

INTRODUCTION

Welcoming the Stranger

‘And therefore as a stranger give it welcome’, Prince Hamlet instructs his friend Horatio at the close of the play’s first act. Hamlet is speaking of the ghost of his dead father, whose ‘wondrous strange’ appearance the men have just witnessed. The welcome, however, expands in the moment of delivery to invite into Hamlet’s story a wider audience. When Shakespeare’s play was first performed, that audience included the men and women assembled for an afternoon performance at the Globe Theatre on the south bank of the Thames. By now, in a tradition that extends over 400 years, the protagonist’s line beckons to actors, spectators, readers, and adapters around the world, bidding them to detect themselves in its address.

As with so many aspects of the play, that address is a complicated one. Hamlet’s hospitality, with its echoes of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament,¹ gives way to hesitation; his tenderness towards the ghostly stranger, to suspicion. His attitude is informed, surely, by his own identification with the ‘outsider’: in the wake of the death of his royal father and the remarriage of his mother, Gertrude, to his uncle Claudius, who has assumed the throne, Hamlet understands himself as a kind of foreigner, an alien in his native Denmark and its court at Elsinore. But he also feels a stranger to himself, absorbed in the kinds of tortured self-reflection seen today as a model of modern consciousness.

Recipients of his welcome, then, face an interpretive challenge. Does Hamlet’s invitation summon them into the narrative in order for them to discover that they, like the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘have a smack of Hamlet’ in themselves?² Or does it usher them into the world of the play only to remind them, as it does T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock (‘I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be’), that they are different and distant from him?³ Or does it ask them to see the whole drama as something strange, and to welcome it into their lives with both interest and trepidation?

At the turn of the seventeenth century, when Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was first played, it may have seemed as familiar as it did strange on the London stage. Its story was not new: a dramatic version – what scholars call the *Ur-Hamlet* – had been performed as early as the late 1580s, when it was mentioned by the prolific writer Thomas Nashe in

¹ Naseeb Shaheen gives the New Testament allusions (2 Heb. 13.2 and Matt. 25.35) in *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 545. Consider also Lev. 19.34, Deut. 10.17–19.

² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring (Princeton University Press, 1990), 14.2: 61.

³ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 7.

a scornful attack on contemporary dramatists. And its dramatic events and concerns were guaranteed to resonate for its audience with familiar, topical issues: the ageing of the female ruler, Queen Elizabeth I; the question of her successor; the declining fortunes of the charismatic figure of the Earl of Essex and with him a model of chivalric honour; the deep challenges to religious belief and practice as a result of Reformation religious change; and the revival of philosophical stoicism and its concerns with liberty and tyranny. In addition, viewers would have recognized in the play ancient themes and narratives of intimate violence, adultery, and retaliation. These include the biblical accounts of Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel – Judaeo-Christian culture's primal scenes of marital betrayal, fraternal hatred, and death – as well as Greek and Roman drama and epic by Aeschylus, Euripides, Seneca, and Virgil.¹

Staging Revenge

WHAT DO REVENGERS WANT?

Perhaps most strikingly, the play – which takes shape around a son's pursuit of vengeance for his father – would have echoed for its audience the concerns and conventions of the popular dramatic genre of revenge tragedy. Although the term 'revenge tragedy' is a modern invention, plots of vengeance and vendetta – like Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1588–90) and Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589–90) – captured the dramatic imagination in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. These plots were characterized by a flexible set of conventions. A protagonist discovers a fatal or destructive deed that wrecks his or her sense of justice and order. He or she wants the violation addressed – wants balance restored – but recognizes that social institutions are unable to deal with the outrage. Therefore, the protagonist, often urged by a ghost or other soliciting spirit, takes upon him- or herself the burden of personally and privately avenging the wrong. His or her efforts, pursued to the edge of the protagonist's sanity, involve tactics of delay, disguise, and theatrical display before they end in a final retaliation that exceeds the destructiveness of the original crime.²

Shakespeare had been interested in these tropes since early in his career: he used them in the abundantly gory *Titus Andronicus* (1592); he put issues of the vendetta and talionic justice at the core of mid-1590s plays like *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1595); and he haunted both *Richard III* (1592) and *Julius Caesar* (1599) with ghosts. Vengeance for Shakespeare and his audience was not novel, but its dramatic allure remained potent. Both the topic and structure of revenge offer, as John Kerrigan has noted, 'a compelling mix of ingredients: strong situations shaped by violence; ethical issues for debate; a volatile, emotive mixture of loss and agitated grievance'.³

¹ For the biblical allusions, see Hannibal Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 154–61. For the classical allusions, see Robert Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), esp. 33–67; Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 173–6.

² Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton University Press, 1945).

³ John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 3.

Early modern audiences would have appreciated the ways in which those ‘ingredients’ could be fashioned to speak to their own moment and investment in revenge scenarios. Past scholars such as Eleanor Prosser claimed that Shakespeare and his contemporaries condemned retaliation as barbaric and contrary to divine law (as in Deuteronomy 32.35 and Romans 12.19, ‘Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord’). Revenge plays, according to this reading, reinforced this message.¹ But more recent scholarship has challenged this conclusion, suggesting that the early modern drama offered more complex approaches to the morality and legality of revenge.² Revenge plays, that is, did not simply condemn vengeance; they dramatized the human desire to match crime with crime, exploring it in connection with classical, Christian, and Elizabethan principles of justice, honour, stoicism, obedience, resistance, and suffering.

Plots of revenge accommodated issues that fascinated contemporary dramatists and their audiences. Death, sexuality, and bodily violation lie at the heart of stories of vendetta, and when these involve murder or rape at the highest levels, they become political as well as personal challenges to honour and liberty. Similarly, the human capacities to mourn, remember, and repent are all scrutinized in relation to the pursuit of revenge. These were urgent topics for Shakespeare’s period, particularly as they were inflected by the social, cultural, and religious changes associated with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The genre’s concern with crime, punishment, and atonement provided a structure for exploring both developments in sixteenth-century jurisprudence and doctrinal changes associated with the English Reformation and its competing theologies of death, sin, the afterlife, and the sacraments. Some scholars have seen a special relationship between the blood and gore of revenge drama and Catholic–Protestant debates about the Eucharist.³ Michael Neill has argued that revenge tragedy, with its extraordinary fixation on a dead loved one, functioned as a substitute for rejected (but longed-for) Catholic memorializing practices grounded in a belief in Purgatory. The genre, he writes, supplied ‘a fantasy response to the sense of despairing impotence produced by the Protestant displacement of the dead’.⁴ And although religious belief and practice provided the ‘matrix for explorations of virtually every topic’ during this time, revenge tragedy trafficked in realms other than the strictly devotional.⁵ Lorna Hutson has suggested that early modern revenge tragedy dramatized legal thought and practice by representing on stage ‘the protracted processes of detection, pre-trial

¹ Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford University Press, 1971).

² Linda Woodbridge offers the most thorough-going account in *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). For discussions of the complementarity, rather than the opposition, between revenge and early modern law, see Ronald Broude, ‘Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England’, *RQ* 28 (1975), 38–58; and Derek Dunne, *Shakespeare, Revenge Tragedy and Early Modern Law: Vindictive Justice* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

³ Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 94–123.

⁴ Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 244, 246.

⁵ Debora Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (University of Toronto Press, 1997), 6.

examination, trial, and evidence evaluation'.¹ The genre also gave fictional shape to the sorts of real-life 'systemic unfairness' its audience might encounter at a time that 'witnessed severe disproportion between crime and punishment, between labor and its rewards'.² And, insofar as its plots were focused on the pursuit of justice in the face of political corruption by an individual called upon to strategize and plan, revenge tragedy gave dramatic space to a host of long-standing philosophical dilemmas around identity, intention, and agency.³ Finally, revenge plays seized on ideological assumptions about women and uncontrolled violence to 'tap into fundamental fears about women . . . maternal power and female agency'.⁴

HAMLET AND THE RESOURCES OF REVENGE

Hamlet participates in these concerns and the revenge conventions to which they are attached. It relies for its core narrative on the Nordic legend of Amleth, the clever, as well as vengeful, son of a valiant father slain by his own brother. The story, set in pre-Christian Denmark, was chronicled in Saxo Grammaticus's late-twelfth-/early-thirteenth-century compendium *Gesta Danorum*, or 'Deeds of the Danes', which was printed for the first time in Paris in 1514 as *Historiae Danicae*. It was translated by François de Belleforest in the fifth volume of his collection *Histoires Tragiques* (1570); Shakespeare's play ultimately derives from this version.⁵ (Belleforest's account was translated into English as the *Hystorie of Hamblet* in 1608, well after Shakespeare's play was in the repertory.) Saxo and Belleforest's accounts differ in important ways,⁶ but they agree on most of the elements of the plot. In both, Amleth's uncle takes over as ruler of the province of Jutland and marries his widowed sister-in-law. Amleth, the betrayed son, feigns madness in order to protect himself from his spying, murderous uncle and to implement his revenge, which he accomplishes with great relish, teasing the court with seemingly nonsensical riddles and grotesque behaviour (including the murder of a councillor whom he feeds to pigs) before burning down the palace hall and decapitating his uncle. He then appeals to the startled populace with a powerful oration, defending his revenge as the only way to preserve the people's liberty against the deprivations of the tyrant.⁷

¹ Lorna Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

² Woodbridge, *English Revenge Drama*, 7.

³ Christopher Crosbie, *Revenge Tragedy and Classical Philosophy on the Early Modern Stage* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

⁴ Alison Findlay, *A Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1999), 49.

⁵ Bullough, vii: 15; Margrethe Jolly, 'Hamlet and the French Connection: The Relationship of Q1 and Q2 *Hamlet* and the Evidence of Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*', *Parergon* 29.1 (2012), 83–105.

⁶ Bullough, vii: 10–15. For the ideological use of Saxo by Belleforest during the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century, see Julie Maxwell, 'Counter-Reformation Versions of Saxo: A New Source for *Hamlet*?' *RQ* 57.2 (2004), 518–60.

⁷ Bullough gives Oliver Elton's translation of Saxo in Bullough, vii: 60–79, and of *The Hystorie of Hamblet* in *ibid.*, 81–124. For a more contemporary translation of Saxo, with Latin on facing pages, see Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen and trans. Peter Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), i: 178–221.

Hamlet takes this ancient fable of the north, absorbs the warrior practices and ideals it represents, and transforms them ethically, psychologically, politically, and theatrically. There are three distinct texts of *Hamlet* – the first quarto (Q1, 1603), the second quarto (Q2, 1604/5), and the First Folio (F, 1623) – but they are all informed by this kind of global adaptation. (The different texts are discussed below, pp. 12–17, and in the Textual Analysis.) Shakespeare gives his play a cosmic frame, with frequent references to the heavens, earth, and the underworld. He portrays as an unsolved mystery the killing by Claudius of his brother Hamlet, making the play an early instance of detective fiction or even a ‘precursor’ of cinema.¹ He introduces the ghost of the murdered King Hamlet, a deliberately mysterious presence, who urges his namesake to avenge his death and who reappears when the demand has not been fulfilled. Shakespeare uses the conventional revenge delay – mistakenly cited by some critics as a sign of Hamlet’s failure as an avenger – to present the young Hamlet as a grief-stricken son who, in the play’s signature soliloquies, contemplates suicide and castigates himself for his own doubts and fears of death.

At the same time, Shakespeare develops in Hamlet Amleth’s wit, giving his protagonist extended opportunities to riddle and perform in ways that reflect the kind of philosophical scepticism associated with Michel de Montaigne, a favourite of the dramatist. Shakespeare introduces the characters of Laertes and young Fortinbras, who function as Hamlet’s foils, and he portrays a unique male friendship between Hamlet and Horatio. Shakespeare enlarges and complicates notions of the feminine and female sexuality in the role of Ophelia, whose conflicts and desires are given dramatic space for their own sake, and in the role of his mother Gertrude, whose own seemingly selfish need for erotic attachment gives way over the course of the play to concern for her son. He furnishes a troupe of travelling players who fuel Hamlet’s sense of humour and who provide a play-within-a-play that rehearses the original crime. And he complicates the end of the story in two significant ways. First, he brings Hamlet into a graveyard, where he faces death in its most literal form when he holds the skull of the dead jester Yorick. And then, in the play’s final scene, he brings Hamlet to a duel at court, where he kills his uncle only after his mother has been poisoned and he himself fatally injured by Laertes. (Is his revenge, then, for himself, his father, or his mother? Or some combination of the three? Are these even different?) Finally, Shakespeare substitutes for Saxo’s and Belleforest’s pre-Christian world a moment closer to his own, setting the play in a Renaissance Danish court coloured by humanist and Christian principles and alert to key symbols of the different Christian confessions (Hamlet returns to Elsinore from Wittenberg, seat of Lutheranism; his father’s Ghost seems to return from Purgatory, a distinctly Catholic otherworld).

With these kinds of changes, Shakespeare refashions the legendary source material into an early modern revenge tragedy. In so doing, his play ‘updates’ the form, reinvigorating his colleagues’ models according to his own interests and dramatic

¹ Courtney Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains: Theater to Film, Early Modern to Post-Modern* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 90.

priorities.¹ These priorities give the play what Maynard Mack calls its distinctly ‘interrogative mood’, its presentation of a ‘world where uncertainties are of the essence’.² Hamlet’s response to these uncertainties distinguishes him from his vengeful predecessors. He is certainly disgusted by Gertrude and Claudius, but he is a conflicted, resistant avenger – the opposite not only of the Nordic Amleth but also of single-minded Renaissance characters such as Kyd’s Hieronimo, Marlowe’s Barabas and even his own foils, Fortinbras and Laertes. Of course, some critics and performers have portrayed Hamlets who are keen on exacting revenge; their approaches are justified textually by Hamlet’s pledge to the Ghost to ‘sweep to [his] revenge’ and by his declaration that he ‘could . . . drink hot blood’ (1.5.31, 3.2.351). But at significant moments he also voices reluctance about his task, as it seems to him to require not only the talionic killing of his uncle but also the spiritual rescue of his mother and the restoring to health of his entire country, now an ‘unweeded garden / That grows to seed’ (1.2.135–6). We hear this reluctance in his lament, for instance, that ‘The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right’ (1.5.189–90), and in the famous ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy, where the problem of not being is woven through with the dilemma of not revenging.

The impact of his hesitation is only intensified by his ‘antic disposition’, the feigned madness that he assumes as a strategy for protection. But if Hamlet adopts his antic disposition as a cagey disguise, at times it actually seems to express – to be – his true, broken emotional state. This complication of appearance and reality, of exterior and interior, pervades the play so completely that even – perhaps especially – an audience familiar with revenge plays would see Shakespeare’s version as something ‘strange’.

Staging the Stage

Hamlet’s revenge plot, in other words, opens onto a persistent conundrum of human experience: the problem of seeming and being. The conundrum has a long philosophical and theological history that predates *Hamlet* by two millennia. But, as Katherine Maus has explained, ‘in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England the sense of discrepancy between “inward disposition” and “outward appearance” seem[ed] unusually urgent and consequential for a very large number of people’.³ Hamlet presents this dilemma at the play’s outset, when he announces to the Danish court that ‘I have that within which passes show’ (1.2.85). Hamlet testifies here to a personal crisis, the painful distance between his internal grief and the modes available for him to express it publicly. Hamlet’s lament thus presents his onstage and offstage audiences with an epistemological challenge, a reminder of how difficult it is to assess another person’s interior feelings or essence according to what they do or say. For the rest of the play, we will experience this predicament

¹ For the play’s ‘updating’ of the revenge genre, see Allison K. Deutermann, “‘Caviare to the general?’ Taste, Hearing, and Genre in *Hamlet*”, *SQ* 62.2 (2011), 230–55.

² Maynard Mack, ‘The World of *Hamlet*’, *The Yale Review* 41 (1951–2), 504.

³ Katherine Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13.

most powerfully during Hamlet's signature soliloquies, since they encourage us to believe, despite their obvious construction for performance, that they give us 'unimpeded contact with Hamlet's mind'.¹ But Hamlet's statement also refers to a political crisis, the radical fracture between appearance and reality at the now-corrupt Danish court. After Claudius's murder of King Hamlet and assumption of the throne, Elsinore 'seems' one way but 'is' another. Claudius can 'smile, and smile, and be a villain' (1.5.108).

METADRAMA

The theatre serves as a rich analogue for this kind of existential confusion. The theatre is all about appearances: on a purpose-built stage, actors perform pre-scripted narratives, playing characters other than themselves and pretending to do things they don't truly accomplish (falling in love, killing an enemy). At the same time, those appearances have a special relation to reality. They may voice truths that can be spoken only at a slant. They may inculcate behaviour on stage that becomes a model for activity off stage (this was a particular fear of the anti-theatricalists, civic and religious leaders opposed to the professional drama). Or they may remind spectators of the influential commonplace that 'all the world's a stage' – that earthly life itself is a fiction or performance in comparison to the reality of eternal life. Human beings, according to this notion, play roles for one another as well as for a divine audience.

The imaginative reach of the theatrical metaphor explains *Hamlet's* fascination with plays, players, and playing. *Hamlet* is full of metatheatrical moments, scenes that 'stage the stage'. These scenes remind audience members that they are watching a play, that they occupy the time-honoured role of spectator and thus are subject to both the rewards and dangers associated with playgoing. Such moments also highlight the disjunction between seeming and being, feigned action and genuine action, or feigned action and genuine effect. The supreme instances of this kind of metatheatre are the arrival of a travelling troupe of actors at Elsinore in the second act and their performance of an inset play in the third. In the first instance, the lead player delivers Aeneas' account of the fall of Troy in a speech that, to Hamlet's wonder, moves the player himself to tears. In the second instance, the group performs at court a fully realized play that recapitulates a royal marriage and the murder of the king by an interloper who seizes his crown. Both reflect, from different angles, recent events in Denmark, and both are meant to affect the audience ('The play's the thing', Hamlet says, 'Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king' (2.2.557–8)).

Additional gestures in these scenes also reflect recent events in Shakespeare's immediate theatrical landscape. For example, just before the play-within-the play in Act 3, Hamlet quizzes Polonius about his acting experience:

¹ Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: 'Hamlet'* (Princeton University Press, 1946), 53.

HAMLET . . . My lord, you played once i'th' university, you say.

POLONIUS That did I my lord, and was accounted a good actor.

HAMLET And what did you enact?

POLONIUS I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th' Capitol. Brutus killed me.

HAMLET It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there. (3.2.87–93)

This is a shout-out to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and alert audience members then and now are rewarded with the gratifying sense of being 'in the know' about Shakespeare's canon. But in Shakespeare's time, it was also a warning: if the same actor who played Caesar played Polonius, and the same actor who played Brutus played Hamlet, Polonius is setting himself up to die at Hamlet's hands, just as Caesar died at Brutus'.

THE POETS' WAR

There is a similar, though more complex, dynamic at work in the 'tragedians of the city' scene in Act 2 (present, though with significant variations, in all three early texts). It offers a fictionalized glimpse into early modern performance conditions, gesturing imaginatively to events and pressures within the entertainment industry. In Q1, Hamlet is told that the players visiting Elsinore have left their residence in the city because 'noveltie carries it away', and audiences are 'turned' 'to the humour of children'. In F, Rosencrantz elaborates a similar complaint (2.2.313–33), when he tells Hamlet (in lines often referred to as the 'little eyases' passage) that:

there is sir an eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top of question and are most tyrannically clapped for't. These are now the fashion, and so be-rattle the common stages (so they call them) that many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills, and dare scarce come thither.

These moments in Q1 and F have long been linked to developments in the theatre industry at the turn of the century, specifically the revival of two children's companies, Paul's Boys and the Children of the Chapel, in 1599–1600. According to the traditional narrative, a so-called 'War of the Theatres' pitted the boy players, who performed in smaller, indoor playhouses and dominated the market by exploiting the satiric and erotic potential of adolescent performers, against the adult troupes, which suffered financially. Rosencrantz seems to affirm this situation when he admits to Hamlet, who has asked if the boys 'carry it away', that indeed they do. 'Ay', says Rosencrantz, with an allusion to the Globe Theatre emblem, 'Hercules and his load too' (332–3).

Recent scholarship has challenged this adversarial scenario in various ways. James Bednarz has suggested that the 'Poetomachia', as one dramatist called it – or 'Poets' War' – was not a commercial battle between adult and boy companies but a theoretical, and perhaps mutually beneficial, debate between individual playwrights about the 'social function of drama'.¹ Dramatists such as Ben Jonson, John Marston, and

¹ James Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Poets' War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 7. Suspicion that the whole affair was a 'contrived situation' for publicity purposes is expressed by W. Reavley Gair, *The Children of Paul's: The Story of a Theatre Company, 1553–1608* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 134.

Thomas Dekker put caricatures of one another on stage in order to showcase their different ideas about effective playwrighting and performance. The ‘little eyases’ passage, Bednarz explains, represents Shakespeare’s ‘distress over the vituperative tenor of the Poets’ War’, as well as his concern for the fates of both adult and boy companies as a result of the theatrical skirmishing.¹ Roslyn Knutson, in contrast, has argued that F’s ‘little eyases’ passage was a later addition to the manuscript, and that it does not comment on both boy companies at the turn of the century. Rather, it was added between 1606 and 1608, and it gestures to *Children of the Revels* (formerly the *Children of the Chapel*) and their politically charged Jacobean plays performed between 1604 and 1608.²

As we shall see, these distinct metatheatrical references can help us to date the composition of the play. But they also work thematically, showcasing Shakespeare’s ability to reinforce events happening in the fictional world of the play with the real world of the theatre. Here, he glances at the generational rivalries between contemporary London playing companies in order to illuminate the generational rivalries at the Danish court. Both sets of rivalries, Shakespeare makes clear, are intimately bound up with the issues of professional and political inheritance. In F, his Hamlet enquires of the children: ‘Will they not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players – as it is most like if their means are no better, their writers do them wrong to make them exclaim against their own succession?’ (2.2.322–5).

