

# ORESTES AND HAMLET

## *From Myth to Masterpiece: Part I*

Earl Showerman

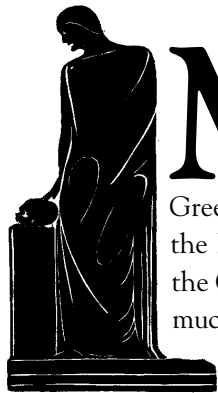
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And though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek,  
From thence to honour thee, I would not seek  
For names; but call forth thund'ring Aeschylus,  
Euripedes and Sophocles to us . . .

*To the memory of my beloved, The AUTHOR,  
Mr. William Shakespeare, And what he hath left us,*

Ben Jonson



**M**ANY have commented on the classical themes and allusions in the poems and plays attributed to William Shakespeare. *Hamlet* is rife with easily identifiable classical sources, reflected in language, plot, metaphor, and allusion. A close look may even reveal that *Hamlet* derives as much from Greek myth and Roman history as it does from the universally accepted primary source, the Danish legend of Amleth (Amlodi) as reported in the late twelfth century by Saxo the Grammarian and later by the Frenchman, Belleforest. *Hamlet's* dramatic power owes much to its author's deep knowledge of Homer's epics and the Greek tragedians.

The themes of royal assassination, inherited fate, intergenerational murder, incest, adultery, tainted food and wine, ghostly visitation, and violated sanctuary and burial rites permeate the stories of Hesiod, Pindar, Homer, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, and the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles. Further, *Hamlet's* classical roots seem to extend beyond mythic drama, extended by allusions to the corrupted Roman emperors Claudius and Nero. Hamlet may be a Dane, and Saxo's Latin or Belleforest's French his first source, but his story has such a variety of classical elements that earlier sources of this Elizabethan masterpiece must be considered.

In the annual Shakespeare lecture to the British Academy of 1914, published as *Hamlet and Orestes: A Study in Traditional Types*, Gilbert Murray explored the remarkable similarities in the *Oresteia*, Saxo's *Amlodi*, and *Hamlet*. He identifies two interesting aspects in these comparisons:

There are first the broad similarities of situation between what we may call the original sagas on both sides; that is the general story of Orestes and Hamlet respectively. But secondly, there is something much more remarkable; when these sagas were worked up into tragedies, quite independently and on very different lines, by great dramatists of Greece and England, not only do most of the old similarities remain, but a number of new similarities are developed. That is Aeschylus, Euripides, and Shakespeare are strikingly similar in certain points which do not occur at all in Saxo or Ambales or the Greek epic. (14)

Murray gives the example of the hero's madness, which is the same in Euripides and Shakespeare, but very different from the Northern legend in Saxo or the later form of the same legend in the Icelandic Ambales Saga. He actually asks the question, "Did Shakespeare study these Greek tragedians directly?" To which question he must answer "no," based on the opinion of "all critics"; although "of course it is likely enough that some of Shakespeare's university friends, who knew Greek, may have told him in conversation of various stories or scenes or effects in Greek plays" (15). Murray further argues that Orestes shows no character development in Seneca's Latin. Reverting to a proposed archetypal dramatic principle in tragedy, he asks:

Are we thrown back, then, on a much broader and simpler though rather terrifying hypothesis, that the field of tragedy is by nature so limited that these similarities are inevitable? . . . I do not think that in itself it is enough to explain those close and detailed and fundamental similarities as those we are considering. . . . [T]here must be a connection somewhere. (15)

Hamlet and Orestes are perhaps even greater as tragic heroes because their dramas move through times of cultural liminality. Orestes's generation is the last of the Age of Heroes, to be followed by what Hesiod called the Iron Age. No more would the Olympian gods walk the earth. Heroes transform into revered ancestors of noble families. Hamlet's highly developed conscience, his moral philosophy, reflects a similar cultural transition. The medieval Great Chain of Being, codes of honor, and religious dogma were giving way to a heliocentric cosmos, the Renaissance, and the Reformation. Hamlet's spiritual power arises from an Orestian root. Both these archetypal tragic dramas succeed by addressing the ultimate anxieties of existence in an uncertain age.

### Shakespeare's Greek: sources, words, themes and tropes

In "Shakespeare's 'Lesse Greek,'" Andrew Werth reviews the evidence that, despite Ben Jonson's dismissive phrase—"small Latin and lesse Greek"—the author of the Shakespeare canon

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had a solid knowledge of the Greek language and of classical literature, both Greek and Latin. J.A.K. Thomson's *Shakespeare and the Classics* (3) and Michelle and Charles Martindale's *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity* are reviewed by Werth, who concludes that the goal of these authors was, apparently, "to place . . . limits on Shakespeare's knowledge, proving thereby that because Shakespeare relied on a relatively small fund of classical knowledge, the plays were written largely by one man" (12). Although Thomson describes the Latin in Shakespeare as "formidable," he must conclude that "Shakespeare was not a scholar" because "Greek was out of the question." Similarly, the Martindales assert:

Any Greek language Shakespeare had would not have been sufficient to allow him to read the extremely taxing poetry of the fifth century BC. Renaissance culture remained primarily Latin-based . . . . Moreover, despite all efforts, no one has succeeded in producing one single piece of evidence from the plays to make any such debt certain, or even particularly likely. (41-2)

This last statement is a flat untruth, as Werth and many others have shown in great detail, but where the truth isn't palatable, one can always replace it with a flat untruth, uttered with the kind of emphasis one might give the truth had one the courage to pronounce it. While admitting that there are some unexpected allusions in *Titus Andronicus* to untranslated sources, among them Euripides's *Hecuba* and the *Ajax* of Sophocles, both authors dismiss them as simply proof of Shakespeare's mastery of Greek drama.

Yet back when Shakespeare experts were classically trained themselves, George Stevens, a remarkable Shakespeare editor of the eighteenth century, held that the author must have read *Ajax*, and that *Titus* was "the work of one who was conversant with the Greek tragedies in their original language" (Thompson 58). Werth points out references to other untranslated Greek sources for *Henry VI Part 3* (Homer's *Iliad* or Euripides's *Rhesus*) and *Timon of Athens* (Lucian). "The Martindales surmise that Shakespeare might have seen Erasmus's Latin translation, but Thompson notes that Shakespeare's treatment of the material is devoid of the Latin feel we get, for example, in *Julius Caesar*, which is "studiously" Latinized" (14).

Shakespeare's inventiveness with language is exemplified in *Hamlet* where up to 600 new words or meanings have been noted by scholars. Werth identifies a number of these as deriving from classical Greek. These include: *academe*, *critic*, *dialogue* (as a verb), *metamorphize*, *Olympian*, *pander*, *ode* and *mimic* (15). Sonnets 153 and 154 about Cupid's "heart-inflaming brand" pose a similar problem, since many traditional scholars, including Katherine Duncan-Jones, and A.L. Rowse, seem to agree that the source of both is the *Greek Anthology*, untranslated until the Latin version of Lubinus was published in 1603 in Heidelberg (16).

**R**EGARDING Shakespeare's debt to Greek epic poetry, a leading authority on biblical allusions has asserted that "Shakespeare used many Homeric details not in Chapman," whose translation of Seven Books from the *Iliad* was printed in 1598, with five more appearing in 1608. Scholars have also noted Shakespeare's use of Homer in plays that include *Troilus and*

*Cressida*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *Comedy of Errors* (19). In a 1960 article in the *Shakespeare Newsletter*, William Jones asserts that the name *Laertes* signals that the core drama of *Hamlet* concerns the relationship between fathers and sons.

A careful check of *Hamlet* and the *Odyssey* reveals even more valid reasons for the use of the name *Laertes*. At the beginning of *Hamlet*, the prince sits brooding over the wedding feast. At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus sits brooding among the wooers to his mother. To both sons comes news of a supernatural visitation: Hamlet hears of the Ghost, Telemachus hears from Athena cum Mentor. Both supernatural agents demand that the sons take action to restore their fathers to their rightful positions, one to the crown of Ithaca, the other to eternal rest. And in both *Hamlet* and the *Odyssey* it is the sons' responses to these supernatural demands that bring about the remaining action.

