

The Politics of Delay in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: Artistic or Political Failure?

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Abstract: Hamlet can be best described as the play of dispossession. Not only has the hero been dispossessed or, in other words, usurped, but so has the text. In this paper, I will be addressing the famous question of delay. My argument in this paper is that Hamlet's delay is not a mystery as has been always claimed. I will attempt to read the hero's delay from the politico-philosophical theories contemporary to the text to show that 'delay', rather than being a political or artistic failure, is the political alternative Hamlet offers. I will be analysing the hero's delay from the politico-philosophical context contemporary to the play. Instead of subscribing to the claims that the delay is due to indecisiveness or uncertainty, I will be arguing that the hero's delay, if it can be termed so, is political action *per se*.

Keywords: Hamlet, delay, politics, transition, alternative

Sumario: I. II. III.

This paper will address the famous question of delay in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. My argument in this paper is that Hamlet's delay is not a mystery as has been always claimed. I will attempt to read the hero's delay from the politico-philosophical theories contemporary to the text to show that 'delay', rather than being a political or artistic failure, is the political alternative Hamlet offers. *Hamlet* is the play of dispossession *par excellence*. Not only is the hero usurped, but so is the text. Skimming through the critical history of the play allows for the conclusion that the text has always been appropriated by different schools of thought in different times and contexts. The play and its protagonist's delay, however, still remain an unfinished business. The text evolves with time, with the development of histories and cultures so much so that it becomes "paradigmatically . . . a history of cultural change" (Bevington 2014: 4).

Critical scholarship has most probably been metamorphosing into delaying to answer the question. Annabel Patterson, in *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* talks about the Hamlets of her profession and what the “‘form and pressure of the time’ has done to them” (1989: 31). She claims :

Academicism . . . is valued for its own sake and awarded special privileges in society; while literary theory, in league with certain branches of philosophy, has subordinated the signals sent out from the material world in favor of the most abstract conception of the word and text. Somehow, *Hamlet* anticipates this. . . . Nevertheless, under the influence of deconstruction, this most brutal aspect of *Hamlet*'s material world has been made to disappear (1989: 29-30).

Further, she adds:

But there are ways of relearning the conditions in which Shakespeare produced *Hamlet*, in the aftermath of a failed rebellion (for whose leader he had once thought to intercede), on the threshold of a new regime (whose character was not yet imaginable), for a theater perceived at the time as a powerful social practice, that might be salutary for our own (1989: 31).

Read in both contexts, that of the text and the critic's as well, the play can be depicted as an unfinished business. Terry Eagleton, likewise, remarks:

Though conclusive evidence is hard to come by, it is difficult to read Shakespeare without feeling that he was almost certainly familiar with the writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, and Derrida. Perhaps this is simply to say that though there are many ways in which we have thankfully left this conservative patriarch behind, there are other ways in which we have yet to catch up with him (2000: v).

In this paper, I will be analysing the hero's delay from the politico-philosophical context contemporary to the play. Instead of subscribing to the claims that the delay is due to indecisiveness or uncertainty, I will be arguing that the hero's delay, if it can be termed so, is political action *per se*.

I

The play starts in the peripheries of the 'state'; with guards protecting it from any external or foreign threats. However, the claustrophobic Elsinore is ripe with internal problems. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark, claims Marcellus (2019: I. 4. 90). The buried ghost of the dead, or killed, father-king, arises to call for justice and restoration of order, leading to further complications in the royal family. Upon his return, the ghost of the dead king curses the new alliance of Claudius and Gertrude as illegitimate. Private and public spheres in the play are blurred. The

rotten state of political affairs is poisoned by the incestuous sheets (2019: I. 2. 157) of Denmark. Both the ghost of the father and the son evoke sexual politics in their reading of current political affairs in Elsinore and Denmark. Starting from the most marginal aspect of the patriarchal state, guards, to the most private sphere, Gertrude's room, or even further, her womb, the depiction of the political affairs of Elsinore is never positive.

The new marriage prevents Hamlet from becoming king after his father's death as works in the *Lex terrae*, land law. *Lex terrae* is the Latin equivalent to common law but *terrae* can also designate earth/land. When entering his mother's closet, a quintessentially private space, Hamlet says that he "will speak daggers to her, but use none" (2019: III. 2. 386). In the first folio, when entering this private space, Hamlet puns on the word mother by screaming the Latin word "mater," that is translated to womb, three times, and the F stage directions call for shouts from "within" (De Grazia 2007: 103) playing therefore on the land/womb metaphor. By poisoning Gertrude's womb, and by marrying her, Claudius both poisons and marries (espouses) the state. Hamlet alludes to Nero's notorious desire to see his mother Agrippina's womb:

Soft, now to my mother.
 O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
 The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
 Let me be cruel, not unnatural:
 I will speak daggers to her, but use none. (2019: 3. 2. 382-386)

