



The Ghost of Elsinore

A Tragedy of Justice and Its Unintended Consequences

Shakespeare's longest and most popular play, it is a timeless story of treachery, poisonous politics, and the quest for justice.



Hamlet's language and ideas are woven into our own.

The play has profoundly influenced culture and language. Memorable phrases have entered common usage, including:

- “cruel to be kind”
- “hair standing on end”

The critic Harold Bloom assessed that “only the world’s scriptures can compete with *Hamlet* as a meditation on human fragility in our confrontation with death.”

Ultimately, the play is a genre-defying masterpiece: it is at once gripping, funny, moving, and philosophical.



‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.’

The play opens on the cold winter ramparts of Elsinore Castle. The nervous energy of the guards is palpable in their challenge, ‘Who’s there?’, and the parting soldier’s comment, “Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart.”

There is an external political threat: young Fortinbras of Norway seeks to avenge his father and reclaim lands lost to the late King Hamlet. Denmark is preparing for war.

A supernatural element deepens the anxiety. For two nights, King Hamlet’s ghost, dressed in full armor, has appeared on the ramparts, terrifying the guards and perplexing the scholar Horatio.

Denmark is an unweeded garden, full of things rank and gross.



The fear on the ramparts is contrasted with a decadent court celebration. We meet King Claudius, the late king's brother, and Queen Gertrude, his widow, who married less than two months after King Hamlet's death.

Prince Hamlet is consumed by profound sadness and righteous anger. He sees his mother's marriage as incestuous and his uncle Claudius as a "lustful drunk" unworthy of the crown. He scorns the combined funeral and wedding, noting that "the prepared for mourners one day had been thriftily repurposed for a merry banquet the next." Initially, he feels powerless, resolving that he must hold his tongue, even if it breaks his

Initially behind his tongue, even if it breaks his heart.





The ghost reveals a murder and commands a terrible revenge.

Horatio tells Hamlet about the ghost, sparking Hamlet's suspicion that "foul deeds will rise." On the tower, the apparition reveals its blood-curdling tale:

- * He is the spirit of Hamlet's father, condemned to purgatory.
- * He was not killed by a snakebite, but murdered by his brother Claudius, who poured poison in his ear as he slept in his orchard.
- * Claudius stole his crown and his wife, turning the royal bed into a "couch for luxury and damned incest."

The ghost's command is absolute: Hamlet must kill the "smiling, damned villain" Claudius and weed the overgrown garden of Denmark.

To unmask a killer, Hamlet puts on a mask of his own.



Unlike typical revenge heroes, Hamlet is a thinker. The ghost warns him not to “taint” his mind; he must act thoughtfully, like a surgeon removing a cancer while preserving the state.

His strategy is to feign madness by putting on an “antic disposition,” acting “strange and odd” to hide his plans from the suspicious court.

His ruse is effective. Ophelia describes his transformation from a man of charm, wisdom, and courage into a broken instrument, “out of tune and harsh,” with a look so piteous “as if he’d been recently released out of hell.”

In a court of spies, every vice becomes a weapon.



Polonius's Hubris

The crafty flatterer boasts he knows where all "truth is hid." He arrogantly misdiagnoses Hamlet's madness as lovesickness for his daughter Ophelia, whom he has forbidden from seeing the prince. He arranges for them to meet while he and Claudius spy from behind a curtain.



Claudius's Paranoia

The "evil dreader" sees too much method in Hamlet's madness. He enlists Hamlet's old university friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to spy on him. Hamlet sees through them immediately, calling them "sponges" that the king will wring dry.

‘The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.’

As a scholar, Hamlet needs proof, knowing the devil can assume a “pleasing shape.” The solution arrives with a troupe of traveling actors.

The Plan: He asks the actors to perform a play about a king’s murder, inserting a new scene that mirrors his father’s death by poison in the ear.

The Proof: As the scene is performed, Hamlet and Horatio watch Claudius. The king leaps from his seat and halts the performance, unable to bear the sight of his own crime. His guilt is confirmed.



One rash act unleashes a tragic chain reaction.

Immediately after the play, Hamlet finds Claudius kneeling in prayer but refrains from killing him, reasoning it would send the repenting king to heaven.

He then confronts his mother, with the meddling Polonius hiding behind a tapestry. In a frenzied state, Hamlet hears a cry. Thinking it is the king, he plunges his sword through the fabric, killing Polonius.

