

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

Hamlet

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



HAMLET

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HAMLET

William Shakespeare

Edited by
CEDRIC WATTS



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare Series, with *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V* and *The Merchant of Venice* as its inaugural volumes, presents a newly-edited sequence of William Shakespeare's works. Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive paperbacks for students and for the general reader. Each play in the Shakespeare Series is accompanied by a standard apparatus, including an introduction, explanatory notes and a glossary. The textual editing takes account of recent scholarship while giving the material a careful reappraisal. The apparatus is, however, concise rather than elaborate. We hope that the resultant volumes prove to be handy, reliable and helpful. Above all, we hope that, from Shakespeare's works, readers will derive pleasure, wisdom, provocation, challenges, and insights: insights into his culture and ours, and into the era of civilisation to which his writings have made – and continue to make – such potentially influential contributions. Shakespeare's eloquence will, undoubtedly, re-echo 'in states unborn and accents yet unknown'.

CEDRIC WATTS
Series Editor

INTRODUCTION

I

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is probably the most famously problematic play ever written. Wherever you look, it seems to offer problems, big, medium and small. The early texts vary greatly: which, if any, is authoritative? The religious and moral implications of the play seem inconsistent. The Ghost is strikingly ambiguous. Why is the historical setting both ancient and modern? Why is Horatio both informed and uninformed about Danish matters? Was Claudius's marriage to Gertrude really incestuous? As for Hamlet himself: why does he delay? How mad is he? Why does he treat Ophelia so badly? Why does the text specify that he's thirty years old, even though he's still a student? Why does he profess uncertainty of what lies beyond death, even though he has spoken to a ghost? What is the key to his character? Thus the questions multiply. For centuries, commentators have wrangled about them. The play's pregnancy breeds midwives.

What keeps the wrangles going is largely the following combinations of factors. First, there are commentators who hope to find a play as unified and intelligible as possible, and who tend to treat this play as text rather than as performance. Secondly, parts of *Hamlet* give evidence of a lack of intelligent co-ordination; there are even signs of confusion or contradiction. Thirdly, much of *Hamlet* displays splendidly intelligent co-ordination: incisive ironies, subtle thematic connections, telling dramatic contrasts. Fourthly, some parts have an uncertain status, so that commentators will argue about whether they are intelligently integrated or not. Similarly, the characterisation of Hamlet himself includes features which are well co-ordinated and features which are contradictory or perplexing;

and, of course, his character has an opaque area which is made conspicuous (or generated) by his declared perplexity concerning its content. Hamlet says: 'I do not know / Why yet I live to say "This thing's to do"': so we are seduced into seeking an answer for him. 'You would pluck out the heart of my mystery', he scornfully declares, and thus challenges us to be mystery-solvers.

Some commentators, notably the influential A. C. Bradley and the Freudian Ernest Jones, produced interpretations which emphasised the intelligent co-ordination of the work. For Bradley, the key to the central character and to much of the play was provided by Hamlet's nature: Gertrude's re-marriage provided a 'violent shock to his moral being' which caused him to 'sink into melancholy': hence Hamlet's morbid brooding and incapacity for action.¹ For Ernest Jones, the key to the character and the play was the Freudian 'Oedipus Complex': this explained both the delay and Hamlet's bafflement. According to Jones's theory, the explanation of Hamlet's reluctance to kill Claudius is that Claudius (by killing Hamlet's father and marrying his mother) has enacted the Prince's own repressed desires; but, precisely because these desires *are* repressed, Hamlet cannot understand his own delay.² In contrast to such 'co-ordinating' interpreters, other commentators, and most famously T. S. Eliot, argued that the play was radically disunited. Eliot declared *Hamlet* so incoherent as to be 'most certainly an artistic failure': 'probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art'; 'Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him'.³

Accordingly, Part 2 of this Introduction presents the case of someone who wishes to emphasise the puzzles, gaps and apparent inconsistencies of the play. Part 3 offers a contrasting case. Finally, Part 4 attempts to adjudicate.

