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## "Mad In Craft": Action And Melancholy In William Shakespeare's Hamlet

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“MAD IN CRAFT”: ACTION AND MELANCHOLY IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S HAMLET

by

Daniel Arthur Johnson  
Bachelor of Arts, Minot State University, 2014

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota

May

2016

This thesis submitted by Daniel Arthur Johnson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This thesis is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

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Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

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Daniel Arthur Johnson

April 14, 2016

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis contains two parts. First, I will present a character analysis of *Hamlet* in William Shakespeare's play Hamlet; secondly, I will perform the role and conclude this project with a brief reflection on the experience. For the character analysis, I will examine Hamlet's inner action and his melancholy.

CHAPTER 1:  
ACTION AND MELANCHOLY

The idea of action is central to the art of the actor. Hamlet recognizes his role as actor and self-referentially rejects the actor's action. Hamlet himself acts, does, and performs; yet, he often rejects the process of these—through delay, through thought. Aristotle saw the “imitation of an action” as the fundamental aspect of tragedy (Poetics 11-2). A drama becomes tragedy because of its singular imitation of an action of a certain magnitude. *Hamlet's* central Aristotelian action is Hamlet's revenge. Yet, Hamlet also has a set of several subsidiary actions, for example: his antic disposition, the play, a trip to England, etc. In the following writing, Hamlet's general struggle of reconciling his inner action and his externals will be explored, then how this inner action is manifested as melancholy which leads to a sort of “madness.”

At the outset, Hamlet decries “actions that a man might play” (*Hamlet* 1.2.84). Gertrude addresses the commonness of death, “Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die,/Passing through nature to eternity.” (1.2.72-3) Likewise, Claudius also plays upon this commonness of death, specifically to fathers: “But you must know, your father lost a father,/that father lost, lost his” (1.2.89-90). Gertrude asks Hamlet “Why seems it so *particular* with thee?” (1.2.75) Hamlet does not identify with commonness nor does he wish to be particularized by his exterior *seems*. By particularize, the intended meaning is any form of denoting which could enclose Hamlet within a word. He calls attentions to his



costume, his “inky cloak”, and “customary suits of solemn black”, all which *seem*. What they represent then, and even now, is a superficial “visage” of mourning or melancholy. Despite the trappings of his costume, Hamlet never particularizes what is un-“common” about his feeling. He merely says what does not “denote” him. These externals do, however, beg the questions from Gertrude and Claudius.

In Hamlet’s attempt to pull apart the seams of his seems, he utters more exteriors, which further particularizes the “trappings of woe”, “the suspiration of forced breath”, the “fruitful river in the eye”, and the “dejected haviour of the visage.” Thus sighing, crying, and any amount of face-making limits Hamlet’s internal struggle in some kind of external enclosure. Nothing in all language or gesture/sign can denote him. So what is left is an unfinished question: what is Hamlet’s condition? He seems to be warning all that play him or upon him—be it actor, King, Queen, Rosencrantz/Guildenstern, Critic—that these exterior shows, these emotions, as Hamlet says, “forms, moods, shapes of grief...are actions that a man might play.” Paradoxically, Hamlet is contradictorily denying the particularization of his character even as the actor/Hamlet will particularize him through *playing* actions. Thus Hamlet places the actor in a seemingly impossible situation: representing a state negating action, negating imitation.

“How is it that the clouds still hang on you” (2.2.66)? Claudius asks Hamlet, and Claudius implores him to “throw to earth/This prevailing woe” (2.2.106-7) as if it were something external to be cast off, like clothes, a collection of cloth seamed together. Gertrude and Claudius identify the exteriority of Hamlet’s “mourning”. They do not acknowledge the interiority of Hamlet’s *woe*. Lionel Abel saw Gertrude and Claudius in this scene as trying to dramatize Hamlet, trying to get him to present a better exterior (Abel

