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## HAMLET, PRINCE

### Tragedy, Citizenship, and Political Theology

*Julia Reinhard Lupton*

What is a prince? In Renaissance English, “prince,” from *princeps*, meaning “first” (as in the German *Fürst*), could refer to the monarch as such, regardless of gender; Elizabeth was often called “prince.” More often in Shakespeare’s lexicon, however, a prince is a monarch-in-waiting, a future king: the *Henriad* is Shakespeare’s royal *Bildungsroman*, charting the education of Hal from prentice prince to successful sovereign. Other princes in Shakespeare live in order to die, the very word coming to evoke the tender shoot of a blasted future, from the slaughtered princes of *Richard III* to young Mamillius of *The Winter’s Tale*. To these sovereign, developmental, and elegiac senses of the prince we must add the distinctively Machiavellian turn impressed on the word by Renaissance political philosophy. For Machiavelli, *il principe* is he who makes a beginning—Machiavelli addresses the *new* prince, an innovator in search of legitimacy through the tactics of fear and love. The word itself derives from the Roman emperors, who called themselves *princeps*, meaning “first citizen,” in order to retain a nominal relation to the constitutional order their office had eclipsed.

The *Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is a meditation on the origins and destinies of princeliness. In *Hamlet's Heirs*, Linda Charnes's Hamlet is always a prince, never a king, pursuing the curriculum of the princely *Bildungsroman* but kept out of office by the Ghost's undead resistance to his own succession. Hugh Grady (2002) and Agnes Heller (2002: 8) are among the most recent critics to test Shakespeare's Machiavellian motives, finding in both Claudius and Hamlet traces of the Machiavel (see also Husain 2004). Responding to these recent reflections on Shakespeare's princes, this essay teases out the political possibilities embedded in the juridical conceit of *princeps* as First Citizen. What might it mean to encounter Hamlet as "First Citizen," understood not as the imperial terminator of representative rule, but rather as the initiator of the chance for constitutionalism, an emperor in reverse? The outlines of such a possibility take shape around Hamlet's friendship with Horatio, his Machiavellian moments, and his election of Fortinbras, political factors brought into literary focus by Hamlet's affiliations with Orestes, tragic subject of constitutional change.

The Shakespeare pursued here is "alternative" in several ways. I am looking for scenes of constitutionalism harbored only as experimental potentialities—as dreams, prophesies, and promises—in a play where courtly intrigue holds center stage. The speculative character of the project, brokered among distinct historical–juridical and literary–generic moments, is more formal and conceptual than historical or contextual. To read Shakespeare for citizenship is to enunciate an alternative genealogy of politics from the materialist variations that engage so much of contemporary academic criticism; my debts are to Aristotle and Arendt rather than Marx and Foucault. Reading *Hamlet* for citizenship also means rethinking the play's deep investments in political theology in relation to democratic futures as well as medieval pasts. In his essay *Hamlet oder Hekuba?*, Carl Schmitt, modern theorist of political theology and the state of exception, strove to dispel any liberal connotations that might accrue to "election" in the play. I take Schmitt's reading seriously, but I also take Schmitt to task, asking why he has to work so hard to defend the play against constitutional interpretations.

## TRAGEDY AND CITIZENSHIP

In Book III of the *Politics*, Aristotle grants that definitions of citizenship will vary from polis to polis, but then puts forward a definition of citizenship “in the strict sense”: “his special characteristic is that he shares in the administration of justice, and in offices” (1984: III.i, 1274b–1275a). The movement in Aristotle’s thought points to an essential ambiguity of citizenship, which both adheres with passionate tenacity to a particular time, place, and regime, and aims beyond that local habitation to politics as a science transferable among regions and epochs. Citizenship is unabashedly restricted to those in its circle; one function of citizenship protocols is to police the limits of the polis. At the same time, citizenship names a broader, more mobile discourse that touches on human emancipation as such, insistently taking exception to its own exclusions. Citizenship makes this shift from the particular to the universal by shuttling a purely formal feature of its operations—the limited equivalence of persons conferred by rotating offices within a civic sphere—into categories of value concerning rights, equality, equity, and access. Releasing a fresh set of key words for critical musing, including office and duty, election and consent, friendship and fellowship, the discourse of citizenship invites us to reconsider power in its participatory and collective dimensions, the republican line historically in tension with the command–obedience model consolidated by Hobbes.<sup>1</sup>

Tragedy represents a foundational moment in the literature of citizenship (see Lupton 2005a, 2005b). Richard Seaford has uncovered the agon in Greek tragedy between the ancient stories of the great aristocratic houses, marked by self-destructive crises of incest and parricide, and the new institutions of Athenian citizenship, which challenged the charisma of authority based on kinship in order to reorganize political life around the equivalences conferred by civic participation (Seaford 1994). Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet placed the education of the ephebes—young male citizens in training—at the mythic and ritual origins of Greek tragedy.<sup>2</sup> Deployed as scouts at the frontiers of the polis, the ephebes exercised ambiguous skills of ruse and surveillance.<sup>3</sup> At the end of their *ephebeia*, the Athenian youths would renounce the arts of cunning by joining the orderly

army of hoplites, to whom they would swear their solidarity. John Winkler has speculated that the ephebes were given central seating along with members of the Boulê or Council in the central wedge of the theatre, and he suggests that members of the Chorus may have been chosen from the ephebes, strengthening their ties with the young heroes on stage.<sup>4</sup>

