

An Onomastic Approach to *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*: David Wroblewski's Transformation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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IF DAVID WROBLEWSKI had chosen to begin his American Hamlet with a double *Dramatis Personae* — and since the reader quickly realizes that she knows this story, she has read it before, there is no reason for him to have done so — it might have looked something like this:

<i>Edgar Sawtelle</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>
Gar: the name by which Edgar Sawtelle senior goes	Hamlet I, the murdered king of Denmark
His son Edgar, a boy who cannot speak	Hamlet II, son of the murdered king of Denmark
Trudy: Edgar's mother	Gertrude: Hamlet's mother
Claude, Edgar's younger brother	Claudius, Hamlet's younger brother, who succeeds him as king
Doctor Page Papineau	Polonius, Claudius's Lord Chamberlain
Glen Papineau, Page Papineau's son	Laertes, Polonius's son
Almondine: the dog who loves Edgar from the day of his birth	Ophelia, daughter of Polonius
Henry Lamb, who befriends Edgar when he seeks refuge in the Chequamegon Forest	Horatio, Hamlet's loyal friend
Forte, a stray of immediately apparent strength and beauty	Fortinbras, Claudius's successor as king of Denmark

Wroblewski's characters' names *are* different, but traditional naming and word formation processes point to his intention, Taylor Emery writes, to create "an American retelling of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*."¹ My purpose here will be to give attention to what could be called "nominal determinism," an intention on the part of an author to use the names he gives his characters to predict what their actions will be. To begin with the first father-son pair, Edgar Sawtelle Senior goes

¹ Emery provides this identifying phrase in "Edgar Sawtelle: The American Hamlet," *Tennessee Philological Bulletin* 47 (2010): 28-37.

by the shortened form Gar, but the same Hamlet-the-father Hamlet-the-son namesake relationship, with its burden upon the son of a responsibility to avenge the father's death, becomes visibly apparent with appearances of Gar Sawtelle's ghost.

Trudy's name is a result of subtraction followed by addition. Wroblewski reduces Gertrude to Trude, then adds a diminutive suffix to the remaining syllable. But Trudy Sawtelle is no sweet little Betty or Polly or Pattie or Julie. She is a strong American farm woman, a partner in the Sawtelle family business of raising a new breed of dogs and training them to be ideal companions for human beings, and as a trainer of dogs she is not restrained by her husband's over-sympathetic consideration for their feelings when they need to be firmly controlled.²

Deeply wounded by the stillbirth of the first child she is able to bring to full term, Trudy is nevertheless able to rise from her bed and cleanse her body and the body of her child by getting into the bathtub, where Gar finds her with the water and her bed clothes drenched with blood. Concerned with Edgar's inability to utter sounds and their physician's inability to diagnose his problem, she does not despair but determines to take action. She takes Edgar to Popcorn Corners (which consists, Wroblewski later informs his readers, of a grocery store, a gas station, and three equally decrepit houses) and lays him on the grocery store counter for Ida Paine's examination (Ida Paine, a character Wroblewski adds to those presented in his source, plays the role of a "wise woman," a woman with uncanny knowledge that cannot be explained by reason). Trudy then accepts the help of a woman who identifies herself as a daughter of profoundly deaf parents and tells her she can teach her son to communicate by the use of signs. Later, though she is devastated by the unexplained death of her husband whose body is found on their kennel floor, she continues, with the help of her son, now a teenager, to train and care for the Sawtelle dogs.

Claude, whose name is a result of subtraction of the second and third syllables of Shakespeare's Claudius, is not immediately identifiable as the man in a pea coat of the *Sawtelle* Prologue who exchanges a vial of penicillin for a cylinder of poison (the Korean herbalist who supplies the poison calls this a "life for a life" exchange), but the basic *Hamlet* story of Claudius's murder of his brother emerges as Edgar begins to realize it. Edgar Sawtelle knows when Claude first returns to the Sawtelle farm and is unable to sleep in the spare room he and his mother have carefully prepared for him that he must have come from confinement in prison, and as the story progresses we gradually learn about Claude's experience as a navy medic, his work treating dogs injured in dog fights, and his close familiarity with Doctor Page Papineaux's pharmaceutical inventory. And, because Wroblewski includes "a well-worn navy pea coat" (117) among the belongings Claude leaves behind after a ferocious fistfight with Gar almost as a kind of murder mystery novel detail, we know that the un-named character of the *Edgar Sawtelle* Prologue must have been Claude.

