

Reflections on Rebellion: Shakespeare's 1601 *Hamlet* and the 2nd Earl of Essex

Although scholars have long identified allusions to the second Earl of Essex throughout the Shakespeare canon,¹ Jonathan Bate's recent verdict that the "semi-concealed political intentions" behind the playwright's late Elizabethan plays nudge him "only a little over halfway to being an Essex man" characterizes enduring scholarly reluctance to portray the playwright as a factional writer.² Unsurprisingly, the plays' recent editors, as guardians of their texts, tend to be most skeptical of Shakespeare's political affiliations, judging it "far from likely [that he] intended to write politically barbed and controversial" dramas, whose associations with Essex were "after the fact and [...] fortuitous."³ Yet even new historicists tend to cast factional intrusions into the theater as opportunistic dilettantism and the players as self-contained subversives protected from the political realities beyond the playhouse walls.⁴ Perhaps fearful of reducing (or of being accused of reducing) Shakespeare to a political toady, scholars continue to promote Ben Jonson's image of a writer "not of an age, but for all time."⁵

¹ In various Shakespearean figures, Essex has been said to represent a range of dissident attitudes: suicidal aristocratic emulation as Brutus in *Julius Caesar* (1599); the withdrawn Stoic Timon of Athens in the play of his name (1607), or Jacques in *As You Like It* (1599); the apotheosis of factionalism as Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida* (1602); the Senecan overachiever displaced in a new political order in the titular *Othello* (1604) and *Coriolanus* (1608). Most obviously, Essex has been associated with his Hereford ancestors, the royal deposer Henry Bolingbroke and his son Hal, in the second historical cycle, *Richard II* through *Henry V* (1595-99).

² Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age* (New York: Random House, 2009), 254-55.

³ *Henry IV, Part 2*, ed. Rene Weis, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1998), 35; and *Richard II*, ed. Charles S. Forker, Arden 3 (London: Methuen, 2002), 10.

⁴ Their "theatrical power," writes Louis Montrose, "did not lie in the specific advocacy of explicit political positions, but rather in the implicit but pervasive suggestion [...] that all such positions are motivated [...] by the passions and interests of their advocates," "Shakespeare, the Stage, and the State," *U of Wisconsin P*, 25.2 (1996), 63.

⁵ Ben Jonson, "To the memory of my beloved, the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare," 1623 Folio.

Illuminating the neglected role of the factional writer in early modern England, my recent doctoral work⁶ situates Shakespeare among a loose federation of autonomous authors who, bonded by their ideological affiliations with Essex's radical moderatism, from the mid-1590s contributed to the circle's propaganda campaign to promote their leader's qualities as an international statesman.⁷ Focusing on a second history cycle brimming with Essexian associations, I argue that Shakespeare, a master of the oblique allusion, refracts the Essex "megalopsyche" among competing figures (the three Henrys: Bolingbroke, Hal, and Hotspur) to construct a rich analysis of the aristocratic yet anarchic energy that resides in various proto-rulers or pretenders to the throne. Eschewing propaganda for the humanist tradition of advice giving, Shakespeare promotes Essex's impressive political ubiquity while concurrently interrogating the implications of a governor whose many roles risk leaving him discontented and over-exposed.

My thesis, which brings together writers suspected by the authorities of promoting Essex's political interests, is indebted to a rich vein of recent scholarship into what Annabel Patterson calls the "hermeneutics of censorship,"⁸ which authorizes censored and suspected playtexts as evidence of both state anxiety and authorial collusion. Focusing on *I Henry IV* (1597), the only play of the second tetralogy whose complex Essexian allusions largely escaped the censor, I pressurize the presumption of innocence of unrestricted texts and the factional ineptitude of expurgated material by arguing that a factional author's agency could extend to self-concealment *and* controlled self-revelation.

⁶ "The 2nd Earl of Essex and the History Players: the Factional Writing of John Hayward, William Shakespeare, Samuel Daniel, and George Chapman," UT Austin (defended August 2012).

⁷ For this argument, see Paul Hammer, *The Polarization of Elizabethan Politics: The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-97*. Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 144.

