



*Twelve
arguments
about
Hamlet*

sources
opinions
dramaturgy

PRAXIS
STAGE

**Во имя Родины
ВПЕРЕД БОГАТЫРИ!**



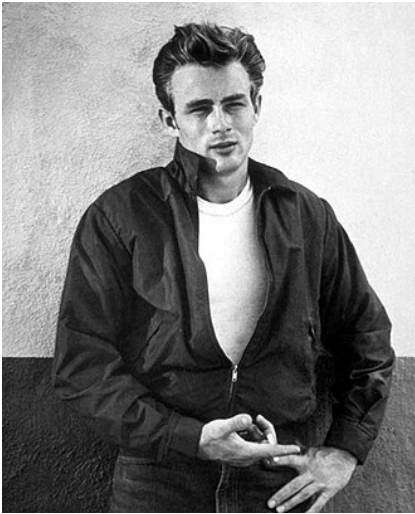
*In the name of your fathers
Fight on, brave sons!*

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Bad Romance

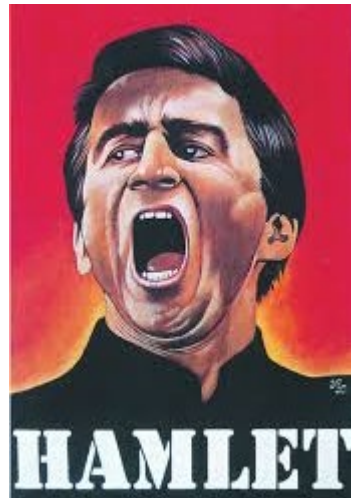
Modern theater does *Hamlet* as a Romantic Epic. Tortured young hero subverts authority - a hip Hollywood take on existentialism, psychoanalysis, creative madness, dissent, the New Left.

Which is fine, but it's not Shakespeare.



When I watch Hamlet on the modern stage, I am always struck by how much Shakespeare was influenced by Marx, Freud, Sartre and Jack Kerouac.

- Terry Eagleton



*Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep*

Romanticizing madness turns it into performance: charismatic, subversive, witty. An audience that *enjoys* a character's madness doesn't feel his suffering. Not to mention the suffering he causes.



*Insanity is relative.
It depends on who has who
locked in what cage.*

— Derrida



*There is no
such thing as
'too insane'
until others
turn up dead
because of
your madness.*

— Gandhi

The Romantic rewrite came out of 19th Century sentimentality for doomed rebellions, pitiable but harmless. On the stage, it got momentum from star actor-directors who seized the chance to make the play all about the Prince, and so all about them.



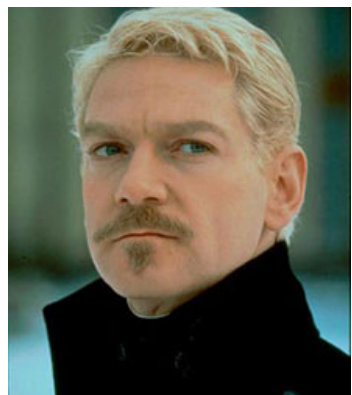
Edwin Booth 1870



John Barrymore 1925



Laurence Olivier 1948



Four painful
hours of this



Sarah Bernhardt 1899

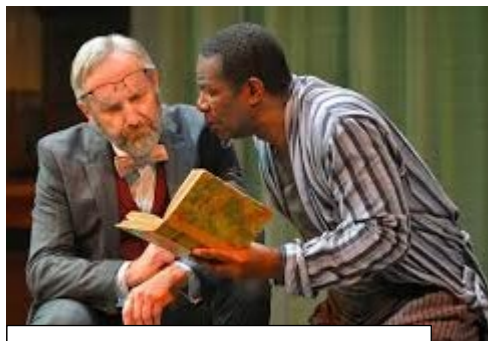
This strips both prince and actor of their agency. The story of Goodness Versus Oppression erases Hamlet's privilege, anger and insanity. As early as 1859, Ira Aldridge encountered in *Hamlet* what Keith Hamilton Cobb says about *Othello* in *American Moor*: "If you could just see me, I could save you from another cookie-cutter Othello."

The Romantic narrative can be especially toxic for women and actors of color who play Hamlet.

Even when they can overcome barriers to getting on stage at all, they run into directors and audiences who expect their Hamlet to be earnest, weak, pitiable and doomed.



