

3-1-2011

Oral Narrative and Disembodied Language in Othello and Hamlet

Michael Ferut
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/studentawards>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ferut, Michael, "Oral Narrative and Disembodied Language in Othello and Hamlet" (2011). *Gateway Prize for Excellent Writing*. Paper 1.
<http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/studentawards/1>

This Gateway Prize for Excellent Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the Academic Programs and Advising at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gateway Prize for Excellent Writing by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Oral Narrative and Disembodied Language in *Othello* and *Hamlet*

An unattached voice, like a crinkle in the night, unsettles the mind. Language without a speaker hangs cold in the air and rings in the ears. Even after a watch with “not a mouse stirring,” Francisco opens *Hamlet* with demand for a connection between sound and body. Bernardo arrives to change the guard “most carefully upon [his] hour” and asks Francisco a simple question, “Who’s there?” However, Francisco cannot see Bernardo and this disembodied voice startles him, forcing him into defensive speech: “Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself” (3). Only this reconnection of words with speaker can soothe Bernardo’s brief paranoia.

In this opening scene, Shakespeare offers an insight into the nature of dramatic narratives. It is a form which relies on the connection between voices and speakers, language and bodies. Just like Francisco, the audience expects specific actors and specific words to be inextricably linked. While this link is characteristic of drama, it is also somewhat unique. In many types of fiction, a solitary voice represents and speaks for several bodies. Such is the case with oral storytelling. In many of his dramas, Shakespeare breaks from strict dramatic form into scenes that more closely resemble oral narratives. Both in *Hamlet* as well as in *Othello*, individual characters tell oral narratives in which their singular voice relates the actions of several bodies rather than having several bodies act out the narrative with the help of their individual voices. While this could be seen merely as a device for plot condensation, Shakespeare often uses oral narratives to relate crucial moments of the plot. Through the use of oral storytelling within dramatic action, Shakespeare detaches language from specific speakers and physical bodies in order to unsettle the minds of both the characters and the audience. In *Hamlet* and *Othello*, Shakespeare’s movement from dramatic action to oral storytelling and his detaching of language from bodies indicates a movement towards and transition into a state of confusion, transformation, and ultimately death.

Audiences’ reception and interpretation of language differs between dramatic narrative and oral narratives. A drama is presented through the actions of an actor or actors playing out their characters’ role(s) in the narrative. When an audience interprets a drama, the actors’ physical bodies are semantically intertwined with actors’ language. As such, meaning is embodied, or dependent upon the physicality of the actors. Shakespeare relates through the presentation of “The Mousetrap” and Hamlet’s discussion of drama with the Players. Hamlet urges the Players to:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action... for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure (70).

In this conception of drama, the word and action of the body speaking that word are almost interchangeable. In acting, the language of the actor and the physical mark, or “the form and pressure” of the language must co-align to reveal “the very age and the body of the time.” In other words, drama transforms the abstract, non-physical concepts of age and time (whether interpreted as indications of temporality or in the sense of the spirit of the era, or *zeitgeist*,) into physical bodies.¹ Similarly for Hamlet, he believes that drama’s physicality will create a

physical mark in or upon the audience. Because “guilty creatures sitting at a play/ Have by the very cunning of the scene/ Been struck so to the soul that presently/ They have proclaimed their malefactions,” Hamlet believes he will be able to “catch the conscience of the King” (62). The language and action of the drama transforms the non-physical into the physical.ⁱⁱ The king’s conscience will be manifested physically, as will Hamlet’s suspicions with this new physical evidence. This ability to embody, or give physical form to language and non-physical concepts is unique to dramatic narratives.

Oral storytelling, on the other hand, presents narratives in which language exists as ephemeral, non-physical, and not embodied. In *Hamlet* and *Othello*, Shakespeare uses storytelling in the midst of dramatic action to demarcate and describe separations from physical reality. That is to say, in *Othello*, Shakespeare uses storytelling in order to call into question and completely end the correspondence between the non-physical and the physical. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses oral storytelling to illustrate the transition between physical states, the spaces in between existence and non-existence. Furthermore, oral storytelling, as opposed to dramatic narrative, can introduce these processes because language becomes removed from the actors’ bodies.

