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# Elsinore's a Stage, Too: Analyzing Shakespeare's Hamlet through Erving Goffman's Sociological Theories

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**Elsinore's a Stage, Too:  
Analyzing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through Erving Goffman's Sociological Theories**

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a world-famous tragedy of the troubled prince of Denmark, who is unable to accept his mother Gertrude's marriage with his newly deceased father's brother, Claudius. The emotional protagonist is told by his father's ghost to take revenge on Claudius, who has, according to the ghost, murdered Hamlet's father. The play, showing Hamlet's mental struggle and attempts to reveal the truth behind his father's death, has been the subject to on-going scholarly debate. In his essay on *Hamlet*, Brent M. Cohen states that "No doubt Jacques' aphorism "All the world's a stage" is always available to Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, but curiously neither it nor its theological context is ever activated." (227). With his reference to the famous lines of Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It*, Cohen argues that the idea of our everyday life being a play, in which people possess a set of roles, is not present in *Hamlet*. This concept of a universal theater, which Cohen says to be absent in the tragedy of Hamlet, is closely related to the theories that sociologist Erving Goffman introduces in his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman sees our everyday life as "a kind of information game – a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery" (8). In this paper, I am interpreting *Hamlet* by applying the sociological concepts of Goffman to the dramaturgical structure of the play in order to demonstrate that, unlike Cohen's argument, Shakespeare has actively addressed the idea of our everyday interaction being a complex set of performances. I will start by analyzing events that take place before and after Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost by introducing some of Goffman's main ideas, arguing that Hamlet's madness is a performance rather than a sign of mental disability. My interpretation is made in discussion with Marvin W. Hunt, who claims that Hamlet's madness is real and foreshadowed early in the play, and D.J. Snider, who agrees with me about Hamlet's madness being a planned performance. I will elaborate on the intentions behind Hamlet's performance by introducing Goffman's

explanation of how an individual can manipulate other people's impression of him – or herself. While disagreeing with Jacqueline Latham's theory of Hamlet simply attempting to escape his duties, I argue along Snider that the protagonist's main purpose is to control his social environment. Goffman's concept of one's "true self" will be applied to the play's soliloquies in discussion with Claude Williamson and Bernard Grebanier. This is followed by my own analysis of the play-within-a-play scene of Act 3, which's action I will interpret by using theories introduced in Goffman's *Frame Analysis*. By using a set of Goffman's theories as tools of dramaturgical analysis, I aim to show that *Hamlet* is an ideal piece to establish how the metaphor of the world being a stage becomes valid in our everyday life.

### **Hamlet's "Madness" as a Performance**

One of the most common and heated debates about *Hamlet* has to do with whether the protagonist is mentally sick, or simply pretending to become mad. Marvin W. Hunt represents the scholars who suggest that Hamlet does show signs of real madness, stating that "to find Hamlet, we must look to mental illness" (125). He argues that the protagonist's loss of mental stability is foreshadowed early in the play, referring to the fourth scene in the first act. Hamlet desires to talk to the Ghost, but Horatio attempts to prevent him from doing so. Hunt interprets Horatio's reaction to be a sign of him sensing "the potential that Hamlet might be carried over the edge into madness" (125.) After Hamlet says that he will follow the ghost, Horatio speculates in the following way: "What if tempt you toward the flood, my lord, or to the dreadful summit of the cliff... and there assume some other horrible form which might deprive your sovereignty of reason and draw you into madness?" (69-74). According to Hunt, Horatio's reaction communicates that he sees Hamlet as a person who already fulfills certain characteristics of a

person who is likely to lose his sense of reality. Yet, Horatio's following lines suggest something else: "The very place puts toys of desperation, without more motive, into every brain that looks so many fathoms to the sea and hears it roar beneath" (75-78). Horatio does not speak of Hamlet's mental instability, but points out the fact that the sea itself can trigger anyone's mind into desperation. Therefore, his reaction should not be seen as an act of a friend expressing his fear of Hamlet's emerging madness, but as a statement about the external setting which he associates with its ability to provoke suicidal thoughts in any human being.

