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**Enter Shakespeare's Young Hamlet, 1589**

Terri Bourus, Ph.D.

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis  
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

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## Enter Shakespeare's Young Hamlet, 1589

Terri Bourus

Indiana University/Purdue University Indianapolis

### Abstract

This essay argues that Q1 *Hamlet* represents the earliest version of Shakespeare's play, written in the late 1580s. The argument builds upon, and for the first time combines, evidence in Terri Bourus, *Young Shakespeare's Young Hamlet: Print, Piracy and Performance* (2014) and Zachary Lesser, *Hamlet After Q1* (2015). It concentrates on differences between Q1 and the later, expanded, canonical texts of the play, specifically in relation to the age of Hamlet and the Queen. It emphasizes that Hamlet's age crucially affects the age, sexuality, and political importance of his mother (an issue ignored by male critics). Hamlet's age has been a factor in performances of the play from Burbage and Betterton in the seventeenth century to 2015 productions of Q1. Why then did Harold Jenkins in 1982 dismiss the importance of Hamlet's age? To contextualize Jenkins' dismissal (founded on the principles of both New Criticism and New Bibliography), this essay traces scholarship on the age difference back to the 1870s. It focuses particularly on the conflict between two influential texts: A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) and L.C. Knight's "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" (1933). It also calls attention to neglected details of Thomas Nashe's 1589 allusion to "whole *Hamlets* of tragical speeches": these point to Shakespeare as the author of the 1580s play, and also to specific details found in Q1 but not present in Belleforest's story of Amleth in *Histoires Tragiques*.

Key Words: Q1 Hamlet, Queen Gertrude, Burbage, Bad Quartos, Nashe Thomas, Performance, Early Shakespeare, authorship

## Résumé

### L'entrée en scène du Jeune Hamlet en 1589

Le présent essai soutient que le premier quarto (Q1) d'Hamlet représente la plus ancienne version de la pièce de Shakespeare, écrite vers la fin des années 1580. L'argument se base sur les travaux de Terri Bourus (*Young Shakespeare's Young Hamlet: Print, Piracy and Performance* [2014]) et de Zachary Lesser (*Hamlet After Q1* [2015]) et les combine pour la première fois. Il se concentre sur les différences entre Q1 et la version ultérieure et amplifiée, sur les textes canoniques de la pièce, en particulier en ce qui concerne l'âge d'Hamlet et de la reine. Il met l'accent sur le fait que l'âge d'Hamlet affecte de manière décisive l'âge, la sexualité, et l'importance politique de sa mère (un problème que les commentateurs masculins ne prennent pas en compte). Or, l'âge d'Hamlet est un facteur déterminant dans les représentations de la pièce depuis Burbage et Betterton au dix-septième siècle, jusqu'aux mises en scène de Q1 en 2015. Par conséquent, pourquoi Harold Jenkins a-t-il écarté l'importance de l'âge d'Hamlet en 1982? Afin de replacer le rejet de Jenkins dans son contexte—fondé sur les principes à la fois de la Nouvelle Critique et de la Nouvelle Bibliographie—le présent essai retrace les études sur cette question de la différence d'âge jusqu'aux années 1870 et se concentre tout particulièrement sur le conflit entre deux textes influents: *Shakespearean Tragedy* de A. C. Bradley (1904) et "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" de L.C. Knight (1933). En outre, cette étude attire l'attention sur des détails négligés auxquels Thomas Nashe a fait allusion en 1589 en parlant de "whole Hamlets of tragical speeches"; ces détails portent à croire que Shakespeare est bien l'auteur de la pièce des années 1589, et indiquent aussi certains détails spécifiques que l'on trouve dans Q1 mais pas dans l'histoire d'Amleth proposée par Belleforest dans ses *Histoires Tragiques*.

Mots Clés: Q1 Hamlet, Gertrude, Burbage Richard, les mauvais Quartos, Nashe Thomas, représentation, Shakespeare, Histoire du livre, Nouvelle Bibliographie, Lesser Zachary<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translation provided by Didier G. Bertrand, Associate Professor of World Languages, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, 30 Oct 2015.

How old is Hamlet?

That question may seem desperately old-fashioned. The question presumes that Shakespeare had an intention about Hamlet's age, that Shakespeare's intention matters, and that Shakespeare's intention is recoverable. By even asking the question, I may seem to be ignoring Barthes' announcement of the death of the author and Foucault's analysis of the author-function.<sup>2</sup> But as a theatre historian and theatre practitioner I am well aware that Shakespeare has been dead since 1616, and that since then his functions in casting and rehearsing his plays have been limited (and always mediated by someone else's agenda). The age of Shakespeare's characters changes regularly in performance. Every performer is, and must be, a presentist. We succeed, or fail, in the moment. A 2014 Irish production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was set in a nursing home, with all the lovers, fairies and mechanicals as aged patients. A 2013 production of *Much Ado about Nothing* at the Old Vic cast Vanessa Redgrave (then 76 years old) as Beatrice and James Earl Jones (then 82) as Benedick. Whether or not those interpretations worked in performance, they certainly did not reflect Shakespeare's historical intentions. Likewise, the great Restoration actor and theatre manager Thomas Betterton was still performing the role of Hamlet when he was seventy. But in a North Carolina production in February 2015 Hamlet was played by a twenty-two-year-old, pretending to be nineteen. The text of that production, and the age of its protagonist, were based on the first quarto of *Hamlet*, published in 1603. Christopher Marino, the director, takes it "As a testament to Q1" that "a five, seven and eight-year-old sat through the entire thing, and still talk about it", and he recommended that Q1 *Hamlet* should be "the go-to text" for all college productions of Shakespeare's play.<sup>3</sup> But in another 2015 production, textually even more faithful to Q1 *Hamlet*, the Prince was played by a thirty-three year old

