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Hamlet: Surveillance and Bipolarity

> "'I will appeal to the experience of this Dr Mosgrave … physicians and lawyers are the confessors of this prosaic nineteenth century. Surely he will be able to help me.'"
> "'The revelation made by the patient to the physician is I believe as sacred as the confession of a penitent to his priest?'"
>
> - Robert Audley from *Lady Audley's Secret*[1]

Foucauldian theory on the political role of the so-called human sciences has a divided fan base in the 21st century. For one, it is clear that institutions like that of psychiatry are crucial for disciplining populations. For another, our discipline is all too familiar with the historical imprecision of Foucault's broad theoretical assertions. Notable are his quick shifts between Continental (French) and English historical developments, shifts that do not account for the disparities in those cultural, religious, and governmental contexts. To more precisely account for the genealogy of political formulations and the human sciences, this paper returns to the most notable early modern work to invite psychological diagnoses: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Historicizing the religious and political context of the play's production, this paper employs a diagnosis of Hamlet heuristically, characterizing him and the play under the modern psychological framework of bipolar disorder. In returning to *Hamlet* and rediagnosing Hamlet, we can account for the historical circumstances of Hamlet's religious and ontological crises as well as bridge our 21st century moment with the early modern period: tracing a genealogy of bipolarity and scaffolding a structure of feeling of the early modern state.

The primary text bridging the early modern period and the development of psychoanalysis — a text that excludes the interwoven historical concerns of religion and state

[1] Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 319-319

power — is Freud's reading of *Hamlet* in "Mourning and Melancholia." Yet Freud's focus on sorrow accounts for only half of Hamlet's pathology. Turning to Foucauldian narratives — namely his historiography of mental illnesses — we can more adequately characterize Hamlet, as not just melancholic, but also manic: in contemporary terms, as bipolar. Beyond melancholia, rediagnosing Hamlet as bipolar provides a bridge between *Hamlet's* historical moment and ours: characterizing the affect of the early modern state and reconfiguring the genealogy of the diagnosis itself.

In his 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud diagnoses Hamlet as melancholic and uses Hamlet's character to further his description of melancholia. Freud describes the characteristics and symptoms of mourning and melancholia in order to differentiate the two diagnoses. Whereas mourning is the reasonable response to the loss of a loved one, for Freud, melancholia is pathological. He writes:

> The difference … is that the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely. The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning — an extraordinary diminution in his self regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale … For there can be no doubt that if anyone holds and expresses to others an opinion of himself such as this (an opinion which Hamlet held both of himself and of everyone else*), he is ill, whether he is speaking the truth or whether he is being more or less unfair to himself.[2]

For Freud, the emotions of the melancholic are partially obstructed from view: "we cannot see what is absorbing him." In this parenthetical, Freud implicitly diagnoses Hamlet as melancholic, and uses him as a cultural reference point for his definition of melancholia. The reader knows how Hamlet behaves, and if Hamlet is like Freud's melancholic, then the reader can understand Freud's conception of melancholia through the literary referent. By invoking Hamlet's

[2] Freud, Mourning and Melancholia, 246. The asterisk indicates Freud's citation of Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii

pathology, Freud inserts Hamlet in the history of medical diagnosis, while simultaneously suggesting that his description of melancholia is a way to view Hamlet's character.

Melancholia is not a wholly accurate description of Hamlet, for while it accounts for his grief, it does not account for his madness. Notable in Freud's description of melancholia is its relationship to another pathology: mania. He writes, "The most remarkable characteristic of melancholia, and the one in most need of explanation, is its tendency to change round into mania — a state which is the opposite of it in its symptoms." In "Figures of Madness," Michel Foucault historicizes psychological pathology and describes the characteristics of mania and melancholy. He cites Thomas Willis as the first to describe the 'manic-depressive' cycle, wherein someone alternates between mania and melancholy.[3] Foucault writes of Spengler's description of mania, "When a certain intensity is reached, [a] local charge suddenly spreads throughout the system, shaking it with considerable violence until the discharge is complete."[4] When a charge spreads throughout the system it moves from one pole to another; this description characterizes the volatility of mania. Additionally, the metaphor of electric charges is the etymological root of the modern clinical term for manic-depression: bipolar disorder.

