

INTRODUCTION

Welcoming the Stranger

‘And therefore as a stranger give it welcome’, Prince Hamlet instructs his friend Horatio at the close of the play’s first act. Hamlet is speaking of the ghost of his dead father, whose ‘wondrous strange’ appearance the men have just witnessed. The welcome, however, expands in the moment of delivery to invite into Hamlet’s story a wider audience. When Shakespeare’s play was first performed, that audience included the men and women assembled for an afternoon performance at the Globe Theatre on the south bank of the Thames. By now, in a tradition that extends over 400 years, the protagonist’s line beckons to actors, spectators, readers, and adapters around the world, bidding them to detect themselves in its address.

As with so many aspects of the play, that address is a complicated one. Hamlet’s hospitality, with its echoes of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament,¹ gives way to hesitation; his tenderness towards the ghostly stranger, to suspicion. His attitude is informed, surely, by his own identification with the ‘outsider’: in the wake of the death of his royal father and the remarriage of his mother, Gertrude, to his uncle Claudius, who has assumed the throne, Hamlet understands himself as a kind of foreigner, an alien in his native Denmark and its court at Elsinore. But he also feels a stranger to himself, absorbed in the kinds of tortured self-reflection seen today as a model of modern consciousness.

Recipients of his welcome, then, face an interpretive challenge. Does Hamlet’s invitation summon them into the narrative in order for them to discover that they, like the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘have a smack of Hamlet’ in themselves?² Or does it usher them into the world of the play only to remind them, as it does T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock (‘I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be’), that they are different and distant from him?³ Or does it ask them to see the whole drama as something strange, and to welcome it into their lives with both interest and trepidation?

At the turn of the seventeenth century, when Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was first played, it may have seemed as familiar as it did strange on the London stage. Its story was not new: a dramatic version – what scholars call the *Ur-Hamlet* – had been performed as early as the late 1580s, when it was mentioned by the prolific writer Thomas Nashe in

¹ Naseeb Shaheen gives the New Testament allusions (2 Heb. 13.2 and Matt. 25.35) in *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 545. Consider also Lev. 19.34, Deut. 10.17–19.

² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring (Princeton University Press, 1990), 14.2: 61.

³ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 7.

Hamlet

2

a scornful attack on contemporary dramatists. And its dramatic events and concerns were guaranteed to resonate for its audience with familiar, topical issues: the ageing of the female ruler, Queen Elizabeth I; the question of her successor; the declining fortunes of the charismatic figure of the Earl of Essex and with him a model of chivalric honour; the deep challenges to religious belief and practice as a result of Reformation religious change; and the revival of philosophical stoicism and its concerns with liberty and tyranny. In addition, viewers would have recognized in the play ancient themes and narratives of intimate violence, adultery, and retaliation. These include the biblical accounts of Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel – Judaeo-Christian culture's primal scenes of marital betrayal, fraternal hatred, and death – as well as Greek and Roman drama and epic by Aeschylus, Euripides, Seneca, and Virgil.¹

Staging Revenge

WHAT DO REVENGERS WANT?

Perhaps most strikingly, the play – which takes shape around a son's pursuit of vengeance for his father – would have echoed for its audience the concerns and conventions of the popular dramatic genre of revenge tragedy. Although the term 'revenge tragedy' is a modern invention, plots of vengeance and vendetta – like Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1588–90) and Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589–90) – captured the dramatic imagination in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. These plots were characterized by a flexible set of conventions. A protagonist discovers a fatal or destructive deed that wrecks his or her sense of justice and order. He or she wants the violation addressed – wants balance restored – but recognizes that social institutions are unable to deal with the outrage. Therefore, the protagonist, often urged by a ghost or other soliciting spirit, takes upon him- or herself the burden of personally and privately avenging the wrong. His or her efforts, pursued to the edge of the protagonist's sanity, involve tactics of delay, disguise, and theatrical display before they end in a final retaliation that exceeds the destructiveness of the original crime.²

