

Hamlet

Schools' synopsis by Rebecca Lenkiewicz

Marcellus:

'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.'

On a dark, bitter, cold night Bernardo, a castle guard, keeps watch at Elsinore. His fellow sentry Marcellus joins him with Horatio who is visiting the fortress. For two nights running Marcellus and Bernardo have seen a Ghost, that of the King of Denmark, who died two months ago. Horatio is sceptical but the Ghost now appears to all three of them. Horatio asks it to speak. But it will not. And it disappears.

Claudius, the brother of the dead king, has succeeded him to the throne. He has also married Gertrude, his brother's widow. Laertes, the son of an old and senior counsellor Polonius, is part of Claudius' court. He asks Claudius' permission to return to Paris. The king grants him his request. Claudius turns next to Hamlet, whom he calls both cousin and son. Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, tries to persuade her son not to leave for Wittenburg where he has been a student. Claudius and Gertrude criticise the young Prince for being in mourning for so long. Hamlet agrees to stay in Elsinore and the royal party leave the chamber. Hamlet is left alone. He tells us of the anguish of his mother marrying his uncle within weeks of his father's death. His old friend Horatio enters and tells Hamlet about the Ghost of his dead father. They will watch together tonight.

The night is freezing and forbidding. The Ghost appears. Hamlet talks to it but it is silent. The Ghost indicates to Hamlet to go with him. The Prince's friends try to stop him. But Hamlet breaks from them and threatens to kill anyone who tries to hold him back. The Ghost tells Hamlet how he did not die from a snake bite but from his brother pouring poison into his ear. Hamlet must avenge his father's murder.

Hamlet feigns madness in order to accomplish his plan of killing Claudius. Ophelia is a young noblewoman. She lives at court and is Polonius' daughter. She has had romantic links with Hamlet in the past and Gertrude has always hoped that one day Ophelia and her son will marry. Ophelia tells Polonius how Hamlet has just come to her in a crazed state. Her father blames Hamlet's strangeness on his love for Ophelia. Polonius shares his theory with Gertrude and Claudius. Polonius and the king conceal themselves and watch Hamlet as he encounters and interrogates Ophelia. She knows they are being watched but he doesn't. He rejects her cruelly. Claudius and Gertrude recruit Hamlet's old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to try and find out what is wrong with him.

A company of actors arrive. Hamlet is fond of them and asks them to enact a play *The Mouse-trap* which is all about the killing of a king. They do this in front of the court and Claudius becomes agitated and angry. He calls for light and leaves. Hamlet's trap has worked. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Hamlet that his mother has summoned him to her room. On the way to Gertrude Hamlet sees Claudius praying. He could murder him now. But he decides against it, he wants to kill Claudius when he is doing an evil act not a holy one. Hamlet lashes out at Gertrude for marrying so quickly and to such an unworthy man. Hamlet realises that there is a third person hidden in the room. He stabs

behind a curtain with his sword. The blade goes through a body. Hamlet expects to find Claudius but instead it is Polonius, dead. Hamlet has unwittingly killed Ophelia's father. Claudius sends Hamlet to England and plots for him to be murdered. Laertes returns from Paris. He wants revenge for his father's murder. Laertes' sister Ophelia has lost her mind since their father's sudden death. She wanders around the court singing and giving out herbs for remedies. Ophelia falls into the river and drowns.

Hamlet escapes from Claudius' trap and returns. He and Horatio see an old man digging a grave. The gravedigger shows Hamlet a skull of the jester Yorrick who Hamlet knew. The funeral party arrive and Hamlet realises that Ophelia is dead. Laertes sees Hamlet and flies at him. Claudius arranges instead a friendly fight. He plots with Laertes that his sword will have a poisoned tip so that if Laertes even scratches Hamlet it will be fatal. Hamlet fights well and is winning but then Laertes lunges at him while Hamlet is unprepared. He draws blood. Hamlet is near to death but he does not know it. Hamlet picks up Laertes' sword and cuts him with it, still innocent of its being poisoned. Laertes realises that he too will soon die . Laertes confesses Claudius' plot to Hamlet. Gertrude drinks to her son but takes a cup that has been poisoned, intended for Hamlet. She dies. Hamlet realises he is dying too but he does manage to kill the king before losing all his strength. Horatio holds the dying Prince.

Hamlet:
'The rest is silence.'

Horatio:
'...Good night sweet Prince:
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.'

Young Fortinbras of Norway arrives and lays claim to the throne of Denmark.