Hamlet and Fortinbras
Author(s): William Witherle Lawrence
Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Sep., 1946), pp. 673-698
Published by: Modern Language Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/459241
Accessed: 01-11-2016 13:46 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

*Modern Language Association* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *PMLA*
HAMLET AND FORTINBRAS

THE tragic history of the royal house of Denmark opens with an episode which seems today, on any rational basis, absurd. Horatio tells Marcellus and Bernardo on the castle terrace at midnight that the elder Fortinbras, King of Norway, challenged Hamlet's father to single combat, agreeing to forfeit all his lands if vanquished, and that the Danish king put up an equal stake. In the ensuing encounter Fortinbras was slain. The elder Hamlet thus appears as a reckless champion, risking life and lands on personal valor, rather than as a careful guardian of his domain. Nowadays, if we give this a thought, we are likely to dismiss it as an odd custom, familiar from Viking days and the time when knighthood was in flower. It is indeed one of the archaic features of the old tale of Amleth which survived into Shakespeare's pages, but it still had, in the Elizabethan age, a validity which is not always realized. Although it is only a small piece in the great tapestry of Hamlet, it will repay, I think, some special examination.

Even more interesting, though raising far more difficult questions, is the subsequent 'history' of the relations between Norway and Denmark. As we all know, Horatio goes on to tell how Young Fortinbras has got together a band of 'lawless resolutes,' to attempt to recover by force the lands his father lost. So the Danes are keeping shipyards and armorers busy day and night. More about this youthful hero is told as the play progresses, until he comes into his own at the very end, when he claims the sovereignty at Hamlet's death. He is of special interest because, as will be remembered, he plays no part in the pages of Saxo Grammaticus or Belleforest. He is apparently a distinctively English and distinctively dramatic addition to the story. He serves an important purpose: a distinguished person is needed to succeed to the Danish throne, to close the action with a formal speech, and, as a matter of stage necessity, to see that Hamlet is borne honorably to his bier, and the dead bodies carried off. The final catastrophe and the events following it in the old story were quite unsuited to the theater. There Amleth traps the king's men under a netting fastened down by hooked stakes, and burns down the royal hall about their ears. After disposing of his uncle-stepfather, he goes to England and Scotland, and sad to say, bigamously marries a second wife, and is slain by another uncle. This was no stuff for a Senecan tragedy. It properly gave way to the death of Hamlet in the fencing-match and the succession of the Norwegian prince.
Young Fortinbras and the relations between Denmark and Norway help the play in other ways. The background of foreign affairs gives realism and breadth to the action. Denmark is a powerful state, as is shown also in her dealings with England, and Claudius a bold and able statesman. Striking effect is gained by the passage of the army of Fortinbras through Denmark on the way to Poland, contrasting the activity of soldiers and an ambitious leader, fighting for a mere patch of ground, with the inactivity of Hamlet, faced with a duty which must not be evaded. These points are, however, often blurred or lost on the modern stage. Horatio's speech at the opening of the play is usually heavily cut, and the whole scene on the plain in Denmark omitted. Furthermore, we can all remember how often the curtain has been rung down immediately after Horatio's touching farewell, and Fortinbras given no opportunity at all to make his triumphal entrance at the end.

That the diplomatic relations between Norway and Denmark and the campaign of Young Fortinbras are "excrescences" on the play\(^1\) needs little refutation. All the figures in so elaborate a piece cannot be in the foreground. By the time that he wrote his great tragedies, Shakespeare certainly knew what was effective and necessary on the stage. Much that has been considered superfluous has proved on closer examination to be quite in order. But, familiar as the Fortinbras business is, there are certain difficulties which must be faced. Does the development of the political situation in Norway, as the action moves on, involve a contradiction with the events narrated by Horatio in the beginning, creating, as a recent critic has put it, "one of the most puzzling problems in the play"? Did Shakespeare suddenly change his mind, or is the supposed contradiction explainable? What is meant by the "law and heraldry" by which the duel with Old Fortinbras was ratified? What are the "rights of memory" to which Young Fortinbras refers at the end, and which, presumably, Hamlet had in mind when he gave him his voice for the succession to the crown? Is Young Fortinbras the invention of Kyd, in the lost play, or of Shakespeare himself? How far is it safe to say that Shakespeare developed him as a "foil," in order to emphasize a temperamental weakness in Hamlet's character? These, and other questions, will confront us in the ensuing pages.

Discussion of details is, however, not my main object. They do indeed claim careful consideration for their own sake; nothing in Hamlet, however secondary, ought to be neglected. But they often serve a special purpose in providing a solid and objective point of departure for the consideration of larger issues. Patient investigation of small matters leads almost inevitably to greater ones. Study of earlier forms of the

story, so much neglected by most aesthetic commentators, is particularly important. Nobody was ever hurt by knowledge of Saxo and Belleforest, and of what may be learned about Kyd. In the present paper, the problems connected with Fortinbras necessarily involve the question how Shakespeare made plausible Hamlet’s delay in taking vengeance. Anyone who announces to an expectant world that he has thoughts to utter in regard to that old and much-disputed issue is likely to be met by a pitying and tolerant smile. I am facing that danger; indeed, I am venturing to ask at the end not only how the delayed vengeance is related to the figure of Fortinbras, but how it is to be interpreted today in the play as a whole. Having touched the nettle, it may be well, according to the admonition of the old fable, to grasp it firmly.

II

First of all, the duel between the kings of Norway and Denmark may be examined, since that comes first in the chronological order of events. In Belleforest’s tale, the closest extant earlier analogue to Hamlet, the Danish king appears as Horvvendille, the elder Fortinbras as Collere, Claudius as Fengon, and Gertrude as Geruthe.

Rorique, King of Denmark, appointed Horvvendille and Fengon his brother co-governors of Jutie (Jutland); but the renown of Horvvendille, the most noted sea-rover of his day, aroused the jealousy of Collere, King of Norway, who challenged him to mortal combat, under the agreement that the loser should forfeit all the riches in his ships, and the victor honorably bury the vanquished. In this encounter Collere was slain, and Horvvendille gained high favor with Rorique, who gave him his daughter Geruthe to wife. Of this union Amleth was born. But Fengon slew his brother at a banquet, and subsequently married his widow Geruthe, with whom he had already had sexual relations. The tale then takes up the fortunes of young Amleth, but nothing is said of any further political connection between Norway and Denmark. For Belleforest I use the convenient text of Gollancz, Sources of Hamlet (London, 1926). The extract just quoted is on page 268. The Elizabethan translation of Belleforest, the Hystorie of Hamblet (1608), is printed by Gollancz opposite the French text. The same volume contains Elton’s rendering of Saxo, The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus (London, 1894), opposite the Latin. Elton used the edition of Holder (Strassburg, 1886); Gollancz printed from the editio princeps, 1514.

I assume that Shakespeare worked mainly from the lost Hamlet play, and that this was the work of Thomas Kyd. He may also have gone directly to Belleforest. In referring to Kyd I use the edition by F. S. Boas, Works of Thomas Kyd (Oxford, 1901). It is hardly necessary to say that the much-discussed German piece, Der Bestrafte Brudermord, is conveniently accessible in a careful English translation in the second volume of the Furness
The fratricide of Fengon is motivated mainly by jealousy of his brother's renown as victor in the duel. Added to this is his envy of Horrvendille's marriage with the daughter of the Danish king, and fear lest he himself may lose his power in the state. Saxo puts the matter very briefly: "tantae felicitatis invidia accusus Fengo." Shakespeare probably followed Kyd in making the elder Hamlet king of Denmark, and explaining the crime of Claudius as due not to jealousy of his brother's prowess, but to love of Gertrude and desire for the crown, thereby greatly sharpening and simplifying the dramatic effect.

