**Hamlet Honours Teaching Notes**

**Revenge in *Hamlet***

There are three plots in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: the main revenge plot and two subplots involving the [romance between Hamlet and Ophelia](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/playanalysis/opheliaplot.html), and the [looming war with Norway](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/playanalysis/fortinbrasplot.html). The following is a guide to the main plot, with a look at all the significant events on Hamlet's journey for vengeance.

**Introduction to the Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy**

Thomas Kyd established the revenge tragedy with his wildly popular *Spanish Tragedy* (1587), and Shakespeare perfected the genre with *Hamlet*, which is likely based on another revenge play by Kyd called the *Ur-Hamlet*. Sadly, no copy of Kyd's *Ur-Hamlet* exists today.

Most revenge tragedies share some basic elements: a play within a play, mad scenes, a vengeful ghost, one or several gory scenes, and, most importantly, a central character who has a serious grievance against a formidable opponent. This central character takes matters into his own hands and seeks revenge privately, after justice has failed him in the public arena. It should be noted that Hamlet is the only protagonist in any Elizabethan revenge play who can be considered a hero, aware of the moral implications involved in exacting his revenge.

**Characters Involved in the Revenge Plot of *Hamlet***

Hamlet
Ghost
Claudius
Gertrude
Polonius
Laertes
Horatio

**Key Revenge Plot Events**

1. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo. Horatio begs the apparition to speak (1.1.127), but it refuses. Horatio reports the encounter to Hamlet.

2. The Ghost appears to Hamlet and they leave to speak in private (1.4.86).

3. The Ghost reveals that he is, in fact, the ghost of Hamlet's father. **The revenge plot is established with the Ghost's utterance, "So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear" (1.5.7)**. He tells Hamlet that he was poisoned by his brother Claudius as he slept in his orchard and, if Hamlet is not already feeling the desire, the Ghost makes plain the demand: "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (25).

4. To be certain of Claudius's guilt, Hamlet decides to re-enact the murder of his father with the production of [*The Murder of Gonzago*](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/spokenplayhamlet.html) (known also as *the play within the play* or *The Mousetrap*). If Claudius is disturbed by the play it will reveal his guilt. In Hamlet's words:
The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king (2.2.606-07).

5. Hamlet stages *The Murder of Gonzago* and Hamlet and Horatio agree that the agitated Claudius has behaved like a guilty man during the production (3.2.284).

6. Hamlet has an opportunity to kill the unattended Claudius in his chamber, but, after soliloquizing on the matter, he decides not to take action because Claudius is praying. Killing Claudius in prayer would not really be revenge because he would go to heaven, "fit and season'd for his passage" (3.3.86).

7. Hamlet kills Polonius, mistaking him for Claudius as he hides behind a curtain. (3.4.22)

8. The Ghost appears again to Hamlet. He is angry because Claudius is still alive. He tells Hamlet he has returned to "whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.111).

9. Claudius banishes Hamlet to England for the murder of Polonius (4.3.46). He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet's actions (55) and makes plans to have Hamlet assassinated on English soil.

10. Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet reporting that he is returning to Denmark, thanks to pirates who had captured his boat and released him on the promise of future reward (4.6.11).

11. Claudius hears of Hamlet's return and he conspires with Laertes, Polonius's son, to murder Hamlet. Laertes will use a poison-tipped sword during a fight with Hamlet, and Claudius will have a poisoned drink at the ready (4.7.126-161).

12. Hamlet stabs Claudius (5.2.311) and forces him to drink the poisoned wine (316). **The revenge plot is thus concluded**. Hamlet himself then dies from the wound received during the fight with Laertes (348).

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**Deception in *Hamlet***

Deception is an essential element of Shakespearean drama, whether it be tragedy, history, or comedy. The deception can be destructive or benign; it can be practiced on others or, just as likely, self-inflicted. On occasion deception becomes the very foundation of a play, as is the case with *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, and, most notably, *Hamlet*.

The following introduction to the many instances of deception in *Hamlet* will help you plan your own essay on the broader topic of how this important theme relates to the play on the whole.

