Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable[39] of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element: but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch[40] from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

Laer. Alas, then is she drown'd!

Queen. Drown'd, drown'd.

Laer. Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears: but yet
It is our trick; nature her custom holds,
Let shame say what it will: when these are gone,
The woman will be out.[41] — Adieu, my lord;
I have a speech of fire, that fain would blaze,
But that this folly drowns it. [*Exit.*

King. Let's follow, Gertrude:
How much I had to do to calm his rage!
Now fear I this will give it start again;
Therefore let's follow. [*Exeunt.*

[39] *Incapable* for *insensible* or *unconscious*. The Poet has it so in one or two other places. So in *As You Like It*, iii. 5, we have *capable* in the opposite sense: "Lean but upon a rush, the cicatrice and *capable* impressure thy palm some moment keeps."

[40] *Wretch*, again, as a strong term of endearment. See page 103, note 24.

[41] "I shall have wept the woman's tenderness all out of me, and shall be again ready for a man's work."

ACT V.

SCENE I. — *A Churchyard.*

Enter two Clowns, *with spades, &c.*

1 Clown. Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?

2 Clown. I tell thee she is; and therefore make her grave straight:[1] the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial.

1 Clown. How can that be, unless she drown'd herself in her own defence?

2 Clown. Why, 'tis found so.

1 Clown. It must be *se offendendo*;[2] it cannot be else. For here lies the point: If I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act; and an act hath three branches; it is, to act, to do, and to perform: argal[3] she drown'd herself wittingly.

2 Clown. Nay, but hear you, goodman delver, —

1 Clown. Give me leave. Here lies the water; good: here stands the man; good: if the man go to this water, and drown himself, it is, will he, nill he,[4] he goes, — mark you that; but if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself: argal he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life.

2 Clown. But is this law?

[1] *Straight* for *straightway*; a common usage.

[2] The Clown, in undertaking to show off his legal learning, blunders *offendendo* for *defendendo*.

[3] *Argal* is an old vulgar corruption of the Latin *ergo*, *therefore*.

[4] "Will he, *nill* he," is will he, *or will* he *not*.

1 Clown. Ay, marry, is't; crowner's-quest law.[5]

2 Clown. Will you ha' the truth on't? If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial.

1 Clown. Why, there thou say'st; and the more pity that great folk should have countenance in this world to drown or hang themselves, more than their even-Christian.[6]—Come, my spade. There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers; they hold up Adam's profession.

2 Clown. Was he a gentleman?

1 Clown. He was the first that ever bore arms.

2 Clown. Why, he had none.

1 Clown. What, art a heathen? How dost thou understand the Scripture? The Scripture says Adam digg'd: could he dig without arms? I'll put another question to thee: if thou answerest me not to the purpose, confess thyself—

2 Clown. Go to.

1 Clown. What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?

[5] Sir John Hawkins thinks the Poet here meant to ridicule a case reported by Plowden. Sir James Hales had drowned himself in a fit of insanity, and the legal question was whether his lease was thereby forfeited to the Crown. Much subtilty was expended in finding out whether Sir James was the *agent* or the *patient;* that is, whether *he went to the water* or *the water came to him.* The following is part of the argument: "Sir James Hales was dead, and how came he to his death? It may be answered, by drowning; and who drowned him? Sir James Hales; and when did he drown him? In his lifetime. So that Sir James Hales being alive caused Sir James Hales to die, and the act of the living man was the death of the dead man."

[6] *Even-Christian* for *fellow-Christian* was the old mode of expression, and is to be found in *Chaucer* and the *Chroniclers.* Wicliffe has *even-servant* for *fellow-servant.*

2 Clown. The gallows-maker; for that frame outlives a thousand tenants.

1 Clown. I like thy wit well, in good faith: the gallows does well: but how does it well? it does well to those that do ill: now, thou dost ill to say the gallows is built stronger than the church: argal the gallows may do well to thee. To't again; come.

