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Teaching *Hamlet* in South Africa:

Refining, Developing and Applying the Wits School Shakespeare Model

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Preface

Teaching 'Hamlet' in South Africa: Refining, Developing and Applying the Wits School Shakespeare Model

The aim of this research is to review the two current titles in the Wits Shakespeare Series (WSS), *Romeo and Juliet* (2008) and *Macbeth* (2007) by probing the editorial decisions and approach adopted in these editions. This dissertation articulates and qualifies the existing paradigm of WSS in the context of wider debates on 'Shakespeare' in the South African education system past and present, taking into account new directions in *Hamlet* criticism, especially the interest in republicanism, leadership and civic responsibility.

The WSS, under the general editorship of Professor Victor Houliston, is a series of Shakespeare's plays tailored for advanced second-language English speakers which is designed to enable and encourage a nuanced and politically sensitive engagement with Shakespeare's plays. So far the theoretical underpinning of this series has been premised on the understanding that 'Shakespeare continues to be central to the English curriculum not only because of his unparalleled fame as a writer but because people throughout the world find he tells their story, here and now'.[1] With this aim in mind, Cape Town based educational books publishers, Nasou Via Afrika, have partnered with Wits to create a topical Shakespeare series for the contemporary First Additional Language (FAL) English classroom in South Africa.

The South African component of the series stems from Houliston's knowledge of the discourse surrounding the postcolonial implications of teaching Shakespeare in post-apartheid South Africa. His approach is one where:

> Instead of trying to "Africanise" Shakespeare, we encourage learners to be inspired, by their enjoyment of Shakespeare, to read works by African writers that raise similar issues or develop similar situations. ... This gives the text currency and links it to contemporary African issues which school children relate to and engage with.'[2]

[1] Terry Gray (ed), 'Shakespeare in Africa,' *Mr. Shakespeare's Blog*, N.p. 22 June 2007, Web, 26 April 2009, http://mrshakespeare.typepad.com/mrshakespeare/2007/06/shakespeare-in-.html.
[2] *Ibid*.

Houliston is dedicated to the English Renaissance in every aspect: WSS is defined by an application of the humanist philosophies of Renaissance scholars like Desiderius Erasmus, in treatises such as *De Pronuntiatone* (1643). When applied in a postcolonial context this approach recognises how the cultural contributions of Renaissance England may be used to enrich the cultural heritage of present-day South Africa, while maintaining an awareness of how cultural artefacts may be misused, as happened during apartheid.

Through this formula, South African school children are encouraged to learn through methods similar to, but more rigorous than, those used to educate school children in Elizabethan England. This model was first conceived in the seventeenth century by the humanist scholar Erasmus, who believed that by knowing what had come before, and mastering this knowledge, students would be able to reach the peak of their potential in their own time. J. K. Sowards describes Erasmus' principles as follows:

> …his educational curriculum is modelled almost entirely and in detail upon the standard educational writings of classical antiquity. Plutarch was probably Erasmus' own favourite Greek author after Lucian, and Plutarch's tract *On the Education of Children* from the *Moralia* is often taken over almost entirely into *De Pueris Instituendis*, *De Pronuntiatone*, and *De Civilitate.*[3]

At face value, the ethos behind the series appears to be a straightforward application of humanist educational philosophies but the theoretical basis of the WSS has several important modifications. These include an awareness of the unique challenges of the South African classroom as well as a corresponding awareness that the time of reading does not inform reading the texts in as valuable a way as an awareness of the time of writing.

As the WSS series goes into production of its third, fourth and fifth titles – *Othello*, *The Tempest* and *Hamlet* – it has become desirable to articulate and refine the theoretical assumptions underlying the production of these editions in a more comprehensive way. What Houliston and his fellow editors have done is to reproduce the scholastic principles of Renaissance humanism by conceiving of a distant time as 'other', in parallel to the way English teachers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries conceived of the Greeks and Romans as 'other', with a rich language to learn and to teach.[4] Essentially what this approach entails is to retain the best of Renaissance culture while taking an honest look at its faults, without judging the Elizabethans unfairly or in a manner counter-productive to learning.

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[3] J. K. Sowards (ed.), 'Introduction,' *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Writings 4*, trans. Beert C. Verstraete (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. XV.

[4] This approach is hinted at in André Lemmer, 'Shakespeare Among South African School Children,' *SiSA*, 13 (2001), p. 78.

The role that this dissertation plays in developing the WSS *Hamlet* in particular is to provide a well-researched account of the historical context in which *Hamlet* is written, so that full justice is done to the complex political pressures that inform its composition. In doing this historical research, what comes to the fore is that ideas of Republicanism, as articulated at certain points of the Italian Renaissance are referenced in a way which would have been far more accessible to an audience in the English Renaissance to access than a South African audience. In order to make this method of interpreting the play accessible to students parallels between South African politics and the politics of Elizabethan England are suggested without overworking those similarities, the application of this method is demonstrated in this dissertation's Appendices.

Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER I

Towards a South African School Shakespeare

South Africa has always had its own unique style of representing 'Shakespeare': typically these methods have been polarised as either 'political' or 'traditional'. However, through the latest wave of 'Shakespeare' in South Africa, these seemingly irreconcilable factions have begun to fruitfully share their ideas through a concentration on the political context of Shakespeare's own England. This allows the play to be understood in its own terms while, at the same time, catering to South African scholars' sharpened critical instincts for the realm of the political.

South African literary studies' engagement with the high theory associated with 'political Shakespeare' as it has developed over the last century has been largely facilitated and expanded through this country's relationship with Shakespeare's plays. The first recorded production of a 'Shakespeare' play on South African soil is telling:

> … Shakespeare's story in South Africa begins with the production of *Henry IV*, *Part One* which opened Sir George Yonge's 'African Theatre' on the former Hottentot's Square, Cape Town, in September 1801…. to make place for the theatre, Khoesan traders were cleared from the town, in what can only be seen as a disheartening foretaste of the practice of forced removals which was to define apartheid land and population policies in the twentieth century.[5]

Although 'Shakespeare' entered South Africa in this violent fashion, he has since become a native in his own right, growing up among other cultural offerings and gaining varying appeal, approval or rejection among local readers and theatre goers.

This concept of a South African Shakespeare is in keeping with American scholar, Stephen Greenblatt's observation in the Norton complete edition of Shakespeare's plays, where he observes, 'some of the richest and most complex English verse ever written migrates with

[5] Laurence Wright, 'Introduction: South African Shakespeare in the Twentieth Century,' *The Shakespearean International Yearbook*, (eds) Graham Bradshaw & Tom Bishop (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010), p. 14–15; For a fuller discussion of this first Shakespeare performance in South Africa, see Laurence Wright, 'Shakespeare in South Africa: Alpha and "Omega",' *Postcolonial Studies*, 7 (1) (2004): 64–69.

spectacular success into German and Italian, Hindi, Swahili and Japanese.'[6] South Africa too has its 'Shakespeare,' but South Africa's colonial relationship with England has cast Shakespearean studies in this country under the shadow of ill repute; a circumstance which has had the surprising result of making his works more topical and worthy of study in this country rather than less. Nevertheless, it has become necessary to recuperate a more balanced picture of South African 'Shakespeare', as the image of the villainous imperialist 'Shakespeare' is not sustainable in the long-term, either pedagogically, as drama or as literature, as it denies the richer complexities of the poet as a creative entity.

A counter-argument here might point out 'Shakespeare's' universality. Italian scholar working in South Africa, Pier Paolo Frassinelli, points out how tenuous a factor this turns out to be:

> Whereas the most ambitious theorists of globalisation argue that we have entered into a radically new stage of capitalism, marked by the rise and consolidation of totalising social and economic processes and new supranational structures of power that extend their rule over the entire space of the globe, more sceptical observers caution that the world is not the homogeneous entity that the idea of globalisation suggests, or, conversely, reminds us that the beginning of the process of global integration dates back at least to the early modern period and the flourishing of the mercantile and colonial enterprises.[7]

What Frasinelli reminds his readers is that in terms of economic and financial parity, there is not and never will be any unconditioned 'essentialism', and that a cultural product like 'Shakespeare' must for that reason continue to be viewed as a totality, one that may be harnessed to increase a particular country or institution's economic and cultural wealth, but which may also be used as an ideological tool for the purpose of sustaining larger social iniquities.

Since the following material handles such ideologically sensitive materials as school textbooks, it should be stated from the start that the aim of these textbooks is primarily to teach and inspire a love for 'Shakespeare', and secondarily to inspire analytical interest in the realm of politics, and this, only as far as it is relevant to the play in question which in this case happens to be *Hamlet*, a play that revolves around factionalism, politics and courtly intrigues. The stance articulated here considers the theoretical standpoints of Marxism and post-Marxism, Humanism and African Humanism, and distils these so that politics and culture remain central to the notion

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[6] Stephen Greenblatt, General Introduction, *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, (eds) Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009 & Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 1.

[7] Pier Paolo Frasinelli, 'Introduction,' *English Studies in Africa* (*ESA*), 47 (2) (2004), p. 1.

of a South African 'Shakespeare,' while keeping this material accessible enough to be taught at secondary level in South African Schools.

This heady mix is a reflection of South African 'Shakespeare' itself; produced out of theoretical milieu which Chris Thurman characterises as follows:

> Under apartheid, during the transition to democracy and the early years of post-apartheid South Africa, the clash of 'isms' – Marxism, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Nationalism – really seemed to matter. Not only that, but one was apparently forced to choose a camp on one or the other side of various 'battlelines', from which position one was expected to clash head-on with opponents from the other camp/s.[8]

The past thirty years of 'Shakespeare' criticism in South Africa have been dominated by a lively, sometimes incendiary, debate as to the appropriateness of assigning this icon of 'quintessential Englishness' such a significant role on the South African secondary school syllabus. At one extreme, the further study of 'Shakespeare' is endorsed by educators on the basis of his humanity and universalism, while at the other, his work is seen as a vehicle for purveying the evils of neo-colonialism and racist exploitation. In the following chapter, a theoretical basis for looking beyond this debate is proposed as an alternative that encompasses political, moral and imaginative approaches to teaching Shakespeare's plays in South African schools.

The great 'Shakespeare' debate came to a head in July, 1996 at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) when academic, Martin Orkin organised a conference concerning 'Shakespeare' and Postcolonial theory. The conference was launched as a follow up to his now seminal, but slightly idiosyncratic, *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* (1987); a book which Orkin begins by maligning the academy of English studies in South Africa, saying 'I am now much more hopeful of the likelihood of escape from the traditional stranglehold on English studies in South Africa where Shakespeare is concerned than I was when I first thought of writing this book.'[9] Orkin's *rationale* is that, through his efforts, '…we may read the 'Shakespeare' text in ways that no longer subtly encourage a passive acceptance of the apartheid system but rather in ways that promote more active awareness of the possibility of alternatives to it.'[10]

The conference served as a nexus for debate and discussions on 'Shakespeare' in the 'periphery', referring to countries previously colonised by Britain, especially in India and South Africa, not just in these countries, but internationally. In attendance were heavyweights of New Historicist and Cultural Materialist studies proliferating at the time, including Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Terence Hawkes and Ania Loomba, with whom

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[8] Christopher Thurman, 'Editorial,' *SiSA*, 22 (2010), p. i.
[9] Martin Orkin, *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* (AD. Donker: Craighall, 1987), p. 11.
[10] *Ibid*.

Orkin subsequently went on to edit *Post-colonial Shakespeares* (1998) as a direct result of the conference. The preface of his earlier work in this field, *Shakespeare Against Apartheid*, presents a polemical picture of Shakespeare studies in English departments, dichotomising Shakespearean scholars in a way that is deeply problematic:

> These debates were evident at the conference 'Shakespeare–Post-coloniality–Johannesburg, 1996' at which all the papers included here were first presented.…The conference took place in Johannesburg after the first democratic elections had been held in 1994, when South Africa was under an ANC government and during what was optimistically regarded as a transitional period in the move away from apartheid. Yet it is noteworthy that while Witwatersrand University supported it, the conference was organised not by the University's English Department , but by a self-generating group, consisting of one member each from the Departments of Sociology, African Literature, Theatre and Drama, Comparative Literature and English, which called itself the Africa/Shakespeare Committee.
>
> This is perhaps as good an indication as any that in so many 'non-metropolitan' contexts, Shakespeare takes on a vitality outside of English departments, whose members are more prone than others to present a moribund, ossified version of the 'Bard of Avon' and his high-cultural legacy. At Johannesburg every word in the title of the conference was debated, apart perhaps from '1996'. But as people living in an extraordinary moment in South African history (or as visitors privileged to share that experience), we noticed that no one had to strain to establish that 'Shakespeare' is a political issue. Shakespeare was political, whether one wanted to celebrate him, appropriate his work or throw it out of the classroom, the academy or the theatre.[11]

Orkin's arraignment against the villainous subservience of the Wits English department is part of his strategy of self-mythologising. While the above version of events is vigorous and entertaining, not to mention true of many an academic during the apartheid dispensation, it is not entirely fair or accurate concerning the majority of members of the Wits English Department staff.

Orkin applied his oppositional politics to any and all situations alike, as is evident from the pessimistic comment on the conference having taking place, 'after the first democratic elections had been held in 1994, when South Africa was under an ANC government and during what was optimistically regarded as a transitional period.' As memory serves, the period to which Orkin refers was not regarded 'optimistically' as anything: it *was* the most euphoric era in South African history: Nelson Mandela was elected as president and as a result the sanctions against South African sports men and women competing overseas were lifted. This in turn

[11] *Ibid*., p. 19.

resulted in the South African Rugby team, the Springboks, winning the 1995 World Cup, an event of enormous nationalistic import.[12]

In the second place, while the conference was organised without the knowledge of the Wits English department staff, many did become involved to the extent that they were chairing and attending debates.[13] One example of a Wits academic in the English department who participated in the conference is Dr Eugenie Freed-Isserow, recently retired who was, at the time, a leading medievalist at Wits who 'taught for many years for the South African Council for Higher Education (SACHED), a program designed to supplement the inferior secondary education of black students.'[14] She, and fellow Wits academic, Lorraine Chaskalson, made considerable personal sacrifices during those years to better the quality of education for their students.

Over twenty years later, one of Eugenie Freed's university students, Kgomotso Masemola, now lecturing at Sheffield University, wrote her the following letter:

> I relive those moments when it became clear what kind of sacrifice you were making when you maintained a presence much … heavier in its combined clout and aura than the legions of those robotic-looking riot police. You were not intimidated. Rather, you imbued a semblance of dignity and even lent dignity to the near irrational frenzy of political desperation so vividly dramatised by the toyi-toyi rallying call …. A day, even a week, must come when tribute should be paid to outstanding academics like yourself who made the difference during the dangerous eighties. I can never forget the sophisticated social readings of Chaucer by Dr Lorraine Chaskalson.[15]

While more traditional versions of teaching Renaissance and Medieval literature were not seen by some as 'cutting edge', teaching Shakespeare's texts in a dedicated manner, to all students without prejudice was nevertheless its own act of defiance against an oppressive education system.

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism's next significant engagement with South Africa evolved out of two works. The first, published in 1996 is David Johnson's *Shakespeare and South Africa*. In the preface, Jonathan Dollimore is acknowledged as the supervisor of the project and the book represents a Postcolonial examination of Shakespeare's role in the lives of

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[12] See, John Calin, *Invictus* (London: Atlantic Books Limited, 2010).

[13] For this information I am indebted to the supervisor of this dissertation, Victor Houliston.

[14] Victor Houliston, 'Medieval Studies and the Voice of Conscience in Twentieth-Century South Africa,' *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of "the Middle Ages" Outside Europe*, (eds) Kathleen Davis Nadia Altschul (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), pp. 353–356.

[15] Kgomotso Masemola, 'Letter to E. Freed-Isserow,' (27 June 2006), Masemola later completed a doctorate at Shaffield University. Qtd in *Ibid*.

South African school children in the Western Cape. In that history Johnson states that his aim is that 'History might thus be read, in Jonathan Dollimore's phrase, through "theoretical lenses", but at the same time, theory might be read itself historically.'[16] The conclusion of Johnson's thesis is that Shakespeare should be done away with on the South African school syllabus completely so that educationalists might 'use the knowledge, memories and theories of past revolutions in order to "exalt the new struggles"'.[17]

The second book published under the influence of postcolonial theory on Shakespeare in South Africa is the aforementioned *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* (1998) in which the essayists seek to concentrate their attention on the project of, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, 'Provincializing Europe'.[18] This presents a difficulty from the outset, as, to diminish one contextual situation does not necessarily preclude the elevation of another. The collection features a number of articles influenced by a new generation of postcolonial theorists including Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha (but not yet Gayatri Spivack) and their theoretical models for the deconstruction of the postcolonial subject, sometimes called 'subaltern studies', a term developed from Antonio Gramsci's work referring to anyone regarded as a second-class citizen as a result of their race, gender, class or ethnicity.[19]

These publications reaffirm the opening assessment of Shakespeare studies in South Africa as a fraught occupation. Their effect on perceptions of European Literature in the postcolony is summed up in Victor Houliston's portrayal of Shakespeare studies in South Africa to date:

> Superficially, interrogating the presence of medievalism in the South African postcolony – that is, under settler rule in the twentieth century – African postcolony – seems tied to the acrimonious debate about Shakespeare studies fuelled by Martin Orkin's notorious diatribe *Shakespeare against Apartheid* and David Johnson's *Shakespeare and Southern Africa.* Although Orkin's project was to stimulate ways of teaching Shakespeare for and in a post-apartheid society, much of his energy went into an indictment of South African English departments whose preoccupations with moral themes in Shakespeare's plays, he believed, betrayed the urgent need to challenge racial injustice. The institution of Shakespeare studies was found guilty by association with the state education system. At

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[16] David Johnson, *Shakespeare and South Africa* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 8.
[17] *Ibid*., p. 211.
[18] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who speaks for "Indian" Pasts?,' *Representation*, (Winter), 37 (1992), p. 1, qtd in Martin Orkin & Ania Loomba (eds), *Postcolonial Shakespeares* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 19.
[19] Antonio Gramsci, 'Hegemony (1929),' in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, (eds) Imre Szeman & Timothy Kaposy (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2010), p. 191; the term 'second-class citizen' is borrowed from Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (California: Knopf, 1953), p. xxii.

> the same time, the terms Eurocentric and colonialist were used to question the credentials of virtually every aspect of the South African arts scene.[20]

Although contentiously depicted here as a new McCarthyism, Orkin and Johnson's publications on Shakespeare were nevertheless important. They shone a light onto educational practices engineered to entrench either British colonial or 'post'-colonial white-supremacist nationalist values that had previously been taboo subjects in the corridors of higher education.

As a result of Johnson and Orkin's work, South African critics were catapulted to the forefront of Postcolonial studies on a global scale. They had succeeding in demystifying 'Shakespeare' the icon, a construction, they argued, that was being deified for all the wrong reasons. As Orkin insists, 'unless we are willing at a profound level to countenance a shift in emphasis, away from traditional approaches … we shall continue to support *apartheid*.' He continues, '[w]e will produce students who, in their experience of the Shakespeare text will have had all their tendencies towards prevailing relationships of domination and subordination encouraged.'[21] Orkin believed there was still a 'Shakespeare' to be recuperated and taught better but others including Johnson and David Macfarlane (fierce press opponent to the continuance of School Shakespeare) were calling for school 'Shakespeare' to be abandoned completely.[22]

'Shakespeare's' continuing presence on the school syllabus is a hotly contested issue, understandably since Orkin and Johnson's works, written alternately under the aegis of either Louis Althusser or Edward Palmer Thompson, finger education as sites of ideological indoctrination. To explain these associations briefly, Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970) focuses on the coercive powers of state educational institutions. He designated schools, along with churches, families and cultural products like literature, as Repressive State Apparatuses, arguing that '… Schools and Churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection, etc., to "discipline" not only their shepherds, but also their flocks'.[23] These set formulations were contested through the writings of socialist polemicist E. P. Thompson. He believed that the idea of institutions conditioning people tended to encourage a totalising discursive structure, 'wherein blind, non-human, material forces are endowed with volition—even consciousness—of their own'. The result, he argued, is the reduction of 'human consciousness to a form of erratic, involuntary response to steel-mills and brickyards, which are

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[20] 'Medieval Studies and the Voice of Conscience,' p. 349.

[21] *Shakespeare Against Apartheid,* p. 182.

[22] Macfarlane asks 'why should we bother with Shakespeare at all?' in, David Macfarlane, 'The Role of Shakespeare in Africa,' *Mail&Guardian Online*, http://www.mg.co.za/article/2007-07-17-the-role-of-shakespeare-in-africa, (accessed 26 April 2009).

[23] Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),' in *Cultural Theory*, p. 208.

in a spontaneous process of looming and becoming'.[24] In spite of this major divergence in their work, the two theorists come to the same basic conclusion, i.e. that people tend to accept the received ideas of their cultures too readily, except that Thompson is far less pessimistic about the process.

Uneasy with Althusser and Thompson's somewhat straightforward formulations, neither David Johnson nor Martin Orkin absolutely identify themselves with either figure. However, the ideological implications of these Marxist and socialist writers having been read and popularly debated at the time remains evident in both South African scholars' work. This can be discerned in Johnson's critique, where he observes, '[t]he new English syllabus for the Cape published in 1973 merely repeated the requirements of the 1951 syllabus, with Shakespeare continuing as a compulsory text.' He criticises the education system's unconscious endorsement of unequal power relations, noting that '[f]or second-language English speakers, the emphasis was far more strongly on memory and comprehension-type questions.' Here, Johnson is alluding to the fact that black and white students were experiencing very different qualities of education.

Johnson draws heavily upon the work of Gramsci on the processes and workings of cultural *hegemony* whereby a small, power-holding group is able to terrorise and suppress a much larger non-power holding group through controlling the reproduction of that society's grand narratives. As Gramsci describes it, hegemony is allowed to continue through the work of intellectuals who:

> [A]re the dominant group's "deputies" exercising the subaltern function of social hegemony and political government. These comprise:
>
> 1. The "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; the consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.
>
> 2. The apparatus of state coercive power that "legally" enforces discipline on those groups who do not "consent" either actively or passively. [25]

These observations are behind Orkin and Johnson's technique of attack against institutionalised English studies as represented by 'Shakespeare'.

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[24] E P Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', *The New Reasoner: A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Humanism* (Summer) 1 (1957), pp. 113–114, for a description of Thompson's career and thought I am indebted to David McNally, 'E. P. Thompson: Class Struggle and Historical Materialism,' *International Socialism Journal* (Summer) 61 (1993) http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj61/mcnally.htm (accessed 24 August 2010).
[25] Antonio Gramsci, Hegemony (1929), in *Cultural Theory*, p. 191.

In the 1990s, Orkin and Jonson characterised Shakespeare studies in South Africa for an international reading audience. What they contributed to the field was immense: demonstrating how teachers were complicit in the repressive and destructive practice of conditioning school children, as quiescent subjects, for entering into the normative culture of apartheid South African society. They criticised, with equal vigour, the way other educationalists were teaching 'with unwavering respect of the English masters of Bradley's generation'.[26] Despite much of this excellent work, the theoretical foundation of these arguments is flawed in several ways, the first being that teachers and school children are not always and not only passive recipients of received culture, but creative and responsive citizens.

The second chink in the armour of the South African New Historicists, is that their terms of ideological debate are germane to the historical moment of apartheid, and only imperfectly applicable to the intrinsic value of a 'Shakespeare' play. Laurence Wright, honourary Life President of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa, in his riposte 'Shakespeare and the Bomber Pilot: A Reply to Colin Gardner' opposes the kinds of politicised readings of 'Shakespeare's' plays employed by Orkin. Johnson recounts the article in his history, noting that 'Wright starts with an anecdote from T. R. Henn's *The Apple and the Spectroscope* about a bomber pilot who read a speech from *Macbeth* as related to flying aircraft.' Here Wright is making the point that while 'Shakespeare' can be read in such a way so as to teach anything, this course of action is not always productive and can end up becoming absurd as 'contemporary' intellectual priorities change.

Johnson completely rejects Wright's argument, and cuttingly classifies it as 'the critical complement to his and [André] Lemmer's new school editions of the plays {these were the 'Active' editions, published by Macmillan].'[27] What goes unrealised by Johnson is that Wright calls for respect for the autonomy of the author and by extension his history; a less coercive, hegemonic and 'presentist' approach than those presented by Orkin and Johnson in their respective political appropriations of Shakespeare's plays.

Orkin's readings of contemporary preoccupations into a 'Shakespeare' play are evident in his analysis of *Hamlet*, where he parallels the corruption of staged Denmark to the corruption of P. W. Botha's ministerial cabinet. He provides the following Gramscian analysis of Claudius in relation to his subjects:

> This recognition of the inter-relatedness of ruler and ruled reflected a well-known Elizabethan notion. A similar identification which registers the magnitude of impact of the dominant class not only in its relation against those who threatens aspects of, or oppose, the existing social order but also in its domination of those who submit to it emerges from an account in present day South Africa of a recent tragic event,

[26] *Shakespeare and South Africa*, p. 121.
[27] *Ibid*., pp. 208–209.

> representative of many other similar cases. The 1981 Race Relations Survey contains the following report relating to the death of Steve Biko.…

What occurs in this analysis is a reversal. Orkin uses the preoccupations of the present to mediate his interpretation of Shakespeare's plays. The play itself becomes co-opted for retelling the story of Orkin's own period as well as those of his indirect teachers, Althusser and Gramsci's (in their respective contexts of French Algeria after World War I and Fascist Italy.) Due to the deteriorating relationship between the South African Marxist and post-Marxist Shakespeareans and the traditionalists, an opportunity for collaboration was missed. Orkin *et al* concentrated on the present in a way that makes their criticism seem dated a decade later.

The Macmillan editions of Shakespeare's plays that Johnson is referring to as an example of complicity were, in actual fact, constructed so as to ease the difficulty Second Language English speakers experienced while learning Shakespeare's plays. These texts are represented by Johnson as being 'imposed' on Second Language students, so that the difficulty of deciphering Shakespearean language became demeaning, leaving children feeling disempowered and inadequate. 'School Shakespeare' had become conflated with the practice of issuing passbooks, a measure which became extremely frustrating during the middle and later parts of apartheid as Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona's *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (1972) attests. That play lays bare the ironic dehumanising effect of the practice of carrying passbooks with special designations in segregated South Africa.[28] The aims of the Macmillan series were, however, far more constructive and the comparison is unjust.

Orkin and Johnson had good reason for the vitriol of their attacks. However, the subjects of attack fell wide of the mark. Schools in South Africa were sites of corrosive racist ideology and this was instilled state-wide by means of the 1953 Bantu Education Act. This act facilitated the introduction of a systemic deterioration in non-white education, which Zandile Nkabinde describes as marking "the origin of the crisis of black education in South Africa."[29] This matter may seem more appropriate for the History classroom than the English classroom, but History as a school subject is not compulsory for all learners, whereas English (and Mathematics) are. As it is unlikely that apartheid history is going to be taught in a Mathematics classroom, it is useful to see South Africa's historical background as a rich resource of examples of real heroes and villains, people whose acts and words are paradigmatic of good and evil and a coherent example of the dangers of suppressive ideology, and the ease with which it comes to dominate.

That being said, Shakespeare's plays, and specifically *Hamlet* in this case, become pedagogically uninteresting and unengaged with present-day concerns (political or otherwise) if this is the only way in which they are examined. In the first place, the play presents its own

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[28] Athol Fugard, John Kani & Winston Ntshona, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (The Hague: Wikor Drama Library, 1973).
[29] Zandile P. Nkabinde, *An Analysis of Educational Challenges in the New South Africa* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997), p. 5.

history of political intrigue, motivation, and resistance strategy, and in the second, the text has the wider capacity, which is often ignored, to provide insights into appropriate political intervention of conscientious citizens, which go beyond the political extremism called for in the context of a rotten Denmark or a rotten South Africa. 'Appropriateness' is the key word here; because Hamlet's political action draws attention to itself and to the inherently problematic realm of politics.

This approach is more or less assumed by the WSS, as the icon on the timeline represented early on in each edition depicts the difference between Shakespeare's time and the 'present-day' – marked by an image of the Globe theatre and the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg respectively.[30] By incorporating the history of apartheid into Shakespeare studies, this aspect of South Africa's past forms part of the expected background of a larger thought matrix, on which Shakespeare's texts can be mapped.

Learning a Shakespeare play is often difficult for those who encounter one of them for the first time and can be demoralising, especially if students do not grasp the basis of what they are doing intuitively. Second-language speakers will not often have an intuitive grasp of English language classics because they have no precedent for these materials in their home environments. That is why some contextual information concerning South Africa's apartheid history is included in the WSS on a timeline which also shows when the texts were written and set. Lemmer and Wright, when they created their Shakespeare editions did not yet have post-apartheid resources to draw upon, so they sought to overcome the impediment of an alien cultural background by spelling out the meaning of virtually every piece of dialogue in a Shakespeare play. A leaflet circulated as a complement to the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa advertises the launch of Lemmer and Wright's new 'Active' Shakespeare series; one of the sample comments gathered from teachers using the series records, tellingly 'Bold type enables one to read the book even if the lighting is poor.' The aim of the series was to include '[i]nnovative ways of easing the learning difficulties of ESL (English as a Second Language) students.' This method appeared paternalistic to academics invested in high Marxist theory however, it is far more nuanced than modernised Shakespeare, a way of teaching Shakespeare in the second-language classroom which has gained acceptance in the South African education system in recent years.[31]

Central to Lemmer and Wright's textbooks was the aim of teaching students how to be more proficient in their use of the English Language; their editions included 'Suggestions for discussion and activities which engage a wide range of learning modes, making the 'Shakespeare' prescription a rich source for developing communicative competence in English.'[32] Shakespeare's original text, slightly edited and modernised, was kept in these

[30] WSS *Macb. & Rom. & Jul.*, p. 5.
[31] See, Walter Saunders' Clever Books Series.
[32] Anon., 'Newsletter,' *Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa*, 8 (1 & 2) Dec. 1993.

textbooks, reflecting not so much the desire to confound students but rather Wright's own philosophies for making the study of the English language more enjoyable for second-language speakers. After being involved in the field of 'Shakespeare' studies for so many years and experiencing the learning curve that only time and commitment can provide, Wright is now the expert on teaching Shakespeare's work in South Africa, which has been adapted for the WSS in a number of surprising ways.

In Wright's article 'Language and Value: Towards Accepting a Richer Language Ecology for South Africa' (2004) he acknowledges that English Education in this country is a politically sensitive issue. At the same time he demonstrates that learning English needs to be approached pragmatically, where proficiency in English empowers people who speak African languages as a home language to find better jobs. Wright's argument runs:

> An instrumental attitude to language indicates a confining range of human motivations for acquiring and using that language, usually to those which are strictly and rationally adapted to achieving desired extrinsic and material ends. Intrinsic, non-utilitarian satisfactions are minimalised and ignored: in particular, what Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 250) calls *funktionslust*—"pleasure in the activity itself"—is minimal.[33]

For someone who avidly pursued and promoted school Shakespeare in this country over the past thirty years, Shakespeare's plays are seen by Wright as providing this 'pleasure in the activity itself'. His textbooks made the text in its original form as accessible as possible, promoting the sensation of pronouncing Shakespeare's ornate syllables and allowing students the autonomy to decide for themselves how they relate to characters in the plays. Following on from this, if 'Shakespeare' is going to continue to be taught in South Africa to secondary learners, it will need to be taught incorporating this attitude of trust in students' own capabilities.

What Orkin *et al* had done by reading 'Shakespeare' as a weapon of political struggle was to invigorate the discipline of Shakespeare studies in South Africa considerably, but it has taken a toll on developing young people's long-term commitment to the greats of English literature. There is no denying that his confrontational style of address was appropriate for the time and infectious to the point that it had a marked influence upon the written style of many of the articles and editorials published in the journal *Shakespeare in South Africa* (*SiSA*) which became something of a forum for debate following the publication of *Shakespeare Against Apartheid*. It is little wonder then that these ways of reading Shakespeare promoted such fervent interest.

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[33] Laurence Wright, 'Language and Value: Towards Accepting a Richer Language Ecology for South Africa,' *Language Problems and Language Planning* (Summer) 28 (2) (2004), p. 7; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 250.

