

“The Real or Assumed Madness of Hamlet”

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The mooted question of the Prince's sanity has divided the readers of Shakespeare into two opposing schools; the one defending a feigned, and the other an unfeigned madness. The problem arises from the Poet's unrivalled genius in the creation of characters. So vivid were his conceptions of his ideal creations that, actually living and acting in them, he gives them an objective existence in which they seem living realities, or persons walking among us, endowed with our human emotions and passions, and subject to the vicissitudes of our common mortality. The confounding of this ideal with the real has given rise to two divergent schools. The critics of the one, unmindful of the fact that Hamlet is wholly an ideal existence, are accustomed to look upon him as real and actual as the men they daily meet in social intercourse, and accordingly judge him as they would a man in ordinary life. The other school, ignoring the different impersonations of Hamlet upon the public stage, considers him only as an ideal existence, and places the solution of the problem in the discovery of the dramatist's intention in the creation of the character.

The Poet with consummate art has so portrayed the abnormal actions of a demented mind, and so truly pictured all the traits of genuine madness, even in its minutest symptoms, that a real madman could not enact the character more perfectly. Conscious of his skill in this portrayal so true to life, he has in consequence depicted the court of Claudius divided in opinion on Hamlet's feigned or unfeigned madness, just as the Shakespearean world is divided today. To say that the Queen, and Polonius, and others thought him mad, is no proof of his real madness; but only that by his perfect impersonation he succeeded in creating this belief; and that such was his purpose is clear from the play. If the court firmly believed in the dementia of the Prince, Claudius, who was of a deeper and more penetrating mind and an adept in crafty cunning, stood

firm in his doubt from the first. The consciousness of his guilt made him alert and, like a criminal ever fearing detection, he suspected the concealment of some evil design under Hamlet's mimic madness. If today we find eminent physicians standing with Polonius and the Queen in the belief of Hamlet's real madness, we see on the opposite side others with the astute king and an overwhelming majority of Shakespeare's readers. That many physicians should deem the Prince's madness a reality is nothing surprising. Well known are the celebrated legal cases in which medical specialists of the highest rank were divided in judgment on the sanity or insanity of the man on trial.

Let a man mimic madness as perfectly as Hamlet, and be summoned to court on trial of his sanity. If it be shown by judicial evidence, that before beginning to enact the role of madman, he had never throughout his life exhibited the least symptom of dementia, but, on the contrary, was known as a man of a sound and strong mind; if it be shown that before assuming the antics of a madman, he had actually summoned his trusted friends, informed them of his purpose, cautioned them against betrayal, and even sworn them to secrecy; if it be proved that on every occasion, when moving among his intimate friends, he is consistently sane, and feigns madness only in the presence of those who, he fears, will thwart his secret design; and if it be shown on reputable testimony that he entered upon his course of dementia to guard an incommunicable secret, and to shield himself in the pursuit of a specified end, difficult and dangerous of attainment; such a man on such evidence would in open court be declared beyond all doubt sane and sound of mind by the unanimous verdict of any specially impanelled jury.

The mad role that Hamlet plays to perfection, is certainly a proof of Shakespeare's genius, but by no means a surety of the insanity of the Prince, unless we be prepared to maintain that no one save a madman can simulate dementia. If, as Lowell has well remarked, Shakespeare himself without being mad, could so observe and remember all the abnormal symptoms of insanity as to reproduce them, why should it

be beyond the power of an ideal Hamlet, born into dramatic life, to reproduce them in himself any more than the many tragedians, who, since Shakespeare's day, have so successfully mimicked the madness of the Prince upon the public stage?

The perfect portrayal of Hamlet's mad role has been ascribed to the unaided genius of Shakespeare. The character, it is thought, is nothing more than the outward expression of the Poet's subjective and purely mental creation. Such a notion, while highly magnifying the powers of the artist, is, however, contrary to psychological facts. Our ideas are mental images of things perceived by the senses. They depend upon their objective realities no less than does an image upon the thing which it images. The dictum of Aristotle: "There are no ideas in our intellect which we have not derived from sense perception," has become an axiom of rational philosophy. If then all natural knowledge originates in sense perception, Shakespeare's perfect knowledge of the symptoms of insanity was not the product of his imagination alone, but was due to his observation of these symptoms existing in real human beings. His portrayal is admittedly true to nature, and it is true to nature because a reflex or reproduction of what he himself had witnessed in demented unfortunates. This fact has been placed beyond reasonable doubt by a legal document which was recently discovered in the Roll's Office, London. [The document is a record of a lawsuit of a Huguenot family with whom Shakespeare boarded, and in whose interest he appeared several times as a sworn witness in court.] From it we learn that Shakespeare lived on Muggleton Street, directly opposite a medical college near which was an insane asylum. Here, by studying the antics of the inmates, he had every opportunity to draw from nature, when engaged in the creation of his mad characters. It is therefore more reasonable to infer that his accurate knowledge of traits which are common to the demented was not solely the product of his imagination, but rather the result of his studied observations of individual cases.

