

Hamlet Summary and Analysis of Act 2

Summary

Scene 1

Act Two begins with Polonius speaking to one of his servants, Reynaldo, about his son, Laertes, who has by this time returned to Paris. We see Polonius in the act of sending Reynaldo after Laertes to inquire into his son's conduct. He instructs Reynaldo very precisely in the method of obtaining this information. First, Reynaldo is to find out from strangers in Paris about the prominent Danes in the city without revealing that he has any particular attachment to Laertes. When Laertes' name comes up, Reynaldo is to pretend to have some distant knowledge of him, and is further to suggest that he knows of Laertes as something of a happy-go-lucky youth given to gambling, drinking, fencing, swearing, fighting, and whoring. By this path of insinuation, Polonius explains, Reynaldo will hear from his hypothetical Parisian interlocutor the unvarnished truth about Laertes' conduct in France. Having thus prepared Reynaldo to spy on his son, Polonius sends him off.

Ophelia enters, distraught. She tells her father that Hamlet has frightened her with his wild, unkempt appearance and deranged manners. After Ophelia describes Hamlet's behavior, she further reveals that, as per Polonius' orders, she has cut off all contact with Hamlet and has refused his letters. Polonius reasons, thus, that Hamlet's madness is the result of Ophelia's rejection. He had thought that Hamlet was only trifling with her, but it turns out (he now declares) that Hamlet was indeed deeply in love with Ophelia. Polonius hurries off to tell Claudius and Gertrude that he has discovered the reason for their son's odd behavior.

Scene 2

King Claudius has made plans of his own to discover the reasons for Hamlet's supposed madness. He has summoned two of Hamlet's school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, both to comfort his nephew-cum-son and to try to discover the reason for his distemper (so he says). The two scholars are only too happy to oblige in this task.

After Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave the royal presence, Polonius rushes in, announcing that he has found the reason for Hamlet's madness. Before he reveals his news, however, he entertains Claudius and Gertrude to hear from the two ambassadors to Norway, Voltemand and Cornelius, who have just returned. They report that the King of Norway, after looking into his nephew Fortinbras' actions, found out that he was indeed planning to invade Denmark. The King of Norway then rebuked Fortinbras and ordered him to abandon his plan of Danish conquest, which young Fortinbras agreed to do. Overjoyed at his nephew's acquiescence, Norway then rewarded Fortinbras with a generous annual allowance. Further, Norway granted Fortinbras leave to levy war against the Polish. Finally, the ambassadors report that

Norway seeks Claudius' permission to allow Fortinbras passage through Denmark in this proposed campaign against Poland. Claudius declares his approval of this message and says that he will consider its details anon.

Polonius steps forward to reveal his discovery. He tells the king and queen, in a very roundabout way, that he has discovered Hamlet's foiled love of Ophelia, and that he believes this lost love to be the root cause of Hamlet's madness. Claudius asks how they might prove this to be the case. Polonius has a plan. He offers to loose Ophelia on Hamlet while he is reading alone in the library. Meanwhile, he suggests, he and Claudius could hide behind a tapestry and observe the meeting. Claudius agrees.

Just then, Hamlet enters, reading. Gertrude and Claudius exit while Polonius attempts to speak to Hamlet. Hamlet plays with Polonius, mocking him, evading his questions, and turning his language inside out. Nevertheless, Polonius "reads between the lines," as it were, and interprets Hamlet's nonsensical replies as motivated by a broken heart. Polonius leaves to contrive the proposed meeting between Hamlet and his daughter.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter, surprising their friend Hamlet. The three friends banter philosophically for a good while before Hamlet asks the two why they have come to Elsinore. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to dodge this question, declaring that they have come for no other reason than to visit him. Hamlet, though, won't let them off the hook, and makes them admit that the king and queen sent for them. When they admit it, Hamlet also tells them why they were sent for – because he has been deeply melancholy, and has foregone his accustomed behavior. He sinks deeply into a speech detailing this misery.

Rosencrantz changes the subject. He tells Hamlet that he and Guildenstern passed a troop of players on their way to Elsinore. They gossip briefly about the city theaters the troop had left before coming to Denmark (presumably those of London). Soon the players arrive with a flourish. Polonius rushes back into the scene, bearing the already stale news that the players have arrived. Hamlet banter with Polonius in the same mocking vein as before until the players burst into court, at which point Hamlet rushes up to welcome them.

Hamlet insists upon hearing a speech straight away, and in particular requests a recitation based on a scene in Virgil's *Aeneid*, as related by Aeneas to Dido, recounting the death of Priam during the fall of Troy. Hamlet himself begins the speech and then cedes the floor to one of the players, who recites a long and fustian description of Priam's death by Pyrrhus' hand. The player goes on to speak of the wild grief of Hecuba, Priam's wife, after her husband has been killed. While speaking of her agony, the player begins to weep and shake. Polonius finally cuts him off and Hamlet agrees.

Before the players retire, however, Hamlet pulls the main player aside and asks him whether the company knows a certain play, "The Murder of Gonzago." The player says that they do, and Hamlet commissions it for the following night, saying that he

will write some speeches of his own to be inserted into the play as written. The player says that this would be fine and then takes his leave.

Left alone on stage, Hamlet muses about the strangeness of his situation. He asks himself, “How can this player be so filled with grief and rage over Priam and Hecuba, imaginary figures whom he doesn’t even know, while I, who have every reason to rage and grieve and seek bloody revenge, am weak, uncertain, and incapable of action?” He curses himself and his indecisiveness before cursing his murderous uncle in a rage. Having regained composure, Hamlet announces his plan to make sure that the ghost of his father is genuine – that the apparition was not some evil spirit sent to lure his soul to damnation. He declares his intention to stage a play exactly based on the murder of his father. While it is played he will observe Claudius. If the king is guilty, Hamlet figures, surely he will show this guilt when faced with the scene of the crime.