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1967), in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 142-148, and Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" (1969), in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, 113-38.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Marino, private communication, 26 February 2015. The play was performed at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington from 19 February to 1 March 2015.

professional actor, Marcus Kyd, who was also the artistic director and co-founder of the acting company that produced the play.<sup>4</sup>

How old is Hamlet?

However old a producer, a director, or an actor with sufficient clout, wants him to be.

Readers and performers can imagine whatever Hamlet suits the times or their own experience. But we, as scholars and critics, or as theatre artists interested in original performance practices, should legitimately investigate the age of Hamlet in our earliest texts of the play. In fact, if we are paying attention to textual variants in the earliest editions of *Hamlet*, we cannot avoid the question of Hamlet's age.

Imagine that you, reader, are already convinced that there is nothing suspicious about the printing or publication of the first quarto;<sup>5</sup> and that you are convinced that the first quarto cannot possibly be a memorial reconstruction; and you are convinced that the first quarto cannot possibly be the result of note-takers in the audience. Imagine you already know that Edmond Malone was wrong to assume that Shakespeare only began writing plays in 1591, and that Malone was also wrong to assert that Thomas Nashe's 1589 reference to *Hamlet* refers to a lost play by someone other than Shakespeare. You realize instead that Nashe was referring to an early version of Shakespeare's tragedy, a version preserved in the first quarto edition. Imagine that I have already shown you how perfectly the style and dramaturgy of Q1 fit the literary and theatrical circumstances of the late 1580s. Above all, imagine that you are already convinced that Shakespeare himself was the first person to transform the story of Amleth in François Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* into an English play.

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<sup>4</sup> *Hamlet: The First Quarto*, dir. Joel David Santner, Taffety Punk Theatre Company, Capitol Hill Arts Workshop, Washington D.C., 30 April – 23 May 2015. I saw the final performance. For a justifiably enthusiastic review of this dynamic, inventive production, see Alan Katz, "Shakespeare's 'Bad' Quarto by Taffety Punk hailed the best Hamlet," DC Theatre Scene.com, 6 May 2015. Biographical details for Marcus Kyd are available at the International Movie Database, [imdb.com](http://imdb.com). <http://dcmetrotheaterarts.com/2015/05/03/hamlet-the-first-quarto-at-taffety-punk-theatre-co/> 3 June 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Terri Bourus, *Young Shakespeare's Young Hamlet: Print, Piracy, and Performance*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 11-34.

Let me on your imaginary forces continue to work: think now that when I speak of the first quarto of *Hamlet*, you see before you the proof that it is closer to Belleforest than either the second quarto or the folio texts. Imagine that this sentence *can* hold the vasty fields of France, and that you see that Shakespeare, like himself, like a typical educated Tudor Englishman, was particularly interested in sixteenth-century French literature, from the very beginning of his career.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare did not need Thomas Kyd to pre-digest Belleforest's *histoire* of Amleth and spoon-feed it to him.

Zachary Lesser's book on Q1 *Hamlet*, published just a couple months after my own, takes a radically different approach to the problem, and we disagree on one or two minor details, but the two books complement each other so perfectly that, if I did not know better, it would be easy to imagine that they are the result of a carefully planned conspiracy *à deux*. Lesser devotes whole chapters to issues that I barely mention: the "to be or not to be" soliloquy, for instance, or the textual variant "country/contrary" in the Mousetrap scene.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Lesser spends only a few pages on the publisher Nicholas Ling, whose career in the early modern book trade is the subject of my entire first chapter. Lesser says almost nothing, and nothing new, about Malone's chronology or Nashe's 1589 allusion to *Hamlet*. Nevertheless, Lesser's history of *Hamlet* criticism in the wake of the 1823 re-discovery of the first quarto demonstrates that the orthodoxies of twentieth-century textual criticism are profoundly unsatisfactory, and that the New Textualism of our own time is equally bankrupt. In his conclusion, Lesser criticizes what he calls the twenty-first century's "constitutive refusal to ask questions about [the] historical origins" of Q1, and he urges scholars to "find new methods for producing a stemma of the three early texts of *Hamlet*". His final chapter could well serve as the introduction to my book, which does, indeed, construct a new stemma for the relationship of those three texts.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Reading*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 169 ("Shakespeare's library certainly contained books in French and Italian, as well as those in Latin"). More generally, see Deanne Williams, *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare* Cambridge University Press, 2004. The major source of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, often regarded as Shakespeare's first play, was Montemayor's *Diana*; Shakespeare did not read Spanish, and no English translation was available in print, but Shakespeare could have read the French translation by Nicole Colin, first published in 1578, and often reprinted over the next two decades.

<sup>7</sup> Zachary Lesser, *Hamlet After Q1: An Uncanny History of the Shakespearean Text*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, 157-206, 72-133. All subsequent references to Lesser refer to this note.