Our concern is chiefly with the duel itself. Saxo's description is much more detailed than that in Belleforest. Much of it is taken up with one of those long rhetorical speeches which the Danish monk so loved, which is of no special significance, excepting that it elaborates the formal terms of the contract, more briefly set forth by Belleforest. Although the Norwegian king was moved by jealousy, not by desire for justice, and "deemed it would be a handsome deed if by his greater strength in arms he could bedim the far-famed glory of the rover" ("decorum sibi fore existimavit si tam late patentem Piratae fulgorem superior armis obscurare quivisset")\(^3\) the duel was fought under the definite arrangements of a judicial combat, and must be considered as an example of that early custom. It took place on an island; it is therefore an illustration of the Germanic holmgang.

There was an island lying in the middle of the sea, which each of the rovers, bringing his ships up on either side, was holding. The captains were tempted by the pleasant look of the beach, and the comeliness of the shores led them to look through the interior of the springtide woods, to go through the glades, and roam over the sequestered forests. It was here that the advance of Koll and Horwendil brought them face to face without any witness."\(^4\)

---

\(^3\) Gollancz, 94. It would be easy to put together an imposing bibliography of works dealing with the judicial duel, but it seems better to refer to only two sources: for the earlier period to Hoops's *Reallexicon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, article "Zweikampf" (iv, 595 ff.) by R. Hübnner and K. Lehmann; for the later period to F. Carl Riedel, *Crime and Punishment in the Old French Romances* (N.Y., 1939), especially 33 ff. Bibliography will be found in each of these; Riedel (181-186) gives much that bears upon Germanic conditions. For the situation under Elizabeth, see the article by A. Forbes Sieveking, "Fencing and Duelling" in *Shakespeare's England* (Oxford, 1916); ii, 389 ff., bibliography 406 f.

\(^4\) Gollancz, 95.
That the beauties of nature prompted these champions to take a stroll through the woods appears to be a rationalization, in the mind of Saxo, of the Viking custom of island fighting. The *holmgang*, which "differed from the plain *einvigi* or duel, as being accompanied by rites and governed by rules, whilst the latter was not," was abolished by law in Iceland and Norway in the early eleventh century. It is noticeable that Belleforest omitted all mention of fighting on an island, which would have had small meaning for a Frenchman of the sixteenth century.

There are other duels in Saxo's pages which are of interest; one between a Slavic champion and Ubbe, a Danish warrior; and another between King Athisl of Sweden and Frowin the Dane. In days of constant warfare, it was no doubt an agreeable change to have one hero from either side, rather than two bands of warriors, settle a dispute. Moreover, such an affair tended to become a sporting event, in which desire for personal glory played no small part.

[Ubbe] eagerly went to fight, showing that he was a seeker of honour and not the slave of lucre, and that he set bravery before lust of pelf, and intent to prove that his confidence was based not on hire, but on his own great soul. Not a moment is lost; a ring is made; the course is thronged with soldiers; the champions engage; a din arises; the crowd of onlookers shouts in discord, each backing his own."

Notice that Ubbe wanted the reward of victory, the "stakes" of the contest, put into neutral hands. The king had pledged valuable bracelets, but Ubbe objected.

"How can I trust the promise when thou keepest the pledge in thine own hands and dost not deposit the gift in the charge of another? Let there be some one to whom thou canst entrust the pledge, that thou mayst not be able to take thy promise back." This recalls the arrangement with Old Fortinbras, who had staked his lands as well as his life on the issue, while the elder Hamlet had "gaged," on his part, "a moiety competent," a corresponding portion of his own lands, which would have returned to the "inheritance" or possession of Fortinbras, had Hamlet been defeated.

How far are we justified in discerning, in Shakespeare's pages, the survival of details as far back as Viking days? Caution is necessary, yet

---

6 Elton, 101 ff.; 131 f. Neither of these is in Gollancz, since neither is part of the Hamlet story.
7 "If we have to have war, why can't we be as intelligent as they were back in the old days when each army chose its best swordsman and the two rival champions met in a clearing and battled to the death, with victory in the whole war going to the army whose champion won?" Robert St. John, *From the Land of Silent People* (N.Y., 1943), p. 282.
8 Elton, p. 104. 9 Elton, p. 103.
much certainly filtered down into the sixteenth century. The laws of chivalry, of which France was the foremost exponent, were of course much affected by Germanic traditions. To those traditions is partly due the continuing conviction that divine intervention, pagan or Christian as the case might be, would thrice arm him who had his quarrel just, and give him victory. While the judicial duel was far commoner in France than in England, it continued for a long time in the latter country, not merely as a courtly amusement, but as a legal settlement of disputes. Indeed, it was not abolished by law in England until the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{10}

Survival of early Germanic conditions is greatly obscured by two later mediæval developments: the greater formality and elaborateness of the arrangements governing the duel, particularly through the institution of heraldry; and the employment of single combat to decide affairs of the heart. All this is too familiar to need much emphasis, as is also its continuance in the plays of Shakespeare, but one or two points may be noted.

In the scenes in Richard II (I, ii, iii) in which Bolingbroke and Mowbray arrange to defend their respective claims by personal combat in the presence of the king, Richard makes it clear that the issue at arms will manifest the right.

\begin{quote}
Since we cannot atone you, we shall see
Justice design the victor's chivalry.
\end{quote}

The ceremoniousness of the affair, particularly the part played by heraldry, is conspicuous. The whole is ordered by the [Earl] Marshal, the head of the College of Arms, and each combatant is formally announced by a herald. The Earl Marshal exercised "joint and coordinate jurisdiction with the constable [of England] in the court of chivalry, and afterwards became the sole judge of that tribunal till its obsolescence."\textsuperscript{11} Heraldic authority thus assumed a legal aspect. The court of chivalry appears later to have given place to the civil courts in the rare instances where the right of judicial combat was actually invoked. "Spelman tells us how, in 1571, one of the last judicial duels, which was adjudged to be decided before the Justices of the Common Pleas as umpires, in Tothill Fields, proved abortive owing to the non-appearance of the petitioner, who was consequently non-suited."\textsuperscript{12} In King Lear justice is manifested in the encounter between Edmund and Edgar (v,
iii, 90 ff.), which is governed by due ceremony, under the management of Albany, with a herald and trumpeters.

Commentators differ as to the meaning of the phrase in Hamlet “well ratified by law and heraldy.” (I, i, 87) Does it mean “both by civil law and by the usages of heraldry,” or, by hendiadys, merely “by heraldic law”? The answer, it seems to me, depends strictly speaking upon the era in which we conceive the action of the play as taking place. Usually this action seems to be contemporary with Shakespeare, and Hamlet as “modern” as Sir Philip Sidney. Under such conditions civil as well as heraldic law would have to be considered. There is very little in the play which indicates, as in Lear or Othello, a remote time or a foreign country. A few touches, such as the schooling at Wittenberg or the drinking habits of the Danes, remind us that we are on the Continent, and Hamlet’s occasional crude brutalities, relics of the old story, seem inconsistent with a cultivated sixteenth-century prince. But these are not important, since Shakespeare never boggled at anachronisms or inconsistencies. And perhaps the time at which the action takes place is really not significant, after all. Perhaps, if he were to return to earth, Shakespeare would be puzzled to say just what meaning he attached to “law and heraldry.” If the phrase sounded well, and in a general way recalled a familiar practice, as it evidently did, that was enough for romantic drama. I do not think that we can gravely examine the arrangements governing the duel with the King of Norway as if they were a true reflection of historical conditions at any given time, any more than we can take seriously Venetian jurisprudence as expounded by Portia, or Lear’s constitutional right to divide his kingdom between his daughters.

