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Music, Shakespeare, and Redefined Catharsis

Aristotle used catharsis as a concept within Greek tragedy to define the outcomes of “true tragedy” on a spectator in his treatise *Poetics* (Britannica, Catharsis). Of catharsis, Aristotle said that “tragedy had to evoke both pity and fear in order to ‘purge’ the emotions of the spectators” (Ospovat, 210). As spectators, we experience this type of catharsis as we watch Shakespearean tragedies. Shakespeare is able to take people’s difficult emotions and put them into words, allowing a sense of relief within his audience. However, as we look through a modern-day lens, we can see how the experience of catharsis is redefined. Thomas Rist wrote “the mimesis between the play and audience [...] encourages the audience to see the staged purgations as their own” (141). Shakespeare is inviting his audience to be a part of his plays, become immersed in the spectacle, and to address and face the emotions that are being shared by his characters. We are better able to understand this redefined catharsis in Shakespeare as we relate it to modern-day music. When we listen to music, watch music videos, and attend concerts of contemporary music we experience catharsis as we are invited to tackle the emotions of the musician and further relate them to ourselves and our own lives. While Aristotle related catharsis to be brought on by pity and fear, we redefine catharsis when we immerse ourselves into the spectacle of Shakespeare or modern-day music, causing a release of emotion and expanding catharsis beyond tragedy.

A feeling that many experience but have a hard time finding the words for is depression. That is why many people have an affinity for the media that expresses the feeling of sadness. *The Smiths*, Picasso's *The Old Guitarist*, "Mr. Jones" by *The Counting Crows*, *Les Miserables* (the book and the musical), anything written by John Green: all sad things that are adored because they address and relate to their audience through the emotion of sadness. By doing so, the media can become a therapist for its audience. Kasey Colligan talks about this idea, specifically about music, when he discusses the benefits that music therapy has as a person is able to relate to and feel the music because "Music provides both auditory and tactile stimulation. Music is a means of self-expression. Music is a motivator and distraction. Music is safe; familiar styles of music will always follow our expectations, and eventually resolve to a nice-sounding ending." A great example of this is found in *Billboard's* number 1 album holder, Billie Eilish. Specifically, we see this in her song "Idontwannabeyouanymore" as she says, "Tell the mirror what you know she's heard before / I don't wanna be you anymore." I shared this song with a friend of mine who suffers from depression, has had suicidal thoughts, and has also attempted suicide before. This friend of mine made an attempt to help me understand the thoughts of one of my roommates who recently attempted suicide but was unable to find words that truly capture those thoughts. After we listened to this song together, she said, "Oh my gosh! That's it! When you're in that state of mind, you just don't want to BE anymore, so not being seems like the better option." In this song, Eilish puts words to the feelings of deep depression for which others have not been able to voice.

We are able to relate this to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, particularly, the famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy. At this point in the play, we have witnessed Hamlet find out about his father's death, speak to his father's ghost, discover it was his uncle who killed his father, and then

witness the marriage between the murderer and his mother. Also, Hamlet has begun to act mad in order to make sure that no one knows that Hamlet suspects his uncle, Claudius of murder.

However, when one takes on a new personality, it can send them spiraling into an identity crisis which Hamlet experiences as he obsesses over avenging his role model, his father. Witnessing Hamlet have these experiences that make him vulnerable is what makes spectators more inclined to connect with him as he contemplates suicide saying:

To be or not to be, that is the question:
 Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
 And, by opposing, end them (3.1.57-61).

The audience feels those arrows jut into them and a release as, again, words become available for emotions we have felt. Furthermore, Shakespeare and Eilish relate in form, giving rhythm to the lines by writing in verse. Eilish even provides a rhythm to her lyrics as she writes in iambic pentameter, like Shakespeare. By writing in this form, it makes listening to and reading the lines much easier for the audience. Also, by offering this ease, Shakespeare and Eilish provide a way for their audiences to simply focus on the words and the emotions of those words. Additionally, looking at the diction of these two works, the choice of the word “be” is an interesting one as it seems to be a softer word for “exist.” However, if Hamlet were to come out and say, “To live or to die, that is the question,” people would be turned off by that as it seems almost too direct. It is this word choice of “be” that allows us as the audience to stay with each respective author as they explore these dark thoughts, and, again, as they “encourage the audience to see the staged purgations as their own” (Rist, 141).