Ira Aldridge 1859



John Douglas Thompson
A.C.T. 2018

Even now, strong black Hamlets like John Douglas Thompson get contradictory reviews, some terrified that he brings his malevolent *Richard III* energy, others confused that he is warm and loving too.

One wonders whether a white Hamlet would be attacked from both directions like this.

As more women play the Prince, the Romantic indulgence of the disturbed, privileged boy is



Maxine Peake
Manchester 2014



Ruth Negga
Dublin 2018

slowly becoming irrelevant. As we see more furious female Hamlets who refuse to hide behind Romantic pity, we get closer to what Shakespeare intended.

Revenge, with no apologies.

Inigo Montoya



The Romantic version reduces
Hamlet to two lines from
The Princess Bride:

- *You killed my father, prepare to die*

- *You've been chasing me your
whole life only to fail now?
I think that's about the
worst thing I've ever heard.*



The Spanish Tragedie:
OR,
Hieronimo is mad againe.

Containing the lamentable end of *Don Horatio*, and
Belimperia with the pittifull death of *Hieronimo*.

Newly corrected, amended, and enlarged with new
Additions of the *Painters* part, and others, as
it hath of late been diuers times acted.



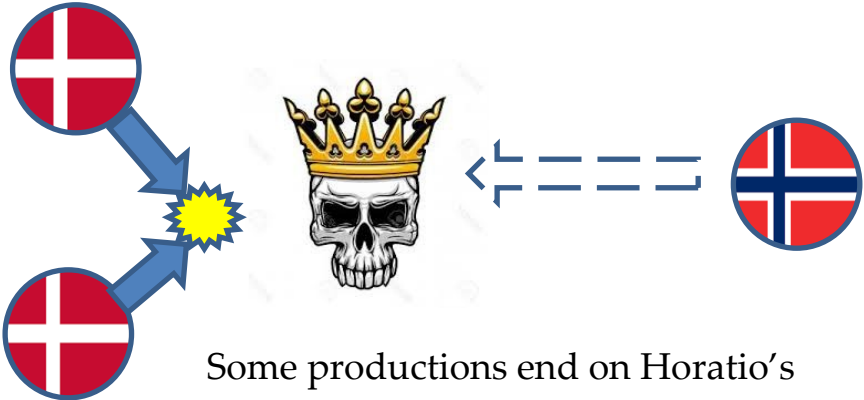
LONDON,
Printed by W. White, for I. White and T. Langley,
and are to be sold at their Shop ouer against the
Sarazens head without New-gate. 1615.

Hamlet is a revenge play,
not *The Princess Bride*.
Its modern equivalents
are Tarantino, Scorsese,
and the Coen brothers.

The audience of a
revenge play
doesn't care about the
existential passion of the
protagonist. It comes to
see a trainwreck.

There are at least *three* Inigo Montoyas in the play: Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras.

In the perversely synchronized world of the revenge play, the first two avenging sons kill each other off, so the third wins by default.



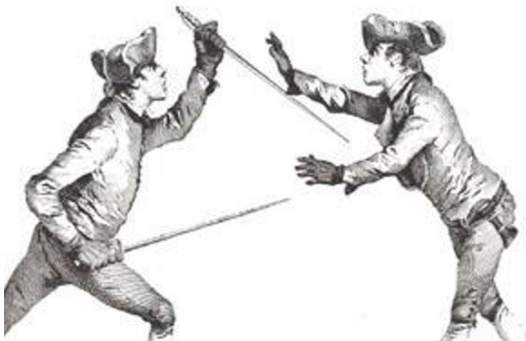
Some productions end on Horatio's *Goodnight sweet Prince/And flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest*. Which is sad and romantic, but even this moment is killed off by war drums. Fortinbras marches in to find the Danish court has become a Jonestown. This is the opposite of Romantic pity – the futile end of everyone in the play (except Osric, who still has a job.) King Hamlet fails, Prince Hamlet fails, Claudius fails, Gertrude fails, Laertes fails, Rosencrantz and Ophelia and Polonius and Guildenstern fail. The danger that the soldiers feared from the first scene bursts through the door, and Denmark falls to the Hun after all.

