

## **“Hamlet on the Potomac”: Anti-intellectualism in American Political Discourse Before and After “the Decider”**

Like so many countries, especially those that were once colonies of Britain, the United States has a long history of imagining Shakespeare as a central part of its national heritage. Perhaps more than any other country, though, the US has invested an inordinate amount of material resources to secure Shakespeare’s citizenship. Currently, there are a number of federally sanctioned arts programs aimed at recognizing and strengthening Shakespeare’s place in American culture. Since 2003, the National Endowment for the Arts, through its *Shakespeare in American Communities* program, has made Shakespeare in America a centerpiece of its national arts and education campaign (Barnes, 2007). The Folger Library, sponsored by the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, has initiated a similarly-themed program: *Shakespeare in American Life*. As part of a larger exhibition, the library has created a “radio documentary” broadcast on both Public Radio International and online. The Folger radio documentary provides a detailed history of intersections between Shakespeare and American culture. Sam Waterston, who narrates the series, notes, “From the very beginning, Americans have sought to make Shakespeare an honorary citizen” (Paul, 2007).

This desire to use Shakespeare to blur the British-American distinction also has a long history. At the turn of the twentieth century, Charles Mills Gayley, professor of English and Classics at the University of California, Berkeley published a now-quite-controversial book entitled *Shakespeare and the Founders of Liberty in America*. In the book, the patriot professor (a term which historically shortsighted Americans might find oxymoronic) recounted Shakespeare’s visceral role in America’s origin narrative:

The adventurers and planters of Virginia, in later years when Shakespeare was writing *Troilus and Cressida*, *Coriolanus*, and *The Tempest*, were of his blood and temper, the blood and temper of the forefathers of many of us today. Their adventures and failures, their faults and virtues, are our history, Anglo-Saxon and American, as well as theirs. (Gayley, 1917)

Almost one hundred years later, contemporary Shakespeare scholar Michael D. Bristol (who has many insightful comments about Gayley’s claims) wrote *Shakespeare’s America, America’s Shakespeare*, perhaps the most comprehensive study of American Shakespeare. In his book, Bristol writes, “The idea that Shakespeare is a founder or creator of a specifically American experience of individuality and of collective life is articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who described him famously as ‘the father of the man in America’” (Bristol, 1990, p.3). Scholars researching American Shakespeare will find Emerson’s patriarchal adoption of Shakespeare ubiquitously cited. Historian Lawrence W. Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* traces the Americanization of Shakespeare back to the 1830s, when Alexis de Tocqueville commented, “There is hardly a pioneers hut that does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare” (Levine, 1988, p.17). De Tocqueville’s and Emerson’s comments are frequently cited as an example of how American traditional figures Shakespeare as one of its founding patriarchs. The NEA’s *Shakespeare in American Communities* program cites both of these figures in their promotional/curricular

materials. The also cite German journalist Karl Knortz, who in 1880 wrote, “There is, assuredly, no other country on earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such general high esteem” (NEA, 2010, n.p.).

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, America’s figurative relocation of Shakespeare onto American soil became literal when, in 1932, Henry Clay Folger—an avid collector of Shakespeareana—opened his library. Today, the Folger Shakespeare Library holds the largest collection of Shakespeare’s works in the world—surpassing even England. The library’s physical location in Washington D.C. literalizes Shakespeare’s centrality within the American imaginary. The Folger Shakespeare Library sits just east of the Supreme Court, the Library of Congress, the Jefferson Memorial, the US Senate and House office buildings, and the US Capitol itself. William Slade, the first director of the Folger library remarked on its location saying, “a line drawn from the site of the Folger Shakespeare Library Memorial through the Capitol building and extending onward, will all but touch the monument to Washington and the memorial to Lincoln—the two Americans whose light also spread across the world” (qt. in Bristol, 1990, p. 76).

