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Shakespeare's Prince of Denmark

Political Pandering in *Hamlet*

Moriah Theriault

Records from The World Shakespeare Bibliography indicate that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's most popular play in modern times. Because of this, innumerable articles of literary criticism have been written on the subject. As Robert Ornstein writes, "What is there left to say about *Hamlet*?" (502). But despite the immense popularity of the piece and the "millions of words already written" on it (Ornstein 502), one avenue has remained relatively untouched: *Hamlet's* setting in Denmark. The setting at Elsinore's castle has long been considered a mere backdrop for Shakespeare's complex narrative, relegating the famous prince of Denmark to being Danish in name only. As Lillian Schanfield expressed the de facto opinion, "Even when Shakespeare's plays are set in 'real' places like Vienna, Venice, Cyprus, or Windsor, we know that they were not intended to be actual representations of those cities or societies . . . One's expectation of *Hamlet* is not that it reflects a 'real Denmark,' whether of Hamlet's time or any other" (66–67). To Schanfield and the vast majority of scholars, the only genuine ties to Scandinavia seem to be in the plot of the play, which comes from the old Danish legend *Amleth*. But a closer analysis of *Hamlet* and an understanding of Danish history illustrates that the setting played a key role in forming Shakespeare's tragedy. *Hamlet* contains frequent cultural ties and insights into Danish tradition that demonstrate

intentional effort on Shakespeare's part to create a piece that would ring true with Danes, as seen in the accurate description of the castle in Elsinore, the deep-seated conflicts between Christian forgiveness and revenge, and the traditional cannon salutes. But this brings up an inherent question: why would the Bard go to great lengths to research and attempt to create an accurate representation of Danish culture? The answer lies with the head of England—King James and his wife, the Royal Queen Anne of Denmark. This paper will illustrate that Shakespeare's deep connections in *Hamlet* to Danish culture were a political maneuver and attempt at winning the favor of the future King and Queen.

Upon Queen Elizabeth's approaching death, King James VI of Scotland had the strongest claim to the throne as the closest living relative of the Virgin Queen (Stuart Successions Project). Throughout the general public, he was well recognized to be the future heir. This would have created interest in gaining King James VI's favor, particularly amongst artists who depended on nobles and royals for their patronage. Shakespeare had been in favor with Queen Elizabeth and it would have been in his best interest to earn the approval of the incoming foreign monarch. This was especially true considering James had a keen interest in languages, theology, writing, as well as having a "love of learning that lasted a lifetime" (Panton 259), making it likely he would choose to support one of the performing companies. But a crucial step in winning James' approval would have also included winning that of his Danish queen, Anne.

Queen Anne of Denmark had proved to be a formidable force in their marriage. Although academics have long disregarded her as a simple accompanying piece to her husband, recent scholarship has begun to recognize the significant part she played in influencing her husband and her "importance as a patron of the arts" (Panton 75). A key example of this is seen in the birth of their first son, Henry. Following Danish tradition, Anne wanted to raise her son herself. James saw this as unfit, preferring to send the child to governesses and tutors according to the custom amongst British aristocracy. But Anne persisted and even refused to move to England with James once he took the throne unless she would be given the ability to raise Henry in her own household. In the wake of her strength and determination, James conceded, illustrating the power and influence she had on her husband (Panton). As Alan Stewart accounts in his book on King James VI, her sway led Venetian envoy Nicolo Molin to comment in 1606, "She is intelligent and prudent; and knows the disorders of the government, in which she has no part, though many hold that as the King is most

devoted to her she might play as large a role as she wished . . . She is full of kindness for those who support her, but on the other hand she is terrible, proud, unendurable to those she dislikes” (Stewart 182). As a fascinated devotee to the arts, she used her power to become a patron to many architects, musicians, and playwrights. Knowing this, Shakespeare would have been inclined to win her favor so as to have the support of her husband.

This made the Danish setting of *Hamlet* a strategic choice, rather than coincidental. Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* between 1599 and 1601 with the likeliest date being 1601, just a mere two years before King James VI took the English throne in March of 1603 (Dates and Sources). This timing makes the connection apparent. The Bard was clearly aware of the significance Danish royalty would soon play in England. By choosing to make Denmark the central location of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was attempting to cater to Queen Anne and the King. Not only does the play take place in Denmark, but the narrative revolves around the Kronborg castle in Helsingør (Elsinore is the anglicized name)—the very same castle where Queen Anne grew up.

