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## KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN

Band 39

William Shakespeare, **HAMLET**

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## PRÜFUNGSAUFGABEN MIT MUSTERLÖSUNGEN

In Ergänzung zu den Aufgaben im Buch (Kapitel 6) finden Sie hier zwei weitere Aufgaben mit Musterlösungen. Die Zahl der Sternchen bezeichnet das Anforderungsniveau der jeweiligen Aufgabe.

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### Aufgabe 5 \*

**Hamlet and the Ghost – is it really all that matters? Is Hamlet’s hesitation understandable? Discuss.**

#### Mögliche Lösung in knapper Fassung:

Today we know that spirits do not exist, but there are a lot of old legends that mention them. About 450 years ago we arrive at a time that was completely aware of the fact that appearances really *did* exist. *Hamlet*, the play, tells us, the audience, that there is a ghost and this ghost is not only seen by Hamlet, but there are Marcellus, Bernardo and later Horatio who have seen it as well. So there are people who can testify that a figure resembling Old Hamlet was walking the castle after midnight but did not speak to them. Bernardo states simply what he has seen: “In the same figure, like the king that’s dead.” (I, 1, 41) Even Horatio, the scholar, remains unsuccessful when he manfully shouts: “By heaven, I charge thee, speak.” (I, 1, 49) The ‘figure’ waits up to the moment when Hamlet is informed by Horatio and keeps watch together with his companions. Now is the time that the ‘figure’ begins to speak and what Hamlet hears makes his hair stand on end. He is informed that Claudius has killed his father and apart from that, has taken Gertrude as wife soon after. But information is one thing, proof is another and often much more difficult to gain without evidence. Hamlet does not tell his companions what he has seen and heard. He only makes them swear to keep their mouths shut and to tell nothing to anybody else. But Hamlet knows what a heavy burden he has to shoulder. He begins to brood and to face reality: “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right.” (I, 5, 188 f.)

After all these pieces of information he has been given by the ghost it is Hamlet’s task to prove his uncle’s guilt. But how? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to his ‘help’ by telling Hamlet that a group of players is approaching the castle in order to act out something. Hamlet is absolutely delighted because they may still have an interlude in their repertoire called “The Murder of Gonzago”. And indeed, they have. The first player simply says “Ay, my lord.” (II, 2, 516)

It is the next day when this short interlude is enacted and Hamlet pleads with Horatio to look carefully at his uncle’s face: “Observe my uncle, if his occulted guilt / Do not itself unkennel in one speech / It is a damnéd ghost that we have seen.” (III, 2, 75–77) Hamlet will – under all circumstances – find out if the ghost has told the truth and furthermore, if Claudius will react in such a way that may prove his guilt. Hamlet is successful because as soon as the play is under way his uncle becomes highly nervous and shouts: “Give me some light – away.” (III, 2, 255) Hamlet is now convinced that the ghost has told him the truth.

During his conversation with his mother the ghost appears again but can only be seen by him. The ghost speaks to him: “Do not forget! This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.” (III, 4, 109 f.) It reminds Hamlet of what he has promised to do: Revenge! This is what matters to him, the ghost. From now on Hamlet is on his own and tries to find a moment to kill his uncle. But he has his scruples.

When the moment arrives that he can act out his revenge he does not only end his uncle’s life. It is Laertes who – as a tool in his uncle’s hand – wounds Hamlet with his rapier but is again wounded by Hamlet by the same weapon having fallen to the ground. Now Hamlet does not only make his uncle drink the poisoned wine but is aware of the fact that his last hour has come. Instead of only killing his uncle it is four people whose lives have come to an end. To sum it up: without the ghost, the play would never have been able to develop.

## Aufgabe 6 \*\*\*

**Explain why *Hamlet* is called an Elizabethan revenge play!**

**Mögliche Lösung in knapper Fassung:**

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* follows very closely the dramatic conventions of a revenge play presented on the Elizabethan stage. Revenge tragedies were originally of Greek origin. The Roman counterpart was Seneca whose plays had considerable influence on all the Elizabethan tragedy writers. Seneca was the first Roman writer to introduce all the ideas and norms which applied to revenge plays at the time of the Renaissance. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* were among the most influential plays of that time.

These two plays used almost all of the Elizabethan conventions for revenge tragedies. *Hamlet* in particular included all the revenge conventions, thus making *Hamlet* a revenge play par excellence. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one of the heroes of the Elizabethan and later of the Jacobean stage, who finds himself grievously wronged by a powerful figure, in this instance King Claudius, who murders his father, a crime he has to avenge.

In fact, in all the revenge tragedies a crime is committed and there are a lot of reasons why the law and justice of the time cannot punish the crime. In this case it is up to Hamlet who is the main character, to revenge this crime. The main character then often questions whether or not he has to complete the revenge, which normally involves tough and complex planning. Other features typical of a revenge play were the appearance of a ghost, who had to incite the avenger to act out the bloody deed. In addition, the avenger normally had a very close relationship with the audience through his soliloquies and 'asides'. The original crime's victim must have been a family member of the avenger. The avenger places himself outside the legal and moral order of things, and thus becomes even more isolated as the play progresses. This isolation can result in madness. The revenge must be the result of a catastrophe (e.g. the murder of Hamlet's father) and the first step of the revenge must start directly after the crisis.