**Hamlet**

**1)** Hamlet's madness is an act of deception, concocted to draw attention away from his suspicious activities as he tries to gather evidence against Claudius. He reveals to Horatio his deceitful plan to feign insanity in 1.5:

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,
As I, perchance, hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on,
That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,
With arms encumber'd thus, or this head-shake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
As 'Well, well, we know'; or 'We could, an if we would';
Or 'If we list to speak'; or 'There be, an if they might';
Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
That you know aught of me: this is not to do,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you.
(187-199)

**2)** Hamlet stages *The Murder of Gonzago*, itself an elaborate deception, to try to catch Claudius in his guilt. He again reveals his deceit to Horatio:

Give him a heedful note
For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
And after we will both our judgments join
In censure of his seeming.
(3.2.86-89)

**3)** Hamlet schemes to deceive his mother, Gertrude, at their meeting in her closet. Hamlet will appear to intend her harm; he will channel the cruelty of Nero, said to have murdered his mother, to help him "speak daggers" to Gertrude, but he has no intention of being physically brutal:

Soft! now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom:
Let me be cruel, not unnatural:
I will speak daggers to her, but use none;
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites;
How in my words soever she be shent,
To give them seals never, my soul, consent!
(3.2.384-91)

**4)** When Hamlet discovers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carrying his death warrant on the ship bound for England he changes his name to the names of his unwitting companions, thereby sending them to be executed in his place. This unusually ruthless act of deception shocks and disappoints Horatio:

**Hamlet.** I had my father's signet in my purse,
Which was the model of that Danish seal:
Folded the writ up in the form of the other,
Subscrib'd it, gave't the impression, plac'd it
safely,
The changeling never known. Now, the next day
Was our sea-flight; and what to this was sequent
Thou know'st already.
**Horatio.** So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't...
Why, what a king is this?
(5.2.47-55,62)

**5)** Hamlet's philosophical reluctance to murder Claudius results in self-deception several times in the play, particularly in his soliloquies. He convinces himself to delay in his [second soliloquy](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/soliloquies/doitpat.html) because the Ghost might be playing false: "The spirit I have seen/May be a devil, and the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape" (2.2.600), and, in his [fifth soliloquy](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/soliloquies/doitpat.html) he tricks himself into believing he should not kill Claudius in his chamber (a perfect opportunity) because he would go to heaven if murdered while praying.

**Claudius

1)** Claudius lies to everyone about the murder of Hamlet's father. He expresses guilt over his deception in an aside:

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word:
O heavy burthen!
(3.1.50)

**2)** Claudius deceives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Hamlet's voyage to England, telling them that the lunatic Hamlet must leave Denmark in the interest of public safety. In truth Claudius plans Hamlet's assassination once he is on English soil:

Our sovereign process, which imports at full,
By letters congruing to that effect,
The present death of Hamlet.
(4.3.64-6)

**Polonius**

**1)** Polonius deceives Laertes when he gives him his blessing to go to Paris but sends Reynaldo to spy on his every action:

Inquire me first what Danskers are in Paris;
And how, and who, what means, and where they keep,
What company, at what expense; and finding
By this encompassment and drift of question
That they do know my son, come you more nearer
Than your particular demands will touch it:
Take you, as 'twere, some distant knowledge of him;
As thus, 'I know his father and his friends,
And in part him: ' do you mark this, Reynaldo?
(2.1.8-16)

**2)** Polonius deceives Hamlet when he, for the benefit of Claudius, arranges for Ophelia to meet Hamlet by accident to determine whether his irrational behavior is the result of "the affliction of his love" (3.1.36). So skilled is Polonius at the art of deceit that he has Ophelia pretend to read a prayer book to deflect any suspicion that might arise from her lurking alone in the corridor – Hamlet will believe she is simply meditating in seclusion:

Ophelia, walk you here. Gracious, so please you,
We will bestow ourselves. (To Ophelia) Read on this book,
That show of such an exercise may color
Your loneliness.
(3.1.43-6)

**3)** Again Polonius deceives Hamlet when he hides behind the arras to spy on Hamlet's conversation with his mother (3.3.28). This time, however, Polonius pays for his deceit with his life, as Hamlet pierces him through the curtain, believing he is Claudius.

**Even More Deception**

One could cite numerous additional examples of deception in *Hamlet*: Horatio is deceptive by being a willing participant in Hamlet's plot to "catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.606); Ophelia deceives Hamlet by remaining silent about her father's manipulative behavior (2.1.107-9) and (3.1.43-9); Fortinbras lies to his uncle about his plan to attack Denmark (1.2.28-30); Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deceive Hamlet about their voyage to England; Laertes lies to Hamlet about the poison-tipped sword he wields in the duel; and so on.

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From *Hamlet, an ideal prince, and other essays in Shakesperean interpretation: Hamlet; Merchant of Venice; Othello; King Lear* by Alexander W. Crawford. Boston R.G. Badger, 1916.

