From Saga to Tragedy: Exploring the Original Sources of Hamlet and Macbeth

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Abstract: Almost all of Shakespeare’s plays are based on prior sources, some contemporary to him and some not. By looking at the prior sources for two of Shakespeare’s famous tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, we can better appreciate and understand Shakespeare’s work. This paper begins with a discussion of whether Shakespeare exists as an adaptor, a plagiarist, or an appropriator. Next, I explore how Shakespeare’s changes to the endings, protagonists, and female characters change the original texts from historic sagas to theatrical tragedies.

Keywords: English, History, Shakespeare, Hamlet, Macbeth, Raphael Holinshed, Saxo Grammaticus, The Danish History, Amleth, The Hystorie of Hamblet, Hamblet
Shakespeare exists as two ideals: an original genius or English literature’s most successful plagiarist. Realistically speaking, he was neither of these things and would not have considered himself as such, either. We have gotten to a point where we think of Shakespeare less as a person and a writer and more as an idea, which becomes an issue when we look at Shakespeare only as someone who rarely came up with original ideas and instead mostly took work from previous sources. Looking at Shakespeare in this way is an unproductive way of looking at his work and its impact. He was inspired by other texts, stories, and plays, some by his contemporaries and some not. Some were well-known tales from history such as his plays about Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, or his many English history plays. Shakespeare was always being inspired by the world as well as the history, arts, and literature around him. Meaning, he would base his own work on works by others—both recent and not recent—and often not giving credit or saying where these ideas or information originated.

Ultimately, it does not really matter how Shakespeare obtained the material for his works. He has been dead for four hundred years. There is no point in trying to cancel him, especially considering that concepts of appropriation and intellectual property did not exist in Shakespeare’s time. That is not what I am setting out to discuss. There are merits to looking at the original sources for his works, especially since when analyzing them against one another, they show significant changes. The most major differences between his plays and the originals are the addition and/or expansion of characters or reconstruction of endings, which have major repercussions on the ways that the plays are interpreted, read, and performed. Notably, Shakespeare widely expands the roles of the female characters by creating memorable lines, scenes, and soliloquies that are far beyond what the sources provided. He did not have to reconfigure the characters, stories, and endings, yet he did so in order to make a more interesting
story and stage experience. If you had to choose to consume the original sources or Shakespeare’s play versions based solely on the principle of enjoyment, you would choose Shakespeare. He presents us with moral quandaries and complicated characters that stand the test of time. Indeed, these plays have been read and performed continuously throughout four hundred years and will continue to be. Being based on prior material is not a flaw of the plays, but a feature that deserves more critical analysis and attention, and we can better understand his work if we go back to the sources Shakespeare looked at. Doing so will give us new perspectives on or appreciation of the work if we can explore how it changed and why. What sorts of choices did he make when creating his own plays? How are the plays that we know similar or different from their sources? Why use these sources in the first place?

There needs to be some kind of dividing line between the original sources and the plays that Shakespeare created from them. The immediate conclusion is to label Shakespeare’s works as some kind of blur between adaptation and appropriation. The theorist and critic Julie Sanders points out that there are numerous different synonyms for adaptation, each one with a slightly different definition, such as “version, variation, interpretation, continuation, transformation, imitation, pastiche, parody, forgery, transposition, revaluation, revision, rewriting, echo.” For simplicity, sticking with “adaptation” versus “appropriation” is best. Sanders defines “adaptation” as “transpositional practice casting a specific genre into another generic mode…indulging in the exercise of trimming and pruning: yet it can also be an simplification procedure engaged in addition, expansion, accretion, and interpolation….” One of Sanders’ most important points is that adaptation is “frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text,”[1] which truly gets at the heart of what Shakespeare does as he adapts the original texts into his own plays. Shakespeare chose these stories for a reason. He saw something in them that he

not only believed spoke to his own time period and culture, but also themes, ideas, and characters that had potential for expansion. Sanders also mentions how Shakespeare’s works tends to be adapted for the purpose of making them easier to understand, which is ironic considering that Shakespeare actually adapts his sources by making them much more complicated. The moral quandaries that Shakespeare is known for do not really appear in the sources he looks at. Problems are solved easily and without hesitation. Shakespeare adds all of that subtlety into his versions.

Sanders defines “appropriation” as being more complicated than adaptation. She argues that while an adaptation hinges its whole identity on a connection with its source material, appropriation takes the source material and reframes it as “a wholly new cultural product and domain, often through the actions of interpolation and critique as much as through the movement from one genre to another.” Linda Hutcheon argues that adaptation and appropriation are intertwined; they are part of the same process, and an adapter must embark on “a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another’s story and filtering it, in a sense, through one’s own sensibility, interests, and talents,” or more succinctly, “adapters are first interpreters and then creators.” Popular sensibilities of the term “appropriation” tend to be more negative, but Hutcheon’s framing of what appropriation can be (along with Sanders’ notion about the complexity of appropriation) fits well with what Shakespeare was doing when he adapted the original sources into his plays. His works are both adaptations and appropriations, both in a positive sense.

Shakespeare worked solidly in the literary culture of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which did not have the same theories and ways of thinking about

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adaptation and appropriation versus the more blatant notion of plagiarism. The concept of appropriation, plagiarism, and intellectual property as we think of them in a legal and moral sense did not really exist in Shakespeare’s time. There was the concept of wanting credit for your work, but intellectual property as a legal condition was not a thing. We already don’t think of the plays and their sources as the same works. We do not refer to both Hamlet the play and its sources as both being Hamlet. One is Hamlet the play and the others are Hamlet’s original sources. We are more interested in the differences between them than we are in the similarities. And if we had to pick one to view, we would choose Shakespeare’s because they are more interesting. He added something and transformed the sources so much that we recognize the sources as older versions or remnants of the plays we know now, but not as the same works. We apply these theories to modern works all the time. We understand that the 1995 movie Clueless is an adaptation and modern retelling of Jane Austen’s novel Emma. No one is accusing The Lion King of plagiarizing Hamlet. These examples provide works that have a clear source material, but are still considered separate works in their own right, with their own value. However, we end up being more interested in the differences between them than in the similarities.

