

The Tragedie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke

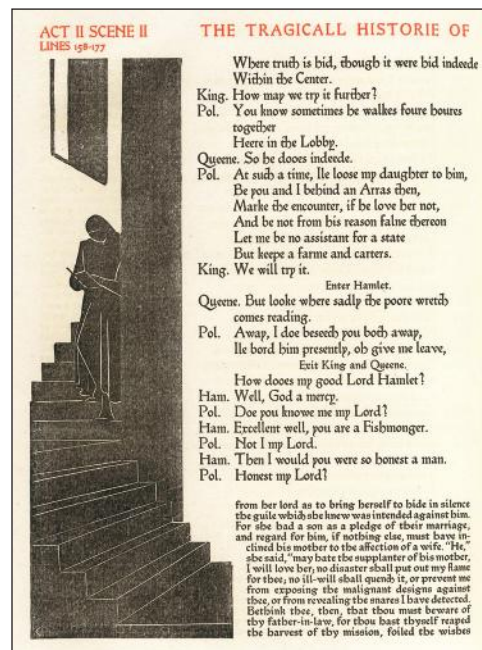
by Gary Goldstein

This 1930 edition of *Hamlet*, published by the Cranach Press of Weimar, Germany, is often regarded as the most ambitious example of 20th-century book art: Stephen Orgel actually described it as “the most monumental book of the 20th century.” It uses hand-made paper and decorated binding, evocative images and elegant typefaces to enhance the dramatic effect of Shakespeare’s play.

At the center of each page is the text of *Hamlet* from the second quarto edition (1604–05), interspersed with 80 woodcuts designed and carved by Edward Gordon Craig.

In the margins of each page are extracts from two of Shakespeare’s probable sources:

- The Hamlet story in Latin by Saxo Grammaticus
- An English translation of the Latin by Oliver Elton, 1894
- The Hamlet story in French by Belleforest, 1582
- An anonymous English version of Belleforest’s tale, *The Hystorie of Hamblet*, 1608



Finally, there is a stand-alone pamphlet of explanatory notes by John Dover Wilson, for which a separate pocket is bound into the book, “for the convenience of readers who may desire to lay them open beside the text of the play.”

The meticulous design process was overseen by Count Harry Kessler (1868–1937), director of the famous Cranach-Presse in Weimar Germany. As well as Gordon Craig’s woodcuts, Kessler commissioned a new typeface by Edward Johnston based on a font used for the *Mainz Psalter* of 1457, and

a title page cut by Eric Gill. The black-and-white color scheme is accompanied by a single accent color—orange for the book’s running heads, plus one striking use of blue for the illustration of Ophelia’s impending death.

The book was first printed in German in 1929, then in English in 1930. There was a run of only 300 for each, printed with hand-presses on specially-made paper. There are copies in just 22 libraries worldwide, with 10 available in US libraries (see worldcat.org for locations).

The outline of the Hamlet tale first appears in the Norse folk-tale of Amleth. This Scandinavian legend was recorded in Latin around 1200 by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus and first printed in Paris in 1514. It is part of the collection of tales known as *Gesta Danorum*—a partially mythical history of the Danes.

It is likely that Shakespeare encountered the Amleth legend via an expanded French version, written by François de Belleforest (1530–1583) in his popular *Histoires Tragiques* (series 3, part 5). This is double the length of Saxo’s version, placing the pagan Danish legend within a Christian framework.

Who was Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966)?

Hamlet’s exquisite achievement is the result of all aspects of its design working in tandem to create something aesthetically pleasing and functionally readable. In order to achieve this, Kessler knew that the play’s illustrations needed to work with the text to supplement it. He asked Edward Gordon Craig to design and carve the woodblock illustrations since Craig had extensive experience working on *Hamlet* as an actor, set designer and artist.

He was born into a creative family—the son of the renowned Shakespearean actor Ellen Terry and the architect Edward William Godwin. From childhood Craig worked as an actor, playing Hamlet in 1894. He then branched into directing and theatre design, producing a powerful, minimalist set for the Moscow Art Theatre’s *Hamlet* in 1911–12.