The use of Kronborg castle in *Hamlet’s* narrative catered to Queen Anne not only because it was her birth home but also because of the Danish pride that was instilled in it. Kronborg castle in Helsingør was an impressive display of power and beauty. Upon the order of Queen Anne’s father King Frederick II, renovations began on the castle in 1574, making it a magnificent piece of architecture upon its completion in 1585. Queen Anne had married King James VI shortly after the conclusion of the reconstructions in 1589, sailing away with the memory of her home fresh on her mind. This was likely a source of her noted admiration for architecture, ensuring the need that Shakespeare’s description of the castle be detailed and accurate. Shakespeare succeeded in this, according to William Jansen, a Danish *Hamlet* expert located in Denmark, who points out, “The topography of Hamlet . . . does seem to show that someone knew his or her way around the castle” (Bolt). The descriptions were also accurate enough that today performances and tours are given at the Kronborg castle in which the audience travels from room to room as the narrative progresses, physically following in the steps of the characters as they move throughout rooms of the castle (e.g. see fig. 1). Speaking on Kronborg, Ralph Berry writes, “It radiates upon the play its own stage directions. The highlighted words in the text become living realities close to the actors’ space . . . The play is made for the castle” (Berry). The similarities between the layout of the castle and Shakespeare’s descriptions are illustrated even from Hamlet’s first encounter

with the ghost.

After the Prince's interaction with the ghost, Horatio tells Hamlet he mustn't follow the ghost because he might "tempt [him] toward the flood . . . / Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff / That beetles o'er his base into the sea" (1.4.658–660). It is no wonder drowning or falling into the sea is on Horatio's mind when considering Kronborg's structure. The platform where the three stand not only has a clear view of the sea but is also surrounded by water, as Kronborg is encircled by high walls that form cliffs over a deep-filled moat (see fig. 2). The text is especially apt when considering that when *Hamlet* was written, a fall would have been "a drop straight into the Sound" (Bolt).

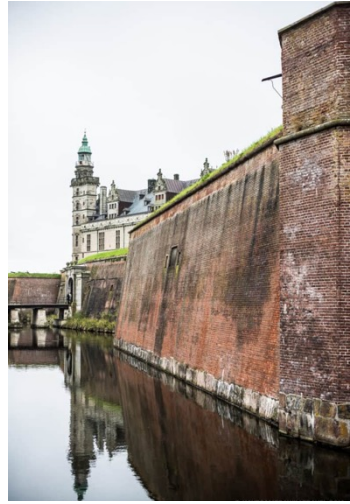


Figure 1: Moat at Helvinor

Insight into the castle layout is also reflected in the scene where the players arrive at the castle. As they enter Elsinore, a "flourish" of trumpets is heard announcing their arrival (2.2.1415). This sounding of welcoming trumpets illustrates a unique understanding of the Kronborg castle. As Kai Flor said in his book, *Kronborg*, one of the four towers was called Trometertårnet, "fra hvis galeri trompeterne blæste fanfares, når fyrstelige gæster kom på besøg" ("from whose gallery the trumpets blew fanfares when royal guests came to visit"). The 1950 Danish short film *Shakespeare og Kronborg* ("Shakespeare and Kronborg") filmed at Kronborg, which worked to show what the castle would have looked like during Shakespeare's time, depicted this, showing the scene's traditional calling trumpets in Trometertårnet ("The Trumpeter's Tower", e.g. see fig. 2).

