Applying Psychopharmacology To Two Characters in Shakespeare

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Applying Psychopharmacology to Two Characters in Shakespeare

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Contents

Introduction

1. Elizabethan Psychiatry: Humoralism 4
2. Justification for Applying Later Theory 5
3. Objections to This Practice 10
4. Basic Psychopharmacology 13
5. Applying Psychopharmacology to Shakespeare 15

Antonio: The Major Depressive

1. His Inexplicable Sadness 20
2. Basic Humoral Melancholy 22
3. Other Factors Contributing to Humoral Melancholy 24
4. Antonio’s Humoral Symptoms 27
5. Basic Psychoanalysis 32
6. Antonio’s Repressed Homosexuality 35
7. Antonio’s Repressed Masochism 41
8. Antonio and Major Depression 50
9. The Psychopharmacological Understanding of Depression 56
10. The Mysterious Nature of Emotion 59
11. Understandings of Other Characters 63
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. The Love Plot and the Failure of Rational Choice</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The Play as a Whole</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hamlet and Bipolar Disorder</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The Varying Nature of Humoral Melancholy</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Frustrated Desires</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Psychoanalysis: Hamlet’s Oedipus Complex</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Maternal Contamination</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Problems with Psychoanalysis</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Foundations of Psychopharmacological Readings of Hamlet</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Bipolar Disorder</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Hamlet’s First Hypomanic Episode</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Hamlet’s Mixed States</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Hamlet’s Later Hypomanic Episodes</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Psychopharmacological Understandings Hamlet’s Relation to His Mother</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Bipolar Symptoms in Other Characters</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The Play as a Whole</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusions</strong></td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Works Cited</strong></td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

1. Elizabethan Psychiatry: Humoralism

Winfred Overholser, former president of the American Psychiatric Association, wrote in his overview of Early Modern psychiatric theory “Shakespeare’s Psychiatry” that “in all ages men have been interested in human behavior and motivations, and have attempted in one way or another to explain mental peculiarities.” Like those of any period, doctors during the Elizabethan era engaged in this practice of studying human mentality; however, they did not possess the scientific knowledge which have become essential to the field we now call psychiatry. In fact, the term psychiatry was not invented until the 19th Century, and even psychology was not coined until 1590. As a result, a writer of the period, such as Shakespeare, could, obviously, understand human behavior and mental states using the instead using only the tools available in his particular historical and cultural moment.

Individuals in Shakespeare’s time understood human mentality in terms of the psuedo-science of humoralism. In its most simplistic understanding, humoralism is founded on the principle that four substances within the body, referred to as “humors,” were responsible for determining a person’s

2 Overholser, 335.
temperament. The proportions of these humors--blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile), and black bile--in the body was the predominant factor which affected individual mental states. When all four were in equal proportion within the body, a person was healthy. However, should those humors be out of proportion, that is, if one of them were present in a greater or lesser quantity than the others, that person would display one of "various complexions or temperaments named after the humors, the sanguine, the phlegmatic, the choleric and the melancholic." Of course, this conception of human psychology has been discredited by more empirical scientific research. Yet, though Shakespeare’s depictions of human mental conditions are based on outdated theory, scholars continue to consider Shakespeare's portrayals of human psychology to be some of the most accurate in literature.

2. Justification for Applying Later Theory

Overholser writes of Shakespeare, “He was perhaps the most accurate mirror ever held up to mankind, a keen observer, one who knew human nature, and who depicted it with truth.” In his analysis of the mental disorders of characters in Shakespeare, *Shakespeare’s Melancholics*, clinical psychologist William Inglis Dunn Scott remarks, “Shakespeare wrote his plays with particular

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3 Overholser, 342.
4 Overholser, 349.
characters in mind, which he was incapable of falsifying to meet the exigencies of plot or dramatic construction.”

Late lecturer in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School Marvin Bennett Krims applied his clinical knowledge to Shakespeare in order to help patients better understand their own psychologies. In his book *The Mind According to Shakespeare*, Krims writes that Shakespeare possessed a “genius for portraying characters with stable predictable personalities,” and an “intuitive understanding of the complexity of human psychology and the capacity to convincingly represent this complexity in writing.”

Literary critic Gail Kern Paster writes in her analysis of the humoral aspects of Shakespeare's work entitled *Humoring the Body*, “Certain basic emotions—love, hate, fear, anger, and sadness, for example—are broadly recognizable across wide distances of time and culture.” What all of these authors are suggesting is that, in Scott’s words, “We no longer accept Elizabethan and Jacobean theories of the causation and treatment of mental disorder, but the clinical picture is one as true today as it was 350 years ago.”

This ongoing belief in Shakespeare’s ability to overcome the misguided


7 Krims, xix.


9 Scott, 14.
notions of his time and convey human psychologies not as they were understood then but as they actually are has resulted in a long history of critics and scholars applying later psychiatric theories, theories the author could not have actively considered while writing, to his characters.

Considerable support for such a practice can be found in both the history of literary criticism and of psychiatry itself. Norman Holland is one of the most significant literary critics to discuss in detail the subject of psychological criticism. In his book, *The Shakespearean Imagination*, Holland describes two opposing schools of scholarship:

The historical critic holds, as a basic axiom, that the way to read a writer from the past (like Shakespeare) is to put yourself in the positions of his own original audience: try to know what they knew, feel what they felt, think as they thought. The “new” critic takes the opposite tack: the modern reader should put all matters of biography, history, intention, evaluation, and background aside until he has pondered the text by itself with all the twentieth-century care, intelligence, and feeling he can muster.10

When we consider the subject of psychology in Shakespeare’s work through the eyes of these schools of thought, we see that the historical critics would maintain

that we must understand the mental conditions of his characters through humoralism alone. It is the new critics who open the door not only for Holland but also for a host of other thinkers throughout history to apply their contemporary conceptions of psychiatry to Shakespeare. Holland traces psychological Shakespeare criticism to as far back as Samuel Coleridge and Goethe. Literary scholars such as A. C. Bradley read the plays as “psychological novels.” As we shall see below, Freud himself used Hamlet to both support and illustrate several aspects of psychoanalysis—a branch of psychiatry which is, in simplest terms, predicated on the principle that much of human behavior and feeling is the result of unrealized and repressed desires stemming from a person’s life experiences. Holland’s extensive catalog of psychoanalytic readings of Shakespeare entitled Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare recounts innumerable examples of psychoanalytic Shakespeare criticism and was perhaps the most comprehensive survey of the material available at the time it was written. New Zealand professor and critic of literature Philip Armstrong’s similar catalog Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis details still more psychoanalytic readings of Shakespearean characters (predominantly Hamlet) over the course of the 20th Century, both pre and post-Holland.

11 Holland, Imagination, 156.
12 Scott, 12.
Clearly, the academy has no qualms about looking at Shakespeare’s works in light of psychiatric theories the author knew nothing about. Scott quotes S.L. Bethell who contends, “A dramatist may express meaning of which he is himself only dimly aware, and his method may be dictated by an end which he is not consciously seeking; the real reason for his doing this or that can be discerned only when the work is finished and understood.” As Krims remarks, if we accept psychoanalysis as an effective means of understanding the human mind and Shakespeare as an effective presenter of that mind, “it follows that [author’s] ability to create the illusion of real people must also include unintentional but intuitive representation of unconscious motivations as a necessary requirement for verisimilitude of character portrayal.” In attempting to create characters who seem believable, Shakespeare presents something which he himself did not consciously understand. He recreates human minds which are governed by the same principles that govern all human minds throughout history. Shakespeare just did not know specifically what those principles were. If we accept this notion, it follows that we may use any accepted psychiatric theory in Shakespearean character analysis and that as the science of psychiatry evolves, so should our psychiatric readings of Shakespeare.

13 Scott, 14.
14 Krims, xix.
3. Objections to This Practice

However, Holland takes issue with such a method of literary criticism. Surprisingly, his problem is not with the conceit that one can analyze Shakespeare using theories which the author could neither know nor understand. Rather, Holland questions the premise that any form of psychological theory can be applied to fictional characters. Regarding psychoanalytic readings of Hamlet, Holland comments, “The psychoanalytic reading, in other words, makes the same mistake as all these literalistic readings of Hamlet’s character, beginning with Goethe’s. They lift Hamlet out of the play and treat him as a living person… Hamlet is not a living person, but a part of a play.”\(^{15}\) Holland suggests that Hamlet--and by implication all fictional characters--is not an actual person with a past, an unconscious mind, or a fully-realized personality. He is not a real, complete human, and therefore, he lacks a complete psychology to analyze. Consequently, it is futile to use any form of psychiatry on a Shakespearean character.

Krim addresses this issue by first acknowledging that psychoanalysis is an interactive process in which the analyst and the analysand must engage in an

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\(^{15}\) Holland, *Imagination*, 159.
active discourse.\textsuperscript{16} Obviously, such a process is impossible with a fictional character. However, Krims continues, “Although we cannot apply the psychoanalytic \textit{method} to texts as we do with real people, we can apply psychoanalytic \textit{theory}--the body of knowledge derived from the psychoanalytic method--to enhance our understanding of texts.”\textsuperscript{17} Though the interactive process of psychiatric treatment is impossible with fictional characters, the glimpses into their nature which the playwright provides should be sufficient for psychological analysis.

Indeed, the incomplete mental picture which we get from a character in a play is not much less than what an actual clinician may glean from his real-world patients. The emotional state of characters can be determined from only the dialogue and actions which the author chooses to give them within the finite and static text of the play. Similarly, any account of a real patient’s condition must be self-reported and, as a result, limited and skewed. No patient can provide a doctor with a comprehensive description of his or her psychological state, nor can most doctors observe their patients at all times. Freud recognized that any patient’s report cannot be entirely objective and accurate because it is automatically influenced by the very same unconscious motivations which Freud sought to

\textsuperscript{16} Krims, xvi.
\textsuperscript{17} Krims, xvii.
Furthermore, later psychiatrists agree that it is impossible to ever make a completely accurate diagnosis based on an all-inclusive assessment of patient’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Dr. Jim Phelps is an acclaimed psychiatrist, member of the International Society for Bipolar Disorders, and expert on the diagnosis and treatment of bipolar disorders. His book *Why Am I Still Depressed?* seeks to help patients without expert knowledge of psychiatry analyze their symptoms and determine whether or not they may constitute a form of bipolar disorder. Phelps writes, “Diagnoses are merely best estimates of reality, not reality itself.” Though it seems logical to claim that since Shakespeare’s characters are not real, complete, and independent entities, they cannot be accurately diagnosed or psychoanalyzed, in truth, real-world diagnoses of real people can hardly be considered more “accurate.” Instead, diagnoses are guesses, applications of theory to a limited quantity of data meant to help doctors understand their patients and their patients’ conditions. Consequently, the idea of diagnosing or simply studying the mental disorders of fictional people is not unreasonable, so long as it gives us a greater understanding of the characters and the text.

18 Armstrong, 18.
4. Basic Psychopharmacology

Writing in the middle of the 20th Century, Scott states, “The trouble is that the critics have not kept themselves informed of modern views on insanity… We are now living in an era of enlightenment on mental disease at least as far ahead of the turn of the century as Shakespeare’s time was of the Middle Ages.” While, as we shall see, Scott's ideas were extremely forward-thinking, in the more than 50 years since his writing, the scientific understanding of mental disease has of course continued to progress. As doctors learned more about the workings of the brain, they developed the now widely-accepted discipline of psychopharmacology. This branch of psychiatry eschews Freudian ephemera such as the unconscious and repressed desires in favor of more empirical physiological study. Rather than attempt to dig deep into the causes of mental disorders, psychopharmacology concerns itself with how disorders affect or are affected by chemical reactions in the brain.

The discipline sees emotional states as primarily--although, as I will explain below, not exclusively--the results of specific, observable, and objective chemical reactions in the brain. While psychoanalysis works by first by discovering the root of a psychological problem and then working forward to a

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20 Scott, 17.
diagnosis and treatment, psychopharmacology operates in reverse. It looks first at
the symptoms and from there seeks to, in a sense, reverse-engineer a diagnosis
and treatment plan; meaning, though doctors cannot be certain what instigated the
disruption of brain chemistry which causes mental disorders, they treat these
conditions by manipulating the workings of the brain until symptoms are relieved.

Though *Understanding Depression*, an informational publication for
patients produced by the Harvard Medical School to outline the basic symptoms
and treatments of depression explains that today’s doctors “know more now than
ever before about how the brain regulates mood,” their understanding of the
biology of conditions such as depression is still limited.\textsuperscript{21} Psychopharmacology
may possess as many “gaps” in knowledge as Overholser attributes to the
psychiatry of his day,\textsuperscript{22} but studies showing that 65% to 85% of patients
experience positive results from antidepressants\textsuperscript{23}--medications which function by
altering brain chemistry--demonstrate that psychopharmacology is an increasingly
significant field of study. As such, it constitutes the next logical phase in the long-
standing tradition of applying post-Elizabethan psychiatry to characters in
Shakespeare.

\textsuperscript{21} Harvard Medical School, *Understanding Depression* (Boston: Harvard Health
\textsuperscript{22} Overholser, 335.
\textsuperscript{23} Harvard, 18.
5. Applying Psychopharmacology to Shakespeare

In the following pages, I shall undertake the task of using this relatively new science of psychopharmacology to examine two of Shakespeare’s characters. Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* and Hamlet in his eponymous play are both explicitly suffering from melancholy so extreme and so seemingly in excess of the stimuli around them that they beg for psychiatric analysis. Though similarities exist between these two cases--their unshakable and inexplicable sadness, their self-deprecation, the inability of their friends to diagnose them--their conditions present themselves with significant differences in terms of symptoms and the effect those symptoms have on each character’s behavior. Furthermore, the narrative and thematic relations between the characters’ conditions and each play as a whole are substantially dissimilar. Antonio is primarily a passive character whose sadness appears to be inconsequential to the events transpiring around him. Hamlet is quite clearly the focus of his play, and determining the nature of his illness is as important a plot point as any other. I will continue the process of psychological criticism by bringing the principles and scientific research of psychopharmacology to bear on these characters. By examining Antonio and Hamlet’s symptoms and behaviors in light of this modern branch of psychiatry, I will make a preliminary diagnosis of both characters as they might be understood.
by psychiatrists today. Since these are not real men who do not have real brains, my diagnoses will be--like any diagnosis of living people as wel--far from conclusive, but they will be supported by contemporary research and grant us new understanding of both the characters.

However, merely diagnosing these characters with modern ailments would be an accomplishment of only minor significance. Holland writes, “And it is not fair to look only at those parts of the play which deal with the quite appealing figure of Hamlet. We have to look at the play as a whole.” To say that Hamlet (or Antonio) suffers from this or that psychological condition, even if it is one which previous critics have not considered, runs the risk of being an indulgence in idle speculation. What does thinking about these characters in psychopharmacological terms actually add to the existing wealth of psychological Shakespeare criticism? In order to be worthy of discussion, psychological criticism must expand beyond the locus of a single character. Understanding the psychology of Antonio or Hamlet must somehow help us understand the texts in which they exist. Thus, after assessing the mental states of these two characters through recent developments in psychiatry, I will demonstrate what effect this reading of these patients has on our understanding of the characters around them, the thematic and narrative structures of their plays individually, and the thematic

24 Holland, Imagination, 159.
Before I can accomplish this task, however, I must first survey the pre-existing psychological criticism of Antonio and Hamlet. Predominantly, I am engaging in what Holland describes as the new critics’ practice of analyzing texts through the lens of their own historical and cultural moment (my moment being the early twenty-first century), but Holland also states, “The new critic (on the sly, as it were) corrects his reading of the text in isolation by his (bootlegged?) knowledge of what an Elizabethan play is likely to contain.”

Psychopharmacology does not exist in a vacuum. It has developed over time and through the course of scientific discovery. It has evolved out of previous psychiatric models, and those prior models evolved from others that came earlier still. In order to make the most informed psychopharmacological assessment of the mental states of these characters and of the significance of those mental states to the entirety of the plays, I must begin by considering them as Shakespeare and his audience likely considered them; through humoralism. I will look at the arguments for viewing Antonio and Hamlet’s sadness as being typical humoral melancholy.

From there, it is necessary to review the criticism of the psychoanalysts. Psychoanalysis has been and continues to be a dominant psychiatric method, and

as such, it has been the focus of copious amounts of psychological Shakespeare criticism. It would be foolish to ignore such a wealth of psychiatric analysis.

Therefore, I will also consider the psychoanalytic readings of Antonio as repressed homosexual or repressed masochist and of Hamlet and his repressed Oedipal desires. By detailing the insights and shortcomings of the humoral and psychoanalytic readings of Antonio and Hamlet, I will not only establish the purpose (perhaps even the necessity) of a psychopharmacological reading but also provide the historical and academic context in which this reading operates.

Finally, I will consider the observable symptoms of Antonio and Hamlet and compare them to contemporary understandings of major depression and bipolar disorder respectively. The information I provide regarding modern understandings of these conditions will come primarily from Phelps, Harvard, and the National Institute of Mental Health's publication *Bipolar Disorder in Adults*. These works present complex medical and scientific information in terms intended for patients who are not necessarily well-versed in the science of psychiatry, and therefore, they are most appropriate for a work of literary criticism. When necessary, I will also provide supplementary information from scientific papers.

My new interpretation of the characters and their mental illnesses will demonstrate an overarching thematic message which Shakespeare develops from *Merchant* to *Hamlet* as well as the ways in which psychopharmacology and
psychopharmacological criticism are not inherently opposed to previous psychiatric fields but in fact evolve out of and in some ways encompass them.
Antonio: The Major Depressive

1. His Inexplicable Sadness

_The Merchant of Venice_ begins with the titular character, Antonio, declaring, “In sooth I know not why I am so sad.” The mysterious reasons for Antonio’s sadness are discussed for the first half of the scene and then all but forgotten once Bassanio and the love plot appear. Indeed, Antonio himself quickly drops out of the play almost entirely. He appears in only six out of twenty scenes, and in one of those, he does nothing but inform Gatiano that Bassanio is waiting for him, a task which would seem more appropriate for Bassanio’s man Lancelot Gabbo or an unnamed messenger. Thus we are left with two questions: If Antonio is predominantly a background character, one whose primary purpose appears to be to enter a dangerous bargain with Shylock and thereby allow the events of the narrative to unfold around him, what is the significance of inexplicable sadness? Second, why is his sadness significant enough to serve as the audience’s point of entry into the world of the play?

Norman Holland posits that every detail in a work of literature serves to “add to the organic unity of the whole” and that in order to “put the details together to form an artistic totality… it is sometimes helpful to look first at what

Berkovits 21

seems to fit in least well; because such elements are ‘farther away’ from the center of a work, they often add most to it.” Antonio’s sadness is so “far away” from the center or point of the play that it seems almost irrelevant both in terms of narrative necessity and thematic connection. Yet, by beginning with such a blunt statement of Antonio’s unexplained sadness, Shakespeare is clearly drawing the audience’s attention not only to the sadness itself, but also to the fact that it is inexplicable. By refusing to provide any resolution the mysterious cause of this sadness, Shakespeare gives the audience what what Johns Hopkins University Professor of English Drew Daniel calls in an essay examining the psychoanalytic nature of Antonio’s melancholy an “invitation to interpret melancholy pitched oddly between opportunity, challenge, and therapeutic responsibility.” In the process of such interpretation, we must also discover how this seemingly minor detail fits into “the organic unity of the whole.” In the following pages, I will undertake this two-pronged task—finding the cause of the sadness and then determining its contribution to the wholeness of the work. This study will ultimately probe into the heart of mystery of Antonio the character and of The Merchant of Venice itself.

27 Holland, Imagination, 43.
2. Basic Humoral Melancholy

As I have explained, simple humoralism asserted that the proportion or “balance” of four humors, each of which was produced by a different organ in the body, determined a person’s physical and mental health. According to former University of West Virginia English Professor John W. Draper’s book *The Humors & Shakespeare’s Characters*—a work which seeks to classify major Shakespearean characters using the four main humoral temperaments—an excess of black bile was responsible for the melancholic disposition.²⁹ One would expect that Shakespeare would have designed the perpetually sad Antonio to match the profile of the humoral melancholic, but the textual evidence does not necessarily allow for such an easy labeling.

There are few direct references to the humors in *Merchant*. When participating in the casket test, Bassanio mentions cowards who “have livers white as milk”³⁰ implying that they lack blood, the humor responsible for courage. More important for the discussion of Antonio is Gratiano’s response to the merchant’s unshakable sadness,

> “Let me play the fool!

> With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,

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³⁰ Shakespeare, “Merchant,” III.ii.86.
And let my liver rather heat with wine
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.
Why should a man whose blood is warm within
Sit like his grandsire cut into alabaster?
Sleep when he wakes? and creep into the jaundice
by being peevish?”

