



OPHELIA: QUEEN OF DENMARK

By Jackie French

Book Summary:

She is the girl who will be queen: Ophelia, daughter of Denmark's lord chancellor and loved by Prince Hamlet.

But while Hamlet's family stab, poison or haunt one another, Ophelia plans a sensible rule, one filled with justice and the making of delicious cheeses. Even if she has to pretend to be mad to make it happen, Ophelia will let nothing, not even howling ghosts, stand in her way.

This is Shakespeare's play, but with what might also have happened behind the scenes. And this story has a happy ending.

From Jackie French, one of Australia's most respected and awarded authors and the Australian Children's Laureate and 2015 Senior Australian of the Year comes a book that re-imagines the life of one of Shakespeare's most intriguing female characters.

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes:

- **English – Language Literature and Literacy**
- **SOSE**

Appropriate Ages: 12+

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

*'With murder, ghosts, love, plots ... and quite a lot of cheese.
And with apologies to Denmark and its history.'*

'But if I was ever to be a queen, I must tame an angry prince now.' (p 28)

'This book can be read as a story of love, murder and cheese in its own right. But it can also be used to make readers interpret the original play differently, seeing the events from a new – and more rational – perspective.' Jackie French

Ophelia is usually seen only as the tragic betrothed of Hamlet, prince of Denmark and would-be heir to his father's throne. But in Jackie French's version the ghost of King Fortinbras tells six-year-old Ophelia that she would make a good queen. He also warns against the evils of revenge.

This book explores the main theme of the play: how vengeful madness destroys lives. But incidents are seen from the point of view of a young woman who thinks that cheese is more important to the happiness of a land than feuds and warfare, and that killing someone by pouring poison into his ear is both melodramatic and stupid: what if the servants see?

Ophelia is aware that she has been given skills in her upbringing as the daughter of the lord chancellor, which may well equip her for the role of queen. When the king is murdered, his brother Claudius quickly weds the widow Queen Gertrude. Ophelia senses that the returning Prince Hamlet may well claim her as his wife, and hopes and plans that this will happen. Her brief love for and romance with Hamlet, though, teaches her more about her own character, and about the nature of considered thought, strategic action and good governance.

When Hamlet discovers that it was Claudius who murdered King Hamlet, he embarks on a confusedly vengeful path enhanced by his own pretended madness. Ophelia is hence unsure both of his sanity and of his love. A series of further tragic deaths occurs, beginning with that of her father Polonius.

If Hamlet can pretend to be mad to save himself from a suspicious uncle, then so can Ophelia. She can even fake her own death, for in the play only the coffin (not the body) is ever seen. She is still alive to see the deaths of lover Hamlet and brother Laertes, and of the queen and king. This leaves the plot open for a new final scene: Ophelia may save Denmark – and keep it peaceful and prosperous, with extremely good cheese – as the queen with the new King Fortinbras.

The novel ends on a note of hope: 'It was time for a new rule now.

Kindness instead of hate. Compassion for our people. No shadows, no vengeance from the past. Just good sense, and cheese. "You would be a good queen," the ghost had told me when I was a child. I knew how to be one now.' (p 253)

Ophelia: Queen of Denmark (2015) is the second book in a series by Jackie French that began with *I am Juliet* (2014) and will continue with *The Diary of William Shakespeare, Gent* (2016) and *Third Witch* (2017). In this series, she brings new life to several well-known Shakespearean plays by concentrating on the female heroine, or even Shakespeare himself, and writing from that perspective. These classical stories are retold with wit and verve and are bound to attract a new and avid audience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jackie French is a multiple award-winning author who deals with a very wide range of topics. Of her books she says on her website that: 'There were over 140 at last count, slightly more than we have varieties of apples. If something is worth doing, you may as well go heart and soul and boot leather ... I write for kids and adults, fiction, history, gardening, pests control, chooks and some that must be a nightmare for bookshops to work out what genre they are. Have a look at "which book?" for a probably not quite up-to-date list of what is where and for whom.'

