



EVERYMAN
HAMLET
 William Shakespeare

Edited by John F. Andrews
 former editor of the *Shakespeare Quarterly*
 Foreword by Derek Jacobi

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HAMLET



THE EVERYMAN SHAKESPEARE

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FOREWORD BY DEREK JACOBI

As an actor I thank God for William Shakespeare. An extraordinary, superhuman genius – I mean, where did he come from? And he wrote most of his plays while still a man in his thirties! Where did he get all that knowledge? Where did all that wisdom come from? If you go through all the plays, you find that he knew something about everything. He had a phrase or a sentence, a word for every conceivable human situation and emotion.

I think Shakespeare is for all ages. He is always relevant and exciting. He is loved and understood and respected and thrilled to no matter where you are in the world, no matter what age you are. He's survived four hundred years of reverence and idolatry. And during those four centuries he's also survived a great deal of iconoclasm. You can muck about with Shakespeare. You can do all sorts of things with and to him. It doesn't matter. He always survives.

He was a true man of the theatre, and he wrote wonderful parts. And I so hope he's looking down and approving of what we're doing with his plays when we try to be true to them. Whatever changes we make – textual transpositions, little felicities, whatever – we do so that the play and its characters will shine through. Our job is not to glorify any particular actor or director or designer, but to make the play as fresh and new-minted as we can.

I constantly remind myself that Shakespearean actors should approach their parts, in a sense, as they do contemporary roles. 'Forget it's Shakespeare,' I said to the actors I recently directed in *Hamlet*, and in a certain sense I meant it. When they come to Shakespeare, many actors tend to block off all those wonderful juices that naturally flow into modern parts. They cease to think,

imagine, react, and feel as they would do normally. Their voices become different. Their bodies become different.

They must learn to make Shakespeare's language sound like the language they speak every day. They must live in the moment, create the words out of the air. They must forget that Shakespeare wrote them; get rid of the smell of ink; forget that anybody's ever said them before; pluck them out of the feeling and the situation and make them new.

I think that spontaneity comes from the immediacy of emotion. If actors regard these lines as speeches, famous speeches, then that is how they'll come out. Actors must not think that what they say and do is the result of what Shakespeare wrote. What actors say and do must be the result of what they're thinking and feeling, of what is happening in the play as the company has chosen to present it.

Of all of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* probably holds the most interest for an actor. Because one of the things it's about is acting and pretending to be what you're not. It's a play that very much inhabits the world of the imagination: the world of what if, the world of finding out who you are, what you are, where you are in relation to other people and to the universe. This is true of most of Shakespeare, but *Hamlet* in particular comes very close to what acting itself is about, how actors react to a situation and the whole craft of pretence, of being someone else.

Another reason *Hamlet* is so interesting for an actor is that a performance can never be definitive. There are as many *Hamlets* as there are actors to play *Hamlet*. Each one is different, because each production, to a great extent, turns on the personality of the actor who is playing *Hamlet*, and most actors have a *Hamlet* within them.

Hamlet is probably the clearest and most accessible of all of Shakespeare's plays, largely because it's such a wonderful story, with wonderful dramatic sweep rhythmically throughout the evening. *Hamlet* goes on a voyage of self-discovery. I don't believe he's ever truly mad. There are three occasions in the play, maybe four, when he drives himself to the edge of madness, but he never

actually topples over that edge. He is in control of his own destiny for a great deal of the play.

This play has always been very important to me. *Hamlet* was the first major role I ever played as a schoolboy. That was when I was seventeen or eighteen. It really started my career as an actor, because my performance got a great deal of press and attention. I was very lucky in that respect. And so I had a very fond memory of the play long before I came to play it professionally in 1977. I played it again in 1979 at the Old Vic. Then I did it for television in 1980. And most recently, in 1988 I directed the very talented young actor Kenneth Branagh in a production for the Renaissance Theatre Company.

Over the years since I first began playing *Hamlet*, I have become more and more convinced that 'To be or not to be' is to be treated not as a soliloquy, but as a dramatic speech to Ophelia. And my reasons are very much rooted in the text.

The way the Nunnery Scene is set makes it clear that *Hamlet* is not merely wandering round the Castle with thoughts of death on his mind. Claudius has just told Ophelia that 'We have closely sent for *Hamlet* hither.' So *Hamlet* is on his way to a particular place at a certain time to fulfil an appointment.

