



## THE DEATH OF OPHELIA

As Hamlet meditates revenge and Claudius thinks about how to deal with Hamlet, Ophelia faces the loss of her love and the death of her father.

### 1 Read the summary of the story so far.

- a Why does the ghost reappear and why does Gertrude think Hamlet is mad again?
- b What does Claudius plan for Hamlet in England and why doesn't he carry out the plan?
- c Why does Laertes become an important character in the play at this point?

### THE STORY SO FAR

The ghost of Hamlet's father appears in Gertrude's room to remind Hamlet of his real purpose. The queen cannot see the ghost and consequently thinks that Hamlet is mad once more. Hamlet convinces her that he is not mad and she is not to tell Claudius that he is feigning madness. Hamlet reminds her that he has to go to England and he leaves, taking Polonius's body out of the room with him. Claudius states that he's going to have Hamlet killed when he arrives in England. Hamlet, on the other hand, finds new determination to avenge his father's death. Although he sets off for England, chance has it that he manages to return to Denmark.

Horatio brings Ophelia to see the queen, as he is worried about her mental state. When Ophelia appears, it is clear that she has fallen into madness. Laertes, who has returned to Elsinore after hearing of his father's death, finds his sister has gone mad. Claudius tells him that Hamlet is responsible and, since he has also discovered that Hamlet is returning to Elsinore, he asks Laertes to help him murder Hamlet. They decide that Laertes will challenge Hamlet to a duel. To ensure that Hamlet dies they have two back-up plans: they will poison the tip of Laertes's sword and Claudius will prepare a poisoned chalice of wine.

As Claudius and Laertes are finishing their conversation, Gertrude enters with some bad news.

### 2 Predict. What will the queen's bad news be about?





- 1 Read the text. Use the notes on the right.

# THE DEATH OF OPHELIA

## ACT IV SCENE VII

*Enter QUEEN GERTRUDE*

**KING CLAUDIUS**

- 1 How now, sweet queen!

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

One woe doth tread upon another's heel,  
So fast they follow; your sister's drown'd,  
Laertes.

**LAERTES**

Drown'd! O, where?

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

- 5 There is a willow grows aslant a brook,  
That shows his hoar leaves in the lowly stream;  
There with fantastic garlands did she come  
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and purples  
That liberal shepherds give a haphazard name,  
10 But our cold maids do dead men's fingers  
call them:  
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet  
weeds  
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver  
broke;  
When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the angry stream. Her clothes  
spread wide, and her white thighs the green  
15 And mermen-like, while they bore her  
up;  
With their pickers and canters, old  
tunes;

Claudius meets his wife.

Gertrude says that another tragedy occurred so soon after the last one. She tells Laertes that his sister was drowned.

Laertes is shocked and asks where it happened.

Gertrude explains how Ophelia climbed out over a river on the bough of a willow tree so she could hang her flowers on its branches. A branch broke beneath her and she fell into the water.

At first, she stayed afloat because her dress spread out and supported her. She sang as she floated in the water, unaware of the danger.

As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element: but long it could not be  
20 Till that her garments, heavy with their  
drink,  
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious  
lay  
To muddy death.-

**LAERTES**

Alas, then, she is drown'd?

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

Drown'd, drown'd.

**LAERTES**

25 Too much of water hast thou, Orophelia,  
And therefore I forbid my tears to ebb.  
It is our trick; nature her own commodity;  
Let shame say what it will: when these are  
gone,  
The woman will be out: Adieu, my lord:  
30 I have a speech of fire that would blaze,  
But that this folly doth entice.  
*Exit*

**KING CLAUDIUS**

Let's follow, Gertrude:  
How much I have to do to calm his rage!  
Now fear I will give it start again;  
35 Therefore let's away.  
*Exeunt*

Soon the dress became wet  
and its weight pulled her under  
the water.

Laertes asks again if  
she has drowned.

Gertrude says yes, she has drowned.

Laertes says he will not cry because  
Ophelia has already had too much  
water. But crying is human nature,  
he says, and once he has finished  
crying he can be manly again. He  
says he must leave because he has  
some angry words to say but he  
cannot speak at the moment.

Claudius says he and Gertrude  
should keep an eye on Laertes in  
case he becomes totally enraged  
again, despite the fact that he had  
previously managed to calm him  
down.

