

“WHO’S THERE?”

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THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB

13 May 2002

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“Who’s There?”

“Who’s there?” This simple question is the opening line of one of the most enduring and perplexing plays ever written. The play I refer to is William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the full title of which is *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

Many years ago, without quite knowing why, I began attending performances of *Hamlet* whenever and wherever conveniently possible. For some time, I have wanted to explore my fascination with this play in a systematic fashion. This paper has given me that opportunity, and if it may seem that I have written it largely for myself, I have done so with the hope that if I were to find a sympathetic audience anywhere, it would be here. This evening gives me the opportunity to share with you my enthusiasm for a work that, although nearly four hundred years old, seems uniquely written for our own times.

Hamlet first appeared in print in 1603, as a pocket-sized book known by scholars as the First Quarto. It appeared again, in 1604 or 1605, in a form known as the Second Quarto, which contained nearly twice as many lines as the First Quarto. The third printed version of the play is found in the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays, published seven years after his death, in 1623. This version lacks about two hundred lines found in the Second Quarto. It also contains about eighty-five or so new lines.

Which of these three printed versions of *Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s? It is widely held that the First Quarto, by far the shortest version of

the play, is a corruption of the original text, perhaps prepared from memory by an actor who had performed in an abridged version of the play. Most modern editors have preferred the Second Quarto, believing that this version was based on Shakespeare's own manuscript or from a scribe's copy of the manuscript, and it is this version, combined with as much of the Folio version as good scholarship would dictate, that most of us are familiar with today.¹

There is a related question here. Not only are there uncertainties regarding the correct versions of the plays in the Shakespeare canon (none of the plays survives in manuscript form), there is also a question regarding the identity of their author. This question has been lurking on the margins of Shakespeare scholarship for a long time, and I had decided early not to pursue it. Several months ago, however, I changed my mind, upon learning that the question is being put before us again in a new play (which may be seen at the Goodman Theater starting this fall) and in a new film, both of which were reviewed in the Sunday *New York Times* on February 10.²

At least fifty persons other than Shakespeare have been promoted as the author of the plays. Only three, however, are serious candidates: the philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon, the playwright Christopher Marlowe, and Edward de Vere, the 17th earl of Oxford. Bacon's name was the first to surface, in 1769, nearly 150 years after Shakespeare's death. It was perhaps also the first to be withdrawn from consideration, largely as a result of the craziness of the arguments advanced in favor of Bacon's authorship, which depended on a cryptogram analysis of the plays as well as including the claim that Bacon was also the author of the plays of Christopher Marlowe and the essays of Montaigne.³

Christopher Marlowe, you may recall, was one of the characters portrayed in the 1999 award-winning film *Shakespeare in Love*. He now appears at the center of the authorship controversy in a

documentary film entitled *Much Ado About Something*, which was first shown at the Film Forum in New York on February 13. Anyone familiar with Marlowe's plays can testify to their forcefulness and to the skill of the author. Marlowe, however, was no Shakespeare. The argument for his authorship of the Shakespeare canon is strained at best, and, at worst, ridiculous.

The case for de Vere is another matter. It was first proposed in 1920 by a man whose name is spelled "looney," but pronounced "lony"—J. Thomas Looney. In recent years, the argument for de Vere as Shakespeare has picked up momentum. In a celebrated moot-court debate held in Washington, D.C., in 1987, three U.S. Supreme Court justices—John Paul Stevens, Harry A. Blackmun and William J. Brennan, Jr.—sided with the Shakespeare camp. Stevens and Blackmun, however, subsequently changed their positions, backing the de Vere proponents, and Brennan was later reported to have become more skeptical of what is known as the Stratfordian position. And two years ago, a Massachusetts scholar successfully defended a 500-page doctoral thesis—now referred to as the Rosetta stone of the de Vere movement—supporting the earl as the author of the plays.

This controversy shows no signs of abating. At a Smithsonian seminar on the subject in January, several noted trial lawyers, including Robert S. Bennett, the attorney for President Clinton in the Paula Jones matter, cross-examined proponents on both sides of the question. The debate has even spilled over into the world of the visual arts, with proponents of the de Vere position arguing that a roughly contemporaneous painting, owned by the Folger Shakespeare Library, that was thought to be of Shakespeare is really a portrait of de Vere.

This evening is not the time to plow through the voluminous amount of scholarship devoted to this question. It is perhaps suf-

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ficient to note that many people simply cannot believe that the plays could have been written by "a relatively unschooled glover's son from Stratford who became a minor actor in London and who never left England."⁴ For the record, however, I mention others who support, or have supported, de Vere as the author of the Shakespeare canon: Sigmund Freud, Derek Jacobi, Orson Welles, and Mark Rylance, the artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe in London.

