

Summary of Act I of Hamlet

Scene I

The opening scene takes place at the Elsinore castle in Denmark. A soldier, Francisco, is on duty while officer Bernardo accompanies his watch. Hamlet's friend Horatio and another soldier, Marcellus, joins the others to guard the castle. Marcellus reveals that on a previous night, a guard had seen a ghost, and suddenly the image appears to them. The ghost strongly resembles the late King Hamlet of Denmark, who was Hamlet's father. Horatio asks in God's name for the ghost to speak to them, but it disappears. Later that same night the ghost of King Hamlet reappears, and again Horatio asks it to speak, but a rooster crows, the ghost departs, and the characters agree to inform Hamlet of their experience.

Scene II

King Claudius, who is Hamlet's uncle, and Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother are in the castle with Lord Chamberlain Polonius, his son Laertes, and other members of the court. Claudius speaks of his brother's death and encourages the others to not mourn his decease excessively and discusses general issues regarding the land battles between Elsinore and Norway. Claudius and Gertrude begin to urge Hamlet to stop grieving his father's death, because long term grief is unmanly and obstinate. Gertrude then asks her son to remain in Elsinore, to that Hamlet agrees. Everyone but Hamlet leaves the room, and he expresses his inner thoughts about his father's death and his mother's hasty incestuous marriage and her brief period of mourning. Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo enter and tell Hamlet of their encounter with a ghost. Horatio then explains that he thinks the ghost is of Hamlet's father and Hamlet agrees to accompany them on their next watch. Horatio and Marcellus vow to keep silent of their knowledge of the ghost, and Hamlet realizes that the ghostly figure of his father is a sign that something is wrong.

Scene III

In Polonius' house, Laertes is saying goodbye to his sister, Ophelia, and advises her not to take Hamlet courtship seriously and to remain lady like. Ophelia accepts the advice, and reminds Laertes to listen to his own advice. Polonius enters and briefly lectures his son on how to behave publicly and ethically. Laertes leaves and Polonius asks Ophelia the subject of their conversation. She tells him that it concerned Hamlet's affection towards her and her father tells her to avoid his company. Ophelia agrees to obey her father's wishes.

Scene IV

Back at the castle's gates Horatio, Marcellus, and Hamlet await the ghost's appearance. Hamlet tells the others of the King's drinking problem and how it will later affect the reputation of the country. The ghost emerges and Horatio attempts to talk with it, but it beckons only Prince Hamlet. Against Horatio's and Marcellus' physical restraint, Hamlet follows the ghost out of view. Thinking Hamlet is in danger, the two agree to follow his steps.

Scene V

The ghost confirms that it is the spirit of the late King Hamlet, cursed to roam the earth at night because of unforgiven sins. He then orders Hamlet to prove his love for his

father by killing his murderer, who the ghost reveals to be Claudius. Claudius had poisoned the King in order to become King and husband of Gertrude. Although Hamlet is to avenge his father's death by killing Claudius, he is not to harm his mother because heaven and her own conscious will determine her punishment. The ghost leaves and Hamlet joins Horatio and Marcellus, avoiding their questions. He orders them to take an oath of secrecy about what they had seen. The ghost repeatedly utters "Swear" to Hamlet and he tells the others that if he purposely acts mentally ill they cannot tell the reason of his actions. Finally, after the oath is taken, Hamlet thanks his friends and declares his deep sorrow.