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Hamlet's Madness: Feigned or Not? That is the Question.

Whether or not Hamlet is actually "mad" has been debated by every serious scholar of Shakespeare. The "mooted question of the Prince's sanity" has produced only two serious, but opposite schools: one for the feigned madness, the other the unfeigned (Blackmore 1). The dichotomy of this debate has left much between the extremes untouched by scholarship. In my opinion, Hamlet does not demonstrate and either/or.

Hamlet's own words reveal a supposed "madness" that is never fully rationalized by him. He happens "perchance" … "/To put an antic disposition on" (Shakespeare 1.5.171). Here, Hamlet never says why he might act mad, but the feigned madness has been used before by Shakespeare. In his first play, *Titus Andronicus*, the one seeking revenge, Titus, acts antic so that his targets do not suspect his true intentions till he succeeds, most dramatically. For Hamlet, a supposed madness does not seem necessary since he does not ever reveal a successful plan as does Titus. Hamlet succeeds tragically and only "perchance."

On the other hand, Hamlet presents a plan "wherein [he'll] catch the conscience of the king" by the play within a play (2.2.592). This play is Hamlet's only divulged plan and has ambiguous results. The king responds how Hamlet expects only superficially, crying for "light" and proceeding to pray. The reasons for the king's actions are, however, truly uncertain. He cries for light perhaps out of fear for his life since Hamlet's play presents the murderer of the player-King to be his nephew, which is the same relationship the king has to Hamlet. Furthermore, the king's prayer is

explicitly misinterpreted by Hamlet, who sees it as repentance, but the King reveals, truly, "what can it when one cannot repent" (3; 3, 66).

King Claudius, himself, is uncertain of Hamlet's madness, at least explicitly. Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia is performed masterfully by the Prince for Claudius, the King, and Polonius, Ophelia's father. The King and Polonius are only concerned with Hamlet's performance and not the damaged prop that is Ophelia's love. The King begins simply following Ophelia's woe: "Love?" (3; 1, 161), and he immediately dismisses love as a concern of Hamlet's by remarking that "His affections do not that way tend, nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little, was not like madness" (3;1, 162). Here, the king acknowledges that Hamlet was acting mad for some other purpose and not love; (additionally, the pairing of "madness" and "love" by the king is typical for Shakespeare). A few lines later, the King closes the scene by stating: "Madness in great ones must not unwatched go," suggesting that Hamlet is both mad and "great" (3; 1, 187). Claudius would like to keep an eye on Hamlet perhaps to determine whether or not he is truly mad.

The king seems to be using Hamlet's madness as an excuse to spy on him. Since "madness in great ones must not unwatched go," the king summons Hamlet's childhood friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As the Hamlet's play weighs on Claudius' conscience, the king remarks, "I like him not, nor stands it safe with us / To let his madness range" (3; 3, 1). The king now asserts Hamlet to be mad since the prince now threatens him and his kingship. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are given orders to protect the kingship by taking Hamlet from Denmark to England. The king believes that "the terms of our estate may not endure / Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow / Out of [Hamlet's] brows" (3; 3, 7). King Claudius is speaking politically. The King is not properly respected by the prince and must be removed from court. Hamlet's madness is simply an excuse for such disrespect.

On the other hand, Hamlet's mother thinks Hamlet to be mad and has proper reason to believe so. When Gertrude cries, "Alas, he's mad," she has seen Hamlet speak to the Ghost, whom she cannot see. The Ghost speaks to Hamlet in this scene so we know that the prince cannot be feigning the discussion. Hamlet does hear and see the Ghost, but his mother neither does not.

In such a world, what is real, and what is illusory? The Ghost is called an "illusion," yet in another sense he is "real." He is seen by the guards and even the skeptical Horatio. We, the audience, have observed this supernatural phenomenon. Also, when the ghost speaks to Hamlet, his statements seem "real," since the news the ghost imparts is expected news, truth, not fiction. Although, the kind of world the Ghost proposes is an illusion. It belongs to mortality and past history, yet King Hamlet remembers as the Ghost. If Hamlet is to discover the "real" for himself, he must seek it in a different kind of illusion by assuming his "antic disposition."

Hamlet's "antic disposition," or perceived madness, is his means to participate in the "real" world. With the arrival of players, the prince has a new release for his perception of reality. He is free to act through imagination and through art and improvisation as he cannot do in politics or in the world of decaying, "rotten" Denmark. While the players are only actors, and their play is fiction, there is a way in which their brand of intentional illusion is more trustworthy, and more open to Hamlet, than is the way of the Ghost. Hamlet discovers that "the play's the thing" wherein he'll seek to catch the conscience of the King.

Hamlet's first choice for the play is not "The Murder of Gonzago." In act 2, scene 2, he asks the First Player to recite a speech from "Aeneas' tale to Dido," a speech that had impressed both so much that they can recite much of it from memory. Aeneas' tale is part of the complete work, *The Aeneid* by Virgil. Aeneas by this time in Virgil's tale is taking refuge with Dido in Carthage after fleeing the burning city and tells her the story of Troy's fall.

