Hamlet’s Ghost

Archbishop John Whitgift
By indirects find directions out
—Hamlet
(2.1.68)

9th c. Rorik, king of Jutland, becomes founder of Russia, and via
Byzantium the Varangians bring to Scandinavia the Roman
story of Junius Brutus, founder of the Roman Republic, who
played the fool to the tyrant Tarquin

10th c. Amleth, prince of Denmark, first mentioned in connection with a
cosmic mill by Snæbjörn in the Icelandic Prose Edda

ca. 1200 Saxo Grammaticus tells the story of Amleth in Book 3 of
Historica Danica, incorporating Icelandic and Roman legends

1514 Saxo Grammaticus’s version of Hamlet published in Latin in Paris

1571 Belleforest’s Hamlet, based on Saxo, published in French in
Histories Tragiquest and in English translation in 1608

c. 1587–89 Ur-Hamlet may have been composed by Thomas Kyd and/or
Marlowe and performed in London

1594 Ur-Hamlet or another early lost version of Hamlet produced by
Henslowe at the Rose theatre

1599 Archbishop Whitgift’s bonfire of the books, including Marlowe’s
translation of Ovid’s Elegies, satirized in As You Like It, may
stimulate further revision of the Hamlet manuscript

1600 Probable stage performances of Hamlet at Cambridge and Oxford

1601 Essex Rebellion, “the late innovation,” alluded to in the play

1602 Hamlet registered at the Stationers’ Company on July 26

1603 First Quarto of Hamlet by William Shakespeare published by
Ling and Trundle and printed by Valentine Simmes

1604–05 Second Quarto of Hamlet published by Ling, enlarged by half
as much as the First Quarto

1607 Hamlet performed on the Red Dragon, an English ship off the
coast of Sera Lyoa, for several African dignitaries

1623 First Folio of Shakespeare’s works published, including a slightly
revised version of Hamlet

1626 English actors perform Hamlet in Dresden

1710 Der Bestrafte Brudermord (“Fratricide Punished”), possibly incor-
porating material from the Ur-Hamlet, especially the prologue,
transcribed in a German manuscript and published in 1781

182
THE PLAY’S THE THING WHEREIN MARLOWE CAPTURES THE CONSCIENCE OF THE QUEEN

No writer was ever more autobiographical.
—A. L. Rowse, Christopher Marlowe: His Life and Work

Interpreting Hamlet is like embarking on an archaeological quest. Its roots go back through successive layers of composition, performance, translation, myth, dream, and autobiography, all of which have transformed it into the Troy of modern literature. The tasks of situating the play’s historical parameters, plummeting its psychological depths, and mining its spiritual treasures are akin to raising the walls of the ancient Anatolian city—a city, not surprisingly, that occupies a special place in the play itself. And making sense of Hamlet’s word plays, allusions, echoes, and disjointed time frame is another formidable task, one that requires the patience and sense of humor of the gravediggers in Act 5. But undertaking these tasks, and sifting through the puns, rhymes, ballads, theological rhetoric, biblical passages, legal references, and other literary shards in the text, is well worth the effort, as it yields fascinating insights into the playwright’s mind and purpose.

Hamlet’s wellsprings and tributaries extend from the mythic Golden Age to ancient Greece and Troy, run through the Promised Land and early Christianity, wind around the Roman Republic and early Empire, follow the Viking trade routes from medieval Russia to Scandinavia and Iceland, and course through Renaissance Europe across the channel to Elizabethan England. Time unfolds not only backward but forward, with echoes of a contemporary French Hamlet and a German Hamlet (Der Bestrafte Brudermord) that may have been incorporated into an early English stage
play (the Ur-Hamlet) that lies at the core of the familiar Shakespearean quartos and version in the First Folio. Besides inaugurating the era of modern self-consciousness, or what critic Harold Bloom calls “inventing the human,” the play itself anticipates a future epoch founded on the sovereignty of reason that has not been fully realized on the planet four centuries later.

Cosmopolitan to the core, Hamlet touches upon dozens of nationalities, ethnicities, and religions. The protagonist is a student in Wittenberg, the capital of Protestant reform; he invokes St. Patrick, the patron saint of Catholic Purgatory, and quotes the ancient Hebrew scriptures as well as Barabas, the Jew of Malta in Marlowe’s play of the same name. Prince Hamlet is conversant in several tongues, including Latin and German, imagines wearing shoes embroidered with Provençal roses, and skirmishes with pirates of the North Sea. Among those the prince also paraphrases or invokes are Aeneas and Queen Dido of Carthage, the star-crossed lovers in the Aeneid; Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great, the classical conquers; and Gonzago, the Viennese noble whose murder is recreated in The Murder of Gonzago, the play-within-the-play that Hamlet stages before the king. Claudius (whose Latin name echoes that of the Roman emperor) meets with ambassadors to Norway and England; recalls the visit of Lamord, a gentleman of Normandy; maintains Swissers (Swiss mercenaries) for his personal guard; and takes his nightly rouse with a stoup of Rhenish wine. In describing his uncle, the prince castigates his mother Gertrude for “batten[ing] on this Moor” or swarthy follower of Mohammed (3.4.74). He also glances at Muslims or Orientals when he refers to Termagant (3.2.11), the Saracen in the old morality plays, rejoices that his fortunes did not “turn Turk” (3.2.263), and paraphrases Tamburlaine’s magnificent speech, “Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend / The wondrous architecture of the world” (2.7.21–22), in the soliloquy beginning with “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties” (2.2.295–296). Besides Ophelia’s gypsy proverb, “they say the Owl was a Baker’s daughter” (4.5.38–39), the principal Asiatic and Near Eastern references in the play are feline and ruminant: the fierce tigers from Hycranaia near the Caspian Sea and the passing cloud that assumes the shape of a camel.

And proof of the play’s internationalism goes on. Polonius, the chief counselor whose name derives from “Poland,” dispatches a servant named Reynaldo (from the French for “fox”) to Paris to spy on his son. The rapiers that figure in the swordfight are French in origin, as presumably is the deadly unction acquired by Laertes from a mountebank. Like the distracted prince who observes a player’s chopine, or fashionable women’s shoe from Italy, Ophelia sings about her lover’s “Sandal shoon” (4.5.25) and alludes
to St. James à Campostela, the pilgrimage site in Spain. Despite his French name, Fortinbras is Norwegian, and most of his time is spent off stage pursuing a pointless invasion of Poland. “[C]aviary to the general” (2.2. 401) calls to mind the prized delicacy of Russia, the imperial power on Europe’s northeastern flank.

Curiously, Denmark, the site of the play, is barely mentioned, and its geographical features sound more like the Dover coast than the Jutland peninsula. Aside from its comparison to a prison and a seat of rottenness, Denmark is clearly a place marker for Tudor England and, to some extent, Stuart Scotland. Africa also figures prominently in the early dramatic history of the play. Not only was Hamlet’s first foreign performance evidently aboard ship off Sierra Lyoa, a free African state, in 1607, but also the first foreign translation was probably in Tenme, the West African tongue (with a possible simulcast in Portuguese, the lingua franca of sailors). America does not feature directly in the play, though some critics see the word “continent” (5.2.112) as referring to the New World and the exploration of Virginia (named after England’s Virgin Queen). India, too, is neglected, but Hamlet’s preoccupation with karma (“purposes mistook, / Fall’n on th’inventors’ heads” [5.2.382–383]), exercises during “the breathing time of day” (5.2.161–162) and soliloquy on being and non-being reminiscent of the Upanishads (“To be, or not to be” [3.1.62–63]) suggests that he studied yoga with a visiting gymnosophist in Wittenberg. His despondency and inaction, followed by newfound resolve and providential taking up of arms, parallels that of another prince, Lord Arjuna, in the Bhagavad Gita.

Beyond these cosmopolitan strands, the play’s flora and fauna constitute both a veritable Eden and veritable Noah’s Ark—on the cusp of a modern Flood. From rosemary, columbine, and the other emblematic flowers that Ophelia hands out to the willow tree in whose tendrils she is dragged down in the pond (like Persephone to the Underworld), to the deadly hebona poured in the ear of King Hamlet sleeping in his orchard to the wormwood and dram of cale (elderberry?) that the prince calls to mind, the splendor and terror of nature and history are rarely off stage. The prince’s “wheaten garland” of peace (5.2.44) offsets Claudius, “full of bread” (3.3.83), and Hamlet’s preference for porridge, sallets, salt, and other wholesome fruits of the earth contrasts sharply with the royals’ penchant for “baked meats [that] / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (1.2.182–183), Danish pastries, and other high-cholesterol fare. The prince’s deep sympathy for the natural world and effort to balance the four elements and humours of traditional philosophy and medicine in his own temperament counter the king’s penchant for excess, deceit, and cleverness and resolve to treat “diseases desperate grown, / By desperate appliance” (4.3.9–10). The nearly sixty birds
and animals that appear—from the hulking whale and strutting pajock to the
sinewy lion and the mewing cat, from the lapwing with the shell on its head
to the lowly glow-worm, water-fly, and little eyases (caglets)—firmly situate
the drama within the Great Chain of Being even as Hamlet compares
the human body to a “machine” (2.2.127). The play’s subtle astronomical re-
ferences and Copernican outlook hint at the chasm between religion and sci-
ence that opened during the Renaissance.

Like a soaring cathedral, much of the superstructure to Hamlet’s plot is
oriented to the heavens. Jove, Phoebus (Apollo), Mercury, Hyperion,
Vulcan, Neptune, and other classical gods and heroes are referred to direct-
ly. In the play-within-the play, Hecate, the Greek goddess of the dead, is
summoned to work her sable magic on Claudius. As the queen of Night, she
and her furies also labor behind the scenes to stir up mischief and mayhem,
as they do in Dr. Faustus, Macbeth, King Lear, and many of the other Marlo-
vian and Shakespearian plays. From the opening scene, emissaries from the
spirit world are never far from the celestial cauldron, brewing up a recipe for
revenge. Beside the four appearances of Hamlet’s ghost, the prince con-
stantly meditates on death, “this fell sergeant” (5.2.330). There is even a
mysterious Cherub who may help effect his rescue at sea. The Triple World
of gods, humans, and denizens of the next life forms the setting to the
unfolding drama on stage, even as Claudius “sanctuarize[s]” murder in a
church and assures Laertes that revenge knows no bounds (4.7.138–139).

The play’s reference to “Hercules & his load” (2.2.341) alludes to the
Globe theatre itself, whose name derives from the celestial sphere. Like the
“massy wheel” (3.3.18) around which the axletree of heaven and the zodi-
ac revolve, Hamlet chronicles humanity’s epic voyage through the stars.
From the mythic Golden Age through the historical wilderness of discord,
treachery, bloodshed, and alternating periods of destruction by water and
fire, the dramatic action takes us at the level of the overplot through the rise
and fall of civilization to the construction of a new era of peace and plenty.
It is a journey that mirrors the poet’s own interior landscape, the perilous
age in which he lived, and the quest for truth that inspires each soul’s incar-
nation, including our own.

Like the gravediggers in the play, let us now excavate Hamlet’s deepest
levels, beginning with its Viking origins.
1

More Than Mortal Wisdom

Horwendil, King of Denmark, married Gurutha, the daughter of Rorik, and she bore him a son, whom they named Amleth. Horwendil’s good fortune stung his brother Feng with jealousy, so that the latter resolved treacherously to waylay his brother, thus showing that goodness is not safe even from those of a man’s own house. And behold when a chance came to murder him, his bloody hand sated the deadly passion of his soul. Then he took the wife of the brother he had butchered, capping unnatural murder with incest.

—Saxo Grammaticus, Amleth, Prince of Denmark

Amleth, Hamlet’s earliest incarnation, is first mentioned in the Prose Edda, a saga attributed to Snæbjörn in the tenth century and written down by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturlason in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Modern researchers trace it even further back, to oral legends in Norway, Iceland, Persia, and the Far East. In the Historiae Danica, an early Latin anthology of Scandinavian tales published in 1514, Saxo Grammaticus presents a narrative account of Amleth. In his story, the young prince of Jutland, a Danish principality, avenges the death of his father, Horwendil, a Viking conqueror who has slain the king of Norway and been deceitfully murdered by his brother, Feng, at a court banquet. Proclaiming himself king, Feng proceeds to marry Queen Gurutha, Amleth’s mother.

Alone and scorned at court, the young prince plots his revenge, choosing “to feign dullness and pretend an utter lack of wits.” Suspicious that his nephew “only played the simpleton in order to hide his understanding and veiled some deep purpose under a cunning feint,” the king sets a trap by putting a fair woman “in his way in some secluded place, who would provoke his mind to the temptations of love.” The stratagem fails when Amleth is warned by his foster-brother, and he drags the girl, a childhood sweetheart, to “a distant and impenetrable fen” out of sight or hearing of his trackers. Stymied by Amleth’s mingling of “craft and candor,” the advisors next arrange for the prince to meet with his mother in her chamber where one of the councilors can overhear their private conversation. At the interview, Amleth plays the fool, crowing and flapping his arms like a bird. Jumping on the straw bedding, under which the unnamed spy is hiding, he
slays the eavesdropper with his sword, cuts him into pieces, and feeds the remains to some pigs. Gurutha reacts in horror at the violence and Amleth rebukes her: “Most infamous of women! Dost thou seek with such lying lamentations to hide thy most heavy guilt? Wantoning like a harlot, thou hast entered a wicked and abominable state of wedlock, embracing with incestuous bosom thy husband’s slayer.” Comparing her behavior with that of a mare that couples with the vanquisher of its mate, he reveals the purpose of his lunacy and admonishes her “to walk in the ways of virtue.”

In a witty exchange with Feng, Amleth explains the fate of the missing councilor with many jokes and puns on filth, diet, and death. The perplexed king senses his nephew’s underlying hostility and decides to eliminate him. Fearing Gurutha’s reaction and that of his father, Rorik, the Danish King, Feng dispatches Amleth to England with two retainers bearing a letter enjoining “the king of the Britons to put to death the youth who was sent over to him.” Carrying two hollow canes filled with gold, Amleth gets wind of the deception, substitutes a fresh message, and instructs his mother to hang a knotted tapestry in the banquet hall and arrange for his funeral exactly a year after he departs. In England, Amleth is welcomed by the monarch who, on the basis of the altered missive and the boy’s “more than mortal wisdom or more than mortal folly,” does away with the messengers and presents his daughter in marriage to the young visitor, along with a substantial dowry. Returning to Jutland, Amleth enters the banquet hall on the day of his funeral. Like Odysseus in his beggarly disguise, he disarms the surprised courtiers by his riddling and jesting, and when they are in a drunken stupor, secures them with the knotted tapestry and sets fire to the palace. Confronting the king in his chamber, Amleth slays Feng with his own sword, makes a speech to the multitude, and is hailed as the new king.

“O valiant Amleth, and worthy of immortal fame, who being shrewdly armed with a feint of folly, covered a wisdom too high for human wit under a marvelous disguise of silliness! And not only found in his subtlety means to protect his own safety, but also by its guidance found opportunity to avenge his father,” Saxo proclaims. “By this skillful defense of himself, and strenuous revenge for his parent, he has left it doubtful whether we are to think more of his wit or his bravery.” The story includes a sequel, almost as long as the original, in which Amleth returns to England, runs afoul of the king who had a mutual aid pact with Feng, and travels to Scotland, where he takes a queen for his second wife. He returns to Denmark with his wives in triumph, but ultimately is slain in battle by Wiglek, the successor to Rorik.

Amleth’s story also appeared in François De Belleforest’s *Histoires tragiques*, a French rendition of Saxo’s narrative, embellished with elements from Livy’s account of Lucius Junius Brutus, who avenged the rape of
Lucrece and founded the Roman Republic. Originally published in 1570, the French version proved immensely popular, going through seven further printings through 1601 and then appearing in English in 1608 as *The Hystorie of Hamlet*. Belleforest is generally considered the main source for the Shakespearean versions. But since there is no evidence that William of Stratford could read French, critics have long wondered how he accessed the French account a decade or so before it was translated into English. Marlowe was fluent in French and had previously used Belleforest’s *Cosmographic Universalle* as a chief source for *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta*. Of course, this provides more support for Marlowe’s principal authorship.

Belleforest’s account essentially follows Saxo’s but makes several subtle changes. It portrays Fengon and Geruth as committing adultery before the murder of Amleth’s father, implies that the queen may have inspired the murder, and attributes the prince’s dabbling in the occult “by reason of his over-great melancholy.” The Shakespearean rendition incorporates several significant performance details and passages from the French version. In *Hamlet*, the courtier hides behind the arras, and when the prince feels something stirring behind the drapery, he cries, “A rat, a rat! and presently drawing his sword thrust it into the hangings.” The prince reproaches his mother with many of the lines and images found in the quartos, showing that the Shakespearean version, unlike its harsh reputation among many modern viewers and readers, actually softens the original. While there are no soliloquies, the genesis of the “To be or not to be” speech may be found in the lines:

I am constrained to playe the madde man to save my life, instead of using and practicing armes, following adventures, and seeking all meanes to make my selfe knowne to bee the true and undoubted heire of the valiant and vertuous king Horvendile . . . It is better for me to fayne madnesse, then to use my right senes as nature hath bestowed them upon me; the bright shining clearnes therof I am fosed to hide under the shadow of dissimulation, as the sun doth hir beams under some great cloud, when the wether in somer time overcasteth.

As a cautionary tale, *Hamlet* relates the account of Lucius Junius Brutus, the nephew of the tyrant of Rome, who was instrumental in avenging the brutal rape of Lucrece by Tarquin. The name Brutus means “stupid” and fits the Roman prince who “counterfeited himselfe to bee a foole” in order to avoid his uncle’s wrath. At the end of Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*, Brutus, like Hamlet, throws off his mad antics to take vengeance:

Brutus, who pluck’d the knife from Lucrece’ side,  
Seeing such emulation in their woe,
Began to clothe his wit in state and pride,
Burying in Lucrece’ wound his folly’s show.
He with the Romans was esteemed so
As silly jeering idiots are with kings,
For sportive words and ut’t’ring foolish things.

(1807–13)

The ancient Scandinavian tale and the French rendition provide the basic plot line to Hamlet, including the genesis of the main characters—King Claudius, Queen Gertrude, Prince Hamlet, Ophelia, Polonius, and Horatio—though only the names of the prince and queen are similar. There are even many striking parallels between the original Scandinavian dialogue and Shakespeare’s version. For example, Amleth commands his mother to “weep for the blemish in thine own mind, not for that in another’s. On the rest see thou keep silence.” These are directly echoed in Hamlet’s contemplation of “some vicious mole of nature” (1.4.26), “the stamp of one defect” (1.4.33), “The dram of eale / Doth all the noble substance often doubt / To his own scandal” (1.4.38–40) and the famous words of the dying prince, “the rest is silence” (5.2.354).

The new material in the Shakespearean Hamlet includes the use of poison in the murder of Elder Hamlet, the appearance of his ghost, the arrival of the actors at court, the performance of the play-within-the-play, Ophelia’s madness and death by drowning, Laertes and the subplot in which he avenges his father’s death by Hamlet, the pirates who enable Hamlet to escape from the ship en route to England, the comic scenes with the gravediggers, Ophelia’s burial, the final duel with Laertes, and Hamlet’s own death by a poison-tipped rapier.

Many of these changes may result from the author’s consultation of a third likely source, a lost version of Hamlet that dates to the late 1580s or early 1590s. In a preface to Robert Greene’s novel, Menaphon, published in 1589, Thomas Nashe, in a discussion of classical Roman tragedy, observes: “Yet English Seneca read by candlelight yields many good sentences, as Blood is a beggar and so forth; and if you entreat him fair in a frosty morning, he will afford you whole Hamlets—I should say handfuls—of tragical speeches.” Generally attributed to Thomas Kyd (because of a later pun in Nashe’s passage that refers to a “Kid” in Aesop’s Fables), the Ur-Hamlet, as it is called, is also known through two other contemporary references. In his diary, Philip Henslowe, manager of the Rose theatre, notes the performance of “hamlet” on June 9, 1594, at Newington Butts. Two years later, Thomas Lodge records attending a performance of the play in his Wit’s Misery and the World’s Madness. Describing one of the devils “as pale as the wizzard of a ghost, which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster wife,
‘Hamlet, revenge.’” Marlowe has also been cited as a possible author or co-author. It “was first used as a play in 1589, said to have been written by Shakespeare and Marlowe,” observed R. S. Guernsey in a nineteenth century monograph for the Shakespeare Society of New York.

In the Argument or preface, which sets out the moral of the fable, the French Hamlet draws a thematic parallel with Bajazeth, the Turkish emperor, who was treacherously slain by his son. Bajazeth is a major character in Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, raising the possibility that Kit originally came upon the Hamlet legend while researching this earlier play. Following Tamburlaine’s success, he may have decided to produce a tragedy about the young prince, whose character was diametrically opposite the Scythian warrior’s. Instead of force, as Belleforest constantly reminds his readers, Hamlet had to rely solely on his wits. In this way, Marlowe may have been inspired to develop the revenge theme and contribute to the Ur-Hamlet.

The Spanish Tragedy also looms large behind the Ur-Hamlet, especially the figure of the ghost. As the most popular revenge drama on the Elizabethan stage, The Spanish Tragedy is attributed to Thomas Kyd, though some critics think that Marlowe wrote it, or that the two poets may have collaborated on it when they were living together. In addition to a ghost, The Spanish Tragedy has a melancholy hero who delays taking action and ponders suicide; a play-within-the-play that is used to unmask skullduggery at court; a young woman whose father and brother oppose her romance, thereby contributing to her madness and suicide; a character named Horatio; and the reconciliation of the avenger and his adversary prior to the final massacre. The Spanish Tragedy was registered at the Stationers’ Company on October 6, 1592, Southampton’s birthday, about nine months before Venus and Adonis came out. Though that may have been merely a coincidence, it could suggest that Marlowe and Kyd had an earlier connection with the earl before the appearance of the first poem attributed to Shakespeare and dedicated to the young nobleman.

In A New Look at the Old Sources of Hamlet, Marion A. Taylor, a scholar at Southern Illinois University, establishes a strong Russian connection with the story. She shows that Saxo’s original account is based largely on the Junius Brutus tale that was brought to Scandinavia via Byzantium by the Varangians, Swedes who settled in Russia in the ninth and tenth centuries. Rorik of Jutland, the Danish king in Saxo’s saga and grandfather of Hamlet, she demonstrates, became prince of Novgorod. Later known as Rurik, he founded Russia, whose chief city became Kiev. According to this reading, the original homeland of Nordic saga poetry is the Baltic, not Iceland. Like a mammoth encased in ice, the remote Arctic location preserved the ancient oral legends relatively untouched by other cultural influences.
Saxo’s *Historia Danica* also includes a Scandinavian version of the classical story of how Dido founded Carthage, a tale that would have sparked Marlowe’s interest. As a university student, Kit may have come across Saxo’s books in Latin at Cambridge University while researching his play *Dido Queen of Carthage*, and further browsing may have led him to discover the Amleth legend. There are several other curious parallels. An archbishop plays a prominent role in both Saxo’s and Marlowe’s life. In the former case, Absalon, the archbishop of Lund from 1179 to 1201, requested that Saxo write a Danish history to glorify the nation. And just as the Marlovian and Shakespearean plays often embroider their sources, Saxo ignores Rorik’s long history of opposing Christianity and turns it into a morality tale upholding the sanctity of the faith. (In Taylor’s view, the vilification of Gertrude arose from the Church’s misogyny, not the original sources.)

There is another curious parallel between Amleth and Kit involving gold. In the case of the Danish prince, he fills a pair of hollow canes with gold before traveling to England (just as Brutus did when visiting the Oracle at Delphi). In Marlowe’s case, he is detained for making gold coins in Flushing and, like Prince Hamlet, is dispatched by ship to England. At least one sentiment attributed to Grandfather Rorik finds its way into the modern *Hamlet*. The Russian founder proclaimed of his enemies that “perchance the guile might in the end recoil on the heads of the devisers,” a motif that runs through the Shakespearean versions. Finally, *Hamlet’s* famous line—“caviary to the general” (2.2.401)—is distinctly Russian. “[T]he old Roman-Byzantine-Varangian tale of Hamlet may well be a myth,” Taylor concludes. “But history shows us Hamlet’s grandfather was not only very real but an illustrious Dane who was the founder of Russia.”

Given Marlowe’s family connections with the Muscovy Company and early interest in Prince Scanderbeg, Tamburlaine, and other heroes in Russia’s traditional eastern or central Asian sphere of influence, it is not surprising that he would have been attracted to the Amleth story.

Other classical influences on *Hamlet* are also apparent. The murder and incest theme follows Aeschylus’s version of the Agamemnon story in which the Greek warrior is slain on his return home from the Trojan War by his wife, Clytemnestra, who has an adulterous relationship with Aegisthus. In Sophocles’s *Electra*, Agamemnon’s daughter revenges her father’s death with the help of her brother, Orestes, who is spurred on by a Delphic god. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil’s Latin sequel to the Homeric epics, the hero is exhorted by the ghost of Hector and spurns his lover, Dido, just as Hamlet is led on by his father’s shade and rejects Ophelia.

Other major literary influences on *Hamlet* are the Bible (with over a hundred references and echoes); Marlowe’s *Dido Queen of Carthage* (for the
scenes with the Player and commentaries on the Trojan war); Timothy Bright’s *A Treatise of Melancholy* (for a treatment of melancholy, the elements, and humours); Montaigne’s *Essays* (for general philosophical coloring); *A Warning for Fair Women*, an anonymous play performed by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (for some of the revenge themes); Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (for the tripartite structure of a main plot, overplot, and sub-plot); Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* (for the imagery of hell and purgatory, allusions to magic and the occult, and the clown scenes); and Marlowe’s *Edward II* (for the idea of murdering Elder Hamlet by pouring poison in his ear).

In addition to drawing upon a wealth of sources, *Hamlet* has a challenging publishing history. The first edition, known as the First Quarto, came out in 1603, followed by an enlarged edition, the Second Quarto, in 1604–1605, and finally, a slightly revised version in the First Folio in 1623. We do not know when *Hamlet* was first performed, but it was entered on July 26, 1602, in the Stationers’ Register as “A booke called the Revenge of Hamlet Prince Danemarke as yt was latelie Acted by the Lord Chamberleyne his servantes.” Since it is not included in a list of plays by Shakespeare in Francis Meres’ *Palladis Tamia: Wit’s Treasury* to 1598, *Hamlet* was probably first presented on stage in 1600 or 1601. The First Quarto states on the title page that *Hamlet* “hath been diverse times acted by his Highnesse servants in the Cittie of London: as also in the two Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, and else-where.” This implies that the Chamberlain’s Men, like the players who visited Elsinore, may have been banished from the capital or voluntarily left for the provinces. Evidently the Globe actors absented themselves from the queen’s felicity for a while for their role, however unwitting, as a result of the “late innovation” (2.2.316–317), or Essex rebellion.

Complicating matters even further, an English troupe of players took a version of *Hamlet* to Germany with them, where it later appeared as a play, *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* (“Fratricide Punished”) published in 1781. The oldest manuscript copy of the German *Hamlet* dates to 1710, but internal evidence suggests that it was based on the lost *Ur-Hamlet* in English, an early German adaptation of the *Ur-Hamlet*, and some local German coloring, mostly comical in nature. Some of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, from the original English or a later German translation, may also be mixed in. Hence, drawing from a variety of sources, *Der BB* contains possible elements of Kyd’s and/or Marlowe’s original version of the play, which appears to lie at the core of the Shakespearean drama.

The biggest difference between *Der BB* and Saxo’s and Belleforest’s versions is that the murder of Elder Hamlet is committed secretly and then revealed by his ghost. Also the king and courtiers in *Der BB* are not as sus-
picious of Prince Hamlet as they are in the earlier sagas, seeking at first only
to determine the cause of his madness, not whether it is feigned. Another
new element in Der BB is the chamberlain’s family, including a daughter,
Ophelia (who is clearly modeled on the original foster-sister), and
Leonhardus, a son (who becomes Laertes in the familiar version). The
German play also includes the play-within-the-play, Pyrrhus’s speech (drawn
from Virgil and Marlowe’s Dido), Ophelia’s madness, the duel between
Laertes and Hamlet (including their mutual forgiveness), the final deaths of
the king, queen, and prince by poisoning and/or sword, and Horatio’s
lament. Among new characters in Der BB are Phantasm (a cross between
Osric, the foppish courtier, and Yorick, the jester); a peasant, Jens; his com-
panion (a clown, “Brother Windy”); and Duke Fortembras of Norway
(Shakespeare’s Prince Fortinbras), to whom the Danish crown is conveyed.

Der BB also has a unique prologue in which Hecate as queen of Night
commands three of her furies to stir up strife and unleash the spirit of
revenge in a realm where an incestuous union between a murdering
monarch and his late brother’s wife will soon take place. This mythic intro-
duction is characteristically Marlovian, with its correspondence between
celestial and terrestrial events. Given the inevitable alterations occurring in
multiple translations (from English into German and back into English), this
opening passage is remarkably reminiscent of the young Marlowe, imbued
as it is with the classical doctrine of “as above, so below.” It also has striking
echoes with the three witches in Macbeth around the bubbling cauldron, the
Fairy Queen in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and other occult or magical
characters in the Shakespearean canon. Small details in Der BB are also sugges-
tive. One of the sentinels on the Elsinore plain is boxed on the ears by
the ghost in the opening scene, which is similar to an event in Dr. Faustus.
In Marlowe’s play, the magus is struck by the Pope in this fashion, and the
parallel suggests that the ghost is Catholic (a major point of contention
among modern scholars). It may also be a topical allusion to the soldierly
Earl of Essex, who was boxed on the ear by Queen Elizabeth in the Privy
Council in 1598 for his insolence.

The famous scene in which Hamlet tells Ophelia to go to a nunnery is
included for the first time in Der BB, though the bawdy line “but not to a
nunnery where two pairs of slippers lie by the bedside” is omitted in
Shakespeare’s versions. In the German rendition, Hamlet also refrains from
killing the king at prayer, a deranged Ophelia makes wedding plans despite
her lover’s absence and distributes flowers, and Gertrude is forced by her
son to compare the portraiture of her two husbands. In the play-within-
the-play, Elder Hamlet’s murder by pouring a vial of poison in his ear is
reenacted, Hamlet discourses wittily on acting, and the clowns banter about
tax-collectors. Salient differences include Hamlet’s escape from execution by the two messengers by falling down on the ground while they fire their pistols and hit one another, Ophelia’s death by jumping off a cliff, and a princely nosebleed just before the final sword duel that augers ill. The nearest thing to sustained reflection in Der BB is a mini-soliloquy at the beginning of the last act in which Hamlet laments,

Unhappy Prince, how long must thou live without rest! How long a time, O just Nemesis, cost thou appoint for whetting thy just sword of vengeance against my uncle, the fraticide! Now am I back here once more, and cannot yet attain to my revenge, because this fraticide is at all times surrounded by many people. But I swear, that ere the sun has finished his journey from east to west, I will avenge myself on him.

If Der BB is based on Kyd’s and/or Marlowe’s lost version, the Ur-Hamlet is clearly a revenge play in the Senecan mode like The Spanish Tragedy. Ten years or more elapsed between this primitive version and the Shakespearean texts. During this time, the brash young dramatist, Marlowe, schooled in classical literature and expressing dramatic bombast, has transformed into a seasoned observer of the human condition. With nearly twenty more plays under his belt, he is concerned more with characterization than with plot, with mercy than with justice, and with irony and paradox than with rhyme and meter.

Thy Natural Magic and Dire Property

The First Quarto (Q1) of Hamlet has generally been regarded as a “bad” edition based on an actor’s faulty memory, a pirated playscript, or the notes of a spy for a rival theater company or printer. Internal evidence suggests that it was based on the role of the actor who played Marcellus/Lucianus and who had access to Voltimand’s part, because their lines are unusually clear and distinct compared to other cast members. Q2 appears to allude to this on the title page, where it states that the play has been augmented half again as much since it was originally printed. Q2 has been widely considered a “good” or authorized edition based on the author’s original unpolished manuscript, known as “foul papers” from which the printer directly composed type. In contrast, the First Folio (F), published in 1623, is regarded as the acting company’s play script based on a scribe’s polished version, known as “a fair copy.” F generally follows Q2, but omits about 200 lines.
(some for censorship reasons) and adds about eighty-five new lines. There are also hundreds of minor differences in word selection, and the stage directions in F are more elaborate. The Act to Restrain Abuses of Players in 1606 prohibited all but the most grave use of the name of God, Jesus, the Holy Ghost, or Trinity on stage, and F alters several theological references. Most modern editions of Hamlet follow Q2, adding the new material in F, though a few follow F as the standard text.

The Arden Shakespeare recently raised eyebrows in the academic community when it announced that it would publish a new edition of Hamlet containing all three versions. After centuries of neglect, Q1—a leaner, more streamlined, less melancholy version—is coming into its own, and Shakespearean theater festivals around the world are starting to include it in their repertoires. Gradually, Q1 is being viewed less as a “bad” quarto and more as a serviceable first draft, if not quite a “good” one. In Shakespeare and the Book, David Scott Kastan, a Shakespeare authority at Columbia University, explains that, given the complex relationships among authors, publishers, and printers, charges of piracy for the first edition of Hamlet and early quartos of other plays are largely unfounded. “I am not saying that Q1 Hamlet is as good a play as the Hamlet we usually read (though I would say that it is a better play than has generally been allowed)... I am saying only that such questions of literary judgment should not be allowed to color our understanding of the textual history.”

