



**TEACHER PACK**

**HAMLET**  
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

## ABOUT THIS PACK

This pack supports the RSC's 2016 production of *Hamlet*, directed by Simon Godwin. The production opened on 12 March 2016 at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The activities provided are specifically designed to support KS3-4 students attending the performance and studying *Hamlet*.

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These symbols are used throughout the pack:



**READ**  
Notes from the production, background info or extracts



**ACTIVITY**  
A practical or open space activity



**WRITE**  
A classroom writing or discussion activity



**LINKS**  
Useful web addresses and research tasks



Paapa Essiedu as Hamlet in the 2016 production of *Hamlet*. Photo by Manuel Harlan.

# EXPLORING THE STORY

## NOTES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

**Before beginning work on the text Simon Godwin and the creative team knew they wanted to draw on influences of African culture. In the play Hamlet is a student who returns home, which Simon was keen to explore in terms of a young man educated in Europe who then returns home to reconnect with his African roots. This led them to discussing the play opening at Hamlet's graduation from Wittenburg and contrasting this with the death of the King in an African styled kingdom of Denmark.**



## SYNOPSIS

A full synopsis of the play is available at:

<https://www.rsc.org.uk/hamlet/the-plot>

You can also see the trailer, in which Hamlet celebrates his graduation before receiving the call about his Father's death on the RSC website.



## ACTIVITY 1: THE STORY IN FIVE ACTS

The following activity will introduce students to the play and ensure that the whole group is familiar with the story. It is also an opportunity to introduce some of the key questions that will be explored in more depth in later activities.

- Divide students into small groups.
- Using the 'Story in Five Acts' Resource in this pack, assign an act to each group.
- Ask each group to create a series of tableaux or freeze frames for their act. They will need to break it down into two or three scenes.
  - Encourage them to narrate their Act, explaining what happens in each scene before we see it and trying to use the lines from the play to bring some of the freeze frames to life.
- Allow each group the time to perform their Act, in the correct order.
- Encourage each group to summarise what happens in their Act in one sentence.
- Ask each group to share their sentence summaries and discuss what has happened just before the play starts. Explain to students that the company spent a lot of time in rehearsal discussing this, to help them understand each characters' actions.

Invite them to do the same, thinking specifically about:

- Hamlet: where has he been while away from home and what was his relationship with his mother like before the play starts? He is clearly angry about her re-marrying Claudius.
- Gertrude: does she know or suspect Claudius killed her old husband? Could she even be part of covering it up and did she know her actions in re-marrying would upset Hamlet?
- Claudius: we learn in the play that he did kill his brother and become King. How did he kill him and does anyone else know? How well does Claudius know Hamlet and how does he expect him to react?
- Ophelia: How does Ophelia know Hamlet and what kind of relationship have they had in the past? How does Ophelia feel about him coming home? She also appears to only have one parent so how might she feel about what has happened to Hamlet now he has lost his Father?

- You may also want to discuss with students why it might be important to ask these questions. During the rehearsal process, each of the actors created a detailed backstory to help them think about their character's mind-set at the start of the play and what their attitude might be to the characters around them.
  - A **BACKSTORY** is the story of what happened to any of the characters before the start of the play.



## ACTIVITY 2: WHO IS WHO IN HAMLET?

In this production Hamlet begins the play as a student at Wittenberg University who returns home to Africa when his Father dies. As part of the events of the play we encounter five distinct groups of people:

- The Royal Family of Denmark
- Polonius' Family
- Hamlet's friends
- The Players
- The Court/Security

### NOTES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

**While rehearsing the play Simon asked the company to work in units to explore the different character relationships in the play, grouping the characters so that they could discuss their backstories and link them together to create a shared story of what happened before the start of the play. As part of the discussion with Claudis and the Court, for example, Simon introduced the idea that new rulers usually promote 'trusted' people very quickly to surround themselves with support for their new regime. This discussion then helped to think about how those characters would behave towards both Claudius and Hamlet.**

