

András Kiséry



HAMLET'S MOMENT

Drama and Political Knowledge
in Early Modern England

OXFORD

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Modern England*

ANDRÁS KISÉRY

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List of Abbreviations

- CP The Cecil Papers at Hatfield House, accessed through *The Cecil Papers*, <http://cecilpapers.chadwyck.com>
- ODNB *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>
- TNA SP The National Archives, State Papers collection, also accessed through *The State Papers Online, The Government of Britain, 1509–1714*, <http://gale.cengage.co.uk/state-papers-online-15091714.aspx>

Note on Texts

I quote the modernized text of *Hamlet* from Harold Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet* (The Arden Shakespeare; London: Methuen, 1982); and the writings of Ben Jonson from David M. Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (eds.), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*. 7 vols. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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Introduction

Hamlet's Moment

This is a book about early modern plays and political knowledge. It suggests that around 1600, drama as a form of popular entertainment and as the most influential secular public medium was instrumental in familiarizing its audience with *politics as a profession*: with political institutions and offices, with the protocols of political negotiation, and with the kinds of knowledge that were necessary for survival and advancement in political careers. In talking about political knowledge, my aim is not to attribute a political theory or a political position to the theatre in general or to some plays in particular, nor do I seek to discover representations of such positions or theories within plays. And although I think these plays think about politics, I don't want to claim that Shakespeare and his colleagues were original political thinkers, or political philosophers of sorts, either. In this I veer from the approaches that have dominated our thinking about the politics of early modern drama.

Clarifying my own starting point might be easiest through a contemporary analogy. Popular genres familiarize us with areas of society from which we are excluded not by physical distance, cultural difference, or social privilege in general terms, but by the very systems and structures of expert knowledge that constitute them. Detective fiction like Georges Simenon's Maigret stories, Jean-Claude Izzo's Montale trilogy, or Henning Mankell's Wallander novels, and TV series like *Law and Order* and *CSI* have imagined for us the work of police inspectors and professional investigators. Our sense of the practice of the law and of the process of the jury trial has been similarly shaped by movies like *Witness for the Prosecution* and *Twelve Angry Men* and by courtroom drama on television. Such fiction doesn't simply build on what the audience already knows. The opposite is implied by the fact that as a result of the worldwide distribution of American TV shows, people in many civil law countries are now more familiar with the American jury trial than with the protocols of their own legal system.¹ Hospital drama like *ER* has made wide audiences eager to discuss medical procedures they have never undergone, much less studied or performed.² Closer to the concerns of this book, our

¹ Carol J. Clover, 'Law and the Order of Popular Culture', in Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns (eds.), *Law in the Domains of Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 97–119 at 97–8; Barbara Villez, *Séries Télé, Visions de la Justice* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005).

² Pam Belluck, 'A Made-Up Hospital That Offered Real Medicine', *The New York Times*, 4 April 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/05/weekinreview/05belluck.html>, accessed 15 May 2015; Catherine Belling, 'Reading *The Operation*: Television, Realism, and the Possession of Medical

understanding of intelligence operations is defined by John Le Carré's *oeuvre*, and our sense of the corridors of power is based on television programmes like *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*. Fictions make the professions familiar, invest them with cultural prestige, incite us to talk about them, and invite fantasies of professional careers as exciting paths of social mobility. Few of us would make the mistake of confusing such fiction-based competence with professional expertise, and yet we rely on it in our conversations about Westminster and Washington politics, about open heart surgery, or about the criminal justice system, and ultimately, we depend on it in how we make sense of our world—and none of this would happen if their creators (writers or expert consultants) did not invest substantial professional knowledge in these fictions.

Early modern drama played a role similar to these modern fictional forms, as a channel for the dissemination of knowledge about professional work, and about the business of politics in particular, to a broad and socially inclusive public.³ The central claim of my book is that this engagement with professional political knowledge informed and shaped the theatrical production of the early years of the seventeenth century, defining some of the greatest plays written in English. In this book, I explore the connections between political knowledge and dramatic form, tracing how plays engaged with (and also contributed to) the professionalization, popular dissemination, and aestheticization of politics. I here begin with an initial look at the role of drama in the dissemination of political knowledge in early modern England, and at the nature and use of political knowledge in circulation outside the realm of politics.

