

Hamlet

DIALOGUE AND SUBTEXT



Get writing!

The Bard has a lot to teach modern playwrights about the fundamentals of their craft.

Here we look at what is said (and goes unsaid) in a section of Hamlet.

Spot the show!

These images are from previous Watermill Ensemble productions.

Can you name the Shakespeare play?

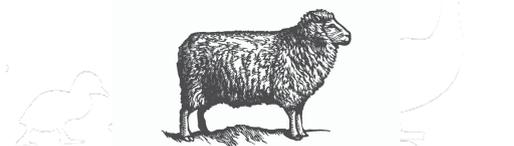
Studying Hamlet?

The following resources and exercises will be very helpful for anyone studying the play Hamlet.

Keep checking our website for more resources.



Thank you



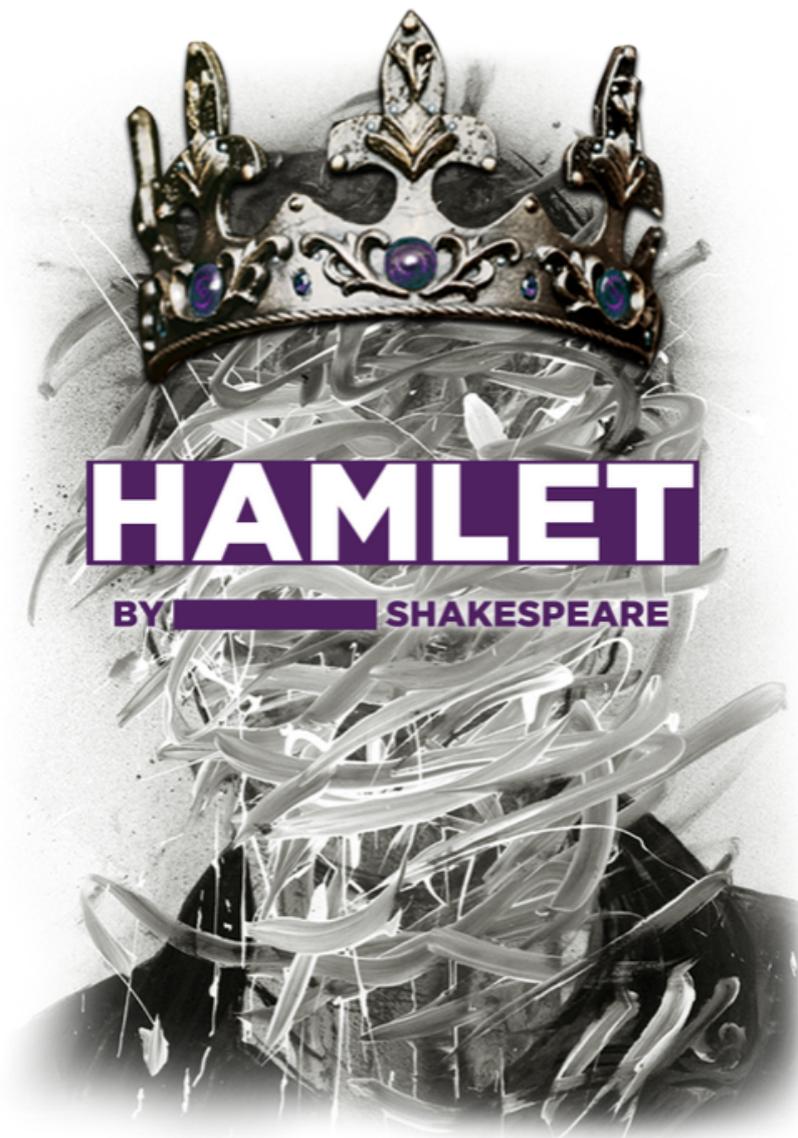
SHEEPDROVE

Principal Sponsor of The Watermill Ensemble's production of Hamlet.

Introduction

We've all studied Shakespeare in school and enjoyed productions in the theatre... but the Bard also has a lot to teach modern playwrights about the fundamentals of their craft. In this exercise we're going to look at what is said (and goes unsaid) in a section of Hamlet.

Read the following section from Act 1 Scene 2 of Hamlet. At this point in the play it's not long since the old King Hamlet has died, but the Queen, Gertrude, has already married his brother, the new King Claudius. Here Hamlet comes before his mother and uncle for the first time properly since the funeral and wedding:



The Text

HAMLET: ACT 1 SCENE 2

CLAUDIUS

But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son,--

HAMLET

[Aside] A little more than kin, and less than kind.

CLAUDIUS

How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

HAMLET

Not so, my lord; I am too much i' the sun.

GERTRUDE

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
Do not for ever with thy veiled lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust:
Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

HAMLET

Ay, madam, it is common.