The person he sees when he gets there is the person he least expected to see. For the last few weeks, every time he's met Ophelia she's run the other way; she's avoided him. If he saw her at the end of the corridor, she would turn the other way and off she'd go. Now he sees her and she doesn't run away. Of course, the last thing Polonius has said to her is 'Walk you here. Read on this book.' But most Ophelias have to not 'walk you here' but go to the wings or hide behind a pillar, or do something to get out of *Hamlet*'s way, whereas the whole point of the scene is for her to confront him.

If we presuppose that they have been lovers, that they are in love, then what better opportunity for him to be able to say, 'This is where my head is at the moment: I'm thinking about committing suicide.' He speaks at her, through her, around her. He soliloquizes to her, if you like.

Well, what does Ophelia do while he's doing this? Does she just sit there? Yes indeed. What else can she do? She's in a very false situation, having been placed there by her father and the King. She knows they are listening behind the curtain. She doesn't want to be there. She knows she's a decoy. It's a completely false situation to her. Hamlet is the man she loves.

I played Hamlet this way with two Ophelias, and both said it helped them with their character. Because the irony is that the speech is about the very things that happen to Ophelia – madness and suicide. She goes mad, and commits suicide, virtually. Hamlet talks about both but experiences neither. In effect, though, hearing this speech plants the seed in Ophelia's mind.

The speech ends with 'Soft you now, the fair Ophelia.' This line is usually taken to mean 'Oh look, there's Ophelia,' but I take it to be one of those little titles he gives her, that we all give each other: the tedious Polonius, the villainous King. This is the way he sees her and he wants her to know it. Then he goes on to call her 'Nymph'. What he is saying is 'Soft you now . . .' 'I don't need you to say anything. Now you know where I am. Just remember me in your prayers. Now, off you go.'

But of course, she's been placed there by her father and the King, so she's got to keep him there, however she can. 'Oh, good my Lord,' she blurts out, 'how does your Honour for this many a day?' 'How have you been lately?'

So the first thing she says is false, and immediately Hamlet knows that the whole situation is phoney. We don't have to see the curtains moving to know that Hamlet senses Polonius' presence. From the beginning of the scene Hamlet has suspected that something is wrong, something is out of kilter. 'She didn't run away like she usually does. She's had the most extraordinary reaction to what I've just said. Then she goes on to give back all these tokens of love and remembrance. Something is extremely wrong.' And then when he confirms it by testing her, by asking her, 'Where's your father?' and she answers, 'At home, my Lord,' in spite of the fact that everything in her being might be struggling

to tell him the truth, their relationship, and their lives, can never be the same again.

From this point on, Hamlet realizes that there is no one in his world that he can trust. Everyone is acting, and survival will depend on choosing and playing one's own role as shrewdly as possible.

DEREK JACOBI has acted in three professional productions of *Hamlet*, including one at the Old Vic and one that permitted him to perform the title role in Elsinore. In 1988 he made his directorial debut with the play in England. A veteran of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Mr Jacobi has won the theatre's most coveted awards, and his television credits include such BBC series as *I, Claudius* and *The Shakespeare Plays* (for which he played both Hamlet and Richard II).

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO *Hamlet*

In an eloquent tribute to *Ulysses*, the most celebrated novel of the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot praised the brilliance with which James Joyce had deployed classical myth and legend to convey 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'. What Eliot applauded in the work of his fellow writer was what he himself was endeavouring to accomplish in *The Waste Land*, our century's most famous poem. And something akin to what both authors attempted was what Shakespeare appears to have undertaken more than three centuries earlier in *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

Of all the plays he penned, *Hamlet* is the one that has most persistently been described as 'modern'.* Its hero is a figure of

* A close second is *Troilus and Cressida*, a travesty of the *Iliad* that crushes all the grandeur of Antiquity into a squalid 'Argument' about 'a Whore and a Cuckold' (II.iii.82–83). From all indications *Troilus and Cressida* was completed in late 1601 or early 1602, a time-frame that suggests some overlap with *Hamlet*, and the little we know about its production history would seem to make it the perfect Shakespearean analogue for what the Prince of Denmark depicts as a drama that 'was never acted, or if it was, not above once', because 'it pleas'd not the Million'. When the copyright for *Troilus and Cressida* was registered in 1602, the work was listed as a 'History' that had been performed by Shakespeare's company at the Globe. That designation remained on the initial title-page for the quarto that was printed in 1609. A different title-page was substituted before the print run finished, however, and in the new 'Epistle' that commended Shakespeare's text to sophisticated readers *Troilus and Cressida* was advertised as a 'Comedy' that had never been 'stal'd with the Stage' or 'clapper-claw'd with the Palms of the Vulgar'.

