

HAMLET

by William Shakespeare

It's hard to generalize about "Hamlet." But that doesn't stop people from trying. Here's a rather compelling thought: it's about five young people who don't have the strength of character to disobey their elders.

Think about it. Ophelia obeys her father's order to stop seeing Hamlet, loses her mind, then her life. Her brother listens to the king's murder plot and buys into it, dying in consequence. Rosencranz and Guildenstern are only too eager to do their school chum in to please the monarch and they "go to it."

Hamlet sets out to obey the ghost of his father, but can't quite bring himself to commit the crime of revenge. He pauses again and again, once acting compulsively, only to find he has killed the wrong man. By the end of the play, his passion is largely spent and it takes the deaths of both the queen and Laertes, his own imminent demise, and the obvious guilt of Claudius to move him to action. Had he acted immediately, everyone but Claudius would be alive.

And that's just one way of looking at this huge and deeply involving work. It is a revenge play, but an unconventional one. It's a demonstration of the power of theatrical art ("Speak the speech, I pray you" and "The play's the thing wherein I'll capture the conscience of the king."). It is a summation of the thoughts and feelings that all of share to some degree. It is a poetic and dramatic masterpiece.

With this play, Shakespeare ascended to a new height of dramatic invention. Taking, as was his custom, an older play (or plays), he transmutes much simpler material into a poetic drama and a character which have achieved mythic proportions. "Hamlet" was the first great tragedy to be produced in Europe in two thousand years and it remains the object of intense, scholarly study and its central role, the ambition of every serious actor. More has been written about Hamlet than any other fictional character - and more than all but a handful of living persons.

It is a sprawling play, accommodating a wide range of actions and emotions, contrasts and parallels, time and space. Simply choosing a performance text is demanding work. If the play were done in its entirety, including important variants, it would run between four and five hours.

If Shakespeare's play were looked at as an opera, its highlights would be the stirring arias - or monologues - it contains. After examining the plot, we'll look at some of these, in particular the celebrated "To be or not to be" speech and see how its question is resolved in the final act.

What makes the work so compelling is the all-encompassing scope of Hamlet's character and the richness of his inner life, revealed in these passages. Each person

can glimpse bits of himself or herself in Hamlet (several women have essayed the part on stage). Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous remark, "I have a smack of Hamlet," is something everyone could say.

Plot

The play opens on the heights of Elsinore Castle, A new watch arrives, bringing with them Horatio to witness the appearance of a ghost, a likeness of the recently-deceased King Hamlet. The ghost materializes, but says nothing. Horatio resolves to tell the king's son, young Hamlet, what has happened.

Only in the second scene do we meet young Hamlet and this only after the new king, Claudius, brother to the dead monarch, tell of his hasty marriage to his brother's widow, Gertrude, and gives Laertes, son of his counselor, Polonius, permission to return to college. At his mother's urging, Hamlet agrees not to return at college but to remain at court. After the stage empties, Hamlet gives vent to his depression. Horatio enters and tells of the ghost and the son resolves to see his father's shade that night.

As Laertes prepares to leave he advises his sister Ophelia to be wary of a relationship with Hamlet. Polonius enters and sends Laertes off with a string of paternal precepts. Picking up on Laertes' parting remark, Polonius finds out about Hamlet's interest in Ophelia and orders her to have nothing more to do with the young prince.

On the battlements that night, Hamlet waits with Horatio and the others for the ghost while the king carouses in the great hall below. Suddenly the ghost appears and beckons Hamlet to follow it. Hamlet orders the others to leave him alone and follows the ghost.

Once they are away from the others, the ghost speaks to Hamlet, telling him that he was murdered by his brother. He bids his son take revenge on Claudius, but not to punish the Queen. As the ghost disappears, the others appear and Hamlet makes them swear not to tell what they have seen. He further warns them that he may "put on an antic disposition."

In the next scene, Polonius sends one of his servants to spy on his son, to be sure of his behavior. Ophelia then enters and tells her father of Hamlet's strange, new behavior. He concludes that the prince has been driven mad by unrequited love and sets off to tell the king.

In the meantime, Claudius has sent for two of Hamlet's school companions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to have them spy on the prince to see if they can tell what has caused the change in his character. After they are dismissed, Polonius brings in ambassadors from Norway who seek permission for young Fortinbras to pass through Denmark to fight with Poland. When they are gone, Polonius tells Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet is mad for love of his daughter. He promises to bring Ophelia

together with Hamlet so that they may spy on them. As Hamlet approaches, the king and queen leave and Hamlet speaks to Polonius in ambiguous terms.

Rosencranz and Guildenstern return and are greeted by Hamlet, who quickly divines why they are there. They also tell him of the arrival of a group of traveling players, who are then ushered in by Polonius. Hamlet asks for a scene from a play he enjoyed. After the first player speaks his lines, Hamlet asks if they can perform "The Murder of Gonzago" that evening, adding some new lines that he will give them. The players agree and leave. In a soliloquy, Hamlet decides to use the play to prove Claudius' guilt.

