

SHAKESPEARE

was a playwright. Obviously. But many other aspects of his life are reflected in his plays. Let's look at specific examples in *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare was an actor.

Shakespeare is known to have performed for The King's Men, in addition to writing for the company. It is traditionally supposed that Shakespeare played the Ghost of Hamlet's father in the original production of *Hamlet*, although the first mention of this is recorded nearly 100 years after Shakespeare's death.

Watch:

Blah blah blah

Shakespeare was a father.

In 1585 Shakespeare's wife gave birth to twins, Hamnet and Judith. Some have theorized that the Hamnet's death at age 11 inspired the writing of *Hamlet*, with its similarly named hero, focus on fathers and sons, and themes of death and grief.

Watch:

Are there any details or nuances in the text, that support such a theory? Why do you think people would like to believe in such a personal connection between Shakespeare's life and his art?

Shakespeare was a loyal subject.

Shakespeare's company was frequently called upon to perform before the Queen, and the patronage of the monarch was an important honour. Shakespeare would have been well aware of the perils of displeasing an absolute monarch. Versions of *Hamlet* published after Elizabeth's death removed Hamlet's lines referring to Denmark as a prison, out of deference, perhaps, to the new King James, who was married to a Danish princess.

Watch:

Watch for ways in which Claudius wields his new power, and for how others defer to him. Watch and listen, too, for the moments in which Hamlet defies the new king, and the increasing boldness of his defiance as the story progresses.

Hamlet was probably written in 1599-1600, about midway through Shakespeare's career as a playwright.

- The play was first published in 1603, although that first printing was a somewhat unreliable version, with some scenes and dialogue apparently reconstructed from memory.
- *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play; with over 4000 lines, it is nearly twice the length of his shortest tragedy, *Macbeth*. Hamlet himself speaks over 1/3 of those lines, a huge role, and a challenge to the actor's stamina.
- Shakespeare's basic source for *Hamlet* was a play (now lost) that was popular in London in the 1580's, which told the same basic story, elements of which can be traced back to the 9th century. The name of the hero in earlier versions is "Amleth", which means "foolish" or "dull" - probably a reference to the madness the character feigns.