A Crowded Stage – Critical Responses to Hamlet Over Time

Diana Hallam's whistle-stop tour of critical responses to Shakespeare's most commented upon play provides you with a great overview of the landscape, with key criticism from Shakespeare's own time to the present day.

Hamlet is a complex play, described by Harry Levin as

> *the most problematic play ever written by Shakespeare or any other playwright.*

Complexity is to literary critics what honey is to bees, so it is no surprise that Hamlet has attracted what Sean McEvoy describes as a 'vast encrustation' of critical interpretations. The good news is that these interpretations can be grouped according to when they occur in history and what schools of thought they represent.

The 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries

Hamlet was apparently popular with audiences in Shakespeare's time and on into the seventeenth century. Gabriel Harvey, an Elizabethan commentator, praised it for its capacity to 'please the wiser sort' and the title page of the first Quarto goes out of its way to boast that the play was performed at both Oxford and Cambridge. In 1710 the Earl of Shaftesbury recorded that the play was the one

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> *most to have affected English hearts and has perhaps been oftenest acted.*

Eighteenth-century critics, who favoured classicism in drama, responded to Hamlet more critically. In 1748, the French philosopher and writer Voltaire declared the play

> *a vulgar and barbarous drama that would not be tolerated by the vilest populace of France, or Italy.*

Eighteenth-century audiences favoured the French style of plays based on stories from classical antiquity and observing Aristotle's rule that drama observe the three unities of time, place and action. Hamlet offends on all three counts: the action occurs over more than 24 hours, events do not only occur in Elsinore Castle and the play is not exclusively concerned with Hamlet. French classical drama also involved maintaining a particular tone: lofty and posh; tasteful and tragic. The inclusion of comedy in Hamlet and in particular the obscenity of some of the double-entendres was not appreciated by seventeenth century critics and Hamlet's punning to Ophelia on 'country matters' (3.2.115) famously prompted Lewis Theobald to write in 1726 that

> *if ever the Poet deserved a Whipping for low and indecent Ribaldry, it was for this passage. (sic)*

The writer Samuel Johnson identified the apparent passivity of Hamlet in enacting revenge, and in describing him in 1765 as ‘rather an instrument than an agent’ was one of the first to identify what came to be seen as the central critical problem of the play: Hamlet’s delay in killing Claudius.

The Romantics and Hamlet

Writers of the Romantic Movement were drawn to the hesitating Prince, seeing him as like themselves: a sensitive, suffering intellectual incapable of carrying out the Ghost’s wishes. In 1795, Goethe memorably described the insertion of revenge into Hamlet as equivalent to ‘an oak tree planted in a costly jar’; it was bound to shatter him. The writer William Hazlitt famously remarked

> *it is we who are Hamlet*

referring to the way in which Hamlet articulates the experience of anyone who has felt

> *his mind sink within him.*

This view was shared by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-

1834), a major Romantic poet and critic, who identified strongly with Hamlet, saying that he had

> *a smack of Hamlet in (him)self*

(by which he meant that he was capable of feeling a bit Hamlety). The relatability of Hamlet as a hesitant and suffering human being has been a recurring theme in much subsequent critical work.

Prince-centric Interpretations – The Early 20th Century

However, the final year of the nineteenth century saw a powerful challenge to this view from the founder of modern psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. In his seminal book The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), Freud rejected the idea that Hamlet is basically paralysed by his own thoughtfulness, pointing to his stabbing of Polonius, and his premeditated murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Instead, he proposed that there is something specific about Claudius that makes it impossible for Hamlet to kill him. Freud theorised that achieving healthy adulthood involved the suppression of a boy's infant desires to kill his father and have sex with his mother. As the hero of Sophocles's tragedy Oedipus the King does both these things, Freud called this desire the 'Oedipus Complex.' Because Claudius kills Hamlet's father and has sex with his mother, Freud considered that Hamlet is unable to kill the man who shows him

> *the repressed wishes of his own childhood realised.*

This laid the foundation for much psychoanalytic literary criticism to follow.

