Act 4 Scene 4
The sea coast near Elsinore

Enter Fortinbras with his army

Fortinbras Go captain, from me greet the Danish king.
Tell him that by his licence, Fortinbras
Craves the conveyance of a promised march
Over his kingdom. You know the rendezvous.
If that his majesty would aught with us,
We shall express our duty in his eye,
And let him know so.

Captain I will do't, my lord.
Fortinbras Go softly on.

[Exit Fortinbras, with the army]

[Enter Hamlet, Rosencrantz, etc.

Hamlet Good sir, whose powers are these?
Captain They are of Norway sir.
Hamlet How purposed sir I pray you?
Captain Against some part of Poland.
Hamlet Who commands them sir?
Captain The nephew to old Norway, Fortinbras.
Hamlet Goes it against the main of Poland sir,
Or for some frontier?
Captain Truly to speak, and with no addition,
We go to gain a little patch of ground
That hath in it no profit but the name.
To pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it,
Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole
A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.
Hamlet Why then the Polack never will defend it.
Captain Yes, it is already garrisoned.
Hamlet Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats
Will not debate the question of this straw.
This is th' impostume of much wealth and peace,
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
Why the man dies. I humbly thank you sir.

Captain God buy you sir.

[Exit]
Hamlet criticises his delay in revenging his father’s death. Is it forgetfulness or too much thought that stops him? Prompted by his encounter with Fortinbras’s army, he resolves to speed to his revenge.

1 Hamlet is spurred on to revenge (in small groups)

Hamlet’s soliloquy contains five sections:

Lines 32–3 ‘How all occasions . . . revenge!’: everything I encounter prompts me to revenge.

Lines 33–46 ‘What is a man . . . To do’t’: man has great intelligence, but somehow I delay, even though I have good cause.

Lines 46–56 ‘Examples . . . stake’: many examples prompt me, but this sight of Fortinbras’s army teaches me that honour must be defended.

Lines 56–65 ‘How stand I . . . slain’: I have great cause, yet do nothing, but I see thousands of men about to die for a trivial cause.

Lines 65–6 ‘Oh from this time forth . . . nothing worth’: from now on, I will pursue only revenge.

Sometimes the soliloquy is cut in performance because it does not appear in the First Folio (see p. 269). Although Hamlet finally determines on revenge, he deludes himself when in line 45 he says he has ‘cause, and will, and strength, and means’ to do it: he is a prisoner under guard being escorted to exile. Scene 6 will reveal that another chance encounter (this time with pirates) frees him to find the strength and means for revenge.

Explore different ways of speaking the soliloquy: individually; or echoing words and phrases you think especially important; or speaking short sections in turn as a kind of anxious ‘conversation’, or as if you are trying to persuade someone of the argument you are developing. After your explorations, each person writes notes on how the soliloquy might be delivered on stage.
ROSENCRANTZ: Will’t please you go my lord?
HAMLET: I’ll be with you straight; go a little before.

[Exeunt all but Hamlet]

How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To lust in us unused. Now whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th’event—
A thought which quartered hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward—I do not know
Why yet I live to say this thing’s to do,
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do’t. Examples gross as earth exhort me.
Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour’s at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain. Oh from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.

Exit]
Hamlet

Gertrude refuses to see Ophelia, but is told that Ophelia is mad and needs pity. Gertrude agrees to admit Ophelia, but expresses guilt and misgivings about the future.

1 A graphic picture of mental illness (in pairs)
The Gentleman gives a moving account of an extremely disturbed young woman. Ophelia’s thoughts are full of her father, she thinks the world to be corrupt (‘There’s tricks i’th’world’), beats her breast, flies into a temper at the slightest thing, and so on. Take turns to speak lines 4–13, trying to express Ophelia’s pitiable state.

2 Does Gertrude share Claudius’s secret? (in pairs)
Gertrude’s lines 17–20 display a guilty conscience. She speaks of her ‘sick soul’, and says that guilty people give themselves away because they cannot hide their fear of being found out. Some critics argue that these lines show she shares, or suspects, Claudius’s secret, and is complicit in her first husband’s murder.

What is your view? Look back at Gertrude’s appearances (Act 1 Scene 2; Act 2 Scene 2; Act 3 Scenes 1, 2 and 4; Act 4 Scene 1). One person looks for evidence to support the view that Gertrude does not know that Claudius killed King Hamlet. The other person’s task is to find evidence that Gertrude does know about Claudius’s crime. Present your conflicting arguments as powerfully as possible.

3 Ophelia enters – ‘playing on a lute’?
In the First Quarto (see p. 269) the stage direction at line 20 is ‘Enter Ophelia playing on a lute, and her hair down singing’. In Shakespeare’s time it was customary for madness in women to be marked by a long wig of loose hair. How would you stage her entrance? The picture caption on page 172 and the picture on page 180 will help.

| importunate | persistent |
| distract    | mad        |
| What would she have? | What does she want? |
| hems        | clears her throat |
| Spurns . . . straws | gets angry at little things |
| to collection | to work out a meaning |
| yawn        | guess      |
| conjectures | suppositions, ideas |
| ill-breeding | suspicious, trouble-makers’ |
| toy         | trifle     |
| amiss       | misfortune |