

ID Number: 0618147

Module: Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists

Seminar Tutor: Will Sharpe

Date of submission: Friday 20 March 2009

Word count: 4677

Hamlet begins his soliloquy in Act II Scene ii, “Now I am alone”. In comparison with one other Shakespeare play, explore the extent to which soliloquies examine the solitary state of public figures

The Penguin *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines “soliloquy” as a “speech, often of some length, in which a character, alone on the stage, expresses his thoughts and feelings” (838). But this definition is unsatisfying and inadequate. Shakespeare’s soliloquies are often deliberately theatrical and consciously aware of their dramatic setting, sometimes breaking the fourth wall between actor and audience, but always playing with the idea of what “seems” and what “know[s] not ‘seems’” (*Hamlet* I.ii.76). Alex Newell gives us a deeper definition for soliloquies, touching on the notion of truth, and suggesting that the soliloquy gives the audience member the privileged position of knowing the character’s “truest self”:

Sometimes a soliloquy reveals subconscious mental conflict in the subtext of the language of the soliloquist, conveying aspects of the character hidden from himself... it is the periodic revelation of a character’s mind in soliloquy that gives a sense of encountering the character’s truest self (19).

W. Clemen sees soliloquies as “necessary”, especially for Hamlet, who “has put on a mask (the ‘antic disposition’) and is playing a part” to everyone, excepting perhaps Horatio (119). The soliloquy is the only way in which he can, and needs to, “break

out of this unnatural situation and... speak his mind. We share both the relief that he experiences in solitude and the need that he feels to watch his tongue in company” (120). Furthermore, “without the soliloquies we would scarcely know anything of Hamlet’s self-accusations... [they] make us aware of inner conflicts” (120-21). This suggests an intense reader- character relationship, or an obligation, even, on the behalf of the writer to allow us as audience to access the inner most consciousness of his characters. And yet, if we are sharing in his “relief” and “need” than how can he be truly solitary? Is he aware of our presence and if so is his solitude as deceptive as his madness? Is Henry V seeking solitude or is soliloquy merely a device to demonstrate his capability in being a good king?

This essay considers these questions and the position of rulers, or potential rulers, forever within the public eye- Hamlet and Henry V- trying to locate their private selves within the soliloquy whilst dealing with the public forced upon them, and questions whether, even at their most solitary, we can ever know their “truest” selves. I am going to draw together key scenes to finally suggest that Shakespeare is uniquely playing on this public/ private dichotomy to bring the soliloquy out from solitary confinement and into the public gaze of those other than the soliloquist. Crucially, we shall see that several of these soliloquies are, in being overheard by other characters, less private than presupposed. In these instances a character’s awareness, or lack thereof, can reinterpret the entire speech. And finally, the presence of the audience adds another, frequently interactive, dimension to the words spoken on stage.

Hamlet speaks 37% of the words spoken amongst a large cast. Seven of the play’s soliloquies belong to him, including the one made after observing Fortinbras’ army, found only in the second quarto and not in the folio. One of these is a short soliloquy moment (“’Tis now the very witching time of night...” (III.ii.331-342)), not the lengthy utterance indicated in the Penguin Dictionary. By comparison, King Henry is only granted the one. However, he too receives the majority of spoken lines- 32%. The difference being that only a small fraction of those lines are spoken alone.

Numerically and structurally, then, there is already something interesting to say about the differences between *Hamlet* and *Henry V*, before even approaching the mental and the psychological state of their eponymous protagonists. The mind and the words are very much connected. Discounting those words spoken upon the invasion of Fortinbras, all of Hamlet's soliloquies occur within the first two thirds of the play. There is a link here between inaction and action, demonstrated through the pattern of soliloquies. Once Hamlet has decided to act, he shrugs off the need to soliloquise. His obsession with the solitary acts as his tragic flaw, disabling him from the ability to act and keeping him in a perpetual state of thought. Alternatively, Alex Newell sees Shakespeare using the soliloquy as more than a dramatic function, but using the collection of all seven to create "an intense dramatization of the human mind as the innermost realm of consciousness" (18) and as such, "Shakespeare makes the mind itself and what happens to it a major focus of the tragedy" (19). According to Newell, Hamlet's mind is the main focus, and this is more focused on his solitary state and his own metacognition than on seeking revenge.

