

# Act 1 Scene 4

## *Elsinore: The Platform*

**Enter HAMLET, HORATIO, and MARCELLUS**

HAMLET

The air bites shrewdly. It is very cold.

HORATIO

It is a nipping and an eager air.

HAMLET

What hour now?

HORATIO

I think it lacks of twelve.

HAMLET

No, it is struck.

HORATIO

Indeed? I heard it not. It then draws near the season  
Wherein the spirit held his wont to walk.

*A flourish of trumpets, and two pieces of ordnance go off*

What does this mean, my lord?

HAMLET

The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse,  
Keeps wassail, and the swaggering upspring reels.  
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down  
The kettledrum and trumpet thus bray out  
The triumph of his pledge.

HORATIO

Is it a custom?

HAMLET

Ay, marry, is't:  
But to my mind, though I am native here  
And to the manner born, it is a custom  
More honoured in the breach than the observance.  
This heavy-headed revel east and west  
Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations.  
They clepe us drunkards and with swinish phrase  
Soil our addition; and indeed it takes  
From our achievements, though performed at height,  
The pith and marrow of our attribute.  
So oft it chanceth in particular men  
That – for some vicious mole of nature in them,

2 eager: biting

3 lacks of: is just before

[5] 5 season: time of day

6 held ... walk: has been accustomed to walking

8 wake: stays up, has a drinking party

8 takes his rouse: carouses

9 Keeps wassail: drinks heartily

9 the swaggering ... reels: drunkenly performs the upspring, a German dance

[10]

10 Rhenish: wine from Germany's Rhineland

11-12 bray out ... pledge: noisily celebrate his great ability to drink toasts

15 In the manner born: accustomed to it because I was born here

16 More honoured ... observance: [a custom] that it is better to break with than it would be to observe it

[15]

18 Makes us traduced ... nations: Causes other nations to slander us and point out our faults

19 clepe us: call us, describe us as

[20]

20 Soil: blemish, tarnish

21-22 though performed ... attribute: though these achievements are our real high point, the heart and soul of our glorious reputation

As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty,  
 Since nature cannot choose his origin –  
 By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,  
 Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,  
 Or by some habit that too much o'er-leavens  
 The form of plausible manners – that these men,  
 Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,  
 Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,  
 His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,  
 As infinite as man may undergo,  
 Shall in the general censure take corruption  
 From that particular fault. The dram of evil  
 Doth all the noble substance of a doubt,  
 To his own scandal –

**Enter the Ghost**

**HORATIO**

Look, my lord, it comes!

**HAMLET**

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!  
 Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,  
 Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,  
 Be thy intents wicked or charitable,  
 Thou comest in such a questionable shape  
 That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,  
 King, father, royal Dane. O, answer me!  
 Let me not burst in ignorance. But tell  
 Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death,  
 Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre  
 Wherein we saw thee quietly interred  
 Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws  
 To cast thee up again. What may this mean  
 That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel,  
 Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,  
 Making night hideous, and we fools of nature  
 So horridly to shake our disposition  
 With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?  
 Say, why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?

*The Ghost beckons him*

**HORATIO**

It beckons you to go away with it,  
 As if it some impartment did desire  
 To you alone.

**MARCELLUS**

Look, with what courteous action  
 It waves you to a more removed ground.  
 But do not go with it.

**HORATIO**

No, by no means.

- [25] 25 birth: parentage  
 27 o'ergrowth of some complexion: the build-up of an excess of some natural personality trait  
 28 pales: fences  
 [30] 30-31 some habit ... manners: some acquired habit that changes for the worse behaviour that would otherwise be pleasing  
 32 Being nature's ... star: which is due either to being a slave to nature or to bad luck  
 [35] 33-36 His virtues else ... fault: Even if someone otherwise has the best qualities, and has them to the greatest extent possible for a human being, that one fault is nevertheless enough for public opinion to decide that they are thoroughly bad.  
 36-38 The dram ... scandal: Even a small quantity of evil covers over a person's essential goodness with dirt.  
 [40] 38 scandal: shame  
 40 goblin: demon  
 43 questionable shape: form or appearance that raises questions  
 [45] 47 canonized ... death: entombed in a proper manner and given necessary Christian funeral rites  
 48 cerements: shrouds, grave clothes  
 [50] 51 cast up: vomit  
 52 in complete steel: in full armour  
 54 hideous: scary  
 54 fools of nature: playthings of nature  
 [55] 55 disposition: mental composure
- 59-60 As if ... alone: as if it has something that it wants to tell you alone  
 [60] 61 waves: beckons

HAMLET

It will not speak. Then I will follow it.

