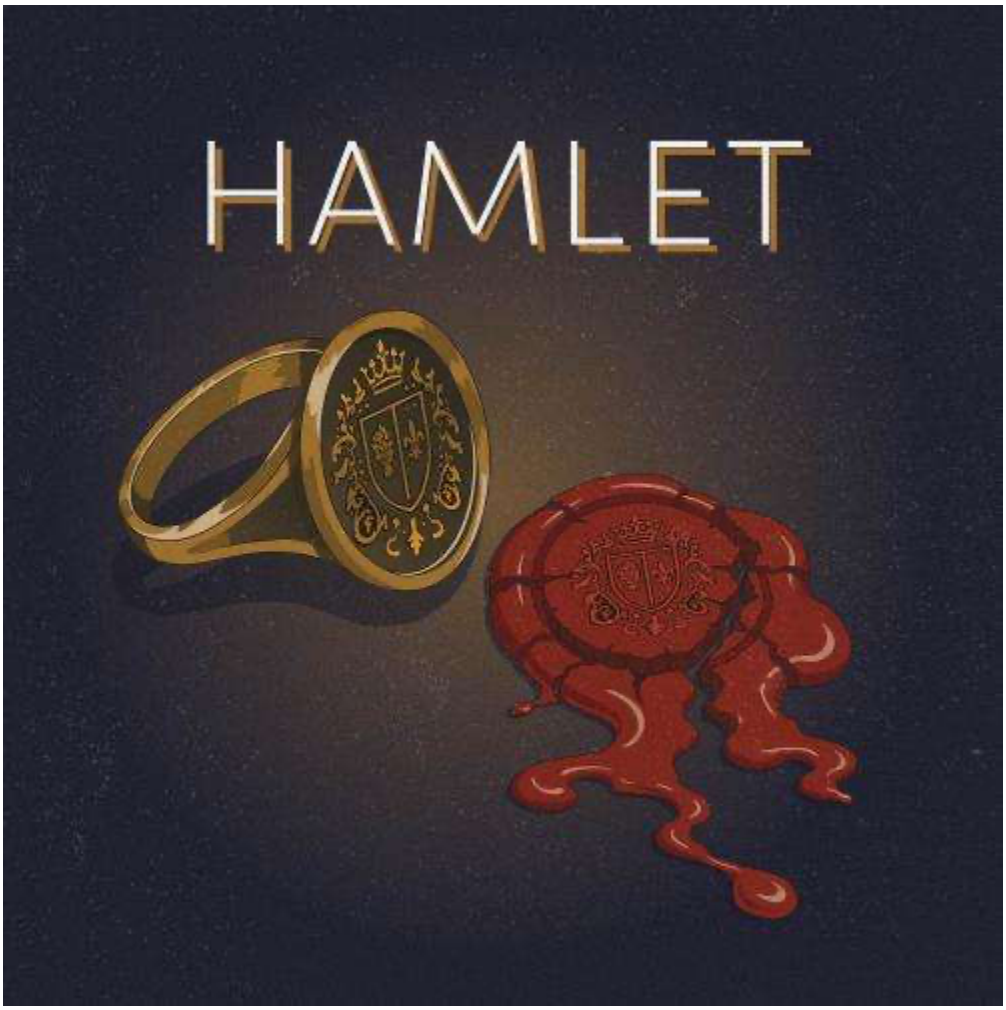

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Political Uncertainty in Early Modern England

Though the exact date of its first performance is unknown, scholars believe that William Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* around 1601, shortly after *Julius Caesar* (1599). Queen Elizabeth I was still in power, but she was an ailing, aging monarch without a direct heir, and threats to the stability of the state seemed to be all around. In 1594, two plots on the Queen's life were uncovered and a rebellion in Ireland was put down. Following a disastrous campaign to put down another Irish revolt (1601), the Earl of Essex returned to England and attempted to launch his own rebellion against the Queen. The signal to supporters to begin the uprising was a performance of Shakespeare's play *Richard II*. No one joined him, and Essex was executed at the Tower of London. The Lord Chamberlain's Men (Shakespeare's company) had performed *Richard II,* and a member of the company was questioned in connection with the plot.

Some years earlier, Queen Elizabeth I's cousin, the infamous Mary Queen of Scots, was alleged to have been involved in a plot to murder Henry Stuart Lord Darnley, her husband and the father to the infant king James VI of Scotland. Widowed for just three months, Mary was married to the Earl of Bothwell in May of 1567, which made her more unpopular than she already was. When she was kidnapped by Protestant conspirators, she was forced to abdicate her post as Regent, and she never saw her son again.

James VI of Scotland succeeded Elizabeth I upon her death in 1603, and he was crowned James I of England. During his first year, James evaded two attempts to remove him from the throne. He survived a late-1605 assassination attempt by a group of English Catholics that has become known as the Gunpowder Plot. After the authorities received an anonymous tip, they searched Parliament and discovered Guy Fawkes guarding 36 barrels of gunpowder in a room under the House of Lords. The plan was for Fawkes—a military veteran—to light the fuse during the state opening of the Parliamentary session while other conspirators kidnapped the King's daughter. Had Fawkes not been caught, the explosion would have reduced the building to rubble and killed not only the King, but many other government officers. Fawkes and his co-conspirators were executed.