A little more than a decade later, when the publishers of the First Folio began printing the work for the collection that would be issued in 1623, their original plan was to put *Troilus and Cressida* in the part of the volume reserved for 'Tragedies'. Owing to some problem that developed after typesetting commenced, they abandoned this intention, withheld the pages that had gone to press, and eventually repositioned the play in a no-man's-land of its own between the 'Histories' and the 'Tragedies'.

In many ways the publishing history of the title has proven prophetic. Some of today's scholars group *Troilus and Cressida* with the Comedies and some with the Tragedies. Others point to its affinities with those histories that are now labelled Roman Plays. But most have classified the work with the 'Comical Satires' that enjoyed a brief vogue during the outbreak of the tlespian mudslinging known as the War of the Theatres (see *Hamlet*, II.ii.338–95). No doubt Polonius would have been able to fit *Troilus and Cressida* into one of the ludicrously composite genres he catalogues in II.ii.424–31 of *Hamlet*.

dazzling wit and complexity, a uniquely attractive if tantalizingly elusive personality, and for many interpreters the 'Mystery' (III.ii.392-402) that shrouds him has made the brooding Prince an epitome of man's problematic identity in the post-medieval world. For all his charm, and for all the sympathy he evokes through the soliloquies he shares with the audience, Shakespeare's introspective Prince can be a dark, impulsive, and even savage protagonist. But that has seldom dismayed his admirers. In his clouded mirror entire nations have claimed to see their psyches registered. And so multifarious are the intellectual and artistic progeny of the melancholy Dane that the commentary on *Hamlet* and its offshoots is now a significant body of literature in its own right.

Shakespeare probably wrote the first of his four 'great tragedies' between 1599 and 1601 (quite possibly in two or more increments, since some of the material about the upstart children's companies in II.ii may have been a later addition to the script). It has close affinities with *Julius Caesar*, a title it echoes at several points, and it could well have alternated in the repertory with the playwright's rendering of history's most famous assassination. If so, theatregoers who'd seen the earlier drama would have been amused by Polonius' remark that he'd played Caesar and been 'kill'd i'th' Capital' (III.ii.110-11), because in all likelihood the same actors who had taken the parts of Brutus and his victim in the tragedy that preceded *Hamlet* were now exchanging comments as the Prince and a later ruler's chief counsellor.

Like *Julius Caesar*, and like several of the other plays Shakespeare wrote between 1595 and 1603, *Hamlet* reflects the waning of the Elizabethan era whose glories were receding into gloom. As the sixteenth century yielded to the seventeenth, many of Shakespeare's contemporaries grew increasingly anxious as the ageing, heirless Queen refused to forestall a social and political maelstrom by designating her successor. In the absence of a vigorous, fully involved monarch and a ratified arrangement for the transition to a new head of state when Elizabeth died, Englishmen who'd never regarded their island's defences as secure

began bracing themselves for a new onslaught of armadas, coup attempts, and assassination conspiracies. Meanwhile, for those who kept abreast of what was happening in intellectual circles, fears about the country's dynastic instability were being compounded by other concerns of a more cosmic nature. As people looked about them and saw their old verities succumbing to the 'new philosophy', a corrosive scepticism that was said to cast 'all in doubt', there were many who wondered if the human race was abandoning its traditional moorings. Virtually everyone was apprehensive, and theatregoers on the Bankside would have heard reverberations of their own doubts when they listened to a funereally attired actor's remarks about how quickly 'this goodly Frame the Earth' had deteriorated to a 'sterile Promontory', 'a foul and pestilent Congregation of Vapours' (*Hamlet*, II.ii.318-24). If the Prince's sentiments could be applied to England, the 'Other Eden' a nostalgic John of Gaunt had described a few years earlier as a 'demi-Paradise' (in *Richard II*, II.i.42) was coming more and more to resemble a rank, 'unweeded Garden' whose caretakers were permitting it to go 'to Seed' (*Hamlet*, I.iii.135-36).