In Q2, the corresponding passage lacks explicit references to boy actors, stressing instead the more general precariousness of theatrical success. When Hamlet asks why the players have left the city to tour, Rosencrantz submits in the second quarto that ‘their inhibition comes by means of the late innovation’. His response may invoke the popular novelty of the boy companies. Or it may refer to immediate political contexts: scholars have suggested the regulation by the Privy Council in June 1600 to limit the number of London playing companies, or the Essex rebellion of February 1601. Or it may refer to events a couple of years later: Elizabeth I’s death, the accession of James I, and the plague which shut down the theatres in 1603.³ But the pleasingly alliterative line also makes sense entirely within the fiction itself: the players have left the city because of the ‘innovation’ that is King Hamlet’s death. The troupe, similar to Hamlet, has been displaced by Claudius. Hamlet himself, in fact, makes the comparison as he remarks upon the oddity of the new regime: ‘Is it not very strange, for my uncle is king of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little’ (2.2.334–6).

DATING HAMLET

Metadramatic scenes call attention to the play’s status as a play, inviting the audience to reflect on the relationship between the stage and the world. Metadramatic scenes

¹ Bednarz, *Poets’ War*, 30.

² Roslyn L. Knutson, ‘Falconer to the Little Eyases: A New Date and Commercial Agenda for the “Little Eyases” Passage in *Hamlet*’, *SQ* 46.1 (1995), 1–31.

³ See Richard Dutton, *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 226–44.

that are as topical as the little eyases passage call attention to the play's immediate historical moment. They – along with other kinds of internal and external evidence – thus seem to give scholars interpretive access to *when* the play was composed and first performed. In other words, various elements of the play seem to give us access to the complex personal, social, political, and literary contexts that spoke to Shakespeare, and to which he spoke back in the *Hamlet* we know today. But, as with other strange or estranging aspects of the drama, the evidence is multivalent and scholarly interpretations complex, recursive, and often in conflict.

Given this caveat, however, we can locate other important signposts for dating the play. *Hamlet* is not included in the list of Shakespeare's tragedies mentioned in Francis Meres's famous catalogue in his *Palladis Tamia* (entered in the Stationers' Register in September 1598). Claims from omission are never conclusive, but the absence makes a date earlier than 1598 unlikely. So, although a marginal note about *Hamlet* by Gabriel Harvey in his copy of Speght's Chaucer, which was published and purchased by Harvey in 1598, has often been taken to suggest an early date, we should be more circumspect. The notation, which groups *Hamlet* with Shakespeare's narrative poems of 1593–4, is a compelling instance of early modern literary evaluation: 'The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeares Venus, & Adonis, but his Lucrece, & his tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke, have it in them, to please the wiser sort.'¹

But as a means of dating the composition and performance of the play, the note is inconclusive, as the date of the note itself is subject to debate. A recent study suggests that it is likely a series of five notes composed over a number of years after Harvey purchased the volume', and that the comment on *Hamlet* was probably 'written ... after the Second Quarto of the play was published in late 1604'.²

As opposed to the vagaries of the Harvey note, the play has a definitive entry for publication – 26 July 1602 – in the Stationers' Register, the official record book of the Stationers' Company that was essential for regulating the book trade. The entry documents the right of the printer James Roberts to print 'The Revenge of Hamlet Prince [of] Denmark as it was lately acted by the Lord Chamberlain his men'. It thus reinforces a date before the summer of 1602, suggesting that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* had been on the stage both recently ('lately') and for enough time to make the prospect of printing it (a significant investment for stationers) appear worthwhile.

The Poets' War has been used routinely to fix the date of *Hamlet*'s composition and performance. Since the children's troupes were revived in 1599–1600, and since the playwrights were staging barbs at one another well into 1601, the allusions discussed above suggest that the play was taking shape around the turn of the century, from roughly 1599 to 1601. But this evidence is neither transparent nor unequivocal. Bednarz, for instance, suggests that the 'little eyases' passage was added in 1601 to

¹ *Gabriel Harvey's Marginalia*, ed. G. C. Moore Smith (Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1913), 232.

² Michael J. Hirrel, 'When Did Gabriel Harvey Write His Famous Note?' *Huntington Library Quarterly* 75.2 (2012), 292. See also Jenkins, 3–6 and 573–4; E. A. J. Honigmann, 'The Date of *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Survey* 9 (1956), 24–6.

a play that had been on the stage for some time.¹ Richard Dutton agrees with this dating of the ‘little eyases’ passage, but suggests, based on Q2’s ‘late innovation’, that the play was substantively revised – rewritten into the canonical version we know today – in mid- to late 1603 for court performance.²

Additional metatheatrical nods also orient the play to the turn of the century. In late 1599, Shakespeare’s company, the Chamberlain’s Men, had relocated from their previous home, the Theatre in Shoreditch, to the Globe Theatre, on the south side of the Thames. Hamlet’s lamentation on ‘this distracted globe’ (1.5.97) seems to glance at the new amphitheatre, a reference that makes the most dramatic sense if the play was scripted and performed in the immediate wake of the move. The same applies to his mention of ‘Hercules and his load’: the emblem of the new theatre was Hercules carrying the celestial globe on his shoulders. And so too do many of the play’s thematic preoccupations, which resonate with the popular concerns of the end of the sixteenth century: the downfall of the Earl of Essex, fears about the ageing Queen Elizabeth and who would succeed her as monarch.³

At the same time, the play has been seen to resonate more directly with topical events of mid- to late 1603, including the death of Elizabeth I and the accession to the English throne of King James I of Scotland. (James’s own father had been murdered and his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had remarried the putative assassin. James’s queen, Anne, was Danish, the sister to the current King of Denmark, Christian IV.) Stylistic and linguistic evidence places it near *Henry V* (1599) and *Troilus and Cressida* (1600–1), but also near his major Jacobean tragedies: *Othello* (1603), *King Lear* (1606), and *Macbeth* (1606).⁴

Hamlet himself struggles with dates and temporality. In his first soliloquy, he accuses his mother of remarrying within two months of King Hamlet’s death; he then remeasures: ‘nay not so much, not two . . . within a month . . . A little month’ (1.2.138–47). At an equally critical juncture, the protagonist, having seen and spoken with the ghost of his father, realizes that ‘The time is out of joint’ (1.5.189). In the world Hamlet inhabits, that is, even the routine flow of days, months, and years has been rendered unstable and untrustworthy. That sense of instability seems most appropriate for a composition and performance date at the turn of the century: ‘later than mid 1599 . . . and . . . earlier than July 1602’.⁵ *Fins de siècle*, Elaine Showalter has written, are particularly charged moments, when ‘crises . . . are more intensely experienced, more emotionally fraught, more weighted with symbolic and historical meaning, because we invest them with the metaphors of death and rebirth that we

¹ Bednarz, *Poets’ War*, 225–54.

² Dutton, *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist*, 226–44.

³ See Stuart M. Kurland, ‘Hamlet and the Scottish Succession?’ *Studies in English Literature* 34.2 (1994), 279–300.

⁴ Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (repr. New York: Norton, 1997), 122. Taylor has more recently argued for a mid- to late 1603 date for the composition and first performances of the canonical *Hamlet*; see *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Authorship Companion*, ed. Gary Taylor and Gabriel Egan (Oxford University Press, 2016), 544.

⁵ Philip Edwards, ‘Introduction’, in *Hamlet*, ed. Philip Edwards, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7–8.

project onto [them]'.¹ *Hamlet* may challenge us to mistrust our instincts to give it any precise date; but there is a poetic justice in locating its 'questionable shape' in such a moment.

Staging the Text

Towards the end of his interaction with the travelling players in Act 2, Hamlet asks whether, for their performance the following night, they could 'study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in't' (2.2.493–5). The request offers a theatricalized rendition of textual practice in Shakespeare's theatre, where revisions of various kinds were routinely made to playscripts: older scripts were rewritten by different playwrights, working scripts were cut or supplemented for performance – sometimes by their original dramatists, sometimes by a new writer.² Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was fashioned in this environment. It helps to account for other aspects of the play's strangeness: its relation to an earlier Hamlet play and the shape of its earliest printed editions.

HANDFULS OF HAMLETS?

A reference by Thomas Nashe indicates that by the late 1580s there was on the London stage a pre-Shakespearean *Hamlet*, which we now refer to as the *Ur-Hamlet*. The reference is not complimentary. In a dedicatory epistle at the start of his friend Robert Greene's *Menaphon* (1589), Nashe complains about a group of ambitious, blustering playwrights for whom 'English *Seneca* read by candlelight yields many good sentences, as *Blood is a beggar*, and so forth, and if you entreat him fair in a frosty morning he will afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls, of tragical speeches.'³ Another reference to a play of *Hamlet* dates to 1594, from the account book (known now as *Henslowe's Diary*) of the theatrical entrepreneur Philip Henslowe. He records the performance (likely by Shakespeare's company, the Chamberlain's Men) of a play called *Hamlet* on 9 June 1594, at the Newington Butts playhouse on the south side of the Thames.⁴ This reference may or may not be to the same play mentioned by Nashe. And in his 1596 *Wit's Misery*, the writer Thomas Lodge invoked the character of Hamlet to describe a type of slanderous devil who 'walks for the most part in black under cover of gravity, and looks as pale as the vizard of the ghost who cried so miserably at the Theatre like an oyster-wife, *Hamlet, revenge!*'⁵ Lodge's description may point to the play recorded by Nashe or by Henslowe.

These references to a putative early *Hamlet* play (or plays) raise multiple questions. Some are questions about authorship: who wrote the *Ur-Hamlet*? Because Nashe's epistle of 1589 seems to include three swipes at the playwright Thomas Kyd, Kyd has

¹ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 2.

² Grace Ioppolo, *Revising Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

³ Thomas Nashe, Preface to R. Greene's *Menaphon*, in *Works*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow (London: A. H. Bullen, 1905), III: 315, spelling modernized.

⁴ *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21.

⁵ Thomas Lodge, *Wits Miserie* (London, 1596), h4v, spelling modernized.

been seen as a candidate for penning the play. Kyd is an attractive option since he is the author of another play preoccupied with revenge, *The Spanish Tragedy*, which features a ghost and a character named Horatio. But Nashe, whose references come in the form of puns and allusions, never explicitly states that Kyd is the ‘afforder’ of ‘whole Hamlets’. More cautious approaches, then, resist naming a specific writer, suggesting instead that the hand behind the early *Hamlet* be identified simply as one among a group of playwrights that had earned Nashe’s scorn. Shakespeare himself may be implied in Nashe’s critique, and some scholars have suggested that he was the author of an early *Hamlet* play that he subsequently revised around the turn of the century. A related, but not inevitable, position is that the first quarto (see p. 17) is what we now call the *Ur-Hamlet*.

Additional questions concern the relationship between an earlier version and Shakespeare’s drama. Grace Ioppolo has argued forcefully that Shakespeare was a dedicated reviser of his own work.¹ But how might he have refashioned an earlier play? Did he work from a manuscript, from memories of the other play, or from some combination of the two? To what extent did he follow the earlier play’s structural and linguistic patterns? A long line of criticism tended to accept the idea that Shakespeare rewrote his *Hamlet* in one fell swoop, making it into an entirely different text from the play Nashe and Lodge mocked. But more recent scholarship has challenged this model of ‘radical substitution’. Instead, some scholars have argued, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was the product of his ‘incremental’ revision over many years, rather than the result of the replacement of a primitive play by Shakespeare’s brilliant script.² Others have questioned the existence of an *Ur-Hamlet* altogether, seeing it as a scholarly invention or ‘phantom play’ to which textual bibliographers have attributed a ‘surprising corporeality’.³

All of these claims remain unsettled, subject to further debate. For now, the most reliable – though not indisputable – account may be summarized as follows: Kyd or one of his fellow-dramatists wrote an early version of *Hamlet* at the end of the 1580s; shortly after that, Kyd capitalized on its success in his revenge play *The Spanish Tragedy*; and Shakespeare had both earlier plays in mind when he pursued his own drama of a Danish prince. His pursuits, as we shall see, come to us in three distinct printed versions, yet another aspect of the play’s complexity or ‘strangeness’.

THE THREE TEXTS OF HAMLET

There exist three distinct early versions of the play: the first quarto, published in 1603; the second quarto, published in 1604/5; and the text in the Folio, published in 1623. Differences between them, both large and small, abound. Q2 has over 200 lines not in

¹ ‘Shakespeare’s authorial revisions in character, theme, plot, structure, and setting, made for changed theatrical or political conditions, censorship, publication, or private transcription (and for his own artistic demands) infuse the canon of his plays’ (Ioppolo, *Revising Shakespeare*, 133).

² James Marino, *Owning William Shakespeare: The King’s Men and Their Intellectual Property* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 79.

³ Emma Smith, ‘Ghost Writing: *Hamlet* and the *Ur-Hamlet*’, in *The Renaissance Text: Theory, Editing, Textuality*, ed. Andrew Murphy (Manchester University Press, 2000), 177, 179.

F (including Hamlet's soliloquy 'How all occasions do inform against me' in 4.4 and the dialogue with the Lord in 5.2), and F has over 80 lines not in Q2 (including the little eyases passage in 2.2).

Q1 is a text substantially distinct from both Q2 and F; the latter two look much more similar in comparison to the first quarto. (The title page of Q2 announces this difference by proclaiming that it is 'Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppie'.) Q1, at about 2,200 lines, has roughly half the number of lines of Q2 (around 3,800) and F (around 3,700).¹ Q1 has some different names (Polonius is Corambis) as well as detailed stage directions not in Q2 or F. Interestingly, Q1 gives more attention to Gertrude. In dialogue not in Q2 or F's closet scene (3.4), Hamlet tells his mother that her new husband murdered her former one, at which point she promises to assist Hamlet in his plans for revenge. Q1 also includes an entirely novel scene between Gertrude and Horatio in which Horatio delivers, in abbreviated form, the news of Hamlet's return to Denmark (4.6) and of Claudius's intent to kill him (5.2). Q1 also places the famous 'to be or not to be' speech significantly earlier than the other two texts: before the arrival of the players in Elsinore. Differences in language are also worth noting: Q1 is significantly less poetic and more garbled at numerous points than Q2 or F.² Finally, there are noticeable irregularities in the print history of the quartos. The 1602 entry of *Hamlet* in the Stationers' Register licenses the play to James Roberts. Roberts's name, however, does not appear on the title page of Q1, which was published the next year by Nicholas Ling and John Trundle and printed by Valentine Simmes. Roberts returns to the scene with the enlarged Q2, which he printed for Nicholas Ling.

Hamlet's complex textual situation has long been known to scholars. Although Shakespeare's eighteenth-century editors were unaware of the survival of the first quarto (it was not found until 1823), they grappled with the differences between the second quarto and the Folio. Such grappling, made thornier by the discovery of Q1 and its significant differences from Q2 and F,³ still continues. It often takes the form of a transmission history, a bibliographical and editorial strategy founded by scholars in the early to mid-twentieth century in order to explain the process by which a play moved from script to stage to print. The job of a transmission history of *Hamlet* is to establish the temporal and substantive relationships between the three editions by determining the type of manuscript or copy-text 'behind' each of them. These types include Shakespeare's autograph draft; transcriptions or

¹ See Thomas Clayton, 'Introduction: Hamlet's Ghost', in *The 'Hamlet' First Published (Q1, 1603): Origins, Form, Intertextualities*, ed. Thomas Clayton (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 22.

² The differences between versions of 'to be or not to be' are often cited: Q1 reads 'To be, or not to be – ay, there's the point: / To die, to sleep – is that all? ay, all'; Q2/F: 'To be, or not to be, that is the question – / Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. The best way to observe the differences is with Paul Bertram and Bernice Kliman, *The Three-text Hamlet: Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and the First Folio*, 2nd edn (New York: AMS Press, 2003).

³ Zachary Lesser provides an important account of the 'uncanny' effects of the discovery of Q1. See *Hamlet After Q1: An Uncanny History of the Shakespearean Text* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

revisions of that draft – by Shakespeare or another scribe, in preparation for performance; and written recollections of performance. (It is important to note that no manuscript of a Shakespeare play survives – though some do for other Renaissance dramatists, and these inform bibliographers' categories.) Once the category of manuscript underlying the printed edition has been surmised and its connection to the others established, scholars can then advocate for that edition's status as the most 'authoritative' in relation to other versions. But in another twist, scholars do not necessarily agree on which kind of printer's copy represents the most 'authoritative' text. Some champion printed editions that derive from manuscripts closest to Shakespeare's own papers. Others champion texts that seem closest to the play as it was performed.

As might be anticipated when the evidence is both scarce and subject to multiple interpretations, scholars have proposed competing transmission theories for *Hamlet*. Philip Edwards's comprehensive Textual Analysis (pp. 253–77) provides such a theory, and it governs the text of the *New Cambridge Shakespeare Hamlet*. In brief, Edwards suggests printers set Q2 from an early authorial copy ('foul papers'), perhaps with reference to Q1; F from a revision of those foul papers as they were readied for performance, perhaps with reference to Q2; and Q1 from a memorial reconstruction, probably by an actor or actors, of the play in performance. In a nutshell, Q2 is closer to the page and F is closer to the stage. In terms of a timeline of composition, the manuscript behind Q2 was the first to be written, the manuscript behind the Folio the second, and the manuscript behind Q1 the last. Edwards's persuasive account, from 1985, was published at roughly the same time as three other major editions: Harold Jenkins's for Arden 2, G. R. Hibbard's for Oxford, and Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells's for the Oxford *Complete Works*. All four editions from the 1980s concur, with qualifications, on the nature of the manuscripts behind the *Hamlet* editions. And they all agree that the complexity of the play's textual situation reverberates in the complexity, even ineffability, of its central character. But they disagree in crucial ways about how the status of the texts should influence the editing of the play. Their editions, then, reflect conflicting views on which version should be used as the basis (the 'copy-text') for an edition and on how to choose between variants. In general, Edwards's careful choices for the body of this NCS edition represent what he believes Shakespeare intended when composing *Hamlet*. (Variants are printed under the main text, so readers can see the alternative versions.) Often Edwards chooses Folio readings over Q2 readings. Such choices may seem paradoxical for Edwards, since he maintains that Q2 was printed from an authorial manuscript and thus putatively closer to Shakespeare's original intentions than F, which was printed from a transcript prepared for performance. But Edwards proposes that Shakespeare had made significant revisions to the manuscript behind Q2. These revisions, he explains, confused the printers of the second quarto. But they were accurately included in the transcription for performance that stands behind the Folio version. In those cases, then, the Folio represents the text closest to Shakespeare's designs.

THE THREE TEXTS TODAY

Later 20th- and early 21st-century scholars have inherited these and other disagreements. In response, they have fashioned their own approaches to the three-text problem, challenging or correcting with fresh intellectual energy many of the suppositions of earlier bibliographical scholarship. One of the salient characteristics of this kind of work is its critical self-reflexivity. That is, it makes explicit not only its methodological principles, as previous scholarship does, but also the assumptions behind, and stakes of, those principles.¹ So, although these approaches often echo proposals from earlier decades, they reflect recent theoretical and practical developments in bibliography, editorial theory, theatre history, and performance studies. And, insofar as they are embedded in more comprehensive arguments about the structure and sociability of the early modern theatre, they put pressure on inherited assumptions about authorial intention, about strategies of revision, about the status of page versus stage, even about the definition of a Shakespeare play itself.

