Michael Neely

Professor Smith

ENGL 430

17 December 2019

Perchance to Dream: Shakespeare and the "Offstage"

Introduction

Lay theatre folk may contend that, on the theatre stage, there actually exist two stages: onstage and offstage. The onstage is what the audience *sees* taking place explicitly in front of them in real-time. The offstage is what takes place in between acts or scenes or is only mentioned through passive dialogue, i.e., exposition or plot advancement that the audience *does not see* performed explicitly in front of them nor in real-time. Since the onstage is performed for the audience to watch in real-time, some may claim it is more important than the offstage. However, the offstage can be just as, if not more, important than the onstage. In William Shakespeare's tragedy, *Hamlet*, a significant amount of the play is performed offstage: King Hamlet slays King Fortinbras; Claudius poisons King Hamlet; pirates capture Prince Hamlet; Ophelia drowns; Prince Hamlet averts his murder by killing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.[1] Particular pivotal moments of Shakespeare's other plays—*As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Winter's Tale*—are also relegated to offstage dialogue. Putting aside any potential logistical excuse (such as Shakespeare was pressed for time by his theatre company, King's men), that these pivotal events are brushed aside begs the question: why are they not performed onstage? Instead of dramatic action, we are given expository dialogue. Indeed, Shakespeare opts for dialogue, but he opts for dialogue for a purpose. Shakespeare opts for dialogue because it affords

[1] To avoid confusion, I will hereafter refer to Prince Hamlet as "Hamlet" and to his father as either "King Hamlet" or "the ghost."

us a perspective that illuminates the true subject and purpose of the scene, thereby engendering an effect on the audience and/or the characters in the play.

Phraseological Inferences

In the first act of *Hamlet*, the exposition pertaining to King Hamlet and his battle with King Fortinbras is delivered by Horatio. When Horatio delivers this information, we may pay heed to subtle yet narratively significant elements in his speech that would be unfound if the battle were performed onstage and in real-time. For instance, when Marcellus, a guard of the castle, asks about the conflict between Denmark and Norway, Horatio's status as an unreliable narrator evinces. Shakespeare undercuts the authority of Horatio by having the character temper his claim: "That can I—/ At least the whisper goes so" (McDonald and Orwin, 1.1.79-80). Through the em dash and restricting modifier, "at least," Horatio intimates that he is uncertain of the reliability of the authority or sources on which he reports. Later, when speaking about the battle between King Hamlet and King Fortinbras, Horatio lets slip another subtle element: not everyone was a supporter of King Hamlet. Horatio says:

> . . .Our last king,
> Whose image even but now appeared to us,
> Was as you know by Fortinbras of Norway,
> Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride,
> Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet—
> For so this side of our known world esteemed him—
> Did slay this Fortinbras; who by a sealed compact,
> Well ratified by law and heraldry,
> Did forfeit (with his life) all those his lands

> Which he stood seize of, to the conqueror;
> Against the which a moiety component
> Was gagèd by our king, which had returned
> To the inheritance of Fortinbras
> Had he been vanquisher; as by the same comart
> And carriage of the article design,
> His fell to Hamlet. (1.1.80-95)

Shakespeare's diction therein concisely affords us numerous facts. The choice of the term, "emulate," in the line, "Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride" (1.1.84), tells us that King Hamlet might have been particularly aggressive and in over his head. Further, Shakespeare's syntax in the line, "in which our valiant Hamlet—/ For so this side of our known world esteemed him—" (1.1.84-85), tells us first that Horatio and those with him share a favorable perception of the King, and it tells us second that not everyone viewed him favorably. Therefore, perceptions were split. All of these inferences in mind, a reader or audience member can already be sure that the characters in the play are in a state of disorder. Without even hearing yet about Claudius killing King Hamlet nor Hamlet's reaction, we know that something is rotten in the state of Denmark. But had the battle between King Hamlet and King Fortinbras been performed onstage, we would not be able to make these inferences. In all likelihood, we would have seen a simple fight that, though may have made for thrilling staging, would not have conferred us the omniscience granted from Horatio's monologue. Hence, Shakespeare's decision for this information to be delivered through dialogue has both tonal and foreboding effects as regards King Hamlet, his legacy, and the state in which he left his kingdom.

