

# About *Hamlet*

## The Dates of Composition

Against considerable evidence to the contrary, academics officially maintain that *Hamlet* was written between 1599 and 1601. Here are the facts.

A play was entered into the Stationers Register on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1602 to James Roberts: “A booke called the Revenge of Hamlett Prince Denmarke, As yt was latelie Acted by the Lord Chamberleyne his servantes”.<sup>1</sup>

The First Quarto did not appear until 1603, but Roberts seems to have lost his rights: “*The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke. By William Shakespeare, as it hath been diverse times acted by His Highnesse servants in the Cittie of London, as also in the two Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, and elsewhere. At London printed for NL (Nicholas Ling) and John Trundell*”. The mention of “*His Highness servants*”, places the publication after Queen Elizabeth’s death in March 1603.

For reasons that will be made clearer below, the hypothesis generally accepted by scholars is that the First Quarto (known also as the Bad Quarto) was a cut version of the Second Quarto, such as it was published in 1604/5. But, apart from the fact that this does not explain the changed names, notably that of Corambis who becomes Polonius, it would mean that having the complete MS of the Second Quarto at their disposal, a group of actors went to the trouble of writing down the lines they remembered from their performances, leaving out the lines they did not remember, and neither William Shakespeare whose name was recorded as author, nor the Company of Players who owned the rights, objected.

In the Second Quarto however, (Roberts had recovered his rights apparently) we are told the play was this time “*newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect coppie. Printed JR (James) Roberts for NL*”. The word “enlarged” would be equivocal if the text of the Second Quarto had been there all along; “*enlarged*” suggests text newly written. The stated date of publication of the Second Quarto varies between 1604 and 1605; this suggests the copies were perhaps printed in the first months of 1605, which would have been 1604 in the Julian calendar year.

One of the arguments used to support the dates of composition is the fact that *Hamlet* does not appear on the list of Shakespeare’s plays in Francis Mere’s *Palladis Tamia* (1598); however, neither do the three parts of *Henri VI* or *The Taming of A Shrew* appear on that list. As far as we know the authorship of William Shakespeare is only made officially manifest on the date of entry into the Stationer’s Register, some 4 years after Meres’ publication.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bullough: *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol.7 (1973)

The reference in Henslowe's *Diary* to a *Hamlet* performed on June 9<sup>th</sup> 1594 has suggested the existence of an *Uhr-Hamlet* by some unknown author; I find this unconvincing. Though Henslowe does not make clear whether the play in 1594 was performed by "my Lord Admiralle men" or "my Lord Chamberlene men", either the two Companies had performed two different *Hamlets*, or the Lord Chamberlain's Men had two different *Hamlets* in their repertoire.

In their study of stylometrics applied to Elizabethan and Jacobean poets, Profs Elliott and Valenza<sup>2</sup> established the approximate composition dates of Marlovian and Shakespearian texts based on the average sum of feminine and open-ended lines to be found in them. According to these scholars, "the percentage of both indicators (open lines and feminine endings) tripled over Shakespeare's lifetime".

I have studied the two *Hamlet* Quartos dividing the texts in three different lots:

- 1) Speeches that appear in the First Quarto only.
- 2) Speeches that are common (with minor variations) to the First and Second Quartos.
- 3) Speeches that appear in the Second Quarto only.

According to these charts, these averages<sup>3</sup> would place dates of composition thus:

- 1) Speeches in the First Quarto only: Average 27.5%. Would correspond between 1587 (*Tamburlaine 2*, average 27%), and 1594 (*Comedy of Errors*, average 28%).
- 2) Speeches common to both Quartos: average 34%. Corresponding between 1594 (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, average 33%), and 1597 (*The Merry Wives*, 33%).
- 3) Speeches in the Second Quarto only: average 43.7%. Corresponding approximately to 1604 (*Measure for Measure*, average 50%).

If we apply the Elliott and Valenza stylometrics to these dates, Marlowe would have written a first version of *Hamlet* around 1587/8, thus explaining Nashe's reference to "whole *Hamlets*" in 1589<sup>4</sup>, as well as the coincidence between the reference in *Doctor Faustus* to Sextus Empiricus' quotation *ON KAI ME ON* and *Hamlet's To be or not to be*.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in the First Quarto such as

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<sup>2</sup> Ward Elliott and Robert Valenza, *And Then There Were None: Winnowing the Shakespeare Claimants* (*Computers and the Humanities* 30 (1996). Ref: Peter Farey: <http://www2.prestel.co.uk/rey/oxfordians1.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> My special thanks to S. Phelps for her help in the tedious task of counting the endings in both Quartos.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Nashe: Introduction to Robert Greene's *Menaphon*.