Sixteenth and seventeenth century thought was similar, but also different. Intellectual property is a modern idea. The culture that Shakespeare was working in believed that he had the right to rewrite these stories. The culture expected him to create new works by building upon previous ones. History plays were a hugely popular genre during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some of Shakespeare’s earliest works are some of his histories. Writing someone else’s story was normal and expected. So, other writers were already making their own works based on someone else’s. It was not strange for Shakespeare to have done so as well. There also was no legal notion of plagiarism. One could not sue for plagiarism or for intellectual
property/copyright infringement like someone could today. These concepts did not come around until the late seventeenth and were actually implemented in law in the early eighteenth century, well after Shakespeare’s time. Additionally, many of the sources that Shakespeare is working from are so far removed from his time period that the idea of “plagiarizing” the old sources ends up becoming irrelevant, like someone now making an adaptation of a medieval text. No one is going to complain about plagiarism for that because those texts were from hundreds of years ago. The same understanding existed in the late sixteenth/early seventeenth century. These are old works that have value, but there is still room for addition and places that can be expanded upon.

**Hamlet and Macbeth as Case Studies**

To fully understand what Shakespeare was doing, we need a kind of case study. *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* are excellent candidates to compare against their sources. Both are well-known and well-documented plays with numerous kinds of literary criticism and research on them. Another valuable aspect of both plays is that in each one there is a clear link with their sources. We know which sources Shakespeare used and looked at as sources for his plays and the contexts in which they were originally read in. By using *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, we can see that Shakespeare made radical departures from his sources that transform the plays into the iconic and beloved pieces of literature that we know. The original source of *Macbeth* comes from Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* that was originally published in 1577 and outlines tales of British history. There was also a second edition of Holinshed published in 1587, which was the one that Shakespeare used. *Macbeth* was a historical figure in Scottish history, whose story in Holinshed generally resembles

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Shakespeare’s version. Finding the original source for *Hamlet* is more complicated. It began in Scandinavian oral tradition as a legend akin to *Beowulf*, but Saxo Grammaticus created the first written version of the tale in the thirteenth century. Saxo’s work was later adapted and translated into French by François de Belleforest in the mid sixteenth century. We know that Shakespeare would have read this French translation because an English translation would not be published until 1608 by an unknown translator, who used details from Shakespeare’s play. To complicate matters even further, there is also believed to have been a now-lost play by an unknown author, referred to as *Ur-Hamlet*, performed in 1589, roughly ten years prior Shakespeare’s, which he possibly viewed and drew from as well. By understanding the previous lives of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, we can also understand the intertextuality of Shakespeare’s plays as adaptations. As Linda Hutcheon explains, intertextuality is how multiple texts interact within a work. If we understand Shakespeare’s plays as adaptations, then we can recognize the many different forms that the stories in them have taken.

The separation between Shakespeare’s plays and their original texts gives us a new perspective on what these plays can mean to us. By comparing Shakespeare’s plays with their original versions, there is something to be learned about how myth and history become tragedy and drama. The original versions of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* were not dramas, so in order to get them to be, Shakespeare had to adapt. That being said, neither play is typically thought of as an adaptation. There must be a necessary distinction between Story and Plot as well as how Shakespeare technically adapts the stories. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster illustrates this difference by saying “‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then

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7 Saxo Grammaticus, *The Danish History* (c. 1200), translated from the Latin by Oliver Elton (Norroena Society, New York, 1905).
the queen died of grief” is a plot.” While Forster was applying his theories to novels, they also can apply to theater. Theater is still a form of literature, with Shakespeare being an exemplary practitioner. Story is just what happens. Plot is when the author or playwright lets audiences understand the underlying human thoughts and actions. Plot is more complex, which makes the text more human and interesting. In a Shakespearean context, the Story of Macbeth is that Macbeth murders the king, takes his place, and is eventually killed himself. The Plot of Macbeth delves into the motives and ambitions of both Macbeth and his wife, allowing them to become richer characters inside a richer story. These changes dramatically alter the originals and turn them into the plays that we know today. After all, what is Macbeth without Lady Macbeth or Hamlet without its iconic bloody ending? The absence of iconic characters or endings drastically changed these plays so much that they are no longer the same stories. And yet in many ways, they also are.

The most apparent differences between the original versions of Hamlet and Macbeth and their subsequent plays are in the beginnings and the endings. These changes massively influence how we are supposed to read each text. In Historiae Danicae, Amleth lives and announces to the people of Denmark why he had to burn down the castle and kill his uncle, Feng. In The Hystorie of Hamblet, Hamblet does die, though not until much later and under entirely different circumstances than in The Tragedy of Hamlet. There is no fight with Laertes where he and Hamlet mortally wound each other; there is no Laertes at all, for that matter. Geruth does not poison herself to save her son. Like Amleth, Hamlet murders his uncle, destroys the castle, and makes a speech justifying his actions in accordance with revenge law. Where The Hystorie of Hamlet differs is that Hamlet returns to England to marry the king’s daughter, who eventually

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10 Saxo Grammaticus, The Danish History, 8.
murders Hamlet to marry his uncle and take over the kingdom. The cycle of violence and betrayal continues. The reason for all of these differences lies in their respective genre. *Hamlet* is a tragedy, while the tale of Amleth in *Historiae Danicae* and *The Hystorie of Hamblet* are legends and meant to be sagas. Tragedy wants finality. We see tragedy in death and in endings. Saga and legends want to continue, for there to be a cycle. Tragedy works differently; the tragedy is in death and endings. These tragedies depict periods of chaos and imbalance. When Feng and Claudius take the throne, they throw the state of Denmark into chaos. Macbeth rules Scotland with a bloody fist. The only way to get society back to balance is through death, typical of many other Shakespearean tragedies, such as *Othello*. The only way for the torment that Iago has caused Othello to inflict on Desdemona to end is for Othello to kill himself. Shakespeare’s tragedies are a return to normalcy. Tragedy details the violent way that order has to reestablish itself, that Hamlet must die from an accidental wound and Gertrude never gets to atone for going along with Claudius. Or, perhaps her sacrifice was her atonement, but it still proves to be in vain.