Goffman writes that if an individual person is known by others, "they can rely on assumptions as to the persistence and generality of psychological traits as a means of predicting his present and future behavior" (1). Hunt could refer to Goffman's statement and argue that Horatio knows Hamlet well, and has the ability of predicting his decisions and thoughts – he would not be this concerned about the dangers of the sea if he knew that Hamlet is capable of rational thinking. Yet, I believe that Horatio's concerns emerge from the understanding of madness back in Shakespeare's days, rather than from his understanding of Hamlet's personality. In Elizabethan times, the analysis of human psychology was based on the idea of maintaining a balance between different physiological and mental elements within one's body and mind (Hunt, 125). Paul Gottschalk elaborates on the topic by explaining that the possible illnesses of a man were limited to "blood, choler, phlegm, and melancholy" (38). The "madness" which Horatio is referring to in the scene was often labeled as melancholy, known to be "pretty much the factotum of Elizabethan abnormal psychology, causing men to err in almost any direction" (Gottschalk, 38). Melancholy as a disease shares many symptoms with what we know as depression, yet was used significantly more often, and seen as a common state of mind in Elizabethan times. Hunt

mentions a 17<sup>th</sup> century psychologist Robert Burton, who treated melancholy “not as a person-specific malady but a sickness afflicting whole societies, one that ruined faiths and states” (126).

Based on the arguments that Horatio and Marcellus use in order to prevent Hamlet from following the Ghost, it seems that the “madness” that is addressed in this particular scene has very little to do with the protagonist’s mental health. Horatio’s thoughts are simply driven by the idea that the sea can trigger melancholy in anyone, in “every brain” (76). Goffman states that “observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him” (1). Horatio is familiar with the symptoms of melancholy, and recognizes that anyone in Hamlet’s situation could be driven into such a condition. He is trying to prevent Hamlet from following the Ghost by applying his past experiences with both, melancholy and the setting - it being the dangerous, tempting sea. Therefore, I do not see Horatio’s concern as a statement about how Hamlet specifically is very likely to lose his mind. Horatio’s speculations should be interpreted in context with his sociocultural setting, in which madness could emerge very fast under the right conditions. Instead of fore-shadowing the “madness” that Hamlet appears to adapt later on in the play, Horatio seems to be reminding his friends that all human beings have tendencies to melancholy. This theory is supported by Marcellus’ reaction to Hamlet’s desire of following the ghost: “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (90). This line implies that it is not simply Hamlet who is showing traits of madness – it is the whole country that Marcellus labels as being sick. Hamlet’s behavior is therefore not experienced as the cause of imbalance within the individual’s mind, but as a piece of evidence of the whole nation suffering from some level of sickness.

Even though the argument of Horatio’s reactions in the scene in which the Ghost

appears is not accurate for proving that Hamlet is mentally sick, the scene gives significant proof of Hamlet's "madness" being a planned performance. After the Ghost of Hamlet's father reveals that it was Claudius who murdered him, his own brother, Hamlet makes Horatio and Marcellus swear not to tell anyone about the ghost. Hamlet says that "Here, as before, never, so help you mercy, how strange or odd soe'er I bear myself – as I perchance hereafter shall think meet to put an antic disposition on, that you, at such times seeing me, never shall...to note that you know aught of me" (178-188). Hamlet informs his friends that he will change his behavior in future. He has heard what Claudius did to his father, and has promised to take revenge in honor of the murdered king. It is argued by many scholars that Hamlet consciously pretended to be mad in order to make the revenge happen; D.J. Snider states that "He took a mask to conceal his own designs, to discover the secrets of the King and to deceive the court" (73). This is clearly proven by Hamlet's lines: he openly informed his friends about the "antic disposition."

The "mask" which Snider is referring to can be explained in Goffmanian terms. One of the main theories introduced in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is the idea that in case of all human interaction, an individual's capacity to give impressions "appears to involve two radically different kinds of activity: the expression that he *gives*, and the expression that he *gives off*" (2). Goffman states that "giving" information involves behavior and language which can easily be associated with commonly agreed symbols. "Giving off" information, again, refers to all the signs which tell the receiver of the information that the individual has thoughts and motives different to what is expressed through the symbols. In other words, what we say can be different to what we actually think, and other individuals can be able to get hints of our true motives by interpreting our behavior. A good example of how the theory can be demonstrated through *Hamlet* is the play's first encounter between Hamlet and his mother. Gertrude, referring

to the sorrow of the dead king, asks Hamlet “Why seems it so particular with thee?” (75). Hamlet responds by saying “Seems, madam? Nay, it is” (76). Shakespeare has played around with the distinction between *seeming* to be sad and *being* sad. Hamlet convinces Gertrude that the information he gives off is equivalent to the information he gives. He has a reason to do so: Goffman emphasizes that individuals have the ability to manipulate the impression they give by intentionally conveying misinformation (2). Hamlet decides to use this ability, and also informs his friends that he will be expressing misinformation about his mental state. Hamlet’s motive is to take his revenge, and he understands that in order to do so, he will need to control the impressions he gives and gives off.