By mentioning the heating of his liver and blood, the cooling of his heart, and jaundice (a disease of the liver) all of which are parts of the body which pertain to the production and balance of the humors, Gratiano is clearly suggesting that Antonio’s sadness is resultant from a problem with his humors. Gratiano establishes his own state as one filled with mirth and hot blood--blood being the dominant humor of the sanguine temperament, which was generally considered to be the most pleasant disposition. The melancholic humor was believed to be the direct opposite of the sanguine, was caused by an over abundance of black bile produced by the liver, and associated with the element earth. By first placing his own sanguine temperament in direct contrast with Antonio’s as well as likening

31 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.79-86.
32 Draper, 17-18.
33 Draper, 62, 64, 72.
Antonio to a stone and cautioning him about diseases of the liver, Gratiano appears to view Antonio as a typical humoral melancholic.

However, this speech does not go far in providing a satisfying answer to the problem of Antonio’s sadness because it is merely Gratiano’s opinion. Like the explanations offered by Salarino and Solanio’s earlier in the scene, Gratiano’s diagnosis is immediately dismissed. Bassanio states, “Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing.”

Furthermore, for Gratiano’s view to be accurate it must be based on his observations of Antonio, but as we shall see, Antonio is a socially withdrawn individual. Gratiano must also possess a substantial knowledge of humoralism. Though we have no evidence to credit or dispute Gratiano’s skill as a humoral diagnostician, Bassanio says of him, “His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff; you shall seek all day ere you find them, and when you have them they are not worth the search.” It seems he does not think much of Gratiano’s intelligence. Consequently, we cannot accept Gratiano’s assessment as conclusive and instead must search for other evidence.

3. Other Factors Contributing to Humoral Melancholy

It is not particularly surprising that the humors themselves receive little attention in the play because there is in fact far more involved in the humoral

conception of psychology than just those four substances. Many external factors could contribute to an Elizabethan human’s temperament. Some of these, such as witchcraft and demonic possession, were not applicable to all individuals, and do not seem to be relevant to Antonio. On the other hand, “The conjunction and the opposition of the planets at the time of a man's birth influenced the proportions of the humors which were found in his body, and therefore had to do with his temperament[...].” Indeed, the course of a man's life and his death were influenced by the stars, and could be predicted.”

This fatalistic view of how one’s quite literal position in the universe determines one’s mental state as well as the events of his life may explain Antonio’s lines, “I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano: / a stage where every man must play his part, / and mine a sad one.”

Though Antonio does not mention astrology specifically, the idea that the planets can—as an extension of their power to influence temperament—predetermine the course of one’s life seems to agree with Antonio’s feeling that he has been fated to play a sad part. We might reasonably conclude that if Antonio was assigned a melancholic’s role it was the stars which were doing the casting.

However, such an assessment of these lines ignores their context. Here, Antonio is responding to Gratiano whom he likely knows is “too wild, too rude,

36 Overholser, 339, 343.
37 Overholser, 336.
38 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.77-79.
and bold of voice.””39 Antonio’s overly simplistic assessment of himself as merely playing a sad role shows Antonio--already wearied by his sadness40 and having just endured Salarino and Solanio’s bumbling attempts to diagnose him--attempting to dismiss Gratiano’s concern quickly and spare himself the above-quoted speech rather than making any authentic statement about his condition. Furthermore, the idea of the planets’ ability to control moods or predestine lives does not appear elsewhere in the play other than perhaps Lorenzo and Jessica’s discussion of how the moonlight is reminiscent of similar nights on which great lovers met. Therefore, an astrological explanation does not seem thematically significant.

A humoral interpretation of Antonio is complicated by it’s four-part system of classification. One would assume that Antonio surely falls into the category of the melancholic. Paster notes in *The Body Embarrassed: Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England*, a book in which she discusses Elizabethan conceptions of the body, that the proportions of the humors were affected by variables such as age, diet, and air quality.41 Scientific texts available to

40 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.2.
Shakespeare cited both meat and strong wine as well as “corrupt and pestilent air” as specific causes of melancholy. Differences in causes resulted in various types of melancholy which were localized in separate parts of the body including the stomach, veins, and brain. Yet Shakespeare does not give any information about Antonio’s diet or the quality of the air in Venice. Since Shakespeare provides no definitive cause for Antonio’s melancholy, one cannot assign Antonio a specific strain of melancholy, and therefore we can consider Antonio humorally melancholic in only the most general sense. Not knowing precisely what strain of melancholy afflicts Antonio substantially limits our ability to understand him in humoral terms as we cannot say for certain which symptoms of melancholy who is likely to exhibit.

4. Antonio’s Humoral Symptoms

Indeed, there is considerable contradiction between the common symptoms of humoral melancholy and Antonio’s behavior. According to Overholser, “The melancholic man was supposed to be lean, with hard skin and

42 Considering wine as a cause of melancholy casts further doubt on Gratiano’s understanding of humoralism as he seems to believe that letting his liver (the source of black bile) “heat with wine” would have a positive effect on his disposition.

43 Overholser, 344.

44 This variety was also known as “the windy (flatulent) melancholy or hypochondriasis as mentioned in Overholser, 344.

45 Paster, Humoring the Body, 63.
dusky color, subject to various physical diseases and numerous psychological hazards. In general he slept badly, had fearful dreams, was timorous, full of fear, doubt, and distrust and one whom ‘nothing can please but only discontentment.” Some of these seem to apply to Antonio. His sadness wearies him, which may suggest poor sleep. It seems as though nothing can please him. He is afflicted with melancholy despite his high social standing and the expected success of his business ventures. When Portia saves him from death, he does not express any feelings of relief or gratitude, but rather immediately sets about prescribing Shylock’s punishment. It is not until Bassanio thanks Portia by offering her the 3000 ducats owed to Shylock that Antonio remembers to say that they “stand indebted, over and above, / in love and service to you evermore.”

Given that I have already suggested that Antonio demonstrates in his interaction with Gratiano a willingness to speak disingenuously to appease those around him, it follows that Antonio’s thanks may be merely an attempt not to seem ungracious in contrast to Bassanio’s gratitude.

Later, after Portia has revealed that Antonio’s ships are safe, his initial response is simply, “I am dumb.” Clearly he is taken aback by his sudden

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46 Overholser, 343.
49 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” V.i.279.
reversal of fortune. Once he has found his tongue again he says, “Sweet lady, you have given me life and living, / for here I read for certain that my ships are safely come to road.” These lines read more like a statement of fact than any true thanks, and Portia ignores them completely as if they were hardly addressed to her. Antonio may be stunned by the unexpected news, he may acknowledge that Portia has returned to him his life and living, but he gives no indication that his change in fortune has affected his mood. While these examples cannot conclusively prove that Antonio is incapable of any true happiness or that good news does not please him, they certainly do not provide any definitive evidence to the contrary.

Yet, several other common symptoms of the humoral melancholic to not fit with Antonio’s character. Most importantly, Antonio is hardly timorous or “full of fear, doubt, and distrust.” He does not distrust Bassanio even though Bassanio has already defaulted on an earlier loan. While he certainly mistrusts Shylock, likening him to a “villain with a smiling cheek, / a goodly apple rotten at the heart,” this feeling is surely a consequence of the pair’s ongoing religious and financial animosity. Gratiano tells Antonio, “You are marvelously changed,”

51 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.146-147.
52 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.iii.97-98.
53 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.76.
thereby demonstrating that the merchant’s sadness is a recent development. Therefore, the distrust between Antonio and Shylock likely predates former’s melancholy and cannot be a symptom of it. Antonio certainly never displays fear or doubt. If anything, he is overly confident. He assures Solanio and Salarino that his business ventures are not the cause of his sadness because they are unlikely to fail.\(^54\) He does not hesitate to accept Shylock’s deadly bargain. He explicitly tells Bassanio, “Fear not”\(^55\) and later declares, “In this there can be no dismay; / My ships com home a month before the day.”\(^56\) These are not the words of a man plagued by fear or doubt.

Even during the trial scene, Antonio twice states that he is prepared for death.\(^57\) Again, a man full of fear would not accept his impending death with such calm and what the Duke calls “quietness of spirit.”\(^58\) On the other hand, if Antonio cannot be pleased by anything in the world, then it is certainly reasonable that he would be ready to leave it. Thus, given the scant evidence regarding what sort of melancholy afflicts Antonio, and given also the variety and seemingly contradictory ways in which those different types of melancholy express

\(^54\) Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.41-45.
\(^57\) Shakespeare, “Merchant,” IV.i.11-13, 262.
\(^58\) Shakespeare, “Merchant,” IV.i.12.
themselves, we cannot come to any complete or satisfying understanding of Antonio’s condition based on his symptoms.

Consequently, it is difficult to say what exactly is the thematic purpose of Antonio’s sadness. What does it contribute to the meaning of the play? Paster notes, “That the represented body was, like the actor’s actual body, a humoral entity is a silent, hence rarely thematized element of dramatic representations in gesture or discourse.”

Humoralism was how Shakespeare and his audience understood the psyche, but such ideas were so implicit in human life that they would not consider them noteworthy. According to Paster, a discourse on aspects of the human condition which were so fundamental, commonly-experienced, and already thoroughly discussed in other works would not have constituted an insightful thematic purpose for Shakespeare. To say simply that Antonio’s sadness is caused by his humors would be obvious to the audience. What would be less obvious is exactly what type of melancholy it is. Knowing that Antonio suffers from a virgin’s melancholy, for example, changes how we might understand his purpose in a play in which all his closest friends get married. Understanding his melancholy as stemming from his poor diet, redefines his meaning in a play so concerned with consuming flesh—and so on with any form of melancholy. In

60 Of course, if Antonio is a melancholic virgin, his self-identification as “a tainted wether” (IV.i.114) takes on new meaning as well.
truth, Shakespeare does not give us sufficient information about Antonio’s condition for a specific humoral diagnosis, and as result, we cannot come to a satisfying understanding of either the character or his contribution to the thematic message of the text.

5. Basic Psychoanalysis

If humoral theory is unable to sufficiently account for Antonio’s sadness due to a lack of the clinical information needed to make a diagnosis, we must turn to other psychiatric models in hopes that one of them might find a more intellectually satisfying explanation. Sigmund Freud’s invention of psychoanalysis in the late 19th Century irrevocably changed the way humanity conceives of the workings of the mind. As mentioned above, Psychoanalysis is a procedure predicated on understanding and bringing to light “unconscious motivations.” The significant difference between this mode of thinking about mental states and humoralism is that humoralism views emotions “as part of the fabric of the body,” whereas psychoanalysis is concerned with what Paster calls “abstract figurations for the individual psychological characteristics of the

61 Krim, xix.
62 Paster, Humoring the Body, 5.
disembodied self.” For humoralists, mental illness was as physiological in nature as any medical condition, but for psychoanalysts it became something intangible originating from the very much incorporeal realm they call the unconscious. This distinction may allow psychoanalysis to come to a more complete understanding of Antonio’s sadness. We do not have much information about Antonio’s physical condition, but we may see enough of his thoughts and actions for psychoanalysis plumb the depths of his mind.

Before delving into the psychoanalytic scholarship about Antonio it is important to note what Freud believed to be the psychoanalytic purpose of drama. In *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare*, Holland explains that according to Freud drama and certain other forms of literature “achieve their effect by bringing to consciousness unconscious or preconscious impulses, wishes, fantasies, or ways of thinking.” That is to say that for drama to be effective it must bring to light the audience’s repressed unconscious desires and thereby grant them “that energy [they] had been using up in inhibiting the unconscious or preconscious material in real life.” Holland further explains that Freud posits “three preconditions” needed for spectators to recognize the unconscious desire of a play’s “hero”

65 Holland, *Psychoanalysis*, 34.
within themselves: First, the character’s psychopathic condition must not be present at the beginning of the play, but rather arises over “the course of the action.” Secondly, the character’s unconscious or repressed impulse must be universal, one which all spectators also unconsciously represses. Last, that impulse must be recognizable but never named “so that in the spectator, too, the process is carried through with his attention averted, and he is in the grip of his emotions instead of taking stock of what is happening.”

It is clear that Antonio does not meet the first of these Freudian criteria; however, perhaps he is not meant to. While Freud asserted that these criteria were essential to any drama, Holland writes that Freud required this form of unconscious identification between the audience and the play’s “hero” specifically. Antonio is but a minor presence in the play. Perhaps he is not the “hero” whose repressed desires must resonate with the audience. Perhaps it is Bassanio, or Shylock, or Portia. However, if we consider Antonio’s sadness significant enough to the overall scheme of the play that he is worthy of psychoanalysis, then the cause of that sadness must be some universally repressed desire. Otherwise, his feelings would not matter and understanding them would add nothing to our understanding of the text. Therefore, we must assume for the purposes of this discussion that Freud’s criteria apply to Antonio.

Still, the fact that Antonio is suffering from a mental disturbance at the outset of the play and therefore does not meet the first criterion does not necessarily undermine a Freudian reading. According to Freud, if a character is suffering psychologically at the start of the action, “we shall be inclined to send for the doctor… and pronounce the character inadmissible to the stage.” I see no reason why this should be the case. If this character is indeed grappling with a repressed desire which is universally repressed by the audience as well, then the audience should not be shocked by the immediate appearance of that struggle between the conscious and unconscious. Rather, they should intuitively recognize the character’s problem as their own and accept said character as just as healthy as they are. To me, it seems far more important that Antonio meet the latter two conditions—those of universally repressed and unnamed desire—for a psychoanalytic reading to effectively explain the meaning and significance of his sadness.

6. Antonio’s Repressed Homosexuality

Psychoanalytic scholars have discussed extensively the nature of Antonio’s repressed desire. Scott begins one such discussion by saying, “Surely

67 Holland, Psychoanalysis, 39.
what lies behind the display of emotion is Antonio’s intuitive knowledge that he is
giving up his friend to Portia—that relations between them can never hereafter be
the same.” It is clear that Antonio is aware from some conversation prior to Act
I Scene i that he is losing Bassanio to a woman—but why should this make him
so sad? Writes Scott, “The Freudian explanation is quite simple. Antonio has not
advanced beyond the homosexual phase of development[…] But because of his
inherent nobility and strong respect for society he cannot acknowledge his
leanings even to himself.” Holland elaborates on this “simple explanation”
saying, “Deprived of a love object, the subject incorporates it into himself. Once
‘in him,’ however, the loved one turns into a tormenting, accusing conscience, and
the end result of the accusations is that the conscious mind submits to the
unconsciously present accuser.” Since his homosexual desires are trapped within
his subconscious, Antonio’s illicit love must express itself in another form and

68 Scott, 38.
69 In a footnote on her essay regarding Antonio’s relationship to the society around
him entitled “Antonio and Alienation in ‘The Merchant of Venice,’” Davidson College
professor of English Cynthia Lewis attempts to refute this claim by asserting that “The
text itself does not suggest that Antonio even knows about Bassanio’s plans to leave until
I.i.161 ff., well after Antonio has already displayed melancholy.” (Cynthia Lewis,
Antonio and Alienation in “The Merchant of Venice” South Atlantic Review 48.4 [1983]:
30-31n.) However Lewis’s reasoning is questionable, and I wonder how she missed
Antonio’s lines, “Tell me now what lady is the same / to whom you swore a secret
pilgrimage, / that you today promised to tell me of.” (Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.119-
121).
70 Scott, 44.
71 Holland, Psychoanalysis, 234.
thus transforms into an unshakable sadness and dissatisfaction with himself and his place in the world.

Evidence for Antonio’s homosexuality is scant, but not entirely nonexistent. Antonio’s “love” for Bassanio is stated explicitly throughout the play, and the fact that this love is never acknowledged as being homosexual meets Freud’s criterion that the central unconscious desire of a character never be named.\(^\text{72}\) When Solanio suggests that Antonio is melancholy because of love, Antonio replies simply, “Fie, fie!”\(^\text{73}\) The Oxford English Dictionary defines fie as “An exclamation expressing, in early use, disgust or indignant reproach.”\(^\text{74}\)

Whereas Antonio provides a more detailed and reasonable explanation of why his business ventures do not trouble him,\(^\text{75}\) his response to the suggestion that he is in love is curt, indignant, and excessively passionate. Yet, if Antonio is repressing his homosexual love, than an exclamation of disgust and reproach makes far more sense; he is disgusted with himself for his desires, and reproachful of Solanio for unwittingly bringing them up.

\(^{72}\) Whether or not repressed homosexuality would meet Freud’s second condition that the repressed desire all people struggle with is hard to determine from a modern perspective, but as Scott alludes above, the homosexual phase was considered a universal part of childhood psychological development.

\(^{73}\) Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.46.


\(^{75}\) Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.41-45.
However, the question of why Antonio would need to deny that his love for Bassanio is the cause of his sadness in order to adhere to social mores must be answered. Scott’s explanation is that “Elizabethan society, as that of today, specifically regarded overt homosexual behavior as depraved and disgusting,” and therefore, by denying this desire—even to himself—Antonio is able to experience the distress caused by his unrequited love “without any violation of social ethics.”\(^{76}\) Scott’s opinion does not seem to be in line with historical fact. Alan Sinfield, a University of Sussex professor who specializes in representations of sexuality in theater, writes in his book *Shakespeare, Authority, Sexuality*: 

The *Merchant* allows us to explore a social arrangement in which the place of same-gender passion was different from that we are used to[…]It appears not to have attracted very much attention; it was partly compatible with marriage, and was partly supported by legitimate institutions of friendship, patronage and service. It is not that Shakespeare was a sexual radical, therefore. Rather, the early-modern organization of sex and gender boundaries was different from ours, and the ordinary currency of that culture is replete with erotic interactions that strike strange chords today.

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\(^{76}\) Scott, 43.
Shakespeare may speak with distinct force to gay men and lesbians, simply because he didn't think he had to sort out sexuality in modern terms.\(^7\)

According to Sinfield, Elizabethans did not consider homosexuality as disgusting as Scott would have us believe. In fact, it seems that Shakespeare's society did not think of homosexuality as particularly remarkable, something which needed to be repressed or, in Sinfield’s terms, “sorted out.” If that were the case, the play’s original audience would not have identified with Antonio. His homosexuality would not have been a universally repressed desire, and therefore, his sadness would have remained inexplicable and thematically insignificant.

Furthermore, in her book on male-male gender relations entitled *Between Men*, acclaimed gender studies scholar Eve Sedgwick supports Sinfield’s assertion that same-gender passion is tied directly to friendship by stating that homosocial relationships (close male friendships and social bonding) have not only always existed but are considered socially acceptable even today.\(^8\) All the characters are aware that Antonio has an intense affection for Bassanio. As Salarino says, “I think he only loves the world for him.”\(^9\) Homosocial relationships appear several times in the


other places in Shakespeare’s work. Notable examples include Hamlet and Horatio, Falstaff and Prince Hal, and even Bassanio and Gratiano within this very play. Even if Antonio is unwilling to admit his own homosexual desires to himself, he should still be able to acknowledge that his sadness stems somehow from the forthcoming disruption of his socially acceptable relationship with Bassanio and have no qualms about expressing it to others. Thus, reading Antonio as a repressed homosexual is unsatisfying from a narrative perspective as well.

Still, Scott’s view that Antonio needs to hide his sexuality in order to adhere to societal norms is not entirely baseless. As he mentions, the culture in which Scott was writing did see homosexuality as reprehensible. If applying post-Elizabethan psychiatric principles to Shakespeare is justified by the new critics’ practice of examining text in the context of their time rather than the time at which it was written, then it is understandable that Scott, writing in the 1960s, would come to a psychoanalytic reading predicated on the idea that homosexuality was inappropriate. Yet, if we can afford Scott the luxury of his historical and social context, then we must allow the same for ourselves. To paraphrase Holland, we must examine the text with all the twenty-first-century care, intelligence, and feeling we can muster. Gay culture is flourishing and widely accepted in America today. At any given performance of Shakespeare, there may be at least one openly homosexual person, and consequently, repressed
homosexuality can no longer be sufficiently universal to meet Freud’s criteria.

Scott’s reading may have been legitimate in his day, but now we must move away from understanding Antonio as a repressed homosexual, as indeed some psychoanalysts have.

7. Antonio’s Repressed Masochism

Daniel writes, “The widespread adoption and absorption of psychoanalytic terms and phrases into ready-to-hand critical commonplaces have coincided with canonical acknowledgments of psychoanalysis's reductions and biases.”80 This critique of traditional psychoanalysis may have been part of Daniel’s motivation to develop the psychoanalytic reading of Antonio beyond the subject of repressed homosexuality. Indeed, many recent critics deride early psychoanalysis’s view that homosexuality is “a retardation of the individual’s sexual development at an immature phase,”81 a clear indication of the theory’s initial bias in favor of heterosexuality. Daniel’s new interpretation posits that Antonio begins the play as a Freudian melancholic and over the course of the action evolves into a masochist. What is significant about Daniel’s reading is that it does not inherently contradict the repressed homosexual interpretation. Rather, Daniel’s main problem is that the homosexual reading risks being “a too-pat reduction of the psychoanalytic

80 Daniel, 207.
81 Armstrong, 50.
interpretation of melancholia into an Easter-egg hunt for a lost [love] Object,” which would ignore larger “ethical and political” considerations. Daniel is not interested in knowing the root cause of Antonio’s melancholy. He is merely interested in charting how that melancholy evolves into masochism. Therefore, Daniel’s reading does not preclude understanding Antonio as a repressed homosexual, but it also does not limit itself by making homophobia it’s soul focus.

