

Is Bérenger an Alias for Hamlet: An Argument against Reformation in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*

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Abstract

Common readings of Ionesco's play Rhinoceros argue that Bérenger, the last man standing at the end of the play, is Ionesco's hero, the savior of humanity who resists the temptation to conform to a herd mentality. Similarly, many Shakespearean critics argue that Hamlet undergoes a mental reformation that enables him to resolve the conflict presented to him at the start of the play about whether to avenge his father's murder. Following E.M.W. Tillyard's lead, who argues that Hamlet's inability to decide leads to a paralysis and inaction, this paper argues that Bérenger also fails to take action and remains a coward, not the hero that Ionesco searches for.

Keywords: Ionesco, Rhinoceros, Hamlet, paralysis, indecision, alienation

In his excellent work *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, E. M. W. Tillyard (1968) takes issue with the twentieth-century notion that during the course of Shakespeare's play, Hamlet undergoes a mental reformation that enables him to resolve his principal conflict, that is, whether to trust the testimony of a ghost and kill the king to avenge his father's murder or to view the spirit as a demon with intentions to lead him to damnation. Challenging Middleton Murray (1936) and C. S. Lewis (1942), both of whom see Hamlet's resolve to accept Laertes' offer of a duel as pivotal, Tillyard argues effectively that "this critical passage shows nothing new[. T]he notions of a regenerate Hamlet . . . are ruled out" (p. 17). Despite the almost conclusive and damning evidence the king inadvertently reveals in his reaction to the opening of *The Murder of Gonzago* in Act III, Hamlet still hesitates to perform his filial duty. His sole response to Claudius' command that he leave for England immediately is a mere "Good" (Shakespeare, 1974, 4.4. 46). Although Hamlet's exclamation is defiant, once again openly showing his disdain for the king, he allows himself to be carted away rather than take action against the king despite his suspicions of the king's intentions:

King. So it is, if thou knew'st our purposes.

Ham. I see a cherub that sees them. (Shakespeare, 1974, 4.4. 47-48).

Hamlet's unpredictable salvation by the pirates' ship, his hidden return to Denmark, and his engagement with Laertes reveal no change in Hamlet's demeanor. He still fears death and continues to be driven by fate or chance rather than action. Near the end of the play, Hamlet still has not decided to kill the king since he does not return from his aborted trip to England resolved to avenge his father. It is only after he sees his mother fall and hears Laertes' confession that he acts against the king, but in a rage, not with the calm reason that a change in his mental state would suggest. In killing the king, Hamlet behaves just as he has done throughout the play, speaking impulsively but acting cautiously, except that he finally does not let reason halt his actions. Tillyard is correct in noting that Shakespeare offers us in Act V a wiser and more mature Hamlet than the Hamlet in Acts I and II, but Hamlet's exasperating method of reasoning persists until the very end of the play.

By way of a lengthy prologue, I would like to propose that Bérenger in Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* suffers from the same mental malaise as Hamlet.

Plagued by his inability to decide whether to join the herd or to resist, Bérenger also does not change his manner of thinking nor his perception of his life. Surrounded by terrifying change and violent threats, he remains a meek clerk who takes his cues from those around him, and when, at the end of the play, he finds himself alone without anyone to feed him his cues, his only wish is to become one of the herd again. Even in his final words, “I’m not capitulating!” (Ionesco, 1962, p. 472), which some critics (Lewis, 1972; Hughes, 1962; Cohn, 1965) have used as evidence of Bérenger’s reform, he exhibits the exact type of contradictions that have been prevalent throughout the play. As we have become familiar with Bérenger’s character, we can only assume that he will wake up the next day once again trying ever so hard to become a rhinoceros.

