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Anthony Faber

“Words, words, words:” The Idea of the Absurd as Method in *Hamlet*.

My title, which quotes Hamlet’s response to Polonius’ query, “[w]hat do you read, my lord” (2.2.191-2)? Hamlet: “Words, words, words:” (2.2. 193)¹ is meant not only to convey Hamlet’s sense of the triviality of language; Hamlet’s dull repetition of “[w]ords, words, words” is intended to communicate his understanding of the Absurd. More significantly, Hamlet’s use of the Absurd suggests a methodology, which in turn suggests that Hamlet is engaged in a pedagogical endeavour.² Hamlet’s project is not only to inform and instruct his immediate stage characters, but more exceptionally, Hamlet, through his method, offers instruction to his public as to what constitutes as Absurd. Albert Camus, in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, defines the Absurd as a divorce from reason (13)³. The idea of the Absurd stops the mind from ascertaining anything with certainty. In addition to Camus’ definition of the Absurd, I draw on Paul Ricoeur’s view of the role of Fool as found in his text *The Symbolism of Evil*, where he states that only the Fool in Shakespearean tragedy has “access to a comprehensive vision” of the world due to the conflation of genres, the tragic and the comic (323)⁴. Taking Camus’ definition of the Absurd and Ricoeur’s insight of the Fool, I examine the context of the Absurd and the Fool first in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, then in Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* and lastly in Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy*. Each writer fosters a sense of the Absurd and the Fool, which I situate in relation to

¹ All citations are taken from *Hamlet, The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington. (New York: Pearson Longman, 6th. ed. 2009).

² For my understanding of early modern uses of “method” I have used Walter J. Ong’s monograph on the sixteenth century French scholar Ramus, *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*.

³ Camus, in his essay, underscores the historicity of the Absurd. Even though the Absurd is a modern concept in terms of offering a methodology with which to interpret philosophy and reading literary texts, the idea of the Absurd “has been said over and over” (20) in various philosophies as well as literature throughout the history of ideas. My scope in this essay is to recognize the Absurd qualities as method with which Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*.

⁴ In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur attempts to trace the origins of the symbolism of evil. In the chapter and section that I cite, chapter 5 “The Cycle of the Myths,” section 2 “The Reaffirmation of the Tragic,” Ricoeur offers an account where the Fool is held in Greek as well as in Shakespearean tragedy in a position of privilege as seer. Thus, the Fool is able to penetrate the fictional social world of a text and offer criticisms or insights into his society that other characters would not be able to recognize.

Hamlet. With respect to Hamlet's method of the Absurd, I draw attention to Hamlet's role of playing the Fool. Throughout the play, Hamlet is a grieving son; thus, his self-styled role as Fool is designed partly to uncover the true nature of his father's murder and partly to use laughter as a method with which to keep himself, the stage characters as well as the audience in a state of suspended animation.⁵ Hamlet's experience of grief, which he demonstrates in soliloquies as intense emotional suffering, prevents him from discovering anything other than a sense of meaninglessness to his own existence. However, because of the method of the Absurd, the tragic experience at the conclusion of the play becomes that much more poignant due to the collective loss of self through laughter.

The nature of the absurd is notable by its use of ambiguities in mixed dramatic genres. To facilitate apprehending what constitutes as absurd, I first distinguish the absurd by what it is not; that is, the absurd is not pure tragedy nor is it pure comedy. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle carefully distinguishes what constitutes as tragedy as well as briefly expounding on what is comedy.⁶ In this way, Aristotle argues that tragedy is superior to comedy. Aristotle defines tragedy as:

The imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, where with to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions (1449b 6, 24-28).

The purpose of tragedy, according to Aristotle, is for the spectator to experience a sense of tragic pleasure as fear and pity (1453b 14, 12). That is, tragedy is supposed to ennoble an audience as it portrays character "better than ordinary man" (1454b 15, 8-9). Aristotle uses the adjective

⁵ As I will explain, this notion of an audience's "suspended animation," or to put it differently, "loss of self" through laughter, I have taken from Rene Girard's essay "Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis."

⁶ Aristotle, predominantly, devotes his *Poetics* to the study of tragedy. As a result, our knowledge of Aristotle's definition of comedy is limited as it is taken from the context of Aristotle's study of tragedy.

“handsomer” (1454b 15, 11) to describe the process with which a character is portrayed as being better than ordinary. Moreover, a tragic hero ought to be portrayed as an imitation of a good man (1454b 15, 14).

