

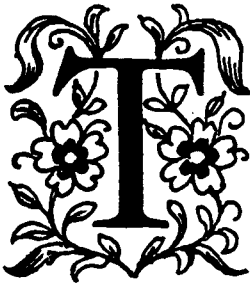
# Dating Shakespeare's Hamlet

Eddi Jolly



*Although you will not find it in most scholarly discussions of Shakespeare's Hamlet, there is, in England, in the city of Oxford, a building called The Golden Cross, which dates from 1193. In the entrance to its courtyard there is a wooden board outlining significant historical dates. One is particularly interesting; it reads:*

1593—The play 'Hamlet' by William Shakespeare  
was produced in the courtyard.



THAT most prestigious of all orthodox Shakespearean scholars, Sir E. K. Chambers, dates *Hamlet* between 1599 and 1602 (*Facts and Problems* I 270-2). Most editions of the play follow this, for example the Arden *Hamlet*, which dates it 1599 to 1601 (1). Clearly the sign at The Golden Cross is a surprising anomaly when viewed in the light of these dates. Nor does it fit with, for instance, Oscar James Campbell's assertion that "Shakespeare's greatest play is, as everyone knows, his version of an older drama, now always designated as the *Ur-Hamlet*" (150). This speculative, so-called *Ur-Hamlet* tends to be dated around 1589.

On the other hand, there are books, such as *The English Drama 1485-1585* (from 1969), which admit to vast gaps in our knowledge of Elizabethan drama and that "lost material might wholly change our estimate of the drama of this period" (118). Andrew Cairncross, who devoted a book to *The Problem of Hamlet*, dated it 1589 (182). Peter Moore says it might be better placed at 1596 or 1594 (or 1589) ("Abysm" 48). Harold Bloom believes that "Shakespeare himself wrote the *Ur-Hamlet* no later than 1589" (383). Charles Knight assumes its existence in 1587 (329). Carl Elze suggests around 1585-6 (xvi). And there is the scholars' bible, *The Dramatic and Narrative Sources of Shakespeare* by Geoffrey Bullough, who would see *Hamlet* as highly topical around 1587, but speculates on a 1597 to 1600 date for Shakespeare's first version of it (VII 18).

In a recent review in *The Observer* of Tom Stoppard's film, *Shakespeare in Love*, Anthony Holden refers to "maverick" scholars who do not conform with the "scholarly consensus" on the dates for Shakespeare's plays—but even the most cursory investigation will rapidly show

that there is no consensus, scholarly or otherwise, on the date for *Hamlet*. Quite simply, we do not know the date of composition for *Hamlet*, nor the date of its first performance. External evidence, internal evidence and topical allusions; these are used for speculations on a date that spans some sixteen years. But speculations that gradually come to be accepted over time as facts are no substitute for a thorough re-examination of the primary sources associated with this play, the external and internal evidence relating to *Hamlet*, and further, an objective attempt to reconcile the many anomalies that arise from the *Ur-Hamlet* theory with its later Shakespearean *Hamlet*.

External references begin with the 23rd August 1589 reference by Thomas Nashe in his Preface to Greene's *Menaphon* to "whole Hamlets, I should say handfulls of Tragical speeches" (313-6). Scholars generally agree that in this context the use of "Hamlets" implies a definite familiarity with *Hamlet* the play rather than Hamlet the character. It is the early date of Nashe's statement—1589—that has caused some scholars to posit the existence of an earlier, pre-Shakespearean *Hamlet*.

In his 1778 "Attempt to ascertain the Order in which the Plays of Shakespeare were written," Edmond Malone dates *Hamlet* to 1596. He claims that he would have dated it to 1601 or 1602 had it not been for Dr. Farmer's evidence that it was acted in or before 1596. It may be that it was Malone's reluctance to accept a date as early as 1589 that led him to suggest Kyd as the author of Nashe's reference. He argues that Nashe cannot be referring to a play by Shakespeare because Shakespeare was not known to be a noverint or notary (from *Noverint Universi*, "Know all men . . ."—the opening phrase on ancient deeds) and because he felt Shakespeare was not markedly indebted to Seneca (642 f. 1).

