

**Ministry of Higher education**  
**University of Tikrit**  
**College of Basic Education / Al-**  
**Shirqat**



*An Introduction to Drama, One Act Play  
and Hamlet*

*English Department*

*Third Stage*

*First Semester*

*Instructor*  
*Shakir Hussein*

## "HAMLET" BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

The story of the play originates in the legend of Hamlet (Amleth) as recounted in the twelfth-century Danish History, a Latin text by Saxo the Grammatician. This version was later adapted into French by Francois de Belleforest in 1570. In it, the unscrupulous King kills his brother Horwendil and marries his brother's wife Gerutha. Horwendil's and Gerutha's son Amleth, although still young, decides to avenge his father's murder. He acts the fool in order to avoid suspicion, a strategy which succeeds in making the others think him harmless. With his mother's active support, Amleth succeeds in killing King. He is then proclaimed King of Denmark. This story is overall more straightforward than Shakespeare's adaptation. Shakespeare was likely aware of Saxo's version, along with another play performed in 1589 in which a ghost apparently calls out, "Hamlet, revenge!" The 1589 play is lost, leading to much scholarly speculation as to who might have authored it. Most scholars attribute it to Thomas Kyd, author of *The Spanish Tragedy* of 1587.

The Spanish Tragedy shares many elements with Hamlet, such as a ghost seeking revenge, a secret crime, a play-within-a-play, a tortured hero who feigns madness, and a heroine who goes mad and commits suicide. The Spanish Tragedy was one of the first and most popular Elizabethan "revenge tragedies," a genre that Hamlet both epitomizes and complicates. Revenge tragedies typically share a few plot points. In all of them, some grievous insult or wrong requires vengeance. Often in these plays the conventional means of retribution (the courts of law, generally speaking) are unavailable because of the power of the guilty person or persons, who is often noble if not royal. Revenge tragedies also emphasize the subjective struggle of the avenger, who often fights (or

feigns) madness and generally wallows in the moral difficulties of his situation. Finally, revenge tragedies end up with a dramatic bloodbath in which the guilty party is horribly and often ritualistically killed. Hamlet is not Shakespeare's first revenge tragedy that distinction belongs to *Titus Andronicus*, a Marlovian horror-show containing all of the elements just mentioned. However, Hamlet is generally considered the greatest revenge tragedy, if not the greatest tragedy, if not the greatest play, ever written.

## ACT I

Late at night, Horatio, Prince Hamlet's friend from school, meets guards on the battlements of Denmark's Elsinore castle. The guards describe a ghost they have seen that resembles Hamlet's father, the recently deceased king. At that moment, the Ghost reappears, and the guards and Horatio decide to tell Hamlet..

Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, married Hamlet's recently widowed mother, becoming the new King of Denmark. Hamlet continues to mourn for his father's death and laments his mother's lack of loyalty. When Hamlet hears of the Ghost from Horatio, he wants to see it for himself.

Elsewhere, the royal attendant Polonius says farewell to his son Laertes, who is departing for France. Laertes warns his sister, Ophelia, away from Hamlet and thinking too much of his attentions towards her. The Ghost appears to Hamlet, claiming indeed to be the ghost of his father. He tells Hamlet about how Claudius, the current King and Hamlet's uncle, murdered him, and Hamlet swears vengeance for his father. Hamlet decides to feign madness while he tests the truth of the Ghost's allegations (always a good idea in such situations).

## ACT II

According to his plan, Hamlet begins to act strangely. He rejects Ophelia, while Claudius and Polonius, the royal attendant, spy on him. They had hoped to find the reason for Hamlet's sudden change in behavior but could not. Claudius summons Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, old friends of Hamlet to find out what's got into him. Their arrival coincides with a group of travelling actors that Hamlet happens to know well. Hamlet writes a play, which includes scenes that mimic the murder of Hamlet's father. During rehearsal, Hamlet and the actors plot to present Hamlet's play before the King and Queen.

## ACT III

At the performance, Hamlet watches Claudius closely to see how he reacts. The play provokes Claudius, and he interrupts the action by storming out. He immediately resolves to send Hamlet away. Hamlet is summoned by his distressed mother, Gertrude, and on the way, he happens upon Claudius kneeling and attempting to pray. Hamlet reasons that to kill the King now would only send his soul to heaven rather than hell. Hamlet decides to spare his life for the time being.

Polonius hides in Gertrude's room to protect her from her unpredictable son. When Hamlet arrives to scold his mother, he hears Polonius moving behind the arras (a kind of tapestry). He stabs the tapestry and, in so doing, kills Polonius. The ghost of Hamlet's father reappears and warns his son not to delay revenge or upset his mother.

## ACT IV

Hamlet sent to England, supposedly as an ambassador, just as King Fortinbras of Norway crosses Denmark with an army to attack Poland.

During his journey, Hamlet discovers Claudius has a plan to have him killed once he arrives. He returns to Denmark alone, sending his companions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in his place.

## ACT V

On the way back to Denmark, Hamlet meets Horatio in the graveyard (along with a gravedigger), where they talk of the chances of life and death. Ophelia's funeral procession arrives at the very same graveyard (what luck!). Hamlet confronts Laertes, Ophelia's brother, who has taken his father's place at the court.

A duel is arranged between Hamlet and Laertes. During the match, Claudius conspires with Laertes to kill Hamlet. They plan that Hamlet will die either on a poisoned rapier or with poisoned wine. The plans go awry when Gertrude unwittingly drinks from the poisoned cup and dies. Then the poisoned blade wounds both Laertes and Hamlet, and Laertes dies.

Hamlet, in his death throes, kills Claudius. Hamlet dies, leaving only his friend Horatio to explain the truth to the new king, Fortinbras, as he returns in victory from the Polish wars.

**Ophelia kills herself** because the fate of Denmark is placed on her shoulders when she is asked to more or less spy on Hamlet, her father has been murdered (by her former lover no less), from the confusion created by her father and brother with regard to the meaning of love, and her suicide is even an act of revenge.