

METATHEATRE AND REVENGE IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* AND *THE TEMPEST*

William Shakespeare incorporates metatheatrics into both *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. Both metatheatrical structures function as a method of communicating similar concepts of morality on the topic of revenge; although, where *Hamlet* urges the audience to question the nature and assumptions about revenge, and to introspectively consider the human fascination and desire to meet it, only *The Tempest* provides 'forgiveness' as an alternative. Elements such as *Hamlet*'s antic disposition and acting, the internal struggle with fulfilling his father's request for vengeance, and how *Hamlet* defies the audience's expectations of a 'revenge play', all question and add skepticism to the perceived 'necessity' of revenge. *The Tempest* - often considered the most metatheatrical Shakespearian play - provides the character of Prospero, who functions as the 'stage manager' in the play, controlling events and anticipating the other characters' reactions to construct his desired outcome. Because of Prospero's arguably absolute control over the plot, the entire play becomes metatheatrical representation and symbolism. Because of this aspect of 'complete control', it could be argued that Shakespeare was making a statement that 'revenge' may be expected, but it is not obligatory, nor the only option.

The Stage Manager is a vital and multipurpose role in theatre. They assist the director, are in charge of the production during the performance, aid designers, supervisor costumes and props, fulfill many directorial roles, and are responsible for technical arrangements within the play. As a character within a play, a 'stage

manager' character mimics the influence the role has in theatre performances. A 'stage manager' character is given near-complete control over the various elements of the plot. They can arrange and engineer events in the plot, anticipate the responses other characters have to these manipulations, can occasionally direct the end of the play, and can sometimes even control nature and the weather.

Similar to a 'stage manager' role, Hamlet also manipulates situations; however, he cannot be classified as a 'stage manager' figure because he does not have the same degree of control over the plot that the role requires. Hamlet is unable to fully conceive of or control the outcome of the play or the schemes that he constructs; instead, his ability to manipulate situations is heavily influenced by his interactions with other characters. Whereas Prospero adopts a near-omniscient role in *The Tempest* and exercises near-absolute control over external forces - such as the weather - and the direction the plot takes, Hamlet's successful schemes in the play are limited to his ability to alter other characters' perceptions of himself or mask his intentions through conversation and his antic disposition, which casts him in a self-appointed role as an actor. His antic disposition is contradictory because Hamlet has previously expressed his value for authenticity; although he has also introduced the problematic nature of authenticity, because "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" (Hamlet 1.2.82-84).

Even though Hamlet's behaviour is the reason other characters take action - such as Claudius' plot to have Hamlet killed - his intentions were primarily to discern Claudius' guilt and confuse other characters about his sanity, and did not intend or necessarily anticipate the actions other characters' had in response to him. Hamlet's ability to manipulate does not place him into the role of 'stage manager' because he does not have the knowledge and control required to arrange and control other characters. For example, Hamlet is able to engineer certain situations where others eavesdrop on his conversations, but he is not able to anticipate that Polonius is the one hiding behind the tapestry: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell/I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune/Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger." (Hamlet 3.4.32-34). The point in the play where Hamlet comes closest to a 'stage

manager' role and exerts the most control is when he orchestrates the mousetrap play.

This scene gives insight into another aspect of Hamlet's character and other possible motivations for his antic disposition: Hamlet strives toward becoming a 'stage manager' character. He sets up different plots, intending to manipulate perceptions of him and gauge their reactions. It is possible that Hamlet constructs his schemes to gain a sense of control over his circumstances. He exercises as much will as possible, despite being in a role in which he does not perceive as having much agency; because the audience initially believes that Hamlet is a revenge play, the basic assumption is that revenge must be attained, therefore, there is a perception is that his fate has already been decided. Hamlet is in a revenge-tragedy play, but he is attempting to control as many aspects of the plot as he is able to with his limited power as a non-stage manager character. Jill L. Levenson argues that Hamlet's encounter with the players "demonstrates to Shakespeare's audience how the idea for the inner performance, 'The Mousetrap,' evolves in the mind of the protagonist. Like the whole play, this remarkable scene is multifaceted: it shows a complex process and simultaneously reflects on the product" (Levenson 331).

