

Introduction

1. It was 1601. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was playing at the Globe Theatre. The great actor Edward Alleyn, who had been the star player of the Admiral's Men, had been to see the play, and was thinking, with some bitterness, about the success of his younger rival, Richard Burbage, and of the celebrity attaching to that shifty bumpkin Shakespeare, whom he had never liked. His servant entered to inform him that a messenger had brought him a portrait, sent by a gentleman who did not wish to give his name. The portrait was of Laurence Nowel, Dean of Lichfield, and compiler of the first Anglo-Saxon dictionary.

2. What possible connection could there be between these two men? One of the most famous and successful actors of the great heyday of the Elizabethan theatre; and an obscure puritanical clergyman? What links might we find, between the player who became, among the high society of the London playhouse, wealthy enough to found Dulwich College; and the amateur antiquary and rural dean, who spent his life poring over dusty manuscripts, and died without having published any of his work?

3. In his youth an unsuccessful schoolmaster in Sutton Coldfield, Laurence Nowel spent the reign of Queen Mary hiding in Germany with his better-known brother Alexander, afterwards Dean of St Paul's. On Elizabeth's accession he returned and received preferment, becoming Dean of Lichfield in 1560. Nowel was an antiquary and linguist, a pioneer of British Anglo-Saxon studies: William Camden praised him as one of the first to revive the study of Old English. He taught William Lambarde, later the Queen's antiquary, and editor of the Anglo-Saxon Laws. Nowel compiled a dictionary of the Anglo-Saxon language, 'Vocabularium Saxonicum'; and left a substantial collection of transcriptions from Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, such as 'Collecteana' (MS. Cotton. Vitell. D. vii); 'Excerpta', and 'Excerpta quaedam Saxonica'. His initials appear on the *Beowulf* manuscript, and his handwriting in the 'Exeter Book', one of the chief collections of Anglo-Saxon literature.

4. On the face of it, a quiet and productive life, doing work from which subsequent generations benefited, but receiving no especial recognition in his own time; certainly a life lived far from the flashy and showy world of the metropolitan theatre. Yet suddenly, for no obvious reason, Nowel handed over the entire corpus of his work to Lambarde, and disappeared to France. In 1570 he was accused of uttering slander against the Queen and the Earl of Leicester. He died in 1576, having apparently undertaken no further scholarly work.

5. What happened? There is nothing seditious or dangerous in any of Nowel's previously known works. It is probable that we will never know the truth; but a recently-discovered manuscript collection, part of which is here, for the first time, translated and edited under the title 'Ofelia', provides more than a few clues to a fascinating and unexplained corner of literary history.

6. Nowel's manuscript collections of transcriptions, his 'Collecteana' and 'Excerpta', have been used as sources and analogues by editors of Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose. Some pieces survive only because he transcribed them, the original manuscripts having disappeared. One Nowel manuscript seemed to have been ignored, until I began examining it in the context of research into the composition and construction of literary anthologies. Entitled 'Excerpta Quaedam Danica', it seems to be a companion piece for 'Excerpta quaedam Saxonica', and may at some time have been confused with it. It contains transcriptions of well-known Anglo-Saxon poems such as *The Ruin*, *The Wanderer*, the *Seafarer*; extracts from *Beowulf*

and *The Dream of the Rood*; short passages from Icelandic poetry and sagas such as the *Volsunga Saga*, and from German works such as the *Nibelungenlied*. All these works are extant elsewhere, which may be another possible reason why this manuscript has been overlooked, perhaps by scholars searching unsuccessfully for some hitherto undisclosed material. The rest of the manuscript is in Latin, and appears at first sight to be a fairly random collection of transcripts from early English history.

7. Intrigued however by the 'Danica' of the title, I began to translate it; and soon began to notice, cropping up frequently in the Latin, some very familiar names: 'Fortinbras'; 'Claudius'; 'Hamlet'. With gathering excitement, I found that some of the extracts proved to be Latin translations of letters, state papers, diary entries and other records, all relating to the story of Hamlet. Yet I knew that Nowel had gathered and translated these documents while Shakespeare was still playing on his father's Stratford dung-hill.

8. Even more remarkably, some of the passages turned out to be narrative in form, and when linked together, seemed to recount not just the story of Hamlet, as we know it from Shakespeare's play and other sources, but the altogether more fascinating, and hitherto untold story, part of which is to be found in the following pages. As I worked through the manuscript, I became more and more convinced that this was no random collection of excerpts and linguistic examples, but an uncompleted attempt to turn a collection of historical documents into a continuous and coherent narrative. Even the poems and extracts from earlier literature seem to be strategically rather than arbitrarily placed in the sequence of documents. If this were the case, what I had found would be an earlier and alternative version of the story later made famous in what became the world's most famous play.

9. Having got over the initial excitement of this discovery, I began to concede that any direct relation between this manuscript and Shakespeare's tragedy remained unlikely. There were plenty of versions of the Hamlet story. The Latin history of Saxo Grammaticus was published in 1514; Francois de Belleforest produced a French translation in 1570. We know there was at least one other play about Hamlet that pre-existed Shakespeare's. It seemed more probable that Shakespeare and Nowel worked from common sources, than that the later play was copied direct from the earlier manuscript.

10. It was therefore with some degree of eye-rubbing amazement that I began to realise the presence, in Nowel's manuscript, of some very close verbal parallels with Shakespeare, too close for coincidence. Thus we find in an entry in Hamlet's journal, the basis of the famous speech in Act II scene ii of the play:

Quam homo factus est! quam ingenuus rationis! quam immensus facultatis! Forma et motu,
quam plenus et mirabilis! actione quam similis angelus! mente quam similis deus!
pulchritudo mundi! rex bestiarum!

Yet the sources Nowel was re-presenting seemed to be authentic historical documents, that must have been in his possession, or at least accessible to him. Unless it were to be assumed that Shakespeare himself worked from the same collection of documents, which is most unlikely (having small Latin and less Greek, he would certainly have struggled with Old Norse), then Nowel's manuscript must have been Shakespeare's primary source.

11. There is no other trace of any of the 'Hamlet' documents translated in Nowel's manuscript. The poems and extracts from Old English Scandinavian and Germanic literature

are of course indisputably genuine. Since Nowel was an antiquary and a master of languages, who spent his life handling such documents, there is nothing extraordinary in his having acquired, or had access to, archives of such material. The only other explanation could be that he invented the entire collection, a clear impossibility.

12. But then, as I turned over these arguments, I suddenly noticed, on the last page of the manuscript, in barely decipherable letters, what seems to be a list of sources:

- i Horatio documents
- ii Ofelia letters
- iii State Papers

13. These three collections were obviously the sources of all Nowel's documents, though he then dispersed and distributed them across his manuscript in a deliberate way. Now, the only other possible explanation could be, that Nowel had not only invented the whole collection, but even invented his sources; as if laying a trap for the unwary scholar, like some precursor of his namesake the author of *Tristram Shandy*, or like some proto-postmodern writer of fiction, born long before his time.

14. I am arguing that Nowel worked from a collection of authentic and original historical documents, which he translated, edited and began to arrange into a carefully-constructed narrative form, interpolating poems and prose extracts from his larger collection of early manuscripts. Given the close verbal parallels between the Nowel manuscript and Shakespeare's play, the dramatist must have worked from the manuscript. Versifying earlier sources was of course a legitimate method of dramatic composition; though the sources were usually classical and mediaeval histories, not the unpublished work of a man not long dead. This forces us towards the conclusion that Shakespeare pirated Nowel's work and passed it off as his own; and we know from contemporary complaints that this was the habit of the 'upstart crow' who was accused of beautifying his work with others' feathers.