Hamlet’s inaction is the catalyst for why the play ends in tragedy. Amleth and Hamlet do not struggle with inaction. They were strategically waiting for the right time to strike, which makes them victorious heroes, as opposed to Hamlet's tragic fatal flaw that damns him and almost all of the other major characters. Either way, in victory or in bloody failure, Hamlet is the key figure. Despite being the titular character, in no version does Hamlet arrive on the scene immediately. In all three versions, there is space at the beginning of the text for exposition. Because they are prose narratives, the *Historiae Danicae* and *The Hystorie of Hamblet* have preambles. *The Hystorie of Hamblet* specifically has two sections titled “The Argument” and “The Preface” preceding the first chapter.11 These sections act as a prologue. “The Argument”

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describes famous ancient Roman figures such as Rome’s namesake Romulus. One reason for adding “The Arguement” (which is not part of the Amleth story in Historiae Danicae) could be to give The Hystorie of Hamblet an element of historical legitimacy. By including references to ancient Roman history and traditions, the author may be trying to frame themself and their writing as a successor to Roman art and literature. There are also parallels between the stories of Romulus and Remus and Hamlet because both involve fratricide and the shift of political control from one brother to the other. The writer of The Hystorie of Hamlet may have been trying to draw connections between them and foreshadow the themes in their story by appealing to a legend that audiences would have already been familiar with. The writer actually names many classical and biblical stories that involve someone being unjustly killed by a family member. The writer asks us “what other impression was it that entered into Romulus’s heart when under pretence of I know not what law he defiled his hands with the blood of his own brother,” “what, I pray you, incited Ancius Martinus to massacre Tarquin the elder,” and “…that there hath been some that, being impatient of staying till their just time of succession, have hastened the death of their own parents, as Absalom would have done to the holy king David his father.” Including these quotes and allusions, readers would get a better understanding of what The Hystorie of Hamblet wants to demonstrate. Like many stories that came before it, The Hystorie of Hamblet is steeped in violence and familicide, which needs to be set up even before the protagonist can enter.

Similarly, in The Tragedy of Hamlet, the Danish prince is absent from the first scene, which instead gives exposition and introduces supporting characters such as Horatio. We are introduced to the situation in media res. The fratricide and revenge plots are already unfolding. Unlike in the original sources, these plots begin offstage. Shakespeare introduces his audience to

12 Olsen, Tales for Shakespeare, 366-367.
a chaotic world. By showing the cataclysmic events offstage, the audience will not be as inclined to feel like it could have been prevented. They do not see the events as they happen. They only hear about them from other characters. The audience has to abide by the choices and events that happened, making the play more tragic. The events did not have to begin or end up how they do, but that is what happened. Starting in medias res increases the tragedy because the audience is never introduced to any alternative. We never see the state of Denmark during peacetime, only during chaos and war. The characters never discuss events from before the war or the murder, which also calls into question whether there ever even was a time before war and chaos, whether the kingdom has always been like in such a state. The original sources also have a culture of violence entrenched in them, such as when the narrator of *The Hystorie of Hamblet* explicitly says “You must understand that long time before the kingdom of Denmark received the faith of Jesus Christ and embraced the doctrine of the Christians, that the common people in those days were barbarous and uncivil and their princes cruel…” The *Historiae Danicae* also implies that Amleth’s father was abusive towards Gerutha in the lines “Gerutha…had been visited with her husband's extremest hate…for he [Feng] thought it shameful that a lady so meek and unrancorous should suffer the heavy disdain of her husband.” The *Historiae Danicae* also specifically cites that Feng kills his brother because of jealousy as well as to save Gerthua. This particular line introduces the idea that Feng does want to bring a political and moral change to the kingdom of Denmark, but he is still so entrenched in the same violent culture that he sees his only solution as killing his brother.

The differences between the openings of the different versions of *Macbeth* are much more subtle. On the surface, not much has changed, but these more minor changes end up

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framing the original tale differently. As in play *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s titular character does not appear in the first scene. Instead, the witches carry the opening section. Though only nine lines long, it frames how the audience is meant to understand the rest of the play. Witches and witchcraft exist in the world of *Macbeth* (which is also meant to be our world), which is not an outrageous thing for Shakespeare or his audience to believe in, but *Macbeth* still presents the audience with the idea of the supernatural. These arcane beings are something outside of human control and fit neatly with the themes of fate versus free will that the play explores: how much of what Macbeth does is his own choice and how much is set up by outside influences?

Shakespeare’s play and the original version provide different answers. Introducing the witches first hints at the possibility that Macbeth’s actions are not his own. The play leaves it ambiguous, while Holinshed’s *Macbeth* does not. In both instances, Macbeth is a major driving force and character, but Holinshed makes it clear that he is not the protagonist, starting out with a long description of a family tree illustrating how Duncane and Makbeth are related, emphasizing the differences between them. Duncane is described as being “soft and gentle of nature,” while Makbeth is “somewhat cruel of nature,” setting up a dichotomy between different characters that is not present in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.15 Duncan and Macbeth still oppose each other, but Macbeth’s adeptness and comfort with violence are not established as a negative until after he kills Duncan. Duncan’s murder is framed as bad more because he is the king rather than someone of good character; murder would be wrong in general, but it is especially wrong here because it is regicide. Macbeth is good at violence and war, but those traits are not considered cruelty in the same way in Holinshed’s version:

> For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
> Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
> Which smoked with bloody execution,

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Like Valor’s minion, carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave;
Which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseamed him from the nave to th’ chops,
And fixed his head upon our battlements.16

