

# InsideOUT

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## Hamlet

HAMLET  
BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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# InsideOUT

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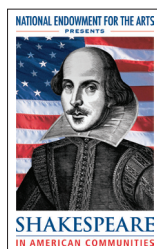
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## SYNOPSIS

*This is a story of a man  
who could not make up his mind.*  
—Laurence Olivier <sup>1</sup>.

**H**amlet is a prince of Denmark with the intelligence and moral sensitivity needed to make him an ideal ruler. However, “the times are out of joint” and corruption covers the court. Hamlet’s mother, Queen Gertrude, has married his uncle, Claudius, the suspected murderer of his father. Though sworn to vengeance by his father’s ghost, Hamlet fails to act swiftly. He feels he must obey his father, but that his deeds must be answerable to God and society. Hamlet loses interest in the world around him and finds it no longer has the powers and possibilities it once possessed. Feigning madness, he attempts to discover the extent of the guilty conspiracy at court with tragic results. ■

1. Epstein, Norrie. *The Friendly Shakespeare*. New York: Penguin Books, 1944.

# SOURCES OF *HAMLET*

Most of Shakespeare's plays did not spring directly from his own imagination, but were based on existing literature or histories. Although Shakespeare's true inspiration or source for *Hamlet* remains uncertain, there are several theories that seem plausible.

Most scholars point to the 12th century historian Saxo Grammaticus' Latin text *Historica Danica* (Danish History) and 16<sup>th</sup>-century author Françoise de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* as the basis for *Hamlet*. Grammaticus tells the tragic story of Prince Amleth, son of the heroic Horwendil and his wife Gerutha, who, deprived of his inheritance by a villainous uncle, feigns insanity to hide his plans for revenge. The story itself was based on a Roman legend of Lucius Junius Brutus. This legend and Grammaticus' plot are strikingly similar to the story of the melancholy Dane: the first king's murder, the "incestuous" marriage, a pretended insanity, a woman as a decoy and spy, with eavesdropping counselors and the trip to England.

One can also find within *Historica Danica* the prototypes of the prince, Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But it is unlikely that Shakespeare read Grammaticus directly. It is more probable that he read the story of Prince Hamblet in the anonymous English translation of Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* when it was published in 1608.

Belleforest's text is longer than the one by Grammaticus and contains more of the psychological and moral observations that we also find in *Hamlet*. Again, the plot patterns are similar though Hamblet and Amleth are both more savage and brutal than

Shakespeare's contemplative Hamlet. There is never any question that Hamblet and Amleth are simply playing insane or that they are going to slay their evil uncles. If Shakespeare indeed drew from one or both of these stories, he clearly increased the level of doubt to challenge the audiences' perceptions of Hamlet over the course of the play.

Another place Shakespeare might have encountered the story was in a play thought to have been produced in 1589, when Shakespeare was just an apprentice. This early Hamlet play—referred to now as *Ur-Hamlet*—is thought to have been written by Thomas Kyd. This is all conjecture as the script for the *Ur-Hamlet* has never been found. Kyd also wrote *The Spanish Tragedy* in 1587 that also contains a ghost seeking revenge, a secret crime, a play-within-a-play, a hero who feigns madness and a love interest who goes insane and commits suicide. That play focused primarily on the revenge, and was the first of a genre of revenge plays in which dramatists place *Hamlet*. Whether Shakespeare remembered the *Ur-Hamlet* or *The Spanish Tragedy* and then went back to *Histoires Tragiques* when sitting down to write *Hamlet* or if he went straight to the history books or did none of the above, these plays and books were highly likely to have influenced the Bard in his writing. ■

Courtesy of First Folio: Teacher Curriculum Guide, The Shakespeare Theatre in The Nation's Capital.



# WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: AN ENCAPSULATED BIOGRAPHY

**F**or all his fame and celebration, William Shakespeare remains a mysterious figure with regard to personal history. There are just two primary sources of information on him: his works and various legal and church documents that have survived from Elizabethan times. Naturally, there are many gaps in this body of information, so we know little about the man as opposed to his plays.

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, on or around April 23, 1564. Church records from Holy Trinity Church indicate that he was baptized there on April 26, 1564. Young William was born of John Shakespeare, a Glover and leather merchant, and Mary Arden, a landed heiress. William, according to the church register, was the third of eight children in the Shakespeare household—three of whom died in childhood. John Shakespeare had a remarkable run of success as a merchant and later as an alderman and high bailiff of Stratford. His fortunes declined, however, in the 1570s.

**T**here is great conjecture about Shakespeare's childhood years, especially regarding his education. Scholars surmise that Shakespeare attended the free grammar school in Stratford, which at the time had a reputation to rival Eton. While there are no records extant to prove this claim, Shakespeare's knowledge of Latin and Classical Greek would tend to support this theory. In addition, Shakespeare's first biographer, Nicholas Rowe, wrote that John Shakespeare had placed William "for some time in a free school."<sup>1</sup> John Shakespeare, as a Stratford official, would have been granted a waiver of tuition for his son. As the records do not exist, we do not know how long William attended the school, but certainly the literary quality of his works suggest a solid education. What is certain is that William Shakespeare never went on to university

schooling, which has stirred some of the debate concerning the authorship of his works.

**T**he next documented event in Shakespeare's life is his marriage to Anne Hathaway on November 28, 1582. William was 18 at the time and Anne was 26—and pregnant. Their first daughter, Susanna, was born on May 26, 1583. The couple later had twins, Hamnet and Judith, born February 2, 1585 and christened at Holy Trinity. Hamnet died in childhood at the age of 11, on August 11, 1596.