Despite the fact that America has long labored to fully appropriate Shakespeare, his works and their characters—to the extent that even unsavory characters like Macbeth have been figured as American heroes (Barnes, 2007)—the character of Hamlet has always troubled the ease of such appropriations. Hamlet, it seems, may be the least “American” of Shakespeare’s *dramatis personae*. Although Hamlet is often invoked in American political discourse, his name, more often than not, functions pejoratively though an association with qualities understood to be particularly un-American. A study of how Americans have used the name ‘Hamlet’ in political discourse will, I hope, reveal this other Shakespeare, a Shakespeare America has labored diligently to disavow. If we track these disavowals, these uses of the name “Hamlet” as it functions as an epithet in American political discourse, my hope is that this will prove especially useful in revealing the aspects of the American Shakespearean heritage that have remained stubbornly resistant to full appropriation.

Our contemporary use of the Hamlet epithet participates in the metonymy that constitutes all epithets; when Americans invoke the name of Hamlet in political discourse, this name stands in for particular qualities the speaker associates with the prince. Most Shakespeare scholars know that Hamlet’s character and his attendant flaws have been read, performed and understood in as many different ways as there are historical periods and world cultures. Contemporary pundits, however, because they imagine “Hamlet” as a stable, trans-historical character, do not see how their comments reveal the roots of their political ideologies. By tracing these epithets, I hope to reveal the philosophies to which America still clings and how, in re-framing Hamlet, America might also re-frame its posture in the arena of military action and political decision-making.

### **Hamlet in Afghanistan**

As I write, ghosts of Hamlet have been haunting the US Capitol. As President Barack Obama deliberates how to manage a war in Afghanistan, the massive Deepwater Horizon oil spill, mounting evidence of prisoner torture under the Bush administration, and a stuttering, lapsed global economy, comparisons between the president and

Shakespeare's Dane have become commonplace. On the question of Obama's strategy in Afghanistan, *The Washington Post* cites Peggy Noonan, who makes a representative comment: "All will depend on the outcome. If his decision is sound and ends in success, history will not say he was indecisive and Hamlet-like. If his decision results in failure, history will not celebrate his wonderfully cerebral deliberative style" (Pierce, 2009, p. 6). For Noonan, the term "Hamlet-like" stands in for a "cerebral deliberative style" the value of which only history can determine, at a later date. Against former Vice President Cheney's claim that Obama is "dithering" (MacAskill, 2009, p. 17), Noonan argues, "If he's really thinking about Afghanistan, he's not dithering—thought can be harder than action, weighing plans as hard as choosing and executing one. A question of consequence deserves pondering" (Pierce, 2009, p. 6). Between 'thought' and 'action', Noonan articulates the possibility of a 'thought' that, deemed successful by a future history, becomes therefore un-Hamlet-like. This successful thought, it seems, circumscribes what might be deemed appropriate 'American thought'. American political discourse around thought and deliberation are ruled by logic of the golden mean and a strict utilitarianism. To avoid an excess of thought, Americans determine the value of thought according to what that thought engenders. But maybe I have already given this too much thought.

Suffice to say, typical of the free market imaginings of the US, Noonan's formulation reveals a highly regulated thought-action economy. In this economy, the value of thought's product retroactively determines how much time is worth investing in deliberation and, on the other hand, how much time would constitute a Hamlet-like waste. Richard Hofstadter, in his *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* argues that the philosophy that "ideas above all must be made to work" is rooted in America's early Protestantism and flourishes in the 1950s (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 55). Hofstadter notes how American scales were tipped against intellectuals in the 1952 presidential election showdown fought between Adlai Stevenson and Dwight D. Eisenhower: "a politician of uncommon mind and style, whose appeal to intellectuals overshadowed anything in recent history" running against one "conventional in mind, relatively inarticulate" (Ibid., p. 3-4). It comes as no surprise that, more than ten years later, Paul A. Samuelson, Professor of Economics at MIT would write in the *Washington Post* that Stevenson, who "share[d] with Lincoln a Hamlet-like indecision," could not win because "anyone who appealed so strongly to professors like me must be poison to the vast majority" (Samuelson, 1965, E7). Stevenson, like so many over-intellectual politicians, "pleased not the million, 'twas caviare to the general" who sleep unless entertained with a jig or a tale of bawdry (II.2.374-5).

