

Hamlet and the Jacobean Succession

Professor Paulina Kewes in conversation with Professor Andrew McRae

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Andrew McRae: I'm in Jesus College Fellows Library with Professor Paulina Kewes, and we are talking about *Hamlet*. Paulina, what do you think makes *Hamlet* a succession play?

Paulina Kewes: Well its plot revolves around revenge for a usurpation and regicide, and this is signalled already in the opening scene with the appearance of King Hamlet's ghost. He says to Hamlet: 'If thou didst ever thy father love / Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder'. And the same theme of usurpation, king killing comes up several times across the play. We also witness two abortive regicides: when Hamlet nearly kills the king at prayer, and when he murders Polonius thinking that he's the king. And finally, the climax of the play sees the entire royal line wiped out, and the accession of a foreigner, the Norwegian Fortinbras .

AMcR: And thinking about the whole idea of succession: obviously Queen Elizabeth was old at the end of the 1590s. She eventually died in 1603. So when was *Hamlet* first performed and when was it first printed?

PK: The first version of a *Hamlet* by Shakespeare first appears on the stage of the globe around 1600 or 1601.

AMcR: And when was it first brought into print?

PK: That's a very interesting question. We actually have three distinct versions of *Hamlet* in print. And all of them appear after the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne in 1603. Of the three versions, the first one (the so-called Q1 or the 'bad quarto') was first printed within just a very few months of James's accession. He comes to the throne in March 1603, and Q1 appears a few months later. The second one (another quarto—that is to say, a small pamphlet or booklet) was printed in winter 1604-1605. And the third version appeared in the collected edition of Shakespeare's works, the so-called folio in 1623.

AMcR: And how different are these three versions?

PK: They're actually substantially different. And the major difference that we notice is between the first two quartos. Quarto 1 gives us the shortest, crudest text Q2, the second quarto of 1604-5, gives the longest, most complex, and sophisticated text. And it contains many scenes and speeches absent from Quarto 1. For example, there is Laertes' rebellion here.

AMcR: And then there was the folio?

PK: Yes, the folio isn't hugely different from the second quarto. It's slightly shorter and it is widely assumed to be the closest to the script as performed by Shakespeare's company, the King's Men.

AMcR: And can you tell us a little bit more about the historical context of the performance and publication.

PK: *Hamlet* belongs very much to the transitional period between Elizabeth and James, between the Tudors and the Stuarts. At the time when Shakespeare conceived *Hamlet*, the question of succession was fiercely disputed, even though there was an official ban on discussing the succession. There were a number of competitors to the English throne, both native and foreign, and contemporaries disagreed about the principles of succession. There was disagreement about whether the throne should go by inheritance or by election. What matters from our perspective is that contemporary partisan polemic invokes national history as well as European history. So for example Denmark features as an example of elective monarchy. The most obvious dynastic successor to Elizabeth was James VI of Scotland, a foreigner married to a Danish princess. He was desired by some, but feared by others. James was the descendant of Henry VII, founder of Tudor dynasty. But he was also the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, who had been executed by Elizabeth. And many believed that there was an obstacle to his succession: namely his foreign birth. Were James to succeed to the English throne, there was the prospect of an Anglo-Scottish union. And again the prospect of union was resented by some, but cheerfully embraced by others.

AMcR: And then obviously the whole context shifts again by the time the printed editions are published.

PK: Yes, they appear after the peaceful accession of James to the English throne. As I mentioned, the succession was disputed before Elizabeth's death. But after James's accession there were different constructions of his claim. Again the proclamation of James as king suggested that he came to the throne because of his blood right. But it also referred to the law, without actually specifying what that law was.

AMcR: So what's the significance of textual variation for the politics of *Hamlet*, in particular its engagement with regime change?

PK: It makes sense to concentrate on the first two quartos, respectively the shortest and the longest extant *Hamlets*. And it is important to remember that during the first couple of years of James's reign, only Q1, the shortest one, was accessible in print. And the appearance of the quarto coincided with an outpouring of texts which engaged with the succession: ballads, poems, sermons, pamphlets, genealogies. In Quarto 1 the Danish monarchy is presented as hereditary; and this explains why Hamlet complains about having lost his father and the crown. He says, for instance, that he had 'his father murdered and a Crown bereft him'. In Q1 the succession of the Norwegian Fortinbras, who has no obvious claim, resembles foreign conquest. By contrast in Q2 the succession in Denmark goes by election. In fact the word appears several times in this version, but is absent from Q1. Speaking about Claudius, his uncle-king, Hamlet complains: 'he popped in between the election and my hopes'. And later on, the dying Hamlet supports the election of the warlike Fortinbras. Hamlet says, 'I do prophesy the election lies on Fortinbras. He has my dying voice. So tell him'. Hamlet's endorsement means that Q2 Fortinbras has more legitimacy, and his elevation is set to be confirmed by the Danish nobility.