For instance, some scholars of *Hamlet*'s complex transmission history do not seek to establish Shakespeare's authorial aims and motives (they contest that very notion). Rather, they study the textual situation as an example of the collaborative nature of the early modern theatre, where actors, scribes, printers, and publishers all contributed to the shaping of the drama in its various forms. In contrast, other scholars see the three texts as a measure of Shakespeare's intentionality as well as his commitment to the revision and publication of his plays. Grace Ioppolo maintains that Shakespeare himself, and not his acting company, is responsible for variations between Q2 and F. And Lukas Erne has upended the commonplace that Shakespeare composed only for performance. He argues that Q2 was written specifically for print – that Shakespeare was thinking of readers as well as spectators for his plays. In Erne's account, Q1 represents a reconstructed version of an abridgement for the London stage; looked at together, the two texts offer 'access . . . to the difference between the writing practice of Shakespeare the dramatist, on the one hand, and the performance practice of Shakespeare and his fellows, on the other'.²

Erne's discussion hints at a significant tendency in recent studies of the textual problem: they often involve reassessments of Q1 as an object of literary, dramatic, and cultural interest. Since the 1930s, the orthodox (though not the only) explanation of Q1 was that it was the debased product of 'memorial reconstruction': the report by an actor or actors of recollected dialogue. Assumed to be a performance text, Q1 had usually been treated as an editorial afterthought, even an embarrassment to the cultural meaning of Shakespeare, and of interest only for the stage directions it supplied. But the new scholarly priorities of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have allowed Q1 to be evaluated according to criteria that privilege it as a record of playing conventions, and actors and directors, as well as scholars, have

¹ Gabriel Egan, *The Struggle for Shakespeare's Text: Twentieth-Century Editorial Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 192.

championed its appeal on stage.¹ Q₁, the director Peter Guinness explains, ‘has an energy and an edge that the Folio in all its refinement . . . doesn’t have’.² At the same time, other scholars have challenged these very categories of ‘performance’ and ‘literary’, arguing that Q₁ is indeed ‘a literary publication’ – but because of, rather than in spite of, its ‘origins in the professional theaters’.³

The fresh appreciation of Q₁ has also altered approaches to *Hamlet*’s transmission history. Essays in the 1992 *‘Hamlet’ First Published*, for instance, offer multiple positions on Q₁’s origins: (1) Q₁ represents an early Shakespearean draft of the play or even a ‘stage-worthy version of the tragedy from the 1590s’ brought out in 1603 to capitalize on turn-of-the-century performances; (2) Q₁ is the product of an ‘intermediate’ copy between Q₂ and F, made as Shakespeare and his company revised an earlier draft for performance; and (3) Q₁ is an abridgement of the play reflected in F, recollected by an actor (probably the one who played Marcellus).⁴ More recent work has challenged this idea of actorly ‘piracy’, suggesting that multiple note-takers in the audience collaborated in getting the performance on paper and then to the printing house.⁵ And Terri Bourus, arguing against this thesis, has revived interest in earlier theories that Q₁ is the *Ur-Hamlet*, written by a young Shakespeare in the late 1580s, about a Hamlet in his late teens to be performed by a young Richard Burbage, Shakespeare’s company’s leading man. According to her account, the manuscript behind Q₁ gave rise to the script behind the Folio, which in turn gave rise to the text behind Q₂.⁶ Dutton, in contrast, maintains that Q₁ is not the *Ur-Hamlet*. But he does view it as an earlier version of the play, the one acted around the turn of the century until Shakespeare substantially revised it in late 1603 into the play we know from Q₂ and F. These analyses are discussed in more recent editions, including the 2016 *New Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works*, which is based on Q₂, and the 2016 Arden 3 revised edition. Arden editors Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor endorse a chronology of Q₂ to F to Q₁, and they publish the three texts as independent entities, since ‘they have a claim to be regarded as separate plays as well as separate versions of the same play’.⁷

¹ Leah Marcus, *Un-editing the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 132–76.

² Quoted in Brian Loughrey, ‘Q₁ in Recent Performance: An Interview’, in Clayton, *The ‘Hamlet’ First Published*, 125.

³ Zachary Lesser and Peter Sallibrass, ‘The First Literary *Hamlet* and the Commonplacings of Professional Plays’, *SQ* 59.4 (2008), 409. Paul Menzer also calls Q₁ the most ‘literary’ of the three texts; looking at the ‘preservation of cues’ in the different editions, he proposes that Q₂ is based on an early authorial draft, F on a manuscript modified over time, probably by players rather than Shakespeare, and Q₁ on a new script by ‘a person or persons unknown . . . solely for publication’ (*The Hamlets: Cues, Qs, and Remembered Texts* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 21).

⁴ See the following, all in Clayton, *The ‘Hamlet’ First Published*: Alan Dessen, ‘Weighing the Options in *Hamlet* Q₁’, 65–78; G. R. Hibbard, ‘The Chronology of the Three Substantive Texts of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*’, 79–89; Kathleen Itrace, ‘Origins and Agents of Q₁ *Hamlet*’, 90–122.

⁵ Tiffany Stern, ‘Sermons, Plays and Note-takers: *Hamlet* Q₁ as a “Noted” Text’, *Shakespeare Survey* 66 (2013), 1–23.

⁶ Terri Bourus, *Young Shakespeare’s Young Hamlet: Print, Piracy, and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁷ Thompson and Taylor, 95.

Critical Responses

It is probably safe to say that no single work of literature has been so extensively discussed, adapted, and appropriated as *Hamlet Prince of Denmark*. The play has become a phenomenon of intercultural exchange and analysis, a cultural icon that various thinkers, writers, and performers have used to understand their own work and worlds. Critical responses to *Hamlet* have thus become an object of study in their own right, as they provide clues to their own culture's values and assumptions. At the same time, they share a set of interpretive paradigms that have become standard concerns for studying the play. In looking at just a sample, we will see them treating again and again, in their distinct ways, the spiritual status of the ghost; the question of Hamlet's interior life (and whether he is playing, or truly, mad with his antic disposition); the causes of Hamlet's so-called delay; Gertrude's and Ophelia's sexuality (Was the former sleeping with Claudius before the murder of King Hamlet? Did the latter intentionally drown herself?); and the political as well as personal valences of the play (is this more a domestic drama or a tragedy of state?).

SHAKESPEARE'S CONTEMPORARIES

Commentary on *Hamlet* began as early as its arrival on stage at the Globe Theatre. Allusions to the play in the period's poetry and drama suggest that Shakespeare's contemporaries intuited (and thus helped to generate) what would become *Hamlet's* abiding appeal. But what later generations appreciate as the play's philosophical and psychological complexities they tended to parody, singling out Hamlet's madness for special mockery. Anthony Scoloker, in his verse romance *Daiphantus* (1604), compares his own poem to '*Friendly Shake-speares Tragedies*' and hopes that it will 'please all, like Prince *Hamlet*'. But he worries that, as a result, his own protagonist (who falls in love with three different women) will 'runne mad'.¹ The city comedy *Eastward Hoe* (1605) is even more sardonic: it gives the name Hamlet to an ancillary character, a footman who serves Gertrude, the daughter of a social-climbing goldsmith. As he dashes across the stage '*in haste*', the other characters call out: 'Sfoote *Hamlet*; are you madde?'²

Eastward Hoe burlesques the serious foundations of Shakespeare's tragedy by turning the hero into a comic servingman. Two other plays closely associated with *Hamlet* operate differently, as they use *Hamlet* as a blueprint for revenge plots fuelled by court corruption. John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, performed by 1601, shares many of *Hamlet's* premises, though it rehearses them with a self-conscious excess and refusal of ambiguity unknown to Shakespeare. In Marston's play, the envious, corrupt Piero poisons his brother, the Duke of Genoa, and plans to marry his sister-in-law and to kill his nephew, Antonio. The ghost of his father appears to Antonio, who follows his command to revenge with delighted, gruesome relish. He murders Piero's own son, and then, as part of an elaborately orchestrated court masque of fellow avengers, he plucks out Piero's tongue and stabs him to death. *The Revenger's Tragedy*

¹ Anthony Scoloker, *Daiphantus* (London, 1604), A2r.

² George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and John Marston, *Eastward Hoe* (London, 1605), D1r.

(published 1607) also takes Shakespeare's themes and conventions and appropriates them with maniacal, parodic energy. Its protagonist, Vindice, has been waiting for nine years to exact his revenge (a poke at Hamlet's hesitations), and he now has two objects of vengeance: the venal Italian duke who murdered his fiancée (and caused his father's demise), as well as the duke's son, who wants to sleep with his sister. In a literalization of Hamlet's 'antic disposition', he takes on an alter-ego, Piato, which he abandons midway through the play and which he (as Vindice) is hired to kill. He actively tempts his mother to sin and then castigates her for it; he murders a 'nest of dukes' with outrageous, and theatrical, violence; and he scoffs at, rather than submits to, a sense of providential design. But *The Revenger's Tragedy's* most ostentatious parody of *Hamlet* depends upon its use of a skull, which scholars speculate may have been the same one used for Yorick in the graveyard scene.¹ Vindice arrives on-stage with the skull of his dead beloved, Gloriana, and he addresses it throughout his first speech. In the *coup de théâtre* of the third act, Vindice uses the skull to exact revenge, dressing it up and putting poison on its lips so that the lecherous duke is killed with its kiss.

We know that *The Revenger's Tragedy* was written and performed after *Hamlet*, as it rescripts Shakespeare's play for the preoccupations of the developing Jacobean stage. But scholars continue to debate the direction in which artistic influence runs between *Hamlet* and *Antonio's Revenge*: from Marston to Shakespeare, from Shakespeare to Marston, or from the *Ur-Hamlet* to both, independent of one another. (Solutions to this question are interwoven with solutions to the puzzle of *Hamlet's* date.)² More crucial for us, however, is that, in their meticulous engagement with *Hamlet's* narrative details, *Antonio's Revenge*, together with the other texts mentioned above, attest to the play's gravitational pull in its own moment.

THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

The long eighteenth century saw the making of Shakespeare as Britain's 'national poet'.³ (He also became an international poet: it was at this time that Shakespeare's plays and poetry were first translated into French, German, Italian, and Russian.) He was beloved by his early editors and commentators as the natural, genius creator of expressive, realistically human characters.

This kind of appreciation did not necessarily translate into affection for *Hamlet* and *Hamlet*. The great literary scholar and poet Dr Samuel Johnson (1765) found the prince a failure in his filial obligations (he is 'rather an instrument than an agent', and 'makes no attempt to punish' Claudius after he has confirmation of his guilt), and he spoke of the 'useless and wanton cruelty' of his treatment of Ophelia. Of the speech in the prayer scene, when Hamlet refrains from killing Claudius for fear he will go to heaven, Johnson famously said it was 'too horrible to be read or to be uttered'.⁴

¹ See *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: New Mermaids, 2008), 70, fn. for 1.1.100.

² See Charles Cathcart, 'Hamlet: Date and Early Afterlife', *RES* 52.207 (2001), 341–59.

³ See Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Authorship, 1660–1769* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

⁴ NV II: 145–6.

Johnson's novelist friend Charlotte Lennox, the author of *Shakespeare Illustrated*, was unimpressed by the play's ending: 'he stabs the King immediately upon the Information of his Treachery to himself! Thus his Revenge becomes interested, and he seems to punish his Uncle rather for his own Death, than the Murder of the King, his Father.'¹ The novelist Tobias Smollett labelled the famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy a 'heap of absurdities, whether we consider the situation, the sentiment, the argumentation, or the poetry'.² And, in his edition of 1778, George Steevens condemned what he considered Hamlet's violence and callousness, pointing out the 'immoral tendency of his character'.³

Not all eighteenth-century critics concurred. Nicholas Rowe (1708) compared the play favourably to Sophocles' *Electra*, praising Shakespeare for representing a protagonist 'with the same piety towards his father, and resolution to revenge his death, as *Orestes*; he has the same abhorrence for his mother's guilt, which, to provoke him the more, is heighten'd by incest: But 'tis with wonderful art and justness of judgment, that Poet restrains him from doing violence to his mother.'⁴ Rowe's appreciation echoes in other accounts, particularly those that stress Hamlet's filial piety. The Earl of Shaftesbury, in his philosophical compendium *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1710), wrote approvingly that the play 'appears most to have affected *English Hearts*', describing it as 'almost one continu'd *Moral*; a Series of deep Reflections, drawn from *one Mouth*, upon the Subject of *one single Accident* and Calamity, naturally fitted to move Horrour and Compassion'.⁵ Laurence Sterne treated the play with comic affection in *Tristram Shandy* (1752–67). Hannah More, the gifted writer, philanthropist, and educator, composed verses on Shakespeare's ability to conjure a range of emotions for Hamlet, 'to draw characters most justly bright, / To contrast light with shade and shade with light: / To trace up passions to their inmost source'.⁶ And Henry Mackenzie (1780), known himself as a writer of 'feeling', acknowledged Hamlet's exquisite sensibility and virtue. He saw the protagonist as a man 'placed in a situation in which even the amiable qualities of his mind serve but to aggravate his distress and to perplex his conduct'. He was not perfect, but he was possessed of an 'indescribable charm ... which attracts every reader and every spectator'.⁷

This emphasis on Hamlet's emotional and intellectual sensitivity became a consistent focus in the first half of the nineteenth century. His princely gentleness, and with it his reluctance to take immediate revenge, made Hamlet, in the eyes of critics, the representative of a troubled, self-divided, specifically *modern* consciousness. In perhaps the most influential European Romantic view of the play, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe depicted *Hamlet* as the story of a noble, dignified prince shocked by the crudeness of his situation, his courteous soul inadequate for or unequal to the stern demands of action. Goethe's metaphor for Hamlet's suffering in his *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–6; translated into English by Carlyle, 1812) has become a standard of criticism: an oak tree has been planted in a precious vase

¹ CR, I: 178.

² *Ibid.*, I: 181.

³ NV II: 147.

⁴ CR, I: 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I: 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I: 194.

⁷ NV II: 148.

fitted to receive beautiful flowers; as the tree's roots spread out, the vase is shattered into pieces. 'A beautiful, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off; every duty is holy to him, – this too hard.'¹ The staying power of Goethe's analogy is matched by August Wilhelm von Schlegel's claim in his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809–11; translated into English, 1815): that *Hamlet* is a 'tragedy of thought' (*Gedankentrauerspiel*). By 'thought', Schlegel implies a profound scepticism, in the face of 'the dark perplexity of the events of this world', that questions the value of action. His Hamlet is a doubter and not an amiable dreamer – a restless sceptic of uncertain principles:

Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else: from expressions of religious confidence he passes over to skeptical doubt . . . The stars themselves, from the course of events, afford no answer to the questions so urgently proposed to them. A voice, commissioned as it would appear by Heaven from another world, demands vengeance for a monstrous enormity, and the demand remains without effect. The criminals are at last punished, but, as it were, by an accidental blow . . . The less guilty or the innocent are equally involved in the general destruction.²

In the English Romantic tradition, in which it was preferable to read rather than watch the play, Hamlet is again an anguished thinker. According to Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his lectures on Shakespeare (1808–12), the protagonist's thought renders him incapable of action. And action, Coleridge maintained, was the message of Shakespeare's play: it is 'the chief end of existence'. Coleridge sketches the scene:

The poet places him in the most stimulating circumstances that a human being can be placed in. He is the heir apparent of a throne; his father dies suspiciously; his mother excludes her son from his throne by marrying his uncle. This is not enough; but the Ghost of the murdered father is introduced, to assure the son that he was put to death by his own brother. What is the effect upon the son? Instant action and pursuit of revenge? No: endless reasoning and hesitating – constant urgings and solicitations of the mind to act, and as constant an escape from action; ceaseless reproaches of himself for sloth and negligence, while the whole energy of his resolution evaporates in these reproaches.³

For Coleridge, Hamlet is plagued not by doubt, as Schlegel suggested. Rather, Hamlet is too meditative – he has what Coleridge calls 'an overbalance in the contemplative faculty'. Hence the 'great, enormous, intellectual activity, and a consequent proportionate aversion to real action'.⁴

Despite Coleridge's disdain for Hamlet's lack of action, he confessed that 'I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so.'⁵ The critic William Hazlitt (1817) identified himself similarly, only he included others in the experience. 'It is *we* who are Hamlet', he wrote, democratizing the prince into a version of an Everyman.⁶ Thomas Carlyle,

¹ *Ibid.*, II: 273–4.

² *Ibid.*, II: 279–80.

³ *Ibid.*, II: 59, 54.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II: 61, 62.

⁵ NV I: 152–5.

⁶ NV II: 114. For democratization, see R. A. Foakes on the Romantic treatment of Shakespeare that 'established him as a figure of enormous cultural authority, yet at the same time democratized him as a representative consciousness' (*Hamlet Versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 12).

writer and translator of Goethe, extended the identification with Hamlet to Shakespeare himself: ‘How could a man travel forward from rustic deer-poaching to such tragedy-writing, and not fall in with sorrows by the way? Or, still better, how could a man delineate a Hamlet . . . if his own heroic heart had never suffered?’¹ Across the Atlantic Ocean, Edgar Allan Poe noted that, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare ‘wrote of Hamlet as if Hamlet he were’.²

Identification with characters was not limited to the protagonist – or to male authors, as the above formulas might imply. Writers such as Anna Jameson, an advocate for women’s rights and economic improvement, were interested in *Hamlet*’s females. Jameson’s *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical* (1832), which came to be known as *Shakespeare’s Heroines*, offered a ‘program of female education through empathetic encounters with Shakespeare’s female characters’.³ Jameson championed in Ophelia the essentially feminine qualities associated with her own period’s domestic ideology – innocence, grace, and tenderness – at the same time as she sketched, in a way that effectively captures the heart of the drama, the threats to those qualities: ‘the situation of Ophelia in the story, is that of a young girl who, at an early age, is brought from a life of privacy into the circle of a court . . . at once rude, magnificent, and corrupted’.⁴ Mary Cowden Clarke, in her *Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1850–2), invented for Ophelia a fictional ‘backstory’ in which, having learned of the betrayal of two other young women by a crude suitor, she dreams of their deaths as well as King Hamlet’s and her own. The story ends where *Hamlet* begins for Ophelia: with instructions from her brother Laertes.

The commentary that we have just traced contributed to the emergence of what writers call ‘Hamletism’ – the idea that the protagonist models a particular approach to life. The concept sees Hamlet as ‘well-intentioned but ineffectual, full of talk but unable to achieve anything, addicted to melancholy and sickened by the world around him’. It named a complete ‘attitude to life, a philosophy as we say’:⁵ one of withdrawal or disengagement from the social world into the private realm of thought. It could be embraced, but it also could be derided, as it was by the German writer Ferdinand Freilgrath. His accusation ‘Deutschland ist Hamlet’ (Germany is Hamlet) was meant to draw ‘a rude and bitter parallel between the vacillating dreamer’s political inefficiency and the Hamletian German liberal intellectual’.⁶ The cultural purchase of Hamletism in the second half of the nineteenth century only expanded as the play became a centrepiece for ‘all of the major discourses of the age: literary, historical, psychoanalytical, religious, and political’.⁷ Thus, in addition to being the focus of major literary commentaries by scholars such as Edward Dowden and F. J. Furnivall, *Hamlet* and its protagonist made cameo appearances in the work of novelists on both

¹ *CR*, II: 215.

² Quoted in Foakes, ‘*Hamlet*’ Versus ‘*Lear*’, 12.

³ Cheri L. Larsen Hoeckley, ‘Introduction’, in Anna Jameson, *Shakespeare’s Heroines: Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2005), 24.

⁴ Jameson, *Shakespeare’s Heroines*, 177.

⁵ Foakes, ‘*Hamlet*’ Versus ‘*Lear*’, 20.

⁶ *Shakespeare on the German Stage: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Wilhelm Hortmann (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 90.

⁷ *CR*, IV.1: xvii–xviii.

sides of the Atlantic, including Herman Melville's *Pierre* (1852), Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860), George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885). The play was of similar interest internationally, though often treated with a sceptical or sinister twist. The literary historian Hippolyte Taine described Hamlet as a 'delicate soul' who, once introduced to death, begins to see, in himself and others, 'an evil-smelling and grinning skull'.¹ His fellow Frenchman, the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who saw the protagonist as 'a symbol of himself as poet',² wrote at the close of the century that Hamlet's thinking makes him a killer: 'The black presence of this doubter causes this poison.'³ These interpretations are not far removed from that of Friedrich Nietzsche, who used Hamlet to define his vision, figured in 'Dionysian man', of tragic awareness. As Nietzsche puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872): 'Both [Dionysian man and Hamlet] have gazed into the true essence of things, they have *acquired knowledge* and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things; they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion – this is the lesson of Hamlet.'⁴

Nietzsche's comments, as we can see, revisit the question of Hamlet's delay. For Nietzsche, the failure to act was a philosophical matter. But for others during this period it was a distinctly political one. In tsarist Russia in particular, where through the century the play served functions 'more social and political than aesthetic', Hamlet's plight represented for writers such as Ivan Turgenev and Anton Chekhov a type of aristocratic self-indulgence and retreat from social responsibility that they rejected rather than admired.⁵

THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

In 1898, the Danish Shakespeare scholar Georg Brandes remarked that Hamlet 'represent[s] the genius of the Renaissance'. But he quickly added that, because of 'his creator's marvelous power of rising above his time', the character 'covers the whole period between him and us'. Hamlet thus 'has a range of significance to which we, on the threshold of the twentieth century, can foresee no limit'.⁶

Well into the twenty-first century, that limitlessness has become only more apparent. We can see it in the incorporation of the play in the works of major figures of literary modernism (including James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and Franz Kafka), who

¹ *Ibid.*, 168, 172.

² Martin Scofield, *The Ghosts of 'Hamlet': The Play and Modern Writers* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 11.

³ "La noire présence du douteur cause ce poison, que tous les personnages trépassent: sans même que lui prenne toujours la peine de les percer, dans la tapisserie": Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 1564.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 40.

⁵ Peter Holland, "More a Russian than a Dane": The Usefulness of *Hamlet* in Russia', in *Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics*, ed. Shirley Stead and Alistair Stead (Liverpool University Press, 1999), 316.

⁶ *CR*, IV.2: 788.

took *Hamlet* and its protagonist as ‘symbols for the perplexing, fragmented experience of modern life’.¹ We can also observe the play’s reach in post-modern novels such as Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, with its long riff on Elizabethan revenge tragedy, or Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell*, in which Hamlet, a foetus in his mother’s womb, overhears her plotting with his uncle, Claude, to murder his father. In an even more accessible vein, entertaining YouTube ‘mash-ups’ offer clips of Hamlet references from popular culture.² And with the institutionalization of English literature as an academic discipline at the end of the nineteenth century – and, more recently, with the explosion of web-based means for research – the scholarly study of *Hamlet* has increased exponentially. It has been fuelled by new methodological and theoretical approaches to the play’s perennial questions.

