

# Comrade Fortinbras and Bourgeois

## Hamlet: Global Leftist Hamletism

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### Abstract

In *Bend Sinister*, Vladimir Nabokov creates the world of Padukgrad, a dystopian society symbolic of Stalin's tyrannical regime. In the novel, an obscure scholar proposes an adaptation of *Hamlet* to be performed at Padukgrad state theater. This adaptation transforms Fortinbras into the hero of the play and presents the tragic flaw of Hamlet as secondary. I use Nabokov's anti-Stalinist appropriation of Shakespeare as a point of departure to legitimize Marxist-Leninist appropriative deployments of *Hamlet* that precede the taint of Stalin. German, Soviet, and American Leftists alike incorporated Hamlet as a negative prototype — a representation of bourgeois individualism and uncommitted Leftist sympathizers — into political rhetoric so as to advocate commitment and reform. I argue that global Leftist "Hamletism" not only illustrates a clear (political) distinction between proletarian and popular appropriations of Shakespeare, but also demonstrates a theory crucial to the re-politicization of Shakespeare's social function today.

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### A Leftist Code

Hamlet has become a cultural code in popular and high culture alike. My paper centers on extractions of Hamlet in political contexts. I argue that Marxist-Leninist — or Leftist — Hamletism is a unique tradition in that it is distinct from popular and dominant cultural citations of Hamlet. It is unique in part because it aims to develop a global proletarian consciousness. Even though both popular and proletarian cultures are thought to be representative of the masses at large, there are major ideological differences. "Popular" typically appeals to the democratization of culture in the form of materialist production, primarily with regard to access and ownership of particular media and cultural capital. Proletarian culture, on the other hand, is conditioned by Leftist ideals, historically influenced by Marxism-Leninism, which entail propagating a clear partisan political consciousness from the perspective of the proletariat. In addition, proletarian culture is not organically formed, but rather shaped by a vanguard comprised of highly educated individuals

with access to high and popular culture. In this paper, I intend to show how Leftist Hamletism embodies proletarian principles and how it played a major role in the proletarian movement during the early-twentieth-century. I also want to explain why proletarian appropriations of Shakespeare are worth exhuming and studying.

The political principles of the Old Left — the Leninist Left — are often misconstrued, as they continue to be tainted by the horrors of Stalinism. In *Bend Sinister* (1947), the first novel Vladimir Nabokov wrote while living in America, Nabokov brings to life the world of Padukgrad — a dystopian society reflective of the authoritarian regime of Joseph Stalin. The novel centers on Professor Krug, a renowned philosopher and a sure reflection of the novel's émigré author. Krug appears to be in a sort of "Hamlet dilemma" — considering "to speak or not to speak" as a representative of the Ekwilist philosophy, the philosophy of the ruler Paduk's "Party of the Average Man." In fact, Shakespearean tropes are pervasive throughout *Bend Sinister*, but a more obvious interest in *Hamlet* is evident in what has been called the "Hamlet Chapter" (Chapter 7). In this chapter, a scholar named Ember recites a proposed adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy, one that Ember intends to stage at the Padukgrad state theater. In order for the government to find it "worthwhile to suffer the production of a muddled Elizabethan play," Ember must appease the state by making Fortinbras — "a blooming young knight, beautiful and sound to the core" — the hero of the play, instead of a cowardly Hamlet (Nabokov 1990, 107, 108). Ember claims that his biggest hurdle is persuading the players to adopt his translation of the play and to forget "the abominable one to which they are used" (107).