This “rash and senseless spilling of innocent blood” is the trap Hamlet had carefully avoided. He coldly calls Polonius an “intruding fool” but acknowledges it is a sin he must answer for.



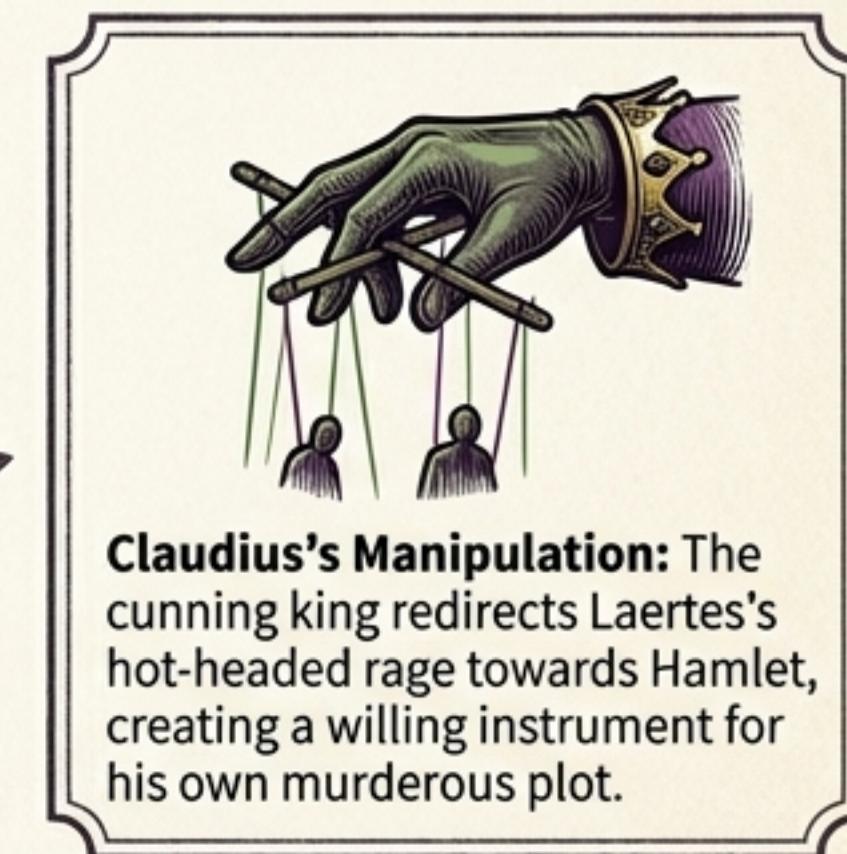
The king turns Hamlet's crime into his opportunity.



Ophelia's Fate: Wounded by Hamlet's attacks and shattered by her father's death at his hands, she descends into genuine madness and eventual death.



Laertes's Rage: Polonius's son, a man of action, returns from France and raises an army to depose the king he holds responsible.



Claudius's Manipulation: The cunning king redirects Laertes's hot-headed rage towards Hamlet, creating a willing instrument for his own murderous plot.

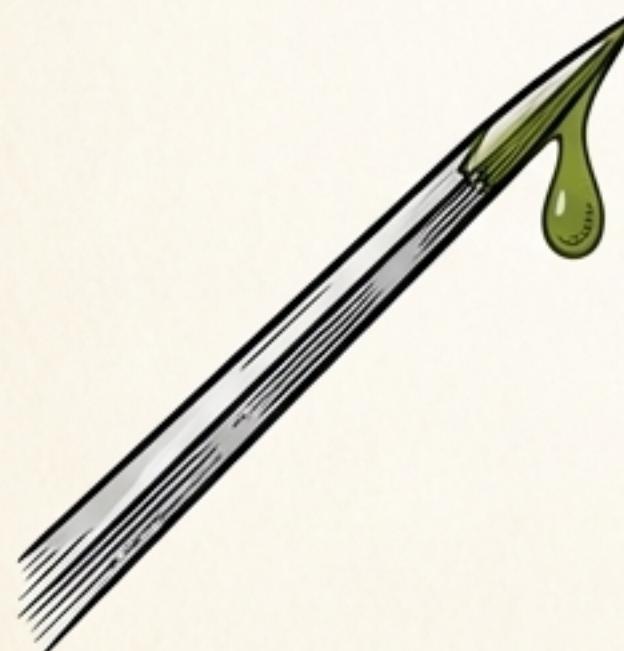
A deadly plot is disguised as a friendly duel.

