

Hamlet— A Brief Review of Acts 1-2

Act One, Scene One

Francisco, a soldier standing watch outside the gates of Elsinore Castle in Denmark, is met by Barnardo who has arrived to replace him. They are soon joined by Marcellus, another guard, and Horatio. Horatio is a scholar, and he has been brought along because Barnardo and Marcellus claim they have seen a ghost.

While Barnardo describes to Horatio exactly what he has seen, the ghost appears in front of them. Horatio tries to speak with the ghost in Latin, but the ghost remains silent and then leaves.

Horatio tells Barnardo that the ghost looks like the deceased King Hamlet, also known as Old Hamlet. Horatio sees that the ghost was dressed the same way as King Hamlet was when he defeated King Fortinbras of Norway.

The story is that King Hamlet went to Norway and fought Fortinbras in combat. The loser agreed to yield all his land to the other king. King Hamlet beat Fortinbras and took all his lands. However, in the time since King Hamlet died, the son of King Fortinbras, known as young Fortinbras, has been gathering together troops and is threatening to attack Denmark. He wants to get his father's lands back.

The ghost enters a second time and Horatio again begs it to speak to him. Just as it seems the ghost is about to say something, a cock crows and the ghost disappears. Horatio tells Marcellus that he will inform young Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark and the son of King Hamlet, that a ghost keeps appearing in the shape of his father. Marcellus knows where young Hamlet is and leaves with Horatio to find him.

Act One, Scene Two

King Claudius, who has assumed the throne since his brother King Hamlet died, is accompanied by Queen Gertrude and other lords and attendants in Elsinore Castle. He addresses the people (1st order of business), telling them that although his brother's death is fresh in their minds, it is time for them to celebrate his royal marriage to Queen Gertrude, who was also his brother's former wife.

He further informs the people (2nd order of business) that young Fortinbras of Norway has assembled armies against Denmark. In response to this threat, Claudius sends two men, Voltmand and Cornelius, as messengers to the uncle of young Fortinbras with a letter in which he asks the older uncle to stop young Fortinbras from attempting to attack Denmark.

Claudius next speaks with a young nobleman named Laertes (3rd order of business) and asks him why he has requested an audience with the king. Laertes informs him that although he has been fulfilled his duties and attended the coronation in Denmark, he would now like return to his university in France. Claudius asks Polonius, Laertes' father (and senior advisor to the king), if he has given permission for his son to go. Polonius assents, and Laertes is allowed to leave Denmark.

Turning to Hamlet (fourth order of business), Claudius asks his nephew why he is still in mourning for his father's death, hinting that Hamlet might only be pretending to be grief-stricken. Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, also asks him why he still dresses in black clothing. Hamlet replies that his grief is quite real and that he will continue grieving. Claudius tells him it is unnatural for a man ("unmanly grief") to remain sorrowful for such a long time. Both Claudius and Gertrude then beg Hamlet to stay with them in Denmark instead of returning to Wittenberg where his university is located.

Hamlet agrees to stay, and watches as everyone leaves the hall to celebrate his uncle's and his mother's marriage. He is upset about the fact that his mother married Claudius within less than two months after the death of King Hamlet. He gives his first soliloquy which reveals his deep depression and wish to commit suicide: "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!" He is interrupted by the arrival of Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus, who have come to tell him about the ghost they have seen.

Horatio tells Hamlet about seeing the ghost of King Hamlet. Hamlet asks them if they have the watch again that night, and Barnardo says they do. At this information, Hamlet agrees to join them that night in order to see the ghost and hopefully to speak with the ghost.

Consider: Hamlet is desperate in this scene; he seems to have no one that understands his grief. Is he willing to believe anything that might connect him to his father?

Act One, Scene Three

Laertes, about to leave for France, says farewell to his sister Ophelia. He warns her to beware of Hamlet, whom he tells her is insincere. "For Hamlet and the trifling of his favour, / Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood, / ...sweet not lasting." Laertes then lectures Ophelia, telling her that Hamlet will say anything to win her heart. He tells her to hold off, and if Hamlet still loves her after he has been made king, only then should she consider marrying him. Ophelia agrees to remember what he has told her but reminds him to practice what he preaches: "Do not, as some ungracious pastors do, / Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven, / Whiles, (like) a puffed and reckless libertine, / Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads / And recks not his own rede." This characterizes her as a strong young woman for her time.

