

About This Volume

Robert C. Evans

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* may be the "most" play ever written—the most respected, the most influential, the most widely known, the most frequently echoed, the most often performed of any major tragedy, the most often filmed, and the one most widely considered a test of any great actor's acting abilities. Hamlet himself may be the "most" literary character – the most commonly recognized, the most often quoted, the most often parodied, and the one whose soliloquies are by far the most famous in the English language. For all these reasons and more, this latest contribution to the Critical Insights series may be of special interest to many readers.

Like all the Critical Insights volumes, this one is divided into several major sections, including Critical Contexts, Critical Readings, and Resources. The book opens with a wide-ranging interview in which Maurice Hunt, a leading Shakespearean, discusses how and why he first became intrigued by this play and its central character and also how and why other readers may find the play worth knowing – or worth knowing better. Hunt's essay is then followed by a brief biography of William Shakespeare that lays out the main details of his life.

The "Critical Contexts" section is designed to introduce readers to several different important aspects of *Hamlet* and *Hamlet* studies. In this volume, the "Contexts" section opens with an article by Marcus Höhne that discusses *Hamlet* in a major historical context: the context of European religious developments in the sixteenth century. Höhne's essay, in turn, is followed by a survey – by Eric Sterling – of major critical responses to the play. Sterling examines the introductions to significant editions of the work, explaining how editors of the text (themselves major scholars of Shakespeare in general and of *Hamlet* in particular) have explored its numerous dimensions. Sterling's essay is then followed by two related articles by Robert Evans. The first, offering a particular "critical lens," looks

at Ophelia in light of recent developments in “trauma theory.” The next examines numerous depictions of the traumatized Ophelia on film, from the 1948 Laurence Olivier screen adaptation right down to very recent productions.

The “Critical Readings” section of each Critical Insights volume is designed to offer at least ten distinct, divergent approaches to the author, work, or theme to which that volume is devoted. In the present book, the “Critical Readings” begin with two by Nicolas Tredell. The first discusses various kinds and aspects of embodiment in the play; the second explores issues of birth, death, and rebirth in *Hamlet*, especially as these affect mothers and fathers. Next, Paul N. Duke, taking issue with frequently offered Freudian approaches to this tragedy, uses modern versions of Jungian psychology to discuss Hamlet as an introverted hero. Matthew Steggle then offers a wide-ranging examination of actual and metaphorical prisons and imprisonment in Shakespeare’s culture as well as in *Hamlet* itself, while Graham Holderness compares and contrasts Shakespeare’s play with his own novelistic version of the story. Holderness and Bryan Loughrey then explore a recent fascinating case in which a quotation from *Hamlet* was used by a British soldier who impulsively—and illegally—killed a captured prisoner in Afghanistan.

In a series of three similarly structured essays, Bryan Warren, Robert Evans, and Jason Shifferd survey critics’ reactions to three recent filmed versions of Shakespeare’s play: the ones starring, respectively, Mel Gibson, David Tennant, and Maxine Peake. These films are very widely and easily accessible and thus are quite likely to be watched by people interested in the play, especially teachers and their students. The surveys of critical responses to these movie and/or video adaptations display the sheer variety of ways in which people can react—and have reacted—to particular productions of one of western literature’s greatest works.

Finally, the book concludes as it opened—with another self-interview by a major scholar of Renaissance literature, Kent Cartwright, who explains his own history of interactions with *Hamlet* and who suggests various ways in which others might wish to approach the play.

The Resources section offers a chronology of Shakespeare's life, a listing of his various works, a survey (by Lee Buford) of recent editions, and an extensive secondary bibliography. This information is then followed by notes on the editor and contributors as well as by a detailed index.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: A Survey of Editors' Introductions

Eric J. Sterling

Hamlet is arguably William Shakespeare's most read, esteemed, and popular tragedy. It is often taught in high schools and colleges and is, perhaps, aside from *Romeo and Juliet*, the most staged Shakespearean play. And although Shakespearean scholars acknowledge the popularity of *Romeo and Juliet* because of its powerful romantic love story, they agree that *Hamlet* is the superior tragedy because of its poignant soliloquies and the depth of its psychological characterization of the protagonist. One way to ascertain recent developments in *Hamlet* scholarship is to discover what eminent Shakespearean scholars have said about the play in their introductions to some of the finest editions of the past half century.

