

Resource Pack

Hamlet

By William Shakespeare

Young Vic

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1. HAMLET: AN INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one of the most famous plays in the world. It has been translated and performed all over the world, on stage and on screen. Quotations from the play have become embedded in the language we use today: '*neither a borrower nor a lender be*', '*suit the action to the word, the word to the action*', '*to be or not to be*', '*the lady doth protest too much methinks*' - all came from *Hamlet*. It has been a major influence on culture and on literature, from numerous critical studies, to new plays and stories based on the characters. And, for an actor, young Hamlet is a part that everyone seems to aspire to play.

The play was written sometime between 1599 and 1601. It is difficult to say precisely when, because publishing worked in a very different way then to now. It was not so easy to simply type, print and copy; all the texts would have been written by hand.

Three early version of *Hamlet* exist, called the First Quarto, the Second Quarto and the First Folio¹. The versions are all slightly different – some lines have been added or omitted, and some words are different. The first quarto of *Hamlet* was published in 1603 by Nicholas Ling and John Trundell, and printed by Valentine Simmes. It contains about half the amount of text of the second quarto, which was also published by Nicholas Ling in around 1604-5. The first folio, which included all of Shakespeare's works and was really the first Complete Works of Shakespeare was published in 1623 by Edward Blount and William & Isaac Jaggard. From these three versions, scholars and directors work to reconstitute the 'original' Hamlet, but it is almost impossible to know what the original *Hamlet* was exactly like.

¹ 'Quarto' and 'Folio' are names that actually refer to the size of the paper that the text was printed on: if you imagine a sheet of paper, fold it once in half so you have a rectangle, then fold it again into a square, then open it out and lay it flat, you have eight sections, four on the front and four on the back. This was called a quarto. If you just fold the paper once into a rectangle and then unfold it, you have four sections, two on the front and two on the back. This was called a folio. (Try it with a normal A4 sheet!).

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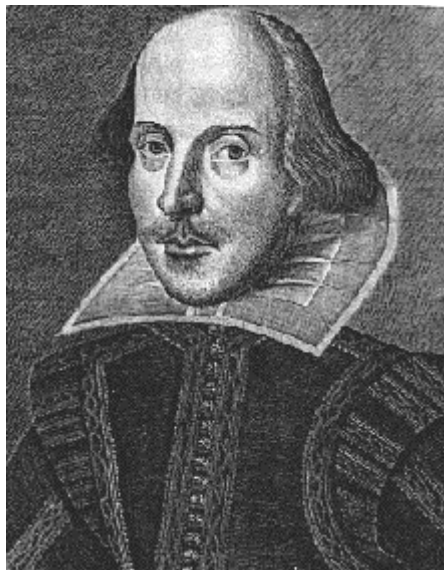
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2. SHAKESPEARE: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564 and died there in 1616 aged 52. There is no exact record of the date of his birth, only a record of his baptism, which was on 26th April 1564. His birthday is anecdotally celebrated on the 23rd April, the day of the traditional English festival of St George's.

He was the son of John Shakespeare, who was an alderman (similar to a local councillor) and Mary Arden who was the daughter of a local farmer, and he was the third of eight children. He went to the local grammar school where he would have learnt Latin and classics, and in November 1582 at the age of 18 married Anne Hathaway. She was 26 and apparently the marriage happened in haste – perhaps because their daughter Susanna was born just six months after. Two years later in 1585, they had twins, Hamnet and Judith.



William Shakespeare

Between 1585 and 1592, there are no records of what Shakespeare was doing and some scholars have called this 'the lost years'. Perhaps he went to London and worked as a stable hand for theatre owners to try and get into the theatre; perhaps he worked as a school teacher; perhaps he fled Stratford and disappeared into the city of London because he had been poaching deer from the local landowner.

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However in 1592, the first traces of his work in the London stage start to appear and from then until around 1614, scholars think he lived mainly in London, writing and acting with his company of players. After that, he probably retired to Stratford, where he could by then afford one of the most expensive houses in the town. He died there in 1616. His son Hamnet had died aged 11, and neither of his two daughters children married. So the Shakespeare line of descendents died when his grandchildren died.

In his will, he famously left his wife Anne his second best bed, though nobody knows if this was an insult or an act of love. Sometimes people would have saved their 'best' bed for their guests, meaning that the second best bed would have been the Shakespeare's marriage bed and therefore a gift with great sentimental value. Like so many things in Shakespeare's life, we do not really know, and can only speculate and make up our own version of what we think is true...

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3. SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

Shakespeare wrote 38 plays, between 1589 and 1613. Again, there has been a lot of scholarly research around whether he was really the author of these plays, whether he worked in collaboration with others, and indeed whether there were other plays he wrote that have not been recorded. However, the accepted list of Shakespeare's plays, with the approximate date they were written are:

1589–92	<i>Henry VI, Part 1</i>
1590–91	<i>Henry VI, Part 2</i>
1590–92	<i>Henry VI, Part 3</i>
1591–93	<i>Richard III</i>
1592–93	<i>Venus and Adonis</i> (Poem)
1592–94	<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>
1592–1609	<i>Sonnets</i> (Poems)
1593–94	<i>Titus Andronicus</i>
1593–94	<i>The Rape of Lucrece</i> (Poem)
1593–94	<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>
1594	<i>The Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>
1594	<i>Love's Labor's Lost</i>
1594–96	<i>King John</i>
1595	<i>Richard II</i>
1595	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
1595–96	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
1596	<i>Henry IV, Part 1</i>
1596–97	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
1596–97	<i>Henry IV, Part 2</i>
1597	<i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>
1598–99	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>
1599	<i>Henry V</i>
1599	<i>Julius Caesar</i>
1599–1600	<i>As You Like It</i>

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1599–01	<i>Hamlet</i>
1601	<i>The Phoenix and Turtle</i> (Poem)
1601–02	<i>Twelfth Night</i>
1601–02	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>
1602–03	<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>
1602–08	<i>A Lover's Complaint</i> (Poem)
1604	<i>Measure for Measure</i>
1604	<i>Othello</i>
1605	<i>King Lear</i>
1606	<i>Macbeth</i>
1606–07	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>
1606–08	<i>Pericles</i>
1607–08	<i>Coriolanus</i>
1607–08	<i>Timon of Athens</i>
1609–10	<i>Cymbeline</i>
1610–11	<i>The Tempest</i>
1611	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>
1613	<i>Henry VIII</i>
1613	<i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i>

So, Hamlet was written well into Shakespeare's career, when he already had a fair few plays under his belt!

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4. SYNOPSIS

This is a synopsis of *Hamlet* in its complete written form. To perform the whole of *Hamlet* uncut would take about 4 and a half hours. Some practitioners, like Peter Brook with *Qui Est Là*, Robert Wilson with *Hamlet: a Monologue*, and Robert Lepage with *Elsinore* have cut, spliced and added to the play so it was almost unrecognisable. In this version at the Young Vic, some cuts have been made.

Act 1: ‘Something’s rotten in the state of Denmark’

The play opens at midnight: in the dark, the cold, and the fog of the castle ramparts. From the start, there is a sense of haunting. On the surface, all is well in the court of Denmark, where there is an efficient new King making tactical political decisions and a propitious remarriage. But under the surface, something unfinished and unresolved has been buried. And as the play opens, it is starting to rise...

Scene 1 – The Castle Ramparts

- As the clock strikes midnight, soldiers Barnardo and Marcellus take over the night watch from their colleague Francisco. Horatio is with them.
- Barnardo and Marcellus tell Horatio about the ghost that has appeared twice at this time of night, but Horatio remains sceptical.
- The ghost suddenly appears, looking like the late King of Denmark. Terrified, Horatio nevertheless tries to question it, but the ghost disappears.
- Horatio interprets this vision as a bad omen: *‘This bodes some strange eruption to our state’* (line 69). He reminds the soldiers about the current political climate in Denmark: young Fortinbras, the nephew of the King of Norway, is threatening an invasion of Denmark to win back lands that his uncle surrendered to the late King Hamlet.
- The ghost returns and Horatio questions it again. He asks three times for the ghost to speak to him, but as the cock crows, the silent ghost disappears.
- They decide to tell young Hamlet what they have seen.

Scene 2 – The Court of Elsinore

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- The court is gathered to hear Claudius, the newly crowned King of Denmark and Hamlet's uncle, address them. He has just married Gertrude, the widow of the late King and Prince Hamlet's mother.
- He deals with court business, sending two ambassadors to Norway to deal with young Fortinbras' threatened invasion, and granting Laertes permission to return to university in Paris.
- He then addresses his nephew. Hamlet is still mourning his father's death, and his uncle and mother deem his behaviour to be stubborn and inappropriate.
- Left alone, Hamlet gives his first soliloquy: '*O that this too too solid flesh*' (line 129). He is disgusted by the new King, who he believes is not a patch on his valiant and noble father, and by his mother, whose behaviour he sees as deeply inappropriate, incestuous and grossly sexual.
- Horatio and the watchmen arrive to tell Hamlet about the ghost. He agrees to meet them later tonight and see if the ghost will talk with him.



Michael Sheen as Hamlet

Scene 3 – The Court of Elsinore

- Laertes is about to set sail for France. He warns his sister Ophelia about Hamlet who, although he has been spending a lot of time with Ophelia lately, Laertes thinks is immature and liable to change his affections.
- Polonius enters and says goodbye to his son giving him a barrage of advice.

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- As Laertes leaves, Ophelia promises to heed her brother's advice, but also warns him about double standards. Polonius asks what his advice was and she tells him it was about Hamlet. Polonius instructs her to stay away from Hamlet; she says she will obey.

Scene 4 – The Castle Ramparts

- Back on the ramparts that night, Hamlet has joined the watch with Marcellus and Horatio, while Claudius is drinking and partying with his court.
- The ghost appears and signals to Hamlet to follow him. His friend urges him not to go, frightened that this spirit might tempt him to death or to madness, but Hamlet follows.