Jackie is the current Australian Children's Laureate (2014–15).

<http://www.childrenslaureate.org.au/>

She is also the 2015 Senior Australian of the Year.

Her website offers further detailed and fascinating insights into her life and work. <http://www.jackiefrench.com.au>

AUTHOR INSPIRATION

On this rewriting of *Hamlet*, Jackie French remarks in her notes that: 'This isn't his play fleshed out – as in my book *I am Juliet* – but another story twisted into his. Would Shakespeare have minded?' (p 260) As with the previous title, she has written *Ophelia: Queen of Denmark* to make Shakespeare accessible and also to give voice to another of his heroines. See **Author's Notes** (pp 260–73).

CHARACTERS

- **The Significance of Character:** Characters are the heart of any narrative, the catalysts for action, and the central core around which all other narrative aspects must revolve and work. In *Ophelia: Queen of Denmark* there are several major characters (some of whom figure briefly in the action) and a cast of minor ones.

Discussion Point: Discuss the character of Ophelia.

- **Major Characters:** Ophelia; Polonius, lord chancellor and Ophelia's father; Laertes, her brother; Hamlet, prince of Denmark; King Claudius, Hamlet's uncle and later stepfather; Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother.

Discussion Point: Which of the main characters did you find most appealing, and why?

Discussion Point: 'Lord Claudius smiled. I tried to read his expression. Was it love? No, I thought. It is the look of a man who has played a game of chess and makes the final move to win.' (p 21) What does this quote tell you about him?

- **Minor Characters:** Horatio, Hamlet's friend; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's childhood friends; Lady Annika, Lady Anna and Lady Hilda, Queen Gertrude's ladies-in-waiting; Gerda, Ophelia's servant; Marcellus and Bernardo, guardsmen; Lord Fortinbras, the would-be king.

Discussion Point: Is there a minor character who might have played a larger part? Why would you have liked to have seen more of this character?

- **Character Arcs** are the curve on which key events show how a character grows or develops in response to events and to interactions with other characters in the novel.

Activity: Choose a character and trace an arc on which key events indicate some aspect of their personality or change in their behaviour, e.g. Laertes.

THEMES

Women's History and Rights

Discussion Point: 'A queen can have power, if she has the courage to take it. If my queen had been alive, perhaps she would have stopped the fight.' (p 3) 'Other women were wives, nurses, tavern wenches, nuns, all obeying orders. A queen must know how a kingdom worked; she must understand the importance of fine weather in midsummer to make the hay to feed the cows over winter so they

could give milk for cheese in spring.' (p 10) How do women in this story wrest power from men?

Discussion Point: 'I envied the waves, free to crash and foam, while I was imprisoned in long skirts and polite manners as one of the queen's ladies, in a room that smelled of too many people, and a strange scent that must be death.' (p 7) Were women in this time imprisoned by costumes and manners?

Discussion Point: 'I wore the keys of our household, and unlocked the larder each morning to give the cooks the day's saffron or cinnamon, Venetian almonds or Parisian chestnuts; and checked that the linen was aired, the cheese in the cellars turned regularly, and the brine in the barrels of salted butter changed each week. Ours were good cellars and I kept them well-stocked: three hundred cheeses, fresh and aged; five tons of salted butter; smoked sides of salmon, rows of hams and slabs of bacon; barrels of old brandy and new ale; crocks of honey; boxes of dried berries or hops; bunches of dried herbs hanging from the rafters — all sent from our estates.'(p 19) The duties which Ophelia is called on to execute give some idea of the practical power such a woman exercised in a household.

Discussion Point: 'It is well-known that too much learning sends a woman mad. But I was not mad yet, and I had found I could best be a good daughter by making sure my father never guessed what to forbid.' (p 50) Can there be power in being a woman who holds her own counsel and keeps secret her real feelings?

