

HAMLET, MADNESS AND HUMANISM



Essay, English Literature before 1900
Engelsk tilvalg, Åbent Universitet
Københavns Universitet 2008
Søren Vestergaard Nielsen

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION.....	3
MADNESS.....	3
HAMLET AND MADNESS.....	4
OPHELIA AND MADNESS.....	8
HUMANISM AND THE TRAGEDY.....	10
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	14

HAMLET, MADNESS AND HUMANISM

Please discuss the theme of madness in Shakespeare's Hamlet and consider whether it can be related to the rise of humanism.

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a tragedy written in the golden age of Elizabethan theatre; a time when the notions of Renaissance humanism gradually superseded the more communal and God-fearing values of the Middle Ages. This transition and the resulting conflicts of ideas are noticeable on many levels of the play and, arguably, they are a large part of the explanation for why this old tragedy has been relevant and fascinating for more than 400 years.

Shakespeare stages his play in a kingdom of Machiavellian power struggles and uses the theme of revenge, a pagan virtue, as the driving force of the plot. But at the same time he induces the kingdom with at least some adherence to Christian values and designs the protagonist not as a staunch avenger, but rather as a hesitating thinker. In other words, Shakespeare sets up a medieval stage and lets a reflective humanist enter. Consequently, the conventional plot elements of the tragedy are not only played out as simple actions on stage: they are twisted and elevated to moral conflicts and opposing philosophical and theological ideas that can be related to the rise of renaissance humanism.

One of the conventional plot elements that Shakespeare uses in *Hamlet* is that of madness. He lets his protagonist put on an 'antic disposition' to fool his adversaries, a plot device often seen in Elizabethan plays. A closer look at how Shakespeare uses it, however, will show that Shakespeare does not treat madness merely as a device to forward the plot, but actually lets the theme of madness expand on the ideas inherent in the play, in particular the clash of the medieval values with those of the rising humanism.

MADNESS

Madness is a broad term and discussing it in relation to *Hamlet* calls for a more accurate understanding of the word. The only explicit definition the play itself offers is Polonius' remark:

To define true madness,
What is't but to be nothing else but mad? (II, ii, 93-94)

The lines mock Polonius' dubious eloquence by their redundancy, but nevertheless they give a clue. Examined closely, these words propose the notion that madness is an all-encompassing state of mind that does not leave room for much else. When being mad, one can be nothing else. This corresponds to the modern 'psychosis'. According to The National Institute of Mental Health a psychosis is a '... serious mental disorder in which a person loses contact with reality and experiences hallucinations or delusions.'¹ The point is that when one loses contact with reality it is not possible to function normally in any minor area at the same time. This is obviously not an adequate description of Hamlet, at least during large parts of the play. Therefore it is helpful to introduce another modern term: 'neurosis'. This is a '...mental or emotional disorder that may involve anxiety or phobias but does not involve losing touch with reality.'² Naturally, madness can be many things but one important distinction is whether the inflicted person loses his or her grip on reality or if it is passing instability that still enables the inflicted person to react to actual reality.

It is also important to look at how madness was regarded in Shakespeare's time. In his book *Madness and Civilization* Michel Foucault points out that the Renaissance society had a benevolent and somewhat inclusive attitude toward madmen. In the Victorian Age, and arguably until very recently, the best way of dealing with the mad was believed to be imprisonment. In Shakespeare's time, however, the mad were not locked up; in stead they were secluded and still viewed as part of society. This is partly demonstrated by the fact that even the mad were offered communion as a token of God's appreciation of all mankind; after all, their state of mind was seen not as a fault of their own but as a result of divine will. This connection to divinity also gave them a somewhat longer leash, even protection, when they transgressed the boundaries of accepted behaviour.³ This is not to say that seclusion was a nice gesture, just to point out that the protection offered to the mad by the idea of their proximity to the divine was a better alternative than being regarded a threat to society most fit for imprisonment.

HAMLET AND MADNESS

The theme of madness in the tragedy is rather prominent: Hamlet pretends to be mad and Ophelia is driven to actual madness and even suicide. On a more

¹ Glossary on homepage of The National Institute of Mental Health

² Glossary on homepage of The National Institute of Mental Health

³ See Michel Foucault: *Madness and Civilization* p. 3-33

abstract level madness lurks in the overall ambiguous attitude of the play towards the true substance of the events seen and referenced on stage. The tragedy skilfully plays with the fact that doubt in everything that surrounds you borders on madness. It is rather telling that the first line of the play is the sentinel Barnardo staring into the blackness of night asking: 'Who's there?' (I,i) Nothing is what it seems, and uncertainty and deceitfulness is the default mode of life at court and of the play in general. With Barnardo's opening line Shakespeare invites his audience to closely observe the difference between what seems and what really is, or in other words: the opposition between truth and deceit. The deceitfulness emerges most visibly in the scheming of Claudius and Polonius and in the entire imagery of the text, where the lies and corruption of the Danish court are connected to illness and decay. This connection is introduced by Marcellus' famous line:

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. (I, iv)

As madness in some sense is an illness and decay of the mind, the imagery also serves to connect the theme of madness with the theme of deceit in the play.

