

Hamlet Resource Notes

Shakespeare's Sources

In brief:

Saxo - Historiae Danicae
Twelfth century, first published 1514



Belleforest - Histoires Tragiques
published 1570 In French



Kydd(?) - The Ur-Hamlet
First performed around 1589



Shakespeare - Hamlet
First performed 1601

The basic story of Hamlet comes from the story of Amleth (Just move the 'H'...), from Grammaticus Saxo's "Historiae Danicae".

After the King, his father, has been murdered by his uncle, Amleth, (whose name seems to have signified 'fool'), due to a fear for his own safety, pretends to be mad.

This involves him appearing sullen, going about covered in dirt, and injuring himself with his own sword, to such an extent that, to protect him, it is nailed to its scabbard.

Fengo (Amleth's murderous uncle) has married his brother's wife Gerutha, and is suspicious of Amleth's behaviour. He tries to trap him, first by sending a beautiful woman to tempt him, but this reveals nothing. His second plan is to have Amleth overheard in conversation with his mother, to whom he would surely speak without pretence. Fengo's spy then hides beneath the bedding in her chamber, but Amleth in his mad antics discovers him and kills him. He then harangues his mother on her incestuous marriage with his father's murderer, and after bringing her to repentance, confides to her the truth about his pretended madness, and his intended revenge.

The disappearance of his friend arouses Fengo's suspicions still further, and he despatches Amleth to England with two escorts carrying a letter

directing the English King to put Amleth to death, but Amleth changes the letter while his companions sleep, and substitutes their deaths for his.

Having arranged a plan in secret with his mother, Amleth returns to Denmark to arrive in the middle of his own funeral wake. He ties up the astonished courtiers, and sets fire to the hall, before going to Fengo's bedroom. Before waking Fengo he then swaps his sword (nailed to its scabbard), for Fengo's, so that when he wakes Fengo by shouting that 'vengeance has come', Fengo is unable to draw, and is instead killed with his own weapon.

So with this tale of Amleth, we have many of the essentials of Shakespeare's plot:

Fratricide

An incestuous marriage

Feigned madness

Revenge

The woman who waylays the hero

The man who spies on him in his mother's chamber

Death of the spy

The confrontation with the mother

Revealing to the mother the pretence of madness

The two escorts to England, and the letter substitution

The hero returning to Denmark in the middle of a funeral.

And the switching of the eventual murder weapon.

But it is unlikely that Shakespeare got the story for his play *directly* from Saxo's tales.

Belleforest, a French writer, wrote his "Histoires Tragiques", which seem to be much closer to Shakespeare's version of the story, but as it wasn't translated into English until 1608 a good 6 years *after* Hamlet was written. This has suggested to scholars that Belleforest's work was only an indirect source, and that what has become known as "The Ur-Hamlet" (which was based on Belleforest's work), was the most immediate source.

Unfortunately, if the *Ur-Hamlet* was ever published, no copy exists today. It was performed in 1596, and may well have been performed as early as 1589, and is reported to have had a pale ghost which cried "Hamlet, revenge!" – the ghost not having been present in either Saxo or Belleforest. Many feel that there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that it was written by Thomas Kydd, author of *The Spanish Tragedy*, which, they argue, is a further development of the themes in the *Ur-Hamlet*, of Revenge, Madness, and Suicide. What the *Ur-Hamlet* lacked was the crucial element of the hero's hesitation. Some critics argue that the *Ur-Hamlet* was written by Shakespeare himself, and is merely an earlier form of the play we have today.

*An extremely potted history to **Notable Hamlets...***

Richard Burbage: Probably the first man to play Hamlet, around 1601.

David Garrick: Stressed Hamlet's horror at the appearance of the ghost.

Kemble: At the end of the 18th century he began the tradition of 'The gloomy Dane', with his intellectual portrayal.

Macreehy: Restored the Character's wildness, whilst making him more gentle, and more likeable.

Barry Sullivan: Made Hamlet into a completely sane quick-witted man, who was filled with bitterness.

Henry Irving: Stessed his self-generated excitement, verging on hysteria.

Forbes Robertson: He restored Fortinbras, putting a stop to the custom of ending the play with "The rest is silence".

Barry Jackson: In 1925 he produced the first modern dress Hamlet.

John Gielgud: Between 1930 and 1944 he played the prince four times, providing us with a lonely prince, incapable of coping with older people, full of bitterness and nausea at the discovery of the ugly side of human existence. His performance was seen to be the definitive way to play Hamlet, until a rival came along...

