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ANTHROPOLOGY, HAMLET AND HISTORY

"If anthropology and history once begin to collaborate in the study of ... societies, it will become apparent that the one science can achieve nothing without the help of the other," said Claude Levi-Strauss.[1] This statement is so immediately sensible in a plain, common-sense way, that only an examination of historical and anthropological practices reveal that such a collaboration is neither as frequent nor as complete as it ought to be.

Anthropologists traditionally studied preliterate societies, historians, literate ones. Preliterate societies lack written documents (or such documents are rare and often unreliable since they are usually written by untrained observers from outside the culture) and anthropologists found themselves with only oral traditions from which to reconstruct the past. Oral traditions, myths, tales, legends and so on are part of every culture; but the value of such traditions as a source of historical information was considered doubtful by most anthropologists,[2] and

[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Basic Books, 1963, p. 25.

[2] R. B. Dixon and J. R. Swanton ("Primitive American History," *American Anthropologist* 16 [1914]), considered oral tradition valuable as a historical source, whereas R. Lowie ("Oral Tradition and History: Discussion and Correspondence," *American Anthropologist* 17 [1915]; "Oral Tradition and History," *Journal of American Folklore* 30 [1917]), denied any historical value whatever. Most anthropologists who concerned themselves with the subject took a middle-of-the road position: oral tradition could be valuable if substantiated by other evidences. See, for instance, E. Sapir, "Time Perspective in Aboriginal American

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historians[3] seemingly had no need of them. The functionalist school of anthropology contributed to our understanding by recognizing the value and importance of oral histories in terms of the functions such tales fulfill in a given society.[4]

Functionalists discussed myths of origins whose function it was to explain how humans arrived on earth in general, or, more often, how the specific social group came into being. Other traditions provided the rationale for the existence of particular institutions and/or helped maintain the status quo by providing supernatural sanctions. For instance, there are widespread myths which relate the events that led to the establishment of enforced spinsterhood for royal princesses and made evident the reasons why this should be so.[5] Other traditions explain the fitness and propriety of organizing a society into a hierarchy of unequal groups, each given its "naturally" deserved status.[6] Such oral traditions were seen as charters for their institutions and they were termed "charter myths." These anthropologists considered the study of oral histories as an integral part of the study of a culture, but stopped there: any historical reconstruction on the basis of oral traditions alone was regarded as "pseudo-history."[7] Only when hard data was found to substantiate oral tradition was the latter considered to be of true historical value.

Culture," in *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir, in Language Culture and Personality,* ed. D. Mandelbaum, Berkeley, 1949, pp. 389-462; C. E. Fuller, "Ethnohistory in the Study of Culture Change in Africa," in *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*, ed. W. R. Bascom and M. J. Herskovits, Chicago, 1958; and Melville J. Herskovits, "Anthropology and Africa—A Wider Perspective," *Africa*, vol. 29 (1959), pp. 225-238.

[3] Few historians studied the methodological problems raised by oral tradition. Those who did the main work on oral tradition's possible value as historical source material were E. Bernheim, A. Feder, and W. Bauer (J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition. A Study in Historical Methodology*, Chicago, Aldine, 1965, p. 3). This changed with contemporary historians who focus on preliterate societies, particularly African societies, for example the work of Roland Oliver.

[4] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Social Anthropology· Past and Present," *Man* (1950); A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, London, 1952; B. Malinowski, *Sex, Culture, and Myth*, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962.

[5] For instance, the Bunyoro; see Rev. J. Roscoe, *The Bakitara or Bonyoro*, Cambridge University Press, 1923; and John Beattie, *Bunyoro*, Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1960.

[6] As the Ruanda; see J. Maquet, "The Kingdom of Ruanda," in *African Worlds*, D. Fordes, ed., Oxford University Press, 1965.

[7] Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function*, p. 3.

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In recent years historians have turned their attention to peoples without writing. They too came upon the problem of the paucity of written documents and the richness of oral traditions. Historian Jan Vansina provided us with a guideline to the special nature of oral traditions as a source of information about the past and with an historical methodology to be applied to them.[8] He maintains that historical truth is not necessarily a concrete reality, but only a faithful transmission of a tradition heard;[9] history merely recovers bits of the past "which have left traces we call sources." [10] As a specialist in oral history, he collaborates with anthropologists and linguists in order to gather his data.[11] Vansina's methodology is reflected in the approach of ethnohistorians who attempt to combine the generalizing aspects of ethnology with careful evaluation of sources of interest in time sequence history.[12] In this way the two disciplines overlap and both contribute to the understanding of a specific culture.

