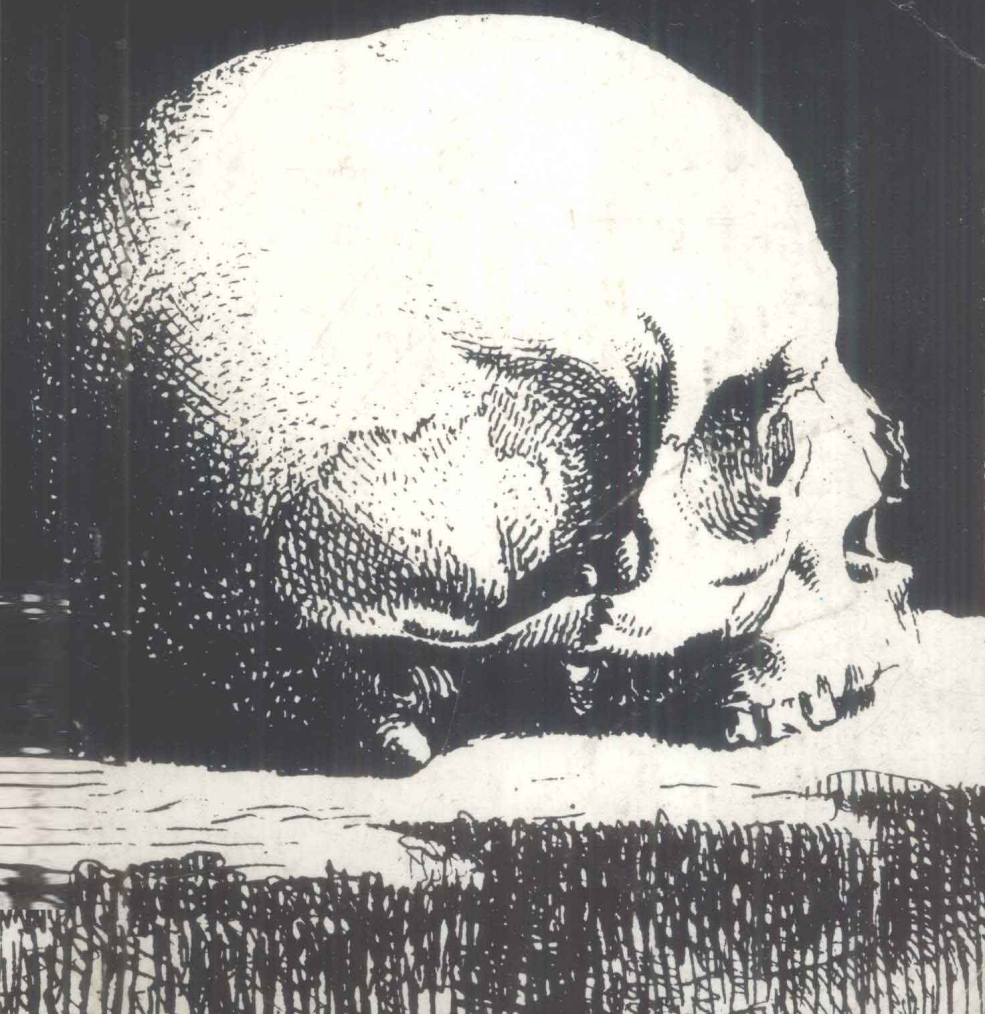


WORLD'S CLASSICS



SHAKESPEARE

HAMLET



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

HAMLET

Edited by

G. R. HIBBARD

Oxford New York

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford New York

Athens Auckland Bangkok Bombay

Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam Delhi

Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne

Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore

Taipei Tokyo Toronto

and associated companies in

Berlin Ibadan

Oxford is a trade mark of Oxford University Press

© Oxford University Press 1987

First published 1987 by the Clarendon Press

First published as a World's Classics paperback 1994

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press. Within the UK, exceptions are allowed in respect of any fair dealing for the purpose of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms of the licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside these terms and in other countries should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616.

Hamlet.

(The Oxford Shakespeare)

Includes index.