**F**or seven years, William Shakespeare effectively disappears from all records, turning up in London circa 1592. This fact has sparked as much controversy about Shakespeare's life as any other period. Rowe notes that young Shakespeare was quite fond of poaching and may have had to flee Stratford after an incident with Sir Thomas Lucy, on whose lands he allegedly hunted. There also is a rumor of Shakespeare working as an assistant schoolmaster in Lancashire for a time, though this is circumstantial at best. It is estimated that Shakespeare arrived in London around 1588 and began to establish himself as an actor and playwright. Evidently, Shakespeare was envied early on for his talent, as related by the critical attack of Robert Greene, a London playwright, in 1592:

*"—an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes factotum, is in his own conceit the only Shakescene in country."*<sup>2</sup>

Greene's bombast notwithstanding, Shakespeare must have shown considerable promise. By 1594, he was not only acting and writing for the Lord Chamberlain's Men (renamed the King's Men after the ascension of James I in 1603), but was a managing partner in the operation as well. With Will Kempe, a master comedian, and Richard Burbage, a leading tragic actor of the day, the Lord Chamberlain's Men became a favorite London troupe, patronized by royalty and made popular by the theatregoing public.

When the plague forced theatre closings in the mid-1590's, Shakespeare and his company made plans for the Globe Theatre in the Bankside district, which was across the river from London proper.

Shakespeare's success also is apparent when studied against other playwrights of this age. His company was the most successful in London in his day. He had plays published and sold in octavo editions, or "penny-copies" to the more literate of his audiences. It is noted that never before had a playwright enjoyed sufficient acclaim to see his works published and sold as popular literature in mid-career. While Shakespeare could not be counted as wealthy by London standards, his success allowed him to purchase New House and retire in comfort to Stratford in 1611.

William Shakespeare wrote his will in 1611, bequeathing his properties to his daughter Susanna (married in 1607 to Dr. John Hall). To his surviving daughter Judith, he left 300 pounds, and to his wife Anne he left "my second best bed."

William Shakespeare allegedly died on his birthday, April 23, 1616. This is probably more of a romantic myth than reality, but Shakespeare was interred at Holy Trinity in Stratford on April 25. In 1623 two working companions of Shakespeare from the Lord Chamberlain's Men, John Heminges and Henry Condell, printed *The First Folio* edition of the Collected Works, of which half the plays contained therein were previously unpublished. *The First Folio* also contained Shakespeare's sonnets.

William Shakespeare's legacy is a body of work that will never again be equaled in Western civilization. His words have endured for more than 400 years and still reach across the centuries as powerfully as ever. ■

1. [www.bardweb](http://www.bardweb.net)
2. Ibid.

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

# SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

FIRST PERFORMED	PLAYS
1590-91	Henry VI, Part 2
1590-91	Henry VI, Part 3
1591-92	Henry VI, Part 1
1592-93	Richard III
1592-93	Comedy of Errors
1593-94	Titus Andronicus
1593-94	The Taming of the Shrew
1594-95	Two Gentlemen of Verona
1594-95	Love's Labour's Lost
1594-95	Romeo and Juliet
1595-96	Richard II
1595-96	A Midsummer Night's Dream
1596-97	King John
1596-97	The Merchant of Venice
1597-98	Henry IV, Part 1
1597-98	Henry IV, Part 2
1598-99	Much Ado About Nothing
1598-99	Henry V
1599-1600	Julius Caesar
1599-1600	As You Like It
1599-1600	Twelfth Night
1600-01	Hamlet
1600-01	The Merry Wives of Windsor
1601-02	Troilus and Cressida
1602-03	All's Well That Ends Well
1604-05	Measure for Measure
1604-05	Othello
1605-06	King Lear
1605-06	Macbeth
1606-07	Antony and Cleopatra
1607-08	Coriolanus
1607-08	Timon of Athens
1608-09	Pericles
1609-10	Cymbeline
1610-11	The Winter's Tale
1611-12	The Tempest
1611-12	Henry VIII
1612-13	The Two Noble Kinsmen

# HAMLET'S CHARACTER

*Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I.*  
—*Hamlet*, Act II, scene ii.

At the heart of the play is the mystery of Hamlet's character: who or what is he? He seems a complete enigma, to himself as well as to others. He chides Guildenstern for trying to “pluck out the heart of my mystery” (Act III, scene ii). He can be tender and loving, sensitive and refined, also crude, cruel, callous and indifferent. At times he is angry, dejected, depressed and brooding; at other moments he is manic, elated, enthusiastic and energetic. He begins by feigning madness as a result of his profound melancholy, but then he becomes “psychologically unhinged” until he recovers in the final act.<sup>1</sup> His verbal acuity works together with his satire and biting wit, yet he gives in to

insecurity, self-recrimination and self-loathing.

He recognizes that he must deal with life on its terms and chooses to meet it head on. As an astute observer of life, Hamlet realizes the decay of Danish society, but understands that social ills cannot be blamed on one person.

Colin McGinn, in *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays*, feels Hamlet is a born performer, sometimes acting the part of madman, sometimes that of the lover, treating everyone as his audience. His identity is basically theatrical, and without a stage to act on, he lapses into despondency. ■

1. McGinn, p. 40.

McGinn, Colin. *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006.

<http://www.cliffnotes.com/literature/h/hamlet/character-analysis/hamlet>

## THEMES IN *HAMLET*

One of the major themes in the play is the impossibility of certainty. Is the ghost real or a figment of the guards' and Hamlet's imagination? Can one ever know the facts of a crime one has not witnessed? Will Hamlet's actions have the wished for consequences?

Another theme is the moral decay of the nation. The play indicates sexual, moral and physical corruption as well as a dysfunctional family. King Claudius and Queen Gertrude urge Hamlet to raise his spirits, while Hamlet expresses outrage at his mother's hasty remarriage (Act I, scene ii). He is mournful, but decides to act deranged to entrap his father's killer.

