READING 19.10

from Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, Scene XIV (1604)

Ah, Faustus,
Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,
And then thou must be damn'd perpetually!
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of Heaven,
That time may cease, and midnight never come;
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again and make
Perpetual day; or let this hour be but
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,
That Faustus may repent and save his soul! . . .
O God!
If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,
Yet for Christ's sake whose blood hath ransom'd me,
Impose some end to my incessant pain;
Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years—
A hundred thousand, and—at last—be sav'd!
O, no end is limited to damned souls!

With this last thought, knowing that he is forever condemned to hell, Faustus dies and falls into "ugly hell."

The play originally consisted of 14 scenes, alternating between Faustus's serious scenes and comic interludes involving an array of "low" or common characters that serve to undercut the overreaching ambitions of Faustus himself. This blending of tragic and comic modes would become a standard feature of the Elizabethan stage. But it is Faustus's unquenchable thirst for the unattainable that defines Marlowe's tragic hero and that constitutes the type of hero that is his most important gift to the theater.

William Shakespeare: "The play's the thing!"

The Rose Theatre hosted the first of Shakespeare's plays known to have been staged in London: *Henry VI, Part I*, and *Titus Andronicus*, both performed in 1592. We actually know almost nothing about Shakespeare's preparation to be a playwright. When he was in his twenties, during the 1580s, he lived in almost total obscurity. But beginning in about 1590, two years before his first two plays were staged, he was active in the London theater. Shakespeare's company was Burbage's newly renamed Lord Chamberlain's players at the Globe, and he earned 10 percent of its profits. He wrote his plays with specific actors in the company in mind and played only minor roles himself. Richard Burbage was the leading man, playing the title role in Shakespeare's major tragedies *Richard II*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. Though many of Shakespeare's characters sing—and music plays an important role in the plays—none of the characters played by Burbage ever sing a note, because Burbage himself was tone-deaf.

While there were other great playwrights in the Elizabethan era—Christopher Marlowe, as we have already noted, and Thomas Kyd (1558–1594) chief among

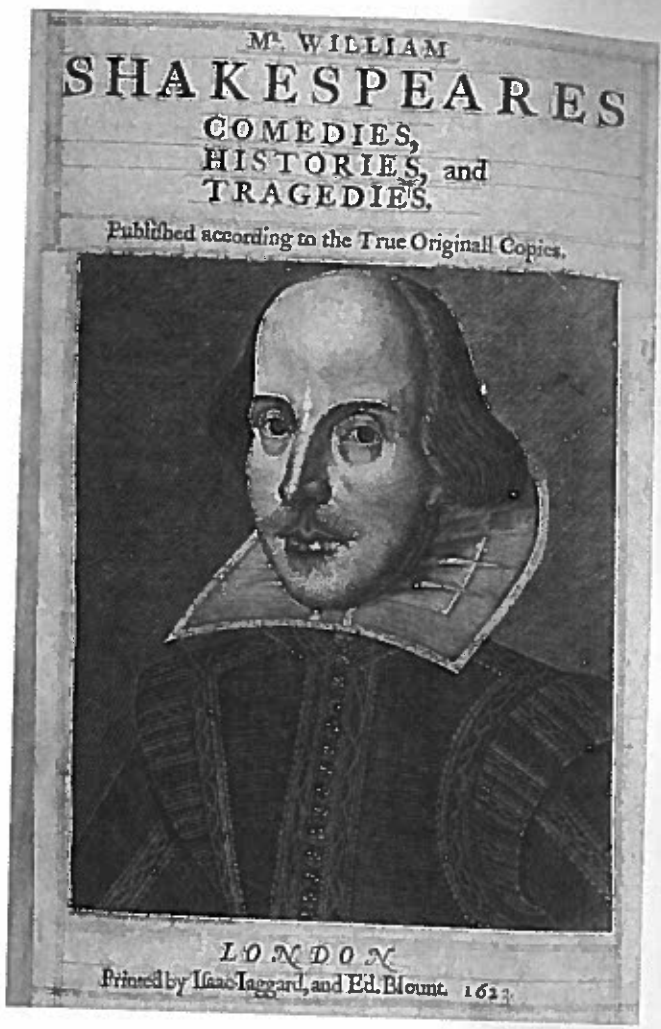
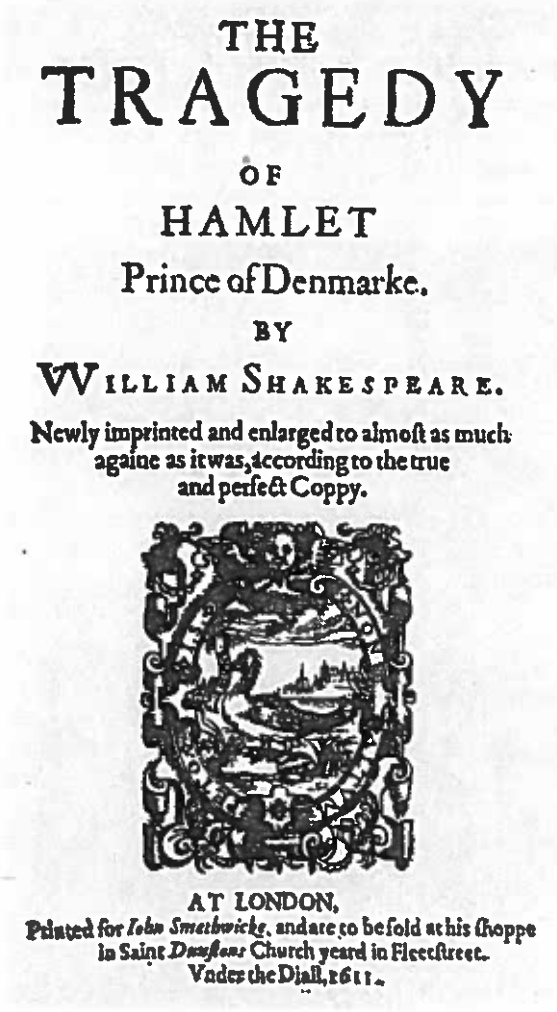


