

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 Pallavincino 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 Histories. 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, nouvelle 22).

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