15. Why did Nowel stop writing and retreat into obscurity? What exactly was it that he said about Queen Elizabeth and the earl of Leicester? The reader familiar with Elizabethan scandal will not have to travel very far into Nowel's manuscript to find the answer to these questions, and to understand why Nowel was glad to hand over his manuscripts, particularly this one, to Lambarde for protection, and to put himself beyond the imperious power of the Queen's anger and the long reach of the earl's secret police.

16. And what of the portrait of Nowel given to Alleyn, while Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was playing to capacity audiences at the Globe?

17. The part of *Hamlet* was played by the actor Richard Burbage. Burbage had been a member of the Admiral's men while Alleyn was its principal actor; and we can easily imagine the tensions between the veteran thespian and the new rising star. It was after a quarrel over takings that Alleyn left the company and joined Henslowe at the Rose: a trivial squabble, probably engineered, which left James Burbage in sole financial control, and his son now unrestricted by Alleyn's competition. It must have been a jaundiced Alleyn who watched Burbage hog the stage and steal the show at the Globe, making the most of that star role that could have been Alleyn's. The arrival of Nowel's portrait may have crystallized some of his own feelings, since Alleyn would have known that, just as Burbage was stealing his thunder, so a considerable part of the play currently packing the theatre had been purloined from

another's pen. Burbage and Shakespeare together sharing the lime-light: Burbage stealing Alleyn's show, Shakespeare pirating Nowel's words.

18. Who sent the portrait? We do not know. Somebody, perhaps, who felt a kinship with Alleyn on the basis of some common cause. Someone who felt the same disenchantment at another's unjustified success; someone who had also been cheated of his own rightful inheritance of fame?

19. Perhaps it was the man who had also been at the same performance of *Hamlet*, concealing his face inside the shadows of the Lord's Box, who had spotted Alleyn in the audience. This man too may have had good cause to smart under a sense of injustice, since he has been identified by some scholars as the true author, not only of this play, but of all the other plays attributed to Shakespeare; but who, for his own reasons, had to permit another to drink from the cup of his own deserving: Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford.

20. After the performance, he arranged to have delivered to Edward Alleyn a portrait of the writer whose work he had used extensively in the play's composition, his own boyhood tutor and manhood friend: Laurence Nowel.

I
The Prince of Denmark
(Part Five of *Excerpta Quaedam Danica*)
I

Pendant branches of willow swept downwards to the mountain stream that flowed, swift and translucent, through a deep rocky cleft and over clean white boulders. Peering down through the glassy green swell she could just glimpse white faces, staring up at her. There they were, re-enacting their ceremony of innocence, the cold drowned maids.

The opposite bank was starred with wild flowers, white daisies, black-eyed crow-flowers, blossoming nettles. Phallic buds dangled limply: dead mens' fingers. These she desired: to feel their soft flaccidity stiffen against her white hands. She grasped a branch of willow, and leaned across, stretching to reach the long purples. With a sharp crack the envious sliver broke, and cascaded her softly, with a cream of foam, into the icy brook.

She sank straight down, her skirt blooming around her. Now she could clearly see the river-maidens, their pale faces haloed with floating green weeds, and now she could clearly hear their sad, sweet song. From below a faint yellow glimmer woke in the depths: the Nibelung's gold. She stretched her long white hands towards her dead sisters.

Feeling the change of pressure, the baby in her womb kicked violently upwards. From the darkness of his warm living sea, he felt his mother seeking the cold waters of death, and he kicked violently against her in instinctive resistance.

Breaking the surface, she leaned back, entrusting her body to the white arms of the water-maidens, who bore her up and steered her, gently but swiftly, downstream. The child rested softly in the dark inland lake of her belly. She took up the maidens' song, a sweet and plaintive lay, melancholy with the sadness of dying love.

He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone.
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.

She floated on, mermaid-like, as if incapable of comprehending her own peril. Slowly, imperceptibly, her sisters let her sink, till the waters covered her fair round belly and her lovely face.

And will he not come again?
And will he not come again?
No, no, he is dead ...

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ofelia. Goodnight ladies; goodnight sweet ladies.
Goodnight. Goodnight.

II

Gudrun's Dreams. From the Laxdaela Saga (c. 1245)

'In my first dream', said Gudrun, 'I dreamed that I was standing by water. On my wrist I found a silver ring, which seemed to belong to me, and which I found very becoming. As bright as the moon, and with a sheen like the surface of water, it seemed immensely valuable, so I resolved to keep it.

'But just when I least expected it, the ring slipped from my hand and fell into the water. I never saw it again. What I had lost seemed more than the value of the ornament, or the beauty of a lovely thing. It was more like the loss of a first love. When I awoke, my face was wet with the tears I wept for the loss of my silver ring'.

III

From Prince Hamlet to the Lord Polonius

My honoured lord -

Having this day observed in court your daughter the fair Ofelia, it likes me that you should draw her forth from her retiring and maidenly demeanour, and present her at your leisure to us. She is indeed of face fair enough to enrich that constellation of beauties that grace the heaven of my father's court. Look to it, my lord, I pray you, for the pleasure of your prince

HAMLET

IV

Lord Polonius to Prince Hamlet

My dear prince and son to my sovereign lord -

I have, my lord, commanded my daughter to comply with your royal will. If her demeanour have displeased you, let me plead for her that she is very young, and unused to society. The attentions of so gracious a prince will, I doubt nothing, bring her forward as her place and breeding require. I am ever your humble and obedient servant

POLONIUS

V

Lord Polonius to Prince Hamlet

My lord -

May I on behalf of my dear daughter send unto you my regrets that an indisposition hath prevented her from appearing in court this last week. She is now recovered in health, and it is my hope that ere long you will see her in company.

I trust that my dear lord will not be angered by a loyal servant's counsel in these delicate matters. Young women in these days are, as your lordship well knows, schooled and learned as though they were young men. Though my daughter lacks nothing in obedience and loyalty, yet in faith to win her consent and compliance in this my lord could do no better than to address his wishes to the lady Ofelia in her own proper person.

It ill befits an old man to school the young in rules of courtesy. But my lord may receive assurance that such is the path to my daughter's affections. For doth not Ovidius himself say:

Young men of Rome, learn the barrister's art.
Not for the benefit of some hopeless plaintiff,
But only because
Women with words can be moved
More easily than judges. You'll persuade them
Quicker than Senate and people,
With the penetrating power
Of an eloquent speech.

From one whose paternal love is exceeded only by loyalty to his sovereign, your servant

POLONIUS

VI

Prince Hamlet to the Lady Ofelia

My lady -

Were it not to seem over-bold to presume on so slight an acquaintance, I would ere this, my fair Ofelia, have addressed my greetings to you in more formal terms than our acquaintance hath hitherto allowed. My friendship with your brother, my dear friend Laertes, and the loyal service long rendered by your estimable father to my father the king, should be

sufficient reasons in themselves to allow between us a greater familiarity than hath yet appeared.

To only glimpse in a crowded court such a face as yours, modestly averted from the throng of common gazers, is to incur a sensation something akin to long acquaintance. For what is such acquaintance, but in truth to know a face as familiarly as one's own? And who could look upon your face, and ever forget a single line or expression of so fair a countenance?

That same friend, your dear brother, hath informed me that, although of age, you have shunned the press of courtly society from a becoming modesty of nature, and a disposition more inclined to learning and devotions than to worldly pleasures. Yet there are, in truth, here in my father's court, such as take greater pleasure in learning and religion than in feasting and drinking, in wassail and carouse. I bid you show mercy to them, my dear lady, and grant them the benefit of your sweet society.

