Title: Hamlet the king: Jonny Patrick asks the question, 'Would Hamlet have been a great king of Denmark?'

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For he was likely, had he been put on, To have proved most royal (5.2.376)

Fortinbras, at least, is in no doubt: Hamlet would have made a fine king, a worthy successor to his father. Yet we must take into account the circumstances in which bras delivers his paean to the dead prince. Fortinbras has sound political reasons for publicly praising Hamlet. The Norwegian outsider has arrived as a conqueror, attempting to pacify and rule a confused and fractious Denmark. Knowing perhaps that Hamlet is 'loved of the distracted multitude' (4.3.4), the wise Fortinbras looks to curry favour with his new subjects by praising their dead favourite, just as Claudius is careful to praise Old Hamlet when he has taken the throne in Act 1, Scene 2. Fortinbras' praise is both politically expedient and risk-free--Hamlet is dead. We may doubt, then, the sincerity of Fortinbras' eulogy. Furthermore, he is speaking about a young man he has never met.

Shakespeare sets up clear parallels between the two young men from the outset, and yet studiously avoids bringing them together. Twice they narrowly miss one another: in Act 4, Scene 3, Fortinbras exits just as Hamlet enters; in Act 5, Scene 2, Fortinbras is just too late and encounters only a corpse among several. In Henry IV Part One, Shakespeare draws similarly strong parallels between two young men, Prince Hal and Hotspur, finally bringing them together in the penultimate scene in an armed confrontation that the audience has long anticipated and desired. We may anticipate a similar Hamlet-Fortinbras confrontation, but the play frustrates this wish, forcing us to settle instead for a showdown with the less princely Laertes which we would certainly not have predicted at the beginning of the play. Finally, if we look at the content of Fortinbras' brief speech, it hardly reflects the Hamlet we have come to know in the course of the play. He presents Hamlet above all as a military hero: he is to be borne 'like a soldier' and to be saluted with a volley of gunfire. This seems entirely inappropriate: the contemplative, sensitive, even feminine prince is given an entirely masculine, martial, noisy funeral. Horatio's farewell to the 'sweet prince' (5.2.338-9) is perhaps a little closer to the mark, coming as it does from his closest friend, though that too seems hardly to capture Hamlet, and is significantly interrupted by the 'warlike noise' of Fortinbras and his army. Fortinbras' presentation of Hamlet as the great king Denmark never had, then, should not be taken as the last word on the question of whether Hamlet would have proved most royal. We must look elsewhere in the play, and into its political and historical contexts for some guidance.

Renaissance ideas on kingship

The question of the qualities that make a good ruler, and the defects of a bad one, was widely debated during the Renaissance, and indeed had been examined by Classical authorities such as Plato in his Republic. There was much discussion of the training and education that a prince ought to receive in order for him to attain the virtues and knowledge that would allow him to rule justly and successfully. These questions took on a particular urgency in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England as it became clear that Elizabeth I would not produce an heir. We can see evidence of a certain yearning for a young, just and, significantly, male ruler in the popularity of plays such as The Famous Victories of Henry V, Shakespeare's own second tetralogy (Richard II, Henry IV Parts One and Two, Henry V) and also, perhaps, Hamlet itself.

Henry V seems to have been seen as the ideal English ruler--just, ruthless when necessary, pious, warlike, possessed of the common touch and a first-hand knowledge of his realm and its peoples. Three easily accessible texts on kingship from which we can draw clear, if sometimes conflicting, models of ideal kingship are Machiavelli's The Prince (1513, published 1532), Erasmus' The Education of a Christian Prince (1516) and James VI and I's Basilikon Doron (first published 1594). There is broad agreement in Erasmus and James I's texts on the qualities desirable in a king. They include goodness, wisdom, moderation, seriousness, a sense of justice, clemency, sobriety, a fatherly care for the state and its people, placing the common good above his own personal interests, bravery in a just war but also a love of peace, knowledge of his country and its people and a willingness to listen to counsel. Undesirable qualities in a king include vices such as gambling, drinking and lust, anger, taxing excessively, idleness, excessive pomp and a liking for flatterers.