HORATIO

Do not, my lord.

HAMLET

Why, what should be the fear?

I do not set my life in a pin's fee.

And for my soul, what can it do to that,

Being a thing immortal as itself?

It waves me forth again. I'll follow it.

HORATIO

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,

Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff

That beetles o'er his base into the sea,

And there assume some other horrible form,

Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason

And draw you into madness? Think of it.

The very place puts toys of desperation,

Without more motive, into every brain

That looks so many fathoms to the sea

And hears it roar beneath.

HAMLET

It waves me still. –

Go on. I'll follow thee.

MARCELLUS

You shall not go, my lord.

HAMLET

Hold off your hands.

HORATIO

Be ruled. You shall not go.

HAMLET

My fate cries out

And makes each petty artery in this body

As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.

Still am I called. Unhand me, gentlemen.

By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!

I say, away! Go on. I'll follow thee.

*Exeunt GHOST and HAMLET*

HORATIO

He waxes desperate with imagination.

MARCELLUS

Let's follow. 'Tis not fit thus to obey him.

[65] 65 I do not ... at a pin's fee: I don't consider my life to be worth even the value of a pin.

[70] 71 beetles o'er: stretches out over, overhangs  
73 deprive ... sovereignty of reason: remove reason from its position of control over you

[75] 76-77 puts toys ... That: puts impulsive notions that lead to despair (notions that have no other cause) into the minds of everyone who....

81 Be ruled: Listen to reason.

[85] 83 Nemean lion: a ferocious and supposedly invincible lion that was killed by the mythological hero Hercules

86 waxes: becomes

HORATIO

Have after. To what issue will this come?

MARCELLUS

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

HORATIO

Heaven will direct it.

MARCELLUS

Nay, let's follow him.

*Exeunt*

89 Have after: Let's follow him.

89 To what ... come?: What outcome will this have?

[90]

## Tease It Out

1. Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus are waiting for the Ghost to make its appearance:
  - a. What phrases indicate that it is cold on the battlements of Elsinore?
  - b. What time is it? At what time does the Ghost usually appear?
  - c. What sound suddenly echoes through the castle?
  - d. What custom or practice is responsible for this sound?
  - e. **True or false:** Hamlet approves of Denmark's drinking culture.
2. Consider Hamlet's reaction to the Ghost's appearance:
  - a. 'Angels and ministers of grace defend us!' What does this phrase suggest about Hamlet's reaction?
  - b. Hamlet is concerned that this apparition, despite its outward appearance, might not actually be his father's spirit. What two very different entities does he suggest that it might be?
  - c. Hamlet can't resist his urge to engage the Ghost in conversation. What phrase indicates this?
  - d. What effect, according to Hamlet, is the Ghost's appearance having on him and his companions?
3. The Ghost, it seems, will only converse with Hamlet when the two of them are alone:
  - a. What phrases indicate the Ghost's unwillingness to converse in front of Hamlet's friends?
  - b. **True or false:** Hamlet's companions are happy for him to follow the Ghost.
  - c. To what dangerous location, according to Horatio, might the Ghost lead Hamlet?
  - d. 'My fate cries out'. What does this phrase suggest about Hamlet's attitude towards the Ghost and what it might have to say?
  - e. How does Hamlet respond when his companions attempt to physically restrain him?

## Exam Prep

1. **Personal Response:** 'Shakespeare was writing for a very simple theatre set up and must use language, rather than stage effects to set the scene on the battlements of Elsinore'. Write a paragraph in response to this statement in which you discuss the opening of this scene.
2. **Class Discussion:** How does Shakespeare build tension and suspense in the lead up to the Ghost's appearance? In your discussion, refer not only to the dialogue but also to the cannon shot and to Hamlet's seemingly irrelevant speech about Denmark's drinking culture.
3. **Think About Themes:** 'Both the play and its main character are obsessed with the concepts of death and decay'. How many references to death, corpses and the afterlife can you find in this particular scene?

## Character Study

1. **Class Discussion:** Hamlet, we remember, is very much a scholar. Identify two phrases, in this scene, that suggest he is a learned man. Identify two phrases that indicate he is eager for more knowledge.
2. In this scene, what does Hamlet claim about the value he places on his own life?
3. Which of the following phrases best describes Hamlet's attitude to life: reckless, carefree, depressed or suicidal? Support your answer with reference not only to this scene but also to Act 1 Scene 2.

