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“Stand and Unfold Yourself”: The Subjectivity of Interpretation in *Hamlet*

By Josh Mahoney

Critical interpretations of *Hamlet* are largely dependent upon the cultural zeitgeist that provides the cognitive paradigm through which critics formulate their ideas. The zeitgeist also influences which text of *Hamlet* to consider, since no single authoritative manuscript of the play exists. Critics must also consider *Hamlet* beyond a simple textual reading, since the competing documents of Q1, Q2 and F1—among later additions—only serve as the basis for theatrical representations. The inherent fluidity of performance is apparent to anyone who has ever been to the theater, even a modern one. Actors embodying characters on stage in front of an audience make decisions about how to deliver their lines and are both coached and critiqued by other actors and by various third parties, often directors. This interpretative license eliminates the possibility of any static, ahistorical, “accurate” representation of *Hamlet*. Such a performance would need to occur outside of time and space, with archetypal actors possessing the attributes of the characters only Shakespeare himself would have declared the most suitable for his players. That Shakespeare recognized the fluid aspects of drama is apparent by the opening line of *Hamlet*, which is a question proposed by the sentinel Barnardo: “Who’s there?” (I.i.1). Francisco, instead of simply responding with his name and rank, instead seeks in turn: “Nay. Answer me. Stand and unfold yourself” (I.i.2). Indeed, the most actively pursued criticisms of *Hamlet* stem from attempts to *unfold*, to discover the true nature of the play and its enigmatic Prince. Such quixotic tasks are, however, exercises in futility. Analyses of *Hamlet*, either of specific documents or of theatrical performance, are inherently subjective and therefore no such criticism can ever be definitively correct.

A problematic assumption of any theatrical performance is that the performance given by the actors is an interpretation of the play. On the contrary, actors on the stage often make subconscious decisions about how to inflect their lines, how to shift their weight while standing, and other various actions that are not meant to be an interpretation of the play they are performing. As David Z. Saltz explains: “The relationship between a play and its performance is not inherently one of interpretation [. . .] interpretation does not *define* the relationship between play and performance anymore than line memorization and makeup application do” (299). Saltz argues that performances of a particular play are not intrinsically interpretative, at least not in the sense that modern theater critics claim they are. A performance gives the audience access to a play and allows a consideration of the author’s vision (in some cases, the director’s vision). However, hyper-sensitive performance criticism may go too far in dissecting a play for evidence of its interpretation. In the case of *Hamlet*, actors on a stage are given a script that can be derived from many competing authoritative documents. The actors and often the director then make decisions about the play that best suit the strengths and limitations of the actors themselves, as well as considerations for the venue in which the actors perform and the audience for whom they entertain. These decisions about *Hamlet* are not necessarily interpretations of the play itself but are aesthetic decisions chosen to maximize the pleasurability of viewing the performance live. Such decisions are not automatically interpretative, as they do not directly seek to provide the audience with a wholly unique rendering of the play.

Attempts to objectify *Hamlet*, especially in performance, are inherently difficult for several reasons. The original documents (Q1, Q2, and F1) of the play are roughly four hundred years old (Riverside, 1234), and the collective cultural consciousness that pervaded Shakespeare’s mind and influenced his composition of *Hamlet* has disappeared. For instance,

Elizabethans lived in an age of Christendom that was void of many modern ideas (think heliocentricity and evolution). However, incipient manifestations of a modern perspective were emerging during the time that Shakespeare created *Hamlet*, as Anthony B. Dawson discusses:

Born at a time when the emerging forces of Protestant theology, capitalist enterprise and humanist individualism were combining to form what has come to be called the 'modern subject', Hamlet seems to embody the struggles and aspirations of the individual soul set afloat in a sea of troubles and uncertainties.

(Dawson, 7)

As Dawson demonstrates, modernity was a budding concept that had not yet reached its fullest manifestation in Elizabethan England. To understand Shakespeare's intention, then, requires modern readers and viewers to imagine the cultural environment that helped shaped the author's skills to craft a play like *Hamlet*. Consequently, attempts to consider *Hamlet* through a modern paradigm is a flawed process since Shakespeare's environment was not in today's sense wholly modern.

