

Hamlet the Populist Politician

PETER TITLSTAD

King Claudius has wider problems of rule than just the disruptive behaviour of Hamlet, though they are not unconnected with Hamlet. His kingdom is unruly, he fears the populace – largely because of Hamlet: “Why to a public count I might not go/Is the great love the general gender bear him.” (*Hamlet* 4.7.17-20) The general gender “convert his gyves to graces” (22). Earlier, Claudius has observed:

How dangerous is it that this man goes loose
Yet must we not put strong law on him,
He's loved of the distracted multitude
Who like not in their judgement, but their eyes.
(1.3.1-4)

Elsewhere he speaks of “The people muddied/Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers/For good Polonius' death.” (4.5.80) Obviously Claudius keeps a ‘bureau of state security’ to take the pulse of the population. He is a fearful tyrant of doubtful legitimacy. There has been a succession crisis, something to which the Elizabethans were at the time sensitive. As Hamlet says, Claudius has “popped in between th' election and my hopes” (5.2.70).

But where is this multitude, distracted, whispering, muddied, and unwholesome? There are no crowd scenes, there is no populace, as in *Julius Caesar* or *Coriolanus*. The nearest we get to a mob on stage is when Laertes confronts the king on his return from Paris: “The rabble call him ‘lord’.” (4.5.76) In more ways than one there is something rotten in the Kingdom of Denmark. However, Laertes Claudius can deal with; Hamlet he cannot. It is the thesis of this article that the thick and unwholesome, distracted populace are the audience, in particular the varied audience of the Elizabethan playhouse, with its apron stage surrounded by groundlings in front of the more expensive seats, although the modern picture stage does not make what is proposed totally impossible. Hamlet has his mob, woos them from the stage, is a popular (if slightly unusual) young politician, and dies a lamented young hero. This is where to put in the thin edge of the wedge to tilt the whole performance, sending ripples through how the whole play should be done, particularly soliloquies and asides.

Any play is at the mercy of producers, directors and actors. To adapt Roland Barthes on the death of the author, in the drama the author is more than usually dead. In a novel or poem the author can intrude; in the drama there are only words in actors' mouths, although there can still be stage directions. Are there limitations on how we can pull a play about? Is Shakespeare up for grabs? The relative paucity of knowledge about him and his remoteness in time make him ‘grabbable’. In fairly recent years there have been books that have eagerly announced their grabbing: alternative Shakespeares, Shakespeare reproduced, appropriated, theoreticised. Jean Marsden, in her introduction to *The Appropriation of Shakespeare*, asks where is the real Shakespeare and then asks: “But is this question answerable or even relevant?” (Marsden 9) “Pluralism” has been one of the many catch phrases of the last, now receding, wave of criticism, which has wanted to overthrow what it called canonical readings and to shatter cultural icons. But every age has had its Shakespeare. We have had centuries of criticism. In fact, Marsden's volume is itself useful in providing an essay on Shakespeare after the Restoration, showing contemporary political appropriations.

It has to be further remarked that some theory-ridden interpretations only restate older interpretations, but in a more abstruse language. Terry Eagleton's section on *Hamlet* in his book *William Shakespeare* is a case in point. To say that Hamlet, the character, does not wish to be part of the Lacanian "symbolic order" (Eagleton 71) is really not to say anything different from countless other critics, Goethe, Coleridge and Bradley included. Of all Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* has been the most discussed, has been the most pluralised. Hamlet is, indeed, at odds with Claudius's court and milieu. The question is, how? What sort of person he is? And how to put all this on stage? The categories of character and mimetic representation have not been popular with the 'new' new criticism. Literature is not about life: Aristotle was wrong. We remember the lady in the front row of a production of *Othello* who shouted at the actor playing Othello, "You great fool! Can't you see?" However naïve this may have been, we need some reaction of this kind, otherwise there is not much point. We know it is theatre, of course, actors playing parts, and we may even be there to see our favourite actor or to see how a particular actor plays a part or a particular production does a play. But if there is no catharsis, whether of tears or laughter, what are we doing there? A.D. Nuttall in *A New Mimesis*, that most theoretical and philosophical of rebuttals of "theory", writes:

University teachers of what we once called 'literature' no longer regard dramatic and literary characters as real; this does not matter at all, since common readers and playgoers (and common believers) rightly continue to quest for personality. It is idle to warn them against the errors of identifying with Hamlet ...