Perhaps just as historians turned their attention to preliterate societies, anthropologists could examine oral traditions of literate ones. Historians often face the dearth of written documents when dealing with early days of western cultures, and realize that some of these documents are only hearsay. An anthropological analysis of oral traditions could illuminate some historically murky corners and thus contribute to the history of literate societies as well.

> Oral traditions are historical sources of a special nature... In those parts of the world inhabited by peoples without writing, oral tradition forms the main available source for a reconstruction of the past, and even among peoples who have writing, many historical sources, including the most ancient ones, are based on oral traditions.[13]

[8] Vansina, *Oral Tradition.*

[9] J. R. Vansina, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba," *Journal of African History* 1 (1960), p. 50.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] J. R. Vansina, "Ethnohistory in Africa," *Ethnohistory* 9, no. 2 (1962), p. 132.

[12] R. M. Carmack, "Ethnohistory: A. Review," in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, ed. Bernard Siegel, Palo Alto, Calif. Annual Reviews, Inc., 1972, p. 230.

[13] Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, p. 1.

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Among literate people, such traditions may have disappeared by now; certainly they did so in their spoken form. Some, collected and telescoped in time, may have been written down, their origins obliterated. Those of great traditions are sometimes regarded as sacred texts, such as the Bible and the Vedas. Others, less ancient and dealing with specific historic events were passed down as classical literature, such as Homer's Iliad. Knowledge of particular micro-histories could flesh out the picture of early beginnings of modern literate societies. It seems, therefore, that historians could use anthropological analyses of former "oral traditions" when found and check them against whatever other data they have to fill out some gaps of early history. These stories of less epic proportions may have been reworked out of recognition and lost, or written down in a literary form which makes their origins unrecognizable to us. Such, I believe, is the case with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

It is known that Shakespeare's plays were based on previously existing works. The story of *Hamlet* had been reworked several times [14] before Shakespeare took hold of it and created the masterpiece now familiar to us. The tale is a window to the society that gave birth to the original myth, a society undergoing fundamental changes. An anthropologist views myths of a people as "a body of narratives woven into their culture, dictating their belief, defining their ritual, acting as the chart of their social order and the pattern of their moral behavior."[15]

The conclusion that *Hamlet* was just such a charter myth was reached by looking at *Hamlet* as an artifact totally divorced from its historical and literary context. To do this, it was examined not as a play, but as a story by an anonymous author, passed on as an oral tale, and finally set down in a document now discovered, to be deciphered by the application of anthropological insights. Consequently, any signs, knowledge or interpretations which could place the story in sixteenth century England are

[14] Thomas Kyd's play *Hamlet*, since re-named Ur-Hamlet, preceded Shakespeare, and there was also a German version called *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*. See, for example, A. L. Attwater, "Shakespeare's Sources," in *Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. H. Granville Barker and G. B. Harrison, Doubleday Anchor, 1960.

[15] Malinowski, *Sex, Culture and Myth*, p. 249.

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disregarded. Only two assumptions are made: 1) that the tale is an Anglo-Saxon one, because it is written in English; and 2) that the setting is Europe, probably northern Europe because the places named are Denmark, England, Norway and Germany.

Because this study of *Hamlet* will examine such anthropological concerns as marriage rules and incest, Gertrude's marriage to Claudius is an appropriate point of departure. Hamlet calls the queen's marriage an incestuous union; it is peculiar that no echo of such an accusation is heard at court. No words of disapproval of the marriage nor any hint of its alleged illegitimacy can be found in the story. Only its haste is questioned. However, if the marriage were unacceptable according to Danish marriage rules it would not have been allowed to take place.

Taking a brother's widow to wife, the levirate, is the preferred widow marriage in countless societies; the Bible shows that it was the rule among the ancient Hebrews. Because of its widespread frequency in the world, it may be assumed that this was also true of Denmark, at least until the time of the Hamlet tale. Young Hamlet—who arguably represents a segment of the society—does not accept the levirate, going so far as to call it incest. Thus it appears that either the marriage rules or ideas about those rules among some sections of the society are in the process of change

Changing marriage patterns indicate an ongoing upheaval in a society. Here, this upheaval may have been caused by the fairly recent advent of Christianity. This would explain why a European would begin to view the levirate as unacceptable, as incest, just as Hamlet viewed it.[16] A new religion is never adopted overnight by a whole society. Old values, ritual and traditions take time to become reworked into vehicles of the new faith, in forms that will be universally acceptable. After conversion, there are periods of vacillation over several generations during which the power of the new religion alternately surges and ebbs. In this society, those in power accept Christianity in general, but create disharmony by clinging to some old traditions. Clearly

16 "... Christianity ... demonstrably produced changes in marriage institutions ... with resulting modifications in social alignments and kinship terminology" (Murdock, *Social Structure,* Macmillan, 1960, p. 137 n.).