The combative ethos of *SiSA* in the early years is best reflected by Wright, in his deeply sarcastic comment on how the New Historicists offer nothing particularly novel as they belong to a continuous tradition:

> [W]hich derives from the revisionary metaphysic of Matthew Arnold and passes through Bradley, Richards, Eliot, Leavis, Williams, Eagleton and Belsey'. What unites this tradition is their shared assumption that 'the importance of literature resides in its relevance to their own vital concerns, their deepest "religious impulse"….'[34]

This quotation is drawn from Wright's sceptical review of *Shakespeare Against Apartheid.*

Wright himself eventually came to subscribe to, if not 'politicised' readings of Shakespeare, at least a more political approach. His description of a 2008 production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Cape Town's Maynardville Open Air theatre, demonstrates the way his thoughts on political Shakespeare developed:

> I remember thinking as I sat down what an inspired choice of a play for this year's Maynardville offering! South Africa's national life is currently strewn with trials and rumours of trials. Key figures such as the President of the ANC, Jacob Zuma – the country's putative President-to-be – and the National Police Commissioner, Jacki Selebi, formerly head of Interpol, plus dozens of members of Parliament and scores of local government officials face investigations or legal proceedings on a variety of corruption charges. The integrity of the Judge President of the Cape Bar is impugned in a contretemps with the Constitutional Court, the highest in the land. Newspapers are crammed with legal machinations and bureaucratic upheavals as the accused fight back with counter-claims, or work to evade their 'day in court'. And behind this legal façade lie matters as various as the 60 billion rand arms deal and its associated bribes, kick-backs, and mysteriously vanishing 'offset' projects (the deal resulted in South Africa buying overpriced military hardware, ill-matched to its strategic requirements and at odds with the governments own technical military recommendations); growing national disquiet over the failure of government to deliver adequate basic services—water, housing, electricity—to the poor fourteen years after liberation; and devastating electricity blackouts (euphemistically dubbed 'load-shedding')….[35]

Wright adds, '[i]n this situation, Shakespeare's cliff-hanger about the use and abuse of the law promises to be almost preternaturally apt.'[36] If the two diametrically opposed positions

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[34] 'Review of *Shakespeare Against Apartheid*,' p. 73, qtd in, *Shakespeare and South Africa*, p. 184.
[35] 'Shakespeare in the Twentieth Century,' p. 3.
[36] *Ibid*., p. 4.

represented by Wright, at the one extreme, and Johnson, Orkin and to some extent, Natasha Distiller who has a stake in revisionist historicism, at the other, are to be reconciled in a simple formulation it is represented by this adaptation: that readings that take into account the political realities of the present-day serve to enliven Shakespeare's plays by giving them a sense of topicality.

In the above two quotations drawn from Wright's work there is a marked difference in tone, and it is worth delving into the reasons for this tonal difference. In the first piece, the writer comes across as being weary and jaded. In the second, there is a tone of enthusiasm and engagement. What comes across strongly in both is a dedication to history and the study of history and the way in which it impacts upon the present. By characterising Wright as indicative of traditionalism, as Johnson did, Wright is caricatured as being a conservative. This is an unfair evaluation. Wright is not seeking to preserve past knowledge without wanting it to change, that is an unfortunate effect of the legacy of a poor South African education system. Wright can more accurately be described as a historicist in a way that is peculiar to an ardent Shakespearean, in a way that is very much influenced by the Renaissance preoccupations with 'humanism'. Humanism here is being used in its purist sense, meaning 'a teacher or student of classical literature and the arts associated with it.'[37] Wright's project was ultimately to connect with the language and rhetoric of a distant past in a way that is far more generous than his detractors gave him credit for.

Distiller's work moves toward addressing this imbalance in the publication, *South Africa, Shakespeare and Postcolonial Culture* (2005). In *South Africa, Shakespeare and Postcolonial Culture*, Distiller defines Orkin and Johnson's contributions as being the substrate of postcolonial culture in South African literature. From this basis, she moves a step further, evincing the desire to recuperate 'Humanism' in Africa. Distiller discusses how Humanism in its nineteenth-century Arnoldian configuration privileged only the humanity of a select few (making it an inappropriate theoretical approach for the 'new' South Africa) and also how a number of black South African intellectuals, including Can Themba and Sol Plaatje, were taught the rhetoric of resistance through a Liberal Humanist ('traditionalist') system of education.[38] Finally, she proposes African humanism as a way to circumscribe the partisan humanism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Written in post-Marxist terms, the work unselfconsciously attempts to merge two philosophical traditions which are at odds by definition.

Distiller's central thesis revolves around reconciling these perspectives through the creation of a theoretical 'Bhabha-ian' third-space, which:

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[37] Nicholas Mann, 'The Origins of Humanism', *the Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 1.

[38] Natasha Distiller, *Shakespeare in South Africa: Literary Theory and Practice*, PhD Thesis, (University of Cape Town, 2003).

> [t]hough unrepresentable in itself … constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.[39]

She continues to write from this basis and she does so in an erudite manner, but the theoretical sophistication of the proposed path is fashioned for the purpose of intellectual argument and, in practical terms, would perhaps result in the practice of reading texts written by African authors alongside English and American ones. This theoretical argument may have a functional application but for the purposes of teaching, it stops short at nurturing the imaginative process of empathy which is so fundamentally of a piece with historicist textual engagement.

New Historicist, Cultural Materialist and Postcolonial theoreticians and their arguments had the positive result of causing a sensation during the most opportune time for questioning the underlying assumptions of the academy. Thirty years on into South African democracy, these urgent political concerns have themselves become jaded and are ready for revision. At last the revolution has come round, and 'radical' criticism sinks into its twilight. Former hard-nosed Marxist, Terry Eagleton's, recent publication *How to Read a Poem* (2007) is evidence of this growing dissatisfaction and demonstrates the realisation that 'new critical' practices of close-reading ought to be cultivated in the classroom once again as a means of creating more sensitive readers. [40] If this is the case in the international arena then it is doubly the case in South Africa where learners and educators grow tired of the 'drama (that) is continually being played out over threats posed to our fragile postmodern and postcolonial selves by what is said and done in a Shakespeare play'.[41] Not that the political should be abandoned, but it can be addressed in more circumspect ways.

The method subscribed to in the WSS is that Shakespeare's England is reproduced for students anecdotally within the introductory content and marginalia of the textbooks. The reasons why this editorial policy has been followed are similar to Wright's reasons for setting out his textbooks the way that he did. This approach places trust in the students' own abilities to draw parallels between their own lives and Shakespeare's plays, so that with each successive generation, new connections are discovered. Once students are given this chance to absorb plays on their own terms, they will hopefully be drawn into this process of reviewing Shakespeare's works from their unique perspectives as South Africans, allowing them an early opportunity to play an active and empowering role in discovering an ancient and distant past.

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[39] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 37, qtd in Natasha Distiller, *South Africa, Shakespeare, and Postcolonial Culture* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press 2005), p.24.
[40] Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), *passim*.
[41] Victor Houliston, 'Offstage! Shakespeare and the Naïve Reader,' *SiSA*, 17 (2005), p. 45.

CHAPTER II

Theory: *Neo-Historicism*

'Shakespeare' in the South African and global contexts is commonly acknowledged as no longer representative of the playwright but his plays making scare quotes dispensable. This also happens to be more or less a statement of intent for the following chapter. Noticing how the constructed nature of Shakespeare is emphasised by New Historicists and Cultural Materialists, is an opportune premise to begin to describe these movements and the way they shape South African Shakespeare. The concept of 'South African Shakespeare' as it was formulated through these theoretical preoccupations is useful, but requires revision according to the newly emergent historicist awareness of *Neo-historicism*. This evolution of historicist theory presupposes the same kind of historical reflexivity encouraged by older models, while concurrently insisting that people who lived in the past be accepted on their own terms rather than being judged unfairly based on their 'political' commitments. Of course, there is always scope for judgment and criticism of past injustices, but these have to be weighed against the positive gains made in the social sciences, especially those represented by cultural products such as art, histories and literature.

Fundamentally the theoretical forerunners of Postcolonialism are based in Roland Barthes' 'structuralism', characterised by his technique of questioning language's capacity to designate the *ding an sich* (thing in itself). In Barthes' *Death of the Author* (1968) he problematises the set categories of 'linguistics' and 'literature', saying 'these distinctions are being superseded', and goes on to denounce the existence of the author of a literary text. He further announces that 'linguistics has just furnished the destruction of the author with a precious analytic instrument showing that utterance in its entirety is a void process'.[42] The decentring of the author is a self-contradictory method of analysis, this being evident from the fact that Barthes is responsible for the work in question, indicating that his argument was initially intended more

[42] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' trans. Richard Howard, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), p. 51, the linguistics to which Barthes refers is that of the controversial post-structuralist (or deconstructionist), Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978; First published by Editions de Suiel, 1967) and *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997; First published by Les Editions de Minuit, 1967).

as a hermeneutic tool for broadening how people think about literature rather than as serious manifesto.

This denial of the writer's selfhood is a by-product of the underpinning philosophies that mark out New Historicist and Cultural Materialist writing. These tandem theoretical movements point up the constructed nature of 'authors' and of 'texts' at the expense of respect for the cogency and coherence of authors and the books they are responsible for producing. As David Scott Kastan observes, '[t]he author is, of course, not dead (the theoretical claim to the contrary hardly worth the effort of refutation and spectacularly rendered fatuous by the Ayatollah's *fatwa* pronounced against Salman Rushdie in 1989).'[43] Kastan continues his strike against structuralism, the keystone of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, saying:

> If we think for a moment about the apparent *sine qua non* of literary study, the text, perhaps this becomes clear. 'Text' is – or at least was, until academic usage thoroughly normalised it – itself a contested word, entering literary studies from linguistic theory. It replaces common sense words, 'book' or 'work,' with the structuralist term exploited for its etymology from the Latin for 'web' or 'woven' to suggest its existence, in Barthes phrase as a 'triumphant plural,' always complexly implicated in the multiple discursive contexts that it intersects and is intersected by. If the word 'book' suggests the literary work's integrity and autonomy, the word 'text' suggests its radical interdependency and indeterminacy.[44]

Following on from the premise of language being a product of certain socially, culturally and politically mediated conditions, New Historicists write based on the circular logic that nothing can be said outside 'the' (depersonalised) author's particular context.

New Historicism in Shakespearean studies specifically was inaugurated by the release of Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), in which he drew attention to the constructed nature of Shakespeare and his *oeuvre* through his own form of politicised historicism. Like Orkin, he uses as a catalyst for his argument a straw-man rendition of traditional criticism, characterising it as either 'a conception of art as addressed to a timeless, cultureless, universal humanism,' or else a 'self-regarding, autonomous, closed system'.[45] Either way, art criticism, he reasons, is divorced from the realities of social life.

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[43] David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare After Theory* (New York & London: Rouledge, 1999), p. 32.
[44] *Ibid*.
[45] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 4.

This program was extended and concretised in Greenblatt's later publication, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988)[46]. Based on the post-Marxist ideas of Michel Foucault, this book takes up his mode of history writing, whereby, 'in replacing the grand-narratives of Marxism and other versions of 'Progress' with discontinuous microhistories, Foucault seemed to offer a more thoroughly historicist approach to past ideas and events'. This had the advantage of freeing those histories up from the prescriptive and limiting 'impulse to see them only as stages in the emergence of the present.'[47] Greenblatt used this form of history writing to reveal the impossibility of making meaningful connections between Shakespeare's past and the present, demonstrating how the grand-narratives of discovery and conquest present in Shakespeare's plays are in part responsible for making and masking a history of colonial oppression.

The other key inspiration behind the New Historicists is Hayden White, an advocate of contemporary *historiography* and intellectual successor to Foucault. In his now seminal *Metahistory* (1973) he elucidates the role of the historian:

> It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by 'finding,' 'identifying,' or 'uncovering' the 'stories' that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between 'history' and 'fiction' resides in the fact that the historian 'finds' his stories, whereas the fiction writer 'invents' his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which 'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations.[48]

By highlighting the fluidity of the categories of 'fiction' and 'history', White demonstrates the constructed nature of history, acknowledging his debt to Barthes, Michal Foucault and Jaques Derrida, and in so doing formalises the practice of reflexive history writing in the field of English literary studies.

While New Historicism began in France with Foucault, Louis Althusser and Jean-François Lyotard, who were all sceptical of the 'grand narratives' of history, it is through White's work that it found its more usual formulations and so today is more frequently associated with America where it has been particularly influential. The movement focuses on *historiography*, which, as the term suggests, emphasises how history is written, rather than what is written. In looking at how a text is written, the political milieu of the writer becomes paramount for textual analysis. This development existed in tandem with its British counterpart,

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[46] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
[47] Robin Headlam Wells, Glenn Burgess & Rowland Wymer (eds), *Neo-Historicism* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), p. 13.
[48] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 6–7.

Cultural Materialism, originating with Raymond Williams. These two movements were, as is demonstrated in Chapter I, a major influence upon South African Shakespeare.

Members of these groups believe that in order for writers to be understood they have to be situated in terms of the political dynamic (especially with regards to the micropolitics of class, race and gender) of their historical context, with a special emphasis on coercion. For them, the crucial element is not genius or imagination but the material conditions of the author's culture. In Jonathan Dollimore's words, Cultural Materialism is 'a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis'.[49] This school of thought follows a *synchronic* approach to history, but it ignores the *diachronic* dimension, which is far more concerned with humanity's creative attempts to make sense of the ever-unfolding present by telling the stories of the past.

The New Historicists and Cultural Materialists extended one set of linguistic theories to discuss history and the role of history in literature and the Neo-historicists tend to do the same except that they rely on the works of a different set of theorists. The terms 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' are used in the above paragraph in a special way. The first South African academic to use these terms in relation to the historiography of Shakespeare's plays is David Schalkwyk in his groundbreaking book *Shakespeare, Love and Service* (2008). The terms derive from the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who, in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), collected and published by his students, defines synchrony as follows, '(it) has only one perspective, that of the language users; and its whole method consists of collecting evidence from them.' Synchronic language is particular to one definable point in time. By contrast, the diachronic dimension of language is necessarily historically mediated and a creative process: 'Diachronic linguistics, however, needs to distinguish between two perspectives. One will be *prospective*, following the course of time, and the other *retrospective*, going in the opposite direction.'[50] Linguists tend to place a greater emphasis on synchrony, but in recent years there has been an emerging trend to apply these terms from linguistics to the act of history writing, which has renewed interest in diachrony.

Developing these ideas to their fullest potential, Schalkwyk combines Saussurean linguistics with the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, focussing particular emphasis on how Wittgenstein saw language as a social game. The philosopher uses a number of useful metaphors to describe the historical relationship between words, the most influential of which has been his theory of family resemblances:

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[49] Jonathan Dollimore & Alan Sinfield, (eds.), *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. VII.

[50] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, (ed. and trans.) Roy Harris (London: G. Duckworth, 1983, rprt 2006), p. 89.

> I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family – build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament and so on and so forth – overlap and criss-cross in the same way. And I shall say 'games' forms a family.[51]

Schalkwyk replaces 'games' in the above extract for the coterminous concepts of 'love' and 'service', using Wittgenstein's rope metaphor to explain that some words are 'synchronic, i.e. they are confined to one particular usage and moment in time, while others are 'diachronic', meaning that, like the fibres of a rope, these words may be disconnected but nonetheless come together to form the actual rope.[52]

The terms of this discussion originally derived from Wittgenstein's writings on linguistics, but once history becomes a matter of the written word (*mimesis*) rather than of tangible actions (*praxis*), it is easy to see how usefully such concepts may be adopted for the purposes of historicism. By using Wittgenstein's work in this innovative way, Schalkwyk reintroduces the human being as an imaginative, creative entity into South African Shakespeare studies, while at the same time maintaining the idea of the contingent nature of history. He makes the point:

> The fact that neither the strand nor their precise points of overlap coincide at each of these diachronic points indicates that continuity is not so much constituted as disrupted by differences.… This is rendered especially complex (or messy) by the fact that each diachronic point is marked by a variety of uses of the same word. (*Ibid*.)

What goes without saying in Schalkwyk's work is that these concepts become real in their own right once the terms of their meanings are socially agreed upon and are tested through a process that is both social and scientific.

Take, for example, scientists' claim against the theory of family resemblances. Their complaint is that, when mixing compounds with the desired intention of creating specific reactions, specific quantities must be known. If a word stands for a number of ideas that change over time which can be known by their differences as well as their similarities, then the theory of family resemblances is completely inadequate for the science of chemistry. This is an argument made from a near-sighted perspective. In order to demonstrate how well the notion of family resemblances works over a much longer period, David Bloor uses Ludwik Fleck's study *Genesis and Development of Scientific Fact* (1935) to show how syphilis was identified in Western medicine. He demonstrates how the disease can be traced back to the fifteenth century, where it

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[51] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G E M Anscombe, P M S Hacker and Joachim Sculte, eds (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. XCV.

[52] David Schalkwyk, *Shakespeare, Love and Service* (Cambridge, CUP, 2008) p. 2.

was interchangeable with other medical complaints such as 'leprosy, scabies, tuberculosis, smallpox, gonorrhoea, soft chancres and a variety of other conditions'. Interestingly, Bloor notes that from this general identification of the disease, two ideas emerged, 'a disease that was a once a carnal scourge and also a condition that could be treated by mercury compounds.'[53] Through the passage of time scientists worked together to realise that gonorrhoea and syphilis were different because gonorrhoea cannot be cured using mercury. These discoveries led to greater ones, such as the imperative for accurate and reliable blood tests. If such advances can and have been made by taking a long view in the field of medicine, then similarly objective results can also be achieved in the social sciences. Notable here is that the precondition for advances in the field of medicine was constructive collaboration and engagement over a number of centuries.

Human beings' creative, imaginary and visionary facilities are what make histories personally meaningful to them. This is why the exclusionary terms and style of New Historicism are losing ground. For, as White observes:

> I understand, I think, the desire – after decades of 'star wars' on a grand scale – to abandon theory and get back to the text, to what Wittgenstein calls 'the rough ground,' back to personal experience and attention to the phenomena of everyday life; these cries go up regularly after every era of efforts to envisage the whole, whether of culture, society, history, or being in general.[54]

For White, theory can never be abandoned because it forces writers and historians to account for their own ontological certainties but he also acknowledges the sense of pleasure elicited by the 'rough ground', which is the root of observable phenomena on which collaboration can be based. In studying a Shakespeare text this becomes particularly interesting because of the richness of the language available for discussion.

Readers and playgoers use their communal and collective powers of historical and textual interpretation. The argument for weaving together multiple viewpoints acts as part of a growing awareness in Literary Studies that, while the historian as subject may only achieve the semblance of coherence, it is through the industry of history writing that particular histories are generated. Glenn Burgess conceptualises this ideal more fully, saying '[w]hile a hypothetical lone historian might become trapped in a vicious circle, generating only the evidence dictated by his meta-narrative, and therefore unable to challenge it, historians as a group are not.'[55] In expressing the desire to return to the histories of grand-narratives, Burgess acknowledges Lyotard's definition

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[53] L. Fleck, *Genisis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), reworded in, David Bloor, *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983), p. 34.
[54] Hayden V. White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. VIII.
[55] Glenn Burgess, 'The Political Culture of Early Modern England,' in *Neo-Historicism,* p. 32.

of postmodernism as 'incredulity toward meta-narratives', while at the same time pointing out the irony of 'postmodernism itself indicating a grand-narrative.[56]

Here, a point of departure is being established for thinking about historical analyses of literature in South Africa in a new, less combative, way: a pressing concern if the study of Shakespeare in South Africa is to ameliorate its character and achieve coherence. This is a vital project, for, as Thurman has pointed out, 'Shakespeare' studies has accrued to itself a broader field of associations than is strictly necessary:

> …the state of Shakespeare studies in South Africa could be seen to function as a barometer of South African literary studies more broadly. During the course of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, the Anglophilic tendency of a particular strand of 'literariness' in this country – arguably the dominant strand, given its prominence in education, media and publishing spheres – meant that Shakespeare was understood to stand metonymically for all 'English'/literary studies. This is certainly not the case today; arguably, Shakespeare has been unfairly tagged as 'representative' of a certain form of (neo)colonialism or even complicity with the cultural chauvinism entrenched under apartheid.

There is more at stake in the discussion of Shakespeare studies in South Africa than casual readers realise. Through the education system, Shakespeare has become inextricably linked with the concept of Literature. For this reason it is fundamental that the best traditions and ideas inherent in his plays be recuperated, incorporating the aim of pointing students in the direction of other writers whose works are in English and whose ideas have widely varying textures and consequences.

A better way of teaching Shakespeare in South Africa requires that those who write about Shakespeare cease agonising over the playwright's origin and take a full account of the historical situation in which the plays were written. These discussions need to be bolstered by teachers and academics sharing their experiences of teaching Shakespeare in the South African classroom. Something of this change in attitude is already apparent, as 'Shakespeare's' identity in South Africa is undergoing a metamorphosis whereby the icon no longer represents incommensurability, but rather serves as a nexus between people. Frassinelli originally conceived of this formula in South Africa, in his statement, '[f]ar from just talking to us about the history and culture of a small island up in the North of Europe, Shakespeare's plays and poems … tell many stories, speak of different locations, cultural traditions, identities and

[56] The quotation is taken from Keith Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 36. See also *Ibid*., p. 31–47.

experiences.'[57] This arises as a result of the plays functioning as cultural fetish objects, embodying the commitment to cultural aspirations both within and outside of England.

Samuel Johnson made a very similar claim in his *Preface to Shakespeare's plays* (1975) where he indicates his belief that there is something inherent in Shakespeare's works that give them universal appeal, rather than literary taste being purely subjective. Even though that approach has resonances with a great deal of criticism and theatre interpretation of Shakespeare that is currently popular, it is remains too indefinite a way for articulating Shakespeare's relationship with his own century compared to the current one. Neo-historicism does take account of this relationship, prescribing rigorous standards for textual analysis that have their roots in a thorough knowledge of the historical circumstances surrounding a play's production. This is outlined as follows:

> The basic principles of context-building do not [seem] terribly difficult: (1) Avoid *a priori* assumptions; (2) eschew single view-point and uniformitarianism; (3) stick to a specific site and a narrow time range; (4) expect to have to take change into account if covering more than a very few years; (5) cite primary documents as your evidence and explain principles of selection or exclusion; (6) always remember that any context is a constructed hypothesis; that it is subject to validation; and that both contexts and conclusions drawn in the light of them must remain provisional.[58]

Here again, the metaphor of the rope applies: Shakespeare's context has its own nature, but this period still can be fruitfully compared to other periods where similar events are happening, in both an elite academic environment and the environment of a secondary school classroom.

The Shakespeare being constructed here is not universal, or the product of a lone critic, but a South African Shakespeare constructed by and for South Africans for the purposes of having a homegrown baseline of literary culture. Shakespeare's works do not simply express universal values in and of themselves, but gather value in the process of his work being shared and debated. For example, Tom Lodge, in his Mandela biography, demonstrates Shakespeare's relevance in the most unlikely of circumstances: of former president, Nelson Mandela's stay in Robben Island, he notes:

> The other prisoners included the Pan-Africanist Congress's (PAC's) leader, Robert Sobukwe. Mandela sat next to Sobukwe in the prison yard most days, sewing mailbags.

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[57] Pier Paolo Frassinelli, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

[58] Robert D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts: The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 71.

> The two men enjoyed each other's company, calling each other by their clan names, and debating the respective claims to greatness of Shakespeare and Shaw.[59]

While Sobukwe and Mandela each held different opinions on how the future state of South Africa ought to be run, they were nonetheless able to establish a friendship through their shared experience of learning Shakespeare. As a result of conceptions of 'culture' increasingly becoming shaped by the trend of globalisation, it is imperative to view 'Shakespeare' as not being indicative of a 'superior' or hegemonic culture, but rather as a global cultural icon, providing a common point of reference for fostering enduring conceptions of 'culture' and 'cultural sharing'.

This runs the risk of conflating Shakespeare with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' which he wrote about in 1973 in conjunction with Jean-Claude Passeron.[60] The method proposed here has its basis in respect for the autonomy of a human being where culture is inherent in people first and secondarily in what they produce and not the other way around. Globally, issues of leadership, good governance and the voice of the electorate are gaining prominence with concomitant stress on the individual's contribution to the political process. On 30 March 2009, a mass protest was held in Hyde Park, London outside the G20 summit calling for governments and their big business affiliates to put people first.[61] In the realm of politics, Marxist philosophies and their economically inclined language will always have their place; Literature, and the teaching of Literature, will certainly be implicated in this world but above socialist imperatives are the imperatives of a human being as a psychologically coherent and politically accountable entity.

This method represents a South African take on Neo-historicism; an approach very similar to straightforward humanism, except that it has a deliberate political inclination. The advantage of this configuration is that it incorporates many insights from Postcolonialism but also recognises its practical limitations. These are: Marxist, or Foucaultian preoccupations with 'Power' and cultural production; 'Power' being conceived in terms of a Marxist dialectic; historical, in that these concerns are now rather stale and, finally, pedagogical, as some textual applications of cultural materialist and postcolonial theory are crude, unimaginative and not conducive to close-reading. An advantage of South African Neo-Historicism over Marxist

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[59] Tom Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 107. For more on the topic of Shakespeare and Robben Island, see David Schalkwyk, *Hamlet's Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and Ashwin Desai, *Reading Revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island* (Pretoria: Unisa, 2012).

[60] Pierre Bourdieu & Jean-Claude Passerson, 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction (1973),' *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education*, (eds) British Sociological Association & Richard K. Brown (London: Tavistock, 1973).

[61] Dominic Casciani, 'The Challenge of Policing the G20,' *BBC News*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7971212 .stm, (accessed: 3 July 2009).

theories of criticism is that it acknowledges the importance of the collective and the politically accountable with politics more broadly conceived.

While the politics of the contemporary world need to be addressed in the English classroom it is remains core to the subject that the primary focus in that space should be language: an area of study from which politically inflected discussions can be teased out of whatever material is prescribed for analysis. In focussing on language, students develop vital sense-making skills which involve sensitivity to English which enables them to use the language proficiently in order to tell collective stories so as to articulate civil injustices. Too many diverse 'postcolonial appropriations' weaken the potential of this collective imperative. Put to practical use, this means that one of the best possible means of equipping scholars for the rigours of political reality may well be teaching them the meaning of an insinuation in one of Hamlet's evasions of Polonius (or Claudius, Rosencrantz or Guildenstern). Learning *Hamlet* also provides an imaginative escape from the contemporary political world, because the political dynamics of another time or of a story serve to rejuvenate our own, so that these ideas can be returned to and reconceived in dynamic, and original ways.

Shakespeare's texts are the most appropriate choice for teaching from the standpoint of this vision of the political sphere, not only because their language is so connotatively and denotatively complex, but also because Shakespeare himself witnessed the invention of the history play: a genre representative of wise and powerful rulers as well as state corruption. That is not that *Hamlet* is exclusively a history. Nonetheless, as Hadfield observes, '(i)n writing *Hamlet*, Shakespeare turned to what might have seemed a relatively obscure source, but it was a tale with immense and obvious political charge in the late 1580s, in the immediate aftermath of the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, and in the 1590s, with the death of Elizabeth ever more imminent, and the threat of the Essex faction culminating in the abortive rebellion of 1601.'[62] In effect, Shakespeare was prevented from articulating an overt censure of the corruption and party politics of the Elizabethan court and so channels his and his society's collective frustration into Hamlet's analysis of corruption in staged-Denmark (and his long suppressed action against it).

Such a reading is only possible with an awareness of the historical circumstances under which Shakespeare was writing; that is the shortfall of Postcolonialism. It is methodologically 'presentist' and takes an insular attitude to the unique political situation in which Shakespeare's texts were conceived. This technique of discussing Shakespeare in his own terms is in keeping with what Schalkwyk suggests when he warns against reading Shakespeare too programmatically in terms of the ideological preoccupations of the present. He notes that:

> Criticism and scholarship in the last two decades of the twentieth century discovered in Shakespearean texts like *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merchant*

[62] Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, (Cambridge & New York: CUP, 2005), p. 187.

> *of Venice*, and especially, *The Tempest*, a much greater investment in the simultaneously repressive and expansive movement of early modern colonialism than had previously been recognised, while more recently scholars have argued that in these plays Shakespeare is responding to the presence of the racial 'other' in London itself.[63]

By reading the preoccupations of the present-day into a Shakespearean text – and this, Schalkwyk implies, has been accentuated by the globalising of academic study – the uniqueness of Shakespeare's time becomes obscured and 'othered' in a reductive way. Schalkwyk calls for an approach to reading Shakespeare that engages with his text in his own terms. By applying Schalkwyk's theories, historicity avoids politically suspect universalising, while enabling more concrete connections to be made between Shakespeare's context and the present; ie, the more accurate a knowledge of Shakespeare's time of writing and political circumstances, the more relatable the content.

Postcolonialism's idiom is typically confrontational, focussing on the dynamics of dominance and subversion. This feature of radical criticism is discussed further in Schalkwyk's earlier works, where he suggests that 'Power' obsessed language is not entirely practical for conveying the meanings behind the words in a Shakespeare play:

> For about two decades now, since theory first made its transforming inroads into Shakespeare studies, two concepts have tended to govern discussion and analyses: desire and power. Derived from the French theorists who cannily trod a path between structuralism and its post, they have invigorated criticism with a refreshing and necessary sense of politics: they stand as the cornerstones of the two most significantly transformative, and now hegemonic, forms of Shakespearean criticism. … Two closely related, if not exactly cognate, concepts … have all but disappeared from our critical discourse: love and service.… Our recent critical obsessions with relations of power has tended to obscure or pass over such reciprocal obligations, by which service was closely allied to love.[64]

Following Schalkwyk, the joy of language is no longer solely situated in the cut and thrust of political intrigues, but also in the more communally orientated realm of reciprocity. This does not entail abandoning the focus on power relations, but rather using a philologically sensitive approach to articulate the political nature of Shakespeare's context in a balanced way.

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[63] David Schalkwyk, 'Race, Body and Language in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays,' *ESA*, 47 (2), 2004, p. 5.
[64] David Schalkwyk, 'Between Historicism and Presentism: Love and Service in *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest*,' *SiSA*, 17 (2005), pp. 3–4, the last assertion is supported by Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: England before the Industrial Age*, 3rd Edn., (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984).

Radical criticism denigrates traditional historicism as it acknowledges European achievements only and exhibits a blind spot regarding the accomplishments of non-Europeans on their own terms. White articulates this dissatisfaction by characterising 'Western' historicism as its own separate discourse, and by saying that discourse is 'the ground whereon to decide what shall count as fact in the matter under consideration and to determine what mode of comprehension is best suited to the understanding of the facts thus constituted.'[65] Crucially however, historicism did not grow up in an exclusively English or imperialist tradition, although it has been employed in their interests.

Historicism, according to Robin Headlem Wells, Glenn Burgess and Roland Wymer has been notoriously misrepresented in English Literary studies. Representatives of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, after making little contact with critics working in the discipline of historical studies, took it for granted that they had reinvented the field of literary studies by forcing scholars to question and redefine their own epistemological assumptions. Professional historians, on the other hand, had been continually employing and revising this method for over two-hundred years:

> Historicism is a confusing term because it has been used by different writers to mean diametrically opposed views of history. For Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) and his eighteenth century predecessors such as Herder and Winkelmann, the historian should not allow his own assumptions, attitudes and beliefs to enter into his judgement of the past: every epoch, each cultural moment, is unique and must be interpreted in terms of its own values.

One of von Ranke's works in this field, *History of England* (1875) is similar to Winkelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1968), his personal *magnus opus*, in that they both contribute towards a comprehensive history of different civilizations and demonstrate the dual awareness that their interpretations of history are coloured by what, for them, were their contemporary preoccupations.

Unsurprisingly, these are each extraordinarily long works and, in an attempt to record everything each author acknowledges the impossibility of ever providing a complete and unbiased picture. Tellingly, von Rank asks:

> Who … could possess the vivid susceptibility requisite for doing justice to several epochs, for appreciating the actions, the modes of thought and the moral standard of each of them, and for understanding their relation to universal history?[66]

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[65] Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural* Criticism (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 3.

[66] Leopold Von Ranke, 'Preface,' *History of England: Pricipally in the XVIIth Century*, Vol I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1875), p. v.

Likewise, Winkelmann's work professes scientific rigorousness, the author stating his intention which is not to write 'a mere chronicle of epochs, and of the changes which occurred within them. I use the term History in the more extended signification which it has in the Greek language; and it is my intention to attempt to present a system.'[67] These works evince a self-conscious desire to connect with the alien voices and values of a distant past, coupled with a familiar sense of cultural relativism.