(Nuttall 420)

And so we get back to *Hamlet*/Hamlet, the play and the character, the populist politician of the title of this paper, faced by his crowd or mob, the audience, whom he has to win to sympathy if the play is to succeed. In dealing with the production we have to remember, as far as we can, that we should not, like Ernest Jones, go outside the play or treat the character as a real person, for example of a well-hidden psychological condition to be divined on the Freudian couch. According to the Leavisites, this is also the mistake of Bradley, who speculated on what may have happened or been the situation outside the bounds of the play – consider the well-known essay by L.C. Knights, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" However, we cannot help ourselves, sometimes: has not Hamlet always loathed smooth, slimy, sexy Uncle Claudius; were Claudius and Gertrude lovers before King Hamlet's demise? Oh, our prophetic souls! In addition, we must retain a certain decent respect for the text as we have it, and consider whether there may not be limits to what we do with and to it. Appropriations or reproductions can be misappropriations, not to say traductions, even hijackings.

The play starts with the tense opening scene on the battlements. Then we have the sharp contrast of the council scene: Claudius enthroned, the Queen at his side, Polonius in attendance, Laertes taking his leave – and Hamlet. Shakespeare might be a hologram through whom the culture of the Elizabethan Age wafted, but he was a commercial playwright during an entertainments boom and the heir to an established revenge drama tradition, some of which already concerned the Hamlet figure. How to do it again? It was a good and already popular story. The playwright had to plan his tactics, his dramatic impact. The smoothly elaborate court procedures of scene two are sharply punctuated by Hamlet's single line first utterance: "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.65). It is an aside – to the audience and not to himself – sharp, contemptuous, the audience's first contact with the leading figure, still in mourning, which would have distinguished him from the beginning. It must grab the audience. It cannot be a soulful lament; it must express the savagery of which Hamlet is capable. It has wit for those who can untangle the epithet but must crackle with personality and get a cackle from the mob, for whom disrespect is fun. Hamlet cannot mutter it to himself with the audience overhearing a minor soliloquy. Hamlet the populist has made contact with his crowd, has established the vital contact with the audience that the play needs. Some of the Hamlet stereotypes are instantly silenced. This is not Goethe's "lovely pure and moral nature without the strength of nerve which forms a hero" (in Weitz 4). It is not Bradley's nervous breakdown and depression. This is our

hero, and from now on the mob is rooting for him, while at the same time tragedy is looming. Coleridge's "enormous intellectual activity" is there in the aside and in what follows in this scene, the exchange with his mother, but there is no hint of Coleridge's "consequent and proportionate aversion to real action" (in Weitz 180; of Coleridge we should remember that he said: "I have a smack of Hamlet myself"). The air crackles, the chips are down, the game of life and death is on. Hamlet has set his stamp on the play.

This contact with the audience is best shown in one of the soliloquies later, the one after the conversation with the player at the end of Act 2. In this soliloquy, when Hamlet refers to "this player here", he derisively jabs his thumb over his shoulder, joking with the audience. In the middle he asks:

Am I a coward?
 Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
 Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,
 Tweaks me by th'nose, gives me the lie in the throat
 As deep as the lungs? Who does me this?
 (2.2.527)

Imagine this said directly at the audience as if in conversation. Imagine, further, that some exhibitionist among the groundlings near the stage, where Hamlet is standing at the edge haranguing the crowd, puts up his hand and shouts "Yes!", to the jubilation of his mates standing round him. The answer is written in the text: "Ha, 'zounds, I should take it, for it cannot be/But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall/To make oppression bitter..." (528-30) This is said directly, individually, at the joker who has tried to interrupt the performance, in a person to person exchange with a member of the audience. Imagine that the speech is planned for this eventuality. Imagine, even further, that the players have planted one of their number near the stage among the groundlings to give the response, in case no-one else obliges. The rest of the speech is a playing up to the audience. The "slave's offal", the "kindless villain" – we recall the word "kind" in the opening gibe – ending with "Oh vengeance!" (541-43), is just the stuff they came to see. Hamlet is an actor playing an actor playing a part. His rebuke of himself that follows, apart from being a general critical statement about contemporary theatre (perhaps aimed across the way at the Admiral's Men) is a rebuke, an educational lesson, to those in the audience who succumbed to the trap that Hamlet (or is it Shakespeare?) has set for them. Who says that the author does not live in his plays?

