
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Shakespeare Speaks

I must be cruel, only to be kind



Narrator

It was a windy November day. William Shakespeare is at the palace of King James I. He's having dinner with the King and Queen.

King James

Mr Shakespeare, have some more wine. What's this? Water? Where's my wine?!

The Queen

Now dear, you know you mustn't drink too much wine. The doctor says it's bad for your health!

King James

No wine?! Madam, you are very cruel to me. Don't you agree, Mr Shakespeare?

Will

Your Majesty, the Queen is being cruel, only to be kind, like my character Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark.

King James

Does Hamlet take away the King's wine?

Will

No, no, your Majesty: Hamlet says cruel and terrible things to his mother, the Queen. He's angry because she married his uncle Claudius, very soon after his father's death. Hamlet suspects that his mother, or his uncle, or both of them, killed his father, so that they could marry each other.

King James

Well! No wonder he's saying cruel things. But how is he going to be kind, I wonder? Go on, go on...

Will

Your Majesty. Hamlet tells his mother that he said these cruel and terrible things to shock her into realising that this marriage is wrong – it's a sin. But he says she can begin to make

up for the sin and be a better person if she leaves her new husband. That's why he says 'I must be cruel, only to be kind'.

Robert Harley as Hamlet

So, again, good night.

I must be cruel, only to be kind:

Thus bad begins and worse remains behind.

One word more, good lady.

Narrator

We'll leave them there for now. Shakespeare's audiences loved the violence and powerful emotions in his revenge tragedies. But Hamlet is not your typical revenge character. He's a thinker who becomes a man of action. In modern English, Shakespeare's phrase is usually shortened to **I must be cruel to be kind**. Or just **cruel to be kind**. People say it when they do something unkind that will actually benefit someone. It's the title of a song in the American movie *10 Things I Hate About You*.

Clip 1

Cruel to be kind, it's a very good sign

Cruel to be kind, means that I love you, baby...

Clip 2

I know I upset her when I told her to get a haircut, but it was such a mess: I had to be cruel to be kind.

King James

Tell me Mr Shakespeare, does the Queen follow Hamlet's advice?

Will

I'm afraid not, your Majesty.

The Queen

She should have listened to him.

King James

Quite right, quite right.

The Queen

And you should listen to me dear. No more wine!

King James

Hmmm. To listen or not to listen, that is the question.