For a definition of comedy, Aristotle inverses what he wrote regarding tragedy. Comedy is:

an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the ridiculous, which is a species of the ugly. The ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain (1449a 5, 32-37).

The relevant word that Aristotle uses to describe comedy is “ridiculous.” After this, he defines the “ridiculous” as “ugly,” a “mistake,” and a “deformity.” Something that is “ridiculous” lies outside the bounds of what constitutes the norm. Hence, a spectator’s appeal for the “ridiculous” is that it resides outside the status quo and is harmless. Though Aristotle does not use the term “absurd” to qualify his understanding of comedy, the “absurd” and the “ridiculous” are synonyms that suggest the same thing: a quality that is a divorce from reason.

Aristotle, evidently, is biased against the comic ridiculous in favour of the tragic catharsis and this prejudice continues into the early modern period. Furthermore, any characterization or use of the ridiculous or the absurd in drama will conflate attributes of tragedy and comedy. It is doubtful that Shakespeare read a complete version of the *Poetics* as the first English translation was by Thomas Twining in 1789. Two Latin editions, one by Hermanus Alemannus, translated in 1256 and published in Venice in 1481 and reprinted in 1515, and

another by Averoes, which was published in Venice in 1575 were both fraught with lexical controversies (Tigerstedt 8).⁷

Rene Girard argues that the differences between comedy and tragedy are in fact minimal (812). This is because both genres evoke a similar physical response: Laughter and tears (812). Girard notes that tears suggest a true *cathartic* experience in tragedy because tears correspond to the twin ideas of Aristotle's *catharsis*, religious purification and medical purgation (813). Girard asserts that laughter includes tears as an integral part of the experience (814). Furthermore, he adds two salient points concerning laughter, which will be integral in my analysis of *Hamlet*. Human beings consistently pretend to laugh when there is nothing to laugh about and the only socially acceptable form of *catharsis* is laughter (814). Similar to tragic tears, comic laughter suggests a purging, only a purging of laughter, according to Girard, "seems closer than tears to a paroxysm which would turn it in to actual convulsions to a climatic experience of rejection and expulsion. Laughter is further along towards a total negative response to a threat considered overwhelming" (815). Laughter, in this sense, implies a warding off of a threat (818) or, in the case of *Hamlet*, postponing the inevitable tragic ending. Consequently, laughter constitutes more of a crisis than tears because laughter, as a paroxysm, threatens the autonomy of the spectator (819). All forms of laughter entail the loss of autonomy and self-possession (819), which includes those on the stage who make each other laugh as well as the audience. In this manner, comedy and laughter are social equalizers as all factions of classes laugh and in the paroxysm of laughter, they become autonomous together.

In laughter, unlike tears, the distinction between the stage and the audience ceases because the result of laughter is a disintegration of self control (819) and one's identity, however

⁷ For a discussion of these controversies see E.N. Tigerstedt, "Observations on the Reception of the Aristotelian *Poetics* in the Latin West," in *Studies in the Renaissance* 15 (1968):7-24.

brief the experience is of no concern (821). A person would not laugh, according to Girard, “unless there is an actual threat to his ability to control his environment and the people in it, even his own thoughts and his own desires” (822). What is more, a person would not laugh if he perceived that threat as eminently real (822). As I will discuss shortly, after my analysis of Ramus and method, Hamlet is a character that attempts to control his tragic environment through laughter.

The idea that comedy is a display beneath human dignity has its echoes in the critical literature of the early modern period. In the *Praise of Folly* (c.1509), Erasmus ironically elevates the Fool in an attempt to demonstrate the lack of virtues in Christian Europe. After praising the Fool for not harbouring any feelings of “shame, fear, ambition, envy, nor love” (117), Erasmus writes that fools are the “favourites of kings” (117) because “wise men have nothing but misery to offer their prince, [and fools] aren’t afraid to speak harsh truths which will grate on [a prince’s] delicate ear” (118). Erasmus draws attention to the fact that monarchs do not like the truth. However, when the truth is uttered by a fool, “even open insults [can be] heard with positive pleasure; indeed, the words which would cost a wise man his life are surprisingly enjoyable when uttered by a clown. For truth has a genuine power to please if it manages not to give offence, but this is something the gods have granted only to fools” (119). Though Erasmus uses the Fool ironically, he nevertheless bridges the idea of the Fool in relation to speaking the truth. Erasmus’ notion is similar to Ricoeur’s idea of the Fool as seer (323), as one who has a privileged place in a tragedy by having a “comprehensive vision” (323) of his society.

