

The Play is the Thing : A Study in Shakespeare's Employment of the Play- within-the-play Technique

Salih Mahdi Hamad

I

The play-within-the-play is generally a brief scene acted by players other than the principal ones as an integral episode within the original play . It is one of the technical devices playwrights employ to help the audience understand the theme of the play, and to "bridge a chasm between stage and audience which would have been quite foreign to the players and playgoers " ¹ . As such , the play scene usually serves both thematic and structural ends.

Most likely, this technique was first employed late in the sixteenth century by several playwrights . Although Shakespeare amply employed it, it does not mean, however , that Shakespeare was the first to handle this dramatic device , because Thomas kyd used it quite earlier in The Spanish Tragedy . No matter how effectively utilized, Thomas kyd must have realized the significance of the technique for both story and

characterization. Thomas kyd was, indeed, the first English playwright who employed the play scene quite functionally and dramatically ² .

Shakespeare, too, manipulated the same technique in some of his plays to serve specific dramatic purposes . He used this device in comedies and tragedies alike: A Midsummer Nights Dream , The Taming of the Shrew , and Hamlet . Within the original play, he knowingly aspired at specific dramatic functions for the play scene to achieve through the players presentation of a dramatic piece on the stage . It is, therefore, evident that Shakespeare's play scenes do function quite dramatically and variably in accordance with the nature of each play and theme . This explains why the function of the play scene in A Midsummer Nights Dream is quite different from that of Hamlet as the messages of both plays are essentially dissimilar .

II

A Midsummer Nights Dream is a comedy concerned with dreaming . The playwright employs a blend of reality and illusion, sleeping and waking, art and nature to treat the central theme of dream that effects the reactions of the characters more than reality does ³. There is very little doubt that the play is more than a mere dream, because it has no real experience at all the players , as Theseus is , are only shadows . This is why the play is most likely related to a weak theme of no significance . When Bottom, for instance, awakes from his sleep under the influence of his dream , which is not a dream, but rather an exact reality within the play, he remarks : " I have had a most rare vision . I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was " ⁴.

This vision indeed harmonizes with the world Shakespeare light - heartedly presents : it is a festive delightful world of marriage celebration where groups of lovers (Theseus , and Hippolyta on the one hand , and the four lovers, on the other hand) , and the Mechanicals arrange for a wedding festival . The framework of the play, the celebration of the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta , plausibly leads the mechanicals to act a play scene for the wedding festivities .

Not a word of me . All that I will tell you is, that the duke hath dined . Get your apparel together, good strings to your beards, new ribbons to your pumps; meet presently at the palace ; every man look o'er his part; for the short and the long is, our play is preferred . (IV, 1, 35 - 40)

Besides its Propitions structural function, the play scene, the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, has a more significant satiric end : it is also a means intended to ridicule some conventional presentations of Elizabethan plays. The presentation of Pyramus and This be indeed shows the weakness and defects of some of the Elizabethan plays under the influence of classical models . One of the features of the play scene is that Pyramus and Thisbe rarely notice each other: they even hardly communicate with other characters on the stage . For this reason , they seem trivial and flat as they have no real role at all . Their presentation of the love story does not have the same influence and eulogy of Romeo and Juliet ⁵.

In the play scene, however, Shakespeare tries to give his audience an idea about earlier Elizabethan drama, and at least his contemporaries understanding of those presentations . Therefore, he makes the newly married lovers, Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius

and Helena, join Theseus and Hippolyta to watch the play-within-the-play in order to satirize some dramatic pieces akin to it, and apply that criticism to similar current conventions. Hippolyta, for instance, comments on the dialogue between Pyramus and Thisbe as the "silliest stuff" she has ever heard, but Theseus sees that "the best in this kind are but shadows: and the worst no worse, if imagination amend them." (V,i, 216-7)

Shakespeare makes Theseus remind us of the need for reason to order society, to make love control our life and to criticize the weaknesses of the play scene. John Russel Brown's conclusion in this respect is, indeed, of value for he thinks that the characters view the "antics of the cast in the play-within-the-play critically" and detach themselves from the "buffonery which turns tragedy to farce before their eyes"⁶. Reason, however, is the power that controls our life, as imagination is in art. Though the play is concerned with dreaming, this does not mean that there is no need for logic and reason: Theseus, as the playwright alludes, represents the mature side - he is aware of everything around him.

