

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Biographical Outline

William Shakespeare was born on the 23rd of April 1564 (and christened on the 26th) in Stratford-upon-Avon, in the county of Warwickshire. His mother, Mary Arden, came from a family of landowners whilst his father, John Shakespeare, a rich trader in the guild of furriers and glove-makers, enjoyed enough reputation and wealth to have a role in public affairs (he rose to the position of bailiff of Stratford in 1568).

William, the third of eight children, was educated at Stratford Grammar School until 1577, at which point his father, having fallen into serious financial difficulties, withdrew him from school and placed him in an apprenticeship. Little is known about the following years but they must have been difficult and marked by great poverty. There are various speculations concerning William's occupations in these early years: choirboy, keeping the company of the nobility, pageboy, and barman in a tavern are those most often mentioned. On the 27th of November, 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior. In the following three years they had three children including, in 1585, the twins Hamnet and Judith.

It has not been established with any certainty how or where Shakespeare lived before 1592; some believe he tried his hand teaching at a school in the country, and it is possible Shakespeare wrote his first plays for provincial companies. In 1587, for reasons which are not clear, he made his way to London and became an actor.

The date which marks the beginning of his literary career appears to be 1591, with the writing of the play *Henry VI*. In 1592 he lived in London, where he was already being talked of both as an actor and dramatist, as evidenced by contemporary accounts. There are suggestions that he ventured to Italy and stayed there in 1592 and 1594, years during which the plague severely disrupted London theatrical life.

In 1593 he published the poem *Venus and Adonis*, which he dedicated to Lord Southampton. From this date onward, until 1611 according to some, until 1613 according to others, he wrote prolifically and ceaselessly, producing 36 plays, 2 long poems, and 154 sonnets. He was very successful and wealthy enough to buy houses and land in Stratford and London, did business in flour and malt and spent several hours a day in the taverns, drinking and feasting in the company of bohemians, actors and writers.

August 1596 witnessed the death, at the age of eleven, of Hamnet, the poet's only son.

In 1599 Shakespeare's theatre company opened a theatre and named it 'The Globe', referring to the burden Hercules carried on his back.

1601, the year *Hamlet* was written, was marked for Shakespeare by two highly significant events: the death of his father, and the imprisonment of his generous patron and friend, Lord Southampton, as a consequence of the failure of a rebellion led by Lord Essex, whose lieutenant he was. Shakespeare had played some part in the plot by authorising a performance of *Richard II* on the eve of the events. Essex's followers compared Elizabeth I to Richard and the scene concerning the deposing of the King was to trigger that of the Queen. However the theatre company did not suffer any retaliation when the plot was exposed.

From this year onward the tone of Shakespeare's plays became sombre, sad, and bitter.

In 1609 Shakespeare's mother died. This was also the year the *Sonnets* were published. The following year, weary of the world and of city life, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and only left Warwickshire for brief visits to the capital.

It seems that Shakespeare went through a religious crisis in his later years and the inspiration of the last plays is sometimes considered Christian.

From January to March in 1616 Shakespeare drew up a will before passing away on the 23rd of April, the day of his 52nd birthday. He was buried in Trinity church on the 25th of April.

Chronology of the Plays

Shakespeare's plays were published with little, if any, supervision on his part. A group of unscrupulous editors published a number of his plays in quarto versions, some faithful to the original, some more or less with the author's consent. Some plays are incomplete and full of errors. There is disagreement amongst critics concerning the exact dates of several of the plays.

- 1590-1592 *Henry VI*
- 1592 *Richard III*
- 1592-1593 *The Comedy of Errors*
- 1593 *Titus Andronicus*
- 1594 *The Rape of Lucretia*
The Two Gentlemen of Verona
King John
- 1594-1595 *Love's Labour's Lost*
- 1594-1598 *The Taming of the Shrew*
- 1595 *Romeo and Juliet*
A Midsummer Night's Dream
- 1596 *The Merchant of Venice*
Richard II
- 1597 *Henry IV*
- 1598-1599 *Much Ado About Nothing*
- 1599 *As You Like It*
Henry V
Julius Caesar
- 1600-1601 *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
Twelfth Night
Hamlet (This first great tragedy was an immediate success and was staged until the closure of the theatres in 1642)
- 1602 *All's Well That Ends Well*
Troilus and Cressida
- 1604 *Othello*
Measure for Measure
- 1605-1606 *Macbeth*
King Lear
- 1605-1608 *Timon of Athens*
- 1606-1608 *Pericles*
- 1607 *Antony and Cleopatra*
- 1608 *Coriolanus*
- 1610 *Cymbeline*
- 1610-1611 *The Tempest*
- 1611 *The Winter's Tale*
- 1613 *Henry VIII*
The Two Noble Kinsmen (in collaboration with John Fletcher)