## Scene Analysis



### LINE BY LINE

In Act 1 Scene 2, Horatio told Hamlet about the Ghost's nightly appearances on the castle walls. Hamlet, we recall, was fascinated by Horatio's account and was eager to see the Ghost for himself. He eagerly agreed to accompany Horatio that very night in an effort to investigate this apparition and learn more about its origins. Now, night has fallen. Hamlet and Horatio, accompanied by the sentinel Marcellus, step out onto the castle's battlements.

Shakespeare's plays were performed during the day on the stage of the Globe theatre, with no modern lighting or special effects. Shakespeare has to use dialogue, therefore, to set the scene. Hamlet and Horatio discuss the weather, so that the audience knows that it is a bitterly cold night, with a 'nipping and an eager' wind blowing about the battlements. They also discuss the correct time, letting the audience know it is around midnight, the time of night when the Ghost is known to make his appearance. (3-6)

Hamlet and Horatio hear the sound of trumpets and the firing of cannons. These sounds, Hamlet explains, are related to the fact that the King is keeping 'wassail', or hosting a drinking party. (9) The King, according to Hamlet, is engaged in a kind of party game. He undertakes to drink entire 'draughts of Rhenish' wine in a single swig. (10) Every time he succeeds, his courtiers make a racket to celebrate the 'triumph of his pledge'. (12) Drums are beaten, trumpets sounded and cannons are fired into the air. (10-2) This, according to Hamlet, is a 'custom' of the Danish court.

Hamlet, however, disapproves of such antics. He stresses that he is a 'native' Danish man, born into courtly life: 'though I am native here/ And to the manner born'. (14-5) But this is one custom of the Danish court he cannot get behind. It would be more honourable, he suggests, to break from such a custom than to observe it: 'it is a custom/ More honoured in the breach than the observance'. (15-6)

Hamlet then launches into a rather lengthy diatribe against the evils of alcohol, highlighting its effects on the Danish people and their reputation abroad.

### The Ghost appears

Hamlet's complaints are interrupted by the sudden appearance of the Ghost. The Prince is, understandably, shocked at the sight of what seems to be his dead father clad in full battle armour walking on the battlements.

Hamlet, it is worth noting, can't be certain of the Ghost's true nature and doesn't know if its intentions are good or evil. (41-2) It may be some supernatural entity that has simply taken his father's form as it walks upon the earth. Perhaps the Ghost, in reality, is a 'goblin damned', a malevolent being sent from hell. Or perhaps it is a 'spirit of health', a benevolent being sent from heaven. (40)

But the apparition, whatever it is, certainly resembles his father. It, therefore, possesses a 'questionable shape', a form that invites further questioning. (43) Hamlet can't resist engaging it in conversation and decides to address it as if it were actually the spirit of his father: 'That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane'. (44-5)

Hamlet's shock and wonder come across in these lines. He saw his father's corpse wrapped in 'cerements' or waxed funeral shrouds and laid in a 'sepulchre' or marble tomb. How, then, can his father be here upon the battlements? Did his father's bones somehow 'burst' out of his shroud? Did the tomb somehow split in two, casting his father's corpse back into the world? (48-50)

The Prince is desperate to understand what this apparition means: 'What may this mean / That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel, / Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon'. (51-3) He repeatedly asks the Ghost why it is walking the earth in this fashion: 'Say, why is this? Wherefore?' (57) He asks the Ghost what he and his companions should do, suspecting, perhaps, that it might have some task in store for him.

The Ghost, it seems, is eager to speak to Hamlet, but is unwilling to do so in front of his companions. Once again, Shakespeare uses dialogue in order to reinforce the audience's sense of the action. Both Horatio and Marcellus describe how the Ghost beckons Hamlet to come away with it: 'Look, with what courteous action / It waves you to a more removed ground'. (60-2)

Horatio and Marcellus both insist that Hamlet 'by no means' should follow the Ghost. (62-4) Horatio warns Hamlet that the Ghost might lead him to his doom. The Ghost might lead Hamlet to the 'dreadful summit' of a nearby cliff only to take on some other horrible form which would cause the Prince to lose his sanity and cast himself over the cliff edge. (69-74) Horatio sternly tells Hamlet that he should be 'ruled' by this advice and not follow the Ghost: 'Be ruled. You shall not go'. (81) Marcellus, it seems, even attempts to physically restrain the Prince.