Revenge Tragedies

The revenge tragedy—of which *Hamlet* is an example—was a popular genre in late 16th and early 17th century England. Typically, the noble protagonist is the victim of a terrible crime who seeks revenge using his wits and various forms of deceit. Interestingly, playwrights in this period never set these plays in England, most likely because they often depicted the court as a corrupt space. Setting such a tragedy in England might imply the existence of such corruption at home, which could raise the hackles of the censors. Unlike the Roman

tragedies of Seneca, whose work was regularly presented at schools and colleges, revenge tragedies violated various "rules" that had been laid out by Aristotle and then Horace in the *Ars Poetica*, which had been rediscovered in during this period along with other classical texts. Early modern revenge tragedies take place over more than one day, involve multiple plotlines, include comic scenes, and their protagonists often behave in ways that were considered inappropriate to their station. It was not unusual for a ghost to jump-start the play's action by demanding that the protagonist avenge their death. The last act often features a courtly entertainment that conceals a deadly plot. And, of course, they end with scenes of carnage in which the main characters die.

The Privilege of Revenge & The Divine Right of Kings

By the end of Elizabeth I's reign, she had stripped the aristocracy of the right to privately seek punishment for wrongs done them, or what Francis Bacon called "wild justice." The State monopolized the exercise of justice. But this change begged the question, what if the State is at fault? For those who believed in the divine right of kings, it was impossible that the State, represented by the monarch, could be in the wrong. The monarch was considered God's representative on Earth, and, therefore, was not accountable to their subjects. This principle was set out in *A Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion*, a sermon provided to clergymen across England and Wales that they were required to read from the pulpit. The divine right was set against humanism, which took the view that humans have agency and the ability to make social and individual change. Humanists argued that subjects had the right to overthrow an unjust or criminal monarch.

The Protestant Reformation, Purgatory, & Ghosts

When Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* (or *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*) to the doors of the churches in Wittenberg in October of 1517, he set off the Protestant Reformation of the Christian Church. Luther believed that the Catholic Church had become corrupt, and he objected to the selling of indulgences. At the time, the Catholic Church taught that people would be saved through good works and the confession of sins, thus avoiding punishment in hell. This did not mean that a person would avoid all punishment. If not subjected to an Earthly punishment, the Christian would be forced to wait in Purgatory, a space between Heaven and Hell, for an indeterminate period. Indulgences could be purchased to shorten the length of time one would have to spend in Purgatory. But members of the clergy abused this practice and sold indulgences for their own benefit.

The schism in the Church resulted in two different beliefs about the path to Heaven. In a nutshell, the Catholic Church argued that good works and taking the sacraments led to

salvation. Meanwhile, Protestants argued that it was only through a Christian's faith in God that they would reach salvation.

The ghost who walks the battlements of Elsinore tells Hamlet,

> I am thy father's spirit,
> Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
> And for the day confined to fast in fires
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burnt and purged away… (1.5)

The ghost's description suggests that he is in Purgatory (note the root word: *purge*). By Shakespeare's day, the Protestant Church had rejected the existence of Purgatory. Both Catholics and Protestants believed in ghosts, but Catholics believed they were dead people confined to Purgatory, while Protestants believed that ghosts were demons. Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg University, where Martin Luther once taught and which was now famous for being dogmatic in its Protestantism. Thus, Hamlet has been steeped in the teachings of Protestantism as well as philosophy, for which Wittenberg University was known.

Madness

There were two contradictory explanations for the existence of "madness" in Elizabethan England: (1) divine or demonic possession (medieval) and (2) a medical condition. In the case of *divine* possession, the possessed have access to special insight or wisdom. Although they may behave in strange ways and ignore certain social graces, the words of someone who is mad may be seen as offering access to some sort of truth. However, *demonic* possession could manifest itself as "madness," too. This suggests that the mad could lead others away from truth, goodness, and godliness. Medical textbooks, on the other hand, describe a physiological cause for madness: the severe imbalance of the body's four "humours," chemical systems that regulate behavior and health. An excess of "black bile" was believed to cause melancholy, or depression. Hamlet and others seem to think he suffers from melancholy.

Amleth

One of Shakespeare's sources for *Hamlet* was a Norse saga that had been translated into Latin in Saxo Grammaticus' *Historicae Danicae* (1514) and adapted by a French writer in 1570. In the story, Feng kills his brother, Horwendil, in a fit of jealousy but publicly claims that he did it to protect his sister-in-law, Gerutha, from his abusive brother. Hornwendil and Gerutha's son, Amleth, witnessed the murder, so he pretends to be mad to protect himself.