46). In fact, Abel saw *Hamlet* as a play in which everyone attempts to dramatize each other. Hamlet chastises Gertrude and Claudius for not understanding anything outside the particular signifiers of “woe.” He refuses to particularize his emotion. These clothes and his body seem; they are a costume. But within, he has that which surpasses play/show/seem/act—this costume/body merely encloses and particularizes that which cannot be said. Hamlet creates a contradiction outright. What is seen is not what is felt. Whatever *seems* signified cannot truly denote Hamlet. Thus, however the actor charged with playing Hamlet acts Hamlet, s/he will always already be failing/succeeding. Failing in that s/he cannot denote Hamlet truly with actions—the way to convey meaning onstage. Succeeding in that playing actions is precisely all anyone playing Hamlet can do—playing actions cannot denote him truly, but they don’t *not* denote him.

As Hamlet is inquiring if Guildenstern knows how to play the recorder, Hamlet seems to be daring the incoming actor, director, or critic—anyone who attempts to analyze and particularize Hamlet, as he chastised his aunt/mom and uncle/dad in Act 1 about the nature of seeming versus being. Here, Hamlet reminds not just Rosencrantz and Guildenstern but anyone who in the course of this play has been judging him, or making an “unworthy thing of [him]”, they do not know his stops. They do not know the “heart of [his] mystery.”

Yet, within this heart of mystery, something has withered. There is something *particular* about him. Despite his protestations to the contrary, his mother and uncle-father are indeed correct in assuming something is wrong other than their “o’er hasty” marriage. Without his central action imposed upon him, Hamlet is a tree without a trunk, an actor without a spine. Something profound is affecting him. Harold Bloom reminds:

Something in Hamlet dies before the play opens, and I set aside the prevalent judgment that the deepest cause of his melancholia is his mourning for the dead father and his outrage at his mother's sexuality. Don't condescend to the Prince of Denmark: he is more intelligent than you are, whoever you are. That, ultimately, is why we need him and cannot evade his play. The foreground to Shakespeare's tragedy is Hamlet's consciousness of his own consciousness, unlimited yet at war with itself (Bloom 86).

Indeed, Douglas Trevor in his book *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England* states: "The fact that he is mourning at the outset of the play complicates Hamlet's status as a melancholic figure by providing us with an objectal frame by which we might be tempted to explain his mood" (64).

Thus Melancholy is indeed what is *particular* with Hamlet. Here, I will discuss how Hamlet is a textbook case of melancholy. Namely, how his deprivation of principal function, God, and his envy breed anger, skepticism, and a sort of madness within Hamlet.

In Robert Burton's book *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, first appearing in 1621 (vi), he sets out to define and catalogue the causes of Melancholy. Melancholy was a very specific ailment and would have been recognized and understood by Elizabethan audiences (Trevor 64). Burton quotes Hercules de Saxonia as melancholy being "a deprivation of the principal function" (Burton 148). Hamlet's principal function may be seen as student and son. Both of these functions have been subverted, his father dead, and his "intent" to go back to Wittenberg seen as being "retrograde to [the] desires" of his Uncle/Father and Aunt/Mother. Soon, Hamlet's principal function becomes that of avenger. He proves to be

less than expedient in this endeavor and further deprives himself of his principal function. This deprivation of principal function furthers Hamlet's melancholy.

Burton also states that melancholy can come from God or Hell:

*General causes are either supernatural or natural. Supernatural are from God and his angels, or, by God's permission, from the devil and his ministers. That God himself is a cause, for the punishment of sin, and satisfaction of his justice, many examples & testimonies of holy Scriptures make evident unto us (Burton 158).*

As Hamlet implores his self to melt, extoling all of God's creations, it is clear that he is in fact calling out to God to release him from this Melancholy. If God is a cause of melancholy then Hamlet must question the intent of God in giving him such a state. In addition to God, Envy and Malice are also a cause:

*Envy and Malice are two links of this chain, and both...cause this malady by themselves, especially if their bodies be otherwise disposed to melancholy....Envy so gnaws many men's hearts, that they become altogether melancholy...[Envy] crucifies their souls, withers their bodies, makes them hollow-ey'd, pale, lean, and ghastly to behold. As a moth gnaws a garment, so, saith Chrysostom, doth envy consume a man (229-230).*

Other causes of melancholy include, Scholarship 263), education (284), Anger (285), indeed G. B. Harrison in an essay entitled *On Elizabethan Melancholy* stated:

Hamlet in his solemn black is the fullest embodiment of the melancholic humour in all Elizabethan literature, and the picture is painted with such

close attention to detail that it give the impression that Shakespeare had made a text book study of the disease (Breton 76).