Scene 5 – Another Part of the Castle Ramparts

- Alone with Hamlet, the ghost tells his story. He is the spirit of Hamlet's father, condemned to haunt the earth at night and walk in Purgatory by day. His death was not, as the populace believe, caused by the sting of a serpent. He was murdered by his brother, killed by poison poured in his ear whilst he slept in his orchard: *'The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown'* (line 39).
- The ghost commands Hamlet to avenge his murder. He must kill Claudius, but leave the incestuous Queen Gertrude to the pangs of her own conscience.
- As morning approaches, the ghost disappears entreating Hamlet to *'Remember me'* (line 91). Hamlet is left alone and passionately promises to fulfil his father's commandment.
- Horatio and Marcellus re-enter, and Hamlet swears them to secrecy, as the voice of the ghost booms to them from under the ground. He tells them he might choose to *'put on an antic disposition'* (line 172) in the future, and pretend to be mad, but that they should reveal nothing of what they know.

Act 2: 'By indirections find directions out'

The second act exposes this court's penchant for espionage: everyone is watching and being watched by everyone else. Polonius sends a man to spy on his son; Claudius sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on his nephew; Polonius sets up Ophelia as bait to spy on Hamlet. How can we know when anyone is genuinely being or expressing themselves when they are under constant surveillance? And into this mix, arrive the players, whose very craft is to 'seem' to be what they play.

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Scene 1 – The Court at Elsinore

- Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in Paris. He has money and letters to deliver, but Polonius also wants to find out how Laertes is behaving himself, whether his behaviour is good, or whether he is gambling, drinking and drabbing (visiting prostitutes). His tactics: *'By indirections find directions out'* (line 64).
- Ophelia enters to tell her father that Hamlet has just come to her room looking and acting very strangely: *'so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosèd out of hell / To speak of horrors'* (lines 49-50). Polonius concludes that it must be Ophelia's rejection of his love that has made Hamlet mad.



Michael Gould as Polonius and Vinette Robinson as Ophelia

Scene 2 – The Court at Elsinore

- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive, invited by the King and Queen to surreptitiously find out the reason for his *'transformation'* (line 5).
- The ambassadors return from Norway. The King has halted his nephew's expedition against Denmark, and Claudius has given permission for him to march his army through Denmark on his way to do battle in Poland.
- Polonius reveals to the King and Queen his deduction that Hamlet is mad for love of Ophelia. He reads out part of a letter from Hamlet to Ophelia, and advises Claudius that he will engineer a meeting between the two, on which they can eavesdrop.

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- Hamlet encounters Polonius on his way out and taunts him, calling him a fishmonger, which in Elizabethan double entendre means a whoremonger.
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to find Hamlet, who smells out that they have been sent for and demands they confess. However, they have brought news that the Players of the city are on their way, relegated from their permanent theatre and now a touring company.
- Hamlet welcomes the Players, and asks the First Player to deliver his favourite speech from the story of the Trojan War. It tells of Pyrrhus's murder of Priam and Hecuba's grief at her husband's death. It is agreed that the Players will perform a play the next evening called 'The Murder of Gonzago', and the First Player agrees to learn a short extra speech, written by Hamlet and inserted into the play.
- Alone, Hamlet gives his second soliloquy '*O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!*' (line 501). He berates himself for his cowardice and inaction in avenging his father's death, but he fears that the ghost may be a devil sent to damn him. He decides to use the play to clarify the situation – as it will closely resemble the true facts of his father's murder, if the King has a guilty reaction, he will know the ghost was telling the truth.

Act 3: 'The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king'

By the third act, everyone is acting up. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are acting the confidants, Ophelia is acting the virtuous daughter, the players are acting their show. And although he is acting mad, Hamlet still cannot act – even when the opportunity presents itself, he cannot enact his revenge.

Scene 1 – The Court at Elsinore

- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report back to the King and Queen: Hamlet would not tell them why he was acting so strangely, but was cheered up by the arrival of the players.
- Gertrude leaves, and, in an aside, Claudius reveals his guilt.
- Polonius sets up the meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet, and hides with the King so they can eavesdrop.
- Hamlet delivers his third soliloquy '*To be or not to be, that is the question*' (line 56) in which he reflects on death and morality. He meets Ophelia, is immediately suspicious and attacks her, and all women's, lack of honesty.
- Ophelia despairs at Hamlet's '*o'erthrown*' mind (line 144).

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- Claudius, who was watching, is alarmed by what he has seen and decides to avert danger by sending Hamlet off to England. Polonius urges him to give it one last chance to find out what is going on, by engineering and eavesdropping on yet another of Hamlet's meetings. This time he suggests Hamlet's mother Gertrude, tonight after they have watched the Players.

Scene 2 – The Court at Elsinore

- Before the play begins, Hamlet gives advice to the Players on how to deliver their speeches: *'Suit the action to the word, the word to the action'* he tells them (line 15).
- Hamlet, trusting his dearest friend, lets Horatio in on his plans to use the play to test the ghost's story and out Claudius' guilt. He asks him to keep a close watch on the King's reactions during the play.
- The King and his retinue enter to watch the performance. Hamlet sits by and continues to goad Ophelia, as well as Polonius and the King.
- The performance begins with a mimed sequence closely resembling the ghost's story of King Hamlet's murder and the wooing of his widow by his murderer. The play proper begins with the Player Queen promising her ailing husband that, after their 30 years of marriage, she will never remarry, even if he dies. Gertrude famously responds to Hamlet's question of how she likes the play that *'The lady doth protest too much methinks'* (line 211). When the character of Lucianus, the king's nephew, enters and pours poison into the sleeping Player King's ear, Claudius rises, halts the play and leaves with his retinue.
- Hamlet is euphoric: he thinks his plan has worked, that the ghost's story was true and that he has found the King's guilt out.
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to tell Hamlet how angry his uncle is and he vilifies them for playing him like a pipe.
- Hamlet is summoned to his mother's chamber by Polonius, and as everyone leaves the stage, Hamlet delivers his fourth soliloquy, rather in the style of the melodramatic Lucianus: *"tis now the very witching time of night"* (line 349).

Scene 3 – The Court at Elsinore

- Claudius, piqued by the play, tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that their next duty will be to escort Hamlet to England.

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- Polonius enters to let the King know that Hamlet is on his way to Gertrude's room and he will hide and eavesdrop on the conversation.
- Claudius attempts to pray for forgiveness, but cannot: *'My words fly up, my thoughts remain below / Words without thoughts never to heaven go'* (line 96-7).
- While the King is on his knees, Hamlet enters. Here is his opportunity to kill his father's murderer and enact his revenge. But, for some reason, he cannot do it: he justifies himself with the thought that to kill the King in prayer would guarantee his entry to heaven, and he does not want to afford that luxury to this villain. He gives his fourth soliloquy: *'Now might I do it'* (line 73).

Scene 4 – Gertrude's Closet

- In Gertrude's room, Polonius tells her that Hamlet is on his way, and hides himself behind a wall hanging.
- Gertrude begins to chide Hamlet for his bad behaviour, but he quickly turns the tables and violently attacks her for her own behaviour. Frightened, she calls for help and when Polonius calls out, Hamlet kills him.
- Hamlet vehemently attacks his mother for her sexual misconduct and her incestuous remarriage of a murderer. From her reaction, it seems that she does not know that the late King was murdered, but she confesses that her conscience is guilty.
- Suddenly, the ghost reappears to spur on Hamlet's *'almost blunted purpose'* (line 110). Seeing nothing herself, Gertrude thinks he must be hallucinating and therefore mad.
- Hamlet urges her not to tell Claudius that he is mad, but that he is mad only *'in craft'* (line 189). As Gertrude resolves not to tell her husband anything, Hamlet drags the body away.

Act 4: 'Diseases desperate grown by desperate appliance are relieved, or not at all'

Tension is rising, and the threat that Hamlet poses to the stability of the court and country, and to the status and lives of its rulers, is increasing. Claudius and Hamlet pit their wits against one another in a series of quick fire scenes. Claudius is plotting to get Hamlet killed in England, and Hamlet, spurred on again by accounts of the fiery actions of young Fortinbras, searches for the will to affect his revenge.

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Scene 1

- Claudius discovers a distraught Gertrude, who recounts that Hamlet in his madness has killed Polonius.
- As he had suspected, Claudius thinks Hamlet is a real danger. Using Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as escorts, he resolves to send him off to England.



Eileen Walsh as Rosencrantz and Adeel Akhtar as Guildenstern

Scene 2

- Hamlet has hidden Polonius' body, but won't tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern where. Instead he teases and goads them once again.

Scene 3

- Claudius confronts Hamlet about Polonius' murder. Hamlet responds with dark humour telling him Polonius is at supper '*Not where he eats, but where he is eaten*' (line 19). Death is a leveller. Claudius tells his errant nephew that he is being sent to England for his own good.
- When he is alone, Claudius reveals that his actual plan is to have Hamlet killed on arrival in England.

Scene 4

- There is a reminder of the sub-plot of Fortinbras, the young Prince who marches through with his army and sends a Captain on to greet the Danish King. Hamlet meets the Captain, and

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questioning him, discovers that they are marching on Poland to do battle over a tiny piece of worthless land.

- Hamlet delivers his fifth and final soliloquy *'How all occasions do inform against me'* (line 32) again berating himself that while whole armies are prepared to die defending a worthless piece of land, he cannot muster the will to enact his revenge his own father's murder.

Scene 5 – The Court at Elsinore

- Horatio and a courtier implore Gertrude to speak with Ophelia who is *'distract'* and *'needs be pitied'* (line 2-3).
- Alone for the only time in the play, Gertrude confesses she feels sick with guilt.
- Ophelia enters, followed by Claudius, singing about death and betrayal.
- Claudius is alarmed and concerned that this series of misfortunate events is starting to cause civil unrest. And, when Laertes bursts in, returned from France, incensed about his father's death and the lack of a proper funeral, and demanding vengeance on whoever is the murderer, he is backed by a riot of supporters who want him to be King.
- Claudius coolly explains to Laertes the circumstances and the fact that he is not responsible for Polonius' death. They are interrupted by Ophelia who brings flowers and herbs and again sings about the finality of death.

Scene 6

- Horatio is sought out by a sailor, who comes in to deliver a letter from Hamlet. Horatio reads the letter. It tells of Hamlet's kidnapping by pirates, asks Horatio to direct the sailor to the King to deliver another letter and to then join Hamlet, which he does.

Scene 7

- Claudius has been telling Laertes about Polonius' murder and his fears for his own life at the hands of Hamlet. He explains that he sent him away, rather than having him tried for treason, to spare Gertrude's grief and because of Hamlet's popularity with the general public. But he intimates that Laertes' revenge will come.
- They are interrupted by a messenger delivering the letter from Hamlet, which reads that he will return, alone, tomorrow.