2 Clown. Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter?

1 Clown. Ay, tell me that, and unyoke.[7]

2 Clown. Marry, now I can tell.

1 Clown. To't.

2 Clown. Mass, I cannot tell.

Enter HAMLET *and* HORATIO, *at a distance.*

1 Clown. Cudgel thy brains no more about it, for your dull ass will not mend his pace with beating; and when you are asked this question next, say *a grave-maker:* the houses that he makes last till doomsday. Go, get thee to Yaughan; fetch me a stoup of liquor. [*Exit* 2 Clown.

[He digs, and sings.]

In youth, when I did love, did love,
Methought it was very sweet,
To contract—O—*the time, for*—ah—*my behove*—
O—*Methought there was nothing meet.*[8]

[7] This was a common phrase for giving over or ceasing to do a thing, a metaphor derived from the *unyoking* of oxen at the end of their labour.

[8] The original ballad from whence these stanzas are taken is printed in Tottel's *Miscellany, or Songes and Sonnettes by Lord Surrey and others,* 1575. The ballad is attributed to Lord Vaux, and is printed by Dr. Percy in his *Reliques of Ancient Poetry.* The *O's* and *ahs* are meant to express the Clown's gruntings as he digs.

Ham. Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that he sings at grave-making?

Hora. Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.

Ham. 'Tis e'en so: the hand of little employment hath the daintier sense.

1 Clown. [Sings.] *But age, with his stealing steps,*
Hath claw'd me in his clutch,
And hath shipp'd me intil the land,
As if I had never been such.

[Throws up a skull.

Ham. That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once: how the knave jowls it to the ground, as if it were Cain's jaw-bone, that did the first murder! It might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'erreaches; one that would circumvent God, might it not?[9]

Hora. It might, my lord.

Ham. Or of a courtier; which could say *Good morrow, sweet lord! How dost thou, good lord?* This might be my lord such-a-one, that praised my lord such-a-one's horse, when he meant to beg it, might it not?[9]

Hora. Ay, my lord.

Ham. Why, e'en so; and now my Lady Worm's;[10] chapless, and knock'd about the mazzard with a sexton's spade: here's fine revolution, an we had the trick to see't. Did these bones cost no more the breeding, but to play at loggats[11] with 'em? mine ache to think on't.

[9] Shakespeare uses *politician* for a *plotter* or *schemer;* one who is ever trying to out-craft and overreach his neighbour, and even Providence, and to intrigue his way to popularity or profit. The equivoque in *o'erreaches* is obvious enough.

[10] The skull that was *my Lord Such-a-one's* is now *my Lady Worm's.*

[11] *Loggats* are small logs or pieces of wood. Hence *loggats* was the name of an ancient rustic game, wherein a stake was fixed in the ground at which *loggats* were thrown; in short, a ruder kind of quoit-play.

1 Clown. [Sings.]
A pick-axe, and a spade, a spade,
For and[12] *a shrouding sheet;* — O —
A pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet.

[Throws up another skull.

Ham. There's another: why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddits now, his quillets,[13] his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the sconce[14] with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? Hum! This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries:[15] is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of

[12] "*For and,*" says Dyce, "in the present version of the stanza, answers to *And eke* in that given by Percy." So in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle:* "Your squire doth come, and with him comes the lady, *for and* the Squire of Damsels, as I take it."

[13] *Quiddits* are quirks, or subtle questions; and *quillets* are nice and frivolous distinctions. The etymology of this last word has plagued many learned heads. Blount, in his *Glossography*, clearly points out *quodlibet* as the origin of it. Bishop Wilkins calls a *quillet* "a frivolousness."

[14] *Sconce* was not unfrequently used for *head.*

[15] Shakespeare here is profuse of his legal learning. Ritson, a lawyer, shall interpret for him: "A recovery with *double voucher* is so called from *two* persons being successively *voucher*, or called upon to warrant the tenant's title. Both *fines* and *recoveries* are fictions of law, used to convert an estate tail into a fee-simple. Statutes are (not acts of parliament but) statutes *merchant* and staple, particular modes of *recognizance* or acknowledgment for securing *debts*, which thereby become a charge upon the party's land. *Statutes* and *recognizances* are constantly mentioned together in the covenants of a purchase deed."

fine dirt?[16] will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures?[17] The very conveyances of his lands will hardly lie in this box; and must the inheritor himself have no more, ha?

