

Manifestation of Derridian Différance in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

MANIFESTATION DE LA DIFFÉRENCE DERRIDIENNE DANS LE HAMLET DE SHAKESPEARE

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Received 12 January 2012; accepted 22 April 2012.

Abstract

William Shakespeare's renowned tragedy *Hamlet* has ascertained itself as a touchstone for students and scholars of English literature. Extrapolating on this play, T.S. Eliot once remarked that, it is the Mona Lisa of Renaissance literature. Like Da Vinci's painting, *Hamlet* (the play or the man) is a faulty or flawed work of art. Foregrounding such a literary hypothesis in mind, the present article attempts to clarify that the play's fault, as claimed by Eliot, is not uprooted in the modern rules of decorum, construction or a reproach against image of a psychic or unaesthetic antagonist, but it is, we believe, in the postmodern concept of Différance which has been so influential in the assessment of literature and its values - simply articulated as the dualistic chemistry of objectifying a subjective emotion. The term Différance as a pre-postmodern quality implanted in this play, now seem to have been anachronistic for the literary context of the second half of the Renaissance period. However this provides a background for Derridian term Différance which calls upon the innovative perception that differs the common perception about *Hamlet*.

Key words: *Hamlet*; Flaw; Impersonalize; Dualism; Différance

Résumé

Le fameux tragédie de *Hamlet* de William Shakespeare est constaté lui-même comme une pierre de touche pour les étudiants et les universitaires de la littérature anglaise. En extrapolant sur ce jeu, Eliot T.S. a déjà fait remarquer que, c'est la Mona Lisa de la littérature de la Renaissance.

Comme la peinture de Léonard de Vinci, Le *Hamlet* (le jeu ou l'homme) est un travail défectueux ou imparfait de l'art. En mettant en avant une telle hypothèse littéraire à l'esprit, le présent article tente de clarifier que la faute de la pièce, selon Eliot, n'est pas déracinée dans les règles modernes de la bienséance, la construction ou un reproche à l'image d'un antagoniste psychique ou inesthétique, mais il est, nous croyons, dans le concept postmoderne de la différance qui a eu une telle influence dans l'évaluation de la littérature et de ses valeurs, vous n'avez qu'à articulé que la chimie dualiste d'objectiver une émotion subjective. La différance terme comme une qualité pré-post-moderne implanté dans cette pièce, semblent maintenant avoir été anachronique dans le contexte littéraire de la seconde moitié de la période de la Renaissance. Cependant, cette offre un arrière-plan pour différance derridienne terme qui fait appel à la perception novatrice qui diffère de la perception commune à propos de *Hamlet*.

Mots clés: *Hamlet*; Défauts; Impersonalize; Dualisme; Différance

Ali Poordaryaie Nejad, Mostafa Mirzaei, Mohammad Bagher Shabani (2012). Manifestation of Derridian Différance in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. *Canadian Social Science*, 8(2), 58-62. Available from URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720120802.1035>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.css.1923669720120802.1035>

INTRODUCTION

The present study starts with introducing the famous belittling criticism of Thomas Sterns Eliot's on *Hamlet*, which is then followed by presenting and applying the manifestation of Derridian Différance on Shakespeare's touchstone *Hamlet*. Scholars, however, have so far not been able to try their hands in drawing a manifestation of the terms, différance on *Hamlet* the play or the man. Highlighting such a hypothesis in mind, in this article the application of the term différance on Shakespeare's

Hamlet is undertaken to be examined. We therefore start analyzing the play to foreground the possible traces of Derredian concept of dualisms, deviations, and simultaneous encounter of concepts taking into consideration Shklovsky's defamiliarization. The article ends, conclusively, by briefly speculating on the reasons for the above phenomenon, and the extracts cited in the main body of the article serve mainly to contextualize and support such a manifestation.

DISCUSSION

Commenting on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* T.S. Eliot casually stated that "more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the 'Mona Lisa' of Renaissance literature" (1974, p.47). Like Da Vinci's painting, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in Eliot's belittling canon, is a fascinating literary piece, but, like the famous painting, a pitfall or flawed work of art. Being a heterogeneous classicist and an innovator of the new forms, the fault Eliot discovers in the play is not in terms of the classical rules of construction, the aesthetic inadequacy of its femininity or decorum, but in terms of the modernist chemistry of objectifying a subjective emotion, which is painstakingly found and discussed by the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky through the following comments on art and literature:

The purpose of any literary art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic and in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important (1925, p.12).