By the end of the nineteenth century, it seems that Gregor Sarrazin was regarded as the scholar who had "proved" that Nashe's reference was to Kyd and to Kyd as the author of a play called *Hamlet*. After closely examining the parallels in phrasing between Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* and Q1 *Hamlet*, Sarrazin concluded that there were sufficient verbal echoes to prove that Kyd also wrote *Hamlet*, this being the supposed pre-Shakespearean *Ur-Hamlet* to which Nashe is referring. Two further arguments from Nashe's words are adduced in favour of Kyd: his reference to "scriveners" together with the fact that Kyd's father was a scrivener, plus his use of the word "Kidde." While another nineteenth-century scholar, Professor Schick, says "The 'Kidde in Aesop'—this is indeed, I think, calling things by their names," he also says "I am bound to add that it is not absolutely certain that the passage refers to Kyd" (McKerrow

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IV 99). Nevertheless, despite disagreements, several nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics assert, without a hint of its being no more than conjecture, that this *Ur-Hamlet* was Shakespeare's source for several ideas. Thus Kenneth Muir writes, "We may be reasonably sure that the author of the *Ur-Hamlet* . . . invented the Mousetrap, the ghost and the madness and death of Ophelia" (160). Fleay assumes an "old play by Kyd" (II, 186). E. K. Chambers, whose views have dominated the dating of the plays in the twentieth-century, also refers to the "knowledge . . . that an earlier play on the subject has been lost." He too dates *Hamlet* some five years later than Malone (420).

ONLY the superficial reader could fail to discover to what extent scholars have disputed—and continue to dispute—this speculative *Ur-Hamlet*. In 1905, Professor A. E. Jack states in *PMLA* that it is not "perfectly clear that Nashe knew of a Hamlet drama" (McKerrow 452). R.B. McKerrow, the early twentieth-century editor of Nashe, makes it quite clear that, in the context in which Nashe is speaking, he is discussing more than one writer. With words and phrases like "common practise," "a sort [meaning a group] of shifting companions," "they," "themselves," and "their," there can be no doubt he is describing more than a single writer. Though Thomas Kyd's father was a noverint, or scrivener, G. I. Duthie comments that scribes were common (62), while Andrew Cairncross disputes the reference to Aesop's "Kidde" as proof of Kyd's authorship of an *Ur-Hamlet* (49-69). J.W. Cunliffe, O.L. Hatcher, and M.W. MacCallum number among those scholars who have not been convinced of the existence of an *Ur-Hamlet* (McKerrow 449-52).

Although it is certainly a fact that Nashe referred to "*Hamlets* of Tragical speeches," a pre-Shakespearean *Hamlet* remains unknown, despite Muir's descriptions of what it contains. One factor not addressed by the speculators is Nashe's readership. His Preface to Greene's *Menaphon* is addressed to "The Gentlemen Students of Both Universities." The *Hamlet* Q1 states on its frontispiece "As it [was] acted . . . [at the] two Universities of Cambridge and Oxford." It is quite logical and not at all speculative to deduce that Nashe knew his audience; he knew that *Hamlet* had been played at the universities, just as the printer of Q1 knew. It gives clear cohesion to some of the references if we recognise *Hamlet* as having been played often enough by 1589 for Nashe to feel secure that the phrase "whole *Hamlets* of Tragical speeches" would be understood by his readers, those same students to whom he addressed his Preface and who would also have formed the audience implicit in the Q1 frontispiece.

The wooden board in Oxford claims a 1593 performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Although at present there is no known documentary evidence to back this up, the prominent post-Victorian scholar, Frederick Boas, deduced from his research of contemporary documents that *Hamlet* was performed in the city of Oxford in October 1593. His research also draws attention to internal evidence, such as Hamlet's reference to the "little eyases," the child

actors, arguing that the private theater at Black-friars had been used off and on for children's performances since 1577. He also suggests it may have been in 1594-5 that *Hamlet* was acted at Cambridge (*Fortnightly*, 249-50).