Margreta De Grazia says that the "mention of daggers in the context of Nero and his mother recalls accounts in which the emperor, whose stepfather was also named Claudius, after committing incest with his mother, had her killed and her body opened so that he might see the womb that bore him" (2007:103). Hamlet seeks to purge the public land being poisoned and rotten, and the private garden being degenerate and unweeded by the incestuous beast, his uncle Claudius, but fails. The new marriage, that is primarily political, brings decadence to the state: "Let no the royal bed of Denmark be/ A couch for luxury and damned incest" (2019: I. 5. 82-83). After the ghost's visit, Hamlet is sure about one thing—that is revenge. His delay does not imply incertitude as I will be showing in the next part.¹ Rather, it can be read in its more general political context. Decadence becomes a recurrent theme in the play that voices the contemporary transition in political thought—transition from Ciceronian Christian politics to Tacitism, from civil

¹ Many theorists claim that one of the reasons behind Hamlet's delay is that revenge is forbidden and should be regulated by justice and law. *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*, for instance, forbids revenge. Hadfield claims that accordingly "private individuals were not handed the sword of justice to perform acts of revenge; only magistrates were entitled to bear it" (2003: 576).

reason to reason of state, and from medievalism and humanism to late early modern politics. Maurizio Viroli in this regard says:

If we go back to the question that I raised at the outset of this paper, namely why political philosophers constructed and put into use the locution 'ragione di state', we can answer that they did it because they needed a new concept of reason apt to excuse derogations from moral and civil law imposed by the necessity to preserve or expand states understood as dominions... It marked the beginnings of what has been aptly called 'the politics of the moderns' as opposed to 'the politics of the ancients', that is the view that politics is simply the art of pursuing, securing, expanding power, not, as the ancients and their naive humanist followers seemed (or pretended) to believe, the art of founding and preserving a republic. Whether the transition from the former to the latter conception of politics should be regarded as an intellectual progress or as a decay is a highly contested matter, but it cannot be denied that the transition, did indeed take place; and it began when those two words, reason and state were put together." (1998: 73)

The decadence starts in the private sphere—that of the family, in the incestuous sheets of Denmark, and reaches that of the commonwealth. Hamlet sees the decadent politics and realizes his revenge will not put an end to it, but will rather further reinforce it. His delay, hence, becomes a political action, a decision, and an alternative as I will be showing in the next part.

II

After the ghost's return and learning about the probable *coup d'État* committed by Claudius, Hamlet decides to devote all his energy to solely avenging his father's death:

O all you host of heaven! O Earth! What else?
 And shall I could hell? O fie! Hold, hold, my heart,
 And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
 But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee?
 Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
 In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
 Yea, from the table of my memory
 I'll wipe away all trivial, fond records,
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
 That youth and observation copied there,

And thy commandment all alone shall live
 Within the book and volume of my brain,
 Unmixed with baser matter. (2019: l. 5.92-104)

Once Hamlet learns of his father's death, he decides to honour his father. His determination to take revenge is tenable. However, he decides to wipe away all the saws of books from his memory. Likewise, when Polonius asks what he is reading, Hamlet's answer is "words, words, words" (ll. 2. 189). Hamlet seems to imply that revenge or acting necessitates breaking up with abstractions. Hamlet's remark on deleting all saws of books from his mind in order to be able to take revenge seems to be a criticism of contemporary princely education. Aysha Pollnitz in this regard remarks that:

Shakespeare's point in portraying Hamlet as a student prince, then, seems to have been a negative one. Where great care was expected on a prince's education – either through a strict Erasmian curriculum or through the liberal arts and sciences balanced with courtly exercises – the result was not necessarily dynastic or national security, as humanists had claimed (2009: 136).

According to Pollnitz the play is a direct critique of northern humanism. It may be so. However, men of the world too do not prove successful princes either. Philosophy fails, but so does militarism. Princely education has been a controversy. Pollnitz quotes Montaigne saying that "sciences doth more weaken and effeminate mens minds, then corroborate and adapt them to warre" (2009: 124). Montaigne's argument is that liberal arts, philosophy, and abstractions do not make a good prince. A good prince should learn theology, law, and military logistics. Similarly, she quotes James I's *Basilikon Doron* when he says to his son "I know what becomes of a prince. It is not necessary for me to be a professor, but a soldier and a man of the world" (2009: 124). Pollnitz's argument is untenable to a certain extent. The play may be a criticism of northern humanism. However, the military men of the play also fail to preserve the state or their rule, including Hamlet the father and King Claudius.