Shakespeare had been interested in these tropes since early in his career: he used them in the abundantly gory *Titus Andronicus* (1592); he put issues of the vendetta and talionic justice at the core of mid-1590s plays like *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1595); and he haunted both *Richard III* (1592) and *Julius Caesar* (1599) with ghosts. Vengeance for Shakespeare and his audience was not novel, but its dramatic allure remained potent. Both the topic and structure of revenge offer, as John Kerrigan has noted, 'a compelling mix of ingredients: strong situations shaped by violence; ethical issues for debate; a volatile, emotive mixture of loss and agitated grievance'.³

¹ For the biblical allusions, see Hannibal Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 154–61. For the classical allusions, see Robert Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), esp. 33–67; Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 173–6.

² Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton University Press, 1945).

³ John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 3.

Early modern audiences would have appreciated the ways in which those ‘ingredients’ could be fashioned to speak to their own moment and investment in revenge scenarios. Past scholars such as Eleanor Prosser claimed that Shakespeare and his contemporaries condemned retaliation as barbaric and contrary to divine law (as in Deuteronomy 32.35 and Romans 12.19, ‘Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord’). Revenge plays, according to this reading, reinforced this message.¹ But more recent scholarship has challenged this conclusion, suggesting that the early modern drama offered more complex approaches to the morality and legality of revenge.² Revenge plays, that is, did not simply condemn vengeance; they dramatized the human desire to match crime with crime, exploring it in connection with classical, Christian, and Elizabethan principles of justice, honour, stoicism, obedience, resistance, and suffering.

Plots of revenge accommodated issues that fascinated contemporary dramatists and their audiences. Death, sexuality, and bodily violation lie at the heart of stories of vendetta, and when these involve murder or rape at the highest levels, they become political as well as personal challenges to honour and liberty. Similarly, the human capacities to mourn, remember, and repent are all scrutinized in relation to the pursuit of revenge. These were urgent topics for Shakespeare’s period, particularly as they were inflected by the social, cultural, and religious changes associated with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The genre’s concern with crime, punishment, and atonement provided a structure for exploring both developments in sixteenth-century jurisprudence and doctrinal changes associated with the English Reformation and its competing theologies of death, sin, the afterlife, and the sacraments. Some scholars have seen a special relationship between the blood and gore of revenge drama and Catholic–Protestant debates about the Eucharist.³ Michael Neill has argued that revenge tragedy, with its extraordinary fixation on a dead loved one, functioned as a substitute for rejected (but longed-for) Catholic memorializing practices grounded in a belief in Purgatory. The genre, he writes, supplied ‘a fantasy response to the sense of despairing impotence produced by the Protestant displacement of the dead’.⁴ And although religious belief and practice provided the ‘matrix for explorations of virtually every topic’ during this time, revenge tragedy trafficked in realms other than the strictly devotional.⁵ Lorna Hutson has suggested that early modern revenge tragedy dramatized legal thought and practice by representing on stage ‘the protracted processes of detection, pre-trial

¹ Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford University Press, 1971).

² Linda Woodbridge offers the most thorough-going account in *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). For discussions of the complementarity, rather than the opposition, between revenge and early modern law, see Ronald Broude, ‘Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England’, *RQ* 28 (1975), 38–58; and Derek Dunne, *Shakespeare, Revenge Tragedy and Early Modern Law: Vindictive Justice* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

³ Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 94–123.

⁴ Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 244, 246.