Much has already been said about the nature of Hamlet as a solitary prince. His search for solitude is desperate, evident from the very first scene, in which he speaks few lines before he declares a wish for separation even from the body- from "solid", or "sullied", flesh (I.ii.129). It is this quest which roots him deep within the mind, and his isolation from the public is signposted in the language of his soliloquies. His first ends "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (I.ii.169), whereas his "Am I a coward?" soliloquy begins "Now I am alone" (II.ii.480). Newell continues his exploration on Hamlet's mind, pitting "Hamlet's sense of isolation and alienation in the world of Claudius's Denmark" (27), a confrontation made acutely ironic when Claudius reveals an equal need to soliloquise in Act III Scene iii.

In regarding all his soliloquies together one can trace the changing states of this "heroic" mind. As a sequence they are often contradictory, like his madness. Consequently, directors have often experimented with their arrangement. For example, in the 2008 RSC production of *Hamlet* with David Tennant in the title role,

director Gregory Doran returned to the first quarto edition in placing Hamlet's Act III Scene i "To be or not to be" soliloquy in Act II, after the encounter with his father's ghost. This, Doran explains in the programme, was a decision made after questioning the logic of Hamlet's solitary brain: "Why, after Hamlet has found such inspiration in the Player's tears at Hecuba, when he has decided to catch the conscience of the king with *The Mousetrap*, has he descended into this slough of despondency and fatalism?" The first quarto is often labelled the "bad quarto" as much of it appears transposed by a biased memory. However, re-sequencing the soliloquy ordering gives a fresh perspective upon the progression of Hamlet's private thoughts. For Doran this seemed more logical- a conclusion that can be reached if Hamlet's madness is regarded a "mask" (Clemen 119).

If the structuring and positioning of the soliloquies reveals a clash between the public and the private, then the language and meaning within them does also. The Penguin dictionary highlighted an explanatory function for soliloquies, with thoughts and feelings at the heart. Contextually, private thought had previously been accessed by the audience via actions, with different symbols for different states of mind. Gurr states, in exploring acting styles from 1574- 1643 that "By the time *Hamlet* was written, in fact, 'Pantomimick action' was openly condemned as old-fashioned". He cites the difference between the Player Queen who "makes show of protestation" and "makes passionate action" in the stage directions of III.ii, and Gertrude: "That Queen Gertrude in the play proper was expected to do the same is unlikely" (102). Explanatory gestures were redundant and resigned to mime work. Therefore, the soliloquies would have assumed responsibility for explaining thoughts and emotions through language, not pantomimic action.

Clemen finds a different purpose behind each soliloquy, each private. The first he titles "Hamlet's rejection of the world" (126)- a rejection of his self, yet acknowledging the impossibility of "self-slaughter", a rejection of his mother and the "incestuous sheets" she shares with his uncle and, in some criticisms, a rejection of all women, correlated here with "frailty". This is easily interpretable as a

continuation of his visible mourning- commented on and disapproved of by King Claudius. His words become laden with grief, and his brief exclamations, questions and repetitions (“Must I remember?”; “Within a month?”) emphasise this. He appears trapped in the past, unable to accept the present and his thoughts, when they do turn to the future, are black: “It is not nor it cannot come to good”. His final thoughts return back to his own heart and a further insular retreat: “I must hold my tongue” (all I.ii.129-159).

His soliloquy after the confrontation with the ghost of his father (I.v.97-118) is memorial. He swears obedience to “remember”. Yet the charge of absolute solitude is increasingly difficult to pursue. For in obeying the “commandment” of old Hamlet he can no longer continue in his rejection of the world. His anger is directed more harshly and emphatically towards mother and uncle: “O most pernicious woman! / O villain, villain, smiling, damnèd villain!”, and his penultimate sentence begins “Now to my word”- a promise of ensuing action.