# Understand and Analyse

## UNDERSTAND

### 1 Discuss the following and choose the best options.

- a** When Gertrude enters, she says that
- 1 Ophelia's death has come soon after Polonius's death.
  - 2 Laertes's return has come soon after Polonius's death.
  - 3 King Hamlet's death has been followed by other deaths.
- b** When Ophelia came to the river,
- 1 she was looking for someone.
  - 2 she was carrying wild flowers.
  - 3 she was collecting leaves.
- c** She climbed the willow tree to
- 1 hang her flowers on a branch.
  - 2 look at her reflection in the water.
  - 3 collect some more leaves.
- d** Ophelia
- 1 jumped down into the water.
  - 2 slipped and fell into the water.
  - 3 accidentally fell into the water.
- e** Initially, Ophelia
- 1 was weighed down by her clothes.
  - 2 tried to swim to safety.
  - 3 floated on the water, held up by her clothes.
- f** Eventually, Ophelia
- 1 was buried under water.
  - 2 washed up dead on a muddy bank.
  - 3 drank too much water and drowned.
- g** Laertes says
- 1 he will not cry and does not cry.
  - 2 he will not cry but does cry.
  - 3 he will cry but does not cry.
- h** Claudius tells Gertrude that they should follow Laertes
- 1 to see where he goes.
  - 2 to calm his rage.
  - 3 to watch his mood.

## ANALYSE

### 2 Gertrude's monologue about Ophelia's death (lines 5-22) is sad and poetic.

- a** Find examples of personification of the willow tree, the stream and Ophelia's clothes.  
**b** What simile does Gertrude use to describe Ophelia?

## THINK

### 3 Ophelia's death takes place off stage and is described by Gertrude. Why do you think Shakespeare decided to play the scene in this way?

## PRODUCE

### 4 Work in small groups. Imagine the events from Ophelia's point of view.

- a** Write a monologue for Ophelia, describing how she is feeling and what she is doing.  
**b** Think of how you could stage the scene 'live', rather than 'reported' by Gertrude.  
**c** Share your work with your classmates.

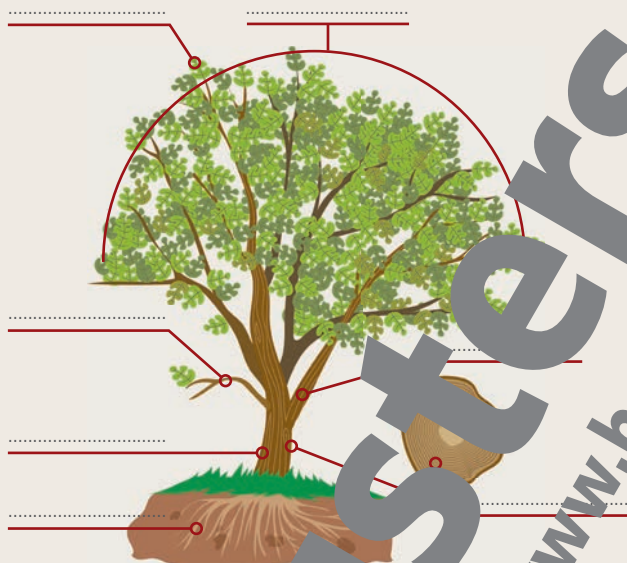
# Vocabulary Building

“Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,”

## Describing plants

- 1 Look at the picture of a tree and name the parts using the words below:

leaf (leaves)    branch    trunk  
roots    twig    bark    crown



- 2 Now look at the diagram of a flower. Label the parts using the words below:

petal    pistil    stem  
stamen    leaf    sepal



- 3 Find the names of these common wild flowers and plants in English using your dictionary and the Internet.





## CULTURE

# Madness in Revenge Tragedy



As you know, one of the common features of revenge tragedies is madness. Madness can be both real or feigned (pretended). The use of real and feigned madness allows the playwright and his characters to achieve different aims.

### 1 Read about real and feigned madness and think about Hamlet and Ophelia's madness in the play. Take notes under the following headings:

- what type
- what cause
- what purpose
- other characters' reaction
- what consequence

💬 Then share ideas with a partner.

#### Real madness

Real madness heightens the sense of tragedy since it usually involves a main character who, at the beginning of the play, is completely sane. After, following a series of more violent events, the person is driven to madness, often by extreme grief. The violence that the character causes and other characters to reflect and meditate on the meaning of life, and on the consequences of violence. It also underlines the evil or desperate nature of the character who committed the act of violence which triggered the onset of madness.



### Feigned madness

Feigned madness is often used as a disguise for a character and can be a way for them to 'survive' on either a personal or political level allowing them to 'buy' time in order to find out information or decide what to do. It helps them to become more enigmatic and difficult to understand without being perceived as a threat. It also enables them to avoid difficult questions and to get away with extreme behaviour, even to attack another character physically without being simply violent. In many cases, it gives them the chance to say things which they could not otherwise say and to make fun of other characters.

### INDEPENDENT LEARNING

Shakespeare tells us very little about Ophelia. We know no story outside her being a daughter, sister and lover. Yet Ophelia is the most represented of all of Shakespeare's heroines in art, literature and popular culture.

- 2  Find out more about some popular representations of Ophelia and report back to the class.

