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Dexterity: The Agility of the Mind or Body?

Shakespeare's usage of language in his plays constantly suggests double meanings in a modern reader's eyes, yet the idea of "double meaning" may go well beyond the contemporary definitions that his audience may be analyzing. The word "dexterity", as used in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* might seem to be conveying the idea of speed and agility, but the historical English definition reflects a different explanation. In act 1 scene 2 of *Hamlet*, when reminiscing on his mother's remarriage, Prince Hamlet states, "With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!/It is not, nor it cannot come to good." (162-163). The definition of this word varies slightly throughout the years, but mainly remains consistent. For starters, from 1527 to 1874, the term dexterity was defined as "Mental adroitness or skill; 'readiness of expedient, quickness of contrivance, skill of management' (Johnson); cleverness, address, ready tact. Sometimes in a bad sense: cleverness in taking an advantage, sharpness" (OED). Additionally, from 1577 to 1805, the term was said to be "A dexterous or clever act; in bad sense, a piece of 'sharp practice'" (OED). Both of these definitions were around during Shakespeare's lifetime and likely were used in relation to Hamlet describing his mother's remarriage. Though she did literally act quickly, "within a month" (Shakespeare, line 149), the definition also suggests that the idea of dexterity goes beyond physical speed and relates to mental agility just as much. Shakespeare uses the word dexterity to further develop Prince Hamlet's skeptical and mad state, utilizing the language to describe the remarriage as a conspiracy against his mother. Though it is not clear if Gertrude was married to

King Hamlet due to political reasons or if she was involved with Claudius before her husband died, it raises the question of whether or not Hamlet believed she was. With the historical term "dexterity" having negative affiliations, such as manipulation, cleverness, and immorality, Hamlet's state of mind may have been affected by his internal perceptions of his mother. Perhaps Prince Hamlet believes Gertrude married his father for politics, and now is conveniently remarried to Claudius to stay in that chain of power, defined as "cleverness in taking an advantage" in the OED. Or, maybe he even believes she was involved with Claudius before King Hamlet's death and planned his murder alongside him. Regardless, as the definitions suggest, and as Prince Hamlet's resentment shows, the queen's reasoning for her actions were unethical yet intentional, as well as conveniently fast. These hypotheses line up with the definitions the OED provided, specifically the idea of a "clever act" and "readiness of expedient". Similarly, the Lexicons of Early Modern English provides an explanation of the term from *Queen Anna's New World of Words* by John Florio (1611), stating that dexterity is seen as "vse[ing] dexterity or discretion in pursuit of any businesse." In other words, this definition illustrates Hamlet's belief that his mother's actions were out of an aspiration for business (power, politics). With these definitions in mind, it can be assumed that Hamlet is confident that Gerturde had manipulative intentions that dictated her remarriage, showing that the significance of the term "dexterity" is in accordance with the play's themes.

Though the definition of dexterity as provided in the Oxford English Dictionary seems to conform to the themes and perceptions of the play, the etymology diverges from them. When looking at the etymology of the word, originally borrowed from Latin, *dexteritās*, the root "dexter" had literal and figurative meanings (Oxford English Dictionary). During Shakespeare's lifetime, the OED states that the figurative meaning was the "opposite of sinister", as used in

Heraldry. Though this definition was said to be from 1562, which is about a year before Shakespeare, with the other examples provided in the OED, the term showed its persistence to be used as the "opposite of sinister" later on during Shakespeare's times. For example, a quote by J. Marbeck from *Booke of Notes & Common Places* 270 in 1581 states, "Aristotle in Politices, admonisheth that men which haue learned to do sinister things, ought not be compelled to doe thinges dextere." In this example, Aristotle is condemning those who do "sinister things", and then proceeds to use "dextere" as an antonym, thus suggesting that dexter was used as the opposite of evil during Shakespeare's times. Thus, the etymology would contradict the idea that Gerturde had evil or "sinister" intentions, which is an interesting finding. Though the definition and etymology juxtaposed each other, the definition clearly parallels the plot of the play more. With that being said, it would make sense that the definition aligns logically in the context of the scene, seeing as the definition provides a more accurate representation of the word than the etymology.

As we navigate the historical definitions, we see that the language used in *Hamlet* provides more meaning and context to Hamlet's state of mind, which shapes the larger theme of madness and corruption in the play. When looking back, the word "dexterity" is not used again in *Hamlet*–however, after checking the Online Concordance of Shakespeare, we see this term used in *Henry IV, Part 1*. After Prince Henry and Fallstaff play a trick, the Prince says, "And, Falstaff, you carried/ your guts away as nimbly, with as quick dexterity" (268-269). Fallstaff may have been physically quick, but in this context, he was involved in a ploy, lining up with the general definition of dexterity as seen in the OED. Thus, seeing as Shakespeare has used the same language in a similar way in other pieces, it is safe to conclude that Hamlet's usage of "dexterity" conforms to the historical definitions of the term.

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