Chapter 2

Of Death and Politics:

Shakespeare’s Political ***Hamlet***

As Queen Elizabeth neared the end of her reign, the instability of the English monarchy threatened the nation with political uncertainty and the potential for civil war or foreign invasion. The Queen had not yet declared a successor and the beginnings of civil unrest were demonstrated in 1601 when the Earl of Essex staged an unsuccessful rebellion in an attempt to increase his importance to the English crown. To gain support for their cause, the Essex rebels paid Shakespeare’s company forty shillings to perform *Richard II* as a blatant criticism of Queen Elizabeth and her reliance on corrupt advisors (Le Comte 88). As Queen Elizabeth aged and the political uncertainty of England increased, the Elizabethan stage became an increasingly politicized venue. The question of succession permeated the national mindset, and Shakespeare likely saw his audience as ready for a revamped version of *Hamlet*.

*Hamlet,* like many of Shakespeare’s other works, was an adaptation with numerous sources largely influenced by the socio-political atmosphere of the time in which he wrote it. Shakespeare’s most recent source, a lost version of a Hamlet play from the 1580s by Thomas Kyd, had become a running joke in England by the time Shakespeare penned his masterpiece. In his article, “*Hamlet* When New,” William Empson writes that “the only record of a performance of it [Kyd’s *Hamlet*]is in 1594, under conditions which make it likely to have become the property of Shakespeare’s company; jokes about it survive from 1589, 1596, and 1601, the later two regarding it as a standard out-of-date object” (15-16). Empson speculates that the political atmosphere of the period in which Shakespeare wrote his *Hamlet*, probably sometime between 1598 and 1601, was a contributing factor to the play’s timeliness. He explains that

A play about a prince who brought disaster by failing to make up his mind was bound to ring straight on the nerves of the audience when Shakespeare rewrote *Hamlet*; it is not a question of intellectual subtlety but of what they were being forced to think about already. (17-18)

The growing political uncertainty and seeming inaction of Queen Elizabeth in naming a successor or finishing any of her foreign campaigns was increasing the tension and fear of the English people. Empson asserts that Essex’s “attempt at revolt might have caused civil war” and that “the Queen herself had long used vacillation as a major instrument of policy, but the habit was becoming unnerving because though presumably dying she still refused to name a successor, which in itself might cause civil war” (17). Shakespeare, Empson argues, effectively altered “an old play to fit an immediate political purpose” (18). With the growing unrest of Essex and his followers and anxiety over the looming need for a successor to Elizabeth, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* emerged from its sources as a highly current examination of the political tensions apparent in late Elizabethan England.

Similarly, Stuart M. Kurland argues in his article, “*Hamlet* and the Scottish Succession?” that “the late Elizabethan succession question—specifically the anticipation that James VI of Scotland might succeed the aging Elizabeth—figures importantly in *Hamlet*” (279). Kurland analyzes Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as an examination of England’s struggles with, and doubts about, succession. He aligns Fortinbras with James I and explains that even up to the moment of Elizabeth’s death, the succession “remained in doubt” and that “although James had what many regarded to be the strongest hereditary claim to the English crown, as a foreigner he faced a common law prohibition against alien land inheritance in England” (281). Furthermore, James rallied his nobility in preparation for potential contention to his succession and maintained secret correspondence with both Essex and Robert Cecil, both of whom swore to support his ascension to the throne of England. In addition, rumors were spreading throughout England that James, supported by his brother-in-law Christian IV of Denmark and a fleet of 100 ships filled with 50,000 Spanish soldiers, was readying an attack on England in his attempt to gain the throne (284). After Essex’s execution, James was urged by Cecil to abandoned any thoughts of attempting to gain the throne through force or before Elizabeth’s death. James put aside his attempts to arm his people and wrote of his plans: “Yea, what a foolish part were that in me if I might do it to hazard my honour, state and person, in entering that kingdom by violence as an usurper” (qtd. in Kurland 283). Of course James’ ascension to the throne in 1603 was a peaceful process, but Kurland reminds us that the nature of his succession was still in the uncertain future when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. The uncertainty about the succession and the threat of war from abroad and civil unrest within England were clearly political concerns that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* dramatized.

Like Kurland and Empson, Edward S. Le Comte also reads Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a highly topical and politically aware adaptation. Following in the critical footsteps of Lilian Winstanley and James T. Foard, Le Comte draws a direct connection between historical figures of the late Elizabethan period and those portrayed in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. He specifically focuses on the character of Hamlet as a representation of Essex, and refutes previous claims that aligned Hamlet with both Essex and James I, stating in a footnote that Hamlet cannot be both men at once. Most importantly, Le Comte emphasizes that the historicizing of Shakespeare’s play is not simply an exercise of contemporary critics because topicality was readily recognized by Shakespeare’s audience. He asserts that “there is overwhelming evidence that the plays *were* taken topically” and quotes Queen Elizabeth’s response to the rebel-funded production of *Richard II* as proof (88). Of the production she reportedly observed, “I am ‘Richard the Second,’ know ye not that?” (qtd. in Le Comte 88). Le Comte further claims that the audience would have recognized an association between Hamlet and Essex because of “current history and the correspondences between the two characters” (90). The correspondences observed by Le Comte range from parallels between Essex and Hamlet’s attitude toward women, and particularly the queen, to the appearance of both figures in black. He further ties the play to Shakespeare’s contemporary England and cites that audiences would have recognized the play’s concern with succession, the similarities between the English and Danish courts, including their shared difficulties with “factions and spyings and conspiracies,” and the brief rebellion incited by Laertes (92-93). Le Comte, however, warns against assigning the *dramatis personae* of *Hamlet* in one-to-one association with historical figures and notes that “The Essex theory is, in short, a potent instrument for interpretation, and the problem is to use it restrainedly” (93). Regardless of whether *Hamlet*’s characters can be assigned historical corollaries with any certainty, it is clear that the political atmosphere of England at the time the play was penned influenced Shakespeare to tackle his adaptation.

