

Histoires Tragiques, Sheldon & R.S

Histoires Tragiques, a multi-volume series of French novellas, was first published in 1559, eventually expanding to 7 volumes with 125 novellas published from 1559 to 1616. Although the first volume included six novellas by Pierre Boaistuau – each a translation of a tale by the Italian writer Matteo Bandello – the rest of the series was continued by Francois de Belleforest, providing his own embellished translations of Bandello but expanding to translations of other authors as the series progressed. From the first, these novellas were hugely popular in England, particularly among the ladies of the court, with Elizabeth meeting Boaistuau in an official audience around early 1560.

Four Shakespeare plays were derived directly from the French language novellas of the series: *Romeo & Juliet* (vol. 1), *Much Ado About Nothing* (vol. 3), *Twelfth Night* (vol. 4), and *Hamlet* (vol. 5). Two appendices are included with this essay, setting forth the history of these four plays:

- Appendix I: “Who Wrote the English Play *Romeo & Juliet*, Circa 1560?” documents the evidence available regarding the first stage performance of the iconic classic around 1560.
- Appendix II: “Who Wrote *Hamlet*?” presents the connections between the sources of three Shakespeare plays (*Hamlet*, *Much Ado*, and *12th Night*), concluding that all three plays were written by the same man, relying primarily on untranslated French novellas from the *Histoires Tragiques*.

These essays indicate that all four plays – beginning with the early version of *Romeo & Juliet* c. 1560 – were written by one man, the man later known as Shakespeare. This presents the evidence that this man was Ralph Sheldon.

I. What's in a Name?: Sheldon and *R&J*, c. 1560

Without doubt, *R&J* was first performed on stage around 1560, in London, as attested to by Arthur Brooke in his preface to his own poem “Romeus and Juliet”(1562): he described it as highly commended, superior his own version of the story. And although the script is lost and the author unnamed, the observations of Brooke, as laid out in Appendix I, allow a conclusive determination that the original stage version was drawn from Boaistuau’s novella in the first volume of *Histoires Tragiques* (1559). As Brooke’s poem is a translation of Boaistuau’s novella, and the Shakespeare play is widely believed to have been derived from Boaistuau by way of Brooke’s poem, all three versions of *R&J*: the lost play, Brooke’s poem, and Shakespeare’s play, were developed from the same source – the *Histoires Tragiques* novella.

Is it possible, in fact, that the lost play – not Brooke’s poem – was an early version of the later published Shakespeare play? One significant deviation from the Boaistuau novella, shared by both Brooke’s poem and the Shakespeare play – the renaming of the “Monteche” family (in the French novella) to the “Montague” family – suggests this possibility. The question becomes: did Brooke make the change himself, or did he follow the script of the lost play? If the latter, the lost script may have been an early version of the later Shakespeare play.

While generally dismissed as merely an Anglicized version of the French name, this far understates the contemporary gloss that the change to “Montague” offered in 1560 in England. The Montague family was part of the Catholic White Rose faction – descendants of the Plantagenet family with a claim to the English throne. Henry Pole, the 1st Baron of Montague was executed by Henry VIII on 9 December 1538, along with his Catholic ally Henry Courtenay. In a letter dated 4 days after Montague’s death, Hugh Latimer, Bishop of Worcester, wrote to Thomas Cromwell that “It is long since this King informed me that he meant to exterminate this house of Montague which is of the White Rose.”

The feud between the White Rose faction and the Tudors continued in the next generation. Courtenay’s son Edward (1527-1556), the surviving Catholic White Rose heir,

was imprisoned at the same time his father was executed, and remained imprisoned until the reign of Mary in 1553. Edward wooed Mary, who rejected him (she was much older than him). He pursued her younger sister Elizabeth in 1554. Elizabeth and he were both imprisoned in the Tower for allegedly fomenting rebellion against Mary. Subsequently he was banished to Europe, allowed to travel to Italy at the end of 1555, where he studied at the University of Padua but died suddenly in September 1556, widely suspected of poison.

Given the serious contemporary implications of the name “Montague,” the choice to alter the French name does not seem random. Its implications color the story – and, in fact, the fate of Romeo strongly resembles the death of Edward Courtenay, just 4 years before the stage production. Was the decision to alter the French name that of the author of the lost play, or of Brooke, the translator of the Boaistuau novella? This cannot be completely determined, but in normal course, the role of a translator suggests that Brooke would have stayed close to the text. And if the stage production had not altered the name from the French “Monteche,” why would Brooke the translator have made the politically-fraught change? By comparison, a later English translation of the same novella by William Painter retains the French name.

Further tipping the balance to the author of the lost play is the presence of Ralph Sheldon in London at Middle Temple at the time of the stage performance. Quite obviously, given the accumulated evidence that he may be the author Shakespeare, it seems unlikely that it is mere coincidence that he is working in London at the time of the first performance of a Shakespeare play. However, this is far from the primary evidence supporting Sheldon’s authorship of the lost play.