⁸ Annabel Patterson, *Mastering the Revels: The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1991), 18.

Shakespeare, I propose, sets about exposing his factional affiliations in progressively censored texts,⁹ culminating in the allusion to Essex's Irish expedition in the fifth act chorus of *Henry V* (1599).¹⁰ By extension, the *Richard II* remount commissioned by Essex's confederates on the eve of the rebellion in February 1601, often cited as the epitome of a text acquiring retroactive dissidence, perhaps represents the culmination of a long-term, politically motivated strategy of self-revelation, albeit one that ended in disaster and Shakespeare's enduring disaffection with the post-Essex faction. Building on this thesis, I want now to examine another Shakespeare play that, under revision during the Essex uprising, seems to betray the bitter wisdom of hindsight and the scars of political apostasy: the 1601 *Hamlet*.

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With its patchy official record and uncertain motives, the *Richard II* commission remains one of the chief cruxes of early modern theatre criticism and modern scholars, while acknowledging the unique value of a play that transcended "the confines of theatrical production to enter into real-life political drama," remain skeptical of assigning authorial intention to the event.¹¹ Shakespeare and his fellow shareholders are viewed either as innocent by-standers subject to the demands of their patrons and the financial

⁹ In considering the potential relationship between Shakespeare's later history plays and the Essex faction, scholars generally focus on three textual cruxes: the excision of the deposition of Richard by Bolingbroke, Essex's ancestor (*R2* 4.1.155-318) from the first three quartos of *Richard II* (1597-98) and its recovery in the first Jacobean quarto of 1608; the Falstaff versus Oldcastle controversy and its connection to Essex's political adversary Lord Cobham in *2 Henry IV*; and *Henry V*'s description of Essex returning as a "conquering Caesar" (*H5* Ch. 5.0.22-34) from the Irish expedition of 1599, which was cut from the Q1 (1599) and not recovered until the 1623 Folio.

¹⁰ Gary Taylor calls Shakespeare's analogy of Henry V with Essex as "the general of our gracious empress [...] from Ireland coming, / Bringing rebellion broached on his sword" (5.0.30-32), the "only explicit, extradramatic, incontestable reference to a contemporary event anywhere in the canon," *Henry V*, (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1982), 7.

¹¹ For full discussions of the issues surrounding interpretations of the *Richard II* commission and the Essex faction, see Paul Hammer, "Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the Play of 7 February, 1601, and the Essex Rising," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 60.2 (2009): 1-35.

imperatives of their profession, or as walk-on players trapped in the endgame of a national power struggle. However, certain additions to *Hamlet* written during the tumultuous events of the uprising, which seemingly alert the audience to the synchronicity between *Hamlet*'s dramatic narrative of a troubled aristocrat adopting the role of rebellious playmaker and his company's collusion in the events of February 1601, suggests that Shakespeare's conception of, and engagement with, the commission was pronounced and personal. Interpreting these revisions, I offer an alternative exegesis -- one, as it were, from the author's pen -- of the purposes behind the replaying of *Richard II* and the possible factional motivations of its playwright.¹²

Although its compositional and performance histories are notoriously murky, broad consensus holds that Shakespeare was revising *Hamlet* during the winter of 1600-1. Harold Jenkins covers the angles when he writes that, while the *Hamlet* that "has come down to us belongs to 1601, [...] the essential *Hamlet*, minus the passage on the troubles

