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# SHAKESPEARE

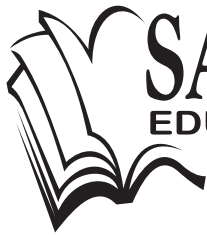
MADE EASY

*Hamlet*



This is a sample not intended for classroom use.

Tanya Grosz and Linda Wendler



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## To the Teacher

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As any teacher or student who has read Shakespeare knows, his plays are not easy. They are thought-provoking and complex texts that abound with romance, deceit, tragedy, comedy, revenge, and humanity shown at its very worst as well as its very best. In short, to read Shakespeare is to explore the depths and heights of humanity.

The *Shakespeare Made Easy* Activity Guides are designed by teachers for teachers to help students navigate this journey. Each guide is broken into six sections of four activities and one review. At the end of each guide is a final test, a variety of culminating activities, and an answer key. The activities are meant to aid textual comprehension, provide creative

opportunities for the reader to make personal connections with the text, and help busy teachers gain quick access to classroom-tested and age-appropriate activities that make the teaching of Shakespeare an easier task.

Each regular activity, as well as each culminating activity, can be modified to be an individual or a group task, and the reviews and tests can be used as quick comprehension checks or formally scored assessments. The guides may be used in conjunction with the Barron's *Shakespeare Made Easy* texts or alone. Ultimately, the *Shakespeare Made Easy* Activity Guides are intended to assist teachers and students in gaining an increased understanding of and appreciation for the reading of Shakespeare.

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## Introduction to the Play

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### Background to *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* has long been thought to be one of the most important plays ever written in English. The story of Hamlet comes from Norse legend. The story is based on a Danish nobleman who took revenge after his uncle killed his father and married his mother. The Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus wrote the story in the 12th century, but it is believed to be much older. In Saxo's version, Amleth (Hamlet) pretends to be crazy after his father is murdered. He is upset by his mother's attachment to his uncle, and he confronts her in private, during which he kills a hidden spy. He is then sent away to England, and returns to Denmark, called Jutland, by switching the order for his death with those of his escorts, so that they are killed instead of Amleth. The story of Amleth was also retold by the French writer François Belleforest in 1580. In Belleforest's retelling of this tragedy, he names the main character Hamblet, Prince of Danemarke. In this version, Hamblet is cunning and decisive in his revenge.

In addition to these sources, Shakespeare is said to have been influenced by Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, a revenge play. The revenge play was a popular type of drama in Shakespeare's era. In this kind of drama, the main character carries out a bloody revenge, which usually costs his own life. Like Hamlet, the main character in Kyd's revenge play is upset with himself for his inability to carry out the revenge right away. Also, like *Hamlet*, *The Spanish Tragedy* contains a play within a play,

a woman who becomes insane and commits suicide, and a ghost who demands that the main character avenge a murder. However, Kyd's version is more graphic and sensational than Shakespeare's play as the focus is on the revenge and its bloody consequences rather than on the character's thoughts and characterization.

In order to understand Shakespeare's characterization of Hamlet, one must know something of the psychology and philosophy of his day. A typical Englishman of Shakespeare's time believed that reality consisted of a combination of four main elements: air, water, fire, and earth. Each human being was also composed of these four elements, and to be physically and psychologically healthy meant that these elements were in balance. Imbalances of the elements resulted in imbalanced personalities. A person over-balanced by air was said to be of a sanguine temperament—light, happy, and carefree. If a person was overbalanced by water, it was said that person was phlegmatic—slow of movement and speech and often seen as lazy and self-indulgent. If a person was overbalanced by fire, the person was choleric—easily angered but quick to end any conflict. In Hamlet's case, because he was overbalanced by earth, he was melancholy. It was a temperament of thoughtful sadness, often resulting in someone who was stubborn and suspicious. It is easy to see how Shakespeare gave Hamlet actions to show his melancholy temperament.



*Osric*: A member of the Danish court who tells Hamlet he is to fence with Laertes

*Barnardo, Marcellus, and Francisco*: Soldiers on watch at the opening of the play who see the ghost of Hamlet's father

*Players*: Members of an acting company who help Hamlet determine if Claudius is guilty of the murder of Old Hamlet. They put on a show called *The Mousetrap*.

*Gravediggers*: Two men who dig the grave for Ophelia and make grim jokes about death

*Ambassadors*: Political representatives from England

*A Priest*: Officiates at Ophelia's funeral

*Other Minor Characters*: A sailor, gentlemen, two messengers, lords, soldiers, attendants, guards, followers of Laertes

### Shakespeare and Stage Directions

The plays of Shakespeare are so well written that they seem to leap off the page and come to life. However, the plays themselves have very few stage directions. Perhaps this is because Shakespeare's plays were performed in large amphitheaters that were very simple.

