

★ CLASSIC STAGE  
COMPANY  
PRESENTS

SHAKESPEARE'S

# HAMLET

★ 2015 ★  
STUDY GUIDE

CSC

# DEAR TEACHERS,

This study guide from the CSC archives was created by Kathleen Dorman, former CSC Director of Education. It's packed full of information about Shakespeare, his language, the play, and our 2015 production of *Hamlet*

Feel free to photocopy pages for your students!

We've also included bonus lessons that correspond with each of our workshops. For more updates on CSC, we encourage you and your students to follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook @classicstage



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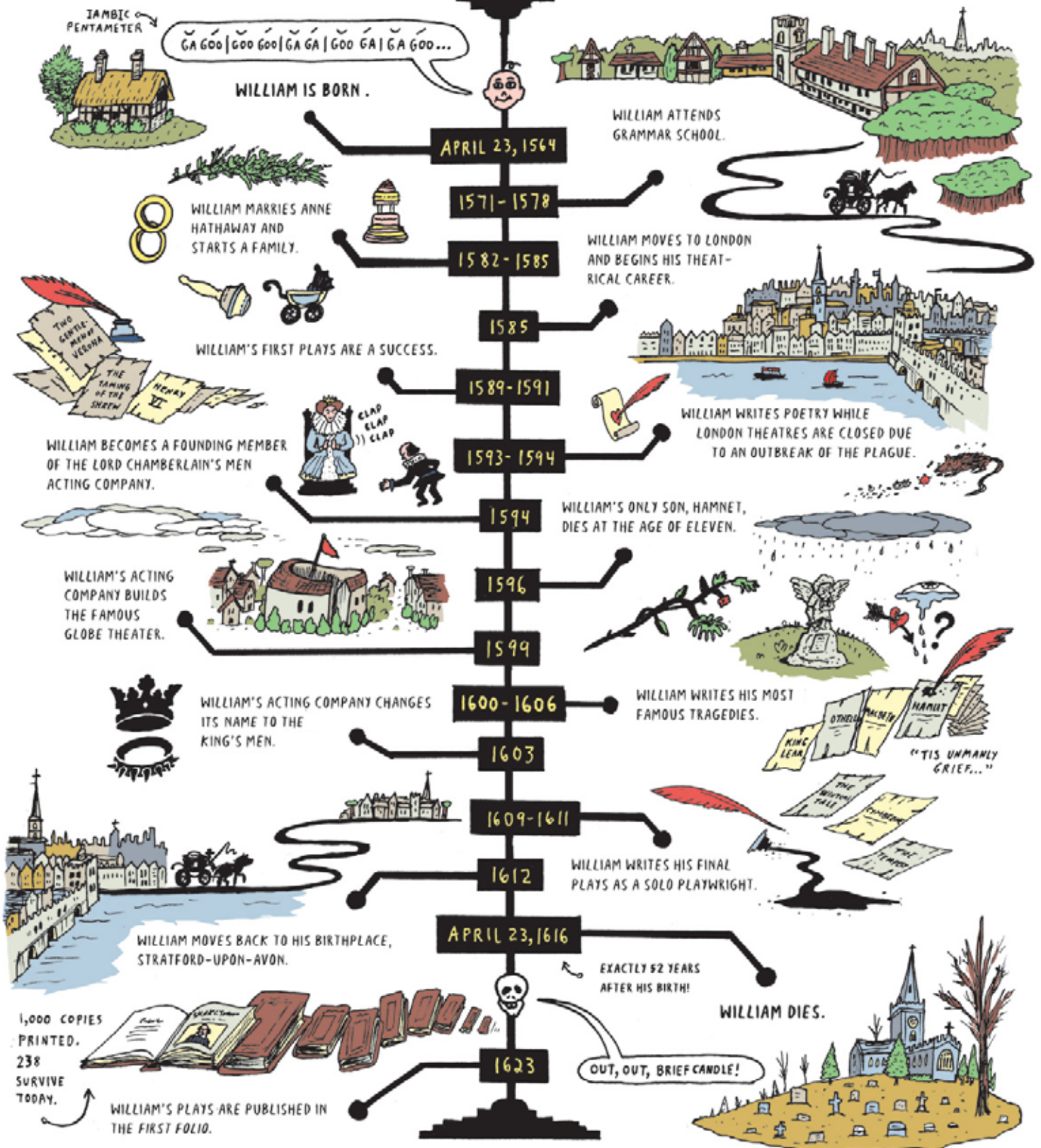
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**PART ONE:**  
**SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE AND THEATER**

# WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE - AN ILLUSTRATED BIOGRAPHY

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID HEATLEY



# ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

## IN 16TH CENTURY ENGLAND,

religion and politics were one and the same. People believed in the “divine right of kings”—that is, monarchs were given their right to rule directly from God, and were subject to no earthly authority. In 1534, King Henry VIII famously broke from the Catholic Church when they denied him the right to a divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, who had not produced a male heir. He declared himself head of the new Anglican Church, which eventually became part of the Protestant Reformation. His actions resulted in a time of bitter and violent religious disputes in England, and the crown changed hands frequently in a short period of time.

## BY THE TIME SHAKESPEARE WAS

**BORN IN 1564,** Queen Elizabeth—Henry VIII’s second eldest daughter, born to his second wife, Anne Boleyn—was in power. Her 44 years on the throne provided the kingdom with more stability than the previous short-lived reigns of her two half-siblings, Edward VI (crowned at age 9 and dead by age 16) and Mary Tudor (nicknamed “Bloody Mary” for the nearly 300 Protestants she had burned at the stake).

## QUEEN ELIZABETH’S REIGN WAS A TIME OF THRIVING CULTURE.

English citizens loved her, nicknaming her “Good Queen Bess”. Because she remained unmarried throughout her rule and did not give birth to an heir, a distant relative, King James VI of Scotland, was named as her successor. Both Elizabeth and James were great patrons of the theater, and enjoyed Shakespeare’s plays. In fact, King James honored Shakespeare’s company of actors with the title of “The King’s Men”, and they performed at court regularly.



## ELIZABETHAN TWITTER FEED

A CSC exclusive! We went back in time and got the scoop from the Royals themselves (plus Shakespeare, and his dad!) via Twitter.



