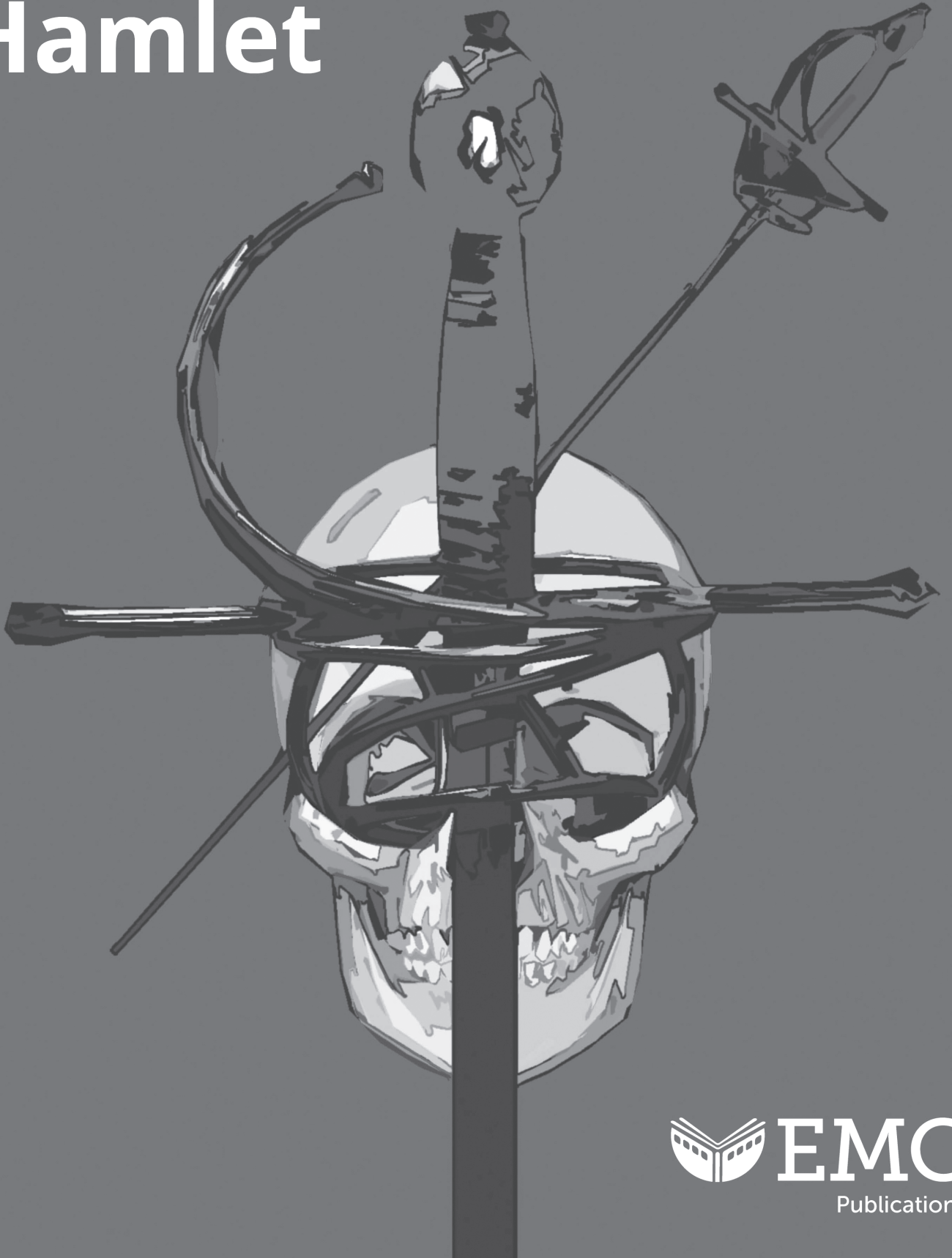


Studying  
**Hamlet**



 **EMC**  
Publications

An EMC Advanced Literature Resource

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Written and edited by Lucy Webster

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# STUDYING HAMLET

## Introduction

### For Teachers

*Studying Hamlet* is designed primarily for use with advanced level students working on the play in class. It also offers plenty for students working independently, for homework, revision or because they want to explore the play in more depth.

The complete publication is provided as a PDF on DVD allowing you either to make copies for students or to show it on your whiteboard. The DVD also includes two video lectures given at the English and Media Centre by Dr Eric Langley (see pages 174-175 for details.)