These allegedly diverse perceptions of King Hamlet, according to Horatio, rise to prominence in Act 1, Scene 5: the dialogue between Hamlet and the ghost. Shakespeare's syntax conditions the audience to see through the lens of Hamlet—who is under the influence of a biased informer—for the principal aim of Claudius's murder of King Hamlet is on Hamlet's systemized acquisition of this knowledge. The first tidbit we receive from the ghost is that "[His] hour is almost come/ When [he] to sulph'rous and tormenting flames/ Must render up [himself]" (1.5.2-4). Speaking of flames and that his hour has come, we can insinuate that the ghost alludes to hell.[2] At this point, keeping in mind the information Horatio provided us in Act 1, one might be ready to infer that the ghost committed some nefarious act that has sentenced him to hell. However, Hamlet does not question the ghost's condemned fate; instead, he promptly renders him a victim: "Alas poor ghost!" (1.5.4). From this point, the dialogue follows in the paradigm of a victimized king rather than, say, a sinful or perhaps tyrannical king. After telling us that he will suffer in an everlasting fire, the ghost tells us that Hamlet will be as bound to revenge as he is currently to bear witness:

HAMLET. Speak, I am bound to hear.

GHOST. So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear. (1.5.7-8)

Before saying he was murdered or getting into the details of the identity of the murderer, the ghost already instructs Hamlet to be bound to revenge and thus subordinate to him and his will. Only after bounding Hamlet and revenge does the ghost reveal his identity as King Hamlet. Once this fact is unfurled does the ghost disclose that King Hamlet was murdered: "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25). Note that the ghost has neither said how he was killed nor the motive of the murderer. He only does so after Hamlet has assured he will avenge him: "Haste

[2] Whether he is telling the truth is debatable since *Hamlet* takes place within a Christian world, and as such, the murdered would not be thought of as doomed to hell simply by virtue of being murdered.

me to know't, that I with wings as swift/ As meditation or the thoughts of love/ May sweep to my revenge" (1.5.29-31). Hereafter, finally, does the ghost permit Hamlet—and us—of the climactic knowledge that Claudius killed him. Therefore, the arrangement of Act 1, Scene 5 is as follows: the ghost renders himself a victim; instructs Prince Hamlet to avenge him; claims that he is Prince Hamlet's father; discloses that he was murdered; discloses that it was his own brother, Claudius, who murdered him. Through this structure, Shakespeare places us in the same mindset of Hamlet in receiving exposition piecemeal and thus being influenced by the bias and authority of its reporter. However, if the murder were performed onstage, we would have been bereft of the bias inherent in this arrangement. Had the scene been featured on stage, we would have been bereft of the ghost's bias and Hamlet's reaction, timed to precisely coincide as we find out.

We need to see from Hamlet's perspective because our alignment with his worldview is vital. After all, our confluence with the protagonist is what raises a mystifying aspect of the play: Hamlet's sanity. Other than the content of Hamlet's remarks, the question of his sanity emerges through his sheer expression. For instance, in Act 4, Scene 6, Hamlet's capture by pirates is only related to us through Horatio reading aloud his letter, so Shakespeare's choice of conduit there is telling. All throughout this play, Hamlet's speech fluctuates between verse and prose. Accordingly, if we consider the arrangement of the play as a whole, this scene is particularly telling in its relation to the prior and subsequent scenes. Before this scene, Hamlet is last onstage in Act 4, Scene 4, wherein Hamlet delivers a lengthy soliloquy in verse. The scene after Act 4, Scene 6 that features Hamlet is Act 5, Scene 1, wherein Hamlet speaks strictly in prose until he and Laertes begin their quarrel. Yet in the very scene after their quarrel, Act 5, Scene 2, Hamlet speaks in verse when he proclaims: "He should those bearers put to sudden death," (5.2.46),

speaking, of course, about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death. That Horatio reads aloud Hamlet's letter detailing capture by pirates—written in prose—only for Hamlet to later seesaw to verse elucidates that the content of the letter is not as crucial as is its deliverance. So, Shakespeare writing this scene to be set onstage would have given more attention to the content rather than the deliverance. Shakespeare's point is not to perform a thrilling action scene. Shakespeare's point is to display a character who cannot make up his mind.

