

## **“The Rotten State of Denmark”: The Discourse of Reason of State in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet***

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**Abstract:** Early modern politics displayed a transition from civil reason to Reason of State. An extensive body on the new political discourse of Reason of State in continental Europe started to emerge, outlining a new grammar for the state, politics, and princes. The latter had undermined the traditional humanist Christian discourse of politics. This paper will address how Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* debates Reason of State onstage—an issue that has been little dealt with in the early modern scholarship of Shakespeare, or, at best, dismissed as marginalia. The protagonist’s famous delay and his political and philosophical reflections can be read in the light of contemporary political discourses to which Reason of State had become so central. Despite Hamlet’s resistance, the play ends with the triumph of political realism introduced mainly by Giovanni Botero in his oeuvre *Ragion di Stato*. *Hamlet* is not the exception in this regard. Reason of State became one of the focal subjects of early modern tragedy as I will be showing in this paper.

**Keywords:** Reason of State, civil reason, politics, transition, Hamlet, delay

The argument of this paper is centred on the politico-philosophical concept of *Raison d’État* in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. I will discuss how radical political theory pervades Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, while the ending seems to, unwillingly, conform to the political discourse of political realism introduced mainly by Giovanni Botero. The play portrays a disintegrated prince in a disintegrated state which is very similar to the context of contemporary England. The early modern era can be described as that of transitions; from feudalism to nascent capitalism; and from medievalism to an early modern world view. Transitions always bring about tension and crisis between old and new leading to the birth of a third space—that of indecisions such as those in the text under study. Politics underwent an important transition marking a shift from medievalism. Early modern political philosophy introduced what came, then, to be known as reason of state, making it the key word of its time.

My primary goal in this paper is to address not only representations and negotiations of Reason of State onstage but to emphasize how central it is to the understanding of early modern texts, that have not been widely dealt with in the early modern scholarship of Shakespeare, or, at best, dismissed as marginalia. Reason of State is central to the sixteenth-century political philosophy in continental Europe. An extensive body of political literature on ways to govern, rule, and discipline started to emerge under the rubric *Raison d'État* which ended with or rather led to what was later known as Contractarianism. Different editions, translations, and circulation of pamphlets and political manifestos on this new political theory provide a solid ground to further understand it as I will be showing in this paper. However, as Peter Burke argues, “for the colouring we have to turn elsewhere, to the arts, and especially to the drama,” (Burke 2008, 488) and that it would be “scarcely an exaggeration to claim that the true subject of these plays is reason of state” (Burke 2008, 488). The term reason of state is, nonetheless, problematic to some extent. In this paper, I will be drawing an identikit picture (Burke 2008, 481) of the theory and then turn to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to show how the stage appropriates and represents it.

### **Early modern Political Thought: Reason of State**

Reason of state was the key word of sixteenth-century continental politics. Early modern political philosophers developed a new conception of politics that broke with the early humanist understanding of politics based on the Ciceronian-Aristotelian moral framework. Reason of State came to eclipse the long-established tradition of civil reason. Protagonists of the new theory brought radical innovations that mainly freed politics from the looming moral and ethical aspect and presented, instead, new political dogmas or reflections including, *inter alia*, utility or the *uso dictum* and the authorization of cruelty for instance for, presumably, the common good. However, reason of state did not succeed at totally breaking with the humanist political framework that preceded it. Transition, in this regard, would be the right term to use to describe the move or shift from civil reason to reason of state as I will be showing in this paper.