The book is divided into six sections:

1. **Before Reading:** Introductory activities to prompt speculation and prime the first reading.
2. **During Reading:** Ideas for exploring responses during a first fast immersive experience of the play. It is suggested that students first experience the play via an unabridged audio dramatisation of the play, following their text as they listen.
3. **Act by Act:** Three or four activities specific to the act, with a focus on supporting students' understanding and developing their abilities to engage with the language, themes and dramaturgy.
4. **After Reading:** Activities exploring personal response, meaning and an overview of the text.
5. **Key Aspects:** The most substantial section, with activities and critical and contextual materials on character, theme, language, stagecraft, literary and generic context (including tragedy and revenge tragedy). This section also provides a case study of the production of *Hamlet* staged at the Almeida in 2017, including an interview with the director Robert Icke.
6. **Appendices:** Eight articles from *emagazine*, prompts for exploring Dr Eric Langley's video lectures on Shakespeare's tragedies and *Hamlet* (see DVD) and a list of further recommended resources.

Extracts from *Hamlet* have been checked against the RSC edition, edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (2008).

### For Students

You're most likely to work through *Studying Hamlet* in class, as you read and explore the play. However, the book offers many more activities and resources than you will have time to work on together. Use the activities and materials to help you further develop your independent understanding and interpretation of the play and to increase your confidence in exploring challenging ideas.

1. Throughout the book there are statements to reflect on and debate. Use these to challenge your own interpretation and sharpen up your thinking.
2. The articles included throughout the book provide a range of critical readings of *Hamlet*. They will give you insights into some of the key aspects it's important to have grappled with, as you develop your own interpretation.
3. Use the activities to help you engage actively with the text – a much more effective approach than simply re-reading.

# BEFORE READING

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# STUDYING HAMLET

## How Do You Feel? What Would You Do?

Before beginning to explore the play *Hamlet*, you're going to think about how you would feel and what you would do if you found yourself living through the experiences listed below.

- Working in pairs, read each of the following pieces of information one at a time. After reading each one, talk about how you would feel and what you would do.

1	Your father dies and less than two months later your mother remarries.
2	The man your mother has married is your father's brother – your uncle.
3	Your father was King and your uncle has not only married your mother but has also become King.
4	You are supposed to be going back to university but your mother and 'uncle-father' persuade you to stay at home with them.
5	You are told that your father didn't just die. He was murdered.
6	You are told that your father was murdered by his brother (the man who has married your mother).
7	You promise to avenge your father's murder.
8	The source of your information is an apparition claiming to be the ghost of your dead father.
9	You have doubts about whether you can trust the source of your information.
10	But you are determined to avenge your father's death.

- Write a short piece, exploring your ideas. Use the first person as though this is happening to you.

The pieces of information you have been exploring all apply to *Hamlet* either at the beginning of the play or within the first act.

- Talk about how you think a play might dramatise these problems, conflicts and uncertainties.

# STUDYING HAMLET

Production 6: Andrew Scott as Hamlet (Almeida, d. Robert Icke, 2017)



Photo credit: © Manuel Harlan

## A First Fast Reading and Listening

### Listening to a Dramatisation as You Read

If you can, try to experience the play quickly as a whole class, without worrying too much about what you've missed or not understood. You will then be in a good position to go back and explore the text in detail, ranging backwards and forwards and focusing in more detail on scenes and speeches which seem most interesting or distinctive.

- One way of doing this is to listen to an audio dramatisation as you follow the text. Try to listen to it in chunks – an act at a time. In an unabridged audio dramatisation of the play, each act lasts between 35 and 45 minutes, leaving you some time each lesson to share responses and understanding.
- As you listen, note down ideas, questions, images or quotations that strike you as interesting, important or puzzling.
- Pause at the end of each act so that you can all share your ideas about what has happened.

### Keeping Track

Use one of the following strategies to help you keep track of your ideas about the play as you read/listen to it.

- **A quotation map:** after reading/listening to each act, select three short quotations to represent what you think is most significant about it. Write your quotations on postcard-sized pieces of paper and stick them on the wall to create a class display. What is the impression created by the quotations you have selected?
- **On the wall act-by-act tracking:** after reading/listening to each act, use a chart to note:
  - scenes – try to indicate the relative length
  - possible title for the scene
  - characters present
  - questions
  - links between scenes
  - rising and falling tension.
- **Investigation board:** record your ongoing responses, questions and ideas on a 'crime scene' style noticeboard on the wall.



