

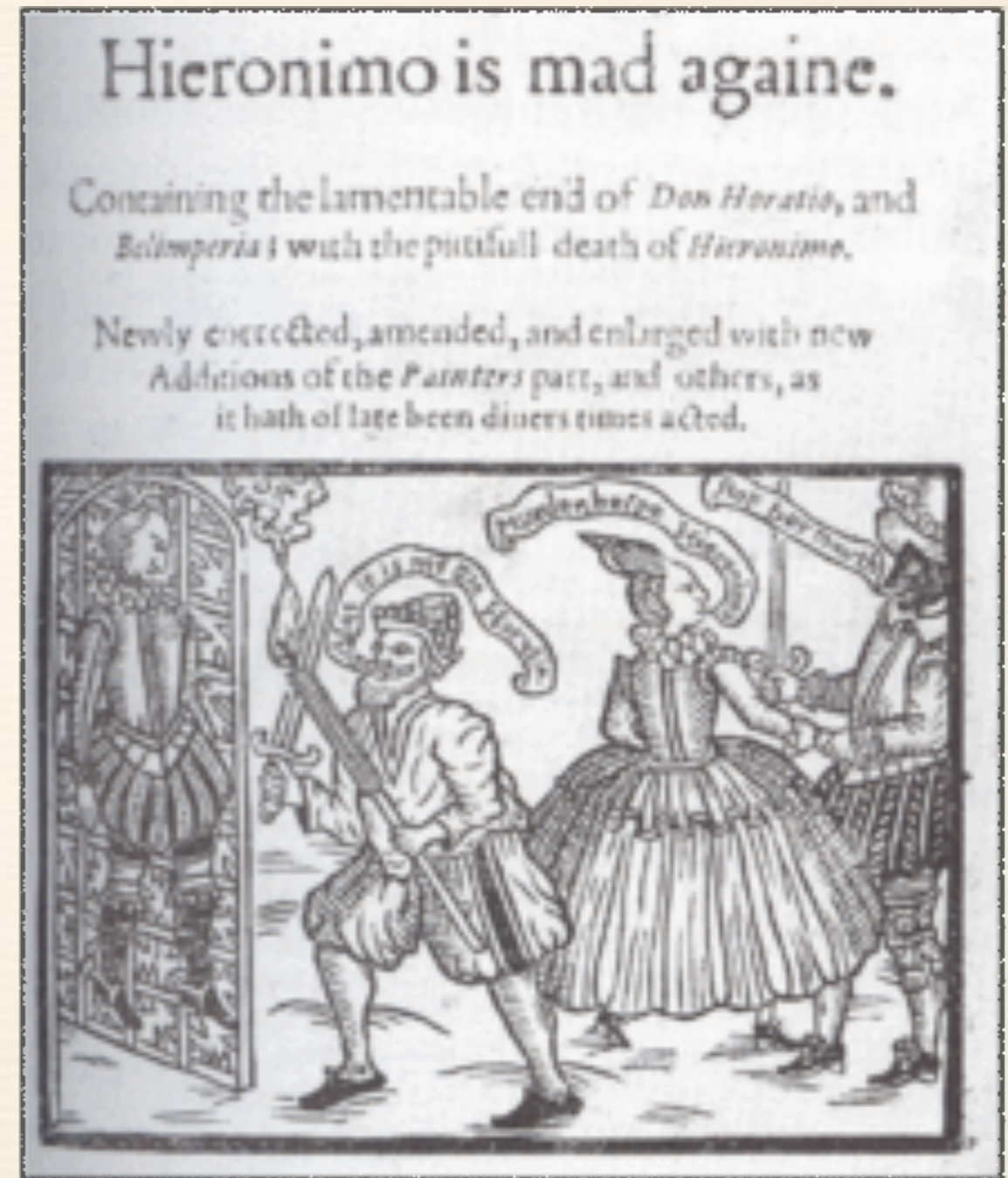
# Hamlet's Revenge



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# Revenge Plays

- ❖ Derived from the work of the Roman playwright, Seneca
- ❖ Gained great popularity in Shakespeare's time
- ❖ Components: (a) ghost appears to hero, demanding vengeance; (b) fake or real madness; (c) scenes of violence and death; (d) plays within the play; (e) death of hero