It is inconceivable that such a speech could be delivered as a soliloquy, as if Hamlet were talking to himself, perhaps muttering it to himself in the inner stage. This could not have been intended as the communing of an isolated sensibility with itself. All the indicators, the signals, point to a participating other or others. The speech is dialogic in that it contains differing voices in itself, but it is dialogic too as capable of being directed at a responsive audience. To ignore this is to miss the dramatic life and vitality waiting to be unlocked, set free. He takes the audience into his confidence about the ghost and his plan, having first given them a lesson in poetics and then arousing in them again the lust for the thriller revenge genre. The speech ends triumphantly with a confiding snap of the fingers at the groundlings on "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.567). Exit to cheers and thunderous applause! It is a bravura performance, a scene matched for its theatrical appeal only by the Boar's Head scene in *1 Henry IV*. The Nicol Williamson approach, camera focussing in on the actor's head, for it is all in the mind, while he mutters, is impossible. In fact, film is impossible (the audience is absent in the moment of the actor speaking), while the picture frame stage is barely tolerable, for this play was written for the apron stage of the Elizabethan playhouse.

The approach outlined above can be applied to the other soliloquies with good effect, not least to "To be or not to be" (3.1.56ff). The occurrence of "we" and "us" in this speech gives us the direction. It starts off as a formal dispute on aspects of Stoicism, something for the university wits in the audience. Stoicism was much discussed at the time. The word "nobler" (57) is important: to the Stoic either possibility is noble. The academic form takes a sudden twist,

becoming intimate, personal and popular, including the colloquial “there’s the rub” (65) and a stock joke about lawyers and civil servants. “There’s the respect/That makes calamity of so long life” (68-69) could be accompanied by a finger jabbed at the audience. This is the speech that above all lends itself to the introverted muttering approach, while toying with a drawn dagger, but it lends itself even more to a direct address to fellow suffering mankind, especially the groundlings. “Who would fardels bear...?” (76) should elicit a rumble of working-class fellow-feeling – it has a touch of the soap box. As Lucky Jim expounds in his notorious lecture in the Amis novel, there was nothing merry about Merry England, nor have things got much better for most of mankind since. Is this speech really about Hamlet’s anguish at his non-existent delay, that notion to which Hamlet’s bold, decisive, resourceful and often impulsive actions give the lie? Or is it a speech to the suffering Elizabethan?

The very first soliloquy, “Oh that this too too sullied [or solid] flesh” (1.2.129ff) might seem to present some difficulty, but the audience’s sympathy has already been gained by Hamlet’s aside and the sharp exchanges. The “sullied flesh” can be accompanied by a thump on the actor’s chest as he stands looking at his crowd. The crowd is invited to share the “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/ ... uses of this world” (133-134). There is the misogynistic crack, “frailty, thy name is woman” (146). “Must I remember? Why she would hang on him” (143) can be done with a hand thrust out towards the crowd in expostulation. By the end of the speech the audience should feel some of Hamlet’s own anger. “Hyperion to a satyr” (140) should win a chuckle. There is much in this speech to work on once the demagogic approach has been adopted.

There are also shorter soliloquies which are not usually discussed as soliloquies. There is the “smile, and smile, and be a villain” of Act 1 Scene 5 (108), a real crowd-pleaser, and the “Now I could drink hot blood” of Act 3 Scene 2 (398). Here the thunderous rhetoric is again tempered by reason, one more bit of teaching by example. Hamlet is both orator and educator in his relationship with his audience. The speech behind the kneeling Claudius is full of dramatic possibilities, along with a riddling theological crux. It might be said in passing that Claudius’s soliloquy before he kneels to attempt repentance could also be a wonderful speech to do directly at an audience guilty itself of what Dr Johnson, in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, calls the “secret ambush of a specious prayer” (line 356). The gravedigger scene has no soliloquy as the clown and Horatio are present, but it is one of those scenes that bind Hamlet to the mob in the pit, for Hamlet the Dane can joke with the lowest. There are hints of Leveller sentiment fifty years before the Levellers became an identifiable group. Then there remains the soliloquy left out of the Folio, “How all occasions do inform against me” (4.4.32ff). It does in fact contain things not in the other soliloquies that further bond Hamlet with his audience, which would probably have included those who had been or would become soldiers. The speech is about honour (Montaigne’s penetration) and futile death. There is also the statement on man given “discourse” (36) and “godlike reason” (38). This connects with Hamlet’s speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about “What a piece of work is a man” (2.2.312ff). Hamlet (or Shakespeare?) is giving Montaigne’s sceptical view of the so-called Elizabethan world picture. Man is hardly the “paragon of animals” (316) but Hamlet is, himself, an example of a young man, in most testing circumstances, trying to retain reason.

