

## TRAUMATIZING MEMORIES AND MEMORIZING TRAUMA – HAMLET AND THE MACBETHS

*UDC 821.111.09 Shakespeare W.*

**Nataša Šofranac**

Faculty of Philology, Belgrade University, Belgrade, Serbia

E-mail: [Natasha.sofranac@gmail.com](mailto:Natasha.sofranac@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** *This paper considers how trauma led Shakespeare's characters to madness. Some memories are violently impressed upon them, some they are desperately trying to hold, while others keep re-emerging relentlessly. Hamlet is pressurized by the Ghost not to forget about the revenge and agonized by all the issues that concern that cause. The most compelling memory, of course, is what the Ghost said about the murder - Hamlet's prophetic soul remembered it from the inside. Ophelia goes mad with the memory of her murdered father, broken promises and unrequited love. Macbeth can't help recollecting what the Witches said, and the part with Banquo's offspring as a lineage of kings particularly vexing to remember. Lady Macbeth goes mad with compunction and solitude. She was not traumatized in the beginning, when Macbeth was, but when he is desensitized, she breaks down and remembers all the victims, trying to wash away their blood from her hands.*

**Key Words:** *memory, trauma, psychology, madness.*

### HAMLET

The latest paradigm of interpreting *Hamlet*, as noted by Bennett Simon (Simon 2001: 710), is that of "*Hamlet and trauma*". The important book Simon invokes is *Shattered Assumptions* by Janoff-Bulman, 1992. Trauma shatters the assumptions of the nearest and dearest one can trust and the stability of the ground beneath one's feet, in intrafamilial betrayal, but also literally, in earthquakes. Interpretation of events becomes constricted or chaotic or both. Numbness (cf. Macbeth's reaction to the news of his wife's death) oscillates with liability and incomplete control of one's emotions. One of the main effects of trauma is a difficulty to decide whether what is going on is real. Trauma breaks apart the intricate linkage between the "logical relationship" and "human relationship". The self and the world become loathsome, and a profound mistrust in the future sets in. In an effort to master a trauma, the quest for revenge and a scapegoat are commonly seen behaviours. In *Hamlet*, the main scapegoats are women and Hamlet himself. A notable syndrome

identified in the wake of severe trauma is "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD). But in Hamlet, a better term would be "a complex traumatic stress syndrome", defined by Hermann in 1992. It signifies that the traumatic events are not entirely in the past. A story that cannot be told directly in narrative discourse finds expression through displacement, symbolization and action, as Freud spelled out in "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through", in 1914. The memories may not be possible to put into words at all, but are expressed non-verbally, encoded as bodily experiences. "Dissociation" comes closer than "repression" to describing the variety of ways in which knowledge becomes confused and disavowed in traumatic states.

Hamlet is severely traumatized by the Ghost's recollections, which leave him both certain and uncertain that his father was killed by his uncle as well as of his mother's collusion with him or, at least, of her betrayal of the memory of her recently deceased husband. Having heard the Ghost's traumatic experience of fratricidal death, he is induced by this traumatic memory, which his "prophetic soul" had already known. Hamlet is not only traumatized by his memories and the Ghost's revelation, but indirectly by the Ghost's own traumatic experience. Is there such a thing as trauma induction? Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost is "replete with imagery of spatial dislocation, shaking of fundamental beliefs and frantic attempts to regain certainty and stability" (*Ibid*, 714). Hamlet was melancholic before he sees the Ghost, but now he decides to feign madness, traumatized by the Ghost's revelations. There is much more continuity between his genuine melancholy and the "antic disposition" than he himself can acknowledge.

His sense of betrayal, due to his mother's "o'erhasty marriage" and Claudius' lies and secrecy, is augmented by the gradual awareness that Ophelia is being used (with or without her consent, he cannot be sure). His feigning madness is a symptom of the "feigning" and deceit around him, but he is intermittently more unhinged than he realizes or wishes to be. His apology to Laertes that his madness, not he himself, was responsible for his rash actions (killing Polonius, cruelty to Ophelia), is "not merely an attempt at exculpation, but represents Hamlet's own struggle to distinguish real from feigned madness" (*Ibid*, 716).

Ophelia's madness is focused on speaking in such a way that she cannot be ignored, because she is silenced and ignored all the time. Only in her madness does anybody begin to listen to her! After the nunnery scene, her father tells her that she need not retell them what Hamlet said, "we heard it all" (3.1.76). When she wants to see the Queen after Polonius' death, Gertrude says "I will not speak with her" (.5.1.). Her trauma is characterized by a web of half-truths, paternal attempts to deny her perception and the secrecy attending the murder and "hugger mugger" burial of Polonius. This web, combined with the fact that the man she loved killed the father she also loved, as well as the impossibility of any kind of open grieving or raging – let alone discussion – contribute to her breakdown. As trauma theory teaches us, the secrecy and extreme difficulty of telling what has gone on are no less damaging than is the actual deed.