During the course of his dramatic career, Craig tended toward minimalism, believing that theater could be stripped down to form, light, movement, and music. More specifically, he wanted to address the lack of stage directions in Shakespeare’s original text by providing illustrations of scene designs, costumes, lighting, and actor movements. This perspective shaped his intentions for the Cranach Press edition of *Hamlet*.

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While beautiful in their own right, Craig's illustrations also pair with the text to guide readers through the play: illustrations cluster around entrances and exits, cluing readers in on changes to a scene's characters. Decorated initials are reserved for peripheral characters: Bernardo and Francisco in the opening scene, and the gravediggers of Act Five, Scene One.

Beyond providing context clues, Kessler and Craig also used book layout to engage readers emotionally. One way they accomplished this is through repeated motifs. *Hamlet's* famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy is framed by an image of Hamlet confronting the turbulent waters of sleep and death. This imagery is repeated in the aftermath of Polonius' killing to convey parallel themes of mortality and moral action. In the first illustration, Hamlet's figure leans back, hands raised, hesitant and contemplative; by the second he is leaning forward, resigned to the consequences of his actions.

For *Hamlet's* play-within-a-play, Kessler was faced with a typographical challenge: how to organize the main text, the play-within-a-play's text, and the historical commentary in a clean, understandable way. He met this challenge by placing the play's text in the center of the page, surrounded by the commentary. The beginning of the play-within-a-play is indicated by orange type and two large illustrations of the players. What's more, these illustrations convey mounting tension as Hamlet waits to witness his uncle's guilty response to the play-within-a-play's plot. When this occurs, the page design shifts—initially your eye was drawn inward, suddenly text and supporting

<p>ACT II SCENE II LINES 432-439</p> <p>AVEC QUELLE RUSE AMLETH, QVI DEPUIS FUT ROY DE DANNEMARCH, VENGEA LA MORT DE SON PERE HORVVENDELLE OCCIS PAR FENGON SON FRERE, ET AUTRE OCCUR- RENCE DE SON HISTOIRE. Qvoy que l'eusse delibere des le commencement de ce mien oeuvre de ne m'eloigner, tant peu soit, des bistoires de nostre temps, y ayant assez de sujets pleins de sucez tragiques, si est-ce que partie pour ne pouvoir en dis- cours sans batouiller plusieurs ausquels je ne voudroy desplaire, partie aussi que l'argument que j'ay en main m'a semblé digne d'estre offert à la noblesse Fran- coise, pour les grandes, et guil- lardes occurrences qui y sont de- duites, j'ay un peu engaré mon cours de ce nicle, et sortant de France et pays voisins, suis allé visiter l'histoire Danoise, afin qu'elle puisse servir et d'exemple de vertu, et de contentement aux nostres, auquel je tasche de com- plaire, et pour le rassaisement desquels je ne laisse fleur qui ne soit goutee pour leur en tirer le miel le plus parfait et delicat, afin de les obliger à ma diligence, ne me souciant de l'ingratitude du temps present, qui laisse ain- si en arriere et sans reconnois- sance ceux qui servent au public, et be- noissent, par leur travail et dili- gence leur pays, et illustrent la France d'autant que souvent la faulx vient plustost d'eux que non des grands, lesquels ont d'autres allures que des destour- neurs de chose qui semble de peu de consequence. Joinct que je me tiens pour plus que satisfait en ce contentement et grandeliberte d'esprit, de laquelle je jouys es- tant syssi de la noblesse pour la quelle je travaille avec si peu de re- laxhe, carressé des gens de savoir pour les admirer, et leur faire re- verence, telle que leur excellence</p>	<p>THE TRAGICALL HISTORIE OF HAMLET PRINCE OF DENMARKE</p> <p>Enter the Players.</p>  <p>Ham. O Jeptha Judge of Israell, what a treasure had'st thou! Pol. What a treasure had he my Lord! Ham. Why 'one faire daughter and no more, the which be loved passing well.' Pol. Still on my daughter. Ham. Am I not i'th' right old Jeptha? Pol. If you call me Jeptha my Lord, I have a daughter that I love passing well. Ham. Nay that follows not. Pol. What follows then my Lord? Ham. Why 'as by lot God wot,' and then you knowe 'it came to passe, as most like it was,' the first rowe of the pious chanson will shewe you more, for looke where my abridgment comes.</p>	<p>ACT II SCENE II LINES 440-454</p> <p>THE PREFACE.</p> <p>Although in the beginning of this Historie, I had de- termined not to have trou- bled you with any other matter, then a Hystorie of our owne time having suf- ficiently tragically matter to satisfie the minds of men, but because I cannot well discourse thereof, without touching many personages, whom I would not willing- ly displease, and partly be- cause the Argument that I have in hand, seemed unto me a thing worthy to bee offered to our French Hob- bists for the great and gal- lant occurrences therein set downe. I have somewhat strayed from my course, as touching the Tragedies of this our age, and starting out of France and over Brit- tish countries, I have ventured to visit the Hysto- ries of Denmarke that it may serve for an example of vertue and contentment to our Nation (whom I specially scelle to please) and for whose satisfaction I have not left any flower whatsoever untasted, from whence I have not drawne the most perfect and deli- cate bony, thereby to bind them to my diligence herein, not caring for the ingrat- itude of the time present, that leaveth (and as it were rejecteth) without recom- pence, much as serveth the Com- monwealth, and by their travell and diligence bon- our their Countrey, and illustrate the Realme of France, so that often times the fault proceedeth rather from them, then from the great personages that have other affairs which with draw them from things that</p> <p>Ham. You are welcome maisters, welcome all, I am glad to see thee well, welcome good friends, obold friend, why thy face is valant since I saw thee last, com' st thou to heare me in Denmarke? what my young Lad and mistris, byrlady pour Ladisbippe is nerer to beaven, then when I saw you last by the altitude of a thopine, pray God pour voyce like a peece of uncurrant gold, bee not crackt within the ring: maisters you are all welcome, weele c'n to't like frendh Faulknrs, fly at any thing we see, weele have a spech straite, come give us a tast of your quality, come a passionate spech. Play. What spech my good Lord? Ham. I heard thee speake me a spech once, but it was</p>
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characters expand outward from the central player and fleeing Claudius. Kessler and Craig wanted readers not only to follow the play's plot, but to experience the emotions of the characters.