⁵ Debora Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (University of Toronto Press, 1997), 6.

examination, trial, and evidence evaluation'.¹ The genre also gave fictional shape to the sorts of real-life 'systemic unfairness' its audience might encounter at a time that 'witnessed severe disproportion between crime and punishment, between labor and its rewards'.² And, insofar as its plots were focused on the pursuit of justice in the face of political corruption by an individual called upon to strategize and plan, revenge tragedy gave dramatic space to a host of long-standing philosophical dilemmas around identity, intention, and agency.³ Finally, revenge plays seized on ideological assumptions about women and uncontrolled violence to 'tap into fundamental fears about women . . . maternal power and female agency'.⁴

HAMLET AND THE RESOURCES OF REVENGE

Hamlet participates in these concerns and the revenge conventions to which they are attached. It relies for its core narrative on the Nordic legend of Amleth, the clever, as well as vengeful, son of a valiant father slain by his own brother. The story, set in pre-Christian Denmark, was chronicled in Saxo Grammaticus's late-twelfth-/early-thirteenth-century compendium *Gesta Danorum*, or 'Deeds of the Danes', which was printed for the first time in Paris in 1514 as *Historiae Danicae*. It was translated by François de Belleforest in the fifth volume of his collection *Histoires Tragiques* (1570); Shakespeare's play ultimately derives from this version.⁵ (Belleforest's account was translated into English as the *Hystorie of Hamlet* in 1608, well after Shakespeare's play was in the repertory.) Saxo and Belleforest's accounts differ in important ways,⁶ but they agree on most of the elements of the plot. In both, Amleth's uncle takes over as ruler of the province of Jutland and marries his widowed sister-in-law. Amleth, the betrayed son, feigns madness in order to protect himself from his spying, murderous uncle and to implement his revenge, which he accomplishes with great relish, teasing the court with seemingly nonsensical riddles and grotesque behaviour (including the murder of a councillor whom he feeds to pigs) before burning down the palace hall and decapitating his uncle. He then appeals to the startled populace with a powerful oration, defending his revenge as the only way to preserve the people's liberty against the depredations of the tyrant.⁷

¹ Lorna Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

² Woodbridge, *English Revenge Drama*, 7.

³ Christopher Crosbie, *Revenge Tragedy and Classical Philosophy on the Early Modern Stage* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

⁴ Alison Findlay, *A Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1999), 49.

⁵ Bullough, vii: 15; Margrethe Jolly, 'Hamlet and the French Connection: The Relationship of Q1 and Q2 *Hamlet* and the Evidence of Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*', *Parergon* 29.1 (2012), 83–105.

⁶ Bullough, vii: 10–15. For the ideological use of Saxo by Belleforest during the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century, see Julie Maxwell, 'Counter-Reformation Versions of Saxo: A New Source for *Hamlet*?' *RQ* 57.2 (2004), 518–60.

⁷ Bullough gives Oliver Elton's translation of Saxo in Bullough, vii: 60–79, and of *The Hystorie of Hamlet* in *ibid.*, 81–124. For a more contemporary translation of Saxo, with Latin on facing pages, see Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen and trans. Peter Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), i: 178–221.

Hamlet takes this ancient fable of the north, absorbs the warrior practices and ideals it represents, and transforms them ethically, psychologically, politically, and theatrically. There are three distinct texts of *Hamlet* – the first quarto (Q1, 1603), the second quarto (Q2, 1604/5), and the First Folio (F, 1623) – but they are all informed by this kind of global adaptation. (The different texts are discussed below, pp. 12–17, and in the Textual Analysis.) Shakespeare gives his play a cosmic frame, with frequent references to the heavens, earth, and the underworld. He portrays as an unsolved mystery the killing by Claudius of his brother Hamlet, making the play an early instance of detective fiction or even a ‘precursor’ of cinema.¹ He introduces the ghost of the murdered King Hamlet, a deliberately mysterious presence, who urges his namesake to avenge his death and who reappears when the demand has not been fulfilled. Shakespeare uses the conventional revenge delay – mistakenly cited by some critics as a sign of Hamlet’s failure as an avenger – to present the young Hamlet as a grief-stricken son who, in the play’s signature soliloquies, contemplates suicide and castigates himself for his own doubts and fears of death.

