THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 178: MUCH ADO ABOUT HAMLET

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 178: Much Ado About Hamlet. As that title indicates, we'll be exploring a few more Shakespeare plays in this episode as we start to dig into the first few years of the 1600s. Specifically, we'll look at a group of plays that are generally dated to the years 1600 to 1601. As we've seen, it's a little difficult to date some of these plays. But what is fascinating about these works is how many of the passages linger in the English language to this day. We use words, and phrases and idioms from these plays all the time without even realizing it. And in fact, Hamlet has contributed more common idioms and phrases to the English language that any other play that Shakespeare wrote. Almost every scene gives us an expression or line that we hear all the time. So this time, I'll take you though those plays as we trace out other important developments that took place in the first couple of years of the 1600s.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now last time, in our chronological look at the history of English, we finally wrapped up our look at the 1500s. The Globe Theatre had opened in the spring of 1599, and we looked at a couple of Shakespeare's play that were likely performed for the first time in the weeks that followed that grand opening. Those plays were Henry V and Julius Caesar.

Shakespeare's plays were primarily intended for performance in front of an audience, but some of them were also published. The publication of a play created an additional source of revenue for the playwright or the acting company. And it made the play available for anyone who wanted to read it in their free time. But before any work could be published, it had to be registered with the guild that regulated printers at the time. That was the Stationer's Company of London, and that guild maintained a register for all works that were intended to be published. That register was called the Stationer's Register, and it's an extremely valuable resource for scholars of the 1500s and 1600s. And for many of the important works of literature during this period, it is the only evidence available to help determine when they were composed.

And that's the case for a couple of Shakespeare's plays that are mentioned for the first time in the register in August of 1600. An entry in the register for August 4 indicates that three plays were "to be staid." That meant that the right to publish the material was disputed or uncertain, and therefore, the publications were blocked until the issues could be resolved.

One of the plays mentioned was Henry V, which we discussed last time. The other two plays were 'Much Ado About Nothing' and 'As You Like It.' Despite that initial block, the rights to Much Ado About Nothing were soon cleared, and a quarto of that play appeared later that year. The other play – 'As You Like It' – was never published during Shakespeare's lifetime. It didn't appear until the First Folio of Shakespeare's works was published after his death. But thanks to this entry in 1600, we know that is existed at that time, along with Much Ado About Nothing.

So I want to begin this episode with a quick look at those two plays. They were both comedies, and since Much Ado About Nothing was actually published in the year 1600, let's look at it first. It is still a popular play, and acting companies regularly present it on stages around the world to this day, but it hasn't had much of an impact on the English language. We do find a few words recorded for the first time in the play, but overall, its influence is limited. For that reason, I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it here, but there are some things you should know about it.

First of all, the play is set in the city of Messina in Sicily. So this reflects Shakespeare's general fascination with Italy and Sicily. The main plot focuses on a young nobleman and warrior named Claudio who is in love with the daughter of the local governor. Her name is Hero. Claudio has just returned from battle with his commander named Don Pedro. And when Don Pedro realizes that Claudio is interested in the governor's daughter, he agrees to help his young companion make the connection with her. Claudio and Hero meet, they fall in love, and they plan to marry pretty much instantly.

The antagonist of the story is Don Pedro's jealous and resentful brother named Don John. He decides to sabotage the marriage plans. He arranges for his associate named Borachio to engage in a deception where he appears to seduce Claudio's fiancé Hero, but in reality, it isn't Hero. It's actually her lady-in-waiting dressed in disguise. The deception is intentionally carried out where Claudio and Don Pedro can witness it. So as a result of this sinister plot, Claudio thinks his fiancé has cheated on him with another man.

The play then introduces one of the most popular characters in the play, and certainly the character is of the most interest to language historians. He is a constable named Dogberry. He and his associate Verges direct a couple of watchmen to keep an eye out for anyone breaking the law. Now the reason why Dogberry and Verges are of interest to scholars is because he constantly speaks in malapropisms. As you might recall, a malapropism is the mistaken substitution of one word for another word. It usually happens when a person tries to use big fancy words, especially when the person uses words that he or she doesn't really understand. In comedy, it's used as a technique to indicate that the speaker is a bit dim-witted. We've seen Shakespeare use this technique in earlier plays, but the most well-known example from his plays is Dogberry because he makes these verbal mistakes in almost every passage.

Now the word ***malapropism*** is derived from the name of a character in a play from the mid-1700s called 'The Rivals.' The character's name was Mrs. Malaprop, and she also routinely made these verbal mistakes. So in the 1800s, people started to refer to these mistakes as ***malapropisms***. But at the same time, some people called them ***dogberryisms*** based on this old Shakespeare play because Dogberry was one of the most famous characters to speak in that way prior to the creation of Mrs. Malaprop. So both terms were common at one time, but ***malapropism*** gradually won out.

Now with respect to Dogberry, we have several passages where he uses malapropisms. For example, he tells one of his associates, "This is your charge: you shall comprehend all vagrom men." So "comprehend all vagrom men' rather than 'apprehend all vagrant men." Before leaving his watchmen, he says, "Adieu, be vigitant" instead of "be vigilant."

Now after Dogberry leaves, the watchmen overhear the person who framed the governor's daughter confess to the plot while having a conversation with a friend. The watchmen also speak in malapropisms. One of them says that they should call up Dogberry to tell him what they just heard. The watchman says, "We have here recovered the most dangerous piece of lechery that ever was known in the commonwealth." So they 'recovered lechery' rather than 'discovered treachery.'

After Dogberry is informed about the plot, he approaches the governor himself. Dogberry says to the governor, ". . . sir, I would have some confidence with you that decerns you nearly." Of course, he means to say that he wants to a 'conference' to discuss a matter that 'concerns' him, not a 'confidence' to discuss a matter that 'decerns' him. Dogberry adds, "Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two auspicious persons." So they 'comprehended' two 'auspicious' persons, rather than 'apprehended' two 'suspicious' persons.

But as Dogberry speaks, the governor is impatient and eager to get to his daughter's wedding, which is about to take place. Dogberry and his associate Verges speak over each other and fail to get to the point, so they are never really able to convey the deception they have uncovered.

At the wedding ceremony, Claudio has been deceived by the plot and thinks his fiancé – the governor's daughter – has been unfaithful to him. So at the altar, he refuses to marry her, and in despair, she faints.

Of course, in the end, the deception is revealed, and the daughter's honor is restored, and she and Claudio are reconciled and do in fact get married. Now, that's a simplified version of the story, and as I noted, Much Ado About Nothing remains a popular play to this day.

