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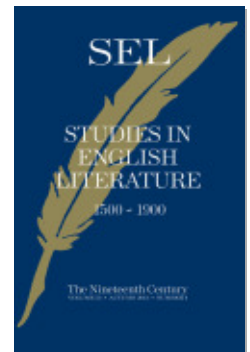
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Making “Young Hamlet”

MATTHEW HARKINS

The stereotype is a political fact, the major figure of ideology.

—Roland Barthes¹

How old is Hamlet, and why does it matter? If the first question echoes the literal-minded curiosity of both A. C. Bradley and A. A. Jack, the second question recalls more recent investigations of youth's thematic significance for the play.² In pairing *The Tragedy of King Lear* with *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Alexander Welsh remarks that one play reveals “pity for the old and the other for the young,” explaining that “*Hamlet* shows how wretched it is to await power that only accrues from the death of parents.”³ Barbara Everett similarly argues that Hamlet's youth matters as an expression of the unenviable position of the young who “had, or resentfully wished not to have, a place in sixteenth-century society.”⁴ Yet Welsh's and Everett's observations raise as many questions as they answer, for *Hamlet* reveals young men denied power even *after* the death of their fathers: Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras are deliberately coded as young in order to deny them mature status and prolong their subservience. Further, in describing the limitations placed on early modern youth, Everett points to restrictive and stereotyped roles rather than the criteria and cultural processes that decided who fit into these roles. Recognizing early modern conventions of youth still leaves unsolved the problem of how to read young men such as Hamlet in relation to them. Put simply, the mystery of Hamlet's age raises a broader conceptual question about the social constructions of youth: what does it mean to call Hamlet young?

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When Horatio refers to “young Hamlet” at the close of the play’s first scene, he distinguishes between a father and son with the same name.⁵ But beyond differentiating between generations, calling someone “young” becomes more complicated. “Young” and “old” are relative descriptors, adjectives that stem from and point to a series of social relations among people whose ages may fall anywhere on a gradual continuum. To split this continuum into discrete parts and characterize these parts in different ways is an inherently political act. While received customs and traditions mask the ideological implications of such acts, to naturalize such divisions as self-evident allows an individual or social group both to obscure and to capitalize on their political significance. Gabriel Harvey’s notes on *Hamlet*—the earliest written criticism of the play—illustrate the processes and effects of this phenomenon perfectly: “the younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeares Venus & Adonis: but his Lucrece, & his tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke, haue it in them, to please the wiser sort.”⁶ Here, critical response splits neatly into two camps: “the younger” and “the wiser.” Harvey does not worry about maintaining the consistency of his parallelism. Rather, he falls back on a binary understanding of social order that might seem self-evident to a politically connected pedagogue in his fifties: youth is the opposite of wisdom. Furthermore, this convenient pairing bolsters Harvey’s taste and critical authority, establishing his approval of the play as wise by virtue of the very distinction it makes.

This essay argues that *Hamlet* itself investigates the cultural logic underpinning such political maneuvers. While youth’s subordinate position in *Hamlet* has played a vital role within the play’s critical tradition, this tradition has not questioned the ideological processes that create “youth” as a social category—that define what youth means, whom it includes, and why.⁷ As Harvey’s example shows, dividing a society into two groups on the basis of age both creates and conceals a series of complex social assumptions. Rather than portray an archetypal contest between the young and the old or Hamlet’s developmental progression from youth to maturity, the play examines the production and application of these categories as political phenomena. By exposing the circumscribed logic that produces these categories, *Hamlet* fractures ideological justifications for early modern constructions of youth and age.

I

The subordination of youth played a key part in constituting early modern political authority. Keith Thomas outlines the fundamental ideological tenets: “[T]he young were to serve and the old were to rule . . . Children had powers of memory and imagination; young men were capable of vigour, eloquence, and invention; but only the mature had judgement, practical wisdom, and self-mastery.”⁸ This brief summary illustrates a critical taxonomic tension. Three distinct categories—children, young men, and “the mature”—provide a rich description of different social assets, but such nuances fall away in the distribution of authority. The tripartite division resolves into a binary between young and old—and young men fall onto the wrong side of the dividing line. Thomas’s passage also offers a glimpse of how “old” evades pejorative descriptors: the “old” are actually “the mature.” The older group consolidate cultural power by defining themselves in positive terms: if they are old, then old, by definition, must be good. The older group thus equal, in Thomas’s words, “the mature” or, in Harvey’s, “the wiser sort.”

Within a society that afforded such privilege to age, it was clearly preferable to be perceived as having passed from youth to maturity. Yet the dividing line between these two states could be difficult to pin down. In his review of conflicting cultural and legal traditions at the end of the seventeenth century, Henry Swinburne explained, “[c]hildren therefore, in respect of their Age, are so termed of some, until they be twice Seven years old (a); of some till they be thrice seven years old, that is One and twenty (b), sometimes until they be of the Age of Eighteen (d), sometimes until they be Twenty (e), and sometimes until they be Five and twenty (f) according to the variety of the subjected Matter and Meaning of the Author.”⁹ This substantive variation illustrates how either a particular writer’s motives or basic differences of opinion and custom complicate the notion of a universally acknowledged transition point between youth and maturity. Of course more sophisticated schemes of the ages existed—such as Jaques’s seven ages of man—but were commonly subsumed by a conflicting desire to reduce this complexity in the interest of manipulating cultural power.¹⁰

Thomas has noted that long apprenticeships were designed to restrict economic competition from the young but that these restrictions tended to be justified through pejorative definitions of youth: “‘Until a man grow unto the age of twenty-four years,’

ran the famous defence of the statute of artificers, 'he . . . is wild, without judgment and not of sufficient experience to govern himself.'"¹¹ But even this period of enforced subordination could not be counted upon to mark the end of youth. Many emancipated apprentices faced restrictions that could keep them from practicing independently until the age of thirty. Similarly, while the legal age affecting the majority of men—twenty-one—provided another fixed point of reference, young men in court still found their maturity challenged by older men who sought to control them far into their twenties. Roger Ascham in particular suggested that the young between the ages of seventeen and twenty-seven needed at least as much governing as those youths aged between seven and seventeen.¹²