The *Oresteia*, dramatizing the movement from an aristocratic revenge culture to a court of law that draws its jury from the citizenry, is perhaps the most classically “political” of the Greek tragedies in this regard. In the first play of the trilogy, *Agamemnon*, the title character returns home from the wars—and home from Homeric epic—to a humiliating death at the hands of his wife and her lover. Following the laws of aristocratic honor, in the second play Orestes avenges his father by killing Clytemnestra and Aigisthos, only to be driven mad and into exile by a swarm of Furies, archaic goddesses of blood right who revisit the rage of the slaughtered mother on her son. Resolution in the first dramatic installment occurs on the Aereopagus, site of the future high court of Athens, where Athena oversees the trial of Orestes. Ten jurors assemble to deliver their judgments. Athena breaks the tie among the ten, inserting the continuing necessity of a singular moment of sovereignty within the new constitutional order. Although Athena exonerates Orestes, the institutional consequence of the trial is to transfer adjudication of murder from the family to the court. Orestes both exemplifies and destroys the absolutism of kinship; he is the last revenger, declared innocent of wrongdoing but marking the ideal terminus of cyclical violence.

At the end of the trilogy, then, a set of passages has occurred: from boyhood to manhood, from aristocratic revenge to constitutional law, and from the world of maternal passion and violence to a normative relationship among cities and between men, figured in the alliance between Argos and Athens. Yet this series of epochal and subjective alterations retains a founding moment of mythic maternal power in the form of the Furies, now transformed into the “Eumenides” or “Kindly Ones” and given cultic place next to the court. Their sublime role, we learn, is to preserve fear of the law next to the law itself, sheltering a theological charge in constitutionalism as well as a feminine element in the suburbs of civic sociality (Conacher 1974: 339–40;

MacLeod 1982:135–6). If Orestes, having reached his majority, returns to Argos as both sovereign and citizen by virtue of his new accord with the Athenian constitution, the feminine Furies have undergone civic naturalization in Athens itself, holding open a place for citizenships to come (Zeitlin 1984: 183–4).

Orestes is a *princeps* in the speculative sense that I aim to develop here: destroyer of his own aristocratic house and in pursuit of his majority, he survives the violent habits of his line by subjecting himself to a new constitutional moment that sets a limit to violence, at least for a time. *Princeps* is he who makes a beginning in a new constitutional order that will subsume him. Such a *princeps* is the last prince of the old order, and first citizen of the new. Another *princeps* closer to Shakespeare's immediate circuit of references is Lucius Junius Brutus, long seen as a classical analogue for Saxo Grammaticus's Amleth.<sup>5</sup> Avenging a crime by killing a tyrant-king who is also his uncle, and using madness as a cover (recalling the cunning of the ephebes), Brutus brings an end to monarchy in order to help institute the republic. If Lucius Junius Brutus is a comic *princeps*, Coriolanus is a tragic one, helping to found the new republic but unable to survive within its norms of civic equalization. The case of Coriolanus helps crystallize the singularity, the persistent "oneness" of the *princeps*, who may indeed enter the order of citizens, but always retains an exceptionality that keeps him apart from the circle into which he crosses. The *princeps* enters a profane or secular space, but he carries over a sacred character from the older mythic order, a charisma that does not illumine his person from within, but rather haunts and halos him as a symptom of epochal change.

Tragedy and citizenship are joint shareholders in Athenian democracy, but their alliance quickly faded in the post-classical period. Modern tragedy is shaped by Christian patterns of martyrdom and redemption rather than by the Greek agon between the *oikos* and the polis. Caught between the vertigo of subjectivism and the claustrophobia of Elsinore, Hamlet's problems feel worlds away from the open court of the Areopagus. Yet, accompanied by Orestes and his fellows, we can recover within *Hamlet* a civic lining that reconnects his story to the passions of citizenship in classical tragedy, without dislodging his tale too absolutely from its proper situation on the late

Elizabethan stage. Critics have long noted the parallels between Hamlet and Orestes, young men sent away to school during the period when their mothers marry the men who have killed their fathers.<sup>6</sup> Whether arguing for mythical parallels or actual influence, these accounts tend to emphasize psychological and domestic similarities rather than constitutional ones. Yet the plays' familial crises take place on the public stage of states in emergency and in relation to constitutional mechanisms inviting us to use the *Oresteia* in order to read *Hamlet* for citizenship.

#### HAMLET AMONG FRIENDS

"Who's there?" "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself" (1.1.1–2). Both the *Agamemnon* and *Hamlet* begin with scenes of a night watch, commanded by a royal household in a state of traumatic transition from one sovereign to another. Both scenes dramatize the night watch as a sequence or rotation among equivalent elements. In the opening scene of Aeschylus's trilogy, a relay of lights, what we might call a pure sequence of signifiers, transmits the message of Agamemnon's imminent return from the ruins of Troy all the way to Argos. In the opening of *Hamlet*, the changing of the watch establishes equivalence among the men, who are soon joined by Hamlet's friend Horatio. Barnardo calls Horatio and Marcellus the "rivals of my watch," "rivals" implying here not competition but exchange, as rendered in Q1's "partners." The duties of the sentry place the young men on the edge of the castle; like the Greek ephebe sent to the frontier of the polis, the sentry is a *peripolos*, "the one who circles around the city without entering it," who scouts the *eschatia* or mountainous frontiers of the polis (Vidal-Nauquet 1981: 148; Vernant and Vidal-Nauquet 1981: 175). The citizen, writes Aristotle, is he who rules and is ruled in turn.<sup>7</sup> What makes citizens equal to each other is not identity of qualities, attributes, skills, or wealth, but rather the offices through which they rotate. The sentries combine the equivalence of office shared by adult citizens with the ambiguities of surveillance assigned to the scout. The inaugural uncertainties of the opening exchange are bred not only by the heavy night and the insecurities of state, but by the sentries' duties of suspicion and the equalizing

function of office as such. As Paul Kottman has argued, when Horatio joins their circle in order to bear witness to the Ghost, the purely formal fellowship among guards is resealed through the act of shared testimony: “the relation between these three might be fairly taken as something like an emergent polity—a nascent company that will soon include Hamlet and that will come to be bound by an oath.”<sup>8</sup> As if affirming the political nature of their association, Horatio secures consent from the sentries concerning Hamlet’s membership in their group: “Do you *consent* we shall acquaint him with it/As needful in our loves, fitting in our duty?” (1.1.177–8; emphasis added).