One of the immediate results of Melancholy then was, among other things, quickness to anger and skepticism: “To be melancholy, as anyone with a smattering of contemporary psychological medicine knew, was to be subject to delusions, and the victim could trust nothing, not even his own senses “(76).

Earlier Shakespeare had presented melancholy in *As You Like It* with the character of Jacques, who like Hamlet and *Hamlet* is keenly aware of the relation between stage and nature/world, cries:

I have neither the scholar’s melancholy, which is emulation; nor the musician’s, which is fantastical; nor the courtier’s which is proud; nor the soldier’s, which is ambitious; nor the lawyer’s which is politic; nor the lady’s, which is nice; nor the lover’s which is all these: but it is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects, and indeed the sundry contemplation of my travels, which, by often rumination, wraps me in a most humorous sadness (*As You Like It* 4.1.10-20).

However, whereas Jacques can be seen as a comical representation of melancholy, Hamlet is a “serious” representation of it (75). Compare Jacques’ enumerations of melancholy to Hamlet’s own confessions to Ophelia: “I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious” (3.1.122) and now compare Hamlet’s emulation or envy of his father, the Player, the armies of Fortinbras which all send him into a deep state of skeptical examination of self and action.

Before the Ghost, Melancholy presents itself in the beginning of Hamlet as an attempt to refute his exterior seems—which was discussed above. His melancholy drives

him to instill in those around him a skepticism of their perceptions in which his exteriority is not representative of his interiority. Although, unfortunately, his protestations only serve to further the diagnosis.

Indeed, if not for the Ghost, Hamlet would “hold his tongue” (*Hamlet* 1.2.159). Without his dramatic action, Hamlet the character is spineless. He refutes action itself, and any word—such as woe—that could denote him. However, naturally there will be an action and naturally this will convey emotion. Perhaps an understanding of the word melancholy, and its perception in Elizabethan times is helpful. Hamlet himself diagnoses his “weakness and Melancholy” (2.2.554) in the third soliloquy. Although there is nothing in the moment that can denote Hamlet truly, there is a recollection of the initial problem: “weakness and Melancholy” which possibly makes him susceptible to the whiles of the Devil.

The Ghost bestows unto Hamlet his dramatic action, gives his son his spine. This is meant to be intentionally ambiguous. For this action, the spine, is not truly son-Hamlet’s but is really father-Hamlet’s. And like a transplant the host, Prince Hamlet, periodically rejects it. As the Ghost gives Hamlet his central action, it’s important to note that it is commonly believed that Shakespeare himself played the Ghost/First Player. Thus, in the second soliloquy Hamlet swears to uphold the action of set before him by Shakespeare/Ghost/Creator/Father. The intention of bringing this into play is not only to explore the extra-dramatic—or metadramatic—nature of the initial production of the play, but to investigate the role in which externalized actions are rejected and questioned by the actor—Hamlet being the actor. As an actor may struggle to find motivation, or the “cue for passion”, when it is not internalized, so Hamlet struggles with the external central action, his role of avenger, and his antic disposition. The second soliloquy is not so much an

argument as a promise. As the Ghost has commanded Hamlet, Hamlet commands himself, his heart, his sinews, and his brain to action. It is an attempt to infect his person with the focus of action. Naturally, this fails and in the next scene he is enacting a parody of madness, a put-on disposition.