<sup>5</sup> *On kai me on*, sometimes translated as "being and not being", from Gorgias of Leontini's lost work *On the Nature of the Non-Existent*, as cited by Sextus Empiricus (c.160-210 AD, physician and philosopher), in his *Adversus Mathematicos* (*Against the*

was published in 1603, we find possible hints to Marlowe's "death" in Deptford (see below).

A revision in 1594 might explain the higher average (34%) of feminine ends and open lines in the speeches that are essentially common between the First and Second Quartos. This hypothesis would also explain the appearance of *Hamlet* in Henslowe's *Diary* in June 1594. The performances may have continued for several years because, in 1596, Thomas Lodge wrote: "*the ghost that cried so miserably at the theatre, like an oyster-wife, Hamlet, revenge!*"<sup>6</sup>

And yet, there are no ghosts in Saxo Grammaticus' *Historiae Danicae*, or *Gesta Danorum* (c.1200), published in Latin in 1514 and adapted in French by Francois de Belleforest, whose *Histoires Tragiques* was published in 1570.<sup>7</sup>

That Shakespeare used Grammaticus' *Historiae Danicae* as a source is indisputable. Starting with the "strength in arms" (*forte-bras*) of the King of Norway follows the role of a childhood girl-friend set as a "trap" to discover whether Amleth is mad or just pretending to be so. There is also the trip to Britain and Amleth's subterfuge changing the instructions by which his companions would be executed. Included as well is Amleth's stormy scene with his mother and the killing of the hidden "councillor". Also, Amleth chooses to behave like a clown in order to preserve his life. But, despite all these similarities, Grammaticus does not mention a Ghost.

The idea of a Ghost-Father for *Hamlet* would have come to the author after 1593, in the revision that appeared perhaps on Henslowe's stage, in 1594. Let us look at the relevant lines.

**Ghost:**

*'Tis given out that sleeping in my orchard,  
A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark  
Is with a forged process of my death  
Rankly abused.*

**1Q Hamlet<sup>8</sup>**

And later:

**Ghost:**

*Thus was I, sleeping, by my brother's hand  
Of crown, of queen, of life, of dignity  
At once deprived, **no reckoning made** of, but sent  
Unto my grave with all my accounts and sins*

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Mathematicians), also known as *Against the Professors*. The complete works of Empiricus were translated into Latin by Gentian Hervet, and published in 1569.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Lodge, *Wits Miserie and the Worlds Madnesse, etc.* (1596)

<sup>7</sup> Bullough, Op Cit.

<sup>8</sup> K.O. Irace (Ed.), *The First Quarto of Hamlet* (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

*Upon my head. O horrible, most horrible.*

**1Q Hamlet**

**Ghost:**

*Thus was I, sleeping, by a Brother's hand,  
Of life, of Crown, of Queen at once dispatchd,  
Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,*

...

*No reckning made, but sent to my account  
With all my imperfections on my head.  
O horrible! O horrible, most horrible!*<sup>9</sup>

**2Q Hamlet**<sup>10</sup>

If Marlowe wrote an early *Hamlet* around 1587 (perhaps shortly before he wrote *Doctor Faustus*), this speech from the Ghost could be an addition post-1593, and, therefore, fitting with Henslowe's performance date and Lodge's quotation.

Also, in the Ghost scene, only Hamlet talks to his father; only he knows the secret of the murder, all that Marcello and Horatio could reveal is that they have seen the Ghost of the king who is supposed to be dead. And yet they are made to swear with a lot of insistence and fuss that they will not tell anybody about this vision.

So, who is "*Hamlet's* father"? There are two "*Hamlet*"-concepts:

- 1) The character, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, whose father has been murdered, as in Grammaticus' History.
- 2) The play, "*Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*", whose "father" would be its author. From Cervantes, who declares himself to be the "stepfather" of *Don Quixote*, to Shakespeare who in the poem *Venus and Adonis*, announces it to be "*the first heir of my invention*", we find many instances in which the authors refer to one of their literary pieces as their "*heir*" or "*creature*", and to themselves as the father (or stepfather, in the case of Cervantes), of such work. In *The Tempest*, for instance, Prospero accuses his brother Antonio of tampering with "*the creatures that were mine*". By this rule, the author of the play *Hamlet* would consider himself to be the father of such a play.

Was there a plausible author the "*forged process of (whose) death*" had at once deprived him "*of queen, of life, of dignity, no reckoning made of, but sent unto (his) grave with all (his) accounts and sins upon his head*", but who was nevertheless able on special occasions to wander about at night and talk to his friends?

