Act I, scene ii

Summary

The morning after Horatio and the guardsmen see the ghost, King Claudius gives a speech to his courtiers,

explaining his recent marriage to Gertrude, his brother’s widow and the mother of Prince Hamlet. Claudius

says that he mourns his brother but has chosen to balance Denmark’s mourning with the delight of his marriage. He mentions that young Fortinbras has written to him, rashly demanding the surrender of the lands

King Hamlet won from Fortinbras’s father, and dispatches Cornelius and Voltimand with a message for the King of Norway, Fortinbras’s elderly uncle.

His speech concluded, Claudius turns to Laertes, the son of the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius. Laertes expresses his desire to return to France, where he was staying before his return to Denmark for Claudius’s

coronation. Polonius gives his son permission, and Claudius jovially grants Laertes his consent as well.

Turning to Prince Hamlet, Claudius asks why “the clouds still hang” upon him, as Hamlet is still wearing black mourning clothes (I.ii.66). Gertrude urges him to cast off his “nightly color,” but he replies bitterly that his inner sorrow is so great that his dour appearance is merely a poor mirror of it (I.ii.68). Affecting a tone of fatherly advice, Claudius declares that all fathers die, and all sons must lose their fathers. When a son loses a father, he is duty-bound to mourn, but to mourn for too long is unmanly and inappropriate. Claudius urges

Hamlet to think of him as a father, reminding the prince that he stands in line to succeed to the throne upon Claudius’s death.

With this in mind, Claudius says that he does not wish for Hamlet to return to school at Wittenberg (where he had been studying before his father’s death), as Hamlet has asked to do. Gertrude echoes her husband, professing a desire for Hamlet to remain close to her. Hamlet stiffly agrees to obey her. Claudius claims

to be so pleased by Hamlet’s decision to stay that he will celebrate with festivities and cannon fire, an old custom called “the king’s rouse.” Ordering Gertrude to follow him, he escorts her from the room, and the court follows. Alone, Hamlet exclaims that he wishes he could die, that he could evaporate and cease to exist. He wishes

bitterly that God had not made suicide a sin. Anguished, he laments his father’s death and his mother’s hasty marriage to his uncle. He remembers how deeply in love his parents seemed, and he curses the thought that now, not yet two month after his father’s death, his mother has married his father’s far inferior brother.

*a beast that wants discourse of reason,*

*Would have mourn’d longer,—married with mine uncle,*

*My father’s brother; but no more like my father*

*Than I to Hercules: within a month;*

*Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears*

*Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,*

*She married:— O, most wicked speed, to post*

*With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!*

Hamlet quiets suddenly as Horatio strides into the room, followed by Marcellus and Bernardo. Horatio was a close friend of Hamlet at the university in Wittenberg, and Hamlet, happy to see him, asks why he has left the school to travel to Denmark. Horatio says that he came to see King Hamlet’s funeral, to which Hamlet curtly replies that Horatio came to see his mother’s wedding. Horatio agrees that the one followed closely on the heels of the other. He then tells Hamlet that he, Marcellus, and Bernardo have seen what appears to be his father’s ghost. Stunned, Hamlet agrees to keep watch with them that night, in the hope that he will be able to

Speak to the apparition.

Analysis

Having established a dark, ghostly atmosphere in the first scene, Shakespeare devotes the second to the seemingly jovial court of the recently crowned King Claudius. If the area outside the castle is murky with the aura of dread and anxiety, the rooms inside the castle are devoted to an energetic attempt to banish that aura, as the king, the queen, and the courtiers desperately pretend that nothing is out of the ordinary. It is difficult to imagine a more convoluted family dynamic or a more out-of-balance political situation, but Claudius nevertheless preaches an ethic of balance to his courtiers, pledging to sustain and combine the sorrow he feels for

the king’s death and the joy he feels for his wedding in equal parts.

But despite Claudius’s efforts, the merriment of the court seems superficial. This is largely due to the fact that the idea of balance Claudius pledges to follow is unnatural. How is it possible to balance sorrow for a brother’s death with happiness for having married a dead brother’s wife? Claudius’s speech is full of contradictory words, ideas, and phrases, beginning with “Though yet of Hamlet our late brother’s death / The memory be green,” which combines the idea of death and decay with the idea of greenery, growth, and

renewal (I.ii.1–2). He also speaks of “[o]ur sometime sister, now our queen,” “defeated joy,” “an auspicious and a dropping eye,” “mirth in funeral,” and “dirge in marriage” (I.ii.8–12). These ideas sit uneasily with one another, and Shakespeare uses this speech to give his audience an uncomfortable first impression of Claudius. The negative impression is furthered when Claudius affects a fatherly role toward the bereaved Hamlet, advising him to stop grieving for his dead father and adapt to a new life in Denmark. Hamlet obviously does not want Claudius’s advice, and Claudius’s motives in giving it are thoroughly suspect, since, after all, Hamlet is the man who would have inherited the throne had Claudius not snatched it from him.

The result of all this blatant dishonesty is that this scene portrays as dire a situation in Denmark as the first scene does. Where the first scene illustrated the fear and supernatural danger lurking in Denmark, the second hints at the corruption and weakness of the king and his court. The scene also furthers the idea that Denmark

is somehow unsound as a nation, as Claudius declares that Fortinbras makes his battle plans “[h]olding a

weak supposal of our worth, / Or thinking by our late dear brother’s death / Our state to be disjoint and out of

frame” (I.ii.18–20).

Prince Hamlet, devastated by his father’s death and betrayed by his mother’s marriage, is introduced as the only character who is unwilling to play along with Claudius’s gaudy attempt to mimic a healthy royal court.

On the one hand, this may suggest that he is the only honest character in the royal court, the only person of high standing whose sensibilities are offended by what has happened in the aftermath of his father’s death. On the other hand, it suggests that he is a malcontent, someone who refuses to go along with the rest of the

court for the sake of the greater good of stability. In any case, Hamlet already feels, as Marcellus will say later,

that “[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark” (I.iv.67). We also see that his mother’s hasty remarriage

has shattered his opinion of womanhood (“Frailty, thy name is woman,” he cries out famously in this scene a motif that will develop through his unraveling romantic relationship with Ophelia and his deteriorating relationship with his mother.

His soliloquy about suicide (“O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!” [I.ii.129–130]) ushers in what will be a central idea in the play. The world is painful to live in, but,

within the Christian framework of the play, if one commits suicide to end that pain, one damns oneself to eternal suffering in hell. The question of the moral validity of suicide in an unbearably painful world will

haunt the rest of the play; it reaches the height of its urgency in the most famous line in all of English literature: “To be, or not to be: that is the question” (III.i.58). In this scene Hamlet mainly focuses on the appalling conditions of life, railing against Claudius’s court as “an unweeded garden, / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (I.ii.135–137). Throughout the play, we watch the gradual crumbling of the beliefs on which Hamlet’s worldview has been based. Already, in this first soliloquy, religion has failed

him, and his warped family situation can offer him no solace.