There is no doubt that Hamlet from the first understood his task as more than taking the life of the king. With the rebellion of Fortinbras threatening, and on the "background of general corruption" which the rule of Claudius had induced, he saw his task to be a gigantic national undertaking. He was not called merely to the physical labor of the hangman, but to the moral task of the restorer of righteousness. To take the life of the murderer needed only the nerve of the common assassin, but to "revenge" the death of the late king called for wisdom and tact of the highest order. He well knew that he could not purge his country with an assassin's dagger, nor purify it by the king's blood. Unlike Fortinbras and Laertes, his passion was not vindictiveness, and could not be satisfied by avenging a guilty king on an innocent nation.

An immediate attack upon the king, then, might have been courageous, but it would have been foolhardy, and would have frustrated Hamlet's larger designs. The king was beginning to have a wholesome fear of Hamlet, and seemed to live in dread lest he should raise up an open rebellion against him. He thought himself of bringing the issue with Hamlet to public accounting, but he was afraid of Hamlet's popularity, as he later admits to Laertes,

"Why to a public count I might not go.
Is the great love the general gender bear him.
(IV. vii. 17-18.)

Nothing would have been easier than for Hamlet to make it a public issue. If it was easy for Laertes at a later time to raise up a band against the king whom he thought had killed his father, it would have been doubly easy now for Hamlet, who according to Claudius himself was "loved of the distracted multitude." But this was the very thing Hamlet wished to avoid. He sees his nation already preparing to resist the threatened attack from Norway, and with heroic self-restraint and true patriotism he refrains from anything that might encourage the enemy. He is commissioned rather to, save his country, as well from foreign aggression, as from the internal corruption that threatens its very existence. The case is desperate and the task difficult, and he would gladly pursue a more tranquil career. But he rises to the necessity, howsoever reluctantly, and steadfastly pursues his appointed task.

In all this Hamlet remembers the warning of the ghost not to taint his mind. He obeys the injunction to keep a clear conscience, and not make himself a worse criminal in revenging the crime of his uncle. This marks the higher purpose and superior nobleness of character that Shakespeare has put into his Hamlet, thereby raising the tone of his play above all other versions of the story. The spirit of some other versions of the Hamlet story is very different, as may be gathered from the German play, *Fratricide Punished*, where we find in the Prologue the following injunction to the prince: "Therefore be ready to sow the seeds of disunion, mingle passion with their marriage, and put jealousy in their hearts. Kindle a fire of revenge, let the sparks fly over the whole realm; entangle kinsmen in the net of crime, and give joy to hell, so that those who swim in the sea of murder may soon drown." 1

This, however, was the very thing that Hamlet made every effort to avoid. As in the version of Belleforest, Hamlet was a deliverer of his people. He tried to save his beloved country from the unjust and corrupt rule of the king, and, as Shakespeare has added to his story, he had also to ward off the threatened attack of Fortinbras. Shakespeare has, therefore, made his task doubly difficult. He must revenge his father, which means he must deliver Denmark from the corrupting rule of Claudius. And he must do this without laying the country open to an attack from Fortinbras. The dramatist has made his task more complicated and hence more difficult than in any other version of the story. But in carrying him through without complete failure in either of his purposes, he has depicted in him a true national hero.

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**FOOTNOTE 1:** Furness's translation. *Variorum Hamlet*, 11. p. 123.

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**Hamlet's Relationship with the Ghost**

From *Hamlet, an ideal prince, and other essays in Shakesperean interpretation: Hamlet; Merchant of Venice; Othello; King Lear* by Alexander W. Crawford. Boston R.G. Badger.

The ghost in *Hamlet* no doubt performs an important dramatic function. Whatever may have been Shakespeare's belief about ghosts he utilizes the popular conception to render objective what is in the minds of his characters. The ghosts or witches that appeared to Macbeth spoke out only what was in his mind, and revealed his inner thoughts to the audience better than any words of his could do. In the same way, the ghost in *Hamlet* discloses to us the suspicions already in the minds of Hamlet and his friends. When Hamlet sees the ghost and hears its revelations, he voices this thought by saying, "Oh my prophetic soul!" (I. V. 40.) And the fact that it first appears to the friends of Hamlet suggests that they shared his suspicions and perhaps even anticipated them, though no word had been spoken. The inquiry of Marcellus about the cause of the warlike activity and his later remark about the rotten condition of Denmark seem to imply a suspicion that he is endeavouring to verify or to disprove.