And indeed, the Hamlet of the first soliloquy wishing for his flesh to melt appears quite changed following the appearance of the Ghost. The King Hamlet of the first soliloquy who was so regal and god-like, “Hyperion”, becomes “old mole”, “truepenny”, and “boy.” Surely, this is Hamlet finding mirth, and, most of all, actions that a man might play. A spine sets him in motion. Indeed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soliloquy is ostensibly a promise to keep this central action. Hamlet seems to have indeed thought on Horatio’s warning that the encounter with the ghost may drive him “into madness” (1.4.74). Conveniently, then post-Ghost Hamlet deems it “meet to put an antic disposition on” (1.5.172) which, in turn will be viewed as madness. Although antic doesn’t necessarily mean *madness*, generally it means fantastic and foolish (*Hamlet* 113n) but also theatrically grotesque, the fantastical quality he assumes appears to be madness to others. Hamlet anticipates the antic which frees himself to alternatively nonsensical and sensical expressions.

If as Claudius and Gertrude exteriorized Hamlet, so Hamlet attempts merely to “put an antic disposition on.” The scene described by Ophelia almost seems staged. A theatricalization of madness, Hamlet continues this with the fishmonger scene. In it, Hamlet plays the fool. Yet Polonius is able to see through Hamlet’s internal method towards madness. Hamlet’s performance has perhaps “o’erstepped the modesty of Nature” (3.2.16) where the mirror of madness is not represented. And in Act Two, we find Hamlet enacting his antic. First in Ophelia’s account, stockings “down-gyvéd to the ankle”, looking as if he

had been “looséd from hell.” And then to her father, Hamlet lets loose this grotesque antic madness upon Polonius . First, however, what happens between 1.1 and 2.2? Hamlet’s “transformation”, in Claudius’ terms (2.2.5), causes Claudius to entreat Rosencranz and Guildenstern to determine “What it should be,/More than his father’s death, that has put him/So much from th’understanding of himself“ (2.2.7-9)?

The timing of the Player then not only shows Hamlet his own impotence but also how he has to accept his own “motive and cue for passion” connecting he performance to his own action, unleashing his real interior mental stress. Thus in his next emergence, in the fourth soliloquy, Hamlet interfaces with his own existence, his own truest interior, the name of his action, the spine of his life, his story, his cause, and all life. Upon seeing Ophelia, a vestige from a happier time before his transformation, Hamlet is confronted with remembrances of love. His Melancholy causes him to appear to overthrow his “noble mind” and curse Ophelia.

Hamlet’s newfound “madness” causes Claudius to spy on Hamlet. And even though Hamlet anticipates madness and cannot said to be truly mad—as we see *true* madness with Ophelia, the dramatic function of mad characters and fools is important to note, as Foucault states about madness perceptions in the Renaissance:

On the one hand, the speech of madmen was rejected as being worthless, and, on the other, it was never completely nullified. We may say that the fool was, in a sense, the institutionalization of the speech of madness. Without any relation to morality and politics , and, moreover, under the cover of irresponsibility, he told, in a symbolic form, the truth that ordinary men could not state (Foucault 373).



Hamlet, in a self-conscious attempt both to negate and elevate his speech, takes on the antic disposition. Foucault continues:

In the traditional European theatre—I imagine the same thing is true in Japan—the fool assumed a central role, from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. The madman made the spectators laugh, for he saw what the other actors did not see, and he revealed the ending of the plot before they did. That is, he is an individual who reveals the truth with spirit. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a good example. The king is a victim of his own fantasy, but at the same time he is someone who tells the truth. In other words, in the theater the madman is a character who expresses with his body the truth that the other actors and spectators are not aware of, a character through whom the truth appears (374).

“Madness” affords Hamlet opportunities to “honesty.” Under the guise of this madness Hamlet is able to say what he feels about Polonius/Ophelia/Claudius to Polonius and later Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Thus to be honest is “to be one man picked out of ten thousand,” being honest, or to hold truth, is to be mad, to feel mad. Yet through the course of the play, Hamlet’s mind becomes tainted by his performance, as before his performance is tainted by his mind. Charney states this is related to “the dyer’s hand in Sonnet 111, Hamlet’s nature ‘is subdued/ To what it works in’ and thereby suffers an ineradicable stain” (Charney 5). This “staining” or “taint[ing]” of Hamlet’s nature is key to understanding his character. Hamlet does not simply fool other characters or play the fool in order to achieve an objective of perceived madness, after some time, he indeed is driven to a sort of madness at these time--if indeed madness may be seen as a kind of truthful

