

# HAMLET

## Teachers' Notes

This 'Hamlet' study guide forms the fourth part of Film Education's 'Screening Shakespeares' series. It is aimed at students of A' level English. All references are taken from 'Hamlet' the Arden edition of the works of William Shakespeare (edited by Harold Jenkins) published by Routledge (1994).

## Hamlet

*Dir: Kenneth Branagh*

*Certificate PG*

*Running time 4 hours*

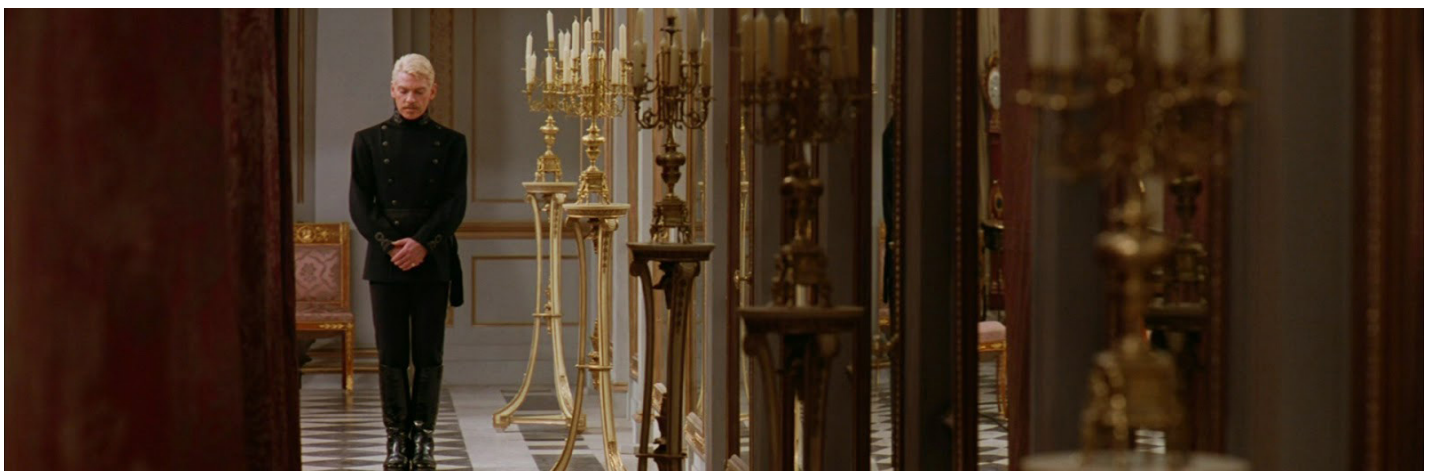
"I do believe that Shakespeare is more understandable when it is performed. His plays were not written as plays which had an immediate life as a published document. They were written very quickly and put on stage very quickly. If they weren't popular then they were taken off very quickly. Shakespeare's company had a very commercial intent and purpose. They were all business partners in this venture. If a play didn't work, it was off."

*Kenneth Branagh*

Actor, director Kenneth Branagh talking about Shakespeare highlights an important point about Shakespeare's plays that are now studied in classrooms across the country - that they were written to be performed. One could also say the playscripts that we study are, in fact, living documents.

In making a complete version of 'Hamlet' the play into a film, Branagh and his script adviser Russell Jackson have taken two different texts of the play and merged them together.

When Shakespeare was writing 'Hamlet', he undoubtedly had certain actors in mind for each part - being the playwright for a theatre company which was based in one theatre meant that he was well aware of the strengths and limitations of his troupe. One should also bear in mind the fact that someone will have directed the play and thus there are a number of additions to the text that could have been made by the director, or any actor.



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In the same way, any actor or director who has since been involved in a stage production will also have added or taken away things from the play. Any production of 'Hamlet' is simply one possible interpretation of one particular text.

