

Forget Hamlet

An Upside-Down Rewriting of Shakespeare's Hamlet

By Jawad Al-Asadi

Translated from the Arabic by Margaret Litvin

Translator's Introduction

Playwright and director Jawad al-Asadi was born in 1947 in the Shi'a holy city of Karbala, Iraq. He graduated from Baghdad's Theatre Academy in 1974 and fled the country in 1976, beginning a 27-year exile from Ba'hist Iraq. He earned a PhD in theatre in Bulgaria and has continued to work in Eastern Europe, Syria, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and elsewhere. His creativity, ironic sensibility, and tireless devotion to his craft have made him one of the most influential directors in the Arab world today. He has won numerous honors, including the 2004 Prince Claus Award. He has written seven original plays, including the one presented here.

First staged in Cairo in 1994 under the title *Ophelia's Window*, the play was retitled for publication in 2000. The new title, "Forget Hamlet," confronts the audience with a paradoxical demand. In the same breath as it reminds us of the figure of Hamlet, it asks us to forget him. Al-Asadi exploits this doubleness for dramatic irony: the audience is made to recall a previous, more impressive version of Hamlet while it watches the hapless non-protagonist on stage. Even the play's characters feel the contrast. At one point al-Asadi's Horatio accuses his friend: "You are not the Hamlet I know and have lived with." Hamlet responds with infuriating blankness: "Well, maybe I should change my name."

Who is this Hamlet we are meant to forget? Let me briefly sketch the tradition of Arab *Hamlet* rewritings to which al-Asadi's play responds and contributes. We should first note that an order to forget makes sense only for something quite well known and clearly remembered. *Hamlet* has been almost completely naturalized into Arab culture over the past century, and is not at all perceived as a British colonial imposition or Western import. Polemicists on all ends of the political and cultural spectrum, including Islamists, quote from the play. Almost every educated Arab has strong ideas about the character. Wearing a doublet and hose, a black pullover and jeans, or a *galabiyya* and slippers, Hamlet is at home in all walks of Arab life. An Arab dramatist who undertakes to rewrite *Hamlet* thus engages with many texts: not only with Shakespeare's original (in some edition or translation) but also with a kaleidoscope of international versions and those of previous Arab interpreters and adapters.

During Jawad al-Asadi's lifetime, Arab stage versions of *Hamlet* have gone through three distinct phases. Because in the Arab world serious theatre is seen as necessarily political, and because *Hamlet* is read as a political play, these phases have largely corresponded to the prevailing political moods in the region: euphoric pride after the Egyptian Revolution of 1952; anger and soul-searching after the disastrous June War of 1967; and a mixture of cynicism and nostalgia since the mid-1970s, as stale autocracies have spread through the region and stifled its dreams of national awakening.

Jawad al-Asadi has said that he grew up in a leftist Iraqi household where Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser was a powerful inspiration. Nasser's revolution, with its stirring populist

speeches and show trials of disgraced royalist sympathizers, had a highly theatrical feel. Al-Asadi says he was impressed by “the *character* of Nasser: Gamal Abdel Nasser as a human being, a patriot, and a nationalist. He influenced all of us—an influence that was not only political. He had an emotional influence. I remember when Nasser gave a speech we would feel exceptionally moved.”

Nasser’s revolution inspired dramatists and directors all over the region to pursue two sometimes contradictory goals. Arab drama was to rise “to world standards,” embracing the most challenging classics of the world canon. Yet it was also to be topical and edifying, immediately relevant to the social and political issues of the day. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, at different times, served both these goals.

In the first phase of *Hamlet* appropriation, until about 1964, Shakespeare was an emblem of international high culture to be mastered. Arab critics focused on the need for more competent translations and productions. Meanwhile, theatre practitioners absorbed a variety of approaches to Shakespeare. To the acting traditions of Italian opera and French comedy were added newer discoveries such as European modernism, existentialism, and the theatre of the absurd. The Arab world’s turn toward socialism also opened the door to Polish, Russian and East German models of reading Shakespeare, including Jan Kott and Bertolt Brecht. Especially influential was the 1964 Soviet film *Gamlet* directed by Grigorii Kozintsev, with Pasternak’s translation, Innokenti Smoktunovsky’s fiercely decisive Hamlet, and Dmitri Shostakovich’s rousing musical score. This political interpretation of the play, emphasizing that “the time is out of joint” and “Denmark’s a prison,” resonated deeply with Arab viewers.

The second phase, from about the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, was the heyday of what I have termed the Arab hero Hamlet. This is the archetypal Arab reading of the character: a martyr for justice in an out-of-joint world. The tyrant can be foreign or homegrown: the important thing is that Hamlet confronts an oppressive political order and sacrifices his life (and sometimes other innocent lives as well) trying to “set it right.” He is a zealous and resourceful justice-seeker – killed at the end, to be sure, but meanwhile a fierce opponent of “th’oppressor’s wrong,” “the law’s delay, the insolence of office,” and whatever is “rotten” in the Egyptian, Syrian, or Iraqi state.

By the late 1970s, when al-Asadi gave up on the Iraqi regime and began his exile in Sofia, this agit-prop phase had ended. Allegorical political theatre had failed to “catch the conscience” of either the governments or the masses. Arab dramatists began to mock and mourn this failure. For the past 30 years, the archetypal revolutionary Hamlet has served mainly as a yardstick to measure the shortcomings of Arab protagonists who are incompetent, inarticulate, and infected with the lack of resolve that poisons their society as a whole.

Al-Asadi’s mid-1990s play makes good use of this contrast. Its Hamlet is no revolutionary hero. He philosophizes aimlessly and refuses to take responsibility for any action. In a scene recalling Kafka’s *Trial*, he meekly extends his neck to Claudius’

executioners. His best lines – the lines we know *should* be his – are parceled out to other characters: Laertes, Horatio, the gravediggers, and especially Ophelia. For instance, Ophelia turns the tables in the nunnery scene, telling Hamlet: “Get yourself to a monastery; that would be more merciful. There you can focus your body and your mind on the pressing theological questions. There you can have more peace and quiet to ask and re-ask your question, ‘to be or not to be.’” (The play includes many such verbal echoes of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, drawn mainly from Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s 1960s translation. I have tried to render the echoes obvious without breaking al-Asadi’s contemporary tone.)

Although al-Asadi’s rewriting is part of the Arab *Hamlet* tradition, no single trait identifies it as a uniquely Iraqi or even Arab text. Rather, the play speaks to the broader psychological reality of dictatorship, sadly familiar to many Europeans, Asians, Latin Americans, and others around the world. For at the imaginative center of *Forget Hamlet*, filling the space vacated by Hamlet, is Claudius: not Shakespeare’s “king of shreds and patches” but a “wild buffalo,” the terrifying head of a bloodthirsty regime. Not simply a version of Saddam Hussein, this Claudius is a mythological monster. He seduces or devours anyone who gets in his way. He reaches across the generation gap with designs on Ophelia. He makes the executioners, not the shipbuilders as in Shakespeare, toil around the clock. Even the sarcastic gravediggers are in awe of his brutality. And he is still on the throne as the play ends.

In his introduction to *Forget Hamlet*, Jawad al-Asadi cites two Eastern bloc *Hamlets* that caught the spirit of their out-of-joint times: Yuri Lyubimov’s *Hamlet* production at Moscow’s Taganka Theatre (1971) and Heiner Müller’s *Hamletmaschine* (1977). He speaks of his desire to “sweep away holy texts” such as Shakespeare’s: to bring them to life through interpretation rather than deaden them through worship. And he says his own play

awaits stoning and abuse, in the sense of taking a big rock and shattering what’s expected. I wrote [this text] not to be copied and revered, but so that new productions could dirty it with a different set of connections that would make the text itself more brilliant and fresh – even if that means sweeping it away entirely.

