

### *Act III, scene i*

#### *Summary: Act III, scene i*

Claudius and Gertrude discuss Hamlet's behavior with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who say they have been unable to learn the cause of his melancholy. They tell the king and queen about Hamlet's enthusiasm for the players. Encouraged, Gertrude and Claudius agree that they will see the play that evening. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave, and Claudius orders Gertrude to leave as well, saying that he and Polonius intend to spy on Hamlet's confrontation with Ophelia. Gertrude exits, and Polonius directs Ophelia to walk around the lobby. Polonius hears Hamlet coming, and he and the king hide.

Hamlet enters, speaking thoughtfully and agonizingly to himself about the question of whether to commit suicide to end the pain of experience: "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (III.i.58). He says that the miseries of life are such that no one would willingly bear them, except that they are afraid of "something after death" (III.i.80). Because we do not know what to expect in the afterlife, we would rather "bear those ills we have," Hamlet says, "than fly to others that we know not of" (III.i.83–84). In mid-thought, Hamlet sees Ophelia approaching. Having received her orders from Polonius, she tells him that she wishes to return the tokens of love he has given her. Angrily, Hamlet denies having given her anything; he laments the dishonesty of beauty, and claims both to have loved Ophelia once and never to have loved her at all. Bitterly commenting on the wretchedness of humankind, he urges Ophelia to enter a nunnery rather than become a "breeder of sinners" (III.i.122–123). He criticizes women for making men behave like monsters and for contributing to the world's dishonesty by painting their faces to appear more beautiful than they are. Working himself into a rage, Hamlet denounces Ophelia, women, and humankind in general, saying that he wishes to end all marriages. As he storms out, Ophelia mourns the "noble mind" that has now lapsed into apparent madness (III.i.149).

The king and Polonius emerge from behind the tapestry. Claudius says that Hamlet's strange behavior has clearly not been caused by love for Ophelia and that his speech

does not seem like the speech of insanity. He says that he fears that melancholy sits on something dangerous in Hamlet's soul like a bird sits on her egg, and that he fears what will happen when it hatches. He declares that he will send Hamlet to England, in the hope that a change of scenery might help him get over his troubles. Polonius agrees that this is a good idea, but he still believes that Hamlet's agitation comes from loving Ophelia. He asks Claudius to send Hamlet to Gertrude's chamber after the play, where Polonius can hide again and watch unseen; he hopes to learn whether Hamlet is really mad with love. Claudius agrees, saying that "[m]adness in great ones" must be carefully watched (III.i.187).

### *Analysis*

"To be, or not to be" is the most famous line in English literature. What does it mean? Why are these words and what follows special?

One reason is that they are a stunning example of Shakespeare's ability to make his characters seem three-dimensional. The audience senses that there is more to Hamlet's words than meets the ear—that there is something behind his words that is never spoken. Or, to put it another way, the audience witnesses signs of something within Hamlet's mind that even he isn't aware of. Hamlet is a fictional character who seems to possess a subconscious mind. How does Shakespeare manage to accomplish this?

In the first place, Hamlet doesn't talk directly about what he's really talking about. When he questions whether it is better "to be, or not to be," the obvious implication is, "Should I kill myself?" The entire soliloquy strongly suggests that he is toying with suicide and perhaps trying to work up his courage to do it. But at no point does he say that he is in pain or discuss why he wants to kill himself. In fact, he never says "I" or "me" in the entire speech. He's not trying to "express" himself at all; instead, he poses the question as a matter of philosophical debate. When he claims that everybody would commit suicide if they weren't uncertain about the afterlife, it sounds as if he's making an argument to convince an imaginary listener about an

abstract point rather than directly addressing how the question applies to him. Now, it's perfectly ordinary for characters in plays to say something other than what they mean to other characters (this suggests that they are consciously hiding their true motives), but Hamlet does it when he's talking to himself. This creates the general impression that there are things going on in Hamlet's mind that he can't think about directly.

While we're on the subject of what's going on inside Hamlet's mind, consider his encounter with Ophelia. This conversation, closely watched by Claudius and Polonius, is, in fact, a test. It's supposed to establish whether Hamlet's madness stems from his lovesickness over Ophelia. Before we, the audience, see this encounter, we already think we know more than Claudius does: we know that Hamlet is only acting crazy, and that he's doing it to hide the fact that he's plotting against (or at least investigating) his uncle. Therefore, it can't be true that he's acting mad because of his love for Ophelia. But witnessing Hamlet's encounter with her throws everything we think we know into question.

