

Hamlet

Francisco is on sentry duty on the gun platform of Elsinore. It is midnight and freezing cold. Barnardo comes to relieve Francisco. Horatio and Marcellus arrive to join Barnardo.

1 Act it out! (in groups of four)

To experience the tense and uneasy atmosphere of the play's opening, the best thing to do is take parts and act out the first nineteen lines. You will find that speaking the lines helps you create the urgent and ominous mood that the short staccato exchanges establish. As you rehearse, talk together about the following points. Remember, your aim is to make the opening moments of the play gripping and dramatic.

- a What will be the first thing the audience sees? For example, is Francisco on sentry duty, patrolling the stage, before the first members of the audience enter?
- b Barnardo, the newcomer, challenges Francisco. This is contrary to military practice (Francisco should challenge him). How can you use that error to intensify the nervous atmosphere?
- c How can you show the audience that the night is bitterly cold?
- d Francisco is never seen again in the play, but his remark 'And I am sick at heart' forecasts the troubled melancholy that Hamlet feels when he appears in the next scene. How might Francisco speak and behave during his brief time on stage?
- e In Shakespeare's day, the play was staged in broad daylight. Identify all the words and phrases in the script that help create the impression of night and darkness.
- f What are the soldiers wearing? Sketch their costumes.

unfold yourself identify yourself, give the password

Long live the king! (the password, which will prove ironic as the play reveals the death of King Hamlet)

most carefully precisely

rivals partners

liegemen to the Dane loyal followers of the Danish king

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Act 1 Scene 1

A gun platform on the battlements of Elsinore Castle

Enter BARNARDO and FRANCISCO, two sentinels

BARNARDO Who's there?

FRANCISCO Nay answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.

BARNARDO Long live the king!

FRANCISCO Barnardo?

BARNARDO He.

5

FRANCISCO You come most carefully upon your hour.

BARNARDO 'Tis now struck twelve, get thee to bed Francisco.

FRANCISCO For this relief much thanks, 'tis bitter cold
 And I am sick at heart.

BARNARDO Have you had quiet guard?

FRANCISCO Not a mouse stirring.

10

BARNARDO Well, good night.

If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,

The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

FRANCISCO I think I hear them.

Enter HORATIO and MARCELLUS

Stand ho! Who is there?

HORATIO Friends to this ground.

MARCELLUS And liegemen to the Dane.

15

FRANCISCO Give you good night.

MARCELLUS Oh farewell honest soldier,
 Who hath relieved you?

FRANCISCO Barnardo hath my place.

Give you good night. *Exit Francisco*

MARCELLUS Holla, Barnardo!

BARNARDO Say,

What, is Horatio there?

HORATIO A piece of him.

Hamlet

Marcellus reports that he and Barnardo have seen the Ghost twice. Horatio doesn't believe them, but is struck with fear and amazement when the Ghost of Hamlet's father appears.

1 Horatio's thoughts and feelings change (in pairs)

Horatio doesn't believe Marcellus's story, but then sees the Ghost with his own eyes. Horatio speaks five times on the opposite page. Talk together about the tone of his voice each time he speaks. Speak the lines to each other in an appropriate style. Afterwards, write down the range of emotions and attitudes that Horatio displays.

2 'Enter GHOST' – dead King Hamlet appears (in pairs)

The entry of the Ghost of Hamlet's father is a thrilling moment in the theatre. Each new production attempts to ensure that the entry is as electrifying and memorable as possible. Talk together and write notes on each of the following:

- a What does the Ghost look like? Horatio gives a clue in lines 47–9 (and see the pictures in the colour section and on pp. 10, 26 and 146).
- b Suggest how the Ghost might enter. Slowly or suddenly? From which direction? Decide whether he makes any gestures, what sound effects you might use, and how he leaves the stage.
- c Sometimes, as the Ghost appears, the bell strikes. Would you have it strike if you were directing the play? Why? Or why not?
- d In some productions the Ghost does not appear physically. The audience has to imagine its presence through lighting, sound and characters' reactions. How effective do you think this style of presenting the Ghost would be? Would you do the same?

Touching concerning
approve our eyes believe our story
assail your ears tell you forcefully
pole pole star (North Star)
scholar student (ghosts were believed to speak Latin)

harrows tortures, tears
usurp'st wrongfully seizes
buried Denmark the dead King Hamlet
charge order

Hamlet

Horatio agrees that the Ghost is the exact image of the dead King Hamlet. He thinks it foretells disasters for Denmark. Horatio begins to explain why there are so many urgent preparations for war.