At the same time, Shakespeare develops in Hamlet Amleth’s wit, giving his protagonist extended opportunities to riddle and perform in ways that reflect the kind of philosophical scepticism associated with Michel de Montaigne, a favourite of the dramatist. Shakespeare introduces the characters of Laertes and young Fortinbras, who function as Hamlet’s foils, and he portrays a unique male friendship between Hamlet and Horatio. Shakespeare enlarges and complicates notions of the feminine and female sexuality in the role of Ophelia, whose conflicts and desires are given dramatic space for their own sake, and in the role of his mother Gertrude, whose own seemingly selfish need for erotic attachment gives way over the course of the play to concern for her son. He furnishes a troupe of travelling players who fuel Hamlet’s sense of humour and who provide a play-within-a-play that rehearses the original crime. And he complicates the end of the story in two significant ways. First, he brings Hamlet into a graveyard, where he faces death in its most literal form when he holds the skull of the dead jester Yorick. And then, in the play’s final scene, he brings Hamlet to a duel at court, where he kills his uncle only after his mother has been poisoned and he himself fatally injured by Laertes. (Is his revenge, then, for himself, his father, or his mother? Or some combination of the three? Are these even different?) Finally, Shakespeare substitutes for Saxo’s and Belleforest’s pre-Christian world a moment closer to his own, setting the play in a Renaissance Danish court coloured by humanist and Christian principles and alert to key symbols of the different Christian confessions (Hamlet returns to Elsinore from Wittenberg, seat of Lutheranism; his father’s Ghost seems to return from Purgatory, a distinctly Catholic otherworld).

With these kinds of changes, Shakespeare refashions the legendary source material into an early modern revenge tragedy. In so doing, his play ‘updates’ the form, reinvigorating his colleagues’ models according to his own interests and dramatic

¹ Courtney Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains: Theater to Film, Early Modern to Post-Modern* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 90.

priorities.¹ These priorities give the play what Maynard Mack calls its distinctly ‘interrogative mood’, its presentation of a ‘world where uncertainties are of the essence’.² Hamlet’s response to these uncertainties distinguishes him from his vengeful predecessors. He is certainly disgusted by Gertrude and Claudius, but he is a conflicted, resistant avenger – the opposite not only of the Nordic Amleth but also of single-minded Renaissance characters such as Kyd’s Hieronimo, Marlowe’s Barabas and even his own foils, Fortinbras and Laertes. Of course, some critics and performers have portrayed Hamlets who are keen on exacting revenge; their approaches are justified textually by Hamlet’s pledge to the Ghost to ‘sweep to [his] revenge’ and by his declaration that he ‘could . . . drink hot blood’ (1.5.31, 3.2.351). But at significant moments he also voices reluctance about his task, as it seems to him to require not only the talionic killing of his uncle but also the spiritual rescue of his mother and the restoring to health of his entire country, now an ‘unweeded garden / That grows to seed’ (1.2.135–6). We hear this reluctance in his lament, for instance, that ‘The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right’ (1.5.189–90), and in the famous ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy, where the problem of not being is woven through with the dilemma of not revenging.

The impact of his hesitation is only intensified by his ‘antic disposition’, the feigned madness that he assumes as a strategy for protection. But if Hamlet adopts his antic disposition as a cagey disguise, at times it actually seems to express – to be – his true, broken emotional state. This complication of appearance and reality, of exterior and interior, pervades the play so completely that even – perhaps especially – an audience familiar with revenge plays would see Shakespeare’s version as something ‘strange’.

