



Western Literature: Texts and Contexts

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*
(ca. 1603)

Raphaël Ingelbien

Hamlet: again?

How many of you had already read *Hamlet* before this term?

How many times have you read (or seen) *Hamlet* in your life?

“the principal pragmatic function of the Canon: the remembering and ordering of a lifetime's reading” (Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 39)

Hamlet: again?

Rereading: “maybe the only pragmatic test for the canonical” (Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 518)

SONNET.

On sitting down to read King Lear once again.

O GOLDEN tongued Romance, with serene lute!
Fair plumed Syren, Queen of far-away!
Leave melodizing on this wintry day,
Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute:
Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute
Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay
Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit:
Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,
Begetters of our deep eternal theme!
When through the old oak Forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream,
But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phœnix wings to fly at my desire.

Shakespeare: again?

John Keats (1795-1821)



SONNET.

On sitting down to read King Lear once again.

—

O GOLDEN tongued Romance, with serene lute!
Fair plumed Syren, Queen of far-away!
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Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,
Begetters of our deep eternal theme!
When through the old oak Forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream,
But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.

From John Keats's 7-volume copy of the *Dramatic Works of William Shakspeare*, with notes and marginalia

[https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:14637636\\$3112i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:14637636$3112i)

Shakspeare. London : Sold by Carpenter and Son [etc.], 1814-[1818]. *f



SCENE I.

ELSINORE. *A Platform before the Castle.*

FRANCISCO *on his Post.* Enter to him BERNARDO.

Ber. **W**HO's there?

Fran. Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold Yourself.

Ber. Long live the king!

Fran. Bernardo?

Ber. He.

Fran. You come most carefully upon your hour.

Ber. 'Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco.

Fran. For this relief, much thanks: 'tis bitter cold, And I am sick at heart.

Ber. Have you had quiet guard?

Fran. Not a mouse stirring.

Ber. Well, good night.

n Shakspeare. London : Sold by Carpenter and Son [etc.], 1814-[1818]. *EC8 K2262 Zz814s. Hou.

Laer. Drown'd! O, where?

Queen. There is a willow grows ascaunt the brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them:
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies, and herself,
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
Which time, she chanted snatches of old tunes;
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indu'd
Unto that element: but long it could not be,
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

Laer. Alas then, she is drown'd?

Queen. Drown'd, drown'd.

Laer. Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia.

Historical context

Hamlet and English Renaissance theatre

- Influence of classical drama (cf. Hamlet, Polonius and the players in 2.2), emulation of Latin classics in vernacular literatures
- Shakespeare's 'great tragedies': artistic maturity + kingship and succession as themes around the time of Elizabeth I's death (1603): *Hamlet* (ca. 1601/3), *King Lear* (ca. 1606), *Macbeth* (ca. 1606)
- Dating: 1603? 1601? Earlier? 'Ur-*Hamlet*' ('lost' play from the 1580s): Shakespeare's or not?
- Quartos and Folio; the problem of the text(s), e.g. order of scenes between 3.4 and 5.1, presence or absence of 'How all occasions inform against me' (4.1 in NOS edition), 'enterprises of great pitch [quartos] / pith [Folio] and moment' in 'To be or not to be' speech (3.1)

Historical context

Hamlet and English Renaissance theatre

- Text v. play:
 - Text: 'poem unlimited': *Hamlet* is so long that it is almost impossible to perform in its entirety
 - Play: 'the play is the thing' (2.2) passionate love of theatre in Hamlet and other characters, play within play, metatheatre
- 'Shakespeare wrote for the stage': not always. Is *Hamlet* an important point in Shakespeare's career as a 'literary dramatist' (Erne 2003) who wrote for readers as well as theatre-goers?

‘Quarto a’ of Troilus and Cressida

THE
HISTORIE OF TROYLUS
and Cresseida

As it was acted by the Kings Maiesties
servants at the Globe

Written by William Shakespeare
LONDON

Imprinted by G. Eld for R. Bonian and H. Walley
and are to be sold at the Spred Eagle in Paules
Church-yard over against the
great North-doore
1609

THE
Historie of Troylus
and Cressida.