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the people at court, both young and old, appear still to adhere to one old tradition: the levirate. They accept the marriage of Gertrude and her former brother-in-law. If some members of this society, e.g., the younger generation, or the common people, have internalized the new morality of Christianity more completely, rejecting the levirate, the stage is set for a clash of values which can result in great disorders.

A second focus for this analysis is Hamlet himself and his idiosyncrasies. He is a prince. Although he is an adult (about thirty years old at the time of the story [17]) he is unmarried, a peculiar condition since princes were married early, often so early that the marriage could not be consummated until years later.

Hamlet appears to be a deviant, for he gives voice to some very unconventional thoughts:

> . . . . I see
> The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
> That for a fantasy and thick of fame
> Go to their graves like beds
>
> (III: 8, 60-63).

and

> Witness this army of such mass and charge,
> Led by delicate and tender prince,
> Whose spirit with divine ambion puff'd
> Makes mouths at invisible events . . .
>
> (III: 8, 47-50)

Princes seek battle for the glory of victory, not necessarily for any concrete gains. This is a traditional way in which the scions of royal families prove their worth. Any prince who sees war

[17] *Hamlet*, Act V, scene 1—Yorick has been dead for 23 years, and Hamlet well remembers not only being borne "on his back a thousand times," but also the man's personality, his wit, and other attributes. Therefore, he must have been at least six to eight years old when Yorick died. (The edition of the play used throughout is William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, T. Brooke and J. R. Crawford, ed., New Haven, Yale University Press, 1954. All citations hereafter will appear in the text.)

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for its own sake as "phantasy and trick of fame" is certainly highly unconventional, if not downright subversive.

Since Hamlet wanted to succeed to the throne, and since the throne of Denmark was elective (V: 2 65)[18] it is strange that he is abroad, away from the court and throne. It would have made more sense to stay home in order to consolidate his position as his father's likely successor. Instead we are told that he went away to a university. If we place the tale of Hamlet in the early days of Christianity in northern Europe, a university did not exist. However, Hamlet is an old tale; the university might have been added much later in one of the countless retellings as an embellishment designed to lend credence to Prince Hamlet as deviant. Universities were hot-beds of heresy and radical ideas, and would represent the embodiment of these characteristics in Hamlet.[19]

A more plausible explanation for Hamlet's absence from Denmark lies in the nature of the Danish political system, specifically election to the throne. Where succession to the throne is elective, the interregnum is likely to be a period of unrest, often of bloodshed; all eligible members of the royal lineage jockey for position, seeking alliances and support for their candidacies for the crown. Such factions subside once a king is chosen, but their political maneuvers grow active again when the king ages (or in any circumstances such as illness which could make a new election imminent). King Hamlet was not a young man at his death. He had defeated Norway in a definitive battle which restored some Danish land on the day his son was born

> . . . that day that our last King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras
> (V: 1, 147-148).

[18] See below, p. 28.

[19] A weakness of the university addition can be seen in the following. Hamlet asks Horatio what he was doing back in Denmark, to which Horatio replies that he had come to the king's funeral. The university could not have been so large that the two best friends and fellow Danes would be in ignorance of one another's whereabouts. Hamlet did not return on time for his father's funeral; indeed, he arrived after his mother's remarriage and possibly after the coronation of Claudius. If he heard of his father's death later than did Horatio, either he was farther away, at some other place, or perhaps no one knew where he could be reached. This would make it convenient not to notify him immediately of King Hamlet's death.

