acters lie deeper issues about the rightness of revenge, about how to achieve an ethical life, and about how to live in a world where tears of sorrow, loving smiles, and friendly words are all suspect because all are "actions that a man might *play*." Hamlet's world is bleak and cold because almost no one and nothing can be trusted. But his world, and Hamlet himself, continue to draw us to them, speaking to every generation of its own problems and its own yearnings. It is a play that seems particularly pertinent today—just as it has seemed particularly pertinent to any number of generations before us.

For "A Modern Perspective" on *Hamlet*, we invite you, after you have read the play, to read the essay by Professor Michael Neill of the University of Auckland, printed at the back of this book.

Reading Shakespeare's Language: *Hamlet*

For many people today, reading Shakespeare's language can be a problem—but it is a problem that can be solved. Those who have studied Latin (or even French or German or Spanish) and those who are used to reading poetry will have little difficulty understanding the language of poetic drama. Others, though, need to develop the skills of untangling unusual sentence structures and of recognizing and understanding poetic compressions, omissions, and wordplay. And even those skilled in reading unusual sentence structures may have occasional trouble with Shakespeare's words. Four hundred years of "static" intervene between his speaking and our hearing. Most of his vocabulary is still in use, but a few of his words are no longer used, and many now have meanings quite different from those they had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the theater, most of these difficulties are solved for us by actors who study the language and articulate it for us so that the essential meaning is heard—or, when combined with stage action, is at least *felt*. When we are reading on our own, we must do what each actor does: go over the lines (often with a dictionary close at hand) until the puzzles are solved and the lines yield up their poetry and the characters speak in words and phrases that are, suddenly, rewarding and wonderfully memorable.

Shakespeare's Words

As you begin to read the opening scenes of a Shakespeare play, you may notice occasional unfamiliar words. Some are unfamiliar simply because we no longer use them. In the opening scenes of *Hamlet*, for example, we find such words as *parle* (i.e., discussion, meeting), *soft* (an exclamation meaning "hold" or "enough" or "wait a minute"), and *marry* (an oath "by the Virgin Mary," which had by Shakespeare's time become a mere interjection, like "indeed"). Words of this kind are explained in notes to the text and will become familiar as you continue to read Shakespeare's language.

In *Hamlet*, as in all of Shakespeare's writing, the most problematic are the words that are still in use but now have different meanings. In the first scene of *Hamlet* (1.1.14), the word *rivals* is used where we would use "companions." At 1.1.44 we find the word *his* where we would use "its" and at 1.1.134 the word *still* used (as it most often is in Shakespeare) to mean "always." At 1.1.67, *sensible* means "attested to by the senses"; at 1.1.169, *extravagant* means "wandering"; and at 1.2.66, *cousin* is used (as it is generally in Shakespeare) to mean simply "kinsman." And at 1.2.278, where Hamlet says, "I doubt some foul play," we would say, "I suspect some treacherous action." Again, such words are explained in the notes to the text, but they, too, will become increasingly familiar as you get further into the play.

Some words are strange not because of the "static" introduced by changes in language over the past centuries but because they are used by Shakespeare to build a dramatic world that has its own geography and history and story. *Hamlet*, for example, builds, in its opening scenes, a location, a past history, and a background

mythology through references to "the Dane," to "buried Denmark," to Elsinore, to partisans and jointresses, to Hyperion and Niobe and Hercules. These "local" words and references (each of which is explained in notes to this text) build the world of Denmark that Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius inhabit; they soon become recognizable features of Shakespeare's Elsinore.

Shakespeare's Sentences

In an English sentence, meaning is quite dependent on the place given each word. "The dog bit the boy" and "The boy bit the dog" mean very different things, even though the individual words are the same. Because English places such importance on the positions of words in sentences, on the way words are arranged, unusual arrangements can puzzle a reader. Shakespeare frequently shifts his sentences away from "normal" English arrangements—often to create the rhythm he seeks, sometimes to use a line's poetic rhythm to emphasize a particular word, sometimes to give a character his or her own speech patterns or to allow the character to speak in a special way. When we attend a good performance of the play, the actors will have worked out the sentence structures and will articulate the sentences so that the meaning is clear. In reading the play, we need to do as the actor does: that is, when puzzled by a character's speech, we check to see if the words are being presented in an unusual sequence.

