### Contextual information

The old Danish folk-tale of Amleth by Saxo Grammaticus has many of the features of Shakespeare’s play: a villain kills his brother, takes over the throne and then marries his brother’s wife. The King’s son Amleth pretends to be mad to shield himself from his uncle. But the tale has no ghost demanding vengeance, no gravediggers or play within a play, and no Laertes character. Amleth lacks Hamlet’s melancholy disposition and long soliloquies, and he survives after becoming king.

Discover Saxo’s legend of Amleth in the *Gesta Danorum*

---

Thomas Kyd’s revenge drama, *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1582–1592) inspired Shakespeare when he was writing *Hamlet*. Kyd’s play includes a hero and his wife both driven mad by desire for revenge against their son’s murderer. It has a ghost who calls for revenge, a play within a play (as a means of achieving revenge) and even a faithful sidekick called Horatio.

Explore Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, 1615

---

In his famous essay, ‘Of Revenge’ (1625), Francis Bacon describes revenge as ‘a kind of wild Justice’ which is not legally defensible. He says that ‘in taking Revenge, a Man is but even with his Enemy; but in passing it over he is superiour: for it is a Princes part to pardon’. Some critics have argued that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* anticipates this more humanist perspective.

Bacon’s essays on revenge, envy and deformity

---

The earliest surviving version of *Hamlet* is known as the ‘bad’ quarto, printed in 1603. It is 1,600 lines shorter than the second quarto of 1604–5. Hamlet’s famous soliloquy reads, ‘To be or not to be, I there’s the point’ and it appears in a totally different place in the text – in the equivalent to Act 2, Scene 2, rather than Act 3, Scene 1.

Explore the bad quarto of *Hamlet*, 1603
Professional players, like Shakespeare’s company, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, frequently toured venues across the country, performing in schools, universities, country houses, town halls and drinking houses. Some ventured even further afield to fairs and festivals in Europe.

The anonymous drama, A Warning for Faire Women, was performed in 1599 by Shakespeare’s company. The play, based on a real Elizabethan crime case, includes a reference to a woman who was ‘mooved’ to confess to ‘her husband’s murder’ while she was watching a tragedy performed by ‘Players travelling that way’.

Melancholy was one of the four humours which were thought to define the character in Elizabethan England. It was a fashionable affliction associated with sadness but also refined male intellect. Thomas Bright’s Treatise of Melancholy (1586), suggests that melancholy can cause ‘dispaire’ leading to both anger and ‘false laughter’. Sufferers are distracted by ‘phantastical apparations’. Their ‘resolution’ is delayed by ‘long deliberation’ and their house may seem ‘a prison or dungeon, rather than a place of repose or rest’.

Christ's Teares over Jerusalem (1593) contains the first quotation in which ‘nunnery’ is used as slang for ‘brothel’ – the ironic opposite of a virginal community of nuns. Thomas Nashe refers to prostitutes who ‘give free priviledge’ to gentlemen in ‘theyr Nunnery’.

Discover these travelling players in the friendship album of Franz Hartmann.

Discover a reference to a play which prompts a murderer to confess in A Warning for Faire Women, 1599.

Explore Bright's Treatise of Melancholy, 1586.

Discover the first use of the word ‘nunnery’ to mean ‘brothel’, 1593.
Memento mori is a Latin phrase meaning ‘reminder of death’. It was used to describe the many symbols of human mortality common in the early modern era. Skulls and skeletons were stark reminders of the transience of human life, prompting people to live virtuously to prepare themselves for death and the Day of Judgement.

The German city of Wittenberg was the birthplace of the Reformation – the Protestant movement for the reform of the Catholic church. In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Wittenberg chapel. He was protesting against the Catholic sale of indulgences (licences that were said to grant sinners freedom from God’s punishment, in exchange for money). Luther argued that faith alone could justify people in God’s eyes.

In Catholic doctrine, Purgatory is a place where the souls of those who are not wholly bad or good are sent after death, to be punished for their sins and receive purification. Their suffering is thought to be reduced by the good works and prayers of the living. But ideas of Purgatory and ghosts were rejected by the Church of England established by Henry VIII. Discussing them was controversial.

Ghosts were often seen by Catholics as restless human souls that had died in violent circumstances and remained in Purgatory. But Protestants like Ludwig Lavater rejected the idea of Purgatory and felt ghosts were more likely to have come from Hell. This meant they could be making dangerous requests to lure people to damnation by persuading them to commit murder or suicide. He also thought that some ghosts are delusions experienced by those suffering from melancholy or madness.
Lord Darnley, the husband of Mary Queen of Scots, was murdered at Kirk o’ Field, Edinburgh in 1567. Shockingly soon afterwards, Mary married Lord Bothwell, the chief suspect in the murder. This was part of the reason for Mary’s deposition from the Scottish throne and the accession of her one-year old son James VI (later James I of England) in 1567.

View a map of the murder of Lord Darnley, 1567

Queen Elizabeth I died childless in 1603, several years after Hamlet was written. Some critics have argued that, in its obsession with death and mourning, the play anticipates this momentous event. By prompting questions about the legitimacy of Gertrude and Claudius’ rule, it could reflect the uncertainty over the royal succession at the end of the 16th century.

View drawings of the funeral procession of Elizabeth I

In early modern England, people were keenly aware of the dangers and benefits of plants as remedies and poisons. John Gerard’s Herball (1597) includes sections on deadly ‘henbane’ and ‘Woolfes bane’, a poison in which arrows were dipped. It also shows the symbolic meaning of daisies, violets and other flowers distributed by Ophelia as she descends into madness.

Explore poisons, sleep-inducing plants and love potions in Gerard’s Herball