Fig. 19.11 Martin Droeshout, *William Shakespeare*, frontispiece of the first folio edition of his works, published in London, 1623. British Library, London. The first edition of the collected plays of Shakespeare was prepared by John Heminges and Henry Condell, both fellow actors at the Globe.

them—Shakespeare even in his own time was the acknowledged master of the medium. He wrote 37 plays: great cycles narrating English history; romantic comedies that deal with popular themes such as mistaken identity, the battle of the sexes, lovers' errors in judgment, and so on; romances that treat serious themes but in unrealistic, almost magical settings; and 11 tragedies. Fellow actors prepared the first edition of his collected plays and published them in 1623, after his death (Fig. 19.11).

Hamlet (Fig. 19.12), one of the tragedies, was perhaps his greatest achievement. It is a **revenge play**, constructed around a murder that must be avenged by the victim's relative, usually at the request of the murdered person's ghost. An Elizabethan audience would have recognized the plot as formulaic, but nothing about the play is standard fare. Hamlet himself, the Danish prince who must avenge the murder of his royal father, is one of the most complex and



THE
TRAGEDY
OF
HAMLET
Prince of Denmarke.
BY
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.
Newly imprinted and enlarged to almoſt as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppy.

AT LONDON,
Printed for *Iohn Smethwicke*, and are to be ſold at his ſhoppe in Saint *Dunſtons* Church yeard in Fleetſtreet. Vnder the Diall, 1611.

Fig. 19.12 *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, title page of the third quarto edition of the play, published in London, 1611. Courtesy of the Library of Congress. Hamlet was first performed in July 1602. Quarto editions are relatively inexpensive publications containing the text of a single play, as opposed to the more expensive and much larger First Folio of 1623 (see Fig. 19.11).

ambiguous personalities in the history of the theater. Early in the play, his father's ghost reveals to Hamlet that his uncle, Claudius, murdered his father to replace him as king and as husband to Hamlet's mother. The ghost orders Hamlet to avenge his murder, setting the play in motion. Hamlet alternately behaves like a raving madman and an intellectual of the most refined sensibility, at once deeply perceptive and blind to the most obvious truths. Even in the company of friends, he is alone with himself, an intensely self-reflective soul tormented by the very act of self-reflection.

Consider Hamlet's famous soliloquy at the end of Act II. A band of traveling actors has just performed for him some lines concerning the death of King Priam [PRY-am] of Troy and the grief borne by his wife, Hecuba [HEK-yoo-buh]. Hamlet marvels at the players' ability to so emotionally identify with their roles (Reading 9.11a):

READING 19.11a

from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II (1623)

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? . . .

The players are moved by their fiction, while he, Hamlet, burdened by the responsibility of avenging his father but unable to act, seems not moved at all:

Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled[1] rascal, peak[2]
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of[3] my cause
And can say nothing—no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn'd defeat was made. . . .