Daniel sees Antonio’s masochism displayed initially as a need for those around him to be aware of and concerned by his sadness. Daniel argues, “Antonio strives to generate conversational interest in his secret, repeatedly drawing those around him into its analysis.” It is the “cry for attention” type of sadness. As already explained, the issue of Antonio’s sadness is explicitly addressed in the first scene only, a fact which troubles Daniel’s claim that Antonio tries to engage his friends in discussing his condition “repeatedly.” Secondly, Daniel does not offer any specific textual evidence from that scene of how Antonio goes about drawing others in. Furthermore, Antonio’s declaration of sadness comes in the middle of a conversation which began at some unseen time prior to the start of the play as evidenced by the fact that Solanio and Salarino have already told him that

82 Daniel, 207-208.
83 Daniel, 212.
his melancholy wearies them.\textsuperscript{84} Therefore, it is impossible to know for certain whether Antonio broached the subject (thereby drawing others into analysis) or whether he is responding to the pair’s inquiries regarding his condition. Still, Antonio’s quick dismissal of Solanio and Salarino’s explanations and his attempt to avoid discussing the subject with Gratiano suggest to me that he does not want to talk about it; however, Daniel might see these actions as an attempt to foster additional conversation by refusing to allow a clear resolution.

Daniel further supports his view by saying that it is thematically evident in Salarino’s suggestion that Antonio is preoccupied with his business:

Salerio’s\textsuperscript{85} image of a loaded merchant vessel bursting open and revealing its contents figures the task of melancholy interpretation itself; the rock pierces the sturdy side of the ship, penetrating to the valued content within, making it available yet also emptying it of value. In an anticipation of Antonio’s later shift from melancholic to masochist, being known, being opened, and being destroyed are all brought into a charged proximity from the very beginning of the play.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{84} Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.2.

\textsuperscript{85} Daniel is seemingly working from an edition in which Salerio and Salarino are conflated into one character, whereas, in the version used for this essay, they are separate entities. Nevertheless, this difference has no effect on the analysis.

\textsuperscript{86} Daniel, 211.
Such a metaphor need not necessarily read as representative of masochistic urges. The purpose of psychoanalysis is surely to “open” a patient’s subconscious, to make a person’s unknown motivations “known.” Lewis notes, “This conceit of man's mind and future as a ship afloat on Fortune's ocean was, of course, an Elizabethan commonplace.” Though the ship in this image is destroyed, we need not understand that aspect of the metaphor as an anticipation of self-destructive masochism. Rather, we might view the breach of the ship’s hull as Shakespeare’s attempt to convey through the use of a familiar metaphor that he intends to explore or “open” psychological interiority in a more general sense than Daniel is suggesting. It is not the destruction of the boat which is significant, merely it’s opening. Furthermore, Lewis also observes that Antonio all but ignores the business anxiety explanation, dismissing in five lines what Solanio and Salarino explain in thirty-two. Again, Daniel might see this action as Antonio’s attempt to prolong the conversation, but it is equally reasonable to argue that Antonio is genuinely resisting attempts to open his subconscious.

Either interpretation clearly aligns Solanio and Salarino with psychoanalysis. Their suggestions are based on the idea that the cause of Antonio’s sadness can be explained through rational reasoning. That Antonio is

87 Lewis, 22.
88 Lewis, 24.
troubled by his business ventures is the most obvious and logical source of his sadness. Solanio and Salarino support their theory by contending that Antonio associates everyday experiences such as blowing on soup or watching an hourglass with the possibility of a wreck at sea.\textsuperscript{89} Were Antonio making these connections consciously, he would surely be aware that they are making him sad. However, what Solanio and Salarino describe evokes the psychoanalytic process of displacement which causes “indifferent experiences to take the place of physically significant ones” or “the transference of affect on to objects, images and words.”\textsuperscript{90} If Antonio were engaged in subconscious displacement, it would be understandable for him not realize what is making him sad. Consequently, for Solanio and Salarino’s theory to be reasonable, we must consider it a psychoanalytic explanation.

As we have seen their second explanation, that of unrequited love, is equally psychoanalytic in that it suggests repressed sexual desire. Yet, as has been shown, throughout the play Antonio repeatedly restates his confidence in his business ventures. While such denials may be more subterfuge or self-delusion, the fact that the two most reasonable explanations--both in terms of logic and psychoanalytic theory--are dismissed so immediately suggests that there may not

\textsuperscript{89} Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.22-40.
\textsuperscript{90} Armstrong, 31.
be such a clear cut explanation for Antonio’s condition. In fact, Solanio comes to the ultimate conclusion, “Then let us say you are sad / because you are not merry,”\textsuperscript{91} By ending the discussion in this manner, Shakespeare suggests that perhaps Solanio and Salarino--and by extension psychoanalytic reasoning--do not have all the answers.

Still, critiques of his reading of Solanio and Salarino aside, Daniel is less interested in the initial cause of Antonio’s melancholy as he is with Antonio’s transformation from melancholic to masochist. Daniel writes “What began as a longing to have his suffering understood by his fellow citizens and comforters becomes a fantasy scenario in which those citizens are nearly forced to preside over his suffering and death in a gruesome spectacle.”\textsuperscript{92} Daniel cites Antonio’s remark to Bassanio, “All debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death”\textsuperscript{93} and his later declaration “Pray Bassanio come / to see me pay his debt, and then I care not,”\textsuperscript{94} as evidence of how Antonio’s need for others to pay attention to his emotional suffering has become a need for others to literally

\textsuperscript{91} Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.47-48.
\textsuperscript{92} Daniel, 233.
\textsuperscript{93} Shakespeare, “Merchant,” III.ii.318-319
\textsuperscript{94} Shakespeare, “Merchant,” III.iii.35-36.
see his physical suffering. However, I have already called into question Daniel’s assertion that Antonio is fishing for the attention of others.

Daniel elaborates on Antonio’s desire for displayed physical suffering.

“Obviously, the mere presence of pain and punishment as plot elements within a narrative does not in itself entail the operation of masochistic fantasy[…] what is required is that this punishment generate a surplus of enjoyment or pleasure.” He goes on to posit that the contract between Antonio and Shylock serves as the means by which Antonio “comes to articulate his desire for that punishment.”

Initially, the idea that Antonio takes pleasure in his own pain appears to fit with Holland’s notion that Antonio has internalized his unattainable love object as a tormenting conscience. The only way Antonio can take pleasure in his repressed love object is by allowing it to hurt him, and consequently, his love for Bassanio makes him submit himself to the contract which Daniel calls an “erotically charged exchange of power between men.”

However, Holland actually believes that Antonio’s submission to his unconscious accuser has the opposite effect. Antonio becomes suicidal and

95 Daniel, 216.
96 Daniel, 221.
97 Daniel, 221-222.
98 Daniel, 222.
“indifferent to his own fate.” Antonio does not submit himself to Shylock’s deadly intent because he enjoys being hurt, but rather, his emotional suffering makes him apathetic to physical suffering. The casual and reckless way in which Antonio agrees to Shylock’s dangerous bargain as well as his acceptance of his fate during the trial scene can be interpreted as supporting either side of this agreement, and it is difficult to find psychoanalytic evidence in favor one over the other.

What is most problematic about Daniel--at least for my purposes--is that he does not provide explanation of what is making Antonio sad at the start of the play. He seems to accept that Antonio is melancholic at the start of the play and then charts how that melancholia evolves into masochism without delving into the origins of that melancholia. Ultimately, we are left with only the repressed homosexuality diagnosis. Daniel understands Antonio’s remark that he is “a tainted wether of the flock, / meetest for death” as an expression of Antonio’s Freudian “female masochism”--his belief that he has been castrated and that the loss of the pound of flesh serves as a second and more literal castration. The association between disapproving views of homosexuality and feminization is

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101 Daniel, 226.
obvious. The less literal castration Antonio has experienced is the sense of impotence which comes with being unable to act on his sexual urges.

However, I have already made a case for the flaws in the repressed homosexual reading, and Lewis provides a counter argument by reading the line as simply more evidence of Antonio’s melancholy.\textsuperscript{102} Rather than being a statement about castration, Antonio’s remark could easily be understood as an expression of concern about being an old man who, having lost his fortune, fears to “outlive his wealth / to live with hollow eye and wrinkled brow / an age of poverty”\textsuperscript{103} and who suffers “discomfort with [his] surroundings”\textsuperscript{104} because so many of his younger companies have recently been married.

I cannot deny that psychoanalytic readings are intriguing or that they provide insight into the character of Antonio; however they possess certain significant flaws in their understanding of Elizabethan culture, their ability to supply much convincing textual evidence or account for the text’s possibly dismissive attitude towards logical psychoanalytic or at least psychoanalytic-like explanations, and even their belief that Antonio’s sadness has a particular and identifiable cause. Lewis writes of the initial conversation between Antonio, Solanio, and Salarino:

\textsuperscript{102} Lewis, 21.
\textsuperscript{103} Shakespeare, “Merchant,” IV.i.267-269.
\textsuperscript{104} Lewis, 23.
One of the most revealing aspects of this scene, in fact, is that no explanation for Antonio's melancholy exists. Nowhere in Act I—or, for that matter, the rest of the play—does Antonio come to terms with his "sadness"; nowhere does he admit a plausible cause for the vague, inscrutable feeling he initially describes as preventing him from knowing himself.¹⁰⁵

To account for this lack of explanation, we must turn to a form of psychiatry which accepts not only that emotional states seldom have objective, discernible explanations but also that such explanations may not even be necessary. The contemporary science of psychopharmacology can interpret Antonio’s words and actions in a way that is both in keeping with modern understandings of depression and compatible with textual evidence while at the same time embracing the concept of unattainable self-knowledge.

8. Antonio and Major Depression

What the Elizabethans called melancholy, modern doctors would likely call depression. While symptoms and experiences of depression are extremely varied, according to Harvard Medical School, current psychiatric theory outlines

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, 21.
two types: major depression and dysthymia. Major depression is exactly what it sounds like--“You feel constantly sad or burdened, or you lose interest in all activities, even those you previously enjoyed. This holds true nearly all day, on most days, and lasts at least two weeks.” Whereas the symptoms of major depression occur in intense but relatively short episodes, dysthymia is a low-level feeling of sadness which persists for several years. Gratiano’s statement that Antonio is “marvelously changed,” indicates that his melancholy is a new development and not something which has been going on for years. Even though Antonio’s depression continues for at least three months, that is still a short enough span that it is logical to associate his condition with major depression rather than dysthymia. For one’s experience to qualify as an episode of major depression, one must experience at least four of the following symptoms:

- a change in appetite that sometimes leads to weight loss or gain
- insomnia or (less often) oversleeping
- a slowdown in talking and performing tasks or, conversely, restlessness and an inability to sit still
- loss of energy or feeling tired much of the time

106 Harvard, 2-3.
107 Harvard, 2.
108 Harvard, 3.
109 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.76.
problems concentrating or making decisions

• feelings of worthlessness or excessive, inappropriate guilt

• thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide plans or attempts

and possibly “loss of sexual desire, pessimistic or hopeless feelings.”

The most significant of these symptoms and the one which many people commonly associate with depression is thoughts of suicide. While Antonio never vocalizes a desire to commit suicide, in nearly every one of his speeches during the trial scene he declares a willingness to submit to death at Shylock’s hands. Furthermore, current research indicates that “loss of social support, for example, because of a move or when a close friend relocates” can create higher risk of suicide in depressed patients. The relocation of a close friend is exactly the problem which Antonio faces when he declares his sadness at the start of the play. His passive-aggressive letter to Bassanio in which he states, “All debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death,” demonstrates the desire to “sort out their finances[...]or visit loved ones” typical of suicidal

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110 Harvard, 2.
112 Harvard, 14.
individuals. His letter does not, however, ask Bassanio save him. When Shylock comes to him with the Jailer Antonio makes just two brief attempts to appeal to the Jew. When they fail, he gives up entirely, never asking the jailer’s mercy or considering Solanio’s suggestion that the Duke might help him. Antonio concludes the scene by declaring regarding his imminent demise, “I care not!” the words of a man who does not wish to remain alive. By the time of the trial, he is so uninterested in living that--while even Gratiano who had previously mocked him pleads for his life--Antonio has not have one word to say in his defense. Therefore, it is reasonable to see his willingness to die as a passive desire for suicide.

Acknowledging this desire helps reconcile the disagreement between Holland and Daniel. As Holland argues, Antonio agrees to Shylock’s deal because he does not care enough about his life to protect it. That apathy towards life results in a converse emotion--the masochistic desire to die which Daniel explains. Because Antonio can take no pleasure in life (as was argued in the above discussion of humoralism), his only option is to desire pain, which in this case means death.

114 Harvard, 16.
Furthermore, accepting that Antonio is passively suicidal clarifies Portia’s remark to Shylock, “It appears by manifest proceeding / that indirectly, and directly too, / thou hast contrived against the very life / of the defendant.” 117 It is quite clear that Shylock has directly plotted Antonio’s death. He admits to hating Antonio and to a desire to kill things which he hates. 118 There is nothing else to his plot, so what could Portia mean by “indirectly?” Though she had not met Antonio prior to her arrival at court, Portia is clearly an intelligent woman, and she has already demonstrated through her assessment of her suitors in Act I Scene ii that she is an astute judge of character; therefore, her observations of Antonio’s words and behavior brought her to the same conclusions described above. Thus, she accuses Shylock of plotting against Antonio’s life indirectly by exploiting his depression and suicidal desires.

Antonio also exhibits several of the less extreme symptoms of major depression. As mentioned in the discussion of Antonio’s humoral symptoms, Antonio demonstrates a lack of energy or feelings of fatigue when he acknowledges being wearied by his melancholy. He admits to weight loss, “These griefs and losses have so bated me that I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh /
tomorrow to my bloody creditor,”¹¹⁹ which is another symptom which major depression and humoral melancholy share. We cannot know how talkative Antonio was prior to the onset of his depression, but we cannot help but be struck by how little he appears in the play and by extension how little he speaks. The Venetian court seemingly has no rules about who may speak when, but even during a trial of which he is the subject, Antonio has little to say. His response to Portia, “I am dumb,”¹²⁰ while a reasonable reaction to the shocking news that his ships have returned safely, still explicitly associates him with speechlessness and thereby draws attention to other points in the story when his taciturn nature is less understandable.¹²¹ Antonio’s above-quoted fear of outliving his wealth and his likening himself to a wether meetest for death¹²² suggest feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness.

Of course, when Antonio mentions his weight loss and throughout the trial scene, he is in peril of his life. Such legitimate stress could easily explain his

¹¹⁹ Shakespeare, “Merchant,” III.iii.32-34.
¹²⁰ Shakespeare, “Merchant,” IV.i.279.
¹²¹ In contrast, consider the responses of other characters to equally shocking news. Upon discovering the loss of his daughter, Shylock cannot help but ramble uncontrollably (II.viii.12-22). When he learns that his friend is in danger, Bassanio has no discernible trouble participating in the ensuing discussion (III.ii.292-326), nor are he and Gratiano at a loss for words when they learn that their wives have repeatedly deceived them (V.i.257-307).
¹²² This statement may also suggest the lack of sexual desire associated with major depression.
weight loss, quietness, and lack of hope. However, if we examine the way depression is believed to affect the brain, we will find that simply because certain symptoms have rational causes or catalysts does not preclude them from being indicators of major depression.

9. The Psychopharmacological Understanding of Depression

Harvard Medical School explains the biological and neurological circumstances which allow for the onset of or exacerbation of depression:

Research suggests that depression doesn’t spring from simply having too much or too little of certain brain chemicals. Rather, depression has many possible causes, including faulty mood regulation by the brain, genetic vulnerability, stressful life events, medications, and medical problems. It’s believed that several of these forces interact to bring on depression. To be sure, chemicals are involved in this process, but it is not a simple matter of one chemical being too low and another too high. Rather, many chemicals are involved, working both inside and outside nerve cells. There are millions, even billions, of chemical reactions that make up the dynamic system that is responsible for your mood, perceptions, and how you experience life.123

123 Harvard, 5 (emphasis added).
To elaborate: Medical professionals believe that mood disorders such as depression are linked to “nerve cell connections, nerve cell growth, and the functioning of nerve circuits”\(^\text{124}\) The most significant of these nerve cells are located in or connected to the amygdala, thalamus and hippocampus, the three areas of the brain most responsible for regulating mood.\(^\text{125}\) Yet there are many internal elements and processes within the body which--either independently or in combination--drastically affect nerve cells.

Neurotransmitters are chemicals that transmit messages between neurons.\(^\text{126}\) Patrick Holford, a British nutritionist and co-founder of the Food for the Brain Foundation--a nonprofit organization which promotes mental health through proper nutrition--adds in his essay “Depression: the Nutrition Connection” that neurotransmitters include “serotonin, thought to primarily influence mood; dopamine, noradrenaline, and adrenaline, thought to primarily influence motivation.”\(^\text{127}\) If a body is over or under sensitive to these chemicals, produces insufficient quantities of them, or absorbs them so too quickly,
depression results. The causes of these several disruptions in the neurotransmitter system are also many and varied. Genetics can determine production and absorption of these chemicals, as can hormonal imbalances and nutritional deficiencies. External factors also affect body chemistry. These include stress and preconditioned responses to “loss, disappointment, or rejection” developed through life experience.

Holford adds that stress “rapidly reduces serotonin levels.” Psychopharmacology does not deny causation of emotional disturbances; it simply does not need to know them. It recognizes that while some conditions may be tied to identifiable stressors, others, like Antonio’s initial sadness, may never have identifiable catalysts. Psychopharmacology instead focuses on the scientifically measurable effect that those causes have on the body. Consequently, whether or not Antonio’s weight loss, unwillingness to speak, and hopelessness are the results of understandable stressors does not mean that they are not also symptoms of major depression. Antonio is already suffering from an inscrutable sadness which psychopharmacology would attribute— as it would attribute any

128 Harvard, 7.
129 Harvard, 8, 10.
130 Holford, 9, 10-11.
131 Harvard, 9, 10.
132 Holford, 12.
emotional change—to an alteration in brain chemistry. The fact that a justifiable fear for his life causes him to display new symptoms indicates only a further disruption of that neurological system.

10. The Mysterious Nature of Emotion

The important conclusion to draw from this discussion of contemporary psychiatry is that the internal systems which create mood imbalances such as depression are so intricate, so varied, and so sensitive to so many bodily changes that modern doctors still do not entirely understand them. Sometimes we will be able to speculate as to what caused a particular fluctuation in brain chemistry, but more often than not, the complexity of human emotional states makes complete understanding impossible. Psychopharmacology shows that people are subject to irrational uncontrollable forces within themselves. Their actions and emotions are decided for them by the substances within their bodies rather than their reason. Similarly, psychoanalysis posits that people suffer from “the enslavement of human agency to forces which remain obscure and illegible—in short, to the unconscious.” The difference is that psychoanalysis seeks to comprehend these forces. It contends that mood disorders develop from identifiable repressed desires resultant from specific life events. Only once those origins of emotion are understood can treatment be effective.

133 Holford, 5.
134 Armstrong, 27.
brought to light can mental disorders be treated. Psychopharmacology does deny
the possibility that subconscious desires can cause mental disorders; rather, it
denies that one can ever be certain that motivation, feeling, choice, desire, etc.
stem from the subconscious and not from genetics, medical or physiological
changes, external circumstances, or any other explanation doctors have yet to
consider. Psychoanalysis seeks to tell us why do we feel. Psychopharmacology
cares about how do we feel.

It is this understanding of the human mind as inexplicable that
Shakespeare conveys through Antonio’s never-explained sadness (though he
could not have comprehended the science behind it). It is this understanding
which justifies the emphasis which Shakespeare places on Antonio’s seemingly
peripheral melancholy. Lewis writes regarding the opening discussion of
Antonio’s mood, “In essence, that scene is filled with references to the unknown,
to what is ‘strange,’ or foreign. Shakespeare fittingly uses Antonio to sound this
note first--’fittingly’ because throughout the play Antonio consistently summons
the motif of alienation.”135 That alienation is not alienation from society as Lewis
understands it136 but an alienation from one’s own body, from the process of

136 Although that attitude is certainly a significant facet of Antonio's character, as
already shown, his loss of connection with life and the world as is a symptom of his
depression, and the depression itself is more thematically important.
feeling. It is that strangeness, that unknowable quality of human experience, which permeates the entire play.