To categorize men in their mid- to late twenties as "youths" was frequently a means of infantilizing potential economic and political competitors. Additionally, simplifying the gradations of the human lifespan into binary categories of youth and age and manipulating the boundaries separating those categories allowed for the political subordination of a steadily growing percentage of the population. An analysis of England's population shows numbers of youth at a "peak in 1576, and a sustained rise until 1621" as young people "became more visible."¹³ This demographic shift brought the political consequences of defining youth into sharper focus. The latter years of Elizabeth's reign saw growing numbers of aging "youths" disenfranchised by older males who retained office and authority for far longer than had been customary.¹⁴ By both shifting the boundaries of youth and then coding youth as ignorant, rash, frivolous, or rebellious, older men could justify keeping political power from younger men who might otherwise have been deemed mature adults. Such acts of political aggression could be masked by the assumption that nothing unusual was happening, that this social tension produced at a particular historical and cultural moment was only "natural"—a timeless pattern only the young and foolish would question.

It is this particular historical tension that foregrounds Claudius's political ascendancy and Hamlet's startling disinheritance in the play's second scene. Claudius sidesteps the possibility that a man with a dead father would be ready to assume his patrimony, that the prince would no longer be a youth but a king.¹⁵ No early modern audience member would consider a young man at university, let alone the thirty-year-old of the play's final act, too young to inherit a kingdom.¹⁶ Yet Claudius proceeds as if the heir's immaturity were self-evident, disrupting Hamlet's lawful

succession by presenting the governing of Denmark as the business of controlling immature youth. Young Fortinbras holds “a weak supposal” exacerbated by a “dream of his advantage”; his inexperience and poor judgment lead him to exasperatingly juvenile behavior—in Claudius’s words, “to pester us” (I.ii.18, 21, 22). Norway’s problems stem from an “impotent and bedred” king who, in his infirmity, has neglected to control young men as sharply as he should (I.ii.29). Claudius essentially presents the military threat of foreign invasion as the predictable problem of a rash youth who forgets his place. Laertes, in turn, provides Claudius with a different sort of useful comparison. Lavishing the young Dane with attention, the new king asks three times what favor he might grant, explaining,

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.

(I.ii.47–9)

Unlike Fortinbras, Laertes knows his place: a properly subordinate youth whose privileges derive from his father’s usefulness to the state.¹⁷ To be young is to be dependent; only the mature, such as Polonius or Claudius, can govern properly.

Before Hamlet has even spoken a word, Claudius ignores the pressing political topic of usurpation, shifting to more advantageous ideological ground: the dangers presented by unruly youths and the necessity of keeping them mastered.¹⁸ In grouping Hamlet with Fortinbras and Laertes, Claudius claims Hamlet is no more than a youth. As such he has only two options: to be unruly or to be subordinate. Hamlet subversively shifts the conversation back to kinship, false appearances, and inheritance (with the punning “sun” [I.ii.67]): all topics that directly bear on the new king’s illegitimacy.¹⁹ Claudius responds by infantilizing Hamlet with renewed vigor, directly attacking any notion of his rival’s maturity:

to persever
In obstinate condolment is a course
Of impious stubbornness, ’tis unmanly grief,
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
An understanding simple and unschool’d.

(I.ii.92–7)

Claudius turns Hamlet's resistance to the trap spread before him into yet another trap. Since he remains so disaffected as to refuse the two stereotyped roles embodied by Fortinbras and Laertes, this refusal itself proves the prince's immaturity. Hamlet's grief is "unmanly," revealing the impatience and "simple" "understanding" of an "unschool'd" youth. Hamlet's resistance to both subordinate roles, as Claudius would argue, only proves how young and unready he is to rule.

Claudius reveals the subtle power available to an older man who understands how to deploy these stereotypes of youth. What could be controversial about stressing Laertes' subordination to Polonius, especially since both reap lavish praise in the process? Who would resist pejorative descriptions of an invading warlord? Characterizing Fortinbras as a troublesome but feckless youth has the additional effect of establishing a comforting paradigm for his actions—a mature man such as Claudius can put him back in his subordinate place—while simultaneously suggesting the danger Fortinbras poses can only be met by such a man. These stereotypes of youth thus construct the ideological rationale Claudius needs in order to consolidate his rule—and this rationale, once established, leaves no place for Hamlet to construct his own political authority. In appealing to ideological assumptions about the propriety of age controlling youth, Claudius portrays these assumptions as self-evident as nature's "common theme": "death of fathers." But there is nothing natural about Hamlet's disinheritance. Only by distorting cultural paradigms of youth and age can Claudius normalize his usurpation.

II

In listing the crucial elements of a proper comedy, one that upholds and promotes social order, George Whetstone explains, "graue olde men should instruct," and "yonge men should shoue the imperfections of youth."²⁰ This parallelism, with its easy, aphoristic authority, presents early modern conventions of youth and age as an indisputable public good. But in exposing the social effects of such aphorisms, *Hamlet* reveals the interests they serve and the cultural practices that construct and promote such an age-based taxonomy. The comedy outlined by Whetstone describes *Hamlet* as Claudius would like it to be, yet the play debunks the moral logic supporting such an outline: that youth's subordination to age leads to "the confusion of Vice and the cherising of Vertue."²¹ This moral logic presupposes that

“graue olde men” wish to help imperfect “yonge men” achieve a mature public authority. In *Hamlet*, however, older men employ Whetstone’s design not to train their younger counterparts for mature roles; instead, they manipulate the juncture of age and authority expressly to keep these younger men from reaching a publicly acknowledged adulthood.²²

Laertes, for instance, dutifully fulfills his appointed role as the “good youth” of act I, scene ii, assuming that his obedience to the age-based social order will help him make a definitive and public shift from youth to maturity. Cognizant of the role his elders play in permitting this transition, he pays close attention to opportunities for advancement. Claudius exhorts him, “Take thy fair hour . . . time be thine,” while as a final blessing, Polonius declares, “The time invests you” (I.iii.62, 83). This endorsement would clear a path to assume and to develop a new, adult identity in France—and he begins adopting this identity by advising his sister,

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.

