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Humor in *Hamlet*

Hamlet is one of William Shakespeare's most famous tragedies, yet there is clearly humor present in the play. If not understood properly, the humor can seem out of place in the tragedy. Horace states in *Ars Poetica* that mixing genres leads to discord in the work (122). While this is not a view that is as highly believed today, it leads to questioning how appropriate the humor in *Hamlet* is and what mixing genres adds to the play.

Mikhail Bakhtin defends the humor in this play by picking up on carnivalesque elements that are present in *Hamlet*. Bakhtin defends the blending of comedy and tragedy by stating, "there are certain works in which the two aspects, seriousness and laughter, coexist and reflect each other, and are indeed whole aspects, not separate serious and comic images as in the usual drama... the most important works in this category are, of course, Shakespeare's tragedies" (122). Each aspect is fully developed, and they even build off each other. The humorous aspects help reveal more truths about the tragedy. This idea is taken further by Phyllis Gorfain who explicitly lays out the carnivalesque elements within *Hamlet*:

riddling tests, tricky deceptions, grotesque revenges, and cyclical saga of deaths, near-deaths, and returns... the most fully centered in a Renaissance court, with its elaborate aristocratic play and performance. Taken together, these elements make *Hamlet* the most performance-centered of the tragedies, the only one with a full-scale play-in-the-play, a trickster hero, and an elaborate series of other ludic performances including the player's

speech, the verbal gaming of the gravedigger scene, and the fraudulent fencing match.

(26)

When these elements of the play are understood with the idea of genre blending in mind the “meaning is reinterpreted through laughter... [in] a carnivalesque tragedy such as *Hamlet*” (Gorfain 43). This interpretation, which points out the carnivalesque and the idea of mixing the important aspects of humor and tragedy, is crucial to the play and helps the audience to move past the idea of a genre-bound play to better understand the function of the humor within the tragedy.

Samuel Johnson, too, in his *Preface to Shakespeare*, defends mixing genres because it makes the work more similar to real life, adds a balanced mix of merriment and solemnity to the tragic genre, and has an appealing emotional effect (376-7). The humor in *Hamlet* meets all of Samuel Johnson’s criteria and clearly mixes humor into the tragedy. When analyzed deeper, though, the humorous features of the play allow Hamlet to connect with the audience, establishing a relationship where the audience can better understand Hamlet and his motivations, a relationship that the audience does not have with any of the other characters. The humor also masks deeper feelings and truths about characters or events throughout the play that are otherwise easily missed. All of these elements combined lead to the overarching purpose of the humor in *Hamlet* which is to allow the audience to better experience the catharsis at the end of this tragedy.

The most widely accepted definition of tragedy comes from Aristotle in his *Poetics*: “Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude... accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions” (92). The pity and terror felt by the audience comes from seeing the tragic hero as undeserving of his tragic fate and uniting in

common humanity with the tragic hero, realizing he is a person like anyone in the audience. The audience members, as well as the characters in the play, are building up negative emotions throughout and the only way to get rid of these negative emotions is to feel and express them (97-98). These concepts are important to review and establish before proceeding in understanding the function of humor as the purpose of the humor directly relates to the ideas of tragedy and catharsis.

Obviously, *Hamlet* fits into the category of tragedy; what complicates this idea is the humor that is present throughout. The ultimate goal of tragedy, for Aristotle, is catharsis. The humor serves as a time of emotional “break” between tragic or serious events. Thus, the humor in *Hamlet* functions clearly in accord to Samuel Johnson’s idea of a balance between “merriment and solemnity” which allows the audience to properly experience the catharsis at the end of the play. Johnson highlights that without this balance or opportunities for the audience to release negative emotions, the tragedy becomes agonizing rather than having a “pleasing emotional appeal.” This aligns with Edmund Burke’s idea of the sublime. Burke adds terror as a source of the sublime as pain is a much more powerful emotion than pleasure (459). These powerful, painful emotions of pity and fear experienced through catharsis still need to be pleasurable or people would not seek out the experience of them. Burke states, “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful” (459). The powerful emotions that are drawn out by the experience of this tragic play still need to be pleasurable so that it is not a wholly painful experience. The elements of humor that are present within make the pain more tolerable by modifying the tragedy and allowing for moments of release before the final catharsis. By Act II, Hamlet has seen his father’s ghost who claims to have been murdered

by his uncle, tolerated this manipulative uncle/step-father, wished to die, and had his girlfriend taken away from him by her father's wishes. It is clear that there needs to be some emotional release and moderating of the pain both for the characters who have to live the tragedy as well as for the audience who has to view the tragedy to ensure that this experience does not become painful, and the humor throughout the tragedy achieves this necessary emotional relief which allows for the audience to experience the highest emotional moment at the end, the final catharsis.