Four years later, the influential Oxford English professor A.C. Bradley appeared on the scene with his own particular brand of character criticism. In Shakespearean Tragedy (1904) based on his famous lectures, Bradley's Hamlet is not neurotic but melancholic. Hamlet's 'whole mind is poisoned' by the loss of his father and the hasty remarriage of his mother and his melancholy is 'the centre of the tragedy' making Hamlet incapable of action: 'he can do nothing.' However, the great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, was unimpressed by the play:

> *the principal figure has no character whatever*

he thundered, and concluded that Shakespeare

> *did not even understand that this was necessary.*

The mid-twentieth century saw another high profile hatchet job. The modernist poet and critic, T.S. Eliot, famously declared the play 'an artistic failure.' He thought Gertrude was too 'negative and insignificant' to be a believable

cause of Hamlet's despair. He argued that the play suffered from being superimposed on an older revenge play and coined the term 'objective correlative' for the idea that a fictional character's responses have to be sufficiently justified in the text if they are to be convincing.

A Break with Character Readings

During the mid-twentieth century, there was a general move away from prince-centric interpretations and a backlash against excessively sympathetic readings of Hamlet's character. Wilson Knight argued that

> *we need not see though Hamlet's eyes.*

In his view, Claudius was an effective king and Hamlet was

> *an element of evil in the state of Denmark [...]*
> *the ambassador of death walking amid life*

corroding everything

> *like an acid eating into metal.*

The commonsensical professor of English literature John Dover Wilson (1881-1969) was among the first to break with

psychoanalytic and character criticism, solving the problem of Hamlet's delays and inconsistencies by asserting that Hamlet could hardly be expected to behave like a real person because he wasn't one:

> *Hamlet is a character in a play, not in history.*

In a lecture to the British Academy, entitled 'The Prince or the Poem', C.S. Lewis argued for the latter; in his view, 'the subject of Hamlet is death' and Hamlet is relatable and important only insofar as he articulates the fear of being dead, the theme which he felt dominated the poetry of the play.

Feminism, Reader-Response, New Historicism and More

Important feminist readings of Hamlet appeared in the second half of the twentieth century. Carolyn Heilbrun rode to Gertrude's defence, pointing out that if we look at what Gertrude actually says as opposed to what is said about her, she emerges as a woman of sound good sense. Elaine Showalter analysed the characterisation of Ophelia as a kind of hybrid of patriarchal assumptions and symbolisms used to typify young women.

The past fifty years have been characterised by a proliferation of differing approaches both revisiting and breaking with previous interpretations. E.A.J. Honigmann, a reader-response critic, argues that the audience is supposed to find Hamlet a sympathetic character. The great American humanist critic Harold Bloom agreed,

describing him as ‘a charismatic-of-charismatics’ but acknowledging that he is nonetheless a flawed protagonist or a ‘hero-villain’ whose great value lies principally in being

> *the leading Western representation of an intellectual.*

Kiernan Ryan defends Hamlet to the hilt as ‘hoodwinked by history’. He takes the opposite view to Wilson Knight, namely that there is nothing wrong with Hamlet and everything wrong with the Denmark in which the Prince lives:

> *it’s the time that’s ‘out of joint’ (1.5.188) and not Hamlet.*

Janet Adelman developed the feminist argument by insisting that Hamlet is more interested in redeeming his mother than avenging his father. In her view ‘The Mousetrap’ was designed

> *to catch the conscience of the queen.*

Latterly, the historicist perspective, pioneered by Stephen Greenblatt, has broken with character criticism and attempted to view the play as a product of its time. Greenblatt is particularly interested in the appearance of a Catholic Ghost to a Protestant Prince and sees the play as

marking the uneasy spiritual effect of Protestantism's break with Catholic doctrines concerning the status of the dead and the rituals which could be performed for them. Leonard Tennenhouse, on the other hand, thinks that the play dramatises Early Modern power politics. For him the tragedy lies in the fact that neither Claudius nor Hamlet is able to combine the necessary routes to stabilise power: 'the magic of blood' and 'the effective use of force'. Lisa Jardine also applies a historian's perspective, pointing out how Polonius's infiltration of Gertrude's closet

> *fatally confuses privacy with affairs of state.*

Most recently, Emma Smith has argued that 'character' may not be a useful category from which to view the play. She points out how actors doubled roles and roles themselves seem to provide 'psychic doubling' with characteristics refracted or shared between more than one character.

By way of conclusion, Stephen Greenblatt provides a helpful summary, suggesting that Shakespeare may have been aiming for

> *a deliberate forcing together of radically incompatible accounts of almost everything that matters in Hamlet*

such that

the opposing positions challenge each other, clashing and sending shock waves through the play.

Hamlet's ability to generate apparently endless shock waves looks set to continue long into the future.