

Schmitt or Hamlet: The Unsovereign Event

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Thus conscience makes cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action . . .

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*¹

One of the most popular facets of Schmitt's philosophy is his theory of sovereignty and decisionism, as developed in his early essay *Political Theology* (1922). There, Schmitt offers an original outlook on the political implications of the secularization of modern Europe and philosophy's purported turn away from theology. The "death of God," along with the gradual disappearance of the political institution of monarchy, are only symbols of the decline of sovereignty in general. What is lost in the process is not sovereignty as such, since it can assume new forms, such as "reason," "nature," "the people," or "the state." What is lost is, rather, the "decisionistic and personalistic element in the concept of sovereignty."² The old sovereign was a *real, specific person of the sovereign*—someone who is not a mere instance, or carrier, of preexisting law, but one who is "behind" the law, deciding both on the law and its suspension.

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 3.1.82–87.

2. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 48.

An action that ensues from a personal sovereign decision neither follows an order nor awaits justification and authorization but is retroactively justified and authorized by the order *it* creates. Not unlike Nietzsche, the Schmitt of *Political Theology* is not so much nostalgic for an irretrievable past, nor does he long for the resurrection of a transcendent God. He is, rather, derisive of those ideologies that tend to celebrate the decline of sovereignty, or make it into a supreme value, be they of the liberal, anarchist, or positivist variety. This kind of ideology is termed by him a “philosophy of immanence,” and he finds its climax in Hegel and nineteenth-century philosophy. Paradoxically, by denying personal sovereignty, and therefore any concrete transcendence, this philosophy asserts unlimited power and scope to the order it creates.³ And, in celebrating the decline of sovereignty, it promotes in fact, if not in principle, mediocrity, mechanical repetition, and a mentality of “cautious half measure.” Personal decisions and assertions are replaced by “everlasting discussions” and negotiations in which no actual decision (i.e., no exception, nothing *else*) is ever made.

According to Mika Ojakangas’s excellent overview of Schmitt’s philosophy, the sovereign decision is but a “good example” of a basic structure or common pattern that exists in most of Schmitt’s essays. He writes: the “same holds true for all of Schmitt’s central political concepts. They are all exceptions, extreme cases.”⁴ The common thread is Schmitt’s search for the *concrete*, which for him means always an *exceptional event* (*Ereignis*). The event as such, whatever its specific content is, indicates “resistance to the absolutization of immanence.”⁵ The event for Schmitt, says Ojakangas, “introduces a rupture—a void—into the closure of order immanent to itself.”⁶ Each of Schmitt’s essays introduces a key concept to designate this rupture, such as the sovereign, the enemy, the constitutive power, and land appropriation (and we may perhaps add the partisan to this list). And each of these concepts is a counter-concept, or *Gegenbegriff*, since it designates

3. To get a sense of the paradox, consider Schmitt’s critique of Mikhail Bakunin (“the greatest anarchist of the nineteenth century”). Schmitt remarks that by opposing sovereignty as such, Bakunin in effect had “*to decide against the decision*,” which is itself a sovereign act. This renders Bakunin “in theory, the theologian of the antitheological and in practice the dictator of an antidictatorship” (*ibid.*, p. 66). It is the image of a new brand of sovereign.

4. Mika Ojakangas, “Philosophies of ‘Concrete’ Life: From Carl Schmitt to Jean-Luc Nancy,” *Telos* 132 (Fall 2005): 32.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

what is real or concrete, that is to say, what is not conjured up by thought, nor what follows some preexisting or overarching logic or rationale, but what simply *happens* or *irrupts*. It, therefore, emerges from *outside* the conceptual order, rupturing it, eventually determining or re-determining its parameters from within.

In what follows I will offer a close, interpretative analysis of Schmitt's 1956 *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Irruption of Time into Play* (*Hamlet oder Hecuba: Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel*), a lesser known essay which analyzes Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.⁷ My reading will show that this essay serves as another good example of the pattern Ojakangas highlights. It should be noted in advance, however, that identifying similarities and a common pattern is never enough. After all, it is not necessarily a perfectly unified theory that we're after in Schmitt, if only because such an image of unity would not fit well with precisely that element which unifies his thought, namely, the exception.

Upon reading *Hamlet or Hecuba*, one finds it remarkable that the great theorist of decisionism should have become so fascinated by one of the most indecisive characters in the history of literature. It is, precisely, Hamlet's indecisiveness or inaction that fascinates Schmitt and serves as his main theme. Whatever the motives and circumstances of this essay, and however subtle and implicit its claims in this regard, we find a profoundly revised assessment of the rise of modern politics and the fall from (or of) sovereignty. What is certain is that if this text, indeed, exemplifies a turn in Schmitt's thinking of sovereignty, then no Schmittian theory of the event can be complete without proper attention to it.⁸

A number of "counter-concepts" are interwoven into Schmitt's argument in *Hamlet or Hecuba*: the tragic event, reality, irruption, and myth (as will be shown, the word "tragic" does not signify a species of the genus "event," but a clarification of the meaning of eventality as such). The

7. Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Irruption of Time into Play*, trans. Simona Draghici (Corvallis, OR: Plutarch Press, 2006).

