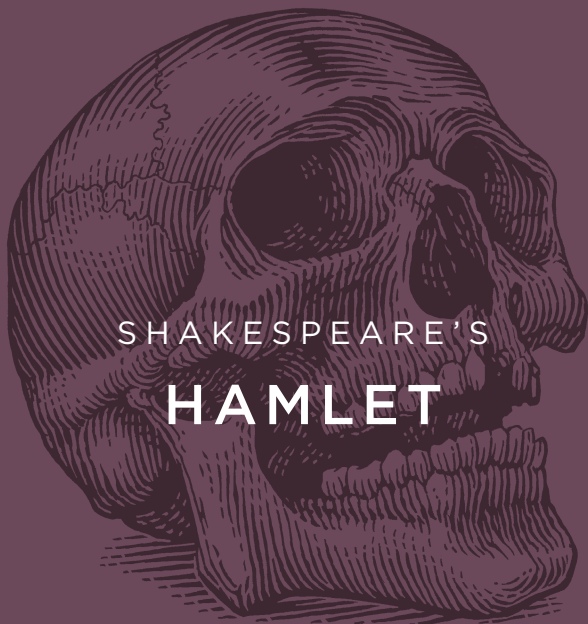


CHRISTIAN GUIDES
TO THE CLASSICS



LELAND RYKEN

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HAMLET

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SHAKESPEARE'S
HAMLET

LELAND RYKEN

Shakespeare's Hamlet

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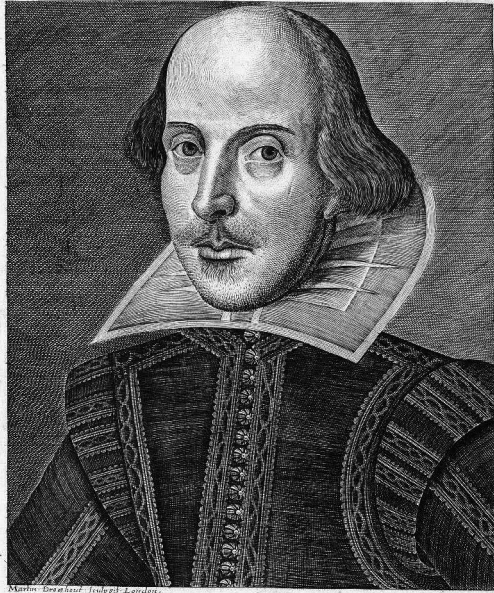
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SHAKESPEARES
COMEDIES,
HISTORIES, &
TRAGEDIES.

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Martin Droghda sculpsit Londini

L O N D O N
Printed by Isaac Iaggard, and Ed. Blount. 1623.

Title page of the book in which
Hamlet was first published.

Hamlet: The Play at a Glance

Author. William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

Nationality. English

Date of composition. 1600/1601

Approximate number of pages. 140 in a paperback edition (*Hamlet* is a very long play—over four hours in performance)

Available editions. Numerous, including Pelican, Arden, Ignatius, Dover Thrift, Signet, Norton, Oxford University Press. The 2001 Pelican edition has been used in this guide.

Genres. Drama; tragedy; melodrama; revenge play

Setting for the story. Elsinore Castle, Denmark, in the late Middle Ages; however, the court practices and some religious references in the play belong to Shakespeare's own Renaissance/Reformation time frame.

Main characters. Hamlet, prince of Denmark, who struggles to cope with the murder of his father and hasty remarriage of his mother; Claudius, current king of Denmark, murderer of his brother King Hamlet; Gertrude, mother of Hamlet, who married her former husband's brother, Claudius, soon after Claudius had murdered Hamlet the king; the ghost of Hamlet's father; Horatio, confidant of Hamlet; Polonius, adviser to Claudius; Ophelia, daughter of Polonius and girlfriend of Hamlet until he rejects her; Laertes, son of Polonius

Plot summary. As the play opens, Prince Hamlet, who has returned from college in Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral, is paralyzed with grief. The cause of his grief is double—his father's untimely death and his mother's hasty remarriage to Claudius. Early in the action, the ghost of King Hamlet appears to his son, informing him that Claudius murdered him and asking Hamlet to avenge his murder. Contrary to many interpreters, Hamlet does not procrastinate in carrying out this mission. Instead he delays because he first needs to ascertain whether the ghost's allegation is true or false. Its truthfulness is determined midway through the play. A second goal also emerges for Hamlet, namely, bringing his mother to repentance. During a fencing match late in the play, Hamlet finally exacts revenge by killing Claudius, but the circumstances are something that only divine providence could have orchestrated. Hamlet dies of poison during the fencing match.

