

## CONSCIOUSNESS TO DISSOLUTION: THE INSANE PRODIGIES OF SHAKESPEARE

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Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence-whether much that is glorious-whether all that is profound-does not spring from disease of thought-from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect. They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their grey vision they obtain glimpses of eternity.... They penetrate, however rudderless or compassless, into the vast ocean of the "light affable" (Poe 1).

The belief that insanity is linked with creative thinking or scholarship, has been held since ancient times. It is a widely popular notion. "Deviant behavior, whether in the form of eccentricity or worse, is not only associated with persons of genius or high-level creativity, but it is frequently expected of them"(Rothenberg 149). Since the time of the Greek philosophers, those who wrote about the creative process emphasized that creativity involves a regression to more primitive mental processes, that to be creative requires a willingness to cross and re-cross the lines between rational and irrational thought. What is the evidence that there is a link between creativity, scholarship and madness? What account can be given for this link, biologically and psychologically? And what does this association suggest for related research and our understanding of creative and insightful people? To look into these queries, I intend to review the journeys of William Shakespeare's preposterous scholars, Hamlet and King Lear from consciousness to dissolution. These two heroes have consistently intrigued scholars. The two prodigies point to deeper and more intricate questions of identity and human predicaments than are presented on stage. The question of their madness has been the center of the interpretation of the two plays. Seneca recorded Aristotle as having said, "No great genius was without a mixture of insanity"(quoted in Langsdorf 90). Shakespeare sets up a medieval stage and lets a reflective humanist enter. Consequently, the conventional plot elements of the tragedy are not played out as simple actions on stage, they are twisted and elevated to moral conflicts and opposing philosophical and theological ideas that can be related to the rise of Renaissance humanism.

Hamlet's is a quest to resolve the discord of existence within and without as to achieve the harmony of being, that may transcend fortune. The question of resolution poses itself for the individual who is painfully conscious of disjointedness, corruption and meaninglessness in existence, for the values that would make it coherent, meaningful and wholesome have been undermined. This has happened in case of Hamlet because of his mother's overhasty and incestuous marriage. His mother's act has made a mockery of the values of modesty, virtue, love and marriage vows. On one hand there is the desire, born of intense disgust to escape the heinous predicament through self-slaughter, on the other the religious sanction against such an attempt –contradictory forces in other words, neutralizing each other, as in a situation of grotesque entanglement: "O limed soul that struggling to be free, / Art more engaged!"(Act III, Sc. III, 70).

But what is characteristic of Hamlet is the impression that the tangle is not only external- naked human kind struggling in the thicket of the tangled coils of the "unweeded garden" of this world, but also internal- the contradictory forces within this mortal coil of existence in the flesh in which the limed human soul is struggling. Thus there is contradiction not only between Hamlet and the world around him but also an inner contradiction between the various parts of his being. The impression is that of contradiction within contradiction, of a grotesque tangle within tangle. A closer look at

how Shakespeare uses the device of insanity shows that Shakespeare does not treat insanity merely as a device to forward the plot, but actually lets the theme of madness expand on the ideas inherent in the play, in particular the clash of the medieval values with those of the rising humanism. 'Madness' is a broad term and discussing it in relation to Hamlet calls for a more accurate understanding of the word. The only explicit definition the play itself offers is Polonius' remark:

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

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

The theme of madness in the tragedy is rather prominent: Hamlet pretends to be mad and Ophelia is driven to actual madness and even suicide. On a more abstract level madness lurks in the overall ambiguous attitude of the play towards the true substance of the events seen and referenced on stage. Hamlet is caught between two codes of ethics, two moralities, which are mutually exclusive. The tension of this insoluble paradox is what makes it natural to assume that Hamlet in his philosophical fragility is at risk of being overwhelmed by madness.