Hamlet, however, is determined to follow the Ghost: 'It waves me forth again. I'll follow it.' (68) He is desperate to hear what the Ghost might have to say, even if this means following it to a remote location: 'It will not speak. Then I will follow it'. (63) He feels that his 'fate' or destiny is tied up in the Ghost's words: 'My fate cries out'. (81) This realisation, he claims, emboldens him, giving him ferocity and courage, and making his nerves as hardy as those of the 'Nemean lion'. (82-3)

Hamlet, therefore, pays no heed to his companions' warnings. He urges them to stop restraining him: 'Unhand me, gentlemen'. (84) He even threatens to kill them if they continue to 'let' or prevent him follow the Ghost: 'By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!' (85)

The scene then ends with Hamlet following the Ghost to some other location, where he believes that he will learn what fate or destiny has in store for him. Horatio and Marcellus have been ordered by Hamlet to depart: 'I say, away!' (86) But they are so concerned for the Prince's safety that they decide to ignore his order and follow him at a distance: 'Let's follow. 'Tis not fit thus to obey him'. (88)

## CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

### HAMLET

#### **A Man of Letters**

This scene deepens our sense of Hamlet as a thoughtful and reflective person. We see this in his meditation on the evils of drink and the damage it causes, not only to individuals, but to the Danish nation as a whole. (14-38) It is also evident, perhaps, when he meditates on the nature of the apparition, wondering if it is a demon or an angel that has taken on his father's form, or if it is his father's body sprung miraculously from the tomb. (40-56)

#### **Depressive Tendencies**

Hamlet, as we saw in Act 1 Scene 2, has been subject to what we might describe as depressive or even suicidal tendencies, wishing that his physical body could somehow 'melt' away. (1.2.129) Such suicidal tendencies are also evident in this scene when Hamlet's friends tell him he is risking his life by following the Ghost. Hamlet responds by declaring that he simply doesn't value his own life. His life, he says, is worth no more than the minuscule amount that one might pay for a safety pin: 'I do not set my life in a pin's fee'. (65)

#### **Action and Inaction**

Hamlet reacts to the Ghost as anyone would when confronted by the spirit of a dead relative. He experiences not only shock and horror but also awe and fascination. But Hamlet also exhibits decisiveness and determination at this moment. He decides immediately that his destiny is bound up with the Ghost's message and is determined to follow it no matter what. (81-6) But such decisiveness, as we shall see, will not always be displayed by the Prince as the play goes on.

## FOCUS ON STYLE

### **A masterful writer of horror**

In this scene, Shakespeare shows himself to be a masterful writer of horror. The audience at the beginning of the scene are primed for something weird to happen, expecting to witness an uncanny encounter with the undead. But Shakespeare hits them first with a false jump scare. We can imagine how the sudden sound of the drums or cannons would cause the audience to flinch or jump. Shakespeare then permits the audience to relax again, as Hamlet launches into his speech on the evils of drinking, before the Ghost finally makes his appearance. This tactic of the double scare will be familiar to anyone who has experienced modern horror films.

Many productions have the Ghost enter early, trundling across the stage unnoticed by the other characters who are caught up in Hamlet's monologue. This, of course, is also a technique used in modern horror films; the audience become aware of some threat or presence, while the characters in the drama are still blissfully ignorant.

### **Imagery**

Images of rot, decay and corruption occur throughout the play. Polonius, in Act 1 Scene 3, compared kingdoms or countries to human bodies. (1.3.23) In this scene, Marcellus echoes that sentiment, likening Denmark to a body that has been infected by some terrible disease, one that causes flesh and organs to rot away: 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'. (90) The fact that Old Hamlet's ghost restlessly walks the earth means that something is very wrong in terms of politics and the affairs of state.

# Hamlet in Performance

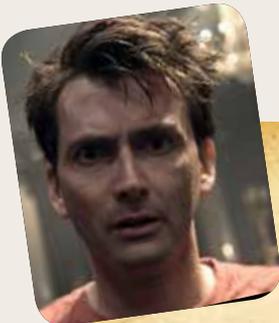
There have been many wonderful performances of *Hamlet* in recent decades, both on stage and screen. Let's take a look at some of the more celebrated performances and compare the different approaches the actors took when performing some of the play's memorable scenes.



## Video 1

Watch Video 1 which features performances of Hamlet's second soliloquy by Benedict Cumberbatch and Kenneth Branagh:

1. In a soliloquy, the character speaking is addressing the audience and can't be overheard by other characters. Describe in your own words how each production handled this concept.
2. Which performance, in your opinion, emphasised the Prince's anger?
3. Which performance emphasised his despair?
4. In which performance did Hamlet seem most human and relatable?
5. Which of these productions would you most like to see in its entirety?