A further connection between Shakespeare's description and the castle layout is seen in the crucial moments of act 2, scenes 3 and 4. In these scenes, Hamlet is headed to confront his mother when he finds Claudius praying. He then proceeds to his mother while Claudius continues to pray. When Hamlet arrives at his mother's chamber, he hears a noise from behind the tapestry and stabs,



Figure 2: Schroeder's Trometertårnet

assuming it is Claudius. But why would Hamlet think Claudius would be able to reach his mother's chambers faster than him and without being seen, though Hamlet left before him? An answer is found in Kronborg's layout. The room where Hamlet observed Claudius praying was most likely the chapel. Though the stage direction simply states a room in the castle, large productions have staged the scene in the castle chapel, as it is the most natural location to pray. The 1964 *Hamlet at Elsinore* adaptation—produced with Danish Radio—filmed the scene in Kronborg's chapel (see fig 3). The Kenneth Branagh adaptation (see fig 4) likewise used a chapel for the scene, even using a set resembling Kronborg's chapel (see fig. 5).

By viewing the scene as taking place in the chapel, the question regarding how Claudius could have reached the chambers before Hamlet is quickly answered. The Kronborg chapel is connected to the Queen's Gallery, a direct



Figure 3: *Hamlet at Elsinore* (top left). Figure 4: Branagh's Chapel (top right).
Figure 5: Kronborg Chapel.

path to the Queen's chambers. The gallery was "custom-built for Queen Sophie [Queen Anne's mother] to be able to quickly walk directly from her chambers to the ballroom or chapel" (Steves). This explains why Hamlet would have thought Claudius was able to reach the chambers before him, as Hamlet would have taken the longer, public route while Claudius took the direct. This shows how the layout of the castle not only matches the descriptions of Shakespeare but also plays a key role in the understanding of the play.

But how was Shakespeare able to give detailed accounts of a castle which he had never visited? There are two distinct possibilities. The first lies in the placement of the castle itself. Located on "Øresunden" ("the Sound"), the castle was a central port which sailors frequently traveled through. Ships would have to dock in order to pay the toll enforced by the towering fortress (Øresundstolden). This meant that many of the sailors traveling would have stopped in Elsinore and been impressed by the magnificent Kronborg Castle. They would have gone back to England ready to regale their stories, from which Shakespeare easily could have acquired details on the castle. But even more plausible, Shakespeare likely heard about the castle from the traveling actors that performed there prior to working with Shakespeare. In 1586, English actors William Kemp, Thomas Pope, and George Bryan visited Elsinore to perform at Kronborg's inauguration following completion of the castle's renovations (Butler). The group worked under Frederick II in Kronborg Castle for three months, providing "music and pastimes for banquets and other social occasions" (Butler). Because of this, the players would have become well acquainted with the castle layout and inner workings of the Danish court. Following their sojourn in Denmark, the players returned to England where they then began to work closely with Shakespeare. This makes it likely that the Bard's knowledge of the castle layout came from the three players. Their experience and key background allowed Shakespeare to add the necessary details that would have impressed Queen Anne. But Shakespeare represented more than just the layout of the castle in Helsingør. He also represented deep cultural ties to Danish history.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, there are recurring themes of revenge as various characters come to terms with the loss of loved ones. These themes take greater meaning when understood in the Danish historical context. *Hamlet* occurs after the Vikings' conversion to Christianity. But the process of conversion was a long and difficult one with various stages of paganistic revival. This led to deep-seated political and internal turmoil as the Dane's new religion came into

conflict with their history and culture. Shakespeare in turn represented these conflicts. This is seen, for example, in Laertes' plotting with Claudius following the death of his father. In this conversation, Claudius asks Laertes, "(W)hat would you undertake, / To show yourself your father's son in deed / More than in words?" (4.7.313-15). His comment regarding being his "father's son in deed" reflects the Scandinavian blood oaths. In old Viking culture, "Violence, especially in the form of vengeance, was both the opportunity and means for preserving honor in Viking-age Scandinavia and followed concrete principles" (Tucker 69). In this protocol, it was the duty of the nearest kin to enact justice and take revenge. To shirk this duty was to bring great shame to one's self and family as well as show a lack of respect to the family member who had died. Accordingly, this is what leads Laertes to accept Claudius' challenge by answering, "To cut his throat i' the church" (4.7.316). Laertes sees his cultural and familial duty as even greater than his ties to Christianity. Claudius also responds tellingly, "No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize; / Revenge should have no bounds" (4.7.317-18). Again, this reflects the importance of the blood ties and vengeance protocols that existed in Danish culture. Shakespeare is clearly mirroring the Danish conflicts of paganistic culture and new Christian affiliation.