The 1594 performances of *Hamlet*, *The Taming of a Shrew*, and *Titus Andronicus* at Newington Butts from the 3rd to the 13th of June, often ignored in the discussion of *Hamlet's* dates, are used by Boas as part of his straightforward argument for this *Hamlet* as Shakespearean. *The Taming of a Shrew* differs in one word only from the title of the Shakespearean play we know by almost the same name. In 1614, in *Bartholomew Fair*, Ben Jonson mentions *Titus Andronicus* as dating to twenty-five to thirty years earlier, which places it somewhere between 1584 and 1589. Although scholars for one reason or another have made repeated attempts to credit both *Shrew* and *Andronicus* to other (earlier) authors, their inclusion in the First Folio continues to keep them within the Shakespeare canon.

In his *Wit's Miserie* of 1596, Thomas Lodge refers to "the ghost which cried so miserably at the Theater like an oyster-wife, 'Hamlet, revenge'" (xlvi). It is assumed this cannot be Shakespeare's *Hamlet* because no one in the play actually says "Hamlet, revenge." Yet the play's central character: Hamlet, and central theme: revenge, are conflated so succinctly in Lodge's terse quotation, that, arguably, he has done so simply to make his point.

In 1598, Francis Meres's now famous *Palladis Tamia* fails to mention *Hamlet* in its list of twelve Shakespeare plays. Editors H. Jenkins in 1986 (*Arden* 1) and G. R. Hibbard in 1987 (*Oxford Shakespeare* 3) both find this highly significant. But Meres mentions *Loves Labours Won*, a play which is either lost or known now by a different title, while he does not mention *Henry VI*, for instance, which scholars usually date by 1592. So we have no proof that Meres's list is exhaustive, or that it is meant to be, or that it is a hundred percent accurate. Park Honan, author of the most recent Shakespeare biography (1998), agrees, saying of Meres, "As a scholar, he is lazy" and "does not produce exhaustive lists" (264).

*Palladis Tamia* requires closer attention than is commonly given to it. For one thing, it is questionable whether it is entirely original with Meres as it echoes closely parts of the 1589 *Arte of English Poesie*. It also adheres to a strict rhetorical "as . . . so . . ." pattern, wherein a classical writer or text is balanced by its Elizabethan counterpart. The list of twelve Shakespeare plays is similarly patterned, with six comedies neatly balanced by six tragedies. In addition, while Meres mentions plenty of other Elizabethans, he does not mention the total works of each and every one of them. Thus Meres's list cannot be seen as complete, nor as evidence that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was necessarily written later than the list simply because Meres doesn't include it. In his 1951 *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, P. Alexander estimates that there were more than twelve Shakespearean plays by 1598, perhaps as many as twenty (xv).

Somewhere between 1598, when an edition of Chaucer was published, and 1602, when the Stationers Register refers to *Hamlet*, Gabriel Harvey wrote in the margin of his copy of

Chaucer “. . . Shakespeare’s . . . Lucrece, & his tragedie of *Hamlet*, haue it in them, to please the wiser sort” (Arden 573). No scholar disputes that in this context Harvey is referring to a *Hamlet* written by Shakespeare. There is dispute, however, about exactly when it was that Harvey jotted down his comments. Not all critics are as uncomplicated and logical as E.M. Tenison who points out the fact that Harvey’s reference to the Earl of Essex, apparently noted at the same time as the reference to *Hamlet*, is in the present tense, which would seem to limit his comments to some time before the execution of Essex on 25th February 1601. Tenison speculates that this “may refer to a time before [Essex’s] departure from London on March the 27th 1599”; in other words, before there was any hint of disgrace attached to Essex (114-15). If we can assume then that all the marginalia in Harvey’s Chaucer pre-dates Essex’s execution, this would put *Hamlet* sometime pre-February 1601—possibly pre-March 1599.

Henslowe’s papers include an inventory for 10th March 1598. One entry reads: “ij Danes sewtes, a j payer of Danes hosse” [two Danish suits, one pair of Danish hose]; a second entry for the same day, fourteen items later, reads: “j gostes sewte, and j gostes bodeyes” [one ghost’s suit, and one ghost’s bodice].

The manuscript, “Edward Pudsey’s Booke,” a commonplace book from 1600, contains quotations from *Hamlet* that match neither the *Hamlet* of the First Quarto, nor the Second Quarto, nor the First Folio (Bodleian). This has led to some speculation as to whether the author might have seen Shakespeare’s foul papers. Further investigation has shown that Pudsey’s quotations are most closely matched by Q2 and F1—in other words, he seems to have been acquainted with a fuller rather than a shorter version of the play. So far we have seen no speculation as to the most likely explanation, namely whether—like the so-called pirates of Q1—Pudsey simply did not remember perfectly what he heard in performance.