In terms of the play's impact on the English language, as I noted, it is somewhat limited. The most obvious phrase from the play is its title 'Much Ado About Nothing.' You might assume that this is where that phrase came from, but it's not that simple. The Oxford English Dictionary cites uses of the phrase 'much ado about nothing' a few decades before this play was composed, so it isn't a phrase that Shakespeare invented. But having said that, there is little doubt that our modern use of that phrase was influenced by the popularity of this play and fact that it is the actual title of the play. It's probably why the phrase has endured so long in the language. In fact, it's one of the few situations where we still use that old word ***ado***. We also use it in the phrase 'Without further ado,' but beyond that, the word isn't really that common anymore.

Beyond the title which has lingered in the language, we find a few words recorded for the first time in the play like the word ***unmitigated***, a variation of the existing word ***mitigate***. The play also contains the term ***candle-waster***, which meant a person who wasted candles by studying late at night, but obviously, that term hasn't really survived. We also find very early uses of words like ***employer*** and ***negotiate***, though not the actually first uses of those words.

Now as I noted earlier, in August of 1600, the Stationer's Register in London referenced this particular play, Much Ado About Nothing. And it also mentioned that other play called As You Like It. It's another comedy, and in fact, many people consider it to be Shakespeare's happiest or

most joyous play. The plot is based on a story composed by the English writer Thomas Lodge called Rosalynde. Rosalynde had been published about a decade earlier. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare & Co., Stanley Wells, p. 69.*] And at some point around 1599, it appears that Shakespeare composed his version of the story. Again, the first actual reference to the play appeared in the Stationer's Register in August of 1600.

The play is a pastoral comedy, meaning that most of the action is set in the countryside, specifically a place called the Forest of Arden. Many of the characters introduced in the story end up fleeing to the forest for one reason or another, and that's where most of the action takes place.

The first to take refuge there is a local duke named Senior who has been deposed by his brother Frederick. Duke Senior's daughter is named Rosalind. She initially stays behind at court where her uncle has taken over, but her uncle soon banishes her, and she flees to the forest as well to find her father. She flees with her uncle's daughter named Celia, and Rosalind decides to dress as a man in the forest to avoid harassment. We've seen that Shakespeare often incorporated cross-dressing in his comedies, and this is another example where it plays an important part in the story.

As Rosalind and Celia travel through the forest, Celia tires of walking, and she says to Rosalind, "I pray you bear with me. I cannot go no further." This passage is often cited as an example of Shakespeare's occasional use of double negatives. "I cannot go no further" rather than "I cannot go any further." The modern rule against using double negatives hadn't been adopted yet, so it isn't unusual to find that type of phrasing in works from this period.

Before leaving, Rosalind was attracted to a man named Orlando, who was also interested in her. Well, his brother is plotting to kill him, so he also flees to the forest to start a new life. He becomes hungry after awhile. Desperately in need of food, he stumbles across Duke Senior and his men. Orlando pleads for food, saying that if the men had ever looked on better days and known pity, he would appreciate their kindness. Duke Senior responds by saying, "True it is that we have seen better days . . .," and he invites Orlando to join them for a meal. Now I mention that passage because it is one of the first instances where we find the phrase 'to have seen better days' meaning 'to have experienced better times in the past.' Shakespeare actually used the phrase again in some of his later plays, and he is probably the person responsible for popularizing it. The phrase also appears in a play composed about a decade earlier called Sir Thomas More. There is some speculation that Shakespeare might have been involved in writing that play, and the use of this same phrase in that play might be some evidence of that since Shakespeare apparently liked to use it. But it is also possible that it was a relatively new phrase in the language, and he just incorporated it into his writings. But again, 'to have seen better days' is a phrase often associated with Shakespeare, even if he didn't actually coin it.

Now at this point, Orlando doesn't recognize the leader of the group as Duke Senior. Remember that Senior is not only the exiled Duke, but also the father of Rosalind – the girl he is attracted to. The Duke reveals that he is actually content with his life in the forest, and he says that there are much worse places to be. He says, "This wide and universal theater Presents more woeful pageants than the scene Wherein we play in." Note how he ends that line with a repetitive

preposition, ". . . the scene Wherein we play in." Again, this would be frowned upon today. We're not supposed to end a sentence in a preposition, but that wasn't really a rule at the time.

That line then leads into the most famous passage from this play. One of the duke's companions is named Jacques, and he is a bit of a philosopher who likes to speak about the general uselessness of life and how man travels through it. This speech is sometimes called 'The Seven Ages of Man' speech, and you will probably recognize the first few lines:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.

He then describes the stages of life from infancy, to schoolboy, to lover, to brave soldier, to wise judge, to skinny old man. He says that the end of this 'eventful' history is the seventh stage of life – what he calls 'second childishness' where a person lives without teeth, sight, taste and most everything else. By the way, when he refers to the end of this 'eventful' history, that's the first recorded use of the word ***eventful*** in the English language. It was a variation of the existing word ***event***, but ***eventful*** appears to be a word that Shakespeare coined because there is apparently no recorded use of the word again until the mid-1700s. So it doesn't seem that it was an existing word that he picked up.

The events continue in the forest, and in a later scene, Orlando expresses his love for Rosalind by writing love poems to her and hanging them on the trees. Rosalind and Celia soon find the poems, and they realize that Orlando has written them and that he must also be in the forest. Rosalind and Orlando soon find each other, but Rosalind is still disguised as a young man, and she doesn't reveal her actual identity to Orlando.

Orlando asks Rosalind if she lives in the forest and if she was born there. She says that she lives on the outskirts of the forest and was indeed born there. But Orlando is surprised by her elevated form of speech. Remember that she is Duke Senior's daughter, so she comes from a noble family, and Orlando doesn't recognize her in disguise. So Orlando says to her, "Your accent is something finer than you could purchase in so removed a dwelling." She thinks quickly and says that she had an uncle who was an educated man that had lived at the royal court, and he taught her speak properly.

Now this passage is interesting because of the way it deals with language. It alludes to the distinction between courtly speech and rural speech. In England, what we know today as Received Pronunciation or Standard Southern British English didn't exist yet, but we can see that there was already a notion that the educated people London spoke a form of English that was different from the forms spoken in the countryside. And of course, that London dialect was generally considered to be more elevated or proper – especially by people from London. And passages like this allude to that idea.

The disguised Rosalind asks Orlando if he is the one who placed the love poems in the trees. He admits that he did it and that he is in love with Rosalind. Rosalind tells Orlando that he should practice trying to woo the girl he loves, and then she offers to let him practice on her – or him. Again, she is in disguise. The scene ends with Orlando promising to come by Rosalind's cottage every day to practice wooing Rosalind – because he doesn't realize that he is actually speaking to her.