The 2015 Norton Shakespeare includes in its printed textbook not only the canonical expanded *Hamlet* but also the Q1 version--giving Q1 *Hamlet* the kind of special status that the 1986 Oxford Shakespeare gave to Q1 *Lear*.<sup>8</sup> But the 1986 revolution in attitudes to *King Lear* was very much the product of a single publisher—the revolution in attitudes toward Q1 *Hamlet* is much more broadly based. My book was published in Palgrave’s “History of Text Technologies” series, Lesser’s book was published in Penn’s “Material Texts” series, and Lesser himself has recently been named one of the General Editors of the next incarnation of the Arden Shakespeare. In Emma Smith’s 2012 Penguin paperback anthology of revenge tragedies, Q1 *Hamlet* is the only Shakespeare text.<sup>9</sup>

In what follows I will assume that you have already read my book and Lesser’s book, and found both of them convincing. That may seem a lot to ask, but I have learned, from previous experience, that it is impossible, in a short essay, to answer all the questions raised by the texts of *Hamlet*. In the past, when I addressed some aspect of Q1 at various conferences and seminars, I was inevitably criticized for not answering simultaneously all the other questions about all three texts of *Hamlet*. It is as if my audiences consisted entirely of clones of Rosalind:

Alas the day, what shall I do with my doublet and hose? What did he when thou saw’st him? What said he? How looked he? Wherein went he? What makes him here? Did he ask for me? Where remains he? How parted he with thee? And when shalt thou see him again?---Answer me in one word.

To which I can only respond, like Celia, “You must borrow me Gargantua’s mouth first.”<sup>10</sup>

Lacking Gargantua’s mouth or Rabelais’ stamina and imaginative fertility, I cannot in this essay answer every question about Q1*Hamlet*, but I will try here to answer the question about Hamlet’s age.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Norton Shakespeare 3E*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt *et al.*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2015; William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, gen. ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford: Clarendon, 1986. Quotations from Shakespeare cite the 1986 edition.

<sup>9</sup> Kyd, Shakespeare, Marston, Chettle, Middleton, *Five Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Emma Smith, London: Penguin, 2012, 97-167.

<sup>10</sup> *As You Like It*, 3.2.214-220.

“No arithmetic is necessary,” Harold Jenkins declared in 1982, “to determine that Hamlet must be thirty.” Jenkins made that announcement in a long note appended to his monumental Arden edition of *Hamlet*--or rather, his monumental Arden edition of the traditional conflated *Hamlet* that began life in Nicholas Rowe’s 1709 edition of Shakespeare’s plays. In that canonical *Hamlet*, and in the second quarto published in 1604, Hamlet is undoubtedly thirty, but if no arithmetic is necessary to answer this question, why did Jenkins write three and a half pages on Hamlet’s age?<sup>11</sup> His long-windedness is particularly surprising because Jenkins followed this proclamation of the utter obviousness of the answer by dismissing the significance of the question: he doubts “Whether the number of Hamlet’s years was of concern to Shakespeare, or should be to us.”

This is a strange claim. Why would a playwright, or any writer, not care whether his protagonist was thirty, or sixteen? Is there no difference in psychology, or social identity, between an adolescent and a thirty-year-old? In particular, is such an age difference irrelevant to the Prince of Denmark, whose claim to the throne is central to every version of his story? Like any prince, Hamlet’s political status, his political power, his political options, depend in part upon his age. Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* emphasized the importance of Hamlet’s age when he summarized the Prince’s situation: “Your father was king. You were his only son. Your father dies. You are of age. Your uncle becomes king.”<sup>12</sup> All of this is indisputably true in all versions of the play---except for the sentence “You are of age”. That is indisputably true in the canonical *Hamlet*, but not in Q1.

Jenkins’ doubts were not evidence of his enthusiasm for Barthes, Foucault, or any variety of postmodernist French critical theory. Jenkins was the perfect English fusion of modernist New Bibliography and modernist New Criticism. But why would a scholar who devoted 574 pages to identifying Shakespeare’s intentions in respect to every word and punctuation mark in *Hamlet* cast doubt on whether Shakespeare cared about Hamlet’s age? Jenkins admitted that Hamlet’s age has caused problems for many readers: “a thirty-year-old Hamlet goes against the impression the play conveys of the hero’s youth,” and “Attempts to deny a certain discrepancy are futile.” Nevertheless, Jenkins warned readers that it was a mistake to “consider it too curiously”, and

<sup>11</sup> Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet, Arden Shakespeare*, London: Methuen, 1982, p. 551-554 (long note on V.i.139-57). All subsequent references to Jenkins refer to that note.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, New York: Grove, 1967, p. 48.



declared that the "numbers are less important than the pattern of a life which they evoke." But if the numbers are not important, why did Shakespeare supply them?