Rather, the major evidence is Sheldon’s close relationship to Edward Courtenay, the dashing 29-year-old Catholic White Rose heir. At the request of English Ambassador Philip Hoby, a friend of Sheldon’s father, Courtenay agreed to take on the then 18-year-old Sheldon as part of his retinue when he traveled to Italy. Sheldon’s father wished to establish a silk tapestry industry in England: principle centers of silk export were in Verona and Venice. Courtenay and his entourage entered into Italy in early January through

Mantua, a major area of silkworm cultivation. Sheldon entered Middle Temple in November 1556, and was likely still in Italy at the time of Courtenay's tragic death in September 1556. From this personal experience with Courtenay, if there was anyone who knew the fateful significance of the family name "Montague" it was surely Sheldon.

That *R&J* was the first Shakespeare play, and that it was strongly connected with *Jexplanation* for the dreamy plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play (c. 1592) seems a reconstruction of another era, 30 years earlier, when traveling bands of "rude mechanicals" first performed rustic versions of *R&J*, under the mulberry trees in the midst of the silkworm fairies (for the precise parallels between *AMND*'s "Duke's oak" and the western gate of the Mantuan utopian city of Sabbioneta, see the book *Was Shakespeare a Hydden Man?*, p. 78-80).

II. Shakespeare the translator & R.S.

Quite obviously, the writer (as argued here, Sheldon) of the lost 1560 play of *R&J* took the play's plot directly from the original French language novella, as the first English translation (Brooke's poem) was not published until 1562. This seems to start a pattern for the writer using novellas from the French language *Histoires Tragiques*. As described in Appendix II, three other classic Shakespeare plays also derived directly from the French novellas: *Hamlet*, *Much Ado*, and *Twelfth Night*.

Moreover, again as documented fully in Appendix II, the use of the direct French language *Histoires Tragiques* seems unique to these Shakespeare plays, as compared to the known sources of other plays of the era. While other playwrights of the era did, indeed, use these French novellas as sources for their plots, there were published English translations available at the time of these plays. Only the writer of the Shakespeare plays seems irrefutably to have consistently worked as his own translator, deriving his English plays directly from French novellas. This evidence – along with other common source materials – allows the conclusion that one man wrote all three plays discussed in Appendix II, as well as *R&J*, the play that began the writer's fascination with the romantic French novellas.

Beginning in 1566, two major sets of English translations of *Histoires Tragiques* were published: William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566/7) and Geoffrey Fenton's *Tragicall Discourses* (1567). Both were dedicated to members of the Earl of Leicester's family, with Painter's book to Leicester's brother, the Earl of Warwick, and Fenton's book to Leicester's sister Mary Sidney, also lady-in-waiting to Elizabeth. Of the two, Painter's work was the more prolific, eventually expanding to over 100 such romantic novellas.

Ten years later a short one-off book emerged with four additional translations of *Histoires Tragiques* novellas: *Foure Straunge, lamentable, and tragicall histories translated out of French into Englishe by R.S.* (1577). These are four tales from early volumes 1 & 2. Unlike the Painter and Fenton works, however, this book is not dedicated to any grand person, and, instead seems to apologize for the unpolished quality of the translations. An introduction by "T.N." notes that the translations "would have been better pollyshed" if God "had lent to the Author longer lyfe." The same T.N. indicates that in publishing this volume of tales he is fathering the "Fatherlesse and protect[ing] the pore Orphane." From these notations by T.N., readers have assumed the early demise of the translator R.S. Further complicating the matter, the Stationers Register lists the work to "R. Smythe," a name conflated with R.S. for obvious reasons. See *Hydden Man*, 150-63.

But, what if, instead of a dead translator named R. Smythe, this is the cast-aside work of a harried playwright, one who at the time was writing plays not only for the Children of Paul's but also for Leicester's Men to perform at their newly opened public playhouse – Ralph Sheldon as R.S.? As noted, the writer Shakespeare has a clear and strong propensity to his own translations of the *Histoires Tragiques*. From the timing, these could be the results of his early efforts.

Obviously, if the translator R.S. is Ralph Sheldon, the introduction and the notation in the Stationers Register would need to be considered part of the continuing effort to keep the Catholic Sheldon deeply masked, and out of the public eye. What is the evidence for this?

First, it seems fair to recognize that the translations published – early novellas from the *Histoires Tragiques*, even if never used – are consistent with the Shakespeare oeuvre and, in fact, trademark sources relied upon by the Shakespeare writer. Further, the language in the anonymous introduction by T.N. seems exceedingly arch if sincerely meant to commemorate the untimely death of an apparent friend and colleague. Finally, it might be noted that “R. Smthe” – as in Robert Symthe – is also the name of a lawyer with whom Sheldon shared Middle Temple chambers during (at least) 1559-60.

While none of this can be absolutely conclusive, a similar sense of obfuscation and ambiguity as to the identity of “R.S.” is shared in another book attributed to “R.S.”, *The Phoenix Nest* (1593). The work is an elegant volume of poetry from elite Oxford poets, with tributes to both Leicester and his late nephew Philip Sidney. The volume is introduced as “Set foorth by R.S. of the Inner Temple Gentleman.” See *Hydden Man*, 196-205.

