

18. Hamlet's Jest

"A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy"
—Hamlet

Hamlet, the greatest play by the greatest writer who ever lived, has held its sway over the human mind for 400 years. And yet it is still shrouded in mystery. When was it written? Was there an earlier version before Shakespeare's? What is it really about? Why does Hamlet delay his revenge? The greatest mystery of all, however, is for some the easiest to answer, namely, who actually wrote the play? Its authorship is commonly attributed to William of Stratford, but there are enormous difficulties in ascribing the play to him. These problems are usually glossed over or explained away by a considerable number of unwarranted assumptions. There is, however, a simpler and more logical theory of the authorship. It is that this play about the machinations of court life was written and rewritten over a period of 30–40 years by a courtier who dares us to make the obvious identification.

Date Of Composition

The first difficulty with the William theory concerns the time of the play's initial composition. There are two known references to a *Hamlet* of the 1580s, both by Thomas Nashe. He was a Cambridge graduate (1586) who became one of the 'university wits', a circle of five writers (Nashe, Peele, Greene, Lodge and Lyly) who came to London and wrote for the stage and the press. In his preface to Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591), Nashe alludes to the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, which he says had been heard on the stage for five years. This dates *Hamlet* as early as 1586. William of Stratford was then 22 years old and had probably not even left his native town. The knowledge of law and court life displayed by the author would then have been non-existent as far as he was concerned. Clearly, to credit him with the writing of the *Hamlet* of *circa* 1586 stretches credulity to the limit.

Supporters of William, however, have an answer to this difficulty. Nashe, they claim, was referring to an earlier, inferior play, and many of them think that Nashe gives us the name of its author in his other reference. It occurs in his epistle 'To the Gentlemen Students of Both Universities', prefaced to Robert Greene's *Menaphon* (1589). Nashe's reference is worth quoting at length:

"I will turne back to my first text of Studies of delight, and talke a little in friendship with a few of our trivial translators. It is a common

practice now a dayes amongst a sort of shifting companions, that runne through every Art and thrive by none, to leave the trade of Noverint, whereto they were borne, and busie themselves with the endeavours of Art, that could scarcely Latinize their neck verse if they should have neede; yet English Seneca read by Candle-light yields many good sentences, as Blood is a beggar, and so forth; and if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, hee will afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfulls of Tragicall speeches. But O grieffe. Tempus edax rerum, what's that will last alwayes? The sea exhaled by dropes will in continuance bee drie, and Seneca, let blood line by line and page by page, at length must needes die to our Stage; which makes his famished followers to imitate the Kid in Aesop, who, enamoured with the Foxes newfangles, forsooke all hopes of life to leape into a new occupation; and these men, renouncing all possibilities of credite or estimation, to intermeddle with Italianate translations: Wherein how poorly they have plodded (as those that are neither provenzall men, nor are able to distinguish of Articles) let all indifferent Gentlemen that have travelled in that tongue discern by their two-pennie pamphlets" (Nashe's preface to Greene's *Menaphon* (1589) is in *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. R.B. McKerrow, 1910. It can also be read online at: <http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/nashebib.htm>).

Many scholars argue that Nashe is ascribing *Hamlet* to Thomas Kyd and that this *Ur-Hamlet*—as it has been designated—is now lost. There are probably three main reasons from the extract for this line of thought. First, Nashe refers to someone born into the trade of 'noverint', and this is sometimes taken to mean a scrivener, the trade of Kyd's father. But the word 'noverint' usually refers to a lawyer or to a legal writ, and in the latter sense it still applies today. A scrivener was a professional copyist, and Kyd's father was for a time warden of the Scriveners' Company. According to Richard Grant White, "by the trade of *Noverint* be meant that of an attorney. The term was not uncommonly applied to members of that profession, because of the phrase, *Noverint universi per presentes*, (know all men by these presents) with which deeds, bonds, and many other legal instruments then began".* Whatever Nashe meant by 'noverint', there is no evidence that Thomas Kyd followed his father's profession: it is merely assumed on the basis of Nashe's comment. We should also add that the published play itself fully justifies the interpretation of 'noverint' as lawyer

* Richard Grant White: 'William Shakespeare, Attorney at Law and Solicitor in Chancery', *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1859. In his *Terrors of the Night* (1594) Nashe writes: "Whereupon I thought it as good for me to reap the fruit of my own labours, as to let some unskillful penman or noverint-maker starch his ruff & new spade his beard with the benefit he made of them". Here 'noverint-maker' appears to mean the writer or copier of a legal writ. Apparently, therefore, Nashe uses 'noverint' and 'noverint-maker' in different senses.

because legal knowledge and terminology pervade the text.

Second, 'English Seneca' is allegedly a description of Kyd since he drew heavily on that author. *The Spanish Tragedy*, probably written, like this early *Hamlet*, in the mid-late 1580s, was clearly inspired by Seneca's tragedies. But Kyd was not alone—Shakespeare the author was also so inspired. Indeed, 'English Seneca' fits him more than Kyd, for Seneca was a philosopher as well as a dramatist. Third, 'the Kid in Aesop' is taken to be a pun on his name. Yet it is by no means clear from this deliberately obscure passage that 'noverint', 'English Seneca', 'the Kid in Aesop' and 'whole Hamlets' are all linked to the same dramatist. Nashe is referring to a sort or group, and it may be that these references are to more than one member of it, one of whom—not necessarily Kyd—wrote *Hamlet*.

The practice which Nashe seems to be complaining about is that whereby a group of men desert the legal profession to which they were born and busy themselves in writing plays, thus encroaching on professional playwrights like himself. These men, he continues, obtain their clever thoughts and sayings from the English translation of Seneca. Nevertheless, Nashe admits, the play called *Hamlet* by one of these lawyers is a distinctly better effort. His allusion to imitating the Kid in Aesop suggests rather that this author of *Hamlet* imitated the style of Kyd's plays. Is it possible that Nashe saw the play performed at Cambridge in 1586 while he was still attending the university? It does seem likely that this *Hamlet* was performed in the 1580s, though not in the public theatre but at university or the inns of court.

There is no doubt about the teasing nature of the whole extract and that Nashe deliberately refrains from naming the author of *Hamlet*. A possible reason is provided in another part of the epistle where he claims that "sundry other sweet gentlemen have vaunted their pens in private devices and tricked up a company of taffeta fools with their feathers". Perhaps, therefore, Nashe does not name the author of *Hamlet* because he is respecting the author's wish not to be publicly known. In any case, Nashe's passage is the only justification for the belief in an *Ur-Hamlet*, and it seems to be very flimsy indeed. The fact that 'Blood is a beggar' nowhere appears in any of the existing Shakespeare *Hamlets* proves nothing, because the play was subject to repeated revision and it may have been included in an early draft.