Unlike Theseus, the Mechanicals present different kinds of joke that reflect their low cultural backgrounds. They produce their roles ineffectively and unsatisfactorily, too. Their language is not suitable to describe what is happening to them. They

show their failure to the task of representing Pyramus and Thisbe in a number of ways. In brief, they misuse the high terms of melodrama⁷.

Bottom, for instance, offers himself for any role: human or animal, male or female, lover or tyrant. This renders Bottom akin to the fool who has the licence to criticize everyone in the play scene. In this sense, he is a Feste-like character, but he fails to show his wit.⁸

For some critics, the play scene is an interlude written and performed for the rich people: it is not an activity. This Renaissance interlude is a Morality meant to ridicule another aspect of the conventions that were prevalent in the sixteenth century stage: the absence of women¹⁰. Characteristically, in Elizabethan plays, a man cannot introduce himself as a man only, but he can play the role of a woman, too. For the audience, this is a joke, because a man has many features that prevent him from being a woman. Demetrius reflects on this point when he ironically comments on the play scene:

A mote will turn the balance,
which Pyramus, which
Thisbe, is the better: he for
a man,
God warrant us; she for a

woman , God bless us .
(V , i , 26-8)

It is highly ironic, and, therefore, comic, that Flute is made to play the role of a woman though he has a beard coming and a voice changing .¹¹ He does not want to play a woman's role for women's parts were played by boys and young men at Shakespeare's time .

The failure of the play scene is well indicated at the end of the play . When Bottom suggests to read the epilogue , Theseus reflects :

No epilogue , I pray you ; for
your play
needs no excuse . Never excuse
; for when
the players are dead , there
need none to
be blamed . Mary, if he that
writ it had
played Pyramus, and hanged
himself in Thisbe's garter, it
would have been a fine tragedy :
and so it is, truly, and very
notably discharged
(V , i , 363-69)

This commentary epitomizes Shakespeare's ridicule of such presentations as well as his criticism of the understandability of the court people . No matter how far-fetched it is , Jan Kott's idea is of interest . He thinks that Shakespeare employs

the play-within-the-play technique to deride Elizabethan morality and reveal his attitude towards certain social traits under the guise of the cheapness of melodrama¹².

III

Hamlet is a tragedy that treats a revenge theme: Hamlet seeks revenge upon the murderer of his father . Hamlet's quest for revenge lies in his waiting for circumstances suitable for his determination :

Yea , from the table of my
memory I'll wipe away all
trivial fond records
All saws of books, all
forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation
copied there ;
And thy commandment all
alone shall live
Within the book and volume
of my brain ,
Unmixed with baser
matter¹³

(I , V , 98-104)

The player's visit to the castle provides Hamlet with the opportunity to achieve his purpose, making the best use of the presentation of a play scene in the presence of both the King and the Queen :

The play's the thing Wherin
I'll catch the conscience of the
king .

(II , ii , 579-80)

Hamlet's primary aim behind the play scene is to make sure that the ghost's message is not a foul act to send him mad , or kill himself in desperation .

Hamlet's plan rests on watching his uncle's and his mother's reactions to the dramatized story of his father's death , for

guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the
scene

Been struck so to the soul that
presently

They have proclaimed their
malefactions ;

(II , ii , 564-7)

This explains why Hamlet approaches his friend Horatio to help him watch the king and the queen , only to make sure of their responses :

There is a play tonight before
the king ;

One scene of it comes near the
circumstance ,

Which I have told thee , of my
father's death .

I prithee , when thou seest that

act a-foot ,
Even with the
very common of thy soul
observe my uncle .

(III , ii , 71-6)

Hamlet's play scene , the "Mouse-trap " , is a practice within a practice that shows the struggle between Claudius and Hamlet . 14 Here , Hamlet plans to play with his uncle as a cat does with a mouse . He considers himself a cat that follows a mouse in order to entrap it - to achieve victory . This is also noticed in Hamlet's answers of the King's questions about the title of the play scene :

King : What do you call the play ?

Hamlet : The mouse-trap . Marry ,
how ? Tropically .

This play is the image of a
murder done

in Vienna : Gonzago is the

dike's name ; his wife ,

Baptista . You shall see anon; tis
a knavish

piece of work : but what o'

that ? Your majesty , and we

that have free souls , it touches
us not ;

(III , ii , 223-8)

The play scene can, indeed, be considered the central point in Hamlet . It is the key that leads the audience to understand Hamlet's

motives and designs . Prior to the play scene, both Hamlet and his uncle are covering their raison d'etre by various masks: Hamlet pretends madness, and the king pretends love and kindness . 15 But the play reaches it climax after Lucianus has poured the poison into the player - king's ears . Now both Hamlet and the king know each other as they are in truth ; therefore , there is on need to use masks any more 16 .