Laurence Olivier: In 1948 he starred in and directed his film version of Hamlet. An isolated Hamlet, misunderstood by Ophelia, and with an incestuous love for his mother.

Derek Jacobi: In 1980 gave a passionate, yet repressed Hamlet, weeping at the ghost's revelations. "It hath made me mad" was an astonished realisation.

Mel Gibson: In the 1990 film version he was a wild Hamlet with sane moments, who kissed his mother passionately in the closet scene.

Kenneth Branagh: Has played Hamlet 5 times (to date) from 1980 - 1996, Three times on stage, once for Radio 4, and most recently in the film which he also directed.

The Elizabethan Malady

Often seen as one of the sources for Shakespeare's Hamlet, the *Treatise of Melancholy* by Timothy Bright, published in 1586, outlines how the person afflicted with melancholy will act:

"The perturbations of melancholy are for the most part sad and fearful, and such as rise of them: as distrust, doubt, diffidence, or despair, sometimes furious, and sometimes merry in appearance, through a kind of Sardonian and false laughter."

Below we compare phrases from the *Treatise of Melancholy*, (T.o.M.), with passages from Hamlet (Ht):

T.o.M: *The sufferer of melancholy is "given to fearful and terrible dreams"*

Ht: *"I have bad dreams...I am most dreadfully attended"*

T.o.M: *He seems to feel that his house is like "a prison or dungeon, rather than a place of assured repose and rest".*

Ht: *"Denmark's a prison."*

T.o.M: *He is "doubtful before, and long in deliberation: suspicious"*

Ht: *" The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
...abuses me to damn me."*

T.o.M: *"...painful in study, and circumspect"*

Ht: *' "...look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading..."
"What do you read, my lord?"
"Words, words, words." '*

T.o.M: *"given to "contemplations"*

Ht: *"To be, or not to be..."*

T.o.M: *"not so apt for action."*

Ht: *"...I do not know
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do..."*

Though the treatise certainly has echoes of our hero's behaviour, and Shakespeare may well have read it, this 'Elizabethan Malady' (as it was later termed), was a subject of general interest. The illness of Depression, as we might now call it, had just been recognised, and was topical, and so it was natural for Shakespeare to colour his main protagonist with an air of melancholy. Some critics suggest that Shakespeare was himself suffering from melancholia, due to the recent death of his son Hamnet,

and was, as many writers, do pouring his own feelings, in this case of grief, into his central character.

Melancholic or Mad?

Polonius says quite plainly, "*Your noble son is mad*", but Claudius feels that there is more to Hamlet's "transformation" than meets the eye: "*There's something in his soul, O'er which his melancholy sits on brood*". He feels that he "*puts on this confusion*", and Guildenstern agrees, calling it a "*crafty madness*". Gertrude gently describes him as her "too much changed son", but then much more bluntly says that he is as "*mad as the sea and wind*", after Hamlet has told her he has been feigning it all along.

So, is he mad?

Even if we disagree with the presumption that Hamlet is melancholic, or depressed at the beginning of the play, I think we can certainly say that the man is not happy.

He is full of anger and frustration directed against his mother;

*Must I remember? Why she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on: and yet within a month -
Let me not think on't - Frailty, thy name is woman -...
...O god, a beast that wants reason
Would have mourned longer -*

grief for his father's death;

*So excellent a king
I shall not look on his like again*

and contempt for Claudius;

A little more than kin, and less than kind.

Certainly after the ghost's appearance to him, he tells us about his plan to "*put an antic disposition on,*" and his initial scenes with Polonius which follow, would certainly seem to show a man using a facade of madness in order to insult and ridicule, whilst at the same time hinting that he knows there is *something "rotten in the state of Denmark"*;

Polonius: *Do you know me, my lord?*
Hamlet: *Excellent well. You are a fishmonger.*
Polonius: *Not I, my lord.*
Hamlet: *Then I would you were so honest a man.*

But at the play, his nervous energy seems to verge on the manic, where he manages to insult Ophelia, Gertrude and Claudius, to the extent that we almost feel that they won't stay for much longer to be treated in this

manner, which would ruin his plan to "*catch the conscience of the King*". Is this an instance of insanity taking control of Hamlet? Or is it merely an example of his innate melancholy as Bright described, "*merry in appearance, through a kind of...false laughter*"?