Indeed, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders categorizes a present-day notion of bipolarity, confirming its historical continuity with manic-depression. From the fifth edition: "The bipolar I disorder criteria represent the modern understanding of the classic manic-depressive disorder or affective psychosis described in the nineteenth century."[5] To be classified as bipolar under the DSM 5, one needs to "experience major depressive episodes" and have at least one manic episode, as characterized by at least three of seven

[3] Michel Foucault, History of Madness, 273
[4] *Ibid.*, 276
[5] The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition, "Bipolar I Disorder".

symptoms, including: “Excessive involvement in activities that have a high potential for painful consequences”; “Increase in goal-directed activity or psychomotor agitation”; “Inflated self-esteem or grandiosity”; “More talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking”; “Flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are racing”; “Distractibility (i.e., attention too easily drawn to unimportant or irrelevant external stimuli), as reported or observed.”[6] These contemporary symptoms of bipolar disorder are also characteristic of Hamlet. They are scientific formulations, and insofar as culture concerns itself with the interiority of subjects, cultural ones as well.

Hamlet, frequently described in the play and in its criticism as melancholic and mad, exhibits this bipolarity. In re-diagnosing Hamlet as bipolar, in acknowledging and incorporating his mania alongside his melancholy, we can appropriately account for the opacity which produces so much of his interiority. Moreover, a diagnosis of Hamlet that accounts for surveillance he undergoes lends insight into the psyche of *Hamlet’s* contemporary political moment, one with an emergent state surveillance apparatus.

To trace the interplay between the religious, psychological, and political registers of *Hamlet*, I begin with Hamlet’s primary ontological problem: the existence of the ghost. Shakespeare anachronistically backprojects the early modern reality of Protestantism onto the Medieval — and thus Catholic — story of Amleth. This anachronism, insofar as it invokes the reality of early modern state surveillance and religious persecution, links the dramatic situation of the play with the extra-theatrical context of the play’s production. The historical conditions of *Hamlet’s* production — the surveillance and persecution enacted by the state on Catholics —

[6] *Ibid.*

induces in the play a form of religious bipolarity: a confused vacillation between Protestant and Catholic worldviews. This vacillation is represented by linguistic duplicitousness, a trait which is characteristic of Hamlet's madness and which is an external manifestation of "flight of ideas" and "distractibility."

In Elizabethan England, the Monarchy spied on and persecuted Catholics. As John Michael Archer writes in *Sovereignty and Intelligence*, "Informing on religious nonconformism was common in the countryside during the early stages of the English Reformation . . . Privy councilors and bishops alike employed pursuivants, special messengers with the power to execute warrants on the hunt for Catholics."[7] It is in the historical context of Catholic persecution that Shakespeare, son of a Catholic father, writes the return of Hamlet's spectral father. As Stephen Greenblatt describes in the biography *Will in the World*, Shakespeare was careful about the language in his plays, as they were censored. The ghost of Hamlet, Sr. says to his son, a student at Wittenberg who is anachronistically made Protestant in medieval Denmark:

> I am thy father's spirit / Doomed for a certain term to walk the night, / And for the day confined to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison-house / I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would Harrow up thy soul.[8]

Protestants do not believe in purgatory, so explicit mentions of it would not have been acceptable to a censor in Protestant, early modern England, hence the implicit language of being in a liminal state: "Doomed for a certain term to walk the night." Greenblatt notes that Shakespeare puns in writing that the ghost is "forbid to tell the secrets of [his] prison-house": both the ghost and

[7]John Michael Archer, Sovereignty and Intelligence: Spying and Court Culture in the English Renaissance, 4.
[8] Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* 1.5.14-21

Shakespeare are "forbid to tell" about the nature of purgatory. Shakespeare is unable to speak freely as a result of his condition of being observed and thus resorts to subtle language and riddling jokes as a response. His meaning is clear to his audience, despite this censorship, and reaffirmed, as Greenblatt states, by Hamlet's subsequent reference to Saint Patrick, the patron saint of purgatory.[9]

Hamlet's knowledge of his uncle's crimes as gleaned from the ghost of his father, visiting from purgatory, thus rests on unsteady ground. In negotiating the pull between Catholic and Protestant world views, he tries to ascertain for himself Claudius' guilt, hesitating out of uncertainty about the ghost's origins: "The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil: and the devil hath power."[10] The nature of Hamlet's vacillation and madness parallels the obfuscated nature of the ghost's origins: he thinks the it is possible the spirit "may be the devil," and not a ghost from purgatory. Extra-diegetically, duplicitous language that is meant to obfuscate is prompted by surveillance. This duplicitousness is also reflected intra-diegetically, manifested in Hamlet's affectations of madness. Just as the duplicitousness of the play's language is a result of state observation, so too is the oscillation of Hamlet's behavior.