The key feature of Obama's deliberative style, for Noonan, is that it's "cerebral." For many Americans, 'cerebral' signifies a pole in the knowledge economy occupied by 'book learning' and opposite experiential learning or 'on-the-job-training'. Both forms of learning owe their value to their perceived utility in relation to an historically shifting labor base. In 1918, Ralph Barton Perry, student of William James and professor of philosophy at Harvard, wrote the following:

But in the great majority of cases anti-intellectualism is only the negative implication of some positive cult [...] The intellect is most often disparaged in behalf of the cult of action [...] The commonest form of this cult is the vulgar

worship of practicality. The soliloquizing Hamlet and the lean and hungry Cassius are open to suspicion because they are not honestly busy. A washer-woman once told me, in the spirit of kindest indulgence, that it might be very nice to be a professor, but her husband liked to *work*. Thinking, in this view, is not working. (1918, p. 282-3)

But the opposition between intellectual book learning and honest business has not always been figured this way. We learn from Adrian Johns, in *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making*, that within the early modern imagination, *book learning* was not yet conceived of separately from *manual labor* and “hands-on” learning: “Human beings perceived letters on a page through the mediation of their bodies; the passions were emotional, physiological, and moral responses of the human body to its surroundings, and thus played an unavoidable part in the reading process” (Johns, 1998, p. 386). The National Endowment for the Arts’ *Shakespeare in American Communities* website tracks changes in American attitudes about education, noting how by the nineteenth century “Education values really shifted because of the industrial revolution [...] with families knowing that a good laborer could support a family and didn’t necessarily need an education that included strong literacy skills” (NEA, n.p.).

Today, casual allusions and political speeches aside, most Americans only encounter Shakespeare or Hamlet in secondary schools, where he stands in for “Big Ideas” (Charnes, 2006, p. 55). When I think back on my time in America’s secondary schools, I can remember moving into my classroom on the first day of school, where I discovered a poster, the headline of which read “To learn or not to learn? That is the question.” Under this title was a cartoon image of Shakespeare posed as Hamlet with Yorick’s skull. One striking feature of the poster was how, under the banner of learning, the poster figured Shakespeare and Hamlet as interchangeable. Another striking feature of the image was how Yorick’s skull had been replaced by the image of a human brain. In the American imagination, learning, the brain, Hamlet and Shakespeare all become fungible commodities. Nevertheless, in this image, as in Noonan’s observation of Obama’s deliberative style, the brain itself is exactly what remains in question.

Like Yorick’s cerebellum in this poster, Hamlet’s reified brain synecdochically represents his character for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience still clinging tenaciously to the mind-body dualism born alongside renaissance humanism and solidified during the Enlightenment. While it might seem as though the sovereignty of thought is being questioned by a culture that must ask itself ‘To Learn or Not to Learn?’, we must remember that just because a culture values the labor of the body does not mean that it does not assume this labor’s subservience to a sovereign (and *efficient*) mind (after all, God guarantees the sovereignty of mind, soul and spirit for both Descartes and America’s Evangelical Right). The classroom poster, by simply reversing America’s priorities and advocating for the power of mind over matter (like much anti-anti-intellectual rhetoric) does not escape the dual logic of mind-body dualism.

William W. Demastes has written brilliantly about how Hamlet, at least at the play’s beginning, returns from Wittenberg schooled in Renaissance Neo-Platonist philosophy and “clearly favors the ideal world of the mind over the physical world of body” (2005, p. 30). For one who—like an angel, like a God—wishes his too too solid flesh to melt, there is indeed nothing good or bad but what the sovereignty of thought

makes so. American Shakespeare pedagogy in the early nineteenth century (if not to this day) frames Hamlet's thinking-too-much as a key feature of his tragic flaw, a reading largely derived from Coleridge, who described Hamlet as one caught up in "endless reasoning and urging—perpetual solicitation of the mind to act, but as constant an escape from action"; Hamlet suffers from an "aversion to action which prevails among such as have a world within themselves" (1971, p. 124). Hamlet suffers from an unsustainable thought-action economy. His thought has been divorced from productive action. Nevertheless, Coleridge firmly believes, following Descartes, in the "sovereignty of reason" (I.4.73). In his discussion of *Hamlet*, Coleridge has this to say about the relationship of mind to body:

We are born, and it is our nature and lot to be body and mind, but [...] [d]o we say that it was owing to a particular degree of fullness of blood that our hearts leaped and our pulse beat? or do we not rather say that the regent, the mind, being glad, its slave, obeyed it [...] [T]he mind has been employed by Providence to raise what is the lower to the higher: we should be guilty of an act of moral suicide to degrade that which on every account is most noble, by merging it in what is most base: as if an Angel held out the welcoming hand of brotherhood, and we turned away to wallow with the sow in her sty. (Coleridge, 1971, p. 93)

Here Coleridge maintains the sovereignty of the mind even against the downward, affective pull of the body. Like Coleridge's discourse, today's political discourse is unable to shake the yolk of Cartesian dualism. US political discourse seems incapable of registering or admitting the strength of the enervated and effete intellectual's mind without discounting his or her body.

Against this Neo-Platonic and Cartesian dualism, we might consider a conception of the mind's relationship to the body much more familiar to early moderns. Hamlet's world, we must remember, predates the dualisms of Descartes. The line between thought and action, not yet rigidly drawn, allows Hamlet to cry, "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (IV.4.65). Hamlet's notion of embodied thought is still possible within the early modern imagination. This early modern notion of mind-body monism or 'affective immanence' begins with the sophists, and continues through Spinoza, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Deleuze. It is this tradition—with its emphasis on the materiality of affects, humors, and behavior—that Gail Kern Paster refers to when she argues that "early modern bodies have an affective immanence and lability supported rather than contradicted by humoral theory [...] It is the immanence of the passions, the power of the passions, that early modern binaries seem intended to counter in the quest for self-sameness—the manly constancy—so prized by humanist thought" (Paster, 2004, p. 22). In this desire for humanism's "manly constancy," it seems Americans have more in common with Hamlet than they dreamt of in their philosophy.

One might wonder how this disavowal of the body might operate in relation to discourses on Obama's intellectualism. I would argue that within the discourse of American racial politics—one already largely informed by a misguided (and racist) race-blindness—Obama's body must be necessarily erased twice over. Even before Obama was elected, the Harvard law professor candidate was already closely associated with Shakespeare's over-thinking Dane. Five months before Obama's election, former advisor

to Bill Clinton, Dick Morris observed that, “The worst one could say about him is that he is a Hamlet-like intellectual who is often subject to paralysis by analysis.” Obama’s analytic mind is here figured as so powerful that his body risks paralysis. One month before the election, when another Harvard academic, Stephen Greenblatt, appeared on *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert thanked Greenblatt for coming down from his “ivory tower.” In his satirical skit, Colbert rehearsed a segment comparing each candidate to one of Shakespeare’s characters. After running footage of various pundits—in which they question Obama’s “backbone” (again, presence of mind entails an absence of body) and Senatorial voting record (his many “present” votes), calling him “professorial” and “elitist”—Colbert exclaims: “There you have it: he is an egg-head elitist who can’t make up his mind; clearly, Obama is Hamlet.”

