

## LESSON ONE:

### The Renaissance Period 1485-1660

#### Historical Context

At certain points in history, factors converge to cause dramatic shifts in human values and perceptions. One such shift, beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy launched the period of European history known as the Renaissance ("rebirth"). During the Renaissance, the medieval world view, focused on religion and the afterlife, was replaced by a more modern view, stressing human life here on earth. Renaissance Europeans delighted in the arts and literature, in the beauty of nature, in human impulses, and in a new sense of mastery over the world. They reinterpreted Europe's pre-Christian past, using the arts and philosophies of ancient Greece and Rome as models for their own achievements. Surging with creative energy, they expanded the scientific, geographical, and philosophical boundaries of the medieval world, often questioning timeworn truths and challenging authority. A new emphasis was placed on the individual and on the development of human potential. The ideal "Renaissance man" was a many-faceted person who cultivated his innate talents to the fullest.

In England, political instability delayed the advent of Renaissance ideas, but they began to penetrate English society after 1485, when the **Wars of the Roses** ended and **Henry Tudor** took the throne as **Henry VII**. A shrewd if colourless monarch, Henry exercised strong authority at home and negotiated favourable commercial treaties abroad. He built up the nation's merchant fleet and financed expeditions that established English claims in the New World. He also engineered a clever political alliance by arranging for his eldest son, Arthur, to marry Catherine of Aragon, daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, England's greatest New World rival. When Arthur died unexpectedly, the pope granted a special dispensation allowing Arthur's younger brother Henry, the new heir to the throne, to marry Catherine. The marriage would have startling consequences.

#### The Reign of Henry VIII

Henry VIII succeeded his father in 1509. A true Renaissance prince, Henry was a skilled athlete, poet, and musician, well educated in French, Italian, and Latin. During his reign, the Protestant Reformation was sweeping northern Europe, propelled by discontent with church abuses and a growing nationalism that resented the influence of Rome. While many in England sympathized with Protestant reforms, Henry at

first remained loyal to Rome. However, after 18 years of marriage he had only one child, Mary, and he became obsessed with producing a male heir. Insisting that the papal dispensation had been a mistake, he requested that his marriage be annulled so that he could wed Catherine's court attendant Anne Boleyn. When the pope refused to comply, Henry broke with Rome and in 1534 declared himself head of the Church of England, or Anglican Church. Growing English nationalism and the spread of Protestant ideas brought popular support for Henry's action; those who openly opposed it frequently paid with their lives. Ironically, Anne Boleyn produced only a daughter, Elizabeth, and eventually Anne was executed on a charge of adultery. A third marriage finally gave Henry his long-sought son, the frail and sickly Edward VI, who in 1547, at the age of nine, succeeded his father. During his six-year reign, the Church of England became more truly Protestant, clarifying its beliefs and establishing its rituals in a landmark publication, the Book of Common Prayer. When Edward died, however, his half-sister Mary took the throne and tried to reintroduce Roman Catholicism. The move was unpopular, as was her marriage to her cousin Philip II of Spain, and her persecution of Protestants earned her the nickname Bloody Mary. On her death in 1558, most welcomed the succession of her half-sister Elizabeth.

## *The Elizabethan Era*

**Elizabeth I**, the unwanted daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, proved to be one of the ablest monarchs in English history. During her long reign, the English Renaissance reached its full flower, and England enjoyed a time of unprecedented prosperity and international prestige. A practical and disciplined ruler, Elizabeth loved pomp and ceremony but was nevertheless frugal and intent on balancing the national budget. She was also a consummate politician, exercising absolute authority while remaining sensitive to public opinion and respectful of Parliament. In religious matters she steered a middle course. Re-establishing the independent Church of England, she made it a buffer between Roman Catholics and radical Protestants, now often called Puritans because they sought to "purify" the church of all remaining Roman Catholic practices. In foreign policy, Elizabeth was a shrewd strategist who kept England out of costly wars and ended the unpopular Spanish alliance. Though she never married, for 20 years she used the possibility of her marriage to utmost advantage, feigning interest in one European prince after another. Convinced by advisers that the path to national prosperity lay in New World riches, she encouraged overseas ventures, including Sir Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the globe and Sir Walter Raleigh's attempt to establish a colony in Virginia. In secret, she funded pirate raids against the ships of Spain, while publicly denouncing such "unlawful acts" of plunder.

The quarrel with Catholic Spain intensified in 1587, when Elizabeth reluctantly executed her cousin Mary Stuart, the Roman Catholic queen of Scotland, for conspiracy. Catholics, who questioned the legitimacy of Elizabeth's parents' marriage, had believed Mary to be the rightful heir to the English throne and had participated in a number of foreign-backed plots against Elizabeth. A year after Mary's execution, Spain's Philip II sent a great armada, or fleet of warships, to challenge the English navy. Aided by a violent

storm, the smaller, more manoeuvrable English ships defeated the Spanish Armada, making Elizabeth the undisputed leader of a great military power.

