

Stewed in Corruption – Polonius and the Politics of Denmark

Richard Vardy looks at Hamlet from a political perspective and discovers that Polonius is more than just a 'tedious old fool'.

An 'intruding fool'?

Upon discovery of the slain body of Polonius, Hamlet – disappointed that it isn't the King he has just killed – calls the Lord Chamberlain a 'wretched, rash, intruding fool'. In the long critical and stage history of Hamlet, it is this view of Polonius that often holds sway: Polonius is nothing more than a stock character, an interfering, ageing busy-body; frequently wrong in his judgements; and an unwitting source of comic relief. Oliver Ford Davies' comic performance as Polonius in the 2009 RSC film exemplifies (brilliantly) this perspective: a slightly senile and ignorant target for Hamlet's contemptuous mockery.

A Political Perspective

But if we adopt what might be called a political perspective on the play, then our understanding of Polonius is transformed. Political literary criticism (sometimes loosely referred to as Marxist criticism) focuses on the larger social forces at work, in and out of the play. Literary texts cannot escape their own history, or the society in which they are read. Political critics tend to be interested in the ways in which power is acquired and maintained in a text. In his influential 1971 book *The Tragedy of State*, JW Lever argues against focusing on the tragic hero. We should

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instead concentrate on the society in which he exists. For
Lever, tragedies are

*not primarily treatments of characters with a
so-called 'fatal flaw', whose downfall is brought
about by the decree of just if inscrutable
[supernatural] powers [...] the fundamental
flaw is in the world they inhabit: in the political
state, the social order it upholds...*

The problem isn't with Hamlet's inability to act. The problem lies with Denmark. A political interpretation would therefore set Hamlet's individual suffering in the context of a world of realpolitik, where power is pursued and kept at all costs. Denmark is described as a prison, as rotten: it is a world of political uncertainty and intrigue with an ever-present threat of war; a state in which the tyrannical 'smiling' Claudius is a modern usurper to a brave and chivalrous king; and the Danish subjects are 'muddied', restless, seemingly in revolt.

Polonius – as Lord Chamberlain (the chief official of a royal household), as Claudius's right-hand man, as chief spy – is instrumental to the seizure and control of power and is at the heart of this corrupt and oppressive state.

Polonius and the State

Polonius is introduced by Claudius in Act 1 Scene 2. His political importance is quickly established:

*The head is not more native to the heart,
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
Than is the throne of Denmark to [Polonius].*

That Polonius was instrumental in securing Claudius's tenuous and contested claim to the throne is here beyond doubt. Polonius's loyalty to the new king is also made clear in Act 2, where he sycophantically confirms to Claudius that

*I hold my duty as I hold my soul,
Both to my God and to my gracious King.*

Some productions even show him conspiring with Claudius in the murder of King Hamlet. In any case, Polonius is established as an apparatchik, a bureaucrat, an agent of the state whose best interests are served by maintaining the status quo: by keeping Claudius on the throne.

Polonius has no qualms about (ab)using his own daughter to serve the new King. He sees Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet as a further means of endearing himself to Claudius: his attempts to prove correct his theory about Hamlet's madness clearly override any feelings he might have for his daughter's well-being. Power and politics evidently trump family values in Claudius's Denmark.

Spying and Surveillance

Polonius palpably enjoys spying and surveillance.

Elizabethan audiences may perhaps have connected Polonius with Francis Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth's infamous (and brutally effective) spymaster. Spying is a political act since it confers knowledge – and therefore power – into the hands of the spymaster. And, in Denmark's corrupt world, spying is endemic. Polonius despatches Reynaldo to Paris – to find information regarding Laertes' behaviour – with a masterclass on the art of subterfuge. Polonius is certainly privy to the King's plans to have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, old school friends of Hamlet's, spy on his nephew. Polonius also arranges to spy on Hamlet on two further occasions. The first is ostensibly to discover the cause of Hamlet's madness; the second is to spy on Hamlet and his mother as she 'entreats him' to reveal his grievance. Polonius (unconvincingly?) claims that a mother's nature 'makes them partial' and therefore a more objective observer is required. It is more likely he wants the power that secret knowledge bestows in Denmark.