It is hard, though, to see his behaviour at Ophelia's graveside as anything other than a kind of insanity. We could argue, as he does, that he loved Ophelia, and feels such strong grief at her death, that he must shout it out more loudly than anyone else;

*I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum...
....Nay, and thou'lt mouth,
I'll rant as well as thou.*

But how can he then ask Laertes -

*What is the reason that you use me thus?
I loved you ever.*

Has he forgotten that he killed Polonius? Or is he really mad, and therefore unable to have any real control over his feelings, let alone take anyone else's into account? He admits later ;

*...I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself;
For by the image of my cause I see
The portraiture of his.*

He excuses his own behaviour by describing it as "*towering passion*". We might agree, or see it as, at least temporary, insanity.

In both the 'Nunnery' scene with Ophelia, and the 'Closet' scene with Gertrude, Hamlet alternates between aggression and tenderness. This shows at least the confusion of a passionate man, (one who still cannot believe his mother's treachery, and assumes that Ophelia will be no different), and more likely portrays a man on the verge, or drifting in and out of madness. Certainly the three lines which he utters having killed Polonius, hardly give time for any emotion at all at the old man's death, though surely even a man caught up in the heat of the moment, would regret such a "*rash and bloody deed*" for a little longer, and would not later be able to make such flippant jokes about the death.

Some would argue that Hamlet at the start of the play sets up the notion of pretended madness and keeps it up until his death, in order to excuse all his subsequent actions. As he says in the last scene to Laertes -

*...I am punish'd with a sore distraction...
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,*

*Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness.*

But are these words to Ophelia just another excuse? Or a terrible self-realisation:

...it hath made me mad.

The Ghost

When thinking about our production, we decided that the way we chose to portray the character of the ghost was crucial to the whole play. After all it is the ghost who sets Hamlet on his road to revenge.

The ghost is trying to enlighten Hamlet, to show him what has happened, in order to spur him on to revenge. Traditionally the part has been played by a man, dressed head-to-foot in white armour, but we wanted to go for a more unsettling idea. We decided on a disembodied voice that would boom through the auditorium, but in order for Hamlet (and the audience) to engage with what the ghost was saying, I also wanted to have images of what was going on in the ghost's mind brought on to the stage. Images that would stay with our hero throughout the play.

A perfect red rose is a beautiful image. A symbol of love and loyalty that is used every St.Valentine's day. Hamlet wearing a rose at the start of the play is a symbol of his grief, love and loyalty for his father, when everyone else seems to have forgotten the late King.

When the Ghost then tells his terrible tale, he uses the rose to show the decay and demise of all that is good: Gertrude's incestuous infidelity, Claudius' treachery, and the Kingdom itself. An image, which shows that "*something is rotten in the state of Denmark*".

After the turbulence of the 'nunnery scene' Ophelia describes Hamlet as "*the rose of the fair state...*" who is "*quite, quite down*". As the rose in his buttonhole decays, and resembles more and more the warning images of his father's ghost, so Hamlet's sanity too becomes fragile and rotten.

The Four Young Men

Fortinbras wants recompense (revenge?), for his country's lost lands As Claudius informs us;

*He hath not fail'd to pester us with message
Importing the surrender of those lands
Lost by his father...
To our most valiant brother.*

He holds courage and honour so dear to his heart that he is prepared to march his men across Denmark to fight for *"a little patch of ground that hath in it no profit but the name."* Hamlet describes him as a *"delicate and tender prince"* who would dare everything for *"an eggshell"*. Although seeing Fortinbras as with *"divine ambition puff'd"*, he also has an admiration for a man who can risk so much for a *"straw"*, whereas he feels he is not fulfilling his own, more just cause.

Laertes, at Ophelia's funeral, is accused by Hamlet of being *"splenative and rash"*, and that is exactly what he is. When we see Laertes in the second half of the play he is, like Hamlet, seeking revenge for his father's death. He is a passionate man, who storms in on Claudius when he thinks he is responsible for his father's death crying *"O thou vile King, give me my father... that drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard"*. We know from this moment on that he will kill for his revenge. He does not speculate on the rights or wrongs of it, but knows and feels what he must do. Even at the end when he begins to question whether what he is about to do is right, *"And yet it is almost against my conscience,"* he doesn't deviate from his initial plan of killing Hamlet. This is where he and Hamlet differ. Hamlet thinks about revenge so much that he cannot actually do the deed, even when faced with the perfect opportunity whilst Claudius is praying;

*...That would be scann'd:
...And am I then reveng'd
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season'd for his passage?
No.*

He cannot help himself from thinking through all the connotations. Laertes sees life, in the same circumstances, much more simply:

Claudius: *...what would you undertake
To show yourself in deed your father's son
More than in words.*
Laertes: *To cut his throat i'th' church.*

Laertes is not as intellectual. He has seen the situation only in black and white terms: *'He has murdered my father, therefore I need revenge'*.

