

SETTING

In Denmark, in and around the castle of Elsinore, home of the late King Hamlet and his surviving heirs. Shortly before the opera begins, King Hamlet has died under questionable circumstances.

ACT I

*Scene one* – The scene opens as the court at Elsinore is celebrating the marriage of King Claudius to Gertrude, widow of the late King Hamlet. Prince Hamlet, son of Gertrude and King Hamlet, remains stunned by his mother's hasty remarriage, merely two months after his father's death. Ophélie, daughter of the lord chamberlain, Polonius, is in love with Prince Hamlet, but is concerned that he may leave the court due to his uneasiness with his mother's actions. Feeling ignored by Hamlet, Ophelia begs him for an affirmation of his love for her. Ophélie's brother Laërtes must depart on court business, so he entrusts her care to Hamlet.

*Scene two* – Hamlet joins his friends Horatio and Marcellus outside the castle walls. They warn the prince they have seen a ghost they believe to be Hamlet's father. Shortly the ghost appears, charging Hamlet with avenging his father's murder, revealing that he was poisoned by his brother Claudius. The ghost urges immediate action, but warns his son not to harm his mother, as her vengeance must be left to Heaven. As the ghost vanishes, Hamlet swears to obey the command.

ACT II

*Scene one* – Ophélie is in distress, as the Prince is shunning her. Hamlet momentarily appears, but withdraws, and she ponders the briefness of her lover's vows. Gertrude enters, seeking to learn from Ophélie what is happening with Hamlet, and discovers Ophélie in tears. She confides to Gertrude that she believes the prince no longer loves her and requests permission to leave the court. Gertrude pleads with her to stay, hoping she can cure the prince of his melancholy. King Claudius then appears, and the queen asks Ophélie to withdraw. The king wonders at Hamlet's strange behavior, and Gertrude suspects he may have learned the truth of their crime. Claudius, however, prefers to think that Hamlet is going mad. Hamlet enters and announces he has arranged a performance for the court that evening. The king and queen, seeking to humor him, agree to attend. Hamlet sings the praises of wine's ability to dispel sadness and depression.

*Scene two* – The play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, is presented. Hamlet narrates the story of King Gonzago, who is lured by the queen to a lonely spot, where her lover administers a lethal dose of poison to the king. At the moment in the play when the murderer places the king's crown on his own head, Claudius nearly betrays himself. Hamlet boldly accuses the King of murder and the court erupts in pandemonium.

ACT III

Seeking a connection with his father in the castle's mausoleum, Hamlet is angry with himself for not having killed Claudius outright. However, he ponders the possibility of taking his own life in order to escape the responsibility his father's ghost has burdened him with, if only suicide were not forbidden, and a person's fate after death could be known. Hamlet hides when Claudius enters and begins praying to the spirit of his dead brother to appease God. The king then calls for Polonius, and Hamlet learns that Ophélie's father was an accomplice in the murder. Gertrude and Ophélie enter and Hamlet's mother urges her son to marry. However he again rejects his fiancé and violently turns on his mother. In a rage Hamlet reveals to Gertrude that he knows of the murder and Gertrude fears for her life. The ghost appears to Hamlet, reminding him that his mother must be spared. The queen, not seeing the specter, believes Hamlet to be mad. Hamlet exhorts her to repent and pray.

ACT IV

Ophélie, looking disheveled and vague, has been driven insane by Hamlet's rejection.

ACT V

In the cemetery two gravediggers are preparing for a burial ceremony. Hamlet asks the men whose grave it is, but they do not know. Laërtes arrives, having returned from abroad after learning of his sister's madness. A funeral procession arrives, and it is only now that Hamlet learns of Ophélie's death. Hamlet finally avenges his father's death.