And why am I beginning with Jenkins, whose edition is now more than thirty years old? Its replacement in the Arden series, the 2006 edition by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, acknowledges that *Hamlet* is thirty years old in the canonical texts of Q2 and F--but also recognizes that, in the first quarto, *Hamlet* is only "about 18" years old.<sup>13</sup> Of course, if *Hamlet* is less than eighteen years old, he would not be "of age," and the play's politics would be significantly different. Nevertheless, the 2006 edition does not address those political implications. It is still haunted by the ghost of Jenkins, and so at times is Lesser's book. The 2006 Arden edition, while refusing to fully endorse theories about bad quartos, nevertheless often speaks of readings in Q1 as "deletions" or "additions" or "alterations" from the canonical version. Such language implies that the larger, traditional version somehow preceded the shorter one that was published first. The editors' language implies an editorial theory, even when their introduction refuses to do so explicitly. The same happens very occasionally with Lesser. He has a brilliant chapter on the Q1 stage direction that specifies the Ghost's final entrance "in his nightgown" (114-56). Nevertheless, Lesser writes more than once about how the Q1 version "becomes" something different, as though Q1 were an evolution from the longer, later, canonical Q2. Even if we ignore entirely the 1589 *Hamlet*, even if we restrict ourselves (as book historians like Lesser normally do) to the perspective of early readers, it was Q2's printed version that "became" something different from the earlier Q1's printed version. And whoever wrote the 1589 *Hamlet*, the canonical *Hamlet* of the early seventeenth century "became" something different from the version written and performed in the late 1580s--which was also being performed by the Chamberlain's Men in 1594.

Jenkins casts a long shadow, especially for an older generation of textual scholars like Brian Vickers, who reviles the 2006 Arden *Hamlet* for its refusal to explicitly, systematically, and violently condemn Q1.<sup>14</sup> These attitudes also explain why another older Shakespearean, whose identity I will not reveal, announced that he "would not read" my book at all, because he already

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<sup>13</sup> *Hamlet*, ed. Thompson and Taylor, London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006, p. 141; *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, ed. Thompson and Taylor, London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006, p. 43. Quotations from Q1 cite their text.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Vickers, review, *Editionen in der Kritik II*, Berlin: Weidler, 2008, 15-42.

knew that its thesis *must* be wrong. In particular, Jenkins' long note on Hamlet's age is the foundation for the conviction, among some older textual scholars, that Hamlet's age is a "pseudo-problem." Even Thompson and Taylor, who recognize the significant difference in age between Q1 and Q2, do not discuss its theatrical, psychological, or political importance. The age of Hamlet becomes simply a hanging factoid, an entirely meaningless mathematical curiosity.

Jenkins himself blames the pseudo-problem on A. C. Bradley.<sup>15</sup> Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, published in 1904, is arguably the most influential academic monograph ever written on Shakespeare; Bradley's book contains a famous, or infamous, appendix of 32 long notes, including one on "Hamlet's Age".<sup>16</sup> But Bradley begins that note by referring readers to the "chief arguments" on this subject in "Furness's Variorum *Hamlet*". Dr. Henry Howard Furness, in 1877, had devoted four pages to the debate about Hamlet's age--including remarks by Furnivall on the "startling inconsistencies" in the early texts, claims by Minto and Marshall that Hamlet was only seventeen or eighteen, and Furness's own editorial comment that "Eduard and Otto Devrient [...] contend, and with much force, for Hamlet's extreme youth".<sup>17</sup> The Devrient edition, *Deutscher Bühnen Und Familien Shakespeare*, published in Leipzig in 1873, used the authority of the Q1 text to argue for "Hamlet to be in his minority", that is, younger than the legal age of adulthood.<sup>18</sup>

Jenkins did not acknowledge this longer history of the debate. Instead, he simply targeted Bradley. And Bradley, of course, was not a textual scholar or an editor. Nevertheless, Bradley's book demonstrates that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, even for a literary critic primarily interested in the philosophy of tragedy, Hamlet's age seemed self-evidently important. Bradley recognized, that the first quarto treats Hamlet's age differently than the longer canonical texts found in the second quarto, the folio, and modern editions that conflate those two later texts.

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<sup>15</sup> Jenkins, *Hamlet*, p. 552, quoting Bradley p. 407 ("the appearance of being expressly inserted in order to fix Hamlet's age").

<sup>16</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London: Macmillan, 1904, Note C.

<sup>17</sup> *Hamlet*, ed. Horace Howard Furness, A New Variorum Edition, 2 vols., Philadelphia, 1877, 1: 391-394.

<sup>18</sup> Their arguments are summarized and translated in Furness, ed., *Hamlet*, 2:346-347.

Even if the general impression I received from the play were that Hamlet was a youth of eighteen or twenty, I should feel quite unable to set it against the evidence of the statements in [the canonical text of] V.i which show him to be exactly thirty, unless these statements seemed to be casual. But they have to my mind, on the contrary, the appearance of being expressly inserted in order to fix Hamlet's age; and the fact that they differ decidedly from the statements in Q1 confirms that idea. So does the fact that the Player King speaks of having been married thirty years (III,ii.165), where again the number differs from that in Q1.

Bradley does not, anywhere in the Note, attempt to establish the stemmatic relationship between Q1 and the canonical texts, though he does recognize that the canonical texts specifically and pointedly insist upon a Hamlet who is thirty years old, in a way that Q1 does not.

And, although Bradley recognizes this difference between the two versions, he cannot satisfactorily explain it. He cannot explain it because, like almost everyone else in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he accepts Malone's theories about Shakespeare's chronology, and therefore he dismisses the possibility that Shakespeare wrote the 1589 *Hamlet* mentioned by Nashe. "It has been suggested," Bradley notes, "that in the old play Hamlet was a mere lad." Here, Bradley assumes that "the old play" is lost, and that we can only conjecture about its contents. Bradley is forced back onto similar conjectures when he discusses the relationship between Hamlet and Wittenberg: "The only solution I can suggest is that, in the story or play which Shakespeare used, Hamlet and the others were all at the time of the murder young students at Wittenberg." Here, Bradley not only refers to the conjectural contents of a lost play, but also conjures up the possibility of a lost "story". The problems here seem insoluble, because the answers depend upon lost documents.

