

Tikrit University

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English Department



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Drama

(The Source of Hamlet)

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The Source of Hamlet

Shakespeare's Hamlet was based on a lost play of the same title, perhaps by Shakespeare himself, perhaps by an unknown dramatist; but *The Spanish Tragedy*, one of the most popular Elizabethan plays, resembles *Hamlet* in certain events that it would appear that the source-play was written by Thomas Kyd or a close imitator of his. Both plays begin with a ghost demanding vengeance; both are concerned with the madness, real or assumed, of the avenger; both contain the death of an innocent woman; both heroes blame them-selves for their procrastination. Instead of a father seeking to avenge his murdered son, he was provided with a son seeking to avenge his murdered father.

The story given by Saxo Grammaticus and in Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* is substantially the same. The father of Amleth, a governor of Jutland (is a peninsula of Northern Europe that forms the continental portion of Denmark and part of northern Germany), to whom the King of Denmark had given his daughter, Gerutha, in marriage, 'won fame by slaying the King of Norway in single combat'. His brother, Feng, murdered him, seized his office, and married his wife, thus 'adding incest to unnatural murder'. Young Amleth determined to avenge his father, but in order to gain time and allay his uncle's suspicions, he feigned 'a foolish and grotesque madness', so that all 'he did savoured of utter lethargy'. In his mad speech he mingled craft and candour (honesty) in such a way that, though his words did not lack truth, yet there was nothing to betoken the truth and betray how far his keenness went.

Two attempts were made to break through his disguise. A beautiful woman who had been friendly with him since his childhood was instructed to seduce him; but he was warned of the trap both by his foster-brother and also by the woman herself. The second attempt to pierce his disguise was made by one of Feng's friends, who undertook to spy upon him when he was talking with his mother in her chamber. From this trap Amleth was saved by crowing like a cock and flapping his arms like wings till he found the spy hidden under the straw mattress. He pierced him with his sword, cut up the body into little pieces, cooked them, and flung them through the mouth of an open sewer for the swine to eat. Then he upbraided his mother for her lustful conduct, comparing it to that of beasts who mate indiscriminately, and urged her to lament her own guilt rather than his madness. The mother repented of her sin, and Amleth won her over to his side. Feng next- dispatched Amleth to Britain with two retainers, bearing a letter which instructed the King to put Amleth to death; but while they slept, Amleth searched their belongings, found the letter, and substituted fresh instructions, as in Shakespeare's play. When they reached Britain, Amleth's companions were hanged, and he married the Princess. A year later he returned to Jutland. Having made Feng and his followers drunk, he set fire to the palace, slew Feng, after changing swords with him—his own having been rendered useless by treachery—and the followers were burnt alive. The version of the story given in the *Histoires Tragiques* is much the same; but in that Gertrude and Fengon had committed adultery before the murder of Amleth's father and Belleforest speaks of Amleth's 'over-great melancholy'.

Whichever source the author of the *Ur-Hamlet* used he would have the origin of most of the characters—Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern—and the basis for the feigned madness, the interview

with Ophelia, the closet-scene, the voyage to England, and the changing of weapons in the final duel. If he used Belleforest he would have found there Amleth's melancholy and Gertrude's adultery. But in neither source was there a ghost, a Mousetrap, a Laertes, a Fortinbras; there was no drowning of Ophelia, no pirates, no graveyard scene, and no Osric. We may be sure that the author of the *Ur-Hamlet*, imitating The Spanish Tragedy, invented the Mousetrap, the ghost and the madness and death of Ophelia. Thus, in the *Ur-Hamlet* the Queen apparently took positive steps to aid the prince in his revenge. In Shakespeare's play she conceals Hamlet's secret and probably keeps herself from her husband's bed, but she does nothing more positive to assist her son. Shakespeare seems to have invented the pirates, The *Ur-Hamlet*, therefore, so far as it can be reconstructed, seems to have been fairly close to Shakespeare's play in its main outlines. The revelation of the ghost, the feigned madness, the play-scene, the closet-scene, the killing of Polonius, the voyage to England, the madness and suicide of Ophelia, and the duel with Laertes were probably all to be found in the old play, and Shakespeare's additions (the pirates, Fortinbras, and possibly the gravediggers), important as they are, are less significant than his intensification and subtilisation of themes and motives present in his source—the effect of a mother's guilt on a son, the malcontent's satire under the guise of madness, the self-laceration of enforced delay, the contrast between the two avengers, Hamlet and Laertes, and the friendship between Hamlet and Horatio.

The Changes that Shakespeare made on the source of *Hamlet*:

- 1-The murder became a secret and revealed by a ghost.
- 2-A ghost was invented and urged Hamlet to revenge.
- 3-New characters appeared, Laertes and Fortinbras.
- 4-Ophelia's role is developed and elevated.

5-A play with in the play is added.

6-Hamlet dies as he kills the king.