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**The Mask of Madness: Identity and Role-playing in  
Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

**Grau en Estudis Anglesos**

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## Abstract

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare explores the notion of identity by making the characters, especially Hamlet, question the role they must perform under extreme circumstances. He presents madness as a strategy of disguise, for only as a madman is Hamlet able to unveil the state's corruptness. However, his presumably acted-out behaviour becomes problematic, for it makes both the other characters and the audience question whether such a performance is a purely feigned act or not. This essay aims to draw a connection between madness and role-playing. I approach the topic from the perspective of what it discloses about one's identity. Moreover, *Hamlet* works as a close representation of Elizabethan theatre. It serves as a demonstration of one of the most recurrent literary techniques in Shakespearean drama, metatheatre. The numerous references to role-playing and theatre suggest that not only Hamlet's conduct, but everything is being feigned.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, identity, madness, performance, role-playing, metatheatre.

## Introduction

“The Mask of Madness: Identity and Role-playing in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*” has a three-part structure. Throughout the essay, my main focus is the role of madness and its implications for identity. I draw a connection between insanity and role-playing and I approach the topic from the perspective of what it discloses about one’s identity.

In the first two sections of the essay, I present madness as a recurring theme in Elizabethan drama. On the one hand, it grants strong theatricality to the production and, on the other hand, it is often employed to accelerate the development of the action. Then, I argue that Shakespeare borrowed multiple ideas from *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, as they both explore the idea of feigning madness thoroughly.

Then, in the first chapter of the essay, my principal interest is Hamlet’s uncanny conduct throughout the action of the play. I establish the origins of his madness and I explain his strange decision to assume the role of the madman, as well as what it allows him to do. In the second chapter of the essay, I set the parameters of his ambiguous behaviour and I attempt to determine and understand his posture both as a skilful actor and a repressed young man whose attitude and performance are always shaped by his tainted environment. Finally, in the last chapter of the essay, I argue that Hamlet’s two-sided conduct is, after all, unsustainable. I try to show that Hamlet’s acts display who he truly is. In order to emphasize how distinctively complex Hamlet’s insanity is, I finish the essay with a brief comparison between his madness and Ophelia’s.

I shall therefore offer an in-depth analysis of the characters’ actions in the play, focusing particularly on Hamlet’s presumably acted-out madness. I provide direct examples from Shakespeare’s depiction of the prince’s mental breakdown in *Hamlet*, as well as other sources content-related to the portrayal of such an ambiguous character.

## **Madness as a Key Theme in Elizabethan Drama**

Madness was one of the preferred themes by the Elizabethan dramatists, as its reach was extremely extensive. Although it was employed both in comedy and tragedy to either mock or praise a characters' intelligence, it was principally used to increase emotion. It encompassed a great variety of current preoccupations, such as the fear of social exclusion and death, and, as Boorman proposes, the eternal battle between reason and passion: "An awareness of this struggle of reason and unreason can be seen in the Elizabethan tendency to dwell on the battle in Man between 'wit' (intelligence) and 'will' (impulse, desire), which gave much scope for the witty handling of the anomalies of Man's situation." (Boorman, 1987: 7). Furthermore, Wilks highlights that insanity was frequently connected to the possession by evil spirits, which is something inherited directly from witchcraft practice in Medieval England (Wilks, 1949: 4). Madness was usually associated with the clouding of consciousness and this deterioration presumably sprung from the fatal work of the Devil on the fragile human mind.

Moreover, insanity never appeared at random; it often occurred at a turning point of the play, thus, it was introduced as a way to forward the action. Not only did madness play a pivotal role in the development of the conflict, but it also granted a sense of extravagance and theatricality to the production. Madness was connected to mockery in that it was employed either to deride the madman or madwoman, or to ridicule those surrounding him or her. At any rate, it never left the Elizabethan audiences indifferent, for it was a great theatrical device which compelled the public and made it engage deeply with the representation: "It must be remembered that the symptoms of insanity that appear pathetic to modern readers often seemed funny to our Elizabethan ancestors. Madness was offered for various motives: to arouse sympathy, to

make sport, to amuse groundlings, to intensify feeling, or to promote pageantry.” (Wilks: 9).

Through the exploration of lunacy, the author pushed the boundaries of his or her imagination. As mentioned earlier, his or her interests range from the comical and grotesque to melancholy and loss of sanity. He or she is even attracted to external elements, such as theatricalism. But the playwright’s ultimate objective was to stimulate the audience’s imagination too. As Wilks puts it, the Elizabethans “were curious about human nature; they enjoyed incongruous emotions; and they wanted stories that would stimulate their imaginations.” (Wilks: 1). Hence, madness was key theme in Elizabethan drama because, amongst other things, it was genuinely appealing to both the author and his or her audience.