utterance in a false world. In these moments he catches himself or is caught when his madness overtakes him. Such as in the Nunnery Scene after he has cursed Ophelia: "Go to, I'll no more on't. It hath made me mad"(3.1.140) After this, Hamlet immediately speaks again of his purpose, to destroy an incestuous marriage. In the closet, the Ghost must reappear to sharpen Hamlet's "almost blunted purpose" (3.4.110). Since Hamlet has ignored the Ghost in dealing with his Mother, could he not have failed the Ghost in letting his mind be tainted? Hamlet out of his own "Weakness and Melancholy" has allowed some subsidiary actions to overwhelm his self and central action. Despite the Ghost and Horatio's earlier warnings, and Hamlet's own idea to put on some performance of madness, Hamlet's mind and action has become tainted with madness and melancholy, with the "pale cast of thought" and hell's breath.

How does Hamlet present his madness to other Characters? Rosencranz and Guildenstern, old buddies to Hamlet, who Gertrude describes as: "two men there are not living/ To whom he more adheres." (2.2.20-1) The questions become, how "excellent good friends" is Hamlet with Rosencranz and Guildenstern? How much does Hamlet trust them? Claudius speaks to a sort of childhood friendship: "being of so young days brought up with him,/And sith so neighbour'd to his youth and havior" (2.2.11-12). Hamlet implores them to tell him "what makes [them] to Elsinore" by using "the consonancy of [their] youth, by the obligation of [their] ever-preserved love." (2.2.270-71) It's safe to assume then that Hamlet, Rosencranz and Guildenstern are indeed "excellent good friends." Yet, Hamlet seems to be suspicious from the outset, his first question is the obligatory "how do ye both" the next "what news?", but as he questions "more in particular" what have they deserved that Fortune, the "strumpet", sends them to prison, Denmark. Hamlet guesses, correctly,

that the King and Queen have sent for them. If Hamlet isn't suspicious of his "excellent good friends" it is only for greetings and jokes about Fortune's genitalia. It seems as soon as Rosencrantz answers Hamlet's "What news?" with just "None...but that the world's grown honest," that Hamlet changes the tenor of the conversation to "why are you here?" If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have nothing to hide they may detail their journey or if they didn't feel so guilty about lying to their "dear honoured lord" they may have concocted at least some reason for being at Elsinore. Recall how Horatio, when Hamlet asks essentially the same question, replies simply that he came to attend King Hamlet's funeral. Hamlet believed that, he also didn't have anything to hide at that point, even though that would mean that Horatio had been at Elsinore for awhile before meeting Hamlet. Could not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at least attempted such a reason? Instead they say "to visit you, [Hamlet], nothing more" (2.2.258) Hamlet only entertains this for awhile, thanks them and then bombards them with inquiries: "Beggar that I am I am even poor in thanks...were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation?" (2.2.259-61) They fold and reveal that they were sent for. Hamlet, does not at first inform them that he's mad in craft, he says that he's "lost all [his] mirth" that the entire world, the stars, humanity, all is quintessentially dust. To Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he seems to particularize himself a bit more of his actual humor, not what he has been playing. Yet this speech, seems to be a Hamlet of an earlier time, this is the Hamlet of the First Soliloquy again, not the Hamlet that just had so much fun at the expense of Polonius. This gives a window into Hamlet that is not seen again until the Third Soliloquy at the end of the act. Hamlet, even though Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been revealed as agents for the King and Queen, Hamlet entrusts in them a bit of his melancholic interiority. And later, he tells them that the

King and Queen are “deceived” and that he ostensibly isn’t mad but mad “north-north-west: when the wind is southerly [he] knows a hawk from a handsaw[heron]” (2.2.347-48). This speaks to Hamlet acknowledging that the task is tainting his mind. At times he is indeed mad, but there are times he is not.

