

The language of *Hamlet*



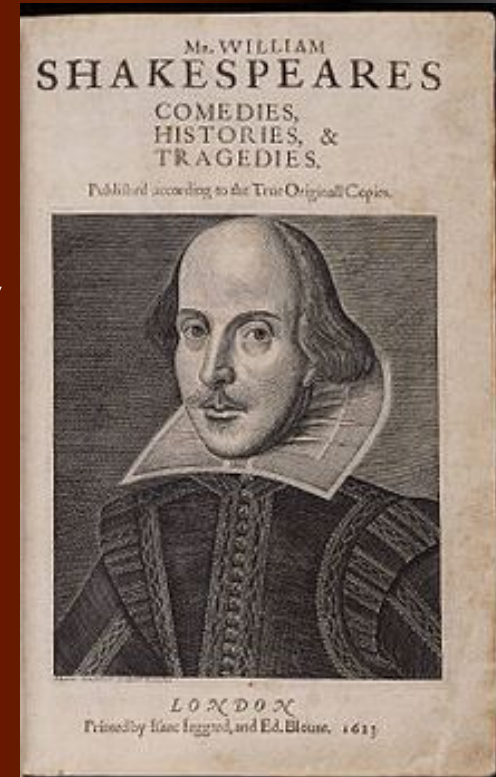
William Shakespeare was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". His surviving works, including some collaborations, consist of about 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

Many critics believe that Shakespeare's greatest tragedies represent the peak of his art. The titular hero of one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies, Hamlet, has probably been discussed more than any other Shakespearean character, especially for his famous soliloquy "To be or not to be; that is the question".



Shakespeare's poetic form

Shakespeare's standard poetic form was blank verse, composed in iambic pentameter. In practice, this meant that his verse was usually unrhymed and consisted of ten syllables to a line, spoken with a stress on every second syllable. The blank verse of his early plays is quite different from that of his later ones. It is often beautiful, but its sentences tend to start, pause, and finish at the end of lines, with the risk of monotony.



Once Shakespeare mastered traditional blank verse, he began to interrupt and vary its flow. This technique releases the new power and flexibility of the poetry in plays such as Julius Caesar and Hamlet. Shakespeare uses it, for example, to convey the turmoil in Hamlet's mind:

*Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes.*

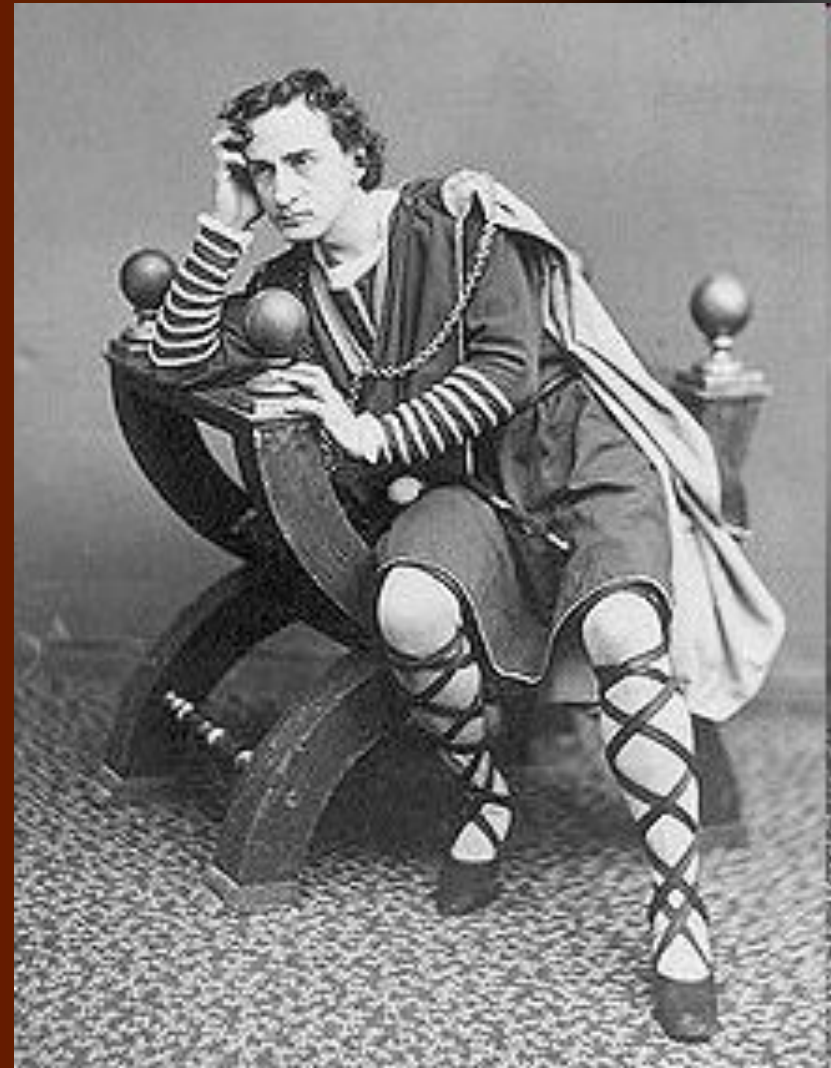
Rashly—

*And prais'd be rashness for it—let us know
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well...*

Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 2, 4–8



The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, or more simply Hamlet, is a tragedy by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written between 1599 and 1601. The play, set in the Kingdom of Denmark, recounts how Prince Hamlet exacts revenge on his uncle Claudius for murdering the old King Hamlet (Claudius's brother and Prince Hamlet's father) and then succeeding to the throne and marrying Gertrude (the King Hamlet's widow and mother of Prince Hamlet). The play vividly portrays real and feigned madness – from overwhelming grief to seething rage – and explores themes of treachery, revenge, incest, and moral corruption.



Dramatic structure

Hamlet departed from contemporary dramatic convention in several ways. For example in Shakespeare's day drama should focus on action, not character. In Hamlet, Shakespeare reverses this so that it is through the soliloquies, not the action, that the audience learns Hamlet's motives and thoughts. The play is full of seeming discontinuities and irregularities of action, except in the "bad" quarto. At one point, as in the Gravedigger scene, Hamlet seems resolved to kill Claudius: in the next scene, however, when Claudius appears, he is suddenly tame. Scholars still debate whether these twists are mistakes or intentional additions to add to the play's theme of confusion and duality.



Finally, in a period when most plays ran for two hours or so, the full text of Hamlet—Shakespeare's longest play, with 4,042 lines, totalling 29,551 words—takes over four hours to deliver. Even today the play is rarely performed in its entirety, and has only once been dramatised on film completely, with Kenneth Branagh's 1996 version. Hamlet also contains a favourite Shakespearean device, a play within the play, a literary device or conceit in which one story is told during the action of another story.

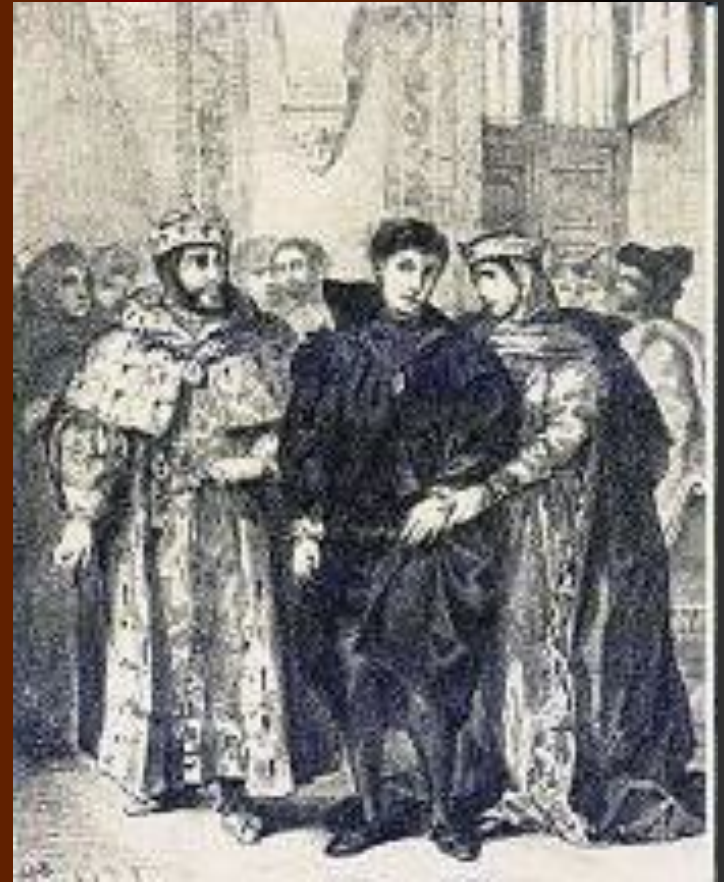


Language

Compared with language in a modern newspaper, magazine or popular novel, Shakespeare's language can strike contemporary readers as complex, elaborate and at times difficult to understand. Remarkably, it still works well enough in the theatre: audiences at the reconstruction of 'Shakespeare's Globe' in London, many of whom have never been to the theatre before, let alone to a play by Shakespeare, seem to have little difficulty grasping the play's action.