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- Sped on by this news, Claudius and Laertes hatch a plan to kill Hamlet as if by accident. Claudius will invite Hamlet to fence against Laertes – an invitation which he knows the competitive Hamlet will accept. Laertes will poison the point of his sword and Claudius will invite Hamlet to drink from a poisoned chalice.
- Gertrude enters and reports in her *'There is a willow grows askant a brook'* (line 166) speech that Ophelia has drowned.

Act 5: 'The readiness is all'

For the first time, the action moves away from the court at Elsinore, into the black humour of the graveyard. Hamlet returns after fate has extraordinarily intervened to save him from death in England. Something about this escape has changed him - he returns with a new understanding and a new acceptance. He accepts the challenge of the final fencing duel, and in a high octane physical sequence, Hamlet, his mother and stepfather, and Laertes, all avenge and are avenged for a father's death, murder and are murdered, realise something true, grieve and die.

Scene 1 – The Graveyard

- Two Gravediggers are at work digging a grave, joking together on the theme of suicide, death and the propriety of Christian burial.
- As one exits to fetch wine, Hamlet enters with Horatio. The Gravedigger continues to dig up skull after skull from the earth, and finds the skull of Hamlet's old friend and court jester Yorick, Hamlet joins the darkly humorous musings on death, the leveller.
- Ophelia's funeral cortege arrives and by the mutedness of the ceremony Hamlet knows it is the funeral of a suicide. When he sees Gertrude scattering flowers on her hoped-for daughter in law's grave, and Laertes leaping into that grave, he realises it is Ophelia who has died. Hamlet proclaims that he really did love Ophelia, and the two men attack each other over the grave.

Scene 2

- Hamlet tells Horatio the story of his travels: on the boat to England, an ill-feeling led him to intercept the letter that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were carrying, which is how he discovered Claudius' instruction for England to kill him on arrival. He replaced the letter with another one,

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signed and sealed with the signet of his father, instructing instead the immediate beheading of the emissaries themselves.

- Hamlet vows to deal with the murderous Claudius, and expresses his regret at his treatment of Laertes: after all, he can empathise with a young man grieving the loss of his father.
- Osric, a courtier, arrives with Claudius' proposal of a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet. He has bet that, in a dozen passes, Laertes will not beat Hamlet by more than three hits.
- Hamlet accepts the challenge, telling Horatio he has been practising his fencing. He admits that he has a strange foreboding sense, but somehow, he has an attitude of calm and acceptance of the inevitability of his death: *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* (line 193-5); he tells Horatio.
- The Court assembles for the match. Hamlet takes Laertes' hand and asks for his forgiveness. Laertes says he accepts it, but they must still duel for the sake of his honour.
- They prepare to play. The King calls for wine and drops a pearl into one cup saying that if Hamlet wins the first or second point, he will drink to his health.



Benedict Wong as Laertes and Michael Sheen as Hamlet

- The game begins. Hamlet wins the first point, but wants to play another round before he drinks. He wins a second point, and in celebration Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup. They play on. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword, then in the scuffle they exchange swords and Hamlet wounds Laertes. The Queen falls. Claudius claims she is swooning because of the fight, but just before dying she tells Hamlet *'I am poisoned'* (line 290). Hamlet calls treachery and calls

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for the doors to be locked. But Laertes falls, confesses the plot and tells Hamlet that both their wounds will prove fatal. Hamlet finally runs at the King, wounding him with the poisoned sword, and he dies. Laertes begs and receives Hamlet's forgiveness as he dies. Horatio in his grief picks up the cup to drink poison, but Hamlet urges him to stay live on and tell the story.

- As he dies, Hamlet hears the approach of a marching army and gives young Fortinbras his blessing to become King.
- Young Fortinbras enters, returning from Poland at the same time as an ambassador from England brings the news to the King that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio prepares to tell the world the story of what has happened. Fortinbras orders a military funeral for Hamlet, and his soldiers fire a military tribute.

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5. CHARACTERS

The Older Generation

The Ghost of King Hamlet

Hamlet's father, the former King of Denmark, who was murdered whilst sleeping in his orchard and returns from the grave to demand revenge

Queen Gertrude

Hamlet's mother, former wife of King Hamlet, who has retained her role as Queen of Denmark by marrying her former brother-in-law Claudius

Claudius

Brother of King Hamlet, uncle of Hamlet and new husband of Gertrude, who has just been crowned King of Denmark

Polonius

Father of Laertes and Ophelia, and an advisor to the King

The Younger Generation

Prince Hamlet

Son of Hamlet and Gertrude, and heir to the throne; a former student at Wittenburg University, now remaining at Elsinore

Horatio

Hamlet's best friend, also a student at Wittenburg

Laertes

Brother to Ophelia and son of Polonius; studying in Paris

Ophelia

Sister to Laertes and daughter of Polonius; possible lover or confidant to Hamlet

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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Childhood friends of Hamlet

Prince Fortinbras

The heir to Norway's crown and a military leader

Other Characters

The Players

A troupe of actors who arrive at Court to present their plays

Reynaldo

A servant from Polonius' retinue – in Shakespeare's time, noblemen like Polonius would have had an entourage of men who were paid to look be in service to them

Marcellus, Barnardo and Francisco

Guards and watchmen

Voltemand and Cornelius

Ambassadors of the Court

Osric

A servant in the King's retinue

Gravedigger

An old man, outside the jurisdiction of the Court, who has been a sexton for 23 years, and whose job would be to maintain and look after the buildings and grounds of the church.

Clown

The gravedigger's companion

Captain

A captain in Prince Fortinbras' Norwegian army

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6. CHRONOLOGY OF THE PLAY

There are numerous references to time in the play, from which we can piece together an idea of when the events are taking place. Of course, these references are often from a character's point of view, so it is debateable how far we can rely on them. Hamlet, for example, clearly exaggerates when he comments in the Mousetrap scene:

Hamlet: ... look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours'

Ophelia: Nay, 'tis twice two months my lord. (Act 3, Scene 2, Lines 112-113)

But here is an idea:

Before The Play Begins

About 30 Years Before

Old Fortinbras of Norway challenges Old Hamlet to battle. Old Fortinbras is killed and, according to the law, Old Hamlet takes control of his territories. On the same day, Prince Hamlet is born

We can piece this together from the Gravedigger's scene:

Hamlet: ...How long hast thou been a grave-maker?

Gravedigger: ...I came to't that day that our last king Hamlet overcame Fortinbras... It was that very day that young Hamlet was born...I have been sexton here man and boy thirty years....this skull hat lien you i'th'earth three-and-twenty years....this same skull, sir, was, sir, Yorick's skull...

(Act 5, Scene 1, Lines 56-100)

It suggests that Hamlet was born 30 years ago, and that Yorick died 23 years ago, when Hamlet was 7.

However, in the different versions of Hamlet the Gravedigger tells us different things. In the First Folio edition the line reads *I have bin sixeteen heere...* and in the First Quarto edition, *I have been sexton here*

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*man and boy thirty years is missing, and instead of 23 years he says, here's a scull hath been here this dozen year.*²

The Gravedigger is also a 'clown' character: intended to be darkly humorous and to appeal especially to the groundlings who could not afford seats in the theatre. So, again, how much we can take his word as true is debateable.

Perhaps the age of the actor playing Hamlet also affected Shakespeare's decision about how much time has passed since the Gravedigger has been in his job.

Between One and Two Months Before

Claudius kills Old Hamlet. Prince Hamlet returns from Wittenberg. Old Hamlet is buried. Claudius assumes the throne. Claudius and Gertrude marry.

In his soliloquy *O, that this too too solid flesh*, Hamlet gives us some clues as to timing. He suggests that it was about two months since Old Hamlet died:

*...That it should come to this,
But two months dead (1.2.138-9)*

He also gives some clues as to when his mother remarried:

*A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she –
... married with my uncle
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules – within a month...
(1.2.147 onwards)*

But, it is a grieving and a seething Hamlet who is revealing this information. He is clearly deeply affected by his father's sudden death and his mother's inappropriate behaviour. In fact, Hamlet makes three references to time in the speech, and each one gets shorter: from *'two months dead – nay not so*

² See introduction for more on the different folios of the play

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much, not two, it becomes *'a little month'*, and then *'within a month'*. Hamlet is he making a point about his mother's disloyalty and fickleness – so again, there may well be a touch of the hyperbole.

Before the Opening of the Play

In Norway, Prince Fortinbras begins to round up troops against Denmark to regain Old Fortinbras's lost territory.

Prince Hamlet starts some kind of courtship of Ophelia. There is no concrete evidence in the text of the play as to when the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet begins - this is something that each director and cast will have to decide for themselves and will affect how their scenes are played.

Two Nights Before the Play

The watchmen see the ghost walking and tell Horatio



The Hamlet rehearsal room

The Play Begins

Just After Midnight

The Ghost appears to Horatio and the guards

Barnardo: *Tis now struck twelve*' (1.1.7)

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The Next Day

Claudius addresses the Court

He sends his ambassadors to Norway

Laertes leaves for France

That Night

Hamlet: ...I will watch tonight

Perchance 'twill walk again.' (1.2.241-2)

The Ghost appears to Hamlet and demands his revenge, setting in motion the main thrust of the play, including Hamlet's 'antic disposition'.

Approximately Three Months Later

It is in 'The Mousetrap' scene that Ophelia corrects Hamlet's sense of time and suggests that about four months have passed since Old Hamlet's death and therefore around two to three months since the beginning of the play:

Hamlet: ... look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours'

Ophelia: Nay, 'tis twice two months my lord. (3.2.112-113)

During this period Hamlet has been acting mad and Ophelia has been rejecting his letters and company.

As Act 2 begins, Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in France.

Hamlet appears in Ophelia's rooms:

'...so piteous in purport

As if he had been loosed out of hell

To speak of horrors..' (2.1.80-2)

The ambassadors return from Norway.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive.

The players arrive and Hamlet sets up 'The Mousetrap' play.

The Next Night

'The Mousetrap' is performed:

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Hamlet: *'...we'll hear a play tomorrow... We'll ha'it tomorrow night.'* (2.2.490-3)

Immediately after the aborted play, Claudius conscience is piqued – Hamlet overhears him, but cannot kill him in cold-blood.

