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HAMLET character/act breakdown

KEY CHARACTERS:

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Claudius, King of Denmark and Hamlet's uncle

Gertrude, Queen of Denmark and Hamlet's mother

Polonius, advisor to Claudius

Ophelia, Polonius's daughter and beloved by Hamlet

Laertes, Polonius's son (Ophelia's brother)

Fortinbras, Prince of Norway

Horatio, Hamlet's best friend

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern, Hamlet's disloyal friends

ACT I:

When the play opens, you learn that a ghost has been bothering the night watch, Prince Fortinbras and his army are bothering Denmark, and Hamlet's Uncle Claudius is bothering Hamlet.

You see, Hamlet should have succeeded his late father to Denmark's throne, but Claudius intervened and took the crown for himself. To make matters worse, he married Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. Hamlet is pretty unhappy about all of the above and doesn't try to hide it.

You also meet the king's advisor, the bumbling Polonius, and his children, Laertes and Ophelia. Laertes dropped in for a visit and to celebrate the new king's coronation and wedding. Now he is returning to school. Polonius likes to lecture him a lot about how to live his life.

It becomes revealed that the ghost is Hamlet's late father, once King of Denmark, also named Hamlet. Old Hamlet tells a sordid tale of how Claudius murdered him to get the throne. Even worse, the murder prevented Old Hamlet from receiving the last rites. Hence his current predicament....being a ghost. Instead of going straight to

heaven, he must remain in purgatory, haunting the Earth by n night and suffering fiery privations by day.
This ghost would like some revenge.

Young Hamlet vows to get even with his uncle. Already his active mind starts it's work....he isn't exactly sure what he'll do, but his plan is to pretend to be crazy.
Not much of a plan. But, it distracts his enemies and gives him time to think and plot the revenge of his father's death.

ACT II:

Polonius is always meddling in the affairs of others. He (for example) sends a spy to check out how his son is behaving. When suddenly his daughter interrupts him, reporting that Hamlet is behaving in a very peculiar manner....that he had burst into her chamber, grabbed her, and stared at her without saying anything. This isn't what princes are supposed to do, so Polonius runs off to report this news to the king, Claudius.

Meanwhile, Claudius has sent for two of Hamlet's school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He wants them to speak with Hamlet and try to get to the bottom of his apparent madness. Polonius is sure that it is unrequited love for Ophelia, or unreturned love. That would certainly explain Hamlet's strange behavior in her chamber.

So, Polonius suggests a plan: that they hide while he accosts Hamlet to sound him out. Hamlet continues to "act up", but even Polonius figures out that there may be more to Hamlet's supposed madness than meets the eye.

Then a troupe of actors arrive. Hamlet welcomes the actors and invites them to perform a play, "The Murder of Gonzago", for the court, but with some small modifications that he will provide....which are of course to make the murder of Gonzago very similar to the murder by his uncle of his father, therefore shaking up Claudius.

ACT III:

Hamlet is really troubled....acting as if he's crazy, feeling quite the opposite, then feeling a little crazy. He wonders if it would have been better had he not been born. Thus the "To be or not to be" speech.

In public, Hamlet continues to be crazy. He insults Ophelia, which seems to argue against Polonius's ideas. Hamlet's grand plan, however, is the play. He asks his friend Horatio to pay particular attention to the king. And it all works....the play strikes home with Claudius. Guilt-ridden, he runs from the room crying for light.

Now Hamlet has the proof he needs....or does he? Well, he thinks he does. But he sees Claudius praying, but he doesn't strike because he wants Claudius's soul to suffer as his father's has.

Next, he reveals his father's murder to his mother, but in an overeager manner. Polonius (hiding behind a curtain to spy), cries for help. Hamlet stabs him through the curtain, finally taking definite action and thinking the man he is killing to be the king. Gertrude is horrified and confused. The ghost appears, but only to Hamlet. The ghost chides Hamlet for his lack of action, yet seems to disapprove of Hamlet's treatment of his mother.