In a way that links it with *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Othello*, *Hamlet* details the lusts — the perversions of reason and will — that undermine civic harmony and bring great kingdoms to ruin. It focuses on appetite as the cause, and disease as one of the consequences, of fatal error. And in the fiery rhetoric the Prince and the leading Player declaim about the downfall of Troy in II.ii.479-553, it hints at ominous correspondences between the corrupt, prison-like Elsonoure* of Shakespeare's play and the embattled Ilium of Homeric and Virgilian epic.

As it happened, Troy was a citadel with symbolic ties to the London in which *Hamlet* was being performed by late 1600 or

* Elsonoure. Here as elsewhere the Everyman text preserves the Shakespearean word-forms to be found in the 1604/5 Second Quarto of *Hamlet* (as explained in the section on 'The Everyman Text of *Hamlet*'). Other proper names whose Everyman spellings may be unfamiliar to today's reader are *Fortinbrasse* (*Fortinbras* in the 1623 First Folio and in most modern editions), *Gertrard* (*Gertrude*), *Ostricke* (*Osric* or *Osrick*), and *Rosencraus* (*Rosencrantz*).

early 1601. According to an account popularized by the twelfth-century chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth, the 'Troy-nauvaunt' that bestrode the Thames had been established by a great-grandson of the same Aeneas that Virgil's *Aeneid* had immortalized as founder of a 'new Troy' in Latium. The voyager who'd planted a third Troy on the site of what was in Shakespeare's day the largest city in Europe had supposedly bestowed his name, Brutus, on the land that became known as Britain. In the process he'd forged a kinship, both lineal and spiritual, that extended back from London through Rome (whose Republic had been instituted by another Brutus, Lucius Junius, in 509 BC, and defended by a third, Marcus Junius, in 44 BC) to the Trojan fortress that fronted the plains of Phrygia.

Given the legends they knew about their nation's early history, when Elizabethans heard allusions to the fall of Troy they were predisposed to connect that cataclysmic event both with the settlement of their own capital and with the cautionary moral that vigilance alone could preserve a latter-day Troy from the same fate that had overtaken the two cities London counted as its ancient forebears. To a cultivated member of Shakespeare's audience, then, 'the matter of Troy' was intimately related both to 'the matter of Britain' (which the playwright had already explored in nine 'chronicle histories' about the dynastic struggles that had brought about the Tudor order) and to 'the matter of Rome' (which the poet had been dramatizing in *Julius Caesar* as he began his preparations for *Hamlet*).

But Troy's import was in no sense limited to these patrilineal bonds. Like Rome, Troy was also an instance of what St Augustine had defined, by contrast with his *City of God*, as 'the City of Man'. As such it could serve as an archetype, not only for human societies in general, but for specific nations and individual human beings in particular.

In a number of his plays Shakespeare treats Troy as a figure for what the title character of *Macbeth* calls the 'Single State of Man' (I.iii.138). Troy's walls become symbols of the bulwark a soul must maintain against the forces of temptation, and for women

especially those walls represent the virtue required to maintain chastity and honour. At the same time, Troy's towers, her 'wanton Tops' (*Troilus and Cressida*, IV.v.218), are emblems of pride, particularly as that primal sin manifests its potency in the unruliness of male assertion. And Troy's undoing can be viewed as a reiteration of the biblical Fall of Man.*

In many ways the ramparts and turrets of Elsonoure Castle function as Danish equivalents of the battlements surrounding Troy, and it is thus very much to the point when the Prince asks one of 'the Tragedians of the City' to resurrect an old play and narrate Aeneas' tale about 'Priam's Slaughter' (II.ii.352, 482). *Hamlet* calls for this speech because he believes his uncle has slain his father, and he yearns to model his vengeance on the mayhem a 'hellish Pyrrhus' (II.ii.498) delivers in retaliation for *his* father's death at the hands of the Trojans. In Pyrrhus' 'Cause', as the Prince will later say of Laertes, the title character sees an 'Image' of his own (V.ii.77-78). Eventually, following a lengthy delay that recapitulates Pyrrhus' 'Pause' (II.ii.522), *Hamlet* succeeds in his aim to emulate the deed, if not all the gory trappings, of his classical predecessor. As he does so, however, he himself is struck down by the treachery of Claudius and Laertes, and what is left of the royal court 'Stoops' to its 'Base' (II.ii.511) as Elsonoure collapses around its poisoned deliverer.