### **The Purpose of Hamlet’s “Antic Disposition”**

Hamlet’s idea of consciously taking up a certain role is triggered by his encounter with the Ghost, which means that whatever action he is planning to take requires him to change his behavior. There are different theories of his motives of doing so. Jacqueline Latham argues that Hamlet’s decision of pretending to be mad is due to his unwillingness of taking responsibility: “When life presents problems that he cannot face or answer he escapes into a dream world of dramatic action where the only decision to be made is the initial decision to enter on the role, and where the actions which follow this initial decision entail no volition and therefore no moral responsibility for the consequences” (198). She suggests that the decision of putting on an “antic disposition” is Hamlet’s excuse to avoid carefully considering his future actions. Latham points out Hamlet’s line at the end of the scene: “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right!” (197-198). She sees this as a sign of Hamlet not being willing to do what his father’s ghost told him to do (198). Yet, Hamlet has already expressed that he is eager to take his



revenge: “Haste me to know’t, that I, with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love may sweep to my revenge” (30-32). Therefore, Hamlet cursing his position of being the one to take action does not communicate his unwillingness to do what he promised, but shows that he is committed to his mission, even though he knows it will be a tough task to complete. Also, his approach to the revenge - pretending to be mad – suggests his deep understanding of social complexities, rather than reluctance of being involved with the consequences of his actions.

D.J. Snider elaborates on Hamlet’s decision in the following way: “He was the self-chosen instrument of a mighty design, which however for a time required concealment; concealment demanded cunning; cunning was the reversal of his entire rational nature; still, to carry out his end, he had to submit to the circumstances, and hence to assume the garb of the Irrational” (74). Snider has put into simple terms the thought process he assumes Hamlet to have gone through before deciding to obey the Ghost’s request by acting insane. Hamlet knows that he is expected to behave in a certain manner by the people of the court, and is aware of the fact that to ensure that the Ghost was speaking the truth, he needs an excuse to behave against these expectations. His plan is strongly analogous to Goffman’s view of how an individual might control others’ treatment of him – or herself: “This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan” (3-4). Behaving like a madman is therefore not an excuse to escape social responsibilities, as Latham suggests, but a brilliant plan of manipulating his social environment in favor of his plan.

### **Defining the Situation – Reception of Hamlet’s Performance**

Whereas Hamlet, during his conversation with Marcellus and Horatio after the encounter with the ghost, very clearly articulates his decision of taking up the role of a madman, he never clarifies the ways in which this role will be performed. In *The Representation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman refers to the way in which an individual attempts to make a certain impression on other people as “dramaturgical problems” (15). Even though the audience never hears Hamlet’s dramaturgical solution to the problem of fooling the people around him, the characteristics of his performance can be interpreted through the other characters’ descriptions and reactions to their encounters with the protagonist. This is first seen in the first scene of Act 2, where Ophelia describes Hamlet’s behavior to her father Polonius: “Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced, no hat upon his head, his stockings fouled, ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle, pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other, and with a look so piteous in purport as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors – he comes before me” (79-86). Based on Ophelia’s description, one of Hamlet’s approaches to “madness” is to change his appearance and way of moving. After Polonius asks her what Hamlet had said, Ophelia tells him that instead of saying a word, Hamlet took her hand and observed her closely, “seemed to find his way without his eyes,” and left (99). Based on his daughter’s description, Polonius comes to the conclusion that “This is the very ecstasy of love” (104). He interprets Hamlet’s mental state without observing his behavior, which means that he already has an understanding of how a person who is “crazy in love” would behave. Polonius is therefore the first character to put a label on Hamlet’s behavior.

According to Goffman’s theory, by changing one’s behavior in order to control what others think of him or her, one attempts to influence the “definition of the situation” (9). In practice, “definition of the situation” stands for the frame within which people interacting with each other

understand what is going on, and how to interpret it. In order for his plan of taking the revenge and discovering whether Claudius is to be blamed for his father's murdered, Hamlet needs to make the people of the court to re-define the situation; situation being Hamlet's mental state. Whereas the "old definition of situation" could be said to be the common understanding that Hamlet is a noble prince who is simply sad about his father's death and his mother's fast remarriage, the definition of situation which Hamlet aims for is "Hamlet is losing his mind." Based on other people's way of discussing Hamlet after he changes his behavior, they all do recognize that the situation has changed, but their definitions vary. In other words, the dramaturgical tools which Hamlet applies in order to establish and maintain his "madness" are interpreted differently by different characters. Polonius' definition of the situation is made clear: he thinks that Hamlet's madness is due to his desperate love towards Ophelia.

