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The Play’s the Thing

In *Confessions*,St. Augustine tells a story of a student named Alypius, who was invited to attend a Roman gladiatorial contest. Alypius was morally opposed to such events, but he figured he was strong enough to withstand any temptation, so he agreed to go. While there, Alypius closed his eyes, but the cheers of the crowd intrigued him, and he opened his eyes to watch. He became dangerously enthralled and entranced by the spectacle before him (Potolsky 71–72). Matthew Potolsky says of this story, “Alypius goes into the arena a moral man, but leaves it fallen” (72). Just like Alypius, Hamlet starts out as a moral man, but the influence of spectacle leaves him fallen.

Hamlet chooses to use a form of mimesis often referred to as theatrical mimesis to determine his decision of whether or not to kill Claudius. Theatrical mimesis places an emphasis on the relationship between the play and the audience. Matthew Potolsky describes it by saying, “Theatrical metaphors . . . figure mimesis as a representation *for* someone, and not only a representation *of* something else” (74).The audience, then, takes an active part in the performance; the aspects of seeing and being seen both contribute to the performance. So, Hamlet’s decision to put on a play to catch the conscience of the king may seem reasonable at first. However, the original play reminds us of what Branagh is attempting to amplify in the film scene. We see that Hamlet’s decision to use mimetic tradition results in the problem of moral proximity. The concept of moral proximity is based upon the belief that evil is not the opposite of good, but rather the inverse of good; evil can come from good. This concept suggests that as one’s power for good grows so does one’s power to do harm (Siegfried). For example, although Hamlet’s intent of using mimesis was to simplify matters, the actual role of mimesis in the play only complicates matters. Hamlet quickly goes from the hero to the villain in the story as his good intentions “distort rather than clarify” (Zilberfain 33). As soon as Hamlet decides to put on a play that represents reality, he begins to confuse reality with fiction. In this case, the moral issue is one of dishonesty. Hamlet’s plan to honestly prove the king guilty by using reality and facts becomes a plan to deceive the audience by means of theatrical mimesis into believing that the king is guilty. His good intention becomes evil. This is apparent through Hamlet’s desperation in proving the king guilty, his doubt in his ability to do so, and his ultimate decision in using mimesis to manipulate the world around him.

After waiting for an opportunity to reveal the king’s crime, Hamlet becomes desperate for some way to prove him guilty. It is in his desperation that he comes up with a plot to trick the king; he decides to use theatrical mimesis. In the play *Hamlet,* lines 566–569 of Act 2 Scene 2 read, “I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play / Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck so to the soul that presently / They have proclaimed their malefactions” (Shakespeare 1731). In Branagh’s version of the play, we see Hamlet collapse to his knees as he speaks these lines. His arms are draped over a chair as if he’s clinging to it for support. His face, once twisted in frustration and agony is suddenly fierce and intent. The audience can both see and feel Hamlet’s desperate state as he begins plotting against the king. And although it may appear that Hamlet is innocently contemplating a plot, we can already see that his honest intentions are becoming dishonest. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary lists one of the definitions of the word “cunning” as “skilful in compassing one’s ends by covert means” or “sly.” In other words, Hamlet is already planning to create or alter a scene for the specific purpose of tricking the king into the reaction Hamlet wants to see. The word “presently” also attributes to this idea. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the definition of this word as “a direct result or conclusion.” So, Hamlet’s idea of catching the conscience of the king would be as a direct result of what the king sees in the altered scene. When Hamlet says, “For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak / With most miraculous organ,” he is indicating his belief that theatrical mimesis (the representation of a murder similar to his father’s) will be more effective than words or reality (Shakespeare 1732). Though the play cannot *speak* to tell the audience how to feel or what to think, it can *show* the audience how to feel and what to think. Hamlet’s seemingly simple and innocent plan is actually a complicated and warped plot.