This rotation of duties settles into an image of classical friendship when Horatio takes Hamlet onto the watch. Greek friendship both pre- and post-dates the institutions of democracy, yet it received a decisive philosophical and political imprint during the rule of the Athenian *demos*. In his chapter on friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle cites the proverb, “*philôtes isotês*,” “friendship is equality,” one of many points where he binds friendship (*philia*) and citizenship (*politeia*) around the measures of equality, reciprocity, and rotation.<sup>9</sup> Laurie Shannon has argued that Renaissance friendship inserted an experimental space defined by parity and likeness into the hierarchical scaffolding of early modern life. Classical friendship forms a kind of lozenge whose roots in Homeric bonds of reciprocity swell into properly political definition in response to democratic institutions, and then taper off into Hellenistic imperial and monarchic formations. In its aristocratic origins, democratic impress, and post-Athenian vicissitudes, Greek friendship carries its egalitarian ethos into Roman and Judeo-Christian scenes of sociability.<sup>10</sup>

Hamlet is, among other things, a young man among friends, ranging from his deep intimacy with Horatio, to the studied informality of his banter with the sentries, to the strategic, cynical friendships of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The play’s awful longitudinals—parent–child, sovereign–subject, divine–human—are crossed by an equally dense network of civic latitudinals—brothers and sisters, comrades and sentries, foils and rivals—the pockets of equivalence created by their various feints and parries ringed about and further leveled by the politic convocation of worms in the great city of the dead. The play’s sublimely vertical relationships usually take center

stage in performance and criticism (and rightly so), but the horizontal strands also sustain our attention.

Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost, an Oedipal scene par excellence, has been the frequent object and emblem of critical attention (see, for example, Lyotard 1977: 395–411; Derrida 1994; Greenblatt 2001). Yet the spectral interview is framed more modestly by Hamlet's conversations with Horatio and Marcellus. Hamlet ventures alone onto Elsinore's *eschatia* ("the dreadful summit of the cliff" [1.4.70]) to meet his father, but he soon returns to his circle of friends, prefacing his request for secrecy by attesting to their community of interests: "And now, good friends,/As you are friends, scholars, and soldiers,/ Give me one poor request" (1.5.146–8). When the Ghost cries, "Swear," Hamlet urges them, "Consent to swear" (1.5.159). The ghostly imperative reinforces the vertical command-and-obey structure of power that Hannah Arendt links to the Decalogue (1969/1970: 39), whose tablets loom behind Hamlet's commitment of the Ghost's "commandment" to the "tables" of his memory (1.5.13–7). Alone on the edge of Elsinore, Hamlet plays Moses to the Ghost's God, becoming, in Lyotard's telling phrase, the "Jewish Oedipus," "possessed by an Other who has spoken" (1977: 402). When Hamlet returns to his comrades, however, the ghosted sovereignty, issuing from the cellarage, not Sinai, loses its sublime edge. By enjoining his comrades not just to swear, but to *consent* to swear, Hamlet rebinds the circle of sentries in a collective agreement, instituting a provisional citizenship among them in order to carry out, but also to test and attenuate, the Ghost's commands. The *ephebia* has begun.

Hamlet shares with his fellows his proposed strategy, "to put an antic disposition on" (1.5.180). As critics have long noted, Hamlet's antic disposition affiliates him with Lucius Junius Brutus, the republican hero and first citizen of Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and late-coming avenger in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*. Hamlet plants itself firmly on the ramparts of monarchy and its discontents, yet it periodically opens onto the other scene of constitutionalism. And it does so in part by casting the prince as a philosopher-friend. Friendship, Aristotle writes, is realized by *philoï* "living together and sharing in discussion and thought" (Aristotle 1984: 1170b). Similarly, Seneca writes to his friend Lucilius, in an epistolary genre that prefigures the *essais* of Montaigne: "The

first thing philosophy promises us is the feeling of friendship, of belonging to mankind and being members of a community” (Seneca 1969: 37). In the dedicatory letter to *The Discourses*, Machiavelli opposes the Prince and the Friend as the addressees of two very different forms—or *discorsi*—of political writing:

Accept [this book], then, in the manner in which things are accepted amongst friends . . . I seem in this to be departing from the usual practice of authors, which has always been to dedicate their works to some prince.

(1983: 93–4)

Machiavelli’s dedication decisively associates friendship and citizenship as part of what makes this particular book a set of “discourses”: a commentary on Livy, but also a set of civil conversations with his contemporaries.

