

Playing with the Play within the Play in *Hamlet*

I begin with a quotation from TS Eliot's Essay on *Hamlet and His Problems* from 1921. In his grand and splendidly haughty way Eliot pronounces:

“Of the intractability there can be no doubt. So far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure. In several ways the play is puzzling, and disquieting as is none of the others. Of all the plays it is the longest and is possibly the one on which Shakespeare spent most pains; and yet he has left in it superfluous and inconsistent scenes which even hasty revision should have noticed.”

Well, I have been reading one of the great masterpieces of Stratfordian criticism, John Dover Wilson's *What Happens in Hamlet*. In my view Wilson destroys Eliot's comparison with *Coriolanus*, which Eliot considered Shakespeare's 'most assured artistic success'. He shows that, above all in the Second Quarto *Hamlet*, Shakespeare demonstrates a devastating mastery of detail, operating at the highest dramatic speed, which makes it, despite its vast and sprawling scale, as explosively concentrated, almost, as the first two acts of *Macbeth*. In particular, Dover Wilson, rightly, says the Play within the Play is the very crux of the drama, and that in it *Hamlet* exhibits pure genius. He makes sense of every single particle of it, in a quite extraordinary way that I have never seen in any other critic. For instance, our very own pioneer Oxfordian, Charlton Ogburn says, in *The Mystery of William Shakespeare*, that *Hamlet* gets carried away with his own 'guidance to the Players', and that this illustrates his autobiographical impetus. Well, Wilson demonstrates that *Hamlet* has to ensure that his play mousetrap will work 100%, and this is part of his ensuring that it does. And the First Player then proceeds to violate all *Hamlet*'s careful guidelines and that is part of the extreme tension created.

http://hewardwilkinson.co.uk/sites/default/files/Background%20Reading%20for%20Playing%20with%20the%20Play%20within%20the%20Play%20in%20Hamlet_.PDF

I do believe there is an intersection between the fictional realm and the realm of (potentially autobiographical) actuality, which comes out most poignantly in the play within the play. It is not demonstrated through the kind of extra-artistic-textual excess Ogburn postulates, but in what we may think of as the classic 'post-modern' way, - not confined to moderns and postmoderns of course, - in which it is integrally and subtly fully woven into the realistic texture of the work. It is *within the work of art as such*, and hidden in plain view, as it were. I shall first give two and a half modern illustrations of this.

I illustrate this 'post-modern moment', first through Frederick Forsyth's *Day of the Jackal* and secondly in Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, (and the 'half' is a work touched by it). This post-modern moment is where an intimation of reality and the world of the author is *radically and subtly absorbed into the fiction with only the tip of the iceberg showing, and plausibly deniably showing*, so that fictional art-text and reality subtly intersect.

Here is Frederick Forsyth:

“The Jackal was perfectly aware that in June 1963 General de Gaulle was not only President of France; he was also the most closely and skilfully guarded figure in the Western world. To assassinate him, as was later proved, was considerably more difficult than to kill President John F Kennedy of the United States. Although the English killer did not know it, French security experts who through American courtesy had been given an opportunity to study the precautions taken to guard the life of President Kennedy had returned somewhat disdainful of those precautions as exercised by the American Secret Service. The French experts rejection of the American methods was later justified when in November 1963 John Kennedy was killed in Dallas by a half-crazed and security-slack amateur, while Charles de Gaulle lived on, to retire in peace, and eventually to die in his own home.” (pp. 67-68)

This was why *The Day of the Jackal* did not at first find a publisher. The brazen verisimilitude, it was assumed, would annul the suspense. But *The Day of the Jackal* turned out to be Forsyth’s most famous book, a huge best seller, and resulting in a film by Fred Zimmerman, which made Edward Fox’s reputation in playing the ice-cold and ruthless Jackal. By cheekily daring anyone to deny the suspense, Forsyth has actually cemented his fiction so hard onto the reality of the history of the time, that we actually wonder whether there was a Jackal-type assassination attempt from which Forsyth is drawing. This kind of seamless interweaving of reality and fictional text is the delicious post-modern moment here.

A more overtly autobiographical instance is to be found in the episode of the White Knight, in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Here, given that the inner world of the story is communicated, with its special solipsistic turn, via Alice herself, there is again nothing incongruous or not fully woven into the story. (*En passant*, I note the tantalising curiosity that the White Knight even alludes to his ‘mousetrap’, along with other possible Shakespeare allusions in the story, such as the ‘monstrous crow’.) And yet, to the best of my recollection, there is nothing else in the story that communicates ‘remembrance’, in Shakespeare’s sense, transcending dream, with the same poignancy, and it is natural for us to conclude that there is a delicate and oblique, very tactful, rarified invisible presence of the author himself in this postmodern moment:

“ ‘Of all the strange things that Alice saw in her journey Through The Looking-Glass, this was the one that she always remembered most clearly. Years afterwards she could bring the whole scene back again, as if it had been only yesterday -- the mild blue eyes and kindly smile of the Knight -- the setting sun gleaming through his hair, and shining on his armour in a blaze of light that quite dazzled her -- the horse quietly moving about, with the reins hanging loose on his neck, cropping the grass at her feet -- and the black shadows of the forest behind -- all this she took in like a picture, as, with one hand shading her eyes, she leant against a tree, watching the strange pair, and listening, in a half dream, to the melancholy music of the song.’

