

Hamlet Summary and Analysis of Act 3

Summary

Scene 1

An entourage consisting of the king and queen, [Polonius](#) and [Ophelia](#), and [Rosencrantz and Guildenstern](#) enters to begin the Act. [Claudius](#) asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern what they have learned about [Hamlet](#)'s malady. The two reply that they have not been able to find its cause. They do mention, however, that Hamlet was very enthusiastic about the players' performance that night, which prompts Claudius to agree to attend the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave. Polonius and Claudius then begin their plan to loose Ophelia on Hamlet and mark their encounter, hoping to find the root of his madness. They instruct Ophelia to pretend that she is simply reading a book and withdraw behind a tapestry.

Hamlet enters and delivers the most famous speech in literature, beginning, "To be or not to be." After this long meditation on the nature of being and death, Hamlet catches sight of Ophelia. After a short conversation she attempts to return some of the remembrances that Hamlet gave when courting her. Hamlet replies caustically, questioning Ophelia's honesty. He then berates Ophelia, telling her off sarcastically and venomously, with the refrain, "Get thee to a nunnery," or in other words, "Go become a nun to control your lust." After this tirade, Hamlet exits, leaving Ophelia in shambles.

Claudius and Polonius step out of their hiding place. The king states that he does not believe that Hamlet is mad because of his foiled love for Ophelia, or really mad at all, but tormented for some hidden reason. He determines to send Hamlet on a diplomatic mission to England before he can cause any serious trouble. Polonius endorses this plan, but persists in his belief that Hamlet's grief is the result of his love for Ophelia. He consoles his daughter. Polonius suggests in parting that Claudius arrange a private interview between Hamlet and his mother after the play that evening and Claudius agrees.

Scene 2

Just as the play is about to begin, Hamlet instructs the players on the art of acting, telling them to act naturally and to avoid bombast. He sets the players to their preparations and then conferences with [Horatio](#). After complimenting Horatio in the most sterling terms, Hamlet asks his friend to assist him in watching the king's response to the play they are about to see (apparently Hamlet has by this time told Horatio what the ghost revealed). Horatio seats himself so as to view the king properly. The royal entourage enters. Hamlet manically chatters with Claudius, Polonius, [Gertrude](#) and Ophelia, reserving special attention for the latter, whom he sits next to and teases.

The play begins with a “Dumb Show,” which is a pantomime of the drama to come. On stage, the basic form of the alleged murder is repeated: a king and queen are shown happily married; the king takes a nap; a poisoner enters and pours something in the king’s ear, killing him; the poisoner then takes possession of the queen. Ophelia seems confused by this plot but Hamlet tells her to wait for the speaker of the prologue to explain.

The prologue is a short little jingling rhyme. The player king and queen then immediately enter the stage. The king mentions that they have been married thirty years. The player queen expresses a hope that their love last as long over again. The king encourages the queen to remarry if he dies. The queen protests against this notion vehemently, swearing never to love another if were to she turn widow. With this, the king falls asleep and the queen exits. Hamlet asks his mother, Gertrude, how she likes the play, and Gertrude replies with the famous line, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.” Claudius is also outspokenly apprehensive about the nature of the play. It continues, however, with the entrance of Lucianus, the sleeping king’s nephew. This evil character creeps up to the sleeping player king and pours poison in his ear. Hamlet, unable to contain himself, erupts, telling everyone that Lucianus will soon win the love of the king’s over-protesting wife.

At this, Claudius rises and orders the play to end. He retreats with his retinue. Hamlet and Horatio laugh together, certain now that the ghost was telling the truth. After a short celebration, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter and tell Hamlet that he has made Claudius very angry. They also say that Gertrude has ordered Hamlet to meet her in her chamber. They then entreat Hamlet to tell the cause of his distemper. Hamlet replies mockingly by saying that they are trying to play him like a pipe and that he won’t let them. Polonius enters and entreats Hamlet again to see his mother. All exit but Hamlet. In a short soliloquy, Hamlet reflects that he will be cruel to his mother, showing her the extent of her crime in marrying Claudius, but will not actually hurt her.