In his modern edition of the book, Harvard scholar Hyder Edward Rollins details his extensive search for a possible candidate for the editor R.S. among all known Inner Temple members, to no success. See *Hydden Man*, 59-60, 64, 199-200. See From this, the introductory phrase would seem either deliberately false, or a well-accepted ruse to benevolently mask the identity of R.S. As both the poets included in the volume, and the likely audience of the book, would be very familiar with both the editor R.S. and the Inner Temple, the latter conclusion seems be far more likely.

Both the two works – the 1577 translations and the 1593 poetry volume – are wholly consistent with the work of the writer at the time. The 1577 translation work was published as the same time the writer would have been likely working on other plays also drawn directly from the *Histoires Tragiques*, such as *Hamlet* and *Much Ado*. The 1593 poetry volume was published the same year as *Venus & Adonis*; its predominant poetry meter was the *Venus & Adonis* 6-line stanza, with also much focus on the English sonnet (the Shakespearean sonnet). The volume marked the new “golden age” of English poetry, first heralded by Philip Sidney. For a general discussion of R.S. and Sheldon, see *Hydden Man*, 57-66.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the pseudonym covering the writer of the Shakespeare plays has deeply shrouded the identity of the writer known as Shakespeare for over 400 years. It must be conceded that the success of this utter secrecy can only be attributed to a very disciplined and orderly approach to insisting at all times to the writer's anonymity, efforts which would necessitate serious endeavors to mask any and all of the writer's literary contributions.

APPENDIX I

Who Wrote the First English Play *Romeo & Juliet*, circa 1560?

It is commonly assumed that William Shakespeare wrote his iconic play *Romeo & Juliet* around 1594-95, using Arthur Brooke's English poem *Romeus & Juliet* (1562) as the play's main source.¹

Yet Brooke himself attested to an English stage performance of *Romeo & Juliet* that preceded his poem, a play that presented the same narrative as his poem. This early play has no extant script and its author is anonymous, and is rarely considered in modern Shakespearean criticism. Even so, salient factors about this lost play – its plot outline, source, date, and location – can be determined about this first English stage version of *Romeo & Juliet*. This essay argues that, in fact, the lost play is an example of a plot construction technique – the translation and embellishment of a popular French novella as the basis for a play script – used by Shakespeare in other plays, most notably *Hamlet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night*.² So, might they all be written by the same man?

I. What facts can be deduced from the existing record?

1. Without doubt, there was an English stage production of the tale of Romeo and Juliet sometime around 1562. In a preface to his poem *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* published in 1562, the author “Ar. Br.” (Arthur Brooke) noted that he had “lately” seen the “same argument” on stage:

¹ See, for example, Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. I (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961), 269.

² See Nancy Maude post dated April 19, 2026, with the substack *Who Wrote Shakespeare*, Shakespeare Authorship Trust, on “Who Wrote Hamlet?” – a discussion of the so-called “Ur-Hamlet,” concluding that the known sources of the three plays were so uniquely connected as to strongly indicate that the same author wrote all versions of all three plays.

Though I saw the same argument lately set forth on stage with more commendation than I can look for – being there much better set forth than I have or can do – yet the same matter penned as it is may serve to like good effect, if the readers do bring with them like good minds to consider it, which hath the more more encouraged me to publish it, such as it is.³

2. As the “argument” of both Brooke’s poem and the play are the “same,” the general outline of the play is also clear. Brooke summarizes the plot of both in an introductory sonnet specifically entitled “THE ARGUMENT”:

Love hath inflamed twain by sudden sight,
And both do grant the thing that both desire.
They wed in shrift by counsel of a friar.
Young Romeus climbs fair Juliet’s bower by night.
Three months he doth enjoy his chief delight.
By Tybalt’s rage provoked unto ire,
He payeth death to Tybalt for his hire.
A banished man he scapes by secret flight.
New marriage is offered to his wife.
She drinks a drink that seems to reave her breath:
They bury her that sleeping yet hath life.
Her husband hears the tidings of her death.
He drinks his bane. And she with Romeus’ knife,
When she awakes, herself, alas! she slay’th.⁴

3. From the details set forth in THE ARGUMENT, the source of the play (and the poem) can be identified: Pierre Boaistuau’s *Histoires tragiques* (1559, Paris). In 1562, three major versions of the tale were available: two Italian novellas, Luigi da Porto’s *Istoria novellamente ritrovata di due Nobili Amanti* (c. 1530) and Matteo Bandello’s *Le Novelle del Bandello* (1554); as well as Boaistuau’s French translation of Bandello’s novella. But between the Italian novellas and Boaistuau’s French translation, there was a key difference: in both Italian versions, Romeo is alive when Juliet awakes, while in Boaistuau’s retelling, Juliet awakes to a dead Romeo.⁵ As THE ARGUMENT’s final two lines indicate, the play (and the poem) follow Boaistuau.

³ Arthur Brooke, *Romeus and Juliet*, ed. J.J. Munro (London: Chatto and Windus Duffied and Company, 1908), lxvi.

⁴ Brooke, lxvii.