Horatio is described by Hamlet as not being *"passion's slave"*, he has passions (his love and loyalty to Hamlet never falter for a second), but he is not generally ruled by them. At the beginning of the play, he too is curious about the ghost, but when Hamlet suggests following it, he is like a fretful mother:

*What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff..
...And there assume some other horrible form
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason*

And draw you into madness?

He has none of Laertes' rashness, but will instead reason things out. If Horatio were to be faced with the situation that Hamlet finds himself in, it would be difficult to imagine him actually committing a murder. His reply to Hamlet's need for justification in his planned revenge attempt; *"is't not perfect conscience to quit him with this arm?"*, has no tinge of the support Hamlet is craving. It merely reminds him "It must be shortly known to him from England what is the issue of the business there." *He does, at the end of the play, try to play the "antique roman" and commit suicide, but this rashness is halted by his Prince's dying wish for him to be the one to record all that has happened truly and fully.*

Hamlet, can be seen as being a mixture of all these men. He has the charisma, royal blood and the need to uphold honour that Fortinbras has;

*...Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stain'd,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep...*

the passion of Laertes;

*...O, from this time forth
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.*

and the intelligence and fear of Horatio;

*... Now whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th'event -*

*A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward - I do not know
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do...*

The three other young men in the play seem to be drawn in order to show the different facets of Hamlet's nature, and to hint at the paths he could have followed if he were a less complex character. Hamlet, though, has many different sides to his personality - indeed, all his quotes above, come from the same speech!

The Fatal Flaw

In most Shakespearean tragedies, where one man is the focal point, our hero is imbued with what has been termed his 'Fatal Flaw'. This is the imperfection in his personality that will eventually lead to his downfall.

With Macbeth it is his Ambition, with Othello his Jealousy, and with Coriolanus, his Pride.

So what is Hamlet's Fatal Flaw? His indecision? His madness? His melancholic introspection? His unreigned passion? His cowardice?

By the fact that so many 'flaws' could be argued to be Hamlet's fatal one, it becomes apparent that he does not fit neatly into the general Tragic Hero mould.

Revenge Tragedy

The genre of Revenge Tragedy was popular with audiences around the late 16th, early 17th century and with Shakespeare's playwright contemporaries: Kydd (who we've already mentioned), Marlowe, Webster and Middleton.

The main plot of a revenge tragedy tends to start with frictions within a noble household, an unjust murder (or two), and someone who finds out, and wants to exact revenge. They are then inhibited by various occurrences, (whilst the original murderer tends to kill a few more people), and then when our hero does actually manage to kill, and be revenged, he (so that the playwright is not to seem to condone murder), normally dies himself.

In Hamlet, although we have the same basis of the revenge plot, Hamlet is not trapped within the plot confines of the play. He is not hampered in his attempts to kill Claudius, it is rather his own inability to decide to, (and then to put words into action,) which stops the revenge from occurring. It is only in the throes of death, when there is no further need or time for thought that he actually manages to kill Claudius.

Prince Hamlet is a character who doesn't follow the Revenger's traditional role. He is a real person, who we cannot pigeon-hole into a stereotype. And this ultimately provides us with a brilliant and original Revenge Tragedy.

"The Director's Cut"

This sounds like a film term, but even with a play, a Director might choose not to have the actors perform the entire piece.

There are many factors to take into account, but one of the foremost ones in many Directors' heads is Time. A modern audience is used to sitting down to watch a play for about two and a half hours on average. Anything longer than this runs the risk of making the audience physically uncomfortable, no matter how good the play or production.