8. At the risk of venturing an analogy too broad to be sustained in this context, it could be suggested that the event of National Socialism effected a turn [*Kehre*] in Schmitt's thought analogous to the one found in Heidegger. The turn from preoccupation with the personal sovereign to a reflection on an unsovereign event, as I call it here, would accordingly be analogous to the turn in Heidegger from the resolutely appropriating Dasein to the still less personal (only quarter-human) event of "appropriation" (*Ereignis*). But even if so, it must be stated that Schmitt's turn is not nearly as radical or "theological." He remains firmly (perhaps even more firmly than before) on all too human grounds.

exceptional event in this essay is portrayed as *a fateful irruption of the real into play, which turns it into tragedy and thereby becomes a myth*. Importantly, however, this event in its concretion, particularity and historicity is now grasped in opposition to, or as restricting, sovereign invention or intervention. It is not that this event is now impersonal, but that the meaning of personhood itself undergoes revision.

A Real Tragedy

Hamlet, for Schmitt, is not just any other play. A play famous, among other things, for staging a “play within a play,” *Hamlet* reflects a more general structure, the structure of playfulness, which is not unique to the theater but is a central facet of our communal existence.⁹ Shakespeare himself is famous for the statement, “all the world’s a stage,” and Schmitt echoes this sentiment a number of times throughout the essay, as when he cites the dictum *ludens in orbe terrarum* (playing in the world), referring to the theological view that the world is a playground for God, and when he quotes Schiller’s words: “the great play of the world.”¹⁰ Schmitt realizes that in certain senses, and especially approaching the baroque age, “the whole world has become a stage, a *theatrum mundi*” and “to act in public was to act in a theater . . . it was a theater performance.”¹¹ It is not hard to recognize here the familiar pattern of Schmitt’s thought. Setting up the notion of play or stage as an all-inclusive order that admits of no bounds corresponds to Schmitt’s broader concern with the totality of immanence, which acknowledges nothing beyond itself.¹²

9. The play within a play takes place in the third act, where Hamlet requests a group to stage a play for the court (the content of the play and its circumstances will later be discussed). Hamlet writes some of the script for the play and partially “directs” it, using the occasion to comment on the ethics of acting and the theater in general, in particular expressing his distaste for “overacting”—which is a theme in *Hamlet*. This gives the impression that Hamlet somehow transcends, almost feels uncomfortable with, his existence as a character in a play.

10. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 40.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

12. The relation between “exception” and “seriousness” (as opposed to playfulness) is already stressed in *Political Theology*, where Schmitt writes, “The exception can be more important . . . than the rule . . . because the *seriousness* of an insight goes deeper than the clear generalization inferred from what ordinarily repeats itself. . . . In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition” (Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 15, my emphasis). But it is also significant that

The “play within the play” in *Hamlet* is not, Schmitt proposes, a baroque gesture, a duplication of the playfulness of play, or an increase in its ludic character. Nor is it a self-parody or a “glimpse behind the scenes” into the apparatus of the play as such. On the face of it, we could suggest that since Hamlet is such an unusually self-reflective character, whose demeanor is always “sicklied with the pale cast of thought,” the play within the play is likely to be an extension of his character to the play as a whole—a self-reflection of the play itself. But self-reflection, for Schmitt, is, at most, a sign or an indication, not the thing itself. For him, the play within the play exposes the reality of the play as such, and therefore the socio-politico-historical reality to which it belongs and in which it is situated. Furthermore, since it hits upon the limits of the play, or stage, it already approaches the tragic. The play tends toward the tragic for Schmitt, to the extent that it makes it difficult, or irrelevant, for the audience, made self-aware, to “cry for Hamlet.” This point is put more emphatically in the second act of the play, in which Hamlet reflects, in a mixture of dismay and admiration, on the readiness and competence of one of the players in the group to cry for Hecuba “on demand”:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit
 That from her working all his visage wann’d,
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
 With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
 For Hecuba!

What’s Hecuba to him, or he to her,
 That he should weep for her? . . .¹³

Schmitt insists that we distinguish between “tragic drama” or mourning play (*Trauerspiel*) and tragedy, and the crux of this distinction lies for him in understanding the properly tragic as earnest (rather than “sad”), and the opposite of playacting. “The tragic ends,” Schmitt writes, “where playacting begins, even if the play is meant to make us cry. . . . It is impossible to overlook the fact that the tragic is not compatible with

the totality of play is not precisely the same as the totality of mechanistic or rationalistic systems.

13. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.486–94.

playacting, particularly in the case of Shakespeare's dramas, with their ludic character, which is apparent even in those that are customarily called tragedies."¹⁴ Tragedy, therefore, is precisely what is not performed; it is the only thing, perhaps, that cannot be performed. But this non-performativity itself must be first chosen or rejected. As Schmitt's title seems to suggest, we are faced with a choice: Hamlet or Hecuba. Are we to face, in *Hamlet*, that which makes it truly tragic, or are we to indulge in its playfulness all the way, either laughing or crying? This choice is presented to us by *Hamlet* itself.

What renders *Hamlet* a tragedy—its earnest aspect—is the fact that, as Schmitt repeatedly stresses in the last few pages of his article, the play assumes a “hard core” or “kernel” of reality, “an extremely powerful present and actuality,” which is irreversible, irrevocable, and incontestable.¹⁵ This real core, Schmitt maintains, is “an extraordinary quality,” a “surplus value” of the tragic, and here we recognize the familiar figure of the exception. “This surplus value,” Schmitt writes,

lies in the very reality of the tragic events, in the enigmatic concentration and imbrication of human beings that are incontestably real. It is on it that the earnestness of the tragic events rests, events that cannot be object of conjecture or relativization, and consequently do not lend themselves to play. All the participants are aware of an irrevocable reality which no human brain has devised, but on the contrary, is there, *thrust on from the outside*. This irrevocable reality is the dumb rock against which the play breaks, and the surge of the truly tragic moves forward in a cloud of foam.¹⁶

14. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 35. The contrast to Hans-Georg Gadamer is interesting on this point. Gadamer shares with Schmitt the thought that the structure of play, which Gadamer regards as “the clue to ontological explanation,” applies beyond the scope of particular activities designated by this name. But Gadamer also stresses that “play itself contains its own, even sacred, seriousness.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 102. It is therefore not surprising that he regards tragedy as a paradigm of, rather than a limit to, play. Schmitt does not necessarily deny that play can be serious in certain senses of the word, but what he means here by the term “serious” *just is* the limit of play, however expansive our definition of play may be. Serious is the exceptional event which disrupts the *structure* or *order* of play. The dispute between their philosophies on this matter would therefore involve the question: can the very applicability of the structure of play (and perhaps of ontological explanations in general) admit of a *limit*, an exception?

15. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, pp. 37–44.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 39 (my emphasis).

That the tragic, after its irruption, does not immediately recede but “moves forward in a cloud of foam” is already a metaphorical expression of the nature of myth, the discussion of which will have to be deferred to a later occasion. For now, two things must be noted concerning this passage. First, the emphasis on the “concentration” and “imbrication” of human beings—phrases that signal what I have suggested is a revision of Schmitt’s conception of personhood. This will be further elaborated as we move on. Second, the source of the tragic is reality, and if *Hamlet* is a veritable tragedy and not a mourning play, it is only because “historical time irrupts into the time of the play.”¹⁷ *This irruption is the event.* As the German suggests, irruption (*Einbruch*) is what breaks in from the “outside,” and it breaks, breaks and enters, disrespecting the boundaries and the autonomy of art and of the play. Unintended, uninvited, and unannounced, reality in the event is not outside, but inside, the play.

Reality is generally defined in Schmitt’s essay through its contrast to human invention, conjecture, or imagination. The opposition between event and invention is most fully apparent in Schmitt’s critique of the romanticist “cult of genius,” which propagates the “poet’s freedom of invention” and his power of “free and sovereign creation.”¹⁸ In general, Schmitt rejects the validity of all attempts by other interpreters of *Hamlet* to determine the meaning of the plot by surmising the subjective intentions of its author. If subjectivist readings are limited, it is not because the author does not play a crucial role; it is, rather, because their conception of subjectivity or personhood is limited. Assuming the author’s sovereignty, and misguidedly liberating him from his concrete dependency on the surroundings, such readings fail to treat his person as a figure belonging to its time and place and as a member of a living public sphere. Schmitt stresses that it is not accidental that precisely those romanticist theorists of art who attribute “freedom” to the poet were themselves “home workers,” namely, working *from* home and producing primarily *for* home consumption (i.e., for print)—such is the nature of *their* public sphere. Shakespeare, however, although often placed among the emblematic representatives of the creative genius, lived and worked in a radically different atmosphere. He wrote for a particular audience, an audience that for the most part would not have read the plays in print, but only witnessed their performance on stage.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

Finally, it is because reality irrupts (*bricht ein*) into the “world stage” that it is truly fateful.¹⁹ A contrived fate, Schmitt suggests, is no fate at all, and he adds that “invention and tragic events are incompatible and mutually exclusive.”²⁰ What irrupts into the play is a force that no one in particular controls, and so it no longer merits the name of “action” (or decision) but is primarily an impingement, a restriction, an *inaction*. This kind of restriction is at least in part connected to the constraints involved in living in a common, public space, within an “imbrication of human beings.” Schmitt writes:

A playwright, whose works are meant for immediate performance before an audience well-known to him, finds himself . . . sharing a common public space [with them]. By their material presence, the spectators assembled in the house form a public space that brings together the author, the stage director, the actors and the very audience, in an all-inclusive way. The attending public must understand the action of the play . . . [otherwise] the common public space dissolves or turns into a mere theater scandal . . . This kind of public space sets a permanent limit to the dramatist’s freedom of invention.²¹

The “personalistic” element is here radically decoupled from the “decisionistic.” The person seems to be the one who is exceptionally impacted, affected, even restricted or maimed, by his or her surroundings, essentially and deeply implicated in a constellation of forces and personalities, which forms a common public space. What is provocative in Schmitt’s account is that he insists that this does not apply to every individual. Therefore, the general strand of a “philosophy of authenticity” that was suggested in Schmitt’s decisionism is retained, albeit in a less proactive and individualistic form. In this case, it is detectable in the contrast between this kind of personal, real involvement, which is exceptional, and impersonal “playacting,” which is the rule. Again, it takes a particular constellation of personalities and an exceptional event to make such fateful impact.

We still need to familiarize ourselves with what it was, exactly, that irrupted into *Hamlet* and what it was that Shakespeare’s public had known and that restricted or interrupted his creativity, thereby producing the

19. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

unique genius of this work. But before we approach Schmitt's concrete analysis of Hamlet, a word of caution is needed. Schmitt protests against what he calls the "division of labor" in the academy, a division that again follows the presumption, by each "division," of sovereignty and autonomy. Different competence areas, Schmitt states, have become "well established value systems, which only acknowledge their own passports and affidavits, accept only their own visas, and do not grant to anybody else the right of entrance and transit." It is for that reason that, in "the sphere of the beautiful . . . questions of history and sociology become tactless and in bad taste."²² As always, Schmitt does not offer a programmatic solution to this state of division, but presents an exception to it. When reading a play like *Hamlet*, Schmitt seems to suggest, we simply have no choice but to get tactless and in bad taste.