A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.
— Stalin



If we climb high enough, we will reach a height from which tragedy ceases to look tragic. — Nietzsche

It is often tragic to see how a man remains totally incapable of seeing how tragedy originates in himself, and how he continually feeds it and keeps it going. Not consciously, of course—for consciously he is cursing a faithless world. Rather, it is an unconscious factor which spins the illusions that veil his world. And what is being spun is a cocoon, which in the end will completely envelop him. — C.G. Jung



*Tragedy is when I cut my finger.
Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.
— Mel Brooks*

War and Peace

During the Nordic War of 1563-1570, King Erik XIV of Sweden went insane. He began stabbing his ministers from behind curtains in his castle.

His army degenerated into roving gangs massacring civilians. This provoked enemy reprisals in kind. Disputed land between Denmark and Sweden became a killing field.



In 1570, Erik's brother finally deposed him by poisoning. His brother, now John III, settled a peace. He was a closet Catholic who tried to reconcile Rome with the Lutherans in Wittenberg.

He spent his life trying to atone for his brother's murder. John was surely

Shakespeare's model for Claudius.

The modern read on Claudius assumes he is an evil, oily Vincent Price character, because that's what we've been told since high school.



But this makes us deny the evidence of the play. Claudius is a capable sovereign, more rational than his brother or his

nephew. With the stroke of a pen, he ends King Hamlet's revenge war, and stops Fortinbras' invasion that terrified his soldiers in the first scene.

He is the grownup in the room, considerate to subordinates, solicitous of their loyalty. He is decisive and mature, unlike his moody Goth stepson.



So how is Claudius so different than, say, Brutus? The soldiers tell us that King Hamlet had brought Denmark into as much peril as Caesar's Rome: *It must be by his death: The abuse of greatness is, when it disjoins Remorse from power*



Perhaps Hamlet's tragedy isn't that he retraces his father's steps, but that he retraces his uncle's.

Well, you see, in this war, things get confused out there: power, ideals, the old morality, military necessity.



It must be a temptation to be god, because there's a conflict in every human heart, between the

rational and the irrational, between good and evil, and good does not always triumph. Sometimes, the dark side overcomes the better angels of our nature.

He's out there operating without any decent restraint, totally beyond the pale of any acceptable human conduct. So by whatever means terminate his command with extreme prejudice.



I took the mission. What else was I gonna do?
- Capt. Willard, *Apocalypse Now*

Ghost as Witch



The Romantic narrative insists that Prince Hamlet is on a noble, even divine, mission of revenge. This forces us to accept the Ghost as an angel.



No. The Ghost is from Hell, where Macbeth's Witches came from. We are repeatedly told that the Ghost is a damned madman, a bad, criminal king. He may be telling the truth, but then so did the Witches. Hamlet's submission to the Ghost is the triumph of war over peace, madness over reason.

*What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
And there assume some other, horrible form
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
And draw you into madness?*

Misogyny

The need to make Hamlet sympathetic also forces a misogynistic take on Gertrude and Ophelia.



If we have to see Hamlet as Good, on a divine mission, we have to gloss over his vicious abuse of the women that love him.

The Romantic narrative forces us to see them *as Hamlet sees them*: Ophelia as a clingy groupie, Gertrude as a weak concubine: needy, complicit, obstacles to his mission. Instead of giving a horrifying view of toxic masculinity, the Romantic narrative *justifies* it.





Male critics have uncritically accepted Hamlet's word "frailty" to describe Gertrude. They cannot acknowledge her agency or her desire. Unable to explain her remarriage except as the act of a weak, vacillating woman, they fail to see Gertrude for the strong-minded, intelligent woman that she is. Her speeches are pithy and warm, with a conciseness of statement that is not the mark of a shallow woman. Gertrude, if she is lustful, is also penetrating and gifted. The critics, like Hamlet himself, forget that she is Claudius' co-sovereign, "th'imperial jointress of this warlike state."

The character whose language most closely resembles Gertrude's is Horatio. "Sweets, to the sweet farewell," she says over Ophelia's body. "Good night sweet prince," Horatio says over Hamlet's. We cannot admire Horatio without also admiring Gertrude.

– Carolyn Heilbrun (1957)



If there is one young woman in Shakespeare who captures the teenage girl, it's not Juliet or Rosalind. It's Ophelia. Not because she's vapid or dramatic, but because she struggles with a society that insists that she's unimportant, that her emotions aren't real, that wearing pink and listening to Taylor Swift makes her inferior—a society that then blames her for finally accepting the humiliating messages that surround her. Today, too many teenage girls who self-harm are derided as attention-seeking; their stories are written into novels that portray sadness as beautiful. When we express our sexuality, we're sluts; when we're celibate, we're symbols of purity instead of people. Ophelia “contributes to her own demise”—never mind she isn't allowed to be anything beyond a pretty virgin.

