

“Cast List: Social Performativity within *Hamlet* and Consequent Dramatic Abilities of the Play”

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Excerpt

Here, then, lies the final and most complicated performance in which Hamlet must choose to or not to partake—the performance of sanity. Several times throughout the play, the audience is challenged to decide whether Hamlet is playing his “antic disposition” or playing his natural self (I.v.170). Again, we must rely on the presence or absence of ritual to understand the performance we are witnessing. In the social play, those who choose not to participate in ritual must be accounted for in some way—either as “bad” at their role (“he is a bad son”; “she is a bad queen”) or somehow outside the rules of that social code (“she is a foreigner”; “he is mad”). Both the actor playing Hamlet-character and the Hamlet-character playing Hamlet-actor must make decisions about which of these categories they are performing—particularly with reference to madness—at any point in time.

The audience, knowing this, is thus impelled by Hamlet’s antic disposition to be aware of themselves also as an audience to an audience. When Hamlet performs a line in what we believe to be “antic-speak,” viewers will simultaneously understand how the other characters in Hamlet’s world understand that statement—Hamlet’s first audience—and then how they as observers of the play understand it—Hamlet’s second audience. A good example of this dual-audience phenomenon occurs when Hamlet turns to Ophelia during *The Murder of Gonzago* and babbles: “What should a man do but be merry, for look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within’s two hours!” (III.ii.118-120). From Ophelia’s response, “Nay, ‘tis twice two months, my lord,” viewers can collect that Hamlet’s first audience detects only Hamlet’s supposed madness and a hint of grief. As his second audience, viewers recall that Hamlet plans to recreate the circumstances of his father’s death within this visiting play.

Knowing that a typical play spans about two hours, viewers might see how Hamlet actually speaks plainly to Ophelia through the coded language of his antic disposition. These instances implicate the audience in a constant activity that runs parallel to Hamlet's roles: at any point in time, it must cast itself either as Hamlet's first or second audience.

The complications of this casting system are highlighted by Hamlet's "the play's the thing" soliloquy in Act II. Hamlet navigates his tumultuous reactions to the player's emotional performance and his failed revenge plot by casting himself in various low-power roles, including "slave," "rascal," "coward," "villain," and "whore" (II.ii.485-520). This is a relatively familiar social reaction; we often use the sting of undesirable roles to chastise each other for actions society discourages. However, there is a portion of this speech in which Hamlet's questioning of his role seems to overlap with his antic ways: "Am I a coward? / Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across... / Gives me the lie I'th'throat / As deep as to the lungs? / Who does me this, / Ha?" (II.ii.506-511). Shakespearean characters have a history of addressing questions to the audience, but they are typically more poetic and passive; for example, earlier in the speech, Hamlet wonders about the player who has just performed, asking, "What's Hecuba to him, or he to her, / That he should weep for her?" (II.ii.494-495). This type of question is less urgent; it does not demand an immediate answer, for the only person who could answer it is clearly offstage. In contrast, these later questions feel urgent—they ask who is responsible for specific, physical reproaches Hamlet claims to feel as a result of his guilt. As noted by Thompson and Taylor, these lines can be so incendiary that "this ['Am I a coward?'] and the following rhetorical questions have sometimes provoked responses from the audience, notably in the case of David Warner's 1965 performance" (276). In such a case, one might argue that Hamlet has transcended the performance of either "sanity" or "insanity" to achieve a performance of "human." The question of casting has been shifted onto the audience—is it insane to respond to a fictional character? Is it more insane than the act of silently empathizing with him, or of sitting in a dark room watching a person pretend to be him for several hours? Just as we begin

to believe again that we are experiencing a better understanding of Hamlet through his soliloquies, we find that in a certain way we are instead experiencing a better understanding of ourselves through Hamlet. In this sense, Hamlet bows to us—showing us who we are.

These reality-based connections between social interactions and performance—performances of family, disconnect, societal critique, insanity, humanity, and on—are not quite metatheater as it is typically characterized. They are made up of subtler hints at the performativity of the moment such that we might not even notice them, because they are so present in our average experiences of that relationship. Metatheater in its more explicit form inspires an awareness of the audience member's presence in the theater, but it is focused on the audience member's experience as a witness to the story rather than a participant in it. Social performance, on the other hand, requires the participation that real-life relationships require: that of all individuals involved. As such, audiences come to occupy a real role within the world of the play—a role which demands an active, critical presence, inspires a reciprocation of performance, and provides a reason, perhaps, that audiences return to *Hamlet* time and time again.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William, Ann Thompson, and Neil Taylor. *Hamlet*. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006. Print.