It is fitting that the only one of Solanio and Salarino’s explanations which Antonio does not reject is “Then let us say you are sad because you are not merry; and ‘twere as easy / for you to laugh and leap, and say you are merry / because you are not sad.” While Solanio and Salarino are not satisfied with this explanation--they are essentially giving up on their attempts to understand Antonio--we as critics will notice that neither Antonio nor anyone else disputes it. If we are to conduct our psychological assessment of Antonio thoroughly, we must consider all possible reasons for his sadness, including the possibility that there is no reason. In fact, if we consider that “you are sad because you are not merry” to be a viable clue to the actual cause of Antonio’s depression, we see that Antonio’s assessment that he has been cast in a sad role works as an attempt to avoid Gratiano’s inquiries because it implies an agreement with Solanio’s conclusion that finding answers is impossible. Both descriptions mean in essence that Antonio is sad simply because he is sad. His mood is enforced by unfathomable external (or internal as psychopharmacology would have it) forces beyond his control, and therefore, Gratiano should forgo attempting to explain it.

138 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.77-79.
Consequently, as was the case with the humoral reading, Gratiano’s speech positions his view diametrically opposite Antonio’s. He begins, “Let me play the fool!”139 demonstrating his belief that he can choose his disposition. His use of the words “willful” and “with purpose”140 further supports that he believes one has the ability to control one’s moods and actions. However, Lewis writes, “Shakespeare indirectly channels our attention toward[…]the epistemological problem of choice in an ambiguous, transient, ‘strange’ world[…]At every turn, we are faced with the distressing, essentially tragic fact that man must judge in blindness and, by judging, must limit the possibilities for his happiness.”141 Her emphasis on the limits of knowledge alludes to that lack of understanding, of certainty, which Antonio, Solanio, and Salarino are admitting. Shakespeare is warning us that all people “judge in blindness” because the ambiguities and strangeness of the world--that is, the unseen natural, external, and internal forces constantly at work upon us--determine those judgments. Gratiano cannot choose his temperament no more than Antonio can because, though we seldom realize it, freedom of choice is never truly free. After being established in the opening of Act I Scene i, this problem drives all of what follows.

139 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.79.
140 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” I.i.90, 91.
141 Lewis, 27.
Once we accept the psychopharmacologic reading of Antonio’s depression, the equally inexplicable nature of the other characters’ feelings comes to light. Antonio’s suicidal depression causes him to apathetically agree to Shylock’s bargain, but Shylock’s side of the deal is equally motivated by the uncontrollable, irrational functioning of brain chemistry which affects mood. Shylock presents clearly rational reasons for hating Antonio: mainly Antonio’s anti-semitism and his interference with Shylock’s livelihood. After voicing these complaints to Antonio, Shylock suggests that their mutual enmity would be reasonable cause for him to refuse the loan. He says, “Should I not say, / ‘Hath a dog money? Is it possible / a cur can lend three thousand ducats?’” The implication here is that refusing to do business with someone who has made it known that he despises Shylock’s business would be a rational response, as would demanding an exorbitant interest rate or insisting that Antonio forfeit his entire fortune. What is not rational is demanding a pound of Antonio’s flesh, and Shylock admits as much every time he is asked. He tells Solanio and Salarino that he wants the flesh “To bait fish withal,” giving an absurd and arbitrary reason to show that there is no reason behind his desire.

144 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” III.i.49.
However, Shylock follows this statement with entirely reasonable argument for why he should take revenge. His series of similarities between Jews and Christians serves as a rational, almost legalistic, justification for revenge and appear to be strong support for the human capacity for logical thinking. In actuality, the purpose of Shylock’s speech is to emphasize the arbitrary nature of his and Antonio’s mutual hatred. After recounting the injuries Antonio has inflicted on him, Shylock states, “And what’s his reason? I am a Jew.” By then enumerating the ways in which Christians and Jews are in fact no different, he highlights that Antonio’s loathing (like his sadness) is at its core baseless and unreasonable. He then determines that if Christians can hate Jews without cause then Jews, being as human as Christians, should return that unfounded hatred. It is an ironically rational argument which proves the irrationality of emotion.

During the trial, Shylock elaborates on the incomprehensible causes of human feeling and action:

You’ll ask me why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats. I’ll not answer that,
But say it is my humor. Is it answered? [...]
Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
Some that are mad if they behold a cat,
And others, what the bagpipe sings i’ th’ nose,
Cannot contain their urine; for affection,
Master of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes. Now for your answer:
As there is no firm reason to be rendered
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig,
Why he a harmless necessary cat,
Why he a wooden bagpipe, but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend, himself being offended;
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio

Holland understands this speech in a typically psychoanalytic way. He writes that Shylock refuses to justify his reasons by “dismissing his action childish and irrational” and comparing “his sadism to the childish impulses or behavior of

others.” However, none of these behaviors seem particularly typical of children. In fact, the examples are ludicrous because the specifics do not matter. While Shylock’s concluding statement that he will provide no explanation other than a “lodged hate and a certain loathing” for Antonio appears to be a legitimate reason to want him dead, the earlier portion of his speech blatantly contradicts such a view. Not only does he explicitly compare his desire to impulses for which “there is no firm reason to be rendered,” he also states that “affection” (glossed in my edition as “feeling, impulse”) controls passion based on “what it likes or loathes.” Shylock’s use of the same word “loathing” demonstrates that his feelings towards Antonio are in fact just as impulsive and irrational as any other emotion. Shylock is acknowledging that his will is entirely beyond his ability to explain, like the uncontrollable urges that all people of all ages possess. Consequently, Bassanio’s response, “This is no answer, thou unfeeling man,” is delightfully ironic. Shylock has not provided an answer, but it is because he is feeling just as much and in just the same way as everyone else.

While the resolution of the Shylock plot, occurring as it does through Portia’s quibbling on the words of the bond, would appear to represent the triumph of reason over emotion, it is clear that even when Portia turns Shylock’s

149 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” IV.i.50n.
150 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” IV.i.63.
own adherence to the letter of the law against him she is demonstrating the arbitrary quality of human judgment. Daniel observes, “Law is simultaneously foundational (it provides the rules by which Venetian society is to be ordered) and foundationless (it cannot itself be justified; it is the law)[...][It is] ‘empty’ (it rests upon nothing but its own self-identity, its status as itself-as-law, and cannot be propped up by anything outside).”¹⁵¹ The law was in fact created by an “absent yet all-powerful authority” which grants it an “arbitrary sovereignty.”¹⁵² Though seemingly rational and logically structured, the execution of law is (literally) determined by human judgment, and that judgment is subjective. The Duke can find no legal way to absolve Antonio of his bond, but Portia can. Each person reads the law according to his or her own thought process, processes which are mysterious and complex. Thus, while Portia’s ruling is apparently rational, her decisions, like anyone’s, are never entirely her own. To borrow from Lewis, justice is blind because humans judge in blindness.

The same message about judgment and feeling being subject to irrational forces appears in even the smallest pieces of the story. When eloping with Lorenzo, Jessica declares, “But love is blind,”¹⁵³ thereby coining the phrase which in modern parlance has become synonymous with the concept that emotion is

¹⁵¹ Daniel, 230.
¹⁵² Daniel, 232.
¹⁵³ Shakespeare, “Merchant,” II.vi.36.
inexplicable. Later, she states, “I am never merry when I hear sweet music,” again demonstrating the disparity between human feeling and logical causes. Lorenzo responds by discussing animals’ instinctive response to stimuli and the behavior of “The man that hath no music in himself,” once again hinting at how the internal workings of the body influence mood and action.

12. The Love Plot and the Failure of Rational Choice

Once we have realized Antonio’s sadness encapsulates the psychiatric theme present throughout the rest of the play, it becomes clear that, while seemingly separated from Antonio, the love plot is in reality more evidence of Shakespeare’s central conceit. Upon her first appearance, Portia expresses a disconnect between her feeling and her circumstances. Her first words are, “By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world,” to which Nerissa responds, “You would be, sweet madam, if you miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are.” Like Antonio, in terms of wealth and social standing Portia has every reason to be happy, yet she is not. Unlike Antonio, she realizes that her emotions are controlled by something within her other than reason. She observes, “The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er cold decree; such a hare is madness the youth to skip o’er

the meshes of good counsel the cripple.”

Holland posits that Venice and Belmont represent two different worlds, each expressing different and contrasting psychoanalytic concepts. Though differences between the places certainly exist, Portia’s words introduce her realm as one in which people must obey the same indecipherable system of psychological cause and effect as Venice. Portia may recognize that her mood is not controlled by thinking or logical responses to outside circumstances, but the reasons behind her unexpected feelings are as difficult to catch hold of as a hare.

It is of course no coincidence that this metaphor appears directly before the description of Portia’s father’s enforced casket test. Portia’s next lines are, “But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O me, the word ‘choose’! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike.” Portia’s emphasis on lack of choice echoes Lewis’s remarks on the limitations placed on free choice by lack of understanding. Indeed, Portia is deprived of her freedom to judge for reasons never explained. Nerissa responds to her mistress’s complaints, “Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspiration.” She is acknowledging that they cannot understand the reasoning

157 Holland, Psychoanalysis, 235-236.
behind the casket test. It is simply the result of a man’s mysterious “inspiration.”

There is no discernible cause for his decision, and that lack of cause strips Portia of her agency. It makes her life controlled by unknown forces, just as her mood is.

The execution of the casket test is itself a demonstration of limitations of rational choice. Morocco and Aragon choose their casks based on detailed rationale rather than passion.\textsuperscript{160} Their reasoning fails because of their inherent lack of knowledge--they literally do not know what is in the caskets. Morocco chooses “what many men desire.”\textsuperscript{161} His decision making process, though logical, is based entirely on the external qualities of the caskets,\textsuperscript{162} but what men desire can not be determined from the outside. The true nature of what we desire is internal, invisible to even the most well-reasoned scrutiny. Aragon at least in part understands this fact. He refuses the gold casket because he suspects it is intended to trick “the fool multitude that choose by show, / not learning more than the fond eye doth teach, / which pries not to th’ interior.”\textsuperscript{163} His ultimate decision, though, is still based on an overconfidence in his understanding of human nature. He chooses silver because he thinks he deserves Portia. His discussion of how he believes that the circumstances of many individuals would be changed if all

\textsuperscript{160} Shakespeare, “Merchant,” II.vii.13-60, II.ix.18-51.
\textsuperscript{161} Shakespeare, “Merchant,” II.vii.37.
\textsuperscript{162} Shakespeare, “Merchant,” II.vii.49-55.
\textsuperscript{163} Shakespeare, “Merchant,” II.ix.25-27.
people were treated as they deserve\textsuperscript{164} implies a certainty that he has, or at least can, peer into the interior character of people and know them. The message he finds inside the casket informs him of his foolishness, “Some there be that shadows kiss; / but such have but a shadow’s bliss. / There be fools alive iwis, / silvered o’er, and so was this.”\textsuperscript{165} One who attempts to grab elusive, shadowy things will ultimately fail. The nature of people is silvered over on the outside, and no attempts to see through that can succeed.

Of course, Bassanio’s thought process during the casket test is as clearly outlined as that of the other suitors; however, he never logically analyzes the written clues, and the entirety of his reasoning is based on acknowledging the difference between the internal and the external.\textsuperscript{166} The other suitors were seeking “a certainty life does not have[…]There is, in short no certainty in human affairs, because things are seldom what they seem.”\textsuperscript{167} One can make informed decisions only if one realizes that there is more taking place internally, especially in human beings, than can be observed and understood from the outside. It is important to note that before Bassanio makes his choice Portia calls for a song which begins, “Tell me where is fancy bred, / or in the heart or in the head? / How begot, how

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\item 164 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” II.ix.25-27.
\item 165 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” II.ix.65-68.
\item 166 Shakespeare, “Merchant,” III.ii.73-107.
\item 167 Holland, \textit{Imagination}, 104.
\end{itemize}
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nourished?" Shakespeare restates the central thematic question of the play before Bassanio chooses to remind the audience that it is not Bassanio’s logic which brings him to a correct judgment but instead it his ability to recognize that the mechanisms of judgment are seldom visible.

13. The Play as a Whole

Daniel concludes his assessment of Antonio by saying, “Antonio's showy declaration of his sadness and his frightening embrace of his own domination mirror the broader forms of subjection that drive the subjects of Belmont and Venice throughout the play.” Lewis writes, “Choice involves more in The Merchant than simply wresting control of one's life from someone else,” and that “Antonio teaches us that choices made for us, as they finally are for him, limit us as surely as our own ignorance of how to choose.” Viewing The Merchant of Venice in light of modern psychiatric understandings of how chemical, genetic, hormonal, and other complex operations within the body determine mood, emotion, motivation, and desire not only explains the initial emphasis which Shakespeare places on Antonio’s melancholy in a way that is both narratively and thematically significant, but it can also combine the readings of these two critics.

169 Daniel, 233.
170 Lewis, 28, 30.
Daniel is correct that Antonio’s sadness shines a spotlight on the subjection which determines the entirety of the play, but the characters are not subject to the violent desires of others, the rule of law, or divisions of class and religion. They are all subject to the internal processes of their brains. Lewis is correct that choice is more than taking control of one’s life from someone else. True choice requires taking control of one’s life from oneself. Choices are made for people and those choices limit them, but the choices are made by cells, by proteins and neurotransmitters.

While both humoralism and psychoanalysis account for some form of natural forces--be they physiological, circumstantial, or subconscious--which exert control over human minds, both disciplines believe they can understand those forces. They see the roots causes of human feeling as identifiable, knowable. Psychopharmacology, however, admits to the limitations of its own knowledge. An emotional problem may be caused by some deficiency in diet or the long-lasting effects of some repressed childhood desire, but all we can see for certain is the effects that those things have on our moods, our bodies, and our actions. That is the message of the Merchant of Venice, and the purpose of Antonio’s never-explained depression. Antonio does not know why he is so sad because no one--not Shylock, not Bassanio, not even wise Portia--can truly know what compels them to feel as they do. This concept will be further developed in
Shakespeare's most famous play.
Hamlet and Bipolar Disorder

1. The Varying Nature of Humoral Melancholy

No Shakespearean character’s mental state has been discussed more thoroughly than has Hamlet’s. Consequently, any effort to apply modern psychiatry to characters in Shakespeare must address the character so often associated with mood disorders that he has been nicknamed “The Melancholy Dane.” In order to do so properly, we must first examine how Hamlet has been previously understood.

At first glance, Hamlet is clearly of a melancholy humor. His statement to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “I have of late--but wherefore I know not--lost all my mirth,”171 seems to echo Antonio’s declaration of inexplicable sadness made to his own concerned friends. However, Antonio remains aloof. The nature of his depression must be inferred from his actions and the remarks of others, and it makes him a flat, apathetic, and unchanging character. In contrast, Hamlet continually exposes his (frequently intense) emotions to the audience. Though some of those emotions result in a suicidal depression, Hamlet’s wish to end his life is active and repeatedly verbalized; whereas Antonio seeks death through inaction. Hamlet also displays a variety of other feelings including rage, elation, lust, and of course the “antic disposition.” With Antonio, the mystery is why he is

171  Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.ii.265-266.
so sad, but no such mystery exists with Hamlet. Shakespeare provides numerous explanations for Hamlet’s unhappiness, the murder of his father alone being reasonable enough cause for sadness. Rather, the question regards how those reasons have affected him. What has happened in his mind that can explain not only his depression, but also his rage, his violence, and his apparent loss of sanity? Hamlet’s melancholy is far more complex and nuanced than Antonio's, and therefore, in order to begin to understand it, we must come to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the Elizabethan conception of the melancholy humor.

As we have already seen, the simplest humoral explanation for melancholy is an excess of black bile, but the results of this imbalance are often substantially more varied than the basic withdrawn depression exhibited by Antonio. Draper explains that the melancholy humor in fact “ran into extremes[...]and, in its alternate moodiness and violence, suggests the manic-depressive type in modern psychiatry.” Draper, 14. This idea that the melancholic humor was not merely a pervading, unshakeable sadness (as the common misconception may be), but rather a fluctuation of negative emotions seems to match the “incongruities” and “strange fluctuations” of Hamlet’s emotional state quite well.

When he first appears, Hamlet presents as a typically sullen and withdrawn

172 Draper, 14.
depressive. In his essay “Hamlet’s Therapy,” UCLA English professor Paul A. Jorgensen examines Hamlet’s symptoms over the course of the play in order to determine if the Prince ever regains his mental health. Jorgensen writes regarding Hamlet's first appearance, “He is almost catatonic in his melancholia[...] He speaks almost not at all to other people.” 174 Indeed, most of his remarks in his first conversation with Gertrude and Claudius are curt, one-line responses, 175 hardly what we would expect from the loquacious Prince of the later scenes. As soon as he is alone, he launches into an overt contemplation of suicide, 176 and from there on displays a gamut of other emotions including rage at himself 177 and others, 178 unrestrained violence, 179 and several more suicidal ideations. 180 Later in his book, Draper elaborates on the emotional inconsistency of the melancholy humor, “Such men were thought to oscillate[...] between a state of choleric violence that might run into madness, and a state of depressed, though by no means phlegmatic, quiet.” 181

175 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.ii.65, 67, 74, 120.
177 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.ii.488-544 among others.
178 At Ophelia, III.i.92-149; at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, III.ii.357-365; at Gertrude, III.iv.10-196.
179 When slaying Polonius, III.iv.24, and twice when fighting Laertes, V.i.248-252 and V.ii.285.
180 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.i.56-87 famously, but there are several others.
181 Draper, 62.
This new information troubles the application of humoral melancholy to the character. Hamlet is certainly depressed, choleric, violent, and possibly mad (as will be discussed below), but after his first appearance, he is seldom quiet. Unlike Antonio whose melancholy manifests in a marked silence, Hamlet is prone to speechifying and long philosophical debates.

A second problem with Draper’s understanding of the variability of melancholy is that it accounts for negative emotions only. Hamlet is capable of feeling more than just suicidal and homicidal. He exhibits and engaged curiosity when being informed of the ghost (“For God’s love let me hear!”182) and encountering it (“Haste me to know’”183). He seems to take genuine enjoyment from ribbing Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Osric as well as from the Player’s speeches. He experiences what Paster calls “bold jubilation” at the success of his Mousetrap plan.184 Hamlet’s mood switches drastically, constantly (even in the space of a few lines), and at one point or another hits on nearly every emotion possible. Clearly Draper’s understanding of the melancholy humor is far too limited. Overholser provides a more inclusive conception of the melancholic variation. Like Draper, he likens the melancholy humor to Manic Depressive

184 Paster, Humoring the Body, 54.
Illness, but remarks that those of the melancholic humor experience “alternating elation and depression.”\(^{185}\) This allows the melancholic a wider spectrum of emotion which includes the positive feelings we would not typically associate with the chronically depressed, and therefore, Overholser’s explanation of how the Elizabethans view melancholy is more fitting for Hamlet.

Other smaller details suggest that Shakespeare meant Hamlet to be viewed as a traditional humoral melancholic. The melancholy humor was associated with the color black and the element earth.\(^{186}\) In his first scene, Hamlet’s “nighted color,” “inky cloak,” and “suits of solemn black”\(^{187}\) are a major topic of discussion. One may also see a reference to the earth in the Prince’s first soliloquy if one accepts “too too solid flesh”\(^{188}\) as the line reading. Melancholy individuals are easily susceptible to demonic influence,\(^{189}\) and Hamlet himself applies this belief to his situation when he insists on confirming that the ghost is not a devil who seeks to exploit his “weakness and [his] melancholy.”\(^{190}\) Polonius supports the belief that the melancholy humor makes one “very lecherous”\(^{191}\) when

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185 Overholser, 343.
186 Draper, 64.
188 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.ii.129.
189 Overholser, 343.
191 Draper, 71.
warning Ophelia not to be romantically involved with Hamlet.\textsuperscript{192} The Elizabethans saw melancholics as “frustrated, ‘desirous of revenge’; they were apt at intrigue, and if given the power, were capable of managing the State.”\textsuperscript{193} That Hamlet is “desirous of revenge” needs no explanation. He demonstrates an aptness of intrigue in the performance of his “antic disposition,” the concoction of the play within a play device, and the disposal of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Fortinbras remarks on Hamlet’s squandered leadership potential.\textsuperscript{194} The issue of Hamlet’s frustration, however, is worthy of a more in-depth examination.

2. \textit{Frustrated Desires}

Draper contends, “as the Elizabethans understood it, [melancholy] was not a cause for frustrated action and delay, but rather a result of these conditions.”\textsuperscript{195} He goes so far as to claim that Hamlet’s natural humor “is sanguine [the most positive and optimistic of the humors]; but the sudden death of his father and the dashing of his own immediate hopes for the crown by the marriage of his mother to Claudius, have made him bitter and melancholy at the beginning of the play.”\textsuperscript{196} It is reasonable the the death of Old Hamlet accounts for Hamlet’s initial melancholy, but

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{192} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.iii.114-119.
\item \textsuperscript{193} Draper, 66.
\item \textsuperscript{194} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” V.ii.380-381.
\item \textsuperscript{195} Draper, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{196} Draper, 67.
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Claudius and Gertrude seem to think that his feelings are in excess of the natural sadness one experiences at the death of a father and that “to persever in obstinate condolement is a course of impious stubbornness.”