AMcR: So these are radically different models of how a new king might take over. How do you see the topical relevance of *Hamlet*, then, when it was performed in these last years of Elizabeth?

PK: Well I think there are evocative parallels irrespective of which version we are considering. For example, the conflict between Norway and Denmark may well have evoked parallels with Anglo-Scottish rivalry. King James VI of Scotland might have been seen as similar to both

Hamlet because of his murdered father, because of his mother of questionable virtue, and also to Fortinbras, who was a foreign claimant keen to avenge his father's death. Naturally the topicality would have been enhanced because James's queen was Anne of Denmark. And he was also widely known to have visited Denmark. James went to fetch his bride from Norway-Denmark, and he passed three months early on in 1590 at Elsinore. So under Elizabeth the Quarto 1 text, had it been performed, might have spoken to fears of what would happen after the extinction of the royal house, the end of Tudor dynasty. It would have raised the spectre of foreign conquest and foreign rule, likely linked to the Scottish James, who was in fact compared in contemporary succession polemic to both Danish and Norman invaders. The play's depiction of Norway's ascendancy over Denmark rather uncomfortably prefigures the Scottish ascendancy over the traditionally more powerful England.

AMcR: What about Hamlet's resonance after James's accession?

PK: Were we to imagine a performance of something approximating Q1 (and of course early Jacobean would have been reading that shorter version) they might well have seen it as depicting danger averted. They would have recognised the contrast between medieval Denmark and contemporary England. In medieval Denmark we witness two monarchs killed in quick succession, and the foreign claimant gaining the throne essentially by conquest. On the other hand, in England we see the foreign James peacefully accepted by his new subjects, and proceeding to unite the crowns of England and Scotland. The impact of the second quarto (the long one) would have been more complex, I think, and contradictory. Now we might well wonder how James himself would have reacted to the play had he seen or read it. James saw his right to the English throne as based on indefeasible hereditary right. He certainly would not have identified with Fortinbras. But for many of James's English subjects, the accession of the Norwegian prince may have evoked parallels with James because of his foreign birth. There were reports circulating at the time that, on her deathbed, Elizabeth in fact named James as her successor. And there were diverse printed justifications of James's title which emphasised that he was made king by consent of the political nation, which he would do well to respect.

AMcR: And I wonder about the authorship of the different versions, how Shakespeare was rewriting, how those texts came to be in print. Can you say a little bit about that, Paulina?

PK: The simple answer is that we don't know, and unless new evidence comes to light it's next to impossible to answer the question. But we can speculate, and it seems that Shakespeare wrote the first quarto in order to address the uncertainty about the succession. And he may well have revised this quarto in order to address the actual Jacobean succession, by which time the worries surrounding the succession had gone in the sense that there was a male king who followed an aged and childless queen. And James arrived in London with children in tow. He had two sons. So the succession was assured at this point. But there were other concerns, for instance to do with his pet project of uniting England and Scotland more firmly. So we can see the second quarto of *Hamlet* beginning to address those questions as well as engaging with the issue of what his title actually rested on.

AMcR: And it's possible, is it, that the different versions were produced for different kinds of performance?

PK: Again we can only speculate, but it has certainly been suggested that Q2, was produced for performance at the royal court before the newly installed James in winter 1603. And it's also worth remembering that during the first year of James's reign in England, theatres were closed.

So in fact the royal court was the only venue where *Hamlet* could have been performed until after April 1604.

AMcR: Which makes one wonder about the much bigger question about how theatre in general tended to engage with some of the political issues of the time.

PK: I think it's fair to say that theatre was the most important public forum for the discussion of succession at the time when the formal discussion of the issue had been banned by statute. But what this meant was that theatre couldn't engage with it directly. Hence the need for ambiguity; that's why that's why *Hamlet* uses the history of medieval Denmark to comment on contemporary political issues.

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