Hamlet is the most frequently acted of Shakespeare's plays.⁵ It has generated more comment than any other written work in English with the exception of the Bible.⁶ Almost every school-boy—who may never have heard of *Hamlet*, or of Shakespeare for that matter—can playfully pronounce the beginning words of the world's most famous soliloquy ("To be or not to be"), and one scholar informs us of his surprise that so many people seem to know the play almost by heart.⁷ For serious actors, the role of *Hamlet* is the Mt. Everest of the classical stage, and many cautiously begin thinking about playing that role early in their careers. Shakespeare himself was said to have been fascinated by his own handiwork, and from the time of its first staging continued to add new material to the text,⁸ in the process making it the longest of his thirty-nine plays.⁹

Most of you, I know, are familiar with *Hamlet*. A brief retelling of the story may nevertheless be in order. The king of Denmark, *Hamlet's* father, has recently and suddenly died. *Hamlet's* mother, Gertrude, the queen, has married the late king's brother, Claudius, who becomes the new king. The first words of the play—"Who's there?"—are spoken at midnight from a rampart of the castle Elsinore. A ghost resembling the dead king appears nightly on the ramparts and on a fourth occasion informs Ham-

let of his murder by the hand of Claudius and demands that Hamlet avenge the murder. Hamlet vows to "remember" his father. His behavior arouses Claudius's suspicions. Subsequent events heighten Claudius's suspicions, and he sends Hamlet to England under the escort of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with secret instructions to have Hamlet killed. Hamlet, however, escapes and returns to Denmark. Claudius plots Hamlet's murder. Laertes, Hamlet's former friend, but now his mortal enemy, believing Hamlet responsible for the death of his father Polonius and sister Ophelia, is enlisted in the plot. The plot to kill Hamlet backfires, and the play ends with the deaths of Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet in quick succession. Of the play's principal characters, only Horatio, Hamlet's faithful friend, survives.

Hamlet begins as an old-fashioned revenge play. Such plays were popular in Elizabethan times and in prior periods as well. An injustice is committed, and the protagonist acts to avenge the injustice. In conventional revenge-play plots, the protagonist delays or bides his time (often feigning madness), in order to seek an opportune time to exact revenge. The story Shakespeare borrowed for *Hamlet*—of a king killed by his brother, who marries the dead king's widow, and of a young prince who avenges his father's death—is an ancient one. It first surfaced in print in the twelfth century and was later adapted for the English stage in the 1580s in a play (now lost) attributed to Thomas Kyd. What Shakespeare borrowed, however, became something altogether different in his hands: "Over the sensationalism and rough energy of a conventional revenge plot is placed a sophisticated psychological drama whose most intense action belongs to the interior world of soliloquy."¹⁰ It is this second, infinitely more challenging aspect of the play that has fascinated audiences and scholars alike for hundreds of years.

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Who was Hamlet? Before we look at that question, we need to acknowledge that unless a play is based on or incorporates the story of actual persons, we take the characters of the play as we find them, knowing no more about them than the playwright tells us. Not so with Shakespeare, however, whose characters are so palpable that lovers of Shakespeare insist on knowing more about them than Shakespeare has been content to tell us. In the nineteenth century, for example, writers were preoccupied with imagining the lives of Shakespeare's characters before they took their places on stage.¹¹ One of the better-known books in this regard is *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, published in 1875. More recently, John Updike made his own contribution to this genre in a novel entitled *Gertrude and Claudius*, in which this present-day chronicler of suburban lust explores the lives of these two characters before they make their appearance in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Updike, incidentally, answers for us one of the questions that Shakespeare scholars have been puzzling about for hundreds of years: were Gertrude and Claudius having an affair prior to the time of the old King Hamlet's death?

This curiosity on the part of Shakespeare aficionados extends beyond even the lives of the characters, with some wanting to mess with the plays themselves. Many, for example, ask regarding the whereabouts of Mrs. Lear while the king was hatching his crackpot plan to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. This was not only bad estate planning, but, as we learn early in the play, was a hell of a way for the king to begin his retirement. Mrs. Lear could undoubtedly have offered some valuable insights into the character of her three daughters and her sons-in-law, but her introduction onto the stage would destroy the plot of the play itself or present us with an altogether different play, and, by and large, we must be content with the story that Shakespeare has given us.