Rosencranz and Guildenstern have had no luck in determining the cause of Hamlet's behavior. Everyone leaves but Claudius, Polonius and Ophelia. She is left alone while her father and the king hid behind an arras. Hamlet approaches, absorbed in thoughts of suicide. When he sees Ophelia, he treats her in a mildly abusive manner and leaves. The king is not convinced that love has anything to do with Hamlet's behavior and decides to send him off to England.

Hamlet advises the players on their craft and prepares for the performance. He cautions Horatio to watch the king for any sign that might betray his guilt. After the court assembles, the players perform a dumb show and then a spoken script, both of which parallel the murder of King Hamlet. Claudius rises from his throne in distress and the performance is halted.

As the court disperses, Hamlet tells Horatio he is now sure that the ghost has spoken the truth. Rosencranz and Guildenstern enter, only to be spurned by the prince. Polonius returns to summon Hamlet to his mother's room.

The king meets with Rosencranz and Guildenstern and tells them they are to take Hamlet to England immediately. Polonius enters and tells him that he will eavesdrop on Hamlet's visit to his mother. When he is left alone, Claudius reveals his guilt in a prayer, as he is praying, Hamlet passes by and is tempted to kill him on the spot, but thinks better of it and leaves.

Polonius informs the queen that Hamlet is coming and hides behind an arras to overhear their conversation. When Hamlet enters the room, he addresses the queen roughly. She calls out for help and Polonius echoes her cries. Hamlet runs his sword through the arras, killing Polonius. He then upbraids his mother with her hasty marriage to Claudius. As his temper rises, the ghost suddenly enters and urges him to his revenge. The queen cannot see the ghost and thinks her son is truly mad. But Hamlet reasons with her and gets her promise to avoid the king's bed. He leaves, dragging Polonius' body after him.

Claudius tells Gertrude that Hamlet must be dispatched to England and sends Rosencranz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet and Polonius' body.

The two friends track Hamlet down and take escort him to the king.

When questioned by the king, Hamlet tells where Polonius may be found. Claudius informs him he is being sent to England. Alone, the king reveals that his letters to England's king demand the immediate beheading of the young prince.

Fortinbras and his army pass across the stage. Hamlet sees them and berates himself for not having the ability to act as decisively as this warlike and ambitious young prince.

Horatio urges Queen Gertrude to see Ophelia who is in a distracted state. The girl enters, clearly deranged, singing snatches of old ditties. Claudius enters to witness the sad sight. As Ophelia exits with Horatio, there is a commotion at the door and Laertes enters, demanding to know what happened to his father. He is told of the murder and, when Ophelia reenters, he learns of her madness. After Gertrude and Ophelia leave, Claudius promises Laertes that he will be avenged.

Two sailors find Horatio and deliver Hamlet's letter from Hamlet which narrates his escape from his guardians and of his coming return to Denmark.

Claudius and Laertes plot how to kill Hamlet. Claudius suggests a fencing match in which Laertes will use an unblunted weapon. Laertes adds that he will poison the tip. To assure success, the king plans to serve Hamlet a poisoned cup during the fight. Queen Gertrude enters to tell of Ophelia's accidental drowning.

Two gravediggers are at work when Hamlet and Horatio enter. During a rambling exchange, Hamlet comments on death and the long-buried jester, Yorrick. A funeral procession comes into view and Hamlet learns that it is Ophelia's. When Laertes leaps into the grave, Hamlet reveals himself and wrestles with the youth. They are parted and Hamlet leaves.

Alone with Horatio, the much-changed Hamlet tells of the king's plot against him, how he found it out, and rewrote the instructions so that Rosencranz and Guildenstern were to be beheaded in his place. A foppish courtier, Osric, enters with news of a proposed fencing match between the prince and Laertes. Hamlet agrees, but tells Horatio that he has an ill feeling about his heart. Despite this foreboding, the match proceeds.

Hamlet wins the first pass. The king places a pearl - actually poison - in a cup and offers it to Hamlet. He refuses and the match continues. Hamlet scores another hit. The queen takes up the cup and drinks. Seeing the plan falling apart, Laertes strikes at Hamlet, drawing blood. In fury, Hamlet takes up the fight, exchanges swords with Laertes, and then wounds him. The queen collapses, telling Hamlet the drink was poisoned. Laertes tells Hamlet that both of them have been poisoned by the sword. Hamlet stabs the king and forces him to drink from the cup. Claudius dies and Hamlet

starts to swoon. Horatio attempts to drink as well, but Hamlet knocks the cup away, charging his friend to live and tell everyone what has transpired.

At this point, young Fortinbras enters and, viewing the death of all claimants to the throne, takes it for himself and orders a full military funeral for Hamlet.

The Monologues

Hamlet has often been called "The Melancholy Dane." There is more than melancholy in his first monologue; he is close to despair. His father died suddenly; his uncle usurped young Hamlet's rightful place as king; and his mother married his uncle with weeks of her husband's funeral. There does seem to be "something rotten in the state of Denmark." When left alone, he voices his thoughts:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead: nay, not so much, not two:
So excellent a king; that was, to this,
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!
Must I remember? why, she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on: and yet, within a month--
Let me not think on't--Frailty, thy name is woman!--
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears:--why she, even she--
O, God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourn'd longer--married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules: within a month:
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not nor it cannot come to good:
But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue.

