

Locating the Elements of Comic Relief in Shakespeare's Tragedy *Hamlet*

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Abstract

This paper challenges the traditional hierarchical view of comedy and tragedy within the realm of aesthetics, which often places tragedy on a pedestal above comedy. It argues that comedy is crucial in alleviating emotional tension in tragic narratives and advancing the plot, offering emotional catharsis to the audience. Using Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a case study, the paper explores the integration of comic elements in the tragedy, examining how they contribute to the complexity of the work. By analyzing characters such as the Gravediggers, Polonius, and Hamlet himself, it explores how Shakespeare employs tragicomic figures to evoke a nuanced emotional response, blending humor and humorathos. Additionally, it delves into the function of Shakespearean clowns as foils and parodies, shedding light on their role in accentuating the protagonists' qualities and critiquing societal norms. By closely examining sub-textual cues, this paper underscores the significance of comic elements in enriching the tragic framework of Shakespearean drama.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Comedy, Tragedy, Emotional Tension, Catharsis, Comic Elements, Pathos, Tragicomic Figures, Shakespearean Clowns.

Introduction and Aim:

Conventionally, aesthetics has viewed comedy and tragedy as divergent forces in a hierarchical system of genres. Under this model,

comedy occupies a subordinate position, resulting from a paternalistic approach that prioritizes specific objects deemed worthy of intellectual inquiry. Tragedy, often implicitly associated with a masculine domain, reigns supreme due to its perceived philosophical depth. Conversely, comedy is relegated to a lesser status with its historical association with popular social mores. However, this binary framework needs to capture the complexities of theatrical experience. While tragedy undoubtedly generates tension in the audience, unrelieved tension can lead to emotional fatigue or apathy. Comic interludes, therefore, become a necessity by providing relief from the intense emotions and gravest themes inherent to tragedy. These moments of humor are not merely diversions; they can also propel the tragic narrative forward. One of the primary motivations for playwrights to integrate comic elements within tragedies is to offer emotional catharsis. Genre classifications, by their very nature, are often fluid. The evolution of drama has witnessed the emergence of numerous subgenres and the blurring of genre lines, making rigid categorization difficult. This approach finds no explicit endorsement in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which emphasizes the importance of a unified tragic action. However, Elizabethan drama abounds with examples that defy this rigid categorization, seamlessly blending tragic and comic elements.

Modern scholarship classifies *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy. However, Shakespeare infuses the drama with profound philosophical inquiries – on identity, jealousy, revenge, and trust – elements largely absent in earlier revenge plays. This introspective dimension and moments of humor challenge the typical focus on swift, unreflective vengeance. Some scholars argue that *Hamlet*, while undeniably a tragedy, possesses a powerful cosmic matrix. Despite its tragic core, the play incorporates humor, wit, and other comic elements used for satire. Shakespeare arguably deconstructs the genre's conventions by employing humor, particularly at the expense of the revenge tragedy genre. Hamlet's internal conflict and philosophical musings appear more nuanced and realistic when contrasted with the protagonists' unbridled passion and fury in plays like *The Spanish Tragedy*. When Hamlet exclaims, "Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless Villain! / O, vengeance!" the echo of

Hieronimo, the hero of *The Spanish Tragedy*, becomes a vehicle for satire (Shakespeare 59). This self-conscious Parody highlights the emotional complexity of Hamlet's situation, one marked by doubt and existential questioning, in contrast to earlier plays' simplistic, action-oriented revenge plots. Later revenge tragedies, demonstrably influenced by *Hamlet*, incorporate a similar use of humor that often serves to critique the genre's concords. The paper investigates the characters and scenes that contribute to *Hamlet's* comic dimension. It further explores the purpose of these elements within the tragic framework.