Instances in Shakespearean drama of the settlement of love-affairs by judicial combat will readily be recalled. In Troilus and Cressida Æneas enters the Greek camp (i, iii) with a trumpeter, and formally delivers Hector’s challenge “to rouse a Grecian that is true in love.” Success in arms will manifest justice in love, as in other matters. So in The Two Noble Kinsmen, in a scene probably written by Fletcher, Palamon, fighting with Arcite for the love of Emilia, says to Theseus:

I call’d him now to answer. If thou be’st,
As thou art spoken, great and virtuous,
The true decider of all injuries,
Say “Fight again!” and thou shalt see me, Theseus,
Do such a justice thou thyself wilt envy. (III. vi. 152 ff.)

The persistence of mediæval love-conventions under Elizabeth was a revival as well as a survival—one of the strange contradictions which

Contrast, for example, E. K. Chambers, ed. Hamlet (Boston, 1904), p. 125, with G. L. Kittredge, ed. Hamlet (Boston, 1939), p. 133.
Hamlet and Fortinbras

mark the era. It might be supposed that a vigorous and sturdy people,
in those stirring times, would have turned to something else than the
faded elegancies of chivalry for imaginative expression. But perhaps both
courtly and popular feeling went deeper than we imagine. Some of the
exaggerated romantic adulation of the Virgin Queen is undoubtedly to be
explained by the belief, widely and sincerely held, that she enjoyed special
divine favor, and that her champions would be aided by the heavenly
powers. This lent a deeper significance to literary flattery, to courtly
compliment, and to duels in her honor. These indeed sometimes fell only
short of absurdity, and sprang in part from vanity and ambition for
royal favor, as when Essex issued his challenges to single combat before
Lisbon or Rouen. But that this is not the whole story is obvious from the
manifestations of such feeling in humbler circles, expressed in the broad-
side ballads. The usages of knighthood, in their simpler outlines, were
perfectly familiar to homespun folk, and plays in which such usages were
prominent were popular on the public stage. There is no better evidence
of their popularity than that they were roundly satirized, as in The
Knight of the Burning Pestle. In Ben Jonson's Magnetic Lady, in the
Chorus which closes Act I, the Boy recites the "miracles" done "in the
Holy Land and elsewhere" by current knightly stage heroes, and
Dauplay replies, "These miracles would please, I assure you, and take the
people." In the Second Part of Henry VI (r, iii, 180 ff.) it is adjudged
that Horner the armorer and Peter his apprentice shall settle their
quarrel "in single combat in convenient place," whereupon Peter's
courage quickly oozes away. Chivalric observances could only provoke
laughter when tradesmen engaged in them—but tradesmen loved them
none the less.

Such, in brief, is the background of the judicial duel in Hamlet, and the
evidence that it would not have seemed to an Elizabethan, gentle or
simple, merely a fantastic story-book procedure. One more proof is thus
afforded of the continuance of mediaeval traditions into the age of
Shakespeare, a subject which has increasingly engaged the attention of
scholars in the last twenty years. Wells observes, in reviewing the course
of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama after 1576, that "the outstanding
feature of the entire movement is the tenacious hold of the medieval
heritage for many years and its rapid decline after 1611." It is ex-

instances of such dramas. "Need we deny reading to 'citizens and 'prentices, the ground-
lings'? . . . I find the Elizabethan drama incomprehensible on such an assumption." C. J.
Sisson, Mod. Lang. Rev., xxxix (1944), 205.
traordinary that recognition of the importance of this heritage has been so long delayed, and that it is even now sometimes only grudgingly ac-
corded.

III

We may now consider Young Fortinbras, whom I will henceforth usually call, for convenience, merely Fortinbras. He is brought to our attention five times: in the speech of Horatio (I, i, 95–107); in the address of Claudius from the throne (I, ii, 17–39); upon the return of Voltimand and Cornelius from Norway (II, ii, 60–82); in person, leading his army on the way to Poland (iv, iv); and again in person at the end of the play (v, ii, 372–414). The allusions in the earlier scenes are dramatically in order; he must not be unfamiliar to the audience when he is needed on the stage. And, as already noted, the pseudo-historical background gives depth to the canvas. Enough is told to make this background reasonably clear, but much is left to be inferred. It is desirable, then, to fill in the outlines, and see how well they harmonize. They seem to me entirely consistent, and I believe that Shakespeare was to a considerable extent responsible for them. For we are lucky in having, in the Brudermord, some evidence that Kyd managed things differently.

It is important to remember that the German play has a far better claim to reflect Kyd's work in its serious portions than in its comic scenes. The worst of the latter certainly cannot be fathered upon him, and there is considerable question about lesser absurdities. An effort was clearly made in the German to relieve the tragedy by horseplay, interpolated anecdotes, comic treatment of Ophelia, etc. Our knowledge of the earliest dramatic form of Hamlet is so meager that the temptation to place reliance on the Brudermord is very great. But no one can be sure just how far the process of brightening up the play has gone in the German version. It appears impossible always to separate definitely

17 For example, Kittredge, noting "the utterly comic fashion in which Hamlet disposes of the representatives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" [Brudermord, iv, i], remarks that "one can only hope that the author of the Ur-Hamlet is not chargeable with this device." (ed. Hamlet, xi) But others have thought that it is certainly due to him. Parrott and Craig, in their edition of Hamlet (Princeton, 1938), held that this scene was due ultimately to Kyd, and that the pirate business was Shakespeare's deliberate alteration, probably suggested by the capture of Caesar by pirates in Plutarch. (p. 12) I pointed out (PMLA, LIX, 53 ff.) that while this is entirely possible, the scene may not have come from Kyd, but have been written in by a reviser. Professor Parrott has recently reaffirmed his belief. ("Hamlet's Sea-Voyage—Bandits or Pirates? A Reply to Professor Lawrence," Shaks. Association Bulletin, xix, April, 1944, 51–59.) His judgment is authoritative. But I cannot refrain from pointing out that where features in this scene do not suggest Kyd's work, he gets out of the difficulty by comfortably attributing them to the reviser. Thus I suggested that Hamlet's remark that he will return to Denmark "by post" sounds more like the eighteenth century than the sixteenth. Mr. Parrott replies that this "may represent an addition by the reviser
what was kept from what was added, perhaps at various times, after the original tragedy came from Kyd’s pen. The Brudermord is very late (MS, now lost, 1710). Several hands may have intervened. Even on English soil, corruption may have set in. Boas noted that when Shakespeare began to write Hamlet “he would appear to have had, as his basis, not Kyd’s play in its primitive form, but a popularized stage version of it.”

But the historical background in the Brudermord, which in two points differs both from Belleforest and from Shakespeare, may in one or both respects reflect Kyd’s work. If this is true, it is of interest as showing that Shakespeare made radical changes in the Fortinbras business. In the Brudermord Hamlet is apparently king of Norway.

Alas, Horatio! I know not why it is that since my father’s death I am all the time so sick at heart, while my royal mother has so soon forgotten him, and this King still sooner, for while I was in Germany he had himself quickly crowned King in Denmark but with a show of right he has made over to me the crown of Norway, and appealed to the election of the states. (I, iv).

