

Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
And that his soul may be as damned and black  
As hell, whereto it goes. . . .

Dr. Samuel Johnson, eighteenth-century Christian of high moral sensitivity: "This speech, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Romantic poet with a smack of Hamlet himself, if he may say so: "Dr. Johnson's mistaking of the marks of reluctance and procrastination for impetuous, horror-striking fendishness!—Of such importance is it to understand the *germ* of a character."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in the voice of Wilhelm Meister, hero of the archetypal Romantic *Bildungsroman*, the novel in which a young man or woman grows to emotional maturity (a genre for which *Hamlet* itself was a key model): "The time is out of joint: O, cursèd spite / That ever I was born to set it right! In these words, I imagine, will be found the key to Hamlet's whole procedure. To me it is clear that Shakespeare meant, in the present case, to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. In this view the whole piece seems to me to be composed."

August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Romantic critic: "*Hamlet* is singular in its kind: a tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, and calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectators."

Lord Byron, always glad to play the devil's advocate:

Who can read this wonderful play without the profoundest emotion? And yet what is it but a colossal enigma? We love Hamlet even as we love ourselves. Yet consider his character, and where is either goodness or greatness? He betrays Ophelia's gentlest love; he repulses her in a cruel manner; and when in the most touching way, she speaks to him, and returns his presents, he laughs her off like a man of the town. At her

## TALKING ABOUT HAMLET

Hamlet is not only the pre-eminent talker in Shakespeare. He is also the most talked-about character in western literature. Because he is both poet and philosopher himself, poets and philosophers have been particularly enamored of him. Hamlet-mania reached its zenith with the self-consciously troubled musings on art and life of the nineteenth-century Romantics. One of their favored literary devices was the "imaginary conversation," in which their cultural heroes gathered round a table and talked about a topic of absorbing interest. It was in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Table Talk* that he said "I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so." *Hamlet* is a play that provokes so many opinions, animates so many energetic voices, that the best way to conclude an introduction to it is simply to bring together some of the play's most impassioned readers in an "imaginary conversation."

Let them begin from that key moment when Hamlet decides not to kill King Claudius while he is praying, since that would be to send him to heaven, not hell:

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:  
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed,  
At gaming, swearing, or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in't,

grave, at the new-made grave of Ophelia his first love, whom his unkindness had blasted in the very bud of her beauty, in the morn and liquid dew of youth, what is the behaviour of Hamlet? A blank—worse than a blank; a few ranting lines, instead of true feeling, that prove him perfectly heartless. Then his behaviour in the grave, and his insult to Laertes, why the gentlest verdict one can give is insanity. But he seems by nature, and in his soberest moods, fiend-like in cruelty. His old companions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he murders without the least compunction; he desires them to be put to sudden death, "not shirving-time allowed" . . . Polonius, father of Ophelia, he does actually kill; and for this does he lament or atone for what he has done, by any regret or remorse? "I'll hug the guts into the neighbor room"—"You nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby!" But suppose him heartless, though he is for ever lamenting, and complaining, and declaiming about the false-heartedness of every one else; Richard III is heartless—Iago—Edmund. The tragic poet of course deals not in your good-boy characters. But neither is he, as Richard is, a hero, a man of mighty strength of mind. He is, according to his own admission, as "unlike Hercules" as possible. He does not, as a great and energetic mind does, exult under the greatness of a grand object. He is weak, so miserably weak as even to complain of his own weakness.

Elaine Showalter, turn-of-the-millennium feminist, as if responding to Byron's remarks about Ophelia:

When Ophelia is mad, Gertrude says that "Her speech is nothing," mere "unshaped use." Ophelia's speech thus represents the horror of having nothing to say in the public terms defined by the court. Deprived of thought, sexuality, language, Ophelia's story becomes the Story of O—the zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference, the cipher of female sexuality . . . we could provide a manual of female insanity by chronicling the illustrations of Ophelia; this is so because the

illustrations of Ophelia have played a major role in the theoretical construction of female insanity.