—Alexa Derman, *Feminist Fridays*



Not allowed to love and unable to lie, Ophelia breaks. She goes mad rather than gets mad. She does what Hamlet preaches, or at least what he pretends, in going mad herself. Thinking she is not loved by him, she becomes him, a 'noble mind overthrown.'

– David Leverenz



The Guns of Elsinore



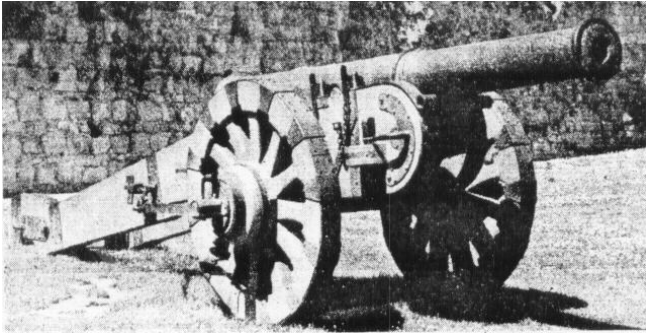
Helsingør Castle (Elsinore) was a notorious Danish gun emplacement commanding the Øresund Straits. From 1428 onward, the Danish crown extorted 10% of every ship's cargo in the Baltic as "Sound Dues," tribute for allowing Russia, Poland and the German Hanseatic League access to the rest of the world. Elsinore bristled with cannon, a fact featured in the play.



English and Dutch traders welcomed the terrible Nordic War of 1563-1570. They hoped that Denmark and its Northern enemies would annihilate each other and relieve the Baltic stranglehold at Elsinore. The Globe audience was *rooting* for endless war with Fortinbras.



1563-70: Danish and Swedish raiding parties mount constant reprisals across the Øresund straits



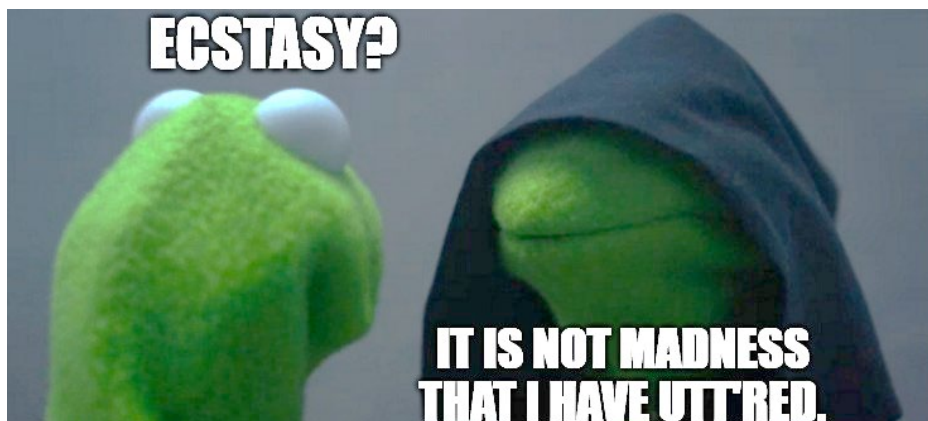
To take Arms against a sea of troubles

Hamlet's *To be or not to be* speech refers to Elsinore's military position. *Slings* means military catapults, *arrows* naval grapeshot.

Even his speech to Ophelia *nymph in thy orisons be all my sins remember'd* has a bawdy naval joke. Shakespeare uses *prayer* 34 times in the play, but *orisons* only here. Since his audience knew what the Øresund Straits were, *orisons* is likely a pun: *water nymph, in thy narrow straits will I be robbed for my sins.*

The Danish continued to extract tribute at the Øresund Straits until 1857, when the U.S. Navy defied the toll. The American captain dared Elsinore to open fire with signal flags from the final line of the Quarto: "*Go, bid the soldiers shoot.*" Denmark eventually settled for a nominal one-time payment, and abandoned the blockade.

Interior Monologue



Romantics point to Hamlet's interior monologues as proof of his sincerity. If Hamlet can bare his soul to the audience (the argument goes) we have to trust him as if he were speaking at a twelve-step meeting. But existential meditation usually comes from Shakespeare's darkest characters. Lady Macbeth,



Richard III and Iago bare their souls to the audience in speeches much like Hamlet's.

