PIRATES IN *HAMLET* AND HAMLET AS PIRATE: PIRATE POLITICS IN EARLY-MODERN ENGLAND

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Introduction

The "pirate" incident in *Hamlet* has long been an enigma to Shakespearean critics. For an incident which did not even take place onstage but was only narrated second-hand in the play, it received a considerable amount of attention from reviewers both classical and modern. Many critics are very critical of the episode. Eissler (1971) considers the pirate incident and Hamlet's subsequent return to Denmark as "improbable" (p. 173). H.D.F. Kitto (1959/1956) also holds that the meeting with the pirates is nothing but "a lucky chance" (p. 324-326). Likewise, Alan Sinfield (1980) asserts that the pirates are ". . . improbable and . . . unnecessary to the plot" (p. 92). Despite such unfavorable critical remarks, there is no denying that the pirate-incident is integral to the story of *Hamlet*. In fact, it becomes even more so in consideration of the facts that "Shakespeare's chief source [for *Hamlet*] was the Norse folk tale of Amleth, written down in Latin by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus (fl. c.1200) and expanded by the French writer François de Belleforest in his *Histoires tragiques* (7 vols., 1559-80) . . ." ("*Hamlet,*" 2000, p. 179) and that "both [these] texts do include significant references to piracy" (Floyd-Wilson, 2009, p. 6). This is a clear indication that the meeting with the pirates was neither an accidental nor a superfluous incident in *Hamlet*. Floyd- Wilson furthers this viewpoint by trying to establish a link between historical England and Denmark on the ground of their both being linked to piracy:

> Although notoriously anachronistic, *Hamlet* makes some effort to historicize the relations between Denmark and England, particularly in Claudius's claim that Hamlet will travel to England to demand Denmark's "neglected tribute." Since the Danish sword has left England's "cicatrice … raw and red," Claudius assumes the English people will pay him "homage" (4.3.63-65). These references situate *Hamlet* in what later became known as the "Viking Age," when Denmark regularly extorted payment from England to protect its coasts from Danish pirates—a payment that hardened into the "Danegeld." (Floyd-Wilson, 2009, p. 5)

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What is strikingly pertinent above is the desire to "situate" *Hamlet*'s pirate-incident in an age of English-Danish piracy. This can be a clear signal that *Hamlet* indeed was aware of the pirate politics of its time.

This paper argues that prince Hamlet himself was enmeshed in such politics. On the surface level, the prince's meeting with the pirates is an unexpected but simple and natural happening: the prince ran into some pirates on his way to England and, after some interesting turns of events, had them transport him safely back to Denmark. However, the prince's tactful handling of such devious men and, despite his brooding and meditative nature, his surprisingly diplomatic maneuvers in dealing with them can signal to a mysterious transformation in Hamlet. This study argues that Hamlet, having interacted and mixed with pirates, rather started to patronize them like the early-modern kings of England who, for the advantage of their kingship, not only promoted piracy but funded and protected those criminals also. This research also examines Hamlet's post-pirate-incident behavior and finds that Hamlet can be shown to be following the lenient pirate policy of the historic early-modern England. This in turn, as the paper further investigates, can be used to suggest that the post-pirate-incident Hamlet betrays a desire to be the next Danish king who could use the help of the pirates in moments of crisis like the English kings did.

History of Piracy in Early-Modern England and Pirates in *Hamlet*

The English world has long been acquainted with pirates. Stories of pirates plundering and looting ships must have been widespread in Shakespeare's England as: ". . . in Shakespeare's day the seas between England and the Continent swarmed with pirate" (Wentersdorf, 1983, p.436). The following account provides a more detailed account on how it was so:

> From the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Europe's shores from the Baltic to the Mediterranean were infested with pirates. The problem was particularly serious in the English Channel. In self-defense, English merchants of the Cinque Ports had banded together in the Middle Ages in a private league, receiving privileges from the Crown, including the right to seize or plunder pirate vessels in retaliation for losses they had suffered. . . . During the Wars of the Roses and later, it became common for pirates-as likely to be British as Baltic, Netherlandish, or Biscayan-to prey upon English shipping along a front from the Humber to the Bristol Channel. . . . And these conditions continued until well into the seventeenth century. (Wentersdorf, 1983, p.437)

This historical insight clarifies that pirates were a familiar phenomenon in early modern England. English monarchy had always had a tough time handling the situation. This situation worsened in the time of King Henry VII with the sea-robbers becoming more and more uncontrollable (Gosse, 1946/1932, pp. 95-103). The magnitude of the problem kept on expanding from the late sixteenth century to the early seventeenth. In Andrews' (1964) words: "[m]any hundreds of men in these years were convicted of piracy […] thousands more actual pirates were never convicted, for the problem was simply unmanageable" (p. 3).