Psychoanalytic Approaches

Sigmund Freud announced his theory of the unconscious in 1900 in his *Interpretation of Dreams*. *Hamlet* serves Freud simultaneously as an object of study and as proof of concept. His brief account of the play returned to the riddle of Hamlet’s delay, proposing to solve it with the language of psychoanalysis. Freud suggested that the protagonist hesitates because his unconscious desires – his Oedipal wish to supplant his father and sleep with his mother – make him feel as guilty in mind as Claudius is in deed. In other words, if for Schlegel *Hamlet* was a tragedy of thought, for Freud it is a tragedy of unconscious thought.

Hamlet is able to do anything – except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father’s place with his mother, the man who shows Hamlet the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is no better than the sinner whom he is to punish.³

Ernest Jones expanded this idea in 1949 in his *Hamlet and Oedipus* (‘[Hamlet’s] uncle incorporates the deepest and most buried part of his own personality, so that he cannot kill him without killing himself’). Jacques Lacan, in his linguistically inflected return to Freud, explained that Hamlet’s desire to be the object of Gertrude’s desire renders him unable to act. But Freud provided the best gloss in his essay on ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1914). Here he suggests that Hamlet suffers from the kinds of self-recrimination that follow the loss of his father, an idealized other: ‘the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged’.⁴

For the next few decades, psychoanalysis, as the theory and study of the unconscious, asserted an interpretive claim over Hamlet, the prince of inwardness as well as Denmark. Early psychoanalytic criticism of the play elaborated it in Freudian terms. But with changes in both analytic theory and literary practice, the hermeneutic angles shifted. Psychoanalytic interpretations of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s had to counter

¹ Scofield, *The Ghosts of ‘Hamlet’*, 6.

² www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDTAn6r4HpQ

³ Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), IV: 265.

⁴ *Ibid.*, XIV: 249.

objections to the theory's patriarchal and anachronistic assumptions (Francis Barker's Foucauldian critique of *Hamlet* as inaugurating the bourgeois subject that psychoanalysis takes for granted is a prime example).¹ They also had to incorporate new, non-Freudian understandings of the ego and the unconscious. Some scholars used object relations theory or ego psychology in order to shift the interpretive emphasis from Hamlet's Oedipus complex to the challenges to his identity occasioned both by the death of his father and by corruption in the Danish court. Others, suspicious of the primacy afforded the ego in these accounts, combined Lacanian and other poststructuralist approaches to focus on the radical instability of the self as it is presented in the play, so that Hamlet, after his confrontation with the ghost of his father, becomes caught in 'compulsive behavior of a kind that translates *him* into a daemon, into a ghost'.²

In one of the most influential psychoanalytic readings of the play to date, Janet Adelman grounded her reading of *Hamlet* on the premise that the protagonist's goal is the assumption of an adult male identity based on the model of his father. Gertrude, however, disables this identification when she remarries: she 'fails to differentiate' between Hamlet Sr and Claudius, forcing Hamlet to idealize his dead father in a way that sacrifices his own sense of self. In this scenario, revenge is not only a dramatic principle or an effect of a violent culture, but also a form of memory designed to preserve the idealized image of the father undercut and threatened by the malevolent, 'suffocating' mother:

Even at the start of the play, before the ghost's crucial revelation, Gertrude's failure to differentiate has put an intolerable strain on Hamlet by making him the only repository of his father's image, the only agent of differentiation in a court that seems all too willing to accept the new king in place of the old. Her failure of memory – registered in her indiscriminating sexuality – in effect defines Hamlet's task in relation to his father as a task of memory: as she forgets, he inherits the burden of differentiating, of idealizing and making static the past; hence the ghost's insistence on remembering and the degree to which Hamlet registers his failure to avenge his father as a failure of memory.³

Readings such as Adelman's, for all their extraordinary sensitivity to *Hamlet's* language and its place in Shakespeare's oeuvre, nevertheless treat the play's characters as creatures in a timeless psychodrama, unaffected by their social or cultural environments. More recent psychoanalytic studies of the play, in contrast, have accommodated these environments either by exploring the effect on Hamlet's unconscious experience of various historical and ideological contexts, or by establishing the place of the play at the origins of psychoanalysis itself.⁴

¹ Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays in Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984).

² Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost-writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 162. See also Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard, who explain Hamlet's melancholy as the collapse of the 'crucial distinction between self and world . . . Hamlet's world has become a "sterile promontory" because he has fashioned it in the image of his own ego' (*After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 20).

³ Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, 'Hamlet' to 'The Tempest'* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 13.

⁴ See, for instance, Heather Anne Hirschfeld, 'Hamlet's "first corse": Repetition, Trauma, and the Displacement of Redemptive Typology', *SQ* 54.4 (2003), 424–48; Susan Zimmerman, 'Psychoanalysis and the Corpse', *Shakespeare Studies* 33 (2005), 101–8; Andrew Barnaby, 'Tardy Sons: Hamlet, Freud, and Filial Ambivalence', *Comparative Literature* 65.2 (2013), 220–41; Philip Armstrong, *Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

Historicist Approaches

In his seminal 1905 account of the play, A. C. Bradley described Hamlet as an example of the tragic hero: he is an exceptional character, divided within himself, whose downfall is imbued with a sense of mystery as well as great waste. Like earlier critics, Bradley tried to tease out the source of Hamlet's hesitation; unlike his predecessors, he denied that it was the result of a delicate spirit or intellectual scepticism. Rather, he insisted, it was Hamlet's predisposition to melancholy, a passion that overwhelms him after the shock of his father's death and his mother's remarriage.

Suppose that under this shock, any possible action being denied to him, he began to sink into melancholy, then, no doubt, his imagination and generalising habit of mind might extend the effects of this shock through his whole being and mental world. And if, the state of melancholy being thus deepened and fixed, a sudden demand for difficult and decisive action in a matter connected with the melancholy arose, this state might well have for one of its symptoms an endless and futile mental dissection of the required deed.¹

Bradley is best known for his treatment of characters – in a way often considered anachronistic – as though they were 'real' people with backstories in excess of the text and the times. But, for his discussion of *Hamlet*, he referred to a range of early modern discussions of melancholy and its causes and symptoms. Bradley, that is, recognized the use of archival documents for studying the play's persistent concerns.

Bradley's historicist impulse, rehearsed in the following decades in essays such as William Empson's '*Hamlet When New*', was thoroughly, methodically developed in the 1980s and 1990s by the interpretive schools of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. Their approaches have become the dominant principle of contemporary literary study. Both schools follow the critical demand to 'always historicize!' – that is, to examine literary works not as transcendent creative achievements independent of their conditions of production but as texts in conversation with ideas and events of their moment. For some scholars, that moment is the early modern one. (Roland Mushat Frye's lucid *Renaissance Hamlet* provides a thorough discussion of it.)² For others who follow Jan Kott's approach to Shakespeare as 'our contemporary', that moment is now, our own: '*Hamlet* is like a sponge . . . it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time'.³

Politics

Historicist and materialist scholars have assessed *Hamlet* as both a reflection of and an active intervention in its contexts. Some have focused on the political determinants of the play, including its engagement with issues of royal succession or its republican overtones in demystifying monarchical authority.⁴ Or they have diagnosed Hamlet's

¹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), 100.

² Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton University Press, 1988).

³ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 64.

⁴ Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 203, 198.

melancholy inwardness as a political condition that, when pressed upon by external and internal circumstances, can become treasonous.¹ Or they have seen in the play's revenge plot an engagement with geopolitics rather than domestic affairs, so that in *Hamlet* 'the thematics of the revenge tragedy are bound together with the dynamics of state-building' and the protagonist's success 'is contingent on his cunning as a diplomat'.²

Religion

Others have addressed the play's religious contexts. Of course, studying *Hamlet*'s Christian orientation has long been part of the critical tradition, particularly in assessing the play's perspective on revenge and sin. But contemporary scholars have become increasingly sensitive to the influence of Reformation religious change on the tragedy. That is, they focus on the ways in which the play is infused with the theological as well as ecclesiastical conflicts that characterized the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism in England over the course of the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth. The Reformation context has allowed scholars to formulate the play's signature concerns – with the interior life, with death and the afterlife, memory, mourning, guilt, and the relation of self and other – in discerning ways: in terms of Protestantism's commitment to scripture and print culture; in terms of the geography of heaven and hell; in terms of a specific breed of religious melancholy that followed from the loss of Catholic sacraments and customary rituals for the dead; and in terms of competing theologies of justification, predestination, free will, and sectarian resistance.³

Perhaps the most significant of these studies has been Steven Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory*, a comprehensive exploration of the Protestant attack on Purgatory and the effect of this attack on Shakespeare's drama. The Catholic doctrine of Purgatory as a 'middle space' between hell and heaven promised believers an end to post-mortem punishment as well as a tangible, memorializing link between the living and the dead. Protestants rejected it, and the institutions that developed around it, opening a gap for mourners worried about lost relatives and for sinners worried about their own fates. This gap – the 'disruption or poisoning of virtually all rituals for managing grief, allaying personal and collective anxiety, and restoring order' – preoccupied

¹ Karin S. Coddon, "'Suche Strange Desygn': Madness, Subjectivity, and Treason in *Hamlet* and Elizabethan Culture', *Renaissance Drama* 20 (1989), 51–75.

² Timothy Hampton, *Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 147, 161.

³ See, for instance, Jennifer Rust, 'Wittenberg and Melancholic Allegory: The Reformation and Its Discontents in *Hamlet*', in *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England*, ed. Dennis Taylor and David N. Beauregard (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 260–86; Kristen Poole, *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England: Spaces of Demonism, Divinity, and Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 93–135; Thomas Rist, *Revenge Tragedy and the Drama of Commemoration in Reforming England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2008), 60–74; John Gillies, 'The Question of Original Sin in *Hamlet*', *SQ* 64.4 (2013), 396–424; Heather Hirschfeld, *The End of Satisfaction: Drama and Repentance in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

Shakespeare throughout his career, Greenblatt explains. But the preoccupation took its most concentrated form in *Hamlet*, which entertains even as it challenges and doubts the Ghost's claim to come from the Catholic realm of Purgatory. As Greenblatt wryly observes, the play represents a prince with 'a distinctly Protestant temperament troubled by a distinctly Catholic ghost'. For Greenblatt, then, Hamlet's 'corrosive inwardness' finds its source in the pressures of Reformation doctrinal change, which Shakespeare in turn used to fuel his plays. In fact, for Greenblatt, the Renaissance stage assumes for its audience Purgatory's function as a place of mourning. As he concludes, 'The Protestant attack on the 'middle state of souls' and the middle place those souls inhabited destroyed this method [of remembering the dead] for most people in England, but it did not destroy the longings and fears that Catholic doctrine had focused and exploited. Instead . . . the space of purgatory becomes the space of the stage where Old Hamlet's ghost is doomed'.¹

Culture

Still other historicist scholars have been concerned with the broader cultural contexts that help to make sense of the play's treatment of madness, marriage, and mourning – even its use of fictional space. Attention to early modern humoral theory, for instance, has allowed us to see Hamlet's failure to kill Claudius not only as a psychological problem but also as a physiological one: a 'lack of gall'.² Attention to early modern laws governing incestuous relationships has allowed us to see that the real threat to Hamlet from the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude is not that they were sexually involved before Hamlet Sr's death but that they have disabled his succession to the crown.³ Attention to the cultural construction of early modern emotions has allowed us to see the ways in which Hamlet models for his audience a particular kind of grief associated with their witnessing the ageing of Queen Elizabeth.⁴ And attention to early modern architecture has allowed us to see the public, theatrical dimensions of what we assumed were the play's private spaces, so that we understand Hamlet's consummate expressions of selfhood as 'tableau[x] of interiority meant for display'.⁵

Feminist Approaches

In 1919, T. S. Eliot described *Hamlet* as a play 'dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son'. Unlike the psychoanalytic critics, however, he saw this focus as a threat to the aesthetic success of the play, rendering it an 'artistic failure' (though interesting precisely for its problems). According to Eliot's logic, Hamlet's obsession with his mother's sexuality – and thus his neglect of his duty to revenge – is in excess of

¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 240, 257.

² Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 25–60.

³ Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London: Routledge, 1996), 35–47.

⁴ Steven Mullaney, 'Mourning and Misogyny: *Hamlet*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and the Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600–1607', *SQ* 45.2 (1994), 150, 153.

⁵ Mimi Yiu, *Architectural Involutions: Writing, Staging, and Building Space, c. 1435–1650* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 108.

what her character should solicit. Gertrude is not, he explained, a satisfactory ‘objective correlative’ for Hamlet’s feelings: ‘Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it.’¹

A rich tradition of feminist scholarship – scholarship that prioritizes women’s experience and the social, cultural, and political institutions that structure that experience – has responded to, and then moved beyond, Eliot’s ‘reproach against the character of a woman’.² Jacqueline Rose interrogated Eliot’s dependence on femininity as the basis for his aesthetic theory, recalling in the process the protagonist’s own – disavowed – female side: ‘Hamlet becomes Renaissance man only to the extent that he reveals a femininity which undermines that fiction.’³ Other scholars have pursued alternative angles to understand the place of the female in the play and its reception. Elaine Showalter’s ‘Representing Ophelia’ investigates how Ophelia has served for centuries as an iconic representation of female madness and its link to female sexuality, perhaps most famously in the art of the pre-Raphaelites. On the stage as well as in popular and medical discourses, Showalter explains, the image of Ophelia ‘carr[ie]d specific messages about femininity’, messages that ranged from ideas that female madness is innate, natural, and biologically determined to ideas that it is caused by familial or societal double-standards and their ultimate realization in physical or emotional trauma.⁴ More recent studies of Ophelia have similarly developed the ways in which the representation of Ophelia is always implicated in cultural fantasies about women, sexuality, and madness.⁵ Of particular interest are studies that examine the confessional implications of Ophelia’s language and behaviour, especially in Act 4. Her songs, with their echoes of medieval Catholic piety, have been seen to reflect either ‘the costs – especially to women – of the English Reformation’ or the possibility that Ophelia was ‘capable of a kind of performance that . . . was unique to early modern girls, and to Catholic girls especially’. In other words, ‘If Hamlet can put on an antic disposition, why can’t [Ophelia]?’⁶

Other feminist studies have laid bare the early modern political and social structures that conditioned the ways in which the women act and are acted upon. (Even the textual issue can be studied from a feminist perspective; Q2 and F, it has been noted, take the more active, sympathetic women of Q1 and ‘effectively reduce [them] to the

¹ T. S. Eliot, ‘Hamlet and His Problems’, in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1964), 98, 101.

² Jacqueline Rose, ‘Hamlet – the Mona Lisa of Literature’, *Critical Quarterly* 28.1 & 2 (1986), 35.

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴ Elaine Showalter, ‘Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism’, in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London: Methuen, 1985), 77–94.

⁵ See Carol Thomas Neely, ‘Documents in Madness: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Early Modern Culture’, *SQ* 42.3 (1991), 315–38; Carol Chillington Rutter, ‘Snatched Bodies: Ophelia in the Grave’, *SQ* 49.3 (1998), 299–319.

⁶ Alison A. Chapman, ‘Ophelia’s “Old Lauds”: Madness and Hagiography in *Hamlet*’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 20 (2007), 112; Caroline Bicks, ‘Instructional Performances: Ophelia and the Staging of History’, in *Performing Pedagogy in Early Modern England: Gender, Instruction, and Performance*, ed. Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 210, 211.

body’.)¹ Additional scholarship has discussed period assumptions about femininity that generate Hamlet’s attachments to as well as contempt for women – and for the aspects of himself (his vulnerability, his passivity) that he understands as female. And recent studies, taking masculinity as a subject for investigation rather than a transhistorical given, have studied the changing models of manhood so central to the play’s plot and language, including Hamlet’s grief, his friendship with Horatio, and his duel with Laertes. Indeed, we might say that most contemporary accounts of the play, whether implicitly or explicitly, take gender and sexual difference as a category of analysis. Even the play’s sources in classical drama have been suggestively rethought through a feminist lens. In her work on *Hamlet* and Greek drama, for instance, Tanya Pollard argues that what Shakespeare takes – and revises – from Greek drama is the centrality of the grief-stricken, vengeful female protagonist: ‘Hamlet is no Hecuba, but the role that he constructs for himself, and in many ways for a generation of English stage revengers, grows directly out of his confrontation and negotiation with her iconic power.’²

Comprehensive Studies

We have been surveying articles, essays, and chapters that offer particular arguments about specific aspects of *Hamlet*. But some of the most influential criticism comes in the form of books devoted entirely to the play. Their scope often defies the methodological categories above. In a format imitated by later writers and editors, John Dover Wilson in 1935 chronicled the play act by act, finding a through-line in the burdens placed on Hamlet – and by Hamlet on others. But he rejected any single conclusion about the play. ‘We were never intended to reach the heart of the mystery’, he wrote in *What Happens in Hamlet*. Instead, we were meant to appreciate Shakespeare’s development of tragic mystery, observing the ‘technical devices he employed to create this supreme illusion of a great and mysterious character, who is at once mad and the sanest of geniuses, at once a procrastinator and a vigorous man of action, at once a miserable failure and the most adorable of heroes’.³ (Two important works of roughly the same period found nothing mysterious or adorable in Hamlet: G. Wilson Knight preferred the virile Claudius to the protagonist, whom he found morbid, and Salvador de Madariaga decried Hamlet’s egotism.)⁴

A clutch of subsequent monographs also pursued the play’s dramaturgical as well as artistic and rhetorical designs. Harry Levin, in *The Question of Hamlet*, charted the play’s depiction of both the primitive and the civilized sides of Elsinore, the background for Hamlet’s interrogations and doubts.⁵ Nigel Alexander studied the ways in which Shakespeare uses revenge conventions to dramatize philosophical and

¹ Tony Howard, *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film, and Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 19.

² Tanya Pollard, ‘What’s Hecuba to Shakespeare?’ *RQ* 65.4 (2012), 1081.

³ *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 229.

⁴ G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 1930); Salvador de Madariaga, *On Hamlet*, 2nd edn (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1964).

⁵ Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

psychological problems (such as the protagonist's relationship to revenge).¹ William Kerrigan has shown how the arc of the revenge plot affords Hamlet an opportunity for self-purification, the purging of an imagination 'as foul / As Vulcan's stithy' into one that can, with equanimity, announce that 'the readiness is all' (3.2.73–4, 5.2.194–5).² More recently, Andras Kiséry has argued that *Hamlet* offered its early modern audiences training in 'political competencies', while Rhodri Lewis has studied *Hamlet* as thorough-going critique of the orthodoxies of Renaissance humanism, which the play reveals as a 'set of doctrines that distorts reality and constrains all human beings to obscure their true natures'.³

Margreta de Grazia's *'Hamlet' without Hamlet*, which anchors the play in early modern preoccupations with land ownership and inheritance, demands special attention. The title is an ironic shout-out to Bradley's assertion that 'the tragedy of *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out has become the symbol of absurdity', and it sets the stage for de Grazia's challenge to *Hamlet* scholarship that, since the eighteenth century, has emphasized the protagonist's 'intransitive inwardness'. De Grazia wishes to 'do without . . . the modern Hamlet, the one distinguished by an inner being so transcendent that it barely comes into contact with the play from which it emerges'. She thus works to put the protagonist back into his 'plot' – that is, back into the story of his dispossession of land and crown. In a sequence of chapters that weave through the play's associations with the Bible, the medieval morality play, classical and sixteenth-century world histories, and epics of the Trojan War, de Grazia examines the ways in which the play's language reinforces connections between Hamlet, the earth, inheritance customs, and global politics. The 'old mole' – Hamlet's appellation for the Ghost in 1.5, for instance – emphasizes the 'overlays between man and clay' that culminate in the graveyard scene, while the setting in Elsinore links Hamlet to the Danish invasion of England in the early eleventh century, and thus to 'what might be called a premodern imperial schema'. Hamlet's insistence on having 'that within which passes show' would not have been mysterious to Elizabethan audiences: 'the Prince cannot utter his expectation of succession during the reign of the king who pre-empted him, not because the disappointment is beyond the reaches of language or the ken of his auditors' but because it would be treason; Ophelia's deadly garlands, like Hamlet's references to Niobe and Jephthah, signal the play's concern with 'spoiled genealogy': 'the play instances what may be the bleakest moment of a civilization: the extinction of a bloodline, that of a family, dynasty, or race'. Such readings, de Grazia promises, preserve the 'centrality and complexity' of Hamlet, but they do so by paying attention not to his interior life but to 'his worldliness'.⁴

¹ Nigel Alexander, *Poison, Play and Duel: A Study in Hamlet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 19. See also James Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Peter Mercer, *Hamlet and the Acting of Revenge* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

² William Kerrigan, *Hamlet's Perfection* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

³ Andras Kiséry, *Hamlet's Moment: Drama and Political Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Rhodri Lewis, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 10.

⁴ Margreta de Grazia, *'Hamlet' without Hamlet* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), xiii, 1, 31, 65, 89, 126, 5.

‘The Play’s the Thing’

The following analysis explores the worldliness of both protagonist and play – how they stretch imaginatively from Elsinore to Wittenberg to Norway to Poland to England. It also explores the events and situations that have made this world a ‘distracted globe’ (1.5.97), one that has become confused, conflicted – strange and estranging. Thus, it also explores the effects of such distraction, on Hamlet and on us, in body, mind, and soul.

