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Performing under Surveillance: Performance, Observation and Identity in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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Abstract

This paper examines how observation, power, and identity are depicted in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* using Michel Foucault and Judith Butler's theories of performance, surveillance, and identity. Much of Shakespearean criticism has addressed issues around identity and performance but there has been less exploration of how observation, as a form of social control, has shaped the performance of identity in the early modern theatrical worlds. Foucault's theory of disciplinary surveillance and Judith Butler's theory of performativity will be used to support the argument that through the actions and words of characters in *Hamlet*, shared social and political surveillance play a major role in determining the degree of performance, and therefore identity, of the characters. This article will illustrate how the identities of the characters in this text developed through their interactions with the various forms of social surveillance they encountered. For example, Hamlet is forced to perform madness in front of the surveilling agents at court; thus he must create an identity that meets the standards of those persons watching him. By integrating Foucault and Butler with Shakespeare, this article will provide a valuable insight into the relationship between power, observation, and identity in the selected text.

Keywords: Surveillance, Performance, Identity Formation, Behavior, Disciplinary Control

Introduction

The concept of surveillance during the period of early modern Europe formed a crucial part of the political landscape since surveillance methods, the management of reputations, and the monitoring of society were implemented in order to maintain the power structures of the time. As individuals internalized the observing gaze of others, they adjusted their behavior to conform to social expectations. The effects of these processes can also be examined through the lens of the characters' experiences in *Hamlet*, as each character tries to find his/her own identity in the process of observation or being observed. Thus, considering both historical and cultural contexts of these productions help us understand how social observation affects the actions of individuals and their attitude to themselves.

Many scholars have examined issues around identity, theatricality, and power in the works of Shakespeare. Yet very few studies have analyzed the role that systems of observation/surveillance play in constructing an individual's identity in Shakespeare's works. Literature has often treated performance and power as separate concerns rather than interconnected ones. Accordingly, issues of surveillance and the relationship between observation, power, and identity have not been addressed systematically, resulting in a lack of understanding about how the self is both created and destabilized through multiple forms of observation.

The development of identity and selfhood has formed part of the critique of Shakespearean drama. This article will address several interrelated issues: the notion of the theater as a conceptual space, the role of performance in introducing identity, and the fluidity of identity concept itself. Researchers have examined characters' struggles with the discrepancy between the concept of 'selfhood' and the demands that are placed on them. As Butler (1990) states: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (p. 25). Therefore, performance refers to both acting out identity and its interpretation within the context of power and control procedures. As a result of outside-prompting, identity is unstable and often leads to internal contradictions.

The paper will analyze *Hamlet* as an essential place of interaction between surveillance, performance, and identity. In the play, people learn how identity is formed, challenged, and transformed due to the existence of constant surveillance. The character of Hamlet, pretending to be mad, serves as an example of the collision of the inner self with outer performance created by the political environment of the palace and its observance. It has been noticed by Bloom (1998) that "One of our many perplexities with Hamlet is that we never can be sure when he is acting Hamlet, with or without an antic disposition" (p. 402). The phenomenon of surveillance was one of the critical aspects of political order in the early modern age because of the existence of systems of espionage, reputation

management, and activity control. In the end, human beings internalized this way of looking around them and controlled their behavior. From this historical perspective, Hamlet represents all these processes happening when the character tries to define his identity while observing people around him.

At the same time, even though there are a lot of scholarly materials about identity, performance, and power in the works of Shakespeare, studies concerning surveillance as the way of forming identity are scarce. Existing research usually views one of these aspects and does not consider their relations. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by using Foucault's concepts of surveillance and the theory of performativity proposed by Judith Butler.