# Hamlet's procrastination

- ❖ Clear duty: Ghost demands that Hamlet 'revenge his foul and most unnatural murder'
- ❖ Hamlet vows that he will act 'with wings as swift / as meditation or the thoughts of love'
- ❖ The Ghost is pleased with this: 'I find thee apt'
- ❖ However, Hamlet does not act.
- ❖ The Ghost reappears in Act 3, reminding Hamlet not to forget: 'This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose'

# Why does Hamlet not act?

- ❖ Hamlet vows instant vengeance, but does nothing for a long time
- ❖ His killing of Claudius at the end of the play is a sudden act: he stabs and then poisons his uncle when he learns that the king has plotted to poison him and has accidentally poisoned Gertrude
- ❖ The killing of Claudius comes too late to save Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildensten, Gertrude and Laertes.
- ❖ Hamlet's procrastination causes a chain of tragic deaths

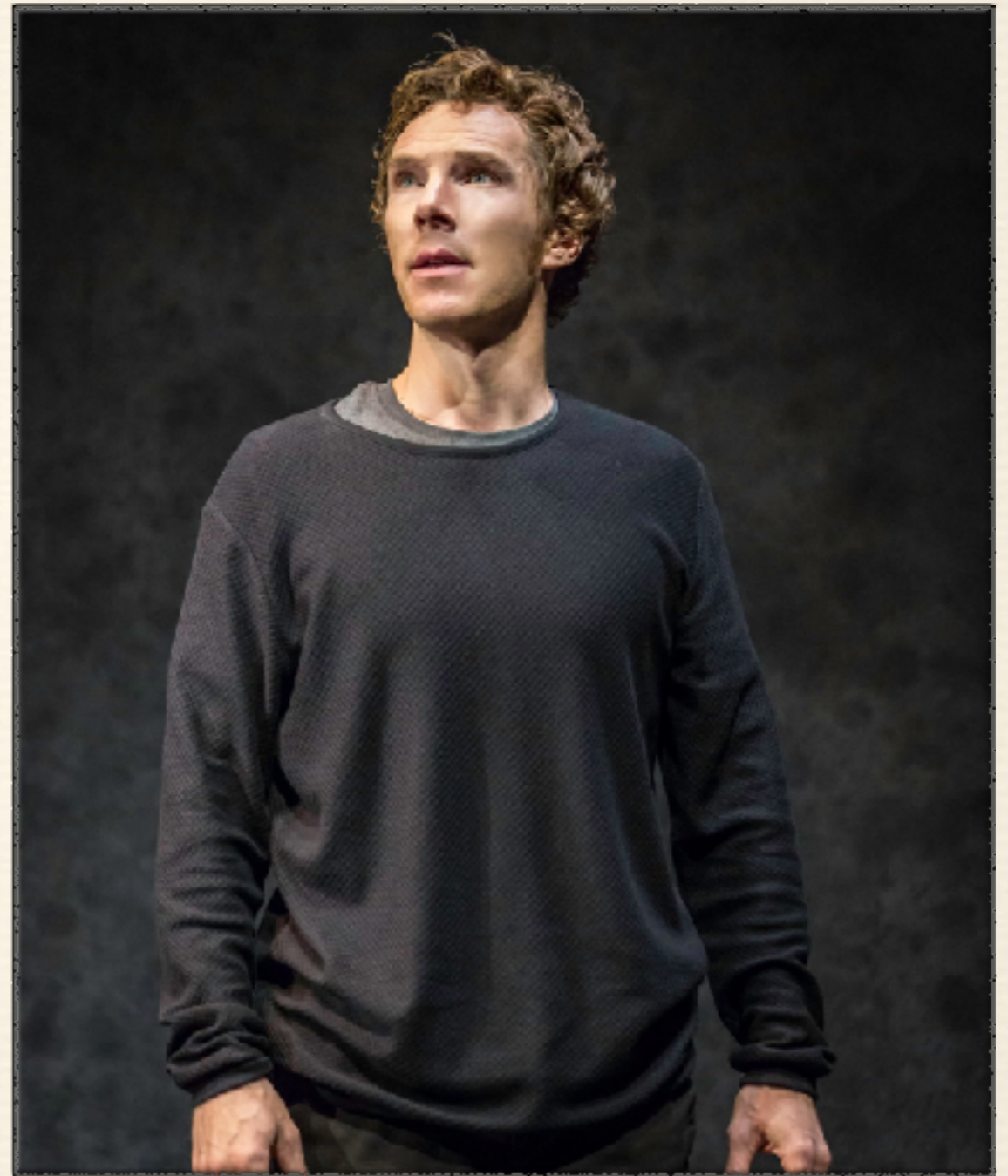
# The baffled prince

- ❖ Hamlet knows he should act
- ❖ He feels guilty when he sees the actor weep ‘in a fiction, in a dream of passion’ in Act 2.
- ❖ Hamlet rebukes himself for his inability to act in his soliloquy at the end of Act 2, acknowledging that he is ‘Prompted to [his] revenge by heaven and hell’.



# Fortinbras

- ❖ Fortinbras' actions highlight Hamlet's inaction.
- ❖ The Norwegian prince gathers an army of 'landless resolute' to attack Denmark in revenge for his father's defeat by Old Hamlet
- ❖ Hamlet is astonished and ashamed when he sees Fortinbras' army marching to fight for 'a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name'



- ❖ Moved by Fortinbras' bravery and determination, Hamlet vows to act.
- ❖ His soliloquy at the end of Act 4 Scene 4 expresses his confusion and disgust at his inability to exact revenge:
- ❖ 'I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing's to do, / Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do't.'
- ❖ He appears determined to act: 'Oh from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth'.

# Hamlet's own arguments do not stand up to scrutiny

- ❖ In his soliloquy at the end of Act 4 Scene 4, Hamlet claims he may be too cowardly or be guilty of 'thinking too precisely on th'event' to act.
- ❖ However, he is more than capable of acting bravely, decisively and mercilessly at times
- ❖ He shows no fear of the Ghost, although he is warned it may be dangerous and is not at all sure that it is not an evil spirit.
- ❖ He cleverly arranges the play to 'catch the conscience of a king'.
- ❖ He kills Polonius and appears unmoved when he realises his error.
- ❖ He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths.
- ❖ He stabs and poisons Claudius in the final scene.