Shakespeare closely examined Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*. The Fool is a significant feature of Shakespeare’s presentation of the predicament of the human condition. A character, portrayed as a Fool, might elicit profound truths about human nature. For example, Jacques, the

melancholic fool in *As you Like It*, compares the world to a theatre: “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (*AYL*, 2.7. 138-9). Shakespeare further develops this use of meta-theatre so that in *Hamlet*, we are constantly reminded that we are watching a play. Shakespeare’s use of meta-theatre suggests that he uses the medium of the theatre as a synecdoche for the world in order to challenge contemporary mores. This is because, according to Richard Dutton, the theatre was subject to the same class as “rogues and vagabonds” (379). Shakespeare’s use of meta-theatre was a clandestine way of addressing social ills, but in a manner which disarmed theatre’s importance by drawing attention to itself. The censors and the audience would recognize that despite the social criticism of a character’s line, the character was still referencing the theatre. Therefore, because of the theatre’s status of “rogues and vagabonds,” the truth uttered would be judged harmless.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare develops the idea of a meta-theatrical methodology of Hamlet playing the Fool in order for Hamlet to act as though he is laughing in the face of danger while concurrently, he instructs not only the characters on the stage (notably the Players in Act 3) but also the audience. Hamlet varies his use of method considerably in the play. The ancient as well as the medieval concept of method implied a pedagogical approach to a complex problem (Ong 227). Ong summarizes the sixteenth century’s foremost authority on method, the French scholar Ramus as stating: “Method (*Methodus*), Ramus’ term for orderly pedagogical presentation of any subject by repeatedly scientific descent from “general principles” to “specials” by means of definition and bipartite division” (30). Method starts with universal ideas and then descends to particular notions. In Act 2, after Hamlet answers Polonius’ query as to what he reads with the redundant “[w]ords, words, words” (2.2.193); Polonius, as a pedagogue, further inquires, “[w]hat is the matter, my lord? (194). Hamlet responds with a litany of truisms concerning the elderly,

which Hamlet uses as a mock attack against Polonius. Polonius responds, as an aside, which is noteworthy because only the audience hears his words: “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t” (205-6). The “method” that Polonius refers to is the five parts of rhetoric that was typically taught to Renaissance youths: these included innovation, disposition, memory, striking expression, and delivery (Ong 275). Even though, according to Polonius, Hamlet is mad, Hamlet is able to cite a text, making the argument his own, and in fact, Hamlet is able to turn the argument around to suit his needs. Polonius thinks that Hamlet uses rhetoric well and he mentions this, again as an aside: “How pregnant sometimes his replies are!” (208-9). Polonius’ *asides*, addressed directly to the audience are significant because of his topical use of “method.” Many playgoers would have been similarly instructed in the formal method of rhetoric and they would have noticed Polonius’ use of the term. Moreover, the audience would have been drawn in to Polonius’ dialogue because of the word “method,” and as a consequence, each member would try to pay further attention to the uses of “method’ in the play. Polonius’s use of the term is the most evident because he openly states that Hamlet is constructing a “method” with which to outwit Polonius. The second use of “method” involves the rhetoric concepts of expression and delivery as a form of elocution and pronunciation.

Of the five parts of rhetoric, Ramus, in his methodology utilizes only elocution and pronunciation (Ong 270). The other three parts, Ramus subsumes in his theory of dialectics. Ramus defines rhetoric as “the doctrine of expressing oneself well” (272) and it was applicable to all subjects (272). Furthermore, rhetoric consisted in the art of teaching (272). Thus, for Ramus, proper expression and pedagogy can be considered as co-dependant terms. In Act 3, Hamlet instructs the Players on the art of Renaissance rhetoric, and for the initial part of his instruction he focuses on elocution and pronunciation:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced
it to you, trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth
it as many of our players do, I had as lief the town crier
spoke my lines (3.2.1-4).

According to Ong, the teaching of Renaissance rhetoric entailed the students imitating the teacher's pronunciation of the Latin text, thus the students would learn proper delivery (272). In this respect, Hamlet echoes the standard Renaissance method for pedagogy.