Gertrude reports Hamlet's action to the king: the murder of Polonius and his bizarre behavior.

Claudius ships Hamlet off to England; perhaps a sea voyage will do him some good. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accompany him.

ACT IV:

Grief for her father's death and for Hamlet's madness has taken a toll on Ophelia's mind. Her brother Laertes returns. He received the news of his father's death and now wants to kill Hamlet in revenge. His grief doubles when he sees his sister's madness.

News comes that Hamlet has returned from England. Claudius is surprised and disturbed, but he doesn't explain why.

Claudius and Laertes prepare for Hamlet's return by plotting against his life. In the midst of all of this, Gertrude brings more bad news: Ophelia, in her madness, has drowned herself.

ACT V:

Hamlet meets with Horatio and explains what had happened on the way to and back from England:

On board the ship, he learned that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carried a letter to the King of England, asking him to kill Hamlet. Hamlet then altered the letter to have the king kill Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern instead. Hamlet escaped and made his way back to Denmark.

Hamlet and Horatio are interrupted by Ophelia's burial.

Hamlet and Laertes have a mourning contest, vying to see who loved her and misses her more.

Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel.

Horatio cautions Hamlet that Laertes is a very skilled fencer, but Hamlet is confident. Plus, Hamlet has come to terms with life, the universe, and everything.

****Hamlet's tragic lesson:

Life is what happens when you're busy making plans. He spent the entire play making plans, and it didn't do him any good. Now is the time to stop planning and just get on with life. Or death. Whatever.

What Hamlet doesn't know is that Laertes plans on cheating. The fencing match is to be a sporting match with bated (dull) blades. Laertes, though, secretly substitutes a sharp blade. Just to be safe, he poisons the tip of his blade. To be extra, extra sure, Claudius has his own poison for Hamlet.

Laertes's plans go awry when he is unable to score any touch on Hamlet...in fencing, a touch or hit is considered a score and stabbing is not done. Finally, in desperation, he attacks Hamlet during a break. Laertes cuts Hamlet with the poisoned sword. In the fight, Hamlet forces Laertes to swap swords in the spirit of competition, and thinking the blade to be illegally sharpened.

Hamlet attacks Laertes.

Claudius has poisoned Hamlet's drink, but Gertrude accidentally drinks it instead. Gertrude dies from the poison, identifying the drink as the source. Laertes falls dieing due to the poisoned blade. As he dies, he accuses the king. Now that Hamlet knows that the blade is poisoned, he stabs the king with it and, just to be sure, forces Claudius to drink the poisoned drink too.

The poison slowly works it's way through Hamlet's system and he dies in Horatio's arms.

The English ambassadors arrive to report that Denmark's wishes have been fulfilled and that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Fortinbras also shows up, returning from Poland. The

ruling family of Denmark is dead, which leaves Fortinbras of Norway in charge. He takes over, restoring proper order to the throne of Denmark.

As Hamlet says, “....the rest is silence...”

VERSIONS TO SEE ON FILM:

*1990 Franco Zeffirelli, director. Mel Gibson as Hamlet, Glenn Close as Gertrude, and Helena Bonham Carter as Ophelia.
This is a great version, well cut or edited. Fabulous.
Go Franco.

*1980 Rodney Bennett, director. Derek Jacobi as Hamlet, and Patrick Stewart as Claudius.
This is a more traditional version.
There is nothing like Jacobi, in any role.

*1996 Kenneth Branagh, director. Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet, Derek Jacobi as Claudius, and Kate Winslet as Ophelia.
This version is uncut, therefore the entire text...it is four hours long.
It is also set in the 19th century.
Good to see if you fall in love with this play.

*1948 Laurence Olivier, director. Laurence Olivier as Hamlet, Eileen Herlie as Gertrude, and Jean Simmons as Ophelia.
This is the great Olivier. It is in black and white, gorgeous. Dated.
But that's ok! It's Olivier.