

# ***Hamlet* and Its Danish Double. The Historical Performance as Medium for a Utopian Monarchy**

## **A Crooked Mirror of the Local Political Realities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The first *Hamlet* production in Danish, performed 1813 at The Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen, went through substantial cuts and changes in the text. The re-cycling of sets from other performances were used in the production of *Hamlet* and turned the reworked version of *Hamlet* into a negotiation of the utopian heroic vision of the Danish monarchy, despite its painful bloody conflicts of power. It is my point, that this production of *Hamlet*, by the dramaturgical choices made, became, what I would determine as, a plain “theatricality” of the play and with the desire for a peaceful future without conflicts. The invisibility of Shakespeare’s “utopia” was transformed into an almost theatricalized “anti-utopia” or dystopia in this production with an affinity for melodrama. How seemingly strange and paradoxical this dramaturgy was, the production of the first Danish *Hamlet* paved the way for a historically very long stylized form of reality in its impact on the long nineteenth century Danish theatre history. The theatrical way of thinking, as embedded in Shakespeare’s play, was adopted into a theatre mentality where dreams would echo the idea of the Royal interest and taste, leaving an impression of conform aesthetics. The dramaturgical choices from 1813 lasted until the time when Henrik Ibsen’s naturalist plays would have their opening nights at the very same Royal Danish Theatre.

### **KEYWORDS**

Hamlet, The Royal Danish Theatre, utopia, dramaturgical reworking, self-censorship

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## **A Crooked Mirror of the Local Political Realities**

Collapses sometimes lead to utopian visions. It can be catastrophes in nature, like earthquakes or it can be human catastrophes in terms of ideological failures. The latter happened with consequences in the Royal Danish theatre at the threshold to the nineteenth century. The critical situation facing Denmark, culminating in 1813, can be regarded as a ghostly presence on the stage during the first Danish performance of *Hamlet* at the Royal Danish Theatre in May the same year. Through substantial cuts and changes in the text, and through the recycling of sets, the reworked version of *Hamlet* made a negotiation of the utopian heroic vision of the Danish monarchy, despite its painful bloody conflicts of power.

Peace and stability in life was the utmost utopia in Denmark in 1813, when the country faced various national and international disasters. This longing for peace, described by Immanuel Kant in *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795), resonates with the contextual situation in Denmark at the time of the first Danish production of *Hamlet*. Kant writes about peace that is not only meant for one nation, but universal and perpetual.<sup>1</sup> The wounds caused by the Napoleonic War had hardly healed yet, following the Battle of Copenhagen in 1802. Fires had resulted in diseases, the English had bombarded the city in 1807, and Denmark suffered bankruptcy in 1813. These events, combined with a conflict with neighbouring Norway, threatened the very existence of the Danish monarchy.<sup>2</sup>

Before the culmination of national crisis, festive theatre for many years had accompanied noticeable occasions such as royal birthdays and important events in the Kingdom. Chapters from the history of the national mythology would make the monarch shine in the light of stage productions as politically affirmative celebrations, concealing the utopian self-image of absolute monarchy.

The obvious result (and intention) of the adaptation of the 1813 *Hamlet* was an uncritical, retrospective, and patriotic narrative, which makes it difficult to present as “utopian”, understood as social dreaming. However, in this essay it is my point to emphasize that this production of *Hamlet*, due to the dramaturgical choices made, became, what I would determine as a plain “theatricality” of the play and with the desire for a peaceful future without conflicts. The invisibility of “utopia” involuntarily turned the aesthetic side of the production into a stylised dystopia. The theatrical way of thinking, as embedded in Shakespeare’s play,

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1 Drewes 2015, 49.

2 My publication “The First Danish Production of *Hamlet* (1813): A Theatrical Presentation of a National Crisis” emphasizes the more *political* sides of appropriating Shakespeare’s tragedy to a Danish context as an event. Kuhlmann 2022.

was transformed into a theatre mentality, where dreams would echo the idea of the Royal interest and taste, leaving an impression of conform aesthetics. Censorship in fact did not allow utopian expression, which, in turn, would make it less likely to find utopian statements in the theatre at all in Denmark in 1813.

This essay demonstrates a situated “paradox” that occurred when the stage director and previously successful actor and pedagogue Frederik Schwarz (1753-1838) became a pioneer in the introduction of both Shakespeare and of *Hamlet*.<sup>3</sup> To Schwarz, who at that time was sixty years old, the dramaturgical tool of the *mise en scène* was obviously crucial in negotiating both political and artistic censorship as well as turning the Royal Danish Theatre into a leading theatre of its day. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was the stage’s prominent performance, representing the rotten state of Denmark (in Shakespeare’s words). To milden those characteristics, backdrops with mythical settings and images of the history of Denmark were adapted for use in this production. In other words, this *Hamlet* production contained stage images from other productions, which provided a supporting narrative during the performance of the play.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, empirical material has been examined taken from the Danish National Archives (Rigsarkivet), from the archives at the Royal Library including the archives of the Royal Danish Theatre, Queen Margrethe II’s personal library, and The Royal Collection of Graphic Art (Kobberstiksamlingen). The approach has been dramaturgical in the sense that all available preparations involved in the production of *Hamlet* have been taken into analytical account. I have applied spectatorial analysis of drama to as much of this material as possible, in combination with the iconographical analysis of drafts of backdrops and drawings of costumes<sup>5</sup>.