### ***The Spanish Tragedy and Hamlet***

*The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1582 – c. 1592) by Thomas Kyd is a well-known Elizabethan play that served as an inspiration to plenty of latter dramas due to its innovative character. It features “insanity, intrigue, physical horrors, stabbings and suicide. [...] Its mad scenes mix the tragic and horrible aspects.” (Wilks: 106). It is widely believed that Shakespeare borrowed numerous ideas from Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, one of the most remarkable being the exploitation of madness in Elizabethan drama. As argued in the previous section, both in comedy and tragedy, madness was mainly employed to enhance passion; to exaggerate one’s emotional state. A madman or a madwoman made audiences engage with the representation, as he or she often added absurd brilliance to the plot.

In terms of action, Shakespeare mirrored Kyd’s idea of using madness as a disguise. Both tragedies focus on the dichotomy between insanity and lucidity. The fine

line that distinguishes lunacy and clarity was previously explored in *The Spanish Tragedy* through Hieronimo, who, after the tragic loss of his child, adopts an abrasive behaviour and goes mad but tries at times to hide his feelings:

Distraught over his son's cruel murder, Hieronimo is insane at times, perfectly lucid at others; at still other times, he may dissemble madness to throw his enemies off war. His intellect remains unimpaired throughout, but he is overwhelmed by grief and rage. Here, as in *Hamlet*, the uncertainty whether the major character is or is not mad becomes a major element in the play.

(Lidz, 1975: 153)

Nevertheless, classifying a certain conduct as a consequence of mere madness becomes problematic. Just as in *Hamlet*, one wonders whether insanity is purely feigned, for the perpetuation of a supposedly acted-out erratic behaviour towards others is highly likely to become legitimate eventually. In fact, in act III, Hieronimo explodes with rage when asked about Lorenzo, one of Horatio's murderers. After this episode, the Second Portuguese concludes that he has gone insane:

HIERONIMO Not far from thence, where murderers have built  
A habitation for their cursed souls,  
There, in a brazen cauldron fix'd by Jove  
In his fell wrath upon a sulphur flame,  
Yourselves shall find Lorenzo bathing him  
In boiling lead and blood of innocents.  
FIRST PORTUGUESE Ha, ha, ha!  
HIERONIMO Ha, ha, ha!  
Why, ha, ha, ha! Farewell, good, ha, ha, ha!

*Exit.*

SECOND PORTUGUESE Doubtless this man is passing lunatic,  
Or imperfection of his age doth make him dote.

(III, xi, 24–34)

In this passage, the importance of being familiar with the context to establish a clear judgement is stressed, as both men burst into laughter when Hieronimo's makes all these hyperbolic references about Lorenzo going to Hell.

Furthermore, Shakespeare seems to be interested in Kyd's unique sense of theatricality. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Kyd makes use of long monologues that provide

the action with strong feeling. This is something Shakespeare later exploited in *Hamlet*; the prince's soliloquies are primarily employed to disclose his private concerns and, consequently, are often emotionally-packed.

Other than that, Kyd's explores the notion of metatheatre by including multiple dramatic scenes, such as dumb-shows, a masque and the allegorical character named Revenge. In *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, Bradbrook observes that metadramatic elements, such as dumb-shows, were frequently used to make audiences lose touch with reality: "The use of dumb shows and inductions further discomposed the narrative, by making some of the action telescoped and symbolic, and preventing consistency in the level of realism or convention on which it was presented" (Bradbrook, 1980: 35). Both in *The Spanish Tragedy* and in *Hamlet*, the play-within-a-play indicates that everything is a mere performance, as the characters automatically become the audience. Due to the success of Kyd's play, the play-within-a-play became a theatrical device highly popular in Renaissance England.

The influence of Kyd's work on Shakespeare is hence fairly evident. It is broadly known that Shakespeare borrowed plots and storylines from other authors in order to produce his own work. So, it is definitely not accidental that *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* share numerous qualities. Shakespeare reinterpreted Kyd's tragedy and produced one of the greatest tales of madness in world literature.