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The most fundamental problem is the inconsistency of the textual bases of the play. The foundation of all subsequent editions is provided by the three earliest texts: the First Quarto of 1603, the Second Quarto of 1604-5, and the First Folio of 1623. (Very roughly, a 'quarto' is a book with relatively small pages, and a 'folio' is a book with large pages.)⁴ They differ greatly from each

other. A common practice of modern editors is to construct a new text of *Hamlet*, taking as the basis the Second Quarto, while adding bits and pieces from the later First Folio and smaller bits from the First Quarto, and then modernising, in varying degrees, the spelling, punctuation and stage-directions (often adding new stage-directions); and, where the text seems obscure or garbled, they offer their own attempts at clarification, or copy previous editorial attempts. Other editors may take as basis the First Folio instead of the Second Quarto, while following the same general procedure. The editors thus seek to create an ample, co-ordinated text of high quality. That endeavour is understandable and worthwhile; but it may create the illusion of a fixed, finished, stable text, and may mask the variety and variability of the original materials. If you look up those early versions, the First Quarto, Second Quarto and First Folio (which have been variously reproduced in facsimile form), you find that what you are looking at is not so much *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* as *The Evolving Hamlet-Material for the Use of Players*.⁵

The original texts, in all their discrepancies and divergences, show that in Shakespeare's day the script of *Hamlet* was a pliable body of material, moving through time and changing as it moved, growing here, shrinking there, being revised and tinkered with, doubtless by Shakespeare, probably by his fellow-actors, and eventually by printers. That material may well have been performed in different ways at different locations. The short version leaves room for embellishments, while the long versions provide plenty of scope for cutting. The First Quarto's title-page claims that the play was performed at Oxford and Cambridge, as well as London. In 1608 *Hamlet* was staged at sea by the crew of Captain Keeling's ship *Dragon*, so that the men would not waste their time on 'idlenes[s] and unlawful games, or sleepe'; doubtless this performance differed considerably from those staged at Court.⁶ Though *Hamlet* has been very popular on stage ever since Shakespeare's day, the play is hardly ever performed in full. Some of the characters may vanish completely. Directors often eliminate Fortinbras, which considerably depletes the play's political significance; and Reynaldo, Voltemand and Cornelius may also join him in oblivion.

In addition to the textual discrepancies, there are various apparent contradictions within the play which suggest that Shakespeare

worked by trial and error, first thoughts being overtaken by second thoughts. He may never have reached the point at which he could say: 'This is the final, perfected version of the script.' One apparent contradiction is that when Hamlet has the bright idea of arranging a play at court to test Claudius, the idea arrives twice instead of once. In the soliloquy at the end of Act 2, scene 2 (in our edition), we see him conceiving the plan, and there he seems quite unaware that he has already – in the same scene – asked the First Player to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* (or *The Mousetrap*) with his own special additions. Again, another contradiction may be that Fortinbras is depicted initially as an impetuous hot-head leading a gang of lawless adventurers, even though later he will be depicted as a statesman-like commander worthy of inheriting the Danish throne (having received Hamlet's vote). A further problem is that Horatio seems to be not only a resident, familiar with Danish politics and able to explain the political situation to the sentries, but also a visitor who has to have the Danish custom of drunken carousals explained to him by Hamlet. Is he an insider or an outsider? Then there's the famous problem of Hamlet's age. Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg University, as is Horatio; and, for much of the time, we have the impression that Hamlet is about nineteen or twenty, and Horatio a year or two older. Yet, in Act 5, scene 1, the grave-digger specifies that Hamlet is thirty, which clashes with our sense of his youthful idealism, moodiness and impetuosity. It is tempting to speculate that what the play offers there is a compromise between Shakespeare's original conception of the character and the evident age of the actor of the part. The play was first performed around 1600. The part of Hamlet was played by Richard Burbage, and he was probably over thirty years old at the time: reference-books give his date of birth as *circa* 1568.⁷ During the duel scene, Burbage might well have been 'fat and scant of breath' (sweaty – or perhaps overweight – and panting), as the text declares.