Hamlet's bipolarity, manifested in his simultaneous affectation of madness and intelligibility of speech, is a consequence of being watched. Hamlet's mental state is inextricable from his presence in Claudius' spying court and the observation he undergoes in it. In Act III Scene i, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are asked by Claudius if they were able to glean why Hamlet "puts on this confusion." Guildenstern replies, "nor do we find him forward to be sounded / but with crafty madness keeps aloof / when we would bring him on to some confession

[9] Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 319; *Hamlet*, 1.5.140.
[10] Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* 2.2.517.

/ of his true state."[11] Guildenstern wants to bring Hamlet to confess what is in his mind, and observes that Hamlet does not want to be "sounded" or probed. As a result, Hamlet craftily "keeps aloof" with "madness," to avoid such an occurrence. Hamlet's mental state, for Guildenstern, is a response to, and an evasion from, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's observation of him, their "sounding."

Indeed, Guildenstern is not the only character to reflect on how Hamlet is under watch. Toward the end of this famous scene, Hamlet, in his vacillating, suicidal anguish, breaks off his engagement with Ophelia: "Get thee to a nunnery!" In lamentation of her broken engagement and Hamlet's broken mind, Ophelia cries, "Oh, what a noble mind is here ov'erthrown / … / Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down!"[12] Here, Ophelia puns; Hamlet is a (courtly) observer, a phrase that describes attendants at the King's court and one that alludes to the culture of spying and observation in Elizabeth's court.[13] His "noble mind...o'erthrown," Hamlet is the most "observed of all." Here, too, is another pun: Hamlet's mind is noble in that it was virtuous, and has now been "o'erthrown" by madness. He is "quite, quite down" as he is observed. Hamlet's mind is also *of nobility,* and that status of his, given the suspicion Claudius has of him, is overthrown. His status as a courtly observer is quite down. In this pun, Hamlet's madness is inextricable from his position at the court. His status as one who is observed is linked with the upheaval of his mind by the respective prepositional words "o'erthrown" and "down."

In the close of this stanza Ophelia returns to discussing optics: "Oh, woe is me / T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!" The line break signifies another moment of duplicitous

[11] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.1.7-9.
[12] *Ibid.,* 3.1.151.
[13] See Archer *Sovereignty and Intelligence*, 41, 42, for a more detailed portrait of the romantic/sexual spy culture of the Elizabethan court.

speech and prompts two readings. One asks for pity: "Woe is me to have seen what I have seen." The other despairs, "Oh woe is me," and then exhorts "To have seen what I have seen, see what I see." The object of her sight is the denaturing of Hamlet's mind. In a moment of dramatic irony, Ophelia asks for empathy "see what I see!," and, in doing so, also prompts empathy for the subject of her speech. Indeed, woe is Hamlet "for having seen what [he has] seen:" a ghost and the truth.

Hamlet's madness, insofar as it is provoked by disciplinary, courtly observation, is performative; it functions to hide that which others want to see. After covertly observing Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia, Claudius describes Hamlet's demeanor to Polonius:

> Love? His affections do not that way tend / What he spake, though it lacked form a little, / was not like madness. There's something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood, / And I doubt the hatch and the disclose / Will be in some danger.[14]

Claudius contends that Hamlet's speech was not indicative of madness — "what he spake … was not like madness" — but of a secret that Hamlet is ruminating over: "there is something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood." Further, Claudius fears the public disclosure of this "something in [Hamlet's] soul:" "I doubt the hatch and disclose / Will be in some danger." Later in the scene, after Polonius responds, Claudius says of Hamlet, "Madness in great ones must not unmatched go." Whereas in his lines immediately prior, Claudius indicates that what Hamlet is afflicted of is not like madness, here Claudius states that Hamlet's madness must not be ignored. There is nothing in Polonius' intermittent speech to have changed Claudius' impression of Hamlet's behavior. Though Polonius argues that Hamlet's grief springs from unrequited love, such a claim does nothing to overturn Polonius' earlier comments about the

[14] Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* 3.3.176-180

reason in Hamlet's speech nor Claudius' observation about how "what he spake . . . was not like madness."