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Now, let's get back to Hamlet. Who was he? Or, in the words with which the play begins, "Who's there?" Shakespeare tells us that he was a young man of thirty. He was, insofar as we know, an only child—one of the few facts that seems to have escaped comment by *Hamlet* scholars. He was also a student, an intellectual, who had only recently come to Elsinore from the university at Wittenburg to attend his father's funeral. We first meet him in scene 2 of act 1, in an audience chamber of the castle Elsinore. His first words, spoken in response to Claudius's addressing him as "my cousin Hamlet and my son" (1.2.66), are as follows: "A little more than kin and less than kind" (1.2.67). These words, spoken as an aside, and usually spoken sullenly, define Hamlet's temperament at court in the early parts of the play.

What more we know about this young prince we learn most importantly from Ophelia following their meeting in scene 1 of act 3. Following that meeting, in which Hamlet first treats Ophelia courteously but then brutally berates her, attacks womanhood, and ends by telling her to go to a nunnery—following that meeting (after Hamlet departs), Ophelia utters the following:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue,
sword,
Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mold of form . . .

(3.1.163-67)

This is not the Hamlet we see as the play begins, but rather a Hamlet who has had a great falling off from his prior estate, nor is it, except in brief flashes of dialogue or action, the Hamlet that we see as the play progresses—until the very last scene.

Critics and scholars are deeply divided about the character of Hamlet. One scholar has written as follows: "Hamlet is one of the

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most appealing characters the mind of man has ever created but he is really a bit of an ass."¹² Another has called Hamlet "a man of exquisite moral sensibility," while a third says that he is an "ego-maniac,"¹³ showing "utter disregard for the feelings of others."¹⁴ Yet another has written that "Critics still argue over whether Hamlet is finally a hero or a villain."¹⁵ And finally, it has been suggested "that Hamlet was the only Shakespearean character whom we could think had written Shakespeare's plays"¹⁶—a comment that perhaps says more about Shakespeare than it does about Hamlet. Is it any wonder, therefore, each time we take our seats for a new performance of *Hamlet*, that we anticipate seeing a performance different from any we have seen before?

Perhaps the best way of getting into Hamlet's mind is to address some of the questions audiences and scholars alike have been asking about him from the time the play was first performed. We need to recognize that we are mostly talking here about the text of the play, and not any particular performance, since the director and the players will have decided beforehand on a particular interpretation and will thereby influence the audience in that direction. That said, the question most frequently asked, and the one to which we now turn, is as follows: was Hamlet mad?

I am tempted to respond to this question as follows: You're damned right he was mad! His father, whom he had greatly admired, had been murdered by his uncle. His mother, for whom he had deep affection, had married the murderous uncle within a month, in the process depriving the prince of a kingdom. In addition, Hamlet's life at Elsinore was made miserable by the close and constant surveillance to which he was subjected by Claudius and other members of the Danish court. Who, I ask, wouldn't be mad in those circumstances? That answer, we know,

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would be an answer to the wrong question, for the correct question is not whether Hamlet was mad in the sense of being angry, but whether he was suffering a disorder of the mind. And yet those very circumstances—a murdered father, a mother seemingly faithless to his father's memory, Hamlet's being subjected to relentless scrutiny by the court, and faced with an injunction laid down by a ghost to avenge his father's death—all are arguably sufficient to unhinge a sensitive mind.

The amount of commentary on Hamlet's madness is enormous. Samuel Johnson wrote that Hamlet's "madness" was a "source of mirth" to eighteenth-century audiences, and was merely "pretended." This view, however, tended to change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and post-Freudian directors were particularly prone to see signs of actual madness and cast the role of Hamlet accordingly. What are these signs? I confess that I am unable to find them in the plain text of the play—either in the words spoken by Hamlet or in his actions. It is true that Hamlet himself claims more than once that he is "mad," and let us acknowledge that he spends an excessive amount of time talking to himself (there are seven soliloquies, more than were spoken by any of Shakespeare's other characters). But madness claimed is not necessarily inconsistent with a pretended madness (if that is the state of mind one desires to project), and as for talking to oneself—well, I leave it to you to decide whether this is a sign of madness.

There are two principal reasons for thinking that Hamlet's madness was feigned. First, Claudius was the possessor of a guilty secret—that he had murdered the king. Hamlet first became privy to this secret in his encounter with the Ghost, and from that time forward, his life was in jeopardy. His only cover, in the circumstances in which Shakespeare had placed him, was pretend-

ed madness. Victor Hugo, the nineteenth-century French novelist, stated the case nicely in the following passage:

Hamlet acts the madman for his safety. . . . In the Middle Ages . . . and even at earlier periods, woe unto him who found out a murder or a poisoning committed by a king! . . . A man suspected of suspicion was lost.¹⁷

Hugo then quotes Aeschylus: "To look a fool is the secret of the wise man."

