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SHAKESPEARE

HAMLET



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HAMLET

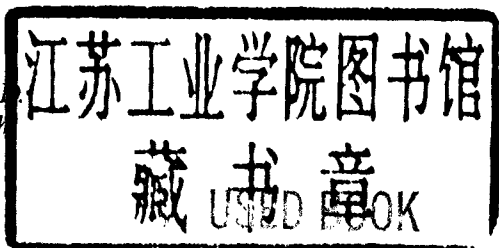
NOTES

including

- *Date of Composition*
- *The Texts*
- *The Source*
- *An Introduction to Interpretations*
- *Summaries and Commentaries*
- *Review Questions*
- *Selected Bibliography*

by

James K. Lowers, Ph.D.
Department of English
University of Hawaii



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Editor

*Gary Carey, M.A.
University of Colorado*

Consulting Editor

*James L. Roberts, Ph.D.
Department of English
University of Nebraska*

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Hamlet Notes

DATE OF COMPOSITION

An entry in the Stationers' Register (in which were recorded works authorized for publication in accordance with the royal charter granted to printers) under the date July 26, 1602, reads: "A booke called the Revenge of Hamlett Prince Denmarke as yt was latelie Acted by the Lord Chamberleyne his servantès." Although some scholars are content to accept the year 1602 as the date of composition, the consensus is that it had been composed earlier. A few would push the date back to 1598, since Gabriel Harvey, one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, made reference to *Hamlet* in a note which he wrote in his copy of Speght's *Chaucer* (1598). Certainly Shakespeare's play could not have been known before that year because it is not included among the plays listed by Francis Meres in *Palladis Tamia*, which also was published in 1598. But it does not necessarily follow that Harvey wrote his interesting note in the year in which Speght's *Chaucer* was published. Most students of Shakespeare accept late 1600 or early 1601 as the date of publication.

By the year 1601, Shakespeare had written no less than ten comedies, nine chronicle histories, and three tragedies other than *Hamlet*. But it is *The Tragedy of Hamlet* which marks the beginning of the playwright's great period of composition. *Hamlet* itself belongs with *Othello* (1604), *King Lear* (1605/6), and *Macbeth* (1606) as one of the greatest tragedies in world literature. Many informed students of Shakespeare insist that it is his greatest play.

THE TEXTS

Sound commentary on *Hamlet*, scene by scene, calls for some knowledge of the first three published versions of the play; two of these appeared during his lifetime and the third appeared seven years after his death. In 1603 the First Quarto, unauthorized by the author or his company, was published. The title read: "The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmark by William Shakespeare. As it hath been diverse times acted by his Highnesse servants in the Cittie of London: as also in the two Vniuersities of Cambridge and Oxford." There are two points of immediate interest here: (1) the Lord Chamberlain's

Company, of which Shakespeare was a member, had become the King's Servants upon the ascension of James I; (2) *The Tragedy of Hamlet* apparently had an intellectual appeal from the start, as the performances at the universities indicate.

The First Quarto is a quite garbled version of Shakespeare's tragedy, although it contains some 240 lines not found in the next version of the play. This earlier printed version just possibly represents *Hamlet* in a transitional stage of composition, but it is practically worthless as a text.

In 1604 the Second Quarto edition of *Hamlet* was published. It is this text, with certain minor additions and corrections, which is generally acknowledged to be Shakespeare's definitive version. Further, it is the Second Quarto which, according to eminent scholars, served as the source for the version included in the First Folio (1623), the latter being essentially an acting version necessarily cut by more than 200 lines, although some new passages were added. Good modern texts of *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, therefore, depend overwhelmingly on the Second Quarto.

THE SOURCE

Sound commentary on this tragedy also calls for a knowledge of the sources available to Shakespeare when he decided to dramatize the story of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Time and again, critics have turned to an earlier version or versions in their efforts to find answers to questions which inevitably arise. Moreover, knowledge of earlier versions makes possible a surer appreciation of Shakespeare's accomplishment.