Hamlet is similarly bound. Upon visiting Hamlet to tell him the tale of his murder, his father tells him, "So art thou (bound) to revenge, when thou shalt hear" (1.5.692). As the most closely related male, it was Hamlet's duty to avenge his father. But Hamlet is also torn by the new themes of Christian forgiveness. He faces intense indecision and turmoil as he feels so strongly that he must avenge his father and yet cannot bring himself to kill his uncle. He laments:

Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
 O, vengeance!
 Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
 That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
 Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
 Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
 And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
 A scullion! (2.2.1621-28)

These feelings of divide are not surprising. Hamlet has just returned from school in Wittenberg, Germany, notably the same religious school Martin Luther attended. It is no coincidence that Shakespeare chose Wittenberg as the school where Hamlet studied, for it was in Wittenberg that Martin Luther

posted his '95 Theses', which "launched the Reformation and a new era in the religious and political history" ("Luther Memorials"). While the Reformation hadn't yet happened in the timeline of *Hamlet* (which takes place sometime between the 14th and 15th century), Shakespeare is clearly setting Hamlet up as a figure comparable to Luther. Just as Luther, Hamlet faces the conflicts that come from old traditions and a new religion colliding. This struggle was a very real one in Danish history and faced by many Danish Royals for years following the transition from paganism to Christianity. The challenge was so deep-seated that it still continues today as a small population of Danes strive to find their place as pagan believers in a country that has embraced Protestantism. By depicting this conflict as the central theme through *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was representing a struggle Queen Anne would have been very familiar with.

But perhaps the most certain of Danish cultural traditions included in *Hamlet* was the *kanonskål* ("cannon cheer"). Poul Grindler-Hansen, a senior researcher at the Danish National Museum and Kronborg expert, said, speaking on Kronborg's history, "[Frederick II] også havde noget, som bliver kaldt for kanonskåler. Det vil sige, at når man udbragt en skål til en fest ind på slottet så bliver det skudt en kanon af for at markere, at nu drikker Konge af Danmark altså en skål" ("[Frederick II] also had something called the cannon cheer. This meant that when there was a toast during a party in the castle, a cannon was shot outside to mark that the King of Denmark was cheering and making a toast") (Kronborg Castle). This *kanonskål* is first mentioned in act 1, scene 2 as Claudius tells Gertrude that because of Hamlet's gentle account, "No jocund health that Denmark drinks today, / But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell, / And the King's rouse the heavens shall bruit again, / Respeaking earthly thunder" (1.2.308–11). The cannons are then heard later as Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus wait upon the platform to see the ghost. The stage directions state "A flourish of trumpets and two pieces go off," to which Hamlet comments, "The king doth wake tonight and takes his rouse, / Keeps wassail, and the swaggering upspring reels; / And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down, / The kettledrum and trumpet thus bray out / The triumph of his pledge" (1.4.613–16). Then Claudius later speaks of the cannons a second time during the tense duel between Laertes and Hamlet. Claudius states:

Let all the battlements their ordnance fire.
The King shall drink to Hamlet's better breath, . . .
Give me the cups,
And let the kettle to the trumpet speak,

The trumpet to the cannoneer without,
 The cannons to the heavens, the heaven to earth,
 "Now the king drinks to Hamlet." (3.2.3730–3738)

Each of these instances occur at significant moments in Hamlet's development. The first happens immediately before Hamlet gives his first soliloquy and expresses his tumultuous feelings. The second immediately precedes Hamlet's confrontation with the ghost of his father. The third occurs as Hamlet finally takes action, joining the duel and then killing his murderous step-father. The fact that these each happen at such significant key points illustrate that Shakespeare wanted to draw attention to the custom. One reason may be that the Danish custom was so typical for Danes and yet so different from English ways. As Poul Grønder-Hansen further added regarding the tradition, "Det var noget, som man ikke rigtig kendte udlandet som fascineret udenlandske gæste på slottet . . . Det bliver så berømte . . . at det også bliver indarbejdet i Shakespeares tragedie *Hamlet* . . . for at give det sådan lidt locale historiske, localt kyrdderi" ("It was something people out of Denmark weren't familiar with and that fascinated the foreign guests who stayed at the castle. It became so famous that it was included in Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* . . . to add local history and color") (Kronborg Castle). Shakespeare may have put this distinct cultural tradition in these important sections to emphasize and highlight the unique Danish culture that would have been so important to Queen Anne.

