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 Excerpt
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INTRODUCTION

'*Hamlet* is always going on somewhere.'¹ So director Tyrone Guthrie once remarked, and it is almost literally true. The play has been performed more than any other and has led a virtually continuous life in the theatre since Shakespeare's time. Even during the Puritan interregnum, when all stage performances were banned, a 'droll' excerpted from the gravedigger scene was performed.² Since then productions have at times been so numerous as to seem ludicrous; London has more than once had three productions running simultaneously. In April and May of 1905, for instance, H. B. Irving, H. Beerbohm Tree, and John Martin-Harvey all opened West End productions of the play, provoking P. G. Wodehouse's 'Too Much Hamlet':

It's 'Hamlet' here and 'Hamlet' there

And 'Hamlet' on next week.

An actor not in 'Hamlet' is regarded as a freak. (*Books of Today*, 1905)

What has been the basis of *Hamlet*'s phenomenal record as a theatre-piece? For one thing, it is so eminently performable that performers have simply wanted to do the play. Guthrie points out that it can be rehearsed very quickly: 'There are few scenes involving more than two or three people; the big ensemble scenes are short.'³ All the scenes, John Gielgud adds, 'are audience-proof . . . if they are played theatrically for all they are worth they will always hold the house' (Gilder, p. 50). As for the play's dialogue, Richard Burton feels that 'there isn't a line in it that isn't infinitely, effortlessly speakable'.⁴ For supporting players it offers a range of colourful middle-sized parts, each with a scene or two alone with the Prince, plus a variety of cameos (the Ghost, the First Player, the gravediggers, Osric, Fortinbras), all of which lend themselves to vivid portrayal. In the past the roles matched the standard stock company 'lines': the heavy, the old man, the male and female juveniles, the eccentric and low comedians, the walking gentlemen.⁵

For leading actors, Prince Hamlet is the role of roles, its extraordinary length (it is by far the longest part in Shakespeare) and its exceptional variety providing opportunities for virtuoso acting. The role is also more

1 Guthrie, *Directions*, p. 72. 2 'The Grave-makers' in Kirkman, *Wits*.

3 Guthrie, *Theatre*, p. 65. 4 Richard Burton, 'Interview', p. 54.

5 Donohue, *Character*, pp. 72–3.

than usually open to interpretation. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (1874), W. S. Gilbert (evidently thinking mostly of Edmund Kean, Charles Fechter, Henry Irving, and Edwin Booth) made sport of the fact that the Prince is

Alike for no two seasons at a time.
 Sometimes he's tall – sometimes he's very short –
 Now with black hair – now with a flaxen wig –
 Sometimes an English accent – then a French –
 Then English with a strong provincial “burr”.
 Once an American, and once a Jew –
 But Danish never, take him how you will!

Yet Kenneth Tynan spoke for many in finding the variability of the role to be a strong point: ‘The best acting parts (*Hamlet* is an obvious example) are those which admit of the largest number of different interpretations.’⁶ Since Gielgud made a great success as a young actor in the role (he was 26), it has more and more become a diploma-piece in which promising stars, usually now in their thirties, show what they can do. Ben Kingsley calls it ‘the greatest part for a young actor’: ‘there are so many beautiful mysteries locked in there about boyhood becoming manhood’ (*Independent*, 17 March 1989).

These acting opportunities can also constitute severe challenges. John Barton lists some requirements for the Prince:

He must have the capacity to be noble and gentle but also brutal and coarse . . . he has to be obviously full of passion but able to stand outside his own passion and be objective about it. He has to have a strong sense of irony, wit, humour. He has to have a *deep* intellectual energy. He has to have a *very* volatile temperament, so that you never know what he's going to be like from one moment to the next . . . (South Bank Show)

‘The demands’, Barton concludes, ‘are huge.’ How are these demands to be met? Gielgud reports Harley Granville-Barker’s advice to him: ‘You must start the next scene where you left off in the last one, even if there is another scene between the two’; and when he directed Burton he passed this advice on: ‘The important thing is to tell the story of the play and to make every scene a progression.’⁷ He once told Kenneth Branagh that the play describes ‘the process of living’ (*Birmingham Post*, 18 March 1993).

