

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT I, HAMLET

Act I, Scene I It is midnight and bitter cold. On a platform (a level space on the battlements) outside the castle at Elsinore in Denmark, a sentry (Francisco) is being relieved by another (Bernardo). Later, Marcellus and Horatio join Bernardo. Horatio is there at Marcellus's request but doubts the sentries' story that on two previous nights they have seen a ghost. But the ghost reappears, and Horatio, seeing its resemblance to the dead king, Hamlet, asks it to speak. Instead, it stalks away.

Horatio interprets the ghost's appearance as an omen that something strange is about to happen in Denmark. He tells the sentries that Fortinbras, a young, hot-headed Norwegian, has gathered an army and intends to march on Denmark to take back the lands which his father, King Fortinbras, lost to King Hamlet.

The ghost then reappears. Again, Horatio faces it and asks it to speak. Before it can, a rooster crows, signalling the dawn, and the ghost retreats once more. Horatio and the others agree that Prince Hamlet must be told of the night's happenings.

Act I, Scene II King Claudius is transacting state business. (Claudius, brother of the dead king, Hamlet, has succeeded him to the throne. He has married the widow, Queen Gertrude, prince Hamlet's mother.) In an attempt to avoid combat with Fortinbras, Claudius is sending messengers, Cornelius and Voltimand, to the elderly king of Norway. He wants to inform him of his headstrong nephew's (Fortinbras) intention to wage war against Denmark. Next, Laertes, son of Claudius's trusted elderly counselor, Polonius, asks permission to return to France now that Claudius's coronation is over.

Having granted Laertes's request, Claudius turns to Hamlet, his nephew (and now his stepson). Claudius says that he and the queen are troubled to see Hamlet still grieving over his father's death. He asks Hamlet to accept him as his new father and assures Hamlet that he will be the successor to the

throne. He and Gertrude entreat Hamlet to remain at court rather than resume his studies at Wittenberg.

After everyone else leaves, Hamlet reveals that he is depressed almost to the point of suicide. His anger and disgust are directed toward his mother because so soon after his father's death, she has married a man inferior to King Hamlet in every way. Bernardo and Marcellus join Hamlet and tell him of the previous night's event. He resolves to watch with them this night.

Act I, Scene III In Polonius's house, Laertes and his sister, Ophelia, are saying good-bye. Laertes warns her against Hamlet, saying a prince must choose his wife carefully and Hamlet is probably not seriously interested in her. At that moment, Polonius comes in and gives Laertes some fatherly advice about what his behavior should be in France. When he finds out that they have been talking about Hamlet, he adds his opinion that Hamlet is probably amusing himself with Ophelia. He tells her to avoid Hamlet. She says she will obey.

Act I, Scene IV At midnight, Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus are on the platform, wondering if the ghost will appear. It does, and although Hamlet is not certain if it is his dead father or an evil spirit, he speaks to it. He asks why it has returned from the tomb. The ghost does not answer, but beckons Hamlet to follow it. Horatio and Marcellus beg him not to, but he does follow the ghost.

Act I, Scene V When they are alone, the ghost tells Hamlet that if he loved his father, he must avenge his father's murder. The ghost (King Hamlet) describes how his brother, Claudius, murdered him, then took his throne and queen. Although offended that Gertrude remarried so soon after his death, he warns Hamlet to take no revenge on her. Her guilty conscience will punish her enough. Because it is almost dawn, the ghost then disappears. Hamlet does not tell the others what the ghost has said, but makes them promise to tell no one what they have seen.

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT II, HAMLET

Act II, Scene I Polonius is sending a servant, Reynaldo, to France to spy on Laertes and see how he is behaving. Polonius tells Reynaldo to talk to Laertes's acquaintances, pretending to know him slightly, and suggest that he is immoral. Thus, Polonius tells Reynaldo, he can trick people into telling whatever they know about Laertes's behavior.

Reynaldo leaves. Ophelia comes in, excited and troubled because Hamlet has just visited her and he was acting very strange and agitated. He never spoke, but studied her face for a long time, then sighed, and left her. Polonius interprets his behavior as an indication that Hamlet's love for Ophelia has driven him mad since Ophelia has been avoiding Hamlet as Polonius told her to do. Polonius decides that he misjudged Hamlet and that King Claudius must be told how matters stand.

