

AP English Notes
November 11, 2004

Summary: Act I. Scene 3

Laertes prepares to leave for France. Bidding his sister, Ophelia, farewell, he 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. Since Hamlet is responsible not only for his own feelings but for his position in the state, it may be impossible for him to marry her. Ophelia agrees to keep Laertes' advice as a "watchman" close to her heart but urges him not to give her advice that he does not practice himself. Laertes reassures her that he will take care of himself.

Polonius enters to bid his son farewell. He tells Laertes that he must hurry to his ship but then delays him by giving him a great deal of advice about how to behave with integrity and practicality. Polonius admonishes Laertes to keep his thoughts to himself, restrain himself from acting on rash desires, and treat people with familiarity but not with vulgarity. He advises him to hold on to his old friends but be slow to embrace new friends; to be slow to quarrel but to fight boldly if the need arises; to listen more than he talks; to dress richly but not gaudily; to refrain from borrowing or lending money; and, finally, to be true to himself above all things.

Laertes leaves, bidding farewell to Ophelia once more. Alone with his daughter, Polonius asks Ophelia what Laertes told her before he left. Ophelia says that it was "something touching the Lord Hamlet" (1.2.89). Polonius asks her about her relationship with Hamlet. She tells him that Hamlet claims to love her. Polonius sternly echoes Laertes' advice, and forbids Ophelia to associate with Hamlet anymore. He tells her that Hamlet has deceived her in swearing his love, and that she should see through his false vows and rebuff his affections. Ophelia pledges to obey.

Summary: Act 1:3

It is now night. Hamlet keeps watch outside the castle with **Horatio** and **Marcellus**, waiting in the cold for the ghost to appear. Shortly after midnight, trumpets and gunfire 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 this sort of custom is better broken than kept, saying that the king's revelry makes Denmark a laughingstock among other nations and lessens the Danes' otherwise impressive achievements. Then the ghost appears, and Hamlet calls out to it. The ghost beckons Hamlet to follow out into the night. His companions urge him not to follow, begging him to consider that the ghost might lead him toward harm.

Hamlet himself is unsure whether his father's apparition is truly the king's spirit or an evil demon, but he declares that he cares nothing for his life and that, if his soul is immortal, the ghost can do nothing to harm his soul. He follows after the apparition and disappears into the darkness. Horatio and Marcellus, stunned, declare that the event bodes ill for the nation. Horatio proclaims that heaven will oversee the outcome of Hamlet's encounter with the ghost, but Marcellus says that they should follow and try to protect him themselves. After a moment, Horatio and Marcellus follow after Hamlet and the ghost.

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Analysis: Act 1.3-4

Neither a borrower nor a lender be:
For loan oft loses both itself and friend;
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.

The active, headstrong, and affectionate Laertes contrasts powerfully with the contemplative Hamlet, becoming one of Hamlet's most important foils in the play. (A foil is a character who by contrast emphasizes the distinct characteristics of another character.) As the plot progresses, Hamlet's hesitancy to undertake his father's revenge will markedly contrast with Laertes' furious willingness to avenge his father's death (3.4). Act 1, scene 3, serves to introduce this contrast. Since the last scene portrayed the bitterly fractured state of Hamlet's family, by comparison, the bustling normalcy of Polonius's household appears all the more striking. Polonius's long speech advising Laertes on how to behave in France is self-consciously paternal, almost excessively so, as if to hammer home the contrast between the fatherly love Laertes enjoys and Hamlet's state of loss and estrangement. Hamlet's conversation with the ghost of his father in Act I, scene v will be a grotesque recapitulation of the father-to-son speech, with vastly darker content.

As in the previous scene, when **Claudius** and **Gertrude** advised Hamlet to stay in Denmark and cast off his mourning, the third scene develops through a motif of family members giving one another advice, or orders masked as advice. While Polonius and Laertes seem to have a relatively normal father-son relationship, their relationships with Ophelia seem somewhat troubling. They each assume a position of unquestioned authority over her, Polonius treating his daughter as though her feelings are irrelevant ("Affection! pooh! you speak like a green girl") and Laertes treating her as though her judgment is suspect (1.3.101). Further, Laertes' speech to Ophelia is laced with forceful sexual imagery, referring to her "chaste treasure open" to Hamlet's "unmaster" importunity (1.3.31-32). Combined with the extremely affectionate interplay between the brother and sister, this sexual imagery creates an incestuous undertone, echoing the incest of Claudius's marriage to his brother's wife and Hamlet's passionate, conflicting feelings for his mother.

The short transitional scene that follows serves a number of important purposes, as Shakespeare begins to construct a unified world out of the various environments of the play. Whereas the play up to this point has been divided into a number of separate settings, this scene begins to blend together elements of different settings. Hamlet, for instance, has been associated with the world inside Elsinore, but he now makes his appearance in the darkness outside it. Likewise, the terror outside the castle so far has been quite separate from the revelry inside, but now the sound of Claudius's carousing leaks through the walls and reaches Hamlet and his companions in the night.

Act 1, scene 4, also continues the development of the motif of the ill health of Denmark. Hamlet

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views the king's carousing as a further sign of the state's corruption, commenting that alcohol makes the bad aspects of a person's character overwhelm all of his or her good qualities. And the appearance of the ghost is again seen as a sign of Denmark's decay, this time by Marcellus, who famously declares, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.67).

Finally, the reappearance of the still-silent ghost brings with it a return of the theme of spirituality, truth, and uncertainty, or, more specifically, the uncertainty of truth in a world of spiritual ambiguity. Since Hamlet does not know what lies beyond death, he cannot tell whether the ghost is truly his father's spirit or whether it is an evil demon come from hell to tempt him toward destruction. This uncertainty about the spiritual world will lead Hamlet to wrenching considerations of moral truth. These considerations have already been raised by Hamlet's desire to kill himself in Act I, scene ii and will be explored more directly in the scenes to come.