One of the many problems orthodox scholars have with their theory of an *Ur-Hamlet* is determining when the various references before 1603, the year of the First Quarto, ceased to be about it and begin to refer to Shakespeare's play. Take, for example, Henslowe's Diary. Philip Henslowe, as we noted before, was a theatre proprietor who kept a diary showing not

only the number of times that different plays were acted in his theatres but also frequently their authors and dates of composition. Many of Shakespeare's plays are entered in the diary, though his name is never mentioned. Now, he records that a play called *Hamlet* was performed at the Newington Butts theatre in June 1594. Henslowe's customary indication of a new play with the letters 'ne' is absent from this entry. So it seems reasonable to believe that the play was old—that it was, in fact, the play to which Nashe refers. However, Henslowe notes that the receipts for its performance were only eight shillings, and thus it is assumed that it could not have been Shakespeare's immortal masterpiece. Yet it cannot be emphasised too often that Shakespeare's plays were frequently revised and the original 1580s draft is unlikely to have been nearly as good as the polished versions of 1604 (the second quarto) and 1623 (*First Folio* version). Moreover, its length and verbosity mean that some audiences will relish it less than others.

The same comments may be applicable to Thomas Lodge's allusion in *Wit's Misery*, 1596. He speaks of the 'ghost which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster wife, Hamlet revenge'. In any case, our next reference seems to prove conclusively that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was known by 1598. In that year Speght's edition of Chaucer was published, and Gabriel Harvey bought a copy, in which he scribbled marginalia. One of his notes reads as follows:

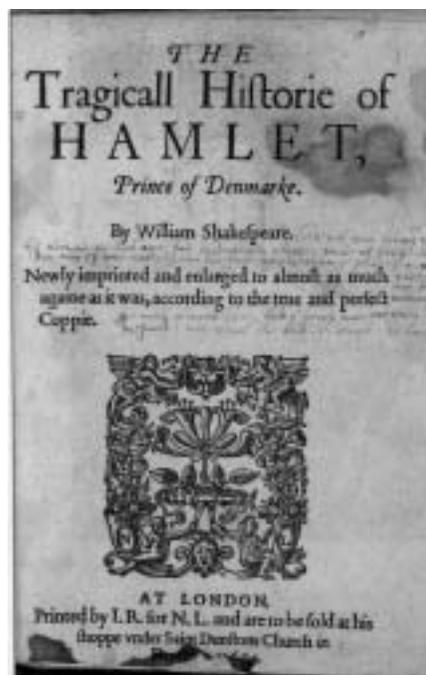
"The Earle of Essex much commendes Albion's England: and not unworthily for diverse notable pageants, before, & in the Chronicle. Sum English, & other Histories nowhere more sensibly described, or more inwardly discovered. The lord Mountjoy makes the like account of Daniel's peece of the Chronicle, touching the Usurpation of Henrie of Bullingrooke. Which in deede is a fine, sententious, & poltique peece of Poetries: as profittable, as pleasurable. The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeare's Venus & Adonis: but his Lucrece, & his tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke, have it in them, to please the wiser sort" (E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare, A Study of Facts and Problems*, 1930, Vol. 2, p196).

Both on the title page and the last page of his copy Harvey signed his name and added the date 1598, and that might seem to clinch the matter: *Hamlet* was in the public domain in the 1590s. However, according to the orthodox view, Harvey sometimes added notes in his books when he re-read them at later dates, and this note may therefore have been made after 1598. Yet it was almost certainly made before 1601, because Essex was executed in February of that year, and the 'Essex much commendes' suggests strongly that Essex was very much alive when the entry was made. Moreover, the two Shakespeare poems also mentioned, *Venus and*

Adonis and *The Rape of Lucrece*, are both early works, published in 1593 and 1594 respectively. On the face of it, therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that Harvey made his *Hamlet* note in 1598, the year he bought the book. And if this is correct, then it adds weight to the view that the so-called *Ur-Hamlet* is pure invention.

What really clinches the issue, however, is the 1603 quarto. On the title page it states: "As it hath bene 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". The phrase 'diverse times' surely implies performances on and off over a number of years. And the reference to performances at the two universities ties in with Nashe's epistle of 1591, suggesting that the play had been performed there before that date. This hardly accords with the orthodox view that the play was written in 1599-1601, only a year or so before it would have gone to the printers.

Q1 (Quarto 1), at 2154 lines or 15,983 words, is just over half the length of Q2 (3723 lines or 28,628 words), published a year later, and in places it reads like a simplified version of the latter. The names of some of the characters are different, one reason why it is more likely to have been an earlier version than a memorial reconstruction. Some orthodox scholars do believe that it is by the same hand as Q2. Whether or not it is precisely the text of the 1580s *Hamlet* is impossible to determine, but the change in some characters' names certainly suggests that the gap between the writing of Q1 and Q2 is greater than that indicated by their appearance in print. There are signs of immaturity and lack of refinement in Q1, adding weight to Swinburne's judgment of Shakespeare's revision that "scene by scene, line for line, stroke upon stroke, and touch after touch, he went over all the old laboured ground again". To believe that he did so within a year or two of the publication of his first effort hardly makes sense. The 1603 Quarto is therefore added support for the



The title page of the Second Quarto of *Hamlet*, 1604

proposition that *Hamlet* in its original form was one of Shakespeare's earliest plays. Perhaps, indeed, it was the first because an artist's first creations are often the sharpest and most incisive, and no one can deny the existence of these qualities in the play.

What Nashe told us about the author of *Hamlet*, therefore, still holds: he was a lawyer who largely neglected the profession to write plays, one of which was performed in the 1580s. In 1576 Francis Bacon left Cambridge, disillusioned with its teaching, without taking a degree. He travelled to France in the train of the Queen's ambassador. In 1579 he returned home on the death of his father, of which he informs us he had a premonition. He had a dream, "which I told to divers English gentlemen, that my father's house in the country was plastered all over with black mortar" (quoted in Lisa Jardine and Alan Stewart: *Hostage to Fortune*, 1999, p66). He entered Gray's Inn to train as a lawyer, but he disliked legal study and in a letter confesses that he devoted his time 'to better purposes'. Whatever they were, they must have been pursued in the privacy of his chambers, for during the 1580s friends referred to him as 'the hermit' .

Sources of the Play

Hamlet is based on a Norse legend told by Saxo Grammaticus in Latin around 1200 AD. The sixteen books that comprise his *Gesta Danorum*, or *Deeds of the Danes* (also known as *Historiae Danicae*) tell of the rise and fall of the great rulers of Denmark, and the tale of Amlethus (in Danish, Amlothi), Saxo's Hamlet, is recounted in books three and four. In Saxo's version, King Rorik of the Danes places his trust in two brothers, Horwendillus and Fengo, who are appointed to rule over Jutland, and Horwendillus weds the king's beautiful daughter, Geruth. They have a son, Amlethus. But Fengo, lusting after the new bride and longing to become the sole ruler of Jutland, kills his brother, marries Geruth, and declares himself king over the land. Amlethus is desperately afraid, and feigns madness to keep from getting murdered. He plans revenge against his uncle and becomes the new and rightful king of Jutland. Saxo's story was first printed in Paris in 1514, and Francois de Belleforest translated it into French in 1570, as part of his collection of tragic legends, *Histoires Tragiques*.