Coined by the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky, defamiliarization is the technique or process of making unfamiliar look familiar, or transferring the out dated in new concepts and image, and this is broadly what Shklovsky called a "sphere of new perception" (qtd. Bressler, 2007, p.52). This concept of slowing down the act of perceiving objects, we believe, can be equated with Jacques Derrida's concept of Différance; and hence can be applied to *Hamlet*; embroidering in this issue, Crawford says:

Shklovsky's formulations negate or cancel out the existence possibility of real perception: variously, by (1) the familiar formalist denial of a link between literature and life, connoting their status as non-communicating vessels, (2) always, as if compulsively, referring to a real experience in terms of empty, dead, and automatized repetition and recognition, and (3) implicitly locating real reception at an unspecified temporally anterior and spatially other place, at a mythic first time of naive experience, the loss of which to automatization is to be restored by aesthetic perceptual fullness (1984, p.209).

It is obvious the Eliot points out other drawbacks which are more or less attributed to the general faults of the Elizabethan drama. However, though Eliot puts

emphasis on the modernist ideal of considering a work as an 'objective equivalent' for a subjective emotion, we label the same pitfall as a postmodern phenomenon ignored by Eliot. The critic further says that:

That play is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art . . . Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalents to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem . . . We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he perhaps attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible we cannot ever know. We need a great many facts in his biography (1920, p.98-101).

As it was said before, the absence of objective equivalents to Hamlet's feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of Shakespeare in the face of his artistic problem. The prolongation reveals itself through the reader's lingering perception which transparently means to defer in Derridaian Différance. Since the term Différance refers to the dual meanings of French word difference to mean both to differ and to defer. In the same way, Shklovsky's defamiliarization draws attention to the use of common language in such a way as to alter one's perception of an easily understandable object or concept. Put differently, the use of defamiliarization both differs and defers, since the use of the technique alters one's perception of a concept (to defer), and forces one to think about the concept in different, often more complex ways (to differ).

In a more common and rustic structure, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is an autobiographical tragedy in which the dramatist has made the hernia of isolating a tale which touches upon a personal emotion that the writer is unable to impersonalize. And this is the subsequent outcome of the clumsiness in the expression of that emotion. However, as Eliot himself (1980) says that the heterogeneous language used by the protagonist is a,

part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of emotional relief. In the character Hamlet, it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the dramatist it is the buffoonery of an emotion which cannot express in art . . . We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him (1980, p.146).

Considering the hypothesis that art is not the freeing of the artist's personality and emotions – and that it is an impersonal formulation of common feelings, therefore the palpable and as quoted by Bressler "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (2007, p.57). Eliot's searching to find the fault related to the author's biography is of no avail. However, taking an overview of his critical writings, his insistence here on the Shakespeare's sensibilities being the material of his art does not sound uncharacteristic of

the critic. For example, Eliot in one of his essays on the comparison of the Renaissance and Seneca arts says:

What every poet starts from is his own emotions. And when we get down to these, there is too much to choose between Shakespeare and Dante; Shakespeare, too, was occupied with the struggle to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal (1980, p.137).

One can elaborately say that, Eliot does not draw a difference between the poet Dante and the dramatist Shakespeare, nor does he see much difference between the poetical vocations of Shakespeare and a dramatic touchstone as *Hamlet*. Put differently, Eliot's justification for measuring the merit of all kinds of fine arts, poets, novelists, dramatists-and of all kinds of literary compositions- epics, odes, lyrics, plays-is the maturity of the artist indicated by the degree to which he is able to objectify and impersonalize the personal emotions into universal significances- the greater the assimilation, the greater the artist. This greater assimilation comes fore of impersonalizing and defamiliarizing the personal emotion, this method paves the way for new perception which is lingered to be perceived by the same reader, hence Shakespeare fails to achieve greatness in *Hamlet* because he fails to impersonalize or defamiliarize his acute personal emotions.

While the controversy regarding whether it is *Hamlet* the play or *Hamlet* the character is the pivotal problem of Shakespeare's master piece, Eliot thinks it is *Hamlet* the play which is problematic. We do agree with Eliot as the actions of the protagonist are a kind of deviation delimited to its own time. In Eliot's view, "few critics have ever admitted that *Hamlet* the play is the primary problem, and *Hamlet* the character only secondary" (1980, p.141). However, this can also be an error on the side of the author as Eliot seems to concentrate on the play ignoring the fact that the play is highly dependent on the central character. The fact of the matter is that *Hamlet* the character and *Hamlet* the play are so interrelated that to make any separation between the two is to do injustice to the work as a whole. Besides, Eliot's and Wilson's contention that *Hamlet*'s disgust with life is rooted in his excessive concern with his mother's frailty, (1976, p.306) which is ultimately rooted in Shakespeare's own personal problem of similar nature clearly shows that the critics themselves are giving primacy to the problem of *Hamlet* the character. This and many other dark corners, as once were not clearly justifiable, are the outcome of Shakespeare's hidden talent of objectifying art in a most defamiliar way as to deviate the aims and scopes of the play, and consequently delaying its conceptual pleasure to come to the surface in a Derridian way. Such a deviation in *Hamlet* the play and *Hamlet* the man goes a long way to make the play a brooding one.