Act II, Scene II Just as Polonius has arranged to have Reynaldo spy on Laertes, King Claudius has summoned two old friends of Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to spy on Hamlet. He tells them to spend time with Hamlet and try to discover what troubles him. Queen Gertrude also entreats them to find out what is on Hamlet's mind, promising them that they will be well paid for their efforts.

Polonius brings in Voltimand and Cornelius, who have just returned with the good news that the king of Norway has made Fortinbras promise never to take up arms against Denmark. The king does request though that Fortinbras be allowed to take his army across Denmark, for he now intends to do battle with the Poles.

In his long-winded way, Polonius then begins to tell Claudius and Gertrude that he has discovered the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior. He is in love with Ophelia, and since she has spurned him (obeying Polonius's order) Hamlet has begun to act like a madman. To prove his point, Polonius proposes to set a trap for Hamlet. He will arrange to have Ophelia meet Hamlet "accidentally." The king and Polonius will conceal themselves behind a wall hanging and eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia.

At that point, Hamlet appears; he is completely engrossed in a book that he is reading as he walks. Polonius asks Claudius and Gertrude to leave him alone with Hamlet so he can see what is on Hamlet's mind. Hamlet's answers to his questions make Polonius more certain that Hamlet is crazy. Actually, Hamlet is baiting Polonius; after Polonius leaves, Hamlet calls him a "tedious old fool."

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive and begin to question Hamlet, trying to prove their suspicion that Hamlet's strange behavior is a result of disappointed ambition because he did not succeed his father to the throne. Hamlet outwits them and shows that he is aware that they have come because the king and queen sent for them. When they admit that he is right, he tells them how disillusioned he feels. Nothing in life gives him pleasure.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell him they passed some actors coming to perform at court. Polonius comes in and tells Hamlet what he already knows, the news about the players (actors). Again, Hamlet makes fun of Polonius, but Polonius takes no offense since he is so certain that Hamlet is deranged.

Hamlet greets the players and reminds them of a scene from a play he once saw them perform. He begins a speech he remembers, and the first player picks it up where Hamlet stops. Then Hamlet tells Polonius to take the players to their quarters and to be certain to treat them kindly. The first player lingers. Hamlet asks him if he knows a play called *The Murder of Gonzago*. When the player says he does, Hamlet requests it for the next night's performance and tells the player that he will write twelve or sixteen lines to be added to the play. He then dismisses the player and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Then, in a soliloquy, Hamlet berates himself for not yet having avenged his father's murder. Still troubled by the possibility that the ghost is an evil spirit, not his dead father, Hamlet has decided to test Claudius. He will have the players perform a murder scene. If his uncle acts guilty, Hamlet will have his proof and take his revenge.

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT III, *HAMLET*

Act III, Scene I With Polonius and Ophelia present, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to the king and queen that they have failed to find the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior. When they leave, Claudius asks Gertrude to leave too, for he and Polonius are about to eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia. After the queen leaves, Polonius instructs his daughter to pretend to read her prayer book. He generalizes that by such pious pretense people often conceal evil actions. His remark troubles Claudius who has much to conceal himself.

Hamlet comes in, talking to himself about suicide. He says that because life is so difficult, people might use suicide as an escape if they were not deterred by fear of what might happen after death. Hamlet then sees and greets Ophelia. She tries to return the gifts he once gave her, but he denies the giving. He is harsh to her, saying, "I did love you once." He talks cynically of marriage and women, then leaves her. Poor Ophelia grieves to see him so changed and, like her father, is certain he is mad.

Having heard the conversation, Claudius doubts that Hamlet is mad but believes he is a threat. He decides to send him to England. Polonius still thinks Hamlet is lovesick and suggests that Gertrude sound him out. Polonius will eavesdrop on their conversation.

Act III, Scene II After instructing the players about their performance, Hamlet talks to Horatio, praising his even temper and sound judgment. He then tells Horatio his plan to test the king. They agree that they will both watch Claudius to see if he acts guilty when the stage murder takes place.

