

Act IV, scenes i–ii

Summary: Act IV, scene i

Frantic after her confrontation with Hamlet, Gertrude hurries to Claudius, who is conferring with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. She asks to speak to the king alone. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exit, she tells Claudius about her encounter with Hamlet. She says that he is as mad as the sea during a violent storm; she also tells Claudius that Hamlet has killed Polonius. Aghast, the king notes that had he been concealed behind the arras, Hamlet would have killed him. Claudius wonders aloud how he will be able to handle this public crisis without damaging his hold on Denmark. He tells Gertrude that they must ship Hamlet to England at once and find a way to explain Hamlet's misdeed to the court and to the people. He calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, tells them about the murder, and sends them to find Hamlet.

Summary: Act IV, scene ii

Elsewhere in Elsinore, Hamlet has just finished disposing of Polonius's body, commenting that the corpse has been "safely stowed" (IV.ii.1). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear and ask what he has done with the body. Hamlet refuses to give them a straight answer, instead saying, "The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body" (IV.ii.25–26). Feigning offense at being questioned, he accuses them of being spies in the service of Claudius. He calls Rosencrantz a "sponge . . . that soaks up the king's countenance, his rewards, his authorities," and warns him that "when he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again" (IV.ii.11–19). At last he agrees to allow Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort him to Claudius.

Analysis: Act IV, scenes i–ii

The short first scene of Act IV centers around Gertrude's betrayal of her son, turning him in to the king after having promised to help him. While she does keep her promise not to reveal that Hamlet was only pretending to be insane, the immediate and frank way in which she tells Claudius about Hamlet's behavior and his murder of Polonius implies that she sees herself as allied to the king rather

than to her son. Whether Gertrude really believes Hamlet to be mad, or has simply recognized that her best interest lies in allying herself with Claudius regardless of what she believes, is impossible to determine from this scene and is largely a matter of one's personal interpretation of the events. Whatever the case, it is Gertrude's speech to Claudius that cements the king's secret plan to have Hamlet executed in England.

As brief as it is, Act IV, scene i is a magnificent example of Shakespeare's skill at developing characters, illustrated by the subtle development of Claudius. Where most of the other male characters in the play, including Hamlet, King Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras, are obsessed with themes of honor, moral balance, and retributive justice, Claudius is a selfish, ambitious king who is more concerned with maintaining his own power and averting political danger than achieving justice through his rule. His response to Gertrude's revelation that Hamlet has killed Polonius is extremely telling. Rather than considering that Gertrude might have been in danger, he immediately remarks that had he been in the room, he would have been in danger. Hamlet must be sent away from Denmark, he thinks, not as punishment for committing murder but because he represents a danger to Claudius. And as soon as he hears of the murder, Claudius's mind begins working to find a way to characterize the killing so that it does not seem like a political crisis to his court and to the people of Denmark. To do this, he says, will require all his "majesty and skill" (IV.i.30). In this scene and the scenes to follow, Shakespeare creates in Claudius a convincing depiction of a conniving, ambitious politician. In this way, Claudius emerges as a figure of powerful contrast to the more forthright men in the play, including Laertes, Fortinbras, and Horatio, and the far more morally conscious Prince Hamlet.

Hamlet's murder of Polonius at the end of Act III is one of the most disturbing moments in the play. If it was previously possible to consider Hamlet a "hero" or an idealized version of a human being, it is no longer possible after he kills Polonius. His sensitive, reflective nature—the trait that constantly interfered with his ability to take revenge on Claudius—now disappears in the wake of its violent opposite: a rash, murderous explosion of activity. Hamlet leaps to the conclusion that Claudius is behind the arras, or else he simply lashes out thoughtlessly. In any case, Hamlet's moral superiority to Claudius is now thrown into question. He has killed Polonius just as Claudius killed Hamlet's father, the only differences being that Hamlet's murder was not premeditated and was not committed

out of jealousy or ambition. Hamlet also eases his conscience with the fact that Polonius was dishonestly spying on Hamlet at the moment when he was killed. But the result of Hamlet's deed is very similar to that of Claudius's: Laertes and Ophelia have lost a father, just as Hamlet himself did.

Now, Hamlet hides the body. But rather than being overwhelmed with contrition, as we might expect of a hero who has committed such a terrible mistake, he seems manic, desperate, and self-righteous, especially in his condemnation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Throughout Act IV, scene ii, as in the play-within-a-play scene (Act III, scene ii), Hamlet's biting, ironic wit is combined with his rash, impulsive streak, and his feigned madness seems very close to the real thing. Though Hamlet has many admirable qualities, scenes such as this one serve as powerful reminders that we are not meant to take the prince as an unqualified hero.