An edition of Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* was published in Paris in 1576, the very year Francis Bacon went there. One notable change made by Belleforest to the story concerns the role played by the mother of Amlethus, whom Belleforest calls Amleth. In Saxo she is persuaded by Fengo to become his wife on the grounds that he had avenged her of a husband by whom she had been hated. Belleforest clearly did not find this

very convincing, so he states that the mother had committed adultery with Fengo during her marriage to the king. Shakespeare follows Belleforest by making the ghost describe Claudius as 'adulterate' and Hamlet remark: "He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother". Shakespeare, however, differs from both in making Gertrude ignorant of the actual murder, so that she has no need to give a tacit consent to the slander of her first husband.

Belleforest's account was not translated into English until 1608. Shakespeare must, therefore, have read it in the original French, and I suggest it is significant that his book was current at precisely the time when Francis Bacon was in France. One possible incentive for a play based on the story could have been the death of Bacon's father in 1579: Hamlet is, after all, partly a tragedy of a son's grief for his dead father. Moreover, Bacon was fairly fresh out of university, as is Hamlet, and in 1579 Bacon was 18, about the same age as Hamlet at the beginning of the play. The First Quarto omits the gravedigger's 30-year statement entirely, and has Yorick in the ground only 12 years instead of 23, making Hamlet in his late teens. The protagonist's age is a matter to which we shall return below.

A more immediate possible source was Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, which has a ghost, a play-within-a-play used for an ulterior motive at court, a hero who reproaches himself for delay and considers suicide, a woman whose love is opposed by her father and brother, a woman who goes mad and kills herself, and an avenger and his intended victim who have a public reconciliation before an ultimately tragic end. However, it is just as likely that Kyd copied Shakespeare as *vice versa*. Of course, here in itself is a further reason why Kyd is unlikely to have been the author of the earlier *Hamlet*. Why should he have written two plays at the same period with such similar story-lines?

Contemporary history is also a likely source. A reason for a revision of the play at the start of the new century was surely the question of the Scottish succession. The possibility that James VI of Scotland might succeed the aging Elizabeth made the play topical. The author may have been attracted by the similarities of the storyline to James's background. James's father, Lord Darnley, was murdered, and his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had been suspected in the scandal of his death. Soon after, she married the supposed murderer Bothwell, who was a heavy drinker, just like Claudius. Mary's meddling chief counsellor, Rizzio, was murdered in her presence, and his body was disposed of secretly by means of a staircase. Also, James was a melancholy, indecisive prince, interested in learning, a poet, married to a woman (Queen Anne) whom he treated

shabbily, and a likely successor to the throne of England before 1603. How could Shakespeare not see the parallels? *Hamlet* is, in some external details, James's life story. However, dating the Second Quarto in 1603 when James acceded is possibly too late, though of course the author would have known of James's strong claim before Elizabeth's death: Sir Robert Cecil, the Queen's principal secretary of state, was negotiating with James to succeed as early as 1601.

And then there was Essex. Rumour had it that the Earl of Leicester had poisoned Essex's father, the first Earl, in order to live in sin with Essex's mother, Lettice Knollys. Leicester was also the nearest to a husband Elizabeth ever had, and he was widely believed to have murdered his own wife to achieve his position, thus drawing a parallel of sorts between Elizabeth and Leicester and Gertrude and Claudius (Leicester's wife was found at the bottom of the staircase with a broken neck in September 1560). Essex was married to Frances, daughter of Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's Secretary of State and spymaster (thus Polonius's spying). Essex was highly educated and addicted to learning, a moody, brilliant, and unstable man who liked to wear black, a notorious procrastinator, sometimes abusive to women (including the Queen), a poet and a patron of players. If you want to consider Polonius a composite of Burghley and Walsingham (very reasonably), then we could add that Essex was an enemy of Burghley. Again, as with James I, in some respects *Hamlet* is Essex's life story.

Shakespeare almost certainly detected these parallels, especially as Essex himself encouraged the claims of James, and he was probably prompted to update *Hamlet* by the lives of both. But whether the external circumstances were linked in his mind to either, there can be no doubt that internally Hamlet is the author himself. Whether prompted for plot details by Saxo or Bellesforest or by the lives of James I or Essex, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a critical self-analysis. The 'observed of all observers' is the mastermind himself who is holding up the mirror. Frank Harris commented that "in Hamlet Shakespeare has revealed too much of himself". He is more charismatic and enigmatic than James; he is more learned and brilliant than Essex; he is more sceptical and poetic than Oxford. Bloom is right: Hamlet transcends the play, and he does so because his creator is his reflection. This truth in itself discounts any Stratfordian claims of authorship.

The Spying Game

There are other circumstances which substantiate the claim that Shakespeare first wrote *Hamlet* in the 1580s. The court in Elsinore, like

that of Elizabethan England, is a very claustrophobic world in which plotting, intrigue and spying are rife and no one goes unwatched. Claudius even speaks of "not single spies, but in battalions" (4:5). Hamlet is spied upon by Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, while Reynaldo is employed by Polonius to spy on his son Laertes in Paris. Hamlet's Mousetrap is a scheme to spy on Claudius and thereby "catch the conscience of the king". Hamlet and Horatio also spy on Ophelia's burial for a while, until Hamlet reveals himself when Laertes jumps into Ophelia's grave. If people are listening in and overhearing what someone is saying, that individual may cultivate a language in which words have double, triple or even multiple meanings in order not to be nailed down. Hamlet, and arguably the author himself, adopts this strategy in order not to have "the heart plucked out of his mystery".

The spying game in *Hamlet* reflects the reality of Elizabethan court life in the 1570s, 1580s and early 1590s rather than the politics at the turn of the century. As a Protestant Queen, Elizabeth was forced to live with the threat of assassination from Catholics throughout her reign, but the plots mounted during this period. Hence the army of men working in secret to protect the Queen. These were her spies, her secret service, and they were overseen by the most ruthless spymaster of them all, Francis Walsingham, who controlled an espionage network that operated both in England and abroad. This spying was of particular interest to university undergraduates and dramatists because students, poets and playwrights were sometimes employed as spies in return for patronage. Thus we have seen that Christopher Marlowe became embroiled in schemes to thwart Catholic influence in Protestant England and his murder in 1593 may have links to his secret work. Note that Marlowe's links were by then no longer with Francis, but with Thomas, Walsingham, as his cousin had died three years earlier.