Hamlets have also learned to pace themselves, for the role demands sheer physical stamina. Michael Pennington has mapped the terrain, finding the

6 Tynan, *He that Plays*, p. 31.

7 Gielgud, *Acting*, p. 42.

first third of the play the easiest because the play carries the Prince rather than the reverse. But 'the great middle arc of the play, from the nunnery through to the departure for England, was the most taxing stretch . . . this is where the part shakes you like a rat, racing you from one crisis to the next with scarcely time to draw breath'.⁸ Even the quieter last part will require the fight at Ophelia's grave and the final duel.

Some have thought the demands of the role to exceed any stage fulfilment. Such an attitude was satirized by Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby* where Mr and Mrs Curdle, those despairing patrons of the drama, ask: 'What man is there, now living, who can present before us all those changing and prismatic colours with which the character of Hamlet is invested?' They conclude: 'Hamlet is gone, perfectly gone' (ch. 24). Despite its daunting challenges, however, there has been no shortage of recent aspirants to the role. The part of the Prince can offer rare rewards. Olivier promises that it 'can give you moments of unknown joy': 'Hamlet just takes you by the hand and either treats you roughly or shows you the way to the stars.'⁹ One of its prime attractions, and a major factor in *Hamlet's* longevity, has been the Prince's extraordinary rapport with the audience, an intimacy that Shakespeare enhances by giving him an unmatched number of opportunities to confide his thoughts and feelings, whether to other characters or to the audience in his soliloquies. To David Warner the rapport he experienced while playing the role at times approached a religious experience: 'A lot of actors say there are moments, maybe just once in a split second in your career, you get next to God. There is this ONENESS – one moment where every single member of the audience is THERE, together with yourself, where you feel everybody is in tune, one split second . . .'¹⁰

The actors and directors quoted above identify abiding strengths that help to account for *Hamlet's* unrivalled durability and worldwide popularity. To these should be added its exceptional responsiveness to changing times and places. Whatever the circumstances, it seems, the play can speak to them. During World War II, for example, Maurice Evans found in the cut-down version he presented to American troops a strong parallel between Hamlet's situation and theirs: 'Each of them was in his own way a Hamlet, bewildered by the uninvited circumstances in which he found himself and groping for the moral justification and the physical courage demanded of him' (*G. I. Hamlet*, p. 17). Meanwhile in Nazi Germany *Hamlet* was no less topical. Although Hitler frowned on Hamlet as overly intellectual, Gustaf Gründgens was allowed to play the role, depicting 'a hero that the Third Reich could be proud of: dynamic, a man of action and,

⁸ Pennington, 'Hamlet', pp. 125–6. ⁹ Olivier, *Acting*, pp. 89, 77.
¹⁰ Maher, *Soliloquies*, p. 62.

most important, a full-blooded Nordic' (*New York Times*, 2 November 1988). In 1989/90 Berlin, Heiner Müller found the play as topical as ever. Taking *Hamlet* to be the tragedy that has most to say about the coming together of Western and Eastern Europe, he saw it as dealing with 'two epochs, and with the fissure between them. This fissure is straddled by an intellectual, who is no longer certain how to behave and what to do: the old things don't work any more, but the new ways aren't to his taste.'¹¹ The play's relevance need not be so immediate, but its performance history confirms that it can be an 'abstract and brief chronicle' not only of its own place and time but also of many places and times since, including our own.

The story of *Hamlet* in production thus records an ongoing process of discovery, as earlier interpretations lose their currency and new performers seek out what it is in the play and in themselves that will speak most powerfully and immediately to the audiences of their own times. To celebrate the play's multifariousness, however, is not to reduce it to a Rorschach blot from which a series of cultural constructs have been drawn. That would be to leave the playwright out of the encounter between playwright, player, and playgoer that makes a play a play. Indeed the whole production history of *Hamlet* – what has passed and is to come – may be seen as an unfolding of the endlessly fertile potentials for drama latent in Shakespeare's originating imagination.