**King Henry VIII** @VIIIKING · 1531

@CatAra you are outta here. This king needs a #maleheir. #kingsgreatmatter



**Anne Boleyn** @AnnieB · January 25, 1533

@CatAra check me out!!!. You better recognize, I AM THE NEW QUEEN! #cinderellastory



**Catherine of Aragon** @CatAra · December 1535

The #kingsgreatmatter is literally killing me. Missing my daughter @BloodyMary.



**Edward VI** @Eddie\_the\_KING · January 28, 1547

I’m the King of the world!!!! RIP, Dad @VIIIKING #kidsrule #9yearsold #winning



**Mary Tudor** @BloodyMary · July 19, 1553

Turn down 4 Protestantism. Turn up 4 Catholicism! This one’s for my mom, @CatAra, RIP. #sorrynotsorry



**Queen Elizabeth** @GoodQueenB · 1560

Philip II, Eric XIV of Sweden, Henry of Anjou...So many suitors. So little time. #singleNready2mingle (i/k I have work to do) #swiperight



**John Shakespeare** @Stratfor\_Dad · April 26, 1564

Baptized my son William today @HolyTrinityChurch! #blessed



**William Shakespeare** @BillyShakes · 1589

Working on my 1st play! RT with title suggestions. It’s a comedy w/ a lot of errors.



**Queen Elizabeth** @GoodQueenB · April 23, 1597

Saw a HYSTERICAL play by @BillyShakes! Check out Merry Wives of Windsor! #LoveMeSomeFalstaff #ChamberlainsMen



**King James I** @Scotty · March 24, 1603

RIP @GoodQueenB, thanks 4 the throne! #transformationtuesday #JacobeanEra



**King James I** @Scotty · May 19, 1603

Congrats to my boy @BillyShakes and his players. #thekingsmen #royalpatent #Othello #MeasureForMeasure



**Anne Hathaway** @ShakesWife · April 23, 1616

RIP/Happy birthday @BillyShakes. Thanks 4 the bed. @HolyTrinityChurch





# GROWING UP SHAKESPEARE:

## Fun, Games, and School

**BOYS AND GIRLS** began “petty school” around the age of four in order to learn how to read. Girls left school at age six to be taught at home by their mothers, or, if they were rich, a private tutor. If boys belonged to a middle class or wealthy family, they could continue on to “grammar school” after leaving petty school, or they were sent to work in some sort of trade, such as farming. At grammar school boys would study Latin, drama, poetry, and history for long hours with no desks. Learning Latin was important for any boy wanting to enter a career in law, medicine, or the Church. Because Shakespeare’s father made a sustainable living in public and government jobs, Shakespeare was able to attend grammar school where he likely picked up his love of drama and writing.



**FOOTBALL**—or soccer, as we know it—was a popular sport for people in the countryside around Shakespeare’s hometown. The balls were made from inflated pigs’ bladders! **(LEFT)** Shakespeare makes mention of this sport in *THE COMEDY OF ERRORS*: “Am I so round with you as you with me, that like a football you do spurn me thus?” Other popular sports of the day Shakespeare mentions in his works include tennis, bowling, wrestling, rugby, billiards, and archery.

**FESTIVALS** occurred at various times of the year. One of the most popular was on May 1st, May Day, the celebration of the arrival of summer! Columns were erected (maypoles) and adorned with ribbons and flowers, traditionally as part of a dance **(RIGHT)**. This tradition is reflected in *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM*: “They rose early to observe the rite of May.”



**RIGHT:** Children learned to read using “hornbooks” like these – a piece of wood covered with printed-paper, protected by a transparent sheet of horn.





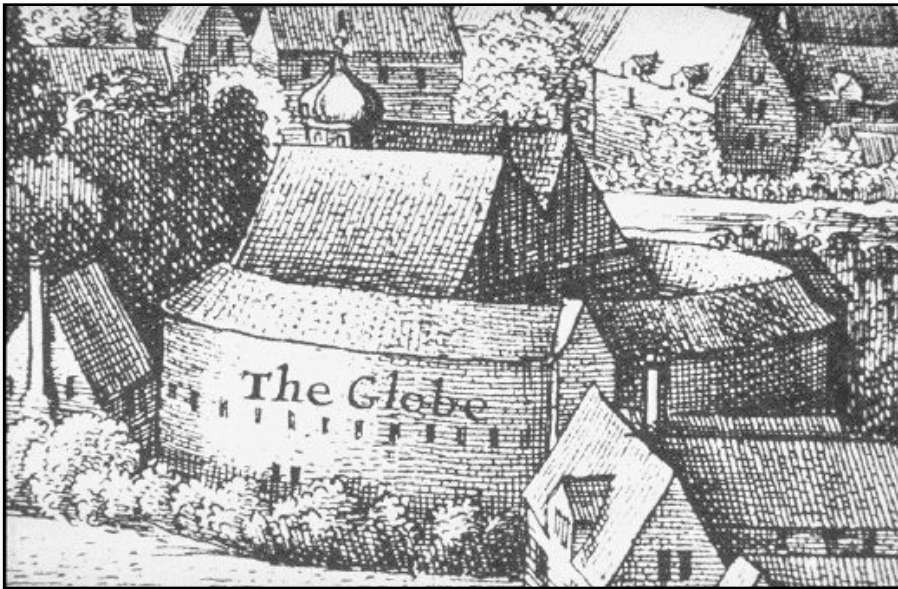
# LONDON CITY LIVING:

## Filth, Fashion, and Fighting

**IF YOU LIVED IN LONDON** during Shakespeare's time, you would have encountered overly crowded streets, heaps of trash on the sidewalk, and the heads of executed criminals placed on poles for all to see. But amidst the grime, there were also beautiful churches and large mansions filled with nobles and wealthy merchants. Most items you needed would have been purchased from street vendors, including vegetables, fruits, toys, books and clothing.



**ABOVE:** Like New York City today, space was tight. Many buildings were designed with vertical living in mind, as London quickly became the epicenter of culture in England.



