

How Many Years Had Hamlet the Dane?

By Stephen F. Roth

Aside from the two old chestnuts of *Hamlet* criticism – Hamlet’s character and Hamlet’s delay – probably no other topic has engaged Shakespeare fans more than the thorny problem of his age: is Hamlet seventeen or thirty? Whether you’re wandering through classes discussing *Hamlet*, lurking the boards at rehearsal, eavesdropping in the bar after a performance, or perusing the online discussions, you find people of all stripes tangling with this key contradiction.

In two blatant references in the accepted text, the gravedigger [suggests] Hamlet is thirty. But aside from these and two other items in the text, everything else about the play –including the gravedigger himself – contradicts the gravedigger’s statements.

The Critics

When I tackled this problem, the obvious first course was to see if the critics had already solved it. Not surprisingly, I’m not the first to dig through these old bones. Every major critic in the last century and a half has noted the oddly obtrusive discrepancy between the gravedigger’s lines and the overall impression of Hamlet’s youth given throughout the play. At least a dozen critics have addressed the issue, with comments ranging from lengthy discourses to terse footnotes to dismissive asides. (You’ll find a rundown of their discussions in transcripts of some commentaries at www.princehamlet.com.)

A lot of the discussion inevitably centers on whether and when Shakespeare revised the play. Scholarly consensus is nonexistent. But somewhere in that process, this contradiction arose. Some have speculated that the gravedigger’s lines were added at some point for Shakespeare’s star partner in *The Lord Chamberlain’s Men*, Richard Burbage, who was thirty years old when Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* debuted in 1600/1601. (We know Burbage played Hamlet, but we don’t know when.) Many equally unproveable speculations are possible.

We do know this: the Elizabethan theater scene was a lot like Hollywood when it came to scripts. Many were created by more than one writer, and many if not most suffered revision at multiple hands. And Shakespeare was as savvy as any Hollywood script doctor.

After reading through all the critics’ wrangling, what surprises me most is that none of them has explored the issue of Hamlet’s age exhaustively. Almost every item covered in this chapter has been discussed by at least one critic; others have been debated by many. But no one has tackled them all. And most critics avoid the whole topic.

The most recent discussion, for instance, is by Professor Harold Bloom, our current defender of the Western canon, modern-day bardolater, and Hamlet eulogist. He evades the question entirely in his 1998 *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*: “When we first encounter him, Hamlet is a university student who is not being permitted to return to his studies. He does not appear to be more than twenty years old, yet in Act V he is revealed to be at least thirty, after a passage of a few weeks at most. And yet none of this matters: he is always both the youngest and the oldest personality in the drama.”

Put aside Professor Bloom’s faulty calendar arithmetic. (The action encompasses four months, as explained below.) Just saying that Hamlet is “both the youngest and the oldest personality” is...less than satisfying.

Seventeen Years Had Hamlet the Dane

So I had to go looking for the answer myself. And I found it: Hamlet is a teen. At this point most of you are scrambling to find Act 5, Scene 1, the graveyard scene. “It’s right there!” you’re sputtering. “It says he’s thirty!”

And it’s true; in the accepted text, the gravedigger says that he started as sexton the day that young Hamlet was born, and that he’s “been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years” (5.1.69). And not fifteen lines later, the gravedigger says of Yorick, “Here’s a skull now hath lien you i’ th’ earth three and twenty years” (5.1.73). If Hamlet rode on Yorick’s shoulders and kissed his lips at age four or seven, Hamlet is 27 or 30. These oddly obtrusive items, plus two others discussed below, seem to bend over backwards to set Hamlet’s age at thirty.

But I just plain knew this was wrong. The play doesn’t make sense if Hamlet is thirty. So I went back to my *Riverside*, and in the textual notes I discovered what I’d halfway expected. The earliest published version of Hamlet (the First Quarto, a.k.a. “Q1,” published in 1603) omits the gravedigger’s 30-year statement entirely, and has Yorick in the ground only 12 years instead of 23 (Q1:3361)—making Hamlet 16 or 20. G. Blake-more Evans, the *Riverside*’s textual editor, adds the unembellished comment, “Q1 thus makes Hamlet a very young man.”