⁵ Bullough, vol. I, 274. Comparing the ending of the Boaistuau’s version with that of da Porto and Bandello, Bullough writes: “Boaistuau omits the ironic situation at the close obtained by da Porto and Bandello, who

4. With the identification of the source, the date of the play can also be confirmed: sometime between 1559 (when Boaistuau's novella was first published) and 1562 (when Brooke published his poem).
5. From two other circumstances, the location of the play in London seems most likely. First, in either late 1559 or early 1560, Boaistuau traveled to England and met with the Queen in an official audience, indicating both his fame in England and her particular interest in his work.⁶ As a special edition of the 1559 *Histoires tragiques* is dedicated to the Queen, it is thought that Boaistuau sent the volume to the Queen in advance of his trip in an effort to win her favor.⁷ Second, Inner Temple archives include a notation that Brooke ("Broke") was given special admission to the Temple on 4 February 1562 without payment, in consideration of work for the Christmas festivities of 1561/2.⁸ Thus, both the Boaistuau novella and its English translator Brooke seem to have special connection to London during this period.

II. As both the lost play and the Brooke poem have the same source and the same story as the Shakespeare play, could the lost play – and not the Brooke poem – be the original version of Shakespeare's play?

Whoever wrote the lost play wrote without any published English translation. Is it possible that this play was, in fact, the original version of Shakespeare's play? Or to put it another

keep Romeo alive until Juliet awakes. He dies, she wakes, kisses his body, and laments, then draws his dagger from its sheath, wounds herself with many blows, and dies after making a speech."

⁶ Georgios Doukas, *Pierre Boaistuau (c. 1517-1566) and the Employment of Humanism in Mid Sixteenth-Century France*, PhD Thesis (Univ. of Birmingham, 2011; etheses.bham.ac.uk), 54-6.

⁷ Doukas, 60; Richard Carr, *Pierre Boaistuau's Histoires Tragiques : Study of Narrative Form and Tragic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 25-6; Nicole Prunster, *Romeo & Juliet Before Shakespeare: Four Early Stories of Star-Crossed Love* (Toronto, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 6.

⁸ Clare Rider, "Lord Robert Dudley, 'chief patron and defender' of the Inner Temple," (London, Inner Temple Yearbook 2000/2001; www.InnerTemple.org.uk/who-we-are/history). The festivities for which Brooke was given admission were presided over by Robert Dudley as Lord Governor of the Christmas revels.

way, was this first performance not a “lost play” but rather an early script that its author revised over the years into the final published version of the iconic *Romeo & Juliet*? This second part sketches out the evidence that the author of the lost play and the author of the published *Romeo & Juliet* were actually one and the same person – the person eventually known as Shakespeare.

1. Although it has always been assumed that Shakespeare needed an English translation of Boaistuau – most likely Brooke’s – to write his play, there is no evidence that documents this assumption as a fact. To the contrary, the published *Romeo and Juliet* includes evidence that Shakespeare translated independently of the Brooke translation in constructing his plot for the play. Scholars have identified clear instances where Shakespeare followed Boaistuau and da Porto directly, without reference to Brooke. Kenneth Muir cites an example of Shakespeare independently following Boaistuau rather than Brooke.⁹ Olin H. Moore documents four instances where Shakespeare followed da Porto, rather than either Boaistuau or Brooke.¹⁰
2. Brooke’s translation contains two examples of changes to the Boaistuau translation: he altered the family name from “Montesche” to “Montague,”¹¹ and he makes the nurse into a comic character.¹² Both changes are trademarks of the Shakespeare play: were they originally in the first performance of the play circa 1560? From the known context, it cannot be determined whether Brooke took from the stage adaptation (which inspired his translation) or simply embellished the Boaistuau translation himself.

However, it can be argued that playwright of the lost play would have been more motivated to make such changes than a translator such as Brooke. Indeed, the later translation of the same Boaistuau novella by William Painter (1567) retains the French

⁹ Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare* (Yale University Press, 1978), 39.

¹⁰ Olin H. Moore, “Shakespeare’s Deviations from *Romeus and Juliet*,” *PMLA*, vol. 52, no. 1 (Mar. 1937; www.jstor.org/stable/458697) 68-74.

¹¹ Compare: the Brooke (and Shakespeare) “Capulet” is much closer to the Boaistuau “Capellet.”

¹² Brooke, lvii.

name, using “Montesche.” Moreover, if the original stage production had likewise retained the same French name, why would the subsequent translator alter the family name used in both the original novella and the popular play? Similarly, the introduction of a bawdy nurse character would engage the theater audience in a way that would be of far more impact in a stage performance than a poetic translation.