Shakespeare's Reputation

1. All the plays are available in English in recent editions; some are available in different and competing editions (cf. Arden, Oxford, Cambridge, Penguin—in 1997 at least five 'official' versions published in Great Britain were available on the market), differing according to the rendering they give of certain passages in the quarto and folio versions. After the Bible, the world's most published work is Shakespeare's.
2. Shakespeare is also the writer about whom most has been written. Around 28,000 books and articles have been brought into the light of day in the past ten years, with an annual increase of 5%. It is difficult to imagine the mass of stuff written on Shakespeare in nearly four centuries. He has even penetrated the Internet, where one can now surf Shakespeare, as you are now doing!
3. He is the most widely read author in Anglo-Saxon countries, where he is seriously challenging the Bible. He is read in 90% of American secondary schools and, in Great Britain, all students in secondary education must encounter Shakespeare as part of their studies.
4. Not a week goes by without one of his plays being staged in London, not to mention the English speaking world in its entirety, or, for that matter, the rest of the world. Cinema too has plundered this rich seam. Speaking only of *Hamlet*, around twenty films have been produced since the Second World War, in one language or another.
5. Several plays have been the inspiration and catalyst for reworkings and 'rewritings'; *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Macbeth* and, more recently, *The Tempest*. See, among others, Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), and, in a more humorous vein, RSC, not the Royal Shakespeare Company but a play entitled *Reduced Shakespeare Company*, staging all of Shakespeare in 97 minutes in London in 1996.
6. The Globe theatre would not have been rebuilt if it had not become a kind of holy site, at the very least a place of pilgrimage, welcoming almost 500 'pilgrims' every day. Other cities have followed suit: Tokyo has its Globe, and Moscow has plans for another.
7. The world's most famous actors have always wanted to play Hamlet, the role being the pinnacle of an acting career (see 'Hamlet and Theatre', below): amongst many who have interpreted Hamlet on the stage or on the screen in the last one hundred years are John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Richard Burton, Nicol Williamson, Ben Kingsley, Jean-Louis Barrault, Vittoria Gassman, Maximilian Schell, Innocenti Smoktunovsky, Mandy Patinkin and, more surprisingly, Sarah Bernhardt. More recent performances are those by Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh.
8. The name Hamlet, like others such as Tartuffe, Don Juan, Don Quixote, etc., has lent itself to transformations which have become everyday expressions enriching the English language: hamletish, hamletism, to hamletise; '*Hamlet* without the Prince'.

The Language of Shakespeare

A. The two greatest trends to have influenced and marked the English language after the Norman invasion of 1066 have been:

1. The Bible in its different versions; not only for all of the religious allusions which have entered into common usage but above all for the simplicity and flexibility of the language used in these versions. Everybody reads the Bible in the English speaking world and its language underpins every form of linguistic expression. Biblical references are without doubt more numerous in Anglophone literature than in any other Western literature.
2. Shakespeare (and to a lesser extent, Chaucer before him). It could even be argued that he invented a large part of the English language, and helped to amplify and develop its major qualities: its flexibility and potential for concrete imagery. There are innumerable expressions which have passed directly from Shakespeare's plays into everyday language. Here are just a few examples drawn from *Hamlet*.

There's something rotten in the state of Denmark
Not a mouse stirring
Frailty, thy name is woman
More matter, with less art
Hold the mirror up to nature B.

1. Shakespeare breaks with all of the rigid principles of the past; for him the world is not fixed, it changes constantly and language can only be the faithful reflection of all these transformations. His language is therefore characterised above all by its flexibility; it adapts itself to every circumstance and reflects every thought and emotion of the characters, from the most lofty to the most everyday. Nor does Shakespeare hesitate to pass from verse to prose, from an ultra literary language to one of the greatest vulgarity, often within the language of a single character and even within the same speech. This is particularly true of *Hamlet*: see for example the soliloquies and the sexual wordplay, puns and innuendoes.
2. Shakespeare's inventiveness: of all the authors in the English language he is without doubt the one with the most extensive and richest vocabulary. He draws from all areas of language and from all registers.
3. Nevertheless his language always has the tone and pace of the spoken word. Shakespeare never forgot that he was first of all a man of the theatre and that what he wrote on paper was to be spoken. From this arise unforgettable sound combinations; there are in the soliloquies of *Hamlet* passages which delight the ear. There are also miracles of simplicity and power: Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' convinces us; 'To be or not to be, that is the question' moves us.
4. The world of Shakespeare is the world transformed into images and metaphors; an object becomes a word which turns it into an idea or an emotion. There are also double meanings, puns and wordplay, at times ironic, often obscene, always witty, even in the greatest tragedies.

Shakespeare has survived all the ages: rooted in the Renaissance he survived the Enlightenment, Romanticism, realism, the Industrial Revolution; he has adapted to the computer age and is spreading throughout the Web. He endures, he is indestructible. He speaks to everyone; for some he is a Marxist, for others a misogynist; some say he is close to what we

would nowadays call the far right, etc. Perhaps he has none of these characteristics, perhaps he is all these things at once, as we all are. He has wonderfully anticipated all the schools of psychology of the 19th and 20th centuries. He knows human nature, consequently he knows us, and consequently we recognise ourselves in his characters.

