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INTRODUCING SHAKESPEARE

There is an aura of unreality about the plays of Shakespeare, and students feel this, although they may not be able to express their reactions precisely. They may say that Shakespeare's language is "too flowery" or that people in real life don't talk the way these characters do. The latter is true. The people one meets in real life are not nearly as articulate as the characters in Shakespeare. It would probably be unbearable if the people one met at the bank and the supermarket, in school or during meetings spoke unrelievedly in the style of the great poets.

Shakespeare's characters lack the foggy-mindedness found in everyday life; they are concentrated and fully in command of their verbal resources. Shakespeare's is a world in which the brain and the heart and the tongue are directly connected. It's a world that perhaps doesn't exist, but what an interesting world it is, one in which people have fully realized their potential—for good and for evil. To have imagined such a world and to have put it on paper is Shakespeare's achievement. And it is why he is read and performed today.

Making Shakespeare's world accessible to students is the reason for this edition of *Hamlet*, a facing-pages translation with the original text on the left-hand side and a translation into contemporary English on the right. The translation of *Hamlet* is not meant to take the place of the original. After all, a translation is by its very nature a shadow of the original. This translation is an alternative to the notes usually included in modern editions. In many cases these notes interfere with the reading of the play. Whether alongside or below the original text, they break the rhythm of reading and frequently force the reader to turn back to an earlier page or jump ahead to a later one. Having a translation that runs parallel to the original, line for line, allows the reader to move easily from Elizabethan to contemporary English and back again. It's simply a better way to introduce Shakespeare.

Also, this translation is suitable for performance, where no notes are available to the audience. Admittedly, a well-directed and well-acted production can do much to clarify Shakespeare's language. And yet, there will be numerous references and lines whose meanings are not accessible on a first hearing. What, for instance, does Polonius mean when he says, "or given my heart a winking"?

ABOUT THIS TRANSLATION

Since 1807, when Charles and Mary Lamb published *Tales from Shakespeare*, adaptations of Shakespeare's plays have attempted, more or less successfully, to broaden the audience for these plays—or perhaps, to restore to Shakespeare the

full audience he had known in the seventeenth century. These days prose paraphrases of the original are offered to students. Insofar as they succeed, these paraphrases offer a kind of literal rendering of the original, largely stripped of metaphor and poetry. But to read them by themselves, without reference to the original, would make you wonder why Shakespeare is still popular.

The translation in this edition aims to retain the feel and the rhythm of the original, but at the same time to be immediately comprehensible to modern audiences and readers, so that they can experience Shakespeare in much the same way the Elizabethans did. That means preserving the sound and the spirit of the original.

Here, for example is a passage taken from the fifth act of *Hamlet*. Hamlet and Horatio are in the graveyard, and they see a few people and a coffin. Hamlet asks:

Who is this they follow?
 And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken
 The corse they follow did with desp'rate hand
 Fordo its own life. 'Twas of some estate.
 Couch we awhile, and mark.

The first line is easily understood, but the trouble begins in line two with the phrase *maimed rites*. We would say something like “shortened ceremony.” *Fordo* means “to destroy,” and while no longer in use, may be found in a large dictionary. Hamlet uses *couch* to mean “hide,” and while it is reminiscent of “crouch,” it does not come from the same root. A dictionary may list “hide” among the definitions for *couch*, but it will be well down the list and labeled “archaic.” Certainly, it is not commonly used in that sense today.

To be effective and authentic, a translation into contemporary English should not only be immediately clear, but should have the ring of Shakespeare. The original and the modified parts should meld so seamlessly that, if you did not have the original at hand, you might think you were reading it:

Who is it they mourn?
 And with such shortened ceremony? This implies
 The person they mourn did with a desperate hand
 Take his own life. It was someone of high rank.
 Let us conceal ourselves and watch.

Here, for comparison, is another approach to translating Shakespeare. Although clear to a modern reader, it does not have the feel and the sound of Shakespeare.

Who are they burying?
 And with so little ceremony? This means

SOLO SPEECHES

There is another difference between the plays of Shakespeare and most modern ones—the solo speeches. These are the asides and the soliloquies in which a character reveals what is on his or her mind. Contemporary dramatists seem to feel that the solo speech is artificial and unrealistic. Oddly enough, modern novelists frequently use a variety of the solo speech. Some critics feel that this convention has given the novel extra power and depth, allowing writers to probe deeply into the motives of their characters. One thing is certain—Shakespeare’s plays without the solo speeches would not be as powerful as they are.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

There are several ways in which this edition of *Hamlet* can be used with students, but perhaps the most effective is to assign a long scene or several short scenes in the translation for reading as homework. Then, in going over this material in class, use the original. This way much valuable time can be saved. Students no longer have to struggle with understanding the basic story, and you can devote your time to providing insights and in-depth appreciation of the play.