A second reason for supposing Hamlet's madness to be pretended relates to the structure of the play itself. James Russell Lowell observed that "The question of Hamlet's madness has been discussed and variously decided." "High medical authority," he says, "has pronounced, as usual, on both sides of the question." Considering the question for himself, Lowell offered the following conclusion: "If you deprive Hamlet of reason, there is truly no tragic motive left. He would be a fit subject for Bedlam, but not for the stage."¹⁸ A lunatic running loose in the castle Elsinore might provide mirthful entertainment for the audience, but the audience would be seeing a play different from the one that Shakespeare has written.

All of this is not to say that Hamlet does not come close to the edge of madness. There are at least two episodes in the play in which we can imagine Hamlet to have lost control of his reason. In one, in the scene with Ophelia, he alternately woos and berates her, berates her with a harshness that puts her on her own path to insanity. In the other, later, scene, that with his mother Gertrude in her chamber, he exhibits a soul seemingly so tormented by his father's murder and his mother's infidelity that we can envision him on the threshold of taking her life at that very instant. Given the overwhelming nature of the circumstances in

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which he finds himself, there is sound reason for concluding that during his short life on stage Hamlet sometimes approached, and even crossed, the flimsy barrier that separates sanity from madness.

I recall being amused forty or so years ago by the witty (perhaps *witless*) observation that the behavior of two-thirds of the inhabitants of New York City is no different from that of the inmates of an insane asylum. Who is to say whether this tormented majority is merely seeking cover and safety in a hostile environment, or whether such behavior is itself the product of that environment? Where Hamlet is concerned, Shakespeare provides no clear answer. And perhaps we should give the last word on the subject to Anatole France, the Nobel-prize-winning French novelist, who, in his “famous apostrophe” to Hamlet, pointedly asks, “What one of us is not mad?”¹⁹

Another frequently asked question—which is the key question for understanding the play—is why did Hamlet delay? Why did he delay avenging his father’s death for so long, resulting in the calamitous death of all (save Horatio) of the principal characters in the play? The short answer, in the words of one scholar, is that Hamlet “thinks too much.”²⁰ To which we might add, he talks too much (this, after all, is the longest speaking part in the entire Shakespeare canon). Put Othello, for example, in Hamlet’s position, and revenge would have been swift and certain. The result, also, would have been a one-act revenge drama, lasting perhaps five minutes, instead of the five-act tragedy that Shakespeare wrote.

Within the context of the play, Shakespeare provides us with several reasons accounting for Hamlet’s delay. You will recall that the action of the play is set in motion by the appearance of the Ghost, who swears Hamlet to vengeance. The appearance of the

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Ghost, however, is not as straight-forward as it might seem. In Shakespeare's time, Catholics believed that ghosts came from Purgatory and were, therefore, souls of the departed, while Protestants thought that they came mostly from hell and "were devils who had assumed the shape and appearance of the dead."²¹ How was Hamlet to know with certainty whether the Ghost was his father, from Purgatory, instead of a devil from hell inciting him to a false vengeance that would result in his own damnation? Hamlet, it seems clear, did not know (or was not certain), and needed time in which to test the truthfulness of the Ghost's story of "murder most foul" (1.5.33), which he subsequently does, most effectively, with the play-within-a-play (the so-called Mousetrap) that is staged in act 3.

There is still more to the Ghost's cry for vengeance. Even if from Purgatory, the Ghost appeared to be crying for a personal vengeance; at least that was the way Hamlet first interpreted it. To an Elizabethan audience, however, "this [would be] a criminal act of blood, not to be condoned by God, and therefore represented a particularly agonizing position for a tragic hero to be placed in."²² According to tradition, only God could justifiably intervene to right the wrong committed by Claudius, and, although Hamlet was somehow to be the minister of God's justice, he could not himself initiate the action, but was compelled to wait for a time and a place and a means of God's choosing. Shakespeare does not give this as a reason for Hamlet's delay in the plain text of the play, but there seems to be little doubt that it would have been clearly understood and appreciated by an Elizabethan audience.

