“背景中的文学”丛书

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A Stuent Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

《哈姆雷特》解读

[美] 理查德·科勒姆 著
(Richard Corum)

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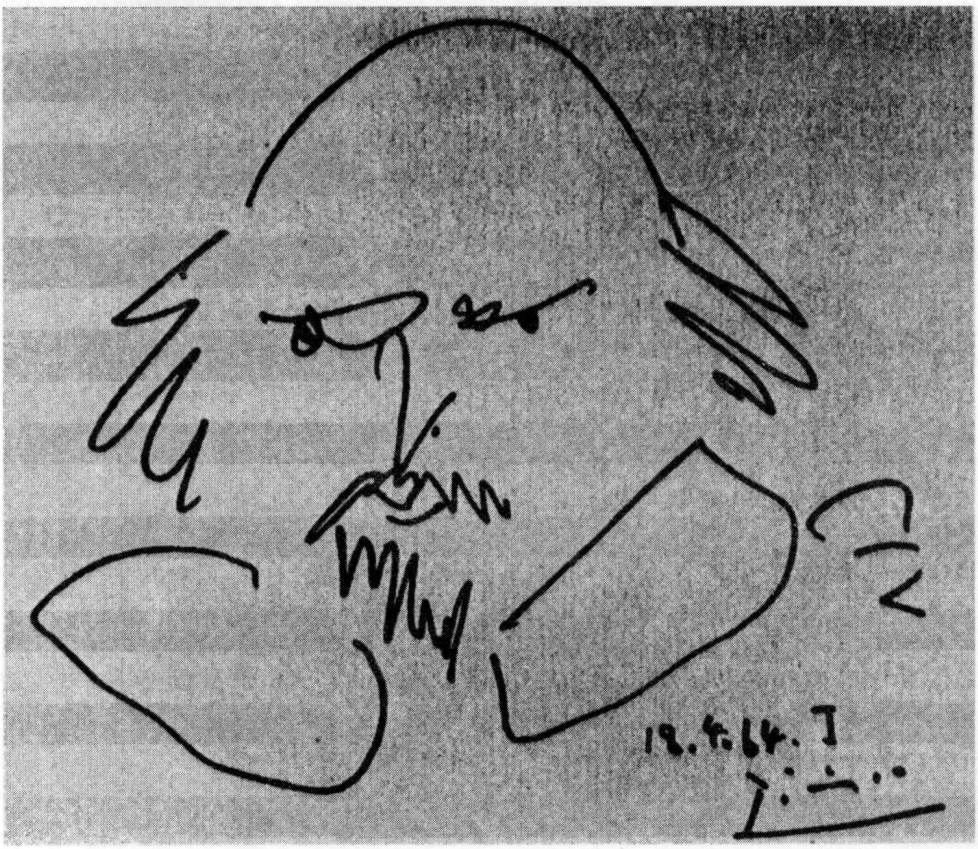

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Introduction

If Shakespeare's works are the Himalayas of literature, *Hamlet* is his Everest: "the world's most famous play by the world's most famous writer," not to mention the world's longest, most complex, most demanding, most discussed, and most influential literary text—"the masterwork that remains the heart of the heart of Western culture" (*Newsweek*, 1997). Who has not made its acquaintance, even if only in the sanitized versions one reads as a child or sees on most stages? Who has not once spoken at least one of its famous lines? And who has not found it difficult to understand?

When *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet* (the title of the early Quartos) first opened in 1599 at the Lord Chamberlain's Men's new Globe Theatre just across London Bridge in Southwark, the city of London, rapidly becoming an urban metropolis, was experiencing far-reaching change. Its population and political power, as well as the number of its poor, had vastly expanded since Henry VIII divorced England from continental Catholicism in the early 1530s. Classical texts in English translations were appearing virtually monthly at the booksellers' stalls in the portico of St. Paul's Cathedral. Inflation was rampant as early modern forms of capitalism gradually replaced feudal economic practices. Business and

trade were prospering because peace had reigned, and because the powers that be had been sympathetic to innovation since Queen Elizabeth I assumed the throne in 1558. Beginning about 1576, professional theatres like The Theatre and The Curtain came to be built in "liberties" outside the city's walls—areas of freedom safe from the jurisdiction of the city fathers and from conservative efforts to silence the new knowledge that was emerging in these theatres. Social mobility was a possibility for many of London's middling classes, and, despite such opportunities (or, more likely, because of them), suicide rates throughout England were setting new records. Adolescents, delayed longer and longer from marriage (until twenty-eight, on average, for men, and twenty-six for women), were gaining greater presence in the culture and its literature, if not also greater political power. And on the south bank of the Thames, the recently erected Globe Theatre (half owned by Shakespeare and six of his fellow actors), competed with other venues for the city's increasing leisure wealth, offering London's citizens and tourists, particularly adolescent ones, opportunities for delight, instruction, and assembly unavailable elsewhere.