Perhaps frustrated ambition has exacerbated Hamlet’s grief and has changed him from a sanguine man to a melancholic. Hamlet first mentions his frustrated political aims when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pressure him for the cause of his melancholy and he replies, “Sir, I lack advancement.” However, when we consider the context, the authenticity of this explanation is doubtful. Firstly, Hamlet is mad or at least pretending to be during this conversation as indicated by his willful misunderstandings and his claim, “My wit’s diseased.” We cannot be certain that anything he says during his supposedly put-on madness is genuine. Second, Hamlet is already aware that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spies for the King. A few lines later he mocks their ability to get any accurate information out of him, “You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery[…] and there is much music in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak.” These remarks would make little sense if Hamlet had already revealed to them the cause of his distemper. On

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the other hand, Hamlet later includes “Popped in between th’ election and my hopes” when listing the King’s crimes for Horatio.\(^{201}\) There is no reason to believe that Hamlet would be dishonest with Horatio; however, it is curious that the Prince never mentions this subject when expressing his unhappiness and describing his motivations for revenge in private or when disparaging the King in Gertrude’s closet. At all other points, Hamlet’s concerns are death and sex but not politics, and consequently, we must wonder whether frustrated ambition is actually a contributing factor to his melancholy.

There are other, more substantial frustrations which may result in Hamlet’s melancholy humor. Draper adds “frustrated love” to the list of Hamlet’s troubles.\(^{202}\) Some may question how much Hamlet actually loves Ophelia given how quickly and violently he turns on her. He claims, “I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / could not with all their quantity of love / make up my sum,”\(^{203}\) but this statement may be hyperbole for the sole purpose of showing up Laertes, more performed madness, or merely another example of Hamlet’s inconstant mood. Earlier, Ophelia describes an incident in which Hamlet approaches her. He acts insane and caresses her face.\(^{204}\) At this point, Ophelia has already refused his

\(^{201}\) Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” V.ii.64.

\(^{202}\) Draper, 68.

\(^{203}\) Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” Vi.257-259.

\(^{204}\) Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.i.76-99.
letters and refused to see him. Scott understands his actions as “real and not assumed distraction” and acknowledges “the effect it would have on Hamlet when Ophelia, who has already denied him access at her father’s bidding, produces no word of comfort for him in his pitiable condition.” Thus, he sees frustrated love and a significant component of Hamlet’s melancholy.

Hamlet’s later aggressive interactions with Ophelia seem to compound this understanding given that the majority of his indictment of her pertains to her unfaithfulness. He opens the his attack on her with the question, “Are you honest,” and proceeds to rail against her inconstancy. He goes so far as to put a curse on Ophelia’s future coupling with another man, an action one would expect from an enraged jilted lover. Finally, he admits that female duplicity “hath made me mad.” While Hamlet may be merely using Ophelia as a scapegoat for his anger at his mother--attributing to all women the unfaithfulness he sees in Gertrude--he is likely at the same time genuinely denouncing Ophelia for reciprocating and then abruptly and inexplicably denying his love.

It is worth noting that, as with frustrated political ambition, in private,

206 Scott, 79.
207 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.i.103.
209 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.i.146-147.
Hamlet never mentions frustrated love as being a problem for him. He does not mention it to Horatio. He does not speak ill of Ophelia other than to her face and does not speak about her at all other than to her family. These do not seem like the actions of a man who has been driven deep into melancholy by his lover’s rejection of him. Rather, they are the actions of someone putting on a performance of lovelorn melancholy for the benefit of others. If Hamlet is enacting madness in order to distract others from his true intentions and the reason for his melancholy, then he would obviously want to lead them off track by modeling the symptoms of the most obvious humoral causes of melancholy. He anticipates that Polonius will conclude, “The origin and commencement of his grief / sprung from neglected love,” because that is the most logical humoral explanation.

Yet, as with Antonio, Shakespeare seems to purposefully deny logical diagnoses. By putting the frustrated love explanation in the mouth of Polonius, a character whom he has already set up to be over-confident in his own wisdom, the author points out how foolish such a simplistic understanding is. Polonius’s judgment is further discredited given that he concluded earlier that “true madness” is “but to be nothing else but mad,” an idea which Polonius himself

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210 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.i.177-178.
211 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.ii.93-94.
immediately contradicts by seeking “the cause of this defect.” If there is a specific cause that can be found, then clearly there is something more complicated at work in madness, and thus Shakespeare shows his audience that, put simply, Polonius has no idea what he is talking about. Furthermore, Claudius immediately sees through Hamlet’s jilted lover routine. He says:

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 his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger.

Unlike Polonius who is more concerned with matching Hamlet’s behavior to his own judgment than with matching judgment to the evidence, Claudius is a “shrewd psychologist” who would is not deceived by Hamlet’s tricks. He is well aware that there is a far more serious frustration behind Hamlet’s melancholy humor than just unrequited love.

212 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.ii.102.
214 Scott, 91.
Draper speaks of the third and most obvious frustration that troubles Hamlet. The Prince “heard the message of the Ghost; and a new frustrated passion troubled him: the obligation for revenge” which was thwarted by his uncertainty as to whether or not the ghost was honest or a demon.215 His inability to fulfill the ghost commandment for revenge is the frustrated desire which Hamlet discusses in most depth. In his first soliloquy after encountering the ghost, Hamlet berates himself for being unable to achieve his end as effectively as he imagines the Player would, and calls himself “unpregnant in my cause.”216 However, if his doubt as to the truthfulness of the ghost is what frustrates Hamlet’s desire for revenge, why then, after he has proven the veracity of the ghost’s story, does his desire remain frustrated? Though he makes one impulsive attempt and kills Polonius instead of the King, shortly thereafter, he has returned to lamenting his own inaction. After seeing Fortinbras’s army prepare for battle, Hamlet asks, “How stand I then, that have a father killed, a mother stained, excitements of my reason and my blood, and let all sleep…?”217 He continues to delay in his mission until imminent death forces his hand. Paster explains that “Hamlet berates himself here as one whose cognitive faculties are literally darkened (muddied) and slowed by the working of the melancholy humors bred of grief, lethargy, disappointment, 

215 Draper, 67.
216 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.ii.507.
misogyny, and thwarted ambition."²¹⁸ Hamlet’s thwarted desires caused his melancholy humor. His melancholy humor, in turn, caused muddied thoughts and a blunted will to action. Consequently, even when the cause of the frustration is removed, the melancholy lethargy it created remains.

On the other hand, Paster later contradicts this notion that Hamlet’s melancholy remains unshakeable. She writes regarding Hamlet’s excited desire to “drink hot blood”²¹⁹ after the success of the play within a play, “We ought, I think, to interpret this new appetite as a sign of release from melancholic depression, the burgeoning of a desire to be ready physiologically and psychologically[…] for sudden physical action.”²²⁰ Should we accept this view that Hamlet is no longer melancholic after confirming the authenticity of the ghost, it is difficult to say how humoralism can account for his ongoing dissatisfaction with his equally ongoing hesitation.

Finally, we must examine the specific manner in which these frustrations affect Hamlet’s humor, exactly how they change his withdrawn depression into the near complete madness he seems to exhibit. Earlier, I accepted the reading that Hamlet’s insanity is genuinely a deception as the character would have us believe.

²¹⁸ Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 47.
²²⁰ Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 58.
Elizabethan humoralists understood that in certain cases melancholy became “unnatural” as a result of “adustion, or burning out of the vitality.” It is clear from Hamlet’s lack of motivation and lack of interest in the world that his vitality is “burnt out.” This condition caused fits of rage, corruption of reason, and “fear and sadness without any apparent occasion,” all of which we see in Hamlet’s character.

Yet, unnatural melancholy is thought to bring with it auditory and ocular hallucinations or thinking that one is “God or that he is about the be damned.” While Hamlet is concerned that the ghost is trying to damn him, he has no delusions or hallucinations. Though only Hamlet can speak to the ghost, Scott points out that the ghost is clearly visible to Horatio and Marcellus, and that, though only Hamlet can see the ghost when it appears in Gertrude’s closet, “It is a dramatic convention that a character may be heard clearly by the audience and by only one other person on the stage.” Ophelia’s madness which does feature hallucinations and delusions among its symptoms stands in contrast to Hamlet’s condition. By providing this counterexample, Shakespeare draws attention to the

221 Draper, 65.
222 Draper, 65.
223 Overholser, 343-344.
224 Overholser, 344.
225 Scott, 94.
226 Scott, 77.
fact that Hamlet’s illness is quite different than the typical humoral madness. Furthermore, Draper notes that irregular pulse was another symptom of this sort of madness, and Hamlet’s demonstration to Gertrude of his steady pulse “would have been sound proof (if proof were needed) to the Elizabethan audience that Hamlet was not insane.”227

There are still more details which trouble humoral understanding of Hamlet’s melancholy. Most notably, if unnatural melancholy was a known condition, why do Claudius and Gertrude not consider it? They continuously seek the reason behind Hamlet’s behavior rather than accepting the obvious explanation of humoral adustion. Jorgensen further undermines a humoral diagnosis, “If Hamlet's disease had been humoral, then bloodletting, baths, and a very complicated diet would have been indicated. Significantly, none of those trying to cure Hamlet once suggest such procedures.”228 While humoralism is a complex enough theory to account for much of Hamlet’s behavior and symptoms, a humoral explanation is riddled with holes, inconsistencies, and contradictions. It is clear that the complexity of Hamlet’s case defies any comprehensive humoral explanation. Consequently, we must turn to later psychiatric theory to see if it can explain some of Hamlet’s more confusing behaviors which do not seem to make

227 Draper, 76-77.
228 Jorgensen, 245.
sense within the humoral system.

3. Psychoanalysis: Hamlet’s Oedipus Complex

Psychoanalysis of Hamlet began with Freud himself, and his reading has become perhaps the definitive understanding of Hamlet’s mental state. Freud’s reading of the case is so ubiquitous it hardly requires explanation. Holland puts it succinctly:

One, people over the centuries have been unable to say why Hamlet delays in killing the man who murdered his father and married his mother. Two, psychoanalytic experience shows that every child wants to do just exactly that. Three, Hamlet delays because he cannot punish Claudius for doing what he himself wished to do as a child and, unconsciously, still wishes to do: he would be punishing himself. Four, the fact that this wish is unconscious explains why people could not explain Hamlet’s delay.  

Freud’s disciple, Ernest Jones, elaborates that because Hamlet desires to do the very same acts for which he indicts Claudius, “Hamlet cannot kill Claudius without killing himself, and therefore he can only do it when mortally wounded.

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229 Holland, Imagination, 158.
and the Queen is already dead and lost to him for ever” thereby making the fulfillment of his Oedipal wish impossible. Yet, as Holland notes, “Psychoanalysts seem to take to Hamlet like kittens to a ball of yarn.” Holland alone lists at least 90 variations by various psychoanalysts on the Freud-Jones explanation. Those most relevant to our purposes as well as some post-Holland Freudian modifications must be considered.

First, Lora and Abraham Heller explain why Hamlet is so particularly troubled by his Oedipal complex, a psychological phenomenon Freud asserts is present in all individuals but which clearly does not affect most people to the degree that it does Hamlet. The Hellers posit that, like most people, Hamlet had in fact progressed beyond the Oedipal stage of psychological development but “has regressed from an adult position to the Oedipal level as a result of three shocks: his father’s sudden death; his mother’s hasty remarriage; the ghost’s revelations.” Two of these three “shocks” are identical to two of the three causes to which Draper attributes Hamlet’s shift in humor from sanguine to melancholy. Draper also mentions the ghost’s revelations as contributing to the deepening of Hamlet’s melancholy.

230 As quoted in Scott, 99.
231 Holland, Psychoanalysis, 163.
232 Holland, Psychoanalysis, 203.
233 Holland, Psychoanalysis, 173.
As for the third of Draper’s reasons for the Prince’s humoral switch, frustrated ambition, Holland adds, “Claudius’s coming between the political election and Hamlet’s hopes is really a projection of Hamlet’s own erotic wish to come between his parents.” This idea not only subsumes the third part of Draper’s explanation into Oedipal theory, it also explains why Hamlet mentions thwarted political aims only when explaining his troubles to others and not when he is alone. He surely cannot publicly admit his incestuous desires, and therefore, he conceals them behind political ones. Consequently, the Hellers’ understanding of how Hamlet came to be arrested in the Oedipal stage not only aligns itself with the humoral understanding of his changed emotional state but also resolves one of the problems found in Draper.

Theodor Reik expands Freud’s theory to account not only for Hamlet’s delay but also his suicidal ideations and variable emotional states. Reik comments that when an adolescent's innate Oedipal desires “are frustrated, aggressive impulses emerge against the authority figures, the parents and teachers, that are going the frustrating.” We have already seen how Hamlet’s melancholy often manifests as anger at those around him and is either created or made worse by frustrations. Though Hamlet is not an adolescent, his regression to an Oedipal

stage could explain his immature response to frustration. Furthermore, the subject’s guilt over his patricidal and incestuous urges cause him to turn his aggressive impulses “against himself, so that finally they take the form of an intense preoccupation with the problem of death in the abstract.”

Thus, psychoanalysis may effectively explain Hamlet’s extreme depression and his excessive and seemingly unwarranted self-recrimination.

Once again psychoanalytic answers resolve humoral problems. Hamlet does not acknowledge frustrated love as a cause of his melancholy because the unattainable object is not Ophelia but Gertrude. Feeling guilty about this illicit sexual desire, Hamlet cannot admit it to himself or others. Additionally, as we have seen, Freud insists that for drama to be effective, the repressed desire which serves as its focus can never be overtly acknowledged. Therefore, Hamlet can never mention his frustrated love because to do so would be to announce his repressed Oedipal lust and disrupt the audience’s ability to unknowingly observe their own desires in him.

Other psychoanalysts turn the Oedipal reading inside out by positing a “negative” Oedipal relation in which an individual “wishes to possess the parent of the same sex and to destroy the parent of the opposite sex.”

Holland, Psychoanalysis, 170.
Krims, 66.
Oedipal complex, the subject’s hatred for the father is easily explained by his jealousy of the father’s position as the mother’s lover. In a “negative” Oedipal complex, the subject’s hatred for the mother is harder to explain. Instead of repressed incestuous desire, Hamlet is struggling with repressed homosexuality. Krims explains, “Hamlet assigns the need for a man’s love exclusively to women, whom he then devalues as weak. Thus he distances and thereby denies his own wish for a man’s love, his homoerotic wishes.”

Hamlet’s obsession with and rage against Gertrude’s sexuality is really revulsion at his own sexual desire. For Hamlet, Gertrude becomes “the despised image of himself” and his remark “frailty thy name is woman” become not only a recrimination of Gertrude but of himself over the “feminine aspects of his own gender identity.”

Such a reading provides a more comprehensible explanation of Hamlet’s diatribe against his mother in her closet, as well as the ghost’s insistence that he “leave her to heaven.” If the father figure is the focus of Hamlet’s rage for coming between him and his desire for his mother, then he should approach her as a potential wooer and not with hostility. If he desires to possess her, then

238 Krims, 68.
239 Krims, 70.
241 Krims, 68.
242 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.v.86.
inherently he does not desire to kill her, and the ghost’s instruction is unnecessary. Rather, before meeting the ghost, Hamlet has already expressed desire to kill himself. Understanding Gertrude as representative of that part of Hamlet which he despises renders the ghost’s need to twice restrain Hamlet from murdering her far more logical.

Holland explains that Theodor Hartwig combines this negative Oedipal complex with the original in order to preserve the explanation of Hamlet’s delay, which was the original purpose of applying the Oedipus complex to the character. He asserts that “the Oedipus complex involves both hate and love of both mother and father.”

Hamlet hates his mother for representing his repressed homosexuality and hates Claudius for being the object of that unacceptable desire. “Because of these competing aspects of the Oedipus complex, Hamlet becomes involved in something like an obsessional or compulsive neurosis; he feels impelled first to do and then to undo, and he is thus inhibited from all action toward his goal.” Thus, repressed Oedipal desires, regardless of where they are directed, leave Hamlet at the mercy of “neurotic drives” which “prevent him from acting freely.”

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244 Holland, *Psychoanalysis*, 178.
245 Holland, *Psychoanalysis*, 179.
The most significant contribution the “negative” Oedipal complex makes to the psychoanalysis of Hamlet is that it opens the door for more recent psychoanalysts to almost completely reimagine Hamlet’s relationship with his mother. When Gertrude is transformed from an object of the protagonist’s lust to a reviled reflection of his self-image, a new dynamic emerges between them. Even before Freud, A. C. Bradley had determined that Hamlet’s delay results not from the death of father, thwarted political ambitions, or frustrated revenge, but from “the mortal shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother’s true nature,” that being the cavalier way in which she exchanges her first husband for his inferior brother. Armstrong calls this view “both like and unlike the Freudian account.” It is like the Freudian in that it places the burden of Hamlet’s delay on his relationship with his mother but unlike it in that Hamlet’s problem is not that his mother has chosen another lover instead of him but that she has chosen another lover instead of his father. However, once the Freudian view is expanded based on the notion that Hamlet in fact despises Gertrude because she reflects the hated or repressed part of himself—that he sees in himself the same unfaithfulness he sees in her—Bradley and Freudian psychoanalysts come to agree more than they disagree.

246 Armstrong, 16-17.
247 Armstrong, 16.
Jungian psychoanalysts help develop this idea of Hamlet seeking to deny the feminine part of himself. They contend that the human psyche is constantly engaged in “the process of ‘individuation’ or ‘self-realization’, the integration by consciousness of those instinctual, libidinal and unconscious forces most opposed to it[...]. The masculine ego thus can only achieve self-realisation by means of its transcendence of the ‘narcissistic’ and destructive feminine principle.”248 The “negative” Oedipal reading would understand this “destructive feminine principle” as the exclusively female need for the love of a man which Hamlet sees in both Gertrude and himself. Indeed Hamlet’s attacks on Gertrude which are not focused on her sexuality is preoccupied with her unfaithfulness to Old Hamlet. Before ever mentioning Gertrude’s alleged sexual voraciousness, Hamlet laments that Gertrude “would hang on [Old Hamlet] / as if increase of appetite had grown / by what it fed on” and yet remarried “within a month.”249 This is the first explanation which Hamlet gives for why the world seems “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable.”250 Undoubtedly, Gertrude’s unfaithfulness is is a significant, if not the significant barrier between the Prince and mental health and between him and his ideal identity as devoted avenging son.

248 Armstrong, 55-56.
250 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I..ii.133.
French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan expounds further on how the feminine represented by Gertrude impedes Hamlet’s mental development. He argues that Hamlet is not motivated (or rather is unmotivated) by desire for his mother but rather “the desire of his mother.”

This desire is the desire not to choose between the “Hyperion” Old Hamlet and the “satyr” Claudius. Lacan explains that Gertrude “does not choose because of something present inside her, like an instinctive voracity. The sacrosanct genital object… appears to her as an object to be enjoyed… in which is truly the direct satisfaction of a need, and nothing else.” Thus, Lacan connects Gertrude’s hasty remarriage to her sexual appetite and the feminine need for love. “Lacan elides Hamlet’s failure to choose into his mother’s failure to choose” thereby suggesting that Hamlet’s delay is the result of his subjection of his will to the desire of his mother, the desire he sees within himself.

4. Maternal Contamination

Janet Adelman, a former Shakespearean scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, clarifies in her book *Suffocating Mothers*--a work which

251 Armstrong, 85.
252 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.ii.140.
253 Armstrong, 85.
254 Armstrong, 85.
examines the varying representations of maternal figures in Shakespeare’s plays--

exactly how Gertrude’s lack of distinction between Old Hamlet and Claudius
instills in Hamlet an inability to act. She writes, “The fathers in Hamlet keep
threatening to collapse into one another, annihilating in their collapse the son’s
easy assumption of his father’s [masculine] identity.”\textsuperscript{255} Adelman sees Gertrude as the source of this conflation of the kings. Her failure to mourn her husband
“appropriately is the symptom of her deeper failure to distinguish properly
between his father and his father’s brother.”\textsuperscript{256} Because she can see no difference
between her husbands, Hamlet can see no difference between his fathers. If he
cannot distinguish between the two men, Hamlet cannot kill one and thereby
assume his active masculine identity as the other’s son. Consequently he hates
Gertrude, hates himself, and cannot act.

In \textit{A Theater of Envy}, literary critic Rene Girard studies the nature of
desire in Shakesperean characters. He supports Adelman’s view by noting that
Shakespeare identifies both Claudius and Old as murderers.\textsuperscript{257} He remarks that
when Hamlet attempts to convince Gertrude of the difference between her current
husband and her previous one, “The symmetry of the whole presentation and of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item 255 Janet Adelman, \textit{Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in
\item 256 Adelman, 13.
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Hamlet’s own expressions tend to assert the resemblance he denies.”

According to Girard, Hamlet’s constant comparison between the two kings is an effort to convince himself of a distinction between them in which he does not actually believe. Adelman understands Hamlet’s need for this artificial separation in extremely Freudian terms, remarking that “the splitting of the father thus evokes the ordinary psychological crisis in which the son discovers the sexuality of his parents, but with the blame handily shifted from father onto another man as unlike father as possible.”