¹² To appreciate the striking parallels between Shakespeare's dramatic narrative and the factional drama unfolding in his playhouse, it is worth rehearsing the pertinent facts of the episode. By the winter of 1601, stripped of his Irish command, Elizabeth's favor, and his revenue from the license on sweet wines, Essex, despite suffering crippling depression, wrote to James VI of his desperate need to act: "Now doth reason, honour and conscience command me to be active" (British Library, MS 31022, cited in Hammer, "*Richard II*," 10). On Thursday 5 or Friday 6 of February, six men, including the Percy brothers and Essex's steward Sir Gilly Meyricke, visited the Globe to request that Shakespeare's company replace the proposed play for that coming Saturday with *Richard II*. In exchange, the actors were offered, in Francis Bacon's words, "forty shillings extraordinary to play it," for eleven conspirators (Essex was not present). "So earnest was he [Meyricke] to satisfy his eyes with the sight of that Tragedy," Bacon later told Essex's judges, "which he thought soon after his Lordship should bring from the Stage to the State" (*The Works of Francis Bacon, Baron of Verulam, Viscount St. Alban and Lord High Chancellor of England, in ten volumes* [London, 1826], 3:181). At 10 o'clock the following morning, accompanied by about three hundred followers, Essex left his house on the Strand and headed east toward the City hoping to rouse the support of London's citizens who, emerging from the city's churches, merely looked on. Within twenty-four hours the "rebellion" was crushed and the instigators in custody. Eight to ten days later three statements mentioning the *Richard II* commission were taken, two from conspirators, the other from Augustine Phillips, actor, fellow shareholder, and future "housekeeper" of the Globe. Within a week and a half, Essex and five conspirators had been executed for treason. Yet on 24 February, the day that Elizabeth signed Essex's death warrant and barely a week after delivering his testimony, Phillips and his fellow players performed their traditional Shrove Tuesday play at court. The following day, Ash Wednesday, Essex was executed.

of the actors, it is true, but otherwise differing little if at all from it, was being acted on the stage possibly even before the end of 1599 and certainly in the course of 1600.”¹³ The passage to which Jenkins refers occurs in the Act two, scene two dialogue between Hamlet and his fellow students, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who inform him of the arrival of “the tragedians of the city” (*Ham* 2.2.327) who have so delighted him in the past. When Hamlet asks why this reputed residential company is on the road, in the 1603 Q1 (sometimes called the “bad” quarto) “Gilderstone” answers briefly that, “the noveltie carries it away, for the principall publicke audience that came to them, are turned to private playes and to the humour of children (*Ham* Q1 Sc.6, 24-49).¹⁴ The novelty of humorous performing children seemingly alludes to two time-specific events: the 1600 revivals of the acting companies of the Boys of St. Paul’s School and the Children of the Chapel Royal at the Blackfriars. The extended Folio passage (largely following the 1604 Q2), which offers a protracted exchange on the so-called “war of the theaters” erupting at the time, affirms this reading:

There is, sir, an eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out on top of the question, and are most tyrannically clapped for’t. These are now the fashion, and so berattle the common stages [...] that many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills and dare scarce come hither. (*Ham* 2.2.336-42)

Despite “much to do on both sides” (2.2.350), Rosencrantz judges this a war that the men of Bankside, whose “inhibition comes by the means of the late innovation” (2.2.330), are losing.

Although this exchange seems little more than a diverting metatheatrical excursion that, in an already bloated play, rarely gets performed, Ann Barton senses an anomaly: “Perhaps the little eyases and their connection with the War of the Theatres, as

¹³ Harold Jenkins, ed. *Hamlet*, Arden 2 (London: Methuen, 1982), 13.

¹⁴ *The First Quarto of 'Hamlet'*, ed. Kathleen O. Irace (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).

well as those detailed and quite Renaissance instructions which Hamlet gives to the players, are a trifle intrusive in a play concerned with the workings of fate and character in medieval Denmark.”¹⁵ As Jenkins notes, at the time “innovation” was an especially loaded word connoted with challenges to the social order, which is precisely how Henry IV employs it to characterize the “hurly-burly innovation” (*IH4* 5.1.78) of the Percy rebellion. This is not the only example of suspicious semantics. In his essay on “Custom,” Montaigne considers that “the best pretence of innovation or noveltie is most dangerous, [...] for to establish them, a man must be faine to subvert a publicke peace.”¹⁶ Even “inhibition,” in “pre-Freudian culture,” writes Patterson, implied legal or institutional prohibition.”¹⁷

Within the completed text of a play that had already been performed, Shakespeare introduces an episode in which, to decode his embedded “buggeswordes,”¹⁸ a celebrated residential theater company suffers some kind of prohibition because of its involvement in an uprising. Rather than expurgating or sanitizing the narrative’s parallels, Shakespeare introduces into his text rhetorical indicators that seem designed to alert us to the synchronicity between his company’s collusion in the events of February 7 and 8 and *Hamlet*’s dramatic narrative of a princely figure adopting the role of playmaker to catch the conscience -- perhaps even the crown¹⁹ -- of the King. In other words, Shakespeare seemingly reshapes his metatheatrical *Hamlet* material to record the experience of having

¹⁵ Anne Barton, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), 159.