First Opening: Taboo

... we find ourselves before a *taboo* which the playwright simply observed and which constrained him to place the question of the mother's guilt or absence of it between brackets, although both morally and dramatically it rests at the core of the revenge drama.²³

According to Schmitt's analysis, reality irrupts into *Hamlet* via two "openings"—"shadows," "obscure zones," or "doorways," as he alternately calls them—in the play. These are named by him *the taboo of the queen* and the *transformation of the avenger type*. It is now time to inspect each of them separately.

Put simply, what is meant by the "taboo of the queen" is the fact that, for reasons of fear and prudence, Shakespeare could not afford to make explicit, or even plainly implicit, suggestions regarding the complicity of Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, in the murder of her first husband, Hamlet's father. This is due to the unmistakable similarity between her case and that of Queen Mary Stuart of Scotland. Mary Stuart's second husband and cousin, Lord Darnley, was allegedly murdered in 1567 (more than thirty years before *Hamlet*'s first performance), and it was suspected that his murderer was James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell, who would later become Mary's third husband. It was also suspected that Mary conspired

22. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

and plotted the murder with Bothwell. The case was investigated and debated already in Mary's lifetime. What made this affair particularly sensitive in the early 1600s was the approaching death of the heirless Queen Elizabeth of England, and the uncertainty regarding the identity of her successor to the crown—Mary's son, James, being one of the leading candidates. The play was, therefore, situated right in the midst of political and historical turmoil, and the affinities between the characters of the play and those of the real historical drama that erupted "outside" were evident. Since the dying Queen Elizabeth "did not want to hear 'funeral tolls,'" nobody, Schmitt writes, "dared to talk about that delicate situation openly."²⁴ Still, clandestine campaigns were conducted by interest groups in support of the competing candidates, to the mortal risk of all those involved. Shakespeare's own company had to quit London for a while because of the persecution of his patrons, who were supporters of James. And James himself, whether for emotional or coldly political reasons, was known to be rigorously unforgiving of anyone who would have his mother's name slandered. The similarity, in any case, between the drama of the Stuart family and that of the Hamlets, could not have escaped the attention of the contemporary spectator, including James himself.

Therefore, according to Schmitt, the whole question of Queen Gertrude's involvement in the murder of her husband stood under the sign of a taboo. And so, although this question "forces itself upon the play from the beginning to the end and cannot be suppressed," it is nevertheless "carefully evaded, and so remains unanswered."²⁵ This peculiarity is only reinforced in view of the fact that *Hamlet* is, at least on the face of it, a "revenge drama," and that its hero is therefore supposed to be an "avenger type." The point is that, given that Hamlet's mother married Claudius—his father's brother and alleged murderer, who thereby took over the throne—the suspicion regarding the mother's involvement and the need to decide on the question of her complicity must have played a decisive role in Hamlet's quest for revenge. And yet, the question is "carefully evaded."²⁶

24. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

26. Schmitt's claim that the question is "evaded" is arguable. Hamlet seems to be obsessed with this question throughout the play and his rage against his mother is only barely suppressed. But it is never made clear *what* precisely he accuses her of. Naturally, he accuses her of getting married with his uncle not even two months after the murder. It

This evasion is the result of a taboo that Shakespeare had to observe, namely, the fact that it was dangerous, to say the least, to condemn the queen (Gertrude/Mary) outwardly, seeing as her son James would not have it. More importantly than the prohibition on “telling the Queen out,” however, this ambivalence, or hole, in the play allowed the real character of Mary, with its enigma (it was never clear whether she was or was not involved in killing her husband, though there was good reason to suspect that she was), to break or irrupt into it.²⁷

As Schmitt writes: “A terrifying reality shed a faint light through the masks and costumes of a theatre play. No interpretation, whether philological, philosophical, or aesthetical, however subtle, can change that.”²⁸ Nothing can change the real intervention of these historical events in the composition of the play as we know it; the play bears their imprint, not just in passing details and contours, but at its very heart and in its structure, subverting all the elements of the traditional plot of a revenge play, producing the hesitation, the introspection, the pervasive silence, and the suppressed rage. This, for Schmitt, is not “open for interpretation.” Mind the phrase “nothing can change,” and note how it is bound up with critiques of philosophic or aesthetic interpretations, a critique that is carefully woven throughout Schmitt’s texts. Schmitt’s point seems to be that any interpretation that fails to take into account the operation of the taboo and its fateful impact on the play is simply blinded to its central problematic.

is not clear, however, if he accuses her of being involved in the *killing* of his father. Even his father’s ghost is not explicit on the matter, but only instructs him to let her be, and later intervenes at the point where Hamlet seems to come dangerously close to blatantly accusing her of murder. This is in fact the only occasion—more suggestive in how fleeting and cautious it is than in anything else—that Hamlet mumbles the forbidden words: “A bloody deed. Almost as bad, good mother/As kill a king and marry with his brother” (it happens right after he kills Polonius). Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.4.27–28. At his mother’s dismay on hearing his remark (“As kill a king?”), Hamlet does not retreat from his words (“Ay, lady, it was my word”), nor does he ever repeat them, and no more is said of the matter.

27. In his biographical novel on Mary Stuart, Stefan Zweig gives the impression that the enigma around Mary’s guilt was inherent to her character and the conflict ridden atmosphere of the time. As he writes: “The answers to the riddle of Mary’s life and character are almost as contradictory as they are manifold. Some regard her as a murderess, others as a martyr; some as intriguer, others as saint. . . . In the thousands upon thousands of documents, reports, records of trials, letters, etc., relating to her, the question of her guilt or innocence is continually being re-examined, and the re-trial has continued for three centuries.” Stefan Zweig, *Mary Queen of Scotland and the Isles*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Broughton Press, 2008), p. v.

28. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 18.

This blindness results, perhaps, from a predetermination of what “art,” in general, is or ought to be.

For what is it that we are talking about here, really? Shakespeare’s incapacity to address the inevitable question of the queen’s involvement? In one single stroke, this banal allusion both degrades Shakespeare’s genius, introducing petty concerns of court diplomacy into his masterpiece, and deprives the play of its immortality, its artistic capacity to be timeless, to be a text or, at most, a performance. Worse still, this is not even an event, in the sense of something that actually takes place within the play, but an evasion, a silence, around which the long string of words and thoughts timidly dances and swirls. But it is just this problematic, Schmitt argues, that determines the fate of the story, the peculiarity of its characters and its poetry. And it is just here that reality shines through despite the creator, a reality, coercing his artistic efforts, of which he is just a part. Finally, it is just this peculiarity that eventually bestows upon it the extraordinary power of myth.

Second Opening: Hamletization

But Gertrude/Mary herself plays only a subordinate role, especially since her problem is carefully evaded. The situation is more complex in the case of Prince Hamlet: “The avenger, the hero of this revenge drama, in other words, the decisive character, has been rendered problematic in an unimaginable manner. . . . This amazing character has rightly become famous not as a revenge-seeker but the opposite, as a problematic character, subject to doubt and ill-assured of his avenging task.”²⁹ Hamlet’s character (which “overflows its mask”) marks for Schmitt the second irruption of real time into the time of play, after the irruption of the taboo. It is “the transformation [later to be coined ‘Hamletization’] of the avenger into a melancholic entangled into his own musings.” An explanation for what Schmitt calls Hamlet’s “singular inaction” cannot be found anywhere in Shakespeare, he suggests.³⁰

Reflect, if you will, on the difference between the event of decision of *Political Theology* and the event of the “Hamletization of the avenger,” as Schmitt calls it here. For one thing, is not a decision that one *takes*, but a change of character and motivation that one *undergoes*.³¹ At the same time,

29. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

however, this change of character peculiarly names this person, rendering him who he is. The impersonal form of “the avenger” is a classic character, an archetype, or rather a stereotype (a model or a pattern), whereas Hamlet is a prototype, not repeated but transformed, problematized, indistinguishably marked and remarked by its “singular inaction.” It is what Hamlet is incapable of doing that makes him who he is, a singular personality and a thinker.

In stark contrast to Hamlet, the Nordic Amleth of the Norse saga (upon which *Hamlet* is said to be based) “is not a doubter but a practical activist who reaches straight for the goal which he has set for himself. . . a born-avenger . . . driven by his instinct of revenge.”³² Note that the “practical activist” is here reduced to the level of a stereotype, a pattern. In general, while “inaction” merits the adjective “singular,” action is almost synonymous in this essay with playacting and, therefore, something constitutively “inauthentic.” Of Hamlet, on the other hand, Schmitt remarks that “this peculiar avenger does practically nothing else about his avenging task but to set up [a] theatre performance . . . a play within the play.”³³

This other play, already mentioned, is meant to serve Hamlet as a “mousetrap” by means of which to conclusively implicate Claudius in the murder of his father. The murder is reenacted on stage, along with a rather explicit, but of course indirect, text that Hamlet composed for the occasion, in order to test Claudius’ reaction. In Hamlet’s words:

The play’s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.³⁴

However, Hamlet’s “mousetrap” seems uncalled for, since he has already been told earlier in the play, by the ghost of his dead father, who the murderer was. Schmitt explains this by suggesting that the function of this play within the play is not only to test Claudius’s reaction, but to judge, by his reaction, the validity of the ghost’s testimony and the authenticity of the ghost itself. It is to reassure Hamlet that the apparition of his father’s ghost is really his father and not the working of a devil. Had he not been

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.539–40. If we imagine these words as Shakespeare’s rather than Hamlet’s, their meaning miraculously transforms. Who’s the king whose conscience Shakespeare hoped to catch? What is “conscience,” and how does one “catch” it?

uncertain of that, he would have had no need of a “mousetrap.” For the Nordic Amleth, in any case, no such apparition, genuine or otherwise, is needed in the first place. He knows who the guilty one is and goes for the kill.

This hesitation, the problematic of deciding on the nature of the ghost and on the nature of existence altogether, which makes for Hamlet’s “singular inaction,” is already a second doorway in the plot. “Hamlet the stage character,” Schmitt maintains, “flows over the limits of his mask . . . against [him] another figure has been propped.”³⁵ The contemporary actor, spectator, and patron knew and recognized well who that other figure was. It was James, Mary Stuart’s son.

As Schmitt records, James was, since childhood, “kidnapped, abducted, imprisoned, captured and threatened with death.” He was “literally catapulted from his mother’s womb into the chasm of his era.”³⁶ It is only fitting that this child of a chasm would also turn to reflection and scholarship, trying to settle in his writings many of the paradigmatic disputes and ruptures of his time—disputes and ruptures he could not even begin to settle any other way. This chasm, as we can learn especially from the two appendices to Schmitt’s essay, can be seen as twofold. Primarily, it has to do with the religious controversies and wars, most specifically, those between Protestantism and Catholicism, which ruptured James’s own personality and family, and which Schmitt finds to be nothing less than “the chasm that defined Europe’s destiny.” This chasm is also “the ultimate and essential aspect of the Hamlet theme.” As he writes:

Hamlet finds himself right at the center of the opposition between Catholicism and Protestantism, between Rome and Wittenberg. Even his doubts about the apparitions of his father’s ghost are decided in the opposition between Catholic and Protestant demonologies, resulting from the difference in the dogmas of purgatory and hell.³⁷

35. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 20.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 53. Schmitt remarks that of the three great symbolic figures of modern European literature—Don Quixote, Hamlet, and Faustus—only Hamlet bespeaks this chasm, as Don Quixote is a good Catholic and Faustus a good Protestant (*ibid.*, p. 45). He therefore questions the sufficiency of Walter Benjamin’s diagnosis, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), that Hamlet is “peculiarly Christian.” “Whatever may here be considered Christian,” he claims, “has gone through James, Mary Stuart’s son, who is totally implicated in the religious confrontation” (*ibid.*, p. 53).