Staging the Stage

Hamlet’s revenge plot, in other words, opens onto a persistent conundrum of human experience: the problem of seeming and being. The conundrum has a long philosophical and theological history that predates *Hamlet* by two millennia. But, as Katherine Maus has explained, ‘in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England the sense of discrepancy between “inward disposition” and “outward appearance” seem[ed] unusually urgent and consequential for a very large number of people’.³ Hamlet presents this dilemma at the play’s outset, when he announces to the Danish court that ‘I have that within which passes show’ (1.2.85). Hamlet testifies here to a personal crisis, the painful distance between his internal grief and the modes available for him to express it publicly. Hamlet’s lament thus presents his onstage and offstage audiences with an epistemological challenge, a reminder of how difficult it is to assess another person’s interior feelings or essence according to what they do or say. For the rest of the play, we will experience this predicament

¹ For the play’s ‘updating’ of the revenge genre, see Allison K. Deutermann, “‘Caviare to the general?’ Taste, Hearing, and Genre in *Hamlet*”, *SQ* 62.2 (2011), 230–55.

² Maynard Mack, ‘The World of *Hamlet*’, *The Yale Review* 41 (1951–2), 504.

³ Katherine Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13.

most powerfully during Hamlet's signature soliloquies, since they encourage us to believe, despite their obvious construction for performance, that they give us 'unimpeded contact with Hamlet's mind'.¹ But Hamlet's statement also refers to a political crisis, the radical fracture between appearance and reality at the now-corrupt Danish court. After Claudius's murder of King Hamlet and assumption of the throne, Elsinore 'seems' one way but 'is' another. Claudius can 'smile, and smile, and be a villain' (1.5.108).

METADRAMA

The theatre serves as a rich analogue for this kind of existential confusion. The theatre is all about appearances: on a purpose-built stage, actors perform pre-scripted narratives, playing characters other than themselves and pretending to do things they don't truly accomplish (falling in love, killing an enemy). At the same time, those appearances have a special relation to reality. They may voice truths that can be spoken only at a slant. They may inculcate behaviour on stage that becomes a model for activity off stage (this was a particular fear of the anti-theatricalists, civic and religious leaders opposed to the professional drama). Or they may remind spectators of the influential commonplace that 'all the world's a stage' – that earthly life itself is a fiction or performance in comparison to the reality of eternal life. Human beings, according to this notion, play roles for one another as well as for a divine audience.

The imaginative reach of the theatrical metaphor explains *Hamlet's* fascination with plays, players, and playing. *Hamlet* is full of metatheatrical moments, scenes that 'stage the stage'. These scenes remind audience members that they are watching a play, that they occupy the time-honoured role of spectator and thus are subject to both the rewards and dangers associated with playgoing. Such moments also highlight the disjunction between seeming and being, feigned action and genuine action, or feigned action and genuine effect. The supreme instances of this kind of metatheatricality are the arrival of a travelling troupe of actors at Elsinore in the second act and their performance of an inset play in the third. In the first instance, the lead player delivers Aeneas' account of the fall of Troy in a speech that, to Hamlet's wonder, moves the player himself to tears. In the second instance, the group performs at court a fully realized play that recapitulates a royal marriage and the murder of the king by an interloper who seizes his crown. Both reflect, from different angles, recent events in Denmark, and both are meant to affect the audience ('The play's the thing', Hamlet says, 'Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king' (2.2.557–8)).

Additional gestures in these scenes also reflect recent events in Shakespeare's immediate theatrical landscape. For example, just before the play-within-the play in Act 3, Hamlet quizzes Polonius about his acting experience:

¹ Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: 'Hamlet'* (Princeton University Press, 1946), 53.

Hamlet

8

HAMLET . . . My lord, you played once i'th' university, you say.

POLONIUS That did I my lord, and was accounted a good actor.

HAMLET And what did you enact?

POLONIUS I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th' Capitol. Brutus killed me.

HAMLET It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there. (3.2.87–93)

This is a shout-out to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and alert audience members then and now are rewarded with the gratifying sense of being 'in the know' about Shakespeare's canon. But in Shakespeare's time, it was also a warning: if the same actor who played Caesar played Polonius, and the same actor who played Brutus played Hamlet, Polonius is setting himself up to die at Hamlet's hands, just as Caesar died at Brutus'.