Scholars have given other reasons for Hamlet's failure to act. One of them we have already referred to: a peculiar disorder of the mind, whether it be known as melancholy, depression, or by

some other name. Another reason, perhaps the twentieth century's distinctive contribution, is found in Freud's suggestion that "Hamlet cannot take vengeance on the man who killed his father and possessed his mother, because these actions are fulfillments of Hamlet's own repressed Oedipal wishes."²³ Yet another—the "theatrical view"—is that Shakespeare used delay as a way of heightening suspense as the story moved to a conclusion. These various points of view are not necessarily exclusive—that is to say, each has a special validity in the action of the play; and their existence confirms the sentiment of one scholar "that no one is likely to accept another man's reading of *Hamlet*."²⁴

Hamlet is the mostly frequently staged of Shakespeare's plays. It is doubtful, however, that any of us has seen an *uncut* performance. The text version of the play most familiar to us is nearly 3,900 lines, and would take four to four and one-quarter hours to perform. Most stage performances are less than three hours, and some considerably shorter. The same is true for film adaptations of *Hamlet*. Laurence Olivier's production, for example, is approximately two and one-half hours. Only Kenneth Branagh, insofar as I know, in his 1996 film version, has given us the complete play. It lasts nearly four hours.

Faced with the task of staging a performance of the play, directors have two choices: to eliminate some parts (and characters) of the play altogether, or to retain all parts but trim the lines of some characters and shorten the action in some of the scenes. (A third alternative, of course, is to do some of both.) Apart from where to cut and paste, directors (and actors) are also faced with making decisions as to how the role of Hamlet should be played. One of the first actors to have played the role is Richard Burbage, a member of Shakespeare's acting company.²⁵ Nothing, however,

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is known of how he played the role. The next noted actor to play the role was Thomas Betterton. He played his first Hamlet in 1661, when he was about twenty-six, and his last in 1709, when he was in his seventies. His performance was described "as manly" by those who saw him. Next came David Garrick, who first played the role in 1742 and continued for another thirty years. Somewhat like Betterton, Garrick's Hamlet was "a man of action."

The first American actor of note to play Hamlet was Edwin Booth, who performed the role from 1853 to 1891. Although Booth modified the role over the years, he insisted that Hamlet was always sane. "The overall impression on viewers," we are told, "was of a man haunted by devotion to his father and anguished by the sin of his mother." Henry Irving, roughly a contemporary of Booth, played Hamlet as a man "overpowered by his love of Ophelia." While first insisting that Hamlet's madness was feigned, Irving later gave us a Hamlet who was "hysterical" in four scenes, including the nunnery scene and the scene in the queen's chambers. Finally, we come to modern-day interpretations, first staged in the nineteen-sixties, often in modern-day dress, typical of which is a 1965 Royal Shakespeare Company performance in which Hamlet is described as having been portrayed as "a limp-wristed anti-hero who dics snickering."

The most recent performance of *Hamlet* that I saw was the production at the Court Theater. It received "rave" reviews and played to packed houses. I am rarely disappointed by any performance of the play. Even the worst of them teaches us something new, and while I enjoyed the Court Theater production, I believe that it fell short of the mark. From beginning to end, Hamlet was portrayed as an anguished adolescent, often close to hysteria. Cast in this fashion, he was overpowered by Claudius, who needs to be played as a forceful adversary, but not one who dominates

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the action. When the performance ended with Hamlet's dying words, "the rest is silence" (5.2.395), one of our friends accompanying us that evening, said, "The play doesn't end there. What about Horatio's farewell to Hamlet?" All of you know those famous lines: "Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,/ And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (5.2.397-98). These lines were not spoken that evening, and could not be, for there was nothing noble about Hamlet in this production.

That the role of Hamlet can be interpreted and played so many different ways testifies to the complexity, and perhaps the universality, of the character that Shakespeare created. Of interest also are the many offshoots of the play that have been fashioned by other playwrights. The most famous of these, undoubtedly, is Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. I recall seeing this play in the late 1960s, without any comprehension of what was taking place on stage. I recently read the play, with pretty much the same result. It is generally regarded as a piece belonging to the Theater of the Absurd, and does not seem to me to add any new insights into Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Stoppard's play, incidentally, followed an earlier, unsuccessful work of his entitled *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*. Ever since learning of its existence, I have been unable to rid my mind of the absurd notion that Stoppard got the idea for the play while watching the 1940s Hollywood movie *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*.

