

The Structure of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

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Structure is one of the principal reasons people find works of art attractive. There is no suspense in rereading novels or poems, or listening again to songs, or rewatching movies. The content is known ahead of time, and yet enthusiasts will eagerly reread poems like *Ozymandias*, rewatch *Casablanca*, or listen to Taylor Swift's "You Belong with Me" for the umpteenth time. There must be something over and above the content which accounts for this, and here I'm going to assume that that something is how these pieces are put together, their form. It isn't necessary that audiences are consciously aware of structure of works that they love for these structures to resonate. But the crucial structure is there nonetheless, as we can see by observing that great poems, for example, are so much more interesting than their paraphrases.

In this paper, I will lay out what I believe to be the structure of Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. It isn't necessary that audiences are conscious of this structure, though Shakespeare certainly was. It will turn out, for example, that there is a reason that Horatio is alive at the play's end, and this reason is related to, in fact required by, the organization of the entire play. On a point like this, it is important to remember that Horatio's fate is entirely in the hands of Shakespeare. The author exclusively must decide if Horatio lives or dies, and in this case we will see that his fate is *motivated*, in the sense that his survival follows from the rest of the structure that Shakespeare built. Horatio's survival reinforces the structure Shakespeare has given to the play.

The key thing to understand is that *Hamlet* is about deception. Of course, this is not in the least surprising, since deception is what playwrights do. Failure to deceive the audience ruins a play. This is a cardinal rule: Trick your audience! Make them believe that something is real when it isn't. Do people cry at the end of *Wicked*, even though they know that they are seeing actors and that no part of the story corresponds to reality? Yes? Hats off to the writer, the director, the actors. They have successfully fooled their audience.

So playwrights are interested in deception like painters are interested in paint and woodworkers are interested in saws and chisels. It's only natural that Shakespeare would write at least one play in which deception plays a fundamental role.

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Here is a quick summary of how *Hamlet* is put together, points that I will elaborate on below.

The ghost of Hamlet's father is played with a voice only. There is no ghost character on the stage. But if played properly by the actors that are on the stage, the audience is tricked into thinking that there is really something there. Later, Hamlet will use this same trick to reveal the guilt of Claudius. In the meantime, almost everyone is lying to someone else. The lone exception to this is Horatio. By

the end of the play, all the deceivers are dead. It can't be that Shakespeare was thereby expressing a negative opinion of deception, since as we observed, that's the business he is in. But what it does do is link up all the characters to the theme of the play, and it binds the parts of the play into a coherent whole.

Structure is often noticed when a part of it breaks. If one is listening to a symphony for the first time, and something goes wrong and the sound is cut off before the end, it will likely be noticed as having been artificially abbreviated. The structure of the piece reveals that. If a printing error cuts off the last line of an unfamiliar sonnet, a reader will feel it because of the structure. We might speculate that the audience would notice that something is off if, for example, a version of *Hamlet* is performed in which Ophelia lives at the end of the play or Horatio does not, because the structure of the play tells us that Ophelia must die and Horatio must live.

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The Ghost in Act I

In this section I will try to show that the ghost of Hamlet's father is best played with only a voice, presumably from below the stage.

The first thing we need to address is the stage directions. It's important to observe that these are supplied not by the playwright but by the person Bradbrook (1932) calls the "book-keeper", a kind of stage manager.

The difficulty of reconstructing Shakespeare's productions is chiefly due to the crabbed stage directions. There is little business that is not implied in the dialogue; it is a matter of expanding the hints, which are often ambiguous. ...The author's stage directions were often tentative, especially with regard to the number of supers; they were expanded and particularized, and in the case of undramatic, altered, by the book-keeper, where they were not merely indicative of business for a single actor [52]

But exits are less carefully marked than entrances because they were not the book-keepers business. [53]

The book-keeper, too, noted what properties were to be prepared; these directions are always a few lines ahead of the appearance of the properties of in the play. [54]

It natural to think that the stage directions are not mere descriptions of stage business, but rather are sometimes instructions for the actors who are on stage, or sometimes for backstage staff. This is especially likely in the cases where the business is fully recoverable from the dialogue.

In the case of the ghost's first "appearance", it would be trivial to place the stage direction in the right place, in addition to what it looks like and when it leaves:

Marcellus: Peace, break thee off; look, where it comes again! [I.I.39]

Bernardo: In the same figure, like the king that's dead.

Mar: Thou art a scholar; speak to it Horatio.

Ber: Looks it not like the king? mark it, Horatio.