Spy work included travelling abroad to gather information on national security. It was while in Paris between 1576 and 1579 that Bacon was introduced to the world of espionage as a member of the household of Sir Amias Paulet, the ambassador to France. As Jardine and Stewart note in their biography of Bacon, no clear distinction was made between legitimate diplomatic activity and undercover espionage. Ambassadors were expected to build up their own personal intelligence service. At the French embassy at this time was Thomas Phelippes, the grand master of intelligence ciphers, and clearly Bacon learned from him, for he tells us in *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623) that he invented the biliteral cipher while he was in Paris. We know also that from 1579 to 1592 his brother Anthony travelled Europe as the Queen's Intelligencer at Burghley's request. However, in the

1590s the two Bacons, Francis and Anthony, switched allegiance and organised an intelligence service for Essex in opposition to Burghley and his son Robert.

Dates are important in our investigation. Francis Walsingham was appointed Principal Secretary in 1573 after William Cecil, Lord Burghley since 1571, was promoted to Lord High Treasurer. Walsingham died in 1590 and Burghley, who was ineffective after 1595, died in 1598. They were therefore working together to protect Elizabeth for about 17 years, from 1573 to 1590. *Hamlet* is an insider's view of their spy network, a fact which clearly points us to two conclusions. First, the author of the play was in the very thick of these activities, at least for a period. And, second, he was initially writing with contemporary events in mind. The character of Polonius strengthens these conclusions.

The Burghley Parody

There is nothing new in the suggestion that Polonius is a caricature of Lord Burghley. It was made as long ago as 1869 by the Stratfordian George Russell French in his *Shakespeareana Genealogica* and has been repeated by perfectly orthodox scholars ever since. Even Rowse, who is orthodoxy personified, writes: "Nor do I think we need hesitate to see reflections of old Burghley in old Polonius—not only in the fact that their positions were the same in the state, the leading minister in close proximity to the sovereign, in ancient smug security". Yet little is offered by way of explanation of how William of Stratford acquired a detailed knowledge of the man. Rowse merely says: "Shakespeare had had plenty of opportunity to imbibe Southampton's unfavourable view of the prosy and meddling Lord Treasurer" (A.L. Rowse: *William Shakespeare*, 1963; Mentor 1967 edn. p290). Once again, Southampton becomes the dubious conduit for Shakespeare's intimacy with court life, an explanation which wears thin when the details begin to pile up and when no connection between Will and the Earl is ever convincingly demonstrated. Anyway, let us take a look at some of the evidence for the Burghley–Polonius connection, and also consider the relevant question why Shakespeare should have wanted to mock Elizabeth's chief minister.

As we have said, Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on his son Laertes in Paris. Lord Burghley similarly received information relating to the life in Paris of his son Thomas Cecil, afterwards Earl of Exeter. Indeed, we know from Burghley's biographers that Thomas incurred his father's extreme displeasure by his "slothfulness", "extravagance", and "inordinate love of unmeet plays, as dice and cards". So dissolute were Thomas Cecil's ways in France that Burghley feared he would "return home like a spending sot,

meet only to keep a tennis court". Burghley even signed one letter to him: "Your father of an unworthy son". These details are too close to Polonius's instructions to Reynaldo to be mere coincidence. Yet Thomas Cecil was in France in the early 1560s. How did William of Stratford become privy to such information many years later? On the other hand, Thomas Cecil was Francis Bacon's cousin and Burghley was his uncle. Thomas was more friendly with Francis than was his half-brother Robert, who regarded Bacon as a rival, and could easily have told him about his father's interference.

E.K. Chambers made these parallels many years ago: "It has often been thought that Polonius may glance at Lord Burghley, who wrote *Certain Preceptes, or Directions* for the use of his son Robert Cecil. These were printed (1618) 'from a more perfect copie, than ordinarily those pocket manuscripts goe warranted by'. Conceivably Shakespeare knew a pocket manuscript, but Laertes is less like Robert Cecil than Burghley's elder son Thomas" (*Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, 1930, p418). Chambers alludes to the precepts which Polonius communicates to his son in Act 1, Scene 3:

*"Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportion'd thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hooks of steel;
But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
Of each new hatch'd unfledged comrade. Beware
Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,
Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice.
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
But not expressed in fancy; rich not gaudy;
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,
And they in France of the best rank and station
Are of a most select and generous chief in that.
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,
Farewell; my blessing season this in thee."*

George Russell French writes that Burghley's 'ten precepts' contain some startling coincidences of expression with the precepts of Polonius. Here are some details:

- Let thy hospitality be moderate.
- Beware thou spendest not more than three of four parts of thy revenue.
- Beware of being surety and for thy best friends; he that payeth another man's debt seeketh his own decay.
- Be sure to keep some great man for thy friend, but trouble him not with trifles; compliment him often with many, yet small, gifts.
- Towards thy superiors, be humble, yet generous.
- Trust not any man with thy life, credit, or estate, for it is mere folly for a man to enthrall himself to his legal friend.

These handwritten precepts, based on the principles of self-love, deceit and cunning, were not published until 1618. It is unlikely that any commoner would have seen a private manuscript of the Lord Treasurer; and even if a commoner had somehow gained access to it, he would certainly not have dared to make it an object of satire. On the other hand, a relative, say a nephew, might well have had access to such information.

Polonius, throughout the early part of the play, stands isolated as the one person who really enjoys the royal confidence. He is not even named in Saxo and is clearly a Shakespearean invention. He is an old man, and no other councillor of equal rank appears anywhere. As Samuel Johnson suggested, he conveys the image of dotage encroaching upon wisdom. He has the best interests of his family and his monarch at heart. This is precisely the position occupied by Burghley from the mid-1580s. Moreover, their characters and circumstances are, in some ways, identical. Hamlet calls him a "foolish prating knave" and a "tedious old fool", but nevertheless he displays Burghley's commitment to the monarch, as Claudius tell Laertes:

*"The head is not more native to the heart,
The hand more instrumental to the mouth
Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father".*

Apart from the spying proclivities and the meddling overprotectiveness towards his son, there is also the same garb of self-importance, the same egoism presented under a cloak of morality, the same Machiavellian scheming and the same long-winded verbosity.*

This brings us to his name. In the first quarto he is not called Polonius but Corambis. There are various theories about the use of these names. One suggestion is that Corambis is short for the Latin proverb found in the *Adagia* of Erasmus which we know Shakespeare read: *'crambe bis posita*

* Some heretics see another parallel and argue that Burghley, as a good Protestant, used to boast that he was born during the Diet of Worms attended by the Holy Roman Emperor at which Luther defended himself, hence Hamlet's reply, in Act 4, Scene 3, when

mors est—'cabbage twice cooked or served up is death'—meaning that the sayings of Polonius are regurgitated or hackneyed cliches which will be the death of him. Alternatively, it might mock Burghley's motto, *Cor unum, via una* (One heart, one way). *Cor* means 'heart' and '*ambi*' is Latin for 'both sides' as in 'ambidextrous', so that 'Corambis' means double-hearted', ie. 'deceitful' or 'two-faced'. Perhaps Shakespeare had both references in mind.