Structure. (1) A three-part structure based on Hamlet's career as an avenger: Hamlet accepts his mission (act 1); Hamlet's career as a madman and detective (acts 2–4); Hamlet's career as avenger (act 5). (2) A design

known as the well-made plot: exposition (background information, showing Hamlet's paralysis of grief and Claudius's taking control as the new king); inciting moment (appearance of the ghost, who entrusts Hamlet with the mission of revenge); rising action (Hamlet's efforts to determine the truthfulness of the ghost's allegation that Claudius murdered King Hamlet); turning point (Hamlet's determination of the guilt of Claudius); further complication (Hamlet gradually masters his difficult situation, though in a frequently destructive way); climax (Hamlet exacts justice by executing Claudius, dying at the same time); denouement (tying up of loose ends).

Cultural context. Shakespeare is a Renaissance writer, and as such, he is indebted to two great intellectual and cultural movements from the past. One is the classical tradition, to which it is common to attach the term *humanism*. Humanism is the attempt to perfect all human possibilities in this life. *Hamlet* is such a pessimistic play that it calls into question rather than endorses humanism. The Reformation went hand in hand with the Renaissance, and the doctrinal tenets of Protestantism are the assumed frame of reference throughout the entire play, including such manifestations as the following: the existence of God and the Christian supernatural; heaven or hell as the destination of every human; the reality of sin and guilt; and the Christian moral scheme of virtues and vices.

Place in Shakespeare's canon. *Hamlet* is the first of Shakespeare's "great tragedies"; it was followed several years later by *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* (in that order).

The Christian world of the play. Christian doctrines and the church as an institution are the frame of reference throughout the play. For the first four acts, these Christian references are like stage props and do not strike us as something that the play is strongly endorsing. In act 5, however, Hamlet emerges as an example of Christian faith and courage, and the story takes on the quality of a surprise ending by affirming Christianity.

Mingling of Catholic and Protestant elements. This play has been the battleground of the debate over whether Shakespeare was Catholic or Protestant. The play has even been extravagantly allegorized to make it fit one of those two. We need to resist this approach. As noted above, the play mingles medieval and Renaissance elements and does not stick with the medieval time frame within which the action took place. The references to Catholic and Protestant practices are simply part of the world of the play. The play does not endorse one over the other but makes use of them for purposes of the plot. In Shakespeare's culture, moreover, Catholic and Protestant elements did exist side by side.

Tips for Reading or Viewing *Hamlet*

The following tips for reading or viewing *Hamlet* are based partly on the fact that it is an extremely long play. It runs close to four thousand lines—30 percent longer than the average Shakespearean tragedy. The playing time is over four hours. The uncut version of the play has been dubbed “the eternity *Hamlet*.”

(1) The excessive length of the play poses difficulties, but it also liberates us from the need to keep the exact sequence of events in mind. No one can hold all the details of the play in mind in their precise order. So instead of reading for plot, we should view ourselves as living in the many-sided world of the play, which resembles a mosaic or collage more than a linear plot.

(2) The play is much given to digressions and sudden shifts. We should simply accept this as a feature of the play and refuse to be frustrated by it.

(3) We should take up this play (no matter how many times we read or view it) with a sense of the momentousness of what we are doing. More than any other Shakespearean play, *Hamlet* has the status of a cultural icon. C. S. Lewis wrote that “we have here something of inestimable importance.” *The Friendly Shakespeare* claims that *Hamlet* has been performed more than any other play in the world, is the most written-about work of literature, is Shakespeare’s most translated play, and has been performed as a movie in approximately fifty different films.

(4) The character of Hamlet is the central focus of the play, and three things in particular make up that interest—Hamlet’s mission, Hamlet’s madness (both real and pretended), and Hamlet’s personality. If we keep our attention on these three things, we will do a good job of understanding the play.

(5) No other Shakespearean play contains as many famous expressions, aphorisms, and one-liners. We should relish these famous quotations by themselves as part of the beauty and meaning of the play.

(6) We need to resist automatically accepting as true certain interpretations that we are likely to have absorbed by way of “cultural osmosis.” Foremost among these is that Hamlet procrastinates (the view taken in this guide is that he delays but does not procrastinate). It is important not to accept interpretive options simply because they are well known.

