

Reception Aesthetics of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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Abstract: H.R.Jauss, an influential German reader-response critic, engages with the historical reception of literary works. According to Jauss, the first responses to a work are significant in its future interpretations. The audiences of each era, he declares, are equipped with certain horizons of expectations which they bring to the text, in the process of deciphering its meaning. These horizons will not necessarily remain intact. In fact, Jauss provides a yardstick to evaluate the aesthetic value of a literary work. The extent to which the horizons of expectations change, are reoriented or even left intact determine the aesthetic value of the text. The more the distance between expectation and fulfillment, the greater the aesthetic value of the work. By employing Jauss's theory and by dividing the responses to *Hamlet* into different phases, the present paper aims to focus on the specific responses of each phase and the objectives they bring in perceiving the play and at the same time, accounting for the gaps they have left behind.

Keywords: H. R. Jauss, reader-response, *Hamlet*, horizon of expectation

INTRODUCTION

It has become quite common to engage with the reason for *Hamlet's* delay, as one can easily observe from the title of the numerous volumes of books and critical essays produced in this regard. However, it might strike one as quite interesting that the *Hamlet* we read and analyze today was not the

same to its contemporaries. Neither did other critics of the play observe it from a similar stance in the history of its reception.

Taking advantage of Hans Robert Jauss's momentous essay *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory*, the present study intends to demonstrate the different phases of the play's reception in the history of criticism, expressing the advantages each phase brought forward, as well as accounting for the gaps they left behind.

HAMLET IN THE HISTORY OF CRITICISM

Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's richest and complex works, which has drawn various responses in different eras. Since the work was played out on stage in Shakespeare's time, for hundreds of years no criticism of the work appeared in print. These early audiences focused on the character of Hamlet, and it was his characteristic as "primarily a bitterly eloquent and princely avenger" that they conceived. This was due to their familiarity with earlier revenge tragedies of the time. This seventeenth century audience was engaged with the work as a play to be performed, not as a text to be read, and evaluated it according to the standards they had internalized of revenge tragedies. The question of Hamlet's delay was never referred to at this time, neither was it necessary for their analysis of the work.

In the early decades of the following century, due to the widespread optimistic view of the world and human nature, the audience ascribed the prince with a sense of delicacy, and a sense of melancholic cast. Hamlet's role as the play's hero, occupied the minds of these audiences, and still, his delay was not mentioned as creating problem in the play. Any reference to Hamlet's character at the time was described in terms of their conception of human nature in general. Hamlet was in this sense viewed as a melancholic character. According to Arthur F. Kinney, there were three reasons for a person to become melancholic according to Elizabethan Tudor medicine; biological, which was the result of "a superabundance of bile

in his body,” mental as a result of “thinking too precisely (too narrowly, too exclusively, too repeatedly) on an event,” and religious as “the demonic possession of the soul” (Kinney, 2002, p. 13-15). All such notions would seek an internal reason for the problem of providing a basis for Hamlet’s conduct but it still created no problem for them in the general reception of the play. The play in performance was observed in its totality, with no specific focus on Hamlet’s problem in relation to his responsibility, in other words external factors, such as his relation with other characters or even the relevance of other characters in the world of the play and also with regard to Hamlet and even his delay were neglected.

It was not until 1736, when Thomas Hanmer for the first time mentioned Hamlet’s delay, dealing critically with his character. His response to this was the necessities enforced upon Shakespeare, therefore searching for the reason for the delay outside the play, ascribing it to the author. He explains, “Had *Hamlet* gone naturally to work, as we could suppose such a prince to do in parallel Circumstances, there would have been an end of our play. The poet therefore was obliged to delay his hero’s revenge; but then he should have contrived some good reason for it” (Jump, 1968, p. 22). And yet he does not continue to mention the poets “good reasons”. Responding to the play personally, he declares his uneasiness on Hamlet’s speech upon seeing the king at prayers, marking it as inhuman of the hero to have such bloody desires.