Macbeth is brave and adept at warfare, but is not cruel. This is an important change in character traits because it gives Macbeth’s character a starting point. The capacity for regicide and tyranny is there, but is more difficult to see until Macbeth finally becomes king, as opposed to Holinshde’s Makbeth, who is an evil antagonist from the beginning. Holinshed describes him as “a valiant gentleman, and one that if he had not beene somewhat cruell of nature, might have been thought most woorthie the gouernement of a realm” and

Duncane was so soft and gentle of nature, that the people wished the inclinations and manners of these two cousins to have been so tempered and interchangeable bestowed betwixt them, that where one had too much of clemencie, and the other of cruelty, the meane vertue betwixt these two extremities might haue reigned by indifferent partition in them both, so should Duncane haue proude a woorthie king, and Makbeth an excellent captaine.17

This passage also implies that Makbeth’s place as a captain allows him to be cruel in a controlled manner, while if he became king, his cruelty would go unchecked and ruin the kingdom. The audience can resonate with Shakespeare’s Macbeth as a human who made bad choices and came to a tragic (though still deserved) end, while Holinshed’s Makbeth is undoubtedly the antagonist and foil to Malolme and Makduffe (as well as Duncane). In both cases, we are meant to root against Macbeth, but only Shakespeare’s is a tragedy because only here are we allowed to understand who Macbeth is and what his motivations are prior to actually killing Duncan.

Shakespeare’s decision to flesh out Macbeth’s character makes his play more interesting and more tragic. There is a brief hint of something deeper in Makbeth, “euen as there were manie that stood in feare of him [Makbeth], so likewise stood he [Makbeth] in feare of manie, in sort

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16 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*. 1.2.16-23.
that he began to make those awaie by one surmised cauillation or other, whom he thought most able to worke him anie displeasure."

Holinshed does give a reason for why Makbeth acts so cruelly as king, but his personality and actions are still not any different from who he was at the beginning of the text. Shakespeare’s Macbeth makes a distinct choice of ambition over ethics and morals, but Holinshed’s Makbeth has always been cruel. There is no ramp up of evil doing or change of heart into a much worse man. There is no chance of the audience feeling any sympathy towards him.

Yet, Saxo does present us with a slight complication because Feng is already a complex villain in Hamblet and Historiae Danicae, whose motivation for killing Amleth’s father includes saving Gerutha from an abusive husband. There is no obligation for anyone to believe Feng’s motivation, but it would be an odd line to include, unless you view the line as an unreliable narrator situation or that Feng is justifying killing his brother to himself. On one hand, it would be unfair and reductive to assume that a medieval text is inherently less complex than its early modern and modern counterparts and that a medieval text is incapable of creating rich, three-dimensional villains who are also unreliable narrators. But on the other hand, we cannot confidently say that making Feng more complex is what Saxo is doing here. Writing characters, especially villains, in this way was not typical of the genre that Amleth is supposed to be part of. Amleth’s killing of Feng is framed as a moment of triumph and victory because Saxo does not want readers to feel sympathy for Feng:

O valiant Amleth, and worthy of immortal fame, who being shrewdly armed with a feint of folly, covered a wisdom too high for human wit under a marvellous disguise of silliness! And not only found in his subtlety means to protect his own safety, but also by its guidance found opportunity to avenge his father. By this skilful defence of himself, and strenuous revenge for his parent, he has left it doubtful whether we are to think more of his wit or his bravery."

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18 Holinshed, Shakespeare’s Holinshed, 34.

19 Saxo Grammaticus, The Danish History, 8.
Amleth is a text about violence, glory, and revenge. If we decide to see Feng as deeper than simply the evil uncle/stepfather, then the straightforward plot about glory and successful revenge does not work as well. Amleth is not questioning violence or revenge; it rewards violence by playing on cycles of violence. Even if Feng were truly saving Gerutha from the violence of Amleth’s father, he still resorts to violence to achieve his goals. Amleth continues the cycle by burning down the castle and brutally killing Feng. And he is rewarded at the end of the text by marrying Hermetrude and returning to Denmark with her and his other wife.20 Hamblet meets a slightly different ending, one more akin to Shakespeare’s, but still with dramatically different implications. Hamblet is murdered by his wife in order to marry his uncle and take the throne, thus continuing the cycle of violence.21 Even Makbeth must be killed in order to return the kingdom to peace. In these stories, violence solves everything. In Holinshed, Makbeth is described as having “accomplished mannie woorthie acts, verie profitable to the common-wealth… but afterward, by illusion of the diuell, he defamed the same with most terrible crueltie.”22 After killing Duncane and taking over, he actually proved to be a good king for a short period of time, implying that Duncane may have needed to be usurped for some prosperity, but Makbeth eventually became too cruel and needed to be taken down himself. Makbeth’s death is described as valorous for Makduff; he succeeds in “cutting his head from his shoulders” and then displays it “upon a pole, and brought it unto Malcome.”23

However, Shakespeare is trying to tell a different kind of story from Holinshed or Saxo or the author of Hamblet. By turning these texts into tragedies, violence becomes not the answer, but the question. Is violence always necessary? What is there to be gained from violence? Just by

21 Olsen, Tales for Shakespeare, 407-408.
22 Holinshed, Shakespeare’s Holinshed, 43.
23 Holinshed, Shakespeare’s Holinshed, 43.
looking at the endings of the plays *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare would want audiences to understand that all of the violence is precisely the reason for the characters’ downfalls. Other reasons get mixed up in these stories such as Hamlet’s inaction or the Macbeths’ ambition, but both of these traits are channeled through violence. Macbeth becomes king by killing Duncan. All of Hamlet’s revenge schemes involve killing Claudius. Neither of these plans end up working out exactly as planned. They both get what they want, but it comes with a tremendous cost that the original versions do not contain. The deaths at the end of Shakespeare’s tragedies are not glorious or honorable. People die in vain, especially the protagonists. Shakespeare’s endings ask the audience whether the resolution was worth all of the pain, violence, and death—whether being able to avenge your father was worth killing so many people, including yourself, in the process. Macbeth risks whether it was worth becoming king if it meant killing your closest friend to retain power and ultimately being usurped and killed by the rightful king. The original sources go out of their way to justify all of the violence. The audience is able to see the pain and anguish first hand, which contributes to the tone of the plays being more tragic than their original sources. Those readers would not have had as direct a connection to the characters and story as Shakespeare’s audience would have had.