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As Hamlet was about thirty years old at the time of the story, and life expectancy was short, King Hamlet, at perhaps fifty or more years of age, would have been an aging man. Desiring that his son should succeed him, and recognizing Claudius's ambitions, the king would have felt the need to strengthen Prince Hamlet's position. Denmark's relationship with Norway suggested a strategy. The political situation between the two countries had reached a point where Norwegian attack was feared, as Prince Fortinbras (son of the man defeated by King Hamlet) was ready to initiate military action to recover the lands his father lost. If Denmark had a strong alliance with another neighboring nation, the Norwegians would have been deterred from attempting to recover Danish lands. If Prince Hamlet could be known to have such an alliance behind him, his bid for the throne would be very much bolstered. Therefore, it appears probable that Hamlet's stay abroad was in the nature of a diplomatic mission at his father's behest. Whether Hamlet achieved his goal or not is immaterial. The fact is, he was not notified on time of this father's death; thus he could neither attend the funeral nor put in his bid for the throne. When he arrived in Denmark it was all over. Claudius married the royal widow and became king. Hamlet says of him

> He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother
> Popp'd between th'election and my hopes
> (V: 2, 64-65)

Here Gertrude's role is pivotal. Her marriage to Claudius deprived her own son of the throne. Although the throne of Denmark was elective, Hamlet as the direct heir of a king would have had a distinct edge over other candidates. This is seen not only in the tone of Hamlet's above remark, but also in the assurances that Claudius made to his nephew: "You are the most immediate to our throne" (I: 2, 109, see also III: 2, 344-45). That Gertrude would not want her son to succeed his father appears to be an "unnatural" development, but may be explained if the position of the Queen in Denmark is analyzed in light of Gertrude's actions. Since Claudius became king because he married Gertrude, two possibilities follow: 1) the queen

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shared her husband's power, so that any eligible member of the royal lineage would become king by marrying the widowed queen; or 2) the widowed queen had enough power to swing the election of the new king whether she married him or not. The first possibility appears more plausible, for if Gertrude would retain power as Queen Mother there would be no reason for her to deny the throne to her own son. If, however, she would be powerless when widowed, her inclination would be to remarry and remain a queen, assuming that she was ambitious and reluctant to give up a power once tasted. Yet, if she helped Hamlet to succeed to the throne after his father's death, she would have had no choice. This conclusion is also bolstered by Claudius' remark which points to a considerable power enjoyed by the queen:

> ... our sometime sister, now our queen, th'*imperial*
> *jointress* of this warlike state
>
> (I: 2, 9; emphasis mine)

Thus she is joint possessor of the throne, not a consort. It is safe to assume that Gertrude did not marry for love. Hamlet points to her years:

> You cannot call it love, for at your age
> The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble,
> And waits upon the judgement; ...
>
> (III: 4, 69-71)

If Gertrude married to maintain her position of power, she most likely had an understanding of some sort with Claudius before the king's death. Claudius would have known from Gertrude why Hamlet went abroad and would have decided that the time to kill his brother was ripe. Hamlet's absence and the danger of Norwegian attack could have justified cutting short the proper mourning time for the dead king. It is dangerous for a country threatened with military attack to be without a commander-in-chief. Thus, no objections were raised and the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius could take place hastily. It was possible to delay the news of the king's death from reaching

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Hamlet, because no one but the royal pair (and probably Polonius) knew Hamlet's whereabouts.

Added to Hamlet's grief for his father and his outrage at his mother's marriage was the deep frustration he felt at being cheated out of the throne. His melancholy was real. "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious," he characterizes himself (III: 1, 4-5) and he tells Rosencrantz, "Sir, I lack advancement" (III: 2, 34).

He plans revenge, but delays it for two reasons. First, he is not sure that Claudius really murdered his father:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be a de'il, and de'il hath power
> T'assume a pleasing shape;—yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy
> (As he is very potent with such spirits)
> Abuses me to damn me.
>
> (II: 2, 603-608)

Second, he waited for the right time. This presented itself shortly after the play-in-the-play, which proved to Hamlet the king's guilt. Claudius, who had previously asked Hamlet to stay at court and not to return to Wittenberg, now decided to send him to England. Hamlet seized the opportunity to kill Polonius, who hid behind a wall hanging in the Queen's chamber to eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with his mother. Killing Polonius was premeditated [20] and it accomplished several things. The king and queen were robbed of their greatest ally, the man who seems to have acted as mediator between the throne and people. Claudius, an unpopular king [21] would be blamed for the murder; the king would be left vulnerable while Hamlet—far away in England—would remain high in the esteem of the Danish people. Claudius was aware of this esteem. He tells Laertes:

> . . . The other motive
> Why to a public count I might not go

[20] Premeditated in that he seized the opportunity, not that he planned the murder ahead of time.

[21] See page 32.

