

*Roundabout Theatre
Company*



Study Guide
March 11 - May 3, 1992

Synopsis

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is brought by Horatio to see his father's ghost. Saddened by his mother Gertrude's remarriage to his uncle Claudius, Hamlet learns from the Ghost that Claudius murdered his father. The Ghost bids his son to seek revenge.

Polonius believes that Hamlet's strange behavior is motivated by the Prince's love for Ophelia. However, Claudius fears that Hamlet suspects the truth and calls upon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two friends of Hamlet, to spy on him.

A company of strolling players arrives at Elsinore and Hamlet sees an opportunity to find out if Claudius is guilty. He asks them to perform a play whose story parallels the murder, and the performance panics the King. Hamlet, however, does not kill Claudius whom he finds in prayer, trying to repent (unsuccessfully) for his crime.

Gertrude summons Hamlet to her chamber to reprimand him for upsetting Claudius. Seeing movement behind the arras in her room, Hamlet runs his sword through the drapes, killing Polonius.

Fearing for his own life, Claudius sends Hamlet to England in the company of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with orders for Hamlet's death. Hamlet learns of the plot, switches the order so Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are killed, and escapes.

Laertes returns to Elsinore for his father's funeral and finds that his sister Ophelia has gone mad. Spurned by Hamlet, Ophelia falls into the river and drowns. Hamlet returns to Elsinore in time for her funeral, and argues with Laertes over Ophelia's grave.

Claudius persuades Laertes to use his anger in a plot to murder Hamlet in a duel. Laertes treats his foil with a poisoned tip and Claudius fills Hamlet's goblet with tainted wine. Hamlet and Laertes are both wounded by the fatal sword, and Gertrude unwittingly drinks from the poisoned cup. Laertes, who knows he is dying, confesses the plot to Hamlet. Hamlet kills his uncle and dies in Horatio's arms. Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, claims the empty throne.

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS AUDIENCE

In order to enjoy any of Shakespeare's plays, it is essential to know the audience for which he was writing. These renaissance theatre-goers were not high-brow scholars. They were common folk, who liked their entertainment filled with sex and violence. If the drama contained elements of the macabre and could give them a good scare, they liked it even better. Shakespeare knew what his audiences wanted and with an interest in box office revenues, he gave it to them. A revenge play, such as HAMLET, had all the ingredients the Elizabethans relished.

HAMLET was first performed at the Globe theatre in about 1600. The Globe lacked the technology for creating outlandish special effects and therefore dramatic poets created their effects with words. The average Londoner had some formal education, usually a few years in grammar school where rhetoric was emphasized. Since all lessons were memorized, rhetoric was relevant to every subject. Rhetorical word figures serve to make memorization easier. As a boy, Will Shakespeare and his friends went down to their local schoolhouse and learned to recognize figures of speech and make use of them. Devices such as rhymes, puns, irony and antithesis were understood and enjoyed by the Elizabethans. The appeal and entertainment value in playing with speech has survived the centuries. These same language mechanisms are used today in R&B, Rock and Blues music lyrics. Also, like contemporary music, Renaissance plays are lewd, filled with slang and inside jokes. Examples of these devices abound in HAMLET.

In act I, scene ii, when Hamlet sneers "A little more than kin and less than kind", we find a pattern of similar sounding words. Their juxtaposition helps to focus attention on his play on meaning and adds music to the line. All this serves to reveal an important character trait; Hamlet is a very witty guy. Another example of this can be found in act IV, scene iii after Hamlet has killed Polonius. Claudius is inquiring as

to Polonius's whereabouts. The conversation goes as follows:

Claudius: Now Hamlet, where's Polonius?

Hamlet: At supper.

Claudius: At supper? Where?

Hamlet: Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but a variable service -- two dishes, but to one table. That's the end.

Here we find a wealth of rhetorical uses suited to satisfy the Elizabethan's verbal appetite. We again find the pattern of similar sounding words with "eats", "eaten" and "e'en". The repetition of a word with a different meanings, as with "fat", is a device called antanaclasis. "Fat king" and "lean beggar", two opposite concepts, is a sample of antithesis. Of course the use of irony is obvious, but the Prince's particularly grim brand of humor would more appropriately be called wry.

