



University of Szeged

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Towards a Poetics of the Tragedy of State:

The Raison d'État in Shakespeare's Hamlet and Ben Jonson's Sejanus His Fall

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Supervised by

Professors Attila Kiss and Ágnes Matuska

Submitted by

Amira Aloui

Thesis Résumé Booklet

1. Table of Contents
2. Brief Outline of the Dissertation (In English)
3. Brief Outline of the Dissertation (In Hungarian)
4. Publications

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I: Introduction to Early Modern Political Thought.....	13
1. A Prologue to Early Modern Political Thought.....	13
1.1. Scholasticism: Aristotle in Europe.....	14
1.2. Cicero and Civil Reason.....	16
2. Early Modern Political Thought.....	18
2.1. Early Modern Europe, Reason, State.....	18
2.2. Tacitism and Reason of State.....	23
3. The Subject.....	26
3.1. The Early Modern Subject.....	26
3.2. Subject/s of History.....	28
3.3. The Subject and Humanism.....	32
3.4. The Subject and the Social Contract.....	33
3.5. The Speaking Subject.....	34
3.6. The Subject of Interpellation.....	36
CHAPTER II: Threshold to the Tragedy of the State.....	39
1. Origin of the State.....	40
1.1. Public Utility.....	40
1.2. Constant Threats versus Preservation of the State.....	44
2. Prologue to the Tragedy of the State.....	53
2.1. <i>Hamlet</i> : On the Margins of the State.....	53
2.2. <i>Sejanus</i> : On the Margins of the Stage.....	60
CHAPTER III: Poetics of the State.....	67
1. Early Modern Typology.....	67
1.1. Jean Bodin: Concepts and Misconception.....	67
1.2. Republicanism: Concepts and Contexts.....	77
2. Politics of the Tragedy of State.....	81
2.1. The Rotten State (of Denmark).....	81
2.2. <i>Sejanus</i> ' Reason of State: "State is enough to make th'act just".....	90
CHAPTER IV: Politics of the Stage.....	100
1. <i>Dérason d'État</i> and Popular Sovereignty.....	102
2. Tragedy and the Crisis of In/action.....	109
2.1. <i>Hamlet</i> and Tragical Inaction.....	109
2.1. <i>Silius</i> and Tragical Action.....	116
3. Reason of State and Neo-stoicism.....	121
CHAPTER V: Poelitics of the Tragedy of State.....	125
1. Anatomy of the State in <i>Hamlet</i> : The Horror, the Horror!.....	127
2. Anatomy of the State in <i>Sejanus</i> : A Great and Monstruous Serpent.....	134
CONCLUSION.....	144
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	148

Brief Outline of the Dissertation

(In English)

The present research will study the poelitics of the Tragedy of State in relation to the politico-philosophical discourse of Reason of State. I will be introducing the new genre of the Tragedy of the State and argue for its poelitics. I will, also, be introducing the discourse of Reason of State to the literary scholarships of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and their contemporaries. The emerging early modern philosophical discourse has remained a gap in the scholarship despite its importance, not to say centrality, in political thought and the history of ideas. The two plays under study in the present research are Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Ben Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall*. In addressing the emerging political thought in England and the continent, I will argue for a rereading of the two plays that can only be possible with acknowledging the importance and centrality of the political discourse of Reason of State. As the title of my work indicates, reading the plays through this historically informed critical perspective will allow for the understanding of a new poelitical form that has long been dismissed as marginalia in the literary scholarship.

After studying Reason of State in sixteenth century Europe and England, the task of working on the Tragedy of State becomes compulsory. The "sub-genre" that I will be discussing in the present work is one that centres on and discusses the emerging philosophical discourse of Reason of State. Therefore, I will be studying both the poetics and politics of the Tragedy of State—hence, its *poelitics*. In the present work, I will be using the term poelitics to refer to, on the one hand, the poetics of the state, its forms, typology, and politics of the stage that centre on Reason of State. The reason why I fuse the two is to further stress the centrality of Reason of State to the tragedies and to argue for a Tragedy of *the* State that was present parallelly to the political discourse under study.