THE POETS' WAR

There is a similar, though more complex, dynamic at work in the 'tragedians of the city' scene in Act 2 (present, though with significant variations, in all three early texts). It offers a fictionalized glimpse into early modern performance conditions, gesturing imaginatively to events and pressures within the entertainment industry. In Q1, Hamlet is told that the players visiting Elsinore have left their residence in the city because 'noveltie carries it away', and audiences are 'turned' 'to the humour of children'. In F, Rosencrantz elaborates a similar complaint (2.2.313–33), when he tells Hamlet (in lines often referred to as the 'little eyases' passage) that:

there is sir an eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top of question and are most tyrannically clapped for't. These are now the fashion, and so be-rattle the common stages (so they call them) that many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills, and dare scarce come thither.

These moments in Q1 and F have long been linked to developments in the theatre industry at the turn of the century, specifically the revival of two children's companies, Paul's Boys and the Children of the Chapel, in 1599–1600. According to the traditional narrative, a so-called 'War of the Theatres' pitted the boy players, who performed in smaller, indoor playhouses and dominated the market by exploiting the satiric and erotic potential of adolescent performers, against the adult troupes, which suffered financially. Rosencrantz seems to affirm this situation when he admits to Hamlet, who has asked if the boys 'carry it away', that indeed they do. 'Ay', says Rosencrantz, with an allusion to the Globe Theatre emblem, 'Hercules and his load too' (332–3).

Recent scholarship has challenged this adversarial scenario in various ways. James Bednarz has suggested that the 'Poetomachia', as one dramatist called it – or 'Poets' War' – was not a commercial battle between adult and boy companies but a theoretical, and perhaps mutually beneficial, debate between individual playwrights about the 'social function of drama'.¹ Dramatists such as Ben Jonson, John Marston, and

¹ James Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Poets' War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 7. Suspicion that the whole affair was a 'contrived situation' for publicity purposes is expressed by W. Reavley Gair, *The Children of Paul's: The Story of a Theatre Company, 1553–1608* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 134.

Thomas Dekker put caricatures of one another on stage in order to showcase their different ideas about effective playwrighting and performance. The ‘little eyases’ passage, Bednarz explains, represents Shakespeare’s ‘distress over the vituperative tenor of the Poets’ War’, as well as his concern for the fates of both adult and boy companies as a result of the theatrical skirmishing.¹ Roslyn Knutson, in contrast, has argued that F’s ‘little eyases’ passage was a later addition to the manuscript, and that it does not comment on both boy companies at the turn of the century. Rather, it was added between 1606 and 1608, and it gestures to *Children of the Revels* (formerly the *Children of the Chapel*) and their politically charged Jacobean plays performed between 1604 and 1608.²

As we shall see, these distinct metatheatrical references can help us to date the composition of the play. But they also work thematically, showcasing Shakespeare’s ability to reinforce events happening in the fictional world of the play with the real world of the theatre. Here, he glances at the generational rivalries between contemporary London playing companies in order to illuminate the generational rivalries at the Danish court. Both sets of rivalries, Shakespeare makes clear, are intimately bound up with the issues of professional and political inheritance. In F, his Hamlet enquires of the children: ‘Will they not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players – as it is most like if their means are no better, their writers do them wrong to make them exclaim against their own succession?’ (2.2.322–5).

In Q2, the corresponding passage lacks explicit references to boy actors, stressing instead the more general precariousness of theatrical success. When Hamlet asks why the players have left the city to tour, Rosencrantz submits in the second quarto that ‘their inhibition comes by means of the late innovation’. His response may invoke the popular novelty of the boy companies. Or it may refer to immediate political contexts: scholars have suggested the regulation by the Privy Council in June 1600 to limit the number of London playing companies, or the Essex rebellion of February 1601. Or it may refer to events a couple of years later: Elizabeth I’s death, the accession of James I, and the plague which shut down the theatres in 1603.³ But the pleasingly alliterative line also makes sense entirely within the fiction itself: the players have left the city because of the ‘innovation’ that is King Hamlet’s death. The troupe, similar to Hamlet, has been displaced by Claudius. Hamlet himself, in fact, makes the comparison as he remarks upon the oddity of the new regime: ‘Is it not very strange, for my uncle is king of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little’ (2.2.334–6).