Doctor Papineau and Glen Papineau present a second father-son pair, their relationship to Polonius and his son Laertes perhaps signaled by the shared initial consonants of their surname. In any case, Polonius's son's drinking in France, for which he expresses his concern in *Hamlet* Act II, Scene i, is multiplied at least fivefold by Glen's consumption of twelve-packs of beer as he engages in an extended conversation with Claude about *his* father's death in a sequence titled "Glen Papineaux" (429-40).

I have included Almondine's name in the Sawtelle *Dramatis Personae* because her role, like that of Forte, is of major importance to the life of the Sawtelle family. Wroblewski writes in "Three

² Wroblewski suggests in the "Acknowledgements" with which his book ends that the reader begin an investigation of the training techniques his fiction depends upon by reading Vicki Hearne's "How to Say Fetch," an essay now included in *Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name*.

Griefs,” *Edgar Sawtelle* Part II, that Trudy, looking at Almondine and seeing how she has aged, sees that “her gaze was as steady and clear as it had ever been,” and remembers that that gaze was “what had made them choose her out of all the other pups” (212). Trudy and Gar chose Almondine to be the family’s house dog because of her remarkable ability to *see*, and Almondine may be seen to take on the role of Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius, whose love for young Hamlet, I must say, does not seem to equal the love of Almondine for Edgar. And I should perhaps acknowledge that beside the facts that both “Almondine” and “Ophelia” begin with vowels and share a stress on the vowel /i/ I do not see a particular trigger to memory in this pair of names.

A relationship between Henry Lamb, who is introduced in Part IV of Wroblewski’s novel, and Horatio, who plays the role of Hamlet’s friend from the beginning to the end of Shakespeare’s play (he is there from the first sighting of the ghost of Hamlet the father to the death of young Hamlet) may or may not be signaled by a repeated initial consonant. But in any case Henry becomes a true friend when Edgar appears at his doorstep in desperate need of help.

And finally, with the Forte-Fortinbras pair, sound similarity may again call attention to a shared character-defining quality. Consultation of *The New Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*, the dictionary Edgar depends upon when he reaches an age at which he can be assigned the task of naming the Sawtelle dogs, reveals that “Forte” comes from the Latin root “fortitude” and is associated with resolute endurance, and Forte has more than aptly proven his ability to survive in the wild” (“Forte”).

The *Sawtelle/Hamlet* naming parallels, then, are clear enough. Emery may overstate his case when he writes that “*throughout* [italics mine] the novel he recreates Hamlet” (28), but he adds that “Wroblewski maintains that the story has elements of *The Jungle Books* and *The Odyssey*,” and we find in “Chequamegon,” Part IV of his five part transformation, that he draws heavily upon Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Books* to tell this part of his story, and, in fact, as Part III ends, we witness a transformation of Trudy to Raksha, the Mother Wolf of *The Jungle Books*, when she tells Edgar to “Go!” She is his *mother*, and he must do as she says (326). But this is getting ahead of the story.

Turning back to Edgar’s early childhood, we find that though he could not learn to read by the conventional see-say method that requires the learner to look at the letters of a word and then utter the sounds represented by the letters in sequence to produce the word to which they give visible form, he could *read*. He would of course never reach the “to be or not to be” heights of Hamlet’s eloquence, but he was able to make excellent use of *The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*, a heavy text he often carried with him to the kennels in preparation for the naming tasks his parents assigned to him.

But let us consider this early scene which, incidentally, provides an account of a naming sequence that begins with Hector, the only name I have been able to trace back to Homer’s *Odyssey*, one of the additional sources Wroblewski cited:

SITTING IN THE WHELPING PEN, watching a new litter of puppies squirm. At five days old, they are too young to name, but this has become his job. One of the pups is trying to climb over the others, pushing them aside to nurse. He is a bully. His name will be Hector, Edgar decides. Choosing names is hard. At night he discusses it with his mother and father. He is very young, and has only now begun using his dictionary to find names and note them in the margins. (48)

The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary is not Edgar’s only source. He names the stray he hopes to entice into the Sawtelle kennels Forte for a dog his father once owned, but it is his *primary* source when he must name the seven pups of his own first litter. And as we consider just the three who will play roles in the story of Edgar’s flight into the Chequamegon forest after the accidental death of

veterinarian and family friend Page Papineaux for which he may well be held accountable, we find that Tinder, Baboo, and Essay's names are especially appropriate. Tinder, who "would break a stay just because one of his littermates looked at him with a certain glint in his eye," is identified as the "most rambunctious" of the litter, and one *Encyclopedic Dictionary* definition for "tinder" reads "an inflammable substance." Baboo, who "once in a while . . . would sit forever" (120), receives a name for which Edgar's dictionary may suggest *Jungle Book* associations: "A Hindu title of respect paid to gentlemen." And Essay receives her name because she "always pushed to see what she could get away with, waiting until he looked away to bolt," and here the *Dictionary* provides a sequence of almost synonymic definitions: "to make an effort to perform, to try, to attempt, to endeavor to do." Edgar names his pups, then, in ways that reflect what he sees as their essential natures, the qualities that will determine their future actions.