Before moving further, it is necessary to define the term “Reason of State” in both historiography and as its contemporaries defined it. Reason of state was *de rigueur* in sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries political philosophy in Europe,

or at least in Italy, Spain, England, and France. The idea of the state started to occupy the thought of political theorists, philosophers, princes, and playwrights, leading to the emergence of an extensive body of political literature on the state, its reason, secrets or in the language of reason of state theorists, *arcana imperii* outlining a new grammar for politics and ways to govern. It is no surprise that in the age of absolute monarchs, reason of state became so central to political thought. The political lexicon started to change. A new political language started to emerge as Quentin Skinner shows:

The clearest sign that a society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is, I take it, that a new vocabulary comes to be generated, in terms of which the concept is then articulated and discussed. So I treat it as a decisive confirmation of my central thesis that by the end of the sixteenth century, at least in England or France, we find the words “State” and l’État beginning to be used for the first time in their modern sense. (Skinner 1987, x)

An analysis of historical semantics, instead of simply history, becomes necessary as Skinner argues. This new vocabulary started to enter not only the political language spoken in courts, but also, the one spoken by commoners. Andras Kiséry in *Hamlet’s Moment* discusses how reason of state, a recent politico-philosophical concept, was then discussed at taverns and coffee houses, emblematic of the public sphere. The latter became involved in the “culture of news, as a setting for an often raucous and scandalous discussion of the secrets of politics, of the reason of state” (Kiséry 2016, 13). Giovanni Botero, the first theorist to use the locution reason of state in his *Ragion di Stato*, defines it in simple terms:

State is a stable ruler over a people and Reason of State is the knowledge of the means by which such a dominion may be founded, preserved and extended. Yet, although in the widest sense the term includes all these, it is concerned most nearly with extension than with foundation; for Reason of State assumes a ruler and a State (the one as artificer, the other as his material) whereas they are not assumed – indeed they are preceded – by foundation entirely and in part by extension. (Botero 1956, 3)

Despite its nuanced nature, Botero's definition of the term is tenable by all contemporaries. Reason of State in simple terms, hence, can be defined as the preservation of the state. Many early modern theorists of the concept include first and foremost Niccolò Machiavelli, Justus Lipsius, Francesco Guicciardini, Michel de Montaigne, Jean Bodin, and George Buchanan. However, they did not write on Reason of State *ex nihilo*. They relied on writings of classical authors including mainly Cornelius Tacitus, inspiring, hence, the rise of early modern Tacitism. Reason of state can be, *grosso modo*, defined as the means rulers employ so as to preserve the state, to put it in a very neutral way. The state, in this regard, becomes the highest of all goods.

Reviving the works and philosophy of Cornelius Tacitus marks a shift from the Ciceronian-Aristotelian understanding of politics. The pre-Reason of State discourse, *viz.* the humanist Christian discourse refers to the art of governing that is based on justice, equality, and the rules of nature. The ruler should always act as a good Christian prince, even at the expense of the common good of the state, the people, or the realm. In Ciceronian political philosophy, law is not a human creation, but rather, derives its origin from nature and is based on the principle of equity. Tacitism is very relevant to the politics of sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries England. During the age of absolute monarchs, Ciceronian politics could no longer be a reference, and, hence, the Tacitean alternative. Francesco Guicciardini, one of the proponents of Reason of State in its most radical forms, argues in his *Maxims and Reflections* that monarchs or rulers in general can read in Cornelius Tacitus the last conversations of the dying Augustus with Tiberius<sup>1</sup> if they want to know how tyrants think (Guicciardini 1965, 44). Tacitus' works are revived and presented as the ideal guidelines for princes on how to rule. However, it is important to note that Tacitism does not refer to the works of Tacitus *per se*. Rather, it refers to, as Ferenc Hörcher puts it, the early modern late humanist intellectual "fashion." Tacitus' name is used as an argument for authority or to replace the ominous word "Machiavellianism" (Hörcher 2021, 196). The works of theorists of Reason of State appropriated Tacitism to a certain extent.