## **Chapter 1: Madness**

### **1.1 Origins of his Madness**

In the famous opening act of the play, a group of soldiers on guard duty gather outside Elsinore Castle at night and discuss the fact that they have spotted an uncanny

figure wandering around the fort. The silhouette of such apparition is particularly striking to them, for it truly resembles that of the recently deceased King Hamlet. While Barnardo and Marcellus are quite paralyzed at the sight of such a marvellous event, Horatio, prince Hamlet's dearest friend, prophetically observes that the apparition of this familiar-looking spirit is certainly not accidental and will definitely trigger serious consequences that will threaten the apparent stability of the Danish court: "This bodes some strange eruption to our state." (I, i, 69). After having been neglected by the ghost, Horatio reaches the conclusion that Hamlet must be informed about the materialization of this unexpected figure, as he is most likely to be noticed by it. Once alerted, Hamlet, just like Horatio, suspects that there is something queer about this rare happening and he is both fearful and desirous of facing it:

My father's spirit! In arms! All is not well.  
I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come!  
Till then, sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will raise,  
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

(I, ii, 256–259)

It is worth mentioning that, right from the very beginning, Shakespeare immerses the audience in a gloomy world of secrecy in which the real and the fantastic merge into a single truth. This dichotomy anticipates the conflict of madness upon the play is constructed: "This opening sets the tone of the whole play, with emotional confusion and doubt beginning to break up the rational order of everyday life." (Boorman, 1987: 152–153). In the opening line of *Hamlet*, Barnardo poignantly asks: "Who's there?" (I, i, 1). So, right from the outset of the play, Shakespeare experiments with the fear of the unknown, as Lee highlights: "From the first lines of the play, the importance of identity and identification is acknowledged, and the fact that neither needs to be established is recognized." (Lee, 2000: 5). Then again, Horatio fears Hamlet's fragile state of mind and effectively foretells Hamlet's descent into insanity.

He repeatedly urges him not to approach the spooky figure by himself, as it might adopt a hideous, menacing form – quite possibly the Devil’s shape, as Hamlet cries in the second act – and it “might deprive your sovereignty of reason / And draw you into madness?” (I, iv, 73–74).

Up to this point, Hamlet feels deeply melancholic due to the sudden passing of his dear father and his mother’s unexpected marriage to his uncle, but yet, his wits remain completely unaltered despite these tragic, unfortunate events. Though saddened, Hamlet enjoys great lucidity, as he expresses his discontentment with the *status quo* through the use of puns, which points to a remarkable quick-wittedness on his part. In act I, he refers to Claudius as: “A little more than kin, and less than kind!” (I, ii, 66). He carries out a light-hearted, even sarcastic conversation with his uncle but, when it comes to Gertrude, Hamlet adopts a rather hostile posture, even before acknowledging the existence of the ghost of his father:

‘Seems’, madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems’.  
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected 'havior of the visage,  
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly. These indeed ‘seem’;  
For there are actions that a man might play  
But I have that within which passes show –  
These but the trappings and suits of woe.

(I, ii, 76–86)

This passage is crucial not only because Hamlet first expresses his deep sorrow for the events taking place in the castle, but most importantly, because he introduces the idea of faking truth and role-playing. In this early interaction with his mother, Hamlet states that there are various things that a person may do to feign grief, such as wearing a black attire, sighing or weeping. However, Lee argues that: “he allows such expressions little

importance in denoting him truly because they are duplicable, they can be ‘played’.” (Lee: 157). Hence, he is already announcing that he is well acquainted with the art of disguise and therefore, he can put it into practice any time he wishes to. In spite of his noted acting skills, Hamlet asserts that, at this specific moment, his melancholy is nothing but sincere.

The outcome of Hamlet’s first encounter with King Hamlet’s ghost is his firm decision to use madness as a disguise. As Hamlet and Horatio had previously speculated, this encounter is crucial in the development of the central conflict of the tragedy, as it is the very moment Hamlet recognizes the murder plot meticulously designed by Claudius. The apparition warns him of the rottenness of the Danish Court and implores him to avenge not only his unfair assassination, but also the incestuous marriage recently carried out: “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / a couch for luxury and damned incest.” (I, v, 82–83).

Impelled by bewilderment, Hamlet questions the authenticity of the ghost’s serious accusations against his uncle. He fears it is a devilish creature trying to persuade him to act sinfully, as the Devil may assume any shape he pleases for the triumph of evil:

The spirit that I have seen  
May be a devil, and the devil hath power  
T’assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me.

(II, ii, 596–601)

Rather than the Devil trying to seduce him into acting immorally, his father’s ghost can be interpreted as a mere projection of Hamlet’s consciousness; it embodies his destiny: “The ghost is his fate, and this Hamlet senses in the most unconscious. In obeying the

ghost, he is responding to an inner drive guiding him non-rationally towards self-discovery.” (King, 2011: 28). At the beginning of the play, Hamlet does not feel at ease with the alliance of his uncle and his mother. The apparition of his father, thus, enables him to externalize his buried feelings: “what is being mourned is the loss of an old way of perceiving the world and defining the self.” (Grady, 2002: 261)

Moreover, when Hamlet confesses Horatio that the ghost lingered on the idea that there is a villain lurking in the shade, his dear friend simply answers that this assumption is not, by all means, far-fetched: “There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave / To tells us this.” (I, v, 125). Hence, Hamlet is not the only one foreseeing the problematic situation that is currently taking place in the castle.