But even as Hamlet damns himself for procrastinating, he devises a plan of action to "catch the conscience of the king"—he will have a play performed before his uncle the king:

. . . 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 he but blench,
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil: and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me: I'll have grounds
More relative than this: the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

[1]**muddy-mettled:** dull-spirited
[2]**peak:** mope
[3]**unpregnant:** not quickened to action

This is Shakespeare at his most dramatic. Written almost entirely in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter)—a form that Marlowe first introduced in his tragedies and that became known as "Marlowe's mighty line"—the soliloquy is alternately fast or slow, smooth or rough, the rhythm changing at almost every line with Hamlet's emotional twists and turns. By the time Hamlet finishes this

soliloquy, with a rhymed couplet to round off the passage, Shakespeare has himself captured the conscience of his audience. Is it not a miracle, we ask ourselves, that this actor playing Hamlet "in a fiction, in a dream of passion, / Could force his soul so to his own conceit" that we are moved to complete identification with his plight?

In the next act, Shakespeare furthers the audience's identification with his play. In Scene 1, Hamlet rejects the love of Ophelia. This is the occasion of what may be his most famous soliloquy, the "To be or not to be" speech, which he delivers as Ophelia sits nearby, "pretending to read a book." The question that the speech raises is timeless. Is Hamlet playacting, pretending to be so tormented in order to convince Ophelia of his madness, or does he not know that Ophelia is present, and is thus sincere in what he says? Such ambiguity goes to the very heart of our understanding the play (Reading 19.11b):

READING 19.11b

from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I (1623)

HAMLET 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 wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub, 72
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, 74
Must give us pause. There's the respect 75
That makes calamity of so long life. 76
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, 78
The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay, 79
The insolence of office, and the spurns 80
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make 82
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear, 83
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn 86
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution 91
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, 92
And enterprises of great pitch and moment 93
With this regard their currents turn awry, 94
And lose the name of action.—Soft you now,
The fair Ophelia. Nymph, in thy orisons 96
Be all my sins rememb'red.

72 **rub** (Literally, an obstacle in the game of bowls.) 74 **shuffled** sloughed, cast. **coil** turmoil **respect** consideration 76 **of . . . life** so long-lived 78 **contumely** insolent abuse 79 **despis'd** rejected 80 **office** officialdom. **spurns** insults 82 **quietus** acquittance; here, death 83 **bodkin** dagger. **fardels** burdens 86 **bourn** boundary

91 **native hue** natural color, complexion 92 **cast** shade of color 93 **pitch** height (as of a falcon's flight). **moment** importance 94 **regard** respect, consideration. **currents** courses 96 **orisons** prayers

However, the audience understands that Hamlet's feigned madness—believed by all the characters in the play—is potentially more destructive than productive. In Scene 2, the players perform what has become known as "the play within the play." As Hamlet planned in the soliloquy at the end of Act II, he means the play to move his uncle to such identification with the scene that he will reveal his own involvement in the murder of Hamlet's father. But the audience members recognize that they too must identify with the play they are watching. This is, after all, as Hamlet says at the beginning of the scene, "the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature. . . ." The audience members understand, therefore, that they are looking at a reflection of themselves.

In all his contradiction and ambiguity, Hamlet is the most desired role and the most often performed character in the history of the English stage, because he lays himself so bare before us, like some open wound that refuses to heal. He demands our understanding, even as he resists it. In fact, Hamlet represents a new idea of character—no longer a unified and coherent being, but rather a conflicted and driven personality, as mysterious to itself as to others, and as unpredictable as its very dreams. Hamlet is, in this sense, the first modern person. He inaugurates a type who will become in future centuries increasingly recognizable as a version of ourselves.

Above all, Hamlet is an individual. He represents the logical outcome of the English taste for portraiture, with its humanist emphasis on individualism. But the questions he poses in his soliloquies reveal a first-person "I" new to the Western tradition in 1600, but totally recognizable to us today. Just as Montaigne (see Chapter 17), Shakespeare's contemporary, became increasingly convinced that he could never wholly know himself, creating for himself the motto "*Que sais-je?*" [KUH sezh] ("What do I know?"), Shakespeare's Hamlet recognizes that knowing anything fully and truly is at best difficult, and that knowing one's self is even more so. You can only take stabs at it—*essais* [es-SAY], as Montaigne called them. From 1600 onward, the human personality increasingly

becomes the obsessive object of human study. In Shakespeare's Hamlet and Montaigne's first-person "I," Western culture inaugurates its tradition of self-examination and self-absorption.

