**Hamlet:**

**Cultural and Historical Contexts**

SP derived the plot of Hamlet from an older play on the same subject.

SP places a primitive revenge-story in a sophisticated Renaissance setting.

The hero is a Renaissance prince, seen by Ophelia as perfectly fulfilling the Renaissance ideal of the complete man, accomplished as a courtier, soldier and scholar (3:1, 151-4)

SP endows Hamlet with a subtle intelligence and a philosophical cast of mind: his most famous soliloquy (3:1, 56-88) is a profound meditation on the great issues of life and death.

Hamlet frequently invokes classical mythology: Hyperion and Hercules are his images of his father's greatness.

It is long been thought by critics that SP's plays, whatever part of the world they are set in, really portray England and English people.

However, the overwhelming evidence provided by the play on the question of succession suggest that Shakespeare presupposes an elective rather than a hereditary monarchy, and that SP has created a distinctively Danish world in *Hamlet* in which elder sons do not necessarily succeed their fathers.

This has significant implications for our interpretation of the play, particularly in relation to two major questions: 'Is Claudius a usurper, who has come to the throne by violating the law?' and 'Can Hamlet justly feel a sense of grievance that Claudius has become king instead of him?'

There are many pieces of evidence in the play that we must regard the Danish monarchy as an elective one.

At the beginning of his opening speech, we learn that the accession of Claudius to the throne and his marriage to Gertrude have been approved by the Council, presumably the electing body (1:2, 8-16).

The notion of an elective Danish monarchy is further developed in the same scene, when Claudius formally announces that Hamlet is his choice as the next king, a pledge that Claudius will celebrate with a drinking-bout ("the king's rouse", 1:2, 127)

At the end of the play Hamlet in his turn, will pledge that Fortinbras has his own dying vote in the coming election for a successor to Claudius:

"But I do prophecy th'election lights

On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice." (5:2, 345-6)

Another reminder that the Danish monarch is elected is when Hamlet complains that he lacks promotion ("advancement") Rosencrantz reminds him that Claudius has nominated him as election as future king ("You have the voice of the king himself for your succession in Denmark". 3:2, 323-4)

There are even more direct allusions to an elective monarchy in Act 5. Here Hamlet brings a new charge against Claudius, that he has indulged in unscrupulous electoral tactics, and got himself elected king before Hamlet's own claims could be properly canvassed.

By thus acting quickly after his murder of King Hamlet, Claudius has "Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes." (5:2, 65)

When Fortinbras arrives at the end to present his case as a claimant to the throne of Denmark, Horatio tells him that Hamlet's dying vote in his favour will encourage other electors to support him:

Of that I shall have also cause to speak,

And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more. (5:2, 381-2)

It is worth remarking that Norway, as well as Denmark, is an elective monarchy. The new king of Norway is not young Fortinbras, but the dead king's brother, "uncle of young Fortinbras" (1:2, 28)

Many passages in the play have reference to the moral, as distinct from the legal right of Claudius to be king, of Hamlet's view of himself as his father's rightful successor, or as an aspirant to kingship.

His answer to his uncle’s query, “How fares our cousin Hamlet?” is the menacing “I eat the air, promise – crammed – you can not feed capons so” (3:2, 89).

There is evidence towards the end of the play that he sees himself as being entitled to assume the royal prerogatives of his dead father. He uses the royal Danish signet that belonged to his father to seal the death- warrant of Rosencrantz and Guidenstern (4:2, 49) and approaches the mourners at Ophelia’s grave with the cry “This is I/ Hamlet the Dane” (5:1, 250).

In many respects, *Hamlet* is SP’s most ‘modern’, most culturally sophisticated play.

The background of classical learning and Renaissance philosophy is only one aspect of this.

Another prominent one is the co-existence within *Hamlet* of pagan and Christian perspectives on its central issues, particularly the revenge theme.

In *Hamlet*, Christian belief is central to the outlook of even Claudius, although putting this belief into practice is another matter.

Perhaps the most interesting cultural dimension of *Hamlet* is that it is a play about the theatrical world.

SP makes the playgoers conscious that they are watching a play by constantly drawing attention to the stage, to acting, to the contemporary theatre, its conventions and its problems.

The play is dominated by theatrical images reminding us that it *is* a play.

Hamlet delivers a learned lecture to the players on the art of acting, based on the best Renaissance principles (avoidance of rant, excessive displays of passion, instead, holding “the mirror up to nature” 3:2, 20).

There is a lengthy discussion of the contemporary controversy over the use of child actors and a long dramatic rehearsal conducted by Hamlet (2:2, 333-584).

The stage on which the play is performed becomes a metaphor for what the actors feel about their world (2:2, 295-300).

There is a moment at the end of the play when the bystanders on the stage, members of the Danish court, become identified with the spectators in the theatre. The dying Hamlet looks around him at the amazed and frightened courtiers:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,

That are but mutes or audience to this act (5:2, 324-5)

The throng of playgoers in the pit and the people in the galleries are all swept inexorably into the drama, swelling the modest ranks of Hamlet’s subjects.

Just before the final dissolution, the play world has reached out to encompass the theatre audience.