Many of Shakespeare's plays have been adapted for the screen. In fact, filmmakers have always looked to popular plays and books to influence their films. Why do you think this is? What is the attraction of say, a Shakespeare play? Can you think of any drawbacks to this approach of filmmaking?

"Some pundit no doubt will hold that Shakespeare has suffered enormous torment over the treatment of his plays by picture people. To this one might capriciously say that millions of film patrons have suffered as much, but this would not be the full truth. I contend that "Old Will" has the movies to thank for an appreciable segment of' new Shakespearean followers. Even the Bard himself' would at least concede that among his new fans are many who, irritated by film versions, decided to look into the original Shakespeare to see if his plays are really as bad as the movies made out, and then found themselves implacably drawn into a new world."

*Albert E Smith (cofounder of the Vitagraph Company of America, who produced numerous silent Shakespeare films between 1908 and 1912). 'Reframing Culture' published by Princeton University Press (1993)*

It is odd to think that much is made of the language of Shakespeare. Some of his plays appeared in silent film format, only with the odd intertitle, so it is worth bearing in mind that when someone like Kenneth Branagh spends time key moments in the narrative to constructing a complete four hour version of 'Hamlet', that at the birth of cinema much effort was made to make 30 minute (or even shorter) versions of Shakespeare's works. As Albert E. Smith also points out: "It was, to put it mildly, literary sabotage to boil Shakespeare down to thirty minutes."

## TASK

You are a silent film producer in 1911. You have been asked to make a very short (25 scenes maximum) version of 'Hamlet' What are you going to leave in and what will you leave out? How can one scene (lasting probably only a minute) encapsulate what might take over ten minutes to produce on stage? You are really looking for key moments in the narrative to keep your film story moving. What are those key moments?

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## Hamlet Hamlet Hamlet

Dr Robert Smallwood, Deputy Director of The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, makes the point that the role of Hamlet is the one that actors want to play. What is this fascination with both the character and the play?

Tony Howard outlines some possible reasons why the play still attracts so much interest:

“Part of ‘Hamlet’s’ lasting attraction comes from its four dimensions. It deals with the individual; with intimate relationships involving love and the family; with politics; and with deeper, spiritual experiences and problems. Hamlet himself never loses touch with any of these levels. He is a philosopher and a national leader, a son obsessed with his parents and a man alone. Around him eight other characters experience their own tragedies. Around them others work, watch and survive.”

Should a film try to capture all of these elements? Does Branagh’s full version of the text encapsulate all of them?

## TASK

Using Howard’s four dimensions, analyse Branagh’s version and see if he has managed to capture these four strands. Try to create a chart and list the scenes from the play which illustrate each of these elements.

## Adapting a Playscript to Film

When we talk about an adaptation of Shakespeare’s playscript ‘Hamlet’, we are faced with a number of problems. Which is the definitive ‘Hamlet’?

- A** There was a ‘Hamlet’ before Shakespeare, possibly by Thomas Kyd, the inventor of Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy. This is now lost.
- B** In 1603, Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’ was published in an unauthorised ‘pirate’ edition. (This was known as the First Quarto or the Bad Quarto.)
- C** In 1604, Shakespeare’s company, ‘The King’s Men’, published their own version of ‘Hamlet’... enlarged to almost as much again as it was, according to the true and perfect copy.” (The Second Quarto)
- D** In 1623, after Shakespeare’s death, his friends included ‘Hamlet’ in the Complete Works of Shakespeare. (The First Folio) This version misses out some passages from the Second Quarto and adds new ones. Hamlet loses his last soliloquy: “How all occasions do inform against me.

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**E** Eighteenth century editors merged the Second Quarto and First Folio 'Hamlet's' together, making sure not a single word was missing. Where the texts disagreed in detail, they decided one version was better or that both were wrong and that scholars must deduce what Shakespeare wrote. So they created yet another 'Hamlet' - the one we know - which could take over four hours to act and can never have been seen on stage at the original Globe Theatre. 'Romeo and Juliet' tells us performances ran for about two hours.