Participating in the humanist tradition shared by Aristotle, Seneca, Machiavelli, and Montaigne, Hamlet the *prince*, is also a *philosopher* and a *friend*. Returned from the ghostly encounter, he announces to Horatio, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (1.5.174–5). The Folio reads “our philosophy,” situating their discourse in the conversational sphere of friendship. The “more things” that represent the rational limit of philosophy bear not only on matters supernatural but on the untested resources of philosophy itself. Hamlet’s philosophical language repeatedly touches on this “more,” a potentiality caught between the social and the subjective, between civil publicity and psychic inwardness. Hamlet “eats the air, promise-crammed” (3.2.93–4), a phrase that binds a *souçon* of the stage Machiavel with the promissory language of friendship in order to hollow out an inward space of pure expectancy. Hamlet would be “king of infinite space” if it were not for his bad dreams (2.2.255–6); he imagines an absolutism of reason, to which he assigns the name “king,” and then finds its limits in the world of dreams, philosophy’s other side. If the netherworld contains “more things” than philosophy, philosophy, too, is always more than itself, not simply a system of rational principles, but a discourse of social and political dreaming that overflows its own enunciation at any particular moment.

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As the *peripoloi* prepare to reenter the castle, Hamlet reaffirms their bond:

Rest, rest, perturbed spirit. So, gentlemen,  
 With all my love I do commend me to you;  
 And what so poor a man as Hamlet is  
 May do t'express his love and friending to you  
 God willing, shall not lack. Let us go in together.  
 And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.  
 The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,  
 That ever I was born to set it right.  
 Nay, come, let's go together.

(1.5.190–8)

Hamlet rotates here among several forms of address. He bids farewell to his father (“Rest, rest, perturbed spirit”), but his main energy is for his entourage. Twice he enjoins the group, “Let us go in together,” “Let’s go together,” as if hungry for their companionship and sustained by their presence. And then there is the agonized couplet: “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,/That ever I was born to set it right.” We are tempted to hear this as a private cry, even an aside, but the couplet’s placement allows it a more public currency as well. Hamlet finds himself “cursed” by the ghost’s commandment, set on a mission that he will resist for most or even all of the play; he is, as many critics have argued, a reluctant revenger, a last action hero. Hamlet is doubly lonely, trapped by the secrecy and illegality of the Ghost’s commandment, and isolated still again by the subjective terror of his own resistance to the generic machinery of revenge. Yet this double loneliness is nonetheless from the beginning accompanied by a fellowship of friends who lighten and lessen this isolation. These “friends, scholars, and soldiers”—a cohort bound by education, vocation, conversation, affection, and consent—shelter and support Hamlet’s loneliness as he grudgingly shoulders the burden of the paternal past, providing an alternative scene—for both Hamlet and for criticism—to the drama of sovereignty played out on center stage. Throughout the play, Hamlet “plays the Machiavel,” adopting a posture of frustrated ambition in order to cloak his agenda, which involves not so much carrying out the commandment to revenge as testing

its provenance, its limits, and its meanings. When Hamlet assumes the mask of the Machiavel in the presence of friends and in the circle drawn by their collective consensus, *il principe* of tactical theatricality momentarily joins the *res publica* (public things) of the *Discorsi*.

Hamlet's fellowship with the sentries is thin, but his friendship with Horatio is substantial. Aristotle contrasts the "comradely way of friendship" (*hetairikê philia*), "always between two people," and the wider ties of political friendship (*politikê philia*).<sup>11</sup> Though linked to political friendship by the measure of parity, the friendship shared by two people is exclusive and intimate; in Laurie Shannon's formulation, "friendship discourse offers no compartment or affect to be generalized beyond the pair, no pattern to link all political subjects to one another" (2002: 18). Orestes, too, has such a friend, Pylades; early English versions of the Orestes story spell the hero's name "Horestes," who shares a syllable as well as a friendship discourse with Horatio.<sup>12</sup> In Louise Schleiner's analysis, Pylades provides "by his supportive presence and collaboration, male sanction and support for the supposedly necessary killing" (1990: 39). Horatio's role is a little different: his name implying *ratio* or reason as well as Horatian decorum, he supports not revenge per se but rather Hamlet's experimental path of evaluating and rerouting the Ghost's command. If Hamlet is the object and mirror of our imaginary fascination, Horatio directs the symbolic dimension of our subjective capture within the scenes before us. A late remnant of the classical chorus, Horatio performs this work in the mode of public opinion formation, as he goes about testing, weighing, and summarizing the state of the union throughout the drama. As such, Horatio is another figure for us, the audience, not a *princeps* or First Citizen like Hamlet, functioning at the head of the signifying chain, but rather situated discreetly within the devolution of public reason, a figure of normative consciousness within the play, between the play and its audience, and in the constitution of tragedy as a genre.

If the thin friendship of the fellowship of sentries is signed by the *collective consent to swear*, the thick friendship between the play's two philosophers is signed by the *fact and act of election*, a key term in the play's interlocking political and theological vocabularies. Hamlet and Horatio share a private moment:

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Hor. Here, sweet lord, at your service.  
 Ham. Horatio, thou art e'en such a man  
 As e'er my conversation cop'd withal.  
 Hor. O my dear lord.  
 Ham. Nay, do not think I flatter  
 [. . .]  
 Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,  
 And could of men distinguish her election,  
 She hath seal'd thee for herself.

(3.2.53–65)

Horatio adapts a language of deference, but Hamlet responds by asserting their parity in friendship. Hamlet's "conversation"—his dealings, his social experience—has never met the match of Horatio, who in turn has become his partner in further conversation, in the *discorsi* of civil exchange. Hamlet goes on to say that he has "elected" Horatio as his special friend and confidant, the word implying the deliberative choice that distinguishes friendship from love. It also carries a Calvinist overtone: Hamlet deigns to "elect" Horatio much as God elects His saints, repeating, reversing, and rendering horizontal—profaning—Hamlet's own terrible election by the Ghost. The scope of "election" here is primarily private, but the word carries political connotations elsewhere in the play, and it is thence we must follow it, towards the temporal and conceptual *eschatia* of the drama.