Critics of this era began to attack Shakespeare for employing obscene language, since what had framed the horizon of expectation of this age in relation to the language of literary text, was incongruent with what they encountered in the language of the play. For Lewis Theobald, the language not only did not reflect neoclassical taste, but was reprimandable for lack of ethics. By this point in history, critics appear to be addressing Shakespeare, rather than considering the play and its world.

That Shakespeare’s presence was strongly felt in the readings of critics can be seen as reflected in the review written by Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1765 “ The poet is accused of having shewn little regard to poetical justice, and may be

charged with equal neglect of poetical probability” (Jump, 1968, p. 24). By the end of the eighteenth-century, however, responses were mainly centered on the character of Hamlet as the hero of the play. Critics began to search for Hamlet’s procrastination in the character of the hero himself. Henry Mackenzie mentions the reasons for Hamlet’s delay in *The Mirror* printed in 1780 as follows:

“that sort of melancholy which is the most genuine, as well as the most amiable of any, neither arising from natural sourness of temper, nor prompted by accidental chagrin, but the effect of delicate sensibility, impressed with a sense of sorrow, or a feeling of its own weakness, will, I believe, often be found indulging itself in a sportfulness of external behavior, amidst pressure of a sad, or even the anguish of a broken heart” (Dyson, 1870, p. 25).

To him, Hamlet’s melancholy is in accordance with the atmosphere of the play, in this sense he does not see Hamlet’s procrastination as creating a problem but rather as intensifying the general atmosphere of the play.

As such character-analysis mode of criticism flourished, the work was dealt with as a text to be read, rather than a play to be performed. This reached to the point that they believed no actor could be able to take the role of Hamlet. Psychoanalysis began to find its way, employed in the analysis of Hamlet’s character. Romantic critics of this era responded to the play in accordance with the spirit of the age, seeing Hamlet as a solitary figure, even ascribing delicacy to his personality, which was in stark contrast to the earlier bitterness, the audience observed in him.

Later nineteenth century critics still carried the trend of character analysis even further; this time stressing the characterization of Hamlet, with no sign of the author, and subtracting him from the rest of the play. Such critics would engage with the reasons for Hamlet’s delay, seeing it as inordinate, but would seek the solutions only in the character of Hamlet himself, with no reference neither to other characters and their influence, nor the general tone and atmosphere of the play. This is made explicit by Hartley

Coleridge who begins his essay written for Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine in 1828 with the following statement "Let us, for a moment, put Shakespeare out of the question, and consider Hamlet as a real person" (Jump, 1968, p. 31). Almost all critics of the nineteenth century dealt with the reason for Hamlet's delay, and sought the resolution in the deficiency of his character. Hamlet's father has placed a duty upon the shoulders of Hamlet which he must no doubt obey and this conception arises, according to Catherine Belsey from a specifically Victorian mentality:

"the explanation of the consistent assumption that there must be something wrong with a Hamlet who does not unhesitatingly kill Claudius is to be sought, I believe, deep in the nineteenth-century culture. We might link it with the filial obedience thought due to the stern father of Victorian conventional; with the popularity of ghost stories showing revenants in possession of a truth withheld from mortal knowledge, and the widespread belief in spiritualism in the latter part of the century; and with the emergence of psychology and psychopathology as medical disciplines, as well as the readiness with which the Victorians confined their non-conforming relatives, especially their wives, to mental asylum" (Kolin, 1997, p. 142).

Even more important than the influences above was, according to Belsey, the fact that violence and putting the wrong into right through violence, was the norm of the day, even heroic, seen as the practice of European civilization. Various critics of the age found different yet once again internal reasons for his delay; either he was insane, overweight, or even feminine. Since inactivity is always associated with the feminine, it was not uncommon to see female actors playing the role of Hamlet or even male characters displaying effeminacy.