GERTRUDE

If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?

HAMLET

Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not 'seems.'
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected 'havior of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly: these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play:
But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

The Text

HAMLET: ACT 1 SCENE 2

CLAUDIUS

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father:
But, you must know, your father lost a father;
That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
In filial obligation for some term
To do obsequious sorrow: but to persevere
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness; 'tis unmanly grief;
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
An understanding simple and unschool'd:
For what we know must be and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart? Fie! 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd: whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
From the first corse till he that died to-day,
'This must be so.' We pray you, throw to earth
This unprevailing woe, and think of us
As of a father: for let the world take note,
You are the most immediate to our throne;
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son,
Do I impart toward you. For your intent
In going back to school in Wittenberg,
It is most retrograde to our desire:
And we beseech you, bend you to remain
Here, in the cheer and comfort of our eye,
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.

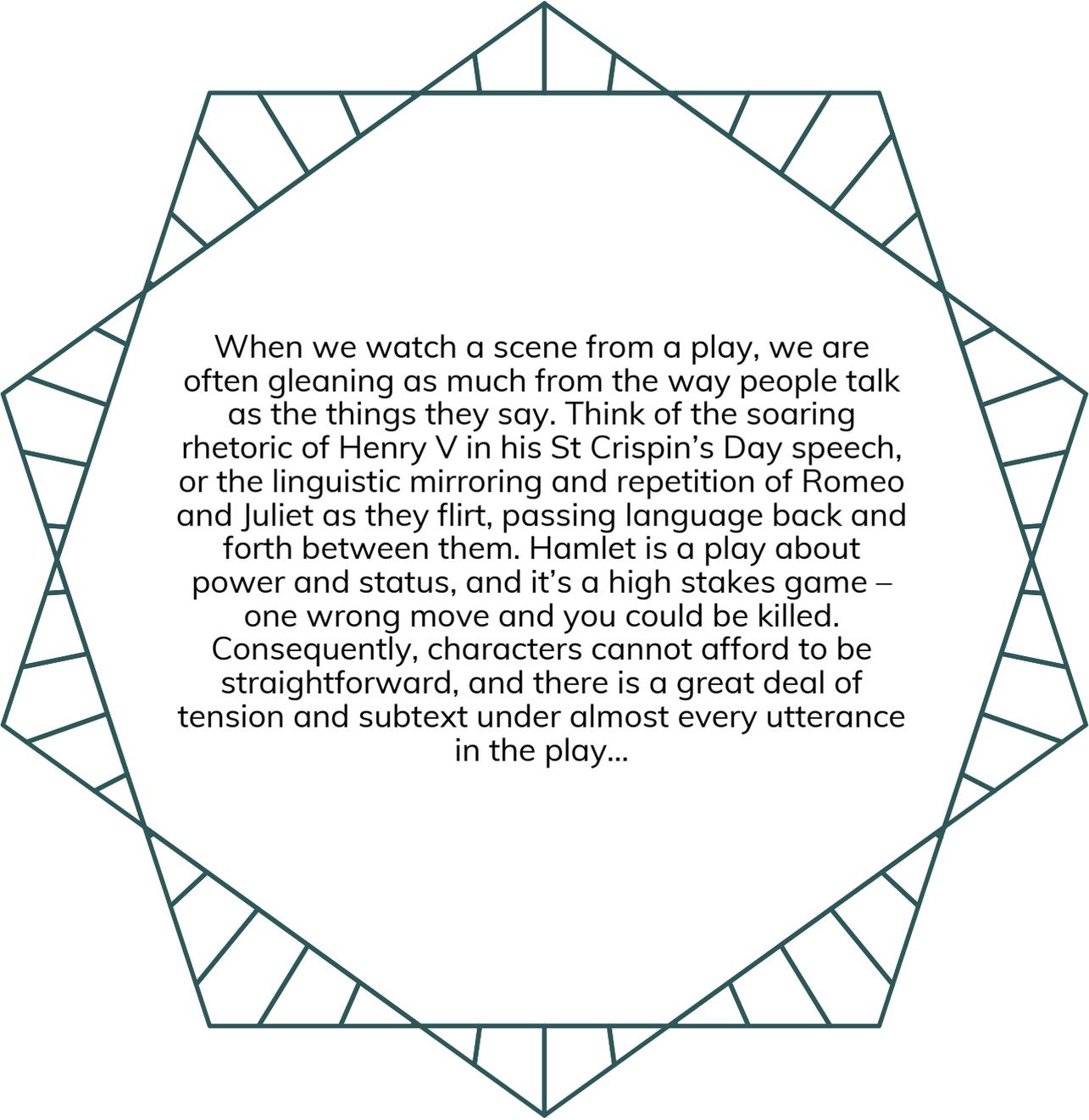
GERTRUDE

Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet:
I pray thee, stay with us; go not to Wittenberg.

