

Mill Productions Presents

# HAMLET

STUDY GUIDE 2019



Shakespeare's Hamlet  
Directed by Geoff O'Keefe  
9th—25th October 2019  
dlr Mill Theatre



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# Introduction: Hamlet and Us

Actors who have played Hamlet sometimes speak of how, during a performance, the role begins to possess them, to interrogate them about their own lives and their attitudes to the great questions of existence and death. There is even a strangely post-modern moment when Hamlet, a character in a play, becomes a playwright and a director, advising others on how to act. Maybe Hamlet is just too large a personality to be contained within the play itself. To some extent, we can all see ourselves in Hamlet and this is probably why it is the most universal of Shakespeare's tragedies. As we watch him dominate the stage like few other characters in theatre and are afforded regular access to his private thoughts, his questions, doubts and fears become our own.

This is a play that invites us to ask fundamental questions such as 'Who am I?' and 'What is the meaning of life?' and when Hamlet says that 'a man's life is no more than to say "one"', we cannot help but reflect on our own lives, what has already passed and what might be to come; the countless years that have preceded us and the years that will follow us after we 'shuffle off this mortal coil'. The play forces us to consider the strange journey of life, its brevity, its strangeness, and the mystery of its ending.

It also reminds us of the hell that can be decision-making. Hamlet berates himself for allowing thought to impede action, and in two of his soliloquies accuses himself of cowardice for not having already killed Claudius. But can we condemn Hamlet for over-thinking ('thinking too precisely on the event') this momentous and utterly life-changing act? Many of us, over the course of our lives, will spend at least a few sleepless nights agonising over comparatively trivial choices.

The play speaks to us in other ways too. It explores the endless complexity of family relationships and the unrealistic expectations we sometimes place on one another: many of us will recognise Hamlet's frustration with his mother's damaging actions, some will be familiar with the domestic bullying suffered by Ophelia. Similarly, everyone who has experienced sudden rejection will be able to relate to the moment when Ophelia returns Hamlet's gifts and his love tokens, without offering an explanation. It also offers us timeless commentaries on true friendship and the corrosive effect of guilt as well as an exploration of the varied impact of grief.

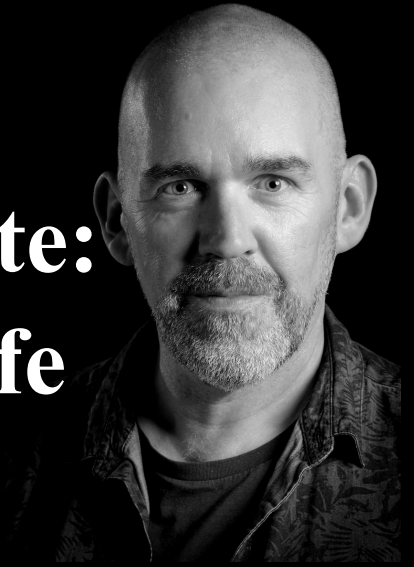
In addition to personal matters, the political manoeuvrings in the play are not far removed from what we are accustomed to seeing in 2019. Fratricidal tendencies apart, some current national premiers bear comparison with Claudius, a leader who has risen to power by questionable means and then surrounded himself with self-serving enablers. Modern politics is often overrun with Rosencrantz's and Guildensterns – spineless sycophants who respect power regardless of how it is wielded.

The London in which Hamlet was first performed had a sophisticated spy system that is echoed in Claudius' and Polonius' close observation of Hamlet, which involves employing Hamlet's old friends and his girlfriend, and accessing the prince's private correspondence with Ophelia. The Elizabethan regime's obsession with surveillance as a means of exerting control is the same fixation of certain governments and corporations today.

But perhaps the main reason for the play's continuous popularity is that it is so full of endlessly intriguing questions. Why does Hamlet delay his killing of Claudius? Does Hamlet actually love Ophelia? If so, why does he treat her with such persistent disdain? What is the meaning of his 'To be or not to be' soliloquy? Does his attempt to feign madness result in actual insanity? Why does he dwell in such depth on his mother's private life? Would volatile, obsessive Hamlet be any better as a king than scheming, manipulative Claudius? How do we reconcile the sensitive and painstakingly deliberate Hamlet of the early scenes with the man who kills the unarmed Polonius, coldly arranges the decapitation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and then fights Laertes in Ophelia's grave?

The fact that the play can be read in so many ways has made it ripe for all manner of experimental productions – a quick search through the images on any internet browser will produce a huge range of Hamlets: some noble, some fierce, some athletic, some gentle, some deranged. The internet is also home to numerous different readings of his most famous soliloquy. The sheer openness of *Hamlet* means that students, like directors and actors, are free to interpret the play in whatever way they wish, provided of course they are able to support their views with textual references. This guide is by no means a definitive reading of the play but there is none available and there never will be. Despite being the subject of a vast number of in-depth studies over four centuries, Hamlet remains one of Shakespeare's most mercurial and unknowable creations. Therefore, it is important for you to engage with the play personally and make your own decisions about the text. After all, 'there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so'.

# Director's Note: Geoff O'Keefe



Like most of you reading the study guide, I too first came to *Hamlet* while preparing for my Leaving Cert. The lyrical savagery of Synge's *The Playboy Of The Western World*, probably made more impact on the younger me, if truth be told. My memories of *Hamlet* consist of half-remembered quotes and four-page essays. It became something else that had to be ticked off a never-ending list. I'm now back with *Hamlet* and as I write, preparing to go into the rehearsal room to direct this play for the second time.

As with all the plays I direct, I aim to tell the story with clarity and insight, but do so in a way that excites, provokes and questions. Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed, and through live performance, we come to know the characters. It's on the stage that we see what is truly at stake and we bear witness to a world where a young man has lost all sense of certainty, whose very sanity is threatened by an obsessive search for truth in the detritus of a world that has changed utterly.

I'm not sure that we can ever fully 'understand' Hamlet, and that is why he remains the holy grail for actors. The chance to play 'the Dane' is what they all hunger for. And it is the depth of humanity that Shakespeare has invested in this character that makes the play such a joy to work on. The incredible use of language, the laying bare of the soul and the, at once simple, yet utterly profound questions that he poses are all so recognisable. While most of us will never play *Hamlet*, there is perhaps a bit of *Hamlet* in us all.

It is an honour to have the opportunity to revisit the text and once again dive into those searing questions - Does Hamlet really go mad? Why does he delay? This time we are creating a very different space to accommodate the world of the play. The production will have a contemporary aesthetic and working with a new ensemble of actors we will seek to unravel, to question and to probe.

My hope is that on seeing this show, that Hamlet becomes more than half-remembered quotes and four-page essays. You will have walked in his shoes and come to know him better. I hope he frustrates, angers, and even scares you. You might even like him. They are the parts of Hamlet that are in you.

The rest is silence.

