S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

4:1 2018

Transitions

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliazzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

ISSN 2421-4353

SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
http://www.skenejournal.it
info@skenejournal.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

Contents

Special Section

Guido Paduano*

Is Hamlet's Madness True or Faked?

Abstract

The article discusses Hamlet's artificial madness by examining his own declarations of intent, his witticisms and intellectual constructions, as well as his relation with Ophelia. The argument is set against the backdrop of a few classical examples of Shakespearean criticism holding idealizing views.

Keywords: Hamlet; Ophelia; madness; performance

1.

The old stratagem of simulating madness in order to evade difficult situations or conflicts is drawn by Shakespeare from Saxo Grammaticus, but when it breaks into his tragedy it creates a brilliant antiphrasis in respect to the already consolidated values of the protagonist. One of *Hamlet*'s first cues is in fact a passionate declaration of authenticity, entailing his rejection of all pretence. To his mother's question about why his father's death – a common event – appears "so particular" to him, he retorts: "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not seems" (1.2.76).[1] Then he explains that conventional forms of mourning "indeed seem, / For they are actions that a man might play" (83-4).[2]

This position is radicalized after his father's ghost's revelations: Hamlet no longer only hypothesizes generic insincerity ("they are actions that a man might play"), but is also led to notice a glaring contradiction between reassuring appearances and the perverse substance of murder and fraud both at the highest level of the State and in his uncle's exhibition of affection for him:

> O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
> My tables. Meet it is I set it down
> That one may smile and smile and be a villain.
> (1.5.106-8)

But if the "time" that a reluctant Hamlet is called to "set right" (1.5.196, 197) is structurally ruled by pretence, if this world understands no other language than

[1] All references to acts and lines of *Hamlet* are from Shakespeare (1997).

[2] Hamlet will adopt the same attitude, with paroxistic accents, with regard to Laertes's magniloquent laments over his sister's tomb in 5.1.

* University of Pisa - guido.paduano@unipi.it

© SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies 4:1 (2018), 213-21
http://www.skenejournal.it

this, he himself can only use pretence in order to turn it into the paradoxical instrument of truth.

To this end Hamlet devises two forms of pretence. On the one hand, the institutional pretence of theatre: Hamlet hires a company of players, just arrived by chance, to perform a drama closely following Claudius's murder. He relies on the fact that the murderer, "by the very cunning of the scene, / Been struck so to the soul" (2.2.568-9), will reveal his own guilt; at the same time, this experiment will provide the definitive evidence of the ghost's veracity.

On the other hand, the performance of madness allows Hamlet to express his own *Weltanschauung*, or, to say it better, the judgement and condemnation of the world he pronounces under the licence of folly, which exempts him from the social pact of non-aggression. Concurrently, his self-portrait as harmless will conceal his revengeful plans socially, as his madness will be traced back to Ophelia's unrequited love, a motive that excludes more embarrassing interpretations linked to suspicions of conflict with power. This mechanism at the basis of his pretence guarantees that it be one. Nonetheless, this fact has not prevented the precocious spreading among Shakespearian critics of the opinion that pretence may be tinged with authenticity, implying that Hamlet believes that he is faking folly, while in fact folly is deeply rooted in his own personality.[3]

If I take this opinion into account it is not because I mean to acknowledge its reliability,[4] but because I believe it useful, for hermeneutical reasons, to consider carefully the textual data that may have fostered or favoured it.

In this respect, it should be remarked that Hamlet declares his intent only twice, at moments when the parental relations constitutive of the tragic action are being defined: the first one follows his father's ghost's revelation, the second one occurs at the end of Hamlet's dialogue with his mother. In both cases, his plans are illustrated lucidly, and yet with a digressiveness resulting in reticence, as if tortuous discourse almost underlined Hamlet's own difference and the violence his nature suffers.

This is in fact Hamlet's request to his friends at the end of Act 1:

> . . . But come,
> Here as before, never, so help you mercy,
> How strange or odd some'er I bear myself –
> As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
> To put an antic disposition on –
> That you at such time seeing me never shall,
> With arms encumbered thus, or this headshake,
> Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase

[3] One for all, Bloom (2008: 403): "feigning derangement, Hamlet also becomes deranged". Kitto, with regard to Hamlet, talks about two forms of madness, albeit neatly distinct ("his real 'madness' is something much deeper", 1964: 290).