Hora. Not a jot more, my lord.

Ham. Is not parchment made of sheep-skins?

Hora. Ay, my lord, and of calf-skins too.

Ham. They are sheep and calves which seek out assurance in that.[18] I will speak to this fellow. — Whose grave's this, sirrah?

1 Clown. Mine, sir. —

[Sings.] O — *A pit of clay for to be made*
For such a guest is meet.

Ham. I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't.

1 Clown. You lie out on't, sir, and therefore it is not yours: for my part, I do not lie in't and yet it is mine.

Ham. Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say it is thine: 'tis for the dead, not for the quick; therefore thou liest.

1 Clown. 'Tis a quick lie, sir; 'twill away again, from me to you.

[16] Here we have *fine* used in four different senses: first, in the proper Latin sense, *end;* second, in the legal sense, to denote certain processes in law; third, in the sense of *proud, elegant,* or *refined;* fourth, in the ordinary sense of *small.*

[17] *Indenture, conveyance,* and *assurance* are all used here as equivalent terms, and mean what we call *deeds;* instruments relating to the tenure and transfer of property. They were called *indentures,* because two copies were written on the same sheet of parchment, which was cut in two in a toothed or *indented* line, to guard against counterfeits, and to prove genuineness in case of controversy. — *Inheritor,* in the next line, is *possessor* or *owner.* The Poet often uses the verb to *inherit* in the same sense.

[18] A quibble is here implied upon *parchment;* deeds, which were always written on parchment, being in legal language "common assurances."

Ham. What man dost thou dig it for?

1 Clown. For no man, sir.

Ham. What woman, then?

1 Clown. For none, neither.

Ham. Who is to be buried in't?

1 Clown. One that was a woman, sir; but, rest her soul! she's dead.

Ham. How absolute the knave is! we must speak by the card,[19] or equivocation will undo us. By the Lord, Horatio, these three years I have taken a note of it; the age is grown so pickèd,[20] that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe.[21] — How long hast thou been a grave-maker?

1 Clown. Of all the days i' the year, I came to't that day that our last King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras.

Ham. How long is that since?

1 Clown. Cannot you tell that? every fool can tell that: it was the very day that young Hamlet was born; he that is mad, and sent into England.

Ham. Ay, marry; why was he sent into England?

1 Clown. Why, because he was mad: he shall recover his wits there; or, if he do not, it's no great matter there.

Ham. Why?

1 Clown. 'Twill not be seen in him there; there the men are as mad as he.

Ham. How came he mad?

1 Clown. Very strangely, they say.

[19] To speak by the card, is to speak precisely, by rule, or according to a prescribed course. It is a metaphor from the seaman's *card* or chart by which he guides his course.

[20] *Picked* is *curious, over-nice.*

[21] *Kibe* is an old word for *chilblain.* The Poet has it several times.

Ham. How strangely?

1 Clown. Faith, e'en with losing his wits.

Ham. Upon what ground?

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

Ham. How long will a man lie i' the earth ere he rot?

1 Clown. I' faith, if he be not rotten before he die,—as we have many pocky corses now-a-days, that will scarce hold the laying in,—he will last you some eight year or nine year: a tanner will last you nine year.

Ham. Why he more than another?

1 Clown. Why, sir, his hide is so tann'd with his trade, that he will keep out water a great while: and your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body. Here's a skull now; this skull has lain in the earth three-and-twenty years.

Ham. Whose was it?

1 Clown. A whoreson mad fellow's it was: whose do you think it was?

Ham. Nay, I know not.

1 Clown. A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! 'a pour'd a flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the King's jester.

Ham. This?

1 Clown. E'en that.

Ham. Let me see. [*Takes the skull.*]—Alas, poor Yorick!—I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft.—Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chap-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come: make her laugh at that!—Pr'ythee, Horatio, tell me one thing.

Hora. What's that, my lord?