Hamlet confronts his mother and, in a fit of rage, murders Polonius

Claudius decides to ship Hamlet off to England, and gives a letter to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to deliver which commands that Hamlet be killed.

The Next Day

Hamlet leaves for England.

He meets the Captain of Fortinbras's army, who are marching to battle over a small piece of land in Poland.

One or Two Days Later (off stage)

Hamlet discovers the letter from Claudius with their instructions for him to be killed, whilst on board the ship to England. He destroys the letter and in its place, writes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be put to death. Then, *'[e]re we were two days old at sea'* (4.6.13), the ship is attacked by pirates and he is taken prisoner. He reveals this in his letter to Horatio which we are read later in Act 4.

Two Months Later

Time passes between Hamlet's departure for England and the next series of actions, which include Laertes' return from France and Ophelia's descent into madness. We might assume this to be around the length of time it would have taken word of Polonius' death to have reached Laertes in France and time for him to voyage back to Denmark.

Also, when Claudius talks to Laertes about the duel, he says that

'...Two months since

Here was a gentleman of Normandy' (4.7.80-1) who had a conversation with Hamlet about what a fine fencer Laertes was. So we can assume that two months ago, Hamlet not yet left for England.

So, at Act 4, scene 5, two months have passed when the King and Queen and a just-returned Laertes witness Ophelia in her 'madness'.

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Horatio, Claudius and Gertrude receive letters from Hamlet saying he will return tomorrow.

Claudius conspires with Laertes for Hamlet's death.

Ophelia drowns.



John Everett Millais's 1851 painting Ophelia, which depicts her death

The Next Day

If we assume that Hamlet was accurate in his letter saying he would be returning 'tomorrow', Act 5 starts the next day.

Hamlet returns via the graveyard and the gravediggers. Ophelia's funeral cortege arrives and Hamlet confronts Laertes.

Hamlet tells Horatio how he has averted Claudius's murderous plot on the way to England.

Osric invites Hamlet to the duel with Laertes.

They duel: Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius and Hamlet are all killed.

Fortinbras arrives in Elsinore, victoriously returning from Poland.

- ❖ Using this information, and informed by your own decisions about time in the play, try creating your own timeline on a big piece of flip chart paper. Draw a line from one end to the other, and start filling in what happens when in terms of the action of the play. There are points in the play when a long period of time passes (eg between Act 1 and Act 2, after Hamlet has seen the Ghost and while he is pretending to be mad) and times when things happen in quick succession (eg the Players' arrival, the play, Hamlet's killing of Polonius, and his confronting of his mother). What do you notice about the structure of the play?

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7. YOUNG VIC CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

The Players:

Guildenstern/Francisco	Adeel Akhtar
Horatio	Hayley Carmichael
Claudius	James Clyde
Gertrude	Sally Dexter
Marcellus/Player/Captain	Callum Dixon
Barnardo/Player King/Gravedigger	Pip Donaghy
Polonius	Michael Gould
Ophelia	Vinette Robinson
Hamlet	Michael Sheen
Rosencrantz/Nurse	Eileen Walsh
Laertes	Benedict Wong

The Creative Team:

Direction	Ian Rickson
Design	Jeremy Herbert
Costume	Nicky Gillibrand
Music	Stephen Warbeck
Light	Adam Silverman
Sound	Gareth Fry
Choreography	Maxine Doyle
Casting	Sam Jones CDG
Wigs	Campbell Young
Fight	Kate Waters
Voice	Patsy Rodenburg
Assistant Direction	Elle While

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8. 10 FACTS ABOUT *HAMLET*

1. *Hamlet* is the most widely performed play in the world. It is estimated that it is being performed somewhere every single minute of every day.
2. *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play and uncut would take between 4 and 5 hours to perform. Hamlet has 1530 lines, the most of any character in Shakespeare.
3. One of the earliest re-mounts of *Hamlet* was on board a ship called The Dragon, anchored off the coast of Sierra Leone in 1607.
4. It is believed that Shakespeare appeared in the play as the Ghost at the Globe.
5. In the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of *Hamlet* in 2009, David Tennant used a real skull as a prop in the gravedigger scene. The skull had belonged to the composer André Tchaikovsky who bequeathed it to the RSC when he died in 1982 'for use in theatrical performance'. David Tennant was the first actor to use the skull on stage in a performance.
6. The first actor to play Hamlet was Richard Burbage, the lead actor in Shakespeare's company, The King's Men.
7. The castle in which the play is set really exists. It is called Kronborg castle and was built in the Danish port of Helsingør in 1420s by the Danish king, Eric of Pomerania.
8. At the end of every play performed at the Globe, four dancers, two dressed as women, would perform an upbeat, bawdy song and dance routine called a jig - even if the play was a tragedy like *Hamlet*.
9. Where now we say 'I'm going to see a play' in Elizabethan times, people talked about 'going to hear a play'.

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10. Shakespeare advertises his own work in the play. When Polonius interrupts the players and proclaims that he enacted Julius Caesar and was '*accounted a good actor*' in Act 3 scene 2, he is reminding the audience that he will soon be starring in Shakespeare's production of *Julius Caesar*.

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9. ELIZABETHAN THEATRE AND THE CONTEXT OF THE PLAY

Elizabethan Theatre - Popular Theatre

The way plays were presented in Shakespeare's era was very different from what we experience in the theatre today. Theatre in the Elizabethan era was a hugely popular, social event that spanned different social classes. With no television, radio, internet, theatre was one of the main forms of entertainment – along with other live events like bearbaiting and cock-fighting – and was really interactive. Actors on the stage would be competing with the audience shouting, jeering and heckling, throwing tomatoes onto the stage, and joining in the performance. It was real 'popular' theatre. Shakespeare's great skill was to write plays that appealed to the hecklers in the pit at the same time as the royal patrons in the stalls.



Queen Elizabeth I of England, who reigned during Shakespeare's time

The Playhouse

The origins of Elizabethan theatre start with itinerant musicians, mummers, players of morality and mystery plays. A bit like wandering minstrels, these bands of players would move around from town to town, manor house to castle, literally singing for their supper, acting out stories and trying to draw in an audience, perhaps like buskers or street performers might today. Eventually, the players began constructing temporary stages and putting them up in the courtyards of taverns, or inn-yards, playing to

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an outside crowd. It was not until 1576 that there was a permanent theatre in London, when actor, manager and theatrical entrepreneur, James Burbage (father of the actor, Richard Burbage) decided to capitalize on the growing popularity of plays. He managed to get a lease on a piece of land and permission to build a theatre – which was called, simply, 'The Theatre' and stood in Shoreditch. In the 1580's, Shakespeare became a member of the resident company of the theatre, which would later become the Lord Chamberlain's and then The King's Men. Over the next 20 years, a series of other theatres sprung up. They were huge – with capacities of up to 3000 people – that's about 6 times the size of the main house at the Young Vic which can house about 450 people. Huge, rough and rowdy, they were constantly being shut down by the puritanical elders of the city because of the threat of bubonic plague as well as the general debauched behaviour of the audiences.



James Burbage

The Globe

The lease on the Theatre was due for renewal in 1596, but due to disputes and the death of James Burbage, the company was forced out. They performed for two years in the neighbouring Curtain Theatre, but then decided that if they could not rent the ground that the building stood on, they would have to just move the building. In 1598, they leased a plot near rival theatre, the Rose on the south bank of the river outside the jurisdiction of the city of London, demolished the Theatre and carried its timber piece by piece over the river to build a new theatre, the Globe. It opened in 1599. Several members,

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including Shakespeare, became shareholders, having put in the money to fund the scheme, and this became the permanent home for Shakespeare's company of actors.

The Company of Actors

In 1559, Queen Elizabeth had issued a proclamation that all players must be licensed. This meant that the earlier informal troupes of wandering actors were replaced by new touring companies with patronage – support - from high ranking courtiers in Elizabeth's retinue. Shakespeare's company was patronised by the Lord Chamberlain, and therefore called The Lord Chamberlain's Men, until James I succeeded Elizabeth in 1603, when they became, very prestigiously, The King's Men.

Unsurprisingly, there were no women in the King's Men – and no women in any theatre company. Female roles would all have been played by boys, who entered adult companies as apprentices aged 10 – 13, and would play the female roles up until the age of around 20. There were also child acting companies which these evolved from a tradition of grammar school performances and choirboy practises, and they were particularly popular with the Royal patrons: when Rosencrantz talks of the '*eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top of question and are most tyrannically clapped for't*' (Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 315-6), he is clearly referencing the child acting companies, who were very real rivals in terms of audiences, patrons and profit.

Producing Plays

With established playhouses and licensed, patronised companies of actors, there came a real need for dramatists to produce the plays that would fill these new establishments and satisfy the audiences hunger for novelty.

Writers like Shakespeare did not compose their plays sitting at home, working in isolation and coming up with the whole thing in advance. First, they had to present their ideas for the plot and the main characters to the rest of their company. If the lead actors and manager liked it, they would give a down payment for the play to be written. Knowing the company well, the different actors' strengths, likes and dislikes, the characters would often be written with the specific actors in mind. Richard Burbage, for example, who was a lead actor in The King's Men, had a prodigious memory for learning lines – and it is thought that Hamlet, with his 1530 lines, was written for him.

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Then the play would be written, by hand, and distributed to the actors - rather than getting a copy of the whole play, each actor would receive just the lines of his own part, written out on a piece of parchment to learn. He would have no idea who else was on stage or what happened in between his scenes until the rehearsals started. Where now we have a strong concept of the director, who takes overall responsibility for the direction, design and overall coherence of a play and works in rehearsal to bring this all together, it would have been up to the individual actor's in Shakespeare's theatre to deal with his own entrances, exits, 'blocking', songs, movement and costumes. Once written, plays entered the repertoire, and each day, the company would present a different play, rehearsing it in the morning and performing it in the afternoon.

All these conditions meant that theatre in Shakespeare's time, was a wholly different experience. Productions were rough and ready, spontaneous and living, and adapting to the needs and demands of their audience. There was no elaborate set, no scene changes, no lighting, no manufactured sound effects. This was a theatre of shared imagination, where through his words alone, the actor transported the audience to the foggy ramparts of Elsinore castle, the raging stormy seas, or the magical forest of Arden.