The play eventually fulfills the revenge plot, however, Hamlet's hesitation indicates a search for an alternative to his vengeful task: "To be, or not to be? That is the question/Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune/Or to take arms against a sea of troubles/And, by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep" (Hamlet 3.1.57-61). Hamlet dismisses suicide as a means of escaping revenge, but the play still tries to explore that alternative. Ophelia's predicament mimics Hamlet's situation: her father is murdered by someone who was close to her/who she may have even considered family: "And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord/With almost all the holy vows of heaven" (Hamlet 1.3.600-601). Instead of seeking revenge, Ophelia commits suicide, becoming the tragic victim. The Tempest's ability to forgive results in a revenge-comedy with a more favourable ending.

During the mousetrap play, Hamlet not only instructs the actors on how to act according to his preferences, which he considers the proper method of acting: "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to/you, trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it/as many of your players do, I had as lief the/town crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air/too much with your hand thus, but use all gently," (Hamlet 3.2.1-5) but he does so to gauge Claudius' response to the play. The mousetrap play provides an early example within the play of how life and art mirror each other and how performances are capable of revealing hidden truths about the audience: "The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (Act 2, scene 2, lines 604-605). Many playwrights during this time period claimed that theatre promoted virtuous behaviour in good people and 'caught the conscience' of degenerates. The metatheatricalities of the mousetrap play indirectly implies that Hamlet is also formatted to evoke a particular reaction from the audience. Because the mousetrap play unsettles Claudius by displaying similarities to his own misdeeds, the audience becomes more conscious of possible connections they may have to the characters and themes explored in Hamlet.

The most common first response to this play is a sense of frustration toward Hamlet for not implementing an act of swift revenge. The audience is expecting Hamlet to follow the typical structure of a 'revenge' play, and therefore, become unsettled when the play defies expectations. Prospero plays a vital role in *The Tempest*; however, because of the near-absolute control Prospero exercises over the plot, he appears to stand outside of the play to a certain extent.

Unlike Prospero, Hamlet does not have complete control. Hamlet is an 'outsider' within the play, but he does not stand outside of the play itself. Rather, where Prospero is often viewed as a 'stage manager', Hamlet's role appears as a character placed in the wrong genre. His inaction does not align with the typical hero of a revenge play. Hamlet's personality and behaviour do not function as the audience would expect from that genre, instead, they see a character who is trying to force himself to fit a role which he is incompatible with. The tension created between his true character and his assigned role leads to many displays of Hamlet's internal conflict. Shakespeare's use of conflict between a character and their role in the play creates space for a larger commentary on the nature of

revenge.

As the play progresses, the scenes in which Hamlet struggles with the decision to complete his task of revenge could, at times, seem tedious and many; however, shows that revenge should not be assumed as obligatory. As Hamlet undergoes psychological distress due to this task, even contemplating suicide, the play causes the audience to reconsider their negative reaction to delayed revenge fulfillment, and question their own desire for revenge: "The play Hamlet seems almost as obsessed with the idea of theater as the character Hamlet is with his more metaphysical concerns. Whatever else it accomplishes, this great tragedy succeeds in taking the measure of theater: its possibilities and limits, the mechanics of production, the connection between the world of the play and the world of the audience" (Levenson 330). The alternative of 'forgiveness' is not posited as a valid option in this play, as it is in *The Tempest*. The only alternative considered is suicide, which further indicates how severe Hamlet's task is.

Other Shakespearian plays have presented characters who fill a 'stage manager' role within their plays. There is no inherently negative stigmatization attributed to the absolute power these characters have access to. Despite being the 'stage manager' within the play *Othello*, Iago's manipulation of the sequence of events in the plot being negatively perceived has nothing to do with the role itself; rather, the aversion to Iago's control is due to his morally corrupt personality and unjustified motives. Whereas Iago is condemned because his manipulative actions result in tragic deaths and are seemingly unprovoked, Prospero's role as the 'stage manager' in *The Tempest* possesses a more positive interpretation.