The alteration of *Hamlet* by Nabokov's character speaks to the history of the Russian stage and the controversy that surrounded the play in the Soviet Union. By the mid-1930s, even though Shakespeare continued to dominate the Soviet stage, *Hamlet* was essentially erased from the Soviet repertoire because Hamlet's internal conflict and hesitance did not echo the so-called "optimistic spirit" of the times (Rowe 1976, 127). There is no doubt that Nabokov was familiar with the *Hamlet* controversy; and it is quite possible that Ember's report that the "only respectable" Hamlet actors "left the country in disguise" (Nabokov 1990, 107) is an allusion to Soviet actors, such as Mikhail Chekhov, who took their business abroad. Chekhov was recognized as Russia's best Hamlet, but after his performance in a 1924 production of *Hamlet*, he was publicly censured for appearing to be "so crushed by grief and despair for himself and mankind that his consciousness seemed to disintegrate" (Rowe 1976, 128).

I bring up *Bend Sinister* because it is to an extent historically accurate in its depiction of the Soviet stage. Broadly speaking, *Hamlet* was viewed as counterproductive to the Leftist program. As Arkady Ostrovsky explains, the "source of tragedy in the 1930s could be an accident,

a misunderstanding, or a mistake as in *Othello* or *Romeo and Juliet*, but not the innate conflict or guilt of the protagonist as in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*" (Ostrovsky 2006, 61). The play *Hamlet* was thought to represent bourgeois individualism, and the character Hamlet symbolized a weak-kneed individual who is the source of his own tragedy. We see this by examining Leftist Hamletism.

### Global Hamletism

An unsympathetic interpretation of Prince Hamlet is by no means unique to the Soviet Union. In his book *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art*, R. A. Foakes explains the history of the phenomenon commonly known as "Hamletism," a term that describes Hamlet as a cultural signifier identified with "the problems of [an] age" and politicized as "mirroring those who from weakness of will endlessly vacillate" (Foakes 1993, 19). While this description may apply to a multitude of political purposes and disparate ideologies, the common ground in all forms of Hamletism is that they are "interconnected, and developed from an image of Hamlet as well-intentioned but ineffectual, full of talk but unable to achieve anything, addicted to melancholy and sickened by the world around him" (20).

As we trace Hamletism back to Ferdinand Freiligrath's 1844 poem "Deutschland ist Hamlet," we see that Hamletism has typically been motivated by nationalist agendas. In this poem, Freiligrath describes the German population as one filled with revolutionary thinkers who substitute philosophizing for action. In 1877, following German victories in the Franco-Prussian War, Horace Furness delivered a different German message as he dedicated his staging of *Hamlet* to the "GERMAN SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY OF WEIMAR REPRESENTATIVE OF A PEOPLE WHOSE RECENT HISTORY HAS PROVED ONCE FOR ALL THAT GERMANY IS NOT HAMLET" (quoted in Foakes 1993, 20). In the West, nineteenth-century British imperialists urged soldiers not to be Hamlets (26). And even in the United States, as recently as the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of State George P. Shultz applied a similar allusion to *Hamlet* during a debate over foreign policy. Shultz declared that we should not allow the United States to become the "Hamlet of Nations." In his book *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations*, Thomas Cartelli makes a noteworthy assessment of Shultz's application of *Hamlet*:

The image of ruined bodies draped across the stage at the play's end and familiarity with the Reagan Administration's position on the fatal consequences of U.S. indecision in Vietnam combine to suggest that if decisive action is required to enforce yet another Cold War intervention, the United States is well-prepared to play the role of the late imperial Fortinbras. (Cartelli 1999, 87)

These examples of German, British, and American Hamletism reveal imperialist-motivated — militaristic and nationalist — deployments of Hamlet. They are not far disconnected from Nabokov's satirical critique of what I see as "Comrade Fortinbras."

In contrast, Leftist Hamletism is implemented to reach an end goal of international proletarian solidarity in opposition to capitalist oppression. The literary Left during the 1920s and 1930s was far less concerned with military action than it was with political commitment. American Communist Party member and literary critic Joseph Freeman claimed, "Whatever role art may have played in epochs preceding ours — whatever may be its function in the classless society of the future — social war today has made it the subject of partisan polemic" (Freeman 1935, 9). And for this reason Leftist Hamletism was employed: for a partisan political purpose. The Left focused on creating a hegemonic proletarian literary tradition and did not use "Hamlet" as a popular expression without a literary and political purpose. "Hamlet" became the name for fellow-travelers, Leftist sympathizers, who would not fully commit to the proletarian movement — more specifically, wavering liberal intellectuals.