To assume that all these external references refer to a single Shakespearean *Hamlet* gives us a coherent set of references to a play that was popular for some dozen or so years before it was finally published, a scenario that fits well with what we know of the patterns of play publication at the time. Interestingly, Sir Sidney Lee (in 1925) sees *The Spanish Tragedy* holding the breathless attention of its audience for at least a dozen years (357); while C. Elliot Browne (1974) suggests the two plays were rivals, one the analogue of the other. To promote an earlier *Hamlet*, perhaps by Kyd, raises far more problems than it solves.

Orthodox scholars have a difficulty with a 1589 date for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, since, in their chronology of the plays, *Hamlet* is seen as about eighteenth or twentieth of the thirty-seven or so plays (Chambers *Facts* 249); thus, Shakespeare of Stratford, born in 1564, would have been no more than twenty-five-years-old by the time he had written this play. Yet Christopher Marlowe, who was christened in February 1564, a couple of months before Shakespeare of Stratford, purportedly began his writing career around 1587. Could Shakespeare not have done the same, if he was, as Park Honan asserts, “at the age of eight . . . mem-

orising enormous lists of Latin adages such as *multitudini place* (please the multitude) or *somnus mortis imago* (sleep is the image of death) from Leonard Cullmann's *Sententiae Pueriles*—well enough to use 209 of these later in his works [and] at eleven . . . absorbing the most complex rhetorical system ever invented—the Roman one—with its hundreds of verbal schemes and devices for creating an emotive ‘voice on paper’”? One would think he might be capable of writing an earlier, less mature version of *Hamlet*. Professor Honan also comments that “one of [Shakespeare’s] handicaps was that he was likely to imitate styles long out of date” (55). Of course, this “handicap” would vanish if Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* were dated back to the 1580s.

**Y**ET by far the biggest difficulty with dating *Hamlet* to 1600 is its internal evidence. Critics who subscribe to the *new historicism* or who seek an overview of Elizabethan drama, consider the historical contexts of the plays, asking how they might reflect contemporary life. For instance, Marlowe’s last play, *The Massacre at Paris*, was a highly topical, highly political work based on the recent death of the French King, Henri III, and performed in January and February of 1593. Or there is George Chapman, whose play of 1609, *The Old Joiner of Aldgate*, was a direct dramatisation of a current scandal. Chapman had to answer to the authorities for its topical allusions (Spivak 17-18).

Indeed, topical allusions abound. In *Every Man out of his Humour*, Ben Jonson includes references to people who buy evidence to prove themselves a gentleman, seen by some as a satirical glance at Shakespeare of Stratford’s purchase of a coat of arms. Jonson satirises his opponents in the so-called wars of the theatres. Nashe and Harvey have a spat in published letters. Harvey is caricatured in a Latin play, *Pedantius*. In 1597 the theaters are closed (briefly), Jonson goes to jail, and Nashe goes into hiding due to the perceived dangerous nature of their play, *The Isle of Dogs*. Why should we assume that Shakespeare must be less topical than his contemporaries? Is it because, with the wisdom of hindsight, we see him as “eternal,” insulated by his greatness from ordinary human concerns over the events and issues of his day? Or is it simply because we have failed to identify his references?

Of course, recognising the internal evidence of a play requires a knowledge of the history of the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and James I. One of the earliest historicists, Plumtre, was questioned about how he came to make his suggestions about *Hamlet*’s historical relevance. He explained that he had been reading Hume’s *History of England*, then turned to Walpole’s *Historical Doubts*, and then to Tytler’s *Inquiry*. Plumtre acknowledged that the links and circumstances were perhaps unusual, but we who are so removed from the Elizabethan period can only begin to capture allusions to it through immersion in its history (22).