# The World of the Play

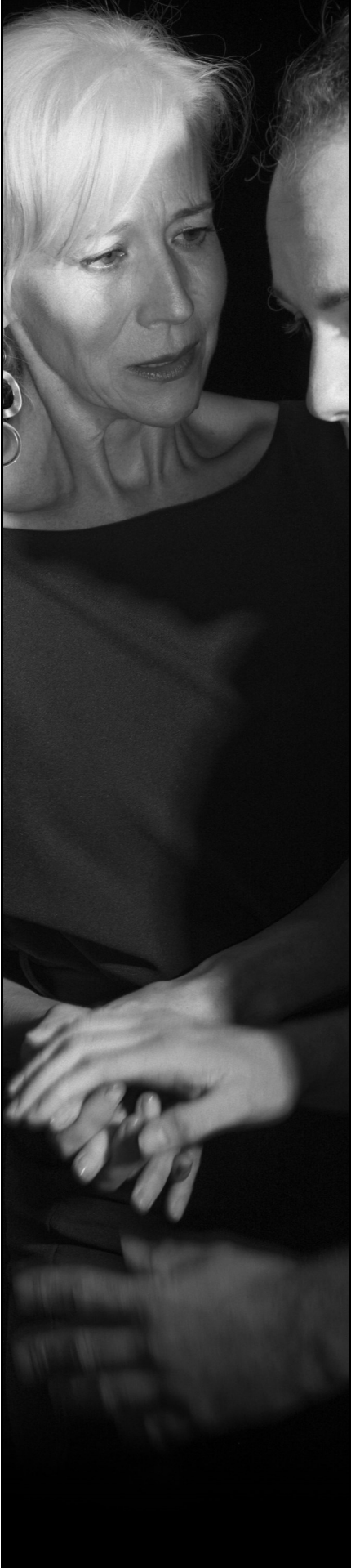
Like many of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* takes place during a time of transition – in this case, the early period in the reign of a new king. This is a time of real uncertainty as reflected by an opening scene in which frightened watchmen, initially unable to identify one another in the darkness, express feelings of discomfort. 'Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart.' The uneasy atmosphere in the kingdom mirrors the very real fears of a contemporary audience who would have had strong folk memories of flawed monarchs making sweeping, and devastating, changes to their own country. *Hamlet* demonstrates how the attitude and behaviour of the monarch can have a profound effect on the court and on the country as a whole.

As a new king in a world where the monarch holds so much importance as the figurehead and sole decision-maker of the state, Claudius must establish himself quickly and demonstrate his strength, particularly at a time where he is succeeding a king whose reign he ended by the shocking crime of regicide. The kingdom is in a state of flux and, like any leader, he needs to provide a sense of continuity with the past but also to stamp his identity on his new position. In his opening speech in Act 1, Scene 2, he attempts to present himself as a sensitive but pragmatic individual who will joyfully celebrate his marriage to Gertrude while continuing to remember his late brother. But there is something perverse about the juxtapositions in these lines:

**'With an auspicious and a dropping eye,  
With mirth in funeral and dirge in marriage.'**

These strangely distorted sentiments reflect Hamlet's later observation that 'the time is out of joint'. Claudius' killing of his brother, and his marriage to Gertrude, has disrupted the natural order of the monarchy and twisted out of shape the court, the kingdom and language itself.

'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,' claims Marcellus in Act 1, scene 4, and we gradually learn that the source of the rot is Claudius, a malignant force who spreads corruption throughout the kingdom, much like the poison which coursed through the body of his unsuspecting brother. Not only does this usurper legitimise and promote spying as a means of maintaining control but he also surrounds himself with venal, self-interested lackeys like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and oleaginous flatterers like Osric – weak and superficial figures whom he can easily manipulate. The recklessly grief-stricken Laertes is another willing collaborator. Even before he learns of the new king's fratricidal deed, Hamlet considers Claudius a deeply flawed individual whose rule is causing extreme damage to the state. The new king's marriage is a poor model for the rest of his kingdom and his bombastic, drunken behaviour (Claudius' drinking bouts are accompanied by cannon-fire and trumpet fanfares) risks damaging Denmark's international reputation.



The rot mentioned by Marcellus also relates to the sudden acceleration in the production of arms and ships. The kingdom is on a war-footing and perhaps this is the reason why young Fortinbras, seeing a possible weakness in Denmark's position of having a new and untested ruler, chooses to launch a personal revenge campaign to win back the lands seized by Hamlet's father. Claudius deals with the threat of Fortinbras through diplomatic means, avoiding any bloodshed, though the deal he makes with the king of Norway to allow his nephew's army to have free access through Denmark to Poland is highly questionable. Claudius' major concern in the play is a domestic matter – a wayward stepson/nephew whom he must contain and neutralise: 'like the hectic in my blood he rages.' (4.3) It could be argued that his preoccupation with dealing with Hamlet ultimately becomes a distraction from external events and allows Fortinbras to invade the kingdom with comparative ease.

Claudius' uncertainty about his own position is reflected in the conditions he creates to deal with the threat presented by Hamlet. When Hamlet says 'Denmark's a prison,' it seems like an unusual remark for a prince to make about the kingdom where he is the heir to throne. And yet, Hamlet is subject to confinement and close surveillance throughout the play. Claudius and Gertrude request that Hamlet does not return to university in Wittenburg in Act 1, scene 2 and later on in the play, Claudius forces him to travel to England in the company of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The king enlists the same two friends of Hamlet to spy on the prince and report back to him about his changed behaviour. Claudius also spies on Hamlet when the latter meets Ophelia and Polonius also spies on him when he is with Gertrude. Polonius uses a similar approach when checking on his son Laertes' behaviour in Paris, directing Reynaldo to tell lies about Laertes in order to find out whether he has been misbehaving. 'Your bait of falsehood, takes this carp of truth' (2.1) and he interrogates Ophelia about her relationship with Hamlet.

The wave of deceit and treachery that has taken hold of Denmark reaches its apogee in the final scene of the play, when Claudius makes an ineffectual attempt to stop Gertrude from drinking from the cup of poisoned wine and allows Hamlet and Laertes to fatally wound each other. Though Hamlet gives his blessing to Fortinbras as his choice in the succession to the throne, Denmark has been thrown into further upheaval by the invasion of a representative of the old enemy. A purging of Claudius' diseased court is likely but the future of Denmark is entirely uncertain.

# Hamlet – an unsuitable avenger?



The longest role in Shakespeare, with its 4,000 lines and over 30,000 words comprising 37 per cent of the entire play, Hamlet is a remarkably varied character. At various points in the play we see him as the philosopher, brooding on the afterlife, death, fate and existence itself; the self-lacerating critic despising himself for his lack of energy and direction but also pontificating on matters theatrical; the wit, unleashing clever puns that set his enemies on edge; the spurned lover, the disgusted son, the faithful friend. He is also an accomplished duellist. Lamenting his apparent slide into insanity, Ophelia describes him in glowing terms as 'The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, / sword.' The sheer variety and changeability of the character makes it one of the most challenging parts to play. And yet for all his versatility, for much of the play, Hamlet considers himself a failure because of his inability to exact revenge on the man who killed his father.