The last mention of the cannons occurs as Fortinbras orders Hamlet a soldier's funeral. The very last written line of the play is the stage direction, "Exeunt marching, after the which a peal of ordnance are shot off" (5.2.3905). Again, this inclusion of the cannons occurs at a significant point. It is with the cannon sounding that Shakespeare finishes his play and puts the story of Hamlet to rest. But in this occurrence, the cannons are different. Instead of a *kanonskål*, the cannons are sounding a *kanonsalut* ("cannon salute"). Cannon saluting is also a significant part of Danish culture and Kronborg history. The salutes were given for Royal birthdays, births, deaths, and other special occasions. This tradition still continues at Kronborg and is an important cultural mark ("Kanonsalutering"). This makes it noteworthy that Shakespeare chose to end *Hamlet* with the tradition. The cannons were so important at Kronborg because it was through them they enforced the Sound toll. As the World Heritage Center states, "Around 1.8 million ships passed through the Sound during this period and all of them had to pay a toll at Kronborg Castle. For this reason Kronborg

Castle and its fortress became a symbol of Denmark's power" (Centre). By putting the canons throughout the central parts of *Hamlet* and ending on a *kanon-salut*, Shakespeare is recognizing and symbolizing the Danish strength, a tactic that would surely have been well-received by Queen Anne.

These attempts to create an accurate representation of Danish culture in order to win over Queen Anne and King James were clearly successful. Ten days after arriving in London to take the throne, King James announced he would patron Shakespeare's company, renaming the group the King's Men (Mabillard; Dickson). This couldn't have been more of a relief to Shakespeare's company. In 1597, they had lost their licensed playhouse and had been forced to call on the actors to pay for the replacement (Gurr). Even worse, in 1603 the theaters were closed due to a serious outbreak of the plague. But because they were named the King's Men by King James and Queen Anne, Shakespeare's group were able to continue to work, performing for high nobles outside of London (Mabillard). It is almost guaranteed that Shakespeare's political maneuvering with *Hamlet* helped save his company. King James and Queen Anne became "voracious consumers of theatre" (Dickson), with Queen Anne even requesting private performances from Shakespeare's company.

But the impacts of Shakespeare's political pandering with *Hamlet* went even beyond saving The King's Men; it allowed Shakespeare to form a key relationship with King James and Queen Anne that deeply influenced his future works. Though the ties to Queen Anne in *Hamlet* are previously unstudied, connections between Shakespeare's later plays and King James have been well discussed in academic research. *Macbeth*, for instance, has been illustrated to be a nod to King James' obsession with witches and sorcery. As HRH Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales and President of The Royal Shakespeare Company stated in an interview, "Shakespeare was not above a bit of flattery where royalty was concerned. It seems certain that Shakespeare and his King must have known each other well." But though Shakespeare carefully catered to his Royals, he also used his plays to critique—"to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.1870–71). For example, although Shakespeare includes the *kanonskål* to clearly cater to Queen Anne's culture, he also makes comments on the practice, commenting through Hamlet that the practice is "[m]ore honoured in the breach than the observance" (1.4.621). But despite how Shakespeare critiques the custom for representing them as drunkards, he still points out the Danish accomplishments, saying that the custom

misportrays them because it “takes/ From our achievements, though performed at height” (1.4.621.5). Through this, Shakespeare is able to maintain a careful balance between flattery and critique, even while writing to win the favor of the future monarchs. Jane Rickard says regarding this talent of Shakespeare’s, “This does not make Shakespeare a covertly subversive writer. Rather it highlights his determination to exploit the resources available to him but not to be limited by them, and his remarkable ability to operate within the parameters of political accept-ability while exposing and testing those parameters.” Therefore, while he still challenges some aspects of Danish culture throughout the play, he ultimately ends with a sign of respect. In this way, *Hamlet* is much like the cannons themselves; occasionally a derisive sign of Danish drunkenness but ultimately a salute to the Danish Royal—Queen Anne.

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