However, action does not ensue. The soliloquies act as caesuras to the action, providing breaks and pauses as Hamlet doubts, decides, stalls, and doubts again. His II.ii soliloquy, although ending actively (“I’ll observe his looks...” (528)), is the most critical self- assessment of his character in the play. He wonders that he can be so cowardly, and swears again to immediate action. What follows next in the folio is of course not action, but his “To be” soliloquy (III.i.62-96), the most renowned soliloquy in all literature. This speech would seem to be the most private of them all. But “seeming” is always at the centre of this play. For whilst his reflections are self-reflective, they deliberate over the consequences of his soul not just after death, or suicide, but after his not-quite determined course of action. So he says:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all:
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sickled o’er with the pale cast of thought

I find here the dawning of Hamlet's recognition that he cannot seek active and public revenge whilst simultaneously living in the private reclusive world that his initial mourning so strongly desired. Even Clemen, who sees Hamlet so "absorbed in thought [that] he seems to be isolated from everything around him" (135) (erroneous, as Hamlet's concluding sentence draws attention to the approach of Ophelia) returns to the relationship created with the outside viewer: "Hamlet's doubts spread to the audience" (134).

Hamlet is not the only one to soliloquise. Yet Claudius, the most public figure in Elsinore, does not turn to privacy until he fears that his guilt has been launched into public knowledge. His prayer (III.iii) acts as a confessional to him and a confirmation for us, if we ever doubted the truth of his villainy. Even this fails to be strictly private, for he kneels before a God he cannot pray to and, unbeknownst to him, before a nephew who cannot kill him whilst he seems to be deep in prayer. And the accompanying soliloquy of Hamlet's catches him on the very edge of action, the moment at which Doran chose to pause his 2008 production for the interval-freezing Hamlet between moving from private to public.

The reading of Hamlet as located insularly within his own private thoughts is limited. To analyse so risks making him blind and ignorant. It is equally reductive to consider his soliloquies as inactive or as displaying the truth behind the mask of insanity as Clemen and Newell would argue, for his private words play with theatricality and double meanings as much as his insanity does, and such words are often considering the consequences of public action. And even in his most private moment his feelings are shared with an eavesdropping audience. His first soliloquy may be a stage of grief in rejecting all around him, including his physical self, but it is also the introduction of his character to an audience which has not yet heard him speak freely and independently. His soliloquy after meeting the ghost of his father promises his ability to remember, but in the setting where "memory holds a seat/ In this distracted globe" (I.v.102). Such a pun on the Globe Theatre would have provided basic humour for the Elizabethan and Jacobean groundlings, but it

compromises Hamlet's privacy and returns us to, and develops, the unique relationship between character and audience.

At this point it is important to remember Shakespeare's position as an actor as well as a playwright. Shakespeare has been noted for using this background for the use of comedy, for the pure benefit of contemporary audiences. For example, his employment of the same actor (Richard Burbage) for the parts of both Polonius and Julius Caesar would have been a cunning joke, and a point of foreshadowing, when in III.ii Polonius informs Hamlet that he once "did enact Julius Caesar" (86), with the further inference that he was killed, stabbed even, by Brutus. Here, Shakespeare composes a dialogue which reminds us of the actors behind the roles, the artificial nature of the performance, the stage history of the company, and points in jest to Polonius' future end, giving us as the audience the privileged position of holding more knowledge than some of the characters. In another way, David Tennant's *Hamlet* broke the fourth wall as he addressed a line directly at an audience member caught laughing at an inappropriate moment. This was for the purpose of comedy, and not within the context of a soliloquy, but demonstrates that the assumed rules of theatre can be purposefully broken for many varied effects, and Shakespeare enjoyed testing the rules.

In many ways Shakespeare's soliloquies are not conventional. Kenneth Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet* demonstrated this visually in the "To be or not to be" sequence. During this soliloquy Branagh's Hamlet walks along a wall of mirrors behind which, at one point, Polonius and Claudius can both be seen reflected, concealed. Whether or not Hamlet can see them is never answered, but there is a definite level of reservation and awareness played into his words. A similar mirrored wall was used in Doran's production, but suspicion did not enter Tennant's words until his question to Ophelia: "Where's your father?" (131). I am not doubting the genuine depths of Hamlet's suicidal contemplations. I am, however, certain that his awareness that such morbid and bitter reflections were being overheard would not hurt his cause to

project an appearance of madness. Hamlet himself would then be using the soliloquy to his own devices.

The implication that Hamlet might be aware of the other characters on stage around him whilst he soliloquises is that he might be aware of the audience's presence as well. Bridget Escolme says the following:

... subjectivity is constructed in the relationship between Hamlet and his audience. His gestures towards the agency of the modern subject become gestures to the audience; his struggle with the constitutive powers of court and family takes place in the audience's acknowledged presence (54).

