

What Madness Represents in *Hamlet* — Aspects of Hamlet's and Ophelia's Insanity —

Yoko KASHIHARA*

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Abstract

Hamlet is a complex play which deals with several interrelated themes and is full of riddles. The most obvious theme in the play is the taking of revenge and the biggest riddle is Hamlet's delay. The taking of revenge in *Hamlet* is intimately interrelated with the themes of faithlessness, love, and ambition. In the development of these themes, madness is a significant element in the text. Through the dense texture of the play's layers of complexity, the play contrasts madness and sanity, faithlessness and honour, the urge for revenge with the desire not to act precipitately. Hamlet's insanity is contrasted with Ophelia's madness: Hamlet's scholar's garb, his 'suits of solemn black' with Ophelia's virginal and vacant white, and Hamlet's pretended insanity with Ophelia's real madness. Shakespeare does not provide all the 'answers', all necessary clues that allow one to put together all these characters and fully understand their speeches, actions and motivations.

I

Hamlet was probably written sometime in 1600 or 1601, that is, at the beginning of the period of Shakespeare's mature tragedies. Usually this play is referred to as *Hamlet* but its full title is *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, a self-explanatory title. People have studied it and discussed it for several hundred years and millions of words have been written about it. Probably no other work in English literature has had as much written about it as *Hamlet*. Each generation makes Shakespeare its own in its scholarly reinterpretations. Nevertheless, *Hamlet* himself is the center of the riddle in the drama, a riddle unsolved despite all the efforts of critical insight.

The text of *Hamlet* not only lacks crucial details of staging but the plot itself is notoriously full of loose ends. There are certain matters of fact that cannot be recovered: Shakespeare simply did not make things clear and left us a text full of question marks. As a consequence, there are some traditional problems in the text. During the last century dramatic changes have taken place in the landscape of Shakespeare studies; the development of contemporary critical theories has brought a thorough transformation in literary criticism. Previous generations of critics reacted to aspects of the play as problems that had to be solved; now most would claim that there are questions in the play which may be discussed but not solved. This means a greater possibility of giving plural interpretations or of giving no answer. In consequence, when one discusses the complexities of meaning, one risks giving the impression that those lines in the play are

* Department of Medical Social Work, Faculty of Medical Welfare
Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare
Kurashiki, Okayama, 701-0193, Japan

“caviare to the general” (II.ii.433), too complex, subtle and philosophical for the audience to appreciate.

It can safely be said that the world of *Hamlet* is one of incertitude. Probably Dover Wilson was the first to suggest this view in *What Happens in ‘Hamlet’*. Since then many critics have suggested this or something like it. The incertitude of this drama is based on the atmosphere of ambiguity, irony, and interrogation as Maynard Mack’s essay *The World of Hamlet* shows. He writes that “Hamlet’s world is preeminently in the interrogative mood. It reverberates with questions, anguished, meditative, alarm” (504).

II

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is the central figure in the tragedy and much of the dramatic impact of the play derives from the complex nature of his character. Hamlet is in low spirits because of his father’s recent death and also because of the hasty marriage of his mother to the new King, his father’s brother Claudius. He comes on the stage, dressed in black. He himself refers to his “inky cloak” (I.ii.77) and “customary suits of solemn black” (I.ii.78). His feelings of depression are intensified when he learns that the spirit of his father has been seen walking on the battlements of the castle. The Ghost tells him that he was murdered by Claudius, and he urges Hamlet to seek revenge for his “foul and most unnatural murder” (I.v.25). After his meeting with the Ghost Hamlet decides to find proof of his uncle’s villainy. He resolves “To put an antic disposition on” (I.v.172) in the hope that people will not realize that he is plotting to kill the King. And, before long, his ‘madness’ is known to everyone at court. Claudius and Gertrude are unsure of the cause of Hamlet’s ‘insanity’ although Gertrude believes his “transformation” (II.v.5) is the result of “His father’s death, and our o’erhasty marriage” (II.v.57). Polonius, on the other hand, is convinced that Hamlet has gone mad because of his unrequited love for Ophelia, but although Claudius and Gertrude would like to believe in this simple explanation, Hamlet’s behavior with Ophelia convinces them that Ophelia is not the main cause of Hamlet’s ailment. As Claudius puts it:

Love? His affections do not that way tend,
Nor what he spake, though it lack’d form a little,
Was not like madness.