But why the change to 'Polonius' in the second quarto? The usual explanation is that Shakespeare is satirising the Polish statesman Laurentius Grimalius Goslicius, whose *De Optimo Senatore* was published in English as *The Counsellor* in 1598. This is also reasonable because 'Polonius' seems to be a play on 'Polonia', i.e. Poland. Yet it is surely equally plausible that Corambis was indeed the original name and that Shakespeare, when revising the work at the turn of the century and under the threat of public inquiry in the wake of the *Richard II* case, changed it to the more topical but less personal name of Polonius. We should bear in mind that Burghley died in 1598 and Shakespeare may not have wanted to be seen lampooning him publicly so close to his death.

Bacon had a clear motive for lampooning Burghley. He could say, with Hamlet: "Sir, I lack advancement", and Burghley was largely the reason, for the Lord Treasurer obstructed his promotion in the service of the State throughout the 1580s and 1590s. This 'service' was not necessarily 'political' or 'legal', as is often assumed. As early as 16th September 1580 Bacon had written to Burghley asking him to press his "suit" with the Queen, indicating that it was "rare and unaccustomed" and that the Queen need never "to call for the experience of the thing". Here was Bacon at the age of 19 seeking the assistance of Burghley to induce the Queen to supply him with means and the opportunity to carry out some great work upon the achievement of which he had set his heart. The work was without precedent, and in carrying it out he was prepared to dedicate to her Majesty the use and spending of his life. Fifteen years later, in 1595, Bacon wrote to Burghley:

Claudius asks him where Polonius is: "A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet". However, Burghley was born in 1520 and the Diet was held in 1521, so this parallel doesn't seem to be correct, which is a pity because it would aptly explain Hamlet's cryptic remark.

Note, however, that Hamlet's reference to Polonius as a 'fishmonger' (2:2) may be an allusion to Burghley's attempt as Lord Treasurer to stimulate the fish trade. In 1563, he had urged a Bill imposing a second compulsory fish day every week, Wednesday as well as Saturday. In a surviving memorandum, we find him arguing that it is "necessary for the restoring of the Navy of England to have more fish eaten and therefore one day more in the week ordained to be a fish day and that to be Wednesday rather than any other". He sought, among other things, restrictions on the import of fish and the removal of restrictions on their export. Catholics called the result 'Cecil's Fast'.

"It is true, my life has been so private as I have no means to do your Lordship service" (Martin Hume: *The Great Lord Burghley*, 1906), a remark which may have been a mild rebuke to the uncle for not giving him the official post which he had requested over all these years.

Burghley's obstruction of Bacon has been the subject of much speculation. Paul Hammer in *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics* (1999), claims that Bacon's failure to gain public office in Elizabeth's Government was a result of a power struggle between Burghley and the Earl of Essex in which he was a pawn. (A third possibility is that the Queen herself blocked Bacon's advancement because she was angry at his intervention in the subsidy debate in the 1592/3 Parliament in which he spoke for the majority of MPs in urging that the subsidy be paid over six years rather than the four put forward by Thomas Cecil, Burghley's eldest son.)

There is also the suggestion that Burghley was naturally ambitious on behalf of his second son, Robert, and not inclined to encourage a rival, especially one who possessed such exceptional abilities as those of his nephew (Hammer, *op.cit*, 1999). One thing is clear: Bacon, like Shakespeare, did not have a high opinion of either his uncle or his cousin Robert. In a letter to Buckingham in 1616 he writes: "In the time of the Cecils, the father and the son, by design and of purpose able men were suppressed".

In 1595 Bacon wrote a device for the Earl of Essex in which the Statesman's Speech is almost certainly another attack on Burghley. It ends: "And ever rather let him take the side which is likeliest to be followed, than that which is soundest and best, that everything may seem to be carried by his direction. To conclude, let him be true to himself and avoid all tedious reaches of state that are not merely pertinent to his particular". But, wait, this is precisely the advice that Polonius gives to Laertes in the play:

*"To thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou can'st not then be false to any man".*

What Polonius is saying is perfectly in keeping with his own ethic of self-interest; logically, a man cannot be false to anyone else if he acknowledges fidelity only to himself. Undoubtedly, the character of Polonius as portrayed by Shakespeare is precisely that which would have been portrayed by Bacon.

Scientific Allusions

The following evidence is largely a summary from Edwin Reed's book,

Bacon our Shakespeare, published in 1902. In the first, 1603, quarto of the play we find a letter, written by Hamlet to Ophelia, in which she is told she may doubt any proposition whatever, no matter how certain it may be, but under no circumstances must she doubt the writer's love:

"Doubt that in earth is fire,
Doubt that the stars do move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But do not doubt I love" (2:2).

Among the certainties here specified, which Ophelia was at liberty to question before she could question the writer's love, is the doctrine of a central fire in the earth—"Doubt that in earth is fire". The belief in the existence of a mass of molten matter at the centre of the earth was universal, but for some reason the author of the play changed his mind in the second edition in 1604, when the first line of the stanza, quoted above, was made to read as follows: "Doubt that the stars are fire".

The doctrine of a central fire in the earth was thus taken out of the play some time between the appearance of the first edition in 1603 and that of the second in 1604. In the early part of 1604 (according to Spedding it was written before September of that year), Bacon wrote a tract, entitled *Cogitationes de Natura Rerum* in which he boldly took the view that the earth is a cold body, cold to the core, the only cold body, as he afterwards affirmed, in the entire universe, all others, sun, planets, and stars, being of fire. It appears, then, that Bacon adopted this new view of the earth's interior at precisely the same time that the author of *Hamlet* did; that is to say, according to the record, in the brief interval between the appearance of the first and that of the second editions of the drama, and, furthermore, against the otherwise unanimous opinion of the physicists throughout the world.

The second line of the stanza is also significant. In the first edition as above it reads: "Doubt that the stars do move". But, having inserted the word 'stars' in the first line in the second quarto, the author or whoever felt the need to alter the second line, and substituted 'sun' for 'stars': "Doubt that the sun doth move". The geocentric doctrine that the earth is the centre of the universe around which the sun and stars daily revolve is thus retained.

Copernicus published his heliocentric theory of the solar system in *De Revolutionibus* in 1543, yet Bacon persistently adhered to the old theory to the day of his death. The author of the plays did the same. The two were agreed in holding to the cycles and epicycles of Ptolemy after much of the scientific world had rejected them; and they were also agreed in rejecting the Copernican theory after much of the scientific world had accepted it.