She remembers Hamlet as "the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword; The expectancy and rose of the fair state, / The glass of fashion and the mould of form, The observed of all observers" and that memory hurts, seeing such a noble mind overthrown. Perhaps she cannot break out of this impression and this is why she is not traumatized by the humiliating treatment by Hamlet, as she is more traumatized by what happens to others (Hamlet's madness, her father's death) than to herself. Even in her madness, though her voice and thoughts are unleashed for the first time, she sings about or alludes to the two men that marked her life. Janet Adelman noticed that only when women disappear do men restore

their masculinity and independence (Othello, Lear, Macbeth) (Adelman 1992: 70). Contrary to that, when the men of her life disappear, Ophelia is destroyed, not relieved, after a slender piece of "freedom of speech". Hamlet's trauma is supposed to effect action, to accomplish revenge, while hers just makes her powerless and incapable of survival. Incidentally, in the "nunnery scene" Ophelia tells Hamlet that she has remembrances of his that she wishes to re-deliver. Could remembrance as well be re-delivered? Does someone else "give" us our memories that we can return if we no longer want them?

Trauma likewise disturbs the sense of reality, leading to processes of disavowal or disconnection, in the sexual domain. Both the ghost of Hamlet's father and Hamlet himself reproach Claudius (and Gertrude) for being "incestuous" and "adulterous". The union between the deceased husband's brother and the wife were not considered incestuous and were often practised, especially if that meant that the property would not be lost. Other characters never notice this "incest", but only Hamlet, obsessed with his mother's sexuality, fixates on the theme of incest. So, Simon asks (*Op.cit.*: 717), "who is traumatized and therefore responding with denial, confusion, and uncertainty, about what is real and what is fantasy?" Hamlet, followed by Ophelia, and probably Gertrude. Trauma theory emphasizes the *indirect* telling of that which cannot be remembered or safely told. Hamlet is told about the murder by the Ghost. He does not know whether there was any complicity on the part of Gertrude. We likewise do not know whether Hamlet was only feigning madness or whether the marriage between Gertrude and Claudius was really incestuous. Hamlet cannot say publicly what he has heard from the Ghost, so he appears before Ophelia and it is from her that we learn what he looked like and how he behaved (2.1. 81-83). Ophelia cannot say how distraught, used, furious and negated she has been, so she sings in her ditties about her father's death and about her love for and from Hamlet. Hamlet's imparting to Horatio about the Mousetrap play is a way of filling in the hitherto unspeakable. Finally, the words *tell* and *report* in Hamlet's last words to Horatio (5.3. 312-18) represent an effort to restore the broken narrative, typical of trauma.

The Ghost's urges Hamlet to revenge "this most foul and unnatural murder" if he ever his dear father loved. But his parting injunction is that he *remember* (1.5. 95-104). The whole play is about "this spectral shift of emphasis from vengeance to remembrance" (Greenblatt 2001: 206). Hamlet is driven to suicidal thoughts by his inward recollections: So excellent a King! ...Heaven and Earth, / Must I remember? (1.2.139-3). Evidently, he must, because he continues to grapple with the same images of parental intimacy: "Why, she would hang on him.../... and yet within a month- / Let me not think on't (1.2.143-6). These scenes remind Hamlet of the shock and loss he has experienced. They press themselves on his mind as compulsive remembrance. Plato and Aristotle explained memory in terms of storage and searching functions, but not of involuntary hauntings. Hamlet says "I shall not look upon his like again" (1.2.186), at the boundary between memory and haunting. He proclaims the ghost's commandment will live "all alone" in his brain; everything else will be erased. As the tragedy unfolds, Shakespeare conjoins memory with its opposite, the fading of remembrance. There was something "more than his father's death", as Claudius suspected (2.2.8) that dulled his intense grief. Those were doubts about the precise nature of the Ghost and hence about the trustworthiness of his account. Intense idealization of his father as a Hyperion (3.4.54-62), making a painted combination of classical deities, may be a way of forgetting. This may be a prelude to the nauseated vision of his mother's intimacies with her new husband. This loathing seems to stand between Hamlet and his full remembrance, or so the Ghost's sudden appearance in