In addition to Scene 1 of Act 2, Polonius expresses his hypothesis after his encounter with Hamlet in the second scene of Act 2. Polonius greets Hamlet, who pretends not to recognize Polonius, but calls him a "fishmonger" (174). After Hamlet asks Polonius whether he has a daughter, Polonius reacts to Hamlet's strange behavior by talking to himself: "A is far gone. And truly in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this" (189-191). Polonius sees similarities between Hamlet and his own youth, applying past experiences in order to interpret what is happening. He therefore defines the situation in an empathetic way. This may also explain why he does not take offense in what Hamlet says both about him and Ophelia. Hamlet first makes a comparison between Ophelia and a dead dog (181), and then makes fun of Polonius' age by saying that "for yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am, if like a crab you could go backwards" (203-204). These lines give information about the fact that one of Hamlet's dramaturgical tools for building up his "madman character" is the usage of offensive language –

it is rather unlikely that a prince, who has the reputation of a good man, would address people who rank high in the court's hierarchy in such a rude manner. Assumingly based on the fact that Polonius seems to feel sorry for Hamlet, as he has once suffered the same symptoms of "the ecstasy of love," Polonius sees some level of genius in Hamlet's insults. He talks to himself, stating that "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (205). One might interpret this line to communicate that Polonius, being impressed by Hamlet's clever wit, starts to question his own definition of the situation. Yet, his next line reveals that Polonius relates "method" with madness: "How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of" (209-211). Polonius seems to have a certain level of respect towards madness. He thinks that Hamlet's words are insane, but also represent an alternative, fascinating understanding of the world which a sane person could not experience.

The scene does not only convey information about Hamlet's tools of creating his role and Polonius' way of interpreting his "madness," but also gives a significant hint of Hamlet's attitude towards the whole performance. Goffman states that "When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term sincere for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance" (17). To me it seems that Hamlet is confident in his role – he expresses clear understanding of how a mad person would move and respond to questions. Even though he seems to believe in his own performance, and it is important for the others to be convinced by it, Hamlet does not seem too worried about the dramaturgical problems. During this scene, the audience gets a hint of how easy it is for Hamlet to trick other people. Clearly referring to the conversation he just had with Polonius, Hamlet makes a frustrated comment. When Polonius is

exiting the scene, Hamlet states: “These tedious old fools!”(219). By saying this, Hamlet communicates that it was easy for him to fool Polonius – maybe even so easy that it felt boring to him. Therefore, Hamlet shows signs of being cynical about the performance.

Goffman writes: It should be understood that the cynic, with all his professional disinvolvement, may obtain unprofessional pleasures from his masquerade, experiencing a kind of gleeful spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously” (18). Throughout the scene Hamlet uses ridiculous and offensive language, and makes very little sense. It seems like he is testing his performance on Polonius, and is successful. Whatever he says, Polonius interprets as crazy, yet somewhat smart in its own way. Hamlet takes advantage of this, shamelessly making fun on Polonius’ daughter and his old age, expressing the “gleeful spiritual aggression” that Goffman writes about. Based on Hamlet’s comment at Polonius’ exit, Hamlet has realized that he will not need to put much effort on his performance. Hamlet’s role allows him to do things he could not have done as the “sane Hamlet.” It seems like he was expecting to be more challenged by the role, and is disappointed by the fact that Polonius was tricked so easily. Counting on rather stereotypical associations with madness – illogical reasoning, messy appearance, strange behavior – Hamlet had decided to approach his role in a simple way. During this scene with Polonius, Hamlet’s negative attitude towards the court people is strengthened due to the fact that his almost caricatural performance is immediately accepted.

Polonius and Ophelia are not the only people making their own interpretations of Hamlet’s “madness.” Goffman points out that “Together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored

(9-10). Before his encounter with Hamlet, Polonius had already met Gertrude and Claudius in order to inform them about his conclusion of Hamlet being mad because of love. Polonius describes what his daughter has told him, and tells the king and the queen that “Mad let us grant him, then, and now remains that we find out the cause of this effect, or rather say, the cause of this defect, for this effect comes by cause” (100-103). Polonius suggests the reason behind Hamlet’s madness to be Ophelia, receiving doubts from the queen: “Do you think ‘tis this?” (151). The king is not completely convinced either, and asks Polonius “How may we try it further” (159). Polonius suggests that they should observe how Hamlet behaves around Ophelia, by hiding behind a tapestry: “Mark the encounter. If he love her not and be not from his reason fallen thereon, let me be no assistant for a state, but keep a farm and carter” (164-167). The king agrees. Polonius presents his plan in order to make the king and the queen believe his definition of the situation. He seems to hope that, by making the king see how Hamlet treats Ophelia, that he is right about the reason behind Hamlet’s madness. Yet, “the real agreement” on the definition of Hamlet’s situation is not reached through Polonius’ experiment.