Why do most critics agree that Bérenger is a hero who grows from being a timid, insignificant drunkard into the savior of humanity? In his book *Ionesco*, Alan Lewis (1972) characterizes Bérenger as “the meek, apologetic clerk who defies totalitarian hysteria and refuses to become part of the ‘monstrous phenomenon of massification’” (p. 67). In comparing Bérenger to the other characters in the play who have relinquished their individuality to the demands of totalitarian conformity, Lewis continues that “Bérenger, who almost alone of Ionesco’s characters, grows and changes in the course of the play, stands apart, irresolute, reluctant, but allergic to the mass epidemic, unable to respond to the pressures that surround him because something deep within him, some instinctive human need, compels resistance” (p. 68). Catherine Hughes (1962), arguing that Bérenger awakens from his stupor and sees as his mission the need to save humanity, notes that in “his ‘I just can’t be indifferent,’ [Bérenger] echoes many of literature’s major figures in his need to share, to be ‘involved’ with his fellows (p. 124). And Ruby Cohn (1965), while comparing the two Bérengers of *Rhinoceros* and *The Killer*, voices the opinion of most critics writing about Ionesco’s works: “In spite of the unprepossessing appearance of the protagonists, both Bérengers emerge as heroic figures battling power forces, the deadly killer and the more ambiguously menacing rhinocerotis” (p. 127).

On the surface, Ionesco does lead us to believe that Bérenger emerges as a hero, the sole resister to the fanaticism that has conquered his world. In our first encounter with him, we cannot help but see him as submissive:

JEAN: Late as usual, of course. (*He looks at his wrist watch.*) Our appointment was for 11:39. And now, it’s practically mid-day.

BERENGER: I’m sorry. Have you been waiting long?

JEAN: No, I’ve only just arrived myself, as you saw.

They go and sit at one of the tables on the café terrace.

BERENGER: In that case I don’t feel so bad, if you’ve only just . . .

JEAN: It’s different with me. I don’t like waiting; I’ve no time to waste. And as you’re never on time, I come late on purpose—at a time when I presume you’ll be there.

BERENGER: You’re right . . . quite right, but . . .

JEAN: Now don’t try to pretend you’re ever on time!

BERENGER: No, of course not . . . I wouldn’t say that (Ionesco, 1962, p. 374).

Despite Jean’s pompous, self-righteous absurdity, Bérenger willingly subjects himself to his friend’s badgering. Rather than risk Jean’s displeasure and the possible loss of one of his few friends, Bérenger only mildly objects to Jean’s accusations, even though, at least on this occasion, he has the right to assert himself since, as he has seen, Jean was also late for their meeting.

When the first rhinoceros appears, Bérenger takes little notice. Ionesco tells us that “BERENGER, *still listless without appearing to hear anything at all, replies tranquilly to JEAN about the invitation*” (Ionesco, 1962, p. 377). Despite the thundering noise of the rhinoceros and the panic of the other characters, he “*still a little dopey, remains seated*” (Ionesco, 1962, p. 377). His oblivious disregard for the confusion that surrounds him and his general apathy establish his character.

At the point when the second rhinoceros appears, Ionesco tempts us with the suggestion that Bérenger wishes to alter his appearance, his behavior, and his life in general. He has just resolved to stop drinking and to become better educated to attract Daisy. As the second rhinoceros passes, Bérenger still remains seated, but this time he takes notice and actually voices his observation: “Rhinoceros! In the opposite direction!” (Ionesco, 1962, p. 394). The change in Bérenger’s character is minor; his tone still suggests indifference. Given the supposed sincerity of his resolutions, however, we could be led to believe that Ionesco is signaling a change in that Bérenger appears to be awakening from his stupor.

That awakening and the process of self-affirmation continues a few pages later in Bérenger and Jean's senseless argument in which Bérenger challenges Jean's assertion that the second rhinoceros was not the same as the first. His words become forceful: "Yes, absolute, blithering nonsense! . . . You're just a pretentious show-off— (*Raising his voice.*) a pedant!" (Ionesco, 1962, p. 398). It seems obvious that Bérenger is changing. He defies Jean's presumed authority in all matters. But the argument leads nowhere. Jean departs angrily, and Bérenger regrets having contradicted his friend. He forgoes his resolution to cultivate his spirit, orders a brandy, and is meek and unsure when we meet him once again in Act II.

