

Shakespeare

Hamlet

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palgrave
macmillan

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Contains important information about how the extracts used in the Guide have been reprinted and what versions of *Hamlet* have been used when quoting from the play.

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Introduces the key concepts that will be a feature of the Guide.

CHAPTER ONE	4
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Neoclassical Approaches to *Hamlet* or 'Does Ophelia's breath smell?'

This chapter discusses the reactions to *Hamlet* from the period of the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 through to the mid-eighteenth century. This period was the first to get to grips with Shakespeare's work as coming from a world that was no longer familiar to the critic. Criticism from this time is dominated by the demands of neoclassicism which sought, with varying degrees of exactitude, to judge drama by the standards of unity laid out by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. This chapter examines these neoclassical 'rules' and considers the extent to which they were successfully applied to *Hamlet* as well as some of the ways that critics, such as James Drake and Samuel Johnson, whilst operating within the neoclassical paradigm, sought to explain Shakespeare's diversion from its tenets.

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From Sensibility to Romanticism: 'the majesty of melancholy'

In the later eighteenth century, *Hamlet* came to the attention of two Scottish academics, William Richardson and Henry Mackenzie, both of them associated with what has been called the 'cult of sensibility'. Their writing shifted attention away from the neoclassical concern with the decorum of the

play's narrative towards an investigation into the workings of Hamlet's character. Their idea of Hamlet as an isolated figure, too virtuous for the corrupt world in which he found himself, was picked up on by the next literary generation, the Romantics, who delivered a Hamlet who was too philosophical for the world of politics in which he was caught up. This chapter will trace the ways in which Romantic writers – from the German novelist, Goethe, through to the English poets, Coleridge and Keats – produced a Hamlet in their own image – thoughtful, melancholic and isolated. Their version of Hamlet reveals some of their own attitudes towards the creative process.

CHAPTER THREE

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Psychoanalytic Approaches: Oedipus and After

In this chapter we will see how the work of the Romantics in the early nineteenth century to uncover Hamlet's inner motivations comes to fruition in the ways that he is treated in the early twentieth-century discipline of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic readings of Hamlet have often been dominant in the popular understanding of the play. Elements that were previously seen as flaws in the plot or in Hamlet's character are now seen, by Freud and his pupil, Ernest Jones, as symptoms of psychosis. Freud's famous analysis of the Oedipus complex is seen in operation in Hamlet's apparent delay in exacting revenge on his father. Later critics, influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, will be seen to react against the master. Some attempt to rewrite the family drama that Freud described. Others refute the gender bias that is inherent to his system:

CHAPTER FOUR

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The Early Twentieth Century

The study of English literature as a university discipline emerged in the early part of the twentieth century. An important influence on the study of Shakespeare from this time, and the dominant presence in this chapter, was A.C. Bradley and his book, *Shakespearean Tragedy*. This chapter shows how he develops his idea of 'action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action' and how this results in a character-based type of criticism. Subsequent critics, such as Dover Wilson and L.C. Knights, however much they reject some of Bradley's work, are shown to be operating in his shadow. This chapter also presents T.S. Eliot's notion of the 'objective correlative' as he developed it in his reading of Hamlet.

CHAPTER FIVE 105

Contemporary Interpretations: Historicist *Hamlet*

In the last twenty years, work on the English Renaissance has been governed by an overriding interest in the historical contexts of literary production. Critics, such as Barker and Belsey, have seen, in *Hamlet*, the formation of a modern idea of what it means to be human. Where earlier critics were interested in 'character', more recent critics will be interested in the 'subject'. They argue that *Hamlet's* 'interiority' is not essential and timeless, but part of a historical development. Following this insight, other critics have further elaborated on the historical contexts which have produced this kind of subjectivity. Others, here represented by Harold Bloom, have resented these developments as counter-intuitive and anti-humanist.

CHAPTER SIX 146

Contemporary Interpretations: Feminism

Much of the criticism we will have looked at in the previous chapters will have attached great importance to the relationships between *Hamlet* and either his mother or Ophelia. However, rarely will the figure of the woman in the plays have been given great consideration. In this chapter, we will see how some recent critics have sought to redress the balance of our interest in *Hamlet*, interrogating the position of women both in the play and in the historical contexts of its production as well as addressing the perceived gender bias of previous critics.

CHAPTER SEVEN 159

Derrida and Lévinas

As well as providing a brief summary of the history of *Hamlet* criticism as it has been outlined in the Guide, this chapter looks at possible futures by examining the position of the play in the work of two important theorists of the twentieth century. Both offer a way out of the sometimes tautological approaches to the play that have been seen in earlier generations – Derrida by helping us rethink the way in which narrative relates to political consequences, through the figure of the ghost and Lévinas by reintroducing ethical considerations into our account of literature.