The story of Hamlet goes far back in Scandinavian legend, in this respect bearing comparison with the Anglo-Saxon account of Beowulf. The earliest surviving literary tale of Hamlet is found in Saxo Grammaticus' *Historia Danica* (c. 1200). For his *Histoires Tragiques* (1576), a widely popular collection of tales in French, Francois de Belleforest adopted it, with basic themes, prototypes of characters, and story elements later to be found in Shakespeare's play. These include adultery, fratricide, revenge, assumed madness, and the villain's use of spies and especially of the girl loved by the hero. Nevertheless, the differences between Belleforest's version and Shakespeare's are great and significant. The chief ones in the former are as follows:

1. The action takes place in pre-Christian times, and the standards of morality and conduct differ accordingly.

2. The slaying of King Hamlet is public knowledge, although the usurping murderer succeeds in convincing the public that he acted only in defense of the Queen.
3. Hamlet is depicted as a defenseless youth who pretends to be mad in order to protect himself.
4. Although Hamlet is dedicated to truth, he emerges as being vindictively cruel.
5. As in Saxo Grammaticus, Hamlet's manifestations of madness take rather absurd forms, a notable example being his crowing like a cock and flailing his arms.
6. The Queen sincerely repents, and Hamlet tells her that he plans to kill her villainous husband.
7. Hamlet marries the daughter of the King of Britain and remains in England for a full year.
8. Hamlet returns to Denmark just as his uncle is celebrating the young Prince's own death.
9. Hamlet succeeds in getting all the courtiers drunk and then sets fire to the palace and kills the King.

If this were the only version of the Hamlet story available to Shakespeare, critics would have no more difficulty as regards source than they have in dealing with *Othello*, the source for which is just one story. But there was written and performed in England an earlier Hamlet play, usually referred to as the *Ur-Hamlet*, which unfortunately has not survived in manuscript or print.

The *Ur-Hamlet* dates before 1589, for in that year Thomas Nashe made a reference to it. The general opinion is that the *Ur-Hamlet* was the work of Thomas Kyd, best known for the widely popular *The Spanish Tragedy* (printed in 1594), a tragedy replete with a ghost and sensational incidents, in which a father takes vengeance on his son's murderer. A diary entry made by Philip Henslowe, an Elizabethan theatrical manager, tells us that this *Hamlet* was acted on June 11, 1594, by members of the Lord Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the latter being the group of which Shakespeare was a member. A third reference is found in Thomas Lodge's *Wit's Misery* (1596).

What conclusions are to be made from all this? First, when Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first presented, the audience was already familiar with a Hamlet story, one in which revenge is the dominant theme. Second, since the *Ur-Hamlet* apparently belonged to the popular Senecan tradition of the Elizabethan stage and has been generally attributed to Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, which survives, must be a prototype. In that play are found the pagan revengeful ghost, the protagonist's

unceasing efforts to attain vengeance, his intermittent madness, and extreme sensationalism. Kyd properly is credited with dramatic skill in plot construction, for he carefully provides motivation and suspense before moving to the catastrophe, or resolution. What especially is missing is the intellectual probing, the apparently studied ambiguity, the complexity of character portrayal, the superior poetry—all of which are to be found in Shakespeare's play. One may assume that the popular *Ur-Hamlet* sufficed insofar as melodrama is concerned; Shakespeare had to transcend the melodramatic, imbuing the material with new significance and interest without sacrificing the sheer excitement of the action.

THE PLAY: AN INTRODUCTION TO INTERPRETATIONS

Although many students of Shakespeare believe that *Hamlet*, among all the plays in the Shakespearean canon, best reflects the universality of the poet-dramatist's genius, it remains an enigmatical work, what has been called a "grand poetical puzzle." No artist can control the use to which his insights are put by posterity, and this dictum is especially true of Shakespeare, whose Hamlet has caused more discussion than any other character in fiction, dramatic or non-dramatic.