I have, as my lady knoweth, had words with your dear father on this matter. Though as your prince, I might command, I do but entreat, being in affection but your humble servant

HAMLET

VII

The Lady Ofelia to Prince Hamlet

My noble lord -

I am most honoured to receive your highness' kindly words of commendation. Yet in truth I do fear me that the object of your gracious praise is of far less value than the praise itself. That my face is considered fair, is praise to my mother, who gave it me. If my mind be educated, let the quality be ascribed to my father, who taught me. And if my behaviour be modest, let that virtue redound to the praise of my dear brother, who is as scrupulous to protect his sister's honour as he is to preserve his own.

There are many ladies in your father's court of far greater beauty and learning, and without the trammels of modesty to curb their forwardness. I pray ye, my good lord, to seek the company of such as these, and to reserve in your court a quiet place of stillness and peace for your loyal subject

OFELIA

VIII

Gudrun's Dreams. From the Laxdaela Saga (c. 1245)

'In my second dream', said Gudrun, 'I had another arm-ring, this time fashioned of pure gold. The bright yellow thing seemed a compensation for the loss of my silver ring, so I laughed at its cheerful brightness. Though gold is dearer than silver, this ring did not seem more precious than the first one. Yet I valued it more, and believed that this ring would be faithful to me, and would not betray me as the other did.'

'Then in my dream I seemed to stumble, and putting out my hand to save myself, my gold ring struck on a stone and shattered in pieces. To my horror I saw that each piece was bleeding, as if it were torn flesh. I felt a great grief at this accident, but not the same sense of loss. For the ring must have been flawed, I thought, to have broken so easily. I looked closely at each broken piece, and saw that the gold had indeed been full of flaws. It was not worth mourning; and yet my mind was full of sadness. It seemed to me that if I had taken better care of the ring, I might have kept it unbroken. The loss of this ring was like the loss of a loved husband. So when I woke, my face was wet with the tears I wept for the breaking of my golden ring'.

IX

Prince Hamlet to the Lady Ofelia

My dear lady -

Indeed you speak truly when you praise the virtue of modesty in women. Such a disposition doth grace a lady, inclining her from idle pleasure, fixing her mind on truth and learning. But it befits not that she withdraw herself from the society of such as would be more than glad to taste of her learning, and to receive from her piety the blessings of sweet grace.

You do mistake me quite should you believe me eager for the company of immodest women, whose free manners pass for wit, and whose unchaste deeds, though disgraceful to their sex, are praised as honourable by the swinish multitude. Nor yet do you catch my drift of circumstance, if you do believe my entreaty to be a counsel of immodesty, or a request that you forbear your virtuous disposition.

No, my lady, it is by no means in these terms that I address you. You must know me, from your brother and your father, as a man more devoted to philosophy than pleasure, and as one whose chief love is private conversation with the wise and learned. I beseech you, in the name of the love I bear Laertes, and my father's friendship to the good Polonius, to bear yourself more openly in court, that you may receive the respects and admirations due to you from your prince and servant.

HAMLET

X

From the Lady Ofelia to Prince Hamlet

My honoured lord -

If my dear brother have borne honest witness to my character, your lordship will not I trust fall under the illusion that modesty of demeanour, and a disinclination to frivolity, betoken in a maid either weakness, silliness, or a readiness to succumb easily to the promptings of others, even such as are greater than themselves.

Your lordship knows himself to be my prince, son to my king, and one day my king in your own right and title. As such, I love and honour you as a good subject should. Yet mine

own virtue as a maid, and the dignity of my family, I prize in good earnest as highly as my loyalty to my sovereign.

That you are my brother's friend, his good report confirms. And yet I trust it no disparagement upon my maidenly modesty to report that my dear brother is often more foolish than witty, and more fond than wise. I do fear that Laertes' manner of praise, though given with the best of hearts, may not be such as I myself would wish to own.

If your lordship wishes in truth to know me better, then I pray you to know me as I am: a lady, neither foolish nor fearful; of good family, and a father favoured by the king; a lover of learning, but no ink-stained scholar; a friend to the Holy Church, but no pale veiled sister; modest as becomes one of my years and situation, and free of all desire to have my character, even to my advantage, mistook.

If my lord wishes better acquaintance with such a one, let him approach her. A prince may look freely on his subject; discretion demands that the gaze be not returned. On this wise, in indirections, are false images born. Prince Hamlet will in truth find a loyalty of worth, and an affection of price, if in his eyes there appear a true image of his loving servant

OFELIA

XI

Gudrun's Dreams. From the Laxdaela Saga (c. 1245)

'In my third dream', said Gudrun, 'I was wearing a beautiful helmet of bright gold, all studded with precious gems. Though I had never seen the helmet before, I knew it as my own, as if it were a gift from the gods.

'The day was hot, and the helmet heavy. I could scarcely bear its weight, and felt myself stooping beneath its burden. I did not blame the helmet: it was mine, and I resolved to keep it. Yet although I desired it so, and took such care to preserve it, as I walked by the *Hvammfjord* it tumbled from my head, and fell with a splash into the water. The loss of my helmet seemed a greater grief than the loss of my gold and silver rings. It was as if all beauty had gone from the world: my loss was inconsolable, like the loss of life itself. So when I woke from this dream my face was wet with the tears I wept for the loss of my golden helmet'.

XII

The Lady Ofelia to Prince Hamlet

My most dear lord -

Having as befitted my duty complied, as I thought, with your desire, bore myself openly in court, and readily received your highness' attentions, I find myself not, as I expected, sealed to my prince in greater friendship and affection, but instead bereft of his companionship, condemned to hear the common prattle of courtly flatterers, and to solace my own solitude with memories of your lordship's favour.

You know right well, my lord, that I gave my friendship not easily, but freely and with all my heart. For a maid of some learning to find a man of like sentiment and reason, whose conversation both sharpens the mind and gladdens the spirit, seemed to me a precious prize, and one which I would not willingly part withal.

Yet now, when I might in truth hope to expect continuance of that blessed sympathy, my lord instead shuns me, and spends his days in hunting with companions unworthy of his grace and princely virtue.

Yet indeed, my lord, briefly to conclude, if such is the society my lord prefers, then you are not what I took you for. Forsaken and disappointed rests your poor

OFELIA

XIII

Prince Hamlet to the Lady Ofelia

My most sweet lady -

Forgive your chastened prince his truant disposition. It is not, in good sooth, any discontent with your society that drew me from your side. Do not the pleasures of the court oftimes cloy on the sober spirit? Yet though I am able, I find, to bellow after a boar with the best of my companions, my aching bones inform me that I am not after all more suited to the pleasures of the chase than I am to the chasing of pleasures.

Believe me, lady, that when I begged you to show me the brightness of your countenance, there was no ill will in my intention. Though our elders may care as little as they seem for the honour of an unblemished fame, it is the vice of our generation to set an inestimable value on reputation. I hold your ladyship in too great respect to permit any stain on your candid character. If those who surround us can think only ill of such a sweet association, let their malicious tongues have no tale on which to ply their slanderous trade.

But to be open with you. My lady, from a distance I offered you friendship, in all sincerity. At closer quarters, I found that friendship nearer akin to love. To win the heart of a chaste maid by dishonest blandishment is a base and dishonourable proceeding, not worthy a man of honour.

Had I offered love, you might have accepted or declined my suit at your pleasure. I offered you the gift of friendship, little knowing that the cunning little god of passion lurked behind my smile, ready to work his mischief. Now 'tis done, and in sorrow I ask that my gift, now become a mere conjurer's trick to catch unawares a maiden's eyes, be restored to me.