From a Marlovian perspective, besides the registration date, July 26, St. Christopher’s Day, one of the most salient connections between Marlowe and the play is Hamlet’s first printer. Valentine Simmes had a long and distinguished history of sedition. In 1589 he had been arrested and tortured for printing some of the Martin Marprelate tracts. In a letter to the privy councilors, Whitgift urged that Simmes and others involved in bringing out the unauthorized books be dealt with “according to the[i]r deserts”—a phrase made famous by the play. Like Thomas Kyd, Marlowe’s later roommate, Simmes confessed his involvement under torture, but either did not know the identity of the author of the tracts or reveal him. (In his biography of the archbishop, Sir George Paule omits mention of the torture, recalling: “Some of the Printers... were proceeded against in the Star-chamber, and there censured: but upon their submission (at the humble suite of the Archbishop) were both deliuere out of prison, and eased of their fines.”) Unlike Kyd, Simmes recovered from his imprisonment and racking and went on to print seven other works under Shakespeare’s name beside Hamlet, including Richard II, the play that figured in the Essex conspiracy, at least two books by Catholic recusants, and the poetry of Robert Southwell, the martyred Catholic poet. In 1599, the year Whitgift burned
Marlowe’s books and prohibited the printing of satires, epigrams, elegies, and plays without authorization, Simmes was expressly warned to obey the archbishop’s “commandments.” In 1603, he printed a folio edition of Montaigne’s *The Essays*, which is considered a literary influence on *Hamlet*, and the following year the first edition of Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*.

Besides his skill in typesetting, Simmes served as a proofreader for the Marprelate literature, suggesting literary skills that may have been put to use in polishing the first edition of *Hamlet*. He would also seem a likely candidate to have served as an intermediary for Marlowe in exile and may have had a hand in the clandestine publication or distribution of the poet’s translation of *Ovid’s Elegies* in the Netherlands and other illicit projects.

As theatrical producers, directors, and actors well know, Q2 and F each run to about four hours’ acting time on the stage. Since this is about twice the normal length of a play, *Hamlet* is usually shortened. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of the bawdy passages and scenes were excised. In recent years, the scenes involving Fortinbras, considered tangential by modern directors, are often abridged or eliminated. Given the myriads of sources, texts, and dramatic adaptations of the play, there is considerable debate: What did the author really have in mind? What constitutes the authentic text or performance of *Hamlet*? Is the quest for an authentic *Hamlet* achievable and, most recently, is it desirable?

Compared to its sources, the First Quarto of *Hamlet* is a masterwork of versification and dramatization. It includes most of the familiar soliloquies from the Second Quarto (though in rudimentary form), the same dramatic cast (with several name changes), and a fast-moving, internally consistent plot line that is often considered superior to those of Q2 and F. Its stage directions are also more fully developed (e.g., noting that the ghost appears in a sheet in Act 3) and are often incorporated into editions based on Q2. Q1 is exactly the kind of sophisticated drama that we would expect from a mature poet who has returned to a dramatic script that he and/or a colleague composed a decade earlier.

In terms of dramatic action, the biggest difference between Q1 and the later versions is that it presents Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy much earlier in the play and in a wholly different context. In Act 2 of Q1, Ophelia is instructed by her father to return Hamlet’s gifts in order to test his madness and reveal his true purpose to the king who is hidden nearby. The prince observes the king and councilor entering into the study and realizes that they intend to spy on him. In meditating on life and death and debating between revenge and suicide, Hamlet addresses himself not only to his sweetheart, but also to the monarch and advisor whom he knows are eavesdropping close by. Turning his thoughts to self-slaughter confirms their sus-
picions that he is truly mad. In contrast, Q2 and F defer the “To be or not to be” soliloquy to Act 3. In the interim, Hamlet has met with the players and devised the play-within-the-play. In this subsequent version, he has already decided to take action and force the issue with the king, but then has second thoughts. When he delivers “To be or not to be,” the result is a much darker, more inward Hamlet in Q2 than in Q1. The well-known passage “Get thee to a nunnery,” which follows “To be or not to be,” is also moved from Act 2 to Act 3, further intensifying the overall gloom.

Ironically, the passage that may best illuminate the history and development of Hamlet’s composition and shed light on the authorship question is one that appears in all three versions of the play. It consists of the pivotal six lines in the play-within-the-play that help catch the conscience of the king. Lucianus, one of the players, delivers the following lines just before pouring poison in the player king’s ear reenacting the murder:

Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing,
Confederate season else no creature seeing,
Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
With Hecate’s ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
Thy natural magic, and dire property,
On wholesome life usurp immediately.

(3.44–49)

The incantation, strikingly similar to the conjuring in Dr. Faustus—“The planets seven, the gloomy air, / Hell and the furies forkèd hair, / Pluto’s blue fire and Hecate’s tree. / With magic spells so compass thee”—and to the witches’ sabbath in Macbeth, echoes sable Night’s opening lines in Der BB. The dark images, the invocation of Hecate, the threefold oath, and the rhyme scheme are similar to those in the German prologue. Probably dating back to the Ur-Hamlet, the passage points to a core element of the play that survived the many metamorphoses it went through. It also bears the hallmark of Marlowe’s youthful style, imagery, and fascination with proscribed religious rituals. Hecuba, Priam’s wife, is also referred to at length in The Rape of Lucrece, showing a further connection between this early narrative poem and Hamlet.

Under cloak of classical antiquity, Marlowe was a past master at communicating forbidden knowledge and commenting incisively on contemporary events. The Mousetrap (Hamlet’s name for The Murder of Gonzago) is a perfect loan, or paradoxical vehicle, for his overarching purpose: to prick the conscience of Queen Elizabeth, expose the abuses of Archbishop Whitgift, and inspire the Commons to take a more active role in its own self-government. Although much new subversive material was added in Q2, other pas-
sages were deleted, including the twenty-four-line section in Q1 about the players (2.2.335–358). This section includes the wholly obscure, but wonderfully revealing, reference to the Essex rebellion and the players’ exile from London: “I think their inhibition comes by the means of the late innovation.” The drunken carousing at the Danish court, a fixture of the early sources, was also downplayed in Q1 and Q2, including twenty-two lines (1.4.17–38) that later appeared in F, apparently in deference to Queen Anne, James’s wife, who was Danish.

(See Table 4 on pages 200–201 for the evolution of the main characters in the seven versions of *Hamlet*.)

**The Purpose of Playing**

HAMLET. Treat them well, I say; for there is no greater praise to be gained than through actors, for they travel far and wide in the world. If they are treated well at one place, they do not know how to praise it enough at the next; for their theatre is a little world, in which they represent all that takes place in the great world. They revive the old forgotten histories, and display to us good and bad examples; they publish abroad the justice and laudable government of princes; they punish vices, and exalt virtues, they praise the good, and show how tyranny is punished—wherefore you must reward them all.

—*Der BB* (“Fratricide Punished”)

The purpose of playing,” the Shakespearean version of *Hamlet* instructs, in a vast improvement from *Der BB* and the putative *Ur-Hamlet*, “... is, to hold as ’twere the Mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature; scorn her own Image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3.2.16–19). This celebrated insight, often said to reflect the author’s own views on the theater, suggests that the stage performs a social function. Like the Church, Crown, and Commons, the theater is one of the pillars of society, if not its most eloquent voice, a concept later broadened to include journalism and the arts in general as “the fourth estate.”

Until recently, it was widely held that the Shakespearean plays were timeless masterpieces of psychological insight and characterization, as well as being apolitical. In *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre*, Louis Montrose shows how *Hamlet* and the other works engage contemporary issues: “Through the persona of the Prince, the Elizabethan playwright voices the notion that theatrical fictions are forms of ethically and politically purposeful play. Plays that are well written and well performed imprint exemplary images of virtuous and vicious
behavior upon the minds of their audiences, disposing them to emulate virtue and to repudiate vice. Thus, Hamlet defends the theatre upon the same high moral ground from which its enemies sought to destroy it.”\textsuperscript{15}

“\textit{Hamlet} will place a dramatic performance at the center of his design to de-legitimate the monarch,” he adds.\textsuperscript{16} In \textit{Hamlet: Poem Unlimited}, Harold Bloom also distances himself from past generations of scholars who ignored the play’s social dimension: “Shakespeare, despite much scholarly argument to the contrary, was no lover of authority, which had murdered Christopher Marlowe, tortured and broken Thomas Kyd, and branded Ben Jonson. The poet kept some distance from the ruling powers, and temporized whenever necessary.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Der BB} includes several salient comments on acting that were left out of Shakespeare’s versions (including the one at the head of this section) that may have some autobiographical content. In the scene, Hamlet converses with Charles, the principal player:

\textbf{HAMLET.} You acted good comedies that time when you were at Wittenberg.
But you had some fellows in your company, who had good clothes, but dirty shirts; others who had boots but no spurs.

\textbf{CHARLES.} Your Highness, it is often hard to procure everything; maybe they thought they would not need to ride.

\textbf{HAMLET.} Still it is better to have everything correct. But listen a little longer, and excuse me, for you do not often hear directly what judgments the spectators pass on you. There were also a few who wore silk stockings and white shoes, but had on their heads black hats full of feathers, nearly as many below as on the top; I think they must have gone to bed in them instead of nightcaps. Now that is bad, yet it may easily be reformed. Moreover you may tell some of them, that when they have to act a royal or a princely personage, they should not make such eyes whenever they pay a compliment to a lady. Neither should they walk so many Spanish \textit{pavane} or put on such airs. A man of rank laughs at such things. Natural ease is best. He who plays a king must in the play fancy himself a king; and he who plays a peasant, must fancy himself a peasant.

The passage was probably cut in the Shakespearean texts because it is largely extraneous to the dramatic action, but the comment on performing with “natural ease” has the ring of truth. (Note that Charles, the head of the players, may glance at Charles Howard, the Lord Admiral, and patron of the troupe for which Marlowe wrote many of his plays.) Indeed, in the very next exchange, after Charles apologizes and resolves to do better in the future, Hamlet invokes the central metaphor: “I am a great lover of your art, and hold it not wrong, since by it one can, as in a mirror, see one’s failing.” The prince then goes on to ask about King Pyrrhus, leading to a discussion about one brother murdering another by pouring poison in his ear. In this brief
exchange, as in Shakespeare’s versions, there are three echoes to Marlowe’s work: Wittenberg (Faustus’s domicile); Pyrrhus (whose story is told in *Dido Queen of Carthage*); and pouring poison in the ear (a stratagem mentioned in *Edward II*). In the earlier lines, there are several more Marlovian echoes in the references to “boots” and “shoes,” items of dress that the cobbler’s son from Canterbury always demonstrates a keen awareness of in his plays and in the Shakespearean works. Speaking through Prince Hamlet, the author comes across as a fashion plate, a quality we associate more with Marlowe in his stylish weeds in the Cambridge portrait than with Shakespeare in his rather stiff and ill-fitting tunic in the Droeshout engraving.

Another tantalizing reference to acting in *Der BB* comes earlier in this scene when Hamlet inquires of Charles, “Have you still the three actresses with you? They used to play well.” Charles replies, “No, only two; one stayed behind with her husband at the court of Saxony.” Unlike England where men and boys played the roles of women and girls on stage, female actresses performed in Germany and other continental venues. The English poet gives his nodding approval to this practice—a progressive, feminist stance that we associate with Marlowe, the iconoclast, whose heroines take on male gender roles, in comparison to Shakespeare, the conventional actor and property owner, whose wife and daughters evidently didn’t know how to read or write. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the Player Queen is depicted as a woman (though played by a man on stage). But unfortunately Hamlet’s lines approving female actors, so far ahead of their time, did not make it into the Quartos or Folio.

As the principal play registered, published, and performed during England’s transition from Queen Elizabeth to King James, *Hamlet* is an inexhaustible source of insight and wisdom into this golden age of arts and letters. In its transformation from a feudal saga to a Renaissance novel to a modern play, *Hamlet* mirrors the metamorphosis that European civilization itself undergoes and presents a microcosm of human consciousness.
2

Poem Unlimited

Hamlet: Courtier, Soldier, Scholar

OPHELIA. O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!
The Courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword.
Th’expectancy and Rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mold of form
—_Hamlet_

(3.1.151–154)

Imagine seven Prince Hamlets, like a set of Russian wooden _matroskha_ dolls, the smaller dolls stacked within the bigger ones. Critics have focused on the various individual roles that Hamlet played: son, nephew, lover, prince, scholar, dramatist, philosopher. But few have remarked on the social dimension to the play or the autobiographical layer that influenced its development. Most commentators have dealt with the psychology, intellect, or motivation of the characters, and only a handful have commented on their outward resemblance to King James of Scotland, the Earl of Essex, Burghley, John Shakespeare (the actor’s father, an occasional candidate for the ghost), or some other historical figures. Exploring _Hamlet’s_ intricate web of connections to the life of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and their contemporaries will provide a richer, more illuminating experience. It may even inspire us to discover additional dolls nested within those we have already opened and reach the deepest level—the tiniest Hamlet—at the core of the play.

Of course, characters in a literary work take on a life of their own. They are rarely based on a single person. Even if there are biographical models, they often take on new qualities and personas, build on other characters, and depart from the historical record because of the performative requirements of the drama. Often the end result is a composite of several actual persons or a new creation that completely transcends the original. Please keep this in mind in the following pages that probe the autobiographical layer of _Hamlet_ and offer historical antecedents and role models for some of the different characters. I do not believe there is a simple one-to-one correspondence between the figures and action in the play and the life of Marlowe and
Shakespeare. And such parallels and associations that do exist may well arise from the depths of the unconscious rather than from conscious plotting or characterization. Like The Comedy of Errors, King John, Titus Andronicus, the Henriad, Twelfth Night, and other plays that we looked at in the last section, Hamlet appears to construct an inner reality that mirrors some of the momentous issues of the day rather than to present an outward allegorical show. The play yields multiple interpretations, and the one that follows is very preliminary and open to further alteration.

Hamlet, the most autobiographical of all of the Marlovian and Shakespearean plays, bears traces of Amleth, Hamlet, Ur-Hamlet, and other earlier incarnations of the prince. In Hyperion and the Hobbyhorse: Studies in Carnivalesque Subversion, Arthur Lindley likens the prince to Tamburlaine. Both serve as lords of misrule, demystifying the ordained order and controlling the chaos around them. But the Quartos and Folio present a wholly new protagonist, largely modeled on the author himself.

Faustus has often been cited as a possible prototype for Hamlet. The magus from Wittenberg portrayed in Marlowe’s play shares many of the same characteristics as the Danish prince. Both are students of philosophy and theology, drawn to explore the forbidden and unknown. Constantly going beyond what is permissible, they tempt fate and bring disaster down upon themselves. (As Harvard critic Harry Levin shows, there is a striking resemblance in the way the two characters appear on stage and deliver their lines. Both Faustus and Hamlet speak 38 percent of the lines in their respective plays, and the average line length is almost the same: 3.5 to 3.2 lines per speech. In comparison, the protagonists in the other Shakespearean plays average about 25 percent.)

Since Faustus so closely resembles Marlowe, we might examine what Prince Hamlet and Kit share in common. Like Faustus, both Hamlet and Marlowe are in their thirtieth year. As students at a major Renaissance university, they have a similar intellectual orientation and interests, including theology, music, law, astronomy, cosmology, seafaring, and ornithology. Both Hamlet and Marlowe are accomplished travelers, converse in French and Latin, and are consummate wordsmiths, comics, and punsters. Hamlet can “write fair” (5.2.36) and shows “a hand of little employment” (5.1.60) (according to Ben Jonson, Shakespeare rarely needed to blot his words). They also share a passion for poetry and drama, composing verse and participating actively in the theater. As avid readers and writers, Hamlet and Marlowe like to quote from Cicero, Montaigne, Luther, Seneca, Matthew, Paul, and Isaiah, and both tote books, tablets, and scripts wherever they go. One of the prince’s iconic activities is pacing the corridors of the castle with a book in front of him. In Marlowe’s case, as we saw, his ghost reportedly
proveled the bookstalls in St. Paul’s Churchyard “in 3 or 4 sheets”—a probable pun on his spectral attire and the number of his published works available. The two contemplatives tend to talk to themselves, the prince through his penchant for soliloquizing, Marlowe through the habit of repeating himself in his verse and plays. Ovid is their favorite poet, the Aeneid their scripture, and both see the world primarily through the lens of mythology and classical verse. Judging from The Passionate Shepherd to His Love, Hero and Leander, and his other poems, Kit was as romantic as Hamlet and also shared his bawdy sense of humor. Like his Danish counterpart, Marlowe’s penetrating wit, subtle irony, and keen appreciation of beauty must have endeared him to the opposite—and/or the same—sex.

Fashion-conscious to a fault, especially in the matter of buskins and boots, their thoughts also frequently turn to bodkins (bare or sheathed), a common male fashion accessory. If neither actually serves in uniform, each is soldierly in his own manner. As a prince of state, Hamlet is skilled in the ways of diplomacy, providing political information to the Danish court. As an intelligrencer, Marlowe is well versed in affairs of state, serving as a conduit for critical news to the English sovereign and Privy Council. Both are continually spied upon, the object of informers, and surrounded by treacherous friends and conspirators. Only Marlowe is accused of atheism and of holding beliefs that go against the teachings of the Church, but Hamlet shares a Copernican worldview that denies an earth-centered cosmos, calls into question the Holy Trinity, and undermines other doctrines of revealed religion (see below).

Though meditative in nature, both Hamlet and Marlowe keep physically fit and active. In Marlowe’s case, daily constitutionals began at Cambridge University where students customarily performed walking exercises early in the morning to keep warm. In Hamlet’s case, “the breathing time of day” (5.2.162–163) finds him working out on the Elsinore battlements. Both are experienced swordsmen, though not of the top rank, and suffer as a result. Marlowe would have lost his life in a street fight, but for the providential intervention of his friend Tom Watson, who slew the assailant. Hamlet pays the supreme price from the poison on the tip of the rapier. In the actual duel, he outscores Laertes, who is more skillful and superbly conditioned.

As the sword fights show, Marlowe and Hamlet are impulsive, often to the point of recklessness, getting into frequent verbal duels and physical scrapes. But both are quick to forgive, as in the case of Hamlet’s encounter with Laertes and Marlowe’s fight with Corkine. In addition, both conceal their true motives with an antic disposition. The prince, of course, dissembles at court in order to divert suspicion while he gathers intelligence confirming Claudius’s guilt. Kit feigns Catholic sympathies in the Rheims inci-
dent at Cambridge and is so successful that he provokes the university authorities into withholding his degree. Though a failure, the counterfeiting episode in Flushing also falls into this category.

In appearance, Marlowe’s wavy hair could pass for Hamlet’s “knotted and combìned locks” (1.5.22). Dressed in mourning, the prince’s “inky cloak” (1.2.79) is better suited to a Scythian shepherd than a Danish prince, but as he is the “glass of fashion,” we can be confident that his dressing room contained coats with copper lace, breeches of crimson velvet, and other attire suitable to the Scandinavian court. If Hamlet sat for a portrait, it might well resemble that of young Kit’s in Corpus Christi College. It is easy to imagine Gertrude or Ophelia opening a locket with Hamlet’s likeness, debonair and confident to the point of cockiness, yet with arms crossed, the soul of discretion, the master of interior ratiocination and delay.

Like Hamlet, Marlowe’s melancholy, as evidenced in the sonnets, stems from insufferable restrictions on his freedom put in place by an implacable authority figure. Both are marked for an early death, yet turn the oppressors’ wrongs against them. Like Marlowe, Hamlet is finally detained in the play and “guarded” (4.3.16) by the king’s mercenary Swiss soldiers. After losing his freedom of movement, the prince goes into exile by traveling to England, while Kit seeks asylum abroad. Noble in mind and action, both men are deeply conscious of diet, yet irregular in their own food habits. The prince avoids the rich fare that “Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (1.2.183) while Marlowe’s entries in the Cambridge Buttery Book show he observed a balanced natural way of eating. Kit’s motto—“Consum’d with that which it was nourish’d by”—finds numerous echoes in Hamlet’s philosophizing such as “As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on” (1.2.146–147). Ovid, the epitome of the shepherd-poet, was a vegetarian and appears to have strongly influenced Marlowe’s own diet and approach to food in his plays and poems.

As widely admired public figures, both Hamlet and Marlowe are essentially loners, finding solace in just a few close friendships. The prince has Horatio and fond memories of Yorick, the jester who mentored him in his childhood. Marlowe has scattered friendships with Tom Watson, Thomas Kyd, and several other University Wits. Also a deep bond of friendship may have developed between him and his literary alias, Shakespeare. Hamlet’s faith in the people and their ability to govern themselves parallels Marlowe’s devotion to libertas. Instead of glorifying aristocrats, his plays largely celebrate the rise of commoners—a radical innovation on the London stage—and empower his audience to think and interpret independent of outside authority. In a line that appears to refer more to Marlowe than himself, Hamlet tells Ophelia, “I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more
offences at my beck, than I have thoughts to put them in” (3.1.128–130). Finally, in perhaps the most macabre similarity, both tragic figures leap in and out of their own graves. Hamlet does so in the graveyard scenes with Laertes and the clowns, who are digging what turns out to be his grave, as well as Ophelia’s. Kit does so metaphorically in “dying” in Deptford and reappearing two weeks later in Venus and Adonis, under cover of Shakespeare’s dedication, with the wry promise of “a graver labour” in the future.

Both Marlowe and Hamlet make repeated use of the glass as a basic metaphor in nature. Though the mirror is an Elizabethan commonplace, Thomas Nashe eulogizes Marlowe as “a burning glass” after the events in Deptford.20 As these correspondences show, in many ways they are the mirror image of each other. Because we have accepted Kit’s tragic death at age twenty-nine as fact, and because Hamlet is immortal, it has never occurred to us that they are essentially one and the same. And herein lies the fundamental difference between them—not their lives, which are perfectly symmetrical, but their deaths, which are polar opposites. Curiously, both die in a room (possibly an upper story) with table, bench, and bed nearby. But Hamlet dies a noble death, with flights of angels singing him to his rest, while Marlowe passes away after instigating a cowardly attack. After attacking a man from behind—the basest of base deeds—he meets his comeuppance and is buried in an unmarked grave. No wonder that, with his dying breath, Marlowe’s Hamlet makes Horatio promise to see that his story is told and his good name remembered—a recurrent theme in many of the Shakespearean plays and the sonnets.

Our ignorance of the poet’s true identity is part of Hamlet’s sphinx-like fascination. Like Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, Prince Hamlet has smiled enigmatically at us for century after century, daring us to uncover his secret. At the end of the day, at the close of the play, when the last matrioska doll is opened, its countenance resembles the young man with the lofty brow, knowing eyes, and folded arms from the Cambridge portrait. Could it be that the poet who authored Hamlet, the play that defines the modern human condition, fashioned an ancient Viking legend around himself? (See Table 5 on the following two pages.) With the help of his namesake, St. Christopher, his protectors at court, and his friend Will, Marlowe survived and his works achieved literary immortality. Like Mercury whose cap rendered him invisible, the coroner’s death certificate completely erased Kit’s identity. Hamlet is the most enduring monument to his life, “death,” and literary resurrection.
Hamlet’s Ghost

Claudius: O Wicked Wit and Gifts

GHOST. Ay that incestuous, that adulterate beast,  
   With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts,  
   O wicked wit, and gifts that have the power  
   So to seduce; won to his shameful lust  
   The will of my most seeming-virtuous Queen  
—Hamlet

(1.5.47–51)

In exposing his nemesis, “Wicked” John Whitgift, the archbishop of Canterbury, in the ghost’s opening speech, Marlowe hints at his own identity as the dramatist whose princely role on the English stage has been usurped by England’s top prelate. Not only did the archbishop censor his work, but he tried to silence the poet through character assassination, arrest, torture, and execution. As we have seen, the puns were not included in Quarto 1, when Whitgift was alive and oversaw the censorship of all theatrical scripts and printed works. They appeared in a later version of the passage, which was probably revised after his death in February 1604 and was published in Q2 the following autumn or winter.

The inclusion of this pun was especially daring because the archbishop’s name was so prominent and lent itself to word play. When the prelate was still at Cambridge, Queen Elizabeth summoned him to preach before her for the first time. She “tooke so great liking of him, for his method, and matter, that, hearing his name to be Whitgift, she said he had a white gift in deede,” records Sir George Paule, the archbishop’s comptroller and biographer. “And as his gifts were then esteemed white, so his Fortune afterward proved white, and happy: his good name, and reputation, white, and spotless.” By dressing all in black, Prince Hamlet/Marlowe may signify not only that he is in mourning, but also that he is of an opposite persuasion—and theological hue—from Claudius/Whitgift.

As a rule, Elizabethan plays do not overtly pun on the names of the powerful because of censorship and the threat of libel or sedition. But Marlowe always pushed the limit. Titus Andronicus, the first Shakespearian tragedy, includes a pun similar to that in Hamlet: “NURSE: O tell me, did you see Aaron the Moor? / AARON. Well, more [moor] or less, or ne’er a whit [white] at all” (4.2.53–54). As high priest to Queen Tamora, Aaron also parodies Whitgift, Elizabeth’s “little black husband.” In Didò, Kit puns on Elissa, the Queen of Carthage’s Carthaginian name, and Queen “Eliza”
Elizabeth, as Spenser does in *The Faerie Queene*. *Love’s Labor’s Lost* includes several puns on Lord Strange involving the words “strange,” “stranger,” and “estranged.” Lord Strange, one of Marlowe’s patrons and the character reference he gave when arrested in Flushing, died mysteriously in 1594 at about the time this play is believed to have first been performed. The Falstaff plays pun on the name of Lord Cobham, who was vying for the position of Lord Chamberlain with George Carey, the patron of Shakespeare’s theater troupe. In her book *Puzzling Shakespeare*, Leah Marcus sees a sustained pun on Joan La Pucelle, the puzzling representation of Joan of Arc in *1 Henry VI*. The title of *Much Ado About Nothing* plays on the deception of the lovers. “Nothing” is a pun on “noting,” an Elizabethan term for observing, eavesdropping, or spying.

In accusing his assailant of being a “beast,” Hamlet’s ghost invokes the rhetoric of the reform Protestant clergy that commonly used this term (derived from Revelation 13, 16, and 17) to characterize John Whitgift and the church hierarchy. For their inhumane and foul treatment of their opponents, the bishops were derided as “beasts” and “devils.” Throughout the Marprelate tracts, Martin uses the terminology. For example, in the *Theses Martinianae*, Martin Junior exhorts his father to “fear none of these beasts, these pursuivants, these Mar-Martins, these stage-players, these prelates, these popes, these devils, and all they can do.”23 According to his inquisitors, John Barns, a tailor, swept up in the dragnet against Separatists two months before charges were brought against Marlowe, confessed: “Item he saith that the Bishopp of Canterbery is noe magistrate but a beast and that the said bishop is noe Counceller, and that the Queene’s Majestie cannot give her autchhoritie or power to any such.”24

The word “seduce” also invokes a common metaphor used by the Protestant reformers. For example, in a passage in *Reformation No Enemy* that he had written in exile in Scotland, John Penry, the preacher executed the day before Marlowe’s fateful meeting in Deptford, addressed the bishops: “you stand at this day guiltie in [the Lord’s] sight of the defects, ruins, and profanations of his worship and also the utter undoing of many a thousand soule within England. And I do not see what you can alledge for your defence, except you will joyne with that notable seducer of your people, the Arch of Cant.”25 Penry accused Whitgift of “unjustly” accusing sincere reformists of being “Enemies unto Her Majestie” and of turning Elizabeth against their cause in actions analogous to Claudius’s seduction of Gertrude in *Hamlet*. Martin Marprelate had used a similar refrain in his first tract: “Now, Master Prelates . . . You have seduced her Majesty and her people.”26 The images of seduction and lust further echo a notable exchange between Whitgift and Thomas Underdown that occurred shortly after he became pri-
mate. Like other Puritan clergy, Underdown objected to Catholic doctrines that continued to be upheld in the Bishops’ Bible. In a dialectical exchange on whether the devil really loved Sara, as described in the Apocrypha, the archbishop retorted, “Is it strange to you that the devil should love men and women? Do you think that the devil doth not love?”27 As other bishops rushed to the archbishop’s defense, he became a laughingstock for defending the archfiend’s passion for female beauty and companionship.

The word “gifts,” which appears three times in the telltale passage, is also freighted with theological significance. In that era, it was universally believed that gifts, or talents, originated in heaven, not in nature. “Seeing then that we have gifts that are diuers according to the grace that is give vnto us,” Romans proclaims, in the fullest Christian exposition of the subject, distinguishing prophecy, office, teaching, exhorting, distributing, and mercy.28 These find echoes in the play, especially the prince’s “prophetic soul” (1.5.46) and “[t]he insolence of office” (3.1.79). As the note in the Geneva Bible reminds us, “offices” means “all suche offices, as apperteine to the Church, as Elders, Deacons, &c.”29 The debate over ecclesiastical offices lay at the heart of the Puritan critique of the Church of England, Whitgift’s persecution of Thomas Cartwright and other divines, and the Marprelate affair. It reached its zenith in the parliamentary debate of early 1593, culminating in the judicial murder of Barrow, Greenwood, and Penry; the arrest and torture of Kyd; and the arrest and sudden “death” of Marlowe. The controversy, as we have seen, reverberates through many of the early Shakespearean plays. The telltale passage in *Hamlet* also echoes Proverbs 17.23, “A wicked man taketh a gift out of the bosome to wrest the waies of judgment,” as well as Exodus 23.8, “Thou shalt take no gift: for the gift blindeth the wise, & peruergeth the wordes of the righteous.” In other words, Claudius misuses his divine gifts, as does his Elizabethan prototype, for his own private ends: power, seduction of the will of the queen, and the persecution of the faithful. His gifts are not only secular, but traitorous.

The epithet “wicked” in the climactic passage further reinforces the religious imagery and points to the archbishop as a partial role model for the king. Combined with “seduces,” it echoes “The way of the wicked seduceth” in the Bishops’ Bible (Proverbs 12.26). “Wicked” suggests not only moral and spiritual evil, but also was a code word among the Puritans and nonconformists for the orthodox, especially the bishops who misled them. In *The Admonition*, Thomas Cartwright, the Puritan leader, thundered against Whitgift’s “wicked reign.”30 In a summary of John Penry’s appeal to the queen protesting his loyalty, Church officials highlighted his use of the term as the first of seven reasons he should be convicted: “1. By his peremptory condemning of the whole ecclesiastical government estab-
lished by her majesty, as wicked and Antichristian.” Throughout the Geneva Bible, the reform version of the scripture originally published in English in Switzerland in 1560 and the edition favored in the Marlovian and Shakespearean works, the marginal notes contrast the “wicked” with the “godly,” as the reformers called themselves. For example, at the end of the Cain and Abel story in Genesis (a story with major echoes in Hamlet), we read, “In these dayes God began to moue the hearts of the godlie to restore religion, which a long time by the wicked had bene suppressed.” In 2 Chronicles (a book alluded to several times in Hamlet), the margin note reads like an epigram of the Danish king: “Because the wicked liueuer in feare and also are ambitious, they become cruel and spare not to murther them, who by nature they most oght to cherish & defend.” Possibly the greatest attack on the wicked comes in Job, which is another favorite subtext of Hamlet. Across the top of the Geneva Bible, the subtitles proclaim: “The wicked punished,” “The fall of the wicked,” “The plagues of the wicked,” “The prosperity of the wicked,” “The oppression of the wicked,” and “The rewarde of the wicked.” “And I haue sene, they that plowe iniquitie, and sow wickednes, recepe the same” (4.8), which we read in Job, comes from the same passage of the Geneva Bible that Gertrude quotes to her son in the closet scene. Once again, the murderous king is subtly linked to wickedness.

Twice, Hamlet refers to his mother with this term. In the opening scene, he castigates her: “She married, O most wicked speed” (1.2.158). Other usages also occur in the play, reinforcing the distinction between the righteous and the ungodly. In her bedchamber, he rebukes her “wicked tongue” (3.4.13). In the chapel scene, the king accuses himself of succumbing to “the wicked prize” (3.3.62). Laertes laments the “wicked deed” (5.1.219) that distracted his sister and drove her to her death. All of these instances can be viewed as allusions to the Church of England’s doctrines of uniformity and conformity imposed by Queen Elizabeth and her chief prelate.

There are other indirect echoes of this scriptural judgment passed on England’s highest officials. In accusing Whitgift of witchcraft, a form of proscribed worship viewed by the Church of England as demonic, Marlowe further turns the tables on the cleric, accusing him of atheism and blasphemy. The witchcraft imagery also appears throughout the play. For example, in accusing his mother of being a harlot, Hamlet compares his stepfather with the animal familiars of a witch or wizard:

For who that’s but a Queen, fair, sober, wise,
Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib,
Such dear concernings hide

(3.4.204–206)
Hamlet’s Ghost

From the view of the Puritans and Separatists, the archbishop was the caricature of a spiritual leader. Instead of love and compassion, he governed with intimidation and violence. His bishops, disciples, and acolytes regularly sanctioned exorbitant fines, long imprisonment, and judicial murder for acts of conscience. The creed that John Whitgift attempted to force on the nation was a perversion of human values and Jesus’s gospel of peace. The Thirty Nine Articles present a dark, pathological view of life, justifying eternal damnation in the afterlife, capital punishment in this life, and other torments of body and soul that are wholly repugnant to human reason and original Christianity. In 1592, the year before Marlowe’s arrest, Sir Francis Knollys, the queen’s cousin and treasurer of her household, supported Morice, the outspoken lawyer in the House of Commons, who accused Archbishop Whitgift of usurping power in the church. “[T]hese Civilians, and other confederates of the Clergy government, would fain have a kind of monarchy in the said government [of the Church], as was in the temporality.”34 In silencing his opponents, shredding the Magna Carta’s prohibition against self-incrimination, and seizing power, the archbishop, in Martin Marprelate’s words, sought to become “the second person in the realm.”35 Like Claudius, he saw his way to the pinnacle of power through alliance with the queen.

Witches, real or imagined, also played a role in the primate’s career. In April 1593, at the height of the religious persecution by the archbishop and as the case against Marlowe was being prepared, John, Alice, and Agnes Samuel were executed as witches in Huntingdon, about seventy miles from London. Known as the Three Witches of Warboys, the Samuels make suitable candidates for the three avenging furies in the prologue to the German Hamlet, possibly reflecting Marlowe and/or Kyd’s original Ur-Hamlet. In five pregnant lines in the ghost’s revelatory speech, Hamlet’s author brilliantly depicts Whitgift’s tyrannical reign, his unbridled lust for power, and his seductive hold over England’s sovereign queen.