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Picture of the Globe



Here is a picture of what theatres like The Globe looked like. Audience who could afford a seat, sat in tiers of stalls that created a full round amphitheatre, completed with the tiring house. Groundlings were the poorer people, who stood in the pit close to the stage for the performance. The tiring house was a backstage area where the actors dressed and rested, and then entered the stage through the two doors at the front. There were possibilities of using different levels in the Globe – the stage, where most of the action would have happened, but also the upper floor in the tiring house, which would have been useful for scenes like the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, and also the under stage space. Through using a trap door, things could appear or disappear from the stage, for example, the gravediggers may have used the trap door as Ophelia's grave, into which Laertes and Hamlet leap and fight. Knowing that an actor could literally get under the stage gives a bit of a theatrical in-joke to the scene in which Hamlet

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asks his friends to swear not to reveal what they have seen of the Ghost, and references the booming echo of this *fellow in the cellarage* (Act 1, Scene 5, Lines 151).

Shakespeare's Globe stood on Bankside until 1613, when during a performance of Henry VIII, a stage cannon set light to the thatched roof and the theatre burned down. Of course, now you can see and feel what the Globe would have been like, by visiting the reconstructed Globe on the Southbank.

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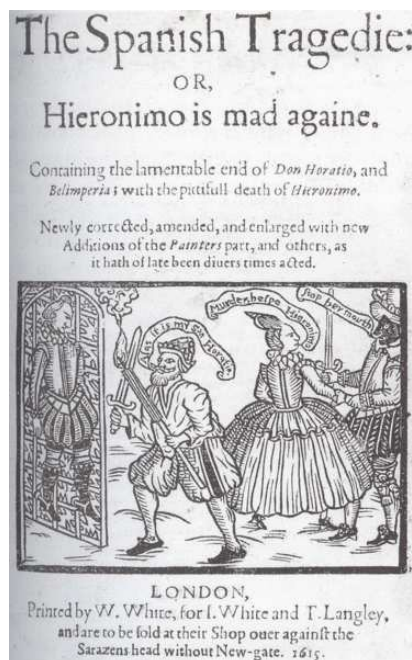
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10. THE TRADITION OF REVENGE TRAGEDY

Hamlet can loosely be said to belong to a theatrical genre known as revenge tragedy. It was immensely popular in Elizabethan theatre from around the 1580's to the 1640's and tended to always include similar elements: a wronged avenger, ghosts, murders, madness, disguise, a play-within-a-play, plotting, suspense, intrigue, and grisly crescendo of on-stage violence.

Thomas Kyd wrote *The Spanish Tragedy* in around 1585, and is credited with being the initiator of this new genre. His play was immensely popular, bringing a classical style revenge play to a popular audience for the first time, and it initiated a long line of revenge tragedies which, in their earliest forms, were real crowd pleasers, restaged again and again.



Title page of The Spanish Tragedie

Scholars believe that these tragedies were initially influenced by the Roman playwright and philosopher Seneca whose works from the 1st Century AD started to be translated and performed in 16th Century England. The most popular were based on Greek mythical stories and characters, for example, Thyestes (who ate his own children), Medea (who killed her own children) and Agamemnon (who was murdered by his wife's lover). They were large scale, spectacular performances in which passions and stakes ran sky high. Similarly, it is sometimes thought that Italian novella being translated at the time also influenced

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revenge tragedy with their tales of Machiavellian villains, of sexual deceit and bloody vendettas. Other scholars also chart the influence of the medieval tradition of *contemptus mundi* on the genre of revenge tragedy. This means 'contempt of the world' and was a tradition preoccupied with the ephemerality of our mortal lives, the split between the flesh and the spirit, and the inevitability of death. The image of the *memento mori* – a man holding a skull as he contemplates his death – was the emblem of this.

Why was it so popular?

The Elizabethan period was a time of great change in English history – society was shifting from the Medieval period, with its codes of private revenge, into the new Tudor era, with the construction of a sense of statehood and new centralised codes of law and order. There was an accompanying shift in the idea of justice. The private code of vengeance, when individuals and families had used violence to settle their own grievances, was being replaced by an emerging, organised system of law. Perhaps revenge tragedy was so popular at this time because the public needed a place to think about, maybe even to mourn, the passing of the old ways of social organisation and understanding, into the new ways.

Hamlet - Shakespeare's Response

Whether this was the case or not, it was out of this increasingly popular genre that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. The storyline was probably not original – after *The Spanish Tragedy*, Kyd is believed to have written a play called *Ur-Hamlet*, based on a legend called Amleth. No copies of this play survive, but the King's men probably bought the text from Kyd and performed it before Shakespeare then reworked it into this new version: *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

Many of the stock elements are still there: ghostly visitations, revenge, madness, and a man holding the decaying skull bone of the once living royal jester and ruminating on his own mortality. However, *Hamlet* is much more complex, sophisticated and human than a conventional Elizabethan revenge tragedy bloodbath. Whereas in *The Spanish Tragedy*, revenge is a straight-forward non-negotiable duty that a family member is honour bound to perform, for *Hamlet*, revenge is factually and morally ambiguous. Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* not as the stereotype of an avenging protagonist, but as a psychologically defined human man, with real hopes, fears and emotions. And his achievement was to satisfy the audiences of the time with a barnstorming, bloody revenge tragedy at the same time as touching the reality of the human condition through the psychological depths of his characters.

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But Hamlet, unlike earlier revenging protagonists, really wrestles with the problem of revenge. He is a complex, psychologically real man forced into an extra-ordinary and super-natural situation. Hamlet feels the weight of his father's indictment and knows what custom demands of him, but his individual sense of morality and ethics and his own intellectual rigour, make him question those demands. So, in some ways, Hamlet the avenger is an emblem of a clash between an old and a new world order.



Yorick's skull in the Young Vic production of Hamlet

Catholicism & the Protestant Reformation

The tradition of the revenge tragedy came from countries like Spain and Italy which were then, as now, staunchly Catholic. However, England in Shakespeare's day was experiencing religion upheaval. The country had also been Catholic, but after the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's, was now violently alternating between Catholic rule and the Protestant rule, depending on the preference of the ruler of the day. In the play, Hamlet and Horatio have been at university in Wittenberg, which was the German university town from where Martin Luther started the Protestant revolt. The ongoing battles between the old religion and the new religion would also have been explicit Shakespeare's audience, and again Hamlet is a figure who stands questioning at the bridge between the old and the new.

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11. MADNESS & MELANCHOLY

Hamlet's madness is a much debated element of the play, especially the question of whether his madness is 'real' or feigned. But as Polonius tells us *'to define true madness, / What is't but to be nothing else but mad?'* (Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 93-4) We can never fully get inside the mind of another, and never fully understand the unbearable pressures of a man in Hamlet's position; behaviour that may look 'mad' from an outside perspective may appear entirely logical and sensible inside the mind of a 'madman'. Also, there is an accepted social code that labels what it is to be rational, sane and within the boundaries of 'normal'; if a person chooses to flout those conventions, does it necessarily make him or her mad? Hamlet is certainly an expert in flouting social mores and conventions, and at Elsinore - especially after the ghost has appeared and revealed the truth under the veneer - perhaps he has good, sane reason to.



Vinette Robinson as Ophelia and Michael Sheen as Hamlet

Madness in Elizabethan Times

In Elizabethan thought, an individual's emotions, behaviours and health were understood to be affected by a number of internal and external causes, notably the balance of bodily fluids inside her or him. The four liquids were black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and water. When the four were well balanced, the individual was healthy, effective and optimally functioning; when they were out of balance, the result was illness, including mental illness. Black bile was the substance thought to be responsible for melancholia, so an excess of black bile might have been understood as the physical cause of depression and mental ill health.

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The following chart shows the four humours with the corresponding qualities, characteristics, elements, and organs where the fluid was produced:-

Humour	Season	Element	Organ	Quality	Ancient Name	Characteristics
Blood	Spring	Air	Liver	Warm & Moist	Sanguine	Courageous, hopeful, amorous
Yellow Bile	Summer	Fire	Gall Bladder	Warm & Dry	Choleric	Easily angered, bad tempered
Black Bile	Autumn	Earth	Spleen	Cold & Dry	Melancholic	Despondent, sleepless, irritable
Phlegm	Winter	Water	Brain & Lungs	Cold & Moist	Phlegmatic	Calm, unemotional

Hamlet shows qualities of a man with too much black bile, despondent, sleepless and irritable; a melancholic, or a man suffering melancholy.

Those with a severe imbalance who went 'mad', might have been unlucky enough to end up in Bedlam. Bedlam was a notorious institution for the mentally ill that was a fixture in London from the 13th Century onwards – a hospital where abuse, appalling conditions, and forced incarceration were the norm. The playwright Nathaniel Lee who lived in the mid-late 1600's was in Bedlam for five years, and famously reported *that 'They called me mad, and I called them mad, and damn them, they outvoted me'*².

Power and the Fool

It seems that certain people make the rules about what is 'madness' and what is not this, and who sets the 'norm' is always linked to power. This is key in Hamlet. He cannot expose Claudius' crime without destabilising the whole power structure of the court. But, by feigning or even being mad, Hamlet can tangentially expose the King and court's corruption. For example, in feigning madness, he can rip

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bethlem_Royal_Hospital#cite_note-0

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Polonius to shreds, telling him he is a meddling, dull, unattractive old fool (Act 2, Scene 2, Line 190 onwards). It is uncomfortable for Polonius, but Hamlet's 'madness' absolves him of responsibility for what he is saying and doing. Likewise, it is virtually impossible, given the subservience of the court, for Hamlet to speak out against his uncle and mother's marriage, but he can organise a show in which to attempt to pique them.

Certainly Shakespeare uses the convention of the fool in many of his plays - characters who are given license to criticize or satirize situations and people because they are somehow outside the accepted conventions. The madman is in that same adjunct position: meting out brutal truths because they have absolved themselves of responsibility for what they say and do. But they are always teetering on the edge of danger. And Hamlet is in a dangerous situation: if he avenges his father's death, he kills both a man, which is murder with moral, ethical and religious ramifications, and he kills a king which is treason. He is stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The shifts in his state of mind, his 'madness', speak to this danger and impossibility of his situation. He satirizes, he improvises, he plays the fool and the madman. He does not know who he can trust in a court where his mother has remarried, his girlfriend has become the mouthpiece of her father and his two childhood friends are playing him like a pipe. He has been approached by ghostly apparition, which he does not know whether to trust, and which has revealed the murder to him alone without witnesses - Horatio has expressed a fear that the ghost might send into madness: '*What if it tempt you toward the flood .../ And draw you into madness?*' (Act 1, Scene 4, Lines 70-4), and Hamlet himself doubts whether this vision is to be trusted: '*The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil*' (Act 3, Scene 1, Lines 551-2).