Machiavelli's model is very different, self-consciously differentiating itself from the ideal of what a ruler should be and presenting instead a lesson in Realpolitik: 'I have thought it proper to represent things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined.' For Machiavelli, necessity and raison d'etat are all. A ruler should perform any action that preserves and strengthens his power, regardless of its morality: '[A prince] must not flinch from being blamed for vices which are necessary for safeguarding the state.' Whereas Erasmus argues that a ruler should actually possess certain virtues, Machiavelli states that he should merely seem to have them: 'He should appear to be compassionate, faithful to his word, kind, guileless and devout. And indeed he should be so. But his disposition should be such that, if he needs to be the opposite, he knows how ... Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are.' Claudius is in many ways a Machiavellian ruler, and a successful one at that. A master dissimulator, he appears to grieve for his brother, hides his own guilt and is willing to adopt underhand means to destroy the threat of Hamlet while maintaining his own position.

Hamlet the king

So how does Hamlet measure up against these various models? He is undoubtedly an attractive character: witty, learned, blessed with physical courage, a fine swordsman. The court and populace of Denmark have high expectations of him. For Ophelia, he is (or, crucially, was) 'The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,/The expectancy and rose of the fair state' (3.1.145-6). The common people love him. We should not, however, set great store by 'the great love the general gender bear him' (4.7.18), since Julius Caesar shows that the mob are fickle and easily swayed. Sure enough, the same crowd that loved Hamlet are clamouring for Laertes to be king on his return in Act 4, Scene 5. However, Hamlet does possess some of the virtues that were seen as desirable in Renaissance thought on kingship. He is very quick to spot, see through and ignore the flattery that a prince inevitably attracts. James I calls flattery 'the pest of all Princes, and the wracke of Republicks', while Erasmus and Machiavelli both devote a chapter to the danger of flattery. Hamlet very quickly sees through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and has great fun with flatterers such as Polonius and, of course, Osric. From a Machiavellian perspective, Hamlet is promisingly ruthless and willing to resort to underhand means where necessary, best illustrated by his despatching of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. Coldly, he states that 'They are not near my conscience' (5.2.58).

Hamlet has the discernment, shown in his choice of friends such as Horatio and enemies such as Claudius, that all good kings must possess. Furthermore, he has the necessary ability to hide his own feelings. Several of his soliloquies begin or end with what we might term 'bridge phrases' which mark the passage from public persona to private self: 'But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue' (1.2.159); 'Ay so, God bye to you. Now I am alone' (2.2.501); 'Soft you now,/The fair Ophelia' (3.1.88-9). Quickly, Hamlet can shift from private despair to public jocularity. Erasmus insists that the king's time is not his own, and that all private concerns must be forgotten or ignored: 'When once you have dedicated yourself to the state, you are no longer at liberty to live in your own way: you must maintain and cultivate the role you have taken'. He goes on to argue that a king must remember that he is always on duty and must remember that his every word and action will be scrutinised:

It is better for the prince to be engaged in public duties than to

spend his life hidden from sight. But whenever he goes out, he

should take care that his face, his bearing, and above all his

speech are such that they will set his people an example, bearing

in mind that whatever he says or does will be seen by all and known

to all.

From this point of view, Hamlet's upbringing in the court of Elsinore, where spying is rife and his every action scrutinised, is an excellent apprenticeship for a king and his own obvious concern for how he is perceived bodes well for his eventual kingship. This leads us to perhaps Hamlet's most kingly quality, namely his passion for the theatre and for acting (another area of similarity with Hal/Henry V). This may seem surprising: a few years ago an A-level question asked students to consider the statement that 'Hamlet should have been an actor, not a prince', as if these were mutually exclusive roles. In fact, Renaissance thinkers would see them as eminently compatible --a good king must be a good actor. In Basilikon Doron James I says that 'It is a trew old saying, That a king is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly doe behold'. Recent Shakespeare scholarship has been much exercised by the idea that political power rests on performance, that a king's authority derives from being seen to be a king, from the ceremonial rituals, public pageants and even dressing-up that create, confirm and perpetuate his authority. Of course, this makes the theatre a particularly apt place for a debate on kingship such as we see in Shakespeare's history plays, and also gives rise to a number of profound anxieties about political power: if kingship is only about performance, anyone can play the king. Erasmus seems to betray such an anxiety, wondering

If all that makes a king is a chain, a sceptre, robes of royal

purple, and a train of attendants, what after all is to prevent the

actors in a drama who come on stage decked with all the pomp of

state from being regarded as real kings?

