

The inseparability of acting and ruling: an analysis of hamlet and the first part...



Within Hamlet and 1 Henry the Fourth are examples of Shakespeare including the trade of acting within the text as a central theme. Hamlet certainly shows us his skill as an actor throughout the play, but there is a more blatant preference to acting in the scene where Hamlet stages the death of his father in front of King Claudius. In 1 Henry the Fourth, the signs of Shakespeare's opinion of acting and ruling as inseparable things is more ordinary and yet more substantial. The signs are more ordinary because Hal doesn't go so far as to put on a play within the play. But the signs are more substantial because each and every scene that Hal appears in demonstrates the skill of acting applied to everyday situations. Hamlet and Hal both share two common traits: they are both princes and they both employ acting as a means to achieving their desires. I think that Shakespeare makes a profound statement about rulers and players. Both rulers and players have the difficult task of convincing their observers that they are other than they are. Because of this relationship between players and rulers the roles are often intermingled, for instance, rulers often perform like players and players often portray the part of rulers. Convincingly, Shakespeare demonstrates how the skill of ruling and the skill of playing are integrally related and completely inseparable. Hamlet's reliance on the theatre substantiates the connection between playing and ruling. Hamlet says, "... the play's the thing" (Ham. 2. 2. 604) when he thinks of the best way expose Claudius as guilty of Hamlet Senior's murder. Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, has many political and militaristic tools at his disposal. With these tools, Hamlet could plan to expose Claudius in any number of different ways. But Hamlet chooses to rely on the gifts of the theatre and those who live within it - the players. Using the players, Hamlet gains the subtle probe that he needs to show the

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assembly a perfectly normal tragedy and, simultaneously, a perfectly real crime. It is little wonder that Hamlet chooses the theatre as his means of showing Claudius that he knows about the crime. To the assembled nobility, the play that Hamlet stages reflects a stereotypical tragedy of the day, but to those few people who recognize the deeper meanings in the actions of the players, the play functions as a warning. King Claudius certainly sees the deeper meanings as Hamlet intends him to and openly walks out during the performance. No other tactic, whether political or militaristic, could achieve the reaction that Hamlet desires from Claudius. Hamlet knows “the play’s the thing” because Claudius gives the precise reaction that Hamlet wants. So a prince, having at his disposal all of the tools of government, relies instead on a tool as ambiguous as playing in order to achieve his purpose. The tools of drama are ambiguous because drama has no singular definition; Hamlet clearly makes use of the ambiguity of drama. By using the play within the play, Shakespeare demonstrates that the skills of kings and players are exceptionally similar. Hamlet relies on acting in order to create deception, but Hal’s skill at acting allows him to create a mythic structure as the reformed prince returning to save England from Civil War. Falstaff teaches Hal the importance of language and timing. Because of the valuable lessons that Falstaff teaches Hal, Hal is able to manipulate everyone in the country until he effectively sets himself up for one great moment of return in which to feign maturity: “I have a truant been to chivalry, ... And will ... Try fortune with him in a single fight” (1 Henry IV 5. 1. 94-100). Hal understands the importance of “revealing” his regal nature at the proper place and time. All of the assembly believes Hal’s words despite his previous behavior because Hal picks an extremely dramatic moment to stand up like a true prince. In <https://assignbuster.com/the-inseparability-of-acting-and-ruling-an-analysis-of-hamlet-and-the-first-part-of-henry-the-fourth/>

the same way, players deliver the most profound soliloquies and monologues during moments of intense drama on stage. Kings and players understand the importance of timing a speech correctly in order to obtain the maximum effect for better or for worse. Hal understands this idea of timing, so he delivers his “ maturity speech” at a precise moment – much like the actor knows by feel the moment he should deliver his lines. Hal shows the assembly that he is no longer an adolescent thief; the assembly accepts Hal’s words because he picks the perfect moment to say them. Acting is essential to ruling because the training involved with acting allows a monarch (or prince in this case) to gain a feel for the crowd. The mythic structure that Hal creates for himself amounts to no more than a well-timed moment on stage. Fortunately for Hal, the assembly, and the audience, accept without question Hal’s divine right to challenge Hotspur. Hal commands the respect of the English army through perfect timing. Hal knows that his true nature is not that of a thief, and, similarly, even though the character of Hamlet is real within the play, the actor-Hamlet plays to an audience. Hamlet greets his mother in scene 2 in a dreary mood: “ Together will all forms, moods, shapes of grief, That can denote me truly” (Ham. 1. 2. 82-83). Hamlet’s adolescent tendency to mourn his father for an extremely long period of time presents a problem within the text. A 30-year-old man should be able to deal emotionally with the loss of his father. Although Hamlet cannot inwardly overcome his father’s death, he performs in such a way that his mother’s suspicions are not aroused: “ I shall in all my best obey you, madam” (1. 2. 120). Hamlet dismisses his mother’s worries by playing the part of the obedient son. Gertrude functions as an audience within herself at this point in the play. Ruling and acting demand a person

