Act I

We are introduced to the court of Denmark at the castle of Elsinore. The King has recently died and the throne has been taken by his brother, Claudius. Claudius has also married his brother's widow, Gertrude.

Hamlet, Gertrude's son, does not approve of his new stepfather. Hamlet finds out from Horatio that a ghost, resembling Hamlet's father, has been seen on the ramparts of the castle. Hamlet vows to see it for himself and finds it is the ghost of his father, the late King. The ghost tells Hamlet that he was killed by his brother and that Hamlet must avenge his death.

Ophelia has told her father, Polonius, and brother, Laertes, that she has romantic feelings for Hamlet but they advise her to stay away from him.



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Act II

Hamlet begins to act in an irrational way. Ophelia tells her father that Hamlet appeared at her door late at night and half undressed. Polonius believes that Hamlet's madness is simply love-sickness for Ophelia.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (friends of Hamlet's) arrive at court and are asked by Claudius and Gertrude to discover the truth about their son's illness. He rebuffs them, realising that they are spying on him for his mother and stepfather.

A threat from Fortinbras (Prince of Norway) seems to have been averted as his army will travel to fight in Poland instead. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have brought a company of players with them to court and Hamlet decides to ask them to put on a play that will show the events of his father's death (the King's murder at the hands of Gertrude and Claudius). He aims to make Gertrude and Claudius face the guilt of their actions.



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Act III

Polonius insists that Ophelia gives Hamlet back all of the gifts and letters he has sent her. Ophelia tries to do this but Hamlet reacts in a wild manner, accusing her of many things and telling her to go to a nunnery. The play is put on and Claudius, on seeing the play version of himself pour poison into the ear of his brother, rushes out of the room. Hamlet is now sure of his guilt.

Gertrude and Hamlet have a fight in which he insists that she stop sleeping with his uncle. Polonius is behind a curtain in the room and makes a sound, alerting Hamlet to the fact that he is there. Hamlet, thinking the man is Claudius, slashes at the figure with his sword. Too late, he realises that he has killed Polonius. Claudius is in fear of his own life now and asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet to the English court. He sends a letter with them asking that Hamlet be executed on arrival.



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Act IV

Ophelia goes mad, deranged by sadness at the death of her father and the madness of Hamlet. She wanders the castle alone. Laertes, her brother, returns from France to discover that his father is dead.

News has reached Claudius that Hamlet is still alive and has returned to Denmark. Claudius convinces Laertes that Hamlet is solely to blame for the death and suggests a duel in which Laertes will be given a poison-tipped blade. Claudius will also have a cup laced with poison ready for Hamlet in case he wins the fight.

Gertrude appears and tells them that Ophelia has drowned. It is not clear whether she commits suicide or whether she falls into the water in her madness.



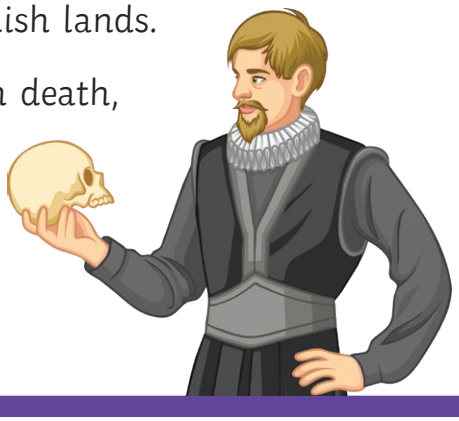
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Act V

Horatio has received a letter from Hamlet, explaining how he escaped a pirate attack on his way to England. The two friends are reunited and Horatio tells Hamlet of Claudius's letter which told the English court to execute Hamlet. Horatio had found the letter in the belongings of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and switched it with one he wrote, asking for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead.

The duel between Laertes and Hamlet takes place. Hamlet does well initially and Gertrude drinks a toast to his success, unknowingly from the poisoned cup Claudius was saving for Hamlet. Claudius notices and tries to stop her. Laertes, knowing that the game is up, attacks Hamlet with his poisoned blade, wounding him. In the scuffle, blades are dropped and switched and Hamlet manages to strike Laertes with his own poisoned sword. Gertrude dies, crying out that she has been poisoned. Laertes makes peace with Hamlet in his final moments and tells him that the plan was Claudius's. Hamlet attacks and kills Claudius. Realising he is dying from his wound, Hamlet gives the kingdom of Denmark to Fortinbras (Prince of Norway) as he is aware that he is riding through Danish lands.

Horatio wishes to drink the poison and join his friend in death, but Hamlet makes him promise to live and tell Hamlet's story. Fortinbras arrives to take the crown.



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