For Hamlet, Troy is the Old Denmark the one that belonged to his father, King Hamlet. However, the golden age of Denmark belonged to a people not cultivated to appreciate it. As Hamlet acknowledges, ""Twas caviar to the general, but it was – as I received it, and others, whose judgments in such matters cried in the top of mine – an excellent play, well digested" (2.2.424). "Grandsire Priam," the old Trojan king, resembles an idealized King Hamlet, but on the other hand the desperate and grieving Hecuba, Priam's wife, running barefoot up and down, is distinctly contrasted with Gertrude, who married again so quickly after her husband's death that "the funeral baked meats/Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.180). Pyrrhus, the avenger of Achilles, "whose sable arms,/Black as his purpose" (2.2.440), first hesitates with his sword in the air, and then acts, avenging the death of his father. In short, Troy emerges from this speech, which Hamlet fondly remembers, as an image of what should have been, an epic ideal.

Here at the play's midpoint, Hamlet catches a glance backward towards a different world, a lost world of epics, and at this point Hamlet discovers something new. Through the player's, through fiction, he finds not only raw emotion – a way of engaging and accessing his own suppressed and unarticulated feelings – but also what he desperately needs and wants: action. He is ready to "catch" the conscience of the King.

Then Hamlet discovers the proper play is not an ancient one. He chooses to confront and entrap Claudius with a play much more "extant" than the one of Pyrrhus, "Aeneas' tale to Dido." Hamlet's first choice for the players, alas, is "too long" according to Polonius. The "rat behind the curtain" does not relate to the epic values found in the classics; Polonius is too Machiavellian. The ancients in classics were martyrs, but Polonius would not die for anything or anyone but himself.

However, "The Murder of Gonzago" is a thriller, a modern (albeit, Renaissance) melodrama, a play about political intrigue. As Hamlet says, "the story is extant and writ in choice Italian"

(3.2.250). A play of modern Italian, unlike the classic Virgil's *Aeneid* that is in tedious Latin, which is Italian's precursor. All harbingers of audience titillation. Italy, the home of Machiavelli, is the site of scurrilous intrigue and scandal.

Hamlet knows what his audience wants and knows that in order to "catch" his audience, his play must be realistic, not idealistic. Polonius is an experienced actor and director. He admits that he "played once i'th' university" and did "enact Julius Caesar" (3.2.90). He has already acted in one of Polonius' plays by the time of speech that is the "loosing" of Ophelia in the lobby in act 3, scene 1. In act 3, scene 4, the episode in Gertrude's closet, Polonius again positions himself as a hidden spectator, but tragically dies at Hamlet's sword when he is discovered. Hamlet's actions here demonstrate the potential realness of plays even for their audiences.

The victim of actors, Hamlet now becomes one. He sees that the world around him is inhabited by pretenders, that only those who know they are actors are "real." It for this reason extremely appropriate that the player's appear in act 3, scene 2 to discuss the play within a play as if on cue. They have been conjured out of Hamlet's own imagination, and they will disappear in the same way, once they complete their task. With the arrival of the players, the function of illusion in the play begins to shift. Hamlet starts to use it, the players and their repertoire, to investigate his own society, as well as himself.

The Murder of Gonzago is Hamlet's investigative tool. He calls it "The Mouse-trap" when Claudius asks, and that is what it is if Claudius is the mouse to be "caught" (3.2.225). Throughout his play, Hamlet acts as interpreter – a role he plays in the larger drama, using soliloquies and asides as a way of commenting to the offstage audience, just as his interpolations of the *The Mouse-trap* enlighten and disturb the onstage court. Ophelia remarks, "You are as good as a chorus, my lord" (3.2.235). Hamlet's glosses are brief and to the point. "This is Lucianus, nephew to the King," he

explains as the murderer makes his appearance (3.2.233). This is a fact neither the court nor the audience of *Hamlet* would know if not for Hamlet.

Why "nephew" and not, as in the real case of Claudius and old Hamlet, "brother?" Hamlet, himself, is "nephew" to King Claudius and has combined past murder and present threat. Both a glance backward and forward: Claudius has killed Hamlet's father, and the "nephew" silently announces that he will avenge that murder with another. And then "the King rises," thereby ending the performance before the murder can take place.

The play the king watches is not the play Hamlet has been watching. The prince's eyes were on the King, not the stage. Hamlet had added some "dozen or sixteen lines" to "The Murder of Gonzago" and already knows the outcome of that play. The suspense for him is in what Claudius will or will not reveal. Claudius and Gertrude are the Player King and the Player Queen for Hamlet. Our eyes to deceive; the play was in the audience. Claudius and Gertrude are the "guilty creatures sitting at a play," yet unaware of their role in the larger play (2.2.578). They are also the bad, morally, actors Hamlet criticizes in his advice to the players:

> "O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, … that neither having th' accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably" (3.2.30).

The king and queen are an audience, but are also players, players now "caught" in Hamlet's play, his "mouse-trap." His art now acts on their lives. The play catches the king. What was a mere fiction or fabrication reveals a key truth: Hamlet has evolved from actor to director.

From this moment, the play's turning point (act 3, scene 2), Hamlet will himself begin to act, not only in the gravedigger's sense of "perform," but also in his sense of "do." Hamlet will no longer act as directed by others but by his own deliberation. When Hamlet next appears, he does act, quickly and without remorse in his mother's closet, stabbing behind the arras at the intruder he believes is Claudius, but kills Polonius instead: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell./I took thee for thy better" (3.4.31). Gone are Hamlet's days of obedience when once he said, "I shall in all my best obey you, madam" (1.2.120). Hamlet wastes no time on pathos. He does not even "lug the guts into the neighbor room" until he has spoken with, and shamed, his mother. The body of Polonius remains onstage until Hamlet exits with it.

Works Cited

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