Critics who do not doubt that Shakespeare was topical include G.B. Harrison, who says “There was far more personality behind Elizabethan comedy . . . than has always been

realised" (292). It is not uncommon to find historians cross-referencing with the plays. Elizabethan historian, A.L. Rowse, says, "Shakespeare regularly picked up what was happening at the time" (85). Geoffrey Bullough comments that the "plays were rather more topical than has sometimes been supposed" (VII 18). With *Hamlet*, Creizenach suggests that Polonius and Reynaldo referred to specific personages (Duthie 22). R. Simpson, biographer of Edmund Campion, wrote that Shakespeare "truly painted [Burghley] as Polonius" (145), while Israel Gollancz also links the Q1 name *Corambis* and the Q1 name of *Polonius* with "the great statesman Burghley" (173-4). In spite of these, many scholars and critics ignore issues of topicality in Shakespeare; sometimes, of course, because that is not the focus of their articles, but often because they simply do not know enough about the history of the time to see the parallels.

Consider the suggestion that Polonius is a caricature of Lord Burghley. Oddly, Stanley Wells's book, *Shakespeare; A Dramatic Life*, does not mention it. Jonathon Bate asserts that "Polonius cannot be a satirical portrait of Lord Burghley for . . . if he were, the author . . . would have found himself in prison" (47). Irwin Matus argues against it, quoting from Camden's *Annals* as quoted in Conyers Read's book on Burghley. Harold Jenkins simply dismisses any parallel with Burghley with "the notion that Polonius, on the strength of his similar role in Court, was a caricature of Burghley is sheer conjecture." In a footnote he adds, "This was believed to be supported by an analogy between Burghley's Precepts for his son and the 'precepts' delivered by Polonius to Laertes. But now that these have been shown to derive from a long literary tradition, a reflection upon any individual can no longer be supposed" (35). Jenkins considers only two aspects of the portrait—he is adamant and, as an Arden editor, influential.

**P**ERHAPS it is more appropriate to ask historians to look at Polonius than to expect literary critics to read up on Lord Burghley, for even if we ignore the two parallels Jenkins objects to, there are striking comparisons that seem to establish that Burghley is being parodied in the character of Q1's *Corambis* and Q2's *Polonius*. Not all of Burghley's biographers begin as does Martin Hume, with his crest on the book cover; nor do they all include an engraving of him from later life, though most give some illustration of his Latin motto, *Cor unum via una*—"one heart, one way." Since Latin is no longer taught in most schools, Shakespeare's pun on Burghley's motto, *Cor unum via una*, or "single-hearted," and *Corambis*, or "double-hearted," is probably not immediately accessible to most modern readers. The later name, *Polonius*, may be a blend of two of Burghley's nicknames, *Polus* and *Pondus* together with an allusion to a book called *The Counsellor*, Burghley's role at Elizabeth's Court as well as the title of the English translation of a Polish book published in 1598 (Matus).

Another parallel connects Burghley, who, as Elizabeth's spymaster, requested one of his agents, Thomas Windebank, to spy on his own son, Thomas Cecil, while he was overseas

(Hume 123-4), with a similar request made by Polonius when he asks Reynaldo to spy on his son, Laertes, while he is away at school (II-1). Another connects the fact that Burghley was fond of telling how he was born in 1520 during the Diet of Worms in 1520 with Hamlet's pun in IV-3, when asked where to find the old man's corpse, "A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet." Sheer coincidence?

Hamlet calls Polonius a "fishmonger" in II-2. In 1563, Burghley, eager to encourage the English fishing industry, fought in Parliament to make Wednesday a fish day; again, in 1584, he attempted to renew the statute. According to Conyers Read, in spite of Burghley's efforts, the Commons did away with "Cecil's fast," even after he offered a compromise limiting Wednesday fasting to regions within twenty-five miles of the sea (303-4). John Dover Wilson called him "the Fishmonger Secretary of State" (303).

A. L. Rowse comments on Polonius "with his Precepts and his prosiness," reminding us that Burghley was notorious for his verbosity (86). Hume's comments on how Burghley managed to maintain polite, even reasonably friendly, relations with his political enemies, such as the Earl of Leicester (Hume 434) reminds us of the way Polonius agrees with Hamlet in II-2, no matter how fantastic and contradictory his statements. "O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou!" says Hamlet, quoting the Bible to Polonius in the same scene. Both Polonius and Burghley had daughters whose deplorable fates were brought about by the manipulations of their fathers.