Just before the play, the members of the court come in. Instead of sitting with his mother as she asks, Hamlet sits beside Ophelia, a better vantage point to watch the king. Hamlet is playing the madman again and continues his cynical remarks to Ophelia. In the play, the actress-queen vows eternal

love for her husband and says that should he die, she would never remarry. She then leaves the actor-king, who falls asleep. The wicked nephew comes in and pours poison into his ears. Hamlet comments on the play, saying that later the wicked nephew marries the king's wife. Claudius gets up abruptly to leave, and the rest of the court follow. Hamlet now has the proof of guilt he needs.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come in to tell Hamlet that the king is ill and that his mother wants to see him. Polonius appears and repeats the summons. They all leave. Hamlet, in a soliloquy, says he will speak harshly to his mother but do her no bodily harm.

Act III, Scene III On a pretext that mad Hamlet is a threat to him, Claudius asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take his nephew to England. Polonius then reports that Hamlet is on his way to his mother's room where Polonius will eavesdrop on the conversation between mother and son. Alone at last, Claudius tries to pray, but cannot. He acknowledges to himself that he cannot pray for forgiveness while he keeps the rewards his evil deed brought him, the crown and Gertrude. Claudius does not see Hamlet come in. Finding his uncle alone and kneeling, Hamlet's first impulse is to kill him. Then he realizes that if he kills Claudius at prayer, his soul may go to Heaven. Hamlet decides to wait.

Act III, Scene IV Hamlet is so harsh to his mother that she fears for her life and cries out. Hidden behind the wall hanging, Polonius shouts too. Hamlet thinks he hears the king, and he slashes the hanging, killing Polonius. Hamlet realizes from Gertrude's replies to his accusations that she knew nothing of her husband's murder. He berates her for marrying Claudius. The ghost appears, but Gertrude cannot see it. When Hamlet talks to it, she is certain he is mad. He tells her he is only feigning madness, but she must not let the king know that. He then leaves, taking Polonius's corpse with him.

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT IV, HAMLET

Act IV, Scene I Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet, in his madness, has killed Polonius. Claudius realizes that Hamlet is sane and probably intended the sword thrust for him. But he says to Gertrude that because Hamlet is mad, he is a threat to all of them. He tells her that the public will be critical that Hamlet was not restrained before this. He plans to send Hamlet to England immediately and will inform his counselors of the murder and his plans for Hamlet's departure. Thus he hopes to avert a scandal which might weaken his own position. He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Polonius's body and take it to the chapel.

Act IV, Scene II Rosencrantz and Guildenstern approach Hamlet, asking where Polonius's body is. He is flippant with them and still feigns madness. He tells them, in effect, that the king is using them and will discard them when he is through.

Act IV, Scene III Alone, Claudius voices his thoughts. He must be careful in his treatment of Hamlet because the people love him and would resent his being punished. Rosencrantz reports that Polonius's body has not been found. Then Guildenstern brings in Hamlet. When the king asks Hamlet where he has put Polonius's corpse, Hamlet says it is food for the worms. Claudius is outwardly patient with Hamlet and tells him that, for his own safety, he must leave for England immediately. After Hamlet goes out, the king instructs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to get Hamlet aboard ship at once; it is to sail that night. Alone again, Claudius reveals in a soliloquy that he has sent letters to the king of England, asking that Hamlet be put to death. The king is under obligation to Claudius and will do his bidding.

Act IV, Scene IV Fortinbras and his troops are marching across Denmark to Poland. Hamlet meets one of the officers and finds that these Norwegians are going to risk their lives with little justification, for a bit of worthless land. He then berates himself that

with so much justification to act, he himself has taken no revenge.

Act IV, Scene V Gertrude has been told that Ophelia is talking incoherently and her words are making people suspicious about Polonius's death. She agrees to see the girl. Ophelia comes in singing snatches of song interspersed with a few words that make sense. She is oblivious of her surroundings. Claudius, realizing Ophelia's mental state, asks Horatio to follow her and watch out for her. Claudius then recites to Gertrude all the woes that have befallen their kingdom—Polonius's death, Hamlet's hasty departure, and Ophelia's madness. Laertes has returned to Denmark, convinced that Claudius is responsible for his father's death. After a commotion outside the door, Laertes comes in. He addresses Claudius as "vile king," asks where and how his father died, and vows revenge. While Claudius tries to calm him and assures him that he had no part in Polonius's death, Ophelia comes in. Laertes realizes that she is mad. Claudius sympathizes with him for his two sorrows, says again that he had nothing to do with Polonius's death, and promises him revenge on the guilty one.