*As it was acted by the Kings Majesties
servants at the Swan.*

Written by William Shakespeare.

George Chapman.



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LONDON

Printed by I. Bladwell, at the Swan, and
sold by the Stationers, at the
Church-yard, opposite the
great North door.
1609.

‘Quarto b’ of *Troilus and Cressida*

From the ‘Preface’

Eternal reader, you have here a new play, never staled with the stage, never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar, ...

(...)

It deserves such a labor as well as the best comedy in Terence or Plautus. And believe this, that when he is gone, and his comedies out of sale, you will scramble for them, and set up a new English inquisition. Take this for a warning, and at the peril of your pleasure’s loss, and judgment’s, refuse not, nor like this the less, for not being sullied with the smoky breath of the multitude...

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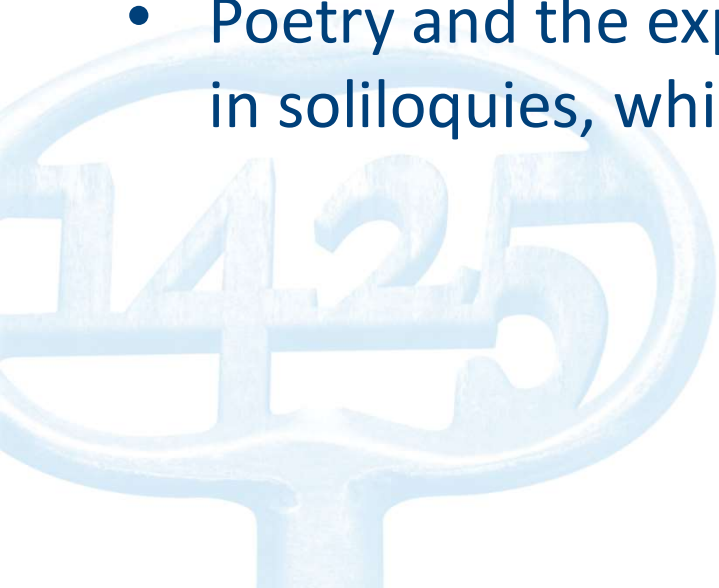
A neuer writer, to an euer
reader. Newes.

Eternall reader, you haue heere a new
play, neuer shal'd with the Stage,
neuer clapper-clawd with the palmes
of the wulger, and yet passing full of
the palme comitall; for it is a worth of
your braine, that neuer under-take
any thing comitall, statelie: And
were but the vaine names of comedies changed for the
titles of Commodities, or of Playes for Pleas; you should
see all these grand censors, that now stile them such
vanities, flock to them for the vaine grace of their
granities: especially this authors Comedies, that are
so fram'd to the life, that they serue for the most com-
mon Commentaries, of all the actions of our liues. Shew-
ing such a dexteritie, and power of witte, that the most
displeased with Playes, are pleas'd with his Comedies.
And all such hull and heavy-witted warlangers, as were
neuer capable of the witte of a Comedie, swimming by
report of them in his representations, haue found that
witte there, that they neuer found in them-selues, and
haue parted better witted then they came: seeing an
edge of witte set vpon them, more then euer they
dream'd they had braine to grinde it on. So much and
such sauerd salt of witte is in his Comedies, that they
seemes for their height of pleasure to be borne in that
sea that brought forth Venus. Amongst all there is
none more witty then this: And had I time I would
comment vpon it, though I know it needs not, (for so
much

Historical context

Hamlet and English Renaissance theatre

- Plot: not Shakespeare's. Sources: 16th-century stories about (H)amlet (Saxo Grammaticus, Belleforest, ...). Shakespeare's contribution: some plot twists and subplots, but mostly poetic language, characterization and individual psychology (cf. Bloom on Shakespearean character).
- Poetry and the exploration of inner lives most typically combine in soliloquies, which abound in *Hamlet*.

