Hamlet — An introduction

Hamlet is one of the most famous plays of all time, and has possibly been the object of more commentaries and questions than any other literary work. Why can the ghost be seen by all in Act I, only by Hamlet later? Why does Claudius react to the play but not to the pantomime? Is Hamlet actually mad, or is it really a trick? Why does he hesitate and procrastinate so much? Did and does Gertrude know about the murder? Is Claudius actually guilty? Did Ophelia commit suicide, or was it an accident? For centuries, many critics have seen it not only as puzzling but as a puzzle, a riddle, and have been looking for a key that would make it consistent and would allow it to make perfect sense; all sorts of hypotheses have been offered to that effect.

Could we know exactly when the play was written, perhaps it would help answer the biographical questions that have been asked about it: must we read it (or part of it) in the light of the deaths of Shakespeare's son Hamnet (1596), of his father (September 1601), or the foreseeable death and difficult succession of the "Virgin Queen" (1533–1603)? Another biographical element that has been much discussed is the religious question, raised in particular by references to Purgatory in the play (the existence of such a place was denied by Protestant theologians, and a typically Catholic notion): were Shakespeare or Shakespeare's parents crypto-Catholics?

There is probably no puzzle to be solved, no underlying riddle to the play—and no need for such a hypothesis. *Hamlet* is arguably only rich and complex, not mysterious. For the whole play to make sense, one only has to remember that dramatic effect was much more important to Shakespeare than verisimilitude (whether psychological, chronological or historical), that the political context was one of tensions, and that such issues as the fear of sin and damnation were no trifling matter at the time. → *See n^o 7, 48*

THEMES AND ISSUES

Revenge — Family ties & duties — Political (in)stability, chaos & order — Truth & lies; sincerity & hypocrisy; knowledge & ignorance — Death: mortality & destiny; the afterlife — Free will & fate — Madness & melancholy

COMPOSITION DATE, SOURCES, CONTEXT

See the introduction to the Arden edition. Wikipedia also has clear and interesting material: see the articles "*Hamlet*" and "Critical approaches to *Hamlet*".

THE MELANCHOLY DANE

Hamlet is usually portrayed as downcast and gloomy, and the text explicitly states that he is still wearing his black mourning garb. This makes him one of the most famous *melancholic* (in modern terms, melancholy) characters in Elizabethan literature, the word being of course to be understood in the context of the medical theory of the humours. The way melancholia was described by doctors of the time certainly seems consistent with Hamlet's character and behaviour. Here is what Thomas Sydenham (1624–1689; *Opera medica*, 1742) writes about people suffering from melancholy: "For the slightest reason, or even for no reason at all, they fall prey to fear, anger, jealousy, suspicion [...] They hate joy, hope and happiness

in every one [...] When they set themselves a goal, they immediately change their minds and start doing the opposite, but never achieve anything, so they never feel peace of mind." → *See n° 15, 25*

The Pseudo-Aristotle's Problem XXX asked whether melancholia was a form of madness or the mark of genius (especially poetic genius), a question that could be relevant to *Hamlet* as well, especially if one sees Hamlet as a version of the archetype of the fool. → *See n° 8, 31*

A passage by Giovanni Pontano (1429–1503; *De rebus coelestibus*, IX) might also be of interest: "Black bile is very much akin to earth. Just as everything proceeds from the earth, which gives life to seeds with its heat, in the same way from black bile, where it has been heated, come teeming the seeds of representations *[simulacrum]* and thoughts *[cogitatio]*." The word *simulacrum* could mean "false idea", "illusion", or even "ghost"...

TRUTH AND DECEPTION

One issue raised by many of Shakespeare's plays, if only as a consequence of the dramatic conventions and traditions, is an epistemological question: how can we be sure of what we see or hear, how can we escape being fooled or deceived, how finally can we know anything? Whether in the comedies (e.g. *Much Ado About Nothing*), where it takes the form of comic misunderstanding, or in the tragedies (*Othello*), where it leads to tragic misinterpretation, the characters frequently think that they know something, only later to discover that it was not the truth; they may have been deliberately deceived by another character, or it may be that the human mind and senses are fallible. The late 16th century did see ground-breaking scientific advancements (Galileo, F. Bacon, etc.) and the advent of the Modern Age, after all. → *See n° 5, 6*

This also appears in *Hamlet*. The most obvious manifestation of it is probably the question Hamlet himself raises: is it really his father's ghost that he has seen, or is it a trick played by some devil? The question leads Hamlet to be cautious (the stakes are high: eternal damnation, no less) and try to make sure of Claudius's guilt before doing anything. But deception is also to be found in the form of political intrigue and plotting throughout the play: for example, Polonius includes it in the instructions he gives Reynaldo, who is sent to spy on Laertes, and it will eventually lead him to his death. The same goes for the other spies in the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. And of course, Hamlet's madness is feigned, another case of deceiving and dissimulating as a means to reach the truth. → *See n° 11, 14, 15, 17, 30, 33–35, 39, 49*