As an apprentice or a shop girl in 1599 London, you would have had a variety of ways to spend your free time and your excess pennies. You could take a boat upstream to a holiday spot on the Thames, shop in the city's markets and stalls, or walk out one of its thoroughfares to look at a stake that had been driven through the heart of a recently buried suicide. You could spend your time at a tavern or a cockfight, or go to a brothel, a gambling den, or the bear-baiting arena. Along with crowds of sensation seekers, you could take in a hanging or beheading at Tyburn or Wapping Marsh, walk to Bethlem Hospital (Bedlam) and gawk at the insane, or try to catch a glimpse of the queen or an aristocrat entering or leaving the Tower of London. Or you could go to the Globe in the afternoon and stand in the cockpit under an open roof and watch a new play like *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet*.

Presumably you would go to the Globe and watch *Hamlet* because it was the newest play by the best playwright in London, and Richard Burbage, the best actor, was playing the lead; because you knew Shakespeare had rewritten an ancient legend you'd recently read in translation; because you knew that *Hamlet* was the latest instance of a genre, revenge tragedy (modeled on recent transla-

tions of the classics), you particularly liked, a genre, moreover, that was scarcely older than you or the public theatres that had come into being during your lifetime; or because the Globe and the plays it offered provided you with something unavailable to you anywhere else in London: the equivalent of a secular university education.

If you went to the Globe and watched this new play, you would soon recognize that *Hamlet* is a play about adolescents and, more particularly, what adolescents do when they lose a powerful and commanding father. On the stage of the Globe, you would see seven adolescents—Hamlet, Ophelia, Laertes, Fortinbras, Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (four of whom lose a father)—struggling to overcome melancholy by taking one of the dead-end options offered them by their parents and/or their culture.

Watching *Hamlet*, you would also see that this play is about fathers—particularly the demands fathers make on their adolescent children, the knowledge and advice they hand down to these adolescents, and the adequacy of such demands and knowledge. You would see the terrible consequences of obeying certain parental demands, and the equally terrible consequences of not being able to figure out what to do other than merely disobey such demands. Watching *Hamlet*, you would learn about the ways parents manipulate and use adolescents to further their own desires, not to mention the tragedy that frequently results from such use and manipulation. And you would leave the Globe wondering about the sufficiency of your parents' knowledge, as well as questioning the advisability (if they were) of allowing them to go on controlling and manipulating your life. Moreover, you would see how difficult it is, and how necessary it is, for you to become independent and set out on your own. In short, if you watched *Hamlet* at the Globe and saw all seven of its adolescents end up dead by the time the play's action is finished, you would understand that Shakespeare's company was staging a play about how the lives of adolescents like yourself come to be wasted. In fact, you would see that *Hamlet* is a play about how certain kinds of parents and/or certain kinds of cultures tragically squander the lives and energies of its adolescents, and what these adolescents must do if they are not to be blasted [to wither or fall under a blight] "in the morn and liquid dew of [their] youth" (1.3.41). Thus, just as London gave you op-

tions about how you might spend your free time and your excess pennies, *Hamlet* gave you options with respect to how you might live your life.

But, as modern readers, we are not Elizabethans, so we face significant obstacles in the way of understanding *Hamlet* and seeing these options. The language of the play, even when modernized, is not our language, nor is the culture of the play's original audiences our culture. With the exception of one or two productions at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the *Hamlets* audiences saw, and that critics interpreted from 1660 until 1980, were so altered or butchered (by cutting lines, speeches, scenes, characters) that they had little or nothing to do with the play Shakespeare wrote and staged at the Globe. Moreover, Shakespeare's theatre, a quasi-illegal activity on the margins of society, had a different form and function than theatres have tended to have since 1660 when they first joined hands with church and state. Moreover, like theatre, literary tragedy also functioned differently in 1599 than it often does now.