When it was first staged after the first Gulf War, *Forget Hamlet*, too, caught the spirit of its historical moment. Since then much has changed in Iraq, in the Arab world as a whole, and in al-Asadi’s work. We have the opportunity today to see him revisit his own text twelve years later and, if he wishes, carry out whatever creative destruction he feels is appropriate.

Introduction: Sweeping Away Hamlet

Jawad al-Asadi

So let us sweep away his kingliness, pull the chair of contemplation out from under his feet, and stop those tragic rattles sliding around the icy kingdom's cold court – and then let us gather up the scraps of “to be or not to be” from the shelves of his huge library! No friendship, no kinship, and not even the least familiarity between the fire of Ophelia and the ice of Hamlet, just as the German Heiner Müller had it when he publicly shed Shakespeare's blood more than once, in front of passers-by and applauding spectators in rough galleries. Heiner Müller transformed *Hamlet* into *Die Hamletmaschine*, and all the characters played out with unparalleled violence Müller's vicious anger and hatred toward those who, lost in the kingdom of the political priesthood, invented justifications for collusion and appeasement with the enemy (i.e., Power). And then a crowd of rats and dinosaurs was flung from between Ophelia's thighs, indignant at the concept of political worship.

I wanted in my dramatic text *Forget Hamlet* to pull the curtain from some characters suffering the edge of madness and to open the door of the text to their desires and their rancor, postponed in the face of Claudius, the state barbarian who swallowed up both his brother and sister-in-law at once to send the former to the gravediggers and the latter to his own bed and his boorish unmanly haste.

Here I approach, at least a little, the temptation to sweep away holy texts. This is an old passion, which I have expressed more than once by turning the tables on texts I have directed. It is a passion that goes beyond the idea of playing with one's inheritance and the revered achievements of tradition, into an intertwining and wrangling with texts crowded with silent desires and longings, fires ready to be exploded open or shattered, either on the level of the thoughtful actor's performance or by a director who believes in sweeping away established certainties.

To sanctify texts turns them into dead texts, sentenced in advance to be blackened by executive-minded directors or writers infatuated with literalist execution. To take issue with texts, whether through writing or direction, pulls them from their places and times and puts them into a time and place that respond to the intellectual and political changes that have occurred, which brings texts into contact with contemporary life. Directors don't take on classical or modern texts in order to pray to them, as though they were holy texts admitting no excavation or rough handling or varied readings, but in order to kindle in them a flame that will push the characters and the issues to explode and splinter and collide.

Once the text, the writer's text, reaches the reader through some publishing house or other, it escapes the writer's hand and walks freely into the hands of directors and readers. It acquires a more varied and multifarious life, changing from a jewel lying neglected in the bookstore to a ball of fire moving between the workshops of directors,

some of whom may read it literally and others of whom may quarrel with it, or even sweep away the text as form and as content in order to explore the form of the text improvised from the original.

Of course I am not at all speaking here of illiterate directors who wipe away their texts, but about those who attend to longings and pleasures outside the realm of purely mechanical expectations. For instance, avant-garde Russian director Yuri Lyubimov, head of the Taganka Theatre, did precisely this when he changed *Hamlet* into a jazz singer: he dragged the text toward its sensitive points, toward the resonances and insights implied in its musical aesthetics, which removed the text from the realm of expectation into that of raucous innovation. Lyubimov read (or wrote) *Hamlet* in a way that diabolically intersected Shakespeare's text, an inspired rewriting that set into motion some viruses, codes, and signs in the text that audiences and critics had ignored before.

The idea of rewriting, whether through a new text or a different directorial interpretation, is now accepted both by drama critics and by audiences committed to a historicist view of literature in all its forms. However, it still leaves a negative impression on many Arabs. The theatre is still judged by ancient and weighty criteria, especially in the minds of the many artists and writers who hold the established, centralized point of view focused on a singular point that forbids all doubt, and that does not wish to play with texts' majestic splendor. For these people still treat texts or theatre productions as jewels or icons with which to beautify their houses.

In this sense I present my dramatic text, *Forget Hamlet*, in its organic departures from the original *Hamlet*, to take a step backward or forward (it doesn't matter which), side by side with directorial interpretations that depart from the original. I say to any director who wishes to produce [this text], that [it] awaits stoning and abuse, in the sense of taking a big rock and shattering what's expected. I wrote [this text] not to be copied and revered, but so that new productions could dirty it with a different set of connections that would make the text itself more brilliant and fresh – even if that means sweeping it away entirely.

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Dramatis Personae:

Laertes (The Blind Man)

[Hamlet]

Claudius

Ophelia

Horatio

Polonius

Gravediggers

Soldiers

[Old King, Gertrude, Violinist, Player, Guard, Servants]

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Scene One (The Celebration)

Glass doors, rickety chairs! Huge chandeliers hanging down from the ceiling. An atmosphere of mirrors and masks. All the dramatis personae seem lost; their facial expressions indicate confusion and anticipation. As the king is wheeled in on a moving bed by his servant, the whole scene moves in the direction of the king.

The King: Gertrude!

Gertrude: Shall I take you to bed?

King: No, prepare the drinking table.

Gertrude: You won't be drinking tonight! You're not well, and you should sleep.

King: (shouting) Polonius!

Polonius: Yes, my lord.

King: Have them prepare the drinking table.

Polonius: Yes, my lord.

King: Where's the violinist?

Polonius: Right away, my lord. He'll play. As delicately as you desire.

The drinking table is prepared, the violinist plays, and all the actors join in the drinking. A beautiful celebratory atmosphere fills the scene.

Horatio: (to Hamlet) How desolate the world is!

Laertes, the blind man, stumbles and falls. A shriek from Ophelia, who is holding him. Hamlet also helps Laertes. Horatio brushes the dust off him.

Laertes: (exclaims) Which is blinder, the world, or me?

Hamlet: (sarcastically) The fools are even blinder than the blind man himself.

They laugh. The music is still playing. Hamlet approaches Ophelia.

Laertes: Hamlet, don't dance with my sister in the dark.

Hamlet: You can't see rays of light anymore. I'll dance with her in the light.

Laertes takes his place at the table. Horatio as well.

Laertes: Horatio, be a witness to what your friend is doing. He's trying to seduce my sister.

Hamlet: How I long to tear that lace from your breast!

Ophelia: *(embarrassed)* Shh! They'll hear us.

Laertes: I pray you, flirt with my sister out loud. Otherwise I'll order her to her room. Or plunge my dagger into you.

Horatio: Laertes!

Gertrude: Will you ask me to dance, Laertes?

Laertes: Even though I can't see the shape of your face or the blue of your body, I'll dance with you.

(She dances with Laertes the blind man.)

Ophelia: You haven't accustomed me to such soft words.

Hamlet: When I look into your eyes, I forget about lamps and candles.

Ophelia: If my brother weren't so vicious and rough I would take you away to the sea, and there beside the waves I would let you hear the flute of my pain.

Hamlet: *(Silence)*

Ophelia: Allow me to put this gold chain around your neck.

Hamlet: Oh, how I thank you!

Gertrude: Laertes, why do you speak to me in this fashion?

Laertes: I didn't mean to offend you. I was just joking with you.

(He laughs hysterically. The king approaches and cuts in to dance with Gertrude.)

King: I am not as well as one might wish.

Gertrude: *(Silence)*

King: Cold in my bed, and cold in her kiss.

Gertrude: I don't feel the sweetness of sleep anymore, or the pleasure of companionship.

King: Take me to bed, then. A sudden pain is throbbing in my head.

(As the King and Gertrude are moving toward their bedroom, they meet Claudius.)

Claudius: You'll go to sleep, my brother, and God keep you.

King: *(Gives Claudius a strange look)*

Claudius: Allow me to kiss this hand and these cheeks.

(Exit the King, Claudius, and Gertrude, followed by Ophelia. The Violinist continues playing. A light wind starts blowing, then rises gradually.)