Many readers have been disturbed by what has been called the "two Hamlets in the play": one, the sensitive young intellectual and idealist, the "sweet prince" who expresses himself in unforgettable poetry and who is dedicated to truth; the other, a barbaric Hamlet who treats Ophelia so cruelly, who slays Polonius and then speaks of lugging the guts into another room, and who callously reports sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. It has been argued that Shakespeare transmuted an old play without reconstructing it in response to audiences who would not have tolerated excisions (J. M. Robertson, "*Hamlet*" *Once More*, London, 1923).

Most commentators cannot accept this argument. For one thing, audiences and readers find themselves very sympathetic to Hamlet—some even to the extent of identifying with him. But if there are those who create Hamlet in their own images, fortunately others have sought to find the key to his character through intensive study of Renaissance thought. Yet no answer that satisfies all, or even most, has been found. In the words of a competent Shakespearean critic of the last century, H. N. Hudson, "It is easy to invent with plausibility almost any theory respecting [Hamlet], but very hard to make any theory comprehend the whole subject" (Introduction to *Hamlet*, 1870). Some familiarity with

leading theories regarding the tragic hero is necessary if the commentaries provided scene by scene in these Notes are to prove most useful.

Most interpreters of *Hamlet* start with the assumption that the tragic hero has a clear and sacred obligation to kill Claudius and to do so without delay. The basic question, then, is why does so much time elapse before the young Prince sweeps to his revenge? It is argued that, if Hamlet had substituted prompt action for the considerable verbalism in which he repeatedly berates himself for procrastination, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Laertes, and—most important—Hamlet himself would have survived. But then Shakespeare would not have achieved tragedy and the resulting work would have been no more than a potboiler. There must be found some effective explanation for Hamlet's long delay.

HAMLET, THE VICTIM OF EXTERNAL DIFFICULTIES

Before one turns to the more elaborate and better-known theories, it is desirable to notice one that provides a simple answer: as is true in Belleforest's prose version of the story, the Hamlet of Shakespeare's play faces external difficulties which make immediate, positive action impossible. Claudius was too powerful and only once before the final scene placed himself in a defenseless position. Moreover, had the Prince been able to carry out the Ghost's injunction of immediate revenge, he would have placed himself in an especially difficult position. How could he have convinced the people that he justifiably had executed revenge? To be sure, this theory leaves many questions unanswered. But, as will be true with reference to other theories, no rebuttal is required here and now.

HAMLET, THE SENTIMENTAL DREAMER

Leading Romantic critics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw Hamlet as a young man, attractive and gifted in many ways, but incapable of positive action. For them, "the native hue of resolution/Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," to use Hamlet's own words (III.i.84-85). One would have little difficulty in finding several passages in the play which seem to support such an interpretation. These will be noted in the commentaries.

Goethe is to be credited with first providing in detail this basically sentimental interpretation. His Hamlet is a young man of "lovely, pure,

and moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero." In brief, Goethe's Prince of Denmark is an impractical dreamer. Some thirty years later, A. W. Schlegel, Goethe's compatriot, arrived at the same conclusion. His Hamlet has "no firm belief either in himself or in anything else. . . . in the resolutions which he so often embraces and always leaves unexecuted, his weakness is too apparent. . . . his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want of determination. . . ." (*Dramatic Art and Literature*, 1810).

Leading English Romantics arrived at the same conclusion. Coleridge's well-known remarks on the character of Hamlet have been most influential. For him, the Prince of Denmark suffers from an "overbalance of the contemplative faculty" and, like any man, "thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation and loses his power to action" (*Notes and Lectures on Shakespeare*, 1808). And William Hazlitt continues: "At other times, when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided, and sceptical, dallies with his purposes, till the occasion is lost, and finds out some pretense to relapse into indolence and thoughtfulness again" (*Characters in Shakespeare's Plays*, 1818).

That this Romantic view of Hamlet has survived into the twentieth century is only too evident. The late Arthur Quiller-Couch stated: "Hamlet's character is the prevalence of the abstracting and generalizing habit over the practical. . . . He is full of purpose, but void of that quality of mind which accomplishes purpose" (*Shakespeare's Workmanship*, 1931).

