Hamlet Essay, Research Paper

Context

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a prosperous leather merchant in the village of Stratford-upon-Avon, in Warwickshire, England. He attended grammar school, married an older woman named Anne Hathaway, and eventually left Stratford for London to pursue a career in the theater. Legend has it that Shakespeare began his career by holding the reins of horses for theater patrons; in any event, he quickly worked his way up the ranks of his chosen profession. By the early seventeenth century, he had written some of the greatest plays the world has ever seen, and was, along with Ben Jonson, the most popular writer in England. He owned his own theater, the Globe, and amassed enough wealth from this venture to retire to Stratford as a wealthy gentleman. He died in 1616, and was hailed by Jonson and others as the apogee of theater during the Renaissance of Queen Elizabeth’s reign.

Shakespeare’s works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration garnered by his works led to a fierce curiosity about Shakespeare’s life; but the paucity of surviving biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare’s personal history shrouded in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact that Shakespeare’s plays were in reality written by someone else–Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates–but the evidence for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by many scholars. Today, Shakespeare is remembered for the wealth of magnificent poetry and drama he left the world: for his 154 sonnets, for Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and many other plays–including the most celebrated work of literature in the English language, Hamlet.

Written during the first part of the seventeenth century and at the close of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, Hamlet was probably performed first in July, 1602; it was first published in written form in 1603, and appeared in an enlarged edition in 1604. Shakespeare often appropriated ideas and stories from earlier literary works into his own plays, as was common practice during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; he likely knew the story of Hamlet from an earlier German play, and from a prose work called Hystorie of Hamblet translated from Francois de Belleforest’s Histoires Tragiques, and from an ancient history of Denmark, written by Saxo Grammaticus in the twelfth century. What Shakespeare then made of this raw material–the story of a Danish prince whose father is murdered by his uncle, whom his mother then marries–may have been informed by a much more personal tragedy: Shakespeare’s young son (whose name was Hamnet) died in Stratford shortly before the play was written, which has led many critics to speculate that Shakespeare’s grief for his son found expression in Hamlet’s grief for his father. Of course, Shakespeare’s intentions are entirely undocumented, and all assertions about his inspirations and influences, as with so many claims about Shakespeare, can only be speculation.

Characters

Hamlet – The Prince of Denmark. Hamlet is the son of the late King Hamlet, and the nephew of the present king, Claudius. At the start of the play, Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude, has recently married Claudius, her dead husband’s brother. When Hamlet learns from his father’s ghost that Claudius murdered his father before marrying his mother, the discovery propels the action of the play, as the young prince grapples with the question of whether or not he should seek revenge. A reflective and thoughtful young man who has studied at Wittenberg, Hamlet is also prone to fits of passion and impulsive action.

Claudius – The King of Denmark, Hamlet’s uncle, and the play’s antagonist. The villain of the play, he murdered Hamlet’s father in order to obtain the throne, then promptly married Hamlet’s mother, the widowed Queen Gertrude. Claudius is a robust, scheming man driven by his appetites and a lust for power, but he occasionally shows signs of guilt and human feeling–his love for Gertrude, for instance, seems entirely sincere.

Gertrude – The Queen of Denmark, Hamlet’s mother. At the beginning of the play, shortly after the death of her husband (Hamlet’s father), Gertrude has married Claudius, the new king and her dead husband’s brother. Gertrude loves Hamlet deeply, but she is a shallow, weak woman who seeks affection and status more urgently than moral truth. She refuses to listen to Hamlet when he attempts to persuade her of Claudius’s wrongdoing, instead persisting in her belief that her son has gone mad.

Polonius – The Lord Chamberlain of Claudius’s court, a pompous, conniving old man. Polonius is the father of Laertes and Ophelia; Hamlet accidentally kills him as he hides behind a tapestry in Gertrude’s chamber, spying on the queen’s meeting with her son.

Horatio – Hamlet’s close friend, who studied with the prince at the university in Wittenberg. Horatio is loyal and helpful to Hamlet throughout the play; after Hamlet’s death at the end of the play, Horatio remains alive to tell Hamlet’s story.

Ophelia – Polonius’s daughter, a beautiful young woman with whom Hamlet has been in love. As the play opens, however, Hamlet’s grief over his father’s death drives thoughts of love from his mind, and his disgust over his mother’s marriage to his uncle makes him deeply cynical about women in general. Ophelia is a sweet and innocent young girl, who obeys her father and her brother Laertes. She gives in to Polonius’s schemes to spy on Hamlet. When Hamlet kills her father, she lapses into madness, singing songs about flowers and finally drowning in the river, amid the flower garlands she had gathered.

Laertes – Polonius’s son and Ophelia’s brother, a young man who spends much of the play in France. When Polonius is killed by Hamlet, Laertes returns to Denmark in a fury, and collaborates with Claudius (or is used by Claudius) in a scheme to murder Hamlet. Passionate and quick to action, Laertes is a clear foil for the reflective prince.

Fortinbras – The young Prince of Norway, whose father the king (also named Fortinbras) was killed by Hamlet’s father (also named Hamlet). Now Fortinbras wishes to attack Denmark to avenge his father’s honor, making him a natural foil for Prince Hamlet.

The Ghost – The specter of Hamlet’s recently deceased father, who appears on the ramparts of Elsinore Castle late at night. The ghost tells Hamlet (the only character to whom he speaks) that he was murdered by Claudius, who poured poison into his ear while he napped in the castle orchard. Later, the ghost appears to Hamlet during his confrontation with Gertrude.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – Two slightly bumbling courtiers, former friends of Hamlet from Wittenberg, who are summoned by Claudius and Gertrude to discover the cause of Hamlet’s strange behavior. Hamlet’s realization that they are acting as the servants of the king and queen strains their relationship; in the end, they are sent to accompany Hamlet to England, bearing a letter from Claudius instructing the English king to execute his nephew. Hamlet switches the letter with one of his own devising, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are executed instead.

Osric – The foolish courtier who summons Hamlet to his duel with Laertes

Voltimand and Cornelius – Courtiers whom Claudius sends to Denmark, to persuade the king to prevent Fortinbras from attacking.

Marcellus and Bernardo – The officers who first see the ghost walking the ramparts of Elsinore, and who summon Horatio to witness it. Marcellus is present when Hamlet first encounters the ghost.

Francisco – A soldier and guardsman at Elsinore

Reynaldo – Polonius’s servant, who is sent to France by Polonius to check up on and spy on Laertes

Summary

In the dark winter night, a ghost walks the ramparts of Elsinore Castle in Denmark. Discovered first by a pair of watchmen, then by the scholar Horatio, the ghost wears the visage and expression of the recently deceased King Hamlet, whose brother Claudius has inherited the throne and married the dead king’s widowed wife. When Horatio and the watchmen bring Prince Hamlet, the dead king’s son, to see the ghost, it speaks to him, declaring ominously that it is indeed his father’s spirit, and that it was murdered by none other than Claudius. Ordering Hamlet to seek revenge upon the man who usurped his throne and married his wife, the ghost disappears with the coming of dawn.

