

Free extract from the Introduction to *The True Mystery of Hamlet*, by [Thomas] Watson (London, 1589); with details of the original 16th century sleuth.

Sherlock James and the Case of *Hamlet*

Sir, it is a mystery.

—William Shakespeare

PRESERVED among the Jamestown Shakespeare papers is a chronicle called “The Trewe Misterie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke.” This historic case, preserved as a holograph manuscript, narrates actual events that took place in 1588/9, in Denmark, at the close of the so-called “Magnus Interregnum.” This was a brief but turbulent interval in Danish history falling between the death of Frederick II (4 April 1588) and the twelfth birthday of his son, Christian IV (12 April 1589). The Interregnum is shrouded in obscurity. After Christian IV came to the throne, many historical records of the interregnal period were burned, or revised. *The True Mystery of Hamlet* therefore sheds light not only on English theater history, but on a critical and hitherto obscure moment in the chronicles of an entire nation.

The author of the *True Mystery*, who signs himself “Watson,” is Thomas Watson (1557-1592), the well-known university wit. In 1588/9, in Helsingør, Denmark (Shakespeare’s “Elsinore”), we find Watson assisting one “Sherlock Homes” in a missing-persons case, an investigation that developed into a full-blown national tragedy. The detective’s real name, as we learn from *Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587) was Sherlock James alias Homes.¹

¹ For the known facts of the life of Sherlock James alias Homes, see “Biographical Notices,” at the rear of this volume.

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In 1588/9, Sherlock James was in Denmark (with Watson) when he was called upon to search for a missing girl—the daughter of Charles de Dançay, royal counselor; the acceptance of which case-file led Sherlock into a moral swamp unequaled in the annals of the Danish royals and unsurpassed in the whole of English literature. As an eyewitness account, Watson’s *True Mystery of Hamlet* has the virtue of objectivity: neither the author nor Sherlock James was involved in Danish politics except as a spectator. Attentive to detail, Watson confirms what we already knew concerning the turbulent Magnus Interregnum; and he snaps into place missing pieces of a puzzle that has long perplexed historians.

Like most writers of the period, Watson in his commitment to factual accuracy makes a few trivial concessions to political necessity. On a vagrant leaf among the Jamestown Shakespeare Manuscripts is a note that reads: “In deference to his royall maiestie, James, Kinge of Scotland, the authour hath chang’d y^e names of principall figures & a fewe biographical detayles, thereby to conceale from historicall scrutinie certaine vnsauoury detailes of the Interregnum.” Watson was evidently pressured by the Scottish king (later James I of Britain) to represent the Oldenburgs of Denmark in the best possible light. (King James owed a political favor to Denmark with respect to his father’s killer: in 1568, when the earl of Bothwell fled to Scandinavia and was apprehended, the Danish king, Frederick II, imprisoned the fugitive assassin in the notorious dungeon at Dragsholm Castle. Bothwell spent the last ten years of his life chained to a pillar.)

On 23 November 1589, not long after the Magnus Interregnum drew to its bloody and poisonous close, King James married Princess Anne of Denmark, eldest daughter of the

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late Frederick II. Watson therefore had good reason, even without political pressure, to change the historical names, as requested. But invention was not his strong suit as a writer.¹ In renaming the central historical figures, Watson had no thought for plausible Christian names: King Frederick II becomes “King Hamlet”; Queen Sophie of Mecklenburg-Güstrow, “Gertrude”; King Magnus, “Claudius” Prince Frederick, “Hamlet” [Jr.]; Christian IV, “Fortinbras”; Charles de Dançay, “Polonius Corambis”; Dançay’s children, Jørgen and Kristence, Watson renames “Laertes” and “Ophelia.” The name “Hamlet” is derived from an old Icelandic word meaning “nincompoop,” and seems to have been chosen by Watson only because the historical narrative bears certain superficial similarities to the ancient tale of “Amleth,” as transmitted by Saxo-Grammaticus. Other names, Watson plucked from antecedent Greek, Latin, German, and English texts. The result is a culturally diverse hodgepodge. Hardly a single Danish name remains in Watson’s tidied-up history. The only authentic names are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a pair of unfortunate Danish Jews who were, in fact, named Rosenkrantz and Gyldenstjerne.

Shakespeare inherited most of his character names from Watson. The playwright cannot, therefore, be blamed for the inaccurate *dramatis personae* of the stage adaptation. All other departures from historical fact in *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, and all of the play’s notorious obsessions and absurdities, are, of course, Shakespeare’s own.

