



# Hamlet: The Danish Court Council

Chair: Lira Bajraktari Schwab '26

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Dear Delegates,

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark! My name is Lira, and I will be your chair for Hamlet: The Danish Court Council committee at CAMUN this year. I've been involved in Model UN since my freshman year and have spent the last year serving as co-head of Concord Academy's Model UN club. Outside of debate, I am an actor, writer, and passionate Shakespeare nerd (perhaps you could tell by my choice of committee topic). If you don't share my love of the bard or don't know much about *Hamlet*, fear not; the proceedings of this committee take place directly after the play ends. As such, there is no "script" and I look forward to seeing what original and wacky ideas you all have! That being said, you should at least read a summary of the play. This will be my fourth and last CAMUN and I can't wait to get started with you all in April.

My name is Nicolas, the rapp, and I am currently a sophomore at Concord Academy. I've been involved in Model UN for this past year, and I think it's a great way to improve one's confidence in public speaking and teamwork, and just as importantly having a fun time and meeting new people and friends. I'm excited to help lead this particular committee because I find politics very interesting, and I look forward to seeing how you all try to work through this. Not to mention, who doesn't want to be making decisions for how to rule medieval Denmark? That said, I hope to make this committee as fun, engaging and inclusive as possible. I can't wait to meet you all in April!

Shakespeare's Denmark is not only a dramatic setting, but a state facing very real early-modern problems: disputed succession, foreign threats, factionalism, and civil unrest. We look forward to seeing how you tackle these complex issues. Position papers must be emailed to the dais by April 1st, and are required in order to be eligible for awards.

Please let us know if you have questions—feel free to email us. See you in April!

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## **Background**

Welcome to medieval Denmark! Our committee takes place right after the events of *Hamlet*, which for our purposes (and by the best estimations of Shakespeare scholars) is circa the early 14th century. The royal family of Denmark has been devastated; King Claudius, Queen Gertrude, and Prince Hamlet are all dead, and the Danish court lies in chaos. Fortinbras of Norway has arrived, with the intention of claiming the Danish throne with the apparent consent of Hamlet as he died. However, the monarchy is not the only faction at play. Powerful nobility, military leaders, church authorities, and foreign interests all have stakes in the fate of Denmark. In the wake of such unprecedented events, it will be your responsibility to restore order to the nation, whatever your definition of that may be. Not even a year after the death of Old King Hamlet, months of unstable rule have plunged Denmark into debt and disorder.

### **The Danish Monarchy**

The monarchy of Denmark is well established with the first king, Gorm the Old, having ruled in the first century. Unlike strictly hereditary monarchies, Denmark in the late medieval and early modern periods operated under a semi-elective system. Usually, however, the crown passed to the king's eldest son or another blood relative. At this point in history, only men were eligible to rule. Even so, a king's success was often dependent on acceptance by the nobility and other powerful factions. This system made succession inherently unstable during moments of dynastic collapse. In *Hamlet*, this instability is already visible as Claudius ascends the throne not simply through marriage, but through political management of the court and council. With all heirs dead, Denmark faces a historical dilemma—whether legitimacy comes from blood, consent, military power, or some combination of all three.

### **Foreign Interests**

Denmark's crisis does not occur in a vacuum. Norway, England, and the broader Baltic world are closely watching events in Elsinore. Fortinbras's presence with troops creates immediate pressure, but England's past alliance with Claudius suggests alternative diplomatic paths. Trade routes, military alliances, and control of the Sound (Øresund) all heighten the stakes of succession. Foreign actors may prefer a weak Denmark that is easily influenced rather than a strong, independent kingdom. It must be considered how internal decisions, such as accepting a foreign king or limiting royal authority, will affect Denmark's long-term position in northern Europe. Every decision made within the council sends a message to enemies and allies alike.

Denmark is also strategically vulnerable. Norway has recently ended a conflict with Denmark, yet Fortinbras has maintained an aggressive posture throughout the play. England has been used as a diplomatic and military partner, while internal trust within Denmark has eroded due to espionage, secrecy, and political violence. One of the most pressing issues at the end of the play are Hamlet's dying words; "I do prophesy the election lights / On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice." This statement creates a profound political crisis, as Hamlet's endorsement is powerful but legally ambiguous.

### **The Håndfæstning**

A critical element of Danish governance is the Håndfæstning, a written charter imposed upon kings by the nobility at the time of their accession. The Håndfæstning outlined the limits of royal authority and guaranteed noble privileges, including protections of land rights and constraints on taxation and warfare. If the king disobeys the Håndfæstning, nobles may renounce their loyalty and rebel against his rule. As such, the charter and its contents are highly relevant to this committee.