I. Hibbard, G. R. (George Richard), 1915-

II. Title. III. Series: Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. Works, 1982.

PR2807.A2H5 1987 822.3'3 86-2533

ISBN 0-19-812910-6

ISBN 0-19-281448-6 (pbk.)

9 10

Printed in Great Britain by

Mackays of Chatham,

Chatham, Kent

PREFACE

I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the grant it made me in 1981, thus enabling me to work uninterruptedly on this edition for a period of eight months in 1982-3.

I also owe a large debt of another kind to the General Editor, Stanley Wells, and to the Associate Editor, Gary Taylor. Their many suggestions and criticisms have been invaluable, and their patience exemplary.

G. R. HIBBARD

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	ix
General Introduction	1
Date	3
Sources	5
From Stage to Study	14
The Play	28
Textual Introduction	67
The First Quarto	67
The Second Quarto	89
The First Folio	104
Editorial Procedures	131
Abbreviations and References	132
THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET	139
APPENDIX A	
Passages Peculiar to the Second Quarto	355
APPENDIX B	
Alterations to Lineation	370
APPENDIX C	
<i>Der bestrafte Brudermord</i>	373
APPENDIX D	
The Music for the Songs	379
APPENDIX E	
Notes to Act 1, Scene 2	382
Index	385

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Richard Burbage (By permission of the Governors of Dulwich Picture Gallery)	15
2. Fortune's wheel (By permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford; shelfmark Douce L461, sig. E4 ^r)	29
3. The ghost appears to Hamlet (from Rowe's edition, 1709)	39
4. David Garrick starts on seeing the ghost (By permission of the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon)	39
5. Ophelia 'playing on a Lute' (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 1970) (The Tom Holte Theatre Photographic Collection, by permission of the Shakespeare Centre Library)	52
6. Crow-flowers, from Gerard's <i>Herbal</i> (1597)	53
7. Nettles, from Gerard's <i>Herbal</i>	53
8. 'Long purples', from Gerard's <i>Herbal</i> (Figs. 6-8 by permission of the Shakespeare Centre Library)	53
9. Claudius attempts to pray (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 1965) (The Tom Holte Theatre Photographic Collection, by permission of the Shakespeare Centre Library)	57
10. Hamlet upbraids his mother (Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1958) (Photograph by Angus McBean)	57
11. The duel (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 1961) (Photograph by Angus McBean)	65
12. The title-page of Q1 (1603)	68
13. B1 recto of Q1 (1603)	78
14. B1 recto of Q2 (1604)	78
15. B1 verso of Q1	79
16. B1 verso of Q2	79
17. The title-page of Q2 (1604) (Figs. 12-17 by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California)	90

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

UP to the end of the First World War and for some time thereafter, *Hamlet* was generally regarded as the greatest of all Shakespeare's plays, the most exciting, absorbing, and profound drama ever written. Since then the balance of academic judgement, as distinct from interest, has tipped somewhat in favour of *King Lear*; but the theatre-going public remains unconvinced; so does 'the common reader'; and so do the actors. *Hamlet* is still the most often produced of the plays, as well as the most widely read; and the role of the Prince continues to be the ultimate goal to which actors aspire. Moreover, Hamlet himself is part of the consciousness of the modern world in a more intimate and familiar way than *King Lear* has ever been or seems likely to become. Of all Shakespeare's tragic heroes, the Prince of Denmark, his rank notwithstanding, is the one whose experience comes closest to and impinges most intimately on that of men in general. It has, despite its highly unusual and, at times, almost bizarre nature, a representative quality about it. Spectators and readers alike feel drawn to identify themselves with Hamlet.

Yet, while it has this universal appeal, *Hamlet* is also for many the most personal of the plays, conveying, as does no other, a sense of the playwright's involvement with his own creation. In part this is due, no doubt, to the remarkable similarities between the great central soliloquy in it, 'To be, or not to be', and Sonnet 66, 'Tired with all these, for restful death I cry', which may well lead one to think that at this point in the action Hamlet's sentiments are very close to Shakespeare's own. But this is by no means the end of the connection. There is a strong temptation to take the Prince's views on the art of acting as a faithful reflection of his author's; and, still more fascinating, the very length of the tragedy, even in the Folio version, almost invites one to speculate that Shakespeare composed it, at the compulsive urging of his *daimon*, for his own satisfaction. The last act in particular cries out for some such explanation; for into it he brings three entirely new figures: two Clowns, for one of whom death is simply a means of livelihood; and the empty-headed fop Osric. It is almost as though the creative impulse refuses, for once, to heed the practical limitations and

demands of the theatre. In the very process of bringing his play to an end Shakespeare expands its reach and significance. He cannot let go of it; and it will not let go of him.