Since Hamlet then on the testimony of medical experts exhibits accurately all the symptoms of dementia, the question of his real or pretended madness can be solved only by ascertaining the intention of the Poet. We may safely assume that a dramatist so renowned in his art has not left us in darkness concerning a factor most important in this drama. In our doubt we may turn for light to other dramas wherein he portrays demented characters with equal skill. Nowhere can we find more striking elements of contrast and resemblance than in Lear and Ophelia. The grandeur of Lear in his sublime outbursts of a mighty passion, differs surprisingly from the pathetic inanities of the gentle Ophelia; yet Shakespeare leaves no doubt of the genuine madness of the one and the other. In Lear, supreme ingratitude, blighting the affections of a fond and over-confiding parent, has wrecked his noble mind; in Ophelia, the loss of a father by the hand of a lover, whose "noble and most sovereign reason" she has seemingly blasted by rejecting his importunate suit, has over-powered her feelings, and left her "divided from herself and her fair judgment, without the which we're pictures, or mere beasts." Both Lear and Ophelia are portrayed as genuinely mad, and nevertheless, unlike Hamlet, they disclose no purpose nor design in their madness, nor seek to conceal the cause of their distress. On the contrary they always have on their lips utterances which directly or indirectly reveal the reason of their mental malady.

Far otherwise is it with Edgar and with Hamlet. Hence, a comparison of the nature of their madness may be a flash of light in darkness. Both are pictured as feigning madness. If Edgar, the victim of a brother's treachery, enacts in his banishment the role of a fool with a perfection which eludes discovery; so does Hamlet, the victim of his uncle's treachery, deceive by his mimic madness all but the crafty King. Both, unlike Lear and Ophelia, enter upon their feigned madness for an expressed specific purpose, and both, far from revealing the real cause of their grief, are ever on the alert to conceal it; because its discovery would frustrate the object of their pursuit. As in the drama of Lear, the Poet has left no possible doubt of the real madness of the king, and of the feigned

insanity of Edgar, so also we may reasonably expect to find in his Tragedy of Hamlet, not only clear proofs of Ophelia's madness, but also, sufficient indications of the Prince's feigned dementia.

The first of these indications is the fact that the assumed madness of Hamlet is in conformity with the original story, as told in the old runic rhymes of the Norsemen. Considering moreover the exigencies of the plot and counterplots, the role of madman seems evidently forced upon him. As soon as he had recovered from the terrible and overpowering agitation of mind and feelings with which the ghostly revelation had afflicted him, he realized that the world had changed about him; that he himself had changed, and that he could no longer comport himself as before at the court of Claudius. This change, he feels he cannot fully conceal, and, therefore, welcomes the thought of hiding his real self behind the mask of a madman. But he must play his role, not indifferently, but with such perfection of truthful reality as to deceive the whole court, and above all, if possible, his arch-enemy, the astute and cunning King. With this in view, the dramatist had of necessity to portray the hero's madness with all the traits of a real affliction; for, if the court could discover Hamlet's madness to be unreal, his design and purpose would be thereby defeated.

It seems evident that the Poet in the very concept of the plot and its development, intended, in the portrayal of Hamlet's antic disposition, to produce the impression of insanity, and, nevertheless, by a flashlight here and there, to expose to us the truth as known alone to himself and to Hamlet's initiated friends. Throughout the first Act, wherein the Prince is pictured in acute mental grief at the loss of his loved father and the shameful conduct of his mother, there is nothing even to suggest the notion of dementia. It is only after the appalling revelations of the ghost, which exposed the secret criminals and his own horrid situation that he resolved to wear the mask of a madman in the furtherance of his suddenly formed plan of "revenge." Hence, at once

confiding his purpose to his two trusted friends and swearing them to secrecy, he begins to play the part and to impress upon the court the notion of his lunacy.

Had Shakespeare failed to shed this strong light upon Hamlet's purpose, he would certainly have left room for doubt; but not satisfied with this, he scatters through the drama other luminous marks, to guide our dubious path. A strong mark is found in the many soliloquies in which the Prince, giving way to the intensity of his feelings, expresses the inmost thoughts of his heart; in them were surely offered ample opportunities to expose, here and there, some trace of his supposed affliction. But it is remarkably strange that never, like the insane, does he lapse in his frequent monologues into irrelevant and incoherent speech, nor use incongruous and inane words. Another luminous index is Hamlet's intercourse with his school-fellow and sole bosom friend, the scholarly Horatio. The Prince throughout takes him into his confidence, and Horatio, therefore, surely knew his mental condition; yet in mutual converse, whether in public or in private, he always supposes his friend to be rational, and never, by any sign or word, does he manifest friendly sentiments of sorrow or of sympathy, as he naturally would, if ignorant of the feigned madness of Hamlet. Horatio is well aware that everyone assumes his friend to be demented, and, nevertheless, because true to him and to his sworn promise of secrecy, he does nothing to dispel, but rather lends himself to sustain the common delusion. Another striking indication is the Prince's treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. After worming out their secret mission from the King, Hamlet partly lifts the veil for us in the words:

HAMLET: But my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived.