Laertes: A cold wind is coming from the direction of the window. A cold, cursed wind. How about another glass of wine? Nobody can hear me! Nobody! Have they all gone to bed? *(The wind rises a little more. He shouts.)* Why did you leave the window open, servant?

Polonius: Shh! Lower your voice. The king is about to fall asleep!

Laertes: Ha! The king is about to fall a... sleep. Of course! And as for me, sleep is about to fall on me! *(Laughs.)*

Polonius: Be quiet! Come with me.

Laertes: I don't want to. I won't be quiet, and I won't come with you.

Polonius: I said come with me and don't be a fool.

Laertes: Where is my sister Ophelia?

Polonius: She went to sleep! *(Drags him away, but not without difficulty.)*

Laertes: What about Hamlet?

Polonius: He's reading.

Laertes: Reading? What's he reading?

Polonius: Theology.

Laertes: He's planning how to seduce my sister.

Polonius: Don't worry, my eyes are wide open. I'm watching them.

Laertes: I smell a foul smell.

Polonius: If you don't shut your mouth, I'll beat you.

Laertes: Father, you hate me as though I weren't your son.

Polonius: I hate you?

Laertes: You're conspiring against me.

Polonius: Are you mad?

Laertes: What's driving me mad is being in the walls of this palace. Take me outside Denmark. Bury me outside Denmark. I smell the stench of treachery in the walls of this palace. Where is Ophelia? *(Shouting)*
Ophelia!

Polonius: You idiot! The king is asleep!

Laertes: I hope he sleeps forever. *(Still shouting)* Ophelia!

He exits, with Polonius covering his mouth and dragging him out. Hamlet is left alone. Enter the Player, moving his flexible body gracefully and wearing a mask.

Hamlet: Come here, Player.

Player: Just as I expected you, my lord. Sweet, handsome.

The wind rises gradually.

Hamlet: Has everyone fallen dead asleep?

Player: The whole kingdom is sleeping except for Claudius and your mother.

Hamlet: Can you recite to me a piece of what you're working on?

Player: Of course, my lord. I'll perform for you the last thing I've written.

A long silence. Horatio begins to play the flute.

Player: I was Socrates' jailer and the guardian of the community.

Before that I was a groom for the horses, and a blacksmith making swords for the wars.

Every day the carriage with its shabby horses used to take me to the town square where the guillotine stood, solid and high. We would wash the guillotine at dawn to remove the scent of blood. Especially the blade, which took off the heads of many of the best young people of the land. More than once I knelt at the feet of the saints and begged forgiveness for my sins. One day something unexpected happened. The head of the prison asked me to serve as a jailer for Socrates! I was happy, for I admired Socrates. Why? Because Socrates was Athens, and Athens was Socrates. And indeed I became Socrates' jailer: I watched him, and heard him, and loved him.

I gave him food and drink, and I carried his letters to his friends in Athens, as well as bringing many letters to him.

One night, suddenly out of nowhere, the head of the prison ordered me to pour poison into Socrates' cup and make him drink it. I said: Me, kill Socrates with my own hands! Kill the most precious thing in Athens with my own hands? They tore my body with whips, they humiliated me until I agreed. I said Alright! Give me the cup! And indeed I took the cup filled with poison. Socrates was asleep at that moment, sleeping like a huge angel on the burnt-out earth. In that decisive moment I decided to drink the poison. And indeed I poured everything in the cup down my throat, and I was victorious. I died, and that death was the most beautiful and radiant moment of my whole life.

A long moment of silence. The wind rises. Suddenly we hear a piercing scream from inside the palace. Gertrude emerges, screaming.

Gertrude: They slaughtered the king! *(She repeats this several times.)*

Claudius: *(Dragging one of the servants, with the blood-dripping dagger in his hand)* Lowlife! Lowlife! Lowlife! *(The servant flees. Claudius chases him until he catches and stabs him. The servant dies.)* Who bribed you to kill the king? Who?

Gertrude: *(To the servant)* Lowlife! You slaughtered my husband!

Horatio, Hamlet, and the Player run toward the palace and the direction of the piercing scream. Ophelia, half-mad, is screaming.

Ophelia: Hamlet! *(Crying)* Hamlet! *(She repeats this.)* I saw the slaughter with my own eyes, Hamlet! *(Laertes screams.)*

Laertes: Who did this ... deed?

Ophelia: Laertes, I saw the slaughter with my own eyes.

Laertes: Oh, what a filthy world! I had a premonition that a crime was going to be committed. Coachman, where's the carriage? *(Very loud music)*
Coachman, take me away! Drive me, or my bitterness will explode! I want to drag the bull by his horns in front of a huge mirror to show him his crimes!

Ophelia quiets Laertes. The sound of horses and a carriage approaching from afar. As Laertes and Ophelia exit, the sound of horses and scraping carriage wheels intensifies.

Scene Two The Gravediggers (women)

Gravedigger 1: Look at this skull! Used to belong to the best violinist in Denmark.

Gravedigger 2: (*Derisively*) I wonder where are the hands he used to play with.

Digger 1: The worms ate them! The same worms that will eat the heart and head of our mighty king, the standard-bearer of justice.

Digger 2: So we'll shovel dust onto the body of the wisest and most just king.

Digger 1: I know it. He's the only one who brought our country some sense of dignity and peace of mind. What will become of us with his brother Claudius, the shameless one? We hadn't even buried the body of the old king yet, when the news came out about his marriage to the old hag.

Digger 2: Claudius won't just marry the hag-queen: he'll marry you, and he'll marry me, and he'll marry your mother and my mother... He'll marry all of Denmark. (*They laugh.*)

Digger 1: And Polonius? (*Laughs.*)

Digger 2: What about him?

Digger 1: He was the greatest flatterer of our poor betrayed king.

Digger 2: So he'll be the greatest flatterer of Claudius, our new king.

Digger 1: Pity the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet. Where will he go now that his father is dead?

Digger 2: Dig, dig! Claudius ordered us to bury the dead man with lightning speed!

Digger 1: Will Claudius make sure we are well compensated?

Digger 2: Pray, you wretch! When we're burying the mighty king you're not supposed to think about money at all! Pray!

(They pile dirt onto the body of the king.)

Scene Three (The Funeral)

The king's coffin is on a chariot pulled by two men. Enter Gertrude, Claudius, Ophelia and Laertes, Horatio, Polonius, and Hamlet. Chorales, sounds of cannon fire. The coffin is lowered to the ground. Each of them strews flowers on it, each throwing the flowers in his fashion and addressing the king extemporaneously.

Exit all except Hamlet. He is alone in front of the coffin.

Hamlet: One evening a confused butterfly decided to travel with the little waves to the angels of boats at the edge of the sea, where the just king was reclining in the dew, holding the book of wisdom. The butterfly could not hide its light from the king's eyes. It trembled so badly that it hovered circling in the dawn, and poured all the light in its mouth into the mouth of the king sleeping eternally on a drunken boat on a journey from which there is no return.

(Long pause)

What dust will they pile on you? What worms will eat your body? Who will wear your crown? In the name of God, I ask you, what kind of messed-up land are you leaving me?

Ophelia and Horatio approach and hold him as he repeats these words with an air of hysteria.

Scene Four
The Gravediggers

Digger 1: While we were burying our king's body, I saw you sneaking glances at Claudius.

Digger 2: Because I didn't see any sign of grief on his face. His eyes never once teared up.

Digger 1: And the queen – did you see? She looked sad, but her eyes were totally blank! Like a mummy!

Digger 2: And Polonius? (*Laughs*)

Digger 1: What's wrong with you? And what was wrong with Polonius?

Digger 2: You dunce! He was sleepwalking.

Digger 1: No, sister, he was *dead*walking. Death on legs! (*They both laugh.*)

Digger 2: Pour water on Denmark.

Digger 1: Pray, you lowlife! Have you prayed?

Digger 2: I took money...

Digger 1: Pray, you wretch!

Scene Five
(The Coronation)

Neighing of horses outside. Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia are in one corner of the theatre.