The second fold of this chasm is of a temporal nature, and not unrelated to the first.³⁸ It is the transition period in which the insular and increasingly maritime kingdom of England finds itself at the dawn of the seventeenth century: no longer “barbaric” (feudal) and not yet “political” (a modern, sovereign state). Accordingly, Shakespeare’s theater, too, “and his *Hamlet*, in particular, are no longer ecclesiastical, in the medieval sense. On the other hand, they are not yet a political state theater, in the concrete sense that state and politics acquired on the Continent as a result of the development of state sovereignty in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”³⁹ This difference is essential to the interpretation of *Hamlet*, he insists, because “the *core* of this play cannot be grasped by means of the categories of art and cultural history, such as Renaissance and Baroque.”⁴⁰ A political history, or the history of the concept of the political, underlies aesthetic categories and relativizes them, simply because the play itself, the theater, is subordinated to a certain social and political order.

These unbridgeable chasms, in any case, are embodied in the person of James, and in his reflection, and are given expression in Hamlet’s every turn. And the “fact remains recognizable” that

the transformation of the typical revenge-seeker can only be explained by taking into consideration the historical presence of King James. In times of religious schisms, the world and its history lose their established forms, and a series of human problems becomes visible, on the basis of which no purely aesthetical consideration is any longer capable of producing the hero of a revenge drama. The historical reality is stronger than any aesthetics, and also stronger than the most original subject. A king who by his character and destiny was himself the product of the dismemberment of his era was present in his concrete existence there, under the nose of the author of the tragedy.⁴¹

We sense that Schmitt’s interpretation insists on two very different points. On the one hand, it insists on locating a concrete particular personality behind Hamlet’s stage character, rather than allowing him to be either a figment of Shakespeare’s creative imagination or, as he is usually made

38. The chasm between Catholicism and Protestantism is, after all, a chasm between the old and the new, though the “new” here is still shadier, more intertwined, conflicted, and bounded with the old, than the Enlightenment ideal of a post-theological modernity.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 53 (my emphasis).

41. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 26.

out to be, a metaphorical image of the “modern subject/individual,” which would again bring us back to Shakespeare’s philosophical genius and creative imagination. On the other hand, Schmitt also insists that this singular and particular personality behind Hamlet is itself but a “product of the dismemberment of the era”; it is not “authentic,” “heroic,” or “original,” only real and paradigmatic at that. Thus, extending Hamlet into James, Schmitt rescues Hamlet from the hold of Shakespeare, his creator, as well as from that of the interpreter, the performance, and the text. Hamlet is not simply a mirror image of James, but rather James, in his troubled existence, *Hamletizes* him.

Irruption and the Problem of Historicism

In an appendix to his *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer advances a critique of Schmitt’s essay, arguing that “in [his] opinion, Schmitt falls victim to a false historicism when, for example, he interprets politically the fact that Shakespeare leaves the question of the queen’s guilt open, and sees this as a taboo.”⁴² This is an “immanent critique” of Schmitt. Gadamer uses the phrase “*falls victim* to false historicism” because he is aware that Schmitt endorses an explicitly *anti*-historicist stance. For example, we read in Schmitt that it is only the “grotesque misunderstanding of historicism,” and one of the “monumental errors associated with the word ‘history,’” that history is considered merely as something past, over-and-done-with, something for the archives.⁴³ These allegations are addressed precisely against what Gadamer calls “false historicism,” namely, the kind of historicism that reduces all considerations to one. This, however, does not contradict the fact that, as mentioned earlier, Schmitt rebels against the “division of labor” that bans historical and sociological considerations altogether from the land of art, and vice versa.⁴⁴

Gadamer, in any case, cannot see how Schmitt’s appeal to history is anything but false historicism, one which overdetermines the significance of the play, reducing it to a reference to specific historical reality. I will not try to disqualify this critique, because there is evidently something to it, but I do take it as an occasion to observe a few important qualifications that Schmitt makes regarding his notion of irruption, for he makes them, I believe, precisely, in order to fend off critiques of this sort. As suggested,

42. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 499.

43. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 44.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

it is as an *irruption of real time into the time of play* that Schmitt characterizes the event, and it is the “evental” status of this irruption that renders it something other than a piece of historical data. He distinguishes his notion of “irruption” from two other modes of relation between play and reality. These are allusions and reflections.⁴⁵ Allusions are references, invoked within the play itself, to actual events with which the audience might be familiar. Reflections occur more at the character level, namely, real-life characters of the period are reflected into, and reflected by, stage characters. Schmitt remarks that such characters do not have to be unproblematically self-identical: “pictures and figures, situations and events blend dream-like on the stage.”⁴⁶ Prince Hamlet, for example, is not only a reflection of James but, as Schmitt suggests, a compound reflection of both him and the Earl of Essex. In any case, it arises from Schmitt’s account that reflections are truer than allusions. Reflections work like a mirror, which really coexists with what it reflects, rather than as reference to something totally distinct. Reflections are, therefore, not mere signposts and accessories, but living and dynamic correspondences with reality. What allusions and reflections nevertheless have in common is that they both retain the reality-play opposition present in every theory of representation. Irruption, on the other hand, poses a different sort of relation altogether. We could perhaps illustrate it as follows:

← ALLUSION

←→ REFLECTION

→ IRRUPTION

This illustration has its limitations, but it serves to indicate that, as suggested, irruption breaks in, rather than refers to or mirrors, the outside. The notions of reflection and allusion suggest then, to different degrees, that the “outside,” or “reality,” remains outside. Once we understand, however, that the play and its public performance themselves are real, and that the structure of play extends far beyond the actual stage, it becomes plainer that these distinctions between play and reality, and between an inside and an outside, while not without specifically determinable coordinates, are superficial. False, or reductive, historicism stops short at this level. In irruption, however, the play-reality distinction itself is violated, but

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

only for that reason is it substantiated for the first time.⁴⁷ Only in irruption does the play immanently realize a limit, and only in the negative mode of a limit, a boundary, a restriction, can something like reality be said to intervene.

Schmitt draws these distinctions in order to clarify *why* the two “openings” or “doorways” he uncovers in the text are not to be reductively understood. His tracing of the character of James as lurking behind the avenger type’s Hamletization is not to be interpreted as a case of simple reflection, nor is the taboo of the queen a mere allusion to a historical fact. These are not, he insists, “simple historical-political implications, nor simple allusions or true mirror-like reflections, but data recorded into the play, observed by the play, and round which it turns timidly.”⁴⁸ It is, therefore, *in* the play, not merely in the historical situation “outside” of it, that this imprint occurs. The play itself is the event, and the reference to James and Mary is necessary in order to explain how it happened and what is specific to it as such, given that events are always concrete for Schmitt. But if a play is an event, then it is no longer a mere play, for it is a tragedy.

The Myth

One can imagine, perhaps, the spectators of the original performances of *Hamlet* inspecting each other’s reactions as the words escape from Hamlet’s mouth, elusively accusing his mother of murder.⁴⁹ And one can notice, perhaps, that these are the same sort of gazes that were exchanged earlier on stage, between the actors-turned-spectators during the “play within the

47. The groundwork for a theory on the concept of “truth” shines through these remarks by Schmitt, especially through his rather methodical deployment of adjectives. Schmitt does not develop such a theory, nor will I try to do so here, but I will offer a few indications for further reflection. Notice the use of adjectives: Schmitt writes about “*simple* allusions” (ibid., pp. 22, 31) or “*fleeting* allusions” (ibid., p. 23), but about “*true* reflections” (ibid., pp. 22, 23, 31). And yet when irruptions are introduced, we suddenly find the sentence: “in this play, the superiority of the *true* irruption over the *simple* reflection becomes manifest however veridic the latter may be” (ibid., p. 24, my emphasis). There seems to be a scale of “veridity” that stretches not from “false” to “true,” but rather from “simple” and “fleeting” to “true,” implying that truthfulness (referring, so it seems, to the extent of *impact* historical reality makes on a given text or occurrence) is always relative. The irruption is true (and truly tragic), because it is not simple (meaning perhaps that it is not a one-to-one relation), and it is pervasive to the play in all its dimensions rather than fleeting.

48. Ibid., p. 38 (my emphasis).

49. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.4.26–27.

play.” One can imagine, along with Schmitt, how the boundaries of the play were thus shaken, how reality irrupted into it, and how it rose to the level of a tragedy, not because of the stage character’s lamentable fate, but because of the fatefulness of the moment for everyone involved. “A terrifying reality shed a faint light through the masks and costumes of a theatre play.”⁵⁰ One can also follow Schmitt’s thought that Shakespeare, in the words of Hamlet, tried to “catch,” without grasping or inventing, “the conscience of the King” within the play. This yielded a new type, or prototype, of character: one who is condemned by his position and circumstances to sublimate or to repress his vengefulness in thoughts and words, and to question every facet of his existence and demeanor. But the question still remains as to the significance of this historical event *for us*, that is to say, its mode of endurance.

Gadamer, again, believes that insofar as the interpretation traces the significance of the play back to Shakespeare’s England, it overdetermines it, closing it off from our involvement as contemporary spectators. Accordingly, while Schmitt sees the greatness of *Hamlet* in its allowing the irruption of time into play, i.e., the irruption of a certain political reality, which is a constitutive event, Gadamer sees this kind of observation as rather depriving the play of its power to continually become a new event. In Gadamer’s words, it denies the play’s power to “*irrupt into time*” (our time, for example).⁵¹ The play loses its “eventuality” when its significance is overly rooted in a specific and over-and-done-with historical event.⁵²

It may well be, however, that for Schmitt the opposite is the case and the fateful impact of the event is no more available to the contemporaries than it is to us. It is only in the mythologization of the event that its historical truth comes to bear. When Shakespeare, with James “under his nose,”

50. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 18.

51. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 499.

52. I will only mention that Gadamer’s own work, as well as his critique of Schmitt, essentially draws on a Heideggerian conception of time. It might be the result of this ontological commitment (or should I say prejudice) that Gadamer all but overlooks the fact that Schmitt’s brand of anti-historicism, unlike his own, rests on a distinction between two temporal dimensions—real time and time of play—which is probably more Freudian in influence than Heideggerian. In any event, even if the time of play is portrayed by Gadamer as hectic, shifting, and open-ended, indeed “ecstatic” in the Heideggerian sense, it is nevertheless organized in each case *hermeneutically*. For Schmitt, and on this point he is explicit, “real time” irrupts independently of hermeneutics, and hence independently of play.

