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SHAKESPEARE

Hamlet

PAUL A. CANTOR

University of Virginia



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What a work this *Hamlet* is! The interest in it, lasting over centuries, probably arose from the fact that a new type, fully developed, stands out as totally estranged in a mediaeval environment that has remained totally unmodified. The scream for revenge, ennobled by the Greek tragedians, then ruled out by Christianity, in the drama of *Hamlet* is still loud enough . . . to make the new doubting, testing, planning appear in a strange light.

Bertolt Brecht

Skepticism . . . always develops when races or classes . . . are crossed suddenly and decisively. In the new generation that, as it were, has inherited in its blood diverse standards and values, everything is unrest, disturbance, doubt, attempt; the best forces have an inhibiting effect, the very virtues do not allow each other to grow and become strong; balance, a center of gravity, and perpendicular poise are lacking in body and soul. But what becomes sickest and degenerates most in such hybrids is the *will*; they no longer know independence of decisions and the intrepid sense of pleasure in willing – they doubt the ‘freedom of the will’ even in their dreams.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

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Preface to the second edition

I have left the text of the first edition largely unchanged (I have corrected a few typographical and other minor errors and altered a few passages). I have used the supplement to the 'Guide to further reading' to come to terms with recent developments in the study of *Hamlet*.

Preface to the first edition

I would have hesitated to add another book to the vast literature on *Hamlet* if the conception of this series had not offered an opportunity to take a fresh look at the play by considering it in the context of world literature. Accordingly, my discussion ranges from Homer to Tom Stoppard. I believe that our understanding of *Hamlet* can benefit from this kind of wide-angled approach: it seems to be uniquely situated at the intersection of ancient and modern literature. On the one hand, *Hamlet* strikes us as the most modern of Shakespeare's heroes, caught up in a kind of questioning and doubt that seems all-too-familiar to us in the twentieth century. On the other hand, the story of *Hamlet* has its roots in the most primitive strata of the imagination, a tale of blood feuds and vengeance, the kind of legend found at the fountainhead of many of the great literatures of the west, including Greek and Norse. Thus *Hamlet* has a peculiarly rich texture: it has passages that sound as though they could have come from an Elizabethan translation of the *Iliad*, but at other times the dialogue seems to anticipate a work like *Waiting for Godot*. Recognition of this hybrid character of *Hamlet* provides a profound clue to the sort of questions Shakespeare is exploring in the play.

Although I have tried to provide as comprehensive a discussion of *Hamlet* as a brief book will allow, I have chosen to focus on the issue of heroism in the play, specifically on the way *Hamlet* stands poised

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between an older and a newer conception of heroism, between one view which sees heroism as something external – triumphing physically over an opponent – and another view which sees heroism as something internal – a quality of soul which cannot always be manifested in deeds. I realise that talking about heroism in Shakespeare's plays is unfashionable at the moment, since for a variety of reasons, heroism has come to be viewed as a deeply problematic notion. I believe that the anti-heroic tendency of much contemporary criticism is causing us to lose sight of Shakespeare's tragic vision, but in any case, I will be arguing that what makes Hamlet unique as a hero is precisely the fact that heroism has become problematic for him, and yet he can still respond to a heroic model (though obviously not in a simple way). Shakespeare's historical situation facilitated a comprehensiveness of vision when he approached the issue of heroism, and thus a play like *Hamlet* can help to re-open it for us. Living in the Renaissance, Shakespeare was still in touch with classical conceptions of heroism, but he was also aware of how those notions were being challenged by newer conceptions, particularly under the influence of Christianity. Thus I begin my discussion of *Hamlet* with an attempt to survey the Renaissance context in which Shakespeare created the play.

In analysing heroism and tragedy in *Hamlet*, I have drawn heavily upon Hegel and Nietzsche. Since both discuss *Hamlet* in some detail – Hegel in his *Aesthetics* and Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* – I should explain that, while I make use of their general ideas, I disagree with them when they interpret this specific play. Though a volume such as this does not offer the opportunity to work out one's differences with critics at length, I will say that in my view both Hegel and Nietzsche failed to see how powerfully their ideas could illuminate *Hamlet* because they approached it within a tradition of interpretation that grew out of Romanticism (see the first section of chapter 2). Both saw the problem of Hamlet as somehow rooted in his individual soul, whereas I will be arguing that the conflicts within Hamlet mirror a more fundamental tension in the Renaissance culture in which he lives. Thus, although the conflicts in *Hamlet* are not objectified in institutions such as the family or the state, they are not merely subjective in Hegel's terms either. I could in fact formulate my argument in Hegelian terms by stating that

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Hamlet lies as it were halfway between ancient and modern tragedy as Hegel conceives them (whereas he himself views the play as a purely modern tragedy).

All my quotations and line citations from Shakespeare are drawn from G. Blakemore Evans's edition, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston, 1974). In my quotations from *Hamlet*, I have occasionally altered Evans's spelling, and at one point his wording (in Hamlet's first soliloquy, I prefer the Folio reading of *solid* at I.ii. 129 over the Second Quarto reading of *sallied*, changed to *sullied* by many modern editors). As is often the case in Shakespeare, the textual situation in *Hamlet* is complex; readers interested in the details should consult any scholarly edition such as Evans's. Suffice it to say here that we are faced with two authoritative texts of the play, the Second Quarto and the First Folio, which largely overlap but also diverge at many points. Though most editors use the Second Quarto text as the basis for their editions, it cannot simply be preferred to the Folio text (which for one thing contains some 90 lines not found in the Second Quarto). I do not have space to go into the issue here, but I will say that, although the uncertainty about the text of *Hamlet* is troubling and should be borne in mind in any analysis, I do not believe that we are dealing with two distinct versions of the play or that questions about the text need materially affect our interpretation of the play as a whole.

