

## Third Year Drama/ Hamlet- Act 2/ Scene 2

This is the longest scene in the play. The action has shifted back to the court where the tension that began in Act I, Scene 2 continues to build. Hamlet's behavior and attitude have changed dramatically, and this switch has not gone unnoticed by the court. Gertrude has a maternal concern for Hamlet's well-being. Claudius, on the other hand, is worried because he is unsure about the authenticity of Hamlet's madness. The question Claudius must ask himself is, "Why is Hamlet behaving this way? He has never appeared to be an emotionally frail person before. If he is pretending, what is his purpose"? Keep in mind that the king is Hamlet's uncle and presumably has known the prince since infancy. Claudius is shrewd; he understands and can therefore manipulate human nature. Hamlet is acting out of character, and this alerts Claudius to possible danger.

The king has good reason not to trust his nephew, because Claudius has a terrible secret. Discovery could cost Claudius his hard-earned criminal gains — his crown and his marriage — as well as his life. The king's first avenue of defense against the potential threat Hamlet poses is the summoning of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's old school friends. The king wants them to draw out the cause of Hamlet's "transformation" (5). Claudius intends to use these two foolish men as pawns. Under the guise of parental concern, he asks them to spy on the prince, hoping that Hamlet may share information with his peers that he would keep from his mother and uncle.

Claudius charms and flatters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, making them feel invaluable. Gertrude supports his endeavor, even implying that the two will be monetarily rewarded for their efforts: "Your visitation shall receive such thanks / As fits a king's remembrance" (25–26). The insincerity of their friendship with Hamlet is clear from the fact that the two men are willing to spy on the prince and then report back to the king.

The queen seems to display genuine concern for Hamlet and may believe that his friends are sincere as well. At this point, we cannot yet know the extent of her involvement with Claudius's crimes and plans. But her statement to Claudius in lines 56 and 57 indicates that she is innocent of her husband's murder. The queen suspects that Hamlet is hurt and angry because she remarried so quickly; she and Claudius wed without waiting

at least one year for the traditional proper mourning time to pass. Later in the scene, she also accepts Polonius's explanation that Hamlet is acting strangely because his love for Ophelia has been rejected. Her conviction that these two sources are creating Hamlet's agitation seems to indicate her ignorance of Claudius's schemes.

Polonius plays a game of wait-and-see when he enters the court. He tantalizes the royal couple by announcing that he has discovered the "very cause of Hamlet's lunacy" (49). But he postpones delivering his heady news and instead announces that the ambassadors Voltimand and Cornelius have returned from Norway. The ambassadors bring the news that young Fortinbras has accepted his uncle's request — Fortinbras will march his troops through Denmark without attacking it. The young man has promised that he will never raise an army against the Danish crown. Claudius's diplomacy is successful once again.

After the ambassadors leave, Polonius tells the king and queen why Hamlet is mad. Polonius is long-winded, even as he declares that it is best to be brief. The royal couple barely tolerates his rambling explanation. This scene is intentionally comic, but it also divulges a great deal about the characters onstage. Gertrude prefers that Polonius get to the point, without so much rhetoric. Polonius, however, feels excessively self-important, and he will draw out his explanations as long as he can. Polonius reads Hamlet's love letter, written for Ophelia. The recitation is awkward, and Polonius even seems to stumble over the words. Hamlet's letter is a conventional poem written in the Elizabethan style. The expression sounds amateurish and intense, and it reveals the passion he feels toward Ophelia.

This letter reveals just how far their relationship had progressed. Obviously, they were in love, as Hamlet will later admit at Ophelia's graveside. The letter opens with a compliment to Ophelia, continues with a declaratory verse, and concludes humbly and hopefully. His use of the word "machine" reflects Hamlet's low opinion of the body when compared with the spirit.(123) Polonius tells the king and queen how he handled the situation after he realized that Hamlet and Ophelia were in a serious relationship. Like Laertes, he refers to Hamlet's noble birth and the improbability that he would be free to marry Ophelia (141–142). Polonius explains that with this fact in mind, he told Ophelia to break off her

relationship with Hamlet (142–145). She obeyed him and, Polonius claims, Hamlet became depressed immediately thereafter.

Gertrude responds to Polonius sympathetically and wants to believe that this is, indeed, the cause of Hamlet's deterioration. Claudius is skeptical of the explanation. He cannot believe that Hamlet (or anyone) could lose his mind for love. No matter what Gertrude wants to believe and no matter how determined Polonius is to maintain his standing with the court, Claudius is too alert and suspicious to be mollified by this explanation.