## The Rise of the Stuarts

With Elizabeth's death in 1603, the powerful Tudor dynasty came to an end, and the rule of England fell into the hands of the weaker house of Stuart. Elizabeth was succeeded by her cousin James VI of Scotland, son of Mary Stuart, who ascended the throne of England as James I. Separated from his mother in childhood, James was happy to support the Church of England, but both Roman Catholic and Protestant extremists expected otherwise - Catholics because he was Mary Stuart's son, Puritans because he was king of Presbyterian Scotland. Problems with Roman Catholics arose early in his reign, when a group including Guy Fawkes conspired to kill him and blow up Parliament in the unsuccessful Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Later, James had greater difficulties with the Puritans, and these problems only worsened when his son Charles I took the throne in 1625.

James and Charles lacked the political savvy and frugality of Elizabeth, and both aroused opposition by their belief in the divine right of kings, considering themselves God's representatives in all civil and religious matters. Their contempt for Parliament and their shocking extravagance met with much hostility in the House of Commons, now dominated by Puritans. Even more offensive to the Puritans was the kings' preference for "High-Church" rituals in the Anglican Church—rituals that seemed to smack of Roman Catholicism.

In 1629, with the situation deteriorating, Charles I dismissed Parliament, refusing to summon it again for 11 years. During this time he took strong measures against his political opponents through the royal Courts of the Star Chamber, which operated without trial by jury. The result of these oppressive measures was a deepening of religious, political, and economic unrest. Thousands of English citizens—especially Puritans—emigrated to North America, making the Stuart years England's first period of major colonial expansion. Then, in 1637, Charles's attempt to introduce Anglican prayers and practices in Scotland's Presbyterian churches led to open rebellion there. In need of funds to suppress the Scots, Charles was forced to reconvene Parliament. In a session known as the Long Parliament, many of his powers were stripped. He responded with a show of military force, and England was soon plunged into civil war.

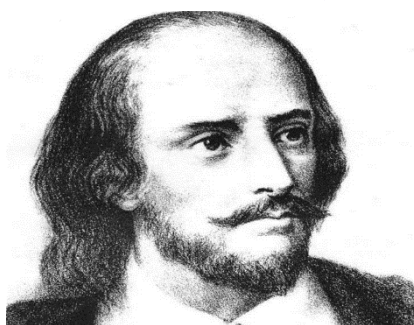
- A series of events changed the intellectual & moral attitude of people. Among them are:
1. 4th Crusade that can be regarded as the basic condition and the cause of the Renaissance;
  2. The penetration of Greek & Latin culture that occurred as a result of the Crusade;
  3. The recognition of the Copernican system of astronomy;
  4. The invention of printing;
  5. The setup of protestant church: Some countries broke away from the Catholic Church & set up their own national Church, the Protestant Church. A profound study of Latin & Greek uncovered

the stories of antique literature for the humanists. Antique works were looked upon from the new, humanistic, point of view. The humanists also appealed for the creation of a new science, Natural Science, based on experiment, study & investigation, as a result man learned to know himself. Antique literature seemed original and up-to-date again. Great men appeared in science, art and literature. There were **Dante** ['dænti], Petrarch ['petra:k] and **Boccaccio**[bəu'ka:tʃiəu] in literature. The **Italian painters & sculptors**, such as **Leonardo da Vinci** [liə'na:dəudə'vintʃi:], Michelangelo ['maikəl'ændʒiləu], and **Raphael** ['ræfeɪəl] revived *the natural beauty of a body & the subject of love in art*, both of which had been made sinful during the Middle Ages. In France we find the great writer **Rabelais**, in the Netherlands - **Erasmus**, in England-**Thomas More**, **Francis Bacon** & **Shakespeare**, in Poland - the astronomer **Copernicus**.

## Renaissance literature

Although the zenith of English Renaissance literature was not reached until Elizabeth's reign, a number of earlier writers paved the way. Among them were Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, court poets of Henry VIII's reign who introduced into England the Italian verse form called the **sonnet**. During Elizabethan times, the sonnet became the **most popular form of love lyric**. Sonnets were often published in sequences, such as Edmund Spenser's Amoretti, addressed to his future wife. William **Shakespeare's** magnificent sonnets do not form a clear sequence, but several address a mysterious figure known as the Dark Lady, who some scholars think may have been the poet Amelia Lanier. Shakespeare left an even clearer mark on drama, which came of age in the Renaissance. Although most plays of medieval times had treated religious themes, Renaissance drama was concerned with the complexities of human life here on earth. Plays were often staged at court, in the homes of wealthy nobles, and in inn yards, where spectators could sit on the ground in front of the stage or in balconies overlooking it. A similar plan was used in England's first theatres, like the famous Globe Theatre in London. Most of the plays were written mainly or entirely in verse. Among the era's finest playwrights other than Shakespeare were Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson. Jonson was influential in shaping English drama on the basis of classical models, distinguishing clearly between tragedies, which end with their heroes' downfall, and comedies.