The first scene of Act 3 as a whole illustrates how the characters are attempting to reach an agreement on their definition of the situation. The queen questions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet’s friends, to find out more about his recent behavior: “Did he receive you well?” (10). According to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet treated them “Most like a gentleman” but with “much forcing of his disposition” (11, 12). Queen hears that Hamlet has expressed a level of joy when meeting the players, and encourages his friends to distract him with delightful past-time activities “Give him a further edge and drive his purpose into these delights” 26-27). Therefore, Gertrude seems to believe that Hamlet is not mad, but is simply sad, and can easily be cheered up with the company of his friends and the players. She also thinks

that Ophelia's presence might cure Hamlet's short-term depression: "I do wish that your good beauties be the happy cause of Hamlet's wildness" (39-41). Both Polonius and the queen are therefore sharing the same definition of the situation before observing Hamlet and Ophelia – his actions must be driven by love. The king is yet to be convinced, and wants further proof: "Her father [Polonius] and myself, lawful espials, will so bestow ourselves that seeing, unseen, we may of their encounter frankly judge, and gather by him, as he is behaved, if't be th' affliction of his love or no that thus he suffers for" (32-37).

Going back to Goffman's theory, he emphasizes that the real agreement on the definition is less about what is experienced to be true, and more about who is the person to decide what to do about the situation – according to whose rules is the situation handled. It is clear that in this case the person is Claudius: he is not willing to accept Polonius' theory without seeing Hamlet's behavior himself. Hamlet enters, and Polonius and Claudius go to their hiding position. Hamlet first performs his famous soliloquy that begins with "To be or not to be" (57), in which he addresses the misery of life. He then offends Ophelia multiple times, telling her to join a "nunnery." (121). Before exiting the scene, Hamlet tells Ophelia to "marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them" (139-141) and calls her double-faced: "God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" (145-146). Hamlet does not only offend Ophelia, but speaks rudely of all women. He is clearly re-using his dramaturgical tool of saying things that a prince would not say. After Hamlet leaves, the king has created his definition of the situation: "Love? His affections do not that way tend; nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little, was not like madness. There's something in his soul o'er which melancholy sits on brood" (165-168). Claudius rejects Polonius' claim of Hamlet being affected by love. His impression is that Hamlet is deeply disturbed, beyond being just "mad."

Goffman states that “real agreement will also exist concerning the desirability of avoiding an open conflict of definitions of the situation” (10). In terms of interpreting Hamlet’s performance, “real agreement” is not present: Claudius and Polonius have a different view of Hamlet’s mental state. The king announces: “I doubt that the hatch and the disclose will be some danger; which to prevent, I have in quick determination, thus set it down: he shall with speed to England” (169-172). Polonius still prevents his argument: “But yet do I believe the origin and commencement of his grief sprung from neglected love” (179-181). In order to avoid the conflict, or at least postpone making the decision of whose definition is the driving force in dealing with Hamlet, Claudius and Polonius compromise on observing Hamlet’s behavior around Ophelia more. Therefore, there exists an agreement on the fact that Hamlet shows signs of some levels of madness. The characters’ inability of easily deciding on whose interpretation is the correct one is a great demonstration of how one’s performance is seen differently by different individuals, influenced by their past experience and knowledge of the person. Shakespeare has illustrated an issue we all experience in our everyday lives: when discussing someone’s behavior, we all tend to have our own ideas of what the person is like, and compare our observations with other people through discussion.