Furthermore, this unfolding has been marked not only by change but by lines of continuity, large and small. Derek Jacobi has called *Hamlet* 'the greatest of all acting traditions'. Like many other actors he likes to emphasize connections with performers before and since. He recalls how seeing Richard Burton play Hamlet at the Old Vic made up his mind that he wanted to be an actor and how thrilled he was when Burton came to see him play the role at the Old Vic: 'And also there was another visitor at that time who came backstage and told me that seeing the performance had made up his mind to go into acting. His name was Kenneth Branagh.'¹² One marvels that there should be a felt line of succession among three such different actors, whose portrayals of Hamlet have proved so different from one another. Perhaps what they share is less a matter of style than of aspiration: the daring to take on the challenges the role presents and the courage to come to terms with them, each in his own way. In a longer perspective Gielgud has commented in detail on the place of his own work within what he calls 'The Hamlet tradition' (Gilder, pp. 29–73) while Olivier has sketched his general line of inheritance from Henry Irving (with a deep bow to John Barrymore) through Edmund Kean and David Garrick to Richard

11 Quoted in Pfister, 'Hamlets', p. 76n.

12 Jacobi, 'Hamlet' video.

Burbage.¹³ No one, though, could feel a deeper affinity for a forebear than must Nicol Williamson for John Barrymore, having played his ghost in Paul Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet* and recreated his life in the one-man show *Jack*. In the latter, Williamson would begin a *Hamlet* soliloquy in a baritone reminiscent of Barrymore's recordings that soon gave way to his own natural tenor, with nasal intonations familiar from Williamson's stage and film performances; eerily, one could hear in the overlap the mingling of the two perturbed spirits.

The rest of this introduction will fill in the outlines of these patterns of change and continuity.

Scripts

For the stage history of *Hamlet*, five versions of the play may be distinguished. The first three published editions reflect performance of the play during Shakespeare's lifetime; they are the First Quarto (Q1) published in 1603, the Second Quarto (Q2) published in 1604–5, and the First Folio (F) published in 1623. Since there is currently no consensus among textual experts as to the relationships of the three with one another or with Shakespeare's presumed manuscript(s), it seems best simply to assume that each was in some way the basis for performance and to note their main differences.

The First Quarto title-page advertises that 'it hath been diverse times acted by his Highnesse servants in the City of London: as also in the two Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, and elsewhere'. At 2,154 lines it is by far the shortest of the three versions. Structurally it is unique in placing Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' soliloquy and the 'nunnery scene' at the beginning of the sequence of six scenes leading up to Hamlet's instructions to the players rather than at the end, as in Q2 and F. Q1 thus allows the playlet to follow directly from Hamlet's resolve that 'the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king' whereas in the other versions the execution of his resolve is interrupted by his 'to be or not to be' soliloquy and the nunnery scene. (Like Q1, a number of films have similarly rearranged these episodes.) Among other differences in characterization, Q1's Laertes (Laertes) does not lead a rebellion but simply seeks revenge for his father's death, and its Queen is decidedly different: she is informed by Hamlet that the King murdered her husband and later by Horatio of the plot to have her son killed in England; and she explicitly changes her loyalty from her husband to her son, vowing to 'conceal, consent, and doe my

¹³ Olivier, *Acting*, pp. 35–66.

best, / What stratagem soe'er thou shalt deuse'. In the 'to be or not to be' speech it is the 'joyful hope' of a happy life after death that deters Hamlet from killing himself. Although the First Quarto's diction is relatively pedestrian and in places garbled, several productions in this century have shown it to be stage-worthy.¹⁴

The Second Quarto (3,674 lines) differs from the other two in its inclusion of a number of passages. The most important of these is Hamlet's 'How all occasions do inform against me' soliloquy. Also the ties between the Q2 Hamlet and his mother are strengthened in 5.2 by the unique inclusion of the Lord who confirms Osric's embassy and conveys the Queen's desire that Hamlet 'use some gentle entertainment to Laertes, before you fall to play'; in F this gesture seems altogether Hamlet's own idea.