Theoretical Framework

Foucault's governmentality approach serves as a simple yet rich lens through which identity formation under conditions of social and political observation can be better understood. According to Michel Foucault, surveillance and disciplinary power shape identity through observation and social order. For Foucault, the constant observation and control of people's actions enables modern societies to govern not only by traditional means but also through the normalization of behavior. Moreover, people are subject to both external surveillance and internalized surveillance; thus, making them responsible for monitoring their own behaviors as they conform to society's expectations. Through this process, individuals go from being externally controlled to being internally controlled and become active participants in their own discipline.

According to Foucault, power does not always operate in an overt manner; there are several forms of power that can be categorized. However, Michel Foucault describes disciplinary power as a pervasive form of power and a general mechanism of social control. The mechanisms that operate under disciplinary power include surveillance, classification, and norming of behaviors. The primary mechanism for fueling the inescapability of disciplinary power is surveillance; people anticipate they are under observation, creating a situation where individuals exercise self-discipline and conform to normative expectations, even when they know they are not being monitored. The panopticon, as an example of the power of observation, demonstrates how individuals internalize the disciplinary gaze. As Foucault (1975/1995) writes,

> He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (pp. 202–203)

Being subjected to such observation to the extent that they regulate themselves accordingly, thus blurring the line between external coercion and internal regulation, as power influences not only actions but also thoughts, motivations, desires, and overall self-conception.

In early-modern court society, the existence of direct social and political surveillance was evident. Courtiers were under the constant gaze of the public, and their social status and reputation depended on how well they performed the expected behavioral norms and how well they managed their public appearances. As More observes, "being under the eyes of all, people are bound either to be performing the usual labor or to be enjoying their leisure in a fashion not without decency" (as cited in Greenblatt, 1980, p. 147). Shakespeare's *Hamlet* also shows this culture of observation, where characters live under both visible and concealed surveillance, with Hamlet serving as a key example, since he must constantly deal with being observed and balance the pressure to conform to social expectations with his own moral and personal desires, often in conflict with public scrutiny. Although this observation is panoramic of most of Shakespeare's works, this observation is most notable in *Hamlet* from the "antic disposition" he puts on to feign madness in order to hide his wish for vengeance.

Foucault's concept of the relationship between observation and surveillance in relation to identity helps explain how these forces shape the self. Characters internalize observation, pre-emptively considering potential judgment and acting according to anticipated expectations. Consequently, identity becomes not only an outward expression of the self but also a negotiation between inner consciousness and social expectation. In such a way, characters from Shakespeare's plays are beheld under the influence of constant supervision but at the same time are able to use self-presentation to present themselves to others. The power of discipline makes its way through both the curtailing of personal actions and the opening up of the possibility of self-presentation made through fulfilling the demands of surveillance.

Judith Butler's notion of identity, which is established and sustained through social practices, can be applied to make research into the development of identity possible. From Butler's perspective, identities do not exist in advance but are made through habitual getting involved in patterned behavior and speech depending on the social norms of behavior. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler's (1993) assertion that "gender is a repetition of norms" (p. 95) challenges our perception of identity as performative. This repetition establishes the illusion of identity as something constant and fixed despite the fact that it focuses on the social situation. Butler (1988) further clarifies: "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (p. 527).

Implicit in Butler's argument is the role of social environments in shaping identity. Individuals are expected to conform to behavioral norms and are often marginalized when

they deviate from them. Performance becomes a means of negotiating the gap between personal self-concept and external expectation. Thus, Claudius justifies his hasty marriage with his sister-in-law through a banquet where his incestuous activity gains public support. In addition to that, repetition reinforces social norms while also allowing individuals to adjust their behavior in response to changing conditions.

