
Embedded Madness: Mad Narrators and the Possible Worlds: A study of Shakespeare's Plays

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Abstract:

Madness is a theme especially prevalent in the works of Shakespeare. Whether using it as comedy or tragedy, the sheer number of characters afflicted with mental health crises on Shakespeare's stage is impressive. What is equally worth noting is the effect that Shakespeare's staged breakdowns has on those viewing or reading his works and how this impact may differ drastically depending on the viewer's own culture. After a basic examination of Elizabethan cultural views regarding what is now referred to as mental health, various examples of madness on Shakespeare's stage can be studied to a greater degree. Specifically, it can be seen how Shakespeare's plays provide the opportunity for comedic, utterly tragic, and, with Othello, Lady Macbeth, and Lear as ascending examples, even penitential or redemptive uses of on-stage madness. This paper deals with the theme of madness in the four major tragedies of Shakespeare: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth. Its main purpose is to show that the heroes of these tragedies display very individual characteristics which are adaptable to the modern ideas of R. D. Laing about madness.

Keywords: Madness, mental health, Shakespeare's stage, redemptive uses, R. D. Laing

Introduction

Madness has long been a popular theme for literature, featuring as a trope of horror, mystery, tragedy and comedy genres in varying degrees of amplitude. The topic has provided a significant access point for analysing historical, socio-political and cultural issues as it addresses controversial themes of alienation and criminality as well as philosophical theories of perception and consciousness. As a result, studies on the representation of madness in literature have been dominated by historical approaches that focus directly on social, political, philosophical and psychoanalytical interpretive models. Comparatively little has been done to analyse madness in literature from a narratological perspective. Madness has plagued the minds of some of the most intriguing and iconic characters of literary history. Shakespeare's famous mad characters: Hamlet, King Lear and Macbeth of the eponymous plays are some of the earliest examples from English Literature. His characters descend, true to tragic form, from noble heights to deplorable laws of violence, murder and derangement. Allen Thiher notes in *Revels in Madness* that Shakespeare's dramas were the first to combine the essential motifs of literary madness - the descent into madness with a crucial element of uncertainty. This is achieved in Shakespeare's plays by blurring the ontological boundaries between the supernatural and natural worlds as the entropic plots unfold. The sense of ambiguity that is introduced forces the audience to consider whether the characters are really visited by ghosts and witches, or whether they are hallucinating. For literary theory, these examples mentioned have been rich sources for historically motivated research that aims to discover the contextual significance of such representations of madness. For Shakespeare's plays, appreciations for medical history, superstition and social structures unveil a wealth of interpretive possibilities, not just for the protagonists, but for Ophelia, Lady Macbeth and the Bedlam beggar (Edgar) too. Stylistic evolutions and literary movements must also be taken into account: the fictional world of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) for example, can be read as an early Modernist experiment that explores levels of consciousness and subverts literary convention by playfully challenging logic, reason and lexical

semantics. "Madness" for literature, therefore, is not simply a character-related concern: Alice in Wonderland depicts a mad, dream world where logic, sense and order are notably absent. The vertiginous plot, nonsense language, and impossible taxonomy concocts a bizarrely vivid, yet disturbingly coherent imaginary world of madness. The experiment presents a shift in familiar perspective and disrupts conventions of literary form, so it is as much structural madness as it is a story about the mad characters of Alice's mad dream world. Despite the modernist and postmodernist evolutions in the representation of madness seeming to invite and prompt formal attention, very few structuralist or narratological studies have been conducted on the theme of madness.

Jacques Lacan, The Language of the Self, 1968

The phenomenon of madness is not separable from the problem of signification for being in general.