Hamlet's last use of method goes to the heart of my thesis. In Act 1, once Hamlet has encountered the Ghost of his father and he decides upon a theatrical method with which to present his self to the court, Hamlet decides, "[t]o put an antic disposition on" (1.5.181). That is, he will feign madness and play the part of the Fool with the aim of waiting for an appropriate time to act. Hamlet uses the disguise of the Fool meta-theatrically so as to appear to be harmless and outside the norm of the play's social fabric, which he critically examines and by extension, he also critically appraises the audience. Thus, when Hamlet presents himself as a Fool, he does so to mask his true private emotions that he shares with the audience in his soliloquies.

There are a number of points to acknowledge in Hamlet's method. First, Hamlet is not a Fool, he decides to play one; thus, part of his method is to use meta-theatrics in order to instruct his audience primarily about playacting. In this, Hamlet uses laughter to de-stabilize the acting on stage. Through participation of laughter, which is a paroxysm experience, the audience's collective identity becomes vulnerable as a loss of identity in the shared experience (Girard 821). This allows for the tragic experience at the play's end to be that much more tragic because the audience opened itself through laughter and the result is tragedy. Hamlet teaches his audience to see the world through the rhetoric of a theatrical discourse because he "acts" the Fool; Hamlet, therefore, embodies the meta-theatrical methodology of being a Fool.

For an example of what I mean by Hamlet's meta-theatrical method of playing the Fool, I cite Act 3, at the start of the play within the play, the "Mousetrap." Claudius asks Hamlet how he is, whereby Hamlet responds with deliberate ambiguity: "Excellent, i'faith, of the chamelion's dish./ I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so" (3.2.92-3). Claudius responds as one confused: "I have nothing with this answer" (3.2.94). Harold Jenkins suggests that perhaps Hamlet is punning on the word "air" and "heir" (Jenkins 293). In addition, Hamlet's identification of "capons" is a cloaked insinuation that Hamlet suspects Claudius of plotting against him (293). This is because of the use of "capons," which early modern audiences might have understood as a food. The *OED* defines "capons" as a domestic cock that has been castrated and fattened for eating (*OED* 1a see 2). The idea that presents itself is that Hamlet believes that Claudius thinks Hamlet is a castrated cock and therefore powerless, in which case Hamlet can be eliminated at Claudius' discretion. Furthermore, in the same scene, after Hamlet has asked to lie between Ophelia's legs, Ophelia responds to Hamlet's gestures by identifying him as a Fool:

Ophelia:	You are merry, my lord.
Hamlet:	Who, I?
Ophelia:	Aye, my lord.
Hamlet:	O God, your only jig-maker. What should a man do but be merry? (3.2.119-124).

As Erasmus indicates, there is a quality about being a Fool, suggesting that Hamlet's words are on one level received in a manner of nonsense or even harmlessness. When Claudius responds to Hamlet's assertion with, "I have nothing with this answer" (3.2. 95), Claudius, in effect, echoes what most of the audience may glean. Hamlet is verbally fencing with Claudius, warning him that Hamlet is heir to the throne. Similarly, when Hamlet parries with Ophelia and says, "[w]hat should a man do / but be merry" (3.2.123-124), this is a commonplace statement that an audience would readily identify.

During the early modern period, commonplaces were a form of pedagogy, recognized identically as either *loci* or *loci communes*; however, in antiquity, these two words had different connotations. Zachary S. Schiffman states “*loci* were universal categories of argumentation by means of which all statements could be analysed, mental “places” where one searched for knowledge. *Loci communes* were those words and ideas acceptable to all listeners, “commonplaces” embodying the traditional wisdom of society” (500). However, the sense of these two words merged, according to Schiffman, by the early sixteenth century, “signifying a system of commonplace thought in which all knowledge was classified in mental places embodying the traditional wisdom of society” (500). Thus, despite the fact that Hamlet offers Ophelia a traditional commonplace term, his use of the commonplace is absurd because he is attempting to disguise his true feelings of bereavement.

