SHAKESPEAREAN VARIATIONS: 
A CASE STUDY OF HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK

Steven Barrie

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
August 2009

Committee:
Dr. Stephannie S. Gearhart, Advisor
Dr. Kimberly Coates
ABSTRACT

Dr. Stephannie S. Gearhart, Advisor

In this thesis, I examine six adaptations of the narrative known primarily through William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* to answer how so many versions of the same story can successfully exist at the same time. I use a homology proposed by Gary Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon that explains there is a similar process behind cultural and biological adaptation. Drawing from the connection between literary adaptations and evolution developed by Bortolotti and Hutcheon, I argue there is also a connection between variation among literary adaptations of the same story and variation among species of the same organism. I determine that multiple adaptations of the same story can productively coexist during the same cultural moment if they vary enough to lessen the competition between them for an audience.
For Pam.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Stephannie Gearhart, for being a patient listener when I came to her with hints of ideas for my thesis and, especially, for staying with me when I didn’t use half of them. Her guidance and advice have been absolutely essential to this project. I would also like to thank Kim Coates for her helpful feedback. She has made me much more aware of the clarity of my sentences than I ever thought possible. And, of course, many thanks to all my friends and family who supported me with their encouragement, quiet places to work, and lots of caffeine.
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>HAMLET, FINCHES, AND ADAPTATION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hamlet and the Finches</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>THE HAMLETS</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saxo the Grammarian’s <em>The Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus</em> and Francois de Belleforest’s <em>Histories Tragiques</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>William Shakespeare’s <em>The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark</em></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Updike’s <em>Gertrude and Claudius</em></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michael Almereyda’s <em>Hamlet</em></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David Wroblewski’s <em>The Story of Edgar Sawtelle</em></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SHAKESPEAREAN VARIATIONS:  
A CASE STUDY OF HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK

CHAPTER I: HAMLET, FINCHES, AND ADAPTATION

Introduction

*If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, / Absent thee from felicity for a while / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story.*

- Hamlet to Horatio (Shakespeare 5.2.287-291)

In these lines at the end of William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Hamlet makes a dying request of his friend Horatio that his story live past his death. Hamlet’s fear is that when Fortinbras arrives at Elsinore, he will not know what to make of the bloody duel and will misconstrue what had happened. Before the end of the play, Horatio requests Fortinbras move the dead bodies from the duel to a stage where Horatio will “speak to th’ yet unknowing world / How these things came about” (Shakespeare 5.2.323-324). Despite Horatio’s claim that he can “truly deliver” (5.2.329) the story of what happened, there will be changes. Horatio was not present for every moment of the play, and he only knows of some events through Hamlet’s telling. He probably learned other aspects of Hamlet’s story from other characters or castle gossip. Still other elements of the story so central to us, the audience of Shakespeare’s play, such as Hamlet’s many soliloquies, must be absent altogether from Horatio’s telling for lack of a witness to the speeches. The story Horatio tells Fortinbras will be recognizable as Hamlet’s story, but there will be changes as Horatio interprets the tale from his own point of view in order to answer Fortinbras’s questions.

Hamlet’s request of Horatio is, in effect, a call to adaptation. Hamlet knows Horatio’s task of adaptation will not be easy as in his request he asks Horatio to “absent [himself] from
felicity” (5.2.289), but Hamlet also knows the task is necessary if his voice is to be heard. The dueling room is full of courtiers who cried out treason when Hamlet cut Claudius with the poisoned foil (5.2.265) and Horatio’s version of the story will have to contend with all the versions they provide, but if Hamlet’s voice is to live past his death, it must be through the mouth of another who is living. Horatio shoulders that responsibility despite having no professional obligation to do so. Osric, one of the king’s courtiers, seems a more likely choice. Horatio and Osric, although they would relate the same events, have very different points of view and allegiances, making their telling of the bloody duel decidedly different variations of the same story.

Horatio is not the only one to have adapted the Hamlet story. The tale was already popular one in Elizabethan England by the time Shakespeare adapted it with The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (Hunt 27) and was well known through a 12th century Danish text by Saxo the Grammarian and a 16th century French prose adaptation by Francois de Belleforest. By the end of the 20th century, there were 75 adaptations of Shakespeare’s play in film alone, countless stage productions, and transpositions of the play into non-performance media (Hunt 3). If all these adaptations merely repeated the same story, so many retellings would be superfluous and counterintuitive, so why do so many variations of the same story exist?

Hamlet and the Finches

Adaptations, however, are not replications; they perpetuate an older work and remain simultaneously autonomous. As a perpetuation of an older work, adaptations intertextually engage the other work to recreate it. As an autonomous work, adaptations provide unique variations to the older text to change it, therefore justifying their own existence among a myriad of other versions of the same story. Literary scholar Linda Hutcheon discusses how an adaptation
can recreate an older work without being repetitious in her book *A Theory of Adaptation*. She describes an adaptation as “a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing” (9). This basic idea behind Hutcheon’s definition emphasizes an adaptation’s ability to display its textual history through recreating older stories while still being its own autonomous text. Hutcheon further explains the concept, saying that an adaptation is

- An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works
- A creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging
- An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work. (8)

From this definition, adaptations are interrelated and autonomous, making no single adaptation more important than any others in terms of temporal existence. Instead, Hutcheon would like readers to see adaptations as existing through their intertextual relationships regardless of which adaptation existed first. Indeed, as she argues, readers do not always come to texts in the same order in which they were written; they may encounter the adaptation before the text it was adapted from, which changes the way those readers relate to the texts and challenges temporality as a basis for judging the authority of adaptation. Hutcheon’s impulse in *A Theory of Adaptation* is to separate an adaptation’s autonomous nature from its derivational nature to discuss how adaptations perpetuate narratives, but I argue the two go hand-in-hand for a text to be considered an adaptation. Since Hutcheon’s definition of adaptation hinges on the intertextuality between the adaptation and adapted text(s) rather than the order in which the texts were created, study of what makes the adaptation independent from the adapted text, in addition to the direct relationships between the texts, fully explains how the adaptation is able to perpetuate the adapted text.
In order to understand how an adaptation perpetuates an older work, it is important to understand which characteristics of the adapted text the adaptation has retained or inherited and where variation has occurred because this is what allows for the possibility of a multitude of adaptations of the same text. This is the process of recontextualization. In their anthology *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier emphasize the importance of recontextualization to the adaptation process. They explain that an adaptation engages a specific work “so as to invoke that work and yet be different from it” (4); this is done through recontextualization. This process is important for the study of adaptations because it is the creative and interpretive act that prevents an adaptation from recreating the adapted text through mere repetition.

Moreover, Fischlin and Fortier’s notion recontextualization is very similar to the process of replication through change that occurs during biological evolution. In their 2007 article “On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and ‘Success’ – Biologically,” Gary R. Bortolotti, a biologist, and Hutcheon argue that there is a similarity between biological adaptation and cultural (or literary) adaptation. To begin making this claim, the authors argue the current standard when seriously studying adaptations “has been to denigrate them as secondary and derivative in relation to what is usually (and tellingly) referred to as the ‘original.’ Adaptation theory has rarely challenged this dismissive evaluation” (443). They compare this viewpoint of literary adaptations to the mindset of early evolutionary biologists when they say, “like that early evolutionary theory […] much work in adaptation today thinks only in terms of higher and lower forms” (444). Bortolotti and Hutcheon’s goal is to apply post-Darwinian ideas of evolution to their study of literary adaptation because “in biology, it was only when this sort of evaluative discourse was discarded that new questions could be asked and therefore new
answers offered” (444). By accepting Bortolotti and Hutcheon’s request to discard discourse based on evaluating higher and lower forms, it becomes possible to discuss recontextualization rather than replication because the adaptation and adapted text are placed in an open intertextual relationship. Within this relationship, the adaptation and adapted text are equally valid as versions of the same story.