Ham. Dost thou think Alexander look'd o' this fashion i' the earth?

Hora. E'en so.

Ham. And smelt so? pah! [*Puts down the skull.*

Hora. E'en so, my lord.

Ham. To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bung-hole?

Hora. 'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so.

Ham. No, faith, not a jot; but to follow him thither with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it; as thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam: and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Imperial Cæsar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away:
O, that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall t' expel the Winter's flaw![22]

But soft! but soft! aside! here comes the King,
The Queen, the courtiers:—

Enter Priests, *&c., in procession; the Corpse of* OPHELIA, LAERTES *and* Mourners *following; the* KING, *the* QUEEN, *their Trains, &c.*

Who is that they follow?

[22] A *flaw* is a violent gust or blast of wind.

And with such maimèd rites? This doth betoken,
The corse they follow did with desperate hand
Fordo its own life: 'twas of some estate.[23]
Couch we awhile, and mark. [*Retiring with* HORATIO.

Laer. What ceremony else?

Ham. That is Laertes, a very noble youth: mark.

Laer. What ceremony else?

1 Priest. Her obsequies have been as far enlarged
As we have warrantise: her death was doubtful;
And, but that great command o'ersways the order,
She should in ground unsanctified have lodged
Till the last trumpet; for charitable prayers,
Shards,[24] flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her:
Yet here she is allow'd her virgin crants,[25]
Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home
Of[26] bell and burial.

Laer. Must there no more be done?

1 Priest. No more be done:
We should profane the service of the dead,
To sing a requiem and such rest to her
As to peace-parted souls.[27]

[23] *Estate* was a common term for persons of *rank*. — To *fordo* is to *undo* or *destroy*. See page 95, note 21.

[24] *Shards* not only means fragments of pots and tiles, but rubbish of any kind. Our version of the Bible has preserved to us *pot-sherds;* and bricklayers, in Surrey and Sussex, use the compounds *tile-sherds*, *slate-sherds*. — *For*, in the preceding line, has the force of *instead of*.

[25] *Crants* is an old word for *garlands;* very rare, and not used again by Shakespeare. It was customary in some parts of England to have a garland of flowers and sweet herbs carried before a maiden's coffin. Johnson says it was the custom in rural parishes in his time.

[26] *Of* has here the force of *with*.

[27] A *requiem* is a mass sung for the rest of the soul. So called from the words, *Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine*. — "Peace-parted souls" is souls that have *departed in peace;* or, as the Prayer-book has it, "in favour with Thee our God, and in perfect charity with the world."

Laer. Lay her i' the earth;
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring! — I tell thee, churlish priest,
A ministering angel shall my sister be,
When thou liest howling.

Ham. What, the fair Ophelia!

Queen. Sweets to the sweet: farewell! [*Scattering flowers.*
[hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife;
[thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
And not have strew'd thy grave.

Laer. O, treble woe
Fall ten times treble on that cursèd head
Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious[28] sense
Deprived thee of! — Hold off the earth awhile,
Till I have caught her once more in mine arms.
[*Leaps into the grave.*
Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead,
Till of this flat a mountain you have made
T' o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head
Of blue Olympus.

Ham. [*Advancing.*] What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis? whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
Hamlet the Dane! [*Leaps into the grave*

Laer. The Devil take thy soul!
[*Grappling with him.*

[28] *Ingenious* for *ingenuous, guileless*. Even Defoe has it so in his *Colonel Jack*, 1738: "But 'tis contrary to an *ingenious* spirit to delight in such service."

Ham. Thou pray'st not well.
I pr'ythee, take thy fingers from my throat;
For, though I am not splenitive and rash,
Yet have I something in me dangerous,
Which let thy wisdom fear: hold off thy hand!
King. Pluck them asunder.
Queen. Hamlet, Hamlet!
All. Gentlemen, —
Hora. Good my lord, be quiet.
[*The* Attendants *part them, and they come out of the grave.*
Ham. Why, I will fight with him upon this theme
Until my eyelids will no longer wag.
Queen. O my son, what theme?
Ham. I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum. — What wilt thou do for her?
King. O, he is mad, Laertes.
Queen. For love of God, forbear him.
Ham. 'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do:
Woo't weep? woo't fight? woo't fast? woo't tear thyself?
Woo't drink up Esill?[29] eat a crocodile?
I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine?
To outface me with leaping in her grave?