In a later scene, as Orlando courts the disguised Rosalind, Orlando asks if she will have him. She playfully responds by saying, 'Sure, and twenty others like you,' adding "Why then, can one desire too much of a good thing?" I mention that passage because it is the first recorded use of the phrase 'too much of a good thing.' So if you ever feel like you can't get 'too much of a good thing,' it appears to be a phrase coined by Shakespeare here in this play. If he didn't coin it, he was at least the first known writer to use it.

Now in the final part of the play, Orlando's brother – who had earlier plotted to kill Orlando – is sent to the forest to retrieve Orlando. As the brother takes a nap, a lion approaches and threatens to attack him. But Orlando comes across the lion and his brother, and he manages to scare the lion away. Having saved his brother's life, the two of them reconcile. Later, Rosalind reveals her true identity to Orlando, and they finally come together as a couple. Meanwhile, Duke Senior's brother gives up the throne back in town. So in the end, everyone is reconciled and a happy ending ensues.

Now in addition to the specific Shakespearean phrases associated with this play like 'to have seen better days' and 'too much of a good thing,' there are also some new words recorded for the first time. One of the most enduring of those new words was ***lackluster***, which appears to be a word that Shakespeare coined. It was literally something lacking luster or sheen. He loved to combine the word ***lack*** with other words. He used ***lack-love*** in A Midsummer Night's Dream, and ***lack-beard*** in that other play I discussed earlier called Much Ado About Nothing. And he used ***lack-brain*** in Henry IV Part I. They all appear to be terms he coined. But ***lackluster*** is the only one that really survived. And again, the best evidence that it wasn't a term already in use is the fact that it isn't recorded again until the mid-1700s. So it was apparently a unique term when Shakespeare used in As You Like It.

Now so far, we've looked at two Shakespeare plays that are mentioned for the first time in the public record in summer of 1600. Well, around that same time, another important work appeared. In earlier episodes, I talked about Richard Hakluyt, who wrote extensively about English naval history. Most of his writings were composed with one aim in mind, and that was to encourage the creation of an English colony in the New World. In this same year, 1600, he published the final part of an expanded work called 'The Principal Navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoueries of the English Nation.' This third and final part included a map of the world, and that map is actually important to our story.

The map was prepared by an English mathematician and map-maker named Edward Wright. His map was innovative for certain technical reasons that aren't really important to our story, specifically the way he incorporated lines of latitude and longitude and the way he adjusted the

sizes of the land masses near the north and south pole to keep them fixed to those grid lines. Again, the technical aspects aren't really important here, but what is important is the detail that he included on the map. Wright relied on every piece of available evidence at the time from European sources to depict the islands, continents, and other land masses in the Americas and in the Far East. Prior to this map, those regions were often vaguely depicted, and the depictions were often inaccurate. But Wright's map was much more accurate. It was really a summary of the collective knowledge of European explorers at the time.

Now you may be wondering why I'm telling you about this particular map. Well, first of all, the map was so notable at the time that Shakespeare even made reference to it in one of his plays called Twelfth Night. We'll look at that play next time. But the map is also important because it proved to be a valuable tool for sailors and merchants who wanted to reach those far corners of the globe, especially the islands of the East Indies, and specifically the island chain we know today as Indonesia.

Up until the final few years of the 1500s, the trade with the East Indies had been dominated by Portugal. But Portuguese power was on the decline, so there were opportunities for other European powers to break the Portuguese monopoly and trade directly with the islands of the Far East.

To understand why other European powers were so interested in getting in on the action, we have to understand the value of the spices and other commodities that came from the Far East. The specific spices in question where those that were grown in and around modern-day Indonesia. They included pepper, nutmeg, mace, cloves and cinnamon. Of course, people used those spices as flavorings, but they were also used to help with digestion and as meat preservatives. They were also common ingredients in perfumes and medicines. So there was an incredible demand for those spices, but it was extremely difficult to obtain them in the West. And of course, when you have a high demand for something and a limited supply, the price skyrockets.

Today, we can go to the local grocery store or supermarket and buy those spices for a few dollars or pounds. But in the early modern period, they were incredibly expensive. You could say that they were worth their weight in gold, but that wasn't literally true because they were actually worth more than gold. They were sometimes even used as currency. [*SOURCE: Merchant Kings: When Companies Ruled the World, 1600-1900, Stephen R. Bown, p. 18.*]

So if you were a merchant, and you were able to send a ship to Indonesia and fill it up with those spices and bring it back home, you could make a fortune. The problem is that it was almost impossible to do that. To mount such a trading expedition, you needed ships, a full crew, and supplies and provisions for the crew. You also needed goods and products that you could trade for the spices that you wanted to obtain. All of that cost a lot of money. And here's something that people today don't really appreciate. It literally took two or three years to sail from Western Europe to Indonesia and back. So if you invested all of that money and all of those resources, you literally had to wait years to find out if it paid off. And there was no guarantee that the ships would even make it back home. During the voyage, the ships had to fend off foreign powers and pirates that would attack the ships, and of course, storms could destroy the ships, and diseases

could wipe out the crew. So you were lucky if your ships made it back home loaded with spices. It was a high risk venture, and there was a good chance that you would lose all of the money you invested. But if the ships actually made it back home filled with spices, you could make a fortune. It was high risk and high reward.

With the decline of Portuguese power in the east, there were opportunities for other European countries to take that risk and to break that Portuguese monopoly. And the first country to try to do that was the Netherlands. The Netherlands had been under Spanish control for many years, but in earlier episodes, we saw that the Dutch had rebelled against Spanish authority, and by the late 1500s, the region had obtained a degree of independence, though the war with Spain continued for a few more decades. Spain didn't recognize the region's independence, and in fact, Spanish authorities blocked Dutch ships from accessing Spanish ports. That blockade limited Dutch access to those valuable spices, so out of desperation, the Dutch decided to send ships directly to the Far East to obtain them. [*SOURCE: The Dutch Moment, Wim Klooster, p. 15.*]

That effort began during the previous decade, the 1590s, and by the current point in our story in 1600, several groups of Dutch merchants were sending ships to Indonesia. Of course, that competition cut into profits, but there was still a lot of money to be made. [*SOURCE: Merchant Kings: When Companies Ruled the World, 1600-1900, Stephen R. Bown, p. 20-1.*]

Well, back in England, a group of merchants observed what the Dutch were doing. So in 1599, a group of those English merchants reached out to Queen Elizabeth and requested that she give them a royal charter to launch their own trading expeditions to the East Indies. That decision was held up for several months, but late in the year 1600, Elizabeth finally gave her consent. And on December 31, 1600, a royal charter created a company that could trade directly with the East Indies from India all the way to Indonesia. That company became known as the East India Company. And I thought you should know how it was established because you're going to hear a lot more about it as we move forward with the podcast. The creation of this company had numerous consequences – far too many to list here. But the most obvious consequence for our story is the eventual establishment of an English colony in India and the gradual export of the English language to South Asia over the next few centuries.