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Is the great love the general gender bear him,
Who, dipping all his faults in their affection,
Would like the spring that turneth wood to stone,—
Convert his gyves to graces;

(IV: 7, 16-21)

On his way to England Hamlet checked the king's orders, found that Claudius commanded his life to be taken, changed the orders exchanging the lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for his own. He planned to go back to Denmark and finish his revenge. It is doubtful that he thought of the throne any longer. Hamlet, an essentially moral man, was too well aware of his own crimes, "How stand I then, that have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd" (III: 8, 56-57). Hamlet is quite aware of his own unworthiness to become king. At the end, he casts his vote for Fortinbras (V: 2, 358-359), as the good Norwegian prince arrives at the right time to take over the throne:

For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune.
I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me

(V: 2, 391-393)

Horatio, the true friend and the virtuous man (original witness) survives to tell the story (the first testimony).

. . . to th' yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads. All this can I
Truly deliver

(V: 2, 382-388)

Hamlet started out with all the attributes that would enable him to be chosen king. In the course of the unexpected events that took place he became guilty of hubris, in this way invalidating all his rightful claims. This is in juxtaposition to the other contender, Claudius. Claudius is shown to be a murderer

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—thus unworthy of the throne—in the very beginning of the story. An examination of the tale points to the conclusion that his ability to accede to the throne of Denmark by legitimate means is doubtful. Claudius is very unpopular in the country both with the "common people" and with "gentlefolk." Hamlet refers to their jeers before Claudius became king:

> . . . for my uncle is king
> Of Denmark, and those would make mouths at
> him while my father lived give twenty, fourty, fifty, a
> hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little
> (II: 2, 366-369)

Furthermore, when the common people believe Hamlet to be in England, sent there because of his alleged madness, and find out about the death of Polonius, the "people want Laertes king" (IV: 1, 99-109) a messenger tells Claudius. The distrust the people feel toward Claudius must be very great indeed if they would make Laertes king, a man outside the royal lineage. It also reaffirms that the people trusted Polonius and transferred their trust to his son. Claudius was quite aware of his own unpopularity and of the love people bore both Hamlet and Polonius. Therefore, had king Hamlet died a natural death, and there were no widow to marry, Claudius would have had no chance to be elected to the throne as long as Hamlet was also in the running.

The relations between Claudius and Hamlet confirm the above conclusion, for Claudius, though king, is still afraid of Hamlet. When the latter returned to Denmark from Wittenberg, unhappy over his father's death, his mother's perfidy, and his loss of the throne, he proposed to go back to the "university." Claudius, however, expressed the desire to keep him nearby:

> In going back to school in Wittenberg,
> It is most retrograde to our desire
> (I: 2, 113-114)

Claudius prefers his nephew where he can keep an eye on him, because he feels insecure vis à vis Hamlet and because he worries about any suspicions the latter may have. This explains

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the attempts to find out the reason for Hamlet's "melancholy." Ordinarily, it must be obvious that a young man who lost not only his much loved father, but also the chance to become king would show his unhappiness. Yet, Claudius does all he can to name the reasons for Hamlet's dark mood as if to convince himself that he, Claudius, has nothing to fear. Polonius tries to convince him that Hamlet is mad for the love of Ophelia. Claudius may be worried about any alliance that Hamlet may have been successful in concluding abroad—and about which he cannot question him without giving himself away. His conscience bothers him sufficiently to be continually worried about being discovered:

> The harlot's cheek beautified with plastering art,
> Is not more ugly from the thing that helps it
> Than is my deed to my most painted word
> O heavy burthen!
>
> (III: 1, 51-54)

It is this troubled conscience that makes him doubt Polonius's conclusions about the causes of Hamlet's "madness":

> Love! his affections do not that way tend
> Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,
> Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
> O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
> And I do doubt, the hatch and the disclose
> Will be some danger; which to prevent,
> I have in quick determination
> Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England
> For the demand of our neglected tribute
>
> (III: 1, 166-174)

Claudius thus sends Hamlet to England on a pretext—although he refuses to have him return to Wittenberg. This appears to confirm the alliance thesis. Once Claudius suspects that Hamlet knows what really happened to his father, he must do more than send Hamlet to England:

> The terms of our estate may not endure

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> Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow
> Out of his braves
>
> (III: 3, 507)

And so he sends Hamlet to an arranged death. Unmasked in the eyes of his rival, he admits a crime and its objectives with his own words

> . . . since I am still possessed
> Of those effects for which I did the murther,
> My crown, mine ambition, and my queen
>
> (III: 3, 53-55)

This is the final, incontrovertible proof that a listener to the story has of the king's guilt.