[4] Which it has, if we consider the merely intellectual construction. Confirmation may be found in the episode of *Don Quixote* where the protagonist fakes or performs his amorous madness in the Sierra Morena in the footsteps of Amadis and Orlando, replacing their form of madness with emulation, which constitutes his own peculiar form of madness. Apart from any other difference, it should be noticed that the narrative discourse is much better equipped to manage this complex construction, with the alternation of the narrator's perspective and the character's limited point of view.

> As "Well, well, we know" or "We could and if we would",
> Or "If we list to speak", or "There be, and if they might",
> Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
> That you know aught of me – this do swear,
> So grace and mercy at your most need help you.
> (1.5.176-88)

Hamlet has already urged them "never to speak of this that you have seen" (1.5.162), and he apparently mentions the possibility, and his intent, of behaving oddly ("antic disposition" sounds almost like an euphemism for his simulated madness), only to prevent the additional risk that his odd behaviour might prompt gossip – which indeed he depicts with the vividness of an autonomous *scène de genre*.

Also, in his dialogue with his mother he avows that pretence is, on his part, an unnecessary addition. His choice of speaking with her from the outset the language of truth would dispense him from explaining the corollary that truth and falsity are entirely under his control. This is all the truer since he has already had the opportunity to claim the same when Gertrude interpreted his address to his father's ghost – visible to him only – as a symptom of folly:

> This is the very coinage of your brain.
> This bodiless creation ecstasy
> Is very cunning in.
> (3.4.141-3)

His need to demand that Gertrude be explicitly bound to secrecy derives from the risk that the truth may reach Claudius. And yet, in order to express that request he resorts to negative phrasing leading to a lengthy description of what his mother must not do. Thus, he shifts the attention onto the lasciviousness of the adulterous relation, showing clear signs of oedipic jealousy, and contrasting it with a touching, idealized image of maternity:

> Let the bloat King tempt you again to bed,
> Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse,
> And let him for a pair of reechy kisses,
> Or paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers,
> Make you to ravel all this matter out,
> That I essentially am not in madness,
> But mad in craft. 'Twere good you let him know,
> For who that's but a queen, fair, sober, wise,
> Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib,
> Such dear concernings hide?
> (3.4.186-95)

Gertrude solemnly promises that she will keep the secret, and will maintain that promise, reporting to the king as follows:

> Mad as the sea and wind when both contend
> Which is the mightier.
> (4.1.7-8)

2.

Much of Hamlet's artificial behaviour raises no problems: I am alluding to the prodigious series of malicious witticisms that pin down Claudius's universe and his Court on their own nothingness ("The King is thing . . . Of nothing", 4.2.26, 28). With good reason this behaviour has been likened to that of the fool, the official speaker of uncomfortable truths through playful eloquence (Dover Wilson 1935: 95; Gentili 1978: 84-5). In this case, it exposes Hamlet's extraordinary lucidity and acuity, his peerless intellectual mastery. Rather, it may be useful, if anything, to reconsider a few passages in order to rule out trivializing readings or interpretations reducing them to gratuitous word play.

Here are only a few examples: to the King's question "where's Polonius?" (4.3.16), Hamlet first replies with a calembour ("At supper", 4.3.17, further specifying "Not where he eats, but where he is eaten", 4.3.19), then he gets it right, eventually providing the required information:

> In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i'th' other place yourself. But if indeed you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby. (4.3.32-5)

Hamlet gets the satisfaction of sending the king to hell, only slightly covering the vulgar aggressiveness of "yourself", as opposed to the ceremonial language of the "messenger", through the euphemistic "i'th' other place". The force of the expression may be fully perceived, however, once we relate this passage to the moment when Hamlet spies on the king praying, and repels the temptation to kill him because repentance would send him to heaven – an inappropriate revenge for his father who was instead "[c]ut off even in the blossoms of [his] sins" (1.5.76).[5]

Soon afterwards Hamlet takes leave from Claudius with "Farewell, dear mother" (4.3.50), and to Claudius's objection "Thy loving father, Hamlet" (4.3.51),[6] phrased with all the patient attention owed to madmen, he reiterates: "My mother. Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, so my mother" (4.3.52-3). This line has dizzying implications: Hamlet rejects Claudius's metaphorical paternity as twice false: in respect to his real parental relations and to their affective import. By alluding to the Biblical and Evangelical definition of marriage, he recalls the incestuous and murderous nature of this marriage. Finally, he subjects the sovereign's patriarchal virility to a vilifying process of feminization, the same that Aeschylus (Choe. 304-5) applies to the homologous figure of Aegisthus.