The creation of this new trading company is also notable because of the way it was structured. It was structured as a corporation. A corporation was a relatively new type of business structure. They had been used to operate cities and churches, but in the late 1500s, they started to be used for private businesses. Since a corporation had shareholders that were distinct from the people who actually ran the business, the underlying ownership could change while the entity itself was largely unaffected. So investors could come and go while the business itself was largely perpetual. It was a perfect structure for a long term enterprise like a trading company. The era of the private corporation had finally arrived. And the new East India Company formed in London was destined to become most powerful corporation in the history of the world.

The company was also granted broad and sweeping powers. Because of the challenges posed by foreign powers, the company's royal charter allowed it to raise armies and wage war against rival powers if the need arose. The company could establish trading posts and settlements in the East

Indies, and it could appoint people to govern those settlements. It could make laws in those settlements, and it could even mint its own money. The company became a government in itself, and it became the agent of English colonization in the east.

Over the course of the year 1600, while those initial merchants were waiting for the royal charter to be issued, they started looking for ships that they could use in the operation. They looked at a lot of ships, and one of the ships they considered was a ship called the Mayflower, but they ultimately passed on it. Of course, that ship would soon pass into history for a different reason. Its destiny lay in a voyage to the west, not the east.

When the charter was finally approved on New Years Eve of 1600, the merchants were able to jump into action. There was no delay since many of the arrangements had been worked out in advance. Within a couple of months, they were ready to go. In February of 1601, the company's first five ships left England for the East Indies. [*SOURCE: New World, Inc., John Butman and Simon Targett, p. 218.*]

Around the time those ships set sail in February, there was another notable development in England, and this development actually takes us back to Shakespeare. The matter concerned Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, known to history as simply 'Essex.' I mentioned him in the last episode, and a few episodes prior to that. He was a prominent earl and a key member of Elizabeth's court, but he also had a strained relationship with her. A little over a year earlier, he had led a military expedition to Ireland to put down a rebellion there, but he didn't have much success, and he ultimately entered into a truce with the Irish rebel leader over Elizabeth's objection. He then left his post and came back to England to explain his actions, again over Elizabeth's objection. He was then put under house arrest, and he was still under house arrest a few months later in February of 1601.

But Essex had a lot of popular support, and he had support among several prominent members of the nobility, including the Earl of Southampton who had been Shakespeare's early patron and who may have been the young man referenced in Shakespeare's early sonnets, which I discussed in prior episodes. Shakespeare had even alluded to Essex's Irish campaign in glowing terms in his play Henry V. Again, we looked at that development last time. So there is reason to believe that Shakespeare saw Essex as a sympathetic figure.

But by this point in 1601, Essex and his supporters had become restless and were contemplating the unthinkable – actually rising in rebellion and deposing Elizabeth. This was always a concern for Elizabeth and his close advisors, especially given there had been numerous plots against her over the years.

The English authorities were sensitive to any suggestion that Elizabeth's reign was illegitimate or that she might be replaced with someone else. This sensitivity extended to the arts, including drama. One play that bothered Elizabeth and her advisors was Shakespeare's history play about Richard II, which had been composed a few years earlier. It is the story of Richard II – the last in main line of Plantagenet kings. He was childless, and he was overthrown by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke, who became the first Lancastrian king. Well, the play featured a scene where

Richard was deposed, and in every printed version of the play published during Elizabeth's reign, that scene was omitted. It was clearly censored by the authorities. [*SOURCE: Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London, Catharine Arnold, p. 203*.]

In fact, there is an account of Elizabeth having a conversion with the man who was the keeper of the records at the Tower of London. The keeper, named William Lambard, had prepared a summary of the records that were in his possession. As Elizabeth was reviewing the summary, Lambard mentioned some records associated with Richard II, at which point, Elizabeth interrupted and purportedly said, "I am Richard II: know ye not that?" She then added, "This tragedy was played forty times in open streets and houses." It was obviously a sore subject for her, and she knew precisely how many times the play had been performed. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare A Life, Park Honan, p. 217*.]

Well, during the first week of February, the plan to depose Elizabeth was set in motion by Essex and his supporters. They wanted to generate popular support for the rebellion, so one of Essex's accomplices named Sir Gilly Meyrick went to the Globe Theatre, and he asked the actors there to set aside any other productions they had planned, and to perform of Richard II instead. He offered them forty shillings on top of the regular box office revenue. The next day – February 7 – the company performed Richard II, including the scene where the king was deposed. Many of Essex's supporters were in the audience. [*SOURCE: Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London, Catharine Arnold, p. 203-4*.]

The next morning, the royal authorities went to Essex's home to determine what he was planning. But Essex took them prisoner, and he left with about two hundred supporters to meet up with another conspirator who promised a thousand additional supporters. But the whole plot quickly fell apart. The supporters didn't show up, and when the authorities got word about what was happening, they immediately went after Essex. He was soon forced to return home, where he was promptly arrested. [*SOURCE: Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London, Catharine Arnold, p. 205*.]

Essex was given a quick trial for treason, and he was executed a few days later, along with several of his accomplices. Interestingly, Shakespeare's former patron the Earl of Southampton was also put on trial and found guilty. He was also ordered to be executed, but at the last minute, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. As it turned out, the life sentence was really for his life or Elizabeth's life, whichever ended first, and Elizabeth only had a couple of years to live. When she died, her successor James I released Southampton from confinement.

Shakespeare's acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, were also implicated in the plot. One of the leading actors in the company was questioned extensively by the authorities, and he declared that the actors had no knowledge of the plot. He declared that they were merely actors and they had simply responded to a request for a command performance of one of their plays. In the end, it was determined that the acting company had done nothing wrong. And in fact, the surviving records show that they performed at Elizabeth's court on the same day that she signed the warrant for the execution of Essex. [*SOURCE: Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London, Catharine Arnold, p. 208*.]

So Shakespeare, and his acting company, and his former patron, all escaped with their lives, but it was a close call, and it was a reminder that there was a fine line between drama and real life.

Now speaking of Shakespeare and plays about kings being deposed by relatives, that happened to be the premise of another Shakespeare play that appeared around this time – probably at some point in 1601. And that play was called 'The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark,' but most people today know it simply as 'Hamlet.'

Hamlet is the longest Shakespeare play, and it has probably had more influence on the English language than any other play. Almost every scene of the play features a line or phrase that speakers still use to this day.

The exact date of the play is unknown, but most scholars think it was first performed in or around the year 1601. It wasn't mentioned in the list of Shakespeare plays assembled by Francis Meres in 1598, so it is generally agreed that it was composed after that point. And in July of the following year, 1602, the play was registered with the Stationers' Company to be published. The entry in the register says the play was "latelie Acted by the Lo: Chamberleyne his servantes." So that implies that the play had been performed in the stage prior to that point. That puts the earliest performances at some point around the year 1601.