A sensitivity to these rhetorical forms aids the observer in discovering the drama. The theatre-goers at the Globe did not sit there, waiting to label the language devices as they came up in the play. The word figures were not used as an end in themselves, but as a technique. Like any technique, once mastered, it becomes subtle and used unconsciously, except when it is intentionally being emphasized. Once familiar with this use of rhetoric, you can respond to both the poetry and drama in Shakespeare's plays and appreciate them fully. There are many more word figures implemented in this short passage, let alone the play.

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS PLAYERS

William Shakespeare began his career as an actor. One of the first records of his acting work is a 1583, Pentecost play produced by his future brother-in-law. In HAMLET, Shakespeare takes the liberty of airing his

views on the profession. Performers in the Renaissance had their rivalries and egocentricities as much as they do today, possibly more. Much of the humor in HAMLET deals with the "stars" and what was going on in London theatre at the time.

There were no women on Shakespeare's stage and few in his audience. The theatre was considered decadent and corrupting, so women were discouraged from attending performances and forbidden to act. Boys who apprenticed with the acting companies played the women's roles. The role of Ophelia was believed to have been originated by William Ostler, who retired from the stage at age 20. It is also believed that he was the first Desdemona, Cordelia and Cleopatra.

At the time HAMLET was first produced, a company consisting completely of child actors had been established at the Blackfriars. This was quite a novelty and The Children of the Chapel of Blackfriars became a popular attraction in London. So popular, in fact, the Queen became their patron and the Globe started losing a lot of business to the children. Shakespeare takes aim at The Children of Blackfriars in HAMLET, act II, scene ii during a conversation between Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Shakespeare describes them as "an eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top of question and are most tyrannically clapped for't". He also pokes fun at the people who attend these performances and describes the acting as "much throwing about of brains".

The Admiral's Men was the other company that gave Shakespeare's troupe, The Chamberlains Men, the most competition. Their leading actor was Edward Alleyn, who originated most of Christopher Marlowe's major characters. Richard Burbage, the star of The Chamberlains Men, of course, was involved in a rivalry with him. During Shakespeare's classic passage of advice to the actors, HAMLET, III, ii, Hamlet discusses the dangers of over acting and his personal distaste for it. When Richard Burbage, who first played the role, spoke these lines and arrived at the words "it out

Herods Herod," the Globe audience knew that Shakespeare and Burbage were referring to Mr. Alleyn and accusing him of bad acting. Thomas Nash, a leading theatre critic of the time, had written of Alleyn's acting: "He was better than Roscius or any actor before Aesop." Roscius was a great actor of ancient Rome. The Elizabethans would know Shakespeare's reference to Herod, a contemporary of Roscius, implied a reference to Edward Alleyn.

There is a great deal of debate centered on the style of Elizabethan acting. Current wisdom seems to indicate the acting was natural and realistic, not stylized. The fact is, no one knows. There are descriptions of what happened on the Renaissance stage, but they only serves to tell us the writer's opinion of the acting. There is no video tape for us to view and judge for ourselves.

John Barrymore said of the role of Hamlet: "You can play it standing, sitting, lying down, or, if you insist, kneeling... It makes no difference as regards your stance or your mood. There are, within the precincts of this great role, a thousand Hamlets, any one of which will keep in step with your whim of the evening." There are infinite possibilities for interpreting the role of Hamlet and the play. It is a role most actors aspire to play and success in the part is considered the crowning glory of a career. These attributes make HAMLET worthy of being in the select category of dramatic literature called classic.

With HAMLET and all of Shakespeare's plays it most important to bear in mind that the Bard of Stratford was just a storyteller. Shakespeare was not a Freudian psychoanalyst and there is no interlinear meaning in the play. William Shakespeare just wanted to tell a good story and that's what he did.

SUGGESTED READING

Acting Shakespeare by Bertram Joseph

Theatre Arts Books, New York, 1969

Actors on Acting by Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy

Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, 1970.

The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642 by Andrew Gurr

University Press, Cambridge, 1990