The question of "To be or not to be" arises in every individual's life when "being" is opposed to "seeming". "To be" means, not merely to live, according to mere self-interest, as a beast or a treacherous villain does it, but how to live and how to die, to be fully human in one's responses, with "perfect conscience"(v, ii, 67) and "tempered passions"(III, ii, 7-10) that is, to know oneself, and others, to know good and evil, to be true to oneself and to others. In combating with all these impossible aims, Hamlet is forced to put on the seeming of an antic disposition, to provoke with his weapons of words, his opponents into violence. He has to play in his own way a composite role of a lover, actor, politician and soldier, and also the role of a wise fool who is seeking knowledge, in opposition to unknowing fools like Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Some critics, such as Paul Jorgensen and Theodore Lidz, have taken a psychological approach to the issue of Hamlet. For Jorgensen, Hamlet is the victim of a pathological grief that manifests itself in his melancholia. The critic diagnoses this melancholy in Freudian terms as repressed rage diverted toward himself instead of his enemies, and sees the movement of the play as leading to a resolution of this perturbed state. Lidz complicates the issue by contending that Hamlet, though he suffers from certain real forms of madness, nevertheless retains his keen intellect and at times only pretends to be insane in order to thwart and baffle those who would prevent him in his quest for revenge. P. J. Aldus has observed Hamlet's madness from multiple perspectives, ranging from the clinical, including an analysis of his paranoid schizophrenia, to the mythic and archetypal, particularly in the relationship between the prince's insanity and his roles as poet, dramatist, actor, and reflection of Shakespeare. Anna K. Nardo, conversely, has asserted that Hamlet's madness derives from the impossibility of his situation; forced to avenge his father without harming his mother or tainting his honor, he escapes into insanity. Still other critics have examined the political and cultural dimensions of madness in *Hamlet*. Duncan Salkeld has maintained that Shakespeare presents a paranoid world in the play, which projects his society's collective fears of subverted power and sovereignty(Shakespearean Criticism, vol.35).

The tale that the Ghost unfurls to Hamlet consumes his sharp and meditative mind. In *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes, "Such a mind as Hamlet's is near akin to madness"(Coleridge 162). Coleridge is referring to a proverb by John Dryden "Great wits are sure to madness near allied, / And thin partitions do their bounds divide"(quoted in Coleridge

162). Even Claudius recognizes the truth that “madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go” (III. i. 188). Claudius understands that characters such as Hamlet present a great risk to those around them. However, once madness has taken hold on great ones, the threat increases, as the limits of reason, judgment, and often remorse no longer bind the character. In *Shakespearean Tragedy*, A. C. Bradley observes this condition as it relates to Hamlet: “Thought is the element of his life, and his thought is infected. He cannot prevent himself from probing and lacerating the wound in his soul. One idea, full of peril, holds him fast, and he cried out in agony at it, but is impotent to free himself” (Bradley 65). With the foundation of the play and the roots of madness established, Shakespeare concentrates his efforts on constructing the inescapable downward spiral that Hamlet contends with on his quest for revenge. Clearly, the murder of his father is such a shock. Throughout the tragedy, Shakespeare marks the character of Hamlet with numerous manifestations of madness. As the knowledge of his family’s evils overwhelms Hamlet’s senses, Shakespeare presents Hamlet as a broken man increasingly engulfed by madness and melancholy. Shakespeare uses the play within the play to amalgamate the concepts of illusion and reality. Hamlet orchestrates “The Murder of Gonzago,” an apparently well-know play in which Gonzago is murdered in the same manner as King Hamlet, to “catch the conscience of the King” (II. ii. 605). The significance of the play is that it demonstrates how fiction, and the actors that create fiction in particular, can mirror reality. This concept is directly applicable to the character of Hamlet: Hamlet’s feigned spells of madness are very much a mirror of the true state of his mind. Coleridge identifies Shakespeare’s purpose in Hamlet:

In Hamlet he seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses and our meditation on the working of our minds, an equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed; his thoughts and the images of his fancy are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the medium of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a color not naturally their own (Coleridge 344).

