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Notes & Commentary on Shakespeare's Hamlet

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Introduction

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* stands as one of the most enduring masterpieces in the canon of English literature. Its exploration of universal themes—revenge, madness, mortality, love, betrayal—continues to resonate with readers, performers, and audiences more than four centuries after its first performance. As students of English literature well know, *Hamlet* is a dense and multifaceted work, rich with meaning and complexity. The purpose of this book, *Notes & Commentary on Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Guide for Students*, is to serve as a companion to your studies, offering clear explanations, insightful commentary, and practical guidance as you engage with this extraordinary play.

Hamlet often presents challenges to new readers: arcane language, intricate plot twists, and layered character motivations can appear daunting at first glance. Through each chapter, we will break down these difficulties, exploring Shakespeare's intentions, the context of Elizabethan drama, and the critical debates that have surrounded *Hamlet* through the centuries. We aim to provide both foundational understanding and new ways of thinking about this famous tragedy.

This guide delves into the play's main characters, from the enigmatic Prince of Denmark himself to the supporting cast whose actions drive the story forward. We analyze the central themes and motifs that recur throughout the text, paying special attention to issues such as madness—whether genuine or feigned—the pressures of familial loyalty, and the haunting presence of death and the supernatural. Each chapter includes detailed notes, explanations, and interpretative commentary designed with the needs of students in mind.

Special emphasis is given to literary devices and language—how Shakespeare's wordplay, imagery, and rhetorical flourishes create meaning and emotional impact. We devote separate chapters to key soliloquies, famous scenes, and the significance of the play within the broader context of European drama. Additional chapters offer practical advice on writing about *Hamlet*, preparing for exams, and engaging with the rich tradition of critical scholarship that has grown up around the play.

Whether *Hamlet* is your introduction to Shakespeare or a deeper exploration for advanced studies, this book is structured to support learners at every stage. By working through the chapters, you will gain greater confidence in reading, understanding, and appreciating one of the greatest works ever written, equipping you with the tools to succeed academically and to enjoy the play for a lifetime.

CHAPTER ONE: Understanding Hamlet: Historical and Literary Context

To fully appreciate the profound and complex masterpiece that is *Hamlet*, we must first understand the world from which it sprang. Plays, like any work of art, are products of their time, shaped by the historical events, social customs, intellectual currents, and artistic traditions prevalent when they were created. While Hamlet's themes feel timeless, the specific ways in which they are explored and presented are deeply rooted in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean era in England. Stepping back to examine this context can illuminate Shakespeare's choices, clarify potentially obscure references, and reveal the ingenious ways he worked within, and sometimes against, the conventions of his day.

Imagine yourself an audience member in London around 1600. What kinds of stories were popular? What did a theatrical performance look and sound like? What ideas were people discussing in taverns, universities, or at court? Understanding these elements provides a vital framework for approaching *Hamlet*, moving beyond just the plot and characters to grasp the layers of meaning Shakespeare embedded within the text for his contemporary viewers and listeners. It's like looking at an old photograph – the individuals are central, but the background details of clothing, architecture, and light tell you so much more about the moment captured.

One of the most fundamental aspects of *Hamlet's* context is its origin story. Shakespeare didn't invent the tale of the Danish prince who seeks revenge for his murdered father. The core narrative existed long before him, part of a tradition of Norse legends and historical chronicles. The most significant source is the story of Amleth, preserved in the *Gesta Danorum* (Deeds of the Danes), a twelfth-century history compiled by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus. Saxo's account tells of a young prince, Amleth, whose father, Horwendil (the governor of Jutland), is murdered by his own brother, Feng (Shakespeare's Claudius), who then marries Horwendil's widow, Gerutha (Shakespeare's Gertrude).

Amleth, fearing for his life, feigns madness to appear harmless while plotting his revenge. This feigned madness is tested, notably through encounters with a woman (his eventual lover) and by Feng's advisors (one of whom hides under a straw mat and is discovered and killed by Amleth – a clear parallel to Polonius's death). Amleth is eventually sent to England with two companions carrying instructions for the English king to kill him, but Amleth cunningly alters the message to decree the death of his companions and his own marriage to the English princess. He returns to Denmark, enacts bloody revenge at a feast, reveals his sanity, and is proclaimed king.