HAMLET, THE VICTIM OF EXCESSIVE MELANCHOLY

Traditionally, Hamlet has been called the Melancholy Dane, and quite appropriately. His first lines in Act I, Scene ii, wherein he first appears, and certainly his first long soliloquy establish him as grief-stricken. Moreover, Hamlet himself refers to melancholy in a way which suggests that it is a debilitating factor. Ordinary grief, of course, is one thing; everyone experiences it. But Hamlet's grief, it is argued, is pathological; it is a destructive thing which causes him to procrastinate and leads to his death. Actually, this theory dates from the eighteenth century. Among later critics who have accepted it is A. C. Bradley, whose still widely influential Oxford lectures on Shakespeare's tragedies were first published in 1904. In a definite way his work represents the keystone in the arch of Romantic criticism because he treats Hamlet not as *dramatis persona*, not as an artistic representation which stops just where the author chooses, but as a living human being. Again like the early nineteenth-century Romantics, Bradley found Hamlet to be

irresolute. He makes reference to what he calls Hamlet's "otiose thinking which hardly deserves the name of thought, an unconscious weaving of pretexts for inaction." At the root of this, Bradley finds melancholy which was "increased by deepening self-contempt."

Melancholy has been called the "Elizabethan malady." It was recognized as a disease and was the subject of treatises published in England and on the Continent. At the time Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, Timothy Bright's *A Treatise of Melancholie*, first published in 1586, was well known. In an age when the proper study of mankind was man, it seems improbable that a writer like Shakespeare, with his manifest intellectual curiosity and acquisitive mind, was unfamiliar with contemporary ideas regarding the causes, symptoms, and results of melancholy. Indeed, melancholy characters of one kind or another appeared rather often in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. Hamlet, inevitably, has been classified as the intellectual melancholy type. The disease which afflicts him is the most destructive kind, namely, melancholy adust. When Hamlet speaks of "my weakness and my melancholy" (II.ii.630), for example; when he speaks "wild and whirling words" (I.v.133); when his mood shifts from deep depression to elation, he is following the pattern of behavior peculiar to the melancholic as described by Bright and other writers on the subject. So goes the argument.

HAMLET, THE VICTIM OF THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

The Freudian, or neo-Freudian, interpretation of *Hamlet* appeals to many people today. The first and most elaborate presentation of this theory was made by Dr. Ernest Jones, disciple and biographer of Sigmund Freud, as early as 1910 and received full expression in *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York, 1949). Concisely stated, the Freudian interpreters fervently believe that the Prince of Denmark suffered from the Oedipus complex—an undue and unhealthy attachment of a son for his mother which is apt to be morbidly suppressed and cause great mental distress. To quote Mr. Harry Levin, this ingenious theory "motivates Hamlet's delay by identifying him with Claudius, through whom he has vicariously accomplished the Oedipal feat of murdering his father and marrying his mother" (*The Question of Hamlet*, New York, p. 56). Mr. Levin rejects this theory.

HAMLET, MOTIVATED BY AMBITION

A few commentators see *The Tragedy of Hamlet* as one of the Elizabethan ambition plays. For them, the primary reason for Hamlet's

desire to kill his uncle is not to avenge his father's "foul and most unnatural murder," but rather to make possible his own advancement to the throne. The delays and inner conflicts are the result of his awareness that personal ambition and pride, not sacred duty, motivate him. Once more it is possible to cite lines from the text which, if taken out of context, lend support to this theory.

HAMLET, MISLED BY THE GHOST

Not all critics agree that the Ghost of Hamlet's father is an "honest ghost" or that Hamlet himself has a solemn duty to slay Claudius. This, of course, is to deny the widely held assumption that the Prince was called upon to execute public justice—that he functions as God's minister, not as scourge who, though he may be the instrument of divine vengeance, is himself a grievous sinner and must suffer for his sins. For these critics, Shakespeare depicts a tragic hero who should not take vengeance into his own hands: not only Gertrude—but also Claudius—should be left to heaven.