Two of the main factors to which we owe the tremendous popularity of Shakespeare's work are his treatment of universal themes and his skillful portrayal of human characters. Madness, as it is explored in Shakespeare's tragedies, is a fascinating theme. Indeed, it must have fascinated Shakespeare too, because it appears recurrently in the poet's work, even outside the tragedies. It is symptomatic, for instance, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, that Theseus should address the lovers with a speech where the madman, the lover and the poet are said to be "of imagination all compact." It is as if Shakespeare put madness together with love and poetry in a level above that of mere rationality. Besides the heroes, there are also secondary characters who display traits of madness. In *Hamlet* there is Ophelia, whose sweet lunacy sharply contrasts with the hero's feigned and bitter madness. *Othello* is maddened by the machiavellian, sadistic Iago, whose "motiveless malignity" is, a proof of his own peculiar kind of madness. *King Lear* also presents to us two mad characters, Lear and Edgar, the former truly and desperately mad, and the latter, like *Hamlet*, just pretending to be insane. As for *Macbeth*. there can be no doubt that both the hero and Lady Macbeth are also, in a way, mad..

It has been said that madness is a sickness of civilization, of the cities. Probably this is not always so, but there is a great deal of

truth in it. Michel Foucault and R. D. Laing are two psychiatrists who share this view in our time. M. Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* offers a historical view of madness from the Middle Ages until the seventeenth century, the age of reason, when there is a transition from the humanist experience of madness to our own experience. Dr. Laing's work contests the usual assumption about normality with a radical and challenging view of the mental sickness in our society. Shakespeare had already investigated such problems; he was a genius living ahead of his own time, foreseeing, so to speak, the kinds of troubles and anxieties which would be afflicting men in our modern world.

Madness in Shakespeare's Time

In the Middle Ages and until the Renaissance, man's dispute with madness was a dramatic debate in which he confronted the secret powers of the world; the experience of madness was clouded by images of the Fall and the Will of God, of the Beast and the Metamorphosis, and of all the marvelous secrets of knowledge. This is how Michel Foucault summarizes the medieval and Renaissance experiences of madness in the preface to his book *Madness and Civilization* (1973).

During the Middle Ages, madness had been seen as the manifestation either of God or of the Devil in the body of man. The Bible itself was filled with instances of possession by evil. People thus afflicted were supposed to have been seized by the Devil after a deliberate pact with him. The "witch-hunt" became a well-known by-product of this attitude in the Middle Ages. The cure of madness was a religious ritual with gesturing, incantation, prayer, exorcism and even scourging, which were used to relieve man from his sufferings. This belief still persisted in the Renaissance, though it was beginning to wane a little.

Towards the end of the medieval period, another method of treating madmen began to develop: exclusion. This custom had already been used during the Middle Ages as an effective way of dealing with lepers and other sick people. They were expelled from the cities and forbidden any social contact. As the dawn of the Renaissance approached, however, this kind of treatment was also

assigned to poor vagabonds, criminals and madmen. Exclusion took many different forms which had the practical purpose of rendering the cities free from the inconvenient presence of their mad citizens. (Lear abandoned on the heath as a poor wretch is one of the many instances of exclusion that we find in Shakespeare.)

A delightful and yet horrible way of effecting exclusion was "embarkation." Madmen were put on a ship and entrusted to sailors, who were supposed to take them away. These were the famous Ships of Fools, a very common presence in the landscape of the Renaissance. One of the reasons for this practice was the belief, long established in the European mind, that water and madness had an affinity for each other; the sea was restless like the madman's mind, and its mysteries were compared to the deep labyrinths of his mad knowledge. Once put on a ship, the madman was not likely to return, but the embarkation presumably befitted him, because it was believed that water could cure and purify him. Some people thought, on the other hand, that an aquatic element was also present in madness, which caused the dark chaos of the madman's brain. Hence, the relationship between water and madness.