First, the character of Hamlet deserves a closer look: He is troubled by suspicions of deceit in large parts of the play, most notably in regards to the true nature of the ghost. Even though Hamlet sees and speaks with the ghost, he is still in doubt whether the apparition really is his father's ghost trying to convey the true events that led to his death, or if it is a devil lying to him (II, ii, 533). His doubt is demonstrated by the fact that he does not set out to kill Claudius immediately, but rather puts on a play to obtain certainty of his uncle's guilt. Hamlet thinks fast when he hears of the murder, because immediately after meeting the ghost, he tells Horatio and Marcellus of his plan to put on an 'antic disposition' (I, iv, 168-180). With the Renaissance view on madness in mind, the plan makes perfect sense: If Claudius has, in fact, unrightfully usurped the throne of Denmark, then the most immediate threat to his power is Hamlet, and therefore it is extremely rational and sane for Hamlet to seek the protection of having been touched by the divine will. Still, it is obligatory for an essay on madness in *Hamlet* to address the ongoing discussion on the actual state of mind of its famous protagonist, because in some scenes Hamlet does show signs that can be interpreted as real madness. This is most noticeable in his hateful encounter with his once beloved Ophelia (III, i) and in the confrontation with his mother where he in a fit of rage kills Polonius, Ophelia's father.

When Hamlet meets Ophelia after his famous soliloquy 'to be or not to be', he is presumably confused since he both tells her that he once loved her and that he didn't love her at all (III, i, 115 and 119) . All of a sudden Hamlet explodes in a fit of rage and tells Ophelia,

Get thee to a nunnery
why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? (III, i, 121)

and he even questions her chastity and comes very close to calling her a prostitute. The background of the scene, however, is that Ophelia has been instructed to spy on him by Polonius and the King, who are hiding nearby. It is implied that Hamlet discovers this when he out of context suddenly asks: 'Where's your father?' (130). Thus his verbal attack on Ophelia is quite understandable as a reaction to his feelings of betrayal. In the essay *Antic Disposition* J. Dover Wilson even proposes that Hamlet overhears Polonius' plan to spy on him earlier in the play⁴ (II, ii, 162). Wilson argues that Polonius' description of Hamlet's behaviour, which precedes the plan, is, in fact, an implied stage direction for Polonius to point at the inner stage when he says:

You know, sometimes he walks four hours together
Here in the lobby. (II, ii, 162)

Thus the latter part supposedly directs the attention of the audience to Hamlet who is entering the stage unseen by Polonius and his listeners. The consequence of this idea is that immediately when he sees Ophelia, he must infer that she has agreed to spy on him. His sense of betrayal only grows stronger throughout the scene since Ophelia does not reveal her real agenda, even though Hamlet repeatedly asks her: 'are you honest?' and 'Are you fair?' (III, i, 103, 105). Consequently, Hamlet obviously shows quite a temper in this scene, but it is a far stretch to call him insane.

Hamlet's rage turns to violence in the scene where he confronts Gertrude and kills Polonius (III, iv). The lines spoken indicate that he thinks Polonius is the King. However, this is clearly not the case, since he just left Claudius on his knees a moment ago. Therefore his actions do point to very irrational behaviour. This behaviour is probably provoked by the emotional intensity that surfaces when he at last confronts Gertrude with Claudius' murder of old Hamlet. He accuses her of living

...In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,

⁴ J. Dover Wilson: 'Antic Disposition' in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet* edited by David Bevington (Prentice-Hall 1968) p. 106

Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty (III, iv, 92-94)

The scene shows Hamlet having a very unhealthy interest in his mother's sexuality, which he refers to no less than five times and, if not mad, one might characterise him as hysterical in this scene.