¹⁶ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, tr. John Florio (London: Putnam, 1904), 1:118-19. See also Patterson, “Re-Historicizing Shakespeare’s Theater,” 97.

¹⁷ Patterson, “the Very Age and Body of the Time, His Form and Pressure’: Re-Historicizing Shakespeare’s Theater,” *New Literary History*, 20.1 (1988), 98.

¹⁸ *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. Norman Egbert McClure, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1939), 1:70.

¹⁹ Hamlet finally admits to Horatio that, apart from killing his father and “whoring” his mother, the reprehensible Claudius has “popp’d in between th’ election and my hopes” (5.2.64-65).

his art overtaken by life; and in so doing he perhaps offers us new ways of thinking about his own status as a factional playwright.

Viewed as part of a broader “innovation” Hamlet’s negotiation with the actors appropriates sinister undertones. The acknowledged theatre-lover, who reacts with a rare display of “joy” (3.1.17) to hear of the players’ arrival and who exhibits easy charm on their meeting (2.2.417-27), shows no qualms at implicating them in treason. In events that now seem to foreshadow the *Richard II* commission, Hamlet hijacks the actor’s planned performance, replacing it with another of their repertory standbys, *The Murder of Gonzago*, which he refashions as *The Mousetrap* for a specific political purpose in a one-off command performance: “You could for a need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in’t, could you not?” Hamlet asks, to which the First Player replies, as perhaps he must: “Ay, my lord” (2.2.534-37). Confronted by this troubled aristocrat’s request that they reenact violent regicide in front of a newly crowned king, the players find themselves in a precarious position. Yet Hamlet, despite knowing of their professional and financial fragility (2.2.329), exploits them with shocking indifference before letting them disappear into the night, presumably unpaid. Shakespeare’s 1601 text renders Hamlet’s reputation as a benevolent patron deeply suspect.

If the players were driven to Elsinore purely out of financial need, then Hamlet’s exploitation of his actors, as a critique of the deferential structures of theatrical patronage, might offer an inverted reflection on the forty shillings that, according to the testimony of Augustine Phillips at Essex’s trial, sealed the deal for the *Richard II* remount. Yet when the Globe could expect to take in fifty to seventy shillings at the opening of a new play,

forty shillings seems a low price for risking professional suicide.²⁰ Perhaps the players seek something else from Hamlet in exchange for their performance: his protection. Hamlet has a history of theatrical patronage, in both the public theaters -- where presumably he learned to recite lines echoing Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (2.2.442-93) -- and in private houses among elite audiences. "I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never acted," he tells the First Player, "or if it was, not above once -- for the play, I remember, pleased not the million, 'twas caviare to the general" (2.2.430-33). The royal couple, by contrast, deem drama merely a "delight," a pastime (3.1.14-26) that will divert Hamlet from his disturbing thoughts; while Polonius, who embodies an older tradition of university amateur dramatics poses enough of a threat to the professional actors to warrant Hamlet's warning them: "Follow that lord, and look you mock him not" (2.2.538-39). The ruling faction offers bleak prospects for the touring players whereas, under the patronage of Hamlet and his theater-loving friend, Horatio,²¹ they at least invest in their professional future. The abuse of even this small measure of self-determination by a patron careless of the actors' welfare offers a tempting correlation with the *Richard II* commissioners, who likely kept their premeditations from the actors.

In contrast to the theatrical patronage offered by Essex's close intimates Southampton and Rutland who, in 1600, "passed away their time merely in going to playes every day,"²² the opposing faction promised little to Shakespeare's company.