The allusion in the play, devastating in itself, raises the question of whether it is a topical reference—a passing verbal sally—or a part of a broader identification of Claudius with Whitgift. In addition to Queen Elizabeth’s punning remark on his name, Whitgift himself referred to his divine favors. In The Defense of the Answer to the Admonition, the prelate admonished the Puritans and their leader, Thomas Cartwright, “I have confuted both them and you, according to the gifts and grace that God hath given me.”36 (The relation between Cartwright and Whitgift was likened to that between Pyrrhus and Priam, a major subtext in the play, as explained in the section on The Players below.)

Aside from its theological import, the puns on “gifts” by Hamlet’s ghost
introduce a dramatic theme that runs through the play. Gifts play crucial roles, and Claudius, we later learn from the Dumb Show, woos and wins Gertrude with gifts. In contrast to these murderous presents, at the behest of the king and her father, Ophelia returns Hamlet’s love tokens (books, poems, and romantic letters) to him, though they were written sincerely and in a spirit of celebration. Hamlet also gives the likeness of his late father to his mother to prick her conscience, while Ophelia’s gift of flowers to the king and court betrays a method behind her madness. Her familiarity with herbal symbolism, based on the traditional doctrine of signatures—rosemary stands for remembrance, pansies for thoughts, and so forth—shows an acute sense of justice. And the diplomatic packet given by the king to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to present to the king of England is a true manifestation of the black arts. After divining and altering its contents, Hamlet leaves a parting gift for the messengers, and he seals the amended execution warrant with the kiss of death. In inviting the prince to fence with Laertes, Claudius entices him with the prize of six Barbary horses.

The sword fight itself is a metaphor for theological dispute. According to Whitgift’s close associate and biographer, Sir George Paule, Thomas Cartwright, the archbishop’s leading spiritual foe, incited the clergy “to prick at him with the swords of their tongues, and otherwhiles uncharitably through the sides of others pierce and wound him.” In mentioning Lamord, a French cavalier officer whose name signifies “Death” in French, the king’s choice of stakes strongly suggests one of the four pestilential horsemen of the Apocalypse. Earlier, Hamlet’s exclamation, “That’s worm-wood” (3.2.174–175) during the play-within-the-play, referring not only to the bitter herb but also to the star by that name in Revelation, foreshadows this apocalyptic imagery. Finally, the play ends with Laertes, Gertrude, the King, and Hamlet all dying from Claudius’s venemous gifts of wine and/or the tainted sword. Poison is a common symbol of slander and betrayal, while a sword represents knowledge, so a poison-tipped sword further suggests a corrupt royal doctrine or dogma.

The king’s ultimate gift, the cup of wine, further alludes to fraudulent religious doctrines. It is associated with the cup of the whore of Babylon in Revelation. Indeed, administered in the form of a large pearl—known as a “union”—the cup’s poisonous contents allude to the counterfeit union of Church and State that is at the heart of Marlowe’s critique of Elizabethan society.

And in the cup an union shall he throw,
Richer than that which four successive Kings
In Denmarke’s Crown have worn

(5.2.256–258)
(“Richer,” or more toxic and lethal, may contrast Elizabeth’s rule with that of the first four Tudor monarchs—Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary—whose reigns were characterized by successively more serious religious and political unrest.) In rejecting such unholy ties, Hamlet forces the poison down his uncle’s throat: “Here thou incestuous, mured’rous, damned Dane, / Drink off this potion, is thy Union here?” (319–320)

In an earlier act of poisoning, Claudius killed Elder Hamlet by pouring hebona from a vial or small cup into his ear. The ear imagery that permeates the play shows that the poison is metaphorical. “A Serpent stung me, so the whole ear of Denmarke / Is by a forgéd process of my death / Rankly abused” (1.5.41–43), the ghost explains, and then it relates how his brother poured poison into the “porches of my ears” (67). This analogy is prefigured by Barnardo’s comment to Horatio in the first scene, “Sit down awhile, / And let us once again assail your ears” (1.1.35–36), as well as by Hamlet’s backhanded welcome to his fellow student from Wittenberg: “I would not hear your enemy say so, / Nor shall you do my ear that violence / To make it truster of your own report” (1.2.172–174). Another dozen major clusters relating the ear to poisoned speech, as well as extensive references to dumbness and muteness, as Lee Sheridan Cox shows in his brilliant study of the Dumb Show, culminate in the English Ambassadors’ lament at the close of the play.39 “The ears are senseless that should give us hearing” (5.2.367). The ear symbolism points to the vial of poisonous doctrines that Archbishop Whitgift has poured into the whole ear of England, his hold on the ear of Queen Elizabeth, and his suppression of reformists and dissenters preaching the true Word of the gospels. Prince Hamlet’s muteness and dumbness echo the persecution or silence imposed on Marlowe, Kyd, Penry, Barrow, Greenwood, and other artists, religious dissenters, and freethinkers.

In Elsinore, eavesdropping has been honed into a fine art. Like the archbishop, Claudius maintains power through a network of spies, informers, and agents at home and abroad. In virtually every corridor and corner of the castle lurk the Elizabethan equivalent of bugs and listening devices. As Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “Denmarke’s a Prison” (2.2.244). (Significantly, this remark appears only in the Folio version, long after Whitgift and Elizabeth have died.) Incoming intelligence streams in from France, Germany, Norway, and England, reflecting court life in Elizabethan society. “The Bishops through their pursuivants turned London into a whispering gallery,” explains historian William Pierce, “where every word spoken in intimate chat or wayside gossip was focused in the Archbishop’s chamber at Lambeth.”40 As the ultimate authority, the king does not hesitate to lie, deceive, conceal, subvert, injure, and even kill to preserve power. In the process, he sacrifices the lives of Polonius, Ophelia,
Laertes, Gertrude, and Hamlet to his diabolical scheme.

Claudius’s ruthlessness is mirrored in that of his real life prototype. Through censorship, destruction of printing presses, and the torture of printers and writers, John Whitgift, England’s high priest, has created a moral and spiritual wasteland comparable to the rottenness in Denmark. The theme of pestilence and corruption in Hamlet goes far beyond the physical plague to a moral and spiritual bankruptcy; “poison” and its variants (“poisoner,” “poisoning,” etc.) are mentioned thirteen times in the play, “serpent” appears twice, and “venom” or “envenom” six times. The toxicity begins with the administration of hebona into King Hamlet’s ear in the orchard, includes the venomous words that led to Ophelia’s madness and death, and ends with the downing of the fatal flagon of wine. Along the way, Hamlet compares his uncle’s reign with the serpent in the garden, likens Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “Adders fang’d” (3.4.219), and suggests that Claudius’s forked tongue and honeyed words have seduced the queen. In many ways, the prince’s attitude toward the king carries on where the Marprelate tracts left off. One of the lost Penry-Throkmorton writings, excerpts of which survive, compare Whitgift with a poisonous snake: “None so tirranal as he; no not Bonner [Queen Mary’s chief persecutor]. He [Whitgift] sits upon his coggling stoole, which trulie be called the chaire of pestilence. . . . there is none of Gods children, but had as leue see a Serpent as meet him.”41 According to Elizabethan historian Collinson, Leicester was concerned “that Whitgift could poison the reputation of the Commons in the estimation of the Queen,” and Edward Dering lamented, “Dr. Whitgift is a man whom I have loydy, but . . . bewrayeth a conscience that is full of sicknes.”42

Because censorship forbade its direct representation on stage, religious conformity is not openly addressed in the play. But issues of authority, obedience, and conformity are indirectly voiced in relations among the characters, such as when Hamlet accuses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of being sponges and even has old Polonius agree that a passing cloud takes the shape of a camel, a weasel, and a whale. (Curiously, all three of these animals appear in the Bible in negative metaphoric contexts. “Blind guides! You strain at a midge, yet gulp down a camel” [Matthew 23.24–25]. The weasel is listed as unclean in Leviticus, and the whale figures prominently in the story of Jonah.) Actual theological issues are also cleverly woven into the psychology of the play, including the nature of the ghost (Protestant or Catholic), Hamlet’s inner struggle to come to terms with a world governed by design or chance, and the morality of vengeance.

As the spiritual and temporal leader of Denmark, Claudius’s smooth tongue and manner of expression echo Whitgift’s, who was known for his
mellifluous expression. As a result of his eloquent gifts of speech, the queen promoted him to archbishop of Canterbury. In his first major address, he delivered a sermon at St. Paul’s Cathedral on the topic of the obedience owed to monarchs that endeared him to the queen.

The most overt theological resemblance between Claudius and Whitgift is the chapel scene, in which the king on bent knee seeks to repent but cannot. “Bow stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel, / Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe, / All may be well” (3.3.73–75). Observing him unseen, Hamlet prepares to strike. Torn between allegiance to basic human decency, which tells him not to kill a penitent sinner, and a visceral desire to dispatch his adversary when his soul is least prepared for death, he pauses and decides to wait for another opportunity. The image of the king on bent knee may be a veiled echo of the death of Queen Elizabeth, when the archbishop entered her chamber to ready her soul through prayer. As the story goes, during Elizabeth’s last hours, Whitgift—himself old, infirm, and with labored breath—attempted to rise at least three times (the number is symbolic of both the Trinity and witchcraft). But each time the dying queen gripped his hand and forced him to remain kneeling. Only when she drifted into unconsciousness did he finally arise and steal away. This could have influenced the scene, but even if it did not it would be in accord with Claudius’s character.

*Hamlet*’s chronology follows the ecclesiastical calendar, further reflecting its religious subtext. According to Steve Roth, author of *The Undiscovered Country, The Murder of Gonzago* takes place on Twelfth Night, January 5, the last day of the Christmas season and a traditional night of revelry. When the king calls for “Lights” out at about midnight this may signify the change from Twelfth Night to Epiphany, January 6, the solemn Feast of Lights in the Church of England. Another echo of Whitgift’s clerical function comes when the king instructs that Polonius’s body be moved to the chapel. In further support of these parallels, let us note the historical allusion to Claudius in Ophelia’s Valentine song. The Roman emperor Claudius II, known as “Claudius the Cruel,” banned all engagements and weddings in order to augment his legions. A priest named Valentine defied the emperor and was killed for marrying couples in secret. As Roth points out, “The name’s quite a clincher, and it’s hard not to think of Hamlet’s ‘I say we will have no more marriage’” (3.1.148–149). These subtle allusions point to the play’s spiritual as well as temporal outlook.

The graveyard scene highlights Claudius’s ecclesiastical authority. During Ophelia’s burial, he uses his influence over the priest to hallow her interment. As a probable suicide, Ophelia was barred from receiving proper funeral rites. Throughout Christendom, suicide had been considered a dia-
bolical inspiration since the fifth century. But the Danish king, like the archbishop in Elizabethan England, could override a parish priest and sanction whatever obsequies he liked. “We shall jointly labour with your soul” (4.5.205), Claudius promises Laertes, after his sister’s death, further echoing the archbishop’s theological function. The line recalls Whitgift’s sanctimonious ministrations to those victimized by his policies. To John Penry, awaiting death in his prison cell, the prelate sent several senior church officials to counsel him on his “soul’s health.”

Another possible theological allusion comes in the famous lines to “bear the whips and scorns of time” (3.1.76) and “use every man after his desert, & who shall ’scape whipping” (2.2.485–86). In addition to hellfire and damnation, the passages may echo a passage in one of Whitgift’s most famous sermons. Describing how a monarch has a duty to emulate Christ and make himself “both the accuser, and the judge, and the executioner too” to punish sinners, he describes lovingly how Jesus “made the whip to drive the profaners out of the temple.”

Prince Hamlet’s reference in the graveyard scene to Alexander the Great’s dust stopping a beer-barrel may also slyly allude to the prelate. Not only did the archbishop act like an imperial conqueror, but he was known as an “old barrel.” The epithet originated at Cambridge University, where Whitgift and his conservative cronies constituted “the greater sort . . . being old barrels which could holde no newe wine [and been] addicted partly to poperie and partly to licentiousnesse.” Coincidentally perhaps, the “barrel” line comes directly after Hamlet meditates on Yorick’s skull, which alludes even more directly to John Whitgift’s tyrannical rule, as noted below.

In personal habits and mannerisms, there is also a strong resemblance between Claudius and Whitgift. The king is portrayed as a glutton, given to excessive eating and imbibing at the table. In his younger days at Cambridge, the prelate shared the simple food of his pupils, but over the years grew increasingly fat and jowly. His satiated countenance and behavior are satirized by Martin Marprelate and appear to be alluded to in Hamlet’s remarks on the king’s fat and greasy behavior. In the play, this shades over to the royal couple’s steamy sexual relationship, which may be more of a metaphor for the incestuous relation between the Elizabethan Church and State than it is an allegation of lasciviousness on the part of Elizabeth or Whitgift. In the Marprelate tracts, Archbishop Whitgift is often referred to as “uncle,” and Martin Jr.—the most Hamlet-like figure in the eight pamphlets—is constructed as his “nephew.” Guildenstern refers to the king as “marvelous distemp’red / . . . with choler” (3.2.285, 287), echoing the archbishop’s notoriously short fuse. Choler was the principal humour attributed to Whitgift by Marprelate and other contemporary observers, includ-
ing his own authorized biographer. In dramatizing Whitgift’s charge to his underlings to spare no effort to capture him, Martin has the prelate proclaim, “And I think I shall go stark mad with you, unless you bring him.” In a similar vein, Hamlet determines to “Make mad the guilty and appall the free” (2.2.515) by staging the play-within-the-play. And Claudius’s relationship to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is essentially that of Whitgift to his pursuivants, whom he empowered to hunt down and arrest subversive printers, atheists, and heretics.

The horse passages in Hamlet comparing Claudius to a mythical being that is half man and half horse—“So excellent a King, that was to this / Hyperion to a satyr” (1.2.141–142)—also allude to Whitgift. The archbishop kept a small army of retainers at the Lambeth Palace, including one hundred mounted horsemen, and on his official visits to Canterbury his train swelled to a thousand men. Marprelate and many Puritan preachers bitterly criticized the primate for acting more like a Roman general than a servant of Christ, but the archbishop saw his private army as a prerequisite of rule and a sign of God’s favor. In another use of an equestrian reference related to Whitgift, commenting on the bishops’ appointment of ignorant and unqualified ministers, Burghley once observed wryly, “I am sure the greater part of them [the unlearned clergy] are not worthy to keep horses.” Given to equestrian metaphors himself, Whitgift talked of “bridling and reforming the intemperate humour of these Nouelists” and compared Essex’s “hot and unruly spirits” to “Phaetons untrained horses.” As the head of the largest company of armed men in London, Whitgift rallied his mounted detail during the Essex rebellion and effectively ended the threat of a violent coup. The passage where Claudius talks about his horses and reminiscences about Lamord, the master horseman from France further reinforces this theme. Another horse image comes when Hamlet speaks of Claudius and resolves that “his heels may kick at heaven” (3.3.96). And one of the archbishop’s bete noirs, “the commotion of the unbridled multitude,” reverberates in the scene in which the citizenry demand that Laertes be named king. In stark horror, Claudius and Gertrude use all of their enormous wiles to put down the incipient rebellion.

Perhaps the most obvious link between Claudius and Whitgift lies in their role vis a vis the stage. Like Whitgift, Claudius is chief censor of the Danish theater, overseeing and correcting scripts, performances, and printed texts. The king interrogates Hamlet and the Player about the play beforehand, criticizes it performance, and ultimately shuts it down. On the basis of its seditious script, he determines to slay Hamlet. All of these actions and reactions closely parallel those of Whitgift to Marlowe.

The king’s name offers a further clue to the play’s hidden agenda. In an
act of apparent self-censorship, the name “Claudius” is largely veiled in the original Shakespearean versions of Hamlet. Except for the stage directions, Claudius is referred throughout Q1 as the “King.” In Q2, he is also referred to as the “King,” but his proper name appears in his first speaking part. In the Folio, Claudius’s name only appears in the initial stage directions. The author may have hesitated to openly equate the monarch in his play with the Roman emperor out of deference to the Elizabethan or Stuart courts. Claudius’s reign was associated with parricide, incest, and a succession crisis. Religious reformers frequently compared Whitgift and the bishops with Roman emperors and tyrants, including Nero.51 The reference later in the play to Nero, the historical Claudius’s son and successor, reinforces the tyrannical imagery. Nero also had his mother, Agrippina, put to death for poisoning her husband. Ironically, though Hamlet shies from doing violence to his mother lest “The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom” (3.2.363), the kingdom falls in the end to Fortinbras, another incipient despot. In real life, Marlowe chose exile over death, as did his heroes, Ovid and Lucan, who were banished from Rome by Claudius’s predecessors and Nero respectively. Also, Claudius’s name in Latin means “lame,” calling to mind Tamburlaine, the hero of Marlowe’s play, whose name means “Tamur the Lame.”

Though primarily “a secular scripture,” in Harold Bloom’s phrase, Hamlet is at heart a deeply religious play. It parallels Dr. Faustus in many respects, but the contest it constructs is not over an individual soul, but for the salvation of England and the modern world. An examination of the similarities between the plays reveals a close spiritual affinity. Faustus’s many references to Icarus may be echoed in Hamlet’s “To flaming youth let virtue be as wax / And melt in her own fire” (3.4.91–92) and “wings as swift / As meditation, or the thoughts of love” (1.5.33–34). Faustus’s meditation on suicide, including death by halter or hanging, as several critics have observed, precedes Hamlet’s “shuff[ing] off this mortal coil,” (3.1.73) or rope, through self-slaughter. The prince’s “consummation / Devoutly to be wish’d” (3.1.69–70) parallels Jesus’s last words, “Consummatum est,” which is repeated in Fautus’s oath: “Consummatum est. This bill is ended / And Faustus hath bequeathed his soul to Lucifer” (2.1.74–75) and Mephistopheles’ encouragement for the magus to “pray devoutly to the prince of hell” (1.3.55).52 In a further parallel, Faustus’s vows to “build an altar and a church [to Beelzebub] / And offer lukewarm blood of newborn babes” (2.1.13–14) corresponds with Hamlet’s plotting at “the very witching time of night” (3.2.357) and determination to “drink hot blood” (3.2.359). Throughout the play, as Arthur McGee shows in The Elizabethan Hamlet, the prince utilizes triple invocations—the sign of God or the devil—just as Faustus did. For example, he calls, “Mother, mother, moth-
er!” (3.4.6) to Gertrude and has a tendency to repeat himself three times on other occasions. The lines the prince writes for the play-within-the-play refer to “Hecate’s ban thrice blasted, thrice infected” (3.2.247). (See Appendix B for more triplicities.)

“For Claudius, as for Faustus,” as McGee points out, “the means of bringing him to heaven were ‘contrition, prayer, repentance,’ but in Claudius’s case his contrition is at best imperfect, he cannot pray sincerely, and he cannot repent.”55 The prince’s rage enlarges upon the sin of wrath portrayed in the Seven Deadly Sins pageant in Faustus. Finally, as in Marlowe’s earlier play, Hamlet’s stormy confrontation with Gertrude, in which he chastises her for making “sweet religion” (3.4.53) into a meaningless string of words and uses such phrases as “grace” (62), “habit” (149), “unction” (159), and “frock” (178), parodies the backwards conjuring and Black Mass in Kit’s earlier play.

McGee also finds theological resonances in Hamlet from Marlowe’s other plays. In The Jew of Malta, Barabas recoils at the ghosts of misers, which were considered evil: “And speak of spirits and ghosts that glide by night / About the place where treasure hath been hid” (2.1.26–27). Hamlet echoes this passage in the exchange between the prince and Horatio in which the prince wonders whether the ghost is the shade of a departed miser who has: “Extorted treasure in the womb of earth / For which they say your spirits oft walk in death” (1.1.146–147). Such parallels further support the view that Marlowe was the principal author of the play.

From broad brushstrokes to fine details, as well as scattered allusions to earlier plays, the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius mirrors the epic clash between Marlowe and Archbishop Whitgift. In the play, the prince is portrayed as the emblem of unfettered human reason, while the king plays the role of unyielding absolute authority. Like Hamlet scanning the heavens for portents, Marlowe’s “prophetic soul” (1.5.46) foresees the approaching collision between the medieval and the modern, the decline of monarchical right and the rise of democratic rule, and the widening chasm between religion and astronomy, medicine, and the other sciences.

While change is the most fundamental law of the universe, it need not be sudden or extreme. In maintaining his own integrity, Hamlet always turns his opponents’ weapons against themselves and never intentionally precipitates violence. He slays Polonius in apparent self-defense, sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their execution in his stead, pricks Laertes with a fatal dose of poison after exchanging swords, and forces the king to drink his own poisoned wine. This “aikido-like” moral stance can be traced back to the original Amleth legend, the Hamlet novel, and the Ur-Hamlet/Der BB, in which the Danish prince scrupulously avoids initiating aggression and uses
his mastery of word play and puns to tell the truth under all circumstances. “I shall not dye without revenging my selfe upon mine enemie,” Hamlet declares in the Belleforest version, “and that himselfe shall be the instrument of his owne decay, and to execute that which of my selfe I durst not have enterprised.” In the Shakespearean texts, this becomes “purposes mistook, / Fallen on th’inventors’ heads” (5.2.382–383) and “the engineer / Hoist with his own petar” (3.4.222–223). In turning the tables on Archbishop Whitgift and staging his own death, Marlowe adopted a similar strategy.

By revealing to his son the identity of his murderer in Act 1 in the “Wicked” Whitgift passage, the ghost gives us the key to decoding the autobiographical subtext to Hamlet. Theological imagery permeates Claudius’s character and relationships throughout the play. But thanks to the muse and liberal sprinklings of fairy dust, the ghost’s and ghostwriter’s secret has been kept for four centuries.

**Gertrude: Into My Very Soul**

HAMLET. How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world.
Fie on’t, ah fie, ’tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature,
Possess it merely that it should come to this

(1.2.135–139)

Weeds in the fields, if they be suffered, will quickly overgrow the corn, but subjects being dandled, will make their own reigns and forlet another reign.

—Elizabeth, Letter to James

Atirizing Queen Elizabeth on stage was fraught with more peril than parodying the archbishop. After the Essex rebellion and the staging of Richard II, portrayals of conspiracies were banned from the theater. At the time Hamlet first appeared, the censor must have been especially vigilant for any topical references to Elizabeth, as her long reign drew to a close and the question of the succession remained clouded.

Given these limitations, it is understandable that in the play Gertrude bears less direct resemblance to Elizabeth than Claudius does to Whitgift. In fact, her part follows very closely her earlier incarnations in Saxo Gramma-
ticus and Belleforest. Yet the basic nature of the relationship between Elizabeth and the archbishop is well represented in the play. Although not as secretive as her husband or Polonius, she enters into their conspiracies and must be included, in Laertes’ words, among the “people muddied / Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts, and whispers” (4.5.72–73) at court.

In real life, Elizabeth was not only secretive but she flaunted her omniscience. One of her most famous gowns depicted images of human eyes and ears, according to one historian, “reminding all who looked on it that she saw and heard everything happening within her realm.”

There are scattered hints in the play to Elizabeth’s distinctive habits and mannerisms, and one striking passage qualifies as a “blazing cannon,” in which she can be almost positively identified, as we shall see below.

Early in the play, Gertrude is described as “Th’imperial jointress to this warlike state” (1.2.9), a term referring to a wife who shares joint tenancy rights with her husband. In real life, of course, Elizabeth and Whigfit were both unmarried, a state that paradoxically drew them together in a bond that proved stronger than marriage vows. Recognizing their spouse-like union as head of Crown and Church, with a pun on “Whit” or “white,” the queen referred to the prelate as her “little black husband.” Though flirting with Dudley, Ralegh, and Essex, she came to regard the archbishop as her better spiritual half. It was rumored that Whigfit served as her confessor, a popish practice. Given their outward celibacy, it would not be surprising if gossip of a more scurrilous nature also circulated.

On the surface, Gertrude lacks Elizabeth’s commanding presence. She is complacent, unassertive, and, as Hamlet observes, basically bovine: “Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, / And batten on this Moor” (3.4.73–74). She has none of the imperiousness, pluck, or steel that we associate with the English monarch. Yet it is precisely Elizabeth’s passivity that the play highlights. Generations of students have addressed the questions: Did the Danish queen flirt with Claudius and commit adultery prior to King Hamlet’s death? Did she know that Claudius planned to murder her husband or assist him in carrying out the deed? Did she acquiesce in his elevation to the throne or did she stand up for her son, who was in Wittenberg? Why did she agree to marry Claudius, her dead husband’s brother, when it was considered incest during that era by both Church and Crown? Why did she remarry so hastily, without observing a decent interval of mourning for her husband and before her son returned from the university?

All of these questions about the play relate to the queen’s knowledge of the evil around her and her possible complicity in heinous acts. These are precisely the most vexing unanswered questions about Elizabeth that historians and biographers continue to debate four centuries later. Did she know
that evidence had been fabricated against Mary Queen of Scots and used to convict her in a trial that was little more than a judicial murder? Did Elizabeth tacitly give the order for Mary’s execution, after staying it indefinitely? Her own words indicate that she may not have. “My dear Brother,” she wrote James, Mary’s son and the king of Scotland, after Mary’s death, “I would you knew (though not felt) the extreme dolor that overwhelms my mind, for that miserable accident which (far contrary to my meaning) hath befallen.”

How much did she know about the torture of Puritan and Separatist dissidents? Did she sanction their execution? Twice she granted a reprieve to Barrow and Greenwood, the second time her stay arriving just after the noose had been fastened around their necks. Did she know about Marlowe’s arrest and acquiesce in his persecution? Or did she covertly assist in Kit’s flight into exile, and order the coroner’s report placed under lock and key, where it remained for three hundred years? How aware was she of the plots and machinations of her own privy councilors, especially their overtures to James? In brief, what did the queen know and when did she know it? Historians wonder, just as literary critics wonder about Gertrude, how much of Elizabeth’s plausible deniability was real and how much was feigned. As a woman and sovereign of the realm, she had a mother’s compassion for her subjects, and her natural inclination was to be merciful. But policy—matters of state—usually won out in the end.

In his new biography, David Riggs contends that Elizabeth was the moving force behind Marlowe’s arrest and prosecution. In August 1593, Drury, the informer Buckhurst and Puckering recruited, wrote spymaster Anthony Bacon, complaining that he had not been paid for his recent services to the Crown. In his letter, Drury related that he delivered “the notablist and yldist articles of Atheism that I suppose the like were never known . . . to her highness and command [was] given by her self to prosecute it to the full.” Riggs sees this as a smoking gun referring to the Baines Note and pointing to Elizabeth’s direct order to pronounce Marlowe’s death sentence, though other historians believe it refers to Cholmeley or someone else.

Like Hamlet putting on an antic disposition, how much of Elizabeth’s demeanor was a mask? For decades, she skillfully held off the Continental powers by feigning a secret sympathy for Catholicism. By allowing her bishops to wear popish ornaments, keeping a silver crucifix and lighted candles in her private chapel, and suppressing Protestant reformers and separatists, she held out hope to Spain, France, and the Vatican that a marriage alliance would result in the return of the old faith to England. By playing the antic, she begrudgingly won the respect of her harshest critics. As historian William Pierce, the principal chronicler of the Marprelate affair, observes, “Her splendid mendacity almost wins from us a sinister admiration.”
In public, Elizabeth appeared a tower of strength. In her speech on the battlements overlooking the English Channel as the Spanish Armada approached, attired in battle regalia, she declared that she had “the body of a weak and feeble woman, but . . . the heart and stomach of a king.” There are echoes of this military stance in Hamlet’s reference to Gertrude’s heart as clad in armor: “And let me wring your heart, for so I shall / If it be made of penetrable stuff, / If damned custom have not brass’d it so, / That it is proof and bulwark against sense” (3.4.40–43).

Feminist critics have discoursed at length on Elizabeth’s masculine attire and attempted to match it with themes of cross-dressing in the Shakespearean plays. Early in Hamlet, Gertrude is described as “Th’imperial jointress to this warlike state” (1.2.9). In rudely bidding Claudius “Farewell dear Mother” (4.3.52), Hamlet may be pointing to this shared exercise of power, as much as feigning loss of his wits. Elizabeth could be chilling when she wanted to be. In a letter to James, referring to one of her subjects, she says she “would wish him under the ground if he should not serve you with greatest faith that any servant may.” Another time she advised, “You will prosecute or dislike as much those that seek my ruin as if they sought your heart blood, and would I had none in mine if I would not do the like.”

As the defender of the realm, Elizabeth inspired her subjects through public appearances, pronouncements, and annual progresses through the countryside. But behind the closed doors of her court, she was often weak and vacillating. Even Burghley, her most loyal advisor and the real temporal ruler of state, told her what she wanted to hear and carried out foreign policy largely as he saw fit. Elizabeth’s weakness for strong, handsome men such as Leicester, Ralegh, and Essex parallels Gertrude’s foolish dalliance with Claudius. Despite her persona as the Virgin Queen and a reborn Artemis, the fierce virgin of Greek mythology, the queen was given to fleshly exhibitions, if not indulgences. In a bold allusion to the monarch’s passion, Gorboduc, the first English tragedy, warned her of the dangers of worldly vanity and “lust of kingdome.” Several derogatory references in Hamlet to women painting their faces also appear to refer to England’s queen. As she aged, the rouging grew more prominent. In a visit to court in 1600, about the time the play was written, one observer commented that Elizabeth was painted “in some places near half an inch thick.” In the play, Claudius refers to “the harlot’s cheek beautified with plast’ring art” (3.1.57), and Hamlet may obliquely allude to the aging queen in the graveyard scene with the discovery of the noblewoman’s skull, “Now get you to my Lady’s Chamber, & tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come, make her laugh at that” (5.1.163–164). The facial makeovers point to the spreading moral and spiritual infection at court that no amount of
cosmetics can cover up.

In my view, one of the central questions *Hamlet* raises is to what degree Elizabeth has participated with Whitgift in tyrannizing the realm, suppressing liberties, and turning England into a prison. Did she actively conspire with him as jointress in these reprehensible policies, did she merely acquiesce, or was she as ignorant as she professed? In a letter to James in 1590, as the Puritan crisis heated up, she writes, “[L.]et me warn you that there is risen, both in your Realm and mine, a sect of perilous consequence, such as would have no Kings but a presbytery, and take our place while they enjoy our privilege. . . I pray you stop the mouths, or make shorter the tongues, of such ministers as dare presume to make orison in their pulpits for the persecuted in England for the Gospel.”65 She goes on to implore him “not to give more harbour-room to vagabond traitors and seditious inventors, but to return them to me, or banish them your land.” Possibly she was thinking of John Penry and his family who had fled to Scotland about this time in the wake of the Martin Marprelate affair. The phrase “stop the mouths” forewarns the Baines Note on Marlowe: “I think all men in Christianity ought to indeavor that the mouth of so dangerous a member may be stopped.” If she did not give the actual orders to suppress dissent in every instance, she created the climate in which reformers could be silenced and withheld her own tongue in the most brutal and extreme cases.

The play’s theme of contagion in Denmark echoes Elizabeth’s sentiments on infection in her personal correspondence. “A long-rooted malady, falling to many relapses,” she once wrote James, “argues, by reason that the body is so corrupt that it may never be sound. When great infections light on many it almost poisons the whole country.”66 On another occasion she writes, “Know you, my dear Brother, for certain, that those ulcers that were too much skinned with the doulceness of your applications were but falsely shaded, and were within filled with such venom as hath bust out since your departure with most lewd offers to another King to enter your land . . . I will not fail, for time to other, to warn such as I may think most clear of this infection.”67 On still another occasion, when the Scottish king wrote her about some perceived wrong, Elizabeth protests, “And charge you in God’s name to believe, that I am not of so viperous a nature to suppose or have thereof a thought against you.”68

Pestilence is a common literary trope of the time, especially given the horrendous plague conditions in England. In 1603, the year of *Hamlet’s* first publication, nearly 20 percent of London’s 200,000 inhabitants died of the disease. Epidemic, famine, war, and other catastrophes were commonly seen as signs of heavenly disfavor arising from the sinfulness of monarchs or the corruption of society. In the chamber scene, Hamlet’s interrogation of
his mother probes at the relation between inner and outer pestilence. Although the dialogue reflects the vehemence of the original Amleth story, *Hamlet* strives to catch the conscience of England’s sitting queen:

**HAMLET.** Come, come, and sit you down, you shall not budge.
You go not till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you.

(3.4.21–23)

Continuing the metaphor of a glass or window into her own depths, Gertrude replies to the prince’s devastating portrait of her complicity:

**QUEEN.** O *Hamlet*, speak no more,
Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

(3.4.96–99)

The passages allude directly to Elizabeth’s famous dictum on religious belief that she did not want “to make windows into men’s hearts and secret thoughts.” The queen’s Religious Settlement required outward conformity, not inward assent. It sought to ensure uniformity of practice, but did not seek to probe personal conscience or faith. So long as one professed the Thirty-Nine Articles, attended church every week, and obeyed the other regulations prescribed by the Church of England, one was free to believe as one liked. Until Whitgift assumed office as prelate, English Protestantism prided itself on its personal religious toleration in contrast to Catholicism, which used the Inquisition to root out unorthodox individual beliefs. Hooker’s *Ecclesiastical Polity* offered a tortuous defense of this doctrine, which Puritans and Separatists ridiculed as the soul of hypocrisy. In their view, Whitgift and the other bishops were concerned only with the external exercise of authority, not with inner truth. Like Claudius, the archbishop’s inner hollowness and outward manipulation of events suggest that he is more a disciple of Machiavelli than the prince of peace. In its emphasis on outward “show” and “seeming”—twin themes throughout *Hamlet*—the partnership between Elizabeth and Whitgift was very much like an Oriental despotism that prized saving face above all things, even though it masked deep-rooted conflict and murderous intent.

As a case in point, Elizabeth’s treatment of John Udall, the Puritan divine, was extremely harsh. Arrested in 1589 during the Marprelate affair, Udall was convicted of writing a schismatic book and, at the queen’s insistence, sentenced to death. Archbishop Whitgift sent several senior preach-
ers to the Fleet, where he was imprisoned, to reason with the dissenter and encouraged him to seek the queen’s mercy. Like Penry, Udall had a family and sought to pacify Elizabeth’s “high displeasure” in several servile and humiliating letters. Though ultimately pardoned, he died in prison of a broken heart before he could be released. The following year, in 1592, Burghley wrote a letter to the Lord Keeper explaining that “her majesty is offended, that in sharp, yes, no capital punishment hath been done upon . . . the rogues,” referring to the case of some Catholic priests. The same summer, Richard Topcliffe, the rackmaster, wrote the queen asking her advice on how much torture to administer to another Jesuit: “But if your highness’ pleasure be to know any thing in his heart, to stand against the wall, his feet standing upon the ground, and his hands but as high as he can reach against the wall.” Topcliffe concluded his missive with the witty refrain, “Here at Westminster [the Star Chamber] with my charge and ghostly father.” The queen’s reply has not survived.

