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Hamlet act 2 scene 1 summary thoughtco

Polonius sends Reynaldo to France to monitor his son's behavior. Hamlet has visited Ophelia in her room with her clothes in disarray. He grabbed her wrists and stared at her. Ophelia tells her father, that she is convinced that he is sick with love for her. He manages to meet the King. Gertrude asks friends at Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern schools to encourage his melancholy son. The king's father and Ophelia hide and watch Hamlet and Ophelia speak. Ophelia tries to return the gifts Hamlet gave her. He tells her I should go to a convent. Do you know they're being watched? Hamlet asks a traveling company of players to deliver one of his favorite speeches. Once they're done, he asks them to spin up Gonzago's Murder the next night. All images © 2009 Illuminations/Royal Shakespeare Company Next: Act 3Back to top of page As Hamlet returns to Elsinore sees two men digging a grave. As the funeral feast approaches it becomes apparent, it is Ophelia's tomb. The two young men argue about who loved Ophelia the most. Laertes is even more determined to carry out the plan to kill Hamlet. The fencing match begins and Hamlet wins the first two rounds. Claudio didn't expect Hamlet to fight so well and offer him the poisoned drink. Hamlet refuses the drink. Instead, Gertrude drinks Hamlet from the poisoned cup. Hamlet is cut by the laertes sword and with anger cuts him. The Queen's death encourages Laertes to reveal Claudio's plot. Hamlet takes revenge on Claudio. He stabs him with the poisoned sword and makes him drink the poison. Laertes, Hamlet and Claudio die, leaving Horatio to mourn his loss. All images © 2009 Illuminations/Royal Shakespeare Company Back to the top of the page In order to continue enjoying our site, we ask you to confirm your identity as a human. Thank you very much for your cooperation. The second act begins with Polonius talking to one of his servants, Reynaldo, about his son, Laertes, who by then has returned to Paris. We see Polonius in the act of sending Reynaldo after Laertes to investigate his son's behavior. It instructs Reynaldo very precisely in the method of obtaining this information. First, Reynaldo must find out from strangers in Paris about prominent Danes in the city without revealing that he has any particular attachment to Laertes. When Laertes' name appears, Reynaldo pretends to have a distant knowledge of him, and it is also to suggest that he knows Laertes as something of a happy and fortunate young man given to gambling, drinking, fencing, swearing, fighting and doing things. By this path of innuendo, explains Polonius, Reynaldo will hear from his hypothetical Parisian interlocutor the unrepainted truth about Laertes' conduct in France. prepared so Reynaldo to spy on his son, Polonius sends him. Ophelia comes in, distraught. She tells her father that Hamlet has her with her wild appearance, careless and deranged manners. After Ophelia describes Hamlet's behavior, she further reveals that, under Polonius' orders, she has cut off all contact with Hamlet and rejected her letters. Polonius must therefore be that Hamlet's madness is the result of Ophelia's rejection. He had thought Hamlet was only playing with her, but it turns out (now declares) that Hamlet was deeply in love with Ophelia. Polonius rushes to tell Claudio and Gertrude that he has discovered the reason for his son's strange behavior. Scene 2Elking Claudio has made his own plans to discover the reasons for Hamlet's alleged madness. He has summoned two of Hamlet's school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, both to comfort his nephew-son and to try to find out the reason for his distemper (he says so). The two scholars are too happy to please in this task. After Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave the actual presence, Polonius rushes, announcing that he has found the reason for Hamlet's madness. Before he reveals his news, however, he pleads with Claudio and Gertrude to listen to the two ambassadors to Norway, Voltemand and Cornelius, who have just returned. They report that the king of Norway, after examining the actions of his nephew Fortinbras, learned that he was actually planning to invade Denmark. The king of Norway then rebuked Fortinbras and ordered him to abandon his Danish conquest plan, which the young Fortinbras agreed to do. Cheerful at his nephew's accency, Norway then rewarded Fortinbras with a generous annual allowance. In addition, Norway granted Fortinbras permission to impose war on Poles. Finally, the ambassadors report that Norway is requesting Claudio's permission to allow Fortinbras to pass through Denmark in this proposed campaign against Poland. Claudio declares his approval of this message and says he will consider his anon details. Polonius one step ahead to reveal his discovery. He tells the king and queen, in a very round