



## Am I a coward?

*Hamlet welcomes a troupe of actor comedians who recite lines concerning the death of King Priam of Troy and the grief borne by his wife, Hecuba. He asks the main actor to perform The Murder of Gonzago before the court and to add a few lines Hamlet himself is to write. The following text is regarded by many actors as the most beautiful soliloquy of the play. Here Hamlet is enraged, furious and rude. This is Shakespeare at the height of his theatrical ability, giving Hamlet's language severe changes in tone, the peaks of rage mix with brief moments of profound depression or of incredulous questioning.*

William Shakespeare  
**Hamlet**  
**(1601)**

Act II, Scene II

[Exeunt ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN.]

**HAMLET** Ay, so God buy to you. Now I am alone.

O, what a rogue and peasant slave<sup>1</sup> am I!

Is it not monstrous that this player here,

But in a fiction<sup>2</sup>, in a dream of passion,

5 Could force his soul so to his own conceit<sup>3</sup>

That from her working all his visage wann'd<sup>4</sup>,

Tears in his eyes, **distraction**<sup>5</sup> in his aspect,

A broken voice, and his whole function suiting

With forms<sup>6</sup> to his conceit? and all for nothing!

10 For Hecuba!

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,

That he should **weep** for her? What would he do,

Had he the motive and the cue<sup>7</sup> for passion

That I have? He **would drown** the stage with tears

15 And cleave<sup>8</sup> the general ear with horrid speech,

Make mad the guilty and appal the free<sup>9</sup>,

Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed

The very faculties of eyes and ears.

Yet I,

20 A dull and muddy-mettled rascal<sup>10</sup>, peak,

Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause<sup>11</sup>,

And can say nothing – no, not for a king,

Upon whose property and most dear life

A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a **coward**?

25 Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across<sup>12</sup>?

Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face<sup>13</sup>?

**Tweaks me by the nose**? gives me the lie i' th' throat,

As deep as to the lungs<sup>14</sup>? who does me this?

Ha!

30 'Swounds<sup>15</sup>, I should take it: for it cannot be

But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack **gall**

To make oppression bitter<sup>16</sup>, or ere this

I should have fatted all the region kites

With this slave's offal<sup>17</sup>. Bloody, bawdy<sup>18</sup> villain!

35 Remorseless, treacherous<sup>19</sup>, **lecherous**, kindless villain!

O, vengeance!

Why, what an **ass** am I! This is most brave,

That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,

**Prompted** to my revenge by heaven and hell,

40 Must, like a whore<sup>20</sup>, unpack my heart with words,

And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,

- 1 **rogue and peasant slave.** Furfante e bifolco.
- 2 **But in a fiction.** Solamente fingendo.
- 3 **to his own conceit.** A sua immagine.
- 4 **wann'd.** Pallido, sbiancato.
- 5 **distraction.** Pazzia.
- 6 **suiting ... forms.** Tesa a dar forma.
- 7 **cue.** Battuta d'entrata (termine teatrale), *qui*: sprone.
- 8 **cleave.** Spaccherebbe.
- 9 **appal the free.** Spaventerebbe gli innocenti.
- 10 **A dull ... rascal.** Una canaglia fatta di pietra e fango.
- 11 **peak ... my cause.** Sto qui a perder tempo come un qualsiasi stupido sognatore e non mi curo della mia causa.
- 12 **breaks my pate across.** Mi spacca la testa.
- 13 **Plucks ... face.** Mi strappa la barba e me la sbatte in faccia.
- 14 **Tweaks ... lungs.** Mi tira per il naso, mi caccia l'accusa in gola, giù fino ai polmoni.
- 15 **'Swounds.** Per il sangue di Cristo.
- 16 **I am pigeon-liver'd ... bitter.** Ho il fegato di un piccione e mi manca il fiele per rendere amara l'oppressione.
- 17 **ere this ... offal.** Altrimenti avrei già ingrassato tutti gli avvoltoi dell'aria con la carogna di questo schiavo.
- 18 **bawdy.** Osceno, lascivo (si riferisce a Claudio).
- 19 **treacherous.** Traditore.
- 20 **whore.** Sgualdrina.



A scullion<sup>21</sup>! Fie<sup>22</sup> upon 't! Foh!  
 About<sup>23</sup>, my brain! Hum – I have heard  
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
 45 Have by the very **cunning** of the scene  
 Been struck so to the soul that presently  
 They have proclaim'd their malefactions.  
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players  
 50 Play something like the murder of my father  
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;  
 I'll tent him to the quick<sup>24</sup>. If he do blench<sup>25</sup>,  
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen  
 May be the devil, and the devil hath power  
 55 To assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
 As he is very potent with such spirits,  
 Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds  
 More relative than this. The play's the thing  
 60 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

- 21 **fall ... scullion.** Darsi a bestemmiare come una baldracca, una sgattera.  
 22 **Fie.** Vergogna.  
 23 **About.** Al lavoro.  
 24 **I'll tent him to the quick.** Lo scruterò fino in fondo all'anima.  
 25 **If he do blench.** Se solo sussulta.

## READING COMPETENCE

### 1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- |                          |                               |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 astuzia .....          | 6 spinto, spronato .....      |
| 2 piangere .....         | 7 mi prende per il naso ..... |
| 3 fegato, coraggio ..... | 8 lussurioso .....            |
| 4 somaro .....           | 9 inonderebbe .....           |
| 5 codardo .....          | 10 pazzia .....               |

### 2 READ the text again and do the following activities.

- Underline the questions Hamlet asks himself. Then rewrite them in your own words.
- What strikes Hamlet about the player?
  - That he has dreams and passions.
  - His skill at making appearance real.
  - The uselessness of his work.
- What is the meaning of 'I am pigeon-liver'd' in line 31? Tick as appropriate.
 

<input type="checkbox"/>	I am not brave.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am short.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am a dreamer.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am sick.
- Who does 'Bloody, bawdy villain!' in line 34 refer to?
  - Hamlet.
  - Hamlet's father.
  - King Claudius.
- What is Hamlet's opinion of Claudius?
- Has he carried out his revenge yet? What are his plans?



**7** List the words and phrases Hamlet uses to refer to himself.

1	.....	5	.....
2	.....	6	.....
3	.....	7	.....
4	.....	8	.....

**8** What picture of the man do they convey?

- A He is a man of action.
- B He considers himself as a hero.
- C He has a very low opinion of himself.

**9** What is Hamlet's dilemma?

- A What decisions he should take.
- B Whether he will be able to make any decisions at all.
- C Whether to kill himself or not.

**10** What is the function of Hamlet's soliloquy? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ To express his thoughts about a specific problem.
- ☐ To gain the audience's confidence in an act of communion.
- ☐ To make his plans.
- ☐ To speak to himself of his feelings.

**11** Why does Hamlet want to stage a play at court?

- A To observe the king's reaction.
- B To entertain the king.
- C To annoy the king.

**12** What will the players perform?

**13** What does Hamlet think of the ghost he has seen?

- A That he is the devil.
- B That he is sincere.
- C That he is an angel.

**14** Report what you have learnt about Hamlet's character from this soliloquy.