Throughout *Othello*, Shakespeare uses oral storytelling in the place of dramatic narrative in order to indicate events that will never occur physically before the audience or at all. The first notable instance of oral storytelling in the play occurs when Brabantio forces Othello to explain his relationship with Desdemona to the Duke of Venice. In an immediate sense, Shakespeare uses Othello’s story here to introduce marvels and grotesques knowable to his English audience only through language, “...anters vast and deserts idle... cannibals that each other eat,/ The anthorpophagi, and mens whose heads/ Do grow beneath their shoulders” (21). In a less immediate sense, Othello’s tale gives the audience a linguistic account of his and Desdemona’s mutual love, which is itself based upon language and storytelling. Othello relates, “She... bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,/ I should but teach him how to tell my story,/ And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake. She loved me for the dangers I had passed, And I loved her that she did pity them” (22). Shakespeare describes Othello and Desdemona’s love as dependent upon oral storytelling. Even if only inspired by a moment of shyness, Desdemona detaches her love from Othello himself and rather claims it is the stories which he relates that have filled her heart. However, throughout the rest of the play, evidence of their love remains almost exclusively within the realm of language. With their first night on Cyprus interrupted by the fight between Cassio and Roderigo and their relationship thereafter scarred by the interventions of Iago, the physical relationship between Othello and Desdemona may never have occurred at all. Shakespeare certainly does not offer the audience any confirmation. Because Shakespeare first presents the love of Othello and Desdemona through oral storytelling rather than dramatic action (as it is in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example,) the connection between the non-physical language of the narrative and the actors’ physical bodies is lost. Or rather, Othello and Desdemona never embody their romantic language in the play.

This inability to connect non-physical language and physical reality continues throughout the play largely as a result of Iago’s schemes. Shakespeare presents Iago not only as a dramatic character but also as an oral storyteller and constructor of fictions. Iago both constructs stories to other characters and relates the events to the audience as if he were a commentator. Throughout the play, Iago deceives the other characters into replacing his words with their physical realities. While listening to Iago’s advice about Desdemona, Othello demands, “Make me to see’t; or at

the least so prove it/ That the probation bear no hinge or loop/ To hang a doubt on – or woe upon thy life!” (79) Similar to Francisco in the opening scene of *Hamlet*, Othello expresses the absolute desire to link non-physical language with physical evidence. Even Othello’s understanding of doubt is expressed as that which has a physical weight, something to be hung upon the similarly strange physical form of Iago’s probation. For Othello, everything remains uncertain and unsettled until he can make a connection to the physical.

However, once Othello makes this connection it is within the false reality of Iago’s fictions, causing him to move even further away from the reality of his actual situation. Upon hearing from Iago that Cassio lied with Desdemona, lied on her, or “what you will,” Othello can no longer attach language to reality:

Lie with her? Lie on her? – We say lie on her when they belie her. – Lie with her!
Zounds, that’s fulsome. – Handkerchief – confessions – handkerchief! – To confess, and be hanged for this labor – first to be hanged, and then to confess! I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus. – Pish! Noses, ears, and lips? (94-95)

Othello’s sense of temporality and causality have been compromised by his inability to distinguish what Iago has told him in his narratives of deception and jealousy from what he can deduce from his physical surroundings. He equates the physical presence of the handkerchief to the linguistic act of confession and continues further, claiming that this affair must be reality as mere words cannot have such a physical effect upon him. Now, instead of looking for the physical correspondence to language, Othello presupposes that the physically observable is confirmed in language. Later in the scene, while watching Cassio and Iago interact, Othello heeds only the visible and pays no attention to the spoken language. Even though it is rather explicit that Cassio and Iago are speaking about Bianca, Othello fails to realize this as he only notices the physical movements of Cassio, such as his laughter, and the presence of the handkerchief. Instead of being able to link spoken language in Iago’s oral narratives to visible and physically knowable reality, Othello becomes unable to connect the physical back to the language being spoken.

The failure to connect language with the physical bodies in *Hamlet* resembles most closely with the audience’s inability to connect the spoken testaments of Othello and Desdemona’s love to the physical certainty of their love. That is to say, Shakespeare uses oral narratives in lieu of dramatic action in *Hamlet* as a means to detach what is spoken from what can be observable in reality. In *Othello*, this detachment moves characters into a state of un-becomingⁱⁱⁱ and sends them steadily towards death. The inability to connect the language of love to the physical act or confirmation of love results in the metaphorical death of Othello and Desdemona’s romance. The inability to access reality amidst Iago’s deceptive narrative resulted in the literal death of Desdemona, Othello, and others. However, in *Hamlet*, the detachment of language from physical bodies describes a movement into un-becoming and death rather than prescribes such a movement. The three most notable uses of oral narrative within the dramatic action are the ghost’s narrative of his own death, Gertrude’s narrative of Ophelia’s death, and Hamlet’s narrative of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s deaths.

