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The Implications of Hamlet's Punning

When reading Shakespeare's plays it is always important to explore all the possible meanings of his diction. His language is rich with implications, and to fully understand his works we must consider all the relevant connotations and choose our personal interpretation while understanding that all are possibilities. *Hamlet* is a play filled with multiple-meanings-words. Hamlet, in particular, manipulates possible word connotations in his rhetoric. The effect on the audience of his word play differs relative to his conversation partners. His ambiguous rhetoric functions either to hide his intended meaning from his counterpart or to create moments of humor for the play's audience; this distinction reveals the difference in his relationships to other characters in the play.

Hamlet often uses words that have multiple connotations, creating an element of mystery and concealment; we do not know Hamlet's actual thoughts but can only infer them from our interpretations of his words. Hamlet's obscuring word play is most obvious in his discussions with Claudius and Gertrude. Hamlet calls Claudius, "a little more than kin and less than kind" (1.2.65). Here, Hamlet plays on the word *kind*. Despite having a more immediate relationship with Claudius now that he has married Hamlet's mother, Hamlet says there is little *kindness* in that relationship. *Kind* could connote a *likeness*, in which case Hamlet means that despite being more closely related, they are no more similar to one another; He and Claudius do not resemble each other in personality, belief, or action. However, Hamlet could also mean *kindness* in terms of warmth and compassion. In this case, Hamlet's words would serve as a warning to Claudius

that he does not feel warmth and love towards Claudius simply because Claudius married Hamlet's mother. The footnote also suggests that Hamlet may be "playing on "kind" in the natural sense..." and so calls the kinship with Claudius unnatural (1.2.65). Claudius is Hamlet's uncle, but now he has married Gertrude so Claudius is Hamlet's father. He cannot naturally be both Hamlet's uncle and father, yet he is. Which of these meanings is Hamlet's intent? All are contextually appropriate so we cannot say for sure; his exact thoughts on this kinship remain a secret from both his parents and the audience.

Hamlet also responds to his mother's speech about death – "Thou know'st 'tis common—all that lives must die,/Passing through nature to eternity" – with ambiguous use of the word *common* (1.2.72-73). The content of Gertrude's speech defines her use of *common* as *commonplace*, a footnote-suggested definition. We understand her to mean that death occurs frequently when she says "all that lives must die"(1.2.72). Hamlet's response, however, lacks context. His response, "Ay, madam, it is common," is unclear (1.2.73). He could either agree with Gertrude's assertion that death is routine, or he could intend *common* to mean "crude," as suggested by the footnote (1.2.73). The Oxford English Dictionary cites "Of persons and their qualities: Low-class, vulgar, unrefined" ("common") as a definition of *common*. This definition parallels a meaning of *crude*, cited in the footnote; so *crude* is an acceptable characterization of King Hamlet's death. This second interpretation interestingly foreshadows Hamlet's later realization that Claudius murdered his brother – a very vulgar death indeed for the late King Hamlet. Hamlet may also imply that death is for commoners, people without rank, and so is unsuitable for the King of Denmark. Several OED entries define *common* in terms of something of the general public: "The common people, as distinguished from those of rank or dignity"

(“common”). Perhaps Hamlet thought of his father as everlasting – a strong king and therefore, invincible. If the royal family is above the public in rank, perhaps royals are above their natural experiences too. It is doubtful that Hamlet thought his father would never die, but it is easy to unconsciously believe such a dominant leader is unconquerable, even by death. Hamlet’s word play with both of his parents can hardly be characterized as play. Both of these exchanges exhibit a solemn use of pun.

Hamlet’s word play with people other than the king and queen – Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the gravedigger – is much more humorous. Rather than multiple word meanings concealing Hamlet’s thoughts, the puns used by these characters create comic relief in a very serious play. Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern’s interaction is more sexual in tone. Guildenstern refers to Fortune as a woman and calls Rosencrantz and him “her privates” (2.2.229). *Privates* can connote persons of no official rank, friends with whom someone confides intimacies, or genitalia. The OED defines *private* as both a class of “people who hold no public office” and “Of a person: intimate or confidential (*with* a person)” (“private”). Interestingly, both these definitions apply to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in relation to Hamlet: they are friends who share intimate conversations with him, and they are also of a lower class. However, Guildenstern seems to imply that he and Rosencrantz are also friends of Fortune – that is, fortunate – and of a lesser class than the personified Fortune. Hamlet responds to this statement with, “in the secret parts of Fortune? Oh most true she is a strumpet...” (2.2.230-231). By referring to the “parts” of Fortune, we understand that he takes the word *privates* to mean private parts of a female. He calls Fortune a “strumpet,” or whore, and so Hamlet chose to interpret *privates* as genitalia and enhances the sexual innuendos in the scene. Their conversation cuts the

seriousness of the play's plot. There is no real significant content in this exchange, just word play.

