

Graham MacWilliams "Was Shakespeare a Narcissist?"

Essay Revision

by Graham MacWilliams

Submission date: 05-Dec-2017 04:01PM (UTC-0800)

Submission ID: 890885447

File name: aham_MacWilliams_Was_Shakespeare_a_Narcissist_Essay_Revision.txt (8.45K)

Word count: 1309

Character count: 7176

Graham MacWilliams

Professor Julie Pesano

ELIT 17: Introduction to Shakespeare

12/05/2017

Was Shakespeare a Narcissist?

Long regarded to have unique insight into the human psyche, Shakespeare continues to grant readers and audiences invaluable understanding about the lives they lead four centuries after his works were first performed. While each work yields singular insight about the lives of each audience member, motifs present across Shakespeare's dramas reveal deeper thematic undertones of Shakespeare's view of the world. Perhaps the most prominent of these stem from the commonalities between characters throughout his works, revealing Shakespeare's understanding of the patterns of personality he witnessed during his life. Few instances of these commonalities manifest themselves more poignantly than the similarities between the male protagonists of Much Ado

About Nothing and Hamlet with respect to their interactions with women. Claudio in Much Ado About Nothing and Hamlet in Hamlet both exhibit paranoia and mercurial affections, suggesting that the two characters share the underdeveloped sense of self inherent in narcissism.

While modern psychologists identify paranoia as one of the key identifiers of narcissism, Shakespeare understood and incorporated this trait into his works over three centuries before the first paper on narcissism by Otto Rank in 1911 (New World Encyclopedia). In Much Ado About Nothing, a wounded Claudio bemoans that Hero has been wooed by Don Pedro when he says "I trust no agent, for beauty is a witch" (2.1.177-180). In this statement, Claudio reveals that in light of the ostensible loss of Hero, he will never again fall prey to the insidious enchantments of female beauty. In this frame of mind, Claudio's infatuation with Hero can only be a result of her bewitching appearance rather than Claudio's own feelings, revealing a paranoid mindset. Additional indications of this paranoia are present later in the work before he witnesses the purported proof of Hero's infidelity. As he is about to observe Hero's window at the

request of Don Jon, Claudio says "if (he) sees anything tonight" to suggest Hero's disloyalty, then "(he) will shame her" (3.3.116-118). This speaks to Claudio's paranoia, as even before he has seen any evidence of Hero's disloyalty, he demonstrates that he is willing to publicly shame her. Such a mentality is comfortable with jumping to character conclusions with major impacts on a relationship. Additionally, Claudio does not speak of validating these allegations with Hero herself, instead revealing he is willing to immediately accuse her publicly. Such paranoia is also present on the part of Hamlet when he impulsively slays Polonius when confronting his mother. Rather than investigating the source of a noise behind the tapestry, he blindly stabs at it with his sword, saying "How now, a rat? Dead for a ducat, dead." (3.4.29-32). Believing he must be overheard by his malevolent uncle, Hamlet is surprised to find that he has instead stabbed Polonius. Rather than showing remorse, however, he directs his guilt at his mother, saying his action is "almost as bad...as (to) kill a king and marry with his brother" (3.4.34-35). Such a statement reveals Hamlet's paranoia through his accusation of his mother's involvement in his father's murder. Such a recrimination also conveniently minimizes the significance of his own reckless action. In these textual instances,

Shakespeare portrays Claudio and Hamlet as characters who consider themselves victimized and persecuted by those they most care about. Such ideation suggests the presence of narcissism. The narcissist in his or her own mind is the perfect center of the universe that can never be wrong (Psychology Today). This reveals the underdeveloped sense of self on the part of individuals with narcissism, as in this paradigm, the difference between the self and the world around them is not well defined (West). As a result, blame can more easily jump from the self to others (West). The presence of this psychology in Claudio and Hamlet underscores the Bard's grasp of this affliction centuries before its appearance in academic literature.

Another narcissistic behavior pattern shared by Claudio and Hamlet is that of mercurial affections. Both characters alternately idealize and devalue the women they love. Claudio exhibits this behavioral dichotomy through his attitude towards Hero at the beginning and end of their engagement. When he has first heard that Hero has been wooed in his name, he expresses "I were but a little happy if I could say how much...I give away myself for you and dote upon the exchange." (2.1.300-303). At their

wedding, however, he changes his tone. Rather than privately questioning her about her ostensible infidelity the night before, he publicly denounces her as a "rotten orange" and avows "not to knit (his) soul to an approved wanton." (4.1.32-45). This abrupt change in behavior comes without sufficient supporting evidence, and signals the presence of mercurial affections on the part of Claudio. Hamlet also exhibits this binary behavior in his relationship with Ophelia. While the audience hears of the "many tenders of (Hamlet's) affection to (Ophelia)" prior to the outset of the play (1.3.108-109), Hamlet's adoration inexplicably turns to withering scorn. During his conversation with Ophelia in which he is observed by Claudius and Polonius, Hamlet tells her "(she) should not have believed (him)" when he spoke of his love, and that "her wantonness (and) ignorance... hath make (him) mad" (3.1.127-162). Such a sudden shift in Hamlet's demeanor speaks to his mercurial affections for those he loves. In both *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet*, Claudio and Hamlet initially elevate their romantic partners to levels that no ordinary human can reach, only to unexpectedly devalue them as worthless. This illuminates the underdeveloped sense of self on the part of those with narcissism. To a narcissist, the boundary between the self and others close to them is

not well defined (West). As such, the narcissist alternately uses adoration and scorn to put their emotional needs at the center of their relationships, exerting control over others around them (Psychology Today). In this way, the narcissist attempts to make their worldview match the way the world functions, revealing the underdeveloped boundary between their self-concept and the world around them (West). Claudio and Hamlet's treatment of the women they love in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet* strongly suggests their challenges with this behavior pattern.

In both *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet*, Claudio and Hamlet exhibit the behaviors of paranoia and mercurial affections, suggesting their shared trait of an underdeveloped sense of self. This narcissistic personality pattern is portrayed with such vivid realism that Shakespeare likely observed it either in those close to him or in himself. The conspicuous similarities between the names "Hamlet" and that of his son, "Hamnet", cannot be overlooked. The fact that Shakespeare chose to incorporate these characteristics into two of his most well known protagonists suggests that their struggles were his struggles. As Claudio and Hamlet seek to determine who to trust and

contend with their own rapidly shifting behaviors, so likely did Shakespeare as he made his way as a writer and actor. As Shakespeare's works give modern audiences a window into previously unexplored realms of the human psyche, so do they give us a window into Shakespeare himself. While we view the Bard as one who enjoyed a mastery over his craft, the emotional labors of his characters suggest he engaged with the extraordinary struggles of any normal human experience. While our world has changed a great deal since Elizabethan times, Claudio and Hamlet reveal that the people who inhabit it may have changed little. As such, Shakespeare's words are as relevant today as they were when they were written, affording audiences insight into both others and themselves.

Bibliography:

"Otto Rank." Otto Rank - New World Encyclopedia,

www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Otto_Rank.

"Narcissistic Personality Disorder." Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, 17 Apr. 2017,

www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/narcissistic-personality-disorder.

West, M. "Identity, Narcissism, and the Emotional Core." *Journal of Analytical*

Psychology, vol. 49, no. 4, ser. 521-551, Sept. 2004, pp. 521-551. Pubmed. Narcissism

Graham MacWilliams "Was Shakespeare a Narcissist?" Essay Revision

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

/0

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

PAGE 1

PAGE 2

PAGE 3

PAGE 4

PAGE 5

PAGE 6

PAGE 7

PAGE 8
