

How Young was Young Hamlet

From the evidence of the printed word, it is usually estimated that Hamlet was thirty years old at the time of Ophelia's burial. In Act 5, Scene 1, we find the Gravedigger saying to Hamlet:

Why, here in Denmark: I have been sexton  
here, man and boy thirty years.

A few lines earlier a short passage relates this time to Hamlet's birth:

*Hamlet:* .....How long hast thou been a gravemaker?

*First Clown:* Of all the days i' th' year, I came to't that  
day that our last King Hamlet o'ercame Fortinbras.

*Hamlet:* How long is that since?

*First Clown:* Cannot you tell that? every fool can tell  
that: it was the day young Hamlet was born,  
he that is mad and sent to England.

Hamlet then enquires, as if from idle curiosity, about the madness of Hamlet. Finally, he says, 'Upon what ground?' meaning: for what reason did Hamlet become mad? Either naively, or deliberately, the clown misunderstands him. 'Why here in Denmark:' There follows a colon and then those words: 'I have been Sexton here, man and boy thirty years.' The conclusion seems unavoidable: Hamlet was born thirty years before the day of this scene, that is, the day of Ophelia's funeral!

Yet we reach this conclusion with a certain reluctance. To be thirty years old in the 16th and 17th centuries was to be almost middle-aged, and the impression that Hamlet gives us is of a somewhat younger man. His extreme volatility, his swings of mood from low to high, from suicidal despair to self-forgetful enthusiasm (as in the company of the players), or near manic excitement (as after Claudius' reaction to the 'Mousetrap') make us think of him as somewhere in his twenties. But, the fact is, any modern version of that sentence which tells us how long the Gravedigger has been sexton, is based on the 1604 so-called 'Good Quarto', and not on the 1623 'First Folio', which exhibits curiously aberrant spelling in this sentence.

In the First Quarto the words are identical to those of a modern text, except that 'sexton' is spelt: 'sexten' and there is no comma after 'here' in the First Folio. In the place of 'sexton', we find the word 'sixteen', so that the sentence reads:

I have bin sixteene heere, man and Boy, thirty yeares.

If we take the word 'sixteen' at its face value, the sentence seems to make no sense. So we assume that 'sixteen' is a rather way-out way of spelling 'sexton'. Perhaps there was a careless compositor here and, anyway, spelling in Shakespeare's day was notoriously free. That must explain it!

At this point, I cannot avoid what will sound like dogmatism. There is recent evidence to show that a great many of the so-called 'errors' in the Folio are not errors at all but in fact quite conscious riddles and jokes, and that very often their signature is a number. This is not the place to bring forward that evidence, but I can perhaps just ask the reader to suspend suspicion of that great book for a little and to concede that these words: 'I have been sixteen here, man and boy thirty years' are actually intentional on the part both of the poet and of the editors, John Hemming and Henry Condell.

But, if they are intentional; if 'sixteen' is meant to mean 16, then something surely is intentionally left out. We have to tease Hamlet, this somewhat superior young man who has been shooting questions at him like bullets: 'what, who, how long, why, how?'

From the text itself, we know the Gravedigger liked to drink. He says to the other clown, 'Go get thee to Yaughan; fetch me a stoup of liquor', and hence we find him alone when Hamlet and Horatio arrive at the graveside. And again, speaking of Yorick's skull, 'A pestilence on him for that he was not entirely sober during his exchange with Hamlet. That he was a quibbler and enjoyed teasing his questioner is even more evident from all that has just passed.

*Hamlet:* What man dost thou dig it for?

*First Clown:* For no man, sir.

*Hamlet:* What woman, then?

*First Clown:* For none, neither.

*Hamlet:* Who is to be buried in't?

*First Clown:* One that was a woman sir; but rest her  
soul, she's dead.

*Hamlet:* How absolute the knave is!

and so on. Earlier in the scene, he plays verbal games with the Second Clown and floors him with a riddle before sending him off for some drink. So, a witty man, probably a little tipsy, keeping his end up. He likes to withhold for awhile, the information for which he is pressed.