Jones further observes that, as Zeus makes the opening speech of the *Odyssey*, he meditates on the story of Aegisthus, who seduced Clytemnestra, helped kill Agamemnon, and was slain in turn by Orestes. The choice of a Greek name for Laertes's sister Ophelia (meaning "help" or "a source of gain") also seems relevant. "It is not surprising that Shakespeare, probably trained in the analogous thinking of the Renaissance, should have turned to the *Odyssey*." Werth notes that Jones,

realizing perhaps how unusual it was to suggest that Shakespeare was intimate enough with the *Odyssey* to actively draw on these parallels, qualifies his thoughts by noting that "Shakespeare might have been only half-conscious of the thought process . . ." though his conclusion is firm: "Nevertheless the relationship is there." (20)

According to the work of several scholars reviewed by Werth, the Greek tragic style seems to have influenced Shakespeare's use of dramatic tropes (21). Rhetorical devices shared by the Greeks and Shakespeare include play on words (paronomasia), paired opposites (antithesis), line by line dialogue between two characters (stichomythia), words that sound like their meanings (onomatopoeia), compound epithets, and most particularly the use of metaphors. The importance of irony in both the Greek dramas and Shakespeare has also been noted by scholars. Thomson writes: "Shakespeare works in the Greek way upon the knowledge of his audience in order to produce the effect of tragic irony." In her book *Shakespeare, Sophocles: Dramatic Themes and Modes*, Mary Shackford begins:

Shakespeare shared with the Greek dramatists an artistic instinct for irony . . . an ever-present element in the subtle effectiveness of his dramas, giving them fine edge and significance. *Hamlet* is the most ironic of his works, and, perhaps because of this dominating irony, the appeal of *Hamlet* has been wider, more powerful, and closer to the heart of common life than that of any other tragedy since Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides wrote plays. (1)

### Greek and Latin allusions in *Hamlet*

Scholarship on Shakespeare's knowledge of Greek has focused primarily on parallels of plot, ideas, philosophies, and on classical allusions that are part of the rich tapestry of the plays and poems. Opinions include evidence for his Platonism, his stoicism, his ability to weave theology into moral law, and his knowledge of Aristotelian cosmology (Werth 22). Shackford compares *Hamlet's* plot and style to Sophocles's *Electra* and *Antigone*. "Certain resemblances between *Hamlet* and *Antigone* in the character of the protagonists, the conduct of the uncle, the moral problems of the paternal marriage, and the premature death of hero and heroine, suggest that the Hamlet story might have had some common source before the *Ur-Hamlet*" (25).

An astonishing number of classical names and allusions appear throughout *Hamlet*. These are worth noting in exploring the argument that the family dramas of *Orestes* and *Hamlet* have a great deal in common. Greek and Roman gods, Titans and heroes (Hercules in particular) are often referred to in the text, most frequently by Hamlet in his speeches and soliloquies. The pantheon of Greek mythic characters named in *Hamlet* includes Apollo, Hecate, Hymen, Niobe, Hyperion, Priam, Hecuba, Pyrrhus, the Cyclops, satyrs, Mounts Pelion and Ossa, the Nemean Lion and the Hyrcanian beast, and—last but not least—Alexander the Great. Roman Gods, places, heroes and artists identified in *Hamlet* include Jove, Mercury, Neptune, Mars, Tellus, Vulcan, Lethe, Aeneas, Dido, Damon, Pythias, Caesar, Brutus, Claudius, Nero, Herod, Roscius, Seneca, and Plautus. Although these names were popular in both Court conversation and popular poetry, Shakespeare never uses a mythological name or place name inaccurately, suggesting a genuine knowledge of sources in versions of Ovid, Homer, and Hesiod not yet available in English.

The use of so many Latinized names in the text—Claudius, Marcellus, Bernardo, Francisco, Reynaldo, and Lucianus—seems as unusual as the use of Greek names for Polonius's children, particularly for a drama that takes place far to the north. Horatio describes himself as "more an antique Roman than a Dane." The same might be said of the entire text of the play.

### The tragic House of Atreus

A selected number of these classical allusions can be used to demonstrate the relationship between *Hamlet* and the characters and themes of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Oresteia*, and other sources that tell of the curse of the house of Atreus. In his first soliloquy Hamlet identifies Gertrude with Niobe when he says, "frailty, thy name is woman—a little month, or ere those shoes were old with which she followed my poor father's body, Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she—O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourned longer!" (1.2.46-51). In Pindar's account, Niobe was the daughter of Tantalus, the son of Zeus and more honored by the Olympian gods than the rest of his many mortal children.

Niobe was blessed with a happy marriage to Amphion, another son of Zeus and an incomparable musician. A rich and powerful queen, she demanded that her people worship her instead of the goddess Leto, and that they make sacrifice at the temple, not to the goddess, but to her. Niobe

believed she was more worthy than Leto because she had borne fourteen children to Leto's two. To revenge this insult, Leto's children, Apollo and Artemis, kill all of Niobe's children one by one, as she watches. Witness to her children's slaughter, Niobe's grief was too great to express. Dumb as a stone, she continued to weep for her children until she turned into a pillar of weeping stone.

This reference to Niobe in Hamlet's first soliloquy connects the story to her father, Tantalus, who was so favored by the gods that he could partake of the nectar and ambrosia reserved only for the Immortals. In some versions he is guilty of attempting to steal the food of the gods, but his greatest sin, cause of the curse that will bring suffering to generations and lead ultimately to Orestes's matricide, was his attempt to deceive the gods by serving them, at a banquet, the cooked flesh of his son Pelops. For this offense his punishment was to stand forever in a pool in Hades surrounded by trees bearing ripe figs, apples, pomegranates and pears, all just out of reach, while he suffered the torments of eternal thirst and hunger. Pelops was resurrected by the Gods (all except for an ivory or golden shoulder, necessary because Demeter had tasted of him) but, like his father, he too was cursed. Having required the assistance of the charioteer Myrtilus in gaining the hand of Hippodamia in marriage, when Myrtilus showed too much interest in Hippodamia, Pelops threw him off a cliff. As he fell to his death, Myrtilus cursed Pelops, a curse which falls heavily on Pelops's sons, Atreus and Thyestes. Grown to adulthood, the younger brother, Thyestes, commits adultery with Atreus's wife and steals the golden fleece that determined the kingship of Mycenae. Successful at first, an inauspicious omen, the sun setting in the east, brings his banishment and his brother's rise to power. Still furious over his wife's infidelity, Atreus lures Thyestes back to Mycenae on the pretext of reconciliation and, at another ghoulish banquet (will they never learn?!) has his brother's sons roasted and served to their father, their hands and feet brought to him on a platter.

We get further details of the story from Homer. On the advice of an oracle, Thyestes impregnates his daughter so that he may beget a son who will take revenge on Atreus. It is this son, Aegisthus, who seduces Clytemnestra during the ten-year Trojan War, helps her murder her husband Agamemnon on his return from Troy, and who is in turn killed by Orestes. In the *Iliad*, Zeus tells of Aegisthus's treachery, of how he ignored Hermes who advised him not to kill the King because Orestes would be revenged on him. In the *Odyssey*, Agamemnon's ghost meets Odysseus in the underworld and tells him how Aegisthus killed him when he was defenseless at a feast held in the King's honor. In the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, it is the queen, Clytemnestra, who first strikes Agamemnon, while he is taking his bath, in revenge for the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia.

The compounding of these inherited curses and crimes makes the House of Atreus the most tragic in Greek mythology. Deceiving the gods and demanding to be worshipped sets the stage for generations of murder, revenge, adultery, incest, and cannibalism.