Scene 3

Claudius gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a sealed envelope with orders to convey Hamlet to England and give the envelope to the king there. In highly flattering terms, they agree to do the king’s bidding and exit. Polonius then enters, saying that Hamlet is going to meet with his mother, and declaring his intention to hide behind an arras and listen to their conversation. He exits. Alone, the king looks into his soul. He is deeply disgusted by what he sees. He kneels to pray, hoping to purge his guilt, but reflects that this penance will not be genuine because he will still retain the prizes for which he committed murder in the first place, his crown and his wife.

As Claudius is vainly attempting to pray, Hamlet comes up behind him. He reflects that he now has an opportunity to kill his uncle and revenge his father, but pauses, considering that because Claudius is in the act of prayer he would likely go straight to

heaven if killed. Hamlet resolves to kill Claudius later, when he is in the middle of some sinful act. He continues on to his mother's chamber.

Scene 4

In the chamber, awaiting Hamlet's arrival, Polonius hides himself behind one of Gertrude's curtains. Hamlet enters. Gertrude attempts to be firm and chastising, but Hamlet comes right back at her, saying that she has sinned mightily in marrying her husband's brother. He pulls his mother in front of a mirror, saying that he will reveal her inmost part, and Gertrude momentarily misinterprets this, thinking that Hamlet may attempt to murder her. She cries for help. Polonius, hidden from view, also cries out for help. Hamlet thinks that the hidden voice belongs to Claudius. He stabs Polonius through the curtain, killing him. When he sees that he has killed Polonius, Hamlet declares the old man to be a "rash, intruding fool."

Quickly forgetting about this death, Hamlet seats his mother down and presents her with two portraits, one of her first husband and the other of Claudius. He describes the two as opposites, the one all nobility and virtue, the other all deformity and vice. Gertrude is deeply affected by this comparison and seems to comprehend the enormity of her sin. Hamlet continues to berate her and describe Claudius in the most foul and hurtful language. While in the middle of this harangue, [Old Hamlet](#)'s ghost appears once more, telling Hamlet to stop torturing his mother and to remember his duty to kill Claudius. At the ghost's command, Hamlet consoles his mother. Gertrude, unable to see the ghost, sees Hamlet talking to thin air and resolves that he is indeed insane. The ghost exits.

Hamlet tells his mother that he is not in fact insane. He reiterates that she should repent her marriage to Claudius and tells her in particular to stay away from their shared bed for the night. After describing the importance of this abstinence in the most colorful terms, Hamlet reminds his mother that he is ordered to England. Hamlet says that although he will go to England, he will not trust Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He exits his mother's bedroom, dragging the body of Polonius behind him.

Analysis

One of the most remarkable things about the speech that begins, "To be or not to be," the most famous speech in western literature, is how out-of-place, how offhand it seems in the larger context of the play. Hamlet has, only a few lines before, hit upon the play as his means of exposing the king – why, then, is he suddenly contemplating suicide (if that's what he's doing in "To be or not to be")? This psychological strangeness is true, at least, of the version of the play that most of us read – which is a conflation of two Renaissance texts, as explained in the "Additional Content" section. (In the first printed version of *Hamlet*, the speech occurs at perhaps a more logical place, in Act Two scene two, in place of Hamlet's mocking repartee with Polonius.)

In these longer, more literary versions of *Hamlet*, “To be or not to be” arrives as a surprise – it slows down the action just as the action is really beginning to move.

This odd, out-of-place effect of the speech is a testament to Hamlet’s tendency to become wrapped up in his own thoughts, regardless of his surroundings. In the middle of the urgent business of revenge, Hamlet takes the time to explore the nature of death and human life with a subtlety and eloquence that renders the speech unforgettable. Think of his brain as a sort of obsessive problem-solving machine, a focused, powerful instrument that exhausts one subject and then another indiscriminately in short-term bursts – now theater, now death, now sex, now filial duty – and that can only with great difficulty (if at all) focus on a longer-term plan, such as, “I must kill Claudius.”

So what is “To be or not to be” about, anyway? This is an enormous question. Entire books have been written on the speech, most recently Douglas Bruster’s *To Be or Not To Be*, and critical consensus as to its nature is far from settled. Most casual readers of *Hamlet* take the speech to be, at its simplest level, a contemplation of suicide. Hamlet is saying, in effect, “Wouldn’t it be nice to die? We don’t know what to expect after death, though, and so that keeps us alive. We would rather suffer the woes we know, painful as they are, than go on to possible woes we cannot conceive of.” But of whom is he speaking? Himself, or human beings in general? In other words, the speech can be thought of as a general contemplation of the human condition rather than a specific expression of a desire to die. In an interview in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the famous Shakespearean Harold Bloom offers an idiosyncratic reading of the speech along the latter lines: “It is a testimony, indeed, to the power of the mind over a universe of death, symbolized by the sea, which is the great hidden metaphor.” You can read more about this interpretation in his book, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*.