I beg you to think better of your prince than he deserves, and to pray for your loving servant

HAMLET

XIV

Princess Kreimheld's Dream. From the Nibelungenleid (c. 1100)

In her dream Kreimheld thought she had hatched and reared a hawk, wild and magnificent, its plumage beautiful, a fierce untamed light in its golden eye. But as she cast it from her wrist on its first flight, two great eagles swooped and tore it to pieces. The loss of her hawk seemed the bitterest fate that had ever befallen her.

On awakening she sought her mother Uote, and told her of her dream. 'The falcon you reared', said the wise old woman, 'is a noble knight who will one day become yours. But unless God protects him, he will as soon be wrested away from you'.

'Why speak to me, mother,' replied the maiden, 'of a man as my destiny? No warrior's arms will ever embrace me. I will never surrender my beauty to the love of a knight, but will keep it for myself to my dying day. I'll never cry for the love of a hero: no man is worth it'.

'Do not forswear so forcefully, my child', said her mother. 'If you are ever to know true happiness, it will come from a man's love. And if by the grace of God you should win to your love a noble and worthy knight, he himself will protect and foster your beauty'.

XV

The Lady Ofelia to Prince Hamlet

My lord, I know not what to reply to your letter with its words so sweet, its feelings so noble and commendable. But why indeed should you believe your expressions of love unwelcome to my all too open ears? Do I seem so hard of heart as to reject, out of hand, the offer of a true and virtuous love from one in whose arms I would fain die, rather than live a maid? O my lord, I have said too much. To our next meeting, and may it be soon, O soon, my sweetest lord, your devoted

OFELIA

XVI

Prince Hamlet to the Lady Ofelia

To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ofelia. In that sweet name I name both my sovereign and my tormentor. To plead for her pity, her humble subject begs that she may place thus, in her excellent white bosom, these trifling but heartfelt verses, penned by one whose gift of eloquence comes nowhere near the lofty height of his subject:

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love.

O dear Ofelia, I am ill at these numbers, I have not art to reckon my groans, but that I love thee best, O most best believe it; Adieu.

HAMLET

XVII

The Lord Laertes to the Lady Ofelia

Dear sister: I write to you from a traveller's inn not many leagues distant from Paris. Despite many days of journeying, we have not yet, you will surmise, reached our destination. The roads are little more than tracks of impassable mud; the horses are wretched beasts that can scarce run a mile; the coachmen insolent brutes who set a higher priority on their meat and liquor than on the comfort and convenience of their charge. There is little, then, to report in the way of diverting traveller's tales, since we have seen no place worthy the description, and no person worth the recognition.

My reason for writing to you so soon after my departure is, however, of quite another kind. Though my straitened leisure allowed me before my departure only to broach the subject, I was unable, especially in the presence of our dear father, to open my heart as fully as I would have wished to you touching the Lord Hamlet, and his apparent affection towards you. Though I count myself his friend, and have indeed sought to incite in him an admiration for your beauty and virtue such as befits a prince towards a lady of the court, I cannot joy, as you seem to do, in the prospect of the prince's using his favour to trifle with your affections.

I held it but a duty to encourage in Lord Hamlet such amity toward you as would serve to advance the nobility of our family. But, sister, professions of love are quite another matter. It is no more for Hamlet freely to choose the future queen of Denmark than for you or I. In this, as in all matters of state, his will is not his own; he is subject to his birth, and may not carve out his own path, as may lesser creatures such as we. His choice must be circumscribed, since on it depends the safety and health of the whole state.

For Hamlet's suit, then, take it as nothing more than a fashion, a desire of the moment; a violet that has blossomed too soon, and whose perfume will be spent before the frost of prudence nip its sweetness in the bud. Even if his love be sincere, though I beg leave to doubt it, it must at all events yield to the voice of that great body, the state of Denmark, of which he will one day be the head.

Consider, then, my dear sister, what loss your honour may sustain, should you listen to his songs of love with too attentive and yielding an ear. Suppose you should lose your own heart to him? or worse still, unlock the chaste treasure of your virginity to his unmastered importunity?

Fear it, Ofelia, my dear sister, fear it. Keep yourself in the rear of your own affections; guard yourself from the shot and danger of desire. Undress your beauty, as a chaste maid should, only to the innocuous gaze of the virgin moon. Be wary: fear is desire's best antidote. Repel Hamlet's suit; disclaim his attentions; keep both your virtue and your good name, that you may never live to be a shame unto your loving brother

LAERTES

XVIII

From the Lord Laertes to the Lord Polonius

My gracious and most reverend father -

Though I have not yet reached my destination, and hence have yet to encounter any opportunity of testing that sound and careful advice with which, ere my departure, I was by yourself so liberally supplied, I write prematurely on a matter too weighty and urgent to be deferred.

It is to me cause of some shame and regret that I have not hitherto confided in you my fears touching the Lord Hamlet and our own sweet Ofelia. I had hoped and trusted that my own private counsels, bestowed on her some time since, would have worked in her some consciousness of the danger to which, exposed to an assault from her prince's affections, she would render herself so easily liable. Hamlet's feelings towards her seemed, to my innocent eye, nothing but the seemingly consideration granted by a prince to the family of the king's chief counsellor. But perceiving the Lord Hamlet's interest in my sister to go beyond courtly flattery, I began to entertain misgivings and suspicion respecting his true intentions. He hath of late given much private audience to Ofelia, and she hath in her turn been toward him most liberal of her affection.

Though I have attempted, within the bounds of discretion proper to a subject, to convey to the prince himself the impropriety that would ensue were such a relation to proceed beyond amity, and to my sister, using a brother's privilege, I have offered sharp remonstrances against the dangers of her conduct, my good offices have achieved no good effect.

I am left therefore with no choice, though loyal to both friend and sister, than to alert my father to the hidden danger within his own house. In short, I fear me that my friend and prince means to make my sister, and your daughter, a whore.

Offering this intelligence to your consideration, and trusting your wisdom and discretion for its proper application, I rest, your loving son

LAERTES

XIX

The Lord Polonius to the Lady Ofelia

Ofelia,

I was ere you rose this morn from your chamber dispatched by his majesty our noble king Amled on urgent business to Norway. The matter on which I would confer with you cannot however await my return.

So to be brief. It is told me that very oft of late the Lord Hamlet hath given you freely of his private time, and that you of your audience have been most free and bounteous. If it be so, as so 'tis put on me, and that in way of caution, I must tell you that you do not understand yourself so clearly as befits my daughter, and your own honour.

If you believe Prince Hamlet's tenders of affections, then you behave like a green girl, unacquainted with the manners of the world. You may think yourself little more than a baby to accept as true currency protestations that can be no more than thin air. Lord Hamlet is a

prince out of your star: as far above you in eminence as my judgement out-tops yours. When Hamlet comes to wed, the match will be one set between nations, not persons; its purpose to seal amity between states, not to fulfil a silly maiden's idle dreams.

Were you to succumb under the sway of these blandishments that pass for love to unchastity, you would dishonour me, my good name and my worth in the eyes of my sovereign. Think on it: the king's chief counsellor father to the Prince's drab, and grandsire to his unlawful bastard? For shame, Ofelia, for shame. Entertain no more talk or correspondence with the Lord Hamlet. I forbid it as your father

POLONIUS

XX

The Lady Ofelia to Prince Hamlet

My most sweet lord -

Since I am unable to meet with you today as I promised, my lord must needs take this letter as poor substitute for my company. It is not of my choice, you will most readily believe, that I have broken our tryst.