To do full justice to the immediate subject, one should investigate in depth Renaissance theories of revenge. For the immediate purpose, let it be noted that Hamlet has been said to have been misled by the Ghost, the test of whose honesty is not the establishment of Claudius' guilt but rather the nature of its injunction. It is argued that the Prince is called upon to execute *private* vengeance, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, contrary to all Christian teaching. His problem, then, is that of a man who believes in heaven and hell and whose reason tells him that the man who defies divine ordinance ultimately must face judgment. It follows that Shakespeare portrays a tragic hero who should *not* take vengeance into his own hands and a Ghost that is "a spirit damn'd." This theory has been developed brilliantly by Miss Eleanor Prosser in her well-documented study, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford University Press, 1967). Certainly there are passages in the text of the play which may be used to establish vindictiveness in Hamlet's character. Instead of seeing Hamlet as one whose propensity for thought prevents him from performing the necessary action, Miss Prosser finds him to be one whose conscience, which operates with reason, restrains him for some time from acting impulsively in response to instinct.

From this survey of better-known interpretations of *Hamlet*, two major conclusions can be made. First, Shakespeare's tragedy is a work of surpassing interest and genius, and the tragic hero is universally attractive and fascinating. Second, only the naive will start with the

assumption that there is one obvious interpretation of the play and that critics, not Shakespeare, have introduced complexities into it. It would be gratifying to be able to offer these Notes with the subtitle "The Meaning of *Hamlet*" and to present a simple, direct interpretation based upon a major generalization and to ignore passages in the play which do not fit into the argument. But such a presentation would not do justice to a great play or help the student. Therefore, when appropriate, passages which seem to lend support to a given theory will be called to the student's attention. But always one must ask himself whether or not the entire play urges the acceptance of such a theory; ultimately, major themes emerge from the entire plot, not from isolated episodes or passages.

All textual references are made to W. A. Neilson and C. J. Hill, *The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1942.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Son of the dead King Hamlet and nephew to the present ruler of Denmark; he has returned to Elsinore because of his father's death.

Claudius, King of Denmark

Hamlet's uncle who succeeded his brother to the throne and married his brother's wife.

Gertrude

Queen of Denmark and mother of Hamlet.

Polonius

Elderly Lord Chamberlain and thus chief counselor to Claudius.

Horatio

Commoner who is a fellow student and loyal friend of Hamlet.

Laertes

Polonius' son, a student at the University of Paris who, like Hamlet, has returned to Elsinore because of King Hamlet's death.

Ophelia

Obedient daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes; the young court lady who Gertrude hoped would be Hamlet's bride.

Rosencrantz }
Guildenstern } One-time schoolfellows and friends of Hamlet.

Fortinbras

Prince of Norway, a valiant young man who, like Hamlet, has lost a father.

Osric

Affected courtier who plays a minor role as the King's messenger and as umpire of the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes.

Voltimand }
Cornelius } Danish courtiers who are sent as ambassadors to the Court of Norway.

Marcellus }
Bernardo } Danish officers on guard at the castle of Elsinore.

Francisco

Danish soldier on guard duty at the castle of Elsinore.

Reynaldo

Young man whom Polonius instructs and sends to Paris to observe and report on Laertes' conduct.

The Gravediggers

Two clowns who dig Ophelia's grave, the first of whom is engaged by Hamlet in a grimly humorous conversation.

SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES

ACT I—SCENE 1

Summary

The setting is the royal castle at Elsinore. On a platform before the castle, Francisco, a soldier on guard duty, challenges Bernardo, an officer, who appears to relieve Francisco at midnight. Francisco expresses his thanks, for it is "bitter cold" and he is "sick at heart." Horatio and Marcellus, who are to join Bernardo in the watch, arrive and identify themselves as loyal Danes. "What, has this thing appear'd tonight?" asks Marcellus, and it is revealed that a strange, frightening apparition was seen during the watch on a previous occasion. Horatio, who has not seen it, has assured Marcellus that it is a hallucination but, at the officer's entreaty, has agreed to join in the watch.