(7) A further concern is the myth of the secular Shakespeare. If this play has a surprise ending that affirms Christianity (the view taken in this guide), it is important that we not reject the data that Shakespeare puts before us in act 5. Once we accept the Christian premises of the play, we will find Christian and biblical references throughout the play.

(8) *Hamlet* is a work of sophisticated art and “high culture.” We must respect it as such. But we must also relish the way Shakespeare chose common literary forms as the foundation on which he built his edifice. We must summon a childlike fear of ghosts, a common person’s love of melodrama and sword play, and the universal taste for “murder mysteries” and detective stories.

The Author and His Faith

The myth of the secular Shakespeare is a fallacy foisted on us by an unbelieving age. Before we look at the play, we need to consider the cultural milieu in which Shakespeare lived. Shakespeare's England was a thoroughly Christian and Protestant society. The Bible was the best-selling book. Regular church attendance was mandatory (and there are no parish or civil records that suggest that Shakespeare was found guilty of nonattendance). Shakespeare was baptized in the local Anglican church. Upon his retirement he became a lay rector (also called lay reader) in that same church. When he died he was buried inside the church (not in the surrounding cemetery). All of this should predispose us to expect Christian elements in Shakespeare's plays.

One evidence of this pervasive Christianity in Shakespeare's plays is the abundance of biblical allusions and echoes. At least two thousand biblical references exist, and additional biblical parallels and subtexts keep surfacing. Additionally, the plays assume the same kind of reality that the Bible does with such Christian beliefs as the existence of God and Satan, heaven and hell, good and evil, and punishment for sin and reward for virtue. There is nothing in Shakespeare's plays that shows skepticism about the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. Storytellers show their intellectual allegiance by means of the world that they create within their stories; the world of Shakespeare's plays is a thoroughly Christian world (as well as classical).

The particular form that Christianity takes in Shakespeare's plays is specific to the genres (with comedy and tragedy giving voice to quite different aspects of the Christian faith) and to the individual plays. Here is a list of leading ideas in *Hamlet*, and the list is entirely congruent with Christianity: (1) the power of evil in the individual soul and in human institutions like the family and the state; (2) the reality of guilt and damnation, with repentance viewed as necessary to achieve relief from damnation (as seen in the characterization of Claudius, who refuses repentance); (3) the certainty of justice, with evil ultimately punished and good rewarded; (4) God's providential direction of events in people's lives (the story of Hamlet in act 5); (5) the existence of an unseen spiritual world (including heaven and hell) in addition to the physical world in which we live.

It is easy to find biblical stories, poems, proverbs, and didactic (teaching) passages in the Bible that assert these same things. The fact that some of the ideas also belong to other religious systems does not make them any less Christian. Christianity was the only active belief system in England in Shakespeare's day, and the version of these ideas that Shakespeare embraced was the Christian version.

The Two Main Genres of *Hamlet*

Drama

Drama belongs to the broader category of narrative or story, so everything that is said about "How to Read a Story" earlier in this guide applies to *Hamlet*. But drama has its own way of telling a story:

- The action is not stated directly by a storyteller or narrator; instead, we need to piece together the action by listening to the dialogue of characters. The portrayal is objective in the sense that our only basis for interpreting action, scene, and character is what we hear characters in the play say. We have to come to the right interpretations without the help of a narrator who directs our responses.
- Instead of being divided into chapters the way novels are, plays are divided into acts and scenes. The movement from one scene or episode to the next is much more abrupt than the smooth flow found in a novel or short story.
- The strong point of drama is not plot but the presentation of characters and clashes between them.
- Because *Hamlet* falls into the further category of *poetic* drama, we need to pay even more attention to the words that we read or hear than we usually do when reading a story.

Revenge Play

The genre of the revenge play (also called revenge tragedy) had been popular among Roman dramatists and was an absolute rave on the London stage in Shakespeare's day. The revenge play was a specific type of melodrama, characterized by sensational external action.

A revenge play begins with a murder. This murder places the duty of revenge on the neck of kin (usually a son). Many obstacles lie in the path of the avenger, beginning with the need to ascertain the guilt of the murderer. In his role as detective, the avenger plays what seems to be a waiting game. He may lacerate himself for inaction. Vengeance is finally exacted in the last act. Ghosts are common in revenge plays. Although revenge was denounced by preachers in Shakespeare's day, the situation in a revenge play is more akin to enforcing justice than it is to carrying out personal revenge.