Hamlet turns the tables on Elizabeth, demanding that she look into the window of her own soul and confront the darkness within. As Sidney Lee notes in the Dictionary of National Biography, the queen was “reported to reveal ‘the very secrets of her soul’” to Archbishop Whitgift. She also gave him great power. “The whole care, of the church was, she declared, delegated to him.” In acquiescing to the villainy of her spiritual spouse, Elizabeth violated her own nature and spirit. Reinforcing this image, Claudius at one point refers to Gertrude as “conjunctive to my life and soul” (4.7.16). In the chamber scene, the prince goes on to accuse his mother of living “In the rank sweat of an ensamèd bed / Stew’d in corruption” (3.4.101–102), to which Gertrude replies, “O speak to me no more, / These words like daggers enter in mine ears, / No more, sweet Hamlet” (3.4.104–105). The queen’s refrain may refer not only to the poisoning of her husband, but by analogy to Elizabeth’s sins of commission or omission. For example, it calls to mind the admonition in John Penry’s final appeal to the queen before he was executed: “Among the rest of the princes under the gospel, that have been drawn to oppose themselves against the gospel, you must think yourself to be one. For until you see this, madam, you see not yourself.” The principal author of Hamlet, like his main character, genuinely wants to know the nature of his queen’s complicity in unspeakable crimes. Was Elizabeth involved in the deaths of Mary, Penry, and other religious martyrs and in Whitgift’s plot against him? How much did she know before, during, and after the events of May 30, 1593? Marlowe rightly cannot let these questions alone.

In the play, Gertrude professes to believe her son and promises not to reveal his secrets to Claudius. While she keeps silent about the ghost and
Hamlet’s plan to avenge his father’s death, she confides to the king that her son is crazed. Her distress seals Claudius’s suspicion that Hamlet is plotting against him and must be silenced. From the vantage point of four centuries later, we continue to wonder what role Elizabeth played with her “little black husband” in Marlowe’s life, “death,” and literary resurrection. The play provides no definitive answer. Situated at the heart of the drama, this ambiguity—which perhaps perplexed the playwright more than it does his protagonist or his audience—underlies its endless fascination. Aimed at Queen Elizabeth, who made a pledge to her subjects not to “open windows” into their souls, “Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul” appears to be a “smoking gun” comparable to the double pun on Whigfield’s name in the ghost’s revelation. Windows are a common literary symbol for the eyes, and in this passage the play opens them widely to peer into the deepest recesses of the queen’s own heart.

We may never know for sure what Elizabeth’s role was in the Marlowe affair. But a letter she wrote in the autumn of 1592, about six months before the poet’s arrest, suggests that she did not underestimate the power of the theater and intended to bring it to heel. In a letter to James about his own difficulties, but which could equally apply to her own, she advised him in words that prefigure Hamlet:

I find so many ways your state so unjointed, that it needs a skilfuller bonesetter than I to join each part in his right place . . . Who to peril a King were inventors or actors, they should crack a halter if I were King [of Scotland]. Such is my charity. Who under pretence of bettering your estate, endangers the King, or needs will be his schoolmasters, if I might appoint their university they should be assigned to learn first to obey; so should they better teach you next.74

In acquiescing to the archbishop’s repression of religious dissent, censorship of the stage, and investigation of London’s leading poet and dramatist the following spring, Elizabeth administered just such a harsh lesson. Titus Andronicus, the first Shakespearean tragedy, came out the following winter, and Marlowe appears to administer a strong dose of literary revenge by casting Elizabeth as Tamora, the evil queen of the Goths, who ironically performs the role of Revenge, the relentless fury, in the play. In the final scene, Tamora is stabbed (as reputedly was Kit), and she and her Moorish lover, Aaron (representing Whitgift as high priest and “little black husband”) are left for the beasts and birds of “prey” (5.3.197)—a pun on “pray.” While Elizabeth may not have “opened windows into men’s souls,” she kept their minds and hearts tightly closed to change and the spirit of free inquiry. With clarity, radiance, and wit, Hamlet opens them widely to the “sweet breath” of life (3.1.105) and gentle “winds of heaven” (1.2.143).
Polonius: One Heart, One Way

POLONIUS. “Neither a borrower nor a lender be,
For loan oft loses both itself, and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry;
This above all, to thine own self be true
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

(1.3.79–84)

The Polonius family, including Denmark’s chief advisor of state, his daughter Ophelia, and his son Laertes, constitutes the major subplot of Hamlet and has given rise to almost as much controversy as the central plot and the dynamics of the royal family. George Russell French, a British critic, first connected Elizabeth’s principal councilor, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, with Denmark’s top advisor, Polonius, in the mid-nineteenth century. (In most modern editions of the play, Polonius is identified in the Dramatis Personae as Lord Chamberlain, but that is a custom going back only to the eighteenth century.) Like Burghley, Polonius is portrayed as a venerable councilor who can be entrusted to keep royal secrets. Despite a meddlesome and long-winded veneer, he fixes things behind the scenes with the utmost craft and guile. Shuffling through the corridors of power, he appears like a doting fool, but as his relations with the king, queen, Ophelia, Laertes, Reynaldo, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern show, he is at the center of court espionage. Just like Elizabeth’s right-hand advisor and lord treasurer, Polonius is the real administrative power behind the throne. With his death (as with Cecil’s), everything spirals rapidly out of control.

As many critics have observed, Polonius’s worldly wisdom (such as “neither a borrower nor a lender be”) reads like a gloss on Burghley’s maxims:

• Let thy hospitality be moderate . . . rather plentiful than sparing, for I never knew any man grow poor by keeping an orderly table.
• Beware thou spendest not more than three or four parts of thy revenue, and not above a third part of that in thy house.
• Beware of being surety for thy best friends; he that payeth another man’s debts seeketh his own decay.
• Towards thy superiors be humble, yet generous; with thine equals familiar yet respectful; towards these inferiors show much humanity and some familiarity, as to bow the body, stretch forth the hand and to uncover the head.
• Trust not any man with thy life, credit or estate, for it is mere folly for a man to entrust himself to his friend.75
In another close parallel, Burghley’s homespun advice was based on his relation to his wayward eldest son, Thomas. Like Laertes, Thomas was living abroad in Paris and had acquired a reputation as a gambler and a rake, causing his father much anguish. Burghley later formulated these precepts for his younger son, Robert, who reverenced his father and took them to heart. Marlowe also seems to have learned from the great statesman, one of whose precepts counseled, “Be sure you keep some great man always to your Friend.”

In Hamlet and the Scottish Succession, Lilian Winstanley adds a few other salient details to this emerging likeness. She notes that like Burghley, who was chancellor of Cambridge, Polonius takes pride in his connection to a university, even participating in the campus plays. The absence of a spouse for Polonius is one of the minor mysteries in Hamlet. Like Elizabeth’s advisor, Claudius’s councilor confides that he enjoyed one great romance in his life. In Burghley’s case, he eloped with Mary Cheke in the face of family opposition. She died young, after giving birth to Thomas, and he quickly remarried for reasons of advancement at court. In this, the play differs from reality. Nor does Polonius’s fate coincide with Burghley’s. In the Amleth saga, the royal eavesdropper gets sliced up and fed to the hogs. In Hamlet and Hamlet, he is stabbed behind the arras. Burghley, the spider at the heart of the Elizabethan espionage web, died in his own bed. In an admirable bit of sleuthing, Winstanley shows that Burghley was known as the Dromedary, echoing this enigmatic exchange:

HAMLET. Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a Camel?
POLONIUS. By the mass and ’tis, like a Camel indeed.

(3.2.347–348)

A reading of Hamlet that posits Marlowe as its principal author readily accepts that Burghley was the prototype of the play’s platitudinous advisor and contributes several new insights into the play based on his religious proclivities and his relation with the poet. As Queen Elizabeth’s chief minister, lord treasurer, and indispensable statesman, Cecil is largely responsible for the contours of her foreign and domestic policy over forty years. Though an architect of the English Religious Settlement and a fierce anti-Catholic, Burghley is sympathetic with individual Puritans, Separatists, and other Protestant dissenters. He is the immediate superior and confidant of James Morice, the Commons lawyer who attacked the repressive religious legislation in the Parliament of 1593. As Master of the Court of Wards, Cecil also oversees the education of Southampton, Essex, and Arbella Stuart, all of whom play an important role in Marlowe’s personal drama. He is also an old friend of William Danby, the queen’s coroner; the boss of Robert Poley, the
spy and third man at the Deptford rendezvous; a kinsman of Mistress Bull, at whose house Marlowe’s “death” took place; and an investor in the Muscovy Company that had links with her establishment. As secretary of state in his final years, Burghley is in clandestine communication (often through his son, Robert) with the Scottish court regarding the English succession.

Because of the power struggle between Essex and Robert, Burghley lost the earl’s trust in his final years. But aside from Catholics and Spanish ambassadors, Cecil’s only other major flaps in the corridors of power occurred with John Whitgift. In the early days, as chancellor of Cambridge, Burghley appointed the rising young theologian as master of Trinity College, groomed him for advancement to bishop, and approved his appointment as archbishop of Canterbury. But on the Privy Council, he often found himself at odds with the stern disciplinarian on matters of conscience and rebuked him for using methods more repugnant than those of the Catholic Inquisition. Burghley privately supported several reformers and appointed two outspoken Puritans, one to be his personal chaplain and the other to instruct his son, Robert. However, he was no prude. Once, when Archbishop Sandys of York was found in flagrante delicto with a local innkeeper’s wife, he prudently accepted the excuse that she must have slipped into his bed unseen.

Polonius’s surprising interest in the theater in Hamlet is paralleled by Burghley’s use of the stage as reported by the Spanish ambassador. “For what we otherwise know of Cecil it is not easy to picture him in the role of coach to obscure playwrights composing ribald comedies,” historian Read explains. “But [Ambassador] Feria could hardly have invented the tale. As it stands, without any confirming evidence, it is an interesting revelation of the use of the stage for political propaganda.”

As the Crown’s principal official and fount of intelligence, Burghley’s surveillance network, relations at court, and precepts are adroitly mirrored—or parodied—in the play. And for all of his meddling and stale homilies, Polonius is represented as personally honest, attentive to his children (even as he manipulates them), and a patron of the theater. In Burghley: Tudor Statesman, W. W. Beckingsale observes:

By being all things to all men, Burghley presented a baffling mirror to those observers to whom he did not choose to reveal himself. He could discern “what things are to be laid open, and what to be secreted and what to be showed at half lights and to whom and when.” . . . Like Elizabeth, who knew that princes were set upon a stage for all the world to see, Burghley understand that public life was a play and he acted his part behind the appropriate masks. . . He took the roles of wise counsellor, great lord, just judge in the morality play of the public imag-
inaction. If in the end he was taken for Polonius, it was the penalty of having held the stage so long.78

Whether or not Polonius overstayed his welcome like Burghley, his name offers a further clue to his historical correlative. In the First Quarto, Polonius’s name appears as Coramis, from the Latin cor meaning “heart” and ambis from the adjective ambo meaning “both” (e.g., “ambidextrous”). The name is an apparent word play on Burghley’s motto cor unum, via una, which meant “one heart, one way.” Instead of steadfastness and singleness of purpose, the first version of Hamlet implies, he was double-minded or duplicitous.

Nearly a half century earlier, when Queen Elizabeth first appointed Cecil as her chief minister, she told him, “This judgment I have of you, that you will not be corrupted by any manner of gift and that you will be faithful to the State and that, without respect of my private will, you will give me that counsel which you think best.”79 As lord treasurer, Burghley did earn a reputation for personal incorruptibility. And this is reflected in the play’s depiction of Polonius. Unlike the king and queen, he is not portrayed as susceptible to gifts, bribes, or flattery. The play also accords with his pious moralizing, which is scathingly satirized. However, the allusion to him being double-minded was probably objectionable to his son, Robert, and Coramis’s name was discreetly changed to Polonius in Q2.

Another possible clue to Polonius’s historical model comes in Act 2, when Hamlet likens Polonius to a fishmonger. Many critics gloss this as a slang for “pimp” or “bawd,” referring to the old man’s use of Ophelia as bait to divine the prince’s state of mind. But Cecil’s support of a measure mandating the eating of fish on Wednesdays has also been cited. Early in Elizabeth’s reign, Burghley restricted the eating of meat on Wednesdays, as well as the traditional Fridays and Saturdays, in order to support the navy, which controlled the fishing trade. The queen’s chief minister took pains to point out that the switch was patriotic and not due to religious scruples, as in Catholicism. However, for those who could afford it, an exemption could be had in the form of a flesh-eating license—a practice that smacked of indulgences and that was satirized by Falstaff in 2 Henry IV.

The fishmonger reference may also refer to one or more incidents involving James Morice, the leader of the Puritans in Parliament. During the 1589 session in which he lost his liberty for speaking out against Archbishop Whitgift’s repression, Morice chastised Burghley, who was his friend, confidant, and superior at the Court of Wards. Burghley advised him that he shouldn’t have expressed his opposition to “the common people,” but privately to Elizabeth. While in detention for several months, Morice complained that the summer heat and stale air left him “gasp[ing] for breath, like
the taynted fyshe in a corrupt water.” He also chastised Burghley, a noted supporter of the fishing industry, for putting mercantile interests above matters touching upon liberty and conscience. “Billes of assize of bread, shippinge of fyshe, and such like maie be offerde and receayved in to the House and no offence to hir Majesties Royal Commoundement, being but as the tithing of mint. But the greate things of the lawe and publique Justice maie not be tollerated without offence. Well, my good lord, be it so.” 80 The reference to Polonius as a fishmonger may allude shly to these events, as well as to the 1593 Parliament in which Morice again stood up to Whitgift and Elizabeth when Marlowe was swept up in the general crackdown on reform and nonconformity. During this tumultuous session, Robert Cecil spoke up in the Commons, according to one historian, “to save Morice from the consequences of his rash motion, by suggesting that the bill should be stayed until the Queen had been consulted.” 81 Polonius’s moralizing advice, “give thy thoughts no tongue” (1.3.63), perfectly captures this Cecilian trait.

The “corrupt water” that suffocated Morice, the Puritan clergy, Separatists, and poets and artists such as Marlowe was directly stirred up by the archbishop’s rigid exercise of authority, especially his subversion of the queen. As historian Collinson notes in Elizabethans, even the lords in the upper house of Parliament, the bastion of conservatism, were concerned “with the danger that Whitgift could poison the reputation of the Commons in the estimation of the Queen.” 82 It is this poisonous state of affairs, the collusion between Whitgift and Elizabeth, that Hamlet constructs in the unseemly union between Claudius and Gertrude. If not outwardly blessed by Burghley, this collusion was likely rationalized by him in the hypocritical manner employed by Polonius.

Burghley’s role in the death of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587 also involved poisoning, but in a literal rather than a figurative way. In partnership with Francis Walsingham, who was secretary of state at the time, Burghley hoped to rid England of its greatest potential threat. In their view, so long as she lived, Mary would be a magnet for conspirators who wanted to assassinate Elizabeth, replace her with the Scots queen, and return the country to Catholicism. The two privy councilors successfully masterminded the conspiracy for which Mary was arrested, oversaw the forgery of evidence, arranged for the torture of witnesses into testifying falsely against her, and manipulated the trial so that she couldn’t defend herself.

The only problem was that Elizabeth was loath to see the capital sentence carried out. In a Hamlet-like bout of procrastination, the queen refused to sanction Mary’s execution. To Burghley’s repeated requests to carry out the order, Elizabeth replied that she needed more time for “prayer and contemplation.” In frustration, Walsingham and Burghley prepared a
death warrant and instructed Davison, the queen’s secretary, to get her signature. Still she balked and let the matter rest for several weeks. Finally, in early February, three and a half months months after the trial, the councilors tried again and Davison shuffled the warrant into routine papers and got her signature. But once more, the queen asked that the execution be delayed.

Convinced that Elizabeth was not in her right mind, Walsingham and Burghley attached the Great Seal to the warrant themselves. They prepared to send it to Sir Amyas Paulet, who had custody over the hapless prisoner and was charged with overseeing the execution. But that morning, Elizabeth found out about the sealed warrant from Davison and let it be known that “another way of doing it” had to be found. As the historical drama unfolded, an alternative solution came up: poisoning Mary. Elizabeth signaled to Davison that the tainted cup would be preferable to beheading, the customary mode of execution and the one that had been used to put her mother to death. Notified of the queen’s latest change of heart, Burghley summoned the Privy Council to meet at his house, and it was decided to dispatch the warrant without notifying the queen. Paulet, in whose custody Mary remained, was given the option to poison Mary, but declined with moral indignation.

That night, Elizabeth dreamt that Mary was executed and the next morning angrily confronted Davison, who feigned ignorance of what was happening. A few days later, however, the hapless secretary was instructed by his powerful superiors to give the bad news to the queen. She reacted with predictable fury, raging at Paulet, a Puritan, who had refused to employ a more humane means and poison Mary, “The daintiness of these precise fellows!” In the end, Davison was made the scapegoat, relieved of his post, imprisoned, and left destitute. The queen was officially exonerated from any involvement, as was Burghley, who let it be known he had been ill and confined to his home during these unfortunate events. Even Mary’s son, James, and the French court bought the cover story that Davison and several enemies of the Scottish court on the Privy Council had taken matters into their own hands against the better judgment of the queen and her principal advisors. In *William Cecil: The Power Behind Elizabeth*, British historian Alan Gordon Smith relates that Elizabeth directed her furor toward Burghley:

But though it was her greatest, it was not her first humiliation at his hands. She would recover from it in time. It hardly mattered very much if she did not. Burghley’s course was run, his achievement complete: the killing of Mary was the consummation of his life’s endeavour. The Queen of Scots had died, as she had lived, the personal representative of a cause, and with her perished what Burghley had striven all his life to destroy.53
Though not referred to directly in *Hamlet*, the episode mirrors many of the play’s themes. Indeed, Queen Elizabeth wins the Elizabethan Academy Award for her multiple roles. In the space of three and a half months to four months (the same time frame that the action in *Hamlet* takes place), amid an atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia at court, she performs the part of Hamlet, delaying her revenge, steeling her conscience, and temporizing about providence; she mimics the role of Claudius in stooping to use poison on her closest relative; she reprises the role of Gertrude in complying with the duplicity; she loses her wits like Ophelia and appears deranged to others; and like Laertes, she takes retribution on the closest person at hand, her secretary Davison, the Rosencrantz-like custodian of the sealed documents.

In the play, the treatment of Polonius appears to reflect Marlowe’s general unease about the Crown, his own complicity in its sins (e.g., through courier or intelligence work), and doubts about his protector. The plight of the Catholics in England touched upon religious freedom and had obvious affinities with his own case. Over the years, Burghley had been the main architect of Catholic disenfranchisement. Hundreds of devout priests and laity, including grandmothers who sheltered priests in their vestibules and printers who imported Catholic texts from abroad, had been executed for their religious beliefs and actions. Mary was only the most celebrated example. In many cases, the deaths were more barbaric than anything John Whitgift and his minions carried out against the Puritans and other Protestant dissenters. Twice in the play, Polonius swears “by the mass,” evidently satirizing Whitgift’s Catholic antipathies.

Burghley also had a hand in the Marprelate affair. When Martin’s first tract appeared, Cecil addressed the original note to Whitgift about this “lewd and seditious” matter, setting in motion the manhunt for “persons of unquiet spyrrites.” Along with the lord admiral and the lord chancellor, the lord treasurer had ordered that the Marprelate printers (including Valentine Simmes, who later printed the first edition of *Hamlet*) be held in close confinement and tortured, if necessary, to unmask the author. In addition, Burghley played a pivotal role in John Penry’s tragic fate. After he was suspected of being Martin and fleeing to Scotland, Penry found protection under King James and wrote subversive materials. Burghley demanded that James forbid further publishing and banish Penry. From Scotland, Penry returned to England and was convicted of sedition for *Reformation No Enemie*, a book he had published in Scotland, though Burghley later tried but failed to save his life. There was also the case of Dr. Lopez, the Jewish physician to Elizabeth, who was sacrificed by the Cecils (and Essex) to the Machiavellian requirements of state. Marlowe had alluded respectfully to the Jewish community in both *Dr. Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*. After Lopez
was convicted on trumped-up charges, the queen was reluctant to sign his death warrant and, again like Gertrude, was pressured to comply.

In their defense, it can be countered that Catholicism represented a potentially deadly threat to Protestant England. Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth in 1570 and threatened measures against English Catholics who obeyed and recognized her authority. Ten years later, Pope Gregory XIII released English Catholics from this ban pending the invasion of England and the queen’s overthrow. Cardinal William Allen, the English Catholic spiritual leader in exile, branded the queen a tyrant and a heretic and took charge of smuggling priests into the country to preach defiance. In Elizabethan England, the line between freedom of religion and sedition was as complicated as it is today in parts of the world where religious extremism and terrorism are synonymous.

While Marlowe would have been thankful to Burghley for arranging his flight and orchestrating his resurrected literary career, these instances of religious bigotry and judicial murder at the highest level could not easily be swept behind the arras. Torture and murder in the name of national security go to the heart of the rottenness in England that are projected onto Denmark and are part of what makes Hamlet such a modern play. Yet Burghley was more flexible, accommodating, and personable than Whitgift, and he was the court of last resort for religious dissenters. Throughout his life he intervened on behalf of imprisoned or condemned Puritans and Separatists, and he intervened to stop the anti-Martinist plays on the London stage. But usually he didn’t act until the last minute, after letting injustice run its course.

Although he died peacefully in his own bed, his dramatic counterpart, Polonius, meets a sudden, violent demise in his mistress’s chamber in the play. The setting follows the Viking sources, but the climactic scene administers a strong dose of literary revenge into the enlightened listener’s ear. Marlowe may not have had any blood directly on his own hands, but he clearly didn’t feel altogether comfortable in his capacity as an espial and projector. The thread of sympathy for Catholicism that runs through the Shakespearean canon, including Hamlet, especially after possible exile in Catholic Italy, may represent a correction for the deviation in his own moral compass. According to the Baines Note, Kit said that “if there be any god or any good Religion, then it is in the papistes because the service of god is performed with more ceremonies, as Elevation of the mass, organs, singing men, Shaven Crownes, &cta. That all protestantes ar Hypocrickall asses.”

The fatal injury to Marlowe’s name and reputation may also have colored the depiction of Polonius to the extent that his character is based on Burghley’s. After the events in Deptford, Marlowe was forever tainted (i.e.,
poisoned) with the charge of stabbing a man from behind (as was Hamlet after stabbing Polonius). He metamorphosed into “the coward conquest of a wretch’s knife,” as Shakespeare’s Sonnet 74 puts it. My own hunch is that Kit was not told what the real cover story would be for the staged altercation at Deptford. Or perhaps it was altered to fit the requirements of the inquest, as events spun out of control. It was certainly in character for Burghley to fasten blame unjustly and sacrifice his underlings, as the treatment of Davison shows. Afterwards, the Cecils may have pled they had no choice except to slander his name and he should be grateful to be alive. But the loss of his honor and reputation continued to haunt Marlowe ever after and, in *Hamlet*, becomes an obsessive theme.

From the vantage point of four centuries later, it appears that Burghley had a deeper, broader view than Marlowe of the issues at stake. From long age and experience, he knew that times change and Kit’s regrets would ultimately pass. The important thing was to save the daring poet-intelligencer’s life, assure an opportunity for his voice to be heard in the future, and exert a successful and beneficent influence on posterity. The loss of name, identity, and the familiar security of family and friends was a tremendous sacrifice. But it was no greater than that made by many of Marlowe’s protagonists and, as the Cecils evidently foresaw, led to almost limitless political and cultural benefits for England and literary immortality. Young, impressionable, and dependent on others, Kit took his loss to heart and succumbed to self-pity, as the sonnets, undoubtedly meant only for private circulation, show.

On the continent, his fury abated, but following the archbishop’s bonfire, especially if he returned to England, Marlowe’s anger and frustration appear to have resurfaced. From this view, *Hamlet* marks the turning point in his own return to psychological and spiritual health. In wrestling with his own demons, Kit projected some of his own interior landscape on Denmark and the relations among the ruling family and its court.

Finally, Polonius’s humorlessness partakes of some of Burghley’s undisguised contempt for jesters. In the final precept to his son, Robert, Elizabeth’s somber councilor warned:

> Jests when they savor too much of truth leave a bitterness in the mind of those that are touched. And although I have already pointed all this inclusive, yet I think it necessary to leave it thee as a caution, because I have seen many so prone to quip and gird as they would rather lose their friend than their jests, and if by chance their boiling brain yield a quaint scoff they will travail to be delivered of it as a woman with child. Those nimble apprehensions are but the froth of wit.87
As a rebuke to the antics of the Danish prince, Polonius could not have put it better. For the principal author of Hamlet, England’s lord of misrule, the most unpardonable sin of all was the lack of a sense of humor. As the butt of generations of high school students who have ridiculed his platitudes, Polonius has provoked more mirth than he expressed. To his author, who fashioned him around Burghley, the oppressive society he represented was no laughing matter. Indeed, as we shall see, in looking at Ophelia, Polonius’s daughter, the stifling atmosphere at court was prelude to tragedy.

**Ophelia: Crownet Weeds**

Ye are from dingle and fresh glade, ye flowers!
By some kind hand to cheer my dungeon sent;
O’er you the oak shed down the summer showers,
And the lark’s nest was where your bright cups bent.
—Arabella Stuart

At first glance, Ophelia is an unlikely muse or goddess figure. Compared to her crafty, beguiling father, she is the model of pale innocence and the sweet bloom of youth. As a dutiful daughter, she is naively enlisted in the campaign to spy on Hamlet and provides intelligence to Polonius, the throne, and her brother that serves to compromise her lover as well as undermine her own relationship with the troubled prince. As a personification of art and beauty, Ophelia mirrors the venomous effects produced by the unholy union between the king and queen—the rottenness in the realm.

From this perspective, Ophelia represents one of the three pillars of Elizabethan society that is corrupted by the harsh, repressive policies of Archbishop Whitgift and Queen Elizabeth. At a mythological level, she plays Venus—or, like the heroine in Hero and Leander, at least a young devotee of the goddess of love—to Gertrude’s Juno and to Hamlet’s muse. The tension between the prince’s mother and beloved reaches a peak when Gertrude refuses to see Ophelia in her distracted state. Like the wife of Zeus, the king of the gods in Greek mythology, Gertrude is jealous of Ophelia’s prerogatives and puts what she perceives as her son’s welfare and advancement over that of his paramour.

Besides appearances in Der Brill’s prologue and the Dumb Show, the muse does not appear directly on stage in Hamlet, but like a Kabuki actress is invisibly present in many scenes and nearly every soliloquy the prince gives.
Representing wisdom, she constantly inspires him to take resolute action. Carrying the spear of knowledge, Athena—the Greek counterpart to Minerva—was known in classical literature as “the Spear Shaker”—a pun on William Shakespeare’s name that was no doubt a source of endless mirth to Marlowe, the master wordsmith and punster, as well as his actor friend and dramatic partner.

Throughout the play, Hamlet the courtier, soldier, and scholar is torn among the competing claims of beauty, power, and truth. Marlowe, too, led a tripartite life—shepherd or wandering poet and lover, spy and emissary for the Crown, and scholar and seeker after forbidden knowledge. *Dido, Tamora*, and *Faustus* explore these three aims of life, as do Kit’s other plays and poems. His entire canon can be seen as a contemporary epic enshrining the mythical event that triggered the Trojan War. In the beauty contest among Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena, Paris awarded the trophy to the goddess of love after she promised him Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world. The myth of the golden apple (which Paris presented the fairest of the goddesses) permeates Marlowe’s writings, from the appearance of Helen’s spirit in *Faustus* and her mention in most of his other works, to the systematic exploration of the pursuits of beauty, power, and truth.

In Marlowe’s dedicatory passages to Mary Sidney, Southampton, and other patrons, the muse is ever present. In *Hamlet*, she also appears in her chthonic aspect as Hecate, the ancient goddess of the crossroads, custodian of lunar mysteries, protector of roadside graves, and the divine witch. In the play-within-the-play, the prince invokes the goddess of darkness, just as *Fratreicide Punished*, the German *Hamlet* possibly based on the original *Ur-Hamlet*, opens the play with Hecate in the guise of sable Night, calling down mayhem and mischief on Denmark.

More than in Gertrude, who remains a rather stiff, unapproachable figure, the allusions to the goddess constellate around the character of Ophelia. Deriving from the Greek for “sucro” or “usefulness,” Ophelia appears to be Marlowe’s or Kyd’s invention, though her unnamed prototype appears in the ancient sources. In *Der BB*, she assumes the name Ofelia, is rejected by the prince and told to go to a nunnery, and commits suicide by jumping off a cliff.

In the opening of the Shakespearean versions, she is the beautiful nymph, the pure and innocent heroine. As the action unfolds, she becomes the obedient servant to her father, her brother, and the heads of state. In the process, her mind splits and she acts out the extremes of nun and whore as Hamlet characterizes her in his own tragic flight from reason and conscience. Her songs, dress, and floral coronet mimic both the Virgin Mary and Maid Marion, the outlaw, common-law wife of Robin Hood. They are
twin aspects of the feminine divine. Neither Ophelia nor Gertrude is left breathing at the end of the play, which tells us something about the corrosive effects of Elizabethan society on women, both obedient and compliant females as well as self-reliant and assertive ones.

The mythological dimension of the play figures heavily in Ophelia’s tragic fate. As the goddess of the waning moon, Hecate rules childbirth, initiation, and death. When they express fear or jest about Ophelia giving birth out of wedlock, Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet refer to this aspect of Hecate’s domain, while barrenness would also come under her aegis. (Curiously, after thirty years, Gertrude has had no children but Hamlet, echoing the barrenness of Elizabeth.) The goddess is associated with herbs, garlands of flowers, and plaintive love songs, and in addition to intuition and wisdom, she bestows madness and lunacy. The owl that is mentioned in one of her songs, the rue she gives, and the willow tree in whose vines Ophelia drowns are sacred to Hecate. Her death parallels Dido’s, who after Aeneas leaves her, invokes Hecate’s curse on her lover before committing suicide. Although this scene is not included in Marlowe’s play, *Dido Queen of Carthage*, the poet would have been familiar with it from the *Aeneid* and recreates it in *Hamlet*. Ophelia’s gifts of rosemary and pansies to Laertes, emblematic of remembrance, unwittingly steel his resolve to avenge their father’s death. Hecate’s curse on Dido’s behalf resulted in the endless wanderings of the Trojans and the eventual death of Aeneas. A similar dynamic contributes to Hamlet’s fate after he rejects his beloved.88

Are there any historical role models for Ophelia? Several notable ladies at court such as Elizabeth Vernon and Lady Essex have been suggested, but the correspondences are weak and unconvincing. A more likely candidate is Arbella Stuart, the princess and claimant to the English throne. As a girl, Arbella may have been tutored by Marlowe, then a divinity student at Cambridge, while she was living in London. In fact, as John Baker and other Marlovians have suggested, this role may have been one of the instances of “good service” to his country cited by the Privy Council in directing the university authorities to award Marlowe’s M.A. degree despite his prolonged absences from the university. Of royal blood, the young princess was a potential future queen of England and a focus of Catholic conspiracies. Elizabeth’s relations with Arbella were warm and supportive when the young woman was resident in London, and every effort was made to groom her for possible leadership, especially as an alternative to her aunt, Mary Queen of Scots.

What makes this connection so attractive from a literary view is that Lord Burghley, the historical figure associated with Polonius, in actual life served as her fatherly protector! As an orphan, Arbella was a subject of the Court
of Wards presided over by Burghley. While he named Bess of Hardwick, her grandmother, as guardian, and though she lived with Bess, he exercised parental authority over Arbella’s living conditions, education, and future matrimonial prospects. Burghley’s relation to her was comparable to that between Polonius and Ophelia. This reading of Hamlet perfectly explains the minor mystery in the play of why Ophelia has no mother. As the ward of Burghley, Arbella had a legally appointed father figure, but no mother.

If he was her tutor for several years, Marlowe may have fallen in love with the young heiress and vice versa. Yet, whatever his poetic and dramatic accomplishments, a marriage between the pair would have been out of the question. English royalty simply didn’t marry commoners, at least until the early twentieth century, when it still caused a scandal. Perhaps Marlowe was dismissed as tutor by Burghley precisely because of such an infatuation. The historical account indicates that Arbella’s teacher was let go because of a quarrel over finances with Bess. “That [Learning] and poverty should always kiss” (470) as Kit lamented in Hero and Leander. However, it is more likely that the shrewish Bess instigated the altercation, since she had a history of quarreling with her own children’s tutors. Meanwhile, like Polonius, Burghley may have doubted Kit’s motives and broken up the relationship before Arbella got with child as in the play, which would have further complicated the succession crisis and imperiled his own position as master of wards and chief secretary to the queen.

From this remove, it is impossible to know the nature of Marlowe’s and Arbella’s relationship, if indeed they had one at all. She was tutored in literature, foreign languages, and music—all subjects in which Kit was proficient—and learned to compose verse in iambic pentameter, as the selection from her poetry at the head of this section shows. In one of her letters, she quotes a passage from Marlowe’s translation of Lucan’s Civil Wars of Rome in which warriors valiantly take their own lives rather than submit to defeat.

Whatever autobiographical strands went into her character, Ophelia is treated harshly by Hamlet. The play’s misogyny moderates the original sources, which are vehement in the extreme, and do not necessarily reflect the poet’s own experience. Hamlet’s denunciation of women echoes (and possibly satirizes) the treatises of John Knox. In A First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women, the Scottish theologian characterized women as “weake, fraile, impacient, feble, and foolshe, . . . unconstant, variable, cruel, and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment . . . And these notable faultes have men in all ages espied in that kinde.”

