

NOTES ON THE SOURCES OF *HAMLET*

Sources: (see Bullough)

- * non-extant play (or plays) with a Hamlet character: called 'ur-Hamlet'
performed around 1589, vague allusions to Thomas Kyd as author: a Senecan tragedy,
In Thomas Lodge's *Wit's Misery* the author writes about a devil looking "as pale as the
vizard of the ghost, which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster-wife,
'Hamlet, revenge'"
- * François Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (1559-80): probable source of ur-Hamlet, possible for
Shakespeare
translated into English as *The Historie of Hamblet* (printed in 1608)
- * Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae* (written around 1200, printed in 1514) which contains a
version of a Norse legend of *Amlóthi*
- * *The Spanish Tragedy*, a revenge tragedy, attributed to Thomas Kyd
written between 1582 and 1592, probably between 1585 and 1589
- * possible historical source: The murder of Francesco Maria I, Duke of Urbino
- * Timothy Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy* : -> the melancholic aspects of Hamlet

Saxo Grammaticus: provides -> much of plot, most main characters

- Amleth's father defeated the king of Norway in a duel
- fratricide: Amleth's uncle, Fengo, kills Amleth's father, Horwendil
- Amleth's mother marries his uncle
- Amleth feigns madness and talks in riddles
- a 'fair woman' is used to test Amleth's insanity
- a friend of Amleth's uncle suggests spying a meeting between Amleth and his mother; Amleth
kills him
- Amleth bitterly attacks her mother for forgetting her first husband
- Amleth is deported to Britain with two of Fengon's retainers carrying a secret commission to
have Amleth executed, but Amleth discovers the commission, substitutes the retainers' name for
his own, and adds the suggestion that he should marry the king's daughter
- After a time in Britain, Amleth returns in disguise, and sees the court celebrating his death
- Amleth burns the hall down, kills Fengon in his bed
- Amleth makes a speech of justification, claiming that he has wiped off his country's shame,
quenched his mother's dishonour, beaten back oppression, stripped the Danes of slavery, clothed
them in freedom, deposed the butcher and triumphed over the butcher
- Amleth proclaims himself king, and has other adventures before he is killed in a battle

Belleforest:

- adds adultery of Amleth's mother and uncle before the murder of his father
- "before resorting to parricide Fengon had already incestuously sullied his brother's bed ... by
corrupting the honour of that brother's wife (Gollancz, 186)" (Hibbard 1987: 10)
- > "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be

A couch for luxury and damnèd incest" (1.5.82-3)

- "Belleforest remarks that Geruthe's subsequent marriage to Fengon led many to conclude that she might well have inspired the murder in order to enjoy the pleasures of her adulterous relationship with Fengon without restriction or restraint (Gollancz, 188) Amleth repeats this charge in his passionate harangue to his mother after his discovery of the spy, and draws an absolute denial of it from her. She begs him never to harbour the suspicion that she gave consent to the murder (p. 229)" (Hibbard 1987: 10)
 - Amleth suffers from "over-great melancholy"
 - Fengon's crimes are magnified by stressing not only fratricide and incest but tyranny and the oppression of his people (Jenkins 1982: 91)
 - Belleforest adds much moralizing comment, harangues, reflections, religious digressions displaying conventional prejudices against women and the pleasures of the senses
- Fengon's death is an example of vengeance becoming justice, and act of piety and affection, a punishment of treason and murder (Edwards 1985: 2)
- Belleforest expresses reservations about some of Amleth's actions

ur-Hamlet:

- ghost of Hamlet's father returns to demand vengeance -> the murder must have been secret

What's new in Shakespeare's Hamlet:

- The murder is secret (Edwards) -> makes the ghost necessary
 - Laertes and his revenge
 - Fortinbras's subplot
 - The players and their play are introduced (Edwards)
 - Hamlet commissions the performance of "The Murder of Gonzago"; use of the play-within-the play convention
 - Ophelia's role is extended and elevated (Edwards)
 - Ophelia's madness; her death by drowning taken as suicide; her funeral
 - Hamlet musing at the graveyard
 - Hamlet dies as he kills the king (Edwards)
 - Setting: from "pre-Christian times ... to a courtly, modern-seeming period in which ... renaissance young men travel to and from to complete their education in universities or in Paris" (Edwards 1985: 2)
 - the pirates intercepting the ship taking Hamlet to England
 - grave-digger and companion
-
- Hamlet's delay is problematic, while in Amleth it is simple and natural: he has to grow up before he can act (Hibbard 1987: 11)
 - Hamlet's revenging plans have a casual improvised quality, while Amleth's revenge is "the most cunningly planned and skilfully carried out" (Hibbard 1987: 11)

-->

- Sh turns a heroic legend of success into a tragedy
- ghost -> becomes starting device for revenge mechanism

- the temptress 'fair woman'/Ophelia becomes daughter of Fengo's friend/ Polonius, to whom Laertes is added, -> Sh sets closer relations between characters , and creates creating a triangle of family relationship father-son-daughter
 - > creates new dialectical contexts and new theatrical situation that re-orient the narrative function of the old story
 - Fortinbras' subplot: parallel to Hamlet's situation
 - Hamlet father kills Fortinbras father – Fortinbras son seeks revenge
 - Hamlet and Fortinbras did not succeed to the throne, rather their uncles became kings
 - At the end, Fortinbras assumes Hamlet's post and brings order to the state
- Three triangles around three sons: Fortinbras, Hamlet, Laertes
- Hamlet gets killed in the revenge -> conventions of revenge play dictate that revenge entails the avenger's damnation [GENRE ISSUE]
 - Sh re-examines the revenge mechanisms of the revenge play, not so much for a more efficient spectacularity, but rather for its internal logic: the purpose is to examine how it is made and why (Melchiori p. 419. See "Genre Hamlet")
 - use of monologues and soliloquies : emphasizes the dialectical character of the play
 - "Shakespeare added to that complexity [Belleforest made Amleth more complex by a streak of melancholy] by transferring the French writer's reservations about some of his hero's actions to that hero himself" (Hibbard 1987: 11)

List of Works cited

- Bullough, Geoffery, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols., (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967-75).
- Hibbard, G., ed. *W. Shakespeare: Hamlet*, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)
- Jenkins, Harold, ed. *W. Shakespeare: Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1982)
- Edwards, Philip, ed. *W. Shakespeare: Hamlet*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)
- Melchiori, Giorgio, *Shakespeare: Genesi e struttura delle opere* (Editori Laterza, 2005)