Polonius: You'll leave as soon as Claudius is done being crowned the king of the land.

Laertes: I won't leave until the blood that was spilt on the tiles of this palace has dried.

Polonius: Laertes, show some wisdom, or you'll lose your head. The guillotine will be very busy these days, and Claudius won't spare even his own mother's womb!

Laertes: I don't want to leave my sister inside this big oven.

Polonius: Hold your tongue. Go pack your bags.

Laertes: I want to spit in Claudius' face.

Polonius: Spit in my face instead, if that will make you feel better. Look at Hamlet, how peaceable he seems.

Laertes: He's a rat, good for nothing but sophistry. No doubt he seduced my sister with his honeyed words.

Polonius: Lower your voice!

Laertes: Claudius killed the just king, which of us doesn't know that? And meanwhile Hamlet responds to his father's murder with "to be or not to be." Be, just for once be, you rat!

Polonius: You'll get me killed with your clamor, and you'll put your sister in danger.

Laertes: Go to hell, all of you. I have nothing to fear. The world was dark, and it'll stay dark. The coronation – when will he marry the crown?

Polonius: I won't invite you to attend.

Ophelia: Laertes, I beg you, get out of here right now!

Laertes: Get away from me, both of you. I'll make the palace echo with my screams. *(Screams loudly.)*

Polonius: Laertes, I implore you to stop screaming. *(He grabs his heart.)* A glass of water! *(Ophelia runs and brings him water.)* My heart, Ophelia! Won't you have mercy on your father?

Laertes: Claudius! *(Shouts)* Press your weight on Denmark, lie down on our chests, make the rounds among us, won't you? We're always ready to be annihilated.

Trumpets herald the arrival of the king and the queen for the coronation. The trumpeting crescendos. Claudius advances with a number of soldiers. Hamlet and Horatio withdraw to the side. The jester performs a dance before Claudius begins.

Claudius: Tonight will mark our wedding to our brother's wife, who is still living in widowhood with all the appropriate sadness. Several times she refused to set a wedding date, but my insistence made her agree.

In this deed of mine, I want to grip the corners of the kingdom tightly, to make Denmark a fortified stronghold with a fortified army and a carefree life, protected by the guillotine from any who would tell lies or go fishing in dirty waters. Denmark will not be spoiled or weakened. I will not tolerate the rot and permissiveness that crept in with my good, tender brother. Never! Even if it meant I had to witness the beheading of my own wife, the queen! Or put my own mother to death for the sake of applying the law in Denmark. Denmark should seem strong and sound, with a terrible army to frighten its enemies.

Laertes: *(applauding insanely)* We are ready for blood, O master of Denmark! We attend your celebration and your coronation only to bear witness to your guillotine, which you show us very early! We have become your food! The meals for your table! Your witnesses, and also your killers! We've understood your message. I pray Hamlet has understood it as well. It's simply that his mother will sleep tonight with his uncle in his father's bed. What is more glorious than Denmark! *(Laughing and mocking.)*

Polonius: Please excuse Laertes, my lord. He's unwell – he has been in the middle of a terrible nervous breakdown for some time now.

Laertes: Precisely! Tell him I'm ill! I need a psychologist!

Polonius: Precisely, my lord, he's ill. And in need of medical attention.

Claudius: *(Treating the matter wisely)* It's all right, I'll forgive my son Laertes for his words. At the same time, we will send him away to the sanatorium tonight. The chariot will be ready, with two horses harnessed.

Ophelia: *(Screaming, crying)* No, no, no, no! I beg you, my lord, don't send him to the sanatorium! Laertes is just tired. He will apologize to you!

Claudius: My word is final. *(Ophelia cries madly)*

Laertes: I will go to the sanatorium. Better than staying in this brothel! You say that your guillotine is active – so bring it here and cut off my head!

Hamlet, Horatio, Ophelia, and Polonius step forward to hush Laertes.

Laertes: But before you cut off my head I will cut off yours. You rat, you killed the king of Denmark to sleep with his wife and wear his crown! I spit on you!

They pull him. He continues screaming, cursing, and laughing hysterically.

Laertes: Gertrude. I know you'll sleep with the new king in the bed of the old king. But realize that the old king was more noble and more just than this dinosaur standing beside you.

They drag him offstage. The sound of a chariot and the whinnying of horses fill the space.

To a crescendo of kettledrums, Claudius advances toward the crown. Gertrude lifts up the crown and places it on his head, as the jester continues to dance.

Scene Six (Ghost)

A light wind. Guard 1 and Guard 2 stand watch in front of the palace gate. The hour strikes several times.

Guard 1: I get uneasy at this hour.

Guard 2: We've got a long night ahead of us.

Guard 1: It's bitter cold.

Guard 2: You just have to bear it.

Guard 1: I can't forget the king's corpse. Did you see what a sweet smile he had, even in death?

Guard 2: I feel uneasy, like a heavy weight on my chest I just can't shake.

Guard 1: What's wrong with Claudius? He can't stay still. He didn't sleep last night or tonight either.

Guard 2: He's keeping an eye on everything. He's afraid of enemies!

Guard 1: God rest the old king's soul – he hadn't killed anyone in over ten years, and Claudius has already chopped off 20 heads since he took the crown! He's got the guillotine going around the clock, day and night!

Guard 2: Here's Hamlet! My God, he's changed.

Guard 1: He looks all skinny and pale.

Guard 2: Maybe from fear. He's got to be afraid for his head right now.

Guard 1: He doesn't act like a prince anymore. He's fading away. He must be suffering.

Guard 2: Suffering in silence.

Enter Hamlet and Horatio.

Horatio: I swear I saw him.

Hamlet: What did you see?

Horatio: The new king.

Hamlet: Don't ruin my peace with your nonsense.

Horatio: I've never seen anything so horrible in my life. Claudius, turned into a wild buffalo, parting the sea and coming toward us with a sword in his hand.

Hamlet: I'm going back to the palace. It's my bedtime.

Horatio: You act as though Claudius hadn't killed your father.

Hamlet: He killed my father or he didn't kill him – it's all the same to me.

Horatio: You're making me angry.

Hamlet: I don't care about anything anymore. That's how I've trained my body and mind to be.

Horatio: You don't care about anything – and here your uncle has grabbed the crown away from your father just like a child grabs a doll away from its brother.

Hamlet: This is the play of brothers. An eternal play that will never cease.

Horatio: A bloody king has mounted the throne of the just king.

Hamlet: Who said my father was just? And who can tell if Claudius is really bloody? This killing doesn't prove that the new king is bloody.

Horatio: You aren't the Hamlet I've known and lived with.

Hamlet: Well, maybe I should change my name.

Horatio: Your father's blood hadn't dried on the floor tiles before your mother married your uncle. Two days after your father's death! Doesn't that stir any doubts in you?

Violent noises are heard approaching from afar. The sound of roaring waves. The music rises as the scene changes. Horatio shouts.

Horatio: Look, the same buffalo! Don't you see his sword? He's coming our way!

Hamlet exits – or, to put it bluntly, flees.

Horatio: Oh God! (*screaming*) I've never seen anything so terrifying! He's pointing at me! Hamlet!

The moment grows more intense. Then the scene begins to fade gradually.

Horatio: Where's Hamlet?!? *(Exit Horatio, still calling him.)* Hamlet!

Sound of roaring waves.

Scene Seven
(The King and Queen)

King: What's wrong, Gertrude?

Queen: I feel uncomfortable. Something is pressing on my chest.

King: Let's go out to the garden!

Queen: No, I'd rather stay here.

King: What's bothering you? We carried out our plan successfully. The kingdom is calm. And no one but you is sitting on the throne.

Queen: I feel afraid!

King: Afraid? Why, and of what?

Queen: We have to get a new bed. I can't sleep with you in the same bed that used to join me to the late king.

King: Of course, we'll change the bed.

Queen: I can't stand the feeling of my clothes on my body anymore!

