

The savagery in this play excludes laughter

[Experience](#), [Laughter](#)



The term “ savagery” means an act of violent cruelty. Without a doubt, both Hamlet (H) and The Revenger’s Tragedy (RT) both contain multiple acts of extreme savagery in the form of acts such as torture, poisoning, murder and rape. But is there a place in plays which contain such dark acts for moments of comedy and humour? There are many different opinions in answer to this question which will be explored; but at first glance one might think that humour would not be an appropriate addition to the plays.

In H the protagonist is cruel to his lover and his mother dies. He also kills a man and organizes the murder of two friends before he is himself killed at the end. It is even harder to accept humour in RT where we are presented with the protagonist nearly killing his mother and then torturing and killing the duke. In addition there are scenes involving rape, severed heads and mass murder. Perhaps the most obvious example of a scene that includes comedic and savage elements in either of the plays is the discovery of Polonius’ corpse in H.

Claudius asks Hamlet where Polonius is to which he informs him that he is “ At supper”. When Claudius asks him where he’s having supper he states that it’s “ Not where he eats, but where he is eaten”. Hamlet is referring to the fact that Polonius is being eaten by worms. If this joke is told well then it should get a great amount of laughs from the audience, but he’s also talking about a brutal murder he has just committed. Lee Lady writes¹ that “ In contemporary terms, Hamlet’s lines here would be called a ‘ sick joke’”.

This ‘ sick joke’ continues throughout the scene as Hamlet continues to use wordplay to comic effect. There is humour in the dramatic irony that Hamlet

spins words in front of Claudius, referring to the “ fat king” and “ lean beggar”. Claudius’ confusion is definitely amusing to the audience and it is finally ended when he asks bluntly: “ Where is Polonius? ” We can also look closely at the beginning of act three in RT where Ambitioso and Supervacuo set off to the prison to order the execution of the Duke’s son. There is a grave misunderstanding and the guards take it that it is the youngest son, Junior that is to be executed. There is even further savagery in the fact that we feel little sympathy for Junior as he makes a cynical joke about a rape he has committed when he states that he “ dies for that which every woman loves”.

There is humour in the dramatic irony that takes place once they believe that Lussurioso has been killed. They are looking forward to being the next in line for his position and are already scheming about killing one another. They later pretend to be saddened when the severed head they still assume to have belonged to Lussurioso is brought to them, while they are in fact elated by his demise. There is a clear comparison between these two scenes in that fact that they both involve death and the comedy that surrounds it. These deaths are both avoidable. They were not murdered on a battlefield or for any real purpose.

Hamlet killed Polonius by accident in the same way that Junior was executed instead of Lussurioso. We can see the different ways Middleton and Shakespeare choose to weave comedic elements around very similar scenes. There is no obvious ‘ fool’ or ‘ jester’ in Hamlet (apart from himself at some points in the play) until we meet the gravedigger in act five. Hamlet and he

exchange a flurry of quick witted words in a conversation unlike any other that Hamlet comes across in the play. Hamlet immediately jokes that “ That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once”.

He then goes on to make many more jokes and puns in the same vein over the course of the scene. Hamlet asks to whom the grave belongs, to which the gravedigger claims that it is not for a man or a woman either. Hamlet then asks who is going to be buried in the grave and the gravedigger tells him that it is “ One that was a woman, sit; but, rest her soul, she’s dead”. There is obvious comedy in the manner in which the gravedigger mocks death.

The gravediggers represent a stock character found in many of Shakespeare’s plays. They are intelligent and witty common men that get the better of their social superiors. These characters would have most likely appealed to the “ groundlings,” the poorer members of the audience that were not seated. The comparative scene in RT is the very memorable one in which the duke is poisoned and killed by Vindice.

The motif of the skull is one that is obviously alluding to Hamlet (In which Yorik’s skull plays an integral part in the gravedigger’s scene). This skull is the centre of both the savagery and the laughter in this scene as the duke is murdered in a very brutal and disgusting fashion. He is poisoned with acid by the skull of the woman he himself killed, while he thinks he is to have sex with a beautiful woman. There is comic wordplay introduced by Vindice when he tells the duke that the woman he is about to have sex with has a “ grave look to her”, the pun being that the “ woman” is about to kill him and send

him to his grave. There is humorous irony in the fact that the duke wanted to seduce Gloriana, but when she refused he killed her with poison and he is eventually killed by her poison-laced skull; almost as if she had exacted her revenge and murdered him. There are further parallels with H in this scene when Vindice says “ then those that eat are eaten” which bares more than a slight resemblance to when Hamlet says “ Not where he eats but where he is eaten”.