Fortunately, "the story" behind *Hamlet* is not lost: it is Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*. In Belleforest, Amleth is indeed what Bradley calls "a mere lad": he is called not only "jeune", but also "Adolescent" and "enfant"; explicitly, he had not yet reached "perfection d'age", or the legal age of majority.<sup>19</sup> About Belleforest as the primary source of any English "Tragical History of *Hamlet*" there can be no reasonable doubt. But most scholars still believe, as Bradley did, that

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<sup>19</sup> Bourus, *Young Shakespeare*, p. 108.

the “play” mentioned by Nashe in 1589 actually *is* lost. I argue in my recent monograph that Shakespeare is the author of that 1589 play, and that the text of that 1589 play is preserved in Q1; the case for Shakespeare’s authorship of the 1589 play is, for four reasons, even stronger than I realized when I wrote that book.

First, I think that most Shakespeare scholars, since Malone, have been reluctant to believe that anyone could have criticized so flippantly any version of *Hamlet* written by the great and immortal Bard of Avon. We have reconciled ourselves to the fact that the first mention of Shakespeare in print--in 1592, in *Greenes Groatsworth of Wit*--is mocking and negative; however, we can accept mockery of *Henry the Sixth, Part Three* much more easily than we can accept mockery of *Hamlet*. But the play Nashe was mocking in 1589 (and that Thomas Lodge mocked in 1596) was *not* the world-famous play written by Shakespeare in the early seventeenth century, at the height of his powers. It was perhaps the first full-length play Shakespeare had written; a play that conservative literary critics continue to mock. You need only think of Brian Vickers’ description of the text of the first quarto: “Hamlet by Dogberry”.<sup>20</sup>

Second, Nashe puns on the proper name of the protagonist and the common noun “hamlet”: he describes an anonymous author who “will afford you whole *Hamlets*, I should say handfuls, of tragical speaches.” Italicized, and with an upper-case initial “H”, that odd word “*Hamlets*” undoubtedly refers to a proper name. But in the 1599 reprint of Nashe’s text, “*Hamlets*” was emended by a compositor to the commonplace plural noun “hamlets” (with no italics and no upper case “H”).<sup>21</sup> In 1778, Malone had seen only the 1599 edition, and he denied that Nashe was alluding to a proper name; in 1790, having finally seen a copy of the 1589 original, Malone changed his mind, and recognized that Nashe must be alluding to a play.<sup>22</sup> This error in the reprint is proof that at least one early reader gave the pun priority over the literary allusion, and

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<sup>20</sup> Brian Vickers, “Hamlet by Dogberry: A Perverse Reading of the Bad Quarto,” *TLS*, 14 December 1993.

<sup>21</sup> I have confirmed by a first-hand examination that the misprint “hamlets” occurs in the British Library copy of the 1599 edition (STC 12273). Nashe himself uses the singular “hamlet” to mean “village” in *Lenten Stuff* (iii.160.36).

<sup>22</sup> Malone, “An Attempt to ascertain the Order in which the Plays attributed to Shakspeare were Written,” in *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. Samuel Johnson and George Steevens, 10 vols. (1778), 295-296, and “An Attempt to ascertain the Order in which The Plays of Shakspeare were written,” in *The Plays of Poems of William Shakspeare*, ed. Malone, 10 vols. (1790), I:305.

Malone demonstrates that such an interpretation was also possible for an astute reader in the late eighteenth century. But what was the purpose of this pun in Nashe's original 1589 text? Unlike the other alleged puns in this paragraph, this one must explicitly refer to a Hamlet play. But it has nothing to do with the story told by Belleforest, or with any known version of the English play. However, it may have something to do with the unnamed author. Other documentary evidence establishes that the 1580s *Hamlet* cannot have been written by Lyly, Daniel, Drayton, Nashe, Peele, Greene, or any university-educated playwright; the only remaining candidates would be Thomas Kyd, Anthony Munday, or William Shakespeare, and of those three Shakespeare is the most likely for a variety of reasons.<sup>23</sup> This pun decisively eliminates Munday and Kyd: both were born in London, so the pun makes no sense if either of them was the author of the 1589 play. Shakespeare, by contrast, came from a small market town in the English Midlands that might easily be mocked as a "hamlet". The derisive pun on "hamlets" resembles Robert Greene's jibe at Shakespeare as a country bumpkin ("the only Shakes-scene in a countrey").<sup>24</sup>

Third, Nashe's plural proper name ("*Hamlets*") is itself odd. Neither Saxo Grammaticus nor Francois Belleforest names Hamlet's father. But Shakespeare's play, in all versions, contains *two* men named Hamlet. Shakespeare does this elsewhere: *The Comedy of Errors* contains two men named Dromio and two named Antipholus, and *Henry IV* contains a father and son both named Henry ("Not Amurath an Amurath succeeds, But Harry Harry"). This kind of name-doubling does not occur in Thomas Kyd's work.

