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Hamlet's Moment: Drama and Political Knowledge in Early Modern England / András Kiséry

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András Kiséry. *Hamlet's Moment: Drama and Political Knowledge in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 336 pp.

Reviewed by MATT CARTER

H*amlet's Moment: Drama and Political Knowledge in Early Modern England* by András Kiséry is a particularly useful text for scholars and educators alike, and will doubtlessly form the baseline for entirely new fields of inquiry in the field of early modern drama. Kiséry explores the impact of a newly-developing occupation in the early modern period – diplomacy. As Kiséry describes his intentions, “this book is contextualist,” (20) and what Kiséry seeks to contextualize, that which he has dubbed “Hamlet’s moment,” is the confluence of the rise of modern diplomacy in the period and the theatre’s public role as a playground for new ideas and forms of expression. Kiséry’s intervention is to rewrite the way we see the early seventeenth century theatre’s role in politics. As he explains, traditional scholarship has it that the 1590s saw the zenith of politically-invested theatre in the period, with the decades following that moment proving to be resistant to similar readings. Kiséry, however, challenges that notion: “That resistance is overcome if we realize that many of the conversations these plays were tapping into – and more importantly feeding into and also generating – were of a different nature: they were conversations about the means, not necessarily about the ends of political action” (27). *Hamlet's Moment* provides a new way to read political investment in early modern drama, one that, rather than prioritizing only polemical drama, acknowledges the role of plays that take joy in the representation of political maneuvering for its own sake. This re-contextualization of our understanding of what counts as “political drama” in the period is, in my opinion, the greatest strength of Kiséry’s work, and its greatest contribution to the field at large.

Kiséry explores the notion of the theatre as a showcase for political knowledge through trenchant readings of several plays, including *Sejanus*, *The Malcontent*, *Monsieur d'Olive*, *Volpone*, and (naturally) *Hamlet*. While scholars studying any of these plays will benefit significantly from Kiséry’s treatment of them, the eponymous *Hamlet* chapter will prove particularly influential for most readers. Kiséry’s work not only offers new insights into the play itself; his particular emphasis on the political maneuverings of characters such as Polonius, Horatio, and Laertes re-centers these characters in such a way that calls for new teaching strategies. By way of example, Kiséry makes the following fascinating claim about Laertes’ behavior in the play: “his competent evocation of the reason of state, his understanding of the constraints this imposes on the Prince’s ability to follow his personal interest, will, desire, or the normal requirements of honesty, provides a powerful analytic perspective on the entire sequence of scenes in Act 1 of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*” (82). This observation paints Laertes in a new light; rather

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than a reactionary who plays second fiddle to the prince, Kiséry's Laertes is erudite and intentional throughout the play, maneuvering deftly through a political landscape that is unfairly skewed toward the members of the royal family. When Laertes warns Ophelia about what will happen if she opens her "chaste treasure... To [Hamlet's] unmastered importunity" (I.iii.30-31), the advice seems less like the ramblings of an overprotective brother and more like the weary insight of a learned political operative who recognizes the political consequences of Hamlet's advances. Many insights such as this one pepper *Hamlet's Moment*, and while the book's larger claims about political theatre should inform future scholarship on early modern theatrical practices, the text's particular success exists in such fine details. This is a text for researchers and educators alike, and as such, it accomplishes something that is incredibly rare among scholarly monographs: it provides texture for the ongoing conversations in our field while simultaneously laying groundwork for new pedagogical approaches to the texts.

Kiséry manages to maintain this delicate balance, in part, by introducing new texts into the list of important sources for our understanding of early modern plays. In particular, Kiséry champions the importance of early modern *relazioni*. As he puts it, "*Relazioni* described the geography, economy, and demography, the social, religious, political, and military structures of the country visited, and offered an analysis of the nature of the regime, its domestic and especially foreign political ambitions and alliances" (106). Kiséry explains that these texts proved to be valuable sources for early modern playwrights seeking to actualize foreign lands onstage, but also points out that such representations were often repurposed by, and disseminated by, playwrights. Situating these documents, with their social and political power, as central to early modern theatre answers many of the questions scholars have wrestled with regarding the commercial theatre's political investment in the early seventeenth century. Thanks to Kiséry, we see the effect of these reports in texts such as *Hamlet* not only as important sources for world-building, but integral parts of the plays' exposition. The need to successfully navigate the political world abroad (as well as at home) becomes the mark of a successful aspirant to power. With this insight in mind, the embassy to England that destroys Rosencrantz and Guildenstern becomes less a failure on the part of the two clowns than an example of Hamlet deftly surviving the political maneuverings of a pair of dangerous sycophants.

Kiséry uses such excellent readings in the service of a larger point – one that will likely provide scholarship on the period's dramatic works with new avenues of exploration. Political knowledge and the deft handling of the power that it provides become, in both the drama and the early modern world writ large, an authorizing force. The ability to display and discuss political knowledge becomes a sign of one's authority and competence, even when the speaker has no actual political clout. As Kiséry concludes from his analyses of *Sejanus* and *The Malcontent*, "passive on-stage critical observers of the political scene" (249) rely on a model that seeks to "represent the modern condition of politics, the condition of a split between actors and spectators" (250). This ability to comment upon, often through the fashioning of aphorisms, the political conditions of the world, provides characters – and the real people to whom they correspond – with agency.

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In this regard, Kiséry sets the stage for an entirely novel vein of scholarship of the period, one that focuses attention on the impact of this new way of understanding agency. Kiséry's observations disrupt older models that see political power as inherently polemical, opening a completely new, and I believe fruitful, model for investigation.

Ultimately, *Hamlet's Moment* is a text that deserves a place in both the works cited page and the classroom. The intellectual depth Kiséry brings to the work is clear, readable, and evocative, while the practical applications of his research to a classroom setting are self-evident. Those researching the power dynamics at play between the machines of state and the professional theatre will find much to learn here, while those seeking new avenues by which to explore early modern drama in the classroom will find a robust text full of tantalizing possibilities.

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