I should note that a quarto version of the play was published in 1603, and another quarto was published in the 1604. Of course, the version we know today is the version published in the First Folio of Shakespeare's works compiled after his death. By the way, they are all different in many respects, and they show that some of the well-known passages from the play were probably different in the early performances.

And speaking of early versions of this play, I should note that there are also references to a play about Hamlet in the 1580s, but that version doesn't survive and its author is unknown. It isn't clear if Shakespeare's version was based on that earlier play or was influenced by it. By the way, the story of Hamlet is derived from an account about a legendary Danish king named Amleth who lived during the Viking era. That account was composed about four centuries earlier by a Danish writer, but there is no solid evidence that such a king ever really lived. [*SOURCE: Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare, Isaac Asimov, p. 80.*] But the point is that this wasn't a completely original story. There were earlier versions of this story floating around. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's version is considered to be one of his masterpieces.

The play opens in a gloomy castle in Elsinore in Denmark. Sentries are keeping watch over the battlements when they see a ghost. The ghost has the appearance of the recently deceased king who had lived in the castle.

The sentries assume that the ghostly figure is a sign. Since the ghost appeared to take the image of the deceased king, and since the figure was dressed in battle armor, they assume that the ghost represents impending war with Denmark's enemy Norway. The king had defeated the Norwegians before he died, and now they were gathering their forces for retribution.

The sentries find a man named Horatio who is a friend of the king's son. When they tell him what they saw, Horatio says that such signs often warn of forthcoming events, and he gives examples of events that portended the murder of Julius Caesar, some of which also appeared in Shakespeare's play about Julius Caesar. This is one of several references to Julius Caesar in Hamlet, and many scholars think this is evidence that Hamlet was composed around the same time as Julius Caesar, probably a short time afterward. Shakespeare apparently still had Caesar on his mind.

The ghost then reappears, but doesn't speak. Horatio and the sentries try to communicate with the apparition, but it soon disappears. One of the sentries says, "It was about to speak when the cock crew." Now, today, we would say that the cock '***crowed***,' but this is another example of a phenomenon I discussed at the end of the last episode. The verb '***to crow***' was once a strong verb. The past tense was ***crew***, just like the past tense of ***grow*** was ***grew***, and ***blow*** was ***blew***, and, as I've noted before, ***snow*** was once ***snew***. But over time, that strong verb ***crew*** has become the weak verb ***crowed***. So the verb ***crow*** now takes a regular 'e-d' ending in the past tense in standard English. But we can see that older form used in this passage in Hamlet.

After the ghost disappears again without speaking, the sentries consider the fact that the figure takes the appearance of the dead king and conclude that it might speak with the dead king's son named Hamlet.

Now when Hamlet's father died, his uncle Claudius succeeded him as king. And Claudius then married Hamlet's mother, who had been the queen before Claudius took the throne. So Hamlet's mother remained the queen after this marriage. Claudius basically stepped into the old king's shoes in more ways than one. So at this early point in the story, the assumption is that Hamlet's father has died unexpectedly of natural causes, and Hamlet's uncle has simply taken his place on the throne.

Hamlet had been away at university, but he has recently returned to the Danish court. His uncle Claudius, the king, insists that Hamlet stay rather than return to university. Hamlet agrees, though he has little choice under the circumstances.

When his uncle and mother leave, Hamlet vents his frustration. We find out that his father has only been dead for a few weeks, and Hamlet is angry that his mother married his uncle so quickly. He considers it an act of disloyalty to his father, and he says of the situation, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" This is another line from the play that endures to this day.

The sentries from earlier suddenly arrive along with Horatio. Remember that Horatio is a friend of Hamlet, and they haven't seen each other for a while. Hamlet recounts his father's unexpected death and the quick marriage between his mother and his uncle. He then says to Horatio that he thinks he sometimes sees his father. Horatio says, "Where, my lord?" And Hamlet replies, "In my mind's eye, Horatio." Now I mention that exchange because it is largely responsible for the phrase "in my mind's eye" meaning 'in my imagination.' I say 'largely responsible' because Chaucer had used an early version of the phrase in the Canterbury Tales, but it didn't really

become common in the language until this play became popular, so Shakespeare's use of the phrase in this play is apparently what popularized the phrase.

Horatio then informs Hamlet that he and the sentries have seen an apparition that appears to take the form of his father. When Hamlet asks how the ghost looked and if he was frowning, Horatio says, "A countenance more in sorrow than in anger." That line gave us the phrase 'more in sorrow than in anger,' which is typically used to refer to a situation where we might expect someone to act in anger, but instead the person acts in a sense of sadness or disappointment. It's another Shakespearean phrase. Hamlet then makes it clear that he intends to join the sentries on their watch so he can see the ghost for himself.

The next scene introduces three new characters – a close advisor and courtier of the king named Polonius and his two children, a son named Laertes and a daughter named Ophelia. We soon find out that Hamlet is attracted to Ophelia, but has little use for her father. Her brother Laertes is packing his bags because he is returning to university in Paris. He pauses to warn Ophelia about Hamlet's intentions with her. He thinks that Hamlet's present intentions may be honest, but because of his position as prince, that may change with time. He says, "Perhaps he loves you now, And now no soil nor cautel doth besmirch The virtue of his will; but you must fear, . . . his will is not his own." Now I mention that passage because it contains the first recorded use of the word ***besmirch*** in the English language. It appears to be a word coined by Shakespeare here in this passage. He derived it from the older word ***smirch***, which meant 'to make dirty.' Interestingly, the word ***smirch*** soon fell out of common use, but Shakespeare's new word ***besmirch*** survives to this day.

Ophelia takes her brother's advice about romantic relationships, but she warns him not to be like the hypocritical pastor who shows the steep and thorny way to heaven while treading the 'primrose path' of dalliance. That passage contains another Shakespearean term – 'primrose path.' Today, if someone takes the 'primrose path,' it means they live the easy life or take the pleasurable path of idleness. Again, it comes from this play.

Their father Polonius arrives, and he tells his son Laertes to hurry before the ship to France leaves without him. He also gives his son various pieces of advice on how to behave at university, including a suggestion that he should dress as nicely as he can, saying, "For the apparel oft proclaims the man." This is an early form of the expression we know today as "clothing makes the man." Again, it a phrase generally attributed to Shakespeare.

Polonius continues the advice to his son, telling him to avoid making loans and incurring debts. He says, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." The father concludes his speech with this sage advice, "This above all: to thine own self be true." Again, both of those phrases are recorded here for the first time, and are considered to be Shakespearean in origin.