Before Polonius dies, Hamlet wishes that Gertrude were not his mother. In Act 1, Hamlet dreams of self-slaughter, in Act 2 he felt old and imprisoned, in Act 3 he muses that death is but a dream and then to Ophelia wishes he was not born, and now, still in Act 3, “would it were not so, [Gertrude is his] mother.” This is important because Hamlet no longer actually muses on self-slaughter, or a sort of retroactive erasure of self. Instead, his thoughts become “bloody” and then are tempered by actually facing death—in the face of the commission, evading certain death, premeditatedly sending his “excellent good friends” to execution—and facing it again—literally, in the skull of Yorick, and the face of Laertes and Claudius’ ham-handed trap. The Hamlet of acts 1,2,3 stand outside of death, he sees his father, thinks of the ontological problem, and, indeed, causes death but only in a fit of passion. The Hamlet of Act 5 is no longer a stranger or outsider to death but is commingled within in it. Hamlet no longer plays the actor, he becomes the actor in Act 5.

This antic Hamlet will be in stark contrast to the Hamlet of Act 5. No more does Hamlet seem to play. Once Hamlet has become murderer, he obsesses with the body and its aftermath, less with the soul and its aftermath. Always has Hamlet been fascinated with death and the macabre—“maggots in a dead dog”, “Too, too sullied flesh...melt”—and the imagery it is heir to. However, once Polonius is dead and his guts dragged from the Closet Scene, Hamlet becomes more interested in a body’s result. No more “for in this sleep what dreams may come”, or musings on the undiscovered country, a concern with the soul. Now,

Hamlet fixates on worms, decay, rotting, what the physical body becomes upon death. Hamlet has found the commonality of all organism—be they worms, beasts, fishes, beggars, or kings. They all will rot i' th' earth and service her progeny. Indeed, this is again symptomatic of the Renaissance understanding of melancholy:

To a large extent the melancholy of the age is due to an unwilling agnosticism and a morbid fear of death which was increased... by the pomps of the undertaker, the wormy circumstance of the charnel-house, and the uncertain hope of immortality (Breton 74).

Yes, what about an “undertaker”? Hamlet’s first line to the Clown/Gravedigger is one of disgust: “A sings in grave-making” (5.1.56), this, coming from the Hamlet who seemed rather flippant about his murdering of Polonius. The Hamlet of Act 5 and the Hamlet of Act 1 are mirrored now, mirthless. The Act 1 Hamlet was action-less and mirthless, and the Act 5 Hamlet is certain of his action and yet is largely mirthless. In response to the Gravedigger’s willful misuse of his words, Hamlet says to Horatio: “we must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us.” Hamlet before was never one to miss an equivocation of language into which he may leap. In the dead skull of Yorick Hamlet remembers a man of infinite jest, he may as well be speaking about himself as well.

Despite Hamlet’s new humor, he has, as he will state in 5.2, a newfound virtue of rashness. He has been rash before—Polonius—but it now is part of what makes living with himself easier—it is not madness in rashness. As Laertes weeps over the grave of Ophelia, Hamlet’s rashness spills over and allows his passion to push him into a quarrel with Laertes. And once again, Hamlet’s primary passion is not squared upon the King but is deflected to another who offends Hamlet more. It would be strange to assume Hamlet is

merely mocking Laertes' love of Ophelia and to state that, in fact, Hamlet did not love Ophelia. Hamlet has had much time to ruminate on Ophelia, if their love was only convenient, a tryst, or lacking that which makes true love, then Hamlet would not react as he did. Later Hamlet apologizes to Horatio for losing himself with Laertes (5.2.76). This speaks to Hamlet's passion being a passing relapse of a former self in which the fighting in his heart spilt out and over onto others. It is emblematic of Hamlet to be faced with the name of action and to fight with Laertes's "until his eyelid's will no longer wag" an oddly prescient remark. Despite claiming bloody thoughts when last seen, Hamlet still does not move to kill Claudius. Namely, he knows now that Claudius has an eye to kill him too. Thus Hamlet can "let be" and instead of contriving in some deep plot, may let the plot come to him.

