

William Shakespeare's
Hamlet
A Sourcebook

Edited by
Sean McEvoy

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William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1600) is possibly his most famous play, in which the motives of revenge and love are entangled with the moral dilemmas of integrity and corruption.

Taking the form of a sourcebook, this guide to Shakespeare's remarkable play offers:

- extensive introductory comment on the contexts, critical history and many interpretations of the text, from first performance to the present
- annotated extracts from key contextual documents, reviews, critical works and the text itself
- cross-references between documents and sections of the guide, in order to suggest links between texts, contexts and criticism
- suggestions for further reading.

Part of the *Routledge Guides to Literature* series, this volume is essential reading for all those beginning detailed study of *Hamlet* and seeking not only a guide to the play, but also a way through the wealth of contextual and critical material that surrounds Shakespeare's text.

Sean McEvoy teaches English at Varndean College, Brighton, and has also taught at the University of Sussex and at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of *Shakespeare: The Basics* (2000).

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Contents

Annotation and Footnotes	x
Acknowledgements	xi

Introduction I

I: Contexts

Contextual Overview 7

Revenge and Tyrannicide	7
The Theatre and Politics	11
Marriage	13
Madness and Melancholy	14

Chronology 17

Contemporary Documents 20

A summary of the story of 'Amleth' in Saxo Grammaticus' <i>Historicae Danicae</i> (1514)	20
<i>A Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion</i> (1574)	21
Desiderius Erasmus, <i>The Education of a Christian Prince</i> (1516)	23
Francis Bacon, <i>The Essays: 'Of Revenge'</i> (1625)	25

2: Interpretations

Critical History 29

Pre-Romantic Criticism: Can We Admire the Prince?	29
Romantic Criticism: Why We Should Identify With the Prince	31
Modernist Criticism: Below the Surface	32

Late Twentieth-Century Criticism (1): Psychoanalysis	34
Late Twentieth-Century Criticism (2): History and Politics	36

Early Critical Reception 41

James Drake, <i>The Ancient and Modern Stages Surveyed</i> (1699)	41
Anthony Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, <i>Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author</i> (1710)	42
Samuel Johnson, <i>Notes to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays</i> (1765)	43
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Bristol Lecture' (1813)	44
William Hazlitt, <i>Characters of Shakespeare's Plays</i> (1817)	46

Modern Criticism 48

Sigmund Freud, <i>The Interpretation of Dreams</i> (1900)	48
A. C. Bradley, <i>Shakespearean Tragedy</i> (1904)	49
T. S. Eliot, 'Hamlet' in <i>Selected Essays</i> (1919)	53
John Dover Wilson, <i>What Happens in 'Hamlet'</i> (1935)	55
Terence Hawkes, 'Telmah' (1986)	56
Valerie Traub, 'Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama' (1992, essay originally published 1988)	62
Graham Holderness, 'Are Shakespeare's tragic heroes "fatally flawed"? Discuss' (1989)	65
Carol Thomas Neely, '“Documents in Madness”: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture' (1991)	66
Alan Sinfield, <i>Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading</i> (1992)	70
Philip Armstrong, 'Watching Hamlet Watching: Lacan, Shakespeare and the Mirror/Stage' (1996)	75
Lisa Jardine, <i>Reading Shakespeare Historically</i> (1996)	78
John Kerrigan, <i>Revenge Tragedy</i> (1996)	81
Kiernan Ryan, <i>Shakespeare</i> (2002)	85
Stephen Greenblatt, <i>Hamlet in Purgatory</i> (2002)	87

The Work in Performance 91

<i>Hamlet On Stage</i>	91
------------------------	----

Edwin Booth (1860–91): Robert Hapgood, <i>Shakespeare in Production: 'Hamlet'</i> (1999)	95
David Warner (1965): Ronald Bryden (1967) on Peter Hall's production of <i>Hamlet</i>	98
Samuel West (2001): Steven Pimlott, interviewed by the sourcebook editor	100

<i>Hamlet On Film</i>	101
-----------------------	-----

Directed by Laurence Olivier (1948): Anthony B. Dawson, <i>Shakespeare in Performance: 'Hamlet'</i> (1995)	103
--	-----

Directed by Franco Zeffirelli (1990): Neil Taylor, 'The Films of <i>Hamlet</i> ' (1994)	105
Directed by Kenneth Branagh (1997): Julie Sanders, 'The End of History and the Last Man' (2000)	107

3: Key Passages

Introduction 113

The Texts of <i>Hamlet</i>	113
Plot Summary	115
A Note on the Passages	119

Key Passages 120

Act 1, Scene 1, lines 1–22: sentry duty at Elsinore	120
Act 1, Scene 1, lines 61–119: news of Fortinbras	121
Act 1, Scene 2, lines 64–86: Claudius and Hamlet's first exchange	124
Act 1, Scene 2, lines 129–59: first soliloquy – Hamlet's private grief	126
Act 1, Scene 5, lines 9–112: the Ghost speaks to Hamlet	128
Act 2, Scene 2, lines 544–601: second soliloquy – Hamlet's response to the Player's speech	132
Act 3, Scene 1, lines 56–88: Hamlet's third soliloquy	136
Act 3, Scene 2, lines 181–264: the performance of <i>The Murder of Gonzago</i>	139
Act 3, Scene 3, lines 36–98: Claudius prays; Hamlet's opportunity to strike	143
Act 3, Scene 4, lines 53–160: the central part of the 'closer' scene – Hamlet and Gertrude alone together	146
Act 4, Scene 5, lines 16–168: Ophelia's madness and Laertes's rebellion	151
Act 5, Scene 1, lines 1–118: the gravediggers	157
Act 5, Scene 2, lines 213–408: the final duel; the deaths of Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes and Hamlet and the entry of Fortinbras	162