Analysis

This Act begins by establishing the atmosphere of political intrigue at Elsinore. Polonius plots to spy on Laertes by means of Reynaldo; Claudius and Gertrude plot to spy on Hamlet by means of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Norway foils Fortinbras’ plot to invade Denmark, only to assist him in a venture against Poland. It seems that everyone in Elsinore is plotting against everyone else. Significantly, though, these intrigues are represented as very clumsy, if not stupid. Polonius’ instructions to Reynaldo are so comically complex and so circuitously related that he himself loses track of them at one point. And his attempt to relate his great discovery of Hamlet’s broken heart to Claudius and Gertrude in the second scene does not go any better. “Brevity is the soul of wit,” he says (another instance of Polonius getting one of Shakespeare’s most famous and most often decontextualized lines); and he then proceeds to be anything but brief, anything but witty. Rather, he is dull, pedantic, self-important, pompous, flowery – and, more to the point, dead wrong. As in Act One, Polonius obviously fancies himself a great political mind. We might beg to differ.

Claudius, too, shows remarkable political stupidity in trusting to the espionage of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two rather clownish fellows whom Hamlet sees through instantly. Moreover, the Norway episode reveals Claudius’ blunt instincts quite clearly; he appears ready to agree to allow Fortinbras, whom only days before had planned to take over his realm, to march through Denmark on his way to conquer Poland. This is sort of like allowing Canada to march through the United States in order to attack Mexico. In other words, it makes no sense at all, strategically or logistically. Claudius and Polonius, try as they might to play the part of Machiavellian lords of state, are really quite out of their depth.

Hamlet, however, has found his element in Act Two. His language is dazzling, full of wild puns, inventive jokes, and succinct and strong observations – sheer mastery. His repartee with Polonius, for instance, plays brilliantly with the notion of “method in

madness” (as Polonius puts it). He plays the role of the melancholic madman almost as though Polonius is a gullible audience member. Hamlet toys with Polonius, leading the old fool to think just what he wants. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, too, are no match for the perceptiveness of Hamlet. He instantly plumbs the depths of their purpose, calling them out for royal spies. In short, Hamlet appears in this Act as the only truly gifted politician, the only accurate reader of men’s minds, in the whole of Elsinore. Why, then, is he so reluctant to act – so incapable, it seems, of action? Why does he not even mention revenge until the very last speech of the Act? It seems that Hamlet is so obsessed with contemplating the meaning of action that he is rendered unable to act himself.

This is the central question of *Hamlet*, of course, and one that has frustrated and intrigued readers for centuries. The transition from the Hamlet of Act One Scene Five, so willing and eager to kill Claudius, to the Hamlet of Act Two Scene Two, where he is witty and evasive and ultimately impotent, is really quite absurd. It’s almost as though we’ve suddenly landed in another play – one not about revenge, but about something else, about madness or politics or about the very meaning of acting.

This theme comes to a head, of course, with the appearance of the troop of players. The handling of the players in *Hamlet* places the play firmly in the genre of “metatheater,” or theater about theater. The scenes with the players are full of in-jokes about theatrical happenings in Shakespeare’s own day – the rise in popularity of boy acting troops, for instance. In another winking moment in Act Three, Polonius declares that he was an actor in his younger days. “I did enact Julius Caesar,” he says. “I was killed i’th’Capitol. Brutus killed me.” In fact, scholars surmise, Shakespeare staged *Hamlet* immediately following his own *Julius Caesar*. Here are two moments among many, then, where Shakespeare refers outside of the play, to the reality of London stage culture (where, in fact, the play is *actually* taking place, at the time of its first performances). What is he up to with these references? Are they simply jokes, or do they point to some deeper concerns?

It seems that Shakespeare is blurring the lines between theatricality and reality. He insists that we see his play as occurring at the same time in the fantasy world of Elsinore and in the actual world of the Globe Theater in London in the early seventeenth century (which for us, at our historical remove, is yet another layer of fantasy). He writes elsewhere, in *As You Like It*, “All the world’s a stage.” In *Hamlet*, he takes this notion a step farther, giving us a play that presses relentlessly on the primordial relationship between acting in the theater and acting in “real life.” Is there ever a moment when we, as human beings, are not “playing a role” in one way or another? Are the tears that we shed for the loss of our loved ones any more genuine than the tears that an actor sheds for the imaginary death of Priam, the imaginary grief of Hecuba? If so, how? Why?

And this, of course, is the subject of Hamlet’s second soliloquy, which closes the Act. “What’s Hecuba to him or he to her?” he asks of the player who has just wept for his

fictional subject. Shakespeare has layered this speech so carefully and so vertiginously that it might be helpful simply to bracket out the several planes of meaning on which it operates. First, Hamlet speaks of the man on stage who has shown such an outpouring of emotion for Hecuba while he, Hamlet, who has every reason to show such grief himself, remains cold and reluctant to act. But on another level, "Hamlet" himself is an actor on stage, and has no more reason to wail and grieve and gnash his teeth than the player who spoke of Hecuba does. While he is philosophizing about the nature of pretend grief versus real grief, all is ultimately pretend. There is no Hamlet. There was no poisoning, not really. On this second level, it seems almost as though Hamlet "knows" that he is in a play. He does not hurry along the revenge because he knows there is nothing really to revenge; nothing really happened; it has all been staged. Of course, he can't really "know" this, but Shakespeare creates the effect of self-awareness and self-doubt that reaches beyond the limitations of the stage. Somehow he is able to explore these philosophical questions while maintaining a compelling plotline.

By the way, this notion of *Hamlet* as "metatheater" is explored, among several other places, in Lionel Abel's book, *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form*