

The Mixture of "High" and "Low" Culture in Hamlet I,i: a Close Reading

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It was Oscar Wilde who best said that the people have to be brought up to the level of art. As with many of his utterances, he probably had Shakespeare in mind. Clearly, Shakespeare's perennial success as a popular playwright has to do with his mastery of levels and his ability to inveigle the common spectator into his worlds, and then, in a sense that I shall demonstrate, up to his people's reactions to those worlds. This paper is based on the assumption that popular culture is not folk culture but low culture elevated to high. And in Shakespeare's case it is mostly his negative capability, his refusal to take political positions or to write in either the overwrought or too plain styles of most of his contemporaries that makes and keeps his art popular. Mostly, it is his negative capability in the sense of empathy that does this. His hearing the way people speak, and his feeling the way they think..which he can reproduce in metaphor and verbal texture.

The line that famously opens Hamlet with a question is more than that. It is a contraction, "Who's there?", that may also be seen to introduce stylistically and therefore tonally the earthbound ordinariness of its characters, the sentries of Elsinore, before elevating their perceptions to a more intellectually ethereal level. To this latter level the characters are forced in this scene by their reactions to events.

I use "high and low culture" as ways of describing the modes and levels of speech, which are of course outward and visible emblems of inner states.

`Sit down awhile,  
And let us once again assail your ears,  
That are so fortified against our story,  
What have have two nights seen

Well, sit we down,  
And let us hear Barnardo speak of this'

is the sort of comradely ordinariness that sets these soldiers apart from other Renaissance theatrical military men. It is part of a technique of levelling that is Shakespeare's favourite way of giving events and human reactions to them a naturalistic perspective that make the tragic or, in this case, supernatural unease, so dramatically and psychologically acceptable. The effect, indeed the popularity of his tragedies is precisely this ability to let in the common man by vacillating between the two matrices on the mind, of sheer physical experience expressed in "low" or "plain" unornamented speech and "high" or "rhetorical" speech and the mental adjustments and reactions to this physical experience. The technique seems to be based on his (or the age's) consciousness of the concept of levelling itself:

Golden lads and lasses must  
Like chimney sweepers come to dust,

which is later in Hamlet put into the mouth of at least Hamlet himself as he juxtaposes the two levels of mankind in "the paragon of animals. . .yet what is this quintessence of dust"

{Cf.Lear's "Pray you Sir, undo this button" as he enters on his death.} It is the inclusive first person plural, too, of "Well, sit we down" that gives this speech its appeal. And then comes

"Last night of all,  
When yond same star that's westward from the pole

Hath made its course t'illumine that part of heaven  
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,  
The bell then beating one---" and its almost blatant

conjuring trick of distracting the audience from the ghost as it makes its entrance through the star trap or from a curtain. As ordinary eyes in the house look up at the sky [the trick obviously does not work quite as well in the modern indoor theatre], the extraordinary comes in.

The very presence of a ghost on a stage is of course "popular culture" at the best of times, in the best of art, and ensures that we are engaged on a mixture of levels. Consider, too, the scholar in his study re-reading Hamlet and experiencing it as a long poem, which is perhaps what the reading of a play by the fireplace is. He does not find the ghost a piece of popular culture but part of the high culture piece of literature he is reading in order to be translated to a higher mental plane than that necessary for putting another log on the fire. He is not tricked by this "last night of all" speech, but takes it as a poetic expression of a reality of which he has sought to partake.

Let us return to the popular stage. Marcellus' brief speech is, although in verse, not "poetic" at all, but prosaic in the sense that its thrust is plain narrative. A good, true, immediate ghost story, broken off ["Peace! Break thee off! See where it comes again!"] by the arrival of the very subject of the tale. See what happens to the language of the scene, the style of utterance, the vocabulary and rhythms, when the supernatural is addressed by the intellectually bravest soldier on the battlements this night. The "low culture" of the scene, with its prosaic earthbound verse, changes to the "high culture" of Horatio's formal salutation and question to the apparition.

What art thou that usurpst this time of night,  
Together with that fair and warlike form  
In which the majesty of buried Denmark  
Did sometimes march? By heaven I charge thee, speak.

It is rhetorically fine, its first line constructed phonetically to be taken at a slow pace, contains a transferred epithet ["majesty of buried Denmark"], and carefully accurate in its metaphor of "usurpst". The height of the utterance is reduced bathetically by the following line that is shared by Marcellus and Barnardo,

It is offended. See it stalks away.

both very ordinary factual statements, which infect Horatio with his totally plain second charge to the departing figure,

Stay! Speak, speak. I charge thee, speak.