I know that we haven't seen the last of imaginative works inspired by Shakespeare's masterpiece. The ground is simply too fertile. One scholar has opined that Hamlet seems "to have been shaped to order for psychoanalysis."²⁶ Why not, then, a play entitled *Hamlet's Psychiatrist*? Also, in Shakespeare's play, Hamlet dies,

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as we know, telling Horatio that his (Hamlet's) story remains untold. Many scholars have tried to penetrate the mystery suggested by this final lament, and it seems to me that Hamlet himself should be given the opportunity to tell his "untold story," in a play entitled *Hamlet in Hell* (with a nod to George Bernard Shaw for his clever work *Don Juan in Hell*). While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Gertrude and Claudius, have already been spoken for—the first two by Stoppard, the second pair by Updike—other characters in the play are begging for attention, the Ghost being only one of them.²⁷ Finally, someday, I am sure, we will be treated to a debasement of the play written and staged without an appearance by Hamlet—perhaps called *The Invisible Hamlet*.

This theme can unquestionably be carried to the point of absurdity. Once I started down this road I found it difficult to stop, and ended up with a two-page piece entitled *White House Hamlets*. I did not intend it to be a part of my paper, but have decided to include it to illustrate my own madness on the subject.

(White House Hamlets)

It occurred to me, for example, that the play *Hamlet* would resonate in the rooms of the White House in the final days of the Nixon administration. The operative words are taken directly from a line spoken in the play: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.100). President Nixon, perhaps, would have been too old to be cast as Hamlet, but if Thomas Betterton could play the role in his seventies, why not Nixon in his sixties? The soliloquies themselves are made for the brooding Nixon. Consider the opening lines of the first soliloquy: "O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,/ Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew" (1.2.133-34). Or the greatest soliloquy of them all, beginning "To

be or not to be" (3.1.64), spoken quietly at midnight in the Oval Office, with Nixon furtively glancing from side to side to discern whether or not he is being overheard, half hoping that he is, half hoping that he isn't, but with every word nevertheless being taped and recorded and awaiting only the issuance of a subpoena to uncover its existence.

Not all characters in the play would find their places in the Nixon White House. Many, however, were clearly resident there. There were countless Rosencrantzs and Guildensterns—so many, in fact, that their roles would need to be multiplied. Then there is Vice President Ford, cast in the role of the stoic Horatio. And finally, Polonius: none would claim the role, but one or more administration officials clearly earned and surely deserve it.

The *Hamlet* template also serves for the Clinton White House, but somewhat less convincingly. I can get President Clinton onto the stage, wailing away mournfully on a tenor saxophone, but I can't get him much further. Certainly there are character flaws to be examined. He would, however, be unable to deliver the line "Get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.131) without the audience collapsing in laughter. Clinton himself would be unable to say those words without a smile. Also, being given more to explanation than introspection, Clinton would not be able to make the soliloquies work. They would need to be rewritten or eliminated altogether. A new soliloquy, however, could be composed, in which the President would quietly debate with himself what the meaning of the word *is* is.

Finally, the ending of a Clinton White House adaptation of *Hamlet* would need to be revised. Instead of perishing with the other principal characters of the play, Clinton would be the sole survivor. Standing amidst the carnage, with the stage lights dimming, he would speak what would be the final words of the play:

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"I feel your pain." Such a production as I have imagined, I am certain, would best be classified as a comedy.

As for the current Bush White House, it is too soon to know whether we have a Hamlet in residence. I have some thoughts as to the direction in which he is headed, which I will be happy to share with you on some other occasion.

When my wife learned what the subject of my paper this evening would be, she was dismayed. Her last words to me on the subject were "Please don't make it too dark." *Hamlet* is not her favorite play. I believe she would have preferred that I write a paper about *Dracula*.

The reasons for her feelings concerning *Hamlet* are twofold. The first is the play's treatment of women. Gertrude and Ophelia are the only female characters in the play. Both are principal characters, and both are treated badly. Indeed, one scholar was apparently so distraught by the conventional portrayal of Gertrude as "well-meaning but shallow" and "weak-minded," that she felt compelled to come to Gertrude's defense in an essay entitled *The Character of Hamlet's Mother*.²⁸ Perhaps Hamlet's words "frailty, thy name is woman!" (1.2.150) tell us all that we need to know about this aspect of the play.

The second reason—my wife's second reason—is that the play is, *in fact*, "dark," unmistakably so. It is a dark play in several respects, all of which seem to me to be more or less related. First, as one commentator has observed, *Hamlet* may be read as "a prolonged meditation on death."²⁹ There is much talk in the play, for example, about the common destiny of all mankind, as in Gertrude's first words to Hamlet, as she enjoins him to set aside what she sees as a sadness attributable to his father's death: "Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,/ Passing

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through nature to eternity" (1.2.74-75). There are also multiple references to suicide, most famously in the soliloquy that begins "To be or not to be" (3.1.64), meaning to exist or not to exist, all of which may be seen as Hamlet's reflecting on death by his own hand as a way of escaping the burden of revenge his father has placed upon him. And finally (if there is any doubt as to where Shakespeare stands on the subject)—finally, as the play is ending, and Horatio reaches for the poison cup to follow Hamlet in death, Hamlet stays Horatio's hand and says to him:

