

Summary of Act III of Hamlet

Scene One

As this scene opens, King Claudius and Queen Gertrude are interrogating Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to see if they have found the reason for Hamlet's awkward behavior. The two young men report that no matter how many times they question Hamlet, he always alludes the question in a crafty manner. They continue to tell the royalty that Hamlet has invited them to a play that he has arranged (from Act 2, Scene II). As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exit, Claudius urges them to keep pressing Hamlet for information. In their own search for information, Claudius and Polonius concoct a plan to spy on a personal encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia. The two men hear Hamlet drawing close, and hide. In Hamlet's long famous soliloquy, he is trying to search out the basic thought process that will help him solve his problems, but he is interrupted by Ophelia's entrance. She presents Hamlet with the trinkets and love letters he had previously sent her, but does not take them from her, and his conversation with her is cruel. He asserts that all women are promiscuous, tells her that he can no longer love her, and calls for an end to the institution of marriage. Ophelia can only conclude that Hamlet has gone mad by such an outburst. Claudius and Polonius can not agree on the reason for Hamlet's state, though. Polonius believes he is acting in such a way because of love, but Claudius believes it has its origins from something else. With his conclusion in mind, the king begins to ponder sending Hamlet to England.

Scene Two

Hamlet is giving last-minute theatrical advice to the actors in the play, which will hopefully achieve his plan's purpose, to cause Claudius to feel guilty. In the play, a nephew murders his uncle, the king, by pouring poison in his ear, a similar heinous deed as to that of Claudius'. When the murder is committed on stage, Claudius calls for light and ends the performance abruptly, dismissing everyone present. As Hamlet and Horatio discuss the king's response, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive and reveal that the king is not feeling well, and that Queen Gertrude would like to see Hamlet in her chamber.

Scene Three

Claudius, sensing that he is in danger, sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to England with Hamlet. As they leave, Polonius enters and makes the king aware that Hamlet is on his way to Gertrude's chamber. Upon Polonius' exit, Claudius gets on his knees and begins to pray. Hamlet then passes by the unaware kneeling king, the perfect opportunity to revenge his father's death. Realizing that it is immoral to kill someone while they are praying, rather than doing it when they are drunk or angry, Hamlet decides to let the sinful king live. Claudius, unaware of the danger he has just been in, gets up from his prayer too late to see Hamlet pass by.

Scene Four

This scene takes place in Gertrude's quarters, where she is discussing the plan with Polonius. He tells her to say that Hamlet's behavior has been unacceptable, and that she has stood up for him despite what the king thinks of him. When they hear

Hamlet, Polonius hides behind a tapestry covering the wall of the room. As he enters, the queen tries to follow Polonius' instructions, but each time is interrupted by Hamlet's outbursts. Noticing that reason is not working on Hamlet, Gertrude gives up her attempt. Hamlet then becomes aggressive and tries to force his mother to discuss her conscience, rather than his unfavorable behavior. He scares the queen, and she calls for help, a call that is answered by Polonius from behind the tapestry. Seeing this unknown shape suddenly move, Hamlet leaps into action, draws his sword, and stabs Polonius. Paying no attention to the corpse, Hamlet continues to make Gertrude question her marriage to Claudius. He criticizes Gertrude for not acting her age, and suggests that she may even be mad for showing such bad judgement. The queen admits her own feelings of guilt over the marriage, but Hamlet refuses to hear it, and continues badgering his mother until an astonishing thing happens- the ghost reappears. Hamlet's reaction to the appearance of the ghost shocks Gertrude, for she cannot see the ghost, and believes that her son is surely insane. The ghost reminds Hamlet of his task, letting him know that his visitation to Gertrude is pointless. Hamlet then tells his mother that he will be a dutiful son again if she stops sleeping with Claudius, and that he will make up a reasonable explanation for Polonius' death. He then asks her if Claudius actually plans to send him to England. When she confirms this rumor, Hamlet vows to outsmart his enemies, and drags the body out of the room, leaving the shattered Gertrude alone.