Act five brings the achievement of the central action of *Hamlet*. Hamlet says that "I have shot my arrow o'er the house/ hurt my brother" (5.2.215-6). Hamlet's actions cause many arrows to be shot over houses. Hamlet is not to be blamed for it, however, or judged for his lapses. For all his brilliance he is still human and not prescient. His reason for not killing Claudius at the most opportune time is entirely right. His father died with all his crimes upon his head and now wanders in the fires of purgatory. Claudius' earthly fate matters little to his eternal fate.

As Hamlet walks into the trap placed before him he only has to say "Let be." He apologizes to Laertes, He fences, the King's treachery manifests and the task of the last five acts is done, twice, as Claudius is stabbed and poisoned. As Hamlet dies, he thinks of all the thoughts he could say. "Had I but time...oh I could tell you--/But let it be" (5.2.315-16) He

instead sticks to the moment, tells Horatio to tell his tale aright and cast his vote for Fortinbras. "The rest is silence."

Hamlet can only complete his action after he is dead. And it is only after his death that he shares a little more of his anxiety of his now completed action (Trevor 50). His name is wounded. Horatio—meaning "speaker"—must "report his cause" and "tell his story". Thus what becomes and perhaps was of the utmost importance was Hamlet's posterity. Seeing his Father's memory so abused seemed to enrage Hamlet more than his murder. The fear that the name of his action might envelop his own, how his same-named father did seem to write over his memory. When his central action is achieved, He is only left with his name, wounded, in need of just reportage.

In this chapter, I set out to discover Hamlet's inner action or his interiority. What I found was melancholy, which underpins all of Hamlet's subsequent actions. As I stated above, Hamlet's need to deny any denotation of his true state is itself a symptom of melancholy. Melancholy was understood to make men skeptical, angry and itself could look like madness. Madness then, as it was understood in Renaissance, was to be discredited but also a bearer of truth.

## CHAPTER II

### REFLECTIONS

So many books and articles unread—I cleaned out the library’s section on Hamlet and scanned the lot for minable material. I did find much, and then forgot, and then sat stewing. A comparable trip to England occurred. The divinity that shapes my end in this reflection of my journey with Hamlet is the deadline—always looming, heavy and hard upon the mind. As Bloom wonders “Why are we persuaded that Hamlet somehow fights for us?” (97) Indeed I found that by the image of Hamlet’s cause I saw the portraiture of my own--an unseemly hero upon whom an immense task was foisted. In this chapter, I intend to share the reflections of my research into action and melancholy.

At first I became interested in the idea of metadrama in *Hamlet* and how Hamlet was, in fact, a metadramatical character. Indeed, as metadrama is concerned with self-conscious theatre, or theatre that knows it’s theatre, so was this avenue like Hamlet’s play “The Mousetrap”, an extraordinary digression, but not incredibly useful. It did however influence much of how I wrote and thought on the play, though not necessarily on how I played Hamlet. I felt metadrama negated Hamlet’s humanity and this project was largely abandoned. I learned that *Hamlet* may be enmeshed in a game of theatrical mirrors but it seemed disingenuous to portray Hamlet as a character of mirrors. A character in which he would sociopathically investigate the affect his brash performances have.

At first approaching the role of Hamlet, I felt his intelligence too great to fall prey to actual madness or melancholy. The authority with which I saw this noble mind could not



actually be overthrown. At first suggestion, I thought “melancholy” a tired word and concept as far as the character was concerned. I fancied to think that Hamlet’s affliction was too great to be particularized by a mere word or affliction. I took his first speech—the “Seems, Madam” speech—to be a refutation to the possibility of reading Hamlet’s disposition, as well as an indication of the impossibility to understand the state of Hamlet. I thought it was quite clever—thinking of some sort of Artaud-cum-Derrida connection of the failure of representation. As I began to take the stage, I realized my inability of such an approach.

As Hamlet’s words and actions became my own, I began to understand much more of the heart of his mystery. Hamlet, who at first seemed a mortal God, imperious not only to representation but criticism, now became approachable. Returning to my basic approach to acting was key. In early rehearsals, I felt like I was narrating Hamlet’s lines, Brecht-like, commenting on the action—keeping my hands clean.