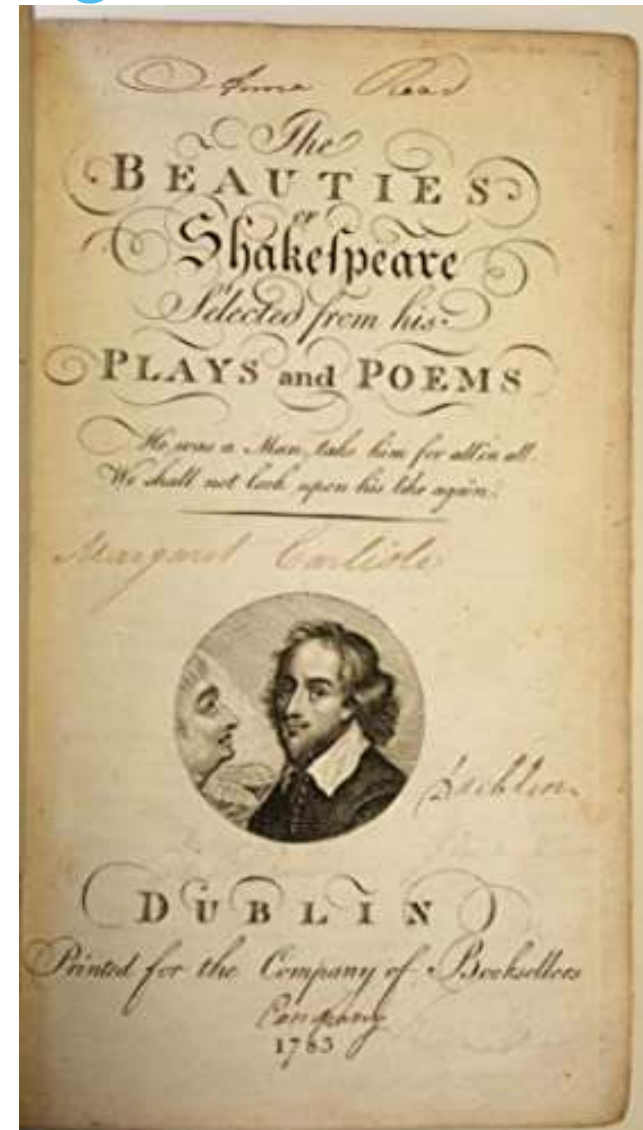


Hamlet/Hamlet's place in English literature

- Shakespeare is quickly regarded as a major English author, adaptations of his plays dominate the English stage (especially after the 1737 Licensing act), but he is virtually unknown outside the British Isles until the mid-18th century.
- *Hamlet* is established as one the central plays in the Shakespearean canon:
 - soliloquies give great/ambitious actors their best opportunity to shine on stage.
 - 'anthologizing' Shakespeare: focus on soliloquies as 'independent' poems.

Hamlet/Hamlet's place in English literature

‘Anthologizing’ Shakespeare: the practice of copying extracts from longer texts in ‘anthologies’ was already common in Shakespeare’s own day (“commonplace books”), Shakespeare himself may very well have anticipated the selective ‘anthologizing’ of passages from his plays. Hamlet’s speeches were perhaps inherently ‘detachable’.



Anthony Van Dyck,
Portrait of Sir John
Suckling (1637-8?
before 1641)

Suckling holds a copy of
Shakespeare's 1623 Folio
open at a page of *Hamlet*



Hamlet/Hamlet's place in Western literature

- 18th century: Voltaire's ambivalent response to Shakespeare
- Voltaire: defender of French classicism in literature, Anglophile liberal in politics
- Voltaire's partial translations of Shakespeare, especially soliloquies (e.g. 'To be or not to be')

Hamlet/Hamlet's place in Western literature

Voltaire on *Hamlet*:

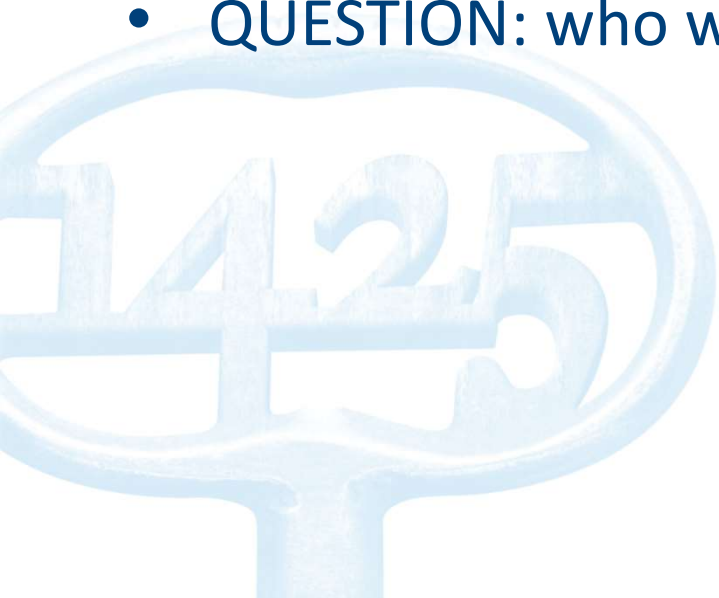
“One would think the whole piece was the product of the imagination of a drunken savage. And yet, among all these gross irregularities, which make the English theatre even at this day so absurd and barbarous, we find in *Hamlet*, which is still more strange and unaccountable, some sublime strokes worthy of the greatest genius” (1748)

Voltaire on Shakespeare:

“As the height of calamity and horror, it was I who in the past first spoke of this Shakespeare; it was I who was the first to point out to Frenchmen the few pearls which were to be found in this enormous dunghill. It never entered my mind that by doing so I would one day help the effort to trample on the crowns of Racine and Corneille in order to wreath the brow of this barbaric mountebank” (1776)

Hamlet/Hamlet's place in Western literature

- Shakespeare and character: centrality of Hamlet, reflected in the English phrase 'like *Hamlet* without the prince' → Hamlet without *Hamlet*? Can we 'hit the delete button' on other characters (cf. *Hamlet Unplugged*)
- QUESTION: who would you eliminate?



C

ETCetera presents:

hamlet unplugged

Hamlet is the supreme character in the finest play by the greatest playwright we have. He struts, frets, worries, jokes, abuses, roars, feigns madness, goes crazy, kills and finally is killed. All this because his mother married his uncle.

So what if 4 different actors play Hamlet's psychological unravelling and we simply hit the delete button on all other characters. See Hamlet struggle unaided with his demons in German, Swedish, Spanish, French and English.

Surtitles in English & French.