So powerful is this remembrance, that it pops up as a reminiscence in Asimov's *The Robots of Dawn*, where, if followed, it leads a very long way down Asimov's very own special solipsistic rabbit hole.

“(In later years, this was what Baley pictured first when thinking of his stay on Aurora. Not the storm. Not even Gladia. It was, rather, the quiet time under the tree, with the green leaves against the blue sky, the mild breeze, the soft sound of animals, and Giskard opposite him with faintly glowing eyes.)”

We now come to the *Hamlet Play within the Play*. As Oxfordians, our attention might first be caught by Hamlet's frenzied rejoicing after the triumph of his device (and there is no reason not to take it as a little nudge, but every reason not to take it as the start of characteristic Oxfordian biographical speculations, which undermine the artistic purpose):

“Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers—if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me—with two Provincial roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?”

However, the deepest mystery within this Play within the Play is the ‘inexplicable dumb show’, as Hamlet has earlier deplored it as being, when talking to the First Player. Of this Wilson shows, correctly I believe, that

1. Hamlet does not intend this, and is extremely angry:

“We shall know by this fellow: *the players cannot keep counsel*; they'll tell all.”

2. That Hamlet has to prevent, by his barbs delivered under the cloak of his ‘antic disposition’, the King, Queen and Polonius from seeing the dumb show, in which he succeeds, and

3. Is greatly relieved when the threatened prologue, which *would* have got the King's attention, turns out only to be ‘a prologue or the posy of a ring’ and explains nothing. Thus the mousetrap can continue, with Hamlet's infinite malice, to be set and sprung. Of this Dover Wilson writes:

“All his game are now in the trap – all except the Queen perhaps, and he can deal with her later. It only remains to begin those lines of his, those precious lines of which he is so proud, and the gin will go off, the jaws will snap, and the imprisoned prey will writhe in the anguish that Hamlet longs to see.”

Of the whole performance he writes:

“Hamlet's brilliant handling of the successive situations in the play scene must be set down to genius not calculation.”

However, Dover Wilson also says:

“But Hamlet's ‘look you’ is a direction, not merely to Ophelia and the court, but also to the audience in the theatre. At this point all eyes turn naturally and inevitably to the Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius group, to see how they will take the ruthless sally. In other words, *beneath Hamlet's purpose there lurks another purpose of which he is completely unconscious, since it is the purpose of his creator, of the showman who is pulling the strings of the greatest puppet-play in all literature.*”

[my italic] It is essential to Shakespeare that his audience should be fully aware of what Claudius is doing at this critical moment, *because it is the moment before the dumb-show appears*. [Wilson's italic] And what is he doing? Polonius and he have been watching Hamlet for several minutes past, but this last sally complicates the matter in dispute between them and drags in the Queen also."

And of Shakespeare's use of the dumb-show he writes:

"Will the King find out the plot too soon? *The vicissitudes of Hamlet's mood are mirrored in theirs*. [the audience, my italic]when the tension is relaxed, the dumb-show has fallen naturally into its place in the scene, the stupidity of the players is fully appreciated, and the episode is so exciting in its doubled suspense that, while taking in the complete identity which the show reveals, the spectators bother no more about it, since all their thoughts are concentrated upon Claudius. Finally, this obsession with Claudius's doings drives still deeper into their minds the fact that he has not seen anything, *so that by building upon his difficulty Shakespeare has completed his triumph over it*. [my italic]"

Shakespeare's infinite malice and dark exultant enjoyment of his mastery parallels Hamlet's. The infinite malice in the play as a whole, the joy in the devastating mastery which he exhibits, in the unfathomable dramatic riches of the dramatic transformation of the saga narratives which he has engineered, are emblematised in the exploitation of the dumb-show, and of the Play within the Play. Shakespeare plays maliciously with us, as Hamlet plays maliciously with Claudius and the rest. Shakespeare's art is Dionysian, even though Hamlet himself is part caught in the toils of Luther and the Geneva Bible. Hamlet, in his multiple cueings of his victims, is the visible parallel and enactment of the invisible mastery of his creator, and so inextricably are they interfused that it is impossible any longer to separate author and text.

©

Heward Wilkinson

September 2018