HAMLET

The Play's Historical Sources

It is probable that *Hamlet* has its origins in a popular Icelandic saga mentioned for the first time by Snaebjörn, an Icelandic poet of the tenth century. The Danish historian and poet Saxo Grammaticus refers to it at the end of the twelfth century. In this Latin work recounting the history of Denmark Shakespeare's future character appears under the name Amleth in a story probably influenced by the classical history of Lucius Junius Brutus. Here is the story:

Horvendill, the father of Amleth, is killed by his brother Feng, who then marries Gerutha, the widow of his victim. Amleth feigns madness in order to appear ineffectual and harmless in the eyes of Feng, who would spare him for these reasons. He evades the snare of a young woman sent by his enemies and kills a spy concealed in his mother's bedroom. Ophelia and Polonius are already vaguely sketched, as is the episode concerning a letter ordering the assassination of Amleth by the king of England. Amleth manages to intercept this letter and it is the two messengers who are killed instead. Amleth marries the daughter of the king of England, returns to Denmark and assassinates Feng, whom the king of England has secretly promised to avenge. He sends Amleth to the court of the queen of Scotland, who falls in love with him and marries him in her turn. Amleth then defeats the king of England and returns to Jutland with his two wives.

However there are controversies concerning the exact origins of Hamlet. Some see Hamlet as the product of Jutland's folklore, an interpretation supported by the possible etymology of the name of the protagonist as meaning mad Onela, suggesting some identification with the Swedish king Onela mentioned in *Beowulf*. Others find Oriental (Persian) or Celtic (Irish) origins. Parallels can also be found in the English romances of Havelock, Horn and Bevis of Hampton.

Saxo's version was translated in the sixteenth century, with the horrific elements emphasised, by François de Belleforest in his collection *Histoires Tragiques* (Vol.5, 1570). An English version of this history was published in London in 1608 under the title *The Historie of Hamblet*. At the end of the 1580s a revenge tragedy in the tradition of Seneca about Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, based on Belleforest, was already popular in London. This *Ur-Hamlet* is traditionally attributed to Thomas Kyd and was contemporaneous with Shakespeare's presence in London. It has similarities with the other predecessors of the latter's play, which can be dated between 1599 and 1602, in that it is less psychologically complex concerning the central protagonist, whose prevarications are essentially due only to the practical problems of assassinating a king permanently surrounded by guards. This *Ur-Hamlet* has no soliloquies and no cemetery scene.

Another source, this time Italian, *The Murder of Gonzago*, which Hamlet mentions in Act 2, Scene 2 and Act 3, Scene 2, might have provided Shakespeare with the idea of murder by poison poured into the ears.

Not content with merely developing literary sources from the past, Shakespeare was, as

always, concerned with building into his play references to contemporary events. One amongst several was the alleged suicide of H el ene de Tournon, a victim of tragic love and either the sister or daughter of one of Marguerite de Valois' ladies in waiting. Accounts of the circumstances of her death and of her funeral are sufficiently similar to the fate of Ophelia to suggest they fathered them. It is reasonable to believe that Shakespeare reshaped Kyd's play in the final years of the sixteenth century before writing up his work completely in 1601. *Hamlet* was deposited in 1602 at the Registry of the Library and published in quarto form in 1603. The play was subsequently reworked, adapted and amended down the centuries according to prevailing sensibilities. Judged barbarous and brutal, some scenes were toned down during the Enlightenment, whereas the nineteenth century lent the character a Byronic texture. More recent times have seen Hamlets in Victorian or contemporary dress and regular film adaptations, the most recent English production having been directed by Kenneth Branagh.

Themes

One could read *Hamlet* simply, simplistically even, as a revenge tragedy. Hamlet's father, the king of Denmark, is killed by his brother, Claudius, who, overriding the rights of succession, appropriates both the crown and the wife of Hamlet's father. The ghost of the father reveals everything to his son, and all the elements of the revenge tragedy are in place: Hamlet has an obligation to avenge the murder, the usurpation, and the adultery. This he does by killing Claudius at the end of the play.

However it is clear that the theme of vengeance is merely a vehicle used by Shakespeare in order to articulate a whole series of themes central to humanity:

- relationships between father and son, mother and son, and Hamlet and his friends
- love relationships
- power wielding
- madness, feigned madness, dissembling
- youth and age
- action and inaction
- corrupt power and power corrupting
- the most significant existential questions; the existence of a god; 'to be or not to be'; 'if it be now...?'
- the meaning and possibilities of stagecraft

All these themes, as well as others, are found in *Hamlet*. However, it is important to remember that Hamlet himself is at the centre of everything, and it is on him that all the great themes are focused. There is no other character in literature so rich, so complex, so enigmatic, at once so opaque and transparent.