[29] What particular lake, river, frith, or gulf was meant by the Poet, is something uncertain. The more common opinion is, that he had in mind the river *Yesel*, which, of the larger branches of the Rhine, is the one nearest to Denmark. In the maps of our time, *Isef* is the name of a gulf almost surrounded by land, in the Island of Zealand, not many miles west of Elsinore. Either of these names might naturally enough have been spelt and pronounced *Esill* or *Isell* by an Englishman in Shakespeare's time. In strains of hyperbole, such figures of speech were often used by the old poets. — *Woo't* is a contraction of *wouldst thou*, said to be common in the northern counties of England.

Be buried quick with her, and so will I;
And, if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone,[30]
Make Ossa like a wart! Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
I'll rant as well as thou.
Queen. This is mere[31] madness:
And thus awhile the fit will work on him;
Anon, as patient as the female dove,
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,[32]
His silence will sit drooping.
Ham. Hear you, sir:
What is the reason that you use me thus?
I loved you ever: but it is no matter;
Let Hercules himself do what he may,
The cat will mew, and dog will have his day. [*Exit.*
King. I pray you, good Horatio, wait upon him. —
[*Exit* HORATIO.
[*To* LAERTES.] Strengthen your patience in our last night's speech;
We'll put the matter to the present push. —
Good Gertrude, set some watch over your son. —
This grave shall have a living monument:
An hour of quiet shortly shall we see;
Till then, in patience our proceeding be. [*Exeunt.*

[30] "The burning zone" is no doubt the path, or seeming path, of the Sun in the celestial sphere; the Sun's diurnal orbit.
[31] Here, as often, *mere* is *absolute* or *downright*.
[32] The "golden couplets" are the two chicks of the dove; which, when first hatched, are covered with a *yellow* down; and in her patient tenderness the mother rarely leaves the nest, till her little ones attain to some degree of dove-discretion. — *Disclose* was often used for *hatch*.

Scene II. — *A Hall in the Castle.*

Enter Hamlet *and* Horatio.

Ham. So much for this, sir; now shall you see the other:
You do remember all the circumstance?[1]

Hora. Remember it, my lord!

Ham. Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting,
That would not let me sleep:[2] methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes.[3] Rashly, —
And praised be rashness for it; let us know,
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,
When our deep plots do pall;[4] and that should teach us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will, —

[1] *Circumstance* probably means the *circumstantial account* given by Hamlet in his letter to Horatio. — *The other* refers, no doubt, to the further matter intimated in that letter: "I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb."

[2] Hamlet has from the first divined the King's purpose in sending him to England. Since the close of the interlude, when the King was "frighted with false fire," Hamlet *knows* that the King did indeed murder his father, and he also knows that the King *suspects* him of knowing it. Hence, on shipboard, he naturally has a vague, general apprehension of mischief, and this as naturally fills him with nervous curiosity as to the particular shape of danger which he is to encounter.

[3] The *bilboes* were bars of iron with fetters annexed to them, by which mutinous or disorderly sailors were linked together. The word is derived from *Bilboa*, in Spain, where the things were made. To understand the allusion, it should be known that, as these fetters connected the legs of the offenders very closely together, their attempts to rest must be as fruitless as those of Hamlet, in whose mind *there was a kind of fighting that would not let him sleep*. — *Mutines* is for *mutineers*.

[4] *Pall* is from the old French *palser*, to *fade* or *fall away*. So in *Antony and Cleopatra*: "I'll never follow thy *pall'd* fortunes more." — Note that all after *rashly*, down to the beginning of Hamlet's next speech, is parenthetical.

Hora. That is most certain.