1 A battle? Or an angry gesture? (in small groups)

Do lines 62–3 tell of Denmark's king defeating the Polish army ('Polacks') in a battle on the ice ('sledged' = on sledges)? Or do they mean that the king, in an angry discussion ('parle') with the Norwegians, struck his battle axe on the ice like a sledge hammer (= 'sledged'). Sometimes the word 'Polacks' is printed as 'polax' (poleaxe).

Work out two tableaux (frozen pictures) showing each interpretation. Decide which version is more imaginative and dramatic.

2 Denmark prepares for war (in pairs)

In lines 70–9 Marcellus questions why Denmark is feverishly preparing for war. Guards are mounted everywhere. 'Brazen' (brass) cannons roll off the production line daily. Weapons are bought in foreign countries and imported ('foreign mart for implements of war'). Ships are being built by forced labour ('impress'), working night and day, even on Sundays (unusual in a Christian country).

Write six additional lines listing more of Denmark's frantic war preparations. Use the same urgent style as Marcellus does.

3 'Doubling' – a feature of the play

Opposite are examples of a language device that recurs through the play. It is the use of 'and' to achieve a 'doubling' effect: 'tremble and look pale', 'sensible and true avouch', 'gross and scope', 'strict and most observant'. As you read on, list other examples (there are at least seven in Horatio's lines 80–107). The technical term is **hendiadys** (pronounced 'hen-die-a-dees'). You will find information about its dramatic importance on pages 268–9.

sensible and true avouch evidence
jump exactly
martial stalk military stride
In what particular . . . work how to think about it
gross and scope general view

bodes . . . state is ominous for us and for Denmark
toward in preparation
emulate jealous
sealed compact treaty
law and heraldy laws of chivalry

- MARCELLUS 'Tis gone and will not answer.
- BARNARDO How now Horatio? you tremble and look pale.
 Is not this something more than fantasy?
 What think you on't? 55
- HORATIO Before my God, I might not this believe
 Without the sensible and true avouch
 Of mine own eyes.
- MARCELLUS Is it not like the king?
- HORATIO As thou art to thyself.
 Such was the very armour he had on 60
 When he th'ambitious Norway combated;
 So frowned he once, when in an angry parle
 He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.
 'Tis strange.
- MARCELLUS Thus twice before, and jump at this dead hour, 65
 With martial stalk hath he gone by our watch.
- HORATIO In what particular thought to work I know not,
 But in the gross and scope of mine opinion
 This bodes some strange eruption to our state.
- MARCELLUS Good now sit down, and tell me he that knows, 70
 Why this same strict and most observant watch
 So nightly toils the subject of the land,
 And why such daily cast of brazen cannon,
 And foreign mart for implements of war,
 Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task 75
 Does not divide the Sunday from the week.
 What might be toward, that this sweaty haste
 Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day?
 Who is't that can inform me?
- HORATIO That can I –
 At least the whisper goes so. Our last king, 80
 Whose image even but now appeared to us,
 Was as you know by Fortinbras of Norway,
 Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride,
 Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet –
 For so this side of our known world esteemed him – 85
 Did slay this Fortinbras; who by a sealed compact,
 Well ratified by law and heraldy,
 Did forfeit (with his life) all those his lands
 Which he stood seized of, to the conqueror;

Hamlet

Horatio says that young Fortinbras intends to regain the lands his father lost when killed by King Hamlet. The Ghost's appearance presages violence, just as Caesar's death was foretold by ominous events.

1 Act out Horatio's story! (in groups of six or more)

In lines 80–107 Horatio explains why Denmark is preparing for war. The king of Norway (old Fortinbras) had dared King Hamlet (Hamlet's father) to personal combat. Both men wagered ('gagèd') large areas of land on the outcome of the duel. Hamlet killed Fortinbras and so took over his territory. Now young Fortinbras, with an army of mercenaries ('landless resolute'), seeks to recover his father's lost lands. The Danes are hastily preparing to defend themselves against the imminent invasion.

Bring Horatio's story to life. One person narrates, the others enact each episode. The lines contain over twenty-five separate actions that can be shown. (For instance, 'Sharked up' is a vivid image of a shark feeding indiscriminately.)