Applying Butler's theory to Shakespeare, characters construct identity through performance shaped by social pressure. In *Hamlet*, the prince adopts madness as a strategic performance to conceal his intentions and navigate the political environment of the court. As Neves (2019) asks, "Is Hamlet playacting, or is he actually insane?" (para. 2). This performance functions both as protection and as a means of negotiation, enabling Hamlet to retain a degree of control within a system of surveillance. As David Rosen and Aaron Santesso (2013) state,

> As often in Shakespeare, when a character tries to articulate the split between his own desires and the social role he must play, Iago toys with tropes of interiority and exteriority: in contrast to the 'forms and visages of duty', 'outward action', and 'complement extern', he posits a soul, heart, and self, which only heaven can see and judge. (p. 19)

The similarity between them needs no additional explanation: Hamlet also attempts to cope with the duality of his feelings and what kind of persona he must wear instead. "Only heaven can see and judge" form a strong connection with Hamlet's soliloquies, as well as with the idea of keeping the real self even when under scrutiny.

Performativity theory demonstrates that identity is not something static; it is created through multiple social actions. Identity is shaped by the interactions with the spectators as it is not the same as creating; rather, it is produced again and again. Based on Foucault's concept of internalized observation; we know that somebody is watching us, thus influencing our actions as well as perception of ourselves.

Thus, Foucault and Butler provide complementary approaches in terms of identity development theory. While Foucault observes the effect of external forces on human behavior through observation, Butler is interested in how the identity is shaped while performing under the 'eye' of these forces.

The usage of the integrated framework happens on three levels. First of all, it analyzes the mechanisms of the operation of surveillance as a result of internalization of observation and development of the disciplines afforded by the early modern power structures. Secondly, it investigates the ways of performance of identity through repeated actions determined by social expectations with the help of Butler's performativity. Thirdly, it analyzes the relationship between power and performance as the creator of identity.

To conclude, the synthesis of the works by Foucault and Butler offers a full framework for the analysis of identity in Shakespeare's plays: identity is non-static and

non-uniform since it is formed through the mechanisms of interaction of observation, social expectations, and performance.

Surveillance as a Means of Disciplinary Control

The concept of surveillance present in the Danish court in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be regarded as a reflection of the world already set where the act of monitoring is one of the most important tools used to exercise power politically and socially, as well as for the purpose of one's self-identification. Those exercising power in the court are not simply relying on the older methods of collecting information or force, but on the continuous presence of monitoring and possible reactions of those who are being watched. As Lefait (2013) points out, "Shakespeare often uses surveillance as an allegory of the interaction between watching entities and watched entities within theatrical space" (p. 2). *Hamlet* is an example of such allegory since its complicated structure of observation shows the relationship between theatre spectators and actors.

The character of Claudius, the newly appointed king, plays the most significant role among the people ruling the court and being the most observant one. Claudius knows that there are many people in the court who may have unstable loyalty, thus he is always observing Hamlet in order to understand his intentions relying on the observation of the actor's face and spoken words. The constant watching by Claudius makes Hamlet being more conscious of his behavior. He is to understand how he is perceived by the king. As Lefait (2013) states, "The play defines power as visual" (p. 5), and Claudius is able to maintain this power owing to his ability to watch and be watched.

Claudius is not the only character from the royal court who utilizes observation to control other people as Polonius, who holds the title of lord chamberlain, exercises power by locating the sources of information. Polonius implements an extensive network of spies in order to control others, in particular, when he sends Reynaldo to inspect Laertes in Paris. Speaking to Reynaldo, Polonius says:

> Put on him / What forgeries you please; marry, none so rank / As may dishonour him; take heed of that; / But, sir, such wanton, wild, and usual slips / As are companions noted and most known / To youth and liberty. (Shakespeare, 2015, 2.1.16–21)

Through these lines, it becomes clear that Polonius gives instructions to Reynaldo to investigate and influence Laertes' behavior covertly, disguising it by concern.

He also observes Hamlet and Ophelia's interactions so that he may interpret Hamlet's motives for himself: "I'll loose my daughter to him. ... Be you and I behind an arras then" (Shakespeare, 2015, 2.1.176-177). The actions of Polonius are indicative of the Foucauldian principle that power is exerted through networks of observation and not

through unilateral authority, and that surveillance becomes institutional within society. As Foucault (1975/1995) writes, "The examination is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish" (p. 184). Furthermore, the performance of Polonius' surveillance serves to demonstrate his allegiance to Claudius and to provide himself with an elevated status compared to the other members of the court.