Hamlet's approach to his task is undoubtedly slower than the audience might expect, especially one accustomed to the then-popular revenge play genre. According to Ophelia in Act 3, four months have passed between the death of old Hamlet and events in Act 2, scene 2. If this is true, then there is an interval of two months between Hamlet's meeting with the ghost where he swears to wholly dedicate himself to his revenge task and the performance of the 'play within the play'. What has Hamlet been doing in the time between these two events? There is evidence of altered behaviour, the 'antic disposition' he told Horatio and Marcellus he would adopt. Claudius mentions his 'transformation' and Gertrude refers to the prince as her 'too much changed son' while Ophelia is confronted in her chamber by a silent but disturbed Hamlet. Polonius claims that Hamlet sometimes walks 'for four hours together', in the lobby.

Some may find Hamlet's cautious approach, involving his elaborate ruse of feigned madness, frustrating to watch but Hamlet's wariness is justified. He is rightly suspicious of the motives of almost every character. He obviously distrusts Claudius, and by extension his right-hand man Polonius, but is also understandably wary of people who were previously close to him but who are now seemingly under the sway of the usurper king: his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his former lover, Ophelia, and his own mother. The king and queen refuse him leave to return to Wittenburg and

later on, Claudius forces him to go to England. Despite being the heir to the throne, Hamlet has little freedom of movement and is surrounded by former allies who are now converted to adversaries.

Hamlet's delay can also be partly explained by his own religious beliefs. Because he is unsure whether the ghost is actually his father's spirit or a shape-shifting devil preying on him in his depressed state, he devises his plan to stage a play so that he can assure himself of Claudius' guilt. Similarly, afforded an opportunity to kill Claudius in Act 3, when the king is alone and unaware of Hamlet's presence, he is unable to do so because he fears the praying Claudius may be absolved of his sins and pass directly into heaven.

As well as the above circumstances, it is worth looking at some of the traits that possibly make him unsuitable for the role of avenger. One area to consider is his apparent love of performance and play, another his analytical nature.

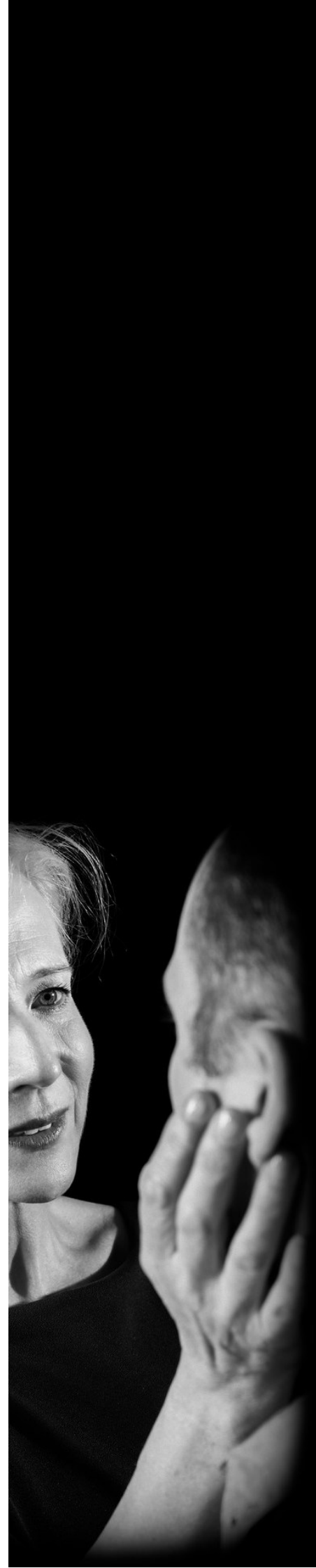
Hamlet's fond memories of Yorick provide an important insight into the character of the main protagonist. He remembers his old play-mate as a great wit ('a fellow of infinite jest') with a wide imagination ('of most excellent fancy'). The relationship between the two was close – Yorick carried the young prince on his back and kissed him – and there are clear similarities between them. The 'gibes' and 'flashes of merriment' that Hamlet remembers are also evident in his own frequent bouts of playful invention, though it might be stretch to describe them as 'merry'. His memories of his relationship with Yorick are striking because Hamlet seems so comparatively distant from his father, who seems such a stern, martial figure, with 'an eye like Mars to threaten and command' (3.4)

While he is often characterised as morose, Hamlet, like Yorick, is a lively performer, possessed of the kind of razor-sharp wit that we usually see employed by clowns in Shakespeare's plays. For much of the play he is acting, feigning madness as a means of confusing his opponents, but there is clear evidence that for Hamlet, acting in itself is of great importance. He warns Polonius to ensure the players are well attended during their stay in Elsinore as they can use their performances on stage to fatally damage reputations:

**'after your death you were better have a / bad epitaph than their ill report while you live.'** (2.2)

His affection for the players mirrors his love of Yorick and their arrival gives him a welcome opportunity to act, write and direct. He briefly becomes a player himself when he performs from memory the beginning of a speech about the death of Priam; his plot to ascertain Claudius' guilt involves a play which he augments with the addition of self-penned lines and, before they perform, he becomes the players' director, giving them expert instructions on how to act. He reminds them of the importance of their trade, and how the 'purpose of playing' is 'to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature'. While these scenes provide the audience with a brilliant display of Hamlet's various talents, they are further evidence of the scope of his imagination, a feature that makes him particularly ill-suited to the comparative simplicity of his revenge mission.

Another possible drawback for Hamlet is the sheer breadth of his consciousness. As a student in Wittenburg, it is likely that he has spent much of his time considering, reflecting, and dwelling upon a multitude of ideas he encounters in books. In his soliloquy in Act 3, the guilt-ridden Claudius is preoccupied with eternal damnation in hell but while he is alive, he cannot forgo the 'effects' or benefits he has accrued from stealing the crown – 'My crown, mine own ambition, and my Queen'. (3.3) Hamlet, in contrast, considers life and death from a much wider perspective that takes in the entire human race and everyone who has ever existed. His soliloquies and major speeches frequently move from the personal to meditations on existence that apply to every human being. When he considers the skulls the grave-digger throws up from the grave, Hamlet considers the lives, and after-lives, of Yorick, anonymous lawyers, important ladies, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and ultimately, every one of us. As well as being a general statement about the human condition, his claim that 'conscience does make cowards of us all' is an admission that his own overwhelming fascination with existence has stymied his progress as an avenger.





# Polonius – a ‘foolish, prating knave’?

Following his sudden and rather ridiculous death (stabbed through a curtain by a confused Hamlet), the image of Polonius as a pompous windbag is reinforced by Hamlet's cool dismissal of the freshly-dead chief counsellor as one 'who was in life a foolish prating knave'. In the scenes that follow, Hamlet makes facetious remarks about the dead Polonius, referring to his corpse as 'the guts' and alluding to the smell of putrefaction that is now emanating from the body. Claudius too seems unmoved by the death of his close confidante. His immediate reaction is an expression of fear for his own safety. 'It had been so with us, had we been there'. (4.1) The king's decision to discreetly bury Polonius without a full ceremony adds further insult. It is not until we see the traumatising impact of Polonius' death and its aftermath on his children that we are reminded that this was a human being with a family who loved him.