Introspection does not always mean redemption.



Richard III

*Why, then, I do but dream on sovereignty;
Like one that stands upon a promontory,
And spies a far-off shore where he would tread,
Wishing his foot were equal with his eye,
And chides the sea that sunders him from thence,
Saying, he'll lade it dry to have his way:
So do I wish the crown, being so far off;
And so I chide the means that keeps me from it;
And so I say, I'll cut the causes off,
Flattering me with impossibilities.
My eye's too quick, my heart o'erweens too much,
Unless my hand and strength could equal them.
Well, say there is no kingdom then for Richard;
What other pleasure can the world afford?*



Iago,
Othello

Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners: so that if we will plant nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness, or manured with industry, why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions: but we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts, whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion.



The Bastard,
King John

*Mad world! mad kings! mad composition!
As God's own soldier, rounded in the ear
With that same purpose-changer, that sly devil,
That broker, that still breaks the pate of faith,
That daily break-vow, he that wins of all,
Of kings, of beggars, old men, young men, maids,
Who, having no external thing to lose
But the word 'maid,' cheats the poor maid of that,
That smooth-faced gentleman, tickling Commodity,
Commodity, the bias of the world,
The world, who of itself is peised well,
Made to run even upon even ground,
Till this advantage, this vile-drawing bias,
This sway of motion, this Commodity,
Makes it take head from all indifferency,
From all direction, purpose, course, intent:
And this same bias, this Commodity,
This bawd, this broker, this all-changing word*

Metatheater



*We, lawful espials
Will so bestow ourselves that seeing unseen
We may of this encounter frankly judge*

The audience is always a character in Shakespeare. In a play like *Hamlet*, where the characters are continually performing to each other and watching each other's performance, the presence of listeners in the stalls is simply another layer of the spectacle.

Actors in the early modern English theatre were always in conversation with their audience. (The concept of the fourth wall and method acting were thankfully still a few hundred years in the future.)



The play within the play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, is downright hilarious. The modern tradition does it with dead seriousness,

but it's every bit as funny as the Pyramus and Thisbe play within *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Player King and Queen overact, step on each other's lines, and ham it up in all the ways Hamlet specifically instructed them not to do.

The Murder of Gonzago is more than just a device to confront Claudius with the crime of regicide. It is also a parody of actors and playwrights.

The First Player in the Chamberlain's Men's staging was dressed to look like Richard Burbage, who was playing Hamlet. The "advice to the players" scene would therefore have come across as Burbage advising himself on how to be a "good" actor. So very meta.





Hamlet's line *And let those that play your clowns say no more than is set down for them* is almost certainly a dig at former company member Will Kempe (the original Bottom and

Dogberry) who suddenly left the company in 1599.

The Player King's first lines in *Murder of Gonzago*:
*Full thirty times hath Phoebus' cart gone round
Neptune's salt wash and Tellus' orb'd ground...*

were likely a none-too-kind parody of his rival Robert Greene, whose plays were filled with plodding verse and showy classical references.



Greene attacked Shakespeare early in his career: *... for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.* Shakespeare's revenge was to lampoon Greene in the most-produced play in history.

*I, prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must unpack my heart with words*

The Politics of Stage Directions

A play can turn on a missing stage direction. The First Folio has Polonius entering to tell Claudius that he will hide in Gertrude's closet, just before Claudius' "Oh my offense is rank" confession. *But it doesn't say when Polonius exits.*

2301 *Enter Polonius.*
2302 *Pol.* My Lord, he's going to his Mothers Closset
2303 Behinde the Arras Ile conuey my selfe
2304 To heare the Processe. Ile warrant shee'l tax him he
2305 And as you said, and wisely was it said,
2306 'Tis meete that some more audience then a Mother,
2307 Since Nature makes them partiall, should o're- hear
2308 The speech of vantage. Fare you well my Liege,
2309 Ile call vpon you ere you go to bed,
2310 And tell you what I know. **1**
2311 *King.* Thankes deere my Lord.
2312 Oh my offence is ranke, it smels to heauen,
2313 It hath the primall eldest curse vpon't,
2314 A Brothers murther. Pray can I not,
2315 Though inclination be as sharpe as will:
2316 My stronger guilt, defeats my strong intent. **2**
2317 And like a man to double businesse bound,
2318 I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
2319 And both neglect; what if this cursed hand
2320 Were thicker then it selfe with Brothers blood,
2321 Is there not Raine enough in the sweet Heauens
2322 To wash it white as Snow? Whereto serues mercy,
2323 But to confront the visage of Offence?
2324 And what's in Prayer, but this two- fold force,
2325 To be fore- stalled ere we come to fall,
2326 Or pardon'd being done. **3** When Ile looke vp,
2327 My fault is past. But oh, what forme of Prayer
2328 Can serue my turne? Forgiue me my foule Murther
2329 That cannot be, since I am still possesst