This speech, which is really tangential to the action, threatens to dominate most readings of Act Three. But there are many more interesting exchanges and famous scenes in the Act. The play-within-a-play, for instance, is the culmination of the theme of theatricality that we’ve already looked at in Act Two. The play-within-a-play, like other features of *Hamlet* (the madness of the revenger, the appearance of a ghost, etc.), is a convention found in several revenge tragedies, including [The Spanish Tragedy](#) and Shakespeare’s own early tragedy, [Titus Andronicus](#). In *Hamlet*, naturally, Shakespeare takes this convention to its extreme. Hamlet seems to take great pleasure in the exposure of Claudius’ guilt by theatrical means, relishing the self-referential potential of the scenario, exploring the multiple forms of drama capable of representing the same action (the dumb show versus the spoken verses), and filling the whole scene with London theatrical in-jokes.

After all this, though, the exposure does not actually lead to the satisfaction of vengeance. Just after the play, Hamlet has a chance to kill Claudius and talks himself out of it; two scenes later he is shipped off to England, no questions asked. One can

speculate on his reasons. To me, it seems almost as though the exposure, the “catching of the king’s conscience” in the play, is fulfillment enough for Hamlet, who is at home in a realm of contemplation rather than action. He has had his revenge on Claudius’ conscience, which is aptly demonstrated by the king’s moving prayer soliloquy (the only soliloquy in the play that does not come from Hamlet), and this is what counts for him. The body is simply a silly machine for Hamlet; the mind, the spirit, is where the action really is.

Another strain that goes through Hamlet, and a disturbing one, is the abuse by Hamlet of his former beloved and his mother, Ophelia and Gertrude. In his scenes with Ophelia, Hamlet is relentlessly cruel, charging her with a lustful nature, a dishonest heart, a dissembling appearance, and so on. He builds up, in scene three, to an utterly misogynistic rant, beginning, “I have heard of your paintings well enough.” Men in the English Renaissance were obsessed with women’s make-up, which they took to be a symbol of feminine wiles, excuses, manipulations, artifices, and hypocrisies. Shakespeare, especially, has a long rhetorical history with this line of vitriol; it shows up in many of his plays and features strongly in his *Sonnets*. Readers have long sympathized deeply with Ophelia’s position in the play; as far back as 1765, Samuel Johnson wrote, “[Hamlet] plays the madman most, when he treats Ophelia with so much rudeness, which seems to be useless and wanton cruelty.”

Up to this point, Ophelia has been given few lines and hardly a will or mind of her own; she has done her father’s will, her brother’s will, and Hamlet’s will. All three of the men in her life have defined her almost exclusively in terms of her sexuality and her beauty. Remember [Laertes](#)’ parting instruction to Ophelia, that she should not open her “chaste treasure” to Hamlet? Here, throughout Act Three, is Hamlet’s own iteration of the same patriarchal order, only now in a mocking, sarcastic, ghastly tone. The young and presumably innocent Ophelia is besieged and defined by fantasies of female lewdness and she has little power to do anything about it.

Hamlet’s conduct with his mother is also probably repulsive to most readers. Their encounter in scene four is full of even more ripe and fetid language of corrupt sexuality. Can you imagine saying to your parent, to your mother, “Nay, but to live / In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty.” This is ridiculously hurtful language, and seems motivated by something very deep and dark in our protagonist. Sigmund Freud claimed to have discovered the buried, primeval cause of Hamlet’s flare-up in his Oedipal theory, his assertion that all little boys go through an original sexual drama in their childhood, in which they want to murder their fathers and possess their mothers. Ensuing scholars have questioned this theory, but this scene provides continuing fuel for speculation as to the exact nature of Hamlet’s feelings toward his mother. Again, at the very least we can agree that he is here uselessly, excessively cruel. His cruelty toward both Ophelia and Gertrude seems at least as motivated by a deep-seated and virulent hatred of women as by the logic of the revenge plot. Act Three, then, gives us Hamlet as his

most sublime, in his meditations on death, and his most inexcusably depraved, in his cruelty toward the women.