In addition to the dramatist's undigested, and hence

un-dramatized emotion, Eliot also finds the play faulty sharing the general faults of the Shakespearian and Elizabethan drama, as he sarcastically calls it "impure art" (1980, p.114), the critic sermonizes that "the weakness of the Elizabethan drama is not its defect of realism, but its attempt at realism; not its conventions, but its lack of conventions" (Ibid., p.112). Distinguishing between art and reality Eliot insists:

It is essential that a work of art should be self-consistent, that artists should consciously or unconsciously draw a circle beyond which he does not trespass: on the one hand actual life is always the material, and on the other hand an abstraction from actual is a necessary condition to the creation of the work if art (Ibid., p.111).

In all Eliot's criticism of *Hamlet*'s subjectivity or its lack of objective correlativity, one can find a sense of looking at the world in a different way, and that is a postmodern tendency. Here it is worth pointing out that both Shklovsky and Derrida brood upon for example, a paradoxical model of thinking or to simultaneously think on contradictory claims; that is a process of thinking for the other which is foreign and impossible to the thinking process. And for Shklovsky, art removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways, since the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. Thus, in Eliot's view, it is Shakespeare's failure to draw a circle around reality, to abstract many views from actual life, which makes *Hamlet* a faulty work of art. Elaborating more on the faults of the tragedy, Eliot makes a terminology:

the Elizabethans committed faults and muddled their conventions. In their plays there are faults of inconsistency, faults of incoherency, faults of taste, there are nearly everywhere faults of carelessness. But their great weakness is the same weakness as that of modern drama, it is the lack of convention . . . Shakespeare, like all his contemporaries, was aiming in more than one direction (1980, p.111).

For Eliot then, the play on *Hamlet* suffers from two kinds of fault: it shares the general Elizabethan fault of being a muddle of conventions having closeness to life than to artistic form; it has the peculiar fault of having behind it a personal emotion of Shakespeare the man which Shakespeare the artist fails to objectify, however in the contemporary notion one can simply apply the dualistic strategy in changing the concepts either through estrangement or Derridaian Différance, which seems more justifying than Eliot's habits of fault findings.

Thus in Eliot's views, the pivotal error in *Hamlet* is owing to a lack of tradition in the Elizabethan age, rather than a new discovery in the modern age. For our great critic, the only tradition which he would accept as tradition was the medieval tradition, and not postmodern strategy. If Shakespeare's fault as an artist can be attributed to his flexibility with literary conventions and artistic forms, Eliot's fault as a critic should be attributed to his rigidity in demanding from all kinds of literary works

except the postmodern dualistic notions of postponing the existed realities and inverting the privileged and unprivileged elements in Hamlet. He compels us to question the appropriateness of using an absolute or one particular scale of aesthetics for different kinds of literary compositions. Can we use, for instance, the Romantic scale of sincerity and authenticity for judging the Neo-classical poetry of Dryden and Pope, or the Modernist scale of irony and paradox for judging the Medieval poetry of Virgil and Dante or even the postmodern concept of defamiliarization or Derridaian Différance. Obviously, the works of every literary tradition, movement, age or genre, and even of every individual artist, have to be judged in terms of the elements of art that are there. The only justifying common scale of value that can be thought of for universal application, as suggested by Coleridge is that of internal coherence, of artistic and “autonomy, which requires a work of art to have within itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise” (1951, p.530), or as we believe a special literary anachronism in case of Eliot’s observations on Hamlet.

One of the most important instances of Shakespeare’s unconscious tendencies to the modern and postmodern issues in Hamlet has been the scene comprising the technique ‘play within play’ which bring to the fore the internal controversy in Hamlet between the forces of Medievalism and the Renaissance. Even before the hero encounters his father’s ghost, he seems suspicious of his uncle and mother; the ghost’s revelation only confirms his suspicion. He seems fully convinced about the truth of whatever the ghost reveals. Besides, he does not seem to have any doubt about the authenticity of the ghost. He seems to use the ‘play within play’ as a sort of handy excuse for covering his failure to do what he seems to consider his obligations. His contention that he is using the actors for confirming the ghost’s utterance fails to convince the reader; rather, he seems to be using the occasion as a ruse for his pricking conscience, which keeps rebuking him for his failure to do his duty. The play within play may be in the Elizabethan convention of the interlude, which in tragedy acts as much to reinforce the tragic theme as to provide the comic relief. What is more important about the scene, however, is its appropriateness in terms of defamiliarizing the usual routine of the plot and reporting a known subjective situation in quiet different stylistic feature unknown to most of the Elizabethan theater goers. It is very much in the character of Hamlet to postpone or delay the concept of taking the revenge. And this is what Derrida has introduced in the manifesto of his reading strategies in the postmodern era. In fact, the lingering revenge contains a paradoxically suspending the validity of the every order by which it is constituted; this way it seems that, on the one hand, Hamlet is outside the order which constitutes him and, on the other hand, he belongs to the same order because