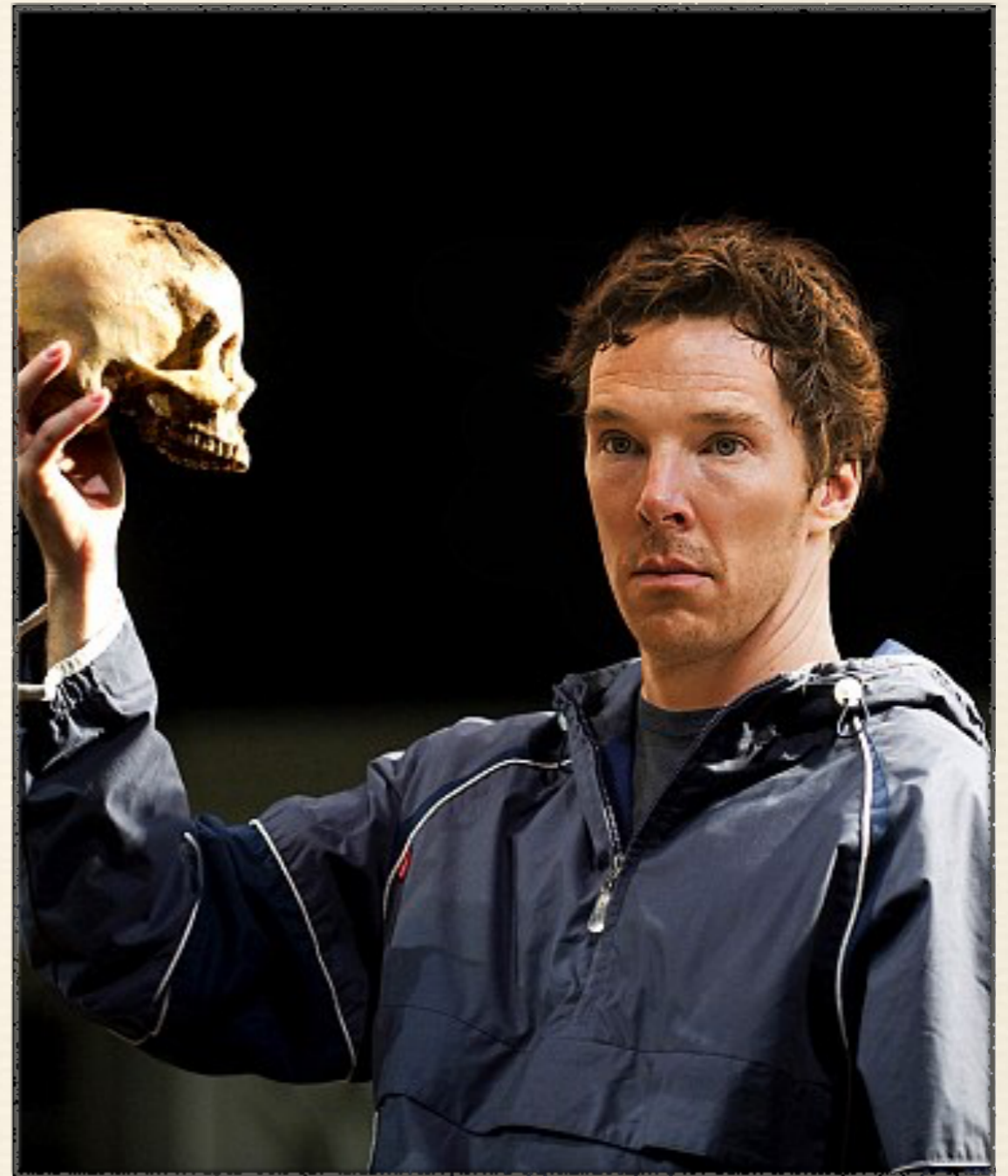


# Critics differ

- ❖ Some believe that Hamlet's play is a result of depression: 'I have of late - but wherefore I know not - lost all my mirth.'
- ❖ Others feel the prince is marred by 'some vicious mole of nature' which stops him from exacting revenge in a timely manner
- ❖ Another viewpoint is that Hamlet finds the whole world so intolerable that he cannot act. This is an interesting angle and worth closer examination.

# Hamlet's world view

- ❖ The world is made up of 'many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o' th' worst'.
- ❖ 'the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory'; 'the air [...] no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours'.
- ❖ 'what is this quintessence of dust?'
- ❖ If Hamlet finds the world intolerable, then his inaction and his descent into madness makes more sense.



- ❖ Hamlet sees the world as ‘so weary, stale, flat and unprofitable’ that he wishes ‘the Everlasting had not fix’d / His cannon ‘gainst self-slaughter’.
- ❖ It is not surprising that he should find it difficult to stir himself to act when there seems so little point in life.
- ❖ Hamlet is fascinating because he is so unlike a conventional hero. Laertes and Fortinbras are straightforward: they believe they have cause to seek revenge and they act.
- ❖ Hamlet has flaws, but so does the world in which he lives. His behaviour is a comment on a flawed society.

# ‘The time is out of joint’

- ❖ In the graveyard scene, Hamlet reflects on the transience of life.
- ❖ Would killing Claudius change the fabric of the world?
- ❖ Is there any point in playing an expected role in time which is ‘out of joint’?
- ❖ Hamlet feels trapped and paralysed by a society which disgusts him. Why should he play the role expected of him?

