



## SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRE

### WORKSHEET 4: *HAMLET* (c. 1600-1601)

#### I. *Hamlet*, Providentialism and Early Modern Socio-Political Theory

1. According to Francis Barker, in his chapter "Hamlet's Unfulfilled Interiority" (1992), how have Romantic and post-Romantic critics traditionally read *Hamlet*, and why is this reading historically inaccurate?
2. What is the "body politic" (p. 159), according to Barker, and what essential idea(s) does the metaphor of a body imply?
3. In what ways could *Hamlet* be read, following J.W. Lever's terminology, as a 'tragedy of state'?
4. Watch the opening scene of Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), and then compare it to that of Grigori Kozintsev's *Hamlet* (1964), and/or to Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996). What differences can you observe between the adaptations, and what reading do you think each film will make of the play?

#### II. Identity: A Historically-Premature Search for 'Interiority' (Act I, Scene ii)

1. What is the theory of kingship, according to Barker, and how can lines 1-4 and 64 of Claudius's speech in I, ii, be interpreted in the light of this definition? What is Claudius trying to do in his speech, and how does Hamlet respond to that on lines 65 and 67?
2. What is the significance of Hamlet's refusal to celebrate Claudius and Gertrude's marriage, and of his reply to Gertrude (ll. 76-86), and especially of his claim that he has "that within which passeth show" (l. 85), in relation to the whole play? Is the fact that it is his first speech in the play of any significance? Watch Branagh's cinematic version and Thomas Ostermeier's filmed stage production (2008) and discuss how each director chooses to portray the scene.
3. What, do you think, does Barker mean when he says that Hamlet's subjectivity is "anachronistic" (p. 164), and that his modern interiority "remains gestural" (p. 163)? What metaphor does the text offer, according to Barker, in order to show Hamlet's still empty subjectivity? Now turn to pp. xlv-xlvii of Alan Sinfield's "Introduction" (2015). How does the play attempt to dramatise subjectivity and how does it draw attention to its historical development?

### III. Revenge Tragedy: The Ghost and the Play-within-the-Play

1. Read Old Hamlet's speech in I, v (ll. 1-91). Does he fit Hamlet's idealised description in III, iv (ll. 54-68)? Why/Why not? What effect do the ghost's words have on Hamlet?
2. Now watch Branagh's depiction of Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost, and then compare it to Peter Brook's rendering of the same scene in his filmed stage production of *Hamlet* (2001). Which filmed version do you think is most accurate or effective? Why?
3. Why does Hamlet claim that he will "put an antic disposition on" (I, v, l. 179) after talking to the Ghost, and how is this received in court? How can Hamlet's delay in revenging be read?
4. Does the play-within-the-play in III, ii, lead to certainty about Claudius and, therefore, to revenge? Why/Why not? Justify your answer by close reference to the text.

### IV. The 'To be, or not to be' Soliloquy

1. What topics can be found in Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy (III, i, ll. 57-89), and how is it structured thematically? What imagery and use of rhetorical figures (metaphors, personifications, antitheses, etc.) can you identify in it? In your view, what is the mood of the soliloquy (e.g. reflective, philosophical, pessimistic, belligerent)?
2. Do you think Hamlet knows he is being spied on throughout the soliloquy and in the 'nunnery scene' (ll. 90-162)? If so, when do you think he discovers this? Describe how and at which point you would stage Hamlet's realisation if you were a director.
3. Watch Olivier's depiction of the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, and then compare it to Branagh's, Brook's, Ostermeier's and/or Franco Zeffirelli's (1990) renderings. How is their approach to the soliloquy different or similar, and what aspects does each director emphasise?

### V. Act V: Subversion or Containment?

1. How can Hamlet's change of behaviour in V be understood? Do you agree with Barker's claim that *Hamlet* is a "contradictory, transitional text" (p. 164)?
2. How can Hamlet's death be understood? Is Hamlet's modernity completely "extinguished" in act V (Barker, 1992, p. 166)? Now read pp. lvi-lviii of Sinfield's "Introduction". Will Horatio and/or Fortinbras, in his view, be able to reveal Hamlet's interiority or "the heart of [his] mystery?"
3. Read pp. xlvi-lv of Sinfield's "Introduction". Does he understand *Hamlet* as a subversive play, despite Hamlet's final death? Why/Why not? According to him, what problems does *Hamlet* subversively reveal in Providentialism and, by extension, in Elizabeth I's and James I's reigns?

## VI. *Hamlet*, Gender and Sexuality

1. Read Hamlet's soliloquy in I, ii (ll. 129-159), bearing in mind his attitude towards Gertrude and Claudius's marriage. What is his view of women throughout the soliloquy? Comment on its imagery and use of rhetorical figures and discuss the extent to which Hamlet has a conventional or advanced view of women for his time. Watch Branagh's and Ostermeier's adaptations and discuss how each director stages the soliloquy, paying special attention to the latter's representation of Gertrude.
2. Read the 'closet scene' (III, iv). In lines 40-52, what does Hamlet say are the moral consequences of Gertrude's remarriage? How does Hamlet see and describe female sexuality in lines 54-88? Read Lisa Jardine's (1983 & 1996) and Rebecca Smith's (1992) articles and discuss what other elements are to be taken into account for a feminist assessment and reading of Gertrude.
3. Watch Olivier's depiction of the 'closet scene'. To what extent does the film prove Smith's claim that Gertrude has traditionally been played as a "sensual, deceitful woman" (1992, p. 80)? Justify your views by drawing on specific elements from the scene (acting, *mise-en-scène*, etc.). Now compare it to Branagh's, Zeffirelli's and/or Ostermeier's renderings of the same scene.
4. Read I, iii, paying special attention to Laertes's and Polonius's warnings to Ophelia. What conception and understanding of women do their words imply, and what female virtues are emphasised in their speeches (see especially Laertes's speech in ll. 4-44)? In this context, what is Ophelia's reply like (see ll. 45-51)? Now turn to Sinfield's "Introduction", and especially to pp. li-lvi. In what ways is Polonius's treatment of Laertes and Ophelia different and what views of masculinity and femininity does it reflect? Finally, why do women become the victims of the men's attempts to gain advantage and control among "a corrupt political elite" (lvi)?
5. The 'nunnery scene' (III, i, ll. 89-162) is often read as fostering Ophelia's descent into madness. What does 'nunnery' mean in Elizabethan slang, and why, do you think, does Hamlet react in such a way against Ophelia? What generalised statements on women does Ophelia's supposed betrayal prompt Hamlet to make, and what view of women do they imply? Now watch Olivier's and Branagh's depictions of the scene in their films and discuss the extent to which they portray/critique Hamlet's violence.
6. IV, v depicts Ophelia's madness. What gender conventions and contradictions do Ophelia's songs reflect (see especially ll. 4-70)? Now look at Gertrude's description of her death in IV, vii, ll. 138-159. In this sense, do you agree with David Leverenz that Ophelia's suicide "becomes a little microcosm of the male world's banishment of the female" (1992, pp. 143-144), which does not leave Ophelia any other alternative but madness and/or death? How do Olivier's and Branagh's films represent her madness and death? (See also Leonard's article "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias" (2012) on the Virtual Campus).

## Reference List

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## Visual Material

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