[The King says to Hamlet:] “Stay with us at court, or, if not, you can betake yourself to your kingdom, Norway.” (I, vii).

to take the place of an excised scene in the Ur-Hamlet which showed the Prince on his way home.” (p. 55) But that there was such a scene in Kyd’s play, or that it was excised and this substituted, is pure hypothesis. Again, I observed that while the two villains on the island are called “bandits,” they are in another scene (iii, x) called “attendants” (Diener), which may indicate two different writers. Mr. Parrott replies that the words “Bandit” and “Banditen” are “probably due to the reviser or even to a German copyist.” (p. 55) This seems to me argument to fit a theory. He thinks that Kyd would have found the sea-fight and the boarding of the pirate ship “difficult, if not impossible to present upon the Elizabethan stage.” (p. 56) But if Shakespeare could manage this by having it reported, why not Kyd? “And, further,” says Mr. Parrott, “if we accept Professor Lawrence’s suggestion and attribute the intervention of the pirates to Kyd [I did not suggest that we make this attribution, but that it is a possibility to be considered], we must go on to suppose that the German reviser cancelled it and composed in its place the effective scene on the island so wholly in Kyd’s style. This, frankly, seems quite impossible.” (p. 56) It does not seem to me at all impossible that some adapter, with his head full of Kyd, could have written this wretched stuff, and substituted it, in order to make the play more amusing, as was undoubtedly done elsewhere, by introducing a comic incident. “The source of this incident has been traced to Hans Sachs, and this scene may therefore be the work of the German author. The story was probably current; a variation of it occurs in Baron Munchhausen, which draws most of its material from old German sources.” (H. D. Gray, Philol. Quarterly, vrr [1928], 267) Professor Gray does not regard the question as settled, however; he notes that “the general tone of the incident is not impossible to the author of the Pedrigano [sic] sub-story in The Spanish Tragedy.” The fundamental issue is how far one may draw definite conclusions from the Brudermord. All that I maintain is that we should be cautious; probabilities may easily assume the color of facts.

18 Loc. cit., lili.
In the second place, the closing scene of the *Brudermord* is managed otherwise than by Shakespeare. Fortinbras does not appear in person; Hamlet says: "I pray you, dear Horatio, carry the crown to Norway, to my cousin, the Duke Fortempras [sic], so that the kingdom may not fall into other hands." (v, vi) Of course "cousin" does not imply blood relationship; all royalties were cousins in Shakespeare’s day. "The crown" is obviously that of Denmark, not Norway, as is also shown by a remark of Horatio’s.

On the whole, it looks as though Fortinbras had been introduced into the play by Kyd.¹⁹ The plot, as will be pointed out in detail later, was obviously much elaborated by him, and Fortinbras is a suitable figure to receive the crown, even by messenger, at the death of Hamlet. Whether Kyd utilized him as a foil to Hamlet in respect to character is discussed below. It looks further as if Shakespeare had twice sharpened the dramatic effect by bringing on Fortinbras in person. But certainty is impossible. I do not here enter upon the problem of how far the *Brudermord* depends upon Shakespeare, who may possibly have invented Fortinbras himself. Since the old play is lost, we cannot move far from the realm of conjecture.

When we try to arrange the foreign affairs in Shakespeare’s play in a coherent sequence, we encounter what has been felt to be an inconsistency. Horatio says (I, i, 88) that all the lands of Old Fortinbras were forfeited to the elder Hamlet as a result of the duel. But in the next act the brother of Old Fortinbras is on the Norwegian throne; Claudius is sending ambassadors to "our brother Norway"; and mutual compliments are exchanged. After the mission of Voltimand and Cornelius, the king of Norway and Young Fortinbras placate Claudius: the youth is rebuked, agrees not to attack the Danes, and moves his "lawless resolves” against the Polacks, their old enemies. Permission is courteously asked for the expedition to cross Danish territory, and Young Fortinbras even offers to “express his duty” in the presence of the Danish king. (II, ii, 60 ff; iv, iv, 1, ff.).

The most careful analysis of this situation, so far as my knowledge

¹⁹ Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that the proper name Fortinbras has nothing Scandinavian about it. The best guess seems to be that it was taken from, or suggested by, some French prose romance, probably one of the late prose redactions. The list of proper names of the *chansons de geste* by Ernest Langlois, the most extensive onomasticon of medieval romantic literature, does not show it, though this does contain *Sanson Fortin*. I am indebted to Professor C. H. Livingston of Bowdoin College for assistance on this point. Latham’s suggestion (Athenaeum, 27 July, 1872, quoted by Furness, *Variorum*, I, 14) that Fortinbras is "a corrupt French form, equivalent to *Fierumbras* or *Fierabras*” seems likely enough, but his effort to equate it with *Tarnsidha* [sic], “a name actually applied to one of the old Norse Sea-kings,” does not seem worth serious consideration.
extends, has been given by Professor H. D. Gray. He argued that Kyd told "the story of Hamlet's revenge attempted by force of arms"; that Shakespeare started with this idea, as shown in Horatio's speech (i, i, 80 ff.), but abandoned it when he decided to make Hamlet's delay depend, not on external obstacles, but on character; and that even after he had changed his plan, Shakespeare retained Horatio's speech, "knowing that it was good and would act well." The passages in the Brudermord in which Hamlet is referred to as king of Norway are cited as proof that "the situation in Kyd's drama was . . . in accord with what we find in Shakespeare's opening scene: that the crown of Norway had been forfeited to Denmark. It is out of accord with the second scene, in which Shakespeare shunted off this whole matter of the threatened invasion, and determined instead to tell the story of Hamlet's delay."

This ingenious argument should be read in full, in the author's own words. I am sorry to say that it does not convince me. Would Shakespeare have allowed such a glaring contradiction and right about face to stand in a piece upon which he obviously bestowed great care? We are dealing with a very different sort of play from, let us say, Timon or Pericles. He was very careful about the exposition in the opening scenes of his great tragedies; was he willing in Hamlet to let his audience get off on the wrong foot? Professor Gray himself observes that Shakespeare "gives no such specific and extended mislead in any other play." Moreover, there does not seem to be any real contradiction between Horatio's speech and what follows later in the play. The Norwegian throne is occupied, not by

20 Reconstruction of a Lost Play," PQ, viii (1928), 254–274, esp. 261 ff.) It is said, without details or a reference, that "in the last chapter of Belleforest the relationship of Hamlet and Fortinbras is mentioned." (263) I do not understand this; I cannot find in Belleforest any mention of Young Fortinbras whatever. Old Fortinbras, of course, appears as Collere. The odd remark in Amleth's speech after the burning of the hall, already referred to above, to the effect that Fengon gave the succession to the crown to "quelque voleur estranger," certainly does not establish a relationship between Hamlet and Fortinbras.

A good deal is also made by Mr. Gray of the fact that the Ghost appears in armor. But he does not tell us why, if Shakespeare changed his mind about the armed vengeance, he again emphasized the armor in the second scene, in Hamlet's interview with Marcellus and Bernardo. (i, ii, 200, 226, 230, 255) Hamlet's comment seems sufficient explanation:

My father's spirit—in arms? All is not well.
I doubt some foul play.

The armor seems to mean merely that some wickedness is afoot that requires violent redress, not necessarily by war. A man put on armor for protection against any kind of bodily danger. "Foul play," nowadays sometimes "specifically implying murder" (Webster's New International Dictionary, sub foul), has no such necessary implication in Shakespeare; it means any kind of underhand business. Prospero tells Miranda that thus were they banished from Milan. "By foul play . . . were we heav'ed thence." Of course Hamlet does not yet know of his uncle's crime when he uses the phrase.
Fortinbras, the heir in normal succession, but by his uncle. The young fellow is of the kind to make trouble, but the uncle, "impotent and bedrid," is not; he would give the Danes no cause for anxiety. Subject states were frequently allowed to have a local king. Of this Scandinavian history affords many instances. Saxo calls Jutland in Amleth's time a kingdom, though it was part of the domain of the Danish king Rorik.

