**Fun Facts about “Hamlet”**

“Hamlet is an unlikely masterpiece—crowded, ungainly, gratuitous, and impossibly long, more than twice the typical length of a play from the period. Furthermore, though it ends in mass violence, for much of Hamlet not much happens. None other than T.S. Eliot called it a failure: ‘Hamlet, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, or manipulate into art. We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble enigma.’

(Marvin W. Hunt, _Looking for Hamlet_

*Hamlet* is arguably Shakespeare’s best-known and most frequently-performed play—also his longest, running about five hours uncut. In the four hundred or so years since it was written, it has seduced countless performers, survived productions of all sorts, and served as the inspiration for numerous works of art.

**Works Derived from Hamlet:**

Works which have been influenced by Hamlet, or in which Hamlet is mentioned or otherwise utilized as a story device, include novels (Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*, and John Updike’s *Gertrude and Claudius*), plays (such as Sir Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*), operas (most especially *Hamlet*, by Ambroise Thomas), musicals, ballets, even porn films—ever see *Hamlet: For the Love of Ophelia, Parts 1 and 2*? Shakespeare’s version of *Hamlet* has itself been filmed some 40 times, and movies as wide-ranging as Kurasawa’s *The Bad Sleep Well* and Disney’s *The Lion King* have borrowed elements from Shakespeare’s tragedy.

**Sources**

The inspiration for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is not known for certain, but one possible source is a 13th-century legend called *Amleth*, chronicled by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus. Although it is unlikely that Shakespeare would have known the original story of *Amleth*, it is quite possible that he discovered it in an adaptation by 16th-century scholar François de Belleforest, which was published in French in 1570.

Theories about the source material for *Hamlet* abound. Maybe the most tantalizing theory of them all is that of the Ur-Hamlet (Original Hamlet). The Ur-Hamlet is a hypothetical first version of the Hamlet play, perhaps written by Shakespeare, or possibly by another playwright of the time, Thomas Kyd, author of *The Spanish Tragedy* (1589), a play extremely popular in its day.

Elements of Shakespeare’s play that do not appear in the Danish or French sources—the ghost of the King, the character of Laertes, a travelling troupe of players, the gravedigger—may have been present in the Ur-Hamlet. However, as the Ur-Hamlet was never printed, there is no concrete proof it actually existed, making it unlikely this particular mystery will ever be solved.
Versions of the Play, HAMLET

Most important among the extant versions of Hamlet are the three earliest: the First Quarto (1603), the Second Quarto (1604), and the First Folio (1623). Current scholarship regards each of these versions as having some merit, since each of the three includes lines, and, in some cases, whole scenes, missing from the others. Many modern editions of the play have combined elements from the three texts to create an amalgamated version for performance purposes.

The First Quarto was likely a reconstruction from memory by an actor who had performed in the play. It is missing almost half the text to be found in the Second Quarto, published a year later. Although for this reason Q1 has been labeled the “Bad Quarto” by scholars, it does contain elements that are of great value: the inclusion of stage directions, which have helped reveal to us some of the stage practices of Shakespeare’s time, and an entire scene (Act 4, Scene 6) which appears in neither of the other two versions. (The Seeing Place production includes this scene.)

The First Folio was published in 1623 (seven years after Shakespeare’s death), and includes thirty-six of the thirty-eight plays which today we attribute to Shakespeare. Had it not been for the efforts of two of Shakespeare’s friends and fellow actors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, in putting together the First Folio, many of these plays might have been lost forever.

Performance

The role of Hamlet was written for the actor Richard Burbage. Burbage was in his thirties when he first performed Hamlet, and cut a stout and rather unromantic figure. Nevertheless, he was a great success in the role, and performed as Hamlet until the end of his career. (Shakespeare, an actor himself, appeared most notably as the Ghost in Hamlet.)

In the 400 years since Burbage, the role has been performed by highly acclaimed actors and actresses from each successive age, from David Garrick to Sarah Bernhardt, John Barrymore, Laurence Olivier, Mel Gibson, and Adrian Lester.

Interpretation

Each successive age had its own idea of what the play should be: The Restoration Era removed most of the religious or moral ambiguity (which served to remove much of the title character’s complexity); The Romantic Movement brought out the poetry and emotion of the piece;

The Victorians dismissed the darker and more internalized aspects of the character; and with the advent of Freud, focus shifted in the Twentieth Century to the character’s mental imbalance, sexuality and Oedipal leanings.
**FUN FACTS ABOUT “ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD”**

One of the best-known works derived from Shakespeare's play is Sir Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The title of Stoppard’s play is taken from one of the final lines in *Hamlet*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is an absurdist, existentialist take on the Hamlet story, as viewed from the vantage point of two of its minor characters. In this play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take center stage and attempt to unravel exactly WHAT is going on, as *Hamlet’s* major characters flit in and out of the action.

**Interpretations**

*Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* is often compared to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, because of the relationship between its two major characters, and because of certain similar story elements. Stoppard, however, insists that "the play had no substance beyond its own terms, beyond its apparent situation. It was about two courtiers in a Danish castle. Two nonentities surrounded by intrigue, given very little information and much of that false. It had nothing to do with the condition of modern man or the decline of metaphysics. One wasn't thinking, 'Life is an anteroom in which one has to kill time.' God help us, what a play that would have been. But Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wasn't about that at all. It was about two blokes, right?"

In an interview with Theatre Quarterly, Stoppard speaks of his work thusly: "insofar as it's possible for me to look at my own work objectively at all, the element which I find most valuable is the one that other people are put off by--that is, that there is very often no single, clear statement in my plays."

**Productions**

Stoppard’s play first saw the light of day in 1964, as a one-act entitled *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*. The first production of the expanded and re-titled version was at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1966. It was subsequently produced at the National Theater in London in 1967, and came to Broadway, where it ran for a year, received four Tony Awards, and was voted Best Play of 1968 by the New York Drama Critics Circle.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* was transferred to film in 1990, and starred Gary Oldman, Tim Roth, and Richard Dreyfuss. Sir Tom Stoppard directed the film version, and also adapted his play for the screen.