Some have said that Hamlet procrastinates because he is intrinsically incapable of acting. Another way of seeing it is that he is too much of a scholar. Aware of the epistemological difficulties, he ratiocinates, double- and triple-checks, and is generally subject to the plight of the intellectual (others have called it "Woe from Wit"—another theme that is central to *Much Ado About Nothing* e.g.). Although on the buffoon side, Polonius is another instance of a character overthinking things. The paralysing consequences of thinking too much was tackled by Montaigne, whose *Essays* were translated into English by John Florio (published 1603; II,20): "Because [Simonides's] imagination concerning the question Hieron the King had made unto him (which the better to answer he had diverse dayes allowed him to thinke of it) presented sundry subtil and sharpe considerations unto him; doubting which might be the likeliest; he altogether dispaireth of the truth. Whosoever searcheth all the circumstances and embraceth all the consequences thereof hindereth his election. A meane engine doth equally conduct and sufficeth for the executions of great and little weights." (Montaigne wrote that "to study philosophy is to learn to die", which is echoed by Hamlet's words in V.2.) Whether Hamlet's melancholy would be a cause or a consequence of this overthinking tendency remains an open question. → *See n° 20, 21, 36, 41*

THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

In the last years of the 16th century, when the play was probably written, England had been an Anglican country for some time, and uninterruptedly since the accession of Elizabeth I (1558). But it does not mean that the religious question had died out: it is established that some (many?) people were still crypto-Catholics, hoping for a Catholic restoration (as Guy Fawkes would make manifest in 1605), and international affairs still revolved around it (see Mary Stuart's beheading in 1587, the Spanish Armada in 1588, etc.), let alone the thorny issue of Elizabeth's successor.

In the light of this religious context, some say this it is not innocent that Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg: there were strong associations between that university and Martin Luther, who taught and started the Reformation there. The Ghost's elusive statement about his situation, which seems to refer to Purgatory, could thus be part of a reflection on Catholicism and Protestantism; although of course, the play is supposed to take place in a distant past, long before the Reformation... In the same way, Hamlet appears to believe in the effective power of repentance and confession in the prayer scene, something that is central to the Catholic faith, but rejected by Protestant theology.

Some critics (S. Greenblatt prominently) have suggested that Shakespeare, the son of crypto-Catholics if not one himself, was having scruples, even feeling guilty, for having given a Protestant funeral to his son Hamnet. → *See n° 24, 26, 28, 38, 46*

THE POLITICAL AND TOPICAL ASPECTS

"The time is out of joint", "something is rotten", "some strange eruption to our state", and so on: even before anyone has any doubt as to the late king's death, several characters express their sense of something awry going on, their feeling of some lack of stability in the political order: "it is not, nor it cannot come to good"...

Under the terms of the Elizabethan law and Weltanschauung, marrying one's brother's widow was considered a case of incest (see Fig. 1); moreover, the new marriage was "hasty", as the queen herself admits. Thus, there is something amiss, sinful, in the opening situation of the play, even without a murder. This case of tragic *hamartia* is a political issue: disorder at the highest level of the state cannot but imply chaos lower down in "the body politic". What is more, the legitimacy of the new king is dubious (even in an elective kingdom), and he is obviously weaker than his brother was, which puts his kingdom under threat of a foreign invasion. Indeed, the play closes on Fortinbras, presumably the next king, taking charge: order is restored in the end, although under a foreign king.

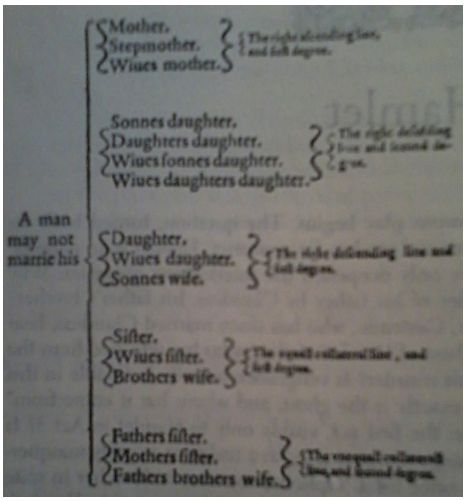

Figure 1: William Clerke, *The Triall of Bastardie*, 1594

Those political issues arguably found a strong echo in Elizabeth's England. The Queen was old (at least sixty-five years old), unmarried and heirless (she refused to name a successor) after decades on the throne: it was probably clear to anyone that the end of an era loomed, with a possible succession crisis. A foreign invasion had recently been repelled, and the Queen's celibacy was presented as a means to keep her kingdom independent. → *See n° 1, 9, 16, 29, 40, 51*

It may be worth mentioning that from 1524 on, Denmark and Norway were bound in a personal union (one king reigned over both kingdoms), and were formally integrated in 1536 (Norway retaining some degree of autonomy): a situation not unlike what would happen to England and Scotland in 1603 with

the accession of James I & VI (then 1707 with the Act of Union). Although the negotiations between Elizabeth's court and James were secret, he was the obvious candidate, and it may be that Fortinbras's taking over the kingdom of Denmark, far from being a form of failure, should be interpreted as a way of anticipating the Queen's death and attracting the next king's favours...