### **Exploring Hamlet’s “True Self” Through the Soliloquies**

In the opening passage of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman states that “Many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it... the “true” or “real” attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or thought what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior” (2). Goffman’s understanding of an individual’s personality is strongly structural – he believes



that we all have a “true self,” which can only be indirectly expressed through signs provided by shared verbal language and body language. He therefore suggests that we can never reach a complete understanding of a person simply based on his or her way of expressing themselves in a social context. Yet, in his *Frame Analysis*, Goffman points out that this is not necessarily the case in terms of drama, as “makeshift devices” such as soliloquies can be used in order to communicate characters’ “unexpressed thoughts and feelings” (153). This concept is a crucial part of *Hamlet*: without the soliloquies, the audience would be unaware of what truly goes on in Hamlet’s mind. Throughout the play, Shakespeare portrays his protagonist in different situations which show Hamlet’s ability to change his behavior according to his motives. If the soliloquies were absent, and the audience was to base their understanding of Hamlet merely on his interaction with the other characters, confusion would be inevitable. For example, without Hamlet’s soliloquy in the third scene of Act 3, in which he first plans to murder the praying Claudius, the audience would remain completely unaware of his thought process. Hamlet pulls out his sword, is about to commit the bloody act and thereby obey the will of his father’s ghost, but instead of doing so exits the scene. The audience could interpret this as moral guilt, pity, a sudden realization of the Ghost being just an illusion, or a variety of other things. Yet, Shakespeare has given the reason to Hamlet’s actions in the soliloquy: “And now I’ll do’t. And so ‘a goes to heaven. And so am I revenged” (73-74). Hamlet did not kill Claudius, as he believed that if the king dies while praying, he will enter heaven – this would be a shame, as heaven is not a place for a murderer like him. Shakespeare therefore illustrates Hamlet’s tendency of carefully considering his acts, making the audience realize that this is one of the characteristics of his “true self.”

Soliloquies have been widely recognized as the device of expressing Hamlet’s pure, inner

ferment, and are therefore analyzed in order to find out more about the protagonist. Claude Williamson argues that through the soliloquies, Shakespeare has aimed to show that Hamlet is a “man who is too intellectual to be practical; he thinks too much and does too little” (88). Williamson’s interpretation could be supported by looking at Hamlet’s soliloquy in the second scene of act two, for example. Hamlet is touched by a player’s interpretation of Hecuba, and is overwhelmed by the feeling of uselessness: “He would drown the stage with tears and cleave the general ear with horrid speech... Yet I, a dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, and can say nothing” (559-569). Hamlet does show signs of guilt, caused by the fact that his revenge is postponed; yet, not all scholars have experienced the soliloquies to be Shakespeare’s way of characterizing Hamlet as a man whose actions are limited by self-pity and regret.

Bernard Grebanier, again, states that in order to understand Hamlet, “we must, since this is drama, interpret his soliloquies not literally but in terms of the situations which occasion them” (256). Grebanier’s approach is the opposite of Williamson’s. While Williamson sees Hamlet as a passive, depressed philosopher, Grebanier emphasizes the significance of his actions. Even in the case of Hamlet’s inner conflict expressed in the soliloquy followed by meeting the actors, Shakespeare’s protagonist cannot be seen as a passive man. One needs to consider the fact that the same Hamlet, who so insecurely calls himself a “dull and muddy-mettled rascal,” has showcased behavior that goes beyond continuously drowning in sorrow. A good example of this is the pure joy he expresses when meeting the players: “You are welcome, masters; welcome, all. I am glad to see thee well. Welcome, good friends” (421-422). As Grebanier points out, Hamlet “takes unconcealed delight in the company of any human being he has no reason to distrust” (257). Also, later on Hamlet uses the players to take a step forward in terms of revealing whether

Claudius truly is responsible of his father's death. The controversy between these two scholars is the result of two different answers to the same question: who is the real Hamlet - the one that acts, or the one that speaks? To me it seems that through the soliloquies, Shakespeare has provided his audience with an answer, and that his idea of the essence of one's personality is very similar to Goffman's.

### **Hamlet's "True Self" as a Dramatic Tool**

The playwright has used the idea of one's true motives going against one's actions as a way of elaborating on Hamlet's personality. In Act 3 Scene 2, Hamlet performs another soliloquy in which he reveals that he wants to meet his mother to assault her verbally, but not physically: "Let me be cruel, not unnatural; I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (394-395). In her mother's bedroom, while engaging in a heated conversation with Gertrude, Hamlet accidentally murders Polonius. Later on Hamlet apologizes Polonius' son Laertes by saying that he was not being himself during the incident: "Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet. If Hamlet from himself does wrong Laertes, then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it" (231-235). This is a case in which Hamlet himself recognizes that his actions have gone against his true nature, and says that the accident was rather committed by his "madness" (236). Some might argue that Hamlet now admits that he truly is mentally ill. Yet, I believe that in this case he uses "madness" to refer to the emotional state he had while committing the bloody act. Just before the incident he says that "Mother, for love of grace, lay not that flattering unction to your soul that not your trespass but my madness speaks" (151-153). Hamlet is therefore clearly driven by emotional rage rather than madness.