The scepticism that all at first show concerning the ghost seems to indicate their unwillingness to put faith in their suspicions. They do not willingly think evil of the king, and they all want some undoubted proof, not only of the fact of the ghost's appearance, but of the truth of his words. Horatio hesitates to take ths word of Bernardo and Francisco, and is convinced only by the actual sight of the ghost. Hamlet, apparently the least suspicious of all, for he is the last to see the ghost, seems reluctant to believe that Horatio and the others have seen it. To convince him, Horatio assures him with an oath of the truth of his report, saying,

"As I do live, my honor'd lord, 'tis true."
(I. ii. 221.)

His doubts are not finally removed until the fourth scene when he sees the ghost for himself. At last, the evidence overcomes his moral reluctance to believe such foul suspicions, and Hamlet is convinced of the guilt of the king.

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**Claudius and the Condition of Denmark**

From *Hamlet, an ideal prince.* Alexander W. Crawford.

The second scene of the play makes it clear that it is the weak and corrupt condition of Denmark under Claudius that affords occasion for the warlike activities of Fortinbras. From the beginning of the play Hamlet has had suspicions, which are gradually confirmed as the plot develops, that Claudius has exerted a very evil influence upon the country. The later development shows that Hamlet has rightly divined the true inwardness of the situation. Claudius himself is fully cognizant of the state of affairs, and from his lips we get the true explanation. He discloses the fact that young Fortinbras has no such wholesome fear and respect for him as he had for the late king, and makes the damaging admission that:

"young Fortinbras,
Holding a weak supposal of our worth, . . .
. . . hath not fail'd to pester us with message.
Importing the surrender of those lands
Lost by his father."
(I. ii. 17-34.)

Claudius further remarks that he has written to Norway, uncle of young Fortinbras, imploring him to restrain the fiery temper of his nephew, and now dispatches two courtiers to the same end. Only by weakly supplicating Norway is Claudius able to keep peace with his neighbor and prevent an invasion. This weakness is in great contrast to the days of the elder Hamlet, when the Danish royal power was feared and respected, both at home and abroad.

There is no doubt that Claudius was a thoroughly bad man. If like Hamlet we cannot prove it at the opening of the play, we need only wait for the later developments and for his villainous attempts on Hamlet's life. Claudius is indeed as much a villain as Macbeth, and with little or nothing of Macbeth's great ability. The ghost speaks of him as one "whose natural gifts were poor to those of mine!" (I. v. 61-52.) And Hamlet, comparing him to his father in his later interview with his mother, calls him:

"A murderer and a villain;
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings."
(III. iv. 96-98.)

Yet Claudius, though a villain, was capable of quick and effective action. He was clever enough to leave no traces of his crime when he killed his brother, and he showed dispatch and skill in quickly bringing about the election of himself as the next king before Hamlet could return from the university. This same power of speedy action is his greatest strength, and enables him to make Hamlet's task at once exceedingly difficult and dangerous.

Gradually there is disclosed in the play considerable evidence of a general corruption and weakening of the state under the example and influence of Claudius. Hamlet is conscious of it on his return from the university, and the king readily admits his dissipations. No doubt Hamlet's sad words about the condition of the world in his first soliloquy are spoken more with reference to Denmark :

"Fie on't! O fie! 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely."
(I. ii. 135-7.)

The king had led the way in dissipation and debauchery, and in his first interview with Hamlet promises elaborate festivities (I. ii. 121-9). In the same scene Hamlet refers to these habits, and satirically tells his friend Horatio: "We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart" (I. ii. 175). In his next conversation with Horatio, Hamlet again speaks of the king's drinking habits, and says:

"The king doth wake to-night and takes his rouse.
Keeps wassail, and the swaggering up-spring reels;
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down.
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge."
(I. iv. 8-12.)

When Horatio asks if this is a Danish custom, Hamlet replies that "it is a custom More honor'd in the breach than the observance." At a later time when Hamlet tries to show to his mother the baseness of his uncle he speaks of him as "the bloat king" (III. iv. 182).

To the virtuous mind of Hamlet one of the worst features of this debauchery is that it has destroyed their reputation among nations, and the fair name of Denmark has suffered irreparable loss:

"This heavy-headed revel east and west
Makes us traduced and tax'd of other nations;
They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition."

(I. iv. 17-20.)

Then he moralizes upon the baneful influence of "some vicious mole of nature" that corrupts the whole being, until such men

"Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault."
(I. iv. 35-6.)