A. D.

¹ In a few places, Watson has forgotten to alter the historical names; in this edition, for the sake of uniformity, those oversights have been quietly corrected within square brackets.

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The True Mystery of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

By Watson

THE KING of Denmark's marriage and its curious termination—ending in the violent deaths of the entire royal family, of Lord Corambis and two of his children, plus two boyhood friends of Prince Hamlet—have long ceased to be of interest in those bored and exalted social circles in which the unfortunate monarch once moved.¹ The lurid details of a scandal in Bohemia have eclipsed the inscrutable mystery known today as the “Danish Tragedy.”² But no history of Denmark nor any memoirs of Sherlock Homes will ever be complete without some sketch of this remarkable episode—which I happen to know something about, because my friend had a considerable share in clearing up the matter. The details have never, until now, been revealed to the public.

¹ *King of Denmark* | Frederick II (July 1534 - April 1588), King of Denmark-Norway, here called “King Hamlet”; father of Prince Frederick (“Hamlet” Jr.); husband of Queen Sophie (“Gertrude”); succeeded by his brother Magnus (April-Sep. 1588), then by his 2d son, Christian IV (“Fortinbras,” April 1577 - Feb. 1648).

² *scandal in Bohemia* | In May 1591, Rudolf II, King of Bohemia, arrested the Englishman Sir Edward Kelley and imprisoned him in the Křivoklát Castle outside Prague, on allegations of murder. Sherlock Homes traveled from Copenhagen to Prague, where he argued that Kelley—an alchemist who swindled Rudolph on a promise to change lead into gold—was innocent on the murder rap. Imprisoned by Rudolf without having secured Kelley's freedom, Homes is believed on Warner's testimony to have been released from Bohemian custody in 1592, only to perish at sea. This helps us to date *The Trewe Misterie of Hamlet* with some precision, between May 1591 and Thomas Watson's death in September 1592.

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The strange case of the Danish Tragedy was first presented to Homes during our brief abode in Helsingør. Having writ *finis* to a domestic affair—a homicide tried in the High Court of the Doge of Venice—we made our way at leisure into Switzerland; traveling thence by closed carriage from Aadorf to Zealand, for a wished conference with the renowned painter, Horatio Vernet, a distant kinsman of Sherlock Homes. Vernet's rumoured portraits of Homes's mother are a lost treasure that my friend had earnestly hoped to acquire for his private collection, but it was not to be. Arriving in Copenhagen, we learned that the artist was chronically indisposed from a painful *akronisme*, and beyond recovery. We were therefore unable to see him, even for a brief visit. Disappointed, Homes and I while awaiting our return passage to London retired to Helsingør, taking an upper room at the Krebshuset, overlooking the Øresund Strait.

The Danish tragedy unfolded nearly two years after I had said a last farewell to my beloved friend, Sir Philip Sidney. It was on 22 September 1586, in the Battle for Zutphen, that Pip took his mortal wound. As a memento of that historic conflict, I too came away with a musketball in my leg. I shall always recall Sir Philip's words as he passed me his water bottle, calling out my name, saying, "Thy necessity, dear Wat, is yet greater than mine." Pip died 26 days later, from gangrene. I survived, but the hurt I received on that day persisted still, with a dull throbbing in my trousers.

At Helsingør, when Homes was out and about, I remained indoors, the weather having taken a turn to rain,

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with high gusty winds. On one such melancholy day, with my body in an easy-chair and my bad leg resting upon another, I surrounded myself with a stack of broadside ballads, news sheets, and play quartos; until at last, saturated with these trite fictions, I tossed them aside and just sat there, listless, pondering the huge crest and monogram double-V on a sealed parchment that had arrived by afternoon post. I wondered who my friend's correspondent might be.

"Here is a very fashionable epistle," I remarked as Homes entered. "Yet your morning letters, if I remember right, came from a Danish fishmonger, and from a great attorney in Venice."

"My correspondence has the charm of variety," he answered, smiling, "and the humbler are usually the more interesting. This, however, looks to be one of those unwelcome social invitations that call upon a man either to go and be bored, or to lie."

He broke the seal and glanced over the contents. "Surprise, it may prove to be of interest, after all."

"Not social, then?"

"No, professional."

"And from a noble client?"

"Among the highest rank and station in all Scandinavia."