I received yesterday, from my father who is absent in Norway on my lord the king your father's business, such a communication as I thought never to receive, and I hope never to receive again.

Therein my loving father, careful I doubt not only for my safety and protection, tells me in the roundest terms that he is acquainted with our mutual affection; that I should believe nothing of your professions of love, and trust nothing in your courtship. He warns me to break off our correspondence, and no more to entertain talk or society with your gracious self.

I am sorry indeed that my father is so mistaken in his apprehensions. 'Tis true, I warrant, that having been informed not at all of how things truly stand, he has no means of understanding them but those of his own conjectures.

I must without delay return an answer to my father's instruction. He must not long labour under these misapprehensions, believing as he does that you mean to make me not your wife and princess, but your whore.

Though it is indeed a hard task to persuade my dear father, once he is fixed in a course of thought, that he is mistaken, so dearly is he attached to his own words and ideas; and yet more so for a mere maid to challenge her father's judgement; yet I have all the courage needed to defend my love, as the bravest of knights, against all comers.

This, notwithstanding my firmness of resolve and bravery of spirit, I cannot do alone. You must, my lord, stand with me in this trial, and make known to the world the truth of our virtuous love and everlasting pledge of mutual faith.

Though I cannot, forbidden outright by a father's instruction, come to you, my soul is as deeply intertwined with yours as we had never been apart. You must instruct me, my lord and prince, as to what I should now say and do. I cannot speak or act alone.

OFELIA

XXI

The Lord Hamlet to the Lady Ofelia

You cannot, my sweetest love, be more solicitous than I am myself to have our love declared and committed to public knowledge. Though for the lascivious, secrecy may be an incitement to lust - no place being so well-suited to illicit passion than the inscrutable shadows of a locked corridor, no time so fitting as the protective shadows of deep midnight - with our love it is far otherwise. A love that hopes only for the mutual fulfilment of lawful wedlock, by its nature seeks the light of day, longs to breathe the blessed air, to feel the warm healing touch of the sovereign sun. Until our reciprocal affection be declared to the world, we cannot choose but remain wrongly burdened by the secret shame that belongs to guilty passion and adulterous lust.

Though this be plainly the mark we aim at, 'tis not so easily hit as was my poor heart, when your fair hand so skilfully directed the blind bow-boy's cunning butt-shaft. I have spoken with my lady mother, and fully confided to her all the circumstance of our position. She, like the loving mother and trusting soul she is, has naught but praise for you, kind wishes for me, and copious blessings to bestow upon our union. Be assured, good Ofelia, that no daughter could ever hope to gain not only a second mother after loss of the first, but to acquire one whose maternal tenderness looks to exceed even the fast affections of she who groaned for thee.

It is now incumbent on my good mother to address our suit unto my noble father the king. For he, she tells me, has been revolving for no little time some notion of my attachment to a foreign princess, in a marriage made not in heaven but in the council chamber; a union instituted for the mutual comfort of nations, and for the procreation of treaties. Let the good councillors dispute as they may, and howe'er she may be the fairest and purest of all ladies, I'll none of it. Yet thou knowest my great father to be of unshakeably firm opinions in matters of state. To him, as to all the noblemen of his generation, in point of marriage a woman may be weighed in kingdoms, and valued in principalities. The men of the old times had many wives, or none, and allowed no woman to interfere with their battle-plans, or curtail their carouses. And as you know, my dear father does but grudgingly accept the Word of Our Lord, and the wisdom of Holy Church. He, I know, would of his own opinion give no countenance to a love-match; for he would see no let or hindrance to our mutual pleasures, notwithstanding what woman sleeps in the king's bed, and bears his children.

Yet I doubt nothing that my dear mother will so prevail upon him as to overcome these ignoble and unchristian ambitions. For despite himself, he has long loved her as faithfully and truly as any Christian husband ought to cherish well his wife. Why it is long since, and well before the weaknesses of age began to curb the appetite, that he willingly forsook the embraces of those many women traditionally approved as fitting companions for a king's bed. Though it is no solace to me that I lack siblings, yet am I distinguished among the princes of my generation in that there are no little imitations of my father, got on the wrong side of the

blanket, filling the chambers of Helsingor. For my father, there has been but one woman, one he has so dearly cherished that he might not betwixt the winds of heaven visit her face too roughly. Why, he would hang upon her, as if increase of appetite did grow by what it feeds on ...

School yourself to patience, my dear Ofelia, and let our love be presented to my father through the mirror of that kindred affection he bears for my mother. I have urged the queen to seek an opportunity for audience with my father ere this week be out, for at midnight on the Sabbath following I am appointed to embark on my journey to school in Wittenberg. The king being much busied with matters of state, she will need some womanly wiles if she is to obtain from him a proper attention and care. But if she cannot obtain this suit, then there is none that can.

I rest, dear Ofelia, your loving prince

HAMLET

XXII

From the Lord Hamlet to the Lady Ofelia

My dearest love

I am en route for Wittenberg, where I am to undertake at the University studies considered fitting for a future king. You will surmise that my mother could gain no audience with the king, despite her best endeavours, good woman, to broach to my father the subject of our affections. Once he has successfully concluded the present negotiations with the Swede, she will present our suit to him.

It is but a short space, Ofelia, but two months - nay, not so much, not two. On my return to Denmark for the festival of Eostre, I look to meet you not as my secret *inamorata*, but as you will then be known in the eyes of Denmark and of the world, as my beloved, my wife, my queen. Till then, I remain your loving

HAMLET

XXIII

*Proclamation of King Claudius,
A.D. 1050*

Be it known throughout the kingdom of Denmark and all its tributary nations, that our sovereign lord Amled is, to our great grief and chagrin, this day by accident deceased. For sleeping in his orchard, his custom always of the afternoon, our best-loved brother was by a serpent stung; and in that instant, by infusion of that leperous distilment that holds such enmity with blood of man, at once dispatched.

It us befits to bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom to be contracted in one brow of woe. Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature, that we with wisest sorrow think on him, together with remembrance of our poor bereaved country. We therefore have without

delay, and by full consent of our Great Council in their better wisdoms, assumed the crown, and taken to wife his majesty Amled's widow Gertrude, our sometime sister, now our queen.

With a defeated joy, with an auspicious and a dropping eye, with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage, in equal scale weighing delight and dole, we name ourself king of Denmark.

Our loved and noble nephew Hamlet has been straightway summoned to return from where he is at school in Wittenberg, that we may comfort him and fold him to our heart, as he is our heir, and most immediate to our throne.

Rex mortuus est; vivat rex.

Signed this day with the king's seal

DENMARK

XXIV

The Lady Ofelia to the Lord Hamlet

My loving prince -

Though it has not been granted to me since your sad and most unfortunate return to Denmark, to see your highness in your own proper person, let Prince Hamlet bear in his remembrance the tender and abiding love of a devoted subject. Your loss is our loss too; you weep for a father, we mourn a king, who was to all his subjects a most kind and loving father. I long for the conclusion to this time of mourning, that my Prince may once again look upon his loving and loyal servant

OFELIA

XXV

The Lord Polonius to the Lady Ofelia

Daughter -

Preoccupied (though yet in mourning for the loss of an incomparable monarch and gracious lord our much-lamented king Amled, may God have mercy on his soul) in the service of a new sovereign, my duties of state are, you will readily conceive, both heavy and time-consuming. I have little enough leisure to spare for the pursuit of irksome private matters such as that concerning which, some months since, I had occasion to write to you from Norway. His majesty having broached in council the subject of Prince Hamlet's future, I need all assurance that the folly for which I had cause to rebuke you no longer remains to trouble my peace. It is a matter of no small moment, in which I depend on your discretion. My daughter cannot be discovered in the fomentation of some covert conspiracy to divert the prince's affections from whatever true and proper object may be directed by his majesty king Claudius. I look to be assured, Ofelia, that you have ceased to hold any communication or correspondence with the Lord Hamlet. Nay, that you be found on any inquiry made to be

beyond all suspicion and above all reproach, I command that you return to Hamlet any letters he may have sent to you. In filial duty you are bound to obey my express command. Waste no more of that time of which there is little enough for discharging of the great responsibilities of power.