The inevitable implication of course is that the whole state of Denmark has been corrupted by the king's bad habits and vicious nature, until

"the dram of eale,
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
To his own scandal."
(I. iv. 36-8.)

This condition of corruption impresses both Hamlet and his friends almost from the outset. When the ghost has vanished after his appearance to Hamlet and others, Marcellus at once recognizes its relation to the country, and says, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I. iv. 90). It is Hamlet, however, with his deep moral nature, who most fully recognizes the king's corrupting influence upon Denmark. After the ghost has revealed to him the matter and the manner of his murder, Hamlet at once sees that the crime is not a mere matter between him and Claudius, but that it has engendered a bad condition of affairs in the state and that it is imperative upon him to set himself to the task of reparation:

"The time is out of joint; — O cursed spite.
That ever I was born to set it right! — "
(I. V. 189-190.)

These thoughts are no doubt in Hamlet's mind when Rosencrantz and Guildenstem tell him the only news is "that the world's grown honest." To this he quickly replies that "your news is not true," and goes on to say that "Denmark's a prison," and "one o' the worst," and at any rate "to me it is a prison" (II. ii. 233-246). A little later in his great soliloquy, referring to his grievous troubles and sufferings, he calls them "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (III. i. 58). No doubt he is thinking not only of the foul murder of his father, but of the times that are out of joint and that he must try to set right.

There has been a feeling from the first that the coming of the ghost has had to do with affairs of state. Horatio, who has just come from Wittenberg when Marcellus and others report to him of seeing the ghost, volunteers the idea that "This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (I. i. 69). Horatio knows nothing of the murder and yet he thinks the ghost has to do with affairs of state. When he sees the ghost, he thinks of three possible reasons for his appearance. He may want something done; or may want to tell where he has hoarded some treasure; or he may be privy to his country's fate. Taken in connection with what he has just said of the impending danger from young Fortinbras, it seems to indicate a feeling that all is not well with Denmark. Hamlet, however, is the only one who fully comprehends the actual truth.

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Of the three types of plays recognized in the Shakespeare [First Folio](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/shakespeareinprint.html) -- Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies -- the last has been the most discussed annnd is clearest in outline.

1. Tragedy must end in some tremendous catastrophe involving in Elizabethan practice the death of the principal character.

2. The catastrophe must not be the result of mere accident, but must be brought about by some essential trait in the character of the hero acting either directly or through its effect on other persons.

3. The hero must nevertheless have in him something which outweighs his defects and interests us in him so that we care for his fate more than for anything else in the play. The problem then is, why should a picture of the misfortunes of some one in whom we are thus interested afford us any satisfaction? No final answer has yet been found. Aristotle said that the spectacle by rousing in us pity and fear purges us of these emotions, and this remains the best explanation. Just as a great calamity sweeps from our minds the petty irritations of our common life, so the flood of esthetic emotion lifts us above them.

In the drama of [Marlowe](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/shakespearecontemps.html) the satisfaction appears to depend, not on the excitement of the catastrophe, but on the assertion of the greatness of man's spirit; and this seems to have been the theme also of [Senecan tragedy](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/senecadrama.html). It will be remembered that the first part of *Tamburlaine* ends, not in his death, but in his triumph, and yet we feel that the peculiar note of tragedy has been struck. We have the true tragic sense of liberation. [Kyd](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/playanalysis/revengetragedy.html) also asserted the independence of the spirit of man, if he is prepared to face pain and death.

It is really much more difficult than is always recognized to be sure what constituted Shakespeare's view of the tragic satisfaction or even that he believed in it. It is possibly true that Lear is a better man at the end of the play than he was at the beginning, and that without his suffering he would not have learned sympathy with his kind; but this does not apply either to Hamlet or to Othello, and even in the case of King Lear it does not explain the aesthetic appeal. That depends on something more profound.

The student, after getting the story of the tragedy quite clear, should concentrate first on the character of the hero. Ask yourself whether his creator considered him ideally perfect -- in which case the appeal probably lies in the spectacle of a single human soul defying the universe; or flawed -- in which case the defect will bring about the catastrophe. It is true that in the [Revenge Play](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/playanalysis/revengetragedy.html) type we have frequently the villain-hero, but the interest there depends rather on his courage and independence of man and God than on his villainy. This is particularly true of pre-Shakespearean plays. It is remarkable that the post-Shakespearean drama was apt to combine plots involving unnatural crimes and vicious passions with a somewhat shallow conventional morality.