Interestingly, this "unmanageable" problem was later turned into a *manageable* venture by Queen Elizabeth I. Four hundred pirate ships were active in English Channel during her reign (Rankin, 1969, p. 3), and she rather used them for her own benefit:

> Under Elizabeth I, particularly in the period of the Anglo-Spanish war of 1585–1603, the state encouraged reprisal against enemy shipping, tolerating those that perpetrated it as necessary, if somewhat unpalatable, agents of foreign policy. Of course publicly and explicitly piracy was condemned, but once at sea the boundary between licit and illicit maritime activity was difficult to maintain and frequently breached, with at times state authorities demonstrating little appetite for punishing all but the most serious offenders, and the queen profiting from the activities of her men of war by taking a percentage of their spoils. (Jowitt, 2012, p. 3)

This shows how pirates continued to grow in number and power in Elizabethan England. Their unofficial involvement in the Anglo-Spanish war and England's clear approval of their violation against enemy states suggest that pirates were becoming a state-sanctioned crime syndicate. This, thus, signals to the fact that the English monarchy had had a hand in the rise of those criminals.

King James I, however, openly condemned piracy and "was determined to do his utmost to eradicate them" (Earle, 2004, p. 7-8). He took numerous punitive measures against the plunderers, but their number did not decrease. Ironically, the exact opposite happened: ". . . by 1604–1605 the implementation of James' policy to end the war with Spain had led to an influx of unemployed soldiers and sailors, and endemic piracy as a result" (Jowitt, 2012, p. 9). James' failure in creating employment for the newly jobless naval veterans instigated them to become pirates for good: it was the rise of a new age of piracy. Thus, from the fourteenth

century onwards till the late seventeenth, England's pirate-policy had been a convoluted one with the English monarchy and the pirates being both in a conflicting and accommodating position simultaneously.

In such a context, Shakespeare's inclusion of the pirate-scene in *Hamlet,* which was written ". . . in about 1600 . . . but had [been] revised . . . by 1602 . . ." ("*Hamlet,*" 2000, p. 179), can be thought of as an intentional maneuver to comment on the contemporary king-and-the pirates synergy. The writer seems to be consciously juxtaposing the Danish monarchy and the pirates. The following asserts that he indeed was thinking about real life king and the pirates oppositions when he incorporated the pirate episode in *Hamlet*:

> Shakespeare was also familiar with historical accounts of pirate activities, such as the capture and murder in 1450 of the Duke of Suffolk, an incident incorporated in *2 Henry VI* (IV.i). Another incident, this time in the Roman era, is recorded in *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* (as translated by North, 1579), a work used by Shakespeare in 1599 during the writing of his *Julius Caesar*. . . . [Caesar was taken by some pirates.] After being ransomed and set at liberty, Caesar returned to capture the pirates and then crucified them. Shakespeare, in planning the writing of Hamlet only a year or so after his work on Julius Caesar, may well have recalled a historical incident of this nature rather than a fictional episode from a romance. (Wentersdorf, 1983, p. 436)

This shows that Shakespeare was indeed inspired by real incidents to juxtapose a prince or a would-be king with marauders like the pirates. To be specific, it might not be an exaggeration to assert that Hamlet's interaction with the pirates functions to reveal Hamlet's desire to be a king

Following the Footstpes of English Kings: Hamlet and the Pirates

Hamlet's meeting with the pirates and the pirates helping him return to Elsinore are very much in touch with historical reality. As Bradley (1992) phrases: "Hamlet's return to Denmark is due partly to his own action, partly to accident" (p. 120). When Claudius ordered Hamlet to go "For England" (4.3.43), Hamlet almost mimicked him "For England?" (4.3.43), and said "Good." (4.3.43). The readers are not given a direct account of what happened to Hamlet on his way to England except from via his letter to Horatio. When Horatio receives the "letters" from some "Seafaring men" (4.6.2), he reads:

HORATIO *(Reads the letter)*   'Horatio, when thou shalt have overlooked

> this, give these fellows some means to the king; they have letters
> for him. Ere we were two days old at sea, a pirate of very warlike
> appointment gave us chase. Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we
> put on a compelled valour, and in the grapple I boarded them. On
> the instant they got clear of our ship, so I alone became their
> prisoner. They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy, but they
> knew what they did : I am to do a good turn for them. Let the king
> have the letters I have sent, and repair thou to me with as much
> speed as thou wouldest fly death. I have words to speak in thine
> ear will make thee dumb, yet are they much too light for the bore
> of the matter. These good fellows will bring thee where I am.
> Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hold their course for England. Of
> them I have much to tell thee. Farewell.
>
> He that thou knowest thine,
>
> Hamlet.' (4.6.11-25)

This is a terse and ambiguous account of Hamlet's meeting and dealing with the pirates. As Farley-Hills (1999) points, "Hamlet's meeting with the pirates is presented entirely in narrative in the play, we see nothing of the action on stage . . ." (p. 330-331). The audience simply learns that Hamlet fights the pirates initially; but having been taken prisoner, ". . . by promises induces the pirates to put him ashore in Denmark" (Bradley, 1957/1992, p. 120). It is intriguing to see in Hamlet's account above how appreciative he is of his captors: they were "warlike" men of "mercy" to him. In exchange of their kind handling of him, Hamlet is to "do a good turn for them." In Wentersdorf's (1983) words: ". . . [Hamlet] may well mean that he has agreed to try to obtain an official pardon for them" (p. 438). Hamlet's easy acceptance of such an agreement with a host of marauders might seem unnatural on the surface level. Judging from the following perspectives, however, his action can appear to be very much in concord with historical reality. Philip Gosse (1946/1932) records fascinating incidents of real life pirates escaping death sentence and getting exonerated because they had connections in the English court. Gosse (1946/1932) documents the incident of a pirate John Nutt of Devonshire who, during James I, had his friend Sir George Calvert, the king's principal secretary, free him from court trial (pp. 131-134). Another arresting instance Gosse (1946/1932) records of English courtiers helping pirates is the incident of the Killigrew

family pirates of Falmouth where John Killigrew, Queen Elizabeth's Vice Admiral of Cornwall and royal governor of Pendennis Castle, intervened to obtain his mother, a pirate sentenced to death, an official pardon (pp. 107-111). One of the most striking examples, though, is the one of pirate Mainwaring's of Sussex whom king James I -

> at the request of many of the leading nobles, consented to grant … a pardon because 'he [Mainwaring] had committed no great wrong,' on condition that he would arrange with the interested parties for the damage he had inflicted. The negotiations being brought to a successful issue, it is recorded that on the 9th of June, 1616, 'Captain Mainwaring, the sea captain, was pardoned under the Great Seal of England.' At the same time a general pardon was granted to all those who had served undeI him, on condition that they returned to England and gave up the 'trade'. (Manwaring, 1920-1922, I, pp. 30-31)

All these show how it was an open secret that many from the privileged class actually patronized and were themselves involved in piracy. In Hamlet's attitude towards the pirates in the play, there seems nothing adversarial to the pirates he met. On the contrary, he seemed to have befriended them. As Floyd-Wilson remarks:

> Hamlet's message to Claudius indicates that he has arrived on Denmark's shore "naked," hinting that he has been stripped of his old belongings and making it likely that he would be dressed in sailing garb (4.7.42). If this is the case, Hamlet's costuming when he announces himself as "the Dane" would be indistinguishable from the pirates who deliver his letters to Horatio in the previous act. (Floyd-Wilson, 2009, p. 11)

Here, Hamlet's becoming "indistinguishable from the pirates" can signify the level of his affiliation and connection with them. In this very manner, like the pirate-friendly royalty of historic England, he consented to do them a favour.