- Divide students into five groups, assigning each of them one of the groups of characters just as they did in rehearsal.
- Allow each group some time to look through the character profiles in their group and ask them to assign each character to a person.
  - In some groups they will have fewer characters than group members, reassure them that this is fine they should first of all make sure that each character is represented and the rest of the group will be 'photographers' or additional members of the court.
- Ask each group to take turns reading out the information about each character.
- Invite the groups to then create a still image, or photograph, of their family or group. All of the characters should appear in the image so those students without character profiles, the 'photographers' will be needed to help shape the image and help the others get into position.
  - In arranging the picture, students should think about how each character is seen in relation to the rest of their group. For example, who are they close to, who are they distancing themselves from and how do they see themselves.
- Allow each group to show their family/group photograph to the rest of the group and encourage the audience to guess which character is which before asking the 'photographers' from that group to explain their choices. Based on the information they had, why did they choose to place each character where they are and what instruction did they give?



Tanya Moodie as Gertrude and Clarence Smith as Claudius in the 2016 production of *Hamlet*. Photo by Manuel Harlan.

- Encourage students to reflect on the groups as a whole once they have seen them all. What connections can they see between the groups? Which characters appeared in multiple groups? Are they the same in each group or do they show a different face in one from the other?
  - Encourage students to think specifically about Hamlet here; how is he different with his friends to with his family? How might Hamlet be different, or similar, if you added him to the Polonius family image or even the Court image?

## VOICES FROM THE PAST

In Hamlet, the young Prince of Denmark is spurred into action by meeting with the ghost of his Father, Old King Hamlet. For modern audiences the way Hamlet naturally accepts this appearance of his dead Father can often be difficult to believe. When talking about the African countries that inspired the setting of the 2016 production, Simon Godwin really wanted to explore the more spiritual side of their cultures in which meeting a ghost or dead spirit might not feel so out of place.

### NOTES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

**As part of the rehearsal process Simon invited Augustus Casley-Haeyward, the presenter of BBC series *Lost Kingdoms of Africa*, to come in and talk to the company about different African customs, beliefs and traditions. Discussing lots of different cultural practices, Augustus emphasised how important heritage and inheritance were in many of those societies. The designer, Paul Wells, also brought in images of funeral dress for the company to explore, helping to build an image of how Old King Hamlet's funeral might be presented in this setting.**



### ACTIVITY 3: SUMMONING A GHOST

- Provide students with copies of the script for Act 1 Scene 5 where Hamlet meets the ghost of his Father.
- Explain to them that this is the second appearance of the ghost in the Act, but the first time Hamlet has spoken to it and organise them into pairs to work on it.
- Ask each pair to read the script through while standing back to back, reading the parts of Hamlet and the Ghost.
- Encourage students to share what it felt like to read the script while not looking directly at each other.
  - Explore with them the idea that if Hamlet is not looking at the ghost as he speaks it still feels like it might be partly in his mind.
- Ask students to then read the scene again, this time creating a space between them so that they have to raise their voices.
  - Reflect with them on how this felt different. Which reading seems to reflect the situation best?
- Allow each pair to join with another, forming groups of four.
- Ask each group to read the script again, with two students reading and two forming the audience. This time, ask those reading to start with a space between them and to either step towards or away from the other person each time they speak a line.
  - Encourage them to think about the impact they want to have on the other person and remind them that their steps can be in any direction; they could even stand back to back if the other speaker allows them to.

### WAYS TO EXTEND THIS WORK

- During rehearsal Simon and the company looked at some of the deaths which are not featured in the play and also how other characters might have learned about them.
- Encourage students to think about creating short scenes for:
  - Gertrude being told about her husband's death and how it happened.
  - Ophelia being told (much later in the play) how her father was killed.