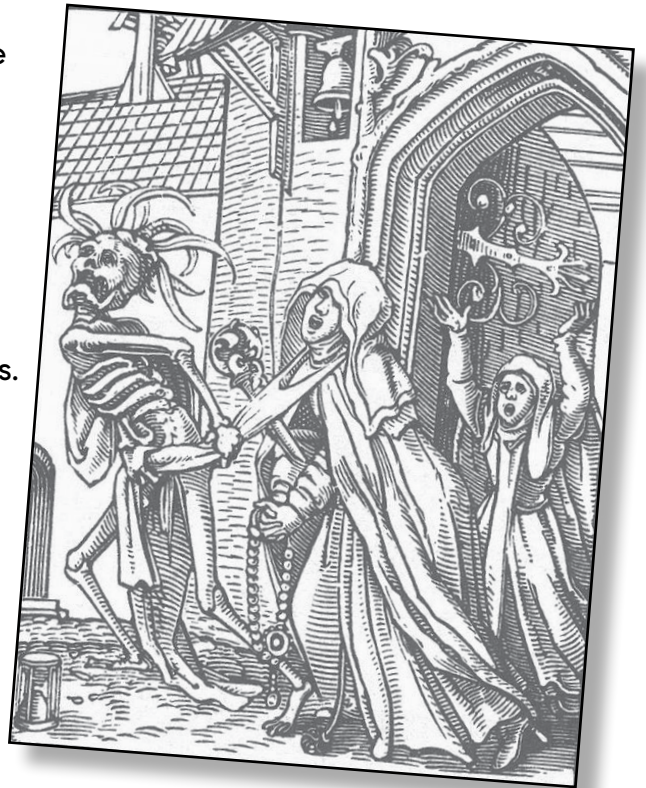
**SHAKESPEARE MOVED TO LONDON** to work in the theater. But theater wasn't the only cultural event happening in London. You could also view bloody tournaments between animals, and public executions! Gambling was also popular.

The first theater was built in 1576. Its shape, like The Globe (**ABOVE**), was influenced by bear fighting-rings (**RIGHT**), which were popular in London at the time. Shakespeare referenced this Elizabethan sport in Macbeth when Macbeth states, "They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly, but bear-like I must fight the course."





In 1592, the plague forced London theaters to shut their doors for two whole years. 12,000 Londoners lost their lives. With no playhouses to produce his works, Shakespeare focused his attention on writing narrative poems and sonnets for wealthy patrons.



**CLOTHING WAS A SIGN OF ONE'S RANK** so there were strict rules dictating what citizens could and could not wear. Those dressing above their status could be arrested! Exceptions were made for actors as they often played nobles on stage.



**ABOVE:** As a rule, the less practical the outfit, the higher the rank of its wearer. Wealthy men often wore hats with ostrich feathers for decoration, and huge “ruff” collars. Wealthy women wore wide padded dresses with puffy sleeves.



**RIGHT:** The less wealthy wore practical clothing conducive to labor. While the wealthy were wearing luxurious fabrics such as silk and velvet, the lower-status citizens often wore rough wool.





# THE COURT



**ABOVE:** The procession of Queen Elizabeth I. She is surrounded by her courtiers, ladies maids, and favored knights.

**FOOLS AND JESTERS** were a familiar sight at court. They traditionally wore motley, a colorful patchwork costume, and functioned like resident stand-up comedians or clowns. There were two types of fools: natural, and artificial. In Elizabethan England, mental and learning disabilities weren't understood, but those who had one of these disabilities could earn a living for themselves if they could make people laugh. Fools of this kind were called natural, meaning they were born "foolish." Artificial fools were deliberately foolish or eccentric for the purposes of entertainment, much like the comedians of today.

**CHIVALRY**, a code of ethics that glorified warfare and armed conflict as well as the pursuit of courtly ladies, was revered by Elizabethan society. They believed that honor was something you attained through physical prowess rather than moral integrity. Some of these values still exist in our culture today—superheroes are often heroic because they have incredible combat abilities. Legendary knights were the superheroes of the Renaissance!



**ABOVE:** A motley fool! Notice that this fool's motley costume has ass's ears attached, a common symbol of foolishness. He also carries a "ninny stick," a rod with a carved imitation of his own face at the end.

**LEFT:** One of the most important figures in the history of chivalry was Saint George who, according to legend, tamed and killed a dragon to save a damsel in distress and convert a city to Christianity.





# WELCOME TO THE GLOBE THEATRE

LET ME TELL YOU A LITTLE ABOUT "THIS WOODEN O."

THE COMPANY WAS HAVING DIFFICULTY RENEWING THE LEASE ON OUR FIRST THEATER, SO IN 1599 WE TOOK IT DOWN AND MOVED ITS TIMBERS ACROSS THE THAMES RIVER TO THE BANKSIDE AND BUILT THE GLOBE.

THE BANKSIDE IS GREAT—IT'S JUST OUTSIDE THE JURISDICTION OF THE CITY OF LONDON, SO WE'RE SAFE FROM CITY OFFICIALS WHO THINK THAT THE THEATER IS IMMORAL AND WANT TO ABOLISH IT.

THE ORIGINAL GLOBE BURNED DOWN IN 1613 WHEN CANNON FIRE—PART OF A PERFORMANCE OF HENRY VIII—ACCIDENTALLY SET THE THATCHED ROOF AFLAME! OOPS!

WE BUILT A SECOND, MORE ELABORATE GLOBE ON THE SAME SITE, AND IT REMAINED IN USE UNTIL CIVIL WAR BROKE OUT IN ENGLAND IN 1642.

THE FLAG IS FLYING! THAT MEANS WE'VE GOT A PERFORMANCE TODAY.

MY TICKET COST TWICE AS MUCH AS WHAT THAT GENTLEMAN PAID FOR HIS CUSHIONED SEAT. I'M RIGHT ABOVE ALL THE ACTION! EVERYONE CAN SEE THAT I'M A VIP.

THE STAGE ROOF PROTECTS THE ACTORS FROM THE WEATHER, AND ALSO ACTS AS A SET PIECE WE CALL THE "HEAVENS." SEE THE STARRY SKY WE PAINTED?

THE BALCONY IS GREAT FOR WINDOW SCENES.

O ROMEO, ROMEO, WHEREFORE ART THOU ROMEO?

DID YOU KNOW JULIET WAS PLAYED BY A BOY? NO GIRLS ALLOWED!

THIS IS A "THRUST" STAGE, MEANING WE HAVE AUDIENCE MEMBERS ON THREE SIDES. JUST LIKE AT CSC!

