

AP English Notes
November 8, 2004

The Tragedy of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark by William Shakespeare

Act 1, Scene 1 and Scene 2

- Atmosphere
- Speeches
- Claudius' excuses
- Problems with Norway
- Laertes' Request
- Polonius' Response
- Gertrude's Concern
- Hamlet's Sadness and Anger

Shakespeare

- Borrowed concept for the story line for Hamlet.
- Saxo Grammaticus' History of the Danes
- de Belleforest's Tragic Histories

In de Belleforest's version,
Hamlet fakes madness because—if he is sane—his uncle will kill him.
Hamlet slaughters the Danish court, chops off his uncle's head.

Ur Hamlet by Thomas Kyd

version disappeared

Hamlet was written and produced sometime around 1600-1601.

Elsinore Castle

Kronburg Castle

(near the site of Heorot)

Family Relations

- Gertrude -- Queen
- Claudius -- King
- Hamlet -- Deceased King (Ghost)
- Hamlet -- Prince of Denmark

- Fortinbras -- Prince of Norway
- Fortinbras -- Deceased King of Norway

- Polonius
- Laertes
- Ophelia

What is the mood of Elsinore and the Danish court as the play opens?

What is the atmosphere of the first scene?

What are the first words spoken?

HAMLET

The Play's Historical Sources

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The Danish historian and poet Saxo Grammaticus refers to it at the end of the twelfth century. In this Latin work recounting the history of Denmark Shakespeare's future character appears under the name Amleth.

However there are controversies concerning the exact origins of Hamlet. Some see Hamlet as the product of Jutland's folklore, Saxo's version was translated in the sixteenth century, with the horrific elements emphasized, by François de Belleforest in his collection *Histoires Tragiques* (Vol.5, 1570). An English version of this history was published in London in 1608 under the title *The History of Hamlet*.

At the end of the 1580s a revenge tragedy in the tradition of Seneca about Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, based on Belleforest, was already popular in London. This Ur-Hamlet is traditionally attributed to Thomas Kyd and was contemporaneous with Shakespeare's presence in London. It has similarities with the other predecessors of the latter's play, which can be dated between 1599 and 1602, in that it is less psychologically complex concerning the central protagonist, whose prevarications are essentially due only to the practical problems of assassinating a king permanently surrounded by guards. This Ur-Hamlet has no soliloquies and no cemetery scene.

It is reasonable to believe that Shakespeare reshaped Kyd's play in the final years of the sixteenth century before writing up his work completely in 1601. Hamlet was deposited in 1602 at the Registry of the Library and published in quarto form in 1603. The play was subsequently reworked, adapted and amended down the centuries according to prevailing sensibilities. Judged barbarous and brutal, some scenes were toned down during the Enlightenment, whereas the nineteenth century lent the character a Byronic texture. More recent times have seen Hamlets in Victorian or contemporary dress and regular film adaptations, the most recent English production having been directed by Kenneth Branagh. (Hamlet)

<<http://www.ulg.ac.be/libnet/germa/hamleteng.htm>>

Summary

Act 1, Scene 1: At the castle Elsinor in Denmark, the sentries (Bernardo and Marcellus) have invited

Horatio to join them and talk about a ghost which has appeared before them during the previous nights. For the sentries this is a sign of imminent danger, perhaps indicating an attack by Fortinbras, Prince of Norway. Horatio refuses to believe them but then the ghost suddenly appears, and he recognizes the ghost as the King of Denmark, who has recently died. It says nothing and disappears almost immediately. It reappears shortly afterwards and seems on the point of speaking when the crowing of a cock, signaling dawn, obliges it to disappear. Horatio decides to warn Prince Hamlet Ghosts (who could be demons taking on the form of a dead person or this could be an actual ghost) could only appear between dusk and dawn.

Act 1, Scene 2: In his castle Claudius is addressing his Council and refers to his accession to the throne, the death of Hamlet's father, his own marriage to Gertrude, the widowed queen. (This is Claudius explanation of his reason for marriage to his dead brother's widow--considered incest in this day; the country was in danger is his explanation.) Claudius announces that he has written to the old king of Norway, charging him with the task of reining in the ambitions of his nephew, Fortinbras, who wants to reclaim land lost by his father to Hamlet's father. He asks Voltimand and Cornelius to take a message to the old King of Norway. He then speaks to Laertes, the son of his advisor, Polonius, giving him permission to return to school in Paris.

Turning to Hamlet he questions him as to the source of his melancholy, urging him to put an end to his sadness, which he deems excessive, and asks (orders) Hamlet not to return to the University of Wittenberg. (Claudius fears that Hamlet may try to take the throne from him.)

The queen adds her own pleas to stop looking so gloomy and look as a friend to the court and the new king; Hamlet promises to do his best to follow their wishes. (Hamlet)

The summary above came from the following site.

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