Grief⁴

A hugely important element in thinking about Hamlet and madness must come from a consideration of his grief. He has just lost his father unexpectedly, and his mother has remarried, very quickly, his own uncle. His world has been turned upside down and he is reeling from the impact. The court, his companions and the people he is in contact with seem to have glossed over the tragedy and just moved on. He feels deeply alone in his grief – it is only with the audience that he expresses his true feelings of

⁴ Please see the accompanying DVD of interviews with the cast and creative team, for more on the importance of grief and madness in this production.

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suicidal thought and hopelessness. And in that place of being essentially alone in grief, he 'loses his mind'. In modern terms, we might call him depressed.

Hamlet becomes obsessed by death. This may seem a symptom of his madness, but it is little wonder given that he is surrounded and haunted by death. There is a pervading sense in the play of unfinished business, things not laid to rest, rites of passage not properly respected, transitions not effectively made. Hamlet the elder was killed without spiritual preparation, as are Gertrude, Claudius and Laertes during the course of the play. Proper mourning for the king was not observed. Ophelia was not given full burial rites because she committed suicide.

In the first three Acts of the play, this ethereal, pervasive sense of death as a figure that haunts the mind, is contained in the image of Hamlet's ghost. But after the significant interlude between Acts 4 and 5 in which Hamlet himself escaped death, his attitude shifts. He famously tells Horatio that *'There's a divinity shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will'* (Act 5, Scene 2, Lines 10-11). In the fifth Act, he faces death not as an intangible, terrifying, haunting ghost, but as a skull, a real, earthy emblem. It is as if he finally faces the reality of his own death, and this brings him to a sense of acceptance and peace.

It is significant that the final lines of the play are Fortinbras' orders to give Hamlet a soldier's funeral, to observe a full and proper ritual of death. Perhaps things which have haunted and been haunted throughout the play are finally laid to rest.

12. THE ACT OF ACTING

Hamlet, as with many of Shakespeare's plays, is full of references to actors and acting. In many ways, this reflects how the theatre of the day functioned. While theatre today often reinforces a divide between the audience and the performers – with the audience often sitting in silence in the dark while the actors 'act' and pretend not to see them – in a theatre like The Globe there was much less of a divide. Plays were performed in the daytime, without lighting or elaborate technology, and without the rules of an audience having to arrive or leave on time. Actors and audience could clearly see and respond to each other. Shakespeare's plays acknowledge the presence of this audience; they are self-conscious and delight in playing around with their own theatrical conventions.

Hamlet is full of ideas of watching, performance, setting up scenes, acting and pretence. For example, Polonius regularly plays director – setting up a 'reading' scene where Ophelia will play out a duologue with Hamlet. Claudius directs Laertes as pawn in his own revenge plot, setting up an elaborate fencing match in order to strike Hamlet out. Even Hamlet himself sets up The Mousetrap to crack Claudius' social façade and get to the bottom of his story.

Indeed, the character of Hamlet is preoccupied with these themes. He often berates others for playing a role, for not showing their true selves and not being what they seem: his mother for 'seeming' to love his father, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for 'seeming' to be loyal companions, Ophelia for 'seeming' to be virtuous. But of course, Hamlet himself is a great actor. He tells his mother '*I know not seems*' (Act 1, Scene 2, Line 76), but he knows speeches off by heart and is not afraid to deliver them in front of a room of professionals; he writes lines to be delivered on stage and happily gives his opinions about their delivery; and he performs his madness with the gusto of a blood thirsty revenge hero.

The irony is that while Hamlet may be able to 'act' the actor, he cannot 'act' the revenger. He can perform his part as a madman, but cannot perform his part in avenging his father's murder. For all his rhetoric, play-acting and games, the act of killing belongs in a different register. And when he is alone on stage, he shares this problem with the audience. His soliloquies are not inner monologues which he speaks to himself. He addresses a large audience, baring his soul to them and letting them into his inner process.

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In some ways, Hamlet is a metaphor for the role of the actor himself; the man or woman who experiences and shares emotions real enough to move an audience, but who is after all just playing make believe. The part of Hamlet demands a high level of self-awareness from the actor about being an actor.

There is no hiding behind the part of Hamlet, and actors though the ages have been simultaneously attracted to and daunted by playing this complex, gruelling and thrilling role.

13. PLAYING HAMLET

It seems there is a Hamlet for every generation. He is a character who has endured through history, who continues to fascinate and mesmerise audiences, whose questions and dilemmas are as insistent now as they were in 1600. William Hazlitt, a writer and editor in the early 1800's, said that *'it is we who are Hamlet'*; and Oscar Wilde in the late 1800's that *'there is no such thing as 'Shakespeare's Hamlet'... there are as many Hamlet's as there are melancholics'*. Somehow, the character of Hamlet does not age and become irrelevant, but continues to have something to say to every generation of actor that plays him and audience that witnesses him. Hamlet *'holds a mirror up to nature'* not just with Claudius, but with the actual audience watching him in the here and now. He brings to life themes which are universal and enduring.

Playing Hamlet is a rite of passage for the younger actor and has been described *'the supreme test for a performer in the earlier half of his career'*⁵. The experience must be a daunting one, not only because of the weight of historical tradition on the actor's shoulders, but also because the part demands a brutal honesty.

Michael Pennington, an actor who has played Hamlet several times and written a book about the experience, said that *'the part is like a pane of clear glass, disclosing the actor to a greedy audience; playing it changing you for the good and for the better.'* Kenneth Branagh has called it a *'naked, X-ray role'* and said that playing it is like an emotional obstacle course⁶. Central to playing Hamlet are the five soliloquies, when he directly addresses the audience and lets them into the innermost workings of his mind. He is constantly berating the other characters for playing roles and not showing the truth of who they are under their social masks. In the soliloquies, the actor playing Hamlet has to strip off his mask and let the audience see his (or her) true vulnerability.

⁵ Paul Taylor in The Independent at Sunday on <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/hamlet-the-hardest-part-to-play-so-who-is-fit-to-wear-the-crown-464173.html>

⁶ Both quoted in an interview at www.bbc.co.uk/archive/hamlet/8529.shtml

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Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet

But for all its emotional difficulty, the part is also forgiving, according to Pennington. He describes how it mutates to accommodate the individual actor and adapt to his personality. So as well as demanding honesty and openness, it also contains and supports. In an interview with Simon Russell-Beale and Sam West, who both played Hamlet in 2000-2001, Simon says of Hamlet *'it is the most hospitable part there is....it is so broad, I can see no logical reason why anybody can't play it'*⁷. It is this coalescing between the individual actor's personality, Shakespeare's text, and the spirit of the time that can create this simultaneous sense of the very specific and the universal.

Hamlet Through the Ages

The first actor to play Hamlet was Richard Burbage, the chief tragedian of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. He was well known for his prodigious memory for line learning and Shakespeare most probably wrote the part with him in mind. Famous Hamlet's of the following 18th Century included David Garrick, who adapted the play, cut out the entire fifth act and played Hamlet himself at Drury Lane in 1769 and John Philip Kemble whose performance in 1783 was 20 minutes longer than expected due to his, perhaps over-enthusiastic, use of the long dramatic pause.

⁷ See interview with Sarah Comptom at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4723170/How-to-play-Hamlet.html>

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David Garrick

In the 19th Century, Edmund Kean, one of the most highly regarded actors of the time, was the first person to dispense with Hamlet's royal costume and play him as a serious, introverted individual in plain, every day clothes. Slightly later in 1899 Sarah Bernhardt, who had been a courtesan before becoming a renowned actress, played a Hamlet first on stage and then on screen in a two minute long silent version of the play called *Le Duel d'Hamlet*.



Sarah Bernhardt

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In 1911, the Moscow Arts Theatre produced *Hamlet* with Stanislavsky as director and Gordon Craig as designer. Both were huge theatrical figures of their time and have had lasting legacies on theatre today - Stanislavsky with his pioneering method of psychological realism, and Gordon Craig with his vision of stage sets as symbolist interpretations of inner states of mind.

During the 20th Century in Britain, John Gielgud played the part many times, as did Laurence Olivier who also directed it with Peter O'Toole in the title role in the inaugural performance of *Hamlet* at the National Theatre in 1963. The play ran again at the National Theatre in 1989 directed by Richard Eyre and with Ian Charleston playing Hamlet, after Daniel Day-Lewis left the production. Day-Lewis collapsed on stage during the scene when the Ghost first appears to Hamlet, started sobbing uncontrollably and refused to go back on the stage. Allegedly, he had seen the Ghost of his own father. When Ian Charleston took over the role, his friend and fellow actor Ian McKellan commented that it looked as if he had been practising all his life. Seven weeks later, he died of AIDS.

Hamlet continues to excite director and actors, and over the last decade many well-known actors have taken on the role. *Hamlet* has been produced twice at the National Theatre since the turn of this century with Simon Russell Beale in 2001 and Rory Kinnear in 2010; and three times for the RSC, with Sam West in 2001, Toby Stephens in 2004, and David Tennant of *Doctor Who* fame in 2008. Other recent include Christopher Ecclestone at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2002; Ben Whishaw at the Old Vic in 2002 and John Simm at the Sheffield Crucible Theatre in 2010. Jude Law played Hamlet at the Donmar Warehouse in 2009, followed by a run on Broadway. This will be Michael Sheen's first time playing Hamlet; Ian Rickson's first time directing a Shakespeare play, and the second time *Hamlet* has been seen at the Young Vic in the last 10 years.

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14. A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAMLET ON SCREEN

by Daniel Rosenthal

Type "Hamlet" into the Title Search on the Internet Movie Database, hit Return and up pops a list of almost 150 film and television productions, spanning dozens of countries and more than 100 years. From a silent short made in France in 1907, to the BBC version of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) revival starring David Tennant in 2009, *Hamlet's* popularity on the world's stages has been matched on small and big screens – to such an extent that in 2004 an American radio documentary about Shakespearean cinema chose a mock-exasperated title: "*How Many Hamlets Can There Be?*".

