THE

CONNELL GUIDE

TO SHAKESPEARE'S

HAMLET

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PROFESSOR KIERNAN RYAN

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Graham Bradshaw

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Introduction

In the four centuries since Shakespeare's death in 1616, *Hamlet* has almost always been regarded as Shakespeare's greatest play. This in itself is not surprising. As Barbara Everett has observed, *Hamlet* was not only "the first great tragedy in Europe for two thousand years"; it was, and still is, "the world's most sheerly entertaining tragedy, the cleverest, perhaps even the funniest".

Once the news got round among Elizabethan theatre-goers of Shakespeare's decision to revise an earlier, now lost, play called *Hamlet* it must have surprised them, just as modern theatre-goers would have been surprised if Samuel Beckett had decided to produce a new version of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*. When Shakespeare's play was first performed, many in the audience would have seen – or at least known – what happened in this older but far from old *Hamlet*, which was in existence by 1589 and still being performed in the early 1590s. Surviving references to the earlier play confirm that it was popular and highly melodramatic. The Ghost in the early version, for example (dismissed by one critic for the way he cries "Revenge! Revenge!" like an "oyster-wife" – at a time when oysters were cheap), was hardly the imposingly mysterious figure Shakespeare created.

Nor was the central figure more than a shadow of the character Shakespeare was to create. While we now use the phrase "Hamlet without the Prince" to refer to something unimaginable, like an omelette without eggs, the play that Shakespeare had chosen to revise was also a *Hamlet* without the prince – or without *his* Prince, a character who utterly dominates the play he so reluctantly inhabits to a degree that is rivalled only by Prospero in *The Tempest*. Even when Hamlet isn't on stage, speaking nearly 40% of the play's text, the other characters are talking and worrying about him.

This is the most obvious reason why – as the Spanish poet and diplomat Salvador de Madariaga observed at the beginning of his splendidly provocative book *On Hamlet* – the chief trouble in the history of *Hamlet* criticism has been that it is so Hamlet-centred: many critics, from Coleridge through to A. C. Bradley and beyond, see the play and its other characters almost entirely through Hamlet's eyes.

Yet the play is no exception to – and indeed can be seen as an extreme example of – Shakespeare's usual dramatic method, which was never to press or even reveal his own view on controversial issues like the divine right of kings or honour or ghosts and purgatory, but to "frame" these issues by assembling characters who think and feel differently about them. This is what sets a Shakespearean "play of ideas" apart from a "play of ideas" by, say, Ibsen or Bernard Shaw. It is usually easy to see what these later dramatists think about the issues they are dramatising. But with Shakespeare it is very hard, even impossible, to know what he thinks about (say) revenge or incest or suicide – and Hamlet's view is often strikingly different from the views of those around him.

If we take suicide, we find all kinds of different attitudes expressed to it in Shakespeare's work, and Hamlet himself sees it in different ways in his first soliloquy – and in his fourth, the most famous of all soliloquies. In the first ("O that this too too solid flesh would melt...") he takes God's prohibition of revenge to be decisive. In the fourth ("To be or not to be...") he does not even refer to God.

Or take revenge. While a divine prohibition of suicide is nowhere to be found in the Old or New Testaments, God's prohibition of revenge is not in doubt: "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord; I will repay." Hamlet, however, barely discusses revenge and never takes a coherent view on it. Indeed he is torn between opposing views in a play which includes three sons whose fathers have been killed (Fortinbras, Hamlet and Laertes) – and who think and react very differently. At least they *can* act differently, whereas the daughter who has lost her father can only react by going mad – and (probably) committing suicide.

Sometimes it almost seems as though a Shakespearean play of ideas is doing its own "thinking", with the playwright orchestrating intensely divisive either-or alternatives that academic critics can then debate very intensely, with much flaring of gowns. Is Shylock a black-hearted villain or a crypto-tragic victim? Is Henry V the mirror of a Christian King, or a cold-hearted Machiavellian manipulator? Is Othello a "Noble Moor" or a deluded egotist? And it is these debates which make the plays so exciting. If the doubts about whether the Ghost in *Hamlet* is the messenger of divine justice or a devilish instrument of damnation were ever finally resolved, the play would be diminished, or shrivel into a museum piece. This short guide deliberately targets "traditional" ways of seeing the play and some of its arguments will seem unorthodox and even heretical. But I have taken pains to set such views alongside views that are more familiar and indeed traditional, leaving you in the end – as Shakespeare himself did – to make up your own mind.

A summary of the plot

Although editors divided *Hamlet* into five acts, the play is structured in three movements, each of which covers a startlingly short period of time. In each movement the scenes follow each other very rapidly, with no longer break than the nights in which the characters are sleeping, or trying to. The first critic to see this was the distinguished actor, producer, director and playwright Harley Granville-Barker in his *Preface to Hamlet* (1936). Although the 1605 Second Quarto and the 1623 First Folio texts (the two most authoritative early texts of *Hamlet*) differ in many ways, the three movement structure is apparent in both: the first spans two nights and one day; the second, two months later, spans three days; the third two days.

The first movement

The first movement has five scenes and, as Granville-Barker dryly puts it, "coincides with the first act of the editors". This movement begins at midnight on the castle ramparts where it will also end, a day and a night later.