Although it is not the aim of the present study to read *Hamlet* as an allegorical representation of Elizabeth, James or Essex, it is necessary to note that the political tenor of the play is clearly linked to the author’s awareness of his own time’s political reality. An acknowledgement of the play’s historicity, therefore, provides a point of departure in analyzing the political tensions—concerns of succession, the right to rule and the flow of information, conspiracy, rebellion, and foreign threats—contained within Shakespeare’s text.These tensions, while clearly products of the political reality of monarchal England in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, can be understood without a correlation to any particular historical figure. Whether or not Shakespeare’s audience recognized James I in Fortinbras or Essex in Hamlet need not effect our understanding of the political nuances evident in the text of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. What Shakespeare presents to his audience (and ours) is a kingdom in flux, plagued by the uncertainties of the sudden death of a monarch, the quick and illegitimate rise of his brother to the throne, and threats from abroad and within. What is revealed in a considered political reading of Hamlet is that Hamlet’s great flaws—vacillation, fear, over-analysis, inaction—are both personal and political, as personal flaws in a nation’s prince cannot but infect the nation as a whole. Hamlet’s inability to embrace his personal mission of vengeance, and thus his political role as rightful sovereign, leaves Denmark politically bankrupt. Its possession by a usurping Machiavellian regicide and absence of a functioning Council further contaminate the nation and leave it subject to hostile takeover. Shakespeare thus presents an adaptation keenly aware of the political clime of early modern late Elizabethan England and adroitly negotiates questions of succession and the political health of a nation.

While the main focus of the action of *Hamlet* centers around the happenings of the royal family and members of the Danish court, the political instability of the nation is evident in even the lowest classes of characters. What Shakespeare strives to demonstrate from the very beginning of the play is that the internal politics of the state have overarching effects on all of its subjects. Shakespeare is quick to establish a destabilized and fearful state and begins his play with the dubious meeting of two sentinels. Bernardo, entering to relieve Francisco of his guard duties, begins the play with the doubtful question, “Who’s there?” (1.1.1).[[1]](#footnote-1) The question, however, comes from the wrong guardsman. It is Francisco, the guard on duty, who should be asking the questions, but Bernardo, as we soon learn, has witnessed a politically portentous spirit haunting the battlements and is more than unsettled by the experience. Francisco himself admits that he is “sick at heart” (1.1.9), but from what cause we do not learn.

However, it is not just Francisco who is sick; the state itself is suffering from its own sickness—the death of the king, the threat of invasion, irresolute loyalty to the new king—and the effects appear to be unsettling even the lowliest guards. Furthermore, the new king, Claudius, does not appear to have gained the loyalty or love of his general subjects as Laertes easily gathers a rabble to storm the castle after his father’s murder. They cry, “Laertes shall be king, Laertes king!” (4.5.111) and follow his commands as their lord. As Stuart M. Kurland observes, “a recurring concern throughout the play [is] popular unrest” and “this brief assertion of popular will is as treasonous as it would be in Elizabethan England” (288). Throughout the play the threats posed from within Denmark are represented as being as serious as those from without. Although the members of the court seem to have “freely gone / With this affair along” (1.2.15-16), granting Claudius easy ascension to the throne, the lower class represented in the play reacts to the precariousness of the state’s safety in very real and potentially dangerous ways. The people do not feel secure, so the new king is not secure in his position, and therefore the state is not secure.

Kurland speaks at length of the persistent threat that outside forces pose to Claudius’ Denmark. He explains that in all actions, Claudius is “compelled to try to avoid the appearance of responsibility,” and although “It is not clear where Claudius most perceives a danger: from the populace, the Council, or Laertes,” his primary concern is always to dispel any appearance of negligence (289). After Hamlet murders Polonius, Claudius immediately fears that he will be blamed for the incident. “It will be laid to us” (4.1.17), he realizes. Claudius, always the politician, immediately implements his plans for damage control. He tells Gertrude, “[W]e’ll call up our wisest friends / And let them know both what we mean to do / And what’s untimely done. / Whose whisper [...] may miss our name / And hit the woundless air” (4.1.38-44). Rumors, Claudius realizes, can be more damaging than directly facing and acknowledging incriminating charges. By proactively addressing the issue with those figures closest to the crown, and therefore most likely to cause trouble, Claudius will be able to spin the event in such a way that will “Both countenance and excuse” (4.1.32) Hamlet’s actions, and, most importantly, leave the King blameless.

However much Claudius may fear being personally implicated in Polonius’ death, he more greatly fears “the distracted multitude” who love Hamlet and realizes that he “must not [...] put the strong law on him” (4.3.4, 3). Therefore, to avoid garnering the wrath of the populace and “To bear all smooth and even” (4.3.7), he sends Hamlet to his death in England under the pretense of a diplomatic mission. As Kurland asserts, “Claudius’s strategy fails, however: despite his efforts, the people become ‘muddied, /Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers / For good Polonius’ death’” (289). However, when Claudius realizes that Laertes’ primary concern is revenge and not forceful usurpation, Claudius is again able to use rhetorical misdirection to maintain his claim of innocence and refocus Laertes’ energy on Hamlet, the true murderer.

1. All *Hamlet* quotes are from David Bevington, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare 6th Edition* (New York: Pearson, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)