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CHARACTER MAP

Claudius
King of Denmark, after murdering brother, Old Hamlet. Hopes to keep crime secret but distrusts nephew, Hamlet. Killed by Hamlet.

Poor advice

Old Hamlet
Recently dead king returns as ghost to demand his son take revenge on Claudius.

Polonius
Not-so-wise chief counsellor to Claudius. Domineering father of Ophelia and Laertes. Killed in error by Hamlet.

Newly married

Brother; murders for throne

Kills

Father (ghost)

Urges Hamlet to seek revenge

Kills in error

Controlling father

Gertrude
Hamlet's mother, now wife of Claudius. Unaware of murder but accepts guilt for incestuous remarriage, dies attempting to protect son.

Mother

Hamlet
Scholarly prince forced to take on role of revenger. Disgusted by mother, feels betrayed by Ophelia. Uses Play at court to confirm ghost's story and reveal crime of Claudius. Dies in final duel.

Loves

Loves but rejects

Ophelia
Loves Hamlet but obeys father. Goes mad after Hamlet's cruelty and father's murder. Drowns herself.

Loves

Disapproves of new marriage

Father/son

Betray Hamlet

Discovers plot; kills them

Close friends

Kill each other in final duel

Brother; spies on Ophelia for father

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern
 Hamlet's treacherous student friends set to spy on him by Claudius. Die in Hamlet's place after he substitutes their names in diplomatic letters.

Horatio
Hamlet's closest student friend, trustworthy, calm observer. Survives to tell Hamlet's story.

Laertes
Young courtier, good swordsman. Becomes revenger plotting with Claudius after his father's murder. Dies in final duel.

Harbinger of death

Perform play; Claudius gives himself away

Names him as heir to throne

Gravedigger
Makes Ophelia's grave, shows Hamlet Yorick's skull. Has grim realistic sense of humour.

Players
Actors who come to play at court, allowing Hamlet to write scene that proves Claudius is murderer.

Fortinbras
Warlike prince of Norway. Hamlet names him next King of Denmark.

INTRODUCTION

Hamlet can seem intimidating because of its acknowledged status as a 'Great Work of Literature'. Forget all about that and just get to know the play — take it seriously but also expect it to be enjoyable. Clive James starts his perceptive and witty discussion of Hamlet's character by describing something he says a lot of people have thought:

> I identify with Hamlet. In my mind's eye he even looks a bit like me. Perhaps a couple of stone lighter, with blonde hair and more of it: one of those rare Aussies who happen to fence quite well and stand first in line to the throne of Denmark. I don't think this is a mad conceit because I think all men and most women who've ever read or seen the play feel that its hero is a reflection of themselves*...*

This idea of Hamlet somehow being 'like' us is certainly how earlier writers summed up their attraction to the play's complex central character. They thought: 'He's so interesting because he's just as complicated and mixed up and brilliantly intelligent as me. And he's tragic, too!' Someone even wrote an essay asking which interests us more, the prince (character) or the poem (the whole imaginative structure of the play)?

Not everybody gets so excited by Prince Hamlet's wordy agonising any more. The contemporary director Charles Marowitz wrote in the 'Introduction' to his 1960s reworking of the play:

> I despise Hamlet.
> He is a slob,
> A talker, an analyser, a rationalizer...
> ...
> And how can someone talk so pretty in such a rotten country
>   with the sort of work he's got cut out for him?
> You may think he's a sensitive, well-spoken fellow but,
>   frankly, he gives me a pain in the ass.
>
> <div align="right">Charles Marowitz Hamlet (1968)</div>

Over the centuries Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been edited, reshaped, adapted for film and pirated in many other ways that seem to leave behind little of a 'Revenge Tragedy' that was originally made to please a crowd

of demanding Elizabethan citizens standing outdoors, in broad daylight, watching a group of familiar faces performing onstage at the Globe Theatre. It became a theatre classic over the centuries because it was, and still is, a fascinating story about crime and punishment. It is difficult, too, for several reasons, but don't be put off. The language may take effort to understand nowadays but it helps to read aloud so that you get used to hearing rhythms and stresses in speeches, noticing how characters reveal themselves through the words of the text. You also need to know something about Elizabethan ideas on revenge and ghostly apparitions, because they help to drive the plot. You'll find out about contemporary views on acting from Hamlet's interaction with the travelling Players. You'll also realise how many different ways there are to drive a person crazy.