Consequently, the new discourse Bortolotti and Hutcheon offer allows for the study of adaptations without resorting to fidelity criticism, which is a mode of discourse about adaptations that examines how absolutely an adaptation replicates the older work. The problem with this mode of discourse, as Hutcheon explains in *A Theory of Adaptation*, is that fidelity criticism is composed of “morally loaded discourse […] based on the implied assumption that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text” (7). Such an assumption limits the intertextual relationships available for study because the emphasis of fidelity criticism primarily focuses on how the adapted text influences the adaptation. However, the discourse presented by Bortolotti and Hutcheon sees influence moving in many directions, such as between the adaptation and the adapted text and between both texts and the surrounding cultural environment. As a result, this intertextually open discourse illuminates the way stories of the past have been perpetuated and varied in the present as it places a large emphasis on how the adaptation has recontextualized the older story to a new environment. What they propose is a “homology between biological and cultural adaptation” (444). Homologies describe different structures that are similar in position and origin, such as the wing of a bird and the foreleg of a cat. While homologous structures share a common origin, they do not have to perform the same function. This means Bortolotti and Hutcheon propose that cultural, or literary, adaptation, and biological adaptation share a common origin even if the two processes are applied differently. They explain that the common origin
they see between the processes is that “both kinds of adaptation are understandable as processes of replication. Stories, in a manner parallel to genes, replicate; the adaptation of both evolve with changing environments” (444). In other words, Bortolotti and Hutcheon suggest that the basic process involved in literary adaptation and biological adaptation are fundamentally the same. In both cases, a unit – a story in literature and genes or an organism in biology – is recreated and adapts to fit more successfully in changing environments. Bortolotti and Hutcheon do concede that some comparative aspects of literary studies are important to understanding an adaptation as an adaptation, like biologists study the evolutionary history of organisms. However, their use of comparative studies is not for the purpose of judging a text only on its fidelity to sources but because “by revealing lineages of descent, not similarities of form alone, we can understand how a specific narrative changes over time” (445). This is the crux of the homology and the very reason why it is so important. The biological-cultural homology allows literary scholars to talk about the similarities between adaptations and sources more objectively with a purpose larger than merely debating sameness. This discourse discusses similarities and differences in order to answer questions about why the changes did or did not occur, therefore discussing why recontextualization may or may not have occurred.

Furthermore, Bortolotti and Hutcheon’s homology is incredibly useful because the lineages of descent Bortolotti and Hutcheon want to study provide a constructive end for discussing similarities and differences between an adaptation and an adapted text. However, I want to move the homology in a slightly different direction. Bortolotti and Hutcheon are concerned with uncovering a lineage of descent among adaptations because they see a common origin and similar structure between the processes of cultural and biological adaptation. The lineage of descent they wish to discover among literary adaptations will expose the relationships
between texts and explain why variations among adaptations occurred, but it will not explain why there are so many adaptation of the same story in circulation. They ask the question, “Why do the same stories exist in such a startling array of forms?” (446), but I ask why do the same stories exist simultaneously in such a startling array of forms? While Bortolotti and Hutcheon see a homology between the processes of cultural and biological adaptation, I see a homology between variation among literary adaptations and variation among species, which can be explained by work done on beak variation among finches of the Galapagos Islands.

The finches of Daphne Major in the Galapagos are a famous example of variation and evolution at work and explain how multiple species very similar to each other can simultaneously exist in the same area. When Charles Darwin first studied them in 1838, he noted the subtle variation between the many species of finch that lived on the islands but could not determine any importance behind the variation among the finches. Darwin initially believed that individual variation among the finches would have as large an impact on the survival of the species as the difference between the beak of an eagle and a hummingbird have on how those species survive; an eagle and a hummingbird can survive in the same location because each bird consumes a different food source, as identifiable by their beak. Darwin believed beak variation among the finches of Daphne Major would show the same process at work. What he and others found, however, were a wide variety of finches eating all the same food. In 1938 David Lack, a British ornithologist, studied the finches of Daphne Major and discovered the key role variation plays among the Daphne Major finches. In his book *The Beak of the Finch* Jonathan Weiner explains Lack’s findings. He explains that when Lack went to the islands, he was not able to see natural selection at work, but when he studied his notes at home he noticed that finch species with very similar beaks generally did not live on the same islands. When the like-beaked finches
did live on the same islands, they exhibited much more pronounced beak-length variation. Weiner says, “Whenever species with very similar beaks try to colonize the same island, Lack decided, they are thrown into competition. The struggle grows so bitter that one or the other species of finch is driven to extinction. But occasionally two like-beaked species evolve enough local differences that the intensity of their competition is reduced. Then both species survive” (56). Currently Peter and Rosemary Grant study the finches of Daphne Major. Weiner explains that the Grants’ study of the beaks of finches, among other specifics about the birds, continues the work done by Darwin, Lack, and other scientists. He says the Grants go to Daphne Major every year and see natural selection in action the way Darwin and Lack inferred it to work (19). By observing living finches in the field as opposed to only having access to stuffed specimens, skeletons, and fossils like Darwin and Lack, the Grants are able to contribute valuably to the study of natural selection and evolution by observing these processes in action on Daphne Major in a way that makes the science incredibly accessible and alive.

Studying beak variation among the finches of the Galapagos Islands has proven that one reason species variation occurs is for survival. Species in the same environment that consume the same food will be in direct competition with each other so that peaceful coexistence is not possible unless one or both of the species varies enough from each other that the competition is alleviated. Similarly, adaptations of the same story in the same cultural environment will be in direct competition with each other for an audience so that peaceful coexistence is not possible unless the adaptations vary enough from each other that the competition for an audience is alleviated.

Whereas Lack and the Grants looked to the like-beaked finches of Daphne Major to answer their questions about how such incredibly similar species can coexist in the same
environment, I look at various adaptations of the Hamlet story to understand how the same story can simultaneously exist through multiple adaptations that have all met with success. Because Lack’s first big breakthrough with the finches happened in his lab, studying finches from the past, and that is where I also begin. I start the next chapter by looking at a 12th century Danish text by Saxo the Grammarian that was influential on a 16th century French prose adaptation by Francois de Belleforest, and William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. These three adaptations of the Hamlet story, we will see, existed simultaneously during the Elizabethan period because of variation, or differences, between them. Saxo the Grammarian’s account served as a history, Belleforest’s account concerned itself with morals, and Shakespeare’s play entertained. After making inferences based on the evidence of the past, as Lack did, I move to studying Hamlet adaptations in the field i.e., contemporary adaptations, as the Grants study living finches. I specifically focus on three American adaptations from the late 20th to early 21st century: Jonathan Updike’s 2000 novel *Gertrude and Claudius*, Michael Almereyda’s 2000 film *Hamlet*, and David Wroblewski’s 2008 novel *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*. These three adaptations of the Hamlet story all exist in the same cultural moment and vary from each other, allowing them to coexist as successful adaptations of the Hamlet story. Updike’s novel retains the setting of the Hamlet story and modernizes the language to explore questions left unanswered by Shakespeare. Almereyda’s film retains the language but modernizes the setting to explore the way Hamlet’s story can be applied to contemporary concerns. Wroblewski’s novel, on the other hand, transplants the Hamlet story into modern times and modern language with an altogether different cast of characters that invokes Shakespeare’s play to explore what the Hamlet story has to say about the benefits of remembering loved ones in a positive way as opposed to the destructiveness that arises from sustained resentment.
Just as Lack and the Grants have focused on a specific characteristic of the finches, i.e., their beaks, to observe the role variation plays in the survival of the finch species, I also focus my study of the Hamlet story on a specific characteristic. My concern is the Ghost from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. I have picked my focal point from Shakespeare’s play rather than the other versions because Shakespeare’s play is the most obviously influential in the current cultural moment and the play most people would be likely to think of first when hearing the name Hamlet. As Marvin Hunt explains in *Looking for Hamlet*, there are textual inconsistencies associated with the text of Shakespeare’s play; I use *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* provided in *The Norton Shakespeare* edited by preeminent Shakespearean scholar, Stephen Greenblatt for my analysis. *The Norton Shakespeare* provides the Folio edition of Shakespeare’s play with passages from the Quarto 2 edition inserted in italics because of the belief that these editions reflect revisions made by Shakespeare to the play’s text (1666-1667). *The Norton Shakespeare* does not incorporate the Quarto 1 edition of the play’s text. I have chosen this text because the anthology is well researched by a respected Shakespearean scholar and produced by a respected press. I specifically focus on the Ghost’s first discussion with Hamlet in 1.5 of Shakespeare’s play because this conversation initially sets Hamlet on a course for murderous revenge. Before this, Hamlet was disconsolate and melancholic but had not been exhibiting evidence of homicidal tendencies. In Shakespeare’s play, the Ghost appears once before this scene, once after, and is referred to multiple times throughout the play. Almost all appearances or references to the Ghost revolve around the action Hamlet has been set upon. Additionally, the themes and concerns that revolve around Hamlet’s interactions with the Ghost are present throughout the play even when the Ghost is entirely absent. As such, the Ghost is an integral part of Shakespeare’s play, even if it is a minor character. I contend that studying the variations
between adaptations of this element of Shakespeare’s play will provide valuable insight into the way these adaptations have evolved from a common textual-ancestor to existing simultaneously in the same cultural environment. The key to the peaceful coexistence of similarly based adaptations is the same as the key to the peaceful coexistence of similarly beaked finches: variation.
CHAPTER II: THE HAMLETS

Saxo the Grammarian’s *The Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus* and Francois de Belleforest’s *Histories Tragiques*

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is by far one of the most popular and famous texts from the Elizabethan period, but Shakespeare’s adaptation of the Hamlet story was not the only adaptation of the Hamlet story to exist at its time. Many other adaptations of the story were quite popular as well. In order to understand how Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* recontextualized the Hamlet story in order to compete with other successful versions of the narrative, it is important to examine the adaptations of the Hamlet story from which Shakespeare’s play descended. This shows us the lineage of descent Bortolotti and Hutcheon are interested in studying as well as the adaptation variation that interest me. Two known adaptations of the Hamlet story which were successful at the time were Saxo the Grammarian’s *The Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus* and Francois de Belleforest’s *Histories Tragiques*.