GUILDENSTERN: In what my dear lord?

HAMLET: I am but mad north-northwest; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.

Again, Hamlet's instruction to the players, his cautious direction to Horatio, as well as his skillful intermittent play of madness when in the same scene he addresses

Horatio, Ophelia, the King, and Polonius, display, not only a sane, but also a master mind, versatile in wit, and ready to meet cunning subterfuge with artifice at every point. If he were really mad, he could never have preserved such perfect consistency in word and action towards so many people under rapid change of circumstances; always sane in dealing with his friends, and always simulating madness in presence of those whom he mistrusted. Once he was obliged to raise his vizard in presence of his mother. It was in the formal interview, when she sought to shelter herself against his merciless moral onslaught by asserting his madness. But by unmasking himself he baffled her, and proceeded in a terrible but righteous wrath to lacerate her dormant conscience, till he awakened her to the shameful sense of her criminal state and to manifest contrition.

An objection to Hamlet's sanity is sometimes seen in his own alleged confessions of madness. He seeks pardon, they say, from Laertes for his violence against him on the plea of madness. This objection is rather an argument to the contrary; for insane persons are never known to plead insanity in self-exculpation. The objection, moreover, is not valid, because it is based upon a misinterpretation of the word madness. The madness of which Hamlet speaks in the present instance and which he pleads in excuse, is not a fixed mental malady, but what in common parlance is a madness synonymous with a sudden outburst of anger, in which self-control is lost for the moment. Such was the madness of Hamlet, when in sudden anger he slew Polonius, and again, when at Ophelia's grave, his mighty grief was roused to wrathful expression by the unseemly and exaggerated show of Laertes.

All these indications scattered through the drama are intermittent flashes, which, amid the darkness of doubt, illumine the objective truth of Hamlet's feigned madness. But there is still another and independent truth which, though already alluded to by a few eminent critics, merits here a fuller consideration. This truth grows to supreme importance when viewed in relation to Shakespeare and his dramatic art. A little reflection on the nature and principles of art will engender a repugnance to any

theory of Hamlet's real madness. Art is the expression of the beautiful, and dramatic poetry is a work of art, and like every other art it has its canons and its principles. If poetry be the language of passion of enlivened imagination; if its purpose be to afford intellectual pleasure by the excitement of agreeable and elevated, and pathetic emotions; this certainly is not accomplished by holding up to view the vagaries of a mind stricken with dementia. The prime object of tragic poetry is to expose some lofty and solemn theme so graphically that its very portrayal will awaken in our moral nature a love of virtue and a detestation of vice. This verily is not effected by delineating the mad antics of some unfortunate whose disordered mind leaves him helpless to the mercy of the shifting winds of circumstances, and irresponsible to the moral laws of human life. No spectator can discover in the portrayal of the irrational actions of a madman an expression of the beautiful. It gives no intellectual pleasure, stirs no pleasing emotion, and engenders no love of virtue and hatred of vice.

Nothing, it is true, may be so abhorrent to our world of existences, but may, in some form or other, be brought under the domain of art. "Men's evil passions have given tragedy to art; crime is beautified by being linked to an avenging Nemesis; ugliness is clothed with a special form of art in the grotesque." Even pain and suffering become attractive in the light of heroism which endures them in the cause of truth and justice. In consequence, the dramatist enjoys the privilege of portraying characters of every hue, of mingling the ignoble with the noble, and of picturing life in all its varied forms, with the view that the contemplation of such characters will excite pleasure or displeasure, and moral admiration or aversion in every healthy mind. This is true only when these characters are not pitiable mental wrecks, but agents free, rational, and responsible. A healthy mind can find nothing but displeasure and revulsion of feeling at the sorry sight of a fellow-being whose reason is dethroned, and who as a mere automaton concentrates in his mental malady the chief elements of the tragedy and its development of plot. A drama so constructed is intellectually and morally repugnant to

human nature. Rob the hero of intelligence and consciousness of moral responsibility, and you make the work devoid of human interest and leave it wholly meaningless. Such an unfortunate should not be paraded before the public gaze in defiance of the common feelings of humanity; but in all kindness, be relegated to the charitable care of some home or refuge.

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