As Hamlet’s plan begins to form, we see a change in him. His desperation has transformed into a confidence in his new evil intentions. Lines 571–575 of Act 2 Scene 2 read, “I’ll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle. I’ll observe his looks, / I’ll tent him to the quick. If a but blench, / I know my course” (Shakespeare 1732). In Branagh’s version, as soon as Hamlet begins to speak these lines, he rises up from his knees and stands with newfound resolution and confidence in his evil design. But, theatrical mimesis is not an ethical or an adequate way of proving the king’s guilt. Hamlet cannot understand his uncle’s actions simply through his reaction to the play. Matthew Potolsky states, “Spectacles transform the emotions, making pain a source of pleasure and rendering ethical feelings a matter of aesthetic enjoyment” (73). Our bodies respond to imaginative actions as if they were real, allowing us to sympathize with characters in a play or a movie. Theatrical mimesis, then, has the ability to completely transform our emotions. Because the scene that Hamlet set was so similar to Claudius’s actual situation, it is possible, and perhaps even very likely, that Claudius’s reaction was more as a result of sympathetic feelings toward the character rather than guilt. He related to the king in the play, and he felt for him. Hamlet attempts to understand Claudius by his reaction to the theatrical mimesis, but this is just not possible. Ava Zilberfain says, “. . . it is impossible to come to know the true nature of beings by studying manifestations and representations of those beings” (110). Hamlet’s desperation, then, has led him to unfairly judging the king’s reaction in order to justify his cause in murdering the king.

Hamlet’s confidence doesn’t last for long, and he begins to doubt not only those around him, but also his own ability to prove the king guilty. Hamlet’s external world has been thrown into chaos and confusion, so he turns inward to find peace and order. Zilberfain says, “When external reality is corrupted, the purity of self retreats to an inner reality” (33). In this case, the inner reality is theatrical mimesis. When Hamlet begins to doubt his ability to deal with the issues at hand and prove Claudius guilty, he turns to theatrical mimesis. In doing so, his good intention of fulfilling his dead father’s request to avenge his death becomes a bad intention of letting the play do it for him. Potolsky describes this type of theatrical mimesis by saying, “Theatrical mimesis, in this regard, arises not from the distinction between a real original and an illusory copy but from a particular kind of action and attention” (74). So, because he is so doubtful, Hamlet decides to let the play take action for him. For example, lines 575–577 of Act 2 Scene 2 read, “The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil, and the devil hath power / T’assume a pleasing shape” (Shakespeare 1732). Hamlet begins to doubt those around him—he is hesitant to accept the spirit as a good spirit, which also means he is still unsure of the king’s guilt. In Branagh’s interpretation of the scene, we see the intensity in Hamlet’s face disappear as he speaks these lines. His speech becomes softer, slower, and less deliberate. His face becomes clouded with the shadow of doubt. Hamlet himself admits his questioning state when he says, “Yea, and perhaps, / Out of my weakness and my melancholy— / As he is very potent with such spirits— / Abuses me to damn me” (Shakespeare 1732). The Oxford English dictionary reveals that the word “abuse” can also mean “to misrepresent.” So, Hamlet is worried that the spectacle he saw was a performance of theatrical mimesis—the very means by which he wants to prove his uncle’s guilt. He fears the ghost may have been sent by the devil to put on a performance with the specific purpose of influencing him to murder the king. In short, he is worried of being deceived and easily tricked into damnation. In Branagh’s interpretation of the scene, Hamlet pauses after speaking these lines, as if full realization of his warped plot is sinking in. Hamlet allows this doubt to influence his decision of using theatrical mimesis to catch the conscience of the king. He gets the idea from his doubting self.

Hamlet’s good intention of proving his uncle’s guilt becomes a bad intention of allowing the play to do it for him. Unsure of what to think, Hamlet decides to let the play determine the conscience of the king. Hamlet does in fact take action, but it is through his fictional world that he does so. His doubt leads him to allow the play to guide actions and reactions. However, as we have seen, theatrical mimesis can be altered in order to bring about desired effects. The deceptive mode of mimesis can be used to trick its audience into seeing and believing things that aren’t true. This idea can be likened to Photoshop in photography. Photoshop can lie and conceal as it allows the photographer to rearrange the entire photograph in order to create the desired outcome. The photograph, in this instance, may be considered a lie. The image that the viewer sees is not the actual image the photographer photographed—it has since been altered. So, the effect of the image on the viewer is, in a sense, just as false as the image itself. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet is like Photoshop and the play is like the photograph.Hamlet alters the play that he decides to put on in order to create a desired reaction from the king. Therefore, this play within a play may be considered a lie. And the effect that the play has on Claudius is just as false as the play itself. This also results in Hamlet as the villain rather than the hero since he is the one who creates these false images and effects. By relying on the play to prove the king guilty, Hamlet becomes a liar.