**A**GAMEMNON is the eldest son of Atreus. In the post-Homeric dramas he appears to compound the family curse by sacrificing Iphigenia to Artemis as the Greeks gather to make war on Troy. This sacrifice is required because an omen warns that Artemis is offended: two eagles tearing apart a pregnant rabbit foretell the fall of Troy, her favored city. In Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Iphigenia is saved by the substitution at the last minute of a stag, while she herself is spirited away to the island of Tauris where she lives on as a devotee of the goddess. Things end less well for

Iphigenia in Sophocle's version where she is tempted to the Greek camp at Aulis by her father's promise to wed her to the great Achilles. Although Achilles himself is quite willing to consummate the marriage—in one version, he offers to defend her from those who demand her sacrifice—the model child obediently accepts her fate.

In this she is like Ophelia. Both are noble innocents promised to warrior princes. Both are pawns of powerful fathers and both end as victims of nasty Court politics. The brothers of both Iphigenia and Ophelia seek revenge on their fathers' killers. Laertes, who uses a poisonous deception to effect his vengeance, dies in the attempt, while Orestes is driven mad by the Furies.

### The play's the thing

Shakespeare uses the Players in Act II Scene 2 to hint that the fate of Achilles, who was to wed Iphigenia, foreshadows the fate of Hamlet, who was to wed Ophelia. References in *Hamlet* to Achilles, the hero of the Trojan war and central figure of Homer's *Iliad*, would add to the Dane's aura as doomed hero in the minds of a classically-educated Court audience. It is Achilles's son Pyrrhus that Hamlet and the First Player describe in horrific detail, revengefully dismembering Priam, King of the Trojans (2.2.428-499). A detail omitted by Shakespeare—but one which would have been understood by a classically-trained sixteenth-century audience as a turning point in the ancient war—was the desecration of Priam's body. The gods were offended, not because Pyrrhus killed the old King, but because he murdered him in a place of sanctuary, dismembering him in full view of his anguished wife. Things did not go well for the Greeks after this.

The sin of Pyrrhus is an interesting prelude to the play that Hamlet hopes will catch the conscience of the King. Following Claudius's guilty response to the play, Hamlet seeks him out, determined to carry out the revenge demanded by his father's ghost, but, unlike Pyrrhus, Hamlet refuses to take the King's life while he is protected by the sanctuary of prayer:

A villain kills my father, and for that, I his sole son, do this villain send to Heaven!  
Why this is hire and salary, not revenge . . . . And am I then revenged to take him in  
the purging of his soul, when he is fit and seasoned for his passage? No! (3.3.76-86)

The unusual style of the First Player's Pyrrhus speech has drawn attention from scholars as well. The Martindales note its "bizarre phrases" and "strained hyperboles," which they feel clearly marks it off from the style of the rest of the play:

It is thus reasonable that Shakespeare is attempting an epic style, grand, slow-moving,  
with strange and archaic words, numerous tropes, adjectival doublets and half-lines, a  
distinctively Virgilian feature. (116)

This they label Shakespeare's "Trojan style." Thompson too notes the peculiarities of this passage and asserts, "The Pyrrhus speech in Hamlet has every quality of Lucan" (231), the Roman poet who was a contemporary of Seneca. Emrys Jones carries this analysis further:

The suggestion that Lucan is behind this style is illuminating, and, I think, worth

considering. But we need to go beyond saying that Shakespeare was merely “influenced” by Lucan—he was doing something much more purposeful and deliberate. He was imitating him, and imitation implies at least some close knowledge of the model. We may still wonder, however, why particularly the subject of Priam’s death should have been cast into an imitation of Lucan’s style. Lucan’s epic is about the war between Caesar and Pompey, not the fall of Troy. (276)

Jones suggests that Shakespeare is perhaps letting the audience hear what Lucan’s “lost tragedy” of Troy may have sounded like. “Hamlet does in any case incorporate a number of details from the lives of Claudius and Nero; perhaps a Lucan pastiche is related to them” (277).

### Theobald’s classical allusions

The more contemporary scholars, Shackford (1960), Thompson (1966), Jones (1977), and the Martindales (1990), ignore the earlier commentators, Victorian William Theobald (1829-1908) and classicist Gilbert Murray (1866-1957). Theobald’s 400-page book, *The Classical Element in the Shakespeare Plays*, includes hundreds of allusions and devices from works of classical antiquity he finds in the plays and poems of Shakespeare. That he dedicated his book to the memory of “Miss Delia Bacon, a protomartyr in the cause of truth” may explain why his work has been ignored by more recent scholarship. His agenda for Shakespeare is spelled out early:

Therefore, when we come across unequivocal echoes or unmistakable references to the works of Herodotus, Homer, Plato, or Sophocles, which were untranslated when the plays were written, we are fully justified in concluding that their author was acquainted with those works in their original garb, or in the Latin translations sometimes appended to the Greek text. (15)

Theobald identifies several new words and meanings in *Hamlet* such as *implorators* and *perpend*, a word used by Polonius (2.2.106) and also by Henry the Fifth (4.4.8). Interestingly, long before Shakespeare used it in *Hamlet* (1603), *perpend* was used in 1568 in the interlude play *Horestes*—the focus of Part II of this thesis.

The following classic references are selected from Theobald’s compendium, as organized in his text in alphabetical order by poet and playwright:

**Aelian:** Hamlet tells Gertrude “Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed / Pinch wanton on your cheeks, call you his mouse” (3.4.166). Theobald points out that *mouse* as used here implies a thorough understanding of the classical idiom as expressed by the Roman stoic rhetorician, Aelian (170-235), who wrote moral anecdotes about the characteristics of animals and humans. In Aelian’s words “they call a woman who is grossly unchaste by the name of mouse” (60).

**Aeschylus:** In offering numerous possible connections between *Hamlet* and the works of Aeschylus, Theobald is not alone. His contemporaries Sidney Lee, in his *Life of Shakespeare*, and



J. Churlton Collins, in “Shakespeare as a Classical Scholar,” draw attention to the “sea of troubles” image in Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy (3.2.61). Collins notes that in both *Seven Against Thebes* and the *Persae*, Aeschylus uses a Greek expression with the same meaning, *hakon pelagos*, an expression also used by Homer (61). More relevant to our thesis perhaps is the grave concern of the avenging children in *The Libation Bearers* (*The Choephoroi*) (420-60) similar to Hamlet and Laertes in their anguish over the manner of the deaths of their noble fathers and their lack of appropriate burials. Both pairs—Orestes and Electra, Hamlet and Laertes—are deeply troubled by this offence. Electra laments to Orestes that their father has been buried with maimed rites:

O fierce flint-hearted mother!  
 To a flinty grave you bore him;  
 A king by no procession  
 Through mourning streets attended  
 A husband, laid unhonored,  
 Unwept in a cruel bed. (*Choephoroi* 430-435)

In expressing his dismay over the neglect of proper rites for Polonius, Laertes comes close to Electra’s language.

