Summary of Act 1, Scene iv (4)

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 it 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.

Analysis: Act I, scene iv (4)

Act I, scene iv also continues the development of the motif of the ill health of Denmark. Hamlet 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” (I.iv.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.

Summary: Act I, scene v (5)

In the darkness, the ghost speaks to Hamlet, claiming to be his father’s spirit, come to rouse Hamlet to revenge his death, a “foul and most unnatural murder” (I.v.25).

Hamlet is appalled at the revelation that his father has been murdered, and the ghost tells him that as he slept in his garden, a villain poured poison into his ear—the very villain ho now wears his crown, Claudius. Hamlet’s worst fears about his uncle are confirmed. “O my prophetic soul!” he cries (I.v.40).

The ghost exhorts Hamlet to seek revenge, telling him that Claudius has corrupted Denmark and corrupted Gertrude, having taken her from the pure love of her first marriage and seduced her in the foul lust of their incestuous union. But the ghost urges Hamlet not to act against his mother in any way, telling him to “leave her to heaven” and to the pangs of her own conscience (I.v.86).

As dawn breaks, the ghost disappears. Intensely moved, Hamlet swears to remember and obey the ghost. Horatio and Marcellus arrive upon the scene and frantically ask Hamlet what has happened. Shaken and extremely agitated, he refuses to tell them, and insists that they swear upon his sword not to reveal what they have seen. He tells them further that he may pretend to be a madman, and he makes them swear not to give the slightest hint that they know anything about his motives. Three times the ghost’s voice echoes from beneath the ground, proclaiming, “Swear.” Horatio and Marcellus take the oath upon Hamlet’s sword, and the three men exit toward the castle. As they leave, Hamlet bemoans the responsibility he now carries:

“The time is out of joint: O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!” (I.v.189–190)

Analysis: Act I, scene v

The ghost’s demand for Hamlet to seek revenge upon Claudius is the pivotal event of Act I. It sets the main plot of the play into motion and leads Hamlet to the idea of feigning madness, which becomes his primary mode of interacting with other people for most of the next three acts, as well as a major device Shakespeare uses to develop his character. Most important, it introduces the idea of retributive justice, the notion that sin must be returned with punishment. Claudius has committed a sin, and now, to restore balance to the kingdom, the sin must be punished. The idea of retribution haunts and goads characters throughout the play, functioning as an important motivation for action, spurring Claudius to guilt, Hamlet to the avoidance of suicide, and Laertes to murderous rage after the deaths of Ophelia and Polonius. While Hamlet fits a genre called revenge tragedy, loosely following the form popularized by Thomas Kyd’s earlier Spanish Tragedy, it is unlike any other revenge tragedy in that it is more concerned with thought and moral questioning than with bloody action. One of the central tensions in the play comes from Hamlet’s inability to find any certain moral truths as he works his way toward revenge. Even in his first encounter with the ghost, Hamlet questions the appearances of things around him and worries whether he can trust his perceptions, doubting the authenticity of his father’s Ghost and its tragic claim. Because he is contemplative to the point of obsession, Hamlet’s decision to feign madness, ostensibly in order to keep the other characters from guessing the motive for his behavior, will lead him at times perilously close to actual madness. In fact, it is impossible to say for certain whether or not Hamlet actually does go mad, and, if so, when his act becomes reality. We have already seen that Hamlet, though thoughtful by nature, also has an excitable streak, which makes him erratic, nervous, and unpredictable. In Act I, scene v, as the ghost disappears, Hamlet seems to have too much nervous energy to deal competently with the curious Horatio and Marcellus. He is already unsure of what to believe and what to do, and the tension of his uncertainty comes out in sprawling wordplay that makes him seem already

slightly mad, calling the ghost names such as “truepenny” and “old mole” as it

rumbles, “Swear,” from beneath the ground (I.v.152, I.v.164).

The short scene that begins Act II is divided into two parts, the first of which involves Polonius’s conversation with Reynaldo about Laertes and the second of which involves Polonius’s conversation with Ophelia about Hamlet. The scene serves to develop the character of Polonius, who is one of the most intriguing figures in Hamlet. Polonius can be interpreted as either a doddering fool or as a cunning manipulator, and he has been portrayed onstage as both. In this scene, as he carefully instructs Reynaldo in the art of snooping, he seems more the manipulator than the fool, though his obvious love of hearing his own voice leads him into some comical misphrasings (“And then, sir, does a this — a does — / what was I about to say? By the mass, I was about to say some / thing. Where did I leave?” [II.i.49–51])