Reason of State has not been central in the historiography of political thought until very recently, that is by the end of the twentieth century. A body of political literature on Reason of State started to emerge in the twentieth century, including Quentin Skinner in his foundational oeuvre *The Foundations of Early Modern Political Thought* in which he argues that a radical shift in the understanding of and status of politics started to take place with Reason of State philosophy that brought about an abrupt break with early Humanist politics: "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... we find the words "State" and l'État beginning to be used" (Skinner 2002, x). Maurizio Viroli, in 1992, devoted his oeuvre *From Politics to*

Reason of State to the study of the emergence of Reason of State and political science. Richard Tuck devotes *Philosophy and Government*, in the same vein, to the study of the revolution of politics, “*raison d’État* in the late sixteenth century, the explicitly anti-constitutional (and often anti-ethical) literature which burgeoned so astonishingly in Europe from 1580 to 1620” (Tuck 1993, 1). Yves Charles Zarka writes a foundational volume¹ in the philosophy of Reason of State in which he represents a comprehensive outlook on the theory, its emergence, and key principles. The above-mentioned sources are the foundational texts in the study of the Reason of State philosophy in contemporary political and philosophical theories. The literature on Reason of State is immense.

For a deeper understanding of the concept, I rely on the works of Ernest H. Kantorowicz’s “Mysteries of State: An Absolutist Concept and Its Late Mediaeval Origins,” Peter Burke’s “Tacitism, Scepticism, and Reason of State,” Friedrich Meinecke’s *Machiavellianism: The Doctrine of Raison d’État and its Place in Modern History*, Yves Charles Zarka’s *Raison et déraison d’État : Théoriciens et théories de la Raison d’État aux xvi^e et xvii^e siècles*, Maurizio Viroli’s *From Politics to Reason of State: the Acquisition and Transformation of the Language of Politics 1250-1600*, Richard Tuck’s *Philosophy and Government*, and many others. The following volumes are central to the theory: Botero’s *Della Ragion di Stato* (1589), Machiavelli (*The Prince* 1532), Francesco Guicciardini (*Ricordi* 1530), Jean Bodin (*Six Books of the Commonwealth* 1576), Michel de Montaigne (*Essais* 1580), and Justus Lipsius (*Politica: Six Books of Politics or Political Instruction* 1589). These are the chief and foundational books on Reason of State theory. I will be analysing the theory at length in the rest of this work.

In the present research my primary goal is to address what I call the poelitics of the Tragedy of State in light of the emergent political discourse of Reason of State that paves the way to state formation and the legal subject. In so doing, I will be arguing that the Tragedy of State denounces the new political discourse of Reason of State as unethical and illegitimate, and that in representing the new political discourse onstage, the Tragedy of State fuses the poetic and political to create its own grammar, though on the verge of its demise, that is both political, in that it comments on the poetics of the state, and poetic in that it self-reflexively comments on its political stage. By poetics of the state, I refer to the form, structure, and grammar of the state that was introduced by early modern political thinkers. Forms of the state,

¹ Zarka, Yves Charles. 1994. *Raison et Déraison d’Etat : Théoriciens et Théories de La Raison d’Etat Aux XVIe et XVIIe Siècles*. Paris: Presses Universitaires De France.

or in other terms, the poetics of the state, were both very central and problematic to early modern political philosophy as I will be showing in the rest of the present work. However, politics of the stage merely refers to the discourse of Reason of State onstage and its centrality, hence the concept the Tragedy of State. As I argue for a poetics of the state and politics of the stage, I am introducing in this work the term *poelitics* of the Tragedy of State, as the two are interrelated.

The question that this research attempts to answer is as follows: In representing *Raison d'État* onstage, in what terms does the Tragedy of State, and particularly the two texts under study, examine the legitimacy of the state in its nascent state, with regard to the contemporary political debates, political thought, and ancient theories of *étatisme*. In addition to the central question, I would like to answer another question central to my research that is to what extent can one speak of a poelitics of the Tragedy of State. This question is by no means a reductive one, nor does it seek to harmonize a 'generic' early modern poelitics. It seeks to address and recognize the central concept of this research, Reason of State, on and off stage, particularly in its nascent phase in early modern Europe and draw attention to the awareness of this political phenomenon that is not only starting to adumbrate but also changing and marking a transition in the history of political thought. Therefore, I advance the concept the Tragedy of State, not for the sake of novelty, but to highlight a pattern within early modern tragedies that has been not addressed by scholars.