Thirdly, in the second quarto of *Hamlet*, 1604, we find the tides of the ocean attributed, in accordance with popular opinion, to the influence of the moon:

*"The moist star,
Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands,
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse".*

This was repeated in the third quarto, 1605; in the fourth, 1611; in the fifth or undated quarto; but in the first folio (1623), the lines were omitted. Why? During the Christmas revels at Gray's Inn in 1594, Bacon contributed to the entertainment, among other things, a poem in blank verse, known as the Gray's Inn Masque. It is full of those references to natural philosophy in which the author took so much delight, and especially on this occasion when Queen Elizabeth was the subject, to the various forms of attraction exerted by one body upon another in the world. Of the influence of the moon, he says:

*"Your rock claims kindred of the polar star,
Because it draws the needle to the north;
Yet even that star gives place to Cynthia's rays,
Whose drawing virtues govern and direct
The flots and re-flots of the Ocean".*

The masque is not in Bacon's name, but no one can read it and doubt its authorship. Bacon was the leading promoter of these revels. At this time, then, Bacon held to the common opinion that the moon controls the tides; but later in life, in or about 1616, he made an elaborate investigation into these phenomena, and in a treatise entitled *De Fluxu et Refluxu Maris*, definitely rejected the lunar theory: "We dare not proceed so far as to assert that the motions of the sun or moon are the causes of the motions below, which correspond thereto; or that the sun and moon have a dominion or influence over these motions of the sea, though such kind of thoughts find an easy entrance into the minds of men by reason of the veneration they pay to the celestial bodies. Whether the moon be in her increase or wane; whether she be above or under the earth; whether she be elevated higher or lower above the horizon; whether she be in the meridian or elsewhere; the ebb and flow of the sea have no correspondence with any of these phenomena". In every edition of *Hamlet* published previously to 1616, the theory is stated and approved; in every edition published after 1616, it is omitted.

The tides are attributed to the influence of the moon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Winter's Tale*, but both these plays were written long before the date of Bacon's change of opinion on the subject. The former we know was not revised by the author for publication in the Folio;

and we have no reason to believe that the latter, then printed for the first time, underwent any revision after 1616. The same theory is stated also in *King Lear* and the First Part of *Henry IV*; but the tragedy was in existence in 1606, and the historical play considerably earlier.

Finally, in *Hamlet*, again, we have a singular doctrine, advanced by the author in his early years but subsequently withdrawn. The prince, expostulating with his mother in the celebrated chamber scene where Polonius was hidden behind the arras, says to her:

"Sense, sure, you have,
Else could you not have motion" (3:4).

The commentators differ on the interpretation of these words. One suggests that for 'motion' we substitute *notion* (i.e. reason, intellect); another, *emotion*. Others still contend that the misprint is in the first part of the sentence; that 'sense' must be understood to mean *sensation* or *sensibility*. Is, as yet another argues, Hamlet referring to the Queen's wanton impulse? The editors of the 2006 Arden edition of the play simply state that it means: "You must have some basic sense or apprehension or you would not be living and moving" (Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor: *Hamlet*; The Arden Shakespeare, 2006, p341). They also suggest that Shakespeare was not happy with these lines and therefore omitted them from the *Folio* of 1623. But in Bacon's prose works we find not only an explanation of the passage in the quarto, but also the reason why it was excluded from the *Folio*.

The *Advancement of Learning* was published in 1605, one year after the quarto of *Hamlet* containing the sentence in question appeared, and in it Bacon writes: "The ancients could not conceive how there can be motion without sense". He offers no repudiation of this old doctrine; indeed, he seems to have a lingering opinion that the doctrine is true, even as applied to the planets, in the influence which these wanderers were then supposed to exert over the affairs of men. But in 1623 he published a new edition of the *Advancement* in Latin, under the title of *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, and therein expressly declared that the doctrine is untrue; that there can be motion in inanimate bodies without sense, but with what he called a kind of perception. He writes: "Ignorance on this point drove some of the ancient philosophers to suppose that a soul is infused into all bodies without distinction; for they could not conceive how there can be motion without sense, or sense without a soul". The Shakespeare *Folio* with its revised version of *Hamlet* came out in the same year and the passage in question, having run through all previous editions of the play—in 1604, 1605, 1611, and in the undated quarto—but now no longer harmonising with the author's views, dropped out.

Legal Expertise

Nashe tells us that the author of the play was a lawyer, and the text bears him out. Even such an orthodox critic as Kenneth Muir accepts that the legal textbook *A Briefe Treatise of Testaments and Last Willes* was known to the author. In the gravediggers' discussion of Ophelia's death (Act 5 Scene 1) there is also an extensive reference to the law of suicides, as found in the famous case of *Hales v Petit*, reported by Plowden in Norman-French in his *Commentaries and Reports* (1571). Hales, like Ophelia, had drowned himself, and the discussion mirrors the case so closely that most legal experts acknowledge Shakespeare's use of it in this scene. We discussed this example earlier (Chapter 3), where we pointed out that the dialogue of the two clowns is undoubtedly intended as a travesty of the case.

Hamlet himself displays a detailed knowledge of the law, but he is not exactly enthusiastic. In the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, he refers to 'the law's delay'. The relevance of which remark to the Prince of Denmark is not apparent, though it would be to someone writing from bitter experience. Hamlet's critical view of the law was identical to that of Francis Bacon, who more than once contemplated abandoning his legal career. We could cite Hamlet's famous speech in this scene when he picks up a skull and surmises that it may be that of a lawyer and then runs through a whole gamut of legal terms as an example that only a trained lawyer could have written the speech:

"There's another: Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quilllets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this rude knave, now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? Hum! This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. Is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will hardly lie in this box; and must th' inheritor himself have no more? ha?" (5:1)

Some critics have argued that the hunting of a metaphor or conceit into the ground is a fault characteristic of Elizabethan literature. A parallel is said to be George Wilkins's *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*, thus demonstrating that this kind of piling on of figurative law phrases supplies little support for the author as a lawyer:

"Now, Sir, from this your oath and bond,
Faith's pledge and seal of conscience, You have run,

*Broken all contracts, and the forfeiture
 Justice hath now in suit against your soul:
 Angels are made the jurors, who are witnesses
 Unto the oath you took; and God himself,
 Maker of marriage, He that hath seal'd the deed,
 As a firm lease unto you during life,
 Sits now as Judge of your transgression:
 The world informs against you with this voice,
 If such sins reign, what mortals can rejoice?
 Scarborough. What then ensues to me?
 Doctor. A heavy doom, whose execution's
 Now served upon your conscience".*

