

Hamlet and the Purpose of Playing

November 2018

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Hamlet is a play that is preoccupied with the role of theatre, inviting the audience to debate the “purpose of playing”. Theatre fascinates the character of Hamlet and the play goes to great lengths to show how he is obsessed with presentation and acting. For Hamlet, theatre reflects reality. Thus, he sees overt displays of emotion as unreliable, claiming that a person could be merely putting on an act. This theme is echoed by how Hamlet fakes his own madness in an attempt to fool his uncle, Claudius. The play further examines theatre through a pivotal scene depicting *The Murder of Gonzago*; a play commissioned by Hamlet that not only mirrors real-life but has a profound impact on it.

Hamlet has a fixation upon the gulf between what is real and what is not. He sees the world as a stage and people as actors disguising their internal feelings. Forker proposes that “the theatre to Hamlet, to Shakespeare, and to the audience becomes a symbol for making unseen realities seen, for exposing the secret places of the human heart and objectifying them in a way without which they would be unbearable to look upon” (pp. 217). While theatre allows the audience to see into the depths of a person’s feelings through their soliloquys and expressions, it also shows audiences how all people play roles and deceive. Hamlet is acutely aware of this and takes nothing at face value; not even his own displays of grief. When Gertrude comments on his “nighted colour”, he remarks that his behaviours “are actions that a man might play” (1.2.84). This reveals his somewhat extreme concern with appearance. Woods notes that Hamlet also “polices the boundaries between performance and reality” (s.2). After Gertrude asks Hamlet about his sadness, “Why seems it so particular with thee?” (1.2.75). Hamlet immediately replies “Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not ‘seems.’” (1.2.76). He is shown discarding any displays of emotion, believing they do not reflect a person’s true feelings. This attitude is shown again when he discovers the treachery of Claudius. Hamlet is captivated by the fact “That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!” (1.5.107-108). His belief is that “playing” is used as a tool for deception. To Hamlet, a

person's authentic feelings are separate from how they act. He realises that people often wear masks and does not allow himself to be so easily deceived.

For the majority of the play, Hamlet, in spite of his hatred of "seeming", purports that he too is performing. As Forker points out, "the irony is that Hamlet himself must adopt a pose in order to expose it in others" (pp. 217). Upon witnessing the ghost's appearance and making an oath to avenge him, Hamlet decides to act "strange or odd" and to "put an antic disposition on" (1.5.170-172). The purpose of this playing, Hamlet claims, is to confuse the King. Roberts, however, argues that he ultimately fails at this aim. "Insofar as Hamlet employs this "antic disposition" as an instrument to allay Claudius' suspicions, it fails" (pp. 358). It can be argued that, had Hamlet not adopted this disguise, he would have likely been viewed as a threat and killed by Claudius, but this still does not justify the lengths to which Hamlet goes in his acting.

Bynum and Neve ask, "was Hamlet really mad, or did he merely feign madness?" (pp. 392). This is a question that has puzzled critics for centuries and can be answered by examining a quote from Hamlet himself. "For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" (3.2.21-24). It becomes clear that, by the end of the play, Hamlet's "antic disposition" is not as artificial as he had once predicted. The act has become real and held a mirror up to his inner self; a man driven to madness by the death of his father and betrayal of his uncle. Bynum and Neve note that "when preparing to fight Laertes, Hamlet announces that it was his madness which caused him to wrong Laertes, and by extension, Polonius and Ophelia as well" (pp. 392). Hamlet admits here that he has now succumbed to the same madness he planned on feigning. Through theatre and playing, a window into his mind has been opened, corrupting his outer self and blurring the lines between show and authenticity.

A central scene of *Hamlet* is a play Hamlet commissions called *The Murder of Gonzago*. The play portrays a death similar to his father's. It has two purposes. First, to validate the story told by the ghost and second, to judge Claudius's guilt. Hamlet advises the actors to "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action,

with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature" (3.2.18-21). It's clear that he thinks exaggeration has no place in theatre, again supporting the belief that theatre should reflect reality. *The Murder of Gonzago* is a distinctly literal interpretation of this belief and purposely reflects real life. Forker notes that, as the play commences, Hamlet "wears his "antic" mask to Claudius and the others, but at the same time he is carefully observing the players' performance and that of Claudius which the play-within-the-play will presumably affect" (pp. 255). Claudius is also performing in a sense. He must act as if the poisoning shown in the play bears no resemblance to any recent event, so as to not prove his guiltiness. However, he cannot handle the pressure, rising and leaving the room in a hurry at the sight of the King's death, calling for light as he leaves "Give me some light, away" (3.2.254). Hamlet has shown here that the role of theatre is not only limited to reflecting reality, but also proving it.

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