However, it is not only Hamlet's behaviour in specific scenes that invites the spectator to regard Hamlet as mad; it is also the grand conflict he is placed in as a human being: Hamlet is a student from Wittenberg, a humanist, yet he is expected to revenge his father. This traps Hamlet in a dilemma. The ghost's demand for retribution is based upon pagan ethics, in which revenge is accepted, even necessary to restore harmony. But Shakespeare places the story of Hamlet in an unmistakably Christian setting and according to Eleanor Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge* the concept of revenge was not seen as naturally virtuous, nor as an accepted convention of the stage in the Elizabethan age.⁵ Therefore one might say that Hamlet is caught between two codes of ethics, two moralities, which are mutually exclusive. The tension of this insoluble paradox is what makes it natural to assume that Hamlet in his philosophical fragility is at risk of being overwhelmed by madness

One the other hand, the question of whether Hamlet only plays mad or actually has gone mad is not as obvious as one might think. The question arises because scholars and actors, especially in the romantic period,⁶ had a preference for the emotionally fragile Hamlet driven to madness. But a close reading of the text gives only little merit to the claim that Hamlet embraces actual madness.

Most obvious his mental state is much closer to a neurosis than to a psychosis. Hamlet is distressed, even hysterical at times and he is melancholic in one moment and hyperactive the next, but still he retains the ability to plan and to ponder. True madness would mean a psychosis in which he loses touch with reality and the ability to think rationally. Yet Hamlet has not lost his reason. He has, however, lost his father and his trust in his mother and Ophelia so there is quite a lot of reason for distress and bursts of bad temper and tears. Arguably, Hamlet is the victim of a neurosis, but not of a psychosis, as Harry Levin argues in his essay *The Antic Disposition*⁷

⁵ See Prosser: *Hamlet and revenge* page 32

⁶ Harry Levin, for instance, mentions the romantic actor Edwin Booth, who played Hamlet as he was in fact a victim of the madness he was simulating. See Levin: *The Antic Disposition*, page 122

⁷ Harry Levin: *The Antic Disposition* page 124

Levin also explains that Hamlet's strategy of simulated insanity was a well known plot element of the Elizabethan theatre, and it is also an important part of the different versions of Hamlet's story that preceded Shakespeare's take on the young prince. The oldest source, the Danish Saxo Grammaticus' tale of Amleth actually portrays Hamlet as a trickster in the same tradition as the Norse half god and shape shifter Loki, as pointed out by Hilda Ellis Davidson in *Loki and Saxo's Hamlet*⁸. Shakespeare even uses what, according to Levin,⁹ is a well established convention to point out Hamlet's control of his pretended madness: a shift between blank verse and prose. When we meet Hamlet in the first act he speaks in blank verse, but when he starts simulating madness, he begins to speak in prose. Whenever he is alone or with someone he trusts, however, he switches back to blank verse. This is an unmistakable indicator that Hamlet's madness is, in fact, a mask this clever shape shifter puts on to fit the situation.

For these reasons it is more than likely that Hamlet only pretends madness and is never actually consumed by it. This view of Hamlet makes him less fragile and it has consequences for the discussion on humanism later in this essay. Nevertheless, the fact that the play still invites a lot of doubt as to the true state of Hamlet's mind stresses the aspects of uncertainty inherent in the tragedy.

Ophelia and Madness

Where Hamlet arguably keeps his feet grounded in sanity throughout the play, Ophelia undoubtedly slips and falls into pure madness. But maybe she is not so much slipping as she is pushed by the hands of Polonius, Laertes, and even Hamlet himself.

Ophelia's state of mind is easier to determine than Hamlet's: She is clearly driven into insanity during the play and her madness contrasts Hamlet's make-believe and also sheds light on the overarching theme of deceitfulness.

Ophelia's first appears on stage in act I, scene iii, where she takes leave of her brother Laertes, who is leaving for Paris. Laertes is concerned with the warm feelings obviously arising between Ophelia and Hamlet, and he advises her to fear Hamlet's courting (I, iii, 33). This is arguably well meant advice from a loving brother, but nevertheless his choice of words reveals that he does not hold his sister in high esteem:

⁸ Hilda Ellis Davidson: 'Loki and Saxo's Hamlet' in *The Fool and the Trickster* page 6-7

⁹ Harry Levin: *The Antic Disposition*, page 127

The canker galls the infants of the spring,
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed, (I, iii, 39-40)

With these lines he actually compares her to a flower damaged by disease even before its buds open. Apart from the rather offensive comparison, the imagery in this quote also exemplifies how all his advice is directed at Ophelia's sexual conduct. In a sense, Ophelia as a person is of less interest to him than the chastity of her body. This tendency becomes even more apparent when Polonius enters. He gives some last pieces of advice to his son before the journey and then he turns his attention to Ophelia. Polonius is not as much giving her advice as he is interrogating her on her relationship with Hamlet. Ophelia describes Hamlet's love for her as both enduring and honourable (I, iii, 110-111), but Polonius is more concerned for her chastity than her feelings. Even though this misogyny might not have been unusual in Shakespeare's time, the play is clearly stressing Laerte's and Polonius' hypocrisy when Polonius in his orders to Reynaldo suspects Laertes of visiting whorehouses in Paris, a practice which seems only a minor offence to Polonius (II, ii, 59-60). Furthermore, Polonius' metaphors draw upon the domain of trade:

Be somewhat scanter of your maiden presence;
Set your entreatments at a higher rate
Than a command to parley... (I, iii, 123-125)

This suggests that he is mainly interested in Ophelia as a means to an end and line 109 makes it abundantly clear that the end in question is his own self-interest:

Running it thus—you'll tender me a fool. (I, iii, 108)

So the audience is presented with a young girl whose brother and father show her no affection and uses her as an instrument of their own ambition. The play mentions no mother, so it is natural to assume that the only one she can turn to is Hamlet. He does not offer any help, though. Instead he uses her as an instrument as well to start the rumour of his madness, because she is the first one he chooses to witness his 'antic disposition'. Even though the audience does not witness the visit on stage it still contains some important details: Hamlet keeps silent, and he actually shows some affection in gesture and touch. In other words, he uses her but avoids lying to her. It almost seems as if Hamlet takes leave of her love because he knows it will not survive his simulated madness.

Nevertheless, Hamlet's explodes in hostility towards her at their next encounter, where he denies his love of her and tells her to get to a nunnery. As

covered earlier, Hamlet probably knows Ophelia is spying on him and this triggers the avalanche of hate and distress in Hamlet. Whatever his justification, though, he represents the last safe harbour for Ophelia, and now she has nowhere to turn for comfort. Shortly thereafter Hamlet kills Polonius and the next time Ophelia is on stage, she has clearly lost her grip on reality, a condition that corresponds to the modern term 'psychosis'. Nevertheless, the well established symbolism of the flowers she gives to the King, Queen and Laertes suggests that she in her madness has a clear understanding of the grim truths under the polished surface at court.¹⁰ The text does not specify which flowers are given to whom, but considering their symbolic meaning, it is quite reasonable to assume that the different flowers were meant for specific characters. Columbine, for instance, signifying infidelity, would have been given to Gertrude. Also significant is that Ophelia wants to hand out some violets, the flower of fidelity, but they have all withered away.

Her madness is closely linked to the overarching theme of deceitfulness, for her insanity is a direct result of her family's rather heartless manipulations and of the deceit Hamlet makes use of to survive as the most immediate threat to Claudius' power. Indirectly the play is very sympathetic towards Ophelia as it describes her as the sanest person on stage in her scene of madness. Ophelia's insanity ends in suicide, but the details of her death implies that she did not kill herself as an act of random madness. First, Hamlet's and Ophelia's confrontation in act III, scene I, does imply that their love of each other was once physical and secondly the rue, which Ophelia distributes and gives to herself in her scene of madness, was considered a powerful abortifacient¹¹ This actually implies that she was carrying Hamlet's illegitimate child, and a suicide, though still horrifying, would make more sense under these circumstances.

Three points emerge from this exploration of Ophelia: She is an innocent victim of the manipulations and deceitfulness of others, even in her madness she is closer to truth than any of the others, and Hamlet's dismissal of her is implied to be particularly cold-hearted if, in fact, she was pregnant.

HUMANISM AND THE TRAGEDY

The rise of humanism in the renaissance had at its core a renewed interest in classic Latin and Greek scholars. Their ideas spurred a focus on the individual

¹⁰ See Ann Thompson's and Neil Taylor's notes to the scene in the referenced edition of Hamlet

¹¹ See Maurice Hunt's *Impregnating Ophelia* page 12

human being and a new approach to philosophical and moral truth with the ambitious goal of finding a unity of truth. While humanism was still very much a Christian endeavour, other sources than the bible and Christian scholars were now examined, and the worth of life in this world was emphasised. The medieval notion of this world was more of mandatory assignment to prepare for eternal life. In other words, man and his ability to reason replaced God at centre stage of attention. The new ideas of humanism are clearly visible in Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* from 1486 where God says to Adam:

We have made thee [...] so that with freedom of choice and with honour, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.¹²

Seen through this quote the faiths of both Hamlet and Ophelia are comments on the humanistic ideal in a cynical reality. The most clear-cut case is that of Ophelia: In the world presented on stage she has no freedom of choice, and she is given no opportunity to fashion herself as she wishes. Rather she is *being* fashioned, even confined, by the orders and manipulations of her own family and Hamlet's utter disregard of her. Furthermore, her insanity examines the humanistic ideal of truth for it is her madness that lets her see through the lies and concealments at court. She might not be a humanist in the scholarly sense of the word, but she is the most human in the entire play if one considers the ability to love, and the need for love in return, to be basic human traits. In Shakespeare's Denmark, however, these traits have no chance of survival.