But what of Hamlet's verdict on Polonius? There is no question that he is self-important and his rambling, digressive speeches are often used by directors as a form of comic relief. 'More matter with less art,' is Gertrude's curt request when he allows verbal flourishes to delay his theory on Hamlet's madness. He is also a target of Hamlet's wordplay, and gives sycophantic replies to the prince's apparently nonsensical, but clearly derisive, observations. Hamlet's barbs reduce him to 'a fishmonger', 'a tedious old fool' and a 'great baby'.

However, it is highly unlikely that anyone employed as chief counsellor to the scheming Claudius could be entirely foolish. It is more likely that Claudius has chosen a prime minister with whom he has much in common and we an icy ruthlessness in the manner in which Polonius treats his children. His advice to the departing Laertes, though delivered in a long-winded speech, is eminently practical and wise and he appears to be a sensible and caring parent, but this is entirely undercut by his actions in Act 2, scene 1, when he sends Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in Paris and to slander his son by suggesting to locals that he is involved in various disreputable pursuits – 'put on him what forgeries you please' (2.1) – in order to discover how he has actually been behaving. In giving these instructions, Polonius contradicts the final and most important piece of advice he has given to Laertes: 'This above all, to thine own self be true.' (1.3)

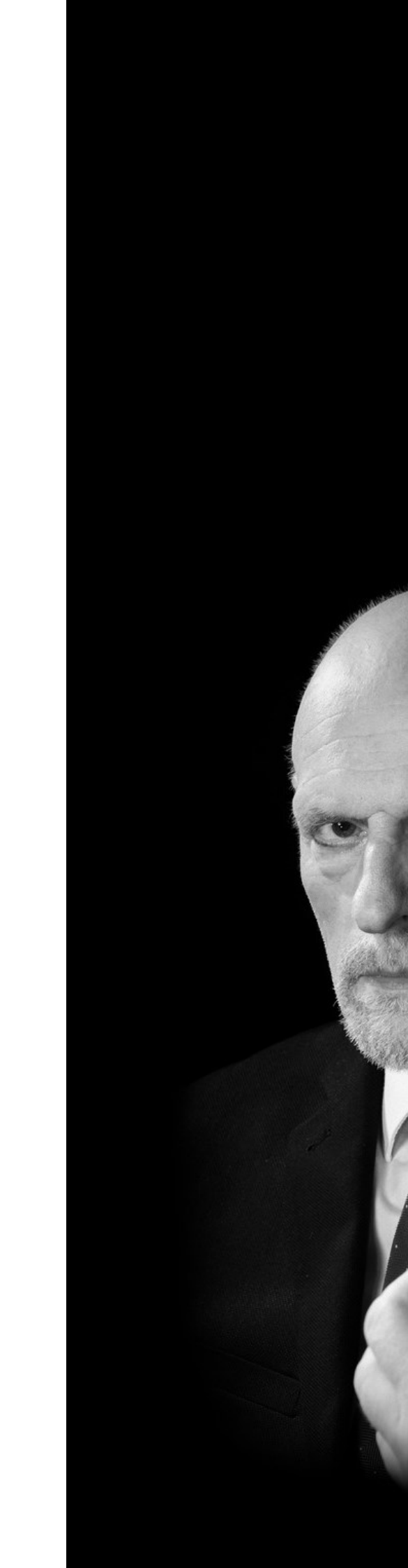
His domineering side is on full display in his interrogation of Ophelia, whose attitude towards her lover Hamlet he condemns as childishly naïve and potentially damaging to his reputation: 'Tender yourself more dearly.... Or...you'll tender me a fool.' (1.3) With brutal insensitivity, he commands her to end the relationship and, using a series of demeaning financial terms, orders her to offer herself at a higher price.



**‘Set your entreatments at a higher rate  
Than a command to parley.’ (1.3)**

As a father, Polonius is intent to keep a tight rein on his children and uses surveillance, slander and humiliation to maintain his control over them. With regard to his domestic affairs, this is clearly no blundering fool but a man who is determined to maintain his position as the king's key advisor and to prevent any possible damage to his reputation. His disregard for his daughter's feelings are again evident in the scene where he reads aloud the love letters Hamlet wrote to her and then forces Ophelia to return the letters while Polonius and Claudius spy on the former lovers. His willingness to exploit his daughter by watching an intimate scene between two young people is clear evidence of a character that is willing to put the needs of a scheming king above the wellbeing of his family. In advance of this scene, Polonius tells Claudius 'I will loose my daughter to him (Hamlet)' (2.2), his choice of words evoking an image of the release of an animal from a cage.

Both Polonius and Claudius use spying as a primary means of exerting control and Polonius even persuades Claudius to allow him to observe another intimate meeting, this time between Hamlet and Gertrude, from behind an arras in the queen's chamber. Polonius is deeply mourned by Laertes and Ophelia but having seen how he so shamefully abuses his position as a parent and as a high-ranking politician, it is difficult to sympathise with them.



**'I will  
loose my  
daughter  
to him'**

# Fathers and children

**'This in obedience hath my daughter shown me.'** (2.2)

In the rigidly patriarchal society of *Hamlet*, loyalty to one's father appears to be indivisible from blind obedience, and this gives impetus to some but places a heavy burden on others.

Some characters are motivated by a sense of duty to their fathers and clearly relish the thought of honouring them. Fortinbras' initial attempt to invade Denmark with a private army of mercenaries is linked to a desire to avenge his father by re-capturing those lands lost in a previous war. His willingness to go on a rogue mission without the consent of the king suggests that loyalty to a dead father exceeds any loyalty he might have to the kingdom of Norway.

Similarly, Laertes forgoes all propriety when confronting Claudius over the unexplained death, and secret burial, of Polonius. When Gertrude attempts to pacify him, he says, 'That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me / Bastard' (4.5). The wily Claudius manipulates Laertes' profound sense of filial loyalty to persuade him to become the king's chief weapon in his war against Hamlet, asking him, 'what would you undertake / To show yourself in deed your father's son / More than in words?' (4.7) Laertes' answer, 'To cut his throat i' th' church' reassures Claudius that he has recruited someone he can easily direct.