The First Folio (3,535 lines) is largely similar to Q2. It differs from the other two especially in the extra banter it includes between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ('Denmark's a prison') and the full account it gives of the boy actors in 2.2. These inclusions, plus the absence of later indications of their knowing involvement in Claudius's plot to execute the Prince in England, make for a more sympathetic treatment of Hamlet's 'excellent good friends' than in Q2. Laertes, too, is in general more sympathetically treated in F than Q2, and Hamlet shown to be somewhat less intuitive.¹⁵ Until recently it was thought that because they are unusually long, Q2 and F must have been heavily cut for performance. Recently, however, that assumption has been cogently called into question.¹⁶

Although these differences among the three versions are important (further instances will be noted in the Commentary), they should not be exaggerated. Especially between Q2 and F the points of difference are far fewer than those of resemblance. As with popular ballads, the fact that the play exists in more than one version does not mean that its identity is an indeterminate blur. Jacobean playgoers would still have recognized any one of them as *Hamlet*. Nor do the three versions rule out a distinguishable authorial presence; on the contrary, they afford insight into Shakespeare's originating hand at work in multiple manifestations.

What may be called a fourth version of *Hamlet* is delineated by the pattern of abridgements that, with individual variations, prevailed in the theatre from the Restoration to the end of the nineteenth century. Apart from Garrick's short-lived reworking of the last act, the play has not undergone the major textual modifications which helped *Richard III* and *King*

¹⁴ Loughrey, 'Q1', pp. 123–36. ¹⁵ Werstine, 'Mystery'.

¹⁶ Urkowitz, 'Basics', pp. 266–70.

Lear to hold the boards.¹⁷ Surviving promptbooks and published ‘players editions’ show, however, that *Hamlet* was considerably altered for performance, with cuts of sufficient consistency as to define in rough outline a ‘players version’ of the play.¹⁸ Regularly left out or severely trimmed in this version are the ambassadors Cornelius and Voltemand, the scene between Polonius and Reynaldo, Hamlet’s long speech reflecting on a ‘custom more honoured in the breach than the observance’, the ‘little eyases’ passage about the boy actors, the dumb show, much of Hamlet’s bawdy talk to Ophelia at the play, his speech about ‘the politic convocation of worms’, Ophelia’s mad song concluding ‘By Cock they are to blame’, much of the King’s plotting with Laertes, Hamlet’s graveyard musings about politicians, courtiers, lawyers and their skulls, his account to Horatio of his voyage, and the lord who seconds Osric’s invitation to the fencing match.

Now-familiar speeches were unspoken for centuries. Polonius’s advice to Laertes was omitted by leading productions from Betterton through Macready. Hamlet’s ‘Now might I do it pat’ monologue was often cut (for example, by Garrick, Kemble, and Irving), as was his ‘How all occasions do inform against me’ soliloquy. Hamlet’s appeal for secrecy about his ‘madness’ and his mother’s vow to keep his secret (3.4.182–218) were rarely heard from 1755 to 1900.¹⁹ In the nineteenth century Fortinbras was most commonly left out altogether; it was a major innovation when, at G. B. Shaw’s urging, Forbes-Robertson had him appear at the end. Diction was commonly modernized until Kemble, controversially, restored a large number of original readings. References to God were omitted or altered from Betterton through the eighteenth century and, to a lesser degree, into the first half of the nineteenth century.

