

Our Affairs from England

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Kiséry, András. *Hamlet's Moment. Drama and Political Knowledge in Early Modern England*. New York, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016. 340 pages. ISBN 9780198746201. Hb. £66.

András Kiséry performs a simple but brilliant trick. He takes some well-known and not-so-well-known Shakespeare-related texts that critics have used instrumentally in the past—to date plays, to reconstruct costumes or stage action—and reads them for what they are: commonplace collections or notes of a reader/playgoer who is interested in politics and diplomacy. The consequence of taking these texts seriously in their own right is an enlightening analysis of the place of Renaissance plays within the wider manuscript and print culture of the period. Kiséry shows how Shakespeare, Jonson, Chapman, and Marston use political material that circulated at the time, and then how the playwrights' appropriations of other texts feed back into the same culture through the various ways in which contemporaries read and reflected on those plays.

What Kiséry calls “Hamlet's moment” is a short period around the turn of the seventeenth century when theatrical culture and the culture surrounding theatres changed. These changes relate to the birth of modern politics—politics as a profession—and the modern public sphere that is eager to discuss politics. He compares the role of public theatres in disseminating political knowledge to present-day TV series like *The West Wing*; these shows have measurable impact on how people understand the workings of the state and the professions of those who run it. Programs like these make their audience want to discuss politics—just like Shakespeare's or Marston's plays did around 1600, thus contributing to the birth of modernity themselves. Despite the occasional well-chosen modern parallels, Kiséry's book is, nevertheless, a historicist study. The argument that these plays demonstrate an enhanced interest in internal and foreign affairs is not the same as claiming that they put forward a consistent political theory or agenda: Kiséry is deeply suspicious of the approach that sees the authors of these plays as political thinkers. These plays do speak about questions of sovereignty and legitimacy (topics that defined plays of the last decade of the sixteenth century), but also feature a distinctive curiosity in the job of servants of the states, secretaries, envoys, and the like.

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Chapter 1 revolves around Gabriel Harvey's extended marginal notes on his readings, and especially an analysis of his division of Shakespeare's works into categories of works which "the younger sort takes much delight in," like *Venus and Adonis*, and which "please the wiser sort," like *Hamlet*. What emerges from this discussion is the complex picture of the characteristics of Renaissance "political reading": practices of note-taking and commonplace-collecting, and how printing conventions encouraged such practices by marking memorable, quotable phrases on the margins. This then feeds into a comparative analysis of the ways in which highly-educated people like Harvey may have read political authors, like Machiavelli, and works of literature, like *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Hamlet*, to glean political expertise, which then they would synthesize into a body of practical political knowledge.

The second chapter turns our attention to diplomacy as a field where emerging politicians proved themselves, and how they used and disseminated the information that they gathered on their foreign missions. This chapter looks at diplomatic manuals, as well as the careers, letters, and works of Daniel Rogers, Giles Fletcher, George Carew, William Davidson, Henry Wotton, and others, who all hoped to enter the political sphere through showing their usefulness in diplomacy. They travelled abroad, sent letters, negotiated on behalf of the monarch or some nobleman, and when they returned, they often produced country profiles, transmitting useful diplomatic knowledge but also framing their embassy as a service that merits gratitude. Some of these careers blossomed, others were cut short, for example, by Essex's rebellion. The parallels with the actions of characters like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are striking: they gather information, report to the throne, and when sent on embassy to England, their mission fails when Hamlet intercepts their letters. The ambassador (another aspiring courtier-to-be?), who returns to report on the "affairs from England," finds no-one alive to thank him.

