

Thomas Westbrook

Dr. Wilson

Expos 20: Why Shakespeare?

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“Something Is Rotten in the State of Denmark”
(But Not What You Think)

In William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, when Marcellus famously proclaims “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.4.90), there would seem to be an obvious answer as to what that rotten thing is: King Claudius has murdered his predecessor and brother, King Hamlet. Upon closer examination, however, this interpretation is problematic. For one thing, at this point in the play the Ghost has only just appeared, and neither the audience nor Marcellus has any reason to think the king was murdered. For another, Marcellus’ line responds to a question by Horatio about what Prince Hamlet is going to do next. A reader new to *Hamlet* might, if asked Marcellus’ meaning, say Denmark’s problem is that Norwegian invaders are looming on the horizon while the heir to the throne is wandering the castle deranged and quite possibly violent.

Under the first interpretation, Claudius has polluted Denmark, and Shakespeare is arguing the uncontested point that killing one’s brother for power is wrong. In this paper, however, I argue that the primary source of pollution in Denmark is not Claudius’ crime but Prince Hamlet himself. Death and decay seeps out from Hamlet’s mind, in both his actions and his speech, until the court itself comes tumbling down. Hamlet is what is rotten in the state of Denmark. Were this a “morality play,” in which the good are rewarded and the bad punished, it would be a rather unnecessary denunciation of fratricide. Instead, however, *Hamlet* is a tragedy, a generic classification we understand better by contrast with the morality play.

Hamlet destroys an otherwise flourishing Denmark. Consider what Shakespeare has

shown us of him at the point when Marcellus delivers his famous line. This is a man who has previously considered suicide (1.2.129-34), and who announces again here that he doesn't value his own life (1.4.65), even though his claim to the throne seems secure. Hamlet demonstrates a worrying fixation on the Ghost, repeating his desire to follow it four times and taking a frantic tone in conversation with his friends. He refuses the advice of his friends not to follow it and instead threatens to kill them when they try to stop him (1.4.84-85), after which Horatio and Marcellus agree that Hamlet seems mad and is not currently fit to command:

HORATIO: He waxes desperate with imagination.

MARCELLUS: Let's follow; 'tis not fit thus to obey him.

HORATIO: Have after. To what issue will this come?

MARCELLUS: Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. (1.4.87-90)

Which is more plausible, that Marcellus prophetically sensed the spiritual pollution caused by King Hamlet's murder and therefore replied to Horatio with a complete *non sequitur*, or that Marcellus answered Horatio's question with the reasonable point that Prince Hamlet may be a danger to the state?

Furthermore, Marcellus is *correct* to see Hamlet as a danger to the state. After the Ghost's appearance, Horatio compares Denmark's current state to that of Rome before the murder of Caesar (1.4.87-89). His parallel has nothing to do with hidden past crimes, but with a death to come. Just as Brutus killed Caesar (and Shakespeare had just written *Julius Caesar*, so he certainly knew what he was implying here), so Hamlet will kill Claudius.

Imagine the events of *Hamlet* without Hamlet's perspective. Claudius rules capably, diplomatically preventing the invasion of Denmark. Suddenly, inexplicably, Prince Hamlet goes mad. Concerned, Claudius and Gertrude try to find out the source of his madness in order to help him, but discover only that Hamlet is dangerous as well. Claudius plans to exile Hamlet for his own good (3.1.185-89). Before that, however, Polonius volunteers to try one last time to help

(3.1.188-201). Hamlet causes his mother to fear he is going to murder her (3.4.20-21), and then he does murder Polonius. After this, Claudius finally orders Hamlet's execution, but Hamlet escapes and kills the king. Norway then takes advantage of the chaos to invade. This is a story of one person, Hamlet, who brings down the state, not a story of a corrupt state that falls by itself.

That is because Denmark is not very corrupt. Examining other countries in *Hamlet* reflects very well on Denmark. The English are mad, according to the Gravedigger, but Claudius calls the Danes reasonable, declaring "you cannot speak of reason to the Dane / And lose your voice" (1.2.44-45). The French are effete and too interested in clothing, to judge from Polonius' remarks (1.3.77-80), whereas tiny Denmark has apparently managed to dominate both England and Norway by force of arms. The grim Norwegians bitterly resent their defeat, and are led by a doddering old king; the Danes sing and feast the nights away, and have the dynamic and intelligent Claudius on the throne. Denmark seems distinctly less rotten than its neighbors. It is easy to see why, when Hamlet announces that "Denmark's a prison" (II.ii.236), a surprised Rosencrantz replies that the rest of the world must be too. Hamlet agrees with this assessment, making it hard to maintain that Denmark is particularly polluted at this time.