Polonius then arrives and tells Laertes to hurry up and catch his ship before it leaves the harbor. As he walks Laertes towards the ship, Polonius gives his son fatherly advice. "Neither a borrower nor a lender be [...] This above all, to thine own self be true..." Laertes promises to obey his father, and leaves after he reminds Ophelia to remember what he has said.

Polonius asks Ophelia what advice Laertes gave her. Ophelia tells him, and Polonius gets mad at her for believing what Hamlet has told her. He orders her to give less of her time to Hamlet in the future and Ophelia dutifully obeys.

Consider: While Polonius and Laertes seem to have a relatively normal father-son relationship, their relationships with Ophelia seem somewhat troubling. They each assume a position of unquestioned authority over her, Polonius treating his daughter as though her feelings are irrelevant ("Affection! puh! you speak like a green girl") and Laertes treating her as though her judgment is suspect. What effect will these relationships have on Ophelia?

Act One, Scene Four

Hamlet and Horatio are outside waiting for the ghost to arrive. They hear a cannon go off, and Hamlet tells Horatio that the cannon is fired whenever the king empties a draught of Rhenish wine. Hamlet is upset about the custom, because he thinks it makes Denmark appear to be a land of drunkards. The ghost arrives and Hamlet tries to speak to it, but it only beckons him to follow it. Horatio and Marcellus try to make him stay, but Hamlet tells them to let go of him. Marcellus and Horatio watch him leave and decide to follow him. Marcellus remarks, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" suggesting that all is not right in the kingdom.

Act One, Scene Five

Hamlet follows the ghost, who finally speaks and informs Hamlet that he is the spirit of King Hamlet, Hamlet's father. The ghost indicates that he is in purgatory, "I am thy father's spirit, / Doomed for a certain term to walk the night / And for the day confined to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burned and purged away." The ghost then tells Hamlet to listen to him closely.

King Hamlet asks his son to revenge his murder. Hamlet is confused, not understanding what the ghost is speaking about. The ghost tells him that it has been said that he was "stung" by a serpent (bitten by a snake), but in fact, he was murdered. He goes on to say that the serpent is his brother, Claudius, who entered the garden

where he was sleeping and poured poison into his ear. He died without having a chance to confess his sins, and is therefore forced to suffer in Purgatory until his sins are burned away.

The ghost asks Hamlet to revenge his murder, but urges Hamlet not to act against his mother in any way, telling him to “leave her to heaven” and to the pangs of her own conscience. The ghost leaves Hamlet with the words, “Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me.” Hamlet wonders about what he has heard, and decides that he believes the ghost. He makes Marcellus and Horatio swear to never reveal what they have seen. He then makes them swear a second time, this time on his dagger which is shaped like a cross. He tells Horatio, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy.” They all swear yet again and return to the castle.

Consider: Should Hamlet believe this ghost or is it merely his own imagination or some kind of evil trickery?

Act Two, Scene One

Polonius is in his apartments with his servant Reynaldo. He is sending Reynaldo to France with instructions to keep tabs on the behavior of Laertes. Polonius tells Reynaldo to first inquire what other Danes are in the area, and then to tell them that he knows Laertes. He wants Reynaldo to hint to the other Danes that Laertes has a reputation for gambling, drinking, or whoring. The purpose of this lie is to see if the other Danes agree with Reynaldo and tell him about real things that Laertes has done. Polonius is careful to insist that Reynaldo does not harm his son's honor in the process, saying, “none so rank / As may dishonour him, take heed of that.” However, the whole episode characterizes Polonius as a sneaky and distrusting father. Reynaldo leaves the room to depart for France.

Ophelia arrives and tells Polonius that she thinks Hamlet has gone mad. She claims that while she was sowing he came to her looking completely disheveled. Hamlet took her by the wrist and looked at her for a long time. He then turned to walk away, all the while keeping his eyes on Ophelia and even walking through the doors without averting his gaze. Polonius is upset when he hears this, and he concludes that her refusal to see Hamlet anymore has driven the young prince mad. Polonius takes Ophelia to go see King Claudius and tell him what has happened.

Act Two, Scene Two

Claudius and Gertrude meet with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two supposed friends of Hamlet. Claudius informs them that he has summoned them to Denmark due to Hamlet's madness. He wants them to spend time with Hamlet and find out what the reason for the madness is. They both agree to do this, and leave to find Hamlet.

Polonius arrives and informs Claudius that the ambassadors he sent to Norway have returned. Claudius tells him that he always brings good news. Polonius, delighted by the compliment, further tells him that he thinks he knows the cause of “Hamlet's lunacy.” Claudius is excited by this news as well, but orders the ambassadors to enter first.