. . . means of death, his obscure burial—  
 No trophy, sword, or hatchment o’er his bones,  
 No noble rite no formal ostentation—  
 Cry to be heard as ‘twere from heaven to earth. (4.6.208-211)

Hamlet’s father’s ghost, too, it seems, is troubled not so much that he has been deposed and usurped, than that he died unconfessed:

Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched,  
 Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,  
 Unhousled, dis-appointed, unaneled,  
 No reck’ning made, but sent to my account  
 With all my imperfections on my head.  
 O horrible, O horrible, most horrible! (1.5.75-80)

**Euripedes:** The possible demonic nature of his spirit visitor troubles both Hamlet as it does Orestes in Euripedes’s *Electra*. Regarding the command to kill Clytemnestra, Orestes asks, “Did not some demon, likened to the God, enjoin that?” (Theobald 158), so that Elektra must reassure him that it was in fact the Olympian Apollo who had appeared to him, while Hamlet’s great “rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy concludes:

. . . the spirit that I have seen  
 May be the devil, and the devil 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. (3.1.575-580)

**Homer:** Homer's description of Agamemnon in Book II of the *Iliad* has parallels with Hamlet's impassioned description of his father while pleading with Gertrude during the bedroom scene. Both Agamemnon and old King Hamlet have many divine attributes that make heroes of men:

. . . powerful Agamemnon,  
 with eyes and head like Zeus who delights in thunder,  
 like Ares for girth, and with the chest of Poseidon;  
 like some ox of the herd pre-eminent among the others,  
 a bull, who stands conspicuous in the huddling cattle;  
 such was the son of Atreus as Zeus made him that day,  
 conspicuous among men, and foremost among the fighters. (*Iliad* 2.441-83)

See what grace was seated on his brow –  
 Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,  
 An eye like Mars, to threaten or command,  
 A station like the herald Mercury  
 New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;  
 A combination and a form in deed  
 Where every God seemed to set his seal  
 To give the world assurance of a man. (Hamlet 3.4.55-61)

Theobald adds a detail to Emrys Jones's suggestion that *Hamlet* and the *Odyssey* are linked. In Book I, as Telemachus daydreams that his great father will come home, scatter the suitors, and recover honor, Athena appears at his door in the form of Mentor. Hamlet's comment to Horatio—"My father, me thinks I see my father; ["O where, my lord"?] In my mind's eye, Horatio"—is immediately followed by Horatio's description of the ghost's appearance (1.2).

Homer may also be the source of an unusual allusion found only in the Second Quarto (1604). At the beginning of Book 24 of the *Odyssey*, Hermes uses his golden wand to herd the souls of the slain suitors past the Ocean, White Rock, Sun, and Country of Dreams to their resting place at the World's End. In two different translations, ghosts are described as "squeaking" or "gibbering" like

bats, by Robert Fitzgerald (1963) and by Richmond Lattimore (1965). Horatio uses the same words for the noises made by Roman ghosts resurrected from their graves when Caesar was murdered:

In the most high and palmy state of Rome  
 A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,  
 The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead  
 Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets  
 At stars with trains of fire and dews of blood  
 Disasters in the sun and the moist star  
 Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands . . . (*Ham.* Q2 106.6-106.12)

**Juvenal:** Decius Junius Juvenal (60-140) is the great Roman poet that Robert Greene referred to as a “byting satirist.” Theobald compares Gifford’s translation of Juvenal’s Tenth Satire to Hamlet’s description of the miseries of old men during his interrogation by Polonius. Juvenal wrote:

. . . for mark what ills attend  
 Still on the old, as to the grave they bend:  
 A ghastly visage, to themselves unknown;  
 For a smooth skin, a hide with scurf o’ergrown,  
 And such a cheek as many a grandam ape  
 In Tabraca’s thick wood is seen to scrape. (230)

Hamlet abuses Polonius in similar fashion during one of the wittiest exchanges in the play:

. . . the satirical slave says here that old  
 Men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes  
 Purging thick amber or plum tree gum, and that they have a  
 Plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams. (2.2.196-9)

Hamlet continues to mock Polonius until—mistaking him for Claudius—he kills him by stabbing through the arras in his mother’s bedroom. Many of Hamlet’s mocking speeches invoke Juvenalian satire, which featured self-righteous indignation against a troubled and corrupted world. Juvenal’s topics include satires against luxury, vanity, sexual depravity, and clichéd literature. Interestingly, Juvenal is given a big part in the Tudor revenge interlude *Horestes*. In *Horestes* the hero asserts to Clytemnestra, in the way of justifying the imminent matricide:

Wherefore the poete Juvenal doth think it for the best,  
 That those that live licentiously should bridled be with pain,  
 And so others, that else would sin, thereby they might restrain. (*Axton* 125)

**Lucretius:** In Hamlet, Theobald also finds the spirit and words of the epicurean Roman poet and philosopher, Titus Carus Lucretius (99-55 BCE). Lucretius's great work was *De Rerum Natura* (*Concerning Nature*), a philosophical poem of epic proportions. Lucretius was revered during the Renaissance, for centuries providing the basis for teachings in ethics and science. Contrary to his reputation among anti-pagan Christians as a hedonist, Lucretius neither promotes nor justifies sensual extravagance, preferring intellectual to physical pleasures. Like Hamlet and Socrates he is preoccupied with the moral question of what constitutes virtue. Best known for his keen observations of nature, Lucretius wrote in hopes of freeing humans from their anxieties, especially about death. His philosophy provided the ancient world with an explanation for the origins and structure of the entire universe. To him the world was a natural phenomenon, one that did not require the creativity of gods, although he did not deny their existence.

When Hamlet tells his stoic friend, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," he reflects Lucretius:

From hence proceeds all our distrust and fear,  
That many things in Earth and Heaven appear,  
Whose causes far remote and hidden lie  
Beyond the ken of vulgar reason's eye . . . . (qtd. by Theobald 244)

Theobald finds both Lucretius and Plato reflected in Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. In *Natura* Book 3 he comments on the peace of death:

Thou art safe! The sleep of death protects thee! And secures  
From all the unnumbered woes of mortal life! . . .  
What has death if death be a mere repose,  
And quiet only a peaceful grave,  
What has it thus to mar this life of man? (245)

**Plato:** At the end of Plato's *Apologia*, Socrates, facing an imminent death sentence, waxes eloquent on the great reason to hope that death is a "good," a "gain":

For one of two things—either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain . . . . if death be of such a nature, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is only a single night. (27-8)

. . . To die, to sleep,  
No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep.  
 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil  
 Must give us pause. (*Ham.* 3.1.62-70)

**Palengenius:** Though not a classic writer, the poet and cosmologist known as Marcellus Palingenius Stellatus (1500-1543) was famed among Protestant reformers and readers for his poem *Zodiacus Vitae* (*The Zodiac of Life*), published in twelve volumes during the 1520s and banned by the Pope in 1559. Theobald notes marked similarities between the precepts of Palingenius and the famous advice of Polonius to Laertes in Act I (279-280). The complete *Zodiacus* was translated from the Latin by 1565 by a young Barnabe Googe.

Theobald is not the only writer to have noted Palingenius's probable influence on Shakespeare. Peter Usher cites other scholars who share this opinion in his 2001 article, "Advances in the Hamlet Cosmic Allegory." Among these are T.W. Baldwin ("William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greek") and John Hankins ("Shakespeare's Derived Imagery"), who confirm Palingenius's "considerable influence on Shakespeare's work" (34). Palingenius, while maintaining a modified geocentric model, was nonetheless an original thinker, postulating invisible stars and an infinite universe created by an all-powerful God. Usher argues convincingly that Hamlet's Marcellus was named to immortalize the "Stellified" poet who predicted the existence of stars beyond the limits of human vision, and the first, he proposes, that, by means of Googe's translation, exposed the English reading public to the idea of an infinite universe.

**Pliny:** Pliny the Elder (24-79), Roman senator, natural historian, and scientist, died in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius that destroyed Pompeii. Theobald identifies him as the source of the peculiar notion that chameleons feed on air: "The only animal which is sustained by neither food nor drink, nor anything but air alone" (307). Hamlet's sarcastic reply to Claudius's question, "How fares our cousin?" reveals his awareness of Pliny: "Excellent, i'faith, of the chameleon's dish. I eat the air, promised-crammed. You cannot feed capons so" (3.2.84-6).

**Plutarch:** Plutarch (45-125), who served as a priest at the temple of Apollo at Delphi, became a celebrity among the Romans for his teachings and writings. His dialogues were collectively known as the *Moralia*, but he is most renowned for his biographies of important Greeks and Romans in his book *Parallel Lives*, read throughout Europe during the Renaissance and translated from a French version into English in 1579 by Sir Thomas North. Theobald suggests Hamlet's dramatic device of "The Mousetrap" derives from Plutarch.