Revenge and the complexity of taking action is another theme. Hamlet promises to avenge his father's murder, but laments the responsibility he

now bears (Act I, scene v). He procrastinates and overthinks the situation (III, iii). He marvels that people will kill one another over a little piece of land (IV, iv). On the other hand, Laertes chooses to avenge his father's death without the slightest hesitation (IV, v).

Hamlet ponders mortality and the mystery of death. Marcellus and Bernardo tell Horatio they have seen the ghost of old Hamlet, but Horatio is skeptical (I, i). Hamlet considers the question of suicide and whether it is a solution to the pain he is experiencing (III, i). Hamlet talks with the gravedigger and learns that even great men come to dust—as he will (V, i). ■

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/hamlet/themes.htm>

[www.artsalive.ca/pdf/eth/activities/hamlet-guide.pdf](http://www.artsalive.ca/pdf/eth/activities/hamlet-guide.pdf).

<http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/halet/teachers-resources/themes.aspx>

# GREAT HAMLETS THROUGH THE AGES

Ever since Richard Burbage, Shakespeare's lead actor who first played Hamlet in 1600, the role has been among the most sought-after and famous ones in the English-speaking world. From classically trained actors to teen matinee idols, performers of every

stripe, shape and background have played Shakespeare's melancholy Dane. And with each actor's individual approach, the character of Hamlet has proven to be immeasurably complex and mysterious. ■

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## THEATRE HAMLETS

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### Early Hamlets—Finding the Character's Soul

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Every actor who has played Hamlet has emphasized and clarified different aspects of the Dane. Richard Burbage, the very first Hamlet, was a 37-year-old, overweight character actor when he originated the role. Gertrude's comment about Hamlet during the final fight scene, "He is fat and scant of breath" (V, ii), may have been penned specifically for Burbage's Hamlet. After Burbage died in 1619, an actor named Joseph Taylor took over the role, playing Hamlet for the first time as a vivacious, enterprising youth in a version that had most of its philosophy and poetry cut.

A century later, David Garrick stressed Hamlet's horror at the appearance of the ghost. At the end of the 18th century, an actor named John Philip Kemble first introduced the tradition of the gloomy, melancholic prince. In 1814, Edmund Kean played Hamlet at Drury Lane and reduced the extreme physical horror of Hamlet meeting the ghost. Kean also introduced Hamlet's lasting love for Ophelia and a tameness in his confrontation with his mother. Later in the 19th century, Edwin Booth created the first many-faceted, multi-layered Hamlet; his interpretation added a sense of psychological haunting.

### 20th Century Danes—Beauty, Sensitivity and Psychology

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Regarded as a matinee idol, John Barrymore stunned audiences with his 1922 Shakespearean debut. He was probably one of the most beautiful Hamlets to grace the stage, and as Orson Welles (the creator of *Citizen Kane*) pointed out, he was a true prince, both virile and sensitive. In 1925, Barry Jackson produced the first modern-dress *Hamlet* and freed the play of many of the stifling preconceptions of the past; notably, he rescued

Polonius from being played as an old fool.

In four separate productions between 1930 and 1940, Sir John Gielgud played a youthful, sensitive, lonely prince incapable of coping with older people and full of bitterness and nausea at the discovery of the ugly side of human life.

The 20th century saw perhaps the most diverse and prolific work on *Hamlet* since its creation. Laurence Olivier chose to approach Hamlet with



more modern speech cadences, breaking up the verse and attempting to make the Dane as “natural” as possible. In a production directed by Tyrone Guthrie, Olivier performed Hamlet at the real Elsinore in Denmark. During a fierce storm that closed down their outdoor performance, Guthrie allowed Olivier to restage the entire production to his own liking inside the Elsinore ballroom.

**W**hile Gielgud was heralded as the poetic Hamlet, Olivier was the lover and, like Barrymore, the athletic Hamlet. Directed by Gielgud in 1964, Richard Burton’s *Hamlet* became the longest-running Shakespeare play on Broadway. Clad in a black turtleneck sweater, Burton made an intense yet fiery prince.

Derek Jacobi, in his famous 1980 tour of the play, played the prince as wildly emotional, repressed and unbalanced as he wept uncontrollably at the report of his father’s murder. In 1988, Jacobi directed another famous Hamlet, Kenneth Branagh, who emphasized the prince’s intellect and his ability to manipulate language. While Branagh’s Hamlet stressed repression and manipulation, Daniel Day-Lewis showed more genuine insanity and turmoil within the dark prince as he played the role with Dame Judi Dench as Gertrude in the 1980s.

**S**ome actors have taken on the Herculean task of playing and directing *Hamlet* at the same time. One of these was Kevin Kline, who directed himself at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1990 to mixed reviews.

### Women as the Danish Prince

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**T**here have also been several female Hamlets in the last two centuries, including the actress Sarah Bernhardt in the early part of the 20th century, who played it at age fifty-five, with a wooden leg. Of her performance, one critic wrote: “Her friends ought to have restrained her. The native critics ought not to have encouraged her. The custom

house officials at Charring Cross ought to have confiscated her doublet and hose.” Diane Venora, who recently starred in the movies *Heat* and *The Insider*, played Hamlet at the New York Shakespeare Festival in the 1980’s, and then played Gertrude at the same theater in 1999 and in the Michael Almeveyda film version in 2000.

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## CINEMA HAMLETS

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### Hamlet and the Silver Screen

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**B**eyond the countless stage productions, *Hamlet* has also been adapted for the movies more than any other Shakespeare play. Laurence Olivier became obsessed with the play’s Freudian aspects in the 1940s. Ironically, Freud had written about *Hamlet* in many of his essays on the Oedipal complex, citing Hamlet

as the classic example of a young man obsessed with killing his (step)father and sleeping with his mother. Olivier went so far as to include many Freudian images and influences in his 1948 film, in which large ominous pillars of Elsinore and a sexy young Gertrude are among the most lasting images.