Prince Hamlet devotes himself to avenging his father’s death, but, because he is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, his heart is not fully in the deed, and he delays, entering into a deep melancholy and even apparent madness. The king and queen (Hamlet’s mother Gertrude) worry about the prince’s erratic behavior, and attempt to discover its cause. They employ a pair of Hamlet’s friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to watch him. When Polonius, the pompous Lord Chamberlain, suggests that Hamlet may be mad with love for his daughter Ophelia, the king agrees to spy on him in conversation with the girl. But though Hamlet certainly seems mad, he does not seem to love Ophelia– he orders her to enter a nunnery and declares that he wishes to ban marriages.

A group of itinerant actors comes to Elsinore, and Hamlet seizes upon an idea to test his uncle’s guilt: he will have the players perform a scene closely resembling the sequence by which Hamlet imagines his uncle to have murdered his father; if Claudius is guilty, he will surely react. When the moment comes in the theater, Claudius leaps up and leaves the room; Hamlet and Horatio agree that this proves his guilt. Hamlet goes to kill Claudius, but finds him praying; he decides that to kill him while in prayer would be to send his soul to heaven, and that to do so would be an inadequate revenge. He decides to wait. Claudius, now frightened of Hamlet’s madness and fearing for his own safety, orders that Hamlet be sent at once to England.

Hamlet goes to confront his mother, in whose bedchamber Polonius has hidden behind a tapestry. Hearing a noise from behind the tapestry, Hamlet believes the king is hiding there; he draws his sword and stabs through the fabric, killing the unseen Polonius. For this crime, he is immediately dispatched to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, Claudius’s plan for Hamlet includes more than banishment: he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed orders for the King of England, demanding that Hamlet be put to death.

In the aftermath of Polonius’s death, Ophelia goes mad with grief and drowns in the river. Polonius’s son Laertes, who has been staying in France, returns to Denmark in a rage. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet is to blame for his father’s and sister’s deaths. At this point, Horatio and the king receive letters from Hamlet indicating that the prince has returned to Denmark after pirates attacked his ship en route to England. Claudius concocts a plan to use Laertes’s desire for revenge as a tool with which to achieve Hamlet’s death: Laertes will fence with Hamlet in innocent sport, but Claudius will poison his blade, so that if Laertes draws blood, Hamlet will die. As a back-up plan, the king decides to poison a goblet, which he will give Hamlet to drink should Hamlet score the first or second hits of the match.

Hamlet returns to the vicinity of Elsinore just as Ophelia’s funeral is taking place; struck with grief, he attacks Laertes and declares that he had in fact always loved Ophelia. Back at the castle, he tells Horatio that he believes one must be prepared to die, since death could come at any moment. A foolish courtier named Osric arrives on Claudius’s orders to arrange the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes.

The sword-fighting begins. Hamlet scores the first hit, but declines to drink from the king’s proffered goblet; instead, Gertrude takes a drink from it, and is swiftly killed by the poison. Laertes succeeds in wounding Hamlet, though he does not die of the poison immediately; meanwhile, Laertes is cut by his own sword’s blade, and, after revealing to Hamlet that Claudius is responsible for the queen’s death, he dies from the blade’s poison. Hamlet then stabs Claudius through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies, and Hamlet dies immediately after achieving his revenge.

At this moment, a Norwegian prince named Fortinbras, who has led an army to Denmark and attacked Poland earlier in the play, enters with the ambassadors from England, who report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Fortinbras is stunned by the gruesome sight in the castle: the entire royal family lies sprawled on the floor, dead. He moves to take power of the kingdom; Horatio, fulfilling Hamlet’s last request, steps forward to tell him Hamlet’s tragic story. Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be carried away in a manner befitting a fallen soldier.

Analysis

It may be arguable whether Hamlet is Shakespeare’s greatest play, but it is undoubtedly his most famous and most influential. Hamlet is, without exaggeration, the most written-about, interpreted, and studied work of literature in English. It has been read and analyzed exhaustively, for its aesthetic, moral, political, psychological, historical, allegorical, logical, religious, and philosophical aspects; there are hundreds and even thousands of works devoted to each of these, and books devoted as well to its characters, backgrounds, plots, performances, and place in world theater as a whole. What this means, of course, is that Hamlet supports a massive variety of interpretations and understandings. There may be wrong ways to understand the tragedy, but there is no single right way to understand it: Hamlet is concerned with deep truths about the nature of humanity in the universe, and it is no more reducible to a set of simple themes than are the complicated questions arising from human experience itself.

That said, there are a number of clear, important themes that dominate the play and form the core of its interpretability. Hamlet’s struggle over the question of whether or not to murder Claudius presents Shakespeare with an opportunity to explore giant questions. First among these is the relationship in human life between thought and action; Hamlet’s reflective, contemplative nature often renders it impossible for him to act on his convictions, and many critics have described the imbalance between his active and passive natures as a “tragic flaw” that makes his wretched fate inevitable. Other important themes explored in Hamlet include: the nature of justice and revenge; the idea that sin must beget retribution; the line between sanity and madness; the nature of political power and the connection between the well-being of the state and the moral condition of its leaders (When Hamlet declares that “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” that “something” is Claudius); the moral question of suicide in a malevolent universe (Hamlet longs to kill himself, but fears God’s wrath in the afterlife); the relationship between sons and fathers (Hamlet and the ghost, Laertes and Polonius, Fortinbras and the dead King of Norway); the nature of the family; the inevitability of death; and, against that inevitability, the question of truth, of what human beings can cling to in a painful, unjust, and hostile world–the question of what gives life meaning, of what lasts.

Hamlet, who is in love with learning, thought, and reason, is driven closer and closer to a kind of wild, unwilling nihilism, as every verity (religion, society, philosophy, love) fails him or proves false. The question of Hamlet’s sanity is one of the most hotly contested critical controversies surrounding the play: does he actually lose his mind, or does he only pretend to, as he claims? The answer is probably that his decision to feign madness is a sane one, a strategic move to confuse his enemies and conceal his intentions, but also that his mind is so troubled, confused, and desperate in the absence of any grounding truth that his pretense assumes the intensity of real madness, and something of its quality as well.