Readings of *Hamlet* are innumerable and vary according to the personality of the reader, director, or actor. Hamlet is someone who both imposes himself on us through the complexity and mysterious nature of his character, which is to an extent almost indecipherable. His is also one around which our own personality can allow itself to be shaped. He is one of the rare characters of the theatrical world, perhaps the only one, who permits such constant exchange. Each of us, no matter what age, can recognise him/herself in Hamlet and can shape the myth of Hamlet in his/her image.

Laurence Olivier said that he could have played Hamlet for a hundred years and still found something new in him on each performance; the character is ambiguous, almost impossible to grasp, as is the language of the play. Instead of impoverishing the play this ambiguity makes it all the more rich and textured. It is precisely this mystery which allows each reader and actor to

engage in a personal and intimate reading of the character, and to share his complexity. Hamlet is himself, you, me, he is all of us; being all of us he is universal, the myth which each of us, in our own individuality, tries to understand and comes to recognise in our own nature.

What are the main characteristics of this fascinating and, hence, unforgettable character? Interpretations are legion and only the main ones are cited here.

Dilemma and Indecision

If the heroes of the great classical tragedies are all confronted by choices, it is because they are all obliged to resolve them in one manner or another: once the decision is taken, everything else follows, accompanied by acts of majestic nobility or, at the other extreme, of abject decay and ruin. For Hamlet nothing is simple, everything raises questions. His dilemma is not about what decisions he should take but rather whether he will be able to make any decisions at all.

According to some interpretations, Hamlet makes no decisions and instead projects the image of an indecisive, inactive and passive individual, a romantic incapable of action who is in some ways snivelling and pathetic; he is nothing but a compulsive talker taking pleasure in his own words. Jean-Louis Barrault said of him that he is 'the hero of unparalleled hesitation'. He astonishes us with soliloquies of unequalled beauty, his emotions are of stunning force, but he does not evolve beyond them. This is why T.S. Eliot regarded *Hamlet* as a failure and said that it presented a character 'dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible because it *exceeds* the events that occur'. Why so much emotion and so little action? That is his nature, say some critics: this is what he is, the absolute opposite of Macbeth. Others see him as stunted by an Oedipus complex which has turned him into a belated adolescent, somewhat mad, mired in sterile existentialist ponderings (this alone would disqualify him as king!). Others still see him as suffering from an overdose of chastity. Others go further: is he not simply a puritan or a homosexual? A drunkard, even? Could he be the unfortunate hero, the hero-victim for whom life holds nothing but frustration and disillusionment? The murder of his father and the revelation that his own brother was his assassin (who then throws himself on the widow, Hamlet's mother!), the betrayals by Gertrude, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even Laertes: it is not only the state of Denmark which is rotten, it is the entire world. The celebrated French critic Henri Fluchère, who sees *Hamlet* as 'the first Shakespearean drama which can lay claim to both extremes in personality and universality', interprets the play as a symbolic representation of the battle between man and his destiny, his temptations and contradictions.

To this is opposed another reading. First of all it has to be said that Hamlet, loquacious as he is, is nevertheless extremely active, although it is true that the impulse for his actions is imposed on him by other characters or by events. He listens to the ghost (which his friends refuse to do), he adopts a coarse attitude verging on insubordination *vis-à-vis* the king, he violently rejects Ophelia, he thwarts one after the other plots aimed at revealing his plans, he stages for the court a show which is nothing but a trap in which he hopes to catch the king, he confronts his mother in a scene of extreme violence, and he fights Laertes. Engaging further in pure physical violence he kills Polonius, sends his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, kills the king, and is indirectly responsible for the death of Laertes. Not bad for someone who, for some, doesn't know the meaning of the word action.

It is possible, even probable, that in his particular fashion Shakespeare wanted to disrupt the conventions of classical tragedy, which he may have seen as too heavily laden with stereotypes. His Macbeth, his Othello, his Brutus, even his King Lear, are, from the first act, so imprisoned in conventional attitudes that they become perfectly predictable: the mechanisms of the plot evolve through cause and effect, the outcome becomes ineluctable. None of that in *Hamlet*; Shakespeare surprises us at each turn, it is the unpredictable which dominates, and even the scene of the final slaughter has only tenuous connections with the elements provided by the first act. True, Hamlet

does kill the king, but he does so because the latter has just inadvertently killed Gertrude, and it is particularly striking that at this moment Hamlet utters not one word concerning the assassination of his father, just as it is curious that no-one at the Danish court seems disturbed by the monstrous carnage which has, in the space of a few seconds, done away with the most important individuals of the kingdom. Maybe Shakespeare, merely simulating the grand themes of classical tragedy (vengeance, madness, the struggle for power, etc.), wanted to shake the established certainties flooding each of these themes and chose, in the final analysis, to present the only themes which for him had any fundamental importance: doubt and uncertainty. In this, he could have been a precursor of the theatre of the twentieth century: he may, in 1601, have anticipated the theatre of the absurd.