2 Predicting disasters – is Horatio superstitious?

'A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye' says Horatio (line 112): the appearance of the Ghost is an irritant ('mote') to the imagination. It suggests that disasters lie ahead. Shakespeare had written *Julius Caesar* shortly before *Hamlet*. The recollection of the sinister omens that preceded the death of Caesar was fresh in his mind. Horatio lists them: the living dead, comets, bloody rain, sunspots, an eclipse of the moon ('the moist star').

Is Horatio superstitious? He at first disbelieved the supernatural events that Marcellus had described. Now he seems to believe in omens and auguries. Explore different ways of speaking lines 112–25 (as obvious truth, sceptically, fearfully etc.). Which style seems most appropriate to Horatio's character?

moiety competent equal amount
comart . . . design treaty
unimproved mettle untested
 bravery
a stomach in't courage in it
terms compulsory forced
 agreement

post-haste and romage frantic
 activity and turmoil
Neptune's empire the sea
precurse forewarning of doom
 (pre-curse)
harbingers messengers
climatures territories

Act 1 Scene 1

- Against the which a moiety competent 90
 Was gagèd by our king, which had returned
 To the inheritance of Fortinbras
 Had he been vanquisher; as by the same comart
 And carriage of the article design,
 His fell to Hamlet. Now sir, young Fortinbras, 95
 Of unimprovèd mettle hot and full,
 Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
 Sharked up a list of landless resolutes
 For food and diet to some enterprise
 That hath a stomach in't; which is no other, 100
 As it doth well appear unto our state,
 But to recover of us by strong hand
 And terms compulsory those foresaid lands
 So by his father lost. And this, I take it,
 Is the main motive of our preparations, 105
 The source of this our watch, and the chief head
 Of this post-haste and romage in the land.
- [BARNARDO I think it be no other but e'en so.
 Well may it sort that this portentous figure
 Comes armèd through our watch so like the king 110
 That was and is the question of these wars.
- HORATIO A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye.
 In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
 A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
 The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead 115
 Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;
 As stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood,
 Disasters in the sun; and the moist star,
 Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands,
 Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse. 120
 And even the like precurse of feared events,
 As harbingers preceding still the fates
 And prologue to the omen coming on,
 Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
 Unto our climatures and countrymen.] 125

Hamlet

Horatio five times demands that the reappearing Ghost speak to him. The cock crows and the Ghost vanishes without reply. Horatio says it cannot be harmed, but that it behaved like a criminal summoned to justice.

‘. . . lo where it comes again!’
 Compare this presentation of the Ghost with those in the colour section and on pages 26 and 146.

1 Advise the actors

Horatio expresses three popular superstitions about why a ghost appears: it seeks someone whose action will enable it to rest in peace (lines 130–1); it knows of a future disaster in store for its country (lines 133–4); it seeks buried treasure, unjustly acquired (‘Extorted’) when alive (lines 136–7).

Step into role as director and write notes for the actors playing Horatio and the Ghost. Advise them, line by line, what they should do throughout lines 126–42. Give thought particularly to Horatio’s five-times repeated demand that the Ghost should speak.



privy to knowledgeable about
uphoarded hoarded, hidden
partisan pike, long-handled spear
invulnerable impossible to hurt
vain blows futile attempts to hit
a guilty thing . . . summons an evildoer caught redhanded

extravagant and erring wandering
hies . . . confine hurries to his prison (cell, place of confinement)
present object apparition (Ghost)
made probation gave proof

Act 1 Scene 1

Enter GHOST

But soft, behold, lo where it comes again!
 I'll cross it though it blast me. Stay, illusion.

It spreads his arms

If thou hast any sound or use of voice,
 Speak to me.

If there be any good thing to be done 130
 That may to thee do ease, and grace to me,
 Speak to me.

If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
 Which happily foreknowing may avoid,
 Oh speak. 135

Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
 Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
 For which they say you spirits oft walk in death, *The cock crows*
 Speak of it. Stay and speak! Stop it Marcellus.

MARCELLUS Shall I strike at it with my partisan? 140

HORATIO Do if it will not stand.

BARNARDO 'Tis here.

HORATIO 'Tis here.

MARCELLUS 'Tis gone.

Exit Ghost

We do it wrong being so majestic
 To offer it the show of violence,
 For it is as the air invulnerable, 145
 And our vain blows malicious mockery.

BARNARDO It was about to speak when the cock crew.

HORATIO And then it started like a guilty thing
 Upon a fearful summons. I have heard,
 The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn, 150

Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat
 Awake the god of day; and at his warning,
 Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air,
 Th'extravagant and erring spirit hies
 To his confine. And of the truth herein 155
 This present object made probation.