Does Hamlet mean what he says to Ophelia? He says that he did love her once but that he doesn't love her now. There are several problems with concluding that Hamlet says the opposite of what he means in order to appear crazy. For one thing, if he really does love her, this is unnecessarily self-destructive behavior. It's unnecessary because it doesn't accomplish very much; that is, it doesn't make Claudius suspect him less. His professions of former love make him appear fickle, or emotionally withdrawn, rather than crazy.

Is Hamlet really crazy or just pretending? He announced ahead of time that he was going to act crazy, so it's hard to conclude that he (coincidentally) really went mad right after saying so. But his behavior toward Ophelia is both self-destructive and fraught with emotional intensity. It doesn't obviously further his plans. Moreover, his bitterness against Ophelia, and against women in general, resonates with his general discontentedness about the state of the world, the same discontentedness that he

expresses when he thinks no one is watching. There is a passionate intensity to his unstable behavior that keeps us from viewing it as fake.

Perhaps it is worthwhile to ask this question: if a person in a rational state of mind decides to act as if he is crazy, to abuse the people around him regardless of whether he loves those people or hates them, and to give free expression to all of his most antisocial thoughts, when he starts to carry those actions out, will it even be possible to say at what point he stops pretending to be crazy and starts actually being crazy?

### *Act III, scene ii*

#### *Summary:*

That evening, in the castle hall now doubling as a theater, Hamlet anxiously lectures the players on how to act the parts he has written for them. Polonius shuffles by with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Hamlet dispatches them to hurry the players in their preparations. Horatio enters, and Hamlet, pleased to see him, praises him heartily, expressing his affection for and high opinion of Horatio's mind and manner, especially Horatio's qualities of self-control and reserve. Having told Horatio what he learned from the ghost—that Claudius murdered his father—he now asks him to watch Claudius carefully during the play so that they might compare their impressions of his behavior afterward. Horatio agrees, saying that if Claudius shows any signs of guilt, he will detect them.

The trumpets play a Danish march as the audience of lords and ladies begins streaming into the room. Hamlet warns Horatio that he will begin to act strangely. Sure enough, when Claudius asks how he is, his response seems quite insane: "Excellent, i' faith; of the chameleon's dish: I eat the air, promise-crammed" (III.ii.84–86). Hamlet asks Polonius about his history as an actor and torments Ophelia with a string of erotic puns.

The players enter and act out a brief, silent version of the play to come called a "dumbshow." In the dumbshow, a king and queen display their love. The queen leaves the king to sleep, and while he is sleeping, a man murders him by pouring poison into his ear. The murderer tries to seduce the queen, who gradually accepts his advances.

The players begin to enact the play in full, and we learn that the man who kills the king is the king's nephew. Throughout, Hamlet keeps up a running commentary on the characters and their actions, and continues to tease Ophelia with oblique sexual references. When the murderer pours the poison into the sleeping king's ear, Claudius rises and cries out for light. Chaos ensues as the play comes to a sudden halt, the

torches are lit, and the king flees the room, followed by the audience. When the scene quiets, Hamlet is left alone with Horatio.

Hamlet and Horatio agree that the king's behavior was telling. Now extremely excited, Hamlet continues to act frantic and scatterbrained, speaking glibly and inventing little poems. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive to tell Hamlet that he is wanted in his mother's chambers. Rosencrantz asks again about the cause of Hamlet's "distemper," and Hamlet angrily accuses the pair of trying to play him as if he were a musical pipe. Polonius enters to escort Hamlet to the queen. Hamlet says he will go to her in a moment and asks for a moment alone. He steels himself to speak to his mother, resolving to be brutally honest with her but not to lose control of himself: "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (III.ii.366).

