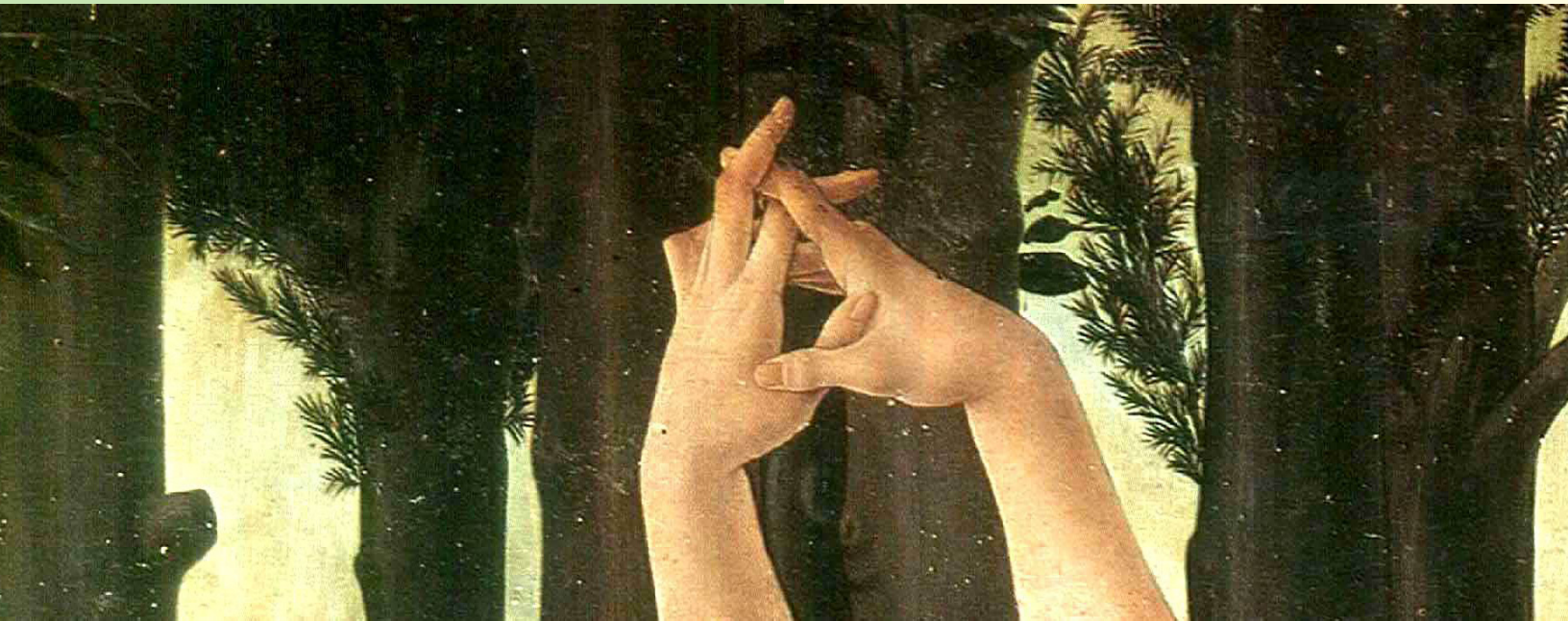


SHAKESPEARE
and Forms of Life



A SEMINAR
with Victoria Silver
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Results [Ergebnis (52-55)]

What is the result of our efforts on the problem of Hamlet?

1. The first is a rational insight that explains the unbelievable excess of existing interpretations of Hamlet. The riddle does not allow itself to be elucidated by the content of the stage play itself, nor by the inner relations of a self-contained; however, this riddle is also not to be understood by transforming it into a question of the subjectivity of the poet because an objective historical reality penetrates the play from the outside. The many interpretations pursued for over two hundred years are not really rendered meaningless with this awareness, however. In the inexhaustible abundance of ever-new interpretations and interpretive possibilities, the mythical quality of Hamlet is actually maintained. One may well say, however, that it would not make sense anymore to pursue interpretations such as these that are carried on in the style of psychology. The psychoanalytic interpretations of father-and mother-complexes were the last stage and at the same time the death spasm of the purely psychological phase of Hamlet interpretations.