Editions from the 1970s

Edward Hubler's Introduction in the *Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare* (1972) praises Shakespeare for including several ideas and their opposites simultaneously in the tragedy—a sign of a mature playwright. Both comedy and tragedy (Hubler says) constitute ways of looking at life; neither can do so comprehensively by itself but can when combined. Hubler enjoys the comedy in this tragedy, such as the ostentatious Osric and affected Polonius, who considers himself an astute, worldly courtier and father. Hubler is also impressed with “Hamlet's mordant wit” (910), as when he mocks Gertrude's hasty marriage to Claudius by telling Horatio that they married quickly after the old king's funeral to save money on catering. Hubler thinks the audience might even laugh at Hamlet when the prince is shocked to see the Ghost, although it would be nervous laughter, not humor. *Hamlet*, he says, does not follow Aristotle's conception of tragedy by presenting a single action. The play also differs significantly from Greek tragedies, which contain tragic heroes who learn a truth

and transform from unawareness to knowledge. Rather, Hamlet transforms and matures, going from depression to composure and maturity. In the last act, he starts to dress better, apologizes to Laertes, and treats Claudius respectfully until learning that the monarch has poisoned Gertrude. Hamlet learns “that man is not a totally free agent. With this realization Hamlet can face the fencing match and king’s intrigues without concern for self. What matters at the end of an important tragedy is not success or failure, but what a man *is*” (911).

In the Introduction to *Hamlet* in G. Blakemore Evans’s *Riverside Shakespeare* (1974), Frank Kermode claims that the great abundance of debate and commentary on the play is reasonable and appropriate given that it is “the first great tragedy Europe had produced” for hundreds of years (1135). Kermode is impressed by the play’s psychological and metaphysical aspects but concurs with T. S. Eliot that the tragedy is problematic. Although the drama begins with the standard Elizabethan revenge tragedy motif, “Shakespeare produced something which is inexplicably confused as drama, something distorted by the pressure of a personal emotion which did not succeed in finding an objective equivalent in so simple and archaic a form” (1135). He finds the play problematic because of its complexity, which extends beyond typical ideas (such as a protagonist having a motive to kill or a duty to his father) to the metaphysical and esoteric.

Kermode considers the first quarto (a cheap paperback) a pirated version recited to a publisher by the actor who played Marcellus and Voltemand (1136). The first quarto is truncated, inserts the famous “To be, or not to be” soliloquy in the wrong part of the play, and mistakenly calls Ophelia’s father Corambis rather than Polonius. Kermode thinks the actor supplying the text from memory called the courtier Corambis because he supplemented the quarto’s text with lines from Thomas Kyd’s so-called “*Ur-Hamlet*,” a previous play about Hamlet (1136). Thus, in Kermode’s opinion, the first quarto conflates a few versions of the Hamlet story. Kermode observes that the First Folio of 1623 (a huge hardbound edition of many Shakespeare plays) “has about eighty-five lines missing from

Q2 [the second quarto] to compensate for over two hundred that it lacks” (1136).

Kermode claims that the Bard willingly diminishes the realism in his plays, consciously ignoring the realism found in the plots of his sources. He argues that Shakespeare “shows less interest in mere probability than in thematic development of a subtler kind” (1137) as well as insightful psychological and character development. Kermode’s assertion that Shakespeare deviates significantly from his literary source texts in this tragedy conflicts with Philip Edwards’s Introduction to the New Cambridge edition of 2004 (see below), which claims that when writing *Hamlet*, the playwright followed his sources faithfully (1135-1137).

Editions from the 1980s

In the third edition of his *Complete Works of Shakespeare* (1980), David Bevington focuses on the themes of appearance versus reality and the dichotomy of the exterior versus the interior. What seems healthy on the exterior (Bevington suggests) is, in reality, diseased beneath the surface. Major characters such as Claudius appear virtuous to other characters yet hide sinister souls and guilty consciences. Polonius treats his daughter as a decoy to trick Hamlet into revealing what he is hiding. She feigns solitude while her father and Claudius eavesdrop on her conversation; her seemingly innocent behavior masks their darker, political purpose. The sinful comportment of the evil characters, Bevington says, typifies the moral degradation in the nation: “The motif of concealed evil and disease continually reminds us that, in both a specific and a broader sense, ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark’” (1069). The evil often takes the form of poison, a plot device but also a theme that permeates the tragedy: it appears in the murder of King Hamlet, the murder of Gonzago in the play-within-a-play, the envenomed rapier and wine, and also the poisoned nature of postlapsarian human beings, which dates back to “the archetypal murder of Abel by Cain” (1069).

Bevington believes that Hamlet knows that the political state of Denmark is in shambles because the queen has committed incest by

marrying her deceased husband's brother, who now rules the country. Bevington also asserts that the murder of King Hamlet is "something Hamlet has subconsciously feared and suspected" (1069), with the Ghost simply confirming what the prince, at some level, already knows. Bevington insightfully suggests that the courtiers are not as corrupt or as evil as Hamlet believes: they know nothing about the regicide, lack the prince's knowledge of the Ghost's revelation and very existence, and believe that Claudius is the rightful and legitimate monarch. Bevington believes that the courtiers' fear of Hamlet and their belief that he is a threat to the nation's well-being and safety are actually well founded, given the prince's bizarre, cruel, and sociopathic behavior. Bevington considers the point-of-view of the other characters, not merely relying on Hamlet's perspective, as many other scholars and readers do.