Hamlet

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Act I, Scenes i-ii

Summary

On a dark winter night outside Elsinore Castle in Denmark, an officer named Bernardo comes to relieve the watchman Francisco. Cold, tired, and apprehensive, Francisco thanks Bernardo, and hurries home to bed. As Francisco leaves, Bernardo is joined by Marcellus, another watchman, and Horatio, a friend of Prince Hamlet. In hushed tones, Marcellus and Bernardo discuss the apparition they have seen for the past two nights, and which they now hope to show Horatio: the ghost of the recently deceased King Hamlet, which they claim has appeared before them on the castle ramparts in the late hours of the night.

Horatio is skeptical, but the ghost suddenly appears–and just as suddenly, vanishes. Terrified, Horatio acknowledges that the specter does indeed resemble the dead King of Denmark–he says the ghost even wears the armor King Hamlet wore when he battled against the armies of Norway, and the same frown he wore when he fought against the Poles. Horatio declares that the ghost must bring warning of impending misfortune for Denmark, perhaps in the form of a military attack: he recounts the story of King Hamlet’s conquest of certain lands once belonging to Norway, saying that Fortinbras, the young prince of Norway, now seeks to re-conquer those forfeited lands. The ghost reappears, and Horatio tries urgently to speak to it. The ghost remains silent, however, and disappears again with the first hint of dawn. Horatio suggests that they tell Prince Hamlet, the dead king’s son, about the apparition; he believes the ghost will not refuse to speak to his beloved son.

That morning, the new king, the former king’s brother Claudius, gives a speech to his courtiers about his recent marriage to Gertrude, his brother’s widow and Hamlet’s mother. He says that he mourns his brother, but has chosen to balance Denmark’s mourning with the delight of his marriage. He says that young Fortinbras has written to him, rashly demanding the surrender of the lands King Hamlet won from Fortinbras’s father, and he dispatches Cornelius and Voltimand with a message for the King of Norway, Fortinbras’s elderly uncle.

His speech concluded, Claudius turns to Laertes, the son of the Lord Chamberlain Polonius, and asks what business he has from the court. Laertes answers that he wishes to return to France, where his stay was recently cut short by Claudius’s coronation. Polonius tells Claudius that Laertes has his permission to go, and Claudius jovially gives Laertes his consent as well. Turning to Hamlet, Claudius asks why “the clouds still hang” upon him: Hamlet is still wearing black in mourning for the dead king. Gertrude urges him to cast it off, but he replies bitterly that his inner sorrow is so great that his dour appearance is merely a poor mirror of it. Claudius declares that all fathers die, and that all sons must lose their fathers, and that to mourn for too long is unmanly and inappropriate. Gertrude asks Hamlet not to return to Wittenberg, where he had been studying at the university, and he stiffly agrees to obey her. Professing to be cheered by Hamlet’s decision to stay in Denmark, Claudius escorts Gertrude from the room; the court follows, leaving Hamlet alone.

Alone, Hamlet says that he longs to evaporate, and wishes that God had not made suicide a sin. Anguished, he laments his father’s death and his mother’s hasty marriage to his uncle. He remembers how deeply in love his mother and father had seemed, and curses the thought that now–only a month after the king’s death–she has married his far inferior brother. “Frailty,” he cries, “thy name is woman!”

Horatio enters with Marcellus and Bernardo, and Hamlet, happy to see his friend, asks why he has left Wittenberg. Horatio says that he came to see King Hamlet’s funeral, and Hamlet curtly argues that he came to see his mother’s wedding. Horatio agrees that the one followed closely on the heels of the other. He then tells Hamlet that he, Marcellus, and Bernardo have seen what appears to be his father’s ghost. Stunned, Hamlet agrees to keep watch with them after night falls, in the hopes that he will be able to speak to the apparition.

Commentary

With masterful economy and grace Shakespeare sets his mood, introduces his major characters, presents his background information, begins his exploration of the play’s major themes, and sets his plot in motion, all within two short scenes. The only major plot strand not established in this section is that of Hamlet’s relationship with Ophelia, who appears in the following scene. Other than that omission, these two scenes introduce all the major strands that will wind throughout the play. The appearance of the ghost affords the characters the opportunity to tell the audience about the recent death of King Hamlet and the history of his conflict with Poland (which in turn introduces the idea that Fortinbras has a grudge against Denmark), Claudius’s speech informs us of his marriage to Gertrude, and Hamlet’s bitterness toward Claudius and his subsequent soliloquy establishes his melancholy and desperation over those events. The revelation of the ghost’s appearance, and Hamlet’s decision to confront the apparition, sets in motion the main plot of the play, which will culminate in Hamlet’s death at the end of Act V.

The appearance of the ghost on a chilling, misty night outside Elsinore Castle introduces the element of the supernatural into the play, and indicates immediately that, as Hamlet puts it later, “the time is out of joint”: something is wrong in Denmark. Despite the apparent vitality of Claudius’s court, Shakespeare tells us, trouble is clearly on the horizon–Horatio interprets the ghost as a warning about Fortinbras. Hamlet, devastated by his father’s death and betrayed by his mother’s marriage, already feels that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark”; his bitterness, his cynicism, his yearning for suicide, and the other characters’ remarks about his eccentric behavior indicate the extent to which Hamlet is not his usual self. In fact, nothing in Denmark is usual: the play opens immediately after the disruption of a very long, stable, and uneventful period under the reign of King Hamlet. One of the most extraordinary qualities of these first two scenes is their ability to convey that impression, and something of what the previous period itself was actually like, without ever showing it to us directly.

Hamlet’s soliloquy about suicide (”O, that this too too solid flesh would melt”) ushers in what will be a central idea in the play. Hamlet wishes to kill himself, but God has forbidden it (”the Almight” has “fixed his canon ‘gainst self-slaughter”); the question of the moral validity of suicide in an unbearably painful world will haunt the rest of the play (the question reaches the height of its urgency in the most famous line in all of English literature, “To be, or not to be: that is the question”). In Act III, Hamlet decides that no one would choose to live under the conditions of the world if they were not afraid of what will happen to them after death. Hamlet wants to sleep, but he is afraid of his dreams.

This first soliloquy, therefore, puts Hamlet at odds with the dictates of religion; if God did not have contrary wishes that made him fear hell, Hamlet could seek the felicity of death. Throughout the play, we watch the gradual crumbling of the human verities on which Hamlet’s worldview have been based; his mind is left with little or nothing to cling to. Already, religion has failed him, and the shattered grotesquerie of his family can offer him no solace.

Act I, Scenes iv-v

Summary

In Polonius’s house, Laertes is preparing to leave for France. Bidding his sister Ophelia farewell, he also cautions her against falling in love with Hamlet, who is, according to Laertes, too far above her by birth to be able to love her honorably. Hamlet, he says, is responsible not only for his own feelings but for his position in the state, and his position may make it impossible for him to marry her. Polonius enters, and gives Laertes a great deal of advice about how to behave with integrity and practicality. Laertes leaves, and Polonius asks Ophelia about her relationship with Hamlet. She says that Hamlet has claimed to love her; Polonius sternly echoes Laertes’s advice, and forbids Ophelia from associating with Hamlet again.