This awareness of the contingent nature of history and the way in which a historian's particular historical positioning limits his or her ability to see beyond what can immediately be known was detected and expounded by Karl Popper. His *Poverty of Historicism* (1957) deals with this topic with the aim of proving that there are no 'universal laws' in history because it is impossible to predict the outcome of a particular historical event. For Popper the term 'historicism' is misleading because it assumes that 'historical prediction' is the 'principal aim' behind the 'social sciences'.[68] Popper turned previous 'naturalistic' notions of history on their head by discussing how ideologies and doctrines are products of very specific historical circumstances, demonstrating 'their connection with the predilections prevailing in a particular historical period.'[69] It is this specific cultural awareness that serves as a marker of the Neo-historicist method.

From these tenets, it may be apparent that Neo-historicism has a great deal in common with straightforward humanism. This is true except for the adapted interest in politics and the two extra dimensions of reflexivity and cultural relativism. Even so, Neo-historicism unquestionably incorporates some characteristically 'humanist' concerns. However 'humanism' is a term that must always be historically situated, although it has a common thread running through its different evolutions. As Claude W. Thompson observes:

> Samuel Johnson in his Dictionary defines Humanism as the study of "classical literature and learning". This may seem far away from the modern ideas; but basically it is the same concept—the study of the wisdom (and foolishness) of the past shown in the history and writings of the ancients. This is the basis of humanistic studies—to comprehend man; to know his achievements and failures; to try to understand why he succeeded or failed; to hope with him and dream with him; and in the end become one with those who have sought and are seeking the ultimate that man is capable of

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[67] Johan Joachim Winckelmann*, History of Ancient Art*, Vols I &2 With Johann Gotfried Herder's Essay, *Winckelmann*, trans. Alexander Gode (New York: Frederich Unger Publishing Co., 1968), p. 3.
[68] Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 3.
[69] Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge and Paul Kegan, 1960), p. 17, qtd in, Wells *et al.*, 'Introduction.' *Neo-Historicism,* p. 2.

> achieving; to join the forward march of material, social and ethical progress, to seek the ways of pleasantness (happiness) and those paths that are peace.[70]

Johnson's definition of humanism as the study of literature and learning might have stood here had it not been for humanist education's fall from grace in post-apartheid South Africa. Ideally, humanism in Africa would set up Shakespeare's England as an ancient (classical) culture, with knowledge of Early Modern English (MnE) being important for understanding that culture on its own terms.

Nonetheless, in this country, humanism was applied narrowly in the nineteenth century to emphasise the humanity of a select few (of black people as well as white) over the humanity of those disadvantaged by financial poverty. This application is commonly known as 'liberal humanism' and (David) Johnson outlines how its originator, Matthew Arnold, did not properly stand for universal humanity. He notes that 'Arnold's theory of the state and social function of teaching English literature … does not extend to colonial subjects. Some idea of Arnold's view on African subjects of the Empire can be gained from his essay *An Eton Boy* (1882). The essay consists of the letters and diary of Arthur Mynors, an old Etonian who died of dysentery in 1879 while fighting in the Zulu war. Arnold's warm approval of all Mynors stood for suggests that their views on race, if not identical, were at least similar.'[71] This makes Arnold's claims for universal human dignity highly suspect as, in practice, he was unable to see past his own nation's interests.

Consequently, a form of historicism can be recuperated by taking into account the ideally civil character of collective interactions. 'Peace' and 'pleasantness', to use Thompson's terminology, may be difficult to achieve through the study of literature, but achieving an awareness and understanding of other people's cultures is an important first step. Incidentally, this pairing of peace and pleasantness was not originally Thompson's, but are derived from the patriotic hymn 'I vow to thee, my country' (sung to the tune of Jupiter from Holst's *The Planets*) which only goes to show that the association of 'peace and pleasantness' with politics is no new endeavour. These ideas find their contemporary expression through the concept of nationalism, especially a nationalism seen as contingent upon culture as it is embedded in different nations' language and history. An understanding of these relationships requires that scholarship be undertaken in English in the humanist tradition of Renaissance thinkers such as Erasmus and also, to some extent, Montaigne, but without their political biases.[72] As to what these biases were, they were formed, in part, by Renaissance Neo-classicism which took to heart the patriarchal character of ancient Rome and Greece.

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[70] Claude W. Thomson, *Humanism in Action* (Toronto: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1950), p. 51.

[71] *Shakespeare and South Africa*, p. 43.

[72] Jonathan Dollimore writes extensively on Montaigne's historical reflexivity in a manner pertinent to this argument, see, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and* Power (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984), esp. Ch 1.

This is the point where 'Republicanism' and notions of the formation of 'The Republic' become important for defining the role of the individual among collective society. In the earliest known treatise on the subject, Plato's *Republic*, the author attempts to promote an egalitarian position, of sorts, and fails as a result of his unconscious political affiliations. In his dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, Socrates raises the question of women's role in the ideal republic. In contemporary theoretical parlance, 'women' here can stand for any 'other' that Postcolonial studies deem silenced. Plato asks, 'Ought female watchdogs to perform the same guard duties as male, and watch and hunt and so on with them? Or ought they to stay at home on the grounds that the bearing and rearing of their puppies incapacitates them from other duties, so that the whole burden of the care of the flock falls on the males?' and his answer is: 'They should share all duties, though we should treat the females as the weaker, the males as the stronger.'[73] At the time of writing this would have seemed a radical proposition: that women were as capable of guarding the interests of the collective as well as men. Prejudices aside, the value of Plato's original point remains: that all people should act as watchdogs over their own freedoms in a civil society to ensure that the needs of the citizenry as a totality are met. In this instance, maintaining selfhood is broadened to the field of reading and teaching literature.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework promotes a return to the most valuable account of humanism's republican concerns. It is built on the critique of New Historicist, Cultural Materialist and Postcolonial theory and as a means of broadening what has recently come to be seen as 'the political'. The argument is structured in this way in order to integrate divergent theoretical standpoints that make up what has come to be known as 'South African Shakespeare' with a new kind of historicism so that Shakespeare's plays might be read in the poet's own terms, as far as those terms are possible to know. This has introduced an interest in the political model of republicanism; however, the term republicanism is tainted, like humanism, with exclusionary historical associations and so South African 'Neo-Historicism' is the method of analysis adopted instead. In order to recover the best parts of older scholastic endeavours, a 'civic', or publically-minded approach is proposed, one that knits together the work of various writers on South African Shakespeare, ultimately urging teachers and their pupils to make a connection between literature and their own political spheres in a constructive, group oriented and politically mindful way.

[73] Plato, *The Republic*, (trans.) Desmond Lee, (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

CHAPTER III

Hamlet in Context

Hamlet's behavioural and language play in the work arises predominantly from his political predicament. As the most directly in line for the throne, Hamlet poses a threat to the usurper Claudius. The argument here is that Hamlet's political actions are predicated, on the one hand, on his search for truth amidst difficult to interpret political surroundings, and, on the other, a quest to interrogate his own internal feelings and weigh their impact on his actions. The hero's actions are set up in comparison to similar political situations germane to Elizabethan England that gave Elizabethan audiences material to relate back to their experience of the play.

At the outset of *Hamlet*, the audience is introduced to the ghost of the former King Hamlet. The appearance of a spectre from some mysterious otherworldly realm which smacks of a Catholic conception of Purgatory, indicates some disturbance in the 'world' of staged Denmark: the natural order of things has been undermined and, since it is the spectre of the past king, it is likely that the apparition signifies some disturbance which carries with it political implications. The ghost represents the overturning of 'healthy' social, hierarchical relationships, and the beginning of a sequence of tragic events through its ghastly presence. Notably, the ghost is impelled to depart when the cock crows, the cock signifying, as Marcellus observes, the season 'wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,' when 'no spirits may walk abroad.' (I.II.141–143)[74] The opening of the play creates an ominous *mise-en-scene*, one that has implications for both the physical and metaphysical realms.

Introducing Hamlet Senior's ghost is just one of many alterations Shakespeare made to his source material, Saxo Grammaticus' *Historiae Danicae* (C. 1140–60), accessed through François de Belleforest's *Histoires tragiques* (1570). It has frequently been noted that some of the major alterations to the source material arose from Shakespeare's Christian revision of the ethos of the play, which translated into an exploration of the relationship between service and the state.

The implications of these preoccupations are dealt with succinctly by Maynard Mack, in his *Killing the King* (1973), which provides the following useful account of the political content of this play:

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[74] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford & New York: OUP, 1994), G. R. Hibbard (ed.), all further quotations from *Hamlet* are from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

> *Hamlet* takes place in a Denmark that has a genuine political orientation, but where fable has moved closer to the heart of things and the normal activities of court can be adjusted so as to throw into high relief the intensely personal struggle of Hamlet and Claudius. To give a second instance of the change, the Christian background … forms the basis for the whole conception of Christian service…. It supplies what keeps the hero from committing suicide, what pricks the conscience of the king, and it supplies also the paradigm of the ruined garden to which so many of the plays actions may be referred, both as they exist in their own right and as they suggest a parable of moral experience everywhere.[75]

Mack conceptualises the political ethos of *Hamlet* as being closely associated to a religious one. This is why Hamlet, as an agent of revenge, cannot possibly go on to live and thrive at the play's close, as the character does in earlier versions of the same play by different authors. The act of revenge is seen in the context of Christianity as being completely antithetical to that religion's ethos of forgiveness.

Again, the religious context informing the play would have also required an emphasis on the act of service of the powerful to the less powerful. Upon entering into any kind of analysis of Early Modern politics, it needs to be born in mind that the concept of 'service' was the primary criterion for judging the effectiveness, or 'rightness' of a monarch. Two other observations made by Mack that bear further investigation include his description of the 'ruined garden' motif in *Hamlet* and his focus on personal relationships. These two concepts are interconnected. From the earliest scenes of the play, there are a number of markers pointing towards an alternative Denmark, a country where relationships are healthy and bonds of service are fulfilled. Hamlet's close friendship with Horatio is one, and his 'back-story' relationship with Ophelia is another. This Edenic setting, where relationships last and all are virtuous, is never made part of the 'world' of staged Denmark, but is most strongly suggested through the garden imagery employed in the description of Hamlet Senior's murder, which he describes as being conducted by 'that adulterate beast,' (I.v.42) and 'that serpent that did sting thy father's life' (38). Here Claudius' actions and description echo the role of the Mystery Play's Satan, with a Fall narrative more thoroughly accentuated through the use of the words 'orchard' (I.v.59) and 'blossoms'(I.v.76), in relations to the setting of the crime.

The ghost's description of its wrongs not only contributes to a *leitmotif* linking service, in an hierarchical, Christian vein, to political service, but also introduces the tandem philosophical question of the search for truth into the narrative. Hamlet Senior is poisoned using the mythical toxin, 'juice of cursèd hebenon' (I.v.62), which some scholars have suggested has a phonetic resonance with the poison, hemlock, which Socrates was purported to have taken willingly as a

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[75] Maynard Mack, Jr., *Killing the King: Three Studies in Shakespeare's Tragic Structure*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 147–8.

show of his adherence to Athenian justice system.[76] Again, this is an instance of foreshadowing, as philosophical questions around the search for truth, ethics, destiny and the rights and responsibilities of good citizenship are all referenced through Hamlet Senior's murder weapon. This Edenic foreshadowing can also be read as suggesting the physical world and its politics are inherently fallen, and that any expectation of this aspect of human life as being remediable or wholesome is completely futile.

A further indication of the play dealing with the theme of dystopia, is indicated by the incident of a brother murdering a brother. As the character of Hamlet notes, this act bears a resemblance to the Old Testament murder of Abel by Cain, which prompts his comment that Claudius' murder, 'hath the primal eldest curse upon't' (III.III.37). This theme of the fallen nature of man provides a pervasive mood of pessimism that infuses the play.

In line with this 'fallen' depiction of the world, Shakespeare's rendition of political life is similarly out of joint in *Hamlet*, far more so than many of the plays he penned in later life. A likely reason for these thematic preoccupations would have been the tragic death of the playwright's first and only son, Hamnet, only one year prior to the play first being performed.[77] Popular criticism abounds with critical conjecture over the influence this single event had on *Hamlet*'s preoccupation with fathers and sons, the notion of patrilineal legacies and the bonds of kinship. Undoubtedly, the death of Shakespeare's son colours this particular tragedy, and goes a long way to explaining frequent representations of grief, and a pervading sense of futility over whether a single person can make any meaningful difference in the whole overarching structure of society, political or otherwise.

Through these means the themes of the search for truth and corruption are initiated. Hamlet's role as the hero in search of the truth and his uncle's opposing position as a liar are established in their first exchange. When Claudius refers to Hamlet as his 'son' (I.II.64), Hamlet's response to his uncle's question, 'How is it that the clouds still hang on you?' is to reply, 'Not so, my lord. I am too much i'th'sun.' (I.II.66–67). Hamlet is at once acknowledging his uncle while pointedly rejecting the idea of being his uncle's son. This is the first of many similar instances where Hamlet, forced to remain in the confines of Claudius' corrupt administration, uses double talk in order to serve his commitment to the truth while at the same time giving answers that do not mark him out as a political opponent to Claudius.

Hamlet's commitment to the truth is again shown through *The Mousetrap*, where Claudius demonstrates his guilt by rising at the scene in which Gonzago, the Player King, is murdered by his nephew, Lucianus, in the same manner as Claudius murdered his brother. This series of events suggests the republican concerns of the play. As with the reference to Socrates,

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[76] According to the works of Plato, Aristophenes and Xenophon, for longer discussion, see Emily R. Wilson, *The Death of Socrates: hero, villain, chatterbox, saint* (London: Profile Books, 2007), Introduction & Chp 1.
[77] Michael Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare* (London: BBC Worldwide, 2003), p. 166.

the reference to Republicanism is elliptical, but nonetheless integral. Hamlet tells the assembled nobility that *The Mousetrap* is '…extant and writ in choice Italian.' (III.II.246) The reference to Italy is more than accidental. It has frequently been commented upon that the refinement of Denmark's court, as it is represented in the play, is removed from the brutality of Saxo's original and resembles far more closely the refined courts of Renaissance Italy: the opulence of which was only matched by the treachery that simmered beneath a veneer of exquisite civility.

This meta-thearical moment is the point at which the realities of staged Denmark and Elizabethan England intersect, and it is ironically, through a casual reference to Italy. Italy had been the last country (even though it had not yet formalised its existence as a single country at that stage) to make use of a strictly republican political model. The formation of small republics, four-hundred years earlier, was a feature of that geographical area to the point that German historian Otto of Freising commended the citizenry of these self-enclosed political systems, commenting on their ability to limit the power of their ruling authorities and maintain their own freedoms.[78] Many years later, under the rule of oppressive dictators, the satellite cities of Italy were pining for the greater liberty represented by their republican days. These same yearnings for a greater and more individualistic sense of political influence had migrated to England, but found a very different environment there in which to take shape.

Under Queen Elizabeth's aegis, the system of republicanism had become co-opted so that courtiers gained a greater semblance of executive authority while remaining largely obliged to support and pander to the monarch's wishes. This scaffolding of power, which had been established purposefully by Elizabeth in order to maintain her role, was premised on the service of male advisors. Queen Elizabeth tacitly outlined this strategy as follows:

> I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good will of my subjects … I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too.[79]

In order for Elizabeth to be seen as effective she was forced to arrogate masculine qualities to herself, and where this was not effected directly as in the speech quoted above it was achieved indirectly through her courtiers. Since the Queen was born in 1533, this political ruse had grown stale by the time Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was in the process of being written. The system whereby courtiers offered advice solely out of a sense of duty or altruism (or even admiration) could no longer be sustained and the real reasons for their concern for the Royal Person became more

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[78] Otto of Freising, *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*, (trans. and ed.) Charles C. Merrow and Richard Emery (New York: Norton, 1953), 127; Skinner, *Foundations*, 3.

[79] Cited in Busnell, *Tyrants*, 64; See also, Louis A. Montrose, The Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture', *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 80.

difficult to ignore than they had been previously. These were power and preferment at court. The role of the courtier had become the most important in the realm, and it became the case that those with the influence also had the most power and responsibility in terms of their advisory role.

This system of preferment echoed and grossly distorted Classical models of republican government in a unique way: courtiers cast themselves in the mould of the Roman councillors, a tendency that has prompted Hadfield to describe the English courts as essentially republican in spite of the monarchy:

> (i)f republicanism stood for any clear and coherent doctrine in late sixteenth century England, it was the intellectual conviction that it was necessary to control the powers of the crown by establishing a means of ensuring that a coterie of virtuous advisors and servants would always have the constitutional right to counsel the monarch, and so influence and control his or her actions within the limits of the law.[80]

The waning powers of the Queen, especially during the latter part of her reign when she was declining in popularity and the English people were starting to feel decidedly nervous over the fact that she had not named a successor, caused the issue of the rights and powers of members of court to become increasingly important.

This is evident in the culmination of the Essex faction in the English court; Elizabeth's enduring good fortune and political acumen is demonstrated through Essex's failure to seize power. Crucial to understanding what the effect of this falling out had on the English people, is to realise that Essex had achieved celebrity status and was wildly popular before the failed rebellion. He was a friend to many powerful people in London, including Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare dedicated his politically and sexually provocative 'Rape of Lucrece', a poem which elegises the rise of the Roman Republic.[81] Essex' fall from grace was sudden and shocking. Dishonoured and humiliated, he and a handful of supporters, including the Earl of Southampton, led a desperate march on the palace. Before they had even reached the gates of Whitehall, loyal supporters of the Queen had run ahead and informed the palace guard. The perpetrators of the failed *coup* were apprehended and sent to the Tower of London. At Essex' final trial he and his accomplice Southampton were sentenced to be hanged for treason.[82]

The queen had made men at court feel stifled and powerless through her prolonged projection of a corrupted version of Republicanism. As a result, a few of these men banded

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[80] Hadfield*, Republicanism*, p. 17.
[81] Stanley W. Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett & William Montgomery (eds), 'Introduction', *The Oxford Complete Shakespeare*, Second edn (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 237.
[82] *Memoirs of the Life of the Earl of Essex* (London, 1753) *passim*.

together and marshalled their supporters. For their pains, these once powerful courtiers were thwarted and executed. In the WSS, the measured and contingent nature of both Hamlet and Essex's reaction to the misconduct of leaders could be profitably compared with students' own feelings towards their leaders. While present-day South Africa is not a context that justifiably calls for coups and assassinations, it is crying out for the more prosaic and practical questions to be asked, including: what makes a good leader? What is a leader's responsibility to his or her people? And, what is a citizenry's responsibility to its country?

Ultimately, *Hamlet* can be interpreted as an allegorical depiction of a perfect, 'Edenic' version of politics, embodied in the ideals of Republicanism, which is thwarted by a corrupt version of Republicanism, which stands symbolically, both for Queen Elizabeth I's court and the rotten court of Denmark. Shakespeare's total disillusionment with the physical, politically bound, world is illustrated through the fact that not only does Hamlet die at the close of the play, but so too do most of the rest of the cast. Fortinbras takes the throne, reinitiating the cycle of a son inheriting the kingdom from a warmongering father, and the suggestion is that politics is necessarily a fallen, imperfect and corrupt endeavour. Of course, Hamnet's death occurring a short time prior to the play's first performance, may also go a long way to explaining the depth and extent of this deeply pessimistic and dystopian worldview.

A useful classroom exercise might be to test this world view, by writing short essays on a variety of South Africa's struggle heroes, people like Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Albertina Sisulu, Trevor Huddleston, John Dube, Oliver Thambo, Chris Hani, Steve Biko, Desmond Tutu, Hector Pieterson, Helen Joseph and Bram Fischer; to name a few examples, and how their legacies refute this darker view of politics. Students might also discuss what the rights they fought for were, whether those rights continue to be maintained by the present dispensation, and students own personal power and responsibility to protect those rights.

CHAPTER IV

Civic Historicism

Looking at *Hamlet* as a play set in the mythical 'world' of staged Denmark, which is then connected contextually to a second 'world', Elizabethan England, which is further connected historically to the 'world' of present-day South Africa, is a useful pedagogical device for studying the play. All three 'worlds' are unique in that they have their own political circumstances, but it is through looking carefully at each that comparisons can be drawn and parallels discussed. Staged Denmark seems to be an elective monarchy, because while the monarchy represented in the play is hereditary, the people feel they have a right to name other claimants to the throne. Elizabethan England, on the otherhand, was a straight monarchy where the Queen also happened to have religious clerical powers. Present-day South Africa is a democracy with, arguably, strongly socialist inclinations, structured so as to aid the developmental goals of the state. None of these systems is or ever was perfect: the flawed nature of power politics is dealt with by Shakespeare through *Hamlet*, and these flaws have proved pervasive and problematic enough that the work continues to ask vital questions about philosophy, politics and psychology.

While there is something to be said for the axiom 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,'[83] the set of political questions and concerns raised by *Hamlet* are nevertheless historically contingent and specific. As an explanation for the flaws present in Elizabethan politics, Greenblatt has said in the past that religion and a belief in Fate were the reasons that Elizabethan people accepted political unfairness and autocracy more readily.[84] Accounting for the political implications of this complex and advanced belief system is important, but it does not mean that educated men (and a few educated women), other than Queen Elizabeth herself, were powerless in the political sphere, or that they necessarily felt powerless.

When dealing with Elizabethan politics, there is the need to make the distinction between how politics was seen then as compared to how it is viewed in a democratic and developmental system. Elizabethan England, while being religiously divided, comprised two religions that had more in common to unite them than to divide them.[85] The belief that, in some way, a god (or God) played a defining role in the affairs of men meant that when a king or queen came to

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[83] Acton, John Emerich Edward Dalberg, 'Letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, April 5, 1887, reprinted in Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power* (Boston: The Bacon Press, 1949), p. 364.

[84] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005).

[85] E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1942).

power, there existed the precedent for a fatalistic acceptance of the new ruler. Fate was seen as an instrument within this metaphysical system which was not immediately just, but rather indifferent to the effects it had on the lives of men. While things have changed considerably today, there remains a certain sense of futility among voters in many nations that employ the democratic system. Even in South Africa, where universal enfranchisement for over eighteens was fought for and hard won, elected officials seldom live up to the people's expectations, and the whole political arena often appears farcical to non-party aligned observers.

There is a similar sense of political fallibility discernible between this and the Elizabethan system but there are also significant differences. Identifying these differences will require, first, an identification of the most salient features of Elizabethan politics. To see politics from the perspective of the Elizabethans requires having a broad sense of their history, their commonly held beliefs and an awareness of how much sway the notion of free will had among firstly, the laity, secondly, the nobility and thirdly, the emergent wealthy middle class of which Shakespeare was a member. As the ordered world of three-tiered medievalism began to give way, middle class wealth and prosperity began to grow as a political presence. While the notion of free will had always had its place in Medieval England, a real sense of personal power and ability to effect societal change grew alongside the middle class.[86] This characterised the English Renaissance, gave it its impetus, and those who were aware of the shift began looking at similar models of free will and independence embodied in the writings of the Italian historians who had undergone their own Renaissance some two-hundred years previously.

These writers included the likes of Michel de Montaigne, Baldassare Castiglione, Nicollo Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini and Leonardo Bruni, all of whom were humanist political commentators and many of whom espoused republicanism as a political model that grafted neatly onto to both an increasing sense of personal autonomy and influence, as well as the monarchical system. Historically, the republican model makes sense as something that emerged in parallel to a greater sense of financial freedom and political volition; powerful men and women were in a position to 'advise' members of the nobility. This being the case, the role of the advisor became increasingly important, as the moneyed classes gained the power to influence the running of the state and the intellectual and ideological development of a nation.

Quentin Skinner and John Pocock call the history writers who tracked these historical upheavals the civic historicists; these influential Renaissance thinkers wrote manuals on how to be better 'princes', but were not yet concerned with the responsibilities of concerned citizenship. There are a number of Shakespeare's plays that play off this tradition, most notably, *Julius*

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[86] It is Jill Mann who covered this idea most extensively in her *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to 'The Canterbury Tales'* (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), the work is supported by the writings of A. C. Spearing in his edition of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* (Cambridge: CUP, 1966) and both relate to general historical themes presented in Derek Brewer's *Chaucer and his World* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer), 1978. These works each pick up on themes in Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture.*

Caesar, *Coriolanus*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* is distinct from the other plays that explore this 'advisory' imperative, in that the central character tends to 'run away' with the plot, placing a greater emphasis on introspective reasoning than decision making through collaboration. As a result of this personal focus, Hamlet himself has been the focus of so much late nineteenth and early twentieth century literary criticism that the character seems to have stepped out of the boundaries of the play and taken on a life of his own.

De Grazia makes this point in her work, '*Hamlet' without Hamlet* (2007), where she levels the accusation that the hero has been too far removed from the play's original context. Understanding the surrounding context of the play requires that its political ethos is revisited and more carefully explored, so that the mystique of the protagonist is preserved while at the same time maintaining a sense of why he feels the need to put on his 'antick disposition' in the first place. Being the rightful heir to a throne currently occupied by a character that is both a usurper and a murderer is a dangerous position to be in. The difficulty of this situation is exacerbated by a sycophantic court, which leaves Hamlet very much isolated in his search for political justice. Without wanting to detract from analyses of the compelling psychological pain exhibited by Hamlet, the verbal game playing resulting from his deeply problematic situation has a great deal of potential for original and dynamic classroom interpretation, especially in terms of nuanced political engagement.

School children in South Africa usually encounter school Shakespeare about a year before they come of voting age and start being in a position to make real changes for the betterment of their country and society. The parallels between Hamlet's Denmark, Elizabethan England and present-day South Africa do not represent perfect, one-to-one correlations of events; they do however, provide a framework for comparing one political dispensation with another so that a rubric for discussing the most appropriate form of citizenship to adopt in each context may be established. In addition, it is of interest to note that although democracy represents a greater amount of political freedom for a greater number of people, there remain political constraints in all three contexts under discussion. These are situations where a citizen may want to act or speak freely but is obliged to stay their tongue, at least until the right time to speak out emerges. Being able to create a model for deciding when it is appropriate to act in each political situation, as well as what the correct political action might be, is a set of questions that can be mobilised as a means for giving students a sense of how much freedom they have at the present time relative to what was normative in Elizabethan England as well awakening an awareness of their responsibility and power as agents within a political system.

Part One:

Censorship

Shakespeare's England was notorious for its harsh censorship as a result of the Schism between it and the Catholic Church. This is true to the extent that, according to the OED the word 'censor' first came to be used in this sense during Elizabeth I's reign in 1592.[87] What is at issue for the latest generation of South African school children, is to establish a sense of the power of their voice as potential voters and more broadly as citizens. A citizen's voice (and how they use that voice for the greater social welfare of the country) is a contemporary political concern that may be fruitfully teased out of a contemporary discussion of *Hamlet* in South Africa, but it is also important that, at the same time, information relating to historical context and textual integrity is not sidelined. After all, Hamlet is slow to take action; he is considered and measured in all his steps to avenge his father, down to the consideration that his father's ghost is an ill-willed spirit set on seeing him damned through wrongly taken vengeance against King Claudius (I.IV.1–198). Hamlet's political involvement is extreme, but still called for, and it is this careful consideration based on evidence which ultimately make his actions heroic.

'Evidence' is the key word thrown out above if parallels are to be drawn between the world of *Hamlet* and present-day South Africa. The South African press are the body responsible for providing politically orientated evidence to the South African public so that it can exercise its judgement as a citizenry. That is why the debate which currently rages in parliament is of interest here; the debate concerns the passing of the new Protection of Information Bill, the purpose of which is uncertain and a cause of anxiety for many South African citizens. Critics of the bill say the law could restrict press freedom by making it a criminal offence to publish information deemed by the government to harm the 'national interest.' On the other hand, Vice President Kgalema Motlanthe argues that ' "corrections" to the bill (are) in progress.' He says, 'This has nothing to do with restricting the media in any way. It is about the classification of information.'[88] So while the press are watchdogs over the South African people's freedom, it is worth noting that the developmental South African government feels there is a need to curtail the free dissemination of information, which in turn has an effect on voters' ability to weigh evidence and make educated decisions.

Hamlet is a useful resource for discussing the broader societal results of social strictures such as the one cited above; it can be read as a political statement about civic responsibility, but in order for it to be understood in this way, something of the constraints that Shakespeare faced in his own times requires further investigation, so that it may be understood that the extreme

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[87] *OED,* 'censor', p. 282.

[88] William MacNamara & William Wallis, *Financial Times* (*FT.com Africa*), 'South Africa makes Pledge on Mines and Media', 17 Sept. 2010, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/51841D06-C1E1-11DF-9D90-00144feab49a.html, (accessed 17 Sept. 2010).

actions of Hamlet are only acceptable when tyrannical rule is imposed in such a way that the people's rights are unjustly encroached upon. Censorship in Shakespeare's England varied in the environs of the theatre, fluctuating in its severity from year to year, or even, from month to month depending on the monarch's own publically perceived success as Queen. Not only did manifest political concerns shape Elizabethan censorship but personal relationships also played a considerable role. For example, Shakespeare was forced to change the original name of his Falstaff from Sir John Oldcastle in order not to offend the Lord Cobham, Henry Brook, eighth Lord Cobham, who served, for a brief period, as the Lord Chamberlain, chief censor of the plays. Cobham was related to the historical Sir John Oldcastle, Lollard Knight, who 'had married the widowed Lady Cobham and had been known as Lord Cobham'.[89] Here, it appears that Shakespeare and his men attempted to cock a snoot at interfering royal authority and found themselves reined in. These events would have taken place around the end of 1596, in the brief period when a Cobham was the Lord Chamberlain rather than a Hunsdon.

Moving back in time, to look at how Elizabethan precedents are similarly complex, Shakespeare and the players had a happier time under the protection of the first and second Lord Hunsdons than they did under Lord Cobham. This was true to the extent that the troupe famously, acquired their patron's name as 'The Lord Chamberlain's Men'. While the history of Shakespeare's relationship with the Queen is quite complicated to track over a series of representational highs and lows[90], the Queen's relationship with the first Lord Hunsdon, Henry Carey is easier to ascertain. They were affectionate first cousins, and Hunsdon was one of the few people at court that Elizabeth could trust: she wrote the following letter to Hunsdon after he had quelled Scottish rebellion in the 1570s, 'I doubt not, my Harry, whether that the victory was given me more joyed me, or that you were by God appointed the instrument of my glory.'[91] For all intents and purposes, it appears very likely that the Queen favoured Hunsdon's players. Lord Hunsdon's son succeeded him to the title of the Lord Chamberlain, after Lord Cobham's brief stint.



George Carey, the second Baron Hunsdon, was, by all accounts, not the man his father was; he is of interest here, since, being appointed in 1597, he was the patron of the Chamberlain's Men at the time *Hamlet* was first being performed. From a miniature executed by Nicholas Hilliard, he appears a careworn figure.

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[89] William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. T. W. Craik, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: OUP, 1990), p. 9.

[90] See Helen Hacket, *Shakespeare and Elizabeth: The Meeting of Two* Myths (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 13–14. See also, A. L. Rowse, *William Shakespeare: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1963).

[91] MSS, Border, Rolls House, in James Anthony Froude, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Death of Elizabeth*, Vol. 9 (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1866), p. 595.

Elizabeth I certainly had affection for his father, but she only wanted to project a semblance of concern for his son, her second cousin. The Queen's involvement with George Carey's career began with his being considered as a match mean enough for Elizabeth I's less educated, less civil rival, Mary Queen of Scots. Correspondence between two of Elizabeth's prominent courtiers, records that if Mary Stuart were 'so matched…Elizabeth need have no fear of her, and young Carey, with his fortune to make, would not be particular.'[92] Nevertheless, weakened by illness early on in his career, George Carey's patronage of his players was a duty he took seriously, replacing their prowess and popularity in the public eye for his own. This was the strategy he adopted in order to keep in favour with Queen and court.[93] Carey's highly involved patronage translates to the fact that *Hamlet*, written in 1600, was first performed at a time when the Lord Chamberlain's men would have been enjoying a relatively high amount of protection from the law, and they could have got away with far more than the other troupes of players working at that time – with the possible exception of 'The Queen's Men'.

Leslie Hotson, expert on Shakespeare's relationship with his censors, writes that 'In his deliberations in the Privy Council, Henry Lord Hunsdon, Lord Chamberlain, who was of course at this time the patron of Shakespeare's company, must have had no easy task to protect the interests of his players'.[94] The reason for the players' lack of favour in London during this time is that they were viewed as immoral, indecent and as little more than beggars by some city officials; this attitude is clear in the Lord Mayor of London's edict for the temporary closure of the Shoreditch playhouses, which he describes as:

> the ordinary places of meeting for all vagrant persons and masterless men that hang about the City, thieves, horse-stealers, coneycatching persons, practitioners of treason, and such other like, where they may consort and make their matches, to the great displeasure of Almighty God, and the hurt and annoyance of Her Majesty's people.[95]

The theatre grew up as a revolutionary space, and, as a result, it came under tremendous pressure from the city's magistrates to close down. Consequently, it was only through the influence of powerful patrons that the dramatic arts were allowed to thrive and flourish in the way they did.