1
Conventional choice:
Polonius leaves on
Thankes deere my Lord

2
Polonius lingers and
overhears Claudius

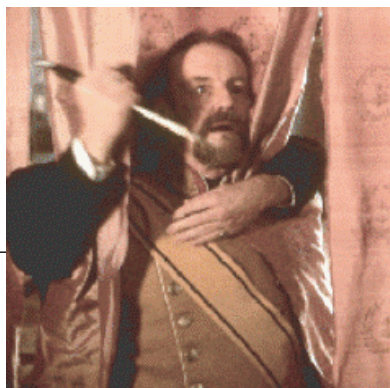
3
Polonius has been
complicit in the
murder all along.
He stays on stage as
Claudius' confessor
and co-conspirator



When does Hamlet notice Ophelia during *"To be or not to be"*? She's right there on stage with him. The conventional assumption is that it's not until *"Soft you now, the fair Ophelia."*

But what if he knows she's there all along? What if *"To be or not to be"* is not a genuine soliloquy but a performance, a rehearsal of his rejection speech: *"I'm too complicated to love you. It's not you, it's me."*

Is Hamlet aware of Polonius and Claudius hiding? Does he yell *"Those that are married already, all but one shall live, the rest shall keep as they are"* as a threat to the hidden Claudius?



Straight Men



Hamlet thinks Polonius, Osric, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are just stooges, straight men, passive targets of his wit. He's wrong. Hamlet's higher status means they have to take his abuse, but they still have their own wits, and can still play *him* for the fool.

The best straight men make the joker look ridiculous. The joke should always be on the wise guy. That is the secret of playing the straight man.

- Harvey Korman



O, there has been much throwing about of brains.

Nay, good my lord, this courtesy is not of the right breed. If it shall please you to make me a wholesome answer, I will do your mother's commandment; if not, your pardon and my return shall be the end of my business.



Class Struggle

The Gravediggers were probably a spoof on the Diggers, 17th Century Protestant radicals and early anarchists. The Diggers argued the common people of England had been robbed of their birthrights by a foreign ruling-class. They dug to unearth the original State of Adam untainted by the nobility.



King Arthur: *Please, good people, I am in haste. Who lives in that castle?*

Peasant Woman: *No one lives there.*

King Arthur: *Then who is your lord?*

Peasant Woman: *We don't have a lord.*

King Arthur: *What?*

Dennis: *I told you, we're an anarcho-syndicalist commune.*

We take it in turns to act as sort of executive officer...

King Arthur: *Yes I see...*

Dennis: *...by a simple majority in the case of purely internal affairs...*

King Arthur: *Be quiet! I order you to be quiet!*

Peasant Woman: *"Order" eh? Who does he think he is?*

King Arthur: *I am your king.*

Peasant Woman: *Well, I didn't vote for you.*

King Arthur: *You don't vote for kings.*

Peasant Woman: *Well, how'd you become king, then?*

King Arthur: *The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur*



Dennis: *You can't expect to wield supreme executive power just 'cause some watery tart threw a sword at you!*

King Arthur: *Shut up!*

Dennis: *I mean, if I went around saying I was an*

emperor just because some moistened bint had lobbed a scimitar at me, they'd put me away!

King Arthur: *Shut up! Will you shut up?!*

Dennis: *Oh! Come and see the violence inherent in the system! Help, help, I'm being repressed!*

King Arthur:
Bloody peasant!