In contrast, what I call "Leftist Hamletism" is implemented to reach an end goal of international proletarian solidarity, in opposition to capitalist oppression. While Hamletism has become a cultural signifier in popular culture, I argue that Marxist-Leninist, or "Leftist," Hamletism is a unique tradition distinct from popular citations of Hamletism. It is unique in part because it aims to develop a global proletarian consciousness. Even though both popular and proletarian cultures are often thought to represent the masses at large, there are major ideological differences. "Popular" generally describes the democratization of culture in the form of materialist production, primarily with regard to access and ownership of particular media and cultural capital. Proletarian culture, on the other hand, is conditioned by Leftist ideals, historically influenced by Marxism-Leninism, which entail propagating a clear partisan political consciousness from the perspective of the proletariat. With regard to literature, American Leftist and literary critic Joseph Freeman claimed, "Whatever role art may have played in epochs preceding ours — whatever may be its function in the classless society of the future — social war today has made it the subject of partisan polemic" (Freeman 1935, 9). With the advent of the Leftist literature movement in the 1920s and 1930s, Leftists cited "Hamlet" as a proletarian expression with a literary *and* political purpose. And unlike previous historical uses of "Hamletism" in nationalistic rhetoric, the literary Left was far less concerned with military action than it was with political commitment. And for this reason Leftist Hamletism was employed — for a partisan political purpose. "Hamlet" became the name for fellow-travelers, Leftist sympathizers, who would not fully commit to the proletarian movement — more specifically, wavering liberal intellectuals.

Leftist Hamletism has Russian roots. During the nineteenth-century, the intellectual classes sought to disgrace the nobility for resisting change, so they called noblemen "Hamlets"; thus, they formed the concept of "Russian Hamlets": "superfluous men" who "overemphasized psychology" (Freeman 1935, 9). The Soviet Left ultimately turned what it meant to be a "Russian Hamlet" against the intellectuals. A "Russian Hamlet" became one who would not commit to the proletarian movement. American Leftist Joshua Kunitz, after traveling to the Soviet Union around 1930 to observe the political climate, provided an account of the Bolshevik opposition to wavering fellow-travelers. As he explained,

In contrast to the unswerving Bolsheviki, [the intellectuals] seemed a pitiable lot. And it is as such that we see them portrayed in Soviet literature. Weak-kneed Hamlets, whose "native air of resolution" had been "sickled o'er by the pale cast of thought," superfluous people, ludicrous creatures, nonplussed mourners with their noses timorously tucked in their ragged furs. (Kunitz 1930, 85)

Such rhetoric can be found in Soviet works of literature. In N. Ogniov's *The Diary of a Communist Undergraduate*, there is a description of a lack of uniformity among the intelligentsia and the Left. One of the instructors says, "[I]f you tell me that the *intelligentsia* is co-operating with the Soviet Power, and serving the Soviet Power, I shall answer that you are mistaken — for it is not the *intelligentsia* as a whole, but only a few categories, a few individuals . . . Some [others] just look like Hamlets" (Ogniov 1929, 66, emphasis in original).

Leftist Hamletism also speaks to the challenges proletarian culture faced. The Left needed support from liberal intellectuals. Following the Kharkov Conference of Revolutionary Writers in 1930 — the biggest players being the Soviet, American, and German Left — it became understood that "proletarian [culture] . . . had not yet established its undisputed hegemony [and] was still waging a battle against the literary tendencies represented by the so-called 'fellow-travelers'" (Editors 1931, 6). This was even true in the Soviet Union. Contributing to the conference, American representatives created a ten-point list of things that needed to change. The very first point read: "The widening of activity of the John Reed Clubs and the *New Masses* in two directions: a) extending the proletarian base of our movement by drawing in new proletarian elements; b) winning over of radicalized intellectuals" (7). Mike Gold, arguably the most influential figure in the American proletarian movement, in a personal follow up to the conference stated, "We must bring our young artists and writers to a revolutionary consciousness, for this will give their work strength and clarity" (Gold 1931, 11). Gold was not only directing this statement to an American audience, but to the entire Communist International.

