

Book Review: James Söderholm, *Prince Hamlet*. Lioness Writing Ltd. 2021. ISBN: 978-1-8381278-8-6 (Paperback). 103 Pages. \$9.99.

Reviewed by Fevronia Novac¹

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Would you be interested in a book about the childhood of Shakespeare's philosopher-prince? *Hamlet* is William Shakespeare's best known and most performed play. The protagonist, a fictional Danish prince and 16th-century philosopher who is set the impossible task of dispensing justice without vengeance, is one of the most interesting characters in world literature. The young man whose dead father appears to him as a ghost and tells him that he was murdered by his brother, Hamlet's uncle, who then married the prince's mother, the Queen, must convince himself that his father's undead apparition is legitimate and that he is telling the truth. Shakespeare also creates a *mise en abîme* in his play, as Hamlet brings a troupe to play out the scene of the murder of the king by the usurper, Claudius, in front of the court to convince himself of the truth of his fears. Hamlet decides to play the fool, in every sense of the word, to act like a fool in order to bring out the truth. His beloved Ophelia, a victim of the tragic circumstances in which she is caught, goes mad and commits suicide. She had comforted Hamlet and tried to encourage him. Her father, Polonius, who is a hypocrite in the service of King Claudius, intercepts Hamlet's love poems and ends up accidentally killed by Hamlet while spying on him, creating a tragic, impossible situation for Ophelia.

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Yorick, a former jester in Hamlet's father's court, although he appears only in a flashback scene in Shakespeare's play, is an essential character in the play, as he is presented as a symbol of the ephemerality of human life. Hamlet remembers the games he played with Yorick as a child. When he discovers his skull in the graveyard, the young prince remembers Yorick with a grief-stricken soul and delivers one of literature's most famous mortal reflections, beginning "Alas, poor Yorick."

Based on Shakespeare's play, James Söderholm dedicates his book to his nieces and nephews and their children and to "all the lonely, brainy Hamlets out there," an ingenious book in which he imagines Prince Hamlet's childhood and his friendship with Yorick, taking a little anachronistic liberty with the chronology of Shakespeare's play. It makes you curious to find out what Hamlet was like at the age of twelve as an enfant prodige: intelligent, cultured and full of witty remarks and humour. The little prince recites from Homer and learns puns about death from Yorick, who carves chess pieces out of ice to help the young Prince to make quicker decisions. At the end of the game, the jester tells him, "Life goes by so quickly and I'm afraid that King Death is the only King that does not get checkmated." It's very clever how Söderholm takes what Shakespeare mentioned in passing and restores Yorick to life for young Hamlet as a friend, mentor, and private jester.

We read how the Danish prince's closest friend and father figure is Yorick, but the child also enjoys the company of Horatio and Ophelia. With Horatio he has discussions about the existence of Paradise, and with Ophelia, about everything, especially the ambivalence of his situation as a prince who prefers not to act when he is troubled by the possible consequences. Hamlet and Ophelia share many puns, songs, poems, and lively dialogues of their sister souls.

One chapter is devoted to the prince's mother, who loves him tenderly and worries about his melancholy state. She is too preoccupied with the kingdom and fails to understand him as Yorick does. Hamlet's mother will never realise the immense role Yorick has played in her child's life. When Yorick dies, Hamlet is devastated and the only consolation for his passing will come posthumously, again from his teachings, which lend courage and imagination to his young friend in spirit and in the afterlife. This twist is masterfully executed by Söderholm, who places Yorick in the book's most important role for Hamlet. The court jester is the one who appears to the prince in his dreams or in a dream as a ghost.

Söderholm's book draws inspiration from the American critic Harold Bloom's intuition that Yorick is in effect both Hamlet's real mother and

father. The author prepares the prince nicely for his role as a young adult in Shakespeare's play. He gracefully manages to make him grow into the role Shakespeare envisioned. The pre-teen prince becomes, as Söderholm's readers watch, the brooding, indecisive, incorruptible young man, a misfit in a world we know he will tragically fail to set right.

From the beginning of the book the young prince sadly states: 'my mind is not my friend' (p. 9) Excessive thinking often leads to depression and that is why Yorick tries to constantly arouse his curiosity, giving him daily reasons to continue the intellectual game with life. For young Hamlet, the mind is a flowing river (p. 54). He calls his favourite horse - a mare - Nightmare and his cat Inkling (p 56-57).

I also loved the book's cover, by Jason Yohe, which depicts the moment when little Hamlet is pondering Yorick's gravestone, inscribed only with the letter Y, his single initial which also reads as a visual and auditory pun: "Why?" (p. 76)

In Söderholm's version of Shakespeare's play, we see how Hamlet is not cut out for his role in a warlike society, where the entertainments of the aristocracy demand the sacrifice of unfortunate animals to the hunters, and where success is measured in the accumulation of useless new territories through murderous battles. The young prince refuses these actions, preferring instead "his castle of books" (p 18). He consoles himself with word games. While reading *The Iliad*, he ponders the ambivalence of one's role in the world: "Hamlet could never figure out if Homer was *praising* or *blaming* Achilles, the great Greek hero of the Trojan War. His fellow Greeks certainly had something to complain about. Hamlet's final reflection for the day was that words were better than swords. But it was a thought that he had to keep to himself. He was beginning to think that his castle of books was kingdom enough for him." (p 18)

Even some of the children in his entourage amuse themselves by killing birds, and he hesitates and resorts to philosophical reflection before any gratuitous act of violence. He finds a spiritual guide in the person of Yorick, who consoles and amuses him in his depressive moments.

Söderholm tackles the problem of a child's depression with great grace and, when asked about the meaning of life, Yorick, in the graveyard, gives Hamlet a ready reply: "The only reason to stay alive is... to see what happens next." (p. 85)

Söderholm's book would not be easy to translate, for it is laced with puns like strings of pearls that make you smile and should probably be left in the original, in English in the text, to be properly enjoyed.

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James Söderholm, who is a literary historian of British Romanticism and a great exegete of Byron, this time writes a charming book for curious teenagers who wish to know more about Shakespeare's most intellectually beguiling Prince and what he might have been like as a melancholic and ingenious lad, raised in every sense by a mad rogue skilled in the art of infinite jest.