For me, the climax of the book was Chapter 3, which explores the significance of the changes that Shakespeare introduced to the Hamlet story, and to the way in which the world of politics is represented on stage. The chapter features a thorough comparative reading of the two surviving versions of the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, as well as other shorter passages. As opposed to earlier versions like François de Belleforest's *histoire tragique* of Amleth, which focuses on the discussions of hereditary rule and the subjects' right to resistance, *Hamlet* is interested in politics as a career in which its practitioners might succeed or fail. The chapter provides an enlightening analysis of how an older generation of courtiers like Polonius, who supposedly acted as the performers of the interest of the community, are gradually replaced by the younger generation of career politicians like Laertes and

Horatio. Their situation is marked by their dependence on patronage, rather than authority invested in them by the political body. The last section of the chapter, “Horatio’s Moment,” is a highly original analysis of the deep contrast between the rhetoric of friendship that Hamlet employs, and the limitations imposed by the reality of patronage on an emerging politician like Horatio. He “advances himself to a key position by his competent service and his ability to keep quiet about controversial issues” (31). It is not just his political success, but his very existence that is at stake when he chooses his friends and loyalties.

Chapter 4 looks at the dangers of collecting and conveying foreign intelligence, and anxieties about such knowledge ending up in the wrong or incompetent hands, especially that of the general public beyond court circles. In *Hamlet’s moment*, Kiséry argues, plays were still the most important source of knowledge of foreign politics for those who themselves did not take part in it—as opposed to after the 1640s, when news publications took over this role. The five plays by Chapman, written in this period, which all engage with contemporary or near-past French court politics, form the backbone of this chapter. These plays scrutinize the ways in which foreign intelligence is produced, transmitted, and authenticated on the receiving end. A special concern is the potential failures of the transmission process, such as malicious alteration or interception. “The tantalizing complexity and treacherousness of the uses of letters and documents in these tragedies is not only a philosophical and theological reflection on the nature of writing in general, but also, and perhaps more pointedly, an exploration of the perilous dynamics of the use of information and intelligence in the life of the political elite” (191).

The fifth chapter, which is the only other chapter fully devoted to a non-Shakespearean play, looks at the way in which Jonson attempted to present his *Sejanus* (1605) as an authoritative history, written in the vein (and based on) the “politic” style of historiography associated with Tacitus, Comynes, and Guiccardini. Perhaps this was the only play where I felt that the link to Hamlet’s moment was a bit tenuous. Yet, its inclusion is ultimately justified by the various connections it has to the other plays discussed in Chapter 6.

While previous chapters generally focused on one play and one topic, the last chapter of the book serves as a conclusion, by way of shorter analyses of three plays, Marston’s *The Malcontent* (1604), Chapman’s *Monsieur d’Olive* (1606), and Jonson’s *Volpone* (1607). The final section is an analysis of the notebook of Edward Pudsey, a Gloucestershire gentleman who collected memorable phrases from works of political philosophy, sermons, speeches, and twenty-six plays published in the early-1600s. The common thread in this chapter is the use of satire to explore desires of social mobility through

characters who pretend to be above their status by misusing one or more forms of political engagement that previous chapters examined from a serious perspective. Marston, Chapman, and Jonson may have thought that the many Sir Politic Would-bes, who gathered their conversational phrases and political knowledge from playbooks, were satire-worthy upstarts, but Pudsey's notebook consists of exactly such quotes, as a representative of the new way of seeing professional politics.

New historicist literary studies have been widely criticized for overstating the relevance and scope of their claims, but Kiséry's book is exemplary in its honesty about the limits of the knowledge we might gain by demonstrating parallels between different texts written at the same time. His primary interest is not in finding direct influences or drawing sweeping conclusions from single texts about an entire culture, but anchoring his claims in textual evidence of reading practices. His method of highlighting parallels in annotating and excerpting plays and political works by the same people allows him to reconstruct convincingly how they could have influenced playgoers/readers.

A particularly appealing feature of Kiséry's writing is his generous sign posting and cross-referencing, which skillfully guide the readers' attention to subtle details and connections. Despite the occasional lengthy sentences, Kiséry's book is written in a lively, often entertaining, sometimes even ironic, but always lucid academic prose.

In modern performances some characters, like Cornelius or Voltmand, are often cut, others, like Polonius and Dogberry are played for comic effect. Yet, for audiences who lived in "Hamlet's moment," their speeches served as sources of information and as examples of the terms in which politics is conducted. For anyone who is interested in early modern political thought and practice, print and manuscript culture, and, above all, drama, it is worth following Kiséry on his journey with these ambassadors.

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