The office scene in Act II for Bérenger centers on the argument about whether the rhinoceros has one or two horns. One message Ionesco clearly sends is the absurdity of the discussion. What difference does it make if the rhinoceros they saw has one or two horns? Is Ionesco suggesting that the victims of "rhinocerotitis" are establishing a class structure, one based solely on physical attributes? As a central theme to his play, Ionesco is pointing out the absurd notion that people in modern society will concern themselves with meaningless details, thus avoiding the wider implications—the tyranny and hysterical euphoria that generally accompany totalitarian societies. But the implications of the mass conversion to "rhinoceroism" have not hit Bérenger. He continues to receive his cues from Jean and from his co-workers. In that sense, he has not changed; he remains incapable of thinking for himself, like a self-conscious actor who must be prompted. The fact that in Act II Bérenger actively participates in the debate rather than passively listening is the only argument that can be put forward in defense of a changing Bérenger, but as I have already noted, that debate is absurd and therefore pointless.

By the end of Act II, however, Bérenger does give us the impression that he has become capable of intellectual thought. When Jean quickly converts into a rhinoceros, Bérenger becomes philosophical: "Just think a moment. You must admit that we have a philosophy that animals don't share, and an irreplaceable set of values, which it's taken centuries of human civilization to build up" (Ionesco, 1962, p. 434). His defense of humanity, at exactly the point when he friend is yielding to the call of the masses, is admirable. Ionesco has successfully turned Bérenger into the author's spokesperson, clearly advocating the superiority of humanism, the rights of the individual, and the need not to succumb to a herd mentality. Such a conversion from the drunkard of Act I to the philosopher would indicate a fundamental alteration of Bérenger's character and thus lead critics such as Richard Coe (1971) to conclude that "Bérenger alone resists the temptation of 'scientific detachment'" (p. 105). Bérenger defends his individuality even at the end of the play when he finds that he remains alone, the only surviving human: "Oh well, too bad! I'll take on the whole of them! I'll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end" (Ionesco, 1962, p. 472). From that perspective, Bérenger does change. He voices his opinions even though no one is listening, and he guards his decision to remain human, even if it means ostracism and standing outside of society.

But Bérenger's cry that he will never capitulate remains dubious. We feel uncomfortable believing someone who so suddenly changes his mind. Only a few lines before his definitive cry, he laments his inability to become one of "them." We can read his transition line, "Oh well, too bad!" as defiance, but we can also read the same line as resignation. The evidence throughout the play, we must concede, suggests that Bérenger strives for acceptance, and he truly grieves when he has gone "against the grain" and has offended his friends. Given the evidence, we must speculate that Bérenger's resistance will go the way of his resolution to stop drinking. We can find support for that speculation by analyzing exactly how Ionesco develops Bérenger's character.

The first question that we need to investigate is whether Bérenger ever stops being meek. As I see it, the answer is a simple "no." He confronts Jean at the end of Act I, but subsequently, he is apologetic. At the beginning of Act II, he sneaks timidly into his office hoping that his employer will not notice that he is ten minutes late. And at the start of Act III, once again he cowers in fear of the rhinoceros, finding courage in a glass of brandy. By his own admission, he has no will power and has never gotten accustomed to life: "But everybody hasn't got as much will-power as you have. I can't get used to it. I just can't get used to life" (Ionesco, 1962, p. 376). At times, it even seems that Bérenger has not yet awakened. He concerns himself with none of the world's problems, he acts as if those problems will vanish if he merely closes his eyes, or he simply refuses to acknowledge their existence. In fact, most of Bérenger's life appears to be in a dream: "I do dream. Life is a dream" (Ionesco, 1962, p. 383). He coldly accepts the irrational, just as one does while dreaming, without questioning the contradictions, without searching for explanations, and without seeing the reality of his situation. "A rhinoceros is running through the streets," he thinks. "It obviously escaped from the zoo or from some circus. We need not concern ourselves. It will not hurt us here." During such thoughts, he even appears weary and bored, as indicated by his yawning.