### **The Church**

The monarchy depends on the church for moral legitimacy. Kings are expected to uphold divine order, protect the church, and rule justly. Regicide, incestuous marriage, and revenge killings—as seen in Claudius's reign—threaten this moral foundation. Claudius's own admission that his crime prevents him from praying underscores the idea that a sinful king endangers not only his soul but the spiritual health of the entire realm.

The church, however, is not merely a passive force. Senior clergy often sat in the court and played a role in governance, succession, and public communication. Through sermons, funerary rites, and proclamations, church officials shaped how political events were understood by the general population. In the aftermath of the royal family's collapse, the church holds immense power to frame the deaths as divine punishment, tragic necessity, or righteous justice.

A major point of tension lies in the deaths of the royal family. The dispute surrounding the circumstances of Ophelia's death demonstrates how religious rites can become political statements. The church strongly condemns suicide, so while her official cause of death was cited as drowning, these rumours still pose a threat. Decisions about how Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius are buried, or whether their deaths are publicly investigated, carry enormous symbolic weight, with real political consequences.

## **Danish Peasants**

While most people of Denmark grieve for the three monarchs they lost, the working class also grows restless. The nation is now at a turning point in history, one that especially implicates the working class. Although political power in Denmark rests with the monarchy, nobility, and church, the vast majority of the population consists of peasants who work the land and sustain the kingdom's economy. In the late medieval period and into the early modern era, Danish peasants were not a uniform class but existed along a spectrum of legal and economic status, ranging from relatively independent freeholders to heavily burdened tenant farmers.

Peasants were obligated to pay rents, taxes, and labor services to their landlords and to the crown. These burdens intensified during periods of war or dynastic instability, as rulers sought additional revenue. As a result, peasants were often deeply affected by elite political decisions despite having little formal voice in governance. Famine, conscription, and taxation could quickly translate court politics into civil unrest. Prolonged conflict or foreign occupation could lead to increased exploitation or unrest, making the peasantry an overlooked but potentially decisive factor in Denmark's stability. Any ruler who ignores the peasantry risks undermining the economic and social foundations of the state. Furthermore, the deaths of the royal family have not been publicly explained. Rumors of madness, poisoning, and treason threaten public confidence in the state. How the nation remembers King Hamlet, Claudius, and Prince Hamlet will shape the legitimacy of whatever regime follows.

## **Committee Positions**

### **Fortinbras**

As Prince of Norway, Fortinbras arrives in Denmark at the end of the play with the intention of conquest. The memory of his father, murdered at the hands of Old King Hamlet remains in his memory, and he is highly concerned with legitimizing Hamlet's dying endorsement.

### **Horatio**

Horatio is one of the very few remaining members of the court at Elsinore. Deeply loyal to his friend Hamlet during his life, Horatio is in the unique position of being the sole witness to his dying words.

### **Court Jester**

The court jester is a medieval anomaly, the only member of the court who can insult the king and live to tell the tale. Even though their profession is comedic, the jester plays a central role in the court, and is

often privy to things they should not be. Consider how the jester's fate is intertwined with the monarchy's and how Hamlet's relationship with Yorick might inform their decisions.

### **Reynaldo**

Serving as Polonius's servant before his death, Reynaldo is a self-interested member of the court. He has a history of espionage and dishonesty. Consider how he might align himself in this unpredictable political landscape.

### **Voltimand**

A nobleman in the court, he served as an ambassador and was sent to Norway by King Claudius to negotiate peace. He did so successfully, though the agreement was short-lived. With no king to serve, Voltimand will prioritize his own interests as a member of the nobility.

### **Cornelius**

A nobleman in the court, he served as an ambassador and was sent to Norway by King Claudius to negotiate peace. He did so successfully, though the agreement was short-lived. With no king to serve, Cornelius will prioritize his own interests as a member of the nobility.

### **The Archbishop of the Danish Church**

The church is deeply invested in the governance of the nation. For the sake of Denmark's morality and spiritual health, the Archbishop feels the sins of the previous reign must not be repeated.

### **General of the Royal Guard**

One of the few remaining military leaders. Their loyalty is decisive, but aligning with the wrong ruler could mean disgrace or death. They control a sizable military force.

### **Osric**

A wealthy member of King Claudius's court. He served as referee during the final deathly sword fight in the play and witnessed the subsequent deaths.

### **The Court Chaplain**

A religious figure close to the royal household, aware of any private confessions. Perhaps they know the truth behind Ophelia's death? The chaplain's loyalty is split between the church and the monarchy.

## Questions to Consider

1. Does Hamlet's verbal endorsement of Fortinbras constitute a legitimate transfer of power?
2. Is stability more important than justice for the crimes of Claudius's reign?
3. How should Denmark manage its foreign relations with England and Norway simultaneously?
4. Should a new monarch be chosen, will they be required to accept a Håndfæstning, and if so, how restrictive should it be?
5. How should the deaths of the royal family be publicly handled?

## Bibliography and Resources for Further Research

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