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# Shakespeare Burlesque and the Performing Self

DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER

If you wanted to see a play in London in the 1860s, here were a few of your options: you could see *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*; or you could see *A Thin Slice of Ham let!* (1863), *The Rise and Fall of Richard III, or, A New Front to an Old Dicky* (1868), and *Antony and Cleopatra; or His-tory and Her-story in a Modern Nilo-metre* (1866). The Victorian era saw an explosion of Shakespeare burlesques: irreverent, pun-ridden parodies that spoofed sanctimonious productions of the National Bard. These burlesques, I will suggest, offer more than silly titles, opening up an alternate literary history: a movement away from private consciousness toward collective expression. I will examine Victorian burlesque treatments of Hamlet's soliloquies in particular to show how this popular form upsets a conventional novelistic equation of Shakespearean character with interiority. Instead, Shakespeare burlesques offer another trajectory, substituting collaborative performance for the private self.

A little background on burlesque first, in case you need to brush up your "His-tory and Her-story." The conventional image of the Victorian Shakespeare, if you open any standard survey, is heavy-handed idol worship. The Victorians performed Shakespeare in elaborate, reverential productions with clunky historical sets that often drowned out the words themselves. "Others abide our question. Thou art free," Matthew Arnold opened his 1844 sonnet "Shakespeare," and

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that Victorian Shakespeare burlesques reveal an alternate literary history: a movement away from private, novelistic consciousness toward collaborative performance. Many materialist scholars fault post-Romantic critics for casting Shakespeare as a psychological realist and reading his plays as if they were novels. The burlesque treatment of Hamlet's soliloquies, however, suggests a contrary trajectory, challenging the equation of Shakespearean character with psychological reflection. Rather than inaugurating a tradition of interiority, Hamlet's soliloquies generate social speech in works like Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, inviting audience participation. The burlesque imperative also inflects novels like Dickens's *Great Expectations*, turning the internal debate of the canonical literary self into the public dispute of populist entertainment.

the poet Robert Browning concurred in his 1884 sonnet “The Names”: “Shakespeare!—to such name’s sounding, what succeeds / Fitly as silence?” (1-2; qtd. in Karlin 150). Mute reverence appeared to be the normative Victorian attitude toward the national poet.

Yet against the party line, a more raucous party had begun to rumble. As the worshipful stance that George Bernard Shaw would call “Bardolatry” gained Victorian converts (207), and as the end of the patent theaters’ monopoly on straight plays allowed more theaters to stage official Shakespeare, popular burlesques of the Bard’s most revered plays blossomed in response. Whereas Restoration and eighteenth-century adaptations had remedied Shakespeare’s perceived shortcomings (violation of neoclassical unities, lack of decorum) to furnish new official dramas, Victorian burlesques targeted the officiousness and pomposity of the mainstream versions themselves. The great tragedies elicited the most pious attitudes, and thus were most often parodied—*Hamlet* chief among them. I will mention only *Hamlet Travestie* (1849); *Hamlet! The Ravin’ Prince of Denmark!!* (1866); *Hamlet, or Not Such a Fool as He Looks* (1882); and *Hamlet Revamped: A Travesty Without a Pun* (1879), which sounds highly unlikely, given the burlesque inability to let, say, the Duke of Gloucester go offstage without a snappy joke about cutting a double-Gloucester cheese. In nineteenth-century theatrical parlance, “travesty” and “burlesque” were relatively interchangeable terms. Both terms indicated a ridiculous parody, often by rendering high drama in the low style—so you get, for example, Andrew Halliday’s play called *Romeo and Juliet Travestie: A Burlesque* (1859). The burlesques featured famous soliloquies set to popular songs, lots of topical references, blank verse recast as rhyming couplets, and frequent digs at the famous actor playing Shakespeare straight next door. In his valuable study of nineteenth-century Shakespeare burlesques, Richard Schoch proposes that “burlesque continually shifts its focus from Shakespeare’s texts as dramatic masterpieces to Shakespeare’s texts as objects of canonization” (67). The idea was not so much to laugh at Shakespeare as to laugh at the piety that would stop you from laughing at Shakespeare.