Hamlet keeps watch outside the castle with Horatio and Marcellus, waiting for the appearance of the ghost. Shortly after midnight, trumpets sound from the castle, and Hamlet explains that the new king is spending the night carousing, as is the Danish custom. Disgusted, Hamlet declares that the custom is better broken than observed. Then the ghost appears, and Hamlet calls out to it; the ghost beckons Hamlet to follow it out into the night. His companions urge him not to follow, but Hamlet declares that he cares nothing for his life, and that the ghost can do nothing to his soul; he follows after it and disappears into the darkness. Horatio and Marcellus, stunned, declare that the event bodes very ill for the nation–as Marcellus declares, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” After a moment, Horatio and Marcellus follow after Hamlet and the apparition of the dead king.

In the darkness, the ghost speaks to Hamlet, saying that it is his father’s spirit, come to rouse Hamlet to revenge his death, his “foul and most unnatural murder.” Hamlet is appalled, and the ghost tells him that as he slept in his garden, a villain poured poison into his ear–the very villain that now wears his crown. Hamlet’s worst fears about his uncle are confirmed: “O my prophetic soul!” he cries. The ghost exhorts Hamlet to seek revenge, and disappears as morning dawns. Intensely moved, Hamlet swears to remember and obey the ghost. Horatio and Marcellus arrive upon the scene, and ask Hamlet what has happened. Shaken and volatile, he does not tell them, but insists that they swear upon his sword not to reveal what they have seen. He pleads with Horatio not to give him away if he seems to act strangely, even if he seems to be insane. Three times the ghost’s voice echoes from beneath the ground, declaiming “Swear.” Horatio and Marcellus take the oath upon Hamlet’s sword, and the three men exit toward the castle.

Commentary

Hamlet and Laertes form one of the most important polarities in all of the play; as the plot progresses, Hamlet’s hesitance and general inability to obtain his father’s revenge will be heavily contrasted with Laertes’s furious willingness to avenge his father’s death. The centerpiece of each of these scenes is the conversations each son has with his father, Laertes with Polonius and Hamlet with the ghost of the dead king. In contrast with the bitterly fractured state of Hamlet’s made clear in the previous scene, in which Hamlet laments his mother’s “o’erhasty” marriage to his father’s brother, the bustling normalcy of Polonius’s house appears all the more striking. Polonius’s long speech advising Laertes on how to behave in France is almost deliberately over- fatherly, as if to hammer home the contrast between what Laertes has and what Hamlet does not have. (Of course, the sincerity of Polonius’s pose as loving father will be called into question later in the play, when he sends his servant Reynaldo to France to spy on his son.)

The abnormality of Hamlet’s situation is again emphasized in his meeting with his dead father: in Hamlet’s family, father and son may only interact under supernatural circumstances. And what the ghost tells Hamlet–that he was murdered by Claudius, his brother and the very man now married to Hamlet’s mother, and that until Hamlet obtains revenge on Claudius, he is doomed to an existence of torture in hell–contrasts quite sharply with the rather clich?d advice Polonius gave Laertes two scenes earlier. The ghost’s demand for revenge upon Claudius sets the main plot of the play into motion, leads Hamlet to the idea of feigning madness, and introduces the theme of retributive justice–the idea that sin must beget punishment–into the play: the idea of retribution haunts and goads characters throughout the play, spurring Claudius to guilt, Hamlet to the avoidance of suicide, and Laertes to murderous rage after the deaths of Ophelia and Polonius.

Of course, Hamlet is a revenge tragedy, written loosely in the form popularized by Thomas Kyd’s earlier Spanish Tragedy, and the ghost’s claim to have been murdered by Claudius also channels the play into the revenge- tragedy form. But Hamlet is unlike any other revenge tragedy in that it is more concerned with thought and moral questioning than with bloody action, and almost nowhere is this more evident than in the scene with the ghost. Already, Hamlet questions the appearances of things around him and worries whether he can trust his perceptions: the ghost looks like his father, but he is already troubled by religion, and worries that the ghost might in fact be a demon from hell, come to deceive him. One of the central tensions in the play comes from Hamlet’s inability to find anything to believe in as he works his way toward revenge; even here, before his work has begun, he doubts the authenticity of his father’s ghost and its tragic claim. He is already under the influence of the kind of unwilling, desperate nihilism to which he will eventually succumb.

Act II, Scenes i-ii

Summary

Polonius dispatches his servant Reynaldo to France with money and written notes for Laertes; he also orders him to inquire about and spy on Laertes’s personal life. He gives him explicit directions on how to pursue his investigations, then bids him on his way. As Reynaldo leaves, Ophelia enters, visibly upset. She tells Polonius that Hamlet has accosted her, unkempt and wild-eyed: he grabbed her, held her, and sighed powerfully, but did not speak to her. Polonius says that Hamlet must be mad with his love for Ophelia, for she has distanced herself from him ever since Polonius ordered her to do so. Polonius speculates that this love-sickness might be the cause of Hamlet’s general distemper, and hurries out to tell the king of his discovery.

Within the castle, Claudius and Gertrude are welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet’s friends from Wittenberg. The king and queen have summoned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the hope that they might be able to cheer Hamlet out of his melancholy, or at least to discover the cause of it. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to investigate Hamlet’s feelings, and the queen orders some attendants to take them to her “too much changed” son.

Polonius enters, announcing the return of the ambassadors Claudius sent to Norway, Voltimand and Cornelius. He also says that he has discovered the cause of Hamlet’s “lunacy”; Polonius urges him to speak on that subject, but Polonius counsels the king to hear the ambassadors first. Voltimand and Cornelius enter, and describe what took place with the aged and ailing king of Norway: the king rebuked Fortinbras for attempting to make war on Denmark, and Fortinbras swore he would never again attack the Danes; the king, overjoyed, bequeathed upon Fortinbras a large annuity, and urged him to use the army he had assembled to attack the Poles instead of the Danes. He has therefore sent a request back to Claudius that Prince Fortinbras’s armies be allowed safe passage through Denmark on their way to attack the Poles. Relieved, Claudius declares that he will see to this business later. Voltimand and Cornelius take their leave.