It seems, then, that to Claudius, Hamlet is both mad and not. He is sound in reason and mad in affect. Indeed, it is the outward form of Hamlet's behavior that Claudius notes, even as he contends that his speech "was not like madness." Claudius notes that what Hamlet spoke "lacked form a little," and that "This something-settled matter in his heart, / Whereon his brains still beating puts him thus / From fashion of himself."[15] This matter rooted in Hamlet's heart, to Claudius, makes him unlike his normal self. Hamlet is both sound in reason and mad in appearance or "fashion," fashion being a descriptor that is notably about external appearance, "grandiose" performances of the self, as the DSM describes. Additionally, Claudius notes that disclosing that which Hamlet is brooding over has the risk of danger should it be disclosed. This secret affects Hamlet's fashion of himself precisely because he cannot disclose it. For Claudius, like for Guildenstern, Hamlet's madness is an evasion of disclosure and performative for the purpose of obscurity.

The opacity of interiority induced by observation manifests at the level of speech for Hamlet. In Act II, Scene ii, Hamlet converses with Polonius in a riddling manner. Polonius as an aside describes the interaction: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't. . . . How pregnant sometimes his replies are—a happiness sometimes madness hits on, which reason and sanctity (sanity Q1) could not so prosperously be delivered of."[16] Hamlet's speech is mad but "pregnant," loaded in meaning. It is mad "yet there is a method in it." If Hamlet's language is pregnant and methodical it is also purposeful, and moreover, prompted. "Though this be

[15] Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* 3.1.170-3.
[16] Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* 2.2.200.

madness," it is caused by something. Hamlet's affectation of madness through riddling language and simultaneous reason of speech is precisely because of the danger of disclosing that "something in his soul." It is precisely because he is under watch by the court.

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault addresses disciplinary power in 18th and 19th century France, citing psychologists and psychiatrists as part of the "technology of power over the body" that is a tool of the penal system.[17] By historicizing the political conditions around *Hamlet*'s production, we can further extend the genealogy of the surveillance state, characterizing the interwoven constitutions of religion, state power, and mental illness beyond the continent, in England. The anxieties around observation inside the play reflect the conditions of its production. Archer, following the sociologist Norbert Elias, and reading him alongside the Frankfurt school, traces the origins of modernity and political intelligence to the sixteenth century.[18] Responding to Foucault's dichotomous periodization of sovereignty and surveillance in *Discipline and Punish*, Archer writes, "If sovereignty is the mystifying survival of a medieval concept in the era of the Enlightenment, surveillance is equally a refinement of institutions and practices that enabled the creation of the modern state. The techniques of surveillance were firmly rooted in the court politics of the pre-Enlightenment state ruled by a personal sovereign." [19] Here, Archer traces the development of surveillance to at least the pre-Enlightenment state of Queen Elizabeth and highlights this development as an enabling factor of modernity. Archer's historical account of the emergence of the modern state coheres with the literary account of the emergence of modern interiority, famously traced back to *Hamlet.*

[17] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 30.
[18] Archer, *Sovereignty and Intelligence*, 13.
[19] Archer, *Sovereignty and Intelligence*, 6.

Indeed, the play notably reflects the anxiety of early-modern spy culture, through an extraneous scene otherwise unrelated to Hamlet's struggle. In Act II, Scene i, Polonius implores his man Reynaldo to spy on his son Laertes in Paris: "You shall do marvelous wisely, good Reynaldo, / Before you visit him, to make inquire / Of his behavior."[20] Polonius continues by encouraging Reynaldo to lie about Laertes' behaviors so as to solicit affirmations about his proclivities, be it whoring, drinking, or swearing. Reynaldo assents, exits, and does not return in the play. This scene, though it is irrelevant to the plot, foreshadows the surveillance of Hamlet — particularly as it relates to his tryst with Ophelia — and normalizes the culture of spying in Elsinore. The marginal relevance of the scene, and the humor of an old man sending a servant to spy on his son's sexual proclivities, indicates it is for catharsis, an acknowledgement of the spy culture of the Elizabethan court and of the early modern state.

