



**Understanding Shakespeare:
Hamlet**

Robert A. Albano

UNDERSTANDING

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MERCURYE PRESS

Los Angeles

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Robert Albano is an Associate Professor of English Literature in Taiwan.

NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

INTRODUCTION

Hamlet is the most famous play in the world. The primary reason for this fame is the complex **protagonist**, who has continued to fascinate, intrigue, puzzle, and entrance audiences for over four centuries. Hamlet is a young man who rails and scoffs at fate and criticizes the world as a place of corruption and decay. With the death of his father, the King of Denmark, Hamlet, the prince, feels that the best and the good in life are now over. Hamlet is full of depression and sadness. Yet, he is also a witty and clever character who becomes a social critic of great insight and understanding. The members of the audience may either relate to him or be puzzled by him, but nearly everyone in the audience will recognize the truth that is contained in Hamlet's critical assessment of the world.

Hamlet is an astonishing and remarkable character, and many critics argue that Shakespeare was able to create such a complex and intriguing character because of his own personal experiences, notably the death of his son in 1596. Shakespeare son, who was only eleven years of age when he died, was named **Hamnet**. And, indeed, the possibility is quite strong that Shakespeare chose the story of Prince Hamlet because of the similarity in names. Shakespeare wrote this, his greatest play, around 1601. Five years had passed since the death of his son, but the emotional upheaval and depression

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within Shakespeare would not have passed in any amount of time. Shakespeare appeared to pour all of his emotional energy and resources into this play. It is a working out of many of Shakespeare's own anxieties and uneasiness regarding death and the father-son relationship. So, although the play is not autobiographical in regards to plot or story, the rich emotional intensity of the play most certainly does reflect the powerful and bitter emotional upheaval that Shakespeare would surely have experienced at the time of his own son's death.

Shakespeare is, of course, known for creating some of the greatest characters in world literature; and, indeed, Hamlet stands out as the greatest of these great creations. Therefore, the reader should not be surprised that most commentary and criticism about this play focuses on the character of young Prince Hamlet.

However, this **story**, the plot of this tragic play, also deserves and merits the serious attention of the reader. Shakespeare took a rather simple and straightforward medieval tale of revenge and developed it into a complex account of political intrigue and family dysfunction. It is, furthermore, a ghost story and social allegory. The play of *Hamlet* is so rich and multifaceted that most readers will need to read it several times before they realize just how intricate and marvelous the play really is. Each time readers approach the play, they will discover

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something else new to amaze, startle, and astound them.

ACT I

ACT I, 1: A GHOST STORY

The story is set in Denmark at the castle of the king. Two soldiers named Marcellus and Barnardo are assigned to stand guard at night. But for the last two nights they have seen what they believe is a ghost. A young lord, an aristocrat named **Horatio**, tells one of the guards that the soldier just thinks that he sees a ghost; but, in reality, it is nothing more than his own “fantasy” or imagination (line 21). In response, the guard asks Horatio to come and see the ghost for himself.

Horatio is an aristocrat, whereas the guards are commoners. The guards know that they might be laughed at if they told everyone that they had seen a ghost. But the word of an aristocrat would be accepted as fact. The reader should note that this is not the only instance in this play where Shakespeare suggests distinctions and prejudices among the social classes of England (which Denmark symbolizes). So, as the guard Marcellus tells Barnardo, Horatio “may approve our eyes and speak to it” (27). The word *approve* here means that Horatio will serve as a witness to prove what they have seen. In addition, because Horatio is also a university scholar, he knows **Latin**. As the language of the Catholic Church, Latin was a language of mystery and the supernatural. Commoners were often awed by it and

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afraid of it (students may recall Geoffrey Chaucer's Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales*: the Pardoner would use Latin phrases to intimidate and scare the peasants as he attempted to swindle them out of their money). Therefore, many commoners would associate Latin with the afterlife and the supernatural. In addition, priests, who were fluent in Latin, would use Latin prayers and chants to **exorcise** (to get rid of or eliminate) evil spirits or ghost. During the Middle Ages (which is the time period of this story), universities were run by priests of the Catholic Church; and the primary goal of nearly every student was to become a priest. Horatio would thus have both the religious training and the knowledge of Latin as a result of his study at the university.

As the reader will discover later, Horatio also represents **the voice of reason** in this play. He is not someone to accept readily the superstitions and fears of most people. He is not someone who will allow his emotions to take control over his ability to think rationally.

The ghost appears for the third time before the two guards, and on this occasion Horatio is their witness. The ghost is wearing military armor, including a helmet. But its beaver (the visor, the metal piece that covers the eyes) is up so that Horatio and the others can see its face. The ghost looks exactly like old **King Hamlet** (the father of young Prince Hamlet). The old king had been dead for only a few months, and his brother Claudius (Hamlet's

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