On the subject of direct connections, this is also where the ghost of Hamlet’s father plays a role. The presence of ghosts not only implies the existence of some kind of afterlife, but also the presence of more supernatural beings. This detail is important because of the personal, human connection that is missing from the original sources. Hamlet’s revenge mission is not just a cultural obligation, but a final request personally delivered to him by the ghost of his dead father. The audience also not only sees that appeal, but also sees Hamlet struggle over whether or not he can bring himself to kill his uncle, even if it is what his father wants. Neither Amleth nor
Hamlet struggle with indecision over moral and ethical implications of their actions. They accept what they need to do and seek to carry out without the same internal struggles. Amleth does not even explain how Amleth knows that Feng killed his father, just that he does know and is hiding his knowledge by feigning madness. Saxo Grammaticus writes Feng committing fratricide and then skips to Amleth, saying that

Amleth beheld all this, but feared lest too shrewd a behaviour might make his uncle suspect him. So he chose to feign dulness, and pretend an utter lack of wits. This cunning course not only concealed his intelligence but ensured his safety. Every day he remained in his mother's house utterly listless and unclean, flinging himself on the ground and bespattering his person with foul and filthy dirt. His discoloured face and visage smutched with slime denoted foolish and grotesque madness.24

The Hystorie of Hamblet also does not explain how Hamlet knew what Fengon had done. The ghost of Hamlet's father being the one to inform Hamlet of the murder and instructing him to take revenge is also Shakespeare's invention. After time is taken to explain the murder and backstory between the two brothers, both original texts jump into the story of Amleth/Hamblet without much second thought. They already know about the fratricide and have plans for revenge and how they got to those points are never explained.

There is also another way to look at the endings. While the plays are tragedies and their endings point in a tragic direction, they could be seen as more similar to their original counterparts if they are viewed as having comic endings instead. That may sound like a ridiculous proposition at first, it would fit in with the idea of the tragic ending being a reset on the chaos the preceding events brought. By returning to normalcy, the characters and world can move into a brighter future. That mandatory transition is helped by the fact that there are always major two characters left alive in the carnage. One of these characters has a strong connection to the titular protagonist and the other represents a change in regime. In Macbeth, Macduff is left

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24 Saxo Grammaticus, The Danish History, 2.
alive after killing Macbeth. Malcolm is also alive, representing the new leadership of Scotland. Horatio fulfills a similar role to Macduff, though is close friends with Hamlet instead of his enemy. Fortinbras’ presence has been foreshadowed throughout the play, despite not receiving very much stage time. His appearance at the end signifies a reformation of the kingdom. The tragedy is that so many people had to die before the restoration of peace could happen, but there is a bittersweetness in the violence finally being able to end. By looking at the endings through a combination of comic and tragic resolution, the final moments of Shakespeare’s plays are actually more similar to their original sources than may be first thought. While Hamlet does not give a long speech to the people of Denmark chronicling and detailing each of his actions, he addresses Horatio about his legacy and how to remember him:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,  
That are but mutes or audience to this act,  
Had I but time (as this fell sergeant, Death,  
Is strict in his arrest), O, I could tell you—  
But let it be.—Horatio, I am dead.  
Thou livest; report me and my cause aright  
To the unsatisfied….  
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story….  
I cannot live to hear the news from England.  
But I do prophesy th’ election lights  
On Fortinbras; he has my dying voice.  
So tell him, with th’ occurrents, more and less,  
Which have solicited—the rest is silence.25

Horatio does give him a eulogy, while explaining the events to Fortinbras, who has suddenly arrived on the scene of a massacre, calling Hamlet “sweet prince,”26 and even Fortinbras says that they should “bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage.”27 These lines illustrate what

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26 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.2.343.  
Shakespeare is trying to say about legacy. Hamlet will be remembered as a hero for trying to bring about change and do something good, even if he brought many people down with him intentionally or unintentionally. It should also be noted that Macbeth does not get the same kind of eulogy: Macduff holds up his severed head and calls him an usurper while bowing to Malcom as the new and rightful king of Scotland.

    Hail King, for so thou art. Behold where stands Th’usurper’s cursed head: the time is free. I see thee compassed with thy kingdom’s pearl, Whose voices I desire aloud with mine. Hail, King of Scotland.28

Horatio’s eulogy is not the same as what Amleth and Hamlet say about themselves; their authors are more under the impression that change is not always a positive force and if there must be change, it must come through violence. While Shakespeare’s plays are more tragic in tone, they are also more hopeful about the future and the nature of human beings.

**How Shakespeare Change the Women**

It would be remiss to not discuss how Shakespeare transformed the female characters. His female characters are some of his iconic roles, especially Lady Macbeth who seems like a favorite among scholars and fans alike. However, if we go looking for these characters in the original sources, we come up with very different women. Of the female characters in Shakespeare’s plays (Gertrude, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and the witches) only one of them has an actual formal name: Gertrude finds her origins in Geruth/Gerutha. Lady Macbeth’s name is implied, but never directly stated. She is only offhandedly mentioned once and is referred to as Macbeth’s wife. Ophelia is an amalgamation of multiple characters, some of whom are named,

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such as Hermetrude, and some of whom are not. The witches are similarly called “the weird sisters.”

