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This is I, Hamlet the Dane

by Jack Hayward

(English 1153)

I have recently been cast as the titular role in a new production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In order to better understand this character and shape my portrayal of him, I turn to the play itself, along with some previous iterations of the character. My main areas of focus when it comes to shaping my portrayal of Hamlet are his appearance and behavior, delivery of lines, and physical mannerisms. Through these areas of focus I aim to form an interpretation of Hamlet that matches my interpretation of the play: living a double life will inevitably lead to one's destruction.

The first aspect of the character I will consider is his appearance and behavior. Not much is stated about Hamlet's appearance in the play, but one can reasonably infer that his appearance becomes more and more haggard as the play goes on. For example, in Act II Scene i, Ophelia describes Hamlet "with his doublet all unbraced,/ No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,/ Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle" (II.i.88-90). Later on, in Act III Scene iv, Gertrude tells Hamlet that "[his] eyes [his] spirits wildly peep,/ And, as the sleeping soldiers in th' alarm,/ [His] bedded hair, like life in excrements,/ Start up and stand an end" (III.iv.136-139). Thus my Hamlet will become gradually haggard as the show goes on. Over time I will stop tucking in my shirt, make my hair messier, and make the clothes look dirtier in order to make it appear that Hamlet has not changed clothes in a while. One idea for Hamlet's appearance which I find apropos is David Tennant's choice to eventually go barefoot in the Royal Shakespeare Company film *Hamlet*. To me, this little detail creatively and effectively conveys Hamlet's disregard for his appearance due to his obsession with revenge. Going barefoot forgoes not just a sense of royalty, but civility as well, creating an almost less-than-human aspect to Hamlet; indeed, I believe that Hamlet loses himself to his cause figuratively as much as literally. In my interpretation of the play, Hamlet is only pretending to be mad. However, this charade does have a negative effect on him, causing him to become increasingly depressed, as seen in the famous "To be or not to be" speech (III.i.64). In my portrayal of the character, both Hamlet's false madness and hidden sadness would lend to his disheveled appearance.

These two facets of Hamlet's psyche will also influence how I portray his behavior. When acting mad, I prefer the more wacky and senseless interpretations, along with sudden starkness in order to evoke a sense of something bipolar. My Hamlet is very unpredictable; one never knows whether he will respond seriously or sarcastically, loudly or softly, calmly or enraged. I will use varying inflections and different voices for the scenes where Hamlet appears mad. My goal is to make it appear that Hamlet is almost having fun playing mad; he is happy with himself that he can so easily convince all of Elsinore that he is mad, and this giddiness only adds to his apparent insanity. In stark contrast to this, my Hamlet is very serious and depressed in the appropriate scenes. It is in these moments that I believe Hamlet drops the charade and is genuine with himself. This real side of him also comes out when someone he truly cares about is threatened or afraid. For example, in Act III Scene iv, Hamlet states to Gertrude that "[i]t is not madness/That [he] has uttered" (III.iv.162-163), in reference to his allusion that Claudius killed King Hamlet, and thus Gertrude has done a terrible sin in marrying Claudius. "Bring [him] to the test," Hamlet insists, "and the matter will reword, which madness/Would gambol from" (III.iv.163-165). When he realizes that Gertrude is paying more attention to his display of madness than his message, Hamlet drops the act and seriously implores her to hear him out; his ultimate goal is not to convince people that he is mad, it is to get revenge for his

father and cleanse his family. This motivation is the driving force of my Hamlet, and whether or not he plays mad or decides to be straightforward depends on which path will get him closer to this goal.

The delivery methods of my Hamlet are also dependent on whether he is being serious or insane. As I stated earlier, when playing mad I plan to use a wide variation of inflection, and multiple voices to match whatever emotion Hamlet is trying to evoke or poke fun at. Hamlet's words when playing crazy will be more eloquent than when he is serious, however. Polonius says about Hamlet's dialogue that "[t]hough this be madness, yet there is method in 't" (II.ii.223-224); it is a charade that is carefully played out in order to achieve a goal. When Hamlet is serious, however, such as when talking to his mother in Act III Scene iv, or the "To be or not to be" monologue earlier in the Act, or when confronting Laertes over Ophelia's grave in Act V, he is fuelled by raw emotion, not a scheme, and thus my delivery will reflect that. Words will be sharper yet simplistic, and very to-the-point. Hamlet will speak a little faster and more passionately in these scenes.

Physical mannerisms are my last area of focus for shaping my interpretation of Hamlet. When playing mad, he is very quick and light on his feet. I will be very animated when speaking, with lots of hand gestures and various facial expressions to match the varying inflections and voices that I use. I will also come up with a few ticks for when playing mad, such as itches, scratches, sniffing and licking things, etc. In more serious and somber moments, Hamlet is more slow and heavy to convey the weight of the burden of revenge he carries. He is very reserved and notably still for the most part, in order to create a sharp visual contrast between the two sides of himself.

My interpretation of Hamlet is key to my interpretation of the play as a whole. To me, Hamlet is only pretending to be mad, as Polonius states in Act II, and Hamlet himself alludes to when he says that "[he] essentially [is] not in madness, / but mad in craft" (III.iv.209-210) and "I am but mad north-northwest. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw" (II.ii.402-403). However, his charade causes him to become increasingly conflicted and depressed, ultimately tearing him in two and resulting in his death. To me, this is the central theme of the play: living a double life will inevitably lead to one's destruction. This can be seen in Hamlet's life, as his feigned madness and bottled up emotions cause his uncle to plot his murder and Laertes to carry it out. In the life of Claudius, his hidden sin and outward royalty cause his own internal conflict, as evidenced by Act III Scene iii, where he states that "pray can [he] not, / Though inclination be as sharp as will. / [His] stronger guilt defeats [his] strong intent" (III.iii.42-44); it is the combination of both Claudius' hidden sin and outward righteousness that spur Hamlet to pursue revenge. For Gertrude, it is her shame at the realization of what Claudius has done, and what she has done, which contradict her public image; she proclaims in Act III Scene iv that Hamlet "turn'st [her] eyes into [her] very soul, / And there [she sees] such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct" (III.iv.100-102). I believe in the last scene when Gertrude takes the poisoned wine meant for Hamlet, she does so fully knowing that it will kill her. Despite believing in a just cause, Hamlet ends up going down the same road as his uncle-father and aunt-mother in the end. My interpretation of Hamlet as a character strives to embody the conflicting sides of him and clearly portray a man becoming, in a twisted way, the very man he vowed to destroy. The parallels between Hamlet and Claudius are too clear to ignore. Claudius killed Hamlet's father and married his mother; Hamlet killed Laertes' father and wanted to marry his sister. Laertes' desire to get revenge on Hamlet is no different than Hamlet's desire to get revenge on Claudius. Through my interpretation of Hamlet, I endeavor to exemplify this, which I believe to be the central arc of the play.

Works Cited

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