When Polonius is killed, Claudius is in great trouble. "Alas, how shall this bloody deed be answered? it will be laid to us, . . . " (III: 5, 16-17). He must be very careful how he treats Hamlet in this affair, "yet must not put the strong law on him: he's loved of the distracted multitude" (III: 7, 3-4) and ". . . To bear all smooth and even, this sudden sending him away must seem deliberate pause " (III: 7, 7-9). The king proceeds to handle Polonius's death very poorly, without the kind of rites and rituals expected on the passing of a beloved public servant, thus adding to the suspicions and anxieties of the people:

> . . . the people muddied,
> Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers
> For good Polonius death, . . .
>
> (IV: 1, 81-83)

He was afraid to tell the truth for

> . . . my arrows
> Too slightly timber'd for so loud a wind,
> Would have reverted to my bow again,
> And not where I had aime'd them
>
> (IV: 3, 21-24)

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Claudius expected Hamlet to be killed in England according to his orders. When the prince returned from England unscathed, Claudius, in a last desperate attempt, resorted to trickery. If it worked, Laertes would kill Hamlet and assure the king of some peace. But the king found himself up to his neck in crime. He must die.

The story teaches that a king who usurps the throne by means of murder, the only way he can satisfy his ambition, cannot be allowed to rule and must pay the price. A prince who in the course of his revenge resorts to murder commits a crime which makes him unfit to rule his people, no matter how popular he may be.

Juxtaposed against Hamlet's need for revenge is Fortinbras' attempts to avenge his father: he had wished to attack Denmark and regain the lands lost by his father to King Hamlet. Deterred by the king of Norway, he gained permission to cross Denmark with his troops and to conquer a worthless plot of land in Poland (as a substitute for the one his father had lost). A battle won in the field, a military feat is characterized as right and proper, no matter what the cost. It brings glory to the nation and honor to its leaders; it is seen as moral and hallowed by social sanctions. Hamlet's way is personal rather than group action, surreptitious rather than open, directed against individuals rather than a collective "enemy." It even appears to have been a way that King Hamlet would have disapproved of: his ghost appeared to his son in full military regalia, surely a symbol to be considered. Hamlet, the man who saw through the vainglory of needless war and death, became embroiled in his own sins: deviance, even in the cause of good, does not guarantee moral conduct. Young Fortinbras followed in the path of righteousness and thus emerged as the individual worthy of the throne of Denmark. His accession to it was proper and legitimate.

* * *

The society which originated this tale must have exhibited many symptoms of disorder. Something of this state of affairs may be gleaned from the way that Denmark and the Danish are

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seen by the various characters. Hamlet feels that Denmark is a prison, and bitterly tells Horatio

> This heavy headed revel east and west
> makes us traduc'd and tax'd of other nations;
> Theye clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase
> Soil our addition; and indeed it takes
> From our achievements, . . .
>
> (I: 4, 17-21)

Denmark then is not seen by other nations as a neighbor to be respected or admired. And the Danes themselves make comments which appear to show their low esteem of themselves. For instance, Horatio tells the dying Hamlet, "I am a Roman more than a Dane," and Hamlet himself to Claudius "die you murderous, incestuous Dane."

Any society on the brink of a civil uprising—and that is what wanting "to make Laertes king" (IV: 1, 99-108) must mean—is certainly torn by strife. The people are beyond distrusting and disliking Claudius: they are ready for action against him. Since Claudius ruled for only a few months it can be assumed that the social disorder existed before he became king. There is nothing in the tale of Hamlet which would point to Claudius as the cause of the unrest. As long as King Hamlet lived he could control incipient disorder by the force of his popularity. After his death and the accession of a disliked man, the problems surfaced. There are a number of possible causes for this unrest. The changing value system resulting from Christianization of the country is one. Perhaps Danish standing vis à vis her neighbors was also undergoing a downward change. This would explain Denmark's worry about Norwegian attack (I: 1, 70-107) and England's failure to pay tribute (III: 1, 174). Danish fortunes were changing for the worse, and it is of such bad days that some charter myths are born.

