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Alexander Welsh: Hamlet in His Modern Guises

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Medieval Hamlet Gains a Family

IGNORANCE ABOUT the lost play that was performed on the English stage some years before Shakespeare's *Hamlet* makes it all the more imperative to compare his play—traditionally the conflation of two texts, the quarto of 1604 and folio of 1623—with the still earlier narrative versions of the hero's story that do survive. This procedure at least apprises us of features not wholly original to Shakespeare, even if it leaves us only with intelligent guesses as to the intervening contributions of an *Ur-Hamlet*.¹ Comparison with the earlier narratives also yields a positive understanding of ways in which the play is modern, and particularly why Hamlet's family—a little more than kin, if less than kind—seems to us so modern. For good measure, Shakespeare built into his play a second family, that of Polonius, posed novel-like for intermarriage with the younger generation of the first. The word “family” in our sense of parents and children was new in the sixteenth century. Shakespeare rarely uses the word at all, and never in its modern sense. Yet his *Hamlet* reads like a textbook on the conjugal and patriarchal family.

The present study is concerned with Hamlet in history, more especially Hamlets of the last four centuries. Was there, in the other direction of time, a historical Hamlet with a mother and father who lived and died a violent death six centuries prior to Shakespeare's time? The difficulty of answering this question—apart from my difficulty of collapsing a millennium into a few pages—is that very old histories defy modern belief. Thus when Amleth, in the earliest extant chronicle of Hamlet's story, travels to England and somehow intuits the English king's secrets (without recourse to magic), we seem to be reading of an exercise of wit that never was, though the chronicle does not distinguish between this feat and others more plausible. Like speculations about the *Ur-Hamlet*, the quest for the historical Hamlet is bound to be frustrating compared to the experience of suspending disbelief in the play, for Shakespeare is among those artists chiefly responsible

¹ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 395–401, contends that the earlier play must also have been by Shakespeare. The evidence for the *Ur-Hamlet* consists of a satirical allusion to it by Thomas Nashe in 1589, the record of a performance in 1594, another allusion by Thomas Lodge in 1596, and lesser matter. For a succinct summary see *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), 82–85.

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for our (high) standards of verisimilitude. Notoriously, it is Shakespeare's Hamlet who so unmistakably lived that we can engage in long debates about his character. Even the ghost in the play, who does not arise in the old story, seems all too human—though I for one do not believe in ghosts any more than I believe in Amleth's extraordinary intuitions.

The chronicle in question, Saxo's *Historiae Danicae*, written in Latin at the end of the twelfth century and printed in 1514, was most likely never seen by Shakespeare; but its elaboration in François de Belleforest's *Histoires tragiques* had been available in five French editions since 1570.² Thus the medieval history is the source of the sixteenth-century narrative most likely consulted by Shakespeare along with the *Ur-Hamlet*. If the French version or an unpublished translation of it had not been familiar to some English playwright, obviously, there would have been no *Ur-Hamlet* or any *Hamlet* at all.³ Saxo's history is both a better read and closer to folklore, whether it be fact or fiction; Belleforest's version, over twice as long but without more action or incident than Saxo's (and a faithful translation in that sense), is already a Renaissance text, with explanations, political and religious reservations, and moralizing, some of which matter is reflected in the play. Even if one refuses the quest for a historical Hamlet and isn't much interested in which details Shakespeare may have lifted from Belleforest, both earlier narratives are important for the perspective they throw on Hamlet in his modern guises.

Saxo's story is compelling in its own right, and not merely dependent—as might be charged of Belleforest's—on the fame of its Shakespearean sequel. There are few wasted words; in the style of northern saga, interest and suspense are characterized throughout by the unspoken, a withholding of explanation that enhances each demonstration of the hero's cleverness. The unspoken irony, in fact, offers a foretaste of the ambivalences of Shakespeare's hero. But though Amleth suffers as a boy—roughly, until he slays the uncle who has murdered his father and married with his mother—his suffering and madness are not pitiable as such, but rather disguise his motives and sustain the suspense. Nor is the uncle, Feng, particularly wicked or expressive of something wrong so much as he is simply dangerous. Saxo, called Grammaticus, is proud of his Latin, as his allusions, proper names—

² Information on these two sources can be found in Jenkins, 85–96; also *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, vol. 7 (London: Routledge; New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 5–25.

³ An English translation of Belleforest, apparently prompted by the success of Shakespeare's play, was published anonymously as *The Hystorie of Hamblet* in 1608. This is given nearly in full by Bullough, 7:81–124.

Amlethus, Horwendillus, Gerutha, Fengo, Vigletus—and a few incidents show; yet his overt summary or commentary is still very spare, with moralizing confined to the end of each book:

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 marvelous 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.⁴

Amleth's ingenious revenge, plotted all along by means that are eventually disclosed in the acting but never confided in advance to the reader any more than to Feng, is thus said to merit eternal fame; but this fame boils down to that of a man both tough and smart, *fortis* and *sapiens*.

The triumph over Feng completes book 3 of *Historiae Danicae*, and just about here (with a very different action) terminates the experience of Hamlet dramatized by Shakespeare. For the chronicle, however, the rest is not silence: book 4 commences with the notation "Amlethus rex" in the margin; the prince becomes king in Jutland and enjoys further successes in England and Scotland before his eventual defeat at the hands of another uncle at home. The marked differences between the play and the chronicle, therefore, are the truncation of the career and the alteration of the first triumphant return to tragedy, in which the principal actors *all* die.⁵ Omitted along with the remainder of Amleth's career, significantly, is a long stump speech by which the latter defends his action and calls for his election to the throne: Shakespeare's tragedy, by no means apolitical, is less political and less historically situated than its source, more focused on the personal and familial clash of its antagonists. But the chronicle is not so naïve as to offer mere triumph and congratulation where its famous redaction supplies

⁴ "Fortem virum, aeternoque nomine dignum: qui stultitiae commento prudenter instructus, augustiorem mortali ingenio sapientiam admirabili ineptiarum simulatione suppressit: nec solum propriae salutis obtentum ab astutia mutuatus, ad paternae quoque ultionis copiam eadem ductum praebente pervenit. Itaque et se solerter tutatus: et parentum strenue ultus: fortior, an sapientior existimari debeat, incertum reliquit." From *The Sources of "Hamlet,"* ed. Israel Gollancz (1926; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1967), 130, with Oliver Elton's translation on the facing page. Elton's translation is also given by Bullough, 7:70.

⁵ Famously, the tragedy is also presaged by a Senecan ghost. That the *Ur-Hamlet* too featured a ghost, crying "Hamlet, revenge," is one of the few things we know about it: see *Hamlet*, ed. Jenkins, 83; and Bullough, 7:24.