- After completing the reading once, allow the groups to swap readers so that everyone has read and everyone has been in the audience.
- Ask students to discuss how the reading felt. When were they close and when were they furthest away from each other? What do those moments show us about Hamlet and his reaction to this extraordinary situation?
- Allow students to reflect on how it felt to be an audience member as well. What was the more believable reaction to a ghost coming back to life to talk to his son? Were there any points where it was more believable? When they were close or far apart?
  - You might want to show students some of the images below from the current production. In these they can see some of the staging choices made by Simon Godwin and the company for this scene. In this version of the play the ghost of Old King Hamlet's appearances are signified by music so this opportunity for Hamlet to talk to his Father has a very different feeling to a haunting, where it is like the ghost has been summoned.

# STORYTELLING

## NOTES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

**As well as talking about customs and beliefs Augustus Casely-Heyward was able to talk to the company about the history of oral storytelling and its importance in African cultures. Without written records in many early cultures, oral history became incredibly important. Gus also talked about travelling troops of actors and their freedom to criticise often brutal regimes. Simon was keen for the company to explore this in relation to the play, where Hamlet uses the players to criticise Claudius in a similar way.**



## ACTIVITY 4: WHY STORIES MATTER

The players first appear in Act 3 Scene 1 and stage their performance in Act 3 Scene 2. Hamlet uses the story within the play to try and create guilt in Claudius and make him react to what is happening in front of him and the below activity will help students to explore how that might be done on stage.

- Before beginning you might want to ask students to think about any comedy or satire shows they have seen which criticise the government or decision makers/rulers of a country or group. Why do they think comedy or fictional shows are able to do this? You may also want to explain that this play is often staged in a comical way for similar reasons. It is much easier for the players, and Hamlet, to criticise Claudius in this indirect way.
  - Organise students into groups of six and provide each of them with the edited version of the dumbshow, explaining that the players do a silent version of the story first.
  - Ask students to create a short version of the dumbshow, without Hamlet's lines, with two of them acting as directors.

Paapa Essiedu as Hamlet in the 2016 production of *Hamlet*. Photo by Manuel Harlan.



## WAYS TO EXTEND THIS WORK

- You may want to develop this activity by giving each group a different style in which to perform the play, to see what each option brings out in the text. In rehearsal they did this, looking at versions including a rap battle.

- Invite the directors to then take on the role of Hamlet and Claudius. This time, as the players perform, Hamlet and Claudius can react:
  - Hamlet can stop them at any time and interrupt with his lines. When he does interrupt, the players should all freeze and allow him to speak.
  - Claudius can show his reactions to the play and what is happening on stage as he watches. These reactions can be very physical or more subtle.
- You may want to mention to students that the interruptions from Claudius and Hamlet are taken from the longer version of the play that comes after the dumbshow, but if they read this later part they can look to see how accurate they were.
- Allow some of the groups to perform their plays, showing both Hamlet's interruptions and Claudius' reactions. Does each group pause the action in similar places? Which parts of the story do they think Hamlet is most interested in and why?



The Company of Hamlet in the 2016 production. Photo by Manuel Harlan.



## ACTIVITY 5: HAMLET'S DILEMNA

After this scene has taken place and Hamlet has seen Claudius' guilt he hears him confess his crimes in prayer. This moment gives Hamlet the perfect opportunity to kill Claudius once for all, just like his Father asked him to, but he doesn't.

- Organise students into two rows, facing each other so they form a corridor.
- Invite one student to stand at the end of the corridor and place a crown at the other end to represent Claudius.
- Ask the students in the corridor to whisper to Hamlet, reasons why he should take revenge and kill Claudius in this moment and reasons why he shouldn't.
  - You may want to split this so half of them look at reasons for and half of them look at reasons against.
  - It can also be useful to use quotes and extracts from the scenes they have just looked at so encourage students to do this as well as thinking about the motives they can see or imagine, such as 'Your Father would be disappointed in you if you did nothing', for example.
- As the students speak their reasons, ask the student playing Hamlet to move up and down the corridor depending on how certain he is that he should kill Claudius.
- Allow a number of students the opportunity to walk down the corridor before reflecting on what they think. Are most of the arguments for or against? Which is more persuasive and why? What is it that stops Hamlet in the end?