Both Fortinbras' and Laertes' attitudes to avenging their fathers' deaths throws Hamlet's behaviour into sharp relief. The ghost of Hamlet's father clearly states that it is a child's duty to honour his parents. 'If thou didst ever thy dear father love... Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.' (1.5). The ghost fully expects his son to accomplish his murder mission - 'If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not' (1.5). The word 'natural' suggests unquestioning loyalty to family, regardless of the circumstances. Hamlet regularly lavishes praise on his late father at various junctures throughout the course of the play and at first, he, like Laertes, seems to be as stirred by the thought of avenging his father's death. To that end, he swears to be entirely single-minded in his approach to his mission:

**'And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmixed with baser matter.'** (1.5)

However, in contrast to the other bereaved sons, the task proves an almost intolerable burden for Hamlet and when the ghost reappears, Hamlet assumes it is to criticise him for taking so long to fulfil his 'dread command' (3.4). Unlike Fortinbras, who appears to be a warrior in the mould of his late father, the audience is left with little sense of Hamlet's relationship with the old king. When he appears, the ghost is in full battle gear and at the only point where he is remembered in any detail it is as a warrior:

**'So frowned he once, when in an angry parle  
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.'**  
(Horatio, 1.1)

His son, in seeming contrast, is perplexed by the notion of soldierly honour. Watching Fortinbras' army travel through Denmark on a campaign of little value, he struggles to understand the willingness of many to sacrifice their lives 'even for a straw...'. It is likely that Hamlet's eternally questioning sensibility would be thoroughly unsuited to the brutal practicalities and unswerving discipline of army life. Laertes, on the other hand, is a less complicated individual, as evidenced by the speed with which he pledges allegiance to the cunning Claudius.

**'My lord, I will be rul'd'** (4.7).

While Hamlet feels the burden of the ghost's command, Ophelia is virtually imprisoned by her living father's will. Polonius forces her to end her relationship with Hamlet (to which she submits with the single, muted line 'I shall obey, my lord'), to give him the love letters Hamlet wrote her, and to allow Claudius and the chief counsellor to spy on her meeting with Hamlet. When showing the letters to Claudius, Polonius refers to Ophelia's filial loyalty – 'This in obedience hath my daughter shown me' (2.2). To a modern audience, Polonius' meddling in his daughter's private affairs and his coarse bullying of her makes for dispiriting viewing. On the two occasions when she is clearly distraught, he does nothing to soothe her anxiety but is only concerned about whether she has helped produce any more clues regarding the source of Hamlet's madness. Why Ophelia eventually succumbs to real insanity and later takes her own life, we cannot know for sure, but there is a suggestion in her disordered talk and songs that she is haunted by the unexplained circumstances surrounding Polonius' demise and burial. As with Hamlet, Fortinbras, and Laertes, the shadow of the father looms large, in life and in death.



# Hamlet and Friends:

## Loyalty and Betrayal.

**'Those friends that thou hast, and their addition tried,  
Grapple them onto your soul with hoops of steel.'**

Polonius' advice to Laertes applies directly to Hamlet – because he feels deprived of his father, betrayed by his mother and his lover, and isolated in the court of Claudius, old friends take on an enhanced importance and tried and trusted ones are of greater value than ever. But Hamlet quickly realises that in Claudius' kingdom, even old comrades can turn traitors and that a genuine friend is priceless asset.

Though Hamlet appears to be genuinely happy to meet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at Elsinore, he quickly detects their ulterior motive for visiting Elsinore – to spy on Hamlet for Claudius. While initially he gently chides them for not being honest with him, he becomes increasingly agitated by their behaviour until the point when he accuses them of being no more than mindless puppets for Claudius to manipulate.

**'When he needs what you have gleaned,  
it is but squeezing you, and sponge, you shall be dry  
again.'** (4.2)

It becomes apparent that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern place loyalty to the king above their friendship with Hamlet and are willing to sacrifice the latter for what they believe is the good of the state: to protect the king regardless of his moral standing. 'Never alone does the king sigh / But with a general moan.' (3.3) Their interest in the king's welfare is tightly connected to their own self-interest. They stand to be handsomely rewarded for collaborating with Claudius and so they willingly spy on their friend, deliver him to the king following the death of Polonius, and accompany Hamlet on the journey Claudius sends him on to England.

Though we never learn whether or not they were aware that Hamlet was due to be executed in England, Hamlet feels no regret for his decision to have them killed in his place. He claims they 'did make love to their enterprise', in other words that they were all too happy to work with Claudius. The main reason for Hamlet's antipathy, and lack of sympathy, for them is that they are content to be used by the king.

He tells Horatio he will trust Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as 'adders fanged' though there is little evidence that they are a match for him. When Hamlet first questions them, they quickly concede that they were indeed sent for by Claudius and, as the play progresses, they become little more than messengers for Claudius. Even the musicality of their names and their lack of clearly defined personalities (they are virtually interchangeable) adds to the sense that they are little more than colourless 'yes'-men.



Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Horatio is an important member of the court: he advises the royal couple that Ophelia's wretched state of madness could provoke unhealthy rumours and provoke mutiny among their subjects and Claudius orders him to closely observe her behaviour. However, unlike Hamlet's other friends, he works with Claudius while remaining faithful to his fellow-student, a quality that Hamlet recognises and celebrates.

After spending time with two old friends who have now turned informers for Claudius, Hamlet acclaims Horatio as an honourable person, who is as measured and controlled as Hamlet himself is volatile. He describes Horatio as a balanced individual who, unlike himself, is not 'passion's slave' and is unlikely to become overly-affected by extreme emotions. He also lauds the authentic nature of their friendship: that they can praise each other without expecting rewards. This is partly a commentary on the transactional relationship Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have with Claudius. But it also highlights the importance of Horatio as the sole individual Hamlet feels he can genuinely trust.

And there is ample evidence that Horatio is a worthy friend. He is protective of Hamlet: fearing for the prince's safety, he uses physical force to try to stop him from following the beckoning ghost and he is wisely suspicious of Claudius and Laertes' duel and suggests Hamlet turn down the invitation. He is also a character with whom Hamlet feels he can drop his guard and share his ideas. Hamlet seems to be at his most relaxed and most natural in Horatio's company and Horatio is content to listen quietly to Hamlet's meditations on the state of Denmark in the first act and his observations on death and the story of the prince's escape from the ship bound for England in the fifth.

Hamlet also trusts Horatio to maintain the secret of his feigned madness and he gives him several important tasks. He asks him to help ascertain Claudius' guilt during the 'play within the play'. He later writes a letter to Horatio to inform him of his surprise return to Denmark following his aborted trip to England and to arrange a meeting-place. Finally, he requests that Horatio give an honest account of his story after he dies to prevent other versions from damaging the prince's posthumous reputation. Because his feigned madness has sowed so much confusion in the court and malicious rumours have been spread to the kingdom at large, it is important that Horatio explains Hamlet's unusual behaviour and helps restore his image in Denmark. As the one left to 'truly deliver' to Fortinbras the story of recent events, Horatio is guaranteed to present Hamlet in a sympathetic light. In death, Hamlet could not have a better advocate.

The steadfast friendship between these two characters is one of the few shining lights in the play's murky sea of treachery and duplicity.

# Frailty, thy name is woman?

Hamlet's behaviour towards the two women in the play is complicated – it appears to be driven by a sense of bitter betrayal - and sometimes bewildering. However sympathetic one might be to this troubled character, his scenes with Gertrude and Ophelia can make for puzzling and even uncomfortable viewing.

