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Hamlet: The Play within the Play

Hamlet – both the character and the play in which he appears – is deeply concerned with performance. In his very first scene, Hamlet polices the boundaries between performance and reality. When his worried mother asks why his grief ‘seems [...] so particular’ (1.2.75) with him, Hamlet ignores her main point (why does he grieve more intensely than other bereaved sons?) and snatches at the idea of ‘seeming’:

Seems, madam? nay, it is, I know not ‘seems.’
 ’Tis not alone my inky cloak, [good] mother,
 Nor customary suits of solemn black,
 Nor windy suspiration of forc’d breath,
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
 Nor the dejected havior of the visage,
 Together with all forms, moods, [shapes] of grief,
 That can [denote] me truly. These indeed seem,
 For they are actions that a man might play,
 But I have that within which passes show,
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe’ (1.2.76-86).

Outward displays of emotion are untrustworthy, Hamlet reasons, because a person could ‘play’ or mimic them. Indeed, even his own sincere demonstrations of sadness are compromised because it would be easy to feign them. So while Hamlet’s mourning clothes, sighs and tears ‘seem’ to express his grief, Hamlet insists they are not significant: his inner feelings are his true meaning. This relationship between ‘show’ and ‘authenticity’, ‘performance’ and ‘reality’, preoccupies Hamlet throughout the play. When he discovers that his uncle has murdered his father, Hamlet interprets the news as a lesson in deceitful appearances: ‘meet it is I set it down /

'That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain!' (1.5.107-8). However, the tragedy complicates any easy moral distinctions between acting and authenticity. Hamlet himself, despite his petulant outburst against 'seeming', cannot escape the human impulse to perform. Not only does he successfully adopt an 'antic disposition' (1.5.172) to deflect attention from his revenge plot, but his endless soliloquising makes him all the more theatrical, even as he meditates on 'that within which passes show'. At the very moment Hamlet insists that his mourning is authentic and internal, he seems deliberately to parade his grief for all to see. In this tragedy, Shakespeare explores the ways in which performance exists in and shapes reality.

What kind of truth can be told through theatre?

The play *Hamlet* commissions the travelling players to enact gives his obsession with performance a specifically theatrical focus. Staged at the Globe in 1601, *Hamlet* was originally produced at a time when professional theatre was a relatively new medium (the first playhouse opened in 1567). Renaissance plays are particularly self-conscious about their own theatricality, as their writers explored the technical possibilities and ethical implications of the form. The play staged at Elsinore gave audiences at the Globe an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the entertainment they had paid to view. What kind of truth can be told through theatre? What sort of impact do plays have on those who watch them? These were questions that moralists and playwrights debated endlessly.

Theatrical entertainment was not restricted to London. The itinerant actors who appear at the Danish Court reflect early modern practice. Professional players, like Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, frequently toured venues across the country, performing in schools, universities, country houses, town halls and drinking houses.¹ Some ventured even further afield. A German *album amicorum* or friendship album (a Renaissance cross between an

¹ See, Barbara Palmer, 'Early Modern Mobility: Players, Payments, and Patrons', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56.3 (2005), 259-303.

autograph book and a scrapbook) compiled by Franz Hartmann (1597-1617) includes a watercolour painting possibly depicting English players on their way to perform at the Frankfurt fair.² The picture captures some of the excitement that also accompanies the entrance of the players in *Hamlet*. Brightly costumed and carrying their properties in full view, the illustrated players are a spectacle on horseback, travelling to, and generating anticipation for, their next performance. Similarly, a trumpet '*flourish*' (2.2.368) heralds the players' arrival at Elsinore; their very entrance is clothed in pageantry.

Hamlet's enthusiastic welcome of the players reveals his affection for theatre, in spite of his distaste for 'seeming'. However, having insisted on hearing the lead actor recite an impromptu speech about the destruction of Troy, the performance leaves him reeling:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit
 That from her working all his visage wann'd [...]
 What's Hecuba to him, or he to [Hecuba],
 That he should weep for her? What would he do
 Had he the motive and [the cue] for passion
 That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
 And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
 Make mad the guilty, and appall the free (2.2.551-64).

Once again Hamlet is tormented by the 'monstrous' relationship he perceives between acting and authenticity. It isn't so much that the player has done a good job of pretending to feel grief, but rather that the act of pretence has involved something real: the actor cries actual tears by forcing

² See, June Schlueter, 'An Illustration of Traveling Players in Franz Hartmann's Early Modern *Album amicorum*', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 21 (2008), 191-200.

his very 'soul' into the fictional role. And this performed outpouring of emotion is somehow more authentic than Hamlet's response to his father's murder, or at least, so he fears. Having earlier shunned 'actions that a man might play', Hamlet now fantasises about the real actions that might follow acting: how if the player had Hamlet's experiences, his performance skills would enable him to expose courtly corruption.

