**Reading Questions on *Hamlet***

Please run off these questions and respond to them in the spaces provided. They will help you keep track of the complicated plot, characters, and character relationships. Remember that Mr. Flasch will expect to find them when he takes in your blue notes.

Please respond in note form to save time but don’t forget to refer to specific materials from the play to provide evidence for your observations and assertions.

**ACT 1**

**1.1**

1. What happens when Francisco and Bernardo meet at the beginning of 1.1? Where are they? What is the time? Why is Horatio with Bernardo and Marcellus? Who is he?

2. What is Horatio's initial response to the story of the apparition?

3. What does Horatio first assume the appearance of the ghost means? Why are there such intense war preparations in Denmark?

4. What happens when the ghost appears for the second time? Why does it leave so abruptly? (Note: the questions Horatio asks it represent, according to the thought of the time, the reasons why a ghost could appear.)

5. What do we know so far about the nature of the ghost? Do we know yet if it is a "good" ghost (i.e. "really" the spirit of the person it appears to be) or a "damned" ghost (i.e. a devil or evil spirit in the shape of the person it appears to be)?

**1.2**

1. What is Claudius telling the court in the first part of his speech? What does he say about young Fortinbras and his uncle the king of Norway?

2. What does Laertes want from the King? How does Claudius respond to him? In what ways does Claudius already differ from Old Hamlet as king?

3. What is your first impression of Hamlet?

4. How seriously do you take Claudius's argument against Hamlet's "prolonged" mourning?

6. What do you make of both Claudius and Gertrude encouraging Hamlet to get over his grief?

5. Read Hamlet's first soliloquy carefully. What is it that is really bothering him about what has happened since his father's death? How would you describe the tone of his feelings— detached, impassioned, rational, ironic, or what?

6. What is Hamlet's response to the news from Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo? Notice the way Hamlet questions them. How much do we know about how his mind works at this point of the play? What does he suspect as the reason for the ghost's appearance?

**1.3**

1. What does Laertes warn Ophelia about? What, apparently, has been the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia since his return from Wittenberg?

2. How seriously do you take Polonius's precepts? Consider especially the last one.

3. How willing is Ophelia to discuss with her father what she has discussed with Laertes? What are Polonius’s response to Hamlet's interest in her and her response to him? How seriously should she take her brother’s and her father’s warnings about Hamlet's lack of seriousness and his inability to choose his own wife?

4. What do we know about Laertes, Polonius, and Ophelia by the end of 1.3? What sort of people are they? What sort of family are they? Who is missing from this family?

**1.4**

1. Why do the trumpets and cannons sound, according to Hamlet? What does Hamlet think of the custom?

2. How does Hamlet respond to the ghost?

3. What does Marcellus still think the nature of the problem is?

**1.5**

1. Is Hamlet surprised when the Ghost asks him to revenge his father's murder? Is he surprised when he learns who the murderer is?

2. How did Claudius murder Old Hamlet?

3. What does the Ghost tell Hamlet to do about his mother?

4. Read Hamlet's second soliloquy carefully. What does Hamlet say he has learned? In other words, what general piece of wisdom does he want to save from this encounter? Is this shockingly new information to us? Or is Hamlet just becoming "grown up"? (When did you first learn that you couldn't always trust people?) Notice how quickly Hamlet moves from the specific (Claudius) to the general ("one"). Compare the same movement he makes from the specific person Gertrude to "frailty, thy name is woman" (1.2.146). Given this soliloquy, how soon would you expect Hamlet to go for his revenge?

5. What happens when the others find Hamlet? What does he ask them to swear? What does his mention of an "antic disposition" suggest about his future plans? How might you expect Hamlet to be when we next see him?

**ACT 2**

**2.1**

1. What is Polonius telling Reynaldo to do? What does this material tell us about Polonius and his way of thinking and acting?

2. Why is Ophelia so upset when she enters? What has happened to her? Does Hamlet's appearance (in her description of it) as a madman (a distracted lover) come as a surprise after what we last heard Hamlet say? Why would he appear in this sort of mad state to her? Is there any possibility he really is a distracted lover responding to Ophelia's apparent rejection of him? How well has she obeyed her father's orders?

3. What is Polonius's response to what Ophelia tells him? Where are they going?

**2.2**

1. Why have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to court? What is their relation to Hamlet? What use does Claudius have for them?