Do you want to know what distinguishes the real king from the

actor? It is the spirit that is right for a prince: being like a

father to the state. It is on this understanding that the people

have sworn allegiance to him.

Hamlet's passion for play-acting, illustrated in his frequent theatrical metaphors, adoption of the antic disposition, his joy in the players and of course his staging of The Murder of Gonzago, far from disqualifying him from kingship, suggest that he might well delight and excel in the role.

Hamlet the man

Although Hamlet clearly possesses a number of kingly virtues, there are key features of his character that ultimately suggest that Denmark does not lose a great future ruler at the close of the play. It is not even clear whether Hamlet is really interested in or excited by the prospect of ruling Denmark. On the one hand, he suggests that Claudius 'Popped in between th'election and my hopes' (5.2.65), suggesting that frustrated royal ambition may be at least one source of his resentment. He is furious that his uncle stole 'the precious diadem/And put it in his pocket' but he may mean 'stole from my father' more than or rather than 'stole from me'. Hamlet frequently seems contemptuous of kingship: he traces the passage of a king through the guts of a beggar in Act 4, Scene 3, and in Act 5, Scene 1 similarly speculates on how the dust of Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar might come to serve only to fill holes in a wall or a barrel. This disdain for the pomp and grandeur of kings may not in itself disqualify him from kingship. Quite the opposite, in fact: following Plato, Erasmus argues that 'only someone who has assumed an office unwillingly and not without persuasion is fit to be a ruler'. However, there is a difference between the healthy knowledge of the awesome responsibilities of rule and an indifference to its worldly trappings, and the actual lack of interest in being king that Hamlet shows. Hamlet in fact seems indifferent at best to his realm and his own prospective kingship. Denmark may love Hamlet, but he does not love it. He talks very little of his nation, and when he does it is with a Wittenberg student's contempt for an intellectual backwater: he bemoans the Danes' drunken coarseness in 1.4.14-22. Like Laertes, he is keen to leave Denmark at the beginning of the play and the prospect of banishment to England seems not to upset him at all. Erasmus insists that '[n]othing alienates the people's affection from a prince as much as when he enjoys going abroad, because they seem to be neglected by the one whom they would wish to be especially concerned for them'. Yet would Hamlet the king really confine himself to Denmark's narrow shores? When he gives his 'dying voice' to Fortinbras, we might argue that he makes one last dig at a country he does not love, handing Denmark over to a foreign prince who is unlikely to be a benevolent ruler.

Hamlet, then, is no patriot. The political life of his country, or any other, seems hardly to interest him at all. Hamlet's major concern is himself, and it is notable that his soliloquies frequently follow a pattern whereby he begins with a stimulus in the outside world, but before long has moved into himself. This is not to accuse Hamlet of selfishness, more to say that the study of himself and of humanity occupy him more than questions of kingship. As such, he is highly unlikely to prove a good or successful king. Erasmus argues that the king 'must take account of the other people's interests and disregard his own...His mind must be drained of all personal feeling, and while he is engaged in public business he must think of nothing but the people.' Can we really imagine Hamlet being able to do this?

Hamlet has so many virtues, but they are not the virtues of a king, and he is all the better for this. He is ultimately a modern figure and he blends two figures that had emerged in the late medieval and early modern periods: the scholar and the courtier. Hamlet is an intellectual, a product of the universities that were born in medieval Europe and of the intellectual energies of the Renaissance and Reformation. His swordsmanship, wit and the hospitality he extends to Horatio, Marcellus, Barnardo, the players and to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern show that he is the epitome of a sophisticated modern courtier as described in Castiglione's The Courtier (1528). But he is no soldier, no politician, no king.

The Hamlet that Ophelia laments, the Hamlet who is dead before the play even begins, might have made an outstanding king of Denmark. But the Hamlet we meet could never have done so, because he is too interesting, complex and, perhaps, too good a man. Fortinbras is incorrect, and Shakespeare's play is the greater for it.

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