Background:

In his endeavor to differentiate Shakespeare's plays based on their unique merits, Dr. Johnson extols the "praise of variety" inherent in the tragedy of *Hamlet*. He observes, "The scenes are interchangeably diversified with merriment and solemnity" (*Hamlet: A Casebook*, 23-24). While *Hamlet* undeniably ranks among Shakespeare's most potent and enthralling tragedies, dismissing the presence of comic elements in its framework would be a fallacy. Palmer aptly notes, "The partitions are thin, which divide comedy and tragedy in Shakespeare's world" (344). Indeed, a multifaceted genius, Shakespeare frequently transgressed the boundaries established by ancient dramatic canons, as espoused by the Greek masters and Aristotle. Appreciating the comic aspects of Shakespearean characters demands a nuanced approach that transcends the limitations of the written text. Tennessee Williams aptly captures this notion when he describes a play in a book as "only a shadow of a play. . . an architect's blueprint of a house not yet built. . ." (xiii). The subtext, the veiled meaning, and the intention beneath the surface dialogue become paramount. Like an iceberg, a Shakespearean play reveals only a portion of its essence on the page, with the proper depth residing in the subliminal cues and stagecraft absent from the script. Unlike novels or short stories, where authors provide explicit character commentary, playwrights rely on more subtle tools. Fragmentary stage directions and brief character descriptions offer a starting point, but proper understanding lies in the audience's active engagement. By employing their "mind's eye" and mind's ear, as Hamlet evocatively phrases it in the play, viewers must interpret the characters' expressions,

gestures, and silences to grasp the inner action – the hidden motivations driving their comic behavior (Shakespeare 16). The essence of a theatrical performance lies not solely in the written word but in the multifaceted interplay of elements which Louis Jovet, the French actor-manager, terms as a "special alchemy composed of words, sounds, gestures, colors, lines, movements, rhythms and silences" (xiii). Within this framework, vocal delivery, encompassing inflection, tone, pitch, and pauses, transcends the literal meaning of the script, revealing a character's inner world – their motivations, true nature, and comic potential. Critical examination of these sub-textual cues within the play's dialogue becomes paramount to analyzing the undercurrent of Hamlet's comic elements.

While Shakespeare readily employs comic elements in his tragedies, the humor derived from figures like Roderigo, the Fool, the Gravediggers, Polonius, and Hamlet is distinct from the boisterous and light-hearted comedy found in characters like Touchstone, Bottom, and Falstaff. These tragicomic figures possess an inherent pathos, a sense of suffering that evokes a more nuanced emotional response from the audience. Roderigo's fate in *Othello* exemplifies this concept. Mercilessly manipulated and ultimately killed by Iago, he becomes a target of audience amusement yet garners sympathy due to his tragic demise. The Fool, in *King Lear*, too, embodies this melancholic humor. Though his presence offers comic relief as he attempts to stave off Lear's descent into madness, his suffering during the storm on the heath and his unceremonious disappearance from the play underscores the harsh realities of the tragedy.

Polonius, another figure eliciting a blend of amusement and pity, meets an accidental and undeserved death at the hands of Hamlet. Even Hamlet, burdened by "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," embodies a mental anguish that precludes light-hearted laughter (Shakespeare 63). Despite their inherent pathos, these characters undeniably fulfill a comic function. Their actions, misinterpretations, and social blunders provide moments of comic relief in the broader tragic framework. Shakespeare's genius lies in his ability to weave these contrasting elements together, creating a rich tapestry of human experience that evokes a complex interplay of emotions in the audience.

Moreover, Shakespearean clowns function either as foils to the protagonist's behavior and beliefs or as parodies of them. Richard Levin expands on this concept and explains that the clown as a foil highlights the protagonist's higher qualities by exhibiting a contrasting demeanor. Through repulsion, the clown reinforces the sense of elevation of the protagonist above the normal or the common. On the other hand, Parody involves the clown's assimilation of the main plot, dragging it down to his level. Falstaff in *Henry IV* exemplifies this approach. His crassness accentuates Prince Hal's eventual nobility, while his comic mimicry of King Henry IV's royal pronouncements diminishes his stature. Significantly, Falstaff embodies both foil and Parody within a single character.