After playing in several stage versions, Kenneth Branagh directed and played the Dane in his full-length 1996 film. Set in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century winter palace and utilizing the entire, four-plus hours of text, Branagh's film portrayed the cool royalty and formality of Elsinore in which the passions of Hamlet and Ophelia are repressed until they ultimately explode. During the filming of this version, Derek Jacobi (who played Claudius) gave Branagh a small, redbound copy of *Hamlet*, which has been passed on to the greatest Hamlet of the current generation for centuries. Jacobi had received it from Gielgud in the 1980s.

Perhaps the most famous contemporary actor to play Hamlet is Mel Gibson in the 1990 film by Franco Zeffirelli. He cast Gibson as the famous prince after watching his self-destructive performance in the first *Lethal Weapon* film, in which Gibson struggles over whether to commit suicide because of his wife's sudden death. Gibson proved to be worthy of the director's trust, bringing a compellingly passionate, violent and devastated Hamlet to life opposite Glenn Close as Gertrude and Helena Bonham-Carter as Ophelia.

In the most recent film version of *Hamlet*, Ethan Hawke played the Danish prince as a contemporary rich kid in Manhattan, whose father has been murdered by his uncle, played by Kyle MacLachlan, over a power struggle for control of a corporation known as Elsinore. The cast included the playwright Sam Shepard as the Ghost of Hamlet's father, who appears to Hamlet through a vending machine. This very contemporary *Hamlet* emphasized the angst and loneliness within a tumultuous world.

With each of these performances, Shakespeare's greatest character is further illuminated and becomes even more intriguing. There are truly as many Hamlets as there are actors to play him. As the director Peter Brook wrote in *The Shifting Point*, "there are only two kinds of actors: those who believe they will play Hamlet and those who don't." ■

1. First Folio

2. Ibid.

Courtesy of First Folio: Teacher Curriculum Guide, The Shakespeare Theatre in the Nation's Capital.

# INTERPRETATIONS OF *HAMLET*

*Hamlet is the Mona Lisa of literature.*  
—T.S. Eliot.

**T**here are countless interpretations of *Hamlet*. Writers from Ben Jonson to Sigmund Freud to T. S. Eliot to Oscar Wilde have put their spin on Shakespeare's most enigmatic character.

Isaac Asimov and the editors of *The Cambridge School Shakespeare: Hamlet*, Richard Andrews and Rex Gibson, feel the play depicts a political struggle. Asimov says, "What bothers Hamlet most is the loss of the crown." Hamlet's anger mounts and he says of Claudius:

*A murderer and a villain—  
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule  
That from the precious diadem stole  
And put it in his pocket—* (III, iv, 97-102)

**C**laudius has stolen the succession that rightfully belongs to Hamlet. In addition, Andrews and Gibson write that Hamlet's "personal vendetta against Claudius is in reality a struggle for political power, just as Claudius' murder of old Hamlet was a political assassination,"<sup>2</sup> These political tussles reflected the anxieties of Shakespeare's England. Queen Elizabeth's reign might have seemed stable, but there were always threats from other powerful factions of the nobility.

Peter Alexander in an essay titled "The Complete Man" feels the play dramatizes "the perpetual struggle to which all civilization that is genuine is doomed."<sup>3</sup> In order to live up to his ideals, Hamlet has to place himself at a disadvantage with the cunning and treacherous Claudius; he must be humane, but still retain toughness. ("I must be cruel only to be kind," Act III, scene iv).

**R**evenge is another prominent theme. *Hamlet* can be characterized as a "revenge tragedy," a kind of play that was hugely popular when Shakespeare was writing. "The central features of

each revenge play were a hero (or villain) who sought to avenge a wrong."<sup>4</sup> The Elizabethan revenge tragedy contained typical ingredients: a melancholy, hesitating hero/avenger; a villain who was to be killed in revenge; complex plotting; more murders and other physical horrors; a play-within-a-play; sexual obsession and lust related to the passions for revenge; a ghost or other spirit who calls for revenge; real or feigned madness, and finally, the death of the avenger.

**T**hough the Church of the 16th century condemned revenge as a crime in law as well as a sin, it is a real human impulse to exact retribution from someone who has wronged you or your family.

Elizabethan psychology gives credence to the view that "the entire play (is) a study in grief: Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras each provide variations on the central theme of the loss of fathers."<sup>5</sup>

Elizabethan England inherited from the Middle Ages the belief that man maintained an equal distance from the angels and the beasts. Man's reason was angelic; his passions bestial. In the Christian doctrine the prime moral rule was the domination of reason over passion. The student of Elizabethan psychology, therefore, would view *Hamlet* as a tragedy in which the hero succumbed to his passion—grief. This, in the age-old phrase, is Hamlet's tragic flaw.

Elizabethan psychologists would also see *Hamlet* as a morality play. Hamlet is not a weak individual, but he does represent the weakness of humanity. "He rebukes himself, not for his own faults, but for those of humankind."<sup>6</sup> The psychological problems of several characters (Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, Hamlet) demonstrate that the individuals who meet their doom are overruled by their passions and the survivors are those who temper passion with reason, thus carrying the message that one must be of strong moral character.

A 20<sup>th</sup>-century psychological evaluation might conclude, “Hamlet is the tragedy of the intellectual, of the impotence of the over-cultivated imagination and the over-subsidized reasoning powers to meet the call of everyday life.”<sup>7</sup>

In this interpretation, Hamlet is an idealist. The series of blows he encounters in the death of his father and remarriage of his mother, shatters his idealism and plunges him into a severe depression, symptomized by suicidal impulses, a desire for solitude, irritability and brooding.