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tragedy. With the play's ending one ought to compare the irony of Amleth's second homecoming in book 4 and his death.

When in England for the first time, Amleth disposes of the two companions bearing a letter begging the favor of his death just as Hamlet disposes of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but he scores one better than Hamlet by marrying the king's daughter there. On his second visit, when he has told his father-in-law what has become of his uncle back in Jutland, the king inwardly recalls his pact with Feng and—in spite of this marriage—sends Amleth off on a dangerous mission to court on his behalf the queen of Scotland, known for putting to death every suitor to date. Hermutrude the queen is only opposed to older husbands, however; Amleth she embraces with all her kingdom, and after an ingenious victory over the English king his father-in-law, the hero returns to Jutland with much plunder and two wives. Of the (apparently) younger English wife, who has borne him a son, backed him against her father, and put up with Hermutrude, nothing more is told. Amleth dotes on Hermutrude, and meanwhile a new threat has arisen against his mother Geruth—this time from her own brother Wiglek. In the swiftly told end of his days, and now more concerned for Hermutrude's future than for his own life, according to Saxo, Amleth nonetheless cannot shun battle with Wiglek: he loses, and in the last sentence of book 4 this maternal uncle weds Hermutrude. Belleforest, it has to be said, weakens this irony in his version by moralizing and claiming that Amleth's second wife planned in advance her widowhood and remarriage. Given the way Hermutrude proposed to Amleth in Scotland earlier, Saxo's few words suffice to make the point: to Wiglek “she yielded herself up unasked to be the conqueror's spoil and bride.”⁶

Amleth's death is not tragic; as with many heroes of northern saga, when his violent life has run out, it is over with. Saxo's two books neatly divide the hero's life course into two parts, in which first a paternal uncle murders the father and marries the mother and then, after the hero copes well with this emergency, a maternal uncle kills the hero himself and marries his widow. There is something about Amleth's choice of women—more nearly their choice of him—that leads to trouble with uncles, in short, while the design of the whole seems to make an ironic statement about clever young men. The moral Saxo has to offer is one long sentence of misogyny—the *quod erat demonstrandum*, so to speak—which parallels his praise of Amleth at the end of book 3:

⁶ “*Utro in victoris praedam, amplexumque concessit*” (Gollancz, 160–61). For Belleforest's French with the 1608 English translation on the opposite page, see Gollancz, 302–3. The respective translations may also be consulted in Bullough, 7:79, 122.

Thus all vows of women are loosed by change of fortune and melted by the shifting of time; the faith of their soul rests on a slippery foothold, and is weakened by casual chances; glib in promises, and as sluggish in performance, all manner of lustful promptings enslave it, and it bounds away with panting and precipitate desire, forgetful of old things, in the ever hot pursuit after something fresh.⁷

About ten times longer, Belleforest's restatement of this moral is relieved only by a quaint apology for being so carried away by the subject. Shakespeare evidently was impressed by the whole of Amleth's history and not merely the first half. The irony of Amleth's eventual destiny could be said to reappear in the repeated poisonings of the play, or indeed in the difficulty so many critics have experienced in determining what if anything Hamlet finally achieved. On the playwright's side, it might be said that at least he assigned the misogyny dramatically to the deceased father and to the son rather than endorsing it outright.⁸

That Saxo is closer in spirit to northern saga than is the moralizing Belleforest no one would deny. He is still far from modeling himself on the sagaman, and it seems doubtful that his narrative is a faithful translation from old Danish originals, even if the hazards of translation might account for some of the story's baffling details.⁹ Saxo is too much the classicist; he most likely emulated the Roman historians, for it has long been observed that he borrows Livy's account of Junius Brutus seeking vengeance upon *his* uncle, Tarquin.¹⁰ Homer and Virgil offer famous precedents for such details as the intricate history of his exploits that Amleth has painted on

⁷ "Ita votum omne foemineum fortunae varietas abripit: temporum mutatio dissolvit: et muliebris animi fidem lubrico nixam vestigio fortuiti rerum casus extenuant: quae sicut ad pollicendum facilis, ita ad persolvendum segnis; variis voluptatis irritamentis astringitur atque ad recentia semper avidius expetenda, veterum immemor: anhela, praeceps cupiditate dissultat" (Gollancz, 160–63). For Belleforest's outdoing of Saxo in this vein, see Gollancz, 304–10; translations also in Bullough, 7:79, 122–23.

⁸ For the case that the play itself bears the misogynist burden, see Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (New York: Routledge, 1992), esp. 11–37. The subtext that Adelman creates may be more persuasive than the one offered by Freud, but her method and evidentiary claims are thoroughly Freudian.

⁹ See William F. Hansen, *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 125–34.

¹⁰ Shakespeare's Brutus, sometimes thought to be a prototype for his Hamlet, alludes to Junius Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, 2.1.53–54: "My ancestors did from the streets of Rome / The Tarquin drive when he was call'd a king." See also 1.2.159–61; and *The Rape of Lucrece*, 11.1807–41. Quotations from Shakespeare's works other than *Hamlet* are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

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his shield. While Saxo could not have known the carefully orchestrated return to Ithaca of Homer's Odysseus, Amleth's recourse to his former filth-covered self when he returns to Jutland is similar to Odysseus's disguise as a beggar; so too is the scale of the slaughters carried out by the two heroes, which extend beyond their immediate enemies or practical needs. Most of these resemblances to classical epic are generic in the oral tradition. Thus we would expect long set speeches rather than dramatic dialogue: the longest, Amleth's political justification and appeal to the people, fills about one-eighth of the total number of pages of Saxo *or* Belleforest. That speech Shakespeare has no use for; but another, heralded in Belleforest by a part title, "Harangue d'Amleth a la Royne Geruthe sa mere," supplies many of the verbal borrowings that persuade one that the playwright consulted the French, or an unpublished translation of the French, firsthand. The corresponding scene in *Hamlet* is by far the longest confrontation of the hero and another character and notoriously, in the closet scene he does most of the talking. Finally, classical allusions appear in Saxo only less frequently than in Belleforest. Possibly the studied comparisons of Amleth to Hercules (twice in Belleforest) provoked Hamlet's wry disclaimer: "My father's brother, but no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" (1.2.152–3).¹¹

Amleth's tricks and self-abasement seem closer to folktale. It may be claimed that the wily Odysseus is also a famous trickster, but his ruses are so well advertised and prolonged in the return to Ithaca that the pleasure they afford is quite different. Homer invests Odysseus's disguise as a beggar with high dramatic irony, whereas Saxo provides a low and less certain irony: at times we can only surmise that Amleth knows what he is doing. As a mere youth, he has no heroic past to build our confidence in the part he has to play. To Feng, certainly, the threat arises from below, in the regressive and apparently witless behavior of the younger adversary. The name Amleth appears to derive from a word meaning fool,¹² and the stunts and riddling of this fool afforded Shakespeare material that still baffles but

¹¹ Quotations identified by act, scene, and line number in parentheses are from *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Like many recent students of *Hamlet*, I am more indebted to Harold Jenkins's edition (note 1 above) than to any other; but while Edwards too includes all lines from the second quarto, he makes it easier to view the first folio text as a later version of the play. For an excellent account of the issues involved, see R. A. Foakes, *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 78–97, 146–80.