After this scene, we return to Elsinore Castle at midnight. Hamlet joins Horatio and one of the other sentries who have seen the ghost that looks like Hamlet's father. They are standing on the battlements of the castle where the ghost has appeared before. Hamlet hears trumpets and cannon shot and observes that his uncle is drinking and reveling late into the evening. Hamlet then says

that even though he was born into that way of life, he had decided to break from that custom. He says, “But to my mind, though I am native here And to the manner born, it is a custom more honoured in the breach than the observance.” Now this passage gives us the phrase “to the manner born.” Here, the phrase is rendered in its original Shakespearean form with the word ***manner*** (‘m-a-n-n-e-r’). So when Hamlet says that he was ‘to the manner born,’ he meant that he was born to that manner of behavior or custom or lifestyle. But in later centuries, the phrase was altered slightly, perhaps as a pun, by replacing the word ***manner*** (‘m-a-n-n-e-r’) with the word ***manor*** (‘m-a-n-o-r’), thereby creating the more modern version of the phrase – ‘to the manor born,’ which implies someone born into a high estate or aristocracy. This modern variation became solidified in the language thanks to a popular British sitcom with that version as the title. So today, we are more likely to encounter it as ‘to the manor born’ with ‘m-a-n-o-r’ in the sense of someone born into wealth and privilege. But ultimately, its another Shakespearean phrase from Hamlet.

Now, while Hamlet speaks, the ghost suddenly appears. The ghost beckons Hamlet away from the others and Hamlet follows. Horatio and the other sentry initially remain behind, and the sentry says, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” Of course, that’s another line from the play that has survived into Modern English.

The ghost then reveals to Hamlet that he is the spirit of Hamlet’s father. The ghost says that he cannot reveal all that occurred. If he could reveal the details, it would strike terror in Hamlet, and cause “each particular hair to stand on end.” Now this is where we get the phrase “make your hair stand on end” meaning to be shocked or very afraid. It’s actually a line from this play.

The ghost then reveals that there had been a “Murder most foul.” The apparition explains that Hamlet’s uncle placed drops of poison in the ear of Hamlet’s father while his father was asleep. The poison caused a quick death, and the uncle then reported that Hamlet’s father had died from a snake-bite. The ghost asks Hamlet to avenge the murder, and then it disappears.

Horatio and the other sentry have overheard what the ghost said, but Hamlet demands that they never reveal what they heard. He also demands that they must not say anything, no matter what Hamlet himself says or does, even if he seems to be mad or out of his mind. That sets the stage for events to come. Hamlet has to devise a plan to avenge his father’s murder while also revealing his uncle’s culpability. It is the only way that Hamlet can get revenge while also securing the throne for himself.

The scene then shifts forward an unspecified period of time, and we have reports of Hamlet’s mad behavior from his girlfriend Ophelia. She reports Hamlet’s madness to her father Polonius. Remember that Polonius is the king’s close advisor. By this point, king Claudius is also aware of Hamlet’s purported madness, and he is trying to determine if Hamlet has really gone insane or if he is just pretending because he had learned how his father really died. Polonius reports to the king that he knows whether Hamlet’s madness is real. King Claudius is eager to find out, but Polonius is long-winded as is his normal manner. At one point in the long wind-up, he ironically mentions that he will get to the point by saying “brevity is the soul of wit.” Of course, Polonius

doesn't apply they principle to himself, but that passage is the source of the modern idiom 'brevity is the soul of wit.' It means that clever people know how to put things succinctly.

When Polonius finally gets to the point, he says that Hamlet has gone mad due to love. That scene is followed by a separate scene where Polonius and Hamlet speak directly to each other. Hamlet continues to feign madness and says things that seem insane sometimes have a bit of fundamental truth about them. At one point, Polonius turns to the audience and remarks, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." That line has also survived the centuries. Today, if a person acts a little crazy to achieve a specific goal, you might hear someone say that there was a 'method in his madness.' It come from this passage in Hamlet.

We then have a scene where Hamlet meets two of his good friends who he knows from university. They are visiting the royal court, but we know from an earlier scene that they have been sent by King Claudius to spy on Hamlet to determine if he is really mad. The two friends eventually acknowledge that they have indeed been sent by the king. Hamlet replies that he has become depressed and hopeless. He says, "What a piece of work is a man." He adds that man is noble in reason, infinitely able, angelic, and the most perfect of animals, but neither man nor woman delights him anymore. Now I mention that passage because Hamlet's opening line in that passage – "What a piece of work is a man" – is still common in the language today. Hamlet meant it in a positive way, indicating that man was perfect in many respects. But today, the 'piece of work' part is usually used ironically or sarcastically to mean the opposite. So if we encounter a very annoying person today, we might say of that person, "What a piece of work." But, believe it or not, that expression actually comes from this line in Hamlet.

The two friends then inform Hamlet that a group of actors are arriving at Elsinore Castle. They have come to entertain the court. Hamlet loves drama, so he is very interested in this development. And it soon becomes part of his plan to reveal his uncle's treachery. He decides to use the actors to stage a play that will reveal his uncle's guilt. The scene concludes with Hamlet's well-known line, "The play's the thing Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." Of course, this is where we find the origin of the phrase "The play's the thing."

The next scene gives us probably the most famous soliloquy in the entire Shakespeare canon. It is 'to be or not to be' speech from Hamlet. At first glance, it is a contemplation of suicide, but most scholars agree that there is a lot more going on. Hamlet considers the unknown consequences of death and the fear of what happens when we die. All of that has to be considered and taken into account if life comes to an end. But Hamlet's contemplation of death isn't simply about taking his own life. It's also about taking revenge against his uncle. If he simply murders his uncle without establishing his uncle's guilt, then Hamlet himself will be killed as a traitor or usurper. So by killing his uncle, Hamlet would effectively be committing suicide. So this soliloquy is as much about whether to kill his uncle as it is about whether he should take his own life.

Here's are the first few lines of the soliloquy from a version presented by the Irish actor Andrew Scott. This version is a bit non-traditional in its delivery, but I like the conversational approach, and I think it makes the language a little more approachable:

To be or not to be – that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And, by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep –
No more – and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to – 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep –
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause.

Now in addition to the 'to be or not to be' part and the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' part, that passage also gives us the wonderful Shakespearean line "there's the rub." Today, if we encounter a dilemma or potential problem and we say 'there's the rub,' it comes from this passage And of course, the passage also contains the reference to being 'shuffled off this mortal coil,' meaning to die and leave the earthly realm. Again, its another classic Shakespearean line.