THIS TRAP DOOR LEADS TO "HELL," THE SPACE BENEATH THE STAGE. IT MAKES A GREAT GRAVE, TOO!

ALAS, POOR YORICK. I KNEW HIM...

MY TICKET COST TWICE AS MUCH AS WHAT THOSE "GROUNDLINGS" PAID TO STAND IN THE YARD BELOW. AND FOR AN EXTRA PENCE, I GET TO SIT ON A CUSHION!

THE GLOBE CAN ACCOMMODATE NEARLY 3,000 AUDIENCE MEMBERS. CSC'S HOUSE ONLY SEATS ABOUT 200.

CHEAPEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE! WELL, IT'S NOT A SEAT, EXACTLY. AT LEAST I GET TO SEE THE SHOW!

THE "GROUNDLINGS" SOMETIMES THREW FRUIT AT THE ACTORS IF THEY DIDN'T LIKE A PERFORMANCE!

Joseph B. Redman

DAVID HEATEY



## **PART TWO: THE PLAY**



PRINCE HAMLET AND HIS GOOD FRIEND, HORATIO ARE KEEPING WATCH OVER ELSINORE CASTLE IN DENMARK.



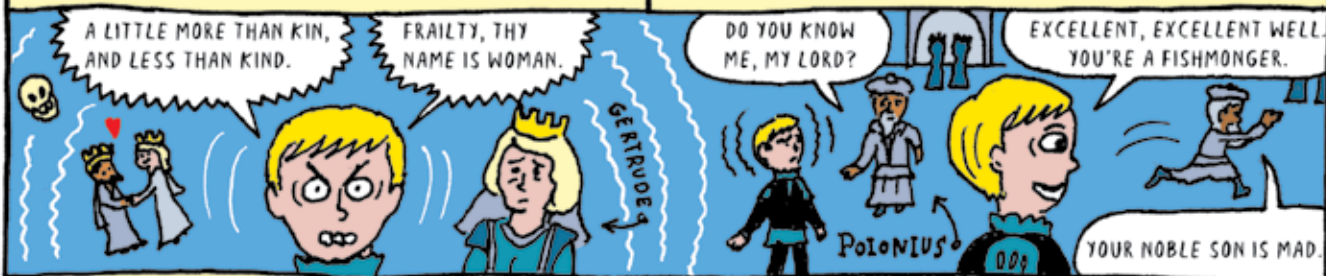
THE GHOST OF HAMLET'S FATHER APPEARS TO THEM!

THUS WAS I, SLEEPING, BY A BROTHER'S HAND OF LIFE, OF CROWN, OF QUEEN AT ONCE DISPATCHED.

MURDER!

HAMLET WAS FURIOUS WHEN HIS MOTHER, QUEEN GERTRUDE, MARRIED HIS UNCLE CLAUDIUS SO QUICKLY AFTER HIS FATHER'S DEATH. BUT HE HAD NOT SUSPECTED FOUL PLAY.

THE GHOST'S MESSAGE WEIGHS HEAVILY ON HAMLET. EVERYONE AT COURT, INCLUDING THE KING'S CHAMBERLAIN, POLONIUS, BEGINS TO NOTICE THAT HE IS ACTING STRANGELY.



A LITTLE MORE THAN KIN, AND LESS THAN KIND.

FRAILTY, THY NAME IS WOMAN.

DO YOU KNOW ME, MY LORD?

EXCELLENT, EXCELLENT WELL. YOU'RE A FISHMONGER.

YOUR NOBLE SON IS MAD.

WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW IS THAT HAMLET IS FEIGNING MADNESS TO KEEP THEM FROM NOTICING THAT HE IS SUSPICIOUS OF HIS UNCLE.

POLONIUS BEGINS TO THINK THAT HAMLET'S MADNESS IS CAUSED BY LOVE FOR HIS DAUGHTER, OPHELIA. BUT EVEN SHE IS SUBJECT TO HAMLET'S IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOR.



I AM BUT MAD NORTH-NORTH-WEST; WHEN THE WIND IS SOUTHERLY, I KNOW A HAWK FROM A HANDSAW.

I DID LOVE YOU ONCE.

YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE BELIEVED ME. I LOVED YOU NOT.

INDEED, MY LORD, YOU MADE ME BELIEVE SO.

I WAS THE MORE DECEIVED.

OPHELIA

UNSURE OF WHO TO TRUST OR WHAT TO DO, HAMLET BECOMES DEPRESSED. SHOULD HE KILL HIMSELF? OR HIS FATHER'S MURDERER? HE HESITATES TO TAKE REVENGE WITHOUT MORE PROOF...

TO BE, OR NOT TO BE – THAT IS THE QUESTION.

THEN ONE DAY, A TROUPE OF ACTORS ARRIVES, MUCH TO HAMLET'S DELIGHT. HE FINALLY HAS AN IDEA OF HOW TO REVEAL THE TREACHERY OF KING CLAUDIUS!

THE PLAY'S THE THING WHEREIN I'LL CATCH THE CONSCIENCE OF THE KING.



CLAUDIUS

IN FRONT OF THE COURT, THE PLAYERS PERFORM A SCENE – WRITTEN BY HAMLET – THAT MIMICS HIS FATHER'S MURDER. CLAUDIUS, VISIBLY DISTURBED, HASTILY EXITS, LEAVING HAMLET DOUBTLESS OF HIS UNCLE'S GUILT.

GIVE ME SOME LIGHT. AWAY!

GIVE O'ER THE PLAY.

O GOOD HORATIO, I'LL TAKE THE GHOST'S WORD FOR A THOUSAND POUND.