This point takes us beyond the relationships indicated in my introduction, whereby the character comes to greater knowledge of his private self through soliloquy, and through that same dramatic device, the audience member is privileged to know the character at their truest level. In emphasising the relationship between actor and audience the notion of truth is again complicated as we are brought into another level of the public sphere. The prime example of this is Hamlet's soliloquy in Act II Scene ii. Hamlet begins by accusing himself: "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (481), but proceeds to question not just himself, but in some productions, the members of the audience too, with the interrogatory: "Am I a coward? / Who calls me villain?" (502-03). Escolme examines this, suggesting that "spoken to an individual in the audience, the image of Hamlet's beard being plucked off and blown in his face is a consciously theatrical one" (71). Her writing on the audience's "acknowledged presence" (54) is highlighted in particular performances in which this deliberate choice has been taken by the director and the actors. In particular, she cites Mark Rylance's performance as Hamlet at the Globe theatre, in which the result of this onslaught of brutal questions was that "Hamlet/ Rylance demands that the audience condemn him for being an inadequate revenge hero" (71).

Here the soliloquy is transformed from memorial, mourning, self-referential, self-prophesising and clarifying- all private perspectives- to outwardly challenging, condemning and publicly provoking. Equally, the tone here is far from the “intimacy” described by Clemen as existing between character and audience (120). Clemen is mindful of one important fact: Hamlet’s “self-accusations” are, as his “self-analysis”: “inconclusive” (121). If the audience answers to the questions posed at them, Hamlet never gives a verbal response. His conclusion to the soliloquy is not focused on himself, but on the fate that awaits Claudius, whose conscience he will “catch” (537). His words have finally led to action and as such, his death.

Consequently, his soliloquies from this point (if following the same rearrangement as Doran) are all focused on action: his self-command to “be cruel, not unnatural” to his mother (III.ii.338) and his deliberation over whether or not to kill Claudius whilst praying- the active “Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent” (III.iii.92) often accompanied by a Hamlet holding a threatening sword behind the very back of his uncle. His soliloquy upon sighting Fortinbras’ army concludes “O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!” (IV.iii.138-39). At this last he seems to discard altogether thought that does not centre upon revenge, including all self-centred solitary confinement.

Clemen argues that Hamlet “does not understand himself” (121), but how much less do we understand him. He does though, for the beginning two acts, discard the world for words and then, resolving upon action, resign the words to act in the world. His comprehension is that there can be no reconciliation of the public and the private, a fact that Henry V demonstrates his awareness of in Act IV Scene i.

Prince Hal is, in his new position as King Henry, wearing a mask as much as Hamlet. His one soliloquy is as much a demonstration of his theatrical, oratory power and his preoccupation with the public eye as his memorably rousing public battle speeches at Harfleur and on St. Crispin’s day. This section explores Harry as both King and actor, roles by definition more public than private.

The introduction to the Penguin edition of *Henry V* suggests that “England as well as England’s King is its principal character. In a general sense, England is the hero of all the histories... [and] this is especially so in *Henry V*” (Humphreys 10). Following this, Harry is in a position in which solitude is impossible: more than being the monarch, he represents the entire nation. Furthermore, “Dr Johnson rather oddly remarked, ‘Shakespeare does not seem to set distance enough between the performers and spectators’... The answer is that Shakespeare wants to *cancel* the distance between performers and spectators” (Humphreys 11). Again we find that Shakespeare has written an underlying relationship between actor and audience, playing on the function of theatre. *Henry V* composes a favourable relationship between the king and his subjects- subjects from all across the nation- Welshmen, Scotsmen and Irishmen. In this relationship he is “England” (and labelled so by the French) and we become his “band of brothers”. In this sense, his soliloquy *is* necessary as it brings us closer to the humanity behind his title.

However, even in this moment of rare solitude, Harry the man is inseparable from Henry the King. The 2007 RSC production of *Henry V*, completing the octology of history plays directed by Michael Boyd, presented Harry wearing his crown throughout, and most notably on the battlefield of Agincourt. This can be a king either obsessed by, or plagued by, the weight of his role, symbolised through his physical crown, an actual weight upon his brow. And this is an idea that Shakespeare plays with skilfully, using the chorus at the beginning and between each act to remind us that this play is just that- role playing. In the very first scene he asks:

... Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O, the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt? (Prologue 11-14).