Since his election, President Obama has repeatedly been compared to Hamlet because of his unproductive ‘over-thinking’. This over-thinking is only part of the American Hamlet-complex; we must follow the figure further (whither will it lead us?). Hamlet’s analysis paralysis is often related to another one of Hamlet’s ostensible attributes, one that gets much traction in American political discourse: indecision. ‘Backbone’ in political discourse figures certitude, stability and resolve at the same time that it signifies the presence of a solid, upright skeletal body. The American Hamlet, on the other hand, is a proverbial ‘brain in a jar’, a gelatinous ‘flip-flopper’ who stands nowhere and who is ready to change direction as often as new information becomes available. ‘Flip-flopper’ was the memorable epithet leveled at democrats leading up to 2000 presidential contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore, what pundits appropriately called “Indecision 2000.” In Frank Rich’s *New York Times* editorial that November, he referred to “Mr. Gore’s visible, Hamlet-like vacillation about [President Clinton] during the debates” (Rich, 2000, E7). This “Hamlet-like vacillation” and inconstancy also touches the Obama administration. When Obama vacillated around the question of whether or not to appoint a special prosecutor to investigate the Bush administration’s torture program, constitutional law attorney Jonathan Turley lambasted the president on MSNBC’s *Rachel Maddow Show*, saying, “I hope, at a minimum, the president will end this just endless performance of Hamlet on the Potomac [...] and do the right thing” (Turley, 2009, n.p.). When Obama had to decide whether or not to release images of torture victims in prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan, at first he acquiesced to the ACLU’s demands for their release. After senior military advisors stressed to Obama how the release of these images might increase anti-American sentiment and endanger troops, Obama agreed to censor the photos. On Fox’s News’ *O’Reilly Factor*, right-wing pundit Monica Crowley argued that Obama’s “Hamlet-like indecision about this has actually made the situation worse” by allowing “imagination” to “run wild.” Crowley, it seems, is worried that insurgents will be spurred to hold “a weak supposal of our worth” and imagine “Our state to be disjoint and out of frame” (I.2.18, 20). More recently, in *The Washington Post*, Crowley argued, “Terrorists strike for many reasons, but particularly when they sense weakness and chaos in their enemy. The United States cannot effectively prosecute this war while the commander in chief channels Hamlet” (Crowley, 2010, n.p.).

The exigencies of war and the destabilizing effects of terror often return political commentators to Hamlet’s dilemma. In these moments of terror, the hope is that decisiveness can suture our precarity, and Hamlet’s tragedy thus becomes a cautionary

tale. The idea that wartime—as a time of exception—forecloses indecision was perhaps best articulated by Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, who, in an oblique reference to the Boer War, sadly observes “Khaki Hamlets don’t hesitate to shoot” (Joyce, 1986 p. 154). In late July of 1961, when tensions surrounding the communist threat in Southeast Asia were coming to a head, Richard Nixon declared in the *Los Angeles Times* that the Kennedy administration was “plagued by a Hamlet-like psychosis which seems to paralyze it every time decisive action is required” (qt. in Johns, 2010, p. 24). A year later, this rhetoric continued; another *Los Angeles Times* article describes the “Cuban debacle, where Hamlet-like indecision withdrew at the last moment the air support without which the [Bay of Pigs] invasion was doomed” (Ryskind, 1962, p. A5). On October 25, 1984, George P. Shultz, Reagan’s Secretary of State, again invoked Hamlet, this time in response to increased terrorist activities (embassy bombings, kidnapping and suspected torture) in Lebanon and Kuwait. According to the Congressional Committee’s report, Shultz “designated Iran a sponsor of International terrorism [and] called for swift measures against terrorists, both to prevent attacks and to retaliate for them: ‘[W]e cannot allow ourselves to become the Hamlet of nations, worrying endlessly over whether and how to respond,’ he said” (Hamilton and Inouye, 1987, p. 160).

Those who would cast Obama’s indecision as Hamlet-like, consciously or not, continue to cite previous invocations of the Dane in American political discourse. Today, those highlighting Obama’s indecision might also be measuring the president’s performance by the yardstick of his immediate predecessor, George W. Bush, who famously or notoriously declared himself ‘the Decider.’ In what came to be called the Generals’ Revolt, a number of retired Generals claiming to represent seventy percent of those active on the field called on the President to fire Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. During the press conference that followed, a reporter asked Bush how he would respond to the criticism of these generals; Bush replied, “I listen to all voices, but mine’s the final decision. [...] I hear the voices, and I read the front page, and I know the speculation. But I’m the decider, and I decide what’s best. And what is best is for Don Rumsfeld to remain the secretary of defense” (CNN, 2006, n.p.). This move, in addition to being a rejection of the civilian rule of the military, for many Americans represented a challenge to the basis of American democracy. Despite the fact that Bush’s father once ruled America, and despite the fact that Bush Jr. found his administration locked in a revenge narrative begun by his father, Bush was never cast as an American Hamlet because of this certitude and absence of doubt. Linda Charnes argues that Bush, after September 11<sup>th</sup>, represented the Hamlet many Americans “have always wanted to see—a man more than willing to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing, end them. No self-reflective paralysis, no philosophizing here (how some imagine Gore would have responded to 9-11)—just a Supreme Subject.” Charnes explains how “[m]any if not most Americans do not like public figures who prove too knowledgeable or who consider all sides of an issue before taking a position. This anti-intellectualism and distrust of subtle philosophizing are clear in the American preference for ‘men of action’, even when their actions involve appalling collateral damage” (Charnes, 2006, p. 103). Charnes reminds us of Bush’s ability to decide even before the fact, as when he declared “Mission Accomplished” before the war had hardly begun (ibid.).