Much of Hamlet's language is courtly: elaborate, witty discourse, as recommended by Baldassare Castiglione's 1528 etiquette guide, *The Courtier*. This work specifically advises royal retainers to amuse their masters with inventive language. Osric and Polonius, especially, seem to respect this injunction. Claudius's speech is rich with rhetorical figures—as is Hamlet's and, at times, Ophelia's—while the language of Horatio, the guards, and the gravediggers is simpler. Claudius's high status is reinforced by using the royal first person plural ("we" or "us"), and anaphora mixed with metaphor to resonate with Greek political speeches.



Hamlet is the most skilled of all at rhetoric. He uses highly developed metaphors, stichomythia, and in nine memorable words deploys both anaphora and asyndeton: "to die: to sleep— / To sleep, perchance to dream".



In contrast, when occasion demands, he is precise and straightforward, as when he explains his inward emotion to his mother: "But I have that within which passes show, / These but the trappings and the suits of woe".



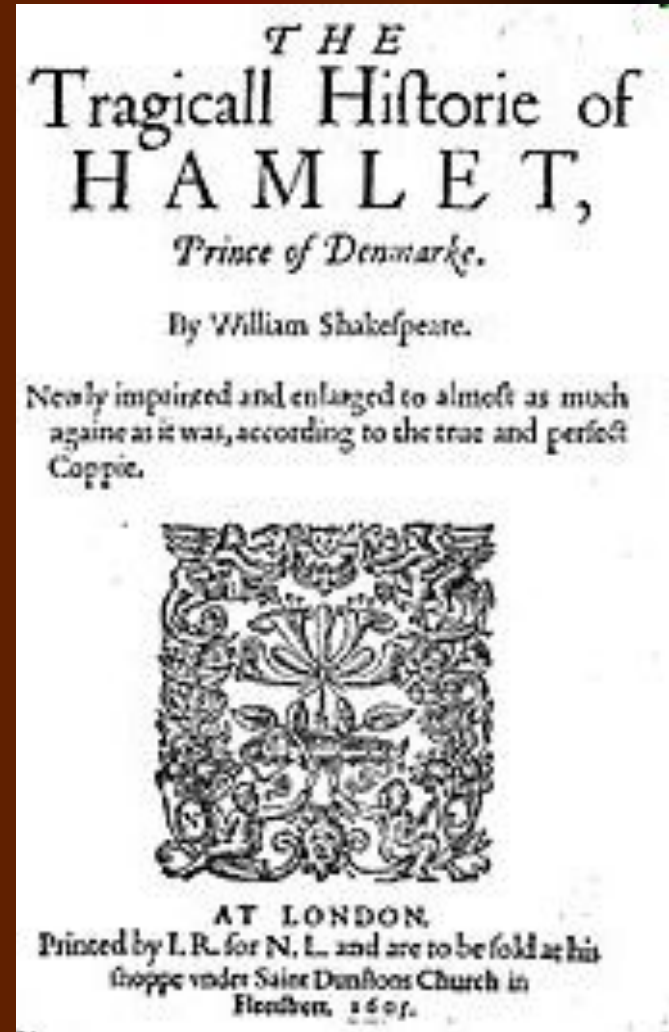
At times, he relies heavily on puns to express his true thoughts while simultaneously concealing them. His "nunnery" remarks to Ophelia are an example of a cruel double meaning as nunnery was Elizabethan slang for brothel. His very first words in the play are a pun; when Claudius addresses him as "my cousin Hamlet, and my son", Hamlet says as an aside: "A little more than kin, and less than kind." An aside is a dramatic device in which a character speaks to the audience. By convention the audience realises that the character's speech is unheard by the other characters on stage. It may be addressed to the audience expressly (in character or out) or represent an unspoken thought.



An unusual rhetorical device, hendiadys, appears in several places in the play. Examples are found in Ophelia's speech at the end of the nunnery scene: "Th'*expectancy and rose* of the fair state"; "And I, of ladies most *deject and wretched*".



Many scholars have found it odd that Shakespeare would, seemingly arbitrarily, use this rhetorical form throughout the play. One explanation may be that *Hamlet* was written later in Shakespeare's life, when he was adept at matching rhetorical devices to characters and the plot.



So, *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play and among the most powerful and influential tragedies in the English language. It has a story capable of "seemingly endless retelling and adaptation by others." During Shakespeare's lifetime, the play was one of his most popular works, and it still ranks high among his most-performed, topping, for example, what eventually became the Royal Shakespeare Company's list since 1879. It has inspired writers from Goethe and Dickens to Joyce and Murdoch, and has been described as "the world's most filmed story after *Cinderella*"

