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Dickens's Hamlet Burlesque

Midway through Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Pip and a friend attend a spectacularly bad production of *Hamlet*. The costumes are outrageous, the casting implausible, the scenery absurd, and the acting thoroughly unnatural; the audience responds by hurling nuts and insults throughout the performance. Having come to see his old village acquaintance, the churchman-turned-actor Mr. Wopsle, in the leading role, Pip laughs at the inadvertent drollery despite himself, but Dickens's readers have long enjoyed the episode with unalloyed mirth, except for a persistent interpretive confusion about what the episode is doing in the novel. For some critics who acknowledge its thematic function, the badness of Wopsle's acting provides an inauspicious parallel to Pip's own expectations: just as Wopsle hoped to soar out of his humble station through the London theater, only to have "had a drop," in Joe Gargery's phrase (170; ch. 27), so Pip's aspirations to metropolitan grandeur will earn him ridicule and failure. Other critics have discerned parallels between Pip and the character Wopsle portrays: both young men struggling to find their way in the world, haunted by an absent patron, tormented by an unattainable love, stuck in a bad dream of a revenge tragedy.¹ The significance of Wopsle's bad *Hamlet*, then, has been taken either to be that it's bad, or that it's *Hamlet*. Few critics have noted, however, that it's bad and it's *Hamlet*, or, more radically, that it's bad because it's *Hamlet*.

Rather than read this episode for what *Hamlet* can do for *Great Expectations*, I would like to consider what this interlude in *Great Expectations* can do for *Hamlet*. Edward Said has suggested that Dickens's "narrative somehow manages to portray *Hamlet* and *Hamlet* travestied, together, not so much only as montage, but as criticism,

opening the venerated masterpiece to its own vulnerability....” The vulnerability that interests Said, in a section of his work on Derrida, is the general inability to differentiate an original from its copies, a text from the performances it sanctions, for “the text commands and indeed permits, invents, all its misinterpretations and misreadings, which are functions of the text” (198). Though this is a provocative view of literary dissemination, I’m interested in the specific vulnerabilities of *Hamlet* that open it to a performance like Wopsle’s, or rather, what Dickens’s rendering of Wopsle’s travesty reveals about *Hamlet*’s openness to an audience’s derisive laughter.

The fictional layers get tricky here, for we are watching Pip watch an audience watch Wopsle play Hamlet, but this is not an unprecedented scene, for we are used to watching Hamlet watch Claudius watch the Player King play King Hamlet. Dickens’s dramatic setup attunes us to meta-theatrical reflection, and indeed one of the jokes at Wopsle’s ineptitude comes at the prime meta-theatrical moment in *Hamlet*: the prince’s advice to the players. “When [Wopsle as Hamlet] recommended the player not to saw the air thus, the sulky man [in the audience] said, ‘And don’t *you* do it, neither; you’re a deal worse than *him!*’” (195; ch. 31). This peanut-gallery wag turns Hamlet’s line into a self-reflexive gag, making Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* a commentary on Wopsle’s, but Dickens holds a two-way mirror up to nature: Wopsle’s “thus” is Hamlet’s “thus,” itself a performance of what a bad actor would do in the part. The threat of bad acting precedes Wopsle, and even precedes Hamlet; Wopsle inadvertently brings out the burlesque potential of the play.

Dickens is no doubt mocking contemporary theatrical styles in Wopsle’s performance—both the high seriousness of an actor like William Macready, whom

Dickens admired, but whose pompous gestures with a handkerchief in the graveyard scene meant that “it is well known in a constitutional country that Mr. Wopsle could not possibly have returned the skull, after moralizing over it, without dusting his fingers on a white napkin taken from his breast” (195; ch. 31); and the “lamentable ignorance and boobyism” of the amateur productions that Dickens had already savaged in his piece on “Private Theatres” in *Sketches by Boz*. Wopsle fits the booby role, as Boz defined it: a pretentious provincial actor buying the rights to perform a classical lead role (“the soliloquies alone are well worth fifteen shillings”) under an assumed name (Mr. Waldengarver, Pip is startled to learn) with poor props and a Jewish dresser in a cheap theater to a low-class audience that would enjoy a protracted death scene (*Sketches by Boz* 120). But Dickens himself was once such an amateur actor in private theaters, as well as an impoverished clerk who attended them, and there’s as much of the old theater maven in his portrayal of Wopsle as there is Pip-like scorn for his dim origins. Wopsle’s production may be a travesty, but Dickens’s narrative of that production is a burlesque, with *Hamlet* as much its target as Wopsle.²