Horatio: Most like: it harrows me with fear and wonder.
 Ber: It would be spoke to.
 Mar: Question it, Horatio.
 Hor: What art thou the usurp'st this time of night.
 Together with the fair and warlike form
 In which the majesty of buried Denmark
 Did sometimes march? by heaven I charge thee, speak!
 Mar: It is offended.
 Ber: See, it stalks away!
 Hor: Stay! speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!
 Mar: 'Tis gone, and will not answer.

Here, we can also see the first indication of the problem of how to block the scene so that that audience's attention is directed to the actors that are speaking and reacting to the ghost instead of on the static and mute ghost. This will become clearer later, but for now we can just observe that one good way to solve this problem would be to simply eliminate the figure of the ghost altogether. That way, we can be sure the audience's attention is directed where we want it.

The same elaborate description in the dialogue, and a more severe blocking problem, is evident when the ghost returns:

Hor: But soft, behold! lo, where it comes again! [I.i.126]
 I'll cross it, though it blast me. Stay, illusion!
 If thou hast any sound, or use of voice,
 Speak to me:
 ...
 Speak of it: stay and speak! Stop it, Marcellus. [I.i.139]
 Mar: Shall I strike at it with my partisan?
 Hor: Do, if it will not stand.
 Ber: 'Tis here!
 Hor: 'Tis here!
 Mar: 'Tis gone!
 ...
 Ber: It was about to speak, when the cock crew. [I.i.147]
 Hor: And then it started like a guilty thing
 Upon a fearful summons.

It's hard to see how one can play this scene where the location of the ghost is unclear if the figure of the ghost is plain for the audience to see. Better, no ghost figure on stage, but good acting creates the illusion that there is something there.

In the fourth scene, we see once again that every action of the ghost is described in the dialogue:

Horatio: Look, my lord, it comes! [I.iv.38]
 ...
 Hor: It beckons you to go away with it, [I.iv.58]
 As if it some impartment did desire
 To you alone.

Marcellus: Look, with what courteous action
It waves you to a more removed ground:
But do not go with it.

...

Hamlet: It waves me still. [I.iv.78]
Go on; I'll follow thee.

It seems clear that the reason the ghost's actions and appearance are in the dialogue is that without them the audience would have no idea what is going on. The ghost's actions have to be described because they are invisible. In the next scene, the ghost will reveal to Hamlet that he is Hamlet's father, and that he was murdered by Claudius. Here once again the blocking of this scene is crucial. When the ghost says

The serpent that did sting thy father's life [I.v.39]
Now wears his crown.

We want the audience to be looking not at the ghost but at Hamlet as he gets this news. Many films of this scene, where obviously the director can control where the audience sets its attention, plays the scene in this way. The ghost is not in the picture. Hamlet is.¹

The question we're asking is how do you make sure in a stage production that the audience is focused not on the speaking ghost but rather on Hamlet. There doesn't seem to be any natural place on stage to put the ghost to bring this about. The most natural thing to do would be to bring Hamlet front and center and play the ghost with a voice only.

By the end of Act 1, the audience has seen the actors interact with something that obviously is not there. They describe what it looks like and what it does, they follow the illusion with their eyes, they react to what it says. If they are talented, the audience may also be at least partially taken in by this deception. They see that nothing can have effects.

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### The Ghost in Act III

Hamlet visits his mother's room. He has just killed Polonius. The ghost "appears" again, and again we have a serious blocking problem. Hamlet sees the ghost, but his mother does not. Once again, the ghost's movements are described in the dialogue. And again, it is clearly more effective to play this without the ghost's figure on stage. The audience sees what Gertrude sees, namely, nothing.

III.iv.131

Queen: To whom do you speak this?

Hamlet: Do you see nothing there?

Queen: Nothing at all; yet all there is I see.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Wikipedia (accessed October 25, 2023), over fifty films of *Hamlet* have been made since 1900. It would be interesting to check how most of them shoot this scene, but the observation here applies to works directed by Olivier, Richardson, and Branagh.

Hamlet: Nor did you nothing hear?

Queen: No, nothing but ourselves.

Hamlet: Why look you there! look, how it steals away!

My father, in his habit as he lived!

Look, where it goes, even now, out at the portal!

Queen: This is the very coinage of your brain:

This bodiless creation ecstasy

Is very cunning in.

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For our purposes, the Act 2 mainly introduces all the important characters. But the very end of the act reinforces the main theme. The players have arrived, and they will play a very important role in Act 3. Hamlet requests one of the actors to give a speech about the murder of Priam, evidently imitated from Marlowe and Nashe's *Dido Queen of Carthage*. The actor performs it with great emotion, prompting this reflection by Hamlet

Is it not monstrous that this player here [II.ii.577]

But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,

Could force his soul so to his own conceit

That from her working all his visage wann'd,

Tears in his eyes, distraction is 's aspect,

A broken voice, and his whole function suiting

With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!