Finally, I would like to recall a particularly elaborate passage in his skirmish with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: the prince has avowed that he has "bad dreams" (2.2.250-1), and Guildenstern, inferring that the content of those dreams is

[5] Language is here treated as in Aristophanes' *Birds*, where *es korakas* (meaning to go 'rack and ruin', but literally 'to the crows') refers to the actual migration of humans to the birds' country: ΠΕ. οὐ δεινὸν οὖν δῆτ' ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς δεομένους / ἐς κόρακας ἐλθεῖν καὶ παρεσκευασμένους / ἔπειτα μὴ 'ξευρεῖν δύνασθαι τὴν ὁδόν; [What misfortune is ours! we strain every nerve to get to the crows, do everything we can to that end, and we cannot find our way!, Aristophanes 1938: 734].

[6] Strangely Jenkins (1982: 342) thinks that Hamlet refers to Gertrude, and that it is the king who misunderstands his words.

his ambition, declares, with conventional morality, that ambition is "the shadow of a dream" (253-4). But "a dream itself is but a shadow" (255), Hamlet insinuates, maieutically inducing Rosencrantz to draw the conclusion: "Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that is but a shadow's shadow" (256-7).

From this rhetorical dawdling Hamlet's powerful final statement eventually stands out: since all shadow implies a body projecting it, "our monarchs and outstretched heroes" (258-9), whose substance lies in their own ambition, may be called the shadows of beggars, who, precisely because devoid of ambition, constitute the authentic body of reality.

It is up to us to decide whether this conclusion, which mimics the causidical extremism often attributed to madness, limits itself to ridiculing the moralistic cliché (Jenkins 1982: 251), or expresses a revolutionary potential comparable to the solidarity with the lowest of the low Lear voices in the storm. Be it as it may, it cannot be coincidental that Hamlet qualifies himself as a "beggar" (2.2.267).

What is certain, instead, is that this mystification is mirrored in Hamlet's mocking admission of his own folly ("For, by my fay, I cannot reason", 260; "I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw", 364-5) which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are gullible enough to take seriously: "He does confess he feels himself distracted, / But from what cause a will by no means speak" (3.1.5-6).

3.

Yet, Hamlet's derisive inclination intertwines with, and is prevailed upon by, his tormented and anguished reflexivity which has turned him into an icon of human thinking, at least starting from Schlegel's definition of *Gedankentrauerspiel*. Is it possible to trace in it a pathological dimension, which appears justified by yet another common definition of the prince, that of 'melancholic'?[7]

I believe that Hamlet's pessimistic view of the world and of man as "this quintessence of dust" (2.2.301) is entirely adequate to the dramatic situation. But what is of interest here is only the extent to which it interferes with the pretence he has devised, and therefore with the only affective relation involved in it: that with Ophelia. This is part of the plot that requires that Hamlet should consider the chamberlain's daughter too close to the establishment he perceives as hostile to let her share in his secret.

The first news we hear about Hamlet after the ghost's revelation is indeed brought by Ophelia: she tells her father that Hamlet suddenly presented himself to her, pale and half-undressed, "with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" (2.1.85-7); he "took [. . . her] by the wrist" (90) and long stared at her; then "He raised a sigh so piteous and profound / As it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being" (97-9). Finally, he went out without ever diverting his eyes from hers. The anguish palpably showing through this tale (consider the recurring "piteous") misled Wilson Knight into denying the

[7] In the tragedy it is Claudius who attributes it to him (3.1.164), albeit within a context which explicitly excludes madness.

