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**Shakespeare's Sources for *Hamlet***

*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*. An English translation of Belleforest's text appeared in 1608 called *The Hystorie of Hamblet*, so either Shakespeare was fluent in French or he used another source, because he wrote *Hamlet* in 1600. Many scholars believe a translated copy of Belleforest existed well before 1608 but there is no proof to support this claim. It is more likely that the *The Hystorie of Hamblet* is based on Shakespeare's play, not the other way around. For more on this topic, please see the comments of critic Karl Elze in “Theories on *The Hystorie of Hamblet*.”

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!"

**Introduction to *Hamlet***

*Hamlet*, the first in Shakespeare's series of great tragedies, was initially classified as a problem play when the term became fashionable in the nineteenth century. Like Shakespeare's other problem plays -- *All's Well that End's Well*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure* -- *Hamlet* focuses on the complications arising from love, death, and betrayal, without offering the audience a decisive and positive resolution to these complications. This is due in part to the simple fact that for Hamlet, there can be no definitive answers to life's most daunting questions. Indeed, Hamlet's world is one of perpetual ambiguity.

Although those around him can and do act upon their thoughts, Hamlet is stifled by his consuming insecurities. From the moment Hamlet confronts the spirit of his father, and consistently throughout the play from that point on, what he is sure of in one scene he doubts in the next. Hamlet knows that it is the spirit of his father on the castle wall, and he understands fully its unmistakable cry for revenge. But, when he is alone, Hamlet rejects what he has witnessed in a maelstrom of doubt and fear:

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil; and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness, and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. (2.2.600-05.)

The emphasis on ambiguity in the play, and the absence of overt instruction on how to overcome such ambiguity is Shakespeare's testament to real life. Each one of us has experienced Hamlet's struggle to find the truth in a mire of delusion and uncertainty, often to no avail. As Kenneth Muir points out in *Shakespeare and the Tragic Pattern*:

[Hamlet] has to work out his own salvation in fear and trembling; he has to make a moral decision, in a complex situation where he cannot rely on cut-and-dried moral principles, or on the conventional code of the society in which he lives; and on his choice depend the fate of the people he loves and the fate of the kingdom to which he is the rightful heir. (154)

*Hamlet* also can be sub-categorized as a revenge play, the genre popular in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Elements common to all revenge tragedy include: **1)** a hero who must avenge an evil deed, often encouraged by the apparition of a close friend or relative; **2)** scenes of death and mutilation; **3)** insanity or feigned insanity; **4)** sub-plays; and **5)** the violent death of the hero. Seneca, the Roman poet and philosopher, is accepted to be the father of such revenge tragedy, and a tremendous influence on Shakespeare. Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, written in 1592, is credited with reviving the Senecan revenge drama as well as spawning many other plays, such as Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the *Ur-Hamlet* (see the sources section), and Shakespeare's own *Titus Andronicus*, in addition to *Hamlet*.

***Hamlet* as a Revenge Tragedy**

Most revenge tragedies share some basic elements: a play within a play, mad scenes, a vengeful ghost, one or several gory scenes, and, most importantly, a central character who has a serious grievance against a formidable opponent. This central character takes matters into his own hands and seeks revenge privately, after justice has failed him in the public arena. It should be noted that Hamlet is the only protagonist in any Elizabethan revenge play who can be considered a hero, aware of the moral implications involved in exacting his revenge.

**Characters Involved in the Revenge Plot of *Hamlet***

Hamlet
Ghost
Claudius
Gertrude
Polonius
Laertes
Horatio

**Key Revenge Plot Events**

1. The ghost of Hamlet’s father appears to Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo. Horatio begs the apparition to speak (1.1.127), but it refuses. Horatio reports the encounter to Hamlet.

2. The Ghost appears to Hamlet and they leave to speak in private (1.4.86).

3. The Ghost reveals that he is, in fact, the ghost of Hamlet’s father. **The revenge plot is established with the Ghost’s utterance, "So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear" (1.5.7)**. He tells Hamlet that he was poisoned by his brother Claudius as he slept in his orchard and, if Hamlet is not already feeling the desire, the Ghost makes plain the demand: "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (25).

4. To be certain of Claudius's guilt, Hamlet decides to re-enact the murder of his father with the production of *The Murder of Gonzago (*known also as *the play within the play* or *The Mousetrap*). If Claudius is disturbed by the play it will reveal his guilt. In Hamlet's words:
The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king (2.2.606-07).

5. Hamlet stages *The Murder of Gonzago* and Hamlet and Horatio agree that the agitated Claudius has behaved like a guilty man during the production (3.2.284).

6. Hamlet has an opportunity to kill the unattended Claudius in his chamber, but, after soliloquizing on the matter, he decides not to take action because Claudius is praying. Killing Claudius in prayer would not really be revenge because he would go to heaven, "fit and season’d for his passage" (3.3.86).

7. Hamlet kills Polonius, mistaking him for Claudius as he hides behind a curtain. (3.4.22)

8. The Ghost appears again to Hamlet. He is angry because Claudius is still alive. He tells Hamlet he has returned to "whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.111).

9. Claudius banishes Hamlet to England for the murder of Polonius (4.3.46). He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet’s actions (55) and makes plans to have Hamlet assassinated on English soil.

10. Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet reporting that he is returning to Denmark, thanks to pirates who had captured his boat and released him on the promise of future reward (4.6.11).

11. Claudius hears of Hamlet's return and he conspires with Laertes, Polonius's son, to murder Hamlet. Laertes will use a poison-tipped sword during a fight with Hamlet, and Claudius will have a poisoned drink at the ready (4.7.126-161).

12. Hamlet stabs Claudius (5.2.311) and forces him to drink the poisoned wine (316). **The revenge plot is thus concluded**. Hamlet himself then dies from the wound received during the fight with Laertes (348).