Look first for the placement of subject and verb. Shakespeare often places the verb before the subject (e.g., instead of "He goes," we find "Goes he"). In the opening scene of *Hamlet*, when, at line 73, Horatio says "So frowned he once," he is using such a construction, as he is at line 91, when he says "That can

I." Such inversions rarely cause much confusion. More problematic is Shakespeare's frequent placing of the object before the subject and verb (e.g., instead of "I hit him," we might find "Him I hit"). When Horatio says, at 1.2.216–17, "This to me . . . impart they did," he is using such an inverted construction (the normal order would be "They did impart this to me"). Polonius uses another such inversion at 1.3.126–29 when he says, "These blazes, daughter, / . . . You must not take for fire." Ordinarily one would say "Daughter, you must not take these blazes for fire."

In some plays Shakespeare makes systematic use of inversions (*Julius Caesar* is one such play). In *Hamlet*, he more often uses sentence structures that depend instead on the separation of words that would normally appear together. (This is usually done to create a particular rhythm or to stress a particular word.) Claudius's "which have freely gone / With this affair along" (1.2.15–16) interrupts the phrase "gone along"; Horatio's "When he the ambitious Norway combated" (1.1.72) separates the subject and verb ("he combated"), interjecting between them the object of the verb ("the ambitious Norway"). To create for yourself sentences that seem more like the English of everyday speech, you may wish to rearrange the words, putting together the word clusters and placing the remaining words in their more familiar order. You will usually find that the sentences will gain in clarity but will lose their rhythm or shift their emphases. You can then see for yourself why Shakespeare chose his unusual arrangement.

Locating and rearranging words that belong together is especially necessary in passages that separate subjects from verbs and verbs from objects by long delaying or expanding interruptions—a structure that is used frequently in *Hamlet*. For example, when Horatio, at 1.1.92–110, tells the story of how King Hamlet

won the Norwegian lands and how the prince of Norway seeks to regain them, he uses a series of such interrupted constructions:

> *our last king,*
> Whose image even but now appeared to us,
> *Was*, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,
> Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride,
> *Dared to the combat; in which* our valiant *Hamlet*
> (For so this side of our known world esteemed him)
> *Did slay this Fortinbras, who* by a sealed compact, . . .
> *Did forfeit*, with his life, *all those his lands*. . . .
> Now, sir, young *Fortinbras*,
> Of unimprovèd mettle hot and full,
> *Hath* in the skirts of Norway here and there
> *Sharked up a list of lawless resolutes*. . . .

Here the interruptions provide details that catch the audience up in Horatio's story. The separation of the basic sentence elements ("our last king was dared to the combat") forces the audience to attend to supporting details while waiting for the basic sentence elements to come together. In the second scene of *Hamlet* (at 1.2.8–14), Claudius uses the same kind of interrupted construction in his opening speech,

> Therefore *our sometime sister*, now our queen,
> Th' imperial jointress to this warlike state,
> *Have we* (as 'twere with a defeated joy,
> With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
> With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
> In equal scale weighing delight and dole)
> *Taken to wife* . . . ,

where the basic elements of the sentence are simply "we [i.e., I] have taken to wife our sometime sister [i.e.,

my former sister-in-law]." Claudius's speech, like Horatio's, is a narrative of past events, but the interrupted sentence structure here seems designed to add formality to the speech and, perhaps, to cover over the bald statement carried in the stripped-down sentence.

Occasionally, rather than separating basic sentence elements, Shakespeare simply holds them back, delaying them until much subordinate material has already been given. Marcellus uses this kind of delaying structure when he says, at 1.1.76–77, "Thus twice before, and jump [i.e., exactly] at this dead hour, / With martial stalk hath he gone by our watch" (where a "normally" constructed English sentence would have begun with the basic sentence elements: "He hath gone by our watch"); Barnardo's sentence that precedes the entrance of the Ghost at line 46 uses this same delayed construction, though the Ghost's entrance breaks off Barnardo's words before the subject of the sentence ("Marcellus and myself") finds a verb. Hamlet, in his first soliloquy (1.2.133–64), uses a delayed construction when he says (lines 158–61) "Within a month, / Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears / Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes, / She married."