Saxo the Grammarian was a 12th century Danish scholar who recorded the story of Hamlet from older legends. In his book *Looking for Hamlet*, Marvin Hunt explains that Saxo the Grammarian’s version is the earliest known written account of the story (13). The importance of this text is that it is the first known written record of the story and can serve as a baseline for further changes to the story in other adaptations of this time. Moreover, this account of the Hamlet story influenced Belleforest’s *Histories Tragiques*, which was incredibly popular during the Elizabethan period (Greenblatt, *Will*, 295). Saxo the Grammarian’s account, as related at the end of Book Three of *The Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus* does not mention a Ghost because the murder of the king was committed openly, so the prince already knew about it. In this version, Horwendil, king of Denmark, is murdered by his brother Feng, who subsequently
marries Horwendil’s widow, Gerutha. Amleth, Horwendil and Gerutha’s son, feigns madness to avoid Feng’s suspicion. He spends much of his time fashioning pointed sticks, which he says are javelins to avenge his father’s murder. While some think this proves Amleth mad, others think Amleth’s craftsmanship betrays a hidden intelligence, so Feng devises two plans to determine whether Amleth is truly mad. First, Feng sends a woman to Amleth, under the assumption that Amleth would not be mad if he could openly love another. Amleth, warned of the trap by a foster-brother, took the woman into seclusion to make love to her and ask for her confidence. The second trap is to arrange for a spy to observe a private conversation between Amleth and his mother. Amleth discovers the presence of the spy, stabs him, and cuts the body into pieces to feed the pigs. After killing Feng’s spy, Amleth convinces his mother to become virtuous by berating her actions. Because Feng cannot find his spy after the event, he is positive Amleth is tricking him and, wanting to kill Amleth without offending Amleth’s mother and grandfather, Feng arranges to have two retainers escort Amleth to Great Britain with a note condemning Amleth to death. Amleth discovers the note while the retainers sleep, changes the instructions to condemn the retainers to death, and adds a request to the King of Britain that he should grant his daughter in marriage to Amleth. Impressed by Amleth’s wit, the British king hanged the retainers and gave Amleth his daughter’s hand in marriage. After a year, Amleth returned home, where he trapped Feng’s court in a fire and killed Feng by the sword (Saxo 106-117). The similarities between Saxo the Grammarian’s account and Shakespeare’s play are remarkable. The two plans to determine Amleth’s state of mind correspond very closely to the plots Claudius devises regarding Ophelia and Polonius respectively. Amleth and Hamlet are both dismissed to Great Britain with two retainers in a secret plot against their lives, although the match is not exact as Amleth returns with a wife after a year in England and Hamlet immediate escapes on a pirate
ship. It is very clear to see that despite the variations between these two texts, the evidence between the texts certainly supports a relationship, leading to the conclusion that Saxo the Grammarian’s account of the story is an early rendition of the tale perpetuated by Shakespeare’s 
*Hamlet* whether Shakespeare directly encountered this version or not.

A second version of the Hamlet story popular at the time of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is Francois de Belleforest’s *Histories Tragiques*. Belleforest’s version of the story is more similar to Saxo the Grammarian’s account than to Shakespeare’s play. Hunt explains the main difference between the two is that “much moralizing” has been added to the story (16). Belleforest changes the story so that the Queen, now called Geruth, has already had sexual relations with the usurping brother, now called Fengon, before the murder of the king, now called Horvendile. In his version, the Prince, now called Hamblet, returns to court after having been at the school of Junius Brutus, a Roman Prince. In this version of the tale, the woman, still nameless, sent to seduce Hamblet has loved Hamblet since she was a child and it is ambiguous as to whether they have sex in the forest. Hamblet’s harangue on his mother is more intense in this version of the story. The rest remains mostly the same as Saxo the Grammarian’s account. This adaptation of the Hamlet story did not experience massive revisions in terms of plot to compete for its audience. Bortolotti and Hutcheon explain why this could happen: “When an environment is stable we can predict that adaptations will differ little from the previous generation” (449). While we cannot know exactly why Saxo the Grammarian’s version and Belleforest’s version differ little in terms of plot, we can see that the adaptation did experience a change in tone. This variation, becoming more moralized, seems to represent a change large enough to attract a large audience in the 1570s. According to Greenblatt in his Shakespeare biography *Will in the World*, Belleforest’s “collection of tragic tales was a publishing phenomenon in the late sixteenth
century. (It went through at least ten editions)” (295). This evidence suggests that Shakespeare’s play would have had to contend for an audience with Belleforest’s immensely popular version of the story.

The textual similarities between Saxo the Grammarian, Belleforest, and Shakespeare’s versions of the Hamlet story suggest a strong intertextual relationship. However, it is unknown whether Shakespeare had ever directly encountered Saxo the Grammarian or Belleforest’s versions of the Hamlet story when creating his own adaptation. The number of substantial changes to the plot of the story suggests at least one missing link between these versions and Shakespeare’s. Greenblatt explains in *Will in the World* that the earlier versions of the story began when the Hamlet character was a child and unable to immediately take his revenge. He says, “The problem, however, is that the theater is not particularly tolerant of long gestation periods: to represent the child Hamlet feigning idiocy for years in order to reach the age at which he could act would be exceedingly difficult to render dramatically compelling” (304). As a result, Shakespeare’s play changes so that the action starts when Hamlet is at an age where he can readily avenge his father. This variation between adaptations to adjust to the genre change differentiates Shakespeare’s Hamlet story from Saxo the Grammarian and Belleforest’s Hamlet stories. However, in Saxo the Grammarian and Belleforest’s versions, the murder of the king is public knowledge and there is no ghost, which, unlike waiting for Hamlet to grow up, could be rendered dramatically compelling in a play. Because the murder is secret and the Ghost is used to tell Hamlet about it when no change would have been required in an adaptation from Saxo the Grammarian or Belleforest’s versions indicates that this change occurred in an undocumented version, usually referred to as the *Ur-Hamlet*. Hunt also identifies Laertes, the visiting players, *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet’s soliloquies, and the gravedigger scene as additional elements.
of Shakespeare’s play that are not present in the first two iterations of the story and might have originated in a missing link play (23). While it is conceivable that Shakespeare could have made some of these changes himself, logic dictates that if he was working from Saxo the Grammari
on or Belleforest’s versions, his variations would have been more conservative, especially given the popularity of Belleforest’s collection. Greenblatt agrees it was likely Shakespeare adapted the Hamlet story from a missing version rather than Saxo the Grammari
on or Belleforest. He explains that Amleth and Hamblet’s feigned madness makes so much sense from a cunning standpoint when the murder is public but Hamlet’s feigned madness is no longer tactical when the murder is secret, meaning that “Shakespeare in effect wrecked the compelling and coherent plot with which his sources conveniently provided him” (305) had he used Saxo the Grammari
on or Belleforest. Therefore, Shakespeare probably adapted a missing version of the story that introduces at least some of these changes. This also means Shakespeare’s play would have had to contend with the missing Ur-Hamlet for an audience and would have had to find a way to distinguish itself through variation as it seems as if Shakespeare’s Hamlet would have been much more similar to the Ur-Hamlet than it was to The Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus or the Histories Tragiques.

William Shakespeare’s The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Shakespeare’s The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark is a remarkably successful adaptation of the Hamlet story in its own time, as Shakespeare’s original lead, Richard Burbage, “remained synonymous with the lead part for the rest of his life” (Hunt 3), and in our own. For Shakespeare’s Hamlet to achieve such lasting popularity is a convincing testament to its success because, as Hunt explains, by the time Shakespeare would have written his Hamlet, the Hamlet story “was already a staple of the London stage” (27). This means Shakespeare’s play had to
contend with many adaptations of the Hamlet story. While we cannot know how Shakespeare’s adaptation varied from plays we do not know about, we can see how it varied from versions such as Saxo the Grammorian and Belleforest’s. One of the main variations that makes this adaptation unique is its use of the Ghost, which does not exist in the other two versions. Whether the Ghost was introduced by Shakespeare or inherited from a missing link, the play effectively uses the Ghost throughout, the study of which serves to explain one way the play might have made itself successful through variation and to act as a baseline for understanding variations undertaken by adaptations of it.