Jonathan Bate remarks that this is one of many “self- conscious theatrical references” that might date *Henry V* to 1599 “as a showpiece for the newly- built Globe theatre” (1031), with “this wooden O” referring to the shape of the theatre. The 1989 Kenneth Branagh film featured Derek Jacobi’s Chorus opening his Prologue on an abandoned stage littered with props, before following the action to the cliffs of Dover and beyond to France. Whichever stage is refers to, it is clearly a stage, and a self- conscious reference similar to those made in *Hamlet*. It reminds us of Shakespeare’s fascination with acting and selfhood- the debate on “seeming” as in *Hamlet*. It also provides us with a different position to interpret Harry’s soliloquy, which comes directly after Harry has been wearing a literal mask, visiting his soldiers under disguise. This deception might be problematic but, akin to Hamlet’s madness, he only uses it to discover the true thoughts and feelings of those around him. His speech touches upon the theme of madness when he cries “O, be sick, great greatness/ And bid thy ceremony give thee cure!” (IV.i.205-06). His repetitions often appear illogical, as with the “wretched slave” (223), one moment a “child of hell” (225), the next sleeping sweetly in Elysium (228). It is true that at this point Harry can seem weighed down by his responsibilities, missing the “heart’s-ease” of “private men” (189; 190) and the “vacant mind” of the “wretched slave” (223; 222). However, this is a weightiness which is easily removed. The uneasiness is a “proud dream” (211) and not to be trusted. He is comfortable in accepting that he is not a “private man” and declares in line 213: “I am a king”. Critics have been critical of the lack of depth with which the cares of kingship are explored here, finding the new King Henry “limited” (Humphreys 43). It has been said that the moments when Harry “feels the burdens of kingship profoundly” (most starkly here in IV.i) are “passing phases only, soon superseded by the zest of leadership or by triumph in war and love” (43).

His speech is even structured as a public speech. The language is as vivid and gripping as in his speeches to his noble courtiers in the early political scenes, and those to his less noble subjects before and during battle. He uses the tools of rhetoric

to demonstrate his skills as an orator- the repetition of “thrice gorgeous ceremony” (219), the most striking example. Even his moments of confusion appear carefully structured, as if even in private he cannot escape from a public mode of speaking. Indeed, this soliloquy focuses more upon status and his position of kingship than it does on his personal, solitary mental state. Not once does he speak in the first person, save in the line “I am a king”, as above. He speaks with the royal “we” (187), even to himself, alone. There is no reference to his “too too solid flesh” (Hamlet, I.ii.129), his breaking heart or his tortured mind. For these things would risk making him a bad king. Shakespeare shows us just what is necessary to know that our king is a good king with a “heart of gold” (IV.i.45). Humphreys lists some “predetermined attitudes in which Henry needed to be displayed”, including “King-as-counsellor, King-as-spokesman, King-as-patriot, King-as-warrior, King-as-wooer” (39), but not including “King-as-solitary thinker” or “King as soliloquist”. The latter is not necessary, but is given to us to demonstrate how far Harry the King is inseparable from Harry the man and how far he has developed from *I Henry IV* Parts I and II. This confirms our relationship as actor/ audience, and monarch/ nation.

In many ways he is the antithesis of Hamlet- a man of actions, not of thought. Which raises the inevitable question, would Hamlet have made a good king, as Fortinbras declares too late, at the close of the play? The answer is perhaps that the later, active Hamlet is worthier than the inwardly preoccupied Hamlet of the first two thirds of the play. For Shakespeare seems to suggest that a good king needs to be outward, not inward looking. And Harry proves that here in his following prayer, the words of which turn straight to his “soldiers’ hearts” (245). Concern for his men would resonate well with an audience representing the same. Again there is no mention of his self, his pleas are all for “Richard’s soul”, not his own, as he seeks to atone for the past. His prayer is genuine, unlike Claudius’.