History plays seem in Shakespeare's hands to represent the compromise of life. They may end in catastrophe or in triumph, but the catastrophe is apt to be undignified and the triumph won at a price. Again, we may say that in the [Histories](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/numberofplays.html) Shakespeare is dealing with the nation as hero. The hero in this case is immortal and his tale cannot be a true tragedy; while on the other hand there can never be the true comedy feeling of an established and final harmony. Apart from Shakespeare, Histories are almost entirely inspired by patriotism, often of a rather rabid type.

There is the greatest variety in the section entitled "Comedy," and critics generally distinguish sharply between Comedies and Romances in Reconciliation plays. We are apt to expect a comedy to aim chiefly at making us laugh, but, although there are extremely funny passages, it is clear that this is not the main character of any but one or two early plays. The Romances are four -- "Cymbeline," "Winter's Tale," "The Tempest," and the play not contained in the First Folio -- "Pericles." "Cymbeline" [was] actually printed at the end of the Tragedies for reasons which can only be conjectured. Romances are always concerned with two generations, and cover the events of many years. There is an element of the marvellous in them, and the emphasis on repentance and forgiveness is very marked. But they are, indeed, the natural development of the plays of the great period. "As You Like It" deals also with two generations, with wrongs committed and then repentance, forgiveness and restitution. In the earlier play the stress is laid on the actions and emotions of the younger folk, while in the later plays the older generation is most fully portrayed.

But before Shakespeare arrived at this conception of Comedy, he had tried various types. In "The Comedy of Errors," founded on a translation of a Latin comedy, he had produced an example of pure farce. The humour in a farce generally consists of violent action provoked by misunderstanding of a gross kind. There is an element of farce, therefore, in the "Taming of the Shrew," though the main appeal of the play is the stimulus of Petruchio's high spirits. Probably the original conception of the "Merchant of Venice" was much the same. A youthful Shakespeare was probably pleased with the outwitting of the churlish old miser Shylock. It is the theme of youth and crabbed age. An older Shakespeare must have revised it and seen the story more through the eyes of Shylock and of Antonio, and the unity of the play has been destroyed.

"Love's Labour's Lost" and the "Midsummer Night's Dream" are probably both Court Comedies, and have the superficiality of emotion which for whatever reason was associated with Court Comedy. A graceful and fanciful working up of the occasion for which the play was produced was the special character of a Court play, and it has been conjectured that the "Midsummer Night's Dream" was written for a noble marriage.

But the Shakespearean theory of Comedy went much deeper than this, and has no classical exposition, Meredith's "Essay on Comedy" is quite inapplicable. It may be suggested that his intent was to present a picture of an harmonious society in which each person's individuality is fully developed and yet is in perfect tune with all the others. At the beginning of the play there is always an element of discord, which is resolved before the close. As in History the hero of the play is rather Society as a whole than any person in it, and because of this we get at the end a sense of "happiness ever after." In the last plays we have generally an incorrectly reported death, and the discovery of these mistakes gives a curious sense that "there's nothing serious in mortality." All existence is seen as one great web of being, so that, although in tragedy, Hamlet sickens at the thought:

"Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
May stop a wall to keep the wind away."

in "The Tempest" the same thought becomes:

"Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange."

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**Life in Shakespeare's London**

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This people, in a sense, was an ignorant people. Those of the highest rank were well and laboriously educated according to the contemporary standard; but the rank and file paid no attention to learning. They neither read, wrote, nor thought. One today is astonished at the ignorance of the then common people concerning public affairs. Compare a history like Holinshed's with a history like Fronde's or Grardiner's. You find in the former no exposition of principles, no attempt to sift tradition from fact, no sense whatever of the dignity of a thousand page folio in black letter. On the other hand, we read in Holinshed of a terrible storm that killed a dog in Essex, or of a cow that gave birth to a five-legged calf in Kent. Street parades, tiltings, trivial and momentous events alternately, mere gossip, above all, inspired utterances in the form of public proclamations from the crown — this is the sum and substance of Holinshed and Stow — and the people were well satisfied.