²⁰ Roslyn Knutson, *The Repertory of Shakespeare's Company: 1594-1613* (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1991), 32.

²¹ When Hamlet, high on post-performance adrenaline, asks "Would not this, sir, [...] get me a fellowship in a cry of players?", Horatio completes the in-joke: "Half a share" (*Ham* 3.2.269-74).

²² So wrote Roland Whyte to Sir Robert Carleton, Sydney Papers, 2.132; cited in "Wriothesley, Henry, third earl of Southampton (1573-1624)," Park Honan in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

Cecil preferred private performance;²³ Raleigh was only an occasional theatergoer; Cobham would doubtless remember the Brooke-baiting his brother had endured as Lord Chamberlain. It seems plausible, then, that Shakespeare and his company, secure in their new home and with a developing sense of their cultural significance, mounted *Richard II* to endorse Essex's political redemption in order to improve their future prospects. If so, their discovery the following day that they were implicated in an attempted *coup* must have come as an appalling surprise.

If the 1601 *Hamlet* suggests that the players were prohibited from performing in some way due to their *unforced* engagement with innovation, then Shakespeare's text has the potential to become self-scrutinizing. Transforming *The Murder of Gonzago* into the political dynamite of *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet determines the power of plays to incite through infiltration, while concurrently delineating the narrow scope of theatrical influence. Hamlet's belief in theater's capacity to effect change -- to strike "guilty creatures [...] so to the soul that presently / They have proclaimed their malefactions" (2.2.586-88) -- at first seems borne out in performance: "Give o'er the play," commands Polonius, as the "frighted" King rises (3.2.259-62). Claudius's subsequent remorse, however, is both equivocal -- "May one be pardon'd and retain th'offence? (3.3.55-56) -- and brief. As confession gives way to ethical negotiation, Claudius's eighty-line speech, delineating the narrow limits of *The Mousetrap*'s power to prick his conscience, seems to offer an excoriating critique of Shakespeare's own flirtation with conspiracy, an association at once facile and perilous. Shakespeare's 1601 *Hamlet* does more than hold

²³ On December 7 1595, Sir Edward Hoby wrote to Cecil of a planned entertainment at his home two evenings later: "as usual as it shal please you a gate for your supper shal be open: & K. Richard present himself to your vewe"; cited in Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1930), 320-21.

the mirror up to playing; it turns the reflection upon the playwright. Oblique allusion has evolved into a process of self-revelation, perhaps of confession.

I want finally to posit that if we inflect the mirror once again then Hamlet's -- and by interpretive extension, the Essex faction's -- potential motives emerge from the apparent failure of their twin theatrical commissions. Hamlet is an oddly visible intriguer who remains hyperactively conspicuous as producer, arbiter, and critic throughout *The Mousetrap*: "Marry, this is miching malicho. It means mischief," he tells Ophelia and the audience at large: "The players cannot keep counsel: they'll tell all"; "I could interpret" (3.2.135, 139, 256). Above all, in underlining the enactment of familial regicide -- "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king" (3.2.239) -- Hamlet alerts Claudius to the violent revenge he claims to seek. The play, like Hamlet's antic disposition, "not only alarms Claudius," writes Alan Friedman, "It seems designed to do so."²⁴ Consciously or otherwise, Hamlet traps himself rather than his uncle; by setting himself as a lure, he goads his quarry into offensive action. Unable to commit the revenge demanded of him by the ghost of his father, Hamlet uses *The Mousetrap* to force the King's hand, to react, in other words, to the actions of another: "The readiness is all" (5.2.237).

When applied to Shakespeare's Essex analogue, Hamlet's tactic of provocation encourages an interpretation of the *Richard II* commission that challenges recent scholarly consensus that Essex's "signature play [offered] a bonding exercise [...] a steeling of the will, a visible show of solidarity" in advance of some future "intervention."²⁵ What such speculation fails to explain is why the faction required visibility at all -- why, if its members wanted a bonding exercise, they did not simply hire

²⁴ Alan Warren Friedman, "Hamlet the Unready," *Modern Language Quarterly* 37.1 (1976), 21.