## PROPHESYING ELECTION

In Denmark, the king was elected by the Council, consisting of the major nobles of the land, a choice ratified by representatives of the common people. The reigning monarch played a substantial but not decisive role in shaping the election of his successor, and one sixteenth-century case involved the contested elections of an uncle and a nephew. Gunnar Sjögren describes the happier coronation of Christian IV in 1596:

The Ordinator, the Bishop of Sjælland, asked the twenty Councilors to come forward and join simultaneously in putting the crown on

the head of the King . . . The King was crowned with the following words: “Your Majesty, accept *from us* the Crown of this State in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

(Sjögren 1983: 36, 38; his italics).

Neither a classical republic nor a hereditary kingdom (though closer to the latter than to the former), the elective monarchy of Hamlet’s Denmark could hold a mirror up to England’s own succession worries while also prophesying more distinctive forms of constitutionalism that might emerge from a genuine crisis in the crown.<sup>13</sup>

Various scholars have discounted the elections at Elsinore in order to tighten the play’s analogies with the late Elizabethan scene, including James’s own tortured family romance and the interest of the Essex group in furthering his claims to England’s throne. The most interesting and symptomatic of these apologies is the one mounted by Carl Schmitt, the conservative Catholic jurist who became the legal architect of National Socialism by drafting Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, and who recovered political theology for modernity by publishing *Political Theology: Four Essays on Sovereignty* in 1922. In his 1956 essay, *Hamlet oder Hekuba? Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* [Hamlet or Hecuba? The Intrusion of Time into the Play], Schmitt argues for a strong relationship between Hamlet and James, a coupling that enters the play not as an allusion or reflection, but as what he terms an *Einbruch*—an intrusion, a break-in, a traumatic incursion of real history into the space of the play.<sup>14</sup> In order to mount this argument (itself quite complex and sophisticated), Schmitt feels compelled to neutralize the “elective” character of Denmark’s monarchy. The “dying voice” of the reigning monarch plays a major role in the choice of a successor, he notes, and the elections were always in-house: the king is:

bound to name a member of his own royal clan, a son or brother or sundry fellow kin. The *dying voice* is, in other words, ordained by the old blood right; it had an originally sacred character . . . still recognized in James’ writings on the doctrine of the divine right of kings.

(Schmitt 1956: 60)

It is not clear, however, that election in *Hamlet* can or should be kept so firmly apart from its liberal post-history. When Hamlet returns

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from his aborted trip to England, he declares to Horatio that Claudius “hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother, / Popp’d in between th’election and my hopes” (5.2.65). Hamlet comes closest to subscribing to the Machiavellian persona that he elsewhere assumes as a pose in the same moment that he calls our attention to the elective character of the Danish monarchy. It is not his *succession* to the throne by primogeniture that has been stymied by Claudius, Hamlet tells Horatio, but rather his *election* to it. If this prince suffers from frustrated ambition, his foiled hopes reach beyond inherited blood right to include the chance for some form of political self-actualization on a broader public stage.

When he returns to the word again in his final speech, it is to “elect” Fortinbras:

O, I die, Horatio,  
 The potent poison quite o’ercrows my spirit.  
 I cannot live to hear the news from England,  
 But I do prophesy th’election lights  
 On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.  
 So tell him, with th’occurrences more and less  
 Which have solicited—the rest is silence.

(5.2.357–63)

Schmitt, following J. Dover Wilson, insists that Hamlet’s act is fully intelligible within the terms of England’s own monarchy: “This is the *dying voice* with which Hamlet names Fortinbras, with which Elizabeth will name James and that, in the year 1658, they attempt to assume at Cromwell’s death in favor of his son Richard.”<sup>15</sup> Yet Hamlet, unlike Elizabeth, is not sovereign when he gives his dying voice to Fortinbras, for he himself has not been elected; Denmark is in effect headless once Claudius dies. Hamlet “prophesies” the election of Fortinbras, not naming his successor outright but rather initiating a political process by which Fortinbras will likely come to power. Election, though not “free” in the liberal sense, is nonetheless distinct from what Schmitt calls the political decision. Whereas decision names the extralegal judgment of the sovereign in a state of emergency, “election,” as we saw in Hamlet’s earlier musings on friendship,

implies deliberation, rationality, and choice.<sup>16</sup> Whereas *decision* steps outside the law in order to make a sovereign judgment, *election* occurs within and fundamentally reaffirms the law. Election, unlike decision, implies *consent*: consent to a constitutional process, and consent to concur with the results of the process.<sup>17</sup> “Election” itself belongs to the people through its representatives, not to the monarch; if Hamlet predicts Fortinbras’s election here, his voice issues from a place somewhere between that of the dying sovereign and that of the body politic that must ratify any new king. Turning to the phalanx of doubles and foils that have assembled around him in the course of the drama, the *princeps* as sovereign-in-waiting becomes the First Citizen, initiating an election that by definition exceeds the scope of his own life and will.

Moreover, the man whom Hamlet names, far from being a Danish clansman, comes from *out of state*. Schmitt writes, “a word like *Wahl* or *election* must only be understood in connection and collusion with the concrete order of a people and its dynasty” (1956: 59). For Schmitt, a “people” is a *Volk*, defined nationally and ethnically. But the English word “people” has two competing roots in Greek thought: the people as *ethnos* represents the national idea emphasized by Schmitt in this essay, while the people as *demos* suggests a group constituted by its institutions. While in many national formations (including ancient Athens), these two forms of the people overlap almost completely, citizenship steps forward as a discourse and a problem precisely at the moment when the two circles separate out around an alien element that requires either naturalization or exclusion.<sup>18</sup> Fortinbras, a new prince in the Machiavellian paradigm, introduces a measure of heterogeneity into the state, whose institutional and demographic circles cannot remain identical to each other under the late innovation of his coming rule.

