

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

Prereading Activity
for
Hamlet
Plot Summaries
Act II

Directions: To help you better understand and follow *Hamlet*, read the summary of a specific scene before you begin to read it. If you get lost during the scene, you can refer to the summary.

Act II,
scene i

Some weeks later at Polonius' house, Polonius sends money to Laertes by way of Reynaldo. Polonius instructs Reynaldo first to inquire about Laertes' behavior and to manage Laertes' life, so that Laertes will follow his father's advice before meeting with him.

Ophelia enters, quite upset from a recent meeting with Hamlet. With his clothes in disarray, a silent Hamlet had caught Ophelia by the wrist, held her close, and then at arm's length. He stared at her, sighed deeply, and then left.

Polonius suggests they tell the king about it. He believes Hamlet is mad from frustrated love. Polonius asks Ophelia whether she has met with Hamlet. She replies that she has neither accepted Hamlet's letters nor spoken with him since Polonius told her not to. Polonius interprets this as evidence that his explanation for Hamlet's sudden madness is correct.

Act II,
scene ii

Claudius has summoned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet's college friends, to get them to pump Hamlet and discover the cause of his strange behavior.

Polonius enters and informs the king that the ambassadors have returned from Norway. He then reveals that he will expose the cause of Hamlet's insanity after the ambassadors have given their reports.

Gertrude believes that the death of King Hamlet and her remarriage is the cause.

The ambassadors reveal that Fortinbras' plot against the Danes was stopped.

Polonius explains that Hamlet's madness comes from Ophelia's rejection of him. To prove his theory, Polonius suggests that the king and queen and Polonius watch Hamlet from behind a tapestry when Ophelia goes to him. The king and queen exit.

Hamlet: Act II Plot Summaries (continued)

Hamlet enters, feigning madness, insults Polonius (calling him an old fool) while encouraging Polonius to continue believing that Hamlet's love for Ophelia is the cause of his madness.

Once Polonius is gone, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter. Hamlet quickly sees through their pretense and recognizes that his uncle has sent for them. They believe Hamlet is insane, so he encourages this belief.

The troupe of traveling players arrive and recite a story of the death of a king and his queen's grief. Hamlet compares the actor's imagined grief to his own real grief that paralyzes him and prevents him from acting. Hamlet then reveals his own plan for trapping the king into revealing himself: Hamlet will have the actors perform a play that imitates the murder of his father. By watching the king's face, Hamlet will know whether Claudius is guilty or not. Hamlet reveals that this plan is necessary just in case the ghost was an evil spirit who might trick Hamlet into murdering an innocent person. Hamlet would then be damned for all eternity.