The base subject matter of the play is undoubtedly grave; the entirety of *Hamlet* revolves around Hamlet trying to avenge his father's murder, which results in numerous deaths. The humor that is present in the play acts as comic relief which allows an emotional release between dramatic scenes in the play as well as makes the tragedy bearable. Polonius dies in Act III and Act IV ends with Ophelia's death. Act V begins with a humorous scene between two clowns who are jesting while digging Ophelia's grave. The gravedigger asks, "What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright or the carpenter?" (5.1.37-38). The second man offers, "The gallows-maker, for that outlives a thousand tenants" (39-40) only to find out the answer is "a gravemaker. The houses he makes last till doomsday" (54-55). This is just one of the many jokes the men exchange while digging Ophelia's grave, bringing light to a serious task and a dark part of the play as Act V scene ii holds the final battle between Hamlet and Laertes, the deaths of both of these men, as well as the deaths of the king and queen.

Lorrie Wolfard furthers this idea and states, "Hamlet's last scenes have more 'punch' if they aren't of the same emotional valence as all the previous material" (50). The comedic scene that begins Act V allows the audience to reduce the building despair they are feeling after the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia. The break in solemnity also allows the events leading up to

Hamlet's vengeance as well as the final tragic moments of the play to be expressed and felt more deeply in a way that is not wholly painful. Had the entire play been serious and tragic, this final scene would not have carried the same weight, nor would it have had the same intense effect on the audience as they would have been too emotionally exhausted to feel the ultimate tragedy. Throughout the entirety of the play, the audience has been building negative tensions based on the tragic events. When there are breaks in the constant tragedy, the audience has the opportunity to release some of their tensions to allow for a renewal of the emotional capacity for fully feeling the final tragedy of Hamlet's death and experience purgation of pity and fear.

There are many times that this balance is reached through shorter character interactions instead of full scenes such as the gravedigger scene. Polonius is often a clueless and rather foolish man. When his personality encounters Hamlet's cynicism and bitterness, humorous and witty banter between the two characters often ensues, typically at the expense of Polonius. When Polonius confronts Hamlet about what Hamlet is reading, wanting to know the subject matter or the title of the book, Hamlet's response is "Words, words, words" (2.2.189). Through this response, Hamlet alludes to the fact that words themselves are meaningless as they do not correspond to action, can easily mask the truth, and, therefore, that he has a distrust for language. Polonius asks for Hamlet to clarify his response, which results in Hamlet calling Polonius old and dumb, which goes unnoticed by Polonius (2.2.193-201). Hamlet's witty and ambiguous remarks and Polonius' naive responses add humor to the scene and allow the audience and Hamlet to draw merriment even in the small breaks from tragedy within the play.

The humor present in *Hamlet* also allows for Hamlet to form a connection with the audience, which is something no other character in the play does. This relationship between Hamlet and the audience then further establishes the audience's pity for Hamlet. Hamlet's

humorous direct addresses to the audience as well as his revelations to them, which contain information that most other characters are not privileged enough to know, allow the audience to form a deeper connection and unite their sympathy with Hamlet more than any other character. This directly relates to how the audience experiences pity for Hamlet throughout the play and the catharsis at the end. Hamlet's death is the final tragic moment that elicits the purging of pity especially because of this relationship. While the other deaths that occur throughout the play are serious and sad, they do not have the same impact as the death of Hamlet because the audience has no deep connection with any of them.