## **1.2 Assuming the Role of the Madman**

Hamlet, then, makes the strange decision to assume the role of the madman. After having had a profound epiphany, he opts for using insanity as a disguise to justify his actions and conceal both his identity and his intentions. He warns Horatio that he plots to “put an antic disposition on” (I, v, 172), which essentially means to be “fantastically disguised” (Spencer, 2005: 208). Madness gives Hamlet the quality of being somewhat ambiguous; he is able to speak and perform without any restrictions whatsoever, as Wilks points out: “In Hamlet, Shakespeare used assumed madness as means for speaking sharp and bitter truths.” (Wilks: 71).

Other than that, lunacy grants him further time, which he needs desperately, as he cannot make up his mind on his actions. In addition, Hamlet pretends to be mentally disabled, hoping that, by acting in a deranged way, others will unconsciously provide him with evidence pointing towards Claudius’ fratricide. In fact, when Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern are sent to keep an eye on him in act II, they disclose the nature of their sudden interest in his person with hardly any hesitation:

HAMLET (*aside*) Nay then, I have an eye of you. – If you  
Love me, hold not off.  
GUILDENSTERN My lord, we were sent for.

(II, ii, 290–292)

He also succeeds in the sense that everybody at court, especially Claudius, invest their time on determining the origins of his madness instead of trying to identify and prevent his next move. On the one hand, Gertrude maintains that Hamlet's insanity mainly springs from King Hamlet's unexpected death and her later marriage to Claudius: “I doubt it is no other but the main, / His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage.” (II, ii, 56–57), whereas Polonius, on the other hand, emphasizes that it is primarily due to Ophelia's lovesickness. After exhorting his fair daughter to reject prince Hamlet's love offerings, he helplessly:

Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,  
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,  
Thence to a lightness, and, by declension,  
Into the madness wherein now he raves  
And all we mourn for.

(II, ii, 147–150)

Ana Maria Kessler Rocha points out that “everyone has a self-centred explanation for Hamlet's madness, depending on each person's individual preoccupations.” (Rocha, 1980: 47) and then she argues that none of these explanations is utterly incorrect. While others are seemingly wasting their precious time speculating about the cause of his lunacy, Hamlet is granted extra space to reflect on the ghost's deadly accusation and his role as a retributive justice executor.

In the last scene of act III, Hamlet finally dares confronting Gertrude and, on top of that, he is able to stab Polonius to death with fairly little reprisal considering the

seriousness of such event. However, Polonius' death is a turning point in the play, for madness cannot longer be approached as an innocent issue. Hamlet is then sent away to England, as his actions shake the stability of the *status quo* imposed by Claudius. It is worth mentioning that Hamlet's insanity is not only a threat to the Danish court, but it is also a threat to himself. As it will be argued in chapter 3, Hamlet's brilliance seems to vanish eventually as he carries on playing his game of madness:

Hamlet has now been moved further into the world of the King; the Hamlet who had been so apart from the alien society around him is now deeply involved with that society on its own terms; now, he is the murderer of Polonius; the revenger has become the legitimate object of revenge, and Hamlet now is a kind of Claudius.

(Boorman: 163–164)

Hence, from the ghost scene onwards, insanity becomes Hamlet's only medium of communication, except for his moments of solitude. So, by paying attention to his brief periods of alienation, it can be asserted that Hamlet is indeed an audacious thinker, for he displays his lucidity in numerous occasions.

When alone, Hamlet takes off the mask of madness and starts pondering about his true concerns, that is, the role he must fulfil: "Hamlet is constantly aware of his mental processes. More than that, he is aware that he is constantly watching them." (Davis, 1921: 632). Hamlet proves that he is able to restore his brightness from the very moment he is left alone, unwatched: "Now I am alone. / O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (II, ii, 46–47). In this soliloquy, he expresses his deep self-hatred because of his inability to carry out the revenge plot encouraged by the figure of his late father. Furthermore, he intends to recreate his father's murder scene in a play in order to observe the King's reaction to it and then decide whether he is free of guilt or not. Nevertheless, as the action progresses, Hamlet's 'antic disposition' is no longer transparent to him nor the audience. As it will be discussed below, the prince's seeming acted-out behaviour towards others is extremely likely to become genuine eventually.