Thus, up against an Everest of a text to understand and the obstacles that stand in the way of understanding it, this book begins by illustrating the historical, contextualizing method it will use throughout in terms of a brief scene between Polonius and Reynaldo (2.1) that has been cut from virtually every production of *Hamlet* for the past 300 years, and from every movie prior to the four-hour film Kenneth Branagh directed in 1997. The question asked in this first chapter is not so much "What is the best knowledge to use in reading this scene?" but, "If the best knowledge of the past three centuries found this scene worthless, then what knowledge will allow us to understand why Shakespeare included it in this play?" In light of this test case, the second half of Chapter 1 proposes that there are always at least four different kinds of best knowledge circulating in any culture at any point in time, which means, among other things, that in Shakespeare's own time, *Hamlet* was understood in at least four radically different ways.

Chapter 2 deals with two other historical contexts crucial to an understanding of *Hamlet*: the popular public theatres in which Shakespeare and his company first produced *Hamlet*, and the genre—tragedy—in which it is written. The assumption in this chapter is that an understanding of the theatre in which *Hamlet*

was staged and the literary genre in which it is written is crucial to an understanding of *Hamlet*.

Having reached base camp with the equipment assembled in these first chapters, we will then stop in Chapter 3 ("Literary Analysis: Hamlet's Options"), get out a telescope, and survey at some length the route we will be climbing to get a sense of the crevices and glaciers, the faces and clefts that lie ahead. After extended literary analysis, we will then tackle, in four subsequent chapters, the rugged and majestic terrain we have surveyed, following Hamlet's route from melancholy (Chapter 4), to ghost (Chapter 5), revenge (Chapter 6), and antic disposition (i.e., Hamlet's pretended madness) (Chapter 7). The views are exhilarating and the going is sometimes difficult, but working our way across these diverse terrains will allow us first-hand experience of the complex materials from which the brilliant play we are seeking to understand was constructed. From this vantage point we will then look at Gertrude (Chapter 8) and Ophelia (Chapter 9)—two major figures in this text who have long been seen far too exclusively from Hamlet's point of view. The conclusion takes up the pressing question of what route Hamlet and the other adolescents in the play could have taken that would not have led to tragic death or a stage littered with dead bodies.

The argument of this book is that if we get ourselves out of the center of London, across the Thames and into the public theatre in which *Hamlet* was initially produced, if we know what is meant by a literary tragedy, and if we have access to a wide range of early modern thinking about melancholy, ghosts, revenge, antic dispositions, suicide, men and women, then, like the play's early audiences, we will be able to understand the *Hamlet* Shakespeare's company staged in 1599.

As is clear from this brief account, tragedy and comedy, especially in high places, are matters of knowledge, the best knowledge amounting finally to whatever knowledge enables one to avoid tragedy and generate comedy. In this light, the thesis of this book is that it is precisely this kind of knowledge that Shakespeare's *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet* offers us as a play, even though it is also precisely this knowledge that Hamlet and the other adolescents, as characters in this play, so thoroughly lack. Thus, as a modern reader, you have a choice that perhaps you did not think

you had: you do not have to follow Hamlet's path or that of any of the other adolescents you see on stage as they write tragical histories for themselves; rather, you can learn from Shakespeare's play how to avoid reduplicating such terrible disasters. If, having seen or read *Hamlet*, you do not have a clear sense of what created the tragic pile of dead bodies that litters the court at Elsinore, or what must be done if you are to avoid such a lethal conclusion, then you have not understood *Hamlet*.

In each chapter a variety of materials, many not readily accessible elsewhere, are excerpted from Elizabethan and classical sources as contexts for understanding this play: essays, poems, plays, histories, scriptural passages, treatises, official documents, stories, religious tracts, homilies, engravings, memoirs, village records. In addition to such documents and the text introducing them, each chapter also contains an introductory discussion, study questions, topics for written and oral discussion, and a list of suggested readings.

Hamlet quotations are from the 1604 second Quarto, though occasionally this text has been modified by reference to the 1623 first Folio. All quotations are keyed parenthetically to the Oxford text as reprinted in *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt (1997).

Except for titles and epigraphs, quotations from the play, and excerpts from supporting documents have been modernized by the author. In the longer abridged excerpts, ellipses within sentences and paragraphs have not been indicated, and quotations marks have been added to increase clarity.