Then there is the Freudian interpretation, that “Hamlet is able to do anything—except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father’s place with his mother—the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized.”<sup>8</sup> This explanation derives from the Oedipus Complex, which emphasizes the small boy’s attachment to

his mother and antagonism for his father who is the rival for his mother’s affection. Thus, in Hamlet’s eyes, he feels less sorrow for his father’s death than for his mother’s hasty remarriage. ■

1. Asimov, p. 130.
2. Andrews and Gibson, p. 245.
3. Bevington, p. 114.
4. Andrews and Gibson, p. 252.
5. Gottschalk, p. 43.
6. Gottschalk, p. 50.
7. Gottschalk, p. 70.
8. Freud, Vol. 7.

Andrews, Richard and Gibson, Rex. Cambridge School Shakespeare: Hamlet. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Asimov, Isaac. Asimov’s Guide to Shakespeare. New York: Wings Books, 1970.

Bevington, David, ed. Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968.

Alexander, Peter. “The Complete Man.”

Freud, Sigmund. “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage.” Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 7. London: Hogarth Press, 1953.

Gottschalk, Paul. The Meanings of Hamlet. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972.

## HAMLET AND THE REFLECTION OF BRITISH HISTORY

*On whatever side we regard the history of Europe, we shall perceive it to be a tissue of crimes, follies and misfortunes.*

—Oliver Goldsmith: *The Citizen of the World*

Elizabethan audiences would not view the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude as overly hasty. At the beginning of *Hamlet*, Denmark is facing a national crisis; Fortinbras is demanding the return of territories lost by his father and is threatening invasion of the country. With the death of old king Hamlet, Denmark needs a leader and quickly. Young Hamlet will not really qualify because he has been at school

and does not have the experience Claudius has. Whatever the motives of the newly wedded couple, the Elizabethan world would see the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude as a matter of public policy and patriotic duty.

They also would not look askance at the marriage of a relative to unite rival claims to the throne. Mary, Queen of Scots married her first cousin Darnley in 1565 to strengthen her position for the crown. In addition, Richard III attempted to marry his niece Elizabeth in order to fortify his kingdom, but she escaped him and married Henry VII instead, thereby uniting the rival houses of York and Lancaster in



1485. But how would the British public regard the “incestuous” union of Claudius and Gertrude?

Such a union did take place in Britain, justified by political reasons, and it changed the course of British history: the marriage of Henry VIII to Catherine of Aragon. Henry the VII’s oldest son Arthur was first married to Catherine to cement an alliance between England and Spain. When Arthur died, it was deemed politically necessary to keep the agreement so Catherine became betrothed to Henry VIII. The Pope granted a special dispensation and the two wed in 1509. However, after 20 years, Katherine bore no male heir to the throne, and Henry VIII believed this was “divine” punishment for this “incestuous” union. He applied to the Church for a divorce, but the Pope refused. This disagreement, which raged for 25 years, together with the English clergy’s unhappiness with Italian domination, caused a schism with Rome and the establishment of the Anglican Church in 1534.

There is a parallel in history to Hamlet’s hesitation to kill Claudius. Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, daughter of Henry VIII’s sister, was a constant source of danger to Elizabeth I and the English throne. Elizabeth’s advisors urged the Queen to have Mary killed, because the Catholics (including Mary) stressed Elizabeth’s illegitimacy (she was the child of Henry’s second wife, Ann Boleyn, a marriage never recognized by the Catholic Church).

Numerous plots were launched against Elizabeth’s life and Mary was implicated in some of them. If

Elizabeth were dead, Mary would automatically succeed to the throne and the Catholics would resume power. Yet, despite the urgent pleas of her advisors, Elizabeth delayed the obvious solution for many years, all the while being in mortal danger.

It is apparent that Elizabeth faced a dilemma much like that of Hamlet; she had to find evidence that Mary was plotting against her. She was finally convinced when Sir Francis Walsingham, her principal Secretary of State, intercepted a letter with Mary’s signature approving the plot against Elizabeth’s life. The similarity to Hamlet is close. He, too, is made absolutely certain of Claudius’ treachery when he intercepts a letter to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bearing the order to kill Hamlet and signed by Claudius. Hamlet preserves the letter so that Horatio can view the evidence. Elizabeth, like Horatio, was finally convinced by Mary’s letter that the execution of her cousin was a duty demanded by justice and not personal animosity. Mary was beheaded in 1587.

“Like Hamlet, she was also concerned for the ‘wounded name’ that might result from her slaying of a royal personage.”<sup>1</sup> ■

1. Hankins, p. 105.

Hankins, John Erskine. *The Character of Hamlet and Other Essays*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1941.

# HAMLET'S WOMEN

*Frailty, they name is woman.*  
—Hamlet, Act I, scene ii

Much has been written about Gertrude. She has been characterized as everything from a wicked woman to a weak, soulless individual. The latter opinion is held by Isaac Asimov who calls her “not very bright” and “shallow”.<sup>1</sup> He insists that she is unclear about what is going on and absolutely unaware of the consequences of her actions. He feels that her reaction to the play-within-a-play (“The lady doth protest too much, methinks”) demonstrates her superficiality and dullness. His opinion is supported by Baldwin Maxwell who finds Gertrude dependent and ineffectual. He supports his claim by the fact that she remains with Claudius after Hamlet has told her of her husband’s crime. Her reply to him, “What shall I do?” (III-iv) illustrates her lack of initiative and independence that mark her throughout the play.

But there are other scholars who disagree. Carolyn G. Heilbronn in her essay, “The Character of Hamlet’s Mother” finds Gertrude strong-minded and intellectual. Most of her speeches are concise and pithy with a “talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes. If she is not profound, she is certainly never silly.”<sup>2</sup> She is kind to Ophelia and speaks sweetly and intelligently of her help (III-i); she is the only one who decently mourns the young woman’s death. She sees reality clearly and expresses it, even when it concerns her.