Fourth, the "he" whom Nashe associates with *Hamlets* (and hamlets) is described in a specific, peculiar way: "if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, he will affoord you whole [...] handfulls of tragical speeches." The "he" may be the aforementioned "English *Seneca*" (the translations of Seneca's plays into English), but those were the work of multiple translators, and one can "intreat" a person but not a book. Nashe more particularly imagines a dialogue between "you" and "him" on "a frostie morning". It is hard to imagine a playwright, on a morning walk, carrying around handwritten pages consisting only of separated sample speeches, which he would hand over to anyone who asked him nicely. The sentence makes much more sense if

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<sup>23</sup> For a full account of the evidence, see Bourus, *Young Hamlet*, p. 148, 159-166.

<sup>24</sup> *Greenes Groatsworth of witte* (1592), sig. F1v.

Nashe were imagining someone who would, if asked, immediately declaim tragical speeches, anywhere, like an actor giving an impromptu audition. The verb “afford” has the common meaning “provide, supply”, and the word “speeches” here clearly refers to a formal oral utterance.<sup>25</sup> *OED* does not recognize theatrical speeches as a distinct category, but the word was often used in that sense, by Nashe among others.<sup>26</sup> But undoubtedly the most famous early example of an actor giving a tragical speech outside of a theatre comes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, when the Prince encounters the players. This episode does not occur in the *Hamlet* narratives of Grammaticus or Belleforest, but it does occur in all texts of Shakespeare’s play. I will quote it here from the Q1 version. Soon after the players enter, Hamlet demands of them,

Come on, masters, we’ll even to’t--like French falconers, fly at anything we see. Come, a taste of your quality--a speech, a passionate speech.

PLAYERS. What speech, my good lord?

HAMLET. I heard thee speak a speech once [...] Come, a speech in it I chiefly remember was Aeneas’ tale to Dido [...] (7.324-37)

After one of the players delivers the tragical speech, Hamlet asks, “couldst not thou for a need study me some dozen or sixteen lines which I would set down and insert?” (7.394-6); later, in rehearsal, presumably referring to those inserted lines, Hamlet advises the player to “Pronounce me this speech trippingly o’ the tongue as I taught thee” (9.1-2). Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* departs from Belleforest by having a player speak a tragical speech on demand soon after he encounters someone; Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* also treats a speech as a distinct unit of theatrical performance, which can be scripted separately.<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare in Q1 *Hamlet* combines an actor giving a

<sup>25</sup> *OED* afford v.3, and *OED* speech n.<sup>1</sup> 8.a, 8.d. The combination of transitive verb “afford” with direct object “speeches” was not uncommon in the 1580s: EEBO records additional examples in Greene, Kyd, and Munday.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penniless*, 1592, p. 55: “Our Players are not as the players beyond sea’, who ‘forbeare no immodest speach or vnchast action that may procure laughter, but our Sceane is more stately furnisht than euer it was in the time of Roscius . . . not consisting like theirs of a Pantaloun, a Whore, and a Zanie, but of Emperours, Kings and Princes: whose true Tragedies (*Sophocleo cothurno*) they doo vaunt.” Nashe specifically uses “speech” in relation to ‘players’ and performances of English tragedies.

<sup>27</sup> On individual speeches as distinct units of composition for early modern playwrights, see Gary Taylor and John V. Nance, “Imitation or Collaboration? Marlowe and the Early Shakespeare

speech, when politely entreated to do so, outside of a theatre, with the writing of speeches for players—and that is exactly the scenario that Nashe mocks in his sentence about someone who will “affoord you whole *Hamlets* [...] of tragical speeches.” Nashe is not just alluding to a play about Hamlet; he seems to be alluding to a specific incident unique to Shakespeare’s versions of *Hamlet*. Moreover, although Nashe’s words are printed in a book registered in August, he associates “whole *Hamlets* [...] of tragical speeches” with an encounter “in a frostie morning”. Unlike Grammaticus and Belleforest, all texts of Shakespeare’s play contain a dialogue between Hamlet and his father’s ghost, also named Hamlet; the ghost would not speak to Horatio and the soldiers, who “offer it the show of violence” (1.100); but the Senecan ghost of Hamlet does afford tragical speeches to another Hamlet (Sc. 5), who entreats him fair in the pre-dawn hours, when “the air bites shrewd” with “a nipping wind” (4.1-2).

The man that Nashe associated with Hamlet, and with famous scenes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, is characterized as though he were an actor as well as an author. Neither Kyd nor Munday was an actor. Nashe’s gibe conflates actor and author in the same way that Greene would do when he mocked Shakespeare’s “tiger’s heart wrapped in a player’s hide”. Nashe also, in 1589, described the author of *Hamlet* in the same way that John Aubrey described Shakespeare “when he was a boy”: “when he kill’d a Calfe he would doe it in a high style, and make a Speech.”<sup>28</sup> Aubrey recorded an oral anecdote about Shakespeare in his youth, so enthusiastic about his own tragic speeches that he recited them outside the theatre. That is also how Nashe describes the author of *Hamlet* in 1589: as an actor-playwright who came from a small town, lacked a university education, and performed theatrical speeches outside of theatres. Who else but Shakespeare, in 1589, could possibly fit those criteria?