Character Consistency and Growth

If Hamlet may be described as one who cannot make up his mind, Ophelia may be described as one who was never given an opportunity to do so. In Act 4, Scene 7, the death of Ophelia is only mentioned passively by Gertrude. Shakespeare's decision to have Ophelia's death be subsidiary to the conversation between Claudius and Laertes—the subject concerning Hamlet's murder of Polonius, with which they preoccupy themselves—is in keeping with her perceived irrelevancy. All throughout the play, Ophelia has been deemed secondary to something or someone else far more critical: Right before leaving for Paris, Laertes hastily tells her not to consider Hamlet trustworthy in his affections; after giving a much lengthier and intimate voice to Laertes, Polonius lambasts her for carrying on a relationship with Hamlet then commands her to cease their relationship; she is tasked by Polonius and Laertes to spy on Hamlet to discover the cause of his madness. For Shakespeare to write Ophelia's death in concord with others' attitudes toward her means her death must be as trivial as they considered her life throughout the play. In fact, when Gertrude mentions her death, Laertes reacts for a mere four lines before broadening the topic to a reflection on the foils of feminine feelings in men:

LAERTES. Alas, then she is drowned?

GERTRUDE. Drowned, drowned.

LAERTES. Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,

And therefore I forbid my tears. But yet

It is our trick; nature her custom holds,

Let shame say what it will. When these are gone,

The women will be out. Adieu my lord,

I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze,

But that this folly douts it. (4.7.183-191)

If Shakespeare showed us her death onstage and in real-time, he would be appointing her to primary status, and that is not how she has been treated throughout the play.

Evidently, Shakespeare holds dear his concern for maintaining character perceptions, including even the most irreverent and jocular of them. Such is especially the case in Shakespeare's comedy, *Twelfth Night*, in which Cesario's true identity, Viola, is constrained through dialogue onstage in Act 1, Scene 4, then finally declared plainly in Act 5, Scene 1. When Orsino tasks Cesario to woo Olivia, Cesario answers: "I'll do my best/ To woo your lady" (1.4.39-40), but it is Viola who utters in an aside: "Yet a barful strife!/ Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife" (1.4.40-41). Cesario's statements are aware to everyone, but only the audience is aware of Viola's. Thus it is only suitable that in Act 5, Scene 1, Orsino tells her to make explicit her true identity, that of her femininity: "Give me thy hand./ And let me see thee in thy women's weeds" (5.1.263-264). Through her dialogue, Viola displayed her love for Orsino. Since Viola's conflict in needing to shroud her true feelings began onstage through dialogue, it only fits that Shakespeare resolves that conflict onstage through dialogue.

In other plays, this concern for consistency in character perceptions materializes differently yet still chiefly with the same effect. For instance, in Shakespeare's comedy, *As You*

Like It, a contingent plot point is also revealed in passive dialogue, but the passivity is warranted in relation to its source. In Act 4, Scene 3, Oliver discloses a magnificent feat wherein his brother, Orlando—with whom he has been enwrapped in a hypermasculine conflict since the very first scene—saved his life by fighting a lion. Consequently, Oliver emasculates himself. When Celia says, "O I have heard him speak of that same brother,/ And he did render him the most unnatural/ That lived amongst men" (4.3.118-120), Oliver reaffirms her sentiment, "And well he might do so,/ For well I know he was unnatural" (4.3.121-122). Oliver does not only emasculate himself through self-criticism, however. He also does so through lending credence toward Orlando and the heroism of his bravery and action. A few lines later, in Oliver's monologue, his diction renders Orlando a committed and selfless figure:

> Twice did he turn his back and purposed so
> But kindness, nobler ever than revenge,
> And nature, stronger than his just occasion,
> Made him give battle to the lioness,
> Who quickly fell before him; in which hurtling
> From miserable slumber I awaked (4.3.124-129)