I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play  
 Have by the very cunning of the scene

Been struck so to the soul that presently  
 They have proclaimed their malefactions;  
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
 With most miraculous organ. (2.2 566-571)  
 . . . The play's the thing  
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King. (2.2.581-2)

In his "Life of Pelopidas," Plutarch reports on the behavior of the tyrant Alexander of Pherae who left the theatre during a performance of Euripides *Troades* "excusing himself for so doing by saying he was ashamed his own subjects should see him weep at the sufferings of Hecuba and Andromache, while he never pitied those he himself put to death" (316). After watching the First Player weep over the fate of Priam's wife, Hamlet ponders this incident from Plutarch in his great speech, "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I":

Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,  
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
 With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.  
 For Hecuba! What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,  
 That he should weep for her? (2.2.532-7)

Another Plutarchian source for "the play's the thing" is his version of the story of the Cranes of Ibycus, frequently cited as the source of the concept of poetic justice. Ibycus was a sixth-century Greek poet who had Apollo's gift of song. En route to Corinth for a musical competition, he was robbed and murdered in Neptune's sacred grove. As he lay dying, Ibycus cried out a lamentation that was heard by a flock of cranes flying overhead, birds he had honored earlier that day in prayer. Later that afternoon, in the crowded amphitheater of Corinth, the chorus personified the avenging Furies with such terrifying intensity that, when a flock of cranes flew over the theatre, the two murderers cried out "the cranes of Ibycus"! The murderers had informed against themselves.

**Sophocles:** Theobald finds several passages in Sophocles's *Electra* that reflect central themes in *Hamlet*. Claudius and Gertrude both admonish Hamlet for his excessive grief, for continuing to seek his "noble father in the dust"—reminding him that "all that lives must die / Passing through nature to eternity" (1.2.72-3). Theobald repeats Sidney Lee's observation that a similar truism can be found in Sophocles's *Electra* when the chorus seeks to reassure Electra who fears that, like their father, Orestes too is dead: "Thou art daughter of a mortal father, Electra; be reasonable; and Orestes was mortal. Wherefore lament not in excess; for this is debt that is due unto all to suffer" (330).

Finally, Theobald compares the revenge of Sophocles's Orestes to Hamlet's unwillingness to take the life of Claudius while he's at prayer. Revenge is incomplete should the victim escape damnation by dying in a state of repentance. Nor does Hamlet flinch when it comes to making certain

that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are appropriately dispatched. In his forged letter to “England” Hamlet instructs the king to put the two false friends “to sudden death / *Not shriving-time allowed.*” (5.2.47-8) In an action that smacks of a ritual, Sophocles shows Orestes, before he kills Aegisthus, forcing him to place himself on the very spot where he murdered Orestes’s father (331).

### Echoes of Imperial Rome

Before undertaking a more in-depth comparison of Orestes and Hamlet, a closer look at the references in *Hamlet* to famous Romans offers an enlightening focus on another era rife with imperial corruption, adultery, incest, assassination, and poisoning. Caesar’s terrible fate is alluded to at several points in *Hamlet*. King Claudius has obvious parallels with the Roman Emperor Claudius (10BC-54 AD), who came to power in the year 41 by means of the assassination of the deranged tyrant Caligula. Claudius’s role in this event is unclear; that he left the theatre just minutes before Caligula’s murder casts some suspicion on him. Interestingly, it was Herod Agrippa, the archetypal villain of medieval Christian mystery plays, who was instrumental in bringing Claudius to power. Claudius returned the favor by awarding Herod the rulership of Judea and Samaria. This Emperor would be particularly distasteful to an educated English audience since it was he who had sent troops to expand Caesar’s initial conquest of Britain, nearly completing its annexation as a province of the Roman Empire. According to Ross and Robins, the vastly outnumbered Romans defeated the Druid army in the decisive battle, causing (*pace* Tacitus) a death toll of some 80,000 Britons (90).

Claudius had his first wife, Messalina, killed for infidelity. He later married his niece, Agrippina, daughter of his brother Germanicus, which necessitated a change in the Roman law against incest. Having advanced Agrippina’s son Nero over the interests of his own son, Britannicus, he set the stage for his own assassination at the hands of Agrippina, who poisoned him with a deadly mushroom so that her son Nero might come to power a little sooner.

Later, Nero had Britannicus killed. After divorcing Claudius’s daughter, he arranged for her exile and murder. He even had his own mother murdered, just five years after she brought him to power. It was this sin of matricide, referred to in *Hamlet* (3.3.364), which disqualified Nero from admission to the Eleusinian mysteries during his extravagant tour of Greece. A failed conspiracy to unseat the criminally insane emperor resulted in the suicides of three playwrights: Petronius, Lucan, even Seneca, Nero’s childhood tutor.

Shakespeare thus cleverly alludes over and over to a tragic Greek lineage, using a sharply-focused Roman lens to highlight emperors and kings by means of direct allusions to them and their great poets Virgil, Seneca, and Plautus. He digs deep into the most important revenge stories of the classical canon, embedding his archetypal drama with subtle meanings and metaphors and thereby investing his modern hero with both the greatness and the horror of those who walked the ancient and dramatic road of gods and ghosts.

### Orestes and Hamlet: tragic archetypes

Even more impressive than the astonishing variety of Greek and Roman sources in *Hamlet* are the parallels between Shakespeare's masterpiece and the Orestian dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. According to Gilbert Murray, Orestes is the most central and typical tragic hero of the Greek stage, appearing in no less than eight of the extant dramas, twice as often as any other character. His importance to *Hamlet* may even exceed Saxo's *Amleth*, which is acknowledged by most scholars to be Shakespeare's primary source.

In reviewing the roots of Saxo Grammaticus's *Latin History of the Danes*, Murray suggests it was "a very ancient Northern tale, not invented by anyone, but just living . . . in oral tradition" (2). Besides Saxo, Murray includes commentaries on manuscripts of the very similar Icelandic *Ambales Sagas* which appeared in the 1600's.

Saxo wrote about the year 1185; he calls his hero Amlethus, or Amlodi, Prince of Jutland, and has worked in material that seems to come from the classical story of Brutus—Brutus the Fool—who cast out the Tarquins—and the deeds of Anlaf Curran, King of Ireland. But the story of Hamlet existed long before Saxo; for the Prose Edda happens to quote a song by the poet Snaeborn, composed about 980, with a reference to Amlodi. (3)

The story of Brutus and the early Kings of Rome, the corrupt Tarquins, whose expulsion marks the founding of the Republic, is explored by Shakespeare directly in *The Rape of Lucrece* and, according to Evangeline O'Connor, by allusion in numerous plays including *Titus Andronicus*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline* (361). The tyrant Tarquinius Superbus was the uncle of Brutus the Fool, whose deeds and those of his family were recorded by the Roman poet and historian, Livy (59BC-AD17). Brutus acted the court fool for years in order to survive after his father and brothers were executed by the King, finally taking his revenge after Tarquinius's son raped and murdered the ill-fated Lucretia. But Brutus was himself betrayed by his own sons, who wished to reestablish the monarchy. Brutus showed no mercy, looking them straight in the eyes at the time of their executions. Livy's story may veer from the historical facts, but the name of Brutus remains closely connected to the end of the Roman monarchy and the beginning of the Republic.

In comparing the Greek, Northern, and Tudor versions of this story, Murray notes many similarities in plot:

In all versions, the hero is the son of a king who has been murdered and succeeded on the throne by a younger kinsman—a cousin, Aegisthus, in the Greek; a younger brother, Feng or Claudius, in the Northern. The dead king's wife has married his murderer. The hero, driven by supernatural commands, undertakes and carries through the duty of vengeance. (4)

In all versions but *Hamlet* the hero succeeds to the throne. Otherworldly manifestations are present in all but Saxo's legend: Orestes has dreams or visions of Agamemnon and receives his charge from Apollo at the oracle of Delphi; *Ambales* has angels; and Hamlet has his father's ghost.



