

*The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* was written by Shakespeare between 1599 and 1602. *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play and among the most powerful and influential. It has inspired writers from Goethe and Dickens to Joyce.

Set in the Kingdom of Denmark, the play dramatizes the revenge Prince Hamlet on his uncle Claudius for the murder of Hamlet's father in order to take his throne and this wife Gertrude. Denmark has a long-standing feud with neighbouring Norway, and an invasion led by the Norwegian prince, Fortinbras, is expected. The play vividly portrays the themes of treachery, revenge, incest, and moral corruption as well as Hamlet's true and feigned madness and emotional changes going from overwhelming grief to rage. Shakespeare created the title role for Richard Burbage, the leading tragedian of the time.

Two different quartos (one from 1676 and the second discovered in 1823) of the play and one folio version (in the First Folio 1623) are preserved. Each version includes lines, and even entire scenes, missing from the others. One such example is the centuries-old debate about Hamlet's hesitation to kill his uncle, which some see as a mere plot device to prolong the action, but which others argue is a dramatization of the complex philosophical and ethical issues that surround cold-blooded murder, calculated revenge, and thwarted desire. Traditionally, editors of Shakespeare's plays have divided them into five acts. None of the early texts of *Hamlet*, however, were arranged this way, and the play's division into acts and scenes derives from a 1676 quarto. The 1823 quarto contains stage directions that reveal actual stage practices in a way that the 1676 and the first folio do not.

The play opens on a cold winter midnight on "platform before the castle" of Elsinore. The sentry Francisco is keeping trusty guard when two figures appear in the darkness, Horatio (Hamlet's friend) and Marcellus (an officer) who are coming to visit Bernardo (another officer). They discuss the recent appearance of a "dreaded sight" perhaps their "fantasy". The ghost appears, and is described by the three witnesses as looking like the late King Hamlet. They endeavour to open a conversation with it, but it disappears and later wanders back as the three men discuss Danish politics and Fortinbras' invasion. They decide to tell prince Hamlet. The scene shifts to a "room of state in the castle" where Claudius and Gertrude talk with Laertes and his father Polonius (Lord Chamberlain) about his trip to France. The King and Queen then turn to Hamlet, still in deep mourning for his father and they try to persuade him to lighten up. When they leave, he soliloquizes that his mother jumped into a new marriage too quickly after the death. Marcellus, Horatio and the sentry come in and tell Hamlet about the ghost. Hamlet resolves to see the ghost himself. Two of Hamlet's friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are told to discover the cause of Hamlet's mood. Hamlet greets them warmly, but he quickly discerns that they are spies. That night, the ghost appears to Hamlet and tells him that Claudius murdered him by pouring poison in his ear, and demands that Hamlet avenges him. Ophelia, who attempts to court Hamlet, meets Hamlet secretly and is alarmed by his behaviour and she tells her father Polonius. At their next meeting Hamlet, thinking of his mother's treason, accuses Ophelia of immodesty and tell her she should go to a nunnery. Uncertain of the Ghost's reliability, Hamlet sees a troupe of actors at Elsinore and asks them to stage a play re-enacting his father's murder to determine Claudius's reaction. After seeing the performance, Claudius abruptly rises and leaves the room: proof positive for Hamlet of his uncle's guilt. Gertrude summons Hamlet to her bedchamber to demand an explanation. On his way, Hamlet passes Claudius in prayer but hesitates to kill him, reasoning that death in prayer would send him to heaven rather than hell. In the bedchamber, a furious row erupts between Hamlet and his mother. Polonius spies behind a tapestry, makes a noise, and Hamlet, believing it is Claudius, stabs wildly, killing him. The ghost appears again, urging Hamlet to treat Gertrude gently but kill Claudius. Gertrude takes Hamlet's conversation with the ghost as further evidence of madness. Claudius banishes Hamlet to England closely watched by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Demented by grief at her father's death, Ophelia wanders Elsinore singing. Her brother, Laertes, arrives back from France. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet is responsible for his father's death and his sister's madness, and proposes a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet with poison-tipped swords. Gertrude interrupts to report that Ophelia has been found drowned. In the next scene, two gravediggers discuss Ophelia's apparent suicide. Hamlet arrives back from England with Horatio and banters with a gravedigger, who unearths the skull of a jester from Hamlet's childhood, Yorick. Ophelia's funeral procession approaches, led by Laertes, their fight is broken up and resumed at the fencing (duel). Laertes pierces Hamlet with a poisoned blade but is fatally

wounded by it himself. Gertrude accidentally drinks poisoned wine intended for Hamlet and dies. In his dying moments, Laertes is reconciled with Hamlet and reveals Claudius's murderous plot. In his own last moments, Hamlet manages to kill Claudius and names Fortinbras as his heir.