The Folio and the Quartos derive from alternative playscripts put together by Shakespeare and his actors as conditions changed. Probably Shakespeare rethought these too.

Look at various versions available. Ask yourself these questions. Is there a definitive text from which to produce a stage production or a film of 'Hamlet'? Who put together the final Folio version? Given that one editor of the play describes 'Hamlet' as a play in motion, who can we say is responsible for the version that you read or see - Shakespeare or the editor of the text?

We can consider 'Hamlet' in three ways - as a written text, as a theatrical production and as a film. Also in existence are radio productions, records and audio tapes of studio productions of the play, comic books of 'Hamlet' and also complete rewritings of the story. What is 'Hamlet'? Is it one of the texts outlined above, or is it any production? Is it simply the point of view of the director? Is any one better than the other?

In Appendix I and II, both of which begin "To be or not to be - One is from the first Quarto version of the playscript, the other from the Folio version of the playscript, probably with additions from the Second Quarto. (Russell Jackson comments in the programme that this is the method that he and Branagh used to create their extended film version of 'Hamlet'.)

## TASK

Find out where in the play the "To be or not to be" speech takes place. What happens just before Hamlet starts speaking and what happens just after? Create, in your own words Hamlet's character as presented to us at this stage of the play.

Assume that Shakespeare wrote both versions of the two texts, just because one was published earlier than the other does not mean that one was written before the other.

Now read both versions so that you become familiar with them. Once you have done this, you should then start to note the differences between the two. What has been added or omitted? How have the words and phrases changed?

Having completed this first task, think about the idea of the soliloquy and how it reveals character. In reading the two texts, does the same sense of Hamlet's state of mind emerge from both? Is it the same character speaking?

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## TASK

Divide into groups of four. Two of you must defend version A (Appendix I) of the speech, the other two must defend version B (Appendix II). Try to explain why your version is better than the other, both in dramatic and poetic terms, and also how it illustrates Hamlet's state of mind at that point in the play.

What you may well feel is that these are not just simply different versions of the same text but two different texts. The changes that have been made are quite radical.



## Adapting Hamlet

“In the filming of ‘Hamlet’, we tried with most of the soliloquies, not necessarily consciously, but it worked out that way, to let the soliloquy probably play in one take, in one shot, in one sustained shot. It was, I thought, to make it a little easier for the audience to understand if the actor, from line to line, was, in the theatre. You know, following one thought into the other.

Sometimes, these are quite complicated thoughts, quite complicated sentences. Sometimes I was concerned that cutting also cuts the sense of it as well. Also, and particularly in ‘Hamlet’, these soliloquies are difficult to bring off and even if people aren’t that familiar with the play, there’s something about the soliloquies that seems familiar. In any case you’re expecting ‘Hamlet’ to talk on his own. So there’s an expectation brought to it that means you have to give the actor the best chance you can of explaining it. I often find that it’s through having a run at it rather than doing it in bits that you can really maintain the overall sense of what Hamlet’s saying.”

*Kenneth Branagh*

Branagh explains the way that he chose to shoot each soliloquy. Suppose that instead of filming each speech in one shot, he had decided to edit together various shots to form the soliloquy. Where, within a soliloquy, would he have introduced the various cuts?

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## TASK

Take Hamlet's first soliloquy "Oh that this too too sullied flesh would melt," (Act I Scene II: Page 187). Read the speech carefully and then decide where any natural breaks occur. Is this where you would edit to another shot? Are there any other moments where you feel that you could edit and still retain the overall meaning of the soliloquy?

What would you actually show in each shot? When would you use a close-up shot? When would you use a long shot? Bear in mind that closeups are usually used at a crucial moment in the action so you need to consider carefully which are the key moments of the soliloquy. You may wish to actually construct a storyboard for the soliloquy.

## Hamlet on Film

Firstly, think about the possibilities of the film. What can be done in the cinema which cannot be done on a stage? Secondly, what possibilities does a playscript allow you which a novel would not?