In all versions of the story there is some shyness about the mother-murder. In Saxo the mother is not slain; in Shakespeare she is slain by accident, not deliberately murdered; in Ambales she is warned and leaves the burning Hall just in time. In one of the variants the mother refuses to leave the Hall and is burnt along with her husband. In the Greek versions she is deliberately slain, but the horror of the deed unseats the hero's reason. (4)

Murray further observes that there is a "shadow of madness" in all versions, but it is somewhat different in character. Although Hamlet's madness is largely feigned, his emotional instability reaches a crisis pitch when he assails his mother with violent words, then mistakenly kills Polonius in a blind rage. According to Murray, this is also true of Brutus, and of Amlodi in *Ambales*. Orestes, on the other hand, is a haunted man before he murders Clytemnestra; total madness comes only after his brutal revenge. Both Orestes and Hamlet have visions while in their mothers' bedchambers; for Orestes it is the horrible image of the Furies; for Hamlet it is the Ghost. In both stories, it is only the heroes who can see these unnatural and terrifying beings.

Orestes is very much like Hamlet in other ways as well: he doubts himself and hesitates to take action; he fears that the god who commands him to take revenge may be an evil spirit in disguise; and he is given to expressing himself with soliloquies. Murray notes that in the Northern legends, the quality of the hero's madness is very different. There he is gross, foolish, filthy, covered in dirt and ashes, eating like a hog. Such heroes appear to pose no threat because they seem absolutely witless. Although Orestes post-matricide madness is very real, nonetheless, like Hamlet, he is crafty at disguising himself and hiding his revengeful feelings until he's ready to act.

Orestes, Amlodi, and Hamlet all undertake sea journeys to return home and all are presumed dead before their arrival. In all three versions the hero interrupts funeral rites—their own funerals in the Greek and Northern stories and Ophelia's burial in *Hamlet*. All these characters frequently use abusive or outrageous language. Both Orestes and Hamlet have the support of a companion who arrives and joins them in their mission, Pylades for the Greek and Horatio for the Dane. The young heroes are also clearly prone to expressing cynically negative opinions about women. Hamlet's invective against both Ophelia and Gertrude is reflected in Orestes's troubled misogyny. Summarizing the Greek dramatists' treatment of Orestes relations with women, Murray observes:

Orestes is very surly to Iphigenia . . . draws his sword on Electra in one play . . . takes her for a devil in another . . . holds his dagger to the throat of Hermione till she faints . . . denounces, threatens and kills Clytemnestra, and tries to kill Helen. There are not many tragic heroes with such an extreme anti-feminist record. (9)

Orestes and Hamlet also share more interesting features. They are both away from home when the king's murder takes place (Phocis, Wittenberg), they both escape repeatedly from harmful forces, and they are both connected to ghosts, graves, and funerals. Murray notes another peculiar detail in the Northern sagas in which the hero wins a victory in a great battle by a ghastly show which is alluded to in *Electra*.

He picks up his dead—or his dead and wounded—and ties them upright to stakes and rocks. So that when his pursuers renew their attack they find themselves affronted by an army of dead men standing upright, and fly in dismay. Now in *Electra* Orestes prays to his father “Girt with thine own dead armies wake, Oh wake . . .” (10)

Both Orestes and Hamlet have scenes in which they hear the grievous details of their fathers’ deaths and both idealize their fathers, likening them to the sun god. Hamlet’s “Hyperion” is comparable to Agamemnon’s “Hellas.” Both fathers are great warriors: King Hamlet defeated Fortinbras in medieval ritual combat; Agamemnon led an army to victory in the Trojan War. The usurpers Aegisthus and Claudius are both guilty of murder, incest and drunkenness; both revenging heroes will put off killing their enemy in order to inflict a worse death later—with, in *Hamlet*, deadly consequences for the entire Court.

Lastly, and more important, one of the greatest horrors about the Father’s death in both traditions is that he died without the due religious observances. In the Greek tragedies, this lack of religious burial is almost the central horror of the whole story. Whenever it is mentioned, it comes as something intolerable, maddening; it breaks Orestes down. (11)

Finally, Murray notes that in the plays about Orestes he is depicted as closely connected to an odd couple, a young woman, Electra, and an old servant who saved Orestes’s life during his childhood. This pair turns up in various forms during the sagas, eventually emerging as the lover Ophelia and the courtier Polonius. In concluding his comparisons, Murray speculates,

I think it will be conceded that the points of similarity, some fundamental, and some perhaps superficial, between these two tragic heroes are rather extraordinary; and are made the more striking by the fact that Hamlet and Orestes are respectively the greatest or most famous heroes of the world’s two great ages of tragedy. (14)

In seeking an explanation for the rich matrix of connections between Orestes and Hamlet, Murray is hampered by the prevailing opinion that Shakespeare’s Stratford grammar school education would have been inadequate for him to have read primary sources in Greek. He asks if the Roman conquest of England or the Scandinavian mercenaries at the court of Byzantium could provide a relevant bridge, a suggestion he discards since it does not provide any connections between the Orestes of Greek tragedy and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. He is left with the difficult premise, given the lack of historical evidence, that “the ultimate similarities between Euripides and Shakespeare are simply due to the natural working, by playwrights of special genius, of the dramatic possibilities latent in that original seed” (16).

His analysis includes reference to this lineage as representing an aspect of the world wide ritual stories of the Golden Bough Kings, first compiled by Sir James Fraser. Thus Orestes, Brutus the Fool, and Feng are all mythic madman king-killers of the same tradition. Orestes has also been identified as a Winter God, the slayer of the summer.

He is the man of the cold mountains who slays annually the Red Neoptolemus at Delphi; he is the ally of death and the dead; he comes suddenly in the dark; he is mad

and raging, like the winter god Maimaktes and the storms . . . ; he finds his comrade in the Bitter Fool—may we say the bitter Amlodi?—of many Mummer's Plays, who is the slayer of the Joyous King. (17-18)

In these sagas and legends the treatment of the ancient King's wife who protects or marries the King's slayer is usually sympathetic, despite the shadow of adultery, murder, and incest. Gaia and Rhea, the Earth Mothers of Greek myth, are, like Gerutha and Gertrude, forgiven their betrayals of their husbands. Clytemnestra is an exception to this principle, although this may be because she has a double reason to betray Agamemnon, since he slew her first husband and child in addition to sacrificing their daughter.

Thus, if these arguments are trustworthy, we finally run the Hamlet-saga to earth in the same ground as the Orestes-saga, in that prehistoric and world-wide ritual battle between Summer and Winter, [between] Life and Death, which has played so vast a part in the mental development of the human race, and especially, as Mr. E.K. Chambers has shown us, in the history of medieval drama. (21)

Murray concludes that there must be a vast subconscious solidarity and continuity, lasting from age to age among the poets and playwrights, the artists and the audiences. He indulges a romanticized tradition of genius that gets repeated "quite unconsciously" by generation after generation, culture after culture, mixing fact with myth, history with legend, heroes with sacred ancestors. Ouranos, the Sky King, wedded Gaia the Earth Mother, and their usurping children were but the first in a continuous mythopoetic tradition that leads to Prince Hamlet.

The things that thrill and amaze us in *Hamlet* and *Agamemnon* are not any historical particulars about medieval Elsinore or prehistoric Mycenae, but things belonging to the old stories and the old magic rites, which stirred and thrilled our forefathers five and six thousand years ago . . . . (22)

This beautiful analysis by Gilbert Murray ends with the proposition that there is a subtle, strange, unanalyzed "vibration," an undercurrent of desire, ambition and fear, which is of an eternal nature, evolving over thousands of years, yet ever present in the fabric of our dreams and culture. This archetypal vision of the roots and the fruit of our highest artistic achievements is expressed with a rhetorical and scholarly genius worthy of the subject. That said, there may be a more pragmatic explanation of the remarkable Greek influences to be found in *Hamlet*.