Universal, yet with pronounced overtones of the personal and the private about it, *Hamlet* is timeless in its preoccupation with the dilemmas and the uncertainties that are at the heart of life, and, simultaneously, very much of its own time. It belongs to that period in the history of England—and of Europe—when the assurances of the Elizabethan world, which had so much in common with the mediaeval world, were being invaded and eroded by ‘the new doubt’, as D. G. James calls it,¹ which is so characteristic of the modern world. Similarly, within the framework of its author’s career as a practising dramatist, it comes as the climax to three or four years of extraordinary fertility and achievement. During the course of them he had written at least two comic masterpieces, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It*, and probably, though its exact date is uncertain, yet a third in the form of *Twelfth Night*. He had also revolutionized the English history play by composing the two Parts of *Henry IV*, completed his dramatization of the fifteenth century with the making of *Henry V*; and then, as though to demonstrate his versatility yet further, turned his attention from celebrating the success of the English king who conquered France to the downfall and death of the Roman dictator who conquered Gaul, Julius Caesar. The resultant tragedy is a Janus. In so far as its hero is Caesar, it looks to the past. His tragedy is in his fall, in his being brought to ‘lie so low’. But, in so far as its hero is Brutus, it looks to the future. His tragedy is an altogether more inward thing than Caesar’s. In the end it is not what is done to him by others that matters, but what he does to himself. *Hamlet* belongs to this newer kind, and belongs to it with an assured confidence that *Julius Caesar* lacks. There is no doubt at any time in *Hamlet*, as there is for so much of the time in *Julius Caesar*, about the centrality of the character who gives the play its title. ‘Like *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark’ has been proverbial since the end of the eighteenth century. This tragedy asks insistently to be placed with, and compared to, those that were to follow it, rather than those that preceded it, in the Shakespearian *œuvre*. It is most fitting therefore that it should have been composed at almost the exact mid-point of its author’s career as a playwright, and very soon after the com-

¹ *The Dream of Learning* (Oxford, 1951), 33–68.

pany for which he wrote and in which he was both an actor and a sharer had begun to occupy its new theatre the Globe, to which Rosencrantz probably refers at 2.2.357–8.

Date

Exactly when *Hamlet* was composed depends in part on which *Hamlet* is under consideration, for the play exists in three different forms. The relationships between the First Quarto, published in 1603, the Second Quarto, published in 1604–5, and the text of the tragedy that appeared in the First Folio of 1623 are complicated and controversial. They are discussed in detail in the Textual Introduction to this edition, where reasons are given for thinking that the Second Quarto represents Shakespeare's first draft of his play; that the Folio text is essentially his revision of that first draft, together with some additions to it; and that the First Quarto is a reported version of an abridgement of this revised text. This said, it can be stated that a Shakespearian *Hamlet* must have been written and performed by 26 July 1602, for on that day James Roberts entered it on the Stationers' Register as

A booke called the Revenge of Hamlett Prince Denmarke as yt was latelie Acted by the Lord Chamberleyne his servantes.¹

On the other hand, however, *Hamlet* is not included by Francis Meres in the well known list of Shakespeare's plays that he gives in his *Palladis Tamia: Wits Treasury*, published in the autumn of 1598. Its absence from that list amounts to strong presumptive evidence that it had not yet been staged, and goes far towards establishing a *terminus a quo*. Allusions within the tragedy itself suggest that a further refinement is possible. Julius Caesar is named twice: first at Appendix A, i. 7, where Horatio describes the omens that preceded his assassination; and then again at 3.2.96–7. There Polonius, after admitting with pride that he did some acting in his student days, replies to the Prince's question, 'And what did you enact?', with the words: 'I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th' Capitol. Brutus killed me.' The answer appears to serve three different purposes at one and the same time. Like the previous reference, it acts as an advertisement for *Julius Caesar*, either still in

