

SHAKESPEARE AS A SATIRIST AND SATIRE IN HAMLET

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Öz

William Shakespeare sadece büyük bir komedi ve trajedi yazarı olarak değil, aynı zamanda büyük bir hiciv ustası olarak ta tanınmaktadır. Klasik dönem hiciv yazarlarından büyük ölçüde etkilenen Shakespeare, yazmış olduğu oyunlarında hiciv sanatını başarıyla uygulamıştır. Kahramanlarının trajik hatalarını, ahmaklıklarını, eksikliklerini dile getirirken keskin bir dil kullanmıştır. Görünüşle gerçek arasındaki zıtlık Shakespeare'in oyunlarının temelini oluşturmaktadır. Bu aynı zamanda hiciv sanatının ilgi alanına girmektedir. Ünlü trajedilerinden biri olan Hamlet adlı oyununda hiciv sanatını başarıyla uygulamıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Hiciv, Kusurlu Ayna, Gerçek.

Bir Hiciv Yazarı Olarak Shakespeare ve Hamlet'teki Hiciv

Abstract

The present analysis is intended to shed some light on Shakespeare as a satirist and his play Hamlet, as a satire. The boundary of the study is confined to the satire represented in the play. The introductory part revolves around the background information about satire, and Shakespeare as a satirist. There is a close relationship between Shakespeare's theme of appearance and reality and satire, since it exploits the difference between appearance and reality as well.

Key Words

Satire, Defective Mirror, Reality.

Introduction

Shakespeare is a brilliant dramatist and a man of the theatre: he is also one of the greatest satirists in the English language. He was influenced by the satiric tradition in the classical period. Satire existed in early classical literature of Greece and Rome. It is one of the most original, challenging forms. Heinsius, in his Dissertation on Horace, defines it in these words:

“Satire is a kind of poetry, without a series of actions, invented for the purging of our minds; in which human vices, ignorance, and errors, and all things besides which are produced from them in every man, are severely rephended; partly dramatically, partly simply, and sometimes in both kinds of speaking, but for the most part figuratively and occultly; consisting, in a low familiar way, chiefly in a sharp and pungent manner of speech, but partly also in a facetious and civil way of jesting, by which either hatred or laughter or indignation is moved.” (qtd. in Guilhamet, 1987: 4)

Its chief target is the irrational impulses concealed behind the masks people wear in society. By arousing the feelings of ridicule, amusement, contempt, hatred, anger, scorn, disgust, or other hostile emotions, satire confronts people with the foolishness and immorality that humans are capable of. As J. A. Cuddon points out, “the satirist is thus a kind of self-appointed guardian of standards, ideals and truth; of moral and as well as aesthetic values. He is a man who takes it upon himself to correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of society and thus to bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desirable and civilised norm. Thus satire is a kind of protest, a sublimation and refinement of anger and indignation.” (Cuddon, 1992: 827-828)

Shakespeare is remarkable especially for his satiric genius, which has several aspects. This is an unusual achievement because only a great master of drama could blend tragic, comic and satiric scenes in such a convincing manner. His plays have always had a serious element in it. They are concerned with some of the follies or weaker aspects of human nature. The emphasis is on the foolishness of people's behaviour, and we are presented with an exaggerated version of human folly. Shakespeare's plays have, at their heart, the appearance and reality theme, which is concerned with self-knowledge, and with how one distinguishes between what a person or situation seems to be, and what it actually is. Shakespeare here enters the sphere of the satire. As remarked by Patrick Murray, "whatever the aim, the classic targets of satire are folly and vice, and its field of operation is human society. The satirist is more fully conscious than most people of the contrast between the way things are and the way they ought to be; he exploits the differences that exist between appearance and reality, between what people officially stand for and how they behave, between words and deeds." (Murray, 1981: 138) Shakespeare's plays, a microcosm of the world, make us think about the complex nature of man and the world we live in. All of his plays have abundant comic, satiric, and grotesque episodes. Hamlet is one of them which has such kind of aspects.

Shakespeare pictures real men and women often in lurid colours, but always with unforgettable clarity in Hamlet. He uses bold and vivid language of his own time. Where other patterns of literature tend sometimes to be formal and remote, Shakespeare is free, easy, and direct in Hamlet. The biting satire scourges the play. It prompts unease and uncertainty in us. There are many kinds of humour, and it performs many functions in Hamlet. Hamlet's humour is properly to be termed wit. Hamlet's wit is a mark of his intellectual superiority. His wit, his power of mind take expression in his attempt to puzzle out the meaning of life and death. To use Northrop Fry's words "two things, then, are essential to satire; one is wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque, or absurd, the other is an object of attack." (Fry, 1957: 224)

Hamlet is a satirist throughout the play, because his world has become "an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature/ Possess it merely." (Shakespeare, 1982: 188) Hamlet's use of satire goes on until Hamlet the tragic hero kills. He uses it skilfully as much a defence against the decay and the corruption of the world as an expression of disillusion and soured idealism. Satire is a natural vehicle which helps him to express his annoyance. Hamlet is worried about his father's death and his mother's "o'er-hasty" marriage. (Shakespeare, 1982: 239) He must hold his tongue, but he cannot:

Polonius: (*aside*) How say you by that? Still harping on my daughter. Yet he knew me not at first; he said I was a fishmonger. he is far gone. and truly in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this. I'll speak to him again.-What do you read my lord?