(III.i.164-6)

And Hamlet’s own reference to his madness raises a crucial issue in the consideration of Hamlet’s mentality.

Give me your pardon, sir, I have done you wrong;
But pardon’t as you are a gentleman.
This presence knows, and you must needs have heard,
How I am punish’d with a sore distraction.
What I have done
That might your nature, honour and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was’t Hamlet wrong’d Laertes? Never Hamlet.

(V.ii.222-29)

Whether Hamlet is mad or not is a big question. Hamlet seems to swing between the reasoned pathos of his soliloquies and sudden, unexpected attacks of excitement or fury. There are a number of occasions in the play when Hamlet does not seem to be in full control of his behavior. In the famous nunnery scene, Hamlet’s attitude to Ophelia suggests that he is not fully in control of his actions. Even if he knows that Polonius and Claudius are listening, and even if he feels that Ophelia, like his mother, is faithless, it is hard

to explain the cruelty of his remarks. The effect on Ophelia is immediate and she believes that Hamlet is certainly mad. Furthermore, Hamlet's behavior in Gertrude's bedroom seems to border on the hysterical, which is enough to make Gertrude take fright and call for help. Finally, Hamlet's behavior in the graveyard scene calls his sanity into question. When he realizes that Ophelia is dead, he leaps into her grave, insisting that his love is greater than any brother's:

I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
 Could not with all their quantity of love
 Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?
 (V.i.264-6)

It may well be true that Hamlet loved Ophelia, though his behavior to her was not that of a sensitive lover. But his actions in the graveyard are frenzied and hysterical and are more indicative of a lack of balance than of deep-rooted affection. His emotions have taken over from his reason, prompting his anguished outburst.

It is hard to be dogmatic on the question of Hamlet's sanity. He certainly warned Horatio after his meeting with the Ghost that he would pretend to be mad. Later, he asserts: "I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is/ southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw" (II.ii.374-5). Later still, however, he apologizes to Laertes for his uncontrolled behavior:

If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
 And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
 Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
 Who does it then? His madness.
 (V.ii.231-33)

Hamlet is sometimes cruel, sometimes sarcastic, and often he seems to show signs of hysteria. His vacillation between thoughtful gentleness and unbalanced frenzy is best summed up by Gertrude:

And thus awhile the fit will work on him.
 Anon, as patient as the female dove
 When that her golden couplets are disclos'd,
 His silence will sit drooping.
 (V.i.280-3)

He is, at one and the same time, gentle and cruel, loving and vindictive, a deeply reflective introvert and a man capable of acting on impulse. With regard to Hamlet's madness, there are three possible answers for the question whether or not he is mad. The first answer is that Hamlet is not mad but merely pretends to be in order to test the claims of the Ghost. The second is that Hamlet, at first, merely pretends to be mad, but eventually he goes mad. The third view is that Hamlet shows signs of madness or at least mental instability throughout the text. There is evidence in the text to support all three views, as I stated above. Hamlet's seeming madness is as real as, or perhaps more genuine than, his calmer behavior. It can be said that Hamlet's madness is a case of conscience unresolved, that is, Hamlet's being is compelled to be in incertitude.

III

Ophelia, Hamlet's love, had not until recently been accorded enough discussion, as compared with Hamlet. She has been regarded by most prefeminist critics as being chiefly interesting in what she says about Hamlet. Part of the difficulty of discussing Ophelia, as Elaine Showalter, one of America's most influential critics, notes, is that:

She appears in only five of the play's twenty scenes; the pre-play course of her live story with Hamlet is known only by a few ambiguous flashbacks.(221)