### **Reception of the First Night**

In the Danish newspapers there are no reviews kept from this *Hamlet* production. However, there is a letter, written by the historian Chr. Molbech to Kamma Rahbek, at midnight on the 12th of May 1813, straight after the performance. Molbech vigorously describes his impressions from *Hamlet* at The Royal Danish Theatre. The performance was much better than Molbech had expected it to be. He wrote: “When I tell you that watching *Hamlet* tonight, I have far better and clearer understood the high unity in this poetic work, rather than by reading, and whose colossal ingenuity I have admired for such time. It has become clear to me (...) unfortunately that many scenes to me were pure pantomimes. (...). I know the endless theatricality in this play did not hinder me imagining, though a couple of times I discovered something nontheatrical, which I did not like (...).”<sup>6</sup>

What Molbech understood as theatrical or nontheatrical is not easy to grasp, but his impression still mentions the formal side of the production as something which would draw his attention.

### **Reworking Utopian Realities on Several Stages**

In a time with problematic political laws against theatre, and when censorship was a boundary for post-revolutionary voices from intellectuals and some poets in the era after the French revolution, Frederik Schwarz directed *Hamlet*, with an opening night on 12 May 1813, at the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen.

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3 Gösta M. Bergman describes Frederik Schwarz’ earlier career as pedagogue and eventually mentions that Knud Lyne Rahbek’s dramaturgical approach, inspired by Lessing, on how to rework a drama may have had a deeper impact on Schwarz’s work, Bergman 1952, 76-8. See also Jørgensen 1997, 172-80. Lisbet Jørgensen’s monograph on Frederik Schwarz provides many interesting details, but Schwarz’s work as both dramaturg and director on *Hamlet* is not mentioned.

4 See also Krogh 1932, 291.

5 Kuhlmann 2016, 141-53, Kallenbach & Kuhlmann 2019, 22-39.

6 Molbech, quoted in Rahbek, Dreyer & Molbech 1993, 109-10. My translation.

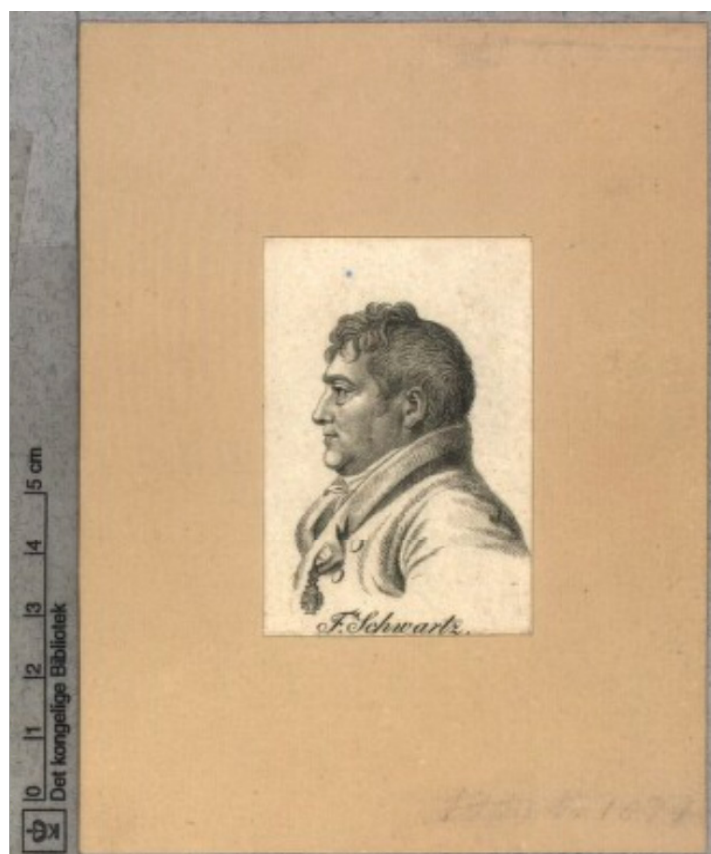


Figure 1: Frederik Schwarz (15.06.1753-13.07.1838).  
Actor, stage pedagogue, translator, and stage director.  
The Royal Library in Copenhagen.

The play was translated by the principal actor, Peter Thun Foersom (1777-1817), whom himself had the dream of playing Hamlet. As this essay will demonstrate, the first Danish *Hamlet* on the stage of the King's theatre would present a "utopian version" not only because of the revised Shakespearean play but also of the actual geopolitical situation of the Danish monarchy in the years just before 1813. The line from *Hamlet* "the time is out of joint" (I, 5) was removed in the Danish production, thereby literally adapting *Hamlet* to suit the current situation in the kingdom of Denmark. However, the reworking of the play was dramaturgically speaking so massive, that it is a wonder as to how this version could survive up to the mid-1880s.

There had previously been an attempt to introduce Shakespeare in Danish, since Johannes Boye (1756-1830), a student of philology, published his translation of *Hamlet* in 1777. This version was never put on stage and is regarded as a literary translation.<sup>7</sup> I shall not discuss Boye's version in any more detail at this point.

Foersom, who knew English well, had his translation of *Hamlet* published in several editions before it became part of the first volume out of nine called *Shakespeares tragiske Værker*.<sup>8</sup> The first volume contained both *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*, and this version was used for the dramaturgical reworking for the staging of *Hamlet* at the Royal Danish Theatre, incorporating minor linguistic adjustments in the 1811 edition.<sup>9</sup>

7 Shakespeare 1777.

8 Shakespeare 1807c.

9 Quite a few scholars have touched upon certain aspects they found interesting. Some study linguistic issues, whereas others focus on literary studies. It is worth mentioning the following, who have worked on Shakespeare in Denmark, and also on *Hamlet* as a historical source for Danish theatre: Høy 1971, Ruud 1918, 1920, Latham 1872, Rose 1877, Schwanenflügel 1884, Rubow 1950, 1939, Bergsøe 1950, Rubow



Figure 2: Peter Foersom (20.02.1777-24.01.1817). Actor and translator of Shakespeare's plays. Litographer: Heuer, Wilhelm Heinrich Moritz. The Royal Library in Copenhagen.