4: Further Reading

Collections of Essays	173
Critical Interpretations	173
Stage and Film History	175
Online Resources	176
Selected Videos and DVDs	177
Index	179

Introduction

In Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860–1) a 'gifted townsman' in the role of Hamlet has certain problems with his audience at a sensitive moment in the performance:

Whenever that undecided Prince had to ask a question or state a doubt, the public helped him out with it. As for example; on the question whether 'twas noble in the mind to suffer, some roared yes, and some no, and some inclining to both opinions said 'toss up for it' . . .¹

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has enjoyed genuine popularity and, indeed, iconic status since it was written in (probably) 1600–1. Very many people in English-speaking countries do seem to know at least *one* line of the text. The play has been in practically constant production somewhere in the world since the late seventeenth century, and has acquired a vast encrustation of conflicting critical opinion and theatrical interpretation. *Hamlet* has been appropriated for many different ends, from an exploration of psychoanalysis to an examination of the role of the intellectual in a totalitarian state. But like the prince himself, the essence of the play – if it has one – is notoriously difficult to pin down. The play's lines, a director has claimed, can be performed in 'a hundred different ways, all at least compatible with the basic semantic references of the script'.² There is not even one stable text of the play from Shakespeare's own time, but three competing versions (see Key Passages, pp. 113–15). Shakespeare wrote nothing quite like it before, nor perhaps after, and it has the feeling of an experimental text. It is a tragedy which is packed with comedy. It is a tense and pacy thriller which can run four hours in performance. It is a play which constantly re-examines itself, and which questions the very nature of theatre and performance.

This book, which sets out to provide a set of sources for students to come to their own opinions about the play, has of necessity had to be partial and selective in the material which it presents. Critical interpretations vary enormously, but I

1 Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 275.

2 Jonathan Miller, 'Plays and Players', in *Non-Verbal Communication*, ed. R. A. Hinde (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 362.

would argue that three perspectives emerge as particularly important. These three concerns shape this sourcebook.

The first key perspective is that *Hamlet* is a political play. Three kings are murdered. Spies are set by the state on a royal prince. There is an attempted *coup*, backed by a popular uprising. There are important and secret diplomatic dealings between Denmark, Norway and England. The play ends with a foreign army seizing power. These events seem to me to be particularly significant. Whether the overthrow of an anointed king was ever justified, even if he were a tyrant, was a major question in contemporary politics. Just such a thing happened in Britain forty years after the play first appeared on stage.

The second key approach is through psychoanalysis and gender studies. Since the late eighteenth century there has been a tendency to see the play as an examination of the consciousness of troubled man whose closest relationships, especially with women, are in crisis. Hamlet has lost his father, and feels that his mother, at the very least, cannot really have loved her husband. Hamlet's affair with Ophelia comes to a difficult end. Notable twentieth century critics, and some feminists in particular, have explored this consciousness in terms of psychoanalysis.

Third, I have also chosen to focus on the play as a blueprint for a wide variety of performances at different moments in history. It is a supremely, and self-consciously, *theatrical* play. Actors and directors both in the theatre and in the cinema have interpreted it in very many exciting and illuminating ways. In doing so they have both illuminated the play itself and given an insight into their own times.

This sourcebook is divided into four parts, the first of which deals with the play's contexts. Here you will find information on relevant aspects of the theatre, politics and society in 1600. These ideas are illustrated and developed in the selection of contemporary documents which follows. A chronology puts the play in the context of Shakespeare's other work and of contemporary events.

The 'Interpretations' section begins with a brief history of critical opinion of the play from the seventeenth century to the present day, followed by extracts from a selection of notable criticism. As elsewhere in the book, each extract is prefaced by a headnote which explains more about the critic, and about the extract's place in the longer work from which it is taken. The focus in the 'Modern Criticism' sub-section tends to be on political and psychoanalytical responses to the play, but other views are also represented. Footnotes explain references or difficult terms and ideas. The section closes with reviews of some theatrical and cinematic realizations of the text, prefaced by a brief account of the play's performance history.

In the introduction to the 'Key Passages' section I deal first with the problem of play's 'unstable' text, and the implications for criticism of that instability. Each of the subsequent extracts in 'Key Passages' is prefaced by remarks which usually relate discussion of that passage back to the critical opinions in the previous section. Footnotes gloss the more difficult and obscure phrases, but also offer illustrations of how particular moments were played in a range of stage productions and films. The aim of this section is to encourage a closer reading of the text in the light of the variety of both contextual and critical material presented elsewhere. Cross-referencing to this material is intended to help here.

Finally, the 'Further Reading' section directs you to some of the enormous

bibliography of criticism and stage history on *Hamlet*, as well as to significant websites, videos and DVDs.

The critic Terence Hawkes is amazed at the authority ascribed to this play in our culture:

At one time [*Hamlet*] must obviously have been an interesting play written by a promising Elizabethan playwright. However, equally obviously, that is no longer the case. Over the years, *Hamlet* has taken on a huge and complex symbolizing function and, as part of the institution called 'English literature', it has become far more than a mere play by a mere playwright. Issuing from one of the key components of that institution, not Shakespeare, but the creature 'Shakespeare', it has been transformed into the utterance of an oracle, the lucubration of a sage, the masterpiece of a poet-philosopher replete with transcendent wisdom about the way things are, always have been, and presumably always will be.³

Such is the status and scope of *Hamlet*, that anyone attempting to pluck out the heart of its mystery must risk appearing either parochial or partisan, or both. I hope this book appears to be neither, but that it will encourage its readers to explore, analyse and appreciate this marvellous play, both on the page and in the theatre.

3 Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 4.