Absent thee from felicity awhile
[meaning "keep yourself from the happiness of death"]
And in this hatsh world draw thy breathe in pain
To tell my story. (5.2.382-84)

Another aspect of the darkness of the play is that it speaks to the futility of human action. The pertinent question here, I believe, is what in fact did Hamlet achieve by setting out to revenge the death of his father? The only verifiable answer, it seems to me, is that Hamlet achieved not only his own death, but also the deaths of the play's other principal characters, who, with the exception of Claudius and arguably Gertrude, were innocent of any harm to his father. The final irony is that Fortinbras, whose father's lands the old King Hamlet had taken in battle, and who had threatened to march against Claudius to reclaim these lands in his father's name, becomes the inheritor of the Kingdom of Denmark at the end of the play. Old King Hamlet's conquests, in other words, "have been for nothing."³⁰

This theme—the futility of human action—is echoed in the writings of Nietzsche and Sartre, who speak of the terror or absurdity of existence. Its roots lie deeper, however, for if we look to the Book of Ecclesiastes, sometimes styled the Book of Wisdom,

we read the irreducible lesson spoken by its author: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity" (Eccl. 12.8 RSV). If you agree that this is one of the lessons that Shakespeare has written into *Hamlet*, then you will not, I am sure, be too surprised by the nihilistic ending fashioned by Ingmar Bergman in his production of the play. The play written by Shakespeare, as we know, ends with Fortinbras ordering his soldiers to shoot their guns as a final tribute to the fallen Hamlet. In the Bergman production, however, Fortinbras's order is a signal to his men to draw their guns and slaughter Horatio and the other surviving members of the Danish court.

A third (and final) aspect of the darkness of the play speaks to the issue of revenge, a force that has deeply stained the history of the human race. Moby Dick aside, we seem to be the only species on the planet in full possession of this destructive trait. Shakespeare offers us, and the play begins as, a conventional revenge drama, a form that was widely popular in Elizabethan times. If we look more closely, however, we find that while Shakespeare has given his audience the revenge play it wanted, he is also presenting a case against the institution of revenge itself.

Our history is replete to the present day with examples of the old calling upon the young to avenge ancient grievances. The story told in *Hamlet* is but another chapter in that history—different only in that the grievance is personal, laid upon the son by the father under circumstances that are ambiguous, with the added complication that the father, as Shakespeare hints, may himself have been a murderer. Is it really so strange, then, that Hamlet is hesitant to take action to revenge his father's death? Is it not the case that, instead of simply thinking too much, Hamlet thinks more deeply than others and sees consequences that others are unable or unwilling to see, and is understandably reluc-

tant, therefore, to become a participant in the endless cycle of violence and revenge.³¹

Perhaps more so than in any of his tragedies, Shakespeare is dealing not with a central flaw in the character of his protagonist, but rather with something larger, something fixed firmly in the very structure of our existence. I believe that this something is best expressed in words of William Faulkner which I came upon years ago and have been unable to find since. As best as I can recall them—and I believe they succinctly state the nature of the case—these words are as follows: "Poor man, born into a world he did not make, engenders heavier burdens than he can bear."³²

T. S. Eliot, perhaps the leading poet of the twentieth century as well as a prominent literary critic, declared in a penetrating essay on the subject that *Hamlet* is an "artistic failure."³³ Needless to say, scholars have responded vehemently to this assessment. One has written, "To reason as Eliot does is to indict the taste and intelligence of three centuries."³⁴ Another has said, ". . . if this be failure, what in the world of the arts constitutes success?"³⁵ I conclude this evening by affirming the verdict on the play pronounced by Victor Hugo, nearly 150 years ago:

Other works of the human mind equal *Hamlet*; none surpasses it.³⁶

Notes

1. The edition of the play relied on for purposes of this paper is The Folger Shakespeare Library edition, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992). For an interesting and informative discussion of various scholarly editions of *Hamlet*, see Ron Rosenbaum, "Shakespeare in Rewrite," *The New Yorker*, 13 May 2002, 68-77.
2. William S. Niederckorn, "A Historic Whodunit: If Shakespeare Didn't, Who Did?" *New York Times*, Sunday, 10 February 2002, Theater section.
3. Sylvan Barnet, "Shakespeare: An Overview," in *Hamlet*, Signet Classic Shakespeare, 2d rev. ed., ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: New American Library, 1998), xii.
4. Stanley Kauffmann, "Examined Lives," review of *Much Ado About Something* (Helpful Eye movie), *The New Republic*, 25 February 2002, 24.
5. Sylvan Barnet, "Hamlet on Stage and Screen," in *Hamlet*, Signet Classic Shakespeare, 240.
6. Michael Neill, "Hamlet: A Modern Perspective," in *Hamlet*, The Folger Shakespeare Library, 307-08.
7. Source misplaced.
8. Stuart Sherman, "Between the Lines," in stagebill for production of *Hamlet* by the Chicago Shakespeare Repertory, 1996-97 season.
9. There is disagreement as to the number of Shakespeare's plays. See Alan Riding, "Staging 'Edward III,' by (They Think) Shakespeare," *New York Times*, 1 May 2002.
10. Neill, "Hamlet: A Modern Perspective," 309.
11. Stephen Greenblatt, "With Dirge in Marriage," review of *Gertrude and Claudius*, by John Updike, *The New Republic*, 21 February 2000, 38.
12. Richard A. Lanham, "Superposed Plays," in *William Shakespeare's Hamlet*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 93.
13. Maynard Mack, "The World of *Hamlet*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet*, ed. David Bevington (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 48.
14. Salvador de Madariaga, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet*, 113.

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15. Howard Felperin, "O'erdoing Termagant," in *William Shakespeare's Hamlet*, 113.
16. Harold Bloom, introduction to *William Shakespeare's Hamlet*, 6.
17. Victor Hugo, "Shakespeare," critical extract in *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), 30.
18. James Russell Lowell, "Shakespeare Once More," critical extract in *Hamlet*, 37.
19. Mack, "The World of Hamlet," 61.
20. Lanham, "Superposed Plays," 96.
21. Harold Goddard, "Hamlet: His Own Falstaff," in *William Shakespeare's Hamlet*, 24.
22. Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet*, 86.
23. Barnet, "Shakespeare: An Overview," in *Hamlet*, Signet Classic Shakespeare, lxxxi.
24. Mack, "The World of Hamlet," 48.
25. Barnet, "Hamlet on Stage and Screen," 239-56. The quoted words and much of the information in this and the immediately succeeding paragraph are taken from this essay.
26. Willard Farnham, introduction to *Hamlet*, The Pelican Shakespeare, rev. ed., ed. Willard Farnham (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 16.
27. See David Norbrook, "Kaddish at Elsinore," review of *Hamlet in Purgatory*, by Stephen Greenblatt, *The New Republic*, 23 July 2001: 39-43.
28. Carolyn Heilbrun, in *Hamlet*, Signet Classic Shakespeare, 223-32.
29. Neill, "Hamlet: A Modern Perspective," 323.
30. Goddard, "Hamlet: His Own Falstaff," 23.
31. We see a different Hamlet midway into the final scene of the play: composed, seemingly untroubled by past events, resigned to a destiny now controlled by others. Claudius has arranged a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, taking steps to ensure that the outcome will be fatal to Hamlet. When Horatio, believing he senses an uneasiness on Hamlet's part, proposes that the match be postponed, Hamlet de-

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murs: "Not a whit. We defy augury" (5.2.233). He then says to Horatio:

There is (a)
special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be
(now), 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be
now; if it be not now, yet it (will) come. The
readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves
knows, what is 't to leave betimes? [meaning "since
no one knows what he leaves behind, what difference
does it make to leave early?"] Let be. (5.2.233-38)

Harold Bloom suggests that these words, expressing "a sort of heroic quietism," represent "the prince's final advice to the audience." Introduction to *William Shakespeare's Hamlet*, 3.

32. Does it surprise us that these sentiments are so pessimistic? In his introduction to *Schopenhauer: Essays and Aphorisms*, comp. and trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), Hollingdale, commenting on Arthur Schopenhauer's famous pessimism, makes the following reference to Shakespeare (at 22): "There have been great pessimists before; we have our own great pessimist, whose last word to us was that we are such stuff as dreams are made on"

33. T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet," critical extract in *Hamlet*, 44.

34. Goddard, "Hamlet: His Own Falstaff," 14.

35. Felperin, "O'erdoing Termagant," 108.

36. Victor Hugo, "Shakespeare," 30.

This paper was written for The Chicago
Literary Club and read before the Club on Monday
evening, the thirteenth of May, Two Thousand and Two.

This edition of three hundred copies
was printed for the Club in the month of
September, Two Thousand and Three.

PRINTED
IN THE U.S.A.