Analysis:

The Gravediggers

A thorough textual analysis of *Hamlet* reveals a play demonstrably woven from two distinct threads: the tragic and the comic. While the tragic elements have been extensively analyzed and celebrated, the presence of the comic remains somewhat under-examined yet equally significant. This comic vein originates from the primary source, the gravediggers, Polonius, and Hamlet. The gravediggers designated as 'clowns' in stage directions are better understood as the Shakespearean proletarian or rustic— a figure traditionally believed to possess intuitive wisdom by his particular affinity to nature (or the deity). This inherent wisdom allows them to offer insights that elude even the intelligent and mature Hamlet. The gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet* disrupts the play's escalating tension with a jarring juxtaposition. Preceding this moment, many tragic events unfold: Polonius's murder, Claudius's manipulation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia's descent into madness, and Laertes' arrival fuelled by vengeance. Just as the audience anticipates the culmination of these plotlines, the gravediggers enter, engaging in a legalistic chop-logic debate concerning the morality of Ophelia's presumed suicide. This unexpected shift provides broad comic relief amidst the otherwise profound and grim tragedy.

Composed during a period of intense religious upheaval in England – the Reformation – *Hamlet* grapples with the evolving

relationship between religion and sensitive topics like suicide. Shakespeare employs the gravediggers to explore the legality of suicide within a religious framework indirectly. This approach allows Shakespeare to engage with a contentious issue without directly voicing potentially controversial opinions. The dark humor of the gravediggers abruptly redirects focus from lofty themes of love, honor, and revenge to the fundamental reality of human mortality. They are a stark reminder of death's universality, stripping away the solemnity and mystery Hamlet contemplates in his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy. For the gravediggers, death is not an abstract philosophical concept; it is a quotidian reality, a cycle of dirt, stink, and toil that awaits everyone. Their casual musings on death foreshadow the worm's meat theme explored by Hamlet shortly after that. We first meet the two gravediggers shovel out a grave for Ophelia in the churchyard. Their exchange centers on the question of whether Ophelia, presumed to have died by suicide, deserves a Christian burial according to religious strictures. This theological debate regarding the morality of suicide becomes a central theme of their macabre jests and jibes exchanged amidst the graveyard and its skeletal reminders of mortality. The gravediggers' witty banter embodies a common Shakespearean trope: the clever commoner who outshines his social superiors through sharp wit. However, in this instance, their humor is darkly comic due to the grim setting. Shakespeare underscores the pervasive sense of uncertainty and the erosion of traditional values in the play's tragic world by juxtaposing philosophical contemplation with coarse exchanges concerning mortality. The gravediggers also lament the fact that the wealthy have more freedom to commit suicide than the poor.

Following their initial, albeit macabre, discussion of Ophelia's possible suicide, a more light-hearted exchange ensues. The first gravedigger engages in a playful challenge with the Second, using wordplay ("arms" signifying both weapons and limbs) to test his companion's wit. Their dialogue reaches a comical impasse when the second gravedigger's response, "The gallowsmaker, for that frame outlives a thousand tenants," to the riddle, "What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?" fails to satisfy the first

gravedigger (Shakespeare 120). The scene concludes with the first gravedigger dispatching the second to fetch some alcohol. This interlude of riddles and witty banter surrounding death, with the first gravedigger posing questions and the second attempting responses, further underscores the gravediggers' role as comic foils and philosophical provocateurs. Their lewd humor starkly contrasts the play's prevailing atmosphere of darkness and brooding, functioning as a form of comic relief that allows the audience a brief respite before plunging back into the tragic narrative.

The gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet*, thus, serves a multitude of dramatic purposes. Beyond providing a welcome moment of comic relief, it offers a veiled critique of organized religion by raising questions about the moral rigidity surrounding suicide. More importantly, the scene underscores the play's central theme of mortality. The gravediggers' casual acceptance of death starkly contrasts Hamlet's philosophical contemplation. Their presence also foreshadows the impending tragedy, as the grave they are preparing becomes the final resting place for multiple characters. This interlude further facilitates Hamlet's transition from his antic disposition to a more contemplative state. By engaging with the gravediggers and contemplating Yorick's skull, Hamlet sheds his veil of madness and confronts mortality with newfound realism. Significantly, the gravediggers, despite their brevity on stage, manage to touch upon many of the play's central themes, albeit in a manner that is distinct from the play's overall dramatic tone. In contrast to the play's self-contained world of Elsinore, the gravediggers' scene also disrupts the narrative flow by establishing a connection to the audience's reality. Shakespeare achieves this through recognizable references from contemporary times, potentially reflecting the oral tradition of the Elizabethan era.