This performance of *Hamlet* is an extraordinary case. The sources, preserved primarily in the Royal Library and the National Archives in Copenhagen, are unique. In the preface to the published play, Foersom adds that he translated it from a version published in London in 1798, based on Steevens' Text, and adjusted to Malone's version.<sup>10</sup>

Schwarz gained inspiration from significant travels to Paris in 1775 and especially to Hamburg in 1786 and 1788, where he was impressed by both the artistic and the organisational level of the work, conducted by Friedrich Ludwig Schröder. Schwarz later translated several of the plays he saw in Hamburg for the Royal Danish Theatre. The impression from this visit strengthened Schwarz's work during the first decade of the nineteenth century until the production of *Hamlet*, revealing that we may need to redefine the history of the professional theatre director to involve his more dramaturgical approaches in the reworking of the play. According to André Veinstein, the very notion of the theatre director is considered only to become a reality in 1820 as referring to the person responsible for *mise en scène*, or staging a production (literally derived from "*mise en place*": "placing on stage").<sup>11</sup> By Schwarz's practices, inspired by the travels he made, we may understand that he became a pioneer in combining dramaturgical skills and directing into a profession.

### **Political Collapse**

In 1813, the political situation in Denmark was highly dramatic. The then absolute monarchy, which had been taken over by King Frederik VI (1768-1839) in 1808, was a power in its own right. However, the king's power had met continuous challenges from political and military

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1951, Krogh 1964, Anker 1971, Theil 2011, Kuhlmann 2006, 2022.

10 Shakespeare 1807b.

11 Veinstein 1955, 9.

forces, which had threatened the monarchy and the territories belonging to the Danish Crown since the beginning of the nineteenth century. One of the roots of this crisis lay in Denmark's problematic involvement in Napoleon Bonaparte's wars. The position, favouring the relationship with the French, led to a conflict with England and resulted in the Battle of Copenhagen in 1802 (Danish: Slaget på Reden), which was followed by a series of devastating attacks on the city of Copenhagen itself.<sup>12</sup>

The problems began years before in 1772 after the arrest and execution of the German count Johann Friedrich Struensee (1737-1772). Struensee had informally conquered governmental power as if he were the king, achieving a large number of reforms inspired by the ideals of the French Enlightenment. Struensee, who was the physician to King Christian VII (1749-1808), the mentally ill father of Frederik VI, had also conquered the heart of Queen Caroline Mathilde (1751-1775). One result of this foreign affair was the birth of Princess Louise Augusta (1771-1843), to whom Peter Foersom dedicated his translation of *Hamlet* with a poem. This dedication reflected a textual portrait of the King's sibling, written in three couplets, addressing the princess, who was only six years older than Foersom.

As the production of *Hamlet* in 1813 was based on a simplified version of Shakespeare's original play, in which the complexity of the theatrical composition of *Hamlet* to a wide extent was lost, the subtle connection between themes, space and metaphors would not allow the audience to identify the symbols and possible references of the original play.

This combination of foreign ideas of freedom and the indiscreet nature of a forbidden love resulted in King Christian VII and his ministers imprisoning Struensee and executing him following a public, open-air trial at Øster Fælled (East Common) in Copenhagen on 28 April 1772. Caroline Mathilde was exiled to Celle in Germany, and the one-year-old "petite Struensee" Louise Augusta was raised together with the four-year-old crown prince Frederik by the widowed Queen Juliane Marie (1729-1796), mother of King Christian VII. In 1784, at the age of sixteen, the young crown prince Frederik carried out a coup against his father, the King, announcing that all royal declarations should bear only his name and signature. Unofficially, this meant that Frederik took over the crown from his sick father twenty-four years before his death. His father remained like a ghost. Shakespeare's works must have been present in the King's cultural horizon since I found a printed version of *Hamlet* from the J. E. J. Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, published 29 September 1796, in Her Majesty the Queen, Margrethe II's library. There are no cuts in this album. All characters are present, but we may not exclude that the heroic side of the images in this album had an impact on the romantic interpretation of *Hamlet* at The Royal Danish Theatre.

The political spirit of the times became apparent among educated circles. Numerous controversies in the capital, for example revolutionary thoughts among some Norwegian intellectuals and poets were a disturbing factor for the monarchy.<sup>13</sup> The regional mayor (stiftamtmand) Frederik Moltke wrote in spring 1790: "The only question is how close we are to a revolution. That Norway's bold sons are aware of the progress of freedom in Europe and watch for the moment when they can obtain new advantages, and that they are more drawn to them than ever, seems to me evident."<sup>14</sup> In other words, Danish society was not a monarchy in which everybody agreed about anything. There were different voices, but these voices were not shared in the historical canonisation and historiography. Wars and conflicts had destabilised the situation, making the bankruptcy of the Danish state inevitable. King Frederik VI was cautious about the effects that this instability would have on theatre audiences. An episode at the Royal Danish Theatre has shown that the minister of justice accompanied with armed soldiers would intervene between "whistlers" and "applauders" in the audience to stop their "participatory" behaviour in relationship to a production with Foersom in the main part.<sup>15</sup>

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12 According to Kristian Smidt, professor in English literature at Oslo University 1955-1985, "some of Foersom's manuscripts were destroyed by fire during the British bombardment, and the publication of his second volume of Shakespeare translations was delayed until 1811 due to shortage of paper and lack of workmen." Smidt 1993, 98.

13 Idsø Viken 2011, 344.

14 Barton 1986, 181.

15 Overskou 1891, 384-6.

Such an experience, reflecting absolutism as a very concrete concept in the theatre space, had apparently an effect on the way that Schwarz would be prepared to address the situation. The establishment could be extremely possessive and powerful when it came to social and moral issues at the Royal Danish Theatre. However, the turbulence in the audience was not only a revolt against social norms, it was also a revolt against a steadily weaker aesthetic profile of the theatre's repertoire, which was characterized by light comedies by Dibdin, Kotzebue, and others.<sup>16</sup> Foersom and Schwarz were both engaged as translators of many of the plays in the contemporary repertory, so one can understand that they were concerned with the dramaturgical suitable solutions.