While trying to appear more important to the court, Polonius becomes less the counselor and more the fool. He talks too much, relies heavily on outdated clichés and parables, and has a tendency towards forgetfulness (see II.i.49–51). Claudius is beginning to think that he will have to discover Hamlet's ruse for himself. Still he agrees to try Polonius's plan to eavesdrop on the prince and Ophelia. This scheme shows Polonius's thoughtless cruelty toward his daughter as he concerns himself only with the king's favor. He wagers his office on the gamble that this trick will reveal the source of Hamlet's ills. He vows that he will be a farmer and drive a cart if he is wrong.

After Claudius and Gertrude exit, Hamlet enters reading a book. Polonius takes the opportunity to speak to him. The result is an interaction that moves from satire to suspicion, with Hamlet carefully keeping Polonius off balance. Hamlet's intention is to frustrate Polonius and make him question Hamlet's madness while at the same time verifying that he is, indeed, mad. Polonius plays easily into Hamlet's hands. The old man does not even understand when Hamlet insults him by calling him a "fishmonger" (174). As if being referred to as a man who sells fish isn't insulting enough for a man in Polonius's position, in Shakespeare's time the term also meant a pimp. A fishmonger's daughter was a harlot. Hamlet's speech is filled with bitter irony and vicious puns, which Polonius fails to detect.

Hamlet makes several references to physical decay and death. A commonly held Early Modern belief asserted that the heat of the sun caused maggots to spontaneously appear in carrion (dead flesh). Hamlet moves from the subject of rotting flesh to Polonius's daughter, advising him to "[l]et her not walk i' the sun" (184). Hamlet may be referring to Psalm 121 in this passage. The scripture reads, "So that the sun shall not burn thee by day, nor the moon by night." The passage implies that the sun

is to blame for causing maidens to experience lust. By extension, Hamlet seems to be calling Ophelia a whore. Hamlet's digression is so confusing to Polonius that, instead of angering him, the dialogue convinces him more than ever that he was right to suspect that Ophelia was the cause of Hamlet's madness.

Hamlet then mocks Polonius to his face, saying that old men "have a plentiful lack of wit" (200–201). Looking right at Polonius, Hamlet insults him again and again; he tells Polonius that old men are ugly and weak — that if they could they would be young again. Polonius feels uneasy with Hamlet's message. He is convinced that Hamlet is mad, but at the same time, because he cannot figure out Hamlet's riddles, Polonius detects some kind of strange wisdom in Hamlet's words.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter as Polonius departs. Hamlet greets them as he had greeted Horatio earlier, happily and exuberantly: "My excellent good friends!" (226). But the conversation that follows is superficial compared with the conversations between Hamlet and Horatio. Hamlet engages the two men politely, but his initial enthusiasm at seeing his old friends dissipates steadily until, by the end of the encounter, he is darkly depressed and disappointed. The hypocrisy of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is so transparent that Hamlet begins to question their motives for coming to see him. He knows they are not genuinely concerned about him, and he deduces that they were sent for. They self-consciously evade Hamlet's questions as to why they have come.

Hamlet turns the tables on the two men. Although Claudius sent them to sound out Hamlet, Hamlet sounds them out instead in a brilliant turnabout. Hamlet asks them directly, "Were you not sent for?" (277). When they avoid the question, Hamlet states it as a fact: "You were sent for. . . I know the good king and queen have sent for you.(284–281) " Guildenstern gives up and admits the truth. In return, Hamlet tells them earnestly in calm, direct prose what has happened since his mother's remarriage. Hamlet explains that he is no longer happy and that he has lost faith in his fellow man and in himself. (Horatio is the only person thus far in the play who has not disappointed him.) Hamlet declares pessimistically that man has everything going for him, but somehow he manages to disappoint himself and everyone around him. His words refer back to his first soliloquy (I.2.129–159).

Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that a traveling troupe of players is on its way to the court. We learn here that Hamlet enjoys theatre and is a devotee of drama. As Hamlet discusses the players' arrival, he begins to lose his melancholy and show interest in something other than his own problems. He shows genuine pleasure in seeing the players, and he obviously knows them personally. This is new information about Hamlet's personality, and the insight tells us something about the man he used to be. From other references in the play, we can deduce that Hamlet is a lover, a scholar, a quick wit, and a loyal son and friend. Now we see that he is also a patron of the theatre.

The anticipation of the players brings relief from the strained conversation between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Now they exchange dialogue on neutral ground, conversation that's easy and distantly friendly. Hamlet asks Rosencrantz why the players are traveling. Rosencrantz's answer reflects a real problem occurring at the time Shakespeare wrote Hamlet: the establishment and popularity of children's acting companies. These acting troupes created significant competition for adult companies. The popularity of children's companies undermined the security of the adult players, who often took their performances on the road in order to make money.