## Chapter 2: Theatricality

### 2.1 Hamlet's Role

After having warned Horatio that he will feign madness, Hamlet proceeds to carry out his mischievous plan. His first instances of insanity occur during an off-stage encounter with Ophelia. The young lady is deeply terrified at his sight, for he is presented: “Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other, / And with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell” (II, i, 81–83). Then, Ophelia describes that he angrily held her with great force and, at the same time, he was shaking heavily. Most certainly, Hamlet foresaw that she would instantly inform Polonius about this rare happening. So, his shrewd plan is hitherto going smoothly, as his lunacy is already causing turmoil and he has not even appeared on stage yet. Hamlet effectively creates the hectic atmosphere he longed for. The following scenes are thus impregnated with his seeming madness. And, as emphasized in the previous section, everybody has a self-centred explanation of its origins.

Nevertheless, Hamlet repeatedly hints that his early behaviour is nothing but the performance of a skilful actor. When he enters the scene for the first time in act II, he is treated as a complete madman. He pretends not to recognize Polonius, who, though quite surprised by this misunderstanding, speaks to him with care and compassion. It is worth mentioning that Hamlet’s behaviour is not, at any rate, stolid. Hamlet is never interested in presenting himself as a lost soul wandering around the castle. He thoroughly enjoys over-exaggeration and, above all, theatricality:

POLONIUS What do you read, my lord?  
HAMLET Words, words, words.

(II, ii, 192–193)

Often highly dramatic, he moves from sorrow to psychosis in a considerably short period of time: “Hamlet is forever breaking and reconstituting himself, fluid yet centred, varied yet the same.” (Lee: 142). After exchanging a few words with him, Polonius aside observes: “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.” (II, ii, 205), which essentially means that he enjoys a “logical organization of thought” (Spencer, 2005: 217). He is thus quite aware that Hamlet’s two-sided conduct cannot be classified as mere insanity, for it certainly seems to be somehow premeditated. However, right after that, he exclaims: “How pregnant sometimes his replies are! / A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could / not so prosperously be delivered of.” (II, ii, 208–211). Hence, Hamlet fools him completely into thinking his charade is genuine. In a way, Polonius praises lunacy, for he observes that, now that Hamlet is clearly insane, he is overall honest and straightforward. Similarly, in the opening scene of act III, the Queen asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for his impressions of the prince’s unusual conduct:

ROSENCRANTZ He does confess he feels himself distracted,  
But from what cause ’a he will by no means speak.

GULDENSTERN Nor do we find him forward to be sounded,  
But with a crafty madness keeps aloof  
When we would bring him on to some confession  
Of his true state.

QUEEN Did he receive you well?

ROSENCRATZ Most like a gentleman.

GULDENSTERN But with much forcing of his disposition.

(III, i, 5–13)

First, Rosencrantz states that Hamlet will not, at any rate, reveal what actually triggered his distress. Then, Guildenstern confesses that Hamlet’s behaviour is particularly sly, as he successfully avoids addressing the questions on his disparity. He later points out that he feigned his kindness and politeness. Could this imply that Hamlet is always acting?

Up to this point, he is certainly only mad when he wishes to: “I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind / is Southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.” (II, ii, 77–78). In this lines, Hamlet reinforces the idea of him being a gifted actor playing with madness. Through insanity, he is, amongst other things, deriding those surrounding him, as Williamson explains:

This madness of Hamlet then, assumed for a specific purpose in the movement of the story, serves also as relief: the hysterical incoherence of the supposed madman is used to mock king and courtier, and to mock even Ophelia herself, whom in the general hollowness of all appearances Hamlet has come to doubt.

(Williamson, 1922: 94)

Moreover, one must remember that Hamlet is not simply an ordinary young man; he is the prince of Denmark, therefore, he is expected to perform his duties accordingly to his social status. The fate of a whole country depends upon him. He holds a great responsibility and the anxiety caused by his obligations as a ‘public’ man is one of the main reasons why he insists on postponing action:

The ‘private’ man has the duty to use his reason to protect himself from trouble (as Hamlet is trying to do), but the ‘public’ man, the man in authority, has a far greater duty to do so, not only for his own sake, but for that of the common people whose safety is bound up with his.

(Boorman: 162)

Then, Hamlet is constantly performing the role of the prince of Denmark. In fact, everybody must perform a certain role at Elsinore Castle. They are all acting because, in the end, they are simply fictional characters played by a set of actors. Nevertheless, they are also acting in the sense that they are all expected to project a certain image of themselves onto others. Thus, Hamlet’s madness is not any more feigned than any other conduct carried out in the play, as the first clown appropriately observes in act V: “There the men are as mad as he.” (V, i, 153). By the same token, although he is

referring to a group of characters, Hamlet explicitly states that every single one of them has a specific role in act II:

The adventurous  
knight shall use his foil and target; the lover shall not  
sigh gratis; the humorous man shall end his part in  
peace; the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs  
are tickle o'th'sere; and the lady shall say her mind  
freely, or the blank verse shall halt for't.