"mock-madness" (1989: 22);[8] yet, while there is no reason to exclude Hamlet's anguish also in performing his plan, the effectiveness of that plan may be judged only by other peoples' reactions: already halfway through the tale Polonius shows no hesitation in speculating about amorous folly ("Mad for thy love?", 2.1.88), and Ophelia fundamentally agrees, although in soft tones as dictated by *bienséances* ("My lord, I do not know, / but truly I do fear it", 88-9).

Validated by Polonius's personal experience in ways that his overall characterization endows with more than a tinge of the grotesque ("and truly, in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this", 2.2.189-90), Polonius's hypothesis turns into pompous arrogance as he boasts about it with the king:

> . . . If he love her not,
> And be not from his reason fall'n thereon,
> Let me be not assistant for a state,
> But keep a farm and carters.
> (165-8)

He goes so far as to draw, with presumptuous accuracy, the story of Hamlet's infirmity, distinguishing six stages in his mental deterioration, while Polonius's frigid playing on the word 'true' ("That he is mad 'tis true; 'tis true 'tis pity, / and pity 'tis 'tis true", 97-8) denounces his own blindness by antiphrasis, thus guaranteeing the success of Hamlet's ruse. It is in fact entirely unmethodical to think that Polonius falls into a trap that has not been set for him, that is, that Hamlet involuntarily achieves the result he had shown he wanted to achieve (this may very well happen in everyday life, but not in the semantic system of a work of art ruled by Aristotelian universality).

The king himself will take Polonius's thesis seriously and will accept to assess it through espionage:

> . . . Her father and myself [lawful espials],[9]
> We'll so bestow ourselves that, seeing unseen,
> We may of their encounter frankly judge,
> And gather by him, as he is behaved,
> If't be th'affliction of his love or no
> That thus he suffers for.
> (3.1.31-7)[10]

[8] Along the same lines is Jenkins (1982), although he claims that it is impossible to distinguish "what is and is not feigned" ("an anguish which goes beyond anything put on", 461). The problem was insoluble also for Bradley (1964: 157).

[9] The part within brackets is in the Folio only.

[10] At the end of the experiment, however, Claudius's perspicacity derived from his guilty conscience keeps him sceptical about Polonius's thesis: "Love? His affections do not that way tend" (3.1.161). On the contrary, the queen is comforted by believing it: "And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish / That your good beauties be the happy cause / Of Hamlet's wildness; so shall I hope your virtues / Will bring him to his wonted way again, / To both your honours" (37-41). Besides ensuring her son's recovery, this perspective silences her guilty feelings that had pushed her to claim that his disease had no other cause than "his father's death and our hasty marriage" (2.2.57). Nevertheless, this remains an isolated pathetic touch, as it is not his mother that Hamlet wants to deceive.

Something more should be said about Hamlet's 'silence' during his spectral visit to Ophelia. On the one hand, his suspension of communication, creating distance and isolation, is a traditional symptom of madness (compare, for instance, Euripides' *Heracles*, 929-30) – but of course it can be easily faked. On the other hand, we are presented with a disturbing structural, or rather architectural, symmetry: Hamlet's own performance begins with a pantomime, just like the actors' performance, which in this regard offers one of the tragedy's most difficult cruces, since Claudius does not react to the visual representation of the murder, and stops it only when in its 'spoken' re-enactment the poisoner gives voice to his own murderous intent (on this see Jenkins 1982: 501-5). In the two 'performances', the climax and the consequent hierarchy of deceptive means remain constant: in both, the expressive gesture is succeeded by the power of the hegemonic word, as can be seen in the terrible confrontation between Hamlet and Ophelia, often misunderstood either by interpreting Hamlet's behaviour on the basis of *bienséances*, or by padding their relationship out with romantic details.

It may be worth repeating that Hamlet has nothing to blame Ophelia for (as justly noted by Jenkins 1982: 124, 149-50); the violence with which he sets upon her is the application – in fact, the most impressive application within a literary text – of the so-called principle of generalization that, as Matte-Blanco (1975, 1988) has shown, presides over human emotions. His mother's guilt becomes Ophelia's own guilt, because it is interpreted as every woman's guilt, undermining all faith in love, marriage, procreation. There follows that Ophelia too may be turned into the victim of his jeering humour, resulting in malicious insinuations and obscene avances. Clearly, the generalization – an evident violation of the ethical-juridical principle of personal responsibility – is not only unjust and ungenerous, but also extremely unreasonable. However, folly, I believe, is one of those cases, possibly the extreme case, showing how one's way of being is part of one's physiological experience, competing with reason for a place in everyday life.