When deciding to make a film of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' there is the question of which text to use and how long you think that the film should be. Kenneth Branagh has chosen to use the complete text of the play which lasts four hours long.

Why do you think that he has done this? What do you think will be the expectations of an audience for a four hour 'Hamlet'?

Branagh has filmed other Shakespeare plays - 'Henry V and 'Much Ado About Nothing'. In both of these he cut the playscripts that he was going to film. So why choose to use the complete text of 'Hamlet'?

## TASK

Imagine that you are Kenneth Branagh. Compose a letter which outlines why you should wish to film a complete version of 'Hamlet'. You should explain why you do not want to cut certain characters who have been omitted in previous versions, such as Reynaldo, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Fortinbras.

In two previous film versions of the play, the character of Fortinbras has been left out. What effect does this have on the play? Does it mean that certain interpretations of the play are no longer valid.

In your opinion, what does Fortinbras stand for? In leaving him out, are the ideas and themes associated with his character shown by any other characters, thus retaining the play's themes intact?

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As a director, the main point for you to consider is what you think the play is about:

- Is the play about political power?
- Is the play about the love of a son for his mother?
- Is the play about treachery and intrigue?
- Is the play solely about the character of one person?
- Is the play about a reasonable, reliable, responsible central character?
- Is it all of these, or is it none of these?

Once you have decided what the play is about, you can then decide which parts are relevant to your vision of the play, and which are not. This would be the starting point for your adaptation of the playscript.

Another point to bear in mind is the character of Hamlet himself. Do you need to include every speech that he makes in order to convey his character?

Looking at the character of Hamlet in the film, what would you say Branagh's view of Hamlet's character is? Which version of 'Hamlet' is he presenting? How has he communicated this idea to the audience? Is it through the costumes or the setting? If you were the actor playing Hamlet, how would this affect you?

## Soliloquies

"Soliloquy. An actor's address to the audience, a prolonged 'aside'; the soliloquy reveals character;... The tragic soliloquy is generally confined to the introspective characters: to Brutus, Hamlet, Macbeth; Antony and Coriolanus think outwards and do not confide in the audience."  
*'A Shakespeare Companion' by F.E. Halliday by Penguin Shakespeare Library (1964)*



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There are moments when characters, in theory, tell us the truth. When they confide in the audience or allow the audience to know their innermost thoughts. There's always a challenge particularly on film about whether you talk directly to the audience or whether they overhear, or, you allow them to overhear. Essentially it's for yourself but there are moments of revelation and of real truth as opposed to what a character might have been dissembling in a scene up to that point." *Kenneth Branagh*

One of the key points about the soliloquies in any Shakespeare play, as Branagh indicates, is that we, the audience, are being presented with information from one viewpoint. Whilst they seem to be a monologue, they are, in fact, a dialogue between the character and the audience. The audience, in the case of the play itself is the character himself. However, in a film we, the audience, take that part of the audience.

If they are character revealing then we should look very carefully at all of Hamlet's soliloquies, as of all of Shakespeare's characters he soliloquises the most. What do they reveal about Hamlet? Do they show a change in character as the play progresses?

## TASKS

1. You will be given a sheet which has the opening lines and closing lines of each soliloquy (Appendix II, page 13). Can you match the opening lines with the closing lines of each soliloquy? It may be very difficult to link the lines of the soliloquies because there may not be an obvious progression within each of the seven soliloquies within 'Hamlet'. However, to take this exercise further, you should now look at each of the soliloquies in turn. Start with the first soliloquy and complete the following tasks. 1 Take the first of Hamlet's soliloquies (Act I Scene II: Page 187) and then the last (Act 4 Scene IV: Page 345). Look very carefully for key words which give us an indication of his train of thought and mood. Are there any images that Shakespeare uses which might help us understand Hamlet's feelings? Write a summary of what Hamlet is talking about within the soliloquy, his train of thought.
- 2 When you have completed task 1 you should then examine each of the other soliloquies. Write an outline for each soliloquy. Look and see if there is a progression of both thought and decision from one to another. One thing to note is that Hamlet is not the only person to soliloquise within the play. Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, the King of Denmark, whilst praying also 'talks to the audience'.
- 3 Look carefully at what Claudius says in (Act 3 Scene III: line 35: Page 313) "Thanks, dear my lord." How does his view of events compare to Hamlet's view of events? How do we gain a greater understanding of Hamlet from this soliloquy?