The unplanned but perhaps fitting result of *Hamlet's* Pyrrhic victory is that the sceptre he has been trying to wrest from the murderer of his father devolves to a youthful Norwegian who has been skirting the borders of Denmark in search of an opening that will enable him to avenge *his* father's death and territorial losses at the hands of the elder *Hamlet*. With no Dane of noble blood remaining to ascend Elsonoure's throne once the crown prince has drawn his last breath, the expiring *Hamlet* correctly surmises that 'th' Election lights / On Fortinbrasse'.

Just what an Elizabethan audience would have thought about

* For a sampling of Shakespearean reminders of the Troy paradigm, see 1 *Henry VI*, V.ii.103-8, 2 *Henry VI*, I.iv.19, III.iii.100-4, 3 *Henry VI*, II.i.50-52, III.ii.185-89, IV.viii.25, *Titus Andronicus*, III.1.68-69, V.iii.83-84, 2 *Henry IV*, I.1.170-75, and *All's Well That Ends Well*, I.i.133-36 (a passage that parallels *Hamlet*, I.iii.19-44).

Denmark's default to Fortinbrasse is impossible to say, but it seems likely that at least some of the Globe's more judicious patrons would have seen it as confirmation that a Troy-like Elsonoure had sown its own destruction through vices analogous to those that had proven disastrous to the original Ilium. Anyone who stopped to consider the broader implications of the Hamlet–Pyrrhus parallel, moreover, would probably have found it interesting that the Prince's role model is not a Trojan but a Greek. The effect of the playwright's inclusion of the Troy story, then, is to align Hamlet with those who reconnoitre and eventually invade the 'Pales and Forts' (I.iv.27) of his own castle. In other words, the Troy motif defines Denmark's heir apparent as the unwitting agent of an adversary* who enters Elsonoure at the end of the action only to discover that his enemies have already slaughtered themselves and made his battalions unnecessary.

Hamlet has often been called the most enigmatic of Shakespeare's tragedies, and the Pyrrhus narrative that prompts the Prince to 'cleave the general Air with horrid Speech' (II.ii.600) is characteristic of its conundrums. Little or nothing in this drama can be taken for what it superficially appears to be, and it is in keeping with the play's ironies and ambiguities that the title character's name means 'imbecile' or 'fool'. This fact is by no means lost on the paronomastic Prince, of course, and he plays upon it when he dons an 'Antic Disposition' (I.v.163) to lull his 'Mighty Opposites' (III.iv.62) into the confidence that they needn't trouble themselves over-much about the disconnected ramblings of a harmless madman. Hamlet picks up on the significance of his name a second time when he tells Polonius that 'It was a Brute part' for Brutus 'to kill so Capital a Calf' (III.ii.110–13) in the Roman Capitol. In this quip what sounds like a crude, throwaway pun conceals a veiled warning, because the name 'Brutus' carries the same connotations as the name

* Whether Hamlet considers Fortinbrasse an adversary is less than clear. In the soliloquy he delivers just before he departs for England (a speech that occurs only in the Second Quarto printing of the text), he paints his Norwegian counterpart as 'a delicate and tender Prince, / Whose Spirit, with divine Ambition puff'd, / Makes Mouths at the invisible Event' (IV.iv.45–47).

'Hamlet'. With the boldness his eccentric 'Disposition' gives him licence to exercise, the Prince is informing anyone with ears to hear that he too is engaged in a 'Brute part', and one that depends upon an artful combination of two distinct but related 'antique Roman' roles (V.ii.353). One is the persona Lucius Junius Brutus devised when he feigned idiocy to outwit a suspicious autocrat, avenge the death of his father, and expel the tyrannical Tarquins from a Rome that was thereafter to enjoy nearly five hundred years as a republic. The second is the role Marcus Junius Brutus took upon himself half a millennium later when he helped cut off a new dictator who seemed poised to restore the oppression a previous Brutus had abolished.