Names aside, the female characters of the original texts feel thin and hollow when compared to their Shakespearean counterparts. Like with the discussion of Story vs. Plot, Shakespeare similarly took the general premise of the female characters, but expanded them into nuanced, three-dimensional characters. That complexity stems from an added ambiguity about the roles these characters take on. Is Lady Macbeth the one who instigates Macbeth’s change of heart regarding regicide? Is Gertrude an accomplice or a victim? How has Ophelia changed from a seductress and traitor to a pawn and a victim? Shakespeare allows these women to have rich inner lives that did not exist in the originals, which is also helped by the transition from text to stage, where audiences can connect with the characters differently because they can see and hear them in person rather than simply reading about what happens. Seeing Ophelia and Lady Macbeth’s madness makes more of an impact because we watch it happen as opposed to reading about Hermetrude’s betrayal of Amleth. The original texts are not about the women and are also incredibly misogynistic; which is not to say that Shakespeare does not have his own issues when it comes to writing women, but he still gives much more nuance and respect to his female characters than any of the original texts.

Gertrude is a great character to begin with because the way that one could portray her is left open to interpretation. Not only is it about Shakespeare’s words, but there are personal acting choices as well as staging and directorial decisions that affect how a character is played. Allowing that freedom to let certain productions choose their own ways to interpret Gertrude is important and necessary. While this may not have been what Shakespeare originally intended, it
is still a lasting effect of his work. Female characters are allowed to be just as morally ambiguous as male characters.

We see moral ambiguity play out in Gertrude’s love for her son versus the question about how much she knew of Claudius’ deception, which scholars and productions have been grappling with for centuries. These are the parts of Gertrude’s character to dissect because neither *Amleth* and *Hamlet* really deal with either of them. We don’t get to see Geruth or Gerutha be a mother to her son. The strongest relationships that she has are with her husband and his brother Feng/Fengon. In *Hamlet*, they are even having an affair, specifically describing that “…Fengon, boldened and encouraged by such impunity durst venture to couple himself in marriage with her whom he used as his concubine during good Horvendile’s life.”29 This line already implicates Geruth in the crimes against her husband, closing the gap of possible ambiguity as to whether Geruth knew what Fengon was planning for her husband. If they were already having an affair, it stands to reason that she would likely know about the murder. Her status as an accomplice is only furthered in the scene where her son confronts her. In both of the original texts, she is lamenting and punishing herself for her sins, presumably both the technically incestuous marriage and adultery, as well as the regicide, as her son enters to immediately and viciously verbally attack her.

Most infamous of women; dost thou seek with such lying lamentations to hide thy most heavy guilt? Wantoning like a harlot, thou hast entered a wicked and abominable state of wedlock, embracing with incestuous bosom thy husband's slayer, and wheedling with filthy lures of blandishment him who had slain the father of thy son. This, forsooth, is the way that the mares couple with the vanquishers of their mates; for brute beasts are naturally incited to pair indiscriminately; and it would seem that thou, like them, hast clean forgot thy first husband. As for me, not idly do I wear the mask of folly; for I doubt not that he who destroyed his brother will riot as ruthlessly in the blood of his kindred. Therefore it is better to choose the garb of dulness than that of sense, and to borrow some protection from a show of utter frenzy. Yet the passion to avenge my father still burns in my heart; but I am watching the chances, I await the fitting hour. There is a place for all

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29 Olsen, *Tales for Shakespeare*, 373.
things; against so merciless and dark spirit must be used the deeper devices of the mind. And thou, who hadst been better employed in lamenting thine own disgrace, know it is superfluity to bewail my witlessness; thou shouldst weep for the blemish in thine own mind, not for that in another's. On the rest see thou keep silence.  

It is very intense, but somehow not the most intense that it could be, as the interrogation and verbal abuse from Hamlet is approximately two and a half pages, which Geruth is not even upset about. She reacts by feeling

...nearly touched and that Hamlet moved her to the quick, where she felt herself interested, nevertheless she forgot all disdain and wrath which thereby she might as then have had, hearing herself so sharply chidden and reproved, for the joy she then conceived to behold the gallant spirit of her son and to think what she might hope and the easier expect of his so great policy and wisdom.  

In both the Historiae Danicae and The Hystorie of Hamlet, Geruth(a) resigns herself to what her son has accused her of, framing his interrogation as both a way of repenting her, but also overcoming an obstacle; once again lending to the genre of the original sources because the scene between Geruth(a) and her son are not tragic and do not lead into tragedy, but into victory. Amleth and Hamlet feel victorious over their mothers. Neither the narrator nor Amleth/Hamlet seem to respect her feelings or her agency as a person. This scene ends by saying, “With such reproaches he rent the heart of his mother and redeemed her to walk in the ways of virtue; teaching her to set the fires of the past above the seductions of the present.” Afterwards, Feng reenters the narrative and the conversation between Gerutha and Amleth is dropped, making it seem like Gerutha’s feelings, motives, and character are unimportant.

Hamlet plays this sequence out differently from its sources. Firstly, there is a murder. Polonius’ murder is not too relevant to the larger thoughts about Gertrude here, but is still important to mention as a difference that Shakespeare added in. The death of Polonius here  

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30 SaxoGrammaticus, The Danish History, 5.  
31 Olsen, Tales for Shakespeare, 382.  
32 SaxoGrammaticus, The Danish History, 5.
serves to further illustrate the tension between Hamlet and his mother. The audience sees Hamlet kill someone so suddenly that even though they can see more of Hamlet’s perspective, this is still a horrible act that he has committed. Her reaction says it all, “O me, what hast thou done?...O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!” and is likely heightened even more by any accompanying stage directions. While the audience knows that Hamlet is feigning madness, we are attracted to and can connect with Gertrude’s pain and fear because all we see is a mother trying to understand her son and come to terms with what she has participated in (willingly or unwillingly); which is not present in the original sources because they have Geruth(a) so ready to accept what her son accuses her of. Gertrude, on the the other hand, repeatedly asks Hamlet to stop berating and interrogating her, painting her as a more regretful queen than in the originals:

O Hamlet, speak no more!  
Thou turn’st my eyes into my very soul,  
And there I see such black and grainèd spots  
As will not leave their tinct...  
O, speak to me no more!  
These words like daggers enter in my ears.  
No more, sweet Hamlet!34