3. Most significantly, the lost play is first in a pattern unique to Shakespeare plays: it is derived from an untranslated French novella from the hugely popular multi-volume French series, *Histoires tragiques*.¹³ This is exactly the same as three later Shakespeare plays: *Hamlet* (*Histoires tragiques*, vol. V, histoire 3, 1570); *Much Ado About Nothing* (*Histoires tragiques*, vol. III, histoire 18, 1569); *Twelfth Night* (*Histoires tragiques*, vol. IV, histoire 7, 1570). Like the lost play, none of these plays was available in translation at the time of the first play performance. Among the other known plays of the era, these were the only plays using untranslated versions of *Histoires tragiques*.¹⁴
4. An early theatrical version of *Romeo & Juliet* is strongly suggested in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the playlet *Pyramus & Thisbe*: eminent scholar Geoffrey Bullough commented that the playlet may have been “a whimsical burlesque of Shakespeare’s first experiment in romantic tragedy.”¹⁵ In *AMND*, the playlet – an very early version of

¹³ Boaistuau’s *Histoires tragiques* began a multi-volume series of novellas, published from 1559 to 1616. Boaistuau’s first volume included translations of six Bandello novellas, published in Paris in 1559 by Vincent Sertenas. In the same year, Boaistuau’s friend and collaborator Francoise de Belleforest added twelve more Bandello novellas to Boaistuau’s original six; Belleforest’s twelve novellas were published as the *Continuation des histoires tragiques*, and in 1560, Boaistuau’s and Belleforest’s stories were combined into one volume, *XVIII Histoires tragiques*. From then on, Belleforest continued to publish new volumes of *Histoires tragiques*, with ultimately seven volumes including 125 novellas. See Georgios Doukas, 79-80, Carr, 25.

¹⁴ The French *Histoires tragiques* series proved hugely successful in England; beginning in the 1560’s there were English translations of the novellas, with Brooke’s 1562 translation of *Romeus & Juliet* followed by other English translations by William Painter (1566/67), Geoffrey Fenton (1567), and writer ‘R.S.’ (1577).¹⁴ However, there were no English translations of any of the four aforementioned Shakespeare plays (*R&J*, *Hamlet*, *Much Ado*, *Twelfth Night*) before the plays were first performed. William Painter included a translation of Boaistuau’s *Romeo and Juliet* novella in his *Palace of Pleasure* (1567); this was obviously after the performance of the lost play. Also, there was an English translation of *Hamlet*, first published in 1608, after the publication of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. See Nancy Maude, *Substack Who Wrote Shakespeare* 19 April 2026.

¹⁵ Bullough, vol. I, 269.

the *Romeo & Juliet* tragedy – was performed not by professional actors but by “rude mechanicals” in a rustic woodland setting. Was *AMND* and its playlet, first performed circa 1592, a comic reenactment of the lost first performance of *Romeo & Juliet*, staged over 30 years earlier?

Was Shakespeare the author of the lost play? Absent other evidence of the actual script of the lost play, and without consensus as to the identity of Shakespeare, no conclusion is possible. However, no English playwright other than Shakespeare has ever taken – or been given – credit for the iconic play *Romeo & Juliet*. So, if not Shakespeare himself as author, who else?

APPENDIX II

Who Wrote *Hamlet*?

Since the 18th century, there has been near certainty that a version of *Hamlet* predated the commonly-accepted chronology of Shakespeare plays. But the question remains: who wrote this earlier version?

This essay argues that overlapping rare and esoteric source material shared between *Hamlet* and other Shakespeare plays indicates a high probability that the author of the so-called *Ur-Hamlet* was the same man who wrote *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Richard II*, *Henry V*.¹ And conversely, that it is actually improbable that some other writer – not Shakespeare – used the same rare source material to construct *Ur-Hamlet* randomly, independent of these other iconic Shakespeare plays.

I. The History of the *Ur-Hamlet*

In an essay first published in 1778, the Irish barrister Edmond Malone compiled what is still a widely accepted chronology of the Shakespeare plays.² Concerning *Hamlet*, he recognized that “some play on the story of *Hamlet* had been exhibited before the year 1589” – 1589 being the year that he believed the actor/playwright Shakespeare had produced his first play. To reconcile this apparent anomaly, Malone wrote that he was “inclined to think that it was not Shakespeare’s drama, but an elder performance, on which, with the aid of the old prose *History of Hamlet*, his tragedy was formed.”³

Malone went on to speculate that “[P]erhaps the original *Hamlet* was written by Thomas Kyd.” His evidence regarding Kyd was threefold: (1) Kyd wrote at least one other play anonymously; (2) Kyd had used a source translated from French for another play; and (3) in Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, Kyd presented a play “within a play.”⁴ Nearly 250 years later, Malone’s speculation on an *Ur-Hamlet*, with possible attribution to Thomas Kyd as its author, remains the pervasive view.⁵

In the intervening period, much debate ensued on the exact source of the *Hamlet* story, leading to a consensus that the principal source was a French novella by Francois de Belleforest (1530-83).⁶ Based upon a 12th century history by Danish writer Saxo Grammaticus, Belleforest’s

Amleth was first published in 1570 as the third story in Volume V of his *Les Histoires Tragiques*.⁷ However, while many Belleforest stories were translated into English during the 1560s and 1570s, *Amleth* was not. There was no English translation of the novella until 1608, after the publication of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.⁸ The absence of an English translation of the *Hamlet* story led to yet another speculative reason for *Ur-Hamlet*: after the publication of the Belleforest novella, the writer of *Ur-Hamlet* translated the story to produce an early stage play which was then used by the actor/playwright Shakespeare to create *Hamlet*.⁹ Nonetheless, no printed version of *Ur-Hamlet* by Thomas Kyd – or any other playwright – has ever been found to exist.

