Ghosts, Murder, and More Murder - Hamlet Part I: Crash Course Literature 203

Crash Course: Literature
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=====Intro=====

John Green: Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and today we are going to talk about the greatest Dane of all: Scooby Doo. No! It's *Hamlet*.

So *Hamlet* is either a 16th or a 17th century play, we're not positive. The tragedy of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, was written by William Shakespeare sometime between 1599 and 1602. And it's considered by many to be Shakespeare's best work, even better than *Timon of Athens* or *Cymbeline*.

John from the Past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green, I know *Hamlet* is like super famous, and important and everything, but isn't it just basically a super long play about a guy who never makes up his mind.

John Green: Well, me from the past, some argue that Hamlet doesn't have trouble making up his mind as much as he has trouble executing his vision, more specifically executing his uncle. Then again, me from the past many of us would argue that does struggle to make decisions, he has to make are quite difficult. I mean this is a play about justice and revenge, and your conscience, and your place in the social order, and once again, deeply uncomfortable feelings about mothers.

[Opening music]

=====Hamlet Inspiration, Versions and Summary=====

So, Shakespeare based *Hamlet* on a medieval Scandinavian tale chronicled by everyone's favorite Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, pictured here, depending on your world view, as either Santa Claus or God. But Shakespeare probably knew the tale from contemporary plays rather than like actual Danish history because up to that point it had mostly been about Vikings and pastries. Actually, you know, that's still most of what it is.

So, Saxo tells the story of Prince Amleth, a kid who sees his uncle murder his father. And then young Amleth bides his time and pretends to be crazy in order to lull his uncle into a false sense of security. And then, as soon as he's grown up, Amleth slaughters his uncle with his father's sword. Amleth, by the way, 80% of the way to being Pig Latin for Hamlet.

Anyway, it's interesting to know that background because it makes you think about the changes that Shakespeare makes to that story, which indicates something about what's really important to Shakespeare. For instance, Hamlet isn't unable to kill his uncle because he's young. And he doesn't actually see his uncle murder his father. So basically, Shakespeare was introducing ambiguity into the story, which is kind of Shakespeare's specialty.

So *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's most popular play. In fact, it's perhaps the only one to have been consistently performed since it debuted. It's also very long. Like when Kenneth Branagh attempted to film every line the movie lasted more than four hours. Some theatrical productions have gone on as long as six.

The general consensus is that Shakespeare wrote the play so long to satisfy himself and he knew that theater troupes would just make it shorter any way they wanted. But it's also possible that he thought that by keeping the audience at the theater for longer would help him to sell more mutton pies at the concession stand. We have to remember art is also commerce.

But this whole link thing brings us to the fact that there are actually three different versions of *Hamlet*. There are two quartos, one from 1603 and another from 1604, and then the Folio edition from 1623. The second quarto and the folio are somewhat similar, although the first was probably based on Shakespeare's notes and the second based on seeing the play in performance.

But the first quarto is known as the "bad quarto," and not in the sense that it's evil, but in the sense that it's kind of terrible. Historians believe that an actor probably transcribed the first quarto from his memory and that that actor probably only played really small parts, like Marcellus. Basically, the scenes he was onstage for he remembered pretty well, but the others ones, not so much. He was probably that actor who's always mouthing other peoples' lines. For example, here's the bad quarto's "To be or not to be" speech: "To be, or not to be, that's the point, to die, to sleep, is that all?" Yeah, that's, that's fantastic.

Anyway, in all the versions the plot is the same. Hamlet is a grad student who returns home to Elsinore when his father dies. And then his mother Gertrude suddenly marries his uncle Claudius. Claudius takes over as king, even though technically Hamlet should inherit the throne. So a grieving Hamlet deals with this, as any grad student would, by wearing black, listening to sad music, and making long speeches about how he wishes his flesh would melt, which - spoiler! - it eventually will. But then his father's ghost appears to him and begs Hamlet to revenge his murder by that aforementioned uncle Claudius.

Hamlet isn't sure about this, so he pretends to be insane, you know, as you do. He then hires a troupe of players to put on a show that will make Claudius reveal his guilt. Claudius is indeed overwhelmed with emotion, flees the play. Gertrude summons Hamlet to her bedchamber where they have a weirdly intimate discussion until Hamlet hears a noise and in a rare decisive moment stabs the curtain. Oh, but it's not my uncle, it's Polonius. Polonius who is never free despite saying that remedy is the soul of wit and then also famously said "to thine own self be true", and then you know, decided not to be terribly true to himself. So Gertrude decides that Hamlet should get out of time for a while, and he sails away and there's a bit of death, and storms and pirates and then Hamlet returns only to find that Polonius' daughter Ophelia has committed suicide and her brother Laertes is kind of mad at Hamlet. So Claudius schedules a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet, poisoning Laertes' sword and Hamlet's wine. Hamlet is stabbed but manages to wound Laertes while Gertrude downs the fatal wine. And then when everyone is dead or dying Hamlet decides that now is finally a good time to stab Claudius. Basically all the Danes die, except Horatio of course because you need someone to say "goodnight sweet prince: and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!".

=====Thought Bubble=====

What kind of place is this Denmark where people have stunningly un-Danish names like Claudius and Polonius? Well, let's go to the Thought Bubble. So throughout the play, Claudius is building up an army to take on Norway, and Denmark is caught in a strange limbo between "war" and "not war". As often happens the specter of external enemies leads the ruling powers to search for enemies within. We see a lot of examples of Elsinore as a surveillance society, like, Hamlet's not wrong when he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "Denmark's a prison".