Shakespeare was certainly acquainted with such ideas, and there are clear references to them, for instance in Hamlet, when we hear Gertrude's account of Ophelia's drowning. It is as if that "aquatic element" in the girl's madness sought for its like and thus drove her steps to the brook. The queen says that the girl sang

As one incapable of her own distress, Or like a creature native and indued Unto that element. (IV.iii)

Some of the sailors in those ships of fools disembarked their "cargo" and "lost" them in great cities of commerce and travel, where the madmen would wander and beg for their lives. Others were sent to places of pilgrimage, thus uniting exclusion and interest in cure. As Foucault says, "madmen were confined in the holy locus of a miracle." There was also the custom of whipping the demented publicly and chasing them out of town in a grotesque race. The practical, social importance of exclusion was obvious, but there was another reason for it which was highly symbolical and bore a more ritualistic significance. The madman, like the leper centuries before, was

abandoned to be saved. The rites and formulas were still the same, implying social division but spiritual reintegration. However true and sincere this belief might be, it was certainly born as an excuse for the expulsion of the demented.

In the early Renaissance madness replaces death and comes to the fore. It presents itself as a new, great spectacle to be watched on board the "ships of fools," in the public whipping sessions at market places, in prisons, hospitals, etc. Madness becomes a symbol of menace and mockery, as can be seen through Foucault's words 'The end of man, the end of time, bear the face of pestilence and war. What overhangs human existence is this conclusion and this order from which nothing escapes. . . .

In its lunatic displays, madness expresses the nothingness of existence, and it must be shown and heralded to teach men that they are already dead, that madness is death in life. How characteristic it is that the mad Hamlet should come upon dead Yorick's skull in the graveyard scene! Even in death the court—fool keeps his job as a reminder of the ambiguity latent in the madness-folly relationship. In Shakespeare's tragedies, madness is always related to death and murder. The playwright's treatment of the theme, however, applies more to the dark and tragic experience of madness of the fifteenth century than to the critical and moral approach to unreason which was soon to abolish the previous views and which developed in his own epoch. For instance, in the latter years of the sixteenth century, "the social madness of demonology began to wane and was replaced by a different perception of the disturbed." In King Lear, however, Edgar's use of the medieval fiends still testifies to that tragic experience of unreason of the fifteenth and previous centuries.

Foucault very well remarks that the experience of madness in literature and art seems to have been extremely coherent, but that there was no continuity in such themes. Indeed, in the early years of the Renaissance, word and image begin to dissociate in their treatment of insanity, and the Gothic symbols of the Middle Ages, once so rich in spiritual significance, now become images of madness. In these fantastic figures of nightmare, the concepts of animality, long established in the medieval mind, are now reversed. The beast is set

free from the moral and mystic world of legend that it had inhabited in the Middle Ages. It becomes the secret nature of man. "Animality has escaped domestication by human symbols and values; and it is animality that reveals the dark rage, the sterile madness that lie in men's hearts. Thus the madman was compared to animals and beasts, the lowest forms of creation. He was "the thing itself," as Lear most properly named the disguised Edgar. It is the animal that exists in the madman that reveals to man his own truth and inaccessible limits of knowledge that only the Fool, in his innocent idiocy, already possesses. This is where madness and folly coincide: both madman and fool share that forbidden kind of knowledge enclosed within itself, like a crystal ball which they proudly hold as the prize of their insight. Madness and folly had been linked since the old morality plays of the Middle Ages, where they represented Vice. Madness in the Renaissance was treated in a way which would not be repeated in any other period. But, in Shakespeare's time, madness was still laughed at and scorned, respected and praised; it was linked to folly and vice, to dreams and illusions, to tragedy and comedy. Madness was life and death, satirist and truth-teller, morality and sin. It enjoyed imaginary freedom and was allowed to flourish in philosophy, literature and art. To quote Michel Foucault once more, it was "present everywhere and mingled with every experience by its images and dangers."