¹² See Kemp Malone, *The Literary History of Hamlet: The Early Tradition* (1923; rpt. New York: Haskell, 1964), 52–58; also Hansen, *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet*, 6 and 161–62n.

seldom fails to please an audience, material that doubtless fuels the warmth and even exultation that *Hamlet* inspires, notwithstanding the doubt and cruelty and bloodshed. Shakespeare had already designed high and low scenes for Prince Hal, and he would unforgettably put King Lear through an even greater range of experience and styles, but the creation of Hamlet *as* clown owes something to the northern saga material.¹³ Saxo may afford grounds for answering one famous question about the play: if Amleth's strategy supplied the precedent, Hamlet was not mad but invented his "antic disposition" (1.5.172). Yet the source provokes a similar question: it is not possible to tell where strategy leaves off and madness begins, since Amleth seems not fully in control of himself.

Near the heart of Amleth's seeming madness is his riddling. Notably, when anyone tries to trap him into revealing himself, he speaks the truth but in such a way that his antagonist cannot understand it. The riddling creates a special kind of dramatic irony, since the reader or listener to the story is able to glimpse both meanings while the antagonist is only able to sense that he is being put on. Belleforest feels he needs to gloss the practice as a sort of Aristotelian virtue—"as a generous minde is a mortal enemy to untruth"¹⁴—but the hero's way is really to tease with the truth, to risk giving himself away without quite doing so, to reply to a challenge with the counterchallenge of a riddle, and to enjoy the upper hand that riddling confers (much as children love to riddle). Language is the medium most used for conveying truth; and language can be used to baffle those who demand the truth. To lie outright forgoes wit and fails to exploit language to the fullest. Shakespeare's Hamlet may be closer to Saxo's filthy child in this respect than he is to Belleforest's generous spirit. Then, too, in the play riddling assumes its modern role of masking the hero's genuine ambivalence, as if he were playing with words from despair of expressing himself. Telling the truth in riddles keeps the game fair; and the sincerity of Hamlet's Montaigne-like doubts is faithful to an aspect of his own story that goes back to Saxo and to folklore.

¹³ The early reactions to *Hamlet* surveyed by Paul S. Conklin, *A History of "Hamlet" Criticism, 1601–1821* (1957; rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1968), 7–26, suggest that the play was indeed popular but not always taken with complete seriousness. The few surviving remarks about the *Ur-Hamlet*, in fact, tend to laugh at it; and William Empson, in "Hamlet When New," *Sewanee Review* 61 (1953), 15–42, 185–205, speculates that Shakespeare addressed this state of affairs in his revision by staging theatricality itself. Hamlet "walks out to the audience and says 'You think this is an absurd old play, and so it is, but I'm in it, and what can I do?'" (189).

¹⁴ "Comme aussi tout esprit genereux est mortel ennemy de la mensonge" (Gollancz, 228–29). Also Bullough, 7:101.

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The prominence of mourning and funeral rites in *Hamlet* derives mainly from Elizabethan revenge tragedy. Belleforest's uneasiness about using pre-Christian Danish lore, however, may have moved him to omit a long speech on proper burial in Saxo. In the medieval account, when Amleth's father Horwendil proposes single combat to Coller, the Norwegian king, the latter agrees but counters with the proposal that the combatants mutually guarantee a dignified burial for the loser—the speech represented by a single clause in Belleforest's translation. Coller, of course, is the one who wins the funeral so desired, but these are the terms with which Saxo commences the story of Amleth's inheritance. Of a funeral for Horwendil after his brother Feng's treachery, nothing is told (and not much more in Shakespeare). Presumably there was scant ceremony. When Amleth triumphs in turn over his uncle, according to Saxo, he vehemently directs that Feng not be buried at all: "Let no trace of his fratricide remain; let there be no spot in his own land for his tainted limbs; let no neighbourhood suck infection from him; let not sea nor soil be defiled by harbouring his accursed carcass."¹⁵ Belleforest renders this speech more or less faithfully yet softens the thrust of the nephew's words. No exact equivalent exists in *Hamlet*, but denying burial is a common enough idea in other revenge tragedies including *Titus Andronicus*; and Hamlet's jokes about dead bodies keep them in view regardless—just as his parrying of questions about Polonius's body creates an intertextual joke about what happened to the adviser whom Amleth killed, cut in pieces, boiled, and fed down a drain to the hogs. When Amleth returns from England the first time, a funeral is being held for him in absentia; in the play this becomes Ophelia's funeral, a tragic rather than an ironic turn. There is no graveyard scene in the chronicles, either at this point or upon the second return. In his world of violence the saga hero needs no skull to contemplate, no *memento mori*.¹⁶

This is not to deny that Belleforest's French is the nearest text we have to an actual source for *Hamlet*.¹⁷ With his cautions and allusions, moralizing and justification, Belleforest has done his best to transform the matter into a "histoire tragique." Without adding any characters, his treatment creates

¹⁵ "Nullum parricidii vestigium maneat: nullus contaminatis artibus intra patriam locus existat: nulla contagium vicinia contrahat: non mare, non solum damnati cadaveris hospitio polluat" (Gollancz, 134–37). Also Bullough, 7:71–72.

¹⁶ Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 205–53, fills in the rich iconographical background of Shakespeare's graveyard scene.