On the morrow I leave again for Norway. Make haste in fulfilling my command. Your father

POLONIUS

XXVI

The Lady Ofelia to the Lord Hamlet

My dear prince -

Though I had hoped, ere the need arose to write to you, to have received from you some word, my duty as a daughter requires me, though unwilling, to initiate this communication. Unwilling to disobey even the most unjust command of a dear father, I am obliged to return to you, as he has expressly ordained, your letters to me. Since our love is no idle passion that will bloom in spring and wither in the summer, I look not in some lonely future to solace regretful memories by the contemplation of faded love-letters, and will for that reason alone be willing to surrender those sweet love-tokens (though into your hands alone will I commit them). Until we may again be together, and now, I trust, not in the shadows of a secret love, but openly in the eyes of the world, I remain your devoted

OFELIA

XXVII

Prince Hamlet to the Lady Ofelia

I know not why, my lady, you should offer to return to me letters I never writ, or seek to remind me of remembrances that come new to my memory. Why indeed should you believe you owe me anything, since I am sure I never gave you aught?

'Tis true that your father, the fishmonger, hath often sung in the market the praises of his mermaid daughter, half-fish and half-flesh; but for my part, touching fish, I cannot abide the stench of 'em. If the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion, then do not walk i' the sun; for though conception is a blessing, 'tis not how you would wish to conceive.

I know you fair; I would you were honest. If you be honest and fair, then your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty, for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty into a bawd than the force of honesty can transform beauty into his likeness.

Say I did love you once: why, you should not have believed me. Virtue cannot inoculate our nature from the disease of original sin: cure our rotten carcasses as you may, we will still stink of it. Get thee to a nunnery, go. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou

shalt not escape calumny. If thou wilt marry, marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell.

HAMLET

XXVIII

The Lord Polonius to the Lady Ofelia

Ofelia -

In sooth your immediate and peremptory reply to my last missive is urgently required. More hangs on this circumstance than you can possibly dream of. Let me have your answer, and in haste.

POLONIUS

XXIX

The Lady Ofelia to the Lord Polonius

My dear father,

The delay in my reply was occasioned by no wilful diffidence of your authority. You know me no undutiful or disobedient daughter, though I have with all reserve proper to a maid spoken out, as my learning and good sense have obliged me, wherever I have seen foolishness or injustice.

But forgive me my anger, which is occasioned more by the cause into which you inquire, than by any word or action on your own part. The reply I had hoped to deliver to your exhortation will now never be uttered; could you know the sum of it, 'twould touch you with the same despair and loss of hope that now afflicteth me.

That I had hopes of the love between the Lord Hamlet and myself, is true. Had you known the Prince's true mind, you could not have spoken with such contempt of his virtuous and noble affection. 'Tis the more pity, then, that the youthful promise of that love now lies withered in the ruin of its forward spring; and the true and chivalrous mind, that never conceived towards me aught but proper and princely intentions, lies blasted in the ecstasy of madness.

Yes, madness. Having written to my Lord Hamlet as you commanded, and hoping that our love would soon be openly declared, I had from him the strangest reply that ever I saw, quite unlike his ordinary speech and character. Fearing for my lord's health of mind, and knowing him much affected by the king his father's death, I sent my good wishes to him by a messenger.

Then, as I was sitting sewing in my closet, in comes the Lord Hamlet himself, his doublet all unbraced, no hat upon his head; pale as his shirt, and with a look so piteous in purport as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors. He takes me by the wrist, and holds me hard; pushes me to arm's-length, and with his other hand clutching his brow, falls to such

perusal of my face as though he would draw it. Then came a sigh, so piteous and profound that it did seem to shatter all his bulk and end his being. That done, he lets me go, and with his head over his shoulder turned, he seemed to find his way without his eyes, for to the last he bent their light on me.

O father, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! The expectation and rose of the fair state; the glass of fashion, and the mould of form; the observed of all observers, quite, quite down. And I of all ladies am the most deject and wretched; I, who sucked the sweet honey of his vows, to see that noble and most sovereign reason, like sweet bells jangled out of time and harsh! That unmatched form and stature of fair youth, blasted with ecstasy!

O woe is me! to have seen what I have seen, see what I see!

OFELIA

XXX

Claudius King of Denmark to the Lord Rosincrance

Our loving and dutiful subject, and loyal companion to my nephew the prince -

Welcome to Denmark. May your sojourn with us be as pleasurable as the resources of our court can provide. We were unable on your arrival last night to give you audience, the affairs from Norway being of a pressing and peremptory character. Besides, moreover that we did long to see you, the need we have to use you did provoke our hasty summons; and the service we require being of a confidential nature, 'twere better that our correspondence be at some discreet distance. You may trust the bearer of this letter, though none other, with your replies.

Something you will have heard, being even but a brief space in the court, of Hamlet's transformation. So we needs must call it, since neither the exterior nor the inward man resembles what it was. What hath put him so much from the understanding of himself I cannot dream of: there is no cause I know of but his father's death, now full two months since, to task his mind and senses with any more than ordinary weight and pressure.

I entreat you, and your companion Gilderstone, being from your youth brought up with Hamlet, and loving him as well as any of us, to vouchsafe your rest here in our court some little time, that by your company you may draw him on to pleasures, and thereby gather as much as you may glean of the cause of his distemper. If there is aught to us unknown that afflicts him, which brought to light may lie within our remedy, I pray you inform us of it with all the speed and dispatch you may expedite.

We need not further impress upon you, as one of our loyal subjects, the dangers that imperil a new-established state. Should you in the course of your conversations in our court hear any untoward murmurings against our place and person, I trust we will soon know of it. Your reward will equal the loyalty you show your grateful sovereign

CLAUDIUS

XXXI

King Claudius to the Lord Polonius

My dear friend and counsellor -

I trust our communications with the Norweyan ambassadors go well. Not so, however, are affairs here in our court, where my nephew's conduct goes from bad to worse.

We readily forgave his sullen resentment of our person, voiced in silent dumb-shows of distaste, or riddling speeches of opposition, by the plain causes of his father's death, and our expeditious marriage to the Lady Gertrude. Though none could question our legitimate right and title, or the wisdom of our alliance to my brother's queen, yet our nephew could be forgiven some immediate loss of his own hopes, since his father might have out-lived ourself and passed the crown direct to his son; and it is ever the case that a son who loves his mother, as Hamlet truly loves Gertrude, finds it hard to accept a second father.

Yet Hamlet's proper mourning for his father should not have been so protracted as to taint the pleasures of our court with his black moods and threatening demeanours. Our state requires, once we have paid our proper respects to the dead, a jovial and a hopeful air. Our subjects have no business with regret, or with the past: let them look cheerfully towards the future. Our nephew more than any other should be leading our royal festivities and cementing our state: not pacing preoccupied through the court with veiled lids, and seeking his noble father in the dust.