2. We have distinguished mere allusions from true reflections of the contemporary present (Essex) and from genuine intrusions. If we recognize and respect in the taboo of the queen and the transformation of the avenger type the genuine intrusion of historical reality, we can let both rest and leave them open. Then the way becomes free for an unrestricted play. One can then perform Hamlet as pure theater, as Jean-Louis Barrault did in 1952. Only the shadow of objective reality must nevertheless remain visible. Otherwise the play is a slightly crass so-called tragedy of fate, especially the conclusion with the mixed-up rapiers and the poisoned wine and its many deaths, and the play runs the risk of becoming [a boulevard ballad(?) (Moritat)] interlarded with brilliant reflections(?). All the same, the inoffensive play results in a better and inwardly freer representation than the continuation of attempts to pump up intrusions with philosophical or psychological associations (Introduzierungen).

3. As soon as we have found our way to an impartial theater play, all historical and anti-historical misunderstandings are overcome. We have already refuted one historical misunderstanding. It would be foolish to play Hamlet in the mask of James. This would be either a historical panopticon and nineteenth century costume drama (Meiningerei) or just the attempt to give life to a spectre, a kind of vampirism. No archive, no museum, and no antique dealer can conjure the present of a myth with its kind of authenticity. Shakespeare's greatness still resides precisely in the fact that he recognized and respected the tragic core of the existing chaos of his age and of the quickly antiquated flotsam of daily events and trashy literature.

However, deliberate modernization as a reaction against historicism also misses the target. It is understandable when one considers the grotesque misunderstandings of historicism and knows which obvious errors are associated with the word "history." Where history is only understood as the past and that which "has been" and when the events of the past are no longer understood as present or real, the protest against out-dated costumes is meaningful and one must perform Hamlet in tails. But this is only a polemical reaction that remains bound to its enemy. Its conclusion is no more than a momentary effect, and its consequence is rapid self-destruction. From Hamlet in tails to Offenbachiana (*zur Offenbachiade*) is then hardly far.

4. In conclusion, the final and greatest benefit, at which my own ambition aims in my efforts concerning the problem of Hamlet, should be at least hinted at here. It consists in the fact that in distinguishing Trauerspiel and tragedy, we recognize that indestructible core of a singular historical reality that transcends every subjective invention and recognize its elevation in myth.

As is generally known, the European spirit has demystified and demythologized itself since the Renaissance. Nonetheless, European poetry has created three great symbolic figures: Don Quixote, Hamlet, and Faust. Of these, one,

Hamlet has in any case already become a myth. All three are oddly enough readers of books and thus intellectuals, so to speak. All three are become disoriented as a result of the intellect. Let us pay attention, then, to their origins and provenance. Only Don Quixote is Spanish and purely Catholic; Faust is German and Protestant; Hamlet stands between them in the middle of the schism that has determined the fate of Europe.

To me, this appears to be the final and greatest aspect of the theme of Hamlet. Ferdinand Freiligrath's poem, "Germany is Hamlet," and his allusion to Wittenberg strikes one as an intuition of this connection. Thus a horizon opens in which it appears logical to remember the deepest source of tragedy in the historical reality of Mary Stuart and her son James. Mary Stuart is still something always other and more than Hecuba to us. The fate of the Atreidae does not stand as near to us as that of the unhappy Stuarts. This royal line was shattered by the fate of the schism in European faith. The seed of the tragic myth of Hamlet is grown in its story.

Excursus 1: Hamlet as Heir to the Throne

It is important for both the evaluation of Hamlet's demeanor and character and for the objective meaning of the dramatic events whether Hamlet was the rightful heir to his father's throne. For this particular case, King Claudius would be a usurper with all the moral and legal consequences and effects of this concept. He would not only be the murderer of the father, but also would have directly violated the law of succession of the son. Hamlet would not only be the avenger of his father, but also the defender of his own throne. The drama would not only be a revenge play but also a drama of succession.