THE ENGLISH IN VIRGINIA

In one of his last plays, *The Tempest*, first performed in November 1611, Shakespeare created a work that many scholars find tempting to read as a parable of the colonial exploitation of the Americas. His chief protagonist, Prospero, once Duke of Milan, has been stranded on a remote island for twelve years with his daughter Miranda, the two having been left to die on a raft at sea by Prospero's jealous brother. Over the years, Prospero has assumed control of the island and its spirits and nymphs, including Ariel, the chief agent of Prospero's considerable magical powers, whom he has promised to one day free, and Caliban, his servant, described as a monster, a "thing of darkness . . . as disproportion'd in his manners / As in his shape." Caliban rankles at his servitude. Told that he should be grateful for having learned language, he replies:

> You taught me language; and my profit on't
> Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you
> For learning me your language!

It is easy enough, then, to see Caliban as a figure for the Native American (it seems likely that Shakespeare was reading a new English translation of Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" [see Reading 17.7] as he wrote the play), and Prospero as the embodiment of colonial overseer.

Whether Shakespeare intended this reading—or instead was interested only in exploring the faces of political power in more general terms—we can be certain that he was of England's colonial aspirations. Faced with the prospect of an ever more powerful and increasingly wealthy Hispanic Catholic presence in the Americas, England sought to establish its own colonial foothold in the New World as well. In 1584, Sir Walter Raleigh (1552–1618) secured a charter from Queen Elizabeth giving him the right "to discover, search, find and view such remote heathen and barbarous lands, countries and territories, not actually possessed of any Christian Prince, nor inhabited by Christian people as to him, his heirs and assigns, to every or any of them shall seem good, and the same to have hold and occupy and enjoy, to him his heirs and assigns forever." America, north of Florida at least, was Raleigh's for the taking.

The Roanoke Colonies

An expedition led by two of Raleigh's lieutenants determined that the best place to establish such a colony was the Outer Banks of present-day North Carolina. From there, they believed, it would be possible to raid Spanish settlements to the south, as well as explore the as yet uncharted territories inland. To those ends, Raleigh dispatched an expedition of 108 men in the spring of 1585 composed almost entirely of soldiers who had fought to establish English rule in Ireland. In June, seven vessels led by Sir Richard Greenville landed on an island they called Roanoke, after the word for "money" in the language of the Algonquin peoples whom they found living in the larger region, which they named Virginia, after Queen Elizabeth, the "Virgin Queen."

The first expedition was short-lived. For one, Greenville's supply ship was grounded on a shoal off the Outer Banks, and almost all the company's supplies were lost. Greenville returned to England in order to resupply the colony. In his absence, Algonquian Indians did at first come to their aid, but relations quickly deteriorated and within a year, the desperate settlers sailed home on board a ship commanded by Sir Francis Drake (1540–1596), who stopped at Roanoke on his way home from the Caribbean on a mission, also financed by Raleigh, to capture Spanish treasure ships

Undaunted, Raleigh organized a second expedition, this one to be headed by a member of the original 1585 expedition, John White (ca. 1540–ca. 1593). White had returned from the 1585 expedition with watercolors that, in addition to recording the local flora and fauna of the region, chronicled the customs of the local Algonquian peoples as carefully as possible. In 1590, Theodore de Bry (1528–1598), a Flemish engraver particularly dedicated to publishing accounts of the New World, issued A *briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia*, an account of the 1585 Roanoke expedition written by White's friend, the scientist Thomas Hariot (1560–1621). It was originally written in Latin, as a scientific text, and translated into English by Richard Hakluyt]HACK-loot] (1522/23–1616). Hakluyt was himself author of a lengthy memorandum personally delivered to Queen Elizabeth in 1584 in support of Raleigh's request for a charter entitled *A Particular Discourse concerninge the Greate Necessitie and Manifolde Commodyties That Are Like to Growe to This Realme of Englande by the Westerne Discoveries Lately Attempted*. He readily understood the value in creating popular interest in and enthusiasm for settling the New World, and he encouraged de Bry to include in Hariot's *Brief and True Report* illustrations based on White's watercolors (all of White's paintings survive, housed today in the British Museum).

White's bird's-eye view of the unenclosed Indian village of Secotan, on the Pamilico River, was probably done in mid-July 1585. It shows thirteen houses, or *wigwams*, with barrel-shaped roofs and wooden frames covered with woven mats and sheets of birchbark (Fig. 19.13). At the top, a path leads from water (a stream or pond) to the main group of houses, widening into a central path. To the right of the path and street are three cornfields each at a different stage of growth. At the bottom right, a path separates the lowest cornfield from the ceremonial area where Indians are dancing. Ten men and seven women are dancing in a circle of seven upright posts, the tops of which are carved in the form of human heads. Two figures stand between the posts in the foreground with clasped hands. In the middle of the circle a woman, viewed from the back, stands naked before a taller central pole, her arms