Inevitably, even among the scholars that agree on the caricature, there is no consensus about when it would have been pertinent. Rowse suggests that "It was safe to caricature him now, for he had died in 1598" (85). How pertinent, how relevant, is a caricature drawn after a man's death? Chambers (I 417) and Jenkins (34) go so far as to state that the change was not from Corambis to Polonius, but the other way round; though this is a minority view.

More minor topical allusions agreed upon by critics include the way in which the gravedigger and Osric parody the style of John Lyly's *Euphues* books, popular in the early 1580s. As Park Honan comments, it is odd that Shakespeare seems to be so out of date with his imitations (*Telegraph*). Mention should be made perhaps of the reference in *Hamlet* in II-2 to the controversy caused by the child actors; however, since there was more than one controversy over the children, one in 1601, one in 1588-9, plus one earlier in 1583, this won't help us much with dating.

The most significant topical reference, explored by only a few critics, would seem to be the political relevance of *Hamlet*. Bullough writes that the play would have been topical at about the time of Mary Queen of Scots execution on 3rd February 1587 (2). Lilian Winstanley explores this thesis most thoroughly in her 1920 book, *Hamlet and the Scottish Succession*, but she seems to be as overlooked as Cairncross. The primary source for both was presumably James Plumtre, who was the first to point out the parallels between the circum-



stances surrounding Mary Queen of Scots and the plot of *Hamlet*. Plumtre, who could hardly get his ideas into print quickly enough, so keen was he not to be pre-empted, wrote that it occurred to him that “Shakespeare had perhaps written his Tragedy of *Hamlet* to flatter the prejudices of his mistress and exhibit to the world an indirect crimination of her injured rival” (2). He notes that where Shakespeare had made alterations to the story as it appeared in Saxo Grammaticus, “they appear to be for the purposes of adapting the story still farther to his design, the story indeed is so extremely pointed, that, unless Shakespeare wished it to apply to Mary, its similarity would have been a sufficient reason for rejecting it” (5).

Whether or not one sees the play as confirming Mary’s guilt, certainly Plumtre’s contemporaries queried this; his argument was that Queen Gertrude was guilty because she does not upbraid her husband, that her composure is due to hardened guilt, and that Claudius and Gertrude do not discuss it because of their conscious guilt. Ironically, one of the objectors to Plumtre suggested that “if Shakespeare had thought proper to have censured Mary he would have sent his play into the world much earlier, and not waited an interval of so many years, when, in the bustle of the events of those times, the matter would be old on men’s minds, or forgotten” (21). This would be no problem, of course, for a play written in the mid-80s.

Conyers Read holds that Burghley believed in the power of the press and undertook to exploit it. He directed and often wrote official propaganda, though “much that he wrote for publication was never published” (241). There was literary uproar after the trial of Mary Queen of Scots and her execution; some thirty pamphlets about it were published before 1590. Was *Hamlet* a part of that “literary uproar”; a facet of the official propaganda?

Shakespeare’s primary source for *Hamlet* is generally agreed to be Belleforest’s *Les Histoires Tragiques*, either the 1572 or the 1576 edition. Belleforest published two other books in 1572. *The Treatise of Treasons*, a translation printed in Antwerp in January which Burghley labelled a “lewd” book, written “by an unknown malicious French writer taught by a rebellious crafty priest of England, wherein he meant maliciously to the state, yet he vomiteth his choler and despite chiefly against me and my Lord Keeper by nicknames” (i.e. Burghley and Sir Nicholas Bacon) (Read 251).

The other, *L’innocence de la très illustre, très-chaste et debonnaire princess, Madame Marie Royne d’Écosse* focuses, amid plentiful anti-English propaganda, on the fate of the Duke of Norfolk, executed by Elizabeth in 1572 for supposedly plotting to marry the Scottish Queen. According to Belleforest, the English are “insensitive, dishonest, and execrable atheists.” They vomit exaggerated falsehoods and messages so abominable that men’s ears are offended. He condemns the “iniquité des demandes Angloises” and the “cruauté des ministres de la royne d’Angleterre” (95).