²⁵ Bate 252. For a similar claim, see Hammer, "Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the Play of 7 February, 1601, and the Essex Rising," 35-36.

the Chamberlain's Men for a cheaper, and safer, private performance.²⁶ The factional indicators in the 1601 *Hamlet* text raise the possibility, at least in Shakespeare's reading of the events, that the engagement was made not by Essex but by his frustrated co-conspirators.

Like Hamlet -- the activist plagued by introspection -- Essex suffered from an almost bi-polar personality: a dynamic and charismatic leader, he also endured periods of melancholy, hysterical illness, and self-lacerating piety that left him incapable of coherent thought. When the co-conspirators looked to their troubled leader for guidance during the winter of 1600-1, Essex proved elusive and uncertain.²⁷ Was the re-commissioned *Richard II* designed to rouse a procrastinating Essex by forcing the hand of the authorities? It is entirely possible that Essex's steward Meyricke, a Welsh firebrand, was charged with hiring the Globe not as a crucible to rouse the citizenry, nor as an elaborate private playhouse encouraging eleven elite patrons amid a hired audience of well-wishers, but as a hollow drum possessing a beat loud enough to be heard in the corridors of power across the water.

If *Richard II*, like *The Mousetrap*, was a forcing tactic it was successful: Essex broke cover. He had been made conspicuous by the visibility of his co-conspirators. The royal authorities, previously patient, were forced to respond to a perceived declaration of intent. Within hours of the play's conclusion the Privy Council dispatched two embassies to Essex House requesting the Earl's presence: both were declined. Alerted to his

²⁶ In 1598, Meyricke arranged a soiree at Essex House, in which the Earl and his friends "had two plays, which kept them up until one after midnight"; quoted in Barroll 453.

²⁷For details of the Essex endgame, see Robert Lacy, *Robert, Earl of Essex* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), G.B. Harrison, *The Life and Death of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex* (London: Cassell and Company, 1937), and Hammer, "Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the Play of 7 February, 1601, and the Essex Rising."

impending arrest, Essex now became, like Hamlet, a man of reaction -- a re-activist -- dramatically bringing the intervention forward to the following morning. Also like Hamlet, his readiness was only partial.²⁸ Essex must have understood the odds against success, but he took his slim chances anyway. The rebellion was doomed before it began, its demise arguably assisted by the *Richard II* production. The authorities, alerted to the imminent threat, were provoked into a suppressing action, which energized the rebels into a precipitous reaction. As with *The Mousetrap*, the performance released energies of containment and suppression, not subversion and insurrection: the *coup d'état* was fatally compromised by the *coup de théâtre* that preceded it.

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The manner in which Shakespeare inserts into his 1601 *Hamlet* factional indicators alerting the audience to the play's "secret drifts," suggests that this process of political self-revelation was intentional and that, following the betrayal of the commission prior to the Essex uprising, Shakespeare was broadcasting his departure from the factional stage. Appropriating *Hamlet's* players for his own ends, as the faction had expropriated *Richard II's* for theirs, Shakespeare, by skewing our viewpoint on the politics of playing, perhaps offers us his reading of the events of early February 1601. If the extremists within the faction, as they sought to exploit the acoustic resonance of the Chamberlain's Men's state-of-the-art new theater, rendered the players "ciphers to [their] great account" (*H5* Prol. 17), *Hamlet* suggests that, at least in political terms, Shakespeare's "wooden O" was just that -- an empty vessel -- and the players, as he would shortly write in *Macbeth*, "walking shadow[s] full of sound and fury signifying

²⁸ An armed contingent from the Welsh marches was still approaching London from the west, a shipment of arms from the Low Countries was yet to dock in the east, and the leaders remained unsure whether to strike for the Palace or the Tower, both of which their opponents were fortifying.

nothing” (*Mac* 5.5.26-29). In the 1601 *Hamlet*, Shakespeare scrutinizes the fraught relationship between players and princes and the futile notion that the performing of power could amount to anything more than playing at politics.