Hamlet's language helps in building this intimate relationship as he often addresses the audience through asides. Hamlet's first words of the play are an aside. Though this is not explicitly written in the Second Quarto, it is considered an aside by many editors because instead of changing his response, "the King continues with his sentence structure" rather than addressing Hamlet's comment (Shakespeare 170n65). Hamlet's first words, "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.65) are directed at the audience rather than the other characters on stage. This immediately sets up the importance of the relationship between Hamlet and the audience. Hamlet uses this jest to directly reveal his true feelings to the audience through a play on words that holds numerous meanings. He immediately begins with a belittlement of Claudius, the now king, who just claimed to be both Hamlet's cousin and father: "But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son" (1.2.64). Hamlet alludes that he is more than just kin now as Claudius is both his uncle and step-father now that he married his dead brother's wife, and that Hamlet is now more related to Claudius than he wants to be. He asserts his disapproval of Claudius in the second half of the line, "less than kind," stating that this new relationship was formed in a manner that was not "kind" meaning not natural, as marrying the wife of a recently deceased brother is not common,

and further that Claudius himself is not kind, because he is a murderer. Hamlet does not reveal his feelings this clearly to any other character, rather he masks his feelings through humor that is only understood by the audience as they are invited to know what is going on in his mind while leaving the other characters clueless and often leading them to be the victims of his jokes.

Hamlet's relationship with the audience also creates dramatic irony within the play. Throughout the play, there is dramatic irony of a more serious tone, such as the audience hearing from the Ghost that Claudius murdered the King while everyone else thinks he died from a snakebite (1.5.32-39). The audience later has the Ghost's thoughts confirmed when Claudius admits his actions when is alone:

“O, my offence is rank: it smells to heaven;
 It hath the primal eldest curse upon't –
 A brother's murder. Pray can I not:
 Though inclination be sharp as will,
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent. (3.3.36-40)

However, dramatic irony is also another form of humor in the play that serves to deepen the relationship between Hamlet and the audience. Through Hamlet's revelations to the audience, they know more than the rest of the characters. Hamlet reveals his plan of acting mad as part of his revenge plot: “As I perchance hereafter shall think meet / To put an antic disposition on” (1.5.169-70). He shares this to only Marcellus and Horatio, and while this is not done through an aside, Hamlet is inviting the audience to know his plan as well. From this point forward, the audience knows that feigning madness is part of his plan, while almost all the rest of the characters are clueless about this fact. The characters pick up on Hamlet's madness, but do not know the cause and try to attribute it to other factors.

Hamlet begins his relationship with the audience with humorous remarks and inviting the audience to know things the other characters do not know. It is in laying the foundation of a relationship built on humor and then trust between Hamlet and the audience that further allows Hamlet to reveal his inner thoughts and true feelings and emotions in a more direct manner, namely his soliloquies. When Hamlet soliloquizes to the audience, he deepens their relationship and allows the audience to further pity Hamlet as they better understand the depths of his character and his true thoughts about his tragic situation.

Marjorie Garber further argues that the audience holds an active role in *Hamlet* as there are times when even the characters are members of the audience. Through the production of “The Murder of Gonzago,” many of the characters take on the role of audience members and the most important aspect of this performance is not what is performed onstage but rather what occurs offstage through the audience response, namely Hamlet wanting to catch Claudius’ reaction to the murder to determine his guilt (22.529-40). Claudius does not realize that there is more to see than what it is occurring onstage and it is through Claudius thinking he is “safe” because he is only watching a play that Hamlet determines that he indeed killed Hamlet’s father (Garber 72). Garber then draws a connection between the actors being audience members and questions “How much are *we* missing, when we are sure that we see and hear all that is to be seen and heard?” (74). Just as the characters take on the role of audience members, the audience members play an active role as well. When Hamlet reveals his thoughts through soliloquies, he is still forming his relationship with the audience due to their constant watchful presence. The audience sees Hamlet’s revelations and sympathizes with him because of the already established relationship between the two parties. Further, like in Hamlet wanting Claudius’ response to the play, the audience’s response to *Hamlet* is extremely important as well. The whole play has been

building pity and fear in the audience for the ultimate goal of releasing these through catharsis at the end. Hamlet's relationship with the audience that was originally formed through humor, but further developed into a more sincere relationship, aids in making this possible.

The humor present in *Hamlet* also serves to prove Hamlet's superior intellectual abilities which aids in making Hamlet more honorable as a character and leads the audience to admire him more, thus pity him and his tragic role. The tragic hero, for Aristotle, must be a man who is admirable. In this though, Aristotle clarifies that the admirable qualities do not necessarily come from the fact that the tragic hero has great reputation or is born of high nobility. These can be qualities of the tragic hero, as they are with Hamlet, but more importantly, the tragic hero must be virtuous, as seen in Hamlet through his intellect. The hero still has imperfections, which allows the audience to further connect with the hero and thus pity him. This virtue or honorable characteristic proves the tragic hero cannot just be anyone, rather he must be someone who is of good character, sometimes even a little better than the audience and the other characters so the audience can admire him and thus feel his tragic fall even more (Aristotle 97-98).