The nature of Hamlet’s “disguise” as a Fool is noteworthy in the preceding examples with respect to Claudius and Ophelia. The audience has been made aware since Act 1 that Hamlet is playacting the Fool. Thus, is Hamlet sincere with his “[w]ords, words, words” (2.2. 193) in his foolish “enactments” with Claudius and Ophelia; or, conversely, is Hamlet using language as a stratagem, a method, with which to garner his own political expediency in wanting to wrest the crown away from Claudius? The point is, in each occurrence of Hamlet’s verbal taunts, the stage characters may laugh, but more significantly, the audience laughs. The method with which Hamlet informs his audience is through dramatic irony. An audience sees Hamlet taunting a character, the characters in the background of the scene laugh at Hamlet’s absurd gestures and the audience, in turn, laughs at the character being ridiculed. This pattern or method of laughter escalates quickly from Act 2 to Act 3; first with Polonius as object of ridicule, “[t]hese tedious old fools!” (2.2 219), then with the sycophant courtiers Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern, "I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw" (2.2.378-9), which suggests that Hamlet is speaking as a mad fool. The purpose of Hamlet's "antic disposition" (1.5.181) comes to full view in his instructions to the Players before the performance of the "Mousetrap." One has to remember that in his role as Renaissance rhetorician, Hamlet is also playacting, therefore, his words, in effect, are meant for himself as well as for the Players whom he addresses: "the purpose of playing, . . . is to hold . . . the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.20-4). This is the thematic climax of the play. Hamlet, to all intents and purposes, is stating that the purpose of theatre is to mimic nature, all nature. By nature, Hamlet infers the world, and the name of the theatre where Shakespeare is performing *Hamlet*, The Globe, is a synecdoche for the world and of nature. Thus, the idea of playacting in a theatre is meant to signify a true representation of the time and ethos the play is performed. In other words, Shakespeare creates a metaphor of the theatre that imitates the world: the theatre is a tiny but true microcosm of the world at large outside the theatre. What does the audience hear? As noted earlier, early modern theatre came under the same rubric as "rogues and vagabonds" (Dutton 379). Hamlet, in his speech to the Players, elevates and praises the theatre for mirroring the society around him. Even though Hamlet addresses the Players, the real audience of Hamlet's words is in The Globe, the audience members who have listened and have absorbed Hamlet's words in a very vulnerable way due to the rhetoric of laughter. At this point in time of the play, Hamlet has elevated the audience's consciousness from what it used to expect and appreciate in drama as "dumb shows and noise" (3.2.12), to theatre holding a "mirror up to nature" (3.3.22).

Because this concept is the thematic climax of the play, I want to return to what I ascertain as the source of Hamlet's insight. Shakespeare takes his perception from *The Essays* of

Michel de Montaigne, translated from the French into English by John Florio and published in 1603. *Hamlet* predates Florio's translation by three years.⁸ Despite this, according to Jenkins, there is no specific evidence to suggest that Shakespeare was not familiar with Montaigne when he was composing *Hamlet* (110). Accordingly, it is quite reasonable to assume that Shakespeare either had access to Florio's notes or that he might possibly have read the first completed French edition published in 1595.

In chapter 25 of Montaigne's *Essays*, entitled "Of the Institution and Education of Children," Montaigne outlines his pedagogical method with which to teach children. Unlike Ramus, where his pedagogical emphasis is on elocution and pronunciation, Montaigne endeavours to teach his pupils to perceive the world as their textbook and not to rely on the authority of a teacher or even on the authority of a text; rather, Montaigne teaches his pupils to learn to think independently. In his analysis, Montaigne imagines nature as a great circle and the student as "the smallest point that can be imagined" (Florio 69). In this way, a student may learn the true proportion of things and their relative value. From this perspective of a student as a "dot" in the kingdom of nature, Montaigne then extends his proportion to the universe:

This great universe...is the true looking-glass wherein we must looke, if we will know whether we be of a good stamp or in the right byase. To conclude, I would have this world-frame to be my Schollers choise-booke: So many strange humours, sundrie sects, varying judgements, diverse opinions, different lawes, and fantastick customes teach us to judge rightly of ours, and instruct our judgement to acknowledge his imperfections and naturall weakness (69).