Much of the careers of the Lord Chamberlain's men were spent dodging the civic authorities and other puritanical critics; Henry Carey had taken on the burden of their protection for himself. Carey, to the dismay of his players, died on 22 July 1596. On the very day of his

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[92] *Knolly's to Norfolk*, 15 October, 1568. Cotton MSS. Calig C., in *Ibid*, p. 294.

[93] Admittedly, Peter Thompson paints a less flattering picture of the first Lord Hunsdon and a grander one of the second, but that appears to be his own amendment to the more generally accepted view proposed here. See, Peter Thompson, *Shakespeare's Professional Career* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 157–168.

[94] Leslie Hotson, *Shakespeare Versus Shallow* (R&B Clark Ltd: Edinburgh, 1931), p. 14.

[95] *Ibid*, p. 13.

death the first edict to be passed was a law prohibiting the opening of playhouses throughout the city of London. The reason given for this was that 'For that by drawing of much people together increase of sickness is feared'. Hotson's rejoinder, almost four-hundred years later, is that, although this was the reason given 'we can find no evidence of plague.'[96] The Lord Cobham was Hunsdon's successor, and the tremendous unpopularity of this man has already been proposed through his association with the fat sensualist Falstaff. In Elizabethan society, there were no common standards for fairness in the eyes of the law, and much of what was either allowed or quelled depended on relationships of mutuality between various parties. As the Queen had sovereign power over her realm, the goings on in the city of London ultimately required her approval. This was usually secured through an intermediary.

To further complicate matters, men of the theatre had dual allegiances, to the public and to the crown. This can be inferred from the scene in *Hamlet*, where the Player King delivers his memorable account of Pyrrhus' revenge and the murder of King Priam. After the recitation, Hamlet is moved to lament:

> He would drown the stage with tears,
> And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
> Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
> Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
> The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I,
> A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
> Like a John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
> And can say nothing—no, not for a king...
>
> (II.II.550–7)

Here, Shakespeare provides an example of a player in the service of a nobleman with the specific purpose of moving his patron. Yet Hamlet also admits this man's connection to 'the general ear', in that all are equally moved to thought or action by theatrical performances of the calibre demonstrated here. Thespians' ability to move people is again invoked in the play-within a play, where Claudius betrays his guilt by rising at the crucial moment (III.II.249).

It seems very likely that through presenting these frequent metatheatrical references throughout *Hamlet*, Shakespeare is intimating that there is a direct connection between the content of this play in particular and the political landscape in which it was received. Elizabeth's anti-Catholicism, her autocratic leadership and, towards the end, paranoid rule may well have been experienced as oppression by those working in the theatre. That being said, it is very unlikely that Shakespeare himself would have wanted to incite rebellion. What appears to be happening in *Hamlet* is that, true to humanist dramatical style, the monarch and the public are

[96] *Ibid*, p. 14.

being asked to see themselves 'mirrored' in the actions of various characters. The Queen and her advisors are being interrogated through a reflective process as to how they are deploying power and the people are being asked to judge their role in history as far as whether they are active or quiescent political subjects.

In terms of this call for reflection, there was a certain degree of risk involved for those involved in performing plays in which monarchs were tacitly enjoined to see something of themselves in that the particular monarch might, for instance, not appreciate the reflection they encounter. This is what transpired in John Stubbs's case, whose right hand was cut off after dedicating his history of *The Life and Raigne of King Henrie* IIII (1599) to Robert Devereux just two years before his failed rebellion in 1601.[97] Shakespeare and his associates could be accused of relatively worse treasonous activity in that they were actually contracted to perform a private recital of *Richard II* (1595) to Essex and his co-conspirators the night before their failed *coup*.[98] *Richard II* represents subject matter that was ideologically loaded and politically sensitive: the displacement of an ineffectual monarch who was 'publicised' as God's chosen representative, with a martially and diplomatically more effective one – in this case the ideal which corresponded all too closely with Essex.

Shakespeare's players were imprisoned for a night and then released after their transgression, but, considering the brutality of state discipline in those years, it was a lucky escape.[99] In spite of this leniency, Shakespeare was unlikely to be particularly enamoured of either Elizabeth I or the way her administration was run. If it were not for the fact that these events occurred sometime after *Hamlet* was written, they might have been interpreted as antecedents for the *Mouse Trap*.

Significantly, it was only after James I's accession to the throne that Shakespeare benefitted materially from the patronage system, being officially declared the company of 'The King's Men' with the attendant honour of wearing the sovereign's livery (an honour reserved for civil servants of the royal household).[100] He may have endangered his and his fellow players' lives in presenting ideological matter that risked being interpreted as seditious during Elizabeth's reign, but James was far fonder of the theatre and more inclined to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with the players. With James's rule came a far higher degree of respectability for Shakespeare's troupe and financial rewards for his players increased along parallel lines with this improved status. Shakespeare's preferment under James has led to some critical conjecture that

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[97] John Hayward, *The First and Second Parts of John Hayward's 'The Life and Raigne of King Henrie IIII,* ed. John J. Manning (London: Royal Historical Society, 1991; Camden Society, 4th series, Vol. 42), see also, Andrew Hadfield, 'Sidney's "poor painter" and John Stubbs's *Gaping Gulf*', *Sidney Newsletter and Journal,* 15.2 (Fall, 1997), pp. 45–48.

[98] *In Search of Shakespeare*, p. 233.

[99] *Ibid*., pp. 234–5.

[100] Wood, *Shakespeare*, 256–7; Schalkwyk, *Love and Service*, p. 9.

Shakespeare, often thought to have been an underground Catholic, saw James as a symbol of hope for the Catholic cause. Others have seen it as a definite sign of the playwright's misogyny directed against a woman ruler. On the other hand, there is little conclusive evidence to suggest that either of these factors was more influential than monetary remuneration which happened to have been elevating Shakespeare into the upper echelons of his society.[101]

Nevertheless, the notion that there was some ideological reason for this change in the state of affairs between the theatre and the monarchy cannot be completely discarded. Whether or not the Chamberlain's Men originally performed more seditious plays with actual treasonous intent is still a matter under discussion. Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, had for some time been a favourite at court, and at the same time a friend to Shakespeare.[102] A notable feature of this association is Shakespeare's elaborate praise of Essex in his Irish campaign in parallel to his fictionalised Henry V's military endeavours, hoping each will bring 'rebellion broached on his sword' (*Henry* V, V. Prologue. 32). Ironically, Essex did bring rebellion back with him, which prompted Elizabeth to the shrewd observation to her principal advisor, Robert Cecil 'I am Richard II, know ye not that?'[103] She had every reason to mistrust any interpretations of Bolingbroke's seizure of the throne, and Shakespeare wrote in a way that pushed the limits of this association in canny and challenging ways.

The parallels between Shakespeare's role in Elizabethan politics and Hamlet's role in Denmark are clear: as an artist, Shakespeare occupied a socially liminal position, so too, does the kingdomless prince. As outsiders from the usual social structures that applied either to the laity or the nobility, each have more scope to criticise the dynamics of the power politics associated with their respective 'worlds'. With this in mind, neither has or had the authority to confront members of the nobility or their advisors directly, and so each enters into a uniquely codified language game, one which must be accessible to all levels of society while at the same time being sufficiently veiled so as to deter persecution.

Hamlet is presented as a figure who works in near isolation, except for his friend, Horatio. These exchanges demonstrate that Hamlet has not, in fact, lost his grip on reality and show that he can still relate, powerfully and materially, to the realm outside his own diseased mind and circumstances. Shakespeare too, uses a language and representational game to connect to his audience, and it is through this metatheatricality that the larger question of art's ability to represent, question and change reality is posed. If literary art and artifices are presented as a manner to express political opinions and advocate for social change, then Shakespeare's representational conundrum becomes a useful vehicle for posing the question as to how the South African youth express themselves. Voting can be one means, but writing can be another,

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[101] The Shakespeare family crest, which the playwright bought, is most frequently pointed to by critics as an indication of his own insecurities and a desire to demonstrate his increasing family status.
[102] Hadfield, *Politics*, 14.
[103] *Ibid*, 16.

and skilful, linguistically agile communication has the advantage of exercising influence in the political sphere without necessarily inviting contributors to enter into the frequently torrid inner-sanctum of politics.

Part Two:

Service and Statecraft in Shakespeare's England

While conjecture abounds in the scholarly criticism of Shakespeare's work as to whether he was a Catholic, a Protestant, an atheist or, indeed, a republican, a built-in constraint on his work was that the plays and poems had to incorporate an outward show of being performed in service to the monarch. Shakespeare had to present the picture of a loyal subject in order for his word play to be allowed at all. Moreover, this dimension of *Hamlet* was not a secondary consideration for the author, but a primary one. As has been noted by Hadfield, 'Shakespeare's plays represent more political systems and a more diverse range of political ideologies than those of any other English playwright working at that time,'[104] indicating that he frequently wrote with his current monarch in mind. Moreover, Shakespeare expected reciprocity in this relationship: he read political works and moved among people who believed that if the monarch did not serve the commonwealth, then it was their God-given right to depose that ineffectual leader. Service, conceived in these terms, refers not only to a citizenry's responsibilities to the realm, but also a monarch's responsibility to their people. The playwright's representation of these responsibilities required a series of performative paragons, as well as foils, in order to explore the problem of political accountability as well as to evade censorship.

Much of what has proliferated in South African Shakespearean criticism follows the recent European and American critical trends which seek to answer whether Shakespeare supported the *status quo* in early modern England, subverted it, or passively represented it. When speaking about the status quo at that time, critics in this school base their understandings on Tillyard's conservative picture of the Elizabethan world – ordered according to 'the great chain of being'[105] – where people fall into a cosmic system of hierarchies. In these instances Shakespeare is being judged by present-day concerns over asymmetrical power relations and coercion; a conscious anachronism employed by New Historicists in the name of history.[106]

These issues, however, are not Shakespeare's concerns, they are the standards by which present-day social interactions are judged, and to impose such expectations on texts over 400-years old demonstrates what David Schalkwyk refers to as a 'presentist' attitude towards Shakespeare, one that hazards rendering 'the human textures of Shakespeare's dramatic and

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[104] See Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, Arden Critical Companions (London: Thompson Learning, 2004), *passim* and Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge & New York: CUP, 2005), *passim*.

[105] E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1942), 26, the author credits Arthur C. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Mass, 1936), but it was Tillyard who popularised the idea.

[106] David Schalkwyk, *Shakespeare*, *Love and Service* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), pp. 4–5.

poetic relationships critically uninteresting or even politically questionable'.[107] Schalkwyk has been instrumental in the shift towards seeing the political content of Shakespeare's plays as acts of service to the monarch, which can be critical or encouraging, as part of Shakespeare's duty as a player expected to perform an advisory service to the crown.

Clearly, the issue of the relationships between servants and masters is an important one in Shakespeare's work, as is evident from the memorable pairings of King Lear and Kent, Mark Antony and Enobarbus, in a more mischievous, ludic vein, Petruchio and Grumio, to name a few. Schalkwyk's *Shakespeare, Love and Service* looks specifically at Shakespeare among the players and the responsibilities of service that these men owed the monarch of the time.[108] Through the inauguration of James I, the players had found a means to enter into the gentlemanly class, an honour that Shakespeare had every reason to take seriously as the crowning moment of his career.

Although not written in Elizabeth I's time *King Lear* (1605) is a prominent example of how, in service to a monarch, a trusted adviser may come to take on the appearance of an enemy, criticising the actions of the sovereign in order to set them on the right path. This is evident in the servant-master exchanges between Lear and Kent, where in reply to Lear's 'What service canst thou do?' the disguised Kent replies: 'I can keep honest counsel, ride, run, mar a curious tale in telling it, and deliver a plain message bluntly : that which ordinary men are fit for, I am qualified in ; and the best of me is diligence.' (I.IV.34–80). Here *Lear* can be seen as Shakespeare's warning to King James against flattery and a new influx of flatterers at court.

Similarly, *The Winter's Tale* (1610 –11), also performed for James I's court (in honour of his daughter Elizabeth's marriage)[109] addresses the relationship between autonomous monarchs and their councillors. Camillo, in refusing to carry out king Leontes' order to 'fetch off' (kill) (I.II.334) Polixenes, the king's best friend and king of Bohemia (now Yugoslavia), does his master more diligent service by denying his wishes. The challenge set out for this courtier is to weigh the monarch's wishes, and then to decide how best to serve: to mind his own interests by following a tyrant's orders to the letter, or to serve the long term interests of both monarch and realm together by hindering the sovereign's temporary jealousy and violent temper, ultimately avoiding tragedy. Difficult decisions made by those close to power-holders such as this are common throughout Shakespeare's corpus.

Conversely, at the time of Elizabeth's reign, Shakespeare faced a great many more limitations to his role as advisor. For example, he adapted his version of the old Queen's Men's

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[107] *Ibid.*, 4, see also, David Evett, *Discourses of Service in Shakespeare's England* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2005).
[108] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[109] A. L. Rowse, (ed.), *The Annotated Shakespeare: The Complete Works Illustrated*, '*The Winter's Tale* Introduction' (London: Orbis, 1984), p. 2334.

play, *King John*, in order to 'diffuse its anti-Catholic rhetoric' in such a way as to 'open up his characteristic dual viewpoints and present on stage the clash of opposites.'[110] He was bold, but at the same time had to tread carefully in his adaptations, and this is evident in *Julius Caesar*.

Julius Caesar was the tragedy written most immediately prior to *Hamlet*, where the title-character's death represents what Arthur Humphreys describes as 'Caesar's bodily defeat and spiritual triumph'.[111] Much of the following argument will demonstrate how Shakespeare was exposed to republican political ideologies, and while he had the choice to present Caesar as a tyrant and enemy to political freedoms, he prefers to venerate the Emperor through the use of a Christ-like martyrdom, a subversive move as Caesar had been elected and was not born to his place of power. This can be read in parallel with Hamlet's death, where he is also 'martyred' for the political ideal that he stands for.

[110] Wood, *Shakespeare*, p. 106; 161.
[111] Arthur Humphreys (ed.), *Julius Caesar,* Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: OUP, 1984), p. 23.

Part Three

Service and Republicanism

The tradition of advising monarchs, which was done both in order to gain greater personal influence, and in the interests of the crown, fell into the humanist tradition of advising 'princes', chiefly by using historical examples. As Skinner explains, '(t)his had always been the aim of the older tradition of advice-books intended for the *podestá* (high ranking Italian officials) and city magistrates, and this tradition had in turn made use of the far more ancient conceit of holding up a 'mirror' to princes, presenting them with an ideal image and asking them to seek their reflection in its depths.'[112] Such treatises were written by, according to Skinner, the 'civic historicist', writers who sprung from early fourteenth-century Florence, who 'concentrated on Republican ideals of liberty and civic involvement.'[113] The English court, being Italianate, adopted and adapted many of these conventions to suit its own prerogatives.

In this genre of commonplace books for courtiers and princes, some of the most influential treatises from Italy that were available during Shakespeare's time included Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Courtegiano*; or *the Courtier*, translated by Sir Thomas Hoby (1556), Machiavelli's *Il Principe*; or *The Prince* (1532) and also his *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*; or *The Discourses on the first Decade of Livy* (1532). Editions of Machiavelli's texts had been banned in England until the mid-seventeenth century, but this seems to have promoted his works rather than having the desired effect of repelling English readerships – particularly the proportion made up of students and those involved with the theatre.[114] While Shakespeare would have had access to several other books of this sort, including the anonymously published *Mirror for Magistrates* (1559) and Geoffrey Fenton's translation of Francesco Guicciardini's *History of Italy* (1597), Castiglione and Machiavelli's political treatises popularised the terms for service and leadership that appear most frequently in *Hamlet*, the principal text under discussion here.

While there is no hard evidence to suggest that Shakespeare actually read Castiglione or Machiavelli's work himself, it is extremely likely that he would have come into direct contact with the former and at least indirect contact with ideas popularised by the latter. In any event, what is crucial about these writers are the issues on which they differ, revealing two contrasting attitudes regarding princely conduct that would have proliferated during the late sixteenth century. Skinner and Russell Price explain:

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[112] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 Vols (Cambridge: CUP, 1974), I: p. 118.
[113] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
[114] Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare's Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sources* (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 312; Hadfield, *Politics*, p. 16.

> Castiglione argues that, even among those whose profession is arms, warlike attitudes must of course be set aside in time of peace in order to cultivate the arts and refinements of civilised life. Machiavelli grimly points to the consequences of adopting such an attitude: 'it is evident that if rulers concern themselves more with the refinements of life than with military matters, they lose power'. A prince, he concludes, 'should have no other objective and no other concern, nor occupy himself with anything else except war and its methods and practices.'[115]

These two versions of princely and courtly conduct have two distinct and separate orientations: one advocates a warrior-prince, as Henry IV, Henry V and Fortinbras turn out to be; the other promotes a more refined and courtly type, a type which was to be found in Richard II and Elizabeth I's administrations, which is also the category that Prince Hamlet falls into.

The reason Shakespeare would have presented these divergent pictures of courtly conduct to the groundlings and the monarch was to subject the two ideals to scrutiny and hold them up for consideration from all echelons of society. In the case of the 'mirror for princes' nature of his work, the playwright is working in the tradition of early-modern courtiers, who, as Daniel Javich points out, were so far influenced by Castiglione's *the Courtier* that 'instead of formulating anew the requisites of the English courtier, simply deferred to Castiglione's prescriptions.[116] Castiglione's reach was so wide that he not only informs the genre Shakespeare was writing in, but also delimited the role of those acting in service of the monarch.

Another factor that defined Shakespeare's role as a servant was his rural upbringing in a tightly knit semi-feudal community. Adam Nicholson discusses the responsibilities and duties of service that bound such communities together, stressing the 'deep communality and tight networks' that depended on 'a profoundly hierarchical community, deriving its security and well-being from the natural relationship of its parts.'[117] These 'natural relationships' had developed over centuries, so that what had first started out as relationships of mutuality, where a 'warlord (would) offer land and defence, a villain – a man of the village – supplied in return labour and loyalty',[118] became relationships of interdependence. Commenting on the symbiotic nature of these relationships, John Norden observes in his *Surveiors Dialogue* (1607, 1610), that these independent parts operated in a system 'whereof the Tenants are the members, the Land the body and the Lord the head'.[119]

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[115] Quentin Skinner & Russell Price, (eds), 'Introduction', *The Prince* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), p. xv.
[116] Daniel Javich, *Poetry and Courtliness in Renaissance England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 5.
[117] Adam Nicolson, *Quarrel with the King: The Story of an English Family on the Road to Civil* War (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 29; 35.
[118] *Ibid*, p. 34.
[119] Qtd in *Ibid*, p. 35.

Norden's characterisation of how these parts operate bears an immediately apparent resemblance to Menenius's 'fable of the belly' (I.I.95–162) in *Coriolanus* (1607–8). From the time of Shakespeare's upbringing in Stratford-Upon-Avon, he would have had a notion of reciprocal relationships between those in power and those acting as servants, relationships where each member of these rigid, hierarchically determined communities relied on every other member in aid of the proper functioning of the whole. Once in London, it is very likely that Shakespeare kept these country values, expecting the monarch to rule faithfully. This sentiment would have extended to a consideration of the common people and how their interests were being served as well as the playwright's responsibility toward them as other parts in the whole system of political England.

As far as prescriptions for courtly conduct are concerned, Castiglione's work and the hierarchy of relationships informs *Hamlet* intrinsically and extrinsically. The role of the ideal courtier is to alternately criticise or encourage the monarch, as is appropriate. When this courtly function fails, it is the duty of the arts, which constituted the players of Shakespeare's era and constitutes the press as well as the performance arts of the modern era, to serve the state (or 'realm') by raising issues of national concern. The idea that such an intervention is a 'service', rather than political agitation maintains a useful control in that the function of advising through the arts is not performed in pursuit of furthering personal grudges, but as a method of civic improvement. The productive ethos of this method requires that there be some political goal or programme for a realm. For Elizabethan England this goal would have been some resolution to the internal religious division. For present-day South Africa, the country's goals are enshrined in its constitution, a document that requires, above all, equality and respect for the freedoms of fellow citizens. It may be useful to read excerpts of this document as part of class discussions so that learners become familiarised with South Africa's larger political project and compare it to that of the Elizabethans.

CHAPTER V

Kingly 'Types' in Elizabethan England

In terms of analysing the political discourse of Elizabethan England, it would be remiss to overlook the fact that Shakespeare could and did rely on a number of standard tropes for representing different kingly types. These types as they appear in *Hamlet*, are drawn from the wider tradition of civic historicism, present in the work of Italian civic historicist writers, Castiglione and Machiavelli. This intellectual legacy provided a useful historical background for questioning a monarch's right to rule and their efficacy in that rule. These ideas and writings have merely an elliptical influence, as the net of writers who dealt with Republican themes that influenced Shakespeare's work is far wider. In addition to this, the balance inherent in *Hamlet*, between courtly show and potentially treasonous intent is a critically interesting one, as it has the effect of opening up a forum for discussion rather than directly addressing the problems of power politics and Republicanism *per se*.

The following Chapter deals with the influence of civic historicist ideas on the Elizabethan political *zeitgeist*, focussing primarily on the two distinct inclinations represented by Castiglione and Machiavelli's work and how these two different conceptions of courtly and princely behaviour shape the political content of *Hamlet.* This section will also address how Shakespeare would have become conversant with these political theorists' main ideas without having necessarily come in direct contact with either work. Looking at the concept of rulership in this way is not an attempt to rehash familiar concepts of 'kingship' in Elizabethan England, but rather seeks to articulate fully the political milieu in which *Hamlet* was first performed.

Castiglione

The major commentator on the bonds of 'service' at that time was Castiglione; while there is no definite evidence that Shakespeare read Thomas Hoby's translation of *The Courtier*, it is likely that he did and that it was the primary source for *Hamlet* in the construction of its protagonist as the model Renaissance man. This is a man, moreover, who might, if given the chance, prove to be an ineffective leader and so is much better suited to the role of being an

instrument for destroying a corrupt and decaying social order—what could anachronistically be termed a 'nihilist'.

Hoby's translation was one of the most influential and widely read commonplace books available at the time, to the extent that 'Sir Philip Sidney went off to the wars with the volume in his baggage, and has been described as Castiglione's disciple.'[120] Javich argues for the work's ubiquity, suggesting that prescriptions therein contained play a defining role in the proliferation of poetry and other literary arts in the Tudor court. He comments on the complex, wrought nature of their poetry, saying, '(a) basic reason why these artifices were so esteemed was their resemblance to the artifices courtiers themselves sought to display in their conduct.'[121] With Shakespeare's connections at court, it would be harder to prove that he had not come into contact with this work than that he had.

Associates of Shakespeare's at Wilton in the Chalk Downs served as a creative matrix for inspiration, and the estate itself served as an Arcadian escape from the poisonous Tudor court. One indirect influence on Shakespeare who spent his time there is Sir Philip Sidney (although he himself would have been before Shakespeare's time); his brother Robert was another; their sister Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, was perhaps the most influential among these, and she passed a legacy of political awareness on to her two sons, William and (to a lesser extent) Philip. Nicholson paints a verbal picture of how she cast herself and her home to resemble the refined and artistic court of Elizabeth Gonzago, the Duchess of Urbino, celebrated in *The Courtier*.[122]

It was because of this powerful patron that poets such as 'Samuel Daniel, Abraham Fraunce, Faulke Greville, Edmund Spenser, Michael Drayton and Thomas Nashe all became part of the Wilton orbit.'[123] Many dedicated their sonnets, prose and poems to the lady of the estate, but Shakespeare's connection with the family is believed to have had more to do with the elder son, William.

In all likelihood, Shakespeare was commissioned by Mary Herbert to write a series of dedicatory sonnets to William Herbert with the aim of inducing him to marry. At least the first seventeen poems in *Sonnets* (1609), dealing with the theme of regeneration and rebirth as a means of conquering death, were commissioned for the young mister W. H., who could well have been 'The Onlie Begetter of these Insuing Sonnets' to which the publisher refers.[124] Nicholson calls this 'patronage poetry, involving no disturbance to any social or sexual

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[120] Gillespie, *Books*, p. 80.
[121] Javich, *Poetry*, p. 6.
[122] Nicholson, *Quarrel*, *passim*, see esp. ch. 6.
[123] *Ibid.*, p. 115.
[124] This is the dedication on the title page of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609), Nicholson argues that the ensuing 109 sonnets are also homoerotic love poems to the young man, although, considering the Neoplatonic tradition prevalent at the time this may be an oversimplification of very complex subject. For a fuller discussion of the sonnets and their relation to William Herbert see *Ibid*, pp. 119–26.

hierarchy, (which) was perhaps delivered, it can be conjectured, to Will Herbert, perhaps at Wilton, perhaps with the indulgent overseeing of his mother and father, on April 8, 1597'.[125] The sonnets connect Shakespeare with Wilton, its intellectual climate and construction, making it more than likely that he was conversant with the themes and even the individual interjections of *The Courtier*.

Parallels between the drawing room in Urbino and Wilton emerge in sharper relief when considering them in terms of physical space and the metaphorical and actual significance that confined spaces had for courtiers in the late sixteenth century. The drawing-room atmosphere is stuffy, circumscribed and claustrophobic. In these aspects it mirrors the role of the courtier, one which demands the highest degree of sophistication and refinement but which is also toothless and, in many ways, effeminate.[126] The powerlessness of the courtier and concomitant frustrations that arise when virile, active men of the court (who were often military men and the descendants of warlords) is discussed at length by Thomas M. Greene in his article '*Il Cortegiano* and a Choice of the Game' (1986).

In this article, Greene draws attention to how, when the question comes up as to whether a courtier should obey a dishonourable command, the answer is 'no', but that 'some commands only appear dishonourable.'[127] The ridiculousness of the situation has emerged as 'the players almost expose themselves to a perception of the corruption endemic to the system they live by, the perception of a courtier essentially passive, dependant on the whim of a master who may be evil and is likely to be a despot.'[128] This revelation causes a sense of uneasiness in the group, and while it is quickly passed over, the party edges around this problem for the remainder of BOOK II.

In discussing something as innocuous as the ideal courtier's dress this issue is once again raised, as black, the colour of mourning, is advanced as the most suitable attire, by Fregosa:

> Therefore, me thinke a blacke colour hath a better grace in garments than any other, and though not thoroughly blacke, yet somewhat darke, and this I meane for his ordinarie apparel.

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[125] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

[126] Daniel Javich, 'The constraints of despotism', *Castiglione: The Ideal and the Real in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Robert W. Hanning & David Rosand (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983), *passim*, esp. pp. 21–22; See also Thomas M. Greene's comparison of space in *The Courtier* with civic humanist scholar Leonardo Bruni's work Ad *Petrum Paulum Histrum Dialoghi* (X) in '*Il Cortegiano* and the Choice of a Game', *The Vulnerable Text,* ed. Thomas M. Greene (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), *passim*, esp. pp. 52–3.

[127] *Ibid*, p. 55; quotation summarised from Badassare Castiglione, *The Courtier*, (trans.) Charles S. Singleton (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959), 2, p. 18.

[128] Greene, '*Il Cortegiano*', p. 55.

> For there is no doubt, but upon armor it is more meete to have slightly and merrie colours, and also garments for pleasure, cut, pompous and rich.' (II.116)

Only in the active pursuits of fighting, tourneying and in attending 'open shewes' (II.117) should the ideal courtier wear brightly coloured clothing, as 'outwarde matters many times are a token of the inward' (*Ibid*). Here the social cohesion of the group is again maintained by Fergosa not saying what it might be that 'passeth show' (*Hamlet*, I.II.85) during the times when the hypothetical courtier dons black garments.

The numerous syntactical, stylistic and thematic parallels that exist between *Hamlet* and *The Courtier* have been extensively covered in past scholarship, with several critics reading Castiglione's work as a grid on which to map the construction of Hamlet's character.[129] These are, for the most part, overly-systematic attempts to set up Castiglione's text as a rubric on which to map Shakespeare's melancholy hero. Even the more general descriptions of Castiglione's influence sometimes miss the mark, in that they do not take account exactly how extensive the Elizabethan frame of reference was for discussing the relationship between the inner and outer self. One such critic is Eric P. Levy, who characterises Catiglione's contribution as the 'locus classicus of Renaissance preoccupation(s) with self presentation … where the ideal of the gentleman is *sprezzatura* or nonchalance through which he is enabled "to conceal all art and make whatever is done and said appear to be without effort and without almost any thought about it." '[130] Levy's discussion is introduced as pertaining to *Hamlet*, but Hamlet can by no means be described as 'nonchalant', as he behaves like a very entertaining lunatic throughout the majority of the play, demonstrating the artificiality a noble character would, logically, feel at having to separate their public and private selves too drastically.

Likewise, in comparing Machiavelli's stake in *Hamlet* over Castiglione's, Lisa Hopkins also raises the issue of Hamlet's attempt to dissociate his inner and outer self, however her description is not entirely satisfactory. She states:

> Hamlet … seems to be indebted to a conduct book which, while equally interested in success, suggests that virtue and not vice, is the way to achieve it, for though Castiglione's *The Courtier* may be more often thought of as advocating appearances

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[129] For example, see Barbara A. Johnson, 'The Fabric of the Universe Rent: *Hamlet* as an Inversion of *The Courtier'*, *Hamlet Studies*, (California: University of California Press, 1987), 9: pp. 34–42; D. C. Biswas, 'Shakespeare's conception of a Courtier', ed. Visvanath Chatterjee, The Romantic Tradition, (Culcutta: Jadaypur UP, 1984); W. B. Drayton Henderson, 'Note on Castiglione and English Literature', *The Courtier*, Dover edn., pp. XV–XVIII.

[130] Castiglione, *The Courtier,* p. 43, qtd in and with, Eric P. Levy, *Hamlet and the Rethinking of Man* (Massachusetts: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp., 2008), p. 198.

> rather than reality, it consistently suggests that vice will be punished and virtue will thrive.[131]

If, as is argued here, Hamlet is modelled on the virtuous courtier, then, since his fate is to die by poisoning, it can hardly be said that he thrives, at least physically. He does thrive in another way: like Julius Caesar, Hamlet is martyred in order to redeem his society.

That Denmark is redeemed is indicated by Hamlet's approval of Fortinbras as that society's future King (V.II.308–9). A dying King approving of their successor on their death bed was common practice at those times when issues of succession were disputed in Europe. There are stories, for example, concentrating on the night of the 23rd of March, 1603, the night Elizabeth I died, and how, on that night, she named her successor as James. Queen Elizabeth had been forced to delay naming an heir till her last breath as a matter of political expediency, this strategy held James I in check right up until the moment of Elizabeth's death.[132] Incidentally, this ceremony simultaneously demonstrates a normative response to a problematic succession as well as how *Hamlet* is intrinsically inflected with issues relating to the succession debate which raged in England immediately prior to Elizabeth's death.

Another important aspect of Castiglione's work that shapes *Hamlet,* is the presence of a powerful woman ruler and the role she plays in mediating state affairs. For A. C. Bradly 'the Hamlet of the play's commencement is almost paralysed by shock arising from his mother's hasty and dishonourable marriage.'[133] W. B. Drayton Henderson notes that it is the misconduct of the presiding female entity that has overturned the naturalised and once stable decorum of the court.[134] In the courtly realms of Urbino and its English parallels of Wilton and Whitehall, women are the arbiters of conduct, making these places where grazia (grace) and decorum dictate the bounds of courtly service.[135] This accounts for the negative portrayal of Gertrude and the play's condescending attitude towards her 'frailty'. Gertrude's infidelity ought not to be read as Shakespeare's personal misogyny, but as a marker indicating how women rulers were celebrated more highly in their successes and derided more roundly in their failures than their male counterparts, indicating, at worst, a double standard.