A mixed social body shows up symptomatically throughout the play as a specter of election gone wrong. Laertes returns to Denmark “in a riotous head,” the possible candidate of a popular election: “They cry: ‘Choose we! Laertes shall be king!’” (4.5.101, 106). Meanwhile, “the distracted multitude” loves Hamlet (4.3.4), though “the people” is also “muddied”—mixed up and adulterated, rendered untransparent to itself—by the death of Polonius (4.5.81–2). And

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then there is “a certain convocation of politic worms”: equal among themselves, they sublimely level “your fat king and your lean beggar” in the common communion of corpses (4.3.19–24). Hamlet thinks of the world itself as a “foul and pestilent congregation of vapors,” an uncivil society of heterogeneous elements. Along with references to “the late innovation” (2.2.330) and “fine revolution” (5.1.89), the play assembles a multitude of phrases and images concerning political and social change. These images never cohere into a positive program of constitutional reform or popular rule, instead congregating distractedly around the undiscovered country of the play’s political potentialities, “th’occurents more and less” that Hamlet bequeaths unenumerated to Horatio.

Schmitt would like Hamlet to represent Denmark in the *volkisch* sense: “Hamlet’s direct, unequivocal right to succeed the throne arises from only one factor in the Nordic order of succession to the throne, the sacred blood right, in other words from the divine right of kings that James always appealed to” (1956: 61). Yet the declamatory energy of Schmitt’s claim indicates that Hamlet’s rights, as well as his commitment to those rights, may not be so unequivocal after all. Throughout the play, Hamlet commits the most extraordinary verbal abuse on the tropes of political theology: more than kin and less than kind, the king is a thing of nothing; Claudius, wed to the body politic through his marriage to Gertrude, is Hamlet’s obscene mother (and the nation’s, too). With the office of kingship already contaminated by the dubious virtues of Hamlet’s father and further violated by the usurpations of Claudius, the prince takes sardonic pleasure in finding something rotten in the linguistic state of sovereignty.

Yet perhaps it is in the negation of these sacred tropes of kinship that Hamlet eventually finds the space for his own subjectivization, the “interim” he calls his own when he returns to Denmark:

It will be short. The interim is mine.  
And a man’s life’s no more than to say “one.”  
(5.2.73–74)

Opening up only to close again, life in and as the interim lasts no longer, Hamlet says, than a man can say “one.” “One” is another

name for the *princeps*, he who is “first” or “one,” but it also suggests the unfolding of a sequence or series. In this interim, Christopher Pye has argued, Hamlet transforms the passivity of delay within the endless cycle of revenge into the activity of an anticipatory deadline, a call to action that allows the prince to become a subject (Pye 2000: 112). The subjectivizing “interim” marked by election orients Hamlet in a sequence of equivalent figures, his foils and doubles, his friends and his successors. If he accepts the beat of “one” as the space of his own life, it is not to remain sublimely apart, but rather to enter into a queue of fellows, to become *primus inter pares*. Hamlet’s final words, I argue, announce not his accession to kingship in the moment of death, but rather his passage into the chain of friendship that will survive Hamlet and take up his story: “Horatio, I am dead./Thou liv’st. Report me and my cause aright/To the unsatisfied” (5.2.280–2). If so, he joins an uncommon commonwealth, sutured out of a grab bag of friendship styles whose conflicting social energies threaten to remain forever “unsatisfied.” Hamlet can only address himself to the world at large through the singular voice of Horatio. Their intimacy creates an existential measure that must find weaker forms of fellowship wanting, but it may also leave us, as Paul Kottman has argued, with a renewed model of human plurality.<sup>19</sup>

The election of Fortinbras takes place on the other side of the sublime abjection and debasement of the sacral metaphors that buttress traditional sovereignty. Fortinbras stages the play’s final tableau:

Let four captains  
 Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,  
 For he was likely, had he been put on,  
 To have prov’d most royal; and for his passage,  
 The soldier’s music and the rite 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.

(5.2.400–8)

Here the pomp and circumstance of princely elegy—the bitter-sweet motif of sovereignty interrupted—put Hamlet to rest. Fortinbras

strong-arms Hamlet's legacy into the mold of the soldier manqué, borrowing capital from the prince's lost future in order to fund his own military campaign. At the end of the play, *princeliness equals potentiality*, urged in a "royal" as well as military direction by the weight of history, narrative, and blood right, yet never fully disclosed or realized, and hence acting as a promissory note for a politics to come. In a Greek tragedy, these final lines were called the *exodos*, the "exit ode" delivered by the Chorus on its way off the stage. At the end of the *Oresteia* and the *Antigone*, the vacuum left by the terrible destruction of the royal house opens onto a scene in which political institutions stand to gain new scope and momentum. Shakespeare's Denmark is, of course, no Athens, and constitutional conditions and outcomes hang very far on the horizon indeed. At the end of *Hamlet*, the monarchy remains a monarchy, in the hands of a foreign strong-arm who is more thug than scholar, more a dictator seizing the occasion of emergency than either an anointed king or an elected magistrate. (There is a bit of Schwarzenegger in Fortinbras.) The political possibilities that attend election disappear even before they are enunciated. Yet an interim has opened up in a scene in which royal primogeniture is haunted by the suspect ghost of sovereignty past and displaced by the ambiguous prophesy of elections future. If the margin of subjectivity wrested by Hamlet by the end of the play is "sovereign," this hard-won sovereignty is not based exclusively on kingship and kinship (*pace* Schmitt), but rather on friendship and citizenship in their emancipatory promise.

