Hamlet: Plot Summary (Acts 1 and 2)

Act 1, Scene 1

*Hamlet* opens with the sentry, Francisco, keeping watch over the castle at Elsinore. He is relieved by Barnardo, who is joined shortly by Horatio and Marcellus. Barnardo and Marcellus reveal that they have witnessed an apparition:

Marcellus. Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy, and will not let belief take hold of him, Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us (1.1.23-25).

The Ghost of the late king of Denmark appears and promptly withdraws into the night. Horatio recognizes the armour covering the Ghost and remarks that it is the very armour that the King wore "when he the ambitious Norway combated" (1.1.61). Barnardo, Marcellus, and Horatio suspect that the appearance of the ghostly King is an ominous message to all of Denmark, as they prepare for war with Norway. Horatio pleads with the apparition to reveal its intentions:

...stay, illusion;
If thou hast any sound or use of voice, Speak to me,
If there be any good thing to be done That may to thee do ease, and grace to me, Speak to me,
If thou art privy to thy country's fate, (Which happily forknowing may avoid)
O, speak! (1.1.127-35).

The Ghost, however, refuses to speak, and disappears as the cock crows. Horatio decides to tell Prince Hamlet all that has transpired, for he knows that the Ghost will only reveal his purpose to his son.

Act 1, Scene 2

The scene opens with King Claudius of Denmark giving a magnificently ostentatious speech on the death of his brother and his marriage to Queen Gertrude, his sister-in-law and Hamlet's mother. Claudius dispatches two of his courtiers, Cornelius and Voltimand, to Norway as peacekeepers, and he grants Laertes, who has come to Denmark specifically for the coronation of Claudius, permission to return to his studies in France. With such matters attended to, Claudius focuses on his troublesome nephew. He commends Hamlet on the length and severity of his mourning, but insists that his "unmanly" grief must come to an end. He reassures Hamlet that his father lost a father, and his father before him, and so on. He implores Hamlet not to return to his studies in Wittenberg, but to remain in Denmark to fulfill his role of courtier, cousin, and son.

Gertrude also pleads with Hamlet to stay, and calmly, he agrees: "I shall in all my best obey you, madam" (1.2.120). Satisfied with Hamlet's answer, the royal couple leave the room. Hamlet is left alone to expound his consuming rage and disgust at his mother for her incestuous marriage to Claudius, within a month of his father's death:

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason Would have mourn'd longer, --married with my uncle,
My father’s brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules: within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married; O most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

Hamlet is interrupted gratefully by Horatio, along with Barnardo and Marcellus. They tell him that the Ghost of his father has appeared on the castle wall, and Hamlet is at first shocked and disturbed: "Indeed, indeed, sirs, but this troubles me" (1.2.223). The three further describe the Ghost to Hamlet -- his silvered beard, his pale and sorrowful countenance, his full body armour -- and, with excitement Hamlet agrees to meet them on the platform, "twixt eleven and twelve".

Act 1, Scene 3
Laertes, who is about to leave for France, warns his sister, Ophelia, that Hamlet's love for her will undoubtedly not last. He will be the next king, and as such his wants must yield to the demands and interests of the citizens of Denmark. When it is no longer convenient or appropriate for Hamlet to love her, Laertes cautions, he will cast her aside. Ophelia defends Hamlet and Laertes lovingly responds "O, fear me not" (1.2.57). Their father, Polonius, enters the room and agrees that Ophelia has been seeing far too much of Hamlet. He begins a rant on the state of young men's morality, insisting that passion causes them to make false vows. He forbids Ophelia from seeing Hamlet again, and she respectfully obeys.

Act 1, Scene 4
Shortly before midnight, Hamlet meets Horatio on the battlements of the castle. They wait together in the darkness. From below they hear the sound of the men in the castle laughing and dancing riotously; the King draining his "draughts of Rhenish down". Hamlet explains to Horatio his dislike of such drunken behaviour. To Hamlet, drinking to excess has ruined the whole nation, which is known as a land full of drunken swines abroad. It takes away the country's accomplishments and renders men weak and corrupt. Then Horatio spots the Ghost approaching. Hamlet calls out to the Ghost and it beckons Hamlet to leave with it "as if it some impartment did desire" (1.4.67) to Hamlet alone. Despite the pleading of Horatio and Marcellus, who are afraid that the apparition might be an evil entity in disguise, Hamlet agrees to follow the Ghost and the two figures disappear into the dark.