'The play's the thing', as Hamlet says, and this is worth taking seriously. Maybe you'll start to agree with Clive James that Hamlet is a bit like you, even four hundred years on.

A Note on 'Revenger'
In Shakespeare's time the word for someone taking revenge on another was 'revenger'. I have used it throughout this text guide rather than the more recent word 'avenger' as it throws greater emphasis on the act of revenge being pursued by the person directly involved.

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

When did Shakespeare write *Hamlet*? It isn't known when it was first performed or what the wording of the first version of the play text was really like. It's usually dated around 1600-1, after Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* had been staged, so that the actors' in-jokes about Polonius playing Brutus could get an extra laugh from the audience, assuming that the same actor in the Globe company played both roles. An earlier version of the Hamlet story by Shakespeare or someone else (known as the *Ur-Hamlet*, meaning the 'prototype') was being seen and written about through the 1590s, although no text of that play survived.

Shakespeare's Reworking of an Old Story

The *Ur* version and Shakespeare's play both used the same history of 'Amleth', a story from Danish chronicles known since the twelfth century that was circulating in European literature, like Belleforest's collection (1570). The Introduction to your edition will fill in this background, or you could look up the original story in Bullough (1973) (see **References & Further Reading**, p.70). Notice what Shakespeare adds and develops to make his source material more interesting dramatically to an audience, particularly by creating opportunities to complicate themes and issues:

- The murder of the king (Old Hamlet) is kept secret at beginning.
- A ghost tells Hamlet about the murder and demands revenge.
- Young revengers Laertes and Fortinbras contrast with Hamlet.
- Ophelia's role is developed, giving her a spectacular mad-scene.
- The Players are created, with a *Mousetrap* play-within-the-play.
- Hamlet dies as he kills Claudius (where the original Amleth lived on as the heroic king and died in battle).
- The historical context is modernised, setting is now Renaissance Europe.

The Text of the Play

Three printed versions of Shakespeare's play exist, dated 1603 (Quarto 1), 1604-5 (Quarto 2) and 1623 (Folio). And all of them present us with a slightly different play.

- Each version is different in line length (over 1000 lines more or less!).

- Whole speeches drop out, or when they appear have different lines in them

- There are different words in key spots. For example: Is Hamlet's 'too too _____ flesh' in 1.2.129 'solid', 'sallied' or 'sullied' in your edition?

- Each text contains odd, unfinished bits of lines where the sense just got lost somehow. Look up these two examples: 1.4.36, 'The dram of eale' bit, or 5.2.195. Notice how your editor has decided to phrase the sentence beginning 'Since no man of aught he leaves...'.

Your study text is a modern editor's compilation, most often based on his or her preferences for a reading of one line or speech over another possibility in Quarto 2 or the Folio version. I chose to work from the **New Cambridge Shakespeare *Hamlet*** edited by Philip Edwards. You're probably reading from another edition, so it won't take you long to spot a few differences between your text and mine, especially in line numbering or wording. Generally speaking, this won't matter for your present study but you should be aware that the 'famous play' known as *Hamlet* is not a polished literary text but was, from the start of its *performance life*, an evolving work for actors that obviously got revised and cut and reworked, with lines misheard or remembered differently.

Hamlet on the Stage

Shakespeare's theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, had its home base from 1599 at the Globe Theatre, Bankside and played in both outdoor and indoor settings. The company had repeated invitations to play at court for the Queen's annual Christmas revels in the mid to late 1590s. Remember how, at the end of the film *Shakespeare in Love*, Elizabeth is discovered in a public playhouse like the Globe, watching *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare's smash-hit of the mid-1590s). Earlier in the film the players perform *Love's Labours Lost* for her private entertainment at court in a small indoor hall temporarily converted for a show. In 1608, the company was permitted to use its Blackfriars building as a permanent indoor theatre, too.[1]

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[1] See Thomson (1983) and Gurr (1970, 1987) for more details about theatres and audiences, and Reynolds (1956) for ideas about how the Globe stage space might have been used for key scenes (**References & Further Reading**, p.70).