POLITICS ON THE STAGE

We have long taken for granted that the complex political plays that proliferated on the English stage around the turn of the seventeenth century—the works of Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, George Chapman,

Knowledge', *Literature and Medicine*, 17 (1998), 1–23; Solange Davin, 'Healthy Viewing: The Reception of Medical Narratives', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 25 (2003), 662–79.

³ For studies of the intersections of drama with various kinds of expert and professional knowledge, see e.g. Nina Taunton, *1590s Drama and Militarism: Portrayals of War in Marlowe, Chapman and Shakespeare's Henry V* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); Patricia A. Cahill, *Unto the Breach: Martial Formations, Historical Trauma, and the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); William Kerwin, *Beyond the Body: The Boundaries of Medicine and English Renaissance Drama* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005); Henry S. Turner, *The English Renaissance Stage: Geometry, Poetics, and the Practical Spatial Arts 1580–1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Edward Gieskes, *Representing the Professions: Administration, Law, and Theater in Early Modern England* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006). The connections between drama and legal culture have received most attention in recent years, including Subha Mukherji, *Law and Representation in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Bradin Cormack, *A Power to Do Justice: Jurisdiction, English Literature, and the Rise of Common Law, 1509–1625* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Lorna Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) is an exemplary exploration of links between professional knowledge, its familiarity among laypeople, and the impact of such knowledge on literary form.

John Marston, Thomas Middleton, and their contemporaries—were crucial to the political culture and the political imagination of their time, but we rarely consider one of their most basic political functions, namely, that they helped large audiences to understand *what politics was*. Plays about the realm of politics represented intricate political situations, the complications resulting from the delegation of power, negotiations and back-channelling, intelligence gathering, and the interception of communication. In doing so, they allowed paying audiences a glimpse behind the public façades of power, into the world of diplomats and secretaries, of court factions and loyalties, and also provided them with a vocabulary necessary to talk about this world. These plays gave virtual access to statecraft, to the knowledge that defined a trade of high cultural prestige: the profession of politics.

The perceived effect of these sophisticated depictions of the political elite's activities are encapsulated in Henry Wotton's exasperated remarks about a performance of *All Is True*, a play 'representing some principal pieces of the reign of Henry VIII'. Wotton noted the sumptuous theatrical imitation of the 'extraordinary circumstances of pomp and majesty, even to the matting of the stage; the Knights of the Order with their Georges and garters, the Guards with their embroidered coats, and the like; sufficient in truth within a while to make greatness very familiar, if not ridiculous.'⁴ The best historicist scholarship of the 1980s focused on the ideological effects of such performances, debating whether they devalued sovereign majesty by demystifying it or confirmed power through making the audience complicit in its production.⁵ Whether they made their audiences accept or challenge that power, it is clear that the price of a theatre ticket promised a familiarity with greatness which went well beyond the embroidered coats of guards and the matting of palace floors, and which was until then not offered by any medium to such a wide audience. The *arcana imperii* discussed (or as it often happened, flaunted and withheld) by plays could certainly be seen as secular equivalents of sacred, pontifical mysteries, as

⁴ Logan Pearsall Smith, *The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) 2:32. The formulation used by Wotton about the dangers of people's familiarity with secrets of state continued to be used to argue for controlling the circulation of political information well into the seventeenth century. In 1663, the first issue of *The Intelligencer; published for the Satisfaction and Information of the People* carried an introduction which uses a remarkably similar formulation, and which, coming from the editor of a newspaper, may sound somewhat surprising. In it, Sir Roger L'Estrange writes that a political newspaper 'makes the *Multitude* too *Familiar* with the *Actions*, and *Counsels* of their *Superiours*; too *Pragmaticall* and *Censorious*, and gives them, not only an *Itch*, but a kind of *Colourable Right*, and *Licence*, to be Meddling with the *Government*' (*The Intelligencer*, Monday 31 August 1663, p. 2). L'Estrange explains that this argument would only be relevant if we could suppose 'the *Press* in *Order*; the *People* in their right *Wits*, and *NEWES*, or *No NEWES*, to be the *Question*'—which, as he explains, is precisely not the case, and the purpose of the newspaper is to inform the people and set them straight, as it were. When in 1660, *The Parliamentary Intelligencer* was renamed *The Kingdomes Intelligencer*, its purpose stated on the title page similarly switched from 'For Information of the People' into 'To prevent false news.'

