darkened. And similar foreshadowing of feared events – as advanced warning of things to come – have Heaven and Earth manifested upon our regions and countrymen.”

As Horatio spoke, his gaze drifted back to the area from which the ghost had emerged. With a start he realized that the apparition had reappeared, and was now closer to them than it had been before. He drew a breath and whispered sharply, “Quietly, behold! It comes again!”

The three shot to their feet. As the ghost approached them, it slowly spread its arms, causing Horatio’s blood to run like ice through his veins. He wanted nothing more than to retreat, to run from this place and never return, but he knew that his duty demanded much more.

Steeling himself, he moved to intercept the silent, frightening phantom. *I shall cross its path and confront it directly, though it may wither me.* He called, “Stay, illusion!” The image again frowned upon him, but continued to advance slowly as Horatio and his companions made an equally lingering withdrawal. “If you have any sound or use of voice, speak to me. If there is any good thing to be done that may ease you, and grace me, speak to me. If you are privy to your country’s fate, which forewarning might help us *avoid*, speak!” The ghost still made no reply, and Horatio’s voice grew more bold. “Or if thou hast, in thy life, hoarded extorted treasure in the womb of the earth, for which, they say, your spirits often walk in death, speak of it, stay and *speak!*”

At that moment, from a pier to their left, a rooster crowed into the night. The ghost started visibly, almost as if in pain, and began retreating once more.

Desperate to find some answers, Horatio ordered, “Stop it, Marcellus.”

Marcellus looked at him as if he had gone mad. “Shall I strike it with my spear?”

“Do it, if it will not be still.”

Reluctantly, Marcellus brandished his weapon, and the three men strode after it. They rounded a corner, and for a moment thought they had lost it. Bernardo pointed toward where it now walked, an impossible distance away. “There it is!”

They ran further, but the ghost managed to stay ahead of them. Horatio pointed as it seemed to come to a halt. “There it is!”

Marcellus drew back his arm to cast the spear, but it was too late. The strange glow again enveloped the ghost, and it vanished for the second time.

“It is gone!” Marcellus lowered his spear in frustration. “We did it wrong,” he said to Horatio, “to offer it the show of violence, for it is as the air, invulnerable, and our vain gestures were empty pretenses.”

Bernardo, out of breath from their spontaneous run, observed, “It

was about to speak when the rooster cried.”

“And then it started like a guilty thing upon a fearful summons,” Horatio added. “I have heard that the cock, the trumpeter of morning, awakens the god of day with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat, and at its crow – whether in sea or fire, in earth or air – the spirits of the dead must hastily return to their confines. This present sight proves it is true.”

Marcellus nodded, slowly at first then with intensity. “It faded on the crowing of the cock,” he agreed. “Some say that by the time that season comes wherein our Savior’s birth is celebrated, the bird of dawning sings *all* night long. And then, they say, no spirit *dares* stir abroad; the nights are wholesome; then no malicious planetary alignments strike, no fairy bewitches, nor witch has power to charm, so hallowed and so *good* is the time.”

Never the superstitious but ever the diplomat, Horatio merely said, “So have I heard, and do – in part – believe it.” He grit his teeth and once more ran his fingers through his hair. “Look, morning lies just beyond that eastern sky. We must break our watch, and I suggest that we tell young Hamlet of what we have seen tonight, for, upon my life, this spirit, mute to us, will speak to him. Do you agree that we must inform him, as much for love as for duty?”

Bernardo and Marcellus both nodded in agreement. Marcellus spoke, “Let us do it, and I know where we will find him this morning...”

The three made their plans as the freezing night listened in silence.

## PART ONE

### CHAPTER TWO

A flourish of trumpets echoed throughout the room of state at Elsinore. The Lord Chamberlain Polonius gestured, and the members of the royal council of Denmark, as well as the small audience – which included the Chamberlain’s son, Laertes – bowed their heads and knelt to one knee, followed a moment later by Polonius himself. The chamber doors opened, and Claudius, the new King of Denmark, entered the room. He paused at the entrance, allowing his royal visage to bathe his congregation for a few moments. He then reached out to his left, his palm open in expectation, and Queen Gertrude appeared to take his hand in her own. With his new bride at his side, Claudius ascended the dais to his throne. The Queen took her seat, and then the King lowered himself. He waited a moment longer, then clapped his hands sharply. The assembly rose to their feet, and Claudius beamed openly as they again nodded their heads before his majesty.