And now, to make matters worse, he is reported not merely melancholy, but melancholy mad. He talks wildly and acts strangely; broods for hours in inward contemplation, then starts up from the table and rushes forth as he had seen a ghost. I tell thee, good Polonius, I do fear for his sanity; but more for the ill-feeling and disorder he strews in our court. What can ail him, think you? Is he dangerous to our place and person?

We pray you to settle our affairs with Feng as speedily as may be, and return to Denmark with all dispatch. We have set a watch upon Hamlet, and hope to learn something of his true disposition, But we will feel more secure with our chief counsellor at home in court to manage both this necessary observation of our nephew, and the buzz and hum of discordant voices that presently afflict our ears, and foment unrest and fear within our court.

CLAUDIUS

XXXII

The Lord Polonius to King Claudius

My royal and most sovereign lord -

I begin my return to your court as soon as ever my business can be concluded, and hope to view again ere long your kingly visage. The fellow who brings this letter will know our stopping-posts on the way, and can be trusted to return a message: though I hope to be with your majesty in person ere you have long ceased to peruse this letter.

Sire, you know me as one whose old brain hath ever surely hunted the trail of policy. Nor do I fail you in this case: for I have found the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy. Your majesty

need fear nothing from your nephew's melancholy and madness; its cause is nothing more or less than love. Love, sire; love for my poor daughter Ofelia.

Soon as I did see this hot love on the wing, sure that your highness would not wish to be troubled, in these times of weighty and ponderous affairs of state, with such trifling foibles, I went roundly to work, and bespoke my young mistress in the plainest terms, rebuking her folly and ambition, showing her that Prince Hamlet by birth and fortune is a prince out of her star. Stern precepts I gave her, that she should lock herself from his resort, admit no messengers, receive no tokens. As my dutiful daughter ever, she took the fruits of my instruction, aimed only at preserving your highness' dignity and nobility; nor did I fear Hamlet's affection to be more than a young man's idle fancy for a pretty young wench. To my dismay your royal nephew, thus repelled, fell into a sadness, thence into a weakness, and by this declension, into the madness wherein he now rages.

Your highness will perceive this tale to threaten in no wise your security or state, though its import for your poor nephew's health of mind is serious indeed. Let me on my return assess the situation, and report to your majesty my intelligence and advice. It seems that we must quickly find some means of removing our beloved Hamlet, for his own better health, from the court. His mother the Queen must also, I do not need to remind you, be persuaded to this effect. His madness must not be permitted to strew dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds. Until I come again into your royal majesty's presence, I remain always your faithful servant

POLONIUS

XXXIII

The Lord Rosincrance to King Claudius

My honoured and most gracious majesty -

The noble Gilderstone and myself have, as you commanded, sought the society of the Lord Hamlet, using all our art to divert his distracted senses, and all our craft to descry the true cause of your great nephew's apparent lunacy.

Lord Hamlet is indeed, we find, sorely troubled with some agony of spirit. Though he received us like a gentleman, no man can doubt, observing his much changed demeanour, that some great distress has visited his deeply troubled mind. Offering ourselves as counsellors, and invoking the close companionship of our youths, we sought from him some private intimation of the causes of his distemper. He does confess he feels himself confused, and knows himself distracted: but from what cause he will by no means speak.

Your majesty asked me to glean what I could of the causes of Hamlet's affliction: else I would not dare to seek with my own lowly thoughts to uncover those of my sovereign's prince and heir. Although no physician, I do venture my opinion that Hamlet's is no true madness. Oftimes he seems full sound in mind, speaking lucidly, though sadly, of many matters. 'Tis true that then when we would bring him on to some confession of his true state, he doth put on a kind of crafty madness, keeping himself aloof from inquiry by riddling speech and incoherent gesture. Methinks his purpose, though coloured and defaced by such lunatic behaviour, can yet be glimpsed by a practis'd eye: and that purpose is, at least to my

understanding, a plain determination to keep his secrets close and guarded from every prying eye and every curious observation.

In brief, your majesty, I do not believe the noble prince to be mad, but to harbour some undisclosed motive he wishes not to see uncloaked. What that may be, we can as yet obtain no indication. Whether his purpose be dangerous to your majesty, I know not: but to freely confess my suspicions, I fear me that it may be so.

If your majesty will continue to avoid open audience with ourselves, notwithstanding some of your courtiers suspect on your part some displeasure towards us, it is like that the Prince's caution may relax, and opportunity arise for some more informative disclosure. Meantime I rest your most loyal and obedient servant

ROSINCRANCE

XXXIV

King Claudius to the Lord Polonius

My Lord -

I would that you see the contents of this ere you arrive at court. Sifting our own intelligence and matching it with yours, I fear me that for once, on the trail of policy, you hunt counter. It is not toward love that Hamlet's affections tend. Though his speech lacks form a little, my informants advise, it sounds not like true madness. No: there's something in his soul o'er which his melancholy sits on brood, and I do fear whate'er may hatch therefrom.

I like him not: nor stands it safe with us to let his madness range. Therefore I have in quick determination set it down that he shall with speed to England, for the demand of our neglected tribute. Let the seas stand barrier between this danger and our safety. Haply the changes of travel, and the sight of different countries, may expel this settled injury, whencesoever it cometh, from his heart. If not, then many a hap and accident may divert the young prince from his purposes, ere again he touch our kingdom's earth.

The terms of our estate may not endure hazard so near us as doth hourly grow out of his lunacies. On your return, since Hamlet knows not of it, waste no time in ceremony and greeting. Place yourself secretly at some point of vantage, in lawful espial upon the prince, until a favourable wind blow him safely from our shores.

Your sovereign master

CLAUDIUS

XXXV

Proclamation of King Claudius of Denmark, A.D. 1050

To the loyal and loving people of Denmark, from your sovereign lord Claudius:

Our subjects will, as one heart and with one eye, both grieve and weep to hear of the sad death of our beloved courtier and counsellor, the Lord Polonius.

Taking a chill on his late journey from Norway, where he was loyally engaged on the king's service, the good old lord was seized with a violent fever, and died this day at six of the clock.

Word has been sent to his son the noble Lord Laertes, who is expected to return post-haste from Paris to assume his father's title and revenues.

We pray for his orphaned children, who must now look to the king and queen as their father and mother; and for the soul of good old Polonius, who served his king and country well. May the Lord watch over him, and may light perpetual shine upon him.

Signed this day with the king's seal

DENMARK

XXXVI

From Hunferth, Court Physician, to Queen Gertrude

My most sovereign queen and mistress -

His majesty the king your husband commanded that I furnish you with a report on the condition of the Lady Ofelia. I have this day examined her, and in truth find the poor lady, though still healthy enough in body, much distracted in her wits.

Her heart and lungs are sound, and she has no fever. Though her pulse at times runs too fast, and her complexion is very pale and bloodless, yet her circulation seems in good order, and there is no case for bleeding. But her mind seems utterly confused, close indeed to madness.

She speaks much of her father, poor lady, as would be expected after such a sudden and unexpected loss. When offered kind words of pity and condolence, she looks knowing and aslant, and says she knows the world's tricks; then sighs and holds her heart as if in some great pain. Then she falls to staring at a stitch in her dress, or at the crack in a cup, as if descrying in these obscure marks some deep mystery of nature. What she says is only half sense, the meaning doubtful.

She says nothing of your noble son, only singing, her head on one side, in the most sad and plaintive way, snatches of old songs, such that you would weep to see her.

My diagnosis is that she is sick in mind, not in body: and that her wits have been turned by the great grief of her father's passing. I have given her draughts to calm her nerves, and help her sleep. Only nature, working on the youthful health of her frame, can calm her tortured spirits. Only God can ease her tormented mind.