The Christendom mentality that pervaded nearly all aspects of Elizabethan culture undoubtedly influences certain themes in *Hamlet*. For modern critics to realize the importance of Christendom, lines in *Hamlet* must be considered relative to the cultural paradigm in which the playwright operates. For example, consider the notions of Divine Providence in the drama. During the play within a play, the player-king illuminates the conflicts often found in Elizabethan time: "Our wills and fates do so contrary run / That our devices still are overthrown, / Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own" (III.ii.211-213). Later, after Hamlet escapes from the pirates and returns to Elsinore, he laments to Horatio: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (V.ii.10-11). Recognition of the importance of these

religious themes is critical to understanding *Hamlet* in the context in which it was written. For a modern person, though, such contemplations are difficult since modernity has effectively eliminated any beliefs in forces outside the scientific world. As a result, modern critics must seek explanations for why Hamlet does not heed the Ghost's advice and avenge his murdered father. They extrapolate meaning from Hamlet's inactions. However, seen through the perspective of Christendom, why Hamlet does not act is unimportant considering the larger forces of Providence imbedded in human existence.

Another common problem that occurs when discussing *Hamlet* is drawing a distinction between the character in the play and his occupation of time and space offstage. Shakespeare creates a functioning protagonist in his work; however, does Hamlet exist outside the lines of *Hamlet*? Critics who seek to discuss Hamlet as a real person, someone who exists outside the portions of the text of *Hamlet* in which he is onstage, may use too much latitude in assigning traits to the protagonist. E.T. Schell explains this phenomenon succinctly: "We [assume] that all of the conditions of action in *Hamlet* ought to correspond to the conditions of action in life itself, that *Hamlet* ought to be verisimilar" (141). However, Hamlet the character does not exist outside the confines of the play; rather, he serves a definitive purpose to further the plot of the drama and elucidate themes that Shakespeare wishes to convey. The dramatic effect of Hamlet's shifting persona, though, is lost in a literary reading of *Hamlet*. Critics seek to construct a character that is not evident from the documents of *Hamlet* nor suggested in any theatrical performance. To discover the character's essence, his purpose in the play, requires a theatrical viewing. The performance witnessed, though, will be predicated on the actors themselves, the directors who oversee the entire production, the venue in which the play is seen, and other variables associated with the theater. In short, the character of Hamlet is an unstable entity. The

audience “sometimes lose[s] sight of the fact that Hamlet is not an ethical or psychological enigma; he is rather a rhetorical component in the play *Hamlet*, and thus he may be used as a voice in service of its rhetorical purposes” (Schell, 146). The theater provides the audience with a Hamlet that is inextricably linked to the performance of *Hamlet*. Similarly, a literary audience is given a Hamlet that is inseparable from the document or combination of documents chosen for study, and criticisms that seek to examine the protagonist outside of these document(s) are engaged in a futile attempt to objectify an inherently subjective character.

When *Hamlet* is produced live upon a stage by actors embodying characters producing action for the purposes of a drama to entertain an audience, the interplay of these different features of drama is readily apparent. Elemér Hankiss claims that the tragic mechanism in *Hamlet* is derived not within the text itself but “*between* the tragedy and the spectator” (375). In other words, the impact *Hamlet* has upon its audience depends entirely upon the play’s ability to be performed in such a manner that manipulates the audience’s emotional economy. To accomplish this task, the play has been performed throughout the centuries with countless different wrinkles to create the most potent product upon the stage to satisfy its particular audience. As an example, consider Francisco and Barnardo, the two sentinels in the opening scene of *Hamlet*, as agents of malleability in performances of the play. The cadence and meter of Francisco’s lines suggest he may be played by an actor in such a manner to suggest his romantic affections for Barnardo (Swan). In certain theaters in Elizabethan England, such a rendering of Francisco’s character would be a welcome addition that further mirrors the types of struggle in relationships that resurface throughout the drama. However, a conservative modern performance would shy away from this wrinkle in the drama, as homosexuality is a modern conception of male-male relationships and is abhorred by modernity.