The characters are closely watching each other. I mean, Gertrude and Claudius are watching Hamlet, so is Polonius, though he's awfully bad at it, Hamlet's school mates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are watching him closely, as Claudius is encouraging them to spy while they throw back Danish grog and talk about girls. Ophelia's watching Hamlet, too, but Hamlet isn't watching her because he's too busy staring at Claudius, trying to figure out if he

really did murder his father, and of course, Hamlet also spends a lot of time watching himself, and then reciting anguish soliloquies about it. Personally, in the end, I'm more struck by Hamlet's narcissism than by his indecisiveness.

Anyway, all of this is probably less a criticism of Denmark, which is a perfectly nice place full of Herring sandwiches and competitive handball, than it is a commentary on Elizabethan England, a place notorious for spying, and also the place where Shakespeare actually lived. There were all anti-royal, anti-catholic conspiracies going, and Elizabeth the First ran a whole network of spies to help discover them, sort of like "M" in James Bond, but with more tiaras. Even Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare's rival, and one of the most bad ass playwrights ever was a spy. So the court of Elsinore can be read as a commentary on Shakespeare's own environment, in which being tried and beheaded for secret treason was kind of the national pass time.

Thanks Thought Bubble, so Hamlet is a play about watching and being watched, something that we're all pretty familiar with these days, but it's also a play about doubling and mirroring. This is a common Shakespearean thing, but it gets to some really core questions about being a person. Like are people really capable of change? Can they become different people over time? And when you look in the mirror are you seeing the person that is actually you? Are you the person that you imagine yourself to be?

So there are at least two Hamlets in this play, right? There's the old, dead, King Hamlet who goes around haunting the Elsinore battlements, and our hero, who is supposed to avenge that old Hamlet. But the living Hamlet is also split into two people: the one who wants to kill Claudius, and the one who is like, "you know, maybe not, maybe I should just be a grad student."

And some critics argue that the Hamlet who returns home from his pirate adventure is yet another person because he is a very different guy from the one who left. And you could even see Ophelia is a kind of extreme, subversive, double for Hamlet, like what Hamlet might be like if he were robbed of all of his power and agency. And then, obviously, when the actors perform their play "The Murder of Gonzago", they're mirroring all the recent events in Elsinore, but it's not a regular mirror, right? It's kind of a fun house mirror. But ultimately, it's not just OH NO, my desk is moving, that must mean it's time for the open letter!

=====Open Letter=====

An open letter to Simba. Hey there, Simba. Let's take a look at the 1990s adaption of Hamlet that didn't star Mel Gibson, the one starring you: The Lion King. Simba, Hamlet. Mufasa, recently murdered king. Scar, Claudius. Mufasa in the sky in smoke, obviously ghost. Nala, Ophelia. The elephant graveyard, England, or maybe the actual graveyard with "alas, poor Yorick, whom I knew well." The point is, you must never go there, Simba. Sorry, I don't have a good James Earl Jones. Best wishes, John Green.

So anyway, it's not just one mirror, but many that reflect Hamlet's trouble figuring out what kind of man he is and how he should act. These mirrors also underscore the perpetual cycle of violence at the heart of the revenge tragedy, which you'll no doubt remember from our talk of Ancient Greek stories. Like in these tragedies, the desire for vengeance ultimately corrupts the revenger, and he or she has to die, too. Each murder has to be answered for with another murder, until we are out of people who can die.

A good example of this unending violence is Old Hamlet's ghost, who can't rest in his grave until he's avenged. Now, the critics Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royal describe ghosts as quote: "The very embodiment of strange repetition or recurrence: it is a revenant, it comes back." Okay, but it comes back from where? Like, ghosts don't really fit in to Hamlet's understanding of death. He describes death as quote: "the undiscover'd country, from whose born no traveler returns." Except his dad, apparently.

In fact, one way to read it is that the ghost fate is in some ways aligned with Catholic purgatory, confined to fast and fires till befoul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purged away. And Hamlet seems to fear something similar, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come.

Though it's also worth noting that Hamlet wonders if the ghost really is his father. Hamlet has to ask if the ghost is quote: "a spirit of health or goblin damned". Regardless, the ghost makes Hamlet wonder about the consequences of his action. I mean, here's Hamlet saying can this ghost, whose name, I will remind you, is Hamlet, be trusted? Is justice the business of people or of God?

Now, obviously there are no easy answers to those questions, but earthly justice is clearly corrupt in this play. I mean, Claudius has usurped the kingdom, and there's evidence that the old King Hamlet might not have been the greatest ruler, either. And Claudius is already being punished spiritually, although it's not clear whether it comes from himself or from God, but like, at one point he tries to pray, and finds that he actually can't. "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below/Words without thought never to heaven go."

Now, prayer was seen as cleansing, and in that scene, Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius because he believes that Claudius is praying and therefore will be cleansed of his sin and will go straight to heaven if Hamlet killed him right then, and that wouldn't be fair, of course, actually, if he'd just killed Claudius in that moment, due to the thoughts not going up to heaven, everything would have been fine. I mean, not for Claudius, but you know, for justice.

So should Hamlet act? Should he let divine justice take its course? Does divine justice only work through people? Even I can't decide!

=====Outro=====

John From the Past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! In the end, how does Hamlet finally make up his mind, though?

Well, me from the past, when he finally makes up his mind, he's dying, right? He has like, seconds left to live. Ultimately, Hamlet is a great play for its aphorisms and its language and its ambiguity, but also because it brilliantly captures the fact that we do not know what we are doing.

Hamlet doesn't struggle to decide a course of action because he's young or because he's an academic, or because he's a narcissist, he struggles because he's human.

We'll continue our discussion of him and the play next week. Thanks for watching, I'll see you then.

=====Credits=====

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