### *Analysis*

In the first two scenes of Act III, Hamlet and Claudius both devise traps to catch one another's secrets: Claudius spies on Hamlet to discover the true nature of his madness, and Hamlet attempts to "catch the conscience of the king" in the theater (III.i.582). The play-within-a-play tells the story of Gonzago, the Duke of Vienna, and his wife, Baptista, who marries his murdering nephew, Lucianus. Hamlet believes that the play is an opportunity to establish a more reliable basis for Claudius's guilt than the claims of the ghost. Since he has no way of knowing whether to believe a member of the spirit world, he tries to determine whether Claudius is guilty by reading his behavior for signs of a psychological state of guilt.

Although Hamlet exults at the success of his stratagem, interpreting Claudius's interruption isn't as simple as it seems. In the first place, Claudius does not react to the dumbshow, which exactly mimics the actions of which the ghost accuses Claudius. Claudius reacts to the play itself, which, unlike the dumbshow, makes it clear that the king is murdered by his nephew. Does Claudius react to being confronted with his own crimes, or to a play about uncle-killing sponsored by his crazy nephew? Or does he simply have indigestion?

Hamlet appears more in control of his own behavior in this scene than in the one before, as shown by his effortless manipulations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and his frank conversation with Horatio. He even expresses admiration and affection for Horatio's calm level-headedness, the lack of which is his own weakest point: "Give me that man / That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him / In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart, / As I do thee" (III.ii.64–67). In this scene he seems to prove that he is not insane after all, given the effortlessness with which he alternates between wild, erratic behavior and focused, sane behavior. He is excited but coherent during his conversation with Horatio before the play, but as soon as the king and queen enter, he begins to act insane, a sign that he is only pretending. His only questionable behavior in this scene arises in his crude comments to Ophelia, which show him capable of real cruelty. His misogyny has crossed rational bounds, and his every comment is laced with sexual innuendo. For instance, she comments, "You are keen, my lord, you are keen," complimenting him on his sharp intellect, and he replies, "It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge" (III.ii.227–228). His interchange with Ophelia is a mere prelude to the passionate rage he will unleash on Gertrude in the next scene.

### *Act III, scene iii*

#### *Summary:*

Elsewhere in the castle, King Claudius speaks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Badly shaken by the play and now considering Hamlet's madness to be dangerous, Claudius asks the pair to escort Hamlet on a voyage to England and to depart immediately. They agree and leave to make preparations. Polonius enters and reminds the king of his plan to hide in Gertrude's room and observe Hamlet's confrontation with her. He promises to tell Claudius all that he learns. When Polonius leaves, the king is alone, and he immediately expresses his guilt and grief over his sin. A brother's murder, he says, is the oldest sin and "hath the primal eldest curse upon't" (III.iii.37). He longs to ask for forgiveness, but says that he is unprepared to give up that which he gained by committing the murder, namely, the crown and the queen. He falls to his knees and begins to pray.

Hamlet slips quietly into the room and steels himself to kill the unseeing Claudius. But suddenly it occurs to him that if he kills Claudius while he is praying, he will end the king's life at the moment when he was seeking forgiveness for his sins, sending Claudius's soul to heaven. This is hardly an adequate revenge, Hamlet thinks, especially since Claudius, by killing Hamlet's father before he had time to make his last confession, ensured that his brother would not go to heaven. Hamlet decides to wait, resolving to kill Claudius when the king is sinning—when he is either drunk, angry, or lustful. He leaves. Claudius rises and declares that he has been unable to pray sincerely: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below" (III.iii.96).

#### *Analysis*

*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;  
And enterprises of great pith and moment,  
With this regard, their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action.*



In Act III, scene iii, Hamlet finally seems ready to put his desire for revenge into action. He is satisfied that the play has proven his uncle's guilt. When Claudius prays, the audience is given real certainty that Claudius murdered his brother: a full, spontaneous confession, even though nobody else hears it. This only heightens our sense that the climax of the play is due to arrive. But Hamlet waits.

On the surface, it seems that he waits because he wants a more radical revenge. Critics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge have been horrified by Hamlet's words here—he completely oversteps the bounds of Christian morality in trying to damn his opponent's soul as well as kill him. But apart from this ultraviolent posturing, Hamlet has once again avoided the imperative to act by involving himself in a problem of knowledge. Now that he's satisfied that he knows Claudius's guilt, he wants to know that his punishment will be sufficient. It may have been difficult to prove the former, but how can Hamlet ever hope to know the fate of Claudius's immortal soul?