<sup>9</sup> The implication of these lines, including the word *reckoning* as a possible reference to the Coroner's Report was already noted by Alex Jack in his book *Hamlet, by Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare* (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, The Second Quarto (1604) - Reproduction of the Huntington Library copy.

Indeed there was such a plausible author: Christopher Marlowe. Needless to say, this scenario would also explain why Shake-speare in 1594, rather than 1602, would give so much importance to one particular speech in Marlowe's old play, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, published coincidentally in 1594.<sup>11</sup>

In both Quartos and with some variations, Hamlet addresses the First Player with this (I copy from 2Q):

*“I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never acted, or if it was not above once, for the play I remember, it pleased not the million, t' was cauiary to the general. ... one speech in't I chifly loved, t'was Aeneas talke to Dido- ... specially when he speaks of Priam's slaughter. ... let me see ... the ragged Pirhus...”*

The curious thing about the relevant lines is that in both Quartos, as well as in *Dido*, we are told that Priam died as a result of the stroke of wind that resulted from Pyrrhus waving his sword, not by the sword itself:

**Aeneas:**

*Which he, disdainning, whisked his sword about,  
And with the wind thereof the king fell down, ...*

***Dido, Queen of Carthage - Scene 1, lines 253-4***

**First Player:**

*Pyrrhus at Priam drives, but all in rage  
Strikes wide; but with the whiff and wind  
Of his fell sword th' unnerved father falls...*

***1Q Hamlet – Scene 7***

**Player:**

*... Vnequal matchet,  
Pirrhhus at Priam driues, in rage strikes wide;  
But with the whiffe and winde of his fell sword  
Th' vnnerved father falls.” ...*

***2Q Hamlet – Act 2, Scene 5***

Because Virgil's *Aeneid* does not include such detail in its description of Priam's death, it is generally accepted that Shake-speare was borrowing the idea from Marlowe's *Dido*. So, why would the author of *Hamlet* borrow in 1599-1601 an unrelated idea from a play written by Marlowe before 1593?

In the anonymous German version: *Fratricide Punished, (Das Bestrafte Brudermord oder Prinz Hamlet aus Dannemark)*, printed 1781,<sup>12</sup> Hamlet refers to a past performance mentioning (oddly) “King Pyr –Pyr-something...” as if he had never read Virgil or heard about Pyrrhus. When questioned by

<sup>11</sup> *The Tragedie of Dido, Queen of Carthage. Played by the Children of Her Maiesties Chappel. Written by Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Na.é. Gent etc. (1594).*

<sup>12</sup> Bullough, Op Cit.

the First Player (Charles), he explains that the speech was “*about one brother murdering the other in the garden*” thus obliterating the reference to *Dido* from this *Hamlet*. By the way, the German translator seems to be using the First Quarto, as the counsellor is named *Corambus*.

The German *Hamlet* however, covers some of the most blatant oddities in Shake-speare, such as why doesn't Hamlet inherit the crown automatically on his father's death? In the German *Hamlet*, he is made King of Norway, while his uncle keeps the Danish crown. Shake-speare doesn't give any explanation for this anomaly even in the Second Quarto when the Gravedigger explicitly says Hamlet is thirty years old, a ripe age by the period's standards. In fact, the only reason why such usurpation of the heir's rights might be tolerated by his loving subjects would be if Gertrude herself were monarch in her own right.

As usual, Marlowe was leaving clues to his authorship by making references to his known plays. In the First Quarto we find a reference to *Doctor Faustus* (*to be or not to be*) and a reference to *Dido*; in the Second Quarto he adds a reference to *Edward II*:

***Mortimer:***

*Farewell, fair queen; weep not for Mortimer,  
That Scorns the world, and, as a traveller,  
Goes to discover countries yet unknown.*

***Edward II – Lines 2637-9***

Compare this with 2Q:

***Hamlet:***

*... The undiscovered country from whose bourns  
No traveller returns ...*

***2Q Hamlet***

The abysmal difference between Hamlet First and Second Quartos, in length, quality and message, plus the already mentioned change of some names, makes it difficult to believe either that the First Quarto is the result of poor editing, or that the mind of Shakespeare made a truly gigantic leap between 1603 and 1604. How could the author allow the First Quarto text to be printed in 1603 if the complete Second Quarto text were already available?

The answer must be that the Second Quarto had not been written yet. In the summer of 1603, the Earl of Rutland (a close friend of the late Earl of Essex), was sent by King James to Denmark, to attend the Danish heir's christening and to deliver the Order of the Garter to King Christian. It has been suggested that Shake-speare went with Rutland to Denmark. I agree.

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