

Brian Ross
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Hamlet, A Play of Play Actors

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is perhaps one of the most famous plays ever written. The most intriguing aspect of the play is the presence of acting, deceit, and plays within the play itself. One of the most important scenes in *Hamlet* is the "play within a play," designed to entrap Claudius. This is not the only time that the characters attempt to deceive or create an illusion to trick another character. Almost all of the characters are "play-acting," and many other scenes echo the dominant theme of illusion and deceit. Many of the characters in *Hamlet* are involved in duplicity designed to deceive, betray, or destroy others. Michael D. Bristol writes about the political façade that underlies the entire play. The characters in a sense are acting but Bristol tends to overlook that not only are the principle characters out to betray and deceive each other through political intrigue but the secondary characters as well seem to engage in a manner of acting at some point during the play. The recurring motif of acting, illusion, and deceit as opposed to sincerity, reality, and honesty illustrates the underlying duplicity throughout *Hamlet*.

In the opening scene of the play we see the first moments of acting or a fake reality. As the ghost appears we see the sentinels wondering if it is real or "but a

fantasy". The different witnesses to the ghost all have a different interpretation of what happened.

Bernardo: I think it be no other but e'en so.

Well may it sort that this portentous figure
Comes armed through our watch so like the King
That was and is the question of these wars.

1.1.109-111

Bernardo thinks that the King's ghost has something to do with the war with Fortinbras. Hamlet soon learns that the true nature of the ghost of his father is to charge Hamlet in enacting revenge against his traitorous uncle. The first scene sets the tone for the rest of the play. From this point forward all of the characters start to lose their sense of reality and question whether or not the other characters are sincere. In the following scene we are introduced to the new king, Claudius. He is in the process of giving a speech about his deceased brother. Michael D. Bristol's essay argues that Claudius' speech is meant to not only deceive but also to mask the reality of what really happened to his brother. Through his political prowess Claudius is able to mask his guilt for his brother's death and justifies his speedy marriage of Gertrude. Bristol's idea about deception in this scene focuses on the parallel between the court speech and Carnivale. While Carnivale was a method of illusion for the lower class Bristol does not convince that Claudius' deception was entirely intentional. Claudius is fully aware of the illusion that he is creating for the royal court and his acting is just one example of the lying and deceit that arises from all the characters in the play.

The relationship between Gertrude and Hamlet is wrought full of lies and deceit. However Hamlet does express some honesty with his mother when he tells her that his grief is genuine and he “knows not ‘seems’”. Hamlet is telling his mother that when it came to his father he knew nothing but honesty, truth, and loyalty. Now that his father is gone Hamlet has been forced into the world of seeming-truths and play-acting. The revelation about the true nature of Hamlet's mother is perhaps the most devastating deception that happens to him. The ghost reveals to him that the “most seeming-virtuous queen” may have known about the plot against his father. With this revelation Hamlet realizes that he no longer has anyone he can trust.

In the third act we see Hamlet plotting to uncover the truth about the murder of his father. This is the most obvious case of play-acting in the play. Hamlet wants to show a play that reenacts his father's murder to try and get Claudius to admit his guilt. The interesting thing about Hamlet's idea is that he wants to use a pretend play to show reality. Hamlet instructs the players to “hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature”. This is very ironic; Hamlet's only way of facing reality is to perform a play that depicts reality. There is a moment where it seems Hamlet is able to confide to someone about his plot against Claudius. He tells Horatio about the Mousetrap plot but in doing so he reveals that Horatio is very easily flattered and Hamlet's confiding in him is only the illusion of trust. He does not really trust him but he knows that Horatio is so flattered by his confidence that he will not say anything. Even Hamlet's supposed friends are unable to be completely honest with him. Rosencrantz and

Guildestern are sent to “spy” on Hamlet. Hamlet realizes this and proclaims that they are “playing” him like a flute, and are not being entirely honest with him. Bristol would argue that the Mousetrap scene is another element of the Carnivale like atmosphere that surrounds the play. The characters seem to have the plays as part of a celebration and Hamlet even pretends to be happy if not a little manic. Scenes in a court like this would tend to suggest a party like atmosphere similar to Carnivale. While the scene does have its elements of disorder and artificial reality it is more meant to uncover true reality. While Claudius is out to cover up his treachery Hamlet is bent on using illusions to reveal the truth.

When talking about deception, illusion, and play-acting one must ask the question: For what purpose do the characters feel the need to often go out of their way to deceive their friends and family? The answer to this question is revealed through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. These two auxiliary characters are the largest play-actors in the play. They are proclaimed friends of Hamlet yet they have no problem betraying him for the King. Their first meeting with Claudius reveals that they are more willing to serve their king than to be true to their childhood friend.

Rosencrantz: Both your Majesties
 Might, by the sovereign power you have us,
 Put your dread pleasures more into command
 Than to entreaty.

Guildenstern: But we both obey,
 And here give up ourselves, in the full bent,

To lay our service freely at your feet,
To be commanded.

2.2.26-33

Here we see that the two friends are willing to betray their friend if they have received orders from the King. They are under the illusion that they are only doing their civic duty and in that sense are innocent of betrayal. In the end what the two players want is to be able to follow orders and do what they need to do without feeling any moral responsibility for their actions. This is not only the case for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern but for all the characters in the play. Hamlet wants to reveal Claudius' guilt but only by Claudius' own admission. If it were revealed that Hamlet was attempting to trick Claudius into admitting his guilt he would be morally responsible for deceiving the rest of the court. The characters of the play all use pretending and illusion to mask the moral responsibility they must face in reality.

The final scenes of the play are not excluded from the deceit and illusion that carries throughout. Hamlet and Horatio have a discussion about how all skulls are similar. Despite the skull's owner or class there is really no way to distinguish between skulls in death. The illusion of wealth, class, and power is merely deceiving the natural body.

Hamlet: There's another. Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where
be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his
tricks?

5.1.92-94

The differences between the skulls are not measurable once a person is deceased. Hamlet suggests that any skull could have been anyone of any class. The truth of death is revealed through Hamlet and Horatio's conversation. While the characters may be able to lie and deceive in life once they are dead there is only truth. The funeral scene also suggests some form of acting or illusion. Hamlet does not believe that Laertes' grief for Ophelia is real or at least is inferior to his own grief.

Hamlet: What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase or sorrow
Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I

5.1.240-243

Hamlet's diving into Ophelia's grave is very overdramatic and is merely an attempt to out do Laertes' grief. He wants his actions to match his feelings. Hamlet is unable to just feel grief for Ophelia he must prove to everyone that their grief does not even compare to his. Hamlet has lost all sense of his true feelings and is only able to act in the manner that seems appropriate to the situation. The final confrontation between Laertes and Hamlet is filled with deception and intrigue. The sword fight that is supposed to be legitimate is actually rigged against Hamlet. This deception is the final act of illusion and acting in the play. All the characters' lies, deceit, betrayal, and treacheries are finally coming to a close in what should be the final revelation of the truth of the entire play. The events unfold so quickly that before anyone knows it Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes are all dead. The ghost's instructions to

Hamlet in Act I have finally come to fruition but not in the manner that Hamlet would have hoped. The revenge on Claudius was merely an accident and certainly did not happen the way that Hamlet's plot for revenge had originally intended. The illusions and lies that occurred consistently throughout the play are finally ended with the death of the primary play-actors.

Hamlet tells the story of the illusions, lies, and deceit that mask the truth and morals of the primary characters. Each character developed their own method of deceiving the other characters. Through acting, false emotions, and lack of moral responsibility the characters' lives are consumed with trying to uncover the true intentions of their counterparts.