Act 1, Scene 5
Hamlet will go no further with the Ghost and demands it speak at once. The Ghost tells Hamlet that the hour is approaching when it must return to the tormenting flames of purgatory and it reveals the hideous and demented truth to an anguished Hamlet, on the verge of hysteria throughout the conversation. The Ghost is indeed the spirit of Hamlet's father, and he has not died, but has been murdered, poisoned by his own brother, Claudius. The Ghost disappears, leaving Hamlet horrified and enraged. "O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!" (1.5.106). Hamlet is not yet sure how he will carry out his revenge, but he vows to think about nothing else until Claudius has suffered for
his betrayal. Amidst the echoing cries of the Ghost rising from beneath the earth, Hamlet insists Horatio and Marcellus swear that they will not reveal to anyone the events of that night. Upon Hamlet’s sword the two take their oath, assuring him that they will remain silent. Hamlet then calls to his father’s spirit “rest, rest” (I.V.179), and the scene and entire act closes with the lines that encapsulate Hamlet’s whole tragedy:

So, gentlemen,
With all my love I do commend me to you,
And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
May do to express his love and friend ing to you,
God willing, shall not lack: Let us go together,
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right! (1.5.181-88)

Act 2, Scene 1
Act 2 opens in a room in Polonius’ house, two months after Hamlet has seen his father’s ghost. Polonius is making arrangements to send his servant, Reynaldo, to Paris to spy on Laertes. Polonius justifies his actions by arguing that he is only concerned for the well-being of his son, so far away from home. The frightened Ophelia rushes into the room to tell her father that Hamlet came to see her while she was sewing, and that it had been a terrifying experience:

Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac’d,
No hat upon his head, his stockings foul’d,
Ungarter’d and down-gyved to his ancle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors... (2.1.77-83).
Polonius at once assumes that the loss of Ophelia’s affections has driven Hamlet insane. He expresses regret that he ever asked his daughter to behave so heartlessly toward the love-sick prince, and he decides the King must know that Hamlet has gone mad.

Act 2, Scene 2
King Claudius has noticed Hamlet’s strange behaviour even before old Polonius can tell his tale. Claudius has summoned two of Hamlet’s classmates at Wittenberg -- Guildenstern and Rosencrantz -- hoping that they will be able to uncover what has sparked such a transformation in Hamlet. The two leave to seek out the Prince and Polonius is granted license to speak before the King and Queen. He begins a tiresome explanation of his theories about the nature of Hamlet’s madness, and produces a love letter that Hamlet has sent to Ophelia. The Queen believes Polonius is probably right, and she knows that her hasty marriage and the death of Hamlet’s father have also been responsible for his dramatic change in behaviour. In the midst of the discussion, the King receives good news from his messengers, Voltimand and Cornelius, back from
Norway. They inform him that the King of Norway has decided to redirect his attack toward Poland, if the Norwegian army is granted safe passage through Denmark. Happy with the news, the King turns again to Polonius, and, after more tedious pontificating by the old man, the King agrees to eavesdrop on Hamlet when he next visits Ophelia.

Polonius sees Hamlet approaching and he advises the King and Queen to leave him alone with the Prince. Hamlet does speak with Polonius, but his answers are nonsensical and rude; due not only to his desire to perpetuate his facade as a madman, but also to his utter lack of regard for Polonius, whom he sees as a "great baby". After a few moments, Polonius gives up, convinced that Hamlet's babbling is a result of his insanity. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter the room and Hamlet greets them with excitement. Hamlet makes the two admit that they are spies of the King and then gives them an answer to the burning question: the trouble is, simply put, melancholia. Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that the players will be there soon, and when they do arrive, Hamlet greets them enthusiastically and asks the First Player to recite a scene from a story about the Trojan War. Hamlet is so moved that he asks the First Player to stop speaking and also to perform a play in front of the court that evening. The play will be *The Murder of Gonzago*, and Hamlet will intermittently add dialogue that he himself will write. Polonius leads Rozencrantz and Guildenstern away, and Hamlet is left alone, safe to reveal his secret anguish:

...Am I a coward,
Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face,
Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i’ the throat,
As deep as to the lungs? who does me this?
Ha!
'Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver'd, and lack gall
To make oppression bitter...(2.2.571-579).

Hamlet still cannot decide what is true or untrue; right or wrong. Is the Ghost an evil spirit? Is it tempting the Prince to orchestrate his own demise? Hamlet must be sure of his uncle’s guilt before seeking revenge. His plan is to reenact the murder of his father during the production of *The Murder of Gonzago*. If Claudius turns pale, Hamlet will have his proof:
The play’s the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king (2.2.606-07).

