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"It Started Like a Guilty Thing": the Beginning of *Hamlet* and the Beginning of Modern Politics

by JEFFREY R. WILSON

King Hamlet is a tyrant and King Claudius a traitor but, because Shakespeare asked us to experience the events in *Hamlet* from the perspective of the young Prince Hamlet, we are much more inclined to detect and detest King Claudius's political failings than King Hamlet's. If so, then Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, so often seen as the birth of modern psychology, might also tell us a little bit about the beginnings of modern politics as well.

* * *

Let's start over. Let's read *Hamlet* as if we've never read it before. It begins with a king who has died. A figure looking like the dead king has appeared to some soldiers sent to guard the castle of Elsinore – they don't know why, nor do we in the audience. This figure was armored up, suggesting something of a warrior king, and this intimation of a warrior king is

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immediately confirmed by a man named Horatio, the only one around who has any idea what's going on:

> Such was the very armour he had on
> When he the ambitious Norway combated;
> So frown'd he once, when, in an angry parle,
> He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice.
> 'Tis strange.

There really is something "strange" about Horatio's story. A technical term of combat, "parle" means peaceful negotiations between the opposing sides of a conflict. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites this line from *Hamlet* for its definition: "A debate or conference; discussion; negotiation; *spec.* a meeting between enemies or opposing parties to discuss the terms of an armistice." But the former king, if Horatio can be taken at his word, once slaughtered a slew of Polacks while in parlay. This is not the only possible reading of this line. Perhaps Horatio is trying to be metaphorical or glib – and there is some editorial dispute over the phrase "sledded Polacks" – but the most straightforward reading of the first substantive bit of information we get about King Hamlet is that he was a warrior king who did not respect the laws of war.

This image of a somewhat scandalous King Hamlet is amplified as Horatio proceeds to explain why Denmark is on high alert:

> Our last king,
> Whose image even but now appear'd to us,
> Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,
> Thereto prick'd on by a most emulate pride,
> Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet–

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> For so this side of our known world esteem'd him–
> Did slay this Fortinbras; who by a seal'd compact,
> Well ratified by law and heraldry,
> Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands
> Which he stood seized of, to the conqueror:
> Against the which, a moiety competent
> Was gaged by our king; which had return'd
> To the inheritance of Fortinbras,
> Had he been vanquisher; as, by the same covenant,
> And carriage of the article design'd,
> His fell to Hamlet. Now, sir, young Fortinbras,
> Of unimproved mettle hot and full,
> Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
> Shark'd up a list of lawless resolutes,
> For food and diet, to some enterprise
> That hath a stomach in't; which is no other–
> As it doth well appear unto our state–
> But to recover of us, by strong hand
> And terms compulsatory, those foresaid lands
> So by his father lost: and this, I take it,
> Is the main motive of our preparations,
> The source of this our watch and the chief head
> Of this post-haste and romage in the land.

A scholar and a skeptic, Horatio tells the story of King Hamlet in a way that calls the quality of the King's character and reign into question. As Horatio tells it, King Hamlet's reckless actions directly led to the endangerment of Denmark and the need for guards to be posted on watch. It all began, Horatio explains, when Fortinbras of Norway challenged King Hamlet to a duel. According to the conventions of heraldry, the winner of this duel would receive the other man's country. The winner

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would expand his land, his subjects, his resources, his power, and thereby his ability to govern and protect his people, but that is not why King Hamlet accepted Fortinbras's challenge, at least not in Horatio's eyes. King Hamlet sallied out to the field to fight Fortinbras with everything on the line because Hamlet was "pricked on by a most emulate pride." King Hamlet wanted to preserve his honor, not to enlarge his resources and capacity to rule, but to be seen as the better, stronger, braver man.

The stakes could not be higher, but is this really a game you want your king to be playing? I wouldn't want President Obama wagering our entire nation in a fistfight with Putin. What if he lost? Here, a modern reader might try to hide behind the indignant charge of anachronism: *That's just how they did things in those days, and we shouldn't hold Shakespeare's medieval king accountable to modern standards of politics*. It must be remembered, however, that in 1599 Shakespeare was telling a story that was already several centuries old. His audience would have had the same reaction that we do. They wouldn't have wanted Queen Elizabeth fighting King Philip of Spain for the other's nation. What if she lost? Then all allegiances and resources would suddenly be redirected to an outside ruler who did not have the land's best interest at heart. It's not anachronistic to view King Hamlet as a reckless ruler. It's common sense.

Thank goodness he won, and yet in winning that duel, acquiring a part of Norway, disinheriting the young Fortinbras, who therefore mounts an army to attack Denmark and reclaim his birthright, King Hamlet has directly endangered his people to satisfy his pride. Arguably, there was no possible good outcome to Fortinbras's challenge: either King Hamlet could

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refuse to fight and be seen by his enemies as weak; or accept the challenge, lose the duel, and lose his entire country; or win the duel and start a blood feud in which he and his people would never be safe. Arguably, tragedy is the logical conclusion of a culture of honor.