All of her moral ambiguity culminates in the final scene of Hamlet, where Gertrude takes her own life to save her son’s by drinking the poison meant for him. In the original sources, we do not hear from the queen again following the scene with her son. She is mentioned several times, but does not actually appear, which is why it is important that Shakespeare made sure that Gertrude is part of the final scene and its chaos. Gertrude actually makes a decision for herself. Throughout the play, all of the male characters have been making decisions for her and placing her in different roles, but she is finally able to control the narrative by protecting Hamlet. It sadly means that she dies, but that adds to the tragedy of Hamlet, along with the fact that it does not

33 Shakespeare, Hamlet, 3.4.23-25.  
34 Shakespeare, Hamlet, 3.4.86-93.
fully protect him. It just prolongs the inevitable, but at least she actually gets an ending, even if it is an unhappy one.

The tragedy in *Hamlet* is that the women are powerless. They are constantly pushed around and used by the men who ultimately fail them. There is no better example of this idea than Ophelia, and also no other female characters at all. Finding a clear one-to-one comparison of Ophelia in Shakespeare’s sources is difficult because there isn’t one. There are several minor female characters who either seduce or marry Amleth/Hamlet and then subsequently betray him, but none of them are clearly Ophelia. To create her, Shakespeare had to piece together different aspects of different characters. The unifying characteristic is that all of these women are romantically involved with the Hamlet character and then betray him, intentionally or unintentionally. This distinction between intentional and unintentional betrayal is important because it ends up showing a link between how both Gertrude and Ophelia were adapted from their source characters: Both characters were originally portrayed as being conniving and villainous, but Shakespeare takes the blame off of them and transforms them into victims. Ophelia becomes an ingénue figure, her innocence and genuine affection for Hamlet being her defining traits; making it all the more tragic when Hamlet rejects her and she spirals into madness and eventual death. The audience can only watch all of the tragedy unfold.

Another point of Ophelia’s character that Shakespeare added is more subtle and underrated: the female friendship/solidarity between Ophelia and Gertrude. It is an aspect that is not always present in Shakespeare’s works. For example, it is also notably missing from Lady Macbeth’s character, which has its own implications. A lack of female solidarity or even pitting every female character against each other is a well-known modern misogynistic trope, so it is interesting to see it subverted here because that subversion allows for more tragedy. In the
original texts, Geruth(a) and the Ophelia-like characters did not interact at all, but in *Hamlet*, Gertrude is the first to know about Ophelia’s madness, suggesting a closeness or trust between them. After all, she finds out even before Laertes does. Gertrude is similarly also the one to report Ophelia’s death, an implied suicide, which seems like a deliberate choice to emphasize the rapport between Gertrude and Ophelia. There are no other women present in the play, so it falls on Gertrude to give a eulogy for Ophelia, showing a protectiveness and affection that is not really seen from the other characters.

There is a willow grows askant the brook
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do “dead men’s fingers” call them.
There on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds
Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress
Or like a creature native and endued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death. 35

There is a tragedy that the relationship between Ophelia and Gertrude cannot be explored more because of the play’s bloody ending and the chaotic genre it adheres to. Since *Hamlet* does not take place in normal, peaceful circumstances, we are never able to see what a normal and peaceful relationship between these two characters could be like. This idea speaks to the main difference between *Hamlet* and its source materials: *Hamlet* is tragic because we care about the women, but never get enough time with them. But the original sources are heroic because we

were never supposed to care about them in the first place. They were nothing more than obstacles or plot devices, not full characters.

The women of *Macbeth*, of whom there are still not many, are different from the women of *Hamlet*. While all of these characters are expanded in Shakespeare’s plays, Lady Macbeth came from nothing, unlike the original counterparts to Gertrude and Ophelia who had many mentions. There is only one line in Holinshed that directly refers to Makbeth’s wife: “The woords of the three weird sisters…also greatly encouraged him [Makbeth] herevnto, but speciallie his wife lay sore vpon him to attempt the thing, as she was verie ambitious, burning in vnquenchable desire to beare the name of a queene.”36 Without this line, nothing would change because she is that unimportant to the text. It would be remarkably easy to completely skip over the line by accident when reading the text because it is that off-handedly and briefly mentioned. It is astonishing to see such a reduced version of Lady Macbeth because she is so fundamental to *Macbeth* and is so beloved by audiences.

Lady Macbeth is almost purely his invention, but is portrayed with a complex and rich inner life of ambition and ambiguous morality. Female characters in literature, particularly ones written by men, can easily be too pure of heart and must be protected or be irredeemable and only there to trick the male protagonist. Lady Macbeth could be seen as the latter, but she gets asides and soliloquies that give her a distinct character, with her own motivations and emotions separate from Macbeth. Her dialogue with her husband also indicates a clear respect between them, which seems like it should be out of place, but ultimately their mutual respect, as well as Lady Macbeth’s competence, actually make the play more tragic because we watch their relationship fall apart due to both of their ambitions and actions:

LADY MACBETH  Great Glamis, worthy Cawdor,
  Greater than both by the all-hail hereafter!
  Thy letters have transported me beyond
  This ignorant present, and I feel now
  The future in the instant.
MACBETH  My dearest love,
  Duncan comes here tonight.

These lines present a couple that is scheming and conniving together. Their plans are about each other as a team and there is no indication that they are thinking about betraying each other to get ahead. If Macbeth is to become king, then Lady Macbeth will be with him. A villainous couple that genuinely respects and loves each other is rare for Shakespeare, marking the Macbeths as a particularly interesting phenomenon. And as much as they are the villains, they are also the protagonists. The play is named for Macbeth, but Lady Macbeth appears often and drives the plot just as much as her husband does.