There is a peculiar cluster of problems around the Ghost. Arguably, the Ghost is both awe-inspiring and ludicrous. The apparition certainly inspires awe and fear in the sentries and even in Horatio; but, equally, in the peculiarly protracted scene of swearing to secrecy, the Ghost seems to become a ludicrous butt of Hamlet's humour: he becomes for a while the 'old mole', the 'worthy

pioneer' (or sapper) and even 'this fellow in the cellarage' – so that briefly the awe-inspiring apparition dwindles into the embarrassed actor scuttling about in the dusty gloom under the planks of the Elizabethan stage. That word 'cellarage' suggests the dark under-stage area, rather than the lofty battlements of Elsinore Castle. A subtler problem is that of the Ghost's provenance. Is he indeed a spirit from Purgatory, as he claims, or is he a devil in disguise?⁸ When Hamlet stages the play of *The Mousetrap*, its prime function is to test the Ghost; for, if Claudius manifests guilt, this will prove that the apparition is truthful – that he is an 'honest ghost'. Claudius does indeed manifest guilt; so, for most of us, the mystery about the Ghost seems to be resolved. Banquo in *Macbeth* reminds us, however, that the Devil and his agents can tell the truth when it serves their evil purposes. As Banquo says: 'And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths'. Thus, even if the Ghost is right about Claudius, that does not prove that the apparition is trustworthy. In Shakespeare's plays, ghosts usually do have the identities that they claim, and this apparition does indeed sound convincingly like the former warrior-king of Denmark; therefore, most of us, probably, assume that his excursion from Purgatory manifests a divine purpose. But then an obvious contradiction appears. This Ghost (who, by confirming the existence of Purgatory, confirms the existence of Heaven, Hell and – of course – the God of Christianity) orders Prince Hamlet to complete a specifically anti-Christian task: that of bloody revenge, which the God of both the Old Testament and the New Testament explicitly forbids: 'Thou shalt not kill'; 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord'.⁹ Theologically, the play is riven with contradictions. The student from Wittenberg (a centre of Protestantism in the sixteenth century) encounters a ghost who claims to come from the Purgatory specified by Catholicism; yet this same student terms the region after death 'The undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns', even though he has recently talked to an apparition who purports to be a traveller returning from that country. Hamlet says he hopes to kill Claudius in circumstances which will ensure that Claudius goes to Hell; nevertheless, this very believer elsewhere expresses the radically sceptical notion that 'there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so'.

The Ghost was indignant about Gertrude's incest with Claudius. The laws of the Church (following Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21) expressly forbade a man to marry a widowed sister-in-law. Hamlet, too, seems appalled by the act of incest; indeed, he seems more disgusted by the incestuous sexuality than by the poisoning of his father. The difficulty here is that although the murder was secret, the marriage of Claudius to Gertrude was public and ceremonial; yet, apart from Hamlet and the Ghost, nobody seems to have noticed anything incestuous about it. Nor can this be taken as evidence that the court is sexually decadent, for the early conversations between Ophelia, Laertes and Polonius suggest that, in sexual matters, this court is conventionally respectable in its morality. Perhaps an ecclesiastical dispensation was provided for Claudius (as it was provided for Henry VIII when he married Catherine of Aragon, widow of his brother Arthur), but the play doesn't say so.¹⁰ Once again, the gaps in the play solicit us to provide gap-filling (and possibly distorting) speculations.

This brings us back to Hamlet's character. He dominates the play, so that the cliché 'Hamlet without the Prince' is a byword for absurdity. If Hamlet's character is incoherent, the play is incoherent. In 1931, A. J. A. Waldock, in *Hamlet: A Study in Critical Method*, offered the following argument. *Hamlet*, the play, is a palimpsest: new material has been superimposed on old, and the old shows through with confusing effect.¹¹ All the main problems of the play may stem from the fact that sophisticated Shakespeare was working on primitive materials. The original story of Hamlet (or Amlothi, or Amleth, as he was called) belonged to the harsh Dark Ages, the era of pagan Nordic sagas. It was transmitted to Shakespeare from mediaeval Scandinavia via Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae*, written around AD 1200, via the *Histoires Tragiques* of Belleforest (circa 1570), and via a lost play by Thomas Kyd (circa 1590); and Shakespeare did what he could to modernise the legend and make it more subtle, sensitive and realistic. But, it can be argued, too much of the old barbaric plot and of the old crude Amleth remain; and the result is inconsistency. Hamlet himself is a hybrid because he is partly a modern philosopher and partly a primitive avenger. His motivation is largely inherited and literary: he does certain things because they are what the legendary Amleth traditionally did. The feigned madness, the murder of an