Perhaps this is why, when a cock crows at the end of the first scene of *Hamlet*, the Ghost "started like a guilty thing." The whole point of the first scene is that the former king is guilty – guilty of being a bad man and a bad king. As we learn more fullly later in Act I, the spirit of King Hamlet is only hanging around here in Denmark because the king died a guilty man. He was, as the ghost laments when it reveals that King Hamlet was murdered by his own brother,

> Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
> Unhous'led, disappointed, unanel'd,
> No reck'ning made, but sent to my account
> With all my imperfections on my head.

While it completely alters the story that later unfolds, the fact that King Hamlet was murdered by his brother does not change the fact that King Hamlet was guilty of being a tyrant. Being guilty and being wronged are not mutually exclusive. Arguably, that is the whole point of the play *Hamlet* and, indeed, the entire plot of the play depends upon King Hamlet's guilt. It is only because his sins were in full bloom upon his death that his spirit is now "Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night, / ... Till the foul crimes done in [his] days of nature / Are burnt and purg'd away." It is not some vague human depravity that sends King Hamlet to purgatory. It is specific "sins," "imperfections," and "crimes," and the only possible point of reference, given the limited information Shakespeare

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provided about King Hamlet, is the political imperfections and war crimes that Horatio identifies in the first scene of the play. At the end of that scene, the reader who, on the one hand, is paying close attention to the details of the play and, on the other hand, is not familiar with the rest of the story of *Hamlet*, must view King Hamlet as a tyrant. His successor, whoever he may be, will surely be an improvement.

* * *

If we can consider the possibility that old King Hamlet was not a very good king, is it also possible to conceive of Claudius as a republican revolutionary? Can we think of Claudius as someone who believes (and is willing to fight for the belief) that nations should be governed by those who are most fit to run them as opposed to those who happen to be born into a line of succession? Indeed, Claudius flouts the tradition of monarchy when he, the king's younger brother, assumes the Danish throne over Prince Hamlet, the King's son and rightful heir to the throne. It must be said that this was a politically judicious decision. However that decision was made – and Shakespeare told us nothing whatsoever about the decision-making process – it was good for the nation. Denmark is much more stable under King Claudius then it would have been under another King Hamlet. No one – in Hamlet's time, in Shakespeare's time, or in our own time – would want someone in the condition that Prince Hamlet is in at the start of the play – despondent, depressed, suicidal, completely unstable – running a nation.

Surprisingly, there is even more to like about Claudius from the perspective of modern politics. First, he acknowledges and embraces the "better wisdoms" of his councellors which, when

Claudius says so, feels like a jab at the former king, his tyrannical brother. Second, by publicly proclaiming Queen Gertrude to be his co-sovereign, “th’ imperial jointress to this warlike state,” Claudius flouts the hyper-masculinity and misogyny associated with King Hamlet’s monarchical mindset. Third, in contrast to King Hamlet, King Claudius’s strategy for dealing with Norway, now represented by the embittered young Fortinbras, is diplomatic, not heraldic nor even militaristic. Claudius writes a letter to the King of Norway, brother of the slain Old Fortinbras and uncle to the Young Fortinbras, and sends some Danish ambassadors to Norway, which works. It successfully ceases Young Fortinbras’s march on Danish lands. Thus, Claudius is not just a diplomat but an effective diplomat.

How (if at all) does a critique of King Hamlet as a tyrant change our conventional view of Claudius as an ambitious, incestuous assassin? Can we conceive of his marriage to Gertrude not as a perverse and illicit sexual union but as a political marriage designed to stabilize the teetering state of Denmark in the eyes of its enemies? What happens when we recognize that King Hamlet was a royalist, a tyrannical and misogynistic monarch pointing back to medieval political order, while King Claudius is a republican, a Machiavellian traitor and murderer to be sure, but also a sexual egalitarian and shrewd diplomat whose meritocracy points forward to modern politics?

What happens is that we are able to identify both King Hamlet and King Claudius as political villains whose villainies are exaggerations of the ideologies they represent. Tyranny is monarchy taken too far. Machiavellianism is republicanism without scruples. And yet, when we read or watch the play

Hamlet, we are much more likely to identify the origin of the evil in Denmark as King Claudius rather than King Hamlet. Even though Claudius's politics look more like our own, and we would probably prefer to live under King Claudius's conniving but secure rule than King Hamlet's state of constant anxiety, we tend to villainize King Claudius and valorize King Hamlet because Shakespeare made us see this story from the obviously situated perspective of King Hamlet's son.

* * *

Prince Hamlet's first soliloquy, which peppers his suicidal thoughts and misogyny with stark contrasts between his father and uncle, radically reorients our attitudes toward Kings Hamlet and Claudius:

> So excellent a king; that was, to this,
> Hyperion to a satyr….
> My father's brother, but no more like my father
> Than I to Hercules.