*“O Hamlet, speak no more!  
Thou turns’t mine eyes into my very soul,  
And there I see such black and grained spots  
As will not leave their tinct.”* (III-iv).

Michael Pennington, actor and writer, feels Gertrude has great natural authority and, as such, has more experience in ruling than Claudius. She handles Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with skill and diplomacy and

is very perceptive about Polonius (“More matter, with less art”). Moreover, after the closet scene and the death of Ophelia, she achieves a humanity that allows her to understand other people’s pain, some of it caused by her. Additionally, she loves her son very much, as evidenced by her desire to have him stay at Elsinore and her tenderness to him in the duel scene.

Alas, the fair Ophelia does not fare as well. Though she demonstrates a saucy sense of humor to brother Laertes (I-iii), she is still chattel to her father and brother as women of Elizabethan times were. She had not been taught to read, write or reason, so what options does she have other than marriage? The woman she might have become—warm, tolerant and imaginative—is thwarted by love gone wrong, her father’s death and her own drift into madness. As to her insanity, Theodore Lidz feels it is caused by her lover Hamlet killing her father, Polonius. She is placed in “the intolerable predicament of having to turn away from the person she loves and idealizes because that person is responsible for her father’s murder.”<sup>3</sup>

Ophelia is a victim of male dominance; without a family her only refuges are submission and shame—or madness and suicide. “The last we see of her,” writes Pennington, “she is being thrown about in a grave, just as she was thrown about in life: shouted over by two assertive young men vying with each other over who loved her more, when there is no great evidence that either of them did very much. Rest in peace.”<sup>4</sup> ■

1. Asimov, p. 91.

2. Heilbrunn, p. 12.

3. Scott, ed. p. 156.

4. Pennington, p. 168.

Asimov, Isaac. *Asimov’s Guide to Shakespeare*. New York: Wings Books, 1970.

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Rosenberg, Marvin. *The Masks of Hamlet*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992.

Scott, Mark W., ed. *Shakespeare for Students*. Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1992.

Maxwell, Baldwin. “Gertrude”.

Lidz, Theodore. “Ophelia”.

# THE STATE OF DENMARK

*It is not nor it cannot come to good.*  
—*Hamlet*, Act I, scene ii

Claudius' Denmark is insecure, for when the play begins it is a country preparing for war. The nervous anxiety of that preparation is evident in the first words of Bernardo, "Who's there?" He is challenging Francisco which military discipline requires. When the Ghost appears, it may be a visitor from the supernatural world, but its meaning is political: "It bodes some strange eruption to our state." (I, i)<sup>1</sup>

There are echoes of an older, feudal world of old Hamlet and old Fortinbras who settled disputes by personal combat guided by a chivalric code. But that older society is giving way to the new world of Claudius. He is a smooth negotiator, an efficient but unscrupulous schemer, who prepares for war but settles quarrels by a dispatch of ambassadors and formal treaties. He is truly a politician of the type Hamlet reviles in the graveyard: "one that would circumvent God." (V, I)<sup>2</sup>

The people of Denmark barely appear in this play, but Claudius sees them as a threat to his rule. He calls them "the distracted multitude," "the rabble" who favor the old Hamlet or Laertes. All such unreliable citizens must be watched like Hamlet. It would be dangerous to allow Hamlet to return to Wittenberg to school, so Claudius refuses permission. He keeps Hamlet under surveillance at home and employs two of Hamlet's friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to spy on him.

The chief minister of the state, Polonius, is a willing instrument of Claudius' desire to keep his subjects under watch. In Queen Elizabeth's England, Polonius' equivalent was Lord Burghley who also believed in close vigilance to maintain order. Just as Burghley maintained an extensive network of spies, so Polonius is corrupted by the desire to overhear in secret, to

keep all potential dissidents under watch. He spies on Hamlet, using his own daughter as the bait. Even his own family must be watched. Though he gives Laertes fatherly advice, he sets a spy on his own son.

For all the formalities of the court, a sense of corruption pervades the play. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" says Marcellus (I, iv); the sense of decay at the heart of personal and social lives increasingly affects the language. The madness that Hamlet assumes and into which Ophelia descends is the symptom of a deeper social illness. Hamlet projects his disgust on a variety of targets: Claudius, his mother, Ophelia, death itself. "But his words mirror the deeper social corruption that pervades Denmark: 'foul deeds,' 'maggots,' 'carrion,' 'offal,' 'an unweeded garden.'" <sup>3</sup>

Hamlet's Denmark is like the England of Shakespeare's time. It is a transitional society between an older state of feudalism and an emerging world of bourgeois capitalism. Hamlet, with his reflective questioning, is as much a modern man as a Renaissance prince. He is preoccupied with notions of sin and salvation, which show he is the product of a feudal state where religion is used as an instrument of control. But his thoughts mark him as a unique individual. He is trapped in a changing world and subject to its contradictions. His personal vendetta against Claudius is a struggle for political power, just as the murder of the old Hamlet was a political assassination. Such political struggles happened in Elizabethan England. Her reign might have seemed on the surface to be stable and secure, but it was always threatened by a faction of the nobility. Like every good writer, Shakespeare reflects the conditions of his own time. ■

1. Andrews and Gibson, p. 243.

2. Ibid, p. 244.

3. Ibid, p. 245.

Andrews, Richard and Gibson, Rex., eds. Cambridge School Shakespeare: Hamlet. Cambridge, UK Cambridge University Press, 1994.