The matter-of-fact critic of today is too apt to condemn the Elizabethan dramatists for the credulity evinced by their characters. But such criticism is often misplaced. The Elizabethans were credulous people. The opening chapter of Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* relates a number of foolish inducements held out by Salvation Yeo and John Oxenham, two prospective sailors of the South Seas. But the inducements were not considered foolish then. Kingsley, in his charming way, points a little pleasantly at the inconsistency of English inscriptions upon the wondrous horn of ivory that had been picked up in the land of the Incas. Even here, the amusing sarcasm is slightly misplaced. The Elizabethans would not allow themselves to be troubled by such trifles. The golden city of Monoa was as real to them as Paradise or Hell. The chapter, in fact, is almost a literal transcript of a contemporary pamphlet, doubtless produced in perfect faith. Even Shakespeare, judged by our modern standards, may not have been a really sophisticated man; the ring of truth in Othello's tales to Desdemona may be due to a believing heart.

There was going on all the time a rapid change in the social scale. The middle class was rising into prominence. It was no longer necessary to be born a peer in order to become a man of wealth and position. The story of Whittington was repeating itself every day; and, what is more to the point, the people were daily growing more and more proud of the fact.

As the age of Elizabeth was the golden time of literature, so it was the golden time of superstition. There was one Banks, a hanger-on of the Earl of Essex, who lived in the Old Bailey and who possessed a wonderful horse named Morocco shod with shoes of silver. This horse could dance to music, count, make answer to questions; do a thousand and one other tricks, among which was his reputed ascent of St. Paul's steeple. London looked upon Banks and his horse as little short of the supernatural; and in later years all London wept at the news from Italy, where both master and horse were burned to death on the charge of sorcery.

With this execution the Londoners could heartily sympathize, for they were superstitious to a degree incomprehensible at the present day. None was so ready as Sir Walter Scott himself to acknowledge that the fatal flaw in *The Monastery* was the demand put upon the credulity of an incredulous people by the introduction of the White Lady of Ayenal. Nothing so well illustrates this difference between the time of Shakespeare and our own as a comparison of the failure of *The Monastery* and of the success of *Hamlet*. A serious tragedy based upon a trivial motive is likely to degenerate into out and out farce. Had the audience of Shakespeare believed as we do in regard to superstition, both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* would have probably missed the public approbation. We should certainly think a logic-loving philosopher or an iron-nerved general tainted in his wits, if he allowed his reason to be swayed by a shadowy apparition, or his intrigues to be governed by a trio of vanishing witches; yet Shakespeare was making use of the most powerful motive at his command. Doubtless every person in The Globe play-house shuddered at the appearance of Hamlet's ghost, for it was true, actually true to them, that this might be either Denmark's spirit or the very devil in a pleasing shape.



John Stow, the annalist of England and author of the *Survey of London* was, next to Camden, the most famous antiquarian student of the age; yet this man, whose *Survey* is the great store- house of knowledge about Elizabethan London — learned, careful, and methodical — thus interprets the effect of a church struck by lightning:

"And here a note of this steeple: as I have oft heard my father report, upon St. James's night, certain men in the loft next under the bells, ringing of a peel, a tempest of lightning and thunder did arise, an ugly-shapen sight appeared to them, coming in at the south window, and lighted on the north, for fear whereof they all fell down, and lay as dead for the time, letting the bells ring and cease of their own accord; when the ringers came to themselves, they found certain stones of the north window to be razed and scratched, as if they had been so much butter, printed with a lion's claw; the same stones were fastened there again and so remain until this day. I have seen them oft, and have put a feather or small stick into the holes where the daws had entered three or four inches deep. At the same time certain main timber posts at Queen-hithe were scratched and cleft from the top to the bottom; and the pulpit cross in Paul's churchyard was likewise scratched, cleft, and overturned. One of the ringers lived in my youth, whom I have often heard to verify the same to be true."

The people not only believed in ghosts and witches, but in magic of every sort. Alchemy was a common hobby, and many a man of brain wasted his time and ruined his fortune in the vain search for the philosopher's stone long after the practice had been held up to ridicule upon the stage by Ben Jonson.

Astrology, or astronomical fortune-telling, was so thoroughly a factor of the age that every one desired the casting of his horoscope. Leicester consulted Doctor Dee, the astrologer, to discover a propitious date for the Queen's coronation. The great Queen herself consulted him upon an occasion, instead of her family physician, in order to charm away the tooth-ache. Again, a waxen image of Elizabeth was picked up in one of the fields near London. Doctor Dee was immediately sent for to counteract by his charms the evil effect of this familiar kind of sorcery.