This story was later retold and significantly expanded upon in the late sixteenth century by the French writer François de Belleforest in his collection *Histoires Tragiques* (Tragic Histories), first published in 1570 and translated into English around 1608, though versions were likely circulating earlier. Belleforest added a more melancholic tone and moralistic commentary to the tale, which may have influenced the psychological depth Shakespeare later brought to the character. The crucial point for students is that the basic structure – the murdered father, the usurping uncle, the incestuous marriage, the feigned madness, the revenge plot – was a known narrative template.

Before Shakespeare wrote his *Hamlet*, there seems to have been an earlier play on the same subject, often referred to by scholars as the *Ur-Hamlet*. This play, which is now lost, was likely written in the late 1580s, possibly by Thomas Kyd, the author of the hugely popular revenge tragedy *The Spanish Tragedy*. References to this *Ur-Hamlet* by contemporary writers suggest it featured a ghost crying "Hamlet, revenge!" and was a significant hit. This means that when Shakespeare wrote his play, he was not only adapting an old legend but also engaging with a recent, popular theatrical treatment of the story.

Understanding the concept of the *Ur-Hamlet* is important because it places Shakespeare's work within a direct theatrical lineage. He wasn't starting from scratch; he was taking a story already proven to work on the stage and elevating it. This is a common practice in Shakespeare's work – he rarely invented plots whole cloth but rather took existing stories (from history, legend, or earlier plays) and transformed them with his unparalleled poetic language, psychological insight, and dramatic skill.

Another crucial piece of literary context is the genre of revenge tragedy itself. This was a hugely popular form of drama in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England, largely established by Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (written around 1587-1592). These plays typically involved a protagonist seeking vengeance for a wrong, often a murder, which cannot be addressed through conventional legal means.

Common tropes of revenge tragedy include the appearance of a ghost demanding vengeance, a protagonist who faces obstacles or delays in enacting the revenge, scenes of feigned or real madness, elaborate plots and counter-plots, scenes of horrific violence and bloodshed (often culminating in a final bloodbath), and sometimes a play-within-a-play device. *Hamlet* incorporates many of these elements: the Ghost of Hamlet's father, Hamlet's delay, his feigned madness, the Mousetrap play, and the final scene's high body count.

However, while *Hamlet* fits the general mould of the revenge tragedy, it also profoundly complicates and transcends it. Shakespeare takes the stock conventions and injects them with unprecedented philosophical depth and psychological realism.

The hero's internal conflict, his questioning of the very nature of revenge, morality, and existence, elevates *Hamlet* far beyond the relatively straightforward (though thrilling) action and sensationalism of earlier revenge plays. He uses the familiar structure to explore universal human dilemmas.

Consider the Ghost. In typical revenge tragedies, the ghost is simply a plot device, a clear signal to the hero to get on with the killing. Hamlet's Ghost is more ambiguous; is it truly his father's spirit, or a devil tempting him? This uncertainty adds a layer of doubt and complexity to Hamlet's motivation that isn't present in Kyd's *Hieronimo*. Similarly, while feigned madness is a common tactic, Hamlet's 'antic disposition' blurs the lines between performance and genuine mental anguish, making his state of mind a central mystery rather than just a clever disguise.

Beyond the specific literary genre, understanding the theatrical conditions of Shakespeare's time is vital. Plays were performed in public open-air theatres like the Globe or the Swan, or smaller, indoor private theatres. The audience was diverse, ranging from groundlings standing in the yard to wealthy patrons seated in galleries. Performances typically took place in the afternoon.

Staging was relatively simple compared to modern theatre. There was no elaborate scenery; locations were often established through dialogue and minimal props. Costumes were often elaborate and contemporary, rather than historically accurate. This reliance on language to paint pictures and convey setting meant that the poetry and rhetoric of the play were paramount. Actors had to be highly skilled speakers and capable of rapid role changes.

The physicality of Elizabethan theatre is also important. Plays were performed in broad daylight, often on a thrust stage that projected into the audience, creating a close connection between actors and spectators. Soliloquies, like Hamlet's famous ones, would have been delivered directly to the audience, fostering a sense of intimacy and allowing the viewer access to the character's inner thoughts in a way modern, more naturalistic staging might obscure.