Hamlet's feigned madness also comments on the humanistic ideals of truth. As a humanist, Hamlet thinks before he acts, he tries to weigh the consequences of his actions, and he at least strives to make sense of the world before he moves to violence. The only way he can adhere to these ideals, and not just run out and kill immediately, is in the protection afforded by a mask of madness. But the brute reality of court does not subscribe to the ideal of truth. So just as Ophelia's mad gifts of flowers has more truth in them than their receivers, Hamlet's mad ramblings often has a sarcastic truth to them that penetrates the falsehood at court.

But the play has even more to say on the subject of Humanism. The ideas Pico della Mirandola refers to is also called self-fashioning and suggests an ideal of personal freedom to fulfil ones potential as a human being through education, sports, and moral virtues.¹³ In the light of this description, it becomes

¹² Quoted from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 1, page 472

¹³ See John Lee: *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self* page 51

clear just how well Hamlet fits these ideals. The crucial point here is that he does not just seem as such, the play actually presents him as quite the perfect, heroic humanist. This is sometimes overlooked, when one focuses on his procrastination or a Freudian analysis. When we look at the text, it is clear that he is not a feeble thinker incapable of action, and when he in a moment of doubt says to himself that:

...conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, (III, i, 85)

it is clearly a phase he gets over. When he returns from England he is in fact a composed and focused gentleman. His wit shows that he is clearly intellectually superior to others at court, and he is a better fencer than Laertes, since the latter's only hit is achieved by cheating¹⁴. Furthermore, his feigned madness shows an adept ability to use his intellect in the real world as does his plot to get Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed instead of himself.¹⁵

Measured by these standards, Hamlet's only severe moral flaw is his treatment of Ophelia. But I argue that Hamlet does not treat Ophelia cruelly by intention. He is forced by his situation to play the part of a madman, just as she is forced by Polonius to spy on him. The progression of their relation in the play is governed by misunderstanding, and in a sense it is the tragic equivalent of a comedy of errors¹⁶.

In the end, however, even the mask of madness that cost him Ophelia is not enough. He gets his revenge, but all the ideals of humanism are crushed by Fortinbras. At heart he is the natural heir of Claudius. His strategic eloquence in his remark: '...with sorrow I embrace my fortunes...' (V,ii) mirrors that of Claudius' opening speech (I, ii,1-39), and his lust for land and power is not burdened by moral scruples, which he clearly demonstrates by sacrificing many of his soldiers for a very small piece of land in Poland.

If we return to the thematic juxtaposition of the power-seeking deceit at court and Hamlet's humanistic values we can say that if Shakespeare had made Hamlet a weak hero, the tragedy of his death would not have been as severe. But since Hamlet, essentially, is not a fool overpowered by '...the pale cast of thought',

¹⁴ According to Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor's notes on the play, Laertes attacks Hamlet between two bouts. See William Shakespeare: *Hamlet, The Arden Shakespeare* edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor.

¹⁵ See also G. K. Hunter: *The Heroism of Hamlet*

¹⁶ Which, coincidentally, is also the title of one of Shakespeare's earliest plays. A large part of its comic effect relies on mistaken identities and other errors.

the cynicism and pessimism of Shakespeare's tragic vision is crystal clear: The rise of humanism is a great idea, but doomed from the outset by the harsh Machiavellian rules of realpolitik.

CONCLUSION

In essence the theme of madness in *Hamlet* explores the fragility of humanism in a world governed by raw power. It describes how new ideals of truth, freedom of choice and self-fashioning clash with the confinements of traditional society – and ultimately loses the battle. With the depiction of madness, both real and pretended, the tragedy shows how twisted and sick such a world actually is, because there only madness is able to be truthful and adhering to these ideals results in insanity or death,

This essay puts forth a very bleak vision of the play and one might wonder if Shakespeare really had such a pessimistic view of the rising humanism, which he himself was a part of? The answer might be that this is a tragedy: it is designed to be a frustrated cry of anguish over the harsh circumstances of life¹⁷. So in a sense, the tragic genre does not leave room for much optimism, even though one begs for just the smallest glimpse of light when submerged in the darkness of the world according to Hamlet.

¹⁷ Cuddon: *Penguin's Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* page 928

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