People, one and all, believed in fairies. The usual critical opinion, that the opening scenes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* owe their arrangement to a desire to lead gradually from the real to the unreal, would have caused an Elizabethan to laugh, if not outwardly, in his sleeve. There is nothing unreal about the fairies of that delightful comedy except their size. Any one might not only have seen the pleasant fairies, but also the wicked, and might have become blind by the sight, if he did not take care to protect himself by charms. A grown man did not feel foolish in those days if when in the neighbourhood of a lonely and ghost-haunted wood at night he wore his coat inside out. There were innumerable superstitious rites performed at births, christenings, weddings, on certain days of the year, and in certain places; as, the churchyard, the cross-roads, etc. Every hour in the day, every article in the world — stone, plant, or animal — had its cluster of superstitions.

The time was further characterised by a general freedom of manners. We often find personal ridicule and abuse, as well as praise, levelled at individuals from the stage. Different companies and rival play-wrights fought out their private battles on the public boards. A play of ancient setting, such as *Hamlet*, does not scruple to allude to current events of interest to Londoners. The mob in *Romeo and Juliet* rallies to the cry of the London 'prentice lads. The actors talked to people in the pit, who in turn pelted an unpopular player from the stage. There existed, likewise, a coarseness of speech in every-day talk that would be quite intolerable to-day. Queen Elizabeth swore like a trooper, spat at her favourites, or threw her slipper at the head of an obdurate councillor. The artificial refinement of our age requires the lines of many of Shakespeare's heroines to be curtailed; yet Beatrice and the like talk no more broadly than did that paragon of female excellence, "Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother."

The great popularity of the stage at once suggests the chief characteristic of the age: artificiality. About the middle of the century appeared Lyly's *Euphues*. This book, a kind of tale, owed its great vogue to its quaintness of phrase, its antitheses, and its elaborate conceits. The book sold by wholesale. No one was considered fit to appear in public unless he could talk the fustian fashion of the *Euphues*. The book is intolerably dull to most of us, but the perusal of a few pages will repay the curious, as an object-lesson in the rubbish spoken by the cultivated Elizabethan courtier.

Part of the Euphuistic training was the art of compliment. This habit was fostered by the vanity of the Queen. Elizabeth, so some of the foreigners who saw her tell us, possessed several undesirable characteristics, among others a hooked nose and black teeth, and there is no doubt that her skin wrinkled as she grew near seventy. Yet, to the very end of the great Queen's life, the obsequious courtier was welcome who would assure her that he is like to die if he is debarred the sight of that alabaster brow, of those cheeks of rose covered with the bloom of peaches, of those teeth of pearl. Besides the elaborate compliments to the Queen that were frequently introduced into plays and masques, a common custom was to set up a tablet to her honour in the parish church. Here is an example of their inscriptions:

"Spain's rod, Rome's ruin, Netherland's relief, Heaven's gem, Barth's joy. World's wonder. Nature's chief. Britain's blessing, England's splendour. Religion's nurse and Faith's Defender."

Gossiping was one of the favourite pastimes of the Elizabethans, and London was not yet too large for the practice to be thoroughly effective. Gossip started from the barber-shop and the tavern-table — the Elizabethan equivalent of the afternoon tea — and spread thence in every direction. Space prevents the enumeration of many of the indications of freedom of manner that are to be discovered in every direction. Grossip led to frequent quarrels, that were more hot and bitter because side arms were worn upon all occasions. The fine woman of the time would jostle with the rudest peasants in the pit of the bull-ring and the theatre. Wakes and fairs were of daily occurrence, in which every one joined, irrespective of previous acquaintance. During the yule-tide festivities all distinctions of class were considered as temporarily non-existent. Elizabeth showed herself so often and so intimately to the common people that they considered the acquaintance almost personal. So much for the happy-go-lucky spirit that characterised the time.

The extent of gaming is lamented by all the contemporary writers who have a leaning towards reform. Dicing, card playing, and racing, though to a less extent than the others, were practised upon every hand; while cheating was but too common. In former times it was considered almost a crime to take interest for money loaned, but by the reign of Elizabeth, this prejudice was so completely overborne that usury was practised by all the money lenders, who did not scruple to turn the screws upon the least occasion.

The people were greatly addicted to showy dress, but show in dress was a mere bagatelle. Pageants of all sorts were planned upon the least occasion. Coronations, funerals, and progresses were always got up upon the most spectacular basis. The riding watches, the parades of civic officials in their gaudy robes of state, the Livery Companies upon the river in their brilliant barges, manned by oars-men in full livery, the Queen coming to St. Paul's in 1588, to render thanks for the victory over Spain — all such spectacles were provided with gorgeous pageants, triumphal arches, side-shows, and so forth, that would be weeks preparing.

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