The sentries are clearly very frightened about something. The actor playing Francisco, the sentry who is being relieved by Barnardo, has a tiny part, but it includes the unforgettable lines:

> *For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold,*
> *And I am sick at heart.*

It soon becomes clear that a Ghost or "thing" has appeared on the two previous nights. When Marcellus – the most thoughtful and vocal of the sentries – arrives he has brought the learned and

sceptical Horatio with him. Marcellus tells Barnardo that he "entreated" Horatio to join them so that he can "approve our eyes" if the "thing" appears again, and because Horatio is a scholar who will know how to address the "thing". Horatio insists that it is their "fantasy" and that it will "not appear again" – whereupon it does, as every theatre-goer would expect. But once again it stalks off without speaking.

In the anxious discussion that follows, the thoughtful Marcellus wonders whether the thing's appearance might be connected with the alarmingly mysterious, pell-mell way in which the country has been preparing for war: "tell me he that knows". The well-informed Horatio then explains "how the whisper goes" in a long story that introduces the play's important political theme.

Thirty years ago old King Hamlet had accepted a challenge to personal combat from King Fortinbras of Norway, who then lost Norwegian "lands" as well as his life. Denmark is now threatened with an invasion since young Fortinbras, who is not King of Norway, has "shark'd up" an army of "landless resolutes" so that he can avenge his father and reclaim the lost lands.

Although these thoughtful men all agree that the "thing" looks "like" King Hamlet they never once suppose that it is what it tells Hamlet it is, "thy father's spirit". They all suspect it is demonic. It is important to notice this, since 19th century critics always assumed – as did important 20th century critics like A.C. Bradley and Stephen Greenblatt – that the "thing" just is the Ghost of Hamlet's father.

At this point the "thing" re-appears, to everybody's amazement, but stalks away again without speaking. Dawn is breaking, and Horatio and Marcellus set off to find young Hamlet and tell him what they have seen.

The second scene begins with what is evidently the new King Claudius's first Council meeting. The main item on the agenda is the threat of invasion from Norway, which the King has already all but contained – through an impressive combination of diplomacy and craft. The new king is not an old-style warrior king, like his dead brother, whose widow Claudius has married.

Hamlet, in a black mourning cloak, is grieving for his dead father, and when he is left alone his torrential first soliloquy explodes with his feelings about his mother's second marriage, a marriage which took place so soon after his father's death. Horatio and Marcellus then arrive to tell him about the Ghost, and he promises to join them on the ramparts.

In the next scene, Ophelia, the daughter of Claudius's Lord Chamberlain, Polonius, is warned by both her father and her brother, Laertes, to be wary of Hamlet's talk of love: Hamlet's royal duties mean she will eventually be cast aside. Her father's onslaught is so fierce that she promises to break off communications with the Prince. (By the end of the play Polonius's family will all be dead, with Hamlet directly or indirectly responsible.)

The fourth scene begins at midnight on the second night, when Hamlet joins Horatio and Marcellus on the ramparts, and the first movement's climax comes in its fifth scene when the "thing" finally speaks. Hamlet has already been shattered before he meets the Ghost. Now he is shattered again as he is given the "dread command" to kill the new king, Claudius. Claudius, he is told, murdered his brother, Hamlet's father, by pouring poison into his ear – and had been sleeping with Hamlet's mother even before the murder. As Hamlet later puts it, Claudius "killed my King and whored my mother".

The second movement

When the second movement begins it is quietly established that time has passed since the first. Laertes is back in Paris and in need of more funds from his father. The ambassadors have just returned from Norway. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have arrived from Wittenberg, after being "sent for" by Claudius. Just how much time has passed is only established much later in the

Mousetrap scene (3.2): when the "mad" Hamlet says to the astonished Ophelia, "look how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours", she replies: "Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord." Her elegantly phrased reply helps us to put this together: there is an interval of two months between the death of Hamlet's father and the beginning of the play, and another two months pass between the play's first and second movements. As Granville-Barker brilliantly shows, Shakespeare wants to indicate the passage of time in natural, unobtrusive ways.

The first scene in the second movement is short and in two parts. Polonius is both funny and morally unpleasant – furthering the play's exploration of notions of honour – when he tells Reynaldo he must go to Laertes and spy on him there, using underhand methods if necessary. Polonius also hears from Ophelia of Hamlet's distracted behaviour. This alarms Polonius because he himself had insisted that Ophelia break off private communications with the Prince, which she has done for the last two months – and now the Prince is more mad than ever. Polonius heads off to tell the King that he has discovered the cause of Hamlet's madness.

The King and Queen welcome Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the next scene, and Claudius tells them he hopes that they can discover the reason for Hamlet's "transformation". When they leave to find Hamlet, Polonius explains his new theory:

Hamlet, he says, is mad with love for Ophelia. The Queen still thinks Hamlet's behaviour is due to his father's death and her "o'erhasty" re-marriage to Claudius, but she doesn't dismiss Polonius's theory, and Claudius and Polonius make a plan for Hamlet to meet Ophelia again so they can eavesdrop on what is said.

In the two months that have passed since the Ghost issued its "dread command", Hamlet has done nothing except feign madness; he himself is, as he says, "lapsed in time". When a company of Players arrives at court Hamlet decides that they can stage a play which will test whether or not the Ghost was telling the truth. During the performance of the play, Claudius responds in a way which convinces Hamlet (though not Horatio) that Claudius did murder his father. Hamlet, however, has made no plan about what he should now do. Shakespeare's plays, and not just his tragedies, typically build towards a climax – in Hamlet, the climax comes in Act Three, scene two, then spreads through the two scenes which follow: the so-called prayer scene, and the so-called closet scene where Hamlet has a searing encounter with his mother. Not surprisingly, many Freudian critics see this as the most important scene of the play.

When he finds the defenceless Claudius on his knees in the prayer scene, he doesn't kill him, or confront him. Instead he goes off to meet his mother in the closet scene, and we hear him calling