Bevington also discusses the dangerous ramifications of meddling in *Hamlet*. For instance, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meddle in Hamlet's affairs at the request of Claudius and Gertrude, yet Bevington thinks them innocent and naïve, not political opportunists: they merely follow the orders of the man they sincerely consider the legitimate monarch. Bevington also emphasizes dramatic irony; he thinks the audience must realize that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, like Polonius and Gertrude, know nothing about the murder of Hamlet's father. They are thus confounded by the prince's antisocial and belligerent behavior and accept Claudius's word that Hamlet severely threatens the realm's well-being. Commenting on Polonius's meddling, Bevington thinks the old courtier means no ill will to Hamlet. Nevertheless, his "complicity in jaded court politics is deeper than his fatuous parental sententiousness might lead one to suppose" (1070). His meddling in Ophelia's romantic relationship with Hamlet and in the prince's relationship with his mother and step-father leads ultimately to his daughter's untimely death. This outcome indicates, says Bevington, "that weak-willed acquiescence is poisoned by the evil to which it surrenders" (1070). Here Bevington not only focuses on eavesdropping and meddling but combines them with his discussion of the theme of poison in the tragedy (1069-1070).

Harold Jenkins's Arden edition (1982) concentrates primarily on the play's date of composition and the complicated distinctions between the first and second quartos and the first folio of 1623. Jenkins claims that the play "as it has come down to us . . . belongs to 1601; but that nevertheless the essential *Hamlet*, minus the passage on the troubles of the actors, . . . was being acted on the stage just possibly even before the end of 1599 and certainly in the course of 1600" (13). Because *Hamlet* was entered on the Stationers' Register on July 26, 1602, Jenkins thinks it was staged before then. He places that staging after September 1598, when minister Francis Meres published *Palladis Tamia, Wits Treasury*, in which he lists twelve of Shakespeare's plays but does not include *Hamlet*. Jenkins indicates that Meres would have included *Hamlet* if Shakespeare had already written it (1). Jenkins also looks to Gabriel Harvey's handwritten marginal notes in his copy of Thomas Speght's edition of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Harvey there praises *Hamlet* as a great tragedy, superior in quality to Shakespeare's poem "Venus and Adonis." Harvey's marginal notes date the play to 1600 or 1601, but the date, as Jenkins notes, depends on whether Harvey was referring to the tragedy as a new play, as E. K. Chambers asserts, or as a revised work, as Dover Wilson believes (5). Jenkins asserts, "There has been too much irresponsible conjecture about Shakespeare's supposed revisions of supposed earlier attempts. My conception of Shakespeare is of a supremely inventive poet who had no call to rework his previous plays when he could always move on to a new one" (5). Jenkins assumes that Shakespeare was extremely gifted and wrote outstanding plays quickly, with little need for revision, and that Harvey, a notable and influential man of letters, immediately recognized *Hamlet's* greatness. As a playwright for a repertory theatre, Shakespeare had to write fast and, upon completing and producing a play, often (but not always, as *King Lear* indicates) did not return later to his dramas and rework them. Gabriel Harvey's comment suggests that *Hamlet* was well received and was popular and well regarded shortly after it appeared on the Elizabethan stage.

Jenkins claims that the first quarto (1603) was unauthorized, corrupt, and deeply flawed; it is often called a "bad quarto" and does

About The Editor

Robert C. Evans is I. B. Young Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, where he has taught since 1982. In 1984 he received his Ph.D. from Princeton University, where he held Weaver and Whiting fellowships as well as a University fellowship. In later years his research was supported by fellowships from the Newberry Library (twice), the American Council of Learned Societies, the Folger Shakespeare Library (twice), the Mellon Foundation, the Huntington Library, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society, and the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

In 1982 he was awarded the G. E. Bentley Prize and in 1989 was selected Professor of the Year for Alabama by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. At AUM he has received the Faculty Excellence Award and has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teaching Professor, and University Alumni Professor. Most recently he was named Professor of the Year by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English.

He is a contributing editor to the John Donne *Variorum Edition*, co-editor of the *Ben Jonson Journal*, and is the author or editor of over fifty books (on such topics as Ben Jonson, Martha Moulsworth, Kate Chopin, John Donne, Frank O'Connor, Brian Friel, Ambrose Bierce, Amy Tan, early modern women writers, pluralist literary theory, literary criticism, twentieth-century American writers, American novelists, Shakespeare, and seventeenth-century English literature). He is also the author of roughly four hundred published or forthcoming essays or notes (in print and online) on a variety of topics, especially dealing with Renaissance literature, critical theory, women writers, short fiction, and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.