⁵ Stephen Orgel, 'Making Greatness Familiar', *Genre*, 15 (1982), 41–8; David Scott Kastan, 'Proud Majesty Made a Subject: Shakespeare and the Spectacle of Rule', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37 (1986), 459–75; Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 21–65. Oliver Arnold, in *The Third Citizen: Shakespeare's Theater and the Early Modern House of Commons* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) extends this analysis to the theatre's (and Shakespeare's) representation of Parliament and to its critique of political representation.

King James explicitly and repeatedly insisted they should be, deeming their demystification, their *Entzauberung*, an act of sacrilege—but also (and even some of James's own references to 'mysteries of state' point in this direction) as the trade secrets of the craft or profession of politics, and their revelation as an act not only of symbolic and political, but also of practical and social consequence.⁶

Already in the 1590s, chronicle plays and tragedies of state, from Shakespeare's *Richard III* to *Henry V*, and from Marlowe's *Edward II* to the anonymous *Woodstock*, were paying close attention to the political mechanisms and institutions of the English monarchy: to the responsibility of the Lord Protector during the sovereign's minority, to the council's deliberative and advising powers, to the negotiation of competing claims of succession, but also to the intrigue, coercion, and underhanded dealings used in discharging political office. Around the turn of the century, the theatre came to focus on statecraft and its court settings even more intently. It is not news that Shakespeare's most successful and most influential play is a political tragedy, but it is worth noticing how different its vision of the realm of politics is from earlier drama. Plays like *Hamlet*, Jonson's *Sejanus*, Marston's *The Malcontent*, and Chapman's French tragedies offer richly detailed visions of political activity, putting on display the techniques of gathering and transmitting intelligence, the analysis of political agents' motives and concerns, the shrewd deployment of information, and scenes of instruction in prudent political analysis and conduct. While these early seventeenth-century plays are looking at the court more closely than earlier political drama was, they are also less directly interested in forms of constitution, in questions of sovereignty, in the legitimacy or the personal burden of rule, than were the plays of the 1590s. They attend to the pressures on the servants of the state and on the clients of powerful statesmen, to the activities of secretaries and envoys, and to the instruments with which power is acquired

⁶ The twofold meaning of the term is recognized by Ernst H. Kantorowicz, 'Mysteries of State: An Absolutist Concept and Its Late Mediaeval Origins', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 48 (1955), 65–91 at 67–8. For the mystery of state as sacred, pontifical *arcana*, see especially the 'Proclamation touching D. Cowels booke called the Interpreter' (25 March 1610), complaining about the age which 'hath bred such an unsatiable curiosity in many mens spirits, and such an itching in the tongues and penes of most men, as nothing is left unsearched to the bottome, both in talking and writing. For from the very highest mysteries in the Godhead, and the most inscrutable Councils in the Trinitie, to the very lowest pit of Hell, and the confused actions of the divels there, there is nothing now unsearched into by the curiositie of mens braines ... And therefore it is no wonder, that men in these our dayes doe not spare to wade in all the deepest mysteries that belong to the persons or State of Kings or Princes, that are gods upon Earth: since we see, (as we have already said) that they spare not God himselfe.' James Francis Larkin and Paul L. Hughes (eds.), *Royal Proclamations of King James I, 1603–1625* (Stuart Royal Proclamations, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 243. But mystery is a term commonly used in the sense of craft—as in other royal proclamations, for example, addressing concerns about 'Trades, Mysteries, or Manufactures of spinning, or making of Gold and Silver Threed, Purles, Plates, Oes, Spangles, or Foliat' (579), and King James himself also talks about the mystery of state in the sense of 'the handicraft or trade of kings' (Kantorowicz 68n10). In his speech in Star Chamber, 1616, he calls the common law 'a mystery and skill best knowen vnto' his audience, just before he would expostulate about his own 'Prerogative or mystery of state': King James VI and I, *Political Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 212. For the traditions connecting divine mysteries and craft secrets as versions of esoteric knowledge, see Pamela O. Long, *Openness, Secrecy, Authorship: Technical Arts and the Culture of Knowledge from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

and maintained. They familiarize their audiences with the business of politics, with the practical, moral, and existential quandaries of political service. If Shakespeare's two tetralogies sought to understand what it meant to be king, and what it took to be king, these plays thought about what it meant to be employed, and what it took to be employed. This perspective defines some of the greatest English plays, the tragedies of the early years of the seventeenth century.