And Wroblewski names *his* characters in ways that enable readers, even if we do not see them as precisely "mirroring" their counterparts in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to begin to understand some of the reasons for their actions. In any case, these are some of the basic *Hamlet* transformations to be found in his retelling of the familiar story.

Action Parallels and Near Parallels

<i>The Story of Edgar Sawtelle</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>
Gar appears to Edgar as a ghost	Hamlet's father's ghost appears and speaks to him (Act I, ll. 684 ff.)
Claude's courtship of Trudy	Gertrude accepts the poisoner's love (Act III)
Members of Edgar's litter perform "carry" and "tag" sequences that lead to Claude's involuntary acknowledgement of guilt	The play's the thing . . . to catch the conscience of the king. Play within the play: silent presentation of King Claudius and Queen Gertrude pouring poison into Hamlet's ears
Edgar, who regrets his failure to have killed Claude earlier when he first found his father dying on the kennel floor, causes Papineau's death, thinking the man he approaches in the darkness is Claude	Hamlet, who has refused to kill Claudius (Claudius is clean from confession, as his father was not), unintentionally kills Polonius (Act III)
Trudy tells Edgar he must go	Claudius decides to exile Hamlet (Act IV, Scene i)
Edgar, upon his return, finds Almondine's un-marked grave	Ophelia's burial scene (Act V, Scene i)

In Wroblewski's *Story*, as in Shakespeare's play, ghost appearances and re-appearances of the father determine what the action of the son must be, but critical differences in the re-telling can be observed. In *Hamlet* Act I, scenes iv and v, Hamlet's father's ghost reveals the identity of his murderer and assigns the task of avenging his death to his son. The first "ghost" to appear in

Wroblewski's story, however, is not really a ghost. Recovering from the stillbirth of the first child she succeeds in bringing to full term, Trudy just sees a *living* Gar who "seem[s] to shimmer into place between [two aspen] trunks like a ghost, hand cradled to his chest, carrying a pup," emerge from the woods. But this vision nevertheless establishes one of the natural conditions for the appearance of ghosts in *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* — a mist, often preceded or accompanied by rain drops.

The "In the Rain" sequence of "Three Grievs," for example, begins with a reference to a background of suspended raindrops from which a vision of a man, a figure who proves himself to be "real" by giving Essay a "down" command that she obeys, followed at once by a "sit" command that Edgar's other dogs also obey, emerges. Edgar's father's ghost tells his son that he could not have saved him and that he must search now for "*What he lost. What he thinks is lost forever,*" referring to the "plastic-barreled syringe" that contained the poison Claude used as his murder weapon. At this point the ghost answers Edgar's "What does it mean?" question with "You've seen him use one," and then he answers "Claude?" which he understands to be Edgar's next question, with the single word "Yes." This sequence, which includes Gar's father's statement that Trudy will marry Claude — he has always taken what he wanted — closes with the words "Remember me," a lessening of the mists, and a vanishing vision of Gar Sawtelle (Wroblewski 236-41).

Edgar *does* remember — and I should perhaps note that Ida Paine, the prescient Popcorn Corners cashier known by the Sawtelles and their neighbors as a woman whose fingers always added up their tab with amazing speed before she asked "Anything more?" reminds him more than once that he *should* remember. And after his heroic attempt to save the records of the Sawtelle Dogs from the conflagration that threatens to destroy all the efforts of his father (and of *his* father John Sawtelle before him) when the ghost of his father appears to him for the last time, Edgar is able to *tell* Gar that he loves him.

Claude's courtship of Trudy amounts to little more than a knock on her bedroom door, to which she responds by addressing him as "Gar" by mistake, but Wroblewski gives close attention to the skill with which Edgar develops *his* parallel to the play within a play of *Hamlet* Act III in "What Hands Can Do," the third part of his five-part novel. Here Edgar is seen patiently teaching his pups a sequence of commands that involve training one pup to approach and touch another pup with a syringe and the pup who is touched to fall immediately to the ground, and to repeat the sequence as many times as he gives the commands.