¹ Edward Arber, *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640* (1875–94), iii. 212.

repertory or newly revived. It also reminds the audience that the actor—probably John Heminges—now playing Polonius also played Caesar to the Brutus of Richard Burbage, now playing Hamlet. Furthermore, it hints that, just as Burbage/Brutus killed Heminges/Caesar, so Burbage/Hamlet will, in due course, kill Heminges/Polonius. From all this it seems reasonable to infer that *Hamlet* was written after, but not long after, *Julius Caesar*, which can be dated with unusual accuracy as having been composed in the late summer of 1599. The Swiss traveller Thomas Platter saw a performance of it at the Globe on 21 September of that year.¹

The other crucial piece of evidence bearing on the date of *Hamlet* is a manuscript note written by Gabriel Harvey in his copy of Speght's *Chaucer*, published in 1598. Harvey signed his name, and added the date 1598, on the title-page and on the last page of his copy. This does not mean, however, that he made all the notes and marginalia it contains in that year; for it has been shown that he sometimes made fresh observations when rereading.² Occurring in the middle of a long paragraph dealing with literary taste, the relevant passage reads:

The Earl of Essex much commends *Albion's England* . . . The Lord Mountjoy makes the like account of Daniel's piece of the Chronicle . . . The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*; but his *Lucrece* and his *Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* have it in them to please the wiser sort.³

The natural implication of the present tense used in connection with the Earl of Essex is that Essex was still alive when the note was written. He was executed on 25 February 1601. It therefore follows that *Hamlet* had been composed and, presumably, acted before that date, and, in all likelihood, before the Earl's abortive rebellion on 8 February 1601, which led to his condemnation and death, since it seems improbable that Harvey would have quoted his opinion of Warner's poem after that time. The two terminal dates for the composition of *Hamlet* would, then, be the late autumn of 1599 on the one side, and the beginning of February 1601 on the other. There is, however, a difficulty for some in the

¹ E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1930), i. 397 and ii. 322.

² L. Kirschbaum, 'The Date of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*', *Studies in Philology*, 34 (1937), 168–75.

³ *Gabriel Harvey's Marginalia*, ed. G. C. Moore Smith (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1913), 232.

way of this dating: the topical reference to the 'little eyases' at 2.2.335-58. The 'little eyases' in question are, it is generally agreed, the Children of the Chapel, the boys' company playing at the Blackfriars Theatre in 1600 and 1601 with such success as to make them formidable rivals to the adult companies. The so-called 'War of the Theatres', caused by the ensuing competition for public favour, began with the acting of Ben Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* by the Children late in 1600. Then, in the spring of 1601, came Jonson's *Poetaster*, provoking a reply, *Satiromastix*, the joint work of Dekker and Marston, performed by Shakespeare's company in the summer of that year. Consequently, the 'little eyases' passage was probably written at much the same time. The relevant lines are, however, peculiar to the Folio text of *Hamlet*, though the First Quarto has a much abbreviated and typically garbled version of them. They do not appear at all in the Second Quarto, generally considered to have been set from Shakespeare's autograph. The most natural and plausible explanation of their absence from it is that they were not part of the play as originally written and then revised, but were a later addition to the revised version which, it will be argued (pp. 105-30), provided the copy for the Folio text. This passage set apart, it seems safe to say that *Hamlet* was indeed written in or about the year 1600.¹

Sources

It has already been suggested in this introduction that *Hamlet* belongs to a time when old certainties and long established ways of thinking began to collide with new doubts and revolutionary modes of thinking. The story that lies behind the play, and to which its action ultimately goes back, might have been designed to produce just such a collision when transferred, as Shakespeare transferred it, to a Renaissance setting. The court where *Hamlet* unfolds is a Renaissance court, the seat of a centralized personal government. Indubitably Danish in its explicit references to Elsinore, in its close relations with Norway, and in its conformity to the popular notion of the Danes, current in the England of the later sixteenth century, as a nation much given to drinking, it is, simultaneously, in its preoccupation with statecraft, intrigue,

