

During the sixteenth century, Queen Elizabeth hired Walsingham as her spy master. As a long-reigning queen and knowledgeable about her enemies, Elizabeth made it her business to make sure she wasn't surprised by those who wanted her off the throne. She often sent delegates off to foreign lands to find out what was going on and, in doing so, she learned how to stay alive. Spying, or espionage, often meant sneaking around when others didn't know; it meant relying on those close to you to be your eyes and ears. It often meant dishonesty. Queen Elizabeth was smart, and the only way she could get ahead was to stay alive. That meant she had to be one step ahead of her enemies. Playwright William Shakespeare made use of 16th century cultural beliefs in his tragedy *Hamlet* (1601). He shows how plotting against a monarch can be dangerous and life-threatening.

Many primary documents, including art, often depicted ideas about espionage. *The Rainbow Portrait* (1600) is a painting by either Marcus Gheeraerts or Isaac Oliver and shows Queen Elizabeth in a most unusual gown. She is wearing a long dress embroidered with eyes and ears, showing that she is all knowing: she can see all and hear all, something she wanted her people as well as those from overseas to know about her. The fear of being caught in a treasonous act against the queen would certainly end in death, so her portrait was a bold reminder.

In addition to the portrait, a spy's duties were often fully outlined by the queen. Even though spies were often called "ambassadors" who went in good will to other countries, they knew what the queen expected them to do. According to Alberico Gentili in *The Perfect Ambassador*, spies had to follow exact instructions and any "who deliberately betrayed their prince should be executed." Those who lived during

the early modern period under Queen Elizabeth both feared and revered her. They knew she had eyes and ears everywhere and didn't want to get caught doing anything she didn't like.

William Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* at the end of Elizabeth's reign, but he certainly understood the dangers of spying and getting caught. Including espionage in his play would have been understood by his audiences; they would have understood the necessity of King Claudius wanting to spy on Hamlet to find out what he knew. As Claudius' right-hand man, Polonius would most certainly have hid behind the arras in the Queen's closet to find out if Hamlet said anything to his mother. Claudius uses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as spies to see if Hamlet confides in them, but the King also goes one step too far when he hires them to have Hamlet murdered in England. He plans to have "letters congruing to that effect / the present death of Hamlet" (4.3.68-69). What the King doesn't know is that Hamlet is one step ahead of him and switches the letter ordering his own execution and has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern murdered instead. It was a dangerous time in sixteenth-century England, and Shakespeare made use of what he knew best to put in his plays.

Today we watch movies, such as *Ozark*, that have agents and double agents doing the dirty work of those in higher power. Today's politicians are no different from the monarchs during Shakespeare's time: they need to know what other people know, so they can stay on top. Power and the need to keep it will always be at the core of espionage. We hear on the news about the CIA going too far or about how much information is leaked during the presidential elections. Today we have

technology that allows us to send information much faster than the letters of yesteryear, but the need for information and the power it gives will always be important. It's not just Shakespeare's issue. It's ours too.