



**Interview with
Stephen Kemble
– Voice & Dialect
Coach CFT’s 2025
production of
Hamlet.**

The ‘Great Chain of Being’ and how this relates/applies to Macbeth?

In *The Elizabethan World Picture* by E.M.W. Tillyard first published in 1943 (my edition is from 1998 published by Pimlico - but, I believe, still available) he describes The Chain of Being, “The chain stretched from the foot of God’s throne to the meanest of inanimate objects. Every speck of creation was a link in the chain...” A search of the internet will reveal many diagrams and sketches which show the progression of the chain from God at the top to inanimate objects at the bottom via angels, demons, humours, animals, and plants. Some of the categories and descriptions differ but they’re all variations on the theme. It gave the Elizabethans a structure to their life and the matter around them and influenced their understanding of society, order and their place in the universe. Tillyard says of the *Hamlet* speech, ‘What piece of work is a man ...’ that it, “shows Shakespeare placing man in the traditional cosmic setting between the angels and the beasts.” And, “What is true of *Hamlet* on man is in the main true of Elizabethan modes of thought in general.” Man can be ‘the paragon of animals’ but also sink to the ‘baseness’ of beasts. This is the context within which Shakespeare’s plays sit and the relevance is acute in those which interrogate the themes of power and authority.

You talked about *Hamlet* being “this very old play” and there being an “explosion of language” and that with Wittenberg we are presenting something new”. Please elaborate?

There was an older version of the story of *Hamlet*. In his brilliant book, “1599”, (Harper Collins 2005) James Shapiro charts the early Nordic version of ‘Amleth’ which contains many of the elements of the story we know via a French telling of the story by Francois de Belleforest to the lost Elizabethan version in the repertoire of The Chamberlain’s Men when Shakespeare was in the company. In this ‘new’ version Shakespeare set out to interrogate the notions of honour and revenge. He sets up questions about morality and the search for truth and in the process attempted to excavate the depths of the human soul and how to free it from evil and misfortune. This approach was innovative and would have been challenging for an Elizabethan audience.

Shapiro says, “Inventing a plot from scratch ... never held much appeal for Shakespeare. Aside from the soliloquies, much of Shakespeare’s creativity went into the play’s verbal texture... inventing more words than he had ever done before.” Referencing the ‘painstaking’ work of Alfred Hart who logged the new words throughout the complete works, Shapiro says Shakespeare “... introduced around 600 words in *Hamlet* that he had never used before, two thirds of which he would never use again.” Shakespeare was

also innovative in how he used language in **Hamlet** and Shapiro points out one of the ways he did this was by, ‘...employing an odd verbal trick called hendiadys ...’ which, ‘...literally means ... a single idea conveyed through a pairing of nouns linked by ‘and’ ...’ Law and Order is probably an example that is still most common. In the Arden Shakespeare, Quarto 2 version of **Hamlet** edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor they identify 66 examples, the most in any of Shakespeare’s plays, including, ‘ Angels and ministers of grace defend us,’ ‘the book and volume of my brain’ and ‘ a fantasy and trick of fame’. Could there be a hunt the hendiadys game? Thompson and Taylor also note the large number of new words in **Hamlet** that end ‘ment’ these include, condolment, blastment, entreatment, distilment, encompassment, strewment, extolment. The complexity of the language and the way it expressed the huge themes in **Hamlet** together with a move towards psychological realism in character would also have been testing for the Elizabethan audience.

Wittenberg was of course associated with Martin Luther and his profound influence on religion that led to the Protestant upheaval across Europe. The academic life of the university also encompassed a humanist element with many scholars contributing to thinking and debate of ideas, creating a rich intellectual atmosphere. This setting may have been attractive to Shakespeare as he developed the character of Hamlet who asks searching questions of himself as he navigates the nature of revenge and how to free himself of the evils around him. It’s interesting that Hamlet and Horatio seem to have had different responses to the life at Wittenberg.

Is there a relationship or relevance between church and state with this play?

The relationship between church and state is a huge question, and volumes have been written. In brief, if we go back to the chain of being Monarchs were at the top of the ‘humankind’ link and indeed they ruled by God’s will. When Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church and installed himself as the head of the Protestant church - state and church became inextricably linked. This situation has fuelled many creative endeavours from Robert Bolt’s ‘A Man For All Season’s to Hilary Mantel’s brilliant ‘Wolf Hall/Bring Up The Bodies/The Mirror And The Light trilogy. The tensions of this arrangement through the succeeding monarchies , with a detour for the reign of Mary I when Catholicism and the influence of Rome returned, often determined governance. At the time of the play there was great unease about who would be Elizabeth’s successor and the question of religion; there had been a failed attempt to bring Ireland to heel which led to the very public humiliation and death of it’s leader, the Earl of Essex, once favourite of the Queen; invasion from Catholic Spain seemed a possibility and so a play at this time that poses probing questions about kingship and corruption is bold.

Finally, you mentioned this was written at time when there was a ‘Cradle of Renaissance Thinking’ Please could you share a little more about this.

There’s a long history of performance and we can hear in old recordings and see in the numerous film versions how much scope there is for different interpretations of the play and how performance style changes over time. Justin’s production sets out to dive deeply into the political landscape of the play and brings a contemporary sensibility to the performance which chimes with the issues and themes that exercise us in our world today.