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constantly perform in front of an audience. The performance that Hamlet gives to his mother holds double meaning: Gertrude believes that Hamlet is telling the truth about obeying her, but the real audience knows Hamlet simply says he will obey Gertrude in order to stop her from troubling him further. Hamlet has a firm feel of what it means to put on a show for the sake of onlookers, and, whether he learned it from being a prince or elsewhere, Hamlet performs as both actor and prince in order to convince Gertrude that his highest wish is to obey her. An interesting difference between Hamlet and Gertrude shows up in the previously mentioned interchange. Hamlet does not allow himself to take anything at face value; on the other hand, Gertrude accepts what she sees as true. “ So excellent a king, that was to this Hyperion to a satyr...” (1. 2. 139-40). Hamlet cannot stop mourning his father, yet Gertrude has already taken a new husband before the play begins. Hamlet suspects that his father did not die of natural causes while Gertrude never mentions that she has ever questioned Hamlet Senior’s death. Hamlet can act for his mother so convincingly because Gertrude accepts the things that she hears and sees without question. A king understands that he cannot accept everything he hears or sees for truth; similarly, an actor endeavors to dissect a play in order to understand a deeper meaning. Hamlet is obviously the actor and the ruler in this scene. Gertrude acts like an audience would act; an audience simply exists to absorb the drama while it unfolds. Both Hamlet and Hal need to be able to convince other people their appearance is other than their true identity, and they are able to achieve this deceit through language manipulation. Hamlet seems to understand intrinsically how to manipulate language; Hal, on the other hand, needs a teacher, so he spends time with Falstaff in order to learn <https://assignbuster.com/the-inseparability-of-acting-and-ruling-an-analysis-of-hamlet-and-the-first-part-of-henry-the-fourth/>

everything he can about the manipulation of language. Hal spends most of 1 Henry the Fourth goofing off with his companion Falstaff. Falstaff teaches Hal many valuable lessons about the manipulation of language; Language manipulation lies at the center of every drama. Nothing in life is completely straightforward, so nothing on stage is completely straightforward either. Falstaff teaches Hal how to perform for an audience with his language. Every actor learns how to create emotional reactions through language. Hal realizes during Act 2 that he no longer needs Falstaff and dismisses him thusly: “ That villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Sahtan” (1H4 2. 4. 262-264). Hal no longer needs Falstaff to teach him how to speak. Hal uses the lessons that Falstaff taught him in order to finally dismiss Falstaff from his presence. In almost the same way that a ruler would cover up his true intentions, Hal uses the lessons Falstaff teaches him in order to obfuscate his intentions. Hal refers to Falstaff as a “ misleader of youth” and calls him “ Sahtan” quite obviously, but Falstaff does not perceive how skilled Hal really is and simply inquires, “ Whom means your Grace?” (2. 4. 261). King’s manipulate treaties and alliances with language; actors manipulate audiences and other characters with language. When Hal feels that he has learned everything he can from Falstaff, he dismisses him like an actor dismisses the watching audience or a king dismisses his court. Hal’s dismissal differs greatly from the way that Hamlet decides to dismiss Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but Hamlet depends on his position as prince and on his skill at acting in order to free himself from the problem the presence of his friends presents. “ How dost thou, Guildenstern? Ah, Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do you both?” (Hamlet 2. 2. 225-226).