In order to dissect the political "genre" contemporary to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is worth discussing its poetics. Theorists started to collect advice for rulers,

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1 "If You want to know what the thoughts of tyrants are, read in Cornelius Tacitus the last conversations of the dying Augustus with Tiberius" and that Tacitus "teaches those who live under tyrants how to live and act prudently; just as he teaches tyrants ways to secure their tyranny" (Guicciardini 1965, 44; 45).

and, hence, the generic name “advice-for-rulers.” These reflections on Reason of State came in the form of lapidary reflections of what was, then, known as *Furstenspiegel*, meaning advice to a ruler. It can, also, be translated as mirror for princes — a metaphor that has been employed in the play-within-play in *Hamlet* that I will return to later. These *Furstenspiegel* came in the form of essays, by Montaigne, who introduced the essay genre, and Bacon, who re-appropriated it later, *ricordi* or observations, maxims, or reflections, or books dedicated to princes and rulers as in Lipsius, Bodin, and Guicciardini, or dialogues à la Aristotle as in George Buchanan’s *De Jure Regni Apud Scotos; A Dialogue Concerning the Rights of the Crown in Scotland*.

However, it would be wrong to assume that Reason of State is one homogeneous theory, whereby all theorists tended to produce similar ideas. Reason of state, as I have pointed out, is a radical political theory in the sense that it broke with the ideals of civil reason and the Ciceronian-Aristotelian framework. However, theorists of the state and its reason have disagreed on various issues including forms and types of government. These disagreements are not minor. Guicciardini and Lipsius may have, for instance, perpetuated Tacitism and absolutism. Other theorists including Giovanni Botero denounced the latter:

Among the things that I have observed, I have been greatly astonished to find reason of state a constant subject of discussion and to hear the opinions of Niccolò Machiavelli and Cornelius Tacitus frequently quoted: the former for his precepts relating to the rule and governments of peoples, the latter for his live description of the arts employed by the Emperor Tiberius in acquiring and retaining the imperial title of Rome... I was amazed that so impious an author and so wicked a tyrant should be held in such esteem that they are thought to provide ideal examples of the methods by which states be governed and administered; and I was moved to indignation rather amazement to find that this barbarous mode of government had won such acceptance. (Botero 1956, xiii)

Botero does not reject Reason of State altogether. Rather, he tries to revise it within the Christian Humanist context. Maurizio Viroli eloquently articulates the complexity of the theory by asking the question “which reason is reason of state” (Viroli 1998, 67). By posing the question, Viroli mainly refers to the di-

chotomy of Reason of State versus civil reason and concludes by problematizing the shift even further when asking whether Reason of State is a degeneration from politics of the ancients or a progressive transition that frees political science from the tyranny of moralism (Viroli 1998, 73). He adds:

If we go back to the question that I raised at the outset of this paper, namely why political philosophers constructed and put into use the locution ‘ragione di state’, we can answer that they did it because they needed a new concept of reason apt to excuse derogations from moral and civil law imposed by the necessity to preserve or expand states understood as *dominions*... It marked the beginnings of what has been aptly called ‘the politics of the moderns’ as opposed to ‘the politics of the ancients’, that is the view that politics is simply the art of pursuing, securing, expanding power, not, as the ancients and their naive humanist followers seemed (or pretended) to believe, the art of founding and preserving a republic. Whether the transition from the former to the latter conception of politics should be regarded as an intellectual progress or as a decay is a highly contested matter, but it cannot be denied that the transition, did indeed take place; and it began when those two words, reason and state were put together. (Viroli 1998, 73)

I would like to address the question differently by pointing to the heterogeneity of the theory of Reason of State *per se*. The first innovation theorists of Reason of State introduced is “freeing” the political discourse from its moral and ethical aspects. Whether the shift is seen as progressive or regressive haunts the protagonist of the play who resists it altogether. Morality is, instead, replaced with new dicta including the principle of utility. The harsh proponents of the latter are Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini, Justus Lipsius, and to some extent Jean Bodin. Giovanni Botero, on the other hand, tried to redirect the discourse of Reason of State to its Christian and humanist roots. Political realism was introduced by Giovanni Botero who re-situated the new political language in a traditional framework to which the play under study subscribes to despite the radical, almost anarchical, and philosophical reflections of its protagonist. *Hamlet* advances radical and almost anarchic views, which reverberate with radical theories of tyrannicide contemporary to the play, particularly that of George

