



TREATING MADNESS IN "GREAT ONES": SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* AND *KING LEAR*ⁱ

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Abstract:

In the Renaissance, the state of madness was associated with a state of uncontrolled and hysterical behaviour or prolonged inexplicable sadness. It was believed that the cause for such mental disorder was great suffering or sin. The theme of madness was popular in Shakespeare's plays. It had different importance depending on context. The theatre of Shakespeare's time showed the social strategies that started to be used in the treatment of the mad. Some scholars like Mackay and Salkeld argue that the madness of the powerful characters in Shakespeare's tragedies results from their conflict with political conditions in which they found themselves and explore special attempts the society made to take care of the mad. Analysing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, the paper shows disastrous effects of madness in "great ones" and explains how it is treated by the surrounding society. The madness of the powerful is interpreted as very much dangerous and able to cause great disaster in both inner-self and society in general. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* deals with the methods of closely observing and restricting the madness of the powerful. In *King Lear*, madness in people in power is unnoticed by the society around him. The mentally ill are not understood either through old symbolic ways of thought or through new scientific ways. Social institutions are presented as self-sufficient and greedy existing not to protect, but to exploit and destroy.

Keywords: Shakespeare, mental disorder, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*

1. Introduction

The theme of madness was very popular in Elizabethan plays. In the Renaissance, madness was closely connected with the feeling of pensive sadness and uncontrollable emotion or excitement. The former was connected with young men, while the latter was associated with young girls. People dominated by one of the two mental states were considered mad. Madness

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was also connected with crime and some troubling events. People believed that the cause for such abnormal behaviour was some suffering or sin. The subject of madness had different importance for presenting in the theatre, depending on its context. In plays, mad people did not have major roles. Their roles were minor and they often made jokes for the entertainment of the lower classes. On the other hand, madness and the mad were used to increase trouble. Witchcraft practice in England during the Middle Ages that represented the troubling idea of possession by evil spirits was believed to be the origin of madness during the Elizabethan age. The theme of madness was often used to elicit sympathy, to make jokes and to amuse (Wilks, 1949).

The loss of reason is treated almost as the loss of life, which is why it is such a common theme in tragedies. Different feelings of sadness, loss, regret overcome us as we watch once powerful rulers, innocent girls and great military leaders fall down, speak rude and confused sentences, shout uncontrollably or make empty threats. Those who succeed in defeating madness "come back" grown stronger by that terrible experience and enriched with wisdom. Those who fail to do so can only find their salvation in death. In tragedies, nothing can be healed or restored. Lady Macbeth knows this perfectly well. She understands that what she has done cannot be undone. Lear will not get a second chance. He cannot repeat the first scene of Act One; Othello will not be able to restore Desdemona to life or protect Iago now that he has found out everything; Hamlet will not be able to punish his father's murderer or at least save his life. That finality is another tragic and rather terrifying feature we are introduced to. By separating the supernatural from the natural, this period begins to separate mind from body, man from woman, madness from normality, and other types of aberrations such as poverty, heresy, and crime. Tragedy has many forms of extreme pain. In the early Renaissance, madness is a mirror in which human nature sees its own self-deformation. Numerous scenes of violence and pain in the tragedy show the injuries that great passions inflict on the soul (Šofranac, 2013).

Madness in the Renaissance is directly connected to the question of the relations between men and women and how that question is presented within an English culture of the period. Such relations become more visible through the images of women who are mentally ill and their roles in society. Their position in such situations becomes specific, they become brave and they start to behave in a way that can be accepted only because they are considered mad, although it usually leads them to death or a kind of confinement (Mackay, 2010).

Duncan Salkeld (1994) thinks that it is only possible through madness that women free themselves from being submitted to a patriarchal society. In that way, they become self-confident and dangerous, showing in public what they had to endure all their lives. As for Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, madness is shown through some verses from songs that imply the ideas of a loyal daughter and faithful lover. Madness reshapes her personality, in a way that she breaks up with a patriarchal society and becomes aggressive and dangerous. At the same time, madness leads her to catastrophe and death.