It is, in effect, both, in differing degrees to be sure. In the first part, which extends to the middle of the third act, it is almost only a revenge play and appears to have the revenge assignment and its fulfilment as its exclusive content. In contrast, in the second part, which begins with the felicitous exposure of the murderer, a battle to the death for naked self-assertion is so predominant that the problem of the succession retreats and the audience hardly remembers it. Nevertheless, it is there. Indeed, the attempt at a compromise negotiation between King Claudius and Hamlet even becomes visible, a theme that runs through the play as a thin, barely noticeable strand and that first becomes visible when one connects with each other the points in act I.2.108-9 (Claudius recognizes Hamlet as the next in line for the throne and wishes to be a father to him), and act III.2.90-92 (Hamlet complains vis-à-vis the King that one feeds him with empty promises) and III.2.342-4 (the succession in Denmark). The remaining acts of the play--II, IV, and V--include, so far as I see, no hints of this curious interposition of a compromise proposal that the murderer makes to the son of the murdered.

John Dover Wilson devotes a careful investigation to the question of Hamlet's succession to the throne (*What Happens in Hamlet*, p. 30). His arguments pose the problem from the point of view of the question: Was Denmark an elective monarchy (*Wahlmonarchie*)? The question is answered in the negative. Claudius is marked as a usurper. Hamlet is presumed to be the heir and bearer of the succession to the throne in Shakespeare's drama. This appears to me to be the proper conclusion. However, the connection here with the contemporary situation of the years 1600-03 in England is quite astonishing. The question of "Scottish Succession" that Lilian Winstanley has placed in the middle of her book on Hamlet cannot be suppressed, as much as one might like to. Dover Wilson demonstrates that for the succession in England an "election" through a council took place that, for its part, observed the final will--the "dying voice"--of the predecessor. In this way, James had the "dying voice" of Elizabeth. Hamlet gives his "dying voice" to Fortinbras, whereby he also speaks of an "election" (V.2.354-55).

Just as significant as striking is Dover Wilson's remark, that one does not need to make a detour through the Danish constitution to understand the legal issue of the succession to the throne in Hamlet: "When Shakespeare and his audience (as he calls it in a literal translation) thought of the Danish constitution in English terms, then Hamlet was the rightful heir to the throne and Claudius was a usurper." In point of fact, if the English public thought of Shakespeare's Hamlet in English and not in archaic Danish terms, as is, in fact, historically obvious, then Hamlet's connection with James and the Scottish succession is palpable and must not remain secret.

When Hamlet speaks of King Claudius as a thief who has stolen the crown from a shelf (III.4.100), then he appears to speak not only as the avenger of his father, but also as the legitimate successor to the throne. But insofar as the word "election" plays a role, Denmark appears as an elective monarchy. Today the elective monarchy is understood as opposed to the hereditary monarchy (*Heute wird die Wahlmonarchie als ein Gegensatz gegen die Erbmonarchie aufgefasst*). It is assumed for the most part that the hereditary successor immediately ascends with the death of the bequeather. The

inheritor of the throne thus becomes king at the moment of the death of his predecessor, according to the formula: the dead bequeaths unto the living, *le mort saisit le vif*. In such a hereditary monarchy, Hamlet would already be King and Claudius usurper. In an elective monarchy, the successor to the throne first becomes king through election. Hamlet has obviously not been elected king, but rather Claudius. He understood that he had to become king in an orderly fashion immediately after the murder of his predecessor. It may be that in this way he obtained the crown by fraud, yet according to legal means and legitimate forms (*unter Benutzung legaler oder legitimer Formen*), but according to form and appearance (*der Form und dem Schein*), he is then rightful king and not usurper. Appearance matters a great deal in the law (*Der Schein gilt viel im Recht*), and the law depends, as Rudolph Sohm says, essentially on form.