Unwilling to admit that he wishes to kill his father so that he can possess his mother, Hamlet must believe that his rage is actually because another man, inferior to his idealized father, possesses his mother. Without that distinction, Hamlet must confront his repressed desires. Since the distinction does not really exist, Hamlet falls prey to the guilt and self-loathing which results from the denial of Oedipal urges, and therefore, he cannot act.

Within this structure of relationships, we see how Hamlet can demonstrate both hatred and love for both parents. He hates his father for possessing his mother, but needs to idealize him in order to successfully redirect that hatred to his mother’s new lover. He loves his mother sexually, but hates her for reflecting

258 Girard, 275.
259 Girard, 275.
the indifference in himself. Furthermore, if Hamlet’s inability to distinguish between his father and his enemy stands in the way of his formation of masculine identity, and that indifference stems from his mother’s indifference, then Adelman’s view effectively combines two prior and opposing psychological schools of thought. At the same time Hamlet is subjected to the Lacanian desire of the mother, “her indifferent voraciousness [which] threatens to undo the gap between [...] Hyperion and satyr, on which Hamlet’s defensive system depends,”261 and also to the Jungian need to overcome the feminine aspects of the self in order to achieve a unified or integrated consciousness.

Interestingly, Adelman, whose view appears to be an amalgamation of several different Freudian and Freudian-derived theories (the negative Oedipus complex, Lacanian desire of the other, Jungian “individuation”) acknowledges that much of her reading of the play develops out of or is at least supported by Elizabethan humoral science. She states that Shakespeare’s culture represented the female body as “the site of deformation and vulnerability.”262 She goes on to say that the science of the time linked “the male with the spirit or form and the female with matter, as though mortality itself were the sign of hereditary deformation by

261 Adelman, 20.
262 Adelman, 5.
the female." Consequently, the unusual terms in which Hamlet first describes his suicidal thoughts—“O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, / thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,”—take on new meaning. Hamlet describes his wish to die by imagining the dissolution of his physical body because the physical form is a representation of the hated feminine portion of himself. Gertrude’s indifference which he describes immediately afterward and which is the cause of his suffering can be overcome only through divesting himself of his body and returning to the masculine world of the spirit.

Adelman suggest an even more direct connection between her argument and humoralism when she explains the Elizabethan belief that a fetus fed off its mother’s menstrual blood and that “this blood transmitted the mother’s likeness to the child.” The blood, of course, is the substance which determines the sanguine humor, the substance which Paster suggests that Hamlet wishes to drink after the success of his play within a play scheme in order “to incorporate the behavioral properties” of another. Therefore, the mother’s blood would presumably not only transfer her physical likeness into the child but also the likeness of her

263 Adelman, 6.
265 Adelman, 244.
266 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.ii.383.
267 Paster, Humoring the Body, 58.
character. Hence, the feminine indifference which Hamlet hates within both
Gertrude and himself could be said to have been transmitted between them
humorally in utero. This transference results in a shift in “contaminating agency
from Claudius to the female body as the site of origin.”268 What is rotten in the
state of Denmark is not the poison which Claudius poured into Old Hamlet’s ear,
but rather, what Adelman calls “spoiling at the site of origin,”269 the corruption of
the feminine. This contamination is the core of the Freudian Oedipal schema.
“The terrifying adulteration of male by female that does away with the boundaries
between them.”270 When Gertrude infects Hamlet through her blood, the barriers
between Hamlet and his mother, between Hamlet and his father figures, between
Old Hamlet and Claudius, and between Claudius and Gertrude disintegrate, and
the result is the Oedipal quagmire which psychoanalysts have examined for
decades.

5. Problems with Psychoanalysis

As fascinating and insightful as the psychoanalytic readings are, they
bring with them some substantial difficulties. Foremost is the fact that they are all

268 Adelman, 24.
269 Adelman, 23.
270 Adelman, 28.
based to some degree on Freud’s original theory, and the basis for Freud’s theory itself is questionable. Freud observed the Oedipus complex first in his own experience and then in studies of other patients. One would expect that a variety of clinical case studies would have been sufficient evidence to support and illustrate his theory. Yet, Freud turned to the example of Hamlet to prove and explain the concept. Armstrong writes:

Freud's ambition to invent and patent psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline remains haunted by an anxiety regarding the necessity of—and the difficulties of providing—empirical evidence for its conclusions. Because he wishes to claim universal provenance for his delineation of the operation of dreams, and of the unconscious mind generally, his own personal memories cannot bear the whole burden of proof—especially insofar as they, too, must be considered subject to those very processes of repression and distortion which psychoanalysis would consider characteristic of every psychology. Therefore, to underwrite his authority at key points such as this, Freud invests in a kind of cultural capital different from that offered by science—namely, that of art, and in
It seems that Freud himself was unsure of the universality of the psychological concept he was promulgating. He used Hamlet to demonstrate aspects of his theory, not his theory to demonstrate aspects of Hamlet. In order to show the ubiquitous nature of the Oedipus complex, Freud had to find it in more than his patients, and few sources would be more compelling than a work of art which had already been exalted for the complexity of its protagonist. However, if the psychoanalytic reading of *Hamlet* supports the legitimacy of the Oedipal complex, then what support is there for the psychoanalytic reading? *Hamlet* may demonstrate the Oedipus complex only if we already accept the Oedipus complex as a valid theory. Freud's logic is circular. Consequently, those who dispute the Oedipal reading assert, “Psychoanalysis arrogantly installs itself [...] prior to Shakespeare, by claiming to 'discover' those universal unconscious tendencies which have characterised human nature throughout history.”

Armstrong goes on to argue against this view by saying, “The Shakespearean text slips in ahead of psychoanalytic theory, so that at every critical moment of his ‘discovery’, Freud find Shakespeare there before him.”

Such a claim is not unreasonable. If Shakespeare is as capable of portraying real
human psychology as critics believe him to be, then like Freud he would have
(albiet implicitly) observed the Oedipus complex in the people he studied.
Professor of English literature at Dedman College Ross C. Murfin writes in his
essay explaining psychoanalytic criticism of *Hamlet*, “What Freud did was
develop a language that described, a model that explained, a theory that
encompassed human psychology. Many of the elements of psychology he sought
to describe and explain are present in the literary works of various ages and
cultures.”

Freud did not necessarily invent the Oedipus complex. It exists
naturally, and therefore, Shakespeare was able to intuit it one his own. Freud did
not need *Hamlet* to support the veracity of this idea; rather, he simply put into
words what Shakespeare had already seen but did not have the terms to express
overtly.

The final difficulty with psychoanalysis we must note is that all these
psychoanalytic readings take up the wrong question. Oedipal theory--even in its
many varied forms--seeks to explain why Hamlet delays in taking his revenge, but
as Girard points out, this issue hardly requires explanation at all. He asks
rhetorically, “Why should a well-educated young man have second thoughts when
it comes to killing a close relative who also happens to be the king of the land and

the husband of his mother?"^275 When put in those terms, Hamlet’s delay seems entirely reasonable. His indecision is not an indication of some complex or diseased mentality. Just the opposite: any sane person would balk at regicide. Psychoanalysts might respond to Girard by noting that while these are rational concerns, Hamlet is hardly acting rationally. He never expresses trepidation due to the concerns which Girard mentions. He is interested exclusively in the sexual relations of his various parents. Hamlet’s attacks on himself show that he clearly sees his hesitation as unwarranted. Girard may give reasons why someone would hesitate in killing Claudius, but they are simply not the issues with which Hamlet is wrestling.

Still, Hamlet’s hesitation is not even the primary mystery of the play. The Prince mentions his hesitation when speaking to Horatio and himself only. Horatio does not appear to find Hamlet’s delay particularly surprising, and Hamlet’s own self-recrimination can be most easily explained as the results of the melancholy originating from his father’s sudden death and exacerbated by the legitimate frustrations in achieving his goals. Complicated explorations of repressed sexual desires may not be necessary. Indeed, Girard likens psychoanalysts to Polonius because they all assume Hamlet is obsessed with

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275 Girard, 287.
As we have seen, Polonius is at least partially mistaken, and his repeated efforts to interpret the evidence to match his hypothesis reflects accusations made against Freud. Jorgensen also compares the efforts of the other characters to diagnose the cause of Hamlet’s melancholy to psychotherapy and points out that their inability to find any substantial answers suggests that Shakespeare did not think much of “psychotherapy from without.” What all these characters are searching for is initially the reason why Hamlet’s grief is so extreme and later why he appears to have gone mad. Humoralists offer conflicting understandings of if and when Hamlet goes mad. The majority of psychoanalysts use the Oedipus complex to resolve the question of the Prince’s excessive mourning, but they seem to ignore the questions of whether his madness is real and where it comes from.

As Claudius says, “madness in great ones must not unwatched go.” As with Antonio’s sadness, the fact that Shakespeare made investigating Hamlet’s “antic disposition” the motivation of most of the supporting characters and that he did not provide any satisfying resolution to the mystery requires us as critics to perform our own investigation. If the madness is performed, what purpose does it

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276 Girard, 288.
277 Jorgensen, 248.
278 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.i.188.
serve and how does that purpose explain the Prince’s strange choices? If the madness is real, how can there be method in it and what differentiates it from Ophelia’s complete insanity? A psychopharmacological reading of the text will provide not only answers to these questions but also a more complete understanding of the protagonist’s mental state and the play as a whole.

6. Foundations of Psychopharmacological Readings of Hamlet

Scott address the question of whether or not Hamlet is mad by noting that pretending to be insane seemingly does not help Hamlet carry out his revenge. As a clinician writing in the 1960s, Scott was up-to-date on the scientific developments in psychiatry occurring in the later half of the century. At around the same time, Lithium, one of the fist medications to treat depression and manic-depression by interacting with brain chemistry was being introduced to the world of psychiatry, so it is not surprising that Scott presages the psychopharmacological theory that would begin to develop but a few decades after him. His explanation sets the stage for the psychopharmacological reading by once again grounding our examination of Hamlet in the natural workings of his body rather than the Freudian intangibles of the mind as well as bringing us back

Harvard, 25.
to the subject of Hamlet’s frequent mood changes. Scott suggests that “by establishing to the Court that he is not responsible for his actions, Hamlet can, and indeed does, avoid the fate of a criminal when his plans miscarry.”

This answer might satisfy Girard as it acknowledges concerns regarding regicide. However, Scott ultimately rejects the notion that Hamlet’s madness is really put on. Regarding the line “But I have that within which passes show,” Scott comments, “The sensation of something strange and oppressive welling up within the body is a diagnostic feature of psychotic melancholia.” Scott is one of few critics who sees in Hamlet a burgeoning psychosis beyond typical melancholy long before the Prince has met the ghost or conceived of feigning madness.

Later, Scott remarks that when speaking to Horatio after the play within a play Hamlet’s jubilant mood “are in excess of the normal effects of triumph on the successful conclusion of his plot.” Certainly, Hamlet’s attitude during this conversation is in stark contrast to his earlier depressed mood. He has not displayed similar exuberance at any prior point. While Paster agrees that Hamlet is exhibiting “a new mood” and “a material change in consciousness,” we must

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280 Scott, 78.
282 Scott, 74.
283 Scott, 88.
284 Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 57.
still wonder if this excitement is an indication of true insanity or simply a momentary lifting of the frustration caused by uncertainty about the ghost’s authenticity? Hamlet’s response to the play may be “in excess of the normal effects of triumph,” but as is clear from his response to the death of his father Hamlet’s melancholy makes him a man of extreme emotions. This fluctuation between extremities of feeling will become the foundation of the modern psychiatric reading.

Twentieth century thinkers, having developed faith in medical science, seek concrete scientific evidence for mental disorders—something which both Humoralism, being hardly scientific, and psychoanalysis, which Armstrong already noted has no hard scientific proof, lack. Once again, Scott helps us take the first steps in finding that empirical diagnosis. In trying to diagnose Hamlet’s specific malady, Scott determines that Hamlet experiences neither hallucinations nor delusions, which means that he does not match the typical understanding of insanity. \(^{285}\) Therefore, Scott must find for Hamlet a mental condition which is more subtle than general insanity. He settles on “manic-depressive psychosis,” \(^{286}\) Unlike the humoralists who merely compare the variable emotional states of the melancholy humor to manic-depressive disorder, Scott claims to be “more

\(^{285}\) Scott, 94.

\(^{286}\) Scott, 100.
Berkovits 112

precise" and charts the specific transitions of Hamlet’s mood in terms of the specific stages of manic-depression:

1. From the opening to the revelation of the Ghost, he is in a state of simple depression. 2. Agitated depression supervenes and lasts up to the end of the ‘nunnery’ scene. 3. Mild elation, or hypomania,\(^2\)\(^8\) is the dominant mood throughout the scenes comprising the ‘Mousetrap’ and murder of Polonius. 4. On his return in Act V Hamlet is mentally normal and remains so until the end.\(^2\)\(^9\)

Scott sees Hamlet’s Manic Depressive Illness as a progression: Depression leads to more extreme depression leads to mild mania leads to mental health. Each stage is distinct, and each transition has a specific trigger--1. the death of Old Hamlet, 2. the revelation of the ghost, 3. the success of *The Mousetrap*, and 4. Hamlet’s return from England. As forward-thinking as Scott’s reading is, his science is out of date. The very concept of manic depression as Scott understands it has been redefined.

\(^2\)\(^7\) Scott, 100.
\(^2\)\(^8\) This term will be defined in more detail below.
\(^2\)\(^9\) Scott, 100.
Current doctors have divided what was known in Scott’s day as manic-depressive disorder into two different conditions: Manic Depressive Illness (MDI) and Bipolar Disorder. According to the National Institute of Mental Health’s (NIMH) informational publication *Bipolar Disorder in Adults*, both conditions refer to individuals who “experience unusually intense emotional states that occur in distinct periods called ‘mood episodes.’ An overly joyful or overexcited state is called a manic episode, and an extremely sad or hopeless state is called a depressive episode.”

While an individual with either of these conditions will exhibit mood episodes, the difference between MDI and Bipolar Disorder lies in what sort of episodes one experiences and the frequency of them. Professors of psychiatry and pharmacology at Tufts Medical Center S. Nassir Ghaemi and Shannon Dalley have attempted to clarify the confusion between Bipolar Disorder and MDI. They write that Bipolar Disorder “is defined by polarity” or in other words, variation between manic and depressive episodes. Whereas, “For MDI, the condition is defined by episodicity: recurrent mood episodes define the illness, irrespective of polarity.” The important distinction is that with MDI one has repeated manic or depressive episodes, while

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290 National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), *Bipolar Disorder in Adults*, (Bethesda: Department of Health and Human Services, 2012) 1.


292 Ghaemi & Dalley, 315.
with bipolarity one has both manic and depressive episodes. It is clear that Hamlet has depressive episodes, but he clearly experiences relief from that depression at various points in the play. The question is whether or not, those moments of elevated mood constitute mania. If they do, then Hamlet’s antic disposition may in fact be the changing mood episodes of Bipolar Disorder.

Bipolar Disorder is further subdivided into Bipolar I, Bipolar II, and Soft Bipolar Disorder. We shall examine the first two now and return to the third later. In order to fully understand the differences between these conditions and the symptoms which determine their diagnosis, we must turn to an expert. As mentioned earlier, Jim Phelps is a prominent clinician specializing in Bipolar Disorder. His book is a detailed examination of the qualities of each version of bipolarity in comprehensible terms. As such, he is a good starting point for my analysis Hamlet’s condition as a form of Bipolar Disorder.

In order to determine if Hamlet at any point experiences the manic episodes required for a bipolar diagnosis, we must first know what mania is. Phelps explains that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) attributes the following symptoms to mania:

1. Inflated self-esteem or grandiosity
2. Decreased need for sleep…
3. More talkative than usual or feels pressure to keep talking
4. Flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are *racing*

5. *Distractibility* (attention is too easily drawn to unimportant or irrelevant external stimuli)

6. Increase in goal-directed *activity*[…]or psychomotor agitation

7. Excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high potential for painful consequences.²⁹³

A person who displays at least three of the items from this list in addition to “a mood shift[…]that is clearly different from the person’s usual state” is considered manic.²⁹⁴ For example, a manic individual may stay up all night for a week, engage in frequent unprotected sex with strangers, and begin a dozen projects without completing any. These are extreme examples, and this sort of mania characterizes Bipolar I.

Bipolar II is defined by a milder form of mania called hypomania.²⁹⁵ Hypomaniac individuals may simply feel more energetic, more positive, or more productive than usual without ever engaging in the socially abnormal or dangerous activities of full mania.²⁹⁶ The DSM provides three characteristics

²⁹³ Phelps, 16.
²⁹⁴ Phelps, 16.
²⁹⁵ Phelps, 12.
²⁹⁶ NIMH, 3.
which distinguish between mania and hypomania: Symptoms must last a week to
be considered mania, whereas hypomaniac symptoms need last only four days;
mania causes “impairment in social or occupational functioning,” while
hypomania does not; and mania can sometimes cause psychosis or loss of
“contact with reality,” but hypomania never does. While the definitions in the
DSM represent “ideal types,” practically speaking, there are some caveats to the
first two characteristics. First, one might still be suffering from Bipolar II even if
one’s hypomaniac symptoms last less than four days, and episodes may even be as
short as a few hours. Hamlet’s mood clearly shifts rapidly and often within a
single scene. He moves from comic madness with method in it to a speech
about his total loss of mirth and heavy disposition in the space of a mere 61
lines.

The second caveat is that impairment in social or occupational functioning
“exists on a spectrum, from utterly nonfunctional to mildly impaired.” Utterly
nonfunctional would denote the total mania of Bipolar I, while varying degrees of
impairment correspond to varying degrees of hypomania. Consequently,

297 Phelps, 17.
298 Phelps, 15.
299 Phelps, 33.
300 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.ii.204-205.
302 Phelps, 18.
psychiatrists have developed a mood spectrum which charts the increase in mania from unipolar depression (major depressive disorder and dysthymia), through the degrees of hypomania of Bipolar II, to the full mania of Bipolar I (Figure 1).

![Mood Spectrum Diagram](image)

**FIGURE 1** The mood spectrum

Hamlet’s ability to function in society is not entirely impaired. He is able to converse with others and attend plays. He is exiled from Denmark only because he is plotting regicide and not because of his mood. This fact coupled with his rapid mood shifts and lack of delusions suggest that, if anything, he is more likely suffering from Bipolar II than Bipolar I.

8. *Hamlet’s First Hypomanic Episode*

However, the question remains as to whether or not Hamlet’s changes in mood are truly hypomanic episodes or merely momentary relief from unipolar depressive episodes. Scott asserts that Hamlet displays hypomania in the scenes following *The Mousetrap*, so that is an appropriate place to begin analyzing the Prince’s symptoms. Scott is correct in saying that Hamlet’s excitement at the

303 Phelps, 16.
success of his scheme is in excess of the facts. Hamlet reads the King’s response to the play as proof of the ghost’s truthfulness, but his scheme has hardly proved anything. Claudius might easily be suspicious of the portrayal of a king’s nephew plotting his murder, or be offended by the thinly veiled assault on his marriage and his wife’s honesty. Horatio who was watching Claudius never confirms Hamlet’s interpretation of events. According to Phelps, “Hypomania is often accompanied by an intense certainty that one is right,” for example, Hamlet’s unwarranted certainty of the success of his plot.

Lauren B. Alloy and other psychiatric researchers studying the onset and symptoms bipolarity expand on the science behind this symptom. Alloy et al have found that “bipolar spectrum disorders stem from hypersensitivity of a behavioral-motivational system, the Behavioral Approach System (BAS), which facilitates approach to rewards and safety cues in active-avoidance paradigms.” This statement means that individuals with bipolar disorders are overly responsive to positive stimuli. Their emotional reactions to rewards and accomplishments are excessive. Additionally, “In individuals with bipolar I or bipolar spectrum

306 Phelps, 26.
disorders, exposure to BAS activation life events involving goal striving or goal attainment triggers hypomanic and manic episodes.”

Hamlet, who had up until this point been frustrated in his plans for revenge, devises a plan to further his goal, and the apparent success of that plan launches him into hypomania.

Hamlet continues to display hypomanic symptoms through the rest of the scene and beyond. He had previously been pleasant to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but suddenly his attitude turns to irritation. He remarks, “There is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak.”

Hamlet’s sudden praise of himself—the same self he had disparaged at length but two scenes earlier—suggests the grandiosity or “pumped-up self esteem” of hypomania. His attack on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern displays the feeling that other people are “too slow, stupid, and irritating” which comes with that grandiosity.

