

SBReview_4:

Margreta de Grazia. *Hamlet without Hamlet.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

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“Landless in Elsinore”

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the first of a seemingly endless line of critics who ignore Hamlet’s warning and try to pluck out the heart of the Prince’s mystery. As one contemplates what Coleridge and Schlegel, Bradley and Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and Bloom have wrought, one is moved to ask Oscar Wilde’s question: are the commentators on *Hamlet* mad or only pretending to be?

In her always enlightening and often entertaining book, Margreta de Grazia summarizes and assesses the modern critical tradition, beginning two centuries after Shakespeare’s old-fashioned play first took the stage and still very much with us. She makes a sweeping claim, and she strongly supports it in a series of interlinked essays. Her contention is that the Hamlet created by modern philosophers and critics, psychologically disturbed, phallically deprived, Oedipally repressed, exemplar of modern subjectivity, type and symbol of modern consciousness, draws attention away from Shakespeare’s great and complex historical tragedy. For Hamlet to appear modern, she argues, the premise of *Hamlet* must drop out of sight.

Margreta de Grazia’s achievement in this book is brilliantly to restore the play’s premise to the attention of post-modern readers and audiences. The book’s central chapters copiously illustrate the

argument that *Hamlet* is a play about the loss of land, the fall of empire, the tragic extinction of a royal line. The play begins with the threat of invasion and ends in military occupation. In scene after scene, characters fight over the possession of dirt – and these scenes climax in the fifth-act grapple in the grave. “Like the play-within-the-play, the plot of the play is driven by the desire for a plot” (36). Drawing upon her vast and deep knowledge of intellectual, social and political history, law, and scripture, de Grazia makes clear that loss of land amounts to loss of identity. If the dispossessed Prince speaks clearly, he will be guilty of high treason, so he is constrained to use the jesting riddles and ambiguities – to put on the feigned madness that disguises his real subversion. Hamlet’s obsession with his mother, made so much of by Freud, Jones, Lacan, and their disciples, makes better sense when one considers, as de Grazia leads us to consider, that Gertrude “imperial jointress” embodies quite literally the present possession of the kingdom. The Prince’s loss of his patrimony tells us far more about the character than do the thousands of pages about the modern metaphysical Hamlet and his mental diseases. De Grazia expatiates on her argument that patrimony is not all that Hamlet loses. By play’s end, the royal line of Denmark will be extinct, and that tragic extinction will be embodied in Ophelia’s corpse and reinforced by references to Alexander, Caesar, and even to the stand-off between Luther and the Holy Roman Emperor. “Your worm is your only emperor of diet.”

This summary only hints at, and does not do justice to, de Grazia’s book. Her erudition is matched by a precise sensitivity to the changing meanings of complex words. Her readers will never again hear words like “modern,” “romantic,” “mole,” “mother, matter, matrix,” “doom, domain,” “human, humus” in quite the same way. “Flesh and earth repeatedly coalesce through overlaps of sound and sense, as they do in the name of the first man, called after not his father but the dust from

which he was fashioned, *adamah*, the Hebrew word for clay”(3). “Doomsday conjoins domain and doom, land and judgment, a pairing that twice recurs when land and law appear as textual alternatives”

(5.) Even the play's title and the eponymous hero's name slip into a second meaning. “. . . it is tempting to connect the landless Hamlet with the humble unit of land whose name he shares. A hamlet is a diminutive ham, the Saxon word for a settlement, often marked off by a ditch, with too few dwellings to warrant a church” (44).

Time and again, de Grazia opens possibilities suggested by the play's three early texts – possibilities often foreclosed by modern editorial confections. That Hamlet leaps into Ophelia's grave is suggested by a stage direction in the so-called “bad Quarto,” but that indecorous leap is denied by many critics and even a few stage directors. “Granville-Barker's claim that only Laertes leaps into the grave was much welcomed; it spared Hamlet the undignified leap” (151). De Grazia's dazzling reading of the fight in the grave, figuring forth all those fights over land so central to the play, demonstrates that she is always alive to the play's use of theatrical resources: props, costumes, and bodies hurtling through stage space. In her penetrating analyses of the play's action and language, especially the zaniness after Hamlet's encounter with the ghost and the frenzy in the grave, de Grazia does not diminish Hamlet's many-sided, always compelling character, but she puts that character back into the plot and the world from which so many modern critics have sought to extract him.

Not every reader will agree with everything de Grazia says, and I suspect each reader will find something to disagree with. Hamlet, for example, can speak the phrase “robustious, periwig-pated fellow” as quietly as may be, even though he indisputably ignores his own advice to the players by tearing the occasional passion to tatters. Other faults of the book may be due to the form in which de Grazia, and all of us, are constrained to write. The book does suffer from some repetition. Matter

in the first chapter is repeated in the last, and each chapter has a few lancements. I found the first third of the chapter on Hamlet's delay tedious going because, like de Grazia, I do not think delay is the play's most necessary question, and I wish she had dispatched her summary of what so many critics have made of that question in fewer pages. Writing this review for an electronic list, I must wonder whether the book-length study is the best form. *Hamlet without Hamlet* might have been more effective if it were thirty or forty pages shorter, but at that length, it might have been too long for an article and too short for a book – especially a book at this price. The book, graced with nineteen illustrations, may be beyond the price range of most readers. Amazon.com lists the hardcover at \$101, and the paperback at \$39.

But every library ought to own this book. Most of the thousands of books and articles on *Hamlet* concentrate on the Prince; De Grazia is one of the few who follow Dover Wilson in looking at what happens in the play. She does not mention Brecht by name, but she performs the Brechtian maneuver of causing us to look at something we thought we knew in a fresh light. After reading her book, we find that *Hamlet* is a richer, deeper, more important play.