(I.iii.5–7)

Not only asserting his maturity by dispensing advice, Laertes deliberately distances himself from the prince’s “youth of primy nature.”²³ As age defends its wisdom in contrast to youth’s folly, Laertes establishes his adult status against Hamlet’s restrictions, blithely outlining youth’s perils as if they only threaten others.

As one of these contrasts, Laertes stresses Hamlet’s “unmast’red importunity” (I.iii.32). In the context of wooing, “importunity” suggests persistent solicitation; yet the theme of youth’s danger underscores the sense of “importunity” as unseasonableness or untimeliness. “Unmast’red” likewise points to a lack of self-control, but also alludes to a young man’s desire to escape elder masters. Like Claudius’s trap in act I, scene ii—framing Hamlet as a subordinate youth no matter what his response—Laertes’ notion of “unmast’red importunity” reveals a prison of mirrors. To be deemed importunate is to be proven a youth who cannot master himself; and yet a youth looking to move past his dependent, mastered state is importunate by definition. Laertes appears to understand that young men in this trap are defined pejoratively for political contrast. In the binary juxtaposition of youth against age, youth’s shortcomings provide a foil for age’s

assets; in zero-sum fashion, youth’s loss equals age’s gain. Laertes shrewdly makes use of this comparative structure by putting Hamlet in the trap he himself is trying to escape.

It is no accident that Laertes’ attempt to portray himself apart from youth seems contrived, for the play reveals political interests trumping all other considerations in constructing and deploying “youth” as a social category. If Laertes manipulates and applies the term for his own purposes, so too does his father. Polonius shows little inclination to help Laertes develop a mature identity, preferring instead to create an image of his son as a reckless youth. Instructing Reynaldo how to spy on Laertes, he explains,

POLONIUS. put on him
 What forgeries you please: marry, none so rank
 As may dishonor him, take heed of that,
 But, sir, such wanton, wild, and usual slips
 As are companions noted and most known
 To youth and liberty.
 REYNALDO. As gaming, my lord.
 POLONIUS. Ay, or drinking, fencing, swearing, quarreling,
 Drabbing—you may go so far.
(II.i.19–26)

The great danger of such “wanton, wild” behavior lies in its potential to cripple one’s public image. This cavalier approach to youthful “slips” runs counter to the entire ethos of early modern pedagogical texts; it also stands in stark contrast to the cautious parting advice Polonius offers in act I, scene iii.²⁴ Laertes explains that the young have particularly vulnerable reputations:

Virtue itself scapes not calumnious strokes

 And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
 Contagious blastments are most imminent.
(I.iii.38–42)

Knowing this danger, it would be possible to imagine Polonius trying to learn whether Laertes engages in behavior that must be curbed. But the logical justification for this inquiry circles back on itself: to keep Laertes from giving himself a bad reputation, Polonius essentially gives Laertes a bad reputation.²⁵

Reynaldo’s horrified response draws attention to the ways this calumny imperils the younger man. Reynaldo twice tries to

reason with Polonius: “that would dishonor him,” he first warns and then breaks in with a troubled interjection (II.i.27). When Polonius finally ventriloquizes Reynaldo’s question—“Wherefore should you do this?”—the servant breathes a sigh of relief: “Ay, my lord, / I would know that” (II.i.27, 36–7). Polonius only partly answers Reynaldo’s question:

POLONIUS. Having ever seen in the prenominate crimes
The youth you breathe of guilty, be assur’d
He closes with you in this consequence:
“Good sir,” or so, or “friend,” or “gentleman,”
According to the phrase or the addition
Of man and country.

REYNALDO. Very good, my lord.

POLONIUS. And then, sir, does’a this—a does—what was
I about to say?

By the mass, I was about to say something.

Where did I leave?

REYNALDO. At “closes in the consequence.”

(II.i.43–51)

Either unwilling or unable to understand “Wherefore” as “why” rather than “in what way,” he gives Reynaldo a method for slandering Laertes rather than a reason. Polonius’s odd break in concentration at lines 49–51 suggests he himself cannot follow the logic of his instructions. Tellingly, Reynaldo does not prompt Polonius with his last spoken line; his “Very good, my lord” suggests as well a desire to skip the minor details of a particular country’s honorifics. Reynaldo invites Polonius to consider the critical issue at hand: how will this instance of speculative slander “close”? What will be its ultimate “consequence”?

Polonius reinscribes his son within a dangerous subject position he has tried to discard, imagining Laertes as a reckless and wild stereotype in order to reinforce his subordinate status as a youth. As in Laertes’ depiction of Hamlet, Polonius’s depiction of Laertes generates a self-serving contrast; in constructing a young, reckless foil, the speaker inhabits the privileged role of maturity. Even when Polonius admits to misdiagnosing Hamlet’s behavior, he mitigates his error by comparing age to youth:

By heaven, it is as proper to our age
To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions,

As it is common for the younger sort
To lack discretion.

(II.i.111–4)

An old man's mistakes are "proper," while a youth's are afforded no similarly recuperative adjective—they are merely "common." In effect, Polonius licenses his own mistakes; they are unfortunate but understandable.