The political and social context of the time also subtly informs the play. *Hamlet* was written during the final years of Queen Elizabeth I's reign and the early years of King James I. This was a period of both stability and underlying anxiety. The question of succession was paramount, as Elizabeth had no direct heir, and the transition to the Stuart dynasty under James was a significant moment of change.

While Denmark is the setting, the play's portrayal of a corrupt court, uncertain succession, and political maneuvering would have resonated with an English audience contemplating their own nation's future. The anxieties surrounding who holds power, how it is obtained, and the potential for rot at the heart of the state speak to broader political concerns of the era, where loyalty, treachery, and the stability of the

monarchy were subjects of constant discussion and concern.

Intellectual currents of the Renaissance also flow powerfully through *Hamlet*. This was a time of immense intellectual curiosity and change, marked by the rediscovery of classical literature, the rise of humanism, and shifts in religious thought. Humanism, with its emphasis on human potential, reason, and the study of earthly life, is evident in Hamlet's famous lines praising humanity as the "paragon of animals."

Yet, alongside this celebration of human capability, there was a growing sense of skepticism and uncertainty, perhaps influenced by thinkers like Montaigne (whose essays on self-reflection and doubt were translated into English and read in England). Hamlet's profound questioning of existence, his grappling with doubt, indecision, and the limits of human knowledge, reflect this intellectual climate where traditional certainties were being challenged.

The play also touches upon the prevalent understanding of psychology and physiology through the concept of humours. Melancholy, a key humour associated with sorrow and contemplation, was thought to be caused by an excess of black bile. Hamlet's disposition aligns with contemporary descriptions of the melancholic individual – prone to deep thought, sadness, and sometimes erratic behaviour. Whether Hamlet's melancholy is a natural state, exacerbated by grief, or part of his feigned madness is left deliberately ambiguous, reflecting the era's fascination with and theories about mental states.

Religious beliefs also shaped how audiences would have perceived *Hamlet*. The Reformation had divided Europe and England, leading to different views on death, the afterlife, and supernatural phenomena like ghosts. Catholics generally believed in Purgatory, where souls could be cleansed before entering Heaven, making the appearance of a ghost from Purgatory (like Hamlet's father claims to be) a more familiar, albeit still awe-inspiring, concept.

Protestant theology, however, tended to reject the concept of Purgatory. For a largely Protestant English audience, a ghost appearing might be viewed with suspicion – potentially a devil in disguise attempting to lure the living to damnation. This religious uncertainty adds another layer to the ambiguity surrounding the Ghost and Hamlet's hesitation to act solely on its word. His need for further proof ("the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King") could be seen partly as a reflection of a wary, post-Reformation mindset.

Finally, the linguistic context of Elizabethan England is fundamental to understanding the richness and complexity of Shakespeare's language in *Hamlet*. This was a period of rapid linguistic development, with a vast expansion of vocabulary through borrowing and coinage. Education, particularly in grammar schools, heavily emphasized rhetoric – the art of persuasive and eloquent speech.

Students like Shakespeare would have been trained in classical rhetoric, learning various figures of speech, logical arguments, and persuasive techniques. This training is evident throughout *Hamlet* in the elaborate wordplay, complex sentence structures, extended metaphors, and the varied styles of speech adopted by different characters. Understanding the conventions of Elizabethan rhetoric can help unlock the layers of meaning and the sheer linguistic artistry present in the play's dialogue and soliloquies.

The language itself, with its now-archaic vocabulary and grammatical structures, is perhaps the most immediate barrier for modern students. However, approaching it not just as something to be deciphered but as a vibrant, flexible medium that Shakespeare was pushing to its limits is key. His contemporaries would have delighted in the verbal agility, the puns, the witty exchanges, and the sheer power of expression that define the play's language.

In summary, approaching *Hamlet* with an awareness of its historical and literary context enriches the reading experience immeasurably. Knowing the story's origins in ancient legend, its place within the popular genre of revenge tragedy, the practicalities of Elizabethan theatre, the intellectual currents of the Renaissance, and the specificities of the English language at the time allows us to see the play not as an isolated, daunting text, but as a dynamic work engaging with the ideas, anxieties, and artistic traditions of its own vibrant age. It helps us understand why certain elements appear, how they would have been received, and how Shakespeare built upon existing foundations to create something profoundly new and enduring.

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