For some students, of course, the original text will still represent a formidable obstacle. In those cases, you may want to use the translation as the basis of classroom presentation with carefully selected passages from the original to illustrate the points you are making. The great advantage of this edition is its flexibility in a variety of teaching situations.

ADDITIONAL TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. A kind of theatre game many directors use to help their actors understand the complexities of the characters in a drama like *Hamlet* is called “Collage.” It doesn’t matter if more than one student has the same character as long as they don’t confer. Each student must choose a color for the background, perhaps pink for Ophelia or grey for Claudius, using colored paper or quickly coloring in a background. The color, of course, represents the character as the student perceives him or her. Most students are aware of the theories of colors and how they affect us, but even without such formal knowledge students are generally adept at choosing a color that suggests what their character is like.

Next, using magazines or newspapers or even simple drawings, each student creates a collage of objects, shapes, and scenery that together present all the student understands about the character he or she has been assigned. Obviously, Ophelia’s collage would have a great many flowers in it, but what other elements, perhaps less obvious, would elaborate on her character? The

SUMMARIES OF ACTS AND SCENES

ACT ONE

Scene 1

At midnight there is a changing of the guard before the royal castle at Elsinore, Denmark. Francisco, a soldier on duty, is relieved by Barnardo, an officer. Horatio and Marcellus arrive and join Barnardo. Previously, Barnardo and Marcellus have seen the ghost of their late king. Since he is a scholar, they have asked Horatio to come and witness the apparition. Horatio assures Marcellus that the ghost was a hallucination. Then the ghost appears. When Horatio charges the ghost to speak, it stalks off. In the following discussion, Horatio learns that the ghost has appeared twice before, dressed in the armor the late king wore when he defeated King Fortinbras of Norway. Young Fortinbras, the king's son, has been making warlike gestures toward Denmark, hoping to recover the land his father lost. The ghost reappears, and Horatio challenges it. The ghost seems about to speak when the cock crows, and then it disappears. All three men agree that Hamlet, the son of the spirit they have seen, must be told of the apparition.

Scene 2

The new king, Claudius, holds an audience. He speaks first of his late brother, King Hamlet, and explains that discretion must curb excessive grief. He thanks his councillors for agreeing to his marriage to Gertrude, his late brother's wife. (In Shakespeare's time the Church considered such a marriage incestuous.) He dispatches Voltmand and Cornelius as ambassadors to the ailing King of Norway, alerting him to his nephew Fortinbras' plans to attack Denmark. He grants Laertes, son of his chief councillor Polonius, permission to return to France. Claudius now turns to young Hamlet, urging him to accept his father's death as part of the natural course of events. He and Queen Gertrude request that Hamlet remain in the Danish court and give up his studies at the University of Wittenberg. Hamlet agrees, and the king, pleased, declares a day of celebration.

Left to himself, Hamlet expresses his thoughts in the famous soliloquy, beginning, "O that this too too solid flesh would melt." Hamlet says that if it were not against God's law, he would commit suicide. Hamlet is disgusted at his mother's hasty marriage and considers Claudius much inferior to the late king. Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo enter. Horatio tells Hamlet what he and the guards saw last night—"a figure like your father, armed all at points exactly." Hamlet questions the three men about the apparition, agrees to join them on the watch that night, and makes them swear to tell no one what they have seen.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

ACT ONE

1. What has been disturbing the night watch of Barnardo and Marcellus?

COMMENT: It is a ghostly apparition that looks to them like the late king of Denmark. They're curious why it appears, yet are fearful to approach it, so they hope to convince their friend Horatio, who is a scholar and understands such things, to confront it.

2. All three men, Barnardo, Marcellus and Horatio, are concerned about the state of their country. What exposition about Denmark is provided?

COMMENT: The battle with the elder Fortinbras is recounted and the men compare the state of their country with the condition of Rome at the time of the assassination of Julius Caesar, even fearing that the ghost may be a portent of bad things to come.