¹ E. A. J. Honigmann, 'The Date of *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Survey* 9 (1956), 24-34.

assassination, poisoning, and lechery, decidedly in keeping with the mental picture that many in the original audience for the play appear to have had of Italy. Moreover, the Prince himself, a student of the University of Wittenberg, the home of his illustrious predecessor among tragic heroes, Marlowe's Dr Faustus, is in many ways the embodiment of the Renaissance ideal of *l'huomo universale*. To quote Ophelia's description of him as he was before his father's death, he had 'The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword'; and was indeed

Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form.

(3.1.153-4)

This is not the world in which the story of Hamlet first took shape, nor is this prince the prince of that story. Briefly mentioned by Snorri Sturlason in his *Prose Edda* (c.1230), a redaction of a work originally composed, it is thought, between 1140 and 1160, Amleth, as he is called, becomes a legendary hero in the *Historiae Danicae* of Saxo Grammaticus, compiled at the end of the twelfth century. The tale Saxo tells conforms to the pattern of blood revenge so common in Norse saga. But it also resembles, in its hero's assumption of 'an antic disposition' to further his revenge, Livy's account of the legendary Lucius Junius Brutus, who organized the expulsion of the Tarquins from Rome after the rape of Lucretia. This Roman element, already implicit in Saxo, becomes fully explicit in François de Belleforest's retelling of the story in the fifth volume of his *Histoires tragiques*, first published in 1570, reissued on seven further occasions by 1601, and ultimately translated into English as *The Hystorie of Hamblet* (1608), where it has been affected by Shakespeare's play. It is quite possible that this similarity between Amleth and Lucius Junius Brutus may have helped to attract Shakespeare to the story. He had already made use of the Roman hero twice: first in the final part of *The Rape of Lucrece*; and then by making him a shadowy yet potent force from the past, almost the ghost of republicanism, in *Julius Caesar*, where he exerts a strong influence on his descendant, Marcus Junius Brutus. Moreover, the playwright had even found a place for him in *Henry V* (1599), where the Constable of France draws a parallel between his behaviour in 'Covering discretion with a coat of folly' (2.4.37) and that of Prince Hal.

In Saxo's account two brothers, Hörwendil and Feng, are appointed governors of Jutland by Rorik, King of Denmark. Horwendil wins great fame as a Viking, and sets the seal on that fame by killing Koll, the King of Norway, in single combat. Rorik rewards him by giving him the hand of his daughter Gerutha in marriage. Gerutha bears Horwendil a son, Amleth. But Horwendil's success arouses the envy of his brother Feng, who treacherously waylays and murders him, and then marries his widow, thus 'capping unnatural murder with incest' (Gollancz, p. 101).¹ Feng glosses over the murder, which is public knowledge, with smooth words and a hypocritical show of concern for Gerutha that find a ready acceptance in the sycophantic court.

Young Amleth, alone and almost friendless but fully aware of Feng's guilt, dedicates himself to revenge. First, however, he must grow up. He therefore seeks to give Feng the impression that he is harmless by pretending to have lost his wits. Filthy and in rags, he talks seeming nonsense which, nonetheless, has its point for those percipient enough to see it. For instance, he spends much of his time in making wooden crooks armed with sharp barbs, and, when asked what he is doing, replies that he is preparing javelins to be used in avenging his father. The answer is greeted with scoffs. All the same, some of the acuter courtiers have their suspicions. Two traps are laid. A beautiful girl, whom Amleth has known from childhood, is ordered to seduce him and worm his secret out of him. The plot fails because Amleth's foster-brother warns him of it. Then a counsellor of Feng's has a bright idea. He suggests that Feng absent himself from court for a short time, and that, during his absence, Amleth and his mother be brought together in the Queen's chamber, where, he is sure, Amleth will speak with complete candour. Before the interview begins, however, the counsellor will have concealed himself in the chamber, and later will reveal to Feng whatever he discovers. The Queen knows no more of this plan than does Amleth. But the wily counsellor has badly underrated the Prince's caution and cunning. On entering the chamber, Amleth, putting on his usual show of madness, crows like a cock, flaps his arms as though they were wings, and eventually jumps on the straw mattress under which the spy is hiding. Feeling the eavesdropper under his feet, the Prince promptly runs him through, pulls him out, finishes him off, chops the body into