¹⁷ Besides the summaries of opinion in Jenkins and Bullough (notes 1 and 2 above), see A. P. Stabler, "King Hamlet's Ghost in Belleforest?" *PMLA* 77 (1962), 18–20, and "Melancholy, Ambition, and Revenge in Belleforest's Hamlet," *PMLA* 81 (1966), 207–13.

the impression of Hamlet surrounded by a small Renaissance court. The hero is substantially pacified and civilized, without deviating from his original bloody deeds. Amleth has become “le Prince” and “le Prince Danois.” Instead of being merely crafty and strong, he possesses “la modestie, contenance, et courtoisie” and is devoted to “l’honneur” and “la vertu.” Not Ophelia, to be sure, but Hermetrude of Scotland declares him to be “le Prince plus accomply,” one who “par son excellence et lustre, surpassa l’humaine capacité.”¹⁸ (In Saxo this same queen talks mainly of herself and her desirability for a hero.) Most important, in a passage that has no equivalent in Saxo’s history, Belleforest has already in principle checked the immediate impulse to vengeance and qualified the proper means for achieving it. His Amleth advises Geruth that he will avenge his father in due time but trusts that Feng will be the instrument of his own death somehow, rather than simply being killed by him. Thus “I shall not dye without revenging my selfe upon mine enemye, and that himselfe shall be the instrument of his owne decay, and to execute that which of my selfe I durst not have enterprised.”¹⁹ Here speaks the modern rather than the medieval Hamlet. The scenario is for the end of Shakespeare’s play rather than the action that its author is engaged in translating from a twelfth-century history of the Danes. Thus Hamlet will vow, “Let it work, / For ’tis the sport to have the engineer / Hoist with his own petar” (3.4.206–8). The point is not that a handful of words supplied by Belleforest inspired Shakespeare’s management of a suitable ending for his Claudius but that his Amleth’s expressed intention, or self-hoisting of the villain, reflects a common sentiment about just vengeance in the sixteenth century.²⁰ The audience of the play will be privileged to overhear the plan to kill Hamlet in a fencing match, will know of the poisons provided by Laertes and by Claudius in case this plan fails, and will then watch the attempt take place before them on the stage—“And in this upshot, purposes mistook / Fallen on th’ inventors’ heads” (5.2.363–4). Claudius and Laertes will have brought about their own deaths; especially Claudius, who will thus doubly deserve his. This formula was already given in the speech Belleforest assigns to Amleth.

¹⁸ Gollancz, 310–11, 288–91; also Bullough, 7:124, 119 (though Bullough omits a portion of the speech).

¹⁹ “Que je ne mourray ja, sans me venger de mon ennemy, et que luy mesme sera l’instrument de sa ruine, et me guidera à executer ce, que de moymesme je n’eusse osé entreprendre” (Gollancz, 226–29). Also Bullough, 7:101.

²⁰ Cf. Helen Gardner, *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 41–44. Gardner cites *Titus Andronicus*, Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, and Cyril Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* as instances from the theater.

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The histories have no equivalent to Laertes. He is the most important entirely new character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, others being the gravediggers and Osric and Fortinbras, who appear only in act 5. The ally who is Horatio, for example, distantly compares to the unnamed friend of Amleth who helped him avoid Feng's first trap. Similarly, Ophelia and Polonius can be traced back through Belleforest to Saxo's history of Amleth. All of the characters in the play seem larger to life than their originals, partly because—as Harold Bloom keeps reminding us—Shakespeare set so many of our standards of what it is to be a character. Yet the members of Laertes' family are so nearly made out of whole cloth as Laertes himself that it is worth paying special attention to them.

Though Polonius figures very importantly in the play and instigates, as I shall argue, a popular modern method for interpreting the hero's behavior, he appears only as one of Feng's friends in Saxo—elevated to counselor by Belleforest but still unnamed—in a single episode of the story. He has no family in these narratives and no ready explanation for Amleth's madness; but he is suspicious as Polonius is, and the latter's character can already be glimpsed—“gifted more with assurance than judgment,” according to Saxo.²¹ As in the play, he suggests that a spy be placed where he can overhear Amleth's interview with his mother, volunteers for the job, and suffers the consequences (except that Amleth disposes of the body immediately, before resuming the interview). The Ophelia part in Amleth's adventures, quite unrelated to this of Polonius's prototype, is sketched so minimally as to make one doubt whether the shadowy young woman in the chronicle was at all necessary to Shakespeare's conception. Yet on the theory that a healthy sexual impulse, if present, will give the lie to any pretended insanity, an unnamed female acquaintance of Amleth's childhood is deployed to tempt him into lovemaking, and this device is too much like the crudeness with which Ophelia is used—the idea in *Hamlet* further credited to Polonius—to be overlooked. And I would add another hint of Ophelia's role from the second part of Amleth's history: his young English bride, similarly without a name, is torn between loyalties to her father and to the hero, sides with the latter, but is so completely overshadowed by Hermutrude that she drops unnoticed from the story.

With these few possibilities afforded by the medieval story and rehearsed by Belleforest, Shakespeare has done a great deal. He has developed two unnamed participants from the portion of the story that he dramatizes, he has related them as father and daughter, he has added the son and brother

²¹ “Praesumptione quam solertia abundantior” (Gollancz, 110–11). Also Bullough, 7:65.

Laertes—and has thrown Osric into the ways of this family for good measure. In so doing he domesticates and makes familiar the love test, provides a foolish opposite for the hero's fool's antics, and connects the two clinical examinations of Hamlet in the presence of women, his girlfriend and his mother, by having Polonius direct both. He thus introduces a second two-generation family to the play and creates his subplot, the second family serving in a number of ways to reflect Hamlet's own. In the represented action Hamlet relates to the Polonius family that Shakespeare has created for him as to a series of potential in-laws: a father-in-law, brother-in-law, and bride—for a wife is an in-law, too, not a blood relation but a contractual one. The matter is best put schematically thus because the crisis in Hamlet's immediate family—the one that has existed in story at least since the twelfth century—is already that of the hero's relation to an in-law, his father-in-law Claudius, as a stepfather could be called in Shakespeare's time.²² The problem of this father-in-law—irrespective of poison, incest, and the rest—is the problem of becoming intimate, or being thrust into intimacy with someone who is not of one's own family but suddenly becomes so and will remain so. Conceivably, the second family presented to Hamlet in the play—his less mind-numbing but not less lively set of possible in-laws—Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia—could previously have been staged by the *Ur-Hamlet*; yet what we know of the sources of *King Lear* argues that the Polonius family is Shakespeare's contribution.²³

Since, unlike the *Ur-Hamlet*, the anonymous play *King Leir* has survived, it is perfectly clear that it was Shakespeare who determined to make parallel to the action of Lear and his daughters a second action of Gloucester and his two sons. The introduction of the subplot redoubles the plight of old age and suggests that Lear's predicament has not more to do with kingship than with something as commonplace as family. As in *King Lear*, the main result of introducing a subplot in *Hamlet* is to generalize the relations of parents and children, to make it less possible to view the hero's situation as unique. In certain respects Polonius actually resembles Gloucester in the later play. The fathers in both subplots are old, a little foolish, and distinctly out of touch with their children. But Gloucester suffers terribly for being foolish and trusting, and he is allowed that natural death that only seems to intensify the painfulness of *King Lear* as a tragedy. Polonius, suspicious rather than trusting, and far more interfering, dies the swift

²² Shakespeare uses "father-in-law" with this meaning in *Richard III*, 5.3.81.