Shakespeare's sentences are sometimes complicated not because of unusual structures or interruptions or delays but because he omits words and parts of words that English sentences normally require. (In conversation, we, too, often omit words. We say "Heard from him yet?" and our hearer supplies the missing "Have you." Frequent reading of Shakespeare—and of other poets—trains us to supply such missing words.) In plays written five or ten years after *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses omissions both of verbs and of nouns to great dramatic effect. In *Hamlet* omissions are less interesting and seem to be used primarily for compressed expression. At 1.1.31–32, for instance, Marcellus says "Therefore

I have entreated him along / With us," omitting the words "to come" or "to go" before "along"; a few lines later, Barnardo omits the word "with" in the construction "let us once again assail your ears [with] . . . what we have . . . seen" (lines 37–39).

Shakespearean Wordplay

Shakespeare plays with language so often and so variously that books are written on the topic. Here we will mention only two kinds of wordplay, puns and metaphors. A pun is a play on words that sound the same but have different meanings (or a single word that has more than one meaning). When, in the second scene of *Hamlet*, Claudius calls Hamlet his "son" and asks him why his mood is so cloudy, Hamlet replies that he is, rather, "too much in the sun" (punning on son/sun). In the exchange between Gertrude and Hamlet,

QUEEN
Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.
HAMLET
Ay, madam, it is common.
QUEEN If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?
HAMLET
"Seems," madam? Nay, it is. I know not "seems[,]"
(1.2.74–79)

Hamlet's reply is a pun on "seems"; for Gertrude, the question was "Why are you acting as if this death were something particularly awful," but Hamlet responds as if she had asked "Why are you putting on this show of grief." In Polonius's conversation with Ophelia in the

third scene of the play, much of his dialogue is based on puns: the word *tenders,* for example, introduced by Ophelia to mean "offers," is picked up by Polonius and used, first, to mean "coins" ("legal tender"), then shifted to its verb form "to tender" and used to mean "to regard," and then, in the phrase "tender me a fool," to mean, simultaneously, "present me," "make me look like," and "show yourself to me." In many of Shakespeare's plays, one may not be aware that a character is punning, and the dialogue can seem simply silly or unintelligible; one must thus stay alert to the sounds of words and to the possibility of double meanings. In *Hamlet*, puns carry a heavier burden (Hamlet packs much of his feeling about Claudius into his single-line "aside," "A little more than kin and less than kind," where "kind" has the double meaning of "kindred" and "kindhearted"; and many of Polonius's speeches are unintelligible until one untangles the puns and related plays on words).

A metaphor is a play on words in which one object or idea is expressed as if it were something else, something with which, the metaphor suggests, it shares common features. For instance, when Horatio refers to the appearance of the Ghost as "a mote . . . to trouble the mind's eye," he is using metaphoric language: the mind is irritated by a question as the eye is irritated by a speck of dust. Hamlet's description of the world as "an unweeded garden that grows to seed" uses metaphor to paint for us his bleak vision; behind his description of Gertrude and Claudius's hasty marriage ("O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets") is the metaphor of post-horses running skillfully and swiftly. Metaphors are often used when the idea being conveyed is hard to express or, for Hamlet, simply beyond normal expression; through metaphor, the speaker is thus given language that helps

to carry the idea or the feeling to his or her onstage listener—and to the audience.

Implied Stage Action

Finally, in reading Shakespeare's plays we should always remember that what we are reading is a performance script. The dialogue is written to be spoken by actors who, at the same time, are moving, gesturing, picking up objects, weeping, shaking their fists. Some stage action is described in what are called "stage directions"; some is signaled within the dialogue itself. We must learn to be alert to such signals as we stage the play in our imaginations. When, in the first scene of *Hamlet*, Barnardo says "Last night of all, / When yond same star that's westward from the pole / Had made his course t' illume that part of heaven / Where now it burns," it is clear that, on the word "yond," he points toward the imagined star. When Barnardo says of the Ghost "See, it stalks away," the stage action is obvious. It is less obvious, later in the scene, exactly what is to take place when Horatio says "I'll cross it though it blast me" (line 139). The director and the actor (and the reader, in imagination) must decide whether Horatio makes a cross of his body by spreading his arms, or whether he simply stands in the Ghost's path; as the Ghost once again exits, the lines "Shall I strike it with my partisan?" "Do, if it will not stand," clearly involve some violent action. Marcellus describes their gestures as a "show of violence" and mentions their "vain blows," but the question of who strikes at the Ghost and with how much vigor will be answered variously from production to production. Learning to read the language of stage action repays one many times over when one reaches a cru-