¹ Sir Israel Gollancz, *The Sources of 'Hamlet'* (1926).

pieces, boils them, and then sends them down the sewer for the swine to eat. Going back to his mother, whom he finds wailing and grieving over what she sees as her son's folly, he upbraids her bitterly for her disloyalty to his dead father, and reveals the purpose behind his seemingly mad behaviour. His words pierce Gerutha's heart and lead her to 'walk in the ways of virtue' (Gollancz, p. 117).

Feng, on returning to the court, is surprised by the absence of his agent, and asks Amleth, among others, whether he knows what has become of the man. Thereupon the Prince, who always tells the truth after his own riddling fashion, replies that the counsellor went to the sewer, fell in, was stifled by the filth, and then eaten by the pigs. These words, though Feng can make nothing of them, increase his suspicions. He therefore decides that Amleth must be done away with. But he is deterred from taking direct action himself by his fear of offending Rorik, the Prince's grandfather, and of displeasing Gerutha. So he hits on the plan of making the King of England—the time is that of the Danelaw—do his dirty work for him, and sends Amleth off to that country, under the escort of two retainers. The retainers carry a letter with them containing the order that Amleth be put to death on his arrival. Before he sets off, however, the Prince, divining what is likely to happen, has a word in secret with his mother. He asks her to hang the hall with knotted tapestry, and to hold a funeral for him exactly a year after his departure, adding that he will return at the year's end. Then, during the voyage, he searches the luggage of the retainers while they are asleep, finds the letter, which is carved in runic characters on a piece of wood, erases the original order, and replaces it with another of his own devising calling for the execution of the retainers. To it he adds the entreaty that the King of England grant his daughter in marriage to a youth of great judgement whom Feng is sending to him. The plot works. Deeply impressed, as well he might be, by the preternatural acuteness of Amleth's mind and senses, which the Prince amply displays as soon as he reaches England, the King of that country bestows his daughter on the newcomer, and has the retainers hanged. At this point Amleth, pretending to be offended by the summary execution of his companions, demands wergeld for them, receives the appropriate sum in gold, melts it down in secret, and pours it into hollow sticks carefully prepared to hold it.

Arriving back in Jutland on the very day when the funeral rites are being carried out for his supposed death, Amleth puts on his old filthy attire, and enters the banqueting hall. At first his coming creates awe; but this soon changes to mirth, especially when, having been asked what has become of the two retainers, he points to the sticks, and says, 'Here they are.' This strange answer confirms the courtiers in their view that he is a harmless lunatic. Nevertheless, to make their assurance doubly sure, Amleth takes one further step. As he moves about the hall, he fidgets with his sword and pricks his fingers with it. To save him from himself, the courtiers have his sword firmly riveted to the scabbard. Secure in their knowledge that the Prince is unarmed as well as harmless, the courtiers allow him to egg them on to eat and drink until they all lie in a drunken stupor. Then, pulling down upon them the knotted hangings prepared by his mother, Amleth uses the barbed crooks he made long ago to fasten the hangings tightly about them, and sets fire to the hall. Thence he moves on to Feng's own apartment, takes the King's sword from the place where it is hanging by his bed, and substitutes his own useless sword for it. Arousing the sleeping Feng, he tells him the hour of vengeance has come. Feng leaps from his couch and seizes the sword hanging by it, but while he tries in vain to wrench it from the scabbard, Amleth kills him with the King's own sword. On the following day the Prince makes a speech to his countrymen, explaining what he has done and why he has done it. They greet the speech with unrestrained enthusiasm, and make Amleth their new king.

