

# Hamlet

- Date** ■ 1599–1601  
**Place** ■ London  
**Type of Source** ■ Play  
**Author** ■ William Shakespeare  
**Historical Context** ■ The English Renaissance was especially strong in literature and drama. The reign of Queen Elizabeth I in particular is seen as a Golden Age of English writing. William Shakespeare is considered the greatest English poet and playwright of his time. He wrote 38 plays for his company, the Lord Chancellor's Men (later the King's Men), who performed at the Globe Theater in London. *Hamlet* was one of Shakespeare's earlier tragedies and is one of the most beloved plays in history.  
**Internal Context** ■ Prince Hamlet is mourning the death of his father, the King of Denmark, when he hears reports of a ghost haunting the grounds of Elsinore castle. Hamlet confronts the ghost, who tells him the truth about his father's death.

## Act 1, Scene 5

Enter HAMLET and GHOST

**HAMLET** Where wilt thou lead me? speak; I'll go no further.

**GHOST Mark me.**

**HAMLET** I will.

**GHOST** My hour is almost come,  
When I to **sulphurous** and tormenting flames  
Must render up myself.

**HAMLET** Alas, poor ghost!

**GHOST** Pity me not, but **lend** thy serious hearing  
To what I shall unfold.

**HAMLET** Speak; I am bound to hear.

**GHOST** So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.

**HAMLET** What?

**GHOST** I am thy father's spirit,  
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to **fast** in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my **days of nature**  
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid  
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,  
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word  
Would **harrow up** thy soul, freeze thy young blood,  
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,  
Thy knotted and combined locks to part  
And each particular hair to stand on end,  
Like quills upon the fretful **porpentine**:

**Mark me**  
*listen to me*

**sulphurous**  
*full of sulfur. Sulfur, also called brimstone, is associated with the fires of Hell.*

**lend**  
*give*

**fast**  
*starve*

**days of nature**  
*lifetime*

**harrow up**  
*shock*

**porpentine**  
*porcupine*

## Hamlet

But this eternal blazon must not be  
To ears of flesh and blood. **List**, list, O, list!  
If thou didst ever thy dear father love—

**HAMLET** O God!

**GHOST** Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

**HAMLET** Murder!

**GHOST** Murder most foul, as in the best it is;  
But this most foul, strange and unnatural.

**HAMLET** Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love,  
May sweep to my revenge.

**GHOST** I find thee apt;  
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed  
That roots itself in ease on **Lethe** wharf,  
Wouldst thou not stir in this. Now, Hamlet, hear:  
'Tis **given out** that, sleeping in my orchard,  
A serpent **stung** me; so the whole ear of Denmark  
Is by a forged process of my death  
Rankly abused: but know, thou noble youth,  
The serpent that did sting thy father's life  
Now wears his crown.

**HAMLET** O my prophetic soul! **My uncle!**

**GHOST** Ay, that **incestuous**, that **adulterate** beast,  
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,—  
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power  
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust  
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen:  
O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there!  
From me, whose love was of that dignity  
That it went hand in hand even with the vow  
I made to her in marriage, and to decline  
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor  
To those of mine!...  
Brief let me be. Sleeping within my orchard,  
My custom always of the afternoon,  
Upon my secure hour thy uncle **stole**,  
With juice of cursed **hebenon** in a vial,  
And in the porches of my ears did pour  
The **leperous** distilment; whose effect  
Holds such an **enmity** with blood of man  
That swift as **quicksilver** it courses through  
The natural gates and alleys of the body,  
And with a sudden vigour doth **posset**

**List**  
*pay attention*

**Lethe**  
*one of the rivers of Hades in Greek mythology. The water of Lethe caused souls to completely forget their earlier life.*

**given out**  
*told, explained*

**stung**  
*bit*

**My uncle**  
*King Claudius, who takes the throne after his brother's death and marries Hamlet's mother.*

**incestuous**  
*sleeping with a relative. The laws in Shakespeare's day said that sex between in-laws, in this case brother-in-law and sister-in-law, was incest.*

**adulterate**  
*cheating, committing adultery.*

**stole**  
*snuck*

**hebenon**  
*a poison. No one is sure if Shakespeare had a specific plant in mind, yew, henbane, or hemlock being the most likely, or if he was simply make up a word that sounded like a poison plant.*

**leperous**  
*disgusting, vile. "Leperous" comes from the disease leprosy (now called Hansen's disease), which causes sores and seemed to cause fingers and toes to fall off.*

**enmity**  
*hatred, hostility*

## Hamlet

And **curd**, like eager droppings into milk,  
The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mine;  
And a most instant **tetter bark'd about**,  
Most **lazar-like**, with vile and loathsome crust,  
All my smooth body.  
Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand  
Of life, of crown, of queen, at once **dispatch'd**...  
**Adieu**, adieu! Hamlet, remember me.

### Exit

**HAMLET** O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?  
And shall I **couple** hell? O, **fie!** Hold, hold, my heart;  
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,  
But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee!  
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat  
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!  
Yea, from the **table** of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All **saws** of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
That youth and observation copied there;  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmix'd with **baser** matter: yes, by heaven!  
O most **pernicious** woman!  
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!  
My tables,—meet it is I set it down,  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;  
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark:

### Writing

So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word;  
It is 'Adieu, adieu! remember me.'  
I have sworn't.

*Despite his initial shock, Hamlet is uncertain that the ghost really is his father. As a result, he hesitates to attack his uncle. The delay leads to the play's catastrophic ending with the death of almost the entire cast.*

**Source:** William Shakespeare, "Hamlet," *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 1993, <<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/hamlet.1.5.html>> (June 8, 2011).

### quicksilver

mercury. Mercury is a heavy liquid that is difficult to hold.

### posset

a drink of hot milk and some type of alcohol. When the alcohol is added, the milk begins to curdle.

### curd

curdle, lump up

### tetter

rash or sores

### bark'd about

broke out

### lazar-like

similar to leprosy

### dispatch'd

sent off, killed

### Adieu

good-bye

### couple

join with

### fie

a mild swear word

### table

record

### saws

sayings

### baser

lower. Hamlet is referring to the classical philosophical/scientific idea that thought and spirit are from "higher" matter, fire and air, while "lower" matter, earth and water, make up the more violent instincts and the body.

### pernicious

destructive, evil