In his commentary on pedagogy, Montaigne emphasizes for the student to be humble with respect to the magnitude that is the world. Montaigne uses the idea of people having a "good stamp or in the right byase" (69) to regard nature. That is, nature teaches people to have a proper

⁸ Harold Jenkins in his introduction to *Hamlet*, posits the date of composition to be between the end of 1599 and 1600 (13).

sense of proportion in terms of estimation between one's self and nature. Shakespeare, similarly, paraphrases this idea, only he equates his rhetoric to playacting, which "show[s] virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.22-4). What is noteworthy is that Montaigne categorizes what a student will glean if he were to pursue the world as his "choise-booke." The categories that Montaigne includes are meant to qualify all possible pedagogical ventures a student may encounter in the world. Shakespeare suggests that playacting demonstrates "the very age and body of the time" (3.2.23-4). Thus, the age and body of the time is a reflection of all possible hazards one may encounter with the world. The notable differences between Montaigne and Shakespeare's rhetoric are: Montaigne's premise is to experience the world as a "Schollers choise-booke" (69), whereas, Shakespeare's "choise-booke" is the theatre. Are both approaches that different? Montaigne uses the metaphor of a "looking glass" (69), in order for the world to reflect back on the viewer what is actually there without prejudice. Shakespeare's "mirror" reflects the world at large with the world of the theatre, without judgement in order to represent "the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.23-4). As discussed, Shakespeare's Globe is a synecdoche of the world at large, and I do not think that Shakespeare necessarily wants the "mirror" to represent "dumb shows and noise" (3.2.12). As Montaigne involves himself with reforming Renaissance pedagogy, where the burden rests between the relationship of the world and the student; Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, involves himself with how his audience perceives plays, Shakespeare's pedagogy rests between the world and the world of the theatre.

As a philosopher, Montaigne is thought of as advocating a sceptical view of the world and with knowledge in particular. In this degree, according to Montaigne, anything is possible because there are no certainties. Though Shakespeare is not a philosopher, he read and absorbed

nearly all that would have been available to an early modern mind. By all accounts, Shakespeare's understanding and use of philosophy, amongst other texts, was truly encyclopaedic. However, Shakespeare's chosen profession was theatre and in *Hamlet*, he uses the figure of Hamlet meta-theatrically, between a grieving prince and a Fool for the purposes of demonstrating to the audience, through irony, that the search for meaning in the world at large or in the theatre is absurd. Absurd, in this respect, suggests Montaigne's premise that nothing is certain (Florio 267).

Throughout the play, Hamlet acts the role of Fool to such an extent, that he is nearly acknowledged as "an antihero or even a clown" (Nuttall, 196). Shakespeare likely used as one of his sources of *Hamlet*, the twelfth century work by Saxo Grammaticus, written in Latin and published in Paris in 1514 titled *Historiae Danicae* (Nuttall 196, 393 and Jenkins 85)⁹. Saxo's text closely parallels the plot structure of Shakespeare's play. Saxo identifies Hamlet as "Amleth," which may signify, according to A.D. Nuttall, "fool" or "weakling" (Nuttall 196). Nuttall speculates that "Amleth" is possibly linked etymologically to the Icelandic word "Amlothi," which means "fool" (393). Nuttall doubts, however, if Shakespeare was aware of this.

Despite this, Shakespeare was attentive to one of the most influential treatises on poetics written during the Elizabethan age: Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*, in all probability written in 1579 and not published until 1595. In the *Defence*, Sidney reaffirms Aristotle's thesis that tragedy is a nobler medium for a poet to pursue than comedy. Sidney's *Defence* is a relevant feature of my thesis of Shakespeare's use of the Fool and the Absurd as it is my contention that Shakespeare engages with the *Defence* in order to refute Sidney's archaic ideas. In the *Defence*, once Sidney has labelled comedy with the same unforgiving stance as Aristotle, namely that it is

⁹ In addition, see for example Julie Maxwell, "Counter-Reformations Versions of Saxo: A New source for *Hamlet*?"

“ridiculous” (Sidney 962), he adds that comedy teaches people to act in an evil manner because this is what is represented on the stage (964). Sidney, thus, equates comedy with evil. He offers as an example of tragedy a close summary of Euripides’ tragedy *Hecuba* and Sidney ends his abridgment with condescension: “this need no further to be enlarged; the dullest wit may conceive it” (971). Sidney tries to imagine what contemporary playwrights would do with the story of *Hecuba*. He calls the efforts by Elizabethan playwrights “gross absurdities” (971) and defends his criticism by exclaiming that contemporary writers do not know about the form in which they work. Sidney writes contemptuously against Elizabethan playwrights:

All their plays be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in the clown by head and shoulders to play a part in majestical matters with neither decency nor discretion, so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragi-comedy obtained (971).