Hamlet and Metaphysical Doubt

A vast tragedy, negating any attempt at a single interpretation, *Hamlet* is before anything else the drama of a man who does not hesitate to confront his own imperfections and who refuses illusions and idealised appearances:

‘What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me...’ (Act Two, Scene Two, Arden)

The tragedy, Fluchère tells us, takes place above all in Hamlet’s consciousness, as

all the events which form the play’s framework are reduced to a symbolic representation, to an internal unrest which no action will resolve, and no decision will quell. The deepest theme, masked by that of vengeance, is none other than human nature itself, confronted by the metaphysical and moral problems it is moulded by: love, time, death, perhaps even the principle of identity and quality, not to say ‘being and nothingness’. The shock Hamlet receives on the death of his father, and on the remarriage of his mother, triggers disquieting interrogations about the peace of the soul, and the revelation of the ghost triggers vicious responses to these. The world changes its colour, life its significance, love is stripped of its spirituality, woman of her prestige, the state of its stability, the earth and the air of their appeal. It is a sudden eruption of wickedness, a reduction of the world to the absurd, of peace to bitterness, of reason to madness. A contagious disease which spreads from man to the kingdom, from the kingdom to the celestial vault’:

‘[A]nd indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.’

Fluchère’s reading situates Hamlet’s drama within the ruptures of an isolated and bruised subjectivity. According to this interpretation, which places the accent on the dissolving of identity and on a Sartrean problematic of being and nothingness, Hamlet’s tragedy appears as the quintessence of a moral and metaphysical instability which some associate with the experience of modernity. Hamlet’s decline and bitterness indeed match his extraordinary lucidity. The

tragedy of *Hamlet*, nevertheless, clearly exceeds the boundaries of the tormented consciousness of its protagonist.

Hamlet and Madness

The third act of *Hamlet* opens with a remark by the king, Claudius, who instructs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, old school-friends of his nephew, to discover why the latter 'puts on this confusion,/ Grating so harshly all his days of quiet/ With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?' For over three centuries hundreds of experts have turned their attention to the problem of Hamlet's madness. Hundreds of articles have been written, and dozens of controversial theories have been put forward and countered. The characters of Shakespeare's play are themselves desperate to discover the origins of the affliction which mars the prince of Denmark. Whilst Polonius sees Hamlet's conduct as the result of disappointed love, Ophelia can only see the symptoms of pure madness. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it is ambition and frustration which are gnawing away at the young heir to the throne. Finally, for Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, who in this joins most critics, at the root of it is a warped reaction, including rejection, to the death of his father and her own hasty remarriage. This interpretation does indeed play an essential role in the play. Hamlet himself never ceases speculating not only about the overt or covert motivations of other characters but also about the uses and abuses of power, the faults of passion, action and inaction, the significance of ancestral customs as well as the question of suicide. Most of the characters observing Hamlet's behaviour can't agree whether it is fake and calculating or whether the prince really is suffering from a mental illness threatening the 'noble, sovereign reason' which separates men from beasts (Claudius). Claudius himself is conscious of the fact that the conduct and words of his nephew are at one and the same time completely irrational and absolutely coherent. Basing his judgement on the theories of ancient medicine, he attributes the ambiguities of the deranged speeches to the workings of a harmful temperament provoking a state of deep melancholia. '[W]hat he (Hamlet) spake' he concludes, 'though it lack'd form a little/ Was not like madness. There's something in his soul/ O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,/ And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose/ Will be some danger' (Act 3, Scene 1). In this respect a parallel can be traced between the 'methodical madness' of Hamlet and that of Ophelia. In effect, whilst everyone agrees that 'their words have no sense', their words and actions are still the object of an exceptional curiosity on the part of their entourage. 'Her speech is nothing' the unnamed gentleman who opens Act 4, Scene 5 tells us, 'Yet the unshaped use of it doth move/ The hearers to collection. They aim at it,/ And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,/ Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,/ Indeed would make one think there might be thought,/ Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.' 'What education in madness!' finally exclaims Laertes, meditating on a nothingness which 'is worth more than all thought'. It is to be noticed that, in the context of Shakespeare's work, Laertes' perplexed state echoes that of Edgar in *King Lear* when he—captivated by the logic and rigour latent in the madness of his king—declares 'what reason in this madness'. Each character tries to decipher the madness of Ophelia and Hamlet because the ambiguities of their deranged discourses seem to reveal a terrible sickness capable not only of threatening the psychological equilibrium of the individual but of infecting the kingdom as well as the world beyond: 'it goes so heavily with my disposition' says Hamlet, 'that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.' (Act Two, Scene Two)

However, Hamlet's madness has not only the effect of disturbing those around him, it also allows him the freedom to transgress the court's rules of etiquette and obedience without incurring immediate punishment. Hamlet, under cover of madness, takes on the role of a critical

and sardonic commentator on the schemes of other characters, and in this he succeeds Yorick, the king's late fool, whose fate is the subject of a full discussion in the fifth and final act. Amongst Hamlet's principal targets are his mother's infidelity, Rosencrantz's servitude and the devouring ambition of his uncle whom he reminds, by means of a riddle, that all are equal before death:

HAMLET: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

KING: What dost thou mean by this?