Hamlet's intellect is revealed through his plan of madness. Even though Hamlet revealed his plan was to act mad, it is easy to believe that Hamlet's feigned madness blends into Hamlet actually being mad. There could be much proof of Hamlet's madness within the play: Hamlet's lack of action throughout, his indecisiveness, and the fact that his acting like a madman can appear to be too good for just acting. Morriss Henry Partee further states that because of his tragic situation and melancholic disposition, Hamlet's actions can be called that of a madman (17). However, Hamlet's mastery of language, which is often articulated in humorous ways, proves this madness is not the case.

Hamlet's wordplay shows that he clearly has supreme control over his language, a control that the other characters do not possess, which speaks to his superior intellect as well as his sane mind. John Russell Brown states, "ambiguous and complicated speech is a distinctive element of the 'mind'" of Hamlet (19). Further, Hamlet's language is so full of ambiguity and hidden truth that it constantly "commands our attention" (32). The audience cannot help but grasp on to every word Hamlet says and analyze the humor and the deeper meaning Hamlet is hiding.

Hamlet's intellect is often drawn on with his witty responses to the other characters. When first seeing Hamlet, King Claudius is curious as to how Hamlet can still be upset over his father's death, especially since he should be feeling joy at the marriage of his mother:

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

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

Here, Hamlet uses a homophone to respond to Claudius' question. Hamlet uses the word "son" to sound like sun to respond to his comment about the clouds. However, he uses "son" because he is still grieving the death of his father and is too much of a son to Claudius now that he married Hamlet's mother. This is just one of many instances throughout the play that Hamlet uses wit to show his intelligence and mastery over language. While it is an early example, Hamlet holds this same clear control over his language at all moments in the play even after he takes on the role of acting like a madman. After Hamlet kills Polonius and Claudius is trying to figure out where Hamlet hid the body he asks,

KING: Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

HAMLET: At supper.

KING: At supper! Where?

HAMLET: Not where he eats but where 'a is eaten...

KING: Where is Polonius?

HAMLET: In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him I'the' other place yourself. But if indeed you find him not within this month you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby.

KING: Go, seek him there!

HAMLET: 'A will stay till you come. (4.3.16-38)

Here, Hamlet avoids answering the question of where Polonius' body is located but does so in a way where he can avoid the question, make fun of Claudius, and confuse those around him with his play on words at supper where Polonius is being eaten rather than eating. He then tells the attendants that there is no need to rush because Polonius will not be going anywhere before they get there, as he cannot move because he is dead. If Hamlet was truly mad and did not have the intellectual capability he possesses, this wordplay would not be possible. These instances allow him to manipulate his words to have meanings hidden from the other characters and a touch of humor for him and the audience to enjoy. Again, Hamlet is connecting with the audience as well as revealing an honorable trait which allows the audience to then pity him more in this tragedy.

The question then is raised at how Hamlet's language can be used to prove he is not mad while Ophelia's use in language clearly proves her madness. Ophelia begins the play as the obedient, inexperienced daughter of Polonius who is perhaps romantically involved with Hamlet (1.3.109-10). There is nothing in Ophelia's speech or behavior that would make the audience question her sanity at the start of the play. As the play progresses, however, Ophelia experiences "Conflicting messages, mostly negative, [that] whirl around in Ophelia's mind, each demanding

primacy” (Dane 411). Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes, and Claudius all make demands on Ophelia that conflict with each other and put Ophelia in difficult positions like trying to use Hamlet’s feelings for her to figure out what Hamlet is plotting (2.2.159-64). She then experiences Hamlet toying with her as well as her father’s murder by her lover. Ophelia, because of the intense trauma, takes a sharp decline into insanity and begins singing and using odd phrases whenever she is present. Like Hamlet, Ophelia’s mad ramblings are pregnant with meaning; however, they are not as pointed as Hamlet’s nor do they carry the same intentionality, intellectuality, or the humorous tone that Hamlet’s do.