Act IV, scenes iii–iv

Summary: Act IV, scene iii

The king speaks to a group of attendants, telling them of Polonius's death and his intention to send Hamlet to England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear with Hamlet, who is under guard. Pressed by Claudius to reveal the location of Polonius's body, Hamlet is by turns inane, coy, and clever, saying that Polonius is being eaten by worms, and that the king could send a messenger to find Polonius in heaven or seek him in hell himself. Finally, Hamlet reveals that Polonius's body is under the stairs near the castle lobby, and the king dispatches his attendants to look there. The king tells Hamlet that he must leave at once for England, and Hamlet enthusiastically agrees. He exits, and Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to ensure that he boards the ship at once. Alone with his thoughts, Claudius states his hope that England will obey the sealed orders he has sent with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The orders call for Prince Hamlet to be put to death.

Summary: Act IV, scene iv

On a nearby plain in Denmark, young Prince Fortinbras marches at the head of his army, traveling through Denmark on the way to attack Poland. Fortinbras orders his captain to go and ask the King of Denmark for permission to travel through his lands. On his way, the captain encounters Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern on their way to the ship bound for England. The captain informs them that the Norwegian army rides to fight the Poles. Hamlet asks about the basis of the conflict, and the man tells him that the armies will fight over “a little patch of land / That hath in it no profit but the name” (IV.iv.98–99). Astonished by the thought that a bloody war could be fought over something so insignificant, Hamlet marvels that human beings are able to act so violently and purposefully for so little gain. By comparison, Hamlet has a great deal to gain from seeking his own bloody revenge on Claudius, and yet he still delays and fails to act toward his purpose. Disgusted with himself for having failed to gain his revenge on Claudius, Hamlet declares that from this moment on, his thoughts will be bloody.

Analysis: Act IV, scenes iii–iv

As we saw in Act IV, scene ii, the murder of Polonius and the subsequent traumatic encounter with his mother seem to leave Hamlet in a frantic, unstable frame of mind, the mode in which his

excitable nature seems very similar to actual madness. He taunts Claudius, toward whom his hostility is now barely disguised, and makes light of Polonius's murder with word games. He also pretends to be thrilled at the idea of sailing for England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

On some level he is prepared for what is to come. His farewell to his mother proved as much, when he told her that he would trust his old schoolfellows as if they were "adders fang'd," that is, poisonous snakes (III.iv.185.2). But although Hamlet suspects his friends' treachery, he may not fully realize the malevolence of Claudius's designs for him. Claudius's subterfuge in asking the English to execute Hamlet reveals the extent to which he now fears Hamlet: whether Hamlet is sane or mad, he is a danger to Claudius, and Claudius wishes him to die. It is also revealing that one of Claudius's considerations in seeking to have Hamlet murdered in far-off England, rather than merely executing him in Denmark, is that he is beloved by the common people of Denmark—"loved of the distracted multitude," as Claudius says (IV.iii.4). Again, where King Hamlet was a brave warrior, King Claudius is a crafty politician, constantly working to strengthen his own power, circumvent threats to his throne, and manipulate those around him to his own advantage.

Act IV, scene iv restores the focus of the play to the theme of human action. Hamlet's encounter with the Norwegian captain serves to remind the reader of Fortinbras's presence in the world of the play and gives Hamlet another example of the will to action that he lacks. Earlier, he was amazed by the player's evocation of powerful feeling for Hecuba, a legendary character who meant nothing to him (II.ii). Now, he is awestruck by the willingness of Fortinbras to devote the energy of an entire army, probably wasting hundreds of lives and risking his own, to reclaim a worthless scrap of land in Poland. Hamlet considers the moral ambiguity of Fortinbras's action, but more than anything else he is impressed by the forcefulness of it, and that forcefulness becomes a kind of ideal toward which Hamlet decides at last to strive. "My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" he declares (IV.iv.9.56). Of course, he fails to put this exclamation into action, as he has failed at every previous turn to achieve his revenge on Claudius. "My thoughts be bloody," Hamlet says. Tellingly, he does not say "My deeds be bloody."

Act IV, scenes v–vi

Summary: Act IV, scene v

Gertrude and Horatio discuss Ophelia. Gertrude does not wish to see the bereaved girl, but Horatio says that Ophelia should be pitied, explaining that her grief has made her disordered and incoherent. Ophelia enters. Adorned with flowers and singing strange songs, she seems to have gone mad. Claudius enters and hears Ophelia's ravings, such as, "They say the owl was a baker's daughter" (IV.v.42). He says that Ophelia's grief stems from her father's death, and that the people have been suspicious and disturbed by the death as well: "muddied, / Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers / For good Polonius' death" (IV.v.77–79). He also mentions that Laertes has secretly sailed back from France.