From a basic plot standpoint, the Ghost’s function in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is to serve as a call to action, which is most likely due to the change of the king’s murder from public to secret. When the Ghost first appears in 1.1, it has already prompted Barnardo and Marcellus into action, as they have sought Horatio’s help. When Horatio cannot speak with the Ghost, the three men tell Hamlet that his father’s specter is wandering the parapets of Elsinore at midnight. In this first scene between Hamlet and the Ghost, the Ghost tells Hamlet how it died and that it is Hamlet’s duty to revenge his father (1.5). Hamlet references the Ghost at times when he is most uneasy about the action he is to take, such as in his soliloquy in 2.2. He sarcastically chastises himself for not taking action sooner when he says, “Why, what an ass am I? Ay, sure, this is most brave, / That I, the son of the dear murderèd, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, / Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words / And fall a-cursing like a very drab, / A scullion!” (2.2.560-565). Although he justifies his inaction by explaining his doubts about the Ghost (2.2.575-580), even this reference to the Ghost ends with Hamlet deciding upon an action; in this soliloquy he affirms his plan to stage *The Mousetrap* to “catch the conscience of the King” (Shakespeare 2.2.581). When the Ghost appears again to Hamlet in 3.4, it is after has failed twice
to deliver revenge – the first being when Hamlet refuses to kill Claudius while his uncle is at confession in 3.3 and the second being when Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius in 3.4 – and to remind Hamlet to take action. From this point forward in the play, Hamlet becomes a man of action. He actively discovers the assassination plot against him and subverts it, returns to Elsinore, and kills Claudius during the deadly duel. Hamlet becomes active not only in his actions but also in his dialogue; when he discovers Ophelia’s funeral and challenges Laertes in grief, he identifies himself as “Hamlet the Dane” (Shakespeare 5.1.242), which Greenblatt explains as “Normally the title of the King of Denmark” (1746). Pronounced in the company of the current king of Denmark, Claudius the Dane, such a statement would carry a serious of challenge Hamlet needs to be ready to answer with action. Once Hamlet actively pursues the vengeance that has been his goal from the start, the Ghost ceases to appear in any way.

No matter what else Hamlet is, it is a revenge play and Shakespeare would have had to find ways to make his play unique among revenge plays, which he manages to do through his variation on the ghost character. Greenblatt explains that ghost characters in Senecan tragedies, which were popular revenge plays, “only appeared to give the audience a shiver of fear” (Will 304). In its first appearance in 1.1, the Ghost seems to be nothing but terrifying. According to Barnardo and Marcellus, the Ghost has appeared to them twice before and Marcellus calls it a “dreaded sight” (1.1.23). Even Horatio, the scholar whom Barnardo and Marcellus have brought to confront the Ghost, is initially struck with fear. He must be prompted to the task he was brought for because, as he says, “It harrows [him] with fear and wonder” (1.1.42). Failing to get the Ghost to speak, Horatio is left trembling when it leaves. When the Ghost returns, Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus are ready to engage the Ghost in combat. Horatio says, “I’ll cross it though it blast me” (1.1.108). If scaring the night watch were the Ghost’s only role, it would
seem to fulfill the traditional role of a ghost in a Senecan tragedy. However, as Greenblatt and Hunt both agree, Shakespeare’s Ghost was more than simply scary. Greenblatt describes the Ghost as crucial to the plot of the play (Will 304) and Hunt explains, “While ghosts were typically bogeymen meant to terrify the hero and his audience, the […] Ghost is a rounded character, rendered with a psychological and emotional complexity not found in typical ghosts of the Senecan tradition” (42). This variation on the traditional ghost character can be seen through Hamlet’s interaction with the Ghost. When Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus tell Hamlet about the Ghost, Hamlet’s first reaction is curiosity rather than horror; he suspects the Ghost bodes an ill omen, but he does not seem to be terrified (Shakespeare 1.2.188-257). When Hamlet interacts with the Ghost in 1.4, he is not as scared of the Ghost as are Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus. Hamlet might have experienced some fear as the first thing he says when he sees the Ghost is “Angels and ministers of grace defend us!” (1.4.20), but he does not seem to value his life even at this point in the play and he doubts the Ghost can do anything to his soul, as exemplified when Hamlet says, “I do not set my life at a pin’s fee, / And for my soul, what can it do to that, / Being a thing immortal as itself?” (1.4.46-48). Hamlet says this in response to Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus’s fearful entreaty not to go alone with the Ghost. When Hamlet speaks to the Ghost in 1.5, the Ghost very explicitly tells Hamlet to revenge his father’s death. The Ghost doesn’t just command Hamlet to revenge his father’s death, but explains what happened and why it was wrong. The Ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius poisoned his father and seduced his mother into marriage. In this adaptation of the story, the fault of the coupling of Gertrude and Claudius is placed primarily on the shoulders of Claudius. While the Ghost finds Gertrude culpable in the incestuous relationship, it does not request Hamlet to perform any act of revenge against her. In fact, the Ghost requests the opposite; it says, “nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother
aught. Leave her to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (1.5.85-88). The Ghost also shows concern for Hamlet when it tells Hamlet, “But howsoever thou pursuest this act, / Taint not thy mind” (1.5.84-85). The Ghost’s concern for Gertrude and Hamlet shows a character which is at least emotionally complex, as Hunt pointed out. Rather than simply demanding justice and bloodletting, the Ghost wants revenge but not at the expense of those it cared for in its mortal life.

The Ghost, a complicated character within the play, is also part of a complicated ideological shift that was happening in England during Shakespeare’s time, which can be understood in the ways different characters responded to it. In terms of adaptation variation, this means Shakespeare’s use of Hamlet occurred at a time when audiences would have been uniquely receptive to it, thus increasing the chances of the play’s success. In his book What Happens in Hamlet, John Dover Wilson explains how each of the characters who met the Ghost corresponded to a school of Elizabethan thought that Shakespeare’s audience could have identified with. Marcellus and the wall guards act on what Wilson refers to as traditional views or slightly more enlightened superstitions (66-67). Horatio, at first, is skeptical about the Ghost, and Hamlet, not doubting the Ghost’s existence, doubts throughout much of the play the Ghost’s origin, whether from Purgatory or Hell (68-73). This variety of views held by the characters of Hamlet would have resonated with Shakespeare’s audience. Those who still had Catholic inclinations might have believed the Ghost was from Purgatory and that it was Hamlet’s duty to fulfill the Ghost’s request so it could move on to Heaven. Those who had embraced Protestantism might have believed the Ghost was a devil from Hell, sent to give Hamlet adamning mission. Still others would have been inclined to be skeptical about the Ghost from the beginning. Skepticism about the Ghost’s existence is dismissed in the play because Horatio,
Barnardo, and Marcellus all witness the Ghost, but Hamlet, at least, is stuck between whether the Ghost is a spirit begging for release from Purgatory or a devil from Hell trying to trick him. For an Elizabethan England, also stuck between long-held Catholic beliefs and newer Protestant ones, the question of the Ghost’s identity and intention would have spoken directly to their own religious questions. Shakespeare’s audience would also have most likely believed Hamlet’s delay of action throughout the play because they would have shared his confusion as to the Ghost’s nature. Wilson explains that Shakespeare was able to appeal to all types in his audience with the Ghost; he says, “The nature and origin of wandering spirits was one of the great questions of the time among thinking people, and the Ghost in *Hamlet* was a real contribution to the subject” (85). The Ghost, as a variation in Shakespeare’s adaptation would have been very likely to be a characteristic that made the play more able to contend with other adaptations of the Hamlet story for an audience. If Shakespeare did not present the Ghost as a complex character implicating questions of religious dogma, the play could have still been a popular story of revenge; the popularity of Belleforest’s collection shows us that the Hamlet revenge story was popular without spiritual significance added. However, since Shakespeare included this variation in his play, it was able to contend for an audience differently than Saxo the Grammarian or Belleforest’s versions would have been able to.