In today's world, with its relentless pursuit of objectivity, directors have become crucial to any production of *Hamlet*. The effect is that critics of these modern performances can attribute even the most subtle deviation from a "standard" performance—which common sense says cannot exist—as the product of the director's vision. Much debate arises concerning the merit of having one sustainable vision throughout the performance of a play. As Michael Taylor explains: "For better or worse, the director, previously of little clout in the era of actor-managers, has emerged as the focal point in this century [20th] of virtually all productions of virtually all plays" (134). Consequently, modern discussions of theatrical performance center on discerning a particular director's vision rather than considering each individual actor's performance as creatively autonomous.

The onslaught of directorial authority likely began in the late nineteenth century when English director William Poels decided to stage a performance of *Hamlet* in London using Elizabethan stage properties and dress (Taylor, 132). The result was a performance that modern audiences found uninteresting, regardless of the merits of attempting to duplicate an Elizabethan production. As this paper argues, modern people cannot comprehend much of the play's intended dramatic emphases since Shakespeare conceived *Hamlet* for a zeitgeist that no longer exists. The desire to create a performance that is wholly Elizabethan can never be fully realized before a modern audience since the interplay between the audience and the actors on stage is a crucial element of Elizabethan theater. In the absence of such interaction, undoubtedly the performance would seem rather odd to the theatergoers. Modern directors who insist upon the authority and accuracy of their productions relative to Shakespeare's England are delusional and callously defiant of the subjectivity of *Hamlet* on stage.

The fluidity of *Hamlet* is apparent in textual studies as well, as decisions regarding which documents of *Hamlet* to use in performance will affect the transmission of the play from the page to the stage. For example, the stage directions in the graveyard scene in Act V differ among Q1, Q2, and F1, and each offers competing conceptions of the scuffle between Hamlet and Laertes. Q2 says nothing about either Hamlet or Laertes entering the grave; F1 asserts only that Laertes leaps in the grave. However, Q1 offers the explicit directions for both Laertes to enter the grave as well as the direction: “*Hamlet leaps in after Laertes*” (Riverside, 1244). While Q1 is rarely used as the base text for the play, many performances have chosen to emulate the stage direction it affords and have Hamlet descend into the grave to confront Laertes. The decision of whether or not to follow Q1 may come largely from considerations of the stage set up, as well as formulations of the presentation of the character Hamlet. If Hamlet is depicted in a performance as possessing an antic disposition and an overriding sense of grief, then perhaps such a Hamlet would need to jump into the grave to demonstrate—albeit in a wildly theatrical manner—his sorrow for the loss of Ophelia (Meagher, 148-149). Yet some performance critics may disagree with such a move, as certain actors portraying Hamlet may give the character an aura of “prince”-liness that is lost after such a rash action (Dawson, 27). Clearly, whether or not the actor portraying Hamlet jumps into the grave is a decision that relies upon the actor’s conceptions of Hamlet’s character and the influences wrought upon the actor’s ideas from the director, as well as the other features of drama. The lack of an objective Hamlet is a deliberate result of Shakespeare’s pen, and the subsequent ambiguity of stage directions reconciles the lack of a supreme didactic authority that allows for multiple performances on the stage.

Another problem with textual objectivity surfaces in the final scene of *Hamlet*. Certain critics highlight the themes of dissimulation by the characters in the drama that have been

present throughout the story; the final scene demands the elucidation of the characters' true motives. For instance, as Charles R. Forker describes: "Gertrude drinks the poisoned cup before Claudius can properly warn her; that he does not snatch it from her hands shows us not only his steel nerves but that he, like Hamlet, must play out his role to the end" (228). Yet while such restraint by Claudius may be taken from a *reading* of *Hamlet* with Forker's interpretation in mind, a performance highlighting this inaction may seem awkward and unbalanced. Textual studies again point to Q1 to resolve this issue that figures prominently in a theatrical rendering of *Hamlet*. In Q2 and F1, the documents themselves create the awkward exchange of Claudius and Gertrude:

Queen: The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet.

Hamlet: Good madam!

King: Gertrude, do not drink.