That famous soliloquy then leads into a scene where Hamlet and Ophelia have a conversation. Hamlet's uncle the king and Ophelia's father Polonius are secretly listening to the conversation to determine if Hamlet is really mad. Hamlet may be aware that they are listening and he continues to feign madness. That means that he has to be cruel to Ophelia. At one point, he denies loving her and says "Get thee to a nunnery." The statement is made as part of a passage where Hamlet says that she should never have to give birth to sinners, thus his suggestion that she should retire to a nunnery. But some scholars note that the word ***nunnery*** was often used as a slang term for a brothel in Elizabethan England. So some people read the line as a harsh insult saying that she would be better suited for sex work. But whichever meaning was intended, the line itself has survived the centuries.

By this point, King Claudius has become convinced that Hamlet's madness is all an act.

The scene then shifts to the rehearsal of the play that will be performed for the court. Hamlet directs the actors how to perform, and this is where we find his instructions to them to speak their lines "trippingly on the tongue," meaning that they should speak the lines 'in an easy or natural way.' I discussed that line in the earlier episode I did about Shakespeare's language. Hamlet says that some actors are overly dramatic and over-act, adding that he would have such an actor whipped for doing so. He says, "It our-herods Herod. Pray you avoid it." King Herod was one of the villains of the Bible as he tried to kill the infant Jesus. So if you 'out-herod Herod,' you're pretty bad. It's another line that lingers in the language to this day.

Hamlet continues his advice to the actors by telling them the purpose of acting is "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature." In other words, the theater should reflect our true nature back to ourselves. 'To hold a mirror up to nature' is another classic Shakespearean line from the play. Of

course, all of these passages gave Shakespeare an opportunity to comment on the theater and the acting profession.

Hamley then sees his friend Horatio, and they speak. Hamlet begins by flattering him. He says, "Give me that man That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart, As I do thee." This passage is also notable because of that phrase 'in my heart of heart.' Here, the first use of ***heart*** means 'center or core.' So 'heart of heart' means 'at the core of my heart.' That's the part reserved for the greatest affection. Over time, the phrase 'heart of heart' became 'in my heart of hearts.' And this is ultimately where that phrase comes from.

Hamlet then asks Horatio a favor. He says that when the play is performed that night before the king, there is a scene that resembles the events surrounding his father's death. He asks Horatio to observe the king's reaction to that scene. He thinks his uncle's reaction will reveal his guilt.

Hamlet's uncle the king, as well as his mother the queen, then arrive. They are accompanied by Ophelia's father Polonius. Hamlet asks Polonius if it is true that he once performed in a play at university. Polonius confirms that he did. He says, "I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th'Capitol. Brutus killed me." Now scholars are fascinated by that passage because it is another apparent reference to Shakespeare's earlier play about Julius Caesar. As I noted earlier, scholars think Hamlet was composed very soon after Julius Caesar given these types of references and the general time frame in which the play was likely composed. Both plays were probably in the repertoire of the Lord Chamberlian's Men at the same time. And in fact, many scholars think that the actor who originally played Polonius in this play was the same actor who had played Julius Caesar in the earlier play. So here, when Polonius says he was killed by Brutus in Julius Caesar, the statement would have worked on two levels. The actor would have also been referring to the fact that he himself portrayed Caesar in the earlier play, and had died in that role. It would have been a joke for audience members who had seen the company perform Julius Caesar on a previous day. At any rate, this is considered to be more evidence that Julius Caesar and Hamlet were contemporary plays.

Now at this point in Hamlet, we are presented with the play within the play. The scene features a king and queen, and the queen in the play repeatedly expresses her loyalty to her husband, and that she will never remarry if he should die. Hamlet watches this portion of the play with his mother and his uncle. He is very curious about his mother's reaction to this scene where the queen affirms her loyalty to her husband, especially given that Hamlet's mother had re-married so quickly after his father died. At that point in the play, Hamlet asks his mother how she likes the play, and his mother replies with one of the most often mis-quoted and mis-interpreted lines from Hamlet. She says, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

Now, obviously, this line is still common in English. First of all, people tend to misquote it by placing the word ***methinks*** at the front of the line rather than the end, so they say "Methinks the lady doth protest too much." They also use it to refer to a situation where someone objects to something so much that they seem insincere. But here, the queen in the play isn't really objecting to anything. She's doing the opposite. She is affirming her loyalty to her husband. So why would Hamlet's mother say that 'the lady doth protest too much.' Well, it's because the word ***protest***

had a slightly different meaning in earlier periods of English. Originally, ***to protest*** meant ‘to assert or affirm or promise’ something. That was still the common meaning of the word during the Elizabethan period. So when Hamlet’s mother says that the queen in the play ‘protests too much,’ she means that she is promising or avowing too much, so much so that she loses credibility. In other words, she is too ‘over the top’ in her expressions of loyalty. So this original meaning is sort of the opposite of the way we use the phrase today. Over the following century or so, the word ***protest*** evolved from a sense of ‘asserting or affirming something’ to a sense of ‘asserting an objection to something.’ So there was still a sense of formally declaring one’s position, but rather than declaring support of something, it came to mean declaring opposition to something. And with that gradual change in meaning, the meaning of ‘the lady doth protest too much’ also changed with time. But again, it’s ultimately a Shakespearean phrase coined here in Hamlet.

As the play being presented before the royal court proceeds, Hamlet’s uncle becomes more and more uncomfortable as the plot starts to hit close to home. In the crucial scene, the king in the play is murdered by his nephew in the exact same way that Hamlet’s father was killed. The nephew pours poison in his ear while he is sleeping. With this, Hamlet’s uncle knows that his treachery has been revealed. He stands up and rushes out, and the play before the court comes to an abrupt end.

Hamlet is overjoyed that the plan worked. He now knows that he can avenge his father’s death by killing his uncle Claudius, and it can be justified by explaining his uncle’s reaction to what took place on the stage.

King Claudius is now aware that Hamlet knows that he murdered Hamlet’s father. With this knowledge, Claudius knows that he has to get rid of Hamlet, so he devises a plan to send Hamlet to an embassy in England, where Hamlet will be quietly murdered.

Claudius is alone, and he kneels to pray, He says, “Oh, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t – A brother’s murder!” That passage is notable because it gave us phrase “it smells to heaven.” By saying that the offense is ‘rank,’ he is saying that it is putrid, and thus, ‘it smells to heaven.’

Hamlet comes upon his uncle Claudius while he is praying. Hamlet has his sword with him, so he could kill his uncle at that moment, but he hesitates since the king is praying. He decides to wait for a better time. Hamlet then confronts his mother. He is still outraged that she would marry the man who killed his father and usurped the throne. Given Hamlet’s anger, she fears for her life. Polonius is eavesdropping behind a curtain, and fearing for the queen’s safety, he calls for help. Hamlet thinks Polonius is his uncle Claudius, and he stabs at the curtain killing the man behind it. But it’s not the king. It’s Polonius.