From the rear of the state room, seated upon steps leading to another level of the chamber and shrouded in shadow, young Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, watched the proceedings. He did not bow, nor did he lower his head. He merely sat and watched ...

... and brooded.

The King hesitated in what young Hamlet was sure he perceived as dramatic pause, then addressed the throng.

“Though the memory of dear brother Hamlet’s death may yet be fresh,” he spoke, his baritone voice carrying more efficiently through the room than Prince Hamlet would have preferred, “and it would benefit us to bear grief in our hearts, and our whole kingdom to be reduced to one mournful brow ... *discretion* demands that we think of him, as well as *ourselves*. Therefore, with an impaired joy, with one eye cheerful and the other weeping, with laughter in funeral and with dirge in marriage, weighing equally delight and grief ... with all this,

I have taken my former sister-in-law – the Queen, the imperial joint-holder to this warlike state – as my *wife*. You have, in good wisdom, condoned this fully and without reservation. For all this, I give my thanks.”

The audience applauded. From his viewpoint in the shadows, Hamlet realized that he had unconsciously clenched his fist until finally his fingernails threatened to break through the skin of his palm. He made a half-hearted attempt to calm himself.

“I must next inform you,” Claudius continued, rising to his feet and pacing slowly before the throne, “that young Fortinbras, holding a weak opinion of our worth, or thinking my late dear brother’s death has left our state disjointed and out of frame, has contrived with this false dream to take the advantage – he has assailed me with persistent messages demanding the surrender of those lands lost by his father, lost with all binding terms of the *law*, to my most valiant, late brother, King Hamlet.” Claudius halted his easy stride and smiled over his shoulder to the congregation. “So much for him.”

His listeners laughed. All save one.

“Now for ourselves,” the King recommenced, returning once more to the throne, “and for this meeting, this is our business: We have written to Norway, the uncle of young Fortinbras – who, feeble and bedridden, barely hears of his nephew’s purpose – to suppress his further proceeding herein, as the monies, the soldiers, and the full supplies are all drawn from the liegemen of Norway. We now dispatch you, good Cornelius, and you, Voltemand ...” The two men stepped forward from the collective body. “To bear this greeting to old Norway, giving you no more personal power in your business with the King than the range that these detailed articles allow.”

From within the folds of his cloak, Claudius produced a scroll, fastened with his royal seal. Cornelius, his back straight and his head high, marched up the steps and took the paper from the King’s hand with an overly-sharp bow of his head. He then descended to again stand beside his fellow herald.

“Farewell,” Claudius told them, “and let haste command your duty.”

Cornelius and Voltemand spoke in unison. “In that, and all things, will we show our duty.”

Claudius seemed to find their uniform performance somewhat amusing, and his tone was light as he returned, “I doubt it not at all; heartily farewell.”

The heralds effected a snap-turn to the right, and marched from the state room. Hamlet eyed them with vague repugnance as they departed.

“And now, Laertes,” the King addressed the Lord Chamberlain’s son, “what’s the news with you? You told us of some entreaty – what is it, Laertes?”

The Chamberlain’s son stepped forward, then seemed to grow nervous and lose his words.

Claudius chuckled. “You cannot speak reasonably to the King of Denmark and waste your voice. What would you ask, Laertes, that I shall not offer? The head is not more closely related to the heart, the hand more instrumental to the mouth, than is the throne of Denmark to your father.” Lord Chamberlain Polonius modestly averted his eyes at the compliment. “What would you have, Laertes?”

Laertes took another step forward. “Your gracious permission to return to France, my revered lord, from where, though I willingly came to Denmark to show my duty in your coronation ... I must now confess, that duty done, my thoughts and wishes bend again toward France, and I request your gracious permission to depart.” He bowed deeply, as if to physically manifest his sincerity.

Claudius seemed to ponder his decision for the briefest of moments. “Have you your father’s leave? What says Polonius?”

The Lord Chamberlain spoke, and there was a degree of humor in his voice. “He has, my lord – by laborsome petition – wrung from me my slow leave, and at last upon his will I gave my reluctant consent. I do beseech you give him leave to go.”

The King nodded. “Take your fair hour, Laertes – time be yours, and your best virtues spend it at your will!”

Laertes smiled from ear to ear and rejoined his father.

Claudius returned the young man’s glow, then his expression grew more somber. He rose again to his feet, and glanced toward his wife. She nodded, her own face a mask of concern, and followed him as he descended the steps. The audience, slightly taken aback, scrambled as graciously as they could to part for their monarch. Prince Hamlet realized too late what was transpiring, and cursed himself for not retreating from sight when he had the chance.