On the contrary, madness is played out by Hamlet with too much accuracy and tenacity for not being part of a planned performance, starting from his repeated blatant exceptions to the principle of non-contradiction: firstly, the cyclothymic changes in Hamlet's attitude, from respectful sweetness ("Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins remembered", 3.1.88-9), to the insistent aggressiveness of the "Get thee to a nunnery" speech (120ff.).

Secondly, Hamlet's denial of a fact: he has given Ophelia certain objects that she now wishes to return to him, since the giver's affection has changed – objects that are present and visible on stage.

Finally, the disowning of the gifts is accompanied by the disowning of love through a formal contradiction within only a few lines ("I did love you once", 113-14, and "I loved you not", 117-18): personally, I have little doubt that also this negation may be specious; after all, who would deny that Othello continues to love Desdemona when he attacks her with even greater violence?[11]

Hamlet's authentic voice will be heard in that terrifying love-test which is his encounter with Laertes in the cemetery:

[11] Hamlet's most famous denial of his love for Ophelia is in Turgenev's comparison between *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote* (Turgenev 1965); on this see Bloom (2008: 168).

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.
(5.1.254-6)

I have no doubt that "loved" here refers to the death of his beloved, not to the death of love.

The last passage in the tragedy, which has been discussed as part of Hamlet's pretence, is his speech to Laertes with his apologies for the damages he has caused him – a euphemism to mean Polonius's murder –, attributing them to his own madness:

What I have done
That might your nature, honour, and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
(5.2.213-8)

The high and noble tone of this speech should not induce us into the same mistake made by idealizing critics, one of whom has written that "to suppose it based upon a subterfuge is monstrous" (Dover Wilson 1935: 217; see also Kitto 1964: 293; Jenkins 1982: 567). As a matter of fact, the thesis that Polonius has been killed in a fit of folly is the one argued by Gertrude with Claudius at her son's implicit request:

. . . In his lawless fit,
Behind the arras hearing something stir,
Whips out his rapier, cries "A rat, a rat!",
And in this brainish apprehension kills
The unseen good old man.
(4.1.8-12)

In no case could Hamlet not endorse this version, also because the truth we have witnessed remains unspeakable: Polonius killed by mistake because confused with Claudius, the murderer whom Hamlet has the duty to kill. To believe in a different truth, as Dover Wilson admittedly does not hesitate to ("It follows that when Hamlet tells us that he is subject to "a sore distraction" and killed Polonius in madness we are expected to believe him", 1935: 217), would oblige us to rewrite the story *a posteriori*, as the diligent bureaucrats in George Orwell's *1984* rewrote history, with the aggravation of an unbearable violation of dramatic time.

Works Cited

Aristophanes (1938), *Birds*, in Whitney Jennings Oates and Eugene O'Neill jr. (eds), *The Complete Greek Drama*, New York: Random House: 725-801, vol. 2.

Bloom, Harold (ed.) (2008), *Hamlet*, New York: Infobase Publishing.

Bradley, Andrew Cecil (1964), *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London: McMillan Company.

Dover Wilson, John (1935), *What Happens in Hamlet*, New York: The Macmillan Company / Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gentili, Vanna (1978), *La recita della follia*, Torino: Einaudi.

Jenkins, Harold (1982), *William Shakespeare: Hamlet*, London and New York: Methuen, The Arden Edition.
Kitto, Humphrey D.F. (1964) [1956], *Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and Hamlet*, London: Methuen.
Matte-Blanco, Ignacio (1975), *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets. An Essay in Bi-Logic*, London: Duckworth.
— (1988), *Thinking, Feeling and Being*, London: Routledge.
Shakespeare, William (1997), *Amleto*, ed. and trans. by Alessandro Serpieri, Venezia: Marsilio.
Turgenev, Ivan (1965), "*Hamlet* and *Don Quixote*", trans. by Moshe Spiegel, *Chicago Review*, 17 (4): 92-109.
Wilson Knight, George Richard (1989), *The Wheel of Fire*, London: Routledge.