It seems that the play scene has been prepared with great care. Shakespeare finds that to preface the " murder of Gonzago " with a dumb - show is a tactically - employed device to ensure that the king and the queen should not miss the minute details and accounts of the king's crime . It is the story of the play performed in action , without uttering a single word . In other words , it is a device to draw the attention of the audience to the play and to stop them speaking to each other. Technically, Shakespeare purposes to furnish the audience with what they need about the play scene in order to get its intentions and understand its theme .

Presenting a dumb - show when Claudius sits watching the device itself is, therefore, quite intentional to secure the king's attention when the play scene is acted . Besides its bitter derision , Hamlet's commentry is highly functional :

He poisons him i' th' graden
for's estate .

His name's Gonzago . The story is extant ,and writ in choice Italian ; you shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife .
(III,ii,246-9)

In his commentry, Hamlet has , most likely, emphasized the significance of "for's estate" It is as if Hamlet "has seized on Lucianus, word usurp (III, ii, 245) in the previous line, where it is used figuratively, and adapted the idea behind it to suit his own ends ; the murderer usurps the estate".¹⁷ And when the king rises , Hamlet ironically cries :

What , frightened with false fire .
(III , ii , 250)

Hamlet subtly pretends in this metaphor that the play about Gonzago is not aimed at Claudius; "and, as this is so, he wonders why Claudius should be frightened ."¹⁸ When "all" the audience of the play scene cry " lights, lights, lights , " (III , ii , 254) , it is clear that they try to understand the king's reaction to wards the dramatic piece as they are amazed at the unnaturalness of the responses .

before the " mouse-trap " , it is time for both , now , to plainly act one against the other . The play scene has made the king quite certain that Hamlet knows the whole story , and , similarly , it has enabled Hamlet to deal with his uncle as an enemy .

Notes

1. See : J. L. Styan , Drama , Stage and Audience . Cambridge : Cambridge University Press , 1975 , p.139 .

2. See : for instance, Sir A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (eds.), The Cambridge History of English Literature . Vol.2 Cambridge : Cambridge University Press , 1970 . p.158 .

3. See : M. B. Garber , Dream in Shakespeare . New Haven : Yale University Press , 1974 , p.59 .

4. See : Shakespeare , Complete Works edited by W. J. Craig , Oxford : O. U. P. , 1905 : (Rep. 1986) A Midsummer Night's Dream , IV , i , 211-3 . Henceforth , all references to the play are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically .

5. Garber illuminatingly sheds light on Bottom's dream and the meaning of " vision " in this comedy in his scholarly study above . See , Garber , 60ff .

6. See : John Russel Brown , Shakespearian Comedy . London : Edward Arnold LTD . , 1972 . p.162 .

7. Jan Kott , Shakespeare : Our Contemporary . London : Methuen and Co. LTD. , 1981 . p.190 .

8. For more details , see Stephen Fender's " Introduction " to A Midsummer Night's Dream . London : Edward Arnold , 1968 . p.34 . See also , Garber , pp.60-1 .

9. Originally , the " interlude " is a short " entertainment put on between the courses of a feast or the acts of a play Interludes

were particularly popular in England in the 15th and 16th c. , and especially between 1550-80 It is very likely that they form a link between the Mystery Play , the Miracle Play and the Morality , and the psychological drama of the Elizabethans . Dividing lines are not clear . Many of them are very similar to Moralities and in some cases are indistinguishable from them . "

For more information , see : J. A. Cuddon , A Dictionary of Literary Terms . London : Penguin Books , 1979 . S. V. , " Interlude " .

10. See : J. Dennis Huston , Shakespeare's Comedies of Play . London : The Macmillan Press LTD, 1989 . p.58 .

11. S. Fender , p.34 .

12. Jan Kott , p.87 .

13. William Shakespeare , Hamlet , edited by Bernard Lott , London : Longman , 1968 . All references to the play are from this edition . Henceforth , references will be cited paranthetically .

14. See : Bernard Evans , Shakespeare's Tragic Practice , London : O. U. P. , p.102 .

15. John Dover Wilson considers the second act of Hamlet a comedy of masks . For more details on this subject , see : J. Dover Wilson , What Happens in Hamlet . Cambridge : Cambridge University Press , 1969 . p.89 .

16. Ibid .

17. See Bernard Lott's commentry on the line (III,ii, 245) , p.120 , Note , 246 .

18. Ibid .

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