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## A Powerful Text

Many stage productions of 'Hamlet' tend to present the play as an examination of the central character's continual brooding over events, a sort of psychological examination and dissection of Hamlet himself. As has been said before, the character of Fortinbras is often completely omitted from the play. However, in restoring the full text, Branagh has been able to reintroduce an important theme of the play - power and rebellion.

The first image we see in the film is the statue of old Hamlet, Hamlet's father. This is also the final image of the film, but at the end we see the statue being toppled from its plinth. The dynasty has fallen. Fortinbras and the Norwegians have taken control.

It is possible to identify three additional instances of rebellion in the play - Claudius rebelling (and killing) old Hamlet to seize power, Laertes rebelling against Claudius and Hamlet rebelling against Claudius.

Obviously Claudius is the pivotal point in all three of these rebellions. Fortinbras's final words give some sense of the unrest that has been caused by Claudius's arrival on the throne of Denmark: "Such a sight as this Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.

Fortinbras stakes his claim to the throne, as all other claimants are now dead. But how does this more political idea of the play affect the ways in which we understand the characters'?

## TASKS

Divide into groups. Each group should take the part of one of the rebellious camps -Hamlet, Claudius, Laertes or Fortinbras. Each group should attempt to show why they should take control of evidence from the play itself to back up your arguments.

At the end of other Shakespeare tragedies there is a real sense of sadness and loss. Is this the case with 'Hamlet'? Is, in fact, the atmosphere different here?

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## Delay

Millions of words have been written as to why Hamlet delays in taking revenge on Claudius for murdering his father. To be very basic we can say that he has to delay otherwise we would not have a play to watch. If he killed Claudius at the end of Act I it would be a very short play indeed!

In other Jacobean Revenge Tragedies there is often a delay in executing the revenge but in 'The Revenger's Tragedy' by Tourneur and 'The Spanish Tragedy' by Thomas Kyd, there are concrete reasons why there is a delay, such as, thwarted opportunity and political problems.

So, what are the causes for Hamlet's delay in carrying out the revenge for his father's death? Look back at the work that you have completed on soliloquies. Is there a logic to Hamlet's delay from what he says in these speeches? Why does he ignore his father's exhortations?

Is the reason for the delay psychological or is it to do with something else? What is the atmosphere at Elsinore during the play/film? Why are Claudius and Polonius suspicious of Hamlet and also of Laertes? What threat do they pose? Why does Polonius, for example, send Reynaldo to spy on his son? Why do Claudius and Polonius want to spy on Hamlet at the time of the "To be or not to be soliloquy? Does the fact that we know that they are spying on Hamlet add anything to the way that we understand this soliloquy?

## Judging Adaptations

What are the problems that we face when we come to make judgements on any Shakespeare text? How do we decide what is good and what has no merit? When considering a film that is based on a play, we are faced with a double problem, namely, what is the merit of the original playscript and what is the merit of the film adaptation? Are there two sets of values here or only one?

When you come to make a judgement on a playscript, how do you decide its merit? Is 'Hamlet' a work of art? What makes a good film? Is there any point of contact between the two sets of values? And where does the theatrical production of a play fit into this scheme?

Write down two lists of criteria that you would use in judging the merit of a play and a film. You could also add to this the criteria that you use when judging a novel. In what areas do the similarities and the differences lie?

Having seen Branagh's version of 'Hamlet', apply to the film the two sets of criteria that you have drawn up. What merits does the film have as a film, and what merits does it have compared to the original playscript?