2. We've now had several different explanations of Hamlet's madness: love, his father's death, and his mother’s "o'erhasty marriage"? Are people content with these explanations? Are you?

3. What results have come from Cornelius's and Voltemand's trip to Norway? Has Claudius's use of diplomacy rather than war been justified? What will Fortinbras be doing next? Can we expect to see him in Denmark after all? Why?

4. How effective is Polonius as a bearer of news? How convinced are Claudius and Gertrude that Polonius has found the answer? How do they plan to test this answer? Does Polonius's plan sound like his normal way of operating?

5. Immediately following the discussion of the plan, Hamlet appears. Wouldn't this be a good time to try out the plan? Do they?

6. How does Hamlet behave when he enters? Does Polonius think he is mad? Is this the way we would expect Hamlet to act after Ophelia's description in 2.1? Why does he call Polonius a fishmonger? (It may help to know that fishmongers' wives and daughters, apparently because of the fish, were assumed to be extremely fertile and thus able to conceive easily.)

7. How does Hamlet behave initially with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Is it different from the way he just acted with Polonius? How does Hamlet change when he realizes that Claudius and Gertrude sent for the two?

8. How seriously should we take Hamlet's view of the world and of "man"? How do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern react to Hamlet's use of the "generic" man?

9. What is unusual about the speech Hamlet begins to recite and the First Player continues? How is its style different from that of the surrounding lines? Why is its subject matter appropriate? Why can't the First Player finish the speech?

10. What play does Hamlet want the players to play? What does he want to do to the play?

11. Read Hamlet's third soliloquy carefully. How does he use the player's response to show how different his own position is? Is the comparison justified by what we have seen happen in the play? Why does Hamlet need the play? What will he learn from it?

**ACT 3**

**3.1**

1. How much have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern learned from/about Hamlet?

2. Finally, the planned meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia is arranged, spies and all. What does Polonius give Ophelia to read? What response does his remark get (in an aside) from Claudius? Why is this speech by Claudius important? What do we learn that we have not learned before?.

3. Read Hamlet's fourth soliloquy carefully. How is this soliloquy different from the first three? Think about the way Hamlet's mind works within the first three—is the same thing happening here? What is the main idea of this fourth soliloquy?

4. What happens between Hamlet and Ophelia in the so-called "nunnery scene"? Does Hamlet know that he's being watched? Does he determine that during the scene? Can you spot a place where he might? Who is the "one" referred to in "all but one" (3.1.147)?

5. How does Claudius respond to what he has seen and heard? Is he convinced that love is the cause of Hamlet's madness? What does he plan to do about Hamlet? How does Polonius respond? Is he willing to give up his "love" interpretation of Hamlet’s behaviour? What does he propose as an additional way to find out what Hamlet is thinking? Are you surprised that it includes spying?

**3.2**

1. What advice does Hamlet have for the actors? Why?

2. Why does Hamlet say he especially likes Horatio? Does Hamlet see Horatio as similar to him or different from him?

3. What function is served by the discussion of Polonius as an actor?

4. How does the play-within-the-playreflect the issues bothering Hamlet?

5. What is Claudius's mood as he stops the play? How does Hamlet respond? If Hamlet has learned that Claudius is indeed guilty (if that's why he stopped the play and not for some other reason), Claudius has also learned something from the presentation of the play. What has Claudius learned?

6. What message do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have for Hamlet? What lesson does Hamlet teach with a recorder?

7. Read Hamlet's fifth soliloquy carefully. How is it different from the other soliloquies? What is the mood of the soliloquy? What is happening to Hamlet?

**3.3**

1. What has Claudius decided to do with Hamlet? Who will go with him?

2. Where is Polonius going?

3. What does Claudius admit in his attempt to pray? Has the play actually had an effect on him? Why can't he ask for forgiveness?

4. What happens when Hamlet enters? Why doesn't Hamlet kill Claudius then? What is ironic about Hamlet's decision?

**3.4**

1. How successful is the first part of the interview between Gertrude and Hamlet? What goes wrong (even before Polonius's death)? Who controls the conversation? Why does Gertrude call for help?

2. Does Gertrude know that Claudius killed Hamlet's father?

3. What device does Hamlet use to force Gertrude to consider what she has done?

4. Hamlet seems to be getting through to his mother when the Ghost enters. Why does the Ghost appear at this point? How is his appearance different from his appearances in Act 1? Who saw him then? Who sees him now? What is his message to Hamlet?

