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Hamlet's Humor as Control

In the early 17th century Hamlet decided “To put an antic disposition on” (1.5.175). Since that time, scholars have quarreled over whether Hamlet is sane or insane during the play. In this essay, I argue that Hamlet's ability to use humor to control people is evidence for him being sane. Hamlet uses humor to establish himself as intellectually superior to other characters. This is done in a deliberate and consistent manner only achievable by a sane person.

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a tragedy by genre. The play's full name *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* says as much. The perpetual suffering of Hamlet and death of nearly all the main characters makes this especially clear. However, one cannot help but notice the subtle yet persistent use of humor throughout the play. In even the gloomiest scenes and the most heated arguments there is comedy. Take for example, the discussion of the grave diggers in 5.1. As the two “clowns” dig a grave for Ophelia, they parody lawyer speech and tell Hamlet the grave is for no man or woman because those are living things.

This comedy serves three prominent functions. The first is to keep the audience engaged and happy. Such is true for any humor in any story. To provoke laughter, a tangible sign of joy, is to please. The second function is closely tied to the first. The comedy also relieves the tension of the relentlessly tragic storyline. *Hamlet's* tragedy touches on subjects of incestuous desire, misogyny, and mortality, amongst others. These heavy topics one after another would make for a cruel, depressing read. The final prominent function of comedy in *Hamlet* is to differentiate Hamlet from the other characters. Throughout the play, the protagonist demonstrates his mastery of various types of humor: from sneering to satirical. His intellectual ability and uniqueness are made clear. This essay will focus on this third function. Below I identify examples of Hamlet's

humor as control, explain their forms, and argue how this comedic ability is an indication of sanity.

In 1.2 Hamlet makes his first joke. After King Hamlet's death, Hamlet continues to wear black mourning clothes. This upsets Claudius.

CLAUDIUS. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

HAMLET. Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun. (1.2.66-67)

The Prince of Denmark puns "sun" to the homophone "son," meaning offspring. The type of humor used is "laugh-at-life." With the death of King Hamlet, Hamlet has become a son for the second time. Being someone's son is a happy thought, comparable to being in the warm sun. However, just like too much sun can be overwhelming, one can be overwhelmed by being the son of too many. This subtle word play demonstrates Hamlet's dislike for the new king in a way that Claudius can't detect. Hamlet is technically the child in the relationship. By toying with the king's intellect, the prince ensures that "child" is a title and not a role. The person in control is made clear. This line sets up a role reversal for the rest of the book.

The second example of comedy comes from Hamlet and Horatio's first interaction.

HORATIO. My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

HAMLET. I prithee do not mock me, fellow student.

I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

HORATIO. Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.

HAMLET. Thrift, thrift, Horatio. (1.2.176-180)

This is another example of laugh-at-life humor. It is employed by satire. Hamlet identifies Horatio's lie and gives him a satirical benefit of the doubt. Hamlet criticizes Horatio in a way that cannot be responded to. The remark is, on the surface, a complement. Hamlet makes clear he

thought Horatio was being thrifty, rather than inconsiderate, by combining these two events into one trip. Horatio is left embarrassed for his lying and indebted to Hamlet for the complement. That Hamlet identified the lie so readily shows he has a handle on the mind of Horatio. That Horatio admits so quickly shows he doesn't have a handle on the mind of the prince.

Hamlet uses humor as control twice in dealing with Polonius. After speaking with the king and queen, Polonius plans to test whether or not Hamlet is mad in love for Ophelia. The actual conversation becomes an inquiry into the mind of Polonius.

POLONIUS. Do you know me, my lord?

HAMLET. Excellent well. You are a fishmonger.

POLONIUS. Not I, my lord.

HAMLET. Then I would you were so honest a man. (2.2.173-176)

Hamlet begins by establishing his seeming insanity. This allows the protagonist freedom in word choice. A confused person can say anything and have it believed as genuine thought. Hamlet then uses this freedom to elicit reaction in Polonius. Calling Polonius a fishmonger is clearly a humorous insult. The insult is subtle because Hamlet is apparently not right in mind. He may genuinely believe that Polonius is a fishmonger. Polonius cannot belittle a fishmonger because Hamlet may believe they are noble people. The result is Polonius not denying Hamlet's moniker, and so being controlled by Hamlet.

