A Study of Hamlet’s Tragic Comedy

Although Shakespeare has undeniably captured the sorrowful aura of tragedy in Hamlet, to ignore his blatant use of comedy and witty humor within the play would be to conform to the dull and “barren spectators” that Prince Hamlet warns his own players against (Ham. 3.2.43). However, because the play functions most prominently as a tragedy, and because students of Shakespeare more often read his work silently rather than witness on-stage performances, much of Hamlet’s jocular nature is lost to modern audiences. Such a loss, we may find, proves significantly detrimental to our interpretations of the tragedy itself. However, a better understanding of Shakespeare’s use of Elizabethan comedic convention within the play should provide audience members with a more accurate and ultimately improved interpretation of the complex and multifaceted nature of the tragedy as a whole.

Let us first acknowledge that Shakespeare employs comedic techniques ambiguously, not only relieving his audience from the melancholic tragedy, but also inviting them to ponder the complexities of the plot. The effect of this juxtaposed humor and grief is notably similar to the mysterious smile of DaVinci’s “Mona Lisa” (de Grazia 231). The woman’s coy smile, in contrast to the dark and serious setting behind her, adds an ironic element to the painting. Her confrontational gaze directly engages her viewers, establishing an interactive bond between art and viewer; fiction and reality. Similarly, Shakespeare’s incorporation of mild comedy within tragedy introduces an irony which stimulates the audience’s intellect, inviting them to actively

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1 Unless indicated otherwise, all quotes from Hamlet are taken from the Folger Shakespeare Library Hamlet, ed. Mowat and Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992).
participate in the story itself. In other words, Shakespeare’s subtle jokes not only provide a break from the intense grief of tragedy, but also cause his audience to think and reflect.

However, because this light playfulness is often upstaged by the play’s overwhelmingly tragic atmosphere, laughter is reserved only for Shakespeare’s most observant and perceptive audience members. In this way, comic relief in *Hamlet* reflects the aptitude of its intended audience. Even beyond the theater, however, humor and laughter of Elizabethan society served as a test for superior intellect. Indira Ghose articulates this concept, acknowledging the commonly accepted Elizabethan belief that “to laugh at every word or deed is the sign of a fool; to laugh at none the sign of a blockhead” (19). This concern to avoid appearing a “fool” or “blockhead” demonstrates Elizabethan emphasis on proper behavior. That is, though laughter may be indicative of sophisticated individuals, in excess or used inappropriately, it may also expose the fool. Thus, laughter was viewed as a bodily function “like spitting and sneezing . . . [that] called for self-control” (19). Assuming Shakespeare also shared this view, the presence of comedians, comic structures, and light wordplay within *Hamlet* are intended most directly for the intellectual elite. Laughter and recognition of Shakespeare’s humor and wit of Shakespeare speaks not only to an Elizabethan’s intelligence, but also to his social, gentlemanly status. Thus, *Hamlet*, though indisputably tragic, encourages modest and suppressed laughter for those quick enough to pick up on it.

Despite its appeal to educated, well-learned audiences, *Hamlet’s* comedy also maintains an authenticity applicable to the common man. Shakespeare’s play with two seemingly opposite emotions emulates the coexistence of tears and laughter within the real human experience. In this way, the ambiguous emotion in *Hamlet* mirrors reality. The comedic genre, as a whole, playfully exaggerates the “ubiquitous…ordinary, everyday life” of the average man (Berger 5).
While “tragedy was thought to be the genre treating of nobility,” dealing with the more serious, urgent, and dramatic concerns of royal and important figures, comedy ridicules the simple struggles of everyday people (Ghose 58). While the tragic structure of Hamlet indeed speaks to the solemn complexities of the nobility, its comedic interruptions allow its characters to connect to their audience on an authentic and relatable level. Therefore, Hamlet, like the “Mona Lisa,” speaks to its audience in a more conversational, interactive and thereby, human manner.