The duke’s murder is almost ridiculously over the top. It is perhaps the kind of shock humour that works because it played upon what were very real fears and dangers in Jacobean life. However, this scene could be played off in many different ways. In a production of RT in London in 2008, Hippolito and Vindice torture the Duke with great joy which perhaps diminishes the comedic elements slightly and replaces them with the unease of two people enjoying torturing a man.

The scene is very versatile and open to interpretation as it can be played for laughs or play much more seriously. The level of comedy perhaps lies in the interpretation. A great deal of the comedy in H is brought to the audience through the mockery of characters. The most prominent of these characters is Polonius.

In a scene where Hamlet is (perhaps) feigning madness, he holds a conversation with Polonius in which he insults Polonius. He insults him in confusing and complicated ways like when he calls him a “ fishmonger” which may sound like nonsense but in the 17th century fishmonger could be used for a pimp or bawd. A pimp Polonius certainly isn’t, but it may be taken

that Hamlet is insulting the fact that Polonius will use his daughter for political purposes. Lee Lady wrote of this scene: " In all of Hamlet's dialogue, there is an irony. What Hamlet is saying is comic, but the feeling behind the comedy is extremely hostile.

" This paves the way to different interpretation which allows the savagery or the comedy to shine through. The comedy against Polonius continues as Hamlet calls him a " tedious old fool" as well as exposing his physical failings and old age by holding up a mirror to him. While he is clearly highly regarded in Denmark, Polonius is past his best and is clearly conceived by Shakespeare as a classic senex. Hamlet's final comic character comes with the brief appearance of Osric, a younger counterpart to Polonius. In A Shakespearean Encyclopaedia², we read " Osric.

.. emerges unforgettably as a typical fawning, sycophantic Elizabethan courtier". Osric's manners and ceremonious speech are intended to impress, but he is outwitted and outsmarted by the sharper Hamlet who makes him look like a fool to comic effect.

When Osric tell Hamlet " I thank your lordship, it's very hot" Hamlet quickly retorts " No believe me, 'tis very cold". There is still the great question of what genre these plays fall into, if any. Ostensibly they are both revenge tragedies with the inclusion of murder, ghosts, madness, disguise and plotting. However there are undoubtedly moments of humour in both of these pieces of work, so do they remain as revenge tragedies? Or would they better be described as tragicomedies or works of black comedy? Sydney Bolt states³ that " What sets Hamlet apart from the other tragedies is that there

is a strong comic element in the performance from the hero himself". Other opinions include that " the occasional admission of comic ingredient in a tragedy to make it light and humorous is one of the most interesting forms of tragedy. This intrusion of the comic into the tragic mode is called comic relief.

Since tragicomedy is defined as " Fictional work that blends the genres of Tragedy and Comedy", perhaps it is best to call Hamlet a tragicomedy. On the other hand RT's comedy is much darker, and circles around black comedy rather than the light interludes of H. The comedy is perhaps more widely interpreted in RT than in H with TS Elliot finding the play to be one of horror and not comedy: " the cynicism, the loathing and disgust of humanity... ome horror beyond words".

While on the other hand CultureWars. org. uk finds that RT is a lot of fun " Everyone gets a ripping yarn about a guy merrily avenging his way through a whole tier or Italian nobility with a series of cunning strategies and just honest to goodness violence. " Overall, these plays provide an excellent show of how to combine elements to tragedy and comedy. Its use is perhaps summed up best by Dr. Johnson⁴ when he said that " what distinguishes Hamlet from the rest of Shakespeare's plays is its variety".

This wealth of different aspects to the play is created largely through the inclusion of comedic moments. Critically, however the level of comedy and how it is used can be widely varied by interpretation and performance. Moments of humour can be played up for big laughs from the audience that provide comic relief but equally they can be suppressed to create a darker

and grittier production. This is even more important with productions like RT in which a lot rides on whether the true horror of the events is portrayed or a more black comedy production is created. With the many different modern adaptations on show in the 21st century it is easy to forget about the context in which these plays were performed in at the time of their conception. While comic relief is an obvious reason for the laughs to exist, plays were watched by a very broad spectrum of people not necessarily the educated.

For the less educated members of the audience comedy was a necessity. The audience can take these complex and dynamic plays in an infinite number of ways but the fact is that there is clearly room for comedic elements to exist in both of these amazing plays.