## William Shakespeare:



### *William Shakespeare's Life*

On April 23rd, 1564 a son, William? Was born to John and Mary Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon. His mother was the daughter of a farmer. His father was a glove-maker. William went to a grammar school in Stratford and had quite a good education. There he learned to love reading. While still a teenager, William married Anne Hathaway, a farmer's daughter

eight years older than himself. Nothing is known about how he earned his living during these early years, perhaps he helped his father in the family business. During these years his three children were born: Susannah[su:'zænə], the eldest, then twins – a son, Hamnet ['hæmnit], and another girl, Judith ['dʒu:diθ]. In 1587 Shakespeare went to work in London, leaving Ann the children at home. Nobody knows exactly why he did it. Some people say that the reason was his love of poetry and theatre. But there is another story which says that he had to run away from law because he killed some deer belonging to a rich man. In London Shakespeare began to act and to write plays and soon became an important member of a well known acting company. Most of his plays were performed in the new Globe Theatre built on the bank of the River Thames. In 1613 he stopped writing and went to live in Stratford where he died in 1616.

### *Three periods of Shakespeare's work*

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) stands out in this period as a poet and playwright as yet unsurpassed. Shakespeare was not a man of letters by profession, and probably had only some grammar school education. He was neither a lawyer, nor an aristocrat, like the "university wits" who monopolized the English stage when he started writing. But he was very gifted and versatile, and he surpassed the "professionals". Shakespeare wrote plays in a variety of genres, including histories, tragedies, comedies and the late romances, or tragicomedies. His literary work is usually divided into three periods.

- **The first period (1590-1600) - comedies:** His early *classical and Italianate comedies*, like *A Comedy of Errors*, containing tight double plots and precise comic sequences, give way in the mid 1590s to the romantic atmosphere of his greatest comedies. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a witty mixture of romance, fairy magic, and rustic comic scenes. Shakespeare's next comedy, the equally romantic *Merchant of Venice*, can be problematic because of how it portrays Shylock, a vengeful Jewish moneylender. The wit and wordplay of *Much Ado about Nothing*, the charming rural setting of *As You Like It*, and the lively merrymaking of *Twelfth Night* complete Shakespeare's sequence of great comedies. After the lyrical *Richard II*, written almost entirely in verse, Shakespeare introduced *prose comedies*, *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*.
- **The second period (1600-1608) - tragedies:** His characters become more complex and tender as he switches deftly between comic and serious scenes, prose and poetry, and achieves the narrative variety of his mature work. This period begins and ends with two *tragedies*: *Romeo and Juliet*, the famous romantic tragedy of adolescent love and death; and *Julius Caesar*. In the early 17th century, Shakespeare wrote the so-called "*problem plays*", *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*, as well as a number of his best known *tragedies*, including *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. The plots of Shakespeare's tragedies often hinge on such fatal errors or flaws, which overturn order and destroy the hero and those he loves. Humanistic ideas are particularly stressed in "Hamlet": something must be done to change the

world, the laws and moral. Human relations depend on social problems; intelligence is not enough to be happy.

- **The third period (1609-1612) - Romantic Dramas:** In his final period, Shakespeare turned to romance or tragicomedy and completed three more major plays: *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Less bleak than the tragedies, these three plays are graver in tone than the comedies, but they end with reconciliation and the forgiveness of potentially tragic errors. Some commentators have seen this change in mood as evidence of a more serene view of life on Shakespeare's part, but it may merely reflect the theatrical fashion of the day.

### Major themes of Shakespeare's works

Many scholars have studied Shakespeare's plays; these are the central themes Shakespeare dealt with in his plays:

1. Humanism. The love for mankind is seen in every play.
2. Freedom. The idea of freedom for people is felt in Shakespeare's tragedies and historical plays.
3. Patriotism
4. National unity under one strong monarch. The Wars of the Roses were not forgotten in the 16th century. Shakespeare felt that a central power through direct succession to the throne was the only force to stand against feudal wars. These last two themes are stressed in Shakespeare's historical plays and in the tragedy of "King Lear".
5. The masses as a political force. Shakespeare was the first dramatist to acknowledge the important part that was played by the masses in historical events. This is clearly shown in the play "Julius Caesar"
6. Relationship of men in a society
7. The themes of love and friendship are developed in Shakespeare's sonnets as well as in his plays.

