

AP English Notes
November 9, 2004

Hamlet Summary
Act One, Scene One

Francisco, a soldier standing watch outside the gates of Elsinore Castle in Denmark, is met by Barnardo who has arrived to replace him. They are soon joined by Marcellus, another guard, and Horatio. Horatio is a scholar who speaks Latin, and he has been brought along because Barnardo and Marcellus claim they have seen a ghost.

While Barnardo describes to Horatio exactly what he has seen, the ghost appears in front of them. Horatio tries to speak with the ghost in Latin, saying, "Stay, speak, speak, I charge thee speak" (1.1.49), but the ghost remains silent and then leaves.

Horatio tells Barnardo that the ghost looks like the deceased King Hamlet, also known as Old Hamlet. Horatio sees that the ghost was dressed the same way as King Hamlet was when he defeated King Fortinbras of Norway.

The story is that King Hamlet went to Norway and fought Fortinbras in single combat. The loser agreed to yield all his land to the other king. However, in the time since King Hamlet died, the son of King Fortinbras, known as young Fortinbras, has been gathering together troops and is threatening to attack Denmark.

The ghost enters a second time and Horatio again begs it to speak to him. Just as it seems the ghost is about to say something, a cock crows and the ghost disappears.

Horatio tells Marcellus that he will inform young Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark and the son of King Hamlet, that a ghost keeps appearing in the shape of his father. Marcellus knows where young Hamlet is and leaves with Horatio to find him.

Act One, Scene Two

King Claudius, who has assumed the throne since his brother King Hamlet died, is accompanied by Queen Gertrude and other lords and attendants in Elsinore Castle. He addresses (1st order of business) the people, telling them that although his brother's death is fresh in their minds, it is time for them to celebrate his royal marriage to Queen Gertrude, who was also his brother's former wife.

He further informs (2nd order of business) the people that young Fortinbras of Norway has assembled armies against Denmark. In response to this threat, Claudius sends two men, Voltmand and Cornelius, as messengers to the uncle of young Fortinbras with a letter in which he asks the older uncle to stop young Fortinbras from attempting to attack Denmark.

Claudius next (3rd order of business) asks a young nobleman named Laertes why he has requested an audience. Laertes informs him that although he has been fulfilled his duties and

AP English Notes
November 9, 2004

attended the coronation in Denmark, he would rather return to France. Claudius asks Polonius, Laertes' father, if he has given permission for his son to go. Polonius assents, and Laertes is allowed to leave Denmark.

Turning to Hamlet (fourth order of business), Claudius asks his nephew why he is still in mourning for his father's death, hinting that Hamlet might only be pretending to be grief-stricken. Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, also asks him why he still dresses in black clothing. Hamlet replies that his grief is quite real and that he will continue grieving. Claudius tells him it is unnatural for a man to remain sorrowful for such a long time. Both Claudius and Gertrude then beg Hamlet to stay with them in Denmark instead of returning to Wittenberg where his university is located. Hamlet agrees to stay, and watches as everyone leaves the hall to celebrate his uncle's and his mother's marriage.

He is upset about the fact that his mother married Claudius within less than two months after the death of King Hamlet. Review the soliloquy that Hamlet gives in this scene; please notice his depression with "the melt and dissolve into dew." Hamlet says, "O most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (1.2.157). He is interrupted by the arrival of Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus, who have come to tell him about the ghost they have seen.

Horatio tells Hamlet about seeing the ghost of King Hamlet. Hamlet asks them if they have the watch again that night, and Barnardo says they do. At this information, Hamlet agrees to join them that night in order to see the ghost and hopefully to speak with the ghost.