*

The Hamlet of Goethe and Coleridge is not yet dead. He has been resurrected. The apparent mystery of the character and the riddling word play have proved a fertile ground for modern (perhaps not quite so modern, any more) critical theorists. Hamlet, it is averred, has no “essence of being”, his individuality is “decentred” (Eagleton 75). Hamlet becomes an example of the destruction of presence or the separation of signifier and signified, poor Saussure come to uses of which he could never have dreamt in his wildest dreams (Eagleton 73). Weiman finds that “there is a disturbing gulph between what is represented and what is representing”, a crisis in mimesis (Parker and Hartman 277). Terence Hawkes says that Fortinbras’s closing words “he was likely,

had he been put on./ To have proved most royal” elicit a tiny gasp of disbelief (311). Are Fortinbras’s closing words just an empty, conventional utterance needed to close off the tragedy on a suitable note, or did Shakespeare want us to believe them, in which case a Hamlet must be found or conceived who fills the part? For Weiman, the words and actions are a “splitting of authority and a subverting of all logocentric standards” (277). But perhaps there is, after all, method in Hamlet’s madness; perhaps there is trenchant, coherent meaning rather than endless deferral and aporia. The play has ceased to be drama and become an excuse for the deployment of an esoteric technical language, really an exercise in academic futility and subservience to fashion. When something substantial seems to be said, it is something that has been said before, perhaps long ago. What the critics mentioned say is intended as a confutation of outworn liberal bourgeois criticism but it says no more, and in its terminology is as conventional as the straw dog it sets up to shoot full of arrows. The play ceases to be drama, done on a stage. Instead we have the catch phrases of Saussure, Lacan, Derrida and bits of Marxism. Germain Greer’s book on Shakespeare is a welcome exception.

While it involves no soliloquy, the graveyard quarrel between Hamlet and Laertes has features similar to those found in the soliloquies, especially the one at the end of Act 2, discussed earlier. The episode starts with Hamlet announcing himself: “This is I, / Hamlet the Dane” (259-260). This is no frenzied rushing to the graveside; it is Laertes who provokes the brawl. The gathering are astonished at Hamlet’s reappearance – silence falls after Laertes’s rantings. There can even be a note of dry humour in Hamlet’s remark. Yes, this is indeed me whom you see. Then with a steely look at all but at Claudius in particular, the statement of kingship, of “presence”, “Hamlet the Dane”. There is nothing “decentred” in this. A formidable young man has asserted himself with cool irony. Eagleton writes that Hamlet moves toward the realm of “bourgeois individuality” (74) but here we have Hamlet asserting his claim to the throne and his status as a Renaissance Prince. Eagleton is talking from his Marxist script, not the play. Then Laertes starts the brawl. Hamlet meets his assault with adequate but controlled force, rebuking and educating Laertes for his overdone rhetoric (as he has earlier rebuked and educated his audience) with contempt, irony and mockery. It is savagely satirical. Hamlet is both warrior aristocrat and educated scholar. Gertrude takes his acting as frenzy, failing to see the point and believing his acting, which is in fact parody.

Harold Bloom calls Hamlet “the western hero of consciousness” (409), “the leading western representative of an intellectual” (283), saying that he has “usurped the western literary consciousness at its most self-aware threshold” (413). At the same time, he writes that Hamlet’s is the “fiercest inwardness ever achieved in a literary work” (401). An accommodation between Bloom’s claim and the interpretation put forward in this paper is not impossible. While Coleridge’s, Bradley’s and Goethe’s Hamlets, or those of later critics, are indeed brought in question, the matters of self-awareness, consciousness and intellect are not. Hamlet is the complete man. What Ophelia says of him should be accepted: soldier, scholar and courtier. The inwardness is indeed, as Bloom says, “fierce”, but this does not mean that there can be no outward fierceness, and that the intelligence has of necessity to be given plangent expression. Neither is Hamlet without fault or flaw. He makes mistakes, causes harm. These are part of the tragedy. If a tragic hero were all-wise, there would be no tragedy. The story of Ophelia, oppressed by king, father, brother and milieu, is sad indeed, although how Hamlet could not have rejected her, suspecting how she has allowed herself to be used (not that she had much chance) is hard to see. It is part of the tragedy, part of Elsinore. Hamlet’s treatment of her, after “To be or not to be” and in the mousetrap scene, is savage. Hamlet the Dane has this streak of savagery, but he is involved in a life-and-death game. If his false friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have to “go to it” (5.2.56), that is part of the game that has to be played.