King: We'll change them too, Gertrude. We'll buy you a whole new wardrobe.

Queen: Mirrors! Take away all the mirrors from me.

King: We'll break the mirrors.

Queen: That smell! All traces of that smell have to be wiped away.

King: I'll do it.

Queen: Hamlet's silence is terrible.

King: He has no response to what happened. That's a good thing.

Queen: But he's not blind. I have a feeling he saw and understood everything.

King: His relationship with his father left something to be desired. So he didn't comment on his death. Who knows, maybe it made him happy.

Queen: I know my son well. Silence doesn't always mean acquiescence. Maybe he's planning something.

King: Yesterday I invited him to eat at my table. He sat beside me like an obedient boy. His silence made me nervous. He's started to look as diffident as a wax statue.

Queen: What was he doing?

King: Reading, as though chewing the page mouthful by mouthful.

Queen: He didn't drop any hints?

King: He didn't even eat or drink! He was immersed in his reading! And so absent-minded! Sometimes he would talk to himself and move his hands in the air. He'd make gestures I didn't understand.

Queen: And Ophelia?

King: Loves him more than he loves her. She brought him a present. She put a necklace on him and gave him letters she had written herself. But he didn't look at her with wonder as he used to do.

Queen: I know Hamlet well. He's preparing himself for some explosion.

King: I don't think so. He's wiser than Laertes, that hothead who destroyed himself.

Queen: I think Laertes is in a difficult situation.

King: He's the one who chose that fate for himself.

Queen: Order them to lighten the pressure on him!

King: Don't interfere in my decisions, Gertrude.

Queen: But I'm your wife and the queen of Denmark.

King: (*Embraces her*) You are my wife in my bed, and my queen. Oh God, how I love you!

Queen: Won't you give me permission to go? I want to go abroad for a few days. I'm so tired.

King: Go to the bedroom, I'll join you there and take care of this.

Queen: I'll go out into the garden! I want to be alone! Please bear with me, Claudius.

King: Shall I call your doctor?

Queen: I'm not sick. I'm just tired, worn down. Something hurts, here, in my chest.

King: Come here.

He takes her by the hand. He leads her out. Exeunt.

Scene Eight
(Polonius/Ophelia)

Ophelia: You slaughtered your son with your own hands!

Polonius: My son is an unsound man, and he needs to pay the consequences.

Ophelia: You're not my father. I don't want to look at you.

Polonius: Fine with me!

Ophelia: Of course, you want to prove to Claudius that you're his servant, his dishrag, his plastic doll!

Polonius: I hated the dead king.

Ophelia: That's because he never learned how to turn you into a servant. He treated you like a human being.

Polonius: I never liked him for one day – he was stingy and petty, not strong and decisive like Claudius.

Ophelia: I don't care about the dead king *or* the living king. What bothers me is that you betrayed my brother.

Polonius: And if you follow his example I'll have you banished.

Ophelia: You'd kill your children for a rotten kingdom.

Polonius: Don't parrot Laertes.

Ophelia: We'll renounce you. You're not my father.

Polonius: Shut your mouth.

Ophelia: There's blood in my mouth.

Polonius: Now be a reasonable girl and figure out how to win the love of Prince Hamlet.

Ophelia: He isn't the Hamlet I used to know.

Polonius: Because he's grown wiser and more composed.

Ophelia: Yes, exactly – they murder his father in front of him and he doesn't budge from all his wisdom and composure. He turns his back on the murderer and keeps contemplating and philosophizing. It's an unforgivable crime!

Polonius: If I'd known you'd be so shameless, I would have strangled you in the cradle.

Ophelia: It doesn't matter. Anyway you'll try to suffocate me with your cruelty.

Polonius: You'll marry Hamlet. That's the best solution.

Ophelia: I gave back all his presents. I'm not going to see him anymore.

Polonius: You would have done battle with all the world for Hamlet's sake. Why are you giving him up now?

Ophelia: He's the one giving himself up. My soul doesn't want him anymore.

Polonius: He's coming – be nice.

Ophelia: He's reading a book!! (*She laughs in disbelief*)

Scene Nine
(Hamlet/Ophelia)

Ophelia: Hamlet – Laertes is in danger!

Hamlet: (*Calmly and coldly*) Why is Laertes in danger?

Ophelia: Don't you know why?

Hamlet: Where is he now?

Ophelia: In heaven, building a kingdom of pain.

Hamlet: Are you ill? Exhausted? You should see a doctor!

Ophelia: Could I please have back the rest of the letters I gave to you?

Hamlet: Never! I've perfumed them and hidden them away in my treasure chest.

Ophelia: Hamlet! Give them back to me! I want to tear up the words that I inscribed once upon a time with such impassioned feelings.

Hamlet: Didn't you write them to me?

Ophelia: They *were* for you.

Hamlet: So they're my property.

Ophelia: Everything in me has been extinguished now. My feelings have dried up, and my tears too. I did love you once. But now, no more.

Hamlet: Don't be in such a hurry. Soon your fire will die down and you'll return to your old promises.

Ophelia: You've disappointed me. Oh God, who planted this tune in your head? You're just sick, just a dumb kid. That's how I see you now.

Hamlet: I guess that means our bed will be less thunderous.

Ophelia: Are you trying to kill me with this lethargy? Even your lips that used to be smoldering hot are cold now. And some kind of stupor has descended over your whole being.

Hamlet: Next Saturday is the wedding day. That's how your father has arranged everything having to do with me, and with you.

Ophelia: Get yourself to a monastery; that would be more merciful. There you can focus your body and your mind on the pressing theological questions. There you can have more peace and quiet to ask and re-ask your question, “to be or not to be.”

Hamlet: I love you, even if the world has stumbled and fallen on its knees.

Ophelia: Search for the cause of your father’s death! Search for his killer! That will bring back your manliness!

Hamlet: (*conjugates*) He died, we will die, he will die. A long train of dead people. This is the poem of non-being. No fear. We die with a knife in the back or a kiss on the lips. Or with a long sleep. We open the door to the quietude that our soul desires. Death is a sleep. Sleep is a sleep in death. What’s the difference? I love you.

Ophelia: Who do you think you are? You’re presumptuous! What a catastrophe for Denmark. You were her prince and her pride – now you’ve become her little lamb. Go away, Hamlet! Get out of my sight!

Exit Hamlet. Enter Horatio.

Horatio: Ophelia, don’t get frustrated and don’t be afraid. We’re up against an unholy grinder. A letter from Laertes just arrived. I’ll read it to you, but please be strong, and keep a grip on yourself.

Ophelia: Oh Horatio! Everything has collapsed on us at once. Hamlet’s defeat, Laertes’ madness. Denmark has become one big prison, Horatio. A basin of rot! Or else how could Claudius the ignorant appoint himself king over us, and take possession of us? Then he mocks our heritage, laughs at our deaths. He’s turning the country into a general graveyard.

Horatio: (*opens the letter and reads*) “My dear Ophelia!
I hope to see you. That is the only dream I have left. I want to hear your laughter – oh God, what could be sweeter than your laughter.
Here I am constantly at a party with my friends in a sanatorium big enough for our screams and curses.
I still remember Claudius, the new king.
That stately rat, he put on the crown in the blink of an eye and started acting as though all of Denmark were in his shirt pocket.
The guillotine is active – impossible news. The death of sense and the freedom of appearance. A winged buffalo is sitting on all of us, crushing us one by one without paying attention to any of us. Even Hamlet with his keen mind and his motives collapsed before the blows of Claudius his uncle.

I love you, my sister, although my body has wasted away like the mummies –
the really old ones!
Love, your brother, Laertes.”

Scene Ten (Gravediggers)

Digger 1: Claudius is going to eat everyone around him for sure. He's an expert at devouring people.

Digger 2: It's said the Citadel prison is crowded with the opposition.

Digger 1: If the guillotine keeps working at this rate, we'll get rich!

Digger 2: Poor Laertes.