Like the Troy legend, the Hamlet story was a tale from the murky past. Although the story probably goes back to at least the tenth century, the earliest surviving narrative dates from the late twelfth century, when a Danish chronicler, Saxo Grammaticus, incorporated it in a Latin anthology that came to be known as the *Historiae Danicae*. It seems doubtful that Shakespeare had read Saxo, even though he might have had access to the *Historiae* in a version that was printed in Paris in 1524. But the playwright was probably aware of a sixteenth-century French adaptation of Saxo's narrative, the redaction François de Belleforest published in the 1570 edition of his *Histoires Tragiques*. Meanwhile Shakespeare was certainly familiar with an English dramatization of the tale, evidently not printed and thus no longer extant, that scholars have denominated the *Ur-Hamlet* ('prior Hamlet').

Prose writer Thomas Nashe referred to this revenge tragedy in his preface to Robert Greene's *Menaphon*, published in 1589. Theatre impresario Philip Henslowe recorded a performance of it in a June 1594 entry for his Diary. And Thomas Lodge alluded to the play in 1597 in his book *Wit's Misery*. Who wrote the *Ur-Hamlet* we can only speculate, but the leading candidate is Thomas Kyd, whose popular *Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1589) anticipated several of the dramaturgical devices – among them the Ghost who visits the hero to tell him how his father died, and the 'Mousetrap' the protagonist later stages in an effort to

substantiate the Ghost's testimony – that Shakespeare is believed to have borrowed from the older drama.

Even more than the works that preceded it in the author's career, *Hamlet* is a play about various forms of acting. Almost everyone in the world it presents is adept in the craft of pretence,* and one of the predicaments each character faces is how to read and react to the roles adopted by others. A similar problem confronts the audience. To what extent are we to infer that the persons of the drama, as distinguished from the actors impersonating those persons, are 'merely Players' (*As You Like It*, II.vii.140) at given moments in the plot?

The Prince poses this question in the first scene at Court when he calls attention to the word 'Seems'. What Hamlet appears to mean when he says, 'I know not Seems' (I.ii.75) is that he is incapable of – and indeed totally inexperienced with – 'Show'. Unlike others, he implies disingenuously, he is unwilling to participate in 'Actions that a man might Play' to deceive onlookers into thinking that he is something he may seem to be but knows himself not to be (I.ii.75–86). Later in the play, when the Prince looks in on a Claudius who has bent himself into the posture of a man at prayer (and, as the audience knows, is genuinely trying to invest that posture with its conventional meaning), Hamlet shows that he knows not 'Seems' in another sense. He assumes that in this instance 'the Action lies / In his true Nature' (III.iii.61–62), and he therefore spares for now a 'Villain' whose would-be slaughterer mistakenly takes him to be engaged 'in the Purging of his Soul' (III.iii.76, 85).

Like the Troy that Shakespeare depicts in *Troilus and Cressida*, the 'State' the hero seeks to set right in *Hamlet* is 'rotten' at the core (I.iv.89). For the Prince as for Thersites in the other play, the

* For Polonius it is axiomatic that to be human is to be a creature of guile. When he tells his son, 'To thine own Self be True' (I.iii.78), the cagey old statesman is not advising Laertes to adhere to the highest principles of virtue so much as telling him to protect himself in a deceptive and dangerous world by keeping his own thoughts and motives under lock and key. To be sure that the young man is heeding his counsel, Polonius commissions a friendly spy to follow Laertes to Paris and report back on the young man's behaviour. In characteristic fashion, Polonius recommends that Reynaldo use 'Forgeries' (lies invented for the purpose) as a way of extracting information about Laertes from supposedly idle conversations with the young man's acquaintances.

'Argument' is largely about 'a Whore and a Cuckold'. But of course in this case the cuckold is the hero's dead father, and his cuckold is also a murderer and a usurper; and that, for Hamlet, is the 'necessary Question of the Play' (III.ii.49–50).