But such license implies that an old man's wisdom will serve a larger purpose. Polonius, however, abandons the ideologically sanctioned aim of transforming reckless youth into a wise maturity—the pedagogical basis underlying Whetstone's praise for "the confusion of Vice and the cherishing of Vertue." Instead, Polonius turns the deferential and dutiful Laertes into a creature of vice with only the thinnest of moral justifications:

thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out.

(II.i.61–3)

Just as he comprehends Reynaldo's "wherefore" as "how" rather than "why," Polonius turns his final opportunity to explain why a father would slander his son into an account of how such slander reifies his mature authority. Earlier in the play, the shock of Claudius's usurpation draws attention to the manipulations of youth and age that make his transgression possible; the shock Reynaldo expresses at Polonius's plan emphasizes a similarly startling transgression. In his willingness to sacrifice his son's reputation to bolster his own, Polonius unwittingly reveals that an older man's "wisdom" and "reach" serve no larger purpose than to perpetuate themselves, that no credible moral principle supports the early modern ideology of age.²⁶

As both a supporter and a victim of the play's taxonomy of age, it is only appropriate that Laertes himself offers the clearest expression of its ideological incoherence. His warning to Ophelia about Hamlet's unmastered importunity and the dangers of youth ends with the cryptic aphorism: "Youth to itself rebels, though none else near" (I.iii.44). One reading of this line might be as follows: youth needs no compelling external force to rebel against, for a young person will rebel naturally against his better nature or best interest. For instance, Laertes cautions Ophelia, "keep you in the rear of your affection," imagining a dangerous

sort of internal rebellion that might be particularly common to youth (I.iii.34). He also may be condemning Hamlet's resistance to the youthful role Claudius offers him, a resistance that simply illustrates the predictably rebellious nature of young men. Both of these readings cohere with conventional stereotypes of youth and the general theme of Laertes' advice: unmastered impetuosity must submit to mature caution.

Yet the equivocal syntax of Laertes' statement—"Youth to itself rebels"—prevents any definitive gloss. Additionally, the phrase gestures far beyond the immediate meaning Laertes intends it to have, foreshadowing the rebellious strife between those presented as "youth." Ophelia finds herself used as a tool against Hamlet, while Laertes, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern connive against the prince more directly. Hamlet, in turn, sends the two old friends to their deaths, abandons Ophelia, and wrongs both brother and sister by killing Polonius. Those circumscribed within their roles as "youth" stand ready to betray those deemed their peers. But Laertes' peculiar aphorism points to his own predicament as well. He accepts the ideological split between youth and age in the hopes of putting it to his own use—by situating himself in mature contrast to the young Hamlet. But no matter how much sage advice he imparts, he cannot talk his way out of his subordinate role. Indeed, Laertes' very didacticism constitutes a claim of maturity, illustrating the notion "Youth to itself rebels" from an entirely different angle. With this phrase, Laertes rebels against his status as a youth, ironically denying his youthful nature by warning against youth's tendency to deny its own nature.

Laertes' acceptance of this age/youth dichotomy traps him in a paradigm he never manages to control. After his father's death—the moment when, as heir, his mature authority would be most assured—he deems himself ready to grapple with the king as an equal. But Claudius ensnares him, calling him a man even as he prompts Laertes to question his own maturity.²⁷ Having accepted the stereotype that youth recklessly rebels—as a matter of course and without cause—Laertes could not be more vulnerable. If Laertes wants to be a man, suggests the king, he should act like one—not like the foolishly rebellious young Hamlet. Seeming to take Laertes' uprising in stride, Claudius treats Laertes as a man who should know better, who rebels with no reason like a peevish youth: "What is the cause, Laertes," cries the king, "That thy rebellion looks so giant-like?" (IV.v.121–2).

III

It is a commonplace that Hamlet too returns to Denmark a changed figure, riper, more mature.²⁸ The graveyard scene reveals him to be thirty years old, and while the apparent incongruity between this age and Hamlet's role as a student has raised critical eyebrows, many have resolved this discrepancy by imagining it as symbolic of the prince's coming of age. This traditional understanding of Hamlet's newfound maturity likewise takes the statement—"This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (V.i.257-8)—as evidence of the prince's fresh understanding of himself as an adult. Having put away youthful antics, he finally has developed into a full-grown man, ready for the tragic paradox of his maturity: "Young Hamlet grows up and grows dead in the same instant."²⁹

But Hamlet does not turn from an adolescent undergraduate to a thirty-year-old over the course of five acts. The "discovery" of his age, rather, highlights the simple fact that the prince's maturity has been constant throughout the play. Thirty is the farthest reach of what might conceivably be classified as youth in early modern England, and Claudius has labored to establish Hamlet as a youth from the play's beginning. Yet, in scene after scene, Hamlet discards conventions about youth that are meant to construct a circumscribed, subordinate role. He says in accepting his role as revenger,

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there.

(I.v.99-101)

Polonius's conviction that Hamlet's madness fits a simple stereotype—"in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this" (II.ii.189-91)—meets a prince more than able to neutralize the force of the older man's adages. "That great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling clouts," he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, countering Polonius's aphoristic critiques of youth with a counter maxim Rosencrantz develops further: "they say an old man is twice a child" (II.ii.385, 382-3). Gertrude's passion for Claudius prompts Hamlet to unravel flattering ideological constructions of age from yet a different angle: "Rebellious hell, / If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones, / To flaming youth let virtue be as wax" (III.iv.82-4). Even the Ghost, the one older figure Hamlet, the revenge hero, would be most likely to trust

completely, cannot secure the unreserved dominance of a father. Hamlet questions the Ghost's authority and motives and in the closet scene explains that he himself must proceed without interference: "Do not look upon me, / Lest with this piteous action you convert / My stern effects" (III.iv.127–9). Hamlet responds to the age-based stereotypes that Claudius, Polonius, and even Laertes employ by emptying them of meaning. The mature have no particular wisdom; the young have no monopoly on recklessness. Whereas Laertes accepts the simple age/youth binary, hoping to bend this system to his will, Hamlet aims to confound the system altogether, knowing it is meant to tie his hands.