This humanity also becomes apparent through Hamlet’s plot structure as well. Susan Snyder conveniently outlines the aspects of comedy that would have been familiar to Elizabethan theatergoers. In so doing, Snyder references the “frame actions and multiple plots” typical of Elizabethan comedy (29). As far as Hamlet is concerned, however, Snyder asserts that in “offer[ing] a heroic pageant and a tragedy, comically at odds with their own actions and acted so as to remind the audience constantly that it is watching a play,” dramatists such as Shakespeare establish a relationship between actors and their audience (36). For example, the metadramatic performance of The Murder of Gonzaga speaks to the humanity of Shakespeare’s actors by allowing Hamlet and other characters to briefly become audience members, themselves. In comedy, such multiplicity would speak to the ridiculous, overexaggerated nature of actors and the stage. For instance, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the multiple plots (i.e. the intertwined love stories, the Fairy kingdom, the mischief of Puck, Bottom’s misfortune, etc.) distance the actors from their audience. Here, the interconnected stories within one overarching narrative seek only to entertain and playfully confuse; the audience knows as they watch, that this is not reality. Rather, this convergence of several absurd stories, makes the play seem even more far-fetched. However, use of this technique in a tragedy such as Hamlet, may instead speak to the authenticity and humanity of the prince’s character. That is, the transformation from actor to
audience member places Hamlet and other characters on the same plane as the observers seated in the theater seats, suggesting that Hamlet’s character possesses some degree of consciousness and perhaps self-awareness similar to that of his human audience—at least in the sense that he recognizes the alternate world of the theater. In this way, Shakespeare’s obvious use of this narrative framing technique so familiar to the comedic genre, also serves a more serious function: while in comedy, these multiple plots add to the humorous confusion of the story, in tragedy, this structure enhances the connection between actor and audience on a more philosophical level, affirming the character’s sense of reality (i.e. by consciousness and self-awareness). Although this metadramatic structure may indeed be acknowledged by audiences unaware of its comic connotations, recognition of its function as a perversion of comedy may shed light on the stark contrast between the humor expected in comedy and the devastating, unhappy events of this play and the tragedy genre in general.

Though plot structure indeed contributes to the dichotomous relationship of tragedy and comedy, Shakespeare’s comedians are perhaps the most outstanding vessels of ambiguity. Though clowns are typically associated with comedy, Shakespeare deliberately incorporates the comic throughout his tragedies. In fact, the Second Quarto and Folio versions of Hamlet explicitly request that the Gravediggers be played by “clowns,” or professional comic actors². Similarly, film adaptations of the play have included professional comedians like Bill Murray, Robin Williams, and Billy Crystal to play the roles of Polonius, Osric, and the Gravedigger. However, the presence of clowns does not officially classify Hamlet as a comedy. Rather, these clowns function quite differently. Essentially, the tragic clown “is posited as an antithesis to serious concerns.” (Berger 6) As an “antithesis,” the comic is not necessarily the hero or protagonist, but instead a light, playful counterpart to the play’s tragic structures. Therefore,

² Note 0 SD. Hamlet. Ed. Mowat and Werstine. (pg. 238).
these clowns serve a more intellectual purpose than those of comedy. Though the common, uneducated audience member can see the blatant humor in slapstick, physical comedy or even playful banter, only the observant audience member will chuckle at the subtle witticisms of tragedy. Thus, even the clown’s most humorous jokes evoke only a controlled and suppressed reaction from a thoughtful, audience (Ghose 58). For instance, when the Gravedigger asks, “What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?” (Ham. 5.2.42-43), we smile amusingly at his answer, “a grave-maker. The houses he makes lasts till doomsday” (Ham. 5.2.60-61). Although this riddle may not cause us to double-over in laughter, it may certainly elicit an appreciative smile for the clever wordplay. Still, in this particular case, the chief restriction to excessive laughter is the joke’s morbid undertones. While we may acknowledge the Gravedigger’s wit, his mirth is somewhat upstaged by the somber reminder of death and mortality. Thus, the tragic clown is himself a paradox, an expression of ambiguity, causing us to stop and consider the almost amusing irony of life itself.