## The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark

**Genre:** Tragic drama; Revenge tragedy

### **About the Play**

*Hamlet* was written sometime between 1599 and 1601 and is often considered the greatest achievement of the world's greatest playwright. It has been performed and translated more than any other play in the world. It has had more written about it – and has inspired more parodies and spin-offs -- than any other literary work. Its famous "To be or not to be" is the most quoted phrase in the English language. *Hamlet* has inspired 26 ballets, six operas and dozens of musical works. There have been more than 45 movie versions, including those by Laurence Olivier, Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh. *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play. Uncut, it would take between four and a half and five hours to perform. Hamlet himself has 1,530 lines – more than any other Shakespearean character. Three different texts of *Hamlet* were published in Shakespeare's time. *The Revenge of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* was entered in the Stationer's Register in 1603 and is now known as the First Quarto. It is considered to have been a pirated edition, assembled from the memories

of actors, and is full of inaccuracies. A second Quarto appeared in 1604. Believed to have been printed from Shakespeare's own manuscript, it was inscribed: "newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppie." This version is the source of most modern editions. A revised, cut, version of the Second Quarto appeared in the First Folio of 1623. This version is believed to have been revised from a prompt book or actor's copy of the script, since the lines that have been cut are literary rather than dramatic.

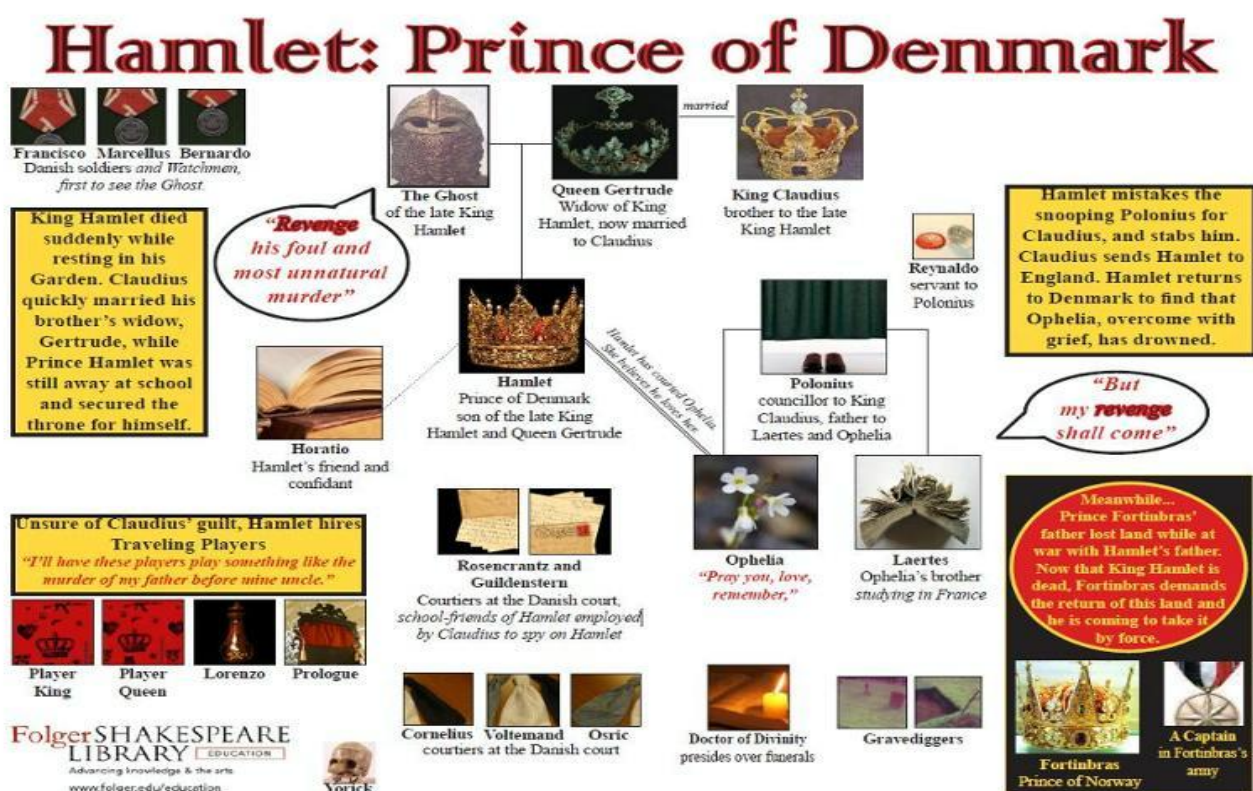
## Setting

Shakespeare's play takes place in Denmark in pre-Viking times. Some scholars locate the story during the time of King Canute (1014-1035).