In this study, the theoretical tools are threefold. I will be first relying on the theory of Reason of State. I will be dissecting the discourse through the primary sources of its theorists and writers. Then, for my analysis of the plays, I will be relying on close reading of the plays. To be able to outline the grammar of the Tragedy of State, I will be heavily relying on close analyses of the two plays. Finally, I will be relying on cultural materialism. I will also be referring to other theorists, particularly Arendt's triadic concept of work, labour, and action, Bourdieu's concept of the dynastic and bureaucratic state, and Foucault's concepts of governmentality and power.

I seek to introduce the new political literary/dramatic genre through two plays that articulate most the philosophical and political transition taking place in early modern England and the continent. In *Hamlet*, the audience/reader sees the emerging political preoccupation with the development of *étatisme* and its mechanisms in the modern sense. The play portrays the modern state, or to say it in other words, the new political order, that was still unfathomable, to the contemporary audience, starting with borders and frontiers, discussing, hence, what became known as the science of international relations onstage, and ending with the principles

and mechanisms of the new emerging political order. The Tragedy of State demonstrates a portrait of the state via its own poetics. It is a Tragedy that has its own grammar. With the birth of the modern state, the play explores the nuanced birth/erasure of the subject and its (absence of) agency under the birth of the modern state and the Reason of State philosophy.

In *Sejanus*, Ben Jonson questions the agency of the subject in its plural form under the new political order that seeks to castrate it. The Tragedy of State demonstrates how the new political order of Reason of State centralises power, castrates its subjects, erases any agency, and challenges any attempts of dissent, and redefines traditional power structures. Tragedy of State starts with building and enforcing territoriality and ends with dismemberment of the state as a way to express how the new political order is a corrupt and unethical one. The genre ends with a dismemberment of the body politic as a way to show how it denounces Reason of State politics and the modern state, *avant la lettre* as such.

Reason of State has not been incorporated in the corpus of political criticism of the plays, be it *Hamlet* and *Sejanus*, or contemporary drama in general. The dismissal of the theory caused a gap in the scholarly study of early modern drama. Acknowledging the centrality of Reason of State theory in political thought has been accomplished only recently in political theory, but there still remains a gap in the political criticism of drama, despite the attempts advanced by the earliest new historicism and cultural materialism and Marxist criticism to restore a historicist and political approach to the readings of texts.

Before the advance of the two critical approaches, in his 1971 study, *The Tragedy of State*, Lever was the first to argue for a Tragedy of State and for centrality of the state in early modern drama. He observes that the “[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 2017, xx). Lever is the first to argue that Jacobean tragedy represents the state onstage not in its providentialist terms but rather or also as a political apparatus formed by a bureaucratic structure situated in the court and argued for such awareness in the plays and contemporary politics.

The concept and the theory are early modern *par excellence*. Reason of State flourished first in Italy. It was first used by the Italian Giovanni Botero in *Della Ragion di Stato*. Many early modern theorists in the continent explored the theory including Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, Francesco Guicciardini, Montaigne, and Justus Lipsius. However, they did not write on Reason of State *ex nihilo*. They relied on the writings and translations of Tacitus, Cicero, and ancient

histories of Rome. Reason of state can be, *grosso modo*, defined as the means rulers seek to employ so as to ensure the preservation of the state—in most cases tyranny—which is, in turn, the highest of all goods.

The theory I use for the analysis of the plays is contextualist. I choose the rubric contextualism to refer to cultural materialism. I situate the play in “early modernity”, and therefore, address the complex matrix of material practices. In the present study, I will be employing cultural materialism to address the complex political theory of Reason of State. Hence, I refer to it in terms of discursivity throughout the present work. I will be chiefly working on the discursive space in which the political discourse under study circulates.

For a brief overview of cultural materialism, Jonathan Dollimore defines it as a practice “appropriate for recovering the political dimension of Renaissance Drama. This entails a consideration of the theater as an institution and more generally literature as practice” (Dollimore 2010, 7). In other words, the text, accordingly, is regarded as a vehicle that contains the same potential for consent or dissent, or power and subversion.