The behavior of Gertrude and Polonius gives additional evidence of the low moral level of Danish society at the time. Gertrude appears to be a woman of intelligenge. She is not easily fooled by Polonius' explanation of Hamlet's black mood; she tells Claudius that "I doubt it is no other but our o'erhasty marriage"

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(II: 2, 56-57). She is also unimpressed by Polonius's clichés and seems to be impatient with him, "More matter, with less art" (II: 2, 95); says she, attempting to cut short his verbiage. She is aware of her own actions and incapable of successful self-deception. When Hamlet accuses her of faithlessness she pleads:

> O Hamlet, speak no more!
> Thou turns't mine eyes into my very soul;
> And there I see such black and grained spots
> As will not leave their tinct.
>
> (III: 4, 89-92)

It is fruitless to speculate on her possible foreknowledge of her first husband's murder; it is also unnecessary to establish this point. Gertrude knows what she is doing when she denies her son the throne and she is quite ready to break another rule of succession. As has been mentioned before, Claudius promises Hamlet that he, Hamlet, is next in line to the throne. But Gertrude is trying deliberately to make that impossible for her own good reasons.

That princes must marry royal women is not an unusual rule, especially in monogamous royal marriages. That such was the rule in the Danish kingdom can be seen from the warnings both Polonius and Laertes give Ophelia. They both warned her not to become involved with Hamlet for "Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star" (II: 2, 141-142). Yet Gertrude said over Ophelia's body:

> I hope'd thou should'st have been my Hamlet's wife
> I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
> and not have strew'd thy grave.
>
> (V: 1, 230-232)

This appears to have been more of Gertrude's behind-the-scene machinations. Both she and Claudius, nervous about their misdeeds, would have felt safer if Hamlet were ineligible for the throne of Denmark. It would have been to their advantage, knowing both Hamlet's ambition and his low opinion of his uncle, to forestall any possible rebellion on his part. A marriage to Ophelia, a gentlewoman, but not of royal blood, would have

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made Hamlet automatically ineligible for the throne. Gertrude was intelligent, she knew the rules, and tried to follow them or break them to her advantage.

Polonius also played that game. Polonius was a sort of prime-minister: "Let me be no assistant for a state, but . . ." (II: 2, 166). He was a trusty of the royal couple and seems to have aided them in whatever plots they undertook. At the same time, he was able to present his famous cliches in such a sincere manner as to acquire the mantle of honesty, integrity and true goodness, and be rewarded by the trust and love of the people. Polonius gives his son a great deal of "good advice," too well-known to be quoted here, in which he voices the kind of sentiments everyone naturally agrees with. In terms of his own underhanded actions, he is, of course, a hypocrite. Spying is his favorite modus operandi: not only does he spy on Hamlet, but also on his own son, instructing an underling on how to use tricks to obtain information (II: 11, 66). Finally, spying becomes his undoing, for it is in the act of spying that Polonius is stabbed by Hamlet. If Polonius's spying activities on behalf of the king and queen are defensible in terms of their character or political action, there can be no such rationalization of his spying on Laertes. This scene seems to be extraneous to the Hamlet tale unless it is seen as a device to establish, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the questionable moral sense of the Danish prime-minister.

In his life, however, Polonius had wielded a great deal of power. Claudius says to Laertes:

> The head is not more native to the heart,
> The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
> Than the throne of Denmark to thy father
>
> (I: 2, 47-49)

Polonius knows the king he serves. When he assures Claudius that Hamlet's grief is the result of the latter's love for Ophelia, it is a statement designed to put the monarch at ease. It is, after all, the kind of explanation that Claudius wants to hear. This again points to Polonius's doubtful character. He is interested in retaining his favorable position at the court and not

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in honestly serving his monarch. This in spite of such pious sentiments as "I hold my duty as I hold my soul, both to my God and to my gracious king" (II: 2, 44-45). Polonius is very sure of his position at court:

> Hath there been such a time,—I'd fain know that;
> That I have positively said 'Tis so,' When it proved otherwise?
> (II: 2, 153-155)

Such was the man whom the people loved and trusted so well that they were ready to enthrone his son.

An orderly society cannot exist with treachery and poor moral values among its leaders. That the people mistrusted the king's character but could not see Polonius in his true light indicates that no clear-cut system of values existed at the time. The society was thus in a state of chaos. The conflict between Christianity and continuing partial adherence to leftover paganism could be partially responsible for the general disorder and the failure to observe social regulations.