Digger 1: What reminds you of Laertes now?

Digger 2: He's dried up like a sick date palm whose fruits and leaves have fallen.

Digger 1: He won't get away this time.

Digger 2: What do you mean?

Digger 1: He slipped up in front of Claudius on Coronation Day, and now he has to reap the fruits. The guy is doomed.

Digger 2: Lots of people are doomed.

Digger 1: Ophelia?

Digger 2: Don't be a fool. Ophelia is purer than pure.

Digger 1: I drink to Laertes' health!

Digger 2: To Laertes! *(They laugh derisively.)*

Scene Eleven
(Claudius/Ophelia)

Ophelia: I beg you to pardon my brother Laertes!

Claudius: He slipped up on Coronation Day, and brought the curse on himself.

Ophelia: He was disturbed and afraid, and he spoke out loud what was hidden away in his breast. It was just words, empty shouting. Why be afraid of someone who shouts out loud in public about everything he has inside? Isn't it better to be afraid of those who plot against you in secret?

Claudius: Each will be punished in accordance with his fault.

Ophelia: Let my brother go! I've never begged you for anything as I do now.

Claudius: Your father has asked me to set the date of your marriage to Hamlet. In a manner suitably splendid for a prince and a princess like yourself.

Ophelia: Hamlet is dead inside me. I buried him yesterday in the tomb of St. John.

Claudius: Are you making fun of me?

Ophelia: The guards didn't tell you about this?

Claudius: Are you accusing me of spying?

Ophelia: I did love him once. But now, no. This love is dead. I buried it in the tomb—

Claudius: Ophelia, if I pardoned Laertes... What would you do for me?

Ophelia: I'd give you a lotus flower.

Claudius: I don't like flowers. How about a kiss, for instance, or a night of drinking together, why not, we'll write Laertes' pardon paper and drink his health together right here, on the bed.

Ophelia: I'll do anything you ask of me. Issue the pardon first!

Claudius: *(takes a paper and pen)* "...Laertes is to be pardoned immediately upon receipt of this message. Signed, King Claudius."

Ophelia: I'll never be happier than I am now! If my brother came back once more!

Claudius: Shall we celebrate this occasion?

Ophelia: Let's celebrate!

Claudius: Will you drink wine, or do you prefer something else?

Ophelia: I'll have what you're having!

Claudius: (*Pours wine for Ophelia. Gives her the glass.*) Your health!

Ophelia: Your health!

Claudius: I've never looked deep into your eyes before. What eyes!

Ophelia: Do you speak to Gertrude in the same manner, my lord?

Claudius: Forget Gertrude now!

Ophelia: Do you want me to forget my queen? Your support in the crown and the state?

Claudius: And what about Hamlet? I don't hear your sighs and poems and flights of joy anymore.

Ophelia: He was my love and still is.

Claudius: You chose the wrong man. That sweet body of yours needs a stallion who knows how to till it.

Ophelia: Isn't Hamlet the son of your brother, whose father was murdered?

Claudius: Are you implying something?

Ophelia: The king died an ugly death he didn't deserve. And his son will follow.

Claudius: "Died" is nicer than "was murdered."

Ophelia: I mean, he died by being murdered.

Claudius: The vulgar mob thinks so. But the truth is otherwise.

Ophelia: The truth is that the king slit his own throat. (*Sarcastically*) Or that a servant went mad and killed him? Are you heading for an excuse like that?

Claudius: Perhaps, because he was the unhappiest of men. He needed to die. He died, and that's that.

Ophelia: I saw the whole scene. I saw it with these two eyes.

Claudius: Where were you at the moment of the death?

Ophelia: There is a window in my room looking onto the King's room and close to it. So I saw everything.

Claudius: Do you want more wine?

Ophelia: It seems the killer is an expert and carried out his task with unique skill.

Claudius: Oh God, your breasts are trembling just like your lips!

Ophelia: The King was sleeping like a naked child. Gertrude covered him with a light sheet and disappeared. I don't know how he fell asleep and started snoring so quickly. A big man entered, wrapped in a cloak and with a turban on his head, carrying a dagger. He tore off the sheet and slaughtered the King without a noise. The King died without a noise. He didn't struggle a lot. What a suspicious death! What animal carried out this hideous deed?

Claudius: I issued my order to pardon Laertes in order for us to have a nice time together, not so you could tell me bloody tales like this! Don't be afraid. And to get straight to the point, I want you!

Ophelia: When will my brother return?

Claudius: My body has never been on fire like it is now!

Ophelia: When Laertes returns I'll pick all the flowers in the garden for him!

Claudius: Don't change the subject!

Ophelia: My lord, it isn't fitting for you to fool around this way. Gertrude!

Claudius: I hate Gertrude! *(Seizes her and pulls her to the bed)*

Ophelia: Why do you hate Gertrude? Didn't she help you seize the crown?

Claudius: Seize the crown! Explain what you mean!

Ophelia: I mean, she married you and helped you secure the throne.

He kisses her, tears her clothes and attacks her like a wild buffalo.

Ophelia: *(Shouting)* Gertrude! My lady Gertrude! My lord the King requests your presence immediately!

Ophelia exits, and Gertrude enters.

Gertrude: What's with Ophelia?

King: She asked me to pardon Laertes.

Gertrude: And did you?

King: Yes!

Gertrude: You were wrong in the case of Laertes. You gave orders to banish him and confine him in the sanatorium, and to subject him to daily torture sessions under the pretext of curing his illness. Now you give the order to pardon him, but it's too late.

King: They'll bring him here tonight. That's what Ophelia wanted and begged for.

Gertrude: Laertes' return to the palace will ignite the fire all over again.

King: No one will dare to start any fires.

Gertrude: I regret it so much.

King: Regret what?

Gertrude: Helping you seize the crown!

King: I would have seized it with your help or without it.

Gertrude: My feeling of shame is killing me.

King: Why have you lost your head?

Gertrude: Leave me alone! Don't come into my bed!

King: Aren't you my wife?

Gertrude: I can't make myself forget.

King: Forget what?

Gertrude: I still remember the moment when I gave you the dagger. I took part in the crime and that's all there is to it. Spit in my face! Curse me! Drive me out! I deserve it all.

King: Gertrude!

Gertrude: I can't imagine your face and his. What a difference between your looks! Your smiles! Even your caresses in bed just make me more depressed. I'm afraid. Afraid of myself because I'm filthy, nasty, my hands are stained with blood! I'll go to church and confess to the priest. I'll tell him that I've committed terrible sins and wrongs!

King: You've lost your self-control as a queen.

Gertrude: I don't want to be queen! I'll take off my crown, and wipe away that smell. I'll tear off my clothes, and break the mirrors! I hate you. That's the truth.

King: I didn't hear you. I'll pretend I didn't hear you. I'll forgive you. I'll act like you're delirious with a fever. You'll get over it soon.

Gertrude: I want to go to my room!

King: You won't move one step from here.

Gertrude: You can't prevent me! You shouldn't do that.

King: *(Defusing the situation)* My darling, my beautiful wife, you were and still are the closest being to my soul.

Gertrude: Don't talk to me like that. Leave me – let me go!

Exit Gertrude. Horatio and Hamlet are alone. Moment of revelation.

Scene Twelve (Horatio/Hamlet)

Horatio: Where are your wild cries, where is your madness, where are the words of love and texts of justice you were boasting of, where, O all ye hosts of heaven, O earth! What else? Hold, hold, my heart, and you, my sinews, grow not instant old! I won't forget you, while memory holds a place in this distracted globe, weren't those your words? Didn't you say, I'll wipe all trivial fond records, all saws of books, all forms, all pressures past, your commandment all alone shall live within the book of my brain! Ha! Aren't these your vain texts?