Associating King Hamlet with Hyperion and King Claudius with a satyr, Prince Hamlet characterizes his father as a hero and and his uncle as a villain, yet Prince Hamlet's contrast between himself and Hercules suggests something else, something so obvious that it is easily overlooked: Prince Hamlet is weak, or at least in a weakened state. In the wake of his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage to his uncle, Prince Hamlet has become agitated, confused, distressed, depressed, and even suicidal, a circumstance that, in our daily lives, would normally prompt us to distrust and resist someone's perspective on the world. In other words, Shakespeare attributed the characterization of King Hamlet as

a hero and King Claudius as a villain to someone we would not usually trust, yet we tend to accept Prince Hamlet's characterization of these kings and adopt it as our own because Shakespeare made Hamlet our interlocutor. We assume Prince Hamlet's viewpoint and take his side, even though his statements are highly suspicious, simply because he presents himself as a victim and speaks directly to us. We experience the events of the play from his agonized perspective. We buy what he is selling when he characterizes his father as a hero and his uncle as a villain because we identify with him. And then we align King Hamlet with Prince Hamlet, the man with whom we identify. And then, because Prince Hamlet opposes his father to his uncle, and we have already identified with the Hamlets, we find ourselves positioned in opposition to the more modern Claudius with whom we first felt an affinity. We distance ourselves from him which, in a sense, is a distancing of ourselves from ourselves.

If so, then there is a meaningful way in which Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is itself a little villainous. Like its characters, the play itself is conniving, scheming, deceitful. The play is wicked. The play is guilty. *It starts like a guilty thing*.

* * *

But the play is only as invidious as politics as such. What Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ultimately reveals about politics is that political judgments and affinities are often developed for reasons that have nothing to do with politics. The ways in which political information comes to us may determine our political judgments more than the actual information at hand. And this is where modern politics begins.

I make this statement as a theoretical, not a historical, claim. I am not saying that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the first document of modern politics. That honor probably belongs to Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, which pre-dated Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by some 20 years and quite possibly could have influenced Shakespeare's composition of this play. What I am suggesting is that modern political theory begins with the recognition that our commitments, affinities, and ideologies are bound up with mediated representations of our political options. From his very first soliloquy, Prince Hamlet is a political pundit who provides not facts but interpretations that are perspectival, simplified, and exaggerated, and he presents those ideas as if they were incontrovertible truths about the world. Modern political theory begins with the recognition that we apprehend the world perspectivally, and so the politician's goal is not only to promote and implement policies for the good of the people, but also to exploit and manipulate the media which control the flow of information from the governing class to the public. The politician's goal is to have media report positive interpretations of his or her policies as if those interpretations were facts, which is precisely what Prince Hamlet does when he speaks directly to us and tells us that his father and uncle couldn't be more different, and that his father is a hero and his uncle a villain.

In treating Prince Hamlet as a partisan politician, I am not merely analogizing him to the cable news pundits who look directly into a camera and offer shockingly simplistic moral outrage as the news of the day. I am also referring to the politicians themselves who (1) cannot help but develop policies from situated positions conditioned by personal fears and desires, and (2) understand that a vote can be won by having

breakfast with someone – giving that person a story to tell, making him or her feel important – as often as by presenting good policies. Hamlet invented the diner campaign stop that wins over an audience through the simple mechanism of face-to-face contact.

Having worked with the English chronicles and other sources that made no attempt to separate judgment from fact, and working in the age that invented culture-war polemics to dispute the questions of the Protestant Reformation, the Shakespeare who wrote *Hamlet* exploited the resources of dramatic expression – namely the *soliloquy* – to represent a vision of politics ruled by perspectival polemic, not demonstrated truth. That is the world in which we still live.

In pointing this out, I am not calling for a new political system. I am simply observing that narcissism is a key political concept in a democratic society that involves candidates presenting themselves to people to be elected. Like Hamlet, politicians in a democratic state develop their policies from situated positions of perceived danger, pain, and suffering and, like Shakespeare's audiences, the people in a democratic state often accept or reject those policies for situated reasons that have nothing to do with the good of the nation. The situatedness of judgment on both sides of the electoral equation is the point of departure for all modern political phenomena.

* * *

In the end, if old King Hamlet can stand for the monarch who rules at a remove from his people, and King Claudius for the Machiavellian who shows one face in public but another in

private, Prince Hamlet represents the politician whose rhetoric attempts to universalize his perspective by speaking from a stage directly to an audience and asking them to adopt his point of view. As such, we can think of King Hamlet's tyranny as the villainy unique to pre-modern politics, of King Claudius's treason as the villainy unique to early-modern politics, and of Prince Hamlet's emotionally charged presentation of his situated and simplistic viewpoint as if it were an unassailable truth as the villainy unique to modern politics. Thus, King Hamlet is the epitome of political villainy when politics works as it did for John Fortiscue, the 15th century jurist who argued that England was a constitutional monarchy in which the rule of men like King Hamlet can and should be held accountable to the rule of law. Claudius is the epitome of political villainy when politics works as it did for Niccolo Machiavelli, not necessarily because Claudius is a murderer and a traitor, but because Claudius is insufficiently capable of pulling off the political schemes he hatches. And Prince Hamlet is the epitome of political villainy when politics works as it did for someone like Michel de Montagne, who addressed the ways that we always apprehend the world from a situated perspective, the ways that we often schematize what is different or unpleasant into binary categories such as good and evil, the ways that we often mistake our polarized judgments of the world for absolute truths written into nature, and the ways that we indignantly and narcissistically insist that others see the world as we do.

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