Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: Historical Context

**Composition**
- Approximately 1600
- Written after a series of English history plays (*Henry IV Part I*, *Henry IV Part II*, *Henry V*, and *Richard II*)
- History plays detailed complex and often deadly process of royal succession and corrupting influence of power and ambition

**Setting and Sources of *Hamlet***
- Setting is medieval Denmark in 11th century during Viking Age
- Plot based on stories of Danish prince, Amleth, who may or may not have really existed
  - Amleth feigns insanity to veil a plot of revenge for his father’s murder
- Many elements of Danish politics represented in play reflect important English political concerns in late 16th and early 17th centuries
- Other sources
  - Francois de Bellegforest’s *Histoires Tragiques*, published around 1576
  - Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, published in 1592
  - Kyd’s *Ur-Hamlet* (original Hamlet), now lost

**Norway versus Denmark**
- Conflict between Norway and Denmark serves as backdrop to main action of play
- Danish king, Hamlet’s father, has killed Norwegian king Fortinbras in battle and confiscated Norwegian land
- Prince Fortinbras (son of Norway’s king) has vowed revenge

**Chivalric Code**
- Code of honor included avenging lawless killing
  - Ghost wants Hamlet to avenge father’s “foul and most unnatural murder”
Supernatural Beliefs in Elizabethan Age

- Elizabethans believed strongly in supernatural, especially ghosts
- concept of Fate or Fortune common in Elizabethan tragedies
  - “Wheel of Fortune”
    - traditionally female because of the association of women with the moon and changeability
    - stands behind the wheel with outstretched wings
    - continually moves the Wheel—on which at the top is a king, at the bottom a beggar
  - belief that individuals were not responsible for their own destinies but were victims of Fortune’s turning of the Wheel

Events in England at the Time the Play Was Written

- England had long history of violent succession to throne
  - Wars of the Roses: 1390-1485 Civil War
  - Protestants versus Catholics
- Elizabeth I, queen of England, had ruled England since 1558
  - childless and had not named heir
- questions of what makes good ruler and how right to rule should be determined were important to Elizabethans
- great deal of anxiety in England about who would follow Elizabeth
  - fear of civil war and foreign invasion

Humanism

- system of values and beliefs based on the idea that people are basically good and that problems can be solved using reason instead of religion
- contrasted medieval code of honor of revenge killing
- Elizabethans began to regard killing as less heroic than people of Middle Ages
- Hamlet torn between concepts of vengeance as honorable and sin as murder