When read in conjunction with *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, aspects of *Hamlet* that have long since been obscured by centuries of revolution in scientific thought concerning madness suddenly become apparent once again. Applying Burton’s work to *Hamlet* reveals that Shakespeare created a character who is the very embodiment of nearly all of the symptoms and causes of melancholy that Burton describes. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* exposes a great paradox inherent in the critical history of *Hamlet*: literary critics revere Shakespeare for his ability to develop such an innovative tragic hero in an otherwise ordinary revenge tragedy; yet, when analyzed in conjunction with Burton’s eclectic and verbose writing, Hamlet is a surprisingly generic character who evokes an unexpectedly general diagnosis of his afflictions. He has been condemned both for his harshness in repulsing the love of Ophelia, which he himself had cherished, and for his insensibility at her death. But he is too much overwhelmed with his own sorrow to have any compassion to spare for others; besides, his outward indifference gives us by no means the measure of his internal perturbation. The destiny of humanity is here exhibited as a gigantic Sphinx, which threatens to precipitate into the abyss of skepticism all who are unable to solve her dread enigmas. Goethe’s interprets Hamlet as a nobly weak-willed hero:

Shakespeare sought to depict a great deed laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it. . . . A beautiful, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off; every duty is holy to him - this is too hard. The impossible is required of him - not the impossible in itself, but the impossible to him. How he winds, turns, agonizes, advances, and recoils, ever reminded, ever reminding himself, and at last almost loses his purpose from his thoughts, without ever again recovering his peace of mind (Waldock 10-11).

Nietzsche wrote on the reciprocity between revolution and madness: “those men irresistibly drawn to throw off the yoke of any kind of morality and to frame new laws had, if they were not actually mad, no alternative but to make themselves or pretend to be mad” (Nietzsche 14). From romanticism, through avant-gardism, to contemporary critical theory, some who sought to ‘make it new’ have willed madness as a means of liberation and revenge, sanctifying madness as a politically, aesthetically, and ontologically subversive way of being. Nietzsche then asks: ‘do you understand why it had to be madness that did this?’, and ‘how can one make oneself mad when one is not mad?’ The words ‘madness’, ‘schizophrenia’ and ‘hysteria’ occupy a prominent place in the work of avant-gardists including Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, and André Breton, and the radical theorists they influenced including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and Helene Cixous. These thinkers equivalently imagine madness as the condition of existential and ontological authenticity that therefore precedes socialisation. If the perceived loss of self in mental illness is the negation of subjection and alienation, it promises a more devastating loss of the self – individual, innate, unified. So madness is the psychic precondition of social revolution: psychopathology as a politics.

Joseph Conrad once wrote to a confidant: “I have long fits of depression, that in a lunatic asylum would be called madness. I do not know what it is. It springs from nothing. It is ghastly. It lasts an hour or a day, and when it departs it leaves a fear” (Meyers, Joseph Conrad 131). Psychiatrists would of course dismiss such a “fear”, since one cannot spend merely an hour or even a day in madness and then regain one’s sanity. One might characterise it as a “cloud” or a “wave” of depression. In the famous work, *The Dynamics of Creation*, Storr paints insightful portraits of gifted individuals like Leonardo de Vinci, Darwin, Mozart, Einstein and includes Isaac Newton, Franz Kafka and Carl Jung among those whose schizoid personality led to extra-ordinary creativity or creative perceptions. It would not be inappropriate, perhaps, to describe such perceptions as a form of “tragic vision” as Conrad wrote, “I see everything with such despondency—all in black” (Meyers 108). In Virginia Woolf’s case, as Jeffrey Meyers has it, “her creativity and genius were closely connected to her fantasies and insanity, and the terrible strain of completing a book would always drive her to the verge of a mental breakdown” (Meyers, *Married to Genius* 129).