A loud noise echoes from somewhere in the castle. Claudius calls for his guards, and a gentleman enters to warn the king that Laertes has come with a mob of commoners. The mob calls Laertes "lord," according to the gentlemen, and the people whisper that "Laertes shall be king" (IV.v.102–106). A furious Laertes storms into the hall, fuming in his desire to avenge his father's death. Claudius attempts to soothe him by frankly acknowledging that Polonius is dead. Gertrude nervously adds that Claudius is innocent in it. When Ophelia reenters, obviously insane, Laertes plunges again into rage. Claudius claims that he is not responsible for Polonius's death and says that Laertes' desire for revenge is a credit to him, so long as he seeks revenge upon the proper person. Claudius convinces Laertes to hear his version of events, which he says will answer all his questions. Laertes agrees, and Claudius seconds his desire to achieve justice in the aftermath of Polonius's death: "Where th' offence is, let the great axe fall" (IV.v.213).

Summary: Act IV, scene vi

In another part of the castle, Horatio is introduced to a pair of sailors bearing a letter for him from Hamlet. In the letter, Hamlet says that his ship was captured by pirates, who have returned him to Denmark. He asks Horatio to escort the sailors to the king and queen, for they have messages for them as well. He also says that he has much to tell of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Horatio takes the sailors to the king and then follows them to find Hamlet, who is in the countryside near the castle.

Analysis: Act IV, scenes v–vi

As we have seen, one of the important themes of Hamlet is the connection between the health of a state and the moral legitimacy of its ruler. Claudius is rotten, and, as a result, Denmark is rotten too. Here, at the beginning of Act IV, scene v, things have palpably darkened for the nation: Hamlet is gone, Polonius is dead and has been buried in secret, Ophelia is raving mad, and, as Claudius tells us, the common people are disturbed and murmuring among themselves. This ominous turn of events leads to the truncated, miniature rebellion that accompanies Laertes' return to Denmark. Acting as the wronged son operating with open fury, Laertes has all the moral legitimacy that Claudius lacks, the legitimacy that Hamlet has forfeited through his murder of Polonius and his delay in avenging his father's death.

Laertes is Hamlet's best foil throughout the play, and in this scene the contrast between the two, each of whom has a dead father to avenge, reaches its peak. (A third figure with a dead father to avenge, Fortinbras, lurks on the horizon.) Whereas Hamlet is reflective and has difficulty acting, Laertes is active and has no use for thought. He has no interest in moral concerns, only in his consuming desire to avenge Polonius. When Claudius later asks Laertes how far he would go to avenge his father, Laertes replies that he would slit Hamlet's throat in the church (IV.vii.98). This statement, indicating his willingness to murder Hamlet even in a sacred place of worship, brings into sharp relief the contrast between the two sons: recall that Hamlet declined to kill Claudius as the king knelt in prayer (III.iii).

As befits a scene full of anger and dark thoughts, Act IV, scene v brings a repetition of the motif of insanity, this time through the character of Ophelia, who has truly been driven mad by the death of her father. Shakespeare has demonstrated Ophelia's chaste dependence on the men in her life; after Polonius's sudden death and Hamlet's subsequent exile, she finds herself abruptly without any of them. Ophelia's lunatic ravings reveal a great deal about the nature of her mind at this stage in her young life. She is obsessed with death, beauty, and an ambiguous sexual desire, expressed in startlingly frank imagery:

*Young men will do't, if they come to't,
By Cock, they are to blame.
Quoth she
'Before you tumbled me,*

You promised me to wed.'
(IV.v.59–62)

Some readers have interpreted passages such as these, combined with Hamlet's sexually explicit taunting of Ophelia in Act III, scene ii, as evidence that Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet was sexual in nature. Of course, this is impossible to conclude with any certainty, but from these lines it is apparent that Ophelia is grappling with sexuality and that her sexual feelings, discouraged by her father, her brother, and her society, are close to the forefront of her mind as she slips into insanity. But, most important, Ophelia's insanity is designed to contrast strongly with Hamlet's, differing primarily in its legitimacy: Ophelia does not feign madness to achieve an end, but is truly driven mad by external pressures. Many of the worst elements in Denmark, including madness, fear, and rebellion, so far have been kept hidden under various disguises, such as Hamlet's pretense and Claudius's court revelry, and are now beginning to emerge into the open.

