

Critical Comment on Hamlet

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By

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Abstract

Claims about Shakespeare's influence on the English language are numerous, yet not always based on empirical research. The questions of what, when, where, why, to what an extend and how does a poet's phrase leave its original context calls for linguistic investigation. Therefore, a number of digitally available text collections, such as The British National Corpus, Literature Online or the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers to name only a few, were searched for verbal traces of Hamlet, Shakespeare's most famous play. The data are brought together in a specialized corpus of quotations and allusions.. One of the most prominent themes in "Hamlet" is acting. Its uses and abuses are constantly remarked on by Hamlet and other characters. Hamlet's view of play-acting is a complicated one; sometimes he admires it, but at other times he is disillusioned with the fakery that playing demands. In this mood, he deplors the ease with which acting can be used to manipulate others. Admiration comes through when he thinks of the player's tears for the non-existent Hecuba. He considers the actor to be able to turn his thoughts to concrete signs or actions, and wishes he was more like the actor.

Hamlet! Hamlet? Hamlet? it seems to me, is of all Shakespeare's plays the one which is most about character, Shakespeare's way of approaching character was, I believe, very different than the approach of modern post-Chekhov drama and the contemporary novel. In trying to understand Hamlet, one should start with the fact that it was one of Shakespeare's most commercially successful productions. Now Shakespeare's audience did not come to the Globe for a cultural experience or a deep thought-provoking character study comparable to a dialogue --- not so much the content of the speeches as their tone, which in Shakespeare is always the most crucial factor --- you will most of his dialogue lines throughout Acts 2 through 4 are ones which would usually be spoken by a jester, such as Touchstone or Feste. Other than Hamlet himself, there is no fool in the play until we get to the gravedigger in Act 5, who might have been played by the same actor who had played Polonius. Consider some of Hamlet's interactions. In the following excerpts.

These are lines that could be spoken by almost any of Shakespeare's fool's paradise. Hamlet is making a joke, which if told well will get a big laugh from the audience, but at the same time he's talking about a murder he's committed. In contemporary terms, Hamlet's lines here, and in fact much of his humor is what would be called a "sick joke." In fact, I think that one of the things that fascinate us about Hamlet is the contrast between the way he charms us and enlists our sympathies with his conversation and, on the other hand, the dreadful nature of the things he does. In a contemporary movie, we would rightly regard a character who kills people and then make jokes about it as a psychopath.

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- Here's another comic interchange (Act 2, Scene 2). Hamlet's lines would work perfectly well for Touchstone in *As You Like it*.
- Polonius. Do you know me, Fool?
- Fool. Excellent well, you are a fishmonger.
- Polonius. Not I, Fool!
- Fool. Then I would you were so honest a man.
- Polonius. Honest, Fool!
- Fool. Ay, sir, to be honest, this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand
- Polonius. What do you read, Fool?
- Fool. Words, words, words.
- Polonius. What is the matter, Fool.
- Fool. Between who?
- Polonius. I mean, the matter that you read, Fool.

Fool. Slanders, sir, for the satirical rogue says that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams; all of which sir, although I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down; for you yourself, sir, should be old as I am if, like a crab, you could go backward.

In all of Hamlet's comic dialogue, there is an irony. What Hamlet is saying is comic, but the feeling behind the comedy is extremely hostile. If one plays these scenes to emphasize the hostility and downplay the humor, then one gets a serious drama, which is the way we think of Hamlet today. I can't believe that the sort of performances we usually see today, though, would have been a commercial success for Shakespeare's troupe.

If one can't see by reading it that Hamlet is more a tragicomedy than a tragedy, I recommend I imagine Hamlet's lines being spoken by Alan Alda in his Hawkeye persona, and I believe that the play will suddenly come alive and become enjoyable, without losing any of the meaning that we are accustomed to attaching to it.

For this reason, because of what I see as Hamlet's comic and ironic attitude toward what he is saying in this soliloquy, it is absolutely essential that Hamlet's words, even if delivered as a voice-over in a film, be spoken to the audience.

This brings up, incidentally, one of the basic questions about the performance of soliloquies, namely: Who is speaking the soliloquy? The obvious answer is that in this case, for instance, Hamlet is speaking. But in fact there are several possibilities.