Hamlet is by far the most popular of Shakespeare's tragedies* It is believed that the play was written between 1598 and 1602, when it was registered in the Stationer's Company in London. Hamlet is the story of a prince of Denmark who comes back to his land after his father's death and finds the throne already occupied by his uncle, who has married the widow— queen. Hamlet mourns his dead father and is shocked at the idea that his mother has been able to forget her late husband so quickly. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him and reveals that he had been murdered by his own brother. He urges Hamlet to punish the murderer, but to spare Gertrude. Hamlet swears to take his revenge "with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love" and he decides to put an antic disposition on" in order to fulfill his task.

Claudius and the queen, very worried about Hamlet's strange behaviour, welcome his friends Rosencranz and Guildenstem to Elsinore and ask them to try to find out the cause of Hamlet's distraction. Hamlet, however, confounds them as easily as he does Polonius, the king's prime counselor who thinks that the cause of Hamlet's lunacy is his frustrated love for Ophelia, Polonius' daughter. Ophelia also helps her father and Claudius to discover the cause of Hamlet's behaviour, but he acts and speaks very crudely to her, and the girl can but lament. However, Claudius is now convinced that Hamlet is not a distracted lover and that his presence in Denmark is dangerous. Hamlet, on the other hand, decides to take advantage of the presence of a company of players in the castle, and arranges for them to perform a play containing a murder very similar to that of his own father. Hamlet wants to test the ghost's words in order to be sure of Claudius' guilt. Perturbed by the play, the king rises during the presentation and leaves the room precipitously. He decides to embark Hamlet immediately to England with Rosencranz and Guildenstern, who will bear sealed orders calling for Hamlet's death as soon as he gets there. Meanwhile, Hamlet goes to an interview with his mother, who has allowed Polonius to eavesdrop on their talk. Polonius hides behind an arras and is killed by Hamlet, who feigns a fit of madness. Then he entreats his mother to abandon her incestuous relationship with Claudius, and the ghost appears once more, reminding Hamlet not to include Gertrude in his revenge. She cannot see the ghost to whom Hamlet talks, and thinks that her son is truly mad. Claudius, informed by the queen of Hamlet's deed, sees in it a good pretext for sending Hamlet away, to which the prince passively submits.

Laertes, Polonius' son who has been in France, comes back at the news of his father's death and finds out that his sister has gone mad for that same reason; afterwards, she drowns herself in a brook. At her burial, Hamlet reappears. He had arranged for Rosencranz and Guildenstern to be killed in England, and came back to Denmark with the help of some pirates. Laertes attacks him in the graveyard, but they are parted by some attendants, and Hamlet leaves announcing madly his own love for Ophelia. The king convinces Laertes that Hamlet has to be killed and they decide to stage the murder by engaging Hamlet

in a fencing match. Laertes' foil will have its point unguarded and envenomed, and a cup of poisoned wine will also be at hand. They trust that Hamlet, not suspecting any villainy, will not examine the foils. The match is proposed and Hamlet accepts it. This is the last scene of the play. Hamlet and Laertes wound each other with the same weapon (which they accidentally exchange): the poison is already in their blood. The queen drinks of the poisoned cup and dies. Hamlet, being informed by the dying Laertes that "the king is to blame," finally kills Claudius and also dies. Critics have frequently discussed the character of Hamlet, his duty to revenge his father's death, the nature of his delay, and the peculiar situation where we see him placed. The richness of Hamlet's character as Shakespeare has depicted it has always accounted for the particular difficulties critics have had in answering the major questions.

However, my main concern here is Hamlet's madness. The biggest question asked about Hamlet's madness is "Is Hamlet really mad, or does he just pretend a derangement that he is far from experiencing?" In other words, does he use his madness as a mask for his plan of revenge, or as a veiled way of criticizing society? As Hamlet's character is rich and complex, so his madness is also not one thing among many, but rather a mixture of various different factors. It can indeed be seen as a mask for a plan, a "stalking-horse," so to speak. Hamlet himself seems to admit this when he proposes the oath after the "ghost scene."

