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CRITICAL HISTORY



CHECK THE BOOK

Victor Hugo contrasts Hamlet with Aeschylus' character Prometheus: 'Prometheus is action. Hamlet is hesitation. In Prometheus, the obstacle is exterior; in Hamlet it is interior. In Prometheus, the will is securely nailed down by nails of brass and cannot get loose ... In Hamlet the will is more tied down yet, it is bound by previous meditation, the endless chain of the undecided ... Prometheus, in order to be free, has but a bronze collar to break and a god to conquer; Hamlet must break and conquer himself', *William Shakespeare* (1864).

When the **First Folio** of Shakespeare's works appeared in 1623, it was published so that people could 'reade him ... againe and againe'. From the appearance of the pirated **Quarto** of 1603 and the authorised one of 1604, it was evident that *Hamlet* was already popular not only as a stage play but also as a text to be read, savoured and, no doubt, hotly debated.

Over the last four hundred years, *Hamlet* has become the most frequently performed play of all time. And its popularity is global. It has been translated into dozens of languages and there have been over eighty cinema and television films made of the play and about the play. These films have reached a worldwide audience. With this popularity has come intense critical activity. No literary text in history has been the subject of so much human interrogation as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. An Internet search engine will reveal some seventy thousand web sites devoted to *Hamlet* topics.

Because there has been so much written about *Hamlet* the play, about Hamlet the character and about *Hamlet* criticism itself, what follows can be no more than the crudest outline of some of the ways critics of different generations have responded to the many interesting problems Shakespeare has left us with. The section **Further reading** contains numerous suggestions.

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CRITICISM

The earliest surviving allusion to a play called *Hamlet* is made by Thomas Nashe in 1589; Henslowe records a production in 1594; and in 1596, Thomas Lodge recalls a play with a character looking 'as pale as the Visard of the Ghost which cried so miserably at the theatre, like an oyster wife, "Hamlet, revenge."' Since we believe that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* dates from about 1601, these tantalising references suggest that an earlier play of *Hamlet*, which most scholars think was probably written by Thomas Kyd, was already familiar to London audiences in the 1590s. It may be that Shakespeare revised the old play.

Although there is little of what we would call formal criticism of Shakespeare's play before the eighteenth century, the evidence of eye-witnesses suggest that *Hamlet* was an immediate popular success. Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, the famous diarists, both record attending performances. What is curious about early comments on this most thought-provoking of plays, however, is that few of the 'problems' which have exercised critics for the last three hundred years seem to have bothered Shakespeare's near-contemporaries.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CRITICISM

It was Thomas Hanmer in 1736 who drew attention to Hamlet's delay in carrying out his revenge. Delay was one of the conventions of **revenge tragedy** that Shakespeare inherited, and Hanmer makes the practical point that had the Prince carried out his father's instructions straight away 'there would have been an End of our Play'. But this has not prevented later critics seeing the delay of which Hamlet accuses himself before the Ghost returns to '**whet [his] almost blunted purpose**' (III.4.110) as a matter requiring investigation along psychological lines.

In 1762, Tobias Smollett examined Hamlet's most celebrated **soliloquy** (III.1.56–88) and found in its confused metaphors 'a heap of absurdities, whether we consider the situation, the sentiment, the argumentation or the poetry'; Dr Johnson, perceiving that the confusion arose from 'a man distracted with contrariety of desires and overwhelmed with the magnitude of his own purposes' sought to demonstrate how the thought of the soliloquy 'is connected rather in the speaker's mind, than on his tongue.'

Meanwhile the French philosopher Voltaire, judging the playwright by the prescriptions of neo-classical critical theory, declared in 1733, 'Shakespeare boasted a strong fruitful Genius: He was natural and sublime, but had not so much as a single Spark of good Taste, or knew one Rule of the Drama ... the great Merit of this Dramatic Poet has been the Ruin of the English Stage.' He was particularly scathing about *Hamlet*, writing in 1748, 'one would think that this work was the fruit of the imagination of a drunken savage.'