Richard Burbage, the company's lead actor who played the new role of Hamlet was about thirty years old in 1600. He was an intelligent, athletic actor, who was also a good artist and capable at swordplay. Burbage was a fighting hero type who played the lead in many shows around town, including (possibly) the central revenger in a revival of Kyd's 1580s crowd-pleaser *The Spanish Tragedy*. The names of other possible actors are unknown, although there was a tradition that Shakespeare himself played the ghost. If it's true, I wonder why he chose that part for himself. Was it, perhaps, as a kind of theatrical joke because the ghost initiates the entire tragic action of the play? Without the ghost, Hamlet would just remain a melancholy, disgruntled prince, moping about the frailty of women.

The Play's Concerns and Historical Realities

While it's generally accepted that 'great works of art' can stand alone and, by definition, outlive their original narrow historical period, we shouldn't forget that they inevitably communicate at some level with us about things in life that were once of immediate significance, too. In considering *Hamlet*, I take into account an historical event around 1601 that may have coloured Shakespeare's own imaginative process and affected how at least *some* members of a contemporary audience received his challenging new play about regicide, revenge and the dangers of thinking.

In 1601, the Earl of Essex's rebellion was a sign of growing political instability. By the late 1590s an obvious problem for everyone was that their adored queen was getting old and she had no heir. Within two years she would be dead and the throne would pass to her Scottish nephew, James, giving Shakespeare more food for thought, some of which he expressed in his next tragedy, *Macbeth*. In 1601 the country's mood was unsettled by rumours of assassination attempts and yet another Spanish armada preparing to attack England (after two previous failures in 1588 and 1597).

The young Earl of Essex, Elizabeth's favourite, was tried and executed for high treason in early 1601, following his poor record as a military leader and after an open attempt at rebellion. His grab for power came at the end of several years of insubordinate behaviour to the Queen, with whom

he was flirting. Their tension first flared openly in 1598 when Elizabeth slapped his ears at a Council meeting for being cheeky. Shakespeare had connections in Essex's circle of friends and a special revival of his recent play *Richard II* (about the overthrow and murder of a weak ruler) was requested by them for performance at the Globe just before the rebellion attempt occurred.

Elizabeth commented soon afterwards that she knew full well what had been meant by choosing that show — people would identify *her* with Richard II. The play was the thing — as was the new tragedy *Hamlet*, where issues of kingship, regicide, fitness to rule and treachery whirl around the onstage world of Elsinore. Even as innocent players, Shakespeare and company must have felt themselves treading on potentially very dangerous ground for a while. Even though *Richard II* failed to whip up a supportive theatre mob for Essex, audience members must have made their own connections, too.

GENRE, STYLE & STRUCTURE

GENRE

Shakespeare created intensely absorbing tragic characters in the plays that take their names: *Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello* and *King Lear*. Many other individual characters, all created before Hamlet, also attain great tragic stature: Romeo, Juliet, Brutus and Shylock. Plays continue to interest us when we can empathise with characters that go beyond being just stage 'types'. Their lives, expressed through their words and actions, have psychological complexity like our own and, therefore, we can understand and identify with them. A similar thing happens when we watch what we'd call a very good film, because we empathise strongly with characters in their situations and care about what will happen to them.

Key Point

Hamlet **is a Revenge Tragedy. This means it combines two very powerful dramatic genres into one intense experience for the reader and audience.**

1. Tragedy

The very name 'tragedy' derives from an ancient song of the sacrificial goat (*tragos oidos*), appearing in the symbolic form of Greek woodland gods (satyrs associated with unrestrained fertility) and Pan — the god of wild Nature associated with 'panic' (the word derives from Pan[2]). Early ritual theatre, involving regular sacrifices to these gods, evolved into the classical Greek form dedicated to Dionysus[3], God of disguises, ecstatic liberation ('ecstasy' is the state you're in when you 'stand outside yourself') and intensely mystical theatre experience. Tragedy takes us into dangerous but thrilling psychological territory, where we are led to feel what Aristotle called *catharsis*, a beneficial and uplifting experience for us at the end, after a roller-coaster ride of pity and terror with worthy but flawed characters.

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[2] Pan could be very frightening, expressing sudden anger if his sleep was disturbed. It was also believed that Pan instilled panic into the giants when he fought against them by striking terror into their hearts with a great shout.

[3] Dionysus is also identified with, or disguised as, other gods and as such was the patron of two great Athenian dramatic festivals: one for tragic drama (City Dionysia) and the other for comic drama (the Lenaea). Most people now know Dionysus as Bacchus, the God of wine, associated with orgiastic rites that promised salvation.