Amleth, like his father and uncle, receives throughout [the history of Saxo] the title of Rex . . .; nor is there any hint at his election that the Jutes are supposed to have had anyone but themselves to consult in choosing their 'king,' though Rorik was reigning in Denmark.21

It must be remembered that in early days "king" often meant little more than "tribal chieftain." In Shakespeare's own day Norway, with a ruler of its own, was completely dominated by Denmark. Hamlet is not history; it is romantic tragedy, but its romantic arrangements of history are based on fact and tradition. Striking confirmation comes from the play itself. England had its own king, but he was under the thumb of Claudius; he had to do homage to Denmark; he could not disregard ("coldly set") the royal Danish commands ("sovereign process") when Claudius wished Hamlet put to death. (iv, iii, 60–65) English subjection to Denmark was not less real if glossed over by high-flown diplomatic phraseology in the letter sent by Claudius.

As England was his faithful tributary,
As love between them like the palm might flourish—

just as Norwegian dependence was disguised under the "most fair return of greetings and desires" which Voltimand and Cornelius brought back to Denmark.

The supposed contradiction and sudden change of plan thus disappear, as it seems to me, in the light of history and tradition.

Another difficulty must be mentioned, and for this we shall look in vain to the play for a direct explanation. What are the "rights of memory," that is, those which everyone will recall, to which Fortinbras refers at the end of the play?

I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me.

And Hamlet says:

But I do prophecy th' election lights
On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.

Why does Hamlet think the Danes will choose Fortinbras for their king?

21 Elton, p. 128, note; cf. also 104.
Surely not because an able young soldier happens to turn up at the moment when a new king is badly needed. "We may infer," said Kettredge, "that Fortinbras is related to the Danish royal family." But since he is an imaginary figure, such a connection can have existed only in Shakespeare's imagination, or in Kyd's play. In either case, the matter is not plain. If we let our fancy roam, we may imagine that the duel of the elder Fortinbras was taken by Kyd as settling by judicial means a dispute as to succession to the Norwegian or the Danish throne, perhaps arising out of earlier intermarriage between the two peoples. There is no suggestion of this, however, in Saxo or Belleforest, and there is no warrant for indulging in speculations unsupported by the texts.

Why did Shakespeare not make these matters plainer? Why did he leave the pseudo-historical background somewhat obscure? The chief reason is, I think, that he did not wish attention distracted from the main events of the play. Some details he does give, as for example in Horatio's speech to Marcellus and Bernardo, in order to produce a general effect of faithfulness to historic fact. But such details are in themselves of little dramatic interest or significance. Moreover, Shakespeare was recasting what appears to have been a piece crowded with action, the work of another writer, and he may well have inadvertently failed to explain points which were clear to him and clear in the play before him. Perhaps he may also have depended to some extent upon contemporary familiarity with the story. A dramatist of sovereign creative gifts does not worry over details, as scholars do; he knows that if his action is convincing in its large outlines his audience will not worry either. We grieve when Shakespeare seems negligent, but he knew what he was about.

In any consideration of Fortinbras, the two scenes in which he appears in person must receive special attention. He remains remote and shadowy in the earlier part of the play, but Shakespeare later on had direct dramatic use to make of him, and brought him sharply to notice. There is a great difference, however, in the way in which he is employed in the two scenes.

In Act IV, Hamlet, just before taking ship for England, vividly emphasizes the contrast between himself and Fortinbras. At the moment, he is getting nowhere with his vengeance; he is even leaving Denmark, perhaps for a long time. And then comes the bitter reflection:

Examples gross as earth exhort me.
Witness this army of such mass and charge,

William W. Lawrence

Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd,
Makes mouths at the invisible event.

This contrast is all the more striking because of the similarity in the fortunes of the two men. The Norwegian prince is the legitimate heir to a crown, but supplanted on the throne by his uncle; he is young, gifted, and ambitious; he burns to avenge the death of his father, and in this again he is thwarted by his uncle. Like Hamlet, he is forced to temporize—but here the parallel ends. He acts with subtlety in placating Claudius, and makes good use of his time in invading Poland. He does not here appear as a young swashbuckler, the impression which we get from Horatio’s speech at the opening of the play and the reproof administered by Old Norway, but rather as a man of something of Hamlet’s own refinement ("delicate and tender"). Here again the parallel ends; for while Hamlet is, it may be, “thinking too precisely on th’ event,” Fortinbras scorns to ponder the outcome, but “makes mouths at the invisible event.” The repetition of the reference to what the future may bring, even to the very word “event,” is striking. The antithesis is too sharp to be accidental; it must be due to deliberate design.

The whole scene has long been thought to have been written mainly to reveal more clearly the qualities in Hamlet’s character which have led to his delay. Thus Richard Grant White wrote, many years ago, “Plainly, the only object [of iv, iv] was to give Hamlet the opportunity for that great introspective soliloquy in which, with a psychological insight profounder than that which is exhibited in any other passage of the tragedy, the poet makes the Prince confess in whisper to himself the subtle modes and hidden causes of his vacillation.”

Very different indeed is the treatment of Fortinbras in the closing scene of the tragedy. Here the contrast to Hamlet is deliberately minimized. For, unlike the Amleth of Belleforest and Saxo, our Hamlet, after his return to England, is not ready to strike, in spite of all his brilliant maneuvers, all his high resolves, all his agonized questionings. When he prepares for the fencing-match, he is little nearer accomplishment than after the awful revelation of the Ghost; and his triumph, when it does come, is not as complete as “poetic justice” may seem to demand. Dr. Johnson perceived this clearly. “The apparition left the regions of the

23 Introduction to Hamlet, quoted by Furness, Variorum, ii, 28. For a recent statement to the same general effect, see J. Q. Adams, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Boston and N. Y., 1929, 294–295. “Shakespeare had an important reason for creating [Fortinbras]; in his anxiety to make us understand the hero . . . he devised Fortinbras as a ‘foil’ to Hamlet.” Dr. Adams also emphasizes the points of resemblance between the two men. Whether Shakespeare or Kyd “created” Fortinbras is of course a question.
dead to little purpose; the revenge which he demands is not obtained but by the death of him that was required to take it." Although Hamlet does finally kill Claudius in a fracas not of his choosing, he falls into his enemy's snare, and dies by the poisoned rapier. This gives the tragedy deeper poignancy; with all his attractiveness and promise, with all right and justice on his side, he perishes, just as Claudius designed he should. And then, by an effective surprise, Fortinbras arrives, flushed with victory over the Poles, to claim the crown and close the play in high heroic fashion. But Shakespeare is careful not to let anything suggest that Hamlet has in any way failed, or to emphasize by contrast the qualities which have given Fortinbras success. What is stressed is the vindication of his conduct, the explanation of the "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts" of the past months. Rightly enough, the play closes with a eulogy, and preparations for a funeral befitting the hero. We may foresee that Old Norway, "impotent and bedrid," will not long keep Fortinbras from the throne of his own land, and that after the death of Claudius there is hope for a better Denmark in the future. But that such speculations had any interest for Shakespeare or for his audience is highly doubtful. Nobody cares a button about Fortinbras, or the political future of Denmark or Norway.