The First Quarto¹

But how reliable is the First Quarto of 1603? It’s definitely one of the “bad” quartos; it’s half the length of the Second Quarto (1604) and First Folio (1623). (Editors disagree on which of these is the most authoritative.) And what’s left in Q1 is in many cases a travesty rather than a tragedy, probably set down from memory by the actor who played Marcellus and perhaps others, including Voltemand. Given how badly many scenes are savaged in Q1, the tendency of critics is to throw most of it out as garbage. (Many find interest in the stage directions, as accounts of actual performances.) But there are hundreds of lines that vary by only a word or spelling here and a punctuation mark there. *If the text’s from memory, it’s from an actor’s memory.* And that actor—Shakespeare’s fellow player and *Hamlet*’s first editor—clearly thought that Hamlet was a youth.

Q1 is a contemporaneous report from an active and memory-trained participant in some of the earliest performances of *Hamlet*. It doesn’t have the authority of Shakespeare’s pen, but it has a third-party authority on the play’s early presentations that the rewrite artist can’t claim.

The First Folio²

This discovery in Q1 was enough to put me on the track, so I dug up the First Folio text, and discovered yet another contradiction—one that is not even mentioned in most of the textual notes I consulted. In F1, the gravedigger’s line reads, “I have bin sixeteene/heere, man and Boy thirty yeares” (F1:3351). Some editors would make hay of the capitalized “Boy,” but it’s the “sixeteene” that’s really telling. The sentence doesn’t make any sense as printed.

¹ Eighteen of Shakespeare’s 37 plays are extant in single-play editions published during his lifetime. These early editions are called quartos, because the printer folded a single sheet of paper into quarters, producing eight sides to print on; the result was a small, relatively cheap book.

² Thirty-six plays appeared in the first collected edition, put together in 1623 (seven years after his death) by fellow actors in Shakespeare’s acting company. This book is now usually called the First Folio: it is a large, impressive book titled, *Mr. William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies.*

“Sixeteene” is patently not a variant spelling of “sexton.” Out of a couple of dozen (wildly) variant spellings for “sexton” cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, only one usage begins with “six”—this one.

And if it’s a printer’s error, it’s an outrageous one, not in keeping with the overall care displayed in the rest of the Folio. A subtler error, one of punctuation, might explain it better, and a slight correction might clarify it: Hamlet asks how long he’s been a gravedigger, and eighteen lines later the gravedigger replies: “I have been sixteen [years?] here—man and boy, thirty years.” By this reading the gravedigger, not Hamlet, is thirty, and he’s been living near Elsinore his whole life. His apprenticeship in the trade started at the normal time, about age fourteen.

Counting on the Gravedigger

Even the gravedigger puts the lie to these thirty-year lines, in another of his oddly intrusive date statements. Immediately after the sexton/sixeteene line, Hamlet asks him, “How long will a man lie i’ th’ earth ere he rot?”

“Eight or nine year,” answers the gravedigger (in all three versions). “A tanner will last you nine year”(5.1.70).

Not thirty lines later, with Yorick’s skull in hand, Hamlet comments that his “gorge rises” and he asks Horatio if Alexander’s skull was similar: “And smelt so? pah!” (5.1.80, 84). If a buried corpse decays in nine years, would it reek with the play’s ubiquitous decay after 23? Hamlet is not complaining of the smell of freshly dug earth here. And Yorick was not a tanner, after all. He can’t have been in the ground more than a dozen years. This little date-laden interchange is directly between the two lines that, in the accepted text, so insistently set Hamlet’s age at thirty. Something rotten here.

Thirty Dozen Moons

To diverge for a moment from the graveyard: There are two other items in the play that strongly suggest Hamlet is thirty – the *Murder of Gonzago* play, and an offhand comment by Gertrude in the swordfight scene.

Gonzago opens with the Player King’s “Full thirty times hath Phoebus’ cart gone round/.../And thirty dozen moons.../About the world have times twelve thirties been,/Since love our hearts and Hymen did our hands/Unite comutual in most sacred bands” (3.2.102).

Since the Player King and Queen are clearly representations of Old Hamlet and Gertrude, this repetitive insistence on thirty years (plus thirty days) since their marriage is hard to ignore in light of the gravedigger’s words. Some critics have discounted it as mere formula-speak, but the insistence on thirty years is undeniably there, and you can’t just ignore its echo in the gravedigger’s lines.

Like the gravedigger’s thirty-year statements, though, this snippet doesn’t appear in Q1. The Player King says, “Full fortie yeares are past, their date is gone,/Since happy time ioynd both our hearts as one” (Q1:2023). This thirty-year parallel tastes of the many direct echoes that pepper the play; it’s likely to have been composed—whenever it was composed—with the gravedigger’s lines in mind.

