

Hamlet—Opening Notes

Hamlet: 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?

- “The Undiscovered Country”
- Commentary on theatre and literature (War of Theatres)—Power and limitations of poet; role of audience and actor
- Action/Inaction
- Skewed version of hero/intellectual (Faustus)
- Repressed love/ oedipal desires
- Education and Intellectualism
- Power and leadership—“needs of the few vs the needs of the many”
- Deeply psychological exploration of human mind
- Commentary on culture of Shakespeare’s day (and ours)—chivalry, manliness, sword fights, clothes, drama
- Revenge—popularity of Revenge Tragedies—“Spanish Tragedie”, and “Revenger’s Tragedy”
- Commentary on upcoming struggle over Elizabeth’s death and dynastic upheaval

T.S. Eliot—“Hamlet is certainly an artistic failure.”

S.T. Coleridge—“I have a smack of Hamlet.”

Sources:

- Thomas Kyd’s “Ur-Hamlet” (a very successful, but lost play from the late 1580’s). Or Shakespeare’s rough draft?
- Historia Danica (translated and printed in English in 1520—relates the story of Prince Amleth—name means “desperate in battle”—(deposed by uncle, madness, rape of Ophelia character, exchange of swords, burns down palace, boils Polonious character, Amleth survives)
- BelleForest’s “Histoires Tragiques” (French text that provided the source for Ur-Hamlet)—Gertrude is an adulteress; Hamlet marries an English Princess
- Bright’s “A Treatise of Melancholoy” (1586)

Production and Publishing:

- Probably written during early 1600—references to Earl of Essex
- Registered in 1602 intended to block unauthorized publication

- First Quarto (Bad Quarto) is pirated by disgruntled members of the company; seriously flawed

Ham. To be, or not to be, I there's the point, [1710]
 To Die, to sleepe, is that all? I all:
 No, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes,
 For in that dreame of death, when wee awake, [1720]
 And borne before an euerlasting Iudge,
 From whence no passenger euer retur'nd,
 The vndiscovered country, at whose sight
 The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd.
 But for this, the ioyfull hope of this,
 Whol'd beare the scornes and flattery of the world,
 Scorned by the right rich, the rich cursed of the poore?
 The widow being oppressed, the orphan wrong'd,
 The taste of hunger, or a tirants raigne,
 And thousand more calamities besides,
 To grunt and sweate vnder this weary life,
 When that he may his full *Quietus* make,
 With a bare bodkin, who would this indure, [1730]
 But for a hope of something after death?
 Which pusles the braine, and doth confound the sence,
 Which makes vs rather beare those euilles we haue,
 Than flie to others that we know not of.
 I that, O this conscience makes cowardes of vs all,
 Lady in thy orizons, be all my sinnes remembred.

- Second Quarto of 1604 was Shakespeare's response—plagued with error.
- 1623 First Folio is perhaps the most definitive—200 lines missing from 2nd Quarto

Shakespeare's Language:

- Hamlet is a play of nearly 4,000 lines (one of Shakespeare's longest); uncut, it would take 4 hours to perform; an autumn production beginning at 2:00 would not finish before sunset. Cuts would need to be made.
- Long soliloquies
- Shakespeare used and invented more new words than in any previous (or post) works. He introduced 600 new words in Hamlet that he had never used before. 2/3's he would never use again. (Contrast that with Lear 350, Julius Caesar 70); the play must have sounded very new for its audience.
- 170 words and phrases Shakespeare coined.

- Hendiadys—a verbal technique of “one by means of two.” (law and order; house and home; sound and fury). Shakespeare had not used the technique much before 1599. Both Henry V and As You Like It employ the technique often. It will almost become a compulsion with Shakespeare at this point in his career. 66 hendiadys in Hamlet, more than any other play (Othello is second with 28). Creates an almost mental vertigo:

“abstract and brief chronicles of the time”

“angels and ministers of grace defend us”

“book and volume of my brain”

- Shakespeare would have played the role of the ghost (“Remember me”) (“Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat/ In this distracted globe. Remember thee!”)
- Possible double roles of Ophelia and Gravedigger