In the silent era, the most remarkable adaptation was *Hamlet The Drama of Vengeance* (1920), a two-hour German melodrama. The plot blends Shakespeare, Saxo-Grammaticus' 12th-century Danish saga of Prince Amleth (who avenges his father's murder by his wicked uncle, Fengo), and *The Mystery of Hamlet* (1881), in which American scholar Edward P. Vining argued that the Prince was in fact a woman. The film sees Gertrude give birth to a daughter just as King Hamlet is 'mortally' wounded in battle. To preclude a dangerous power vacuum, Gertrude proclaims that the kingdom has acquired a *male* heir, only for the king to recover. To conceal the deception, the royal couple raise their princess as a prince, played as an adult by Asta Nielsen, one of the great stars of European silent cinema.

Her casting redefines *Hamlet's* plot (a woman assumes the traditionally male role of the avenger seeking retribution for a father's murder), and introduces unrequited love: this Hamlet adores the virile Horatio, much as the disguised Viola loves Orsino in *Twelfth Night*. When Horatio falls for Ophelia, Hamlet decides to woo Polonius' daughter "*to lead her away from my beloved*" and 'his' existential crisis is articulated in fleeting inter-titles: "I am no man and may not be a woman!"

Fatally wounded by Laertes' foil, Hamlet expires in Horatio's arms. Horatio accidentally touches her breasts and exclaims: "*Death uncovers your tragic secret – your golden heart was a woman's!*" The line is hilarious and heartbreaking: Hamlet might have reigned as Queen not King, and, unlike Shakespeare's hero, dies within reach of romantic fulfilment.

In the sound era, no original-text adaptation (by which I mean a film retaining Shakespeare's language) has had a greater impact than the 1948 version starring and directed by Laurence Olivier, who had

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already won a Special Academy Award for *Henry V* (1944). At Denham Studios near London, Olivier's designers Roger Furse and Carmen Dillon built a stylized, cliff-top Elsinore of cold grey stone, long, arched passageways and steep, winding staircases – a place clearly medieval yet somehow timeless: an ideal setting for a black-and-white adaptation that is part grim fairy tale, part psychological case study.

Olivier's screenplay omitted Reynaldo, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the second Gravedigger and Fortinbras, and two of Hamlet's soliloquies – all told, about half the text. The cornerstone of his performance echoed his stage Hamlet from 1937, when an essay by Ernest Jones, biographer of Sigmund Freud, had convinced him that Hamlet suffered from an Oedipus complex: repressed desire for Gertrude and jealousy of Claudius largely explained, wrote Olivier, "*what is wrong with the prince*". As Gertrude he cast Eileen Herlie, who at 27 was 13 years his junior and looks young enough to be Hamlet's wife. The result is a haunting but reductive interpretation; there is much more to *Hamlet* than Olivier's summation, in an opening voiceover, that "This is the story of a man who could not make up his mind." In 1948-49, however, the film was lavishly praised and its \$3m takings at cinemas in America were exceptional for any non-Hollywood production. It remains the only Shakespeare feature to have won the Best Picture Oscar, while Olivier's remains the only Shakespeare performance to have won Best Actor.

Olivier's influence can be seen in the black-and-white cinematography of the next major adaptation, director Grigori Kozintsev's 1964 Russian epic, which uses Boris Pasternak's translation of Shakespeare. Totalitarian Soviet society is refracted through Hamlet's belief that "*Denmark's a prison*". Inside a vast Elsinore, Claudius' obsession with surveillance ensures that as Hamlet (the blond, brooding Innokenti Smoktunovsky) walks through wide stone halls he is spied on by Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, armoured guards and courtiers (in exquisite sixteenth-century costumes). As he admits the whereabouts of Polonius' corpse, a scribe notes down his testimony, as though in a show trial (in 2010, director Nichols Hytner presented a theatrical take on omnipresent surveillance within Elsinore by setting his National Theatre *Hamlet* in the present in an unnamed former Soviet republic, where Hamlet was monitored by Claudius' armed bodyguards, CCTV and a hidden microphone).

Kozintsev retains the Norway sub-plot and on the film's original release, some viewed the climax as allegory: the tyrannical Claudius/Stalin is replaced by the more liberal Fortinbras/Khrushchev (who had

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succeeded Stalin in 1953), whose 'thaw' may cleanse rotten Denmark/Russia. Ironically, the film opened as Leonid Brezhnev's harsher regime took hold.

Kozintsev had a budget of more than £40m at today's prices; the hour-long experimental video made in 1976 by Celestino Coronado, then a student at London's Royal College of Art, cost £3,000. Shooting almost entirely in close-ups, Coronado presents Hamlet's divided personality with a dazzling casting coup: he is played by blue-eyed, identical twins David and Anthony Meyer. In soliloquy and dialogue, we see Hamlet literally talking to himself. The "sweet" prince tells Ophelia "*I did love you once.*" – but his 'evil' twin yells "*I loved you not!*"

Where Coronado's casting was innovative, Franco Zeffirelli's choice of leading man for his 1990 *Hamlet* was wildly improbable: Mel Gibson, a Shakespeare novice best known as the violent hero of the *Mad Max* and *Lethal Weapon* films. Zeffirelli, however, whose 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* was a huge box-office success, knew that Gibson's presence could bring Shakespeare to a mass audience. Zeffirelli jettisoned 60% of the text to achieve a 135-minute running time and, apart from retaining Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, followed Olivier's cuts and overtly Oedipal interpretation so closely that the film sometimes resembles a colour remake of that 1948 adaptation. Gibson acquits himself competently, but the rest of the characters are left with so little to say that they verge on caricature: Glenn Close's Gertrude is a lusty widow and Alan Bates' Claudius a Henry VIII-like carouser; Helena Bonham Carter's distracted, fidgety Ophelia seems half-mad from the outset, while Ian Holm's Polonius is an absurd chatterbox.

The severe cutting in all these adaptations only underlines the importance of Kenneth Branagh's decision as adapter, director and leading actor to follow his films of *Henry V* (1989) and *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) with a four-hour *Hamlet* presenting the complete text used when he starred in an RSC production in 1992. Almost half a century after Olivier, a filmmaker at last did justice to the domestic and political plots, and to the complexity of Hamlet and the supporting characters.

The action was brought forward to the late 19th century, sets (dominated by a vast hall of mirrors) and costumes evoking the last days of the Russian Tsars. Branagh chose the 1890s because, as he put it in an interview for the book *Shakespeare, Cinema, Fin de Siècle* (2000), they presented an environment "in cinematic terms, where [audiences] can accept people speaking in heightened language." He has always

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resisted setting Shakespeare in the present, "*where you don't expect people to talk in a certain kind of way*" – which is why American director Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) was both daring and problematic.

Almereyda moved *Hamlet* to present-day Manhattan, where Denmark becomes the Denmark Corporation, based in the Elsinore Hotel. As Kyle MacLachlan's sleek, power-suited Claudius succeeds his murdered older brother as CEO and resists a takeover bid from Fortinbras, Almereyda wants us, he wrote in the introduction to his published *Hamlet* screenplay, to accept that "global corporate power is as smoothly treacherous and absolute as anything going on in a well-oiled feudal kingdom." He also uses the play's preoccupation with eavesdropping to comment on 21st-century media saturation: fax machines, phones, answerphones, TV and CCTV screens are omni-present; Ophelia wears a wire-tap for the "Get thee to a nunnery" scene and Hamlet (the mumbling Ethan Hawke) makes experimental digital films (including "The Mousetrap", the play-within-the-play).

The combination of high-tech realism and Shakespearean language throws up glaring incongruities between imagery and dialogue. "Watching the movie requires a certain suspension of disbelief," the director acknowledged, hoping audiences would "*forgive words that don't seem right*", but that is impossible when, for example, Hamlet's friends Marcella (a female version of Marcellus) and Bernardo address him as "My Lord", not in ironic, college student endearment, but in earnest.

Genre Adaptations

It is Shakespeare's 'difficult' language that provides the steepest barrier to films of his plays finding mainstream success; for millions, his pentameters evoke obligatory studies, not an entertaining night at the multiplex. This has led many filmmakers to make "genre adaptations", translating Shakespeare's archaic text into straightforward contemporary dialogue while retaining the storylines and characters, to make a genre film. Thus *Macbeth* and *King Lear* have been reinvented as urban crime dramas (*Joe Macbeth* in 1955; *My Kingdom* in 2000) and *The Tempest* as a Hollywood sci-fi adventure (*Forbidden Planet*, 1956).

The corporate settings of two genre adaptations of *Hamlet* were influences on Michael Almereyda's film. The first is *The Bad Sleep Well* (Japan, 1961), one of several *shakai-mono* (social problem films) made by Akira Kurosawa to comment on his country's post-war woes. Having turned *Macbeth* into a samurai

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warlord in *Throne of Blood* (1957), in *The Bad Sleep Well* he used *Hamlet* to condemn public sector corruption. His Hamlet surrogate is Koichi Nishi, who marries Kieko, lame, fragile daughter of his boss, Iwabuchi, Vice-President of the Public Corporation for Land Development, which has taken a massive bribe from a construction firm. Iwabuchi had earlier driven Nishi's father to suicide and now the hero masks his vengeful intent with a fake persona; he has swapped identities with his friend and accomplice Itakura (Horatio). The widowed Iwabuchi is thus a conflation of Claudius *and* Polonius: responsible for the death of the hero's father, and father to the woman Hamlet loves, Kieko (Ophelia), and her hotheaded brother, Tatsuo (Laertes). The climax of this powerful morality tale sees Nishi's hesitation allow Iwabuchi to have him murdered; corruption goes unpunished, the bad continue to sleep well.

In the second genre adaptation, the Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki turned tragedy into bathos in his spoof, *Hamlet Goes Business* (1987). Here, Old Hamlet, president of a Helsinki conglomerate, is poisoned by his managing director, Klaus, who marries the boss' wife, Gertrud, and tries to sell the business in order to gain control of a Swedish manufacturing company specializing in rubber ducks. He is defied by Gertrud's son, Hamlet, a horny, gluttonous slob – about as far away from Olivier's handsome, swashbuckling hero as can be imagined.