### NOTES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

**In addition to exploring the role of the players and storytelling, Simon focused on many of the other classical stories that appear throughout Hamlet. During the first two weeks of rehearsal as the company worked through the text for the first time together, he asked them to create human diagrams, or short re-enactments, of any classical stories used in the play. Each day they introduced a 'story of the day' from mythology and the company kept track of these, as well as mythical creatures and figures that are mentioned, on a wall in the rehearsal room.**



## ACTIVITY 6: UNDERSTANDING THE MYTHS

If you have time, you may want to challenge your students to research some of the myths and classical stories in the text to discover more about them. Hamlet often uses these references to criticise other characters or draw out parallels and they can be easily missed without knowing the original stories. The following list includes some of the 'stories of the day' from the rehearsal room:

- Niobe the Queen of the Amazons
- Hercules the son of Zeus
- Aeneas and his relationship with Dido
- The Nemean Lion
- St Patrick's Purgatory

If you are only looking at extracts you may only want to pick out one or two of these which are relevant. For example, the story of Aeneas and Dido relating the sacking of Troy is the first story Hamlet tells with the players when they arrive and is very useful to look at if exploring these scenes.

## AN ANTIC DISPOSITION

In the first Act of the play Hamlet claims that he is going to deliberately act as 'strange or odd' and 'put an antic disposition on' in order to confuse the new King and the Court. In staging the play, this can be interpreted in so many different ways.



## ACTIVITY 7: THE CLOSET SCENE

As students will know having looked at the plot of the play and some of the scenes, there are lots of moments in this play where Hamlet has important choices to make. The character of Hamlet has a number of soliloquies in the play which are used to express some of his struggle with those choices. The following activity looks at the closet scene in which he finally has the chance to speak to Gertrude alone.

- Provide each student with a copy of the closet scene in the resource materials.
- Ask students to read the scene out loud, taking turns to swap reader at the end of each line. Allow them to reflect on the tone of the scene at this stage. Does it change at any point that they can tell?
- Organise students into fours and ask two of them to re-read the scene while facing each other and not moving. Encourage the third person to play Polonius and listen while they read through, standing with their back to Gertrude and Hamlet and the fourth to observe.



Paapa Essiedu as Hamlet and Tanya Moodie as Gertrude in the 2016 production of *Hamlet*. Photo by Manuel Harlan.



- Allow students to do this two more times with the fourth person taking on the role of the ghost. Invite them to re-imagine the scene in the following ways:
    - With the ghost being the only character who can move
    - With Hamlet being the only character who can move
- Encourage students to listen carefully to the lines and base their movement choices on the language.
- Reflect with students on how and when they think the ghost is present and how much Hamlet can see. How did the ghost's movement and interaction make Hamlet feel? How did it make Gertrude and Polonius feel? When Hamlet moved, did the scene feel different for Gertrude and Polonius?
  - Ask students to imagine the scene without the ghost at all. Do they think the ghost should be seen by the audience at this point? If the audience can see the ghost does that change our reaction to Gertrude?

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# RESOURCES

## THE STORY IN FIVE ACTS

1. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, returns from University for his father's funeral only to discover that his Uncle Claudius is now King and has married his mother, Queen Gertrude.

**Hamlet: Married with my uncle!**

Hamlet sees his dead father's ghost. The ghost tells him that he was murdered by his brother Claudius who poured poison in his ear whilst he slept. The ghost says that Hamlet must punish Claudius for the murder.

**Ghost: Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.**

2. Claudius, Gertrude and the people of the court think Hamlet is acting strangely. Ophelia, Hamlet's girlfriend, is also very confused by the way Hamlet is acting - and he tells her that he doesn't love her while her father and the King and Queen are listening..