These Act I thoughts, are echoed in the second, but with special emphasis on the immorality of suicide. Hamlet has been charged by his father's ghost to avenge his death, yet he cannot do it and is looking for a way out. Death once again seems alternative:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

Remember his state of mind, questioning whether to be or not to be. Hamlet himself will give us his answer in Act. In the meantime, the arrival of players at Elsinore jolts him out of his melancholy. He sees in them a means of settling an inner argument: Is it an honest ghost?

Every actor in the world must have read and re-read Hamlet's instruction to the players. It obviously summarizes Shakespeare's own attitudes toward the practice, nature, and value of his art. It is an actor's handbook in 28 lines:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumbshows and noise: I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it out-herods Herod: pray you, avoid it. Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so overdone is 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; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

And let those that play
your clowns speak no more than is set down for them;
for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to
set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh
too; though, in the mean time, some necessary
question of the play be then to be considered:

that's villanous, and shows a most pitiful ambition
in the fool that uses it. Go, make you ready.

You can build a successful career in theatre just by following Hamlet's - and
Shakespeare's - instructions.

There are two more powerful monologues in the play: "O what a rogue and peasant
slave am I" - a passionate outburst at his own inability to act; and "How all occasions
do inform against me" - spoken when he sets the example of Fortinbras, the man of
action, against his own inaction.

Why doesn't Hamlet slay Claudius at once? He voices his doubts, yet, in a flash of
anger, he could dispatch Polonius. When faced with the treachery of his school
friends, he could quickly arrange their deaths. What holds him back? Some find a key
in lines he speaks before meeting the ghost, when he deplores the drunkenness of the
Danish Court, something which has damaged the country's reputation:

So, oft it chanceth in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As, in their birth--wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin--
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit that too much o'er-leavens
The form of plausive manners, that these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,--
Their virtues else--be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo--
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault:

What was Hamlet's fault? Indecision? A delicacy of conscience? The point has been
argued since Shakespeare's time.

But let's close with a few lines spoken in the final scene. Earlier, he had said to his
friend, Horatio:

Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.--

During the course of the play, Hamlet has been buffeted by events and his own by
stormy conflicts; in effect, has been "passion's slave." Now, at the end, he is at

peace. When Horatio fearful that Hamlet might come to harm, urges him to forego the duel with Laertes, Hamlet's responds:

. . . . there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all.

By the play's end, he could answer his own question, "To be or not to be" by saying "let it be."

Sources

The history of the "Hamlet" text is as complex as the play itself. There are references to a "Hamlet" drama from 1589 on and most researchers believe that its history goes back even further.

The first reference to Shakespeare's version dates to July 16, 1602 when it was entered in the stationer's Register, probably to prevent unlicensed versions from being printed.

Despite this, an edition (Quarto 1) appeared in 1603. It was a pirated edition, perhaps assembled from the sides of actors who took the roles of Marcellus and Lucianus and Voltemand. It is a mutilated text, only 2,200 lines long, but it contains material not included in later texts. Among many differences, Polonius is named Corambis and the "To be or not to be" soliloquy comes earlier in the play.

It may well be that the First Quarto contains echoes on an earlier "Hamlet," one perhaps written by Thomas Kyd, the author of an earlier and very popular revenge play, "The Spanish Tragedy." This Ur-Hamlet, as it is called, was dismissively criticized by Thomas Nashe in 1589.

The Second Quarto was printed in 1604 or 1605 and is assumed to have been taken from Shakespeare's foul papers. It is the basis for modern editions of the play. The First Folio seems to have been taken from a playhouse manuscript; one or two removes from Shakespeare's autograph copy.

The First Folio has 85 lines missing from Q2, but lacks some 200 lines included in the latter.

Some scholars think Shakespeare rewrote the Ur-Hamlet and made additions later on. It is impossible to set an authoritative edition of the text, or to be certain just what

Shakespeare intended. Contemporary performance texts are based on Q2, with some stage directions from Q1 and lines from the First Folio.

The consensus seems to be that Shakespeare wrote the play after "Julius Caesar" in 1599 and, to judge from what commentators detect as contemporary references, revised it in 1601.

The origins of the story lie in remote Norse legends. The name comes from Amlothi, which means "desperate in battle," a name that implies some hint of madness.

All stage versions probably start with a 12th Century Scandinavian story told in the Third Book of the Latin "Historia Danica" by the Danish author Saxo Grammaticus. The tale was repeated and embellished by Francois de Belleforest in his 1570 "Histoires Tragiques."

Some of the elements common to these sources include the murder of a king by his brother, the subsequent marriage to the surviving queen, the young prince's pretended madness, the murder of a counselor, the deportation to England, the altered order and death of the prince's companions, his return to Denmark and the revenge killing of the king.

Saxo's Amleth is a brutal fellow and quick to take action. Belleforest's hero is somewhat closer to Shakespeare's, but neither version has anything like the Bard's complexity, subtlety, and psychological and poetic force.