Missing from this analysis is any comparison between the sources used to construct *Hamlet* and those which underpin other Shakespeare plays. What if the rare sources that underly *Hamlet* (for example, an untranslated Belleforest novella) matched those used in other Shakespeare plays, and that the use of these particular rare sources was absent from other plays of the era but unique to the Shakespeare oeuvre? That is, if Shakespeare used untranslated Belleforest novellas in other play(s), then it cannot be ruled out that he used another such a play in an early version of *Hamlet*. Further, if he were the only English playwright with a record of use of such untranslated Belleforest novellas – along with other equally rare sources – would he not be the most probable author?

II. Common Source of *Hamlet* and *Much Ado*: Untranslated Belleforest

In 16th and 17th century literature, Belleforest novellas are recognized as the source of plays by various authors as well as Shakespeare.¹⁰ However, the Belleforest novellas used as sources by these authors had most often been previously translated from the French to English, principally by the English writer William Painter in his two-volume work, *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566/67).¹¹ In fact, of the roughly eighteen plays identified as derived from Belleforest during this period, all – with the exception of three Shakespeare plays – had been previously translated by Painter.¹²

Modern research generally agrees that three Shakespeare plays were drawn from untranslated French Belleforest novellas: *Hamlet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and (possibly) *Twelfth Night*.¹³ The Belleforest novellas underlying these three plays first appeared in editions published in 1569 (*Much Ado*, volume 3),¹⁴ 1570 (*Twelfth Night*, volume 4),¹⁵ and 1570 (*Hamlet*,

volume 5). By the time that Shakespeare first published these plays, none of the original Belleforest novellas underpinning these three plays had been published in English. Therefore, unlike the standard practice of other playwrights of the era, these Shakespeare plays drew from the original French edition of the Belleforest novellas, not English translations.

Whereas the precise source of *Twelfth Night* (the Italian play *Gl'Ingannati*, Italian writers Cinthio, Bandello, or the French Belleforest) has not been determined,¹⁶ the source of *Much Ado* – very like *Hamlet* – has been investigated for the past 100 years. As with *Hamlet*, the question was whether the play's plot involving Hero was derived directly from the original story – in this case, Bandello's Italian tale – or through the intermediary French translation by Belleforest.¹⁷ And, again like *Hamlet*, it is, as stated in the 2018 Arden Shakespeare, “generally agreed” that the French translation of Belleforest is a principal source of *Much Ado*.¹⁸

III. Other Common Sources Between *Hamlet* and Other Shakespeare Plays

Between *Hamlet* and *Much Ado*, there is another important overlap of sources: Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (The Courtier), as translated by Thomas Hoby in 1561. The work gave a detailed portrait of the Italian court of Guidobaldo I with this wife Elizabeth Gonzaga. Of this book and its connection with *Hamlet*, Geoffrey Bullough in 1973 wrote that “there can be little doubt that Shakespeare knew Hoby's translation and that it influenced his depiction of courtly manners,” further citing another scholar W.B.D. Henderson: “[W]ithout Castiglione, we should not have had a *Hamlet*.”¹⁹ Similarly, Bullough pointed out parallels between *Il Cortegiano*'s Lady Emilia Pia and Lord Gaspare Pallavicino and *Much Ado*'s characters Beatrice and Benedict.²⁰

In addition to its use of the rare untranslated version of Belleforest bolstered by Hoby's translation of *Il Cortegiano*, *Hamlet* shares yet another exceedingly rare source with other Shakespeare plays: the legal writings (also untranslated from French) of the Catholic jurist Edmund Plowden (c. 1518-85). In Act 5, scene 1 of *Hamlet*, the gravediggers comment on Ophelia's death. Their description is recognized universally as drawn directly from the legal holding in 1561 judicial case, *Hales v. Petit*,²¹ a commentary included by Plowden in his court reports published in 1571, reports written in Norman French.²² No one, however, can explain the provenance of such a source in *Hamlet*.²³ Not only would it have been an obscure legal source in 1571, it also was not translated into English until 1761.

Much like the rarity of the untranslated (French) Belleforest novellas as a source of English drama – with no other similar use known in the Elizabethan era – so too is rarity of the use of the also untranslated (French) Plowden source. Similarly to the Belleforest circumstances, although Plowden’s legal writings are apparently not used by other playwrights of the era, Plowden’s writing is included in other Shakespeare plays. The most prominent use of Plowden’s work as a source of a Shakespeare plot is found in *Richard II*, the source first described by scholar Ernst Kantorowicz. In a ground-breaking study published in 1957, Kantorowicz identifies Plowden’s theory of the ‘King’s Two Bodies’ as a significant source of *Richard II*.²⁴ As with the gravediggers’ scene in *Hamlet*, the original source of this doctrine was Plowden’s legal writings in his French Norman court reports.²⁵ In fact, the principal case on the subject, the 1561 *Case of the Duchy of Lancaster* (1 Plowden 212), was reported by Plowden in the same volume with the source of the gravediggers’ scene, *Hales v. Petit* (1 Plowden 253)²⁶: the two cases are found 30 pages apart in the translated reports.²⁷ Reference to the ‘King’s Two Bodies’ can also be found in *Henry V*,²⁸ and, most significantly, in a line in *Hamlet*: “[T]he body is with the king, but the king is not with the body” (*Hamlet* 4.2.26-7).