Not only do we experience catharsis through the listening of music or reading of Shakespeare, but we also experience it through watching the performance of such. Mats Malm said that “The emotions are instrumental, they are part of the physical performance and verbal figures” (274). Emotions play a huge role in any performance as the performer uses their abilities to appeal to the audience. In this same article, Malm references Quintilian, using his quote that talks about using emotion to possibly sway an audience. Quintilian says, “For as soon as they begin to be angry or to feel favourably disposed, to hate or to pity, they fancy that it is now their own case that is being pleaded” (274). Quintilian is speaking of the use of pathos in an argument for one’s own gain, but this use of emotion also applies to the performance of Shakespeare and modern-day music because these performers are using these emotions to relate and invite their audience into their work. For example, if we look at Eilish’s music video for the aforementioned “Idontwannabeyouanymore” and Kenneth Branagh’s adaptation of *Hamlet*, specifically the “to be or not to be” soliloquy, we see how the performance aspect really contributes to our own cathartic moment.



Figure 1



Figure 2

In both of these performances, the musician and the actor are looking in the mirror as they give their speeches; they are directly addressing themselves as they express some of their darkest thoughts. This is a very powerful move. Gertrude Morin says in her article “Depression

and Negative Thinking: A Cognitive Approach to ‘Hamlet’” that “isolation and powerlessness are central factors in [Hamlet’s] depression” (3). This is seen through Branagh’s performance as he physically separates himself from the others having what he thinks is alone time to discuss his feelings. In fact, seeing both of these performers in the mirror, talking to themselves, allows the audience to physically see the isolation that Hamlet and Eilish are feeling in these thoughts and emotions. By seeing that, spectators are able to relate that isolation to themselves and see how it affects them in their own thoughts and emotions. Also, in both of these performances, we see the performers making moves to take up more space in the mirror. For example, we see Branagh approach the mirror as he says the speech, taking up more space and further signaling his isolation. Likewise, Eilish takes up space in her video by dancing and leaning towards the mirror accomplishing that same feeling of isolation. Furthermore, the cinematography of these two adds to the spatial recognition of the videos. For example, when Eilish sings the words “I don’t wanna be you, anymore” at the very end of the song, the camera cuts to a close up of Eilish pointing to her reflection and making a face of disgust at herself really driving the meaning behind the lyrics home.

The juxtaposition of the physical lightness that surrounds these dark thoughts is another interesting aspect of these performances. In a blog post from theatretofilmadaptation entitled “Olivier and Branagh’s Hamlet” the author says that the bright lighting and scenery contrasts Hamlet’s dark clothing reflecting “Hamlet’s sense of emotional starkness and state of isolation.” This does not only relate to the darkness of clothing, but to the thoughts that are being expressed as well. As mentioned before, the audience can feel the isolation that comes with these thoughts and feelings. However, surrounding the performer with bright-white colors and backdrops further isolates them and, in turn, their audience as they experience the performance. This is

because the brightness is associated with well-being, and therefore gives the sense that all is well around this person who is expressing signs of someone who is not well.

One of the most important parts of catharsis comes from the release that occurs from experiencing catharsis. Kirill Ospovat agrees with this statement as he writes about Aristotle's own view of purgation when he writes:

Aristotle suggested that the sight of another's undeserved ruin is beneficial as it evokes catharsis, a 'purgation of the passions'—which, in Dacier's words, inspires spectators 'to make themselves better' (214).

Catharsis is meant to be experienced not simply to relate to someone else and their feelings, but to be relieved of those feelings. We catch a glimpse of this in a statement within *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* in which it is written that "Shakespeare seems to be released by his dry dependence on his sceptical source into a kind of free flight of language." While this is talking about the language used by Shakespeare, it can be related back to this idea of catharsis as we see that Shakespeare searched for and wanted that feeling of release in his own writing. So, because he writes in this way, it makes sense that Shakespeare would want his audience to have that same feeling of release as they experience his writing. Seeing Hamlet and Eilish in their isolation and hearing them put words to feelings of depression allows the audience to be relieved of their own feelings of isolation as they relate to the performers and realize they are not alone in those feelings. Furthermore, if anyone in the audience has suffered from suicidal thoughts, the fact that they are so directly addressed in these two types of media activate the cathartic experience, but they experience the release of this deep sadness later. Specifically, in *Hamlet*, this release comes when Hamlet says in his speech "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" (3.1.86). It is in this single line where the audience is assured that Hamlet will not be

committing suicide. Also, the fact that this release comes at this time as almost a relief that we won't be witnessing a suicide persuades the audience to let the purgation of their own emotions ensue.