**Act 3, Scene 1**

Rozencrantz and Guildenstern report to the King that, while Hamlet seems distracted and sad, they do not have a concrete reason for his strange behaviour. The King is now forced to rely upon Ophelia for information about his nephew. Polonius arranges for Ophelia to be in a place where she will surely meet Hamlet, and then he and the King hide in wait for the Prince to arrive. Hamlet enters talking to himself, in a state of desperation, contemplating suicide:
To be, or not to be, that is the question;
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing, end them. To die; to sleep,
No more...(3.1.56-61)

Ophelia greets him, holding some trinkets he has given her in happier times. Hamlet, enraged at all women because of his mother's betrayal, can show Ophelia not a drop of affection. He lashes out at the poor girl, rudely suggesting that she quickly get to a nunnery. "Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?"(3.1.121). Hamlet charges from the room and Ophelia is left to believe that Hamlet has gone utterly mad. But the hiding King knows better than to blame Hamlet's behaviour on unrequited love. Fearing for his own safety, Claudius decides to send Hamlet away to England, accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Polonius, who continues to meddle in the whole affair, suggests that the Queen will surely be able to discover what troubles her son, and that she should meet in private with Hamlet after the play, with himself eavesdropping behind the chamber-curtains. The King agrees:

It shall be so:
Madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go (3.1.189-90).

Act 3, Scene 2

Hamlet coaches three of the Players and stresses the importance of the upcoming performance. They must not overact or improvise, for that will ruin the purpose of the play. Hamlet then confesses his plan to Horatio and asks him to watch the King's face during the poisoning scene. The King, Queen, Polonius, Ophelia, Rozencrantz and Guildenstern enter and take their seats. Hamlet, nervous and excited, lies down at Ophelia's feet. She tries to make conversation, but again, his answers are confusing and hostile. The Murder of Gonzago begins, and the King is visibly shaken. The King rises and Hamlet responds "What, frightened with false fire?" (3.2.263), chiding the King for being frightened by a mere play. The King calls for lights and the performance comes to an abrupt end. Hamlet and Horatio are left alone to discuss what has happened. They agree that the King has indeed behaved as a guilty man would, and Hamlet is overjoyed. When Rosencrantz comes in to tell Hamlet that the Queen wishes to see him, Hamlet revels in the idea of finally confronting her. "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (3.2.389).

Act 3, Scene 3

Polonius tells the King that Hamlet plans to visit his mother. The King is now aware that Hamlet knows his secret, and that he is no longer safe in his own castle. He soliloquizes on the crimes that he has committed, and falls to his knees to pray for forgiveness. But, he knows the prayer will remain unanswered, for he still enjoys the fruits of his treachery:

But O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murder"?
That cannot be, since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?

Hamlet, on his way to his mother's chamber, sees the King kneeling in prayer, and his first thought is how simple a task it would be to plunge a sword into his uncle's back. But that will not do, for the King would be murdered in a state of repentance and would surely go to heaven. This would be a benefit and not revenge. He wants to kill Claudius in the same state of sin as his father was in when Claudius poisoned him -- that is, not "full of bread" -- not penitent and fasting. Hamlet wants the King to die when he is drunk or enraged or in his incestuous bed with the Queen. So the Prince goes, and the King is left to finish his empty prayer.

**Act 3, Scene 4**
Polonius is already in the Queen's chamber, unable to resist telling her exactly what she should say to the Prince. As he is speaking, they hear Hamlet down the hall, screaming "mother, mother, mother!" (3.4.5). Polonius hides behind the wall hanging, intending to report every word that is said to the King. The Queen, terrified that Hamlet has come to murder her, cries out for help, and foolish Polonius echoes her cry from behind the curtain. Hamlet, thinking the King has followed him into the room, thrusts his sword into the drapery and pierces Polonius. When Hamlet realizes he has killed the wrong man, he stops to briefly address the situation, but shows no deep regret for taking Polonius' life. Hamlet holds Polonius himself directly accountable:

> Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell;
> I took thee for thy better; take thy fortune;
> Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger. (3.4.32-34)

After this brief acknowledgement of Polonius's death, Hamlet attacks his mother with a barrage of insults and accuses her of being a hypocrite and a harlot. She is bewildered, and begs Hamlet to have mercy, but he is relentless. The Ghost, who has before expressed his concern for Gertrude, appears before Hamlet and reminds him to take pity on the Queen and to "step between her and her fighting soul". Hamlet, with now a calm and civil tone, urges Gertrude to confess her sins and refrain from further intimacy with the King. He bids her goodnight and looks again upon the body of Polonius. Hamlet is aware of the severity of his deed: "[I] will answer well/The death I gave him" (3.4.76-77). Hamlet leaves, dragging Polonius' body behind him.