At the end of the scene, Hamlet declares, “Now could I drink hot

308 Alloy et al, 18.
310 Harvard, 3.
311 Phelps, 12.
312 It is worth noting that Hamlet’s remark that “there is much music” in himself echoes Lorenzo’s previously mentioned lines in The Merchant of Venice. He says regarding Orpheus, “But music for the time doth change his nature. / The man that hath no music in himself, / nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds[..]The motions of his spirit are dull as night / and his affection dark as Erebus” (Shakespeare, “Merchant,” V.i.82-87). This concept of having music inside oneself suggests a connection between the way the two play view emotions. The general relationship between the plays will be discussed below, but for now, we should acknowledge that this is more evidence that
blood / and do such bitter business as the day / would quake to look on.”

Coming from a man who by his own admission had done essentially nothing up to that point, such a claim is also evidence of the “unrealistic belief in one’s abilities” caused by hypomania. Additionally, a shift into hypomania here supports Paster’s view that Hamlet’s melancholy, ie. his depressive episode, has been relieved.

Still more evidence is found in the closet scene. Here, Hamlet makes his only proactive attempt to kill Claudius but kills Polonius instead. Almost immediately after entering his mother’s room, Hamlet stabs at the first sound he hears without even moving the arras to ensure he has the right man. This action seems grossly inconsistent with the unmotivated and thoughtful character whose inaction has so fascinated psychoanalysts. It is, however, consistent with Bipolar Disorder. “Impulsivity, defined as a tendency toward rash, unplanned behavior without reflection,” is indicative of a hypomanic episode, as is increased goal-directed activity and risk-taking.

Hamlet is not merely melancholic or depressed. The person without music in himself is “dull as night” and “black as Erebus,” black being the color of the melancholy humor. Rather, the presence of music within Hamlet makes his nature changeable, and more in line with the reading I propose.

314 NIMH, 2.
315 Alloy et al, 18.
Finally, reading Hamlet as hypomanic in this scene may clarify his much-puzzled-over syntax when urging his mother to keep from Claudius’s bed. When Gertrude asks him, “What shall I do?” her son replies, “Not this by no means, that I bid you do,” and gives a rather graphic description of the King and Queen’s marital relations. Hypomania can cause some individuals to “indulge in, think about, or describe hypersexual behavior.” Furthermore, a major symptom of hypomania is racing thoughts: the experience of uncontrollable flight of ideas, often moving from one subject to the next faster than the brain may be able to process them. Racing thoughts can cause “ideas to come out so rapidly that the person’s speech can become difficult to understand.” Hamlet genuinely wants to tell his mother to abstain from intercourse, but as soon as the subject of sex appears in his mind, his hypomanic thought process immediately arouses his own uncontrollable erotic urges. His preoccupation with sex colors his racing shifts in ideas, so that, regardless of what he actually wants to say, he can only discuss sex. He is subject to an internal conflict of two contradictory but equally intense desires, and his thoughts are moving too rapidly for his mouth to coherently express either.

317 Harvard, 45.
318 Phelps, 22.
Interestingly, this psychopharmacological reading may in fact support the Oedipal understanding. Hypomanic impulsiveness and risk-taking is often displayed as a pursuit of “sexual indiscretions.” While Hamlet does not take any impulsive sexual action towards his mother, we must remember that all hypomanic symptoms exist on a spectrum, and therefore, they can all present themselves to varying degrees. Hypomanic shifts in sexual interests can often be so subtle that they are difficult to detect. Thus, it may be that a hypomanic shift in Hamlet’s sexual desires and an increased interest in sexuality has regressed him to the Oedipal stage of development.

9. Hamlet’s Mixed States

Most cases of Bipolar Disorder present as “a pattern of recurrence over time,” repeated manic and depressive episodes. Consequently, a single seemingly hypomanic phase lasting through a relatively brief period in a rather long play does not seem like sufficient support for the Bipolar II diagnosis of Hamlet, but there is far more evidence to be found. In Bipolar II, over 90 percent of the time spent ill is experienced as depression. This experience is possible because of

319 Phelps, 16.
321 Phelps, 52.
condition called a “mixed state” during which symptoms of both depression and hypomania are present at once.\textsuperscript{322} Phelps describes a mixed state as follows:

You feel overenergized to the point of agitation, and yet you are terribly depressed. You may feel extremely irritable and extremely hopeless at the same time, giving you an angry “What’s the point anyway?” attitude. Your mind is usually racing with thoughts, nearly all of them negative. Perhaps worst of all is a reversed self confidence, where the grandiosity of mania is instead experienced as a profound lack of self-esteem, to the point where you feel worse than worthless[...]and you [feel that] you cannot do anything correctly or of any value[...]Depression in this mixed-state condition often leads to intense suicidal thoughts that seem utterly appropriate.\textsuperscript{323}

Hamlet demonstrates this condition rather clearly throughout his episodes of depression. Unlike Antonio whose unipolar depression caused him to be passively suicidal, from the very beginning Hamlet verbalizes active suicidal ideations.\textsuperscript{324} He express the “what’s the point?” attitude by saying, “How weary, stale, flat and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{322} NIMH, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{323} Phelps, 34-35.
\item \textsuperscript{324} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.ii.129-130 among several others.
\end{itemize}
unprofitable / seem to me all the uses of this world!” and does so again when speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He is surely bombarded by thoughts of reversed grandiosity when calling himself, “A dull and muddy-mettled rascal” and “unpregnant of my cause,” among other insults, for failing to perform an action which Girard notes is understandably daunting. Hamlet expresses these same sentiments even after the above-described purely hypomanic episode. He says, “I do not know / why yet I live to say ‘This thing’s to do,’” and is ashamed that he cannot fulfill his mission and satisfy the “excitements of [his] reason and [his] blood.” Here Hamlet returns from hypomania to a mixed state expressing the same preoccupation with death and the same excessive recrimination of himself he displayed earlier. His language is milder, but given the mood spectrum model, it is reasonable to believe that the degree to which his symptoms have manifested has changed.

Furthermore, in addition to having extreme responses BAS stimuli while hypomanic, in their depressed state, bipolar individuals are equally sensitive to the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS). Whereas BAS determines how one

326 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.i.265-278.
329 Alloy et al, 18.
responds to rewards and successes, BIS controls how one reacts to negative results of goal-directed activity. BIS stimuli might include frustrated political ambition, unsatisfied sexual desires, or the inability to carry out an act of revenge. Therefore, understanding Hamlet’s depressive episodes as a manifestation of Bipolar II works in conjunction with and elaborates on the humoral interpretation that frustrated desires are the cause of his melancholy and that, once created, the melancholy outlasts the frustrations.

10. Hamlet’s Later Hypomanic Episodes

Applying this understanding of Bipolar II to the text, reveals many other examples of Hamlet’s hypomanic or mixed episodes, and it is not necessary to look through them all here. However, the Prince’s actions during and after his trip to England must be examined because, strangely, several critics believe that his condition is somehow changed or even cured by this point in the play. Paster writes that after The Mousetrap, Hamlet displays “a release from melancholic depression.”330 This release may come in the form of hypomania, but it does not last in the way that Paster seems to think it does. Jorgensen believes that after the closet scene “Hamlet is increasingly better. He begins to display more interest in life, he takes on a more hopeful attitude towards the world, his thinking loses

330 Paster, Humoring the Body, 58.
much of its morbid quality, and his confidence in human nature is in part restored.” Adelman contends that after leaving his mother’s closet, Hamlet possess “a new calm about his place in the world and especially about death[...]He can begin to trust himself and in his own capacity for action; and he can begin to rebuild the masculine identity spoiled by her contamination.” Scott claims that Hamlet is “mentally normal” when he returns from England and continues to be so until the end of the play. In contrast, psychopharmacology sees only more bipolarity throughout.

In his letter to Horatio, Hamlet describes a pirate attack on his journey to England. He writes, “In the grapple, I boarded them. On the instant they got clear of our ship, so I alone became their prisoner.” Hamlet is a scholar and fencing skills aside is never said to possess any martial abilities. Boarding an attacking vessel alone, an action Hamlet could not possibly have known would work out in his favor, is the kind of reckless decision one would expect from the hypomanic Prince who stabbed Polonius, not the cautious deliberating character of the earlier scenes or, for that matter, any reasonable person.

331 Jorgensen, 241.
332 Adelman, 34.
333 Scott, 100.
Upon arriving in the graveyard, Hamlet seemingly cannot stop talking. Hypomanic individuals experience “an intense need to keep explaining what they are thinking” which is “closely related to racing thoughts” as we observed in the closet scene. A third symptom which goes hand in hand with these two is distractibility. When mild, “this may be experienced more like a kind of daydreaming, with your mind going all over the place on its own.” While Hamlet has displayed a penchant for verbosity throughout the play, a tendency to make long speeches is not unusual for Shakespeare’s characters. However, Hamlet so dominates the conversation in this scene that Horatio is unable to utter more than a sentence at a time. He has just narrowly escaped death at the hand of both pirates and Claudius, he has spent four acts complaining about his delayed revenge, but suddenly Hamlet is distracted from these important matters because he cannot stop musing on skulls. His ultimate conclusion is the same point that he already made to Claudius using a single example of a king and a beggar, but here it requires a detailed discussion of eight different examples. Clearly there is a change in Hamlet’s speech patterns and ability to focus.

Upon discovering the death of Ophelia, Hamlet declares that his sorrow

335 Phelps, 21-22.
336 Phelps, 24.
exceeds Laertes’s and “conjures the wand’ring stars, and makes them stand / like wonder-wounded hearers”338 This statement echoes the hypomanic grandiosity the Prince displayed when he claimed he would “do such bitter business as the day would quake to look on.”339 As he tries to prove himself more distraught than Laertes, Hamlet rambles, “‘Swounds, show me what thou’st do. / Woo’t weep? woo’t fight? woo’t fast? woo’t tear thyself? / Woot’ drink up eisel? eat a crocodile?’”340 Again, Hamlet’s thoughts and speech are racing. His ideas jump so quickly from one to the next that he moves suddenly from typical expressions of mourning to the unexpected notion of eating a crocodile. It is a bizarre and disconnected final image especially coming from someone whose language is usually elevated and whose typical references are to mythic characters such as Hyperion and the Nemean lion. On the other hands, many critics have interpreted this speech as a willful and hyperbolic parody of Laertes’s expressions of grief. Such an understanding may be accurate, but we must consider what made Hamlet desire to mock Laertes in the first place? Hamlet himself explains his actions:

What I have done[…]

I here proclaim was madness

338 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” V.i.244-247.
Was’t Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.

If Hamlet from himself be ta’en away,

And when he’s not himself does wrong Laertes,

Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.

Who does it then? His madness.\textsuperscript{341}

Though whether or not Hamlet’s apology is genuine is open to debate, taken at face value, this speech supports the bipolar reading that Hamlet was not in control of his actions.

At the beginning of the final scene, Hamlet starts recounting his aborted journey to England by saying, “Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting / that would not let me sleep.”\textsuperscript{342} Decreased sleep in itself is a symptom of mania, and often manic racing thoughts will keep bipolar individuals awake.\textsuperscript{343} Such an experience may be what Hamlet is describing here. He then explains how “rashly” he stole Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s message and how “making so bold, / my

\textsuperscript{341} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” V.ii.208-215.
\textsuperscript{342} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” V.ii.4-5.
\textsuperscript{343} Phelps, 21.
fears forgetting manners” he opened it.  

Hamlet says further that after he read the letter, “Or I could make a prologue to my brains, / they had begun the play,” Armstrong comments on this incident, “From the outset, Hamlet stresses that this nocturnal act of misappropriation is impelled by some force, within or without that he doesn’t understand or control[...] Yet his rhetoric also suggests another kind of agency at work: that of the brains themselves.” The man characterized by his hesitation is again not in control of his actions. He is again acting impulsively without fear of the consequences. He cannot keep up with the speed of his own thoughts. Whereas during his previous manic episode, Hamlet accidentally murdered an innocent man, now he purposefully sends two innocent men to their deaths. Of Polonius, Hamlet says that he will, “answer well the death I gave him,” but regarding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he says, “They are not near my conscience.” His disregard for consequences has grown since his previous hypomanic episode.

As the fencing match approaches, Hamlet dismisses Horatio’s legitimate

344 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” V.ii.6-18.
347 There is no indication that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern knew that they were leading Hamlet to his death. Claudius does not mention it to them, and the letter is sealed when Hamlet finds it.
349 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” V.ii.57.
misgivings by overpraising his own fencing skills, calling Horatio’s concerns womanly, and claiming to “defy augury.” Once more, Hamlet seems to think more of himself than is warranted by the facts. He concludes his dismissal of Horatio by saying, “If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be.”

Scott says that at this point Hamlet is “sane and capable of both judicious and judicial action[...]captain of his soul at last, but unable to be master of his fate,” but Hamlet’s fatalism should be seen instead as more dangerous hypomaniac disregard for consequences and possibly suicidal disregard for his own life. After all, if Horatio whom Hamlet himself praised as one “whose blood and judgment are so well commedled,” is concerned, a sane and judicious man would consider his opinion. Indeed Horatio’s judgment seems accurate in light of the facts: Hamlet already knows that the King wants him dead, so logically Claudius’s sudden invitation to a friendly fencing match should be met with more scrutiny. Surely, Hamlet is aware that Laertes will want vengeance for his father’s murder, and therefore meeting him in a fight, even a sporting one, may not be wise. Yet Hamlet disregards these obvious concerns

352 Scott, 99.
353 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.ii.68.
Berkovits 132

and charges recklessly towards a doom that his far more rational friend has already seen coming.

This analysis of Hamlet’s actions in Act V shows that the Prince is experiencing new or more severe symptoms of mania. Doctors have found “Strong evidence that psychomotor activation is far more central to manic-depressive illness [than] mood per se, and this can include rapid thinking, feeling and movement, which sometimes can be related to impulsivity, but often is not[…]. Psychomotor activation is the key feature of bipolar illness that probably best reflects the disease process.”354 Furthermore, “Trait impulsivity might also predict progression along the bipolar spectrum to a more severe diagnosis, particularly to bipolar I disorder. Indeed, given that mania (bipolar I) is largely differentiated from hypomania[…] by the presence of impairment[…] and impulsivity is predictive of greater impairment and more risky behaviors.”355

There is indeed a change in Hamlet after he departs for England, but that change is the development of more psychomotor manic symptoms and of greater recklessness. This change leads him to the greatest impairment to any and all functioning: death. A bipolar reading of Hamlet suggests that he has shifted down the spectrum from moderate hypomania to a position closer to Bipolar I. Left

355 Alloy et al, 18.
untreated, he has not gotten any better; he has in fact gotten worse.

If the evidence supporting Hamlet’s bipolarity is so substantial why then is the character himself insistent the he is “but mad in craft”? Krims calls Hamlet, “A man who is at times unaware of his own qualities,” an assessment which fits bipolar patients. Bipolar II patients often cannot recognize their own hypomania, especially when their symptoms are moderate. They are accustomed to mood shifts and consider them part of their normal behavior rather than as symptoms of illness. Consequently, it is reasonable that Hamlet cannot acknowledge his disorder and contends that his behavior is his own choosing.

According to Holland, “Hamlet insists on fleeing into an illusion that his will is free, that he must choose and think about his choice, as a defense against recognizing that he is not free at all.” In actuality, there are several hints that Hamlet suspects but will not admit he has a problem. Early in the play, Hamlet contemplates how some men suffer from “some vicious mole of nature in them, as in their birth[…]Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason[…]That too much o’erleavens / the form of plausible manners.” Viewed from the perspective

357 Krims, 76.
358 Phelps, 60.
359 Holland, Psychoanalysis, 178-179.
of modern medicine, this speech reads like a rather accurate case study of bipolar mood episodes. It is also an unexpected (possibly hypomanic?) connection to make to Claudius’s revival of the Danish drinking tradition. Hamlet clearly disapproves of the practice, yet he appears to be offering a defense of it based on some inborn quality that disrupts the control of one’s actions. Given that this speech is hardly appropriate for the circumstances and does not match Hamlet’s opinion of Claudius’s actions, it is likely that he is speaking at least in part about himself and perhaps even realizing some similarity between his mood instability and Claudius’s predilection for drink.

Hamlet’s preoccupation with human control over emotion and choice continues throughout the text. He praises the Player’s ability to “force his soul so to his own conceit”361 and Horatio for being “as e’en and just a man as e’er my conversation coped withal.”362 Hamlet is so impressed by their emotional control because he recognizes himself as a person who experiences, as Holland puts it, “the wrong emotion at the wrong time.”363 In this way, the bipolar reading can integrate psychoanalytic theory. The psychoanalysts found that Hamlet was being controlled by forces within himself that have superseded his reason. It is hardly a contradiction to say that those forces are repressed unconscious desires, and that

361 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.ii.491.
363 Holland, Psychoanalysis, 184.
they are the causes of his mood shifts. Since psychopharmacology is not concerned with causation, the bipolar reading is compatible with this psychoanalytic reading. Similarly, the psychoanalytic understandings of Hamlet’s relationship with his mother may fit within the psychopharmacological reading as well.

12. Psychopharmacological Understandings Hamlet’s Relation to His Mother

Most importantly, Hamlet again demonstrates substantial concern with the human ability to rationally control emotion when recriminating his mother. This indictment of her changes the way we understand their relationship, and sets the stage for new understandings of Hamlet’s relation to other characters. He says:

Sense sure you have
Else could you not have motion, but sure that sense
Is apoplexed, for madness would not err
Nor sense to ecstasy was ne’er so thrall’d
But it reserved some quantity of choice
To serve in such a difference[…]
Proclaim no shame
When the compulsive ardor gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
And reason panders will.\textsuperscript{364}

Clearly, Hamlet believes that Gertrude has let her emotions, her natural and irrational desires control her. Krims suggests that Hamlet’s “increased fury with Gertrude may be explained as a projection of his fury with himself,”\textsuperscript{365} and as described above many psychoanalysts agree that Hamlet’s hates Gertrude because he sees her faults in himself. However, reading Hamlet as bipolar shows that his fury at himself is not just the result of being unable to distinguish between Claudius and Old Hamlet--as the psychoanalysts saw it--but at his inability to control his own emotions which might lead to that inability to distinguish. The speech above shows that Hamlet indicts Gertrude for the same reason. Her sense is “thralled” to ecstasy and fails to retain the ability of choice. Her fault is not that she does not perceive a distinction between her husbands, but rather that her mood, her “compulsive ardor,” has taken control of her reason and prevents her from acting on that distinction, which effectively makes the distinction irrelevant.

That compulsion, as is obvious from the pun on “pander,” is sexual desire. It is what Lacan called the “instinctive voracity” for the “genital object.”\textsuperscript{366} That

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{364} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.iv.71-88.
\item \textsuperscript{365} Krims, 70.
\item \textsuperscript{366} Armstrong, 85.
\end{itemize}
her lechery is an inborn trait is compounded later when Hamlet calls it “the stamp of nature.” Gertrude’s innate compulsion for sex overtakes her reason and results in her ability to shift her affections so easily from one man to another. Of course, excessive interest in sex is one of the primary ways in which the impulsive hypomanic pursuit of pleasurable activity (regardless of consequences) presents itself. Adelman writes, “Gertrude’s appetite is always inherently frightening, always potentially out of control,” like those of many bipolar individuals. Like those the hypomanic Hamlet displays later in the very same scene.

According to Krims, “[Hamlet] asserts that a woman cannot resist her need for a man’s love, but that a man has no such weakness.” Hamlet also sees inconstancy, especially inconstancy of feeling, as uniquely feminine and directly tied to those irresistible sexual urges. Encountering Ophelia for the first time since she rebuffed him—which from Hamlet’s perspective would appear to be a dramatic and inexplicable shift in mood—Hamlet asks her, “Are you honest?”

369 Adelman, 20.
370 Krims, 68.
371 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.i.103.
The word “honest” means both “truthful” and “chaste,” and thereby serves as an accusation that she is both sexually promiscuous and emotionally inconsistent for being dishonest regarding her love for him.

Later in the conversation, Hamlet generalizes about all women, “God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another[…] and you make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I’ll no more on’t; it hath made me mad.” Not only does Hamlet again conflate female inconstancy and sexuality, but he also directly identifies those qualities as the cause of his madness. Adelman writes that Hamlet is in fact talking about Gertrude in this scene, “Gertrude and Ophelia momentarily collapse into one figure[…] Ophelia becomes dangerous to Hamlet insofar as she becomes identified in his mind with the contaminating maternal body, the mother who has borne him.” Her uncontrollable need for sexuality and resultant inconsistency of emotion have contaminated Hamlet because they have instilled themselves in him as well. In essence, Hamlet sees Gertrude as the source of his bipolarity.

This idea is not in conflict with the science--either modern or humoral.