Like others who work on this play, my debt to the hundreds of essays and books that could not be acknowledged below is enormous, as is my gratitude to the staffs of the rare book collections of Cambridge University, the Huntington Library, the University of Minnesota, and the University of California at Santa Barbara. I would also like to thank my Shakespeare classes in the College of Letters and Science and the College of Creative Studies at UCSB; Robert Gedeon, Edward Yang, and Korina Jochim, research assistants from heaven; Peggy Kirk, an unfailing source of insight and encouragement; Barbara Rader of the Greewnwood Press for supporting this project; Professor Claudia Durst Johnson of the University of Alabama, whose editorial suggestions have been unfailingly helpful and deeply appreciated; and Louise Fraden-

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SUGGESTED READINGS AND WORKS CITED

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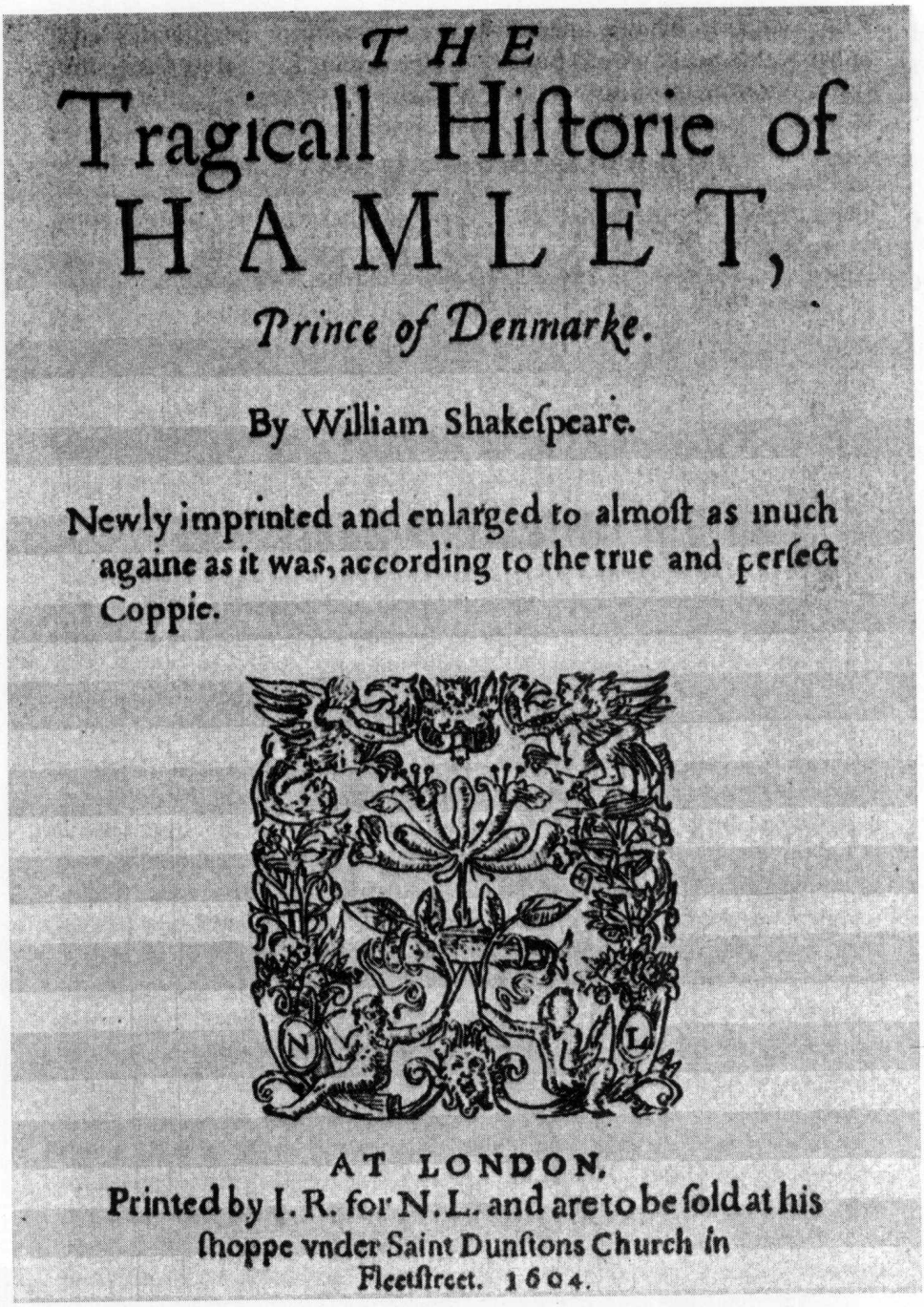
THE
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AT LONDON,
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Title page of the 1604 Quarto, commonly known as the "Good" Quarto.

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