In the concluding chapter of "What Hands Can Do," Edgar uses his own sign language to demand that his mother tell "the Texan" (a man with a business interest in the Sawtelle dogs) that "the dogs see everything that happens here . . . and they never forget," thus establishing their credibility as witnesses. He then begins a sequence of approach, touch, and fall commands that ends when Essay, the last dog to perform, approaches and touches *Claude* with one of the cylinders Edgar has taken from his father's inventory of medical supplies. Claude's sudden involuntary response can be read as a clear acknowledgement of guilt, and this transformation of the *Hamlet* Act III play-within-a-play poisoning scene, in which actors silently play the roles of Claudius and Gertrude pouring poison into the ears of a sleeping King Hamlet, leads to further parallel action.

At this point Edgar's sudden approach causes Page Papineau to fall from the mow of the Sawtelle barn to his death on the kennel floor, which parallels Hamlet's unintentional killing of Polonius who lurks behind an "arras" or tapestry in Gertrude's private or side room (*Hamlet* III, iv). And this leads to Trudy's command to Edgar to "Go!" The manner in which Trudy follows her command by signing "Don't you dare. I'm your mother and you'll do as I say," along with the fact that Wroblewski refers to her at this point as "Raksha, Mother Wolf" (326), functions as a clear signal that he will now begin to draw upon Kipling's *Jungle Books*.

In "Chequamegon," Part IV of *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* (which bears the name of the Wisconsin forest that lay next to the boundaries of the Sawtelle farm), Wroblewski draws heavily

upon his second source. Turning to *The Jungle Books* we find in “Tiger! Tiger!” that Meussa, whose own son Nathoo was stolen by a lion, tells Mowgli (a human child who was taken in and nourished by wolves) that he must leave before the villagers, who believe him to be a wizard, *kill* him (74), and he obeys her command. In Wroblewski’s *Story* Edgar also does what his mother says he must do — and more. She orders him just to hide behind the barn and stay hidden close by until she signals that it is safe for him to return. But Edgar, Tinder, Baboo, and Essay become a group of four dependent for days on end in the Chequamegon Forest upon their foraging skills just as Mowgli (the man-cub), Bagheera (a panther), Baloo (a bear), and Akala and Gray Brother (wolves) became a group of five in flight. And when Edgar finds it necessary to seek the help of another human being because Tinder has suffered an injury that severely impedes his ability to walk, let alone run, his concern that he not be identified as the runaway for whom the police are searching leads him to tell Henry Lamb — by means of the written word — that his name is Nathoo but he can call him Nat — and here the name would seem to function as a clear signal that Wroblewski has turned to his second source for development of Hamlet’s exile to England after the death of Polonius.

Edgar stays for some time with Henry Lamb in his rural residence, but he remains fully aware — he has seen the white car with black stripes driven by Glen Papineaux more than once — that he is the target of an ongoing search. So Edgar sets forth with his dogs and his generous friend in a car he has helped to restore with the intention of getting far enough away that he will never be found. But this further effort to escape is defeated by a tumultuous storm, and Edgar is forced to return to the Sawtelle farm, where he finds that Almondine has died so recently that her grave has not yet been marked. There are no clowns here, no parallels to the *Hamlet* Act V, scene 1 burial of Ophelia. Instead we are made more fully aware of Edgar’s sense of remorse for having rejected Almondine because he thought she was growing close to Claude, and we understand that he cannot bear to sleep in the house and must sleep in the kennels because he finds Claude to be so fully in charge.

“Poison,” Part V of *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, consists of chapters named for the re-named characters of Wroblewski’s transformation: “Edgar,” “Trudy,” “Glen Papineau” (who was also known as the “Blue Ox,” a name that reflected his work as a policeman, the enormity of his physical size, and an accompanying supposed lack of intelligence), “Claude,” and “The Sawtelle Dogs.” These chapter names seem singularly appropriate for the conclusion to a retold story in which a son who bears his father’s name shows a heroic determination to preserve his legacy, and we remember as we read the chapter that bears her name how Trudy, held back by the iron grip of Glen Papineaux from the flames that destroyed the Sawtelle kennels, saw an image of Gar carrying newborn pups as Edgar returned again and again to carry the names and breeding records of the Sawtelle dogs to safety.