Ham. — Up from my cabin,
My sea-gown scarf'd about me,[5] in the dark
Groped I to find out them; had my desire;
Finger'd their packet; and, in fine, withdrew
To mine own room again: making so bold,
My fears forgetting manners, to unseal
Their grand commission; where I found, Horatio, —
O royal knavery! — an exact command,
Larded with many several sorts of reasons, —
Importing Denmark's health, and England's too,
With, ho! such bugs and goblins in my life,[6] —
That, on the supervise, no leisure bated,[7]
No, not to stay the grinding of the axe,
My head should be struck off.

Hora. Is't possible?

Ham. Here's the commission: read it at more leisure.
But wilt thou hear me how I did proceed?

Hora. I beseech you.

Ham. Being thus be-netted round with villainies, —
Ere I could make a prologue to my brains,
They had begun the play,[8] — I sat me down,

[5] *Thrown*, or *gathered*, *loosely* about me.

[6] Such *bugbears* and *fantastic dangers growing out of* my life. The Poet has *bug* several times in that sense. So in *The Winter's Tale*, iii. 2: "Sir, spare your threats: the *bug*, which you would fright me with, I seek." — *Goblins* were a knavish sort of fairies, perhaps *ignes fatui*, and so belonged to the genus Humbug.

[7] The language is obscure, though the general sense is plain enough. I suspect *batea* is an instance of the passive form with the active sense; no leisure *abating* the speed; or the haste not being lessened by any pause. — *Supervise* is *looking over*, *perusal*.

[8] An allusion to the stage, where a play was commonly introduced by a prologue. Hamlet means that his thoughts were so fiery-footed as to start

Devised a new commission; wrote it fair:
I once did hold it, as our statists do,
A baseness to write fair,[9] and labour'd much
How to forget that learning; but, sir, now
It did me yeoman's service.[10] Wilt thou know
Th' effect of what I wrote?

Hora. Ay, good my lord.

Ham. An earnest conjuration from the King, —
As England was his faithful tributary;
As love between them like the palm might flourish;
As peace should still her wheaten garland wear,
And stand a cement 'tween their amities;
And many such-like *ases* of great charge,[11] —
That, on the view and knowing of these contents,
Without debatement further, more or less,
He should the bearers put to sudden death,
Not shriving-time[12] allow'd.

Hora. How was this seal'd?

Ham. Why, even in that was Heaven ordinant.
I had my father's signet in my purse,

off in the play itself before he could get through with the introduction to it.

[9] *Statist* is the old word for *statesman*. Blackstone says that "most of our great men of Shakespeare's time wrote very bad hands; their secretaries, very neat ones." It was accounted a mechanical and vulgar accomplishment to write a fair hand.

[10] In the days of archery, the English yeomanry, with their huge bows and long arrows, were the most terrible fighters in Europe.

[11] Of course "*ases*" refers to the use of *As* three times in the preceding lines. In Shakespeare's time *as* and *that* were often used interchangeably. So here; and, according to present usage, the second *As* and also the third should be *That*.— *Great charge* is great *importance*; *charged* with great *import*.

[12] "*Shriving*-time" is time for confession and absolution.

Which was the model of that Danish seal;
Folded the writ up in form of th' other;
Subscribed it; gave't th' impression; placed it safely,
The changeling never known. Now, the next day
Was our sea-fight; and what to this was sequent
Thou know'st already.

Hora. So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't.

Ham. Why, man, they did make love to this employment:
They are not near my conscience; their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow:[13]
'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell-incensèd points
Of mighty opposites.[14]

[13] Horatio seems to regret, as he well may, the fate of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, who, of course, did not distinctly know the purpose of their commission, else they would have turned back, after the separation of Hamlet from them. Of course, too, Hamlet expected, at the time, to go to England with them; and it has been suggested that, had he done so, he would have arrested the effect of the substituted commission. But I prefer the view taken by Professor Werder: "As surely as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deliver their letter, his head falls. *That* letter, then, they *must not be allowed* to deliver; they *must* deliver a different one. But do you say he could have spared them? he could have written something that would endanger neither him nor them? Does he know, or can he discover from them so that he may depend upon their word, how far they are cognizant of the purport of their errand? whether they are not charged with some oral message? What if they should contradict what he might write of a harmless character? What if the King of England, being in doubt, should send back to Denmark for further directions, detain all three, and then, as surely was to be expected, put Hamlet to death? No, there is no expedient possible, no evasion, no choice between *thus* or otherwise. He *must* sacrifice them, *and* even without allowing them time to confess, — *must* do this even. For, if only they are allowed time for confession, after they are seized and made sensible of their position, there is no foreseeing what turn things may take for him."