Polonius

Other than the gravediggers, the comedy also arises from two other characters, Polonius and Hamlet. Both the characters play the role of a fool in their ways. Polonius exemplifies the self-assured fool, convinced of his wisdom yet consistently exposing himself as a buffoon. Conversely, the comic essence in Hamlet arises from his feigned madness. He is a 'wise man' who adopts the guise of a fool, strategically leveraging this role to

navigate the treacherous court. Touchstone, the fool in Shakespeare's *As You Like*, aptly observes, "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool" (175). This adage perfectly encapsulates the dynamics at play between Polonius and Hamlet.

A significant portion of Hamlet's comic relief stems from Polonius's character. Shakespeare's deliberate portrayal suggests that he intended Polonius to be a comic figure. Act I, Scene iii, in Polonius' household, exemplifies this notion. The scene opens with a flurry of advice-giving, with Laertes and Polonius offering unsolicited counsel. Laertes' initial farewell to his sister Ophelia, "My necessaries are embarked; Farewell," establishes a sense of urgency and haste (Shakespeare 19). However, the comic tension builds as he immediately launches into a lengthy and cynical discourse on love, reducing it to "the trifling of his favor" (Shakespeare 19). This juxtaposition between the urgency of departure and the indulgence in verbose advice creates a humorous dissonance. The further comic effect arises from Laertes' self-awareness of his delayed stay, "I stay too long," his final admonitions to Ophelia, "Perhaps he loves you now, / And now no soil nor cartel doth besmirch / The virtue of his will; but you must fear, / His greatness weighed, his will is not his own," and his discovery in the house by his father who begins to reproach him: "Yet here, Laertes? Aboard, aboard, for shame! / The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail, / And you are stayed for. There my blessings with thee . . ." (Shakespeare 21, 20, 21). However, Polonius undermines this urgency by indulging in his own "few precepts" that perpetuate delay: "Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportioned thought his act. / Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar. / Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, / Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel, / But do not dull thy palm with entertainment / Of each new-hatched, unfledged courage . . . / Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice; / Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment. / Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, / But not expressed in fancy; rich not gaudy, / For the apparel oft proclaims the man . . ." (Shakespeare 21). This self-contradiction exposes Polonius' tendency for pompous pronouncements that belie the practical realities of the situation.

Shakespeare's skillful manipulation of timing and contrasting actions creates a humor rooted in the absurdity of Polonius' character. The scene's comic crux lies in the dramatic irony arising from the contrasting elements of urgency and prolixity.

The scene also hinges on a delightfully ironic reversal. Having just dispensed lengthy advice to Ophelia, Laertes receives a similar barrage from his father. Humour stems from several factors. First, there is the sheer garrulity of Polonius, his excessive talkativeness. He launches into a list of "Do's and Don'ts" for Laertes, delivered as if holding Laertes by the sleeve – a physical gesture highlighting the unnecessary restraint placed upon a grown man. Second, the bookishness of Polonius' advice adds to the comic effect. His pronouncements lack the nuance of lived experience, sounding more like memorized aphorisms than practical wisdom. Third, the timing of this advice is spectacularly inept. Polonius chooses the moment when urgency dictates immediate departure to deliver his unsolicited wisdom. Samuel Johnson's apt description of Polonius as "a man, bred in courts, exercised in business, stored with observation, confident of his knowledge, proud of his eloquence, and declining into dotage" illuminates the character's tragic flaw (239). Polonius, blinded by his self-assuredness and pride in his eloquence, fails to recognize his encroaching senility. He believes his pronouncements are nuggets of wisdom. He is oblivious to the 'sting in the tail' – his diminishing capacity to distinguish true wisdom from empty platitudes. The scene concludes with Polonius seamlessly transitioning his unsolicited advice from Laertes to Ophelia: "From this time / Be somewhat scancer of your maiden presence. / Set your entreatments at a higher rate / Than a command to parley" (Shakespeare 23). The long advice to each of his kids further solidifies the sense of his comic ineptitude.