One can only speculate on the needs of the critics who want a Hamlet of “deferral,” as Eagleton puts it, and so ignore the strong evidence against hesitation and delay. One needs a reading or producing of *Hamlet* that makes possible the impulsiveness and resolution of Hamlet. It is difficult to see how he ever could have been thought incapable of action. He is a ‘man

among men', as the scene on the battlements and the conversation with the sentries shows: he obviously has their respect. He rushes without hesitation after the ghost. There is no hesitation about killing the King, but it turns out to be Polonius instead. When he puts up his sword in the prayer scene the justification (if theologically crude) is there. The revenger cannot send a repentant man to heaven. (He does not know that the king's prayers are in vain.) He has the nerve to steal the document from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and make the needed alterations. Impetuous courage gets him captured by the pirates. He grapples with Laertes at the grave. He accepts the challenge to the duel without hesitation, despite the misgivings he feels in his heart. He is an excellent swordsman and confident of his skill. If anything, Hamlet is too impulsive, not the man of hesitations. The soliloquies need to be seen as the utterances of a man of action. The Goethe/Coleridge/Bradley reading, perpetuated by the subtlety-seeking critics of more recent times, ignores Hamlet's capacity for action and what should be the real reason for his popularity as a character – not, as Eagleton puts it, "opacity" that accounts for the "enigmatic being ... legendary in world literature" (Eagleton 70).

Hamlet's 'soliloquies' have been taken to be occasions for pensive private introspection despite the further evidence in other plays by Shakespeare of 'soliloquies' directed at the audience. There is enough to show that give and take with the audience was a recognised feature of Shakespeare's theatre. Falstaff's eulogy on sack is an address to the audience – it cannot possibly be said to himself. The same is obvious in his "catechism", spoken to the audience just before the battle of Shrewsbury, on "honour" (*I Henry IV* 5.1.126-135). The audience had probably largely endured being catechised at a young age and would have been delighted at the parody and disrespect to which the catechism genre is put, while this catechism spoke to their inner beings in a way that the church's instruction did not. All, in their hearts of hearts, fear the "grinning honour" (as Falstaff puts it elsewhere during the battle, 5.3.54) of the dead Sir Walter Blunt. Hal's speech the night before Agincourt, Richard II's last speech and some of the utterances of Autolycus could also be considered for direct audience contact. Richard III's "Was ever woman in this humour wooed?/ Was ever woman in this humour won?" (*Richard II* 1.2.234-5) cries out to be directed straight at the audience. Among the most interesting and complex 'soliloquies' that could be directed at the audience are the two speeches made by the villainous Edmund in Act 1 Scene 2 of *Lear*. Although declaring himself the villain, Edmund should, at first, gain an ambiguous reaction. Lucretius interested the age. To announce oneself by the striking and polemical line, "Thou, Nature, art my goddess" (1.2.1) was to introduce a subject for debate. Edmund should fascinate the audience and win temporary sympathy. The jokes about bastardy and the "dull, stale, tired bed" (14) are likely win a complex assent. The later speech about the "excellent foppery of the world" in attributing all to "planetary influence" (110ff) is a satirical treatment of the "order of nature" doctrine the Elizabethans are supposed to have held. The two speeches are part of a vital, sceptical debate made all the more interesting and amusing by being delivered by a fascinating villain (as your villain should be) with challenging directness at an audience probably more than a little inclined to scepticism. Hamlet should be played by an actor of sufficient magnetism, and so should Edmund.

This paper has attempted a proposal of how the enormous vitality of the play *Hamlet* and the character Hamlet could be done on stage. In its way it is an appropriation or reproduction, but one that remains within what can legitimately be found in the text, unlike some other appropriations. Is it Shakespeare? That we can never finally know, but the circumstantial evidence is strong. The only real problem is to find an actor of sufficient vitality and force to carry off the part. He must be "Hamlet the Dane": the introverted Hamlet is much easier!

WORKS CITED

- Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare*. London: Fourth Estate, 1999.
 Eagleton, Terry. *William Shakespeare*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.
 Greer, Germaine. *Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
 Howard, Jean E. and O'Connor, Marion E. (eds). *Shakespeare Reproduced*. London: Methuen, 1987.

- Johnson, Samuel. *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. London: R. Dodsley, 1749.
- Marsden, Jean (ed). *The Appropriation of Shakespeare*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.
- Nuttal, A.D. *A New Mimesis*. London: Methuen, 1983.
- Parker, Patricia and Hartman, Geoffrey (eds). *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet Prince of Denmark* (ed. Philip Edwards). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Weitz, Morris. *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*. London: Faber, 1964.
- Widdowson, Peter (ed). *Re-Reading English*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Wilson, John Dover. *What happens in Hamlet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935.