**Act 4, Scene 1**
The Queen informs the King that Hamlet has killed Polonius in a fit of madness, and he orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find the body. Claudius, happy he now has a reason to send Hamlet away, tells Gertrude that they will report Hamlet's crime to his council.

**Act 4, Scene 2**
In another room in the castle, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet alone. They confront him, asking "What have you done my lord, with the dead body? (4.2.5). Hamlet, scornfully contemptuous of the two courtiers, calls Rosencrantz a "sponge", 

---

Hamlet, on his way to his mother's chamber, sees the King kneeling in prayer, and his first thought is how simple a task it would be to plunge a sword into his uncle's back. But that will not do, for the King would be murdered in a state of repentance and would surely go to heaven. This would be a benefit and not revenge. He wants to kill Claudius in the same state of sin as his father was in when Claudius poisoned him -- that is, not "full of bread" -- not penitent and fasting. Hamlet wants the King to die when he is drunk or enraged or in his incestuous bed with the Queen. So the Prince goes, and the King is left to finish his empty prayer.

**Act 3, Scene 4**
Polonius is already in the Queen's chamber, unable to resist telling her exactly what she should say to the Prince. As he is speaking, they hear Hamlet down the hall, screaming "mother, mother, mother!" (3.4.5). Polonius hides behind the wall hanging, intending to report every word that is said to the King. The Queen, terrified that Hamlet has come to murder her, cries out for help, and foolish Polonius echoes her cry from behind the curtain. Hamlet, thinking the King has followed him into the room, thrusts his sword into the drapery and pierces Polonius. When Hamlet realizes he has killed the wrong man, he stops to briefly address the situation, but shows no deep regret for taking Polonius' life. Hamlet holds Polonius himself directly accountable:

> Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell;
> I took thee for thy better; take thy fortune;
> Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger. (3.4.32-34)

After this brief acknowledgement of Polonius's death, Hamlet attacks his mother with a barrage of insults and accuses her of being a hypocrite and a harlot. She is bewildered, and begs Hamlet to have mercy, but he is relentless. The Ghost, who has before expressed his concern for Gertrude, appears before Hamlet and reminds him to take pity on the Queen and to "step between her and her fighting soul". Hamlet, with now a calm and civil tone, urges Gertrude to confess her sins and refrain from further intimacy with the King. He bids her goodnight and looks again upon the body of Polonius. Hamlet is aware of the severity of his deed: "[I] will answer well/The death I gave him" (3.4.76-77). Hamlet leaves, dragging Polonius' body behind him.

**Act 4, Scene 1**
The Queen informs the King that Hamlet has killed Polonius in a fit of madness, and he orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find the body. Claudius, happy he now has a reason to send Hamlet away, tells Gertrude that they will report Hamlet's crime to his council.

**Act 4, Scene 2**
In another room in the castle, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet alone. They confront him, asking "What have you done my lord, with the dead body? (4.2.5). Hamlet, scornfully contemptuous of the two courtiers, calls Rosencrantz a "sponge", 

---
and is outraged that they dare demand an answer from him: "what replication should be made by the son of a king?" (4.2.12-13). They persist and order him to accompany them back to the King. Hamlet replies: "The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body" (4.2.27-28). Although this makes perfect sense -- Polonius is with the King, Hamlet's father, but Claudius remains alive -- the courtiers believe him to be incoherent. Hamlet agrees to see the King and runs off stage. He yells out to begin a game of hide-and-seek: "hide fox, and all after" (4.2.30-31). The fox is Polonius, for whom everyone is searching.

**Act 4, Scene 3**

In a meeting room in the castle, Claudius sits with his lords, and reports to them that Hamlet has killed his lord chamberlain. He tells them that the Prince must be exiled to England, but the public, who love Hamlet, must not know the true reason why he is leaving. Rosencrantz brings the guarded Hamlet before the King:

**King:** Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

**Hamlet:** At supper.

**King:** At supper, where?

**Hamlet:** Not where he eats, but where he is eaten: a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else fat to us, and we fat ourselves for maggots: your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table: that's the end. (4.3.17-25)

Hamlet finally tells Claudius that the body is on the stairs that lead into the lobby. The King informs Hamlet that he must leave for England, for his own safety. Hamlet slyly replies that he knows the King's real purpose for sending him away, but he nonetheless gladly obliges and bids farewell to his mother. When Hamlet exits the room, the King demands that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern follow the Prince closely, and they rush off. Claudius is now alone to reveal his sinister plan: he will send letters to England, a country "raw and red/After the Danish sword" (4.3.60-61), threatening war unless they assassinate Hamlet when he lands on British soil.

