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Appearance, Reality, and Madness in *Hamlet*

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* depicts the titular character's attempt to exact revenge upon the murderer of his father, feigning madness to let his behavior distract those surrounding him from his actions. Hamlet, in his grief and mourning, is very concerned with the distinction between reality and various forms of appearance—illusion, falsification, performance, and subjective experience. Throughout his indecision of action, Hamlet's feigned madness evolves to seem true, as he increasingly questions the nature of reality, the reality of others, and his own sense of reality. Shakespeare uses his depiction of Hamlet's questioning of reality and the ambivalent actuality of his madness to explore the relationship between appearance and reality, the effect of this deliberation for an individual, and humanity's relationship with understanding the subjective experience.

Shakespeare introduces the conception of questioning reality as it exists in the play and for Hamlet through the character's initial assertion and action of feigning madness. Shakespeare establishes the tone of the play from the first line, "Who's there?", (1.1.1), asked by Bernardo in the dark, generally introducing an interrogative tone by tense, and an ambiguous one, and hinting at that which is being questioned: reality. Francisco, the responding sentry, replies, "Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself," (1.1.2) denying a response to the question and asking instead the speaker to open his own self up to knowing, foreshadowing the ways in which Hamlet's questioning of reality in others will turn inward. Shakespeare then introduces Hamlet in his first scene through intentionally intricate language and the character's clarification of his state. When Gertrude, questioning why Hamlet is in a sorrowful mood in the wake of his father's death,

states, “all that lives must die,” (1.2.72), their subsequent exchange demonstrates Hamlet’s established distinction between reality and its appearance:

HAMLET. Ay, madam, it is common.

QUEEN GERTRUDE. If it be,

Why seems it so particular with thee?

HAMLET. Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not ‘seems.’ (1.2.74-6)

Hamlet’s distinction between what “is” and what “seems” demonstrates an understanding and concern with the difference. Similarly, later, in Act 1, Scene 4, upon seeing the ghost of King Hamlet, Hamlet’s declaration of, “Angels and ministers of grace defend us! / Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,” establishes his ever-present internal question of reality versus appearance, this time with respect to the ghost, his motivations, and his words, on which the rest of Hamlet’s thoughts and actions in the play are based. After his encounter with the ghost, Hamlet responds to Horatio’s explanation at the “strange[ness]”, (1.1.165), of the encounter, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” (1.5.168-169), pointing out the limits of the subjective experience in the infinite magnitude comparison between a single individual’s knowledge, “your philosophy”, and all that exists in the world. Thus, the impetus of the Ghost prompts Hamlet’s plan to “put an antic disposition on,” (1.5.172), confusing those who know him and distracting them from his intended plans to exact revenge on Claudius. Shakespeare introduces Hamlet’s feigned madness alongside the character’s concerns with the distinction between reality and appearance. Shakespeare establishes an association between the two for the progression of the play, and the method, madness, of Hamlet's expression for his evolving understanding of the nature of reality.

Shakespeare moves on to demonstrate Hamlet’s appearance of madness to the court and the court’s reaction to it, characterizing Hamlet through the perception of others and

communicating the subjectivity of experience as it exists for individuals. Various characters surrounding Hamlet attempt to theorize the cause of his presented madness. Gertrude asserts that the cause is, “His father's death, and [hers and Claudius’s] o'erhasty marriage.” (2.2.57). Claudius, similarly believes it is the grief for his father, as he tries to lighten his mood “you must know, your father lost a father; / That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound,” (1.2.89-90). Polonius initially believes it is love-sickness after he forbids Ophelia from talking with him, as he subsequently “Fell into a sadness, then into a fast…and, by this declension, / Into the madness wherein now he raves, / And all we mourn for. (2.2.143-148). Slowly, however, those surrounding Hamlet realize that despite his appearance of madness, Hamlet is of sound and clear reason; Polonius remarks in an aside, “Though this be madness, yet there is method / in’t.” (2.2.201-202), and Claudius remarks, scared that Hamlet has realized Claudius’s corruption and will act to unseat him from the throne, “Madness in great ones must not unwatched go,” (3.1.188). Shakespeare uses the various evolving perspectives on Hamlet and his madness to demonstrate the subjectivity of the individual experience, in how each character views Hamlet through their own motivations and experiences. Shakespeare also explores how one person, Hamlet’s, pretense, in his act of madness can affect and be perceived by others.