This willingness to aid the sea-robbers was never a purposeless act: neither in the history of England nor in the story of *Hamlet*. In Hamlet's letter above, it is clear that it was the pirates who helped him *first* and not the other way round: the pirates liberated the prince first and then the prince was to do them a favour. Shakespeare's readers might wonder at the implausibility of a bunch of evil-doers trusting and freeing a prince so easily without ransoming him. The answer can be found in the following quotation:

> And if English pirates were brought into court, they sometimes escaped punishment through the influence of those who needed their expertise in time of war. Pirates from several Cornish ports aided Edward III in his war against France. (Wentersdorf, 1983, p.437)

The elaboration above shows that it had always been a give and take of support between English royalty and the pirates. English kings needed the expertise of barbarous sea-fighters like the pirates in time of crisis, as Edward III needed them during his war with France. Even outside wars, piracy against enemy states was mostly encouraged in England. Queen Elizabeth herself sponsored Francis Drake's pirate-ventures and knighted him later on after he had looted the Spanish galleons (Elizabeth Jenkins, 1959, pp. 232-35). It is evident, then, that English monarchy has mostly been appreciative of the sea-criminals, especially when it came to the advantage of their kingship. And from the way Hamlet was treating them in the play, he clearly seems to be following the footsteps of historical English kings.

Hamlet's Desire to be A King

In comparison to such surprising historical phenomena and in the light of how Hamlet's handling of the pirates can resemble the actions of actual English kings, can Hamlet's contact and contract with the pirates be regarded as an expression of his desire to be the next Danish king? To find an evidential answer to this question, the classic literary debate on whether Hamlet preplanned his meeting with the pirates or not can be referred to. It was George Miles (1870) who first argued that Hamlet himself engineered his capture at the hands of the pirates and that the meeting with the pirates was not an accidental encounter. Miles founds his argument upon the following statement of Hamlet:

> HAMLET [There's letters sealed, and my two schoolfellows,
> Whom I will trust as I will adders fanged,
> They bear the mandate. They must sweep my way
> And marshal me to knavery. Let it work,
> For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
> Hoist with his own petar, an't shall go hard
> But I will delve one yard below their mines
> And blow them at the moon. Oh 'tis most sweet
> When in one line two crafts directly meet.] (3.4.203-211)

Here, Hamlet, having seen through Rosencrantz and Guidenstern's knavery, is revealing his intention to outfox the duo. Miles (1870) thinks that the words "two crafts" in the last line of the passage is a pun: on the one hand, it can refer to the cleverness of Hamlet affronting that of his foes'; on the other hand, it can signify two vessels meeting one another in the sea. Miles (1870) concluded: "If the word crafts had its present maritime significance in Shakespeare's time, the pun alone is conclusive of a prearranged capture" (As quoted in Wentersdorf, 1983, p. 439). That is, Hamlet himself devised the pirate-incident to defeat his enemies. Farley -Hills (1999) explained this in the following manner:

Hamlet's position is clear: he has lost trust in the friendship of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and suspects they are being used in some way by the principal plotter ('engiler') Claudius, although he does not know exactly how until he opens the letter to the King of England on board ship. He will therefore take countermeasures and destroy their plans by the kind of underhand means ('knavery') they are using against him. Given this reading, it is not unreasonable to interpret the reference to 'two crafts' as a pun by which Hamlet is suggesting covertly (as is his wont) that the preparations for this counterplot are already under way in arranging a meeting of the two craft at sea. (p. 324)

Therefore, Hamlet, by punning, was hinting at a prior treaty with the pirates who would render him their service eventually. This interpretation of Miles, however, was opposed by a number of critics. Critics like W.W. Lawrence, D.J. Snider, Robert Petsch, G.R. Hibbard, and H. Jenkins considered Miles's idea to be absurd and rejected it on the basis of their understanding of the pirate-incident as an act of impulsiveness on the part of Hamlet, a youth mostly characterized by inactiveness and procrastination.[**]

Intriguingly still, Miles's very argument that Hamlet himself formulated his escape with the help of the pirates could actually aptly position Hamlet in the early-modern history of piracy in Europe. Contrasted with the early-modern pirate-king synergy as discussed in the preceding sections,

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[**]   See W. Lawrence, 'Hamlet's Sea Voyage', *PMLA,* 59.1 (1944), 45-70; R. Petsch, 'Hamlet unter den Seerauben', *Englische Studsen,* 36 (1905); *Hamlet,* ed G.R. Hibbard (Oxford and New York, 1994), appendix A; Arden Shakespeare edition of *Hamlet,* ed H. Jenkins (London and New York, 1982)

Hamlet's conscious desire to be a king becomes apparent. When Hamlet, on his way to England, learns about Claudius' "royal knavery" (5.2.19), he "devised a new commission" (5.2.32) and did the following:

> HAMLET   …………………………………….
> I had my father's signet in my purse,
> Which was the model of that Danish seal ;
> Folded the writ up in the form of th'other,
> Subscribed it, gave't th'impression, placed it safely,
> The changeling never known. Now, the next day
> Was our sea-fight, and what to this was sequent
> Thou know'st already. (5.2.49-55)

The above is expressive of Hamlet's active initiative taking in outmaneuvering his enemies. The first most remarkable point to be noted here is that Hamlet took care to retain his father's seal and used it for his own benefit. This may reveal two things: that he had knowledge about the uses and applications of the imperial devices, and that he had avowed interest in them unlike a prince who is popularly known to be apathetic to worldly matters. The most notable thing above, however, is his peculiar description of the pirate-incident: "Now, the next day / Was our sea-fight". Hamlet, instead of describing it as an assault, ascribes a more heroic vibe to it: he calls it a "sea-fight" and, most noticeably, uses the determiner "our". This can imply that Hamlet was actually positive about the pirate-incident, almost looking at it as a kind of collaborative act between him and the pirates. This may suggest that Hamlet has indeed used the pirates and that he might do the same in the future too. That is why it has been stated:

> When the intervention of the pirates is understood as an act willed by Hamlet, an important dynamic of the play comes into clearer focus. Hamlet is essentially a play of plots and counterplots, of intrigue and craftiness. Since human volition is at the very core of the central action, it is right that stratagems and machinations, demonstrating the power of the individual will, occupy a prominent place in the dramatic design. (Stevens, 1975, p. 282)

Stevens supports Miles's viewpoint in believing that a prior connection between Hamlet and the sea-looters existed. As he states above, being engaged in a game of "plots and counterplots," Hamlet willingly sought help from the

criminals. Such an interpretation, as the following exchange between Hamlet and Horatio might disclose, is not improbable. Horatio himself recognizes that Hamlet *played* Guildenstern and Rosencrantz like a king:

> HORATIO So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't.
> HAMLET   Why man, they did make love to this employment.
> They are not near my conscience. Their defeat
> Does by their own insinuation grow.
> 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes 60
> Between the pass and fell incensed points
> Of mighty opposites.
> HORATIO   Why, what a king is this! (5.2.48-62)

Hamlet's speech above is marked by arrogance and pride. He considers himself to be as "mighty" as Claudius is as a king; and noticeably, he sounds as sinister and as criminal too. Clearly, the indication here is that Hamlet is not a weak prince anymore but is capable of warring with a king toe to toe. Horatio did not fail to see this transformation of Hamlet: "Why, what a king is this!" He could already see a king in his friend. Perhaps that is why Shephard (1956) says: "The King makes a plan; Hamlet counters in kind" (p. 284). That is, Hamlet is checkmating the evil king in his own game. Such cunning and wickedness become apparent in Hamlet after his encounter with the pirates. As Floyd-Wilson (2009) identifies:

> Critics seem to agree that Hamlet returns from his sea-voyage in Act 5 a transformed man, but there is no consensus on why or how he has changed. The soliloquies are gone and Hamlet makes his only public declaration of his status, "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.250-51). The curiosity of this statement is why the prince would be compelled to characterize his royal identity in this way. Indeed, what Hamlet literally asserts is the recuperation of his ethnic identity—a recuperation that may be connected to his adventures at sea. (p. 7)

Thus, Hamlet, having come into contact with the pirates, never remained the same. As aptly pointed out by Floyd-Wilson above, Hamlet's assertion of his "royal identity" is indeed a result of "his adventure at sea." Therefore, Hamlet's desire to be king becomes very clear after his meeting with the pirates.

Conclusion

Therefore, the pirate-incident in *Hamlet* exposes a darker and more

ruthless side of Hamlet, a Hamlet who is capable of coming to terms with cutthroats like the pirates. His changed behavior, as is evident in the last few scenes of the play, can appear to be more menacing when judged in the light of the pirate-politics of early-modern Europe. Particularly, the kings and pirates synergy of the 16th and 17th century England as detailed in this research is of immense importance to the understanding and unraveling of the mystery of Hamlet's character. This paper, thus, establishes a connection between Shakespeare's Hamlet and historical pirates. The result shows that Hamlet, by befriending the pirates, mirrored the actual evil practices of early-modern English kings. It is as if there was no reason why a prince Hamlet won't imitate them. Therefore, as the research has argued, Hamlet can be considered as an ambitious prince who craves victory over his enemies even at the cost of being in league with men of questionable reputation.

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