The First Attempt

Claudius exiles Hamlet to England with a sealed letter ordering his execution. Hamlet outwits this, replacing the letter with one ordering the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern before pirates return him to Denmark.

The New Plan

Claudius and Laertes devise a new trap: a “sporting” fencing match.



The Sword

Laertes will use a sharpened military sword with its tip coated in poison, while Hamlet uses a blunted one.



The Wine

As a backup, Claudius will place a cup of poisoned wine for Hamlet to drink when the match becomes heated.

‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends.’

Upon his return, Hamlet is colder and more resolved. He tells Horatio of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s fate: “They are not near my conscience.”

He develops a stoical philosophy. Watching a gravedigger, he reflects on how even Alexander the Great returned to dust that could be used to plug a beer barrel. He accepts that while we can try to carve our own destinies ('rough-hew' our ends), it is ultimately providence that decides our fate.

Sensing a trap in the duel, he accepts the invitation anyway, having reconciled himself to whatever may come.



The plotters are “hoist with their own petard.”



Gertrude

Ignoring Claudius's warning, Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup intended for Hamlet.



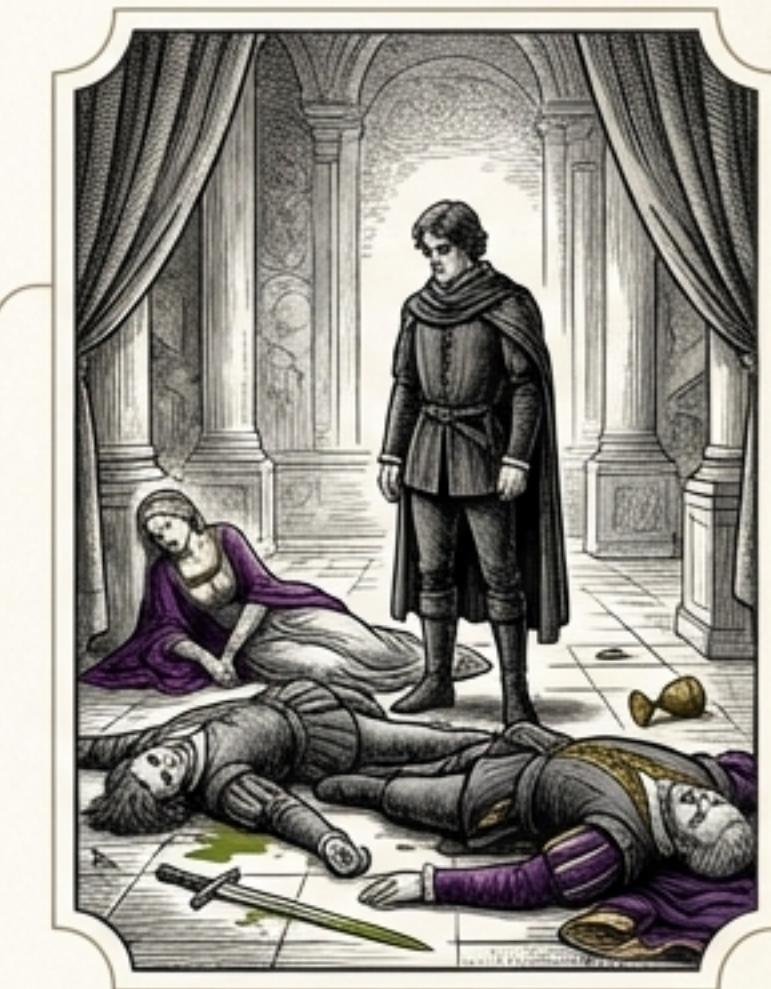
Laertes

The swords are exchanged, and Hamlet wounds Laertes with his own poisoned blade.



Claudius

With the treachery revealed, Hamlet kills Claudius with both of his own poisons.



The Aftermath

The villains' ingenious traps close in on themselves.

'The rest is silence.'

- With their dying breaths, Laertes forgives Hamlet, and Hamlet forgives Laertes.
- Hamlet's final act is to name young Fortinbras of Norway as the new, honorable ruler, ensuring a stable future for the kingdom he sought to cleanse.
- His last request is to his friend Horatio: "tell my story."
- The presentation thus fulfills Hamlet's dying wish, affirming the power of story to make sense of tragedy and restore order. Fortinbras's arrival symbolizes a new beginning for the state of Denmark.

