

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

# Hamlet

*Hamlet*, written around 1600 and first published in 1603, is probably Shakespeare's most famous play, and certainly one of his most widely discussed. Experts consider this play an enigma—it raises far more questions than it answers.

*The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* was the first of Shakespeare's great tragedies. It was also the first play that introduced—in Shakespeare's writing and in Western drama—a new kind of literary subjectivity, in which the audience gets to know what is happening inside a character's head. In fact, *Hamlet* is so contemplative that some critics have cited this thinking in place of action as one of his character flaws.

Though the play deals with many Renaissance ideas—honor, revenge, justice, political order, stoicism, and friendship—it



is actually based on an ancient story that was passed along orally until Saxo Grammaticus wrote it in the 12th century in his *Historica Danica*. Shakespeare modernized the story and made the play his own by his use of language. He introduced more than 600 words in *Hamlet*; many of them do not appear in any other English text.

**Activity:** Invite students to write and perform a brief skit in which a group of actors performs the scene where the king is murdered by his brother. Students may include Hamlet, Queen Gertrude, and King Claudius in the audience, and incorporate their reactions to the mini-play into the skit.

## BARD CARD Hamlet

**Plot Summary:** In this tragedy, Prince Hamlet learns that his uncle murdered his father and married his mother to become king. The events take place in Elsinore, Denmark, around 1200.

### Main Characters

- Hamlet:** Prince of Denmark  
**King Claudius:** Hamlet's uncle (his late father's brother), his mother's new husband  
**Queen Gertrude:** Hamlet's mother, new wife of King Claudius  
**Polonius:** a lord  
**Laertes:** Polonius's son  
**Ophelia:** Hamlet's beloved, Polonius's daughter  
**Horatio:** Hamlet's friend  
**Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:** Hamlet's former friends

### Glossary

- afflicts:** troubles  
**aught:** anything  
**ay:** yes  
**battlements:** a wall with open spaces that is used for defense  
**beckons:** calls  
**beseech:** beg  
**bier:** a coffin and its stand  
**bore:** carried  
**envenom'd:** poisoned  
**fain:** willing  
**glean:** find out  
**issue:** outcome  
**lament:** cry of grief  
**perchance:** maybe  
**stalk:** to walk stiffly  
**unprevailing:** uncommon  
**woe:** grief, sadness