In saying "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane," Hamlet makes no new claim for maturity. He reminds the court, rather, who he is and who he has been throughout the play—the rightful King of Denmark—since the moment his father died. Elsinore has been a place of waiting rather than of growing. The oppression of this prison is best measured by the fact that Hamlet deems "madness" a preferable social role to "youth."³⁰ Tellingly, madness proves easier to jettison than youth; Hamlet shrugs off the stigma of his chosen subordinate position with breathtaking ease: "What I have done / That might your nature, honour, and exception / Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness" (V.ii.231–3). Being "mad" involves inhabiting a dangerously subordinate social position as well, but it does not require submitting to Claudius's judgment of his own immaturity.

By contrast, Laertes' acquiescence to this judgment prevents him from ever escaping it. Ready to avenge himself upon Claudius, the young man casts himself as an emblem of maturity, supporting his father's friends "like the kind life-rend'ring pelican" who feeds its young (IV.v.147). But the king deftly substitutes the image of a pelican with one more ambiguous; he describes Laertes instead as "a good child and a true gentleman" (IV.v.149). When forced to enlist Laertes in a new plan to kill Hamlet, he asks, "Will you be ruled by me?" (IV.vii.60), flattering his new confidant as a mature peer who must be convinced rather than a youth who can be commanded. Yet Claudius shifts his stance moment by moment, accepting Laertes' claims of adulthood only to ensure the young man's investment in the ideological split between youth and age. Once reinforced, this dichotomy can be put to its proper use: Claudius neatly places Laertes back in his subordinate place. His new partner's fencing skills are no more than a vanity—"A very riband in the cap of youth" (IV.vii.78). Yet they are also natural—a "needful" counterpart to the gravity of

age. Laertes succumbs to this reconditioning so completely that it determines his response to Hamlet's apology:

I am satisfied in nature,
Whose motive in this case should stir me most
To my revenge, but in my terms of honor
I stand aloof, and will no reconciliation
Till by some elder masters of known honor
I have a voice and president of peace
To keep my name ungor'd.

(V.ii.245–51)

Willing to take Hamlet at his word, Laertes nonetheless takes every precaution to prevent "elder masters" from criticizing his behavior.³¹ The play has come full circle for Laertes; unable to act without Claudius's approval, he's left to play his familiar subordinate role:

LAERTES. My lord, I'll hit him now.
KING. I do not think't.
LAERTES. [*Aside*] And yet it is almost against my conscience.
HAMLET. Come, for the third, Laertes, you do but dally.
I pray you pass with your best violence;
I am sure you make a wanton of me.
LAERTES. Say you so? Come on. [*They play*]
OSRIC. Nothing, neither way.
LAERTES. Have at you now.

(V.ii.295–302)

Laertes appeals to Claudius, looking for permission to stop the plot. But by responding in the public role he has adopted as Hamlet's supporter—"I do not think't" he scoffs—Claudius signals that the match must continue. Ultimately, Hamlet's own words set his death in motion. "I am sure you make a wanton of me," claims the prince, aware no doubt of his opponent's limited efforts. Yet Laertes' tortured struggle for maturity brings him to the breaking point as he realizes the adulthood Claudius offers necessitates, paradoxically, that he continue to submit to an elder master. By raising the image of "a wanton"—a spoiled, undisciplined boy—Hamlet unwittingly mocks a subject that could not be more sensitive or more dangerous.

Neither Hamlet nor Laertes returns to the Court changed by a newfound maturity; it is the Court, rather, that has changed around them. Stripped of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Polonius—the young men and the old who upheld Claudius’s usurpation—Elsinore’s political landscape lies in shambles.³² The “impetuous haste” of “young Laertes” points to the instability of the age-based ideology that supports Claudius’s rule.³³ The king’s messenger explains that it seems as if “the world were now but to begin” with “Antiquity forgot, custom not known, / The ratifiers and props of every word” (IV.v.104, 105–6). Yet such is the very world Claudius creates by disrupting the “Antiquity” and “custom” that makes Hamlet the legitimate heir. In privileging one cultural system over another—a hierarchy of age over the custom of lineal succession—Claudius usurps a kingdom by usurping an ideology. The messenger’s description of antiquity and custom as “[t]he ratifiers and props of every word” actually reverses the order of Claudius’s political maneuvers. By careful manipulation of key words and phrases—by calling Hamlet young and then defining what young means—Claudius ratifies and props up a key principle of early modern political authority. But by debunking the logic behind this authority and by linking it to Claudius’s criminal enterprise, the play defamiliarizes conventional value judgments of age and youth, opening them up to cultural critique.

If the power of an ideology rests in its broad social acceptance, *Hamlet* focuses on local moments in which cultural stereotypes and assumptions fall apart. In so doing, the play gestures toward alternative ways of thinking about the social significance of age. Brian Melbancke, a student of the Inns of Court, exemplifies the sort of audience that might have been attuned particularly to such an enterprise. In the preface to his *Philotimus: The Warre betwixt Nature and Fortune*, Melbancke reveals a careful challenge to reductive and politically useful constructions of youth and age that an older man such as Harvey would deem merely self-evident. Melbancke explains,

I know that ventrous VWill doth neuer saile surely, vwhere practiced skill doth not hold the Helme, and that brain-sick youth doth neuer raigne vvel, vwhere settled age doth not bear the Bridle, and that it is more meete for my vnmellovved yeeres to be employed in the studie of Phylosophicall axiones, then take upon them to instruct others in literature.