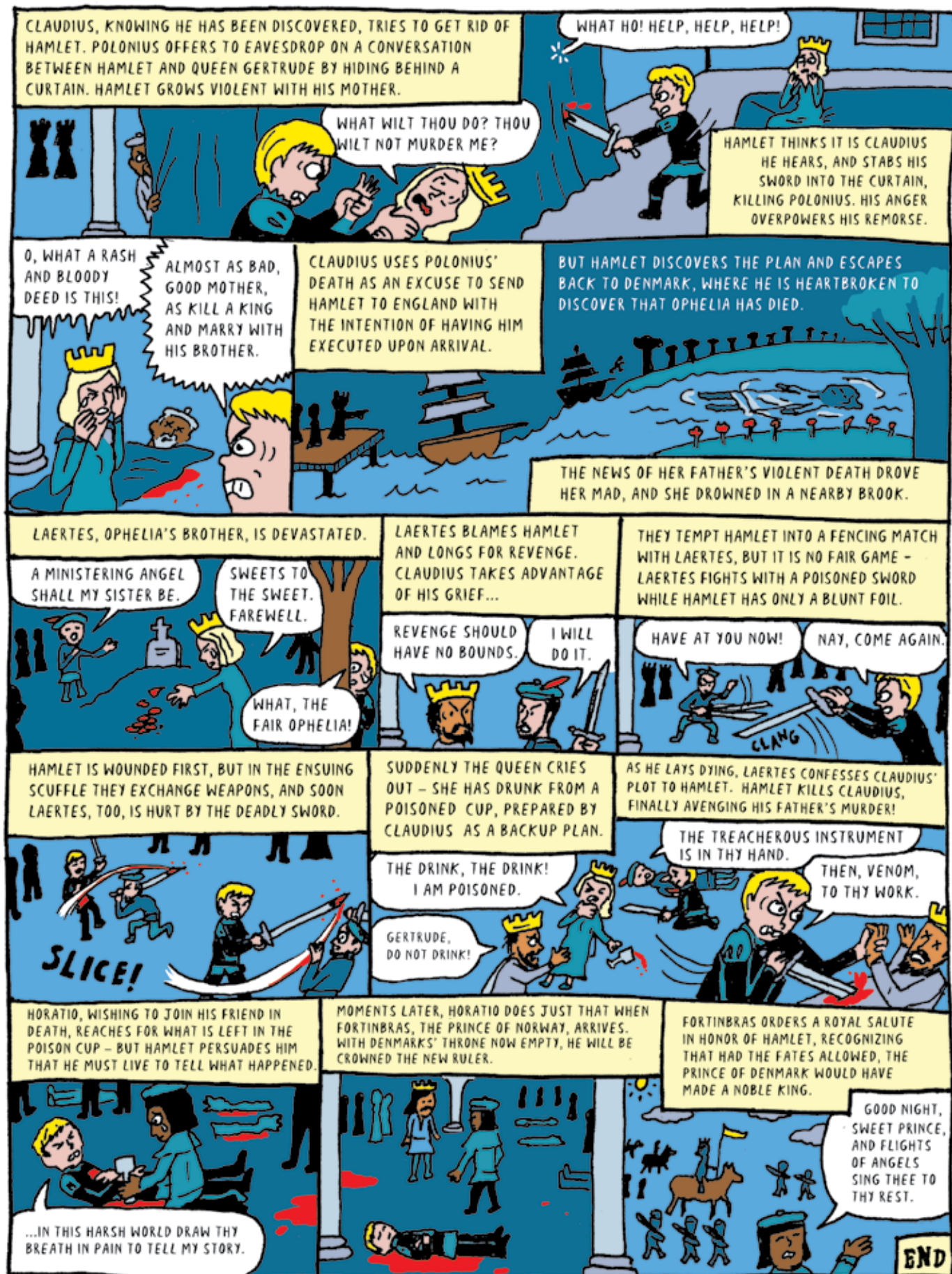
THY NATURAL MAGIC AND DIRE PROPERTY ON WHOLESOME LIFE USURP IMMEDIATELY.

THE KING RISES.

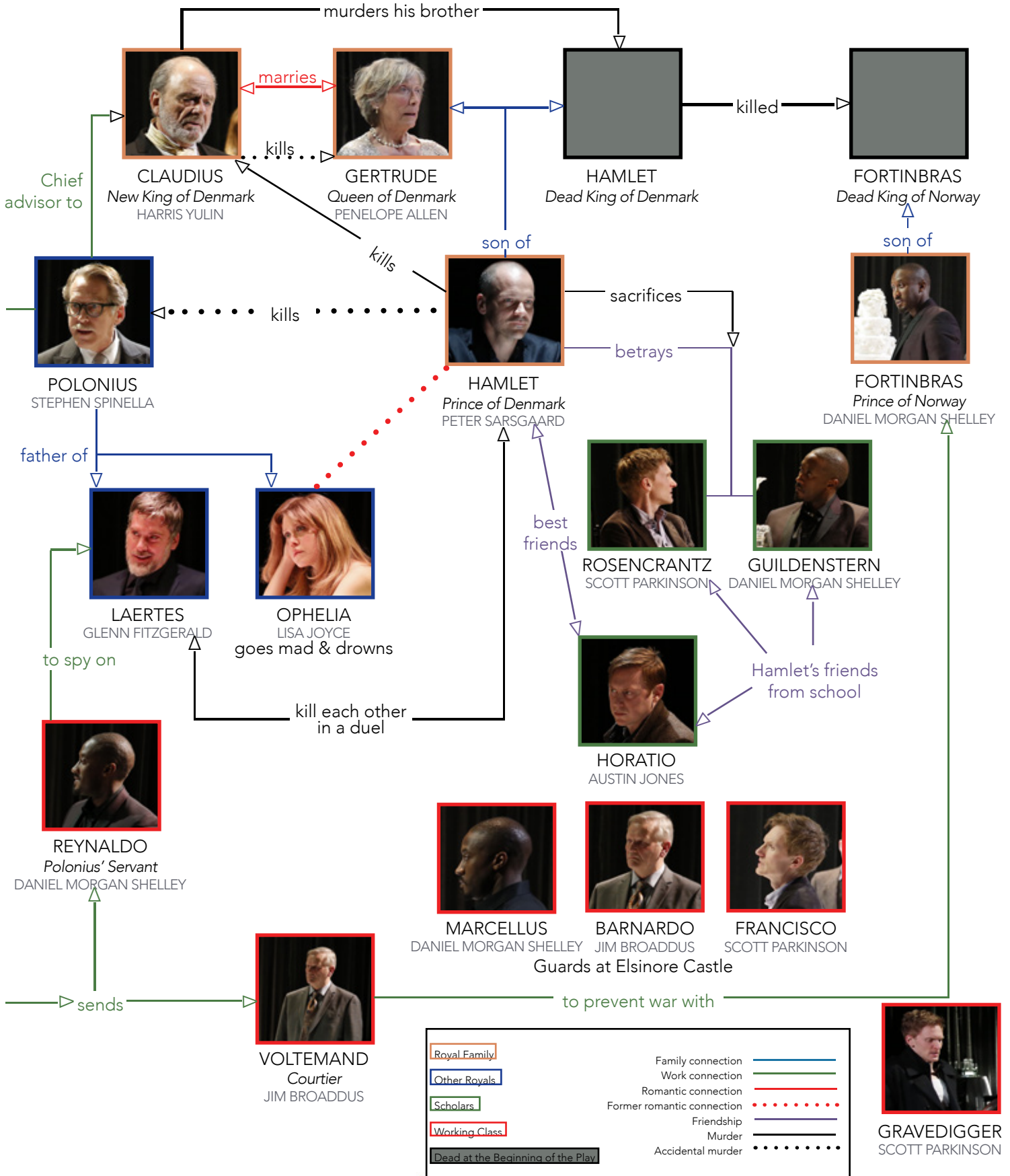
HOW FARES MY LORD?