²³ Or it might be the Corambis family, for in the first quarto Polonius is called Corambis. If anything, the subsequent change of the name suggests a newly developing role.

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unnatural death that his prototype died in the *Historiae Danicae* and is largely unlamented—except by his newly provided children, whom he has systematically distrusted. Polonius and his son and daughter are weaker creations than Hamlet, his uncle, and his mother, in the same sense that Gloucester and his sons are weaker than Lear and his daughters: that is, their behavior, even in extreme, is more commonplace and less finely strung. By that very secondariness, the subfamilies in the two plays fulfill the audience's expectations and bring home a sense of the main action. Both are tragedies with marked points of view, one with pity for the old and the other for the young. *King Lear* shows that to be old and repudiated is virtually to be dehumanized before death, and *Hamlet* shows how wretched it is to await power that accrues only from the death of parents.²⁴

In *Hamlet* the older generation is oppressive throughout. Even if one makes allowances for the poor ghost, the living representatives of that generation are bad enough. Given the supernatural frisson of the first scene, in fact, and the remarkable account of murder soon to follow, the domestic emphasis of most of the first court scene is all the more remarkable. Polonius clearly provides an additional mark for the youthful bias of the play: while much of what Claudius says to his nephew is already more parental than governmental, retaining Polonius as his principal henchman in the state makes the bad uncle still more one of the company of tiresome parents. Once that manipulating father has been lost, Claudius takes over the manipulation of Laertes in act 4 and pits one young man against the other. Ophelia and Laertes have no mother, of course, but therein the Polonius family is also more typical, more recognizable because more literary, than the Hamlet family itself. Gertrude is the great exception to rule, for she is not only a surviving mother but stands in powerful relation to her son; the only mother of comparable development in Shakespeare is Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, and that play at least affords the relief of a third generation to come.²⁵ Present in the background of the old story of Amleth and his

²⁴ On the youthful aspect of the hero I am indebted to Barbara Everett, *Young Hamlet: Essays on Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 14–34; also to Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (1951; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1:331–86. Everett recalls the role of Shakespeare's play in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lebrjahre*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and Joyce's *Ulysses* and reflects that "*Hamlet*, the first great story in Europe of a young man growing up, in a sense originates the *Bildungsroman* itself" (28–30).

²⁵ The policy of extirpating mothers from literary plots would persist in the English novel: Jane Austen made fun of the habit at the beginning of *Northanger Abbey* (1818), but in practice did little to resist it. Memorable mothers in classic English novels tend to be made fun of; only a handful carry the weight that Gertrude does in *Hamlet*, her rather spare language notwithstanding.

mother and uncle is Amleth's maternal grandfather Rorik, to whom the local kingship owes fealty. It is Rorik's death, in fact, that precipitates the hero's eventual fall. But *Hamlet* dramatizes conflicts of the strictly conjugal family, and Shakespeare increases the sense of oppression by confining the action to Elsinore.²⁶

To realize how the design of the original story has been transformed it is useful also to remember how determinedly Shakespeare introduces and integrates his subplot. The play begins with the sentinels, with Horatio and the first appearance of the ghost, followed by the exposition of the court scene and Hamlet's soliloquy. The third scene, however, suspends the exciting prospect of an appearance of the ghost to Hamlet himself in favor of introducing Ophelia, at first with Laertes and then with Polonius at home. Linking this scene to the main plot, besides the new theme of Hamlet's courtship, is a repeat of the parental advice giving in scene 2, buffed to a higher sententiousness by Polonius. By comparison with the all-knowing yet all-suspecting—and forgetful—father of this family, Hamlet's mother and stepfather seem more, not less than kind. "A green girl," "a baby," Polonius calls his daughter, and characterizes Hamlet's addresses to her as "springes to catch woodcocks" (1.3.101,105,115).

Then again, after the tremendous visitation and words of Hamlet's deceased father's ghost and the son's near hysterical reaction, the scene shifts still more deliberately to Polonius's supervision of his family. Reynaldo, a bit player unheard of before or after this scene, receives instruction from the father on how to spy on the son in Paris. So filled with anticipation and possible scenarios are the instructions that we gather Polonius would carry them out himself if he could. Reynaldo seems to have been on this mission or received these instructions before, but his chief is a stickler for detail and overfond of method: "thus do we of wisdom and of reach, / With windlasses and with assays of bias, / By indirections find directions out" (2.1.62–4). Except for Polonius's fuss and forgetfulness, the substance of these seventy lines would answer English notions of an Italian rather than a Danish court, but the play is being faithful to the greater *praesumptio* than skill of the original adviser to Feng (Saxo's characterization comes to seem more and more laconic), with the result that this spy master seems less the Machiavel and more like some old boy of the MI or CIA.

Hamlet proceeds thus far by the alteration of plot and subplot. At the same time the plots begin to move toward one another, mainly by playing

²⁶ Students, players, and ambassadors come and go, and Hamlet starts for England; but unlike Shakespeare's usual practice the stage action remains close to one place. Harley

on the question of courtship. The scene with Reynaldo continues with Ophelia's report of Hamlet's odd behavior and the establishment of Polonius's fond theory (directly opposite to his presumption in the first interview with his daughter) that "This is the very ecstasy of love," and that Ophelia's rejection of that love (in accordance with her father's orders) "hath made him mad" (2.1.100,108). Without the surprising instructions of the father to Reynaldo, the next succeeding scene of the play might seem odd: the king and queen, in only their second appearance on stage are in the midst of introducing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the mission of befriending and spying upon their son. The greater politeness and tone of concern from these parents and the greater unctiousness of these playfellows put Polonius's frank instructions and enjoyment of the game in proper perspective. The scene, and for that matter the entire play through to the fatal breakup of the fencing match, is notable for its atmosphere of a well-to-do family's worries in stunning conjunction with Polonius's crassness and mistake. We know little of Claudius's family life, but Claudius might be any uxorious husband and hard-pressed stepfather of a certain class, rather than a royally got-up fratricide, incestuous lover, and usurper. Polonius "tells me, my dear Gertrude, he hath found / The head and source of all your son's distemper" (2.2.54-5). Much later he seems genuinely moved by Ophelia's insanity: "O Gertrude, Gertrude, / When sorrows come, they come not single spies, / But in battalions" (4.5.76-8). The part may be performed by the actor as one of consummate hypocrisy; but it reads (to me) as some much more ordinary mix of amorality and confidence not unlike Polonius's, with at least the attractiveness of being colored by desire rather than officiousness. The worst that can be thought of Claudius is thought for us by his victims, Hamlet and the ghost; the play's criminal stepfather would nearly win sympathy if it were not for his manipulation of Laertes and fresh use of poison.