Though Shakespeare could certainly not have known this fact, bipolar disorder

372 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.i.103n.
373 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.i.143-147.
374 Adelman, 15.
can be passed down genetically from parent to child. What Shakespeare likely did know is the humoral belief described by Adelman that blood transmitted characteristics of the mother to the child, and therefore, seeing Gertrude as the source of Hamlet’s malady is humorally reasonable. The idea is also consistent with existing criticism. Adelman describes Gertrude as “more muddled than actively wicked; even her famous sensuality is less apparent than her conflicted solicitude both for her new husband and for her son.” Hamlet’s mood shifts leave him similarly “muddled”—unable to make decisions or decide what he believes and unable to distinguish between Claudius and Old Hamlet. Hamlet is caught in a conflict between his depressive and manic urges, between his intellect and his uncontrollable moods. He sees in Gertrude a similar conflict, similar urges, and views her as the source of his condition. In Lacanian terms, Hamlet sees himself trapped by the desire of his mother, a desire which has replicated itself within him. This reading is a reimagining of Adelman’s idea of “spoiling at the point of origin.” She notes, “Man is spoiled in his birth by birth defects not of his own making, and he takes corruption from that particular fault.” It is not merely identification with the female or the maternal that has corrupted Hamlet, but also the inconstant emotions that come with femininity.

375 Phelps, 28.
376 Adelman, 15.
377 Adelman, 23.
I am not arguing that Gertrude is indeed bipolar. There is hardly evidence to support that claim. However, according to the bipolar spectrum model, the severity of hypomanic symptoms increases on a steady slope from unipolar depression to full Bipolar I mania. Consequently, “There is no dividing line between ‘normal’ and hypomania,” and attempting to draw one at any particular point on the spectrum would be arbitrary.\(^{378}\) When the symptoms and behaviors indicative of bipolar disorder are extreme, they are clearly signs of illness, “but when they are mild, they are part of normal human experience.”\(^{379}\) Many people display some mild symptoms of bipolarity without true mania or even hypomania, a condition known as Soft Bipolar Disorder.\(^{380}\) Once one recognizes subdued aspects of Hamlet’s mood shifts and hypomanic desires in Gertrude, the psychopharmacological interpretation can expand beyond the locus of the mother-son relationship to provide a new understanding of the play as a whole, for many other characters display aspects of Hamlet’s condition.

13. Bipolar Symptoms in Other Characters

We have already noted a conflation of Claudius’s love of drink to the

\(^{378}\) Phelps, 16.
\(^{379}\) Phelps, 27-28.
\(^{380}\) Phelps, 13, 39.
spoiling at the point of origin that Hamlet sees as the root of his disorder. Hamlet remarks, “The king doth wake tonight to take his rouse.”\textsuperscript{381} Claudius’s pleasure-seeking need for drink is so powerful that he must get up in the middle of the night to satisfy it. While the King’s hedonism threatens international relations by making Denmark “traduced and taxed of other nations,”\textsuperscript{382} he persists in it. Of course, there is also his gross sexual appetite. Holland is correct in saying that Claudius simply “likes his liquor and his sex,”\textsuperscript{383} but the degree to which he likes them borders on unhealthy. Hamlet’s impulse for murder is also linked to Claudius. The King remarks, “This sudden sending him away must seem deliberate pause.”\textsuperscript{384} This line indicates that Claudius’s decision to send Hamlet to his death is nearly as unplanned as Hamlet’s manic decision to murder Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the same means. According to Adelman, “As his memory of his father pushes increasingly in the direction of idealization, Hamlet becomes more acutely aware of his own distance from that idealization and hence of his likeness to Claudius who is defined chiefly by his difference from his father,”\textsuperscript{385} and other psychoanalysts have posited that Hamlet’s distress stems

\textsuperscript{381} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.iv.8.
\textsuperscript{382} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.iv.18.
\textsuperscript{383} Holland, \textit{Imagination}, 170.
\textsuperscript{384} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” IV.iii.8-9.
\textsuperscript{385} Adelman, 13.
from seeing his own desires for sex and violence enacted by Claudius. Again, psychopharmacology does not preclude psychoanalytic theory. It acknowledges the identification between Hamlet and Claudius because of their mutual Oedipal desires. Psychopharmacology simply understands that relationship differently by placing it within the grander scheme of Hamlet’s bipolarity and obsession with emotional control.

Hamlet is not really so different from his father either. Just as Claudius and Gertrude are associated with Hamlet’s hypomanic phases, Old Hamlet is equally connected to Hamlet’s depressive episodes. Horatio’s example of how the ghost looks like the old king is, “So frowned he once when, in an angry parle, / he smote the sledded Polacks on the ice,”\(^386\) and later he describes the ghost as having “a countenance more in sorrow than in anger.”\(^387\) Immediately, Old Hamlet is identified by his unhappiness and anger. When initially listing the outward signs of his depression, Hamlet refers to his similar “dejected havior of the visage.”\(^388\) The ghost, like Hamlet, is defined by opposing poles—either “a spirit of health or goblin damned” bringing “airs from heaven or blasts from hell,” and


\(^{388}\) Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.ii.81.
“intents wicked or charitable.” The ghost is trapped much of the time in the miserable pole. He is “confined to fast in fires,” to suffer torments to his soul just as Hamlet’s own soul is tormented by depression.

In Polonius we see a mild form of the bipolar individual’s excessive talkativeness. Though he urges moderation to Laertes, Polonius certainly does not practice what he preaches. He advises, “Give every man thy ear, but few thy tongue,” yet within that very speech he demonstrates excessive talkativeness, flights of ideas, and the need to over explain which reflect the behaviors Hamlet exhibits. He does so again when explaining his theory that Hamlet is mad for love and again when introducing the players. He also shares Hamlet’s grandiose certainty that he is right. Even after Claudius correctly observes that Hamlet is not mad for love, Polonius replies, “Yet do I believe / the origin and commencement of his grief / spring from neglected love.” Despite the fact that his plan to spy on Hamlet fails the first time he tries it, Polonius is certain he can find out the cause of Hamlet’s madness by attempting the very same plan a second

390 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” I.v.11.
392 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.ii.86-128.
394 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.i.176-177.
time. Finally, Polonius and Hamlet enact nearly identical schemes to assess the character of others. Polonius instructs Reynaldo to describe Laertes’s possible misdeeds to his friends to test if one of them “having ever seen in the prenominate crimes / the youth you breathe of guilty” will acknowledge it.\(^{395}\) Hamlet’s plan to enact his uncle’s sin and see if Claudius will confirm his guilt follows essentially the same structure and also seeks to “by indirections find directions out.”\(^{396}\) While these plans are not indicative of any particular bipolar symptom, they demonstrate substantial similarity between the thought processes of the two characters and thereby grant their other similarities more significance.

Ernest Jones believes that “Hamlet himself features at times as a projection of Laertes's Oedipal complex,”\(^{397}\) and the parallels between the two characters are obvious. What is notable is that Laertes experiences nearly the same outbursts of uncontrollable rage as does Hamlet. Possessed by hypomania, Hamlet lashes out and kills the wrong man to avenge his father. As a result, Laertes lashes out at Claudius, the wrong man, for the same reason. His rage is nearly as powerful as Hamlet’s, and Gertrude must restrain from attacking

\(^{395}\) Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.i.43-44.

\(^{396}\) Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” II.i.65.

\(^{397}\) Armstrong, 37.
Claudius. In a few brief lines he echoes many of Hamlet’s sentiments throughout the play. Hamlet would dare damnation by following the ghost at risk of his own soul. In the depth of his depression, he twice gives the world to negligence. In his final manic recklessness, he espouses a “let come what comes” attitude. In the graveyard, Hamlet’s manic speech is explicitly identified as a more extreme version of Laertes’s own expressions of grief. Says Hamlet, “I’ll rant as well as thou.” While none of Laertes’s outbursts are beyond the realm of typical human experience, the obvious similarities to Hamlet’s unbalanced actions suggests that Laertes demonstrates softer bipolar symptoms.

On the other hand, Ophelia’s madness is distinguished from Hamlet’s because it includes a disconnect from reality. Shakespeare actually drops several hints that Hamlet’s madness is much different from Ophelia’s. Hamlet tells

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403 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” V.i.273.
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “My wit’s diseased,” and later Laertes says of Ophelia, “Hadst thou thy wits and didst persuade revenge, / it could not move thus.” The connection between possessing one’s wits and the ability to persuade revenge cannot be overlooked. Ophelia has completely lost her wit and is incapable of processing her father’s death, whereas Hamlet, who does advocate revenge, is clearly still in possession of his (albeit diseased) wits. Furthermore, Claudius says of Hamlet, “What he spake, though it lacked form a little, / was not like madness[…]This something-settled matter in his heart, / whereon his brains still beating puts him thus / from fashion of himself.” He says regarding Ophelia, “Poor Ophelia / divided from herself and her fair judgment, / without the which we are pictures of mere beasts.” In both cases, the image is of separation from one’s true self; however, in Ophelia’s case the cause is a total loss of reason, and with Hamlet, it is in fact the continued workings of his brain that causes the split. Some individuals with Bipolar I disorder experience hallucinations and delusions which causes their condition to present as schizophrenia. There is hardly sufficient evidence to assert that Ophelia is experiencing the complete

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404 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.ii.315-316.
406 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.i.1163-175.
407 Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” IV.v.84-86.
408 NIMH, 4.
mania of Bipolar I. Rather, the thematic purpose of her condition is to provide a counterexample to Hamlet’s. She shows the state of someone driven truly mad by the death of a father, and thereby demonstrates that Hamlet suffers from something far more subtle, something which positions him closer on the mood spectrum to the seemingly sane characters than to the fully insane. By acknowledging this similarity, the psychopharmacological reading uncovers a new message within the text, one which develops directly out of the message of *The Merchant of Venice*.

14. The Play as a Whole

Holland explains that Shakespeare employs “a device called ‘character splits’ [...] That is, minor characters are used to reflect certain aspects of the major character.”409 Holland’s case is strong since, as we have seen, many characters possess aspects of Hamlet’s bipolarity. However, what would be the dramatic purpose of dividing the protagonist into many characters? Do we not see enough of his mental processes simply by observing him and listening to his thoughts? On the other hand, Adelman sees the play as thematically focused not on division but on combinations. She writes:

Promiscuous mixture and boundary contamination everywhere infect this play[...] In a psychic world where boundaries cannot hold, where the self is invaded, its pales and forts broken down, its pith and marrow extracted[...]. Identity itself seems on the point of dissolving or being swallowed up. And the overwhelming use of images of oral contamination and oral annihilation to register these threats to the self suggest their origin in the earliest stages of emergent selfhood, when the nascent self is most fully subject to the mother’s fantasied power to annihilate or contaminate.\textsuperscript{410}

Hamlet is himself a mixture of emotions. The boundaries between his moods have broken down to the point where his very identity has dissolved. He is at once a lover and hater of women, overly-contemplative and recklessly impulsive, dour and humorous, laconic and loquacious. A person who cannot predict how he will react from one moment to the next has no constant identity. The annihilating power of the mother is that the emotional inconsistency with which she infects Hamlet destroys his identity. He cannot achieve the Jungian “self-realization.” His consciousness--meaning his reason--cannot overcome the unconscious “feminine principle” causing his mood shifts.

\textsuperscript{410} Adelman 28-29.
Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, Laertes, and Old Hamlet cannot be fragments of Hamlet’s self, because he has no self to fragment. Rather, he is an amalgam of them. Jorgensen posits that “the central image in the play is the opening of a hidden disease.”\(^4\) Hamlet’s disease is hardly hidden; everyone in Elsinore is aware of it. However, the disease of the other characters is concealed from them. Hamlet calls attention to all the defects we have seen in the others, but, other than Gertrude, they never see what he is showing them.

There are no boundaries on the mood spectrum, and it is entirely possible for individuals with mild bipolar symptoms to progress to more severe forms of the disorder.\(^5\) Hamlet is the promiscuous mixture of the mood variations of those around him. Draper remarks, “Hamlet is a drama of physical and emotional violence and of frustrated wills and passions that now and again burst out of all control.”\(^6\) Hamlet is the personification of the ever-present threat that the violence, wills, and passions of the other characters, if left unchecked, will continue to burst out of control. Indeed, the specific hypomanic symptoms we have seen in each of the characters lead to their destruction at the hands of Hamlet, their disease incarnate. Clausius and Gertrude’s sexual appetites enrage

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\(^4\) Jorgensen, 257.
\(^5\) Alloy et al, 17.
\(^6\) Draper, 84.
Hamlet’s own and set him on the path to the King and Queen’s death. Polonius’s
grandiose certainty that he can solve the mystery of Hamlet’s madness puts him
behind the arras, and his compulsive act of speech draws the murderous attention
of Hamlet.\textsuperscript{414} As soon as Laertes’s rage becomes becomes “incensed,”\textsuperscript{415} he loses
the poisoned foil and thus is killed by the implement of his own violent desires.

This concern over lack of emotional control is a direct evolution of
Shakespeare’s point in The Merchant of Venice. If all people are subject to the
irrational desires of their brain chemistry, that irrationality has the potential to
control their actions. The more extreme the subjection of the will to the mood, the
more extreme the impairment to one’s life. In The Merchant of Venice, that danger
is mild and results in characters who are subject to a few uncontrollable whims.

Hamlet is the story of what those people become if their inborn urgens go
unrestrained. Holland writes, “Man, though, is more than these animals, for he has
reason. And yet to Hamlet, his own mother has behaved ‘like a beast that wants
discourse of reason.’”\textsuperscript{416} In actuality, many more characters in Hamlet have lost or
are at risk of losing their reason. Brain chemistry, being natural and often outside
the awareness or control of human consciousness, can reduce people to little more

\textsuperscript{414} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” III.iv.23.
\textsuperscript{415} Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” V.ii.285.
\textsuperscript{416} Holland, Imagination, 175.
than beasts even without making them seem truly insane, and that is the ultimate danger of human emotion.
Conclusions

Holland writes, “Each critic and each historical period seems to find itself in Hamlet.” While in context, Holland appears to be displeased with this practice, if we are truly following the method of the new critics and applying the ideas of our own age to Shakespeare, then it seems inevitable that critics in every historical period should understand Hamlet or any other Shakespearean character in a way that reflects themselves. For Shakespeare's work to remain relevant to us--for it to continue to be worth performing, reading, and analyzing--it’s meaning must be continually updated for the culture, beliefs, and experiences of every era. This fact is especially true when applied to psychiatric Shakespeare criticism. Paster explains, “The history of the embodied emotions is also a history of ways of inhabiting the world.” The effect Shakespeare and his characters have on us changes along with the ways in which we understand ourselves--they ways we think of who we are and how we relate to the world around us. Consequently, any reading of the text using a particular psychiatric school of thought from a particular time will reflect the understandings of that period, and that is exactly what my examination of humoralism, psychoanalysis and psychopharmacology has demonstrated.

417 Holland, Imagination, 158.
418 Paster, Humoring the Body, 8.
Armstrong, quotes Michael Neill who suggests that the study of anatomy which was developing in early modern England literally opened the human body and allowed people to reimagine it as “a multi-layered container of ‘secrets.’”\textsuperscript{419} It is unsurprising then that the contemporary humoral understanding of the psychology was deeply rooted in the physical. Even the secrets of the mind were hidden in the body. At the same time, the Elizabethans believed in the “great chain of being,” an intricate structure of the universe in which everything--animal, vegetable, mineral, and even different classes of people--were organized and ranked based on their proximity to the divine.\textsuperscript{420} As Holland puts it, “As long as everything stays in its place all goes well, but when someone or something tries to get out of line the whole order is wrenched[…]These wrenchings occur[…]when the body falls into disease because one organ or humour has stepped out of line.”\textsuperscript{421} Consequently, Elizabethans had a very precise understanding of the universe and how they related to it. Writes Paster, “The passions or perturbations of mind were fully embedded in the order of nature. Thus to report on an emotion[…]was, among other things, to describe an event occurring in nature and thus understandable in natural terms.”\textsuperscript{422} Humoralism is an extension of that

\textsuperscript{419} Armstrong, 40.
\textsuperscript{420} Holland, \textit{Imagination}, 34.
\textsuperscript{421} Holland, \textit{Imagination}, 36.
\textsuperscript{422} Paster, \textit{Humoring the Body}, 27.
belief, a way of understanding the mind as just another piece of the specifically organized system of the body which itself was a piece of a specifically organized universe. It is a psychiatric discipline and worldview which did not and could not account for the unknown.

Psychoanalysis on the other hand allows for some mystery. Armstrong writes, “The first generation of psychoanalytic readers of Hamlet bequeath, or anticipate, the currently and widely accepted notion that the concept of selfhood[...]and interior complexity, deep layering of experience, memory and affect.” The development of an emphasis of the individual occurring around the time at which psychoanalysis was emerging is reflected in the discipline’s focus on subjective personal experience and individual desires. Psychoanalysis was also the product of the scientific revolution, and therefore it sees the universe as “not an order of things being higher and lower in value than other things but an order of cause and effect.” Those causes may not be immediately obvious to either the patient or psychiatrist. They may be hidden so deep in the subconscious that they create “the impression that ‘we are ‘lived’ by unknown and uncontrollable forces,’” but those cause always exist and can always be discovered. The psychoanalytic view of the mind may differ from humoralism in that it admits to

423 Armstrong, 39.
424 Holland, Imagination, 41.
425 Armstrong, 39.
some degree of uncertainty, to the notion that not all emotion is as visible as a part of the body, but it still espouses a certain self-assurance that it can bring to light what is hidden.

The psychopharmacological reading of Shakespeare, however, is a uniquely twenty-first-century one. This is the case not only because it employs science and technology only recently invented, but also because it allows for much of the psychiatric thinking that preceded it. According to Paster, “No matter what the physical facts of any given bodily function may be, that function can be understood and experienced only in terms of culturally available discourses. These discourses may be more or less technical, more or less empirically accurate, more or less close to us in historical time and cultural space.”\textsuperscript{426} All discourses from throughout history are available to psychopharmacology. It has the benefit of all the humoral and psychoanalytic theory that came before it, and though it differs from those forms of psychiatry, it does not necessarily contradict them. In fact the degree to which it incorporates them is astonishing.

With its emphasis on brain chemistry, psychopharmacology returns the source of emotion to the physical body. Though far more complex than the four humors, neurotransmitters function and determine mood in much the same way. Both psychiatric models even recognize proper diet, exercise, herbs, and sleep as

\textsuperscript{426} Paster, \textit{The Body Embarrassed}, 4.
important treatments for mental conditions.\textsuperscript{427} At its core, psychopharmacology sees the quantities and proportions of substances in the physical body to be the most important determiner of mood, exactly as humoralism did. The difference is that while humoralism saw these disruption of these substances as the cause of emotional problems, psychopharmacology see them as merely an effect of genetics, life experience, or any other of a plethora of factors.

This unwillingness to specify a particular cause(s) for mental disorders allows psychopharmacology to incorporate psychoanalysis as well. Both psychopharmacology and psychoanalysis are predicated on the idea that individual feeling is controlled by unseens natural forces within us. Psychoanalysis sees these forces as the repressed desires of the subconscious. While the main uncontrollable force in psychopharmacology is brain chemistry, the science acknowledges that the ultimate cause for changes in that chemistry may be life experiences, preconceived perceptions of the world, frustrated goals, or any other psychoanalytic explanation. In fact, while medication is the main psychopharmacological treatment for mental illness, psychotherapy is also considered an essential part of a complete treatment plan.\textsuperscript{428} The difference is that psychopharmacology does not assume that it can or needs to find those. It admits

\textsuperscript{427} Paster, \textit{Humoring the Body}, 4; Ovrholser, 337; Holford, 9; Harvard, 33-34; Phelps, 210-211.

\textsuperscript{428} Phelps, 226.
a lack of knowledge that psychoanalysis does not.

Consequently, in those places that humoral and psychoanalytic readings of Shakespeare cannot explain elements of the text, psychopharmacology resolves the difficulty by admitting its inability to explain. In so doing, it gives us a new understanding of Shakespeare’s characters. It does not matter if Antonio is suffering from this or that type of melancholy humor, or if he is a repressed homosexual or a repressed masochist. What matters is that the source of his sadness is and can never be conclusively found, and as a result, to borrow Lewis’s term, he lacks “self-knowledge.”429 If we espouse the notion of selfhood that prompted the psychoanalytic probe into human thoughts and feelings, we accept that Antonio cannot know himself because he cannot know why he feels and thinks as he does. Hamlet’s moods may vary because of the inconstancy of the melancholic humor. He may be homicidal or erotically aroused by any of his parental figures. The end result, though, is that he too cannot know himself because that self is composed of feelings, desires, thoughts, and actions of which he is often unaware and which he does not understand.

429 Lewis, 21.
The psychopharmacological reading of these characters is unique to the twenty-first century in that it accommodates readings which came before it, but also because it is a reading predicated on the limits of human knowledge. In an age when our technology is capable of doing things undreamed of only 20 years ago and continues to progress at an alarming rate, when we can look into the brain and see how exactly how it works if not why it works, when computers provide gateways to limitless information, we cannot help but realize how little we actually know about anything. We no longer have a great chain of being to explain our place in the universe, and the easy and constant interaction between diverse peoples from diverse parts of the world calls into question whether any psychological concept is truly ubiquitous. To have any hope of understanding ourselves we must turn to empirical medical science, but medical science always has its limits. We have no choice but to recognize how little we know and how little we can affect with that limited knowledge. Thus, we are all left, like Antonio, like Hamlet, feeling intensely, constantly, uncontrollably, even dangerously without any real ability to know why.


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