With this understanding of surveillance and bipolarity developed, we now return to the play's religious equivocation. Typical understandings of the scene "A Room in the Castle" find fault with Hamlet's inability to kill Claudius. Crucially, however, the gaze and power of the observer in the play is inverted when Hamlet observes Claudius praying, and the scene becomes an ironized Catholic confession. The practice of confession, like Hamlet himself, exists at the crossroads of psychiatric history and religion. In *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, Foucault historicizes the formation of psychiatry and describes the process by which confession, used to manage sexuality, gives way to psychiatry. He writes, "By making sexuality something to be interpreted, the nineteenth century gave itself the possibility of causing the procedures of confession to operate within the regular formation of a scientific discourse. The obtaining of the

[20] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.1.3-5.

confession and its effects were recodified as therapeutic operations." Foucault traces this development in broad strokes, notably moving from discussing France to describing the practice of confession in all of "the West," with no specific geographic considerations.[21]

In returning to *Hamlet*, we historicize confession beyond Foucault. In Act III, Scene iii, Hamlet walks in on Claudius praying, and having just finished confessing his sins. Claudius says, "O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven; / It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, / A brother's murder . . ."[22] When Hamlet observes Claudius praying, he occupies the position of priest — and transitively, in Foucault's account, doctor — receiving confession. In contrast to the rest of the play, here Hamlet observes Claudius. This inversion of observation also reverses the power relation between the two. As Foucault writes, "The agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing."[23] Whereas earlier, Claudius (through Guildenstern) tries to get Hamlet to "confess his true state," now the roles are switched, and Hamlet is famously crippled by indecision. The surveilled madman is placed in the position of observing doctor and is rendered incapable of action.

Important for both Hamlet in this moment and those early doctors that received confession is a practice of accounting. Foucault describes early psychiatrists as having "established a system of classification" to record that which people confess (in Foucault's account, these confessions are about sex). In a similar vein, Hamlet's concern is for a moral tally of sins: "With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May; / And how his audit stands who

[21] Foucault, History of Sexuality, Volume 1. What begins with a discussion of French doctors on page 54, shifts into a broad claim about the rise of confession in the west on page 59.
[22] Shakespeare, Hamlet, 3.3.40-42.
[23] Foucault, History of Sexuality, 62.

knows save heaven?"[24] Though Hamlet laments that only Heaven knows the "audit" of Claudius' sins, this lamentation is strictly rhetorical. He goes on to say, "To take him in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and season'd for his passage? / No!"[25] Hamlet has classified Claudius, taken an "audit" of him. It is only after doing this calculus, that Hamlet chooses not to kill Claudius. He determines not "to take him in the purging of his soul." In hearing Claudius confess he has determined he has repented, and for precisely this reason, Hamlet does not kill Claudius when "he is fit and season'd for passage." In sparing Claudius from death, Hamlet momentarily absolves him. In Hamlet's words, "This physic but prolongs thy sickly days."[26] Hamlet refers to the reprieve he grants Claudius as a "physic," a medicine, and in this way foreshadows the slide from confession to psychiatry. Hamlet hears confession and audits, determining Claudius' moral status, and in doing so he grants to Claudius what he himself has not been given: a respite for his anguish, for his mental condition. While Hamlet's language suggests an assumption of the priestly role, it is ironic: After Hamlet departs, Claudius acknowledges his penance is empty: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go."[27] Though he said what he said, he does not mean any of it. Just as the play slips into a Catholic worldview, inverting Hamlet's position as the watched, mentally ill, subject, it demurs. In believing himself to receive confession, Hamlet resolves for himself his epistemological and psychological qualms, but rather than provide Claudius religious absolution, Hamlet provides him an extension of life.

[24] *Ibid.*, 3.3.86-87.
[25] *Ibid.*, 3.3.90-92.
[26] *Ibid.*, 3.3.101.
[27] *Ibid.*, 3.3.102-103.

In rediagnosing Hamlet as bipolar in light of the historical conditions of the *Hamlet's* production, we can account for the complex interplay between religion, state power, and psychology as it manifests in both the play and early modern England. This explicit recharacterization of Hamlet's mental state contextualizes the historical emergence of bipolarity, itself as a psychological category that is inextricable from state power and whose manifestation is intertwined with contemporary notions of psychological interiority. Last and most presently pragmatic, reviewing *Hamlet* with the heuristic of bipolarity enables us to characterize a structure of feeling of life under a state that persecutes religious minorities and surveils its citizens, one whose ontological status, unlike that of the ghost, is unequivocally not in question.

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