

Hamlet as a prologue for the rest of the play

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Hamlet does not begin at a light pace or with a trivial introduction to characters and setting. While the first scene does not involve the central characters, it manages to begin the narrative arc of the play immediately. Amidst the inevitable exposition that dominates the first act of the play, scene one contains plot-advancing action: the ghost of Hamlet appears; and, at the very end of the scene, Horatio decides that he should inform Hamlet: Let us impart what we have seen tonight Unto young Hamlet [...] This decision starts a simple chain of events that leads into scene two-which in turn leads into scene three, and so on.

Before long, the younger Hamlet has established that Claudius murdered his Father, and this information is at the base of everything he thinks, says and does subsequently. It can be seen throughout Shakespeare's canon that he writes the narrative of a tragedy in an intricate and interwoven style. Despite writing in a character-driven way, there is a recognition that circumstance and coincidence must conspire for genuine tragedy.

In Romeo and Juliet, for example, the suicides of the title characters are entirely dependent on bad luck and the illusions it creates in their minds.

A better and more relevant example is the first scene Macbeth, which deals with this in a more complex manner: the idea of the witches' self-fulfilling prophecy is merely an ironic twist on his use of interconnection. Shakespeare accepts that removing just one moment from a long and a convoluted string of events can vastly alter the end result. 'Prologue' has rather ambiguous connotations. In one sense, however, it implies that a scene is designed to

be introductory. By extension, this suggests a certain amount of disconnection from the rest of the text.

Shakespeare's official prologue in *Romeo and Juliet* takes the form of an expositional monologue directed openly to the audience. With all of the above in mind, it seems inaccurate to apply this definition of 'prologue' to the first scene of *Hamlet*. It is very much integrated with the rest of the play. It does carry a weight of exposition, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it is important for that purpose. Almost all the back-story included in the first scene is reiterated – and expanded upon – in the second scene, when Hamlet appears for the first time.

Thus, the scene is redundant in that capacity. Furthermore, the scene doesn't really attempt to give much insight into any of the central character. Even the most important of those present, Horatio, is still comparatively minor, serving mostly as an object for Hamlet to talk at. In a series of quick exchanges, Horatio is shown to be a brave, in talking to the ghost; a leader amongst his comrades, in taking charge of them and deciding on the best course of action; and loyal to Hamlet, in his immediate impulse to tell him of the phantom.

But, given that Horatio is a secondary character, none of this implies that the scene is especially introductory or separate from the rest of the play.

Perhaps if the scene was designed to give palpable hints towards the personality of a central character – such as Hamlet himself – then such an argument could be made. * A more loose definition of 'prologue' can suggest that the scene in question foreshadows or is in some way

representative (or symbolic) of the rest of the text. This is maybe a little bit more applicable to Hamlet than the structural ideas discussed above.

Indeed, there is doubtlessly an array of metaphorical and vague interpretations of the scene which can be made to show that it corresponds figuratively to the rest of the play. A dark play, which deals openly with death, is bound to relate in many ways to the image of a ghost. In particular, though, it is interesting to study the verbalised thoughts of Horatio and his peers. Shakespeare's physical imagery is so crude lucid here that even his characters are aware of it! The ghost seems to give form to a general disquiet that has existed since Hamlet's death, and to the idea that this unrest will have consequences.

On one occasion, Horatio announces that the ghost, ' bodes some great eruption to [their] state'. As a man of integrity and intelligence, it seems that Horatio has spelt out the foreshadowing for us: some kind of incursion is going to spoil the peace in Denmark. Later, through an allusion to Julius Caesar, he asserts that the phantom alludes specifically to the assassination of the King: In the most high and palmy state of Rome, A little ere the mightiest Julius fell, [...] There is little doubt, then, that Shakespeare intended the ghost's appearance to foreshadow the tragedy that ensues.

In reality, though, it is more than just an omen; the ghost has affects the narrative and influences the characters. It is an active image: more than just casting a metaphorical shadow over their lives, it will do its part in causing the real destruction. There is an odd merging of imagery - which is supposed to be for the audience alone - and plot-related action. As a result, the

characters experience the symbolism for themselves. The parallel purposes of the same bit of action – the appearance of the ghost – create a certain amount of dualism.

When Horatio fears the repercussions of the ghost and decides to tell his friend, Hamlet, of its appearance, the scene is participating in a collective whole; at the same time, its imposition on Horatio, Marcellus and Baranardo is part of a metaphor. The scene therefore blurs at the edges. At once, it can be a singular entity representing the whole of the narrative and also a part of that narrative in itself. Just like the ghost, it foreshadows, but it also causes; it affects the lives of the characters individually, but it also sparks off a long and fatalistic tragedy. Whether or not this makes it a ‘prologue’ is a matter of definition.