A study of madness is closely connected to the interpretation of "the experience of the identity" in this period. Most critics, since the 1990s, take this into consideration, especially when discussing characters. It is important to point out that Shakespeare's plays describe distinguished characters. Characters like Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear become strong individual

personalities with a complex psychology that can be studied independently of their plays. However, all these characters experience madness in some specific situations they do not expect them to happen (Mackay, 2010).

For Jonathan Dollimore (1984) and his cultural materialist's interpretation of the play, personal identity is identified with political power. Political conditions define the identity of the people that cannot control them. When those conditions become somehow disturbed, both confusion and relaxation come (Mackay, 2010).

During the age of Shakespeare, society starts with attempts to make special methods for taking care of the mad. Theatre has a special role in supporting such attempts.

Dealing with the problem of madness in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, the paper would try to explore the level of madness that these great characters experience as a result of their conflict with the political conditions in which they found themselves. Both of these plays show how the madness of the powerful ones can have troubling effects and how it is treated by the surrounding society.

2. Madness "Under Surveillance" in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Shakespeare shows madness from both tragic and amusing aspects, but Foucault (2009) notices that madness in Shakespeare's plays always has an extraordinary place. He strongly suggests that madness replaces the theme of death. According to Vygotsky (1974), the theme of madness was so much present in *Hamlet* in order to save its meaning. For these critics, madness just presents a process of emotional detachment, and deviation of speech and thinking of everyday life. That is why Hamlet tries hard to hide his true plans and to bring his false madness into the centre of the attention of other characters.

As for the question of Hamlet's madness, Shakespeare explains how the mind, which is mentally ill, "works" and how people who are really mad behave, in a detailed way. He also creates a perfect picture of Claudius' court with two opposite groups of noblemen: those who think that Hamlet is really mad and those who think that he just pretends to be mad. Hamlet's mother and Polonius think that Hamlet is mad, and that helps Hamlet to achieve his goal and create a firmly held opinion that his madness really exists. Unlike everyone else at the court, Claudius is not convinced at all. Throughout the play, he fears that Hamlet may do something bad and threatening for him, pretending to be mad (Blackmore, 2018).

The appearance of the ghost caused enormous anxiety for Hamlet. After he gets better, Hamlet realises that the world around him has changed and that he must change his behaviour, too. Being aware of the fact that he cannot hide that change, he chooses madness to hide his true feelings and thoughts. He uses his state of a mentally ill person every time he encounters those who are two-faced and who want to collect in secret information about his state and intentions for the king. He is also aware that he must be perfect in his role to deceive everyone, especially doubtful Claudius.

Not only does Hamlet seem mad; it seems that the whole Denmark is in a state of some kind of madness and confusion. The political essence of Claudius' Elsinore is intrigue, manipulation, espionage, and unfair power play - all this embodied in Claudius. Elsinore is paranoid and unstable palace where the function of the court clerk to give advice, and discuss

about certain national problems is completely perverted and turned to flattery, spying and a mysterious silence. Political power is based on hypocrisy and fear. The world of Elsinore is deceptive. Elsinore is full of corners, curtains, behind which the gallery has a secret lurking. It is a place where all who want to survive have to be very resourceful and constantly on the alert (Dumitrašković, 2014: 27).