It is not just in Shakespeare's tragedies and modern-day music's sadness that we are able to experience catharsis; we can do so through the love that is displayed in Shakespearean performances and in music as well. The Grassroots Shakespeare Company claims to perform Shakespeare like they did in the days of Shakespeare. Part of this includes the encouragement of audience participation which allows the audience to boo, coo, or simply interact with the performers in any way they want (that doesn't include harming them, that is). Rist says, "Renaissance theater [...] breaks down divisions between audience and performance through models of purgation, allowing us to consider how contemporary audiences responded emotionally to the plays they encountered" (140). This level of performance allows the audience to fully immerse themselves into the content and actually become a part of the performance. Furthermore, being submersed in the performance allows a cathartic experience to happen. Watching Grassroots Shakespeare Company perform *Much Ado About Nothing*, many of the audience members experience catharsis as they interact with the actors. An example of this happened the night I watched this performance during act 2, scene 2 where the prince, Claudio, and Leonato are playing Cupid and trying to convince Benedick that Beatrice loves him. At one point, Benedick asked, "Is't possible?" to which a man in the audience yelled, "She likes you!" (Grassroots 2019). The actor playing Benedick played this up by responding, "I should think this a gull, but that the bald, bearded fellow speaks it" making the audience laugh, but also by interacting with the man, he played to the emotions of the spectators allowing us to be heard and therefore creating this cathartic moment as we saw the puzzle pieces falling into place for

Benedick and Beatrice (Grassroots 2019). The catharsis of the love between these two further came when they actually professed their love for one another. As Beatrice says, “I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest” cheers (of relief and excitement) went through the audience as we finally were validated in our own thoughts of these two and their relationship status.

Similarly, we experience this catharsis in love songs. According to Patrik N. Juslin, “Several studies have investigated the extent to which *performers* can communicate emotions to listeners. These studies have provided fairly precise estimates of the communication accuracy” (94). This further explained that performers can accurately communicate five emotions including happiness, anger, sadness, fear, and tenderness (94). All of these emotions can be felt in love and, specifically, happiness, fear, and tenderness are truthfully portrayed in James Arthur’s “Say You Won’t Let Go.” Arthur penned:

I met you in the dark, you lit me up [...]
 I knew I loved you then
 But you’d never know
 ‘Cause I played it cool when I was scared of letting go [...]
 Just say you won’t let go.

These lyrics mixed with the soft melody and acoustic guitar show the tenderness that Arthur feels and invites the listener into the warmth of the song. Furthermore, he directly addresses the other two emotions of happiness and fear by saying “you lit me up” and “I was scared of letting go.” However, like the Grassroots Shakespeare Company, Arthur “breaks down divisions between audience and performance” by using the second-person point-of-view and addressing his listener, instantly making them a part of the song and allowing them to feel the emotion in the

song. Furthermore, like the *Much Ado About Nothing* performance, it makes listeners cheer as they hear the love story unfold and feel the truthfulness and hope behind the lyrics.

Although I am not addressing catharsis in the traditional way that we know from Aristotle, redefining catharsis to fit with our immersion into modern-day music will further our ability to experience catharsis in Shakespeare. We won't only have a catharsis during his tragedies, this release of emotion can reach across genres including comedies, romances, and histories. Comparing the cathartic nature of Shakespearean performances to this new way of seeing and experiencing catharsis we feel as we listen to contemporary music also aids the modern-day reader in understanding the cathartic nature of Shakespeare. Not only will readers better understand Shakespeare and Shakespearean performances through this new definition of catharsis, but they will also enjoy it more as they are able to relate to the different stories and characters represented in his literature by immersing themselves into his work and allowing themselves to experience that release of emotions. Shakespeare and modern-day musicians invite their audiences to participate in their writing simply by putting it out into the world and allowing it to be seen, heard, read, and felt. However, it is the duty of the reader to accept the invitation and truly work to experience this catharsis that comes through media.

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