In his eagerness to interpose between Hamlet and his mother and uncle, Polonius becomes an easy target of the hero's back talk and impertinence. The constraint that youth usually feels in the presence of its own elders is absent: besides, in the earlier domestic scenes the playwright has portrayed a father-in-law-to-be who deserves to be taken down. Now in his "fish-monger" and "old Jephtha" exchanges (2.2.172,374), the hero blatantly attacks Polonius's age, the very ground of his bossiness and manipulation of his children. The book that the younger man pretends to be reading spells

Granville-Barker speculates that in *Hamlet* the playwright dramatized inactivity by this means: *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (1930; rpt. London: Batsford, 1958), 1:38-39.

out the insult: “for the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plumtree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams. All which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe”—like Amleth, Hamlet will speak truth—“yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down” (2.2.193–8). Conversely, these are sentiments that Polonius’s own children might feel: actors playing Laertes and Ophelia today sometimes express themselves by grimacing out of their father’s sight, since their lines betray no impatience. It takes an inspired naughtiness like Hamlet’s to stall Polonius’s ingrained hypocrisy by taking words out of his mouth, or to stump his powers of observation with rudeness. And though Polonius and Hamlet are not father and son, the intrusiveness of the one and withdrawn state of the other generate much of the humor in the play, until the death of the old man starts the humor off on a different track.

The greatly expanded role of Feng’s adviser provides popular, if one-sided, theater. As Shakespeare approaches the action supplied by Saxo and Belleforest, he proceeds more soberly and repeatedly stresses rather than alters the original adviser’s responsibility. No sooner does Claudius reject the theory that Hamlet’s madness is caused by love—“Love? His affections do not that way tend” (3.1.156)—than Polonius proposes a new experiment, this time from the narrative sources of the play and completely divorced from the seemingly boundless authority as a father that he has acquired. Audiences and readers of *Hamlet*, concentrating on the hero’s plan to catch the conscience of the king by means of a play, mostly fail to notice how determinate Polonius’s moves continue to be in act 3. He gives in to the entertainment but is impatient to resume afterward the routine he understands best.

My lord, do as you please,
 But if you hold it fit, after the play,
 Let his queen mother all alone entreat him
 To show his grief. Let her be round with him,
 And I’ll be placed, so please you, in the ear
 Of all their conference. (3.1.174–9)

In each scene of the act to follow, Polonius seizes his chance to forward this scheme, whether by summoning Hamlet to the interview or by diplomatically crediting the king with his idea and its premise (mothers are more subject to nature than are fathers):

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And as you said, and wisely was it said,
'Tis meet that some more audience than a mother,
Since nature makes them partial, should o'erhear
The speech of vantage. (3.3.30–33)

Thus Shakespeare fixes the responsibility of the adviser for his own death more thoroughly than Saxo or Belleforest. The closet scene of *Hamlet* is Polonius's idea, and he next appears on stage to introduce it. "Look you lay home to him," he tells the queen—"Pray you be round" (3.4.1,5); and he promises to be silent himself. Unfortunately, Hamlet is round with his mother; Polonius fails to hold back three monosyllables—"What ho! Help"—and manages to utter four more after he is stabbed. Then he falls silent at last.

Around the stopping of that voice for good turns a wide difference in the dramatic irony of the play. Right up to the moment of Polonius's death, Hamlet may be partially ignorant of the spying routine against him; yet overall, he shares with the audience, to the exclusion of all other characters, a knowledge of what his father's ghost has revealed. The sharing of this superior vantage, in fact, makes us confident that Hamlet must be able to see through the watch that has been placed upon him and to guard against it. Once Polonius is slain, however, Hamlet loses his superior vantage, for the brief reappearance of the ghost yields nothing but conjecture, and during act 4 the audience shares knowledge of the plans of Claudius and Laertes that the hero does not possess—which awareness makes us see him as a very cool character indeed, if not foolhardy, in act 5. Something like this shift occurs in the medieval story as well: precisely when the young Amleth is not in control, we expect that his policy is to achieve control; but once he is king and nearing his end, the motions of his Hermutrude and of Wiglek are closed to him. Again Shakespeare seems to draw upon Amleth's full career and not merely the portion he dramatizes and alters to tragedy.

The killing of Polonius in *Hamlet* also coincides with some striking mental alterations in the person who kills him—including a new attitude toward death and dead bodies, a discovery of the part played by accident in human undertakings, and an apparent end to his melancholy and return to social life. The graveyard scene could be said to commence right here with the play's first undeniably dead body. The tone of Hamlet's few words covering the disposal problem, both on stage and in the represented action—"This man shall set me packing," and "I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room" (3.4.212–3)—may at first be lost on the audience, but not after the game

of go-seek-the-body and his series of wisecracks on the consumption of kings and beggars at the beginning of act 4. It was similar meat that the medieval Amleth chopped and washed down a drain to the pigs; in the play, Polonius favors us with the ineluctable dead body, a gift that eventuates in the clowning of the sexton and his sidekick, together with Hamlet and Horatio, before the burial of Ophelia in act 5. At the end the hero still has no express plan for dealing with Claudius. In the “interim” before the business in England becomes known, he seems confident that some opportunity will present itself, for twice in recounting his adventures to Horatio he explains how quick thinking has served him. “Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well / When our deep plots do pall,” he remarks, and “Or I could make a prologue to my brains, / They had begun the play” (5.2. 8–9, 30–31)—a play sealing death for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This new attitude, like his humor of the dead body, can reasonably be traced to Hamlet’s “rash and bloody deed” in the queen’s chamber, which he has angrily defended as the destruction of a “wretched, rash, intruding fool” (3.4.27,31) and then more calmly as justifiable homicide:

For this same lord
I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister. (3.4.173–6)

Note the demonstratives, which merely point at the formerly voluble counselor. The only calm utterance from anyone in the closet scene is thus directed at the corpse and anticipates the hero’s trust in providence at the end.