Hamlet also engages in this kind of discourse with the gravedigger who prepares Ophelia's grave. The two play with the word *lie*, shifting between a lie, or falsehood, and lie, the act of laying somewhere. Hamlet says the gravedigger "liest in [the grave]" (5.1.12), meaning that the gravedigger is physically in the grave. But the connotation of the word shifts as a playful battle of the wits ensues. The gravedigger says that he "[does] not lie in't, and yet it is [his]," meaning that he will not lay his body in the grave, but since he built the grave, it is his (5.1.114). Hamlet then retaliates with an alternate meaning of *lie*. He returns, "Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say 'tis thine. 'Tis for the dead, not for the quick," Hamlet argues, "therefore [the gravedigger] liest" (5.1.115-116). Hamlet now means the gravedigger tells a falsehood because the grave is not his but the person's for whom he dug it. The gravedigger then twists the meaning of the word *quick*, intended by Hamlet to mean *living*. The gravedigger defends his "quick lie" - *quick* in this case meaning "nimble" according to the gloss (5.1.117). The primary definition of *nimble* in the OED is "Quick at grasping, comprehending, or learning; (hence) clever, wise" ("nimble"). The gravedigger implies that his lie was a clever and intellectual one. Rather than explicitly speaking falsely, he manipulated word meaning to indirectly tell a lie. This scene with the gravedigger also serves to cut the tension of the play by inserting a humorous interaction. The conversation, again, contains little impactful content. It has no bearing on the plot, and so it must serve some other purpose: comedy.

While Hamlet uses puns with both sets of characters, the tone of his word play is very different and reveals his dissimilar relationships with these characters. With his mother and

Claudius, Hamlet's word play has a seriousness. The effect is a grim and somewhat enigmatic tone to Hamlet's words. With his friends and the gravedigger his word play evokes sexuality and comedy. Why the differing tones? Perhaps Hamlet is so furious with his parents' actions that he cannot appreciate humor in his interactions with them. Hamlet's subsequent speech supports this theory:

...frailty, thy name is woman—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer!—married with mine uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules...
O most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! (1.2.146-156)

Hamlet is infuriated with his mother and Claudius' relationship and feels betrayed on behalf of his father, which explains his secrecy when speaking with them. When comparing Gertrude and Claudius to Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the gravedigger, there are also two important distinctions. Claudius and Gertrude are both members of Hamlet's family and of royal class. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are his friends, and they and the gravedigger are of a much lower class. So in addition to his distrust of his parent figures, Hamlet's differing interactions may be related to the social class or the family versus friend status of his conversationalists. Rank seems to little affect Hamlet's behavior. Certain things are inappropriate to speak of in front of royalty (such as genitals) and Hamlet appears to be following these rules of etiquette. However, when Hamlet jokes with the gravedigger the word play is not inappropriate but intellectual, so his joking is not solely based on what is rank appropriate. The nature of his relationship – family

versus non-family – does correlate with the nature of Hamlet’s word play though. His interactions with non-relatives allow elements of comedy, while his family suppresses his desire for humorous play.

Shakespeare’s words have an infinite number of connotations. As an audience, we must decide what his words mean for us personally and then explore how those words influence the play. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet uses word play in two very different ways and this difference is most striking and illuminating. Hamlet is not comfortable enough with his relatives to create intellectual humor. His tone is serious and his word play is mysterious. With friends and strangers, however, he uses his wit to create comedy and his tone is light-hearted. The difference is that Hamlet did not choose his relatives, and they both disappointed him with their treatment of his father. He cannot escape them so his tone is solemn. As for non-relatives, Hamlet chooses with whom he converses. This freedom is manifested as the comedic elements of Hamlet’s interactions with those outside of his family.

Works Cited

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