**Hamlet: Get thee to a nunnery.**

Ophelia is very upset at the changes she sees in Hamlet.

**Ophelia O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!**

3. A travelling group of actors have come to the court. In order to find out whether Claudius really did kill his brother, Hamlet's father, Hamlet asks these actors to rehearse a play in which a king is murdered by having poison poured into his ear. He helps the actors to prepare their play.

**Hamlet: Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand.**

At the performance of a play Claudius acts very guilty and rushes away.

**Claudius: Give us some light. Away!**

Hamlet talks to his mother Gertrude, telling her how angry he is at her for having married his uncle so soon after his father died.

**Hamlet: Mother, you have my father much offended.**

Hamlet and Gertrude have an argument and suddenly Hamlet hears a sound coming from behind a curtain. He thinks it's Claudius hiding there and stabs through the curtain, killing Polonius, Ophelia's father. As he dies, Polonius cries:

**Polonius: O, I am slain!**

4. Claudius is very worried that Hamlet knows he's a murderer and he sends him away to England with two of his friends from school - Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

**Claudius: I'll have him hence tonight.**

These friends are told to see that Hamlet dies. But Hamlet escapes and returns home to Denmark and meets up with Horatio. While Hamlet has been away, Ophelia has gone insane with sorrow because she has lost both her father and her boyfriend.

**Ophelia: I would give you some violets,  
but they withered all when my father died.**

Ophelia is found drowned in a river, and no-one knows whether it was an accident or suicide. Her brother Laertes comes home from fighting to find his father and sister dead and blames Hamlet.

**Laertes: I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze**

5. Hamlet and Horatio find themselves at the graveyard where Ophelia is to be buried. Hamlet meets a gravedigger, and discovers a skull that belonged to the King's jester from his childhood.

**Hamlet: Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio...**

King Claudius arranges a duel between Hamlet and Laertes. Because he wants Hamlet dead, he gets Laertes to poison the tip of his sword. He also prepares a poisoned drink for Hamlet.

**Claudius: I have prepared him/ A chalice for the nonce...**

Things go very wrong at the duel. The swords get mixed up and both Laertes and Hamlet get cut with the poisoned weapon. Queen Gertrude then drinks the poison meant for Hamlet so Hamlet kills King Claudius with the poisoned sword before he dies.

**Claudius: O, yet defend me, friends!**

Only Hamlet's friend Horatio lives to tell the terrible story.

**Horatio: Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince:  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!**

## CHARACTER PROFILES

### Claudius

The new King of Denmark  
Recently married to Gertrude, prince Hamlet's mother  
Prince Hamlet's uncle who Hamlet comes to believe killed his Father

### Gertrude

The Queen of Denmark and Prince Hamlet's mother.  
Her husband the old king has died suddenly not long ago and she has just married her husband's brother, Claudius.

### Prince Hamlet

Gertrude's son and Prince of Denmark.  
Loyal to his father, the old king, who has recently died unexpectedly. He has come home from university for his father's funeral and his mother's wedding but he wishes his mother had not married his Uncle Claudius. Horatio is his best friend

### Horatio

Prince Hamlet's friend from university  
Loyal to Hamlet, he doesn't seem to know Hamlet's family very much

### Polonius

The chief advisor to the royal family for many years.  
Loyal to the current king, Claudius, and often seen as pompous and self important

### Ophelia

Polonius' daughter and sister to Laertes.  
Hamlet has been interested in Ophelia in the past and has given her gifts and spent time with her. She seems to be in love with him but is also very obedient to her Father who doesn't like Hamlet's behaviour.

### Laertes

Polonius' son and Ophelia's brother.  
Laertes is a loyal son and brother who goes off to fight during the play, with Claudius' permission.

### Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Old friends of Hamlet.  
They seem to have been sent for by Gertrude and Claudius early on in the play to try and help Hamlet deal with his grief.