Turning to the subject of Hamlet, Polonius declares after a wordy introduction that the prince is mad with love for Ophelia. He shows the king and queen letters and love poems Hamlet has given to Ophelia, and details his plan: Hamlet often walks alone through the lobby of the castle, and Polonius says that at such a time, he and the king and queen could hide behind an arras (curtain or wall-hanging) while Ophelia confronted Hamlet, allowing the hidden observers to judge whether Hamlet’s madness really emanates from his love for Ophelia. The king declares that they will try the plan; then Gertrude notices that Hamlet is approaching, reading as he walks, and Polonius says that he will speak to the prince. Gertrude and Claudius exit, leaving Polonius alone with Hamlet.

Polonius attempts to converse with Hamlet, who seems utterly mad; he calls the old man a “fishmonger” and answers his questions equivocally. (”What do you read, my lord?” Polonius asks, and Hamlet responds, “Words, words, words.”) But many of Hamlet’s seemingly lunatic statements hide barbed observations about Polonius’s pomposity and his old age (”Yourself, sir, should be as old as I am, if like a crab you could go backward”). As Polonius leaves, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter, and Hamlet seems pleased to see them; they briefly discuss Hamlet’s dissatisfaction with recent affairs in Denmark–he claims the country is made a “prison” by his “bad dreams,” and they speculate that his ambition has been thwarted by Claudius’s accession to the throne, a speculation Hamlet denies. Hamlet then asks why they have come. Sheepishly, the two men claim they have come merely to visit Hamlet, but he sternly declares that he knowsthey have been sent for by the king and queen. They confess that they were sent for, and Hamlet says that he knows why: because he has lost all his mirth and descended into a state of melancholy wherein all the earth and all of humanity appears sterile and worthless.

Rosencrantz smiles, and says that if Hamlet takes no delight in humanity, he wonders how he will receive the theatrical troupe currently traveling toward the castle. The trumpets then blow, announcing these players’ arrival, and Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they are welcome to stay at Elsinore, but that his “uncle-father and aunt-mother” are deceived. He says that he is mad only some of the time, and at other times is completely sane: “I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.”

Polonius enters to announce the arrival of the players, who follow him into the room. Hamlet welcomes them, and entreats one of the players to give him a speech about the mythological fall of the city of Troy and the death of the Trojan king and queen, Priam and Hecuba. Impressed, Hamlet orders Polonius to see them escorted to guestrooms, and says that the next night, they will hear “The Murder of Gonzago” performed, with a short speech added, which he will write himself. Hamlet takes his leave of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and now stands alone on stage.

Hamlet immediately begins cursing himself, bitterly commenting that the player of the previous scene was able to summon a depth of feeling and expression for Hecuba, a mythological figure who means nothing to him, while Hamlet himself is unable to take action even with his far more powerful motives–for despite his encounter with the ghost, he has not taken revenge upon Claudius. He says that he will devise a trap for Claudius, forcing the king to watch a play that closely resembles the plot of his murder of Hamlet’s father; if the king is guilty, he thinks, he will surely show some visible sign of guilt when he sees his sin re-enacted on stage. By this method, Hamlet reasons, he will obtain definitive proof of Claudius’s guilt, and will have even stronger grounds on which to take his revenge. “The plays the thing,” he declares, “wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.”

Commentary

In this section, the characters become more complex (Polonius, the loving father, begins to spy on his son; Hamlet, the thoughtful prince, seems to lose his mind), the plots thicken (Polonius begins to suspect that Hamlet’s madness is due to his love of Ophelia; the king and queen hire Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to ferret out the cause of the prince’s strange behavior), and the minds and motives of the characters become much more difficult to discern. Polonius seems by turns a doddering, pompous fool and a sinister manipulator (and has been played onstage as both). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in many ways baffling characters: they seem completely undifferentiated from one another, completely ineffective for the king and queen’s purposes, and completely transparent to Hamlet; yet they are treated as significant characters–they appear throughout the play, and the news of their deaths is the final tragedy at the end of Act V. Finally, the plot is complicated by the question of Hamlet’s madness, which, of course, has been the source of enduring critical controversy.

If Hamlet is merely pretending to be mad, as he suggests, he does almost too good a job at it; his portrayal is so convincing that many critics have believed that his already-fragile sanity shatters at the sight of his dead father’s ghost. Given the acute and cutting observations he makes while supposedly mad (and which this “madness” allows him to get away with), it seems unlikely that Hamlet is actually mad. But he is certainly confused and mentally disordered, and his confusion translates into an extraordinarily intense, searching quality of mind that lends authenticity to his portrayal of a madman. In other words, Hamlet’s decision to play a madman is a sane one, designed to confuse his enemies and hide his intentions as he moves toward avenging his father. But his mental state takes him to the very edge of sanity, and makes his portrayal of madness entirely convincing. He may know a “hawk from a handsaw,” but the very fact that his mind would select those two elements as items to compare indicates a trauma-induced eccentricity.

Act III, Scenes iii-iv

Elsewhere in the castle, King Claudius speaks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Still shaken by the play and now considering Hamlet’s madness to be dangerous, Claudius asks the pair to escort Hamlet on a voyage to England, and to depart immediately. They agree, and leave to ready themselves. Polonius enters, and reminds the king of his plan to hide in Gertrude’s room and observe Hamlet’s confrontation with her. He promises to tell Claudius all that he learns. When Polonius leaves, the king is alone, and he immediately bewails his guilt and grief over his sin. A brother’s murder, he says, is the oldest sin, and “hath the eldest curse upon’t.” He longs to ask for forgiveness, but says that he is unprepared to give up that which he gained by committing the murder–namely, the crown and the queen. He falls to his knees and begins to pray.

Hamlet slips quietly into the room, and steels himself to kill the unseeing Claudius. Suddenly he realizes that if he kills the king while he is praying, he will send the king’s soul to heaven–which is hardly an adequate revenge, especially since Claudius, by killing Hamlet’s father before he had time to make his last confession, ensured that his brother would not go to heaven. Hamlet decides to wait, resolving to kill Claudius when he is sinning–when he is drunk, angry, or lustful. He leaves; Claudius rises and declares that he has been unable to pray sincerely. (”My words fly up, my thoughts remain below…”)

In Gertrude’s chamber, Polonius urges the queen to be harsh with Hamlet when he arrives, taking him to task for his recent behavior. Gertrude agrees, and Polonius hides behind an arras, or tapestry, to watch. Hamlet storms into the room and asks his mother why she has sent for him. She says that he has offended his father, meaning his stepfather, Claudius; he interrupts her, and says that she has offended his father, meaning the dead King Hamlet. Hamlet accosts her with an almost violent intensity, and declares his intention to make her fully aware of the profundity of her sin. Fearing for her life, Gertrude calls for help; from behind the arras, Polonius cries out. Crying “How now! a rat?”, Hamlet draws his sword and stabs it through the tapestry, killing the unseen Polonius. Gertrude asks what Hamlet has done, and he replies, “Nay, I know not: / Is it the king?” The queen says his action was a “rash and bloody” deed, and Hamlet replies that it was almost as rash and bloody as murdering a king and marrying his brother. Disbelieving, the queen asks, “As kill a king?” and Hamlet replies that she heard him correctly.