If sparks ignited between Kit and Arbella, Marlowe may have been dismissed from his tutorial post and sent on missions to Scotland, Paris, and
other distant locations to keep the two young people apart. Such an event would further explain Marlowe’s irritation and resentment toward Burghley, which comes out in Hamlet’s mocking attitude toward Polonius and his constant lewd jokes and banter at the older man’s expense. Preserving Arbella for some English earl, French king, or Spanish prince would be little more than playing the fishmonger or mimicking Jephtha from Kit’s point of view. In the play, the events are typically inverted, as in many Shakespearean constructions. Interestingly, Ophelia is discouraged from responding to Hamlet’s advances because she is a commoner, and a liaison with the prince could only result in shame and disaster.

Archbishop Whigfield may even have gotten involved in the affair, as Claudius does in giving unsolicited advice to Polonius. Not only does this add a further wrinkle to the story, but it also would offer a visceral emotional dimension underlying their estrangement and the events leading up to Deptford. In the play, Gertrude displays an ambivalence toward Ophelia, as Elizabeth did toward Arbella when she used her as a check to the ambitions of James. Yet Gertrude is more receptive to a marriage between the young lovers than is Polonius or Laertes. After Ophelia’s death, Gertrude laments that she hoped the maiden someday would have married her son, acknowledging her royal claim (like Arbella’s) and her role as possible successor as queen.

As for Ophelia’s madness and suicide, one of the main elements in the play, these are paralleled in real life by Arbella’s fate. Caught up in the machinations of the court and the succession crisis, Burghley, Elizabeth, and later King James and Robert Cecil blocked every one of Arbella’s romantic attachments and prospects. As Elizabeth’s reign came to an end, at about the time when Hamlet was being revised in late 1602 and early 1603, the English maiden unwittingly became the center of two conspiracies to place her on the throne instead of James. Treated as a pawn by all sides, Arbella became distracted, refused to eat, and wrote incoherent letters to the queen about an imaginary lover—notes that are eerily similar to Ophelia’s wild imaginings in Hamlet. Arbella was also familiar with botanicals from the herb garden at Hardwick and prepared decoctions and remedies to treat her ills. Like the unhappy woman in the play, she voiced sorrows that time and experience “have grafted in my heart and I have watered in tears.”

The author of Hamlet may have anticipated Arbella’s ultimate madness, which culminated in her death—probably by suicide. In 1610, after another seven years of enforced maidenhood by King James, Arbella eloped with William Seymour. Intending to flee to the continent, Arbella was apprehended in a small boat on the English Channel following a frantic search ordered by Robert Cecil. Seymour, who also had royal blood and whose
union with Arbella created a formidable challenge to the Stuart line, escaped. Confined to the Tower of London, Arbella sank into despair, writing incoherent verse. She eventually stopped eating, wasted away, and died in 1615, taking her own life like the soldiers in Marlowe’s translation of Lucan, who preferred death to confinement.

“Throughout her life, and ever since, Arbella has often been spoken of as ‘distracted’ or more seriously rumoured actually to be mad,” Sarah Gristwood explains in her recent biography, Arbella: England’s Lost Queen. “It is tempting to dismiss the allegation out of hand—like Hamlet, Arbella surely ‘knew a hawk from a handsaw.’ But her letters do at this stressful juncture in her life exhibit signs of exaggeration or fantasy amounting almost to delusion. She herself called the ‘scribbling melancholy’ into which she had fallen ‘a kind of madness.’”

In an appendix, Gristwood examines the possibility that Marlowe served as Arbella’s tutor and, while she finds the available evidence inconclusive, notes the suggestive passage in Edward II about the scholar, Baldock, who “has read unto her [the princess] since she was a child” (2.1.30).

Drawing a further comparison between Ophelia’s “maimed rites” (5.1.186) and Arbella’s, Arthur McGee observes that, like Hamlet’s sweetheart, the English princess “was interred at Westminster without funeral pomp, in the night.” But the seeds of her fate were apparent years earlier and may have served as augury in the play. As Arbella’s poems indicate, she had a deep love of flowers. Many critics have identified the “Crownet weeds” (4.7.183) that Ophelia wore on her head when she drowned as buttercups, the flower mentioned in Arbella’s poem at the head of this section. Curiously, Elizabeth was also familiar with herbology and, like Gertrude in the play, may have discussed the virtue of flowers with her niece. In a further parallel, as Harry Levin and other Shakespearian scholars have pointed out, Ophelia’s mad scene in Hamlet is based on that of Zabina in Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, including passages in both plays invoking Hecate’s coach.

In some ways, Ophelia resembles Kore, the daughter of the grain goddess Demeter, who was carried away by Hades while picking wildflowers in a meadow. In the Underworld, as the bride of death, Kore was known as Persephone. In the Homeric hymns, Hecate is described as “gentle-tempered,” and she is portrayed as protecting Kore “lovingly.” In the ancient mystery rites, one of Hecate’s roles was to assist in Persephone’s return from the realm of darkness for half the year. In this myth, we also find an echo of Marlowe’s fate. His anima—or artistic spirit and good name—was banished into the world of eternal torment and could only be revived by readings or performances of his poems and plays.

As a footnote to Arbella’s misfortune, the machinations surrounding her
triggered the downfall of the School of Night. Sir Walter Ralegh was implicated—probably falsely—in the Bye plot to kill James and put Arbella on the throne, leading to his imprisonment and eventual execution. Sir Henry Percy, the Wizard Earl, joined him in the Tower a couple of years later on an equally dubious pretext following the Gunpowder Plot. Ironically, Marlowe, who was accused of giving lectures on the black arts at their academy, was one of the few survivors. As the queen of Night, Hecate would have been the tutelary deity of the School of Night. The muse was able to save her darling poet, but as in Hamlet beauty, art, and truth are crushed.

As in a glass, the maidenly face of the triple goddess appears in the brief life, wistful romance, and tragic death of Ophelia. In the character of her brother, Laertes, other archetypal and historical resonances converge.

Laertes: Passion’s Slave

And I, Mr. Secretary, do clearly and freely forgive you with all my soul; because I mean to die in charity with all men.

—Earl of Essex

As a foil to Hamlet, Laertes represents the man of action, determination, and resolve. Bold and decisive, he acts out his emotions, often to the point of rashness. It is hard to imagine him soliloquizing like the prince and putting off what can be accomplished immediately. If Hamlet delays to the point of endangering his own cause, Laertes has the opposite problem. He acts without reflection. Conscience, as the prince says, may make cowards of us all, but Laertes doesn’t pause to think. He is a typical hothead, or what Hamlet would call “passion’s slave” (3.2.71).

Laertes’ name may stem from that of a Trojan involved in the death of Achilles who is mentioned in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. As this was one of Marlowe’s favorite texts, he may have drawn on this source, which complements the Ilium theme in Hamlet’s discussion with the Player. Laertes is also the father of Odysseus. There are also echoes of the Odyssey in the play, such as the “fanned and winnowed opinions” (5.2.176). The phrase alludes to the final scene in Homer’s epic in which Odysseus leaves Laertes, Penelope, and Telemachus to go inland and plant the winnowing fan in fulfillment of his promise to the ghost of Tiresius.

In the German Hamlet, Der BB, Laertes’ character is known as Leonhardus, from the root word for lionlike. Q1 spells his name Leartes, while Q2
and F change it to Laertes. From a literary and historical perspective, Laertes’ character appears to be partially modeled on Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex. Like Laertes, he was strong, powerful, and ambitious. He visited Paris, as does his counterpart in *Hamlet*. However, he was not as wanton as the fictional young courtier. It appears that Laertes’ character is an amalgam of Essex’s with that of Thomas Cecil, Lord Burghley’s oldest son, who was dissolute in his younger days and prompted his father, like Polonius, to send moralizing letters to his son in the French capital. In the play, Laertes is kept under the careful watch of the court, as was Essex, and Polonius dispatches a personal agent, Reynaldo (whose name means “fox” in French) to spy on him.

On stage, Laertes’ headstrong nature echoes Essex’s, especially in the scene where he rushes back from Paris (as the earl rushed back from Ireland) and bursts in on the sovereigns (as Essex intruded unannounced on Elizabeth in her bedchamber). (The prince’s own earlier intrusion on the queen in her chamber like a “wretched, rash, intruding fool” [3.4.36] is another apparent reference to that scenario.) Demanding immediate satisfaction, Laertes confronts the Danish rulers in the same manner with which his historical prototype challenged Elizabeth and the Privy Council. In the play, Laertes arrives at the head of a mob that is championing his cause: “choose we, *Laertes* shall be king, / Caps, hands, and tongues applaud it to the clouds / *Laertes* shall be king. *Laertes* king” (4.5.99–101). Fearing a rebellion, the king and queen refer openly to his “treason” (120), the charge that Essex ultimately was convicted of following his uprising. (In Q1, this scene is absent, indicating that this version was completed prior to the uprising in 1601 or was of too recent memory to include. Q2, published after the queen’s death, features the rebellion.) In the play, the rulers succeed in soothing the tempestuous young rebel, as Elizabeth and her advisors cooled down Essex. Through praise, flattery, and promises of advancement, the king deflects Laertes’ fury from the throne to Hamlet, in the way that Elizabeth and Burghley may have channeled Essex’s ambition into a rivalry with Raleigh over the queen’s favor. Although the direct threat of revolution is contained, Claudius does not hesitate to sacrifice the son of his former chief advisor on the altar of policy, just as Elizabeth and the Privy Council finally decided to put an end to Essex’s erratic behavior once and for all.

After returning from France, Laertes’ relation with Hamlet also essentially follows that of Essex and Marlowe. After going into exile, Kit may have translated his allegiance to Essex and his intelligence network after the death of Burghley. In the play, Hamlet says that he sees the portrait of Laertes’ cause in his own. At a performance level, this refers to the fact that both young men are avenging a father’s death. By slaying Polonius, Hamlet iron-
ically orphans Laertes and Ophelia, prompts another cycle of revenge, and sets into motion the events that will result in the deaths of the brother and sister, as well as his own.

Like Claudius, who offers Laertes personal guidance and advice on mourning his father and sister, John Whitgift served as a mentor to Essex after his father died and when he was a student at Cambridge University. In turning Laertes against Hamlet, Claudius provokes him to a fevered pitch. Like Faustus, the heedless young man declares, “To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil, / Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit / I dare damnation” (4.5.129–131). In making common cause with the prince of darkness, he pledges to “cut [Hamlet’s] throat i’ th’ Church” (4.7.137). The diabolical references and religious setting can be seen as allusions to Whitgift, who in the person of Claudius proceeds to justify church-sanctioned murder: “No place indeed should murder sanctuarize, / Revenge should have no bounds” (4.7.138–139). In addition to profaning the church, as the Puritans charged, these lines allude to the murder of Thomas à Becket, the saintly archbishop of Canterbury, who was slain in the cathedral near the Marlowe family home at the instigation of a cruel and unscrupulous monarch.

The earl later came to oppose the prelate when he used his power to suppress the Puritans and other nonconformists, as echoed in the graveyard scene. As the funeral procession arrives, Laertes and Hamlet compete in declaring their undying love for Ophelia. Aside from showing them mourning the death of their sister and sweetheart, the scene embodies a heart-felt lament for the loss of innocence, the corruption of the church (in the person of the “churlish” priest that Laertes castigates), and the suppression of individual conscience that permeated Elizabethan society.

In exchanging rapiers and accidentally poisoning each other, the two adversaries fall victim to the pestilence that infects the theater and cultural life in England as well as the contagion that undermines politics, economics, and other domains of society. And just as Hamlet and Laertes are destroyed in the end, Marlowe and Essex were poisoned by the incestuous union of Church and Crown. The prelate was Kit’s special nemesis, while the sovereign was Essex’s.

In the play, these polarities are further mirrored in Hamlet’s and Laertes’ mutual forgiveness and pledge of undying love. At his trial, Essex forgave his judges and strove to put his anger and bitterness behind him. In the sword-fight, Laertes’ declaration that “I have a voice and precedent of peace / To keep my name ungored” (5.2.228–229) anticipates Hamlet, who later casts his dying vote for Fortinbras and shows his determination to prevent his name from being “wounded” (5.2.340). “Gored” particularly alludes to
Adonis, the fair young man in the Marlovian and Shakespearean narrative poems, who is gored by a boar while being pursued by an older monarch, Venus, divine queen of love—another parallel with Essex and Elizabeth.

The play-within-the-play in *Hamlet* also bears a striking resemblance to Essex’s rebellion and the staging of *Richard II*. In the real-life London performance, the earl and his supporters turned to the uncensored Shakespearean text in order to steel their own resolve (much as the prince does) as well as to prick the conscience of the queen. Elizabeth reacted to Essex’s seditious drama at the Globe theatre just as Claudius reacted to the prince’s. He called for the lights to be put out, effectively closing down the performance, just as Elizabeth formally or informally banished Shakespeare’s troupe from London until her wrath had subsided.

The final link to Laertes’ character and identity concerns his family relationships. In the play, Polonius has no wife and his children have no mother. Like Arbella Stuart, Robert Devereux lost his father at a young age and became a ward of the court. Like the heiress, he was brought up under the aegis of Burghley, even living with the councilor and his family at Cecil House before going to the university. In other words, William Cecil was foster father to both Essex and Arbella, just as Polonius was father to Laertes and Ophelia. By virtue of their status as wards, Essex and Arbella were foster brother and sister.

The closeness between Laertes and Ophelia was paralleled in real life by the affinity between Essex and Arbella. The two royal wards conversed frequently and enjoyed an affectionate, brotherly-sisterly relationship. Though observers at court tried to link them politically or romantically, Arbella insisted indignantly that their ties were purely platonic. “Shall not I say I never had nor shall have the like friend?” she recalled on the anniversary of his death. “My noble friend . . . who graced me in his greatest and happy fortunes [at the risk of] eclipsing part of her Majesty’s favours from him.”97 Note the typical Shakespearean plot inversion here: where Laertes mourns for Ophelia in the play, Arbella mourns for Essex in reality.

Unlike the heiress, who lost both parents, Essex lost just his father. His mother, Lattice Knollys, remarried, and he kept in touch with her, though he lived with Burghley. In the play, Laertes makes one fleeting reference to his mother, though she never appears on stage: “That drop of blood that’s calm proclaims me Bastard, / Cries cuckold to my father, brandes the Harlot / Even here between the chaste unsmirched brow / Of my true mother” (4.5.112–115). Whether or not this is a subtle allusion to Lattice, the members of Polonius’s family—as well as their characters and personalities—are modeled, at least partially, after Burghley, Arbella, and Essex.
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:
To Be Commanded

GUILDENSTERN. But we both obey.
And here give up ourselves, in the full bent
To lay our service freely at your feet
To be commanded.

(2.2.31–34)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern trace their roots to the Viking saga. As companions of Amleth, several unnamed courtiers spy upon the prince and report back to King Feng. In Der BB (and possibly the Ur-Hamlet), they are referred to as Bandits and are given a decidedly more sinister character than they possess in the Shakespearean texts. Q1 bestows proper names on the hapless pair, Rosencraft and Gilderstone, which become Rosencrus and Guyldesterne in Q2 and F. Modern editions refer to Hamlet’s two schoolfellows as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Both names are Danish and/or German, with the former meaning “rosary” or “garland” and the latter “golden star.” Aside from faint theological echoes, the names suggest counterfeit friendship or insincerity—meaning perhaps that they both fail to live up to their appellations. Historical links have been proposed by critics, including suggestions that the characters may be based on several Danish courtiers by the same names who recently visited Scotland and England. Shakespearean critic Harry Levin sees Valdes and Cornelius, Dr. Faustus’s two adepts in the black arts in Marlowe’s play, as forerunners to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Marlovian writer John Baker observes that the names appear in a scientific paper that Johann Kepler, the great Danish astronomer, sent to Thomas Harriot, the English mathematician and associate of the School of Night.98 Baker suggests that Harriot may have shown the paper to Marlowe, or that Kit may even have visited Kepler, who lived in Prague, while in exile. The bright star in the opening of Hamlet, Baker suggests, may allude to the supernova that Kepler reported in 1573. As we shall see later, in the section on the ghost, Copernican astronomy permeates the play.

On a very basic level, Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s sycophancy, glibness, and indistinguishability remind us of Richard Baines and Richard Cholmeley, the two informers who charged Kit with atheism, blasphemy, and sedition. (Note the same first name Richard.) As an agent of the Crown and as Marlowe’s chamber mate in Flushing, Baines informs on Kit, accus-
es him of going over to the Catholics, and reports that he conspired with a goldsmith to make false coins with the queen’s likeness. Marlowe’s arrest could have incurred the death penalty, but fortunately he was packed off to England (as was the prince) and escaped this fate. We do not know whether Marlowe and Cholmeley were directly acquainted, but the detailed charges in the Remembrance suggest that they may have crossed paths. Also, if Cholmeley were the author of the Dutch Church libels who signed himself “Tamburlaine,” he would have been counterfeiting Kit’s best known dramatic nom de plume. Alternatively, the second informer parodied here could be Thomas Drury, who is believed to have penned the Remembrances and extracted Baines’s statement against Marlowe.

Hamlet appears to dish out their literary punishment, with Baines the former priest receiving the name of a garland of roses, suggesting the rosary, Catholic sympathies, and the repetition of false accusations. Cholmeley or Drury earns the sobriquet of a golden star, a malleable jewel that lends itself to counterfeiting and hence false utterances and harboring a deceitful heart. Both the Baines Note and the Remembrances cite some of the same charges and share the same wording, which is echoed in the pair’s indistinguishability in the play. Hamlet mocks this pair of adder-fanged twins, who always appear on stage together, by giving them interchangeable personalities. And on a larger scale, the satire points to broad issues of obedience, authority, and conformity occasioned by the Elizabethan Religious Settlement and the persecution of nonconformists. The pair’s obsequious use of the refrain “To be commanded” when speaking to Claudius echoes Whitgift’s own sycophancy toward his superiors. In letters to Burghley and Elizabeth, he customarily ended with the salutation, “Yours to be commanded.”

Let us move on now to minor characters in the play. The pirate who providentially kidnaps Hamlet on the sea voyage to England and enables him to escape the custody of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may be based on several real or fictional personages. According to some critics, the episode alludes to Julius Caesar who was captured by pirates for thirty-eight days and won their admiration and trust during his captivity before he was freed. The scene may also glance at Arcadia, a romance written by Philip Sidney and posthumously completed by his sister, Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke, Marlowe’s designated patroness and muse. After being seized by pirates in the story, Pyrocles proves himself in battle, wins his freedom, and is elected chief by “the popular sort.” In a Marlovian context, the pirate also nods at Sir Walter Ralegh. As an English sea captain and explorer, Ralegh periodically raided the Spanish Main and brought back Mexican gold and other captured booty to England. Queen Elizabeth hailed his privateering and called him her “little pirate.” In having the pirate help Hamlet escape,
Marlowe could be paying tribute to his old friend, patron, and fellow poet, who had spoken out courageously in the Parliament of 1593 against religious persecution. In their accusations, Baines and Cholmeley link Kit with Ralegh through reading the atheist lecture or the libertine use of tobacco. In having the pirate (Ralegh) liberate the prince (Marlowe) from Rosen- crantz and Guildenstern (the two informers), the plot provides a measure of poetic and dramatic justice that can only be described as Shakespearean.

The role of the “churlish Priest” (5.1.209) who sanctimoniously withholds last rites from Ophelia until countermanded by Claudius may have been constructed with Richard Bancroft, the bishop of London and chief ecclesiastical henchman of Archbishop Whitgift, in mind. A star pugilist as a university student, Bancroft was known for his combative nature and cavalier attitude toward his enemies. Prosecuting Valentine Simmes for printing an unauthorized ballad, he once boasted, “I could have hanged the fellow long ere this if I listed.”99 (Fortunately, Simmes survived and went on to print the First Quarto of *Hamlet.*) By having the churlish priest reverse his decision and carry out the last rites, the play shows Claudius acting capriciously as head of the church, as did Archbishop Whitgift, and mocks Bancroft’s conformity and subservience to his master. The priest’s mention of “the last trumpet” (5.1.197) invokes not only the image of doomsday, but also the approaching end of the Tudor dynasty.

The Gravedigger: A Quick Lie

“A pick-axe and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding sheet,
O a pit of Clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet.”
—*Hamlet*

(5.1.80–83)

The gravediggers provide some of the most memorable dialogue in *Hamlet.* The only character in the play who can match wits with the prince, the chief clown engages Hamlet in a feisty exchange on the nature and meaning of life as well as imparting dates and historical details germane to the story. And the banter about decaying corpses silhouettes the grim dismemberment at court.

The opening refrain between the clown and his companion touches on several legal doctrines that reflect events in Marlowe’s life. The *se offend*
do defense that they jest about in their mangled Latin parodies the coroner’s inquest on Marlowe’s death, which exonerated Ingram Frizer by reason of self-defense or se defendendo. Clearly, the two clowns do not take the coroner’s report at face value. Their repartee on whether a drowned man or the water should be held responsible for his drowning satirizes theological doctrines bearing on salvation, free will, dissent, and nonconformity. It also raises the broader issue whether Tudor England, especially with Elizabeth’s reign drawing to a close, is the drowning man in need of rescue.

In this scene, “Crownor” or coroner’s law is mentioned twice in farcical contexts (5.1.4 and 19), further alluding to the coroner’s report on Marlowe’s “death.” As a pun, the unique spelling of the word strongly links kingship and death. The term “reckoning” or “reckon” also appears twice in the play. The first comes in connection with the murder of Elder Hamlet in the same passage in which the ghost puns on “Wicked” Whitgift: “No reck’ning made, but sent to my account, / With all my imperfections on my head” (1.5.82–83). The second comes in the letter that Hamlet writes to Ophelia, professing his undying love: “O dear Ophelia I am ill at these numbers, I have not art to reckon my groans” (2.2.125–126). Though not as overt as the use of “reckoning” in As You Like It, both instances can be viewed as subtle reverberations of the Deptford affair that led to Kit’s “death” and possible separation from his true love.

In the course of the clowns’ conversation after Hamlet and Horatio arrive, the gravedigger sings the song at the opening of this section. Ostensibly “the guest” in the song is the skeleton the clown digs up, but ironically it is the prince himself. This connection is underscored a few lines later, when Hamlet inquires whose grave it is, leading to an exchange of puns relying on the two meanings of the verb “to lie” (deceive and recline).

HAMLET. Whose grave’s this sirrah?
CLOWN. Mine, sir, “O a pit of clay for to be made
For such a Guest is meet.”
HAMLET. I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in’t.
CLOWN. You lie out on’t sir, and therefore ’tis not yours; for my part, I do not lie in’t, yet it is mine.
HAMLET. Thou dost lie in’t to be in’t and say ’tis thine, ’tis for the dead, not for the quick, therefore thou liest.
CLOWN. ’Tis a quick lie sir, ’twill away again from me to you.

(5.1.100–108)
Next to the “To be or not to be” soliloquy that it resembles, this is one of the most profound passages in the play. The questions posed are: Whose grave is it, and will that person really be buried there? The clown replies that the grave is his own, but by repeating the refrain “For such a guest is meet,” he implies that it is more appropriate for his guest, Hamlet, foreshadowing the prince’s approaching death.

The prince parries this response with the witty observation that indeed it is the clown’s grave, but he lies or prevaricates because he does not yet occupy it. By denying for a second time that it is Hamlet’s grave, the clown protests too much, and punningly observes that while he isn’t lying, the grave is meant for himself.

Matching the word play, the prince agrees that the grave is indeed intended for the clown, but that he will never lie in or occupy it because he is too quick-minded. The implication is that if the clown were slow-witted and oblivious to the social and political currents swirling around him, he would already be dead and buried. Finally, like a Zen master acknowledging his disciple’s satori, or sudden enlightenment, the clown sagely confirms that his nimbleness (or “quick lie”) preserved his life and warns Hamlet to behave likewise. “Quick” also means alive—hence “a living lie” or “living a lie”—e.g., writing and having one’s works performed under another name.

In essence, this rapid-fire exchange raises the central question: Who is to be or not to be interred in the grave? On the face of it, there are two main candidates for burial: the clown and Prince Hamlet. But who is the clown? The gravedigger tells us that he is has been “Sexton here man and boy thirty years” (5.1.137–138). Hence, assuming he started as a lad of about ten, he is now forty years old. He also explains that he started working in this capacity on the very day that Prince Hamlet was born. Hence Hamlet is about thirty or some ten years younger than the clown. When Christopher Marlowe presumably went to his grave in Deptford he was in his thirtieth year. When Hamlet was first published, in 1603, ten years later, Marlowe would have been forty. Arbal, as the gravediggers would say, the clown represents Elder Marlowe in disguise as the true author of the play. He is the playwright who is supposed to lie in his grave in Deptford but doesn’t. The prince, in turn, stands for Young Marlowe, especially during the time leading up to his “death.”

The conversation in this scene can be read as a witty interior monologue between Marlowe as author of Hamlet and his own younger self, who serves as the model for the protagonist in the play. The scene marks a disruption in the narrative action, a kind of dialectical word play in Marlowe/Hamlet’s mind, self-consciousness raised to the nth degree. Like its witty gravedigger, the entire play unearths the past, illuminating some of the events in the life
and “death” of its principal author.

In going on to discuss the length of time it takes a body to decompose, the clown confirms this reading of the scene with another set of meaningful dates. In Q1, the gravedigger explains to Hamlet that, if it’s not rotten, an ordinary body will last eight years, while “a tanner / Will last you eight years full out, or nine.” Marlowe supposedly went to his grave on June 1, 1593, and *Hamlet* was registered at the Stationers’ Company on July 26, 1602. Hence, the manuscript for the first printed edition was probably completed in 1601 or early 1602, “eight years full out, or nine,” before being given to the printer. In Q2, published a year later, the figure eight is dropped and the clown declares that “a tanner will last you nine years.” In other words, counting from 1593, the “corpse” has aged another year.

This precise attention to detail belies the common academic view that Shakespeare was extraordinarily careless in matters of dating. As we have seen, the numerical references in the Marlowe/Shakespearean canon are frequently symbolic, and the *Sonnets* and most of the plays are registered on dates that have highly meaningful connections in Marlowe’s life.

As for selecting a tanner as his example of a decaying corpse, in his guise as “gravemaker,” Marlowe, the playmaker, alludes directly to his status as the son of a shoemaker. Tanning of leather hides was an important part of his father’s profession, and John Marlowe was a member of the Guild of Shoemakers and Tanners. While he didn’t follow in his father’s footsteps and become a cobbler, Kit would have been groomed for the trade as a child. In class-conscious Elizabethan England, he would have been known as a shoemaker or tanner, just as the clown refers to himself as Goodman Delver (a common term for digger, gardener, or gravedigger). After receiving his M.A. at Cambridge, Marlowe was addressed formally as Gentleman, but his fellow poets and jealous rivals would have reminded him of his lowly origins. Robert Greene, for example, referred to him in print as “a Cobblers eldest sonne.”100 Shakespeare’s Sonnet 62 observes: “when my glass shows me myself indeed, / Beated and chopp’d with tann’d antiquity” in a possible pun on the tanner genealogy.

Tanning and cobbling played an important role in Kit’s development (as presumably they did in Will’s, whose father was also a tanner in Stratford). In Canterbury, John Marlowe’s shoe shop occupied the front part of the family home. It was here that Marlowe apprenticed for the shoe trade for several years before going to the King’s School. Throughout his life, he remained conscious of footwear and apparel of all kinds. In an aside to Horatio, Hamlet comments on the clown’s wit, learning, and apparent fall from court, “[T]he age is grown so picked, that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the Courtier he gaffs his kibe” (5.1.117–118). In other
words, the lowly sexton was once favored at court and may now (like his author) be living in disguise. Hamlet goes on to ask, “How long hast thou been a Grave-maker?” (5.1.118–119) eliciting the information that his own princely birth coincided with the very day the older man started digging graves—one again linking their destinies.

The triple allusions to aspects of feet—toc, heel, and kibe (a soreness on the ankle)—reinforces the tanner/shoemaker imagery. In the play itself, shoes and footwear are mentioned or alluded to at least seven times. Actors and dramatists are especially fashion conscious because they deal with costumes and sets, but the Marlowe/Shakespearean works reveal an especially intimate knowledge of shoes.

Yet there is more to the feet and shoe imagery than might first appear. In Shakespeare and the Popular View, Annabel Patterson points out that shoes and boots were a common image of Renaissance protest and unrest among the lowest, trod upon classes. She suggests that Hamlet’s references to “the toe of the peasant comes near the heel of the courtier” and “Sandal shoon” (4.5.25) perform the same subversive function as “clouted shoon” (4.2.185) in Jack Cade’s rebellion in 2 Henry VI. In her view, the main gravedigger constructs peasant ideology. His jests about digging and delving, as well as Hamlet’s meditations on the common fate of the emperor and the beggar, point to the radical Digger slogan and text of John Ball, the fiery preacher who incited the Peasants’ Revolt: “But when Adam delved, and Eve span / Who was then a Gentleman?” (Coincidentally, Marx, the father of the classless society, took his epithet “old Mole”—signifying a revolutionary—from a line in Hamlet [1.5.179] referring to the ghost!) The banter between the artisan and aristocrat on asses, she shows, reprises the union between Queen Titania and Bottom the Ass in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. From deep underground, seditious themes occasionally emerge in the play, as in the gravedigger’s refrain, which includes snatches of a worker’s protest song mentioned in Holinshed’s Chronicles. “[H]ere’s fine revolution, and we had the trick to see’t” (5.1.77–78), the prince responds slyly. All of Hamlet’s subtle word play about who lies in the grave takes on a political aspect that prefigures Lear’s canivalesque social leveling: “Hark, in thine ear: change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?” (4.6.52–54)

Ophelia’s burial also has revolutionary implications. The gravedigger’s remark that her grave is to be made “straight” (5.1.3) refers to an east/west alignment afforded Christian burials. Unbelievers, the excommunicated, and suicides were aligned north/south and buried in the dark, cold, north side of the graveyard. Coincidentally or not, Marlowe was said to have been buried on June 1, 1593, in an unmarked grave in the northern corner of the
Church of St. Nicholas. (Could this be one of the multiple allusions of Hamlet’s famous line, “I am but mad North Northwest” [2.2.355]?)) Since he had not been tried and convicted of heresy, sedition, or other offense against the church, Kit was eligible for Christian burial. The rumor that his final resting place lay in unsanctified ground smacks of a hastily arranged cover story. If he were given a Christian burial with proper Anglican fēng shuì, the archbishop may have objected, excommunicated him ex post facto, and like his mentor, Andrew Perne, had the body dug up and reburied at a crossroads with an iron-pointed stake driven through it. Even in plague time, the absence of any funeral rites—maimèd or otherwise—for the slain M.A. in theology, Gentleman, and well-known London dramatist defies augury.

In the play, out of deference to the king and Laertes, the priest consents to lay Ophelia straight. But by refusing to scatter earth on her coffin like he would for “peace-parted souls” (5.1.206) when it is lowered into the ground, the “churlish priest” (209) provokes Laertes and Hamlet to grapple and outdo each other to “pile your dust upon the quick and dead, / Till of this flat a mountain you have made / T’o’ertop old Pelion” (5.1.222–224). Overall, the procession of the coffin, Ophelia’s nonconformist status, and the fracas mimic the Rippon incident in February 1593 that set in motion many of the events leading up to Marlowe’s arrest. In that affair, as we saw, a group of Separatists carried the coffin of a congregant who had died in prison past Justice Young’s house. Their signs protesting the archbishop of Canterbury and other high officials provoked swift arrest and punishment. In another possible resonance, one of the congregationalists, John Sparrow, had been imprisoned in the White Lion in Southwark, not far from the Rose theatre, for five years “without anie tryall, bayle, or pitie” for presenting a petition to the queen.102 Hamlet’s famous line “there is a special providence in the fall of Sparrow” may nod at his plight as well as the Gospel of Matthew.

Unfortunately, these ecclesiastical subtleties and the gravediggers’ black humor have been lost on most readers and critics. For four hundred years, following the churlish priest in the play, shards, flints, and pebbles about Marlowe’s temperament, sexuality, and religious beliefs have been showered on his head.103 In the end, Ophelia and Hamlet—symbolically the muse and the poet—are elevated to the heavenly host, she as a “minist’ring Angel” (5.1.210) and he as attended by “flights of Angels” (5.2.356). The stony-hearted priest (a possible caricature of Bishop Bancroft) and the murderous king (Claudius/Whitgift) are left “howling” (5.1.211) or begging for forgiveness and mercy.
Hamlet’s Age: To Contract the Time

And yet I find the matter as in a labyrinth, easier to enter into it than to go out.
—Lord Burghley, letter to his son, May 1593

By describing the prince as about thirty years old, the gravedigger’s remarks have caused endless controversy among literary critics. Earlier in the play, Hamlet is portrayed as a teenager or young man of about twenty and is referred to about a half-dozen times as a “youth” or “young Hamlet.” A heated debate has thus arisen among scholars over his age in the play. Some argue that Hamlet’s rashness is simply an adolescent’s typical immaturity, while those who hold that he is older throughout the narrative find his behavior indicative of adult-onset mental illness. Since a case can be made for both positions, it is commonly reconciled by referring once again to Shakespeare’s notorious carelessness regarding details. (Hamlet’s confession, “O dear Ophelia I am ill at these numbers, I have not art to reckon my groans” [2.2.125–126], may parody this view.)

To understand the method behind the play’s chronological madness, we must turn once again to Marlowe’s life. In the opening of the play, Hamlet, the student at Wittenberg, is in his late teens or early twenties, about the same age as Marlowe was while studying at Cambridge University. At the end of the play, facing his own impending death, Hamlet is almost thirty years old, the same age as Marlowe was in 1593, when he was in mortal danger. In other words, ten years have transpired, not three and a half months as is usually reckoned. Hamlet compresses the events of Marlowe’s career as a student, playmaker, and government agent into a shorter time frame. The time sequence in the play represents psychological time, not chronological time. The gravedigger’s speech expresses this in the enigmatic line: “To contract O the time for a my behave” (5.1.55).