Activity: 'The palace blacksmith had shut the door upon his daughter, and now she lay, her unborn child with her, in a suicide's grave outside the churchyard. Even death had not washed her sins away.' (p 65) The terrible fate of a young woman is described here, made worse by the fact that her brother has married a girl whom he made pregnant with no such shame. Discuss the values evinced in such double standards.

Shakespearean Theatre and the Play *Hamlet*

Activity: Most scholars agree that Shakespeare published *Hamlet* after 1601 and before 1603. The play is said to be based on a popular Scandinavian saga that had existed for at least a hundred years in one form or another.

<<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/about-hamlet>> Research the background of the play.

Activity: Research Shakespearean drama and theatre further. Read Jackie French's **Author's Notes** on this history (pp 264–6).

Activity: 'Ophelia has been portrayed on screen since the days of early silent films. [Dorothy Foster](#) played Ophelia opposite [Charles Raymond](#)'s Hamlet in the 1912 film *Hamlet*. [Jean Simmons](#) played Ophelia opposite [Laurence Olivier](#)'s Oscar-winning Hamlet performance in [1948](#); Simmons was also nominated for the [Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress](#). More recently, Ophelia has

been portrayed by [Marianne Faithfull \(1969\)](#), [Helena Bonham Carter \(1990\)](#), [Kate Winslet \(1996\)](#), [Julia Stiles \(2000\)](#) and [Gugu Mbatha-Raw \(2009\)](#). Themes associated with Ophelia have led to movies such as *Ophelia Learns to Swim* (2000), and *Dying Like Ophelia* (2002). ('Ophelia' *Wikipedia* <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ophelia>>) There are said to have been over 50 film versions of *Hamlet* since 1900. Watch some films of the play *Hamlet* and discuss with students. (See **Bibliography** for texts related to this activity.)

Activity: Read Lisa Klein's novel *Ophelia* (2006). Compare to *Ophelia: Queen of Denmark*.

Activity: Students might read the 'Cliffs Notes on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*' to gain an insight into the plot, themes and characters.
 <<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/play-summary>>

Discussion Point: There is a play within a play in this novel. The travelling players perform a version of the murder of King Hamlet by his brother Claudius, who is disgraced and outraged. This trope was typical of Shakespeare's plays in which troupes of players often arrive to represent the events being outlined in the main drama. Locate and discuss examples of this in Shakespeare's work.

Shakespeare, or at least members of his company, may also have visited Denmark as they travelled to the continent when the London theatres were closed due to plague. The play shows a detailed knowledge of the castle of Elsinore, for example, which would have been difficult for anyone who hadn't been there.

History of Denmark

Activity: Jackie French makes it clear in her **Author's Notes** (p 260) that she didn't base this novel's setting on any close relationship to Denmark. Nevertheless, this background might be explored with students. Research the general history and culture of Denmark. 'History' *The Official Website of Denmark* <<http://denmark.dk/en/society/history/>>

Activity: Research the history of the Danish royal family.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danish_Royal_Family> Remind students of the current

popularity of the Crown Princess Mary, an Australian who married HRH Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark. Research this royal line further.

Activity: Kronberg is immortalised as Elsinore Castle in *Hamlet*.
 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kronborg>> Study this and other historic castles in Denmark. See, for example, '12 Spectacular Castles to Visit in Denmark'
 <<http://www.visitdenmark.com/guide/best-castles-royal-denmark>>

Revenge and Family Feuds

Discussion Point: 'Revenge is a dish that sits bitter in the stomach, even if the first taste is sweet.' (p 5)

Discussion Point: 'Promise me you will not torment your son when he returns. Leave him in peace, and your kingdom too. Promise me!' (p 211) Even in death, Hamlet's father, King Hamlet, preaches revenge, but Ophelia entreats him to leave his son alone. Why?