Hamlet's feelings of despair in the early scenes of the play are directly linked to his disgust with Gertrude's relationship with her erstwhile brother-in-law, Claudius, and the focus of his revulsion is on the sex act itself -

**'She married. O most wicked speed, to post  
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets.'** (1.2)

He revisits this theme at length when he confronts Gertrude about her behaviour later in the play, wondering aloud why she does not feel ashamed of herself for living 'in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed' (3.4)) and imploring her to give up 'that monster custom' of going to bed with Claudius (3.4). Though he has good reason to warn her about the despicable Claudius, it is strange to hear a son give such blunt advice on how his mother should conduct her private life.

For her part, earlier on in the play Gertrude has already expressed misgivings about what she considers their 'o'erhasty marriage' but Hamlet proceeds to expose her guilty feelings and torture her with them.

**'O Hamlet speak no more,  
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,  
And there I see such black and grained spots  
As will not leave their tinct.'** (3.4)

Hamlet's main concern is to point out to Gertrude the dishonour she has shown her previous husband and to save her soul: 'Confess yourself to heaven, / Repent what's past, avoid what is to come.'

Hamlet also uses the instance of Gertrude's rapid re-marriage to condemn womanhood in its entirety as fickle and treacherous – 'Frailty thy name is woman' (1.2).



How seriously one might take this comment depends on one's view of the character. It is entirely natural for people who are frustrated and distressed to make rash generalisations but Hamlet's subsequent treatment of Ophelia is, at best, challenging, and at worst, heartless. He launches a stinging verbal attack in 3.1, accusing her, and by extension, all women, of infidelity ('Get thee to a nunnery, why wouldst thou be a / breeder of sinners') and deceit ('God has given you one face, and you make / yourselves another').

To some degree, Hamlet's indiscriminate fury with women is understandable – his girlfriend has ended their relationship without an explanation and is now returning the letters and gifts she gave him, he feels betrayed by his mother's hasty re-marriage to his uncle. There is also a possibility that Hamlet is aware that the meeting with Ophelia is a set-up and that he is being spied upon by Polonius. When he asks Ophelia for the whereabouts of her father and she replies 'at home', Hamlet appears to suspect foul play:

**'Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play  
the fool no where but in's own house.'**

If Hamlet knows he is being spied on, he may be exaggerating his rage as part of his feigned madness so that he can further confuse and wrongfoot his adversaries. And of course, there could always be a combination of playacting and sincerity here.

If we are to take a sympathetic view of Hamlet's behaviour in this scene, it is more difficult to do so when Hamlet next meets Ophelia before and during 'the play within the play' when he publicly humiliates her by producing a string of crude and bitter remarks that relate to sex and unfaithfulness. It seems needlessly cruel for him to degrade his former lover in this manner, especially as she is clearly unable to defend herself. On the next occasion he sees Ophelia, she is dead and in the process of being buried. Hamlet's fight over the grave with the similarly overwrought Laertes is followed by a declaration that is hard to square with his behaviour over the course of the play:

**'I loved Ophelia, forty thousand brothers  
Could not, with all their quantity of love,  
Make up my sum –' (5.1)**

Is Hamlet a genuine misogynist or is his behaviour all part of his revenge plot? Do his feelings of betrayal explain (and excuse) his treatment of his mother and his former lover? Why does Hamlet, who is so careful in his thinking on other subjects, appear to lose all sense of perspective with regards to women? These are questions that are left to the audience to ponder, and they are perhaps sharper and more pertinent now than at the time of the play's first performances.

A modern audience may be surprised by how weak and passive Gertrude and Ophelia can appear. Apart from some brief moments of assertiveness, when Ophelia challenges Laertes' relationship advice and when Gertrude defends Claudius from the same when he is seeking revenge for Polonius, they often seem muted and submissive. Even in the scene in her closet, Gertrude's criticism of Hamlet for staging the play that so disturbs Claudius is undercut by our knowledge that this meeting has been orchestrated by Polonius who has also given her instructions on how to talk to her errant son.

**GET THEE TO A  
NUNNERY**



# Words and wordplay

**'O, speak to me no more;**

**These words, like daggers, enter in mine ears'**

Unlike his father, Hamlet is no veteran of the battlefield; his weapon of choice is language. Hamlet's skill with words is central to his revenge plot as he uses it to hide his intentions behind a veil of madness. It is also one of the chief sources of humour in the play. In the absence of Shakespeare's usual clown figure, who does not appear until the appearance of the grave diggers in the final act, Hamlet himself provides most of the comic relief through a dazzling exhibition of wordplay. While he uses words to brilliant effect as a diversionary ploy, his concomitant love of language is perhaps one of the key reasons for the fatal delay of his murder mission.

His opening line in the play, 'A little more than kin and less than kind' is a bitter commentary on the unwelcome change in his relationship with Claudius, and the first of many moments where Hamlet employs words for their varied connotations. He interrogates words to expose the insincerity and shamelessness of Claudius and Gertrude, playing on the different meanings of 'common', 'seems' and 'son/sun'.

**'Seems madam? Nay it is; I know not "seems".'  
'Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun.'**

Because he has been denied leave from Elsinore and because he knows his behaviour is being closely monitored by Claudius and his associates, Hamlet also uses his verbal dexterity to wrongfoot his opponents, stirring them into varying states of suspicion, paranoia, perplexity and fear. When he feigns madness as a means of disguising his intent to kill Claudius, he laces his talk with quips that suggest a sharp understanding half-hidden beneath eccentricity. Regarding Ophelia, he advises Polonius, 'Let her not walk i' th' sun', a reference to Polonius' restricting his daughter's access to the 'son' or heir to the throne. The unnerved Polonius remarks, 'Though this be madness yet there is method in't.'

Following his accidental death, Polonius is also the subject of Hamlet's darkest witticisms. When Claudi-

us asks him about the whereabouts of Polonius' body, Hamlet makes a series of tasteless gibes alluding to the smell of the decaying corpse ('you shall nose him as you go upstairs into the lobby') and its present status as food for worms and maggots. He advises Claudius that if his messenger doesn't find Polonius in heaven, Claudius himself will find the chief counsellor when he joins him in hell ('the other place'). 'Seek him i' the other place / yourself'. In his reference to the smell of Polonius' corpse, there are echoes of Hamlet's pretending to mistake the counsellor for a fishmonger in Act 2. The suggestion here is that in death, as in life, Polonius stinks of corruption.

In the same scene, Hamlet's riddle about a king being eaten and digested by the beggar, by way of a maggot and a fish, is close to an explicit condemnation of the parasitic Claudius. When Claudius asks for its meaning, Hamlet replies:

**'Nothing but to show you how a king may go a  
progress through the guts of a beggar.'**

Because he spends so much time playing with language and 'playing' the madman, it is unsurprising that Hamlet feels an affinity for the travelling players: he is able to remember a long passage of a speech they had previously performed and he gives them detailed technical advice on how to perform the 'play within the play'. Even when he knows he is closing in on the crisis point in the play when he must fight the revenge-crazed Laertes, Hamlet cannot resist mocking the king's messenger, Osric, by mimicking his pretentious style of speech.