HAMLET

I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

Dialogue, Status and Relationships



When we watch a scene from a play, we are often gleaning as much from the way people talk as the things they say. Think of the soaring rhetoric of Henry V in his St Crispin's Day speech, or the linguistic mirroring and repetition of Romeo and Juliet as they flirt, passing language back and forth between them. Hamlet is a play about power and status, and it's a high stakes game – one wrong move and you could be killed. Consequently, characters cannot afford to be straightforward, and there is a great deal of tension and subtext under almost every utterance in the play...

Reading Activity

Think what you can learn about the status of each character in this scene from the way they speak...

What does their formal, courtly language tell us about them?

Why does Hamlet respond in an aside to the audience, and not directly to Claudius?

Why does Claudius greet Hamlet so warmly "my cousin Hamlet, and my son"?

In a scene where one person (Claudius) is talking at length, and another (Hamlet) is saying relatively little, who has the power?

Do you think Gertrude is genuinely worried for her son, or worried that he will cause trouble? Or both? Is she really grieving for old Hamlet? Do you think she wanted to marry Claudius?

When Hamlet talks about his grief over his father's death, is he trying to persuade them? Convince them of his grief? Or perhaps to make them feel guilty over their relative lack of sorrow?

Why do you think Claudius is so keen to stop Hamlet publicly grieving? Does he already see Hamlet as a threat?

To what extent, at this point, do you think Hamlet suspects foul play in his father's death? Do you think he seems suspicious of Claudius, or simply resentful of him?

Why do Gertrude and Claudius want Hamlet to stay at home, rather than returning to Wittenberg for university? Is it from love? Or do they want to keep an eye on him?

Subtext

The playwright David Mamet once said:

“PEOPLE MAY OR MAY NOT SAY WHAT THEY MEAN... BUT THEY ALWAYS SAY SOMETHING DESIGNED TO GET WHAT THEY WANT.”

Wise words, and very relevant in the case of Hamlet! Look again at the scene above. Let's think about what each of them want at this stage in the play...

Claudius:

As we will learn later, Claudius did indeed poison his brother to take the crown and marry his wife. We can assume then that he wants to get away with his crime, to consolidate his power as king and his relationship to his new bride. We might suggest that he is trying to stop Hamlet from making a scene here and draw everyone's attention away from the old king's death and towards the future. He is seemingly kind to Hamlet, but there's a real sense that he is keeping his "friends close and his enemies closer", perhaps trying to work out how much of a threat Hamlet might be going forward...

Gertrude:

It really is hard to tell what Gertrude wants, and it's a decision every actor playing her needs to make with the director of the play. You could play her as a villain, in love with Claudius and in on the murder plot from the start, or as a loving mother caught up in events beyond her control and worried about her son's mental health. Either way, she's trying hard here to comfort and reassure her son, while supporting her new husband in his assertion that Hamlet stop publicly grieving.

Hamlet:

Hamlet is distraught over his father's death and his mother's swift remarriage. One of his key intentions in this scene seems to be to insist that his extreme grief is justified and appropriate, and to imply that their haste to move on is unseemly and disrespectful. But beyond that, we get a sense that he is choosing his words carefully, that he doesn't trust Claudius at all. He stands his ground in the conversation, but without being overtly aggressive. Perhaps biding his time...

Writing Activity

The genius of this scene is that it uses a recognisable moment of domestic tension (a young person is grieving for his father and resents his mother's new choice of partner) and loads it with the political fate of a kingdom.

Taking a simple writing prompt in which you throw together some characters with opposing aims and see what happens, can be a really great way to kick-start your play ideas. This is especially true if you explore the premise that characters are unlikely to just be upfront and honest about what they want... whether they are lying, persuading, arguing, humble-bragging, deflecting, seducing, mocking, encouraging, supporting or empowering, there is always an intention to every utterance.

If you like, try some of the below, and see where they take you...

Write a short scene in which...

- A child talks to a parent about their new partner and tries to convince them to break up...
- A child talks to a parent about their new partner and tries to convince them to stay together...
- Three people discuss the weather, but person one is convinced that person two has committed a murder, and person three is none the wiser...
- A political leader is mired in scandal after having an affair with his brother's wife. He has a conversation with an adviser about what he should do next...
- Three friends are having a conversation in which friend one and friend two are trying to convince friend three not to go back to uni...
- Person one tries to ask Person two on a date, while being tactful about the fact that their partner just died...
- A child is confronted with the ghost of their parent.