‘As I perchance, hereafter shall think it meet To put an antic disposition on— (I.v.171-72)’

Thus Hamlet decides to feign madness, and he actually does so, as we are told by Ophelia in the opening scene of act II. She reports to her father the strange way in which the prince has come before her in her closet, "as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors." (II.i.82-83) Polonius, worried about his daughter, believes that Hamlet is mad for her love, and goes to the king and the queen with this discovery. Claudius, however, is not convinced; he doubts that Hamlet's distraction has so simple a cause as love. Maybe he has guessed, in the deepest part of his soul, the true cause of his nephew's madness. Gertrude, worried about the moral implications of her

marriage to Claudius, relates Hamlet's problem to this fact. It is indeed very interesting to note that everyone has a self-centered explanation for Hamlet's madness, depending on each person's individual preoccupations. And if we examine each case carefully, we shall see that none of them is completely wrong. However, while they try to find out the "cause of this defect," Hamlet wanders in the court, watching them carefully like a witty observer. He tests them to see their reactions; he scandalizes and tortures them; he makes them tremble and look foolish. In a sense, this "madness" allows that same license the Fool used to have in the court. As Hamlet "puts on" his antic disposition, he also wears the fool's coxcomb, or the comic mask. All this "wearing" and "putting on" suggests a rich imagery of clothing, which is recurrent and important in this play. Hamlet's madness is associated with a mask which can be assumed or taken off whenever it is necessary. And this is a peculiarity with Hamlet's case, for madness is usually "unmasking"—as in *King Lear*, for instance, where the old man is deprived of everything, including his clothes. "Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here." (*King Lear*. I II.iv) Madness as "unmasking" also happens to Ophelia, for the girl's derangement allows her to "take off" the cloak of court conventions and inhibitions, and thus talk about things which she would never dare mention before (images of love and sex which appear in the ballads she sings). But Hamlet's madness is not unmasking; it works as a disguise. Thus, Hamlet assumes his pretence and, in his new position, becomes a critic of society—a bitter one—who utters judgements that would be forbidden had he not been "mad."

In 'The Question of Hamlet' Harry Levin says that When Hamlet, after playing hide-and-peek, is captured and brought in attended by guards, his self-humiliation seems complete, . . . But we should not forget that he is stooping to folly in the grand Erasmian manner, and that self-criticism is a premise which enables him to criticize others. The mad prince becomes the "wise fool" who, by making himself ridiculous, is able to criticize openly those "foolish wise men," Claudius and Polonius. Therefore, Hamlet's madness is—or at least seems to be—a mask for his plan of revenge, a "stalking-horse," which he uses as a tool in his criticism of society. But, as a

coin has two sides, so Hamlet's pretence also manifests two facets. It does function as a disguise in the situations just mentioned, but before Hamlet decides to assume it, even as the play opens, we already find him in a very strange state of mind. He is said to have always been introspective, given to reading and lacking exercise. His excessive concern with his father's death and his mother's second marriage, drives Hamlet to the dangerous verge between madness and sanity. Moreover, the ghost's revelation brings Hamlet to such a state of mind which, if not madness itself, is very close to it; one can never be sure whether he is really mad or just pretending. Of course, when he is with Horatio, his speech is sound and coherent and he looks quite sane. But his soliloquies are so deeply rooted in sorrow and grief, so obsessively concerned with fixed ideas, that one certainly doubts his sanity. Hamlet is primarily concerned with his "nausea" with sex and women, which springs from the cruel deception he had with his mother. "Frailty, thy name is woman! . . . O God, 'a beast, that wants discourse of reason, would have mourned longer." (I.ii) Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia also reflects his disgust with Gertrude. He delays in examining the girl's face as if to discover traces of his mother's frailty in it. Later, in the "nunnery scene," he openly insults her: "wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go, and quickly too." (III.i.138-40)

Hamlet's concern with obsessive images of sex, death, and suicide seems to be a consequence of that peculiar attitude of his to which Coleridge calls our special attention. "Hamlet's mind," the critic says, "is constantly occupied with the world within, and abstracted from the world without." His perception of real objects and real actions is greatly dimmed by this tendency to be excessively dominated by thought. Hamlet himself seems to realize this in his most famous soliloquy.

