

Hamlet

INTRODUCTION

SEVERAL references from 1589 onwards witness the existence of a play about Hamlet, but Francis Meres did not attribute a play with this title to Shakespeare in 1598. The first clear reference to Shakespeare's play is its entry in the Stationers' Register on 26 July 1602 as *The Revenge of Hamlet Prince [of] Denmark*, when it was said to have been 'lately acted by the Lord Chamberlain his servants'. It survives in three versions; their relationship is a matter of dispute on which views about when Shakespeare wrote his play, and in what form, depend. In 1603 appeared an inferior text apparently assembled from actors' memories; it has only about 2,200 lines. In the following year, as if to put the record straight, James Roberts (to whom the play had been entered in 1602) published it as 'newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much again as it was, according to the true and perfect copy'. At about 3,800 lines, this is the longest version. The 1623 Folio offers a still different text, some 230 lines shorter than the 1604 version, differing verbally from that at many points, and including about 70 additional lines. It is our belief that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* about 1600, and revised it later; that the 1604 edition was printed from his original papers; that the Folio represents the revised version; and that the 1603 edition represents a very imperfect report of an abridged version of the revision. So our text is based on the Folio; passages present in the 1604 quarto but absent from the Folio are printed as Additional Passages because we believe that, however fine they may be in themselves, Shakespeare decided that the play as a whole would be better without them.

The plot of *Hamlet* originates in a Scandinavian folk-tale told in the twelfth-century *Danish History* written in Latin by the Danish Saxo Grammaticus. François de Belleforest retold it in the fifth volume (1580) of his *Histoires Tragiques*, not translated into English until 1608. Saxo, through Belleforest, provided the basic story of a Prince of Denmark committed to revenge his father's murder by his own brother (Claudius)

who has married the dead man's widow (Gertrude). As in Shakespeare, Hamlet pretends to be mad, kills his uncle's counsellor (Polonius) while he is eavesdropping, rebukes his mother, is sent to England under the escort of two retainers (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) who bear orders that he be put to death on arrival, finds the letter containing the orders and alters it so that it is the retainers who are executed, returns to Denmark, and kills the King.

Belleforest's story differs at some points from Shakespeare's, and Shakespeare elaborates it, adding, for example, the Ghost of Hamlet's father, the coming of the actors to Elsinore, the performance of the play through which Hamlet tests his uncle's guilt, Ophelia's madness and death, Laertes' plot to revenge *his* father's death, the grave-digger, Ophelia's funeral, and the characters of Osric and Fortinbras. How much he owed to the lost Hamlet play we cannot tell; what is certain is that Shakespeare used his mastery of a wide range of diverse styles in both verse and prose, and his genius for dramatic effect, to create from these and other sources the most complex, varied, and exciting drama that had ever been seen on the English stage. Its popularity was instant and enduring. The play has had a profound influence on Western culture, and Shakespeare's Hamlet has himself entered the world of myth.