The historical background is described above because these events and episodes combined to create a context of disturbance and unruliness in which the Danish monarchy faced a "time out of joint". There was a constant threat to the monarchy, which actually did collapse only a few months before the opening night of *Hamlet* at the Royal Danish Theatre when the entire kingdom was declared bankrupt shortly after the peace treaty at Kiel in Schleswig-Holstein.

### **An Operational Utopia From the Stage**

From his childhood, young prince Frederik had been forced to go to the theatre once a week, and on his birthday, 28 January, a huge programme was performed for him from the stage of the Royal Theatre. This programme contained ingredients from the royal and historically supportive repertoire of the theatre. The entire show would then be repeated with more or less the same performances the day after, on 29 January (King Christian VII's birthday), and sometimes even on the following day. The consequence was that two important royal birthdays in a row would place the theatre's dramaturgical decisions under heavy pressure. The fact that art was subject to censorship at this time makes it relevant to consider changes in the way how the play was performed. The theatre felt compelled to avoid any criticism of the King or Danish society, and as a result, the performance of *Hamlet* can be regarded as presenting a supportive narrative, approaching the "utopia" already existing and thus to suit the political realities applying in Denmark in the early nineteenth century.

King Frederik VI, who must have been a trained spectator, would not allow any production containing any criticism of the situation in the kingdom. However, as we shall see, the above-mentioned personal, political, and artistic challenges to the narrative of the monarchy echoed the story about young Hamlet, whose mother had also taken a new husband, and whose monarchy threatened Fortinbras, prince of Norway. The obvious mirroring effect in Shakespeare's play must have been a potential considerable danger for Frederik Schwarz in directing *Hamlet* under complicated conditions and in front of the principal spectator, King Frederik VI, who was in effect the absolute owner of and decision maker at the Royal Danish Theatre at that time.<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare's *Hamlet* does not seem like the most evident choice for the repertory of the theatre.

When the decision was made to translate *Hamlet* for the stage, the theatre was already hesitant about staging Foersom's earlier translation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The director of the Royal Danish Theatre, Jørgen Kierulf (1757-1810), thought that the plot of *Julius Caesar* bore an excessive resemblance to the political situation in Denmark at the time.

Nevertheless, the artistic management was aware that the royal actor, Peter Foersom was very interested in having Shakespeare's plays translated into Danish, probably also because he himself wanted to have a substantial part to play. The theatre historian, Thomas Overskou (1798-1873), who was also an actor and a playwright, wrote about his first impressions of *Hamlet* in *Den Danske Skueplads i dens Historie* (the Danish Theatre in its History): "(...) it was assumed that this Shakespearean tragedy would interest the audience more than any other play because the material was taken from Saxo and set in Denmark, and because it was acceptable to perform most of the minor roles tolerably well as long as the main actor played his role convincingly. And this was something that Foersom could be expected to do

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<sup>16</sup> Dibdin 1809. Kotzebue 1810. Kotzebue & Schwarz 1790, 1798.

<sup>17</sup> In account books from the archives of The Royal Danish Theatre, it is clear that the King signed the budget and financial documents.

– after all, he had no higher artistic ambition than to play Hamlet, even though he only did this once.”<sup>18</sup>

The theatre’s material resources for use in performing the play were very modest, due to the financial crisis; but its moral standing could be used to help rebuild the nation and its national myth. Retrospectively, it is evident that the theatre’s repertoire changed fairly soon after Foersom’s few years of playing Hamlet. Foersom only played in *Hamlet* a few times: twice in 1813, once in 1814, and only nine times in all before he died on 24 January 1817. *Hamlet* was only staged again in 1826, but Foersom’s translation continued to be used until the season 1887-1888. All in all, only very few *Hamlet* performances were shown during these sixty years. Instead, light comedies took more and more over, chosen by the new management at the theatre, which was run by the playwright and literary historian Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860). In 1825, Heiberg introduced the *vaudeville*, and shortly afterwards he wrote *Elves’ Hill* (1828), which became the most popular national play staging the myth about the power of the royal family in Denmark.<sup>19</sup>

On this dramatic background, Shakespeare’s tragedy undoubtedly seemed to depict the contemporary reality of the Danish throne as a utopian vision, since main features in the plot could be recognised by the contemporary audience. The play and the characteristic Shakespearean embedded spectatorship were a structural challenge to direct and put on stage without reworking the play in a dramaturgical way to make it acceptable. This situation is reminiscent of the productive *feedback loop* between stage and audience. However, it would also threaten the control over the performance situation, so that such an interaction became a risk zone.

The problem was solved by removing all the problematic fragments, scenes and objects from the play, making it reminiscent of the kind of medieval story that was frequently staged during celebrations of the royal family. Medievalism became a useful tool for the theatre, because some of the most popular and frequent performances were based on narratives and imageries from Danish medieval history. A few new costumes were acquired, a skull, some bones made out of twigs and a few wings were painted, five of which represented tumuli. The wings, framing the backdrops from older performances, would visually set the very production of *Hamlet* in not only a technically complicated mixture but also a style as if representing the motives from the familiar backdrops in a heavenly frame. Thomas Overskou wrote: “The first performance demonstrated that great care had been taken to give the strange play a worthy stage without great expense. This was done by repairing the best and most suitable older decorations and acquiring new costumes for all the principal characters, all according to Foersom’s instructions and precisely arranged groups of extras. And this would have been entirely satisfactory if all the changes of set decoration using modest machinery had not caused a couple of interruptions – although these were insignificant and did not disturb the dialogue. The artistic performance was not nearly as successful.”<sup>20</sup> The inventory shows that settings were used from *Herman von Unna*, as well as the lord lieutenant and the queen’s room from *Dyveke*, and a room from *Niels Ebbesen*.<sup>21</sup> These three plays were the most popular plays on the stage at that time, often performed to celebrate royal birthdays. In the following, I shall explain, how the national mythology references from the backdrops became artistic elements in building a prominent example of staged utopia.