Naturally, the mainstream actors didn’t like being spoofed, and they responded as though their religion were under attack. “It ought to be denounced as sacrilege,” the actor Charles Kean’s biographer raged after *Perdita, or the Royal Milkmaid* (1856) spoofed the grandiose historical pageantry of Kean’s production of *The Winter’s Tale*

(qtd. in Cole 32). W. B. Donne, the mid-Victorian Examiner of Plays, denounced burlesque as an “impure flesh-fly” that “battens upon the imagination of Shakespeare” (87). Charged with sacrilege, the burlesquers retorted that they were saving the Bard from Bardolatry. In *Hamlet! The Ravin’ Prince of Denmark!!*, for example, the “To be or not to be” soliloquy stops dead in its tracks. After trying to rhyme “that is the question” with, predictably, “indigestion,” Hamlet says, “I really can’t go on, for people say / This is the noblest passage of the play!” (107). The reverent silence that Robert Browning summoned for Shakespeare could kill him off.

Victorians were thus engaged in a battle over whether Shakespeare burlesques desecrated a national icon or whether Bardolatry turned Shakespeare into mere canon-fodder, and indeed canonization is usually the context in which these burlesques are interpreted. But I think the burlesque battle is about more than just Shakespeare’s status and what it means to be canonical. What makes the burlesquers’ campaign a particularly important moment in Shakespearean performance history and Victorian dramatic culture, I would like to argue, is the alternate version of literary history it opens up.

One standard way of viewing Shakespeare’s reception in the nineteenth century is to focus on character. The nineteenth century was the great age of character criticism, inaugurated by Romantic critics like William Hazlitt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge who shifted focus away from the neo-classical emphasis on plot and thereby elevated Shakespeare from an example of faulty dramatic construction to the very source of aesthetic criteria. The focus of character criticism, which runs through A. C. Bradley and, in a certain sense, Sigmund Freud as well, was on thought rather than action, with Hamlet as its prime example. (The speculative temperament of the entire nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson proposed in 1845, was “a sort of living Hamlet” [117].) And the dramatic moments when Hamlet’s character was most revealed came in his celebrated soliloquies, particularly “To be or not to be”—speeches that seemed to show his mind at work. Coleridge actually coined the term “Psychological” to describe Shakespeare’s method; he apologized for the neologism, based on the German, but said that English lacked a word to capture the “Philosophy of the Human Mind” that he associated with Shakespeare (32 n.3).

The legacy of this psychological approach to Shakespearean character is one of inwardness, of the increasingly sophisticated,

nuanced representation of the interior self, of “that within which passes show,” as Hamlet says (1.2.85). This often leads critics to trace a trajectory from Hamlet’s soliloquies through free indirect discourse in Jane Austen and George Eliot to stream-of-consciousness in James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Shakespeare, in the critic James Wood’s phrase, becomes “the essential progenitor of the English novel” because he invested characters with the illusion of an autonomous inner life (17).

If you look back at Hamlet’s image before the nineteenth century, you don’t get the same focus on private reflection. Hamlet seems to have been known by early audiences not for moody introspection but for manic action. Several of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, writing a little after *Hamlet*, gave a frantic footman in their play *Eastward Ho* (1605) the name Hamlet, and had another character ask him: “Sfoot, Hamlet; are you mad? Whither run you now?” (3.2.6). Hamlet’s name had become a byword for frenzy, not philosophy. And when characters in Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749) go to see a performance of *Hamlet*—probably based on David Garrick’s celebrated production—they focus not on any soliloquies but on Hamlet’s crazed reaction to the ghost (659). (On stage, Garrick managed to make his hair stand on end by means of a mechanized wig that started up when the ghost appeared [Schoch 53].) It wasn’t until the Romantic reevaluation of Shakespeare that interiority became Hamlet’s hallmark. Inwardness is less an effect of Shakespeare’s influence than a product of later authors’ imaginative reinterpretations; it’s certainly possible that on the Globe’s thrust stage, the actor playing Hamlet would have delivered his soliloquies as rhetorical speeches to the audience, rather than as private meditations for the audience to overhear. So some recent materialist critics have argued that we need to return to a vision of Hamlet embedded in a social context before the nineteenth century locked him inside his head (de Grazia 1-22). I’d argue that we can stick in the nineteenth century and find the same liberation at work, because the story of Hamlet’s inwardness is not just a story that the nineteenth century tells about Shakespeare; it’s also a story that we tell about the nineteenth century.

