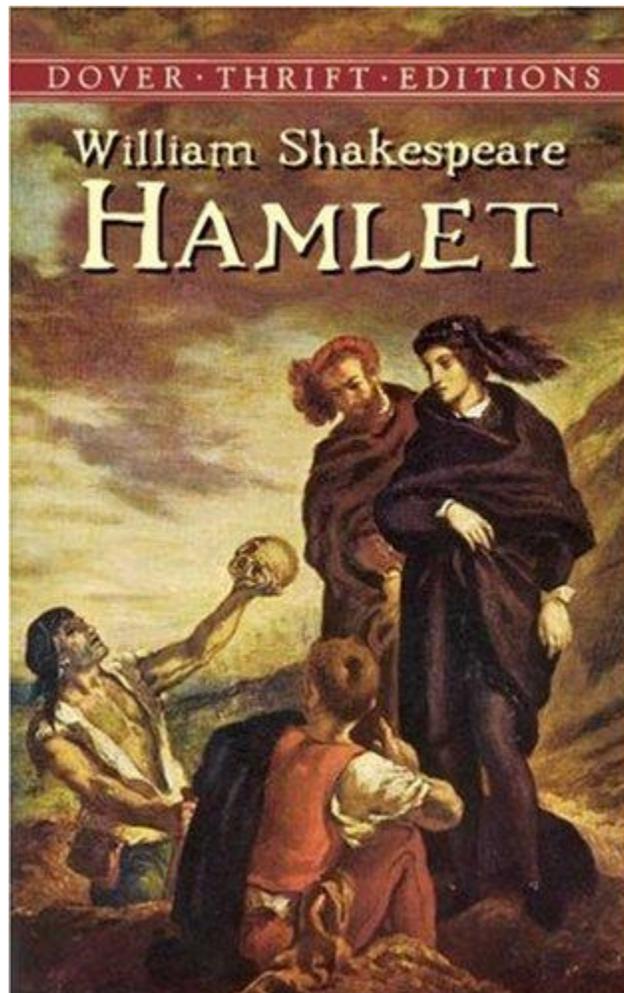


Feigned Madness – Treatment of Theatre Imagery in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

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Abstract

Theatre imagery has become almost an aphorism, has its occurrence been traced out even in plays belonging to the pre - Shakespearean era. The content for feigned madness has ancient roots. In the renaissance, the feigned madness was more than really the stuff of comic duplicity or confusion. The theatre imagery in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a kind of perceptual lens through

which we may observe and analyze the conduct of the character and their tragic predicaments. Hamlet is often described as tragedy dominated by the idea of the plays. Feigned madness becomes a powerful metaphor attached to the theatre imagery. "To be or not to be" begins one of the most famous soliloquies of all time by an author William Shakespeare in his play, Hamlet. There are several different motifs that are relayed within Hamlet's story. These motifs include death, obsession and betrayal all of which contribute to reassure Hamlet's madness. In every motif, the audience can state on a universal level both back in the day and in present times as death.

Key words: Madness, antic disposition, imagery, William Shakespeare

Theatre Imagery- Feigned Madness

Theatre imagery has become almost an aphorism, has its occurrence been traced out even in plays belonging to the pre-Shakespearean era. The content for feigned madness has ancient roots. In the renaissance, the feigned madness was more than really the stuff of comic duplicity or confusion.

The theatre imagery in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a kind of perceptual lens through which we may observe and analyze the conduct of the character and their tragic predicaments. Hamlet is often described as tragedy dominated by the idea of the plays. Feigned madness becomes a powerful metaphor attached to the theatre imagery. It is manifested specifically in Act II, Scene III in *Hamlet* as an "antic disposition". The metaphor takes other important forms in the play: the masks and pretenses put on by the main characters in Claudius mock court: the use of the itinerant players, the play within the play and the imagery of clothing and painting.

Hamlet's Social and Cosmic Role

The manifestations of the theatre are subsumed by the broader questions of Hamlet's social and cosmic role in Denmark. Hamlet completes the arrangements for the play with the help of Horatio, and just before the entrance of the court party, Hamlet says, "I must be idle." *Hamlet* (III .ii. 85.) This evidently is an affirmation of his intention to be "foolish". Then to his mother in the Closet Scene, he precisely refers to the belief held by some about the court that he

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is mad, and assures her that he is consciously acting the part of madness in order to attain his object: "I essentially am not in madness, but mad in craft" (*Hamlet* III. iv.187-8.)

