



The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

by William Shakespeare

“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (I.iv.90).

Background

Hamlet is based on a Norse legend composed by Saxo Grammaticus in Latin around 1200 AD. The sixteen books that comprise Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, or *History of the Danes*, tell of the rise and fall of the great rulers of Denmark, and the tale of Amleth, Saxo's Hamlet, is recounted in books three and four. In Saxo's version, King Rorik of the Danes places his trust in two brothers, Orvendil and Fengi. The brothers are appointed to rule over Jutland, and Orvendil weds the king's beautiful daughter, Geruth. They have a son, Amleth. But Fengi, lusting after Orvendil's new bride and longing to become the sole ruler of Jutland, kills his brother, marries Geruth, and declares himself king over the land. Amleth is desperately afraid, and feigns madness to keep from getting murdered. He plans revenge against his uncle and becomes the new and rightful king of Jutland. Saxo's story was first printed in Paris in 1514, and Francois de Belleforest translated it into French in 1570, as part of his collection of tragic legends, *Histoires Tragiques*. Saxo's text did not appear in English until 1608, so either Shakespeare was fluent in French or he used another English source based on the French translation. Generally, it is accepted that Shakespeare used the earlier play based on this Norse legend by Thomas Kyd, called the Ur-Hamlet. There is no surviving copy of the Ur-Hamlet and the only information known about the play is that it was performed on the London stage; that it was a tragedy; that there was a character in the play named Hamlet; and a ghost who cried "Hamlet, revenge!" [Shakespeare wrote the play we know as *Hamlet* between 1598 and 1602.] Mabillard, Amanda. *An Analysis of Shakespeare's Sources for Hamlet*. Shakespeare Online. 2000. (30 October 2006)
< <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/playanalysis/hamletsources.html> >.

Notes/Informal Journal

As we read and study Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, take notes and comment on the following issues from the play. These comments will help you to focus on important ideas in Shakespeare's longest play and will form the basis of class discussions.

1. Consider the motifs of revenge, mortality, appearance vs. reality, corruption, madness, and doubt. What does the play say about these issues?
2. Consider the following elements of the play. If you are unfamiliar with one or more of them, look them up.
 - a) **Setting:** What is the setting for the scene? Think about how it establishes the tone for the scene.
 - b) **Principal Players/Characters:** Who are they, and what is their interaction about?
 - c) **Events and Conflicts:** What are they?
 - d) **Patterns:** What patterns do you notice? Is there a recurring event, literary device, motif, etc. repeated?
 - e) **Images/Symbols:** What images dominate the scene? What might they foreshadow? symbolize? etc.
 - f) **Diction** – List any words that have significant meaning or are worthy of defining here. Be sure to define them, not by their 21st century meaning, but by their 17th century one.
 - g) **Significant/Memorable Quote** – provide the citation (H II.ii.2). Choose at least one quote that encapsulates the whole scene. Make sure to provide an explanation of its significance.
 - h) **Other items worthy of note** (i.e. allusions, irony, soliloquies and what they reveal about characters, comic relief, foreshadowing and suspense, tragic elements of play and hero, pathetic fallacies, parallels...)
3. Interpretations of Hamlet's character as one or several of the following:
 - a) **victim of external difficulties:** he cannot accomplish the revenge urged on him by the ghost because Claudius was surrounded by "bodyguards"
 - b) **dreamer:** this theory, particular to the 18th and early 19th century Romantics, was first proposed by Goethe. As a dreamer, Hamlet would have been incapable of positive action.
 - c) **melancholic:** In Elizabethan times, melancholia was recognized as a disease. The melancholic man would dwell on his difficulties, could move from the "antic" to the melancholic frame of mind on a moment's notice and could become maniacal, reacting impulsively and violently. In this interpretation, Hamlet's actions follow the pattern of disease.
 - d) **Oedipal Son:** The neo-Freudian approach – a son's unhealthy attachment for his mother.
 - e) **ambitious prince:** all actions are committed in order to make possible his own advancement to the throne.
 - f) **revenger:** Hamlet is to be the scourge as the revenger, taking restitution for the murder of the king. His tragedy lies in the moral danger evoked by revenge – in Elizabethan tradition the revenger was himself condemned and thus Hamlet puts himself in danger of his soul by constituting himself the avenger. He involved himself in a basic conflict between the tribal ethic of "an eye for an eye" and Christian ethics.
 - g) **lover:** Hamlet rejects Ophelia, rejecting the brutal side of his world – if he marries, she will bear children into what he regards as a diseased society. Better for her to enter a nunnery and remain chaste. Conversely, Hamlet also sees Ophelia as part of the baseness of court; Polonius has deliberately set Ophelia to entrap Hamlet. When Hamlet uses the word "nunnery," he was using a word with dual meaning to Elizabethans – nunnery also meant a brothel, and Ophelia, sent by Polonius, is, in this sense, viewed as a seductress.
 - h) **Renaissance man; the man of reason set against a more primitive society:** Hamlet embodies the modern man of the High Renaissance, who believed in the discourse of reason and that the body was animated by the soul. Shakespeare gives Hamlet a humanist cast of mind, and intellectualizes his character. Rather than pursuing the revenge, Hamlet constantly asks questions and searches for the "mysteries of our being." He delays reason because he sees reason rising above primitive brutality and because he sees only too clearly that the avenger commits his own evil deed, thus lowering him to the level of the beast in man, which he despises. Hamlet's view of the Court of Denmark is of a place where the primitive passion of man reigns. Upon returning from his studies at Wittenberg, he finds himself enmeshed in a society that is founded not upon reason, but upon barbarity. He is called upon to commit an act of tribal justice, understandable in a primitive society, but abhorrent in the civilized society in which he has lived. He delays this act because he does not wish to fulfill what he sees as an evil deed committed within a society alien to all that he believes. The "rotten" state of Denmark is diseased to its core, controlled by the beast within man.
 - i) **Hamlet misled by the ghost:** Hamlet is not called upon to execute public justice, but to commit private revenge, thus placing himself outside the pale of Christian law. Hamlet's conscience restrains him from committing what is actually murder, thus delaying the killing of the