How can we change the story? When we turn away from mainstream literary history, when we look at the blasphemous genre of burlesque, and in particular the burlesque treatment of Hamlet’s soliloquies, a different movement unfolds. We can start to see a contrary trajectory that challenges the equation of Shakespearean character with

psychological reflection. Instead, burlesque offers a movement away from private novelistic consciousness toward collaborative performance.

Let me illustrate this alternate history by giving an example from one of my favorite burlesques: W. S. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, written in 1874 in response to Henry Irving's celebrated Hamlet at the Lyceum Theatre (about ninety years before Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* [1966]), and first performed in 1891. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* makes a typical meta-theatrical burlesque move to direct our attention away from interior character to dramatic convention. In this burlesque, Hamlet's problem is not that he's crazy; it's that he goes around soliloquizing all the time, driving everyone *else* in Elsinore crazy. You can see how Gilbert is setting up his play in opposition to the mainstream veneration of the soliloquies. You might detect, as well, an echo of a passage from Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), where, in an account of the importance of circumstances over character, the narrator remarks that if Hamlet's father hadn't been killed, Hamlet would have simply married Ophelia and "got through life with a reputation of sanity, notwithstanding many soliloquies" (418).

So the soliloquizing private self is a problem here. In Gilbert's burlesque, Gertrude summons Hamlet's pals to see if they can cure his insufferable habit of speaking in soliloquies. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wait around for a little while, and then when they spot Hamlet looking particularly insane, they know he's got a soliloquy coming on. Their strategy is to frustrate him by interpreting his individual reflections as shared inquiries, anticipating his thoughts so that he doesn't get a chance to utter them. And the minute he launches into "To be or not to be," they get to work. I'm going to read this group soliloquy for you, to give you a feel for the mode, so you'll have to imagine me as HAMLET, as well as ROSENCRANTZ, and as GUILDENSTERN. (In keeping with this paper's shift from solitary, private reflection to collective expression, I've kept the markers of the paper as a script for public performance.)

HAM. To be—or not to be!

ROS. Yes—that's the question—  
Whether he's bravest who will cut his throat  
Rather than suffer all—

GUILD. Or suffer all  
Rather than cut his throat?

HAM. (*Annoyed at interruption, says, "Go away—go away!" then resumes.*)—  
To die—to sleep—

- ROS. It's nothing more—Death is but sleep spun out—  
Why hesitate? (*Offers him a dagger.*)
- GUILD. The only question is  
Between the choice of deaths, which death to choose. (*Offers a revolver.*)
- HAM. (*In great terror.*)—Do take those dreadful things away. They make  
My blood run cold. Go away—go away!  
(*They turn aside. HAMLET resumes.*)—To sleep, perchance to—
- ROS. Dream.
- That's very true. I never dream myself,  
But Guildenstern dreams all night long out loud.
- GUILD. (*Coming down and kneeling.*)—With blushes, sir, I do confess it true!
- HAM. This question, gentlemen, concerns me not.  
(*Resumes.*)—For who would bear the whips and scorns of time—
- ROS. (*As guessing a riddle.*)—Who'd bear the whips and scorns? Now, let me see.  
Who'd bear them, eh?
- GUILD. (*Same business.*)—Who'd bear the scorns of time?
- ROS. (*Correcting him.*)—The whips and scorns.
- GUILD. The whips and scorns, of course.  
(*HAMLET about to protest.*)  
Don't tell us—let us guess—the whips of time?
- HAM. Oh, sirs, this interruption likes us not.  
I pray you give it up.
- ROS. My lord, we do.  
We cannot tell *who* bears these whips and scorns:
- HAM. (*Not heeding them, resumes.*)—But that the dread of something *after* death—
- ROS. That's true—*post mortem* and the coroner—  
*Felo-de-se*—cross roads at twelve p.m.—  
And then the forfeited life policy—  
Exceedingly unpleasant.
- HAM. (*Really angry.*)—Gentlemen,  
It must be patent to the merest dunce  
Three persons can't soliloquize at once! (Gilbert 252-53)

To get the full effect, of course, you'd really want to have three separate people up here soliloquizing together. But I hope at least you can see the way that Gilbert splits the private, individual self that we associate with soliloquy into multiple figures interrupting one another. Hamlet's figurative self-interrogation ("Who would bear the whips and scorns of time?") becomes a literal riddle that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to tease out ("Who'd bear the whips and scorns? Now, let me see. Who'd bear them, eh?")—their whole policy being to keep Hamlet from getting lost in the solipsistic world of psychological character where Coleridge found him.