At the end of act three (3.1.), Claudius is worried. He is worried about Hamlet's unstable and problematic behaviour. The meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia that Claudius and Polonius induces turns into a disaster. It is especially cruel for Ophelia but Hamlet has an implicit message for the king too, telling that everyone who is already married will live, except one (3.2). When Hamlet leaves, Claudius and Polonius start to discuss the state of his mind, trying to find the best way to solve the problem. Claudius thinks and suggests that Hamlet should be sent to some place where he will be "cured" of his strange behaviour. For him, that is a pragmatic way to solve the problem. Polonius hesitates. He organises one more conversation between Hamlet and his mother. He strongly believes that the cause of Hamlet's madness is his response to not getting what he wants sexually. However, they both are sure that "careful surveillance" is something that is necessary for Hamlet. According to Claudius, madness with ones who are in power can be dangerous and must be controlled (3.1.). As a young prince, Hamlet should not be left to himself because his mental illness might turn into something dangerous and unpredictable. That is why his madness ought to be "under surveillance", in order to find out everything that could discover the nature of it. It is especially important for Claudius because he is tormented by doubts. Being aware of his crime, he is always on alert, and he behaves as a person who has committed a crime: he is continuously afraid that everything he did will be discovered. He suspects all the time that Hamlet pretends to be mad only to hide his intentions for "creating" some disastrous plan. Restriction and surveillance used to solve the problem of "mad Hamlet" can partly be found in the original legend of Amlet that is the source for this play. There are spies in the legend who have to follow Amlet and mislead him in different ways to discover if he is mad. Amlet is also sent for England, and one of those guards who is supposed to watch him over is killed. The problem here is Hamlet's position at the court. He is a prince and a prospective ruler. That is why his insisting on mental illness brings him into a state of confusion. He turns away everybody from his intention to take revenge with success, and due to hesitation, he gets more time; the king recognises Hamlet's "madness" as a big danger so he is in a hurry to eliminate him. It is worth considering how the king very cunningly and carefully creates conditions for eliminating Hamlet, hiding his true fear by taking care of Hamlet's health. Polonius suggests that Hamlet should still be controlled and kept under surveillance. The king agrees with the idea. This definitely involves a kind of political action, considering Hamlet. Despite Claudius, Hamlet as a prince is still an important factor in running of the state, and if he cannot behave in a normal and proper way, it is justified enough to make a plan for close observation and it is exactly what Polonius and Claudius do (Mackay, 2010).

Everyone at Elsinore sees the problem of Hamlet's madness in a different way. They are constantly trying to find in Hamlet something they can connect with his madness. Polonius is convinced that the cause of the prince's strange behaviour is love, in fact, his passion for his daughter. Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's friends from childhood, want to explain his

madness from the political aspect. In their conversation with Hamlet, they carefully look for any sign of unfulfilled ambition, trying to prove that it is the main cause of his strange behaviour. Hamlet, who pretends mad, also feels the tension, burdened by constant attempts of all people around him to prove that he is insane and to find the true cause of it. However, Hamlet's madness is not of a psychological origin. He is involved in larger political struggle that is a consequence of the power problems after the death of old king Hamlet.

Šofranac (2013) argues that the situation with Ophelia is quite different. She is an example of true madness, and she is not in such a social position that is essential for the running of the state. However, her behaviour is carefully controlled: the king in the fifth scene of the fourth act asks Gertrude to take good care of Ophelia. There seems to be an unequal power relationship in the process of observing madness. Ophelia is a mirror of Hamlet's condition. She is driven mad by the contradictory voices of her father and brother that she must obey, and reflects the tensions that Hamlet feels trying to obey the contradictory commands of the Ghost. Ophelia's "madness" is a natural reaction to the group's shared deceptions. Her past is another example of how one can be driven to insanity if their existence is accepted only through scolding and suppression. From the moment she appears, Ophelia must constantly respond to commands that she has to obey. Her brother tells her that Hamlet cannot express feelings unless they deepen his social role as a prince. She accepts her brother's lesson. Madness becomes Ophelia's last refuge, her unconscious revolt. All men in her life want to manipulate her for their own needs controlling her life and her conscience. By offering her an escape from it, madness gives her the opportunity to express her anger and her desire. Madness frees Ophelia from the imposed repressions of obedience, honesty, and patience, frees her from the prescribed roles of daughter, sister, lover, and subject. Ophelia, who has been silent until now, now asks to be heard.

Since Ophelia's self has been defined by the men who have marked her world, her escape into madness allows her to discover her own identity. She seems to get some power and becomes a woman that everyone avoids or watches silently while wandering. Her insane speeches affect everyone's feelings. Nevertheless, the queen describes Ophelia's death almost indifferently comparing her with a creature that seemed to live in water. This is consistent with the general identifying of madmen as nothing more than animals (Salkeld, 1994). Both Hamlet's and Ophelia's madness are a consequence of contradictory loyalties.