After exiling Hamlet to England in Act IV, scene iv, Shakespeare now returns him to Denmark only two scenes later through the bizarre *deus ex machina*—an improbable or unexpected device or character introduced to resolve a situation in a work of fiction or drama—of the pirate attack. The short Act IV, scene vi is primarily devoted to plot development, as Horatio reads Hamlet's letter narrating his adventure. The story of the pirate attack has little to do with the main themes of the play, but it does provide an interesting variation on the idea of retributive justice, since instead of punishing someone for doing something wrong, Hamlet states his intention to reward the pirates for the right they have done in returning him to Denmark. "They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy," he says, "but they knew what they did: I am to do a good turn for them" (IV.vi.17–19). Additionally, Hamlet's letter features a return of the motif of ears and hearing, as the prince tells Horatio that "I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb," an open reference to the poison poured into King Hamlet's ear by the murderous Claudius (IV.vi.21).

Act IV, scene vii

Summary: Act IV, scene vii

As Horatio speaks to the sailors, Claudius and a calmer Laertes discuss Polonius's death. Claudius explains that he acted as he did, burying Polonius secretly and not punishing Hamlet for the murder, because both the common people and the queen love Hamlet very much. As a king and as a husband, he did not wish to upset either of them. A messenger enters with the letter from Hamlet to Claudius, which informs the king that Hamlet will return tomorrow. Laertes is pleased that Hamlet has come back to Denmark, since it means that his revenge will not be delayed.

Claudius agrees that Laertes deserves to be revenged upon Hamlet, and he is disposed to encourage Laertes to kill Hamlet, since Hamlet's erratic behavior has made him a threat to Claudius's reign. The devious king begins to think of a way for Laertes to ensure his revenge without creating any appearance of foul play. He recalls that Hamlet has been jealous in the past of Laertes' prowess with a sword, which was recently praised before all the court by a Frenchman who had seen him in combat. The king speculates that if Hamlet could be tempted into a duel with Laertes, it might provide Laertes with the chance to kill him. Laertes agrees, and they settle on a plan. Laertes will use a sharpened sword rather than the customary dull fencing blade. Laertes also proposes to poison his sword, so that even a scratch from it will kill Hamlet. The king concocts a backup plan as well, proposing that if Hamlet succeeds in the duel, Claudius will offer him a poisoned cup of wine to drink from in celebration.

Gertrude enters with tragic news. Ophelia, mad with grief, has drowned in the river. Anguished to have lost his sister so soon after his father's death, Laertes flees the room. Claudius summons Gertrude to follow. He tells her it was nearly impossible to quiet Laertes' rage, and worries that the news of Ophelia's death will reawaken it.

Analysis

The scheming Claudius encounters Laertes at approximately the same moment as he learns that Hamlet has survived and returned to Denmark. Claudius's behavior throughout this scene, as in

Act IV, scene v, shows him at his most devious and calculating. Shakespeare shows Claudius's mind working overtime to derail Laertes' anger, which is thus far the greatest challenge his kingship has faced. In Act IV, scene v, Claudius decided that the way to appease Laertes was by appearing frank and honest. When Laertes asked furiously where his father was, Claudius replied, "Dead" (IV.v.123). Additionally, in a masterful stroke of characterization, Shakespeare has the nervous Gertrude, unable to see Claudius's plan, follow this statement with a quick insistence on Claudius's innocence: "But not by him" (IV.v.123).

In this scene, Claudius has clearly decided that he can appease Laertes' wrath and dispense with Hamlet in a single stroke: he hits upon the idea of the duel in order to use Laertes' rage to ensure Hamlet's death. The resulting plan brings both the theme of revenge and the repeated use of traps in the plot to a new height—Laertes and Claudius concoct not one but three covert mechanisms by which Hamlet may be killed.

Ophelia's tragic death occurs at the worst possible moment for Claudius. As Laertes flees the room in agony, Claudius follows, not to console or even to join him in mourning but because, as he tells Gertrude, it was so difficult to appease his anger in the first place. Claudius does not have time to worry about the victims of tragedy—he is too busy dealing with threats to his own power.

The image of Ophelia drowning amid her garlands of flowers has proved to be one of the most enduring images in the play, represented countless times by artists and poets throughout the centuries. Ophelia is associated with flower imagery from the beginning of the play. In her first scene, Polonius presents her with a violet; after she goes mad, she sings songs about flowers; and now she drowns amid long streams of them. The fragile beauty of the flowers resembles Ophelia's own fragile beauty, as well as her nascent sexuality and her exquisite, doomed innocence.