The only other item that suggests Hamlet is beyond his youth – Gertrude’s comment during the swordfight that Hamlet is “fat and scant of breath” (5.2.222)—doesn’t appear in Q1, and it just reeks of a rewrite for a huffing [actor Richard] Burbage that would draw a laugh from the pit. It’s also a grim echo, in this death scene, of Hamlet’s “we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots” (4.3.26).

If all we had were the discrepancies between the two gravedigger’s statements in the Q1 and F1/Q2 editions, it would be easy to attribute them to numerical error by the Q1 reporter. But of the four items in

the text that set Hamlet's age at thirty (two by the gravedigger, one by the player king, and one by Gertrude) all are missing from or contradicted by Q1. The most telling is undercut with ambiguity in F1, and all are contradicted by the gravedigger himself.

Noble Dust of Alexander

Only two dozen lines after the gravedigger's thirty-year references, Hamlet conjures up some of the most haunting imagery of the scene: "Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander...." (5.1.86). Alexander's name is repeated like an incantation, five times in a dozen lines. And a dozen lines later, Hamlet invokes "Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay...." (5.1.89).

Consider: Alexander led his father's armies into battle at sixteen. He became king at nineteen, following his father's murder. And by the time he died at age thirty-one, he had conquered the known world. Caesar, likewise, was thrust into the machinations of power after his father's death, at age sixteen, and was leading men into battle at eighteen.

Alexander's life was common Elizabethan fare, and London theatergoers had been treated to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* multiple times in the years preceding *Hamlet*'s release. The parallel between young Hamlet and those warlike young sovereigns – lodged here in the scene that so consciously and repeatedly sets times, durations, and ages – is more than suggestive. Certainly the classics-battered Oxford and Cambridge students and graduates would have copped to it.

Fortinbras: The Delicate and Tender Prince

Speaking of young warriors, let's look to Fortinbras. We know (as we know most things, from the gravedigger) that young Hamlet was born on the day old Hamlet slew old Fortinbras in single combat (5.1.57). Fortinbras must have been conceived before that day, or he'd be hard-pressed to claim his princehood. So he is at most nine months Hamlet's junior. Ignore Professor Bloom's reference to "the younger Fortinbras." If Hamlet's thirty, Fortinbras is thirty or older.

But of the eight times in the play that Fortinbras is mentioned by name, in four of them he is called "young Fortinbras." This of a prince whose namesake father died at least seventeen years ago. Of the four instances remaining, in one Fortinbras is referring to himself; in another he's just been called 'young Fortinbras.'

Fortinbras is still under his ailing uncle's thumb; he and his army are brought up with a round turn after Claudius's embassy to old Norway via Voltmand and Cornelius: "...he sent out to suppress/His nephew's levies...sends out arrests/On Fortinbras, which he, in brief, obeys,/Receives rebuke from Norway, and in fine,/Makes vow before his uncle..." (2.2.69).

Even more telling, in his "How all occasions do inform against me" soliloquy, as Hamlet watches Fortinbras's scrounged-together army pass through Denmark, Hamlet refers to Fortinbras as "a delicate and tender prince" (4.4.53).

Now consider that Hamlet is speaking of a roughshod, warlike young prince. Horatio tells us that Fortinbras, "Of unimproved mettle hot and full,/Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there/Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute/For food and diet..." (1.1.113). He's leading twenty thousand troops to "gain a little patch of ground/That hath in it no profit but the name," (4.4.22) to "fight for a plot/Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,/Which is not tomb enough and continent/To hide the slain" (4.4.67).

If this warlike Fortinbras were 30, even 25, even 21 –in full beard and strength of arms–would Hamlet describe him as "a delicate and tender prince"? Fortinbras has got to be 17. And if he's 17, so is Hamlet.