In the *Defence*, Sidney wants to legitimize taste with what he judges as worthy. For the most part, Sidney finds the efforts of contemporary playwrights to be lacking, as he judges them to be writers of “mongrel tragi-comedy” (971). Sidney’s concern is for contemporary playwrights not to mix genres. Using strong terms, he insists that playwrights ought to evoke “delight” in their audiences, as “delight hath a joy in it, either permanent or present” (971), and not to evoke laughter. According to Sidney, “laughter almost ever cometh of things most disproportioned to ourselves and nature, [which] hath only a scornful tickling” (971). Through the character of Polonius, Shakespeare mocks Sidney’s professed views of representing the idea of purity and certainty of genres in drama.

The clearest indication of Shakespeare alluding to Sidney’s position of dramatic art as absurd is when Polonius announces the arrival of the Players to court. Shakespeare has Polonius, as Sidney’s mouthpiece, relay a litany of mixed theatrical genres the Players are able to perform,

that Sidney has characterized as “mongrel tragi-comedy” (971). According to Polonius, the Players are able to perform, “pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral” (2.2.397- 399). Polonius’ catalogue of mixed genres is humorous because the conclusion of his list “tragical-comical-historical-pastoral” (2.2. 399) is intended to sound absurd. Moreover, as Sidney’s mouthpiece and as the unacknowledged clown of *Hamlet*, Polonius’ words are meant to sound ironic, which is why Polonius ends his litany with a complete discord of mixed genres.

What is more, Polonius’s manner is distinguished by his sense of sureness at discovering the truth (Polonius’ certainty is reminiscent of Sidney’s style of determining the truth in the *Defence*); in this, Polonius is a foil to Hamlet’s habit of doubting. Polonius, however, is also very humorous and his character, as stated, may be read as the clown of the play. For example, Polonius declares to Gertrude and Claudius that he knows the reason for Hamlet’s depression. He addresses them with assurance by stating: “I have found / the very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy” (2.2.48-49). When Polonius explains that Hamlet’s grief is due to Hamlet’s love for Ophelia, Polonius emphasizes his conviction with hyperbole: “That I have positively said ‘Tis so (2.2.153). Furthermore, if this were not the case he asserts, “Take this from this if this be otherwise” (2.2.156), which a stage direction clarifies as “point[ing] to his head and shoulders” (2.2.156). Polonius boldly claims that he will uncover Hamlet: “If circumstances lead me,/ I will find / Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed/ Within the centre” (2.2.157-159). The reason why Polonius is overly confident in deciphering Hamlet is that as chief counsellor to the Danish throne, Polonius must ascertain everything that occurs at court (Bevington 150). Polonius’ behaviour is completely contrary to Hamlet’s behaviour. Hamlet asserts repeatedly in his soliloquies that, “one must strive to know oneself and be aware that such knowledge is

extraordinarily difficult to achieve, since human beings are infinitely complex. Hamlet sees himself as especially so” (150). This is why, according to David Bevington, Hamlet resents the efforts of others to try to understand him (150).

Hamlet’s lexis is rife with uncertainty. He reaches out to his supposed friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to sincerely ask them about the nature of human beings. Hamlet says to them: “What is this quintessence of dust” (2.2.309)? Earlier, in the same speech Hamlet compared man, “like an angel, in apprehension how like a god” (2.2. 307-8). This is followed by a disjunction where Hamlet says “and yet, to me” (2.2.308). In other words, Hamlet is aware that he once thought of human kind as “the paragon of animals” (2.2. 308). However, at this point, he views such idealism as absurd, and what constitutes a human being, “the thing itself” (*Lear*, 3.4.98), according to *Lear*, is for Hamlet, but dust. In his third soliloquy Hamlet exclaims his scepticism of faith: “Who would fardels bear, / To grant and sweat under a weary life, / But that the dread of something after death, / The undiscover’d country” (3.1.77-80). The *OED* defines “fardels” as an archaic noun representing a “bundle” or a “burden” (*OED* 1a and 2b). This is Hamlet’s demonstration of life’s meaninglessness. In Hamlet’s words life holds no purpose other than endless and useless toil. This sentiment is similar to the absurdity of Sisyphus’ labour, who must bear his *fardels* “and sweat under a weary life” (3.1.77-8) in a task which holds no value. Accordingly, one works as an animal during a lifetime, for fear of what may follow after death. Hamlet’s point: faith dispels any fear of death because death is then viewed as a promise of salvation. If one does not possess faith, like Hamlet, death then becomes the “undiscover’d country” (3.1.80).