Hamletizes the avenger and riddles the figure of his mother, he already mythologizes them, and thereby “the surge of the truly tragic moves forward in a cloud of foam.”⁵³ This is not merely in grace of Shakespeare’s creative powers, for these alone would never have had the capacity to make a myth.

Since Hamletization is already mythologization, Schmitt remarks in the introduction to the essay that “interpretations and symbolizations of Hamlet are not limited to the psychology of one individual being. Whole nations too may assume Hamlet’s traits.” Accordingly, one of the questions that guide his work in this essay is precisely “To what is due the fact that a play of the last years of the Elizabethan era gave birth to this rarity—a modern European myth?”⁵⁴ To my understanding there are two kinds of answers provided by Schmitt’s essay, one of them structural (or general) and the other particular. As for the structural, Schmitt maintains that beyond both psychologist and historicist methods of interpretation, “there is the question of the source of the tragic event in general: a question which if left unanswered renders what is special about Hamlet’s entire problem incomprehensible.”⁵⁵ The particular pertains to the concrete historical personalities, the “imbrication of human beings” of this unique time and place. I hope I managed in this essay to address and develop both the structural and the particular dimensions of Schmitt’s response.

The play is transformed into a tragedy, not by adhering to a certain genre and not by inventing a new one, but by allowing the irruption of the real into the play, which, ultimately, resulted in a singular and fateful transmutation of a genre (in this case, “the revenge drama”).⁵⁶ Furthermore, since the event cannot be subsumed into “the time of play” it cannot be a matter for “historical records” either. As Schmitt claims, no “archive, museum or library can conjure up the presence of a myth by its own kind

53. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 39. Schmitt differentiates between modern mythology and ancient mythology. While the Ancients have picked up their myths from an existing arsenal of folktales (which was nevertheless the living presence of real history and a shared public place), Shakespeare, here a paradigm of the modern, “has *made* a myth from the reality which he lighted upon” (ibid., p. 42).

54. Ibid., p. 11.

55. Ibid..

56. The Hamletization of the revenge drama does not quite yield a new genre, since the prototypical (and hence mythic) nature of a tragedy as such does not permit generalization. It may, however, inspire the evolution of genres. I should note that the remarks in this essay about “genre” as well as about “prototypes” and “stereotypes” are not Schmitt’s but mine.

of authenticity.”⁵⁷ It is precisely here that the significance of art, which is, in a sense, a play within a play, can be felt. Shakespeare’s art records not “facts” but the irruption of reality, an event. *If reality turns the play into a tragedy, then the tragedy, in turn, transforms reality to myth.*⁵⁸ The myth marks an enduring living history, or the living presence of real history. Therefore, myth and reality are more closely bound up together than is perhaps normally assumed. The bond between these two concepts sheds light on what Schmitt means by each of them. “Reality” needs to be distinguished from “fact,” and “myth” from what is “mystical,” “fantastic,” or “unreal.”

On this note I can refer again to Ojakangas’s essay on Schmitt. Ojakangas takes issue with Schmitt’s fascination with the mythical. He claims that the problem with “philosophies of the concrete,” such as Schmitt’s and Heidegger’s, is that, “especially because they identify the concrete with the exceptional event, [they] seem to have a tendency to mythical and mystical thinking.” This tendency, he suggests, “at least partly explains [Schmitt’s and Heidegger’s] involvement with Nazism.”⁵⁹ This critique, like Gadamer’s, should be left standing and cannot be dismissed. I did try to emphasize, however, that in *Hamlet or Hecuba* the paradigm of the “heroic,” decisive sovereign undergoes “Hamletization,” just as the political seems to be marked less by a stark friend-enemy distinction than by a common public space exceptionally pervaded from within by agonism, chasms, taboos, intrigues, and threats. The emphasis on personal involvement shifts to an emphasis on “an imbrication of human beings” as well as on the “singular inaction” of the hero, the playwright, and the king. It can be suggested, then, that although Schmitt remains perfectly loyal in this essay to the familiar structure of thought that Ojakangas’s essay highlights, the climate of his thought changes and so do the resonances of concepts like “myth” and “exception.”

To conclude, it seems as if this particular time of chasm, these non-sovereign rulers in a non-sovereign state, continue to lurk alongside and

57. Ibid., p. 44. Zweig’s biography again expresses the same sentiment, as he writes that in Mary Stuart’s case, more so than in others, “The more meticulously we scrutinize the documents, the more painfully do we become aware how dubious is the authenticity of historical evidence, and how untrustworthy therefore the conclusions of historians.” And he contends that her case has always lent itself more easily (and repeatedly) to poetry and legend than to history books. Zweig, *Mary Queen of Scotland*, p. v.

58. Ibid., p. 41.

59. Ojakangas, “Philosophies of ‘Concrete’ Life,” p. 25.

underneath more established and unified forms of government and ideologies, even today, irrupting through the doorways of this play. “Even for us today,” Schmitt concludes, “Mary Stuart is something more and something else than Hecuba. Neither is the fate of the Atrids so close to us as that of the unfortunate Stuarts.”⁶⁰ And in the epigraph to his essay, he cites a passage from the 1603 edition of *Hamlet*:

Why these Players here draw water from eyes:
 For Hecuba, why what is Hecuba to him,
 Or he to Hecuba?
 What would he do and if he had my losse?
 His father murdered, and a Crowne bereft him . . .⁶¹

60. Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 45.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 7.