In the context of the First Clown's condition and nature, that sentence in the First Folio need no longer make nonsense: 'I have been here sixteen here, man and boy thirty years.' No sooner is the word 'sixteen' out of his mouth, than 'sexton' is suggested, at least to himself. To say it all is a mouthful, almost a tongue-twister. 'I have been sixteen years sexton here,' and then an

added thought, 'man and boy thirty years'. He has been official sexton for 'sixteen years' and he has been 'here', in Elsinore, 'thirty years', perhaps arriving with his family as a young boy. But Hamlet, we argue at once, must be well over sixteen, because he knew Yorick, and Yorick's body has 'lain in the earth for twenty-three years'. So how about the clowns statement, that Hamlet was born, a day made memorable because on it the old King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras? in fact, all we learn from this is that Hamlet was born on the day the First Clown had (gained) his first experience in grave-making. But that is not the same thing as being a sexton, who must be a grown-up, strong man, carrying the responsibility of looking after the church, the bell-ringing and the digging of orderly, well-measured graves. Surely such a man must have had some practice at his job, a minimum period of apprenticeship.

The picture we come to is really very straightforward. Thirty years before the day of Ophelia's burial, the First Clown, a little boy, comes with his family to live in Elsinore. The family had a reason to move, and the simplest one would be that the First Clown's father had just been appointed sexton. For a time the child is too young to learn grave-digging, but after three or four years, when he is perhaps nine or ten, it is judged time for him to start learning the craft for which he is destined, and it so happens that in the very day when he has his first taste of putting a spade into the earth, helping his father, a Prince is born to the Queen at Elsinore castle, young Hamlet. The same day is marked by another unforgettable event, the King (old Hamlet) defeats the Norwegian King (old Fortinbras) in battle. It follows that young Hamlet was born, not thirty years before the day of Ophelia's burial, but some time between thirty and twenty-three years before that day.

What can make the timing more exact is Hamlet's still clear memory of Yorick, his father's jester. What he immediately remembers is being carried on Yorick's back and kissing

him, not just hugging him but actually kissing him on the lips. These are the memories of a very young child, a child who must have been more than three, or perhaps two-and-a-half, to remember anything at all, but hardly six or seven when he would have been too heavy for poor Yorick to cart him around 'a thousand tomes on his back'. Twenty-three and two-and-a-half is twenty-five-and-a-half, twenty-three and three is twenty-six.

If little Hamlet took his chief pleasure in being carried around by a wonderfully entertaining jester, then he could have been picked up and set down many times a day. Or it could have been months before Yorick finally died but, in any case, 'a thousand' sounds like the language of exaggeration and I think we may fairly guess Hamlet's age at the time of the action of the play to be between twenty-six and twenty-seven.

The objections to all this are clear enough: I have perversely adopted the approach of treating fictional characters and circumstances as if they were real, I have perversely preferred a nonsensical and suspect text over a perfectly sensible alternative one, and I have built a hypothetical superstructure on a sentence O have actually invented. But, since worthwhile answers to all these objections would take more pages than the proposition that they would defend, I must for the present leave it as it stands.

The second objection, however, can be partly met. The Quarto sentence, 'Why here in Denmark. I have been sexten here man and boy thirty years', makes smooth-sounding sense indeed, and yet not very good sense, since it implies that a mere boy was appointed sexton, which (unless most of the population was decimated by plague) would be an odd choice. Further, his appointment on the day of a battle is made a matter of curious chance, whereas the alternative scenario gives it point. Most of the slain would be buried at or near the battlefield, but a few of noble birth might be carried home, along with the wounded, some of whom would die. An

established gravedigger faced with the prospect of extra work, might well call on his young son to lend a hand for the first time.

There is one further passage pointing to the lapse of time which is a least interesting to set beside the exchange between Hamlet and the Gravedigger. This comes in Act 3, Scene 2, at the beginning of the players' play, following the dumb show and the three-line Prologue. The Player King speaking to his wife Baptista, says:

Full thirty times hath Phoebus' cart gone round,  
Neptune's salt wash, and Tellus' orbed ground:  
And thirty dozen Moons with borrow'd sheen,  
About the world have times twelve thirties been,  
Since love our hearts, and Hymen did our hands  
Unite commutual, in most sacred bands.