Discussion Point: Hamlet is not only upset to have his power usurped, but also that his father's own brother has married his mother. Find examples of such family feuds in classical and contemporary literature.

Leadership and Power

Discussion Point: 'He hadn't been a bad king, just a careless one. Old King Hamlet had loved his throne – so cunningly won from King Fortinbras – more than his people, or his wife. But he had left the kingdom alone enough to allow my father to keep it prosperous.' (p 13) What does this tell us about King Hamlet and Polonius's role in the governance of the kingdom?

Discussion Point: 'One of the mysterious charms of the palace was the way servants appeared just as you needed them, though I knew the magic was in training a good servant in the art of watching. And what not to see while watching.' (p 41) There is a strict hierarchy in this court where servants do the king's bidding and ladies-in-waiting are just as beholden to their power. But there is also an underlying sense that servants are artful in their subservience, too.

Discussion Point: 'The safety and health of this whole kingdom depends on his choice. His will is not his own.' (p 88) Later, Ophelia realises that Hamlet may need to take an English wife to secure England's support for his battle to reclaim his throne (p 149). Discuss the fact that royal marriages were founded on such power play.

Traditional Stories

Activity: Students might like to read the simpler version of the tale in Charles and Mary Lamb's famous *Tales of Shakespeare*. (See also **Bibliography** for further texts.)

Discussion Point: Shakespeare often drew on traditional stories in his plays. Research this, and discuss some of the origins of his dramas and comedies.

Love

Discussion Point: 'I loved him then. Not because he was a prince, whose position I had loved long before I saw the man. I loved him for his loneliness. All my life at the court, I had never seen anyone as alone as he was. He seemed as fragile as an icicle that could be burned away by the sun. I loved him because he needed me, not as a decoration for his table, not to keep the linen mended, but for everything I truly was. I said quietly, "Yes, my lord. For love of you.'" (p 37) Is love often derived from pity or dependence?

Discussion Point: 'For this man *was* her son, her only child. Whatever she has kept from him, whatever she has taken from him, I thought, she loves him still.' (p 42) Despite the fact that she has cheated him of the throne, the queen loves her son Hamlet, still. Find other evidences of this in the novel.

Madness

Discussion Point: 'Dangerous indeed, I thought. If they say he is dangerous, he will be locked up; not just his kingdom lost, but all his world.' (p 116) From what does Hamlet's madness largely stem – revenge or thwarted love?

Discussion Point: 'Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.' (p 126) Is the effect of madness suffered by the privileged and powerful any more crucial than madness amongst the under-privileged and powerless?

Nature

Discussion Point: The novel constantly refers to the natural world; to growing things and to the food claimed from the land around the castle. Ophelia in her pretend madness recites a poem: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember." I took another flower, looked at it sadly, then tossed it to a stout lady carrying a piglet. "And there is pansies, that's for thoughts. There's fennel for you, and columbines." (p 188) Discuss the relationship between nature / the landscape and human beings in this novel.

Discussion Point: 'Denmark needs a queen, I thought, who knows why cheese is so important. Swords are all very well, as long as you have a store of cheese.' (p 252) How important is an understanding of food to the management of a kingdom?

Activity: Jackie French writes about cheeses and includes a number of recipes (pp 266–73). This could provide an interesting activity to share with students. Make up names for the cheeses you create (as Jackie French does in this novel).

KEY QUOTES

The following quotes relate to some of the **Themes** above. You might like to present any one of them (or two related quotes) to your students as a catalyst for further discussion, or as the subject of an essay outlining how the quote reflects a theme that is central to this novel.