Former friends of Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, help Claudius extend the network of surveillance throughout the Kingdom of Denmark by acting as the king's spies; they are one way in which the pervasive nature of surveillance is highlighted in the play, since Hamlet will always remain under the watchful eye of someone at court. As A.C. Bradley (1904) notes, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been sent for, to cheer him by their company and to worm his secret out of him" (p. 129). Their interactions with Hamlet demonstrate the mutual surveillance and hyper-awareness that characterizes Hamlet's relationship to them, while revealing to him that they are conspiring against him in their interpretation of his actions through their perceived knowledge of how he will respond. This web of watchers at the Queen's court creates a system of control that uses visibility itself as a controlling mechanism. As Foucault (1995) argues, "Visibility is a trap" (p. 200), and "He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (p. 200). This produces a need for Hamlet to create, reposition, and enact elements of his identity in response to this outside observation and to the needs of the king's courtiers. Shakespeare establishes the Prince of Denmark's court as a microcosm of a socially disciplinary-based society in which all actions are assumed to be subject to some form of outside observation, interpretation, or manipulation for political or social ends. The culture of pervasive surveillance found in the Elizabethan court supports the Foucault thesis that individuals internalize observation and self-regulate based on anticipated judgments of society. Hamlet uses his knowledge of the scrutiny of the court to form a strategic method of reducing conflict for himself; he uses his moral judgment as a means of addressing his personal integrity alongside his need to engage in political machinations. The court of Denmark functions as both a performance venue for political drama and a laboratory of self, as Hamlet's identity is continually manipulated, created, and enacted through others' observations of him.

Performance under Surveillance: The Antic Disposition

In compromising situations such as Hamlet's surveillance of the court, he sees the use of the "antic disposition" as essential to his strategy. Hamlet himself makes it very clear when he states that "I perchance shall think meet to put an antic disposition on" (Neves, 2019, para. 3). The concept of "antic disposition" allows Hamlet not only to escape the gaze of those watching him but also helps him to balance his inner conflict.

Analyzing Hamlet's masquerade of madness through the theoretical principles of

Butler's performativity, one can see that it enabled Hamlet to perform the identity and conform to rules established by the society. As Gruenberg (2018) argues, "Both the actor playing Hamlet-character and the Hamlet-character playing Hamlet-actor must make decisions about which of these categories they are performing—particularly with reference to madness—at any point in time" (p. 1). Instead of simply disguising himself, Hamlet strategically engages in a performance in response to what is expected of him by the people around him, and each of Hamlet's gestures, words, and actions constitutes a socially acceptable act, communicating meaning to those who can witness the performance. Butler (1988) reminds us that:

> the act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene... but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (p. 526)

Therefore, in the context of this performance, madness has a performative nature: it enacts a new set of behaviors, alters the social perception of Hamlet's behavior, and enables Hamlet to negotiate the pressures of being under surveillance while maintaining agency to act subversively. The antic disposition indicates a relation between performing madness and observing madness as a type of performance. Hamlet knows he is being observed by Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, so he uses madness to manipulate their gaze and create uncertainty about their ability to interpret his true intentions. As Hamlet tells Guildenstern, "You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, ... do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?" (Shakespeare, 2015, 3.2.372-379). This refusal to be observed proves his tactical portrayal.

In contrast to Hamlet's "antic disposition," which serves as a tactical portrayal that allows the prince to exercise a certain measure of control over the state's spying apparatus, the insanity of Ophelia functions in a different way. As argued by Showalter (1985), Ophelia's pretended madness "dressed in white, decked with fantastical garlands of wildflowers, and her hair loose" (p. 11) became the timeless cultural stereotype of female insanity, used by painters and doctors for ages. This means that the look does not simply observe, but fixes people's identities according to their gender. On the one hand, Hamlet acts mad to refuse to be observed; on the other hand, Ophelia is acted as mad, and her identity is just consumed.