5. After the Ghost leaves, does Hamlet succeed in what he came to do? What is Gertrude's state when he leaves? What should she do, and what should she not do?

6. What does Hamlet think of his upcoming trip to England? What does he expect to do?

**ACT 4**

**4.1**

1. Does Gertrude tell Claudius the truth about what happened between her and Hamlet? Is she following Hamlet's advice at the end of 3.4?

2. How does Claudius respond to the death of Polonius? Does he understand the implications of what happened? What will he do now?

**4.2**

1. What do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern learn from Hamlet?

**4.3**

1. Why does Claudius believe he can't simply arrest Hamlet?

2. What is the result of Hamlet's joking about death and worms? What connection do the worms and their diet have with Wittenberg? Keep the whole "worm" discussion in mind when you get to the graveyard scene in Act 5.

3. Is Hamlet going to England as a prisoner or in the guise of a royal representative?

4. What do Claudius's letters tell England (i.e. the king of England) to do with Hamlet? Why does Claudius expect to be obeyed? (The situation is more or less historical, since a Danish king from 1016-1042 ruled England. The original Hamlet story seems to date from about this time.)

**4.4**

1. Why is Fortinbras's army passing through Denmark?

2. What sort of judgment does the Captain make about the place they are fighting for? How does Hamlet describe it?

3. Where is Hamlet going when he meets the Captain?

4. Read Hamlet's sixth soliloquy carefully. What is unusual about it given its position in the play? What example does Hamlet compare himself to? And what other soliloquy does this one remind you of?

**4.5**

1. What do we learn about the state of Gertrude's soul in her aside? What does this say about how she has responded to Hamlet's accusations and recommendations in Act 3?

2. The court assumes Ophelia's madness is caused by her father's death. Judging from her songs, are they correct? Is that the only thing that has made her mad? What else is on her mind and coming to the surface in her madness?

3. What is Laertes's approach to revenging his father's death? How does it compare to Hamlet's?

4. What is being threatened as Laertes enters? How well does Claudius handle this emergency?

5. How does Laertes respond to the mad Ophelia? What offer does Claudius make to get his discussion with Laertes back on track?

**4.6**

1. Who brings Hamlet's letter to Horatio? What has happened to Hamlet?

**4.7**

1. Claudius has obviously convinced Laertes of his innocence. What things of a personal nature do we learn about Gertrude and Claudius?.

2. What does Hamlet's letter tell Claudius? Why does Hamlet want to see him "alone"? What seems to be Hamlet's plan?

3. What plan do Claudius and Laertes develop?

4. What happened to Ophelia? Did she kill herself, or was her death accidental?

5. What is Laertes's response to her death? What does Claudius fear will happen?

**ACT 5**

**5.1**

1. What are the two clowns doing while they talk? Who is the "she" they are referring to? Why, according to the second clown, is this woman really being given a Christian burial, albeit it a circumscribed one?

2. What happens in the discussion between Hamlet and the Gravedigger? What does Hamlet learn from his confrontation with Yorick's skull? What does he learn from his meditation on Alexander and Caesar?

3. What do we learn about the relationship between Hamlet and Yorick?

4. What do we learn from Gertrude's farewell to Ophelia? Would Polonius have been surprised if he had heard this?

5. What happens when Hamlet appears to the others? Why is he so angry?

**5.2**

1. What new sort of attitude to life do you see in the Hamlet of the first 81 lines of 5.2?

2. What would have happened to him in England? How did he find out? What did he do about it? What has happened to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

3. What sort of person is Osric? What message does he have for Hamlet? What seems to be the problem with his hat?

4. What is Hamlet's reaction to the idea of the match? How well does Hamlet expect to do? Why does he go ahead with it? How does this reason reflect the new attitude we saw in Hamlet in 5.1?

5. Hamlet clearly apologizes to Laertes. How does Laertes respond? Given what we know about the plans of Laertes and Claudius, how do you take Laertes's promise? Can we say he has any honour at all? Has he followed his father's precept as it was articulated in Act 1?

6. Who wounds whom and with what sword, and what happens to Gertrude?

7. Why is Hamlet so concerned that Horatio stay alive to tell his story? How much do the other people at court know at this point?

8. Do you believe Horatio in his assumption that Hamlet is saved and not damned? Why or why not?

9. Does the Hamlet Fortinbras describes sound like the Hamlet we have known? What will l likely happen to the kingdom under Fortinbras?