“But now,” Claudius picked up as though he had never stopped speaking, “my nephew Hamlet, and my son ...”

*A little closer than a nephew, Hamlet spat to himself, as you are my mother’s husband, and my father’s brother ... but I am not your son.*

“... how is it that the clouds still hang on you?”

Hamlet regarded the King, and purposely did not stand when he answered, “Not so, my lord, I am *too much* in the sun.”

Claudius blinked, and for an instant, Hamlet thought he glimpsed a flash of irritation behind the sovereign’s eyes. The idea brought him more than a little satisfaction.

“Good Hamlet,” Queen Gertrude, his mother, interjected, “cast your darkened color off, and let your eye look friendly on Denmark. Do not search forever with downcast eyes for your noble father in the dust. You know it is universal – all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity.”

Hamlet looked away from his mother. “Aye, madam, it is universal.”

“If it is, why does it seem so *personal* with you?”

Hamlet’s gaze now snapped to her, and Gertrude was taken aback by the anger and hurt she saw in her son’s countenance. “‘*Seems,*’ madam? No, it *is* – I know not ‘seems.’ It is not only my inky cloak, good mother, nor customary suits of solemn black, nor forced sighing,

nor the plentiful tears in the eye, nor the dejected behavior of the visage. *Together*, with all forms, moods, shapes of grief, can truly portray my feelings. These indeed ‘seem,’ for they are actions that a man might pretend, but I feel them and show them with *sincerity*.”

“It is sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,” Claudius said to him, and Hamlet only resisted striking out at him with firm resolve, “to give these mourning duties to your father. But you must know your father lost a father, that father lost his, and the survivor always mourned for a time.” His tone then darkened. “But to *continually* mourn is blasphemous *stubbornness* – it is unmanly grief; it shows a will unsubmissive to Heaven, an insecure heart, or impatient mind, an understanding simple and *unschooled*.” Claudius straightened, and his following words were obviously intended as a show for his masses. “For what we know must be, and is as common as any of the most common experiences, why should we, in our quarrelsome opposition, take it against the heart? Fie, it is an insult to Heaven, an insult to the dead, an insult to nature, to contrary reason, whose common theme *is* death of fathers, and who still has cried, from the first corpse till he that died today, ‘*This must be so.*’ ”

Hamlet glared at Claudius. If the King noticed, he did not offer a hint as he again lowered his voice to a level that would at least *appear* to be sincere, but could still be heard by all. “Seems” indeed!

“I ask you throw this unending woe to earth, and think of *me* as a father, for let the world take note: *You* are the most immediate heir to the throne, and with no less nobility of love than that which a most loving father bears his son do *I* give to *you*.” Claudius paused, perhaps hoping Hamlet would make some response – after all, he had just announced, publicly, that young Hamlet would be the next man to sit upon the throne of Denmark. When it became clear that none was forthcoming, he pressed on, a gentle hand at the small of the Queen’s back. “Your intent in going back to school in Wittenberg is contrary to our desire, and we beseech you, incline you, to remain *here* in the cheer and comfort of our eye, our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our

son.”

*This* Hamlet found quite interesting. As it happened, if he had not been away at school at the time, the decision as to *who* would, in fact, succeed the deceased King might have swayed to a different breeze. And now that it mattered not ... Claudius wanted him to *stay*? All the better to keep an eye on him, most likely!

Either way, he cared little for his uncle/step-father’s wishes, and might have refused then and there, had his mother not pleaded, “Do not let your mother lose her prayers, Hamlet. I beg you to stay with us – do not go to Germany.”

Hamlet looked into her eyes, at the despondent look upon her face, and sighed. “I shall, in all my best, obey you, madam.”

Claudius smiled broadly. “Why, it is a loving and fair reply. Be as free as us in Denmark. Madam, come.” He guided his Queen away, and with a gesture, dismissed the assembly as well. “This gentle and unforced agreement of Hamlet warms my heart, and we shall hold a celebration that will sound through the heavens. Come away ...!”

A few minutes later, Hamlet was alone.

The Prince of Denmark regarded his cold, shadowed, empty surroundings. How they seemed to reflect the ache in his heart.