## **‘Words, words, words.’**

No character in Shakespeare’s plays speaks as much as Hamlet. As well as employing a host of jagged puns, he makes a number of meditative speeches on subjects such as reputation (1.4), depression (2.2), acting (3.2), friendship (3.2), death (5.1) and fate (5.2). And it could be argued that his love of wordplay and expansive talk has a detrimental impact on his progress as an avenger. Act 2, scene 2, the longest scene in all of Shakespeare, functions as a demonstration of Hamlet’s delight in language and as an example of how his free-ranging mind struggles to focus on his murder mission. Over the course of this scene, he aims a series of mocking quips at Polonius, discusses his state of mind and the state of the theatre trade with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and then summons from memory a speech which the lead player then continues. His only action relating to the revenge plot is to ask the players to perform a play that resembles the murder of his father. The scene ends with a soliloquy that overflows with self-loathing at what he considers his cowardly lack of action. Given the same task, he thinks, others would act quickly, while he is delayed by his need to relieve his feelings of despondency through verbal expression.

## **‘I...must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words.’**

There is more evidence of this damaging trait in Act 3. After the abrupt ending to the play within the play, when he is finally confident of Claudius’ guilt, he lavishes extensive praise on Horatio, and then launches into a lengthy criticism of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Then, in the scene in Gertrude’s closet, he spends a great deal of time highlighting the differences between his father and stepfather using numerous images and then begging his mother to follow his instructions. ‘Speak no more,’ says the distressed Gertrude. This is a character who is almost always inclined to speak at length, to embellish, and re-state his feelings in different ways. Hamlet’s mind is perhaps too energetic and capacious to settle on the single brutal task of bloody revenge.

Even in death, words continue to pour from Hamlet and if it takes him longer to die than the other characters it is because he has so much more left to say. It is language itself that appears to keep him alive until his final line, ‘The rest is silence’ and even here there is a pun on the word ‘rest’ meaning both ‘the remainder’ and ‘sleep’. Watching Hamlet speak his last lines, it’s hard not to feel a sense of relief that he, and the actor who is playing him, can finally ‘rest’ after having delivered such a torrent of words.



# IMAGERY

As in all of Shakespeare's plays, there are few stage directions in *Hamlet* and when we read the play, the only props and costumes we can even vaguely visualise are those mentioned by the characters – Hamlet's black attire, the ghost's armour, curtains, cups, skulls and swords. Beyond the actors' movements and expressions, most of the visuals are provided by the rich imagery of the language. The play was written at a time far removed from our present, image-saturated culture, when we have immediate access to billions of static and moving images. Playgoers in 1601 would have been much more accustomed to experiencing drama through the ears and the imagination.

## 'Sickly days'

Imagery of sickness and decay in relation to the personal and the political appears frequently in *Hamlet*. Denmark and its court are affected by various types of spiritual and moral illnesses - selfishness, dishonesty, hypocrisy, avarice - and the kingdom appears to be in its death throes from the beginning of the play. 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.' By the end, with the king, queen and heir all dead, the illness has been purged from within, but at a heavy cost. The pervasive references to illness and decay also serve to underline the sense of queasy anxiety and self-disgust experienced by several of the characters.

In the first act, Hamlet describes his state of mind (and perhaps by extension, the state of the kingdom) as an 'unweeded garden, grown to seed', an idea he expands upon in conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the second act, when he claims that, for him, the earth itself seems a barren place, 'a sterile promontory' and the sky a bowl of sickening air, 'a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours'. As he says to Horatio, 'There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so'. From Hamlet's despondent viewpoint, the world seems irreversibly spoiled.

He uses further images of decay when he describes Claudius as a diseased blade of corn spreading infection to the brother he murdered, 'like a mildewed ear, / Blasting his wholesome brother' and his and Gertrude's marriage as 'the ulcerous place' infected by 'rank corruption'. When urging his mother to desist from further intimacy with Claudius, he pleads with her not to add compost to the weeds 'to make them ranker'.

And it is not only Hamlet who has decay on his mind. Claudius himself describes his act of fratricide in terms of similar terms – 'O my offence is rank, it smells to heaven'. Addressing his figuratively blood-covered hands he asks, 'Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens / To wash it white as snow?' Horrified by Hamlet's exposure of her shame, Gertrude also uses imagery relating to contamination to describe her feelings of guilt as 'black and grained spots' indelibly marked on her soul.

The recurring use of the word 'sick' intensifies the uneasy atmosphere of the play. 'Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart' is Francisco's ominous complaint in the opening scene while Gertrude expresses her private anxiety in terms of illness: 'To my sick soul...Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss'. Hamlet uses similar language when he describes how over-thinking weakens our determination to take action:  
'And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought' (3.1)

When he decides not to take his revenge on the praying Claudius, but swears to do so at a more opportune time, again using the imagery of sickness: 'This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.'

Claudius too, employs imagery linked to sickness and disease to describe the danger presented by the wayward Hamlet. When he decides to send the prince to his death in England following the killing of Polonius, he argues that 'Diseases desperate grown / By desperate appliance are relieved.' Claudius sees the king of England as the physician who can cure him of fever caused by Hamlet. 'Do it England,' he demands, 'For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me.' Already plagued by the rancid memory of his murder of his brother, Claudius is faced with another disease, but one he can expel from his system.

## 'The paragon of animals'

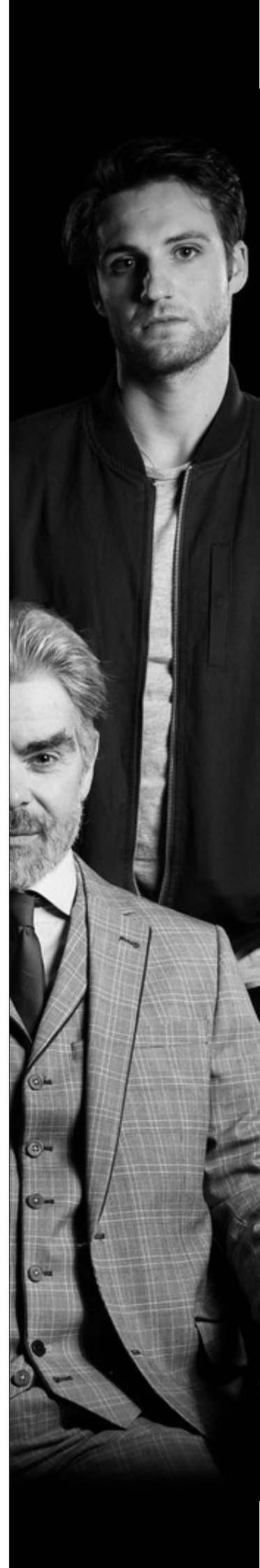
Hamlet's profound sense of disappointment with people is partly fed by his sense of the immense potential of human beings. In Act 2, scene 2, he identifies man as 'the paragon of animals', the highest form of life on the planet, because of his capacity for understanding and reasoning. In his view, man is a masterpiece:

'What a piece of work is a man, how noble  
in reason, how infinite in faculties...  
in apprehension, how like a god (2.2)

Because he has such a high regard for man's rational and moral faculties, he is scornful of those who betray these qualities in pursuit of self-gratification or advancement. He dismisses such people as being no more than basic creatures. The incestuous royal couple are two of the main offenders and he describes them in subhuman terms: Claudius a satyr, a lust-driven, half-goat creature, and Gertrude, 'a beast that wants discourse of reason'. He pictures them as pigs 'honeying and making love over the nasty sty' and, in a similar vein, observes how Claudius' loud and boorish drinking bouts serve to reinforce the stereotype of the Danes being drunken pigs ('They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase / Soil our addition).

