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Madness in *Hamlet*: A Review of Critical Essays

One of the central issues in *Hamlet* is the madness, feigned or real, that several characters display. In order to understand the much of the play, the roots of the madness that Hamlet and Ophelia endure must be understood. Critical approaches to this topic have been varied, with some scholars finding Freudian overtones in Hamlet's madness, and others looking at how madness was treated and addressed in Elizabethan England as a way to better understand this problem. I intend to take a third stance by combining the two perspectives and placing the different representations of madness in *Hamlet* in a historical as well as a psychological perspective.

Hamlet's madness has been often attributed to grief over the death of his father. In Peter Sacks' article entitled "Where Words Prevail Not: Grief, Revenge and Language in Kyd and Shakespeare," this is the approach taken. Sacks finds a correlation between the structures and manifestations of grief in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*. Sacks' argues that the pastoral, a form that enjoyed relative success in previous eras, was ineffective in expressing Elizabethan feelings regarding grief and justice. With the genesis of parliamentary government, Elizabethans individuals experienced justice not as the divine commandment handed down from a divine monarch but as the decision of a mere human, and thus fallible. The revenge tragedy fulfills a desire for direct retribution and a direct administration of justice that appealed to the Elizabethan audience. Sacks discusses *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* very effectively, but his culminating work on *Hamlet* received the bulk

of my attentions, being the most relevant to my research. Sacks argues that Hamlet is unable to mourn effectively due to the strains that his familial relations place upon him. The language of mourning is particularly important to Sacks' argument, and he claims that as Hamlet progresses in his mourning, he becomes more accepting of language. This acceptance of language is reflected in the play's transition from action to language, with Hamlet wielding a sort of "verbal power" at the end of the play (600). Sacks' argument is effective and convincing, and his choice of materials works quite well to demonstrate his points. I found his adherence to the importance of structures a bit excessive and his argument regarding the pastoral form is developed quite well early in his essay but dropped almost completely by the middle of the article and never fully revived again. Sacks' insights into the character of Hamlet and how he relates to characters from other plays is quite useful.

Arthur Kirsch also attributes Hamlet's madness to grief in his aptly titled article "Hamlet's Grief." Early in the play, Kirsch notes Hamlet's speeches are typical of the earliest stages of grief. Due to his new father's position and history, Kirsch notes that Hamlet is forbidden to publicly mourn and is unable to receive the sympathy that he requires. Kirsch notes the Oedipal conflicts that permeate the play, but argues that they are a function of Hamlet's grief and nothing more. Instead, Kirsch relates Hamlet's grief to Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia," saying that Hamlet follows Freud's pattern for grief set out in this essay. Hamlet's grief is intensified by the functional loss of his mother and this grief continues to increase and progress until Hamlet leaves for England. Kirsch argues that Ophelia picks up the scepter of grief that Hamlet laid down and it overwhelms her sanity and breaks her. Upon his return from England, Hamlet's

grief has run its course, Kirsch argues, and all that is left to accomplish is what his father has requested of him. The problem with this argument is, of course, that while Hamlet is clearly in a different mindset upon returning from England, there is by no means convincing evidence that Hamlet is done grieving. Kirsch also seems to have a strong tendency to quote long passages excessively, leaving himself less space for explaining the significance of what he has quoted. The passages he quotes are important passages, however, and despite the fact that Kirsch and I have certain areas of disagreement, his essay is useful in that he provides several clear insights into Hamlet's character.

Anna K. Nardo's essay entitled "Hamlet, 'A Man to Double Business Bound'" is an exercise in psychological criticism in which Nardo uses the double bind theory as a way of explaining Hamlet and Ophelia's madness. The double bind theory contends that a person, particularly an adolescent, who is receiving two different, mutually exclusive demands from a family member. The only way to escape this situation is to realize the problem with the demands or reply with another double bind situation. Nardo argues that both Hamlet's mother and deceased father place such double bind situations on him. His mother places him in this situation by marrying his uncle, which metaphorically asks Hamlet to detach himself from her, and then by requesting his love and approval. Hamlet's father does the same thing by asking him to avenge his death but do nothing to his mother. Nardo then argues that Hamlet's feigned madness is how he escapes true madness. The aspect of play in his madness allows him to express the crazy feelings he has, but still keep his mental capacities in control. Ophelia is also caught in a double bind situation. Polonius tells her to be both chaste and to win Hamlet over with her body, and places her into the same situation. Nardo finds evidence in this of a long term double

bind situation, one which renders Ophelia unable to think for herself. Once all the people that think for her (Polonius and Laertes) are gone, she is unable to think and goes mad. Nardo's analysis seems excellent and her argument is very persuasive. Hamlet really does have multiple, mutually exclusive demands placed on him and these demands most certainly play a role in his madness. Her use of psychoanalysis that has developed beyond Freud's Oedipal conflict that so many others have used is also very interesting. Because of her unique psychological approach to Hamlet, I find Nardo's essay very useful.

Due to the importance I see in placing Shakespeare's portrayal of madness in its historical context, the next article I chose is more a review of studies of the Elizabethan conception of madness than a critical literary essay. In her article "Recent Work in Renaissance Studies: Psychology, Did Madness Have a Renaissance?" Carol Thomas Neely looks at madness in Elizabethan England and prior studies that have been conducted on this material. Neely acknowledges the difficulties surrounding the definition of madness, and recognizes that madness is a socially recognized disorder, particularly in Elizabethan times, rather than an exclusively medical condition. Neely mentions Robert Napier, a traveling pseudo-physician who diagnosed and documented cases and causes of madness throughout southern England and Bethlehem Hospital, an institution commonly known as Bedlam that treated the mentally ill in this period. Besides this, Neely addresses the major books regarding madness in this period of time, and includes a bibliography that has been invaluable to my research. Neely's criticism on which works are worth attention and which are not has saved me many hours of fruitless

reading. This article has been useful not because of the insights into *Hamlet* that it contains, but because of the information that Neely has assembled.

Carol Thomas Neely is also the author of my final source, entitled “‘Documents in Madness’: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Early Modern Culture.” This article provides the literary slant that the prior article lacked. Neely begins the article with an effective and concise description of madness in Elizabethan England that is similar to the previous article, but focused on the points that Neely wishes to make about *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. Neely argues that Shakespeare’s representation of madness is rooted in an Elizabethan understanding of madness. Neely argues that Ophelia’s madness differs from Hamlet’s because of gender differences and the different forms of madness associated with men and women. Ophelia is singing songs and carrying on because that’s what women do in that period of time, while Hamlet’s more reserved madness is reflective of the melancholy that was typically associated with men. Neely contends that Ophelia’s madness is a hysterical reflection of Hamlet’s madness, just as her suicide is a hysterical reflection of Hamlet’s contemplation of suicide. Neely’s analysis of *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are also very effective, but for the purposes of my research, beside the point. Neely puts madness into a historical perspective quite convincingly and argues very effectively. Neely’s new-historicist approach is a large portion of my argument as well.

Admittedly, these articles are diverse in their treatment of Hamlet’s madness and grief and two of the sources spend considerable time addressing plays that I will not. The diversity of the sources is their key strength, due to the combinatory approach that I intend to take to this subject. I think that all of these scholars have interesting ideas

regarding a complicated problem and having this diversity to draw upon will allow my essay to more completely address Hamlet's madness.

Works Cited

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