Taking the similarities of Wilton and Urbino into account, it seems that debates and discussions on proper courtly conduct and Kingship were as likely to have occurred in one context as they do in the other, perhaps even going as far as recreating the game of the ideal

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[131] Lisa Hopkins, 'Harington, *Troilus and Cressida*, and the Poets' War', *Italian Culture in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Rewriting, Remaking, Refashioning*, (ed.) Michele Marapodi (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), p. 129.
[132] Jame Resh Thomas, *Behind the Mask: The Life of Elizabeth* I (New York: Clarion Books, 1998), p. 180.
[133] *Ibid*, XIV.
[134] *Ibid*.
[135] Javich, *Op Cit.*, p. 27.

courtier in real life. This would have effected a rupture at Wilton, and, unlike Castiglione's civilized and contained court, the Wilton mock-up could have resulted in the group stating outright the problem of monarchical rule: namely that it frequently degenerated into a state of being despotic and self-serving. Hadfield concurs in naming this a probable site where Shakespeare participated in the key political debates of his day.[136] In his work, he goes on to demonstrate how the works of Scottish Republican humanist George Buchanan and Huguenot monarchomach Duplessis Mornay influenced the group and their interest in the rights of Kings (and tyrants).[137]

Briefly, what the monarchomachs believed was that, if a monarch denied the populace's freedom to worship the true God, then it was the people's Divine right to assassinate that monarch. Mornay proposed this view under the pseudonym, Lucius Junius Brutus (the hero of the Roman Republic). He argues forcefully, that if a monarch does not serve God, then it is the duty of powerful courtiers (and not the mob) to depose that monarch and uses Biblical allegory to make this point:

> After the death of her son Ahaziah, king of Judah, Queen Athaliah endeavoured to exterminate almost the whole royal line. Only a single boy, Joash, who was still crying in his cradle, survived, thanks to the piety and prudence of his aunt, Jehoshabeath. Athaliah usurped supreme power [*rerum summa*] and ruled for six years in Judah. Perhaps the people muttered then; for to say outright what weighed on its mind was unsafe. At last Jehoiada the high priest and husband of Jehoshabeath, after secretly devising a plan with the princes of Israel and having duly established a league [*coniuratio*], arranged the anointing coronation of the seven-year-old Joash. Not only did he cast down the mother from her throne, but killed her and without delay destroyed the idolatory of Baal. Jehoiada's action was deemed right and proper. He was motivated by a just cause. He attacked tyranny, not kingship [*regnum*]—tyranny, that is, without original title.[138]

In the above illustration, Athaliah has no authentic genetic claim to throne, which indicates that she has not been selected by God as the true and proper heir. The existence of such works demonstrates the deep dissatisfaction many felt towards Elizabeth's administration, and that religious rhetoric was frequently strongly employed against her.

As Houliston has observed, the 'rightness' of a monarch's rule was ratified not solely by birth, but through the three-tier system of birthright, God's Providence and the people. Blood legitimacy was an important overriding factor in determining a King however, from a mystical and religious point of view, succession became a matter of debate. In his discussion of Robert

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[136] Hadfield, *Politics*, p. 93.
[137] *Ibid*.
[138] Stephanus Junius Brutus, pseud. *Vindiciæ Contra Tyrannos*, attributed to Philippe du Plessis – Mornay, ed. and trans. George Garnet (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 48.

Persons's treatise on the subject, *A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of Ingland*, which was published in 1595 under the pseudonym R. Doleman, Houliston discusses how '(t)he whole arbitration among the pretenders rests on the vindication of Henry Bolingbroke's rebellion against Richard II.'[139] The manuscript was, surprisingly, dedicated to the Queen's favourite (before the rebellion), the Earl of Essex, with the intimation that, since he had a blood claim to the throne going back to the warrior King Edward III (the quintessential 'Warrior King'), he might aim at attaining the crown for himself.[140]

The claim of the Tudor dynasty was questioned and destabilised through this and similar illicit literature, and, as a counter measure, Elizabeth and the Cecils were forced to employ increasingly violent measures against Catholics with a direct view to sustaining Tudor power. Hadfield observes:

> The over-riding political issue at the time was the question of sovereignty and the legitimacy of the monarch. While it is undoubtedly true that most people—some historians would argue all— accepted the need for a sovereign ruler, the question of which sovereign was a thorny one. The Tudor dynasty had no undisputed right to rule, and there were numerous other claimants to the throne.[141]

As a result of this weak claim, a massive propaganda campaign was launched by Henry VII, continuing into Elizabeth's I's reign, which sought to propagate the Tudors as bridging the divide between the two houses of Lancaster and York, positioning Henry VIII – younger brother of 'Arthur' who died in childhood – as a saviour figure, reminiscent of the legendary King Arthur.[142]

Establishing such connections would not have been necessary had the Tudor claim been more stable. To this end, one of Shakespeare's most frequently consulted sources, Raphael Holished's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577, but Shakespeare used the extended 1587 edn) was edited with the aim of cementing Tudor claims. While the original proceeded with the intention to 'shew the diversitie' of opinion among Holinshed's historical

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[139] Victor Houliston, *Catholic Resistance in Elizabethan England: Robert Persons's Jesuit Polemic, 1580–1610* (Ashgate Publishing Limited: Aldershot; Institutum Historicum Societatus Iesu: Rome, 2007), p. 74.

[140] In spite of this, the only two serious claimants to the throne proposed by Persons are the Catholic Infanta of Spain and James VI of Scotland, son of the martyred Catholic Mary.

[141] Hadfield, *Politics*, 1; for details see, John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), ch 1; C. S. L. Davies, *Peace, Print and Protestantism*, *1450–1558* (London: Granada, 1977), ch 4; useful reference guides are Rosemary O'Day, *The Longman Companion to the Tudor Age* (Harlow: Longman, 1995); Charles Richard Nairn Routh, *Who's Who in Tudor England* (London: Shepheard-Walwyn, 1990); C. P. Hill, Who's Who in Stuart Britain (London: Shepheard-Walwyn, 1988).

[142] See, William Ferguson, *The Identity of the Scottish Nation: An Historic Quest* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1998), p. 121; for a lively discussion of what happened when historians did not follow the historicity of Arthur see Lily Bess Campbell, *Shakespeare's "Histories"* (Oxon : Routledge, 2005), pp. 85–119.

predecessors, those parts of the later edition featuring Elizabeth and her rule were added by later scholars.[143] These were carefully written 'to please Elizabethan authorities by no means generally prepared to countenance the deposition of monarchs'.[144] Just as sycophancy was encouraged in the historical documents of the period, so was it enforced at court, both before and after Essex' betrayal.

The problem of corruption at court and flatterers is one that crops up continually in all four courts under discussion here, as it was a major theme in civic humanist political discourse. Civic humanists were those writers who cast back to Cicero's Roman Republic as the ideal model for political governance, which secured the liberty of all citizens within at a city state, while at the same time limiting the power of the monarch, aristocracy or ruling class. Hadfield defined this system of government as a 'mixed constitution'. He derived his definitions from Sir Thomas Smith's *De Republica Anglorum: A Discourse on the Commonwealth of England* (1583) which was reprinted in the first edition of Holinshed's *Chronicle.* For Smith, the most effective form of government, in terms of securing citizens' liberty and general happiness, is a mixture of 'monarchy "where one alone doth govern", oligarchy, "where the smaller number" (govern), and democracy, "where the multitude doth rule".[145] Elizabeth I's rule conformed to this model in many ways, but it also diverged from it, approaching despotism. This was most markedly the case in her final years after Essex was executed and her only trusted advisor left was Robert Cecil.

The notorious flatterer Polonius is chief counsellor of state in Hamlet's Denmark, the same role as the Cecils occupied throughout most of Elizabeth's reign. In carrying out his service to Claudius he 'dispenses advice which is generally fatuous, longwinded and too generalized to be useful … (he) is also responsible for corrupting and poisoning other relationships at Elsinore.'[146] It would not be possible to satirise the second most powerful personage in England in the late 1590s, if the convention of service via 'mirror for princes' literature were not in place. Here Polonius and his conduct is not a straightforward allegory, but rather the expression of repressed public impatience with courtly toadying.

As far as Elsinore represents a realm in crisis, Polonius is metonymic of the wider problem of court corruption which sanctions Gertrude's incestuous and imprudently swift

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[143] Holinshed, *Chronicles*, III, sig. A3^{v}, qtd in Gillespie, *Books*, p. 248, Gillespie also comments on the Queen's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the national pride this fostered, as well as reaffirming faith in the divinity of Kings (or Queens as the case may be); however, ten years later, this success was as forgotten and Elizabethans once again began questioning Elizabeth's right to rule.

[144] *Ibid*., p. 242.

[145] Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum: A Discourse on the Commonwealth of England*, attributed to Sir Thomas Smith, ed. Mary Dewar (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1969), p. 9, qtd in, Hadfield, *Republicanism*, p. 20.

[146] Hadfield, *Politics*, p. 88.

marriage. In becoming King through marriage, Claudius circumvents both criteria for Kingship in an hereditary elective monarchy (as Denmark was)[147] as his succession is sanctioned neither by birthright or the people's choice. Worse still, it is offensive to God, having been achieved by committing the 'primal and oldest (sin)' (*Hamlet*, III.III.37) of fratricide. In fact, the name 'Hamlet', derived from Saxo's 'Ambleth' resonates with the same vowel sounds as 'Able' in the Biblical legend, reinforcing the theme of fathers and sons, and the legacies that fathers' leave their sons. Weakening his claim further, Claudius is not liked among the people; they are only too eager to depose him as a tyrant and champion Laertes in his stead. The former's unpopularity is a direct result of him going over the people's heads, as is evident in the emphasising of their rights, 'Choose we! Laertes shall be king.' (IV.V.103). Here, it should be observed, the exclamation qualifies the people's rights and not their actual choice.

The rottenness of Denmark has to be righted, and it is here that the play enters into the discourse of tyrannicide and probes the question of who it is that has the right to kill a King. The answer is Castiglione's ideal courtier, embodied in Hamlet. Hamlet measures up to the prescriptions of the ideal courtier exactly, he is a 'Gentlemen' (born), skilled at 'feates of armes', well read, and given to 'studie and diligence', he is a poet, a musician and also a painter (in words at least).[148] In everything he lives up to Ophelia's high praise in having combined 'the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue and sword' (III.I.159). Such a paragon would be wasted in the service of a monarch who will only permit flattery. A mind so well turned out would be best suited to the difficult task of contemplating the worthiness and legitimacy of a King; such feats in arms would only be useful in war or pursuing revenge, and so Shakespeare puts this personality into a scenario that fits his composition, but this scenario hinges on the all-important question of when, exactly, is it permissible to commit the serious crime of regicide.

Hamlet's indecision is frequently been ascribed to his having a psychological condition which is both masked and doubled by his 'antic disposition' (I.V.192). Ernest Jones's study of *Hamlet* presents one way of reading this play, which is as an archetype of the psychological conditions that take place in the replacement of one generation by another, especially when the cycle is disrupted.[149] This analysis is predicated on the familial relationships in *Hamlet* and is not concerned with another issue which would affect the protagonist's ability to act, namely, the difficulty of discerning whether or not to engage in tyrranacide, if the act would be sanctioned by God. This problem is broached in *the Courtier* in BOOK IV when the Lord Octavian states:

> And thinke not that Procustus, Scyron, Caccus, Diomides, Antheus and Gerion were any other than cruell and wicked tyrants, against whom these noble couraged Demigods kept continuall and mortall warre.

[147] See also Hadfield. *Politics*, p. 96.
[148] Castiglione, *The Courtier*, bk I.
[149] Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Œdipus*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1948), *passim*.

> And therefore for ridding the world of such intolerable monsters (for tyrants ought not to be called by other name) unto Hercules were made temples, and sacrifices, and goodly honours given him, because the benefit to roote up tyrants is so profitable to the worlde, that who so doth it, deserveth a farre greter rewarde, than whatsoever is meete for a mortal man. (289–90)

Here, the act of deposing tyrants is divinely sanctioned and the implication is that the man who commits regicide (and this is presumably a man of the court as it is from this subject that the conversation has recently progressed) must die himself as this is the work for either the semi-divine or the immortal, as it is a burden that no mortal man can bear.

This exchange of one's own life for that of a tyrant's as an honourable sacrifice was common enough in early modern discourse. John Addison Symonds comments on this phenomenon:

> The crimes of the tyrants against their subjects and members of their own families had produced a correlative order of crime in the people over who they tyrannized. Cruelty was met by conspiracy. Tyrannicide became honourable, and the proverb, 'He who gives his own life can take a tyrant's,' had worked itself into the popular language.[150]

Several of Hamlet's memorable speeches make more sense in the light of the fact that he was expected to give his life in pursuit of the duty he owes his father's ghost. One that stands out in particular is his portentous lament that Claudius is 'no more like my father/Than I to Hercules' (I.I.152–3), demonstrating that Hamlet does not class himself among the divine, in spite of being a royal heir, and that he senses that his fortunes pertaining to Claudius will result in his death.

Meditations on the killing of an ineffective king were available to Shakespeare again through the Wilton connection. George Buchanan was James I's boyhood tutor, and he was also known to Sir Philip Sidney, who wrote in his *Apology for Poetry* (1595) that Buchanan's plays were some of the only good examples of British drama written in his lifetime.[151] Buchanan was frequently criticised in England for his monarchomach treatises against tyrants, which were precisely the kind of materials discouraged by Elizabeth's administration for obvious reasons. A Papal Bull had already been issued as early in her reign as 1570, excommunicating her from the Roman Catholic Church and urging Catholic English subjects to rise up against her.[152] Buchanan's *De Jure Regni Apud Scotus* (1579) and *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* (1582)

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[150] John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Bibliobazaar, 1888) Vol. I, p. 124; Baldessare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, 'Notes to the Fourth Book of the Courtier, Dover edn. (New York: H. Liverigh, c. 1929), p. 420.

[151] Gillespie, *Books*, p. 72.

[152] Glynne William Gladstone Wickham, Herbert Berry & William Ingram, *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 49.

(frequently printed together) were not written with Elizabeth I in mind, but rather her second cousin, Mary Queen of Scots.[153] Nevertheless, their anti-absolutionist stance made them seminal works for anyone considering the question of how to identify a tyrant and who should be responsible for murdering such a ruler.

Early-modern theatrical productions abounded with the stage presence of the tyrant, many of which were informed by a mixture of Buchanan's and Machiavelli's theories. Both writers were known to have compared the tyrant to an animal, since after having abused his position of power he descends the hierarchy of being to become re-classed among the beasts. Rebecca W. Bushnell uses the following quotations from Buchanan in defining the tyrant as a concept and stage presence: a tyrant, 'rules unwilling subjects', as opposed to a king who 'governs subjects who willingly accept his authority'.[154] She also notes that in the justification of tyrannicide, beast imagery is commonly used, recalling Hamlet's arraignment against his mother as 'a beast, that wants discourse of reason' (I.II.150), and of his comparison of his father to Claudius as being as like 'Hyperion as a satyre'(I.II.140).[155] The comparison of rulers to animals is also used, in a more positive manner, by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, where, in the art of statecraft, rulers are advised to combine human characteristics with those of the lion and the fox to be most effective in governing their realms.[156]

Machiavelli

The ensuing analysis proceeds on the grounds that English Translations of *Il Principe* and *Discorsi* were available in London during the time Shakespeare was there. The abundance of such editions has already been proved by Felix Raab, who demonstrates the widespread demand for Machiavelli's two most provocative works, saying, 'Of the *The Discourses* and *The Prince*… there were no *printed* translations until the Dacres editions of 1636 and 1640 respectively,' however, there, 'were also manuscripts; seven of *The Prince,* probably representing three separate translations into English,[157] and three of *The Discourses*, two of them incomplete.'[158]

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[153] Gillespie, *Books*, p. 71–2.

[154] George Buchanan, *De Jure Regni*, (trans.) as *The Powers of the Crown in Scotland*, by Charles Flynn Arrowood (Augustin: University of Texas Press, 1949), p. 92, qtd in Rebecca W. Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theatre in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca &London: Cornell UP, 1990), p. 53.

[155] Bushnell notes that, for Buchanan, a tyrant is less a man than a beast: 'If any person divested of his human characteristics should degenerate into such a monster that he could not meet other men except to their hurt, I think he should no more be called a man than should satyrs, apes, or bears, though he should counterfeit humanity in features, carriage and speech,' *De Jure Regni*, p. 95; *Ibid*., p. 54.

[156] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 61, all further references to this edition appear in text.

[157] N. Orsini, 'Elizabethan Manuscript Translations of Machiavelli's Prince', *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, I (1937–8), pp. 166–9, and 'Le traduzioni elisabettiane inedited di Machiavelli', *Studii sul Rinascimento italiano in Inghilterra,* Florence, 1937, pp. 1–19; see also, Hardin Craig, (ed.), *Machiavelli's Prince: An Elizabethan Translation,* Chapel Hill, 1944, pp. V–XXXII, and, I. Ribner, 'The Significance of Gentillet's *Contre-Machiavel*', *M.*

These were just the English translations. There were also French, Latin and Italian editions, some of which found their way into the politically sensitive milieu of Scotland. Added to this, Raab notes the following on the nature of manuscripts:

> Manuscripts and printed books are like snakes: for every one you see there are a hundred others hidden in the undergrowth. The multiplicity of editions and translations thus indicates an interest in and demand for the works of Machiavelli. … Everything indicates that, at least from the middle (fifteen)'eighties onwards, Machiavelli was being quite widely read in England and was no longer the sole preserve of 'Italianate' Englishmen and their personal contacts, as had been the case earlier.[159]

If Shakespeare had not read the works directly, he would have, at the very least, known about them, and certain similarities in cadence and turn of phrase which will be discussed shortly, suggest a more intimate, first-hand knowledge on Shakespeare's part. Furthermore, he was undeniably affected by Machiavelli's historiographic method.

Shakespeare, as was the case in his approach to Castiglione's work, takes the directives for proper courtly procedure in Machiavelli. Machiavelli advocated a notion of statecraft whereby a ruler would ideally, 'know well how to imitate beasts as well as imitating properly human means'.[160] This simple statement in itself would have been shocking to both audiences reading in late *quattrocento* Italy and early modern England. Beastliness was the characteristic applied to plebeians, foreigners and tyrants, not to the virtuous figure of the King, whose position in society was a lonely one, most closely akin to God's.[161] Such honesty in the realm of Florentine politics frustrated Machiavelli's ambitions to serve in Lorenzo de' Medici's court—having the diametrically opposite effect to that intended (3–4). Not only that, but his works were posthumously entered onto the papal index of banned books for Catholic countries as early as 1556.[162]

As a consequence of this candour, which incidentally revealed Machiavelli's atheism, his work was frequently misread in Elizabethan and Jacobean prose and drama. This is nowhere more evident than in Innocent Gentillet's widely read *Discours … Contre Machiavel* (written

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L. Q., X (1949), p. 154, qtd in, Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli: A Changing Interpretation, 1500–1700* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 53.

[158] Orsini, 'Le traduzione', p. 19; 'Machiavelli's Discourses: a MSS Translation of 1599', *T. L.S.,* 10 Oct.1936, p. 820, qtd in Raab, *English Face*, p. 53.

[159] *Ibid.*

[160] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 61, all further references to this work appear in text.

[161] Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox*, *passim*, esp. pp. 80 & 123, see also, Bushnell, *Tyrants*, pp. 54–5.

[162] Gillespie, *Books*, p. 311.

1576; English trans. 1602).[163] It was through Gentillet's work that the figure of the stage Machiavel came about, although this character had other antecedents, and also through him that Machiavelli came to be linked with the dissociation of the Ciceronian ideal of *virtus* from the primary Christian virtue of *caritas* (unselfish love).

It was, as has been pointed out, through Gentillet's work that the 'virtú' of Machiavelli became discernible from the popular virtues of hope, faith and charity.[164] Lewis suggests that the following table of maxims attributed to Machiavelli on the 'treating of religion appropriate to a prince', were likely to have been read by Shakespeare and his contemporaries:

1. A prince, in everything, should try and pass as pious, whether he is so or not.
2. The prince should support what he knows to be false in religion, provided it serves his turn.
3. The beliefs of the pagans disposed them, full of courage and hardihood, to great undertakings: but the Christian religion causes people to be humble, weakens their courage and lays them open to attack.
4. The great Christian teachers have obstinately sought to stamp out the memory of letters and the civilization of antiquity.
5. When it abandoned the pagan cults, the world became corrupted, and came to believe neither in God or Devil.
6. The Roman church is the cause of all Italy's calamities.
7. Moses could never have imposed his laws on his people if his army had failed him.
8. Moses seized Judea in the same way that the Goths seized part of the Roman Empire.
9. The Religion of Numa was the principal cause of the good fortune of Rome.
10. Man is happy so long as his fortune is identical with his appetite.[165]

All of the above points deal in some or other way with Machiavelli's atheism as applied to statecraft and the way he favours personal *virtú* over reliance on Providence. They are a crude

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[163] Full title: *Discours sur les Moyens de bien gouverner et maintenir en bon paix un Royaume ou autre Princepauté – Contre Nicholas Machiavel, Florentin*, See Lewis, *Lion and Fox*, pp. 69–75.

[164] *King James Bible,* 1 *Corinthians* 13.

[165] Innocent, Gentillet, *A Discourse upon the meanes of well governing and maintaining in good peace, a kingdom, or other principalitie … against Nicholas Machiavell the Florentine,* (trans.) Simon Patericke (London: Adam Flip, 1602); qtd in, Lewis, *Lion and Fox*, p. 72.

and partisan rendition of his work, and points 1 and 2 are of particular interest as they relate directly to Machiavelli's hypothesis of the 'lion and the fox'.

Of course, caritas has not been one of the virtues that Cicero, as a pagan, would have espoused himself, but it is easy enough to see why his conception of *virtus* became infused with English and Italian Catholic notions of virtue; Skinner says of Cicero's *vir virtutis* (man of true manliness or honour—*virtus*) that:

> The indispensable role it is thus said to play is that, by uniting wisdom with eloquence, it enables knowledge of the truth to be effectively communicated, and so allows the most salutary doctrines of the philosophers to exercise their proper influence on the conduct of public affairs.[166]

Cicero's ideas had formed an important part of the school syllabus for the educated class, and as such can be seen as a benchmark for many of the most important ideas relating to the humanist movement and humanist studies at that time. But it was not unadulterated pagan Cicero that these scholars came into contact with, it was a Cicero mediated by the Christian virtues bequeathed by his most fervent supporter and translator Petrarch, so that the terms 'virtue', 'virtus' and 'virtú' became unstable, amorphic and interchangeable.[167]

A crude representation of Machiavelli's self-serving 'virtú' was frequently used in Shakespeare's presentation of stage Machiavels such as Iago, with his insidious 'I am not what I am' (*Othello*, I.I.66), to demonstrate a separation between the outer persona and the inner self.[168] This is, for the most part, the stage descendant of Machiavelli's observation that:

> Everyone knows how praiseworthy it is for a ruler to keep his promises, and live uprightly and not by trickery. Nevertheless, experience shows that in our times the rulers who have done great things are those who have set little store by keeping their word, being skilful rather in cunningly confusing men; they have got the better of those who have relied on being trustworthy. …
>
> Since a ruler, then, must know how to act like a beast, he should imitate both the fox and the lion, for the lion is liable to be trapped, whereas the fox cannot fend off wolves. One needs, then, to be a fox to recognise the traps, and a lion to frighten away the wolves. (61.)

In the context of Kings, this will to take on personas for the sake of the commonwealth is dealt with quite differently. Shakespeare' s puissant Henry V, whose claim to England's throne rested

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[166] Skinner, *Foundations*, p. 87.

[167] For a fuller analysis see, Skinner, *Foundations*, pp. 84–101.

[168] For a fuller discussion of the stage Machiavel in Shakespeare's work see Harold Bloom, *The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), pp. 77–82; pp. 432–475.

on ground as shaky as Elizabeth's, is hagiofied for his effectiveness in employing statecraft that secures his success at Agincourt and as a leader of fighting men.

The second tetrology has already been mentioned for its incendiary nature in that it encouraged the supplanting of a legitimate monarch, but Shakespeare's resolution of the problems that, because of Elizabethan propaganda policies on the subject, were commonly depicted to have besieged Bolingbrook's reign, are markedly dramaturgical in *Henry IV part I* and *Henry V*. Early in the former play the young prince confesses in soliloquy his plans to dissociate his reign from that of his father's:

> I know you all, and will awhile uphold
> The unyoked humour of your idleness.
> Yet herein will I initiate the sun,
> Who doth permit the base, contagious clouds
> To smother up his beauty from this world,
> That, when he please again to be himself,
> Being wanted, he may be more wondered at
> By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
> Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.
> If all the year were playing holidays,
> To sport would be as tedious as to work;
> But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,
> And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.
> So when this loose behaviour I throw off
> And pay the debt I never promised,
> By how much better than my word I am,
> By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
> And, like bright metal on a sullen ground,
> My reformation, glittering o'er my fault
> Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
> Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
>
> (I.II.185–205)

Prince Hal's strategy is fox-like, but he also demonstrates military might in defeating his own foil, Henry Hotspur in battle. Not only that, but he goes on to spur his troops on to victory in a foreign field, which is preceded by his stirring 'Saint Crispin's day' speech (IV.III.18–67).

There can be little doubt over Hal's guilty feelings concerning his illegitimate promotion (IV.I.295–311) but that does not detract from the power his methods of statecraft have in swaying his men, and he himself muses on the fact that the only difference between himself and a beggar is 'ceremony' (IV.I.284). Henry V's methods highlight Queen Elizabeth I's use of

stagecraft reflected in her elaborate dress, and also recall her association with Bacon's praise of her in 'not making windows into men's souls' on the grounds of religious controversy between Catholics and Protestants. This behaviour of both real and theatrical rulers was not only informed by Machiavellian discourse on the need for monarch's to provide an outward show of competence and also piety for the sake of their people. It was further transformed, developed and qualified by the notion of *histrionics* in the Elizabethan period.

At present, 'histrionism' is more usually connected with 'dramatically exaggerated behaviour',[169] however, during the time Shakespeare's plays were written it was more closely associated with a set of ideas relating to the dramatic arts and how each person, whether a player or not, acts their role in life. This is typified by the sign once hanging outside the Globe Theatre which read: *Totus mundus agit histrionem*, or 'The whole world plays the actor'.[170] The notion of people from all walks of life 'acting their part', tied in with Machiavellian ideas of statecraft, evolving into Shakespeare's ongoing fascination with Kingship, and the rights and responsibilities of the crown, contrasted against the role that the monarch performed to maintain an ethos of continuity and stability for the benefit his or her public.

This is why Machiavelli's conception of *virtú* has an immediate bearing on *Hamlet*. While it has been previously noted that this is a slippery term, the meaning of which was constantly changing even within the bounds of Machiavelli's work, there is one particular usage that could be behind the invention of Fortinbras.[171] Discussing the exercise of his secular conception of *virtú* Machiavelli defines his ideal Prince's behaviour, saying that he should have, '… no other concern, nor occupy himself with anything else except war and its methods and practices, for this pertains only to those who rule' (52). When reading Fortinbras' lines, and the lines concerning this prince, it is a remarkable aspect of his character that he is only mentioned in conjunction with, or speaks about war and its strategy.

This is manifest in the opening scene of *Hamlet*: before Fortinbras' name is even mentioned, the machinery of war introduces his part in the play as Marcellus asks of Horatio, '… why such daily cast of brazen cannon/And foreign mart for implements of war,/Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task/Does not divide the Sunday from the week(?)' (I.I.73–6) Horatio's answer is worth quoting here in full, as it is paradigmatic of the themes of fathers and sons, revenge and the nature of princes as they play out in *Hamlet*:

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[169] *histrionic*, *OED*, Shorter, Vol. I, p. 1256.

[170] See, Edmond Malone, *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare with the Corrections and Illustrations of various Commentators: Comprehending a Life of the Poet and an Enlarged History of the Stage* (London: C. Baldwin, 1821), no page no. supplied, qtd in, Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography* (London: Vintage Books, 2005), p. 333.

[171] For a fuller discussion of *virtú's* instability see, Thomas M. Greene, 'The End of Discourse in Machiavelli's Prince', *The Vulnerable Text*, p. 61–79.

…our last king,
Whose image even but now appeared to us,
Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,
Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride,
Dared to combat; in which our valiant Hamlet—
For so this side of our known world esteemed him—
Did slay this Fortinbras, who by a sealed compact,
Well ratified by law and heraldry,
Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands
Which he stood seized on to the conquerer;
Against the which a moiety competent
Was gagéd by our King, which had returned
To the inheritance of Fortinbras,
Had he been vanquisher; as, by the same cov'nant
And carriage of the article designed,
His fell to Hamlet. Now sir, young Fortinbras,
Of unimprovéd mettle hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
Sharked up a list of landless resolute
For food and diet to some enterprise
That hath a stomach in't, which is no other –
And it doth well appear unto our state –
But to recover of us by strong hand
And terms compulsative those foresaid lands
So by his father lost.

(I.I.80–103)

Horatio's words, though consisting of dull, legislative content, draw attention to themselves through their structure. Although the frequent use of legal jargon forces a considerably large number of syllables to be elided, Horatio – who takes his name from the great Greek writer on decorum – still manages to speak in the heroic blank verse pioneered by Christopher Marlowe and refined by Shakespeare.

Fortinbras, on the other hand, has no need for such rhetorical flourishes: although he is given the final word in the play, his words follow an inelegant, shunting pattern, which is a mixture of prose, blank verse and atypical iambic pentameters, perfectly suited to the rolling movements and clattering armour accompanying a march to war:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a solidier to the stage;
For he was likely, had he been put on,

> To have proved most royally; and for his passage,
> The soldier's music and rites of war
> Speak loudly for him.
> Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this
> Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
> Go, bid the soldiers shoot.
>
> (V.II.348–56)

Not only is he less decorous than his more courtly counterparts, he is also deceitful. Nonetheless, Fortinbras represents a charitable take on Machiavelli's text. By contrast, Claudius represents a less charitable reading, but one that is nevertheless invested in the 'virtue' (in terms of ability) of Caudius's statecraft.

When Claudius receives a letter from Norway, Fortinbras' aging uncle, he is pleased to learn that in spite of Fortinbras' preparations to wage war on Denmark, done under the guise of '(making) preparation 'gainst the Polack' (II.II.63) his plan had been altered and Fortinbras' attentions redirected towards Poland. This crafty lie of omission is constructed in order to get around Fortinbras' doddering guardian; for although the former succeeds in conquering Poland, a feat for which his uncle gives him the allowance of 'three thousand crowns in annual fee' (II. II. 73), he doubles back afterwards to reclaim his inheritance lost by his father. These actions signify a division between on-stage representations of a Machiavel and the kind of strategic thinking required in the business of statecraft: a more distinctly Machiavellian concept, as compared to his the dramatically effective Machiavel which infuses other Elizabethan stage characters.

Other aspects of Fortinbras' character indicate a connection to Machiavelli's work on statecraft and the prince, particularly those relating to the pagan goddess *Fortuna*. For it is in *Il Pricipe* that a typically 'civic humanist' depiction of *Fortuna* is rendered:

> I conclude, then, that since circumstances vary and men when acting lack flexibility, they are successful if their methods match the circumstances and unsuccessful when they do not. I certainly think that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman, and if you want to control her, it is necessary to treat her roughly. And it is clear that she is more inclined to yield to men who are impetuous than cautious, because Fortune is a woman. (87)

That at least something of this rhetoric was present in the fashioning of Fortinbras as a foil for Hamlet, is further made possible by the following comparison of princes, which points out that Fortuna 'is more inclined to yield to men who are impetuous than to those who are calculating' (*Ibid*.). Fortinbras is one such impetuous man of action and this is why his fortune turns out to be so very different from that of Hamlet.

This personification was an icon of the humanist value that promoted Republicanism and Republican thought, as represented by the Roman Republic. For a number of humanist writers, including Leonardo Bruni in his *A Eulogy on the City of Florence* (n.d.), Salututi in his letter of 1377 and Machiavelli, man's ability to subdue Fortuna through the exercise of his virtú signified his ability to act as a 'creative social force', who is 'able to shape his own destiny and remake his social world to fit his own desires'.[172] Here lie the beginnings of debates centring on Republicanism and man's ability to influence the running of the state of realm, either through a council, through the monarch or by any other means available.

The face of this movement was, surprisingly considering the fame garnered for *Il Principe*, Machiavelli. For although he is most widely associated with his advice-book for how a Prince may successfully control his (or her) dominion, his succeeding work *Discorsi*, sets a firm stamp of approval on the forms of government most closely mimicking those of Rome before Julius Ceasar's Empire. This is partly the subject matter of John Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (2003), in which the civic humanist ideal of Republicanism is mapped as the starting point for the English Civil War (1642–9) and further to nineteenth century perceptions of history.[173] However, the argument here is that, although influenced by Republican thinkers, Shakespeare was himself a product of his time and so, outwardly at least, a loyal monarchist. After all, following Blair Worden, it was only during the Interregnum that many people in England began thinking seriously about how they would practically apply their own model of Republicanism.[174] .