To some extent, Prospero's behaviour - such as crashing the ship on the island, enslaving the spirit of Ariel, or driving the shipwrecked people to insanity - could be negatively interpreted; however, each action Prospero takes or instructs others to take, is intended to end in peace. Despite crashing the ship on the island, the audience is assured that the passengers are unharmed; Ariel is under Prospero's command: "Go make thyself like a nymph o'th'sea. Be subject/To no sight but thine and mine, invisible to every eyeball else," (*The Tempest* 1.2.304-6) but has been rescued from an eternity of imprisonment and plans to eventually free Ariel; and the

insanity inflicted upon the stranded men is temporary and designed to make them more grateful and satisfied with what they already have, and less likely to take things for granted.

Shakespeare's metatheatrical design of *The Tempest* transforms each element of the play to also represent an aspect of theatrical production. For example, The island becomes a stage, Prospero is the stage manager and an actor, a disguise and costumes, and all the other characters are actors who are following a performance which Prospero has designed for them. Prospero approaches his role as 'stage manager' in a rather calculating, but not entirely detached, way. He is aware of all the other characters and where they are on the island, and -from a distance - strategically moves characters around as if they are chess pieces: "And, as thou badest me/In troops I have dispersed them 'bout the isle" (*The Tempest* 1.2.220-221). He appears informed of schemes which characters plan against each other or against him, and is able to easily control the circumstances of the plot and anticipate the other characters' reactions; however, Prospero is also a character himself - he openly acknowledges in the epilogue that he is playing a role "With the help of your good hands/Gentle breath of yours my sails/Must fill, or else my project fails/Which was to please. Now I want/Spirits to enforce, art to enchant"(5.E.10-14). Because Prospero is a character as well, he has personal stakes in the outcome of the plot and is attached to another character, his daughter Miranda.

In *Who Hears in Shakespeare?: Auditory Worlds on Stage and Screen* Laury Magnus lists several scenes in which the characters of Ariel or Prospero 'become invisible', yet are still visible to the audience: "These 'invisible' appearances seemingly need nothing more elaborate in the way of stage business than for the actor to say that he or she is invisible" (Magnus, 101). The audience's ability to see 'invisible' characters serves as another reminder that the play is a theatrical performance, preventing viewers from becoming too caught up in the plot to recognize the metatheatrical commentary. Additionally, the audience is aligned with Prospero's dual existence of being a character within the play, but also outside of it; both the audience and Prospero are -for the most part- omniscient 'invisible observers' who can see past the illusions of the play -such as the 'invisible' characters or the 'device' that gives the impression of a disappearing banquet. Prospero is the 'stage manager', without

whom the play would not exist; however, he also places himself in the role of spectator to a certain degree "Prospero my lord shall know what I have done," (The Tempest 2.1.290) but the play would also essentially cease to exist without an audience. Therefore, the alignment between the audience and Prospero effectively blurs the line between reality and theatre.

Prospero's metatheatrical awareness of the play seems to give him a unique perspective on the concept of revenge. The pursuit of revenge is not all-consuming, as Prospero is able to consider an alternative that can lead to a satisfactory outcome for a larger amount of characters. The concept of revenge is a primary theme throughout the play; however, with the exception of Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano, whose ending remains ambiguous, Prospero engineers 'joy and appeasement for all' which characterizes *The Tempest* as a revenge-comedy. It could be argued that despite Prospero's decision to forgive, he still achieves his revenge throughout the play. Prospero's character alters revenge as a concept; he does not need to forgo revenge in the name of peace, but at the same time he does not need to destroy and kill his enemies to achieve it. Instead of pursuing revenge to the point of self-destruction or self-sabotage, as it is likely that Miranda's opinion of him would have significantly decreased, he is able to satisfy himself with the knowledge of his enemies' temporary distress, meanwhile constructing a universally beneficial ending.

The metatheatrical techniques used within these plays help to facilitate the arguments that revenge is not obligatory, that alternate outcomes -such as 'forgiveness'- can be considered, and asks the audience to reflect on their own views of revenge. The metatheatrical approaches set up a more engaging relationship with the audience which allows these concepts to be more readily analyzed introspectively. *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* have rather different metatheatrical focuses; *Hamlet* contains a play within its play and constructs the concept of theatre into almost its own character, where *The Tempest* provides metatheatrical representations and symbolism to convey themes and ideas. *Hamlet*'s displacement within the play and struggle to fulfill the audience's expectations raises questions about the nature of revenge and people's perception of it. *The Tempest*, however, offers an alternative to revenge through a 'stage

manager' character.

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