Through the soliloquies, the audience has gotten to know Hamlet as a thoughtful, considerate

person, and can therefore recognize that his apology to Laertes is both honest and dishonest. The people who hear his apology understand his reference to “madness” in terms of the madman performance he has maintained. The audience, being more aware of Hamlet’s real thoughts, knows that Hamlet is using his previously successful performance as a way of explaining the certain moment during which he lost self-control. Therefore, this “moment of madness” has two dramatic functions. It is Shakespeare’s way of emphasizing the fact that the murder of Polonius should not be interpreted as something that is driven by Hamlet’s true motives and goals. It also proves that the soliloquies should be interpreted as Hamlet’s true thoughts. Going back to the opposing ideas of Williamson and Grebanier; I partially agree with both. Shakespeare has showed Hamlet as the overly analytic, considerate person which Williamson labels him as: this is seen in his thoughtful soliloquies. Yet, Grebanier’s idea of actions being more significant than ideas is also present: the fact that the considerate Hamlet murders another character shows that Hamlet is, after all, a regular human being that can make mistakes under stressful circumstances. Both contribute to the audience’s understanding of the protagonist’s “real” personality – neither actions nor thoughts are superior to another. This shows that Shakespeare, like Goffman, had a very structural approach to one’s personality; the soliloquies work as distinctions between Hamlet’s “true motives” and the consequences of him indirectly communicating them through action.

In the second scene of Act 1, Shakespeare has used the concept of Hamlet’s “inner self” to elaborate on the protagonist’s social roles. Gertrude has a long speech that encourages Hamlet to be cheerful, instead of remaining in the sorrow caused by his dead father: “And we beseech you bend you to remain here in the cheer and comfort of our eye, our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son” (115-117). Hamlet responds by saying “I shall in all my best obey you, madam,”

therefore agreeing to remain more cheerful (120). Yet, Hamlet's first soliloquy which begins right after Gertrude, Claudius, and others leave, reveals that he is very reluctant to obeying his mother's will. The sorrowful monologue that articulates Hamlet's disgust towards the fact that his mother has married his uncle ends with the line "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (158). This soliloquy, too, as Williams and Grebanier have suggested, reveals Hamlet's "true feelings." Yet, its significance goes beyond telling the audience what the protagonist actually thinks: this is one of the scenes in which Shakespeare has clearly reflected on Hamlet's presentation of himself as the prince in his everyday life. Goffman states that "Sometimes he [an individual] will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression" (6). This explains why Hamlet's response to Gertrude conflicts with the reluctance unfolded in the soliloquy.

Firstly, Hamlet possesses the position of a prince in the court's hierarchy. Both the king and the queen are above him in this social ranking, and therefore he is expected to obey all requests laid upon him by Gertrude and Claudius - the tradition of his social status makes it impossible for him to express his unwillingness to obey. Secondly, the scene also gives information about how Hamlet has performed his role as the prince. As interpreted by Snider: "Hamlet was known to the court as a man of profound candor and earnestness" (74). Hamlet's reputation comes across when Claudius reacts to Hamlet's agreement to be more cheerful: "Why, 'tis a loving and a fair reply... This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet sits smiling to my heart" (121-124). Claudius seems to think that Hamlet's response is honest, and refers to it as "unforced," suggesting that Hamlet's social status had nothing to do with his agreement but rather showcases his pure nature. The soliloquy following the king's lines makes it clear to the audience that the

words which Hamlet said to his mother have been untrue to himself. It is important to note that this scene happens before Hamlet meets the Ghost and decides to take up the role of a madman. The very contradiction between how Hamlet behaves in front of the court members and how he comes across once being left alone proves that Shakespeare has not only played around with the idea of performing in terms of Hamlet's "madness." This scene successfully illustrates how Hamlet is constrained by his social roles and how people expect us to perform them – like we all are.