Buchanan, on the state and its reason, while rejecting the rigid discourse of Reason of State à la Guicciardini. The ending, however, offers the moderate alternative of Giovanni Botero, that of political realism. The play does not exalt the discourse of political realism as such but offers it as an unescapable fate, mourning or, rather, the realization of the loss of liberties first enjoyed by men in their a-political state and later theorized later by Contractarianism. According to the Reason of State discourse, the state or ruler sees the citizens as conquered enemies and not equal citizens with rights. George Buchanan denounces the discourse of Reason of State altogether and provides instead new theories that see the ruler and subjects as equals before the law. Even further, Buchanan insists that the law, and, hence, both the state and the ruler, derive their legitimacy from the people. In the next part, I will be arguing how the play does not subscribe to the political discourse of Reason of State. It offers, instead, the theories negotiated by Buchanan as ideal to finally submit, involuntarily, to the more moderate politico-philosophical discourse of Giovanni Botero that brings the two discourses together and revises the theory of Reason of State.

### Princes and Reason of State

Giovanni Botero argues that preservation of the state depends on the tranquillity and peace of its subjects (Botero 1956, 12), an element that seems to be completely absent in the state of Denmark. The play opens with a sense of unrest with Bernardo’s, one of the guards, famous line “who’s there?” (Shakespeare 2019, I. 1. 1) to which he later replies “Long live the King” (Shakespeare 2019, I. 1. 3). The play sets the tone for the context of Reason of State in its opening lines. It is no coincidence that the first scene starts with guards whose job is literally to guard and *preserve* the state. However, the sense of tranquillity is absent from the very beginning of the play. The ghost of the dead king, emblemizing the past, comes back to haunt the citizens and the son Hamlet who according to the *lex terrae* law is supposed to inherit the throne. After the probable *coup d’État* attempted by the new king Claudius and his father’s death followed by feasts and wedding celebrations, the artificial festivity in the court leads to intensifying the state of denial and indecisiveness of its protagonist. The play introduces three princes and neither of them succeeds in preserving the state. Hamlet the father in the first scene, is described as the chivalrous ruler who rather relies on the power of arms and sword. The ghost of the dead king inspires “fear and

wonder” (Shakespeare 2019, I. 1. 43) in a “fair and warlike form/ In which the majesty of buried Denmark/ Did sometimes march” (Shakespeare 2019, I. 1. 46-48) and in “the very armour he had on/ When he the ambitious Norway combated” (Shakespeare 2019, I. 1. 59-60). From the way the buried king of Denmark is described, the contemporary audience can understand that he belonged to the older tradition of civil reason whereby the prince inspires admiration and love by his excellence. Botero remarks that

Wherein lies the difference between affection and admiration? Both are inspired by excellent qualities, but admiration demands supreme excellence... if this esteem is founded upon piety and religious feeling it is called reverence, if upon political and military ability it is called admiration. What inspires love more than justice does? (Botero 1956, 13)

King Hamlet seems to emblemise the older tradition of civil reason celebrated in, and seems to be gone with, the city republics that seek to preserve justice and equity and where subjects seem to be able to keep their individual liberties to some extent. Before the *coup d'État*, the state of Denmark under the rule of King Hamlet offered justice, liberty, and, therefore, tranquillity to its subjects. Claudius, the antithesis of his brother, is the perfect sixteenth-century ruler described in theories of Reason of State. He relies on diplomacy rather than on the power of arms and martial arts. Neither of the two princes succeed in keeping and preserving the state, be it legitimate or not.