Hamlet lifts the arras and discovers Polonius’s body. He bids the old man farewell, and turns to his mother, declaring that he will wring her heart. He shows her a picture of the dead king, and a picture of the current king, and bitterly comments on the superiority of his father to his uncle; he asks her furiously what has driven her to marry a rotten man such as Claudius, and she pleads with him to stop his speech, saying that he has turned her eyes onto her soul, and that she does not like what she sees there. Hamlet continues to excoriate her and rail against Claudius, until suddenly, the ghost appears before him.

Hamlet speaks to the apparition, but Gertrude is unable to see it, and believes him to be mad. The ghost intones that it has come to remind Hamlet of his purpose; noting that Gertrude is amazed and unable to see him, the ghost asks Hamlet to intercede with her. Hamlet describes the ghost, but Gertrude sees nothing, and in a moment the ghost disappears. Hamlet tries desperately to convince Gertrude that he is not mad, but has merely feigned madness all along, and urges her to forsake Claudius and regain her good conscience. He urges her as well not to reveal to Claudius that his madness has been an act. Gertrude agrees to keep his secret. He bids her goodnight, but before he leaves he points to Polonius’s corpse and declares that heaven has “punished me with this and this with me.” Hamlet reminds his mother that he must sail to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he says he will trust as fully as though they were venomous snakes. Dragging Polonius’s body behind him, Hamlet leaves his mother’s room.

Commentary

Again, the limitations of theological law prevent Hamlet from taking action. Finally psychologically ready to kill Claudius, Hamlet is thwarted by his realization that doing so would send his uncle to heaven, while Claudius’s murder of Hamlet’s father sent him to hell. In the same way, Hamlet has curtailed his desire to commit suicide based on a fear of religious punishment in the afterlife. These invocations of apparently arbitrary theological rules would seem abstract and haphazard, were it not for the actual presence of the hell-tormented ghost to prove their validity. In light of the presence of the ghost, the rules of theology become legitimated commentaries on the theme of retribution and justice–just as Hamlet must kill Claudius to punish him for his father’s death, he cannot kill himself for fear of similar punishment.

Hamlet is determined that, just as Claudius hurt his father on both the natural and supernatural levels, he must not only murder Claudius but send him to hell as well, effectively achieving revenge for eternity. Strangely out of place in all this theology is the idea that the revenge Hamlet seeks is itself anti- Christian. This problem is never explored in the play, which exhibits a far more Old-Testament vision of theological law–except in the scene of Claudius’s prayer.

Hamlet’s confrontation with his mother gives Shakespeare the chance to explore and dispose of the moral problem of Gertrude in one fell swoop: in powerful, passionate language, Hamlet sums up Gertrude’s crimes and shows her the way to salvation (which she will refuse to take). Again, his pretense of madness verges on the real thing; and again, his family relationship is revealed to be terribly damaged and probably irreparable. When the ghost appears before Hamlet and his mother, their nuclear family is reunited–but what a bitter reunion! Gertrude is unable even to see her husband, and believes that her son is mad for speaking to him.

Act IV, Scenes i-iv

Summary

Gertrude goes to Claudius, who is in conference with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and asks to speak to him alone. She tells him that Hamlet is as mad as the sea during a violent storm, and tells Claudius that Hamlet has killed Polonius. Aghast, the king calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, tells them about the murder, and sends them to find Hamlet.

Elsewhere in the castle, Hamlet, alone, comments that Polonius’s body has been “safely stowed”; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come upon him, and ask what he has done with the corpse. Hamlet refuses to give them a straight answer, instead saying “The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body.” He calls Rosencrantz a “sponge… that soaks up the king’s countenance, his rewards, his authorities.” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern escort him to Claudius.

The king is speaking to a group of attendants, telling them of Polonius’s death and his intention to send Hamlet to England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear with Hamlet, who is under guard. Pressed by Claudius to reveal the location of Polonius’s body, Hamlet is by turns mad, coy, and clever, saying that Polonius is being eaten by worms, and that the king could send a messenger to find him in heaven–or to seek him in hell himself. Finally Hamlet reveals that Polonius’s body is under the stairs near the lobby, and the king dispatches his attendants to look there. The king tells Hamlet that he must leave at once for England, and Hamlet enthusiastically agrees; he exits, and Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to ensure that he boards the ship at once. Alone, Claudius expresses urgently his wish that England will obey the sealed orders he sends with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern–which, he reveals, call for Prince Hamlet to be put to death.

On a nearby plain in Denmark, young Prince Fortinbras marches at the head of his army, traveling through Denmark on the way to attack Poland. Fortinbras orders his captain to go and ask the King of Denmark for permision to travel through is lands. On his way, the captain encounters Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, and informs them that the Norwegian army rides to fight the Poles. Hamlet asks about the basis of the conflict, and the man tells him that the armies will fight over “a little patch of land / That hath in it no profit but the name.” Astonished by the news, Hamlet marvels over how human beings could act so violently and purposefully for so little gain. (In comparison, he still delays his violent action, while he has everything to gain.) Disgusted with himself for having failed to gain his revenge on Claudius, Hamlet declares that from this moment on, his thoughts will be bloody.

Commentary

Hamlet’s killing of Polonius in the previous section is one of the most morally disturbing moments in the play. If it was possible before to consider Hamlet a “hero” or an idealized version of a human being, it is not possible after he kills Polonius. The trait that constantly interferes with his ability to take revenge on Claudius–his inactive, reflective nature–here disappears in favor of its violent obverse: a rash, murderous explosion of activity. Hamlet leaps to the conclusion that Claudius is behind the arras, or else he simply lashes out thoughtlessly. In any case, Hamlet’s moral superiority to Claudius is now thrown into question–he has done to Polonius just as Claudius did to the former king, the only difference being that Hamlet’s murder was not premeditated. (The other mitigating factor–the fact that Polonius was dishonestly spying on Hamlet at the moment when he was killed–seems to be what Hamlet falls back on to ease his conscience, as when he declares “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!”) But the end-result of Hamlet’s deed is very similar to Claudius’s: Laertes and Ophelia have lost a father, just as Hamlet himself did.