## Origins and Sources

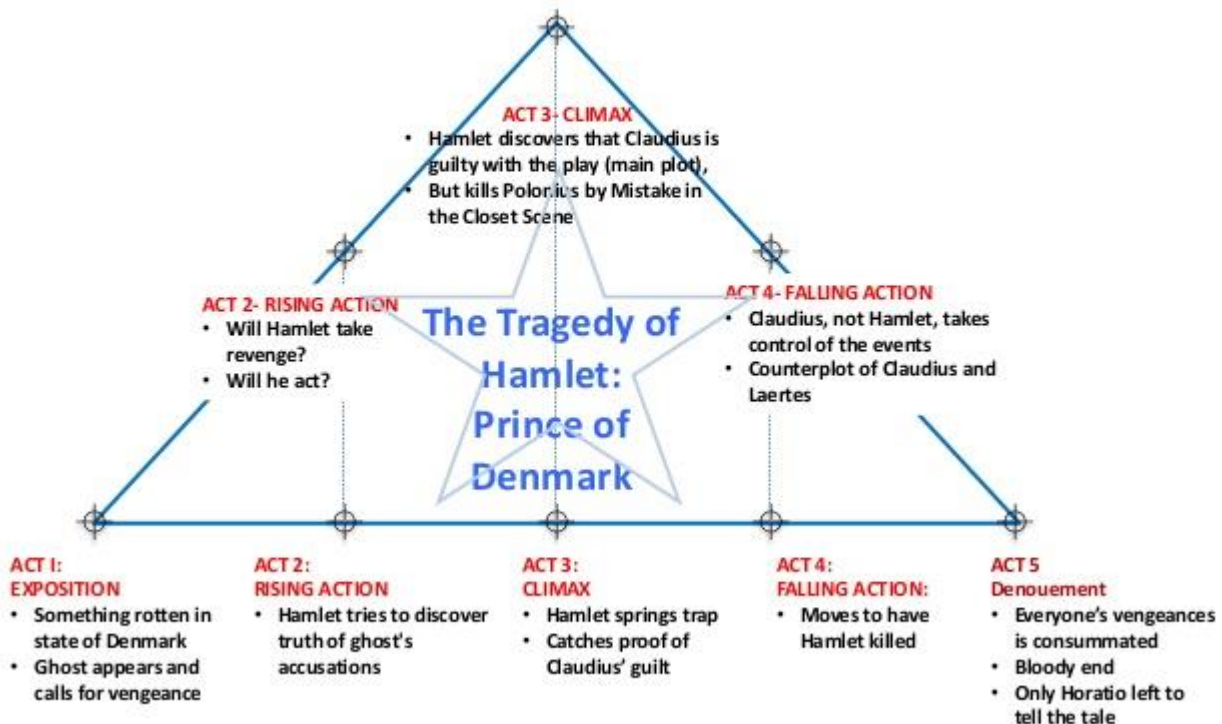
The story of *Hamlet* has no basis in historical events. Shakespeare's source, referred to by scholars as the "Ur-Hamlet", was a lost play popular in London in the 1580s. It was believed to have been written by Thomas Kyd, who based it on a tale in François Belleforest's collection *Histoires Tragiques* (1580). That story was derived in turn from a ninth-century saga about a pre-Viking prince called Amleth. The saga was recorded by Danish monk Saxo Grammaticus in his *Chronicles of the Danish Realm*, written around 1200 and first published in 1514. The word "amleth" means "dimwit" or "simpleton" -- a reference to the prince's feigned madness, which he assumed to protect himself from his uncle who killed his father. Feigned madness was a popular theme in Icelandic and Viking folk tales. Some aspects of the play -- including its gloomy, introspective hero, its ghost urging revenge, its treacherous horrors and its violence -- belong to a tradition of revenge plays that can be traced back to Seneca, the first-century Roman playwright, whose complete works had been translated into English in 1571.

## Characters



## Plot summary

### Distillation Curve – Arc of Tragedy



## Themes

### Revenge

*“If thou didst ever thy dear father love, Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.”* The Ghost, I.5.23-5

Plays based on acts of personal revenge became very popular in Shakespeare’s day. This form came to be known as the **revenge tragedy**, a genre which most often included some or all of the following:

- the ghost of a murdered family member who demands that the hero take revenge
- the revenger must take the law into his own hands and commit an evil act to get revenge, which inevitably leads to his own death
- scenes involving real and/or pretended madness
- a play within a play
- a graveyard scene
- much violence and many deaths, (thus its alternate name “the tragedy of blood”!)

*Hamlet* contains all of these elements; in fact, the play is structured around a double revenge. Both Hamlet and Laertes seek to avenge a father’s murder, but while Hamlet is the revenger in



the main plot, he is the target of Laertes's revenge is the subplot, and this dual role for Hamlet makes it very difficult for us to tell the good guys from the bad guys. This is one way in which Shakespeare moves well beyond the usual revenge tragedy form in this play. It is completely dominated by his remarkably complex characterization of Hamlet, the brooding and brilliant Prince of Denmark, through whom the traditional form is opened up to become a meditation on the deep mystery at the heart of life.