Finally, it should be noted that all the sources identified as overlapping in *Hamlet* and other Shakespeare plays date from the 1560s and 1570s, the early decades of the Elizabethan era. This would seem consistent with, and relevant to, the apparent early date of the first version of *Hamlet*.

Can this overlap of rare and unique sources be considered coincidental? As described above, *Hamlet* was meticulously constructed using an untranslated Belleforest novella combined with a translation of a work describing Italian court life, as well as a vignette created from the legal writings of Edmund Plowden; these same general sources form the structure of other Shakespeare plays, and are found nowhere else in Elizabethan literature. Did some other writer, such as Thomas Kyd – someone with no affiliation with any of the other Shakespeare plays – just randomly seek out and use the same rare sources to independently create an early pre-Shakespearean version of *Hamlet*? This seems highly unlikely. It seems far more probable that whomever wrote *Hamlet* also wrote the other Shakespeare plays routinely constructed with similar sources.

¹ Essentially, this essay presents an evidentiary basis for a theory that the writer Shakespeare wrote early versions of his later publications: that he was a revisionist of his manuscripts, eventually creating literary masterpieces from his original play scripts, following the theory set forth by Lukas Erne in his *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also Margrethe Jolly, *The First Two Quartos of Hamlet: A New View of the Origins and Relationships of the Texts* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2014).

² Edmond Malone, "An Attempt to Ascertain the Order in which the Plays of Shakspeare Were Written" in *The plays and poems of William Shakspeare* 10 vol. (London: 1790) Vol. 1, Part 1, pp. 261 et seq. (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/004135187>; see #361/530).

³ Malone, p. 305 (Hathitrust #405/530).

⁴ Malone, p. 306 (Hathitrust #406/530).

⁵ See, for example, Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, eds., *William Shakespeare, Hamlet*. The Royal Shakespeare Company Shakespeare (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 2008), p. 5.

⁶ Much of the debate concerned whether the play was drawn directly from its original source (Saxo Grammaticus) or through the French intermediary (Belleforest). In his 1982 edition of *Hamlet*, Harold Jenkins concluded decisively that the source was Belleforest: "Direct indebtedness [to Saxo] is improbable, and arguments in favor of it appear to be without substance. What made the story available to the Elizabethans was its retelling in their own day by the Frenchman Belleforest . . ." See Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet*. The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen & Co., 1982), p. 89. This view remains the prevalent consensus; see, for example, Jolly's summary of this debate (Jolly, p. 32).

⁷ Belleforest published Volume V of *Histoires Tragiques* in 1570 in Paris, with 10 later editions following (1572, Paris; 1576, Lyon; 1580, Lyon; 1581, Lyon; 1582, Paris; 1583, Lyon; 1591, Lyon; 1601, Lyon; 1603, Rouen; 1604, Rouen): Frank S. Hook, *The French Bandello* (University of Missouri, 1948), p. 49.

⁸ In his commentary on *Ur-Hamlet*, Malone noted the "old prose *History of Hamlet*," (see above); this was an English translation of Belleforest published in 1608 as the *Hystorie of Hamblet*. Although Malone presented this as a possible direct source for Shakespeare, subsequent scholarship has fully discredited such a theory: in his edition of *Hamlet*, Jenkins writes of the work, "it is, of course, too late for Shakespeare, and indeed appears at one point to be drawing on Shakespeare's play." See Jenkins, p. 89.

⁹ In his discussion on Belleforest as the source of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Jenkins concludes that Shakespeare relied on an *Ur-Hamlet* play for the principal elements of Belleforest's novella, writing "it is as inconceivable that the *Ur-Hamlet* did not use Belleforest as it is that Shakespeare did not use the *Ur-Hamlet*." See Jenkins, p. 96.

¹⁰ In her study on English plays of this period, Mary Augusta Scott identified 18 plays as derived from Belleforest, with 11 named authors. In addition to Shakespeare, Scott identifies plays by George Peele (*Mahomet*, 1594); anonymous (*Edward III*); Marston (*The Wonder of Women*, 1606; *The Insatiate Countess*, 1613); Gervase Markham and Lewis Machin (*The Dumb Knight*, 1608); Webster (*The Duchess of Malfi*, 1623); Sir William Davenant (*Albovine*, 1629); Fletcher (*The Maid in the Mill*, 1647; *Four Plays in One*, 1647); anonymous (*The Queen, or The Excellency of her Sex*, 1653); Lodowick Carlell (*Osmund the Great Turk*, 1657); Gilbert Swinhoe (*The Unhappy Fair Irene*, 1658); Middleton (*The Witch*, 1788). See Scott, "Elizabethan Translations from the Italian," PMLA vol. 10, no. 2(1895; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/456368>) pp. 280-1.