1.1: THE WATCH ON THE BATTLEMENTS

Like Hamlet, ‘crawling between earth and heaven’, *Hamlet* is framed by, and deeply concerned with, the regions of the afterlife. But the worldly space it stages is Denmark. Another island (or peninsular) nation, Denmark was one of England’s closest geographical neighbours, and there was a ‘pervasive sense of the closeness’ between the countries in Shakespeare’s time.¹ Scholars have noted the playwright’s ‘achievement’ in giving a ‘subtle’ impression of the actual environment of early modern Elsinore: cold, windswept, dominated by a castle that was “‘unequaled in Europe for situation, magnificence, force, and revenues’”.²

The first scene opens on the castle ramparts, and it is full of a perturbation and anxiety that never truly leaves us. The replacement sentry, rather than the one on guard, asks in the play’s first line, ‘Who’s there?’. It is a seemingly simple question that heralds the play’s profound concern with identity and personhood. For the moment, though, the concern is with the appearance of a ghost – ‘this dreaded sight’ – a spectre that signals some kind of danger or crisis. Indeed, we learn quickly that the Danish state is under threat, on the alert for an invasion by young Fortinbras of Norway. At issue is the ‘king that’s dead’, in whose ‘fair and warlike form’ the Ghost now emerges. The past actions of this king, the ‘valiant Hamlet’, motivate the present preparation for war. As Horatio explains, a generation ago, King Hamlet defeated in single combat the former King of Norway, winning the lands which Fortinbras now seeks to recover in the name of his father. Shakespeare lavishes considerable effort on Horatio’s narration of the combat between the two kings, emphasizing King Hamlet’s warrior status so that his recent death seems particularly momentous, as if marking the end of an era. He also introduces young Fortinbras as a significant presence in the play, setting him up as a foil to ‘young Hamlet’, who is invoked only at the very end of the scene, when Barnardo, Marcellus, and Horatio agree to inform the prince of what has passed. Until this moment, then, the name Hamlet is associated with the dead king; the protagonist, that is, will always be seen and heard in the shadow of his father.

¹ Lisa Hopkins, *Shakespeare on the Edge: Border-crossing in the Tragedies and the Henriad* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 35.

² For the achievement, see Gunnar Sjögren, ‘The Danish Background in *Hamlet*’, *Shakespeare Studies* 4 (1968), 221–30. Quotation from *Calendar of State Papers Foreign*, July–Dec. 1588, 75, cited in Cay Dollerup, *Denmark, ‘Hamlet’, and Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache, 1975), 1: 153.

1.2: 'I KNOW NOT SEEMS'

That shadow lingers over the second scene, despite the efforts of the new monarch, Hamlet's uncle Claudius, and the queen, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, King Hamlet's widow, to erase it. Superficially, they appear to have succeeded: 1.2 – set indoors, in the midst of a crowd, around a feast celebrating Claudius and Gertrude's marriage – appears a great contrast with the opening scene. (Even the relatively 'empty space' of the Elizabethan stage would have made that difference come to life with ornate props and sparkling costumes.) But, as *Hamlet* will prove so often, this appearance or 'seeming' belies reality, what 'is'. Prince Hamlet, dressed conspicuously in black mourning garb, serves as an active reminder to all around him not only of the death of his father but of the indecent, and indecently hasty, remarriage of his mother to his uncle. As a 'near personification of night', Hamlet recalls for the court its failure to remember, its failure to observe sufficiently his royal father's death.¹ This neglect of ritual (linked now by scholars to Reformation challenges to traditional observances for the dead) preoccupies the prince and contributes to the 'rotteness' of Denmark. As a kind of rebuke, Hamlet insists on expressing his grief. He does so to mock the oily, effective Claudius but also to insult Gertrude and to distinguish himself from the rest of the court. As opposed to them, he 'know[s] not seems'. His emotions, unlike theirs, are authentic. In fact, they are so authentic that no rituals could ever accommodate them. 'I have that within which passes show' (1.2.85), Hamlet says. He thus initiates the great riddle of the character's interiority, the possibility that he harbours an inner life so complicated that it defies expression, an inner life that is an enigma even to himself. This is the riddle that, as we have seen, has energized so much of the play's commentary, including even commentary that diagnoses Hamlet's inner life as a 'hollow void'.²

Hamlet stages the riddle with more focus when the protagonist is alone on stage. Scholars remain divided about what precisely Hamlet *does* in this and the other famous soliloquies. For some, a soliloquy represents a character's 'inner monologue', his or her silent thoughts; for others, it represents a character talking to him- or herself aloud, capable of being overheard if intruded upon.³ And in one clever configuration, the convention of the soliloquy gives Hamlet an opportunity to 'speak to an onstage audience of one [and] delight in his own discourse'.⁴ Given these uncertainties, it becomes difficult to determine precisely what Hamlet *reveals* in his soliloquies. A long tradition saw the soliloquy as 'mak[ing] audible the personal voice . . . of an individual speaker'. But, as scholars have challenged, Hamlet may not necessarily be revealing his true beliefs or feelings. Rather, he may be 'engag[ing] in self-deception' or 'giv[ing] voice to differing points of view'. Or he may be revealing not just the different viewpoints of an individual but the conflicting viewpoints of a divided self: 'Hamlet cannot be fully present to himself or to the audience in his own speeches and *this* is the heart of his mystery, his

¹ Kerrigan, *Perfection*, 43.

² Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 72.

³ James Hirsh, 'Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies', *Modern Language Quarterly* 58.1 (1997), 1–26.

⁴ Deutermann, "'Caviare to the general'", 254.

interiority, his essence.’¹ Or, in a recent formulation, Hamlet’s soliloquies may be like prayer, the ‘fragmentary repository of alternative selves’.²

But, whether or not Hamlet’s reverie on his ‘too too solid flesh’ gives us access to an ‘inexhaustible interiority’, it communicates to us with great feeling a sense of despair, disillusionment, sexual nausea, and, most of all, a sense of personal, familial, and even universal taint (a sense made more palpable in Q2’s reading of ‘sallied [sullied] flesh’). In the aftermath of his father’s death and his mother’s quick remarriage to his uncle, the world appears to him to be entirely corrupt, tempting him to a suicide that he knows divine law prohibits. Hamlet traces this corruption to the Fall in Eden – the ‘unweeded garden / That grows to seed’ – the origin of human sin. He goes on, however, to enumerate the evidence of that sin which he considers most glaring: the disloyalty of his mother in wedding his uncle, his father’s brother, and thus her brother-in-law. Hamlet explicitly names this incest, the ‘ultimate breach’ of natural and divine law that had become in the literature of Shakespeare’s time a ‘powerful metaphor for other forms of social or political corruption’.³ (The issue of incest had also played a critical role in Henry VIII’s divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, the widow of his deceased brother, and thus in the origin story of English Reformation.)

But the remarriage represents additional violations for Hamlet, as he tells us in vivid terms. It threatens his idealized image of his father, of Hamlet Sr’s majesty as well as his chivalric solicitousness of Gertrude. It turns his mother into something worse than a ‘beast that wants discourse of reason’, an appropriate match for the uncle he calls a ‘satyr’, unfit to rule in comparison to so ‘excellent a king’. And it implicates him, Gertrude’s child, in the general depravity, so he cannot help but draw parallels between himself and Claudius: ‘My father’s brother, but no more like my father / Than I to Hercules’. In accepting Claudius as Hamlet Sr’s substitute, Gertrude fails to observe the distinctions and differences upon which her son’s identity, as well as the nation’s social and cultural relations, depend. In sum, the remarriage endangers Hamlet’s memories, makes them intrusive rather than sustaining: ‘must I remember?’

1.3–5: THE GHOST AND OTHER FATHERS

Hamlet is galvanized into activity by the news of the appearance of a ghost that resembles his dead father. He promises to join Horatio and the others on the platform, where he will speak to the spectre, whatever happens. But before he stages that meeting, Shakespeare pauses the pace to dramatize other fathers and children. The third scene features the offspring of Claudius’s councillor Polonius: Laertes, the courtier whom we have already seen asking to return to Paris, and the innocent Ophelia, whom we quickly learn is in Hamlet’s ‘favour’. Polonius arrives to give both son and daughter advice, cautioning Ophelia in particular against

¹ Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Routledge, 1985), 42, 50.

² Brian Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity, and Identity in Early Modern Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 180.

³ Richard McCabe, *Incest, Drama, and Nature’s Law, 1550–1700* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5.

believing the prince's claims of love. Polonius can be played as wily and calculating; he can also be portrayed as good-natured and well-intentioned, though obtuse and bumbling. But his suspicion of Hamlet as well as his brusque treatment of his daughter, in addition to his association with Claudius, announce him as another authority or father figure that the audience – like Hamlet – would do well not to trust.

The interlude with Polonius heightens our anticipation of Hamlet's meeting with the Ghost. He appears in the following scene, prompting an outcry from the prince that will reverberate through the rest of the play: 'Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned, / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell.' Hamlet's address, in other words, offers competing interpretations of the moral and theological status of the Ghost, interpretations that would have represented to his first audiences different early modern models of thinking about ghosts. Strict Protestant doctrine, rejecting the Catholic position that souls could return from Purgatory, maintained that ghosts existed but were demons sent by the devil. Yet records show entrenched popular belief in the return of the dead as ghosts. At the same time, a number of sceptics dismissed the entire prospect of spirits, whether human or demonic.¹ Hamlet's lines invite the audience to 'share [his] doubts', even if they favour one conclusion over the other.²

Drawing Hamlet away from his friends, the Ghost declares that he is the spirit of the dead Hamlet Sr, and he makes it abundantly clear that he suffers now in Purgatory for sins unsatisfied during his lifetime. The Ghost's desperation is poignant: he wants Hamlet both to listen to him and, as a sign of filial love and obedience, to '[r]evenge his foul and most unnatural murder'. The Ghost gives details of that murder meant to inspire retribution, but even as he introduces the new information that Claudius is the killer, his speech resembles the language and fixations we have already heard from Hamlet's in 1.2. The Ghost recalls – conflates, really – the Fall in Eden and the slaying of Abel by Cain that was one of its consequences: 'know, thou noble youth, / The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown'. He dwells on Claudius's extraordinary perfidy, including the treacherous way he poisoned the sleeping, vulnerable Hamlet Sr, destroying the inside and the outside of his perfect martial body. But the Ghost is most concerned by Claudius's usurpation of crown and wife. Indeed, it is the latter that preoccupies the Ghost, who considers the remarriage adulterous as well as incestuous: 'that incestuous, that adulterate beast', he says of Claudius. The implication may be only that the Ghost sees remarriage itself as an act of infidelity. But he opens up the possibility – for Hamlet as well as for the audience – that Gertrude had been unfaithful even before his death.³ Either way, he conveys his betrayal:

¹ Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet*, 19–24; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 587–605.

² Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Scepticism* (London: Harvester, 1987), 118.

³ This is the implication in Belleforest, in which Fengon is accused of marrying 'with her whom hee used as his concubine during good Horvendiles life' (Bullough, vii: 88).

O Hamlet, what a falling off was there,
 From me whose love was of that dignity
 That it went hand in hand even with the vow
 I made to her in marriage, and to decline
 Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
 To those of mine.
 But virtue as it never will be moved,
 Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,
 So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
 Will sate itself in a celestial bed,
 And prey on garbage.

(1.5.47–57)

The Ghost's image, so expressive of moral and sexual disgust with Gertrude, undermines his subsequent injunction to Hamlet: 'Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven'. King Hamlet was poisoned through the ear literally; Prince Hamlet has been poisoned figuratively, even as his suspicions about Claudius and the corrupt state of Denmark are confirmed.¹ Later, he will acknowledge that, despite the Ghost's warning, his 'imagination' is as foul / As Vulcan's stithy' (3.2.73–4).

The Ghost exits after one last message for Hamlet: 'Remember me.' The command poses a crucial question for the play – and for revenge drama more generally – about the relationship between retribution and memorialization. Are they one and the same thing? Or are they distinct but mutually compatible undertakings, with the pursuit of revenge a means for remembering a lost loved one (or remembering a lost loved one a means of revenge)? Or does vengeance detract from, even vitiate, remembrance, redirecting attention from the dead to the enemy, or even to the self? Or does the play suggest a more complex mixture of possibilities, influenced in crucial ways by different religious and cultural assumptions about memory, mourning, and the status of the dead?

In a sweeping pledge, Hamlet promises both to remember and to avenge: he will replace all of his previous knowledge and experience so that

thy commandment all alone shall live
 Within the book and volume of my brain,
 Unmixed with baser matter.

(1.5.102–4)

Recording the command as though he were his father's secretary, Hamlet may indeed pursue 'revenge as a task of creative remembrance'.² Such a commitment, however, comes at a cost and with complications. Scholars have demonstrated that Hamlet would have had as a prop a literal book – an erasable 'table' – to record his thoughts about Claudius ('My tables – meet it is I set it down / That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain').³ But insofar as he also 'wipe[s] away' the metaphoric 'table

¹ Alexander, *Poison*, 56.

² For Hamlet as his father's secretary, see Yiu, *Involutions*, 135. For creative remembrance, see Edwards, 'Introduction', in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, 45.

³ Peter Stallybrass, Roger Chartier, T. Franklin Mowery, and Heather Wolfe, 'Hamlet's Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Renaissance England', *SQ* 55.4 (2004), 379–419.

of my memory’, he swaps the words of the ghost of his father for those of his own ‘youth and observation’. In other words, Hamlet may become half-ghost, even half-dead, himself. Or, as Michael Neill remarks, ‘Hamlet’s solemn rite of memory after his first encounter with the Ghost [is] also an act of oblivion, in which the memories installed by the Ghost expunge’ all former recollections.¹

1.5: THE ANTIC DISPOSITION

The verbal exchange between the Ghost and prince continues when Horatio and Marcellus rejoin Hamlet. In a comic imitation of the Ghost’s injunctions, Hamlet swears his comrades to silence, with the Ghost echoing from under the stage – the conventional habitation of devils. Hamlet also hints to his friends that he plans to assume an ‘antic disposition’: he will ‘bear [him]self’ in ‘strange or odd’ ways that he, as well as the other characters, go on to label specifically as *mad*.

Madness was an essential element in the source story – Amleth’s feigned frenzy kept him alive – but it was also a critical aspect of Shakespeare’s more recent model, *The Spanish Tragedy*. The difference between the three works is revealing. In Saxo and Belleforest’s account, the hero clearly preserves his sanity beneath a disguise of idiocy, a disguise that allows him to accomplish his revenge effectively. But in Kyd’s play, Hieronimo yields to a real, palpable insanity, the psychological effect of the murder of his son and the inaccessibility of justice. And it seems as much a hindrance as a help to his pursuit of retribution. Hamlet’s madness in Shakespeare’s version blends these models in complex ways. Hamlet makes clear that he will ‘*put on*’ his antic disposition, outfitting himself in the conventional costume of the stage malcontent and thus enabling himself to express in a safe fashion his distance from and contempt for the court. But as the play unfolds he seems to inhabit – or to be inhabited by – a madness that exceeds both his control and the boundary between pretended and genuine, so that the costume has become real. With the antic disposition, Harley Granville-Barker has noted, pretence and reality are no longer easily distinguished.² This instability inheres in the very word ‘disposition’, which denotes both external and internal structure. That is, the term refers to the arrangement or order of a material thing – like a building or a garden or even a human body – and the arrangement or order of its personality, ‘a frame of mind or feeling; mood, humour’ (*OED*).

This instability also puzzles – at times threatens – not only Hamlet and the other characters but also the audience. The latter must wonder not simply whether Hamlet is mad or not, but about the connection between acting and being: whether *acting* mad ends up *producing* authentic madness. (Such a transformation – of becoming in reality what you play on stage – was a great fear of the period’s anti-theatricalists, churchmen, and other moralists who were opposed to the existence of the professional drama.) The questions raised by Hamlet’s antic disposition, then, are part of the play’s larger meditation on the relationship between the world and the stage.

¹ Neill, *Issues of Death*, 254.

² Granville-Barker, *Prefaces*, 62.

But Hamlet's final words in the first act seem far from feigned. Alone again on stage, he acknowledges that 'The time is out of joint', his own version of Marcellus's oft-cited comment that 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'. Only, for Hamlet, the recognition demands that he take personal and political responsibility for 'set[ting] it right'. This is the all-encompassing obligation of the revenger, the restoration of familial and social harmony, balance, and justice through potentially unjust and extrajudicial punishment and pain.

2.1-2: BAIT OF FALSEHOOD, CARP OF TRUTH

As if enacting Hamlet's note that 'The time is out of joint', Shakespeare makes a temporal jump of roughly one month to Act 2. The court now seems more claustrophobic than before, as all the characters are spying on one another. Polonius is in the centre of much of this activity: Reynaldo is licensed by him to pry into Laertes's life in Paris, and the obedient Ophelia reports to him about Hamlet's behaviour in her closet. She gives a striking narration of the protagonist's appearance before her:

with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors.

(2.1.76-82)

The report leads to more surveillance. Shakespeare's England had seen the growth of a multi-pronged spy network, designed to ferret out, both at home and abroad, religious and political threats to the monarch and the state. Indeed, Claudius and Gertrude's growing concern with – paranoia about – 'Hamlet's transformation' echoes these contexts, reminding us that Hamlet's inwardness represents a danger to the political nation. But Hamlet's threat is also deeply intimate, striking directly at family members. So Claudius and Gertrude have hired Hamlet's old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to investigate the situation. They in turn team up with Polonius, who believes Hamlet has gone mad because of his rejection by Ophelia. Polonius is willing to sacrifice Ophelia to the plan – he promises to 'loose my daughter to him' – so that Claudius can watch the two from behind an arras. The scheme becomes the occasion and the setting for the famous 'to be or not to be' soliloquy in 3.1.

But, as thorough as these plans seem, the most effective spy – or counterspy – is Hamlet himself. The antic disposition, certainly, gives him cover to scrutinize everyone at court, as he does with Polonius in their grotesque conversation about maggots, his daughter, conception, and crabs. But he is overt in his own suspicion about, and investigation of, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he pointedly challenges: 'Were you not sent for? . . . You were sent for – and there is a kind of confession in your looks which your modesties have not craft enough to colour'. Hamlet's wariness informs, and thus gives an ironic twist to, all of his exchanges with the two friends, which

include some of his most pointed statements – ‘Denmark’s a prison’ – and his most noble formulations:

indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire – why, it appeareth no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals – and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (2.2.281–90)

The force of this monologue lies in its articulation of both the most optimistic claims of Renaissance humanism about human capacities and the most pessimistic claims of Reformation theology about human sinfulness. But its philosophical appeal must be understood in the context of Hamlet’s performance for the duo he distrusts, and whom he will later indict for attempting to ‘pluck out the heart of my mystery’ (3.2.331).

2.2: THE PLAYERS

Hamlet’s interactions with the troupe of players, newly arrived at Elsinore, also cannot be separated from this act’s general climate of surveillance. Hamlet clearly delights in the actors, welcoming them to court and requesting from them a ‘passionate speech’. He suggests ‘Aeneas’ tale to Dido’ – that is, a narration based on the account of the destruction of Troy in Book 11 of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Hamlet himself initiates the oration, focusing on Pyrrhus, the son of the Greek warrior Achilles. The passage – its metre, diction, and syntax – are meant to make the speech ‘audibly different from the rest of the play’:¹

‘The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,
Black as his purpose, did the night resemble
When he lay couchèd in the ominous horse,
Hath now this dread and black complexion smeared
With heraldy more dismal. Head to foot
Now is he total gules, horridly tricked
With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,
Baked and impasted with the parching streets,
That lend a tyrannous and a damnèd light
To their lord’s murder. Roasted in wrath and fire,
...
With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus
Old grandsire Priam seeks –’ (2.2.410–22)

At this point, the Player takes over the narration, elaborating a scene of gore and violence. According to the Player, Pyrrhus hesitates for a moment over the toppled but still living Trojan king. But then ‘[a] rousèd vengeance sets him new a-work’, and his ‘bleeding sword / Now falls on Priam’. The Player then describes the response of

¹ Burrow, *Classical Antiquity*, 66.

Hecuba – the ‘mobled queen’ – to the disaster, which he depicts as a spectacle for the gods:

But if the gods themselves did see her then,
When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport
In mincing with his sword her husband’s limbs,
The instant burst of clamour that she made,
Unless things mortal move them not at all,
Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven,
And passion in the gods. (2.2.470–6)

Although the Player’s speech suspends the momentum of the play, it is deeply connected to its broader concerns. Pyrrhus, like Laertes and Fortinbras, offers an additional foil for Hamlet: he is a son proving his martial valour on behalf of his heroic father. And Hecuba serves as a model for Gertrude: she is a wife who knows how to mourn her husband properly. With its Latinate structure and Homeric/Virgilian content, the speech can also be seen as an explicit instance of what Patrick Cheney calls Shakespeare’s ‘engagement with the epic tradition’, which he uses to record the loss of heroic values to ‘a mercenary post-epic culture’.¹ Finally, the speech provides a meta-commentary on the emotional effects of oratory, when the Player, during his description of Hecuba, is moved – moves himself – to tears.