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, And thus the native hue of resolution Is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought. (III.i.83-85)

It is not surprising that a man who is mainly preoccupied with the mental and sensitive parts of his being should think so earnestly about suicide. Hamlet suffers more in the mind than in the body, which

he wishes "would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew." (I.ii.129-30) Coleridge says that the necessary balance "between our attention to the objects of our senses, and our meditation on the workings of our minds" is, in Hamlet, clearly disturbed. Hamlet's perceptions of the real world pass through his senses greatly altered by this imbalance, and he "loses the power of action in the energy to resolve." This kind of "procrastination" is very peculiar with Hamlet. He lingers upon thoughts and generalizations, giving to intellectual activity much more importance than to actual deeds. Whenever Hamlet performs an action, it is usually forced upon him by accidental circumstances or by an outburst of passion. This is so, for instance, when he kills Polonius— "How now! A rat? ' Dead for a ducat, dead.'" (III.iv) The same happens again at Ophelia's burial, when Hamlet advances from his hiding-place, fearless of Laertes' reaction— ". .

. This is I, Hamlet, the Dane." (V.i) Also, in his sea-adventure with the pirates, Hamlet is impelled to act without having time to think. ". . . and in the grapple I boarded them." (IV.vi,15) This is, for Coleridge, the very peculiarity of Hamlet's madness and the cause of his delay— Hamlet grows all "head"; his thoughts are disconnected from his feelings and ability to act.

Shakespeare's heroes, Laing says, are never truly psychotic, for they "evidently experience themselves as real and alive and complete." Indeed, it is so, but their "sane schizoid" condition is drawn so near the psychotic type especially in the middle of the plays— that one cannot always realize the difference. Hamlet is a good example of this. We can say that Hamlet displays traits of "self-division" right from the beginning of the play. The true self "is never revealed directly in the individual's expressions and actions" and, as a consequence, "the direct and immediate transactions between the individual, the other, and the world, . . . all come to be meaningless, futile, and false." Hamlet's heart is divided between opposite feelings, as his own self comes to be. Immediately after the ghost's revelation, Hamlet knows exactly what he has to do. He knows his course, and yet he delays. This is precisely the case with Hamlet. He refrains from action and develops a false self, like the antic disposition he puts on. Thus he is able to keep his true, "inner" self-unknown and untouched by others.

Hamlet isolates himself from other people in the play; the only two persons who come into contact with Hamlet's true self are Horatio and the queen. Hamlet sees Horatio as a just man who is not "a pipe for Fortune's fingers" (III.ii) and, therefore, not a slave of passion (as Hamlet himself is). Horatio can thus be seen as a part of Hamlet's own self (perhaps an echo of the "double-man theory"), to whom he must be true. But whereas Hamlet's attitude towards Horatio never changes throughout the play, it is only in the closet scene that he can finally be true to his mother. He confesses that his recent, strange behaviour is but the result of cunning, and asks her not to reveal it to Claudius. He trusts her because he has seen the effect of his words on her, and also because she is, after all, his mother and can, as such, be also seen as a part of Hamlet's "self." In this scene we have the third and last appearance of the ghost. It comes in precisely at the moment when Hamlet becomes more incensed in his torture of Gertrude. Three times she asks him "no more," but Hamlet cannot stop directing his rash words at her. In the beginning of the play, the ghost had told Hamlet to spare the queen from his revenge. Now, the spirit comes in once more with the same request: ■ "Step between her and her fighting soul." (III.iv.113-14) The ghost may not want Hamlet to take any action against his (Hamlet's) own mother, which would be a more unnatural deed than Claudius'. Moreover, we can also infer this from the fact that when the ghost talks about adultery and incest, he refers only to Claudius, mentioning Gertrude as a victim of the villain's seduction. The Ghost of Hamlet's father is not primarily concerned with images of sex and incest as Hamlet himself is. The spirit's concern is revenge. Shakespeare's audience would accept this ghost at once; Elizabethans really believed in such things.. Nowadays, interpretations of the supernatural in Hamlet tend to rest mainly on Freudian ideas, according to which the ghost is a projection of the hero's super-ego. This view also explains why Hamlet cries "O my prophetic soul." when the ghost reveals Claudius' crime. Another important fact about the ghost is that in its first appearance it is only seen by Hamlet's friends on the platform; the prince is not with them. When the spirit comes in for a second time, Hamlet is also there to see and listen to it. But in the closet scene, however, the ghost is only