In sum, Orlando could have left Oliver there to die, especially considering the animosity their relationship has borne throughout this play. However, as Oliver himself admits, Orlando is not the type of person to seek revenge. Instead of giving into hate, Orlando sought the kindness in himself and gave into the nature of his kind heart in risking his own life to save a brother he has detested. It was through Orlando's altruism that their relationship has healed:

> By and by.
> When from the first to last betwixt us two,

Tears our recountments had most kindly bathed—

As how I came into that desert place—

In brief, he led me to the gentle Duke

Who gave me fresh array and entertainment,

Committing me unto my brother's love

Who led me instantly unto his cave;

There stripped himself and here, upon his arm,

The lioness had torn some flesh away,

Which all this while had bled; and now he fainted,

And cried in fainting upon Rosalind,

Brief, I recovered him, bound up his wound,

And, after some small space, being strong at heart,

He sent me hither, stranger as I am,

To tell this story that you might excuse

His broken promise, and to give this napkin,

Dyed in his blood, unto the shepherd youth

That he in sport doth call his Rosalind. (4.3.136-153)

Oliver speaks of tears in describing his reunion with Orlando. These tears speculate the premise that Oliver speaks of his recent cleansing and rebirth. Under this premise, Oliver speaks of a "gentle duke" supplying him with not only sustenance as regards victuals but also as regards the sincerity of Orlando's familial love that he hopes to repay by conveying this information to Orlando's love, Rosalind. Finally, Oliver characterizes Orlando as "strong at heart." These word choices are quite contrary to Oliver's depiction of Orlando in Act 1, Scene 1, wherein he

egregiously proclaims: “Wilt thou lay hands on me, villain?” (1.1.48). Had this scene been performed onstage in an action scene, it would have functioned in discord with the dialogue that activated their animosity in the first scene. Bearing in mind the contrast between Act 1, Scene 1 and Act 4, Scene 3, Shakespeare must present Oliver relating the details of Orlando saving his life through dialogue because it was through dialogue in which their strife first materialized.

Impugned Reconciliation Yielding True Reconciliation

However, at the same time *As You Like It* demonstrates accordance with character consistency and growth, it likewise seemingly demonstrates a discordance in character reconciliation. However, the resolution’s passive offstage dialogue befits the play when considering the relationship between the subject of the dialogue—and purported villain of the story—Duke Frederick and his victims: Orlando and Rosalind. Duke Frederick both indirectly and directly instigated the divide between Orlando and Rosalind. Le Beau warns Orlando to leave out of fear of slighting the duke for his relationship to his recently-deceased father—who was friends with the recently-usurped Duke Senior—and it is Duke Frederick who expels Rosalind from his kingdom. In the first instance, Duke Frederick only passively played a role in expelling Orlando; it was really Le Beau who warned Orlando to leave rather than Duke Frederick directly ordering Orlando to leave. But in the second instance, it was Duke Frederick himself who expelled Rosalind onstage. In keeping with this dichotomy, the ending of the play finds a happy medium through which to resolve the conflict. That medium arises when Jacques De Boys, the middle brother of Oliver and Orlando, comes onstage to announce that Duke Frederick no longer has any role in this plot:

> Duke Frederick, hearing how that every day
>
> Men of great worth resorted to this forest,

> Addressed a mighty power which were on foot
> In his own conduct, purposely to take
> His brother here and put him to the sword;
> And to the skirts of this wild wood he came,
> Where, meeting with an old religious man,
> After some question with him, was converted
> Both from his enterprise and from the world,
> His crown bequeathing to his banished brother,
> And all their lands restored to them again
> That were with him exiled. This to be true,
> I do engage my life. (5.4.142-157)