the closet suggests: "Do not forget. This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.100-101). "With Polonius' bleeding body, Hamlet's purpose can hardly be said to be blunted", says Simon (*Ibid*: 225); so what is he to remember? How is he to fulfill the command "Remember me"? He frantically urges his mother to see the Ghost, feeling that his own memory traces are at stake: "Look how he steals away" (3.4.125) – fading of remembrance. The Ghost will gradually disappear not only from the scene, but also from the speech. Hamlet mentions his "bestial oblivion" (4.4.9.30) and the fact that Claudius killed his father and his "mother stained" when reproaching himself on the occasion of Fortinbras' military progress, as well as later in 5.2.65 when he says "my king", not "my father". The memory of the dead is depersonalized. Even at the play's close, there is no retrospect. King Hamlet is never mentioned again. When he finishes off with Claudius, Hamlet says "Follow my mother" (5.2.269) – old Hamlet has in effect been forgotten. Remembering the dead is vastly more complex than it first seemed. Hamlet's strange phrase "I am dead" (5.2.275, 280) and "I die, I cannot live" (5.2.294) has an odd resonance: here he sounds like a ghost. Just like in the beginning, when he says "Now to my word" (1.5.111) referring to the Ghost's words, he "ventriloquizes his father's words, incorporating him lest he disappear" (*Ibid*: 228). The Ghost is eliminated as ghost and turned into the prince's traumatic memory.

**Madness in two.** In Renaissance, human madness was separated from the supernatural one, i.e. from demonic or divine possession. Traditional medicine believed that hysteria was caused by uterus pathology, so it was typically a women's disease, while melancholy was related to men. Shakespeare's male characters regain sanity, while women plunge into irreversible madness, oblivion and absence from the stage.

The Gentleman's description of Ophelia's madness in 4.5.6-13 underlines the differences between her genuine insanity and Hamlet's feigned madness (Neely 1991: 324). Ophelia always seems to be a step ahead – what he plans to do, the madness he feigns, really happens to her. She is his "twin" during his absence from the country, as she goes mad precisely then and enacts his role of madman *in absentia*.

Ophelia's madness is represented through fragmentary discourse of formulae, songs and tales that describe the rites of passage and loss – lost love, lost chastity and death. The context of her insanity is sexual frustration, so its description introduces gender inflexion in accounts of madness. Her madness is somatized and its context eroticized, while Hamlet's is politicized and subject to social criticism (*Ibid*: 326)

Despite the songs in her madness, interpreted by many critics as confession of her sexual relationship with Hamlet, Hugo Klajn (Klajn 1991, 306) believes that Ophelia sings about natural, suppressed and unrealized fantasy and fears: the baker's daughter turned into an owl because she deducted some flour from the bread baked for Jesus Christ.

Most psychoanalysts believe that Hamlet's tempestuous reaction to his mother's overhasty marriage had more to do with his Oedipal complex he had not overcome than with moral judgment. He remembers her hanging upon his father, which could be deemed a *primal scene trauma* of a child, so the love between her and his uncle re-enkindles this flame of jealousy.

## MACBETH

Macbeth is haunted by the memory of the weird sisters, though he assures Banquo, who sees him "rapt", that he has dismissed their words. The prophecy of him as a king, but one with a "barren sceptre", and Banquo as father and ancestor of future kings, particularly vexed his mind. Lady Macbeth also seems to have a "prophetic soul" – she seems to have known, or at least dreamed about his "promotion" before the messengers' report. He has spent all his fears prior to the first crime, so they gradually disappear until he is so hardened that he can barely remember the taste of fear. Quite opposite, Lady Macbeth seems intrepid and atrocious in the beginning, but she gradually loses power and ends up full of fearful memories and guilt. Macbeth did not dare re-enter the slain king's chamber because of the traumatic memory of the King's body, but she did not dare kill Duncan in the first place, pleading his striking semblance with her father. She often has to remind Macbeth of his deliberations, banking on the question of his masculinity. The memory of that commitment seems traumatic now, but "what has been done cannot be undone". He will soon wish to undo the King's murder, just as he thinks the doctor can "untraumatize" his wife and make her mind a clean slate again. Macbeth fears Banquo the most, which is why Banquo's ghost haunts him and traumatizes him, compromising him as a king at the banquet. This was before he heard the witches say that she should fear only Macduff. But he had to get rid of perilous witnesses too, and every victim will be etched in Lady Macbeth's memory. It is as if, assuming his gender characteristics instead the milk of "human kindness" and femininity he had a smack of, she had also taken on his sins, even those she had no complicity in. As if she were a funnel through which all his fears ran off.

Lady Macbeth's suicide, though not involuntary and questionable as Ophelia's, takes place after the same alienation. Her somnambulism is also a rite, with quotations and symbolic purification, culminating in death. She quotes her and Macbeth's earlier words, pseudo-lullabies, mentions Duncan's murder, Banquo's ghost and Lady Macduff, enacting her complicity in these acts and talking to her husband.