Such calmness in the wake of Jean's outbursts leads Charles Glickberg (1962) to conclude rightly that Bérenger "cannot get used to life, to accept things as they are, and that is why he is not upset by this explosion of madness. Life for him is a dream. All explanations for the presence of the rhinoceros are futile. In Bérenger we get the major symptoms of the modern malady of alienation" (p. 105).

Even in Act III, when the full implication of the mass conversions becomes apparent to him, Bérenger still refuses to accept the truth: "I just can't get used to them. Maybe it's wrong of me, but they obsess me so much in spite of myself, I just can't sleep at night. I get insomnia. I doze a bit in the daytime out of sheer exhaustion" (Ionesco, 1962, p. 446). While it is true that Bérenger is no longer indifferent, in spite of his natural tendency to be so, and the sight of the rhinoceroses marching in the streets shocks him, he still cannot find the courage to oppose the new society, nor can he decide to join it. He simply worries because he is resisting the change. He wants to remain as he has always been—simple, carefree, and oblivious. The operative words "in spite of myself" clearly indicate his real nature as a man who never worries about anything, and his newly acquired tendency to doze at work becomes yet another self-defense to deny change.

In addition to his almost schizophrenic non-acceptance of reality, Bérenger proves repeatedly his inability to think independently, first with his interactions with Jean and later with his interactions with Daisy and Dudard. He does not react at all to passing of the rhinoceros at the beginning of the play until Jean forces him into an argument by asking, "Did you see that?" Jean must ask twice, "Well, what did you think of that?" (Ionesco, 1962, pp. 380-381) before he even gets the weak response, "What did I think of what? (Ionesco, 1962, p. 381), and frustrated, he must ask a third time before he gets an apathetic, "Well. . . nothing. . . it made a lot of dust. . ." (Ionesco, 1962, p. 381). And in the argument proceeding the appearance of the second rhinoceros, Jean challenges Bérenger with the truth:

JEAN: Come on, exercise your will. Concentrate!

BERENGER: I really don't see how.

JEAN: You have to be told everything (Ionesco, 1962, p. 390).

At the end of the play, he is still taking his cues from others. Unable to explain what is happening to his world, he listens to Dudard and Daisy's opinions about the epidemic in the hope that he can formulate his own. Throughout the play one sees that Bérenger can only act with someone at his side, whether it is Jean, Dudard, or Daisy. Without direction, he fails. Eventually, all his prompters leave him without his cues, and thus he cannot become the hero, the savior of humanity, the fighter of the movement whom Ionesco is calling for.

Characteristically, Bérenger remains egocentric throughout the play. It is the physical discomfort of the settling dust that disturbs him, not the significance of the rhinoceros stampeding through town. It is not a concern for humanity in general that he observes in himself but his fear of being alone. Dudard chastises him with "You think everything revolves around you, you think that everything that happens concerns you personally; you're not the centre of the universe, you know" (Ionesco, 1962, p. 442). Dudard is correct in his assessment of Bérenger. The truth of the matter, Dudard notes, is that Bérenger refuses to accept change. He makes excuses for why he cannot do anything to rectify the situation, but in reality, he is just selfishly afraid for himself and has little concern for others.