HAMLET: Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. (Act 4, Scene 3)

Forced to play a role which brings him nothing but misfortune and alienation, Hamlet envies those who, unlike him, do not allow themselves to be tormented by 'the scruples of conscience'. For this reason he admires the equanimity of his friend Horatio, whom he includes amongst those fortunate people 'Whose blood and judgement are so well comeddled/ That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger/ To sound what stop she please'. In other words, whilst Horatio 'no revenue hast but [his] good spirits/ To feed and clothe [him]', it is precisely his ability to be someone 'that Fortune's buffets and rewards/ Hast ta'en with equal thanks' (Act Three, Scene 2) that allows him to escape suffering. The stoic Horatio, who admits to being 'more an antique Roman than a Dane' (Act 5, Scene 2), does not succumb to destructive passions. He does not nourish ill-considered hopes and in this avoids frustrations and disappointments. It is because all these qualities are united in Horatio that Hamlet implores him, before his own death, not to give in to the temptation to commit suicide and to stay alive in order to tell the whole truth.

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me.
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

So, what is the answer to the central question: is Hamlet mad? Is he mad partly because his pain and metaphysical doubt are beyond him? Is his madness a strategy for better observing and manipulating others, and furthermore to protect himself? Or does he take cover under an artificial madness which absolves him from all responsibility and allows him to find comfort in inaction, to split himself in some way, to be at once an actor in *and* a spectator of the staging of life, of *his* life? Or is he, all things considered, just insane? Each of us has to decide, according to taste and temperament.

Hamlet and Oedipus

The critical applications of the famous theory of the Oedipus complex to the tragedy of Hamlet are innumerable. It was Freud himself who, in an essay published in 1905, was the first to try and resolve in psychoanalytical terms the enigma offered by Hamlet's behaviour. According to Freud, the personal crisis undergone by Hamlet awakens his repressed incestuous and parricidal desires. The disgust which the remarriage of his mother arouses in him, as well as the violent behaviour during their confrontation in the queen's bedroom, are signs of the jealousy which he constantly experiences, even if unconsciously. Hamlet is absolutely horrified by the thought that

his mother could feel desire for Claudius, whom he describes as a 'murderer and villain,/ A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe/ Of your precedent lord'.

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love
And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oaths—O, such a deed
As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul, and sweet religion makes
A rhapsody of words. Heaven's face does glow
O'er this solidity and compound mass
With tristful visage, as against the doom
Is thought-sick at the act. (Act Three, Scene Four)

A little after, the ghost of Hamlet's father suddenly appears in order to assuage the anger of his son and implore him to take pity on his mother's great distress: 'This visitation/ Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose./ But look, amazement on thy mother sits./ O step between her and her fighting soul./ Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works./ Speak to her, Hamlet'.

The bedroom scene is one example amongst many of Hamlet's aversion to sexuality, which he more often than not associates with vulgarity and sickness. Despite his violent reactions, he is nonetheless fundamentally incapable of acting, Freud tells us, because he cannot bring himself to avenge himself on the man who has killed his father and taken his place at the side of his mother. Given that Claudius does no more than reproduce the repressed fantasies of childhood, the hatred Hamlet feels for him is progressively replaced by a feeling of guilt which constantly reminds him that he is no better than the man he is supposed to punish.

Contrary to Freud the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan thinks that the real psychological dimension of the play lies not in Hamlet's behaviour but in his language. In his famous essay, entitled 'Desire and the interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*', he holds that the most striking characteristic of Hamlet's language is its ambiguity. Everything he says is transmitted, in various degrees, through metaphor, simile and, above all, wordplay. His utterances, in other words, have a hidden and latent meaning which often surpasses the apparent meaning. They have, therefore, enormous affinities with the language of the unconscious which proceeds equally by various forms of distortion and alterations in meaning, notably through slips of the tongue, dreams, *double entendres*, and wordplay. Hamlet is himself aware of the ambiguous nature of his own speeches as well as of the feelings which drive them. Concerned by the dialectic between reality and appearance, and surface and depth, he is conscious that whatever happens to him is deeper and stranger than that which is displayed by the superficial symptoms of mourning:

THE QUEEN: If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?
Hamlet: Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,

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For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (Act One, Scene Two)

Hamlet and Ghosts

Three other Shakespeare plays have ghosts as characters: *Julius Caesar* (Brutus is visited by the ghost of Caesar), *Macbeth* (Banquo's ghost interrupts Macbeth's banquet) and *Richard III* (the king is haunted by the ghosts of his victims). In *Hamlet*, the role of the ghost, who appears as early as the first scene, is to trigger the action by revealing Claudius' crime and by demanding vengeance. For the celebrated English critic John Dover Wilson (1881-1969), the ghost of Hamlet's father is thus 'both a revenge-ghost and a prologue-ghost'. 'It is one of Shakespeare's glories', he continues, 'that he took the conventional puppet, humanised it, christianised it, and made it a figure that the spectators would recognise as *real*, as something which might be encountered in any lonely graveyard at midnight . . . The Ghost in *Hamlet* comes, not from a mythical Tartarus, but from the place of departed spirits in which post-medieval England, despite a veneer of Protestantism, still believed at the end of the sixteenth century'. *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.52.