The Morn and Liquid Dew of Youth

Fortinbras isn't the only one who's spoken of as a young man. Horatio, Laertes, Polonius, the ghost, all refer to Hamlet as a youth. Hamlet even does it himself. Here are the main examples:

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| Horatio to Bernardo and Marcellus | "Let us impart what we have seen tonight/Unto young Hamlet." 1.1.189 |
| Laertes to Ophelia | "For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,/Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,/A violet in the youth of primy nature;" 1.3.8 |
| Polonius to Ophelia | "he is young" 1.3.132 |
| Ghost to Hamlet | "I could a tale unfold whose lightest word/Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood," 1.5.21 "but know, thou noble youth,/The serpent that did sting thy father's life,/Now wears his crown." 1.5.45 |
| Claudius to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern | "being of so young days brought up with him,/And sith so neighbour'd to his youth and havior," 2.2.13 |
| Hamlet to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern | "let me conjure you, by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth," 2.2.246 |
| Claudius | "This mad young man" 4.1.22 |

Every reference to Hamlet in the play that refers to age casts him as a youth. Laertes, Ophelia, and Osric, likewise, are repeatedly referred to as youths. (I won't bother you with all those citations, though they're easily compiled.)

Hamlet the Student

All these references to Hamlet's youth aren't surprising; we find out in his first scene that he's a student at Wittenberg, "intent in going back to school" (1.2.116). The student theme is a constant throughout the play – in Hamlet's relationship to Horatio, to his "schoolfellows" (3.4.224) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to Laertes, even in his banter with the players.

If nothing else in the play convinced us, this in itself should make clear that Hamlet is a teen. The reference to Wittenberg is anachronistic – it was a center of learning in Shakespeare's time, not Hamlet's – but whichever period you're referring to, princes didn't go to school at age thirty. In 400 years, no critic has given a reasonable explanation that I've found of why a 30-year-old Hamlet would still be a student.

How Many Years Hath Hamlet the Play?

Some critics have tried to explain the student discrepancy by suggesting that the duration of the play is thirteen years. But the text of the play makes this impossible.

- When the play opens, Hamlet tells us that old Hamlet is "but two months dead." (1.2.142).
- In the mousetrap scene, Ophelia says old Hamlet has been dead "twice two months" (3.2.83). So two more months have passed. Hamlet leaves immediately for England (after excoriating his mother and disposing of Polonius).

- When Claudius is conscripting Laertes into his plot to kill Hamlet, he says that Lamord, a gentleman of Normandy, had spoken highly of Laertes' swordsmanship "in Hamlet's hearing...two months since" (4.7.79, 89). So Hamlet has been gone on his sea voyage less than two months when he returns in the very next (graveyard) scene – at most six months after his father's death, or four months from the beginning of the play.

- Multiple references in the text show that it's less than a day between Hamlet's return in the graveyard scene and the swordfight.

So the action spans four months at most. Hamlet has developed in those four months, but he sure hasn't turned thirty.

Amleth and the Ur-Hamlet

Given that Shakespeare lifted the basic plot of his play from earlier sources (as T. S. Eliot said, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal"), it's worth looking at those sources to see how old the prince is.

Shakespeare's main source, directly or indirectly, was the Amleth story in F. de Belleforest's five-volume French publication, *Le Cinquiesme Tome des Histoires Tragique*, published in France between 1570 and 1582. That story was in turn borrowed from the Dutch historian Saxo Grammaticus's Latin *Gesta Danorum*, written circa 1200 and published in 1514. In Belleforest's version, the prince is not a man yet.

But there is a good chance that Shakespeare did not read Belleforest's French version—that he took the story from an earlier and now lost play which scholars call the *Ur-Hamlet*, usually attributed to playwright Thomas Kyd. The *Ur-Hamlet* was based on Belleforest, and we know from contemporary references that it was played by Shakespeare's company and perhaps others between 1589 and early 1600. It's possible that the *Ur-Hamlet* playwright changed the hero's age from pre-adult to 30, and that Shakespeare adopted that when he wrote his play, but there's no reason to think that happened.

The Question of Character

So there's all sorts of evidence in and surrounding the play showing that Hamlet is a teen. But beyond all this "hard" evidence, there's Hamlet's character. In addition to being brilliant, noble, eloquent, and all those other things we love about him, at least until the final act he's naïve ("meet it is I set it down/That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!" (1.5.115), peevish, petulant, wildly changeable from moment to moment, maddeningly and intransigently judgmental, and a shallow philosopher who actually believes he can solve the eternal human problems that nobody else has succeeded at. If that's not a teenager, what is?

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Homework Questions

(Answer on loose-leaf in complete sentences.)

1. What reasons are given to support the argument that Hamlet is 30 years old?
2. What reasons are given to support the argument that he is a teenager?
3. What do you think? Explain.
4. Does it matter how the reader/viewer perceives Hamlet's age? How, if at all, does it change our understanding of the play?