As Bardolatry gained converts in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, popular burlesques of the Bard’s most revered plays blossomed. The comedies (already rigged for laughs) and the lesser-known works (for which there was little stake in ridicule) were spared, but the great tragedies enjoyed dual careers on the London stages: nearly every time a serious revival opened, a pack of burlesques would nip at its high-stepping heels. *Hamlet* was by far the most parodied Shakespeare play of the nineteenth century, for its status as “the highest tragic walk of our National Bard,” in the terms of Wopsle’s playbill (170; ch. 27), made it ripe for a fall and a prime target for those who

wanted to puncture Bardolaters' inflated rhetoric. Hence *Hamlet Travestie* (1810), *A Thin Slice of Ham let!* (1850), *Hamlet! The Ravin' Prince of Denmark!!* (1866), *Very Little Hamlet* (1884), and even W. S. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (1891, seventy-six years before Stoppard), among others.³ Though a great Bardophile who referred to *Hamlet* in his writing more often than to any other work except the Bible, and an ardent Shakespearean actor who staged *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to raise money for the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Dickens—the English writer most often compared to Shakespeare—participated in the parodic enthusiasm as well, penning and presenting the burlesque *O'Thello* (the Irish moor of Venice) and tweaking *Hamlet* several times in his early novels.⁴ One particular instance is worthy of note: in a chapter of *The Pickwick Papers* titled “Strongly Illustrative of the Position, that the Course of True Love is Not a Railway,” Dickens derails a *Midsummer Night's Dream* burlesque of illicit seduction in a honeysuckle bower onto a *Hamlet* track, wherein a meddling “fat boy” (Gertrude's epithet for her son as well [*Hamlet* 5.2.290]) plays a diminutive Ghost, telling one of the lover's chaperones that he will unfold a tale to make her flesh creep, as well as a budding Claudius, catching her in her garden and shouting a poisonous report in her ear (*Pickwick Papers* ch. 8). No one can calm the other lover's “perturbed spirit” (Dickens's allusion to Hamlet's attempt to calm the Ghost), for the spirit of Shakespeare (who played the Ghost) is off its mark, and will not run smooth.

That Dickens had already thought to stage a *Hamlet* parody in a *Midsummer* frame suggests that we might read Wopsle's butchery of *Hamlet* as an analogue to the mechanical's travesty of *Romeo and Juliet* in their “most lamentable comedy...of Pyramus and Thisbe” (*Midsummer* 1.2.11-12), illustrating the law that Shakespearean

drama repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Wopsle's rowdy audience has taken its cue from Shakespeare's royal spectators: there's something of Hippolyta's "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard" (*Midsommer* 5.1.209), as well as Gertrude's "The lady doth protest too much" (*Hamlet* 3.2.225), in an exasperated gallery rogue's growl after Ophelia's protracted descent into madness: "Now the baby's put to bed let's have supper!" (*Great Expectations* 194; ch. 31). And if pompous Mr. Waldengarver, né Wopsle, lacks the good humor to be Bottom reincarnate, he could claim his descent from Hamlet's tedious old fool. Compelled to compliment Wopsle's performance after the show, Pip suggests that it went "capitally" (196; ch. 31), but with an ear to the source, we can hear that it was a brute part of Wopsle to kill so capital a calf.

The character of Polonius makes not a single appearance in Dickens's recounting of the Wopsle debacle, which is in keeping with the conventions of burlesque: if it's already burlesque, don't mock it. There's no need to fool Polonius to the top of his bent, for he fools himself quite sufficiently; the burlesquer's task is to take the high and bring it low. "From the force of its sentiments, the beauty of its imagery, and above all, the solemnity of its conduct, there is, perhaps, no tragedy in the English language better adapted to receive a burlesque than 'HAMLET,'" writes John Poole, the author of *Hamlet Travestie*, the first and most popular of the nineteenth-century burlesques, in a wonderful inversion: *Hamlet* isn't ripe for laughs because it's so funny—think of Polonius, Osric, the gravedigger, Hamlet's antic disposition and groaning edge—but because it's so serious, so lofty, so great (Poole 4).⁵ Dickens follows Poole's lead, lingering over the scenes in Wopsle's show that most demand greatness, and thereby fall most short: the Ghost's appearance, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Ophelia's mad-

scene and funeral, and Hamlet's last moments, as he "died by inches from the ankles upward" (195; ch. 31).