However, critics of this age do not merely condemn Hamlet for his inability. In fact there appear paradoxical views of him. He is seen as having effeminate qualities, yet simultaneously profound intellectual insight. He is hesitant, yet he deals deeply with the question of life itself, which critics attribute

to his genius and imagination. The innocence he represents and the violence he rejects is both admired and condemned by his contemporaries. In the words of Belsey “The delicate, fastidious, sensitive, idealistic hero is thus for the nineteenth century both a reproach and a legitimation” (Kinney, 2002, p. 149). *Hamlet* in performance was sometimes of interest as female actors sought to bring the real Hamlet on stage, with specifically feminine characteristics. One such instance was the actress Sarah Bernhardt. She expressed that her aim was to portray the Hamlet of Elizabethan revenge tradition. Although such contesting voices did appear in each era, they were finally silenced by the general spirit of the age which would permit only specific expectations of the age to be brought up, while others were left for later generations to uncover. The acting of Bernhardt was such instance of contestation.

The overall figure of Hamlet for nineteenth century critics was an ambivalent one, characteristic of the age it was received. This kind of reading sprang as a result of the play being mostly read, rather than viewed in performance and the character of Hamlet distinctly isolated from the context of the play. The horizons of expectations readers brought with them to the text, were those involving violence and masculinities. They evaluated the work based on contemporary conceptions of the artist and his place in the society and found Hamlet as the representative and embodiment of the artist’s ambivalence in the society. These expectations were constructed on the basis of the work as something to be read, rather than a play to be performed. For this reason, many other aspects of the play, the hero’s indulgence with other characters in the play and with the world of the play were left intact.

Though such deep character analysis became the standard of critical approaches to the play, early twentieth century critics rejected such subtractions of character from text. Heavily influenced by the New Critical mode of criticism, these critics would prefer to deal with the play as a whole. They also began to emphasize the play in performance, rather than in the book. To apply Jauss’s theory, it was the

critical mode of thinking of the age which invoked certain expectations from the work. This involved the specific aspects of attributing organic unity in literary works, so these critics aimed to invoke the reader's experience of the play as it was performed, challenging earlier Romantic modes of regarding merely a limited aspect of the play. They aimed to set the play free from such imposed confinements by regarding it from a larger perspective. They became interested in the play's poetic visions, and poetic imagery. They would pay detailed attention to the text's organic tradition and its form, and would base their perspective upon a conservatism related to classical values. They would seek to portray how the ideals of society that encourage order and tradition were reflected in literary works.

The writings of Wilson Knight and Caroline Spurgeon provoked later thinking, regarding the play's poetic imagery and words "the distinctive atmosphere of *Hamlet* is partly due to the number of images of sickness, disease, or blemish of the body in the play, and ... the idea of an ulcer or tumor, as descriptive of the unwholesome condition of Denmark morally, is, on the whole, the dominating one" (Jump, 1968, p. 41). However, Spurgeon, like other critics of her time, attempts to link Hamlet with the world of the play and on a larger scale, to the society. But this is sought in detaching the play from the historical setting in which it was produced.

In the light of such critical mode of thinking, once again, Shakespeare as author is brought to the scene and his intention as the author, who has the play in control, is evaluated. The result is a general one:

"he sees it pictorially, not as the problem of an individual at all, but as something greater and even more mysterious, as a condition for which the individual himself is apparently not responsible, any more than the sick man is to blame for the cancer which strikes and devours him, but which, nevertheless, in its course and development impartially and relentlessly annihilates him and others, innocent and guilty alike. That is the tragedy of him and others, innocent and guilty alike. That is the tragedy of Hamlet, as it is, perhaps, the chief tragic mystery of life"(Jump, 1968,

p. 42).

Such readings would view the text of the play as isolated for the context in which it was produced. Also attempting to evaluate the work in the light of classical works would also prove defective for a play like *Hamlet* which diverges from traditional tragedies. In this sense, many questions were left unanswered.