Ophelia’s phrases mainly focus on two things, her father’s death and her relationship with Hamlet. Many of the lines of the numerous songs she sings relate to the passing of an old man, showing that she is mourning the death of her father:

And will ‘a not come again?

No, no, he is dead,

Go to thy deathbed.

He will never come again.

His beard was as white as snow...

He is gone, he is gone. (4.5.182-89)

It is clear that Ophelia is mourning the death of her father through her song and she becomes constantly fixated on his death, so much so that she at times does not even address the other characters on stage; rather she is too wrapped up in her songs or other ramblings. Ophelia’s songs also include sexual references which can allude to her relationship with Hamlet and how she is struggling to deal with the fact that he is the one that broke her heart, killed her father, and then left:

Young men will do't if they come to't:
By Cock they are to blame.

Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me
You promised me to wed.'

He answers:

'So would I ha' done by wonder sun
An though hadst not come to my bed.' (4.5.60-66)

While everything that Ophelia sings cannot be taken for literal truth based on her faltering mental state, it is important to look at the words of the song in regard to her relationship with Hamlet. She sings of a man who promised the singer they would get married, but then he left her. This is like Hamlet's claims of love and now he has left for reasons unknown to Ophelia. While she is fixated on her father's death, she is also clearly fixated on Hamlet and appears to be doubly heartbroken from the abandonment of both of these men as well as broken in her mental sanity.

Ophelia's phrases prove to not be as humorous as Hamlet's either. During Hamlet's time of feigned madness, he uses loaded phrases as traps for the other characters. Hamlet ensnares the other characters in his wit and they do not seem to pity him, rather they get frustrated with his mad ramblings as seen in the previous example of Claudius trying to get Hamlet to tell him where he hid Polonius' body. With Ophelia's mad speeches, the other characters show genuine concern for her and try to care for her and Claudius tells Horatio, "Follow her close. Give her good watch, I pray you" (4.5.74). The characters note the shift in Ophelia's speech and behavior

and when Laertes returns, he even notes an undesirable physical change that accompanies Ophelia's madness:

How now, what noise is that?
 O heat, dry up my brains, tears seven times salt
 Burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye.
 By heaven, thy madness shall be paid with weight
 Till our scale turn the beam. O rose of May,
 Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia,
 O heavens, is't possible a young maid's wits
 Should be as mortal as a poor man's life? (4.5.152-59)

The other characters present genuine concern towards Ophelia in her mad state. Her language is loaded with meaning, but it is directed to the causes of her madness, namely Polonius' death and her relationship with Hamlet, and does not hold the same pointed humor as Hamlet's language does. Further, there is no healing for Ophelia, rather she suffers a deep decline in sanity from which she does not recover, only finding escape through death.

Ophelia began the play as a sane character with clear, unloaded use of language and once she began her descent into madness, there was no turning back or even glimpses of the old Ophelia. While there is no debate about whether or not Ophelia is mad, her language helps confirm her madness. Hamlet, on the other hand, has been prone to wilder actions and speech since the beginning of the play before he was even considered to be mad. When Hamlet decides to start acting mad, his behavior is not too far from how he has previously behaved. His deliberate and humorous use of language when he is acting mad proves that he is actually sane.

Further, even after Hamlet begins acting mad, he still has moments of total rational thought and can easily go back and forth between his feigned madness and total clarity.

When Hamlet and Horatio arrive at the graveyard in Act V, Hamlet has already been acting crazy for much of the play. However, the clowns initiate a major change in Hamlet that could only be accomplished because he is still of sane mind and still possesses the ability to rationally think. Hamlet criticizes the gravediggers for being insensitive because they are singing while digging graves (5.1.61-66). When he confronts the gravediggers to talk to them, he finds they are very literal in their speech: “How absolute the knave is! We must / speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us” (5.1.129-30). The intelligent and witty Hamlet finds himself outwitted by the clowns. Despite their singing and wit, Harold Bloom claims the “Grave-digger is the reality principle, mortality” (76). The clowns see death every day and have accepted it and are able to make jests about life and death. This encounter ignites a change in Hamlet: “Through his new awareness of the great levelling power of death, he finally comes to terms with all the fears, qualms and obsessions that have troubled him for so long” (Draudt 80). Hamlet moves from his philosophical questioning about life and death that has been seen throughout the play, especially in his “To be or not to be” soliloquy (3.1.55-89). He then accepts the reality of death and proceeds towards deciding upon action and finally avenging the death of his father.