Early seventeenth-century plays representing the workings of the realm of politics are part of a larger trend, of a flourishing of genres about affairs of state. Some of the most radically polemical texts of the late sixteenth century were presented as overviews of constitutional issues, and could serve as introductions to theories of government. The last decade of the reign of Elizabeth also saw the emergence of a market in vernacular translations of classical and continental political literature. The publication of English translations of Aristotle's *Politics*, as well as of Tacitus, Livy, and Plutarch, is only the most obvious indicator of the sudden expansion of the accessibility of materials previously restricted to a rather limited academic readership. Translations of Bodin, Lipsius, and Guicciardini, the manuscript circulation of English translations of Machiavelli's *Prince*, as well as the London publication of his major works (albeit in Italian and under false imprints), and the appearance of English works of 'politic history' that were offering lessons from the past for the understanding of contemporary politics, were part of this surge in the circulation of materials that promised instruction in the affairs of state to a broader audience, including people with no hope for putting their knowledge to use in action.

The circulation of the textual instruments and products of political service were another important facet of this widening of access to affairs of state. Political news from abroad was becoming more available in both manuscript and print. Diplomatic surveys of foreign polities (*relazioni*, as we could call them after their Venetian models), the staple products of early modern intelligence gathering and processing, began to enter public circulation. Letters of advice and treatises on politics, on political careers and on the business of government, often in the form of aphorisms, were produced near the centres of political activity, in government circles and at the secretariats of powerful political players, most notably of the Earl of Essex, but they were also copied and soon thereafter also printed. Francis Bacon's *Essays*, in its first edition a series of thematically organized aphorisms, originates in this culture of political instruction, and constitutes a fascinating case of the self-promotion of an expert political advisor through publicity. Manuals specifically written for print circulation, like Lipsius's *Six Bookes of Politics*, Barnabe Barnes's *Foure Bookes of Offices: Enabling Privat Persons for the Speciall Service of all Good Princes and Policies*, or John Melton's *The Sixe-fold Politician*, indicate that 'politics' was emerging as a field of specialized knowledge, an area of expertise that required more than good morals and a well-rounded education.⁷ Frowned upon by

⁷ On politic education in the early seventeenth century see Noah Millstone, 'Seeing Like a Statesman in Early Stuart England', *Past & Present*, 223 (2014), 77–127 at 100–12. I am grateful to Noah Millstone for long conversations about our, at points, remarkably convergent projects.

many (as the uses of the word 'policy', 'politic', and 'politician' indicate, its shades of meaning ranging from 'prudent' to 'diabolic'), politics was nevertheless increasingly recognizable as a profession.⁸ Works written in these political genres served as credentials of their authors' quasi-professional expertise, and the knowledge they articulated promised to be helpful in gaining employment in the system of political patronage. To produce them was to engage in what Lisa Jardine and William Sherman term 'knowledge transactions', an outlay of intellectual labour as part of, or in the hope of, employment.⁹ When they entered wider circulation, however, such texts were also reaching readers unlikely to enter into such transactions, either as authors or as patrons. In print, such works may have advertised their authors' expertise, but they primarily catered to an audience of readers who did not turn to them for advice on how to act (because they were not in the position to act), but for explanations of what was happening, driven by the desire for the pleasure as well as for the prestige they might derive from discussing political events with their peers. The effect of such publicity was not only the dissemination of knowledge about the art whose rules were thus circulated, however, but also an increase in the public prestige of the profession whose members were obviously in the possession of more than just this (now exoteric) information.¹⁰

⁸ For the uses of the word and its associations, see Napoleone Orsini, 'Policy: Or the Language of Elizabethan Machiavellism', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 9 (1946), 122–34. On the long-term evolution of politics as a profession, see the schematic overview in the early part of 'Politics as a profession': Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David S. Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004) 38–43. As Weber's lecture indicates, the professionalization of political work is inseparable but distinct from the birth of modern bureaucracy, of civil service; on the British case, A. G. Aylmer's studies are foundational; see especially *The King's Servants: The Civil Service of Charles I, 1625–1642* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) and for a useful overview of the transformation from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, 'From Office-Holding to Civil Service: The Genesis of Modern Bureaucracy: The Prothero Lecture', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 30 (1980), 91–108. In the sixteenth century, the ambassador emerged as an exemplary figure of high-prestige professional political expertise; see especially Douglas Biow, *Doctors, Ambassadors, Secretaries: Humanism and Professions in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Timothy Hampton, *Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Douglas Biow, *On the Importance of Being an Individual in Renaissance Italy: Men, Their Professions, and Their Beards* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) 21–114. The extent to which the term 'profession' as used in modern, post-industrial contexts might apply to this setting is discussed in Chapter 2.