In the short run, at least, the family Shakespeare has bestowed on Polonius survives him. The disparate reactions to the death by Laertes and Ophelia thrust the subplot unforgettably to the center of the stage in act 4. In fact the emotions generated by these scenes—especially the unexpected and haunting music of Ophelia’s madness and her reported death but also the blustering return of Laertes with sword drawn—tend to overcome the intellectual burden of the analogies and comparisons that Shakespeare has constructed overall. Laertes and Ophelia divide between them the two impulses of mourning that tease Hamlet from the time of his own father’s death: that is, revenge in the one case and suicide in the other, reactions to the loss of a father now differentiated as male and female respectively.²⁷ Act 4 easily traps an audience into excited approval of Laertes’

²⁷ Laertes’ “cause” and Ophelia’s are both Hamlet’s cause, as he comes to recognize in the brother’s case. And who shall say what a Hamlet who was forced to witness Ophelia’s part in

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storming of the gates and, because he first demands satisfaction from Claudius, almost makes us forget that Hamlet should be the object of this vengeance. Yet the swift-following action shows Laertes to be wrong and wrong again: ignorant of how his father's death came about, mistaken either to accuse or to trust Claudius, obtusely eager to cut somebody's throat in the church, treacherous in his offer to use poison, and above all easily manipulated by a more experienced poisoner of the older generation. Notwithstanding these sad mistakes, critics of the play often suppose that Laertes' behavior is designed to put Hamlet's in a bad light. To the contrary, Shakespeare distributes the action in act 4 so as to qualify plotting and revenge once more, by punctuating each of Laertes' reactions with those of his sister: first the reentrance of Ophelia insane and thereafter word of her suicide. Here too, as in the closet scene, he might have stressed Hamlet's responsibility, but instead he works toward analogy and comparison. Before this, Claudius—the play's most vocal authority on mourning—has explained that Ophelia's derangement “is the poison of deep grief, it springs / All from her father's death” (4.5.74–5). Just so Laertes' angry action also springs from his father's death, and the entire play from Hamlet's father's death.

The two male representatives of the younger generation in mourning now draw closer to one another even as they posture over Ophelia's grave or cross and then exchange swords at the end. The brother's love for his sister, though accompanied by a curse, stirs Hamlet to a more genuine feeling, though bellicose, than he could muster when the victim of his antic disposition was still alive. The inward result of the two men's ranting against one another is registered by Hamlet's confession, in a quiet moment with Horatio, “That to Laertes I forgot myself, / For by the image of my cause, I see / The portraiture of his” (5.2.76–8). Again Shakespeare represents his hero as more thoughtful than Laertes, for the latter confesses only after he receives a dose of his own medicine. The family expression that he uses, rather touchingly, is one his father applied in speaking of Hamlet to Ophelia: “Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric” (5.2.286). Does the choice of that expression convey an awareness of his father's methods and entanglement with Hamlet's affairs, as well as regret

act 4 would come to see and believe? It is primarily in the construction of the action around this second family, rather than the characterization of the hero as such, that Shakespeare anticipates those nineteenth-century and later speculations, on the stage and page, that Hamlet was a woman, or man and woman both. For a recent sampling and further references, see Lawrence Danson, “Gazing at Hamlet, or the Danish Cabaret,” *Shakespeare Survey* 45 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 37–51.

for his own recourse to deceit? The subplot comes to a close with Laertes' death and the last words spoken of Polonius in the play: "Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, / Nor thine on me" (5.2.309–10).

If one is willing to make allowances for metempsychosis, Polonius still lives at the close of *Hamlet*. During four centuries Shakespeare has entertained audiences with two bravura pieces of theater in act 5, neither of which has any precedent in the old story: the gravediggers' performance and Osric's. Having brought on, in the first of these scenes, two clowns who are entirely new to the play, he brings on another new character, the courtier Osric. Yet Osric may seem vaguely familiar, a sort of infant reincarnation of Polonius.²⁸ For the audience, aware of the shuffling that Claudius has already rehearsed with Laertes, the appearance of this lightweight with an invitation to fencing is grotesque, like a shivery bad dream. In *Hamlet* it stirs some of the wonted resistance again. The hero's wit serves Osric as it formerly served Polonius, and he almost apologizes for the character to Horatio, who has no more heard of this strange courtier than we have. Thus the last lines of humor in *Hamlet* turn on a phenomenon newborn: Horatio compares Osric to a lapwing fallen from the nest; and Hamlet remarks, in a fresh dialect, "A did comply with his dug before a sucked it" (5.2.165). Earlier, he could refer to Polonius with similar contempt, in speaking to Guildenstern and Rosencrantz: "That great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling clouts" (2.2.351). The key to the mockery here is not the conventional reply of Rosencrantz about old men and second childhood but Hamlet's lasting irritation with the show of compliance in both courtiers. Osric "did comply with his dug" before he complied with Hamlet and Horatio; and Polonius has ever complied with the king, complied with the queen, complied with the prince even when bent on taking his own way.

The issues of whether, or when, or with whom to comply are no small matter in *Hamlet*, both in the represented action and in the acting of it. Compliance is a necessary social grace, a sine qua non of hierarchy, yet—because of the risk of contradiction it runs from one social occasion to the next and from moment to moment of polite discourse, as Hamlet demonstrates—potentially ridiculous, too. The openness of compliance to ridicule is behind some of the exchanges between Hamlet and Polonius that yield pleasure even though we do not, any more than the target figure, quite see why.

²⁸ Cf. Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 110–12. "After Polonius becomes part of the tragedy, his comic function is carried on by Osric" (110).

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HAMLET: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel?

POLONIUS: By th'mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

HAMLET: Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS: It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET: Or like a whale?

POLONIUS: Very like a whale.

HAMLET: Then I will come to my mother by and by.

This bout of logic—the last between Hamlet and Polonius—retrospectively may strike one as somber rather than ridiculous. “They fool me to the top of my bent,” Hamlet says of it (3.2.339–46), exultant at his own wit and fearful of what may pass between him and his mother in the scene to follow. His “they” fairly includes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at this point, besides Polonius and his own mother and stepfather, or any who would use indirections to find him out. “Then I will come to my mother by and by”: this apparent non sequitur sounds its anger in the peculiar conjunction of “I *will*” with the carelessness of “by and by.”²⁹ But Hamlet, remember, is being asked to comply at this very moment, and much more profoundly so than the courtiers Polonius and Osric throughout, even though they make such a show of compliance. The sense is roughly this: you see how readily you comply with my suggestions about a cloud; just so will I comply with your message that my mother wishes to see me—when I am good and ready to. Hamlet has been asked to comply in every possible way since the commencement of the tragedy—by his mother, by his stepfather, and by the ghost of his father; so he may very well feel, now at the top of his bent and on the verge of his principal confrontation with any of those parents, that he is ready to comply with a vengeance—and Polonius, of course, will bear the brunt of his anger, as here.