This was a time before electric lights, so the plays needed to take place during the day to utilize the natural light. The average time for a performance was between noon and two in the afternoon. Theater historians report that there were typically no intermissions; plays ran from beginning to end without a break and took about two hours.

The set might be painted canvas to illustrate whether the play was occurring in a forest or a town, for example. Sometimes the background was accompanied by a sign that indicated the place as well. Props were few and large: a table, a chariot, gallows, a bed, or a throne.

However, the audience in Shakespeare's plays expected a spectacle for the price of admission. Therefore, there were many devices to produce a gasp from the audience. For example, a device in the loft of the theater could raise and lower actors so that they could play gods, ghosts, or other unusual characters. Additionally, a trapdoor in the stage offered a chance for a quick appearance or disappearance. The actors could suggest a beheading or hanging with various illusions on the stage. Sound effects suggesting thunder, horses, or war were common. Music was important, and drums and horns were often played.

Most important to the sense of spectacle were the costumes worn by the actors. These were elaborate, colorful, and very expensive. Therefore, they often purchased these outfits from servants who had inherited the clothes from their masters, or from hangmen, who received the clothes of their victims as payment for their services.

Though Shakespeare's stage directions are sparse, definition of a few key terms will be helpful for the reader. The following is a brief glossary of stage directions commonly found in Shakespeare's plays.

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### Selected Glossary of Stage Directions in Shakespeare's Plays

**Above:** an indication that the actor speaking from above is on a higher balcony or other scaffold that is higher than the other actors

**Alarum:** a stage signal, which calls the soldiers to battle; usually trumpets, drums, and shouts

**Aside:** words spoken by the actor so the audience overhears but the other actors on the stage do not. An aside may also be spoken to one other actor so that the others on stage do not overhear.

**Calls within:** a voice offstage that calls to a character on the stage

**Curtains:** Curtains were fabrics draped around a bed that could be opened or closed for privacy.

**Draw:** Actors pull their swords from their sheathes.

**Enter:** a direction for a character to enter the stage. This can be from the audience's right (stage right) or the audience's left (stage left).

**Enter Chorus:** a direction for an actor to come to the center of the stage and offer some introductory comments, usually in blank verse or

rhyming couplets. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Chorus delivers a sonnet, a form of poetry associated with love.

**Exeunt:** All characters leave the stage, or those characters named leave the stage.

**Exit:** One character leaves the stage.

**Flourish:** A group of trumpets or other horn instruments play a brief melody.

**Have at:** Characters begin to fight, usually with swords.

**Pageant:** a show or spectacle of actors in unusual costumes, usually without words

**Prologue:** an introduction spoken by the Chorus that gives an overview to the audience and invites them into the play or scene

**Retires:** A character slips away.

**Sennet:** a series of notes sounded on brass instruments to announce the approach or departure of a procession

**Singing:** a signal for the actor to sing the following lines as a tune

**Within:** voices or sounds occurring offstage but heard by the audience

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## Introduction to Shakespeare

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### A Brief Biography of William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 to John and Mary Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. His birthday is celebrated on April 23. This is memorable because April 23 is also the day Shakespeare died in 1616.

Shakespeare was the eldest of nine children in his family, six of whom survived to adulthood.

William Shakespeare's father worked with leather and became a successful merchant early in his career. He held some relatively important government offices. However, when William was in his early teens, his father's financial position began to slide due to growing debt. After many years, John Shakespeare's fortunes and respect were restored, but records indicate that the years of debt and lawsuits were very stressful.

Historians assume that young Will went to school and took a rigorous course of study including Latin, history, and biblical study. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was three months pregnant.

Studies of Elizabethan family life indicate that Anne's situation was not unusual since it was accepted that the engagement period was as legally binding as the marriage. The couple had a daughter, Susanna, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith. Not much is known about Shakespeare during the next seven years, but his name is listed as an actor in London by 1592. This was a difficult time for the theater

because measures to prevent the spread of the plague regularly closed the theaters.

Between 1594 and 1595, Shakespeare joined the Chamberlain's Men as a playwright and actor. The acting company featured actor Richard Burbage, and they were a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I. During this time, Shakespeare was writing such plays as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even though Shakespeare was enjoying great success by the time he was 32, it was dampened by the death of his son, Hamnet, in 1596. Soon after, Shakespeare refocused on his home in Stratford where he bought an estate called New Place, with gardens, orchards, and barns in addition to the main home. He still maintained a home in London near the theater.

In 1599, Shakespeare wrote *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It*. The Globe Playhouse was up and running, with Shakespeare a 10 percent owner. This means that he was able to earn 10 percent of any show's profits. This business position helped him solidify his wealth.

In 1603, Shakespeare's reputation earned his acting troop the sponsorship of James I, who requested one play performance per month. Their name changed to the King's Men. By this time, Shakespeare had written and performed in almost all of his comedies and histories. He was proclaimed the finest playwright in London.