Søren Kierkegaard, melancholy Danish philosopher, himself a Hamlet wracked by sexual guilt, coming perhaps to the heart of the mystery: "Hamlet is deeply tragic because he *suspects* his mother's guilt."

Stigmund Freud, inaugurating the language of psychoanalytic criticism which Showalter has been employing and Kierkegaard subtly anticipating: "In Sophocles' *Oedipus* the child's wishful fantasy that underlies it is brought out into the open and realized as it would be in a dream. In *Hamlet* it remains repressed, and just as in the case of a neurosis, we only learn of its existence from its inhibiting consequences . . . 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 childhood realized."

James Joyce, Shakespeare-soaked Irish novelist, in the voice of Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*, wearing a somewhat Freudian reading into a biographical fantasy:

The play begins. A player comes on under the shadow, made up in the cast-off mail of a court buck, a well-set man with a bass voice. It is the ghost, the king, a king and no king, and the player is Shakespeare who has studied Hamlet all the years of his life which were not vanity in order to play the part of the spectre. He speaks the words to Burbage, the young player who stands before him beyond the rack of cerecloth, calling him by a name: "Hamlet, I am thy father's spirit," bidding him list. To a son he speaks, the son of his soul, the prince, young Hamlet and to the son of his body, Hamnet Shakespeare, who has died in Stratford that his namesake may live for ever. Is it possible that that player Shakespeare, a ghost by absence, and in the vesture of buried Denmark, a ghost by death, speaking his own words to his own son's name (had Hamnet Shakespeare lived he would have been prince Hamlet's twin), is it

possible. I want to know, or probable that he did not draw or foresee the logical conclusion of those premises: you are the dispossessed son; I am the murdered father; your mother is the guilty queen. Ann Shakespeare, born Hathaway?

T. S. Eliot, poet and stern critic, dissatisfied with the Freudian solution, but agreeing that there is a problem: "Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, so far as it is Shakespeare's, is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, and . . . Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the 'intractable' material of the old play. . . . So far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure."

Jan Kott, Polish critic, writing under tyranny, swinging away from psychology to politics: his Hamlet is not "the moralist, unable to draw a clear-cut line between good and evil" or "the intellectual, unable to find a sufficient reason for action" or "the philosopher, to whom the world's existence is a matter of doubt," but rather "the youth, deeply involved in politics, rid of illusions, sarcastic, passionate and brutal. . . . a born conspirator. . . . a young rebel who has about him something of the charm of James Dean."

From Wilhelm Meister to Stephen Dedalus to James Dean and beyond, Hamlet is always our contemporary. To be or not to be Hamlet? That is the question for every young aspiring intellectual or actor. Or indeed actress: of all Shakespeare's major male roles, it is the one that has most often and most effectively been played by women. In Renaissance terms, action was the prerogative of the male and feeling of the female, so perhaps Hamlet's intense gift of feeling, and talking about his feelings, makes him a "feminine" character.

For those who do not get to play the part itself, there is the compensation of imagining themselves in a supporting role. Tom Stoppard's razor-sharp existential tragicomedy *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) rewrites the drama from the point of view of the two men on the margins who are cogs in the wheel, and in the cult film *Withnail & I* (1986), an old actor (Uncle Monty, played by Richard Griffiths) is broken by the realization that he will never "play the Dane" (he has only managed to secure the tiny part

of Marcellus the nightwatchman) and a young unemployed actor (Withnail, played by Richard E. Grant) ends up in London Zoo reciting Hamlet's great prose discourse "I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth" (2.2.296–311) to an enclosure of bedraggled wolves. Hardly the "paragon of animals" and yet, because of Hamlet, still he can dream.\*

\*Further selections from critical commentaries on the play, with linking narrative, are available on the edition website, [www.therscsakespeare.com](http://www.therscsakespeare.com).