Polonius' character serves a significant dramatic function in *Hamlet*. He embodies the archetype of the compulsive counselor, an individual with an irresistible urge to dispense unsolicited advice to all around him, regardless of their station or the situation's gravity. This scene, strategically following the emotionally charged scenes of the midnight vigil and the court assembly, provides comic relief through Polonius'

excessive pronouncements. Polonius may not be, as Granville-Barker says, "wholly or a fool, nor externally ridiculous at all," but "dotage" is undoubtedly "encroaching upon wisdom in his case," and that makes him a comic figure (240). The humor arises not from overt buffoonery but from the incongruity between Polonius' inflated self-perception as a sage advisor and his pronouncements' banality and self-serving nature.

Act II Scene serves a multifaceted purpose in establishing Polonius' character. We witness his characteristic blend of intrusive advice and a penchant for espionage. Polonius dispatches Reynaldo, a servant, to France ostensibly to look after Laertes' well-being, but the actual purpose is to spy on him. As Rylands observes, this scene functions as "a relief, an interlude, a lull, after the excitement and climax of Act. I" (240). However, Polonius' covert surveillance foreshadows his demise, aptly earning him the name "the key-hole diplomat" from Rylands (211). Polonius' fatal flaw lies in his misguided belief in his ingenuity. Throughout the play, he consistently employs underhanded tactics, including spying on Laertes, proposing the entrapment of Hamlet and Ophelia in the Nunnery scene, and ultimately, attempting to eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with Gertrude in the Queen's closet. The humor in Polonius' character arises from this very dissonance – the self-assured schemer repeatedly outsmarted by his convoluted machinations. His desperate attempts at cleverness backfire spectacularly, revealing his intellectual limitations rather than his astuteness. This comic effect is further amplified when Polonius loses the thread of his speech once interrupted by Reynaldo. His bewildered query, "And then, sir, does this—a does— What was I about to say? By the mass, I was about to say something! Where did I leave?" highlights his disorganization and declining mental faculties (Shakespeare 37).

Following the scene with Reynaldo, the play shifts to a more serious exploration of Hamlet's mental state. However, this somber mood is shattered by Polonius' pompous re-entry, where he claims to have unearthed "the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy" (Shakespeare 41). The sheer incongruity of his self-importance juxtaposed with the weight of the situation creates a comic effect. Shakespeare's masterful use of dramatic

irony is evident here. Polonius descends into utter clowning in his attempt to appear wise and insightful. His pronouncements, like "My liege, and madam, to expostulate / What majesty should be, what duty is, / Why day is the day, night night, and time is time, / Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time," are so fundamental as to be nonsensical (Shakespeare 43). This self-important rambling further emphasizes his intellectual limitations. The humor intensifies with Polonius' subsequent self-contradiction. He declares, "Therefore since brevity is the soul of wit, / And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, / I will be brief" (Shakespeare 43). However, his proclamation of this desire for brevity exposes his inherent tendency towards garrulity. Shakespeare masterfully satirizes Polonius' inflated sense of self-importance and his utter lack of self-awareness through this ironic juxtaposition.

By Act II Scene ii, Polonius' propensity for self-contradiction is firmly established. Here, he indulges in an unrestrained display of verbosity, prompting the exasperated Queen to interject, "More matter, with less art" (Shakespeare 43). Even this royal rebuke fails to curb his outpouring. Polonius persists in his rambling pronouncements, declaring, "Madam, I swear I use no art at all. / That he is mad, 'tis true; 'tis true 'tis pity, / And pity 'tis true a –foolish figure. / But farewell it, for I will use no art" (Shakespeare 43). His response exemplifies an essential aspect of his comic function: the incongruity between his self-assured pronouncements and their utter ordinariness. He employs an art of the tongue that is all sound and fury, devoid of any natural substance. The Queen's comment highlights the disconnect between Polonius' self-perception as a skilled orator and the reality of his empty clichés.