It must be pointed out, however, that there is a good case to be made off imagery that King Hamlet's murder polluted Denmark. From the very first lines, when Francisco announces that he is "sick at heart" (1.1.8-9), the imagery of decay and rottenness pervades Elsinore. Several of those images are associated with the murder itself. The Ghost gruesomely recounts his death in terms of physical decay, which raised a "vile and loathsome crust" (1.5.79) over his body. Claudius later admits his "offense is rank" and "smells to heaven" (3.3.40). By associating images of rottenness with the murder, Shakespeare makes it easy for audiences to retrospectively link that murder with Marcellus' declaration that something is rotten in Denmark.

If associations with images of rottenness signify a source of spiritual pollution, however, then Hamlet is damned as well. Even before meeting the Ghost, Hamlet considers the world “an unweeded garden / That grows to seed,” inhabited by “things rank and gross in nature” (1.2.134-40). Afterwards, decay seems to be a topic of choice for Hamlet. He brings it up unprompted in conversation with Polonius (2.2.197-98), with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (2.2.332), with Gertrude (3.4.74-75, 168-70) and with Claudius (4.3.22-28). None of these examples refer to the body of his father, or his father’s murder. Hamlet’s preoccupation with images of death and decay soon seems almost unrelated to his meeting with the Ghost. In fact, his revelation in the graveyard is that all humans, regardless of identity, are exactly the same in that they all rot. The entirety of human existence, to judge from the images swirling around Hamlet like a pestilent cloud, can be boiled down to “paint an inch thick” applied over a grinning skull (5.1.200-01). Only by a tremendous stretch of the imagination can such a sweepingly morbid worldview be seen as the direct result of the original pollution of his father’s murder, as the murder is practically forgotten by this point. It is not the Ghost who appears in a graveyard meditating on death. Although meeting the Ghost may have led to his current condition, the pollution is coming from Hamlet himself.

Hamlet’s role in the play, with regard to the other characters, is as the agent of death. From the moment of his introduction, audiences get the sense that something is not right with the Prince. In bright and cheerful Elsinore, only he dresses in mourning clothes. The courtiers and even his own family are afraid of him. They don’t know why, at least not until people start dying, but they are. They sense that something about Hamlet is deeply wrong. Then, one by one, by accident or by design, by his own hand or by backlash from his actions, everyone close to Hamlet begins to die. Death follows Hamlet. It does not, however, follow Claudius, the other

candidate for the source of pollution, who deals in diplomacy and even refuses to carry out Hamlet's execution in Denmark.

The reason why Hamlet's relationship to the pollution of Denmark is unclear, and by extension why it is so easy to see Marcellus' comment as a reference to the murder of King Hamlet alone, is simple: Hamlet is the main character. We see the play from his perspective. When images of decay swirl around Hamlet's brain, we imagine that he is simply observing the corrupt court of Denmark. When people begin to die around him, we imagine that something is killing the Danes, not that Hamlet himself is causing their deaths. Unlike a morality play, which allows its audience to disassociate themselves from wrongdoing by circumscribing it within "bad" characters, Shakespeare writes *Hamlet* as a window into Hamlet's mind, a mind that is slowly warped as Hamlet loses himself in death. The rottenness that plagues Denmark is not observed by Hamlet, but caused by his own sickness.

Although it turns out that Hamlet is the primary source of corruption in Denmark, however, he is also correct. Claudius *did* murder the king. By creating this tension between Hamlet's knowledge of the truth and the trouble he causes, Shakespeare moves the play beyond the reach of easy moral judgment. In a morality play, wrongdoing would pollute the state, and rooting it out would purify it. In *Hamlet*, however, wrong has been done, but it is the *discovery* of the wrongdoing that pollutes the state. In other words, Hamlet does exactly what the protagonist of a morality play is supposed to do by discovering the crime. Yet this discovery is precisely what leads to pollution and the fall of Denmark, because Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* as a tragedy, not a morality play.

Unlike the aforementioned morality play, which carefully separates the good and the bad, in a tragedy a sympathetic protagonist inadvertently causes spiritual pollution and catastrophe.

Shakespeare represents reality more than he moralizes: instead of telling us what to do about evil, he shows us what happens when we seek it out. The tragedy of *Hamlet* is that by searching for pollution, Hamlet became a source of pollution. Rottenness in Denmark and in tragedy is not a signpost pointing out evil to be tracked down; it is accidental, unintended, and ultimately catastrophic. Hamlet suspects briefly that the spirit claiming to be his father “may be the devil” leading him into evil (2.2.627-28). He was right. Hamlet found nothing but death and madness by following the Ghost. Unfortunately for Denmark, he brought them back to court with him.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. A.R. Braunmuller. New York: Penguin Group, 2001.