Lady Macbeth often insists on gender (Campbell 1935: 220) when speaking of fear (she would dash her newborn's brains out had she promised so; she asks Macbeth if he is a man, and he tells her she should give birth to male children only). When the horrified Macbeth tells her that "amen" stuck in his throat, she tells him not to consider it too deeply - otherwise they would go mad (II, ii, 33-4).

All things about fear are related to bad dreams. So, Lady Macbeth walks in her sleep, and Macbeth exclaims "Macbeth killed sleep!" In *Terrors of the Night* Thomas Nashe wrote that at night we experience the horror of everything we suffer during the day. He explained that we create images of the past and that excessive liquids at night create stage for those images as puppets. "It is not repentance, it is fear" (*Ibid.*: 233). Macbeth wants the doctor to pluck out the effects of this passion from his wife's mind (V, iii, 40-5). When he hears the woman's cry, he remembers his prior fears, which belong to by-gone times when he was still capable of feeling (V, v, 9-15).

Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking is a reflection of her guilt, equivalent in Hamlet's reply to his father in V.1.4-10. Hamlet's vision was from Purgatory, and hers from Hell (Walker 1949: 177). Hamlet wants to remember his father's command, while she hopes to forget the ghost of her own misdeed. Her murdered conscience turns her eyes straight into her soul, where she sees black spots, like Gertrude. She jumps at night, puts her gown on and seems to be observing, though asleep. After Duncan's murder, she rushed her husband to put his gown on and look as an observer. She wants light, just as Macbeth didn't want light when Duncan was murdered.

Lady Macbeth can't wash her hands because her husband's are so blood-stained by the crimes, following the one she instigated. She did repent, but that is "annihilated by her loyalty to Macbeth, who never repented" (Eliott 1958, 184). However, Bradley believes that Macbeth did repent and the sorrow in "Tomorrow and tomorrow" shows it (Bradley 1905: 301). Lady Macbeth does not have his imaginative power and that is why she cannot realize the consequences of their deeds in advance, while he fears them.

Before the murder, Macbeth has a vision of dagger, because he contemplated the act too much. After it is done, he had another hallucination, this time auditory:

"Methought I heard a voice cry, / Sleep no more! / Macbeth doth murder sleep; the innocent sleep; / ...and therefore, Macbeth shall sleep no more!"

Dr. Kellogg (Kellogg 1866: 15) believed that neither of them was mad, although Macbeth had hallucinations and Lady Macbeth walked in her sleep, trying to wash the blood off her hands. Still, in wake life, she was very rational. But they both feared each other's insanity.

#### REFERENCES

1. Adelman, J., (1992), *Suffocating Mothers – Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest*, Routledge, New York
2. Bradley, A.C., (1905), *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth*, Macmillan, London
3. Campbell, L., (1935), *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes - Slaves of Passion*, Methuen, London
4. Eliott, G. R., (1958), *Dramatic Providence in Macbeth*, Princeton University Press, Princeton
5. Greenblatt, S., (2001), *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Princeton University Press, Princeton,
6. Kellogg, A.O., (1866), *Shakspeare's Delineations of Insanity, Imbecility and Suicide*, Hurd and Houghton, New York
7. Klajn, H., (1991), *Frojd, psihoanaliza i literatura (Freud, Psychoanalysis and Literature)*, Matica srpska, Novi Sad
8. Neely, C. T., (1991), "Documents in Madness: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 42, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore
9. Simon, B, (2001), "Hamlet and Trauma Doctors: an Essay at Interpretation", *American Imago*, Vol.58, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore
10. Walker, R., (1949), *The Time is Free*, Andrew Dakers Ltd, London

## TRAUMATIZUJUĆA SEĆANJA I SEĆANJE NA TRAUME – HAMLET I MAKBETOVI

**Nataša Šofranac**

*Ovaj rad razmatra kako su traume dovele Šekspirove junake do ludila. Neka sećanja im se nasilno utiskuju, neka oni očajnički pokušavaju da zadrže, dok se neka nemilosrdno javljaju iznova. Hamleta očev duh pritiska da ne zaboravi na osvetu, a sve što ima veze sa time stvara mu agoniju. Najupečatljivije sećanje je, svakako, ono što je Duh rekao o ubistvu – Hamletova proročka duša se toga setila iznutra. Ofelija poludi sa sećanjem na ubijenog oca, neodržana obećanja i neuzvraćenu ljubav. Makbet ne može da se odupre sećanju na reči Veštica, a onaj deo o Bankovim potomcima kao budućim kraljevima posebno ga uznemiruje. Ledi Makbet poludi uz osećanje krivice i usamljenosti. Ona nije bila istraumarana na početku, kada Makbet jeste, ali onda kada on utrne i ne oseća ništa, ona doživi slom i seća se svih žrtava, trudeći se da spere njihovu krv sa svojih ruku.*

Ključne reči: *sećanje, trauma, psihologija, ludilo*