Are these the words of a Fool? How does an audience reconcile between Hamlet’s public persona with his “antic disposition” (1.5.181) and his private self who equates death with an

“undiscover’d country” (3.1.80)? When an audience laughs at Hamlet’s quips to Polonius and Claudius amongst others, why does an audience not laugh at an “undiscover’d country”? Girard mentions, “[m]odern man is constantly pretending to laugh when he has really nothing to laugh about” (814). In this, can we venture to ascertain that Hamlet is a modern man? Hamlet laughs and causes others to laugh because his environment is threatened (818). Given that, Hamlet perceives his environment as threatened due to Claudius’ coup d’état, throughout the course of the play, he attempts to control his environment through laughter. However, Hamlet’s meta-theatrical method of playing the Fool has the effect of causing the audience to open up, to be emotionally vulnerable due to the audience’s laughter. When an audience laughs, it briefly experiences a “loss of autonomy and self-possession” (891); as a result, an audience reciprocates by becoming emotionally involved with Hamlet’s actions. In other words, an audience becomes more sympathetic and empathetic to Hamlet’s plight because he made them laugh, and laughter, according to Girard, has an “equalizing effect” (819) on all who share in the experience. Hence, when an audience experiences tragedy, the prior affectation of laughter has made the audience more vulnerable to the tragic experience.

In addition to the method of laughter, which allows an audience to be more open emotionally to the tragic experience, another clue to Shakespeare’s methodology of Hamlet playing the Fool is the play’s thematic climax. In his advice to the Players, Hamlet, unequivocally, makes certain that the Players understand the differences between what comprises as comedy and tragedy. Hamlet advises the Players with:

And let those that play
your clowns speak no more than is set down for them;
for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set
on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too,
though in the meantime some necessary question of
the play be then to be considered. That’s villainous,

and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses
it (3.2.38-45).

What is remarkable in these lines is that Shakespeare states candidly, unlike Sidney's claim to the contrary, that it is possible to mix the genres of comedy and tragedy. Shakespeare's emphasis seems to be that if "some necessary question of the play be then to be considered" (3.2.42-3), such as Hamlet's soliloquies, i.e. "[w]ho would fardels bear, / To grunt and sweat under a weary life" (3.1.76-7); in such a case, it is necessary for the actor to speak these lines in a serious dramatic manner and not as a Fool. If we return to Hamlet's meta-theatrical method of playing the Fool, as previously stated, Hamlet is instructing himself in terms of when to play the Fool and when to play the tragedian. More crucially is the use of dramatic irony in Hamlet's speech to the Players. An audience would glean that theatre mirrors the world and the world, like the theatre, consists of mix genres, such as comedy and tragedy; or as Girard states, laughter and tears (812). Shakespeare seems to suggest in *Hamlet*, that though existence is meaningless, an "undiscover'd country" (3.1.80), and absurd, regardless of this, it is still necessary to play one's part well, whether the role is comic or tragic. By extension, Shakespeare suggests that it is paramount for an actor on the stage or a spectator in the world, to notice the appropriate cues of when to respond to laughter or tears.

Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, defines the comic ridiculous as that which is outside the so-called norms of society. As a synonym of the absurd, the ridiculous implies a divorce from reason in trying to comprehend something that cannot be readily apprehended. Riccoeur's notion of the Fool as seer, who is outside the social norms of society, looking in critically, and speaking the truth, embodies Aristotle's notion of the ridiculous as well as Erasmus' ideas concerning the Fool who speaks the truth. The figure of Hamlet personifies Riccoeur's notion of the conflation

of dramatic forms: Hamlet is tragic even though he is at times extremely comic. This idea fits well with Girard's notion that the comic and the tragic are similar experiences due to the physicality of laughter and tears. Hamlet becomes self aware through his experience of intense suffering and as a result of this, he elevates the consciousness of the audience. Similar to Camus' notion of the absurd and paralleling Montaigne's scepticism, the "comprehensive vision" Hamlet achieves from this, which as Riccoeur notes is a union of the tragic and the comic, is that there are no absolutes. This notion of the absurdity of existence, Hamlet transfers to the audience through dramatic irony from his meta-theatrical method of playing the Fool. The commonplace truth, if there is one, is Hamlet's "[w]ords, words, words" (2.2. 192).

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