¹¹ Romantic novellas – especially the French versions of stories by Italian author Matteo Bandello – were highly popular among the English beginning around 1559, with the publication of eighteen Bandello stories rewritten by Belleforest and another French author, Pierre Boaistuau. See Rene Pruvost, *Matteo Bandello and Elizabethan Fiction* (Paris, 1937), p. 14. Among these novellas was Boaistuau's version of Bandello's tale of *Romeo*, widely agreed to be a principal source of Shakespeare's play. See, for example, Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (Yale University Press, 1978), p. 39. Subsequently, Belleforest wrote 7 volumes of similar novellas in a series known as *Les Histoires Tragiques*: volume 1 in 1554; volume 2 in 1565; volume 3 in 1568; volumes 4 & 5 in 1570; volumes 6 & 7 in 1582. Numerous editions of each volume followed, all published in France, with the latest publication in 1616. See Hook, pp. 11, 48-50. About thirty of these stories – largely novellas from volumes 1 & 2 retelling Bandello tales – were then translated into English by three translators: William Painter, Geoffrey Fenton, and someone identified as "R.S." Painter was a principal translator of the French and Italian romances of the Elizabethan era, publishing over 100 of such tales in his

Palace of Pleasure (1566/67). In this work Painter included 25 Bandello stories, 16 of which were derived directly from Belleforest (Hook, p. 35). The translations of Fenton and R.S. were both drawn solely from Belleforest's stories from Bandello, with 13 published by Fenton in 1567 in *Tragicall Discourses* dedicated to Lady Mary Sidney (Hook, p. 20-2), and 4 more published in *Four Straune and lamentable Tragicall Hystories. Translated out of French into English by R.S. Anno. 1577* (Pruvost, pp. 78-83).

¹² Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* was published in two volumes dedicated to the Earl of Warwick: the first, published in 1566, contained 66 novellas from many sources including 7 Bandello stories; the second, published in 1567, included 35 novellas, nearly half (17) of which were Bandello stories; the two volumes were printed together in 1575. See Hook, p. 35. Scott lists 23 plays of the period whose plots are in Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*; with the exception of three Shakespeare plays, the plays derived from Belleforest sources (see note above) also are sources translated by Painter. See Scott, pp. 259-61.

¹³ See Hook, pp. 18-9. The story underlying *Twelfth Night* was derived from either Belleforest or an Italian source; none of the possible sources (like those of the other two Shakespeare plays) were translated into English at the time of the publication of the Shakespeare play.

¹⁴ Belleforest vol. 3, Histoire 18: the story of Don Timbreo and Fenicia (from Bandello, vol. 1, novelle 22).

¹⁵ Belleforest vol. 4, Histoire 7: the plot of the Italian play *Gl'Ingannati* (1527), also retold by Italian writers Bandello (vol. 2, novelle 36) and Cinthio.

¹⁶ According to Geoffrey Bullough, "to assess Shakespeare's indebtedness to this tradition is a formidable task," (Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vol. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957-78) vol. II, p. 270). Hook noted that the "same sort of scholarship" undertaken for *Hamlet* and *Much Ado* could be done for *Twelfth Night* (Hook, p. 19).

¹⁷ The work of C.T. Prouty, *The Sources of 'Much Ado About Nothing'* (Yale University Press, 1950), was instrumental in pointing out the importance of Belleforest's narrative to the plot of *Much Ado*. Hook summarizes Prouty's work distinguishing the importance of Belleforest in creating the character of Don Juan: "Belleforest changed the rather pale character of Bandello into a true Machiavellian villain" (Hook, p. 19).

¹⁸ Deborah Cartmell and Peter J. Smith, eds., *Much Ado About Nothing*. The Arden Shakespeare (London, 2018), p. 190.

¹⁹ See Bullough, vol. VII, p. 31.

²⁰ See Bullough, vol. II, pp. 78-9. Cartmell and Smith, p. 190 also recognize the study of the influence of *Il Cortegiano* on the character of Benedict.

²¹ See, for example, John Dover Wilson, ed., *The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare* (Cambridge University Press, 1934) pp. 231-2; Jenkins, p. 547.

²² Edmund Plowden, *Les Commentaries, ou, Les Reportes*, 1 Plowden 253 (1571).

²³ As put by Jolly: "somehow Shakespeare seems to have heard or read about the case of Hales"; see Jolly, p. 186.

²⁴ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 7-41. Charles R. Forker, ed., *Richard II*. The Arden Shakespeare (2002) recognizes, quoting Kantorowicz, the influence of the theory of King's Two Bodies on the play but does not acknowledge (or mention) the Plowden source. See Forker, pp. 17-8; 331note 171-3.

²⁵ Kantorowicz, p. 7. Marie Axton also points out that Plowden first introduced his theory in an unpublished anonymous manuscript dated 1566. See Marie Axton, "The Influence of Edmund Plowden's Succession Treatise," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 37 (May, 1974) 209, footnote 2.

²⁶ Kantorowicz, pp. 9, 403.

²⁷ See *The commentaries, or Reports, of Edmund Plowden* (London, 1761; <https://archive.org/details/commentariesorre00grea/page/222/mode/2up>). This is the translated version of Plowden's *Les Commentaries*; it combines Plowden's first volume (1571) with his second volume (1578). In this translated version, the two referenced cases are 30 pages apart (see pp. 223 to 253.)

²⁸ Kantorowicz, p. 24. See Forker, p. 17.