Since Jacques posits that "men of great worth [resort] to this forest" (5.4.143), and Duke Frederick has come to this forest, the case could be made that Jacques acknowledges Duke Frederick has become a man of great worth. But Duke Frederick has not only converted into a better man; he has converted away from a villain, and in doing so, he has abdicated his role as a source of conflict. That the Duke is stripped of his authority through passive dialogue befits Orlando's relationship with him since they never shared a scene of outright hostility. Though he and Rosalind did share a scene of outright hostility, the offstage reconciliation with her character is logical. It is logical when considering that this brief dialogue is only subsidiary to her importance in three regards: first, she initiates the reconciliation of all lovers in the first place; second, it is because of her reconciliation that they perform onstage a jig; third, she is the last voice in closing the play with a monologue. In other words, her centrality eclipses Jacques' brief interruption; their festivities resume nonchalantly after the disclosure of that information. By

giving active stage time to Rosalind and passive stage time to Duke Frederick, Shakespeare reaffirms that Rosalind is indubitably the main character.

Thus, reflecting on the medium of reconciliation permits us an understanding of why Shakespeare chooses to belie reconciliation: it affords us a more holistic understanding of the play. And even in the most extreme and off-putting moments of his plays—especially the reconciliation scene at the end of his romance, *The Winter's Tale*—does our inquisition yield increasing returns. In the play, Leontes, Perdita, Camillo, Paulina, Polixenes, Florizel, Shepherd, and Clown are on their way to meet with one another at the end of Act 5, Scene 1:

> *[To Florizel]* But your petition
> Is yet unanswered. I will to your father;
> Your honor not o'erthrown by your desires,
> I am friend to them and you; upon which errand
> I now go toward him. Therefore follow me,
> And mark what way I make. Come, good my lord (5.1.227-232)

Upon reading this closing remark, a reader or audience member might think that the next scene will feature the reconciliation scene onstage. However, the next scene ends up being an offstage summative dialogue among Autolycus and various gentlemen, wherein they discuss the details of what transpired during the reconciliation that has already occurred. This artistic choice seems odd at first, but in a holistic reading, it behooves the following scene. Shakespeare's choice to write Act 5, Scene 1 entirely in prose (Autolycus, the three gentlemen, Shepherd, Clown all speak in prose) evinces a truism: Since Shakespeare's use of prose typically signifies the speech of non-regal characters, it can be perceived as less highbrow and thus more direct. That the dialogue within the scene may be perceived that way impugns its importance and relevance. If

we think about the content of the scene, no real reconciliation has been made aside from Leontes and Perdita, but her fate was but a consequence of his direct attack on her mother, Hermione. Furthermore, Polixenes and Florizel's conflict was a matter of misunderstanding, and Laertes has already reconciled himself with Polixenes prior to their offstage reconciliation. The real reconciliation Leontes needs to enact is with Hermione. Her abject treatment and death were at his hands; he only suspected and excoriated Polixenes, but it was his wife who truly endured his wrath to her death. Perhaps that is why the final scene of the play focuses on Hermione and is written and performed entirely in verse. Through verse—the medium of sophistication—she is rebirthed, restored, and reconciled with her husband.

Conclusion

Whether deliberate, an author typically has a purpose in his or her presentation, arrangement, and conduits through which they materialize their stories and characters. For Shakespeare, even the most nuanced of aspects in his plays are open to the same generalization. At first, these moments' relegation to passive offstage dialogue may seem peculiar, underwhelming, or anticlimactic, but a closer reading yields significant insights that may help explain his artistic choices. Though we cannot know for certain the reasons why he made the decisions he made, perhaps that is part of his intention. As many have observed, Shakespeare is an enigmatic figure in history. Maybe it was his choice to characterize his works in the same manner as others characterized him.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. *The Bedford Shakespeare*, edited by Russ McDonald and Lena Cowen Orlin, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015, pp. 747-803.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. *The Bedford Shakespeare*, edited by Russ McDonald and Lena Cowen Orlin, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015, pp. 951-1038.

Shakespeare, William. *The Winter's Tale*. *The Bedford Shakespeare*, edited by Russ McDonald and Lena Cowen Orlin, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015, pp. 1631-1701.

Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. *The Bedford Shakespeare*, edited by Russ McDonald and Lena Cowen Orlin, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015, pp. 1045-1097.