# NOTES ON THE PLAY

## I Will Have My Revenge

Hamlet isn't just any tragedy—it's a revenge tragedy, a form that was crazy popular in Elizabethan England, influenced by even older Greek and Roman tragedies. The most famous of these (aside from HAMLET) is THE SPANISH TRAGEDY, written by a contemporary of Shakespeare's named Thomas Kyd. Many scholars believe that Kyd wrote something they like to call the UR-HAMLET, because they don't know its real title (sadly, the entire play has been lost over time) but know that Shakespeare likely based his own version on this one.

So, what makes for a revenge tragedy? You will generally find these elements: a hero that wants revenge; a secret murder and a vengeful ghost; madness (feigned or real); gory scenes and a rising body count; and our hero more than likely dies a violent death. Sound familiar? The major difference between HAMLET and other revenge tragedies of the time is that Hamlet takes time to pause before taking action, calling into question the righteousness of revenge – a rather modern take on a very ancient theme.



Peter Sarsgaard (Hamlet).

Revenge is cyclical—as soon as one party is appeased, the other is incensed to action, bringing both back to where they started. Have you ever been caught in a cycle of revenge? Can you think of issues in this country and others where two sides are perpetually trying to get even with one another?

## What's Up with that Skull?

It is perhaps the most famous image in Shakespeare's most famous play: Hamlet, holding a skull. People often picture Shakespeare himself as the guy holding the skull—it's that iconic. It's also a moment that is frequently misquoted, wrongly associated with another famous part of this play: Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy. (Go ahead and google image search "to be, or not to be" and see how many pictures of guys holding skulls appear.)

This confusion is not without reason: both Hamlet's speech and the moment with the skull show Hamlet facing mortality. It's no secret that a lot of characters die over the course of this play (at least eight!), and in a variety of different ways. It's no wonder then that Hamlet spends a great deal of time pondering one of mankind's great dilemmas: if death is inevitable, then what is the purpose of life?



Scott Parkinson (Rosencrantz), Peter Sarsgaard (Hamlet) & Daniel Morgan Shelley (Guildenstern).

The skull belongs to Yorick, the old court jester at Elsinore Castle. The gravedigger Hamlet encounters in this scene is also considered to be a clown. Why might Shakespeare plant the morbid image of the skull right in the middle of the most comedic scene in the play? What effect does comedy have on a dramatic moment, or vice versa, be it on stage, in movies and television, or in real life?





## Something Rotten

In Elizabethan times, people believed that a hierarchy known as the Great Chain of Being governed the world. God, as creator, was at the top; various angelic spirits were next; then humans, who also have spirits but are tied to their bodies on earth. Things thought to have bodies but no souls, like animals, came next; then plants; and lastly stones. Elizabethans believed that if anyone were to try to overpower this natural order, unnatural things would come to pass... for example, a ghost might start to hang around your castle grounds.

Marcellus, upon seeing the dead King Hamlet's ghost, says "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." What does he mean by this exactly? Well, just as God

was at the top of all living things, so were kings and other rulers above all earthly beings. In his works, Shakespeare often compares the ruling body to the human body: the head of government is the brains behind the operation. So if the ruler is corrupt, it is as though the head has become unable to reason, and the rest of the body – the country – becomes diseased, too. Claudius, in killing his brother, has disrupted the natural ruling order, and this unnatural deed is what is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Peter Sarsgaard (Hamlet), Harris Yulin (Claudius), Glenn Fitzgerald (Laertes), Stephen Spinella (Polonius) & Penelope Allen (Gertrude).



A lack of reason leads to madness, of which we find plenty in HAMLET. Hamlet tells us that he is just putting on an "antic disposition," meaning he's faking it. Is Hamlet really in control of his "madness," or is he slowly losing it? Would a plea of insanity hold up in court today if Hamlet was held accountable for some of his actions?



Harris Yulin (Claudius), Lisa Joyce (Ophelia) & Austin Jones (Horatio)

## Speak the Speech

Little is known of Shakespeare's personal theories and criticisms of the theatre aside from what his characters tell us in a select few plays. In AS YOU LIKE IT, the clown Jaques tells us that "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." In A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, we see an example of what not to do via the Rude Mechanicals, who put on a comically bad version of what will later become Shakespeare's drama ROMEO & JULIET. But it is only in HAMLET that we get an extensive lecture on what makes for good acting, when Hamlet speaks to the troupe of actors about to perform his Mousetrap play. He famously says, "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action," and asks them to hold "the mirror up to nature"—instructions that many an actor still turns to for guidance today.

Throughout this play, Hamlet is very aware of how he is perceived by others—he is constantly performing. How much of your own life is a performance? What different roles do you play each day? Do you present yourself differently online than in real life?