Alan Sinfield defines cultural materialism as an exercise that reads “the co-occurrence of subordinate, residual, emergent, alternative, and oppositional cultural forces alongside the dominant, in varying relations of incorporation, negotiation, and resistance” in the text under study (Sinfield 2006, 7). Sinfield’s argument goes beyond the binary model of “pro” or “anti” power. It is important to note, however, that a critic can still fall prey to the practice s/he exposes. Cultural materialism seeks “to dislocate and disturb, laying bare the implicit ideological assumptions of established practices” (Sinfield 2006, 20). In the present study, I will be working on the emergent political discourse, but will address the plays in terms of their counter-discursivity.

It is alleged that cultural materialism lost its novelty.² A study of the text should not aim for novelty. Sinfield in this regard says that “[t]he demand that students be in fashion is part of the problem, not part of the solution” (Sinfield 2006, 2). A reading that ignores the text’s inherent politics is “quietistic” (Vickers 1995, 325). Shakespeare was pressed into service to teach reactionary social norms and justify imperialism (Brannigan 2001, 94). Contextualism queers, decolonizes, and restores the popular voice in the text. A critic’s task is twofold; examining the residual voices in the text and argue for a radical reading. The two texts,

² See Veese, H. Aram. 1991. “Re-Membering a Deformed Past: (New) New Historicism.” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 24 (1): 3. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1315021>.

therefore, “present unfinished business in all the fields cultural materialists have addressed” (Sinfield 2006, 27).

It is still important, however, to note that in theoretical terms and, especially, in this particular research, cultural materialism can be limiting as the theory did not address the discourse of Reason of State *per se*. In this regard, I will be employing the theory to show how the plays denounce the emergent political discourse. Cultural materialism may not fully account for the emergence of this particular political discourse. However, the theory can still be useful in illuminating how the plays denounce this discourse. Cultural materialism can be used to explore how the plays reflect and challenge broader political context that enable the emergence of Reason of State discourse.

The present research includes parts of previous publications, chiefly the first chapter. My analysis and introduction to Reason of State philosophy is published in my paper “‘The Rotten State of Denmark’: The Discourse of Reason of State in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*” (Aloui 2021a; Aloui 2022). I have also elaborated on central ideas I have been addressing in the past few years and that I published in other journals (Aloui 2018; Aloui 2021b; Aloui 2021d).

This work will be divided into five major chapters. I will be following two rationales: thematic and linear. I will be devoting the first chapter to introducing at length Reason of State theory, its importance in political thought and state formation, and political subjectivity. In the second chapter I will address the threshold to the poelitics of the Tragedy of State. The second chapter will be a prologue to both Reason of State onstage and the Tragedy of State. In the third chapter, I will be discussing how the two plays introduce Reason of State theory to their audience onstage. The third chapter is devoted to the poetics of the state. Following the same logic, the fourth chapter will be devoted to the poetics of the state. Finally, the fifth chapter will be a synthesis of the poelitics of the Tragedy of State. Having done so, I argue for a structure of the Tragedy of State, that with its demise, the modern state, the leviathan that is, has already been established.

Brief Outline of the Dissertation

(In Hungarian)

Jelen kutatás az Állam tragédiájának poetikáját az államérdek politikafilozófiai diskurzusához viszonyítva vizsgálja. Bemutatom az Állami Tragédia új műfaját, és érvelek annak poetikája mellett. Továbbá bemutatom az államérdek diskurzusát Shakespeare, Ben Jonson és kortársaik irodalmi ösztöndíjasainak. A kialakulóban lévő kora újkori filozófiai diskurzus a politikai gondolkodásban és eszmetörténetben betöltött fontossága, hogy ne mondjam központi szerepe ellenére is hézagosan maradt meg a tudományosságban. A jelen kutatásban vizsgált két darab Shakespeare Hamletje és Ben Jonson Sejanus bukása című műve. Az Angliában és a kontinensen kialakuló politikai gondolkodással foglalkozva a két darab újraolvasása mellett fogok érvelni, ami csak az államérdek politikai diskurzusának fontosságának és központi szerepének elismerésével lehetséges. Ahogy munkám címe is jelzi, a darabok olvasása ezen a történelmileg tájékozott kritikai perspektíván keresztül lehetővé teszi egy új poetikai forma megértését, amelyet az irodalomtudomány sokáig margináliaként utasított el.