King Lear tends to be nominated as the logical successor to Hamlet among Shakespearian enthusiasts and scholars. The reason lies in the concept of a transcendental work; the idea that a work of art can speak to us from across the ages. Lear is both Shakespeare’s bleakest play and also, perhaps, his most insightful. The titular King Lear is driven to madness by the betrayal of his two, ambitious, elder daughters. Despite opportunities for redemption, his foolishness tragically renders him unable to tell friend from foe. The antagonists, meanwhile, achieve their goals through mental and physical brutality, devoid of remorse. Shakespeare explicitly questions the true meaning of human nature. The relative lack of hope in the play suggests he had a very dark interpretation of that question indeed. Shakespeare’s despairing thesis is alluded to in the line: “Humanity must perforce prey on itself / Like monsters of the deep.” (IV,ii,54-55)

These images created by Lear of his three daughters’ love are false and sentimentalized. He understands the nature of none of his children. By demanding an unreal and impossible love from all three, he is disillusioned by each in turn. But his love cannot be taken as weak. It is powerful and firmly embedded in his mind. The tearing out of it is hideous and cataclysmic. A tremendous soul is incongruously geared to a puerile intellect. His senses prove his idealized love false. His own tragedy starts by a foolish misjudgement. His fault, like Hamlet, is a fault of the mind. His purgatory is going to be purgatory of the mind, of madness. He has fed his heart on sentimental knowledge of his children’s love, which he finds is not sentimental. There is a gaping dualism in his mind, drawn asunder by incongruities, which further ensures his madness. It has been demonstrated that Shakespeare’s portrayal of madness parallels Bright’s *A Treatise of Melancholie* (see Wilson 309-20), that medical model alone is insufficient to describe the madness of King Lear. Shakespeare was not limited to a single book in his understanding of madness; he had at his disposal the sum total of his society’s understanding of the issue. Since Lear’s madness is derived from a mixture of sources, it can

only be effectively described in this larger context. Because much of Renaissance medical theory was based on premises from the Middle Ages, a starting point for our understanding of Lear's madness can be found in the 1535 translation of *De Propriatibus Rerum* by the thirteenth century monk Batholomaeus Anglicus. This work is based entirely on the traditional model of illness as an imbalance of the four humours: melancholy (or black bile), choler (or yellow bile), blood, and phlegm (quoted in Hunter 1-4). Timothy Bright's model simplifies Bartholomaeus' categorization of madness by calling all madness melancholy, but diversifies it by distinguishing two separate types of melancholy (see Hunter 37).

The Renaissance held the Aristotelian view that there is a fine line between madness and divine inspiration (see Skultans 20), but by the eighteenth century madness was viewed as no more than degradation and shame. In testimony to this, the eighteenth century's favorite version of *King Lear* was a version rewritten by Nahum Tate to include a happy ending (Byrd 7-8). In this version Lear recovers from his illness, wins the battle and reigns again: by suffering madness Lear pays for his sins and is returned to health and prosperity. In contrast to this, Lear's transformation in the original play leaves him so guileless that it is unlikely that he would survive long with the intrigues of running a kingdom even if he had won the war. When Lear dies it is because he has finally learned to love; and when the one he loves dies, the intensity of his sorrow kills him. He is confronted with what is beyond his capacities of suffering and understanding: an absolute nothing. What kills Lear is the intense agony which arises out of the tension between his human need to suffer the unbearably painful and absolutely unmitigable fact of Cordelia's death and his human need to comprehend the absolutely incomprehensible reality of his fact.