Voltmand, one of the ambassadors, tells Claudius that the uncle of Fortinbras is sick and unaware that his nephew was raising an army against Denmark. He informs Claudius that Fortinbras' uncle summoned Fortinbras to meet him as soon as he heard about his nephew's plans. Fortinbras complied with the summons and was forced to vow to never attack Denmark. His uncle, believing him, immediately gave him an annual income of three thousand crowns and also gave him permission to attack Poland instead. Fortinbras' uncle further wrote a letter to Claudius asking him to allow Fortinbras a safe passage through Denmark on the way Poland. Claudius is very pleased with the way things appear to have turned out, and says he will give the matter some thought.

After the ambassadors leave, Polonius turns to Claudius and Gertrude and tells them that Hamlet is mad. They both become impatient to hear what he is saying, and Polonius finally produces a letter from Hamlet to Ophelia

in which Hamlet professes his love to her. Gertrude then asks Polonius how Ophelia received Hamlet's overtures of love. Polonius is forced to tell them that at his request she ignored Hamlet or rebuked his love. Claudius is not completely convinced that this is the full cause of Hamlet's insanity. He and Polonius decide to put Ophelia into the hall where Hamlet is known to spend hours pacing each day. They plan to hide behind an "arras" or tapestry and watch what happens.

Hamlet arrives at this moment dressed as if he is mad and reading a book. Polonius asks the king and queen to leave so that he may speak with Hamlet alone. Hamlet pretends not to recognize Polonius, whom he calls a "fishmonger." He then asks Polonius if he has a daughter, and tells him to keep her out of the sun: "Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing/but, as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to 't," insinuating that Ophelia might get pregnant if left unsupervised. When Polonius, thoroughly convinced that Hamlet is deranged, asks what he is reading, Hamlet tells him, "Words, words, words." Polonius gives up trying to reason with Hamlet and leaves.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive and are greeted warmly by Hamlet who immediately drops all pretense of madness. He recognizes them and asks them what brings them to Denmark, referring to it as a "prison." They refuse to give him a straight answer, and Hamlet infers from this that they were "sent for." Guildenstern finally admits that Hamlet is correct in his assumption. Hamlet tells them that he has been extremely melancholy during the past few months.

The two friends of Hamlet inform him that some players, a theatrical group, arrived in Denmark with them that day. Hamlet discusses the actors with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern until a trumpet announces the arrival of the performers. He then personally goes to greet them and welcome them to Denmark. Polonius arrives at that moment and, still thinking that Hamlet is mad, tells Hamlet that the best actors in the world have arrived. Hamlet plays word games with Polonius until he starts to ignore him.

Hamlet asks one of the players to perform a speech for him about the fall of Troy and the death of the Trojan king and queen, Priam and Hecuba. Hamlet begins to recite lines from Dido and Aeneas, taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Finally he stops and asks the actor to continue the speech. The man does, describing how Pyrrhus kills Priam (the king of Troy). Polonius starts to get bored and soon Hamlet is forced to stop the actor. He orders Polonius to take care of the actors and ensure their comfort for the night. Hamlet also asks the actors whether they can perform a play about the murder of Gonzago. They tell him they can, and he then asks them whether they can also perform some lines he wishes to write for them. They agree to do this as well and then leave, following Polonius. Hamlet tells Guildenstern and Rosencrantz that he will see them that night.

Left alone onstage, Hamlet speaks to himself. He wishes that he were able to act as eloquently as the actor who performed the speech. He is amazed by the player's ability to engage emotionally with the story he is telling even though it is only an imaginative recreation. Hamlet is prevented from responding to his own situation because he doesn't have certain knowledge about it, but the player king, and theater audiences in general, can respond feelingly even to things they know to be untrue. In fact, most of the time people respond to their real-life situations with feelings and actions that are not based on certain knowledge. This is what Hamlet refuses to do. Hamlet is still torn with indecision about revenging the murder of his father on Claudius or keeping silent due to uncertainty about whether Claudius really killed his father. He decides to try and make the player's enact the murder scene as it was described to him by the ghost. Hamlet is hoping that Claudius, when he sees the scene, will reveal himself as the true murderer of King Hamlet. "I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play / Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck so to the soul that presently / The have proclaimed their malefactions." By watching Claudius when the actors perform this scene, Hamlet expects to discover whether the ghost told him the truth.

Consider: Hamlet has not taken any action against Claudius as of yet. In re-writing the play, is Hamlet truly seeking the truth about his father's death, or merely stalling his revenge?