Hamlet: Words, words, words.

Polonius: What is the matter, my lord?

Hamlet: Between who?

Polonius: I mean the matter that you read, my lord.

Hamlet: Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams- all which, sir though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not so honesty to have it thus set down. For yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am-if like a crab you could go backward.

Polonius: (*aside*) Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.-Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

Hamlet: Into my grave?

Polonius: Indeed, that's out o'th'air. - (*Aside*) How pregnant sometimes he replies are,- a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of. (Shakespeare, 1982: 247-248)

'The method in Hamlet's madness' is a clear indication of his skilful use of satire. In order to use it effectively, he is in dire need of some tools which will help him to express his biting feelings; otherwise he will be driven into real madness. Hamlet's satiric tone does not only function as a defence mechanism, but also provides a good outlet, a means of expressing and releasing his emotions, his feelings, or his ideas. Hamlet's means of satire is words. His words have their sharp edges. They possess intention or aim. The victim of Hamlet's satiric "words, words" is clear. The target is Polonius. Hamlet criticises Polonius, but Polonius, the fool, is unable to understand Hamlet's satiric words. He accepts all satirical insults with gracious patience, because he is too stupid to understand their personal thrust or because he wants to humour the mad Hamlet, who is important to his own political career. Just on the point of understanding the creative role of Hamlet's witty madness, Polonius prudently stops short. As John Synder has pointed out "satire means to criticise, to aim reason at targets; but in the very act of critique, satire wanders its own verbalising way-'Words, words, words.' Were Hamlet here not the complete satirist, Polonius would be certain whether he really is the target. Thus, Hamlet's words strike without the victim's knowing what is hitting him, only that it hits." (Synder, 1991: 95)

Hamlet's satiric tone turns to Ophelia later. He releases on Ophelia all the bitter insulting remarks, meant for his mother. Ophelia is seen as a painted woman trying to gain power over mankind:

Hamlet: I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. (Shakespeare, 1982: 283-284)

As Maurice Charney remarks "Hamlet is preoccupied with the standard topics of anti-feminine satire, so that his description bears little relation to the Ophelia we see on stage. Hamlet's imagination has converted her into the Whore of Babylon who must stand in for all of womankind." (Charney, 1998: 137)

The satiric portraits in the Graveyard scene are more than what we expect from satire, and they have more relevance to an indication of the society of Claudius, Denmark. As the gravedigger turns up skulls, Hamlet identifies them:

Hamlet: That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once. How the knave jowls it to th' ground, as if'twere Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder.

This might be the pate of a politician which this ass now o'ear-offices, one that would circumvent God, might it not?

Horatio: It might, my lord.

Hamlet: Or of a courtier, which could say, 'Good morrow, sweet lord. How dost thou, sweet lord? This might be my lord Such-a-one, that praised my lord Such-a-one's horse when a meant to beg it, might it not?' (Shakespeare, 1982: 380-381)

Hamlet satirises the politician and all the courtly figures. We face a universal pattern, death. In the skulls the gravedigger throws up, he sees quite simply the common destiny of man. He satirises the vanity of life and reminds us of the futility of life. Hamlet continues his comic satiric tone with the lawyer in vanity:

"There's another. Why, may not be the skull of a lawyer? Where his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this mad knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? Hum, this fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. Is this the fine of his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will scarcely lie in this box, and must th'inheritor himself have no more, ha?" (Shakespeare, 1982: 382-383)

Not being operative, the lawyer can no longer take an action of battery against the gravedigger. The dead lawyer can no longer protect himself against the live gravedigger. His successful attempts while he was alive can no longer function now. Here again we face the universal pattern, death and the futility of life. The master of words is accused of using his legal expertise to his own advantage.

At the brink of death, Hamlet tries to free himself from all material encumbrances through satire. He releases himself from all material burdens of life and scorns Claudius and the court of Elsinore. He wants to state that their money oriented material and ambitious world has been in a great vanity. Osric brings Hamlet the challenge to the fencing match, and it offers Hamlet a final opportunity to express his utter contempt for the new style of the new regime, as he makes fun of Osric:

Horatio: This lapwing runs away with the shell on his head.

Hamlet: A did comply with his dug before a sucked it. Thus has he-and many more of the same bevy that I know the drossy age dotes on-only got the tune of the time and, out of an habit of encounter, a kind of yeasty collection, which carries them through and through the most fanned and winnowed opinions; and do but blow them to their trial, the bubbles are out. (Shakespeare, 1982: 405)

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show that Shakespeare was influenced by the satiric tradition of his time. At the beginning of the play the means of satire are Hamlet's satiric 'words' directed to Polonius. Then Hamlet's satiric tone turns to Ophelia on whom Hamlet releases all the bitter insulting remarks meant for his mother. In the graveyard scene, Hamlet satirises the politician and all the

courtly figures facing a universal pattern, death. Lastly, as Hamlet makes fun of Osric, he expresses his utter contempt for the new style of the new regime. Satire is a natural vehicle for his annoyance with things as they are. Shakespeare may be considered a successful satirist who makes us see the follies and faults of the people. His satire blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved. His satiric mirror is a defective mirror, not a reflective mirror.

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