
"Act": the Theme of "Acting" in Hamlet

Beginning with Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost, Shakespeare introduces a line of "action" which his hero then follows throughout the narrative. From missed opportunities to sporadic bursts of movement and progression, Hamlet initially struggles with his stagnancy in change and his reluctance to challenge the present and the secure. Much of his inhibition stems from his preoccupation with fate and its cousins fortune, luck and chance. A good deal more originates in his contempt for the falsity of those who appear to be perpetually stage acting. Shakespeare's use of the word "act" serves all of these issues, albeit in different manners for each. The term's placement reflects its evolving definition from stoic noun to dynamic verb alongside Hamlet's development from immobility to action. This is perpetuated when "act" describes his shifting attitudes on fate, and unveils the true nature of his acquaintances through their deliberately artificial roles as performers.

The theme of "acting", of deceptiveness, playing, mimicking, is present throughout much of Hamlet. It is so pervasive, and on such a magnificent scale, that even Hamlet's death is played out in the metaphor of a production. With his dying breath, he declares the onlookers to be "but mutes or audience to this act" (5.2.335), hinting that all of life's revolutions occur as a dramatic, tragic show, broken into acts with definite divisors, as in a play. As an actor in a wayward staging lambasted by fate, Hamlet exits his grand showstopper with an emphatic bow-out. Perpetually on a stage, he exhibits little individuality, instead playing himself to the spectators around him. The female figures, however, are harshly criticized when they take on characters. Hamlet rails mercilessly against Ophelia when he suspects her of playing aloof for her father's thoughtless machinations; his mother is also spared no mercy. When the ghost commands Hamlet to "pursu'st this act" (1.5.84), Shakespeare first designates "act" as a request for Hamlet to carry out his father's command, to complete a noble deed or decree. Then, however, other connotations shift the burden onto the "actions" of the subjects of the ghost's declared "act". This phrase, when taken as an order to pursue the activities of others, becomes a veiled allegation against Gertrude. It is suggested that she is an actress in an elaborate performance assuming the character of a virtuous, concerned queen, when she is actually infinitely more concerned with "the act" of sex. Her lust turns the pure simplicity of "act" into a filthy taboo spoken with capitals. The prostitution of Gertrude and the whoring of Ophelia's loyalty through "acting" then adds a heroic dimension to Hamlet. Now, he defends his father not simply as an obliged son, but rather, as a crusader for justice at the expense of his deceptive women.

Claudius as actor takes on significantly starker dimensions. Hamlet goes after him in a particular fury of passion, because Claudius is the paragon of treachery and pretense. As an impersonation of his brother, he struts the Denmark stage, flaunting the robes and queen of

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Elder Hamlet; a ventriloquist's dummy-king whose performance debases its subject. And yet, Claudius' case highlights a unique irony surrounding the word "act". While consciously, he produces an alternative reality, a spectacle of flashing lights and loud sounds with no intentional truth, several other denotations of "act" suggest a more dire outcome to Claudius' posturing. In a society of excessive performance, perpetuating falsity, the show gradually becomes "a state of accomplished fact or reality" (OED, noun definition 2). Hamlet is threatened by this paradox of truth spawned by lies, and consequently seeks to disrupt the cycle by trapping Claudius in an act of his own making.

Once Hamlet sets up the players in their imaginary mirroring of actual events, he demands of Horatio that when he "see'st that act a-foot/...observe mine uncle" (3.2.78). Now "act" develops an intensely structured playacting form. The limelight is turned on Claudius; the audience factor has been added into the scheme. Whilst Hamlet was previously the viewer of his mother's shameful performance, now Horatio watches. Here, Shakespeare's enthusiasm for duality and parallels is striking. Horatio bears witness to two performances: the obviously fake players and the silently phony King, one on an obviously grand scale, the other's silently playing out on his face.

Perhaps it is this smothering sense of deceit that compels Hamlet to examine the sincerity of his own deeds. He questions his incentive for "action" in his fathers' defense and muses over his function in his own story, in the story of his nation, and of his father's death. Here, "act" indicates assorted variations of fate. Hamlet's inaction derives not only from his inherent disinclination, but also from his reservations about fortune. He alternately toys with the ideas that he is a pawn in fate's game, that he is the centerpiece of a self-governed destiny, that his fortune follows God's acts, that he is an unknowing participant in a string of events produced by a whim of chance. The irony and slight hypocrisy of his love for using "act" rhetorically and his aversion to "act" physically suggests that he yearns to be in motion, yet is terrified of it. Here, "act" hints that in order to bring about a continual pattern of change, a constantly fleeting "act a-foot"(3.2.78), Hamlet must commit a singular, independent deed as a transition. Shakespeare puts him in direct contrast with Claudius to underscore this point; Hamlet's theoretical musings and indecision seems ill-placed beside his uncle, who wanted and lusted and took the initiative and "pursu'st [his] act" (1.5.84). After the first transition, Claudius now has no reserve about acting, changing more to maintain his created world.

However, as Hamlet begins to take dominance over his identity as "Hamlet, the Dane" and acts upon his new self-derived authority, he also comprehends the consequences of malicious acting, and, in his case, acting too late. Claudius, who attempted to perform a production of Elder Hamlet against the bounds of fate's innate hierarchy, despite actually being his antithesis, ultimately suffers enormously. At the tragedy's conclusion, as the majority of the characters lay dying or dead, Hamlet reflects "there are but mutes... to this act" (5.2.335). Indeed, it appears as

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if Shakespeare's conception of "fate" is illustrated here allowing humans the perception of controlling their own destinies until they somehow threaten the balance of the Great Chain. Then, whether they abuse their self-autonomy, or neglect it too long, fate rises up and sets them in their places; here, relinquishing their right to act and relocating them to a silent, stagnant state of death. Destiny brings the apocalypse to those who challenge it. Strangely, it is at this moment of judgment and punishment that Hamlet finally acknowledges the enormity of his performance, and the catastrophic success of his actions by asking Horatio to "report me and my cause aright / to the unsatisfied" (5.2.338-339).

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