visible to Hamlet, and the queen cannot see it. It is as if it was meant to become more and more subjective as the play progresses; that is, more and more a product of Hamlet's mind, where madness is gradually intensified. Thus, the interview with the queen is the moment in the play when Hamlet is closest to actual madness— or, at least, Gertrude believes so. As it has already been said, however, Shakespeare's heroes are never truly psychotic. Some way or another, they always manage to recover from their dangerous position on the border-line between a schizoid way of being—in—the—world and a psychotic one. To parody King Lear, Hamlet has been more acted upon than acting; he has waited passively that something might happen that should decide for him (maybe divine providence). His "motto" has been, as Bradley puts it, "it does not matter," "it is not worthwhile," "it is no good." But, after Hamlet's frustrated trip to England, (the turning point of the tragedy), all changes. The veil of melancholy and inaction has been somewhat lifted from his brow and he is now ready to accept whatever may come. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. (V.ii.202-20,)

Hamlet's "motto" now seems to be "all is for the best." He has achieved what Aristotle called "tragic recognition" and, indeed, it is the more tragic because, as Bradley says, it comes too late. Now, Hamlet cannot avoid his own tragic fate. Once more he gives his enemies time and opportunity to conspire and prepare his death. There is no way to escape it now and Hamlet accepts it with the realization that "all is for the best." When all is done—the revenge performed, the king killed, forgiveness exchanged with Laertes, Hamlet is finally in peace with his own conscience; he is himself again. As Laertes and Fortinbras are Hamlet's counterparts on the level of action, so Ophelia in her sweet lunacy is the hero's counterpart in the dimension of madness. He feigns a madness that he does not wholly have, whereas the girl's distraction is true and complete. The girl's sweetness and innocence are always associated with flowers, water, and the prime elements of nature. In her mad scenes, more than anywhere else in the play, this association is evident. Ophelia mentions flowers in her songs

and also gives some specimens from the bunch she carries to those who watch her. She is drowned in a brook, and dies all dressed up "with fantastic garlands . . . of crown-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples." (IV .vii.169-70). There is also irony in the fact that Ophelia's true madness treads upon the heels of Hamlet's feigned distraction. In the "nunnery scene" she pities his derangement, but it is she who will become truly mad in the end. One is reminded of the Elizabethan belief according to which reason, like order in the chain of being, was linked to the harmonious music of the spheres. Ophelia was certainly referring to this belief when she described Hamlet's madness as "sweet bells, jangled out of tune and harsh" (III.i.157). Her own madness, however, does not seem to conform to the pattern, for the lyric quality of her distraction is in perfect harmony with the beauty and sweetness associated with her character. Nevertheless, the irony persists; Polonius announces that Hamlet has gone mad for Ophelia's love, but it is actually Ophelia who will lose her mind because she has been deceived. Indeed, Ophelia is the character who is most deceived in this play. Hamlet deceives her three times: when he tells her he loves her and then denies it; when he tells her he does not love her any more, but still does; and when he makes her believe that he is mad. Gertrude's recent behaviour has driven Hamlet to think of women in a very unfavorable light. Therefore, swept by a fit of passion (like Othello when he strikes Desdemona), he cannot help directing at Ophelia the offenses that he should apply to his mother. What Hamlet could not foresee, however, is that Ophelia would go mad herself as a consequence of so much deception and suffering. The gravedigger is not wholly wrong when he realizes that "she drowned herself in her own defense." Ophelia's madness causes even more dismay among those around her because of the images associated with it. In her mad speeches, mainly in the songs she sings, she mixes references to her father and to Hamlet, talking about death, love and sex. Thus, Ophelia's madness lifts the veil of court conventions which had always inhibited her from expressing such thoughts freely. I have said that Hamlet never becomes truly psychotic in the play, because he is able to overcome his loss of identity through tragic recognition. This is not the case with Ophelia; here Laing's ideas are thoroughly