One should note Horatio's scepticism: at first he refuses to believe spirits can assume material form. Then, disconcerted on seeing the ghost, he nonetheless tries to communicate with it by persuading it to speak 'in the name of heaven'. In the end he gives some credence to the ghost whom he feels to be an omen of some strange catastrophe for the kingdom.

The Soliloquies

1. 'O that this too sullied flesh would melt' (Act One, Scene Two)
2. 'O all you host of heaven' (Act One, Scene Five)
3. 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!' (Act Two, Scene Two)
4. 'To be, or not to be, that is the question' (Act Three, Scene One)
5. 'Tis now the very witching time of night' (Act Three, Scene Three)
6. 'And so a goes to heaven' (Act Three, Scene 3)
7. 'How all occasions do inform against me' (Act Four, Scene Four)

Hamlet gives us seven soliloquies, all centred on the most important existential themes: the emptiness of existence, suicide, death, suffering, action, a fear of death which puts off the most momentous decisions, the fear of the beyond, the degradation of the flesh, the triumph of vice over virtue, the pride and hypocrisy of human beings, and the difficulty of acting under the weight of a thought 'which makes cowards of us all'. He offers us also, in the last act, some remarks made in conversation with Horatio in the cemetery which it is suitable to place in the same context as the soliloquies because the themes of life and death in general and his attitude when confronted by his own death have been with him constantly. Four of his seven soliloquies deserve our special attention: 'O that this too sullied flesh would melt', 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!', 'To be, or not to be, that is the question', and 'How all occasions do inform against me'.

Readings of these soliloquies are varied and diverse. However, three remarks are in order:

1. The density of Hamlet's thought is extraordinary. Not a word is wasted; every syllable and each sound expresses the depth of his reflection and the intensity of his emotion. The spectator cannot but be hypnotised.

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2. The language is extremely beautiful. Shakespeare was in love with words. His soliloquies are pieces of pure poetry, written in blank verse, sustained by a rhythm now smooth, now rugged, by a fast or a slow pace, offering us surprises in every line.
3. The soliloquies are in effect the hidden plot of the play because, if one puts them side by side, one notices that the character of Hamlet goes through a development which, in substance, is nothing other than the history of human thinking from the Renaissance to the existentialism of the twentieth century.

The Hamlet of the first soliloquy is an outraged man who, disgusted by his 'sullied flesh', can see no outcome to his disgust other than death. To free himself from the grip of his flesh he must put an end to his life. But there is the rub: God, the Everlasting, he tells us, does not allow one to act in this way. God still rules the universe and Hamlet must obey his strictures.

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
 Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew;
 Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
 His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.

Hamlet's attitude is different in 'To be, or not to be'. He asks himself about death beyond religious considerations; the nature of his dilemma has changed, as Hamlet tells us with a lucid simplicity.

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

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

In the first soliloquy Hamlet submits to rules and prohibitions; in the second he imagines and rationalises and decides to remain in the world, for the moment at least. But he goes much further. Throughout the final act he pictures the final scene. There, where another dramatist would have given the dying Hamlet a long discourse on death, Shakespeare has Hamlet say just a few words of disconcerting simplicity, 'the rest is silence', precisely because Hamlet has already said everything before:

Alas, poor Yorick! (Act Five, Scene One) And a man's life's no more than to say
'one'. (Act Five, Scene Two)
There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come;
if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The
readiness is all. (Act Five, Scene Two)

The other two soliloquies are memorable because they reveal all the passionate nature of Hamlet's personality. Observing young Fortinbras and his army on their way to conquer Poland—'an eggshell', 'a wisp of straw'—Hamlet, on the edge of despair, asks himself why he, when he has so many reasons, cannot stir himself to action, why he cannot carry out the necessary act of vengeance. Why? Why? The last lines of Act Four are very revealing:

How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge. What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unus'd. Now whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th' event -
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward—I do not know
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me,
Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd,
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw

When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.

Some actors, including the very best, believe that the most beautiful soliloquy is that which comes at the end of Act Two, immediately after the first discussion between Hamlet and the travelling players. Here Hamlet is enraged, furious and rude. He lays himself, we feel, totally bare. He is no fool however. Recovering his spirits he devises a plan which will lead the king to betray himself. This is Shakespeare at the height of his theatrical prowess, stamping Hamlet's language with relentless changes in tone, the peaks of rage inter-cut with short moments of profound depression or of incredulous questioning.