Then I went quite in the other direction. In forcing myself to take on Hamlet’s circumstances I found I myself “o’er-step[ping] the modesty of nature”. The entire arc of the character needed to be present at all times. Like a musician I could not find Hamlet’s true *fortissimo* before the Ghost had even entered. At first I felt quite a lot like Kostya in *An Actor Prepares*, who, in preparing to play Othello in a scene, covers his face in Chocolate cake, bares his teeth, and growls. As Hamlet thinks it meet merely “put an antic disposition on” so I thought meet to put a Hamlet disposition on. I was merely indicating how much I identified with Hamlet and his cause.

In my pursuit of Hamlet’s action, the teaching of Stanislavsky and his interpreters became important. Richard Boleslavsky, student of Stanislavsky, saw dramatic action like a

tree: “Look at that tree. It is the protagonist of all arts; it is an ideal structure of action. Upward movement and sideways resistance, balance and growth” (Boleslavsky 25).

Boleslavsky continues:

To comply with nature’s law of action, the threefold law you can see expressed in that tree. First, the main trunk, the idea, the reason. On the stage it comes from the director. Second, the branches, elements of the idea, particles of reason. That comes from the actor. Third, the foliage, the result of the previous two, the brilliant presentation of idea, the bright conclusion of reasoning (Boleslavsky 26).

In *Building a Character* Stanislavsky states that “*Action—real productive action with a purpose is the all-important factor in creativeness, and consequently in speech as well* (133).”

He continues:

To speak is to act. That action sets an objective for us: to instill into others what we see inside ourselves. It is not important that the other person will see or not the thing you have in mind. Nature and the subconscious may take care of that. Your job is to desire to instill your inner visions in others, and that desire breeds action (133).

Thus, the actor’s job is to communicate her interiority so that the actor’s exterior may be communicated, both to the external audience and companion actors.

An immersion in the circumstances propels the actor into action. Thus Stanislavsky’s “magic if”: “*if* acts as a lever to lift us out of the world of actuality into the realm of imagination” (*An Actor Prepares* 49) and “With this special quality of *if*...nobody obliges you to believe or not believe anything. Everything is clear, honest and above-board.

You are given a question, and you are expected to answer it sincerely and definitely” (50) and “[If] arouses an inner and real activity, and does this by natural means” (50) If only it was so easy for Hamlet—to answer his dramatic question—but it is not so simple as Stanislavsky states. Actors are blocked, internally and externally by walls constructed by culture. The actor must work through these obstacles, the external imperatives of script, direction, and self-awareness. The goal of the actor is to achieve a mental state of heightened awareness and a body responsive to unconscious impulse.

Yet, in the performances, the sudden presence of an audience threw my mental focus awry. In the direct address of the soliloquys, I saw familiar faces. I saw faces buried in hands and faces in phones. It was hard not to take John Barton literally at his words when he states in *Playing Shakespeare*: “I don’t believe that most audiences really listen to a complex text unless the actor makes them do so” (106). And unfortunately, I don’t believe that I ever go through any of the soliloquies—on any night—without being a little too aware of the audience.

My research on melancholy helped me to actualize Hamlet onstage. Knowing that there is something particular about Hamlet that manifests in rather regimented ways, I no longer intimidated myself into thinking Hamlet was a character incapable of being represented. The study of melancholy was my way out.

I realize now that my own Melancholy was in fact a great block in my ability to think, write, and play Hamlet. I myself realized “how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable” this world of theatre was to me. I had lost my mirth. In the earliest rehearsals, I stood on the stage with head half-buried in the script, which may as well have been made of sand. The realization came after a particularly bad rehearsal. Hamlet became the Player and this

Player's fiction was monstrous to me. I couldn't be made to care. Perhaps Hamlet's world-view was too close for comfort at that present moment. Unfortunately, for Hamlet and all parties else involved, he had no access to prescription Celexa. And his melancholy, anxiety towards his action, and subsequent divergences into madness remain written to excite that within which is dying to renew our supernatural call to action again.

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