Another instance of telescopic time comes during the theatrical performance. Hamlet tells Ophelia, who is sitting next to him, that his father has died two hours ago. Mistaking his comment for real time, she replies that, to the contrary he died two months previously. The prince himself is simply punning on the two hours that will elapse on stage—the duration of a typical play—in which his father’s murder is reenacted by the players. Since Ophelia is not party to this stratagem, she misses the pun and sees further confirmation that her lover has lost his wits. Marlowe uses the device in other works. In Dr. Faustus, Kit invokes the contraction of time in Ovid’s
famous line “lente currere, nocte equi,” which summons Night to slow the horses of her chariot before the break of day. In myth and epic literature, time can be sped up or slowed down, as in the ending of the Odyssey, when Night holds back the rosy-fingered Dawn in celebration of Odysseus and Penelope’s reunion. 

Hamlet’s use of mythic or psychological time to condense events anticipates modern experimental theater. Overall, in the play, “the time is out of joint” (1.5.204). As a clue to the dramatic or reading audience, the dual ages given for Hamlet point to the playwright’s underlying identity. The 20/30 question of Hamlet’s age also puns on the May 20/30 dichotomy in Marlowe’s life, representing the dates on which he was arrested and “died” as well as the ten-day discrepancy between the Julian and Gregorian calendars. In addition to the Sonnets, several of Shakespeare’s other plays were registered at the Stationers’ on May 20/30, including Antony and Cleopatra and Pericles. May 20 was also the date the dread statute 35 Eliz., chapter I went into effect. Pushed through Parliament by Whitgift and Elizabeth on April 10, 1593, it gave Puritans and nonconformists forty days to conform or be banished from England. Some of those arrested in March 1593 were released in August and went to the Netherlands. Most of the leaders remained imprisoned for several more years until going into exile (at about the time Hamlet was being revised). Altogether, about twenty-five Separatists, men and women, died in London prisons of cold, hunger, illness, or torture during this period. (Some dates appear to be coincidental. The Lord Chamberlain’s Men became the King’s Men on May 19, 1603, close to the tenth anniversary of Kit’s arrest, following a writ issued by Robert Cecil.)

By assuming the role of the clown in Hamlet, the playwright can comment on perilous topical events behind a mask of quips, jokes, and pratfalls. He utilizes a similar approach in other plays, ranging from Dr. Faustus, in which we can hear Marlowe’s voice speaking through the clown Robin, to As You Like It, where Touchstone, the wise fool, jokes about Kit’s “great reckoning in a little room” (3.3.14–15).

Are these echoes intentional, or a case of finding/picking out random numbers and words from sections and linking them to unrelated events of interest to buttress a theory? There is certainly a danger, and even a tendency, to read into the play preconceived notions. No doubt some, if not many, of the correspondences mentioned in this interpretation are unintentional, arising from the playwright’s unconscious. As critics have shown, distinctive word and number clusters frequently appear in a body of literary work, and they appear to surface from the primal depths, triggered by images associated with traumatic events in the author’s own life.
Yorick: A Fellow of Infinite Jest

Has this fellow no feeling of his business? he sings in grave-making.

—Hamlet

(5.1.57–58)

After the discussion about the tanner’s corpse, the conversation at the graveside turns to a discussion of a skull that surfaces in the grave. The clown explains to Hamlet that it “hath lain i’ th’earth three & twenty years” (5.1.146–147). The prince inquires whose it might be, and the clown explains that the skull is “a whoreson mad fellow’s” (5.1.149). “A pestilence on him for a mad rogue” the clown continues, “he poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once; this same skull sir, was sir, Yorick’s skull, the King’s Jester” (5.1.151–153). Taking hold of Yorick’s skull, Hamlet recognizes his old childhood mentor:

Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy, he hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is: my gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kiss’d I know not how oft, where be your gibes now? your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar, not one now, to mock your own grinning, quite chap-fall’n. Now get you to my Lady’s Chamber, & tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come, make her laugh at that.

(5.1.156–165)

More ink has been spilled on this passage than almost any other in the play besides the “To be or not to be” soliloquy. Yorick shares some similarities with Phantasmo, “the antic” in Der BB, but his skull does not appear in any of the earlier versions of the story. Is he wholly fictional, or does he have an historical counterpart or resonance? The usual suspects include Will Kempe, the Globe theatre’s leading comic actor; Richard Tarleton, Queen Elizabeth’s fool; and Will Summers, Henry VIII’s jester. The name “Yorick” does not have a clear root or convey a distinct image. Some critics have linked it with Saxo’s Roricus and Belleforest’s Rorique, the queen’s father, or the Danish/Germanic Yrge, or George, but otherwise the linguistic trail peters out.

Gazing on a skull, however, has a long literary pedigree. In The Dialog of the Dead, Lucian has Menippus visit the Underworld and inquire about the fate of Helen of Troy. Hermes shows him her skeleton and says that this
was the skull that launched a thousand ships. During the Renaissance, the image of a man contemplating a skull commonly symbolized the vanity of all things and echoed the Gospel images of Golgotha, the Place of Skulls, where Jesus was entombed. Known as the mortis mundi, the image of man and skull appears in a variety of paintings, including ones of Savonarola, the Florentine preacher who sometimes meditated in cemeteries holding a skull. In the anti-Marpelate literature, Martin was compared unfavorably with this fifteenth century reformer, whose radical approach, especially his call for elected magistrates and freedom of conscience, resonated with opponents of the Elizabethan Religious Settlement. The fiery preacher was burnt at the stake, and Hamlet may allude to him in this scene, as part of the excavation of the past.

The passage itself offers several possible clues to the identity of the character’s historical model. First, Yorick is a man of many talents. He is a jester, a musician, and an all-around prince of a man. His “excellent fancy” suggests good taste and an eye for fashion. The ability to bear young Hamlet on his back a thousand times indicates that he is physically active, possibly of yeoman stock, a horseman, or an ex-soldier. He has a mordant wit, loves to eat and drink, and can charm the socks (and shoes) off his table companions. In sum, he is a very much like Prince Hamlet himself. The portrait echoes Ophelia’s memorable description of Hamlet as a courtier, soldier, and scholar, “the glass of fashion, and the mold of form” whose witty demeanor, “music’d vows,” and “noble and most sovereign reason” have become, “Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune, and harsh, / That unmatch’d form, and feature of blown youth” (3.1.154–160).

As critics have suggested, Yorick could be Hamlet’s true father and role model as court fool. Certainly, the prince shows more affection and heartfelt emotion for the jester than he does for his own father, the former king. The mention of twenty-three years rotting in the grave offers another hint. Curiously, Q1 has Yorick lying in his grave only twelve years. Why was the number changed in Q2?

Unless we appreciate Hamlet’s use of multiple identities, we can easily become as bewildered as Adriana is in The Comedy of Errors amid twin pairs of Antipholi and Dromios. I believe that Yorick stands for an aspect of Marlowe, but not the young Marlowe (represented in the play as Prince Hamlet) nor the Elder Marlowe (the clown). Yorick is one of Marlowe’s aliases. At first we might suppose he is Shakespeare, Kit’s literary persona and dramatic partner, but Will is more a straight man than a comic. Nothing in the portrait of Yorick jives with what we know about the actor from Stratford.

Rather, Yorick appears to represent Martin Marprelate, the master
saturist, whose infinite jests, gibes, gambols, songs, and flashes of merriment set Elizabethan society on a roar. The queen herself gave the order that Martin should be apprehended, vaulting him into the ironic position, as in the play, of jester to the sovereign. At the Curtain and the Theatre, the Queen’s players and other troupes routinely presented anti-Martin satires in which the realm’s premier fool was “drie beaten, and thereby his bones broken, then whipt . . . launced . . . made a Maygame upon the stage, and so hung, both with prose and rime on every side, as he knewe not which way to turne himself, and at length cleane marde [killed].”\textsuperscript{104}

As we have seen in earlier sections, Marlowe may have contributed to the anonymous Martin tracts or revised and polished them along with John Peny, Job Throkomorton, and other dissenters. The unique literary quality of the Martinist literature is so superior to anything the divines produced that critics attest that it could only have been written by an outstanding poet or dramatist. Martin often referred to himself as a jester and noted that “my purpose is to play the dunce.”\textsuperscript{105} In his accusations against Marlowe, Thomas Kyd noted, “it was his custom . . . in table talk or otherwise to jest at the devine scriptures, gybe at praiers, & stryve in argument to frustrate & confute what hath byn spoke or wrytt by prophets & such holy men.”\textsuperscript{106}

Kyd’s description, produced under torture, could apply equally to Yorick, Marprelate, and Marlowe. The Martinist rhetoric and characterization reverberates through (or is carried a thousand times on the back of) the Shakespearean canon, from Falstaff and the Henriad to \textit{Twelfth Night} and other plays.

There are some logical hints in \textit{Hamlet} supporting the idea that Yorick is the Martin aspect of Marlowe. Like a meteor, the Marprelate phenomenon appeared in 1588, lit up the horizon, and then vanished toward the end of 1589. Hence, as of 1590, or twelve years prior to the registration of Hamlet in 1602, Martin was outwardly “dead.” Not only were his bones broken on the stage, but he had lain in his grave for exactly twelve years, as Q1 reports. There are also several possible associations with twenty-three, the number to which it was changed in Q2, most of them tragic. The statute under which the Martinists were prosecuted by Whitgift and Barrow, Greenwood, and Peny hung was known as 23 Elizabeth (II.4), after the year of her reign when it was passed. It condemned “any person or persons [who] shall advisedlye and with a maliciouse intente againste our sayd Sovereigne Ladye, devyse and wrighte, print or set forth, any manner of booke, ryme, ballade, letter or writing, conteyning any false, sedicious and sлаunderous matter to the defamacion of the Queene’s Majestie.”\textsuperscript{107}

Twenty-three is also the number of years that Egan searched for his sons in \textit{The Comedy of Errors}, supporting some meaningful association, and the
number appears frequently in other Shakespearean plays.\textsuperscript{108}

Finally, the fact that Yorick’s skull turns up in the grave meant for the
cloon (Elder Marlowe) and Prince Hamlet (Young Marlowe) suggests that
he is directly connected with them. Marlowe has escaped the grave—doesn’t lie in it—but his discarded alias does. Could the lament for Yorick be the
author’s tribute to this merry, madcap episode in his life and a mourning for
his own lost youth? In the last of the Marprelate tracts, Martin vows to turn
up again and make the archbishop tremble: “Farewell, farewell, farewell, old Martin! And keep thee out of their hands for all that. For thou art a shrewd fellow; thou wilt one day overthrow them. Amen. And then thou swearest
by thy faith, quoth John [Whitgift] of London.”\textsuperscript{109} In Act 5 of \textit{Hamlet}, he
appears to have done so! Like the prince, Martin Junior, a chip off the old
block who appears in the original tracts, levels accusations of murder against
the archbishop and his cronies following the mysterious disappearance of his
father, “Speake then, good nuncles, have you closely murdered the gentle
man in some of your prisons? Have you strangled him? Have you given him
an Italian fig? Or, what have you done unto him? Have you choked him with
a fat prebend [church officer] or two? What? I trow, my father will swallow
down no such pills.”\textsuperscript{110} The way Martin taunts Whitgift with his quips, jests,
and asides is similar to the way Hamlet baits Claudius.

Curiously, after the Yorick scene, the gravedigger is no longer heard from
in the play, yet he evidently remains on stage, as there is no exit indicated in
the play. Presumably, he fades into the background and continues to observe
while Hamlet and Horatio philosophize, the royals and Laertes arrive, the
funeral rites take place, and Hamlet and Laertes come to blows by Ophelia’s
grave. As the lowliest person in the play (both literally and figuratively), the
sexton remains invisible to the players, but not to the audience. His is the
privileged perspective of omniscience that coincides with that of the play-
wright. This is another indication that the clown represents Marlowe, par-

ticularly Elder Marlowe of the early 1600s, who has gone into exile and writ-
ten nearly a score of plays in collaboration with Shakespeare.

In tracing the “noble dust of \textit{Alexander}” (5.1.172) in the next passage,
the prince reflects that the great emperor’s remains are now “stopping a
bung-hole” (5.1.172–173). A bung-hole is the opening in a beer keg that is
closed with a stopper or spigot. Aside from a further image on the vanity of
all things, this passage may allude to the conspiracy surrounding Mary
Queen of Scots, whose correspondence was smuggled in and out through
the bung-hole of a beer keg while she was living under house arrest. Francis
Walsingham and Burghley knew of this clandestine means of communication,
since Robert Poley, their double agent who had wormed his way into
Mary’s confidence, stage-managed the conspiracy. En route to France and
Scotland, her letters were opened, read, and expertly rescaled, akin to the way Hamlet intercepted the sealed dispatch carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In addition to Poley, Skeres and Thomas Walsingham appeared to be involved in this affair, known as the Babington Conspiracy. Several years later, they came together again in Deptford.

The gravediggers’ scene offers the most sustained autobiographical allusions in the play. Altogether there are about a dozen linguistic puns, double entendres, ad libs, dates, and other references to Marlowe’s fate. In holding Yorick’s skull, Hamlet not only contemplates human mortality, but also as Marlowe reflects on his own near-death experience a decade earlier. Like the book that the prince carries in front of him and the lines that he inserts in the play, the skull is a symbol of holding a mirror up to nature, simultaneously reflecting back universal human consciousness, the particular historical era in which the play was written, and the author’s personal drama. Shaking or twisting the skull—a spherical object—on stage also makes a wordless pun on his new literary persona as Shake Sphere.

**Horatio: I’ll Change That Name with You**

So likewise we will through the world be rung,
And with my name shall thine always be sung.
—Marlowe, *Ovid’s Elegies*

(1.3.25–26)

The characterization of Horatio, the most important supporting role in *Hamlet*, offers further insight into Marlowe’s fate and the authorship controversy. While in the play he is Hamlet’s closest friend and confidant, Horatio appears in other guises in the earliest versions of the story. In *Amleth and Hamlet*, he is known as the foster-brother and the frère-du-lait. In *Der BB*, evidently reflecting the *Ur-Hamlet*, he becomes Horatio, which is the name of a popular character in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Attributed to Thomas Kyd, that play may have some passages contributed by Marlowe, and the two friends may have gone on to collaborate on the earliest Elizabethan version of *Hamlet* in the late 1580s or early 1590s.

The name “Horatio” itself is Roman in origin and calls to mind Horace, the classical poet noted for his high ethical character, and Horatio “at the bridge,” who heroically defended Rome against the Etruscans. The fictional Horatio embodies a well-developed sense of morality. Unlike Laertes,
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and other friends and associates of the prince, he is not “passion’s slave,” but the soul of discretion, given to noble sentiments and steadfast loyalty. In this respect, Horatio shares some affinity with Theridamas, Tamburlaine’s adviser and confidant.111

Horatio appears in the opening scene of Hamlet along with the two sentries and the officer of the watch. He is the first to identify the ghost as Hamlet’s father. Along with Bernardo and Marcellus, he is sworn to secrecy by the prince. As the dramatic action unfolds, Horatio serves as a sounding board for Hamlet and is the only person Hamlet trusts and fully confides in.

Following the arrival of the players, Horatio assists the prince in producing the play-within-the-play, carefully observing the king’s reaction and confirming his guilt. When the queen refuses to see Ophelia, Horatio proposes a meeting anyway and quietly effects a positive outcome. On Hamlet’s journey back from England, Horatio receives a secret dispatch from the prince, including letters to be transmitted to the king and queen, and in Q1 he meets privately with the queen. In the graveyard scene, he observes and participates in the banter between Hamlet and the clowns. He strategizes with the prince about the duel with Laertes, offers to die alongside his friend, and foreswears the poisoned cup vows to carry out Hamlet’s dying commands.

At first glance, we might think that Horatio embodies features of Thomas Kyd. His name echoes The Spanish Tragedy and probably dates back to the Ur-Hamlet. And until he was broken on the rack by the Star Chamber torturers, Kyd was one of Marlowe’s closest friends. John Penry, with whom Kit may have collaborated on the Martin Marprelate tracts, is also a potential candidate. While there is no evidence that Marlowe and Penry, whose term overlapped at Cambridge, knew each other, both faced execution for seditious and religious nonconformity at the same time. Yet Marlowe, like Horatio, alone appears to have escaped the supreme penalty. Thomas Watson, the poet and colleague who saved Kit’s life in the sword fight in London, is a third possibility. Like Horatio, Watson was a scholar (well versed in canon and civil law) and may have served as a courier. But as a Catholic in an avowedly Protestant country, he was an outsider and suspect to the authorities. Also he died young, several years before Marlowe’s encounter at Deptford, the reverse of the sequence in the play. Yet other than sharing genuine friendship and admiration, none of these three men fits Horatio’s character, circumstance, or representation in the play.

A much more likely model for Horatio’s real-life counterpart is William Shakespeare. As the proclaimed author of Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece, prior to the writing of Hamlet, Will was evidently pledged to silence and kept Marlowe’s secret, just as Horatio does in the play. He served
as Kit’s representative or intermediary with the players and court, just as Horatio does. When the prince confides to Horatio in preparing him for the play-within-the-play that “my dear soul was mistress of her choice” (3.2.62), the prince alludes to choosing “to be” rather than “not to be”—the very choice that Marlowe made in staging his death (a play-within-the-play) and grooming Will to collaborate with him. We don’t know whether Shakespeare’s role extended beyond his dramatic duties, but it is likely there was some professional or ceremonial contact between him and Elizabeth, the Cecils, and other highly placed officials. As the acknowledged author of Richard II, Will may have come under suspicion in the Essex affair and suffered the displeasure of the queen, as did Horatio in speaking up on behalf of Ophelia in the play.

Within the play itself, the evidence is more clearly suggestive. The relationship between Marlowe and Shakespeare is hinted at in the opening scene, when the prince first meets Horatio and jests that their names are interchangeable:

HAMLET. I am glad to see you well; Horatio, or I do forget myself.
HORATIO. The same my Lord, and your poor servant ever.
HAMLET. Sir my good friend; I’ll change that name with you

(1.2.163–165)

Beneath the surface of exchanging friendly greetings, the banter points to the deeper authorial relation between their real life prototypes.

In addition, in the play-within-the-play, Horatio plays a subordinate role to Hamlet, signifying the probable dramatic relationship between Shakespeare and Marlowe. The prince directs the performance, prepares and revises the script, and coaches the actors, while Horatio plays second fiddle. But he is the only person entrusted with the true purpose of the performance, and he helps the prince catch the conscience of the king. Afterwards, the witty exchange between Hamlet and Horatio about getting paid for their contribution to the players’ performance hints at their relationship:

HAMLET. Would not this sir & a forest of feathers, if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me, with two Provincial roses on my raz’d shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of Players?
HORATIO. Half a share.
HAMLET. A whole one ay.
For thou dost know O Damon dear,
This Realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself, and now reigns here
A very very pajock.
HORATIO. ‘You might have rhym’d.
HAMLET. O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. (3.2.262–273)

As a shareholder in the Globe, Shakespeare received a full share for his entrepreneurial role. The passage suggests that as the principal author in their collaboration, Marlowe deserves at least half the credit, if not all of it, for the plays performed under his name. The reference to pilgrims' shoes alludes to Kit's lowly origins as a cobbler's son in Canterbury. The pocking—strutting peacock?—may refer to Archbishop Whitgift, who, by usurping the office of dramatic censor, has overturned the moral order like Jupiter, who displaced Saturn and ended the Golden Age. (This is a familiar Marlovian theme and one subtly woven into Hamlet, as described in the section on the ghost below). In the context of the other allusions to Shakespeare, the "thousand pound" appears to be another in joke about the enormous sum Southampton bestowed upon Will to impersonate the poet or about the £1000 stipend that Shakespeare reportedly received each year to produce two plays.

At the end of the play, Horatio, like a faithful retainer in classical literature, offers to follow his lord to the Underworld, but Hamlet insists that he live to “report me and my cause aright” (5.2.334), clear his “wounded name” (340) and “tell my story” (345). The literary role that Shakespeare played on Marlowe's behalf after his “death” and loss of his good name couldn't be constructed more plainly.

After Hamlet's death, Horatio also carries out his last wish to have Fortinbras succeed to the throne. Unlike England, Denmark was an elective monarchy, a form of government Marlowe preferred to an inherited one. At the level of the overplot, the geopolitical rivalry between Denmark and Norway reflects the tension in England between supporters of absolute rule such as Elizabeth and Whitgift and a constitutional monarchy favored by Burghley, Morice, and many parliamentarians. References throughout Hamlet to “election” (3.2.63, 5.2.70, 5.2.351), the popular “voice” (5.2.352), and the will of the “general” (1.4.37, 2.2.514, 4.7.20), or common people, echo this polarity. This epic political struggle is the historical canvas on which Hamlet is constructed. Like a thread, the cause of individual conscience, the primacy of the Commons, and a tolerant respect for human diversity run through the Marlovian and Shakespearean works.

Almost everyone remembers Horatio’s heart-felt elegy for his fallen friend: “Now cracks a noble heart, good night sweet Prince, / And flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest” (5.2.355–356). But few recall that, a few lines later, he advises that orders be given that Hamlet’s body “High on a stage be placed to the view, / And let me speak, to th’yet unknowing world
Hamlet’s Ghost

/ How these things came about” (5.2.376–378).
In words that perfectly describe the role that Shakespeare performed in bringing Marlowe’s continuing genius to life, Horatio goes on to say:

Of that I shall have also cause to speak,
And from his mouth, whose voice will draw on more,
But let this same be presently perform’d
Even while men’s minds are wild, lest more mischance
On plots and errors happen.

(5.2.390–394)

Expressive or dramatic words such as “speak,” “mouth,” “voice,” “perform’d,” and “plots” further underscore the ongoing literary role that Shakespeare is playing. “Errors,” a common term for theological heresies, points to the religious subtext of the story. In acceding to Horatio’s request, Fortinbras reinforces the earlier use of the term “stage” when he commands that the prince’s body be placed on a platform for public viewing: “Let four Captains / Bear Hamlet like a soldier, to the stage” (5.2.395–96).

Throughout Hamlet, the relation between the prince and his confidant is one of harmony and friendship. And like Horatio, his dramatic counterpart, Will performed his duty like a good soldier and bore the body of Kit’s works to the London stage.

The Player: Most Miraculous Organ

In the theater Shakespeare escapes his historicity, becoming for every age a contemporary playwright, and arguably its most important one.
—David Scott Kastan, Shakespeare and the Book

In Hamlet, the poet’s approach to drama and acting is articulated more clearly than it is in any other of his plays. In the scenes with the players, the prince echoes the author’s view that the primary purpose of the theater is to reflect the currents of the era in which it is written. Given the censorship and high risks associated with representing forbidden topics and themes on stage or in print, the images reflected in his dramatic glass are necessarily coded or symbolic ones. Hence, allegory, puns, double entendres, jokes, allusions, echoes, and other veiled references abound in Hamlet and the other plays.

Altogether there are three dramatic scenes or plays-within-the-play in
Hamlet that lend themselves to social commentary: 1) the recitation about the Trojan war, 2) the Dumb Show, and 3) The Murder of Gonzago. All three deal with revenge and treacherous slayings, thus reinforcing and advancing the main plot line. Each performance, moreover, is linked with Marlowe. When Hamlet asks the player to recite a passage that he “chiefly loved” (2.2.408) from Aeneas’s tale about the slaughter of Priam, he invokes Marlowe’s Dido Queen of Carthage. Hamlet prompts the player with the line “the rugged Pyrrhus, like th’Hyrcanian beast” (2.2.411), which directly echoes Marlowe’s “And tigers of Hycrania gave thee suck” (5.1.159). Both plays describe Pyrrhus’s fatal attack on Priam with similar details not found in Virgil’s Aeneid or another classical source. In a discussion with Polonius of the play that “pleased not the million, ’twas caviary to the general” (2.2.401–402), Hamlet probably also refers to Dido, according to several Shakespearean scholars.112

Critics usually describe the long-winded segment on Pyrrhus as a parody or tribute to Marlowe by Shakespeare, whom they view as glancing back at his early rival. Yet the real significance of the Trojan speech may be more theological than dramatic. Thomas Cartwright, the leader of the Puritan opposition against Whitgift, was likened to Pyrrhus attacking and destroying his elders. In The Life of John Whitgift, Paule observes:

Master Cartwright, having upon his first discontentment (as hath been delivered) made a desperate assault and breach in Sions peaceable and blessed Citie, now like a sile Captaine did steale away secretly (after summons giuen) from his once siege, fearing upon his entrie by the force and presse by his owne Souldier, to be environed and kept within the walls (as Pyrrhus was) to the loss of his life; or doubting beile the outrage and, and violence of his Arme, whose furie he could not have appeased, when he list, but haue benne enforced (as Titus was) to see his Souldiers sacke, spoile, and burne the holy Citie . . .113

Interestingly, this passage appears in the section in which Paule describes and justifies the execution of Barrow, Greenwood, and Penry, the three non-conformist clergymen hung in the spring of 1593 when Marlowe was arrested and faced heresy charges. No wonder the tale of Pyrrhus was the prince’s favorite passage. It symbolically recreated the assault on the archbishop’s fortress. (Note how the “Captains / [who] Bear Hamlet like a soldier, to the stage” [5.2.395–396] at the end of the play glances at Cartwright.)

There are also several suggestive individual references.114 In concluding his remarks on acting, Hamlet conceives the idea of reenacting his father’s death on stage. The line “For murder, though it have no tongue will speak / With most miraculous organ” (2.2.544–545), appears to refer to exposing not only Claudius’s villainy but also Archbishop Whitgift’s. In both the
Dumb Show and The Murder of Gonzago, the villain pours poison in the ear of the sleeping monarch, recreating the ghost’s account of his murder, as well as the method first proposed in Marlowe’s Edward II.

While Gonzago resolves the question about the king’s guilt, it further compounds the controversy surrounding Hamlet’s age. Invoking lofty mythological images, the Player King and Queen (representing Elder Hamlet and Gertrude) reveal that they have been married for thirty years. The length is repeated three times—“Full thirty times” (3.2.147), “thirty dozen Moons” (149) and “twelve thirties” (150)—as if to underscore the importance of this figure. If Prince Hamlet was born nine months after their marriage, he would be twenty-nine years and three months old at the start of the play, the exact age of Marlowe at the time of his “death” (February 26, 1564 to May 30, 1593 = 29 years and 3 months).115

Behind the players in Hamlet stands the imposing figure of Edward Alleyn, the most renowned actor of his era and the star of Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, Dr. Faustus, and The Jew of Malta. The scene’s reference to Roscius, a famous Roman tragedian, alludes to Alleyn, who was widely known by that name by his fellow actors and critics. Renowned for enacting the twelve labors of Hercules on the London stage, Alleyn’s exploits are further echoed in Hamlet’s several references to the Greek epic hero, including the line about Atlas shouldering the globe—a pun on the Globe theatre. By the time Hamlet was published, Alleyn had retired from the stage. However, he probably played the lead role in the early performance of the Ur-Hamlet produced by his father-in-law Henslowe in 1594.117

Osric and Fortinbras: With Divine Ambition Puffed

OSRIC. Young Fortinbras with conquest come from Poland,
To th’ambassadors of England gives this warlike volley.
(5.2.346–347)

he two remaining characters in the play, Osric and Fortinbras, possess strikingly opposite personalities and are not usually paired together. However, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they may be more closely linked than they first appear.

Osric debuts in Der BB/Ur-Hamlet as a young courtier and receives his name in Q1. In welcoming Hamlet back to England, Osric’s unctuous manner oozes flattery and insin-
cerity. “Dost know this water fly?” (5.2.89) the prince asks Horatio dismissively, referring to the courtier’s plumed bonnet. When Horatio professes ignorance, Hamlet goes on to deduce that Osric “hath much land and fertile” (92–93) and, comparing him to a baby, notes that “his crib shall stand at the King’s mess” (93). In a witty exchange reminiscent of his cross-examination of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet establishes Osric’s fawning nature by getting him to agree, in the same breath, that it is very cold and then very sultry and hot.

Despite the prince’s hectoring, Osric smoothly gets down to business and, on behalf of Claudius, invites the prince to participate in a friendly fencing contest with Laertes. After broaching the details of the wager and securing the prince’s consent, the courtier excuses himself. “This Lapwing runs away with the shell on his head” (171) Horatio observes, referring to the baby bird whose awkward birth occasioned this proverb. “He did Comply with his dug [mother’s breast] before he suck’d it” (172), Hamlet jests in agreement. Unlike many Shakespearean characters who defy parental authority, Osric is portrayed as unusually subservient.

As the fencing match gets underway before the king and queen and assembled court, Osric is bid by the monarch to distribute the foils. During the swordplay, he also acts as referee, uttering the famous line “A hit, a very palpable hit” (269) when Hamlet scores the first touch. As Laertes’ rage increases and the two men exchange rapiers, the queen unwittingly drinks from the poisoned chalice and falls. “Look to the Queen there ho!” (297), Osric exclaims, rushing to her side. Meanwhile, both Hamlet and Laertes have stabbed each other with the envenomed blade and are bleeding. “How isn’t Laertes?” Osric asks, scurrying over to investigate, to which the latter replies, “Why as a woodcock to mine own springe Osric. / I am justly kill’d with mine own treachery” (299–301).

Discreetly absenting himself from the mayhem that follows, Osric returns, following what the stage directions describe as “A march afar off,” (344 s.d.) and a cannon shot. The courtier proceeds to announce the simultaneous arrival of Fortinbras and the emissaries from England.

Any number of dandies at court could serve as a role model for Osric if we focus only on his attire and sycophancy. But as this summary suggests, the flowery gentleman plays a far more authoritative part than his costume and outward show suggest. Osric displays some facets of Robert Cecil, the young privy councilor, and following the death of his father, Elizabeth’s most powerful advisor. The baby images connect Osric with Polonius (the Burghley figure), whom Hamlet described earlier as an infant living his second childhood and whose role at court he now assumes. As Harold Jenkins, editor of the Arden Hamlet, notes, there is an “ease, with which, like Osric
later, [Polonius] is got to assent to contradictory propositions.” In the womb, Robert was groomed to succeed his sire, before he nursed at his mother’s breast. Elizabethans dubbed him “a courtier from the cradle.” 

Like a lapwing with a shell on its head, Robert was raised to mimic his illustrious father. The shell image may also depict Cecil’s deformity. Born with a curved or hunchedback and a large head that was out of proportion, he was widely ridiculed because of his appearance. Elizabeth nicknamed him her “Pygmy.” In a curious parallel, while secretly engaging in correspondence with King James of Scotland about the succession, Cecil confided, “The subject itself is so perilous to touch amongst us as it seteth a mark upon his head forever that hatcheth such a bird.” In a contemporaneous account, Cecil is described as having “a mind and manners already trained to courts and cabinets, and with a disposition almost ingenuous, as compared to the massive dissimulation with which it was to be contrasted, and with what was, in aftertimes, to constitute a portion of his own character.”

According to a biographer, “One of his most disconcerting qualities was that his mind worked so swiftly that he could catch the drift of what a man was saying before he had finished speaking”—exactly as in the play. Cecil not only enunciated clearly, but would “sensitively vary his phrasing and presentation according to the audience or to the nature of the argument.” As for having “much land, and fertile,” Robert inherited vast estates from his father and was widely regarded as the foremost landscape gardener and gentleman architect of the English Renaissance.

Despite his pampered upbringing, Robert succeeds spectacularly, both historically and in the play. As the duel intensifies on stage, Osric takes command, just as Robert steps in for his deceased father to oversee the successful transition from Elizabeth’s rule to that of James. The duel has echoes of the Essex rebellion. Laertes’ admission to Osric that he brought about his own downfall corresponds with Essex’s apology to Cecil at his treason trial. Earlier, in presenting the terms of the wager to Hamlet, Osric refers to Laertes’ “six French Rapiers and Poniards” (143–144).

Just as Hamlet’s contest with Claudius in the play parallels Marlowe’s struggle with Whitgift, the mutual poisoning between the prince and Laertes can be seen as a metaphorical representation of the wounds Shakespeare’s company and Essex inflicted on each other. The earl was injured following his adaptation of Richard II and the abortive coup. The Globe players suffered the queen’s displeasure and temporary banishment or exile from London.

Since he has so few lines, most of Osric’s importance to the play is dramatic. As the referee for the fencing match, he sets and enforces the rules. He takes his cues from Claudius, but has ample room to influence the course
of the struggle, especially as it becomes more violent. “Is Osric in on the
plot?” J. D. Martinez asks in his perceptive study The Swords of Shake-
speare. Each director has to decide. As the highest ranking court official
left alive, Osric welcomes the returning English ambassadors and the
Norwegian prince. In the original version of Hamlet, Osric may have word-
lessly placed the crown on Fortinbras’s head, as Cecil anointed James larg-
ely on his own initiative.

Fortinbras fulfills on stage the historical role of James VI of Scotland. His
name derives from the French for “strong man,” and he first appears in the
Der BB/Ur-Hamlet as a strutting, martial foil to Hamlet. Given to extremes,
he is superbly depicted on Hamlet’s dramatic canvas in just a few bold
strokes. In the Shakespearean versions, the young Norwegian prince is por-
trayed as valiant, but erratic; ambitious but amenable to guidance by his eld-
ers; surrounded by “lawless resolutes” (1.1.108), but enjoying “some rights
of memory in this kingdom” (5.2.388). In seeking the hand of Anne, the
Danish princess, according to one historian, “James’s envoy made such
extravagant demands for endowment, and military assistance at need, that
his prospects were seriously threatened.” This heavy-handed diplomacy
reminds us of Fortinbras’s captain in the play, who seeks safe passage for a
menacing troupe of soldiers. One of the prince’s soliloquies in Q2, “O how
all occasions do inform against me” (4.4.34) refers to Fortinbras as “with
divine ambition puff’d” (51), a widely accepted allusion to Satan. Demono-
logy was one of James’s abiding passions, and he wrote a treatise on the
subject. (The play’s reference to the interloper’s provocative military incursions into Poland echoes Henry III’s journey across Poland in Marlowe’s
The Massacre at Paris.) Fortinbras’s willingness to lead twenty thousand men
senselessly into slaughter for a worthless piece of land appears to parody
James’s dalliance with Catholic lords to unite with Spain in a suicidal inva-
sion of England and the public bond that he rashly organized in 1599 to
seize the English crown if he were not anointed upon Elizabeth’s death. The
absence of this magnificent soliloquy in the First Folio, published at the peak
of James’s tenure, suggests that it was prudently removed for political rea-
sons. Twenty thousand is a favorite number Marlowe employs in Tamburlaine and Dido, as explained in the Annotations, and alludes to the twenty
twenty thousand foot soldiers slain by David in the campaign against the Philistines.