Hamlet’s intellectual abilities, control over language, and ability to balance madness and sanity are more powerful than any other character in the play. Again, this serves in accordance with Aristotle’s definition of tragedy. These characteristics make Hamlet honorable in a way that the other characters are not. Hamlet proves that he is undeserving of the misfortunes that occur during the play because of his honorable characteristics. This then leads the audience to feeling a deeper sense of pity for Hamlet. This is more clearly seen through the four characters that serve

as almost comedic foils to Hamlet: Polonius, Osric, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. These characters are humorous, but their humor does not serve the same purpose for them as it does for Hamlet. Hamlet uses humor to invite the audience to laugh with him, thus deepening the connection between Hamlet and the audience. However, he uses humor against these other characters and invites the audience to laugh at them as they often fall prey to Hamlet's witty and humorous remarks. The audience is then able to juxtapose these characters' actions from Hamlet's to reveal truths about Hamlet's mind, both in intellect and sanity. The ineffective actions of these characters and the way in which they add humor to the play proves Hamlet's intelligence and stable morality, and comparing their actions even justifies Hamlet's hesitations, which is often the greatest critique of this character.

Polonius is set up to be a humorous character even in the stage directions. Though the stage directions are not necessarily to be understood as Shakespeare's words and can instead be considered as an interpretation rather than constitutive of the text, these are still helpful in understanding the characterization. Act II scene i begins with "enter old Polonius" (2.1.1 [stage direction]) playing on the idea of a crazy old man. In spite of this, Manfred Draudt states, "Polonius always attempts to appear learned and witty, yet his pride in his own skill, cunning, and wisdom makes him appear all the more ridiculous" (73). Polonius tries to combat this idea of himself by having a deeper knowledge of the other characters. However, his means to attaining this knowledge are questionable. Polonius has a tendency to spy on other characters. He instructs Reynaldo to spy on Laertes while he is at university and then spread rumors about him to find out more about his son's character (2.1.2-70). While Hamlet uses language to drive his humor, Polonius falls prey to humor because of his misuse of language, his actions not being congruent with his words, and his skewed belief about the way to accomplish his goals. Polonius' drive to

attain knowledge by spying on others ends up being what gets him killed when he is hiding behind the curtains spying on Hamlet and Gertrude rather than proving himself to be learned and witty (3.4.5-23).

Polonius, like Hamlet, is the only other character to have direct communication with the audience through asides, but his do not have the same effect as Hamlet's. Where, as previously discussed, Hamlet's asides allow him to connect with the audience because he reveals truths to them, Polonius' asides are full of dramatic irony, so they undercut any serious connection that could be established with the audience. Polonius tells the audience he thinks Hamlet is going mad, but the audience already knows of Hamlet's plan to act mad, so anything Polonius says adds to the humor of the play rather than establishing rapport with the audience:

POLONIUS [aside]. Though this be madness yet there is
method in't. – Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

HAMLET. Into my grave.

POLONIUS [aside]. Indeed, that's out of the air. 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
my daughter. (2.2.202-209)

Polonius thinks Hamlet is mad, but that there is a reason for his madness. He wants to take Hamlet inside, and out of the air. Hamlet, of course, wittily responds with a phrase that has ambiguous meanings: both that Hamlet would rather die than go anywhere with Polonius and that if he walks out of air, he will, quite literally, die. Polonius notes how loaded his answers are and that this type of response is only something that can be managed by someone who is not of

sane mind. Polonius' thoughts are already known to be false by the audience, as they know that Hamlet possesses a mastery over language and that Polonius is falling into his trap by believing that he is going mad. While Hamlet and Polonius both speak to the audience, because of the relationship Hamlet and the audience have established, his asides lead him to foster a deeper bond with the audience. For Polonius, asides make him step further into the comic role of the fool.