Author Commentary

Victoria Gruenberg

This paper began from a suggestion by my preceptor, Sarah Case, that our class consider analyzing Shakespeare’s plays less as literature and more as performed pieces of work. That idea resonated with an aspect of power exchange that I had been mulling over as related to both theatrical performance and social performance. Basically, there is an old adage in the theatre world that goes: “A king is only a king as long as everyone onstage bows when he enters.” This simple fact of performance also applies in our everyday lives: the professor is only the most powerful person in a classroom because the students quiet down when she begins to speak, for example. When looking at the “metatheatricality” of *Hamlet*, I noticed that, in the context of performance, the text wasn’t metatheatrical in the typical sense. The purest form of metatheatricality is any aspect of a play that intends to make its audience aware that it is watching a play; one of the most common examples is breaking the “fourth wall.” However, the moments where we are aware that characters are “performing” in *Hamlet* don’t just break into the audience but seem to break past them into our understanding of society as a whole. The best example of this is the eternal question of Hamlet’s “antic disposition.” The fine line between his “acting” crazy and “being” crazy is dictated by minute differences in his social surroundings when he delivers his antic lines.

The reason this was so cool to analyze with relation to Shakespeare specifically was that once I jumped into a mindset of imagining the words said aloud in front of me—or in the case of certain monologues, to me—a whole new layer of the play became apparent. It felt as though Shakespeare wrote this entire script winking and nodding at his actors and audience all the while, saying something to the effect of “We all know we’re performing every day—why not make a story out of it?” I looked at these textual “winks” with reference to the performance of family (Laertes and Polonius), gender (Hamlet), and sanity (Hamlet). This excerpt is my final point, exploring Hamlet’s “antic disposition.”

Fellow Commentary

Harrison Blackman

Successful conclusions require ascending the stepladder of analysis into a higher plane, a space that argues for the importance of the paper itself. This challenge is difficult enough when analyzing Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a play that has been studied for centuries. To justify analysis on such an oft-written subject, a strong conclusion is needed to distinguish its perspective from the plethora of literature on *Hamlet*.

In the final three pages of Victoria’s paper, she tackles the concept of metatheater in a systematic way, showing step by step how the roles of the player and audience can be interpreted in so many ways that *Hamlet* is not a stereotypic example of metatheater but one that requires “an active, critical presence [and] inspires a reciprocation of performance” on the part of the audience.

We thought Victoria’s conclusion was compelling because it builds from its analysis of roles in the play into an exploration of those roles that transcends the traditional definition of metatheater in general, broadening the scope of the paper and giving a strong answer to the “so-what” question of conclusions.

In the her, Victoria first addresses Hamlet’s “antic speak” and the question of whether Hamlet is pretending to be insane or if he is actually crazy at “any point in time.” Then, considering *The Murder of Gonzago*, the play within the play, Victoria expands the discussion to the role of Hamlet’s audience in *Hamlet* watching *The Murder of Gonzago* and the role of the audience watching *Hamlet* itself. By applying the new complexity of the multiple roles of singular characters to Hamlet’s “the play’s the thing” soliloquy, Victoria’s essay transcends conventional discussion of metatheater and fulfills the requirement of strong conclusions by broadening the application of the argument to provoke new questions. Perhaps the best example of this shift is in the final lines of the penultimate paragraph:

Just as we begin to believe again that we are experiencing a better understanding of Hamlet through his soliloquies, we find that in a certain way we are instead experiencing a better understanding of ourselves through Hamlet. In this sense, Hamlet bows to us—showing us who we are.

It is these fluid lines of revelation that reveal the strength of the conclusion. By pivoting the analysis of the previous section and exploring conventional notions of who the audience should be (“is it insane to respond to a fictional character?”), the conclusion builds to its final paragraph, the explicit redefinition of *Hamlet*’s place in metatheater as social performance. By providing a reason “audiences return to *Hamlet*,” Victoria encourages continued active participation and dialogue on this oft-written work. Most often, strong conclusions don’t just end the conversation—they pave the way for new ones. The conclusion of “Cast List” does just that.