[14] When men of lower rank come between the thrusts and sword-points of great men engaged in fierce and mortal duel, or bent on fighting it out to

Hora. Why, what a king is this!

Ham. Does it not, think'st thou, stand me now upon?[15]
He that hath kill'd my King, and stain'd my mother;
Popp'd in between th' election and my hopes;
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage, — is't not perfect conscience
To quit[16] him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?[17]

Hora. It must be shortly known to him from England
What is the issue of the business there.

the death. — Here, as usual in Shakespeare, *opposites* is *opponents*. — I quote again from Professor Werder: "Whoever, from his position, or from his zeal and officiousness, undertakes the office of carrying the letter and Hamlet to England, must suffer whatever of harm to himself may be connected with such an errand. The business is dangerous; such affairs always are. The baseness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is their ruin: they promenade, so to speak, in the sphere of a fate which involves damnation, without scenting or wishing to scent the sulphur. Where such a king bears rule, his servants are always exposed to the very worst that can befall; and at any moment their ruin may come through circumstances and causes, from which nothing may seem more remote than the catastrophe: for the main thing is overlooked, because it is *always* present, even the *ground* on which all concerned live and move, upon which all rests, and which is itself Destruction. Whoever serves such a king, and, without any misgiving of his crime, serves him with ready zeal; upon him Hell has a claim; and, if that claim be made good, he has no right to complain. — These are things in which Shakespeare knows no jesting, because he is so great an expounder of the Law, the Divine Law; and he holds to it as no second poet has done."

15 "It stands me upon" is an old phrase for "it is incumbent upon me," or, "it is my bounden duty." Shakespeare has it repeatedly. So in *King Richard II.*, ii. 3: "It stands your Grace upon, to do him right."

16 Here, as in many other places, to *quit* is to *requite*.

17 "Is it not a damnable sin to let this *cancer* of humanity proceed further in mischief and villainy?" *Canker*, in one of its senses, means an eating, malignant sore, like a *cancer;* which word is from the same original.

Ham. It will be short: the interim is mine;[18]
And a man's life's no more than to say *One*.
But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself;
For by the image of my cause I see
The portraiture of his.[19] I'll court his favours;[20]
But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me
Into a towering passion.

Hora. Peace! who comes here?

Enter OSRIC.

Osric. Your lordship is right welcome back to Denmark.

Ham. I humbly thank you, sir. — [*Aside to* HORATIO.] Dost know this water-fly?[21]

Hora. [*Aside to* HAMLET.] No, my good lord.

Ham. [*Aside to* HORATIO.] Thy state is the more gracious; for 'tis a vice to know him. He hath much land, and fertile: let a beast be lord of beasts, and his crib shall stand at the King's mess.[22] 'Tis a chough; but, as I say, spacious in the possession of dirt.

18 Hamlet justly looks forward to the coming of that news as the crisis of his task: it will bring things to a head, and give him a practicable twist on the King: he can then meet both him and the publie with *justifying proof* of his guilt.

19 Hamlet and Laertes have lost each his father, and both have perhaps lost equally in Ophelia; so that their cause of sorrow is much the same.

20 Hamlet means "I'll solicit his *good will;*" the general meaning of *favours* in the Poet's time.

21 In *Troilus and Cressida*, v. 1, Thersites says of Patroclus: "How the poor world is pestered with such *water-flies;* diminutives of nature." As Johnson says, "A water-fly skips up and down upon the surface of the water without any apparent purpose or reason, and is thence the proper emblem of a busy trifler."

22 This is meant as a sarcastic stroke at the King for keeping such a finical sap-head near his person. Let even a biped puppy be rich, the lord or