Act IV, Scene VI Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet in which he describes a pirate attack on his ship and being captured. He tells Horatio that the pirates have brought him back to Denmark and asks Horatio to come to him.

Act IV, Scene VII Claudius has convinced Laertes that Hamlet killed Polonius and intended to kill Claudius himself. A note arrives from Hamlet, announcing his return. Laertes wants to take immediate revenge, but Claudius says there is a way he can have his revenge, yet make Hamlet's death seem accidental. Claudius's scheme involves a fencing match with Hamlet, for which Laertes will use an unblunted sword with a poisoned tip. Gertrude comes in with the sad news that Ophelia is drowned. Laertes leaves, grief-stricken.

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT V, HAMLET

Act V, Scene I While they are digging a grave for a gentlewoman, the sexton and his helper argue about whether or not she should have Christian burial since she drowned herself. Hamlet and Horatio approach, unnoticed, as the gravedigger tosses out a skull he has just uncovered. Hamlet speculates that it may have been the skull of someone who held an important position. Now its owner is no more, and the skull is tossed rudely aside.

When Hamlet asks the sexton whose grave he is preparing, the man does not give him a straight answer, but does identify the skull as Yorick's. Yorick was the court jester whom Hamlet, as a child, knew and loved. Now only his bones remain. Hamlet generalizes to Horatio that thus the greatest and the least eventually return to dust and obscurity.

Hamlet and Horatio see a funeral procession approaching. In it are the king, the queen, and members of the court. Out of sight of the mourners, Hamlet and Horatio watch. Hamlet recognizes Laertes and soon realizes it is Ophelia's funeral. When Laertes, overcome with grief, leaps into the grave, Hamlet comes forward and leaps in too. Laertes attacks Hamlet who defends himself. Hamlet assumes that Laertes attacked because he was determined to show his unsurpassed grief for his sister. Hamlet then says that his love for Ophelia was greater than any brother's. Gertrude and Claudius beg Laertes to restrain himself since Hamlet is obviously mad.

Act V, Scene II Hamlet describes to Horatio how, when he was aboard ship, he stole the packet of letters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were delivering to the king of England. Hamlet read them and discovered that Claudius was asking the king to have him beheaded. He then substituted some letters he wrote himself, asking that the bearers (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) be put to death immediately. Next day, the sea fight occurred, and he returned to Den-

mark with the pirates. Horatio agrees with him that he must take his revenge quickly before Claudius learns what has happened in England.

A courtier, Osric, comes in to tell Hamlet that Claudius has set up a fencing contest and a wager, pitting Hamlet against Laertes, if Hamlet will agree. Hamlet does, but tells Horatio that he has misgivings about the match. Horatio urges him not to go through with it, but Hamlet does not heed him.

Before the match, Hamlet asks Laertes's pardon if, in his madness, he has wronged him. Laertes answers in a hypocritical way, seeming to accept Hamlet's explanation of his behavior. Falsely, Claudius seems to be Hamlet's champion, saying cannon fire, drums, and trumpets will mark Hamlet's success. He then "drinks to Hamlet." Hamlet is now winning, and Claudius urges him to drink too, but Hamlet is not ready. Instead, Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup that Claudius had intended for Hamlet. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the unblunted sword, they scuffle, and change swords. Hamlet now has the sword with the poisoned tip, and he wounds Laertes. The king tries to stop the match. Gertrude collapses. Both contestants are bleeding. Laertes realizes that his own trickery will now be the cause of his death. Dying, Gertrude calls out to Hamlet that the drink is poisoned. Laertes now collapses but confesses to Hamlet about the poisoned sword; he puts the blame on Claudius. Hamlet wounds Claudius and gives him the poisoned wine. Claudius dies. Just before Laertes dies, he asks Hamlet to exchange forgiveness with him. Hamlet is dying. Horatio is about to commit suicide, but Hamlet says he must live to tell Hamlet's story and clear his name.

Fortinbras arrives, victorious, and Hamlet, dying, predicts Fortinbras will be Denmark's new king. Fortinbras assumes the authority, gives a tribute to Hamlet, and says he will have a hero's burial.