way, that he has discovered Hamlet's frustrated love for Ophelia, and that he believes that this lost love is the root cause of Hamlet's madness. Claudio asks how they could prove that this is the case. Polonius has a plan. He offers to lose Ophelia over Hamlet while reading alone in the library. Meanwhile, he suggests, he and Claudius could hide behind a tapestry and observe the meeting. Claudio agrees. At that moment, Hamlet comes in, reading. Gertrude and Claudio leave while Polonius tries to talk to Hamlet. Hamlet plays with Polonius, mocking him, evading his questions and turning his language from the inside out. However, Polonius reads between the lines, so to speak, and interprets the answers sense of Hamlet as motivated by a broken heart. Polonius leaves to invent the proposed meeting between Hamlet and his daughter. Rosencrantz Rosencrantz Guildenstern enter, surprising his friend Hamlet. The three friends joke philosophically for a 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, however, does not leave them off-hook, and makes them admit that the king and queen sent them. When they admit it, Hamlet also tells them why they were sent, because he has been deeply melancholy, and has renounced his accustomed behavior. It sinks deep 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 theatres of the city that the troops had left before coming to Denmark (presumably those in London). Soon the players arrive with a flourish. Polonius returns to the scene, with the already decayed news that the players have arrived. Hamlet jokes with Polonius in the same mocking vein as before until the players broke into the court, at which point Hamlet rushes to welcome them. Hamlet insists on hearing a speech immediately, and in particular asks for a recitation based on a message scene by Virgil, as Aeneas recounted with Dido, recounting Pram's death during the fall of Troy. Hamlet himself begins the speech and then yields the ground to one of the players, who recites a long and fussian description of Priam's death by Pyrrhus' hand. The player continues to talk about the savage pain of Hecuba. Priam's wife, after her husband has been killed. As he talks about his agony, the player begins to cry and tremble. Polonius finally cuts it and Hamlet agrees. Before the players retire, however, Hamlet pushes the main player away and asks if the company knows a particular play, The Murder of Gonzago. The player says they do, and Hamlet commissions it for the next night, saying he will write some speeches of his own to be inserted into the play as written. The player says this would be fine and then takes his license. Left alone on stage, Hamlet reflects on the strangeness of his situation. He wonders: How can this player be so full of pain and rage about Priam and Hecuba, imaginary figures he doesn't even know, while I, who have every reason to infuriate and cry and seek bloody revenge, am I weak, uncertain and unable to act? He curses himself and his indecision before cursing his murderous uncle in anger. Having regained his composure, Hamlet announces his plan to make sure that his father's ghost is genuine -- that the apparition was not an evil spirit sent to to his soul to condemnation. He declares his intention to stage a work exactly based on his father's murder. While playing, he'll watch Claudio. If the king is Hamlet believes, he'll probably show this guilt when he faces the crime scene. AnalysisThis Law begins by establishing the atmosphere of political intrigue in Elsinore. Polonius plans to spy on Laertes through Reynaldo; Claudio and Gertrude plan to spy on Hamlet through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Norway thwarts Fortinbras' plot to invade Denmark, only to help him on an adventure against Poland. Looks like everyone in Elsinore is conspiring against everyone else. Significantly, however, these intrigues are depicted as very clumsy, if not stupid. Polonius' instructions to Reynaldo are so comically complex and so troubling that he himself loses track of them at any given time. And his attempt to relate his great discovery of Hamlet's broken heart to Claudio and Gertrude in the second scene is no better. Brevity is the soul of ingenuity, he says (another case of Polonius getting one of Shakespeare's most famous and often decontextualized lines); and then proceeds to be anything but brief, anything but ingenious. Rather, it's boring, peedant, self-important, pompous, flowery – and, more to the point, dead badly. As in the first act, Polonius obviously thinks he's a great political mind. We could beg us to disagree. Claudio, too, shows remarkable political stupidity by relying on the espionage of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two fellow clowns hamlet sees instantly. In addition, the Norwegian episode reveals Claudio's blunt instincts quite clearly; he seems willing to accept allowing Fortinbras, whom only a few days earlier had planned to seize his kingdom, to march through Denmark on his way to Poland. This is like allowing Canada to march through the United States to attack Mexico. In other words, it doesn't make any sense, strategically or logistically. Claudius and Polonius, try as you can to play the role of the Machiavellian state lords, are really out of their depth. Hamlet, however, has found its element in the second act. His language is