(II, ii, 320–325)

Hence, Hamlet's lunacy is an extremely complex one, for it involves an exceptional performance by a skilful actor that, eventually and unexpectedly, ends up shaping his identity. As a consequence, the way others hitherto approached him is utterly altered because his behaviour is never completely transparent. Hamlet's smooth vacillation between brilliance and insanity entails great consequences both at an individual level and collectively. In the following chapter, we will see the numerous implications of feigning madness.

## 2.2 Metadramatic Elements in the Play

There are a handful of elements which give theatricality to the production. To start with, in act II, the Queen orders: "More matter, with less art." (II, ii, 95). She urges Polonius to attend her inquiries with less rhetoric. To that, Polonius replies: "Madam, I swear I use no art at all." (II, ii, 96), meaning that he does not employ dramatic paraphernalia. It is truly interesting to see that, in the very action of the play, characters complain about theatrical delivery.

Then, in this same scene, during his conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet depicts humanity and the Earth in great detail. However, the following lines could also be understood as direct references to The Globe, an Elizabethan playhouse essentially associated with Shakespeare:

And indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy, he air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire.

(II, ii, 297–301)

The stage would be what Hamlet calls ‘this goodly frame’; it could perfectly be an allusion to the structure of the theatre platform. ‘Earth’ could certainly mean The Globe, that is, the playhouse itself. And ‘this majestical roof fretted with golden fire’ would be a reference to the gold ornaments that were used for decoration purposes in the false ceiling above the stage famously known as the ‘Heavens’. So, it is quite plausible to believe that, in these lines, Shakespeare made Hamlet look at the stage as a microcosm.

Later, as examined in the previous section, Hamlet speaks about characters and role-playing in general. We find him setting up the Mouse-trap, the dumb-show in the play. This play-within-a-play is a performance conducted by the prince. He is eager to reproduce his father’s assassination on stage in hope of triggering an extreme reaction by the King. Hamlet plots to prove Claudius guilty of his father’s death by closely inspecting his conduct after witnessing a reproduction of his unforgivable act:

It is in order to discover by the king's behaviour whether the ghost of the elder Hamlet has appeared with a true tale upon its lips, or whether the devil in a pleasing shape has appeared with a tale of falsehood, that Hamlet plans the Mouse-trap.

(Stephenson, 1905: 31)

First, he instructs the actors; he even enacts a scene in order to exemplify the way in which a specific speech should be uttered. Apart from being a true thespian, he is quite proficient when it comes to conducting the play as well – in this scene, he also works as a skilful director. Before starting the actual performance in act III, he advises the actors to “suit the action to the word, the / word to the action, with this special observance, that / you o’erstep not the modesty of nature.” (III, ii, 17–19). As a stage manager, he knows

exactly how to deliver an authentic performance that would absolutely captivate the audience. Hamlet's skill in theatre is undoubtedly evident in this metadramatic scene. But, as we have seen, it is equally present throughout the course of the action.

## Chapter 3: Identity

### 3.1 Objectivity vs. Subjectivity

It stands to reason that the play raises the question of objectivity and subjectivity. Simply put, objectivity pretends to be unbiased and factual. Subjectivity, on the contrary, is one's conception of something; a mere interpretation. In the introduction to the 2005 edition of *Hamlet*, Alan Sinfield observes that "for many thinkers today, any identity is, and should be, decentred – unstable, provisional, occupied only through the processes of anxious repetition." (Sinfield, 2005: xliv). Reality is therefore determined by one's (possibly) erratic perceptions of the world.

After having been emotionally damaged by recent events, Hamlet struggles to verify the authenticity of certain happenings, and, consequently, his judgement becomes completely unreliable. Albeit his intimate character makes his identity rather dubious to the people surrounding him, his intimate monologues provide the audience with a glimpse into his inner nature. This is a truly effective dramatic device, as, instead of being absent from the action, the audience becomes Hamlet's most trustworthy confidant. An example of Hamlet's ambiguity would be the appearance of the ghost of his late father in the opening act of the play: is the ghost's serious accusation real or is it an insight of what it might be going through Hamlet's mind? The fact that father and son share the same name somehow indicates a persistence of memory; Hamlet is forced to remember him.