**Act 4, Scene 4**

On his way to England, Hamlet meets a Captain in the army led by Fortinbras, the Prince of Norway. Hamlet asks the Captain where they are going and who commands the troops, and the Captain tells him that Fortinbras is leading his men to capture a "little patch of ground/That hath in it no profit but the name" (4.4.18-19). Hamlet is impressed by the idea of so many soldiers preparing to die for an inconsequential piece of land, and he admires their resolve. He longs to be more like Fortinbras and his men -- they do not lament and waste time pondering when honour is at stake: they act. Hamlet vows that, if he must still think at all, he will think only bloody thoughts.

**Act 4, Scene 5**

Scene 5 opens back at the castle in Elsinore, where Hamlet has been gone a few days.
The Queen, Horatio, and a gentleman are discussing poor, tormented Ophelia, who has shattered under the strain of her father's death and Hamlet's cruelty and has gone completely insane. Ophelia enters the room and begins to sing a song about a dead lover and another about Saint Valentine's Day. The King arrives and speaks gently to Ophelia. She leaves, mumbling good night to the court, and the King asks Horatio to follow her.

A messenger enters and reports to Claudius that he prepare himself, for Laertes has heard of Polonius's death and holds the King responsible. He has raised a rebellion, and his men are crying "Choose we; Laertes shall be king!" (4.5.104). Suddenly, the doors burst open and Laertes rushes into the castle. He holds his Danish rebels at bay and speaks to Claudius alone: "O thou vile king/Give me my father!" (4.5.112-13). But Claudius knows how to control the young and impetuous Laertes, and soon directs Laertes's rage towards Hamlet. From outside the meeting room Laertes hears footsteps. It is his sister, Ophelia, and he greets her with an outpouring of grief, vowing that her "madness shall be paid with weight." Ophelia replies with a nonsensical song and gives her brother some violets. Laertes, overcome with sorrow, cries "Do you see this, O God?" The King offers his condolences once more and then suggests to Laertes that he focus on sweet revenge. They move to another room to discuss a course of action, and the scene comes to a close.

**Act 4, Scene 6**
A sailor brings Horatio a letter from Hamlet. He writes of his capture by pirates on his way to England. These "thieves of mercy" have released the Prince, on the condition that he will repay them when he returns to Denmark. Hamlet finishes the letter by asking Horatio to come to him at once, and to ensure that the King receive letters intended only for him. Finally, Hamlet writes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have continued their course for England. Horatio grants the sailor permission to take the letters to the King, imploring him to return swiftly, so that they can meet with Hamlet at once.

**Act 4, Scene 7**
The King and Laertes meet to discuss Hamlet. The King tells Laertes that he cannot harm the Prince directly, out of respect and concern for his beautiful Queen, who loves Hamlet above all else. Moreover, Claudius cannot enrage the people of Denmark, who adore the Prince and would surely rise up in protest. So the King proposes that they arrange a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet, and that Hamlet, thinking it is for sport, will use a blunt sword, while Laertes will use his own military sword. To ensure Hamlet's death, Laertes will coat the tip with a poison "So mortal, that but dip a knife in it/Where it draws blood, no cataplasm so rare/ ... can save the thing from death/That is but scratch'd withal". (4.7.142-45).

The King then suggests that a goblet full of poisoned wine be set out for Hamlet to drink if he becomes thirsty during the match. Suddenly, they hear noise outside the door. The Queen enters with the news that Ophelia has fallen off a willow tree branch and drowned. Laertes tries to fight his emotion, but storms out of the room. The King, worried that Laertes will act in haste and ruin the plan, rushes to follow him.
Act 5, Scene 1
Ophelia is to be buried in the churchyard and the two gravediggers preparing her grave find it unusual that someone who has committed suicide be buried on sacred ground. They agree that Ophelia is receiving a Christian burial because she is a gentlewoman, belonging to "great folk". They banter back and forth, trying to alleviate the boredom of digging. Horatio and Hamlet come upon the scene just as the second gravedigger is leaving to fetch some liquor from a nearby tavern. Hamlet is disturbed that the first gravedigger, who has begun to sing a love song, can be so happy on such a solemn occasion. Horatio replies that habit has made the gravedigger indifferent to the gravity of his work. The gravedigger produces a skull that belonged to the King's jester and Hamlet takes the skull, sparking his thoughts on death and its power to ravage even the most wealthy and powerful of people.