But these two passages are not parallel. Wilkes uses legal terms that are much more likely to be generally known: oath, bond, seal, contracts, forfeiture, suit, jurors, witnesses, seal'd, deed, lease, Sits, Judge, informs, doom, execution, served. The metaphors tend to be so simple and obvious, even to a modern layman, that they would hardly need annotating. Now compare those terms to Shakespeare's: quiddities, quillies, cases, tenures, action, battery, statutes, recognizances, fines, double vouchers, recoveries, vouchers, purchases, double ones, indentures, conveyances, inheritor. Both use seventeen law terms. But the modern reader of *Hamlet* will be driven to the footnotes to grasp the humour of this opaque passage. Here's how an Arden editor glossed these:

(a) Quiddities . . . quillies: quibbling arguments. The second word appears to be a mere variant of the first, which referred originally to the sophisticated arguments of the schools concerning the quidditas or essential nature of a thing and afterwards to fine legal distinctions; (b) Tenures: terms on which property is held; (c) His action of battery: i.e. his liability to an action for assault; (d) His statutes, his recognisances: often coupled together, the recognisance being a bond acknowledging a debt or obligation, the statute (statute merchant or state staple, according to the manner of record) securing the debt upon the debtor's land; (e) Fines . . . recoveries: a fine (an action leading to an agreement calling itself finalis concordia) and a recovery (a suit for obtaining possessions) were procedures for effecting the transfer of estates when an entail or other obstacle prevented simple sale. A voucher in a recovery suit was the process of summoning a third party to warrant the holder's title, and the customary double voucher involved a second warrantor; (f) The fine: the final result. This begins a series of four different meanings for the same word (handsome pate, powdered dirt); (g) The recovery: the whole gain; (h) Pair of indentures: a deed duplicated on a single sheet which was then divided by a zigzag (indented) cut so that the fitting together of the two parts would prove their genuineness. All the land the purchaser finally has (his grave) is no bigger than the indentures which

convey it; (i) Inheritor: acquirer. (See *Introduction to Hamlet* by Harold Jenkins, 1982.)

What immediately becomes clear is that we are dealing here with a mind that is not only well-versed in the terminology, but one capable of exploiting the nuances of the meanings to superb and razor-sharp effect. Take for example the passage on fines: "Is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt?" The four meanings of 'fine' here are worth explicating. The *fine* of his *fines* means the *final* result (Latin *fine* as in 'the end') of his *fines* (the legal term for an action leading to an agreement). Shakespeare then plays those meanings into "fine pate full of fine dirt" (a handsome head full of finely powdered dirt). But the Arden editors have missed an even deeper pun. Over 100 years earlier in *Shakespeare a Lawyer*, Rushton pointed out that the final *fine* could also mean 'the end', and that his fine pate is filled, not with fine dirt, but with the last dirt that will ever occupy it, leaving a satirical inference to be drawn, that even in his lifetime his head was filled with dirt. These kinds of wordplay on legal terms would not be the kind of wordplay you would find in a Stratford tavern. These are the wordplay of law students attending one of the Inns of Court, like Gray's Inn, where would-be lawyers are trained. Passages like these point to a legal mind that has associated with other legal minds.

Hamlet The Man

When we consider Hamlet's character, we see that he shares more than similarity of name with Bacon. He is the focus of attention for so much of the play because the other characters recognise his unique qualities. Hamlet is an intellectual genius of intense mental activity and profound insight. Similarly, Francis Bacon's genius was recognised at an early age. Around his portrait of Bacon aged 18, Nicholas Hilliard wrote: 'If only one could paint his mind'. The author of the play clearly intended Hamlet to be representative of himself during his early manhood. Just as Prospero in *The Tempest* is a self-portrait of his creator in maturity, so Hamlet portrays him as an 'angry young man'. Maynard Mack in his perceptive essay 'The World of Hamlet' is surely correct in saying that "when we first meet him in the play, he is clearly a very young man, sensitive and idealistic, suffering the first shock of growing up". Many critics have noted that he seems to be about 16-18. He is also fresh out of university and depressed by the falsity of its teaching, or rather by the discrepancy between the idealistic humanism of its professors and the stale, flat and unprofitable uses of the real world. All this fits Bacon to a glove. At barely sixteen Bacon left Cambridge without a degree because he felt it could teach him

nothing, and he was 18 when his father died in 1579. Perhaps he began writing *Hamlet* at this period.

The impression of Hamlet's youth is strong for much of the play. (In Belleforest, the Prince has not yet 'attained to man's estate'.) When Laertes cautions Ophelia against Hamlet's advances (1:3), he tells her not to trust in his love because he is in the "morn and liquid dew of youth" when "youth to itself rebels". And the Ghost (1:5) addresses him as "thou noble youth". Yet sceptics point out that in Q2 the gravedigger says that he started his job the day that young Hamlet was born, and that he's "been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years" (5.1). This seems to give Hamlet's age clearly as 30. A few lines later, the gravedigger says of Yorick, "Here's a skull now hath lien you i' th' earth three and twenty years" (5.1). If Hamlet rode on Yorick's shoulders and kissed his lips at, say, seven years of age, Hamlet is, again, 30. Yet Q1 omits the gravedigger's 30-year tenure statement entirely, and has Yorick in the ground only 12 years instead of 23, which would fit a teenage Hamlet. Moreover, the 1623 Folio *Hamlet* has an interesting change of wording. Here, the gravedigger says: "Why heere in Denmarke: I have bin sixeteene heere, man and boy thirty yeares". This seems to say: "I have been gravedigger here for sixteen years, and I've been living here in Denmark man and boy thirty". In other words, 'sexton' in Q2 is a misprint for 'sixteen' and he started his apprenticeship at the age of fourteen, which was normal in those times. This would put Hamlet's age at sixteen.

Some commentators try to reconcile these discrepancies by suggesting that Hamlet is a teenager at the start of the play but is 30 at the end. In other words, the duration of the action is 12 or 13 years and Shakespeare uses a 'compressed narrative' in which Hamlet ages about ten years from the time he is sent away to England to his return. Alistair Fowler maintains that Shakespeare advances Hamlet in age and therefore in psychological and social maturity ('The Case Against Hamlet', *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 December, 1995). Yet the text suggests otherwise. References by Hamlet (1:2), Ophelia (3:2) and Claudius (4:7) indicate that the action of the play spans four months at most. Hamlet does mature in the final act, but not in terms of age. What we have to bear in mind, though, is that, if *Hamlet* is autobiographical, as we maintain, then the author himself developed as he revised the work over the years, and it is thus his own inner narrative that he is compressing into the play's protagonist.

Certainly, until the final act, Hamlet displays many of the qualities of youthful naivety. Sure, he is brilliant, eloquent, insightful: he has bags of intellectual and expressive power. But, emotionally, he has a lot to learn. He is petulant, judgmental, dogmatic, cynical, sarcastic, fickle, shallow.

When he does act, it is before thinking it out, in the heat of anger; but in general he is presented as a contemplative young man wrestling with the problem of converting thoughts into action. In a very real sense, Hamlet the man incarnates the act of thinking, while *Hamlet* the play is a tragedy of inaction, in which the famous delay enables the writer both to create a character who thinks on stage and to dramatise the quest for truth and goodness in an imperfect, uncertain world.