This capacity of the theatre serves as a kind of taunt to Hamlet. Calling himself a ‘rogue and peasant slave’, he notes that the Player, ‘in a fiction, in a dream of passion’, can generate real, concrete emotion in himself and his audience, while he, ‘[a] dull and muddy-mettled rascal’, can neither say nor do anything. What he should be doing, he says, is seeking vengeance; in fact, if he weren’t ‘pigeon-livered’, he already ‘should ha’ fatted all the region kites / With this slave’s offal’. Hamlet’s concern here, Steven Mullaney suggests, is not only that he delays *per se*, but that the delay ‘cast[s] doubt on the authenticity of his own grief. Is his grief real or sincere if he can’t respond appropriately – by killing Claudius?’² The Player’s speech thus functions as a means for Hamlet to spy on himself. The result is a self-interrogation by which Hamlet is convinced of his own wrong-doing, a failure he equates with prostitution. ‘This is most brave,’ he complains, ‘That I . . . Must like a whore unpack my heart with words, / And fall a-cursing like a very drab’ (2.2.535–9).

His solution, famously, is to direct the power that he associates with the theatre back onto the entire court, onto his entire situation. He had already asked the Player to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* the next day; now he explains:

I’ll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I’ll observe his looks,
I’ll tent him to the quick. If a do blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen

¹ Patrick Cheney, *Shakespeare’s Literary Authorship* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 61.

² Steven Mullaney, *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 60.

May be a devil . . .
 . . . I'll have grounds
 More relative than this. The play's the thing
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king. (2.2.547–58)

The plan, in other words, involves scrutinizing both Claudius and the Ghost. Hamlet will test the latter's veracity by observing the former's response to the play. He does this, he says, to protect his own soul from damnation. (He does not seem to realize that the Ghost could be a devil out to damn him *and* still tell the truth.) He will also be examining his own conscience – the conscience of a king-in-waiting – in the scenarios that follow.

3.1: 'TO BE OR NOT TO BE'

The celebrated soliloquy of 3.1, which has generated vast layers of commentary, participates in this pattern of self-scrutiny. Hamlet, of course, is being 'seen unseen' by Claudius and Polonius, but he is also observing, prying into, himself. Without ever using the first person pronoun, he nevertheless discovers his fascination with both the lure of non-existence and the sturdiness of the self. In 1.2, reeling from his father's death and his mother's remarriage, Hamlet had desired that his flesh 'resolve itself into a dew' (1.2.130). Now, with the heavy burden of revenge placed on his shoulders, he returns to these kinds of thoughts as an issue of both body and soul. 'To be or not to be, that is the question', he begins: the line is so well known that, taken out of context, it can become an occasion for theatrical delight. (In April of 2016, for instance, to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, a BBC Shakespeare Live presentation at Stratford featured a renowned cast of Hamlets – including Benedict Cumberbatch, Dame Judi Dench, Paapa Essiedu, Rory Kinnear, Ian McKellen, Tim Minchin, and David Tennant – who performed distinct emphases of the line, with a cameo by Prince Charles.) In the play's moment, however, it leads Hamlet into a painful, if riveting, consideration of suicide.

To be or not to be, that is the question –
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep –
 No more; and by a sleep to say we end
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to – 'tis a consummation
 Devoutly to be wished. (3.1.56–64)

When Hamlet had presented the problem in his first soliloquy, he had dismissed it quickly by noting that God forbids self-slaughter. Here he considers the issue in far greater detail, attracted as he is to suicide as something honourable, the one action he can take against a 'sea of troubles' that preserves his nobility.¹ The alternative is to go

¹ See Philip Edwards, 'Tragic Balance in *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Survey* 36 (1983), 43–52. Eric Langley offers a useful discussion of the period's competing views of suicide as either noble or damnable, in *Narcissism & Suicide in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

on living, to see, from a Stoic or Christian perspective, suffering as noble, a form of self-mastery of emotions and passions. (Hamlet will praise this sensibility in 3.2, when he congratulates Horatio as a ‘man / That is not passion’s slave’.) Hamlet’s debate, Frye has pointed out, takes the form of a school rhetorical exercise, arguing *in utramque partem*, on both sides of a topic. But, as the soliloquy proceeds, Hamlet weighs suicide not against patient endurance but against the threat of a Christian afterlife, the ‘dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns’. He is concerned not with death but with the uncertainty of death as more life, in a strange, ‘undiscovered’ realm. Invoking conscience – the still small voice of God’s judgement implanted in every human – Hamlet widens the scope of concern:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

(3.1.83–8)

‘[E]nterprises of great pitch and moment’: Hamlet now must be thinking not only about killing himself but also killing Claudius. (Jan Kott suggests, in fact, that the whole soliloquy is about such a murder: “‘To be” means for [Hamlet] to revenge his father and to assassinate the king; while “not to be” means – to give up the fight.’)¹ So it is worth noting the intimate relation for Hamlet between suicide and revenge: both are forms of punitive violence, the first directed at himself and the second at his uncle. For a revenger like Hieronimo, they were distinct impulses: Hieronimo, tempted as he was, refused to commit suicide in order to pursue revenge for his son. For Hamlet, they are versions of one another: ‘The desire to kill Claudius keeps metamorphosing into an impulse to suicide’, Gordon Braden explains. The result is that Hamlet can only ‘contemplate [their] unactability with new rigor’.² Indeed, contemplation is precisely what makes them unactable.

3.1: ‘GET THEE TO A NUNNERY’

The impasse of thought generated in the soliloquy can be seen as either a cause or an effect of Hamlet’s sense of personal and global sinfulness. In the interview with Ophelia that follows, he unleashes the brunt of his outrage for this situation on her, challenging her chastity and attributing to her the infidelity he associates with Gertrude and, by misogynist analogy, with all women. Of course, his accusations – which he also directs at himself – may be a ruse, an element of his antic disposition or a response to his suspicion that they are being watched. (Hamlet asks pointedly, ‘Where’s your father?’) But even if meant as a show, the accusations are grounded in Hamlet’s governing sense of a moral and sexual taint that inheres in individuals and

¹ Kott, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, 62.

² Gordon Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger’s Privilege* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 219.

the world. Even Claudius makes this inference: ‘There’s something in his soul / O’er which his melancholy sits on brood.’ It is possible, then, to hear in his demand ‘Get thee to a nunnery’ not only bitterness but also protectiveness. A convent is the only place where Ophelia will be safe from him and other men: ‘We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us.’ So Ophelia’s lament after the meeting is unironic. It serves as an index of what both she and he have lost over the course of the play, another ‘falling off’ on the model of Hamlet Sr’s replacement by Claudius:

Oh what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!
The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword,
Th’expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th’observed of all observers, quite, quite down,
And I of ladies most deject and wretched. (3.1.144–9)

Claudius takes Hamlet’s activity seriously, for it is at this point that he decides to send Hamlet to England to exact a tribute from its king.

3.2: ‘SPEAK THE SPEECH’

Hamlet’s Senecan and Elizabethan predecessors in the genre of revenge – including Shakespeare’s own *Titus* – saved their inset spectacles (plays or banquets) for the end of their dramas, where they are often used to accomplish the vengeance at which the plot has aimed. Hamlet’s ‘Mousetrap’ operates differently. Here the play-within-a-play, orchestrated in the middle of the drama, functions as a strategy of surveillance. Hamlet and Horatio will ‘observe my uncle’ during the performance in order to assess not only Claudius’s but the Ghost’s guilt.

It also serves as an opportunity for Hamlet to enunciate his own dramatic aesthetic, one that prizes ‘naturalness’ over the kinds of excess – the ‘dumb-shows and noise’ – that Hamlet both associates with earlier dramatic forms and connects to Claudius’s violence.¹ ‘Suit the action to the word’, he tells the players, ‘the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature’. Such a theory of acting seems to indict Hamlet’s own behaviour, since it insists that the actors maintain a control over their emotions that the prince has shown himself unable to do. The entertainment that follows seems to ignore Hamlet’s orders. It begins with a dumb-show, in which a king is poisoned and his wife, the queen, is whisked away by the poisoner. It proceeds to a highly stylized dialogue, notable for its elliptical syntax and rhyming couplets, between the original king and queen. Claudius cuts off the play when he sees ‘one Lucianus, *nephew to the king*’ (my italics) prepare to poison him. For Graham Bradshaw, Claudius’s timing makes the ‘Mousetrap’ a ‘lamentable failure’, since we cannot be certain whether he was seized by guilt or by fear that his nephew might be coming after him.² But Hamlet declares himself assured of the reliability of

¹ Lee Sheridan Cox, *Figurative Design in Hamlet: The Significance of the Dumb Show* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973), 46–7.

² Bradshaw, *Shakespeare’s Scepticism*, 117.

the Ghost: 'I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound', he tells Horatio, and he confirms his role as revenger:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. (3.2.349–53)

It also confirms for Claudius the need to send his nephew abroad to the King of England: 'I your commission will forthwith dispatch / And he to England shall along with you', he instructs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That commission, we will learn, is to have Hamlet slain.

3.3: 'NOW A IS A-PRAYING'

Claudius is intent on exiling (and, the audience will learn in 4.3, executing) Hamlet. At the same time, he feels remorse for his actions, as his soliloquy in 3.3 reveals. Indeed, we might consider this scene as the exact response, only delayed until *after* the 'Mousetrap', that Hamlet had hoped the inset play would prompt. Claudius recognizes the horror of his crime, an inheritance that reaches back to Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel: 'O my offence is rank, it smells to heaven; / It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, / A brother's murder.'

The rest of his speech, more reminiscent of an Elizabethan morality play than a revenge tragedy, enacts the difficulty of Christian repentance, the struggle for Claudius of 'aligning his internal state with his external gestures'.¹ The problem is not only the obvious, explicit one: that Claudius is reluctant to give up the rewards of his 'foul murder'. It is also that Claudius is uncertain of the efficacy of his repentance. In other words, he suspects that his impulse to repent may only be an element of his sinfulness, may only 'lime' – entrap – his soul further. But Hamlet, who discovers Claudius on his knees, alone, is not privy to his uncle's supplication, and he thus does not doubt the status of his uncle's remorse. We might say, then, that Hamlet *misreads* this scene. So, although this moment might seem a perfect opportunity to slay his enemy, Hamlet hesitates, reluctant to send 'this same villain . . . To heaven'. He wants Claudius damned. He will wait for the opportunity to make his revenge more complete and Claudius's damnation more certain.

Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell whereto it goes. (3.3.93–5)

Such savage intent disgusted some of *Hamlet's* early critics. But it is a hallmark of Elizabethan revenge fiction; it answers to the great Senecan insight in *Thyestes* that

¹ Ramie Targoff, 'The Performance of Prayer: Sincerity and Theatricality in Early Modern England', *Representations* 60 (1997), 49.

‘Thou never dost enough revenge the wronge / Except [*sic*] thou passe’.¹ Here ‘doing enough’ (which in the world of revenge is always doing *more*) extends retaliatory violence into the afterlife. While this goal may be an unstated assumption of other revengers, Hamlet makes it explicit: he wants Claudius not only dead but in a Christian hell. Hamlet’s articulation of his desire – as either a genuine reason or as an excuse for postponing revenge – marks another way in which the play refashions the genre.

3.4: THE CLOSET SCENE

Hamlet’s encounter with the praying Claudius had interrupted his passage to Gertrude’s closet. Elizabethan closets were not bedrooms *per se* but built spaces for either prayer, or study, or storage of treasures, or even for the gathering of small sets of people – different functions that all implied ‘possessiveness ... exclusivity ... privacy ... [and] secrecy’.² Hamlet had promised that he would speak, rather than use, daggers when he met his mother, but the scene is pervaded by real as well as metaphoric violence. In a scenario adapted from the sources, Hamlet stabs at the noise he hears coming from behind an arras – only to discover that it is Polonius he has killed and not the King: ‘Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell. / I took thee for thy better.’ In Belleforest, Hamlet’s treatment of Fengon’s spy was ostentatiously grotesque: he chopped up the dead body and fed it to hogs. Hamlet is not as disrespectful, and he acknowledges that the deed makes him susceptible to divine punishment for murder. But he humiliates the corpse at the end of the scene, ‘lug[ging] the guts’ into another room and, in what can be seen as a parody of the Eucharist, telling Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Polonius is at supper ‘[n]ot where he eats, but where a is eaten’.

Some consider the murder of Polonius the catastrophe of the play, as it ‘sends the plot off in a violent new direction, from which everything else flows in ugly consequence’.³ But Hamlet is less concerned about it than his mother, whom he goes on to castigate in a flurry of accusations that repeat both his own and the Ghost’s earlier sense of her ‘falling off’.

Hamlet, who calls himself both ‘scourge and minister’, may understand his chastisement of Gertrude as a form of shrift, prompting her to examine her conscience and to repent. He is thus, as the Ghost had earlier demanded, leaving her to heaven but at the same time encouraging her to feel contrite, to experience the ‘thorns that in her bosom lodge’ in order to save her soul. There is self-interest at work in this effort: a chastened Gertrude would give to Hamlet a purified sense of self and restore for both him and his father the difference between Hamlet Sr and his fratricidal brother. But the extraordinary vehemence and eroticized energy with which he recounts her sins call these goals into question, turning Hamlet’s supposed supervision of his mother’s penitence into a form of revenge, one in which he takes a kind of pleasure. He offers an

¹ See Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, 261–75. Quotation from *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies, translated into English* (London, 1581), D8v.

² Lena Cowen Orlin, ‘Gertrude’s Closet’, *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 134 (1998), 65.

³ Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts*, 228.



Figure 1 'Do you not come your tardy son to chide?' (3.4.106). Redrawn by Du Guernier for the 1714 edition of Rowe's Shakespeare (Folger Shakespeare Library)

extended comparison between Hamlet Sr as Hyperion or Mars or Mercury, and Claudius as a ‘mildewed ear’;¹ he then imagines Gertrude’s sexual desire and her coupling with Claudius:

but to live
 In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
 Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
 Over the nasty sty. (3.4.91–4)

Hamlet’s fixation summons, for the last time, the Ghost, who comes to ‘whet thy almost blunted purpose’ – to urge Hamlet against Claudius and not his mother. But perhaps the most significant effect of the Ghost (who remains invisible to Gertrude) is that his appearance seems to redefine the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude. When Hamlet asks his mother to keep secret the fact that he is only ‘mad in craft’, she agrees, taking his side against the court:

Be thou assured, if words be made of breath,
 And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
 What thou hast said to me. (3.4.198–200)

He also reveals to Gertrude that he has potentially deadly plans for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – whom he ‘will trust as . . . adders fanged’ – when they sail off to England. Hamlet has already tasted the blood of Polonius; now he imagines that, for his former friends, he ‘will delve one yard below their mines / And blow them at the moon’.

4.1–7: ENGLAND, POLAND, ELSINORE

The prince’s trip to England is a key component of the earlier tale. But it would have had special meaning to Shakespeare’s earliest audiences. It included them in the story. It might have recalled for them their island’s past thralldom to Danish invasion and rule in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries. Or it might have reminded them of their present-day commercial and diplomatic relationships with Denmark. After 1603, it would have gestured to another significant relationship between England and Denmark, since the new English Queen, Anne, was born in Denmark, a member of the Danish royal family.

The fourth act rotates around Hamlet’s journey, which, as he narrates in a letter to Horatio (4.6), is cut short by pirates, and he returns to Elsinore. The trip out and back is mirrored or foiled in other characters’ ‘travels’: Fortinbras’s invasion of Poland, Laertes’s return to Denmark from Paris, and Ophelia’s fatal slip into a ‘weeping brook’. In a brief scene, Fortinbras leads a march through Denmark on his way to the continent; in Q2, but not in Q1 or F, Hamlet observes the Norwegian prince, weighs himself in the balance, and finds himself wanting. His soliloquy retards the action and contains striking inconsistencies (Hamlet proposes that ‘from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth’, although he has already stabbed

¹ For the possibility that while making the comparison Hamlet gestures to the tapestries that were a feature of Kronborg, see Dollerup, *Denmark*, 84–5.

Polonius and is plotting the ends of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), and it may have been cut between Shakespeare's first draft and the script prepared for performance. But the fifty-five or so lines missing from F serve a crucial purpose: they show Hamlet still mired in the self-contempt he has exhibited earlier, still seeking models of himself in other figures, and still attracted to the unreflective martial tendencies that they exhibit and that he lacks: 'to be great / Is . . . greatly to find quarrel in a straw / When honour's at the stake'.

Hamlet does not get a chance to observe Laertes, who comes roaring back to Elsinore seeking vengeance for his murdered father. But the audience does. And it witnesses in him a model neither of warrior honour nor of chivalric magnanimity but rather of easily manipulable – if sympathetic – passion. For when he learns, with Claudius, that Hamlet has returned to England in mysterious circumstances, Laertes colludes with the king in plotting the fatal deception of the prince by envenomed, unbated sword.

His willingness to conspire is enhanced on account of what he has seen of the maddened Ophelia. Having lost father and lover, Ophelia lives the lunacy that Hamlet has been feigning. Her eroticized ballads express both desire and innocence: she has become the 'green girl' Polonius foreshadowed in the first act, sick from unrequited sexual longing. Her distribution of flowers is a pantomime of defloration. But it is also part of a mourning ritual for her father, a ritual she brings – or is reported by Gertrude in 4.7 to have brought – to her own drowning: 'she chanted snatches of old lauds / As one incapable of her own distress'.

Ophelia's death is the real version of Hamlet's imagined one, and its status – suicide or accident? – is notoriously tricky. Gertrude's narration, syntactically careful as it is not to cede any agency to Ophelia, does not offer a definitive answer:

There on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. (4.7.172–5)

An answer is of great consequence, since it determines whether or not she will be afforded a Christian burial, in the churchyard and with the rituals appropriate to a woman of high status. And yet, as Michael Macdonald points out, Shakespeare seems deliberately to keep the question unresolved, to 'exploit' a 'new ambivalence about suicide' that began in his lifetime.¹ These attitudes ranged from treating suicide as a terrible crime to seeing it as an honourable deed, from considering it to be the result of insanity to insisting that it was a deliberate, sane action. (The gravedigger mocks all of these options, suggesting in a parodically scholastic appeal that Ophelia's drowning was an act of self-defence, a notion that, knowing the moral condition of Elsinore, we would do well to take seriously.) These distinct attitudes inform Ophelia's funeral and the characters' responses to it, which in turn would have been

¹ Michael Macdonald, 'Ophelia's Maimèd Rites', *SQ* 37.3 (1986), 315.

refracted by considerations of status, wealth, and gender.¹ Laertes is furious, while the priest, who authorized the burial on Christian ground, nevertheless hedges his bets, limiting the ceremonies to ‘maimèd rites’ since her ‘death was doubtful’.

5.1: GRAVEYARD

What is not doubtful is that Ophelia’s death moves the action to the graveyard, where Hamlet’s thoughts have been tending since his first appearance. In 5.1, standing over the grave being dug (without his knowledge) for Ophelia, Hamlet confronts the materiality of death and its levelling power over all classes of people (peasant, courtier, lawyer, emperor). The scene fits the poetic and artistic tradition of *memento mori*, of meditating on the inevitability and omnipresence of death. But it gives the tradition decisive twists. First, this late-in-the-play scene brings us back to the beginning, since the gravedigger – whose literalism is the play’s only match for Hamlet’s wit – explains that his first day on the job was the same day that old King Hamlet defeated old King Fortinbras. He thus harks back to Horatio’s account in the opening scene of the mortal combat between the now-dead warrior kings. (The gravedigger also folds Hamlet into this origin story, announcing for the first time that the prince was born on this very day (5.1.123–4).) Next, the gravedigger throws up a skull – likely the first on the English stage – which he claims is that of Yorick, a former court jester.² Looking at the skull, Hamlet speaks of Yorick as a kind of surrogate father – ‘he hath borne me on his back a thousand times’ – whose remains now nauseate him: ‘how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it.’ Like the ghost of his father, the prop takes on a second life of its own, exerting an influence over Hamlet that reflects its dual function as subject and object, person and thing.³

That influence turns Hamlet’s thoughts away from himself and his own individual mortality to humans’ shared destiny in the dust. He mocks women, for whom the skull should serve as a reminder that their use of cosmetics cannot prevent their death and decay; and he lingers on the transience even of emperors and their empires: ‘Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust.’ But his musings are interrupted by the entrance of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and the rest of the funeral procession. In a famous stage direction, Laertes ‘*Leaps in the grave*’, professing his affection for Ophelia with a flamboyance that seems both an expression of genuine feeling and an effort to compensate for the ‘no more done’ about which he has complained to the priest.⁴ Hamlet responds with similar ostentation. He advances himself with the epithet reserved for the monarch – ‘This is I, / Hamlet the Dane’ – and he asserts that he loved Ophelia in a way that ‘forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum’. A stage direction in Q1 but not in Q2 or F has the prince jump into the grave along with Laertes. The notion, even if not standard theatrical practice (see commentary), is consistent with Hamlet’s

¹ Janet Clare, “‘Buried in the Open Fields’: Early Modern Suicide and the Case of Ofelia”, *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 2 (2013), 241–52, www.fupress.com/bsfm-jems.

² Frye, *Renaissance Hamlet*, 206.

³ See Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 89–115.

⁴ The stage direction is in F and Q1 but not Q2; Shakespeare may or may not be responsible for it.

competitive, even vengeful, ranting. His exhibition may signal a return to his ‘antic disposition’ or perhaps a sincere – if inappropriate and unsympathetic – demonstration of grief over Ophelia’s death. It also underscores his special relationship with Laertes, his adversary but also, as he says in the next scene, his ‘brother’.