A funeral procession approaches, and Hamlet sees the King and Queen and Laertes and asks who has died. Laertes, hysterical with grief, leaps into the grave, crying "Hold off the earth a while/Till I have caught her once more in mine arms" (5.1.250-51). When Hamlet realizes who is being buried, grief overcomes him too, and he leaps into the grave with Laertes, and they begin to grapple. The King's attendants pull them out of the grave, and Hamlet exclaims: "I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers/Could not, with all their quantity of love/Make up my sum" (5.1.270-72). Hamlet is restrained and leaves the funeral, sorrowful and bewildered at Laertes' behaviour and hostility towards him: "What is the reason that you use me thus?/I lov'd you ever" (5.1.290). Hamlet did not intend to murder Polonius; it was an accident brought on by the old man himself. And Hamlet was en-route to England when Ophelia fell ill, so he really does not understand Laertes's rage. The King asks Horatio to go with Hamlet, and reminds Laertes of their plan for revenge.

Act 5, Scene 2
Back at the castle, Hamlet expresses regret for his outlandish behaviour at the grave site. He converses with Horatio, telling him that he intercepted the letter Claudius sent to England, and replaced his own name on the death warrant with the names of the courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet presumes that they met their end in England, but their deaths are not on his conscience, for they were destroyed by their own persistent meddling. Horatio is shocked by Hamlet's cynical apathy: "Why, what a king is this!" (5.2.62).

Hamlet reminds Horatio of the horrible events that have transpired, and asks him if it is not his right to feel anger and thirst for vengeance. The courtier Orsic enters and welcomes Hamlet back to Denmark. Orsic tells Hamlet that the King requests him to fight Laertes in a fencing match. The King has placed his bets on Hamlet, and has wagered a fine collection of goods: Barbary horses, French rapiers and poniards, and gun carriages. Hamlet accepts the challenge, believing that it is indeed only a friendly match. He does expresses a hint of apprehension "thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart" (5.2.202), but he dismisses it, telling Horatio that he is prepared to die if fate commands it so. The court assembles to watch the match, and the Queen
takes her place at the elaborately decorated head table. The King puts Laertes' hand into Hamlet's to start the duel. Hamlet begs Laertes's pardon, denying that he ever meant to hurt anyone. Laertes pretends to accept Hamlet's apology, saying "I do receive your offer'd love like love/And will not wrong it" (5.2.241-2).

They fight, and Hamlet easily wins the first round of combat. The King pours wine to toast Hamlet's success and tries to persuade Hamlet to stop and take a drink of the poisoned brew. The Prince does not want to interrupt his winning streak and refuses the wine, placing the goblet on the table beside the Queen. Gertrude is thirsty and, despite the King's plea, drinks from the cup. The fight intensifies and Laertes wounds Hamlet. But in the ensuing scuffle, they exchange rapiers, and Hamlet pierces Laertes with the poisoned sword. In a whirlwind of confusion, the Queen falls and dies after telling Hamlet that she has been poisoned. Laertes, knowing he will be dead in moments, exclaims "I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery" (5.2.297). He confesses to Hamlet that he has poisoned his sword and that Hamlet will too be dead in less than a half hour. Laertes admits to plotting against Hamlet and casts blame upon the King.

Hamlet stabs Claudius with Laertes's sword and forces him to drink the wine that has killed Gertrude: "Here thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane/Drink off this potion: is thy union here?/Follow my mother" (5.2.315-7). Laertes, with his dying breath, asks Hamlet to exchange forgiveness with him, and absolves him of Polonius's murder. Horatio tries to drink the poisoned wine, but Hamlet pleads with him to stay alive and tell the world his story. Although he lay dying, Hamlet remembers his people will be left without a king and so he chooses Fortinbras, the valiant Prince of Norway, to rule Denmark. Hamlet is finished: "The rest is silence" (5.2.348). Horatio bids a final adieu to his noble friend:

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!
Fortinbras orders four captains to carry Hamlet away and give him a soldier's burial, and he salutes Hamlet's kingly virtues as the play comes to a close.