Although the first and most obvious Shakespearean comedians are, of course, the Gravediggers, perhaps the most consistent source of comical conversation may be found in the profound and philosophical Polonius. We often may find ourselves smirking with sympathy and fondness as the wise old fool loses himself in his own thought and tangents, which the on-stage actors seem to disregard as insignificant rambling. In this way, Polonius occupies the traditional comic role, “bomolochos,” or “the buffoon . . . function[ing] to promote the festive mood” (Snyder 44). Snyder argues that the clown, like any other structure of the comic plot, seeks not only to provide the audience with lively and playful refreshment, but also to pointedly acknowledge the play’s philosophical components (43). Polonius accomplishes just that. Though his comments and advice may be true and insightful, meaning is lost in their ridiculous
presentation. For instance, in his final speech to Laertes, his long list of aphorisms sound more like the clucking and nagging of an overprotective mother than the wise words of a knowledgeable philosopher:

Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,

Nor any unproportioned thought his act.

Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.

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Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice.

(\textit{Ham.} 1.3.65-74)

Again, as in the case of the Gravedigger, while we may not respond to such humor with irrepressible laughter, most will chuckle at the old man’s innocent lack of self-awareness.

Shakespeare’s clown may also function simply as comic relief. Although jokes and humor indeed allow an escape from the darkness of murder and revenge, they also serve as a complementary structure to that of tragedy. As A.P. Rossiter would so astutely suggest, the presence of comedy within tragedy produces very much the same contrasts and exaggerations as those of relief sculpture (Snyder 5): comedic moments reemphasize tragic moments, as low relief sculpture draws attention to the protruding high relief. In this way, the shape and image of the sculpture becomes more apparent to the viewer. Similarly, the clowns of the story allow the mind to focus on the tragic complexities, particularly those embodied by the protagonist (Reid 49-50). Robert Lanier Reid argues that one such way Shakespeare’s clowns accomplish this is by contrasting the exclusive, subjective logic of the heroic characters with the worldly, materialistic reasoning of the clowns. This contrast subsequently allows the audience to acknowledge the hero’s human imperfections:
The fool’s sensible simplicity widens the psychic scene, exemplifying much that the protagonist tries to ignore or transcend—especially physical shortcomings and relational needs that have been lost in the rush for power and autonomy. *(Shakespeare’s Tragic Form 50-51)*

While Hamlet’s primary concern is vengeance, Polonius insists that the prince’s madness is rooted in his love for Ophelia. And herein lies the dramatic irony which so contributes to the sad hilarity of Hamlet’s interaction with Polonius: *we* know that Hamlet feigns madness as a part of his revenge plan, but *Polonius*, by logically sound, but clearly inaccurate reasoning, believes that Hamlet’s madness may be cured by mending his relationship with Ophelia. Thus Polonius acknowledges Reid’s concept of “relational needs…lost in the rush for power and autonomy,” and the duty of the archetypal fool to provide the common, simple perspective to the complex plot. Therefore, Polonius attempts not only to expose the Prince’s flawed logic and character, but also, in a sense, to save the prince from himself. In this way, Polonius considers himself to be clever and wise, but only Hamlet and the audience seem to notice his mistaken understanding of the situation. Still, Polonius confides in us, inviting us to observe the obvious signs of a distraught lover:

How say you by that? Still harping on my daughter. Yet he knew me not at first; he said I was a fishmonger. He is far gone. And truly, in my youth, I suffered much extremity for love, very near this. I’ll speak to him again.

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Though this be madness, yet there is
method in’t.

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How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of. I will leave him and suddenly contrive the means of meeting between him and my daughter.