dazzling, full of wild word games, inventive jokes and succinct and strong observations: mastery. His distribution with Polonius, for example, plays brilliantly with the notion of method in madness (as Polonius puts it). He plays the role of the melancholy madman almost as if Polonius were a believer member of the audience. Hamlet plays with Polonius, leading the old fool to think just what he wants. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, too, are no match for Hamlet's perception. He immediately plumbs the depths of his purpose, calling them the real spies. In short, Hamlet appears in this law as the only truly gifted politician, the only accurate reader of men's minds, all over Elsinore. Why, then, is he so reluctant to act, so incapable, apparently, of action? Why don't you even mention revenge until the last speech of the Law? It seems that Hamlet is so obsessed with contemplating the meaning of the action that he becomes unable to act on his own. This is the central question of Hamlet, of course, and it has frustrated and intrigued readers for centuries. The transition from the Hamlet of Act Five, so willing and eager to kill Claudius, to the Hamlet of the Second Act, where he is witty and evasive and ultimately powerless, is really quite absurd. It's almost as if 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 player troop. The handling of the players in Hamlet places the play firmly in the genre of metateater, or theater on theater. The scenes with the players are full of jokes about theatrical events in Shakespeare's own days, increasing the popularity of the troops acting, for example. At another point of victory in the third act, Polonio declares that he was an actor in his younger days. I promulgated Julius Caesar, he says. I was killed at the Capitol. Brutus killed me. In fact, the scholars assume, Shakespeare staged Hamlet immediately after his own Julius Caesar. Here are two moments among many, then, where Shakespeare refers outside the play, to the reality of London's stage culture (where, in fact, the play is taking place, at the time of his first performances). What are you up to with these references? Are they just jokes, or do they point to some deeper concerns? It seems Shakespeare is blurring the lines between theatricality and reality. He insists that we see his work happen at the same time in Elsinore's fantasy world and in the real world of London's Globe Theater in the early 17th century (which for us, in our historical discard, is another layer of fantasy). Write elsewhere, in As You Like It, Everyone is a stage. In Hamlet, take it a step further, giving us a play that relentlessly presses on the primordial relationship between acting in theater and performing in real life. Is there a time when we, as human beings, are not playing a role one way or another? Are the tears we shed for the loss of our loved ones more genuine than the tears an actor sheds over the imaginary death of Priam, Hecuba's imaginary pain? If so, how? Why? And this, of course, is the subject of Hamlet's second soliloquy, which closes the law. What is Hecuba to him or him to her? he asks the player who has just cried about his fictional subject. Shakespeare has stratified this speech so carefully and dizzily that it might be useful to simply put brackets the various planes of meaning on which it operates. Operates. Hamlet talks about the man on stage who has shown such a spill of emotion for Hecuba while he, Hamlet, who has every reason to show such pain himself, remains cold and reluctant to act. But on another level, Hamlet himself is an actor on stage, and has no more reason to lament and cry and grind his teeth than the player who talked about Hecuba. While he's philosophating about the nature of pretending pain against real pain, it's all finally pretending. There's no Hamlet. There was no poisoning, not really. On this second level, it seems almost as if Hamlet knows he's in a play. He does not rush along revenge because he knows there is nothing really to take revenge; nothing happened; everything has been staged. Of course, he can't really know this, but Shakespeare creates the effect of self-awareness and doubt that goes beyond the limitations of the stage. Somehow he is able to explore these philosophical questions while maintaining a compelling plot. By the way, this notion of Hamlet as a metateater is explored, among other places, in Lionel Abel's book Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form. Way.

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