Hamlet’s feigned madness is accompanied by new anxieties regarding whether or not those surrounding him are lying to him or otherwise masquerading in pretense. Shakespeare demonstrates Hamlet’s concern with the presentation of reality versus other forms of appearance on an interpersonal level. In Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet refutes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s insistence that the state of Denmark is not as bad as Hamlet makes it out to be, “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so,” (2.2.268-270). Hamlet’s profound metaphysical assessment of the nature of reality—that it is one’s “thinking” that determines whether something is good or bad—may indicate his thinking has tragically turned predeterministic, or otherwise

that the act of thinking about something makes it good or bad. This thinking suggests that Hamlet's feigned madness may have either turned true, while also depicting his developing understanding of the nature of reality. Hamlet finds his potential limited by these thoughts, however, as he expresses, "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams." (2.2.273-275). Anxious over this perception of others and whether they are lying to him, Hamlet finds his "bad dreams" come true, his anxieties confirmed, in his assessment of all his relationships in his life. With Ophelia, he misogynistically insulting her—and by proxy, all womankind—for her use of cosmetics, which he claims puts on a false face, "I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God / has given you one face, and you make yourselves / another," (3.1.141-142). With Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he lashes out, "You would play upon me… 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me" (3.2.344-352)," lambasting them for their allegiance to King Claudius, despite knowing the inability to turn down royal command. Hamlet's insults, to his face, an unwise Polonius, in his dislike of the counselor's obsequiousness, managing to demonstrate all, the brilliant humour, depression, and wit of insult that defines his own character:

> POLONIUS. My lord, I will most humbly take my leave of you.
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> HAMLET. You cannot, sir, take from me any thing that I will
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> more willingly part withal: except my life, except
>
> my life, except my life. (2.2.208-211)

And, finally, Hamlet discovers, in the first place, that his uncle, Claudius, had killed King Hamlet and unjustly usurped the throne. Hamlet's steady realization and assessment of the lies in the appearance of the people that surround him confirm his anxieties and drive him into isolation.

Shakespeare shows the upsetting experience of questioning one's reality, and depicts Hamlet's feigned madness as becoming potentially true, as a result.

Shakespeare uses the language of play to depict Hamlet's further exploration of the relationship between reality and appearance, suggesting that artistic forms of fiction may be more real than reality itself. In an attempt to determine whether his perception of reality—the knowledge that Claudius did kill King Hamlet, which he obtained from the questionable source of the Ghost—Hamlet puts on a play, *The Mousetrap*. Hamlet's aim, "The play's the thing, / Wherein I'll catch the / conscience of the king." (2.2.633-634), is for its plot, which mirrors the event of King Hamlet's murder, to illicit a confirmation reaction from Claudius. That Hamlet uses a play, a fictionalized pretense, to elicit the truth from Claudius is, at face, ironic, using the epitome of deceit and illusion, theatre, to determine reality. However, the use of this form of seemingly falsified appearance to find reality begins a countering and paradoxical line of thought, for both Hamlet and the work, that equates the two, reality and appearance. Similarly, in Act 3, Scene 2, when Hamlet is having a conversation with Rosencratz and Guildenstern, as referenced above, the two's "play[ing]" of Hamlet, using the image of instruments, conceptualizes the understanding of human interaction through artistic metaphors as well. Shakespeare asserts that these methods of artifice may capture the truth of humanity's experience more than a strict observation of reality—that fiction can be more true that reality, reality being illogical in nature, and fiction, in being controlled and crafted in humanity's yearn to find logic in reality, logical. Such paradoxes define Hamlet's progression from feigned madness to a question of whether it is still a pretense.

Hamlet's madness, grief, and demise is paralleled and foreshadowed in another character: Ophelia. In contrast to the other characters' perception of Hamlet, Ophelia is not mildly concerned with Hamlet's disposition, but heavily invested in his appearance towards her. Her

father and brother are convinced that Hamlet is “a prince out of [her] star”, (2.2.150), wanting only to use her, take her virginity, and leave her, as they believe marrying her, the daughter of a counselor, would not be possible as a prince; meanwhile, Ophelia is convinced that Hamlet truly loves her. Thus, stuck in a difficult choice between two paradoxical wishes for her, Hamlet’s mad responses to her, from “I did love you once,” (3.1.114), to “I loved you not,” (3.1.117) in the span of four lines, in turn, are maddening to Ophelia. The abuses of Hamlet, a factor prompting her to question her own reality, in combination with the death of her father and the subsequent grief, contribute to her madenning state and eventual suicide. Ophelia’s development parallels Hamlet, in grief and sense of reality; Ophelia’s differs only in her commitment to what Hamlet has soliloquied about but not done, suicide, the only act of agency in life controlled by the men in her life. Ophelia’s struggle with her perception of reality proves the madness of that questioning to be a more universal experience.

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* depicts Hamlet’s drive to epistemological madness in his process of questioning the distinction between reality and appearances, the relationship between the two, and eventually, their equation. This depiction communicates a facet of the human condition: that humanity will forever yearn to make sense of reality and will forever be frustrated by its illogical nature. *Hamlet* demonstrates the limits of the subjective experience through one individual, the play’s titlular character, and shows the tragic limits to which his questioning of his reality drives him, including murder, insanity, and death. The play can be seen as a cautionary tale against trusting reality to be logical, or otherwise a hyperbolic dramatization of the frustration, sorrow, and agony that humanity universally experiences in understanding one’s own consciousness in relation with others and the world one knows.