### National Mythology as Staged Utopia

The three performances referred to here, *Herman von Unna*, *Dyveke* and *Niels Ebbesen*, were independent relatively new productions in their own right. However, since backdrops from significant scenes in these three productions were reused in the production of *Hamlet*, they shaped a cognitive resonance in the mind of the audience, who would recognise the plays to which these settings belonged.

The audiences watching *Hamlet* were situated in yet another context: their own realities in

18 Overskou 1854, IV, 278. My translation.

19 See also Müller-Wille 2012, 67-94.

20 Overskou 1891, IV, 278.

21 Henriques 1948, 69.



Copenhagen in 1813. The contents of *Dyveke* and *Niels Ebbesen* each referred to different iconic chapters from Danish medieval national mythology. The symbols of these narratives and historiographical references constituted a visual diegetic subscore to the performance of *Hamlet*. Due to the backdrop images and the reworking of the play, this production of *Hamlet* was undoubtedly seeking to preserve a specific royal understanding of the utopian narrative of the Danish monarchy at that time. Naturally, many of the changes may have been coincidences, but it is as if an almost staged sense of timing occurred.

### **Herman von Unna**

The Swedish count and statesman Anders Fredrik Skjöldebrand (1757-1834) wrote the play *Herman(n) von Unna*.<sup>22</sup> (1800; first performance in Denmark 30 January 1800).<sup>23</sup> The backdrop of *Herman von Unna* speaks mostly indirectly to the audience of the history of power and defeat with an allusion to *Hamlet*, since the content did not have any relation to Danish national mythology. However, the production became the most expensive, full of pomp, and it was one of Frederik VI's favourite performances, presumably due to the fact that it was very rich and had expensive decorations. This production seems to have unified artists and traits from Sweden, Bohemia, Germany, Vienna, and Venice, so it contained a sort of international grandeur.

The musical score for the performance was by the German court composer Georg Joseph (Abbé) Vogler (1749-1814)<sup>24</sup>. Vogler's music for *Herman von Unna* was compared to fragments in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1791), a music, which Vogler knew. Dances were arranged by the Venetian-born ballet master, Vincenzo Galeotti (Tomasselli) (1733-1816). Since 1775, Galeotti was based in Copenhagen, where he would spend the rest of his career and life. The drama in five acts was translated by Thomas Thaarup, and a repertory list produced by the violin player Jens Peter Hansen, from the Royal Theatre, reveals that the performance had a duration of four hours and ten minutes.<sup>25</sup> Thaarup had obtained a leading position in the administration of the Royal Danish Theatre as result of his translations of opera libretti. He also wrote very patriotic lyrical plays referring not only to royal celebrations, but also to soldiers recovering from the Battle of Copenhagen. The performance became so popular among audiences, that it created turbulent situations outside the theatre building with gatherings of larger crowds of people. The director of *Herman von Unna* was again Frederik Schwarz (who later directed *Hamlet*). The theatre's accounts reveal that Frederik Schwarz received an extraordinarily high salary (300 rigsdaler). *Herman von Unna* generated the highest income for the theatre (523.1 rigsdaler).<sup>26</sup>

### **Dyveke**

The Danish poet and biographer, Ole Johan Samsøe (1759-1796), wrote the tragedy *Dyveke* in five acts (1795; first performance, 30 January 1796).<sup>27</sup> The play was entitled *Dyveke* after King Christian II's mistress, Dyveke Sigbritsdatter, (1490-1517). This topic had a Norwegian implication since Dyveke's mother, Sigbrit, who was a Dutch merchant living in Bergen, where Christian II met Dyveke and invited her to follow him, gave a great deal of advice to the monarch, something which was not popular among the noble class. According to the

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22 Naubert, Øst, and Sköldebrand 1802.

23 This play, created for choir and ballet as well as containing written dialogue, is actually an adaptation of a similarly entitled novel (1789), written by German author Benedikte Naubert (1752-1819), a fact which has not been mentioned directly in contemporary Danish sources as far as I can see. *Herman von Unna* is about a series of heroic adventures, set in the fifteenth century, in Bohemia, in which the proceedings of a secret tribunal, under the emperors Wenceslaus and Sigismund, were revealed regarding the natural or secret reason for the death of an emperor, see also Kela Kvam's essay, in which she has stressed the horror dimension of the play. Kvam 1967, 35-58.

24 Vogler 1800.

25 Hansen 1827.

26 The "rigsdaler" was a currency which changed between the state bankruptcy in 1813 and the monetary reform in 1873, when "kroners" became the currency. It is difficult to compare the value of Frederik Schwarz's salary across different lives and cultures, but it is most likely that it was relatively high.

27 Samsøe & Rahbek 1796.

legend, Dyveke died after eating a poisoned cherry. This episode might look like a parallel to the poisoning of Queen Gertrude in *Hamlet*, but the entire story about a mother determining the future king's power was also a parallel to the narrative of *Hamlet*. Documents show that the famous backdrop, called "Capinet" by the theatre painter Thomas Bruun, was used in *Dyveke* as the queen's room.<sup>28</sup> The meaning from using the "Capinet" as the queen's space was thus adapted as backdrop for the *Hamlet* production as well.

Samsøe's version was performed for the first time at the king's birthday celebration on 30 January 1796, unfortunately without Samsøe himself, as he died just one week before on 24 January 1796.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 3: Hall, begun by Peter Cramer, coloured by Th. Bruun, 1785. KKS2012-51. Et kabinet, 1785. Peter Cramer, Thomas Bruun | SMK Open.