There will not be entire agreement as to the contrast which I have emphasized between these two scenes, since some of the best modern critics do not believe that Shakespeare meant us to take Hamlet's self-reproaches seriously, as pointing to a defect in his temperament. One group tells us that he hesitated no more than he had to under the circumstances, that "disregard of Hamlet's dilemma has led to misinterpretation of his character"; another, that a real hero cannot be guilty of the weakness of procrastination, that what counts is emotion and dramatic effect, that psychology is not the main interest. It is always best, in criticizing theories, to start from definite and recent statements by distinguished authorities. I shall therefore quote Professor Kittredge and Professor Stoll. I am quite aware that to do such questions entire justice other witnesses should be called; that, for example, the idea that Hamlet's delay was forced upon him by his situation is as old as Ritson, and that it has been entertained and sharply questioned by many since that time; and also that Hamlet's temperamental defect, when it has been thought to exist, has taken about every conceivable form from sheer lunacy to genial dilatoriness. In order to keep our discussion within the bounds of a periodical article, however, the whole matter must be simplified as much as possible. It must not be forgotten that our present aim is to define the rôle of Fortinbras. But a little closer examination of the theory of external obstacles will help very much to an understanding of this.
Kittredge has expressed himself to the following effect in his edition, which is a little gold-mine of sound annotation and shrewd observation:

In the earlier part of the play, Hamlet "cannot act upon mere spectral evidence," since ghosts may be demons luring a man to destruction. So he pretends madness, in the hope of hearing "something that will afford the evidence needed to confirm the testimony of the Ghost." But this ruse gets him nowhere. He also has the chance to kill the King at prayer. But he "cannot butcher a defenceless man," and thus what he says is "merely a pretext for delay." The play within the play has given him proof that Claudius is guilty, so in another scene he acts "with decision," killing Polonius by mistake for the King. "This is the turning point of the tragedy. The King, who knows now that Hamlet means to kill him, lays his plans accordingly. There is no moment until the very end of the play when Hamlet has Claudius at his mercy. Both before Hamlet's embarkation for England, and after his return, Claudius is well guarded and Hamlet is under surveillance."24

On a first reading, this sounds convincing. But disturbing questions arise. If Hamlet has not succeeded, under cover of his assumed madness, in convincing himself that Claudius is guilty, why does he directly accuse him at the end of Act II, with the utmost passion and vehemence, and vow revenge?

Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O, vengeance!

and why, if he "cannot act upon mere spectral evidence," does he bitterly reproach himself?

Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing!

it cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fattened all the region kites
With this slave's offal.

Notice that only after this does he resolve upon further delay, lest the Ghost be a devil, a thought first mentioned by Horatio but of course a commonplace of Elizabethan demonology, and determine to use The Murder of Gonzago as a test.

As for killing the King at prayer, I quite agree that this was impossible, but not for Kittredge's reasons, which seem to me oversubtle, and resting

24 xii ff.
upon the assumption of an emotional mood in the audience about which certainty is difficult. When a virtuous hero says he will not kill the villain at prayer lest he go to heaven, I believe that this was taken by Elizabethan playgoers with absolute literalness. It may be, as Dr. Johnson remarked, "diabolical," but a revenge tragedy is often just that.

Two other difficulties with Kittredge's argument are more important for our purposes. If Hamlet has delayed no more than necessary, and the killing of Polonius shows his decision, why does the Ghost reappear almost immediately thereafter, and reproach him with his "almost blunted purpose"? Note that he says, even before the Ghost has spoken,

Do you not come your tardy son to chide,  
That, laps'd in time and passion, lets go by 
Th' important acting of your dread command?

Again, in the later scene on the plain in Denmark (iv, iv), Hamlet speaks of his "dull revenge," which needs a spur, and suggests that he is hindered either by "bestial oblivion"—manifestly bitter irony, since he is as little like a beast as possible—or by "thinking too precisely on th' event." It is striking that he does not invoke external obstacles. How easy it would have been to make him say, in effect, "I am now in the power of my enemy, but my time will come!" But Shakespeare did not do this; just as in the earlier soliloquy (ii, ii, 576 ff.)25, he made Hamlet reproach himself, and even assure us that he has "cause, and will, and strength, and means" to take his revenge. Finally, after he has returned to England, why does Hamlet not only make no move and plan nothing, but even ask Horatio if it is not "perfect conscience" to kill Claudius? He has convinced himself long since; after the Play-Scene he would take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound. His doubts, at critical moments, as to whether he is justified seem to me best interpreted as efforts to rationalize a natural and forgivable shrinking from the horrid business of murder for revenge, though there is much else to be considered. I cannot see how the theory that these doubts explain his inaction from the beginning can hold water.

Professor Stoll's work is, I think, the most important aesthetic criticism since Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy. While such criticism cannot be wholly independent of what others have done, his conclusions are the result of his own thought and research, and seem to me to a large extent convincing. But he goes farther than I can follow him. He gets around the difficulty of reconciling Hamlet as a hero who has no irresolution about him with the reproaches just mentioned by boldly

asserting that "they motive the delay, not in the sense of grounding it in
color, but of explaining it and bridging it over. . . . This is a case
where what the character says of himself in soliloquy . . . is not, accord-
ing to the usual expectation of the dramatist, to be taken at its face value;
or, we might better say, it is to be taken at that and no more."26 Allow-
ance must of course be made for ironical exaggeration, as I have said;
Hamlet does not believe that he is pigeon-livered, any more than that
his "oblivion" (which here clearly means "neglect") is like that of a
beast. But that we can brush aside his self-reproaches completely, as
having no foundation in his temperament, seems to me impossible. An
audience does not get that impression when it is told, more than once,
that Hamlet thinks himself to blame for his delay, and that this is due to
a lack within himself. As I have already discussed this with some fulness
elsewhere,27 I will elaborate it no further here.

V

Having gone thus far, we may carry our consideration of Hamlet's
procrastination still farther, and ask, not only how it is connected with
Fortinbras, but how it is to be interpreted in the play as a whole. Nat-
urally, no answer will receive unqualified acceptance, but it seems worth
while to restate the old problem in the light of modern research.

Most critics have paid, I think, too little attention to the development
of the story. This has, for other purposes, been traced scores of times, so
that no detailed analysis need here be attempted. But there are some
points, in part suggested by the preceding pages, which seem important,
and are often neglected. One or two details appear to have escaped
notice. No one familiar with the staggering amount of Hamlet criticism
will claim originality, however; he is likely to find, about the time that
he reads his page-proofs, that his own pet idea has already been put forth
by someone else.

The beginnings of the delayed vengeance lie in Saxo's history. Here,
as has often been observed, the murder is no secret, and the king is on
his guard. Amleth has no one to help him, excepting later on, after his
reproaches have "rent the heart of his mother and redeemed her to walk
in the ways of virtue,"28 when he bids her hang the hall with the knotted
cords, and after the expiration of a year to announce his funeral. So,
since he is thrown almost wholly on his own resources, Amleth feigns

26 Art and Artifice in Shakespeare (Cambridge, Eng., 1933), pp. 94-95. Chapter v of this
book seems to me the clearest and most concise statement of his views in regard to Hamlet.
He has very courteously, in private letters, given me further information, but I do not
think I ought to draw upon those here.
27 PMLA, llix (1944), 65 ff.
28 Gollancz, pp. 116-117.
Hamlet and Fortinbras

madness, with the idea of persuading the king that he is incapable of rational action, and hence of the blood-vengeance which custom made imperative. Various tests are made by the king and his henchmen to see if he be really mad; one of these contains the germ of the Ophelia story. But Amleth is too clever; he succeeds both in outwitting the king and in playing the idiot, a process made easier by the early conviction that witlessness and wisdom often go together. He is obliged to defer his revenge until his preparations—the sharpening of the stakes in the fire, the weaving of the network, the enlistment of his mother, etc.—are completed.