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at 20.00

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1030 Brussels

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7 soliloquies
6 murders

5 languages

4 Hamlets

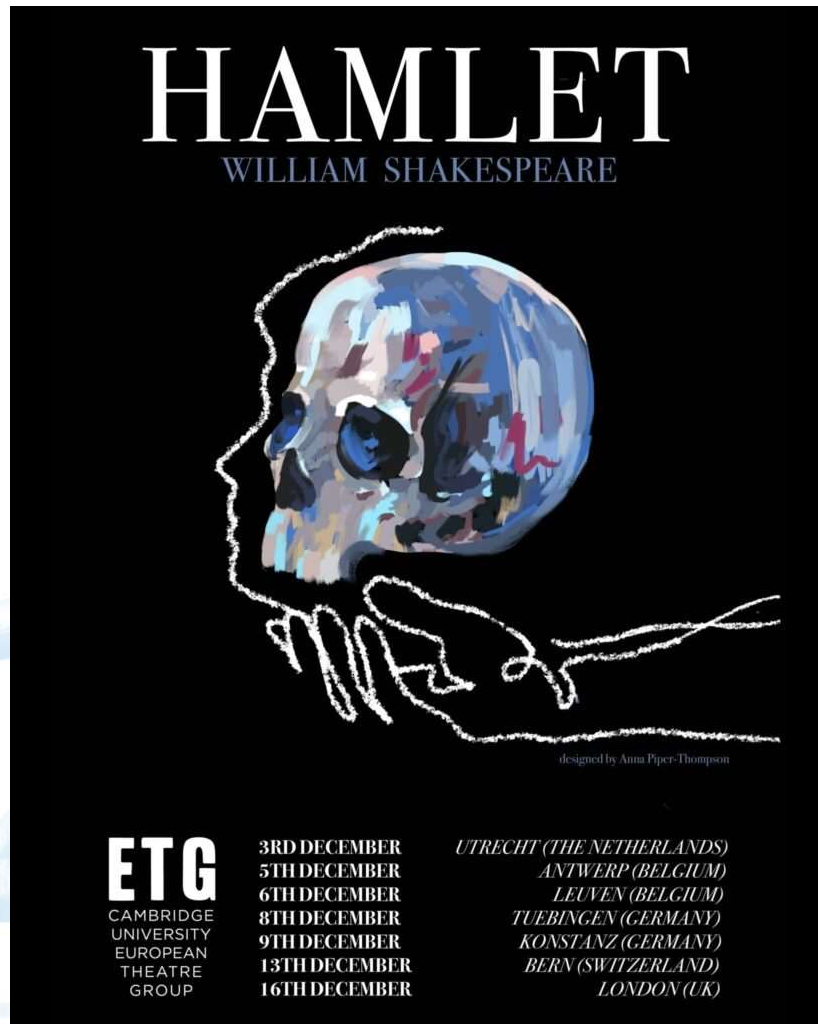
3 songsmiths

2 Acts

1 Shakespeare!

KU LEUVEN

Hamlet 2022



“Our version of *Hamlet* will invite the audience into the psyche of the unstable Prince. We want the audience to enter immersed in their own lives and leave with the uncertainty of the play to grapple with themselves.”

Hamlet/Hamlet's place in Western literature

- The 'To be or not to be' 'soliloquy': not essential in dramatic terms, but essential to modern perceptions of *Hamlet* and its themes?
- QUESTION: Olivier's or Branagh's 3.1?

Olivier <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MiwF4I6bOcA>

Branagh <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykmFhdoiLCw>

Hamlet/Hamlet's place in Western literature

- Romanticism: Shakespeare's lack of respect for classical rules and his role as a Romantic model.
- German Romanticism: Shakespeare as a model for an emergent German literature that defines itself against French classicism, and for other emergent literatures in the Romantic period.
- European Romanticism and (failed) revolutions: Hamlet as the powerless/ineffectual idealist, melancholy intellectual, *Hamlet* and the distance between dream/aspiration and reality (Goethe, Freiligrath, Coleridge, ...).

Hamlet in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1796)

“‘The time is out of joint; O cursed spite! That ever I was born to set it right!’ In these words, so I believe, lies the key to Hamlet's whole behaviour, and it is clear to me what Shakespeare has set out to portray: a heavy deed placed on a soul which is not adequate to cope with it ... An oak tree planted in a precious pot which should only have held delicate flowers. The roots spread out, the vessel is shattered.

A fine, pure, noble and highly moral person, but devoid of that emotional strength that characterizes a hero, goes to pieces beneath a burden that it can neither support nor cast off. Every obligation is sacred to him, but this one is too heavy.”

Freiligrath, 'Deutschland ist Hamlet' (1844)

Yes, Germany is Hamlet! Lo!
Upon her ramparts every night
There stalks in silence, grim and slow.
Her buried Freedom's steel-clad sprite,

Beckoning the warders watching there.
And to the shrinking doubter saying :
“They've dropt fell poison in mine ear.
Draw thou the sword! no more delaying.”

Freiligrath, 'Deutschland ist Hamlet' (1844)

He listens, and his blood runs cold;
The horrid truth, at length laid bare.
Drives him to be the avenger bold, —
But will he ever really dare ?

He ponders, dreams, but at his need
No counsel comes, firm purpose granting,
Still for the prompt, courageous deed
The prompt, courageous soul is wanting.

Freiligrath, 'Deutschland ist Hamlet' (1844)

It comes from loitering overmuch,
Lounging, and reading, — tired to death ;
Sloth holds him in its iron clutch,
He's grown too “fat and scant of breath.”

His learning gives him little aid.
His boldest act is only thinking;
Too long in Wittenberg he stayed
Attending lectures, — maybe, drinking.