If the move towards citizenship represents a set of gains (more equality, collectivity, and diversity in the social and political body), it also comes at considerable costs. One such casualty is Hamlet himself, who may become against all odds a political animal, but only at the cost of his own life. But Hamlet is intentional, not collateral damage; it is the women who must be counted among the play's civilian casualties. In their analyses of Greek tragedy, both Froma Zeitlin and John Winkler have emphasized the sexual stakes of the epebes' transitions into citizenship: Winkler maps the varieties of manliness—competitive versus corporate, cunning versus honorable—required by the polis, as well as the intimate relationship between Greek citizenship and military discipline, while Zeitlin calls attention to the

misogyny mobilized by the *ephebeia* in its struggle to purge itself of feminine attributes (Zeitlin 1984: 159–94). When Louise Schleiner makes the case for the impact of the *Oresteia* on *Hamlet*, she begins not with friendship but with matricide; the closet scene, she writes, preserves its “revision of matricide against intense psychic pressure,” “releasing some of it through the sword thrust into the body of Polonius” (1990: 37). Hamlet’s verbal cruelty to Gertrude is topped only by his verbal cruelty to Ophelia, and both are dead by the end of the play. Hamlet’s sexual rage can certainly be linked, though not exclusively attributed, to the channels of friendship that allow him to drain off and manage some of the urgency of the Ghost’s command. Bonding with the boys creates an easement from the pressure of the paternal, but it may also quicken his sexual fear and rage, at least through Act 4, while also laying the ground for the military solution at the end of the play.

Although citizenship and masculinity bear a deep affiliation, it is by no means a complete or exclusive one. Antigone holds the same relation to her house that Orestes holds to his, each marking the disastrous implosion of aristocratic kinship relations in the ancient past, as staged within the juridical landscape of the new democracy. As William Blake Tyrell and Larry J. Bennett have brilliantly demonstrated in their monograph, *Recapturing Sophocles’ Antigone* (1998), Antigone’s insistence on burying her brother appears to support a conservative aristocratic ethos of family obligation, but ends up affirming the values of the public funeral oration associated with Pericles. Antigone is last princess and first citizen in this brave world new world; her name, meaning “against generation,” places her at odds with the sexual economy, as does the erotic coldness and transitivity of the ephebes whom she resembles. To break with kinship is to make war with sexuality, at least for a period. But ironically, in Shakespeare’s tragedy, written under a queen’s rule, no such parallel space exists for women; we will have to wait for the Jacobean exercise of *Measure for Measure* for anything approaching a Shakespearean Antigone.

Hamlet, like Orestes, passes through but also out of the modality of revenge, discovering something like citizenship on the other side of reciprocal violence and sacral sovereignty. Both heroes find themselves caught up in an imperative for revenge that comes from the grave,

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echoing forth from what each play projects as a prior time, an aging genre, and an antiquated ethic. There is something formal and fantasmatic about this epochal precariousness. Literature always stages itself as the mediating moment between a Then and a Next, calculated in terms of psychic, political, ethical, and cultural regimes. As critics, we find ourselves ascribing to these repeated narratives of transition as if they were statements of fact: Hamlet is the first liberal subject, the first modern tragic hero, the first neurotic. Part of the princely script is to be counted as first (*princeps*); reading *Hamlet* in terms of tragic paradigms helps us recognize this script as precisely that. Still, the play was working *something* through: a civil war would eventually grip Britain, and a new constitutional arrangement would eventually be reached.

At the end of the play, we are left with two doubles of Hamlet on the stage. Fortinbras is the Double as Rival. He hearkens from international law, with its discourse of “just enemies,” noble equals who could become friends through treaty and tribute; in this discourse friendship is a purely strategic category based on opposition to a common enemy.<sup>20</sup> Horatio is the Philosopher-Friend who hails from a more civic, humanist, and *ethos*-based tradition with its roots in Aristotle, Seneca, Cicero, and Montaigne. Both men have been “elected” by Hamlet as his representative, Fortinbras by receiving his dying voice and taking Hamlet’s place as king, and Horatio by speaking for Hamlet and his cause as his elected friend. Both Fortinbras and Horatio survive the Danish prince, largely sharing the stage in the last fifty lines of the play. Each represents a face and future of princely potentiality, the one a “new prince” in the style of Machiavelli’s *Il Principe*, and the other a public speaker and deliberator closer to the republican line of Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*. Although Shakespeare leaves Denmark in the hands of Fortinbras, he entrusts Hamlet’s story with Horatio, who in turn leaves it with us, “the unsatisfied.” At the end of the play, *deliberative reason* (in the form of Horatio) has forged an uneasy alliance with *reason of state* (in the shape of Fortinbras). By virtue of status, rank, and sheer bravado, Fortinbras has the upper hand, but it is Horatio who continues to concern us, inviting us to process current dilemmas that differ in content while still recollecting in shape or urgency those that so vexed and stirred Shakespeare.

These once and future anxieties, I have suggested, concern citizenship: What are the costs and purposes of civic education, and civic membership? How does “election” differ from “decision”? What are the constitutional limits of emergency? What is a sustainable equilibrium between *ethnos* and *demos*, between nation and state? These are some of the questions with which Hamlet and Horatio leave us. The rest is *not* silence. We are enjoined rather to continue to engage, through the play, with matters of ongoing interest: to think with Shakespeare about the shapes, origins, costs, and limits of political community.