By Act III, panic controls most of Bérenger's reactions, and his resolutions of Act I have fled: "*The noises stop; he goes to the little table, hesitates a moment, then with a gesture of 'Oh what's it matter!'* he pours himself a glass of brandy, which he downs at one go" (Ionesco, 1962, p. 439). We see that same shallow drunkard to whom we were introduced at the beginning of the play. While it is true that fear has replaced calmness, essentially the Bérenger of Act III remains the same person as in Act I, a man devoid of willpower, of courage, and of purpose. G. Richard Danner (1979) comments that since "Bérenger has failed in his own life to achieve a full and rewarding sense of humanness, we should not be surprised to discover that he does not manage to plead the cause of humanity persuasively or even coherently" (p. 210). Clearly, Bérenger is no hero. He remains indecisive, apologetic, and a coward, unable to respond to the social pressures that surround him because he is unable to change. As Lewis (1972) notes, Bérenger refuses to join the masses, lacks a fixed ideology, and is allergic to the epidemic (pp. 69 – 70). Cohn sees him as a man who "tries to live only his personal life" (p. 128). These attributes remain equally true in Act III as they are in Acts I and II. While circumstances change, Bérenger remains Bérenger, not the savior of the human race.

Dudard compares Bérenger to Don Quixote, that questionably mad gentleman who believed he ought to follow a calling to save the world. If we see Bérenger as either a savior or a madman, then perhaps the comparison is justifiable. But Bérenger is neither mad nor a savior; he makes no effort to correct the wrongs he perceives. In fact, he fails to act at all, preferring the security of his room, or what he himself calls his prison, much as Hamlet laments to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “Denmarks a prison” (Shakespeare, 1974, 2.2. 243). Like Hamlet, but unlike Don Quixote, Bérenger never escapes from his prison. Rather, he resorts to the same type of activity as Hamlet, that is, endless, empty talk: “I must think it over. I shall write to the papers; I’ll draw up manifestos; I shall apply for an audience with the mayor—or his deputy, if the mayor’s too busy” (Ionesco, 1962, p. 446). In keeping with his egoism, his speech is full of “I’s,” and his ability only to think or to propose senseless activity recalls Hamlet, who hesitates because he reasons, much as Bérenger hesitates as he attempts to reason. Neither can act without thought; neither can act meaningfully.

Interestingly, Bérenger’s relationship with Daisy also mirrors that of Hamlet’s with Ophelia. Although ostensibly Hamlet uses Ophelia to launch his feigned madness, in reality he truly loves her and is grieved by the news of her death. Ophelia, accustomed to the support of the men in her life, genuinely turns mad when the men have disappeared. Her character is weak; she cannot live alone. Although Daisy is a much stronger person than Ophelia, she also cannot survive alone. She doubts Bérenger’s abilities, and the fear of being left alone drives her to join the masses, a form of madness or even a euphemism for death.

But by far, the most telling comparison between Hamlet and Bérenger lies in Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy and in Bérenger’s final speech. Both speeches are characterized by hesitation, reversal, and paralysis, a sign of a mind at work and thought in progress. Hamlet struggles with his anguish, his inability to decide the proper course, his fear of the unknown and of making a mistake, and his own cowardice. Bérenger also grieves over his indecision, his ugliness, and his unknown fate. His speech could be reworded in terms of “To join or not to join.” Much as Hamlet reflects whether it would be better to die than to suffer, Bérenger considers whether it would be better to join than to resist. And as Hamlet realizes that death is like a sleep in which one may dream and have nightmares, Bérenger questions whether joining might be worse than resisting. Finally, as Hamlet asks

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th’ oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,
The pangs of despis’d love, the law’s delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th’ unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin; (Shakespeare, 1974, 3.1. 69 – 75)

ultimately raising the question of who will avenge his father’s murder if he ends his own life, Bérenger seems to demand, “If I join, who will represent humanity?” Having thought for too long, Hamlet finally decides to do nothing:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action (Shakespeare, 1974, 3.1. 82 – 87).

Bérenger vacillates, but in the end decides that he will remain a man. Or does he decide? The only words that we can trust in Bérenger’s final speech, “I’ve gone past changing” (Ionesco, 1962, p. 472), put us back to the beginning of the play. In a sense, Bérenger’s refusal to fight the movement makes him just as guilty as those who join. His passivity, as Ionesco points out in this final message, becomes as harmful as the movement itself. Thus, Ionesco finds no hero to oppose the movement, and the play concludes with the presumed result that the movement has succeeded.

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