According to Gold, "Intellectual Hamlets go through enormous sweaty tragedies," but they usually "drift contentedly" into the capitalist world where they serve as "a kind of intellectual Bomb Squad" (quoted in Aaron 1961, 329). In a review of John Howard Lawson's 1925 play *Processional*, Gold castigates Lawson, calling him a "bourgeois Hamlet." By using "'bourgeois' Hamlet" as an insult, Gold molds Shakespeare's character in order to chastise Gold's wavering contemporaries. In the *Processional* critique, Gold compares Lawson to an over-indulgent Hamlet to insinuate that Lawson "actually hurt the revolutionary movement by portraying the proletariat revolutionary" in a counterproductively idealistic fashion (Chambers 2006, 176). Not only does Gold harshly criticize *Processional*, but he also disparages Lawson as a stagnant playwright, one who does not understand his role in the Leftist movement. "[Lawson] is still lost like Hamlet, in his inner conflict," Gold writes, "Through all his plays wander a troop of ghosts disguised in the costumes of living men and women and repeating the same monotonous questions: 'Where do I belong in this warring world of two classes?'" (Gold 1934, 28).

Lawson did not wait long to respond. A week after Gold's written assault, in an article titled "'Inner Conflict' and Proletarian Art," Lawson unhesitatingly separates himself from many Leftist sympathizers who suffer from hesitancy. In his defense, stating that his position in the global class war is both "definite and disciplined," Lawson indicates that "many American intellectuals are so confused about the whole issue that they waver idiotically between Communism and various manifestations of social fascism" (Lawson 1969, 205). Lawson never defends any positive qualities in Hamlet; quite the opposite, he only tries to clear his own name from being affiliated with such a stigmatizing comparison and, ultimately, shares Gold's and the global Leftist attitude toward bourgeois Hamlet-esque intellectuals. Earl Browder, a prominent figure of the American Communist Party, also refers to Hamlet to attack *The New Republic*. Originally, *The New Republic* was a Leftist newspaper that protested fascism; but it maintained neutrality during the early formation of the Popular Front in 1936, remaining impartial toward the Left and the bourgeois intellectual writers. Browder criticized this neutrality, disavowing the "Hamlet-like paralysis that has gripped the minds of *The New Republic*'s editors under the hypnosis of fascism" (quoted in Warren 1966, 156).

German playwright Bertolt Brecht publicly approached *Hamlet* in a different way, but I believe it still fits under Leftist Hamletism because he opposed the promotion of sympathizing or empathizing with Hamlet, and he used Hamlet to disseminate clear Leftist messages when discussing his "instructive" epic theater. For Brecht, Hamlet is code for "better sleep on it" (Brecht 1931, 49). In most cases, he turned to *Hamlet* in order to direct his actors not to "become" Hamlet on stage — in other words, to avoid appearing to encapsulate Hamlet's internal conflict (sort of the

way that Chekhov was criticized for doing on the Soviet Stage). When an actor performed the part, Brecht said, Hamlet should be portrayed for what he appears to be in the text:

After at first being reluctant to answer one bloody deed by another, and even preparing to go into exile, [Hamlet] meets young Fortinbras at the coast as he is marching with his troops to Poland. Overcome by this warrior-like example, he turns back and in a piece of barbaric butchery slaughters his uncle, his mother, and himself, leaving Denmark to the Norwegian. (Brecht 1949, 201-202)

Brecht understood 4.4 as the turning point in the play, a point when Hamlet's transformation of thought is a return to "feudal business." Hamlet's conflict between the humanist Reason received from Wittenberg and his irrational barbaric action causes him to fall "victim to the discrepancy between such reasoning and such action" (202). In essence, Brecht's alienation techniques were developed in order to keep the crowd alienated from emotional connections, so by showing Hamlet with unredeemable characteristics, Brecht was in a way saying to the crowd, "Don't be Hamlet." This is because embodying the characteristics of Hamlet might evoke an emotional response from the audience, rather than instruct and agitate, the audience to participate in social reformation.