Osric, like Polonius, is set up to be a comedic character in the stage directions. In the First Quarto version of the play, Osric is referred to as a "braggart gentleman" (Shakespeare 438n66.1). Osric's character was literally written to be a showoff, comedic character. Osric often tries to use fanciful speech, but he, like the others, is outwitted by Hamlet. He also adds humor because of his strong desire to please those in power:

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 sultry and hot, or
my complexion –

OSRIC. Exceedingly, my lord, it is very sultry. (5.2.80-86)

Osric's willingness to change his opinion about something as constant as the weather within a short period of time makes him a humorous sycophant. It is clear how easily Osric is swayed by those in power and therefore, he is not assertive. Osric does provide comic relief, but he is unable to hold his own against Hamlet (Shakespeare 438n66.1). One main difference between Osric and Hamlet is whether the audience laughs with or at the character. While this is a characteristic of

each of these comedic characters, it is especially clear with Osric as he is not as present throughout the play as the other characters; this one of Osric's main functions within the play. Hamlet clearly picks up on Osric's eagerness to please and manipulates Osric to get him to become laughable. Hamlet gets the audience to laugh with Hamlet and at Osric by pointing out the ridiculousness in these characteristics, further deepening his connection with the audience.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern add to the humor as they share a similar quality in Osric's desire to please. These two men always appear together and essentially function as one character, to the point where they are pretty much indistinguishable from each other and the King mixes up their names (2.2.33). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are supposed to be Hamlet's close friends, but they turn on him to do whatever they can to please the king. Guildenstern shows his willingness to please and even tells King Claudius he is willing to give himself up to be fully commanded by Claudius (2.2.29-32). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are willing to do anything for the king, even though they are turning on their friend to accomplish this. It adds humor as they share in the same sycophantic characteristics as Osric. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though willing to do anything without much thought, are not successful in their endeavors to please the king as they prove to be incompetent and Hamlet obviously sees this and uses their weakness of character against them. One of the reasons why these characters are humorous is because they are considered dumb and easy to manipulate. When contrasting these two against Hamlet, they prove Hamlet's qualities of overthinking and inaction to be the better option.

When juxtaposing these four characters and the humor they bring to the play against Hamlet and his humor, they reveal a deeper truth about Hamlet. The four accomplish almost none of what they attempt to do as they lack the intelligence of Hamlet as well as their own stable morality to do what they think is right, rather than whatever Claudius tells them to do.

Polonius is constantly outwitted by Hamlet and his fatal flaw ends up being his misguided need to spy on the other characters, especially on Hamlet. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are so busy trying to please Claudius, they do not realize that Hamlet switches the arrangement for his death to their deaths (5.2.12-57). While Hamlet was influenced by the ghost, he did not act hastily and was sure to be more conscious of the other characters. Osric, too, was easily manipulated and lacked Hamlet's stable morality. These comedic foils prove through their own humorous failures that Hamlet's actions and morality are satisfactory, though they may fall short of the ideal, and that Hamlet's intellect is much greater than any of these others'. Hamlet's lack of action seems to be one of his greatest flaws; however, when compared to these four humorous characters, it is clear that Hamlet takes time to reason through his decisions and make sure they correlate to his morality. Rather than changing his beliefs to suit the King's, Hamlet proves his own intellect and beliefs are stronger than the other characters and he actually achieves his goal of avenging his father's death. When the audience notes these characteristics in Hamlet, they are able to connect their own flaws with Hamlet's, but see that Hamlet is still more honorable than the other characters and further deserves the audience's pity.

Humor is often more associated with comedy as it is believed to be more suitable to the end of comedy than tragedy. This stems all the way back to the classical conceptions of comedy and tragedy, which are still held, in slightly developed forms, today. This entire dissociation between humor and tragedy should be called into question, though, as humor actually makes sense for tragedy. The medieval idea of carnivalesque humor aids in adding humor to the tragic genre, but this is still further developed. The humorous aspects prove to be an essential component of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The mixing of the tragic and comic genres proves to provide balance between merriment and solemnity as well as having a pleasing emotional

effect on the audience. On top of this, the humor still serves much deeper functions. The humor in the play allows Hamlet to connect with the audience in a way that no other character does. This relationship allows the audience to better understand Hamlet and his motivations. The humor masks Hamlet's deeper feelings as well as other truths that are otherwise overlooked. When considering Hamlet in relation to other comedic characters in the play, their failures are further proof of Hamlet's superior intellect and mastery over language. All these aspects aid in developing Hamlet's honor as a character and further leading the audience to have pity for Hamlet and feel the end of the play more deeply. This ties back to answer the question posed at the beginning of this essay, how appropriate is the humor and what does this mixing of genres achieve? The answer is Shakespeare reveals that ultimately humor helps the tragic play in reaching the ultimate end of tragedy, catharsis.

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