Dennis: *Ooh, what a giveaway! Did you hear that? Did you hear that, eh?*



Words, Words, Words

Adam's profession digging "when Adam delved and Eve span, who then was a gentleman?" Peasants' Revolt 1381

bodkin sharp instrument; an awl or dagger

caviare to the general delicacy wasted on the masses; pearls before swine

country matters

ladyparts; vulgar pun on "count" **cozenage** trickery

distracted globe insane head/shattered

world/mad theater **ecstasy** religious madness

fall of a sparrow Matthew 10:29: "not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without God knowing it"

fardels laborer's burdens; longshore cargo

fishmonger pimp **goodly frame** Globe

Theater **handsaw** pun on "hernshaw," a heron

Hecuba Trojan queen gone mad after her son's death

hic et ubique "here and everywhere"; from liturgy re transubstantiation and God's omnipresence

Jephtha Israelite judge who sacrificed his daughter

John-a-dreams lazy dreamer, useless vagrant

jointress surviving co-sovereign, widow queen

luxury lust **nothing** vagina **nunnery** convent where unwed mothers bore children or had abortions; or a brothel **out Herods Herod** overplays a role (in Mystery plays, Herod was a raging tyrant) **owl was a baker's daughter** legend in which Christ transforms a baker's daughter into an owl after she denied him a piece of bread **pioner** soldier who digs to lay mines **privates** 1) genitals 2) soldiers 3) intimate friends **quarry** pile of dead bodies **quintessence** concentration **rue** bitter herb, symbol of recognition between witches, a potent abortifacient **Saint Patrick** keeper of purgatory; drove serpents out of Ireland **soopstake** jackpot **strewments** flowers left on a grave **Termagant** mythical demigod, loud and overbearing **these words are not mine** you aren't making sense, you haven't answered my question **toys of desperation** thoughts of suicide **while this machine is to him** while his body lives **Wittenberg** German university town, seat of Lutheran doctrine **woodcock** bird easily caught

HAMILET

Director: Kim Carrell

Stage Manager: Jasper Bliss

Assistant Stage Manager: Lai Penanhoat

Dramaturg: Michael Anderson

Set Builder/Technical Director: James St. George

Fight Choreographer: Kim Carrell

Cast (in reverse alphabetical order):

Elena Toppo (Rosencrantz)

Vijaya Sundaram (Voltemand/Player Queen)

Rachel Richter (Ophelia)

Joan Raube-Wilson (Guildenstern)

Ben Nissan (Marcellus/Fortinbras/Player King)

Kirsten Mulrenan (Osric /Reynaldo/Various)

Allie Meek-Carufel (Barnardo/Gravedigger)

Eric McGowan (Hamlet)

Lorna Lowe (Gertrude)

Diana Lobontiu (Laertes)

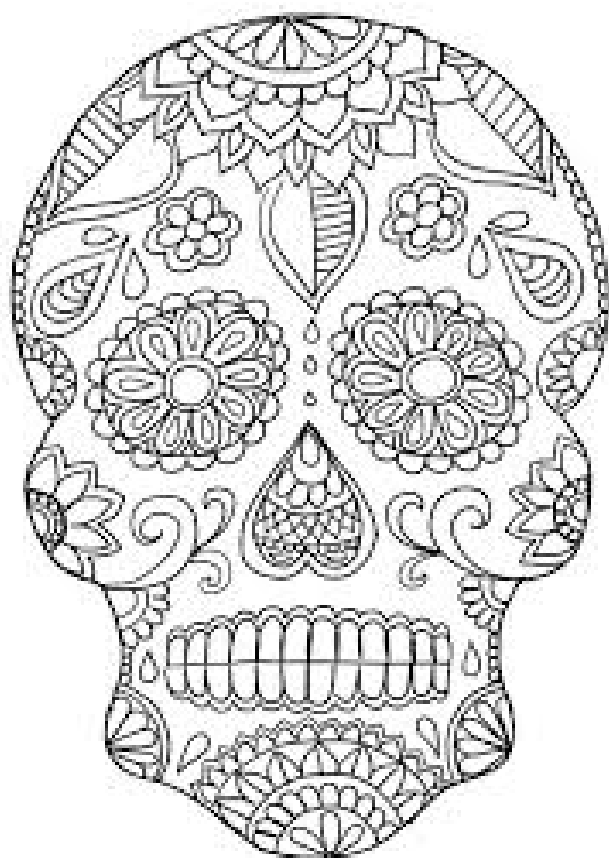
Jean-Dany Joachim (Cornelius/Player/Priest)

Evan Crocker (Horatio)

Daniel Boudreau (Polonius)

Jasper Bliss (Ensemble/Various)

Michael Anderson (Claudius/Ghost)



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