### Rethinking Shakespeare and the Left

With the commencement of the Popular Front in the late 1930s and the Moscow Purge Trials, proletarian culture began to dissipate; in effect, the focus on political commitment lost much of its emphasis. It, however, was not forgotten, and Leftist Hamletism did not disappear. In 1958, Joseph Freeman tried to revive this commitment by delivering a speech titled "Vision of the Thirties" to American Studies majors at Smith University. The speech protested the House Un-American Activities Committee trials, but Freeman's main purpose was to rally the "uncommitted generation" to engage in politically radical literature and art that had been silenced by the "Terror of the Fifties," as manifested through McCarthyism (Freeman 1958). Near the end of the speech, in a moment of meta-theatricality, Freeman put on a satirical skit called "Waiting for Candide," fusing Voltaire's *Candide* and Clifford Odets's overtly political play *Waiting for Lefty* in a Hamlet-esque moment of indecisiveness.

In the skit, Candide was placed on the stand and questioned about his 1930s political position. Unlike Voltaire's naïve character, however, Freeman presented a well-read and informed Candide. Candide used his knowledge of literature to support a firm Leftist political stance. With a powerful allusion to a frequently cited line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Candide declared, "Today something is rotten not only in the state of Denmark but in every state on the face of the

earth without exception" (Freeman 1958). In this instant, Freeman used an unlikely candidate in *Candide*, whose naïveté was paired with Hamlet's hesitancy, to politicize literature in an effort to retrieve the political commitment of the 1930s. Freeman revived a Leftist literary moment in history by returning to a version of Leftist Hamletism, or Leftist "Candide-ism," to advocate the re-politicization of literature.

I understand that Leftist Hamletism is certainly propaganda or, more fittingly, "instructive agitation," but it helps to define proletarian culture and Shakespeare's role in a political movement, which at times may be misunderstood. As Lawrence Guntner says:

There is no such thing as a "socialist *Hamlet*," just as there is no such thing as a "socialist Shakespeare." On closer examination, what we find are socialist *Hamlets* and socialist Shakespeares; or, better, socialist readings or interpretations of what happens in *Hamlet*. Neither the Communist world nor a Shakespeare production behind the "Iron Curtain" — a metaphor in its own right — was as monolithic as the West would like to believe it to have been. (Guntner 2006, 197)

We should not ignore that fact that the West has a part in communist and socialist global Shakespeares. And I, like Freeman, think that we can learn from this by looking at the past.

Andreas Huyssen argues, "The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory," and therefore "[t]he temporal status of any act of memory is always present, and not, as some naïve epistemology might have it, the past itself, even though all memory in some ineradicable sense is dependent on some past event or experience" (Huyssen 1995, 3). So if memory can make the past a part of the present, retrieving the past can make a difference in the present. And looking at Shakespeare within the realm of past political movements might be more effective than trying to invent ways in which Shakespeare is inherently political.

To conclude, I want to mention one last quote by Mike Gold. He claimed that the "New York woods . . . are full of glib intellectuals, who can tear a novel, a poem or a political movement to pieces, but are themselves as incapable as Hamlet of deed or decision" (quoted in Aaron, 1961, 329). Perhaps Leftist Hamletism will let us rethink our political motives when approaching Shakespeare's cultural authority and cultural appropriations of Shakespeare — those which are often categorized as popular and/or elite when they should perhaps be considered proletarian.



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