However, this does not mean questions regarding the plays historical setting were neglected by all critics. One significant figure who attempts to portray an exclusively Elizabethan *Hamlet* is J. Dover Wilson in *What Happens in Hamlet* written in 1935. Wilson focuses on Shakespeare's intention to draw the attention of the audience, focusing on the character of the prince as being the central mystery of the play and in this sense, lapses into the earlier mode of character analysis.

From this point onwards, the mode of character as detached from play began to fall into disfavor and critics, such as Helen Gardner, declared that talking of Hamlet's delay was beside the point. These critics would search for outside forces, imposed on Hamlet and other characters of the play. Many critics of this time try to lift the responsibility and the delay form the shoulders of the prince as being imposed on him.

By centering on the performance of the play and regarding the play as a whole organic entity, the question of Hamlet's delay fell into disfavor once again A critic like Gardener began to seek a link between the historical setting and the work, that a conflict of opinions was what characterized the play as a whole and Hamlet's delay in particular:

“It is consonant with the impression which the whole play makes upon us and adds to our feeling that Hamlet is moving in a world where there are no certainties. It casts light on the relation of Hamlet to Horation . it gives meaning to a scene which had puzzled all critics, the cellarage scene. And lastly, it casts a light upon the whole development of the play's action” (Jump, 1968, p. 139).

Critics engaged in this mode would concentrate on a universalistic view of the world and would take individuals as unified identities. They believed that merely to uncover the mode of thinking of the age as it is reflected directly in the works of literature would solve the problem to many of the text's question.

However, the next generation of critics subverted such monolithic view points and universalizing modes fell into disfavor. Contemporary post-structural critics, unlike earlier traditional ones, do not claim to provide evaluations of the play, as with other literary works. Neither do they deal with matters earlier critics had taken for granted. What they wish to carry out is to offer glimpses of possible meanings which have been ignored in the history of the play's reception. If up to this point, each age had a more or less unifying spirit reflected in the way literary texts were analyzed and meaning was decoded, no such unifying spirit exists in the current mode of critical thinking. In such context, Hamlet is observed from diverging perspectives. From this stance, critics' attempt to look at the text from aspects which have been neglected as marginalized elements of the play. One such reading is attempted by Catherine Belsey in her essay "*Was Hamlet a Man or a Woman?: The Prince in the Graveyard, 1800-1920*". Belsey supplies first the perspective of earlier criticism as centering on looking at the character of Hamlet in terms of an either/or relationship: was he the embodiment of feminine or masculine traits? But she continues to solve the ambivalence by relying on current modes of thinking and providing her own response:

"... in the light of a century of sociology, cultural theory, and psychoanalysis, we have come to believe that subjectivity, whether masculine or feminine, is nether an origin nor an explanation, but a component of an altogether more complicated story. Our *Hamlet* is about more than Hamlet, and what is hard for us to resolve is his ethical and political dilemma" (Kinney, 2002, p. 156).

Belsey's claim reveals the contemporary notion of the identity as a subject in process, never unified and permanent. Since

Belsey deals with the central character of the play and the issue of his delay is questioned, it sheds light on some of the problems of the play while neglecting others. For instance she does not engage with the relationship between Hamlet and his father, but only with Hamlet and himself. Other instances of such glimpses of meaning occur in an essay by Jerry Brotton: "*Ways of Seeing Hamlet.*"

This is an interesting essay, concerned with *Hamlet* in performance. Brotton aims to reflect a strong reading of subjectivity and how it is shaped through encounters with material objects. Brotton's detailed obsession with the two portraits of Hamlet's father and Claudius and their link to constructing the subjectivity of Gertrude, the significance of the closet as a physical space for Gertrude and the significance of the arras in the play shed light on interesting aspects of the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude. Yet such detailed concentration on the construction of subjectivity does not account for the central issue of the play. He manages to prove, through Gertrude's possession of artistic objects, her "social agency", that contrary to earlier declared beliefs of her inactivity, she is a proactive character. Although this uncovering aspect of Gertrude's character may appear interesting, yet it does not provide a wider perspective on the central issue of the play. Neither does it account for the link between other characters in the play.

