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Hamlet: Comedic Tragedy

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is widely recognized as one of the greatest literary works of all time. The brilliant monologues and riveting plot twists no doubt contribute to that honor; however, this tragedy contains a special element that plays like Shakespeare's *Macbeth* do not – humor. In no other tragedy does Shakespeare create a protagonist with a sense of humor like Hamlet. A master of language, Hamlet manipulates words with ease. Hamlet's quick wit is highlighted even more so by the snooping, idiotic brown-nosers who emanate the very essence of what Hamlet despises: things that *seem*. Their stupidity mixed with Hamlet's cleverness make for a humorous play. Homographic and homophonic puns, malapropisms, and witticisms are further sprinkled throughout to not only get a chuckle out of the audience, but also to offset heavy themes such as mortality. In *Hamlet*, subtle humor provides testimony for Hamlet's sanity, highlights the ridiculousness of suck-ups and showcases Shakespeare's ability to ease audiences into topics like death with laughter.

Pesky brown-nosers play a large role in *Hamlet*. These fools' own stupidity and Hamlet's wit make for hilarious exchanges in many scenes usually revolving around attempts to appease the protagonist or expose his madness. These attempts fail miserably, however, with Hamlet consistently out-witting his adversaries. Scenes involving Polonius, Osric, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern highlight the stupidity of those who

fawn and illuminates the main character's genius even more so. The most notable of these brown-nosers is Polonius, who shows himself to be a heavy-worded noble who carries on and on. He ironically says, "brevity is the soul of wit," while giving an eleven-line speech about that very subject (2.2.91). In reality, Polonius is anything but "brief" (2.2.93). He talks entirely too much to the point where the Queen must make a comment about his excessive speech: "more matter, with less art" (2.2.97). Polonius mentions the players coming to Denmark stating eight different genres of play, saying, "either for/ tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical,/ historical-pastoral..." (2.2.382-384). Consequently, the audience finds a bit of lighthearted humor in Denmark's "unweeded garden" (1.2.135).

Humor can also be found during the times that Hamlet uncovers the bad intentions of the suck-ups and deliberately embarrasses them. The spying brown-nosers are often times pointed out and ridiculed by Hamlet because of their false concern for the prince and true loyalty to the wicked Claudius who wishes to keep an eye on Hamlet. Hamlet directly embarrasses these suck-ups and sees right through their intended deception. When Polonius asks Hamlet if he knows who Polonius is, Hamlet identifies him as a "fishmonger" (2.2.175). Hamlet even lures Polonius into exposing himself as a liar by asking him about an imaginary cloud. "Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in/ shape of a camel?" he asks, to which Polonius absurdly agrees, "By th' mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed" (3.2.348-50). Clearly, Polonius is agreeing to procure approval or favoritism from Hamlet, so Hamlet ridicules him saying, "methinks it is like a weasel." When Polonius again agrees with Hamlet ("It is backed like a weasel"), Polonius' lying nature is revealed and Hamlet has subtly compared Polonius to a weasel trying to finesse

information to feed Claudius regarding Hamlet's supposed insanity (3.2.346-9). Hamlet's crafty mind uses the semblance of insanity to reveal lies.

Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, Hamlet's old school chums, further contribute to the humor of the play with their snooping actions and false loyalty. These two men, who are also called by Claudius to spy on Hamlet, are often the subjects of Hamlet's mockery. Hamlet finds every chance to make his two old buddies uncomfortable due to their allegiance to the man who killed his father. When Guildenstern simply asks Hamlet for a "word," Hamlet takes him literally and says, "Sir, a whole history" (3.2.278). Hamlet sees right through these "friends" who do not have his best interests at heart. Throughout the play, the audience has repeatedly witnessed Hamlet's frustration with false appearances, whether it be makeup on women or his mother's sob-show over the death of her first husband. It is not surprising that Hamlet has had enough. An exasperated Hamlet demands of Guildenstern, "'Sblood, do/ you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?" (3.2.341-343), and he tells his mother he will trust Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "as...adders fanged" (3.4.208). Hamlet even labels Rosencrantz a "sponge" for soaking up Claudius' favors (3.4.210). Hamlet's hostility toward his old friends emphasizes his distaste for the show they put on.

At the height of the play's tensions a landowning aristocrat, Osric, is further used to highlight the disingenuousness of fawning brown-nosers. Hamlet tells Osric to put his hat on, to which Osric replies, "I thank your lordship, it is very hot" to which Hamlet responds, "no, believe me, 'tis very cold. The wind is/ northerly" (5.2.97-100). Osric then proceeds to contradict his precious claim – "It is indifferent cold, my lord" – to please Hamlet. To reveal Osric's wavering opinion, Hamlet continues, "but yet methinks it is

very sultry and hot for/ my complexion” (5.2.102-103). Osric again changes his mind to align himself with the young prince. Osric’s “it is very sultry” (5.2.104) is ridiculous and the whole scene echoes Polonius and Hamlet’s exchange about the imaginary cloud. Such fawning behavior must be maddening to Hamlet.