A number of recent critics, most notably, Bushnell and Richard Strier, have explored the possibility for radical and even revolutionary strains to be discerned in numerous Shakespearean and early modern plays and poems.[175] These interweaves are present, but exist primarily as a nod to those audience members who were in the know about such histories and writers. It would be inaccurate to say that Shakespeare was being intentionally seditious through writing and collaborating in the production of *Hamlet.*

What *Hamlet* does demonstrate is a complex and coherent awareness of the political climate of Elizabethan England. The text is not simply a 'Christianised' engagement with a much older Norse or French text. *Hamlet* expresses many of the fears and frustrations that tied in with

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[172] Skinner, *Foundations*, p. 94; cf. Leonardo Bruni, *A Eulogy on the City of Florence* [Laudatio Florentinae Urbis] in Hans Baron, *From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 217– 63; Coluccio Salutati, *Epistolae*, (ed.) Giuseppi Rigacci, 2 Vols (Florence, 1741–2).

[173] J. G. A Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), *passim*, esp. ch. XI, XII & XV.

[174] See, Blair Worden, 'English Republicanism', *The Cambridge History of Political Thought: 1450–1700*, (eds.), J. H. Burns & Mark Goldie (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 443–475.

[175] Bushnell, *Tyrants*, *passim*, Richard Strier, 'Shakespeare and Disobedience', *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts* (California: University of California Press, 1995), p. 165–202.

the monarchical system, and its darkness and its depth serves to further illustrate how oppressive the system was to live under. One of the most important lessons that can be gained through the careful study of this text in the classroom, is that the political is personal, and if South African school students struggle to identify with their own nation's history, then the claustrophobia associated with Hamlet's predicament may serve as a useful imaginative entry point. Imagining how difficult it might have been for struggle heroes like Nelson Mandela and Chris Hani to make the right choices in a system that painted them as villains could equally serve as a way to get students interested in the play.

That being said, there is a reasonably far out claim being made in the rest of the chapter: that Shakespeare had space for both a positive and negative assessment of Machiavelli's work. This means that Shakespeare's character development was not linear, but complex, suggesting that when students assess their own contributions to their country, as well as their leader's contributions, they need to consider quite a lot of different, sometimes contradictory information. One of the key dramatic markers of *Hamlet* is that no character is wholly good or wholly evil, and, in the midst of this complexity, the hero is expected to make enlightened and justifiable decisions.

CHAPTER VI

Neo-historicist Tragedy

A wide-ranging debate has run throughout the last forty years as to what, exactly, constitutes 'tragedy' in a Shakespearean tragedy. The playwright himself was not programmatically bound to older definitions handed down through the neoclassical tradition of scholarship, but, nevertheless, plays considered as 'ancient' by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, such as Euripides' *Hecuba* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* had a profound impact on Shakespeare's way of handling tragic form. What makes Shakespeare's tragedy innovative is his craftsmanship in creating memorable characters who speak majestic and heroic sounding verse and prose. While this is a dramatically effective method of writing tragedy, it is not the only method. The Ancient Greeks would frequently use a chorus to indicate how an Idea might shape the dramatic situation, rather than centring an idea in an individual character. This chorus for the Idea is similar to the way in which New Historicists have attempted to decentre protagonists and see them as blind agents, robbed of personal volition, acting out the culturally mediated notions to which they are subject. There is, doubtless, a strong case to be made for this mode of drama, but it is not to be conflated with Shakespeare's mode, in which ideas may be either obvious or inscrutable, centred in an individual or a conversation, in a manner mimetic of volitional human interactions.

A Space for Neo-historicist Tragedy

In the WSS there is an existing subsection on genre, which has so far dealt entirely with tragedy. The two main intellectual issues at stake in his subsection are 1. the influence of Greek tragedy on Shakespeare and 2. how New Historicist notions of 'tragedy' have affected recent Shakespeare criticism. The section starts with a description of Greek drama and extrapolates this to Shakespearean tragedy:

> Tragedy as a dramatic form began with the ancient Greeks (400–250 BC), with the horrifying tragedies written by Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus. Perhaps the best known tragic story is that of Oedipus (dramatized by Sophocles). Oedipus killed his father by mistake and married his mother. When Oedipus discovered his error he went mad and blinded himself in uncontrollable guilt and rage. Watching these plays, the great Greek philosopher Aristotle developed a theory of tragedy in his *Poetics* which has been the starting point of discussion of tragedy ever since.

The importance of including this seam of connections from Sophocles through to Shakespeare in WSS is pressing because of Ernst Jones's groundbreaking work on Hamlet's Oedipus complex.

In one of the sections following the acts in WSS *Macb.*, a section entitled 'Summing up Act 3' includes a Freudian take on Lady Macbeth's repression. This eclecticism is one of the strong points of the series and it could be maintained in the WSS *Hamlet* in a similar way. Issues surrounding women's psychology play an important role in the WSS, and this is in keeping with the way the series has absorbed some of the most important insights of New Historicist criticism without taking on its reactionary quality. For example, in the pedagogical aid, *How to Study a Shakespeare Play* (1985), one of the editors' suggestions that *Hamlet* be taught with greater empathy for the other characters in the play besides Hamlet, especially Gertrude and Ophelia:

> Many traditional studies all but exclude the other characters from the play or see them as merely contrasts to the hero. More recent criticism, however, has, for example, examined the representation of women in the play, how Ophelia and Gertrude are seen in stereotyped terms signifying either purity or corruption, yet how their presentation disrupts these categories. This involves too seeing how the play is the tragedy of more than one figure: the deaths of both Gertrude and Ophelia are matters that should give an audience pause for thought about the play's violent sexual politics and their cost.[176]

This way of looking at tragedy has profound implication for the study of genre, because once set social norms are overturned in this way, more classical notions of *catharsis* and tragic action are made secondary to unfair power imbalances.

New Historicist Jonathan Dollimore formulated anew his own hypothesis of these ideas (anachronistically applied) being more central to plot than characters in the now seminal *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power...* (1984). His topic is the way ideological forces that work against one another form the basis of tragedy, as tragedy reflects the unconscious fears and anxieties of spectators in a theatre-going audience. Dollimore identifies the theatre as an anti-type of ideological state apparatus and a medium that forces people to confront these anxieties in order to effect positive social change. He asks his readers: '(i)s it too ambitious to see such a relationship between the drama and the English revolution?', He goes on to speak about the 'collapse' of state institutions including the Church, Crown and Court just before the 1642 English civil war, noting that:

> If the causes of the collapse can be discerned in the previous decades then, at the very least, we might postulate a connection in the early seventeenth century between the

[176] John Peck & Martin Coyle, *How to Study a Shakespeare Play*, Second edn, Macmillan Study Guides (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995), pp. 240–1.

> undermining of these institutions and a theatre in which they and their ideological legitimation were subjected to sceptical, interrogative and subversive representations.

This formulation of events is a useful departure for talking about the tragedy of *Hamlet*, but it again displays that characteristic obsession with power which robs Renaissance interactions of the pleasurable dimensions of society, love and service.

In spite of that, Dollimore raises a significant point: that plays like *Hamlet*, in their capacity as a tragedy, had a role in changing the way Elizabethans thought about politics and themselves. *Hamlet* is revolutionary in this way, but it is, at the same time, underpinned by a number of orthodoxies that Shakespeare was not necessarily trying to overturn. Dollimore continues his argument saying, 'we might expect the transgressive impulse in the later plays (after 1592) to take on different forms.' He goes on to deliberate that this is what does take place, affirming, '…one such form involves a strategy already referred to—the inscribing of a subversive discourse within an orthodox one, a vindication of the letter of an orthodoxy while subverting its spirit.'[177] Here, Dollimore's suggestion is that plays such as *Hamlet* are encoded in such a way as to interrogate the political and religious ethos of Elizabethan England.

As compelling as his argument is, it is obvious from those records that survive that Shakespeare was not necessarily a political revolutionary himself: in spite of being friends with Essex and Southampton he chose not to march with the Essex rebels and so kept clear of the gallows. Looking at Shakespeare's involvement in politics from another point of view, the play *Hamlet* itself demonstrates that the playwright sought to effect positive change from within a given system. *Hamlet* interrogates orthodoxies through the medium of tragedy, but in a larger sense, it affirms the orthodoxy of the divine right of Kings, for example, through the representation of the indisputably noble Hamlet and his more decisive foil Fortinbras.

For critics like Dollimore, the tragedy of this play is primarily Ophelia and Gertrude's tragedy, as they are the victims of the blind forces of unquestioned social gender norms in a patriarchal society. Although the questioning of civic institutions was eventually to lead to a more democratic form of government after the interregnum, it is the argument in *Radical Tragedy* that such plays promoted questioning over the idea of what constitutes 'personhood'. This is evident in Dollimore's interrogation of the gender bending practices in *Antony and Cleopatra*, where Cleopatra remembers a night in which she put 'my tires and mantles on him, whilst/I wore Phillipan' (II.v.22–3). From this playful erotic banter, an illustration of power, society and gender roles is drawn. He remarks, '(i)nseparablefrom the playful reversal of sexual roles is her appropriation of his power, military and sexual, symbolized phallically of course in the sword.'[178] In *Radical Tragedy*, *Hamlet* is not dealt with as comprehensively as some of the

[177] Dollimore, p. 119.
[178] *Ibid*., p. 216.

other plays, but it is always somehow elliptically present in this major treatise on the subject of tragedy.

Women's roles ought to be highlighted in WSS *Hamlet*, and from there some part of Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony' could be usefully brought in to discuss the process by which continually marginalised people come to internalise a sense of themselves as second-class citizens. While this is apt material for discussing contemporary notions of tragedy, it needs to also be carefully plotted on the historical continuum so that Shakespeare's own conception of tragedy and how he innovated the genre is not deemphasised. Before New Historicism made its transforming inroads there had long been a cult of sympathy for, if not always Gertrude, then at least Ophelia, as evinced in the large number of artistic homages that have been paid her. Some memorable examples are Everett Millais's and John William Waterhouse's renditions of Ophelia's watery death, reproduced below.



Millais's Ophelia



Waterhouse's Ophelia

This accounts for Ophelia being frequently described as 'The Source of all Goodness', and it is the corruption of accepted courtly norms that causes her insanity and suicide. More broadly, it is this corruption of the court of rotten Denmark that causes her tragedy and the larger tragedy of *Hamlet*, to come about.

The New Historicists are famously averse to the kind of 'type casting' required in drama, whereby, as Aristotle put it, 'Goodness may be found in each human type: there is such a thing as a good woman and such a thing as a good slave, although no doubt one of these types is

inferior and the other wholly worthless'[179]. Expert on Aristotelian tragedy, J. Jones quotes this material to demonstrate that for Aristotle, 'the dramatist who wishes to portray courage or cleverness must remember that it is not appropriate in a woman to be brave or clever.' [180] Importantly, Shakespeare did not ascribe to this simplistic kind of stereotyping, as is evident from the way in which he endeavoured to create fully-drawn characters for the stage. Aristotle's biases were not Shakespeare's; although Shakespeare certainly drew on a number of Aristotelian conventions in the creation of his own inventive generic forms.

Having said this, the following section presents a selection of Aristotle's conventions of tragedy in order to provide a thorough and accurate genre study of *Hamlet*, appropriate for the present-day South African English classroom. This is done with a nod to Bradley coupled with an acknowledgement of how this approach provides an entry point into critical interpretation and discussions concerning character in the play. Concerning character, Aristotle suggests, 'tragedy represents "men as better than in actual life." '[181] Shakespeare certainly applied this principle in his plays, as is evident from tragic heroes such as Othello, Hamlet and Mark Antony.[182]

Like his heroes, Shakespeare's chronologies, another significant focus in Aristotelian tragedy, cannot be neatly categorised; although he makes use his of own dramatic technique, what is sometimes called Shakespearean double-time, in order to address some of the chronological illogicalities in his work. This "double time" is most striking in *Othello* from the fact that the entire action of the play seems to transpire over a few days but there is also a "long time schedule" in play to make Iago's stories more believable.[183] Aristotle recommended that

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[179] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 54a, pp. 19–21, qtd in J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (Chatto & Windus: London, 1962), p. 42.

[180] *Ibid*., p. 41.

[181] S. H. Butcher (ed. and trans.), *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and fine Art: With a Critical Text and Translation of The Poetics*, Fourth edn (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 13, All of the following quotations from Aristotle are also cited in, Cleanth Brooks and Robert B. Heilman, Appendix B, *Understanding Drama: Twleve Plays* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1945), pp. 33-34.

[182] On the other hand, his conceptions of the tragic hero could equally have been coloured by the Boethian notion of the Wheel of Fortune as outlined in Geoffrey Chaucer's MONK'S TALE. Chaucer (referred to as 'The Father of English Literature' throughout the early-modern period) was probably encountered by Shakespeare in either Thomas Specht's edition (1598) or the older Stowe or Thynne ones. Chaucer's heroes are not all 'better than in actual life', but those that are the centre-piece of his Knight's Tale: Palamon and Arcita. These, along with Theseus and every other personage in that tale, are represented as being of the noble estate. In contrast, in Chaucer's the Monk's Tale ignominious anti-heroes jostle alongside the more venerable sort in his list of *De Casibus Illustrium Virorum*. Shakespeare too has his anti-heroes, such as Richard III, King John, and, in a much more sympathetic vein, Lear. What is noticeable about these is their Kingship, those who are born in Fortune's zenith but die out of her favour. Shakespeare's grand theme consistently involves the matter of Kingship and the nobly bred, this is particularly evident in *Hamlet*, in which, as in the KNIGHT'S TALE, all characters belong to the nobility, all meet terrible ends, but the spectator's sympathy is excited proportionately by the protagonists who behave most nobly.

[183] Ned B. Allen,'The Two Parts of *Othello,*' *The Shakespeare Survey 21: Othello, with an Index to Surveys* (Cambridge: CUP, 1968) p. 16

tragedy 'endeavours, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but to slightly exceed the limit.'[184] *Hamlet's* chronology, in particular, is hazy and indistinct. The play starts with the ghost's night-time visitation, Hamlet goes mad, which should take several days at least, he is sent on a nautical voyage to England, an extremely time-consuming undertaking in the sixteenth century, and all the while Fortinbras prepares and then launches a military campaign against first Poland, then Denmark. Going by the play's unruly length, it appears that the qualities of Norse saga (a sub-type of the epic) remain indelibly embedded in this particular tragedy.

In the epic, as in tragedy, Aristotle identifies the closure of a play as eliciting feelings of *catharsis* in the audience, whereby 'through pity and fear' tragedy would cause 'the proper purgation of these emotions'.[185] This is markedly the case in *Rom. & Jul.*, where the couple's deaths bring about order among Verona's two warring families. It is also the conclusion of *Macb.*, where the natural order is finally restored after the tyrannical ruler has been decapitated. Hamlet's rotten Denmark is yet another example of the disruption and restoration of the natural order upon which Tillyard wrote so extensively.[186] This purgation of emotions, is an indispensible marker of Shakespearean tragedy, and is also the final result of *Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus* and *Othello*, particularly in the case of the latter, where the love between two protagonists and the 'evil' of the villain become such complex and profound issues that they overtake the playwright's need to resolve a parallel political situation.

As a dramatist, Shakespeare knew that it was through the exercise of empathy that the greatest identification between audience and characters would be established. In exploring this connection Shakespeare was going beyond Aristotelian prescriptions. Even so, Aristotle deepened Shakespeare's sense of characters. For, according to Aristotle, 'Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids.'[187] Part of the intrigue of Hamlet is that he struggles to make any choices at all; he does this as to maintaun the virtuousness of his identity. This matter is intimately bound up in what today is unfashionably called the 'morality' of the play. Hamlet, when faced with evidence that there is an afterlife—in terms of Seventeenth Century Catholic Church doctrine – by his visitation from his father's ghost, persists in seeing man and himself as a 'quintessence of dust'(II.II.306), who knows not '…what dreams may come/When we have shuffled off this mortal coil' (III.II.67–8). Hamlet's intellect is illustrated by his being unable to accept any source of evidence without knowing the motive of its originator, as is shown from his questioning:

> … The spirit that I have seen
> May be the devil, and the devil hath power

[184] Aristotle, *Op. Cit*, p. 62.
[185] *Ibid*., p. 23.
[186] E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1944) *passim*.
[187] *Ibid*., p. 29.

> T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
> More relative than this. The play's the thing
> Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.
>
> (II.ii.588–95)

It is Hamlet's intellect which endears him to so many, including the likes of Sigmund Freud and T. S. Elliot. What makes so many people identify with this intelligence is also its limitation, its pitiable anxiety; what D. W. Draper identifies as Hamlet's melancholy—a psychological disorder akin to today's manic depression.

Coleridge was one of the first to perceive this infirmity and pronounced, as its trigger, the colossal disappointments of Hamlet's idealism initiated by the first appearance of the ghost at Elsinore:

> Shakespeare places [Hamlet] in the most stimulating circumstances that a human being can be placed in: he is the heir apparent of the throne; his father dies suspiciously; his mother excludes him from the throne by marrying his uncle. This was not enough, but the Ghost of the murdered father is introduced to assure the son that he was put to death by his own brother. What is the result? Endless reasoning and urging—perpetual solicitations of the mind to act, but as constant an escape from action—ceaseless reproaches of himself for his sloth, while the whole energy of his resolution passes away in those reproaches.…This from that aversion to action which prevails among such as have a world within themselves.[188]

For Coleridge, Hamlet's hesitation was brought on by a surplus of intellection combined with excitement. However, Coleridge was wrong in his diagnosis of Hamlet's psychological condition. Eliot would have said that he was wrong in a new way.[189] For it is the misalliance of genre and historical circumstance that give rise to Hamlet's peculiar hesitancy.

Hamlet's morality is, if not religious, strictly controlled by the religious sensibilities of Shakespeare's Seventeenth-Century audience, which the playwright may or may not have adhered to himself. The question of the character Hamlet's moral underpinnings, is best seen as the disjunction between Shakespeare's sources and his own responses to the ethical sensibilities of humanist writers such Montaigne and Erasmus, which have given rise to Hamlet's hesitation.

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[188] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Criticism of Shakespeare: A Selection,* (ed.) R. A. Foakes (London: The Atholone Press, 1989).

[189] T. S. Eliot, 'Hamlet,' in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, (ed.) Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 45–49.

Saxo Grammaticus's tale of revenge, blood and glory, in which, significantly, the hero lives and goes on to marry the King of England's daughter, is at odds with prevailing religious attitudes towards revenge which abounded at the time of *Hamlet's* writing.

Following on from this, the question of the Shakespearean 'fatal flaw' arises. This analytical trope is now so over-used that frankly it ought to be done away with. In the first place, it cannot be applied to all of Shakespeare's protagonists: Romeo, for example, is rightly called impetuous by A. C. Bradley[190], but it is not so much the character's proclivity to make rash decisions that seals his fate but rather the chance incident of his letter not reaching Juliet. In actuality, neither Aristotle, Shakespeare nor Bradley over-simplifies this aspect of the hero so clumsily, although this simplification is often unfairly blamed on Bradley.

In Butcher's translation of Aristotle – upon which Brooks and Heilman base their analyses of drama through the ages – the hero's flaw is conceived as follows:

> The proper effect is not produced by "the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity " nor by "that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity," nor by "the downfall of the utter villain.…" The proper tragic hero is a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty."[191]

The difficulty in deciphering this injunction lies in the ambiguity of the word *harmartia* in the original.

In the WSS *Macbeth* there is a study of the tragic genre and it is worth repeating here, although it is long, in order to establish how the issue of the 'tragic flaw' is dealt with in the series, but also, more generally, how the tragic genre may be approached in high-school textbooks:

> Tragedy of Character
>
> In the analysis of Shakespearean tragedy, a great deal has been made of Aristotle's term *harmartia*. This term is often translated as 'tragic flaw'. According to this understanding of tragedy, the tragic hero is a man (or woman) who is of high rank or royal blood with many admirable qualities, but who has a fatal flaw in his/her character. This flaw brings about his/her downfall. If we apply this idea to Macbeth, we can see the hero as a brave, generous warrior. His tragic flaw is too much (excessive) ambition. The witches and Lady Macbeth encourage this weakness in his character so that it becomes his chief motive for

[190] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear* Macbeth (London: Macmillan, 1904), p. 16.
[191] *Understanding Drama*, Appendix B, p. 33.

action. Driven by his ambition, he commits crimes that would otherwise have been unthinkable. Then his conscience, which he has tried to suppress, begins to bother him and destroys him psychologically. His subjects, whom he has suppressed, rise up against him and destroy him physically.

One can see how well this interpretation works. It appeals to us because it allows us to analyse Macbeth's inner struggle, the role of Lady Macbeth and the witches in undermining his moral character, and the workings of conscience on the individual psyche (soul and mind). These are processes we can identify with. We often think of human beings who are faced with a choice between good and evil, and who have to take responsibility for their actions. This view of tragedy also generates a neat two-part structure: (a) the events and the moral struggle leading up to the murder of Duncan; (b) the increasingly dreadful consequences of the crime.

The idea of the 'tragic flaw' underlines the brilliant discussion of 'character in action' by A. C. Bradley, whose book entitled *Shakespearean Tragedy*, written a hundred years ago, is still one of the most famous and influential books on the subject. Even though many modern critics disagree with Bradley, his book is certainly worth reading, even today. The standard objection is that he treats Macbeth as a real person who could be psycho-analysed, whereas in fact Macbeth is a character in a play, contributing to the impact of what happens on stage. This brings us back to Aristotle, who almost certainly did not think of *hamartia* as a 'tragic flaw' or weakness of character.

Tragic action

For Aristotle, characterization was not the most important element in drama. He focuses our attention on the meaning of the *action*: what makes a story tragic. *Hamartia* probably meant a **'**tragic error' (or mistake); instead of a tragic hero with a tragic flaw, we should think of a tragic event resulting from a terrible error. So we should ask ourselves, before anything else, what does the murder of Duncan *mean*?

How do we respond to these horrifying acts? What do our feelings tell us about ourselves, our values, our understanding of life? Aristotle identifies *pity* and *fear* as the typical response to tragedy, but there are sure to be many other responses: tenderness, horror, despair, grief, even upliftment.

Obviously, there are no right or wrong answers to the questions posed by tragedy. Still, as students of Shakespeare, let us consider two common lines of

> interpretation: the religious (or metaphysical) argument and the political argument, bearing in mind that they can both work at the same time.[192]

The question then arises as to how to discuss Hamlet's hesitation in the forthcoming WSS *Hamlet*. The character-action debate is a convenient one for discussing tragedy with people who encounter the basic assumptions of the genre for the first time but, ultimately, it is a red-herring, as, in Shakespeare's drama, action and character are one and the same, the former arising out of the latter.[193] The WSS has so far dealt effectively with the question of the 'fatal flaw', stating it so that teachers and parents brought up with this concept will not be thrown by its exclusion but also limiting its totalising power so that it does not become the standard and erroneously simplified recourse of the first-time Shakespeare scholar.

Although Shakespeare himself probably did not actively study Aristotle, or Aristotle's taxonomies of genre, his contemporaries, the university wits, including Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe, were familiar with a number of Greek writers. The most widely consulted treatise on Shakespeare's tragedy as a generic form is Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904). By applying the Aristotelian method of analysing tragedy, Bradley was able to isolate this single facet of Shakespeare's work and write eloquently and comprehensively on the subject. Bradley applies certain standards for analysing drama that still hold today, but, when reading his work, it should be remembered that Shakespeare was a creative innovator, and for this reason, the plays surpass any neat classifications concerning what constitutes tragedy.

Commentators, like Bradley, through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tended to read their own Romantic concerns with human essences into Shakespeare's plays. There is a lot to be said for these interpretations as they provided excellent hermeneutic tools for discussing Shakespeare's innate sensibility for developing characters that are engaging and convincing. What must be remembered is that these interpretations are themselves informed by Shakespeare's studies of human nature and character, and so they tend to lend a Shakespearian colouring to their interpretations of Ancient Greek treatises, in a charming but misleading way. What further complicates Bradley's interpretations is his interest in Hegel's 'hero', a phenomenon who is again informed by Hegel's appreciation of Shakespeare. Jointly, both writers conspire to set Hamlet up as 'a beautiful and noble heart' unfit for the confusing and tawdry circumstances that call for him to commit murder.[194]

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[192] WSS, *Macb.*, pp. 25–26.

[193] For Aristotle, character is supposed to arise from plot, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 28–29, However, there have been so many academic books and papers written on Shakespeare's characterization (too many to reference here), that it is safe to say that this is one of many points over which Shakespeare differs from Aristotle's formulae.

[194] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, (trans.) T. M. Knox (Oxford: OUP, 1975) Vol I, p. 583.

In falsely deifying a character such as a Hamlet, Romantic scholars exerted an unconscious anachronism over translations of Aristotle. As J. Jones observes, 'the word 'hero' does not appear in the *Poetics*', and 'there is nothing surprising about the absence of the Greek *hērōs*'. In Aristotle, the much more suitable idea of the protagonist, 'that very wide and flexible idea' is used instead.[195] This observation has a number of implications which are far reaching in modern scholarly refinements over the idea of what exactly constitutes 'tragedy'

Romantic scholars tended to overcomplicate this 'error of judgement', aligning it with a frailty or weakness in Hamlet's character. The problem of interpretation rests in the phrase 'error of judgement', which is aligned with Hamlet's madness, melancholy and failure to act. The truth is that these two aspects of the drama are separate issues. On the one hand, Hamlet is a noble but flawed character making him grandiose but still believable on a human scale. Laertes highlights this flaw in his quickness to avenge his father (IV.vii.114–124) Hamlet's other error in judgement, is his accidental murder of Polonius, whom he dismisses casually, saying 'Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell./I took thee for thy better' (III.VI.33–34). This error has to be divested of the psychological associations it has accrued and seen for what it is: an error of timing in a fatalistic sense.

While the killing of Polonius is accidental, this is unlikely to be the primary error of judgement in the play. As a tense dramatic moment, the scene where Hamlet stands over the kneeling Claudius – helpless in his attitude of prayer – stands out as Hamlet's most unfortunate miscalculation. The dramatic irony of this encounter, heightened by the role arbitrary chance plays in Hamlet and Claudius's encounter, is, as Hamlet muses:

> Now might I do it pat, now he is praying.
> And I'll do't.
> [He draws his sword]
> And so he goes to heaven;
> And so am I revenged. That would be scanned.
> A villain kills my father; and for that
> I, his sole son, do this same villain send
> To heaven.
> O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
> He took my father grossly, full of bread.
> With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
> And how his audit stands who knows save heaven?
> But in our circumstance and course of thought
> 'Tis heavy with him. And I am then revenged
> To take him purging of his soul,

[195] J. Jones, *Op. Cit*., p. 13.

> When he is fit and seasoned of his passage?
> No.
>
> (III.III.73–87)

The irony of this situation is that Claudius is unable to pray, as he admits: 'My words fly up, my thoughts remain below' (III.III.97). Hamlet misses his prime opportunity and does not even realise his mistake. This is not Hamlet's only error in judgement; again, Shakespeare demonstrates his ability to innovate by creating a succession of chance accidents, each leading up to the climactic final scene, by which time the audience are emotionally invested in the play's outcome.

In light of this debate, Aristotle's observation on the unity of plot and character is an important one: he had already resolved this question, as Shakespeare had on his own, in saying: 'Unity of the plot does not…consist in the unity of the hero (sometimes translated more accurately as 'protagonist')….The plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed.'[196] Since the matter of drama is action, and the matter of character is action also, it stands to reason that it is by a character's actions that their identity, as far as it is *mimetic* of the human personality, can be understood.

Again, Aristotle defines this relationship most aptly in his maxim: 'Character must be good, true to life, consistent with itself and with the class to which the person belongs; the dramatist should aim at the necessary and the probable.'[197] This is eminently the case in how Shakespeare developed his characters. There is much more that can be said about how Shakespeare's plays correspond with and also deviate from Aristotle's definitions of tragedy, but character is the preeminent focus here. The reason for this is that Shakespeare's characters are the aspect of his drama which most completely captures the imagination of the first-time reader, theatre-goer or student.

'Character', or more specifically 'identity' and the politics of its formation in an African, previously colonised country, is of vital concern in South African pedagogical studies of the present day. This is because the way English literature is studied in South Africa will have a profound effect on the way people living here perceive their own strengths and abilities.[198] For, as Carolyn McKinny and Crain Soundien assert:

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[196] Aristotle, *Op. Cit*., p. 35.
[197] *Ibid.*, pp. 53–55.
[198] See Carolyn McKinny & Crain Soudien, 'Editorial: Language, Identity and English Education in South Africa,' *Southern African Journal of English Studies*, 24.2 (2007), pp. 1–5; M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Arica and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996).

> Citizenship, and more specifically identity…is primarily a political construct developed in relation to institutions of political authority. …[I]t is how culture — aesthetics and language for instance—plays a role in giving substance to the kinds of identities individuals and groups desire to make for themselves.[199]

Characters in stories are the basis for imaginative engagements with texts. Without being able to identify with characters, without their being warm, diabolical, wise or entertaining, there will be no engagement on the political and critical levels. Thus, it is through imaginative engagement with Shakespeare's characters that students are encouraged to identify with Shakespeare, giving them the linguistic means and the inspiration to tell their stories.

While the development of healthy citizenship is the end-goal of teaching Hamlet in this way, the matter of 'identity' and 'psychology' also require some investigation within this paradigm. Hamlet is not meant to be a role model: he exhibits a major flaw which make him more engaging as a stage character, and it is useful that this flaw be identified and understood. Draper speaks about the psychological condition of melancholy, and from this stems the crux of Hamlet's mystique. However, Hamlet's charm is also his least attractive quality – the psychological machinations that endear him to so many also fuel his misogyny. Draper notes of the former aspect of this condition:

> Hamlet's "melancholy" has long formed a major part of romantic Shakespeare criticism, which made it the keynote of his character and the explanation of his delay in avenging his father's murder, this melancholy was the chief difficulty of those critics who, in opposition to the romantic theory, believed that his delay could be explained on the basis of common sense, objective reasoning.…[I]n 1937 the present writer supported the thesis that melancholy, as the Elizabethans understood it, was not a cause for frustrated action and delay but rather a result of these conditions.[200]

Here, Draper is thinking of the play written at about the same time as *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night* (1601), and its composition as a comedy of the humors, influenced by the combined discipline of medicine, astrology and physiognomy.

Bradley administers his own theory of the tragic error in action in order to explain Hamlet's affliction and, although he uses Aristotle's poetics to arrive at his formulation, he nonetheless hits upon an important aspect of *Hamlet's* design, Hamlet's hesitation. This behaviour does not

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[199] Carolyn McKinny & Crain Soudien, *Op. Cit*., p. 1.

[200] John W. Draper, *The Humors & Shakespeare's Characters* (Durham & North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1945), p. 7; see also, Timothy Bright, *Treatise of Melancholy* (London, 1586; Second edn, 1613).

simply stem from concern for his life or character, or from the psychological condition of melancholy, which is a symptom. It stems from an unacknowledged condition of the mind which affects Hamlet so deeply he cannot possibly acknowledge its cause. Even in the midst of his inability, however, the audience is given some pointers that indicate a psychological truth so ghastly that more sensitive viewers will pass them over as coincidence but in dramatic tragedy there can be no such coincidences.

As a dramatist, Shakespeare made his characters as believable as could be achieved within the few hours traffic of the stage, and this is certainly the case with Hamlet, whom Bloom describes, extravagantly, as 'the most cited figure in Western consciousness.'[201] Proceeding from this, it must be noted that Hamlet's relationship with his mother is the most fascinating dramatic exposition of filial relationships ever produced in the English language. In examining Hamlet's dialogue, it is immediately obvious that succeeding every discussion of his trauma, Hamlet either speaks of his mother's 'incestuous sheets' (I.II.157) or affirms his agonised hatred of women by speaking of a 'whore … and a very drab' (II.II.174–5). The most disturbing example of these is in the exchange, 'Come, come and sit you down. You shall not budge,/You go not till I set up a glass/Where you may see the inmost part of you.' Gertrude replies 'What wilt though do? Thou wilt not murder me? Help help, ho!' (III.III.19–23).

Gertrude, in Q2 and F at least, has no part in the elder Hamlet's murder. She is, however, guilty of committing what was regarded at the time of writing as incest by having a sexual relationship with her husband's brother. Hamlet's affliction is deeply psychological and has gained acclaim, in the same way as *Œdipus Rex*, through the psychological truth it interrogates; Œdipus suffers the harrowing consequences of damnèd incest in his own nation and body. A footnote in Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) concluded that this is what resulted in Hamlet's Œdipus complex. Freud's pupil, Ernst Jones, took this research further by using the language of psychoanalysis to understand Hamlet's hesitation as a psychosis.[202] Although other writers have identified more up-to-date theories of the workings of consciousness as they are represented by Hamlet, these early psychoanalytical interpretations remain the more widely known and accepted. Again, like the 'fatal flaw' discussion, the anachronism of psychoanalysis needs to be carefully mapped for the benefit of students' understanding in a textbook used for teaching purposes.