Hence, what it might be fully legitimate to him, it might not really be so to others. In act II, Hamlet famously utters “Denmark’s a prison.” (II, ii, 243). To Hamlet, being as insightful and reflective as he is, the moral struggle in which he finds himself bound up implies complete oppression. He truly feels as though he has been imprisoned. He is fully aware that he cannot escape this ‘prison’ until his father’s unjustified assassination is properly avenged. But again, this is simply Hamlet’s perspective of Denmark, as reality is subjective, especially in the deceptive world of *Hamlet*. Then, Hamlet cleverly observes: “For there is nothing / either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” (II, ii, 249). One’s personal conception of something determines, in the end, its validity.

### 3.2 Being and Seeming

Hamlet is unsurprisingly persistent when it comes to complaining about the lack of integrity at the Danish court. In act II, he explains plainly to Polonius that: “To be honest, as this world goes, is to be / one man picked out of ten thousand.” (II, ii, 78–79). This is altogether contradictory, for his honesty is just as absent as Claudius’ or the Queen’s. Only as a madman is Hamlet able to fully express his viewpoint. So, quite paradoxically, only when pretending is Hamlet being truthful. As argued in chapter 2, in Elsinore Castle everything is feigned; they are all projecting a false image of themselves. Hence, Hamlet’s attitude is rather hypocritical, as he is entirely plain only when putting on a mask.

Likewise, in the midst of his confrontation with Ophelia, Hamlet tells her off for being such a fool in believing that his allegiance to her was in all sincere: “You should not have believed me. For virtue / cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it.” (III, i, 17–18). In these lines, Hamlet is shedding light on the problem of dishonesty that shapes the characters’ hideous conduct in the play. However, is this rage

against Ophelia a mere performance by a skilful actor? He is viciously hostile to her, in spite of his apparently concealed love for her. His extreme bitterness to her in this very moment makes the audience question whether he is still playing the part of the madman and, if so, for what purpose.

Similarly, he is brutally malicious when defying Gertrude, to the point that King Hamlet's ghost needs to make yet another brief appearance to remind him that the Queen is not, ultimately, his target. When asked if she recognizes his husband in the figure standing close to her, she piercingly answers that she sees: "Nothing at all. Yet all that is I see" (III, iv, 133). The Queen clearly senses a change of mood in Hamlet; he is dangerously impulsive now. Right after that, Hamlet hastily reveals to her: "That I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft." (III, iv, 189), which is one more reference to his competence as a master in pretending. But – after having remorselessly killed an innocent man and disrespected in multiple occasions not only Ophelia, but also Gertrude – is all this pretending still justifiable? At first, Hamlet was a respectable young man playing the role of the terribly afflicted madman in order to place interest in the unfair events taking place at court. Now, his mask of madness has definitely taken over him.

Although there is an apparent incongruity between 'inside' and 'outside' in his case, Hamlet's erratic conduct constitutes an essential part of his identity, for it is the side of him that he projects onto others. In the closing act of the play, right before the final confrontation, Hamlet openly recognizes that his game of madness has certainly exceeded his initial expectations. He claims that his inappropriate acts are an unfortunate consequence of pure insanity:

What I have done  
That might your nature, honour, and exception  
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.

Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.  
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,  
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,  
Then Hamlet does it not. Hamlet denies it.  
Who does it, then? His madness. If't be so,  
Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged.  
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

(V, ii, 224–233)

In *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel thoroughly discusses that the acts carried out by an individual shall not be separated from him/her, as they become decisive in determining and shaping one's identity:

The act is something simple, determinate, universal, to be grasped as an abstract, distinctive whole; it is murder, theft, a benefit, a deed of bravery, and so on, and what it *is* can be *said* of it. It *is* such, and such, and its being is not merely a symbol, it is the fact itself. It *is* this, and the individual human being *is* what the act *is*. In the simple fact that the act *is*, the individual is for others what he really is and with a certain general nature, and ceases to be merely something that is 'meant' or 'presumed' to be this or that.

(Hegel, 2012: 183)

'Madness is poor Hamlet's enemy' because he has allowed it to be his destruction. From Hegel's point of view, individuals are defined by their actions. Hence, Hamlet is a madman because he presents himself as such. Despite being a perfectly sane man at first, he has eventually, and quite tragically, become a madman.