This is delightfully ridiculous, but not much more ridiculous than the death scene Shakespeare writes—or rather, its ridiculousness emerges from the ridiculousness of the play, which, following the tragic convention that no hero can die except by minute degrees, deals Hamlet his death wound at Act Five, Scene Two, Line 306 (in the Arden) but doesn't silence him until fifty-seven lines later, after Laertes proclaims "Hamlet, thou art slain" (thirteen lines in), Hamlet announces "I am dead, Horatio" (thirty-two lines in), and Hamlet repeats "O, I die, Horatio" (fifty-one lines in). Those notorious Folio "O, o, o, o"s that follow "the rest is silence" are as histrionic as anything Wopsle twitches, and make a sonorous counterpart to Bottom's death throes as Pyramus: "Now die, die, die, die, die" (*Midsummer* 5.1.295)—metrical feet broken down into death by inches. This, I think, is the thrust of Dickens's burlesque: *Hamlet* contains its own *Pyramus and Thisbe*, for Wopsle's production is no more a travesty of *Hamlet* than *Hamlet* is of itself; Wopsle is bad precisely because he's good at being Hamlet.

Nineteenth-century opponents of burlesque saw it as degrading high art, but we should remember that *Hamlet* was a travesty before Shakespeare ever wrote it: the original's original, what scholars call the *Ur-Hamlet*, endures primarily in Thomas Lodge's campy reference to a "ghost which cried so miserably at the Theater, like an oyster-wife, *Hamlet, revenge*."⁶ Shakespeare's *Hamlet* must constantly fend off the threat of badness—not only in the foolish figures of Polonius, which nearly displace the central drama, but even in the play's climactic moment, *The Murder of Gonzago*, which comes close to collapsing into one of the "inexplicable dumb shows" that Hamlet says are the

only things fit for the groundlings (*Hamlet* 3.2.11-12). The absurd props and costumes that so bedevil Wopsle's show are there in the play: Hamlet with "stockings foul'd, / Ungarter'd and down-gyved" (*Hamlet* 2.1.79-80) is only a sartorial step away from his cross-gartered contemporary, the comic melancholic Malvolio. When Wopsle's foppish dresser tells him, "You're out in your reading of Hamlet when you get your legs in profile" (197; ch. 31), the joke that showing off a costume would constitute a "reading" has a historical trajectory: David Garrick's famously naturalistic portrayal of Hamlet's reaction to the Ghost was accomplished by means of a mechanized wig that made his hair appear to stand on end, quite like "quills upon the fretful porpentine" (*Hamlet* 1.5.20).⁷ The artifice of stagecraft is its essence; even Wopsle's hapless Ghost, who has to refer to the "ghostly manuscript round its truncheon" to get out its lines, seems to reflect a play where no one can remember their lines: Hamlet flubs the opening of his "rugged Pyrrhus" set-piece; Polonius forgets the instructions he wants Reynaldo to note down; and the Player King, who, like Wopsle's forgetful actor, will play a representation of Hamlet's father, has to be handed a script of a dozen or sixteen lines in order to act his part.

When David Gervais, in a study of the Shakespearean poetry of *Great Expectations*, wrote that "One fancies that Hamlet meant every bit as much to the Dickens of *Great Expectations* as he did to Mr. Wopsle," he was right, but not for all the right reasons (95). Dickens treats *Hamlet* rather as he treats the Joe who delivers Wopsle's playbill to Pip, holding a hat "like a bird's nest with eggs in it" that he constantly clutches, perches, catches, and replaces (170-72; ch. 27): they are objects of deep affection and admiration, but also unfailing sources of the ridiculous in their strivings for seriousness. As Pip laughs through Wopsle's performance, he can't help but

feel that “there was something decidedly fine in Mr. Wopsle’s elocution”—not because it suited the word to the action, but precisely the opposite: because it was “very unlike any way in which any man in any natural circumstances of life or death ever expressed himself about anything” (195; ch. 31). This is Wopsle’s bad acting, but it is also the latter-day Shakespearean’s dirty secret: for all Shakespeare’s vaunted invention of the human and the alleged naturalness of his blank verse, no human ever talks like Hamlet. P. G. Wodehouse mines endless comedy from this contradiction, since any celebrated phrase from *Hamlet* sounds ridiculous in the context of ordinary speech as it has evolved over the centuries.⁸ But this is the conceit of all drama, which is finest in its unnaturalness, most life-like when most mechanized. Burlesque worships the old father as the old artificer, which, it claims, is what honest Bardolatry would do as well.