### **ACTION AND INACTION**

*Hamlet* fits in a literary tradition called the revenge play, in which a man must take revenge against those who have in some way wronged him. Yet *Hamlet* turns the revenge play on its head in an ingenious way: Hamlet, the man seeking revenge, can't actually bring himself to take revenge. For reason after reason, some clear to the audience, some not, he delays. Hamlet's delay has been a subject of debate from the day the play was first performed, and he is often held up as an example of the classic "indecisive" person, who thinks too much and acts too little. But *Hamlet* is more complicated and interesting than such simplistic analysis would indicate. Because while it's true that Hamlet fails to act while many other people do act, it's not as if the actions of the other characters in the play work out. Claudius's plots backfire, Gertrude marries her husband's murderer and dies for it, Laertes is manipulated and killed by his own treachery, and on, and on, and on. In the end, *Hamlet* does not provide a conclusion about the merits of action versus inaction. Instead, the play makes the deeply cynical suggestion that there is only one result of *both* action and inaction—death.

### **APPEARANCE VS. REALITY**

In Act 1, scene 2 of *Hamlet*, Gertrude asks why Hamlet is still in mourning two months after his father died: "Why seems it so particular with thee?" Hamlet responds: "Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not 'seems.'" (1.2.75-76). The difference between "seems" (appearance) and "is" (reality) is crucial in *Hamlet*. Every character is constantly trying to figure out what the other characters think, as opposed to what those characters are *pretending* to think. The characters try to figure each other out by using deception of their own, such as spying and plotting.

But Hamlet takes it a step further. He not only investigates other people, he also peers into his own soul and asks philosophical and religious questions about life and death. Hamlet's obsession with what's real has three main effects: 1) he becomes so caught up in the search for reality that he ceases to be able to act; 2) in order to prove what's real and what isn't Hamlet himself must hide his "reality" behind an "appearance" of madness; 3) the more closely Hamlet looks, the less real and coherent *everything* seems to be. Many analyses of *Hamlet* focus only on the first effect, Hamlet's indecisiveness. But the second two effects are just as important. The second shows that the relationship between appearance and reality is indistinct. The third suggests that the world is founded on fundamental inconsistencies that most people overlook, and that it is this *failure* to recognize inconsistencies that allows them to act. Hamlet's fatal flaw isn't that he's wrong to see uncertainty in everything, but that he's right.

## WOMEN

There are two important issues regarding women in *Hamlet*: how Hamlet sees women and women's social position. Hamlet's view of women is decidedly dark. In fact, the few times that Hamlet's pretend madness seems to veer into actual madness occur when he gets furious at women. Gertrude's marriage to Claudius has convinced Hamlet that women are untrustworthy, that their beauty is a cover for deceit and sexual desire. For Hamlet, women are living embodiments of appearance's corrupt effort to eclipse reality. As for women's social position, its defining characteristic is powerlessness. Gertrude's quick marriage to Claudius, though immoral, is also her only way to maintain her status. Ophelia has even fewer options. While Hamlet *waits* to seek revenge for his father's death, Ophelia, as a woman, *can't* act—all she can do is wait for Laertes to return and take *his* revenge. Ophelia's predicament is symbolic of women's position in general in *Hamlet*: they are completely dependent on men.

## POISON, CORRUPTION, DEATH

In medieval times people believed that the health of a nation was connected to the legitimacy of its king. In *Hamlet*, Denmark is often described as poisoned, diseased, or corrupt under Claudius's leadership. As visible in the nervous soldiers on the ramparts in the first scene and the commoners outside the castle who Claudius fears might rise up in rebellion, even those who don't know that Claudius murdered Old Hamlet sense the corruption of Denmark and are disturbed. It is as if the poison Claudius poured into Old Hamlet's ear has spread through Denmark itself. Hamlet also speaks in terms of rot and corruption, describing the world as an "unweeded garden" and constantly referring to decomposing bodies. But Hamlet does not limit himself to Denmark; he talks about all of *life* in these disgusting images. In fact, Hamlet only seems comfortable with things that *are* dead: he reveres his father, claims to love Ophelia once she's dead, and handles Yorick's skull with tender care. No, what disgusts him is *life*: his mother's sexuality, women wearing makeup to hide their age, worms feeding on a corpse, people lying to get their way. By the end of the play, Hamlet argues that death is the one true reality, and he seems to view all of life as "appearance" doing everything it can—from seeking power, to lying, to committing murder, to engaging in passionate and illegitimate sex—to hide from that reality.

## Sexual, Moral, and Physical Corruption

*“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” Marcellus, I.4.90*

Actions and images on the theme of corruption abound in *Hamlet*. The relationship between Claudius and Gertrude that so disgusts and enrages Hamlet brings the taint of sexual infidelity and incest to the very center of life in the Danish court. Add to that Claudius' additional sins of fratricide (killing of one's brother) and regicide (killing of one's king), and the moral corruption he embodies becomes truly monstrous. And his corrupting influence is contagious: Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all seem to lose their moral sense while doing his bidding, with fatal consequences for themselves. Hamlet compares the evil Claudius represents to a "*canker in our nature*" that must be removed. Ideas about the physical decay and corruption

of the body also constantly recur in much of the imagery in *Hamlet*. These include poison and its effects; sickness and disease in nature and in the body; maggots/worms breeding and feasting on flesh; and the famous meditation over Yorick's skull in the graveyard scene.