It is not only bibliophiles who treasure the Cranach *Hamlet* but academicians as well. In *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, Marjorie Garber writes:

Stephen Orgel provides a sumptuous description of the Cranach *Hamlet*, its design, typeface and images, observing that the deployment of Craig's woodcuts "resembles more the format of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* than any illustrated scholarly edition of drama: the images are not contained by the typography, but are in full partnership with it, and sometimes even seem in control." Orgel sees the Cranach Press *Hamlet* as a project that successfully rethinks the relation among text and image: "it reconceives the book of the play as a performance and completes the play as a book."

Another scholar, Adela Spindler Roatcap, describes her experience of the Cranach *Hamlet*, in the January 1988 issue of *Fine Print*:

In this book the text of the play is framed by its own history—marginal texts presenting early versions of the story allow you to make a choice: to read the play alone without its precursors, or to steep yourself in the anthropology of Hamlet in the original languages. Have you questions about the meaning of Elizabethan words, or obscure passages? Additional scholarly information is readily available...as you turn the pages, if you are reading one of the 300 copies on handmade Monval paper, you experience its rich, dense but soft texture...

...as your eyes follow the story, the illustrations take the place of the actors on the stage, and if you do not wish to read, you may follow the action in Craig's woodcuts page by page. As the drama builds in the architecture of Shakespeare's words and scenes, so in the page layout you experience the tension and balance between type and illustration, between reading and pictorial imagination.



The publisher Benjamin Blom came out with a deluxe reprint of the German edition in 1972 that is now available from rare book dealers for more than \$500 a copy. Several years later, Ayer Company Publishers issued a reprint of the English version that is now out of print. The moment is ripe for publication of an affordable facsimile of the 1930 Cranach *Hamlet* so that the community of college students, theater professionals and Shakespeare *aficianados* may be inspired once again by its unique achievement.