The Ghost’s ability to appeal to audiences by contributing to the ongoing discussion about wandering spirits is more fully discussed by Greenblatt in his book *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Greenblatt specifically looks at Saint Thomas More’s *Supplication of Souls*, which defended aspects of Catholicism, and Simon Fish’s *Supplication for the Beggars* as reprinted by John Foxe, which attacked aspects of Catholicism, and he speculates that Shakespeare could have been familiar with these texts when writing *Hamlet*. Regardless of whether Shakespeare knew
these specific texts, Greenblatt claims Shakespeare would have been familiar with similar texts, and he says, “These works […] stage an ontological argument about spectrality and remembrance, a momentous public debate, that unsettled the institutional moorings of a crucial body of imaginative materials and therefore made them available for theatrical appropriation” (249). Greenblatt provides evidence from John Gee’s *New Shreds of the Old Snare* to support his claim. In 1624, Gee, an English Puritan, published his work that discussed methods Jesuits used to convert women to Catholicism; he sees the Jesuit’s actions in terms of theatricality. Gee says the Jesuits would stage “mysterious apparitions: with a burst of light, ‘a woman all in white, with countenance pale and wan, with long tresses of hair hanging down to her middle’ […] appears before an impressionable young woman and declares that she has come from the torments of Purgatory” (Greenblatt, *Hamlet*, 255). According to Gee, the Jesuits were able to solicit large sums of money from their audience with this tactic. Gee says, “Representations and Apparitions from the dead might be seen far cheaper at other Play-houses. As for example, the Ghost in *Hamlet*” (qtd. in Greenblatt, *Hamlet*, 256). Greenblatt continues his analysis of Gee’s work by explaining,

> With the doctrine of Purgatory and the elaborate practices that grew up around it, the church had provided a powerful method of negotiating with the dead, or, rather, with those who were at once dead and yet, since they could still speak, appeal, and appall, not completely dead. The Protestant attack on the “middle state of souls” and the middle place those souls inhabited destroyed this method for most people in England, but it did not destroy the longings and fears that Catholic doctrine had focused and exploited. Instead, as Gee perceives, the space
of Purgatory becomes the space of the stage where old Hamlet’s Ghost is doomed for a certain term to walk the night. (256-257)

Both Wilson and Greenblatt see that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was very much a part of its cultural environment and the variation brought on by Shakespeare’s use of the Ghost made the play very well suited to its environment. While Wilson shows that the viewpoints about the Ghost represented in the play would have most likely reflected the variety of viewpoints held by Shakespeare’s audience, Greenblatt’s observations show that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* inhabits a cultural niche left vacant in the Elizabethan environment by the public disavowal of Catholicism. Whether the Ghost was Shakespeare’s invention or was inherited from a different adaptation, this adaptation of the Hamlet story is clearly successful; even though other adaptations of the Hamlet story, such as Saxo the Grammarian’s and Belleforest’s, still attracted audiences, Shakespeare’s adaptation successfully coexisted through variation from its textual-competitors.

**John Updike’s *Gertrude and Claudius***

Updike’s *Gertrude and Claudius* is a successful prequel to the Hamlet story. Speaking in terms of success similar to the population distribution among organisms to employ Bortolotti and Hutcheon’s homology, one measure of *Gertrude and Claudius*’s success is that in 2000 Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, which is part of the Bertelsmann AG worldwide media group, published the novel. As a publishing house, Random House has a highly influential, widespread reach. The “About Us” page on the Random House website describes Random House by saying, “The reach of Random House, Inc. is global, with subsidiaries and affiliated companies in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Through Random House International, the books published by the imprints of Random House, Inc. are sold in virtually every country in the world.” In addition to achieving success via a
widely distributed press, *Gertrude and Claudius* was one of the *New York Times* Editors Choice 10 Best Books of 2000 ("Editors Choice") and was a national bestseller.

As an adaptation, *Gertrude and Claudius* is able to find success even when contending with Shakespeare’s play and other adaptations for audiences due to the variation it brings to the story. The novel is, for the most part, a prequel to Shakespeare’s play. Many, such as Hutcheon, consider a prequel to be an extension of a story rather than an adaptation of it (*A Theory* 9). However, *Gertrude and Claudius* places itself prior to Shakespeare’s play in order to answer unanswered questions from Shakespeare’s play. As such, it clearly engages with the play intertextually and approaches the Hamlet story through variation by placing the action prior to the action of the play it adapts. In addition to adapting Shakespeare’s play, this novel varies from many other late 20th to early 21st century American adaptations of the Hamlet story because it openly adapts the Saxo the Grammarian and Belleforest versions as well. The names used in Part I of the novel come from Saxo the Grammarian’s version, the names in Part II come from Belleforest’s, and the names in Part III come from Shakespeare’s. Because there is not a Polonius character in Saxo the Grammarian or Belleforest’s versions and Updike includes him since this novel converges with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Updike uses Corambis, Polonius’s name in Q1, and Corambus, Polonius’s name in a shorter German version of the play, in Part I and II respectively (Updike, *Gertrude*, Foreward). Even though the novel progresses so that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* could conceivably follow immediately after, the forward, which places such a heavy emphasis on the textual ancestry of Shakespeare’s play, seems to make this a scholar’s adaptation set to appeal to audiences interested in the study of literature.

In addition to appealing to literature scholars, *Gertrude and Claudius*, as an adaptation, seeks to answer unfulfilled questions about Shakespeare’s play. To that end, the novel ends with
an afterward that indicates Updike’s motivation behind the variations of this adaptation. Updike quotes a summary of G. Wilson Knight’s interpretation in *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy* from William Kerrigan’s *Hamlet’s Perfection*. Knight explains, “Putting aside the murder being covered up, Claudius seems a capable king, Gertrude a noble queen, Ophelia a treasure of sweetness, Polonius a tedious but not evil counselor, Laertes a generic young man. Hamlet pulls them all into death” (qtd. in Updike, *Gertrude*, 212). While it might seem difficult to ignore the murder of the king, which is what propels the Ghost to make its request of Hamlet, Updike does so by providing backstory for Gertrude and Claudius that is absent in Shakespeare’s play. He explains why he approached the Hamlet story – specifically Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – from Gertrude and Claudius’s point of view in an interview on the National Public Radio show *Talk of the Nation*. When asked, Updike said, “For many years, it struck me that the case for Gertrude and Claudius isn’t made very completely in the Shakespeare play. There is a lot we don’t know about how they got together. Hamlet’s anger at his mother seems overdetermined and she’s generally played by actresses past first prime, but in a very genteel and lovely way.” Updike seems to blame Hamlet for the audience not knowing much backstory about Gertrude and Claudius. In the interview, Updike explains, “Hamlet […] is so condemnatory of [Gertrude’s] misbehavior, as he construes it, that it wouldn’t be up to [him] to add any condemnation to it.” This adaptation, then, varies the story to answer questions left unanswered by previous versions. Nor is Updike the only one to think so; in his review “Spoiled Rotten in Denmark,” Richard Eder observes that “the book illuminates questions about Shakespeare, about what a classic means and also the unexplored hills and forests that lie on either side of the path art pushes through them.” Updike’s claims and Eder’s observations both prove that the novel relates the Hamlet story in a new way that explores unanswered questions
and absent motivations from previous versions of the story, which allows it as a fiction adaptation of the Hamlet story to occupy the cultural niche of literary discussion about Shakespeare.

Because *Gertrude and Claudius* is primarily a prequel adaptation, the Ghost is hardly present in the novel. Because the Ghost is such an important characteristic of Shakespeare’s play, the absence of the Ghost is a variation in itself, drawing attention to the few times the Ghost is referenced in Updike’s novel. The Ghost, as it appears in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, exists only as a rumor in *Gertrude and Claudius*. The novel ends with a rendition of Shakespeare’s 1.2 of *Hamlet*, and this is supposed to be the overlap between the two works that makes them one continuous whole. Up to this point in the play, the Ghost has appeared to Barnardo and Marcellus three times and to Horatio once. In Updike’s novel, as Claudius prepares for the public audience that is Shakespeare’s 1.2, he makes rational plans to bring Denmark into order after suffering from the death of King Hamlet and now facing an invasion from Norway. According to Claudius’s point of view, “affairs [in Denmark and at Elsinore, in particular] trembled on the edge of fantasy; it was rumored that battlement sentries on the midnight watch had been seeing an apparition in full armor” (205). Audience members who are familiar with Shakespeare’s play will know this is a reference to 1.1 of the play when Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus tried to speak to the ghost. They will also know that immediately upon Claudius’s departure, Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus meet with Hamlet to tell him about the Ghost and that the ghost will shortly ask Hamlet for revenge. The novel even pushes for this awareness as Updike begins his afterword by saying, “The action of Shakespeare’s play is, of course, to follow” (211). The Ghost’s function at this point in *Gertrude and Claudius* serves to connect Updike’s novel and Shakespeare’s play in order to facilitate a seamless transition for knowing readers. In terms of
the novel’s relationship with its textual ancestor, Shakespeare’s play, this use of the Ghost is not a variation because it is not all that much different, even though it is provided from an alternative point of view, which means this use of the Ghost was inherited from the play.

However, not all mention of the Ghost is inherited without meaningful variation. The rumor Claudius thinks about is the only time the Ghost is mentioned in the text in terms of it being an actual character that could appear, but the Ghost is indicated in other scenes that carry thematic weight of the novel. While Shakespeare’s play’s focus on Hamlet places much of its focus on his need to weigh his actions against morality when he cannot seem to decide what exactly is the moral thing to do, Gertrude and Claudius in Updike’s novel almost always have a clear sense of what is right and wrong. Instead of weighing their actions against morality, they weigh morality against their actions. Gertrude justifies her affair with Claudius by thinking of her husband as chosen for her by society and Claudius as chosen for her by herself (131); Claudius justifies his affair with Gertrude because he believes Gertrude did not want to be married to his brother (142). He justifies murdering King Hamlet because King Hamlet has found out about the affair and has threatened severe punishment (143-149). While Gertrude and Claudius may enjoy their affair and truly be in love with each other and while Claudius may enjoy the kingship that killing his brother gave him, the world of the novel does not let them happily continue without pangs of guilt.