Obviously Hamlet is a brilliant play, and I can honestly say that for almost every swipe of my pencil I uttered the words "Oh, but that bit's so GOOD, maybe I should keep it in?" However, I wanted to hone the play - not just to keep the length of it down, but in order to focus attention on certain parts of the play. The most obvious of these is the omission of Fortinbras from the stage. I felt that by including this we would be diverting our attention from the main action: Hamlet, his thoughts, and his interaction with the other main characters. I felt that I wanted to concentrate on him and the breakdown of the family relationships - to keep up the claustrophobic atmosphere that Shakespeare creates so well, and not have it diluted with ideas of the larger political picture. I see that the strength of Hamlet the play, is the story of one man, and I did not want to divert the audience's attention away from that.

Similarly with the ghost, I was more interested in Hamlet's reaction to it than Horatio's. By having only a suggestion at the start of the play of the ghost's presence (rather than the entire first scene) it is then with Hamlet that we first hear about the ghost. This also then lends greater importance to his first sighting of the ghost - we want to know more too.

Until the nineteenth century, and Forbes Robertson's Hamlet most Directors had cut Fortinbras completely, and ended the play with Hamlet's last words - *"The rest is silence"*. Similarly at the end of the production I wanted our thoughts to remain with Hamlet, and the ending of his struggle, and his life. Horatio's final words simply allow us to lay him to rest.

Hamlet Survey

Before rehearsals began we took a short 'Hamlet Survey' of a small group of people. They were of various ages, sex, and nationality - the only thing that they definitely had in common was access to e-mail, which was how the survey was conducted.

We wanted to find out how 'famous' this play really was, and how much the words, ideas, and images had seeped into the general consciousness.

The Questions & The Results

1. What are the first three things that come into your mind when you see the word 'Hamlet'?

11%	<i>Cigars</i>
9%	<i>The Skull</i>
7%	<i>To be or not to be</i>
6%	<i>The Ghost</i>

2. How much can you remember of the "To be, or not to be" speech?
 - a) Only that bit
 - b) The next couple of lines
 - c) Most of it

d) All of it

80% said that they knew the next couple of lines.

3. How many other quotes/sayings, if any, do you know from Hamlet?

20% said that they knew "a couple"

20% said they knew "a few"

37% quoted "Alas poor Yorick"

4. Can you think of any adverts where Hamlet has been alluded to?

63% said Hamlet Cigars

23% said The advert for Lager where they play football with the skull

5. Do you know the name of Hamlet's 'girlfriend'?

67% knew that it was Ophelia

6. Did you study Hamlet at school?

40% had studied it, 60% hadn't.

7. Have you ever seen the play?

60% had seen the play

27% said that they had seen a film of it

13% hadn't seen it at all.

Conclusions

Advertising agencies, when deciding how to promote a product, want to choose an 'angle' or format that will attract as many prospective customers as possible to their product. I think that we can assume that tobacco and beer companies are not just hoping to attract theatre-goers and scholars. They have chosen Hamlet as an immediately identifiable name, and image, (man with skull), with associated words and phrases that most people can murmur along with. Advertising teams would have to be sure that Hamlet had been instilled into the general consciousness, in order for their adverts to work. They wouldn't waste their money unless they were sure.

Advertising must indeed work if "Cigars" was what most people thought of when faced with the word Hamlet! The other answers to question one, however, were interesting too. The "To be, or not to be" speech was for some instantly recalled, as were the Skull, and the Ghost - very powerful images, if they spring instantly to the minds of so many.

Other answers given for question one also showed knowledge of the play and its themes; "Denmark" scored quite highly, and various film and

theatre productions were brought to mind. "Castle", "Gloom", "Death", "Yorick", and "Mad" were all given, as well as the less flattering "long"!

Not one person had trouble thinking of the "three things" that they associated with the word. Most people knew who Ophelia was, and nearly everyone could quote something from the play, (other than "to be or not to be"), even though 60% had never studied the play at all.

Hamlet is nearly four hundred years old, and yet has remained popular with the general public, and been soaked into their imaginations, to the extent that a mere mention of the title conjures up images and quotes to everyone. What other play has had such power and influence?

Characterisation

One of the ways that we began discussing each actor's character, was to ask them to choose 5 words that they felt described them.

Claudius : reserved, cold, ambitious, jealous, remorseful

Gertrude : passionate, caring, ambitious, flirtatious, strong

Polonius : : old, statesman-like, verbose, machiavellian, ambitious

Laertes : simple, sleazy, angry, fixated, canine

Ophelia : vulnerable, sexy, bewildered, mad, distraught

Horatio : intelligent, noble, wise, cautious, pure