In these three narratives, Shakespeare emphasizes the manner in which people transition into death through his detachment of language from physical bodies. The ghost’s narrative begins with an assertion of its disconnection from both time and space: “I am thy father’s spirit,/ doomed for a certain time to walk the night,/ And for the day confined to fast in fires” (30). The ghost exists in a liminal state, both in temporality and in physical form. It remains “to walk the

night” for an unspecified amount of time as a non-physical spirit, and exists paradoxically in the day as fire, confined between the solid and gaseous states. Both Hamlet and the audience cannot attach the ghost’s language to a physical body, only to an uncertain sort of spirit. This break into oral narrative to describe this transitory state is similar with the narratives of the deaths of Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. Furthermore, this break becomes a necessity, as characters can now only talk *about* the dead and the audience can no longer re-attach any language or emotion to a corresponding physical body.

The use of oral narrative in describing the transition into death and un-becoming allows Shakespeare to illustrate states of being that would be impossible to present in a dramatic form. Similar to the ghost’s description of its physical state, Gertrude’s brief narrative of Ophelia’s death presents a physically impossible event. That is, a peaceful, serene drowning: “Her clothes spread wide,/ And mermaidlike awhile they bore her up,/ Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,/ As one incapable of her own distress,/ Or like a creature native and indued/ Unto that element” (121). Gertrude describes Ophelia’s death not as if it were a drowning at all, but a transition into another state of being. Ophelia transforms in the description from a creature of the land into a creature of water, “native and indued unto that element.” Similarly, Ophelia transforms from the physically knowable existence as a woman into the imaginary existence of a mermaid. Hamlet’s narrative of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern emphasizes a similar state of limbo or transition between two states in the justification of their deaths. In their case, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are described as existing between the state of cold political reality and fanciful fiction. Describing his revision of a state commission, Hamlet says, “Being thus benetted round with villainies/ Or I could make a prologue to my brains,/ They had begun the play. I sat me down,/ Devised a new commission, wrote it fair” (134). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cease to be friends, or even people close to Hamlet’s conscience, and instead become the fictional characters of Hamlet’s death-bound production. In these moments, language completely splits from physical reality not only for the effect, but because it must split. The form of Ophelia’s body peacefully transitioning “mermaidlike” into another element as well as the metaphorical description of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern straddling the line between truth and fiction, reality and imaginary cannot be represented as physical, embodied occurrences. As such, Shakespeare’s oral narrative disembodies the language used in order to describe such transitory states.

While the majority of Shakespeare’s plays rely on dramatic action and the dramatic embodiment of language within multiple actors, he uses oral narrative in order to illustrate transitory states in which language becomes disembodied. For Othello and Desdemona, the disembodiment of the language results in the failure to culminate their love in a physical or sexual manner. Within this confusion of correspondence between the language of love and the bodily actions of love, Iago completely disables Othello’s ability to ever successfully match words to bodies and objects. As a result, the disembodiment of language leads to both metaphorical and literal deaths. The oral narratives of *Hamlet* work similarly, but instead of foreshadowing a state of confusion onto death, they communicate a state of transition into death. Oral narratives, in other words, attempt to work through and understand what cannot be understood in dramatic action. By condensing the multiple voices of actors into a singular narrative voice, Shakespeare’s oral narratives represent what happens when people lose control of language, when people can no longer speak or listen effectively, and how miscommunication and misinterpretation can quickly result in tragedy.

Works Cited:

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragical History of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*. Ed. A. R. Braunmuller. New York: Penguin, 2001.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragical History of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*. Ed. A. R. Braunmuller. New York: Penguin, 2001.

ⁱ While Hamlet advocates for these neoclassical ideals of acting, it has been noted that his character is not in the least a model for neoclassicism. However, this distinction is drawn on the basis of style and method of acting. So while Hamlet's actions are not restrained and subdued (as they should be if they were to be deemed neoclassical,) the idea that words and actions, and thus words and bodies should be linked is still supported in the rest of the text.

ⁱⁱ This plan is not completed curiously enough when Hamlet impedes upon the dramatic action with a blunt statement of non-dramatic narrative. When Hamlet reveals how the events of the play and how it will end, the dramatic production is stopped.

ⁱⁱⁱ Throughout this essay, "un-becoming" is not used in the traditional sense to indicate that which is unfashionable, rather in a more literal sense. "Un-becoming" indicates a cessation of the processes of being. While Shakespeare describes some of his characters as transitioning into other states of being (Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern are prime examples,) these characters become forever stuck within these transitory states and never become anything else.