eavesdropper in the Queen's bedchamber, the voyage to England, the ruthless dispatch of two escorts by changing their letter: all these features can be found in the ancient legend. Why are the swords exchanged in the duel scene? Probably because Amleth switched swords before killing the wicked Feng (the original of Claudius). Our Hamlet lurches between brutal, callous action and, in contrast, sensitive introspection and civilised humanity; and (arguably) the reason for the lurches is that the likeable modern character is repeatedly being manipulated by the old plot and is obliged at times to mimic the nastiness of his ancient namesake. Even when Hamlet's feigned madness modulates into what might be termed manic depression, there's precedent in Amleth, whose feigned idiocy is a halfway house between melancholy and genuine dementia. Incidentally, the name 'Amleth' means 'Dimwit' or 'Idiot'; so the most intelligent character in Shakespeare's works inherits an aptly paradoxical name. Perhaps, though, to epitomise his palimpsestic nature, the Prince of Denmark should be called not Hamlet but Hamleth.

Other Shakespearian plays, notably *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, seem to have strong, clear dramatic structures. *Hamlet*, in contrast, may seem at first to have a loose and wayward structure. It begins with war-preparations, but no war ensues: an invasion impends but never materialises; there's talk about drunkenness in Denmark and about the boy-players in the city; there's an acting-lesson by Hamlet for the performers who visit the court; there's a voyage to England interrupted by pirates; and there are reflections on many topics, from suicide to cosmetics. *Hamlet* may therefore appear rather straggly and digressive – particularly when the central character accuses himself of digressing from the intended course. In its historical references, it veers between ancient and modern, just as its geographical setting veers between Denmark and England. The boy-player references clearly invoke the situation in the London theatre around 1600, but Claudius's references to an England scarred by Danish troops (and paying tribute to him) suggests the period between the ninth and eleventh centuries when England was obliged to pay massive sums to the powerful Danes. Sometimes, this tragedy even evokes the routines of modern pantomime. There's a grave-digger who orders a 'stoup of liquor' from

'Yaughan' (presumably a tavern-keeper near the theatre) and who, with one eye on the audience, remarks that in England Hamlet's madness won't be noticed, because '[T]here the men are as mad as he'. The actor playing Hamlet, though standing only a few feet from the throng of groundlings, blatantly provokes them, pantomime-style, by declaring that the groundlings 'for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise'. Thus, one of the great inconsistencies of the play is that it lurches between profoundly reflective tragedy and self-mocking comedy; now it invites us to suspend disbelief and now it delights in pricking the bubble of illusion.

3

'Yet there is method in't': that's what Polonius says when he decides that there is method in Hamlet's apparent madness; and that clause could be echoed by a commentator who, in contrast to the view previously summarised, wished to emphasise the play's co-ordinating intelligence. One of the most interesting features of the play is that it seems to be an experiment in realism: an endeavour to give new subtlety and complexity to the inherited material. The stress on realism appears explicitly in Hamlet's advice to the players at the beginning of Act 3, scene 2. He instructs those actors not to rant, not to saw the air with wild gestures. He says:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so o'erdone is from [i.e. remote from] the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature . . .

In short, he is saying 'Reflect reality'. Repeatedly, therefore, Shakespeare submits old stereotypes to new questioning. We soon learn that there is a predictable unpredictability about the play. What makes the unpredictability predictable is that it seems designed: things, people and situations are never quite what they first seem: a critical intelligence is working on the conventional and turning it into something with the complexity of reality. There are many illustrations of this; but notice particularly the effect of having a play within a play within a play. At the centre