"My dear fellow, I congratulate you!"

"I assure you, Watson, that the status of my client is of less moment to me than the interest of his case. But it is just possible, too, that rank will figure in this new investi-

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gation, if only as the favourite epithet of Denmark's socialites: 'rank' corruption, 'rank' offences, 'rank' forgeries, 'rank' mixtures, things 'rank' and grown to seed, 'ranker' weeds, 'rank' sweat dripping upon 'rank' sheets 'rankly' abus'd, and even—in a grocery shop, this morning—a complaint from a Danish hausfrau about my 'rank' tobacco smoke."

Here, Sherlock Homes broke off, pensively. He lit his beloved pipe and let the blue haze envelop him. "You have been reading of late, have you not?"

"It looks so," said I ruefully, pointing to my bundle of half-penny broadside ballads and two-penny quartos: *A Godly Ballad of the Plagues that Ensue Whoredom* (1566); *A Speciall Remedie against the Furious Force of Lawlesse Love* (1587); *A Mery Jest of the Frier and the Boye* (1588); *The Sussex Vampire* (1582); and *A Handfull of Pleasant Delites* (1584). Sex and medicine, sex and the law, sex and catechism, Gothic sex, sex and self-abuse. Some tracts were in favour and some against, but it was sex just the same, nothing but sex. Also, a play-script by some fellow named Hieronymus Justesen Ranch (which I could not read because it was in Danish; but with a title like *Samson's Fængsel*, it was doubtless more of the same pornographic trash). Not a single spine-chilling murder mystery can be found on the entire Danish peninsula, much less in the lobby of Den Krebshuset. That's the Scandinavians for you.

"The letter which I hold in my hand," said Homes, "is from lord Voltimar Voltimand, the Danish ambassador. I will read it to you. In return, you must sort through my

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papers and let me have whatever bears upon the matter. This is what he says:

My dear Master Sherlock Homes:

I was told by Lord Polonius, privy councilor to his royal highness, the King of Denmark, that I may place implicit reliance upon your judgment and discretion.¹ I have determined, therefore, to call upon you and to consult with you in reference to a very painful event which has occurred in connection with my lord Polonius and his daughter, the lady Ophelia. Messr. Horatio of Wittenberg is acting already in the matter, but his Majesty assures me that he sees no objection to your cooperation, and that you may even be of some assistance. I will call at four o'clock in the afternoon. Should you have any other engagement at that time, I hope that you will postpone it, as this matter is of paramount importance.

*Yours faithfully,
Lord Voltimand*

“It is dated from Helsingør, and written with a quill pen. The ambassador has had the misfortune to get a smear of ink upon the outer side of his left little finger,” remarked Homes as he folded up the epistle.”

¹ *Polonius*] Watson's pseudonym for Charles de Dançay (1510 -1588/9), a native of Poitou with Protestant leanings; from 1546 resident French ambassador to Denmark; a trusted counselor of Frederick II; father of s. Jørgen “Laertes” (1570-1588/9) and d. Kristence “Ophelia” (1573-1588/9). “An inveterate busybody, he was ceaselessly making plans, few of which were carried out” (Kirchner, 26).

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“Four o’clock? He will be here less than in an hour.”

“Yes, and I expect he shall be wearing a white silk Spanish doublet with a high-ruffled collar of Belgian lace, Italian breeches, and be-ribboned pumps. Tucked into his belt will be a pair of monogrammed lambskin gloves with a Warwickshire double-stitch.”

“Amazing, dear fellow. And how is that determined?”

“While on my stroll along the strand, I was obliged to visit a public jakes. Standing in line, between myself and a number of rustic tradesmen, stood a Danish lord, richly appareled, rocking gently from side to side. On his left little finger was a smear of ink. He seemed a melancholic figure. I left him to his cogitations, without giving him good day.” Homes leaned back and blew a perfect smoke ring, which hovered above his head. “I have just leisure enough, with your assistance, to get clear upon the subject. Sort through those papers and arrange the extracts in their order of time.”

“I have little difficulty in finding what I want,” said I, “for the facts are quite recent, and the matter struck me as possibly titillating. I feared to refer the piquant details to you, however, as I knew that you had a little something in hand and that you disliked the intrusion of other matters.”

“Oh, you mean the problem of the Venetian handkerchief. Well, that is quite cleared up now—though, indeed, not quite in the nick of time. Come, give me the results of your selections.”