(\textit{Ham.} 2. 2. 204-208, 223-224, 226-231)

The irony of course, is that Hamlet also provides his audience with commentary. In response to Polonius’s apparent misunderstanding of the situation, Hamlet categorizes the senile old man as a “tedious old fool” (\textit{Ham.} 2.2.237). Thus, in this example, we see the difference in priority and concern between the hero and the clown: while the hero, Hamlet, is plagued by questions of morality and existentialism, Polonius the “bomoluchos” is distracted from these deep philosophical questions by the comparably insignificant issue of Hamlet and Ophelia’s broken love.

Polonius’s devoted efforts to remedy this relatively minor problem however, may also expose the audience to Hamlet’s moral status. More simply, the simplistic, rule-abiding innocence of the stage fool often discloses the inconsistent morality of the hero. By comparing Polonius’s character to those of comic celebrities like Charlie Chaplin, “the paragon” of “tragicomedy” (Berger 119), we may clearly observe this effect. In his analysis of Charlie Chaplin, Jerome Stolintz acknowledges that the archetypal clown perpetually expresses honest intentions (48). However, these humorous characters act on these honest intentions with such
obsessive determination that they often appear “stupid or unintelligent” to their audiences (48). For instance, Polonius’s fixation on mending the lovers’ relationship seems absurd when compared to Hamlet’s concern for murder and revenge. Similarly, as Stolintz points out, Chaplin’s character expresses genuine interest in the welfare of others (46). Thus, both Polonius and Chaplin persistently do the right thing, regardless of the situation. In this way, despite their apparent ridiculousness, the comics reflect a “morally praiseworthy” attitude (49). Heroes like Hamlet, however, are often morally ambiguous; their actions may seem morally sound from one perspective while completely unethical from another. Therefore, the dependable, virtuous nature of the clown brings out the complex, questionable morality of the hero.

Shakespeare’s greatest breach in the comedic tradition, however, is perhaps the death of his clown, Polonius. In comedy, despite misfortune and sequences of seemingly destructive events, the clown is ultimately guaranteed “happily-ever-after.” Thus, if Polonius were a character in a Shakespearean comedy, his death would be unlikely. However, despite his comic role, as a tragic character, death is nearly inevitable. Nevertheless, the ambiguous nature of this role makes his death somewhat symbolic. Most clearly, Polonius’s death represents the death of comedy, or rather, its absorption by tragedy. Hamlet’s farewell address to Polonius’s corpse demonstrates this effect:

Though wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell.

I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune.

(Ham. 3.4.38-40)

Here, Hamlet appears to be dismissing comedy altogether. The “wretched, rash, intruding fool” will no longer disturb the grave and important matters of the tragic nobility. Without Polonius, the tragedy may continue as intended, without any interruptions by philosophical rants and
rambling aphorisms. The audience may now focus their attention wholly on grief and misfortune, reflecting without distractions on the miserable microcosm of our flawed society. Similarly, the death of Polonius also foreshadows the several deaths to follow. That is, in killing the comedian, Hamlet has essentially murdered the hope that all chaos and disaster will be redeemed in the end. Polonius’s death marks the beginning of what will later become a homicidal frenzy. In this way, Shakespeare ends the battle between comedy and tragedy, allowing tragedy to ultimately prevail. Such victory reminds the audience of their own mortality, suggesting that, though comedy exists even in reality, it too must someday die.

Therefore, although Shakespeare has created a somewhat ambiguous plot, employing techniques familiar to both Elizabethan comedy and tragedy, the genre of Hamlet itself, is never questioned. Rather, Shakespeare’s use of comedy further emphasizes the tragic elements of his plot, adding to the play’s complexity. Use of archetypal characters and structural conventions engages the audience and encourages active thought and reflection, posing questions and philosophies in a recognizable, easily understood format or framework. Clearly Shakespeare has mastered the craft of combining genres. Perhaps playwright David Garrick presents the most accurate observation of Shakespeare’s balanced, intertwined comic-tragic structure in his address to the personifications of the two genres:

Each sep'rate charm; you grave, you light as feather,

Unless that Shakespeare bring you both together;

On both by nature's grant, that Conq'ror seizes,

To use you when, and where and how he pleases.

(Garrick 316)
Works Cited


Works Consulted