<p>'I liked the idea of leading an army. On a white horse of my own, and dressed in gleaming armour, like my brother Laertes wore sometimes when he practised sword fighting. Girls weren't allowed to use swords ... unless, I realised, they were a queen.' (p 3)</p>	<p>'One day, perhaps, my grandchildren will sit on Denmark's throne. But I will give my son his own road to ride, not chain him to my path with bonds of revenge.' (p 5)</p>
<p>"I thought to have a kingdom by this day's night," he said. "It seems I have a kingdom of the heart, not of the land." (p 37)</p>	<p>'A queen may call a man to her. A lady-in-waiting waits: for the queen to finish eating before she eats too; for a prince to call her, or for his mother to send her to him. I waited. At last the queen finished, and we four ate.' (pp 44-5)</p>
<p>'What people eat tells you a lot about them. The old king had liked bear steaks, red and bloody, or boar he'd speared himself. King Claudius dined on venison with French sauces. My father liked plain roast mutton, well-cooked, or stuffed pike. My cheeses talked to me not just of the seasons, but of the kingdom beyond the palace: spring grass up in the summer-grazing meadows, or autumn blight upon the farmer's hay ...' (pp 50-1)</p>	<p>'One day this man would be our king, and kings and queens made the rules ... and could break them.' (p 53)</p>
<p>'Long ago I had learned that there was only one time a girl could be truly free: night, when all in the castle but its guards and porters were asleep.' (p 57)</p>	<p>'Men made war. Women made cheese, tended boys who cut their knees, nursed wounded warriors. Perhaps women could mend cracked kingdoms too.' (p 156)</p>
<p>'Treason was a dish best served in private. It seemed the men yelling my brother's name had eaten of it too.' (p 175)</p>	<p>'No matter how I tried to twist it, I could never think of Hamlet as a good king for Denmark. He was a child, playing at plots, like he played with his sword below, his grief for me vanishing with the prospect of some sport.' (pp 227-8)</p>

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<p>'Yet she did not look sleepy now. Nor as old as I'd once thought her. I stared at her. Hamlet had tried to hide in madness. Could age and infirmity be a disguise too?' (p 248)</p>	<p>'There are two thrones here, my lord, a king's and a queen's. And one of them is empty.' (p 255)</p>
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CURRICULUM TOPICS

Language and Literacy

- **Colloquialisms**

Activity: Language used in the novel includes some references to colloquial expressions, such as 'Rat droppings, I thought, borrowing Nurse's favourite curse.' (pp 5-6) Research Shakespearean language further. Write a passage using such colloquialisms and then ask another student to attempt to translate it.

- ***This novel is a work of historical fiction – it tells a story set in the past. It is also a retelling of a classical work of literature.***

Activity: Jackie French makes Shakespearean times come alive with details of the customs and culture. Food, for example, is an aspect of life that lends veracity to such a work. See this description of the wedding feast: 'There would be enough geese left to lay eggs for goslings in spring. I ate my goose, my slices of boar, the almond custards dyed gold with saffron, and spiced almond cakes. And if the marzipan table centrepiece of the castle, towns and fields had been used three weeks before at the dead king's wake, stained black then and now covered with gold leaf, there was no one who would mention it openly.' (p 22) (See also p 23.)

Discussion Point: Read what the queen has for breakfast: 'barley bread, fresh baked that morning and dipped in ale we heated with a poker from the fire; hot barley porridge with salted butter and a compote of dried fruits in damson wine; cold meats from the night before, well-minced to suit the queen's age and lack of teeth; and Queen's Cream cheese, named in her honour and so soft there was no need to chew.' (p 44) What does this food tell you about the times?

Discussion Point: Food is often used, too, in symbolic descriptions of people: 'With us were her other ladies: Lady Annika, crumbly as an old blue-vein cheese; Lady Anna, her grey moustache thicker than the hair on her head; and Lady Hilda, round as a barrel of butter.' (pp 7-8) Find other such examples in the text.

Discussion Point: In this novel, cheese also plays a large role! Jackie French refers to early recipes for cheeses, and often uses cheese in colloquial

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expressions, and also to make points about how a household should be run. For example, 'A good household and a good estate meant excellent cheese.' (p 64) Discuss the references to cheese in this novel. See also **Author's Notes** (pp 266–73).