No doubt critics employing such novel perspectives will uncover meaning left intact by earlier scholars yet their revelation will not necessarily account for a complete and comprehensive observation of literary works. I think Peter Erickson's essay "*Can We Talk about Race in Hamlet*" opens up a new horizon, laying bare the introductory steps towards racial issues and discovering the rhetorical and imagery of race in *Hamlet* yet as he himself mentions "This mode of interpretation by no means supplants all the others, but it should be added to the rest" (Kinney, 2002, p. 212). I would like to argue that the same applies to the rest of criticism on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Early critics may have expected to find the play as a revenge tragedy and they did. Later critics dealt with the textuality of the work and divorced

it from performance, in which case simultaneously much meaning was lost and found. Once again, new generation of critics brought new expectations to the work and sought to find what they were looking for. The same applies to current critical thinking.

According to Susan Zimmerman, *Hamlet* is a play that has proved to be a fertile ground for the application of postmodern practices. The reason for this is that this play is one that concentrates on the subjectivity of its protagonist, that of Hamlet. Hamlet's dilemma is not in this regard seen as in terms of an either/or relation: activity/inactivity, masculinity/femininity, and violence/delicacy. Neither is Hamlet's relation to other characters of the play seen as an apparent dichotomy: Terence Hawkes in his essay "*The Old Bill*" has delineated how the opposition between Hamlet and Claudius cannot be regarded as the familiar villain versus hero distinction "far from simply representing corruption on the one hand and justice on the other, Claudius and Hamlet seem, as "mighty opposites," to be not unequally matched" (Kinney, 2002, p. 183). From this, Hawkes draws the conclusion that the link between the world of art and real life is not a straightforward one.

Zimmerman divides postmodern practices into two broad categories which have been extensively applied to *Hamlet*: on the one hand are those which concentrate on language and on the other, those dealing with culture. In this regard, deconstruction and psychoanalysis criticism deals with language while cultural history concentrate with the subject of tragedy as an ideological construct. These are broad and diverging perspectives from which *Hamlet* can be perceived. On the one hand, a critic such as Patricia Parker engages with the ways in which the language of the play deals with the problematic "matter" of women's bodies (Kinney, 2002, p. 160). On the other hand we have a critic such as Hawkes who deals with the ways the play "polices" its audience, as "the players harbor a summary, prosecuting power enabling them somehow to reach out and make a kind of juridical contact with their audiences' private lives and individual conscience" (Kinney, 2002, p. 182).

Such diverse studies of Hamlet, although attempt to uncover different layers of meaning in *Hamlet*, seem to diverging for the play in its totality. Although it is significant to uncover some aspects of the play, which have been left neglected for centuries, it appears that contemporary occupation with theoretical standpoints seems to diverging from the fact that it is the play that is to be studied, dealing with the characters in the play, their interaction with each other and their link to the general world of the play, specifically dealing with the character of Hamlet himself.

One recent criticism of the play which claims to be unlike earlier criticisms is an interesting study carried out by Richard Levin in his essay: "*Hamlet, Laertes, and the Dramatic Functions of Foil.*" Levin opens his essay with a list of ten current critical scenes, at some points rejecting at others accepting the theoretical stances of earlier and contemporary critics. Rejecting contemporary views of the play in relation to the historical and socio-economic conflicts of either its own time or even our own, he expresses his desire to deal with the character of Hamlet, because he sees him as an individual with personality. Offering a concrete method of perceiving the character of Hamlet, Levin rejects the notions brought up by critics about the "illusion" and the fact that identity is something we "construct." Rejecting such abstract notions of identity, Levin engages with the personality of Hamlet as a real character, in fact the central character of the play. However, he diverges from early modes of character-analysis of the play, by attempting to characterize Hamlet's personality in relation to other characters in the play. The most important foil he finds for Hamlet is Laertes and through him, he delineates the reasons why Hamlet's personality is a central issue within the play.