Two directors have transformed *Hamlet* into action-packed adventures. The Italian Enzo Castellari's spaghetti Western *Johnny Hamlet* (1967) opens as handsome Confederate soldier Johnny Hamilton (the Hamlet counterpart) returns home from the American Civil War to Ranch Elseñor (a lovely Tex-Mex-Shakespearean pun) to discover that his father has been murdered by his uncle, Claude. As he seeks revenge, Johnny is reunited with his pre-war girlfriend, Emily (Ophelia), daughter of the corrupt local Sheriff, Polomo (Polonius). There are occasional, one-line stabs at *Hamlet*-esque philosophy, but the rest is violence: a string of mindless shootouts and fistfights.

Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet* (China, 2006) clothed the skeleton of *Hamlet* with the intrigues, doomed romance and gravity-defying martial arts sequences of Zhang Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers* (2004). In 904AD, Crown Prince Wu Luan (equivalent to Hamlet) loves Wan (Gertrude), but exiles himself when his father the Emperor claims her as Empress. Three years later, his uncle, Li, murders the Emperor, usurps the throne and marries Wan. As Wu Luan seeks retribution at home he falls for a demure palace attendant, Qing (Ophelia), whose brother is General Yin Sun (Laertes); their father is bearded, sagacious Minister Yin (Polonius). The superhuman swordplay repeatedly undermines gripping

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chamber drama, in which the ice-cool Wan is the most intriguing Shakespearean counterpart: Gertrude reimagined as a childless, scheming *femme fatale*, reminiscent of Lady Macbeth.

This survey bears testimony to the astonishing breadth and depth of *Hamlet* as a performance text whose appeal reaches across all national boundaries. No film or stage production can ever hope to give us a 'definitive' interpretation; the play's political, emotional, theological and philosophical seams are so rich that they can be mined selectively by film-makers and theatre directors to emphasize specific elements – the mother-son relationship for Laurence Olivier, say, or the corrupting effects of power for Akira Kurosawa – and each version holds the mirror up to the society in which it is made.

- Daniel Rosenthal is the author of *100 Shakespeare Films* (BFI Publishing, 2007) and regularly lectures on Shakespeare and film at schools around England (see <http://shakespeareonfilm.com/lectures.html>).

Select Filmography

Unless indicated in square brackets, these titles are available on DVD via amazon.co.uk.

Hamlet The Drama of Vengeance (1920) Dir: Sven Gade [available from www.edition-filmmuseum.com]

Hamlet (1948) Dir: Laurence Olivier

Hamlet (1964) Dir: Grigori Kozintsev

Hamlet (1976) Dir: Celestino Coronado [unavailable]

Hamlet (1990) Dir: Franco Zeffirelli

Hamlet (2000) Dir: Michael Almereyda

Hamlet (2005) Dir: Stephen Cavanagh

Genre Adaptations

The Bad Sleep Well (1960) Dir: Akira Kurosawa

Johnny Hamlet (1967) Dir: Enzo Castellari

Hamlet Goes Business (1987) Dir: Aki Kaurismäki

The Banquet (2006) Dir: Feng Xiaogang

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15. IDEAS FOR PRACTICAL WORK

Claudius' Court

Act 1 Scene 2

This is the first time we meet the King, the Queen and the courtiers. It is also the first time we meet Hamlet. The opening scene was a misty outdoor scene, a ghostly prelude, and an introduction to the underclasses and the underbelly of the court. The next scene is a very sudden shift to the glossy veneer of courtly life that Claudius is trying to create.

Read Claudius' speech and divide it into his different pieces of 'business' that he is dealing with here. Think about staging the court and what space says about status. Where are the courtiers, the ambassadors, Laertes, Polonius and Hamlet standing in relation to Claudius and the Queen?

When you watch the performance, think about this court space. What is the atmosphere that is being created in this court? What is the veneer? Are there clues already that all is not as it seems under the surface? How do you know? And is there a way, spatially, that hamlet's discontent and suspicion are being shown?

A Space Exploration:

This is an exploration which shows how much you can say simply by where you choose to position yourself in space.

Define a large playing space. Have one person enter the space and take up a position somewhere. Then a second person goes into the space and takes up a position. The first person moves and then second person responds, and so on, like a silent conversation. Think about the middle, the edges, the corners, a low to the ground position, a far-away position, a high-up position. Without there having been any intentions set, see what stories and relationships starts to emerge.

Build an image of the court based on your discoveries.

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Act 3, Scene 1

To be, or not to be

Hamlet's third soliloquy is his most famous, and there are as many interpretations as there are actors.

Work in groups to think about the speech.

Read the speech out loud with each person reading a line.

Read it again and change readers when there is a punctuation mark, comma, dash, full stop.

Which are the words or phrases that jump out for you? Create a version of the speech just based on those words.

Discuss the imagery that Hamlet is using. What is the effect of these images of war and combat? What does it tell you about Hamlet's state of mind?

Translate each sentence into modern day language.

Try delivering the speech 'to yourself' and then to an audience member. What are the differences?

Read the monologue really focussing on the blank verse. Blank verse, or iambic pentameter, has five feet or iambs of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable

-de DUM, de DUM, de DUM, de DUM, de DUM

Look for where Shakespeare keeps this rhythm clean and where he shifts the rhythm. What effect does it have to shift the rhythm?

Act 3, Scene 1

Ophelia & Hamlet

Investigate the relationship of Hamlet and Ophelia.

Think about what has happened between Hamlet and Ophelia before this scene. What do we know from the text has happened between them? Look at Act 1 scene 2, when Laertes and Polonius were giving advice to her about Hamlet, and remember Act 2 scene 1 when she reported Hamlet's 'mad' visit to her room.

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Make a list of the facts around their relationship and the questions: for example, FACT: she has at some point received 'remembrances' from Hamlet which she has *'longed long to re-deliver'* (Act 3, Scene 1, Line 94), but QUESTION: what are they, and when and under what circumstances did he give them to her?

Improvise a scene before the start of the play, between Hamlet and Ophelia, perhaps when she received these remembrances.

Improvise the scene when Hamlet visits Ophelia in her chamber and behaves 'madly'.

Read the duologue in pairs. Find out the meaning of any words you don't know, and establish what they are each saying to the other with each sentence.

In this duologue, Ophelia has been ordered by her father to break up with Hamlet, and she knows her father is watching the exchange. Does she let on? Does Hamlet know he is being watched? At what point does he realise? What difference does it make to how he behaves? Try different versions of the scene, where Hamlet knows he is being watched, where he does not know he is being watched, where Ophelia is trying to tell him that he is being watched. See what differences they make.

What do you think about their relationship, and about how Hamlet treats Ophelia?

Act 3, Scene 2

The Dumb Show

The prologue to The Mousetrap is a dumb show. Act out the stage directions in a group. Try a version where the movement is tiny and very subtle, almost naturalistic, and try a version in a heightened, melodramatic form where the characters strike poses.

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The Closest Scene

Act 3, Scene 4

The closet scene between Hamlet and Gertrude is when Hamlet confronts his mother about her remarriage to Claudius and reveals that her former husband did not die accidentally as she believed, but was murdered. It is also Gertrude's chance, spurred on by Polonius, to get to the bottom of Hamlet's behaviour and so save him from the measured punishment of Claudius.

The scene opens with the lines:

G: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

H: Mother, you have my father much offended.

G: Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

H: Come, come, you question with a wicked tongue.

What is the effect of the rhythm of these lines? Hamlet takes what his mother says and turns it back on her. What does it tell you about how he is feeling, and about the relationship between Hamlet and his mother?

Just a scene before, Hamlet had the opportunity to kill Claudius and get his revenge. Now, he kills Polonius behind the arras. Why didn't he kill Claudius then and why does he kill Polonius now? Think about the emotional motives of Hamlet. What does this say about his state of mind?

Read the scene. Think about the contrasts that Hamlet sets up between his father and his uncle. How were these two men different? What is Hamlet's argument to his mother? Think about Gertrude's response – how are Hamlet's words affecting her?

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16. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING

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- the play text with excellent introduction and explanatory notes

Shakespeare: An Illustrated Stage History, ed. J Bate & R Jackson, Oxford University Press, 1996

- great resource on theatre in Shakespeare's era and through the ages

Freeing Shakespeare's Voice, The Actor's Guide to Talking the Text, Kirsten Linklater, Theatre Communications Group 1995

- a really interesting practical book with practical voice work exercises

Hamlet, A User's Guide, Michael Pennington, Nick Hern Books, 1996

- Pennington has played Hamlet five times and this is his interesting anecdotal take on the play and its performance

Shakespeare on Stage, by Julian Curry, Nick Hern Books, 2010

- with a chapter from Jude Law about his experience playing the Dane

Shakespeare's Advice to the Players, by Peter Hall, Oberon Books, 2003

- Peter Hall gives clear and good introductions to iambic pentameter and Shakespeare's other language devices.

Some interesting articles from recent actors and theatre critics on the internet:-

Hamlet: The hardest part to play, so who is fit to wear the crown?

by Paul Taylor on the Independent website

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/hamlet-the-hardest-part-to-play-so-who-is-fit-to-wear-the-crown-464173.html>

- an article on different Hamlet's of the last 50 years

The Role to Die For

by Michael Billington on the Guardian website

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/jul/31/theatre.shakespeare>

- another interesting retrospective on some recent actors playing Hamlet

How to Play Hamlet

By Sarah Comptom on the Telegraph website

www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4723170/How-to-play-Hamlet.html

- actors Sam West and Simon Russell Beale talk about playing Hamlet

Resource Pack

Hamlet

By William Shakespeare

Young Vic

Information on Shakespeare, Hamlet and Revenge Tragedy

http://www.britaininprint.net/shakespeare/study_tools/

http://shakespeare.about.com/od/hamlet/a/hamlet_themes.htm

<http://www.teachit.co.uk/armoore/shakespeare/hamlet.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Shakespeare

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revenge_play

Some useful Websites:-

See: www.rsc.org.uk

- for information on Shakespeare and his theatre, and for classroom resources on Hamlet from the Royal Shakespeare company

See: www.shakespearesglobe.com

- for information on the Globe theatre reconstruction

Some interesting video resources:-

www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-11380973

- actor Sam west talks about different ways of interpreting the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0jpvNPr3JU>

- the closet scene from director Gregory Doran's RSC production with David Tennant

Some interesting audio resources:-

www.bbc.co.uk/archive/hamlet/8529.shtml

- actors Kenneth Branagh and Michael Pennington talk about playing Hamlet

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00l16vp

- Melvyn Bragg presents a discussion about revenge tragedy from In Our Time.