Hamlet: I emptied my guts in prayer! Yes, I dried out and despaired of everything! I spoke to myself at length, out loud. I spoke the most violent words about his nature and character. There were two Hamlets living in one body: one vicious, pledged to the dagger, dreaming of salvation and killing Claudius and revenge; the other a Hamlet disillusioned and full of anxiety. There was a clash and a struggle between the two Hamlets, and the winner was the disillusioned Hamlet!

The resigned Hamlet!

The spiritually pious Hamlet, the rat with his books and poems and dedication to stillness. If I killed Claudius and spilled his blood and sat on the throne myself, what would happen? Would the world rise to a life without violence, in certain justice? Never. Power is an eternal curse, a wild animal that opens its mouth greedily to positions of rank and blinding lights, and overwhelms and masters people and then turns them into obedient sheep of the king! This is the ABC of the world, and a spiritual person has no business with it, I say, Horatio my bosom friend, because I no longer have any desires, or any appetites, or demands. Power hasn't swept me away, and I haven't been swayed by its pull. Nor by its treasures.

I was alone and that's how I'll stay, without princely dreams, without trumpets sounding my arrival. In all sincerity I renounce the robes of power and look upon the powerful with scorn. For my father's valor and justice, and Claudius' perfidy and his guillotine, these are but two views of the same rostrum. One died and the other is ripe for death.

All of us will die. Even Ophelia whom I used to love – she has died and her spring has dried up in my soul. I've come to see her as a body made of plaster. A mummy-woman just looking for some male to drag her to bed and play with her breasts, like two moons. Nonetheless they will force me into the wedding, and I'll do it! But I will be only a doll in the colorful window display.

This is the world! Lust that dies on the pavement!

(He exits, quite calm. Horatio remains alone, then follows him.)

Scene Thirteen
(Polonius/Ophelia)

Polonius: You have to go to the market with your women to buy clothes for the wedding!

Ophelia: The wedding!

Polonius: Precisely – your wedding to Hamlet.

Ophelia: I can't stand him anymore. He told me he'll enroll in the seminary to be a monk.

Polonius: Who told you that?

Ophelia: Yesterday I saw him supplicating and weeping.

Polonius: Supplicating, weeping, and being monkish. Nonetheless you will marry him, or Claudius the king will not be satisfied with us.

Ophelia: You sent your son to die and now you're planning to sell me too, just to satisfy the king.

Polonius: Sell you! But he's your beloved!

Ophelia: He was my beloved once.

Polonius: Your marriage to Hamlet will be the most splendid present for Laertes' return.

Ophelia: If he returns!

Polonius: Why? Have you heard something?

Ophelia: Nothing, but my heart tells me.

Polonius: The last news I heard were good. They say he has his life and health back, and that he is in such fine spirits now that everyone is surprised!

Scene Fourteen (Gravediggers)

Digger 1: *(Singing)* Cover him, shroud him,
He was bright but got dim
Cover him, shroud him...

Digger 2: And dig me a hole in the dust where I'll be safe.

Digger 1: I'll ask you a tough question. If you answer it as I like, I'll invite you to a feast of Danish rabbit.

Digger 2: Ask me!

Digger 1: He doesn't build bridges, he doesn't write constitutions, he doesn't assemble boats, he doesn't light fires, but they call him the chief of builders. What does the chief of builders build in Denmark?

Digger 2: The guillotine! Ha, ha, ha, ha!

Digger 1: You've won a rabbit, you calf! But why the guillotine?

Digger 2: Because the guillotine destroys two thousand men and isn't destroyed.
(Laughs)

Digger 1: Denmark's never been drowning in corruption and crushed as it is now.

Digger 2: Your time is coming, the guillotine will crush you for such slips of the tongue. And you won't find anyone to cry for you at your funeral.

Digger 1: You'll be the one to cry at my funeral!

Digger 2: I won't cry at your funeral!

Digger 1: Why not, you wretch?

Digger 2: Because you'll cry at mine!

(They laugh.)

Scene Fifteen
(Hamlet/Gertrude)

Gertrude: Laertes is dead!

Hamlet: *(Silence)*

Gertrude: How will we tell Ophelia?

Hamlet: *(Silence)*

Gertrude: She'll take leave of her senses if she finds out.

Hamlet: *(Silence)*

Gertrude: This means we'll have to postpone the wedding.

Hamlet: *(Silence)*

Gertrude: There are two ceremonies. Laertes' and yours.

Hamlet: *(Silence)*

Gertrude: Claudius has taken revenge on Laertes.

Hamlet: *(Silence)*

Gertrude: Why don't you answer me?

Hamlet: *(Silence)*

Gertrude: Have you lost the power of speech? Or is it weakness?

Hamlet: Weakness! Precisely. The sound of a carriage is approaching.

Gertrude: The corpse must have arrived!

Hamlet: *(evenly)* The corpse has arrived.

Gertrude: Will Claudius permit funeral rites?

Hamlet: The funeral rites won't mean a thing if the corpse stays in the palace forever.

Gertrude: Excuse me?

Hamlet: The smell of the dead is more fragrant than that of the living, because the living have basically lost their fragrance.

Gertrude: You've refrigerated all your blood!

Hamlet: Because I have no blood! *(Laughs)*

Gertrude: Come with me, and we'll see.

Hamlet: I can't bear to see the dead.

Enter Ophelia.

Ophelia: There's a coffin being carried in on a carriage! Quickly!

Gertrude: Have a rest! Sit down!

Ophelia: Whose coffin could it be? Hamlet, tell me!

Hamlet: *(Silence)*

Gertrude: I'll tell you. Sit down.

At this moment, enter Polonius, and Horatio as well.

Ophelia: Did you hear the sound of the horses, the sound of the carriage carrying the coffin with no name written on it? Horatio, why don't you speak? Father, have you heard anything?

Polonius: No..., no. Nobody wants to say anything, either about the coffin or about the name of the dead man. The king has asked his servants to carry the coffin inside. To bring it into the palace and put it in one of the rooms.

Scene Sixteen
(Gertrude/King Claudius)

Gertrude: It's chasing me, it's chasing me!

King: Who's chasing whom?

Gertrude: The wild buffalo is chasing the lost little bee!

King: Why is the mirror in the bedroom broken?

Gertrude: Because I can't sleep!

King: What's worrying you?

Gertrude: Sleep itself! I wanted to stab sleep with my dagger, but it ran away. I ran after it, but it plunged into the mire. I'm in the mire of a dream.

King: It's as though you were making up your implausible poem.

Gertrude: Claudius, abdicate power, and resign from it! Exile yourself far away from this country, or exile me!

King: As though you were speaking to the blade of the guillotine.

Gertrude: Ha! If you're preparing an occasion to slaughter me, go ahead and do it quickly, because life with you tastes like a corpse. You're filthy. You've gone back on everything we agreed on.

King: I only promised you one thing, and that's that you would be secure, satisfied, and with no need to enter into the affairs of government.

Gertrude: The country isn't a country anymore! The guillotine has crushed people near and far. The scholars and wise people. Women and men. You've turned life into a big puddle of blood.

King: All I did was wipe out those who were plotting against me.

Gertrude: I'm the one who's most plotting against you now. You insult me daily and isolate me from the country. You've turned me into a dead chair: no sound, no spirit, no desire. Can't you feel that?

King: Neither your body nor your chatter mean anything to me anymore.

Gertrude: Then let me go away with my son.

King: Does Hamlet want to go as well?

Gertrude: We'll go away together.

King: Is there a new plot against me? Another man you're putting up to killing me?

Gertrude: There is no other man besides Hamlet.

Claudius: Too bad Hamlet is not a man anymore. He used to arouse the people's curiosity and my fear with his madness and viciousness. But now he's turned into a sponge that hungrily swallows all kinds of pains.

Gertrude: So what's the solution?

Claudius: No solution at all, except for you to reconsider your unconvincing extremism. We climbed the throne together, and there we'll stay. You gave me the power so that I would be the eternal man! When the throne dies, then dies Claudius! And since the chair is still here, so is Claudius. You won't scare me with your anxiety, your boredom of me, and not even your little plots and conspiracies, which only make you look frivolous and moody. Taking the throne was not some one-day whim. So watch out!