Feng and his supporters suspect that Amleth might be faking his madness and try to unmask him. One of Feng's friends attempts to spy on Amleth while she is in conversation with his mother, but Amleth catches, kills, and chops him into pieces. Amleth throws his remains in a sewer. Feng sends Amleth to England with two escorts who are carrying a letter that instructs the English King to kill "the youth." Amleth finds the letter and modifies it so that it orders his escorts' deaths. The counterfeit letter also asks the King of Britain to give his daughter to Amleth in marriage. Amleth returns a year later, traps Feng's courtiers and burns them to death. He then exacts revenge upon Feng by switching his sword with one that is welded into its scabbard and then surprising Feng as he is sleeping. When Feng leaps up and tries to draw his sword, Amleth kills him. Amleth explains his actions to the people and they elect him King.

European Universities & the Wellborn

The 16th century saw an increase in the number of aristocratic and noble youths attending universities. Universities had been established to educate not the aristocracy, who were educated privately and usually with the aim of military leadership, but the "children of poor men." But with the shift from feudalism to a more urban, capitalist society, nobles, aristocrats, wealthy merchants, and professionals began sending their sons to study at university in greater numbers. These "gentleman-scholars" were not at university to earn a degree, but to develop the trappings of "good breeding" (Hanson, 214).

"Disputation" was the main mode of assessment in the university. Disputation was a type of oral exam in which two students debated one another about a particular topic. Although gentlemen might not be pursuing degrees, they were expected to engage in disputation with those who were—that is, the "poor men" of learning who were most certainly of "lower" birth. Failure to perform well in a disputation was seen as a humiliating defeat. Students needed to study Latin and oratory to develop the necessary skills to succeed in such intellectual contests (Hanson, 218). Although all students were subject to the same scholarly discipline, there remained a divide between the wellborn and the lowborn at a university.

Horatio is a "poor scholar," so we can assume that he is lowborn and at Wittenberg to pursue a degree that will offer him some form of economic and social mobility. Hamlet, of course, is a prince. He does not need to be there, and, in fact, it is odd that he is still at university at his age. Q1 of *Hamlet*, or the "Bad Quarto," suggests that Hamlet is about 18 or 19 years old. Later versions of the play, suggest that he is in his thirties. Commonly, English aristocrats would go to university sometime around 8 to 12-years-old and left around age 16 or so. After that, a noble of Hamlet's rank would travel the European continent (like Laertes) or go on a military campaign (like Fortinbras). Q1's age makes more sense

historically. The change to the later texts may have had to do with the ages of the actors who played the role, rather than a logical age that matched the historical reality of aristocratic university study in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were students at Wittenberg, but they are also members of the aristocracy ("gentle"), having been raised with Hamlet. Clearly Hamlet prefers Horatio's company to anyone else's and uses familiar language with him, but Horatio continually reminds Hamlet that they are not equals through the way that he addresses Hamlet as "my Lord" and "sweet" (a term that implied deference to a superior, according to Hanson, 224).

Fascism, Totalitarianism, & Control

An important feature of totalitarian governments, including Fascist governments like Italy between 1922 to 1945, is the state exercise of social control. Totalitarian governments use several approaches to secure and maintain power over their citizens.

One is the **exercise of violence**—this could be **state-sanctioned** or **extra-judicial** violence. State-sanctioned violence might manifest in the form of police brutality or harassment. Extra-judicial violence might be exercised by gangs against individuals and groups that are seen as somehow threatening. In the American context, an example of this would be attacks by the Ku Klux Klan on African Americans.

A second method by which totalitarian governments have exercised control over their populations is through **surveillance** regimes. Italy established a secret police force so secret that its name cannot be verified even today. It was known as OVRA, which scholars believe stands for *Opera Vigilanza Repressione Antifascismo*, but there is no clear documentation of this. OVRA supervised all of Italy's various police forces and established networks of spies, informants, border control protocols, and even monitored tourism by requiring inn keepers provide records of their guest rolls daily. OVRA collected information on people they deemed a threat to the State, including not only political opponents but also the mentally ill and the unhoused. In addition, Italy established medical surveillance: doctors had to report STIs, abortions, and any infants born with deformities. They also imposed breast-feeding regimes on mothers, required STI passports for sex workers, and monitored places in which gay men were known to congregate. Mussolini's government had the goal of "transforming Italians into a race of virile warriors" (Fonio, 2), which may explain Italy's focus on maternal and infant health. Surveillance was also exercised through symbolism—with giant representations of Mussolini overlooking various urban areas, for example, to give people the sense that they were always being watched.

A third method through with totalitarian regimes exert social control is through what might be called "**seduction**." This includes organizing mass cultural events and supporting group

leisure activities, like sports leagues. Italy was still a young nation, and Mussolini was interested in forming a very distinct national identity. He imposed a unified Italian language in schools (which is the Italian we know today) and he encouraged participation by young people in athletics, among other things. Cultural events were meant to create a sense of – "Italian-ness," group identification, and discourage autonomy and individualism.

The primary and explicit purpose of the Fascist state in Italy was to maintain public security and to protect Mussolini from opposition. At no point was its purpose to support the pursuit of individual citizens' goals. Everything was meant to secure the State, whose big bald beautiful head was Benito Mussolini.