*Oh*, he thought, *that this too solid flesh would melt, thaw, and dissolve into a dew! Or that the Everlasting had not fixed his law against self-slaughter!* The Prince rose to his feet and paced slowly about the lonely chamber. “Oh God, God, how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable all the customs of this world seem to me! Damn it all, damn!” His words echoed through the room, with no reply other than the continuation of his own thoughts. *It is an unweeded garden that grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature possessing it utterly. That it should come to this! Only two months dead ... no, not even two. So excellent a king, that was to this land as the titanic sun-god Hyperion was to a lecherous satyr, so loving to my mother that he might not allow the winds of Heaven to visit her face too roughly.* Hamlet’s pacing brought him before the throne, and he sat upon the

steps, his back to the exalted seat. “Heaven and Earth, must I remember? Why, she would hang on him as if her appetite would increase by what it fed on. And yet, within a month ...”

Hamlet turned and glanced up to the throne, and pictured the new king, his uncle-father, sitting upon it beside his aunt-mother. He quickly turned away, closing his eyes tightly. “Let me not think on it! Frailty, thy name is *woman!*”

His cry again rang through the assembly room, reverberating off the walls as if to mock him.

“A little month, before those shoes were old with which she followed my poor father’s body, like the weeping Niobe, all tears ... why, she, even she ... oh, God, a *beast* that lacks the power of reason would have mourned longer ... she married my uncle, my father’s *brother*, but no more *like* my father than I am to Hercules. Within a month, before yet the salt of most hypocritical tears had left the redness in her swollen eyes, she *married.*”

Hamlet threw back his head as if to cry out in rage once more, but the words instead flowed with a defeated hush from his lips as his face came to rest in his hands. “Oh, most wicked speed. To hasten with such dexterity to those incestuous sheets, it is not, nor it cannot come to good, but *break my heart* ... for I must hold my tongue.”

Hamlet, drowning in his sorrow as he was, failed to notice as Marcellus, Bernardo, and his close friend Horatio entered from the back of the chamber. They hesitated at the sight of their beloved Prince, and Marcellus looked to Horatio as if to question whether or not they should leave and return at a later time, but Horatio steeled himself and beckoned them forward.

“Hail to your lordship!” Horatio called.

Hamlet stirred a bit, too apathetic of the world around him to be truly startled by the disturbance. “I am glad to see you well,” he mumbled in reflexive response. The Prince then looked up, and when he realized who had addressed him, his spirits lifted noticeably and he rose to his feet. “Horatio, or I do forget myself.”

Horatio smiled at the positive change in his friend's poise. "The same, my lord, and ever your poor servant."

Hamlet crossed the room to meet them and locked hands with Horatio. "Sir, my good *friend*. I'll exchange *that* name with you." He smiled warmly, and for the first time since his father's death, it felt natural. "And what brings you from Wittenberg, Horatio?" The Prince then caught himself, and realized that he had completely ignored the sentinels, and also friends, who accompanied Horatio. "Marcellus," he nodded.

Marcellus returned the bow. "My good lord."

"I am very glad to see you." He nodded again, this time to Bernardo. "Good evening, sir."

Bernardo smiled and bowed from the neck as had Marcellus.

Feeling he had now at least answered courtesy's demands, Hamlet returned his focus to Horatio. "But, truly, why are you away from school?"

"An urge to play absentee, my good lord," Horatio told him with a wink.

Hamlet chuckled and shook his head. "I would not hear your enemy say so, nor shall you hurt my ears by reporting against yourself. I *know* you are not negligent. But what is your business in Elsinore? We'll teach you to drink deeply before you depart."

Horatio sighed. "My lord," he admitted, "I came to see your father's funeral."

Hamlet scoffed, "I ask you do not mock me, fellow student. I think it was to see my mother's wedding."

Horatio and his companions shuffled uncomfortably. "Indeed, my lord," Horatio agreed, unsure of how else to respond, "it did follow quickly."

"Thrift, thrift, Horatio, the funeral's cold meat pies did furnish the marriage tables. I wish I had met my most hated foe in Heaven before I had seen *that* day, Horatio!" Torn with anger and hurt, Hamlet turned away from his friends. He looked again to the throne and whispered,

“My father. I think I see my father.”

Much to the Prince’s surprise, his words provoked a violent response from Horatio and his companions. The sentinels looked around as if they expected an attack from every side at once, and Horatio himself drew his sword, his face pale and riddled with fear. “Where, my lord?” he demanded.

Hamlet stared at his friend, and found himself wondering if perhaps *Horatio* had been driven mad over recent events. “In my *mind’s eye*, Horatio.”