While productions can make their own interpretative decisions, *Macbeth* does avoid placing blame solely on Lady Macbeth. There are various interpretations that see the situation differently. Some say that Lady Macbeth is the villain for egging Macbeth on, but others see Macbeth as having always had ambitious desires. As with Gertrude, that ambiguity as to how villainous the female characters really are makes the play more tragic than its source. Similarly to her husband, Lady Macbeth makes distinct choices to become more cruel and violent. Her moral emptiness also notably makes her different from her original source counterpart who is mentioned as being quite ambitious, but does not actually take any actions to feed that. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, truly takes matters into her own hands by invoking spirits to help her prepare for usurping the throne in her first appearance on stage:

  The raven himself is hoarse
  That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
  Under my battlements. Come, you spirits

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37 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.5.54-60.
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.
Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th’ effect and it. Come to my woman’s breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature’s mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry “Hold, hold!”

This passage is what truly separates Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth from Holinsh’d’s. It still
characterizes her with an unquenchable thirst for being queen, but makes her ambition real and
frightening. We should fear her in this scene because she is already taking such extreme steps far
before her husband does. It is also that extremity that makes audiences like her, especially when
she berates Macbeth for being unsure whether he can go through with the murder:

LADY MACBETH What beast was ’t then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both.
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. I have given suck, and know
How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.
MACBETH If we should fail—
LADY MACBETH We fail?
But screw your courage to the sticking place
And we’ll not fail.

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38 Shakespeare, _Macbeth_, 1.5.38-54.
39 Shakespeare, _Macbeth_ 1.7.48-62.
Yes, they genuinely respect each other, but this passage is meant to be a distinct departure from their typical relationship, demonstrating how their ambitions, fears, and vices are beginning to divide them. Their relationship only deteriorates further as the play progresses, but their goals are always about each other. As Lady Macbeth’s madness sets in, Macbeth asks a doctor about her condition, showing concern and care for her.\textsuperscript{40} It is a fairly realistic and oddly sweet portrayal of a marriage, for a play about murder. Holinshed gives no indication as to what Makbeth’s relationship with his wife may be like.

Audiences resonate so much with Lady Macbeth because this play is a tragedy and she is engrossing to watch. Even her demise is fun because it is engaging. We see a strong character with resilient—albeit unethical—principles lose herself and her mind. None of the characters in \textit{Macbeth} are immune to its tragic and violent nature. Lady Macbeth exemplifies this nature because we get to witness her downfall, but not her death. Her madness is public, but her death is private. It happens off-stage and is reported on by another character and implied that she took her own life, all of which is not unlike Ophelia’s death. The famous line: “The Queen, my lord, is dead,” leads into the beginning of the end.\textsuperscript{41} When Lady Macbeth dies, it is an omen for the thing to come. Her death is the beginning of Macbeth’s kingdom and his reign falling apart. His partner in tyranny, blood, and life has died, what else is left for him?

In Shakespeare’s play, it is the women who control the narrative. Shakespeare has the witches utter the first lines of \textit{Macbeth}, not Macbeth himself or any other mortal character. The witches are curious because they are only ambiguously women, but do present themselves as women and are often played by/portrayed as such in productions of \textit{Macbeth}. Since there is still an aspect of them that is female, they should be included here. Holinshed describes them as

\textsuperscript{40} Shakespeare, \textit{Macbeth}, 5.3.37-60.
\textsuperscript{41} Shakespeare, \textit{Macbeth}, 5.5.16.
“three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world.”¹² Shakespeare’s Banquo describes them a bit differently, saying

   What are these,
   So withered, and so wild in their attire,
   That look not like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ Earth
   And yet are on ’t?—Live you? Or are you aught
   That man may question? You seem to understand me
   By each at once her choppy finger laying
   Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,
   And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
   That you are so.⁴³

They both are women and are also not women. It seems that they are witches, rather than women, and that their supernatural status comes before gender status.

   Holinshed seems more concerned with figuring out what they are than Shakespeare does.

Holinshed wonders if they are “the weird sisters…the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie….”⁴⁴ Shakespeare does not need to describe how they look because the audience would be seeing them in person, so it is unclear how they would have been costumed in the original staging of Macbeth. Ultimately, the witches actually do not change that much from Holinshed, with the main difference being that Shakespeare gives them more stage time than they had originally. By giving the witches more of a presence in his play, Shakespeare is able to explore all sides of a tragedy. They end up functioning more like a Greek chorus from ancient Greek theater rather than just as a catalyst to eventual destruction. They have opinions and make plans. They are omniscient and exist simultaneously within the play and outside of it. Holinshed’s witches are much more grounded within the reality of the text because they do not appear very much. By making his witches appear multiple times, Shakespeare makes the audience question what they truly are, how much

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¹² Holinshed, Shakespeare’s Holinshed, 23.
⁴³ Shakespeare, Macbeth, 1.3.39-47.
⁴⁴ Holinshed, Shakespeare’s Holinshed, 24.
power they have, and what they are going to do with all that power. The play intentionally never gives a definitive answer as to whether or not they push Macbeth to commit the murder. Shakespeare leaves the witches in a neutral role, putting the focus on the human characters and the choices they make.

Shakespeare chose to adapt the stories of Macbeth and Hamlet for a reason. He saw themes of violence and power that resonated with how he saw his own world, but also saw room for expansion. There was room to explore what violence and power truly mean, to be able to ask questions about and criticize these known questions. He did this by reimagining these texts as tragedies instead of triumphant historical sagas. In his own day, Shakespeare was following suit of his contemporaries, but to modern audiences, we see a fresh, new take everytime someone performs one of his plays. Shakespeare reminds us that we are constantly adapting. We are always reflecting on a piece of literature--in any form--that we loved, or hated for that matter, and thinking about how we would do it. We take those thoughts and use them to piece together new adaptations of old stories, even when we believe we are creating new ones. By examining the old stories that Shakespeare looked at to create his own, we can understand that all stories fit into a weird gray area of being neither fully original nor completely based on a previous work. Shakespeare shows us the beauty of ideas and the way that humans put stories and ideas together.
Bibliography


