**Hamlet: Characterisation**

**Horatio**

With Horatio, SP has achieved much in spite of a remarkable economy of means. He gives him little enough to say or do, yet he establishes him as a man of stature and character.

For much of the time he moves about in Hamlet’s shadow, and he is given little more to do than echo Hamlet’s sentiments and receive his confidences.

There are times when he assumes a more important role. Indeed, in the first scene he is the dominant figure and several traits of his character emerge.

He is patriotic; he is a scholar; in his attitude to the Ghost he is not carried away by fear or superstition, but is objective and open-minded.

His treatment of the excited Hamlet in Act 1, Scene 5, shows his tact and good sense.

He does not appear again until Act 3, Scene 2, when Hamlet pays him a noble tribute of affection and admiration:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice

And could of men distinguish her election,

She hath sealed thee for herself... (3:2, 58-60)

From this tribute we learn that Horatio is of a stoical temperament, “A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards/ Hast ta’en with equal thanks”, and that Hamlet feels able to rely on his judgement.

**A Trustworthy Friend**

Horatio’s function in the Play scene is to lend moral support to Hamlet. He does not reappear until after the latter has left for England, when, on the king’s instructions, he watches Ophelia.

He is the first to hear the news that Hamlet has returned, and throughout Act 5 he is constantly in his company, assuming a more significant part on the stage than the text can suggest, since his is not given a great deal to say.

He tries to ensure Hamlet’s safety by urging him not to accept the king’s challenge to fence with Laertes.

During the last minutes of the action he becomes almost the dominant figure he was in the first scene; for a few moments, when he determines to share his master’s fate by drinking from the poisoned cup, he steals attention even from the dying Hamlet.

He has two final tasks: to give a true report of Hamlet and his life to those who remain, and to deal with Fortinbras.

**Inconsistent Characterisation**

SP’s presentation of Horatio’s character is not wholly consistent. A close reading of the text reveals two different Horatios, and the manner in which he is handled by SP seems to suggest that we are to take him less as a realistic portrait than as a piece of dramatic structure performing the double function of commentator on the action and confident of Hamlet, and being deprived of self-consistency in the process.

In Act 1, Scene 1, he shows his expert knowledge of Danish history and describes himself as a native of Denmark: he speaks of “our lost king” and “our state.”

Seeing the Ghost in armour he recalls that Hamlet’s father was similarly attired when he combated “the ambitious Norway”; he also mentions the dead king’s encounter with “the sledded Polacks”.

He goes on to give Marcellus and Barnardo a detailed account of the rivalry between the Danish and Norwegian sovereigns, and brings the history up to date (1:1, 79-107).

In the next scene, Horatio does not appear to be a native of Denmark (1:2, 160-83), and in Act 1, Scene 4 he has to have Danish manners and customs explained to him by Hamlet; when, for example, he hears a flourish of trumpets he asks, “What does this mean, my lord?” (1:4, 7).

And in Act 5 it is clear that he knows neither Laertes (5:1, 214) nor Osric (5:2, 84).

These considerations suggest that SP’s interest in immediate theatrical effect was sometimes greater than his desire for psychological consistency.