Another topical reference may be found in comparing Laertes's storming of the court in IV.5 with Essex's rebellion in 1601. After being sent to Ireland to subdue a revolt in 1599 and failing, the Earl of Essex was arrested, then tried to raise the people of London against Elizabeth; it failed, and Essex was executed. Shakespeare and his company were indirectly involved in the plot, as Essex had them play *Richard II* as part of their propaganda; what is more, the Earl of Southampton, a major patron of Shakespeare's and a notoriously unruly courtier, was part of the conjuration. Although the exact significance of the episode cannot be assessed in the absence of a precise composition date, it may not be irrelevant.

On a similar note, some critics have tried to find a real-life model for Polonius. A notable candidate is the Earl of Leicester (1532–1588), a very close advisor to the Queen, who was the patron of an acting company, a rival of Shakespeare's, and supported the Children of Saint Paul's, a boys' company probably alluded to in F II.2. William Cecil (1520–1598) has also been suggested as the archetype of the old courtier.

DILEMMAS & CONFLICTS

In many ways, all of the protagonists in *Hamlet* are faced with alternatives, dilemmas and conflicts of loyalty—which may be why the so famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy is indeed an apt emblem of the whole play. (It is also probably why Freud found the inspiration for his theory of mind as a place of dynamic conflicts in *Hamlet*: see Ophelia's madness.)

Most famously, Hamlet has to choose whether he should trust the ghost (see above) or not, whether he has ground enough to kill Claudius, and whether vengeance is legitimate; he is also torn between his filial duties and his disgust at his mother's actions; and he must choose between his love for Ophelia and her role as an accessory to the King. The latter has remorse at what he did. Gertrude seems to love Claudius, but she also loves Hamlet, and is aware that she is not blameless. Ophelia has to obey her father, even though this implies betraying Hamlet. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz betray their childhood friend's trust—possibly for the greater good—, and seem to feel guilty for it. In sharp contrast to those, Laertes, as opposed to Hamlet, is free to go back to his studies rather than being a "prisoner" of Danish public life, but he has no doubt that he is bound by the laws of revenge, and Polonius never seems to doubt anything whatsoever...

A lot focuses on the eponymous character's inner speculations and doubts, the play giving us access to the innermost life of his mind and conscience, mainly through his soliloquies: in *Hamlet*—arguably more than in Shakespeare's other plays—, conflict is not mainly dramatic, but psychological.→ *See n^o 2, 13, 22, 27, 32, 38, 41, 43, 44, 52*

This can be linked to the question of chance and necessity, or free will and determinism: the characters are in the throes of having to choose between "suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and accepting their fate, and breaking free from their social or moral destiny. But chance plays a part in the play, and so does tragic necessity: as tragic characters, none of them really are free, whatever they decide. Besides, it may be that some of them at least are determined by their temperament (or complexion, i.e. the state of their humours)... → *See n^o 3, 12, 37*

CONCLUSION: A LACK OF FIRM BEARINGS

Whether philosophically, theologically or politically, the play seems to display a lack of "proof relative". Whether in the characters, the Elizabethan audience, Shakespeare himself, or the modern reader (as the case may be), the overall feeling is that of a lack of firm bearings, of many questions and few clear answers, many problems and few solutions. Hamlet is a courtier, a soldier and a scholar all at once, which arguably makes him ill-adjusted to any of those roles, torn as he is between his love of truth, his personal feelings, and the promise he has made to what may be the ghost of his father. It may be that some in the Elizabethan audience of the play, and perhaps Shakespeare himself, secretly experienced that very same indecision in the religious sphere, were worried about the future of the monarchy and the country, and looked for a set of core values or positive facts to guide them though life. (There is a reason why Tom Stoppard based his 1966 existentialist / absurdist play *Rosencratz and Guildenstern Are Dead* on *Hamlet*.)

The play may not give us any such certainty, rather leaving the questions open and showing disarray at their sheer multitude. Nonetheless, one could also argue that it does show a positive conclusion to the political question: Fortinbras, who the play suggests will be the next king of Denmark, may be seen as a good prince because he is (as old Hamlet was—his ghost is in armour) a noble soldier, ready to act for the greater good, in a balanced position between the overthinking Hamlet and the passion-driven Claudius.
→ *See n^o 4, 5, 23, 42, 47*

COMPLEMENTARY REMARKS & RESOURCES

• More about the four humours:
`http://web.uvic.ca/~mbest1/ISShakespeare/Resources/WorldView/humours.html`
• Several websites about *Hamlet*, with analyses, articles and bibliographical references:
`http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/hamlet-at-a-glance`
`http://www.shakespeare-online.com/essays/hamletessays.html`
`http://www.hamlethaven.com/haven.html`
• André Markowicz has miscellaneous notes and comments about his experience of translating *Hamlet* into French on his Facebook page.