5.2: ‘THE READINESS IS ALL’

The Hamlet of the final scene sounds not at all like the Hamlet of the graveyard face-off with Laertes. He recounts his sea-journey in detail to Horatio (in Q1, these details are given in an entirely distinct scene between Horatio and Gertrude). In the retelling, Hamlet demonstrates an unprecedented calm and objectivity, as well as a sense of providential design, of God’s shaping presence: ‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will.’ He has come to this sense, for which he has been accused of fatalism or resignation, based on his experience aboard the ship to England. During the trip, he tells Horatio, he discovered that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had been given written instructions from Claudius to have him executed. Hamlet explains that his instincts took over, and before he ‘could make a prologue to my brains / They had begun the play’. He rewrote the letter, directing the English king to have the letter-bearers killed. It is at this point, as Horatio already knows, that the ship was boarded by pirates, and Hamlet escaped. In his retrospective narration to Horatio, then, Hamlet describes his actions as rooted in his own fortunate impulses and as guided by an omniscient power.¹ Such an understanding marks a literal and figurative ‘sea-change’ in Hamlet, emblemized by his use of his father’s signet to seal his letter. He is now prepared to seize the opportunity to duel with Laertes: ‘we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all’ (5.2.192–5).²

The fencing contest at the end of Act 5, balanced against the opening description of Hamlet Sr’s judicial combat, provides a ‘frame’ for the play; it also offers ‘a means of performance acceptable’ to a character who has been so queasy about acting and action.³ But even as he agrees to fight with Laertes, his real target is Claudius. Fuelled by his discovery of the king’s treachery, Hamlet has returned to Denmark committed to killing him. Hamlet may be asking for assurance from Horatio or seeking it from himself when he poses the matter:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon –
He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother,
Popped in between th’election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage – is’t not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is’t not to be damned

¹ For the connection between luck or chance and Providence, see Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts*, 208–35.

² The allusion is to Matthew 10.29.

³ John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare’s Binding Language* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 221; Jennifer Low, ‘Manhood and the Duel: Enacting Masculinity in *Hamlet*’, *The Centennial Review* 43.3 (1999), 508.

To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(5.2.63–70)

Hamlet rehearses the situation as we have heard it repeated many times, but with some important variations. He is now concerned explicitly with the political nature of his uncle's crime: Claudius has not only usurped the throne from Hamlet Sr but also taken Hamlet's own rightful place in the 'hope' – if not the guarantee – of election to the crown, the expectation of a son in an elective monarchy such as Denmark.¹ And although he returns to the problems of conscience and damnation, his perspective on the two has shifted: conscience is no longer an obstacle to action, but an encouragement to it, and the threat of damnation no longer hovers over his killing of Claudius but over his failure to do so.

5.2: 'THE REST IS SILENCE'

The 'excitement of the fencing match' that ends the play brings us back to its beginning, to poison.² Shakespeare provides unusually detailed stage directions for '[a] table prepared, with flagons of wine on it' – suggestive of a Communion service. Only this is a perversion of the sacrament, since Claudius taints the cup of wine he will offer Hamlet, the 'back-up' plan he has devised should Laertes not stab Hamlet successfully. After three passes, Laertes lands an unscrupulous strike, but in the scuffle he loses the rapier to Hamlet and is 'justly killed with mine own treachery'. In the meantime, Gertrude has drunk from the poisoned cup meant for Hamlet; her death, as well as Laertes's revelation of the 'foul practice', give Hamlet the opportunity for his revenge. The staged duel has become real vengeance. He wounds Claudius with the deadly sword and forces the poisoned liquid down his throat: 'Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damnèd Dane, / Drink off this potion.' This double strike is the 'superfluous death' Claudius had feared in Act 4, and it goes a long way towards Hamlet's mission, since the third act, to damn Claudius in an 'act / That has no relish of salvation in't' (3.3.91–2).

Unlike most revenge protagonists, Hamlet does not orchestrate the tragedy's final spectacle; he is a player in Claudius's design who improvises effectively to exact his revenge. (Indeed, one scholar has called his blow against Claudius 'almost a posthumous act'.)³ But he is like his predecessors in that he is a victim of the conclusion's carnage. His dying speech carries all the more weight given his characteristic introspection. He makes sure to ask Horatio to stay alive to report his story – one of personal vendetta but also action on behalf of his country. He thus makes sure to confirm the nation's successor: 'I do prophesy th'election lights / On Fortinbras; he has my dying voice.' The rest is silence – both from and for Hamlet. The silence stuns all until Fortinbras arrives to assume the crown. He gives Hamlet a final commendation: 'he was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal'.

¹ Andrew Gurr, 'Hamlet's Claim to the Crown of Denmark', *Critical Essays on Hamlet* (1988), 92–9.

² Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, 266.

³ Scofield, *The Ghosts of 'Hamlet'*, 103.

Fortinbras's words affirm for the play what Bradley asked of great tragedy, that it 'involve the waste of [the] good'.¹ Fortinbras steps in to fill the gap left by this waste, and the irony is obvious: the son of a Norwegian king defeated by King Hamlet now wears the Danish crown. But it is Hamlet's story, not Fortinbras's, that Shakespeare wanted told – told again and again according to the prince's demand that Horatio remain alive and 'draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story'. That story, at its heart, is a revenge tale, but one with an essential, deeply Shakespearean sensibility. For it is the story of a revenger doubtful of, divided by, and resistant to the retaliation that his foils (Fortinbras, Laertes) seem so easily to embrace. Whatever the source of this resistance – and, as we have seen, scholars have offered many accounts – it fuels the play's plot and language, and these in turn generate audiences' endless fascination with his tragedy.

Stages and Screens

Fascination with *Hamlet* is manifest in its enduring, worldwide popularity in performance. Behind this popularity, Robert Hapgood suggests, is the play's 'exceptional responsiveness to changing times and places'.² As Hamlet wished to welcome the stranger, the play seems to invite different cultures, over the centuries and across the globe, to enter its ambit: to see their own psychological and political predicaments in Hamlet's situation in Elsinore, and to use the play as a means of expressing urgent existential dilemmas – about power, action, generational decline, authenticity, theatricality – that might otherwise 'pass show'. (Though the welcome is double-edged: as much as actors aspire to the role, several have found it too much to bear and have broken down before, during, or after a performance run.) Far beyond what Hamlet requested of Horatio, the prince's story has been told repeatedly, in venues and with technologies that Shakespeare could hardly have imagined.

This performance history is richly chronicled and, now more than ever, studied in terms not only of Shakespeare's theatrical legacy but also of its implications for social and cultural history. Its documents tell of the invention and reinvention of signature practices, including those to do with scenery and settings, costume, stage-business, the cutting of scenes, and the delivery and styling of individual lines and passages. They also tell of the interpretations and reinterpretations of the play's political dimensions and the prince's tragic status. Marvin Rosenberg has usefully generalized two camps of performance: the 'sweet' Hamlet or the 'power' Hamlet.

The following review provides the broad outlines of this history, calling attention to a few widely regarded, striking, or innovative treatments and adaptations of the play and its characters – most often Hamlet. It traces first an Anglo-American stage and

¹ Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 39.

² Hapgood, 'Introduction', in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Shakespeare in Production Series (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3. In this section, I rely heavily on Hapgood; Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of 'Hamlet'* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992); Anthony Dawson, *Shakespeare in Performance: 'Hamlet'* (Manchester University Press, 1995); David Bevington, *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet Through the Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Andy Lavender, *Shakespeare in Pieces: Peter Brook, Robert La Page, Richard Wilson* (London: Nick Hern, 2001), 1–50.

screen tradition before turning to global performances, adaptations, and the tradition of female actors in *Hamlet* and as Hamlet.

EARLY STAGES

Hamlet's first performances around 1600 were by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, who would become the King's Men at the accession of James I in 1603, at the Globe Theatre on the south side of the Thames. Theatre historians have illuminated the standard conventions of the early modern theatre – all-male casts, bare platform stage, trap door for ghosts, devils, and burials, central opening in the tiring house for royal entries – from which we can infer the embodied movement of the play. (Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa propose a blueprint for *Hamlet* in *Staging in Shakespeare's Theatres*.)¹ Q1 supplies information specific to the play: from it we learn that the Ghost appears in 3.4 'in his nightgown', that Ophelia 'play[s] on a lute, and her hair down, singing' in 4.5, and Hamlet jumps into the grave with Laertes in 5.1. Other evidence makes clear that the role of Hamlet was first performed by Richard Burbage, the leading tragic actor in the Chamberlain's/King's Men and Shakespeare's long-time fellow. An elegy upon his death in 1619 mourned: 'No more young Hamlet . . . / That lived in him'.² And we have hints – though more circumstantial – that Shakespeare himself played the Ghost in the earliest performances.

The professional theatre was closed by the government during the Interregnum or Commonwealth period (1642–60). *Hamlet* survived this period in the droll *The Grave-Makers*, a short comic piece that, like other drolls, had been excerpted and adapted from an earlier play.³ When professional playing began again in London at the start of the Restoration, the play returned to the stage under the aegis of the Duke of York's Company, helmed by William Davenant. The theatre scene was different now, more modern and continental, featuring a proscenium arch, perspective scenery, artificial lighting, and, most striking, women actors playing female parts. In 1663, the Duke's Men's star actor Thomas Betterton took over the role of Hamlet, which he was to play until 1709, when he was in his seventies. (His wife, Mary Saunderson, played Ophelia.)

A 1676 quarto of *Hamlet* (known as the Players' Quarto) gives us a good sense of how extensively the play was cut for these early performances. (The 1676 edition follows the quarto of 1637; it identifies passages to be cut with inverted commas.) Substantial chunks of dialogue were eliminated, from Horatio's account of Hamlet Sr's combat with the King of Norway to much of Hamlet's self-reproach in 2.2, from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's musing on the 'cess [cease] of majesty' to Hamlet's sober reflection on the 'death of a sparrow'. Perhaps most significant, however, was the reduction of the Norwegian element: the account of Fortinbras's 'revenge' in 1.1 is

¹ Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa, 'The Early Staging of *Hamlet*', in *Staging in Shakespeare's Theatres* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 121–62.

² In Edwin Nungezer, *A Dictionary of Actors and of Other Persons Associated with the Public Representation of Plays in England Before 1642*, reprint (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 74.

³ Dale Randall, *Winter Fruit: English Drama, 1642–1660* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 155.

truncated and the embassy to Norway (1.2 and 2.1), as well as Fortinbras's parade across Denmark on his way to Poland (4.1), were omitted. Cuts shape the meaning and impact of the play; reading and listening for them can be a revelatory interpretive experience. The key outcome of the Players' Quarto's cuts, specifically the diminution of Fortinbras's role, was to downplay the international quality of the tragedy, circumscribing within the realm the threats to Hamlet and to Denmark. This move presaged a related trend that dominated performance well into the nineteenth century: a concentration on the portrayal of Hamlet's emotional over his political condition.

THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

A focus on Hamlet's personality was developed in distinct ways by the great actors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. David Garrick, who occupies a central place in the institutionalization of Shakespeare at the heart of the British literary canon, assumed the role in 1742. He captivated his audience with a naturalistic style that emphasized Hamlet as a man of action and feeling; he was known for conveying his palpable terror at his first sight of the Ghost. John Philip Kemble's performance style, in contrast, was studied and stately, offering a Hamlet less active, more solemn, than Garrick's.

Edmund Kean, who began playing the role in 1814, portrayed the Romantic Hamlet of Goethe and Coleridge (see pp. 20–1): he was brooding rather than active (like Garrick) and self-involved rather than grand (like Kemble). But he also conveyed Hamlet's potential for impetuosity and cruelty: one of his signature contributions was to crawl, during the 'Mousetrap' play, towards Claudius to observe and frighten him.

In 1820 Kean, following a tradition of English actors touring the United States, performed major Shakespearean roles – including Hamlet – at the 'best playhouses in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston'.¹ At the same time, another English actor, Junius Brutus Booth, had arrived in the United States – unlike Kean, to stay. Booth performed in venues as far west as San Francisco, but he is better known for having established a family theatrical dynasty: his three sons Junius Brutus, Jr; Edwin Thomas; and John Wilkes (now known not for his acting but for his assassination of President Abraham Lincoln).

Edwin Booth famously played Hamlet from 1853 to 1891, and he was celebrated for his tender approach to the role. His first biographer, the drama critic William Winter, praised him for 'the spiritualised intellect, the masculine strength, [and] the feminine softness' he demonstrated in the role.² On the other side of the Atlantic, Henry Irving demonstrated some of this tenderness and vulnerability, coupled with a nervous, introspective intensity, in performances that spanned the years 1871 to 1902.

Booth and Irving bring us to the close of the nineteenth century and thus to *fin-de-siècle* rethinkings of *Hamlet* for the stage. These reconsiderations went in tandem with changes in theatrical practice, changes that become even more conspicuous in the

¹ Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 41. The first known performance of *Hamlet* in America was in Philadelphia in 1759.

² Quoted in *Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now*, ed. James Shapiro (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2013), 232.

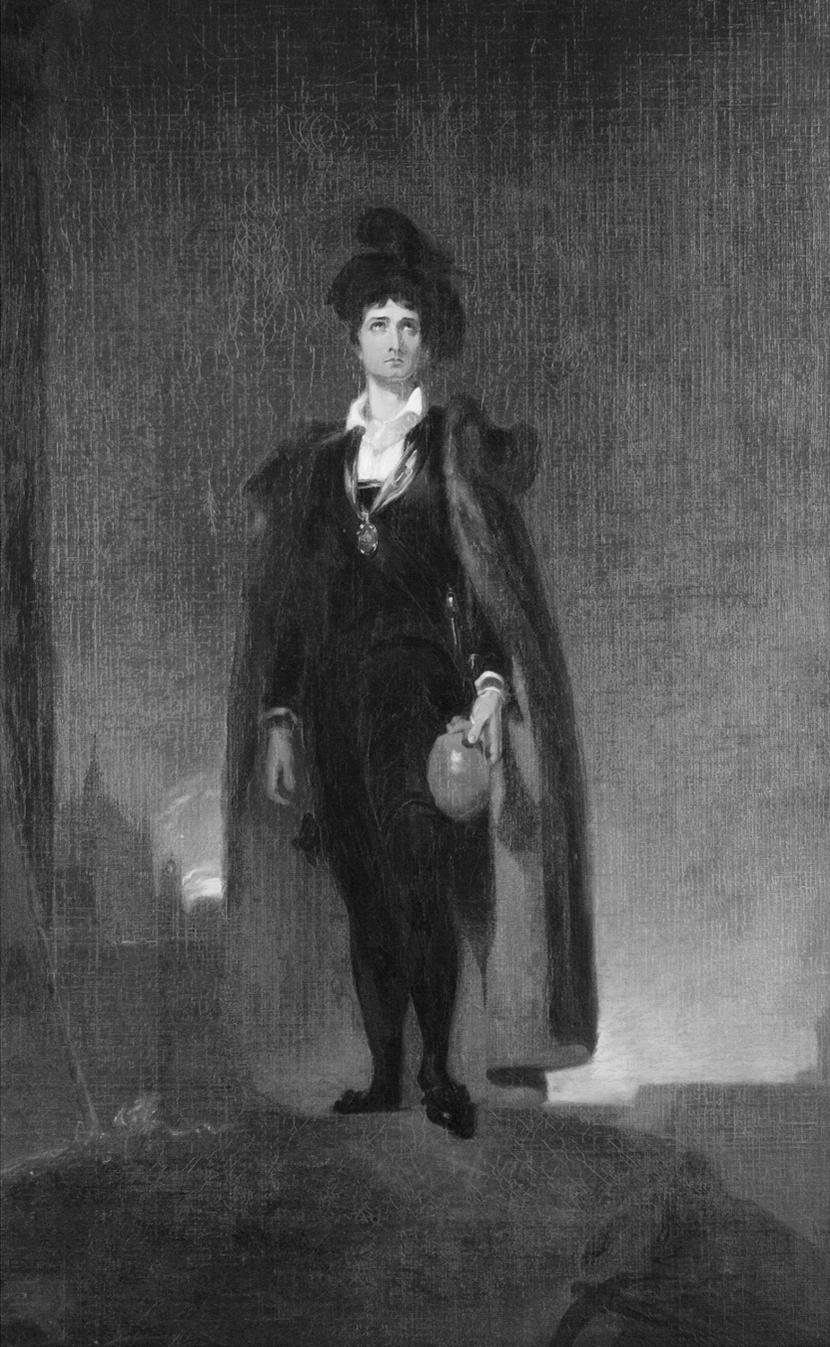


Figure 2 John Philip Kemble as Hamlet, after Sir Thomas Lawrence, early 1880s (Folger Shakespeare Library)



Figure 3 Edwin Booth as Hamlet *circa* 1870 (Library of Congress / Corbis / VCG via Getty Images)

twentieth century. Victorian productions of Shakespeare were highly pictorial, with expensive, elaborate set designs and a proscenium arch that separated audience from actor. Practitioners such as William Poel wanted to dispense with these customs in order to recover the original practices of Elizabethan performance, with its limited stage trappings and fast pace. In 1881, Poel oversaw an amateur performance of Q1 *Hamlet* on a bare platform stage in London; this initiated an interest in the staging of the first



Figure 4 Ellen Terry as Ophelia and Henry Irving as Hamlet (Time Life Pictures / Mansell / The LIFE Picture Collection / Getty Images)



Figure 5 'Go on, I'll follow thee' (1.4.86). Johnston Forbes-Robertson as Hamlet in a 1913 film (Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection)

quarto that continues today. In 1897, Johnston Forbes-Robertson tried to get closer to the original *Hamlet* by restoring Fortinbras to the play's conclusion. And in 1899–1900, at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, F. R. Benson produced a complete *Hamlet* – the whole play as it appears in standard editions (Q2 combined with F). It took six hours to play.

THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

1900–1965

The kind of oversight and vision observed in Poel and his colleagues became increasingly important, and increasingly commonplace, in the twentieth-century theatre. The period is known for the rise of the director and designer, and with them an emphasis on unified stagings in which all the elements of performance contributed to a deliberate concept or interpretation of the play. The collaboration between Gordon Craig and Konstantin Stanislavski for the Moscow Art Theatre in 1912, with Vasili Kachalov as the prince, represented a striking international effort, joining Craig's commitment to stylization and symbolism with Stanislavski's investment in



Figure 6 John Gielgud as Hamlet, 1934, New Theatre (Hulton Archive / Getty Images).

psychological realism. The famous production used abstract, movable screens and lighting to delineate stage space, while Kachalov played Hamlet as an innocent prince who could still offer a serious challenge to Claudius.

Productions of *Hamlet* in the 1920s responded to the social and political quandaries that followed the trauma of the First World War. In the Birmingham Repertory's modern-dress performance of 1925, Colin Keith-Johnston portrayed the prince as a rebellious but regular, contemporary young man. This was a political as well as an aesthetic choice; the break with tradition, Anthony Dawson suggests, made Hamlet 'recognizably ordinary', helping to 'move his dilemmas and crises into the arena of the audience's actual concerns, reducing his remoteness'.¹ (John Barrymore's aristocratic prince, also from the 1920s, thus served as a ballast to Keith-Johnston's.) Important performances of the 1930s (and into the early 1940s) include John Gielgud's acclaimed

¹ Dawson, *Shakespeare in Performance: 'Hamlet'*, 89.



Figure 7 Laurence Olivier as Hamlet and Eileen Herlie as Gertrude, 1948 (ITV/Shutterstock)

portrayal of Hamlet as both elegant hero and bitter satirist, and Laurence Olivier's performance, directed by Tyrone Guthrie, of Hamlet as an athletic, energetic prince psychologically fractured by Oedipal desire.

In the 1940s actors, directors, and audiences found in the crises of *Hamlet* ways of approaching the horrors of the Second World War. In 1944, the actor and director Maurice Evans, who had directed the play in London and New York in the 1930s,

developed a *G.I. Hamlet*, to be performed by and for American soldiers in the Pacific theatre. The pared-down script presented a heroic, action-oriented Hamlet who could serve as both mirror and model for young men ‘on the eve of going into battle or . . . staggering with fatigue and confusion after their first encounter with the enemy’.¹ In contrast, a de-politicized *Hamlet*, given a Victorian setting in a 1948 performance at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon under the direction of Michael Benthall, was meant to celebrate English cultural achievement even as the country’s imperial power was in obvious decline. The same year saw the release of the influential film version of the play, directed by and starring Olivier. The version hewed closely to the Freudian sensibilities of the 1937 performance, intensifying them with camera-work, and setting 3.4 in Gertrude’s bedroom.