it is up to him whether this constitution will be totally suspended, hence he would not question the duty and yet he would not do it. As Coleridge has remarked, Hamlet, rather than take revenge, remains involved in “endless reasoning and hesitating-constant urging and solicitations of the mind to act, and as constant an escape from action: ceaseless reproaches of himself for sloth and negligence, while the whole energy of his resolution evaporates in these reproaches” (1962, p.376). And this delaying is what we call a kind of defamiliarizing the concept of Hamlet as a tragedy, which more pleasure to the viewers.

Similarly, Hamlet’s failure to take revenge whenever the occasion arises, such as the time when Claudius is in prayer after the play scene, has been generally considered by the critics another ‘inconsistency’, but we believe that this kind of hesitancy is more or less a strategy of reversing the usual norms of reporting plot. Put different, in a Derridian sense the readers should see the individual incidents in isolation, and not in relation to each other, and see them finally not in relation to the central character, the incidents should be consistent with the character of the hero, and this what we have found to be the fault of the Derridian stylistic strategy which was unknown to the critics of Hamlet. Even when prince Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius because the latter being at prayer, it reveals a kind deviation from the logo of the cliché ‘seize the day’ and hence a Derridaian différance. He decides not to kill Claudius because once again, he has perhaps found a handy excuse for postponing the problem he has not yet resolved for himself, yet his action can be a deviation from a transcendental concept. The dramatization of the problem by Shakespeare is given utmost intensity by making it an internal problem of the central character, which is certainly larger than an individual, and not a turning away from center.

Another deviation which most critics of Hamlet have discovered is the hero’s changed behavior after his return from England. The change is said to be reflected in more ways than one. Firstly, we find Hamlet grown rather indifferent to the business of revenge. Instead of showing single-mindedness about the task of taking revenue, he seems to feel happier distracting from what he keeps calling his duty. These are the defamiliarized actions which carry the motto of taking revenge into a new direction, differentiating the viewers’ conceptions in a strange way unknown to the theater goers of Elizabethan age. Similarly, the grave-digger’s scene is another testimony to Hamlet’s changed and different attitude to his situation and to life in general. The levity of the scene has generally been viewed by critics as incongruous in the structure of tragedy as well as in the character of Hamlet. However, all these show how the protagonist defamiliarizes his duty in order to make readers step in the way of new perception, which is paradoxical. Readers expect him to take revenge, but he seems to feel happier after ship lags

journey. This situation creates a difference in the plot of the tragedy, altering the reader's perception, and all these are what Derrida coins as *différance*. Justifications have also been offered showing the scene's significance both to the character and the play; as it intensifies the tragedy. Additionally, Hamlet shows a change of attitude towards his foes; before the journey to England he demonstrates great alertness, caution, and foresight in dealing with his enemies, he is found rather complacent and unsuspecting in the closing scenes of the play. The hero who could so quickly see through the game of Claudius in sending him to England with his schoolmates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and turn the tables on them, utterly fails to see through the tricks Claudius plays on him in the change of foils and the change of drinks. Even if these are artistic failures, they are defamiliarizing the tragedy in quite a different way much against what the Renaissance artists could justify.

While Eliot has mostly emphasized Shakespeare's failure in impersonalizing a personal emotion, he has largely ignored the postmodern traces of ambiguity and dualism in the play. Additionally, in our opinion, the more pivotal point involved here is not whether what the protagonist does is believable or not believable, or whether it is consistent or inconsistent with his character, but the fact that in the evil game of treachery and deception he must get defeated at the hands of a villainous character like Claudius. It is not the consistency of any sort, which comprises artistic work; rather, it is the depth of the ambiguous and dualistic presentation which raises art above logic, form, and life, and these have all been anachronistic for the literary context of the Renaissance period.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we intend to show that the play's fault, as

claimed by Eliot, is not uprooted in the classical rules of decorum, construction or a reproach against image of a psychic or unaesthetic woman, but in the postmodern concept of *Différance* which has been so influential in the assessment of literature and its values - simply articulated as the dualistic chemistry of objectifying a subjective emotion. We can further claim that going beyond the presentation of the play into the realm of the writer's life is not an activity of criticism, or an appreciation of art; rather, it is an expression of vulgar curiosity on the one hand, and of object cynicism on the other.

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