At multiple times, the Ghost is implicated to highlight their guilt. The first instance is a moment when Gertrude is wandering alone through the halls of Elsinore. She is thinking to herself that “King Hamlet in Gertrude’s sense of him became almost palpable […] And upon this sense was visited an impression of pain; he seemed this less than apparition but more than absence, to be calling her name” (Updike, *Gertrude*, 194). Of course, Updike’s audience knows
that the Ghost of King Hamlet is present, knows Gertrude’s transgressions, and is still making a claim for her, as Gertrude suspects might be happening (195). Updike’s audience knows all this is true because the novel converges with Shakespeare’s play. It is this connection between the novel and the play that makes this variation so powerful. In Shakespeare’s play, there is no hint that Gertrude would even suppose the Ghost is present. Indeed, when Hamlet talks to the Ghost in 3.4, Gertrude fears her son has gone mad because she does not see the Ghost. In Updike’s novel, though, Gertrude’s relationship to the Ghost is changed because her fear of the Ghost of King Hamlet is her way of dealing with her guilt. The beginning of this passage from Gertrude and Claudius says that Gertrude feels as though she senses a ghost’s presence with all but her sight and even then is barely sure of what she feels other than feeling, “vaguely, pursued” (195). Perhaps this explains for Updike’s audience why Gertrude capitulates to Hamlet’s recriminations in Shakespeare’s 3.4 after Hamlet indicates a ghost is present. In addition to providing an explanation for why Gertrude submits to Hamlet, this answers for audiences why the Ghost, visible to Hamlet, Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus, is not visible to Gertrude in 3.4.

Additionally, when Gertrude tells Claudius her fears about the Ghost, she admits that she is self-ashamedly glad she doesn’t have to hide her relationship with Claudius because King Hamlet died (Updike, Gertrude, 165), which helps explain questions readers of Shakespeare’s play may have had about the speediness of Gertrude and Claudius’s marriage.

In addition to answering questions about Gertrude, Updike’s novel also implicates the Ghost in terms of the guilt Claudius feels as a dark foreshadowing of events to come after the novel ends. The moment is prior to Shakespeare’s 1.2 and from Claudius’s point of view, “whatever of ineradicable unease clung to his soul, and whatever black remorse remained of the vial of poison he had poured into his sleeping brother’s ear […], these ghosts were banished by
the sunlight that flooded the great hall” (Updike, *Gertrude*, 203). The metaphorical ghosts that haunt Claudius’s conscience might be banished by the sunlight, but the actual Ghost is very much present in the night and will have its reckoning through Hamlet. The relationship between the Ghost and Hamlet is foreshadowed when Claudius remarks, “[Prince] Hamlet plays the ghost, a presence spun of rumor, to spite me, for the people have ever had him in their favor, and his absence at Elsinore purposely saps our reign of credibility!” (164). To Updike’s audience, this remark is simple enough that it equates Hamlet and the Ghost, which is fitting because in Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet and the Ghost seek the same ends and are among the most sympathetically presented characters of the play. In Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet is seeking to sap Claudius’s credibility because he wants to prove that Claudius murdered his father.

In Updike’s novel, however, this equivalency is not to Hamlet’s benefit. A major variation of this adaptation is that King Hamlet – Horwendil in Part I and Horvendile in Part II, but King Hamlet here for convenience – is portrayed as a brutish, violent, uncaring man. He is a brilliant politician and a good king, but he does not seem to care for Gertrude as much as he cares for Denmark (187). He is also clearly portrayed as a pillager, with all the tendencies toward looting and raping that it implies (142). In effect, this portrayal of King Hamlet influences the way readers of Updike’s novel understand the Ghost of Shakespeare’s play. If readers take this interpretation with them when they read Shakespeare, the Ghost is less sympathetic because his murder was not spontaneous and Gertrude’s relationship with Claudius developed in part because of King Hamlet’s inability to understand his wife’s needs. As a result, the variations provided in this adaptation might make readers more likely to accept Updike’s negative reaction to Hamlet because the authority from which Hamlet receives his orders has been undermined.
This adaptation’s niche, it appears, is to communicate directly with Shakespeare’s play in an attempt to answer unanswered questions and explore unrevealed motivations. As an adaptation, *Gertrude and Claudius*, tries not to vary setting or characters because Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is ideally meant to follow. What it does vary is backstory and motivation. By adding more for some characters and changing the way other characters are viewed, this adaptation is a recontextualization of Shakespeare’s play, and Saxo the Grammarian and Belleforest’s versions, too, since the novel draws attention to them. This novel’s success as an adaptation relies on its intertextual relationship with the adaptations that came before it. By answering questions about Shakespeare’s play through its intertextual relationship, Updike’s adaptation actively engages with the text it adapts rather than merely replicating or continuing it; this sort of enlightening intertextual engagement is a primary variation of this version and distinguishes the novel from other versions which try to invoke Shakespeare’s play without including the play in its own continuity.

Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet*

In 2000, the same year Updike’s *Gertrude and Claudius* was published, Michael Almereyda’s film adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* also perpetuated the Hamlet story with its own recontextualization through variation. Whereas Updike’s novel maintains the setting but modernizes the language, Almereyda’s film maintains the language but modernizes the setting. The effect of this variation is to recontextualize Hamlet and his dilemma into the media saturated world of early 21st century America. This story is placed in Manhattan at the Hotel Elsinore. Denmark in this movie is the nondescript Denmark Corporation. Rather than taking over as king, Claudius takes over as CEO. Rather than leading an army against the country of Denmark, Fortinbras is initiating a hostile takeover of the Denmark Corporation.
The variations on the Hamlet story in this adaptation confront the trust audiences of the 21st century place in technology. It is this confrontation with technology and media that is the most successful variation of this adaptation because the film recontextualizes the plot of Shakespeare’s 17th century play within themes relating to a 21st century concern. The Ghost only fleetingly engages with this theme. When Horatio, his girlfriend Marcella, and Barnardo, a night security guard at Hotel Elsinore, see the Ghost at midnight, they don’t believe what they see at first, not because they don’t believe in ghosts, but because they see the Ghost on a security camera monitor. When they go down the hallway shown in the monitor and see the Ghost, their doubts are confirmed. Hamlet, in this film, does not doubt the existence of the Ghost because he never sees the Ghost through a monitor. The Ghost appears directly on the balcony of his penthouse room to make the request for revenge. However, Hamlet doubts the Ghost’s word because the reality the Ghost presents him does not equate to the reality Hamlet maintains through technology. Hamlet watches old movies of his happy parents and the Ghost’s message that it was murdered by Claudius, who Gertrude willingly married, does not fit the world-view Hamlet creates through his videos. He is unable to pursue the course of action the Ghost sets for him due to his total reliance on interpersonal relationships as mediated through the video screen and his lack of knowledge about what action is. When the Ghost is in Hamlet’s room, it physically grabs Hamlet multiple times. During this scene, Hamlet has no technological intermediary between himself and reality. In fact, immediately after the Ghost leaves, the film returns to the safety of technology by showing a computer screen connecting to the Internet just as Shakespeare’s Hamlet returns to the safety of speechmaking through Hamlet’s soliloquy (Shakespeare 1.5.92-113). Almereyda discusses the relationship he believes his film adaptation shares with Shakespeare’s play in “A Live Wire to the Brain: Hooking Up ‘Hamlet,’”
“Shakespeare, after all, has Hamlet caught in the wheels of his own hyperactive mind, enthralled by ‘words, words, words.’ The film admits that images currently keep pace with words, or outstrip them, creating a kind of overwhelming alternate reality.” Almereyda’s Hamlet, then, is trapped in the hyperactive constant stream that is media. Hamlet’s predicament mirrors the situation many Americans potentially find themselves in today where their world-view is created from mediated representations rather than real-world experiences. At the same time Almereyda’s *Hamlet* reflects the dangers of a media-saturated society, it also serves as an active warning against such reliance on the media. Prior to the Ghost’s actual appearance on Hamlet’s balcony, Hamlet grieves in seclusion, making snide comments and being asocial in public while watching family videos that support his worldview of his family as an inseparable, happy unit. It is the Ghost’s real world presence that pushes Hamlet outside the isolating safety blanket created by his technology and forces him to make decisions he is not ready to even think about, as his total inability to deal with Claudius during the beginning of the film evidences.

