

**THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET:
PRINCE OF DENMARK. EDITED
WITH NOTES, AN INTRODUCTION
AND OUTLINE QUESTIONS**

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INTRODUCTION

THE play of *Hamlet*, in its accepted form, was first published in 1604. Shakespeare was then forty years old, and had lived in London, it is supposed, since 1586. During these eighteen years he seems to have been absorbed in the practical demands of theatrical life, and to have been essentially denied the literary means of enlarging his preparation for the playwright's work. That he was able thus to produce in *Hamlet* one of the most remarkable examples of secular literature in the world sufficiently proves the genius of the man. Other plays of Shakespeare are more finished, or evince a nobler art; but none has aroused such interest, or become the subject of so much study, and comment, and discussion.

The groundwork of *Hamlet* is borrowed from the account of King Amleth in the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus, the earliest chronicler of Denmark, who died in 1204. It is not clear how Shakespeare became acquainted with the story. There are

reasons for supposing that the general plot had been treated by some one of the playwrights preceding Shakespeare, and that the present play is the product of a reworking. It is possible, nevertheless, that Shakespeare was the first to use the legend. The part of the Saxo chronicles dealing with Amleth was translated and included in the *Histoires Tragiques* of Belleforest, published at Paris in 1570, and this in turn was rendered into English, under the title of *The Historie of Hamblet*, probably early enough for Shakespeare to use; that is, before 1589. Reference to a play of "Hamlet," or at least to a character so named, is found in Greene's *Menaphon*, which was registered for publication in August of that year. The dramatist Nash makes the allusion, while paying his respects to certain "trivial translators," who were abandoning the standard Latin plays for Italian models, in a sort of introduction that he furnishes for this work. "It is a common practise now a daies," he says, "amongst a sort of shifting companions, that ruane through euery arte and thriue by none, to leaue the trade of *Nouerint* [or lawyer] whereto they were borne, and busie themselves with the induors of Art, that could scarcelie latinize their necke-verse if they should haue neede; yet English *Seneca* read by candle

light yeeldes manie good sentences, as *Bloud is a begger*, and so foorth: and if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, he will affoord you whole *Hamlets*, I should say handfulls of tragical speeches."

There was then a "Hamlet" of some sort in existence as early as 1589, and of such a sort as to have become a matter of popular or general remark. Yet it is far from probable that such a drama was the work of Shakespeare; it is too early. He may have begun to recast plays, but probably not to produce them unassisted. But it appears that the piece, whatever its quality, was played by the company of actors that Shakespeare had joined; as an entry in Henslowe's *Diary* (p. 35, Shakespeare Society edition) conveniently proves:—

In the name of God Amen, beginnunge at Newington, my Lord Admeralle and my Lorde chamberlen men, as foloweth. 1594:—

3 of June 1594, Rd at Heaster and asheweros .	viijs
4 of June 1594, Rd at the Jewe of malta . . .	xs
5 of June 1594, Rd at andronicous	xijs
6 of June 1594, Rd at cutlacke	xjs
8 of June 1594, ne Rd at bellendon	xvijs
9 of June 1594, Rd at hamlet	viijs

Shakespeare's company, called at this time the Lord Chamberlain's Players, were evidently playing along with the Lord Admiral's company at the Newington theatre. Henslowe's share of the receipts from *Hamlet* was as little as from the rendition of *Esther and Ahasuerus*, and less than from the *Cutlack* and the *Bellendon*, which were undoubtedly very poor affairs. We can hardly conceive then that the play is Shakespeare's. It would surely rank in popularity as at least the equal of *Titus Andronicus*, which we learn, by turning back the leaf in Henslowe, was a new play — being marked *ne*, like *Bellendon* in the list above — on January 23 of the year before, and was rendered again on the 28th, and yet again on February 6. It is not likely that this play is the *Titus Andronicus*, ascribed to Shakespeare, that we know.

A further hint that the play in question is not the *Hamlet* of this volume is found in Lodge's pamphlet, *Wits miserie, and the Worlds madnesse, discovering the Devils incarnat of this Age*, which dates from 1596. One of these devils, the Hate-virtue, is described as "a foule lubber, and looks as pale as the visard of ye ghost, which cried so miserally at ye theator, like an oisterwife, *Hamlet reuenge*." As no such expression occurs in the present play, it would

seem to have belonged to the Ghost's part in the former piece, and to have been made much of sensationally by the playgoers, since several allusions to it are met with in the literature of the time. The lines most nearly akin (I. v. 25, 91) in the present text — "Revenge his most foul and unnatural murder," and "Adieu, adieu! Hamlet, remember me" — cannot, with their lighter elocution, be identified with such a phrase.

The play that Shakespeare constructed out of this earlier drama, or perhaps wrote at first hand from the *Hystorie*, can hardly have taken shape before the spring or summer of 1602. In July of this year James Roberts secured an entry in the Stationers' Register for "A booke called *the Revenge of HAMLETT Prince Denmarke as yt was lately Acted by the lord Chamberleyne his seruantes.*" It does not appear that any book thus styled was ever printed. It is believed that the work intended was issued the year following with this title, "THE Tragicall Historie of HAMLET *Prince of Denmarke* By William Shakespeare. As it hath bene diuerse times acted by his Highnesse seruants in the Cittie of London: as also in the two Vniuersities of Cambridge and Oxford, and else-where." This is known as the First Quarto. The

text thus published is identical with the eventual play in many passages, but in others seems wholly at war with Shakespeare's characteristic diction and manner. Opening at random we find, —

“Yea, murder in the highest degree,
As in the least tis bad,
But mine most foule, beastly and vnnaturall,” —

answering (I. v. 27, 28) to these words of the Ghost to Hamlet: —

“Murder most foul, as in the best it is,
But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.”

Again, instead (V. i. 279–281 and 284–294) of

“I lov'd Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?
'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do.
Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast? Woo't
tear thyself?
Woo't drink up eisel, eat a crocodile?
I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine?
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I,
And, if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,

Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
 Make Ossa like a wart! Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
 I'll rant as well as thou."

we have these halting and pitiable lines,—

"I lou'de *Ophelia* as deare as twenty brothers could:
 Shew me what thou wilt doe for her:
 Wilt fight, wilt fast, wilt pray,
 Wilt drinke up vessels, eate a crocadile? Ile doot:
 Com'st thou here to whine?
 And where thou talk'st of burying thee a line,
 Here let vs stand: and let them throw on vs,
 Whole hills of earth, till with the heighth thereof,
 Make Oosell as a Wart."

There is little hint of Shakespeare's power and skill in evidence here. "Oosell," of the last line, which does not look like a printer's blunder, suggests the effort of an insufficient mind to report something that has been heard, but not understood. There are other passages much more distantly akin to the eventual readings, and sometimes hardly to be accepted as better than a travesty of their sense. Hence it has been supposed that the text in question was obtained surreptitiously, perhaps by copying and memorizing the parts as heard from the lips of the actors in the playhouse. The lines often seem made up from catch-