O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distractions in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.
Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause
And can say nothing—no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,
Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i'th' throat
As deep as to the lungs—who does me this?
Ha!
'Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall

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To make oppression bitter, or ere this
 I should ha' fatt'd all the region kites
 With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
 Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
 Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
 That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
 Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
 Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
 And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
 A scullion! Fie upon't! Foh!
 About, my brains. Hum—I have heard
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play
 Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
 Been struck so to the soul that presently
 They have proclaim'd their malefactions.
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;
 I'll tent him to the quick. If he do blench
 I know my course. {...}
 The play's the thing
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

The character of Hamlet is without doubt one of the roles most coveted by actors. However, some claim it is also one of the easiest. The text is so beautiful and so expressive that it merely has to be spoken; it flows by itself effortlessly and it only remains for the actor to be coherent for the duration of the performance. Yet it is here that choices have to be made. How should one approach these soliloquies? Should one treat them as pieces of music and approach them as one would the arias of an opera? Shakespeare's language certainly lends itself to such an approach. Or should one see these speeches as Hamlet's thoughts which he expresses aloud, and deliver them as if he were speaking to himself? Alternatively, isn't Hamlet in the act of saying something to the public through the special and particular magic of the theatre, isn't he taking us into his confidence in an act of communion which resembles, in some aspects, an act of love? These three approaches are possible, as well as others, of course.

Hamlet and Theatre

More than any of his other plays, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is pure theatre, a theatre cascading through three or four layers, like Russian dolls.

1. Structurally *Hamlet* offers all the characteristics of classical tragedy. The first act gives us nearly all the elements necessary to drive the plot. The second act accelerates the action until the formidable explosions of the third act, which can only lead to the tragic denouement of the fifth act. The play is long and some directors don't hesitate to make drastic cuts (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sometimes disappear totally, Ophelia's interventions are shortened, and the cemetery scene is reduced to an absolute minimum, as are Hamlet's conversations with the travelling players).

2. There are numerous remarks about theatre itself in the play and Shakespeare obviously makes use of his principal character to make a number of observations on the acting of the players and, by extension, on acting methods and conventions in London at the turn of the seventeenth century. Be natural, he tells them, don't overdo it ('hold as 'twere a mirror up to nature'; 'I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant. It out-Herods Herod'). To this are added some observations on the young boys who play female roles. This is Shakespeare the master speaking. He tells us how things should be, or tries to, for it is not an easy matter, as he is about to show us in a moment. In any case, if one can judge from the sharpness of some of his comments, the acting of some of his contemporaries was such that he would have happily sent them to be flogged! Clearly, Shakespeare is settling a few accounts here; what is astonishing is that, to do so, he has to stop the action and suspend the plot. Only he, Shakespeare, could afford such a thing.

3. The play within the play—the theatre within theatre—occupies the heart of Act Three. It does have its function within the plot, although it is not absolutely certain that it really enables Hamlet to flush out the king, but above all it is a striking example of what theatre should not be. Being bad actors, the players fall into all the traps Hamlet has just warned them against, and give us a piece of bad theatre. This is Shakespeare at his most sardonic, but he may be the butt of his own irony: imagine Shakespeare's *Hamlet* acted as badly *in front of Shakespeare* whilst he admonishes his own actors, in the same play, for acting in such a way!

4. Great theatre is therefore to be found elsewhere in his play, and in no way is Shakespeare economical with it. Let us remember that Hamlet hides behind his 'antick disposition' for the greater part of the play; it is therefore important to remember that he is an actor, and that he acts so well that none of the other characters ever succeeds in 'reading' him. But Shakespeare sprinkles other choice pieces of theatre within theatre throughout the play, the most successful and striking being without doubt the meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia in Act Two, Scene 1. Not a word is exchanged but many things occur. It is a mime, an almost ritualistic dance the full meaning of which we cannot be sure has not escaped us. Hamlet is a master actor, an 'amateur' who acts a hundred times better than the inept professionals of the mime in the third act. There it is, that is good theatre, Shakespeare tells us. However this genius of a director goes further still: this mime does not take place on the stage; in a supreme paradox, it only exists through language, for it is through the words of Ophelia that it is given life in the theatre of our imagination. A perfectly real illusion, it takes shape in our minds through another illusion: the language and acting of the actor on the stage. The *mise-en-abyme* of the mime through language. Only Shakespeare could risk this, and succeed.

With *Hamlet* Shakespeare has bequeathed us a supreme gift. It is a testament in which the creative genius of its author shines out, demonstrating his knowledge of the human spirit, his mastery of plot, and the unbelievable wealth of his language. But there is too much theatre within theatre in this play for us not to see that through a sustained engagement with this theme Shakespeare wanted to discover and to make known a truth rarely grasped, or even perhaps to tell us that there is no truth, save for that truth given existence by a genius through theatrical devices, representation, illusion and art. This is what Tom Stoppard understood very well, when, in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, he took the two most insignificant characters in *Hamlet*, turned them into heroes, and reproduced entire passages from Shakespeare's play. This is theatre in its purest form which self reflexively claims itself as such. That idea was already present in *Hamlet*.