### **Claudius' Secret Viewed within the Theatrical Frame**

The second scene of Act 3 is significant in terms of the plot. One can approach Shakespeare's way of suggesting that Claudius truly is the murderer by interpreting this play-within-a-play scene in terms of theatrical concepts used by Goffman. A group of traveling players have arrived in Elsinore, and Hamlet occupies them to perform a play in which they would add a scene that portrays how Claudius had assumingly murdered Hamlet's father. By inviting the king to see the performance, Hamlet wishes to find out if the Ghost's description of the murder was accurate. Before the play, Hamlet tells Horatio to closely observe the king's reactions: "One scene of it comes near the circumstance which I have told thee of my father's death. I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot, even with the very comment of thy soul, observe my uncle" (75-79). The performance starts with a dumb show, portraying a queen putting her husband, the king, to sleep, and another man pouring poison to the sleeping king's ear, followed by the murderer wooing the queen and finally winning her heart – the action clearly represents the Ghost's story. The same plot is then performed with lines. Yet, before the staged murder takes place, Claudius asks Hamlet "Have you heard the argument? Is there no offense in't?"

(230-231). This question gives significant information about Claudius' role within the frame of the performance.

In his *Frame Analysis*, Goffman addresses the theatrical frame by elaborating on the social roles occupied by people participating in an experience which involves a performance. He states that “theatrical audiences incorporate two elements: theatergoer and onlooker” (131). Simply put, when an individual attends a theatrical performance, he or she possesses two social roles. The role of a theatergoer is more distanced from the dramatic action going on stage; this role includes all the untheatrical activities. A theatergoer knows that he or she is in the space in order to see people acting on stage, and that the performance is over in a given time. Whereas as theatergoers we recognize that people on stage are actors performing roles, as onlookers we get involved in the reality that is created by the actors. In Goffman's words, an onlooker “sympathetically and vicariously participates in the unreal world generated by the dramatic interplay of the scripted characters... He gives himself over” (130). It is clear that Claudius, expressing suspicion towards the play's plot, is not willing to “give himself over.” His reluctance towards simply adapting to the reality on stage suggests that he is unable to participate in the experience as an onlooker, and is viewing the performance as a theatergoer. If he thought of the play as make-believe which's reality exists only on stage, he would not need to worry about its possible “offense.” Claudius' inability to accept the distinction between the two realities present in the scene shows that he recognizes the actions taken on stage. His slightly paranoid behavior can be seen as Shakespeare's way of communicating that he is, indeed, the murderer.

When the character “Lucianus” enters the stage, he tells the audience about his plan of murdering the sleeping king: “Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing, confederate season, else no creature seeing, thou mixture rank...thy natural magic and dire

property on wholesome life usurp immediately” (253-258). After these lines, Claudius rises from his seat and therefore leaves in the middle of the play. His reaction communicates his interpretation of the play as a personal attack. Goffman writes: “It is an obvious feature of stage productions that the final applause wipes the make-believe away...Whatever had been portrayed onstage is now seen as not the real thing at all but only a representation, one made benignly to provide vicarious involvement for the onlooker” (131-132). Claudius does not give applause, and therefore does not contribute to the transition from the make-believe to the real life. By making Claudius leave, Shakespeare has blended the representation of reality with reality, putting more emphasis on the fact that what is true on stage is likely be true to Claudius beyond the theatrical frame. Hamlet makes a witty comment regarding the situation: “What, frightened with false fire?” (264). Also the protagonist underlines the fact that if Claudius had no connections to the plot of the play, he would not react so strongly. Shakespeare has creatively taken advantage of the line between the theatrical frame and everyday life, indirectly revealing the truth about Claudius without making him confess his crime verbally.

### **Conclusion**

Having analyzed a set of *Hamlet's* scenes through the theories and concepts of Erving Goffman, I strongly believe that the sociological approach does justice to this specific Shakespeare tragedy. Shakespeare communicates great understanding of the complexity of our everyday interaction with each other - one could even argue that he has, hundreds of years before Goffman, developed and expressed theories similar to the ones introduced in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and *Frame Analysis*. Therefore, instead of simply seeing *Hamlet* as a phenomenal tragedy, the play should also be recognized as an intelligent, dramatic sociological study of our ways of



possessing, performing, interpreting and manipulating social roles and situations. In other words, *Hamlet's* world truly becomes a stage for a significantly engaging performance, which reminds us of the fact that performances do not only happen inside theater buildings, but are the driving force behind our everyday life. I think this is one of the reasons why Hamlet has deeply touched huge crowds of people – through the protagonist, we can recognize the struggle of being constrained by the expectations of the society. *Hamlet* tests the understanding of everyday interaction which we all develop since childhood, making us use the tools of interpreting action and making distinctions between reality and make-believe. Therefore, the way we interpret the play becomes a sociological phenomenon itself: we all have our own ideas about the plot and its meanings. Both the play's plot and the experience of analyzing it contribute to my conclusion of *Hamlet* being remarkably accurate for demonstrating the complex sociological hypotheses of Goffman.

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