

“Hamlet” without Hamlet. By Margreta de Grazia.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xii + 267 pp.

“Hamlet” without Hamlet is an extraordinary effort to reapproach and even re-create Shakespeare’s most famous play by forever exorcising the modern Hamlet from its archaic battlements. In place of the Hamlet of the bildungsroman and the Oedipus complex, of tortured guilt and existential intellectualism, Margreta de Grazia recovers a frank and heavy Hamlet embedded in a deeply political environment defined by unfamiliar theological, iconographic, and imperial coordinates. The phrase “*Hamlet* without Hamlet” calls us to strip away our preconceptions of the hero to confront the difference between his epoch and ours. By paying more attention to characters such as Laertes, Fortinbras, Ophelia, and the gravediggers, we can reevaluate and reencounter Hamlet himself in a more plotted, more active, more syntactic scene than the one inhabited by the deracinated Romantic Hamlet, whose subjective autonomy freed him to wander the uncharted realms of consciousness, but at the expense of the distinctive textures and territories of Shakespeare’s play.

De Grazia comes to this project from her forays into the editorial history of Shakespeare’s texts. In *Shakespeare Verbatim* she demonstrated her formidable capacity to combine editorial training with ideological analysis and literary acumen.¹ The same serious sprezzatura is at work in “*Hamlet*” without *Hamlet*. With an editor’s ear for the variant, the lost meaning, the allusion, and the icon, de Grazia is a superb reader of words and phrases, including their distribution across the several texts of *Hamlet*. She often cites from Q1 or from an annotated Folio in search of theatrical cues foreclosed by modern editing. When her argument requires it, she sets a patch of facsimile before us to probe the graphic disposition of type on the Renaissance page.

De Grazia’s readings reach deeply into diverse strata of historical and literary materials while rhizomatically ramifying into discourses contemporary to Shakespeare. Yet her interpretations also shoot upward and outward, into the post-Shakespearean annals of editing and commentary. Thus the final chapter, “Hamlet’s Delay” (first published in this journal as “*Hamlet* before Its Time”), brilliantly demonstrates how our modern image of a hesitating Hamlet was crafted as an answer to the moral scandal posed by Hamlet’s decision not to kill Claudius at prayer.² (To do so, Hamlet decides, would be “hire and salary, not revenge,” since it would send Claudius straight to heaven [3.3.79].) Eighteenth-century readers, shocked by the iniquity expressed by their increasingly tender prince, were relieved to accept the solution first

¹ Margret de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).

² Margret de Grazia, “*Hamlet* before Its Time,” *MLQ* 62 (2001): 355–75.

put forward by two Scottish critics, William Richardson and Thomas Richardson, who suggested that Hamlet was deceiving himself by formulating an excuse foreign to his personality. The tradition, de Grazia argues, was forever transformed: “The possibility that the mind does not have access to its own processes opens up a whole new prospect for hermeneutic interpretation,” an avenue that eventually led to the founding of psychoanalysis (164).

“*Hamlet*” without *Hamlet* often reads like a series of exfoliated footnotes, yet a forest or *belleforest* does emerge from de Grazia’s densely cultivated grove of readings. For de Grazia, *Hamlet* is, first and foremost, a political play: a drama set against the great rhythms of imperial revolution and eschatological doom as well as the swifter meter of generational succession. It is a play in mourning for frustrated patrimony yet, for that reason, alive with the possibilities of election and constitutionalism. It is also a play whose hero is both fat and frustrated—out of shape due to decadence in Denmark but resentful that his unexercised ambitions have been stymied by his uncle’s abuses. In “*Hamlet*” without *Hamlet* clowns rule: they sport ties to land and class, and they represent a form of theatrical expression downgraded by the Romantic tradition yet deeply kin to Hamlet’s own antic disposition. De Grazia’s buffoonish Hamlet wields a physical and verbal wit closer to Mel Gibson’s rendition in 1991, when the actor was still fresh from the manic experiments of *Lethal Weapon*, than to Laurence Olivier’s pensive, self-consciously Freudian interpretation.

De Grazia’s own brand of philology is not a purely historical enterprise. She has a true gift for the multiple resonances and conflicted emotions carried by words, and surely this sensibility, this ear for “surrealist semantics” (127), owes something to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Derrida, the evil architects of the modernist Hamlet in her text. Yet mustn’t she clamber onto the wide-spreading branches of their thought to hang the weedy trophies of her own ingenious interpretations? De Grazia acknowledges as much in a suggestive parenthesis tucked into her introduction: “(Unmodernizing the play is not the same as restoring its original meaning)” (5). Although she does not elaborate the point, I take her to mean that the project launched in this brave new book builds on certain fundamental insights traceable to Marx and Freud even as it rejects key features of the Hamlet they have bequeathed us. Her strong readings of class and wealth in the superb chapter on the gravediggers’ scene, for example, reflect concerns with social inequality, labor, materialism, and capital constellated for modernity by Marx and his heirs. So, too, her reading of the play as marking a “failure of transmission” (143) cannot simply be severed from psychoanalysis without suffering its own “failure of transmission” with respect to the Freudian tradition. Although de Grazia ably rejects the psychological details of the oedipal reading of Hamlet, she

comes close to subscribing to Jacques Lacan's account of the vortex created by Ophelia's grave in the play's topology of loss and mourning. De Grazia ends up distinguishing her position by separating Lacan's too-Hegelian "fight for pure prestige" from the "quite materially specific" factor that she identifies with "quantities of earth" (156). Yet these pure quantities of bare matter quickly devolve into a symbolic sequence, "earth" and "humus" spinning into "land," "estate," "lineage," and "patrimony," the very regions of symbolic capital from which she wants to separate them.

What is the future of this new (old) Hamlet, fat and scant of breath from the air of an Elsinore made historical by de Grazia's determined delvings into the past? Her analyses will certainly find their way into new editions and commentaries. By reading the play for signs of heraldry, for example, de Grazia discloses a gallery of affective escutcheons that reilluminate the play's iconography of estates. Her discussion of Ophelia's language of flowers in relation to the sententiae of Polonius is brilliant in its generic precision, allusive implications, and insight into the visual and emotional economies of the play. Moreover, de Grazia's diagnoses of moles and impostumes will leave both the surfaces and the depths of *Hamlet* pocked and puckered by the surgical precision of her interpretive dermatology. But will Fat Hamlet find a place in Second Life's emerging Shakespace, in new productions of the play, in our undergraduate classrooms, or in our myths and memories? It is not clear that we are ready to give up the subjective hero of Coleridge and Hegel, of Nietzsche and Freud, nor is it clear exactly what it would mean for our culture and profession if we were. The Hamlet who inhabits the infinite space produced by the bad dreams of self-deception may not be native to Shakespeare's fields of intention, but he has spawned whole worlds of imaginative possibility that haunt and inspire us still. De Grazia's war on Hamlet's futures in favor of his pasts substantially enriches our sense of Shakespeare's universe in its many sources and dimensions. But futures, I trust, Hamlet will continue to enjoy; after all, invention is the great hazard run by theater, poetry, and thought in their endless concert with each other.

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