There is another very important feature of Saxo’s history which makes for delay in the revenge. The Amleth story is the union of two elements: first, a tale of the vengeance taken by a prince on his uncle for the murder of his father and for adultery and incest with his mother; and second, originally separate folk-tale incidents of the Clever Boy type. Such floating material as the latter tended to attach itself to a figure of history or legend, as the Bear’s Son tale and the Dragon adventure were fathered on Beowulf. So one reason why the slaying of the king is delayed is the desire of the story-teller to get in as many of Amleth’s smart tricks as possible. A striking illustration of this is the long account of the sojourn at the court of the king of Britain, which consumes a whole year. The whole point of this episode is to show what a wise fool Amleth is. The interest in Saxo’s narrative, then, is really quite as much in the adroitness of the hero as in the consummation of his revenge. And this interest is also prominent in Shakespeare’s play. The preceding observations hold equally for Belleforest’s version, which, though padded and expanded, adds little to the story as told by Saxo. Belleforest does add a detail, probably designed to make the long delay more plausible; he says that the courtiers and pages mocked the prince, so that they were included in the final vengeance, naturally a far greater task than killing the king alone.

As to how Kyd managed things in his lost play, we can of course only speculate. But probably a fairly accurate picture can be derived by comparing Belleforest, The Spanish Tragedy, and (cautiously) the Brudermord. The most important change which he made was undoubtedly the concentration of the story around the theme of vengeance.
do not think that anyone will question that he ended his play with the hero's death in the hour of his final triumph over his uncle, or that the adventures in England and Scotland were sacrificed completely. Everything points in that direction: the demands of Senecan tragedy; the greater compression required of drama; the unsuitability of the folk-tale business of the discovery of the base birth of the British king and his consort, and Amleth's relations with his two wives, especially the Amazon queen Hermetrude, who, like the female spider, slew her lovers; and finally the evidence of the Brudermord and of Shakespeare. It must never be forgotten that in Kyd's source the vengeance-theme was only a part of the Amleth story. Belleforest devotes to this four chapters (II, III, V, VI), but three others are mainly taken up by Amleth's adventures in Britain and Scotland, and the events leading up to his death in battle in Denmark. (IV, VII, VIII) Kyd thus shortened the tale, but retained and elaborated the incidents connected with Amleth's relations with his uncle: the attempt to entice the hero to betray his secret to a woman (what was made of the precursor of the fair Ophelia is anybody's guess); the hero's disgust at his mother's sexual intimacy with his uncle, and his bitter reproaches; the murder of the eavesdropping councillor; the faithless companions and the sea-voyage (probably much shortened); and especially the picture of the hero as clever and sharp-tongued, mocking his enemies and matching wits with his uncle, though in other ways very different from the picaresque adventurer of the old tale. But Kyd more than compensated for what he sacrificed by what he seems to have added: the Ghost, a stock Senecan figure who reveals the murder, not common knowledge at the court, as in Belleforest; the sparing of the King at prayer, quite Elizabethan, but a touch which Kyd would have relished; the Play-Scene, which bears a striking resemblance to the culminating episode in The Spanish Tragedy; and the figure of Young Fortinbras. In rejecting the burning of the royal hall, and the death of the courtiers under the netting, obviously not practicable on the stage, Kyd probably devised the fencing-match, which brings in a new character as the opponent of the hero.

Now all these additions had an important effect, whether intended or not: they distracted attention from the postponement of the revenge. This is equally true of Shakespeare's play, but seems generally to have escaped notice. Professor Waldock saw it clearly, however, and he also perceived that the delay does not, from the dramatic point of view, deserve all the ink that has been spilled over it. It is a detail, and like all details, is best viewed as subordinate to the main interest.

There is procrastination. But it is not everywhere in the play, the play is not compounded of it, it is not the theme of themes. . . . And when we look back
over the course of the play, it is not on one long delay that we think. The changing spectacle, the absorbing story, have left us space only now and again for a glimpse of these doubts and hesitations. They are there, they are in the design; they are not the design.

There can be little doubt that Kyd saw the difficulty in Hamlet's long delay, which was far greater in his drama than in Belleforest. There is a very striking and instructive parallel in The Spanish Tragedy. Hieronymo postpones until the very end of the piece his revenge for the murder of his son, whose dead body he discovers in the Second Act. Meanwhile he bitterly reproaches himself for his failure to act.

Then shamest thou not, Hieronimo, to neglect

The sweet revenge of thy Horatio? (iii. xiii. 106 ff.)

Boas remarks: "... the cardinal weakness in the play ... is Kyd's failure in an adequate psychological analysis of the Marshal's motives for this delay." Nevertheless Kyd appears to have endeavored to make this failure plausible. Hieronymo is introspective and meditative. In his youth he applied himself to "fruitless Poetrie." The tragedy by means of which he gains final revenge is his own work, composed while he was a student at Toledo; his own part he plans to deliver in Greek. He is temperamental, alternating between wild excitement and dark brooding, meanwhile elaborating "a secret, yet a certaine meane" of revenge. His grief, anger and mental strain are portrayed with great theatrical effectiveness; they appear to have impressed Elizabethan playgoers deeply. Kyd's art was not subtle, however, his effects are usually splashed on garishly, with occasional flashes of insight. If he did consciously endeavor to rationalize the delay when he wrote Hamlet, by means of characterization, he was perhaps not any more successful than with Hieronymo. Of course we are not bound to conclude that these two heroes were drawn in like fashion, but the many well-known resemblances between the two plays suggest that their chief figures may have been, in relation of character to action, similarly treated.

And so we come to Shakespeare. It will be well, first of all, to review briefly the situation when he began his work on Hamlet. In September 1601 and June 1602 Henslowe, surely the world's most eccentric speller, entered in his diary the payment of sums to "Bengemen Johnson" or "bengemy Johnsone" for additions to "Geronymo" or "Iernonymo," which seems to settle the authorship of the added passages in the enlarged Spanish Tragedy of 1602. I shall take this authorship for granted;

---

694

Hamlet and Fortinbras

---

33 A. J. A. Waldock, Hamlet, a Study in Critical Method (Cambridge [England], 1931), p. 95. As I have not this book at hand, I am obliged to depend upon recollections, and upon Raven's bibliography for the quotation. xxxv.
it has been doubted on stylistic grounds, but apparently without sufficient justification. The quarto of 1602 sold like hot cakes, helped, no doubt, by the fact that it had received "additions," and the continuing popularity of the old piece is shown by the later editions. At about the time of Jonson's work, probably somewhat earlier, Shakespeare set his hand to recasting the old Hamlet. His task was, however, very different. The Spanish Tragedy was extended by five passages, but it was too popular to need rewriting. Its great speeches were very familiar to frequenters of the theater, as quotations and parodies attest. The old Hamlet, on the other hand, had apparently been only partially successful; there is no evidence that it got into print, and references to it are less numerous. Something more than additional material seems to have been needed, so Shakespeare apparently rewrote the entire piece, while keeping the general framework. This was his usual procedure—to retain a given plot, even though archaic or absurd, but to redeem it by skilful characterization, by giving its personages the breath of life. There are traces of Kyd in certain crudenesses still to be observed in Shakespeare, such as the brutal treatment of the corpse of Polonius, or Hamlet's callousness as to the fate of his two school-fellows, though we must not assume that all this would have shocked an Elizabethan audience, and the sweet swan of Avon must not be made too sweet. These bits of savagery are details, which count for little in the picture as a whole. The important thing is that the possibilities inherent in the figure of Hamlet stimulated Shakespeare's imagination to the creation of the greatest tragic figure of the English stage. Kyd had given him the outlines, probably even to the poetry, reflectiveness, and mental suffering. But while Hieronymo is stagy and artificial, and was obviously regarded by 1600 as rather an absurd ranter, Shakespeare made Hamlet very charming and natural; generous, frank, affectionate, and not standing heavily on royal dignity. When the late John Barrymore was playing Hamlet in New York City, he said in conversation—I do not recall his exact words—that an actor finds this far less fatiguing than other tragic parts, because he can often relax, as a human and agreeable person. Hamlet is a great Elizabethan gentleman; there is nothing strange or remote about him, as about the heroes of the other great tragedies. Lear reigns over a shadowy ancient Britain; Macbeth over primitive Scottish clans; Othello is so alien that marriage with a Venetian girl is held unnatural. Hamlet's intellectual versatility, a survival, as we have seen, of the wit and tricks of Amleth, is of the utmost importance for the action, since it enables him to meet adroitly the varied demands imposed upon him. He is a superb actor, running the gamut of the emotions, which has made him

34 Boas, lxxxvii.
the delight and despair of players, and may indeed be one reason why Shakespeare, an actor himself, seems to have bestowed upon him especial care and thought.