Two prominent aspects of Lear and Hamlet are revealed in the course of study. First is the internal monologue as distinct from the heroes' compulsion to communicate with society; the second, more significant perhaps, is to demonstrate the *unhomely* condition of the hero, even when most comfortably "at home". The "language" that encounters "Language" discovers something that is at one and the same time "so familiar and so foreign", in James Joyce's words (Joyce 199-200). The concept of strangeness, of not being at home, is the keynote of the cultural debate which has absorbed the literary and scientific imaginations since the Romantic era. It is both an individual and a collective concern, since it occupies not only the identity of the individual artist but also the discussion which leads to a sense of community among people affected in common by what happens when they feel this strangeness of not being at home or, in Seamus Heaney's version of the theme, "lost/Unhappy and at home". Hamlet, a royal genius, is alienated in his own palace by his mother, and Lear, a powerful king is alienated by his own daughters in his own kingdom.

When observed closely, most of the heroes and the heroines of Shakespeare's tragedies suffer from psychic-disorders. The principal characters of the four great tragedies as, Hamlet, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Othello, and Lear, are in conflict between reality and unreality. Their mental-recesses remain outside the container of a normal man. They are unable to accept the order of the world, their wishes and desires thrust them beyond the society. Their expectations, and wish motives find no approval from the society. Modern psychiatry looks upon this as adjustment-disorder. They get psychologically exhausted with the struggle of their morbid thoughts. This gives birth to repression and depression. Fixation-complex is another outcome of troubled thoughts. To Macbeth fair is foul, foul is fair. To Hamlet the other name of woman is frailty. To Lear ego is truth, to Iago the pain is to see other happy, to Cleopatra men are the tools for sex-fulfillment. Othello suffers from mania of love. He suffers from fixation, his impulse betrays the reality. Mania or O.C.D, overpowers Lady Macbeth, for either she would use a lighted-candle, or she would frequently wash her hands.

Here one needs to reiterate that Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* talks not about the ways in which determinations limit Man's agency, but rather than what we now see as Man himself perhaps a historical phenomena – Man as we now know him. It is not to study the limits of man, but

rather to unravel through history certain structures through which the world is apprehended and comprehended; and it is in the *Order of Things* that Foucault explicitly suggests that Man as we know it is a recent phenomena. Thus in the Renaissance man is not seen as a critical term, an autonomous subject, but rather one among many objects in the vast stretches of the universe. In Renaissance (Cervantes, Shakespeare, Erasmus, etc.), madness was a specific phenomenon of human spirit which belonged to the series of prophets, possessed visionaries, those obsessed by demons, saints, comedians, etc. It was a meaningful phenomenon with a truth of its own. Even if madmen were vilified, they were treated with awe, like messengers of sacred horror. (Foucault 3-33) With Descartes, however, madness is excluded: madness, in all its varieties, comes to occupy a position that was the former location of leprosy. While Derrida is keen to prove the complicity of any subjectivity with the risk and (therefore) fact of madness, Foucault in the specifics of the debate seems to want to prove that subjectivity is constituted only through the exclusion of madness. Thus, again, for the both of them subjectivity has an irreducible relationship to madness.

A critical study on Shakespeare's heroes and heroines eventually signals the sources of modern psychiatry, buried in Shakespeare's tragic characters. There is no doubt that Shakespeare's tragic heroes stand outside the norm in many ways. They must. For, great men must have great flaws or else there is no tragedy. Perhaps, with Hamlet, Othello, and Lear, for instance, Shakespeare points to the very burden of greatness. With power comes manias. History certainly underscores this truth as it records the deterioration of great minds such as that of the Caesars who lost perspective and became perverse, Bonaparte who became a meglomaniac, and Richard Nixon, who was subjected to paranoia.

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

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**WEB RESOURCES:**

- Glossary on the Homepage of The National Institute of Mental Health, U.S.  
<http://scienceeducation.nih.gov/supplements/nih5/mental/other/glossary.html>.
- "Hamlet"(vol.35) "Introduction." *Shakespearean Criticism*. Ed. Dana Ramel Barnes. Vol.35. Gale Cengage, 1997. eNotes.com. 2006. 17 Aug 2013 <<http://www.enotes.com/shakespearean-criticism/hamlet-vol-35>>