

Wordplay in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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Hamlet's very first lines can be read as instances of wordplay:

King: But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—
Hamlet: A little more than kin, and less than kind.
King: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
Hamlet: Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun. (1.2.64-67)

Editors unanimously consider Hamlet's second line to be a pun based on the homophones "sun" and "son." Jenkins calls it "an obvious pun" (435) and points out that Q2's spelling "in the sonne" supports this view. Dover Wilson and Thompson / Taylor draw attention to the supposed pun by spelling Hamlet's line "I am too much in the 'son.'" "

This example from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* shows that "the economy of puns" (Redfern 9) can help to portray dramatic characters. Hamlet is a player, a character who excels in the use of language from the start. And he does definitely not like Claudius.

However, this particular pun does seem a little strained. Hamlet's line is not the immediate response to Claudius's use of the word "son" and can also be read as a reaction to the imagery used by Claudius in the preceding line. Moreover, the phrase "to be in the sun" does not evoke the connection with "son" right away.

In my talk I will use Hamlet's line as a starting point to address the question of how wordplay as means of characterization works in drama. After all, the fact that the play's editors resort to spelling to underline the nature of this line might suggest that this pun works better on the page than on the stage. My talk will also analyze how wordplay works on different levels of communication in drama. Are we, the audience, sure this is a pun? Can Claudius be sure this is a pun, and thus a concealed insult? How does this change our view of Hamlet as a character?

References

- Dover Wilson, John (ed.) (1934). *Hamlet*. By William Shakespeare. Cambridge, CUP.
Redfern, Walter (1984). *Puns*. Oxford, Blackwell.
Shakespeare, William (1982). *Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London, Methuen.
Thompson, Ann and Neil Taylor (eds.) (2006). *Hamlet*. By William Shakespeare. London, Cengage Learning.