Seen in this light, Ophelia's madness can be evaluated not from a psychological point of view, but in a social context. One can consider Ophelia as the innocent of *Hamlet.* She is shown as a being of no convictions, opinions or self-motivated action, characterized by docility. She is also totally unaware of the court or of herself. Polonius warns his daughter" . . . I must tell you you do not understand yourself so clearly as it behooves my daughter and your honor" (I: 3, 95-97). Her naiveté can be seen in the following:

> Affection poo! you speak like a green girl,
> Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.
> Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?
> (I: 3, 101-103)

Polonius does not tell his daughter that she is too young to know better. He expects her to know better—Ophelia has been at court long enough to have acquired a certain degree of sophistication—but she does not. She is like a child who takes everything at face value and answers her father, "I do not know,

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my lord, what I should think" (I: 3, 103-104). And then, as always, she does what she is bid: "I shall obey, my lord" (I: 3, 136). Ophelia does as she is told and refuses to see Hamlet alone. She does not understand what is going on about her and seems to be looking for someone to guide her steps: "Lord! we know what we are, but know not what we may be" (IV: 5, 43-44).

Ophelia, like every member of society, needs a set of values to live by. Instead, she is caught up in a conflict, one side represented by her father, the other by her would-be lover. No individual can exist in a vacuum—thus madness. Society pays dearly for such chaos. Perhaps the tale of Hamlet is telling us that the price of anomie is extinction. In social chaos, we are told, the victims are the innocents. Ophelia, an innocent, is the victim of irrational forces surrounding her. No society can exist in which the irrational is not contained. It can be contained by social regulations, by ritual and by explanation. Conflicting explanations, mutually exclusive ritual and social regulations make it impossible for a society to function properly. The forces of the irrational are unleashed and madness can be seen as its epitome. It leads to death for the individual (Ophelia) and the extinction of the specific social group (sovereign Denmark).

* * *

This essay has sought to demonstrate that Hamlet may be fruitfully examined as an element of oral tradition. Horatio, the observer of the event, gives the first testimony, which then is repeated by word of mouth until a version was written down. Treating Hamlet as a tale originally written down by an anonymous author, and therefore, a cultural document, an artifact to be deciphered, has led to the analysis of Hamlet as a charter myth, which might be further examined for a possible reality behind the events it related.

> ... oral traditions are always for a great part tied up closely with the political structures of the society in which they appear, and it is important to realize these links and to bring them out, for often

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traditions are official history with all the drawbacks of this type of source.[22]

The tale of Hamlet is seen as describing political events, namely the events which led to a dynastic change in the country of origin, and rationalizations for the throne to be legitimately entrusted to a neighboring princeling. The story gives a picture of a society undergoing change with attending conflicts of values and political upheavals.

The anthropological analysis of Hamlet indicates its setting to be the time of early Christianity of northern Europe. The question is, of course, whether known history can support such a conclusion. The foregoing analysis cannot by itself place the events described in a specific nation. However, the fact that the tale is written in English allows a look at English history in search for some answers.

It took approximately 150 years for Christianity to become established in the British Isles.[23] The tribes were converted at different times and reversion to paganism occurred periodically among them with reconversion to Christianity in the following generations.[24] There is a history of brother murdering brother for the throne.[25] There is evidence of joint rule, or joint stewardship by the king and queen.[26] And a letter from the Pope exhorting Christians to stop marrying their brothers' widows was sent to St. Augustine in England.[27] All of the above does not designate England as the country of origin of the Hamlet myth.

[22] Vansina, "Oral History of the Bakuba," p. 46.

[23] I am indebted to Susan J. Shepard for the historical references used here.

[24] For instance, Ethelbert of Kent becomes converted to Christianity by St. Augustine ca. AD 600. Upon his death in AD 616 his son Eadbald becomes king and rejects Christianity. Earcombert succeeds Eadbald in AD 640, orders the destruction of idols and the observance of Lent, rejecting the paganism of his father and returning to the Christianity which his grandfather adopted. See Adam Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, Penguin Books, 1968, I.25 and II.5.

[25] Oswy murders his brother Oswin (Bede, *History*, III.14).

[26] Queen Osthryd of Mercia was either ruling alone following the death of her husband, or, she was ruling jointly with him. Joint tenancy was being practiced (Bede, *History*, V.24).

[27] Pope Gregory's letter to St. Augustine, "It is ... forbidden to marry a sister-in-law since by a former union she had become one with his own brother..." (Bede, *History*, I.27).

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It simply gives supportive historical evidence that the conclusions based on the anthropological examination are plausible. This examination helps to illuminate a bit of culture history of a northern European group. The task remains for historians to place it firmly in time and place.

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