- **Suspense in a story hinges on the intended ending and also on what the reader or audience expects to happen**

Discussion Point: "For me? No, my father's ghost did not speak of me, except to lay me with the duty of a son." Hamlet looked at me again, his eyes as bleak as a lump of coal. "My father told me he was murdered." (p 77) This revelation is the hinge on which the drama opens. From this point, there is a clear path to the tragedy that unfolds, but many twists and turns in the plot as well.

Activity: Jackie French changes the ending of the play. How else might this story have evolved? Write a third possible ending to the story.

- **Narrative structure** — The novel opens with a sort of 'prelude' as Ophelia meets the ghost of King Fortinbras ten years before the 'action' in Shakespeare's drama begins.

Activity: This novel fits into Shakespeare's play. Work out which bits of the play have been deleted, and which bits have been added, to change the interpretation of events without changing any of the events themselves. Why have certain bits been deleted? How do the new bits change the perspective of other parts of the play?

Activity: What effect does the 'framing narrative' have on your reading of the main story presented in this novel? Shakespeare's play opens somewhat differently. (See below.)

Activity: What scenes in *Hamlet* do you now see differently after reading *Ophelia: Queen of Denmark*? Which characters do you see differently too?

- **Narrative perspective** — This novel is told from the personal point of view of Ophelia, and opens with her as a six-year-old: "You would be a good queen," said the king's ghost, hovering above me as I sat on the battlements of the castle's tiny privy tower, nibbling my Wette Willie cheese.' (p 1) This immediately foregrounds the story in her point of view. The play *Hamlet* actually opens with a guard at the castle:

ACT I

SCENE I. Elsinore. A platform before the castle.

FRANCISCO at his post. Enter to him *BERNARDO*.

BERNARDO

Who's there?

FRANCISCO

Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

BERNARDO

Long live the king!

Discussion Point: How does Ophelia's perspective change the action as presented in the play?

- ***Use of ornate and poetic language***

Activity: 'Ice-splintered waves slapped and sucked at the castle's stones.' (p 7) What form of literary device is used here?

Activity: 'I would rather leave honey for the bees, my lord. I prefer to taste what is, rather than wasting sweetness to disguise bad butter.' (p 33) Discuss the meaning of what Ophelia says to Hamlet during their first meeting in the royal garden.

Activity: 'Sit, my dear Ophelia. Should a daisy bow its head, or a rose stare at the ground? Sit or stand as you will, forever in my presence.' (p 51) Discuss the meaning of what Hamlet says to Ophelia in the library.

Discussion Point: 'I felt as empty as a sausage casing when it has been emptied of its meat, and as useless.' (p 93) 'My heart settled like a lump of butter in a bucket of whey.' (p 94) What literary devices are used here?

- ***Setting***

Discussion Point: 'The wind tickled under my nightdress. It smelled of ships and privy and stubborn snow sitting on the mountains.' (p 1) Jackie French conveys the nature of the setting by using poetic descriptions like this one. What information do you glean about the setting from this description?

- ***The literary trope of doomed love and star-crossed lovers is used in this novel symbolically to explore wider issues***

Discussion Point: Hamlet's tragedy was not simply that he had lost a father. He was also doomed to choose a wife not from love, but for the sake of his kingdom. Discuss the trope of ill-fated love in this and other Shakespearean plays.

- ***The cover of a book is an ideogram for the contents and a marketing tool as well***

Activity: Create a new cover for the book drawing on either theme or incident to create the image. Write a blurb for the back cover of the book as well.

SOSE

- **History** — Although this is a fictional story, it does give you insights into the historical background as well.

Activity: What aspects of European history were revealed in this text? Have each student write at least one aspect down and then discuss their findings.

- **Social class** — Hamlet is a prince, and Ophelia the daughter of the lord chancellor, so both are used to wealth and power.