Saxo does not conclude his story here. He goes on to relate further exploits of Amleth—some of them very like his earlier exploits—down to his death in battle. In the course of them Amleth acquires a second wife; and she, after expressing her undying devotion to him and her determination to die in battle with him, promptly marries his conqueror. So far as Shakespeare is concerned, however, Amleth's later adventures are of no account, except that they exemplify yet again the perfidy of women. It is the revenge story that matters, and that story is all of a piece, a heroic tale of the heroic age in Northern Europe. Single-mindedly and single-handedly, the Prince does his duty in avenging his father's murder. Every stratagem he devises is held up to admiration; and he himself is not subjected to the slightest breath of censure. Never in doubt as to what he must do, he moves inexorably to the accomplishment of his purpose.

Belleforest's version of this tale is, in so far as its action goes, in essence the same as Saxo's. But he does make some additions to it that leave their mark on Shakespeare's tragedy. Three of these are most important. First, having related how Fengon, as he calls him, killed his brother, Belleforest goes on to say that before resorting to parricide Fengon had already incestuously sullied his brother's bed (*incestueusement souillé la couche fraternelle*) by corrupting the honour of that brother's wife (Gollancz, p. 186). There is plainly a close connection between this statement and the order the Ghost in *Hamlet* gives his son :

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damnèd incest.
(1.5.82-3)

Secondly, Belleforest remarks that Geruthe's subsequent marriage to Fengon led many to conclude that she might well have inspired the murder in order to enjoy the pleasures of her adulterous relationship with Fengon without restriction or restraint (p. 188). Amleth repeats this charge in his passionate harangue to his mother after his discovery of the spy, and draws an absolute denial of it from her. She begs him never to harbour the suspicion that she gave consent to the murder (p. 220). Thirdly, Belleforest is much troubled by the powers of divination his hero shows, especially after his arrival in England. Reluctantly he is forced to conclude that in pre-Christian times the North was full of enchanters, and, in the words of the English translator, that the Prince 'while his father lived, had been instructed in that devilish art whereby the wicked spirit abuseth mankind' (p. 237). However, having said this, he finds a partial excuse for his hero in the notion that Amleth could well have been rendered highly sensitive to impressions from without 'by reason of his over-great melancholy'. Here, surely, is the origin of Hamlet's lines :

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil, and the devil hath power
T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me.

(2.2.587-92)

It is Belleforest, not Saxo, who is responsible for the idea of Amleth as a victim of melancholy.

The French writer's unease about Amleth's powers of divination is typical of his attitude towards Saxo's story as a whole. He is not happy with it. As a good Christian, he disapproves of private revenge, especially when the object of it is a king; and his reservations on this score lead him into a great deal of special pleading and moralizing. For a solution to his difficulties he falls back on the providential idea of history which was so dominant at the time when he was writing. He prefaces his account with an 'Argument' justifying the writing of history on moral and religious grounds. The great lesson to be drawn from the past is that though God's vengeance may be slow it is absolutely sure. Amleth, the author of 'the most exquisite revenge imaginable, the most carefully planned and skilfully carried out' (p. 172), was, Belleforest implies, acting throughout as heaven's 'scourge and minister' (3.4.164).

Here, then, in the pages of Belleforest whose account Shakespeare seems to have read—it appears unlikely that he knew Saxo's version—are many of the essential elements of the tragedy: the single combat between old Hamlet and the King of Norway; the seduction of Gertrude by Claudius; the murder of old Hamlet; Claudius's marriage to Gertrude; the son's duty to avenge his father; his counterfeiting madness; his delay, if delay it can be called, since Hamlet has to grow up before he can act; his killing of Polonius; his upbraiding of his mother; his sea voyage; his forging of the letter that sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths; his return to Denmark; and his killing of the King. Here too are the bare bones of many of the characters—Gertrude, Claudius, Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and, in the foster-brother, Horatio. To the central figure Belleforest contributed far more than bare bones. He offered Shakespeare the ruthlessly efficient avenger of Saxo's story made more complex by a streak of melancholy in his nature; and Shakespeare added to that complexity by transferring the French writer's reservations about some of his hero's actions to that hero himself.

But, while the resemblances between the story and the play are evident enough, so are the differences. In Belleforest the fratricide is no secret; and the reason for the Prince's taking a long time over the accomplishment of his task is simple and natural, not problematic. The Hamlet of the story reaches England and marries