In this way, then, the "antic disposition" demonstrates that identity is not an immutable quality but rather created through social interaction with others and society's conditioning in anticipation with being watched. Thus, Hamlet's madness is a case when Butler's idea of performativity converges with Foucault's concept of surveillance; the disciplinary vision of the court's inhabitants makes Hamlet develop himself based on what the court thinks about him.

Moreover, the "antic disposition" illustrates that identity is prone to constant observation. By demonstrating madness too often, Hamlet creates ambiguity about his identity, making it impossible to conclude whether he is performing or genuinely suffering from an emotional disorder.

As Neves (2019) observes, "Some people argue that Hamlet may have started out sane, but through the very act of pretending to be insane, became insane himself" (para. 4). Yet Neves (2019) also notes, "When Hamlet is alone, he is completely lucid. His soliloquies are full of keen and intelligent observations that would be improbable coming from the mouth of an insane person" (para. 5). Through Hamlet's actions, Shakespeare indicates that performing for an audience alters mental states, suggesting that identity is constructed for the observer and is thus influenced by social and political forces.

The Mousetrap: Reciprocal Surveillance

Shakespeare also explores how identities are both observed and performed through the use of a play-within-the-play: *The Mousetrap*. Hamlet presents this meta-performance to assess Claudius's response so that Hamlet can uncover whether or not Claudius killed King Hamlet. As Hamlet declares, "I'll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks" (Shakespeare, 2015, 2.2.596-601) and "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (Shakespeare, 2015, 2.2.603-604). It demonstrates a reciprocal observational system as Hamlet views Claudius while Claudius watches the play. The audience plays the role of both observer and object. Thus, the audience serves as an example of how communication between two parties is interlinked. According to Bloom (1998), "Hamlet, who is nothing if not critical, converts his mousetrap into Theater of the World" (p. 36).

In terms of the use of power and observation, The Mousetrap exemplifies the panopticism theory. Hamlet acts both as director and actor and exerts control over the stage. Claudius is also being observed. However, he does not take control over Hamlet's perception of him. Shakespeare indicates that communication and observation form the relationship between the two parties. According to Foucault (1975/1995), "Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (p. 194). Lefait (2013) observes that characters in Shakespeare's works pretend to look at each other, but they are "simultaneously subjected to the spectators' gaze" (p. 9). This phenomenon can be illustrated by The Mousetrap. In this play, Hamlet observes Claudius, and the court watches the tragedy. Thus, the theater audience exerts an influence over all participants of the play, and the whole process of watching looks like a system of harmony.

The play-within-a-play illustrates the ways in which identities are formed and communicated. Hamlet orchestrates the performance so that truth can be discerned through watching and Claudius's reactions confirm Hamlet's suspicions. According to Bradley

(1904),

> Hamlet's device proves a triumph far more complete than he had dared to expect. He had thought the King might 'blench', but he does much more. When only six of the 'dozen or sixteen lines' have been spoken he starts to his feet and rushes from the hall (p.131)

Thus, identity is created and conveyed through performance and observation. The meta-play also illustrates the formation of self-identity. Through combining the consciousness of the observers and that of the actor, Hamlet's play reveals how the expected observation can change identity.

As Gruenberg (2018) explains, "The audience, knowing this, is thus impelled by Hamlet's antic disposition to be aware of themselves also as an audience to an audience" (p. 1). Shakespeare demonstrates the interaction between surveillance and performance, illustrating how observation forms the basis for strategic identity construction within a politically tense environment.