## ACT 1 SCENE 5 EXTRACT

### Edited by RSC Education

#### *The ghost beckons him*

Ghost: **Mark me.**

Hamlet **I will!**

Ghost **My hour is almost come,  
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames  
Must render up myself.**

Hamlet **Alas! Poor ghost!**

Ghost **Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing  
To what I shall unfold**

Hamlet: **Speak. I am bound to hear.**

Ghost : **I am thy father's spirit,  
Doomed to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires.  
If thou didst ever thy dear father love-**

Hamlet: **Oh God!**

Ghost: **Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.**

Hamlet: **Murder?**

Ghost: **Murder most foul. But know, thou noble youth,  
The serpent that did sting thy father's life  
Now wears his crown.**

Hamlet: **Oh my prophetic soul!  
My uncle?**

Ghost: **Sleeping within my orchard,  
My custom always of the afternoon,  
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole  
With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,  
And in the porches of my ears did pour  
The leperous distilment; whose effect  
Holds such an enmity with blood of man  
That swift as quicksilver it courses through  
The natural gates and alleys of the body.  
Thus was I sleeping by a brother's hand  
Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched.  
O, horrible! O, horrible! O, horrible!  
If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not.**

## **ACT 3 SCENE 2 EXTRACT**

### **Edited by RSC Education**

*The dumb-show enters*

*Enter a King and a Queen very lovingly; the Queen embracing him, and he her. She kneels, and makes show of protestation unto him. He takes her up, and declines his head upon her neck: lays him down upon a bank of flowers: she, seeing him asleep, leaves him. Anon comes in a fellow, takes off his crown, kisses it, and pours poison in the King's ears, and exit. The Queen returns; finds the King dead, and makes passionate action. The Poisoner, with some two or three Mutes, comes in again, seeming to lament with her. The dead body is carried away. The Poisoner woos the Queen with gifts: she seems loath and unwilling awhile, but in the end accepts his love*

*Exeunt*

### **Hamlet and Claudius' asides**

**HAMLET**

[Aside] Wormwood, wormwood.

**HAMLET**

If she should break it now!

**HAMLET** (To Gertrude)

Madam, how like you this play?

**HAMLET**

He poisons him i' the garden for's estate. His name's Gonzago

**KING CLAUDIUS**

Give me some light: away!

## **ACT 3 SCENE 4 EXTRACT**

### **The Closet Scene**

**Edited by RSC Education**

**HAMLET**

A king of shreds and patches,--

*Enter Ghost*

Save me, and hover o'er me with your wings,  
You heavenly guards! What would your gracious figure?

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

Alas, he's mad!

**HAMLET**

Do you not come your tardy son to chide,  
That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by  
The important acting of your dread command? O, say!

**Ghost**

Do not forget: this visitation  
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.  
But, look, amazement on thy mother sits:  
O, step between her and her fighting soul:  
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works:  
Speak to her, Hamlet.

**HAMLET**

How is it with you, lady?

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

Alas, how is't with you,  
That you do bend your eye on vacancy  
And with the incorporal air do hold discourse?  
Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep;  
And, as the sleeping soldiers in the alarm,  
Your bedded hair, like life in excrements,  
Starts up, and stands on end. O gentle son,  
Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper  
Sprinkle cool patience. Whereon do you look?

**HAMLET**

On him, on him! Look you, how pale he glares!  
His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,  
Would make them capable. Do not look upon me;  
Lest with this piteous action you convert  
My stern effects: then what I have to do  
Will want true colour; tears perchance for blood.

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

To whom do you speak this?

**HAMLET**

Do you see nothing there?

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.

**HAMLET**

Nor did you nothing hear?

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

No, nothing but ourselves.

**HAMLET**

Why, look you there! look, how it steals away!

My father, in his habit as he lived!

Look, where he goes, even now, out at the portal!

*Exit Ghost*