king. Shakespeare's contemporaries, especially James I, believed implicitly in ghosts. In their terms, a ghost could be an hallucination, a spirit returned to perform a deed left undone in life, a specter portending some momentous event, a spirit returned from the grave or from purgatory by divine permission, or the devil masquerading as a dead person. If Hamlet is misled by the ghost, it follows that the ghost is thus a "spirit damn'd." (Alliance Theatre Company. *Hamlet Study Guide*.)

4. Consider how the play addresses the following contemporary issues: family relationships, unrequited love, friendship (true and false), political corruption, ambition, hypocrisy, revenge, parents' treatment of children, and questions of suicide and mortality.

As you read, keep in mind some of the questions audiences and critics have asked about Hamlet and his role in the play:

- ❖ How trustworthy is the ghost? Is the ghost of Hamlet's father, who spurs Hamlet on to revenge, a good or an evil spirit? Is he a "spirit of health or goblin damned"? Hamlet concludes that he is seeing and talking to an "honest ghost," and he reluctantly responds to the ghost's call for vengeance. But at least one modern critic has argued that, according to the spirit lore of Shakespeare's time, the ghost must have been an evil spirit, luring Hamlet on to damnation.
- ❖ What explains the delay? Why does it take Hamlet so long to accomplish his revenge, his "almost blunted purpose"? Are some of the reasons Hamlet gives for delaying his revenge merely pretexts? Is he temperamentally averse to decisive action? Is he too much of an intellectual, forever debating, forever finding scruples and complications? Does he suffer from paralysis of the will, as the Romantic critics claimed?
- ❖ What are the true sources of Hamlet's melancholy? Is he melancholy by temperament, illustrating one of the character types of the psychology of Shakespeare's time? (According to the psychology of "humors," excess of one such humor or bodily fluid would tilt a person toward melancholy, chronic anger, or cheerfulness.)
- ❖ How mad is Hamlet? He feigns madness to gain time to prepare his revenge. How close is the turmoil in his soul to driving him truly mad – instead of his just pretending to be insane to disorient the king?
- ❖ What is Hamlet's true relationship with his mother? Why is he so obsessed with lurid images of physical intimacy between her and the uncle? What evidence is there for or against his having Oedipal feelings toward his mother?

Shakespeare and the Modern Reader

The language of Shakespeare's times was in transition from medieval English (or Middle English) to modern speech:

- There still were special pronouns (and matching verb forms) for talking to one rather than several persons: *thou art, thou wilt, thou cast*; and also *may it please thee* and *take what is thine*. (Use of this familiar *thou* instead of the more formal *you* corresponded roughly to being on a first-name basis.) *Methinks* and *methought* were still used for *I think* and *I thought*. Many of our modern auxiliaries or helping verbs are still missing: *Ride you tonight?* for *do you ride?* and *prepare we* for *let us prepare*.
- Word order often differs from ours: "We will *our kingdom* give" has become "We will give *our kingdom*" in modern English. "Hamlet, thou hast *thy father* much offended" today would be "Hamlet, you have much offended *your father*." (Objects now generally follow the complete verb.)
- Listeners and readers soon get used to frequently used words like *prithiee* (please), *forsooth* (in truth), *anon* (presently, very soon), *ought* (anything), *ere* (before). *Would* is often used in the sense of *wish* or *want* (*Would it were true* for *I wish it were true*).

Discovering Literature: Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. Hans P. Guth and Gabriele L. Rico eds. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993.

Revenge Tragedy

The revenge tragedy is a form of tragedy made popular on the Elizabethan stage by Thomas Kyd, whose *Spanish Tragedy* is an early example of this type.

Theme of the revenge tragedy: revenge of son for father or vice versa, wherein the revenger ultimately commits suicide.

Revenge is directed by the ghost of the murdered man. The revenger pretends to be insane at least part of the time. The revenger also dies, no matter how good a person he is or how just his cause might be.

Other traits: hesitation of the hero, use of real or pretended insanity, suicide, intrigue, a scheming villain (who is, nevertheless, quite able), philosophic soliloquies, sensational use of horrors (murders on stage, exhibition of dead bodies, etc.).

In the dynamics of the revenge, we experience:

1. the offense (with addition of insult)
2. the antagonist (a person of formidable, but still vulnerable force)
3. outlining of strategy (on both protagonist's and antagonist's part)
4. a series of delays, obstacles, mistakes (anything to retard momentum)
5. an unforeseen development foiling theme

6. the showdown, with revenge carried out (usually in the form of a catastrophe)

The traditional five-act structure for the tragedy is hard to adhere to:

- I. Act of Exposition
- II. Act of Rising Action
- III. Act of Climax
- IV. Act of Falling Action
- V. Act of Catastrophe