If Plumtre, Cairncross, Winstanley, Rowse, Simpson and Bullough, among others, are right, this *Hamlet* is a highly topical play. It was written around the time of Mary Queen of

Scots' trial and execution; it is politically aware, reflecting sensitively on the dilemma of taking a sovereign's life, indeed revealing it clearly, as Marie Axton argues, for it was a central dilemma in Elizabeth's reign from 1568 to Mary's execution in 1587 (60). With Belleforest publishing his translation of Shakespeare's source for *Hamlet* at the same time that he attacks Burghley in another book written at the same time, one that forcefully defends the Queen of Scots, could *Hamlet* be part of this propaganda war? Hamlet himself states that the players "are the abstract and brief chronicles of the times." How can it be that, unlike his contemporaries, Chapman, Nashe, Marlowe, and Jonson, the man that created *Hamlet* had nothing to say about the events of his day? If this is the case, the parallels between *Hamlet* and the life of Mary Queen of Scots are most perplexing.

**T**HE *Ur-Hamlet*, whether by Kyd or another, solves nothing but the perceived problem that Shakespeare wasn't sufficiently developed as a writer by 1589, the date of Nashe's first reference, to have written the play as we have it today. In every other respect it either leaves the problem unresolved, or actually creates new problems. A single *Hamlet* is not only far more likely, in almost every case it tends to simplify, even to completely resolve, problems perceived as stemming from this early date.

With its witty caricature of the Queen's most important counsellor and its parodies of Euphuism, it is "the brief abstract and chronicles" of the Court personalities and *zeitgeist* of the 1580s. It is known to university students by 1589, is perhaps played in Oxford in 1593, is successful at Newington Butts alongside other Shakespearean plays in 1594, perhaps in Cambridge in 1594-5, and is still so popular in 1596 that Lodge can assume his audience understands the allusion, "Hamlet, revenge." It is not mentioned by the "lazy" Meres, perhaps because he does not wish to add another tragedy to his neatly balanced list; perhaps also because his book comes out in October 1598, not long after Burghley's death in August, when to awaken memories of the "murder" of Polonius would surely have been seen as in poor taste at the very least.

In 1603, the frontispiece of Q1 confirms that the play has been performed at the universities; it is so popular that a pirated version is printed, probably close to the "two hours traffic of the stage" version required for outdoor public performance and for tours in the provinces. In 1604 another version is published; it is "newly enlarged" and much longer.

Moreover, *Hamlet* is clearly an intellectual play; one that, as Gabriel Harvey says, pleased "the wiser sort" circa 1600. It was most likely a Court play originally, for, as Spivak notes: "Private theatres catering to a more aristocratic audience were given to satire and cynicism . . . plots were chosen for their intellectual rather than their moral content, and the witty dialogue was often daring in its satirical import" (81). We know that Shakespearean plays such as *The Comedy of Errors* and *Love's Labour's Lost* were performed at Elizabeth's Court (81); we

know that in 1564 at Cambridge, Queen Elizabeth enjoyed a three-hour play in Latin ending at midnight (82), so that even if *Hamlet* in Q2 is nearly four hours in length if performed in full, it does not necessarily mean it had to be cut for a Court performance.

Moreover, for the Court, like the 1564 performance at Cambridge, it would have been played indoors. How much more likely it seems that *Hamlet* was crafted originally for a private performance at night, where, in the opening scenes the Ghost would appear out of the darkness of a room lit only by candlelight rather than the bright afternoon sun at the Globe.

Finally, the gap in time between the early versions of *Hamlet* and its printing should present no problem, for such gaps are typical for the plays of Shakespeare.

A single *Hamlet*, written in the 1580s, amended perhaps by the author for subsequent productions over the years, and so popular that it survived well into the seventeenth-century, makes coherent sense of internal and external evidence. It also recognises the great achievement of the playwright, one that has lasted into our own time undiminished, for what other play can be said to have withstood the test of time as has this greatest and most renowned of all Shakespeare's plays? Misunderstandings about its dating result both from our ignorance of its historical context and from the gaps in the historical records. One Shakespearean *Hamlet* offers a simple, logical explanation while making the best use of the meagre references we have and with as little speculation as possible. Historians should investigate its topicality and surely scholars should reconsider its date. \_\_\_\_\_ ©



Sir Derek Jacobi as Hamlet ponders mortality in the 1979 Old Vic production.

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