

Hamlet, Parents and Death: Family Cartography on Shakespeare's Stage

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Abstract: *This essay explores why the combination of cartography and drama is so important on the early modern English stage in the age of the “new geography” that emerged in this period. Using poststructuralist theories that conceptualize maps as performances rather than passive representations, I argue for a more dynamic understanding of mapmaking and maps as they are represented in the theatrical reconfiguration of families in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. I contend that characters attempt to “map” their immediate surroundings by leading influential social actors in a series of ritualized performances, similar to mapmaking practices. In so doing, they aim to reduce the complexities of their lived experiences to a cartographic canvas that reflects their authority and power. My argument subscribes to the notion that family mappings in Hamlet can alter perceptions of power and space. I argue that by staging mapmaking as a performative process subject to the changes of influential social actors, Shakespeare’s play challenges the idea of authenticity that was increasingly attributed to the new geography in the early modern period. Theatrical maps that outline family dynamics in Hamlet are similar to—yet different from—the popular cartography extant in early modern England. While maps are visual abstractions of landscape, the tragedy’s cartographic coordinates of familial relationships are not only schematic reductions of family dynamics, but also distinctive performative moments in which Hamlet’s dysfunctional family acquires self-reflexive and meta-theatrical proportions.*

Keywords: *Hamlet, family cartography, mappings, spaces, dysfunctional family*