In *Hamlet*, it is interesting to see that observing the mad is drawn into the play itself. People in the audience watch the ones who observe the mad. The whole process thus seems to become normal, for the treatment of the mad who has become an object supervised by the institution. The madness of the powerful is interpreted as very much dangerous and able to cause great disaster in both inner-self and society in general.

3. "The Storm of Madness" in *King Lear*

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare shows how madness in people in power can be completely unnoticed by the society around him.

The story of the play is set in the ancient world. It was a way for Shakespeare to express in an implicit way some important social and political problems of his country and his time.

Lear, the old British king, decides to divide his kingdom among his daughters Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, but only after testing them on their love towards him. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to lie to her father to further her own interest. She decides to be honest and to give him a genuine answer. It is what makes him very angry, and he decides to drive her into exile. Consequently, he stays with the two daughters who promise to take care of him. However, they will soon show their true nature. In the further course of events, they will try to deprive Lear of any power and drive him out of their homes. That plot develops at the same time with a sub-plot, which deals with Edmund, the illegitimate son of Earl of Gloucester. He is very ambitious and greedy. Edmund deceives his father and leaves his legitimate brother Edgar without the property he should inherit. The two main persons affected by these "operations" Lear and Edgar, are thus banished from human society and go through the experience of madness differently. Lear, wandering the heath, experiences a great disaster, really loses his mind and everything he notices becomes submitted to the picture of ungratefulness and unkindness of his two daughters. Edgar, the legitimate son, puts on the mask of madness, pretending to be a "bedlam beggar" because he is worried for his own protection. Edgar's madness seems very well founded, and when Edgar and Lear meet in a dirty hut on the heath, they serve as a mirror for each other. They suffer in a similar way. They are both victims of great disaster rooted in the rejection of the members of their families.

Mackay (2010) argues that Lear's madness suggests the collapse of order in a society that destroys family values through causing quarrels among family members. It is worth noting a disturbing relationship between Lear and the nature that surrounds him in the play. Lear experiences the breaking of family ties, and the turning of his daughters against him as a catastrophe, he goes mad and this mental breakdown is emphasised by the complete disorder in nature. Lear angrily addresses the elements of nature and that considerably changes explanation of what that symbolic relationship signifies. He identifies himself with the angry elements of nature. However, by the end of his speech, he accuses these elements of their "collaboration" with his daughters against him (3.2.). By using such changing views, there is a feeling that the model of the microcosm - macrocosm, signifying order in the cosmos, is beginning to fall apart in a disastrous way and other kinds of relations start becoming to be important.

The great suffering that arises between Lear and poor Tom, when they exchange their experiences on the heath, is especially aimed at the malfunctioning and catastrophic cruelty of different social institutions. On a stormy night, trying hard not to go mad, Lear feels sorry, because he, as ruler, neglected the poor, who without food and shelter live in dreadful conditions. The powerful tyrant from the beginning of the play becomes a fake, mad king, dressed in rags instead of royal clothes. The royal title disappears, as do the royal privileges, and they are replaced by contempt and aversion to political and any form of power.

Muir (1960) notices that the appearance of poor Tom means Lear's fall into complete madness, and later, together with him, he will try to improvise the trial of Goneril and Reagan in the hut, which will end with their "running away" (3.6). This unusual obsession with corrupt institutions continues in later scenes in which Lear reproaches blind Gloucester (4.6.). For Lear, power is the art of concealment and pretense. There is no longer a difference between a legally elected government and a criminal. Although Lear as a king has had absolute power, he now

loses confidence in any form of power and concludes that behind the conventional appearance can be hidden corruption and sin. In a world of lust, cruelty and greed with extreme wealth on the one side and extreme poverty on the other, a man reduced to his "basics" does not need wealth, power or even physical freedom but patience, moral fortitude, and above all the ability to forgive and sympathise for someone else's suffering.

We will never know whether the energy of Lear's passionate criticising of authority comes from Shakespeare's experiences with James, Elizabeth, or some other powerful people. However, without any illusions about the downsides of human greatness, Shakespeare nowhere speaks so drastically about political power. In that way, through suffering, Lear breaks off not only with himself as a king but also with kingship as such.