Hamlet poses his desire to damn Claudius as a matter of fairness: his own father was killed without having cleansed his soul by praying or confessing, so why should his murderer be given that chance? But Hamlet is forced to admit that he doesn't really know what happened to his father, remarking "how his audit stands, who knows, save heaven?" (III.iv.82). The most he can say is that "in our circumstance and course of thought / 'Tis heavy with him" (III.iv.83–84). The Norton Shakespeare paraphrases "in our circumstance and course of thought" as "in our indirect and limited way of knowing on earth." Having proven his uncle's guilt to himself, against all odds, Hamlet suddenly finds something else to be uncertain about.

At this point, Hamlet has gone beyond his earlier need to know the facts about the crime, and he now craves metaphysical knowledge, knowledge of the afterlife and of God, before he is willing to act. The audience has had plenty of opportunity to see that Hamlet is fascinated with philosophical questions. In the case of the "to be, or not to be" soliloquy, we saw that his philosophizing can be a way for him to avoid thinking about or acknowledging something more immediately important (in that case, his urge

to kill himself). Is Hamlet using his speculations about Claudius's soul to avoid thinking about something in this case? Perhaps the task he has set for himself—killing another human being in cold blood—is too much for him to face. Whatever it is, the audience may once again get the sense that there is something more to Hamlet's behavior than meets the eye. That Shakespeare is able to convey this sense is a remarkable achievement in itself, quite apart from how we try to explain what Hamlet's unacknowledged motives might be.

### *Act III, scene iv*

#### *Summary:*

In Gertrude's chamber, the queen and Polonius wait for Hamlet's arrival. Polonius plans to hide in order to eavesdrop on Gertrude's confrontation with her son, in the hope that doing so will enable him to determine the cause of Hamlet's bizarre and threatening behavior. Polonius urges the queen to be harsh with Hamlet when he arrives, saying that she should chastise him for his recent behavior. Gertrude agrees, and Polonius hides behind an arras, or tapestry.

Hamlet storms into the room and asks his mother why she has sent for him. She says that he has offended his father, meaning his stepfather, Claudius. He interrupts her and says that she has offended his father, meaning the dead King Hamlet, by marrying Claudius. Hamlet accosts her with an almost violent intensity and declares his intention to make her fully aware of the profundity of her sin. Fearing for her life, Gertrude cries out. From behind the arras, Polonius calls out for help. Hamlet, realizing that someone is behind the arras and suspecting that it might be Claudius, cries, "How now! a rat?" (III.iv.22). He draws his sword and stabs it through the tapestry, killing the unseen Polonius. Gertrude asks what Hamlet has done, and he replies, "Nay, I know not: / Is it the king?" (III.iv.24). The queen says his action was a "rash and bloody" deed, and Hamlet replies that it was almost as rash and bloody as murdering a king and marrying his brother (III.iv.26–28). Disbelieving, the queen exclaims, "As kill a king!" and Hamlet replies that she heard him correctly (III.iv.29).

Hamlet lifts the arras and discovers Polonius's body: he has not killed the king and achieved his revenge but has murdered the relatively innocent Polonius. He bids the old man farewell, calling him an "intruding fool" (III.iv.30). He turns to his mother, declaring that he will wring her heart. He shows her a picture of the dead king and a picture of the current king, bitterly comments on the superiority of his father to his uncle, and asks her furiously what has driven her to marry a rotten man such as Claudius. She pleads with him to stop, saying that he has turned her eyes onto her soul

and that she does not like what she sees there. Hamlet continues to denounce her and rail against Claudius, until, suddenly, the ghost of his father again appears before him.

Hamlet speaks to the apparition, but Gertrude is unable to see it and believes him to be mad. The ghost intones that it has come to remind Hamlet of his purpose, that Hamlet has not yet killed Claudius and must achieve his revenge. Noting that Gertrude is amazed and unable to see him, the ghost asks Hamlet to intercede with her. Hamlet describes the ghost, but Gertrude sees nothing, and in a moment the ghost disappears. Hamlet tries desperately to convince Gertrude that he is not mad but has merely feigned madness all along, and he urges her to forsake Claudius and regain her good conscience. He urges her as well not to reveal to Claudius that his madness has been an act. Gertrude, still shaken from Hamlet's furious condemnation of her, agrees to keep his secret. He bids her goodnight, but, before he leaves, he points to Polonius's corpse and declares that heaven has "punished me with this, and this with me" (III.iv.158). Hamlet reminds his mother that he must sail to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he says he will regard with suspicion, as though they were poisonous snakes, since he assumes that their loyalties are with Claudius, not with him. Dragging Polonius's body behind him, Hamlet leaves his mother's room.