Claudius and Polonius must spy on Hamlet because he represents a political threat to the kingdom. Prince Hamlet should have inherited the throne himself (Claudius has 'Popped in between th'election' of Hamlet as King; Hamlet also claims that Claudius 'from a shelf the precious diadem [crown] stole/And put it in his pocket'). Also, the general population of Denmark seem to bear Hamlet a 'great love' and Claudius cannot move openly against him for fear of an uprising. Polonius must therefore manoeuvre carefully – unseen, in secret – in such perilous political circumstances. He embodies, in effect, a Secret Police.

So let us consider how chilling and unsettling the following lines might be if we were to imagine them spoken by the Head of a Secret Police force (the Gestapo, for example):

*If circumstances lead me I will find
Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed
Within the centre*

There is nothing Polonius isn't prepared to do for the state of Denmark.

Polonius and Hamlet

Political criticism reveals that Hamlet is set against a world that is fundamentally flawed. Hamlet's confrontations with Polonius in Acts 2 and 3 are therefore the confrontations of a tragic hero against a representative of a flawed political and social fabric. Hamlet's comic mockery of Polonius can therefore be read as satirical, political – and dangerous. Typically for Hamlet his rebellion against the new despotic state isn't with armed struggle but with 'words, words, words'.

Hamlet's first appearance since he spoke of putting on an 'antic disposition' is in a fascinating exchange with Polonius in Act 2. Hamlet begins by calling him a 'fishmonger' – humorously nonsensical, perhaps, but also a mocking pun on fleshmonger, meaning a brothel-keeper. Hamlet may be signalling his disgust at the way in which Polonius has been trying to 'tender' (sell) Ophelia at a higher rate. Hamlet goes on to suggest that Polonius is dishonest, has 'a plentiful lack of wit' and is a 'tedious old fool'. These are politically charged things to say to King Claudius' Lord Chamberlain. Hamlet is able to escape censure by pretending to be mad. In a state characterised by dishonesty, surveillance and subterfuge, Hamlet cannot trust anybody. He must hide behind his words.

Hamlet's murder of Polonius, although accidental, can also be read politically. It is certainly fitting for a spymaster to be killed in the act of spying – hoist, as it were, by his own petard. Critics adopting a political perspective find Hamlet's own reflections on the death of Polonius particularly revealing:

*For this same lord
I do repent, but heaven hath pleased it so
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.*

Hamlet sees himself as (uncomfortably) doing the work of God in his murder of Polonius: a scourge was a whip used as an instrument of punishment. Hamlet is therefore God's weapon. Hamlet, as he knows too well, must eventually take a stand against the rotten state of Denmark, embodied by the King. The idea of Hamlet being a scourge and minister

*became important in many productions of Hamlet in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with Hamlet seen as the self-sacrificing hero who could cleanse the state of corruption and oppression.
Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, editors of the Arden Edition (2006)*

It is little wonder that those suffering in oppressive regimes have found such unsettling parallels in Hamlet. They will know how dangerous state apparatchiks like Polonius can

be.

Polonius's Body

Even after his death, Polonius still has a role to play in Hamlet. Hamlet, with some difficulty, must 'lug the guts into the neighbour room'. The brutal phrasing here reminds us of the corporeal nature of the human body, a key concern of the play. Polonius – pompous, arrogant – suffers the final indignity of being dragged unceremoniously across the stage.

Characteristically, Hamlet then becomes somewhat fixated on the thought of Polonius's decaying body.

KING: Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

HAMLET: At supper.

KING: At supper! Where?

HAMLET: Not where he eats but where 'a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet ... But if indeed you find him not within this month you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby.

Polonius has now become a more sharply defined symbol of the rottenness and corruption at the heart of the state. The worms that eat his body are described as 'politic', meaning shrewd and scheming, in the same way that courtiers like Polonius and Osric amorally feed on the King's own corruption and political patronage. Hamlet is also making the point that, for all his regal splendour and majesty, the King will soon go the way of Polonius. The

pervasive stench of Claudius's rotting corpse will become known to all Denmark; Hamlet – uncertain and equivocal about his role as he is – must be the man to cleanse the court.

Political criticism – with its fascination with power, politics, and society – therefore allows us to see Polonius in a new and intriguing light. He is more than a 'foolish, prating knave'. He is at the heart of the rotten Danish state and embodies the new realpolitik. He represents a modern age typified by political ruthlessness, surveillance and secrecy; characteristics, sadly, all-too-familiar to the 20th and 21st centuries.