The revenge play was a low form of literature, catering to the taste for violence and being comparable to our modern action films. Yet C. S. Lewis is right in saying that Shakespeare "redeemed the popular revenge play." Also helpful is the verdict of Virgil Whitaker that the revenge plot is simply the template on which Shakespeare built a profound picture of "the agonies of baffled humanity."

Shakespeare's Theater

While most dramatic performances of Shakespeare today are based on modern theatrical conventions (including realistic stage props), a few performances adhere to Renaissance practices. These Renaissance stage conventions are worth knowing about, partly for the interest of the matter, and partly to make us aware of what is non-Shakespearean in most of the performances that we view. Here is a thumbnail sketch of what play going was like in Shakespeare's London.

- All plays were held in the afternoons in outdoor theaters that had no lighting.
- The theaters were round or octagonal amphitheaters. The circumference of this structure had three tiers of seats, all of which were under a roof.
- In the middle was an unroofed area known as the pit, where people who paid a small entrance fee *stood* for the entire performance of two-to-three hours.
- The entire physical experience thus resembled attendance at an athletic event in a stadium more than play attendance by night at an indoor theater.
- Jutting out into the pit on one side was the stage, with a roofed area and rooms behind curtains at the back of the stage.
- The entire physical arrangement noted above explains why it is called "theater in the round."
- All players were male actors; female roles were played by males.
- Because changes of scenes in the plays were almost always accompanied by shifts in setting as well, very few stage props were used. Shakespeare often built descriptions into his lines to take the place of physical stage props.
- Costumes were elaborate and costly.
- Additionally, Shakespeare's audiences loved noise and music, so there were frequent trumpet flourishes, banging of drums, and gunpowder blasts.
- The whole cross section of the population attended plays, from aristocrats to uneducated "groundlings" who stood in the pit.

From all that has been said it is obvious that the biggest gap between Renaissance and modern theatrical conventions centers on realism (lifelikeness). The Renaissance did not expect realism in its plays. They expected tragedies to be in poetic form, for example. Modern realistic performances of Shakespeare's plays are different from the plays as originally conceived. This does not make them illegitimate; Shakespeare's plays are remarkably universal and adaptable. Some performances even place the action in different times and places than what Shakespeare conceived. These should be recognized as adaptations, part Shakespearean and part something else.

What *Hamlet* Is About

The sheer quantity of what happens in *Hamlet* is so large, and the world of the play is such a phantasmagoria of unlikely characters and events, that the play may seem unrelated to our lives. Yet literary critics make extravagant claims about the closeness of the play to our own experiences. A critic named Preston Roberts writes, "Every [person] has his [or her] Elsinore. . . . For this reason, Hamlet [the character] is likely to remind us of ourselves." C. S. Lewis claims similarly that the castle "is part of our own world. . . . I believe that we read Hamlet's speeches with interest chiefly because they describe so well a certain spiritual region through which most of us have passed." For the play to seem relevant to us, we need to list the experiences that the poem embodies and presents for our contemplation. *Hamlet* is about . . .

- mystery (C. S. Lewis claims that *Hamlet* "is a mysterious play in the sense of being about mystery.")
- death
- loneliness
- grief
- paralysis of will, mind, and emotions
- suffering
- cruelty
- despair
- insanity
- loss of meaning in life
- corruption of institutions, including state and family, and the impact of that corruption on individuals
- abuse of young people
- breakdown of relationships
- disillusionment of youthful idealism
- "the agonies of baffled humanity" (Virgil Whitaker)

This is an obviously depressing list, and that relates to another feature of the play. *Hamlet* is grouped with Shakespeare's tragedies, but it is not a typical tragedy. Tragedy presupposes that the hero has the power of choice and that he makes a specific choice that leads inevitably to his downfall. Hamlet is so engulfed by the situation in which he finds himself that he lacks the power of choice that would lead us to think naturally of this play as a tragedy.

Overall, *Hamlet* justifies a comment that literary critic G. B. Harrison made about the play: "*Hamlet* is in every way the most interesting play ever written." The mysteries surrounding the interpretation of the play are seemingly endless. The play has even given rise to the term *Hamletology* ("the study of all things *Hamlet*").