#### NOTES

- 1 See Arendt 1969/1970 for an attempt to recover a discourse of power allied with citizenship rather than command. Benhabib 2004 has developed the implications of Arendt’s writings for contemporary citizenship debates in Europe and the United States.
- 2 Vidal-Naquet 1981; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981. John Winkler notes that “Epebe,” meaning “those at (*ep*) their youthful prime (*h b*),” also came to be “the specific designation of the eighteen- to twenty-year old citizen in military training” (Winkler 1985: 27).
- 3 Vidal-Naquet 1981: 153 cites George Thomson.
- 4 Winkler 1985: 39. Other scholars state more simply that the chorus was always drawn from the citizenry, whereas actors and playwrights could be foreigners; see Sourvinou-Inwood 2005: 15.
- 5 Arden editor Harold Jenkins, for example, notes the parallels (1982: 86; Introduction to *Hamlet*); Hadfield 2003: 572 has developed the connection in relation to sixteenth-century tyrannicide discussions.
- 6 Readings of Hamlet and Orestes include: Murray 1914; Kott and Taborksi 1967: 303–13; Guilfoyle 1990: 61–5; and Schleiner 1990: 29–48.
- 7 “In most constitutional states the citizens rule and are ruled by turns, for the idea of a constitutional state implies that the natures of the citizens are equal, and do not differ at all” (Aristotle 1984: *Politics* III. 1259b).
- 8 Paul Kottman (2006) “Speaking as One Witness to the Scene: *Hamlet* and the ‘Cunning of the Scene.’” Unpublished book chapter.
- 9 Aristotle 1984: *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX.8. 1168b. Shannon 2002: 3 cites Erasmus’s *Adagia* for the Latin equivalent: “*Amicitia equalitas*.”

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See Konstan 1998: 279–301 on the deep links among reciprocity, friendship, and the institutions of democracy in the ancient world.

- 10 On the Homeric origins of friendship and reciprocity and the egalitarian strains within the aristocratic ideal, see Donlan 1980.
- 11 Seneca develops both the distinction and dependence between political and comradely friendship, with a cosmopolitan emphasis absent in Aristotle:

The assiduous and scrupulous cultivation of this bond, which leads to our associating with our fellow-men and belief in the existence of a common law for all humankind, contributes more than anything else to the maintenance of that more intimate bond I was mentioning, friendship. A person who shares much with a fellow human being will share everything with a friend.

(1969: 97)

- 12 Schleiner 1990: 38 notes Caxton's spelling; Guilfoyle 1990: 62 cites Pikeryng's *Horestes*, a play produced in 1567–68.
- 13 Critics have mapped late Elizabethan succession worries onto the plot of Hamlet with varying degrees of allegorical precision, which often requires underplaying the elective character of the Danish monarchy (e.g. Charnes 2006: 59). Hadfield 2003: 566–70 summarizes the debates. I concur with Pye: if Shakespeare's Denmark manifests "a mixed form in which a vestige of lineal power is preserved in the form of prophetic knowledge," Hamlet's prophesy of election "equally anticipates a contradiction at the heart of the liberal subject, a subject defined by its freely contractual relation to the political/symbolic domain" (2000: 117).
- 14 Schmitt 1956. One section has been translated as "The Problem of the Tragic" in Schmitt 1987: 133–51. My student Jennifer Rust has translated the section on election and succession cited here, last accessed June 4, 2007 at [www.thinkingwithShakespeare.org](http://www.thinkingwithShakespeare.org). On Schmitt and Hamlet, see especially Kahn 2003: 67–96 and Caverero 2002: 121–88.
- 15 Schmitt 1956: 59 follows closely J. Dover Wilson's *What Happens in Hamlet*, first published in 1935.
- 16 Schmitt 1922: 5 begins *Political Theology* with the famous formulation, "Sovereign is he who decides the exception." In their helpful critique of Schmitt, Heller and Fehér distinguish between decision as will and decision as choice:

Greek philosophy knew nothing about will. In Aristotle, decision is interpreted as choice and it follows the act of deliberation. If the act of decision is not the act of will but the act of choice, *popular sovereignty is possible under the conditions of social diversity and heterogeneity.*

(Heller and Fehér 1991: 412).

- 17 Cf. Archard 1998: 11:

Individual acts of voting are clearly, in the first instance, the formal expression of personal preferences for some candidate, party, or policy. Their full significance, however, is that individuals thereby participate in a process whereby an overall outcome is determined by the voluntarily expressed preferences of everyone who votes.

- 18 Balibar 2004: 8 distinguishes between “*ethnos*, the ‘people’ as an imagined community of membership and filiation, and *demos*, the ‘people’ as the collective subject of representation, decision making, and rights.” On the figure of the foreigner in democratic theory and its narratives, see Honig 2001: 8.

- 19 On Hamlet and Horatio, Kottman (unpublished) writes:

Hamlet does not simply perish alone, after all, but dies *to* Horatio, who, it is decided, must survive him. Indeed, Hamlet is able to grasp his death only in terms of his living, dying relation to Horatio: “Horatio, I am dead,/Thou livest” (5.3.343–4), “O, I die, Horatio” (5.3.357).

Kottman further writes:

From the raw material of this ontological plurality [the sheer gathering of people in a theatre], the scene fashions a new plurality, a singular ‘those’ who were on the scene, a unique ‘they’ who are distinguished from all others in the world inasmuch as they alone can address one another as witnesses.

- 20 On the friend–enemy distinction in international law and modern politics, see especially Schmitt 1996.