There be other details concerning the young lady's condition which I would not willingly trouble your majesty with at the present time. I will inform your highness in due course at such time as your leisure permits a confidential audience. Ever your faithful servant

HUNFERTH

XXXVII

The Birth of Volsung. From the Volsungasaga (12th century)

King Rerir acquired great wealth in war, and took to wife a fair woman for his queen. Long they lived together, but to their mutual sorrow bore no child to receive their inheritance. To the gods they prayed, with heart, soul and mind, that they might be granted the gift of a child.

Odin heard the warrior's prayer, and Freya heeded the petition of the woman. The goddess called unto her the daughter of Hrimnir the giant, who often carried the gift-casket on her errands. To this messenger Freya gave an apple, and bade her carry it straightway to King Rerir.

So she transformed herself into a crow, and flew to where she found the king, sitting sadly on a hill alone. There she let the apple fall into his lap, knowing he would guess at its purpose. So he did, and daring to hope, went home to his queen, and bade her eat of that same fruit bestowed upon them by the goddess.

Soon the queen knew that she was with child, and they rejoiced thereat. But her pregnancy was long and heavy, and under its burden she began to grow sick. King Rerir must needs go to the wars, as does any king who hopes to preserve peace in his lands; though it was with a heavy heart that he left his travailing queen behind.

In his absence she pined yet more, and her body grew weaker as the child in her womb waxed in strength. Six long winters passed, and yet she was not brought to bed. Fearing that her own death would slay the unborn child, she called her physicians, and ordered them to cut the child from her. Though they feared to undertake such a deed, more especially in the absence of the king, yet was her passion so peremptory that they dared not disobey. So they cut the child from her body. He was a man child, already before his birth grown greater and stronger than any mortal ever born. To him was given the name Volsung, and he grew to be the greatest of warriors, the most successful in battle, and he ruled over all Hunland in his father's stead.

But the old story-tellers also remembered his poor mother, and say that the new-born Volsung kissed her tenderly ere she died; and that he never forgot her, and honoured her all the days of his life, for that she freely gave her life, only that he might live.

XXXVIII

From Hunferth, Physician, to King Claudius

My sovereign majesty -

I have as you commanded delivered unto the Queen my report on the Lady Ofelia's condition.

As I have explained to her highness, Ofelia's speech is half sense, half nonsense. Yet though her speech be nothing, there be no lack of hearers moved by the poor lady's sad condition to draw their own conjectures, and botch up words to fit their own thoughts.

'Tis true that Ofelia speaks much of her father: not in accents of mourning or fond recollection, but in tales of blood and murder, slaughter and violence. With all the terror of imagination she paints, in her words, pictures of a dark chamber, a mad swordsman, a vicious and fatal thrust into the shadows. If any believed Ofelia to be sane, they would I am sure be hasty after seeking a murderer. There are even some rash and disloyal spirits who murmur darkly that your majesty, fearing the good old man who knew many a king's secret, must have had some part in his imputed killing.

Ofelia also speaks much, though I have told the Queen nothing of this, upon the Lord Hamlet. It is my belief, though proof positive I have none, that the prince's departure, as much as the old man's death, hath turned the poor lady's wits. No maid, to my knowledge, ever ran mad from the death of an old father; though many a maid has found herself distracted by the loss of a handsome lover. If her pretty songs hold any meaning, then some of them too point towards love, not bereavement, as a principal cause. For though she sings sweetly enough of death and burial, of grass-green graves and grey stone tombs, her music will anon be disfigured quite by a coarse and cracked ballad, full of lewd and obscene language that I muse such a young lady had ever in her life heard.

In brief, then, my lord, though none need fear any harm from poor innocent Ofelia's madness, there may well be peril enough in those who, hearing her imperfect speech, perfect it to their own interpretation. Though a mere doctor and no politician, I beg to advise your majesty to be on your guard against those who would lay the old man's death, and the young prince's banishment, at your door: for those discontented spirits will, I doubt nothing, tell the same tale to young Laertes when he returns from France to find, as well as a father departed, a sister run stark mad.

Your servant

HUNFERTH

XXXIX

Above, in the inverted mirror of the stream's surface, there was only the sun's broken and refracted image. Then grotesque shapes of men, bent and hooded, rippled into vision. Strong hands seized her shoulders, and drew her, heavily and clumsily, water cascading from the sodden folds of her dress, out from the stream and onto a grassy bank. Twisted roughly onto her side, the water that had burned her throat with such a fierce pleasure of self-annihilation was forced, coughed and spewed, back out of her. Cold mountain air pierced her lungs, and the unwilling heart heaved to beat again.

Quickly, before she could realise her new surroundings, she was hoisted from the bank and carried swiftly up a thin track, soon disappearing into the cloistered cool of a pine-forest. Ofelia watched in a dream the bright rays of the sun shatter and re-form between the tops of

the high pines. The men who bore her were inscrutably silent, their sandalled shoes scuffing the wood's dry and leafy floor.

Then the steeped bulk of a building loomed above her, grey stone walls, a glimpse of an inverted bell in a tower. She saw the smooth inner stones of a pointed arch, and was aware of a dark interior, pierced by coloured light from stained-glass windows. She was laid, gently enough, on a wooden table in a small side-chapel. Her head stretched back and her eyes raised, she could see, upside-down, a figure of the Virgin, baby wrapped protectively in her blue cloak, lifting two fingers in blessing. Votive candles flickered at her feet.

She woke from what seemed a long oblivion of unconsciousness to apprehend her surroundings, now curiously thin and unreal. The walls seemed made of paper, the vaulted ceiling about to tear open and admit the bright sun and blue sky. The Holy Mother had conversely become real, her figure standing out from a background of fragile, disintegrating matter, her great pitying eyes enlarged to absorb all of Ofelia's distress, her mouth moving in voiceless prayer and benediction. Pray for us now, and at the hour of our death.

'Ofelia'.

The muscles of her neck would not move: her whole body lay paralysed into immobility. Only her senses of sight and hearing, unnaturally sharpened to unprecedented acuity, gave her assurance that she was still in the world.

Faces appeared above her: the stern brown features of a man, his head cowled in a black hood; and a woman's face, blurred and unrecognisable, forming into familiar definition - the Queen, her eyes as wide in grief and pity as those of the Madonna.

Though her body seemed as if already discarded, she felt within herself a movement, a quiet stirring as if life were returning, but this time without sadness or pain. The man's face turned towards the Queen, and shook in a taut, dismissive negative. Gertrude's eyes widened further, and shook down irrepressible tears. The man continued to stare at her, as if in urgent and imperative demand. Then her eyes closed, and she nodded assent.

Another man's face appeared, holding before Ofelia's eyes a wooden crucifix with the white body of the Saviour twisted in agony across its racking beams. His whispered words meant nothing to her: the Holy Mother, now smiling down on her, knew that she was sorry for her sins, and had already agreed to intercede for her with the Almighty Father. She felt, through her body's insensibility, the soft touch of oil on her hands, her feet and her forehead. It was her own right hand, lifted gently for her by the Queen's long white fingers, that traced across her body the sign of the cross, from head to breast, from shoulder to shoulder. *In nomine patris. Et filii.* The son. But not as your daughter may conceive.

Then with a last pitying look, Gertrude's face disappeared. Ofelia felt, still without pain, another line drawn across her body, again in the shape of the cross: though this seemed more like an incision, a spear-thrust cutting deep into her side; and she heard, just before the final unconsciousness drowned her senses, the loud and indomitable cry of a new life.

Her death was doubtful. Sweets to the sweet: farewell.