In light of this problematic situation, a legal-historical clarification is advisable. Today, we distinguish sharply between elective and hereditary monarchies. By election, we mostly understand only a free election. Our current legal concepts have become positivist and decisionist. Our jurists are legalistic (*Legisten*), although in England less than on the Continent. In order to comprehend the concepts of the “dying voice,” the law of succession to the throne, and election, we thus need the legal-historical clarification that I would like to attempt briefly here.

Three different factors must be taken into account in the succession to the throne in the northern monarchies. The force and significance of the individual factors in relation to both of the others vary strongly according to era and nationality. Each individual factor remains, however, always recognizable as a particular independent force. Therefore, a word like *Wahl* or “election” must only be understood in connection and collusion with the concrete institutions of an individual people and its ruling house.

First of all, the successor to the throne is named by the previous sovereign, his predecessor, as the expression of his final will. This is the “dying voice” with which Hamlet names Fortinbras, with which Elizabeth will name James and that, in the year 1658, the English attempt to attribute to Cromwell at his death in favor of his son Richard. This naming by the predecessor is an authentic designation and is in no way a non-binding proposition or a mere recommendation.

However, it is also no arbitrary selection over which the nominating predecessor could freely dispose. Normally, he 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, determined by the old blood right; it had an originally sacred character. Under the influence of the Roman church, the sacred character became strongly qualified and dismantled many times over. However, it had an effect long after and is also still recognized in James’ writings on the doctrine of the divine right of kings. The divine right of kings is, in its historical derivation, this sacred blood right.

In the history of our German kings, we have a famous exception that precisely as an exception validates the rule and concrete meaning of a Germanic law of succession to the throne. This is the naming of the Saxon Duke Heinrich by the dying King Konrad, who was a Frank. Heinrich did not name his brother, Eberhard, but rather the man of another clan as his successor to the throne. But he did this with a very remarkable rationale that strikes us as very poignant today: he regretted to have to assert that the luck, the *fortuna*, had abandoned his own clan of Franks, and had clearly migrated to the clan of the Saxon Heinrich. This naming of the Saxon Heinrich by the Frank Konrad, and the negotiations and transactions concerning Heinrich’s accession to the throne subsequent to it (918-19), have been researched and described many times by important historians. The norm is thus confirmed in light of this exception; the predecessor names the successor to the throne according to the right of blood (*Geblütsrecht*).

Alongside both of these factors—designation, or “dying voice” and blood right, or divine right of kings—the acceptance of designates according to blood right by the powerful majority of the realm or by a council made up of the powerful or by other participants appears as an additional third factor. In this case, there naturally occur various negotiations and decisions that could be characterized as *Wahl* or “election,” even though they are something entirely other than that which one recognizes today as a free election, and even though the designated successor to the throne is something other than an electoral candidate in the contemporary sense. Seating on the throne, anointment, and homage then follow the acceptance of the designated by the election, as well as the applause of the attendant masses. In all these individual procedures in which the renewed occupation of the throne occurs, one can detect something of “election.” Yet it is inexact and misleading to speak even here of an elective monarchy. All of these procedures combined, from the designation by the predecessor to the ceremonial seating on the throne, homage, and acclamation, generate a unitary whole that can only be correctly understood in its own era and nation (*Volk*).

King Claudius the murderer who prepared a sudden and unprovided death for Hamlet’s father, robbed him not only of life, then, but also the possibility of naming his son Hamlet as the successor to the throne. He stifled the dying voice and violated young Hamlet’s right of succession to the throne. The characterization of Hamlet as legitimate

successor to the throne and Claudius as usurper is thus simply not possible in the way that John Dover Wilson does it. Hamlet's direct, unequivocal right to succeed to the throne arises only from a single 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. Likewise, from the point of view of the question: "was Hamlet the rightful heir to the throne?" it is impossible to disregard the contemporary connection between Hamlet and James.

In our footnote 19, we indicated that the change in Hamlet's concerns occurred due to James' accession to the throne in the year 1603. In the version of Quarto 1 that predates James' accession to the throne, both motives—revenge and his own right to the throne—are distinctly recognizable. In the following versions of Quarto 2 and Folio 1, the battle over the succession to the throne becomes less important because it had lost its relevance as a result of James' accession to the throne.