# STROLLING PLAYERS IN ELIZABETHAN TIMES

In Shakespeare's England groups of strolling players toured the country performing plays. These plays were performed in barns and the courtyards of inns; one of the most popular was *Robin Hood*. The English government did not approve of strolling players as it was concerned that such plays as *Robin Hood* would encourage rebellion. Another fear was that the strolling players were responsible for spreading diseases such as the plague.

In 1572 a law was passed banning strolling players from touring the country. The only actors allowed were those employed by noblemen. During the next two years, Queen Elizabeth gave permission for four noblemen to start their own theatre companies. At first these theatre groups performed in the courtyards of inns, but these inns could only provide seats for small audiences. Therefore, in 1577, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, built a permanent theatre in London for his group of actors. This

venture was a great success and led to several more theatres in London. Prices were low, so most people could afford to go to the theatre. It cost only a penny to stand but it was extra for a seat.

During the autumn of 1601 Shakespeare and his fellow-players closed up their London theatre, the Globe, and traveled around the country. There is evidence that they visited Aberdeen, and a short time later, Cambridge. It seems that one of the plays acted on this trip was *Hamlet*. Traveling of this kind was not held in high esteem and was only done by theatrical troupes in cases of sheer necessity. In Shakespeare's case, a group of child actors gained great success at the Blackfriars' private playhouse in 1600 and gave the Globe players stiff competition. ■

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/TUDtheatre.htm>

<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/theatre/inthecountry.html>



# HAMLET QUESTIONS

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## PRE-PERFORMANCE QUESTION

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1. Have you ever had to make a decision but did not know what to do? How did you go about making the decision?
2. Is revenge ever justified? Have you ever had vengeful thoughts?
3. Why is this play considered Shakespeare's masterpiece? Why does *Hamlet* stand the test of time?

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## POST-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

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1. How do the design elements of lighting, sound, costume and set help to tell the story?
2. How does Hamlet react to the charge by the ghost? How does he seek his revenge?
3. How is family portrayed in the play? What do we know about Hamlet's relationship with his real father? How would you describe the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude?
4. Compare the Polonius-Laertes relationship with the Hamlet-Claudius relationship.
5. How would you describe Claudius? Does he get what he deserves?
6. How are friendships portrayed in this play? Is Horatio Hamlet's friend? Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern considered his friends? What happens to their friendships through the play?
7. Throughout the play, there are many memorable soliloquies. Why does Shakespeare use these monologues and what do we learn from them?
8. How are women portrayed in *Hamlet*?
9. Why does Hamlet treat Ophelia the way that he does? Does Ophelia deserve this treatment?
10. Do you think Hamlet is mad or feigning madness? What examples can you give for both sides of this argument?
11. Why does it take so long for Hamlet to make a decision? What else is at play?
12. What is the purpose of the play-within-the play? How does Hamlet utilize this group of actors for his benefit?
13. What does Hamlet learn in the famous gravedigger scene? What do we learn about him?
14. Who is Fortinbras? Why is he included at the end of the play?

# HAMLET ACTIVITIES

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## PERSONAL NARRATIVES REFLECTED IN DIFFERENT MEDIUMS

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Hamlet uses the traveling acting troupe to make Claudius uncomfortable by having them portray a similar moment from his life.

1. Create a list of five important experiences from your life. Prioritize your experiences and select three that are important to you.
2. For these experiences, write a paragraph (or two) describing each moment from your perspective. Be sure to include as many details as needed to paint a vibrant picture.

Make sure the moment is appropriate for school and that you are willing to share with the rest of the class.

3. Once you have selected these experiences, find a movie, a play or a novel, that best reflects the experience that you had. Is there a piece of visual art or a popular song that also might reflect the experience?
4. Discuss why you chose a movie, a novel, an art piece or a song that best tells your story.

What from the story leads you to believe that it is similar to your experience? Was it a certain character that reminded you of yourself or of another person? Was it a song lyric that summed up a feeling?

5. Discuss how effective or ineffective the use of the art is used to convey your memory or experience. Discuss if one artistic medium seems to convey the attitude and experience better than others. What are the limitations of only using the art to convey how you feel?

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Colorado Writing PG: Articulate the position of self and others using experiential and material logic.

Colorado Visual Art PG: Explain, demonstrate, and interpret a range of purposes of art and design, recognizing that the making and study of art and design can be approached from a variety of viewpoints, intelligences, and perspectives.

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## CONTEMPORIZING SHAKESPEARE

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The director of the Denver Center Theatre Company's *Hamlet* chose to set the play in a different time rather than its original time and place. This is a common practice in the production of Shakespeare because the language and stories are universal to any time period.

1. Do you think *Hamlet* would translate into the United States in 2014?  
Try setting the characters in Elsinore High School, a modern high school in the United States. What type of student, teacher or administrator would each character be? Who would be a cheerleader? A football player? A computer wizard? Class president? History teacher? Principal?

2. Where would you set each scene? A locker room? The cafeteria? The office?

3. Create a short scene with two of your modern-day characters. How does the situation stay the same but mannerisms and language differ?
4. What other settings would adapt well to the play? Create a list of potential settings. Are there some settings that are more adaptable than others? Why?

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Colorado Writing PG: Articulate the position of self and others using experiential and material logic.

Colorado Drama and Theatre Arts PG: Employ drama and theatre skills, and articulate the aesthetics of a variety of characters and roles.

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## CHARACTER MAPPING

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Activities continued from page 18

This activity looks at the internal and external characteristics of a certain character. Start with a circle in the middle of a piece of paper. As there will be writing inside and outside the circle, be careful to leave space. At the top of the page, place the name of a character from the play.

Inside the circle, write descriptive words, phrases, or draw pictures that describe the characters' perceptions of themselves. These descriptions are traits that are the essential and cannot be changed. For example, Hamlet is male, the son of Gertrude and nephew/step-son of Claudius and the Prince of Denmark.