If Americans imagined Bush capable of wreaking revenge “with wings as swift as meditation,” this belief might help to contextualize their frustration with Obama’s

susceptibility to “the law’s delay” (I.5.29-20; III.1.71). While Hamlet’s famed soliloquy actually curses the “law’s delay” it’s just such a delay which has become associated with his character. There are, of course, also moments when Hamlet acts too quickly, as when he kills Polonius behind the arras (an action that we might imagine parallels America’s rash and misdirected invasion of Iraq instead of Afghanistan). On CBS’ “The Early Show,” Mitt Romney, former presidential candidate and potential front-runner for the 2012 bid for president (It should be noted that Romney also holds Harvard degrees in both law and business) accused Obama of a “Hamlet performance” in Afghanistan. Romney’s frustration stems from the fact that the president had not yet come to a decision regarding strategy even though the President, Romney exclaimed in exasperation, “received the report from General McChrystal, what, four months ago.” In fact, it had only been two months, but Romney’s mistake is telling. Hamlet has a similar difficulty tracking time. In his first soliloquy alone, the time elapsed since his father’s death moves from “Two months dead—nay not so much, not two” to “a little month” to “within a month” (I.2.138, 147, 153). Of course, much later, during the play (which he call’s “abridgement” in order to register theatre’s ability to move time more quickly), Hamlet claims that his “father died within’s two hours,” to which Ophelia replies that it’s been “twice two months” (II.2.358, III.2.120-1). There is something strange here with how Hamlet registers time; like Shakespeare’s famed ‘double time’, Hamlet’s calendar is affected by his emotional relationship to time and how it’s filled.

In traditional warfare, nothing sabotages enterprises of great pith and moment like delay. When one pauses, the battlefield changes, and change is an enemy to strategy based on foresight; in such traditional circumstances, change alters one’s ability to execute action. But the US engagement in Afghanistan is anything but a traditional engagement. For General Petraeus, and for President Obama, the US engagement in Afghanistan is a Counter-Insurgency operation that ideally involves nation-building, the overhaul of infrastructures, and the forging of alliances between cultures—all of which require a duration and subtlety difficult to map onto what Benjamin called “homogenous, empty time”—the schema of discrete, cardinal events which one might easily represent within a coherent narrative (Benjamin, 1968, p. 264). *Hamlet* is not a play about homogenous time. Linda Charnes has very fruitfully explored this problem in *Hamlet*. She explores “how post-revenge stories [like the American revenge stories in Iraq and Afghanistan] get told and everything they leave out—everything that cannot be encoded within the straightjacket of calendar time.” Charnes continues:

In a sense, then, we can regard most of Acts 1-4 (the acts that occur before Claudius is slain) as an anti-history play, that is to say, as representing those affects, thought processes, doubts, and internal fragmentations that cannot be told or passed along in story form: everything that occupies what I earlier called affective time.” (2006, p. 100)

These are the actions that occur in *Hamlet*. Words are spoken; thoughts are sifted; relations are evaluated and cultivated; notes are taken. Within some American imaginings, this cerebral deliberation does not constitute action; we might be surprised to learn that General Petraeus acknowledges the importance of sustained, affective relations. In an article on counter-insurgency strategy he wrote for *Military Review*, Petraeus

reflects on his experiences in Iraq. After encouraging students to write and “reflect” on their experiences in their new surroundings, he writes the following:

[E]specially in counterinsurgency operations, a leader’s most important task is to set the right tone [...] If, for example, a commander clearly emphasizes so-called kinetic operations over non-kinetic operations, his subordinates will do likewise. As a result, they may thus be less inclined to seize opportunities for the nation-building aspects of the campaign. In fact, even in the 101st Airborne Division, which prided itself on its attention to nation-building, there were a few mid-level commanders early on whose hearts really weren’t into performing civil affairs tasks, assisting with reconstruction, developing relationships with local citizens, or helping establish local governance. (2006, pp. 9-10)

Petraeus counsils soldiers to *become Hamlet-like*, to invest their “hearts” in civil affairs. He finds it meet for soldiers to set down their reflections on tablets carried into the field. He comments, “Indeed, my own pen and notebook were always handy while soldiering in Iraq” (2006, p. 2). What an egghead. But he may be onto something. Performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson, in writing about the durational performances of Marina Abramovic or Linda Montano, speaks of socially-engaged art in ways that parallel Petraeus’ emphasis on soldiers sharing duration and space with the citizens of Afghanistan:

[W]e might notice that the durational commitment to shared time-space is a *technique* of the social artist, that it is a commitment made whose consequences are unforeseen and—by virtue of an implicit social contract—will redefine the work’s process and structure. Moreover, such an experience of duration is part of a larger gesture of collaboration that is not only an “authorial self-sacrifice,” but a more radical experiment in authorial release to the external claims of others. (n.d., p. 51)

The commitment of the social artist, like the commitment of Petraeus’ Hamlet-like soldier, is one that cannot be set down in a timetable or decided in advance.

### **Words, Words, Words**

The American Hamlet complex arises out of the perceived distance between the kinetic and the non-kinetic, between thought and action, and between mind and body. These binaries often traffic together, and historically they often find a home alongside a series of related epistemological oppositions: phenomena/noumena, words/things, performance/identity, rhetoric/truth. The Hamlet complex, likewise, points us to the ostensible distance between the purely aesthetic surface of words and the material truth of reality. This distance crystallizes in the American imagination during wartime, when the harsh, material realities of war are understood to conflict with the aesthetic language used to describe them. Claudia Rosett, in recent *Forbes* editorial entitled “Obama, the Hamlet of Foreign Policy,” frets over the constitutive polysemy of words: “Obama has a gift for gliding along on words that can mean almost anything, and thus mean nothing” (2009,

n.p.). Similarly, in 1965, Hanson W. Baldwin, *The New York Times*' Pulitzer Prize-winning military editor, wrote: "We have dressed up the fighting in Vietnam with a fancy name—'counterinsurgency', but some of its basic military elements resemble the kind of war Americans have fought successfully many times in the past [...] If we are inhibited from action by Hamlet-like indecision over legalistic concepts of international law, we shall lose the world" (p. SM8). Baldwin's rhetoric, of "action" inhibited by a euphemistic, legalistic indecision strikes readers almost fifty years later as eerily familiar. Baldwin's headline, "We Must Choose—(1) 'Bug Out' (2) Negotiate (3) Fight," seems akin to the "cut and run" or "stay the course" debates surrounding the US engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the opposition framed here is not just one of "surge" or "withdrawal"; more accurately, the action/inaction opposition contains the much more pernicious and pervasive opposition between "the world" on the one hand, and on the other, the dangers presented by a dramaturgy of "fancy" "concepts" which we have used to "dress" up a world we risk losing—so many words, words, words.