### 3.3 Ophelia's Breakdown as a Contrast to Hamlet's

Shakespeare explores a significantly more straightforward case of madness through Ophelia's character. As Theodore Lidz remarks, Ophelia's lunacy diverges from Hamlet's in that her delicate state of mind is not put into question by the members of the court: "Whereas Shakespeare is ambiguous about the reality of Hamlet's insanity and depicts him as on the border, fluctuating between sanity and madness, he portrays Ophelia as definitely, one might even say classically, insane." (Lidz: 88). Ophelia's case is in opposition to Hamlet's, for she does not vacillate smoothly between brilliance and insanity, as Hamlet effectively does. His numerous moments of lucidity and his constant

references to role-playing make his behaviour remarkably ambiguous. However, this does not make Ophelia's lunacy any less fascinating, as she is only able to explore distinct aspects of herself through the loss of her mental health.

Unlike Hamlet's madness, Ophelia's lunacy does not stimulate the court's curiosity. As Claudius points out in act IV, its origin is a rather straightforward one: "This is the poison of deep grief. It springs / All from her father's death." (IV, v, 76–77). However, Claudius does not consider Hamlet's implication in the young lady's descent into madness. One must observe that not only is her only paternal figure dead, but most importantly, he has been brutally murdered by Hamlet, her 'perfect' love contender. Hamlet is therefore the one who seals Ophelia's fate. Ophelia's loss, hence, is substantially greater than it may actually appear to be at first.

Only as a madwoman is Ophelia finally able to express herself freely. Under Polonius and Laertes' influence, Ophelia is a mere shadow; her function is that of a puppet almost. Through insanity, Ophelia is granted self-authority. Now that her emotions are on command, she can finally express her feelings without restraint: "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." (Rocha: 47). The girl's downfall is the epitome of self-expression and her later suicide can then be approached as a purely individualistic act. Hamlet, on the other hand, is only truthful when alone.

Nevertheless, one can also look at Ophelia's descent into madness as the failure of rational thinking. As her pain increases, the young lady sees no reason to carry on. She has lost everything of significance to her, so she suspends her very own rationality and let her emotions free, which adequately, culminates in suicide; the ultimate failure of rationalism. Ironically, Polonius predicts in act II that Hamlet's fragile state of mind

is exclusively due to Ophelia's lovesickness, but it is actually Ophelia the one who, in the end, loses her sanity because of the absence of Hamlet's love. Through lunacy, Ophelia is finally able to recognize the state's corruptness but, contrary to Hamlet, she refuses to restore order to the Danish court and lets herself loose instead.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, madness was a theatrical device highly employed in Elizabethan drama, for it encompassed plenty of possibilities – absurdism, existentialism, melodrama, sensationalism, etc. Not only did it grant a sense of absurdity and theatricality to the production, but it was also crucial in the development of the main conflict. Moreover, madness is never accidental; it is employed either to mock or to point something out. Both in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and in *Hamlet*, the protagonist's presumably acted-out madness becomes problematic, for it makes the audience question whether such a performance is a purely feigned act or not.

In spite of the tragic events in his life, Hamlet does not show any warning signs of mental illness. He displays his strong acting skills at an early stage in the play by explaining to Gertrude that grief may be exaggerated through a great performance, which effectively leads to his later decision to assume the role of the madman. After experiencing a profound shock, Hamlet decides to use insanity in order to conceal both his identity and his future intentions. Despite acting as a madman, Hamlet gives us strong clues of his undeniable skills in the art of pretending. Plus, he is often histrionic and highly theatrical. Although he delivers a remarkably credible performance, some are able to sense some strangeness in his unusual conduct.

As Hamlet states in act II, every single member of the court holds a specific role, for they are all in the public eye. Thus, Hamlet's behaviour is just as feigned as any

other conduct carried out in the play. Similarly, his perceptions of the world are subjective; what it might be fully genuine to him, it might not really be so to the ones surrounding him.

Nevertheless, Hamlet's mask of madness overcomes him in the sense that the seriousness of his actions becomes no longer transparent to the audience. The fact that he ruthlessly mistreats Gertrude and Ophelia and feels no remorse whatsoever when he murders Polonius, makes his behaviour utterly unjustifiable. In *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel appropriately highlights that one's actions are defining, that is, they cannot be separated from selfhood. As the action progresses, Hamlet's identity is eventually darkened and, though not deliberately, he ironically becomes the madman he pretended to be in the beginning.

Unlike Hamlet, Ophelia succumbs to insanity by suspending her very own rationality. She does not enjoy Hamlet's ambiguity and insightful personality and this is precisely why her breakdown is never put into doubt. Hence, Ophelia's sincere madness serves effectively as a contrast of Hamlet's meticulously crafted insanity.

To finish with, Hamlet's behaviour becomes unreliable from the very moment he decides to experiment with madness. Neither the characters surrounding him, nor the audience can fully understand his conduct because it is entirely unpredictable. In addition, the numerous references to role-playing and theatre suggest that everything is being feigned.

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