1965 to the Present

The counter-cultures of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s saw the play and the prince as a standard for – and against – a different set of values. Directors and actors saw *Hamlet* as especially apt for channelling Vietnam-era disillusionment with both heroic ideals and cynicism about social and economic conditions on both sides of the Atlantic. In their deliberately polemical aesthetic engagements, these productions were influenced by the work of prominent twentieth-century theatre theorists and practitioners: Stanislavski, as well as Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, and Jan Kott. The visions of these theorists are radically different (from realist to expressionist to Marxist) but they all attest to the place of the stage as a shaping historical and cultural force. Peter Hall’s 1965 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC; founded in 1961) at its home base in Stratford-upon-Avon spoke to the times, featuring the 24-year-old David Warner as an alienated, unprincely Hamlet – an ‘angry young man’ – whose absurdist humour could do little to oppose the power structure at Elsinore. Joseph Papp directed the play in 1968 for the Public Playhouse in New York City; his Hamlet, played by Martin Sheen as nearly mad, shook hands with and sold trinkets to the audience. (Papp toured another, shorter *Hamlet*, with a bi-racial cast, in city parks that summer.) Richard Eyre’s 1980 production at the Royal Court in London was set in a Renaissance palace whose architecture emphasized the play’s concern with the power of state surveillance. But its most spectacular innovation was to make the broken-hearted Hamlet, played by Jonathan Pryce, be literally possessed by the ghost of his father. In 1.5, the prince himself, rather than a paternal spirit on stage, choked out the Ghost’s lines. Mark Rylance, in a 1989 production for the RSC, portrayed Hamlet as truly mad, particularly when he delivered ‘to be or not be’ in soiled pyjamas and then accosted Ophelia during the nunnery scene. The set, with off-kilter window and walls, was meant to simulate the atmosphere of a mental institution.

Appropriately, given the *fin-de-siècle* origins of the script, the turn of the twenty-first century was characterized by a range of experiments on both film and stage.

¹ Maurice Evans’ *G.I. Production of Hamlet by William Shakespeare* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1947), 17.



Figure 8 Mark Rylance as Hamlet and Peter Wright as Claudius at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1989 (© John Bunting / ArenaPAL)

In 1996, Kenneth Branagh, who had played Hamlet on stage in 1992 (for the fourth time), translated the performance into a film version, which he also directed. Uncut and running over four hours, the film made sumptuous use of the resources of the medium, with impressive wide-angle shots that convey the size and grandeur of the great hall and throne that Hamlet comes to understand have been stolen from him. Branagh's Hamlet was multi-faceted, alert, and energized as well as self-lacerating; his



Figure 9 Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet, 1996 (Castle Rock Entertainment / Kobal / Shutterstock)

delivery of ‘to be or not to be’ in front of a spread of mirrored walls turned introspection into highly self-conscious performance.

Michael Almereyda’s far shorter, modernized film version, *Hamlet 2000*, substituted the skyscrapers and streets of Manhattan – the symbol of the heights and depths of international capitalism – for Elsinore, ‘using corrupted wealth as a surrogate for stained royalty’.¹ Ethan Hawke’s Hamlet performed ‘to be or not to be’ in a Blockbuster video store in the ‘Action’ aisle, and Julia Stiles, as Ophelia, was ‘wired’ in order to record and transmit her conversation with Hamlet in the nunnery scene.

Stage versions from this period offer an embarrassment of riches, illuminating the play’s psychological, political, and theatrical possibilities (or, perhaps more accurately, using the play to illuminate period insights about society, politics, and theatre). Simon Russell Beale’s notably plump Hamlet, at London’s National Theatre in 2000, was praised as a callback to the sensitive, gentle, wounded prince of Irving and Booth. The same year, renowned director Peter Brook, who at age 75 had already produced both the play and his own adaptation of the play, *Qui Est Là* (see below), relied on a multicultural cast of just eight (with Adrian Lester in the lead role) to perform first in Paris and then on tour in the United States and London. The heavily cut, minimalist version emphasized the play’s theatricality as well as Hamlet’s inquisitiveness and

¹ *New York Times*, 12 May 2000.



Figure 10 David Tennant as Hamlet and Patrick Stewart as Claudius in the 2008 Royal Shakespeare Company production directed by Gregory Doran (© Robbie Jack / Corbis / Getty Images)

playfulness: in the graveyard scene, Lester ‘treated the swivelling skull as if it were a ventriloquist’s dummy’.¹ The RSC’s 2008 high-profile, modern-dress production featured David Tennant, best known at the time for playing the Time Lord in the popular BBC television show *Dr Who*. Tennant’s smooth, elegant Hamlet crumpled to

¹ *The Guardian*, 22 August 2000.

the floor while considering ‘to be or not to be’, but he was ultimately ‘more than up to his task, a man whose behavior . . . marked him as the most exemplary member of a brilliant and cunning court circle’.¹

Jude Law was a similar ‘celebrity’ Hamlet the following year at the Donmar Warehouse (and was praised for his moving presentation of ‘moody solitude and moral disgust’ and his commitment to a death-wish).² In 2015, Lyndsey Turner directed Benedict Cumberbatch as an alternately exuberant and deeply thoughtful – though never paralysed – prince. The production opened not on the ramparts but with Hamlet, alone, looking through a family picture album; for the scene with the Players, he cheerfully wore the costume of a toy soldier and manned a toy castle.

The RSC’s 2017 production, with a set-design of oil-cloths painted with brightly coloured graffiti, featured a predominantly black cast; the young Paapa Essiedu played Hamlet as ‘young, quick-witted, and . . . sportive’.



Figure 11 Benedict Cumberbatch as Hamlet at the Barbican, London, 2015 (© Johann Persson / ArenaPAL)

¹ *Shakespeare Bulletin* 26.4 (2008), 119.

² *The Guardian*, 3 June 2009.



Figure 12 Paapa Essiedu as Hamlet at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2016 (courtesy of the Royal Shakespeare Company)

The prize for most ambitious undertaking may belong to members of Shakespeare's Globe who, under the direction of Dominic Dromgoole, took the play on a worldwide journey from 2014 to 2016, with final performances in London at the Globe to coincide with the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

Dromgoole's vision was to visit every country on the planet with a spare company (sixteen actors and technicians) and a lean, original-practices version meant to honour both the plot and the situation of the characters. (When conditions did not allow entry, as with Syria, the company performed in refugee camps; they were unable to go to North Korea.) The tour represents a triumph of planning and perseverance fed by a deep love for the play and a sense of its mystery.¹

AROUND THE GLOBE

Hamlet, of course, is shaped by fictive as well as real travelling performers. Hamlet's one delight is the visit of the touring 'tragedians of the city', and Shakespeare's knowledge of Elsinore and the castle, scholars believe, comes from information he could have gleaned from fellow players, including Will Kemp, who played there in the 1580s with Leicester's Men.² The journal of William Keeling, captain of the East India Company's *Red Dragon*, records a performance by English sailors off the coast of Sierra Leone as early as 1607.³ And English players had *Hamlet* in their repertory for performance on the continent by 1626, when it was performed in Dresden.⁴ But *Hamlet*'s role as an object of intercultural exchange quickly developed beyond these instances of early touring. Over time, the play has become a part of national and regional performance traditions, engaging actors' and audiences' most pressing moral and political convictions.

This is especially true in Germany; *Hamlet* has long occupied a significant place in the German cultural landscape. It was staged first by touring English players, followed by a considerably shortened – to the point of burlesque – German prose version of the play, *Der Bestrafte Brudermord oder Prinz Hamlet aus Dannemark* (commonly translated as *Fratricide Punished*).⁵ Performed by a German company who toured with it between 1660 and 1690, *Der Berstrafte* follows roughly the plot of Shakespeare's work but with curious differences of its own invention: its Ophelia, for instance, shows her madness after her father's death by chasing another courtier. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Shakespeare was seen by Germans as one of their national poets; *Hamlet* in particular 'occupied a central position in German national discourse'.⁶ It was thus available for different kinds of theatrical and political uses, as Wilhelm Hortmann so thoroughly demonstrates in *Shakespeare on the German Stage*. A provocative instance of political experimentation was Leopold Jessner's 1926 Berlin production which, in the wake of the First World War, aimed to present

¹ Dominic Dromgoole, *Hamlet Globe to Globe: Two Years, 190,000 Miles, 197 Countries, One Play* (New York: Grove Press, 2017).

² See Dollerup, *Denmark*, 177–80.

³ Though see Bernice Kliman, who believes the letter is a forgery: 'At Sea About *Hamlet* at Sea: A Detective Story', *SQ* 62.2 (2011), 180–204.

⁴ See E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), II: 286; Jerzy Limon, *Gentlemen of a Company: English Players in Central and Eastern Europe, c. 1590 – c. 1660* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 22.

⁵ Bullough prints the text, VII: 128–58. It was first published in its entirety in 1781.

⁶ Peter W. Marx, 'Challenging the Ghosts: Leopold Jessner's *Hamlet*', *Theatre Research International* 30.1 (2005), 78.



Figure 13 The Mousetrap scene, Berlin, 1926, directed by Leopold Jessner (courtesy of Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne)

what Jessner considered the ‘essence’ of the play, the rottenness of Denmark (and not the melancholy of the prince).¹ All aspects of the production’s design were meant to reinforce this vision and its potential to critique both the pre-war imperial and the post-war Weimar regimes. It culminated in the set for the Mousetrap scene, which included elaborate boxes for Claudius and Gertrude that mirrored the real interior of the Staatstheater.

During the Third Reich, Hamlet was portrayed as the ‘fair-haired Saxon son of a brave Nordic prince’.² After the Second World War, such treatment was countered, in both West and East Germany, from a variety of angles. Some performances were characterized by a ‘calculated aestheticism’, with stage designs, for instance, modelled on Renaissance painting. Others challenged the play’s humanist themes as well as its canonical status in German culture – one, for instance, was set in a circus tent.³ Thomas Ostermeier’s 2008 Berlin production offers a striking 21st-century treatment of such a challenge, offering a darkly comic version, bordering at times on the anarchic. The performance opened with ‘to be or not to be’ announced over a loudspeaker, as a video of Hamlet’s head was projected onto a screen hung in the middle of the stage.

¹ Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage*, 58–9.

² Bevington, *Murder Most Foul*, 150.

³ Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage*, 300; Maik Hamburger, ‘Shakespeare on the Stages of the German Democratic Republic’, in Hortmann, 410–13.



Figure 14 Sebastian Schwarz as Horatio/Gueldenstern, Lars Eidinger as Hamlet, and Robert Beyer as Polonius/Osrik in the 2008 Schaubuehne Berlin production directed by Thomas Ostermeier (Lieberenz / Ullstein Bild / Getty Images)

(Hamlet would go on to videotape a number of later scenes, adding fresh dimensions to the play's concerns with surveillance and introspection.) The set was constructed around a pit of soil-turned-to-mud, which served as a kind of omnipresent graveyard and into which Hamlet flopped during the second scene. A rolling platform provided space above the mud, where the banquet and other court scenes unfolded. A cast of only six actors made the doubling of roles especially intense; perhaps most remarkable, the same actor played both Gertrude (with a blond wig and sunglasses) and Ophelia, turning the two women into one another on stage in the same way Hamlet does in his mind and speech. Lars Eidinger, who played the prince in a fat suit and attempted to rape Ophelia during the nunnery scene, was deliberately un-classical, a 'nasty Hamlet whose energy and aggression [were] almost perversely fascinating'.¹

Russia has had a similarly extensive engagement with the play: 'Not only has *Hamlet* been the most popular and influential of Shakespeare's plays in Russia; its hero, more than any other literary figure, has captured the imagination of the Russian people.'² The play was performed in St Petersburg as early as 1750. The collaboration between Gordon Craig and Konstantin Stanislavski for the Moscow Art Theatre in 1912 was,

¹ John Rouse, 'Jurgen Gosch's *The Seagull* and Thomas Ostermeier's *Hamlet* in Berlin, Dec. 2008', *Western European Theatre 2* (2009), 11.

² Eleanor Rowe, *Hamlet: A Window on Russia* (New York University Press, 1976), viii.



Figure 15 Innokenti Smoktunovsky as Hamlet in the 1964 film *Hamlet*, directed by Grigori Kozintsev (Sovfoto / Universal Images Group / Getty Images)

as we observed above, a signature moment in the history of the play's performance, announcing its affiliation with trends in both theatrical abstraction and psychological realism. In 1954, Grigori Kozintsev directed a production in Leningrad (now St Petersburg again) using a translation by the novelist Boris Pasternak; his film version of 1964 advanced his vision of a Hamlet beset by external sources and for whom thinking itself was an act of political resistance.¹

At the beginning of the film, Hamlet, played by Innokenti Smoktunovsky, races on horseback up rocky sea-side slopes to Elsinore; after he greets his mother, the iron gates of the castle are shut like a prison. The opulent but uninviting interior teems with people; Hamlet moves among the crowds silently while his 'How weary' soliloquy is delivered as a voice-over. The Ghost appears on the ramparts in armour, huge, majestic, and terrifying. He towers over Hamlet, but his voice is a poignant whisper, even when he intones 'O horrible, horrible'. Hamlet never explicitly adopts an 'antic disposition', which shifts the play's interpretive focus away from the protagonist's psychic conflict and towards his political clash with the new guardians of power in Elsinore.

¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

Kozintsev's political *Hamlet* was widely influential across the globe, including in the post-colonial Arab world.¹ As Margaret Litvin has discussed in her important book, *Hamlet's Arab Journey*, in the second half of the twentieth century Arab artists and audiences found in *Hamlet* a crucial model for engaging with the challenges of political agency. The introspective but also anti-tyrannical Hamlet 'encapsulates a debate coeval with and largely constitutive of modern Arab identity: the problem of self-determination and authenticity'. Since the middle of the twentieth century, then, a wide range – a 'kaleidoscope' – of *Hamlets* has appeared on the Arab stage, presenting the play in ways that accommodated various political needs and aspirations. Mohamed Sobhi's production, first staged in 1971 and filmed in 1977, offered Hamlet as a 'visionary activist, a fighter for justice', whose goals were communal as well as personal.² The production starts where the script ends, with Hamlet's dead body borne in a funeral procession; we thus know the conclusion and can concentrate on the causal logic that brought it to pass. Hamlet displays fearlessness as well as shock and anger in his interview with the Ghost, and he demonstrates suspicion of, as well as cruelty towards, Ophelia in the nunnery scene, glancing towards stage doors and pillars looking for spies. A version of the 'to be or not to be' soliloquy, with Hamlet holding Yorick's skull, is moved to the end of the play, so that it seems to express not doubt so much as conviction.

Hamlet's extensive global reach makes a full survey impossible for any Introduction. But one additional regional tradition commands our attention here: performance in Helsingor, Denmark, at Kronborg Castle, the sixteenth-century fortress noted by English travellers and on which Shakespeare's Elsinore is based. The play was staged around the castle precincts for the first time in 1816, in a Danish translation, in honour of the 200th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. A century later it was performed by actors from Copenhagen, but this time on the castle's ramparts. The performers, in other words, knew that they could exploit the castle's imposing architecture in order to accentuate the play's sense of foreboding, danger, and mystery. International companies have continued to do this over the last century, using either the courtyard or the precincts to give the sense that Denmark really is a prison.³ As Ralph Berry suggests, at Kronborg the setting itself becomes 'a political fact of the first order. It radiates upon the play its own stage directions. The highlighted words in the text become living realities close to the actors' space . . . The play is made for the castle.'⁴

ADAPTATIONS

Part of the performance history of *Hamlet* is the history of *Hamlet* adaptation – that is, the reworking of elements of the play's characters or plots into fresh fictions. These new pieces diverge from, at the same time as they hark back to, their source, allowing authors

¹ Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 10, 77–9. See also her blog 'Arab Shakespeare': <http://arabshakespeare.blogspot.com>.

² Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey*, 36.

³ See Niels Bugge Hansen, 'Be As Ourselves in Denmark: *Hamlet* in Performance at Kronborg Castle, Elsinore', *Angles on the English Speaking World*, 10 (1997): 5–16.

⁴ Ralph Berry, 'Hamlet's Elsinore Revisited', *Contemporary Review*, 279.1631 (2001), 365.



Figure 16 *Al-Hamlet Summit* – Sulayman Al Bassam as Hamlet, Mariam Ali as Ophelia, Nicolas Daniel as Claudius, 2005, Kronborg Castle, Elsinore/Helsingør, Denmark; director: Sulayman Al Bassam (courtesy of SABAB Theatre)

and actors to channel the concerns – as well as to capitalize on the cultural authority – of the tragedy to speak to their own interests. The long trajectory of *Hamlet* adaptations could be said to reach back to *The Revenger's Tragedy*; it certainly includes Victorian burlesques such as *Hamlet Travestie* (1849), *A Thin Slice of Ham let!* (1863), and *Hamlet Revamped: A Travesty Without a Pun* (1879). In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it embraces an even wider range of revisions. They include Tom Stoppard's tour-de-force *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), a blend of Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett that both pays homage to and mocks the canonicity of the model play. They also include Charlotte Jones's *Humble Boy* (2001), as well as the multi-media experiments of Robert La Page's *Elsinore* (1995), Robert Wilson's *Hamlet: A Monologue*, and Peter Brook's *Qui Est Là*. Adaptation is not limited to the Anglo-American world. Heiner Muller's *Hamletmaschine* (1977), a radical reconceptualizing that sought to eliminate any vestiges of the heroic from the play, has proven especially influential. More recently, Sulayman Al Bassam's *Al-Hamlet Summit* uses the architecture of the play to create a dynamic, cross-cultural investigation of geopolitics and terrorism, 'show[ing] the inevitable consequences of an alliance between native Arab despotism and the economic machinations of the West'.¹ In it, Ophelia becomes perhaps the most radical and violent of all the characters.

¹ Graham Holderness, 'Introduction', in Sulayman Al Bassam, *Al-Hamlet Summit* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2006), 19.

Indeed, other adaptations have reframed the play entirely from Ophelia's perspective and with a sense of her potential for insight and action. These include Jean Betts's *Ophelia Thinks Harder* (1993), Kim Kwang-bo's *Ophelia: Sister Come to My Bed* (1995), and Ujin Sakuram's *Ophelia-Noh*, for the Koh Lo Sha company, which debuted at the Shakespeare Festival at Kronborg Castle in 2017.

WOMEN AS HAMLET

These latter, feminist adaptations serve as a reminder of the crucial performance choices demanded of Ophelia and Gertrude: choices about Gertrude's maternal relationship to Hamlet, her complicity with Claudius, her intentions when taking the poisoned cup at the play's end, and choices about Ophelia's collaboration with her father, her intimacy with Hamlet, her disintegration into madness. It is also worth emphasizing the presence of women directors of the play, from Buzz Goodbody, whose signature use of the small studio space of the RSC's *The Other Place* for her production of *Hamlet* was lauded in 1975, to Lyndsey Turner, who used the cavernous setting of the Barbican to great effect in 2015.

Of special interest is the tradition of women playing Hamlet. The gender of the prince perplexes even the prince, who rails at what he perceived to be his feminine – whorish – grief and inaction. From its inception, then, the character – alternately thoughtful and aggressive, meditative and energetic – has been a challenge to rigid gender assumptions and paradigms, a creature whose femininity may be part of his masculinity, or whose complicated impulses may defy categories entirely. Cross-casting, as Tony Howard explains in his indispensable account *Women as Hamlet*, intensifies these concerns:

Women who take the role pose recurrent questions. Is Hamlet a 'universal' figure whose dilemmas everyone shares, male or female? Is Hamlet a 'female' character whose words invite a woman's voice? What is the relation between Shakespeare's all-male theatre and the conventions that have succeeded it? How may the sexual and state politics of an English Renaissance play relate to the time and place of its reenactment?¹

The tradition begins with Charlotte Clarke, who played an 'explicitly oppositional and carnivalesque' prince in the first half of the eighteenth century, and it extends across centuries and countries as female actors responded to the appeal of the role. Sarah Siddons, who performed the role throughout Great Britain (though not in London) in the late eighteenth century was 'mold-breaking', according to Howard, in that she 'prioritiz[ed] an androgyny not of the eroticized body but of the mind'. By the mid-nineteenth century, female Hamlets were 'common' in the United States; Charlotte Cushman (who had already played Gertrude) was especially remarked for eliminating melodramatic effects and 'stress[ing] the painful intensity of the bond between mother and bereaved child'.²

¹ Howard, *Women as Hamlet*, 9.

² *Ibid.*, 36, 39, 48.



Figure 17 Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet in the 1900 film directed by Clément Maurice (Bettmann / Getty Images)

When the renowned French actor Sarah Bernhardt addressed the role at the turn of the twentieth century, there had been some fifty travesti performances in England and abroad (including France, Italy, Austria, and Germany).

But Bernhardt's vision for her Hamlet was the most encompassing: she produced and directed, as well as played the lead role in, the French production. And she did so not only with the belief that women are better suited for the role but also with the deliberate intent to challenge the 'Hamletism' of nineteenth-century Romantic



Figure 18 Angela Winkler as Hamlet and Evia Mattes as Gertrude at the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, 2000 (© Clive Barda / ArenaPAL)

princes, in favour of a ‘determined avenger whose roots were to be found in the Elizabethan theater’.¹ The production debuted in Paris and then toured England, including London and Stratford, exciting audiences with Bernhardt’s dignified and intellectual Hamlet, who was bold when meeting with the Ghost and tender when dealing with Ophelia in the nunnery scene. Her portrayal of Hamlet’s death, by falling back into Horatio’s arms, was ‘instantly famous’.² A century later, Angela Winkler was heralded for her performance in a German production; her Hamlet seemed designed for the new century, an ‘emotionally raw and unprotected’ prince whose child-likeness was tinged with a sense of the anarchic.

Winkler thus embodied Howard’s striking description of the travesti Hamlet, in which ‘the paradoxes and dissident intensities of Hamlet’s beliefs and language become sharper through the figure of an actress/prince whose very presence exposes artifice . . . The female Hamlet is a walking, speaking alienation effect’.³ Not unlike this strange and wonderful play itself.

¹ Gerda Taranow, *The Bernhardt Hamlet* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), xvii.

² Howard, *Women as Hamlet*, 108. ³ *Ibid.*, 5.