### Blood feud v. chivalry

The *Oresteia* begins with the knowledge of human sacrifice. Iphigenia, daughter of King Agamemnon, must be sacrificed to the goddess Artemis if she is to allow the Greeks to launch their ships for Troy. The trilogy explores generations of revenge murder, but the *Eumenides* ends successfully with Orestes's trial at the Areopagus. The Hill of Ares in Athens was the site of the court where homicides were tried in 458 BC when the *Oresteia* was first performed in the trilogies

competition. It is the only surviving trilogy of that era of Greek tragedy.

In ancient Athens dramatic works were religious rituals performed to honor the god Dionysus. Greek tragedies vividly depict the enduring power and knowledge of the gods as contrasted with human fate, limitations, and mortality. Mary Lefkowitz identifies special qualities that characterize their roles in the dramas:

When the gods appear as characters, they come for a purpose, to make an immediate change in the course of human action. Most often they appear at the end of plays to inform the mortals of the consequences of what the mortals have done, and to describe what will happen to them in the future. (114)

The Greek poets most often set the dramatic action during the Heroic age, although the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides dramas about Orestes occur at the very end of the age of Heroes. Orestes, Electra, and Iphigenia are the last generation of the house of Atreus to receive dramatic treatment. These plays also represent a transition away from the epic world of archetypal gods and heroes with their blood feuds and revenge motifs, introducing human law in the form of a trial by peers, though still presided over by a goddess, Pallas Athena, goddess of Justice.

The last play in the Aeschylus trilogy, the *Eumenides*, opens at Apollo's Temple in Delphi where the god tells Orestes he will be his constant companion and the dread of his enemies. Orestes offers sacrifice and is purified; then Hermes joins Apollo in protecting him from Clytemnestra's hounding Furies, leading him to Athens where he seeks refuge at the shrine of Athena and undergoes the trial at the Aeropagus. The Furies who torture and then prosecute him represent the old, dark feminine powers, the wild world of Nature with its uncontrollable energies and vengeful destruction. Apollo, acting as Orestes's counsel, represents the new masculine order of reason, civilization, music, and poetry. History emerges from Myth, the "Furies" are transformed into "Friends," and the heroes into revered ancestors.

*Hamlet* opens following a chivalrous battle of medieval kings for lands claimed by both. With the honorable death of King Fortinbras, King Hamlet has acquired his lands as decreed by custom. But in the opening act the ghost of King Hamlet charges his son with the moral imperative of ridding the land of the corrupt usurper who has murdered him and married his queen. So vile is Claudius's sin that all who colluded with him will die unshrived. Henceforth the ritual of chivalrous contests between anointed kings will be replaced by betrayal, by murderous stealth and poisonous ambition.

The *Oresteia* of 458 BC and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* both explore the interaction between gods and ghosts and the tragedy of human beings caught between irreconcilable imperatives. Both plays start with watchmen seeking fateful signs, one a beacon, the other a ghost. Both young heroes have absolute moral duties to avenge their father's murders, although this requires matricide for the Greek and a duel to the death for the Dane.

Both have final trials mediated by forces beyond their control: Orestes by an almost modern trial by jury, Hamlet through an old-fashioned medieval-style trial by combat.

Legal language, often in self-justifying testimonies, is prevalent throughout the *Eumenides*, the

earliest extant drama depicting a trial. It is Athena who decides that trial by jury will be the best means of settling the differences between Orestes and the Furies:

Then, since decision falls to me, I will choose out  
Jurors of homicide, for a perpetual court,  
In whom I vest my judgment. Bring your evidence,  
Call witnesses, whose oaths shall strengthen Justice' hand,  
I'll pick my wisest citizens, and bring them here,  
Sworn to give sentences with integrity and truth. (481-86)

The arguments put forward by the prosecuting Furies against Orestes are cleverly countered by Apollo. First he asks why they did not pursue Clytemnestra when she murdered her husband, thus dishonoring Hera, the goddess of marriage, Zeus, the god of hospitality, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Their reply is that murdering her husband was justifiable because it did not constitute the shedding of kindred blood. But Apollo turns this argument on its head, asserting first that Orestes was following the orders of a god, and second, that in murdering Clytemnestra, he was not shedding kindred blood. Although Apollo's defense may collide with modern biology, no doubt it appealed to the fifth-century Athenian males for whom it was intended:

The mother is not true parent of the child  
Which is called hers. She is a nurse who tends the growth  
Of young seed planted by the true parent, the male.  
So, if fate spares the child, she keeps it, as one might  
Keep for some friend a growing plant. (657-61)

Orestes is a thoroughly modern hero in that he takes personal responsibility for his actions, he is not blinded by the truth like Oedipus, and he follows his conscience as represented by Apollo. In the generations stretching back to the mythical Tantalus, through Agamemnon, Atreus and Pelops, he is the last to suffer the curse of the gods or the duty to revenge. He is both honest and fearless.

I killed my mother—I will not deny it—in  
Just retribution for my father, whom I loved.  
For this Apollo equally is answerable;  
He told me of the tortures that would sear my soul  
If I neglected vengeance on the murderers.  
Whether or no I acted rightly, is for you  
To judge; I will accept your word for life or death. (461-67)

It is a split decision and Athena must cast the deciding vote. Her judgement is softened by

Orestes's purification and by the argument that she herself was born from Zeus's forehead, and therefore had no mother. Male supremacy in all things save giving herself in marriage wins Athena's vote. In acquitting Orestes of his "blood-guiltiness" Athena entreats the Furies to soften their "indignant grief," urging that a fair trial and judgment brings them neither dishonor nor defeat. She offers them a new home in an "upright land," "bright thrones in a holy cavern" where they will receive homage from the citizens of Athens. She urges them to let holy persuasion "check the fruit of foolish threats before it falls to spread plague and disaster," and uses long speeches of "soothing eloquence" to turn their hearts and end the strife. The Furies accept and are transformed into the *Eumenides*, the "Kindly Ones," the "Friends." The curse of the house of Atreus is finally lifted by means of a display of rhetorical brilliance, crafted by the great Athenian dramatist.

WHILE there is no trial by jury in *Hamlet*, the common issues that underlie both dramas—issues of revenge, justice, disinheritance, and personal responsibility—deeply woven into the text, are often expressed in legal terms. Shakespeare uses many legal terms, always accurately, throughout the play, as he deals with issues of inheritance, property rights, and the consequences of suicide. Hamlet is not on trial, although his duel with Laertes at the conclusion of the play can be seen as a sort of medieval trial by battle. His jury is the audience of the world which has been hearing his case for 400 years. Hamlet is not innocent; he killed, yet he is dearly loved and honored by those whose imaginations he has so enriched by his tragic story and its gift to modern English.

Legal language and metaphor abound in *Hamlet*. In his first scene Claudius refers to Gertrude as "Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state" (1.2.9). *Jointress* is a legal term for the female party in a pre-nuptial property settlement, or jointure, intended to provide for her should her husband die. But Claudius's use of it has a special meaning for Hamlet, suggesting his inheritance is threatened. Specific legal language over the loss of property rights is displayed in satiric profusion in Act V with Hamlet's comments on the skull he has found lying in the dirt thrown up by the gravediggers:

Why might not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where's his quiddits now, his quillits, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? H'm! This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. Is this the fine of his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will hardly lie in this box and must th'inheritor himself have no more, ha? (5.1.90-112)

Hamlet's ironic treatment of the Law has been set up by the gravediggers's dialogue, a cascade of extremely clever malapropisms, with damnation as "salvation," coroner as "crowner," *se defendendo* as "se offendendo." An argument with important religious and legal implications is transformed by the apparent mangled logic of the rustics. "How absolute the knave is!" says Hamlet, "We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us" (5.1.126-7).