The fire itself was a result of Glen’s vulnerability to Claude’s influence. Claude, playing an exaggerated role of sympathetic friend to a man who has just lost his father, persuaded Glen to attempt to anesthetize Edgar with the ether that, combined with the quick lime Edgar threw in self defense, ignited the conflagration that destroyed the enormous barn that housed the Sawtelle kennels. *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* does have a tragic ending, but Edgar, reunited with Almondine, is able to express his deeply felt regret that he had earlier turned against her, and Almondine is able to speak to *him* and tell him that he had understood what his grandfather was doing all along, why people wanted Sawtelle dogs, who should have them, and what comes next. The title of the final chapter, “The Sawtelle Dogs,” paying tribute to Gar Sawtelle’s accomplishment of his purpose, which was to develop a breed of dogs who could serve as good companions for human beings, is singularly appropriate. Names, then, continue to guide the reader from the beginning to the end of Wroblewski’s *Story of Edgar Sawtelle* in which, whether the source being drawn upon is Shakespeare’s

Hamlet or Kipling's *Jungle Books*, the Sawtelle dogs are presented as having as fully developed personalities as human beings.

As human beings age we tend to experience moments when we suddenly realize that we cannot remember the word that could enable us to express a thought, or struggle to remember a name that, in the past, had an everyday familiarity. Then suddenly the word or name comes back, accompanied by a sudden joy and a conviction that we are, after all, not really losing it. The words are there, as Jean Aitchison ably demonstrates in *Words in the Mind*. Names are stored in an organized manner, and sometimes, prompted perhaps by a response to a consonant cluster like "Cl" or "Tr," they come to us without our even asking for them. And this, I suggest, may be one of the reasons for the success of Wroblewski's retelling of the *Hamlet* story. We may take a kind of pleasure in the sense that we know the story, and enjoy reading until the story ends the way we remember it. But I do not think this fairly everyday experience really compares to the feeling Edgar has when he slips into a past experience in the "Chequamegon" sequence, which shows its dependence on another story that, though it may not be as familiar as Wroblewski's primary source, suggests another reason for the pleasure of what I like to call "double reading." Here, having been taken in by Henry Lamb and provided with a sofa to sleep on, Edgar is suddenly aware that "the great rock python Kaa [has] materialized and looped his iridescent coils around [his] legs and chest" (385). And thus his dream — it has to be a dream — brings back a memory of a time when Mowgli's life was sorely threatened and Kaa "had very courteously packed himself under the boy's broad shoulders, so that the boy was really resting in a living arm chair" ("The King's Ankus" 275).

Edgar's feeling of comfort would also seem to relate to a happy early memory of "HIS FATHER, READING TO HIM at bedtime, voice quiet, lamplight yellow on the lenses of his glasses" (Wroblewski 47). The story is a *Jungle Book* story, and when Gar pauses, Edgar signals "More." He wants to sleep with the memory of Mowgli, the boy stolen from his human parents by a tiger, and Bagheera, the Black Panther who assumed a responsibility to protect him. His memory of the story, then, is conditioned by the happiness he experienced in hearing it read aloud. When Edgar finds that he can concentrate enough to read for the first time since his father's funeral, the book he turns to is one he heard his father read aloud when he was just learning to deal with the shapes of words.

But what is the source of the pleasure readers of a contemporary novel experience when they realize that it is the retelling of an earlier story? Perhaps readers of Wroblewski's *Hamlet* find pleasure in their sense that they can see behind the words his characters speak — or sign — to the action he presents, that they already know the answer to the question of what caused the death of Edgar's father. They know why Ida Paine's granddaughter told Edgar that her grandmother said he knew a secret before he was born, and why Ida Paine, upon seeing a high school yearbook picture of Claude that Edgar brings to the grocery, tells him that he must get rid of the bottle (which we understand to be the container of the poison Claude used to kill his father) and then "Go!" This of course leads to the kind of pleasure readers take in reading murder mysteries and knowing they have the answer to who did what.

David Wroblewski drew upon two — or *four* written sources, if we count *The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Edgar's source for names) and Vicki Hearne's "How to Say Fetch," an essay he recommended to readers in his brief concluding "Acknowledgements" sequence that is now included in her *Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name*, along with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Kipling's *Jungle Books* — and upon his own life in rural Wisconsin and his dog training experience to re-tell a familiar story in ways that gave it a compelling new life. I do not expect to be able to completely understand how he did this, but I hope I have demonstrated that his skillful use of names played an important part in Wroblewski's story of how a boy named Edgar *Sawtelle* who could not speak or

learn to read the easy *see-say* way, was able to teach his well-trained dogs how to *tell* what he *saw*, and bring the truth of his father's murder to light.

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