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“Here is the first notice which I can find. It appears in a letter from Sir Edward Dyer: ‘*A marriage has been proposed,*’ it says, ‘*and will, if rumour is correct, shortly take place, between the Prince of Denmark and lady Ophelia, only daughter to Polonius, the resident ambassador from France, an intimate of the King*’—but this optimistic report preceded the April 4 death of old King Hamlet.”

“And what has been disclosed concerning King Hamlet’s catastrophe?”

“He is said to have been ‘stung,’ as he lay asleep in the palace garden.”

“Stung?”

“By a serpent.”

“Aha,” remarked Homes, stretching his long, thin legs towards the fire. “The idea of a snake instantly occurred to me as a possibility.”

“I have no doubt,” I said, “who was indirectly responsible for the King’s death, but I cannot say it is likely to weigh upon the man’s conscience.”

Homes eyed me narrowly. “How so, Watson?”

“It has been reported that King Hamlet received his fatal snake-sting while napping in the palace orchard, within the walls of Kronborg Castle.¹ Yet no poisonous snake is native to Denmark except the *vipera berus*, or cross adder, a serpent rarely found even in the most unpopulated woods, and whose bite is rarely fatal. Nor is

¹ *Kronborg Castle* | Kronberg Slot, the royal hold at Helsingør, built in the 1420s by King Erik as a fortress; rebuilt in the 1580s as a magnificent Renaissance palace.

your viper known ever to have attacked a sleeping man, much less a king asleep on a lawn chair. As for the particular reptile by whom his Majesty was stung, bit, or strangled, no such beast was ever examined by coroner, constable, or veterinarian. A snakeskin was found beside the King's body. That is all."

"Of what was condition was the corpse?"

"A government spokesman has evidently stated that the snake's venom blistered the King's flesh with a *'leporous tetter'* and *'barky crust.'* But the bite of your Danish cross adder produces no blisters, sores, dermatitis, or vesicant pustules. So now everyone in Denmark is saying, 'I don't believe his Majesty died of a snakebite. I think he died of a tertiary syphilis.' But that can't be right either because they bore the dead King bare-faced on the bier, from Helsingør to Roskilde Cathedral, and no such effects were seen on his skin by the general public."

"Cosmetics, perhaps."

"Perhaps."

"Very good, Watson. Having learned the tricks of the trade, you could be a detective yourself, someday."

"My surmise is that the sleeping King was actually bludgeoned to death with a blunt object such as a cocklebat."

"That conclusion, however, may be premature."

"Enter," said I, "the dead king's brother.¹ The expectation of the Danish people, indeed of all Europe, was

¹ *dead king's brother*] Magnus, Duke of Holstein (1540-"1583"; i.e. 1588/9), King Magnus I of Denmark-Norway, April 1588-Jan. 1588/9.

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that Prince Hamlet, the late King's eldest son, would return to Helsingør, there to be named by the electors as his father's successor. But when Hamlet arrived from Wittenberg, the election had already been held, and his uncle had won it. Hamlet, Jr., was thereby disinherited from the Danish crown by his own noble electors."¹

"Disappointing to the prince, I'm sure," said Homes.

"Some of those 'noble' electors are said by the common people to have had itching palms."

"Bribery?"

"I think so. Some think also that Prince Hamlet's mother was involved."²

"With the surprising election?"

"No, with her brother-in-law. Old Hamlet was scarce cold in his grave before his widow and brother were betrothed, and wedded, and bedded. Perhaps not in that precise order." [...]

[End extract.]

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¹ *Prince Hamlet* | Frederick, prince of Denmark (1569/70 - 1588/9); whose younger brother, Prince Christian (later, Christian IV, king of Denmark-Norway) was just eleven years old at the time these events took place.

² *Hamlet's mother* | Sophie of Mecklenburg-Güstrow ("Gertrude," 1557-1631), queen (m. 1572) to Frederick II ("Hamlet" Sr.); and (m. June 1588) to his brother, Magnus I. By Frederick, Sophie was the mother of Christian IV ("Fortinbras," 1577-1648); king of Denmark-Norway from 1589 until his death; and of six other children not mentioned by Watson including princess Anne (1574-1619), queen of James I, King of Britain (1566-1625). Queen Sophie/Gertrude is sometimes confused with Frederick's mistress, Anne Corfitzdatter of Hardenberg, who died in 1588, by poison, a homicide never prosecuted.

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