It is desirable that in a study of tragedy included in the WSS on *Hamlet* that all aspects of Hamlet's consciousness be discussed. However, the importance of the plot of *Hamlet* in its composition should also be dealt with. The interdependance of character and plot in *Hamlet* is discussed in Margareta de Grazia's study '*Hamlet*' *without Hamlet*, which shows how *Hamlet* criticism went through a phase concentrating on Hamlet's interiority, whereas the work was, at

[201] *Invention of the Human*, XXI.
[202] Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Œdipus* (London: V. Gollancz, 1941).

its time of writing, meant to focus on ideas centring on the individual in relation to society.[203] This was de Grazia's reaction to Bloom's insistence on Hamlet's separation from the plot.

Finally, what sets Hamlet apart from Shakespeare's other tragedies is its deeply reflexive quality. *Hamlet* is a 'Tragicall Hi*f*torie'[204] Shakespeare's own knowledge of genre was highly refined there is some Aristotelian influence discernable in the plays, evident in the playwright's focus on character, but genre always plays second fiddle to plot in a Shakespearean play. This sense of the plays is underscored by Polonius's small-minded way of announcing the players' arrival. [205] His announcement is completely in keeping with the court official's spineless officiousness:

> The actors come hither…
> The best actors in the world, either for tragedy,
> comedy , history, pastoral-comical, historical-
> pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-
> pastoral, scene individible, or poem unlimited.…
> (II.II.387–94)

Nevertheless, genre does have an important function in the play, because of Shakespeare's manipulation of the original ending and the protagonist's injunction to Horatio to 'draw thy breath in pain' and 'Tell my story' (V.II.301–2)

This historical dimension of this tragedy, and the fact that the original has been so drastically altered so as to include Hamlet's death rather than his triumph, denotes the playwright's interest in people's creative capability in making history. This sense of 'history' having at once a factual and fictional dimension is lightly inscribed into the more orthodox, religious view of Providence's role in the making of history. Hamlet's reflection 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will' (V.II.10–11) shows how acutely he feels that he is part of some mystical order greater than himself.

In conclusion, the tragedy of *Hamlet* should not be seen as the tragedy of one hero, but the tragedy of many personalities and of an entire nation. It was not meant by its author to be the tragedy of primarily Gertrude or Ophelia either, but their roles in the forward momentum of the tragedy enrich *Hamlet* considerably. In *Hamlet*, there is little that can usefully be said about the playwright's political affiliations, as they are often ambivalent, demonstrating Shakespeare's characteristic technique of setting widely oppositional views against one another. The opposing ideas that made *Hamlet* so fascinating for his own audiences are still of interest today: the

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[203] Margreta de Grazia, *'Hamlet' without Hamlet,* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), *passim*.

[204] William Shakespeare, The Tragicall Hi*f*torie *Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmarke, Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppie*, title-page of Q2, (1604).

[205] John Marston, *Histriomastix, or The Player Whipped* (London, 1599); H. Harvey Wood, *Writing and Revenge: John Marston's Histriomastix*, 3 vols (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1934–39), vol III, p. 263; G. R. Hibbard (ed.), *Hamlet*, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford & New York: OUP, 1994), p. 224.

opposition between Fate (or Providence, there is little difference in *Hamlet*) to human free will, even if the only choice available to a person or protagonist is to die or live in misery rather than submit to corruption.

All the above information is summarised and reformatted for the WSS in Appendix 2 of this dissertation.

CHAPTER VII

Pedagogy

In teaching Shakespeare in South Africa, theory has generally grown out of teachers' own experiences, has been tested and refined, and was reconstituted back into manuals, guides and essay collections that aid practical teaching. Based on this dialogical exchange, there has been much innovative and creative thinking in the field of English literature pedagogy in recent years and these principles have been incorporated into the overall composition of the WSS. In 1986 The New London Group formed and began to develop a pedagogy of multiliteracies in order to facilitate a practical application of Howard Gardener's theory of Multiple Intelligences.[206] Two of the editors working on the WSS, Joanna Parmenter and Harriet Davis have each written a dissertation researching the potential of implementing these methods in the South African classroom.

The History of Classroom Shakespeare in South Africa

Enthusiastic students and student teachers working in the English Education programme at Wits in 1987, the same year *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* was published, had already been producing educational Shakespeare-related plays challenging the existing political order. Here is the place to begin looking for the real character of Shakespeare studies in South Africa at that time and it is a rich source of information that has long been ignored, which is surprising, because those who were busy teaching against apartheid during the state of emergency had as great, or greater, an impact internally upon South African 'Shakespeare' as Orkin had had overseas. The evidence of their endeavours, although they influenced an entire generation of South Africa's English teachers, survives in the work of a handful of scholars, most notably Malcolm Hacksley in his articles appearing in *Sisa* and at least one other international journals. Another example of such evidence is an educational video created for the purpose of suggesting how Shakespeare might be taught in schools through dramatic interpretation.[207]

The production is just over thirty minutes long, showing students signed up for the Wits English Education programme discussing how *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest* might be taught in South African schools through the pedagogical method of using Shakespeare-

[206] Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Fontana Press, 1983).
[207] Denise Newfield (dir.), 'Educational Video on Teaching Shakespeare's Plays through Performance in South African Schools' (Johannesburg: The Wits Television Unit with the English Department, 1987), col., 37 mins.

inspired dramatic response. Although the focus of this analysis is on how *Hamlet* might be taught, the students' production of *The Tempest* is particularly telling regarding the perspective from which Shakespeare was being taught in South Africa at that time. In the students' production, ' …the main theme, the central idea [is] that of colonialism'. All the characters wear a mask and Caliban has two masks, one in which he is 'a mythical sort of animal that [is] a combination of birds … and a sort-of a giraffe-like creature and a dog as well and a bit of a buck', and another where he 'has become an urbanised worker' (See fig. 1 and fig. 2). Prospero's mask makes him look like a typical conquistador, with a picture of 'Lady Di and Charles in his hat' (See fig. 3). Also pasted on his cap is a slogan reading 'Operation Hunger' indicating that 'Prospero, as the coloniser , also did some good things'[208].

The English Academics involved in the making of this production are Denise Newfield, Hilary Janks, Eve Horowits, Pippa Stein and Jonathan Paton. These teachers and their students were acting on the basis of their intuition and sense of the ideological power of culture. Their vision was not formally theorised, but they contributed significantly to the character and discipline of South African Shakespeare, although the work they did has heretofore not been recognised by official Shakespeare studies in South Africa. These teaching methods present a practical realisation of the use of New Historicist, Cultural Materialist methods in the South African classroom, but they also highlight how valuable creative pedagogical solutions by individual teachers can be in the learning process.

Fig. 1: Caliban's First Mask



[208] Transcript, 'The Enchanted Island,' *Ibid*.



Fig. 2: Caliban's Second Mask



Fig. 3 Prospero's Mask

Present-day Classroom Shakespeare

Another teacher who has experimented with using a more creative approach to teaching Shakespeare's plays in the contemporary South African classroom is WSS series editor Joanna Parmenter. Parmenter's dissertation: *Towards a Pedagogy of Multimodality: Teaching Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet' in South African Schools* (2000), is a much more recent take on using sophisticated semiotic processes to facilitate learning. An urgent need for research into how to teach literature in post-1994 South African schools arises out of cultural pluralism resulting from the increasingly integrated and dynamic multicultural space of the South African classroom. This dynamism is further intensified by the proliferation of new communication technologies which have had a radical effect on students' preferred learning methods.[209] Parmenter's personal experiences of teaching in an environment where students come from diverse linguistic backgrounds demonstrates how, while performance can be a useful visual aid, it should be supplemented with a variety of other semiotic and sensory activities aimed at improving students' learning potentialities.

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[209] See Joanna Parmenter, *Towards a Pedagogy of Multimodality: Teaching Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet in a Contemporary South African Classroom* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2000); Harriet Beulah Davis, *Visual Responses to Literature and Their Assessment in the Secondary School Classroom* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2000); Frank Rumboll, *The Teaching and Learning of Poetry in Cyberspace* (Johannesburg:University of the Witwatersrand, 2000); Kakanya A. Diale, *Drama and Pedagogy: Teaching Athol Fugard's Boesman and Lena and The Blood Knot as Agencies for Change in the Classroom* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2000).

Parmenter's own initial method of teaching *Macb.* was one where:

> I gave my learners a bit of background first, so that at least they would know what a 'Thane' was; I revised the Elizabethan World View, including those pervasive notions of the Chain of Being and the Divine Rights of Kings, and we discussed the Aristotelian concept of tragedy. We watched the Polanski film adaptation of the play (*Macb.*), mainly as an aid to following the plot before tackling the play.

In teaching Shakespeare's plays, these are the traditional staples of the English classroom. The criticism of Tillyard, Brooks and Heilman's New Criticism, Mack's concept of Kingship and Aristotle's rubric for tragedy form an important foundation for how Shakespeare's texts are contextualised and conventionally understood. Simultaneously, it should be remembered that this information alone is not enough; students want to feel as if they are participating in the learning experience and making Shakespeare's plays meaningful to them personally.

Parmenter goes on to describe some of the other pedagogical methods she used, finding in the process that asking students to read Shakespeare's plays out loud does not work well, and that the teacher should undertake this activity.[210] This has already been observed in English classrooms by Knight, who suggests that teachers' first record their voices reading a play on a tape recorder to ensure Shakespeare's poetry has the intended cadences and emphases.[211] Even as technologies that aid teaching have improved over the last 50 years, the methods for teaching Shakespeare, including the teacher as impresario, the teacher wielding a tape-recorder (or television and DVD player, or projector with video clips) and the teacher who runs through reams of philological data have remained more or less unchanged.

Unfortunately, Parmenter found that her reading aloud was not well received, and she reports 'desperately trying to maintain enthusiasm in myself and in my poor, long-suffering learners, who, despite my best efforts, began to develop that familiar, glassy-eyed look of soul-destroying boredom.'[212] She reports that later, 'very daringly,' when she and her students, 'started preparing and writing essays, [she] suggested, for an essay involving imagery, that they go through the text, in groups, and draw their versions of visual images.' The results from this exercise were 'surprisingly good, particularly in the case of the weaker learners.' The students also reported that they would 'find these visual depictions of imagery easy to remember for exams.'[213]

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[210] Parmenter, *Op. Cit*., p. 1.
[211] G. Wilson Knight, 'The Teacher as Poetic Actor,' *Teaching Shakespeare*, 290-304.
[212] Parmenter, *Op. Cit*., p. 2.
[213] *Ibid*.

Kerryn Dixon observes similar results from her students. In exploring ways of developing and utilising more varied reading strategies in the literature classroom, she noted that the use of journals and discussion groups where students could give feedback on what they had read encouraged pupils to read more and demonstrate greater enthusiasm concerning what they read.[214] She also relates how a straightforward 'new critical' approach to teaching is not the most effective, or even conscionable approach to employ when teaching a culturally alien text such as a Shakespeare play.[215]

The opportunity presented by the multicultural space of the present-day English classroom has already been identified by the South African Department of Education, in their proposed new curriculum, 'Curriculum 2025'. According to this mandate, teachers should choose methods for evaluating their students which are appropriate to the contexts and abilities of their learners. This entails that 'learners should be given the opportunities to develop the skills of demonstrating their learning achievements in a variety of ways.'[216] The danger with this approach is quality control, in that while different learning styles are catered to, students must still be able to produce standardised and examinable responses.

'New critical', content-based questions can balance the imperative of creating a standard for measurability. On the other hand, knowledge is culturally specific and culturally conditioned. Ideally a South African school child should be able to identify a metaphor and also be aware of how the events which they describe in essays have a culturally determined dimension. By factoring in the already present knowledge of students, test and exam questions would allow for the 'reservoir' of knowledge pre-existing in students, while also building new features into that knowledge. The notion of exploring a pre-existing knowledge base has previously been researched by Dixon, who notes:

> There was evidence in all of the students journals, and throughout various discussions during the sessions, that students were drawing on their repertoires. They made more connections using their own life knowledge and experience than their literary knowledge.[217]

Dixon used the method of reviewing students' literature journals in order to test her hypotheses. She notes that some lively discussions arose from talking about topics such as marriage. In South Africa, because of there being so many diverse language and cultural origins, the discussions of various ritualistic human behaviours, such as marriage,

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[214] Kerryn Dixon, *Literacy, Power and the Embodied Subject,* Unpublished Doctoral Thesis (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2007), p. 108–109.
[215] B. Mellor, A. Patterson & M. O'Neill, Reading Fictions (Scarborough: Chalkface Press, 1991), p. 9, qtd in *Ibid*., 84.
[216] Gauteng Department of Education: Assessment Policy Document, Draft 8 (March, 1999), p. 14, qtd in Davis, *Op. Cit.,* p. 4.
[217] Dixon, *Op. Cit*., p. 81.

burial, suicide and (especially apt for Hamlet) leadership can bring about these energetic classroom exchanges.

As yet, this focus on ritualistic (or even religious) human behaviour has not been explored to the extent that it might be in the WSS. Certainly, there is an awareness of how different cultural orientations condition people to react differently to a dramatic situation, but this is explored elliptically. For example, after Act I of WSS *Rom. & Jul.*, a comparison is made between Mercutio's vulgar language and the language employed by Sembene Ousemane's character, Rama, to illustrate alternatively constructed paradigms for male sexual potency. The 'racy, entertaining, no-holds-barred language of Mercutio' focuses on 'sexual conquest' denoting virility.[218] The cultural value of men's virility as an indicator of ability more generally is stressed, in both contexts, by the WSS's *Rom. & Jul.'s* account of Ousmane's *Xala* (1957).

Xala is set in 1950's Senegal. The protagonist is called El Hadji Abou Kader, a rich business owner respected in his community. On the night after he has wedded his third wife, N'Gone, he suddenly discovers that he has the *xala*—he is impotent. His reputation and his ability to perform his duty as the head of his family are called into question. This precipitates a sequence of unhappy events where his wives, Adja Awa Astou, Oumi N'Doye and N'Gone begin to argue and his business suffers. El Hadji's daughter tries to understand the source of the problem and in so doing exposes the generation gap between herself and her mother in their different opinions of how *aye* (the period a polygamist spends with each wife) is discussed.[219]

So far, there has been a reticence over asking test-related and examinable questions regarding how this cultural dimension of textual interpretation affects the way a Shakespeare play is interpreted. This exhibits that tacit dread among educationalists of provoking wild and incoherent answers, reflected in Dixon's warning, 'complete freedom to interpret texts can result in insecure students and outrageous responses.'[220] These fears are not unfounded. As a result of this possibility, it is desirable not to over-state the impact a cultural repertoire plays in forming scholars' opinions, but rather to foreground the issues of 'leadership' and 'citizenship' so that students are able to write structured, sophisticated literary responses to traditional questions but where there is still some scope for these responses to be refined by students' culturally mediated understandings.

The WSS addresses the requirement of providing a sense of stability and continuity for students by including a set of content-related questions in the style of comprehension questions at the end of each act. These require answers which are provided at some other point in the textbook, for example, in WSS *Rom. & Jul.*, an excerpt is supplied following Act V:

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[218] WSS, *Rom. & Jul.*, pp. 20 & 152.
[219] *Ibid*., p. 152.
[220] Dixon, *Op. Cit.,* p 28.

Romeo Thou detestable maw, thou tomb of death,
Gorged with the dearest morsel of the earth:
Thus I enforce thy rotten Jaws to open,
And (in despite) I'll cram thee with more food.

Paris [*Aside*] This is that banished haughty *Montague*,
That murdered my Love's Cousin—with which grief
It is supposed the fair Creature died—
And here is come to do some villainous shame
To the dead bodies. I will apprehend him.
Stop thy unhallowed toil, vile *Montague!*
Can vengeance be pursued further than death?
Condemned villain, I do apprehend thee.
Obey, and go with me, for thou must die.

Romeo I must indeed, and therefore came I hither.
Good gentle youth, tempt not a desperate man.
fly hence and leave me: think upon those gone—
Let them affright thee. I beseech thee, Youth,
Put not another sin upon my head,
By urging me to fury. O be gone:
By heaven, I love thee better than myself,
For I come hither armed against my self.
Stay not, be gone, live! and heresfter say,
A mad man's mercy bid thee run away.

Paris I do defy thy commiseration,
And apprehend the for a Felon here.

Romeo Wilt thou provoke me? Then have at thee, Boy!

Page O Lord, they fight! I will go call the Watch.

Exit Page.

Paris O I am slain! If thou be merciful,
Open the Tomb; Lay me with *Juliet*.

(WSS, *Rom. & Jul.*, V.III.45–75, p. 286)

This excerpt is followed by comprehension-style questions, for which a memorandum is provided at the back of the textbook for teachers. Answers are provided for students on the page mirroring the text so that they can be guessed at or constructively searched for and found. This is a considerably utilitarian method of testing students, and should probably continue to be the primary method, but it is important that this is balanced by the inclusion of some more searching, innovative questions.

More creative, interactive methods of learning are facilitated by activities which are suggested following these comprehension-styled questions. For example, also after Act V,

students are asked to '[d]esign a poster to advertise your school's production of *Rom. & Jul*.. It may be traditional or modern. You must include the following: Relevant information, e.g. time, place, ticket purchase.'[221] This exercise is one among many requiring a visual response which is included as a result of Parmenter and Davis's proposed multimodal learning methods devised to increase student's retention and enjoyment of the plays.

Dixon and Davis have both suggested that keeping personal journals as reading records is a useful way for students to feel connected to the literature they study.[222] This could be a viable option in the future WSS *Hamlet* as it offers an opportunity for students to connect with this, the most solipsistic and easily identified with character. These more creative exercises which may at first seem to have little practical value, in actual fact, play an important part in identifying student's core competencies through Shakespeare, which in turns provides a means for them to develop along personally productive lines. Another activity which could be incorporated into the WSS *Hamlet* is for teachers to ask students to bring newspaper clippings of stories about South Africa's political leaders and to discuss how leadership styles are different or similar to, those exhibited by the leaders of Shakespeare's time.

While these methods correspond with the most cutting edge scholarship on pedagogy available at present (some would even say revolutionary methods), it is surprising to see that these were the exact same methods used during the Renaissance and in the Ancient Roman and Greek civilizations, the periods in world history best known for scholars' proficiency in letters. In Erasmus's *De pueris instituendis* (1529), he records his own 'multimodal methods' for teaching school children:

> Teachers of antiquity, for instance, would bake cookies of the sort that children like into the shapes of letters, so that their pupils might, so to speak, hungrily eat their letters; for any student who could correctly identify a letter would be rewarded with it.… The English are very partial to archery, which is the first thing they teach their children. One clever father, therefore, seeing how fond his son was of the game, had a beautiful set of bow and arrows made, decorated all over with the letters of the alphabet. As targets he used the shapes of letters of the Greek and Latin alphabets; when the boy hit a target and pronounced the letter correctly he would be applauded and rewarded in addition with a cherry or something else that children like.[223]

So while using multimodal teaching methods is not new, grafting on a culturally aware dimension to questions is. For the most part, it is up to teachers to find inventive ways of teaching Shakespeare, which will strike pupils as a fun new game to be learned. As is evident

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[221] *Ibid*., p. 287.
[222] Dixon, *Op. Cit.* & Davis *Op. Cit.*
[223] *Complete Works of Erasmus*, p. 339.

from the above extract, this is a labour-intensive approach that requires educators to take a 'student-centred' approach.

The effectiveness of these methods is supported by the findings of Gardener's now seminal work on developmental psychology in education, *Frames of Mind* (1983). In his analyses, Gardener characterises himself as:

> A psychologist attacking the standard notion of intelligence as a single capacity, with which an individual is born and which proves difficult, if not impossible to alter. In the place of this construct, [I] offered a more pluralistic cognitive universe.[224]

Specific to South Africa, Davis comments that, 'he particularly stresses the importance of determining a learner's intelligence by his/her ability to solve problems and create products in a contextualised setting.'[225] A student-centred approach entails not only creating learning methods suitable for a diverse group of students, but also taking into account that their cultural backgrounds will condition what these preferred methods are. Gardener identifies the following 'intelligences' which different students may possess: linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, musical intelligence, intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence, and naturalist intelligence.[226]

By incorporating activities that accommodate these varying learning potentialities, WSS complies with innovative research pertinent to the environment of the multicultural space of English classrooms in South Africa. Gunther Kress, key figure of the New London Group, envisages the English classroom as an important space for coaching the development of individuals in a social, a political and a moral sense.[227] This is because he believes that it is via the English language that 'definitions of culture and society' are carried, so that it is only in the English classroom that 'all modes and media of public communication can be debated, analysed, taught – there is nowhere else.[228]

In conclusion, the WSS benefits from being a communal effort in that it utilises different knowledges from a number of related fields, including African Literature, English Education and English Literature to stimulate likewise diverse capabilities among students. Even within these fields there are divergent opinions on how material ought to be presented, taught and tested, and

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[224] Howard Gardener, 'Multiple Intelligences as a Catalyst,' *English Journal* (Dec., 1995), pp. 16–19.
[225] Davis, *Op. Cit*., p. 18
[226] This final, eighth intelligence is proposed in Howard Gardener, *The Development and Education of the Mind: The Selected Works of Howard Gardener* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 58.
[227] Davis, *Op. Cit*., p. 13.
[228] Gunther Kress, *Writing the Future: English and the Making of a Culture of Innovation*, NATE Papers in Education (Sheffield, 1995), p. 30–2.

that is the reason why the technique of continued academic research and engagement is so crucial to the series' success.

The only recommendation sincerely to be offered here is that this collaborative spirit be maintained as the over-arching ethos throughout the series' creation, so that a full complement of Shakespeare's plays eventually becomes available in this format. In this, it follows the best possible means of teaching which is to lead by example. The editors of the series act together to create a socially aware educational product; this approach infuses their collective readings and interpretations of Shakespeare's plays with the sense of something that may be handled, shared and made sense of communally in the space of the South African English classroom. In this way it is not only a Shakespeare play that is being taught, but the means for communal sharing and enjoyment so crucial to forging an abiding appreciation of literature.

Recommendations and Conclusion

> *For in Calormen, story-telling (whether the stories are true or made up) is a thing you're taught, just as English boys and girls are taught essay-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays.*
>
> C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and his Boy*, 1954[229]

While writing this dissertation, I felt that a sister dissertation or thesis was not far behind, one that would deal with the unique challenges presented by the multicultural space of the present-day South Africa classroom in a more direct way. The WSS is just one series of English textbooks that would benefit from such an undertaking but, if it were done properly, such a work could be incorporated into the larger Educative philosophy instituted by government to the ongoing benefit of students. Some important questions remain unasked in the field of English teaching in South Africa, such as 'What are our examinable critera?', 'How are these criteria determined'? And 'Is there a cultural dimension to the questions currently asked that impedes the progress of bright students?' For too long people in government have talked about instituting such reforms, resulting in the implementation of the disastrous Outcomes Based Education system, which is currently being scrapped in favour of the 'Curriculum 2025' model. New learning models have been implemented which simply bewilder both teachers and pupils. The notion advanced here is that older educative models from history, models that teachers are familiar with and that work, be retained, while the materials fed into classrooms begin to ask more challenging questions about gender, African culture and South African cultures in particular. The overall gains from such a strategy would ideally be that English Studies in South Africa gradually grows into its own more compassionate, politically aware character, without being forced or strained by dry imperatives of performance assessment.

Shakespeare's misuse in the Educational System in England has been well documented by Alan Sinfield, who takes a rather dim view of the unquestioning reproduction of Shakespeare texts in this environment:

> Any social order has to include the conditions for its own continuance, and capitalism and patriarchy do this partly through the education system.… In education Shakespeare

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[229] C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 220.

> has been made to speak mainly for the right…. His construction in English culture generally as the great National Poet whose plays embody universal truths has led to his being used to underwrite established practices in literary criticism and, consequently in examinations. [230]

The above quotation highlights two important aspects of Shakespeare studies. The first is that the meanings students ascribe to the poet and to literature are culturally mediated and the second is that these constructs are examined based on a system that is also culturally dependant and, as it turns out, rather haphazard.

The manner in which texts are chosen for study in South African schools, seems more deliberate than in English schools, and is geared towards fostering students' ability to make meaningful connections between their own worlds and those in which a literary text is either set or written. In England, the process for text selection proceeds as follows: '…when in 1983 the Secretary of State required the nine GCE boards to devise a common core for A level the English working party could agree only one thing that is not vague and general: that at least one play by Shakespeare must be studied.'[231] Since the mid-nineteen eighties, when apartheid was at its zenith, a number of radical reforms have been instituted in the South African English curriculum. Before then, South Africa unquestioningly conformed to English models of English education. Certain reforms have been for the better, such as the choice of texts available for study. Others have been less successful, in particular the Education Department's assessment methods.

In reaction to previous conditions of ideological oppression in South Africa, the new South African government designed and implemented a completely new and 'innovative' educational method that would be uniquely South African. The first phase of this project, dubbed 'Outcomes Based Education' has been a pedagogical failure, with current Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga issuing the following statement:

> The review committee confirmed that teachers experience curriculum and administrative overload. We have taken steps to provide short term relief on these matters. We have reduced the number of projects for learners (the new system eschews 'European' terminology such as 'students'), and have done away with the need for portfolio files of learner assessments. We have also discontinued the Common Tasks for Assessment (CTAs) for Grade nine learners with effect from January 2010.[232]

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[230] Alan Sinfield, 'Give an Account of Shakespeare and Education, Showing Why You Think They are Effective and What You have Appreciated about Them,' Political Shakespeares: New Essays in Cultural Materialism, eds Jonathan Dollimore & Alan Sinfield (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 134–5.
[231] *Ibid*.
[232] Angie Motshekga, 'Statement by the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshekge, on the progress of the review of the National Curriculum Statement, Tuesday 06 July 2010,' link,

The failure of this initiative just goes to show that overzealous approaches to educative philosophy simply do not work within a nationalised education system. What makes more sense is to implement a gradualist approach by taking an existing system and allowing refinements to be made as they are required by teachers and students.

Having learned from the lessons of the old system, the South African Education board has already begun implementing a more constructive, structured educative philosophy, which at once relies on European models while retaining a uniquely South African character:

> The main committee is ensuring that the National Curriculum Statement is repackaged so that it is more accessible to teachers. Every subject in each grade will have a single, comprehensive and concise Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement that will provide details on what teachers ought to teach and assess on a grade-by-grade and subject-by-subject basis.[233]

By interacting with teachers from all levels of the education system better, more stable long-term plans are beginning to be constructed and implemented. So saying there remains considerable room for enhancing the 'South African' dimension of English literary study in this country, while at the same time keeping Shakespeare on the syllabus.

In the first place, the main reason to maintain Shakespeare on the syllabus is his excellence as a writer and secondarily to demonstrate that self-consciousness about cultural hegemony. A subtler way to do this is to ensure that the syllabus itself reflects a proper balance between African and Western writers. It makes no sense to teach a Shakespeare play in isolation without a work by an African author or, more appropriately a South African author included in the syllabus during the same year of study as the Shakespeare play is being taught. At present, Shakespeare plays are taught in conjunction with works by African authors, such as Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat* and John Kani's *Nothing but the Truth*. Also included are the old staples, *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and *Lord of the Flies*.[234] These works complement one another, and the syllabus itself is fairly well thought out, although whether school children actually receive these texts can turn out to be another matter entirely.

Assessment questions for Shakespeare, moreover still continue to demonstrate a certain lack of creative engagement with questions over home-culture and cultural reflexivity and there is a danger that a too conservative impulse is being catered to in questions such as:

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http://edulibpretoria.wordpress.com/2010/07/07/new-curriculum-for-south-african-schools/, (accessed 04 January 2011).

[233] *Ibid*.

[234] Deapartment of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa Official Website, 'English First Additional Language Matric Papers for 2010,' http://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/NSC%20Feb_March%202010.asp (accessed 4 January 2011).

In the play, Romeo and Juliet share close relationships with the nurse and Friar Lawrence respectively.

Compare Juliet's relationship with her nurse with Romeo's relationship with Friar Lawrence.

You may discuss the following points, among others:

• Friar Lawrence's role in Romeo's life

• The nurse's closeness to Juliet

• How and why Friar Lawrence and the nurse assist the two lovers

• Factors which result in Romeo's and Juliet's loss of trust in Friar Lawrence and the nurse respectively.

Length: 250–300 words

Such examination questions hardly develop the human capital available in the average South Africa classroom. Second-language speakers in this country have the potential to demonstrate a much higher proficiency in English than, for example, students in countries like Germany, Japan or Thailand, because there are a much higher number of home English-Language speakers native to this country who are available to add their skills to the talent pool.

This more developed level of proficiency creates an opportunity to ask more searching questions in the national examinations that could explore culturally mediated issues like marriage, interracial relationships, suicide, leadership and politics. Scholars have been saying something along these lines for over thirty-five years, and the time is ripe for the Independent Examinations Board (IEB) and Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) who set the examinations take account of this research. Here, questions which ask for students to respond in less formal, predetermined ways might be exchanged for ones that allow for a creative exchange between Shakespeare's world, the world of the play and students' experiences of life in democratic South Africa. Of course, standards will have to be maintained: the ideal will still be to produce pupils who write well in English, but perhaps educators' expectations might be changed so that they are less rigid about the content of examination answers. They might, for example, be encouraged to reward students' who question differing cultural norms in their essays in an intelligent way.

The South African education system has long been disturbingly faulty, coming under heavy criticism for a long time, first because of the way it sustained the social iniquity of Apartheid,

and immediately afterwards for the implementation of the contrary OBE system and more recently because it is simply poorly administered. Nevertheless, dedicated teachers do continue teaching and future hopes for the study of Shakespeare really lies with them. The bright spot in the country's education system has been the ongoing communication between teachers, students and government, and this sense of open and democratic lines of communication and this collaborative ethos is a strong point that is evident in the WSS. On the present editorial board there are two English professors from very different disciplines, two women teachers working in the field and a black academic and playwright. It is this diverse quality which provides the series with its eclecticism and strength, and it is worth bearing in mind that the average South African classroom may contain similarly diverse human resources able to contribute to a deeper, richer understanding of a given text.

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Appendix 1

*The following appendix provides a skeleton of what the introduction of the proposed *WSS Hamlet* might look like:

Introduction

The Setting – Denmark at the Height of its Power

The story is set in Denmark, a relatively small country in Northern Europe consisting of a peninsula, which juts out between the North and the Baltic Seas, and a number of surrounding islands. However, the actual location of this play has always been more of a hazy, imaginary space: Shakespeare, never having visited Denmark himself, found the source for his play in a French translation of a story called *Ambleth.* This story was part of a larger history of the Danish people which was written in the twelfth century by a historian named Saxo Grammaticus. The court portrayed in that story has some similarities to the one in *Hamlet*, except that it is more barbaric, deriving from a culture whose highest value was its warrior ethic. The society represented in Shakespeare's play is by contrast, more refined, but it is also a more claustrophobic and dramatically tense location than the one presented in the Norse original. Rules of decorum play a greater role in Hamlet's court, and these rules are part an unspoken code of courtly conduct, a code for behaviour which everybody in the Danish court is expected to understand.

It has often been said of *Hamlet* that its court is *Italianate*, meaning that it resembles the courts of Italy. These courts were ruled by high ranking Italian officials called the *podestá.* The podestá succeeded to their positions by force, by election, by revolution, by birthright, or sometimes by a combination of these methods. Poisoning a competitor was a common way to get ahead in the political game, as was marshalling an army of mercenaries. Another avenue to power was to gain the favour of the established Catholic Church, an organisation which held tremendous political sway at that time. Religion and politics tended to have much closer relationship in these older civilizations than they do today.

To further qualify the location of *Hamlet*, the fact that the Danish court is presented as Italianate links it to the English court of 1600, which was also frequently described as being Italianate. As the absolute power of the English monarchy had been frequently abused in the past, English writers began to compare their court with those of Italy. Shakespeare had first-hand knowledge of the English court, having been called, along with his company, *The Lord Chamberlain's Men*, to perform there on numerous occasions. It is through the construct of this complex imaginary space of staged Denmark that the excesses of the English court are held up for scrutiny and criticism, something which would have brought Shakespeare and his players into trouble with the authorities if it had been done less tactfully.

