

Hamlet vs. Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet

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Abstract

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet is ultimately an emanation of *Hamlet*. Most meta-characters, at least in the Western tradition, absorbed in the process of coming-into-consciousness and ensnared by the anxieties that attend on the awareness of mortality, trace their lineage back to Shakespeare's play; *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* simply discloses this relationship. But by divesting themselves of Hamlet's equanimity in the face of mortality and by replacing Shakespeare's heightened language with a howl of grief, the characters in *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* refuse to concede to *Hamlet* the final word.

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet, by David Dalton, Jeremy Beck, and Christopher Patrick Mullen. *Quinnopolis*, NY. Shakespeare Association of America Annual Convention, Philadelphia. April 15, 2006. *Performed by* Jeremy Beck and Christopher Yeatts.

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet ends in death. We watch as one of the play's two buffoons (hereafter "A" and "B") is killed by the other in a flurry of accident and intent, his head plunged into a mop bucket. We sense at this moment that A's death is more elemental than figurative — that is, that it is not simply death enacted, but that something more than theatrical death is at stake. Our cue for this is the response of Buffoon B. Howsoever accountable B may be for the circumstances of A's death, his howl of grief penetrates past the veil of theatricality; his voice achieves an authenticity that is not only meta-theatrical, but para-theatrical. Our two characters have vacillated between their "authentic" personae — shy, curious, innocent — and the sundry characters from *Hamlet* that they inhabit. Our sense has been that the voices of *Hamlet* represent a sort of channeled, scripted voice, whereas the garbled, inarticulate voices of A and B are impulsive and artless. What happens in *Quinnopolis* is of course all scripted, but because we are intimately familiar with *Hamlet*, the

lines spoken from Shakespeare's play have the penumbra of the artificial (these are words we have heard before, and the rudimentary costumes that A and B put on when speaking them reinforce their theatricality), whereas the mutterings and actions of A and B seem spontaneous; that they are crafted in fact to appear as responses to the fragments of *Hamlet* breathes into them a sense of the authentic and lively. Through this *trompe l'oeil* effect, the death of A resonates. B's anguished cry at the loss of his companion, through a trick of the eye, seems to lie not within the drama, but rises as a response to a phenomenon that can only be indicated by drama; it is not the pain represented by theater, but the pain that is elicited by theater.

Many plays are self-aware, exposing and interrogating their own artifice; a subset of such plays are inhabited by characters who are aware, or become aware, of their own artificial status. *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* follows directly within a tradition not simply of meta-theater, but of meta-theater that employs meta-characters. Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1971) are direct antecedents to *Quinnopolis*. In such plays, characters expose a dominant narrative, identified with an unyielding script penned by some distant (possibly omnipotent) author, by creating a counter-narrative spiced with rebellion. These meta-characters, in seeking in one way or another to be self-authoring, seek a sense of direct agency. Yet invariably, they are limed; the harder they try to pull away, the more entangled they become. Their "resistance" is exposed as participation in a larger, even less yielding narrative, one to which they are not only co-opted, but are bound fast. What these meta-characters embody is our own anxiety that we are ourselves subject to a narrative structure — fate, biological determinism, social constructedness — that lies fixed beyond our control. That their defiance ultimately leads to death is for us, however paradoxically, soothing. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Pirandello's Boy, and Buffoon A all meet untimely ends that are perfectly timed. The outward-radiating circles of narrative determinism that threaten to swamp the stage and "real" life regress as the curtain falls. Through these characters, we create ciphers to scramble our own fears of mortality. In decoding them and naming them, we seem to master them, and we feel a sense of relief. It is of course Pyrrhic relief, but we'll take what we can get.

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet is ultimately an emanation of *Hamlet*. Yet most meta-characters, at least in the Western tradition, absorbed in the process of coming-into-consciousness and ensnared in its attendant anxieties, trace their lineage back to *Hamlet*; *Quinnopolis* simply discloses this relationship. The foil for emergent consciousness is always death, both within drama and without. In touching the raw nerve of being and non-being, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* evinces the shift from morality plays to mortality plays. The revenge tragedies from which *Hamlet* evolves stand on the cusp of medieval morality plays. *Mankind* (c.1475; 1975) and *Everyman* (c. 1485; 1993)

demonstrate that in an intelligently-designed universe choice and action lead to consequences. In mansions, and on pageant-wagons, that design unfolds. In early modern revenge tragedies, choice still evokes consequence. These dramas still deal in the currency of morality — right action versus wrong action — even though the gold standard of conduct may in fact be counter-Christian. Transpiring within a distinct cosmic framework (exemplified for instance by the figure of Revenge hovering over the events of *The Spanish Tragedy* [Kyd 1989]), murder is thus distinguished from vengeance. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* takes on the appurtenances of revenge tragedy — ghosts, calls to bloody action, plays-within-plays — yet all these elements that brought to other plays clarity of purpose, for the Prince of Denmark elicit opacity and obfuscation. An uncertain spirit, the shifting allegiances of women, interlocking patterns of dead fathers and vengeful sons mean, for Hamlet, that murder and vengeance are elided. As his objective blurs, so too does his role. And soon roles, acting and performance have become the hallmarks of indeterminacy. Without reliable cues, Hamlet is set adrift in a seemingly un-scripted, un-authored, un-designed world, in a story that will in fact play itself out, but to no apparent end or purpose.

Like other meta-characters, A and B find themselves resisting an intrusive and overbearing narrative. What raises the stakes, however, is that this invasive story is itself a story of how other authorial voices attempt to intrude upon one's autonomy. The Ghost's call to "Remember me" is not simply a call to avenge a murder, but is a reminder that Hamlet is caught within a web of obligations and expectations not of his own making. The gravitational pull of the roles of son, avenger, lover, and hero is mirrored in *Quinnopolis* by A and B, who are drawn into role after role within *Hamlet*. Hamlet, unable/unwilling to fulfill his roles, turns instead to rewriting: he copies as his "word" not the Ghost's commandment, but an apothegm about the capriciousness of acting; he amends the script of *The Murder of Gonzago*, even re-titling the play; he erases the King's commission and revises it to suit his own ends. Hamlet seems unwilling to concede the authorship of his story to another's hand. Yet in attempting to rewrite *Hamlet*, it is Hamlet himself who in effect un-writes the story: design seems to give way to chance, Providence to casual slaughter. When death is dictated by accident, life itself cannot be scanned.

Superficially, *Quinnopolis*, by setting itself against *Hamlet*, can be seen to be resisting the most obvious of authorial voices: the overwhelming centrality of *Hamlet* in Western drama, the dominance of Shakespeare, the canon, the canon-inducing Western tradition itself, and all those things in our culture that bear down on one's sense of individuation and autonomy. Yet ultimately A and B are resisting an ascendant nihilism that was not initiated by *Hamlet*, but which has become its endpoint; they are resisting not Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but Nietzsche's. *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* is concerned not with the desire for individuation, which is what we have by habit and tradition taken

Hamlet to express, but is rather about the overwhelming agony of finding ourselves alone. A and B emerge from their box with a sort of Edenic innocence, and there is something pre-lapsarian about the buffoons' garbled language and exuberant curiosity. In fending off *Hamlet*, they are attempting to keep contained a terrifying sort of knowledge, but the seal has been broken, and death seeps onto the stage. Yet by divesting themselves of Hamlet's equanimity in the face of mortality (he moves over the course of his play from "To be, or not to be" to "Let be."), by replacing Shakespeare's heightened language with a howl of grief, *Quinnopolis* refuses to concede to *Hamlet* the final word: the universe may be ambivalent, but our response to it is not.

References

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