Hamlet performs for his friends as though he is very happy to see them.
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Hamlet knows that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are come to Denmark only at the request of the King. Even though Hamlet calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “good lads” he doesn’t care in the least about their deaths: “They are not near my conscience. Their defeat Does by their own insinuation grow” (5. 2. 58-59). The method behind all of this madness lies in Hamlet’s skill as an actor. Without Hamlet’s reliance on playing he would have a harder time tricking Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. There are moments in the play where Hamlet manipulates people almost as skillfully as Hal. Hamlet manipulates nearly all of the characters in the play into believing that he suffers from nothing more than a bout of depression and a bit of stress-induced madness. But from the episodes with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet demonstrates that he can use the persuasive powers of playing to trick people into believing his outward appearance instead of seeing through the façade into Hamlet’s true feelings. At the end of both Hamlet and 1 Henry IV the true motives of the lead characters are revealed in much the same way that a play reveals its true meaning at the end. Hal steps into his role as the prodigal son returned on the battlefield. “As if he mast’red there a double spirit Of teaching and of learning instantly” (1H4 5. 2. 64-65). Hal convinces Vernon that he has indeed turned from his childish ways and “mast’red” all of the mannerisms of a true prince. Hal’s mythic structure completes when Vernon praises him so highly. Hal has brought himself to this point in the play through his skillful manipulation of language. Even the officers in the opposing camp appreciate the way Hal speaks to them; it is the way a king, or a rehearsed actor, speaks. Hamlet makes speeches like a king in order to mask his desire for revenge. “Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong” (Ham. 5. 2. 236-237). Hamlet performs for the Danish

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court exactly like an actor performs on stage. In front of the entire court of Denmark Hamlet begs the King's pardon and all of the events within the play would seem resolved except the audience knows that Hamlet plays the King for a fool. Hamlet's technique in front of the King comes directly out of the theatre. Hamlet simply lies to the King so convincingly that the King fears no harm. In some ways the theatre is simply one elaborate lie performed on stage. In the same way Hal comes back as a prince of princes without challenge. There are two levels in which the action unfolds itself and Shakespeare plays on both of them: the drama as it is presented on stage, and the drama within the story. These two levels parallel perfectly with the separate identities within Hal and Hamlet: that of appearance and that of reality. Hal and Hamlet end their respective dramas just like actors end their plays. Hal and Hamlet rely on the tricks of the theatre because Shakespeare wants to explore the fundamental problems within drama. Everything on stage is appearance. Hal and Hamlet employ all the skills of a trained performer in order to demonstrate the relationship between appearance and reality. Before the moment on the battlefield where Hal speaks so eloquently to Vernon and Worcestershire, Hal does not act like a great prince. But Hal manipulates the audience with his language and timing in order to place himself firmly in the seat of rulership. On some level, the skills of acting actually precede the skills of a monarch. Hamlet is able to make it all the way to Act 5 without arousing too much suspicion that he plans to kill the King because of his abilities as an actor. For all intensive purposes Hamlet satisfies the court with his explanation that he has fully recovered from whatever he was suffering from in Act 1. In fact, if not for Laertes, Hamlet might be able to kill Claudius without anyone suspecting him. Hamlet's

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position is so secure because he manipulates those around him through his words. Hamlet might have been a very successful king because of his superb skills as an actor. Shakespeare understands the problem of identity within drama and even though the characters would believe otherwise, the audience knows that Hal and Hamlet are not changed men. It becomes clear towards the end of both plays that Hamlet and Hal, through mastery of the stage, are responsible for directing the action and thoughts of the other characters. Hamlet and Hal skillfully guide their respective courts until they have positioned themselves in such a manner as to achieve their goals. This skillful manipulation can be broken down into the simple stage directions that a director gives to his or her cast, or the leadership by which a king rules his country. Hamlet and Hal are directors within the dramas that they create while they are creating it. Hamlet and Hal achieve their goals by the end of the play like a director achieves his or her purpose, or like a king achieves his goals. Shakespeare suggests that Hal and Hamlet are not the only examples of people who manipulate others in order to complete a task; Shakespeare simply suggests that one method task-completion comes from the trade of the theatre. Everything on stage is appearance, but if a person is part of the drama, who can tell whether or not they are being subconsciously directed as part of a larger picture? There are many characters, but there can be only one director, one king. Shakespeare shows us that one of the fundamental problems within drama is that most of the characters do not realize they are part of a drama at all. Works Cited Shakespeare, William. "The First Part of Henry the Fourth." *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Second Edition. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 889-923.

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