⁹ Lisa Jardine and William Sherman, 'Pragmatic Readers: Knowledge Transactions and Scholarly Services in Late Elizabethan England', in Anthony Fletcher and Peter Roberts (eds.), *Religion, Culture, and Society in Early Modern Britain: Essays in Honour of Patrick Collinson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102–24; William H. Sherman, 'The Place of Reading in the English Renaissance: John Dee Revisited', in James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (eds.), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62–76; cp. also Mario Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Millstone, 'Seeing Like a Statesman'; Eric H. Ash, *Power, Knowledge, and Expertise in Elizabethan England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); and cp. Biow, *On the Importance of Being an Individual in Renaissance Italy* 35–57 on the rhetoric and functions of disclosing knowledge of a craft or art. On the public dissemination of political documents and political knowledge in early modern Europe, see Jacob Soll, *Publishing the Prince: History, Reading, & the Birth of Political Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Chapters of this book show how theatrical representations of the realm of politics (whether fictionalizing recent or historical events or embellishing invented scenarios with factual and verisimilar details) drew on the textual tools and products of the profession of politics, putting on display the knowledge embodied in political news, maxims of state, ambassadorial *relazioni*, politic histories—and dramatized the activities they facilitated in the original, courtly context of their production. On-stage political advice is offered in Machiavellian aphorisms, political positions are argued in the terminology of pamphlets about the rights and obligations of the subject and the monarch, while representations of foreign states rely on intelligence reports and newsletters. Commercial drama did not, of course, compete with expert instruction. Rather, the broad, conversation-provoking publicity of performance supplemented and radically expanded the limited manuscript and broader print circulation of expert political knowledge. Plays offered such knowledge for consumption to a paying, non-professional audience. In doing so, they repurposed them from professional tools into the matter of political conversation among those excluded from political activity.

The first scene of *Alphonsus, the Emperor of Germany*, a late sixteenth-century play that combines a revenge plot with a quasi-historical drama of lurid political machinations, is a particularly crude example of the display of political knowledge on the stage, and therefore illuminates very clearly the promises held by such display.¹¹ The play begins with Alphonsus, whose imperial crown is in danger, asking the secretary Lorenzo for help. Lorenzo, happy to oblige, tells his emperor to

take paper, pen, and ink,
Write first this maxim, it shall do you good:
1. A prince must be of the nature of the lion and the fox, but not the
one without the other. (1.1.99–101)

Alphonsus writes and comments, explaining to himself the point of the instruction; then Lorenzo moves on to the next maxim: ‘2. A prince above all things must seem devout; but there is nothing so dangerous to his state, as to regard his promise or his oath’—and so on, until he reaches ‘6. Be always jealous of him that knows your secret.’ This is a maxim which Alphonsus quickly puts into practice, poisoning his instructor, committing the set of notes to memory, and—‘lest the world should find this little Schedule’—destroying it (1.1.109–11, 173, 197). The rest of the play shows how he uses this secret recipe book for the ruthless and duplicitous

¹¹ *The Tragedy of Alphonsus, Emperour of Germany as it hath been very often Acted (with great applause) at the Privat house in Black-Friers by His Maiesties Servants*. By George Chapman Gent. (London: for Humphrey Moseley, 1654). I am citing the text by act, scene, and line number from the modern edition in Thomas Marc Parrott (ed.), *The Plays and Poems of George Chapman: The Tragedies* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1910). Parrott rejects the attribution to Chapman (683–92), as does Fredson Bowers in ‘The Date and Composition of *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany*’, *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 15 (1933), 165–89, who argues—based on internal, mostly stylistic evidence—that the play was written in the late 1590s. Bowers was the last critic to discuss the question of the play’s date. It was dated 1594 in Alfred Harbage and Samuel Schoenbaum, *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700* (Rev. edn.; London: Methuen, 1964) and it is not assigned a date in the relevant volumes of Martin Wiggins, *British Drama, 1533–1642: A Catalogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012–), that have appeared so far.