According to a popular theory, Shakespeare's main source is believed to be an earlier play—now lost—known today as the *Ur-Hamlet*, possibly written by Thomas Kyd (and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*) or even himself, the *Ur-Hamlet*. The core of the story may of Indo-European origin (i.e. the anonymous Scandinavian *Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, the Roman legend of Brutus, and the 13th-century *Vita Amlethi* or *The Life of Amleth* by Saxo Grammaticus, part of *Gesta Danorum*, translated into French in 1570 by François de Belleforest, in his *Histoires tragiques*, are among the possible sources). Catholicism can reveal important paradoxes in Hamlet's decision process, and seems to be an many critics have found traces of Calvin's predestinarian theology in Shakespeare's play, the idea that conscience, derived directly from God's plan, may be a more powerful force than law. These ideas may have also influence the move away from absolute monarchy in the following century (before the Glorious Revolution against James II in 1688; it is important to explore this topic in relation to Shakespeare's historical dramas as well). The play also seems to oscillate between medieval responses and renaissance individualism and humanism, exemplified in Hamlet's scepticism.

From its premiere at the turn of the 17th century, *Hamlet* has remained Shakespeare's most-analyzed play. The character of Hamlet played a critical role in Sigmund Freud's explanation of the Oedipus complex and thus influenced modern psychology. T. S. Eliot in his noted essay "Hamlet and His Problems," downplayed such psychological emphasis of the play.<sup>1</sup>

In creating *Hamlet*, Shakespeare broke several rules, one of the largest being the rule of action over character. In his day, plays were usually expected to follow the advice of Aristotle in his *Poetics*, which declared that a drama should not focus on character so much as action. The highlights of *Hamlet*, however, are not the action scenes, but the soliloquies, wherein Hamlet reveals his motives and thoughts to the audience. The play is full of seeming discontinuities and irregularities of action, perhaps intentional to add to the theme of emotional confusion. At one point, Hamlet is resolved to kill Claudius: in the next scene, changes his mind. Hamlet's language is likewise rhetoric and profuse in metaphors but also uses anaphora, asyndeton and ironic and sardonic puns to break free (the play is full of constraint imagery – prison-burial-like) and reveal his real inner thoughts to the audience.

Most scholars reject the idea that *Hamlet* is in any way connected with Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet. However, Stephen Greenblatt has argued that the coincidence of the names and Shakespeare's grief for the loss of his son may lie at the heart of the tragedy (Greenblatt 2004)<sup>2</sup>. The topic is also addressed by James Joyce in episode 9 of *Ulysses*, where one of his protagonists, Stephen Dedalus, discusses his theory on Hamlet, which is non other than that of Joyce himself. This theory is one of the fundamental thematic threads in Joyce's novel.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>[http://books.google.es/books?id=SCfHnLwWg2MC&pg=PA55&lpg=PA55&dq=%22Hamlet+and+His+Problems%22&source=web&ots=cq01aXo2KC&sig=gkcaDTGsWpk-1C-vh1f0MNMGRa4&hl=en&redir\\_esc=y](http://books.google.es/books?id=SCfHnLwWg2MC&pg=PA55&lpg=PA55&dq=%22Hamlet+and+His+Problems%22&source=web&ots=cq01aXo2KC&sig=gkcaDTGsWpk-1C-vh1f0MNMGRa4&hl=en&redir_esc=y)

<sup>2</sup>Greenblatt, Stephen. "The Death of Hamnet and the Making of Hamlet." *N.Y. Review of Books* 51.16 (21 Oct. 2004). <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/oct/21/the-death-of-hamnet-and-the-making-of-hamlet/>

<sup>3</sup> See also Quillian, William H. *Hamlet and the New Poetic: James Joyce and T. S. Eliot*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983.

[http://books.google.es/books?id=fxooAAAACAAJ&dq=%22Hamlet+and+the+New+Poetic%22&redir\\_esc=y](http://books.google.es/books?id=fxooAAAACAAJ&dq=%22Hamlet+and+the+New+Poetic%22&redir_esc=y)  
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