Whether at the breast, like Osric with his dug, or by example from siblings and instruction from parents, children very quickly learn to comply. But Hamlet the Dane is the great antiparent of our mythologies—and misogynist par excellence, to be sure. “Farewell, dear mother” (4.3.45–6), he deliberately slurs his stepfather on departing from England.³⁰ And if the violent interview with Gertrude provides the critical turning of the play, as

²⁹ Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 1:96, believes that Hamlet thinks he ought only to go to his mother after he has dealt with Claudius. As Granville-Barker's note attests, “by and by” could also mean at once. In that case, Hamlet's “I will” is more ominous than contemptuous.

³⁰ So I would construe the line. Philip Edwards does not set off “dear mother” with a comma, as if Hamlet were merely expressing the thought aloud that he would miss his mother.

I believe, it is plentifully reinforced by the nunnery scene with Ophelia at the commencement of act 3, as well as by such small inspirations as the man-child who complies with “his” nipple. Somehow the hero’s fierce hatred of courting and contempt for courtiers, together with his intellectual resistance to compliance throughout, are prompted in the first place by that mind-bending parental demand, “List, list, oh list! / If thou didst ever thy dear father love—” (1.5.22–3). In his play Shakespeare represented a young man not just wronged by his uncle but surmounted by parents, teased by their busy surrogates and merely tormented by their love—their love of one another and of himself. These are aspects of *Hamlet* that the meddling of Polonius—ever “the father of good news,” as Claudius remarks (2.2.42)—helps to bring out. Polonius’s two good children are precisely those representatives of the younger generation who alert us to the troubles of compliance, from the third scene of the play onward: especially Ophelia, who well may be said to have “drowned herself in her own defence” (5.1.5–6).³¹

Before taking up the question of mourning within the family, I ought to say a word about the names in the play, since only the names of the hero and his mother seem to bear any relation to those in Saxo and Belleforest.³² Most blatant, among characters’ names that have been changed, the usurping Feng has become Claudius. Even though the name Claudius occurs but once in a stage direction (the entrance to 1.2) and is never spoken on stage, few can resist it when talking or thinking about *Hamlet*, because the emperor Claudius’s reign is so richly associated with incest, parricide, and a political succession thoroughly confused with sensuality. The apparent allusion to the decadence of the Roman empire, in fact, makes Hamlet analogous to Nero, as the hero seems aware when about to confront his mother in a murderous state of mind (“let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom”[3.2.354–5]).

The folio’s Gertrude, a perfectly good Teutonic name in itself, may combine the names of Amleth’s mother Geruthe and that of his second wife Hermetrude (to give the French spellings that Shakespeare presumably would have encountered). Hermetrude, after all, appears to have been the more sensual of the two wives in the old story, who makes much of her

Claudius, obviously, does not read it that way when he replies, “Thy loving father, Hamlet” (4.3.47).

³¹ Cf. Everett, *Young Hamlet*, 31.

³² For summaries of the basic changes, see Bullough’s introduction, 7:34–36; and *Hamlet*, ed. Jenkins, 163–64, 421–23.

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rank, her body, and her real estate in wooing Amleth.³³ This false but telling etymology of Ger-trude breathes with incest by itself, collapsing Amleth's mother's relation to Feng and his second wife's to Wiglek upon a figure who doubles as mother and wife to the same young man. This may be a case of Shakespeare outdoing Freud. If the choice of the name has this significance, it would seem to anticipate the nearly obsessive concern that Hamlet exhibits for his mother's sexuality in the closet scene and more broadly the bafflement he experiences in relation to her after the loss of his father.

Another change amplifies the son's responsibility to take the place of the father, simply by giving them the same name. Gone is Horwendil, Amleth's father, and instead there are two Hamlets: one recently dead of supposed natural causes but still prowling about at night in Denmark, the other "young Hamlet" (1.1.170), to whom Horatio proposes to tell of the first and who appears in black in the following scene. More than any other game played with the *dramatis personae*, bestowing on the father the same name as the son establishes a theme of inheritance that, in the inward-looking world of the younger, is still more personal than political. When the hero compares his uncle so disadvantageously to his father, he can hardly avoid comparing himself with his father too. As if immediately to reinforce this theme, Shakespeare gives the French-sounding name Fortinbras to the king of Norway defeated by Hamlet senior and has Horatio utter it three times before referring also to "young Fortinbras" (1.1.82,86,92,95).

That the last person in the play to pronounce Fortinbras's name is young Hamlet has given many people unease, especially since the hero dies before the other comes on stage.

Oh I die, Horatio,
The potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit.
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'occurents more and less
Which have solicited—the rest is silence. (5.2.331–7)

³³ "And I am not only a queene, but such a one as that, receiving whom I will for my companion in bed, can make him beare the title of a king, and with my body give him possession of a great kingdome, and goodly province" ("Et ne suis seulement Royne, mais telle que recevant qui bon me semblera pour compaignon de ma couche, je peux luy faire porter tiltre de Roy et luy donner, avec mes embrassemens, la jouissance d'un beau Royaume et grand' Province") (Gollancz, 292–93; Bullough omits about 30 lines of this speech).

MEDIEVAL HAMLET GAINS A FAMILY

Hamlet displays as much political consciousness here as in any other juncture in the play, and the effacement of himself is troubling, if nonetheless in character. That the poison overcrows his spirit—the metaphor is from cockfighting—suggests that his sense of irony is still intact. But the most curious thing about the exchange of political fortunes is the gloss already put on it by the clown in the graveyard scene. That venerable sexton, when pressed, has claimed that the “day that our last King Hamlet o’ercame Fortinbras . . . was the very day that young Hamlet was born, he that is mad and sent into England” (5.1.120–1, 123–5). Interrogating the clown, Hamlet shows no surprise at this coincidence, but the point there is to exercise the man’s wits rather than probe for facts. Very likely the clown has recognized the prince, or he wouldn’t answer so pointedly; and no doubt they understand one another. A few lines later, without prompting, he offers that “I have been sexton here man and boy thirty years” (5.1.137–8). While this may be taken as a useful round number, approximating Hamlet’s age and consistent with the claim that he can remember the jester Yorick, it is not necessarily accepted by the hero, and need not be accepted by the audience, that he was born precisely on Victory Day for the Danes. Rather, that is the conceit that will inform Hamlet’s dying voice, the nod he gives to young Fortinbras before the latter arrives.