All this attempt is concluded with a final and very plain

'Tis gone and will not answer.

The speech pattern employed by Horatio in his address to the ghost is continued in his subsequent talking, but it does not influence the others in the scene, who remain "prosaic" or "low" even while being what might be called "poetic". For instance, when Barnardo says

Thus twice before, and jump at this dead hour  
..with martial stalk hath twice gone by our walk

we do well to remember that "martial stalk" is neither metaphorical nor comparative but simply an adjectival phrase uttered as pretty plain description of a recent event. "Stalk" is a particularly ordinary way to describe the walk of the military apparition, and its qualification "martial" nicely places the

audience on the same level as the sentries as it describes the precise way of walking that the ghost has shown us. The monosyllables of his speech further sink it at the "low" level, making clear that Horatio's life is lived on a less "popular" level than that of his mates. Horatio's level does change physically, however. As Barnardo says,

How now Horatio? You tremble and look pale.

Such a line was as accessible then as it remains now, and was then as "low" as it still is. But Horatio's speech pattern, being a reflection of his thoughts as crafted by the playwright, only occasionally descends to this, as in his next lines he tries, as it were, to "talk plain", and we get a sort of "medium high" series of utterances from him.

"And then it started like a guilty thing  
Upon a fearful summons. I have heard  
The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn,  
Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat  
Awake the god of day, and at his warning,  
Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air,  
Th'extravagant and erring spirit hies  
To his confine; and of the truth herein

he concludes with his characteristic logic,

This present object made probation.

"It faded on the crowing of the cock." Here we have low and ordinary utterance rendered high-class, as it were, by the alliteration, perhaps.

But let us have a look at the various popular cultural references in the Christmas speech by Marcellus that immediately follows. Here we have the low raised high, the folk religion raised in poetic form yet retaining its earthbound magic. It is referred to as a shared belief, of course, with the unquestioned "Our saviour", and the less than superstitious observations about the rare quietude and serenity of Christmastide. . .all introduced by the distancing and also magical, again perhaps because of the alliteration that definitely softens the line in volume, "Some say..." etc. Marcellus' speech pattern reflects this stable man's attitude to his religion, which is probably the only thing that may save him from the dangerous and unknown powers of the present ghost: his sentence structure becomes compound complex as he quietly shares the belief, in the form of his brief tale, that holiness removes the powers of the powers of darkness.

"Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes  
Wherein our saviour's birth is celebrated  
The bird of dawning singeth all night long,  
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,  
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm:  
So hallowed and so gracious is that time.

It is the man's awe that has made him wax poetic and indulge in the periphrasis "bird of dawning" rather than "cock" or "rooster". Rather like the error we make now when we imagine thy, thine and thou to be elevated speech simply because they are found to occur in the bible; "Hallowed be thy Name" no longer conveys the intimacy that the King James translation obviously meant, and God being addressed as Thou by fundamentalist pastors trying to be grand are heard by the Creator, if She has ears, as familiar and not reverential. But here in Marcellus' famous speech we have a soldier's quiet devout formality, raising him high by virtue of a periphrasis.

It is one of the few comforting speeches in the play, deluded though it may well be. "The nights are wholesome" I have always found so, and the cadence of the whispered last line, except in the unlikely event of its being shouted, never fails to put me at dangerous rest.

It is not merely Horatio's speech patterns as part of his character that cause his last speech, the scene's penultimate, to be so baroque in expression. It is, I find, the final indication of the influence the appearance of King Hamlet's ghost has had on him. He has been created by Shakespeare not to express fear, but instead his reaction is shown in this quite other way. The ornament of this speech can, it seems to me, be justified psychologically and so theatrically by the actor by virtue of the very level of Marcellus' Christmas speech. Horatio's mind has been following the end of that speech with empathy, with negative capability. Listen to the lines of Marcellus and Horatio taken together, the former giving the latter its volume and its tone.

"No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,  
So hallowed, and so gracious, is the time.

So have I heard and do in part believe it.  
Bit look, the morn, in russet mantle clad  
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.  
Break we our watch up."

The populace has always craved excellence of expression. How else to they appreciate basketball? Football? And when the movie's over, they don't usually say to themselves "Wasn't that story magnificent?", but "Wasn't Robert De Niro great?" The parts of this scene of Hamlet that are remembered are those that provided some of the transcendence of ordinary reality for which the audience came to the theatre.