Jelen kutatásban elsődleges célom, hogy az állam tragédiájának poetikájának nevezett kérdéssel foglalkozzam, az államérdek kialakulóban lévő politikai diskurzusának fényében, amely utat nyit az államalakulás és a jogi szubjektum felé. Ennek során amellet fogok érvelni, hogy az Állam tragédiája elítéli az Állam észének új politikai diskurzusát, mint etikátlan és illegitim, és hogy az új politikai diskurzus színpadi megjelenítésében az Állam tragédiája a poétikát és a politikát egyesíti, hogy megteremtse saját - bár a bukás szélén álló - grammatikáját, amely egyszerre politikai, amennyiben az állam poetikáját kommentálja, és poétikai, amennyiben önreflexív módon kommentálja politikai színpadát. Az állam poetikája alatt az államnak azt a formáját, szerkezetét és grammatikáját értem, amelyet a kora újkori politikai gondolkodók vezettek be. Az állam formái, vagy másképpen fogalmazva az állam poetikája egyszerre volt nagyon központi és problematikus a kora újkori politikai filozófia számára, amint azt a jelen munka további részében be fogom mutatni. A színpadi politika azonban pusztán az állameszme színpadi diskurzusára és annak központi szerepére utal, ezért az állam tragédiája fogalom. Mivel az állam poetikája és a színpad politikája mellett érvelek, ebben a munkában az Állam tragédiája poetika fogalmát vezetem be, mivel a kettő összefügg egymással.

A kutatás a következő kérdésre keresi a választ: A Raison d'État színpadi megjelenítésében az Állami tragédia, és különösen a két vizsgált szöveg milyen szempontból vizsgálja az állam legitimitását a születőben lévő állapotában, tekintettel a kortárs politikai vitákra, a politikai gondolkodásra és az antik etatisme-elméletekre. A központi kérdés mellett egy másik, a kutatásom szempontjából központi kérdésre is szeretnék választ adni, mégpedig arra, hogy

mennyiben beszélhetünk Az állam tragédiájának poelitikájáról. Ez a kérdés semmiképpen sem reductív, és nem is törekszik egy "általános" kora újkori poelitika harmonizálására. A kutatás központi fogalmát, az Állam okát igyekszik színpadon és színpadon kívül, különösen a kora újkori Európában kialakulóban lévő fázisában kezelni és felismerni, és felhívni a figyelmet ennek a politikai jelenségnek a tudatosítására, amely nemcsak kezd kibontakozni, hanem változik és átmenetet jelent a politikai gondolkodás történetében. Ezért az Állami tragédia fogalmát nem az újdonság kedvéért terjesztem elő, hanem azért, hogy rávilágítsak egy olyan mintázatra a kora újkori tragédiákon belül, amellyel a kutatók eddig nem foglalkoztak.

Publications

Articles

- “Early Modern Political Thought: From Civil Reason to Reason of State.” *Festschrift in Honour of Professor Szőnyi*, edited by Kiss Attila, Ágnes Matuska, and Péter Róbert, 27–35. Szeged: University of Szeged, Institute of English and American Studies.
- “‘Free, equal lords of the triumphed world’ Cornelius Tacitus and George Buchanan in Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus His Fall*.” *The European Society for the Study of English Messenger*, vol. 30-2 Winter, 2022.
- “The Politics of Delay in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: Artistic or Political Failure.” *Futhark*, vol. 16, 2021.
- “‘The Rotten State of Denmark:’ The Discourse of Reason of State in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.” *Polish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 7.1, 2021.
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- *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power*, *Babel – AFIAL: Aspectos de Filología Inglesa e Alemá*, No. 30, 2021.
- *Essays on the Medieval Period and the Renaissance: Things New and Old*. *The European Society for the Study of English Messenger*, Vol. 30-1 Summer, 2021.