Discussion Point: Discuss the differences in lifestyle between Ophelia's and Hamlet's families, and also between theirs and their servants.

- **Values** — The values expressed in this work differ from contemporary values but also have some similarities.

Activity: What values are particularly evident in this text?

Discussion Point: Ophelia owes allegiance to the king and queen. She cannot afford to express doubts about their royal power, or it would be interpreted as treason.

Discussion Point: Ophelia knows that the selection of a 'suitable' suitor is not hers to make, and that she must acquiesce to her father, and to his royal employers in this selection.

FURTHER POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'Perhaps my son may try to take this kingdom back. But I will not ask him to, not even to bring me to the gentle rest of death.' (p 5)

Discussion Point: Like all great classical stories, and folk tales, this novel begins with the 'seeds' of its ending. The ghost of King Fortinbras speaks of his son, who will ultimately claim the kingdom back peacefully, and claim Ophelia's hand as well. How important is such structural cohesion in a narrative?

2. 'My father knew how to tax the fleet that brought herring and stockfish, but Queen Gertrude knew why too high a tax on dried stockfish led to starvation.' (p 10)

Discussion Point: Many such references in the novel imply that women wielded the power behind the throne

3. "To be, or not to be? That is the question." The ghost peered into the darkness again, as if he could see the beech trees, the cattle byres and pigsties of his lost kingdom.' (p 5) The ghost uses the line with which Hamlet opens a significant speech in the original play.

Discussion Point: Read the original speech and discuss its meaning.

4. "To die: to sleep, no more; to end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. It is a consummation devoutly to be wished." He closed his eyes, as if he could feel that final sleep already. "To die, to sleep ..." (p 119)

Discussion Point: Hamlet seems to be contemplating suicide. And yet he later duels with Laertes and seems to be still enlivened by revenge. Does he seem mad or simply naive in this novel?

5. 'You should not have believed me. A family like mine does not breed truth. I loved you not.' (p 122)

Discussion Point: Is Hamlet too self-critical here? Does he damn himself too completely?

6. Jackie French writes: 'I suspect Shakespeare would be more horrified by his plays being studied in books than with the liberties I've taken with his plot and script.' (p 262)

Discussion Point: Discuss in relation to how contemporary students engage with Shakespeare on the page, on stage and in film. Watch a play or film version and discuss the similarities and differences. (See **Bibliography** below.)

7. 'Hamlet is perhaps the most perfect of black comedies, but unless you are used to the language, it doesn't read like that. Language in Shakespeare's time was more formal, florid and wordy than it is now.' (p 262)

Discussion Point: Invite students to discuss how this play might be described as a 'black comedy', and also the use of language in it.

8. Jackie French writes about 'melodrama' in Shakespearean life as well as in his plays (pp 263-4).

Discussion Point: Consider the aspects of melodrama in this plot.

9. 'I looked at Lady Annika, peering serenely at me from between her wrinkles. How much of the plot to kill King Hamlet did you know? I wondered.' (p 250)

Discussion Point: The final scenes reveal to Ophelia that the ladies-in-waiting have never been the naive, acquiescent creatures she had imagined. Have such women always hidden their knowledge in this way? Does power often lie vested in those who as servants have such a privileged entrée into the secret world of their employers?

10. 'Remind them that this was no town they had conquered, to be sacked, but a kingdom where they would live in peace, with plenty of cheese and herring. "A balcony scene," said Fortinbras. "I like that. I suspect the crowd will too."' (p 258)

Discussion Point: What do these lines suggest is one of the main themes of the novel?

AUTHOR'S NOTES ON THE TEXT

At the back of the book, there are extensive **Author's Notes** (pp 260–73) by Jackie French on many of the historical and cultural issues referred to in *Ophelia: Queen of Denmark*. These should be an invaluable resource for teachers using the book in the classroom, in conjunction with these teacher's notes.

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