

Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play

By Carl Schmitt

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Though Carl Schmitt is best known for his legal and political theory, his 1956 *Hamlet or Hecuba* provides an innovative and insightful analysis of Shakespeare's tragedy in terms of the historical situation of its creation. Schmitt argues that the significance of Shakespeare's work hinges on its ability to integrate history in the form of the taboo of the queen and the deformation of the figure of the avenger. He uses this interpretation to develop a theory of myth and politics that serves as a cultural foundation for his concept of political representation. More than literary criticism or historical analysis, Schmitt's book lays out a comprehensive theory of the relationship between aesthetics and politics that responds to alternative ideas developed by Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. Jennifer R. Rust and Julia Reinhard Lupton's introduction places Schmitt's work in the context of contemporary Renaissance studies, and David Pan's afterword analyzes the links to Schmitt's political theory. Presented in its entirety in an authorized translation, *Hamlet or Hecuba* is essential reading for scholars of Shakespeare and Schmitt alike.

Praise for Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet or Hecuba*

"Beyond ancient tragedy and the Atreides, through the themes of vengeance, of the brother and of election, this essay also questions the political destiny of the 'European spirit.'"

--Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*

"The intrusion into Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by the highly controversial German legal and political theorist and constitutional lawyer Carl Schmitt will raise eyebrows in the English-speaking world. The able English translation and introductions will engender a plethora of studies by Shakespeare scholars, and by political scientists and historians who will analyze subtexts in order to decipher Schmitt the man from Schmitt the thinker."

--George Schwab, President, National Committee on American Foreign Policy

"In his remarkable essay on *Hamlet*, Schmitt argues that the playwright's


audience shared with him not only a horizon of cultural and historical knowledge; they were also, he claims, profoundly attuned to the symptomatic gaps and displacements, to the dream-like traces of a political unconscious, at work in the play. Here, Schmitt claims to have definitively deciphered what might be called the 'latent dream thoughts' of Shakespeare's most famous tragedy. It is, however, only by way of the inner tensions of Schmitt's own essay, made vibrantly legible in the brilliant introduction by this volume's editors, that the reader can fully grasp the ways in which the traumatic entry of historical time into the realm of aesthetic play generates *Hamlet's* persistent force as the paradigmatic tragedy of modern European theater."

--Eric Santner, Professor of Germanic Studies, The University of Chicago

"Like Hamlet's *Mousetrap*, Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet or Hecuba* is an incendiary provocation, one that still has the power to catch the conscience of Shakespeare critics half a century later. Schmitt's deep reflections on the nature of tragedy, the relations between the real and the aesthetic, and the barbarity of Elizabethan theater, will engage and sometimes irk Shakespeareans of every stripe. His critical practice--poised somewhere between a Kantian contest of faculties and an *Anschluss*--grates productively against the more pacific versions of interdisciplinarity that reign today. And Rust and Lupton's fine introduction lays bare the religious, political, and philosophical stakes of Schmitt's Shakespearean encounter."

--Richard Halpern, Professor of English, The Johns Hopkins University

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Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play By Carl Schmitt Bibliography

- Rank: #1612190 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Telos Press Publishing
- Published on: 2009-10-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.75" h x 6.00" w x .50" l, .55 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 174 pages

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