Bradley’s approach to the problem of Hamlet’s age was confused by the prevailing scholarly confusion over the relationship of the traditional text to Q1. But nevertheless, Bradley did

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Canon,” forthcoming in *Shakespeare Survey* 68, 2015. Stephen Gosson, in *Playes confuted in fiue actions* (1582), refers to “Tragicall speeches” written for the players (D4v).

<sup>28</sup> John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. John Buchanan-Brown, London: Penguin, 2000, p. 289. Aubrey’s anecdote may also be associating Shakespeare’s reciting of speeches with *Hamlet*: in all versions of the play, killing a calf is associated with tragedy and acting. In Q1, Corambis (a.k.a. Polonius) reports “My lord, I did act Julius Caesar. I was killed in the Capitol. Brutus killed me”, and Hamlet responds “It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf” (9.72-74)

recognize that Hamlet's age is a real problem, and he did take the problem of Hamlet's age seriously. So what happened between Bradley, in 1904, and Jenkins, in 1982?

One thing that happened was the rise of the New Bibliography, which banished altogether the fruitful confusion of earlier discussions of the relationship between Q1 and Q2. In the *ancien regime* of Pollard and Greg and Bowers, Q1 was simply and obviously a bad quarto, which could and should be confidently ignored. But the particular question about Hamlet's age was also influenced by twentieth-century changes in literary theory, and above all by an essay by L. C. Knights: "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?"

This essay was first published in 1933 in *Scrutiny*, the influential Leavisite journal that Knights edited, and it was reprinted as the first chapter in his 1946 book *Explorations*, one of the foundational textbooks of New Criticism. This essay is still described, on Wikipedia, as "a classic of modern criticism." Its title invoked, and implicitly mocked, the Notes to Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, and Bradley was explicitly and repeatedly targeted in the essay. But in one significant way the title misrepresented Bradley. Most of Bradley's "Notes" are, of course, about men. Bradley never asks "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" Bradley does discuss children in his analysis of *Macbeth*, but the subheading of Bradley's Note on that subject is "*He has no children*" (my italics). Knights turned Bradley's discussion of whether Macbeth had a male heir into a self-evidently absurd gynecological enquiry.

Knights began by asking "why so few of the many books that have been written are relevant to our study of Shakespeare as a poet"? His answer involved "an examination of certain critical presuppositions, and of these the most fruitful of irrelevancies is the assumption that Shakespeare was pre-eminently a great 'creator of characters'".<sup>29</sup> As examples of this absurd assumption Knight cited two books that had recently been published. The first was Ranjee Shahani's *Shakespeare Through Eastern Eyes*, but the fallacy was "even better illustrated by Ellen Terry's recently published *Lectures on Shakespeare*. To her the characters are all flesh and blood."<sup>30</sup> Obviously, any theory espoused by colonial natives and women (let alone actresses) must be wrong. However, these easy preliminary targets are simply ways of discrediting by association, in advance, the real object of New Critical disdain:

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<sup>29</sup> L. C. Knights, *Explorations*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1946, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.



The most illustrious example is, of course, Dr. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*. The book is too well known to require much descriptive comment, but it should be observed that the Notes, in which the detective interest supersedes the critical, form a logical corollary to the main portions of the book [...] It is assumed throughout [Bradley's] book that the most profitable discussion of Shakespeare's tragedies is in terms of the characters of which they are composed.<sup>31</sup>

Among the specific examples that Knights mocked are Bradley's "conjecture upon Hamlet's whereabouts at the time of his father's death",<sup>32</sup> something that Bradley discussed in relation to the issue of Hamlet's age.

In place of such misguided notions about the importance of character, Knights famously declared that "A Shakespeare play is a dramatic poem." He then immediately quoted G. Wilson Knight's dictum that "The persons, ultimately, are not human at all, but purely symbols of a poetic vision," and if "the only profitable approach to Shakespeare is a consideration of his plays as dramatic poems"<sup>33</sup>, then we need not concern ourselves with such mundane irrelevancies as the age of a character. Bradley's interest in such matters was, for Knights, a natural corollary of nineteenth-century assumptions. "There is no need," Knights declared, "to discuss nineteenth-century Shakespeare criticism in detail." Knights would have had no use for Lesser's book on Q1 *Hamlet*, which traces the genealogy of our own assumptions about the play to the great variety of nineteenth-century scholarly, critical, and theatrical responses to the belated rediscovery of Q1. But for L. C. Knights, the whole century was epitomized "by Mrs. Jameson's *Shakespeare's Heroines* and Mary Cowden Clarke's *Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*",<sup>34</sup> and by the pernicious "growth of the popular novel, from Sir Walter Scott and Charlotte Brontë to our own Best Sellers"<sup>35</sup>. According to Knights, this lamentable history of attention to Shakespeare's characters "accounts for Dr. Bradley's Notes". All these critical illnesses can be cured, Knights

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

assured us, “by treating Shakespeare primarily as a poet.” If we do that, we will be rewarded with the extraordinarily original and specific insight that, “Macbeth is a statement of evil.” Shakespeare’s entire magnificent play is here reduced to a six-word undergraduate thesis. “I use the word ‘statement’,” Knights explained, “in order to stress those qualities that are ‘non-dramatic,’ if drama is defined according to the canons of [...] Dr. Bradley.”