Some parallels between the court of Denmark and that of England are the references to the Danish court's tendency towards drunkenness. This is an unfair and derogatory stereotype that the English believed of the Danish, but it could just as easily be applied to the English themselves, who were notorious throughout Europe for their bad habit of overindulging in alcohol. Much of this material was cut out of later editions of the play because the players were concerned that it would offend Queen Anne, who herself was from Denmark, and was married to James I of England (IV of Scotland), the successor to the throne after Queen Elizabeth I had died.

Other similarities which can be discerned across the three courtly settings of England, Denmark and Italy are found in their ideas concerning the role and function of the courtier, that is, someone engaged in courtly life serving as an advisor to the ruler. A courtier was supposed to be someone who was valorous in arms, creative, good at courtly games, like sword fighting and hunting and who was able to know the right way to behave on all occasions. In addition to these, a courtier was expected to possess superior wisdom in order to advise and serve their master effectively. Real-life courtiers tended to fall far short of this ideal and they were widely ridiculed as being flatterers who had more concern for their careers than for the welfare of the realm. Another widely known misuse of the courtier's role occurred when men at court grew so confident in their abilities that they would try to snatch the reins of power for themselves.

Since Hamlet is dispossessed by his uncle, he is forced to act as a courtier in spite of his rightful claim to the throne. This position, as well as the corruption of the Danish court, results in Hamlet having a sense of isolation from his immediate social world. Hamlet is both isolated and social (part of a network of relationships), and therefore one of the dilemmas facing him is how to negotiate or balance those two positions. At the same time he is faced with a terrible choice: how to act towards his uncle, and when and how, exactly, to avenge his father's murder. Like Renaissance courtiers, we as South Africans also have to make informed political choices about who our leaders are and what we expect of them. Our choices, thankfully, are not as grim as Hamlet's, but we certainly can admire how seriously he takes his responsibility and commitment to taking the most virtuous course of action in the face of a difficult situation.

Shakespeare's Life

Shakespeare's biography presents one of the mysterious and elusive lives in recorded history. For several hundred years, this playwright and poet, born in Stratford-Upon-Avon, had been lauded as the greatest writer in the English language, and yet, he is one of the figures of history about which we know the least. Some people have gone as far as suggesting that Shakespeare did not actually write the plays himself, but that this was the pseudonym of a more learned man, such as Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon, the Italian Michal Angelo Florio or the Earl of Oxford.

These conspiracy theories are not to be taken too seriously, and while they can be very entertaining to contemplate, there is no reason why a young man who grew up in one of the small Southern towns in Warwickshire could not have been brilliant, determined and lucky enough to have become the most celebrated playwright of his age. Even so, some of the evidence that surrounds his life, and the points at which these trails grow cold have led many to believe that Shakespeare had some sort of secret which he purposefully kept out of the public eye and that this is the reason why so little is known of him today.

Creative propositions as to what his secret might have been include questions over Shakespeare's sexuality, his religion and his political affiliations. The reason for this speculation is in part due to the fact that the poet was willing to accept people on their own terms. He may have held his own private beliefs regarding these spheres, and he may have felt very strongly about these beliefs, but, in the poems and in the plays, there is a refreshing sense that no character or person is unfairly over-simplified. The result of this approach is that each of Shakespeare's characters is given a 'voice' of their own, so that his own views are never simply projected onto any of his characters. A contributing factor to this 'objectivity' is that Shakespeare may have been aligned with the suppressed Catholic minority.

Elizabethan England was a Protestant country, where Catholics were mercilessly persecuted. Stratford-Upon-Avon, Shakespeare's hometown, was known to be one of the more persistent strongholds of Catholicism in England, and there is other evidence to suggest that Shakespeare had ties with the 'old faith'. One of the most frequently cited reasons for this argument is that, upon the death of the Protestant Queen, Elizabeth, who had been responsible for the death of many Catholics, Shakespeare wrote no eulogy: no poem praising who life. Such evidence is only circumstantial of course, but it does provide a possible answer to why Shakespeare invested so heavily in representing and investigating widely divergent viewpoints on the English stage.

Shakespeare married a woman named Anne Hathaway, and their first child, Susanna, was born in 1583, nine months later; the following year the couple had twins, Judith and Hamnet. A first born, eldest son was a special child in those days. Shakespeare himself, was the eldest living son in his family and this position in a household had implications for inheritance and family responsibility. This is why the death of young Hamnet in 1597 came as such a shock to the playwright. *Hamlet* is a story about fathers and sons and the legacies and responsibilities that fathers leave their sons. Those who have read the play carefully frequently comment on the significance of there being as many as four sets of fathers and sons, who contrast with one another in interesting ways in terms of their actions.

Shakespeare's Context: Elizabethan Political Life

Hamlet was first performed around 1600. During this time, Shakespeare and his audience were known as 'Elizabethans', because they lived during the period of Queen Elizabeth I's rule , from 1558 until 1603. Towards the end of her reign, one of the most pressing questions in Elizabethan politics was the issue of the succession. Everywhere, people who were concerned about the future of England wanted to know exactly who their next ruler would be. Apprehensions over the succession fuelled the already tense political atmosphere that was caused by England being divided along religious lines.

a. The Theatre and the Court

The English court was situated at Whitehall in the South West of London, on East bank of the river Thames. The Globe theatre, where *Hamlet* is believed to have first been performed, was located on the opposite bank of the River, also in the South. Theatres had originally been built much further North of London, in the area called Shoreditch; a lawless part of the city where the majority of brothels, public houses and the dwellings of the poor could be found. It was also the site in the city most notorious for being frequented by vagrants, criminals, atheists, political dissidents and students. If anyone wanted to make a contentious statement about the goings on at court, it was in Shoreditch that they could do it. Once Shakespeare and his fellow players had moved further south however, they were much closer to the Palace and the infamous Tower of London, where political prisoners were held. The very different nature of these two spaces tells us a lot about Elizabethan plays. The most important thing is that they were surprisingly democratic, meaning they were written to appeal to the tastes a wide audience who came from every conceivable social background and class in the bustling London metropolis.

It is important to realise that, although Shakespeare's world was turbulent and ever-changing, it was nevertheless governed by extremely rigid religious and moral standards. Plays put on to criticise the monarch were not meant to overturn a corrupt political system or incite rebellion; rather, they were put on as acts of service, to both the people and the crown, geared towards both being entertaining and making England a stronger nation. Therefore, men of the theatre had dual allegiances, to the public and to the monarch. This can be observed during the scene in *Hamlet*, where the Player King delivers his memorable account of Pyrrhus' revenge and the murder of King Priam. After the recitation, Hamlet admonishes himself in comparison to the Player King, saying:

> He would drown the stage with tears,
> And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
> Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
> Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed

> The very faculties of eyes and ears. Yet I,
> A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
> Like a John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
> And can say nothing—no, not for a king...
>
> (II.II.550–7)

Here, Shakespeare provides an example of a player in the service of a nobleman with the specific purpose of moving his patron. Yet Hamlet also admits this man's connection to the 'general' ear (II.II.428), in that any noble person would be moved to thought or action by theatrical performances of the calibre demonstrated here.

Hamlet uses the actors' ability to move people to his advantage by asking them to put on a play similar to the Ghost's description of Claudius's crimes against him; Claudius's guilt is demonstrated in the play-within-a play where he rises at the crucial moment (III.II.249). As readers of Shakespeare's plays, we are expected to draw parallels with the playwright's responsibility to serve his countrymen and the courtier's responsibility to serve his country. Shakespeare is doing something noteworthy here, in that he uses a play within a play to comment on the role and responsibilities of art in influencing the political sphere of society, the technical term for this a *mise-en-abyme***,** which is French for 'hall of mirrors'. However, Hamlet uses the players with a much more focused agenda than Shakespeare does: Hamlet uses drama to force Claudius to betray his guilt. It would have been crazy for Shakespeare to accuse Queen Elizabeth I in such a public manner but, on the other hand, it was quite on the cards that he would use this idea of art mirroring political life to criticise Elizabeth's administration in a more subtle and publically acceptable manner.

b. The Personalities of the Court

Among the many powerful personalities associated with the Elizabethan court, were two legendary rivals, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex and Robert Cecil, Lord Burghley, the Queen's most trusted advisor. A handsome and athletic man, Essex entered into courtly service at a very young age and quickly won favour, causing many to cast aspersions as to whether there was secret romance between Essex and the Queen. His popularity resulted in Essex frequently being accused treasonous activity by jealous fellow courtiers and among these was Cecil.

To make matters worse for Essex, he was a direct descendant of the legendary and much loved English King, Edward III, and for this reason, many of his supporters thought him the more rightful monarch than Elizabeth. Unconcerned with what the long-term effect of these jealousies might be, the Queen showered her favourite with honours which he was too young and inexperienced to deserve. She sent Essex as a commander to wage war in Ireland, a promotion which many, including Cecil, resented. Instead of making peace with Ireland, as he had been commissioned, Essex marched his troops on to many minor skirmishes. The Queen was intensely

displeased with his going against her direct order, and Essex was commanded home, where he faced a humiliating trial for his misconduct. The Queen further dishonoured Essex by shunning him publically and giving the post at court he most strongly desired, Master of the Wards, to Cecil. Cecil was notorious among the English people for being a shrewd politician but also a flatterer, and it is not too far a stretch of the imagination to see something in him of Polonius, Claudius' chief advisor in *Hamlet*.

Crucial to understanding what the effect of this falling out had on the English people, is to realise that Essex had achieved celebrity status. He was a friend to many powerful people in London, including Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton, another powerful courtier. Essex' fall from grace was sudden and shocking. Dishonoured and humiliated, He and a handful of supporters, including the Southampton (to whom Shakespeare dedicated some of his finest poems), led a desperate march on the palace. Before they had even reached the gates of Whitehall, loyal supporters of the Queen had run ahead and informed the palace guard. The perpetrators of the failed *coup* were apprehended and sent to the Tower of London. At Essex' final trial he and his accomplice Southampton were sentenced to be hanged for treason.

The night before the coup, Shakespeare and his company had performed a special play called *Richard III*, which is all about how one of the least liked Kings of Britain was replaced by one the people approved of more. The players were incarcerated for one night for their misconduct, but this was a lucky escape, as treasonous activity was much more harshly punished at that time. One could almost interpret the events of *Hamlet* as being directly influenced by the events of the Essex rebellion, but for one important consideration: the play was first performed in 1600 or early 1601, but the rebellion took place later in 1601. What a consideration of the Essex rebellion reveals is that there were major undercurrents of dissatisfaction with Elizabeth's rule in England and that, already a year before rebellion broke, Shakespeare was inviting his audience, of which the Queen may well have been a member, to consider not only the legal and religious suitability of different rulers, but also the comparative merits of different styles of leadership.

c. The Succession Issue

The issue of succession resulted in mounting curiosity and speculation among the people as to whether the aging Queen was fit to rule. Consequently, Elizabeth declared that the subject was not open to discussion. She stubbornly refused to name an heir, fearing that doing so would undermine her own authority. She had become steadily less and less popular during the later years of her rule as people became aware that she planned neither to marry nor have any children: a necessary prerequisite for continuing the genetic line of the royal family. Succession had always been a thorny problem for the English aristocracy, bringing with it the question of which the most appropriate genetic heir might be. Eventually however, James I of England (VI of Scotland), the son of Elizabeth's second-cousin, succeeded to the throne.

The Climate of Political Theory

For many years before Shakespeare became a playwright, there existed a type of history writing in Italy called the ‘mirror for princes’ genre. The purpose of these books was to chronicle the rise and fall of Kings. The most well-known commentator in this genre is the perceptive and cynical, Niccolo Machiavelli. Machiavelli’s books were banned in England during Shakespeare’s lifetime because the English authorities found his atheism heretical, meaning they were seen as going against the will of God. In spite of these books being illegal, many of them found their way into England anyway, especially among the more rebellious sectors of the population, including students and actors.

Machivelli’s works raised the important question over whether Kings came to their positions by inheritance, by the workings of Fate or by the Divine workings of God’s Providence. Hamlet grapples with similar questions: he does not know whether he should exercise his will over his situation in order to change it, or simply give up and ‘go with the flow’, represented by Fortune. This is reflected in his most famous speech:

> To be, or not to be: that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
> No more; and by a sleep to say we end
> The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
> To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil.
>
> (III.I.56–67)

Essentially, what Hamlet is asking here is whether he should take a stoical, accepting attitude towards the terrible circumstances that surround him or whether he should act constructively to improve matters, a course of action that will likely result in his death. Hamlet’s struggle with these issues is again evident in his observation ‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will.’ (V.II.10–11). The idea of ‘Providence’ was different to that of ‘Fortune’, in that the latter is secular, having nothing to do with religion, while the former implies the presence of a concerned and involved God in the affairs of human beings. The effect that these

influences have over people's lives is further complicated by the outcomes of the exercise of a person's *virtu*, or personal will.

Because of these philosophical and political concerns, Hamlet is frequently regarded as a 'Humanist' play. It delves into the meaning of what it is to be human, so that those who view this work of art are simultaneously educated and entertained. While 'civic historicists' sought 'objectivity' in their renditions of history, their Humanist successors who belonged to Shakespeare's generation saw their role as using learning from the past to provide counsel for princes, so that they would know how to navigate their beliefs concerning Fate, Providence and free will wisely. In essence, they wished to use the knowledge (and foolishness) of the past, to make their immediate world a more peaceful and pleasant place. This is why the concept of mirrors is used so frequently in *Hamlet*, because in both of the above traditions the main idea was more or less the same: that a work of art functioned as a mirror to show society and its most powerful members their true nature. The main difference was that, for Humanists, there was a lesson to be learned: one that would educate the emotions and make for better decision making in future.

Hamlet's origin as a history makes it in interesting to study from the point of view of seeing how both historical and contemporary facts might be manipulated by people in government or in power in order to sustain a corrupt social order. Claudius uses the facts of a given situation to his own advantage, but the truth of things comes out in the end, which is implied when Hamlet implores his scholar friend Horatio, with his dying words:

> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
> To tell my story.
>
> (V.II.299–302)

So, while it must be kept in mind that *Hamlet* is not obviously 'history', it deals with the search for ultimate truth in the same way that history writing does. After all, Hamlet, we are told early in the play, attends the University of Wittenberg, he is a scholar who wants to learn more about the world around him. Through the creation of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare is offering a story of another court, in somewhat analogous circumstances to the Elizabethan court, to prompt people to consider more deeply the real truths concerning political issues such as legitimacy of rule, tyrannicide (the killing of a tyrant), the handling of succession, styles of leadership, and the role of the courtier (over issues such as diplomacy, persuasion and flattery).

i. Tyrants

There was a current of political thought that existed at the beginning of the seventeenth century where commentators theorised that if a monarch did not worship the correct God then it was

right for a high-ranking person in that monarch's court to kill that ruler. This crime, called 'tyrannicide', is different from 'regicide', in that, rather than being seen as killing God's chosen representative on earth, it was seen as the heroic act of killing a usurper. This opens up the debate on the importance of perspective in deciding upon the worthiness of a ruler. For example, the persecuted Catholic minority in England saw themselves as 'freedom fighters' and Elizabeth I as a tyrant, while the Protestant majority saw this group as what, today, would be called 'terrorists'.

The plot of *Hamlet* turns on several related issues. In *Hamlet*, Claudius is a tyrant, who has gained his position of power through committing the crimes of 'fratricide', the killing of a brother, and 'regicide', the killing of a rightful King. To add insult to injury, he goes on to marry his brother's widow, usurping not just the kingdom, but also the body of the queen. The court of Denmark has no knowledge of Claudius' murder of Hamlet Senior, and they accept Claudius as King on the grounds that the marrying of a brother's wife was a moral gray area, being sometimes interpreted as correct behaviour and at other times seen as incest. A further reason why the courtiers of Denmark so readily accept Claudius is that he presents a convincing picture of a wise and politically capable ruler. His earliest speech, where he uses oxymorons to explain his reasons for marrying Gertrude, exemplifies this, as can be seen when Claudius' says that he has:

> …as 'twere with a defeated joy,
> With one auspicious and one dropping eye,
> With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
> In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
> Taken to wife.
>
> (I.II.10–14)

These words not only reveal Claudius as a monstrous hypocrite, but also his clever ability in manipulating words.

Refined Kings and Forceful Kings

During the Elizabethan era, there were two commonly accepted stereotypes for rulers. The first was the refined ruler, who would spend their time arranging dances, shows and masques at court and who supported and promoted the arts. The second stereotype provided a rougher, more masculine approach to rulership, where a King's primary concern would be with arms and feats of war. Queen Elizabeth I, having witnessed the wars waged by her father and the toll this took on the English people, made it her policy to avoid war, so she falls into the category of the refined type of ruler. *Hamlet*, through being thoughtful and using painterly words, has some aspects of this refined type. Conversely, Fortinbras is presented as being the more typical warrior King, and so it is he who eventually rules Denmark.

There is potential for seeing Shakespeare's depictions of Claudius' illegitimate reign and Hamlet's indecisiveness as criticism against Elizabeth I. These negative associations with the Queen are effectively split between two diametrically opposed characters, Claudius and Hamlet, diffusing the potentially rebellious dimension of Shakespeare and his audience's dissatisfaction with their ruler. Had *Hamlet* been a play meant to insight rebellion, Shakespeare and his players would have been put to death, and so the playwright is forced to use much subtler methods in his interrogation Kingship and the right to rule. A story-telling device typically used by Shakespeare was to raise certain social issues for scrutiny so that they could be considered from all angles. Notice how the play presents several different Kings, Princes and courtiers, and how each of them exhibits a different style of governance.

ii. Elective Monarchy

During the time Shakespeare wrote Hamlet, the country of Denmark was known as an 'Elective Monarchy'. This is a style of rulership where the King's right to the throne is hereditary; however, succession is not only validated by ancestry but also by the agreement of the people. This presents yet another reason why Claudius' rule is unstable, he has gone over the heads of the people in claiming Denmark's throne. For this reason he is not favoured among by the public; they are only too eager to depose him as a tyrant and champion Laertes in his stead. Claudius' mistake in disregarding the voices of his people is evident in Shakespeare's emphasis of their rights: 'Choose we! Laertes shall be king.' (IV.v.103). Here, it should be observed, the exclamation qualifies the people's rights and not their actual choice. England was a straight monarchy, and the presentation of a more 'democratic' model on stage highlights the instability of 'mob rule' or mass rule, but also demonstrates how the citizens of a nation may eventually become so fed up with bad leadership that they use force to make their voices heard.

a. Choice and Women's Roles

One of the main philosophical themes of *Hamlet* is the idea of *virtu*, or freedom of choice, and the various hard decisions that people who hold positions of responsibility have to make. A state or realm is healthy when the people's basic freedoms are supported by its leaders. On the other hand, when these freedoms become increasingly limited and people are tongue-tied by authority, this is a sign that the citizens of a country are becoming oppressed. Since 1994, South Africa has a free country, and we the security of these freedoms are guaranteed and enshrined in our constitution. Shakespeare's England was not free, and a characteristic of a country that is not free is that minority groups are regarded as a threat to the dominant group and so are monitored and controlled to a greater extent.

This double-bind of repression is demonstrated through Shakespeare's portrayal of Gertrude and Ophelia. As women of that time, their roles are defined narrowly in terms of the relationships to men as mothers, wives, daughters or lovers. Gertrude appears naïve and incapable of ruling Denmark herself, leading to her over-hasty marriage to Claudius. Similarly, Ophelia, by being obedient to her father, breaks ties with Hamlet and unwittingly complies with the corrupt moral and social order of staged Denmark. These women are restricted not only as a result of the corruption at court, but also because they are women, and, according to the worst traditions of that time, cannot think for themselves. They rely on men to make the difficult decisions of consequence over their lives. It is this unthinking subservience is that causes both Gertrude and Ophelia's tragedies.

b. Women at Court

While Elizabeth had considerable success in her political endeavours, her private and family life was, by the standards of her people, an utter failure. Queen Elizabeth I had often used the promise of marriage to gain the upper hand over political opponents, but she never actually married and so never produced and heir. Towards the end of her rule, Elizabeth's past triumphs meant little to her people compared to this failure. As a result, the issue of the succession had brought Elizabeth's ability as a ruler into question. It is likely that at this time the people's fears and anxieties would have been vented through a play like *Hamlet*, a play that focuses overwhelmingly on royal inheritances and the responsibilities of power. Queen Elizabeth I was frequently judged harshly because she was a woman; her reaction was to hold steadfastly to her role as Queen and maintain a fragile peace in the realm. Her comparative success is indicated by the fact that to this day she is one of the most studied and admired figures in history.

Parallels between Elizabethan England, Staged Denmark and Present-day South Africa

- Elizabethans read the works of 'civic historicists'. Civic historicists present history to instruct rulers

- Playwrights present stories as a service to the monarch, the court and the people
    - e.g. 1: Hamlet uses the players (The Murder of Gonzago) to try to trap Claudius (a perversion of 'service to the monarch')
    - e.g. 2: Shakespeare uses Hamlet to interrogate some of the political issues and themes of the late Elizabethan court
- We use Shakespeare, writing and performing Hamlet, as an historical example to prompt thinking about similar themes today, about freedom of choice, civic responsibility, and whether we, as voters, feel our voices are being heard and that our needs are being met

Appendix 2

Tragedy

In the first printed edition of Shakespeare's complete works (1623), known as the First Folio, the title of the play is given as *The Tragedy of Hamlet*. This identifies *Hamlet* as a particular kind of play called a 'tragedy'. However, this category for the genre of the play is not as straightforward as other tragedies that Shakespeare wrote. Before Shakespeare's plays were published together in the First Folio, they existed in a number of single editions called 'Quartos', the earlier Quartos of *Hamlet* identify the play as a 'Tragical History'. This is quite interesting; as it has a considerable effect on the way we read and understand the play today.

Why would we want to watch a play where almost every single one of the important characters dies at the end? The number of deaths that occur throughout the action of *Hamlet* borders on being ludicrous, and it is as if the playwright is trying to communicate some important point through an excess of violent consequences. There is no other play like *Hamlet* in the English Language, because it asks so many deep philosophical questions about life, death, the motivations behind choices that human beings make and the futility of our actions. That this play is a tragedy indicates quite a pessimistic view about people's ability to affect change in their environment. That it is a called a history (even though these events never actually happened) demonstrates a link between tragedies experienced on stage and those that occur in real life. This is why tragedy has remained such a popular form today. Tragedy educates our emotions so that we are able to draw parallels between our own lives and those that are represented on stage. It is through the fear or pity we feel for our favourite characters that we are inspired to come up with creative solutions for avoiding similarly distressing fates.

Greek Tragedy

Tragedy as a dramatic form originated with the ancient Greeks (400 to 250BC), with the horrifying tragedies written by Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus. Perhaps the best known tragic story is that of Œdipus (dramatized by Sophocles). Œdipus killed his father by mistake and married his mother. When Œdipus discovered his error he went mad and blinded himself in uncontrollable guilt and rage. It was a psychologist called Earnst Jones who first noticed that there was a rough correspondence between the familial relationships in *Hamlet* and those in *Œdipus*. By comparing these two works and building on the work of his teacher, the renowned psychologist Sigmund Freud, Jones created the theory of the 'Œdipus Complex'. The idea behind this condition is that, unconsciously, all boys want to marry their mothers and kill their fathers, and this is why, Jones argues, plays like Hamlet and Oedipus hold a permanent sway of people's imaginations: because they express those inexpressible truths deeply embedded in our subconscious minds.

Tragedy of Character

Watching ancient Greek plays, the philosopher Aristotle developed a theory of tragedy in his *Poetics* which has been the starting point of discussion ever since. In the analysis of tragedy, a great deal has been made of Aristotle's term *harmartia*. This term is often translated as **'tragic flaw'**. According to his understanding of tragedy, the tragic hero is a man (or woman) who is of high rank or royal blood with many admirable qualities, but who has a fatal flaw in his/her character. This flaw brings about his/her downfall. If we apply this idea to Hamlet, we can see the hero as a refined and educated nobleman, skilled in feats of arms, social graces and poetry. His tragic flaw, however, is his constant hesitation; his inability to act. This unwillingness to act stems partly from Hamlet's 'melancholy', the Renaissance name for symptoms characteristic of what today would be called manic depression. Added to this, Hamlet both masks and doubles his condition by putting on an 'antic disposition' so that neither his enemies at court, nor indeed the audience are really sure as to how far he is still in possession of his wits.

One can see how well this interpretation works. It appeals to us because it allows us to analyse Hamlet's inner struggle, the role of the hero's psychology in undermining his actions and the extent to which being surrounded by corrupt and unsympathetic companions exacerbate Hamlet's problems. It is this flaw in Hamlet's nature which makes him more real to us so that we find it easy to identify with his suffering. We often think of human beings as individuals who are faced with a choice between good and evil, and can sympathise with Hamlet's desire to do what is right and his difficulty in discerning how to do this. Hamlet has is unable to decide on a course of action because those around him are so morally corrupt that he despairs of effecting any real good in his immediate situation. Added to this, Hamlet's increasing mental illness (which is at once put on and also very real) introduces a further obstacle in the process of his decision making.

The idea of the 'tragic flaw' underlies the brilliant discussion of 'character in action' by A. C. Bradley, whose book entitles *Shakespearean Tragedy*, written a hundred years ago, is still the most famous and influential book on the subject. Even though many modern critics disagree with Bradley, his book is certainly worth reading, even today. The standard objection is that he treats Hamlet as a real person who could be psycho-analysed, whereas in fact Hamlet is a character in a play, contributing to the impact of what happens on stage. This brings us back to Aristotle, who almost certainly did *not* think of *harmartia* as a 'tragic flaw' or weakness in character.

Tragic Action

For Aristotle, characteriation was not the most important element in drama. He focuses our attention on the meaning of *action*: what makes a story tragic. *Harmatia* probably meant 'tragic

error' (or mistake); instead of tragic hero with a tragic flaw, we should think of tragic event resulting from a terrible error. So we should ask ourselves, before anything else, what does the killing of a King *mean*? In the case of the murder of Hamlet senior, Claudius's actions are abhorrent, so why are Hamlet's actions any less abhorrent and why, for that matter, do they strike us as being noble? What do our feelings tell us about ourselves, our values, our understanding of life? Aristotle identified *pity* and *fear* as the typical response to tragedy, but there are sure to be many other responses: tenderness, horror, despair, grief, even upliftment.

Obviously there are no right or wrong answers to the questions posed by tragedy. Still, as students of Shakespeare, let us consider two common lines of interpretation: the religious (or metaphysical) argument and the political argument, bearing in mind that they can both work at the same time.

Tragedy, religion and philosophy

Hamlet has, without exception, attracted more philosophical interest than any other work of literature. From its psychological exposition of character, to Hamlet's meditation on suicide, it delves into those issues that have caused the greatest anxiety to civilised society. It is natural that such a profound meditation on death and the worth of a human being's life should lead on to religious themes, as religion is usually the source of comfort people seek when faced with the imminent death of a loved one or themselves. However, in *Hamlet*, religion provides little comfort: the Ghost of Hamlet senior comes from a place like Purgatory, a interim place that souls are supposed to go for their sins to be burned away if those sins have not been confessed before a person's death. Hamlet contemplates God, but sees him as a remote figure, an impediment to his suicide and the architect of Hamlet's terrible fate. Turning from these spiritual (or metaphysical) considerations, Hamlet begins to contemplate man, and in his reveries we find some of the most moving and majestic lines ever written. For Hamlet, some of the things that make a man (or human being) such an inspiring subject for analysis are:

- His ability to rule wisely, as Hamlet's father had done;
- His ability to think and learn;
- His ability to dream and create;
- The fact that man may do this in spite of being faced by the overwhelming prospect of death.

Notice the use of the masculine personal pronoun 'his' in the above points. Although Hamlet has many admirable qualities, he is also believable as a character because he has natural human weaknesses and human flaws. One of his more pronounced flaws evident in the play is his hatred and deep mistrust of women.

'Misogyny', which refers to the deep and irrational hatred of a man for all women. This reaction arises partly out of Hamlet's psychosis and also partly from the fact that both women in the play, Gertrude and Ophelia, betray Hamlet in some unforgivable way. However, this is no excuse for misogyny, and although we may understand it in a stage character it is an extremely unbecoming quality. Misogyny is a lot like racism, in that it is an irrational hatred caused by someone being different from ourselves, and this kind of destructive hatred has been made constitutionally illegal in post-apartheid South Africa.

Nevertheless, we as the audience sympathise with Hamlet, in spite of this repugnant quality, because we can identify with the extreme causes of his mental and emotional suffering. These are 1.) his father's death, 2.) his mother's over-hasty marriage to his uncle, 3.) the discovery that his uncle, his new father in law, is his father's murderer, 4.) his being rejected by the woman he loves and most needs comfort from, and 5.) the revelation made by the ghost of his father that it is Hamlet's duty avenge his death.

Tragedy and Politics

Political readings of *Hamlet* tend to sidestep the questions of Fate, God and Providence, dismissing these as misleading notions that throw a blanket of mystification over the real human imperative to amass power. These interpretations eschew the metaphysical dimension of a play and instead concentrate on how people's greed for greater wealth, power or status governs the choices which they make. Such a reading of Hamlet would view his father's ghost as, not a spiritual entity, but a psychological metaphor for Hamlet's desire to be King himself. These interpretations are less inclined to a sympathetic portrayal of Hamlet and more likely to concentrate on Gertrude and Ophelia's tragedy. After all, as women in a society dominated by men, these characters are not only oppressed by the corruption of Denmark, but also by their narrow roles as the mothers, wives or girl-friends of powerful men. Some political critics have gone as far as to question the relevance of *Hamlet* at all, because of the play's unfair portrayal of women. However, the misogyny in the play is not Shakespeare's attitude; it is the attitude of his main character who is patently drawn as having a damaged, although brilliant, mind.

Tragedy and the Essex Rebellion

A variation of this political approach is to consider how the play reflects the much larger and more dynamic power relations that were taking place during and immediately prior to the time the play was first performed. Even within this framework, the representation of power dynamics between men and women may be fruitfully explored. At the time *Hamlet* was written Queen Elizabeth I was the absolute monarchical power in England. During her reign she had won respect for her keen ability as a politician, but towards the end her rule she came under increasing ridicule for her inability to fulfil her duty as a woman: she had neither married nor produced an heir. As a probable member of the repressed Catholic minority (see the section

above, ‘Shakespeare Context’) Shakespeare had little reason to feel any genuine loyalty to Elizabeth I, but was in any case duty bound to serve her and offer advice as to how she might rule better and more conscientiously. This is why there is such a pronounced concentration on questions of leadership, rightful rule and good governance in Hamlet.

In essence, Hamlet is a kind of warning: Claudius is quite obviously an unlawful ruler, but even the rightful heir, Hamlet, is unsuitable for the throne because of his melancholy and the terrible duties that Fate and his past have conspired to lay at his door. Elizabeth I was similarly, becoming increasingly unpopular, and this was worsened by her refusal to name a future heir to her throne. The English people were beginning to feel exasperated, and it was these feelings that boiled over into the Essex Rebellion of 1601. Essex was a courtier in Elizabeth I’s court who had nearly as good a claim to the throne as she did. Some would argue that he had more right to it because women, technically, were not supposed inherit the royal title at that time.

It is fruitless to say whether Shakespeare is out rightly criticising Elizabeth by aligning her and her court’s corruption with Claudius, or whether he aligns the sagacious (wise) and refined ruler with the equally sensitive and refined Hamlet. What we can see is a thorough interrogation of the different criteria that determine a person’s worthiness to wield absolute power. The play is set in the location of what, for Shakespeare’s audience, was ‘contemporary’ Denmark. Denmark at that time was an elective monarchy. This means that the succession of a King or Queen was determined not only by birthright, but also by the agreement of the people. In England at that time, political theorists were seeking to add the further criteria of the Divine sanction of God, which would be assured by a candidate following the ‘correct’ religion. It is in and through these debates as they are presented in *Hamlet* that we may see the early foundations for our own political model in South Africa, the democratic model, where the presidency is determined by the vote of all people over 18 years of age.

Tragedy and us

In the end it is useless to ask whether Shakespeare was a Protestant or a Catholic, a royalist (a supporter of the monarchy) or a republican, a conservative or a progressive, an upholder of patriarchy (a supporter of a male-dominated world view) or a feminist (someone who believes in women’s right to equality). *Hamlet* is a play that asks some of the most profound questions that people are faced with in their lives, through intriguing characters and breathtaking speeches. It has meaning, but not a simple message; it asks hard questions and avoids supplying easy answers. It tells us the story of Hamlet, but it also tells us our own stories, in that we are frequently faced by similar questions about life and death and duty.