The presence of humor helps to highlight not only Hamlet’s wit, but also sanity. Humor often accompanies scenes where Hamlet expresses his frustrations. Early in the play, Hamlet licenses his snarky remarks with an “antic disposition” (1.5.173). Under the guise of a madman overcome by grief, Hamlet is “allowed” to say some of the most clever, poignant points in the play. Indeed, the very first moment the audience meets Hamlet he cracks a joke about his uncle, claiming that he is “A little more than kin and less than/ kind” (1.2.65-6). Cracking jokes seems to be Hamlet’s coping mechanism and the means through which he expresses his feelings. His rude humor is often pointed toward those who have wronged him, such as Claudius who has wronged him the most.

Hamlet speaks to Claudius disrespectfully saying, “farewell dear mother” to anger him (4.3.52). Only someone in their right mind could think clearly enough to craft a joke based on the Biblical idea that man and wife are one flesh to intentionally anger Claudius. Hamlet’s manipulation of his uncle’s emotions is planned out. Later, Hamlet uses Claudius to make another point about mortality: dead Polonius is at supper – “not where he eats, but where ‘a is eaten” (4.3.21). Hamlet continues to anger Claudius by commenting, “A certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him” (4.3.21-22).

Hamlet juxtaposes a “fat king” to a “lean beggar” saying they are equal at the dinner table of a worm. Shakespeare delicately touches the issue of mortality by making a joke about this sad truth: death is the great equalizer. Respected kings and lowly beggars become

equal in death – an uncomfortable fact for many Elizabethan aristocrats to face. Hamlet further toys with Claudius by telling him, once he does admit where Polonius' body is, “a will stay till you come” (4.3.39). Clearly, Hamlet “know[s] a hawk/ from a handsaw” (2.2.364-365).

The “worm” discussion fittingly precedes the darkest scene in *Hamlet*, the famous graveyard scene. Interestingly, this heavy scene presents the most obvious comical material with some folios even calling the gravediggers the clowns. Through the humor of two clowns burying Ophelia, serious themes are considered. One of the diggers at the beginning of the scene asks if Ophelia seeks “salvation,” when he most certainly means “destruction” due to her committing suicide (5.1.2). The other gravedigger plays off of his counterpart saying, “make her grave straight”– both quickly (straight away) and physically (5.1.3). Malapropisms permeate the scene knocking the clowns' credibility but also licensing them to consider hard topics like suicide and proper burial without being taken too seriously by the audience. Trying to sound scholarly, the uneducated gravedigger attempts to use Latin mistaking “argal” for “ergo,” an hilarious malapropism (5.1.11). The two men continue their humorous exchange when one gravedigger maintains that Adam could not have been the first to bear arms (meaning have a coat of arms), to which the other responds, “the scripture says Adam digged. Could he dig without arms?” (5.1.33/ 34-35). The meat of the scene occurs when Hamlet and his wit arrive meeting their match with one of the gravediggers who decides to take everything Hamlet says literally. Speaking to the gravedigger from outside of the grave Hamlet asks whose grave the digger is digging. The gravedigger replies with a joke – “mine.” Hamlet responds that it could be his “indeed” since he “liest in ‘t,” (5.1.112). The double

meaning – to lie down or to tell a lie – lightens the mood. Shakespeare also slyly pokes fun at Englishmen (those comprising his audience) by having the gravedigger say that Hamlet has been sent off to England where “men are as mad as he” (5.1.140-141). Such humor is important, though, because the mood is about to get morbid.

The mood in this scene changes when Hamlet discovers and holds the skull of Yorick, his childhood jester. He intently contemplates the remnants of the person who made him laugh wildly as a child; Yorick is “Not one now to mock [his] own grinning” (5.1.174-175). Shakespeare uses this as a jumping point to begin ruminating on death as the great equalizer, a fact that the young prince finds depressing. Hamlet discusses men like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar turning to ashes just like Yorick, his childhood friend. Alexander, once a great general, might now be a loam cork, “stopping a bunghole”; Julius Caesar, once a great emperor, might be “turned to clay/ [stuffed into] a hole to keep the wind away” (5.1.207, 216). Again, the audience is reminded that all men are equal in the face of death – everyone returns to dust. Furthermore, the idea that there might not be anything more after life than dust is surprising in a Christian play; the concept is depressing and hard to digest. Consequently, the funniest characters in the play, the gravedigger and Hamlet, are necessary to open the scene because they balance the serious themes being presented at the site of Ophelia’s grave.

Weaving humor with bleak reality softens the harsh ideas Shakespeare puts forth in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare’s eloquent monologues, clever characters, and dark plot twists, all contribute to his best work, but it is the clever juxtaposition of serious themes and humorous dialogue that allows this play to reach its audience in a real way without challenging too harshly ideas about life and death. The play investigates serious themes

like social climbing, falsehoods and death without being too depressing. The clever and witty Hamlet directs the audience's thought by revealing and embarrassing brown-nosers and ruminating on death. Lighthearted laughter juxtaposed against harsh plot results in a most satisfying and entertaining play.

Works Cited

1. Shakespeare, William, and John Crowther. *No Fear Shakespeare: Hamlet*. New York: SparkNotes, 2003. Print.