applicable. Unlike Hamlet, Ophelia is not able to overcome her schizoid tendencies and advances further into a psychotic state. Ophelia, being weaker than Hamlet, cannot put herself together again, so to speak, and her poor, weak "self becomes irremediably divided. It has been said that there is a great difference between "falling" into madness on the one hand and "diving" into it on another. This may be seen as the way Hamlet's madness differs from Ophelia's. Ophelia, being weaker than he is, is not able to win the battle against the social and family pressures that come upon her, and so her mind gives way to madness, "like sweet bells, jangled out of tune and harsh." Not only does Hamlet overcome such pressures, but he is also able to turn against them in the role of the critic, the "fool" who satirizes everything bitterly. The mask that he wears works as a kind of "X-ray" with which he can see through the conventions of society. Social convention is usually a nickname for hypocrisy and corruption, and Hamlet's Denmark is not an exception to the rule. The court is a place where pomp, vanity and flattery characterize everybody's actions, from the king himself down to the affected.

"The man who suffers as Hamlet suffers . . . is considered irresponsible neither by other people nor by himself. But the responsibility that Laing talks about is not that of revenging the murder of a father; rather, he is talking about one's responsibility for others. In Laing's view, madness reveals society to itself, and this is, precisely, Hamlet's "job at the top," Like the "witty fool," the madman incorporates society's self-division in grotesque, exaggerated forms; thus madness works as revelation and as potential

Thus, Hamlet becomes the very embodiment of Laing's ideas, a symptom and a victim of a sick society He know that there are painful discrepancies between his aspirations and his accomplishments. His own, inner self is sorely divided and he is sick at heart. But madness itself is a way of comprehending and partially relieving personal suffering. Hamlet, having seen what he has seen, has acquired the capacity of pulling free from his "madness."

But in spite of being terribly riddled by conflicts and of undergoing unbearable sufferings and madness, Shakespeare's heroes are always able to recover in the end, because they acquire tragic

recognition. Placed above average humanity, they manage to come out of their torments bettered by pain and even greater than before. None of them is allowed to escape death, but theirs is always a heroic death, which they accept with honour and courage. It has also been said that although Shakespeare depicted four different societies in these tragedies, he obviously had the Elizabethan stereotype in mind. The images associated with madness are precisely those which any Elizabethan would have believed, as are the superstitions, the philosophical and medical theories, the religious beliefs, sociological and political ideas, etc. Nevertheless, Shakespeare was unusually aware of the failure of contemporary schemata to account for the whole of human nature. Thus, in practice, he transcends any schematized contemporary ideas of madness, and is quite modern in the way he creates and treats his mad characters. That is why Shakespeare's heroes can be called "Laingian," as they have been called "Erasmian," "Freudian," "Jungian," etc.

As Kenneth Muir has well pointed out: "Shakespeare's depiction of madness, though based no doubt on sixteenth-century theory, has satisfied medical opinion of later ages. Our increasing knowledge of madness during the past century has served only to justify Shakespeare's intuitions."

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