Furthermore, Polonius' reliance on tired rhetorical devices, such as repetitive phrasing in his speech: "Mad let us grant him, then; and now remains/ That we find out the cause of this effect, / Or rather say, the cause of this defect, / For this effect defective comes by cause. / Thus it remains, and the remainder thus" further emphasizes the nonsensical nature of his pronouncements (Shakespeare 43). Shakespeare utilizes Polonius' bombastic pronouncements not just for comic effect but also to underscore the character's intellectual limitations and self-delusion. By dressing up the

mundane in ornate language, Polonius ironically reveals the grotesqueness of his character.

Polonius' extended harangue in Act II Scene ii is a study of comic ineptitude. He boasts of uncovering the cause of Hamlet's madness but fails to deliver genuine insight. Shakespeare may be using Polonius to satirize "the practice of those times, of prefaces that made no introductions and of method that embarrassed rather than explained" (Johnson 239). However, as Hamlet might say, Polonius is undoubtedly one of the "tedious old fools" (Shakespeare 47). He is a prime example of a character whose self-importance is hilariously out of step with his intellectual limitations. The anticlimactic revelation of the supposed cause of Hamlet's madness further amplifies the humor. Polonius attributes it to the trite and predictable notion of unrequited love. The amusement, however, lies not in the reason itself but in the convoluted path Polonius traces for Hamlet's emotional decline. He outlines a laughably simplistic progression: "And he, repelled, a short tale to make, / Fell into a sadness, then into a fast, / Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness, / Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension, / Into the madness wherein now he raves, / And all we mourn for" (Shakespeare 45). The absurdity of this pseudo-scientific explanation, delivered with self-assured pomposity, exposes Polonius' utter lack of understanding of human psychology.

The sheer incongruity between Polonius' pronouncements and their underlying vacuity lies at the heart of the comic effect. In Act II Scene ii, he declares, with utmost seriousness, that Hamlet's madness stems from unrequited love. This simplistic explanation, delivered with an air of self-assured authority, highlights the absurdity of his character. Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony is evident here. In attempting to demonstrate his intellectual prowess, Polonius unwittingly descends into Parody. He embodies the practices he may not have intended to critique – "the regular figures and formalities of 16th-century rhetoric, an art much studied by would-be courtiers" (Rylands 205). Polonius' subsequent pronouncements further underscore Shakespeare's comic intent. His elaborate and nonsensical categorization of the visiting actors – "the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical,

historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, or poem tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited . . ." mirrors the verbal acrobatics of a Shakespearean clown (Shakespeare 53). This display of empty virtuosity serves no purpose other than to elicit laughter at Polonius' expense. The critical observation that "Polonius in the tragedy of *Hamlet* is more recognizably a comic character than Orsino in the comedy of *Twelfth Night* or Jacques in the comedy of *As You Like It*" holds significant merit. Polonius' self-importance and intellectual deficiencies create a comic dissonance that sets him apart even within Shakespearean comedy (Palmer 344).

Hamlet

Hamlet's deployment of the "antic disposition," a feigned madness, adds another layer of complexity to the play's comic elements. This calculated performance allows him to manipulate and ridicule Polonius, who considers himself a paragon of wisdom. A prime example occurs in Act II Scene ii when Polonius, attempting to gauge Hamlet's sanity, asks, "Do you know me, my lord?" Hamlet responds with the enigmatic, "Excellent, well. You are a fishmonger" (Shakespeare 46). While this statement may hold deeper meaning upon closer examination, our initial reaction is amusement. Hamlet's seemingly nonsensical reply exposes Polonius' self-importance and, on a darker level, reflects his internal turmoil. The audience derives a feast of rich comedy from witnessing Polonius' bewilderment at the hands of the seemingly deranged prince. Another instance of Hamlet's comic manipulation occurs shortly before the Closet scene. Polonius enters and informs Hamlet, "My Lord, the Queen would speak with you, and presently" (III.i.367). Seizing the opportunity to mock the older man, Hamlet replies with a nonsensical string of questions and observations, further reinforcing the perception of his madness. These interactions serve a dual purpose: they provide comic relief in the play's increasingly dark atmosphere and highlight Hamlet's intelligence and cunning as he navigates the treacherous political landscape of Elsinore. The conversation runs thus:

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel?

Polonius: By the mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.

Hamlet: Or like a whale.

Polonius: Very like a whale. (Shakespeare 81).