In the twentieth century it is the fully ‘conflated’ (combined) version that constitutes a fifth version of *Hamlet*. In it, the parts of Q2 lacking in F and the parts of F lacking in Q2 are all included, plus occasional readings from Q1. Most modern productions have used a conflated edition as their basis. Occasionally, full-length productions have been mounted. Although these can last four hours or more, there is abundant testimony that the play in its entirety (‘in its eternity’, goes the old joke) can be less tiring to watch and perform when its easy flow is free from what Margaret Webster termed ‘the

17 Garrick’s adaptation omitted Hamlet’s voyage to England, the conspiracy of Claudius and Laertes, the gravediggers, Osric, the fencing match, and the deaths of Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the Queen, who is reported to have gone mad. Stone, ‘Alteration’, pp. 890–921.

18 Glick, ‘Texts’, pp. 17–37. Glick groups the texts in a way that differs from mine. See also Halstead, *Spoken*. 19 O’Brien, ‘Revision’, pp. 27–35.

compressed tension caused by cutting'.²⁰ Nevertheless, most productions have trimmed the conflated text to the running-time they desire and the particular interpretive emphases they wish to give.

Most conflated editions vary according to whether in points of overlap they generally follow the Folio or the Second Quarto. The present conflated edition follows verbatim the text prepared by Philip Edwards for the 'New Cambridge Shakespeare' series (1985). In his introduction to that edition Edwards develops an elaborate theory of the history of the *Hamlet* texts, leading up to his postulate of an 'ideal version of the play' that is 'some-where between' the Second Quarto and the Folio editions. The line-readings he has chosen for the main body of the text therefore favour neither the one nor the other but are eclectic. In the current state of scholarship, Edwards's theory is by necessity highly speculative. As it happens, I do not find it so persuasive as to alter my own conviction that the provenance of the three early texts is at present simply unknowable with any certainty. His text is nonetheless serviceable for my purposes because it includes all the passages that appear in Q2 but not in F (marked off by brackets) and all the passages in F but not in Q2 (the principal ones are identified as such in my Commentary). In the Commentary I have also added readings from Q1 where pertinent. Stage directions that are not in either Q2 or F are bracketed. Readers who wish to make a fuller comparison of the three early editions will find them conveniently paralleled in *The Three-Text Hamlet*.²¹

The first *Hamlets*: Richard Burbage

The very first specific performance of *Hamlet* for which there is a dated record took place off Sierra Leone in 1607 aboard the *Dragon*, a ship bound for the East Indies. It was performed by the crew as entertainment for a visiting dignitary. The ship's captain William Keeling seems to have been pleased with it because in the following year, as he wrote in his journal: 'I envited Captain Hawkins to a ffishe dinner, and had Hamlet acted aboard me: which I permitt to keepe my people from idlenes and unlawful games, or sleepe.'²² In London and on tour the play had certainly been done a few years before that.

Otherwise relatively little is known for sure about the early performance history of *Hamlet*. A good deal, however, may reasonably be inferred. Richly implicated in the theatrical life of its time, the play is notably self-conscious about its own theatricality, including the play-within-a-play,

²⁰ Webster, *Shakespeare*, pp. 211–12. ²¹ *Three-Text Hamlet*.

²² Chambers, *Facts*, II, pp. 334–5.

Hamlet's advice to the players and other comments on acting, and references to such current developments in the theatre as ad-libbing comedians and the popularity of boy-companies. Polonius's reference to playing Caesar and being killed 'in the Capitol' (3.2.91) may have been an in-joke if the actor of Polonius had himself played Caesar at the Globe. The reference must be to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1599) because in all other versions Caesar was killed in the Forum.²³

In writing a revenge tragedy Shakespeare was reviving a genre that had been in vogue some years before, most notably in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (1587–9) and in an early version of the Hamlet story, now lost, which surviving allusions indicate to have included a ghost crying for revenge. Shakespeare sophisticated this tradition, capitalizing on a deepening in acting styles that had moved from impersonation to 'personation', a term that came into currency at just this time.²⁴ The latter involved the submergence of self in a role at which Shakespeare's leading actor, Richard Burbage, excelled, 'transforming himself into his part'. With Burbage's personating powers at his disposal, Shakespeare could make an unprecedented exploration of his hero's inner life.