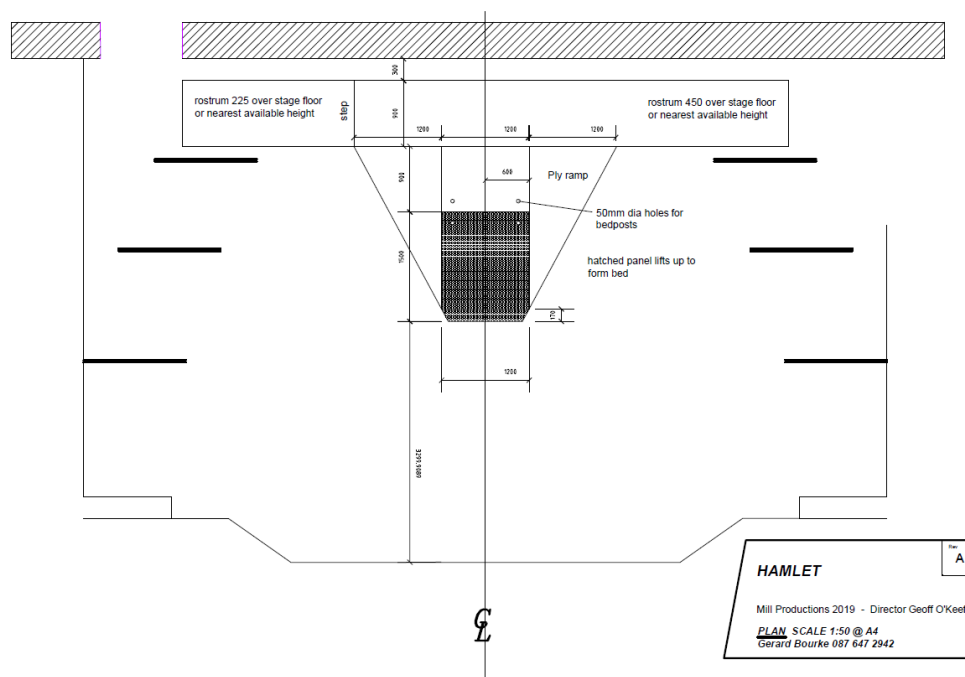
Much like his son, the ghost of Hamlet's father condemns his successor as 'that incestuous, that adulterate beast' and compares him with the Biblical representation of the devil as a poisonous snake. 'The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown.'

Hamlet also reduces Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to snakes ('adders fanged') and, even less flatteringly, to barely sentient sponges from whom Claudius can squeeze assistance and re-use at will. Osric, he considers no more than a 'water-fly', a character of little substance whose goal is to advance through the ranks by way of flattery and imitation.



# Set Design

Set designer Gerard Bourke on his vision for this production of *Hamlet*.



The first thing you see is a sophisticated and cultured modern space; perhaps a palace, or an atrium or even an art gallery. Not obviously indoors or outdoors. A place of ritual, perhaps. But something is wrong - the painting is torn, the sculptural spheres seem to press down too low on the space, become a threat of invasion. 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'. It's an almost abstract composition of simple forms, but quite asymmetrical. It is deliberately not realistic or literal in the way a TV or film set would be - no medieval castles or chambers. The idea was that we should not try to represent any particular place or time or era, but try to bring out the universal, timelessness of the play's themes. So we have a timeless semi-abstract image, evoking a feeling of disrupted order, loss of dignity, of oppression, dangerous times.

With this set, I wanted to evoke the sense of a place that was once majestic but is now dark and threatening. 'Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?' as Ophelia asks. The torn painting is a reminder of this lost state but also, from a practical point of view, it serves as a surface onto which images of the ghost can be projected in an otherwise black backdrop. The spheres are heavy leaden objects pushing down intruding into the high space - 'the dread of something after death'? Again, from a practical point of view, I wanted as many levels as possible raised up off the floor for the actors to use so that someone could feel they were being spied on from above. A ramp (which morphs into Gertrude's bed) is always useful for this as it gives an infinite number of levels. To achieve the sense of some scenes taking place outdoors, we rely on a change in the lighting to suggest a graveyard, or battlements.

While this may well be a world 'in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons', I didn't want to have recourse to high castle walls in order to create a mood that was both confining and yet recalled 'the majesty of buried Denmark'. I wanted an atmosphere where Hamlet could feel both 'bounded in a nutshell' and count himself 'a king of infinite space'. The blackness that surrounds the actors hints at this infinity and danger. The irregularly looming spheres overhead could fall like cannon balls at any time on the walkway beneath.

What I most enjoy about set design is the discovery - researching, discovering things I hadn't noticed before even in familiar texts; exploring the model and when for example I accidentally knock over bits of cardboard and I find I've got great new shapes and spaces. But the biggest thrill of all must be seeing the set actually built, standing there twenty-five times bigger than the model box, lit in all sorts of exciting ways, transforming from one scene to another magically. And of course, finally seeing the actors on it, using the spaces and the levels and the structures in all sorts of ways to enhance their performance. It's amazing when something that was once just imaginings in your head becomes a physical reality, and yet everything that happens on it afterwards is still just an illusion, a wonderful play.

# Hamlet

## Cast and Creatives

**Hamlet**

**Claudius / The Ghost**

**Gertrude**

**Polonius / Priest**

**Ophelia**

**Laertes**

**Horatio**

**Marcellus**

**Bernardo / Guildenstern**

**Player King / Grave Digger / Sailor**

**Player Queen / Grave Digger 1 / Messenger**

**Kyle Hixon**

**Gerard Byrne**

**Caoilfhionn McDonnell**

**Malcolm Adams**

**Laoise Sweeney**

**Felix Brown**

**Harry Butler**

**Jack Mullarkey**

**Rachel O'Connell**

**Neill Fleming**

**Mathew O'Brien**

**Director**

**Geoff O'Keeffe**

**Fight Director**

**Jay Cosgrove**

**Sound / Multi Media Design**

**Declan Brennan**

**Lighting Design**

**Kris Mooney**

**Costume Design**

**Susan Devitt**

**Set Design**

**Gerard Bourke**

**Set Construction**

**Tom Ronayne**

**Stage Manager**

**Ciara Nolan**

**Company Manager**

**Karen Carleton**

**Mill Theatre**

**Kate Canning, Barry Donaldson**

**Study Guide Designer**

**Sarah Coates**

**Hamlet Study Guide 2019**

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