Like Fortinbras, who claimed the Danish throne by hereditary right,
James felt entitled to the English crown. Supporters of Mary Queen of Scots
contested Elizabeth’s right to rule after she was excommunicated by the
pope, and with his mother’s death, James may have felt that the scepter
rightfully passed to him. But as a Protestant, he had to accept Elizabeth’s
tenure, and as the weak ruler of a weak realm, he had to cultivate her favor
and pray that she did nothing to thwart his chances before she died.

“I do propheys th’election lights / On Fortinbras,” Hamlet tells Horatio. “He has my dying voice” (5.2.351–352). In supporting James as Elizabeth’s successor, the play affirms the primacy of an orderly, peaceful succession, not necessarily Fortinbras’s or James’s character. In a hereditary monarchy, Elizabeth’s spinsterhood created permanent instability and provoked numerous conspiracies to succeed her. Despite the violence and chaos of Scottish society, or Marlowe’s diplomatic missions to Edinburgh, he may have come to appreciate the country’s respect for individual liberty and freedom of conscience, which was more developed than England’s. The Scottish Kirk, or church, welcomed John Penry and dissident printers in exile, and like the Puritans, Kit probably entertained high hopes that, as England’s new sovereign, James would end the religious persecution that characterized Whitgift’s and Elizabeth’s reign. In this he was disappointed, as the later Shakespearean plays reveal, but with the curtain dropping on the Tudor dynasty, optimism of change ran high when Hamlet was written.

The play’s subtext, reflecting anxieties about the succession, may touch upon James’s historic ties to Denmark and his own parallels with Hamlet’s character. To an Elizabethan audience, James was a much more obvious role model for the prince than Marlowe. Like Hamlet, James set sail for Denmark by ship (in 1589), went astray (owing to the winds, not pirates), and took a sledge (echoes of the mysterious reference to “sledded Polacks” [1.1.72]). At Elsinore, James and his bride were welcomed at the castle of Kronborg, the setting for Hamlet, with “a flourish of trumpets and ordnance shot off,” as in the play. After four months of “heavy-handed revels” and theological disputations in Copenhagen, the royal couple returned to Scotland. Amid sedition and conspiracies, James resumed the campaign against his cousin, Francis Hepburn, the Earl of Bothwell, who had risen up against him. Hepburn was the kinsman of the previous Bothwell, James Hepburn, who participated in the murder conspiracy against Darnley, James’s father. According to Holinshed, Darnley was slain in a garden and the poison disfigured his skin, similar to the murder of Elder Hamlet. The elder Bothwell proceeded to marry Mary Queen of Scots, who was widely believed to have acquiesced in the murder of her husband, only four months later, parallel to the adultery/incest theme in the play. Though pacific by nature like Hamlet, James led his troops in the field and at Aberdeen defeated the younger Bothwell, whose diabolical scheming, reminiscent of Claudius’s “witchcraft,” extended to serving as a warlock for a coven of witches that put a hex on the honeymooners’ returning ship. (James had the unfortunate women burned to death on his return.) In an allusion to his personal and political ills, the mercurial James once wrote in verse to his
wife, “Your smiling is an antidote against / The melancholy that oppresseth me,” paralleling the Danish prince’s well known embodiment of this humour.\textsuperscript{124} Hamlet’s derision of Fortinbras’s march “Exposing what is mortal, and unsure, / To all that fortune, death, and danger dare, / Even for an Egg-shell” (4.4.53–55) alludes to the popular belief that witches “saile in an egge shell.”\textsuperscript{125}

Given so many parallels, it is easy to see why Lilian Winstanley in her 1921 classic, \textit{Hamlet and the Scottish Succession}, proposed that Prince Hamlet was modeled on James and that the entire play is an allegory of the Elizabethan succession crisis.\textsuperscript{126} Perhaps on the surface the play appeared as a thinly disguised tribute to James constructed for a sophisticated theater audience and court that would have been preoccupied with the end of Tudor rule and the start of the Stuart era. In \textit{Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare}, Geoffrey Bulloch suggests that allusions to James VI of Scotland would have had considerable topicality in the period from 1587–1589 when the Ur-Hamlet was written. Not only had Mary just been executed, but negotiations for her son’s marriage were being conducted with the royal family in Denmark. Fortinbras’s demand for the return of “lands . . . by his father lost” (1.1.113–114), Bulloch thinks, may refer to the Orkney and Shetland isles that a Danish embassy sought in Edinburgh.

Yet despite some superficial resemblances, overall James is no Prince Hamlet, and the characterization quickly unravels.\textsuperscript{127} Even Winstanley is compelled to distance herself from a reductive reading and finds almost as many qualities of Essex in Hamlet as James. In \textit{Inscribing the Time: Shakespeare and the End of Elizabethan England}, the most sophisticated Jacobean reading of the play, Eric Mallin concedes that the figure of the prince is multidimensional, incorporating many influences, but that Fortinbras is based primarily on the Scottish king. “Hamlet helps legitimize a succession that names the son of a former enemy of state [Mary Queen of Scots]; symbolically, James himself, the invading son from the north, has been elected.”\textsuperscript{128} In \textit{Hyperion and the Hobbyhorse}, Shakespearean critic Arthur Lindley comes to a similar conclusion. Fortinbras is a “figure of diminished authority, King James to some previous Tudor.”\textsuperscript{129}

There may also be a touch of Ben Jonson in Fortinbras. To the extent that one dimension of the play has to do with the kingdom of arts and letters, the poet sees clearly that after he is gone, Jonson will inherit the London stage. As one who killed another actor in self-defense, the physically imposing Jonson qualifies as a “strong-armed” successor. The march of the Norwegian invader for “a fantasy and trick of fame / Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot” (4.4.63–64) may point to Jonson’s grandiose ambitions and overworn plots, which are satirized in the “little cayses” pas-
sage and other pointed references earlier in the play.

Hamlet’s openness to these contemporary readings would have helped the play get past the censors and on stage. Archbishop Whitgift’s corrector would have been more likely to notice and approve topical allusions to succession and intramural disputes among poets than to theological controversy. Yet beneath the Jacobean layer to the play lies a deeper, more subversive jeremiad against Church and Crown.

3
To Be or Not to Be

I asked [ninety-year-old Harold] Jenkins what the editor [of the Arden Hamlet] who had given so much of his life to seeking the truths hidden beneath Hamlet’s “veil of print” would ask Shakespeare if he met him in the afterlife. “Well, I think I would ask him one or two things about the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy. I think it’s all a little wrong. It doesn’t seem to relate to the immediate context. I’d quite like to hear his view on it,” Jenkins told me with a mischievous look.


Like The Comedy of Errors, King John, Twelfth Night, and other Shakespearean plays, Hamlet is not only a perceptive commentary on dysfunctional family relationships but also a clever parody of Elizabethan society, especially relations among Church, Crown, and Commons. Through its thematic elements, characterizations, puns, allusions, echoes, and other antic devices, it further points to the author’s true identity as Christopher Marlowe. As the modern proverb puts it, “The personal is the political.” Kit’s personal drama is inseparable from England’s, just as the fate of Denmark follows the fortunes of its prince.

In this light, let us examine the play’s most famous passage for echoes of events in Marlowe’s life as well as the destiny of England in the twilight of Elizabeth’s reign. After years of being forced to comply with an unjust and repressive social order, the poet appears to give vent to his personal struggle in this passage, in one of the most autobiographical reflections outside of the Sonnets.

The principal sources for the soliloquy are generally considered to be
Marlowe’s Faustus who “Bid[s] On cai me on farewell” (1.1.12). The term in the Greek phrase for “being and not being” and was misattributed to Aristotle. The magus is advised by Mephistopheles to “pray devoutly” (1.3.55) to Lucifer, echoing Prince Hamlet’s “a consummation / Devoutly to be wish’d” (3.1.69–70). Secondly, there are echoes of the Book of Job in such images as “The arrow cannot make him flee; for him slingstones are turned to stubble” (41.28). Socrates’s Apology, summarized by Montaigne, the French essayist, and translated by John Florio, is cited as another possible influence: “If it [death] be a consummation of ones being, it is also an amendment and entrance into a long and quiet life. We finde nothing so sweete in life, as a quiet rest and gentle sleepe, and without dreames.”

From an autobiographical perspective, the question uppermost in Marlowe’s mind appears to be whether to defend his wounded name or to die to his old identity. At a social level, this means openly confronting Tudor absolutism—as Martin Marprelate once did and Essex tried—or combating them through more subtle means, such as on the stage or in print. Marlowe seems obsessed with clearing his “wounded name” (5.2.340) and having someone survive to “to tell my story” (45). It is one thing to die a tragic death at age twenty-nine. It is another to die as a coward and a wretch after stabbing a man from behind. The cover story for the Deptford affair may have been music to the ears of the archbishop, Buckhurst, and his other enemies, who saw the divine hand turning Marlowe’s own knife against himself, but these allusions suggest that Marlowe was devastated. The loss of his honor and reputation would explain his bitterness toward the Cecils, who appear to have masterminded the staged death, flight into exile, and creation of a new literary identity. In Hamlet, this may reflect part of the prince’s unusually harsh and cruel treatment of Polonius, though this treatment is consistent with the original sources, and his mocking of Osric.

The author of the Sonnets proclaims, “every word doth almost (tell) my name, / Showing their birth, and where they did proceed” (Sonnet 76). Having examined the autobiographical layer to Hamlet’s soliloquies, let’s look at his most famous speech. One interpretation of the question is whether Marlowe should submit to the approaching interrogation for atheism and sedition and face almost certain torture and death or whether he should flee and save his life. I have added my interpretive notes in brackets to see how this interpretation plays out:

HAMLET: To be [true to myself], or not to be [true to myself], that is the question,
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune [and be martyred in defense of my good name against trumped up charges]
Or to take Arms against a sea of troubles [and fake my death, go into self-imposed exile, and fashion a new persona],
And by opposing [their tyranny and injustice], end them [once and for all],
to die [to my old identity] to sleep [under my own name]
No more, and by a sleep [and break with the past], to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to; ’tis a consummation [reckoning]
Devoutly to be wish’d to die to sleep,
To sleep, perchance to dream [of returning to my old name and life],
ay there’s the rub,
For in that sleep of death [staged or faked] what dreams [of leading a normal, peaceful life] may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal [literary] coil [as Marlowe]
Must give us pause, there’s the respect
That makes calamity of so long life [away from home];
For who would bear the whips [of the archbishop] and scorns of time
[and the torture chamber],
Th’oppressor’s wrong [the sovereign’s injustice], the proud man’s contumely [the court’s contempt and insolence],
The pangs of despisèd love [for Arbella or Mary Sidney], the law’s delay [the Puritans’ cause and parliamentary right],
The insolence of [ecclesiastical] office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th’unworthy [spies and informers] takes,
When he himself might his quietus [flight from England] make
With a bare bodkin [12d dagger]; who would fardels [loss of name and honor and other burdens] bear,
To grunt and sweat [out two pseudonymous plays a year] under a weary life [in obscurity and anonymity],
But that the dread of something after [the] death [of the spirit],
The undiscover’d country [unfinished life], from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have [charges of atheism, blasphemy, sedition, and immorality],
Than fly to others that we know not of [the rack, hanging, burning at the stake, and drawing and quartering].
Thus conscience does make [moral] cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution [to speak out]
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment [to unmask falsehood and bring truth to light],
With this regard [to preserve life and limb] their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. Soft you now,
The fair Ophelia [the portraiture of beauty, love, and truth], Nymph, in thy orisons [prayers]
Be all my sins [to you, my muse] remember’d [and forgiven].

(3.1.62–96)

As throughout the play, this passage appears to reveal the innermost
thoughts of the poet, as well as his dramatic creation. But whether it is a conscious self-reflection or arises out of the depths of the unconscious remains unclear. The Marlovian and Shakespearean plays revel in such ambiguity and paradox. Given what we now know about Marlowe and his circumstances, this reading contextualizes Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy in a way that might satisfy Arden editor Harold Jenkins’s concern. There is nothing in Will Shakespeare’s known life corresponding with it.

Of course, there are even many possible variations to a Marlovian reading of this speech. Given the disjoined quality of the time in the play, it is unclear if this passage refers to a particular moment in the poet’s life or constitutes a general reflection. Historically, the soliloquy could represent Kit’s inner struggle in the passion of the moment in May 1593, when he faced the question of whether to submit to arrest, torture, and probable execution or to “die,” flee the country, and start a new life. Or it could include the torment he later faced in exile when deciding whether to return home and risk discovery: “To be [in England] or not to be [in England]: that is the question.” Since this passage was significantly revised in Q2 which came out after the deaths of Elizabeth and the archbishop, it could represent a blend of both sentiments, as well as the recollection of other experiences and epiphanies. Since the nunner scene follows in Q2 and F, it could echo Marlowe’s preparation for exile and the pain of separation from Arbella, Mary, or other lady love by deliberately turning her against him. Coincidentally, the passage ends with the prince bidding Ophelia “Farewell,” as if he is leaving on a voyage from which he will not return. However actively present in the poet’s conscious mind, traumatic autobiographical memories are alluded to, or surface from the unconscious, in this most heartfelt of all Hamlet’s passages.

The “undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveler returns” resonates with a similar passage in Marlowe’s Edward II: “weep not for Mortimer / That scorns the world, and as a traveler / Goes to discover countries yet unknown” (5.6.63–65). The usual explanation is that the image refers to death. But as many critics have pointed out, in Hamlet the prince has just conversed with the ghost, a spectral traveler who has returned from the world of the dead. Perhaps only the dialectical wisdom of the first gravedigger or the chop logic of his sidekick can fathom the contradictions in Hamlet’s most famous speech. I’ve chosen to interpret “the undiscover’d country” figuratively as “the unfinished life.” Once Hamlet / Marlowe has crossed the frontier or boundary to a new existence (by putting on an antic disposition or staging his death), he can never return to his former identity.

In the end, Marlowe apparently decides that “The better part of valor is discretion” (5.4.119–120), as I Henry IV puts it. With the deaths of Greenwood, Barrow, Peny, and Essex, he learned the lesson of remaining
headstrong and acting too rashly. Seeking a via media, or middle way, between martyrdom and silence, he continues to speak truth to power prudently through the Shakespeare Compact. Will, his actor friend and alter ego, loyal keeps up the public persona and makes his story known. Marlowe only returns to England, as he discloses in the preface to The Jew of Malta, after the “Guise,” or persecutor—Whitgift—is dead, possibly in the same year as the enlarged Second Quarto of Hamlet is completed and published.

Though he takes supreme literary revenge in the play, Marlowe’s portrait of Whitgift is not irremediably evil. The king has many positive attributes. He is an intelligent administrator and an effective diplomat and exhibits a keen sense of strategy. In counseling Ophelia and Laertes, Claudius shows a tender, pastoral side. He loves his wife and shares power with her, though he conceals most of the dirty work and is not without remorse for his despicable deeds. The king tries to repent in the chapel scene, but like Faustus cannot bring himself to make a clean break with the past. By nature, Hamlet, like Marlowe, is pacifist—“pigeon-liver’d” (2.2.528)—and abhors violence. He is an older, more mature version of Calyphas, Tamburlaine’s pacifist son, who refuses to follow his father’s example: “I know, sir, what it is to kill a man; / It works remorse of conscience in me. I take no pleasure to be murderous, / Nor care for blood when wine will quench my thirst” (Tamburlaine II 4.1.27–29). Hamlet would much prefer to find a peaceful solution than carry out the ghost’s vengeful command. In imploring Gertrude to forego the pleasures of the marital bed, he offers an olive branch that would avoid bloodshed:

Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence, the next more easy:
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And master ev’n the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency

(3.4.179–184)

In other words, the prince believes that the archbishop’s nature can be changed for the better. If only Elizabeth would deny him her support just once, then the next time, it would be easier, and gradually his evil nature would subside. The sentiment calls to mind Jesus’s admonition, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” Rather than fight evil (and thereby become evil ourselves), we need only ignore it and put it behind us. If we don’t give it any of our own spiritual and psychic energy, it will collapse of its own accord. This Zen-like solution is reminiscent of the Marprelate tracts. Mixing thun-
derous denunciations of Whitgift as a latter-day Caiaphas and Pilate with punning references to “John of Cant” (Canterbury), Martin calls on the archbishop to repent for his crimes and be welcomed back into the community of faith. Like this real-life Yorick, Hamlet turns the other cheek amid all his jesting and jeremiads.

Nor for all her faults does Hamlet ever completely reject his mother. Gertrude’s complicity in Denmark’s pestilence is starkly delineated, but the question of her duplicity is left open. In the end, Marlowe gives Elizabeth the benefit of the doubt. Similarly, in the graveyard scene, Hamlet laments his unpardonable treatment of Ophelia and vies with Laertes (whom he later forgives) in proclaiming his undying love. Finally, Polonius, too, for all his deviousness is forgiven. After his initial fury has abated, Hamlet confesses his sorrow for slaying the father of his friend, “But I am very sorry, good Horatio, / That to Laertes I forgot myself; / For by the image of my Cause I see / The Portraiture of his” (5.2.80–83). By nature, then, Hamlet is well rounded, balancing passion and reflection, seriousness and mirth, condemnation and forgiveness. He is eminently fit to govern and lead Denmark, England, or the republic of arts and letters. Unlike Claudius and Gertrude, who rule by fear and intimidation, Hamlet inspires all those around him, appealing to their noblest impulses. In his person, all oppositions are reconciled—poet and soldier, aristocrat and commoner, Protestant and Catholic, believer and freethinker. In the characterizations of the prince, the jester, and the sexton, we see a reflection of the stages in the poet’s own life. By the image of Hamlet’s cause—uncompromising truthfulness to himself, the questioning of authority, and the sovereignty of reason—we ultimately see the portraiture of Marlowe’s.
Hamlet’s Ghost  283

4
Spirit of Health or Goblin Damn’d

HAMLET. Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn’d,
Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked, or charitable,
Thou com’st in such a questionable shape,
That I will speak to thee, I’ll call thee Hamlet.
(1.4.43–47)

The Ghost: Remember Me

The ghost, the most mysterious presence in the play, has vexed viewers, readers, and critics for four centuries. On the most basic level, the apparition is that of King Hamlet, the prince’s father. But as young Hamlet himself wonders, Is it a demon from hell, a tormented soul in purgatory, or a spirit from on high? Most scholarship has divided along these theological fault lines, giving rise to a passionate debate as to whether the playwright has Protestant or Catholic tendencies.

A look at some representative viewpoints will help clarify the ghost’s role. In The Elizabethan Hamlet, Arthur McGee contends that the ghost is a manifestation of evil and that the author is an orthodox Protestant. He presents a compelling analysis that, like Mephistopheles in Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, the ghost is an embodiment of Lucifer and its purpose is to bind Hamlet’s soul, subvert the church’s teaching of forgiveness, and bend the other characters toward hell. He identifies Zacharias Pasfield, a church official at St. Paul’s Cathedral, as the individual censor who, under Archbishop Whitgift’s auspices, had responsibility for approving Hamlet for publication. “[I]t is quite inconceivable that there should be a ‘good’ revenge ghost which came, in addition, from Catholic Purgatory because in Protestant eyes—Pasfield’s eyes—the playwright would not only have blasphemed but have uttered heresy also.”131 Hence, he concludes, the ghost is satanic and Hamlet acts like a Vice, the stock tempter in the old morality plays, leading the other characters in the drama to damnation. In the end, according to McGee, Fortinbras (the “Strong Man”), with “divine ambition puff’d” (4.4.51), another guise of Satan, inherits the kingdom. Describing the play’s
theology as impeccably Anglican, McGee concludes that “if Pasfield had
tought that Hamlet's attitude would have corrupted any member of
the audience he would have banned the play.”

In Hamlet in Purgatory, Stephen Greenblatt holds that despite the play’s
Protestant orientation, Shakespeare presents a nostalgic Catholic ghost.
“The assertion that the Ghost is ‘honest’ seems to mark Hamlet’s accept-
ance of its claim that it has come from a place of purgation,” he writes, “and
that acceptance may in turn be marked by the invocation—unique in
Shakespeare’s works—of Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Purgatory.”
Beyond latent Catholic sympathies, Shakespeare, in his view, utilizes the
theater as a cult of the dead to create a psychological space for bereavement
that has been missing in Elizabethan society following the abolition of
Purgatory and other traditional doctrines and ceremonies. Tracing how
Marlowe conjured the spirits of Alexander and his paramour in Dr. Faustus,
Greenblatt shows how Shakespeare built on this imagery in Henry V, The
Tempest, and other plays to transform the stage into a vehicle to bring to life
the ghostly pageant of history and “negotiate” with the dead.

Julius Caesar, believed to have been composed shortly before Hamlet,
includes a ghost that provokes the same questions. “Art thou any thing? /Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil, / That mak’st my blood
cold, and my hair to stare? / Speak to me what thou art,” Brutus asks. The
phantom replies adroitly, “Thy evil spirit, Brutus,” leaving open its ultimate
origin and purpose (4.3.278–282).

Wreathed in ambiguity and equivocation, the plays of Marlowe and
Shakespeare revel in this kind of dilemma, challenging and provoking us to
reflect and come up with our own perceptions. As with the other problems
in the play, there may be no single answer to the prince’s question. The poet
implies that the truth lies in the diversity and strength of all of our individ-
ual opinions. In a foreshadowing of Kierkegaard, subjectivity is the only
objectivity, or as the prince says, “thinking makes it so” (2.2.250). As in The
Comedy of Errors, Twelfth Night, and other plays with subtle theological sub-
texts, Hamlet may simply be trying to unify competing religious doctrines,
showing that one person—and by extension one society—can hold mutually
exclusive views. In this sense, Hamlet is an eloquent plea for the coexis-
tence of Protestantism and Catholicism—a policy of toleration widely
observed in many English towns, hamlets, and rural areas, but opposed by
the Crown, Church, and upwardly mobile urban classes.

From a Marlovian perspective, the starting point for understanding the
paradoxical figure of the ghost lies in its command, “remember me”
(1.5.95). Conventionally, this is interpreted to mean that the prince should
take revenge and kill his uncle. But if the king embodies the character of
Archbishop Whitgift, as the puns in its revelatory speech suggest, who is the ghost? What does it represent? And what is Hamlet being asked to remember? (The remembrance theme in *Hamlet* parallels inversely the forgetfulness theme in *Tamburlaine*.)

To the extent that Prince Hamlet constructs Marlowe and Claudius represents Whitgift, who is Marlowe’s true father? Clearly, the poet’s spiritual parent is not his biological father—John Marlowe—or, as some critics contend, John Shakespeare. Nor is it Burghley, though as a youngster, he once gambled away all of his worldly goods to a boyhood chum. Through a hole in the wall near his playmate’s bed, he howled one night like a ghost until the boy in a panic begged his forgiveness on his knees. A quick study, young Cecil apparently never gambled again, and according to a biographer, it was the “first recorded instance of a Cecilian ‘device.’”

The details that emerge in the play about the ghost help us to identify its provenance. In the course of its appearances, we learn the following:

- The ghost appears in martial attire, in a “fair and warlike form” (1.1.54), at one point with its beaver up. Armed and carrying a truncheon, it resembles the countenance of King Hamlet, who slew Old Fortinbras of Norway in single combat.
- The ghost relates that King Hamlet was napping in an orchard when his wicked brother, jealous of his kingdom and queen, poured hebona, a deadly poison, in his ear.
- The king’s death involved not only extreme physical suffering, but also mental and spiritual anguish. “Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin” (1.5.80), it was unprepared to die and is now undergoing the purging fires to expiate its own faults.
- The ghost is especially solicitous of Gertrude and adjures Hamlet not to contrive against her in any way. Rather, “leave her to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (1.5.90–92).

At first glance, the horror that the ghost invokes and the quenchless fires of the hereafter deflect us from the specter’s message. In its opening statement, the ghost implores Hamlet to avenge its murder, twice employing the word “revenge.” However, after it recounts its tale, there is a subtle shift from the physical to the psychological plane. “[A]dieu, adieu, adieu, remember me” (1.5.95), the ghost admonishes before exiting. In heeding his father’s command, Hamlet vows:
. . . remember thee,
Ay thou poor Ghost while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe, remember thee,
Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,

. . . now to my word,
It is adieu, adieu, remember me.

(1.5.99–115)

By reiterating the words “remember” and “memory,” Hamlet signifies that his revenge is primarily spiritual, not physical. His purpose is not simply to kill the usurper, but to remember what his father stood for and to pass along his dreams and ideals to future generations. The sentiment echoes the feeling at the end of the play, when the prince himself is dying and implores Horatio to remember him and “to tell my story” (5.2.345). As Greenblatt observes, “This corrosive inwardsness—the hallmark of the entire play and the principal cause of its astonishing, worldwide renown—is glimpsed even in its first frantic response to the Ghost, and it is reinforced by the Ghost’s command, ‘Remember me.’ From this perspective, what is at stake in the shift of emphasis from vengeance to remembrance is nothing less than the whole play.” The theme of remembrance also alludes to Jesus’s teachings, especially the celebrated passage during the Last Supper, which is the basis for the Christian eucharist: “Take, eat: this is my bodie, which be broken for you: this do ye in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11.24).

In revealing the identity of his murderer, the ghost alludes not only to Archbishop Whitgift, through the double puns, but to Marlowe as well. Further down in the same passage, the ghost laments that he went to his grave “No reck’ning made, but sent to my account, / With all my imperfections on my head” (1.5.82–83). In some contexts, as we saw, reckoning is an Elizabethan code word that refers to the coroner’s report on Marlowe’s faked death and the quarrel over the bill, or reckoning, As You Like It and other Shakespearean plays and poems frequently invoke this term and clusters of images surrounding it, subtly alluding to the events in Deptford in the spring of 1593. Hence, in Hamlet, the reference to “reck’ning,” coming hard upon the word play on Whitgift’s name, is probably autobiographical, alerting us to the deeper symbolism of the play. The ghost’s entreaties several lines later for Hamlet to go easy on Gertrude further link Queen Elizabeth, however ambiguously, to the events surrounding Marlowe’s sudden arrest.

Given the nature of the accusations against Marlowe, we might initially
identify the ghost with a champion of religious freedom such as Martin Luther. Not only does Luther's spirit haunt European society during this era, but he is also the namesake of Martin Marprelate, the theological prankster whose comic genius pervades the Shakespearean plays and is reborn in Falstaff, Yorick, and other cherished characters. There is some basis for this identification. For instance, Hamlet has several allusions to Luther. And according to critic Steve Sohmer, the play commences shortly after midnight on October 31, All Hallows Eve. This is the same day in 1517 on which Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. (The fact that Luther directed his queries at the archbishop of Mainz subtly echoes Marlowe's contest with the archbishop of Canterbury.)

In addition to being a student in Wittenberg, Hamlet jests about a “convocation of politic worms” (4.3.22–23), referring to the Diet at Worms, where Luther challenged the absolutism of the papacy and of Emperor Charles V. The prince's melancholy digressions on diet, decay, and transmutation may also be glossed as allusions to Lutheran doctrines or other Reformation controversies. In telling the king that the slain Polonius is at supper, Hamlet quips, “Not where he eats, but where he is eaten” (4.3.22). “The supper where the host does not eat but is eaten,” as Greenblatt explains, “is the Supper of the Lord.” The jest is reminiscent of those Marlowe was accused of making about the Lord's banquet. When Claudius mixes the poison into the wine, according to Sohmer, “the mystery of transubstantiation [is] parodied through the onice/union in the lethal chalice.” Once again, from a Marlovian perspective, Archbishop Whitgift's priestly functions—and broadly, his entire administration of the Church—are wickedly satirized by this sacramental image of pestilence and damnation. Luther himself rejected the concept of the Trinity as unbiblical and avoided it in his prayers and invocations. Like Kit, Hamlet is essentially an Arian or Unitarian.

Besides its references to Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, the play alludes to the spirits of martyrs past in its references to the sacrificial fires of the afterlife and Claudius's practice of witchcraft and sorcery. At least in part due to the screening of the manuscript, there are no explicit references to Francis Kett, Mary Queen of Scots, Barrow, Greenwood, Penry, and other contemporaries who were executed for their religious beliefs. But in the context of the struggle between the mighty opposite on stage, their ghostly presence may be eerily felt. Martin Marprelate may also be hinted at in the prince's colloquial reference to the ghost as “truepenny” (1.5.166), an epithet from the old morality plays that was singularly applied to Martin by Thomas Nashe, when Nashe was employed by
the archbishop in refuting the pamphleteer.139

Horatio, the first character in the play to identify the ghost with King Hamlet, offers further insight into the identity of the murdered monarch and what the prince is commanded to remember. In discussing the appearance of the ghost with Bernardo and Marcellus, Horatio is reminded of antiquity:

   In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
    A little er the mightiest Julius fell,
    The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
    Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets
    As stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood
    Disasters in the sun; and the moist star,
    Upon whose influence Neptune’s empire stands
    Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.
    And even the like precurse of fearce events,
    As harbingers preceding still the fates
    And prologue to the Omen coming on
    Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
    Unto our Climatures and countrymen.

(1.1.123–135)

Horatio also invokes Rome at the end of the play when he stoically offers to commit suicide and follow Hamlet into the next world. Coupled with his Roman name, these opening and closing references to Rome establish Horatio as the voice of the Western cultural tradition and constituted authority. Broadly, the Shakespearean plays perform this role in society, distilling the wisdom of the past—embodied in Greek and Roman civilization—and blending it with Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Viking, and other indigenous influences to create an English national identity. From this normative perspective, the ghost in the play represents enlightened classical antiquity. Its martial airs and chivalrous aspect cloak the noble heritage of the past that was commonly referred to as “ancient liberties” and symbolized by Apollo’s laurel bough.

The preservation of individual rights is a major theme in the Shakespearean canon. For example, in Henry V, as Heather James notes, “While Essex protects feudal rights, Michael Williams charges the absolutist state, responsible for protecting the commonwealth, not to exploit the ancient liberties of its subjects.”140 In usurping Elder Hamlet’s kingdom, Claudius is turning away from the values and ideals enshrined in ancestral myths, legends, and cultures, including varieties of power sharing among the various
Hamlet’s Ghost

289

estates of society, to despotic, absolutist rule. In this respect, the king is very modern. His accent is always on self-interest, expediency, and haste. In calling into question the legitimacy of the Religious Settlement of Queen Elizabeth and the Church of England—the murderous and incestuous union of Claudius and Gertrude—Hamlet voices the sentiments of the English Commons, including many Protestants and Catholics, as well as a smaller number of nonconformists, freethinkers, Jews, and witches and other “pagans.” *Hamlet* is a tragic—but eloquent—appeal for freedom of conscience, especially in matters of personal thought, expression, and belief. It is an apotheosis to what classical civilization called *libertas* or freedom. The poisoning of the body politic, the suppression of *libertas* by illegitimate power, haunts the court at Elsinore and, by extension, Elizabethan England.

The subliminal political symbolism helps to explain the dynamics of the ghost. In the bedchamber scene, Gertrude can’t see the apparition, and when Hamlet speaks to “th’incorporal air” (3.4.130), she is convinced that he is mad. Like Elizabeth, she is oblivious to the deeper implications of her incestuous policies. She cannot fathom how they poison those around her or understand why she is the target of such harsh criticism. Only after Hamlet makes her look into the window of her own soul and confront the corruption within does she become aware of the consequences of her outward complicity. After this revelation, the ghost vanishes and does not appear again. Both prince and queen have fulfilled its edict to remember. The ghost’s mission has been accomplished.

In contrast, the sentries and officer on watch—possibly echoing Poley, Skeres, and Frizer, the three foot soldiers in Deptford—and Horatio, mirroring Shakespeare, can sense or see the ghost, but cannot converse with it. They are aware of the rottenness in Denmark, as Marcellus puts it, but they prudently keep silent out of fear or lack the ability to communicate effectively. Only Hamlet, the master wordsmith, scholar, and visionary, succeeds in engaging the apparition and establishing a verbal connection. Like Marlowe defying tradition on the London stage, the prince does not take the voice of antiquity for granted. He recognizes its sins and imperfections. After all, Greece and Rome were not only the abode of the muses, but also the civilizations that gave rise to numerous dictators such as Claudius and Nero, crucified Jesus, and embodied the stultifying Scholasticism of the Middle Ages. But on balance, he sees much in the past that deserves to be remembered, restored, and revived.

*Hamlet* is very much a Renaissance play, celebrating the rebirth of learning and cultural flourishing that characterized its era. And the ghost plays a central role in conveying this message. Like Aeneas founding Rome and his great-grandson, Brutus, founding New Troy (as London was then known),
the Marlovian and Shakespearean works seek to construct the moral and spiritual foundation for a new culture and civilization. In 1633, ten years after the First Folio came out, when Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* was finally published, the poet affirms in his most uncensored speech, “I count religion but a childish toy, / And hold there is no sin but ignorance” (Prologue 14–15). Throughout his works, the poet suggests that the radiance of inner beauty, the wise exercise of worldly power, and the saving grace of knowledge are the keys to the kingdom.

**More Things in Heaven and Earth**

HAMLET. There are more things in heaven and earth *Horatio,*

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy

(1.5.183–184)

The prince’s celebrated admonition suggests that there are higher planes of awareness and deeper levels of understanding than those pointed to by the classical values of ancient Greek and Rome and even by Renaissance learning. As Hamlet expounds in the play, human imagination is unlimited in scope. Four times he uses the word “infinite” to describe the human condition: 1) “As infinite as man may undergo” (1.4.36) in the first soliloquy; 2) “O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a King of infinite space” (2.2.253–254), in an exchange with Rosencrantz; 3) “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties” (2.2.295–296) in the meditation on human potential; and 4) “Alas poor Yorick, I knew him *Horatio*, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy” (5.1.156–157), in the graveyard scene.