Yet haue I tried that the yongest pullet is both toothsome and vwholsom, and that the timeliest haruest makes the best bread; novv adayes, that Parrat is very yong that vwill not prattle, and that Cock very bad that crowes not till his age: the yong cat cries mevv as well as the old one, and youthfull Aristippus vwill be regardant to Phylosophy, asvwell as old Plato is a professor of VWisdom.³⁴

Melbancke acknowledges the cultural conventions that keep young men such as himself subordinate, but he tempers these conventions of what he should “know” with wisdom from his own experiences: “Yet haue I tried.” Rather than contest his position as a youth, he chooses to redefine what that position might mean. But perhaps even more importantly, this passage refrains from simply reversing cultural polarities, from attacking age in order to champion youth. Melbancke offers a more nuanced, less polarized view of the distribution of wisdom along the continuum of lived experience. A similarly evenhanded view emerges from the conclusion of *Hamlet*. The foppish young Osric is a perfect stereotype, but his absurdities make him a foil to Hamlet; he shows all too clearly just how poorly Hamlet fits the conventions on which Claudius relies. Young Fortinbras, in turn, proves less rash than supposed—an able and respected commander—while Horatio remains the same thoughtful companion he has been throughout the whole play.³⁵ To reduce these young men to the simple roles afforded them by the dominant age-based ideology is to construct a “natural” order that is far less evident than early modern stereotypes of age and youth would suggest. In questioning the inevitability of this order, the play also questions its wisdom. Whetstone argues that these received notions of “graue olde men” and the “imperfections of youth” are part of the salutary social order celebrated by comedy. *Hamlet* reveals that they belong to tragedy.

NOTES

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), p. 40.

² A. C. Bradley asserts that, if not for the evidence of a thirty-year-old Hamlet in V.i, his “impression as to Hamlet’s age would be uncertain,” that without this evidence “one would naturally take Hamlet to be a man of about five and twenty” (*Shakespearean Tragedy* [1904; rpt. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992], pp. 363–4). A. A. Jack argues that Shakespeare must have meant Hamlet to be eighteen or nineteen and that he began to see Hamlet

as older when writing the second Quarto (*Young Hamlet* [Aberdeen: Aberdeen Univ. Press, 1950], pp. 147, 153, 148n1).

³ Alexander Welsh, *Hamlet in His Modern Guises* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), p. 14.

⁴ Barbara Everett, *Young Hamlet* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 19.

⁵ Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), I.i.170. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number. References to other plays by Shakespeare are also from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number, and where necessary, the play's title.

⁶ Gabriel Harvey, *Marginalia*, ed. G. C. Moore Smith (Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1913), p. 232.

⁷ Everett cites an elegy for Richard Burbage that "name[s] the actor's great roles as 'young Hamlett, ould Hieronymoe, / Kind Leer, the Greved Moore'—where Hamlet is young as Lear is kind and the Moor grieved" (p. 15). These lines offer a glimpse of the tenacity of these stereotypes, if not the ambiguities surrounding their application. To adopt such terms without regard to such historical contingency, to see *Hamlet* as "the perennial conflict between crabbed age and flaming youth," can elide the play's own interest in these terms (Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959], p. 25).

⁸ Keith Thomas, "Age and Authority in Early Modern England," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 62 (1977): 205–48, 207.

⁹ Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals or Matrimonial Contracts Wherein All the Questions Relating to That Subject Are Ingeniously Debated and Resolved* (London: Robert Clavell, 1686), p. 24; EEBO WING (2d edn.) S6260. For discussions of different early modern opinions about the ages at which "youth" might begin and end, see Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), p. 11; and Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England, 1560–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 21–2.

¹⁰ Bruce R. Smith refers to Henrie Cuffe's *The Differences of the Ages of Man's Life: Together with the Originall Causes, Progresse, and End Thereof* (London: Martin Clearke, 1607) as an example of creating new systems from the old, with Cuffe "combining Aristotle's scheme of three ages with Ptolemy's seven and Galen's four" (*Shakespeare and Masculinity* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000], p. 74). C. John Summerville argues that those Puritan pedagogical treatises that sought to appeal to youth also helped bring about more insight into different developmental stages, such as adolescence (*The Discovery of Childhood in Puritan England* [Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1992], pp. 33–4). Pointing to changing ways of viewing youth over the seventeenth century, Summerville adds that such developments mark a shift from the more rigid, proscriptive conduct books of the Elizabethan Age (pp. 78–80).

¹¹ Thomas, p. 217.

¹² Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, ed. Edward Arber (1570; rpt. Boston: D. C. Heath, 1898), p. 108.

¹³ Griffiths notes that the rise in the younger population is associated by statisticians specifically with the categories "childhood" and "young adulthood" (p. 5).

¹⁴ Anthony Esler, *The Aspiring Mind of the Elizabethan Younger Generation* (Durham NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 136, 141.

¹⁵ Maynard Mack notes that Claudius's correction of Hamlet shows how "traditional wisdom becomes a weapon." I would add that this correction is meant to obscure the tradition of a young man inheriting upon the death of his father with a more politically useful tradition for Claudius: younger men should be subordinate to their elders (*Killing the King* [New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1973], p. 114).

¹⁶ Jack argues for an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old Hamlet, suggesting that "had Hamlet been thirty when his father died, he would have succeeded him without question" (p. 148). More recently, Everett has remarked that Hamlet is presented as an undergraduate to ensure that the audience understands him as young and that as a university student, he would be between sixteen and twenty-three (pp. 17–8). But even if Hamlet were in his late teens, audiences in early modern England would still see him as more than old enough to inherit. Simply put, I agree with J. Dover Wilson's argument that Claudius seizes a throne that Hamlet and the audience would have seen as the prince's—elective monarchy or no (*What Happens in Hamlet* [1935; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967], pp. 26–38).

¹⁷ Harold Jenkins notes the importance of Polonius's permission in this scene as well, though he sees Polonius's regulation of Laertes as wholly benign ("Fortinbras and Laertes and the Composition of *Hamlet*," *Renaissance Studies: In Honor of Carroll Camden* 60, 2 [1974]: 95–108, 96).