Interpretations of Prince Hamlet

The character of Hamlet is one of the most written about aspects of Shakespeare's plays. The following outline lists the leading theories. Not all of the theories can be correct, so the fact that they are listed in this guide should not be interpreted as an endorsement of all of them. Three interrelated topics merge in discussions of Hamlet: (1) the nature of Hamlet's problem or mission, (2) the nature of Hamlet's character and personality, and (3) the nature of Hamlet's delay. In this context, delay should be construed neutrally as meaning that Hamlet does not immediately take action against Claudius; delay need not mean procrastination.

One theory can be summarized as "the two Hamlets theory." This means that two very different characters exist side by side, perhaps constituting a multiple or bipolar personality. One Hamlet is the sensitive young intellectual and idealist who expresses himself in unforgettable poetry—the introspective brooder who listens to his own feelings in memorable soliloquies. The other Hamlet is an impulsive and sometimes violent activist—the sword-wielding Hamlet.

Theories of Hamlet can be placed into a framework of an external-versus-internal dichotomy, meaning that a given explanation focuses on circumstances external to Hamlet or on internal aspects of Hamlet himself. Three external theories are as follows:

- The obstacle or lack of opportunity theory. Hamlet lacks a physical opportunity to move forward in exacting vengeance against the always-surrounded Claudius. It is as simple as that.
- The quest for public justice theory. Hamlet's real quest is not simply to carry out an act of personal vengeance but to bring Claudius to a punishment that the world at large will recognize as justice, perhaps even enabling Hamlet to inherit the throne. Hamlet has no alternative but to wait until public proof of guilt becomes evident.
- The overwhelming circumstances theory. Hamlet's problem is the corruptness of the world he inhabits. There is nothing deficient about Hamlet; the human spirit itself is crushed. This is the story of a moral person in an immoral society. The task of eradicating evil from the world is more than anyone can achieve.

The remaining theories stress Hamlet's character rather than his circumstances. The leading theories are as follows:

- The nineteenth-century Romantic theory of the gentle and irresolute Hamlet. Hamlet is irresolute because he is too gently disposed to perform the ugly deeds that life sometimes requires. Unable to meet the

Shakespeare's "Hamlet"

demand of killing the king, the studious Hamlet searches for excuses to explain his delay.

- Hamlet the victim of the Oedipus complex. Of course Hamlet cannot bring himself to put an end to the man who did what every male sub-consciously longs for—murder of his father and sexual union with his mother. This theory rests on an acceptance of Freudian psychology.
- Hamlet the intellectual. The cause of Hamlet's delay is an excess of thought or intellection. His excessive deliberation and analysis dissipate his resolve and paralyze his ability to act.
- The conscience theory. The reason Hamlet delays is that his healthy conscience will not allow him to perform the immoral act to which the ghost tempts him. This is the story of a moral man tempted to do an immoral act, namely, exact revenge. This theory is on a collision course with all the other theories.
- Hamlet's quest to act from a pure motive. Hamlet delays until he can execute Claudius from a pure motive, that is, a desire for public justice, not from hatred or personal desire for revenge.
- Hamlet as skeptic or nihilist. As stated above, one theory is that Hamlet behaves as he does because the task of eradicating evil from the world is too great for any human to accomplish. Projected onto an inner stage, this view gives us a young man who has lost his way and given up on life. This "is a tragedy not of excessive thought but of defeated thought" (D. G. James). The play deals with the "fundamental doubt" about whether life is worth living (L. C. Knights).
- The mysterious Hamlet. The very multiplicity of interpretations proves that Hamlet remains a mystery. "The tragic conflict centers on the protagonist, who is averse to the deed required of him, seeking the cause of aversion and *failing to know it for what it is*" (John Lawlor; italics added).
- Hamlet the villain. Hamlet himself is the chief problem. He "becomes afflicted by the ruthless mores prevailing in Denmark, because he has a distasteful business to accomplish. . . . Sharing the weakness of those he reviles, Hamlet [rightly] turns his most unsparing criticisms upon himself" (David Bevington). Hamlet is "fascinated by what he condemns" (L. C. Knights). Hamlet "murders all the wrong people, exults in cruelty, grows more and more dangerous" (G. Wilson Knight).

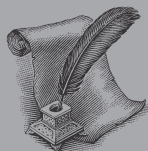
It needs to be stated again that not all of these theories can be right. They are listed here for purposes of information about how the character of Hamlet has been interpreted throughout the history of criticism on this play.

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BY LELAND RYKEN

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