



Who is Hamlet?

Who exactly is this complex and complicated character named Hamlet? One director turned him into a New York City filmmaker in 2000, other directors have made him angry and alienated, T. S. Eliot labeled him “the Mona Lisa of literature,” and scholars continue to argue about who he is. Laurence Olivier said that Hamlet was “pound for pound, the greatest play ever written.” Joseph Papp, founder of the N. Y. Shakespeare Festival counseled all actors: “You haven’t graduated until you’ve played Hamlet.” And for 400 years, actors have been struggling on how to handle him. Here are a few examples:

- In the 17th century, Richard Burbage played him in a swashbuckling style filled with flourishing oratory.
- Between 1742 and 1776, David Garrick went further with the mad act. He wore his stockings down-gyved and used a device to make his hair stand on end when he saw the ghost. Then Garrick “rescued” Hamlet “from the rubbish in the fifth act” by producing a version with no gravediggers, no Yorick, and no Osiric.
- In the 19th century, John Kemble, Edmund

Kean, Charles Macready, and Edwin Booth portrayed Hamlet as a romantic, brooding intellectual with dark hair, black tights and cape, and the obligatory medallion of his father around his neck.

- At the end of the 19th century, Henry Irving moved about the stage with a halting gait and spoke in an uneven voice with odd pronunciation.
- In 1899, Sarah Bernhardt lightened up the role by playing the prince in a blond wig and added quick boyish gestures and little runs and jumps.
- John Gielgud added a white collar to Hamlet's black garb in his 1936 production and put forth the prince as a depressed neurotic.
- Laurence Olivier read some Freud and Ernest Jones's *Hamlet and Oedipus* before directing and starring in his 1948 intensely psychological film.
- The 1960s saw Richard Burton in a modern dress, backstage production, Martin Sheen in a Jan Kott-inspired "Shakespeare Our Contemporary" version, and David Warner as an anti-establishment student, wearing scruffy clothes and a bright red scarf.
- In 1989, Mark Rylance's Elsinore was a tilt, its slanting windows showing that the port was slipping into a stormy sea. Rylance's prince was deeply depressed and volatile, violent with Ophelia and Gertrude. For much of the production he appeared in striped pajamas.

- Before directing and appearing in his nearly uncut film version, Kenneth Branagh's 1991 staged version sported formal Edwardian dress and impeccable manners from which his mad drive to find his father's killer erupted irrationally.
- Hamlet has been played by Ira Aldridge, Judith Anderson, Alan Bates, John Barrymore, Richard Chamberlain, Tom Courtney, Daniel Day-Lewis, Maurice Evans, Ralph Fiennes, Mel Gibson, Derek Jacobi, Ben Kingsley, Ian McKellan, Burgess Meredith, Chris Noth, Peter O'Toole, Christopher Plummer, Christopher Walken, Sam Waterston, and Orson Welles, just to name a few.

Shakespeare magazine treated *Hamlet* extensively in its first issue, [Fall 1996](#). As we begin our fifth year of publication, we thought it was time to revisit the Dane and try to come to terms with who he really is. Thus we devote much of this issue exploring that question with a look at some recent Hamlets, as well as the journey that many of us have had in coming to terms with this chap. ►

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