As Bernardo is telling Horatio how the specter had appeared one hour after midnight, the Ghost itself enters. It is "like the King that's dead"—that is, it appears in the "fair and warlike form" of the late King Hamlet of Denmark. Marcellus urges Horatio to question it, but when Horatio charges the Ghost in heaven's name to speak, the apparition stalks away. The pale and trembling Horatio admits that it is "something more than fantasy."

In the ensuing discussion, one learns that the Ghost has appeared twice before in the same armor King Hamlet wore when he fought the ambitious old Fortinbras, King of Norway, and when he defeated the Poles. Further, in accordance with the solemn agreement made by the two contestants, King Hamlet won Norwegian territory when he defeated and slew his adversary. Now the dead king's son and namesake, young Fortinbras, has raised a force of men willing to fight only for subsistence and is determined to take back the lands his father lost. Thus the military preparations and the nightly watch at Elsinore are explained. Bernardo suggests that the Ghost's appearance may be a portent relating to the martial threat, and Horatio recalls the terrifying omens which preceded the assassination of Julius Caesar.

Again the Ghost appears, and again Horatio courageously challenges it to speak. But at the crow of a cock, it moves from one place to another and then departs. All agree that Hamlet, son of the King whose spirit they may have seen, must be told.

Commentary

First to be noted is the skill with which Shakespeare evokes a mood appropriate to this tragedy. The members of the guard appear in the

bitter cold of a northern winter night. Francisco welcomes relief, although he has been a "quiet guard." His feeling of sickness at heart suggests that neither the hour nor the weather explains his uneasiness.

"Long live the king!" exclaims Bernardo, voicing the password when he is challenged by Francisco. "What king?" one asks; and as details relating to Denmark are provided, it seems to be evident that the changing of the guard is symbolic, "a re-enactment of those dynastic changes which frame the play" (H. Levin, p. 20). Support for such a conclusion is found in Horatio's words when he first addresses the Ghost as one "that usurp'd this time of night" (46).

What of the Ghost, "this thing . . . this dreaded sight," as Marcellus calls it, which fills Horatio with "fear and wonder"? Some knowledge of Elizabethan and Jacobean ghost-lore is needed. Shakespeare may or may not have believed in ghosts; the characters in this play do, and so did most of his contemporaries, including James I. The prevailing theories were that a ghost may be (1) a hallucination, (2) a spirit returned to perform some deed left undone in life, (3) a specter seen as a portent, (4) a spirit returned from the grave or from purgatory by divine permission, or (5) a devil disguised as a dead person. In the course of the play each of these theories is put to test. Immediately the first is rejected, but much later in the play it will arise again. The educated, skeptical Horatio proves to his own satisfaction that this particular ghost is a real one, not an illusion. Appearing in "warlike form" and as the image of the late King Hamlet, the second may be applicable or, more probably, the third, since Denmark expects an attack led by the young Norwegian Prince, Fortinbras. Horatio dwells upon this latter possibility when he speaks of the portents seen just before Julius Caesar was slain in the Roman Forum.

But Horatio and members of the guard particularly fear that the Ghost is diabolical. Horatio properly is called upon to question it because he is a scholar (42), trained in Latin and knowledgeable in arcane things. Among the mortals in this scene, only he is qualified to exorcise an evil spirit. As dawn, heralded by the cock's crow, begins to break and light begins to replace darkness, the Ghost "started like a guilty thing" (148). Marcellus is reminded that, according to a tradition accepted by many, the "bird of dawning singeth all night long" during the Christmas season and then "no spirit can walk abroad" (158 ff.). Indeed this apparition may be a thing of evil.

Significantly, *The Tragedy of Hamlet* is given a Christian setting from the start. Not only is reference made to "our Saviour's birth" in Marcellus' speech, but also Horatio uses the proper Christian formula in challenging the Ghost: "By heaven I charge thee, speak!" (49)—and his words, according to Marcellus, offend the Ghost, which stalks away.