For Hecuba!

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,

That he should weep for her?

This is the power of artifice. Hamlet declares he will use this power to confirm the ghost's accusation.

I'll have grounds [II.ii.632]

More relative than this: the play's the thing

Wherein I'll catch the conscious of the king.

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In Act III, the players perform a play wherein a king is murdered, and the murderer subsequently marries the queen. This arouses Claudius:

Ophelia: The king rises. [III.ii.276]

Hamlet: What, frightened with false fire!

This establishes the link to Act I, and to the general structure of the play. The organizing theme is illusion, deception.

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So now we can turn to the play's denouement. It's a tragedy, so we expect some people will die and some won't. Who falls in which group is, as I mentioned earlier, completely up to Shakespeare. So how did he decide? I think he had everyone who deceives another character, creates some kind of illusion, dies. Horatio is the one character who is honest throughout, so he lives. Shakespeare has to have an honest person live at the end to reveal the play's structure. That's why I wrote earlier that given the structure, Ophelia, for example, must die, and Horatio must live. This is required by the play's structure.

character	deceives	dies
Claudius	III.i.31 Her father and myself, lawful espials, Will so bestow ourselves that, seeing, unseen, We may of their encounter frankly judge, IV.vii.138 Advises Laertes to secreted choose a poisoned rapier when he fights Hamlet. In V.ii poisons Hamlets cup, which Gertrude drinks	V.ii
Hamlet	III.iv.181ff. Hamlet conspires with Gertrude to manipulate Claudius. Many others: plays mad	V.ii
Polonius	III.i.31 III.iv.4 Polonius hides behind the arras in Gertrude's room.	III.iv
Horatio	At V.ii.229, Horatio offers to misrepresent Hamlet to Claudius, but Hamlet forbids. (see below)	
Laertes	IV.vii.140 Laertes	V.ii
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern	II,ii (see below)	V.ii.382
Gertrude	III.iv.7 Gertrude agrees to conceal Polonius from Hamlet.	V.ii
Ophelia	III,i,134 [Hamlet asks,] Where's your father? Ophelia: At home, my lord. [But Ophelia knows that Polonius is hiding nearby, observing this scene.]	IV.vii

Note 1: Horatio is prepared to be dishonest, but Hamlet stops him. This might be a kind of a tease, since if Horatio did lie to Claudius, it would obscure the structure of the play, whether he survives or not. Shakespeare needs at least one character to stay honest and straightforward, and be alive at the end of the play, because not to have such a character would obscure its structure.

Note 2: The case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is particularly interesting. Shakespeare introduces them in order to emphasize Claudius' dishonesty. R&G pretend to be friends of Hamlet, but Hamlet immediately sees through their act. He tells his mother "Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd" III.iv.204

But now, given that they have been deceptive, the structure of the play demands that they die. There doesn't appear to be a way to gracefully do this, so Shakespeare settles on a method that seems (to me at least) *ad hoc*. When they are traveling to England, with a letter from Claudius to the King of England, instructing the King to kill Hamlet, Hamlet discovers the letter, and changes it so that it is R&G who die. He even happens to have his father's signet so he can seal the letter appropriately.

Horatio: How was this seal'd? [V.ii.47]

Hamlet: I had my father's signet in my purse.
Which was the model of that Danish seal;

Well, okay. This scenario is gratuitous and rather hard to believe. Horatio is surprised when Hamlet tells him.

Horatio: So Guildenstern and Rosencratz go to 't
Hamlet: Why, man, they did make love to this employment;

But something like the deaths of R&G are required, once they are dishonest.

It is a bit awkward but in fact it reveals the play's structure, by its very awkwardness.

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*Hamlet* is structured by deceit, illusion. In Act I, the power of illusion is demonstrated. In Act III, an illusion reveals Claudius' guilt. In (or before) Act V, everyone who has been false, dies, and the one who hasn't, lives. It may be useful to once again stress that this does not indicate that Shakespeare was hostile to illusion. He simply uses it to give structure to the play, as it relates events in Act V, to other events in Act I and Act III. It unifies the play.

But, as a playwright, Shakespeare had to love deceit and illusion. It was what he did.

All quotations are from:

*The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (1961) edited by Hardin Craig. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company.

Bradbrook, M.C. (1968) *Elizabethan Stage Conditions: A Study of Their Place in the Interpretation of Shakespeare's Plays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