Outside the circle, write descriptive words to describe how the characters are perceived by the other characters. These would be qualities that are obvious and describe the character.

After seeing the production or reading the text, create another circle for a specific character. For example, if the character is Hamlet, in the circle, write quotes that Hamlet uses to describe himself. On the outside of the circle, write quotes that the other characters use to describe him.

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**Colorado Writing PG:** Effectively use content-specific language, style, tone and text structure to compose or adapt writing for different audiences and purposes.

**Colorado Writing PG:** Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

**Colorado Drama and Theatre Arts PG:** Employ drama and theatre skills, and articulate the aesthetics of a variety of characters and roles.

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## CHARACTER SHIELD

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Pick a character from *Hamlet* and create a character shield or coat of arms. Each shield should be divided into four sections and a picture drawn for each of the following:

- The character's desire,
- The character's worst fear,
- The character's essential nature in symbolic form, preferably as an animal,
- A quote representing the character.

Use the template above to create a character shield for yourself. After you have created a shield, distill the information to create a logo that best represents your family or an icon that best represents yourself. Make the logo or icon as striking as possible, but make sure that it conveys your personal values.

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**Colorado Visual Art PG:** Make informed critical evaluations of visual and material culture, information, and technologies.

**Colorado Visual Art PG:** Explain, demonstrate, and interpret a range of purposes of art and design, recognizing that the making and study of art and design can be approached from a variety of viewpoints, intelligences, and perspectives.

Designed to enhance your theatre experience, the CONNECT program offers a variety of opportunities, including moderated discussions with the cast and creatives, educational resources, tours, and other special events

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**PERSPECTIVES** - Gain a unique behind-the-scenes perspective on each production when you participate in a professionally moderated discussion with the Denver Center Theatre Company's own creative team.

- **Jan 24, 6pm, Jones Theatre**

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**TALKBACKS** - Engage in a stimulating dialogue with your fellow audience members and actors just off the stage to hear their insights and answers to audience questions. Talkbacks are moderated by trained professionals. Higher Education Advisory Council (HEAC) talkbacks are facilitated by faculty members from regional colleges and universities. Theatre & Theology talkbacks are led by Pastor Dan Bollman of the Rocky Mountain Evangelical Lutheran Synod and explore connections between a play's themes and theology.

**Held in the theatre, post-show**

- **Feb 4, Theatre & Theology Talkback**
- **Feb 9, Talkback**
- **Feb 16, HEAC Talkback**

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**PAGE TO THE STAGE: DCTC@THE TC - WE'RE MOVING!**

To be or not to be... John Moore will host *Hamlet* director Kent Thompson and cast members at our new Tattered Cover location.

Join the conversation and enjoy the FREE PARKING!

- **Feb 11, Tattered Cover 2526 East Colfax Ave. Noon.**

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Visit [WWW.DENVERCENTER.ORG/CONNECT](http://WWW.DENVERCENTER.ORG/CONNECT) and learn about:

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- **The Page to the Stage: Book Lovers Club**
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# THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

## AT THE DENVER CENTER THEATRE COMPANY also offers the following programs:

**DENVER CENTER THEATRE ACADEMY ON-SITE CLASSES:** affordable, high-quality theatre classes for children, teens and adults taught by industry professionals. Classes are offered on-site four times a year. Classes are available for all interest and skill levels for ages 3-103. Scholarships are available. Call 303/446-4892 for information.

**DRAMATIC LEARNING:** Teaching Artists from the Academy bring the creative process into classrooms to support and enhance core curriculum. Workshops and residencies in any discipline are tailored for each classroom. Dramatic Learning benefits more than 90 schools and 5,000 students annually. Call 303/446-4897 for more information.

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Recent studies in the *New York Times* and *Cognitive Daily* suggest that training skills used by actors may increase overall cognitive health. With this in mind, the Academy has put together a sampling of one-time workshops that introduce basic principles in a fun and social setting. Don't take our word for it, here are some recent articles:

<http://www.denvercenter.org/science-blog>

<http://www.denvercenter.org/new-york-times>

ACTivate the brain and have fun doing it at the Denver Center Theatre Academy.

For more information: 303/446.4892

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For more information also check out our website at [WWW.DENVERCENTER.ORG/EDUCATION](http://WWW.DENVERCENTER.ORG/EDUCATION)

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# WANT TO KNOW MORE?

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## THE DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY RECOMMENDS:

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**Read!** *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* by James Shapiro This fascinating book reveals just how complex the Bard's world was. Covering the year wherein he wrote four of his plays Shapiro lays out the ways in which each play was a product of the political and historical events of that year in the life of Shakespeare. This excellent read really offers an unique perspective into the mind of William Shakespeare.

**Watch!** *Hamlet* (BBC, 2010) – The Royal Shakespeare Company's production starring David Tennant and Patrick Stewart. Hamlet as performed by David Tennant and Patrick Stewart, need we say more? The play's the thing!

**Listen!** *Basically Bull: or, The adventurous keyboard works of the vexatious Elizabethan composer John Bull, and his contemporaries, the virginalists who invented virtuoso keyboard music, as performed on a Steinway D and recorded one cold winter's day in Virginia* by Alan Feinberg

The title of this new album pretty much says it all. Grammy-nominated classical pianist Alan Feinberg presents pieces of music from Shakespeare's time—some of the earliest virtuoso keyboard music ever written—on a modern grand piano.

**Download!** *Gertrude and Claudius* by John Updike  
This prequel from master novelist Updike fills in the gaps between the lines of Shakespeare's most famous play, providing a sympathetic look at the romance of Gertrude and Claudius while describing the events that preceded the murder of King Hamlet. Steeped in the original Scandinavian legend, this novel (available from DPL in both book and downloadable ebook formats) might change the way you think about the traitorous couple and the vengeful prince.



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