This is not a one-time phenomenon; it happens again and again in the burlesques. The same mechanism recurs in, for example,

*Hamlet Revamped: A Travesty Without a Pun*, when Hamlet begins “To be or not to be.” Horatio barges in on Hamlet, finds out that he’s dejected and soliloquizing, and then assures him, “You shan’t soliloquize alone!” before leading a men’s chorus in “To be or not to be” sung to the tune of “Three Blind Mice” (Soule 208). So it’s silly, but it’s also significant. These examples depict an interpretive intervention as well as a character intervention. Hamlet’s friends are not only rescuing him from wallowing in introspection; they’re also rescuing the critical tradition from over-valuing Hamlet’s inwardness. Instead of inaugurating the tradition of interiority that we saw earlier, the burlesque treatment of Hamlet’s soliloquy generates social speech, inviting the audience to participate and disagree. Victorian Shakespeare burlesques turn the internal debate of the canonical literary self into the public dispute of populist entertainment.

Is the counter-strain that I’m identifying in burlesque a full-fledged alternate history, or is it just a set of isolated interventions? One way to find out is to see where else the burlesque imperative arises. And, as you may have anticipated, it pops up in the most central locations—in, for example, Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861). You recall that in the middle of that most resolutely interior novel, Pip’s childhood friend, Mr. Wopsle, stages a disastrous, depressingly bad production of *Hamlet*. Pip’s description of this production features precisely the interpretive mechanism I have associated with burlesque: turning private reflection into collective expression (Pollack-Pelzner). Here’s Pip’s account of poor Mr. Wopsle’s attempt at “To be or not to be”:

Whenever that undecided Prince had to ask a question or state a doubt, the public helped him out with it. As for example: on the question whether ’twas nobler in the mind to suffer, some roared yes, and some no, and some inclining to both opinions said “toss up for it;” and quite a Debating Society arose. (194)

Hamlet’s internal debate has become a very literal public dispute, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s intervention, now complete with a “Debating Society”; in the court of burlesque, you can’t soliloquize alone. (This is the Dickens, after all, whose earliest extant writing is a burlesque script for *O’Thello, the Irish Moor of Venice* [Haywood 67–88].) Following the typical burlesque deflation of Bardolatry, Mr. Wopsle’s self-congratulatory performance in what he calls “the highest tragic walk of our National Bard” (175) is constantly tripped up by the audience, precisely because of his high-stepping. So when Wopsle delivers Hamlet’s cautions to the



players, for example, a peanut-gallery wag shouts out: “And don’t *you* do it, neither; you’re a deal worse than *him!*” (195).

In the meta-theatrical world of these spoofs, Hamlet’s play-within-the-play becomes the burlesque play-outside-the-play, a space of rival actors, competing lines, and punctured pieties, where parody offers a powerful strategy for cultural dissent. Burlesque upsets a conventional novelistic equation of Shakespearean character with interiority, substituting collaborative performance for the private self.

But there’s a coda: at the end of the *Hamlet* sequence in *Great Expectations*, when Pip goes home, rather depressed by the ambitious Mr. Wopsle’s spectacular failure, his narrative turns inward to a dream: “Miserably I went to bed, . . . and miserably dreamed that my expectations were all cancelled, and that I had to . . . play Hamlet to Miss Havisham’s Ghost, before twenty thousand people, without knowing twenty words of it” (198). Here Hamlet has become an emblem not of collective expression, but of the private unconscious, of the nocturnal dream world of shame and desire—albeit a private consciousness represented as performing on a stage. It’s easy to remember why Dickens was one of Freud’s favorite authors, since he traced Hamlet deep into the mind’s private recesses as well. Flickering between Wopsle’s burlesque Hamlet of public debate and Pip’s psychological Hamlet of the inner self, we can find the dramatic alternative: to see Shakespeare as both the stuff of our shared critical conversations and such stuff as dreams are made on.

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