As these passages intimate, one dimension of *Hamlet* is scientific and cosmological. In upholding a multiplicity of worlds and the freedom of the human mind to soar to infinite heights, the play opens the way for a modern understanding of the cosmos unfettered by medieval dogmas and theology based on fear and superstition. “Infinite” was often a code word associated with the revolutionary Copernican world view that was in the process of displacing the discredited Ptolemaic cosmology of the middle ages. In *Dr. Faustus* and *The Massacre at Paris,* Marlowe sweeps aside Aristotle’s traditional logic, as he does with the Greek philosopher’s dramatic unities of time and place in the player’s scene in *Hamlet.* In *Dr. Faustus,* Kit alludes to Polish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus’s *De revolutionibus orbium caelestium*
in the scene in which the magus asks Mephistopheles for “a book where I might see all characters and planets of the heavens, that I might know their motions and dispositions” (2.1.173–175). The princely demon instantly produces a text. After glancing through it, Faustus exclaims, “O, thou art deceived” (181). As critic Hilary Gatti points out in her perceptive essay, “Bruno and Marlowe: Dr. Faustus,” this enigmatic exchange echoes the censorship of Giordano Bruno by the university dons during a lecture he gave at Oxford University in the 1580s.141 Anathematized by both Protestantism and Catholicism, Copernican astronomy challenged the biblical account of the creation and the geocentric universe with its concentric spheres, primum mobile, and stationary earth.

Bruno, who went beyond Copernicus and posited “an infinity of worlds,” was no more welcome in Elizabethan England (except by Ralegh and Northumberland’s School of Night) than he was by the Inquisition that ultimately burned him at the stake. Gatti appears to be correct that Faustus alludes to Copernicus in this passage, but an alternate interpretation is that the book Mephistopheles produces is an orthodox Ptolemaic handbook of the heavens, with a biblical commentary attached. Since modern scientific knowledge has rendered this approach obsolete, Mephistopheles is “deceived.” In this witty exchange, as throughout his early works, Marlowe contrasts the claims of science and religion and usually finds the latter wanting. As Harold Bloom acknowledges in his recent book, Hamlet: Poem Unlimited, “I belatedly agree with Dame Frances Yates that the Shakespearean Theater of the World has subtle links to visionaries like Giordano Bruno.”142

Hamlet takes the Copernican imagery even further. In the opening scene of the play, Bernardo points to a star “that’s westward from the pole” (1.1.42). The star has variously been identified as Alderamin, the brightest star in the constellation of Cepheus; Denab, a star in the constellation Cygnus, the Swan; and a supernova that Tycho Brahe, the Danish astronomer, first observed in 1572. Cepheus, a king whose family includes Cassiopeia and Andromeda, is identified with tragedy. “Offspring of Cepheus will also furnish words for the buskin of tragedy whose pen, if only on paper, is drenched in blood, and the paper will reveal in the spectacle of crime and catastrophe in human affairs,” explains Marcus Manilius in his classic Astronomicicon. Originally written in Latin in the first century and published in three editions during Marlowe’s and Shakespeare’s lifetime, the handbook to the heavens specifically cites the reenactment of Priam’s death as a scene to be performed before the spectators, exactly as in the players’ scene in Hamlet. The Farnese globe, a map of the celestial sphere dating even earlier, also portrays Cepheus in the garments of a tragic actor.143
Cygnus the Swan, a more pacific constellation, calls to mind the Swan of Avon, the conventional epithet associated with Shakespeare. But it also echoes the Swan theatre in London and the swans of Venus, an image Marlowe frequently employs in *Dido Queen of Carthage* and *Hero and Leander*.

But the third suggestion for the identity of the star yields even richer fare. Like Bruno, Thomas Digges, a native of Canterbury, a scientist, and a probable associate of Marlowe in the School of Night circle, also believed in an infinity of worlds and actually introduced this concept several years before Bruno. From a scientific colleague, Digges received a portrait of Tycho Brahe, the Danish astronomer, with heraldic shields bearing the names Sophie Gyldenstierne and Erik Rosenkrantz, and his laboratory was located near Helsingor Castle, the model for Elsinore in the play. Leslie Hotson believes that Digges, who influenced several other Shakespearean plays, provided the names for the two hapless courtiers in *Hamlet*. Perhaps he also influenced the star—a portent of things to come—in the opening of the play.

In a brilliant essay in the *Elizabethan Review*, Peter D. Usher observes that *Hamlet* makes reference to several astronomical terms associated with Digges’s cosmology, including “opposition” (1.2.102), “retrograde” (1.2.116), “transformation” (2.2.5), “conjunctive” (4.7.16), and “revolution” (5.1.77). Even the prince’s “inky cloak” (1.2.79), the Pennsylvania State University scholar contends, may be a metaphor for the canopy of the night sky. When the king inquires about his melancholy, Hamlet puns “I am too much i’ th’ sun” (1.2.68), an oblique reference to Copernicus’s sun-centered cosmology. “By opposing Hamlet’s return to Wittenberg, Claudius opposes heliocentrism and identifies himself with the model of his namesake, Claudius Ptolemy,” Usher observes. “In fact, only in Shakespeare’s version of *Hamlet* does the usurper king bear Ptolemy’s first name. By expressing a desire to return to Wittenberg in [Act] 1. [Scene] 2, Hamlet allies himself with Copernicanism.”

By ridding himself of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, satellites of the king, the prince kills off rival astronomical models. Usher links the gravedigger’s numerous puns on digging with Thomas Digges and his father, Leonard, the inventor of the perspective glass, or telescope. In one of his boldest and most original insights, he identifies Fortinbras’s expedition to Poland to “gain a little patch of ground” (4.4.19) with Copernicus’s grave!

Among other specters alluded to in the play, Usher sees the conversation between Hamlet and Osric about the terms of the duel with Laertes as a veiled commentary on Thomas Harriot, the mathematician and member of the Ralegh-Northumberland circle. The “card or calendar of gentry”
(5.2.111) mentioned in the passage may refer to Harriot’s expertise in cartography and navigation, including the maps of the New World he kept for Sir Walter Raleigh. “[F]or you shall find in him the continent of what part a Gentleman would see” (5.2.112–113), according to Usher, alludes to Harriot’s trip to North America in 1585 and visit to the Roanoke Island colony in Virginia.¹⁴⁷

The ghostly dialectic between Faustus and Hamlet continued into the Stuart era. In 1616, the revised edition of Marlowe’s earlier play came out with a new scene in which Saxon Bruno, the new counter-pope, is liberated from captivity. By this time, Bruno had been burned at the stake as a heretic, but this could be another example of the dramatist taking literary revenge. The Saxon prefixed to Bruno’s name alludes to Saxony, the principality in which Wittenberg was located and the capital of both Reformation and Copernican thought. It may also pun on Saxo Grammaticus, the source for the original Amleth legend, and the sexton, or gravedigger, in Hamlet, whom as we have seen speaks for the author himself.

Another possible influence on Hamlet’s wider perspective is Unitarianism. There are striking parallels between the lives of Marlowe and Michael Servetus, the Spanish-born theologian and author, who was one of the founders of Unitarianism. Servetus was declared a heretic for his writings against the Trinity, and his books were burned by the Protestant leader of Geneva, John Calvin. Like Marlowe, he narrowly escaped capture but was later identified as the author of his anonymous publications, arrested, and burned at the stake. Servetus was a physician, and his writings include the first modern description of blood circulation, which may have interested Marlowe; Hamlet’s almost clinical preoccupation with blood and its flow through the body has been observed by many critics and physicians. Socinus, another founder of Unitarianism, unified many of the Antitrinitarian factions at the Synod of Brest in 1588. Clandestine translations of his writings were smuggled into England from Holland, and he had many followers among immigrants in the Strangers’ Church in London. Hence, it is probable that Marlowe (who reputedly wrote a work against the Trinity himself) was familiar with his teachings. In Socinus’s first name, Faustus, we may see another influence on Marlowe’s earlier play of that name. Socinus died in Poland in 1603, the year Hamlet was first published, and his grave in Luclawice is an alternative candidate for the small plot of land in Poland sought by Fortinbras.

As these examples show, there is more to the description of heaven and earth in Hamlet than first appears. The Copernican cosmology embraced by the poet challenges the biblically sanctioned dogmas of the Church and substantiates—if not transsubstantiates—Hamlet’s allegiance to the sovereignty
of reason.

Complementing the passage on holding a mirror up to nature, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* offers a reflection on the poet’s art that exquisitely expresses Prince Hamlet’s thought processes and cosmic vision, as well as the dramatist’s skill in grounding his narrative:

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(5.1.12–17)

**Hamlet’s Mill**

’Tis said, sang Snaebjorn, that far out, off yonder ness, the Nine Maids of the Island Mill stir amain the host-cruel skerry-quern—they who in ages past ground Hamlet’s meal. The good chieftain furrows the hull’s lair with his ship’s peaked prow. Here the sea is called Amlodhi’s Mill.

—I. Gollancz, *Hamlet in Iceland*

That almost brent the axletree of heaven.

—*Tamburlaine* (4.2.50)

The time is out of joint, O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right.

—*Hamlet* (1.5.204–205)

In *Hamlet’s Mill*, their celebrated study of the origin of myth, Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend trace the Hamlet story to an ancient Norse legend about Amlodhi’s Mill. Originally the giant mill ground out peace and plenty, but over time, it turned out salt, and now, from beneath the sea, it yields only rock and sand, producing a giant whirlpool that leads to death, destruction, and mystic knowledge. “This imagery stands, as the evidence develops, for an astronomical process, the secular shifting of the sun through
the signs of the zodiac which determines world-ages, each numbering thousands of years,” the two MIT scholars explain. “Each age brings a World Era, a Twilight of the Gods. Great structures collapse; pillars topple which supported the great fabric; floods and cataclysms herald the shaping of a new world.”

In essence, they contend, the Shakespearean Hamlet is the vestige of a worldwide cluster of myths that harken back to the precessional cycle symbolized by the turning of the cosmic mill. “Amlodhi, as his name was in Icelandic legend, shows the same characteristics of melancholy and high intellect. He, too, is a son dedicated to avenge his father, a speaker of cryptic but inescapable truths, and elusive carrier of Fate who must yield once his mission is accomplished and sink once more into concealment in the depths of the time to which he belongs: Lord of the Golden Age, the Once and Future King.”

The cosmic shift corresponds with a 25,800-year-cycle known in antiquity as Plato’s Wondrous Year, the bret of the axletree of heaven, or the pageant of world ages (Piscean, Aquarian, etc.). Modern astronomy calls it the precession of the equinoxes. Because of the earth’s slight wobble, the pole star appears to change gradually during this epochal period. The earth is surrounded by a vast protective belt of electromagnetic fields, but the area over the poles is relatively open. The shower of incoming waves and vibrational energy from the pole stars therefore exerts a strong influence on the earth, as a new star or constellation moves into ascendance. The Great Year falls into two halves, each lasting about 13,000 years, which have been described as the Golden Age and the Age of Darkness, the Time of Paradise and the Time of Wilderness, Spiritual Civilization and Material Civilization, or other complementary opposites. The precessional cycle can further be divided into four seasons: first, summer, or the peak of light corresponding with the center of the Milky Way directly overhead, producing the Golden Age; next autumn, when Vega succeeds as the pole star, displacing the highly charged galactic center, producing a partial axis shift, other terrestrial upheavals, and the spread of glacial ice, leading to the collapse of ancient world culture and the rise of civilization when a warming trend returns; then winter, or the depth of darkness, when Polaris serves as the pole star and millennia of escalating warfare, technology, and environmental destruction imperil the earth itself; and finally spring, the rebirth of planetary life and culture leading to the flowering of a new Golden Age.

While the apocalyptic imagery and chronology differ slightly according to each tradition or culture, when we look at the earth’s history we see that approximately every half cycle, or 13,000 years, the world was faced with destruction, by alternating crises related to fire or water. The last upheaval,
heralded by the arrival of Vega (whose name means “fall” or “decline”), corresponded with the great flood in the Bible and myths of the sinking of Atlantis. The approaching destruction by fire, prophesied by such disparate societies as the Hopi, Laplanders, and Dogen, may take the form of nuclear war, industrial pollution, or global warming. According to many predictions, we are at the very center of the precessional spiral at the present time. Polaris, the pole star that presides over the final, wintry season, will reach its zenith in about A.D. 2100 (at which point, like the full moon at its peak, it abruptly loses its electromagnetic force or energy). The modern age, spanning the Renaissance to our own time, is at the cusp of this momentous change. In most myths pertaining to this cycle, humanity faces the dilemma of finding a collective moral and spiritual means to pass safely through this era and start a new cycle or perish through violence, corruption, and decay.

In Tamburlaine and his other plays, Marlowe alludes to this cosmic cycle and refers frequently to the axis shift. Although Hamlet’s Mill focuses primarily on the ancient Amleth legends and does not mention any cosmological vestiges in the modern Hamlet, we can identify elements of the original story in the Shakespearean version. By doing so, perhaps we can glimpse the poet’s larger purpose and a clue to the play’s universal appeal.

As Hamlet opens at the stroke of midnight, the axis or pole of heaven is introduced in the first scene when Bernardo mentions the “star that’s westward from the pole” (1.1.42). Horatio’s meditation on the “sheeted dead,” quoted above, invokes cataclysmic images of destruction by fire and water. The “trains of fire and dews of blood,” “disasters in the sun,” and “Neptune’s empire . . . sick unto Doomsday” portend not so much the Christian judgment as the coming change of the pole star. Later, Horatio warns Hamlet against speaking to the ghost in words that point to the heavenly mill, now covered by the sea as in the old Norse legend, churning out madness and death:

What if it tempt you toward the flood my Lord,  
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff  
That beetles o’er his base into the sea,  
And there assume some other horrible form  
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason,  
And draw you into madness, think of it,  
The very place puts toys of desperation  
Without more motive, into every brain  
That looks so many fathoms to the sea  
And hears it roar beneath.

(1.4.75–84)
Another passage by the prince’s confidant reinforces the imagery:

HORATIO. Awake the God of day, and at his warning
Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air
Th’extravagant and erring spirit hies
To his confine, and of the truth herein
This present object made probation.  
(1.1.163–167)

These apocalyptic images reinforce the prince’s comment to Horatio that there are “more things in heaven and earth . . . / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (1.5.183–184).

The site of King Hamlet’s murder, an orchard, or idyllic garden, constructs the Golden Age, the primal state of perfection in which the cosmic mill ground out peace and plenty. The lost paradise imagery is reinforced by Hamlet’s lament about his father’s loss:

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seems to me all the uses of this world.
Fie on’t, ah fie, ’tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature,
Possess it merely  
(1.2.135–139)

Within a theological context, the “unweeded garden” points to the expulsion from Eden and the Fall of humankind.

In the opening act, Hamlet praises his father, likening his excellent qualities to Hyperion, a Titan who was the father of the sun, moon, and dawn. In the chamber scene, Hamlet again compares him to Hyperion, but it is another Titan, Saturn, who most closely resembles the prince’s deceased father. Saturn was the god of agriculture (portrayed carrying a curved sword, or scythe) and lord of the Golden Age. As an embodiment of the golden grain (yellow being his color), Saturn periodically died and was reborn. The ancient fertility mysteries of Isis and Osiris, Ishtar and Tammuz, and Venus and Adonis partake of this symbolism. In ceremonial rituals associated with Hecate, incantations can shake the spheres and cause the world axis to shift. In the original Amleth myth, the death of the sowing god and the decline of the Golden Age are represented by crop failures and the progressive corruption of food and drink. Though considerably toned down from Saxo’s text, the Shakespearean versions retain Prince Hamlet’s preference for simple, nourishing fare and abhorrence of his uncle’s feasting and
carousing. Most spectacularly, the food metaphor is translated into Hamlet’s meditation on the purpose of the theater, when in the scene with the player he recalls his favorite speech:

. . . an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning. I remember one said there were no sallets [salads] in the lines, to make the matter savory, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affectation, but called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet, & by very much, more handsome than fine

(2.2.402–408)

The lines not only read like a gloss on Marlowe’s motto on nourishment (“Quod me nutrit me destructit”) but they also refer to the passage on the Trojan War in his play Dido Queen of Carthage, which the player proceeds to paraphrase. As I have described elsewhere, the fall of Troy hearkens back to the end of the ancient world community that reached a peak during processional summer.\(^{150}\) The abduction of Helen—a theme in literature and art from Homer to Marlowe and Shakespeare—represents the loss of the Golden Age. Rather than move forward and adjust to ever-changing conditions, humanity has looked backwards with tragic results.

The precessional cycle with its alternating ages of order and chaos also manifests on a much smaller scale within each individual life.\(^{151}\) In The Mousetrap, the Player King and Queen, representing King Hamlet and Gertrude, reveal that they were married thirty years. Thirty years is the time that it takes Saturn to orbit the sun and was commonly used by classical writers (and later scholars such as Saxo) to signify a general period of peace and prosperity. Reminiscent of Hecate’s spell, the figure is repeated three times in the Player King’s speech:

Full thirty times hath Phoebus’ cart gone round
Neptune’s salt wash, and Tellus’ orbed ground,
And thirty dozen Moons with borrowed sheen
About the world have times twelve thirties been
Since love our hearts, and Hymen did our hands
Unite commutual in most sacred bands.

(3.2.147–152)

From the gravedigger, we learn that Prince Hamlet was born on the day of his father’s victory over Norway almost thirty years earlier, marking the beginning of the era of peace and harmony. With his father’s death, the world has declined into chaos. From grinding out salt (a substance men-
tioned three times in the play), the celestial mill is now turning out rocks and sand in the form of tyrannical deeds, inventions mistook, and other calamities. Piling Ossa on Pelion, a classical image of moving mountains invoked in the scene in which Laertes and Hamlet leap into Ophelia’s grave, refers to the war of the Titans and metaphorically to the struggle of noble reason to scale the heavenly heights.

Under the Roman emperors, including Claudius, mid December marked the beginning of the Saturnalia, a period of mirth and festivities in which the social order was inverted. Masters served slaves, women lords it over men, and princes exchanged places with their fools. By putting on an antic disposition at this season in the play, Prince Hamlet recreates the role of the Lord of Misrule, a familiar figure from the medieval revels that was popular in Elizabethan England. In stating that he was only mad “North Northwest” (2.2.355), Hamlet may be alluding to his spiritual father, Saturn, whose temple was located in the northwest corner of the Roman Forum.

Playing the fool, Hamlet’s motley redounds, and like Cepheus garbed as a tragedian holding a blood-stained pen, he scripts the play-within-the-play and ironically authors his own demise. As the cataclysms on stage unfold, images of destruction by water are followed by those of fire as the entire cycle of death and decay is enacted in microcosm. Let’s begin with images of water. The prince not only faces a metaphorical “sea of troubles” (3.1.65), but also he is sent to his death by Claudius who exults “Haply the seas, and countries different, / With variable objects, shall expel / This something settled matter in his heart” (3.1.172–174). At sea, Hamlet discovers the treachery of his schoolfellows. From this near death experience, he is rescued “naked” (i.e., reborn) at the hands of pirates and returns by barque to Denmark. In a letter to Horatio, he describes his “sea-gowne scar’d about me in the dark” (5.2.14). The queen describes him as “Mad as the sea and wind, when they both contend / Which is the mightier” (4.1.7–8).

The greatest destruction by water, of course, involves the drowning of Ophelia.

GERTRUDE. There is a Willow grows ascant the Brook,  
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream,  
There, on the pendent boughs her Crownet weeds  
Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,  
When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping Brook, her clothes spread wide,  
And Mermaid like awhile they bore her up,  
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and induced
Unto that element, but long it could not be
Till that her garments heavy with their drink,
Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.
LAERTES. Alas, then she is drown’d?
QUEEN. Drown’d, drown’d.
LAERTES. Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia
(4.7.177–197)

As the personification of beauty and love, Ophelia is destroyed by a watery “element” just as the epoch she represents, the Golden Age, disappeared beneath the waves when the axis shifted and a new pole star moved overhead. The “lauds” that she sings can also be seen as songs embodying oral folk memories of that ancient cataclysm, as one of her mad songs suggests:

“And will he not come again,
And will he not come again,
No, no, he is dead, go to thy death bed,
He never will come again,
His beard was as white as snow,
All Flaxen was his pole.
He is gone, he is gone, and we cast away moan
(4.5.186–192)

The usual explanation is that Ophelia is grieving for her aged, white-haired father, Polonius. The refrain, though slightly garbled like many children’s rhymes, appears to refer to celestial events. From a cosmological view, the change from “Flaxen” or golden to “white” represents the end of precessional summer and the coming of winter. The song puns on the pole star and can be seen as referring to the axis shift in Hamlet’s consciousness and behavior. Where once his love was as steadfast as the pole star, it is now gone. In her distracted sorrow, she muses whether he will come again. Like the bright star that returns every 25,000 years, Hamlet’s love will be reborn, but first he too must suffer a setting or ritual death.

En route to England for having slain her father, Hamlet avoids his doom. In recounting his narrow escape from destruction at sea, the prince tells Horatio how he foiled Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s instructions. With another possible pun on Amlodhi’s Mill, he confides how he cleverly substituted fresh characters in the king’s letter and stayed “the grinding of the
Axe”—or grinding of the world axis—lest “My head should be struck off” (5.2.25–26).

Possibly the most direct reference to the ancient mill of the gods that churns out destiny comes when Rosencrantz compares sovereignty to:

... a massy wheel
Fix’d on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes, ten thousand lesser things
Are mortised and adjoin’d

(3.3.18–21)

This is one of several allusions to Fortune’s wheel, a common Renaissance motif, in the play. Though linked with Fortunata, the fickle Goddess of Fate, its cosmological origins clearly go further back. “Massy,” one of Marlowe’s favorite adjectives, appears in similar contexts in virtually all of his early plays.

As the grain god, Hamlet is destined to die not by water, but by fire. Again, as the plot quickens, images and references to fire, flame, heat, sun, and similar images intensify. Not only is he “too much i’ th’ sun” (1.2.68), and burning up under his uncle’s tyranny, but the ghost is cleansed by the “sulphrous and tormenting flames” (1.5.5) and “confined to fast in fires” (15). Polonius warns Ophelia that her lover’s “blazes daughter / Giving more light than heat” (1.3.122–123) and that “You must not take for fire” (125) his smooth words and promises. Invoking ironically the pre-Copernican image of the immovable pole star, Hamlet himself later writes a letter proclaiming his steadfastness: “Doubt thou the stars are fire, / Doubt that the sun doth move, / Doubt truth to be a liar, / But never doubt I love” (2.2.121–124). In reciting the speech about the Trojan war, the Player describes how Hecuba did “Run barefoot up and down, threat’ning the flames” (2.2.463). During The Mousetrap, the actors reenact the scene of the king’s murder “roasted in wrath and fire” (2.2.421). In admonishing his mother, Hamlet declares, “To flaming youth let virtue be as wax / And melt in her own fire” (3.4.91–92). The reference to Icarus—a theme first introduced when the prince tells his uncle that “I’m too much i’ th’ sun”—echoes similar imagery Marlowe used in Dr. Faustus, Hero and Leander, and his other writings. The Icarus image is especially apt because it combines destruction by fire and water. By flying too close to the sun, the son of the mythical architect of the labyrinth melted the waxen wings his father fashioned and plunged into the sea where he drowned. The labyrinth is a traditional symbol of humanity’s quest for a way out of the precessional maze and a return to Lost Paradise.

On learning of his father’s death, Laertes reaches the boiling point and
gives vent to a “speech of fire, that fain would blaze” (4.7.202). Goading him on, Claudius (described elsewhere as “frightened with false fire” [3.2.254]) convinces him that his anger and white-hot desire for blood and vengeance are “the very flame of love” (4.7.124). Throughout the play, Claudius is connected with armaments, cannon fire, and the sounds of war, as well as alcohol and poison—all corresponding with fire energy.

But the great Cannon to the clouds shall tell,
And the King’s rouse the heaven shall bruist again,
Respeaking earthly thunder

(1.2.128–130)

In preparing the poisoned foils and spiking the wine, the king avails himself of a deadly toxin, which as the ghost has testified, sets the mind on fire, congeals the blood, and leaves leprous blisters on the entire body. Laertes’ poison is also fast-acting, killing within a half hour. In letting the mayhem begin, Claudius toasts:

... give me the cups,
And let the kettle to the trumpet speak,
The trumpet to the Canoneer without,
The Cannons to the heavens, the heaven to earth,
Now the King drinks to Hamlet, come begin.

(5.2.258–262)

Hamlet dies by fire—symbolized by an envenomed sword—and yields his dying voice to Fortinbras, a thoroughly modern prince whose philosophy of governance can be summed up in two words: superior firepower. The prototype of future Napoleons, he will not hesitate to sacrifice twenty thousand men to the cannon’s roar, as Hamlet lamented earlier. Arriving at the palace, Fortinbras surveys the carnage and, in his first words, inquires:

This quarry cries on havoc, O proud Death
What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,
That thou so many Princes at a shot
So bloodily hast struck?

(5.2.361–364)

The word “quarry,” a hunting term for pursued or slain game, also means a pit or area where stone is obtained. Its use further alludes to Amlodhi’s great stone mill, the cycle of celestial change that has now come full circle. The
axletree of heaven lies toppled, or inverted; majesty has been dethroned; and chaos rules supreme. “Go, bid the soldiers shoot” (5.2. 403), Fortinbras orders, in the closing line of the play. The final dead march reinforces this pessimistic image of humanity’s imminent future: “Exeunt. [Marching: after the which a Peal of Ordnance are shot off]” (403 s.d.).

In the end, Ophelia has been destroyed by water and Hamlet by fire, but, as as angels sing them to their rest, we can take hope in the eternal return.

Flights of Angels

FAUSTUS. Who knows not the double motion of the planets?
The first is finished in a natural day,
The second thus, as Saturn in thirty years,

Tush, these are freshmen’s suppositions. But tell me, hath every sphere
a dominion or intelligentia?
METHISPHELES. Ay.

—Dr. Faustus

(2.3.51–58)

According to most interpretations, Hamlet’s ghost is a troubled Protestant spirit, an honest Catholic ghost in Purgatory, or a demon from hell. One candidate for the ghost, rarely mentioned but alluded to by Hamlet himself, is a god from on high. (“Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn’d, / Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell” [1.4.43–44].) The soldiers on watch, Horatio, and the prince himself all comment on the specter’s martial appearance, “Cap-a-pe” (1.2.205), or head to foot. By calling attention to the spirit’s helmet and footwear, the poet may be alluding to Mercury, the messenger of the gods and the god of wisdom.

What might such a reading signify? Let’s look at what is known about Mercury from classical sources. The Roman equivalent to the Greek Hermes, Mercury presided over writing, the exchange of goods and services, and the general circulation of energy. He was particularly venerated by the shepherds of Arcadia, the original pastoral poets of the Golden Age with whom Marlowe identifies in Tamburlaine and his poem The Passionate Shepherd to His Love. In Hero and Leander, Mercury comes down to earth, woos in disguise a country maiden, and brings down Jupiter’s wrath for
filching the nectar of the gods. Mercury’s transgression provides the cosmic background for the lovers’ star-crossed tale and the Olympian pronouncement on poor scholars (such as Marlowe) that “Learning . . . and poverty should always kiss” (465–470).

Mercury was also the god of merchants, especially grain, which resonates with the original Amleth myth. As the only deity who could travel freely between this world and the next, Mercury transported souls to Hades and brought back messages from the dead. On the misty Elsinore battlements, the ghost’s helmet of invisibility and winged sandals—Mercury’s two most distinctive attributes—could have been mistaken for martial attire. Or as a god, he could have assumed the guise of the departed monarch in full battle regalia. In iconography, Mercury is portrayed cloaked and bearded—like the ghost—and he is the master of chains. The apparition does not carry a caduceus, or healing wand with entwined snakes, as does Hermes, but “serpent” is mentioned twice by the ghost in connection with Elder Hamlet’s death. The reference to the poison moving like “quicksilver” (1.5.70) in the king’s veins also alludes to Mercury. In showing the portrait of his father to the queen, Hamlet enumerates his divine aspects, including “A station like the herald Mercury / New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill” (3.4.65–66).

Other domains that the winged god ruled included gymnastic exercises and tests of skill and dexterity, which call to mind Hamlet’s breathing exercises, his walking or pacing the corridors of the palace for hours on end, and his fencing. One of Ophelia’s love songs about her wayward pilgrim-lover can also be seen as an oblique allusion to Hamlet in his Hermes-like role, complete with caduceus and sandals, as successor to his father: “How should I your true love know from another one, / By his cockle hat and staff, and his Sandal shoon” (4.5.24–25). Thus we find Mercury’s presence already hinted at in the play. In the opening of the Odyssey, Athena in disguise assumes the shape of old Nestor to test Telemachus who is bent on avenging his parents of the suitors. By the same token, Mercury may assume the mantle of the ghost of Elder Hamlet to test the mettle of young Hamlet.

In The Renaissance Hamlet, Roland Musht Fyfe explains that the union of Mars and Mercury was a common literary and artistic motif in Elizabethan times. In his book on the cultural background to the play, he reproduces a painting, The Mirror of Majesty, with an archetypal figure of a Janus-like soldier-scholar wearing attire associated with the god of war on one side of his body and that of the heavenly messenger on the other. He notes, “It is interesting that the Mars-Mercury emblem was dedicated to Shakespeare’s sometime patron the Earl of Southampton, and the Scholar-Soldier emblem to Lord Carey of the family of the Lord Chamberlain who gave his title and patronage to Shakespeare’s theatrical company.”152 In Fyfe’s view, the Mars-
Mercury dichotomy resonates through Hamlet’s soliloquies, especially “To be or not to be,” in the dilemma about whether to take Mars-like action or to heed the promptings of Mercury-like conscience. Ultimately, he suggests, as shown by the final long passage of self-reflection, “All occasions do inform against me” (4.4.34), Hamlet manages to strike the appropriate balance between action and reflection, and “the idea of combining Mars and Mercury remains intact.”

Finally, as the patron of magic, the deceiver, and the trickster among the Olympian gods, Mercury is the counterpart to Hecate in her roles as queen of Night, divine witch, and terrestrial mischief maker. In Athens, twin statues of Hecate and Hermes guarded the entrance to the Acropolis. Their likenesses were also erected at individual dwellings and city gates. Such a view of the ghost, drawn from Kit’s classical background, offers a third alternative in the debate over the dramatist’s Protestant or Catholic sympathies.

Closely associated with Mercury are Saturn, the first king and ruler of the Golden Age, and Jupiter, who Claudius-like slew Saturn in his sleep and ushered in the epoch of rapine, power, and strife. The Roman Saturnalia, celebrating the return of Lost Paradise, was reborn as the Elizabethan Carnivale. The roots of this festival go even further back to the Egyptian jubilee commemorating the return of Osiris. The poet-king of the Golden Age was murdered when he was nearly thirty years old by his evil brother, Set. To avenge his father’s death, Horus, in his thirtieth year, combats his uncle who, in some versions of the story, has been aided, to the prince’s horror, by his mother, Isis—stories that resonate with the ancient Amleth myth.

From ancient Egypt to Renaissance Europe, from the Pyramid Texts to Hamlet, the passage of twenty-nine to thirty years, corresponding to the 29.5 years of Saturn’s rotation around the sun, constituted a sacred interval. In early Christian iconography, thirty was the number of perfection and twenty-nine the number of pilgrimage—the striving for perfection. (In The Canterbury Tales, for example, a classic known and admired by his fellow Cantabridgian Marlowe, Chaucer tells the story of twenty-nine pilgrims.) From the time of the Chaldeans, this time frame marked the Saturn cycle in astrology, and every twenty-nine to thirty years, the individual was believed to face special challenges and difficulties—a cosmic test—before beginning the next cycle. Marlowe refers to the planet Saturn in most of his plays, even mentioning its thirty-year period in Dr. Faustus as something any first year student at university knew. In Hero and Leander, Marlowe describes how Mercury appealed to the Fates to stay Jove’s wrath and bring about a return to the fabled Golden Age presided over by Saturn:
They [the Fates] offered him [Mercury] the deadly fatal knife
That shears the slender threads of human life;
At his fair feathered feet the engines laid,
Which th’ earth from ugly Chaos’ den upweighed.
These he regarded not, but did entreat
That Jove, usurper of his father’s seat,
Might presently be banished into hell,
And aged Saturn in Olympus dwell.
They granted what he craved, and once again
Saturn and Ops began their golden reign.

(448–456)

But the reprieve was short-lived. “[R]eckless of his promise” (461), the messenger god fell afoul of the adamantine destinies and Jove was restored to his throne. When he wrote these passages, at the beginning of 1593, Marlowe could not have foreseen how prophetic his words would prove. Within several months, shortly after his twenty-ninth birthday, he encountered “the deadly fatal knife / That shears the slender threads of human life” and his recklessness incurred the wrath of England’s Olympian deities, Elizabeth and Whitgift. From presiding over the Golden Age of the London stage, the prince of poets suddenly found himself facing torture, trial, and execution as a heretic. The conspiracy against him was led by a grave, humorless tyrant who, with the active or passive complicity of the queen, instituted a reign of terror that tainted and corrupted the realm. Like the ancient corn gods, Marlowe was destined to die in his thirtieth year, but like Tamburlaine, Barabas, Faustus, and Hamlet, he did not yield to his fate. He survived but had to drink the bitter cup that erased his own name and identity. As Christopher—“the Christ bearer”—he was spirited away to safety and turned the plot that had been devised against him on the heads of its inventors. With the inspiration of the Nine Muses—or the Nine Maids who ground Amlodhi’s meal—and the help of his faithful associate Will, Kit continued to tell his story in print and on the stage.

Hamlet, the most autobiographical and multidimensional of the plays, mirrors the inner journey that the poet undertook in his twenty-ninth and thirtieth year. In addition to the story line, there are scores of quotations, paraphrases, and parallels from his earlier work, as well as references, allusions, and echoes to events in his life. Dozens of puns, word plays, and jests point to his name and age, the events in Deptford, and the contest of mighty opposites between the poet and the archbishop. In 1623, when Marlowe would have turned fifty-nine and just beginning his next Saturn cycle, the First Folio was published under Shakespeare’s name.