### Madness and Melancholy

*"I am but mad north-north-west."* Hamlet, II.2.347

Elizabethans found the wild and unpredictable behaviour of the insane entertaining both onstage and off. The infamous asylum St. Mary of Bethlehem (known as Bedlam for short) opened its doors so people in search of a diverting spectacle could pay to view the inmates. Many plays written at this time feature characters whose madness makes it possible for them to say and do outlandish things not normally permitted in polite society. Hamlet's "antic disposition" -- his make-believe madness -- is a pose he hides behind while he contemplates his revenge. But his actual state of mind seems terribly unstable at several points throughout the play and it is difficult to know for certain whether or not he ever actually slips over the edge into genuine madness. In a production the actor and director working together would have to make a decision about the extent of Hamlet's madness. Hamlet does display the classic symptoms of another kind of mental disorder: melancholy, a pessimistic and cynical mindset, a tendency to ruthless self-criticism, depressed mood and persistent thoughts of suicide. Ophelia's madness in Act IV, scene 5 is indisputable. Having been given more than she can cope with when her father is murdered by the man she loves, she really does lose touch with reality. Her mad ravings suggest the deeper preoccupations that have claimed her mind: the death of a loved one and the utter thwarting of her longing to have her love for Hamlet returned. While Hamlet merely talks about taking his own life, Ophelia actually does allow her own to slip away while in the grip of the madness to which his actions have driven her

### Random Fortune or Divine Master Plan?

*"There is a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will --"* Hamlet, V.2.10-11

Overwhelmed by his own grief and the apparent triumph of good over evil in this world, Hamlet, for much of the play, feels like a victim of a random, indifferent universe ruled by the whims of fortune. All human actions seem meaningless in a world governed by the perpetual, externally imposed cycle of successes and failures symbolized by the image of the goddess Fortune's turning wheel in II.2. But Hamlet undergoes a spiritual journey during the course of the play; in Act V he confides in Horatio his belief in the existence of a divine order underlying events in the world, even "*the fall of a sparrow*" (V.2.215). He can accept the necessity of killing Claudius, finally, when he can believe he is acting as the instrument of a divine justice at work in the world, not in senseless and brutal retaliation. Whether Shakespeare himself shared this essentially Christian vision of human destiny is the matter of ongoing critical debate.

### Hamlet - "Acting" as Thematic Focus

*"...suit the action to the word, the word to the action..."* Hamlet, III.2.16

The pun was Shakespeare's favourite figure of speech, and in some ways *Hamlet* is a kind of extended pun on the verb "to act". **Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius, his failure to act on behalf of his murdered father and take revenge**, has been called the central problem of the play. There are volumes and volumes of scholarly and critical explanation to account for this delay. Like so much else in the play, it remains open to interpretation. Director Marti Maraden feels that perhaps too much has been made out of the problem of Hamlet's inaction. His doubt over the Ghost's veracity and his reluctance to kill Claudius while he is praying would have been completely understandable to an Elizabethan audience. But "acting" in another sense pervades the world of the play and helps to create the sinister atmosphere of Elsinore Castle. **Many of the characters in *Hamlet* present a false front to others, hiding their true feelings and motives while acting out the role society has assigned them:** Claudius conceals his guilt behind his regal facade; Gertrude retains her place on the throne despite her adultery; Polonius defers to Hamlet's higher rank while secretly conspiring against him with Claudius (and his son, Laertes, does much the same later in the play); Ophelia loves Hamlet but rejects him and then helps her father spy on him. And even Hamlet, who refuses to mask his grief behind a more socially acceptable exterior when we first see him in I.2, then fakes being mad for most of the play. To complicate matters further, the play within the play – and Hamlet's famous advice to the players that precedes it--focuses on **"acting" as an art form built on the idea that the best pretending is that which seems to be the most true-to-life!** But *Hamlet*, like most Elizabethan plays, is filled with conventions and devices that force both actors and audience members to acknowledge just how different the drama onstage is from real life, including:

- ✚ **asides** -- short remarks directed by a character to the audience, and unheard by the other characters onstage at the time;
- ✚ **soliloquies** -- a speech delivered directly to the audience by a character who believes he or she is alone onstage (there are seven major ones in *Hamlet*);
- ✚ **a play-within-a-play** -- turns the characters onstage into an audience watching actors, and confronts the actual audience with the fictional nature of what they are watching

During the early –to- mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in America, slaves were transported down the Mississippi River for sale to the plantation where the work was harder than other counties. To sell the person down the river is to betray him for his own benefit.