How interesting that this passage concerning Ophelia's right to a Christian burial on consecrated ground seems to refer to the famous case known as *Hales v. Petit*, which dealt with the rights of those who end their lives by self-destruction. Sir James Hales was a prominent member of Gray's Inn who committed suicide in 1554. As described by Plunket, Judge Hales was

a highly scrupulous and conscientious Judge who strove to act with strict legality between the rival factions and religions. Ultimately he came into collision with Stephen Gardiner, with the result that he was imprisoned, became insane, and drowned himself in a shallow stream near Canterbury. A Coroner's jury gave a verdict of *felo de se*, the effect of which was to cause a forfeiture of his estates . . . . (172)

The clown's garbled reasoning parallels the court's decision in denying Hales's widow's the recovery of lands claimed by the Crown due to her husband's suicide. Although many orthodox scholars have noted the relevance of the case to Act V Scene 1 of *Hamlet*, for readers of THE OXFORDIAN, a good summary can be found in the 2002 issue in Mark Alexander's "Shakespeare's Knowledge of Law: A Journey through the History of the Argument."

The inquest ruled *felo de se* (murder of himself), Hales was buried at a crossroads, and all his lands were forfeited to the Crown. The property in question had been granted jointly to him and his wife by the Archbishop. The widow tried to argue that, since the forfeiture can only occur for an event during Hales's lifetime, the property was not forfeit. Suicide was an act of a person killing himself, and therefore it was not an act that occurred during his lifetime. The widow lost.

While scholars have recognized this allusion to *Hales v. Petit* in *Hamlet*, it has been hard for them to explain how Shakespeare came by his knowledge of a case that was decided in 1561, four years before he was born, while the opinion was published in the archaic law French in 1578 and not translated into English until the eighteenth century. Could the playwright actually read this arcane language? Did he have access to the Inns of Court where these decisions were published? These are questions critical to an understanding of the possible role of the anonymous play *Horestes* in the lineage of revengers, a subject we'll examine in Part II.

The stories of Hamlet and Orestes both use the metaphor of the Law-in-evolution to explore the uncertainties of life during turbulent times. The *Oresteia* lent dramatic and mythic meaning to newly established legal procedures by involving the gods in a dramatized trial by peers. Hamlet's world of chivalrous honor has been undone by a Machiavellian poisoning, by incest, debauchery, and maimed burial rites. His trial takes place in his mind; his witness, his father's ghost, who comes at night, unable to face the sun; his testimony, soliloquies uttered in solitude to the invisible audience of the future. For Hamlet, personal responsibility, ironic consciousness, and a rich imagination take the place of a Law corrupted by a wicked uncle's lust for power.

### Orestes and Hamlet, retrospection and remembrance

In *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, John Kerrigan considers the importance of memory and remembrance in both the *Oresteia* and *Hamlet*, and how important were the Greek

tragedians to the Elizabethan dramatists in general. Citing the work of Emrys Jones on the Roman revenge plays and that of Louise Schreiner on *Hamlet* and the *Oresteia*, Kerrigan suggests that early Latin translations of Aeschylus and Euripides were used as sources for the lost tragedies of Chettle and Dekker, *Agamemnon* and *Orestes Furies*, produced in 1599. Comparing *Hamlet* to the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, Kerrigan writes:

Certainly it is difficult, when we see Bernardo and Francisco scanning the battlements in the first scene of *Hamlet*, not to think of the apprehensive Herald on the roof of the palace in Argos at the beginning of the *Oresteia*. (173)

He also notes the marked similarities between the beginning of the *Choephoroi* and the graveyard scene where Hamlet and Horatio hide behind cover to eavesdrop on mourners come to bury a troubled soul. Orestes and Pylades have a similar exchange before Electra and the libation-bearers arrive to perform ritual at Agamemnon's tomb.

Remembrance is everywhere writ large in *Hamlet*, and though handled very differently in the *Oresteia*, there it too brings dreadful results. Since Orestes and Electra were too young when their father left for Troy to have any genuine memory of him, it is by means of group retrospection, initiated by the Chorus, that their grief turns to murderous intention. As Kerrigan notes, Aeschylus shows how the Chorus is able to incite violence by the way they recount the past. He also shows, by dramatizing Orestes's hesitation to act, that such retrospection can have the opposite effect, suggesting that an end to the downward spiral of revenge violence might be possible (171).

Since none of the children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra have any personal memory of their father, it is the Chorus, representing the community that looks to them for leadership, that reminds them of their duty based on its collective memory of the past.

[The] chanting dancers place the murder of Agamemnon in the same long perspective as the legends of Althaea, Scylla, and the Lemnian women. . . . This choric speech is to *Libation Bearers* what the catalogue of ships is to the *Iliad* (II 494-877). An act of cultural celebration, an opening of the archive, it ends with words which set Agamemnon's murder in the dark background and abysm of time. (171)

Kerrigan notes how Sophocles carried the importance of remembrance beyond the world of the living. A murdered corpse becomes both victim and witness to the crime. The emotions of those involved are projected onto material objects: "Sophocles's Chorus can impute remembrance to the axe which struck down Agamemnon as well as to the dead king's body" (172).

In contrast to the Greek drive toward collective cultural memory, revenge in Elizabethan theatre is far more personal. Kerrigan describes Hamlet's memories as implying the existence of others

lying deeper, unspoken. Receding into remembrance (and the equally obscure process of forgetting), the prince excludes his audience, and, in the process, wins a depth and secrecy unlike anything to be found in Greek drama. (173)

Hamlet's response to the Ghost's exhortation to avenge his "most horrible" death is that "from the table of my memory" he must "wipe away all trivial fond records." It should be noted that he



never promises revenge, his only promise is to remember.

So uncle, there you are. Now to my word.  
It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me.'  
I have sworn't. (1.5.111-113)

Remembrance affects all the characters in *Hamlet*, from the Prince's "mind's eye" on his father, to Ophelia's lamentable memory of Hamlet's noble mind, now "o'rthrown," her "remembrances" of his love, her mad ballads remembering Polonius, and her "Rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you love, remember." As Kerrigan puts it, "Such memories divert and slow the play, giving it an eddying inclusiveness which contrasts with Shakespeare's other tragedies . . ." Even when comfort is found in the past, it can only make Hamlet's present more desolate, "an unweeded garden that grows to seed" (183).

Revenge is so stifled by remembrance that, when the Player King announces that "Purpose is but the slave of memory," he does more than gird unwittingly at Gertrude's forgetfulness of her husband: ironies spark from the prince's retrospective tardiness to the thought that, precisely by remembering his father, he neglects what Old Hamlet's spirit wants him to do. (186)

Through Hamlet's experience, Shakespeare seems to be saying that revenge cannot bring back what has been lost to death—that it is only within the realm of memory that a life gains enduring meaning and honor. Although Horatio may succeed in the end, reporting Hamlet's "cause aright to the unsatisfied," he will not be able to convey the deep philosophical struggles of the hero:

Honest, compassionate, and intelligent though he is, Horatio is not equipped by circumstance to inform the yet unknowing world about the nunnery scene, Claudius's words to heaven, "To be or not to be," or indeed any of those perplexed soliloquies. Only the play can report such things, which is why the dramatic imagery of Hamlet's speech is so interesting. (189)

Fame for an Alexander or a Caesar was their one avenue to immortality. It guaranteed their greatness, despite their inevitable fate, a "pate full of fine dirt" or dust "patching a wall." In his final moments, Hamlet, the hero of memory, asks to be remembered, which has been his glorious fate for 400 years. The origins of his story, both classical and northern, are more obscure than his destination, which has been to light up our imaginations with exquisite language and spiritual sympathy.

Our next task will be to trace the Prince's possible origins in the literature of his own time, using the Greek Orestes to light the way. \_\_\_\_\_ 🍷

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