Internalized Surveillance and the Fragility of Identity

Hamlet adjusts his behavior to manipulate how Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern perceive him, using internalized observation to protect himself. Internalized surveillance also heightens psychological effects on the observed. Claudius later devastatingly contemplates his committed crime alone, crying out, "O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven" (Shakespeare, 2015, 3.3.40). Hamlet's awareness of expectations adds stress while balancing the act of being himself and acting as someone else. His antic disposition misleads others but simultaneously disrupts his self-perception, demonstrating the fragility of identity under the panoptic gaze. Applying Foucault's concept of disciplinary power to the play, Hamlet's self-regulation illustrates how internalized observation enforces adherence and constructs identity. As Greenblatt (1980) argues, "the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society" (p. 256). The simultaneous effects of surveillance and performativity create an ethical and strategic space for Hamlet. Although reactive, his acts are formed through anticipated observation, producing effects on others while establishing a performative self. Surveillance necessitates new strategies for identity presentation, represented through verbal deception and staged insanity. The dichotomy of existence gives rise to a complicated dynamic of observation, performative action, and identity in early modern literature.

After all, the quintessence of the play lies in the idea that surveillance is necessary for identifying people on many levels. The Danish court acts as an observation-based environment that entails a sound presentation of oneself. Hamlet's pretending to be mad is

a reflection of the nature of identity as performed with help of repeated observation and that allows for satisfying the position he occupies. The play reinforces the mentioned idea due to the constant observation of each character by another. Surveillance shows how fragile identity is in complex interaction of external power, public expectations, and one's own performance.

According to Bradley (1904), "There is an outward conflict of persons and groups, there is also a conflict of forces in the hero's soul" (p. 34). This statement refers to the duality of Hamlet's struggle in which not only the external watchdogs such as Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern play their part but also the inner conflict in the hero's mind prompts him to undergo the experience of suffering. The happenings around Hamlet influence the dialogue with inside as well as outside that makes Hamlet feel what he feels. The examination of how visibility works externally and internally goes hand in hand with the observation made by Halio (2012) that "reputation is directly related to one's identity, to how others see us and recognize us for who and what we are" (p. 41). What is meant is that Hamlet's identity cannot be dissociated from the way the members of the court view him. This transformation of Hamlet occurs because of the changing attitude of Claudius and Polonius. That is, Hamlet aims to influence these opinions on him with the help of the "antic disposition", i.e. he would like to direct how people perceive him.

Conclusion

The objective of this research is to analyze how Shakespeare's *Hamlet* generates identity by means of the co-operation of perception, enactment, and authority. Through viewing the play with the help of Foucault's concept of surveillance and Butler's theory of performativity it can be shown that there is no stable or inherent identity present in Hamlet. His identity is created consistently in the light of the social, political, and authoritative types of observation happening around him, and similarly depending on the strategies adopted.

The Danish court operates as a system of complete surveillance. Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern create a network of observation that forces Hamlet to take the positions of the being observed. Thus, Hamlet's "antic disposition" becomes both a protective means against being observed and an instrument of performance. At the same time, Butler's definition of identity as a series of performances is demonstrated in Hamlet's pretended insanity, while Foucault's conception of self-regulation proves that this performance becomes too disturbing psychologically. The situation of constant observation leads to the process of internal self-observation, producing a psychological stress that cannot let Hamlet distinguish between the true self and the created one.

The findings of our research give rise to an essential conclusion: not only do we need to acknowledge that someone is watching us, but also that at the same time, someone

is creating us and that performance equals experience. The subject of Hamlet cannot be regarded as something that can be found as it is changing all the time. The character of the Prince of Denmark exists through being an observer and an observed performer and spectator.

The importance of this research comes from *Hamlet,* but it does not end with it. Today we can also learn a great deal of practical things about the identity issues of the characters of early modern literature. Thus, we come to the conclusion that the identity now can be studied as a dynamic phenomenon, but not a static one, as it was before. Using Foucault's theory and Judith Butler's theory and analyzing Shakespeare's play, it has been shown that it is necessary to study concepts of selfhood in early modern literature.

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