Despite his articulated devotion to take revenge, Hamlet keeps on delaying. Throughout the play, he broods onstage, articulating philosophical abstractions that contradict his oath to avenge his father. However, his philosophical abstractions, or in other words may be read as a political action in this regard, or at least as political par excellence. The play implies a sense of decadence and degeneration with Claudius becoming king. Claudius represents the new political order contemporary to the play. He is the very antithesis of the dead king Hamlet who seemed to represent the traditional political order—the Christian Humanist

framework. From the very start of the play, he has been described as chivalrous, in fair and warlike form (l. 1. 46) with “the very armour he had on/ When he the ambitious Norway combatted” (l. 1. 59-60). Claudius, on the other hand, relies on diplomacy rather military power, which can be read as part of the emergent political thought in continental Europe contemporary to the play. Late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century politics broke with the medieval and traditional political order represented in the Aristotelean-Ciceronian and Humanist framework to, instead, a revival of the works of Cornelius Tacitus and, hence, the emergence, of what has become to be known, then, Tacitism.²

The two kings of the play, Hamlet and Claudius can be seen as two representations of the two different, contradictory even, political orders, one dying, and the other emergent. Claudius is represented as the extreme of the emergent political order that seeks only to validate itself and ensure its continuity. Francesco Guicciardini, an early modern Tacitist, comments, for example, in this context:

Political power cannot be wielded according to the dictates of good conscience. If you consider its origin, you will always find it in violence—except in the case of republics within their territories, but not beyond. Not even the emperor is exempt from this rule; nor are the priests, whose violence is double, since they assault us with both temporal and spiritual arms. (2016: 54)

Claudius is perfectly aware that affairs of the state cannot be done within the dictates of good conscience—like it has been with King Hamlet whose government failed and, therefore, put an end to an entire political practice. He claims after the play that Hamlet staged:

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,
A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin
And both neglect. What if this cursèd hand

² Tacitism does not refer to the works of Cornelius Tacitus *per se*. Rather, it refers to an early modern political fashion shaped around the works and thoughts of the author in the context of early moderns and the remarkable rise of absolutism, particularly James I in England. Tacitism, or the author's name are used as a label for authority.

Were thicker than itself with brother's blood? (2019: III. 3. 36-44)

Hamlet addresses both his awareness and cynical rejection of the new political changes by planning to stage a play that will, despite all, "catch the conscience of the King" (2019: II. 2. 540).

III

Hamlet is not successful in deleting all the saws of books and trivial and fond records from his memory. Instead he decides to go even further by staging a play to catch the conscience of the king. Theatre in this regard becomes a political tool, that is no mere coincidence. In this part, I will be analysing the play-within-play from a political perspective.

Contemporary to the play, that was staged in 1601, a body of political literature on the political subgenre *mirror for princes* has emerged. Mirror for princes or in other words, advice for rulers and in German *Fürstenspiegel*, was de rigueur in late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries continental Europe. To name but few, the most prominent theorists or writers of mirror for princes include Giovanni Botero's *Della Ragion di Stato* (1589), Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), Francesco Guicciardini's *Ricordi or Maxims and Reflections* (1530), Jean Bodin's *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1576), Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* (1580), and Justus Lipsius's *Politica: Six Books of Politics or Political Instruction* (1589).

Hamlet shows an awareness of the political philosophy of his time. He describes his play as:

'Tis well. I'll have thee speak out the rest of this soon.—Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear, let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live. (2019: II. 2. 459-464)

In addition to being the brief and abstract chronicle of its time, Hamlet describes the play as a mirror to nature:

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (2019: III. 2. 16-24)

Hamlet shows an awareness not only of drama being used as a political tool, but, also, echoes contemporary political thought to which the mirror for princes is central. In his *Reason of State*, Giovanni Botero advises rulers to read history and watch plays to be a 'good' ruler:

A far greater field of study is provided by the writings of those already dead, for they cover the entire history of the world, in all its parts. History is the most pleasant theatre imaginable: for there a man learns for himself at the expense of others, there he can see shipwrecks without fear, war without danger, the customs and institutions of many nations with expense. There he learns the origins, means and ends, and the causes of the growth and downfall of empires, there he learns why some princes reign in tranquillity and others are burdened with many troubles, some flourish through the arts of peace. (2016: 37)

Hamlet uses a contemporary trope and holds the mirror up to Claudius, to the audience, and to the readers. Hamlet's delay is *the* political alternative he seeks to advance. His philosophical abstractions support this argument. He does not simply delay because he is indecisive. He delays because there is no other valid political alternative. After killing Polonius, he says:

Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but one table. That's the end. . . . A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of the worm. . . . how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. (2019: IV. 3. 19-31)

Hamlet does not simply utter philosophical abstractions. Rather, he mocks the political mediocrity of his time and chooses not to succumb to what he considers a political decadence. Therefore, his delay is not an artistic failure, but a political decision, that still remains an unfinished business. "The rest is silence," says Hamlet (2019: V. 2. 395).

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