Baldwin's Puritanical and antitheatrical notion of pure politics relegates the fancy concepts of international law to a superfluous realm of pure aesthetics. Words like 'counter-insurgency' (and we might imagine 'torture') are aesthetic terms, like trappings and suits that contain nothing beyond show. Hamlet's metaphysical dualism is yet another quality he shares with many Americans, but American Hamlets are generally identified by their perceived reliance on words radically distant from the world they were 'meant' to represent. Interestingly, this view of politics was first outlined by Jurist of the Third Reich Carl Schmitt in his work *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of Time into the Play (Hamlet Oder Hekuba: Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel)*. In that work and others, Schmitt advocated a philosophy of 'decisionism' (*Dezisionismus*) which, to oversimplify, posits that sovereign authority decides rather than gets decided or authorized through a mediated and thus aesthetic body removed from the purity of the raw political encounter; a raw political encounter is one between two enemies at war. Victoria Kahn has thoughtfully taken up Schmitt's argument and his reading of *Hamlet*. She highlights the connection between decisionism and a distrust of aesthetics:

Reiterating the thesis of *Political Theology*, he argues that the extreme case of war reveals the core of politics precisely because it is an exception and requires a decision (36). Politics is at its core a matter of conflict; law, which attempts to adjudicate conflict is a form of "civilized" depoliticization and thus the counterpart of aesthetics [...] Political and aesthetic representation are equally condemned. Both in politics and in art, in short, Schmitt argues [...] against representation, for decisionism and against the aesthetic. (Kahn, 2003, p. 73-4)

We should, here, think of George W. Bush's claim that he is 'the decider'. This may help us understand how Bush's administration justified disregarding what they might have seen as the purely aesthetic language of the Geneva Convention. We can also hear Schmitt's voice in Crowley's recent tirade against Obama:

Reality bites. President Obama is just discovering this, after campaigning astride a unicorn of hope and change and after a year of trying to govern high atop Fantasyland. The real world—replete with violence, competing interests and a

cast of evil characters—has intruded on Mr. Obama's starry-eyed plan to recast America as a perpetually apologetic, unexceptional nation that will no longer do anything that could be perceived as antagonistic. (2010, p. B4)

Crowley's language of violence, evil and exception echos Schmitt's political philosophy; we might also notice a similar opposition between an aesthetic "Fantasyland" and the brutality of the "real world." Demastes argues that at the play's opening, Hamlet "dons the unadorned black garb of a Puritan iconoclast and declares independence from the illusory world of materialist seeming" (p. 28). It may be (and Gayley would delight in this) that Hamlet is a nearer ancestor to America than it even imagined.

By Act V, of course, we meet a very different Hamlet. Deomostes notes how ultimately Hamlet's *anagnorisis* entails "not a recognition that the physical is more real than the ideal, but that the real and the ideal are in fact inseparable" (p. 31). And if the real and the ideal are coconstitutive, what does that say about the sovereignty of reason? Or the relation of mind to body? Or aesthetics to politics? Hamlet recognizes what Laertes knew in Act I: that "His greatness weighed, his will is not his own" (I.3.17). "The health and safety of this whole state" depends "upon his choice," but that he, at the same time, is likewise "circumscribed/Unto the voice and yielding of that body/Whereof he is the head" (I.3.20-3). Hamlet, "in his particular act and place" is limited in the extent to which he "May give his saying deed" (I.3.25-6). Simon Palfrey has pointed out how Laertes' strange hendiadys, "voice and yielding," points up a delicate interdependence: "'voice' (aural command) and 'yielding' (physical submission)" (Palfrey, 2004, p. 56). That voice is "the main voice of Denmark" (27), which Hamlet, in turn, gives Fortinbras as his "dying voice." In the early modern idiom, much as now, "voice" and "vote" are metonymic synonyms (Thompson & Taylor, 2006, p. 460).

If the lesson of Hamlet is to accept this interdependence—of the ideal and the real, the voice and the vote, the word and the deed, the affective or the kinetic, or the mind and the body—it's a lesson that American discourse continuously disavows in times of terror. After all, what is terror if not the sudden awareness of our precarity, our connectedness and interdependence with the other? I would argue that such heteronomy is, in no small part, the greatest terror of all to a country that prizes its autonomy and unilateral decisiveness. The awareness of interdependence—between the materiality of war and the politico-aesthetic dimension at which its represented and deliberated, between the bodies in harm's way and the mind that we imagine deploys such bodies—this terrifying interdependence, in turn, becomes the unfortunate engine for the production and maintenance of yet stronger divisions. Only when this engine jams do Americans cry 'Hamlet!' But I'm not sure the US has read up through Act V just yet.

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