Hamlet the thinker is trying to learn how to cope with a mad world, just as the dramatist did. Modern critics who reject such an interpretation should go back to reading Goethe, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Lamb and others who see this essential truth. According to Goethe, Shakespeare meant "to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it". Hazlitt regards Hamlet as "the prince of philosophical speculators" and Coleridge speaks of Hamlet's "great intellectual activity and a proportionate aversion to real action", adding that "he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the powers of action in the energy of resolve". Later, he reiterated his judgment: "Hamlet's character", he writes in *Table Talk* (1827), "is the prevalence of the abstracting and generalising habit over the practical".

The triumph of *Hamlet* is that its author has created a protagonist who seems to know everything but who really knows nothing. On the one hand, as Nietzsche says in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Hamlet appears to have "true knowledge of the essence of things". He is, in Bloom's apt words, the most aware and knowing figure ever conceived. Yet, despite his insistence that he knows not 'seems', he too is wearing a mask, and beneath it all he knows nothing—nothing of course, about the reliability of ghosts, but, more important, nothing about life, death, love, truth, justice. As Bloom also says, it is a play obsessed with questions. "Who's there?" at the very beginning sets the pattern. "We know accurately only when we know little; with knowledge, doubt increases". Goethe's words apply to Shakespeare, and in *Hamlet* the play he holds a mirror up to himself and reveals a character who is an iconic representation of his own scepticism.

Hamlet, like Shakespeare, is the arch-sceptic, the ultimate intellectual, a thinker rather than a doer. Francis Bacon gave an identical, though poetical, description of himself in 1605, "Knowing myself by inward calling to be fitter to hold a book than to play a part, I have led my life in civil causes; for which I was not very fit by nature, and more unfit by the preoccupation of my mind". There are several echoes of Hamlet here. We may think, for example, of that famous stage direction in Act 2, Scene 2: "Enter Hamlet reading on a booke" (*Folio*). Think too of his first speech when he dismisses as unfitting to his nature those "actions that a man

might play". Hamlet wants to strip away all "vain opinions, flattering hopes, false evaluations, imaginations" (Bacon: *Of Truth*), but he is left with a mind that is "a poor shrunken thing, full of melancholy and indisposition, and unpleasing to itself".

T.S. Eliot described *Hamlet* as the 'Mona Lisa' of literature. Yes, it is ambiguous, yes, it is enigmatic, yes, it is so open to interpretation. But all this is quite deliberate, for its author is trying to unravel the maze of his mind to us in all its puzzling complexity. He wants us to "pluck out the heart of his mystery". He wants us to "play on his pipes". In short, he wants us to help him portray his mind. We bring to Hamlet our own thoughts and preconceptions. "I have a smack of Hamlet myself", declared Coleridge. And so do we all. That is the point: we pour our personality and thoughts into this most intellectual of characters and in so doing we expand his mind and our own. "If only one could paint his mind". Hilliard's Latin words around the portrait of Bacon at 18 were indeed a challenge. It was taken up by the man himself in *Hamlet*.

What's In a Name?

Bacon had a unique way with words. Recall Sir Tobie Matthew's description of "a man so rare in knowledge, of so many several kinds, endued with the facility and felicity of expressing it all in so elegant, so abundant, and yet so choice and ravishing a way of words, of metaphors and allusions as, perhaps, the world hath not seen, since it was a world". Hamlet too is a master wordsmith. His startling verbal agility is displayed throughout and again this is evidence of the early composition of the play, at least in its original form. The author, like the character, is showing off his restless and inventive mind. Puns proliferate in almost every speech. Hamlet himself relishes teases, riddles and puns: "A little more than kin, and less than kind"; "I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw"; "at supper... not where he eats, but where he is eaten". Two often cited examples occur in this advice: "Let her not walk i'th'sun. Conception is a blessing. But as your daughter may conceive—friend, look to't" (2:2). When Hamlet warns Polonius not to let his daughter 'walk in the sun', this can mean quite literally that she should not walk outside, in public places, but if we consider that the sun in Elizabethan times was also used as a royal emblem, the sentence can be read as an indirect warning not to let Ophelia come near Hamlet himself. Another pun is used with the words 'conception' and 'conceive', which on the one hand refer to the formation of ideas and hence are positive ('blessing') but on the other hand also mean that a woman becomes pregnant, which was not desirable for an unmarried woman. Sometimes it

is not merely double meanings but triple or even multiple puns. For example, in a well known essay John Russell Brown discusses five possible meanings of Hamlet's last words, "the rest is silence" ('Multiplicity of Meaning in the Last Moments of *Hamlet*'; in *Connotations* 2.1, 1992, 19-33).

Moreover, the author of Shakespeare is fond of loaded or punning names—Malvolio, Aguecheek, Miranda, Perdita, Caliban, Prospero. The play *Hamlet* also contains many examples; indeed most of the characters have punning names. Horatio is "I speak reason"; Fortinbras is 'strong in the arm'; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are 'Rose Garland' and 'Golden Stars' (in their case they are living contradictions of their own names); and Reynaldo is obviously 'the fox'. Claudius and Ophelia are not so clear-cut. The former may be from '*claudio*', meaning to enclose or imprison, while Ophelia is possibly the feminine noun form '*Ophelia*', meaning 'spoil' or 'booty'. We have already discussed the possible puns in the names 'Corambis' and 'Polonius', but what of the chief character? Could his name, too, be a pun? As we have argued, Hamlet is the author's own self-portrait as a young man. So, I suggest, the truth is simple and stares at us down the centuries. The name of the play tells us its author. Ben Jonson refers to Bacon's reluctance to 'spare, or pass by, a jest', and if the author could pun on cabbage in 'Corambis', then there is no reason why he did not also pun on bacon. One of the possible attractions to the author of the story in Belleforest was that he could make an anagram of 'Amleth' and come up with a name that was a play on his own. 'Hamlet' is, in fact, a little ham, precisely the subject of the play.

There is another possible meaning to the play's title. The author of Shakespeare frequently refers to his works as if they were his offspring. *Venus and Adonis* is "the first heir of my invention". In sonnet 77 words are "those children nurs'd, deliver'd from thy brain". And Richard II's brain and soul "beget a generation of still-breeding thoughts". In his essay *Of Parents and Children* Bacon says that "the noblest works and foundations have proceeded from childless men, which have sought to express the images of their minds where those of their body have failed". Again, in *Of Marriage and Single Life*, he says: "The best works, and of greatest merit to the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men, which both in affection and means have married and endowed the public". In this sense, we the public have been endowed with *Hamlet*, the 'child' or offspring of Ham. Yet we continue to ascribe this incomparable masterpiece to a mindless maltster. There are truly none so blind as those who will not see.