### Niels Ebbesen

Settings in *Hamlet* were also recycled from Christian Levin Sander's *Niels Ebbesen af Nørreriis eller Danmarks Befrielse* (1797) (Niels Ebbesen from Nørreriis or Denmark's liberation).<sup>30</sup> *Niels Ebbesen af Nørreriis eller Danmarks Befrielse* had its first performance on 31 January 1796, staged by Frederik Schwarz. The play is about a historical figure and Danish nobleman, Niels Ebbesen (1308–40), who killed Gerhard III, count of Holstein, the ruler of Jutland, 1332–1340, when the monarchy was in a state of emergency because there was no Danish monarch.

This narrative was yet another symbolic national reference to the conflict inside *Hamlet*, as if pointing to a latent threat in the current political situation in the spring of 1813. The late eighteenth-century version of *Niels Ebbesen* became very popular, presumably because the nationalistic slant seemed relevant during the culmination of the Napoleonic war.

28 Niels Peder Jørgensen was the research librarian at the Royal Danish Theatre for more than forty years. His most detailed analytical research on the "Capinet" has provided me with a lot of useful information. Jørgensen 2011, 137.

29 The story of Dyveke has inspired many composers and writers. Samsøe's version of *Dyveke* was performed for the last time on 8 April 1968 at Klassisk Studiescene, according to Knud Hegermann-Lindencrones Båndarkiv. [https://soeg.kb.dk/discovery/delivery/45KBDK\\_KGL:KGL/122144772940005763](https://soeg.kb.dk/discovery/delivery/45KBDK_KGL:KGL/122144772940005763) (10.2.2022).

30 Sander 1798.

Two out of the three performances, draw on legends based on historical figures and materials, and they had the status of historical chronicles, making them more adaptable in relation to the nature of the material in *Hamlet*. Frederik Schwarz was also involved as a stage director of the three plays, so he must have had an opinion about using the backdrops for the three performances to celebrate royal birthdays (both the ill King and the Crown Prince, who had long ago taken over the position of the monarch). With such a performance history, it seems likely that the backdrops used in the three above-mentioned performances were regarded as suitable in the production of *Hamlet* (1813). The financial situation facing both the Danish state and the Royal Theatre was so bad that it was undoubtedly useful to recycle the settings from a financial perspective. It was also general practice to do so, and some of the backdrops probably also conveyed a standardised meaning similar to that of stock characters, which were basically like masks.

If we accept that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* mirrored the polemical political situation in Denmark at the time, the director's reworking of the Shakespearean play becomes particularly interesting. It is important to recall that in 1799, the so-called Trykkefrihedsforordningen (an ordinance concerning the freedom of press) had reintroduced strong censorship in Denmark. This meant that no allegorical criticism of the monarchy was allowed in terms of either form or content either written or performed. Consequently, without self-censorship, Frederik Schwarz's directing of the play *Hamlet* could have resulted in a *mise en abyme* – or to use Shakespeare's own words – he would have caught the King's spectatorship in "a mouse trap".

In the following, I shall give some examples of the ways in which Frederik Schwarz's cuts in the text can be interpreted as presenting a utopian political version of the play. I divide these examples into three categories: political utopia, the utopia of revenge, and finally art as utopia.

### **The Drama of Political Utopia**

Peter Foersom's 1807 translation of *Hamlet* was given as a present to Frederik Schwarz, who signed the book as "Knight, Instructeur Schwarz" on 16 May 1812. This date is almost exactly one year before the opening night, which means that Schwarz, as well as book lovers in the city, had access to this text in good time before the production, which in the end only had two and a half days of rehearsals. Schwarz's copy of *Hamlet* contains the director's visible cuts, making it possible to see which lines were omitted for the production in question. The Norwegian Prince Fortinbras has been cut out, as well as Voltimand and Cornelius and the Gesandt (Ambassador). Furthermore, any allusions to state instability have been removed. A good deal of Act I, scene 1 is shown below, with Schwarz's first cuts underlining my thesis that a specific "vulnerable" part of the dialogue has been omitted when Horatio gives his initial interpretation of the impact of the Ghost's appearance. I have marked the problematic words, which were probably removed as an act of self-censorship<sup>31</sup>:

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31 See online edition of Folger Shakespeare Library <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/hamlet/> (12.2.2022).

HORATIO

In what particular thought to work I know not,  
But in the gross and scope of mine opinion  
This bodes **some strange eruption to our state**. 80

MARCELLUS

Good now, sit down, and tell me, **he that knows**,  
Why this same strict and **most observant watch**  
So nightly toils the subject of the land,  
And why such daily cast of brazen cannon  
And foreign mart for **implements of war**,  
85  
Why such **impress of shipwrights**, whose  
sore task  
Does not divide the Sunday from the week.  
What might be toward that this sweaty haste  
Doth make the night joint laborer with the day?  
**Who is't that can inform me?** 90

HORATIO

That can I.  
At least the whisper goes so: **our last king**,  
**Whose image even but now appeared to us**,  
Was, as you know, by **Fortinbras of Norway**,  
Thereto pricked on by a most emulate  
pride, 95  
**Dared to the combat**; in which our valiant  
Hamlet  
(For so this side of our known world  
esteemed him)  
**Did slay this Fortinbras, who by a sealed compact**,  
**Well ratified by law and heraldry**,  
**Did forfeit, with his life**, all those his lands  
100  
Which he stood seized of, to the  
conqueror.  
Against the which a moiety competent  
Was gaged by our king, which had  
returned  
**To the inheritance of Fortinbras**

**Had he been vanquisher**, as, by the same  
comart 105  
And carriage of the article designed,  
**His fell to Hamlet**. Now, sir, young  
Fortinbras,  
Of unimprovèd mettle hot and full,  
**Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there**  
Sharked up **a list of lawless resolute** 110  
**For food and diet to some enterprise**  
That hath a stomach in't; which is no  
other  
(As it **doth well appear unto our state**)  
But to recover of us, **by strong hand**  
And terms compulsory, those foresaid  
lands 115  
So by his father lost. And this, I take it,  
**Is the main motive of our preparations**,  
The source of **this our watch, and the chief head**  
Of this posthaste and rummage in the  
land.

