

Hamlet: The Way Shakespeare Intended

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Many readers rely on historic literature to provide a glimpse of everyday lifestyle in past times. Shakespeare's plays have been a treasure to such historians, and his *Hamlet* is considered one of Shakespeare's greatest works. However, readers of the twentieth century often do not get the same impression as sixteenth century audiences. Because customs have changed and some phrases have gone out of popular use, modern readers must read between the lines. Even more so, Wilson declares, "...unless we can see it as Elizabethans did, we shall inevitably miss, not only many beautiful touches, but, more important still, matters which concern the plot of the play" (157). Differences in the interpretation occur in the matter of royal ascension to the throne, the queen's hasty marriage, and the language of the play.

Initially, modern American readers may have difficulty understanding the line of succession to the throne in a kingdom. Shakespeare's audiences, however, did not have this hindrance. Since the drama was written by an Elizabethan for his contemporaries, the author took it for granted that the audience understood the royal family's lineage and its importance in preserving the kingdom. In the 1500s, Englishmen and women would have understood that the death of [written at e alamance hs in 04] King Hamlet presented the contest of becoming Denmark's next ruler to Prince Hamlet and his uncle Claudius. Since Claudius was victor, Hamlet, in the audience's eyes, was justifiably disappointed (Wilson 156). Wilson describes the audience's reaction: "For if Shakespeare and his audience thought of the constitution of Denmark in English terms, then *Hamlet was the*

rightful heir to the throne and Claudius a usurper" (155). This problem was so important to Hamlet, and to the intended audience, that it was Hamlet's last concern before his death; he was worried about who would take over the throne (V. iii).

Today's modern readers may have a milder reaction concerning Queen Gertrude's quick marriage to her husband's brother than Shakespeare intended. In today's time, marriage laws and customs are much more relaxed than they were when the play was written. It was not unusual, in fact, it was common practice, for a widow to wait at least one full year before remarriage. Queen Gertrude, however, rushed hastily into her next marriage, leaving [written at e alamanca hs in 04] considerably less time in between husbands than ordinary custom required. Wilson says, "Modern readers, living in an age when marriage laws are the subject of free discussion...can hardly be expected to enter fully into Hamlet's feelings on this matter" (156). He even goes as far as to say, "[Shakespeare] expected his audience to look upon it with as much abhorrence as the Athenians felt for what we should consider the more venial, because unwitting, crime of the Oedipus of Sophocles" (156).

The language, though poetically beautiful, may also be a hurdle to cross for modern readers. For example, when Hamlet repeatedly told Ophelia, his lover, to go to a nunnery, today's audience may interpret that to mean, "Go to a place for nuns" or "Go to a sacred place; take the vows of chasteness and poverty." Shakespeare and his audience, however, understood a nunnery to be a "cant term for a house of ill-fame" (Wilson 159). Another source of confusion is in Act IV, Scene V when Ophelia hands out "flowers" (lines 195-200). The reader will inevitably find himself looking to footnotes to understand the meaning of the flowers, while Elizabethan audiences would have known

the symbolism that Shakespeare intended. Again, when Hamlet questions Ophelia, “Are you honest?” (III. i. 102), modern interpretation would be, “Are you telling the truth?” Elizabethan viewers of the play would have understood the phrase’s meaning to be, “Are you not a prostitute?” (Wilson 158), which has a very different implication than the modern reader would assume.

Indeed, *Hamlet* can justifiably be considered Shakespeare’s masterpiece and perhaps can perhaps rival classical works and other highly-esteemed pieces of literature. Modern readers, however, must [written at e alamanca hs in 04] understand the importance of translating the text into Elizabethan language and custom. Differences in understanding the ascension to the royal throne, the rushed mourning period of the queen for her king, and the language of the characters must be realized and conquered. In spite of all of these confusions and disagreements of the times, William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is indeed a jewel in the treasury of literature.

WORKS CITED

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