Polonius' response to Hamlet's 'antic disposition' further underscores his comic potential. Oblivious to the prince's deliberate mockery, Polonius, like an overindulged child, readily acquiesces to Hamlet's nonsensical pronouncements. This behavior reinforces Hamlet's earlier point, labeling Polonius "that great baby" who remains "not yet out of his swaddling clouts" (Shakespeare 53). Rosencrantz's subsequent observation, "Happily he is the second time come to them, for they say an old man is twice a child," further emphasizes Polonius' intellectual limitations (Shakespeare 53). The audience witnesses, with a mixture of amusement and perhaps a hint of pity, Polonius' complete inability to recognize Hamlet's calculated performance. This moment of comic relief precedes one of the play's most pivotal scenes – the emotionally charged encounter between Hamlet and Gertrude in the Queen's closet. The dramatic tension is heightened by the tragic death of Polonius, who, hidden behind the arras, becomes an unwitting victim of Hamlet's rage. The aftermath, however, offers a return to a dark comic mode when the King asks: Now, Hamlet, where is Polonius?

Hamlet: At supper.

King: At supper? Where?

Ham: Not where he eats, but where an eaten. . . . (Shakespeare 98)

The King feels infuriated and again asks him seriously: "Where is Polonius?" Hamlet answers in the same grotesque manner: "In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger finds him not there, seek him i' th' other place yourself" (Shakespeare 98).

This essay argues that beneath the guise of Hamlet's madness lies a potent strain of comic wit, often infused with a scornful edge. The association between pseudo-lunacy and comic effect is well-established. Dr. Johnson also observes, "The pretended madness of Hamlet causes much mirth" (*A Casebook* 129). For example, Hamlet's calculated antics during the play-within-the-play echo the improvisational humor of a

"nightclub entertainer," according to Francis Fergusson (121). The notion of the antic disposition inherently entails grotesque and comic elements. The term 'antic' itself holds a dual meaning: a noun referring to a buffoon and an adjective denoting the fantastical. The present reference comes from George Peele's *Old Wives Tales*, where the three characters are Antic, Frolic, and Fantastic. Hamlet's antic disposition manifests not only in his verbal gibes but also in his appropriation of the role of the fool. He dons the comic mask and embodies the spirit of Yorick, his childhood companion, engaging in gibes and gambols reminiscent of a court jester. Gilbert Murray's observation is particularly insightful: "It is remarkable that Shakespeare, who did such wonders in his idealized and half-mystic treatment of the real Fool, should also have made his greatest tragic hero out of a Fool transfigured" (213). This statement highlights not only Shakespeare's masterful characterization but also the undeniable presence of the jester archetype in Hamlet. Murray further underscores this point by noting, "Hamlet's actual language is at times exactly that of the regular Shakespearean fool" (213). In fact, "the verbal tactics the prince uses to express his antic-disposition are the same as those of Shakespeare's three most famous fools to point up folly and vice. Like Touchstone, Feste, and Lear's boy, Hamlet, under cover of his melancholy madness, puns, manipulates syllogisms, asserts paradoxes, and asks riddling questions to conduct his disguised dialectic with the King and the court." (Graves 73).

Harry Levin emphasizes the multifaceted nature of Hamlet's character, describing him as a "compounded of many simples" (134-135). Among these elements, Levin argues, lies the role of the fool, "the frustrated scholar, the unwilling courtier, the mourner who becomes a revenger, the lover whose imagination rages like that of the lunatic and the poet, and still others least the fool" (134-135). He further strengthens this claim by pointing to the etymological roots of Hamlet's name, which derives from the Old Norse "Amtool," signifying "a fool, a ninny, an idiot" and specifically "a Jutish trickster who feigns stupidity" (Levin 133). By acknowledging the significant presence of the jester in Hamlet's tragic persona, we gain a richer understanding of his motivations and complexities. The comic dimension of Hamlet's character deserves further

exploration, for it sheds light on the depth of his despair, the scathing critique he levels at the court's corruption, and the ingenious methods he employs to navigate his perilous situation.