Guizot on *Hamlet*

But Shakspeare did much more than this: under his treatment, Hamlet's madness becomes something altogether different from the obstinate premeditation or melancholy enthusiasm of a young prince of the Middle Ages, placed in a dangerous position, and engaged in a dark design: it is a grave moral condition, a great malady of soul which, at certain epochs and in certain states of society and of manners, diffuses itself among mankind, frequently attacks the most highly-gifted and the noblest of our species, and afflicts them with a disturbance of mind which sometimes borders very closely upon madness. The world is full of evil, and of all kinds of evil. What sufferings, crimes, and fatal,

Coleridge on *Hamlet*/Hamlet

“*Hamlet* was the play, or rather Hamlet himself was the character, in the intuition and exposition of which I first made my turn for philosophical criticism, and especially for insight into the genius of Shakspeare, noticed. [...]

In *Hamlet* I conceive [Shakespeare] to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to outward objects and our meditations on inward thoughts – a due balance between the real and the imaginary world. In *Hamlet* this balance does not exist – his thoughts, images, and fancy being far more vivid than his perceptions, and his very perceptions instantly passing thro' the medium of his contemplations, and acquiring as they pass a form and colour not naturally their own. Hence, great enormous intellectual activity, and consequent proportionate aversion to real action, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities.”

Hamlet/Hamlet's place in Western literature

- Romanticism: *Hamlet* and supernaturalism
- QUESTION: Olivier's or Branagh's 1.5?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hjx_ihCkA38&list=PLE19F96665495FBBA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g05x9X7mpcY>

Hamlet/Hamlet's place in Western literature

- Romanticism: *Hamlet* and supernaturalism
- *Hamlet* and the Gothic novel
 - “That great master of nature, Shakespeare” (Horace Walpole, preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, 1765)
 - Ann Radcliffe on Hamlet's ghost and the Romantic sublime

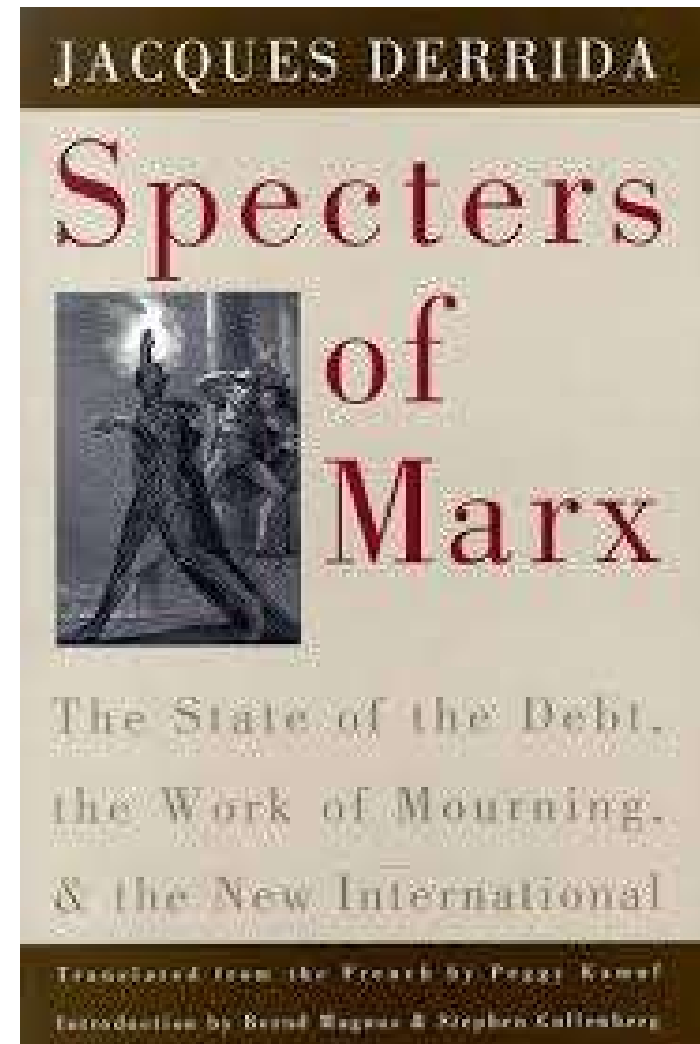
Ann Radcliffe on Hamlet's ghost and the Romantic sublime (ca. 1802)