This is blatant parody, and as such we are apt to dismiss it as absurd anyway, but it must already have been noted that the Player King is not making one statement but two. He is not simply saying, 'My dear, we have been married for thirty years', he is speaking with precision of a sun-measure and a moon-measure, and these are not equivalent. The moon circles the earth in approximately twenty-seven days, eight hours. It therefore circles it three times in roughly 82 days, thirty times in 820 days, and thirty dozen times in  $820 \times 12$  days, or 9,840 days.

Taking a year as 365 days, we come to a period of 26 years 350 days, or fifteen days short of 27 years. The Player King is talking about falling in love and getting married. If we take him seriously, he can only be saying, 'We fell in love thirty years ago, and we were married three years later, just under 27 years ago.' This does in fact make sense. People, especially royal couples, do not usually marry the instant they fall in love.

But, if this passage is meant to be parody, then we have to ask, who is supposed to be doing the parodying? Is it Shakespeare, the real author of the words, parodying the kind of style in which he imagines 'The Murder of Gonzago' to have been written, or is it Hamlet parodying that style? If the latter, could the rather striking correspondence between the date of the Player King's wedding and Hamlet's own age as just calculated, be more than coincidence?

We think at once that Hamlet only spoke to the First Player of inserting one passage into 'The Murder of Gonzago' in order to turn it into 'The Mousetrap'. And there are much better candidates for that insertion later. Again, he says to Horatio, 'If his occulted guilt do not itself unkennel on one speech, 'tis a damned ghost that we have seen,' and so on.

Everything that is said in conversation or in soliloquy emphasises that 'The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.' Yet, in fact, the whole first part of 'The Mousetrap' is much more likely to catch the conscience of the Queen. And it would be simplistic to assume that Hamlet did not add or tamper with another passage, another speech, elsewhere. Rather there is every probability that once engaged in the heady business of verse-writing, his pen began to run away with him (as perhaps it did later, when, pleased with his own handwriting and powers of imitation, he wrote the letter that sealed the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern).

What Hamlet felt about his mother went too deep for any easy words, but how passionately he wished to touch her conscience is made clear in the bedroom scene a little later, in Act 3: 'Unkennel in one speech' - which Hamlet does not even claim to have written, half implies another speech; he certainly changed 'Duke' to 'King' throughout the play, to make it appropriate. If he either wrote or altered the Player King's opening words, the intended effect would be to remind Gertrude sharply of her first and true marriage, alert her for what was to

come. The rather strange words in Baptista's response would even sound like a veiled accusation, besides inevitably reminding her of Hamlet's own recent condition.

*Player Queen:* ...But woe to me, You are so sick of late,  
So far from cheer, and from your former state  
That I mistrust you: ...

We begin to distrust Baptista - was she slowly poisoning the Player King in the story, making his final murder just a 'coup-de-grace'? There is no hint in the greater play that old Hamlet was ill before Claudius murdered him. Indeed the ghost's words in Act 1 Scene 5:

And with a sudden vigour it doth posset  
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,  
The thin and wholesome blood: ...

suggest that he was well. But, at this point, it is clear that Hamlet suspected his mother of collusion in the murder of his father, else he would hardly have said,

A bloody deed, almost as bad good mother,  
As kill a King, and marry with his brother. (Act 3, Scene 4)

Her astonished, 'As kill a king?' must at last have disabused him.

In the First Folio, the Player King's speech takes up six lines, and the Player Queen's, that is Baptista's speech, takes up ten. Six and ten add up to sixteen, reminding us of Hamlet's words to the First Player (Act 2, Scene 2):

We'll ha't to-morrow night. You could for a  
need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines  
which I would set down, and insert in't? could you not?

There is another way of understanding the Player King's first two lines:

Full thirty times hath Phoebes' cart gone round,

Neptune's salt wash and Tellus' orb'd ground:

In the context of the general idea: 'We are married for a long time', each journey of Phoebus' cart is naturally seen as taking a year, I.e. it travels around the Zodiac. But in the absence of that context, the King would simply be saying, 'Thirty days have now gone by'.