Through these five scenes, we must grasp the figure of Ophelia and follow her life. The image of Ophelia established by her behavior, her appearance, and her gestures is almost iconographic. Polonius regards her as a "green girl" (I.iii.101) and Laertes as a "rose of May" (VI.v.157). Both metaphors are associated with youth and maidenly expectation. The impression conveyed by "green" is fresh and chaste, and May is the month when youth is in its prime, a time of expectation when nature quickens, and the time for weddings. Furthermore, in the Catholic calendar, May is Mary's month, and combines the promise of burgeoning fruitfulness with maidenly virginity. It is true that the totality of these images contribute to establishing the iconographic Ophelia. Ophelia is an innocent, young girl, as Dr. Johnson called her: "the young, the beautiful, the harmless, and the pious" (1960,113). Ophelia's beauty is commented on by several characters in the play. Her beauty is so great that Gertrude hopes it may be capable of distracting Hamlet from his gloomy thoughts. Anna Brownwell writing in 1879 represents Ophelia's character as follows:

Ophelia—poor Ophelia! Oh far too soft, too good, too fair, to be cast among the briers of this working-day world, and fall upon the thorns of life! What shall be said of her? For eloquence is mute before her! Like a strain of sad sweet music which comes floating by us on the wings of night and silence, and which we rather feel than hear,—like the exhalation of the violet dying even upon the sense it charms—like the snow-flake dissolved in air before it has caught a stain of earth,—like the light surf severed from the billow, which a breath disperses—such is the character of Ophelia.(189)

Ophelia as described above is so pure, naive and delicate that her existence in itself seems destined to lie in fragments and suffer the utter destruction of the reasoning powers. Brownwell's view of Ophelia compelled her to conclude that:

Poor Ophelia, divided from herself and her judgment, appears here like a spotless victim offered up to the mysterious and inexorable fates.(126)

Shakespeare does not give us full information on Ophelia. Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, shortly before Hamlet showed signs of madness had told his daughter, Ophelia, to have nothing to do with the young Prince. Ophelia is too easily persuaded to stop seeing Hamlet, even allowing for the fact that there was far greater emphasis placed on filial duty in Shakespeare's age than in our own. She says very little, and never expresses her feeling towards Hamlet positively. Ophelia's answer to Polonius is a confession of Hamlet's love for her, but not a word of her love for him. She never confesses her anguish or grief in deceiving Hamlet. She does not express her pity or regret for behaving against her passion. She scarcely betrays her emotions. There is, therefore, no dramatic monologue spoken by Ophelia in which she confesses

or describes her feelings. Maybe she can control her feeling. Ophelia returns Hamlet's love tokens, and he shows that this hurts him when he replies by denying he has ever given her anything: "No, not I./ I never gave you aught." (III.i.95-6). This reply spoken in fury hurts Ophelia. In this way they mutually hurt themselves and each other. She is advised by her brother, Laertes not to take Hamlet's declaration of love too seriously. He denies Ophelia's subjectivity: he assumes that Hamlet sees her only as a sexual object. Here she is obedient but at the same time she discloses though only slightly a more sophisticated aspect. Superficially, Ophelia's response is that expected of a "green girl" but she is not ignorant of the ways of the world. The quotation below eloquently indicates this aspect.

I shall th'effect of this good lesson keep
 As watchman to my heart. But good my brother,
 Do not as some ungracious pastors do,
 Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
 While like a puff'd and reckless libertine
 Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
 And recks not his own rede.

(I.iii.45-51)

She certainly understands the bawdy puns used by Hamlet. In the nunnery scene, Hamlet shouts, "Get thee to a nunnery". A nunnery is the place where she could preserve her chastity and be safe from love, marriage, and the breeding of sinners. "Nunnery" was also sometimes used sarcastically for a house of unchaste women. In telling Ophelia to go to a nunnery, he savagely attacks her and at the same time he advises her how to escape from corruption. Hamlet is profoundly ambivalent toward Ophelia here.

When Ophelia appears next on the stage, she is completely mad. Her insanity seems to result from the death of her father and the loss of Hamlet's love. Gertrude tries to reason with Ophelia but, instead of answering, Ophelia sings verses from love songs. She and Hamlet have presumably been intimate, as her songs suggest.