Queen: I will my lord, I pray you pardon me.

King: It is the pois'ned cup, it is too late. (V.ii.288-292)

Altman explains that it would not have been too late to save the Queen if the King could have swatted the cup away from the Queen while she was saying "I will my Lord" (311). Q1 remedies this apparent discrepancy by inserting a stage direction for the Queen to drink after a salutation to Hamlet and before the King advises her to stop drinking (Altman, 311). Such a subtle addition for the sake of clarity affects the representation of the character Claudius by the actor on stage, yet Shakespeare quite possibly could never have written it into *Hamlet*. Rather, since *Hamlet* was created for its transmission to the stage, its ability to adapt to specific problems reflects the inherent plasticity of the written documents to their performance on stage. Consequently, critics who claim that Shakespeare wished to have Claudius knowingly allow

Gertrude to poison herself have created an illusory construct from textual objectivity that lacks authority.

In the past few generations, access to *Hamlet* has been created through the controversial medium of film. For modernity, film accomplishes the task of providing a fixed interpretation of the play as a solution to performance and its inherently ephemeral nature. A viewer may repeatedly witness a static representation of *Hamlet* that is impossible in theatrical performances. Viewers can then arrive at more uniformed conclusions of the director's vision, and ultimately perhaps use film to achieve more conclusive answers to the play. However, considering Shakespeare created *Hamlet* for an Elizabethan audience that would witness the play on a largely bare stage, the transmission of the play onto a film that is then projected to viewers from a fixed vantage point becomes a question of histrionic credibility. Since Shakespeare was unaware of the mechanism of film, the notion that film can capture his intentions while paradoxically projecting them through a restricted perspective for a non-participative audience is dubious. Iska Alter is especially dismissive of film as a transmission mechanism of Shakespeare:

Resituating *Hamlet*, a dramatic text of particular verbal sophistication and linguistic playfulness within the generic considerations of epic film-making, a form/formula that accentuates any split between action and language, is to raise more general, more troubling, and, perhaps, insoluble questions about the problems inherent in effectively integrating the artifacts of two media with different technical and performative demands as well as viewer expectations; and these exist independently of any single individual who is challenged by the possibilities of such an attempt. (Alter, 168-169)

Alter argues that regardless of the intentions of a film director, the complications that arise from a film of *Hamlet* outweigh any significant benefits that the mechanism of film brings to Shakespearean studies. By removing the audience, the improvisational nature of theater, the stage setting, and the fleeting quality inherent in performance, film falls well short in attempting to reproduce Shakespeare's works. However, some critics recognize the ubiquitous presence of film in the modern world and have sought to bridge the gap between theatrical representations of *Hamlet* and a film adaptation of the work. Regardless, producing Shakespeare through the medium of film remains a contentious issue yet one that will likely remain so long as modern thought dominates the cultural mainstream.

After four centuries of existence, *Hamlet* has continued to elude any attempt to objectify its contents. The ability of *Hamlet* to confound its critics stems largely from the fact that Shakespeare created *Hamlet* within a cultural framework that no longer exists in the modern world. Overt cultural sentiments, such as having Christendom as the psychological paradigm through which most Elizabethans conceptualized their existence, to subtle cultural nuances like the linguistic mechanisms that are different in today's world, prevent modern readers or theater attendees from accessing a form of the play that would be in synch with the Elizabethan zeitgeist. In addition, competing textual authorities of the play make certain that even representations in Elizabethan time were void of any coherent vision or objective truth. *Hamlet* remains at the forefront of intellectual conversation precisely because it lacks any single conclusion to its host of interpretative elements. Indeed, the opening exchange of Barnardo and Francisco gives an idea of the play's elusive meanings: "*Bar*: Who's there? / *Fran*: Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself" (I.i.1-2). These prophetic lines assure both readers and audiences alike that even the most simple of questions will generate a layered and measure response. In a

critical sense, asking ‘who’s there?’—with respect to both *Hamlet* and Hamlet—has led to over four hundred years of responses without a definitive answer. Intuitively, the lack of an accurate response to the question should be quite clear. Within each performance of *Hamlet*, a new answer emerges.

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