Focus on the Betrayal His Family Has Faced

Hamlet's belief revolves around the betrayal his family has faced at the hands of his uncle. Despite the fact that Hamlet appears to have been given evidence that his uncle did, as a matter of fact, murder his father, it seems as though this so – called evidence is simply not enough for Hamlet to be absolutely certain, "where wilt thou lead me? Speak: I'll go no further." Although this state may be seen as Hamlet attempting to state his ground in search for answers as to what is happening, the other side of this could also be that he is somewhat afraid of the ghost that is standing in front of him. The ghost admits to Hamlet that he is Hamlet's murdered father. A conversation takes place between Hamlet and the ghost of his dead father where the ghost openly accuses Claudius, Hamlet's uncle of having been the murderer by stating that "the serpent that did sting the father's life/now wears his crown." *Hamlet* (I. v. 39-40). If the ghost is indeed Hamlet's father and it is to be believed, the ghost's accusation should be all of the proof that Hamlet needs, yet he continually searches for proof, all the while replacing normal joys with his obsession to know the absolute truth behind the betrayal that resulted in the death of his beloved father. Eventually, his obsession with his father's death gets strengthened; when he is separated from his family and loved ones.

Possible Insanity

At the same time, maybe, it was insanity as it could have been because there are many different ways that an individual learns to manage what they are dealing with. In this case, Hamlet must learn to deal with the loss of his father and perhaps something like a ghost is in fact his coping mechanism. Perhaps that is also a sign of feigning madness as he allowed himself to correspond with someone that really should not exist rationally. Since Hamlet seemed to be far past the idea of true sanity, it would further seem that his talking to a ghost would simply add to the madness that is in Hamlet.

Reality and Life

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Hamlet is a play that initiates a young prince into reality and life. His problem concerns roles and identities. He has lost “a Throne” there by a social publically acceptable persona”. He is seeking through out the drama as a “dispossessed ghost”. When the play begins he is no longer a son, a nephew, a lover, a friend or even heir to the throne, as he was before the murder of his father. Revenge was not congenial to his nature. His duty urges him to devise a new part from “the book and volume of his brain”. Hamlet’s identity is related to the social and cosmic role in the kingdom of Denmark. It is at once a geographic centre of his existence and the stage upon which he commits his tragic action. He strives at restoring a fallen world. (“Time is out of joint”.)

Disillusionment and Initiation into Reality

The themes of disillusionment and initiation into reality are the essential element that engenders “madness” in the play. It is in fact his “figured” madness that prevents him from being really mad. Thus the role of “feigned madness” becomes an intermediary way station in Hamlet’s movements from his youthful ideals he must renounce to the mature sacrificial role he fears, but finally to be in - acted. Dramatically, the feigned madness “stands somewhere between the false posturing of Claudius the true player, king and the player king’s performance. Madness then becomes an instrumentality and a defense. With the feigned madness he can work his dislocations into a variety of pertinent roles: social critic, discarded love, moralist philosopher, stage director and so on. These roles express his maddening pain and rage so that he does not succumb to lunacy as it happens in the case of Ophelia.

Tragic Destiny Lies in His Very Maturation

In the final act Hamlet discovers that life is not merely a set of stagey metaphors. Claudius is after him. He sees a mirror of his father’s cause in his own and the reflection of the state’s cause in both. His identification with his father is made more open when he approaches the mourners at Ophelia’s “maimed” funeral rites. He challenges Laertes and Claudius: “This is I/ Hamlet the Dane” *Hamlet* (V. i. 242). We find him using the royal epithet to himself for the first time in the play. Ironically, Hamlet’s tragic destiny lies in his very maturation, in his reluctant embracing of reality. He finds in the Danish court a world of shadows, which he cuts through by becoming a shadow himself, and by using a shadow play as his weapon. He achieves

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his identity by breaking through a world of false symbols into a world of real things. The stage metaphor is no mere metaphor. It signifies the adumbration of a universe of higher meanings and hidden purposes. The last speech in the play itself contains a version of the theatre metaphor.

“ Let our captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he put on,
To have proved most royal.” *Hamlet* (V. ii.19.)

In *Hamlet* the protagonist’s role becomes digested into reality in terms of the character & his acceptance of himself in the world. In *Hamlet*, the castle is controlled by Claudius. The antic disposition of Hamlet is not altogether impenetrable. Hamlet belatedly wakes up to accept life, human being and his doom.

Hamlet’s Madness

At first Hamlet’s madness is considered as harmless and have been caused by no other than the problems that are present. However when hamlet murders Polonius, Hamlet’s madness is interpreted differently. Hamlet’s madness is compared to a “foul disease”. His madness is no longer dismissed as a common problem of grief over his father’s death, resentment in his mother’s marriage or disappointed love. Claudius like others during the renaissance “would not understand”. Hamlet’s madness & distance him from it with the assumption that “disease” is dangerous.

Thus there is no doubt Hamlet’s madness was really feigned. Perhaps Hamlet himself, if we could ask him, would not know why he chooses to feign madness any more than we do. Shakespeare never makes his dramas mere exhibitions of human experience, wise or otherwise, but they all are studies in the spiritual life of man. If Hamlet were thought as truly mad, then his entrances and exists could convey no meaning to sane persons, except the lesson to avoid insanity. Thus, Shakespeare has used the technique of artistic imagery well in the play *Hamlet*.

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