## Symbols

### YORICK'S SKULL

*Hamlet* is not a very symbolic play. In fact, the only object that one can easily pick out as a symbol in the play is the skull of Yorick, a former court jester, which Hamlet finds with Horatio in the graveyard near Elsinore in Act 5, scene 1. As Hamlet picks up the skull and both talks to the deceased Yorick and to Horatio about the skull, it becomes clear that the skull represents the inevitability of death. But what is perhaps most interesting about the skull as a symbol is that, while in most plays, a symbol means one thing to the audience and another to the characters in the novel or play, in *Hamlet* it is Hamlet himself who recognizes and explains the symbolism of Yorick's skull. Even this symbol serves to emphasize Hamlet's power as a character: he is as sophisticated as his audience.

# The Tragedy of Macbeth

Probably composed in late 1606 or early 1607, *Macbeth* is the last of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, the others being *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*. It is a relatively short play without a major subplot, and it is considered by many scholars to be Shakespeare's darkest work. *Lear* is an utter tragedy in which the natural world is amorally indifferent toward mankind, but in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare adds a supernatural dimension that purposively conspires against Macbeth and his kingdom. In the tragedy of *Lear*, the distraught king summons the goddess of Chaos, Hecate; in *Macbeth*, Hecate appears as an actual character.

On the level of human evil, Shakespeare's Scottish tragedy is about Macbeth's bloody rise to power, including the murder of the Scottish king, Duncan, and the guilt-ridden pathology of evil deeds generating still more evil deeds. As an integral part of this thematic web is the play's most memorable character, Lady Macbeth. Like her husband, Lady Macbeth's ambition for power leads her into an unnatural, phantasmagorical realm of witchcraft, insomnia and madness. But while Macbeth responds to the prophecies of the play's famous trio of witches, Lady Macbeth goes even further by figuratively transforming herself into an unnatural, desexualized evil spirit. The current trend of critical opinion is toward an upward re-evaluation of Lady Macbeth, who is said to be rehumanized by her insanity and her suicide. Much of this reappraisal of Lady Macbeth has taken place in discussions of her ironically strong marriage to Macbeth, a union that rests on loving bonds but undergoes disintegration as the tragedy unfolds.

## Summary

The play begins on an open stretch of land in medieval Scotland. Three Witches enter and give the prophecy that the civil war will end that day and that at sunset they will meet Macbeth. The Witches are summoned to leave, but they do not leave without stating that what is normally “fair” will be “foul,” and what is “foul” will be “fair.”

King Duncan learns that Macbeth has been victorious and has defeated Macdonwald. The Thane of Cawdor has betrayed Duncan and is accused of being a traitor. Duncan orders the Thane of Cawdor's execution and announces that Macbeth will receive the title of Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo leave the battlefield and meet the Witches. The Witches state the prophecy that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor and king and that Banquo will be the father of kings, but not king himself. Macbeth has been victorious on the battlefield and the war is at an end—to what greatness should he now aspire?

The Witches spark the ambitious nature in Macbeth, as he knows his rise to power would greatly be enhanced by being named Thane of Cawdor. After the Witches vanish, Ross and Angus arrive and announce that Macbeth has been named Thane of Cawdor. Banquo is sceptical of the Witches, but Macbeth, driven by a desire for power, considers killing Duncan to gain the crown. Macbeth is overwhelmed by the image, yet his desire for power is still present, as stated in a letter he sends to Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth encourages Macbeth to act on his thoughts, telling him that she will guide and support his plan to kill King Duncan. While Duncan is visiting Inverness, Macbeth's castle, Macbeth kills Duncan as he sleeps. After the murder is discovered, Macbeth kills the servants, whom he accuses of Duncan's murder. Duncan's sons, fearing for their own lives, flee Scotland. Macbeth is crowned king.

Banquo raises suspicions that Macbeth killed Duncan. Macbeth hires two men to kill Banquo and his son Fleance, whom Macbeth fears will become king, as the Witches foretold. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes.

The Witches conjure a spell, and Apparitions reveal to Macbeth three prophecies that will affect his future. He is told to beware of Macduff, that no man born of woman can harm him, and he will not be conquered until the forest at Birnam marches to Dunsinane. Macbeth is also shown a procession of kings with the last king looking in a mirror—the reflection is that of Banquo.

Macbeth orders Macduff's family to be murdered and leaves for England to confront Macduff. When Macduff hears of the massacre of his family, he vows to seek revenge on Macbeth. He joins Malcolm in his quest to depose Macbeth.

The army proceeds in camouflage by carrying a branch from Birnam Wood into battle. Alarmed by this, Macbeth fears the Witches' prophecy will come true. Macbeth is told of Lady Macbeth's death by her own hands, and he laments the nature of his life.

Macbeth fights Macduff, and Macbeth boasts that he cannot be killed by any man born of woman. Macduff informs Macbeth that he was surgically removed from his mother's womb and thus was not born of woman. Macduff kills Macbeth in battle and hails Malcolm as King of Scotland. Malcolm vows to restore Scotland to a peaceful country.