### *Analysis*

What is Hamlet trying to do in his confrontation with his mother? It is possible that he wants her to confirm her knowledge of Claudius's crime, to provide further proof of his guilt. Or it may be that Hamlet wants to know whether she was complicit in the crime. Or he may feel that he needs her on his side if he is to achieve justice. While all of these are possibilities, what Hamlet actually does is urge his mother to repent choosing Claudius over his own father. More specifically, he repeatedly demands that she avoid Claudius's bed. Actually, he's much more specific: he tells her not to let Claudius arouse her by fondling her neck, not to stay within his semen-infested sheets, and other shockingly graphic details.

This is another point in the play where audiences and readers have felt that there is more going on in Hamlet's brain than we can quite put our fingers on. Sigmund Freud wrote that Hamlet harbors an unconscious desire to sexually enjoy his mother. Freud maintained that all men unconsciously desire their mothers in this way, and he called this the "Oedipus Complex," after the character in Sophocles' play who unwittingly murders his father and has several children by his own mother. Whether or not Freud was right about this is as difficult to prove as any of the problems that Hamlet worries about, but his argument in regard to Hamlet is quite remarkable. He says that while Oedipus actually enacts this fantasy, Hamlet only betrays the unconscious desire to do so. Hamlet is thus a quintessentially modern person, because he has repressed desires.

Though Gertrude's speech in this scene is largely limited to brief reactions to Hamlet's lengthy denunciations of her, it is our most revealing look at her character. As the scene progresses, Gertrude goes through several states of feeling: she is haughty and accusatory at the beginning, then afraid that Hamlet will hurt her, shocked and upset when Hamlet kills Polonius, overwhelmed by fear and panic as Hamlet accosts her, and disbelieving when Hamlet sees the ghost. Finally, she is contrite toward her son and apparently willing to take his part and help him. For Gertrude, then, the scene progresses as a sequence of great shocks, each of which weakens her resistance to Hamlet's condemnation of her behavior. Of course, Gertrude is convinced mainly by Hamlet's insistence and power of feeling, illustrating what many readers have felt to be her central characteristic: her tendency to be dominated by powerful men and her need for men to show her what to think and how to feel.

This quality explains why Gertrude would have turned to Claudius so soon after her husband's death, and it also explains why she so quickly adopts Hamlet's point of view in this scene. Of course, the play does not specifically explain Gertrude's behavior. It is possible that she was complicit with Claudius in the murder of her husband, though that seems unlikely given her surprised reaction to Hamlet's accusation in this scene, and it is possible that she merely pretends to take Hamlet's

side to placate him, which would explain why she immediately reports his behavior to Claudius after promising not to do so. But another interpretation of Gertrude's character seems to be that she has a powerful instinct for self-preservation and advancement that leads her to rely too deeply on men. Not only does this interpretation explain her behavior throughout much of the play, it also links her thematically to Ophelia, the play's other important female character, who is also submissive and utterly dependent on men.

Hamlet's rash, murderous action in stabbing Polonius is an important illustration of his inability to coordinate his thoughts and actions, which might be considered his tragic flaw. In his passive, thoughtful mode, Hamlet is too beset by moral considerations and uncertainties to avenge his father's death by killing Claudius, even when the opportunity is before him. But when he does choose to act, he does so blindly, stabbing his anonymous "enemy" through a curtain. It is as if Hamlet is so distrustful of the possibility of acting rationally that he believes his revenge is more likely to come about as an accident than as a premeditated act.

When he sees Polonius's corpse, Hamlet interprets his misdeed within the terms of retribution, punishment, and vengeance: "Heaven hath pleased it so / To punish me with this, and this with me" (III.iv.157–158). Though Hamlet has not achieved his vengeance upon Claudius, he believes that God has used him as a tool of vengeance to punish Polonius's sins and punish Hamlet's sins by staining his soul with the murder.