Enter Polonius, terrified.

Polonius: My lord, a terrifying number of people are gathering around the coffin. They're whispering in great fear. They want to know the name of the corpse.

King: Leave the chariot where it is and the corpse in its place! I want terror to enter into the hearts of all the people.

Gertrude: You have to announce the name of the deceased.

King: Don't be frivolous.

Gertrude: I will reveal the name of the deceased to the people.

Polonius: What is the name of the deceased, my lord?

King: Go away! And send me two soldiers. *[Exit Polonius.] (Changes his tone)*
Why the fear and horror?

Gertrude: You are killing them one after another! I don't know when it will be my turn.

King: You are the queen, my darling queen.

Gertrude: You're lying! *(Crying)*

King: Would you like to spend three days in the country? Close to the sea.
There the air will be clean. Why don't you go to your room, rest a little
before we go to supper.

Exit Gertrude. Enter two soldiers.

King: You must execute what I am about to tell you with lightning speed.

Soldier 1: Yes, my lord.

Soldier 2: At your service, my lord.

King: Tonight, you must slaughter Hamlet. Your thanks are ready. He will be in
his room after midnight – that's 30 minutes from now. Change into
other clothes, not the ones you are wearing. Put masks over your faces.

Soldier 1: I'll stab him in the neck.

Soldier 2: No, in the side.

King: Quickly!

Exeunt.

Scene Seventeen (Hamlet/Horatio)

Horatio: Pack your bag and go away quickly! All this excitement doesn't bode well. Claudius is sowing fear and horror among the people.

Hamlet: I won't budge from this room. I want to complete what I have am on the verge of.

Horatio: Are you on the verge of something more precious than your life?

Hamlet: I am in a moment in which the self is completely annihilated in its vision. The world is weightless, it seems light. I can place it in the palm of my hand and then fling it into oblivion. I still put down on paper the traces of old desires that have died.

Horatio: Have you noticed how empty the streets seem, and how muddy – as though the people had swallowed themselves and gone to sleep. You'll only see soldiers out there. It's a country of soldiers. We have to get away!

Hamlet: If you want to escape with your head, this is your last chance. Go, my friend!

Horatio: And leave you?

Hamlet: I will stay here, but I will be with you as well. I give you this book. It will be your friend. You'll smell my scent on every page. Go, quickly!

Horatio kisses Hamlet with great force and cries on his chest. Exit Horatio, leaving Hamlet alone. The screams of the people outside crescendo, as Hamlet draws a large basin full of water. He removes all his clothes and immerses himself in the water. Enter Gertrude, looking like a gray-haired witch. The people's shouts continue to rise.

Gertrude: Don't you want to put a stop to this big farce?

Hamlet: What farce?

Gertrude: Don't you hear the rising screams?

Hamlet: I barely hear anything, Mother, since you have taken over this kingdom. Since my father was slaughtered, I have not wanted to provoke you, because I don't want to be dragged into your filthiness. I am silence itself! I have become the very soul of silence. I do not wish to avenge

anyone or grieve for anyone. Please, do not play these banal and faded performances upon my pain.

Gertrude: I confess before you now! I tell you that I am guilty, and that my sin is unforgivable.

Hamlet: Mother, it would be better if you would go and leave me.

Gertrude: Are you driving me away?

Hamlet: No...

Gertrude: Then...

Hamlet: I want to lie down in this basin where the water is my best friend and my beloved.

Gertrude: Laertes is dead!

Hamlet: Don't repeat to me what you told me a little while ago. I don't care about Laertes' death.

Gertrude: You are silent. You have become a silent boy. I have not been your mother, and I will not be.

Hamlet: What you are saying is reason itself. Actually I am silent because I have been too slow to kill you.

Gertrude: You want to kill your mother?

Hamlet: You were never my mother for one day – you just said it yourself.

A violent knock on the door. Exit Gertrude, enter the two soldiers. Hamlet pretends to be asleep. The two soldiers approach him calmly.

Soldier 1: Is he asleep?

Soldier 2: I think he's asleep.

Soldier 1: Better that way. We'll carry out our task quickly.

Soldier 2: I would have preferred he be awake, because I want to enjoy stabbing him. I've always hated him, and now the time has come to thrust my hatred into him.

Hamlet: What do you want from me, sirs?

Soldier 1: Nothing, my lord, we just wanted to look in and check on your health.

Hamlet: I'm feeling fine!

Soldier 2: Does my lord wish to sleep?

Hamlet: I am sleeping, and yet not sleeping.

Soldier 1: Shall we pour some warm water on the Prince's body?

Soldier 2: Shall we rub his body?

Hamlet: If this game amuses you, you can play it.

Soldier 1: *(Undressing)* What hot water!

Soldier 2: *(Undressing)* How can the body of the Prince of Denmark stand such fire!

Hamlet: *(Buddha-like)* Well, begin!

Soldier 1: One moment please, my lord, we have to get ready.

Hamlet: It's simpler than you expect.

Soldier 2: Not so, my lord! If we wish to fulfill our duty, we have to fulfill it precisely.

Hamlet: It's the middle of the night. The moon is on the windowsill and Ophelia is far away. Do you see Ophelia's window, how the light embroiders its edges?

Soldier 1: *(Stabs him)*

Soldier 2: *(Stabs him)*

They stab him many times, viciously, and then flee. When they exit, enter Ophelia, speaking to Hamlet from afar.

Ophelia: Hamlet, I'm pleading for your help, don't desert me! My strength has collapsed. Claudius the butcher promised me to pardon my brother. Imagine, he pardoned him and killed him at the same time. He tricked me! How should I get revenge on him? How can we get rid of this barbarian? Hamlet, Laertes' corpse was left lying in the street in the middle of a big crowd of people!

She approaches him. A moment of dead silence. She exits, running madly toward the palace.

Ophelia: Gertrude! They've slaughtered Hamlet! Oh Gertrude!

Enter Gertrude, who runs toward her son Hamlet. Enter the King.

Ophelia: You've murdered Hamlet and slaughtered Laertes!

The screaming outside crescendos further. The music rises as well. The place fills with fog. At this moment Laertes appears, totally naked, stained in purple and carrying a large sword. The king draws his sword. They duel, in cinematic slow motion. Laertes advances toward the King to cut him down. He slaughters him. Claudius collapses as Laertes throws his sword on the ground. As though we were in a painting by a painter known for his foggy colors and accursed brush. Laertes sits on the throne as though it were a sculpture of a human body.

Laertes: The rest is silence...

Long silence. Ophelia and Gertrude approach in great dismay. They drink a cup of poisoned drink, then sit on the chair. The glasses fall from their hands onto the ground. Another long silence.

Epilogue (Gravediggers)

Digger 1: Look at this skull! Used to belong to the best violinist in Denmark.

Digger 2: *(Chuckles)* I wonder where are the hands he used to play with

Digger 1: The worms ate them.

Digger 2: The same worms that will eat Hamlet the prince of Denmark.

Digger 1: Isn't this Hamlet's skull?

Digger 2: Where is the sparkle of his eyes? Look at his wide brow! And at his tongue! That's the tongue of the prince of Denmark.

Comes across a book.

Digger 1: What a priceless book.

Digger 2: Read me a little of it.

Digger 1: Listen! (*Laughs*)

Digger 2: Read, you fool.

Digger 1: Listen! Listen! (*Laughs harder*)

Digger 2: (*Takes the book from him and reads*)

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak,
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing.

Am I a coward? Who,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion! (*Long silence.*)

Digger 1: Hamlet died a horrible death.

Digger 2: His problem was his tongue. He kept philosophizing. Look, here's his tongue!

Digger 1: Leave his tongue between the leaves of his book, and toss it up to heaven.

The gravedigger indeed tosses the book up to the sky, and the pages fly high in the air.

THE END