Hamlet’s decision to right a wrong through theatrical mimesis results in his going from a passive character to one who seizes control by manipulating the world around him. Zilberfain says of fictional narrative, “In fact, it can manipulate and reconstruct the portrait of the past to create iconic statements” (29). By manipulating the play to get the reaction he wants to see, Hamlet is manipulating reality, which ultimately results in further confusion and disruption. We can see this as Hamlet says, “I’ll observe his looks, / I’ll tent him to the quick” (Shakespeare 1732). The word “tent” can also be used to mean “to attend to” or “to have charge of” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Hamlet is showing his control of the situation and human emotions. Theatrical mimesis gives him the control to manipulate the king’s reaction—he has charge of the situation. At this point, in Branagh’s version, Hamlet has walked over to and his now standing in front of a small model of the castle. Although only the top points of the structure are shown in the camera shot, it is enough for the audience to know that the castle is not a life size imitation. As Hamlet speaks the lines, “I’ll tent him to the quick,” he glances down at the small castle model. This demonstrates the shift from a helpless character to one who suddenly feels in control and can see the whole picture.

By the time Hamlet finally declares his decision, “The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King,” he has lowered himself so his head is peering into the small castle model. The camera angle is very interesting here as we see Hamlet’s face become blurry and a small figurine of the king appears within the castle model. This is important because it shows us that his theatrical mimesis is intended for just one person—the king. The image on the screen makes the king appear as a pawn or a chess piece, and Hamlet is looking on. He is the one who can determine the outcome. As soon as Hamlet finishes his last line, the king suddenly drops out of sight, making it quite clear what Hamlet intends to do. He intends to make the king disappear by murdering him. Hamlet’s good intention of proving Claudius’s guilt is slowly turning into a desperate attempt for control and power in his chaotic world.

It is not until later in the play that we see the full consequences and confusion that result from Hamlet’s theatrical mimesis. As Zilberfain states, “A fictional narrative is not created to accurately define the real world, despite its resemblance, at times, to the real world, nor can it be confined by reality” (29). A fictional world may resemble the real world, but it is not a perfect imitation of it. Therefore, the effects of a spectacle on the audience may be different than they would be if the audience was viewing reality. Hamlet underestimated the power of mimesis. He did not take into account the fact that the play might affect not only the king, but others in the audience as well, including himself. For example, Hamlet is so enthralled in the fictional world that he becomes confused. We can see this in Act 3 Scene 2 lines 115–17 when Hamlet turns to Ophelia and says, “. . . and my father died within ‘s two hours” to which Ophelia responds, “Nay, ‘tis twice two months, my lord.” “So long?” Hamlet replies (Shakespeare 1739). According to stage time, Hamlet may have been correct—his father had only been dead two hours. But in reality, his father had been dead for four months. This shows us just how lost Hamlet is in his fictional world. Because he is so confused and enthralled with theatrical mimesis, he neglects his relationship with Ophelia, and she eventually goes mad; he murders Polonius in a sudden attempt to kill Claudius and bring the fiction into reality; he creates an enemy of his friend Laertes; and Hamlet is sent away to England. Hamlet’s world becomes even more chaotic then it was before he attempted to right it by using theatrical mimesis. In attempting to seize control through manipulation, Hamlet only lost more control of the situation.

Just as Alypius went into the arena a moral man and left it fallen, so did Hamlet go into theatrical mimesis a moral man, but he left it fallen. Although Hamlet begins with good intentions of bringing justice to his father, he becomes so obsessed with fulfilling the role of a fictitious character in a fictitious world that he is willing to commit the very same crime his uncle did in order to seek revenge. Hamlet’s desperation and doubt caused him to seek for some way, any way, to take control of his chaotic world. They led to his decision of using theatrical mimesis to prove his uncle guilty. His desperation results in him setting up an unfair trial to test the king’s guilt. In his doubt, Hamlet begins to wonder if the ghost which he saw was using theatrical mimesis to trick him into damnation. This doubt in himself leads him to allow the play to do the action for him resulting in a false image, or a lie. His final decision was an attempt to manipulate those around him and only leads to more chaos and confusion in his world. By observing Hamlet’s movement and speech style in Branagh’s interpretation, we see Hamlet’s look of desperation as he searches for some way to gain control of his situation. His dramatic movements clearly relate to the audience his moral dilemma. Indeed, the result of theatrical mimesis is the problem of moral proximity. Hamlet’s good intentions become evil as he plots and plans his revenge for the king. As Potolsky stated, “Spectacles transform the emotions, making pain a source of pleasure . . .” (73). Theatrical mimesis causes emotions to become completely transformed. Pain becomes pleasurable, despair becomes desired, and sorrow becomes satisfying. Herein lies Hamlet’s problem of moral proximity. By using theatrical mimesis, he brings about evil things from good things. As a result, his world begins to fall apart the minute he declares, “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.”

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