

*Literature Insights*  
General Editor: Charles Moseley

# William Shakespeare

## *Hamlet*

John Lennard

*'The final  
testimony  
to Shakespeare's  
generosity is how  
much he leaves up  
to the actors'*

# PUBLICATION DATA

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# Contents

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## A Note on the Author

## Preface

A note on the texts of *Hamlet*

Acts and scenes in the Arden 3 Q2 *Hamlet*

## Part 1. Approaching Shakespeare

- 1.1 A Man of the Jacobethan Theatre
- 1.2 Companies—Actors—Stages—Audiences
- 1.3 *Venus and Lucrece*
- 1.4 *Errors* and *Two Gentlemen*

## Part 2. Approaching Hamlet

- 2.1 Revenge with Complications
- 2.2 A Play by Shakespeare

## Part 3. Actors and Players

- 3.1 Old Hamlet / the Ghost
- 3.2 Horatio
- 3.3 Claudius
- 3.4 Gertrude
- 3.5 Polonius
- 3.6 Laertes
- 3.7 Ophelia
- 3.8 Rosencrantz & Guildenstern
- 3.9 The gravediggers
- 3.10 Osric
- 3.11 Fortinbras
- 3.12 Hamlet
- 3.13 “The best players in the world”

## **Part 4. Acts and Devices**

- 4.1 Acts
- 4.2 Scenes
- 4.3 Soliloquy and Colloquy
- 4.4 Verse, Prose, and Song
- 4.5 Metatheatre
- 4.6 Doubling
- 4.7 Special Effects
- 4.8 Exits

## **Part 5. *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night***

## **Part 6. Critics' Corner**

- 6.1 Bibliography
- 6.2 Web-sites

## **Hyperlinked Materials**

serious doubt  
theatre-space  
breath-length  
discovery-space  
comedic and tragic modes  
Vice  
Inconclusive  
Speculation  
Blackfriars  
Ciceronian periods

## Preface

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Like much in the modern world, *Hamlet* has acquired a tendency to become obese. In the Arden 2 Shakespeare,<sup>1</sup> Harold Jenkins's edition was twice the width of every other play; in Arden 3, Ann Thompson's and Neil Taylor's edition is in two volumes, jointly twice as wide as Jenkins's one, and such remorseless bulking is an unhappy trend. The play can also expand in performance: a fine 2001 Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) stage-production (directed by Steven Pimlott and starring Sam West) ran over four hours with two intervals, and Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film-adaptation, lasting a whopping 242 minutes, is rarely watched from start to finish, especially in one go. Still more off-puttingly for students, *Hamlet* criticism has the same expansiveness.

This *Literature Insight* is determinedly short. Great need not mean ponderous, and on stage *Hamlet* (like most Shakespeare) almost always does better at a brisk canter than a solemn march. In dealing with something as complex as the world's premier Early Modern<sup>2</sup> tragedy simplicity is not always useful; straightforwardness and cogency almost always are, so scholarly problems are ruthlessly relegated to references, while links in the bibliography make available to interested readers the primary materials, that they may see for themselves what the evidence supports. Casting matters are trickier, for there is almost no evidence about the first casting of any of Shakespeare's plays, and most of what is said is pure speculation. But *someone* first played each role, and a pool of most probable names *is* known: so the game can be compulsive. It is in no way necessary, but a grasp of the practical necessities and constraints Shakespeare faced in writing (which for a working playwright of his kind *means* casting) is very helpful, and inevitably brings more speculative territory into view. So sometimes I speculate, but only in footnotes or link-text, and in Part 6, where it is properly flagged and discussion can be as careful as it need.

Plot-summaries etc. are widely available, so I assume readers have read *Hamlet* at least once and know what happens. The only special thing readers—particularly those without theatrical experience—are asked to do is to think seriously about the

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1 There have been three series of Arden editions: the second appeared 1946–82, the third began to appear in 1993.

2 'Early Modern': for historians, the period 1500–1700; 'Modern' = 1700–present.