¹⁸ Andrew Mousley sees Claudius's maneuvering in this scene as an example of the instability inherent to any "new regime," stressing "a need for the continual construction and re-construction of social order. Order, it seems, is never something which can be relied upon, or which can be established once and for all" ("Hamlet and the Politics of Individualism," in *New Essays on Hamlet*, ed. Mark Thornton Burnett and John Manning [New York: AMS Press, 1994], p. 69). Yet the presence of Hamlet makes Claudius's rule especially vulnerable, and the maturity on which Claudius grounds his rule necessitates a particularly strange framing of Hamlet, as a youth.

¹⁹ In that Hamlet's rejoinder at this moment prompts various interpretive responses, a note about the play's thematic and topical fecundity is in order. I would not suggest that Hamlet's concerns about his surroundings—social, philosophical, and cultural—stem solely from his disinheritance nor that his struggles with the role of "youth" should circumscribe our responses to the play. Terry Eagleton, among many, points to the play's broader inquiries into cultural systems of meaning. He notes that "Hamlet loiters hesitantly on the brink of the 'symbolic order' (the system of allotted sexual and social roles in society), unable and unwilling to take up a determinate position within it. Indeed he spends most of his time eluding whatever social and sexual positions society offers him, whether as chivalric lover, obedient revenger or future king" (*William Shakespeare* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986], p. 71). Considering the specific nature of the "determinate position" of youth Claudius offers Hamlet can provide a more tactile understanding of the play's inquiries into early modern hierarchies of age.

²⁰ George Whetstone, *Dedication to Promos and Cassandra* (London: Richard Jhones, 1578; rpt. in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1904]), 1:58–60, 60. Robert Greene, in his *Repentance of Robert Greene*, describes the dangers of plays that do not uphold proper relations between the young and the old. He laments his production of Euphuistic plays as well as “[t]hese vanities and other trifling Pamphlets I penned of Loue, and vaine fantasies” and warns youth to listen to their elders instead of “thinking the good counsell of age is dotage”—bemoaning the fact that “when their fathers correct them for their faults, they hate them” (London: Cuthbert Berbie, 1592; rpt. in *The Life and Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Robert Greene*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, 12 vols. [London: Huth Library, 1883]), 12:177–8, 178, 158. George Puttenham’s compendious *The Arte of English Poesie*, in a chapter titled “Of Decencie in Behaviour which also Belongs to the Consideration of the Poet or Maker,” reminds readers of the decorum governing relations between older and younger men: “th’old man generally is no fit companion for the young man . . . nor the wise for the foolish. Yet in some respects and by discretion it may be otherwise, as when the old man hath the gouernment of the young, [and] the wise teaches the foolish” ([Ludgate: Richard Field, 1589; rpt. London: English Reprints, 1869], p. 286).

²¹ Whetstone, p. 60.

²² Young men presented a particular challenge to their elders. Unlike other subjugated groups in early modern England, particularly women or servants, young men inhabited a subordinate space that was fundamentally transitional. As time passed these younger men would become harder to characterize as youth; they had the potential to become serious political and economic rivals who could not be kept perpetually subordinate due to their gender or class. This social dynamic sheds stark light on Ophelia’s predicament. Polonius calls Ophelia a “green girl” and a “baby” when asserting his control of her, telling her that her situation differs from that of Hamlet: “he is young, / And with a larger teder may he walk / Than may be given you” (I.iii.101, 105, 124–6). Both Ophelia and Hamlet are tethered, but Polonius infantilizes Ophelia even further than the prince by compounding her age with her gender. Though young women could be framed as “youth” by elders wishing to keep them subordinate, such framing was often redundant; older men such as Polonius could dismiss them just as easily through early modern gender inequalities—marginalizing them as women, rather than as youths. See Linda Pollock, “‘Teach Her to Live Under Obedience’: The Making of Women in the Upper Ranks of Early Modern England,” *Continuity and Change* 4, 2 (August 1989): 231–58, 245.

²³ To adopt this tutoring stance, a stance so reminiscent of his father, is to claim a certain mature authority, as “Youth was notoriously unfit to teach youth” (Thomas, p. 210). Laertes’ assertiveness might best be measured through Ophelia’s response. She counters the magisterial “No more” closing the first part of his advice with a deceptively innocent “No more but so?” (I.iii.11) as if to tease him for his mature pedagogical stance by asking “Is that all? Surely our father would have more to say on this subject.” She also notes how he distances himself from the peril faced by those characterized as youth, warning her brother not to fall prey to the dangers he describes like a pastor who “reaks not his own rede” (I.iii.51).

²⁴ Levin notes the "ironic" differences between these two scenes, focusing on how they point to Polonius's "distrustful and cynical attitude towards human nature" (pp. 26–7).

²⁵ Richard Helgerson cites Whetstone's explanation of a proper comedy to elucidate how *Hamlet* participates in the tradition of the prodigal son story: "No one familiar, as Shakespeare's original audience was, with the didactic drama of the midcentury or with the fiction of the 1580s will long hesitate in naming the genre . . . No narrative pattern was more popular in the late sixteenth century" ("What Hamlet Remembers," *ShakS* 10 [1977]: 67–97, 77). Unlike Helgerson, I do not read *Hamlet* as a prodigal but argue that the ubiquity of this literary and theatrical tradition points to an ideological norm that *Hamlet* confronts. Helgerson sees Polonius's references to "gaming, drinking, fencing, swearing, quarreling, and drabbing" as one of the play's many allusions to the popular tradition of prodigal son stories (p. 77). Yet Polonius's behavior here inverts the prodigal model, for his plans imperil his son more than protect him. For instance, in George Gascoigne's prodigal son play, *The Glass of Government: A Tragical Comedy so Entitled, Because Therein are Handled aswell the Rewardes for Vertues, as also the Punishment for Vices*, the chorus explains, "Few see themselves, but each man seeth his chyld, / Such care for them, as care not for themselfe" (London: C. Barker, 1575, rpt. in *The Complete Works of George Gascoigne*, 2 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1910], 2:1–90, 26, [lines 8–9]). As Reynaldo discovers, Polonius's fatherly intentions are far more self-serving.