Hamlet, on the other hand, shows an awareness of the stark contrast between the two kings and the transition that is taking place in contemporary politics, that is sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. The hero of the play is always already delaying his revenge, producing philosophical abstractions, “words, words, words” (Shakespeare 2019, II. 2. 191), and brooding onstage making the play all the more problematic. Instead of being a mystery, Hamlet’s delay can be viewed as a cynical rejection of the two political orders imposed on him as the future prince, who should take revenge and overthrow the tyrannical and illegitimate king in order to take his place. The old order of civil reason fails to ensure its perpetuity, while the new order proves to be inadequate and unacceptable. Hamlet’s indecisiveness becomes all the more problematic with the illegitimate rule of Claudius.



In his description of the prince, Botero provides what the prince should not be. He starts with age, arguing that “vehement passions make young men unfit to govern; he who cannot rule himself will be unable to rule others” (Botero 1956, 23) making Hamlet unsuitable for rule all at once. Princes, argues Botero, should avoid delay at all costs: “When you have completed preparations for some undertaking, do not waste time before acting, for delay is likely to upset your plans. *Nocuit semper differ paratis*” (Botero 1956, 43-4). All the delay, minute study of plans, and all actions that the protagonist seems to be taking throughout the whole play, always end in failure. Hamlet, a scholar, is a man of words rather than swords. He fails to be like his father and rejects to be like his uncle. Even when he tried to “be cruel only to be kind” (Shakespeare 2019, 3. 4. 199), a clear articulation of Reason of State theory, he fails to overcome his indecisiveness. Instead, Hamlet keeps on articulating radical abstractions from contemporary political philosophy.

### **Hamlet’s Political Philosophy: Mirror for Princes**

Hamlet’s delay prevents him from taking any action throughout the whole play but, instead, makes him continue philosophizing. His political and philosophical reflections on the state can be seen as radical and almost anarchical as I will be showing in this part. Following Botero’s advice to rulers to read history as it provides them with stories of tyrants, rulers, and their mistakes so as to avoid them, Hamlet decides to stage a play:

A far greater field of study is provided by the writings of those are already dead, for they cover the entire history of the world, in all its parts. History is the most pleasant theatre imaginable: for there a man learns for himself at the expense of others, there he can see shipwrecks without fear, war without danger, the customs and institutions of many nations with expense. There he learns the origins, means and ends, and the causes of the growth and downfall of empires, there he learns why some princes reign in tranquillity and others are burdened with many troubles, some flourish through the arts of peace. (Botero 1956, 37)

Hamlet stages a play to hold the mirror up to princes, thereby hinting at the political genre mirror-for-princes. The self-reflexive motif of the play-within-

play introduces the political subtext of early modern drama. Hamlet describes his play as the abstract and brief and chronicle of time (Shakespeare 2019, II. 2. 462-463) to which Claudius' conscience is unveiled. As Botero argues, there Hamlet learns of his uncle's deed, there he sees the means and ends and the downfall of an empire, the rotten state of Denmark.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* categorizes theatre next to the mirror-for-princes genre and becomes part of what can be termed as a tragedy of the state<sup>2</sup>. As I have mentioned at the beginning of the paper, early modern dramas in general discuss Reason of State onstage and that, as Burke argues, it could scarcely be an exaggeration to claim that the true subject of these plays is Reason of State. Hamlet's delay seems to be so important in this regard. The main action<sup>3</sup> that takes place in the play is Hamlet not taking any action. Exploring his philosophical reflections in the light of the contemporary political debates, however, is very relevant. *Hamlet* starts and ends on the same note. It is circular; it starts in *media res* and its ending resists closure; or rather ends where it starts. Hadfield describes the play as "a neatly circular work, with its end and its beginning" (Hadfield 2005, 7). The delay and inaction of Hamlet can be read otherwise in this regard. It can be seen as a resistance to the tyranny of politics that seems to impose itself. Hamlet becomes erased not only by his thoughts but by the new order. He resists yielding to the new political dogma and seems to voice the radicalism of other theorists who reject the notion of Reason of State altogether. After accidentally killing Polonius, Hamlet cynically addresses Claudius by saying that Polonius is at supper:

A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service – two dishes, but one table. That's the end. . . . A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of the worm. . . . how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. (Shakespeare 2019, IV. 3. 19-31)

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2 Lever argues that "[s]tate for the Jacobean dramatists was not the embodiment of a sacrosanct, God-ordained authority. Nor was it merely the instrument of this or that ruling class. Though entrenched in a system of privilege and oppression, it was recognized as an autonomous, self-perpetuating entity, with its own breed of agents and informers" (Lever 1971, xx).

3 For an understanding of in/action in *Hamlet* in economic terms, see Halpern 2017.

The royal assembly and progress become a convocation of politic worms. Hamlet’s philosophical answer totally undermines the Reason of State philosophical discourse. Hamlet becomes the observer. He notices the tyranny of his times and chooses not to be part of it; neither by obeying a tyrant<sup>4</sup> nor by becoming a ruler. By showing how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar, Hamlet concludes how the king is not above his subjects. It would be interesting, in this regard, to pose the question whether Hamlet is simply reflecting on political and philosophical theories in general or going further by alluding to tyrannicide. In both cases, his reflections reverberate with George Buchanan’s theory of the *avant la lettre* social contract that places the ruler and ‘subjects’ on an equal footing. In his *De Jure Regni Apud Scotos*, Buchanan talks about “the mutual rights of our kings and their subjects,” sketches his political theories about the limits of monarchy, and advances his theory of popular sovereignty. In Buchanan’s philosophy, “the mutual quarrels of the people had introduced the necessity of creating kings, so the injuries done by kings to their subjects occasioned the desire for laws” (Buchanan 2016, 19) which contrary to Reason of State, make the king the servant of the people rather than their master. The king is not above the law but is subject to the law, that derives its legitimacy from the people: “The king was created for the maintenance of civil society... it was their duty to administer justice to every man according to the direction of the law.” He adds:

M. – By considering that a king is not intended for restraining the law, but the law for restraining the king; and it is from the law that a king derives his quality of royalty; since without it he would be a tyrant.

B. – The law then is paramount to the king, and serves to direct and moderate his passions and actions.

M. – That is a concession already made.

B. – Is not then the voice of the people and of the law the same?

M. – The same.

B. – Which is the more powerful, the people or the law?

M. – The whole people, I imagine. (Buchanan 2016, 67)

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4 “Whenever a country falls into the bands of a tyrant, I think it is the duty of good citizens to try to cooperate with him and to use their influence to do good and avoid evil. Certainly it is in the interests of the city to have good men in positions of authority at all times” (Guicciardini 1965, 98).

Buchanan's espousal of the radical political theory of popular sovereignty seems to be accepted and appropriated by Hamlet, and, hence his delay. His inaction does not derive from his inability to act *per se*. It can be seen as a resistance to the immorality of Reason of State and the new contemporary political discourse that seems to infiltrate the court and undermine the traditional discourse of civil reason. The play, therefore, ends with a foreign invasion by Fortinbras, the perfect prince in Botero's theory of Reason of State. He is valiant, excellent in martial arts, and hence, the play on words "fort in bras,"<sup>5</sup> and scholar, who, unlike Hamlet, is neither speculative, nor melancholic. Fortinbras is not introduced as the tyrant of Reason of State theory. The play, hence, ends with the triumph of Giovanni Botero's political realism that becomes the unescapable alternative—the perpetuity of the state. However, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the play subscribes to the political realism of Reason of State and Giovanni Botero. The play "ends" openly on a pessimistic tone, or at least a tone of undecidability—like that of its protagonist. Its circularity resists a final closure. The political transition is unfinished business and so is the play.

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5 French for strong in arms

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