In addition to addressing the personal isolation brought about by technology, the move from religious beliefs about the Ghost to distrust of technology’s ability to reflect the world because of the isolating nature of technology makes the Hamlet story relatable in ways that Shakespeare’s play might not be to an early 21st century audience. For readers of Shakespeare’s play today, as Wilson noted in 1935 in *What Happens in Hamlet*, ghosts are not taken as seriously as they were in Elizabethan England (53). The qualms Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo have over whether the Ghost is a demon or a soul from Purgatory do not register for audiences in the same way today as it did for the Elizabethans. For the Hamlet story to have the same effect on audiences, the problem that stymies Hamlet needs to be a problem the audience shares. In “‘To Be or Inter-Be’: Almereyda’s end-of-millenium Hamlet,” Alessandro Abbate
argues that Almereyda’s film challenges our comfort with technology and the disembodiment associated with technology. By this, Abbate refers to being able to watch somebody or edit footage of a person without having to physically interact with that person. Hamlet, in Almereyda’s film, is so immersed in the media around him that he only holds quality relationships with people through the videos he has of the past. In his hotel suite, Hamlet watches videos of a happier Ophelia and of his mother and father when they are smiling and together. He cannot even interact with the world around him at the beginning of the film without his video camera; when he attends the press conference that is analogous to Shakespeare’s 1.2, Hamlet watches the event through the playback screen of his video camera. As his gaze roams over the crowd, it is always through the intermediary of his camera. Whenever Hamlet abandons his media technology, he is almost always engaging in reckless action that eventually leads to his death. One of the effects of this variation is that the audience experiences the Hamlet story in terms more familiar to its everyday life, therefore making Shakespeare’s play, in turn, easier to understand.

On the other hand, Almereyda’s film does more than invoke Shakespeare’s play to make it more understandable; the film firmly addresses the status of technology in the 21st century. Its exploration of technology as an intermediary for reality almost always portrays technology as inadequate, as in the scene where Hamlet gives the “To Be or Not to Be” soliloquy which begins with Hamlet reviewing footage of himself holding a gun up to his head saying “To be or not to be.” Hamlet rewinds and replays the tape repeatedly as if he cannot decide what to do. In the next scene, he attempts to take action by resolutely pushing into Claudius’s office with a cocked and drawn gun. Claudius, however, is not there and Hamlet, without guidance, returns to technology for answers. He is next seen walking down the Action aisle of a Blockbuster Video
store. As he walks, bright red signs reading ACTION flank Hamlet and video monitors display violent explosions. The juxtaposition of Hamlet’s famous soliloquy wherein he ponders how overthinking action can make action impossible to take with a store full of films dedicated to heroes who take action shows Hamlet’s inability to translate what media shows him into the real world. Two movies displayed along Hamlet’s route through Blockbuster reflect the sense of loss and uncertainty he feels. At the beginning of the scene is a prominent display of the movie *Liar Liar*. In this movie, a habitually lying lawyer is forced to tell only the truth for an entire day because of a birthday wish his son makes. Since part of Hamlet’s inaction is due to his inability to believe the Ghost, the movie *Liar Liar* is the perfect solution the media presents Hamlet but cannot deliver. Hamlet cannot wish for his father to tell the truth and know it is so; Hamlet is stuck in the uncertain real world where he needs to maintain actual relationships with people in order to know who he can believe. The second movie prominently displayed in this scene is *Lost in Space*. In this movie, a family, accidentally stranded in space after their mission is sabotaged, tries ceaselessly to get home. The family in the movie initially find themselves in uncharted space. This movie represents the position in which Hamlet finds himself. He is metaphorically in “the undiscovered country to whose bourn no traveler ever returns” (Almereyda) while the family of *Lost in Space* finds themselves literally in undiscovered country. The media though suggests at the end of *Lost in Space* that the family does succeed in getting home, but Hamlet has no such promise as he tries to decide what action to take. In this scene, Hamlet does not look at any specific movie or rent one. The film’s audience can clearly see from this scene that technology does not have the answers Hamlet hoped to find.

If Almereyda’s film presents technology as inadequate, it paradoxically also shows technology to be both Hamlet’s ally and a traitor to him. Hamlet, an aspiring film student in this
adaptation of the story, edits a film he calls *The Mousetrap*, which is a collection of edited images designed to recreate the murder of the king and betray Claudius’s guilt, just as Hamlet’s staging of *The Mousetrap* play was meant to betray Claudius’s guilt in Shakespeare’s play. The effect was just what Hamlet intended and in this one instance, technology supported Hamlet’s actions rather than hindering them. However, between the scene of Hamlet editing *The Mousetrap* and Hamlet showing it, technology betrays Hamlet when he makes an attempt to engage in an interpersonal relationship not mediated by technology or media. In this scene, Hamlet meets with Ophelia and opens up to her. The dialogue in this scene is the same as Shakespeare’s 3.1 and up to Hamlet’s “Get thee to a nunnery” dialogue, Hamlet and Ophelia are honestly communicating with each other. Soon, however, Hamlet discovers that Ophelia has been wired with a microphone to record the conversation for her father and Claudius. While it is unclear whether Hamlet knows the recipients of the recorded conversation, it is clear from his suddenly enraged behavior that he knows from the presence of the technology that he has been betrayed. This is immediately followed by Hamlet renting 9 videos from the Blockbuster. The video titles are not shown, and there is no dialogue between Hamlet and the cashier. With his attempt at interpersonal contact a failure, Hamlet returns to the comforting isolation of media intermediaries no matter what they are.

Almereyda’s adaptation varies the Hamlet story so as to invoke Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in a more understandable context for his audience of the late 20th to early 21st century and to explore concerns about the media and technology present today. One of the concerns about media and technology Almereyda explores at length is the isolating effect of technology that prevents users from needing to develop interpersonal relationships or have real-world experiences. This clearly contrasts with Updike’s novel on two levels. On the first level,
Almereyda’s film attempts to engage the Shakespeare play so as to recreate the same plot events through more familiar settings and actions in order to make the story more relatable for its audience whereas Updike’s novel engages Shakespeare’s play by creating plot events that occur before the play with the understanding that the play is to follow in order to provide information not present in the play. By recontextualizing the plot events of Shakespeare’s play, Almereyda’s film answers questions about Shakespeare’s play, too, but it does so to make the story more understandable, not make an open challenge. Updike’s sympathy-altering interpretations of Gertrude, Claudius, King Hamlet, and Hamlet clearly differentiate from Almereyda in that regard. The second level on which Almereyda’s film and Updike’s novel differ is that Almereyda investigates the isolation created by technology and how lack of interpersonal relationships among the characters function through the story, and Updike’s novel is concerned with many interpersonal relationships. In neither case, however, does the play end happily for the characters. Almereyda’s film shares Shakespeare’s ending and Updike’s novel converges into Shakespeare’s play. In sharing the ending to Shakespeare’s play, Almereyda’s film does not rest in its exploration of technology’s influence. Right before Hamlet dies, the camera focuses on Hamlet’s eye and black and white clips from the movie play. Even in death, Hamlet’s identity is represented by his relationship to the media. Through these variations, the movie can successfully coexist with other adaptations of the story because it invokes the play through recontextualization more familiar to today’s audiences and addresses thematic concerns at the heart of its audience. Almereyda expresses the hope that joining Shakespeare to the “spectacle of contemporary media-saturated technology” can help to clarify the themes of the play, and it is for this purpose that the adaptation varies the Hamlet story (“A Live Wire”).
David Wroblewski’s *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*

David Wroblewski’s novel, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, is different on a surface level from other adaptations of the Hamlet story because it does not use all the same plot events, any of the settings, or many of the same characters. This novel is placed on a Wisconsin dog-breeding farm during the middle of the last half of the 20th century. The Hamlet character is a boy named Edgar Sawtelle. He was born mute and communicates in sign language. His sign language is partially composed from American Sign Language and partially of his own invention. Only his mother, Trudy, and his father, Gar, understand his signs. Edgar communicates with the dogs the family trains through sign language, as well. His uncle, Claude, does not attempt to learn Edgar’s sign language when he returns to the farm after being in the Navy. Almost a third of the novel concentrates on the family before Gar’s death, and another third concentrates on the time when Edgar has run away from home for killing Dr. Papineau. Dr. Papineau, Wroblewski’s Polonius character, is a veterinarian who provides medical services to the dogs in exchange for a monetary share of the farm. In terms of plot, Wroblewski’s *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* recognizably invokes Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The main difference, aside from the large sections Wroblewski has added about dog breeding is that the Ghost does not tell Edgar to revenge its death; instead the Ghost only asks to be remembered.

In Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet spends the majority of his time debating about whether he should exact revenge against Claudius for the death of his father. That Hamlet should seek revenge is fitting because one of the requests the Ghost makes of Hamlet is that he “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest” (Shakespeare 1.5.82-83). However, right before the Ghost departs, it says to Hamlet, “Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me” (Shakespeare 1.5.91). This injunction, given at the end of their conversation, is almost like
an afterthought and is not pursued throughout the rest of the play. Hamlet remains concerned
with pushing himself into vengeful action rather than honoring his father’s memory. In
Almereyda’s *Hamlet*, which also portrays this scene, the Ghost asks Hamlet to seek revenge and
at the end of the conversation says, “Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me.” As it says this, it
grabs Hamlet into a close hug and places a hand on the back of Hamlet’s head. When the
embrace ends, Hamlet is visibly shaken emotionally, but, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet,
Almereyda’s Hamlet is not concerned with the memory of his father as much as he is concerned
with vengeance. In Wroblewski’s novel, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, the Ghost does not request
that Edgar, Wroblewski’s Hamlet figure, seek vengeance. The Ghost’s main request is to be
remembered (241). It asks for Edgar to find the syringe Claude used to poison Gar, but the
implied reason for this within the text is that Trudy and the police won’t believe Edgar unless he
has evidence (240). For an audience today, this story updates Shakespeare’s story with
injunctions from the Ghost that are applicable to current standards; after all, *The Story of Edgar
Sawtelle* is a realistic text despite the presence of ghosts. It is no longer socially acceptable or
culturally required in most cases of 21st century American culture to kill somebody out of
revenge. Turning criminals over to the authorities and remembering the dead are the accepted
practice today, so the Ghost’s emphasis on being remembered and lack of a request for revenge
is a variation that modernizes the Hamlet story to the contemporary ideals of its audience.

Another variation within this version of the Hamlet story is that Edgar’s father is not the
only ghost in the novel. The other ghost Edgar comes into contact with also promotes the
importance of remembrance. Edgar is staying with a man named Henry Lamb while he is on the
run for killing Dr. Papineau. As he cleans out Henry’s barn in return for his room and board, the
other ghost appears. It is the ghost of the farmer who used to own the property. He filled the barn
with various odds and ends because his wife wouldn’t let him throw anything away. After she
died, he couldn’t empty the barn because the barn crammed full of useless stuff reminded him of
his wife. The farmer says to Edgar, “Would have been like burying her twice” (403). The
farmer’s commemoration of his wife by keeping the barn filled with the junk she made him store
there over the years even though she was dead corresponds with another instance of devotion
showcased in the novel. When Edgar is talking to the Ghost of his father, the Ghost tells Edgar to
look for information about a dog named Hachiko. Hachiko is a Japanese dog from the 1920s to
1930s who waited every day for his master outside a subway station even though his master had
a stroke and no longer went to work. The dog became so well known that a monument was
erected to him. In the letter in which Edgar learns about Hachiko, the writer says, “I suppose one
cannot conceive of such devotion in man or animal until one has seen it with one’s own eyes”
(267). While I would not argue that Wroblewski’s version of the Hamlet story pushes for its
audience to become slavishly devoted to the memories of their loved ones, the farmer who would
not throw his wife’s garbage away and the dog who waited every day for a master who wasn’t
coming exhibit extremes in remembering the dead that need to be provided in the Hamlet story to
counteract the destructiveness of the plot.

In Wroblewski’s novel, the end result for the characters is the same as in Shakespeare’s
play: the main characters all die. However, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*’s variation changes the
way this happens because Edgar chooses the family’s legacy twice over taking revenge on
Claude. Glen Papineau, Dr. Papineau’s son and the town’s sheriff, attempts to kidnap Edgar in
order to find out what exactly happened to his dad. In the process, the barn that holds all the dogs
and the records about the dogs catches fire. With the barn on fire and the released dogs running
all over the place, the scene Wroblewski paints is one where chaos reigns and almost anything
could happen. Edgar could take vengeance on Claude for killing his father and marrying his mother, or Edgar can save the records about the dogs in an attempt to preserve the work achieved by generations of Sawtelles. He watches his mother, Claude, and Glen and decides if he “watched even a moment longer he thought he would run toward the house, toward Claude, and then there would be no hope” (531). Instead of attacking Claude, Edgar decides to save the family’s legacy. For a while, he is successful, but Claude has hidden the poison with the records and goes in to retrieve it. While Edgar and Claude are in the barn together, the smoke builds so much that neither men can see very well. At that moment, Claude poisons Edgar and Edgar grabs a pitchfork. Rather than stabbing Claude with it, Edgar uses the pitchfork to open the hay hatch on the barn to buy himself more time to save the family’s records. The importance of these actions is that this version of the Hamlet story recognizably invokes Shakespeare’s play through its main plot points, two of the characters’ names, and the death of Edgar, Claude, and Trudy, but it is very much its own autonomous work in that the Hamlet character himself behaves very differently than Hamlet does in many other versions of the Hamlet story.

Thinking in terms of Bortolotti and Hutcheon’s homology, the variations that occur in Wroblewski’s novel would indicate a great change within the lineage of descent of this story. Perhaps that could be due to a substantial environment change. While swordfights and revenge are still popular in the 21st century, those concepts are not applicable for a realistic story placed within 20th century America. In order to reach its audience and perpetuate the story, these changes had to be made. In addition to being a substantial change in terms of plot action, the variations in Wroblewski’s novel exhibit a variation in reader expectation. Like in Shakespeare’s time, the Hamlet story is a very popular one. Audience members who come to Wroblewski’s novel most likely come with an understanding of how the characters will act. All except for
Edgar act according to their corollaries in Shakespeare’s play. Edgar’s choice to honor the Ghost’s request to be remembered over delivering revenge is a fundamental shift in what the character was expected to do. The end result is the only happy ending out of any of these adaptations. For Edgar, there is hope of escaping the Hamlet story after death as he joyously reunites with his father (Wroblewski 552).
CHAPTER III: CONCLUSION

By looking at the intertextual relationships between Saxo the Grammarians, Belleforest, and Shakespeare’s versions of the Hamlet story and Shakespeare, Updike, Almereyda, and Wroblewski’s versions of the same tale, I have found that highly successful versions of the same story can peacefully coexist at the same time because they each approach the story differently. Rather than judging one adaptation to be a better or worse replication of a source text than the other because of their differences, these different approaches are precisely what make the multitude of adaptations successful.

Bortolotti and Hutcheon have asked us to think about adaptations in this way without comparing the stories in terms of faithfulness to an original. It is through the discourse generated by their homology that adaptations can be seen as a natural extension of a successful narrative; in order for narratives to remain successful, they must change to fit new cultural environments. This is certainly seen in Updike’s novel, Almereyda’s film, and Wroblewski’s novel. Updike brought the Hamlet story into an environment that actively questioned character motivation, especially for Gertrude and Claudius, and assumptions brought to the text about those characters. His text explored the relationships among individuals of the Hamlet story in an attempt to answer those questions. Almereyda modernized the Hamlet story; he brought Hamlet out of the Danish past and into the American present. By shifting the focus of Hamlet’s preoccupation from religious concerns to the isolating influence of technology, Almereyda was able to communicate Shakespeare’s play to a 21st century audience and explore concerns relevant to that audience. Wroblewski’s adaptation of the Hamlet story explored what would happen if the focus of Hamlet’s actions turned away from avenging his father and toward remembering him. The
outcome, as we can see in the novel, is still death for Hamlet, but that is because of his violent uncle as opposed to maliciousness on his own part.

As a direct result of Bortolotti and Hutcheon’s homology that emphasizes the lineage of descent among adaptations, the incredible number of adaptations comes into sharp relief. What is especially astounding is the number of coexisting versions of the same story. These multiple versions prove fruitful for discussion, however, because they recontextualize older stories in a myriad of ways to fit different cultural niches. In the first chapter, I asked us to think about these six versions of the Hamlet story as same-beaked finches existing on the same island of the Galapagos. Now, I ask us to think about this a little differently. The adaptations are all versions of Hamlet, so in my metaphor, they are all finches. Like the finches, some species vary subtly from each other, whereas other species vary greatly. The same is true of literary adaptations. What I have done here is try to establish that the biological/cultural construct Bortolotti and Hutcheon developed with their homology can be expanded to think about other processes of evolution and adaptation rather than lineage. To me, lineage retains too much concern with which text came first. Looking at literary adaptations as one story among a multitude of other variations of the story opens the intellectual door for examining intertextual relationships where descent is only one possible relationship. The finches of the Galapagos Islands don’t care about which species developed from which; they care about getting enough to eat and perpetuating the species. Stories, especially adaptations, can also be seen as trying to attract and keep an audience, and in order for simultaneously existing adaptations of the same story to coexist productively without being in constant competition with each other, there must be variation. Like the same-beaked finches on Daphne Major, the stories at the heart of these adaptations may be incredibly similar to each other, but subtle variations in the telling make all the difference. When
describing the importance of the Grants’ work with the finches, Weiner writes, “We add to what was learned before, raising the old questions again and again, lifting them if we can toward higher and higher ground, and ourselves with them. Why are there so many kinds of animals, and why are we among them?” (293). As literary scholars, we must ask the same type of question. Why are there so many stories and where do ours fit in?
WORKS CITED