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Can a play and a film be judged in the same way? If, in the past, you have studied plays, you might well have seen a film version of a play (a 'film of the play'). It is also possible that you will have seen a theatrical production of the play. In your experience, is a film, no matter how faithful it may be to the playscript, a different experience from a theatrical performance for the audience?



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## Appendix I - Hamlet:

To be, or not to be, I there's the point,  
To Die, to sleep, is that all? I all:  
No, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes,  
For in that dreame of death, when wee awake,  
And borne before an everlasting Judge,  
From whence no passenger ever returod,  
The undiscovered country, at whose sight  
The happy smile, and the accursed damn d.  
But for this, the joyfull hope this,  
Whol'd beare the scornes and flattery of' the world,  
Scorned by the right rich, the rich cursed of the poore?  
The widow being oppressed, the orphan wrong'd,  
The taste of hunger, or a tirants raigne,  
And thousand more calamaties besides,  
To grunt and sweate under this weary life,  
When that he may his full Qnidui,u make,  
With a bare bodkin, who would this indure,  
But for a hope of something after death?  
Which pusles the braine, and doth confound the sence,  
Which makes us rather beare those evilles we have,  
Than flie to others that we know not of.  
I that, O this conscience makes cowardes of us all,  
Lady in thy orizons, be all my sinnes remembred.

Hamlet Prince of Danmarke'

(edited by Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey) published by Harvester Wheatsheaf (1992)



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## Appendix II - Hamlet:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them. To die - to sleep,  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;  
To sleep, perchance to dream - aye, there's the rub:  
For in that sleep of' death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause - there's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life.  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of' dispriz'd love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of' thunworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards of' us all,  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action. Soft you now,  
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in they orison,  
Be all my sins rememberd.

Act III Scene I  
'Hamlet'

*The Arden edition of the works of William Shakespeare (edited by Harold Jenkins) published by Routledge (1994)*

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## Appendix III - Hamlet

## Name That Soliloquy Party Game

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>1 0 that this too too sullied flesh would melt,<br/>Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,<br/>Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd<br/>His canon 'gainst self'-slaughter. 0 God! God!</p>                                     | <p>A I'll have grounds<br/>More relative than this. The play's the<br/>thing Wherein I'll catch the<br/>conscience of the King.</p>   |
| <p>2 0 all you host of heaven! 0 earth! What else?<br/>And shall I couple hell? Oh fie! Hold, hold, my heart,<br/>And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,<br/>But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee?</p>                      | <p>B My mother stays.<br/>This physic but prolongs thy sickly<br/>days.</p>   |
| <p>3 0 what a rogue and peasant slave am I!</p>   | <p>C My tongue and soul in this be<br/>hypocrites: How in my words<br/>somever she be shent, To give<br/>them seals never my soul consent.</p>  |
| <p>4 To be, or not to be, that is the question:<br/>Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer<br/>The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,<br/>Or to take arms against a sea of' troubles<br/>And by opposing end them.</p> | <p>D 0 from this time forth<br/>It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me.'<br/>I have sworn't</p>   |
| <p>5 'Tis now the very witching time of night,<br/>When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out<br/>Contagion to this world.</p>  | <p>H 'Tis now the very witching time of night,<br/>My thoughts be bloody or be nothing<br/>worth</p>  |
| <p>6 Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying<br/>And now I'll dot. [Draws his sword.]<br/>And so a goes to heaven;<br/>And so I am reveng'd.</p>  | <p>F It is not, nor cannot come to good.<br/>But break, my heart, for I must hold my<br/>tongue.</p>  |
| <p>7 How all occasions do inform against me,<br/>And spur my dull revenge.</p>  | <p>Thus conscience does make cowards<br/>of us all, And thus the native hue of<br/>resolution Is sicklied o'er<br/>with the pale cast of thought,<br/>And enterprises of' great pitch and<br/>Moment With this regard their currents<br/>turn awry<br/>And lose the name of action.</p> |

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