BARNARDO

I think it be no other but e'en so. 120  
Well may it sort that this portentous figure  
**Comes armèd through our watch so like the king**  
**That was and is the question of these wars**.

This example of the director's reworking of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with the purpose of adjusting the text to present a utopian and suitable image of Denmark would stress and affirm that the Danish monarchy was peaceful and that there were no conflicts inside the King's own family or with the surrounding world, certainly not with Norway, England, or France. This means that the director's cut immediately resonates within the political self-images of realities of the times, where a severe degree of censorship would also judge what should remain unsaid. Absent words became highly significant, almost as if they were pronounced by the Ghost, who later appeared though. The absent fragments are still present in the archival sources, and thus speak to us now like a shadow under which the monarchy was trying to find its way with a view to surviving the inner and outer threats and disasters.

Even before the first Danish production of *Hamlet*, the play was regarded as a shining example of the way in which Danes understood their own history. The administrative management of the theatre, and not least the at that time already influential poet and playwright, Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger (1779-1859), was interested in promoting not only Shakespeare but *Hamlet* in particular. The fact that the material for *Hamlet* was taken from Saxo Grammaticus' story *Gesta Danorum* (Deeds of the Danes) about Amleth would support the interest of performing Denmark as a solid narrative at a time when the kingdom was almost falling apart.

Furthermore, Oehlenschläger, a few years later, translated *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1816), and much later wrote a version of *Hamlet*, namely *Amleth* (1846). Some of Oehlenschläger's most famous plays during the years, when Foersom was working on his *Hamlet* translation, were *Hakon Jarl hin Riige* (1807), *Palnatoke* (1809) *Axel og Valborg* (1810) and *Hagbarth og Sine* (1815).<sup>32</sup> Oehlenschläger drew on Nordic mythology, taking up the tradition which the poet and playwright, Johannes Ewald (1743-1781), had begun earlier. Thus, Oehlenschläger became an influential supporter of the idea about introducing *Hamlet* to the Copenhagen audience, although he had also some reservations about the artistic capacity of the actors, since tragedies had not been in the repertory for quite some years.

### **Revenge as Utopia**

In connection to the Ghost's appearance in the opening scene of *Hamlet*, the subtle sign of revenge is noted already by Shakespeare's few stage directions when the text says: (*the cock crows*) (v. 150) immediately after Horatio has finished his long monologue by asking the Ghost to speak. This situation has often been referred to as a sign of destiny. In the Danish production of *Hamlet*, this sign of revenge has been removed. The absent sign obtains the effect that the Ghost does not carry any danger into the world of realities. Consequently, the theatre audience in 1813 would not see the Ghost as anything more than an example of superstition portrayed on stage. The Ghost may have been removed because it was controversial: in 1813, ghosts were discussed seriously in the newspapers as real phenomena and part of daily life.

The situation between Denmark and Norway was becoming problematic in 1813 because Norway wanted to become independent from the Danish monarchy – like Sweden many years previously. Consequently, any mention of Norway in a tragedy about the Danish prince, which drew on historical chronicles, would simply be too risky.

Polonius' monologue has also been removed, beginning: "Yet here, Laertes? Aboard, aboard, for shame!" (I, 3: 60-87)<sup>33</sup> Polonius is a double character. On the one hand, he is a political official whose political obligation frequently turns his language into something resembling nonsense. On the other hand, Polonius is also a father advising his son, Laertes, about going to France. Both sides of Polonius are problematic in the Danish context of the early nineteenth century. However, the reworking of *Hamlet* mutes Polonius and lets the absent words speak "louder than words". This becomes almost a political action in itself, adapting the play to suit a Danish context in 1813.

### **Theatre as Utopia**

In *Hamlet*, the presentation of *The Murder of Gonzago* or *The Mousetrap* has always been a

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<sup>32</sup> Adam Oehlenschläger's *Hakon Jarl hin Riige* (1807) took up the Nordic mythology about Hakon, who was earl to King Harald Bluetooth (937-995). *Hakon Jarl hin Riige* thus also draws on the "Norwegian topic".

<sup>33</sup> In Schwarz's copy of the Danish translation Shakespeare 1807a, 32-3.

very interesting test of what and how a *Hamlet* performance may communicate to a specific audience. This communication of a play-within-a-play interweaves structurally with the other fictional layers that I have unfolded. Dramaturgically speaking, once you remove passages from one level there is a risk that this will have an impact on the communication of the other levels of fiction. In the case of *Hamlet* (1813), several lines have been removed from the fictional level about *theatre*, starting with the absence of Hamlet's comments to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about children who may become actors when they grow older and more mature. (II, 2: 357-384).<sup>34</sup> In the case of the children, perhaps, this removal has something to do with Schwarz's earlier personal teaching experience as a pedagogue at the theatre, where several child ballet dancers learned to become actors – a trajectory he himself had followed as a child.

In Act II, sc. 2, Hamlet's advice to the players has been removed. This advice has the impact that the play-within-the-play eventually is presented in a style, distinguishable from the style used in the other fictional levels. This would mean that the consciousness which Hamlet transmits to the players about acting would also set off some level of consciousness or at least some reflection in the embedded audience, as well as in the audience at the Royal Danish Theatre. (II, 2: 1-47)<sup>35</sup> The actors playing the dumb show might have resulted in a disapproval from the royal spectators, as it would potentially represent a threat to the monarchy and a degree of artistic freedom, which King Frederik VI would not accept. The artistic interpretation, embedded in Hamlet's message to the actors, contained in the play within the play, could thus become a problem for the monarchy.