One of Shakespeare’s many geniuses is to pose questions without giving any answers. It is well noted that “To be or not to be, that is the question” raises more

than the one question, the majority of which will never have one satisfactory answer. My conclusion attempts to answer my own question, showing both eponymous protagonists having moved away from a self-centred pursuit for the solitary within their soliloquies. From the outset it might have seemed that the opposite would be true. Henry V begins his soliloquy violently:

Upon the king! Let our lives, our souls,
Our debts, our careful wives,
Our children and our sins lay on the king!
We must bear all (IV.i.184-87).

The oppressive burdens weighing him down could have led to a rebellious solitude akin to Hamlet's. However, he is too aware of his public duties. He rejects the public symbols of kingship and "ceremony"- "the balm, the sceptre and the ball, / The sword, the mace, the crown imperial..." (215-16) because he knows the real duty of kingship is to protect your country's peace and your soldiers' lives. In not obsessing over a need for reclusive privacy he reassures us of his capabilities. For this reason, his soliloquy adheres to public functions and structures. In being interrupted straight after by his courtiers searching for him it is clear that it is near impossible for him to be physically alone, a problem which on page does not unduly trouble him.

This begs the question: is the desire for solitude incompatible with good public leadership? Perhaps in excess. Claudius is of the opinion that such self-exile is to be viewed negatively. Yet Fortinbras concludes in obituary that Hamlet "was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royally" (V.ii.351-52). And Hamlet finally wonders "what a wounded name... shall live behind me!" (292-93). At the very last, his thoughts are for the state, entrusting it to Fortinbras- demonstrating his development into would-be leader.

My final point is one on theatricality. Hamlet demands "Am I a coward?" beneath this "most excellent canopy" (II.ii.281) and in "this distracted globe" (I.v.102), and

Harry, after the Chorus has drawn attention to this wooden “cockpit” (Prologue 11), is proven to be a good king outside of “thrice gorgeous ceremony”. These consciously theatrical references encourage the audience to be involved in exactly the way that Paul Prescott reports contemporary critics vehemently dislike. They make presuppositions: “that audiences at Shakespeare, if they must be seen, should not be heard... that the requisite atmosphere for Shakespearean reception is one of silence and reverence” (375). Yet Gurr, amongst other critics, reminds us that this was not the audience that Shakespeare was writing for. Theatre was, and still is, a public domain. In *Harry*, audience and character are united as country and countryman. With *Hamlet*, we are left doubting, questioning, grieving. Soliloquies may be another dramatic device, but they help build audience engagement- an engagement that might lead to someone answering Hamlet’s open challenge.

Bibliography

- Bate, Jonathan and Eric Rasmussen eds. *The RSC Shakespeare: Complete Works*.
William Shakespeare. Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2007.
- Clemen, Wolfgang. *Shakespeare's Soliloquies*. Methuen & Co. Ltd: London, 1987.
- Escolme, Bridget. *Talking to the Audience*. Routledge: Oxford, 2005.
- Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*. Third edition. Cambridge
University Press: Cambridge, 1992.
- Hamlet*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Castle Rock
Entertainment, 1996.
- Hamlet*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Gregory Doran. RSC: Stratford, Sept. 2008.
- Henry V*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Michael Boyd. RSC: Stratford, Dec. 2007.
- Henry V*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Renaissance Films plc,
1989.
- Humphreys, A. R. "Introduction". *Henry V*. William Shakespeare. Penguin Books:
London, 1977.
- Newell, Alexander. *The Soliloquies in Hamlet*. Associated University Presses:
London, 1991.
- Prescott, Paul. "Inheriting the Globe: The Reception of Shakespearean Space and
Audience in Contemporary Reviewing." *A Companion to Shakespeare and
Performance*. Eds. Barbara Hodgdon and W. B. Worthen. Blackwell
Publishing: Oxford, 2005.
- "Soliloquy". *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. J. A. Cuddon.
Penguin Books: London, 1998. 838.

In act II, scene ii, lines 236-37, Hamlet says, "Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." What assumptions underline Hamlet's response? What does he mean? Do you agree with what he says? He then says to his old friends, "I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw" (II.ii.330-31). What does this remark suggest about Hamlet's madness, about his "antic disposition" (I.v.172)? Is he mad? Is he acting? Explain.Â When combining this incident with Hamlet's soliloquy in act II, it reveals that Hamlet is unstable and depressed at his situation. He seems to be stalling repeatedly from killing Claudius. The theme between these two incidents is that over-thinking can weaken your resolve.