DATING HAMLET

Metadramatic scenes call attention to the play’s status as a play, inviting the audience to reflect on the relationship between the stage and the world. Metadramatic scenes

¹ Bednarz, *Poets’ War*, 30.

² Roslyn L. Knutson, ‘Falconer to the Little Eyases: A New Date and Commercial Agenda for the “Little Eyases” Passage in *Hamlet*’, *SQ* 46.1 (1995), 1–31.

³ See Richard Dutton, *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 226–44.

Hamlet

10

that are as topical as the little eyases passage call attention to the play's immediate historical moment. They – along with other kinds of internal and external evidence – thus seem to give scholars interpretive access to *when* the play was composed and first performed. In other words, various elements of the play seem to give us access to the complex personal, social, political, and literary contexts that spoke to Shakespeare, and to which he spoke back in the *Hamlet* we know today. But, as with other strange or estranging aspects of the drama, the evidence is multivalent and scholarly interpretations complex, recursive, and often in conflict.

Given this caveat, however, we can locate other important signposts for dating the play. *Hamlet* is not included in the list of Shakespeare's tragedies mentioned in Francis Meres's famous catalogue in his *Palladis Tamia* (entered in the Stationers' Register in September 1598). Claims from omission are never conclusive, but the absence makes a date earlier than 1598 unlikely. So, although a marginal note about *Hamlet* by Gabriel Harvey in his copy of Speght's Chaucer, which was published and purchased by Harvey in 1598, has often been taken to suggest an early date, we should be more circumspect. The notation, which groups *Hamlet* with Shakespeare's narrative poems of 1593–4, is a compelling instance of early modern literary evaluation: 'The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeares Venus, & Adonis, but his Lucrece, & his tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke, have it in them, to please the wiser sort.'¹

But as a means of dating the composition and performance of the play, the note is inconclusive, as the date of the note itself is subject to debate. A recent study suggests that it is likely a series of five notes composed over a number of years after Harvey purchased the volume', and that the comment on *Hamlet* was probably 'written . . . after the Second Quarto of the play was published in late 1604'.²

As opposed to the vagaries of the Harvey note, the play has a definitive entry for publication – 26 July 1602 – in the Stationers' Register, the official record book of the Stationers' Company that was essential for regulating the book trade. The entry documents the right of the printer James Roberts to print 'The Revenge of Hamlet Prince [of] Denmark as it was lately acted by the Lord Chamberlain his men'. It thus reinforces a date before the summer of 1602, suggesting that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* had been on the stage both recently ('lately') and for enough time to make the prospect of printing it (a significant investment for stationers) appear worthwhile.

The Poets' War has been used routinely to fix the date of *Hamlet*'s composition and performance. Since the children's troupes were revived in 1599–1600, and since the playwrights were staging barbs at one another well into 1601, the allusions discussed above suggest that the play was taking shape around the turn of the century, from roughly 1599 to 1601. But this evidence is neither transparent nor unequivocal. Bednarz, for instance, suggests that the 'little eyases' passage was added in 1601 to

¹ *Gabriel Harvey's Marginalia*, ed. G. C. Moore Smith (Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1913), 232.

² Michael J. Hirrel, 'When Did Gabriel Harvey Write His Famous Note?' *Huntington Library Quarterly* 75.2 (2012), 292. See also Jenkins, 3–6 and 573–4; E. A. J. Honigmann, 'The Date of *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Survey* 9 (1956), 24–6.