In any event, the murder of Polonius and his subsequent traumatic encounter with his mother seem to leave Hamlet in a frantic, unstable frame of mind: he taunts Claudius, toward whom his hostility is now barely disguised; makes light of Polonius’s murder by playing word-games about it; and pretends to be madly thrilled at the idea of sailing for England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Of course, on some level he is prepared for what is to come; his farewell to his mother proved that, when he told her that he would trust his old schoolfellows as if they were “adders fang’d.” But although Hamlet suspects his old friends’ treachery, he may not fully realize the malevolence of Claudius’s designs for him: Claudius’s subterfuge in asking the English to execute Hamlet reveals the extent to which he now fears Hamlet, and to which he is now caught up in the inexorable logic of their situation: whether Hamlet is sane or mad, he is a danger to Claudius, and Claudius wishes him to die.

Hamlet’s encounter with the Norwegian captain serves to remind the reader of Fortinbras’s presence in the world of the play, and gives Hamlet another example of the will to action that he lacks. Earlier, he was amazed by the player’s evocation of powerful feeling for Hecuba, a woman who meant nothing to him; now, he is as awestruck by the willingness of Fortinbras to devote the energy of an entire army, probably wasting hundreds of lives and even risking his own, to reclaim a worthless scrap of land in Poland. Hamlet seems to be able to understand the moral ambiguity of Fortinbras’s action, but more than anything else he is simply impressed by the forcefulness of it; and that forcefulness becomes a kind of ideal toward which Hamlet decides at last to strive. “My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” he declares; of course, he fails to put this exclamation into action, as he has failed at every previous turn to achieve his revenge on Claudius. “My thoughts be bloody,” Hamlet says; it is telling that he does not say “My deeds.”

Act IV, Scenes v-vii

Summary

Hamlet has sailed for England; Polonius has been buried in near secrecy to prevent outrage among the Danish people. At Elsinore, Gertrude refuses to speak to Ophelia; but Horatio convinces her that she should. Ophelia enters, adorned with flowers and singing strange songs; she seems to have gone mad. Claudius enters, and hears Ophelia’s ravings (”They say the owl was a baker’s daughter…”). He says that Ophelia’s grief stems from her father’s death, and that the people have been “muddied, / Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers / For good Polonius’ death.” He also says that Laertes has secretly sailed back from France.

A loud noise echoes from somewhere in the castle. Claudius calls for his guards, and a gentleman enters to warn the king that Laertes has come with a mob of commoners who call him “lord,” and who say, “Laertes shall be king.” Infuriated, Laertes storms into the hall, fuming in his desire to avenge his father’s death. Claudius attempts to soothe him, but Gertrude protests her husband’s innocence, and when Ophelia re-enters, visibly insane, Laertes plunges again into rage. Claudius claims that he is not responsible for Polonius’s death, and says that Laertes’s desire for revenge does him credit–so long as he seeks revenge upon the proper person. Claudius convinces Laertes to hear his version of events, which he says will answer all his questions. Laertes agrees, and Claudius seconds his desire to make right on Polonius’s death: “Where the offence is let the great axe fall.”

In another part of the castle, Horatio is introduced to a pair of sailors bearing a letter for him from Hamlet. In the letter, Hamlet says that his ship was captured by pirates, who have returned him to Denmark. He asks Horatio to escort the sailors to the king and queen, for they have messages for them as well. He also says that he has much to tell of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Horatio takes the sailors to the king, and then follows them to find Hamlet.

In the meantime, Claudius and a calmer Laertes discuss Polonius’s death. Claudius explains that he acted as he did–that is, burying Polonius secretly and not punishing Hamlet for the murder–because both the common people and the queen love Hamlet very much, and he did not wish to upset either of them, as a king and as a husband. A messenger enters with the letter from Hamlet to Claudius, which informs the king that Hamlet will return tomorrow. Laertes is pleased that Hamlet has come back to Denmark, and that his revenge will not be delayed. Claudius agrees that Laertes deserves to be revenged upon Hamlet. He recalls that Hamlet has been jealous in the past of Laertes’s prowess with a sword, recently praised to all the court by a Frenchman who had seen him in combat. The king speculates that if Hamlet could be tempted into a duel with Laertes, it might provide Laertes with the chance to kill him. Laertes agrees, and they settle on a plan: Laertes will use a sharpened sword rather than a dull fencing-blade as is the custom. Laertes also proposes to poison his sword, so that even a scratch from it will kill Hamlet. The king concocts a back-up plan as well: if Hamlet succeeds in the duel, the king will offer him a poisoned cup of wine to drink from.

Gertrude enters with tragic news: Ophelia, mad with grief, has drowned in the river. Anguished, Laertes leaves the room. Claudius summons Gertrude to follow; he says that it was nearly impossible to quiet Laertes’s rage, and that he worries the news of Ophelia’s death will reawaken it.

Commentary

One of the important themes of Hamlet is the connection between the health of a state and the moral legitimacy of its ruler. Claudius is rotten, and as a result, Denmark is rotten, too. Here, at the beginning of Act IV, scene v, things have palpably darkened for the nation: Hamlet is gone, Polonius is dead and has been buried in secret, Ophelia is raving mad, and, as Claudius tells us, the common people are disturbed and murmuring amongst themselves. This ominous seed bears fruit in the truncated, miniature rebellion that accompanies Laertes’s return to Denmark. Acting as the wronged son operating on open fury, Laertes has all the moral legitimacy that Claudius lacks, and that Hamlet has forfeited.

It is extremely important to note the powerful contrast between Laertes and Hamlet, each of whom has a dead father to avenge. (A third figure with a dead father to avenge, Fortinbras, lurks on the horizon.) Whereas Hamlet is reflective and has difficulty acting, Laertes is active and has no need for thought; he has no interest in moral concerns, only in his consuming desire to avenge Polonius. When Claudius asks Laertes how far he would go to avenge his father, Laertes replies that he would slit Hamlet’s throat in the church. This statement–indicating his willingness to murder Hamlet even in the house of morality and piety–indicates sharply the contrast between the two sons: Hamlet will not even kill himself for fear of crossing God.

The scheming Claudius encounters Laertes at approximately the same moment as he learns that Hamlet has survived and returned to Denmark (through the somewhat improbable deus ex machina of the pirates, one of the single most incongruous elements in the play). His immediate thought is that he can derail Laertes’s anger and dispense with Hamlet in one fell stroke, and he hits upon the idea of the duel in order to use Laertes’s rage to achieve his own ends.

Ophelia’s tragic death occurs at the worst possible moment for Claudius; as Laertes flees the room in agony, Claudius follows, not to console him or even to join him in mourning, but simply because, as he tells Gertrude, it was so difficult to quiet him down in the first place. The image of Ophelia drowning amid her garlands of flowers has proved to be one of the most enduring images in the play, represented countless times by artists and poets throughout the centuries. Ophelia is associated with flower imagery from the beginning of the play: in her first scene, Polonius presents her with a violet. The fragile beauty of the flowers resembles Ophelia’s own fragile beauty, as well as her exquisite, doomed innocence.