Bearing in mind Hamlet's remark, 'Beggard that I am, I am even poor in thanks' (II.ii.272), I would like to acknowledge the help of the following people over the years in working out my interpretation of *Hamlet* and in the writing of this specific book: Barbara Black, Gordon Braden, Douglas Hoffman, Daniel Kinney, Stuart Kurland, Michael Moses, Thomas Peyser, and James M. Wood.

Chronology

	Shakespeare's life and works	Historical and cultural events
1558		Elizabeth becomes Queen of England
1561		Francis Bacon born
1562		Lope de Vega born; Norton and Sackville: <i>Gorboduc</i> (first English blank verse tragedy)
1563		Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church; John Dowland born
1564	Shakespeare born in Stratford (Christened 26 April)	Galileo and Christopher Marlowe born; Michelangelo dies
1566		James VI of Scotland born
1567		James becomes king; Claudio Monteverdi born; Palestrina: <i>Missa Papae Marcelli</i>
1571		Battle of Lepanto
1572		St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre; Peace of Constantinople; John Donne born; Camoens: <i>Lusiads</i>
1573		Ben Jonson born
1575		Tasso: <i>Gerusalemme Liberata</i> ; Tallis and Byrd: <i>Cantiones Sacrae</i>
1576		Building of The Theatre, first permanent playhouse in London
1579		North's translation of Plutarch's <i>Lives</i>
1580		Sir Francis Drake completes circumnavigation of globe

- 1582 Marries Anne Hathaway; licence issued 27 November
- 1583 Daughter born; christened Susanna 26 May
- 1585 Twin son and daughter born; christened Hamnet and Judith 2 February
- 1586 Around this time, seems to have left Stratford
- 1587
- 1588 Orlando Gibbons born
 Colonists sent to Roanoke Island, Virginia; Cardinal Richelieu and Heinrich Schütz born; Thomas Tallis dies
 Andrea Gabrieli dies
 Mary, Queen of Scots, executed; Kyd: *The Spanish Tragedy* (?); Marlowe: 1 *Tamburlaine*
 Spanish Armada defeated; Thomas Hobbes born; Marlowe: 2 *Tamburlaine*
 Kyd: *Hamlet* (?)
- 1589 Seems to have begun writing plays and acting in London; 1 *Henry VI* may have been his first play
- 1590
- 1591 James VI marries Anne of Denmark; Spenser: *Faerie Queene*, Books I–III
- 1593 Sidney: *Astrophel and Stella*
- 1594 Marlowe dies; Sidney: *Arcadia*
 Lord Chamberlain's Men formed (Shakespeare's theatre company); Palestrina dies
 Byrd: *Mass for 5 Voices*
 René Descartes born; Spenser: *Faerie Queene*, Books I–VI
- 1595 First associated with Lord Chamberlain's Men
- 1596 Son (Hamnet) dies
- 1597 Buys New Place in Stratford
- 1st Edition of Bacon's *Essays*; Dowland: *First Book of Songs*

(cont.)

	Shakespeare's life and works	Historical and cultural events
1598		Édikt of Nantes; Philip II of Spain dies; Boris Godunov becomes Czar; first instalment of George Chapman's translation of Homer
1599	<i>Henry V</i> ; <i>Julius Caesar</i>	The Globe Theatre opens; Essex's expedition to Ireland; Spenser dies; Oliver Cromwell born
1600	<i>Hamlet</i> written and performed (?)	East India Company formed; Giordano Bruno burned at Rome; Calderón born; Peri: <i>Euridice</i> (first opera)
1601	Father (John) dies	Insurrection and execution of Essex; Siege of Ostend; London War of the Theatres
1603	First Quarto of <i>Hamlet</i> published	Queen Elizabeth dies; James VI becomes James I of England; Chamberlain's Men become King's Men; Florio's translation of Montaigne's <i>Essays</i>
1604	<i>Othello</i> ; Second Quarto of <i>Hamlet</i> published	Treaty of Peace between Spain and England; Dowland: <i>Lachrymae</i>
1605	<i>King Lear</i>	Gunpowder Plot; Bacon: <i>Advancement of Learning</i> ; Cervantes: <i>Don Quixote</i> , Pt. I
1606	<i>Macbeth</i>	Rembrandt and Corneille born
1607	Susanna Shakespeare marries Dr. John Hall	Jamestown, Virginia settlement; Monteverdi: <i>Orfeo</i>

1608	Becomes shareholder in Second Blackfriars Theatre; Mother (Mary) dies	John Milton born
1609	Pirated edition of Shakespeare's <i>Sonnets</i>	Monteverdi: <i>Vespers</i> ; Galileo: <i>The Starry Messenger</i>
1610	May have returned to Stratford	King James Version of the Bible
1611	<i>The Tempest</i>	Giovanni Gabrieli dies
1612	<i>Henry VIII</i> , with John Fletcher (?), possibly his last literary effort	Globe Theatre burns down during performance of <i>Henry VIII</i> ; Bacon made Attorney-General; Galileo: <i>Letters on Sunspots</i>
1613		Globe Theatre rebuilt; Raleigh: <i>History of the World</i>
1614		Cervantes: <i>Don Quixote</i> , Pt. II
1615	Dies (23 April); buried 25 April in Stratford; Judith Shakespeare marries Thomas Quiney	Cervantes dies; Bacon made Lord Chancellor; Jonson: <i>Works</i>
1616	First Folio published	William Byrd dies; Pascal born; Galileo: <i>The Assayer</i>
1623		