Mackay (2010) explains that for Lear, poor Tom is someone who became lost in madness because he was abused while he was a servant. For both of them, social institutions are presented in their true light: they are self-sufficient and greedy and they exploit the weak and poor. Tom has no possibility of merging into society and becoming its part. When Lear first sees the naked Tom, he perceives him as a bare animal (3.4.). Here, he does not think about a man going back to "nature" in a positive context, but about a "thing" that cannot be identified because it is not institutionally recognised.

Lear's tragic journey begins when he comes into conflict with the world after rejecting the crown. He has to reject everything he has learned until then and everything he is used to. It is extremely difficult for him and his mind is not able to bear such a change. He is no longer a king, but he is still no ordinary man. Only the appearance of a complete stranger in the form of a crazy beggar, "poor Tom", breaks Lear, confuses and disturbs him much more than what he experienced from his closest relatives. So far, there has been no sign of Lear by which one could say with certainty that he is mad; at that moment he loses his mind: he no longer controls himself, he tears off his clothes, and his Fool has to calm him down. Lear does not become mad when he regrets separating from Cordelia, nor when he fears that he will go mad because of the heartlessness of his daughters - but when he asks himself what, in essence, a man is, and when the answer to that question turns out, probably, to be different from that he imagined until then. This knowledge completely distracts Lear. Then madness breaks out. Lear's madness is complete and his suffering is enormous. Lear wonders if he is really the man he imagined himself to be or if he is someone else, someone who does not have an indisputable right to be loved without bounds, both as a good and noble father and as a true, born king. If Lear is someone who can be treated without love and respect, and if a man is not something noble and powerful, but a poor two-legged animal, then there are no kings born and every throne is usurped. The king is just a megalomaniac; a lunatic who has adorned himself with a crown and with a sceptre, and everything that Lear has believed in his life is just a terrible delusion and deception. The only thing he can cling to now is that tormented beast, that real man, that "poor Tom". He reveals that Lear was never a just, wise and weak king in his essence, but a weak and two-legged animal. When Lear stops to be a king, he is left without a personal view of the world.

Lear's madness is, in fact, the strongest and most poignant form of Lear's suffering. In contrast to Hamlet's madness-mask, Lear's madness is complete and final. Above all, this

madness shows that Lear's pain is stronger than the defences of his mind and that it is able to overwhelm his entire being.

Old Lear dies in a storm. His madness marks the end of a capricious ruler. The new Lear is born in the scene of meeting Cordelia again. He becomes a complete human being, in whom there is not a single feature of royal majesty that suppressed his humanity.

According to Byrd (1974), in *King Lear*, the mentally ill are not understood either through old symbolic ways of thought or through new scientific ways. However, they are presented, at least in the central scenes, in a way to show that the existing social institutions exist not to protect, but to destroy. In addition, madness helps Lear to break with the illusions of court life. Discussions about power and titles from the first part of the play become discussions about humanity and friendship. In that way, Lear's madness can be understood as both a result of his arrogance and a cure for it.

4. Conclusion

Cummins (2009) thinks that although these two Shakespeare's plays present madness as a kind of state that can be treated or eliminated, their description of insanity can be used as a means of social criticism through disturbing productions. Hamlet's false madness and Lear's real madness can be performed and read as social critiques and predictions of great disasters. Ophelia's madness can be politicised by describing her character as a hysterical female person, or as a woman who publicly expresses her opinion, pain, and anger. It seems that madness, in any form, provides the necessary courage when one begins to question social relations and the functioning of the basic institutions of society.

The complexity of reading about madness in Shakespeare's plays and the time in which he lived imposes the need to understand the difference between today's and early modern culture trying to understand and see what separates and connects them. By dealing with the discussions that deal with the madness and its treatment of the powerful ones and disasters they could cause in both physical and psychological senses, we provide important lessons about the gradual progress of cultural changes and we are beginning to understand complex connections between dramatic texts and other cultural documents.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Tatjana Dumitrašković is an associate professor at the Faculty of Education, University of East Sarajevo Her research interests include English Renaissance, Shakespeare Studies, and Cultural Studies.

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