Lines on smells or senses have also been removed.<sup>36</sup> This may have been done owing to the prevalence of certain smells in Copenhagen at that time, when so much damage had been done to the city by the bombardments. The mirroring would simply become too close to the political realities in society.

Later, every mention of England has been deleted, presumably owing to problems relating to foreign affairs with England and other neighbouring countries. Again, the hot topic of borders of the monarchy become invisible.

In the director's cut, it is evident that Frederik Schwarz carefully avoided any polemical lines that might disturb the critical political situation facing the Danish monarchy at that time.

However, there is another copy of the play, printed in another edition from 1811. In this version, it is apparent that the book belonged to the actor Hr. Liebe, who played Laertes in the very first production. Liebe had received the book from the director in April 1813, one month before the opening of *Hamlet* production.<sup>37</sup> The handwritten added actors' names accompanying the list of the dramatis personae all correspond to the cast for the first *Hamlet* performance in Denmark. Of course, we cannot be sure that they have not been added post factum, but it seems to me that the different handwriting and names clearly correspond to different casts of the same *Hamlet* production.

The fact that there is some uncertainty about the individuals to whom the added handwritten notes in the text refer, makes it less certain that they refer to the very same context production, which Schwarz directed. However, it is clear, that this version of Foersom's translation of *Hamlet* was used until very late in the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup>

It is interesting that this version of *Hamlet* has only been used by male actors (mainly Laertes and Marcellus) from the first performance and onwards. One example underlining this fact becomes particularly interesting when we examine how these cuts work. I would like to end

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34 Shakespeare 1807a, 70-81.

35 Shakespeare 1807a, 104-7.

36 Shakespeare 1807a, 138.

37 Foersom's translation of *Hamlet* (1811) was later used by other actors until rather late in the nineteenth century. The names of Hr. Holst, Seeman (1 September 1826) (Laertes), Liebe (Marcellus) and Hr. Nyrop all occur on 18 May 1872. According to Aumont and Collin's statistical account of theatre performances at the Royal Danish Theatre during the years 1748-1889, not all the actors mentioned in this edition of the translation actually performed in *Hamlet*, and the dates are not all correct if we assume that Aumont and Collin's detailed work is correct. Shakespeare 1811.

38 Edvard Lembcke (1815-1897) translated Shakespeare's works into Danish. However, Lembcke's first attempts were reworkings of Foersom's translations beginning in 1861.

this essay by presenting a few examples. The first cut in this edition from 1811 is after the first line where Bernardo says: "Who's there?" a substantial section of the text is cut and the answer following the initial question is now: "Horatio: Friends to this ground." The actors did not want to create an enemy out of the image of the ghost. The abstract appearance, which resembles Hamlet's dead father, is deleted in this passage, and thus not meant for the characters to realize in that part of the play. The actors wanted the opening of *Hamlet* to be friendly, and not to create problems.

On another level, in the actual political context, such a reworking of the text seems to ignore the political realities. So, this example shows a radical dramaturgical consequence: Not only has the Ghost as a point of attack of the tragedy been reduced to a minimum, but the insecurity of the presence of the Ghost as a wandering shadow from the past no longer has any significance. The deadly revenge, which should end the whole tragedy is therefore different, and opens for a brighter future.

For a similar reason, perhaps, the line "there is something rotten in the state of Denmark" between Marcellus and Horatio has been removed (I, 4: 100)<sup>39</sup>. This line was opted out for both political and dramaturgical reasons.

For similar consequential dramaturgical reasons, the line about Denmark being a prison has also been cut.<sup>40</sup>

Other cuts merely concern erotic sides of the play like Hamlet flirting with Ophelia or with his mother. Social or religious relationships like marriage are also absent: they have been cut without giving any clear indications about the reasons apart from the fact that the political context in Denmark was subject to pietistic power. This may have had a moral impact on what could be presented on the stage.

## **Conclusions**

This essay has demonstrated that the images from the backdrops and dramaturgical situations and narratives in *Herman von Unna*, *Dyveke*, and *Niels Ebbesen* must have been well known to the audience, since the performances in which the decorations were originally used were very popular judging from the large number of times they were shown in the immediate temporal context. Knowledge stemming from these productions and the experience of having seen them formed a cultural horizon in audiences before they saw *Hamlet*. The backdrops did not only represent typical situations from the performances to which they originally belonged but, as I have shown, the backdrops re-used for *Hamlet* carried meanings that would direct the enunciation of *Hamlet* into a manipulating political version. The political utopia in Denmark and all the catastrophes was reflected in Frederik Schwarz's staging of the play. The perception might depend on each individual present in the audience, but there is a striking collection of collective myths in the play, connected to the backdrops from the three productions. These myths come from Danish medieval history and carry particular narratives whose aim was to strengthen the patriotic mood of the audience. The theatrical complexity of the content in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was reduced by turning the imageries to illustrative narrative, as the art historian Haavard Rostrup has pointed out: "Slagfærdighed og Humor, naiv Sentimentalitet og en vis kæk og blond Troskyldighed i Udtryk".<sup>41</sup> Would a similar naïve sentimentality have echoed in the audience watching *Hamlet* productions in Peter Foersom's translation? Would the audience, who had read *Hamlet*, understand Schwarz's dramaturgical reworking of the play? And would the audience understand the dramaturgical choices in a geopolitical context? These questions remain in spite of the fact that we do now know a large part of the dramaturgically arranged material components, which makes it plausible to see the staged utopia resonate with the audience in 1813.

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39 Shakespeare 1811, 41.

40 Shakespeare 1811, 73-5.

41 "Wit and humour, naive sentimentality, and a certain cheeky and blond innocence of expression." Rostrup 1932, 438. My translation.

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