

# Hamlet

Week 2

Hamlet, as the son of the late King Hamlet, is a threat to Claudius' throne. He is not permitted to return to Wittenberg and remains under the watch of his uncle. Upon learning of his father's murder, Hamlet realizes that he cannot trust anyone.

## Things to think about:

- Is Hamlet going crazy because of what the ghost tells him, or is he just pretending to be mad? What might the benefit be to feigning madness? Is he pretending to be crazy to protect himself?

## Exercise 1: Scene Work

In Act 2, Scene 2, Polonius speaks with Hamlet to decipher the cause of Hamlet's madness. Stage this scene. For the actor playing Polonius: how do your questions serve to determine Hamlet's mental state. For the actor playing Hamlet, how do your words and actions work together to convince Polonius of your madness?

**POLONIUS**

Away, I do beseech you both, away.  
I'll board him presently. O, give me leave.  
King and Queen exit with Attendants.  
How does my good Lord Hamlet?

**HAMLET**

Well, God-a-mercy.

**POLONIUS**

Do you know me, my lord?

**HAMLET**

Excellent well. You are a fishmonger.

**POLONIUS**

Not I, my lord.

**HAMLET**

Then I would you were so honest a man.

**POLONIUS**

Honest, my lord?

**HAMLET**

Ay, sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.

**POLONIUS**

That's very true, my lord.

**HAMLET**

For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?

**POLONIUS**

I have, my lord.

**HAMLET**

Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but, as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to 't.

**POLONIUS, aside**

How say you by that? Still harping on my daughter. Yet he knew me not at first; he said I was a fishmonger. He is far gone. And truly, in my youth, I suffered much extremity for love, very near

this. I'll speak to him again.—What do you read, my lord?

**HAMLET** Words, words, words.

**POLONIUS** What is the matter, my lord?

**HAMLET** Between who?

**POLONIUS** I mean the matter that you read, my lord.

**HAMLET** Slanders, sir; for the satirical rogue says here that old men have gray beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams; all which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down; for yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am, if, like a crab, you could go backward.

**POLONIUS, aside** Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't.—Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

**HAMLET** Into my grave?

**POLONIUS**

Indeed, that's out of the air. *Aside.* How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of. I will leave him and suddenly contrive the means of meeting between him and my daughter.—My lord, I will take my leave of you.

**HAMLET**

You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal—except my life, except my life, except my life.

**POLONIUS**

Fare you well, my lord.

## **Exercise 2:**

Contrast the scene you just played with [this scene](#) of Polonius' murder in Act 3, Scene 4. How does Hamlet's attempt at "madness" in 2.2 compare to his actions in this scene? How is his language different? Why isn't Gertrude able to see the Ghost?



### Exercise 3: Other Madness

Hamlet is not the only character who shows signs of madness in this play. When her father is killed, Ophelia loses her mind too. Consider how Ophelia's madness in Act 4, Scene 5 compares to Hamlet's. Write about how you would stage this scene. Do you attribute the cause of Ophelia's madness to her father's death or to Hamlet's actions?

Consider the flowers Ophelia gives to Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes. In the Elizabethan era, every flower had a meaning assigned to it. Look at the list below and see how Ophelia communicates her feelings with the flowers she gives to each person.

- **Rosemary** – “that’s for remembrance” (4.5.199).
- **Pansies** – “that’s for thoughts” (4.5.201).
- **Fennel** - flattery and adultery.
- **Columbines** - ingratitude, foolishness, and adultery.
- **Rue** – regret, repentance, sorrow.
- **Daisies** – innocence and hope.
- **Violets** – faithfulness.



## **Shakespeare and Social Justice:**

- How and why are Ophelia and Hamlet's respective madnenses treated differently?
- Why do Polonius and Laertes spend so much time lecturing Ophelia on how to behave with regards to Hamlet?