

Shakespeare: Interpreting Hamlet. Different interpretations

Catherine Belsey argues that while a director and actor must decide on a single interpretation of a word, the critic should be open to alternative interpretations. She explores the possible meanings of Hamlet's most famous speech, 'To be or not to be'.

His father is dead and his mother has married his uncle with what most people would call indecent haste. At midnight on the castle walls an apparition, speaking in the name of the father, demands revenge for murder by the same uncle. In the heat of the moment, horrified to hear his own worst suspicions confirmed, Hamlet would readily risk damnation to obey his father's Ghost but, on reflection, the project and its possible consequences don't appear to be so simple. 'To be, or not to be, that is the question' (Hamlet, 3.1.55).

But what exactly is the question? What is Hamlet asking himself here?

*Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die ...
(3.1.55-9)*

Is it more honourable to 'suffer', to permit luck to do its worst (however appalling) or to fight back, to put an end to the problem (however overwhelming) - and die? Death, Hamlet goes on, is no more, after all, than sleep. Who

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wouldn't choose to be rid of the misery of this life, if it weren't for fear of what might happen in the next life? After death there may be a price to be paid for the wrong choice. 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all' (3.1.82), and the question which alternative is nobler seems to be left unanswered.

The Victorians assumed, almost without exception, that in this soliloquy Hamlet was thinking about suicide as a way out of his difficulties: 'And by opposing end them. To die ...' But there was always, even in the nineteenth century, an alternative possibility: neither taking arms nor opposition sounds much like putting yourself out of action altogether; and in other Shakespeare plays suicide is only thought to be 'noble' after you've 'taken arms' and lost. What the Ghost is asking for is another murder, which in Hamlet is also regicide (killing a king), but early modern revengers don't usually get away with either. 'And by opposing end them. To die ...' Is Hamlet perhaps not thinking of killing himself, after all, but debating an ethical question: whether it is nobler to accept a wrong without protest, when fighting it may bring not only death, but also damnation?

How are we to decide? The words on the page don't settle the issue. They can be read either way. The words on the stage, by contrast, have often settled it in advance, by bringing the speech into line with the actor's or the director's understanding of Hamlet's role in Hamlet - in the light of a company's interpretation of the play as a whole. An individual performance can indicate either deliberation about suicide or killing Claudius.

Readers have understood Shakespeare in different ways at distinct historical moments, in the light of their own cultural perspectives. Victorian criticism largely took it for granted

that revenge was a sacred duty, violence was a reasonable way of solving problems, and Hamlet's first obligation was to obey his father. The fact that it took him five acts to get round to killing Claudius made most critics and, indeed, most actors of the period, conclude that there must be something radically wrong with Hamlet himself. He was commonly portrayed as slight, pale, languid, melancholy, but thoughtful: a young man who found the world's demand for action too much to cope with. The part was often played by women, on the grounds that fit male actors might look too muscular to play the poetic Prince.

In 1904 A.C. Bradley produced a brilliant reading of the play as the 'case history' of a clinical depressive, pathologically incapable of acting decisively on what he knew to be right. For Bradley, as for Coleridge a hundred years earlier, the plays were primarily character studies. Novelistic rounded protagonists were the origin of everything that occurred on the stage. In effect, Hamlet was the explanation of Hamlet. At that time, making sense of the plays was quite simple, if a bit dull, not least because it had been done so well for so long. You had to analyse the characters to reveal their motives, see how they fitted together to make the plot, and work out from their success or failure a universal moral message (in this instance, 'just do it!').

What has changed? In the case of Hamlet, two world wars and any number of more localised but no less bloody struggles have called into question the idea that violence is necessarily the best way of dealing with wrongs. Also, fathers no longer seem entitled to unquestioning obedience from beyond the grave. 'Just doing it', when 'it' means killing your uncle, who is also the king, as well as the husband of the mother you love, doesn't appear quite so

straightforward any more.

More generally, explanations are not now so easily traceable to character. We have begun to think that in real life individuals are, at least partly, produced by their culture, and personality is not, therefore, the only source of events, or the sole origin of history. Instead, we need history to explain our individuality, to show how our culture makes us to a large extent who we are. Interpretation is also a cultural product. The Victorian Hamlet made sense in terms of certain Victorian values. It makes less sense now. Interpreting the text has come to be seen as historically and culturally relative. In other words, each age reads texts differently, with its own concerns and attitudes to the fore.

Is it possible then to decide what exactly Hamlet is asking himself? Maybe not. Directors may have to: they want to produce a play which will be intelligible to an audience, even if this is not the only possible version of the play Shakespeare wrote. A production is always an interpretation. But for criticism, what would constitute a decision? What, in other words, are we trying to settle? Hamlet is a fictional figure: he has no independent existence; what he is 'really' thinking is an illusion.

Would Shakespeare's intentions for him satisfy us, then? First, we have no access to Shakespeare's intentions, but only a text, and the meaning of the text is the very problem we are trying to resolve. And second, recent Shakespearean criticism has tended to see the plays as theatrical events, the effect of a collaboration between an author and a company, and thus group productions. Shakespeare's individual intentions weren't the only determinant of what his audiences actually saw.

Are we, then, looking to the original stage performance for an answer, Burbage's Hamlet as the definitive interpretation? But even if we had records of how Burbage played the part, which performance would count as decisive? The first? Or a later version, improved with practice? Three early modern printed texts of Hamlet, two quarto publications and a folio, all different, may perhaps represent different performances, with some of Shakespeare's original words modified, deleted or rewritten as the company discovered over time what would work best on the stage. In the second quarto Hamlet has more soliloquies than he does in the later folio, where he appears as a result less hesitant. There was not necessarily one single moment when Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, got it 'right'.

We may, after all, have to settle for uncertainty and accept that undecidability is the condition of interpretation. And if we can't resolve these questions finally, absolutely, what does that mean for criticism? If there is no one correct reading, does that mean that any interpretation of Shakespeare is as good as any other, that we are entitled to make sense of the plays in whatever way we choose?

Stage directors must have a free hand: they have no obligations to historical reading. But scholars and critics can, in my view, misread. It is possible to misunderstand through not knowing the full range of meanings of the words. Shakespearean vocabulary is extensive and dense. Did some of the Victorian critics, perhaps, read 'suffer' only as 'undergo pain', without recognising its more archaic meaning of 'allow', 'put up with'?

In addition, it is possible to read inattentively: to ignore counter-indications in the text itself. The other characters in

the play don't seem to complain that Hamlet is ineffectual or effeminate. On the contrary, Claudius is frightened enough to send him away to be killed; Fortinbras thinks he was likely to have proved most royal (5.2.398). Moreover, plays set up a critical relationship between the events on stage and the audience. Some scholars too easily assume that the opinions of the characters are the same as the values of the play, as if we were invited to take Hamlet's own agonised self-blame as the only possible assessment of his reluctance to murder Claudius.

In other words, the text does have some autonomy, and can reasonably be invoked to limit the range of readings we should be prepared to take seriously. Plays do not belong exclusively in the heads of their audiences or readers. It does not follow that because we no longer have confident access to a single 'objective' meaning, interpretation is all 'subjective'. If the plays had no independent, material existence, we would hardly be able to tell one from another. If meaning was mine to determine, how would I know whether I was reading Macbeth or A Midsummer Night's Dream - or Middlemarch, come to that? Reading is a transaction between an individual and a work. We make sense of texts, but that does not mean we can invent them.

I have suggested, however, that distinct cultural moments make alternative Hamlets, that different assumptions produce different readings. This acknowledgement releases the possibility of a criticism which takes active control of its own practices.