“In nothing has Shakspeare been more successful than in [...] selecting circumstances of manners and appearance for his supernatural beings, which, though wild and remote, in the highest degree, from common apprehension, never shock the understanding [...] never compel us, for an instant, to recollect that he has a licence for extravagance. Above every ideal being is the ghost of Hamlet, with all its attendant incidents of time and place. The dark watch upon the remote platform, the dreary aspect of the night, the very expression of the officer on guard, ‘the air bites shrewdly; it is very cold;’ the recollection of a star, an unknown world, are all circumstances which excite forlorn, melancholy, and solemn feelings, and dispose us to welcome, with trembling curiosity, the awful being that draws near; and to indulge in that strange mixture of horror, pity, and indignation, produced by the tale it reveals.”

Hamlet/Hamlet's place in Western literature

Hamlet's ghost: from possible object of theological debates in Renaissance England to modern metaphor for various ideals/causes

- cf. Freiligrath
- cf. opening sentence of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848):
“A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism.”



Hamlet, the Western (male) intellectual?

John Everett Millais, 'Ophelia' (1851-52)



Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet

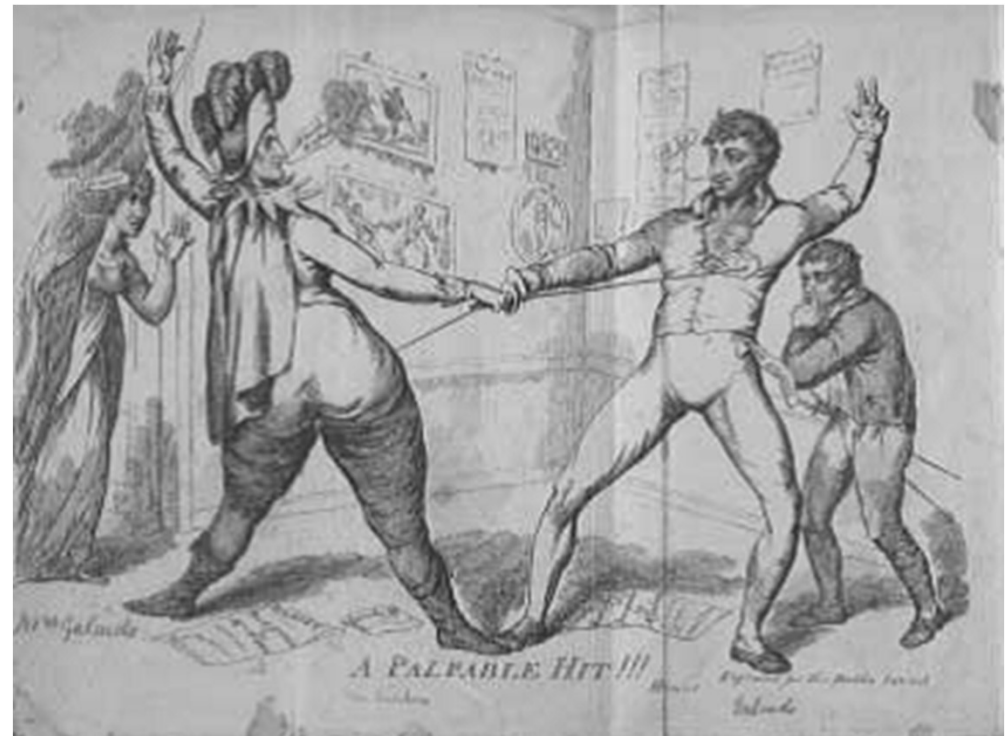


Hamlet, the Western (male) intellectual?

‘Sarah Siddons as The Tragic Muse’
(Joshua Reynolds, 1784)



Caricature of Sarah Siddons
playing Hamlet



Hamlet, the Western (male) intellectual?

Women as Hamlet:

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/gallery/2014/sep/26/female-hamlets-sarah-bernhardt-maxine-peake-in-pictures>

QUESTION: how plausible do you find Maxine Peake as Hamlet?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaHiEtmmsuM>



A (very short) bibliography

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