# QUIZ: WHO ARE YOU IN *HAMLET*

## 1. YOUR IDEA OF A PERFECT SATURDAY NIGHT IS:

- A. A debate with yourself questioning your existence
- B. Observing your domain
- C. Partying it up with your man/girl
- D. A lively game of chess
- E. A quiet night with your crush

## 2. YOUR SENIOR CLASS SUPERLATIVE WOULD BE:

- A. Most dramatic
- B. Most likely to take over the world
- C. Kindest
- D. Most loyal
- E. Most dedicated

## 3. YOU GET INTO A FIGHT WITH YOUR PARENTS. YOU:

- A. Know that you are right, and you are going to prove it
- B. Force them to see things your way
- C. Forget it, the problem will go away
- D. Convince everyone else that you are right until your parents have to believe you
- E. Try to see things their way

## 4. YOUR FAVORITE HASHTAG IS:

- A. #TBT
- B. #sorrynotsorry
- C. #blessed
- D. #win
- E. #love

## 5. IF YOU WERE AN ANIMAL, YOU WOULD BE A:

- A. Panther
- B. Snake
- C. Horse
- D. Fox
- E. Puppy

## 6. IF YOU HAD A SUPERPOWER, IT WOULD BE:

- A. The power of all knowing
- B. The power of immortality
- C. The power to always keep the peace
- D. The power of persuasion
- E. The power to turn back time

## 7. YOUR FAVORITE TIME OF DAY IS:

- A. Midnight
- B. Sunrise
- C. Mid-morning
- D. Evening
- E. Afternoon

## 8. YOUR FAVORITE NUT BUTTER IS:

- A. Peanut
- B. I'm allergic
- C. Honey Peanut
- D. Almond
- E. Chocolate Hazelnut

## 9. YOUR FRIENDS WOULD SAY YOU'RE:

- A. Smart
- B. Ambitious
- C. Cheerful
- D. Loyal
- E. Caring

## 10. YOUR FAVORITE COLOR IS:

- A. Forrest Green
- B. Deep Red
- C. Bright Yellow
- D. Burnt Orange
- E. Sky Blue

## IF YOU ANSWERED MOSTLY:

- A. You are Hamlet
- B. You are Claudius
- C. You are Gertrude
- D. You are Polonius
- E. You are Ophelia





## TABLE WORK: UNPACKING SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

**IS THIS REALLY WRITTEN IN ENGLISH?** Yes, it is! But it's also poetry. Elizabethans used poetry for the same reason we still use it today: to express heightened states of emotion. So the language may be more densely packed with all those great rhetorical devices you learned in English class—metaphors, alliteration, irony—but it's definitely still English.

**DID PEOPLE IN SHAKESPEARE'S DAY SPEAK IN VERSE?** No, no more than we speak in rap today. But people both then and now enjoy the rhythm and rhyme of verse. It helps us tune in more immediately, more completely to the feelings and choices of the characters.

## IS SHAKESPEARE HARDER FOR ACTORS TO PERFORM THAN REGULAR PLAYS?

Actually, for most actors, Shakespeare is easier! The rhythm of the language makes it easy to memorize. (You know how song lyrics get stuck in your head, or how you can remember silly little rhymes from when you were a kid? It's like that.) And all those rhetorical devices act as clues to tell the actors how their character feels.

To find those clues, a company will begin their rehearsal process with table work.

*Shakespeare invented many words and phrases that we use on a regular basis today. Below are some examples.*



## Verse or Prose?

All of Shakespeare's language falls into one of two categories: verse or prose. Prose is what we think of as everyday speech, without specific rules regarding rhyme or rhythm. Verse, then, can be defined as giving order or form to the random stress patterns of prose. For actors, verse is often easier to memorize because of the rhythm. It's almost like memorizing lyrics to a song.

A quick way to tell verse from prose: lines of verse begin with capital letters, while prose will appear in paragraph form.

## Blank Verse

Blank Verse is the standard poetic form Shakespeare uses in his plays. It can also be defined as unrhymed iambic pentameter—that is, a line of poetry containing five ("penta" from the Greek prefix meaning five) iambic feet, not rhyming with any adjacent line. That's ten syllables all together. The pattern flows easily for speakers of English, because the stresses match the human heart beat:

ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM

or, a good way to remember the word "iamb" is to think of it as:

i AM, i AM, i AM, i AM, i AM

If you say, "The Yankees and the Mets are famous teams." with natural inflection, you will have spoken a line of iambic pentameter.

The YANK | ees AND | the METS | are FA | mous TEAMS

Here are two more:

I TAKE | the SUB | way EV | ery DAY | to SCHOOL

I CAN'T | go OUT | be CAUSE | my HOME | work's LATE

Now say a line from HAMLET:

**HAMLET**

A little more than kin, and less than kind.

a LIT | tle MORE | than KIN | and LESS | than KIND

A repeating combination of stressed and unstressed syllables is known as a foot, which is the basic unit of verse.

An iamb is a foot of poetry containing two syllables, with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: ta DUM.

## Prose

Prose is the everyday language used then and now. Since verse was the conventional method of writing in Elizabethan England, Shakespeare was actually pushing the literary boundaries by including prose in his plays.

At first glance, it may seem that Shakespeare used verse and prose to indicate a character's status (rich, powerful, educated characters speak in verse; poor common, fools speak in prose) but upon closer look, you'll find that many characters go back and forth between verse and prose, and they do so at very specific moments in the play. Actors pay close attention to when characters speak in verse and when they speak in prose because Shakespeare made these choices on purpose, and it can tell the actor a lot about how their character thinks and feels.

Hamlet himself speaks most of the prose in this play, usually as part of his "antic disposition." He also drops into prose when addressing his childhood friends and characters with lower status than him, such as the Gravedigger, who does not seem to realize who Hamlet is when he presents him with Yorick's skull:





## HAMLET

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rims at it.

Why might Hamlet choose to speak in prose to accentuate his madness to the court? Other characters, such as Polonius and Ophelia, fall into prose along with Hamlet when addressed by him in this way. Why would they do so?

What was Shakespeare looking to convey to his actors and audiences about these characters by writing in this way?

## Irregular Verse

Shakespeare doesn't always write verse in perfect iambic pentameter. The rhythmic patterns change, and so do the number of syllables. This was pretty innovative stuff in Shakespeare's day. He was one of the first writers to break form. Just like a change from prose to verse is a clue for the actor, so is a variation in the verse pattern. Here are some of the most common variations found in HAMLET.

There are many, many examples of irregular verse in HAMLET. What do you think this might tell the actors about their characters?