Once the Prince fixes his mind upon the task he regards himself as commissioned to undertake, he concludes that there is but one detail to be disposed of before he proceeds; to eliminate any possibility that the accused King is innocent, Hamlet must subject the unknowing suspect to a diagnostic test to determine whether the Ghost has spoken truthfully about how the elder Hamlet died (II.ii.626–43). Hamlet presumes that the Ghost's veracity is the only issue that needs to be resolved before the King's executioner knows his 'Course'. But it seems likely that Shakespeare expected his audiences – or at least 'those with Judgements in such Matters' (II.ii.470–71) – to ponder a couple of additional issues: first, whether Hamlet should infer that even a truth-telling Ghost is necessarily 'Honest' in a sense that would call for it to be received at face value and obeyed, and, second, whether Hamlet would not be well advised to weigh the Ghost's command in the light of biblical injunctions (see Romans 12:17–13:7) and statutory prohibitions against private vengeance.*

The opening scenes of the play draw a significant contrast between the Prince's response to the Ghost and the reactions of more cautious observers such as Horatio and the Danish guard. And a number of Hamlet's speeches suggest that the Prince's orientation to what he considers a sacred duty is difficult to reconcile with Christian precepts that are shown to be applicable elsewhere in the action. In the Prayer Scene, for example, Shakespeare contrives to have Hamlet come upon Claudius at a moment when the King's 'Conscience' has been caught (II.ii.626–43) in a way the Prince had not expected and would not have

* The laws that forbade English citizens to take justice into their own hands were paralleled by similar statutes in Denmark and in other nations. But as Fredson Bowers points out in *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587–1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942), Renaissance codes of honour were often hard to square with official pronouncements against duelling and other unauthorized means of righting individual wrongs. See Anne Barton's introduction to the New Penguin Shakespeare edition of *Hamlet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980) for a discussion of the ambivalence Elizabethans felt about private vengeance.

sought. At this juncture it is possible that even so wicked a man as Claudius might repent. We are surely meant to be surprised at this development, and to ask ourselves what kind of 'Consummation' is now 'Devoutly to be wished' (III.i.61). Then, a moment later, we are probably meant to ask whether Hamlet's decision to postpone his 'Purgation' (III.ii.331) until some occasion when the King's 'Heels may kick at Heaven' (III.iii.93) isn't one that raises doubts about the Prince's own relationship with Heaven. In similar fashion we are no doubt intended to be brought up short when Hamlet tells Horatio that he has arranged for Rosencraus and Guildenstern to be 'put to sudden Death, / Not Shriving-time allow'd', and then says that 'They are not near my Conscience' (V.ii.46-47, 58).

The Prince's dealings with his former schoolmates offer an instructive insight into the way *Hamlet* operates as a work of drama. On the one hand we have the Prince's view of Rosencraus and Guildenstern as 'Adders fang'd' (III.iv.199), willing and presumably knowing tools of the King's cunning. On the other hand we have what might be said to be the play's more objective portrayal of them, as a pair of courtiers who come to Elsonoure at the request of Hamlet's mother and uncle, who seek to help the Queen find out why her son is acting so strangely, and who then comport themselves in accordance with what they perceive to be the legitimate interests of a monarch to whom they owe loyal obedience. So far as we can demonstrate, they know nothing of what Claudius has done in the past and they are never made privy to the King's designs against his nephew.*

Like Polonius, and indeed like virtually every other character in this world of intrigue and counter-intrigue, Hamlet attempts 'by Indirections' to 'find Directions out' (II.i.63). More often than not, for the Prince as for others, those 'Indirections' either result in or contribute tragically to 'Purposes mistook / Fall'n on th' Inventors' Heads' (V.ii.396-97). To what extent Hamlet himself

* In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Tom Stoppard's witty recasting of the Hamlet story from the perspective of two minor players in the action, the hero's schoolmates are puzzled dupes in an absurdist psychodrama.

is to be held accountable for the consequences of his misjudgments – for the products of his frequently rough-hewn 'Ends' (V.ii.10-11) – is a matter of interpretation. But in the encounters that draw the drama to a close he acts with a nobility that elicits the most touching benediction a tragic hero ever received. For most audiences Horatio's prayer for 'Flights of Angels' to 'sing' a 'sweet Prince' to his 'Rest' (V.ii.371-72) is sufficient to assure 'the yet unknowing World' (V.ii.391) that the Prince has at last found the way 'rightly to be Great' (IV.iv.50). For others it is simply a final reminder that, for this as for many of the other questions *Hamlet* raises, the only answer the play proffers with any clarity is 'Silence' (V.ii.370).