## Video 2

Watch Video 2 which features extracts from Act 2 Scene 2 David Tennant and Andrew Scott:

1. Which actor makes Hamlet seem most vulnerable?
2. Comment on how both actors use their bodies when performing.
3. Which actor, in your opinion, does this to greatest effect?
4. What does Andrew Scott convey about Hamlet's attitude to the players that have come to Elsinore?
5. David Tennant's performance in this scene has been described as a 'masterpiece of self-accusation'. Write a paragraph in response to this statement.





### Video 3

Watch Video 3, which features two very different performances, by Ethan Hawke and Richard Burton, of Hamlet's fourth soliloquy:

1. In what environment does the Ethan Hawke version of the soliloquy take place?
2. How do the filmmakers use this environment to compliment the words?
3. Would you agree that the environment sometimes distracts from the words? Give a reason for your answer.
4. Richard Burton has been described as a master of pauses, pace and emphasis'. Write a paragraph in response to this statement in which you refer to Video 3.
5. Which actor, in your opinion, best presents the soliloquy as a set of questions and possible answers?



### Video 4

Watch Video 4, which features two very different interpretations of Hamlet's encounter with Gertrude in Act 3 Scene 4, one by Mel Gibson and one by David Tennant:

1. Which version, in your opinion, best conveyed Gertrude's terror and horror at the events unfolding?
2. In which version did Hamlet seem most unhinged, dangerous and out of control?
3. Which version, in your opinion, best suggested that Hamlet, despite his rage, still has a great deal of affection for his mother?
4. How does Mel Gibson, during his performance, react to the death of Claudius? Pick two adjectives that in your opinion best describe his response.
5. 'David Tennant makes Hamlet's violent outburst against his mother seem understandable and almost forgivable'. Discuss this statement as a class.



### Video 5

Watch Video 5, which features two very different interpretations of the famous Yorick speech from Act 5 Scene 1, one by Ian Richardson and one by Kenneth Branagh:

1. Which version, in your opinion, provides the most compelling and plausible portrayal of the Gravedigger?
2. Which version, in your opinion, best conveys Hamlet's affection for Yorick the long-dead jester?
3. Which actor is most facially expressive in your opinion?
4. Comment on the cinematic techniques used during the Kenneth Branagh version of the speech. Does it enhance or detract from the speech in your opinion?
5. 'Ian Richardson's portrayal of Hamlet is more human and relatable than Kenneth Branagh's'. Discuss this statement as a class.



# Letters

The world of Hamlet is one where communication often takes the old-fashioned form of letter-writing. Studying the letters exchanged between the various characters is a useful way of revising the play as a whole.

## Letter 1

**First Mentioned:** Act 1 Scene 2

**Written by:** Claudius

**Addressed to:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Who will deliver this letter?** \_\_\_\_\_

- What does Claudius intend to accomplish by sending this letter?
- Does this letter have the desired effect?
- In what scene do we learn about this outcome?

## Letter 2

**First Mentioned:** Act 2 Scene 2

**Written by:** Hamlet

**Addressed to:** \_\_\_\_\_

**How did Polonius gain possession of this letter?** \_\_\_\_\_

- Describe in your own words the emotions conveyed by this particular letter.
- To whom does Polonius read it?
- What does he hope to prove by doing so?

## Letter 3

**First Mentioned:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Written by:** Claudius

**Addressed to:** The King of England

**Who will deliver this letter to the English king?** \_\_\_\_\_

- What does Claudius ask the English to do?
- Why is Claudius confident that the English king will obey his instructions?
- What phrases indicate that Claudius is eager – or perhaps even desperate – for his instructions to be followed out?



## Letter 4

**First Mentioned:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Written by:** Hamlet

**Addressed to:** The King of England

**Who will deliver this letter?** \_\_\_\_\_

- What does Hamlet ask the English to do?
- **True or false:** Hamlet signs his own name to this letter.
- Hamlet swaps this letter for letter 3. How does he reseal the envelope after doing this?



## Letter 5

**First Mentioned:** Act 4 Scene 4

**Written by:** Hamlet

**Addressed to:** Horatio

**Who delivers this letter to Elsinore?** \_\_\_\_\_

- Describe briefly how Hamlet ended up on board a pirate vessel.
- Why, according to Hamlet, did the pirates treat him well and return him to Denmark?
- Mention two things that Hamlet, in this letter, asks Horatio to do.



## Letter 6

**First Mentioned:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Written by:** Hamlet

**Addressed to:** Claudius

**Who delivers this letter to Elsinore?** \_\_\_\_\_

- **True or false:** Claudius initially suspects that this letter might be a forgery.
- Suggest why Claudius might be shocked to receive such a letter.
- Describe in your own words how Claudius responds to this development.