CHECK THE BOOK

A rich source of early critical reactions to *Hamlet* is David Farley-Hill's three-volume work, *Critical Responses to Hamlet 1600–1854* (1996–9).

BACKGROUND

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE

There are no personal records of Shakespeare's life. Official documents and occasional references to him by contemporary dramatists enable us to draw the main outline of his public life, but his private life remains hidden. Although not at all unusual for a writer of his time, this lack of first-hand evidence has tempted many to read his plays as personal records and to look in them for clues to Shakespeare's character and convictions. The results are unconvincing, partly because Renaissance art was not subjective or designed primarily to express its creator's personality, and partly because the drama of any period is very difficult to read biographically. Except when plays are written by committed dramatists to promote social or political causes (as by Shaw or Brecht), it is all but impossible to decide who amongst the variety of fictional characters in a drama represents the dramatist, or which of the various and often conflicting points of view expressed is authorial.

What we do know can be quickly summarised. Shakespeare was born into a well-to-do family in the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, where he was baptised, in Holy Trinity Church, on 26 April 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was a prosperous glover and leather merchant who became a person of some importance in the town: in 1565 he was elected an alderman of the town, and in 1568 he became high bailiff (or mayor) of Stratford. In 1557 he had married Mary Arden. Their third child (of eight) and eldest son, William, learned to read and write at the primary (or 'petty') school in Stratford and then, it seems probable, attended the local grammar school, where he would have studied Latin, history, logic and rhetoric. In November 1582 William, then aged eighteen, married Anne Hathaway, who was twenty-six years old. They had a daughter, Susanna, in May 1583, and twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585.



CHECK THE BOOK

There are a number of biographies of Shakespeare – many of them very speculative – but the most authoritative is still Samuel Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1975).

Shakespeare next appears in the historical record in 1592 when he is mentioned as a London actor and playwright in a pamphlet by the dramatist Robert Greene. These 'lost years' 1585–92 have been the subject of much speculation, but how they were occupied remains as much a mystery as when Shakespeare left Stratford, and why. In his pamphlet, *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, Greene expresses to his fellow dramatists his outrage that the 'upstart crow' Shakespeare has the impudence to believe he 'is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you'. To have aroused this hostility from a rival, Shakespeare must, by 1592, have been long enough in London to have made a name for himself as a playwright. We may conjecture that he had left Stratford in 1586 or 1587.

During the next twenty years, Shakespeare continued to live in London, regularly visiting his wife and family in Stratford. He continued to act, but his chief fame was as a dramatist. From 1594 he wrote exclusively for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which rapidly became the leading dramatic company and from 1603 enjoyed the patronage of James I as the King's Men. His plays were extremely popular and he became a shareholder in his theatre company. He was able to buy lands around Stratford and a large house in the town, to which he retired about 1611. He died there on 23 April 1616 and was buried in Holy Trinity Church on 25 April.

SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATIC CAREER

Between the late 1580s and 1613 Shakespeare wrote thirty-seven plays, and contributed to some by other dramatists. This was by no means an exceptional number for a professional playwright of the times. The exact date of the composition of individual plays is a matter of debate – the date of first performance is known for only a few plays – but the broad outlines of Shakespeare's dramatic career have been established. He began in the late 1580s and early 1590s by rewriting earlier plays and working with plotlines inspired by the Classics. He concentrated on comedies (such as *The Comedy of Errors*, 1590–4, which derived from the Latin playwright Plautus) and plays dealing with English history (such as the three parts of *Henry VI*, 1589–92), though he also tried his hand at bloodthirsty revenge tragedy (*Titus Andronicus*, 1592–3, indebted to both Ovid and Seneca). During the 1590s Shakespeare developed his expertise



You can read Shakespeare's will in his own handwriting – and in modern transcription – online at the Public Records Office: <http://www.pro.gov.uk/virtualmuseum> and search for 'Shakespeare'.