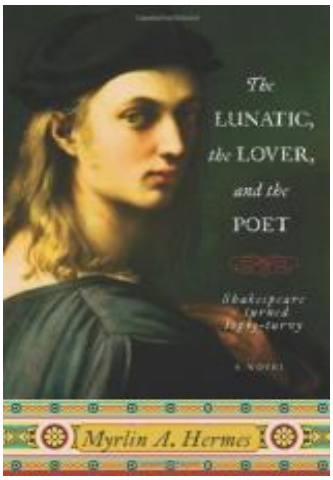
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The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet

by Myrlin A. Hermes



About the Book

A Divinity scholar at Wittenburg University, Horatio prides himself on his ability to argue both sides of any intellectual debate, but as a result is a born skeptic, never able to fully buy into one particular philosophy. That is, until he meets Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark.

As Horatio gets closer to Prince Hamlet, and his own patroness, Lady Adriane, begins to take notice, a mysterious new poet shows up to challenge Horatio's new-found standing, a man called "Will Shake-spear." A bi-sexual love triangle inspired by Shakespeare's own sonnets quickly escalates, and Horatio is forced to choose between his skepticism and his love.

Laced with quotes, references, and in-jokes, cross-dressing, bed-tricks, and mistaken identity, this novel up-ends everything you thought you knew about Hamlet. Witty, insightful, playful, and truly wise about the greatest works of the Bard, **The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet** is a delectable treat for anyone who has loved books like Stephen Greenblatt's **Will in the World** and John Updike's **Gertrude and Claudius**.

Discussion Guide

NOTE: It may be helpful for discussion to have available for reference a copy of Shakespeare's Sonnets and an annotated edition of **Hamlet**.

1. The majority of Shakespeare's love sonnets were written to a beautiful young man he called the "master-mistress of my passion," known to us only as "Mr. W.H." The young man's identity and the exact nature of their relationship remains ambiguous. Why do you think the author chose to re-frame the story of the sonnets within the relationship of Hamlet and Horatio rather than writing a historical novel about Shakespeare and the "real" Mr. W.H.? How are lines or images from Shakespeare's sonnets incorporated into the narrative of the novel? Do you agree with the author's

interpretation of the sonnets? Why or why not?

2. Lady Adriane says that what she wants from Prince Hamlet is what everyone wants: "To play him and be played by him. To take away some piece of him immortal and my own." John Updike, Margaret Atwood, and Salman Rushdie are just a few of the authors who have written fiction based on or inspired by Shakespeare's Hamlet. Why do you think this play in particular is such an attractive subject for literary re-visioning?

3. Many people find that they can recognize lines or images from Hamlet even if they have never seen or read the play. Does the fact that it is so well-known render it something of a "blank canvas" for the author's own ideas? What were your impressions of the character of Prince Hamlet before reading this book? Were they influenced by a particular actor or production? Has reading this book changed your opinion or impression of Hamlet? Of Horatio? Of other characters in the play?

4. Controversial director Charles Marowitz believed his role was to "restore the ambiguity" of Shakespeare's work to a viewing audience that came to the theatre with certain fixed expectations about the play they were going to see. How can the author's role in a novel such as this be compared to that of the modern Shakespearean director? Could this novel be considered as a non-theatrical "production" of the play? Why or why not?

5. Horatio, a Latin scholar, often dissects words into their literal root meanings, such as "carried across" for translation and "without wax" for sincere. How are these translated phrases used in the narrative? Do they carry multiple meanings? How is this similar to the way the author uses or inverts famous Shakespearean quotes, such as "To be or not to be, that is the question" or "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Do these quotes "ghost" the text of the novel the way Latin does to Horatio's thoughts? What other "ghosts" --- linguistic and otherwise --- appear in this book?

6. Hamlet's "madness" is presented as a hallucinatory premonition of the tragic events of Shakespeare's play. How does the author use the reader's knowledge of the "original" text to reinforce or subvert certain expectations? Did this book remind you of any other "intertextual" novels, such as Gregory Macguire's **Wicked** (based on the Oz books) or Jean Rhys's **Wide Sargasso Sea** (prequel to Jane Eyre)? What do you think is the purpose of such works? Can they be read as a creative form of literary criticism? How do these stories compare or relate to the "fan fiction" written about characters from movies or television shows?

7. Lady Adriane first appears in the book hidden behind her beekeeper's veil, and is often described as being obscured by shadows or smoke. What does this indicate symbolically about her character? Is it important to her relationship with Horatio that he can never fully "see" her? How are mirrors and reflection used throughout the novel to obscure or reveal truths about the characters? In which ways does Adriane represent the modern reader of Shakespeare's poetry? Does the "correct" interpretation belong to the reader, or the writer? What does it signify that her husband, the baron, is illiterate? Are there different ways in which the characters read --- or misread --- one another?

8. Chapters set in Elsinore reveal surprising truths about Hamlet's parentage and family. Did these revelations show the events in Shakespeare's Hamlet in a different light? What is Elsinore like without Prince Hamlet? How did these scenes illuminate or provide a counterpoint to the main plot of the novel?

9. The "wooden O" was a term Shakespeare used for The Globe Theatre, and, more broadly, the world. Why in chapter 21 does the author call Ophelia Hamlet's "wooden O"? Why do you think Ophelia herself appears so little, though she is

discussed by Polonius and Laertes as well as Hamlet and Horatio? What does she symbolize to each of these men?

10. What role do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play in the book? Are we expected to believe everything they tell us about Hamlet? Do they represent different types of Shakespearean audiences or critics? Are they more or less sympathetic in **The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet** than in the original play? If you have read or seen the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, how do you think Tom Stoppard's use of the pair compares to the author's approach here?

11. In chapter 12, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discuss the identity of Hamlet's new admirer "Will Shake-spear," making reference to several famous candidates --- Marlowe, Bacon, DeVere --- who have at various times been rumored to be the "real" author of Shakespeare's plays. What do you think the novel is saying about these alternative authorship theories? What is the significance of the revelation that there is no "real" Will Shake-spear? What role does the "rival poet" play?

12. In chapter 8, Hamlet paraphrases a quote attributed to Queen Elizabeth I: "We princes are set on stages, in sight and view of all the world duly observed." Who are the "princes" set on stages in our time? Do Hamlet's antics (either in **The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet** or Shakespeare's original play) resemble at all the tabloid exploits of today's celebrities? Who do you think is a contemporary "Prince Hamlet" character? A contemporary "Dark Lady"? What other Shakespearean characters can you think of with parallels in the modern world?

Author Bio

Myrlin A. Hermes started reading Shakespeare at the age of nine and has since played a variety of Shakespearean roles onstage. She published her first novel, **Careful What You Wish For**, at the age of 23. She graduated from Reed College at the age of 20 with a double major in English and Theater; in 2004, she was awarded a Film & Fiction Scholarship from the Institute for Humane Studies and went to London to study creative writing with Poet Laureate Andrew Motion. For **The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet** she won the Arch and Bruce Brown Fiction Prize. She currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

Critical Praise

"A whirlwind tour of an imaginatively deconstructed version of *Hamlet* that would have delighted the Bard as it is sure to delight his admirers."

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