²⁶ Shakespeare's adaptations of the conventions of New Comedy, with its sympathy for younger characters, surface in his earlier comedies. Though this phenomenon provides a foundation for the play's interests in youth, I would argue that *Hamlet* provides a more focused and indeed a more grim look into the mechanics and cultural significance of age-based taxonomies. Similarly, *King Lear* does not merely pit youth against age but explores the violence surrounding the definition of age: when does an old man transition from maturity into dotage? Who makes such a decision, and how is it converted into a publicly accepted fact (like Claudius's definition of Hamlet as a youth)? It is worth noting that Gloucester's outrage over Edgar's purported disdain for "This policy and reverence of age" reaches a peak with the suggestion that younger men might claim the authority of deciding when this transition occurs, when "it . . . be fit that, sons at perfect age and fathers declin'd, the father should be as ward to the son, and the son manage his revenue" (*King Lear*, I.ii.46, 72–4).

²⁷ Bertrand Evans's comparison of Laertes to a "furious child" echoes Claudius's own framing of the young man (*Shakespeare's Tragic Practice* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], p. 108).

²⁸ Everett reflects on the long history and the persistence of this tradition that dates back at least as far as the Romantic era: "*Hamlet*, the first great story in Europe of a young man growing up, in a sense originates the *Bildungsroman* itself" (p. 30). See also Martin Wiggins, "*Hamlet* within the Prince," in *New Essays on Hamlet*, pp. 209–26, 216.

²⁹ Everett, p. 30.

³⁰ Drawing on Helena's comment in *All's Well that Ends Well* that "The Court's a learning place," Everett locates a parallel pedagogical function to Court life in *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, *All's Well that Ends Well*, I.i.176). Everett

asserts that Hamlet has been “growing up” and “becoming mature” throughout the play: “Elsinore has been for Hamlet a ‘learning place’” (p. 30).

³¹ The argument that Laertes claims to be “satisfied in nature” only because he must acknowledge this apology, that he defers to “elder masters of known honor” simply to guarantee the lethal fencing bout, makes little sense within the context of the play’s final scene. Laertes’ troubled conscience is evident only fifty lines after he accepts the apology (V.ii.296), and his swift repentance needs a foundation.

³² Rosencrantz and Guildenstern owe their brief time in the Court of Denmark to their shared youth with Hamlet. Immediately after outlining his official position that he cannot imagine any reason for Hamlet’s disaffection beyond the elder Hamlet’s death, Claudius explains that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been chosen in that they are “of so young days brought up with” Hamlet and “neighbored to his youth and havior” (II.ii.11–2). Despite Claudius’s protestations of bewilderment, the two young men immediately and tellingly focus on the obvious problem of usurpation, mentioning “ambition” or “the ambitious” four times in ten lines when Hamlet describes Denmark as a prison (II.ii.252, 257–8, 261). Ambition, in an early modern context, commonly carried a strongly pejorative meaning. Francis Bacon contended that “ambitious men, if they find the way open for their rising . . . are rather busy than dangerous; but if they be checked in their desires, they become secretly discontent, and look upon men and matters with an evil eye” (*The Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral*, ed. Brian Vickers [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999], p. 86). In essence, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern assume that Hamlet has reason to feel unjustly disinherited but cast their lot in with Claudius by suggesting that to move beyond the circumscribed role Claudius has provided for him is to be ambitious. Like Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take advantage of any opportunity to seize a mature authority; Rosencrantz, for instance, adopts the role of a rising captain, calling “Ho, bring in the lord” as a guarded Hamlet is brought before Claudius (IV.iii.16). But Hamlet warns them of the conditional nature of this new authority. Like a sponge “that soaks up the King’s countenance, his rewards, [and] his authorities” or Laertes claiming a mature role in IV.iv, the young men will be dispossessed at Claudius’s pleasure: “When he needs what you have glean’d, it is but squeezing you, and, spunge, you shall be dry again” (IV.ii.15–6, 19–21).

³³ Andrew Hadfield suggests that having “disinherited his nephew, the probable successor,” Claudius “has destroyed any hope of a workable political process” (“The Power and Rights of the Crown in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*: ‘The King—The King’s to Blame,’” *RES* 54, 217 [November 2003]: 566–86, 571).

³⁴ Brian Melbancke, *Philotimus: The Warre betwixt Nature and Fortune* (London: Richard Warde, 1583), pp. [v–vi]; EEBO STC (2d edn.) 17801.

³⁵ That Horatio appears to be an enigmatic and oddly malleable figure has been puzzled over repeatedly by critics. Wilson considers him “a piece of dramatic structure” whose “function is to be the chief spokesman of the first scene and the confidant of the hero for the rest of the play”—a split focus inevitably involving “some inconsistency” (pp. 235–6). Mack, in turn, describes him as a quiet “touchstone” who for “most of the play . . . is content to stand silently beside Hamlet, occasionally helping his greater friend . . . sometimes warning him of danger” (p. 89). I suggest that Horatio stands out oddly in the play because he provides a contrast that throws the manipulation

of his peers into greater relief. Unlike the play's other young men, Horatio manages to elude the debilitating scrutiny of Claudius and Polonius. As a result, his path through the play is more exploratory, less distorted by political manipulation. Contemplative, witty, loyal, and inquisitive, Horatio stands quietly by Hamlet as the prince's doppelganger. Horatio is the Hamlet who was never forced to struggle in the trap of youth; accordingly, he possesses a unique perspective to tell Hamlet's story.