3. In Scene 2, why are Claudius and Gertrude so intent on getting Hamlet to cheer up and go on with his life instead of mourning his father's death so deeply?

COMMENT: Gertrude's concern for her son seems genuine, but Claudius surely wants everything in the kingdom to return to normal as quickly as possible so people will forget how hastily he and Gertrude married after the death of her husband. Hamlet's gloomy attitude keeps alive the memory of his father, is a silent reproach to the king and queen, and is sure to cause comment among the people.

4. In Scene 2 of the First Folio, Hamlet begins a soliloquy, "O that this too too solid flesh would melt." In Quarto 2 the line reads, "O that this too too sallied flesh would melt." Some scholars interpret "sallied" to mean "sullied," meaning "stained." Which do you think is more apt here?

COMMENT: "Sullied" is the reading for most modern editions, but the case for "solid" is simple. It is the clear reading for one of the two authoritative texts and seems to fit the context much better.

5. In Scene 3, why are Laertes and Polonius taking such pains to warn Ophelia not to take Hamlet's attentions to her seriously?

COMMENT: There may be some latent jealousy of Hamlet in Laertes, but mainly he is looking out for the welfare of his sister, believing Hamlet to be just amusing himself with her. Polonius cannot believe that the queen would permit Hamlet to marry someone not of royal blood, and so he wants to safeguard his daughter's virtue and ensure that she doesn't have her heart

APPENDICES AND GLOSSARY

Following are two appendices that you may wish to duplicate for your students. The Guide to Pronouncing Proper Names in *Hamlet* should probably be given to students at the beginning of this play. (The terms in this guide are taken from the translation.) The same would hold true for the Shakespearean Time Line. It is useful to be reminded of the events of Shakespeare's life and how they fit into an overall historical framework.

A third appendix traces the sources of Shakespeare's play.

The items in the Glossary are arranged alphabetically, and references are given in parentheses to their use in the play.

APPENDIX 1: A GUIDE TO PRONOUNCING PROPER NAMES IN *HAMLET*

Aeneas	ē-NE-us
Barnado	ber-NAR-dō
Claudius	KLŌ-di-us
Cornelius	kor-NE-lius
Cyclops	SĪ-klops
Dido	DĪ-dō
Fortinbras	FÖR-tin-bräs
Francisco	fran-SĪS-kō
Gertrude	GĒR-trood
Guildenstern	GĪL-den-stern
Hamlet	HĀM-let
Hecuba	HEK-iu-bā

The undiscovered country, at whose sight
The happy smile . . .

Frequently garbled, this version was probably used in preparing Quarto 2, at least for the first act. Only two copies of the first quarto survive.

Quarto 2 runs over 3,600 lines and is dated 1604 on some title pages and 1605 on others. It is the longest of the three versions. Scholars believe that it was largely typeset from a manuscript of Shakespeare's.

The third version to see print was in The First Folio of 1623, a large volume containing thirty-six of Shakespeare's plays. This version runs to about 3,500 lines. Over 200 lines appearing in the second quarto are omitted from the First Folio, but five new passages, totaling over 80 lines, are added. There are hundreds of variant readings between the First Folio and Quarto 2, some of them important and others not. Among scholars, there is no general agreement about the source of this third text, only that it displays the influence of preparation for the theatre. It may be that this version represents a final stage in Shakespeare's revision process.

GLOSSARY

The following terms are taken from the translation of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. The act, scene, and line numbers are given in parentheses after the terms, which are listed in alphabetical order.

Aeneas...Dido...Priam (act 2, scene 2, lines 421–422): characters in the *Aeneid*, an epic poem by Virgil, first century B.C., about, among other things, the Greek siege and destruction of the city of Troy. Aeneas tells the story of the fall of Troy to Dido, queen of Carthage. Priam was the king of Troy. Other Elizabethan dramatists, Marlowe and Nashe, also used this subject

Alexander the Great (act 5, scene 1, line 172): king of Macedon (356–323 B.C.) who conquered all the then known world and was a symbol of imperial power during the Elizabethan Age

baker's daughter (act 4, scene 5, lines 43–44): a folktale in which a baker's daughter denies bread to a beggar. The beggar turns out to be Jesus, and He turns her into an owl

Caesar (act 1, scene 1, line 128): Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.), general and statesman of Rome, whose assassination was preceded by natural disturbances

Cain (act 3, scene 3, line 40): having murdered his brother Abel, Cain was cursed by God and excluded from human society (Genesis 4:10–12)