Everything indicates that Richard Burbage did originate the role of the Prince. 'Young Hamlet' is listed as one of his parts in 'A Funerall Ellegye on ye Death of the famous Actor Richard Burbedg'. The elegy goes on: 'Oft have I seen him, leap into the Grave / Suiting the person, which he seem'd to have / Of a sad Lover . . .' If the 'grave' is that of Ophelia, the lines tell us something about how Burbage performed the graveyard scene. Since the Prince asks 'who plucks off my beard?' and since Burbage wears a beard in his portrait, his Hamlet was evidently bearded. Ophelia's account of his 'doublet all unbraced' confirms that, as was customary, he wore an Elizabethan costume, and the exchanges at the beginning of the second scene, make it clear that he wore black in mourning, including an 'inky cloak'. It seems likely that John Raynold reflected Burbage's business with Yorick's skull: 'He held it still, in his sinister [left] hand, / He turn'd it soft, and stroakt it with the other, / He smil'd on it' (*Dolarnys Primerose*, 1606).

It is tempting but hazardous to try to deduce Burbage's whole interpretive approach from contemporaries' passing references and allusions to the play. Conklin made such an attempt; yet his influential conclusion that the Elizabethan Hamlet was a straightforward avenger and malcontent is patently tendentious. His own examples can be read to indicate a much more deliberative hero (as in the frequent early allusions to Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' soliloquy and his contemplations on a skull).²⁵ Since evidence

23 Orgel, 'Authentic Shakespeare', p. 10.

24 Gurr, *Stage*, p. 98.

25 Conklin, *History*, p. 9.

of this sort is so fragmentary, it seems best not to speculate, one way or the other.

Tradition has it that Shakespeare himself played the Ghost. In his 1709 edition, Rowe reports as the sole finding of his investigation into Shakespeare's acting career that 'the top of his Performance was the Ghost in his own *Hamlet*' (1, p. vi).²⁶

More generally, contemporary theatrical conditions suggest something of the overall impact of the play. At the Globe a number of features must have helped to hold a performance of *Hamlet* together whether or not anyone was deliberately trying to make that happen. Uninterrupted by changes of scenery, the play's action could unfold at a rapid pace, aided by stage conventions (asides, soliloquies, and the like) that made for clear and economical story-telling. Players and playgoers shared the same light of the afternoon sun, and since – without being set apart by a proscenium arch – the platform stage extended into the midst of the audience, they shared the same space and breathed the same air. Taken together these features appear to have provided the nucleus for a richly inclusive unity of impact that, when the features changed, it would take stage practice centuries to approximate.

Hamlets of the Restoration and eighteenth century: Thomas Betterton and David Garrick

Hamlet performances during the Restoration period were decidedly and deliberately distinct from earlier ones. In sharp contrast with the Puritan regime that had prohibited performances altogether, theatre in general under Charles II was much more oriented towards the court and its extravagant, Francophile tastes than ever before. Royal control at first extended to the repertory of the two new patent companies. By royal order the exclusive right to revive the play was assigned to the Duke's Men, headed by William Davenant. *Hamlet* was one of the leftovers after the other patent company, the King's Men, had taken the lion's share of the preferred plays by

26 Statistical support for this tradition may come from Donald Foster's ongoing studies of rare words (those that occur fewer than eleven times in the plays). He shows that the rare words spoken by the Ghost appear much more frequently in plays written after *Hamlet* than in plays written before, a difference he attributes to Shakespeare's having memorized these words and spoken them frequently in performance. From Foster's lexicons, one sees that the recurring rare words tend to cluster within a line (as in the Ghost's 'A *couch* for *luxury* and damned *incest*') or a series of lines: 'So lust, thou to a *radiant* angel linked, / Will *sate* itself in a celestial bed / And *prey* on garbage'. There may, of course, be other ways of explaining these clusters.