## ACTIVITY 1

# *A Father's Explanation*

Act one, Scene 1

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**Background** In Act one, Scene 1, Marcellus asks Horatio what the cause is for all of the feverish military preparation, and Horatio explains it.

**Directions** Imagine that Marcellus is at home later that night after hearing Horatio's explanation for the wartime preparation. He wants to explain it to his eight-year-old son, who is fascinated by all of the activity. Imagine that you are Marcellus paraphrasing Horatio's speech so that your young son will understand and not be frightened. Write your explanation below.

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## ACTIVITY 2

# *What Ghosts Do*

## Act one, Scene 1

**Background** As Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus confront and then discuss the ghost that has appeared to them, they demonstrate some superstitions and beliefs that they have about ghosts.

**Directions** Reread the following lines and describe what assumptions the speakers are making about the ghost and ghosts in general. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

Lines 79–81: “In what particular thought to work I know not, but in the gross and scope of my opinion, this [seeing the ghost] bodes some strange eruption to our state.”

Assumption(s):

Lines 144–153: “If there be any good thing to be done that may to thee do ease, and grace to me, speak to me; if thou art privy to thy country’s fate, which, happily, foreknowing may avoid, oh speak! Or if thou has uphoarded in thy life extorted treasure in the womb of earth, for which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death, speak of it.”

Assumption(s):

Lines 160–163: “We do it wrong, being so majestic, to offer it the show of violence, for it is as the air, invulnerable, and our vain blows malicious mockery.”

Assumption(s):

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Lines 166–172: “I have heard the cock, that is the trumpet to the morn, doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat awake the god of day, and at his warning, whether in sea or fire, in earth or air, th’extravagant and erring spirit hies to his confine.”

Assumption(s):



## ACTIVITY 3

*A King's Explanation and a Son's Sorrow* Act one, Scene 2

**Background** Hamlet's father, after whom he's named, has died. King Hamlet's brother, Claudius, has taken over as king and married his brother's wife, Hamlet's mother. The King and Hamlet have two very different perspectives on the events that have occurred, but Hamlet must keep his feelings to himself.

**Directions** Reread the lines spoken by Claudius and Hamlet in the beginning of Scene 2 in order to answer the following questions. Please use complete sentences. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. How does King Claudius make the marriage to his deceased brother's wife seem reasonable (lines 1–14)?
2. How does Hamlet view his uncle's marriage to his mother (lines 131–160)?
3. How does the King view Hamlet's continued mourning for his father (lines 94–108)?
4. How does Hamlet specifically view his mother for marrying his uncle (lines 140–155)?

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5. Horatio, the ghost's presence, and now Hamlet (in line 160) have each foreshadowed trouble to come. What bad thing do you think is going to happen and to whom?



## ACTIVITY 4

*Brotherly Advice*Act one, Scene 3

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**Background** In lines 1–54 of Act one, Scene 3, Laertes warns Ophelia about Hamlet’s behavior toward her. Laertes, being a concerned big brother, doesn’t think that Hamlet’s affection for his sister will last. He wants to make sure that his little sister’s heart doesn’t get broken, so he urges Ophelia not to take Hamlet’s flirtations too seriously. Though times have changed and, for the most part, people no longer formally court each other, a sister being warned by her over-protective brother is a situation that could easily occur today.

**Directions** In the space below, write Laertes and Ophelia’s exchange in lines 1–54 into modern-day language, so that it sounds like a conversation that could actually occur today. You will need to use another sheet of paper. Suggested length:  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a page–1 page

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## ACTIVITY 5

*Review*

**Directions** Answer the following questions. Write the letter of the correct answer in the space provided. For 10–12, write true (T) or false (F) in the space provided.

- \_\_\_ 1. This play takes place in what country?
- Italy
  - France
  - England
  - Denmark
- \_\_\_ 2. Why does young Fortinbras want war with Denmark?
- He wishes to regain the lands his father lost to King Hamlet.
  - He wishes to avenge his father's death.
  - He has already captured most of Germany and wants to expand his territory.
  - Because Claudius is a mortal enemy of his, and now that Claudius is king, Fortinbras will stop at nothing to destroy him.
- \_\_\_ 3. Laertes asks permission of the King to return to where?
- Germany
  - France
  - the Netherlands
  - Switzerland
- \_\_\_ 4. How many months does Hamlet say his father has been dead before his mother married Claudius?
- not quite two
  - four
  - almost three
  - six
- \_\_\_ 5. What do the King and Queen request of Hamlet?
- a blessing upon their marriage
  - his signature on a paper saying he won't want the throne
  - that he not return to Wittenberg University
  - that he stop courting Ophelia
- \_\_\_ 6. According to Horatio, what happens to ghosts when the cock crows?
- They must return to wherever they came from.
  - They become violent if disturbed at that point.
  - They must make amends with whomever they harmed in life.
  - They flinch as if they are physically hurting.

*(continued)*