This logic explains Hamlet's strategy of staging a play to 'catch the conscience of the King' (2.2.605). Still uncertain about the veracity of the ghost's murderous tale, Hamlet turns to theatre and all its artful contrivance to find the truth:

I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been strook so to the soul, that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions (2.2.588-92).

Theatrical performances may be mere pretence, but they produce a real impact on those who view them. And Hamlet was not alone in believing that the tragic performance of crime could compel criminal spectators to admit their guilt. *A Warning for Faire Women* (1599), produced by Shakespeare's company just a couple of years before *Hamlet*, contains a similar anecdote:

A woman that had made away her husband,
And sitting to behold a tragedy
At Linne a towne in Norffolke,
Acted by Players traouelling that way,
Wherein a woman that had murtherd hers
Was euer haunted with her husbands ghost:
The passion written by a feeling pen,
And acted by a good Tragedian,

She was so mooued with the sight thereof,
 As she cryed out, the Play was made by her,
 And openly confesst her husbands murder (H2r).

In this story, it isn't only the coincidence of the play's plot mirroring the murdering spectator's crime that provokes confession, but the skill of the writing and acting. Artifice is essential to finding the truth. The relationship between theatre and reality is decidedly slippery in this account. *A Warning for Faire Women* is itself a fictionalised play about the real-life murder of Master George Sanders. The story of the Norfolk performance further knits together reality and theatricality: in what may or may not be a 'real' example, the guilty viewer sees the performance as so true-to-life that she feels as though it imitates ('was made by') her. Such anecdotes defend theatre as morally valuable, countering the accusations of anti-theatricalists who claimed that plays not only encouraged vice by staging bad behaviour, but were also fundamentally fraudulent because they work by illusion. Hamlet's forensic use of *The Murder of Gonzago*, whereby he plans to 'observe' his uncle's 'looks' when watching his crime being performed, assumes that theatre has a real and truthful impact on its viewers.

The mirroring nature of the play

We never see Claudius kill Hamlet; we never see the crime on which the tragedy centres. Instead, the murder we do witness – right in the middle of the action – is showily theatrical. The play-within-a-play structure keeps us at a frustrating distance from the definite truth of things. It is also of a piece with the mirroring nature of the tragedy, a drama in which experiences are constantly multiplied. We meet not one, but four, grieving children (Hamlet, Fortinbras, Ophelia, Laertes), two suicidal mourners (Hamlet, Ophelia), two revengers (Hamlet, Laertes), and even two Hamlets (the ghost of the old king appears on stage before his son). This most profoundly individual protagonist is entangled in a series of similarities. Interpreting the tragedy

necessarily involves sorting through patterns of likeness; figuring out the truth of a situation or a person is a comparative, rather than a straightforward, process.

Indeed, the inset play is also double in form: beginning with a dumb-show which mimes a king being poisoned and a queen shifting affections from her dead husband to the poisoner; and followed by a play proper that emphasises the queen's fickleness and the poisoner's treachery in rhymed dialogue. Tension mounts as Claudius ignores the barbed content of the dumb-show (in some productions he simply isn't paying attention). But the play itself horrifies him. When the poison is malevolently described and poured into the sleeping king's ear, Claudius abruptly stops the production: 'Give o'er the play [...] Lights! lights! lights!' (3.2.268-70). As in *A Warning for Faire Women*, the performance of crime is too much to bear for a guilty spectator. Hamlet is delighted he can now 'take the ghost's word' (3.2.286). And yet, while Claudius stops the performance, unlike the Norfolk wife, he makes no public confession. The play does not remove the need for interpretation.

Performance and reality

Furthermore, *The Murder of Gonzago*, adapted and part-directed by Hamlet, curiously combines traits of the prince and his uncle in the character of the poisoner. Significantly, Hamlet identifies this figure as a 'nephew' (3.2.244) to the victim king, and not a brother. In this way the play points to one of the ethical problems of revenge: the revenger ends up becoming like the criminal he seeks to punish. This play-within-a-play not only helps Hamlet to judge Claudius's guilt, but also acts as a spur for his own revenge: it shows him the murder that was done to his father and the murder that could be done to his uncle. Defences and attacks on the theatre are combined here, since the play morally stirs Claudius's conscience and immorally encourages Hamlet to kill (though, in both cases, imperfectly). Hamlet may have started the play by rejecting 'seeming' appearances, but his way of understanding and dealing with his situation is pointedly theatrical. Performance is part of reality.