- The character in the play is speaking the soliloquy as part of the action in the play. The soliloquy represents the thoughts of the character at that moment in the play.

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- The character in the play is momentarily stepping out of the play and making a comment on it. Almost certainly this comment is directed to the audience.
- The actor in question is stepping out of his role and commenting on the play and on the character he is playing, objectively, or sardonically, or whatever.

It seems that all of these possibilities are sometimes appropriate in certain plays, although the fourth is rare. In particular, I think I've seen them all in television sitcoms and comedy shows, especially earlier ones, which in their frank acknowledgement of the existence of the audience were, I believe, much closer to the style of Shakespeare's original productions than contemporary theatre is. It seems to me that Hamlet's first two soliloquies fall into the first category. They represent a statement of Hamlet's thoughts at this particular moment of the play. However I am suggesting that the "To Be or Not to Be" soliloquy can definitely be played in the second mode, where Hamlet is making a statement to the audience that is relevant to the play as a whole, but not to the particular moment when the soliloquy is given. Of course Hamlet is not a comedy, despite the fact that it contains a large number of scenes that seem to me obviously comedic. It seems to me that it would be very difficult to read Hamlet's first soliloquy, in Act I Scene 2, as being comic.

Oh, that this too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon against self-slaughter!
Oh, God! God! How weary,
flat, stale, and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Here, before ever encountering the ghost,
Hamlet does seriously mention suicide as a possibility.

But from the time when Hamlet decides to pretend to be crazy, up to the end of Act 4, almost everything can be played as comic.

Hamlet's killing of Polonius, for example. I don't want to suggest that Elizabethans considered running a sword through someone as funny. But I think that there is indeed something a bit farcical about Polonius's very brief death scene, and it's the sort of humor that works because it makes sport of very real fears that were part of Elizabethan life.

Hamlet is talking to Queen Gertrude. Polonius is hiding behind the arras and listening.
[An arras, incidentally, is a hanging tapestry.]

Hamlet to Gertrude: Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge. You shall not go until I set you up a glass To see the inmost part of you.

Queen: What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me? Help, help, ho!

Polonius (behind the arras): What, ho! Help, help, help!

Hamlet (drawing): How now! A rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead! (Stabs through the arras.)

Polonius (from behind the arras): Oh, I am slain!

Queen: Oh me, what hast thou done?

Hamlet: Nay, I know not. Is it the king?

Queen: Oh, what a rash and bloody deed is this!

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Hamlet: A bloody deed! Almost as bad, good mother, as kill a king and marry with his brother.

Queen: As kill a king.

Hamlet: Ay lady, 'twas my word.

The interesting thing here is the way that when, in the next scene, Claudius takes the killing of Polonius as the deadly serious thing it was, we the audience simply take that as a point against Claudius. It's almost as if we think that Claudius is not being a very good sport to take the killing of one of his key councilors so seriously.
Which kind of Person is Hamlet?

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other dramatists.) This is where I believe Harold Bloom is flat out wrong in his whole approach to Shakespeare.

I want to mention that I am especially indebted to that to say the hamlet is keen sketch of comedy.

FOOTNOTES:

bizarrely, decorum, gravedigger, Fest. Sick joke,
Transcends, assumption, conclusively, Harold Bloom.

References

The ninth chapter of JAMES JOYCY "S ULYSSES commonly referred to as Scylla and Charybdis, is almost entirely devoted to a rambling discourse by Stephen Daedalus on Shakespeare, centering around the character Hamlet. As a character predicts more or less accurately in the very first chapter, "[Daedalus] proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father."

GETRUDE AND CLAUDIUS A JOHN UPDIKE novel, serves as a prequel to the events of the play. It follows Gertrude from her wedding to King Hamlet, through an affair with Claudius, and its murderous results, up until the very beginning of the play.

Novel by MATT HAIG uses to retell the story of Hamlet from the point of view of an 11-year-old boy in modern England.

ANTON CHEKHOV wrote a feuilleton titled I am a Moscow Hamlet (1891), the mutterings of a gossip-mongering actor who contemplates suicide out of sheer boredom.