A recent burlesque, Mel Brooks’s *The Producers*—a show that seems capable of endlessly travesty itself as it hustles from screen to stage and back again—opens with the specter of John Poole’s song-and-dance number, *Hamlet Travestie*: the producer Max Bialystock has just flopped with a production of “Funny Boy,” a musical comedy version of *Hamlet*. The laughs abound, but “Funny Boy” intimates the show’s twisted premise: that the worst show could be the biggest hit—and, as Brooks has discovered, a real musical about the making of the worst fictitious show could be the biggest hit of all. Whether Wopsle’s “unique performance in the highest tragic walk of our National Bard has lately occasioned so great a sensation in local dramatic circles,” as his playbill proclaims (170; ch. 27), because of the amount of orange-peel hurled at him or because of his fine elocution is a moot point: as he does in his own art, Dickens blurs the boundary between Shakespeare’s highest tragic walk and his lowest comic shuffle.

Michael Slater has suggested that Dickens “really seems to have found [Hamlet] an irresistibly comic character” who roused his “derisive laughter” (Gager 10), but following John Poole, we might note that it’s Hamlet’s majesty that makes the comedy irresistible. What else to do with the greatest play to open with a knock-knock joke: “Who’s there?”

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¹ At the end of Chapter 31, the Wopsle sequence, Pip dreams that he had "to play Hamlet to Miss Havisham's ghost, before twenty thousand people, without knowing twenty words of it" (198). For a summary of the critical responses I have outlined, see George J. Worth, "Mr. Wopsle's Hamlet: 'Something Too Much of This.'" William A. Wilson offers a subtler reading of Hamlet's relation to Pip, contending that Dickens transforms Shakespearean revenge tragedy into an ambiguous Victorian comedy of forgiveness, in "The Magic Circle of Genius: Dickens' Translations of Shakespearean Drama in *Great Expectations*."

² In nineteenth-century theatrical parlance, "travesty" and "burlesque" were relatively interchangeable terms: John Poole's preface to his *Hamlet Travestie*, for example, refers to the work as a "burlesque" (3-4). Both terms indicated a ridiculous parody, often by rendering high drama in the low style. My distinction here is that Wopsle travesties *Hamlet* by violating all its conventions, whereas Dickens burlesques the play by poking fun at the conventions themselves.

³ See Richard W. Schoch, *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century*, for a useful overview of Shakespeare burlesques and their cultural function. Dickens, surprisingly, makes no appearance in Schoch's study as either a Bardolater or a burlesquer.

⁴ Valerie L. Gager has carefully catalogued Dickens's references to Shakespeare in *Shakespeare and Dickens: The Dynamics of Influence*. With an ingenious eye for allusion, Gager argues that Dickens burlesques *Hamlet* in the vegetable-wooing episode in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the fat boy sequence in *The Pickwick Papers*, and the character of Micawber in *David Copperfield*, but oddly does not detect parody in the *Hamlet* scene in *Great Expectations*. She discusses *O'Thello* on pp. 97-101 and a *David Copperfield* twist on the Ghost in *Hamlet* on pp. 226-7.

⁵ For recognition of Hamlet's comic elements, in the non-burlesque sense, see Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* and Maurice Charney, "Hamlet as comedy."

⁶ Thomas Lodge, *Wit's Misery*, 1596, p. 56; quoted in Harold Jenkins's introduction to the Arden *Hamlet* (83). Jenkins points out that "Hamlet, revenge" became a byword in early seventeenth-century drama.

⁷ I am indebted to Richard Schoch for this wisp of theater history (53). Henry Fielding depicts Garrick's performance in a scene in *Tom Jones*, one of Dickens's childhood favorites, that no doubt lay behind Wopsle's performance in *Great Expectations*. The country rube Partridge derides Garrick's acting on the inverted naturalistic grounds that "I could act as well as he myself. I am sure if I had seen a Ghost, I should have looked in the very same Manner, and done just as he did" (659)—if, to be sure, he had a mechanized wig.

⁸ To take but one example from *The Code of the Woosters*: After Bertie expresses doubt over whether to steal a particular silver cow creamer that his aunt has asked him to pinch, Jeeves says: "I quite understand, sir, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, and enterprises of

great pith and moment with this regard their currents turn awry and lose the name of action." Bertie replies: "Exactly! You take the words out of my mouth" (33).