Indeed, without an oath, I'll make an end on't
 By Gis and by Saint Charity,
 Alack and fie for shame,
 Young men will do't if they come to't—
 By Cock, they are to blame.
 Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,
 You promis'd me to wed.'

He answers,

'So would I a done, by yonder sun,
 And thou hadst not come to my bed.'

(IV.v.57-66)

Before this song, Ophelia talks about the owl and a baker's daughter. According to Trevelyan and Williams-Ellis, a baker's daughter was notorious for being immoral, and this legend possibly alludes to the loss of virginity. It is sure that Ophelia is conscious of sexuality. Ernest Jones, Freud's student and eventual biographer, argued that "Ophelia should be unmistakably sensual, as she seldom is on stage. She may be 'innocent' and docile, but she is very aware of her body" (139). Hamlet confesses "I did love you once" (III.i.115) and "I loved you not" (III.i.118-9). Ophelia returns again, still singing and offering everyone flowers which symbolize her grief. For the contemporary Elizabethans this was a characteristic expression

of female-love melancholy. And in the Victorian age, Ophelia typified the kind of mental breakdown women were believed to be prone to in adolescence, during the period of sexual awakening. Since the early 1970's, feminist criticism has emerged and feminist discourse has by and large continued concerning Ophelia. She can no longer be a simple "green girl". According to Showalter, "in giving away her wild flowers and herbs", Ophelia is "symbolically deflowering herself" (155).

Gertrude shows consideration and kindness to Laertes in her description of Ophelia's death as an accident, not suicide. She describes Ophelia's death in some of the most beautiful lines in the play:

There is a willow grows askant a brook,
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make,
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
(IV.vii.166-9)

Garber argues "the 'weedy trophies'(IV.vii.173) and phallic 'long purples' which she wears to her death intimate an improper and discordant sexuality that Gertrude's lovely elegy cannot quite obscure" (155). Jacques Lacan, the French philosopher and psychoanalyst has had an enormous influence on poststructuralism generally. For Lacan Ophelia is, when he mentions Ophelia, 'the object Ophelia', that is, "the object of Hamlet's male desire" (Showalter, 77). Later lines from the play show that Ophelia was considered to have committed suicide:

Laer. Must there no more be done?
Priest. No more be done.
We should profane the service of the dead
To sing sage requiem and such rest to her
As to peace-parted souls.
(V.i.228-231)

In her madness, she presents a double image of female sexuality; that is, she can be innocent and obscene at the same time. Her insanity, eventually, represents a series of contradictory Ophelias alternating between strong and weak, virginal and seductive. Such views of Ophelia simultaneously reflect the values of the times that produced them. After all, an Ophelia who is free from the values we bring to the text cannot exist. She needs to be interpreted in various directions. As a result, the 'true' Ophelia seems to be found in ambiguity or incertitude.

IV

Hamlet and Ophelia, both think they have been deserted by the one they love, both have lost a father through murder. Ophelia is shocked into madness by the murder of her father and lets herself drown, while Hamlet feigns madness and is shipped off across the sea to England. And eventually both go to an untimely death. Their stories parallel each other. Roger-Gardner concludes that "Ophelia is Hamlet's mirror, his opposite number" (21). Their madnnesses serve a similar purpose, that is, only when they are no longer rational can they reveal their innermost thoughts and needs. In this sense, Ophelia's madness and Hamlet's insanity are on a parallel circuit, with some points of tangency. Like Lacan who says "she [Ophelia] is linked forever, for centuries, to the figure of Hamlet" (11), we too must conclude that their existences are eternally will be undivided.

There is no doubt that Prince Hamlet "stands not only as Shakespeare's most interesting but also

as his most admirable protagonist" (Frye, 280). For centuries, Hamlet has stood amidst uncertainties, ambiguities, doubts, and disagreements, in spite of all the efforts to explain, investigate, and solve his riddle. And so shall he continue to stand, shrouded in mystery, for centuries to come, so long as certain common cultural assumptions remain: the timelessness of great works of art and the universality of those feelings and emotions that constitute an unchanging human nature.

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