Horatio and the sentinels looked at one another and relaxed their stance, Marcellus and Bernardo averting their eyes in embarrassment. Horatio, however, decided this was the time. “I saw him once, he was a goodly king.”

Still staring in confusion at his friend, Hamlet agreed, “He was a man – take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again.”

Horatio swallowed hard. “My lord ... I think I saw him *last night*.”  
“Saw who?”

“My lord, the King, your father.”

The breath draining from him, Hamlet repeated in a harsh whisper, “ ‘The King, my father.’ ”

Horatio returned his sword to its sheath and held up a hand. “Hold still your disbelief, my lord, and listen, so that I may report, upon the witness of these gentlemen, this marvelous tale to you.”

Part of Hamlet knew that he should be discarding Horatio’s words as madness, and quickly call to the royal guard for assistance. Instead, he remained short of breath, and commanded, “For God’s love, let me hear!”

Horatio steadied himself, and began. “For two nights these gentlemen, Marcellus and Bernardo, together on their watch, in the dead waste and middle of the night, have been thus visited: A figure like your father, armed in every detail, from head to foot, appears before them, and with solemn march goes slow and stately by them. Three times he walked by their oppressed eyes within his truncheon’s

length, while they, turned almost to jelly in fear, stood quietly and did not speak to him. They disclosed this to me in dreadful secrecy, and I kept the third night's watch with them, where, as they had reported, every word made true and good, the apparition appeared. I *knew* your father. These hands do not resemble one another any more than the apparition resembled the former King."

"But where was this?"

Marcellus answered, "My lord, upon the platform where we watch."

"Did you not *speak* to it?" the Prince demanded.

"My lord, I did," Horatio told him, "but it made no answer. Once I thought it lifted up its head and did make a gesture as if to speak, but even then the morning cock crew loud and at the sound it shrunk away in haste and vanished from our sight."

Hamlet remained silent for a moment, his eyes alight with thought, his breath still coming in quick, excited gasps. "It is very strange."

Horatio stood tall. "As I do live, my honored lord, it is true, and we did think it was written in our duty to let you know of it."

Hamlet nodded emphatically. "Indeed, indeed, sirs. But this troubles me. Do you hold watch tonight?"

Marcellus and Bernardo answered together. "We do, my lord."

"Armed, you say?"

Again together, "Armed, my lord."

"From top to toe?"

Horatio had to repress a smile as they answered in unison a third time, "My lord, from head to foot."

"Then you did not see his face?"

"Oh, yes, my lord," Horatio quickly insisted, "he wore his visor up."

"What, he looked frowningly?"

"An expression more in sorrow than in anger."

"Pale, or red?"

"No, very pale."

Hamlet grew more and more excited as he continued. “And fixed his eyes upon you?”

“Undeviating,” Horatio told him.

Hamlet began pacing again, but his manner was not depressed as before. “I wish I had been there.”

“It would have amazed you.”

“Very likely, very likely. Did it stay long?”

Horatio considered. “While one might count slowly to one hundred.”

Marcellus and Bernardo again spoke together, insisting, “No, *longer.*”

“Not when I saw it,” Horatio asserted.

Hamlet pressed, “His beard was streaked with gray, no?”

“It was, as I have seen it in his life, a sable silvered.”

Hamlet stopped before them, his hand coming to rest at his waist, where the hilt of his sword normally rested. “I will watch tonight – perhaps it will walk again.”

“I believe it will,” Horatio agreed.

“If it assumes my noble father’s person,” Hamlet said quietly, more to himself than to those present before him, “I’ll speak to it though Hell itself should gape and bid me hold my peace.” He then looked to them and said, “I ask you all, if you have thus far concealed this sight, let you continue to hold your silence, and whatever else shall happen tonight, give it due thought, but do not speak of it. I will do the same. So fare you well. Upon the platform between eleven and twelve, I’ll visit you.”

Now Horatio joined the sentinels in stating, “Our duty to your honor.”

Hamlet returned, “Your loves, as mine to you. Farewell.”

The three men turned and marched from the room, and Hamlet again found himself alone. This time, his tone was different as his voice echoed from the stone walls. “My father’s spirit ... in arms! All is not well – I suspect some foul play. If only the night were here!

Until then, sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will rise, though all the Earth overwhelm them, to men's eyes.”

Hamlet stood facing the throne, unaware that his hand again searched for the hilt of his sword.