As soon as the ghost commands Hamlet to kill his uncle, the avenger (i.e. Hamlet) often hesitates and delays the action, e.g. by showing others that he is mad, before he strikes hard and mercilessly. But Hamlet has to complete the revenge himself. He may have an accomplice and his accomplice may die if they are successful, even during the course of the revenge.

Nevertheless, do not think that revenge was accepted by Elizabethan audiences. The Anglican Church, the State and public morality at the time of Queen Elizabeth I. did not accept revenge, instead they thought that revenge could not be tolerated no matter what had gone before. Puritans and Anglicans 'officially' did not believe in purgatory, in contrast to Catholics. Nevertheless, they all believed that revenge was a sin and a blasphemy, thus causing danger to the soul of the avenger. They all knew that the avenger, when taking the law into his own hands was acting against the political authority of the state. The Elizabethans should by no means think that revenge was accepted by society. Although they loved to see revenge plays, an act of revenge was considered sinful and was therefore condemned.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare sticks to a great extent to the convention of a revenge play. In other words, Shakespeare begins the play by introducing a ghost appearing outside the castle around midnight. The guards keep watch and at once we sense that something strange is happening in Denmark. The only thing is, we do not know what is going on, as if Shakespeare would like to tell us that some foul play may have been committed. This leads to the major theme in the play which is – as it turns out – revenge. There is the ghost talking to Hamlet. It is rather obvious that the play seems to deal with something gruesome, maybe with violence or some other aspect that will be revealed to us later.

Very soon, the ghost tells Hamlet that it is his uncle who has murdered him and it is now up to Hamlet to take revenge upon Claudius. Hamlet's task is now to find a way how to avenge his poor father, although he does not know what to do at the moment. His hesitation may be regarded as rather silly behaviour, especially as Hamlet tells us in his soliloquies about his feelings and emotions that keep on tormenting him for a long period of time. The question is: should he carry out the deed immediately or later. He "acts" mentally but not physically.

In the end, we come to the conclusion that tragic heroes of revenge plays at that time delayed their revenge until the end of the play. Especially Hamlet starts to play 'cat and mouse' with Claudius by behaving in a mad way and by calling his present situation his "antic disposition". He acts this way because he wants to find out if Claudius is really guilty of his father's death or not.

So, on the one hand, his plan has the disadvantage of drawing all the attention of the people at court towards himself. On the other hand, it is an advantage that his "antic disposition" isolates him from the members of the court because they do not pay attention to what he has in mind or might plan because of his "madness".

Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius can be explained as follows: Firstly he has to prove that the ghost is really telling the truth. Hamlet does so by staging the play "The Mousetrap" at court. When Claudius leaves the room, totally enraged, Hamlet knows that he is guilty. The second step could have ended the play when Hamlet had an opportunity to kill Claudius while he was confessing his horrible sin. If Hamlet had killed the king at this moment then Claudius might have gone to heaven because he was able to confess his sin, in contrast to Hamlet's father who did not have the chance to confess his sins. So Hamlet makes up his mind not to murder Claudius at this point in the play. The last delay is in fact somewhat complicated. Hamlet accidentally kills Polonius, which creates a whole new problem as obviously Laertes now wants to have his revenge by killing Hamlet.

Thus Hamlet constantly delays his revenge and always finds a way to put it off until he finally takes his chance in Act V, Scene 2. At the same time, Hamlet does not end his close relationship with the audience because in every act one of his soliloquies tells them what he may do or what his intention might be. Meanwhile Ophelia has gone mad because her father Polonius has been killed by Hamlet, who is sent to England by Claudius who fears for his life. A rather sexual aspect of the play is brought about by the fact that Claudius has married Gertrude after he has killed Old Hamlet. Thus *Hamlet* very closely follows Thomas Kyd's rule concerning a revenge tragedy. The only point that differs from Kyd's play is that Horatio does survive Hamlet, although Horatio is willing to commit suicide when saying, "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane / Here's yet some liquor left." (V, 2, 325 f.) If Horatio had killed himself, then *Hamlet* would have followed Kyd's formula and at the same time the conventions for an Elizabethan revenge tragedy play.

So we come to the following conclusion: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a good example of a typical revenge tragedy of the Elizabethan theatre era. *Hamlet* is without doubt one of the greatest revenge plays ever written.

Especially influenced first by Sophocles, Euripides and other Greek writers, and then later by Seneca, *Hamlet* as well as *The Spanish Tragedy* stick closely to the formula of a great revenge tragedy. Revenge, although thought to be unlawful and against the law of the Church, was a great favourite of Elizabethan audiences, because they insisted on seeing justice done. Indeed, *Hamlet* is one of the greatest tragedies of all time.