The players enter and Hamlet welcomes them warmly. Polonius hears their arrival and comes to join the group. Hamlet resumes his antic disposition, which he had forgotten about for a short time with the entrance of the players. He points Polonius out to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a doddering old man in his second childhood, an insult that escapes Polonius entirely. "Buz, buz" is Hamlet's way of saying "Why don't you tell us something we don't know" — the phrase was part of an old Oxford tradition.

The reference to Roscius the Roman actor in line 394 is another jab at Polonius's tendency to over-define all of his points. The story of Roscius was old news; by referring to it, Hamlet calls attention to Polonius's stale message. Hamlet then refers to Jephthah, a character from scripture who sacrificed his daughter because she wept for her virginity (see Judges 9, lines 30–40). Jephthah was the opposite of a "fishmonger." In lines 410-

411 Hamlet quotes from Jephthah, Judge of Israel, a popular ballad of the times. The connection to Polonius is inescapable.

The exchange with Polonius mercifully ends with the reentry of the players. Hamlet's interest in the troupe is clear. The players know Hamlet, and their dialogue with him is easy and familiar. Hamlet greets a boy actor with the hope that his voice has not changed. The phrase "cracked within the ring" in line 431 refers to coins. Before milled coins were common, coins were often cut (cracked) for their metal, rendering them worthless. Here, Hamlet puns on the phrase to indicate that if the boy's voice is cracked, it will lose its value, too. (Young boys played female roles onstage at that time because women were barred from performing as a matter of legal and moral principle. Actresses did not appear on the public stage until after the Restoration of Charles II to the English throne in 1660. When a boy's voice changed, his career usually ended. Only a few went on to perform the adult male roles.)

Hamlet tells the players that he has heard a reading of a play and judged it suitable for this company. He remembers and recites 13 lines, to the admiration of his audience. The Pyrrhus speech starting at line 453 is reminiscent of the writings of Christopher Marlowe, whose plays were staged at the Rose Theatre, the Globe's chief competition. Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, though not containing a passage exactly like this one, nevertheless resonates with the speech Hamlet makes here. The language here is not unlike early Shakespeare, but it is very unlike the Shakespeare of 1600 when this revision was staged. The speech is bombastic and the rhythm stiff, making it sound staged and unnatural. Shakespeare may mean for the players in this scene to collectively represent a caricature of Marlowe's company, The Lord Admiral's Men.

Obviously, the story of Pyrrhus parallels Hamlet's dilemma to some extent. A state has collapsed after the death of its king, but unlike Gertrude, the queen is faithful to the memory of her husband. Even Polonius cannot help but notice the emotional impact of the speech.

The players exit and Hamlet, after reminding Polonius to treat the players well, dismisses the old man and his two old friends (531–535). Alone, he reveals his thoughts once more. This well-known soliloquy, the third one we have heard from Hamlet, is full of reproach for his failure to act on the revenge he promised his father. He accuses himself of cowardice. He

speaks of his silence and villainy, and he is filled with self-hate. “[W]hat an ass am I!” he cries (586). He tells himself that he had a good father who deserves a just revenge. He says that only a whore would waste time with talk, and only the meanest maid would waste time cursing fate. The time for action is now, and Hamlet has an idea. The player’s recent speech moved him deeply. Hamlet knows that plays can often reach into the soul of the audience and draw out a response where none was expected. He marvels at the force of imagination that can produce real emotion from a make-believe grief.

Hamlet recognizes that the theatre can help him to expose the king’s conscience and, in doing so, verify what the ghost has told him. Hamlet believes that with proof of Claudius’s guilty conscience, he will be able to act. Even after all that has happened, Hamlet is still not completely convinced that the spirit was his father, that it spoke the truth, and that the revenge it seeks is valid. Hamlet fears he may be a victim of Satan’s handiwork. Hamlet knows he must make Claudius reveal his guilt. Accusing the current king of murder is grave business, and enacting revenge against him may have dire consequences for the state. These factors have caused Hamlet’s hesitation up to this moment. Now, he believes that he has found a way to justify his mission of revenge.

Hamlet has good reason to reproach himself for his hesitation. The ghost appeared to him some time ago, and he has done nothing in the way of formulating a plan of action against Claudius. Until the arrival of the players, he could not think past what he had heard on the castle battlements. Now Hamlet has found a way to ease his own conscience by trapping “the conscience of the king.(610) ”