Hamlet

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Act V, Scenes i-ii

Summary

In the churchyard, two lowly gravediggers shovel out a grave for Ophelia. The gravediggers argue at length over whether Ophelia should be allowed to be buried in the churchyard, since her death so closely resembled suicide, and according to religious doctrine, suicides may not receive Christian burial. The first gravedigger, who speaks cleverly and mischievously, asks the second gravedigger a riddle: “What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?” The second gravedigger answers that it must be the gallows-maker, for his frame outlasts a thousand tenants. The first gravedigger corrects him: it is the gravedigger whose constructions are stronger than those of the stonemason, the shipwright, or the carpenter, for the gravedigger’s “houses” will last until Doomsday.

Hamlet and Horatio enter at a distance, and watch the gravediggers work. Hamlet looks with wonder at the skulls they are excavating to make room for the fresh grave, and speculates darkly about what occupations the owners of these skulls served in life: “Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now…?” Hamlet asks the gravedigger whose grave he is digging, and the gravedigger spars with him verbally, first claiming the grave is his own, since he is digging it, then that the grave belongs to no man and no woman. At last he admits that it belongs to one “that was a woman sir; but, rest her soul, she’s dead.” The gravedigger, who does not recognize Hamlet as his prince, tells him that he has been a gravedigger since the old King Hamlet defeated the old Fortinbras in battle, the very day on which young Prince Hamlet was born. Hamlet takes up a skull, and the gravedigger tells him that the skull belonged to Yorick, the old king’s former jester. Hamlet tells Horatio that he knew Yorick, and he is appalled at the sight of the skull; he realizes forcefully that all men will come to dust, even Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, whom Hamlet imagines has disintegrated and is now part of the dust used to patch a wall.

Suddenly the funeral procession for Ophelia enters the churchyard, including Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and many mourning courtiers. Hamlet, wondering who has died, notices that the funeral rites seem “maimed,” indicating that the dead man or woman took his or her own life. He and Horatio hide as the procession approaches the grave. As Ophelia is laid in the earth, Hamlet realizes who has died; at the same moment, Laertes becomes infuriated with the priest, who says that to give Ophelia a proper Christian burial would profane the dead, and leaps into Ophelia’s grave to hold her once again in his arms. Grief-stricken and outraged, Hamlet bursts upon the company, declaring in agonized fury his own love for Ophelia. He leaps into the grave and fights with Laertes, saying that “forty thousand brothers / Could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum.” Hamlet cries that he would do things for Ophelia that Laertes could not dream of–he would eat a crocodile for her, he would be buried alive with her. The combatants are pulled apart by the funeral company. Gertrude and Claudius declare that Hamlet is mad; Hamlet storms off, and Horatio follows. The king urges Laertes to be patient, and to remember their plan for revenge.

The next day at Elsinore Castle, Hamlet tells Horatio how he plotted to overcome Claudius’s scheme to have him murdered in England: he replaced the sealed letter carried by the unsuspecting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which called for Hamlet’s execution, with one calling for the execution of the bearers of the letter–Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves. He tells Horatio that he has no sympathy for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who “did make love to this employment,” but that he feels sorry for having behaved with such hostility toward Laertes. In Laertes’s desire to avenge his father’s death, he says, he sees the mirror image of his own, and he promises to court Laertes’s good favor.

Their conversation is interrupted by Osric, a foolish courtier who tries to flatter Hamlet by agreeing with everything he says, even when he contradicts himself–in the space of seconds, Osric agrees that it is cold, then that it is hot. Osric begins to praise Laertes effusively, but Hamlet and Horatio are unable to penetrate his overly elaborate proclamations and determine what it is that he wants. Finally a lord enters, and tells them that the king desires Hamlet to fence with Laertes, and that he has made a wager with Laertes that Hamlet will win. Hamlet agrees to fight against Horatio’s advice, saying that “all’s ill here about my heart,” but that one must be ready for death, since it will come regardless. The court marches into the hall, and Hamlet asks Laertes for forgiveness, claiming that it was his madness, and not his own will, that murdered Polonius. Laertes says that he will not forgive Hamlet until an elder, an expert in the fine points of honor, has advised him in the manner. But in the meantime, he says, he will accept Hamlet’s offer of love.

They select their foils (blunted swords used in fencing) and the king says that, if Hamlet wins the first or second hit, he will drink to Hamlet’s health, then throw into the cup a valuable gem (actually the poison) and give the wine to Hamlet. They begin the duel; Hamlet strikes Laertes, but declines to drink from the cup, saying that he will play another hit first. He hits Laertes again, and Gertrude rises to drink from the cup. The king tells her not to drink, but she does so anyway. Under his breath, Claudius murmurs, “It is the poison’d cup: it is too late.” Laertes remarks under his breath that to wound Hamlet with the poisoned sword is almost against his conscience; but they fight again, and Laertes scores a hit against Hamlet, drawing blood. Scuffling, they manage to exchange swords, and Hamlet wounds Laertes with Laertes’s own (poisoned) blade.

The queen falls. Laertes, poisoned with his own sword, declares, “I am justly kill’d with my own treachery.” The queen declares that the cup must have been poisoned, calls out to Hamlet, and dies. Laertes tells Hamlet that he, too, has been slain by Laertes’s poisoned sword, and that the king is to blame for the poison on the sword and the poison in the cup. Hamlet, in a fury, stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies crying out for help. Hamlet tells Horatio that he is dying, and exchanges a last forgiveness with Laertes, who dies after completing his absolution.

The sound of marching echoes through the hall, and a shot rings out nearby. Osric declares that Fortinbras has come in conquest from Poland, and now fires a volley to the English ambassadors. Hamlet tells Horatio again that he is dying, and urges him not to commit suicide in light of all the tragedies, but instead to stay alive and tell his story. He says that he wishes Fortinbras to be made King of Denmark; he then dies.

Fortinbras marches into the room accompanied by the English ambassadors, who announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio says that he will tell all assembled the story that led to the gruesome scene now on display. Fortinbras orders Hamlet to be borne away like a soldier.

Commentary

Called “clowns” in the stage directions of the play, the gravediggers represent a humorous type commonly found in Shakespeare’s plays, the clever commoner who gets the better of his social superior through wit; this type of clown was designed to appeal to the “groundlings” (those who could not afford seats and thus stood on the ground) at the Globe Theater, though in this scene the clowns assume a kind of macabre aspect, in that their jests and jibes are made in a cemetery, about the dead. Their conversation about Ophelia, however, arguing over whether it is morally acceptable to bury a possible suicide victim, furthers an important theme in the play–that of the moral legitimacy of suicide under theological law. By giving this serious subject a d

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