

[Name above]

Steve Chisnell
 August 30, 2004
 AP English
 Mr. Chisnell

Comment [src1]: The name and page number above are done with a Header/Footer function. Go to "View" and choose "Header/Footer" to experiment. Last name and page number should appear on all pages.

Comment [src2]: MLA format requires the name, date, class/hour, and professor's name (in college).

Oaths to Silence: Horatio's Promise in Abbott's *Flatland*

Comment [src3]: Title format is specific to the point of the paper. It can be provocative and even poetic so long as it points directly to the purpose and scope of the essay. No underlining, no special fonts.

Allusions in literature are nearly always intended to parallel a work's theme; however, Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* carries references that both mirror and ironically reverse his themes simultaneously. The novel begins with a quotation from Shakespeare's Hamlet: "O day and night, but this is wondrous strange" (Abbott v), and of course it is easy to see the connection to protagonist A. Square's experiences. In the play, Horatio remarks upon the appearance of the ghost in the first act. In the novel's final act, Square is transported to the nether world, as well. And the novel itself for readers is strange enough. More interesting, however, is the context in which Horatio utters his exclamation, where he is in the middle of a vow of secrecy. In this sense, Abbott's opening allusion to Hamlet foreshadows the wonders which will come, yet cautions readers to silence unless they wish to be labeled mad.

Comment [src4]: The novel is introduced (named) in the opening, even though it may be in the title, too.

Comment [src5]: Since the quote was taken from the novel, the page citation is from the novel, not the play.

Hamlet and Square share a kind of madness. The Dane, having just heard from the "honest ghost" (V.i.138) that his father is an incestuous murderer, launches into a drama of intrigue and possible false madness himself in order to reveal the truth of the crime. Square, unaware that he will be seen as mad, writes his book in an effort to spread the greater truth of multiple dimensions, but he discovers, like Hamlet, that "at times my spirit was too strong for me, and I gave vent to dangerous utterances" (80). Square is "keenly alive to the danger" (80) just as Hamlet knows that "madness is poor Hamlet's

Comment [src6]: THESIS. This is the promise of the paper. Be specific, provocative, insightful. Finding tensions/ironies is always a plus!

Comment [src7]: Avoid opening paragraphs with plot summaries. Assume the readers know the works and then you only need to give enough information to focus their attention. Begin middle paragraphs with arguments and then keep your paragraphs focused on these.

Comment [src8]: Citation for a play (Act, scene, line number). Always nice to reference materials outside the text if they seem relevant to your argument, even if the directions don't ask you to!

Comment [src9]: No need to write (Abbott 80) if the author is clear from the context of the sentence.

Comment [src10]: Working quotations into the sentences/arguments is always better than having them sit as their own sentences.

enemy” (V.i.240). But in the opening allusion, Hamlet turns to Horatio and begs him to swear by the sword (urged by the ghost) to silence—to never reveal his experience with the supernatural. Hamlet apparently understands the safety in this silence of apparent ignorance. Square does not.

While Square flies blindly into his pursuit of revealing the truth to all, Abbott apparently understands the foolishness of it. Certainly the resolution of *Flatland* demonstrates the martyrdom which comes to couriers of unpopular messages. And the allusion to *Hamlet* in the novel’s opening words tells readers the same: the truth is revealed to you, but speak nothing of it. Square hopes his words may “stir up a race of rebels” (82), but readers who become rebels must beware the cost. As King Claudius warns, “Madness in great ones must not unwatched go” (III.i.191).

But silence and ignorance are not the same, though they may appear to be. We must be careful where we speak our truths, but we must respond to Horatio’s oath as Hamlet does, and “as a stranger give it welcome” (I.v.165). In this sense, Abbott’s allusion fits the novel’s theme precisely: it is a cautionary note sounded against enlightenment, a vow to avoid the appearance of madness to find the opportunity to reveal truth. The entire drama is based, then, on this argument, from its first words to the very last, where Square worries that the “realities of Flatland itself” will become the “baseless fabric of a dream” (82). Horatio, faithful to the end, keeps his vow, but we readers—much like him—know more.

This theme may well have pushed Abbott to write his reasoning of credibility through fantasy rather than treatise. Had Abbott written too powerfully *in his own voice*, might he, too, have been ridiculed as mad? Might his message have been lost? Abbott

Comment [src11]: While this paragraph has not directly proven the thesis, notice how the argument builds in complexity or importance from paragraph to paragraph. It’s like a progression, where the next argument depends upon the last. This avoids the “laundry list” approach to essays which offer “three reasons” for the thesis.

Comment [src12]: The last paragraph acted as a transition to this argument. This sentence acts as a transition from it. A better and more natural approach here than the old “In addition,” “Second,” etc.

Comment [src13]: Poetic phrases and images are fun and make your writing stand out, but be careful of their connotations. I’m always impressed by the risk of metaphor and good vocabulary.

Comment [src14]: Notice the pronouns “we” and “us” throughout the essay. This is less formal and more inclusive (of readers and writer alike) than “you” (which can be antagonistic) and “I” (which is usually pointless and weakens the power of the argument).

Comment [src15]: Now the argument has moved beyond the thesis, but it’s a logical extension from the thesis. The writer is moving into speculation, but if the foundation argument is laid well, it should work.

wrote *Flatland* under the pseudonym of A. Square, “as if afraid that it might besmirch the dignity of his more formal writings” (Hoffman in Abbott, iii). It is almost as if Abbott himself assumed a fictional identity in order to mask his revelations, to enable him to speak them. Indeed, Hamlet assumes just such a mask. He cautions Horatio but becomes the “mad martyr” of the play as he berates his own mother and drives Ophelia to suicide.

If this was Abbott’s (Square’s) design, his title-page advice to readers (Horatio) appears to reveal the ploy. In *Hamlet*, a play is staged within the play in order to provoke the King to reveal the truth of his guilt. And while Abbott argued publicly against a Catholic Church steeped in credulity, he staged a fictional “play” inside the debate to see if a Christian’s silence was ignorance or the discretion of a Horatio.

Comment [src16]: Citing a writer whose words appear in a different writer’s book.

Comment [src17]: Close well, never with a mere summary of your ideas. Here, the writer has created a new meaning to the Horatio allusion which stems from the essay’s argument.