In 3.2, Polonius attempts to direct Hamlet once again. Polonius is to escort Hamlet to the queen. Hamlet uses mockery to direct Polonius instead.

POLONIUS. My lord, the queen would speak with you, and presently.

HAMLET. Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

POLONIUS. By th' mass and 'tis, like a camel indeed.

HAMLET. Me thinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS. It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET. Or like a whale.

POLONIUS. Very like a whale.

HAMLET. Then I will come to my mother by and by. (3.3.367-76)

Hamlet agrees that he will see his mother, however on his own time (i.e., “by and by”) and after re-establishing his ability to control Polonius. The conditional surrender shows Hamlet has a difficult time conceding control, especially to Ophelia’s father. Hamlet listens only out of respect for his mother. The protagonist affirms this by using humor to mock Polonius. Hamlet can make Polonius see whatever he wants in the clouds. The will of the two characters is juxtaposed. Hamlet will act on his own terms. Polonius will be a puppet; fetching Hamlet for the queen and being agreeable to someone who he thinks is unstable.

The final instance of Hamlet’s deliberate use of humor to control people comes from the play’s final scene. Laertes and Hamlet are interrupted by Osric, a courtier with a message from King Claudius. Hamlet quickly identifies Osric’s agreeability and uses the humor of mockery to control him.

HAMLET. Your bonnet to his right use. ‘Tis for the head.

OSRIC. I thank your lordship, it is very hot.

HAMLET. No, believe me, ‘tis very cold; the wind is
northerly.

OSRIC. It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed.

HAMLET. But yet methinks it is very sultry and hot for my complexion.

OSRIC. Exceedingly, my lord; it is very sultry, as ‘twere – I

cannot tell how. (5.2.79-87)

Osric's thoughts are replaced by Hamlet's in the same instantaneous manner as with Polonius. This inception is the ultimate form of control. Hamlet demonstrates his ability to overwhelm the conscious. The conversation is able to keep an innocent tone through its humor. When noticed along with other examples, his humor is unarguably manipulative.

The question of whether Hamlet is sane or insane requires another question: What does it mean to be sane? The Oxford English Dictionary defines "sane" as "Sensible, rational; free from delusive prejudices or fancies." Hamlet's humor is too well-crafted to be considered irrational. No one is able to intellectually overwhelm Hamlet. This is because his humor is subtle and well-paced, not because he is irrational.

A stronger support still for Hamlet's sanity is how consistent the prince is. Taken individually, these examples of Hamlet's humor come off as incidental. Individually, they make a case for Hamlet being insane through his oddity. Five examples of humor leading to control says something different. These examples are consistent in that, when Hamlet wants control he takes it. This is most clearly the case with Polonius, Horatio and Claudius. All of these men have slighted King Hamlet in one way or another. Hamlet wants to make sure he is not slighted himself. The Prince of Denmark deliberately controls them through his ability to use humor to subvert their intellect. The errant example is Osric. Hamlet controls Osric for lack of other control in his life. The prince has killed the king and thrown his family into chaos. What he can control, he will.

Hamlet's other insane acts are part of a façade. Hamlet's ambiguous sanity is used as a complement to his humor. The combination of these two things ensure that the protagonist is able to control any given discourse. When Hamlet lacks a façade of insanity and desire to

control, he is more vulnerable to being controlled himself. Take for example, the intellectual challenge of the gravedigger. The prince maintains his humor abilities but lacks the expectation of being crazy and desire for control. The two have a well-matched duel of wordplay. In other instances, Hamlet can choose his words without them being examined for any sort of logical value. A closer inspection reveals how deliberate they are. These words are more than humor, they are an agent for control. Their consistency and deliberateness are signs of a sane, rational man.

Works Cited

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