I want to stress that there is an important difference between the L.C. Knights claim that Shakespeare is “primarily a poet”, and the Lukas Erne claim that Shakespeare is “a literary dramatist”.<sup>36</sup> Erne provides important and undeniable evidence about Shakespeare’s prominence in the early modern book trade. Although Erne has been accused of anti-theatricalism, his evidence can be interpreted more generously as proof that, from the mid-1590s, Shakespeare was a cross-over artist, capable of appealing to both readers and audiences. Unlike Erne, Knights was clearly historically mistaken when he claimed that an interest in Shakespeare’s characters is anachronistic. What is most remarkable about the many early references to Shakespeare, by both readers and spectators, is their consistent focus on his characters.<sup>37</sup> But Knights was also mistaken, in a more significant way, about what makes literature valuable. People who read a lot of literature score higher on empathy tests than people who do not.<sup>38</sup> Literature makes it possible for us to imagine what it would be like to be someone else; literature, like acting, is an exercise in imaginative identification. It is religious fanatics, like those who attacked *Charlie Hebdo*, who are more likely to reduce a complex work of art to “a statement of evil,” or to believe that “The persons, ultimately, are not human at all, but purely symbols”.

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<sup>36</sup> For a response to the charge of anti-theatricalism, see the “Preface” in Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, second edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 1-4.

<sup>37</sup> This point was made by G. E. Bentley in *Shakespeare and Jonson: their reputations in the seventeenth century compared*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.

<sup>38</sup> The most widely cited recent study of the relationship between literature and empathy is probably David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind,” *Science*, vol. 342, no. 6156, 18 October 2013, 377-380; specifically in relation to Shakespeare, see Max J. van Duijn, Ineke Sluiter, and Argie Verhagen, “When narrative takes over: The representation of embedded mindstates in Shakespeare’s *Othello*,” *Literature and Language*, 24:2, May 2015, 148-166.

Of course, L.C. Knights was not a terrorist, and he was right to insist that it does not matter *how many* children Lady Macbeth had. All that matters, for the play or the poem, is that she had at least one:

I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.<sup>39</sup>

Any woman who has nursed a child will understand something important about Lady Macbeth when she says this. In the seventeenth century, with its appallingly high infant mortality rates, no early spectator or reader would have needed an explanation of why the child that Lady Macbeth nursed does not appear in the play. They would all have understood. It's not something that needed to be said. Shakespeare's own wife, after all, had lost a child. His mother had lost several. Lady Macbeth is, or at least was, a mother, who becomes a Queen. There is also a mother who is a Queen in *Hamlet*, but there is a fundamental difference between Lady Macbeth, in Shakespeare's play, and the mother in all versions of the story of Hamlet. In *Hamlet*, the mother's child is alive; indeed, the child outlives his mother. Lady Macbeth's offspring never appear on stage, and their age is therefore irrelevant to that play. But Hamlet does appear on stage, and therefore an audience cannot help but notice how old he is, and the visible age of the son will, in turn, tell us something crucial about the age of his mother. Both Bradley and Jenkins discussed Hamlet's age in relation to the ages of other characters in the play: Laertes, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Horatio, and the Gravedigger. Neither Bradley nor Jenkins, in discussing Hamlet's age, ever mentions his mother.

If Hamlet is thirty--as he is in the canonical texts--then his mother must be at least forty-three years old (if we allow for the early marriages and early pregnancies of some women, and especially aristocratic women, in medieval and early modern Europe). But if Hamlet is only seventeen--as he probably is in Q1--then his mother might be only thirty. If he is only seventeen, and thus just months short of the age of majority when he would naturally and properly ascend the throne, then the 'wicked, wicked speed' with which his uncle married his mother (2.69)

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<sup>39</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.7.54-55.

would make political sense—and would be particularly galling to the prince. Moreover, Hamlet’s age determines whether or not his mother is still young enough to bear additional children, by her new husband. Thus, Hamlet’s age determines whether his mother’s promise to stop sleeping with her new husband is also, in effect, a decision to insure that Hamlet’s murderous usurping uncle will not have a son, and will not have an heir, who could displace Hamlet. Hamlet’s age determines whether his mother’s sexuality has any political significance.<sup>40</sup> Zachary Lesser demonstrates that, in Q1, the appearance of the Ghost “*in his nightgown*” insures that we will assume that the scene is taking place in the Queen’s bedroom, or at the very least that the Queen’s bedroom is just offstage, but still in the thoughts of the characters onstage and in the thoughts of every member of the audience. Q1’s unique stage direction is closer to Belleforest, and it insists on the sexual significance of the scene. By contrast, the canonical texts not only remove the nightgown, but they also insist that the scene takes place in the Queen’s “closet”—a more ambiguous space, not necessarily or even primarily sexual.<sup>41</sup> However, Lesser does not notice that this uniquely sexualized version of the scene also includes a uniquely young, and fertile, Queen. Hamlet’s age cannot be separated from the Queen’s age, and neither can be separated from *Hamlet*’s sexual and political narrative.

How old was Hamlet? As young as Shakespeare and Burbage wanted him (and his mother) to be in the late 1580s--and then again, as old as Shakespeare and Burbage wanted him (and his mother) to be in the early seventeenth century.

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<sup>40</sup> For a fuller discussion of the Queen’s age, see Bourus, *Young Hamlet*, p.117-126.

<sup>41</sup> Lesser, *Hamlet After Q1*, p. 144-156.