Hamlet's calculated descent into antic disposition presents a unique dramatic challenge. When he abandons this facade in the emotionally charged encounter with Gertrude, he faces difficulty convincing her of his sanity. The very act of feigning madness casts a shadow on his subsequent pronouncements, creating a paradox: how can his accusations retain their potency if his mental state remains suspect? Gertrude's initial response to Hamlet's tirade reflects this dilemma. She expresses concern for his mental well-being. The lingering perception of his madness thus complicates Hamlet's impassioned pleas for her to abandon Claudius. The audience witnesses the tragic consequence of his performance: his genuine distress is potentially dismissed as further evidence of his mental instability. This scene underscores the complexities of Hamlet's quest for revenge. In this case, Levin observes, "Both positions could be easily reduced to a comic level: the plight of the man who is generally misunderstood and the pose of the man who deliberately invites misunderstanding" (130). He adds, "*Hamlet* abounds in what was an Elizabethan Comedy-might have been designated as errors or supposes, misconceptions contrived and coincidental" (130). The antic disposition may serve him well in manipulating others but also creates a barrier to genuine communication, particularly with Gertrude. The mask he dons to expose the court's corruption ultimately hinders his ability to connect with his mother on an emotional level.

The gravedigger scene in Act V Scene I of *Hamlet* offers a unique blend of dark humor and philosophical contemplation. Shakespeare's introduction of the clowns in this scene injects gallows humor into the otherwise grim atmosphere. While the overall emotional effect remains somber, Hamlet's pronouncements, delivered with an ironic wit, provide moments of comic relief. Following his abandonment of the antic disposition, Hamlet's observations in the graveyard echo the pronouncements of Shakespeare's other fools, particularly the Fool in *King Lear*. Bradbrook observes, "Hamlet is his fool, for Yorick is dead" (191).

This self-appointed role becomes particularly evident when Hamlet contemplates a skull. He delivers a series of questions, each laced with dark humor, that mocks the pretensions of the legal profession: "Where be his quiddities now, his qualities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?" (Shakespeare 122).

Similarly, he examines the skull through the lens of a grasping landlord, questioning the ultimate fate of wealth and possessions: "Is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures?" (Shakespeare 122). Michael Graves observes Hamlet's role in his commentary on this scene:

Employing the tactics of the Shakespearean fool, Hamlet here questions the values of all the types he imagines. He examines the paradoxical features of their lives: the power and policy of the politician; the breeding and begging of the courtier, his pride and sycophancy; the unique knowledge and dishonesty of the lawyer; the debt-provoking documents that symbolize the material ambitions of the great buyer of land; the mocking of others and ultimately of self by Yorick; and the ostensible beauty and painting of the lady (79-80).

Hamlet's use of puns and wordplay transcends mere amusement. Functioning as a wise fool, he employs these techniques to vent his disillusionment but also to expose the folly of others with a sardonic wit. Shakespeare's introduction of comic elements in the tragedy of *Hamlet* merits critical consideration.

Conclusion:

One compelling explanation for introducing comic elements, characters, and scenes lies in Shakespeare's keen understanding of dramatic tension. As a skilled playwright, he recognized the potential for audience fatigue in the face of relentless tragedy. By dexterously weaving comic moments into the narrative, Shakespeare provides respite to the spectators. This interplay between the tragic and the comic creates a more dynamic and engaging theatrical experience. Another factor to consider is the Elizabethan playhouse's diverse audience. Shakespeare, the astute

dramatist, would have been aware of the 'groundlings' – the commoners who stood in the theatre pit. The comic element likely served to provide them with amusement and a form of light entertainment. This strategic mingling of comic scenes and characters adds texture and complexity to the tragedy, catering to a broader audience without diminishing the play's core themes. The significance of the comic elements in *Hamlet* extends beyond mere entertainment. The play offers a spectrum of humor, ranging from Polonius's 'farcical' antics to the more 'philosophical and cynical' pronouncements of Prince Hamlet himself. This variety underscores the multifaceted nature of the play's tragicomic mode. In conclusion, the comic dimension of *Hamlet* is far from inconsequential. Shakespeare's masterful use of wit, wordplay, and even slapstick humor also enriches the audience's understanding of the characters and the play's central themes.

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