**Hamlet - A Few Details**

The play *Hamlet* has over four centuries taken on a life of its own quite outside the world of theatre.

There is of course the famous soliloquy, the image of the prince in the graveyard holding the skull of Yorick, and that same prince traditionally dressed in black speaking to us directly so often throughout the play, unpacking his heart.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare brought the soliloquy to a new level, basing it on the ‘essay’ – a new literary genre that had just become popular.

Arguably the greatest tragedy in the English language, it is a mammoth piece of work. Fully performed it would run for over four hours with its 4024 lines.

The character Hamlet himself speaks 1445 lines, not far short of the 1736 lines that make up the total in *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare’s shortest play.

It is often suggested that Shakespeare wrote the play in a mood of depression following the death of his eleven-year old son, Hamnet, from the bubonic plague or Black Death. The evidence doesn’t corroborate this.

He wrote the first draft of the play in 1599, the same year that he also wrote the light-hearted *As You Like It*.

Modern scholars believe that Shakespeare wrote and rewrote *Hamlet* throughout his life beginning as early as the 1580s.

There is a theory that an early version of the play (the *ur-Hamlet*), now lost, was performed in 1594, this shouldn’t surprise us as it is estimated that only one sixth of all the plays written by various playwrights, in Elizabethan England have survived.

The only documented performance in Shakespeare’s lifetime of *Hamlet* in England was at Oxford, a production in which Shakespeare played the Ghost. It has of course since been played across the globe in many languages. Every generation tries to re-interpret the play, every actor dreams of re-interpreting the enigmatic central character. Psychologists and literary theorists are in constant debate and of course intriguingly are left at the end with more questions than answers.

It is often thought that Shakespeare is a natural born genius, but he worked hard. By the end of his career he had used 18,000 words in his work. His vocabulary is thrice that of Milton’s. As he came to a new play he constantly introduced new words or compound words that he had never used before. *Hamlet*, of course holds the record. In this play he introduced 600 new words that he had never used before, two thirds of which he never used again. *Labor ornia vincit* (work conquers all).