## Shared Lines & Split Lines

Shakespeare sometimes splits a line of verse, so that two characters share the ten syllables. This is called a shared line or a split line, and it helps to show quick thinking or strong emotion, as well as creating a sense of accelerated action. Thus we have both the effect of poetry AND of natural speech.

Have a look at these lines shared by Hamlet and Ophelia as she attempts to return to him the love tokens they once exchanged:

OPHELIA

There, my lord.

HAMLET

Ha, Ha! Are you honest?

OPHELIA

My lord?

HAMLET

Are you fair?

OPHELIA

What means your lordship?

They scan as:

THERE | my LORD | ha HA | are YOU | hon EST?  
my LORD? | are you | FAIR? what | MEANS your | LORD ship?

That's two lines of verse, shared by two characters, over the course of five sentences that are so simplistic, they would probably not be taken for poetry on their own!

There is a lot more that is irregular about this passage of text than just the shared lines. What else do you notice? The line that immediately follows this exchange, spoken by Hamlet, is in prose. Do you think Ophelia will follow his lead and reply in prose as well?



## Feminine Endings and Extra Syllables

A “feminine ending” is a line of verse that ends with an unstressed extra syllable. The result is that the rhythm of the verse is thrown off just enough to indicate that the characters feel unsettled about something. Not surprisingly, almost a quarter of the verse in HAMLET follows this pattern! Here’s a famous example, spoken by Hamlet:

### HAMLET

To be, or not to be, that is the question.

to BE | or NOT | to BE | that IS | the QUEST | ion

## Rhetorical Device

A rhetorical device is a technique that an author or speaker uses to have an effect on its audience. They go beyond the literal meanings of the words, making use of the sounds and the imagery to create imaginative new ways for an audience to connect with the author’s ideas. Shakespeare would have studied and known how to make use of a very, very long list of rhetorical devices – but the more common examples are things that you’ve probably encountered in English class, such as metaphor, simile, and alliteration.

Rhetoric is the art of speaking or writing effectively.

## Hyperbole

One rhetorical device that appears frequently in HAMLET is hyperbole – an embellished statement not intended to be taken literally, but used to create effect. Hamlet frequently uses hyperbole to try and convey his extreme emotions to others. Take this example, where upon learning of Ophelia’s death he tries to compare his love for her to that of Laertes, her brother:

### HAMLET

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers  
Could not, with all their quantity of love,  
Make up my sum.

When we talk about whether something lives up to its “hype”, we are discussing if the real version is anything like the exaggerated version, good or bad. Does Hamlet believe in his own hype? Does he believe that some of the hyperbolic statements he makes are true? Does anyone else believe him?





# WHAT TO WATCH FOR...

## QUESTIONS AND THEMES TO CONSIDER

### Revenge

- How many different revenge plots are at work in the story of HAMLET? Have revenge tragedies ever reemerged as a fad in pop culture since Elizabethan times? Can you think of movies or television programs that include elements of a revenge tragedy? (For more on revenge tragedies, see NOTES ON THE PLAY.)
- In CSC's production, the director made choices having to do with the ghost of King Hamlet that altered the standard interpretation of Hamlet's revenge. How could a production's interpretation and realization of the ghost affect how you see the character of Hamlet and the other characters in this play?
- How does this change how you see other characters in this play?

### Mortality

- Is Hamlet's anger at his mother and his uncle justified, or over-amplified by his grief? How does grief complicate our worldview and our relationships?
- Look for language with imagery of death and decay as you read this play. How might these images be realized onstage? Consider all of the design elements of the play (costumes, props, set, lights, sound).
- It's not easy to stage a death scene, let alone one where as many people are killed as in the final scene in HAMLET. How does the director go about solving this problem? Think of how you would solve it in a theater like CSC.

### Madness

- Is Hamlet definitely faking his madness, or is he slowly going insane? What choices could an actor make to lead you to believe one way or the other? How could other actors respond to him, and how might this affect your perception?
- Does Hamlet really love Ophelia? What purpose does her madness serve? What is different or similar about their madness, and how it might be portrayed onstage?

### Family

- Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death is often interpreted as commentary on the oppression she experiences as a woman—Ophelia's heavy dress is what weighs her down, and in the end, drowns her. Do you think that Ophelia's strong sense of duty to her father and brother is to blame for her descent into madness?
- Hamlet is outraged by his mother's ability to simultaneously grieve for her late husband while taking on a new one, causing him to question the legitimacy of her grief. Do you think she complicit in the murder of King Hamlet? Were she and Claudius carrying on an affair prior to King Hamlet's murder?
- Most of Shakespeare's plays deal with father-daughter relationships, not father-son relationships. Why do you think HAMLET is the play that bucks this trend?

For more ideas on what to watch for, see **NOTES ON THE PLAY** on page 15.



## **PART THREE: SOURCES**



# SOURCES

## *TEACHING SHAKESPEARE*

by Rex Gibson

## *Shakespeare for Dummies*

by John Doyle (CSC Artistic Director) and Ray Lischner

## *The Friendly Shakespeare*

by Norrie Epstein

## *The Genius of Shakespeare*

by Jonathan Bate

## *Brush Up Your Shakespeare!*

by Michael Macrone

## *Essential Shakespeare Handbook*

by Leslie Dunton-Downer and Alan Riding

## *William Shakespeare and The Globe*

written and illustrated by Alik

## *Eye Witness Shakespeare*

written by Peter Chrisp, photographed by Steve Teague

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to all who contributed to this guide:  
Braden Cleary, David Heatley, Sophie Rosenthal

This guide created by Kathleen Dorman in 2015, and updated by Marella Martin Koch in 2020.





Classic Stage Company (CSC) is the award-winning Off-Broadway theater committed to re-imagining the classical repertory for contemporary audiences. Founded in 1967, CSC uses works of the past as a way to engage in the issues of today. Highly respected and widely regarded as a major force in American theater, it has become the home to New York's finest established and emerging artists, the place where they gather to grapple with the great works of the world's repertory.



The National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest presents *Shakespeare in American Communities*. CSC is one of 40 professional theater companies selected to participate in bringing the finest productions of Shakespeare to middle- and high-school students in communities across the United States. This is the twelfth year of this national program, the largest tour of Shakespeare in American history.



This program is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, and is made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature. Special thanks to the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust for supporting Classic Stage Company.