Hamlet isn’t really saddened by what has happened. He is enraged. He rails against his mother – expressly accusing his uncle of killing his father and stealing the crown. At one point, Hamlet says to her, “I must be cruel only to be kind.” In other words, his cruel words are intended to save

her from further debauchery with his murderous uncle. Today, that phrase 'cruel to be kind' is still common in the language, but it originated here in this play.

Hamlet then acknowledges the sealed letters he received from his uncle that will send him to England, where he will likely be imprisoned or killed. But Hamlet says that the plan may backfire, and he may outsmart those who conspire against him. He says:

For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petard. And 't shall go hard,
But I will delve one yard below their mines,
And blow them at the moon.

Now this passage is notable because it contains another common Shakespearean phrase – 'to hoist with his own petard.' This is where that phrase originated. But what exactly does it mean? Well, if you've listened to the earlier episodes, you might recall that I discussed the meaning of this phrase way back in Episode 78 where I talked about castle sieges and medieval warfare. The entire passage I just read is a reference to siege warfare. A ***petard*** is a French word for a type of bomb. It was a bucket-shaped container filled with gunpowder. The besieger would approach the castle walls and place the petard on or against the wall, and then he would detonate it. The problem is that the person who delivered the bomb was sometimes killed when it exploded. As Shakespeare puts it, they were 'hoisted' or blown into the air by their own petard. It's basically what happens when a plan of attack backfires. And that is what Hamlet is referring to here. He says the plan to kill him will backfire.

But Hamlet realizes the problem he has created for himself by killing Polonuis. He has seemingly confirmed the suspicions of the court that he has gone mad. So no one will believe him if he kills his uncle and tries to justify it. No one will believe him when says that he uncle killed his father. He can't take revenge and claim the throne himself. At the order of Claudius, Hamlet is sent away to England.

Meanwhile, Ophelia has gone mad with grief after the death of her father. Denmark grows restless with rumors surrounding the murder of Polonius and the absence of Hamlet. Shakespeare refers to those who spread rumors and gossip as ***buzzers*** from the sense of the word ***buzz*** as noise or murmur. Some of that sense of ***buzz*** survives when we talk about the buzz surrounding a new movie or technology. But when Shakespeare used the word ***buzzer*** as someone who spreads gossip, it was the first recorded use of that word. It soon came to refer to insects that make a buzzing noise, and then it eventually came to refer to anything that makes a buzzing noise like a buzzer on an alarm. So if you're watching a game show and the host tells the contestants to avoid the buzzer than signals a wrong answer, now you know that the word can ultimately be traced back to Hamlet where it was first recorded as a gossiper.

Now we soon find out that Hamlet has escaped from England and returned to Denmark. And we also find out that Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother Laertes has returned from France after learning of his father's death.

Claudius sees an opportunity to use Laertes to get rid of Hamlet. Both Laertes and Hamlet see themselves as skilled swordsmen and fencers, so Claudius arranges a fencing match where the foil used by Laertes has its guarded point removed and covered with poison. One scratch of the foil will ensure Hamlet's death.

As soon as the plan is made, news arrives that Laertes sister Ophelia has drowned, which fuels Laertes anger even further. The implication is that she has committed suicide.

We then have another famous scene from the play. Hamlet is walking outside of Elsinore Castle when he comes across gravediggers digging a grave. They dig up a skull and toss it to Hamlet. It's the skull of an old court jester named Yorick who had been the jester many years before when Hamlet's father was king. Hamlet holds the skull and says, "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him." But he soon becomes repulsed by the skull and sickened by the death and decay that it represents.

It soon becomes apparent who the newly dug grave is intended for. It is for Ophelia. Her brother Laertes is distraught and throws himself in the grave. Hamlet also comes forward and expresses his love for her, and Laertes attacks him. King Claudius is there, and he tells Laertes to ignore Hamlet because he has gone mad. This leads to the final scene of the play where Laertes and Hamlet engage in a fencing duel.

The duel is witnessed by Hamlet's uncle and mother. Of course, his uncle Claudius wants Hamlet dead. As I noted, the plan is that Laertes's poisoned foil will scratch Hamlet and kill him. To make sure that the event results in Hamlet's death, and just in case Hamlet defeats Laertes, King Claudius places some poison in a cup which he will offer to Hamlet to celebrate his victory.

The duel begins, and Hamlet is dominant early on. His mother the queen toasts to his successful round, but she accidently grabs the cup with the poison in it and drinks it. Meanwhile, the bout between Hamlet and Laertes continues, and Laertes finally manages to cut Hamlet with the poisoned tip of his foil. A scuffle breaks out between the two, and in the confusion, Hamlet grabs Laertes foil and then strikes him with the poisoned tip.

So Hamlet's mother is struggling from the poison she drank, and Hamlet and Laertes have both been cut with the poisoned tip of the fencing weapon. They are all dying. Laertes explains to Hamlet what has happened, and that they have all been poisoned. He then lets it be known that the whole plot was arranged by King Claudius, and that he is the one responsible for the poison which is now killing them all. At that point, Hamlet stabs and kills his uncle as everyone realizes that he is completely justified in doing so.

So at this point, all of the main characters have died or lay dying, except for Hamlet's friend Horatio. In his dying words, Hamlet tells Horatio to tell his story and make the truth of the events known to everyone. Horatio responds with the well-known line, "Good night, sweet prince."

And that brings an end to Shakespeare's version of Hamlet. It's a true tragedy as almost all of the main characters die in the end.

Now I took you through the entire play – the longest in the Shakespeare canon – because it is filled with phrases and idioms that survive to this day more than any other play that Shakespeare wrote. So in that regard, it has had a greatest influence on the English language. And it also points the long term popularity of the play. To this day, the play is still performed on stages around the world. But where was the play first performed outside of England?

Well, we actually know the answer to that question. In fact, if we assume that the play was first performed in 1601, it was performed outside of England just six years later. It might seem remarkable that the play would reach an international audience that quickly, but there was a special circumstance.

Remember that the first English ships of the East India Company left for the Far East early in 1601, perhaps around the time that Hamlet was first appearing on the stages of London. Well, six years later, in 1607, one of the company's ships called the Red Dragon anchored off the coast of Sierra Leone. And according to a surviving account of that voyage, members of the crew performed 'the tragedie of Hamlett' to an audience of sailors and merchants. The English language was starting to spread around the world, and Shakespeare was going with it. [*SOURCE: Shakespearean, Robert McCrum, p. 210.*]

Next time, we'll continue our look at the spread of English around the world, but we'll turn our attention to the west. And we'll also look at the final days of Elizabeth I as the Elizabethan period came to an end. And we'll also look at another defining moment in English history – literally 'a defining moment.' And that's the publication of the first official dictionary of the English language.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.