# STUDYING HAMLET

## A Play About ...

In 1948 the actor Laurence Olivier adapted, directed and starred in a film version of *Hamlet*. The film opened with a voiceover presenting Olivier's interpretation of the play:

This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.

- What do you think of this as a summary of the play?

In the mini-introduction to her chapter on *Hamlet* in *The Cambridge Shakespeare Guide*, Professor Emma Smith summarises the play as:

Iconic revenge tragedy of a brooding hero trapped in a family melodrama and an existential crisis.

- What do you think of this as a summary of the play? Does it miss out anything you think is crucial to the play's identity?
- How would you summarise the play? Limiting yourself to 140 characters – the length of a tweet – write your own summary. Use either of the sentence openings suggested here:
  - ▶ 'This is the tragedy of...'
  - ▶ 'This is a play about...'
- Take it in turns to read out your tweets, then talk about the range of angles you've taken.

## Using Mini Quotations – Dipping and Delving

Use the mini-quotations on pages 16-18 to help you get a sense of the whole play and develop your confidence in making connections between different parts of it.

- Dip into the mini-quotations and pick one at random. Identify it, then talk about it for a minute, using the following prompts to help you: who, where, when, what's interesting, connections?
- Delve back into the text to find another quotation you think is comparable in some way (similar themes, use of language).
- Do the same again, but this time choose a quotation to offer a contrasting view of the text, to complicate or challenge the impression given by the first.

# THEMES

## Introducing the Themes – a First Exploration

Listed here are some of the themes that audiences, readers and critics have recognised in *Hamlet*.

- ▶ Appearance and reality
- ▶ Corruption
- ▶ Death/afterlife
- ▶ Disease (body, mind, state)
- ▶ Duty
- ▶ Family
- ▶ Free will/fate
- ▶ Politics and governance
- ▶ Grief
- ▶ Identity and self knowledge
- ▶ Justice
- ▶ Madness and sanity
- ▶ Nature/natural
- ▶ Revenge
- ▶ Speech/silence
- ▶ Organisation of society and the relationship between individual and state (world picture/body politic)
- ▶ Playing/acting
- ▶ Spying/surveillance
- ▶ Stoicism (acceptance)
- ▶ Stories/interpretation

- Discuss the list as a class and add any further themes you think are significant.
- Explore the themes by:
  - experimenting with different ways of clustering the themes
  - discussing which themes you'd associate most closely with each character
  - considering whether certain themes are most significant at different points in the play.
- Take one of the themes and investigate:
  - how it is dramatised (for example, plot, images, comment from character)
  - its relationship with other themes
  - what you think the play is saying about this theme.



## Exploring Themes in Context

Included below and on pages 67-69 are four different pieces of contextual information related to themes explored in *Hamlet*.

- Share out the contexts between different pairs in the class so that you are each responsible for looking at just one.
  - Read your piece and talk about the main points it makes. Which of the themes underlying the play does this context relate to?
  - Look through the play and choose a passage where this contextual information illuminates the meaning for you, perhaps developing or even challenging your understanding.
- Take it in turns to present your piece of context, explaining how it relates to the themes of the play in general and the insights it gives you into the passage you have chosen.

### Context 1: 16th and 17th Century Views on Suicide

In the 16th century, suicide was held to be a crime greater than murder.

‘That [suicide] is an Offence against God, against the King and against Nature.... Yea it is holden to be a greater Offence than to kill another Man’

*Being, a Compleat Summary of All the Acts of Parliament, Shewing the Various Penalties of Offences by Statute*

Self-murder, as suicide was known, had been against the law since the 13th century (and remained a crime in the UK until 1961). Under Henry VIII the law was strictly enforced and punishment for those who attempted suicide was severe. If someone was convicted of having killed themselves, the state seized all their goods and money.

At the same time the attitude of the Church became increasingly hostile – suicide was regarded as a sin, an evil act for which there was no hope of redemption.

‘Nothing is more damnable, more ungodly, then for a man to slay himselfe’

*William Vaughan: The Golden Grove, 1600*

The Church’s punishment was to deny suicides Christian burial: no prayers, no priest and buried not in consecrated ground, but thrown naked into a pit at a crossroads, with a wooden stake driven through the heart.