Nevertheless, there remained incongruities between hero and plot. How does it happen that this ideal prince occasionally acts in strange and unaccountable fashion? The counterfeited madness is not, as critic after critic has pointed out, really logical; it hurts Hamlet’s plans, since it puts the King immediately on his guard. Kyd had altered completely the motivation of the old tale, when he represented the murder as secret, and revealed by the Ghost. But that the assumption of madness is not plausible is disguised by its stage effectiveness, and by its adoption in the excitement after the first appearance of the Ghost. That this was also the way that Kyd managed it is suggested by the archaic business of the “old mole” beneath the platform, urging the swearing of vengeance. So with the procrastination. Clearly, Hamlet should have gone right to work. There was no reason, as there had been in the old tale, why he had to delay, unless conscientious scruples as to the honesty of the Ghost deterred him—which I have discussed at some length. As has long been perceived, Hamlet had to delay, otherwise the play would stop. How did Shakespeare conceal this difficulty?

I shall not attempt to review the many answers to this question, which involve the impact of external circumstances, such as his mother’s sensuality or his frustrated love for Ophelia, or of “some vicious mole of nature” or “the o’ergrowth of some complexion” within himself, or a combination of those elements. There are scores of solutions, and many of them have much truth in them. It does seem important to recognize, however, as Mr. Stoll has so earnestly argued, that audiences are not much interested in minute medical or psychological analysis. They assume that Hamlet, who has more brains and commands more sympathy than anyone else on the stage, knows what he is about, and accept his conduct without question. If the delay is of minor consequence dramatically, so are the reasons for it. But it is nevertheless desirable that they should be told why Hamlet does not obey the Ghost’s commands and strike sooner, as a part of the general plausibility of the action. If he tells them that he is given to “thinking too precisely on th’ event,” they believe him, and when the Ghost utters his reproach in the Closet-Scene they believe him too, just as Hamlet himself does. They do not think that Shakespeare is playing a double game with them.

I am not of the opinion that we can settle the matter with Mr. C. S. Lewis by impatiently brushing aside “historical criticism” and “character criticism,” and surrendering ourselves “to the poetry and the situation,” or that “the true hero of the play is man, haunted man, man with
his mind on the frontier of two worlds,’” etc.\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Hamlet} is not simple, but it is concrete; the tragedy of an individual, not an excursion into metaphysics. The magnificence of the poetry must not blind us to the fact that the drama itself is the main issue. If one believes that it should be interpreted, not as a story of human sin and suffering, but allegorically or symbolically, he will find plenty of theories—and no two of them alike. Such matters certainly do not occupy the attention of the average spectator in the theater.

What does arouse deep interest is the dreadful dilemma of the hero. A very endearing young prince, with great natural gifts, and everything to live for, is caught in a web of circumstance which brings him prolonged suffering, and death at the end. How does it all come about? The web is a tangled one. We follow his heartsick disillusion at the frailty of his mother, the murder of his father and the guilt of his uncle, the duplicity of his schoolfellows, the weakness and supposed faithlessness of the girl he loves, and so on to the bitter end of the story. Just why he is doomed long to struggle against overwhelming odds is, I believe, something which each of us must decide for himself. There is no easy and ready answer; it depends upon a highly intricate plot, upon material inherited from Kyd, upon comprehension of a temperament more subtle and many-faceted than any other in Shakespeare’s plays, and upon other matters.

From a great novel, as Mr. J. Donald Adams reminded us in a telling phrase, we draw “a poignant sense of the complex character of all human emotions.”\textsuperscript{36} The same is true of a great play. The devices by which Shakespeare rationalized the crude old story and made plausible the postponement of the revenge are not easily set forth. It is desirable that \textit{Hamlet} should not seem to disregard the Ghost’s commands; it is desirable that, as he must disregard them to some extent, we should be told that he did the best he could under the circumstances, and be given occasional hints as to how he did so. That this involves, more than once, a suggestion of temperamental inability to rise completely to the demands of his dreadful duty does not explain everything. Nor does it make him less a hero. As a mortal man, sharing human weaknesses, he becomes at once more credible and more appealing. None of Shakespeare’s tragic

\textsuperscript{35} “\textit{Hamlet, the Prince or the Poem?” Proceedings of the British Academy, xxviii (1942), 15 ff. There will be general agreement with Mr. Lewis, however, that “those critics who solve the whole \textit{Hamlet} problem by calling \textit{Hamlet} a bad play” are not to be taken too seriously. As an illustration, he cites Mr. T. S. Eliot’s dictum that the tragedy is “most certainly an artistic failure.” At this point the wise words attributed to Sir Thomas Hanmer (1736) may be pondered with profit. “We should be very cautious in finding fault with men of such an exalted genius as our author certainly was, lest we should blame them when in reality the fault lies in our own slow conception.”

\textsuperscript{36} In an excellent study, \textit{The Shape of Books to Come} (New York, 1944), p. 129.
heroes who command our sympathy are perfect. Their calamities may not arise from a single fault, but are nevertheless due in some measure to the failure of character to meet the demands of circumstance. If Othello had been perfect, he would never have succumbed to the poison of Iago; if Lear had been perfect, he would not have been blinded to the true character of his daughters; if Antony had been perfect, he would not have been caught in the wiles of Cleopatra. We all know how hard it is, in our own experience, to comprehend the subtle interrelations between character and conduct; to determine, for example, just what specific cause has wrecked the life of some intimate friend, with brilliant gifts; or just why two admirable people, whom we know well, have failed disastrously to achieve a happy marriage. Probably Shakespeare himself could not have answered all the questions about Hamlet. The creator of a fictitious figure must give us evidence in regard to complications of plot and character, and not mislead us; but his business is not to determine actions and motives, unless this is necessary in achieving his desired artistic effect. Much may remain unsolved. It is commonly said that Thackeray could not decide just how far Becky went in her intrigue with Lord Steyne. Ibsen was unable to make up his mind about the ultimate ending of Ghosts.

Immediately after the play was published, William Archer asked him outright how he himself imagined the conclusion. Would Mrs. Alving give her son poison, or not? Ibsen smiled and said thoughtfully: “I don’t know. Each one must find that out for himself. I should never dream of deciding so delicate a question. But what is your opinion?”

Ibsen has provided, however, the necessary elements of the problem: the wretched woman is torn between love for her son and desire to spare him dreadful suffering; between hopes that tragedy may somehow be averted and fatalistic fear that it cannot; between the conventions of her past and the duty of freeing herself and her son from their consequences.

The causes of Hamlet’s long delay are complex; the centre of gravity, so to speak, shifts from act to act, from scene to scene. New complications constantly arise. These causes cannot be summed up in a phrase or two. The trouble is not that we have not been told enough, but that we have been told so much. Paradoxically, the curse of Hamlet criticism is over-simplification. Did not Shakespeare prefer that we should decide for ourselves the motives which determine Hamlet’s words and conduct in each situation through the changing panorama of the play, leaving us, as the final eulogy is spoken by the triumphant Fortinbras, with “a poignant sense of the complex character of all human emotions”?

WILLIAM WITHELE LAWRENCE

Columbia University