However, not all contemporary critics observe the play as such. Most engage with mere parts of the play, weather it be a specific scene, such as the gravedigger scene, seen as an instance of carnivalesque, by Michael. D.Bristol, or even a specific character or group of characters, such as the study carried out by most feminist critics. John Bayley, an eminent Shakespearian critic believes theory is running out

of control. Hence it seems that there has been a prominent shift from texts to theory in general and Hamlet in this sense is no exception. It is theory which now controls the meaning of text. Brian Vickers is also another anti-theorist who believes that all these contemporary theories distort Shakespeare's text by imposing their own specific ideology, forcing the texts into a secondary position.

Although they might be right in believing that the play is being torn into fragments, nevertheless we must recognize that many of these theory-oriented critics have drawn specific meanings from the plays which have opened up new horizons of meaning. Shakespeare was a significantly impartial character. His plays are the embodiment of intersecting discourses. When he himself never attempted to provide an ultimate response for the dualities of his plays, it would be a misconception to attempt to draw a conclusion, as earlier humanistic critics did, from his plays. He has delineated the dualities employing the genre of drama, a relevant genre to communicate his intention yet he made no attempt to resolve the problems he portrayed. Such should be the major purpose of criticism of his work. Rather than offering solutions, they should engage on interpreting them whether in relation to Shakespeare's time, or even our own age.

CONCLUSION

The above study reveals Hamlet as a play which has invoked various responses from its audience. These audiences have responded to the play differently at different times. But it is the specific time in which each audience lived which determines their specific and varying responses to the play. One important factor involved in the reception of *Hamlet* is the issue that its status as a play varies in different times, accounting for the misconceptions of the play. Early responses were drawn from the play's performance, yet they lacked literary responses to Hamlet's delay, observing the play as a revenge tragedy, since they were already familiar with the genre. Later responses, however, began to depart from observing the play in performance, preferring to

read the text of the play, isolating it from its performance. This time, Hamlet's delay was focused and the problem of procrastination was dealt with in detail and from mainly psychological aspects. However, these expectations were confining, since a lot was lost by neglecting the play in performance. Yet as Peter Hall calls it the "sputnik" rolls on in the history of literature, once again the performance of the play becomes significant for the New Critics. However, these critics neglected the play's relevance in relation to the historical context of its production. With the passage of time and the introduction of post-modernism, the play seems to be torn into fragments as each critic will attempt to offer novel glimpses of possible meaning, rejecting earlier limited views of the play's unity.

After observing the history of criticism of *Hamlet* in relation to the various historical settings of its perception by various audiences, it becomes clear that although the contemporary mode of critical thinking in each era was an important phase in completing the puzzle of the play, this puzzle seems to be continuously deconstructed. Based on the current mode of critical thinking of each era, various responses arise as responses to the horizons of expectations invoked in the audience. Yet these expectations, as we have seen, have been continuously reoriented in the history of the play's reception, without rejecting earlier instances of meaning and yet it seems that still there is a vast distance between the work's aesthetic value and the horizons of expectations it invokes. This gap is widening now, perhaps more than ever before, since the more the history of criticism of *Hamlet* proceeds, the more it is torn into fragments, and it seems even though earlier receptions of the play had many shortcomings, they would search for a unity in the text which is now considered as extinct. It appears history of criticism has been moving from considering the play as the primary, privileged position to considering the play in a secondary position, privileging theory and even imposing desired meanings that may not even have been there. Yet it is through a combination of these perspectives, those of the old and the new, that we should attempt to conceive the play, though there can be no guarantee that future generations will not bring to the text

new horizons of expectations and attempts to justify the play in that regard.

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