

# A NARRATIVE CASE STUDY OF *HAMLET* AND THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF WESTERN INDIVIDUALISM, DIAGNOSIS, AND MADNESS

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*There is no story in Western literature that epitomizes the dominant Western discourse of individualism as clearly, and its effects as boldly, as Shakespeare's Hamlet. "This above all: to thine own self be true" (I.iii.78) is the cornerstone of Western individualism and the discourse of the individual over the relational. Though Hamlet was written over 500 years ago, the theme of individualism parallels strongly with the present Western construction of madness in mental health. In this article, a narrative case study of Hamlet is presented as a creative vehicle to explain narrative therapy and to challenge the individualized notion of madness by decentering it, unpacking it, and making it visible (Derrida, 1997; White, 1991). It is proposed in Hamlet that self-subjugation related to individualizing discourse, coupled with corresponding discourses concerning duty, honor, and gender, influence Shakespeare's characters' abilities to communicate and to polyvocally negotiate the meaning of events in their lives. This inability to recognize multiple interpretations of events, the desire and grappling for one truth (mono-truth), creates conflict in the family such that the struggle for meaning results in some family members being marginalized, labeled as insane, and ultimately the negotiation for truth culminates in murder. Given the prevalence of the dominant discourse of individualism in the Western world, Shakespeare's Hamlet serves as a generative case study for counselors.*

Shakespeare's classic play *Hamlet* needs little introduction. It is considered one of the preeminent dramatic tragedies in Western literature by both literary critics and authors alike (Wright & LaMar, 2000). Since its first playing in 1600, *Hamlet* has come to personify the classic tragedy of the Western world and has been firmly established as a staple of Western liberal arts education. The play has been the subject of numerous critical analyses from multiple and diverse lenses, including psychoanalytic (Freud, 1900/1965; Hillman, 2000; Jones, 1949/1976; Morin, 1992), feminist (Dews, 1994; Ouditt, 1996; Roberts, 1995), Marxist (Bristol, 1994),

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metaphysical (Wright, 1992), and queer theory (Reschke, 1997). Overwhelmingly, these reviews focus on Hamlet as the stoic, individual male, struggling for action to revenge his wronged father, and have, for the most part, reinforced the discourse of individualism through various perspectives.

The present exploration seeks to offer a narrative case study of *Hamlet* by examining the story from a postmodern view, with an emphasis on language, discourse, and self-subjugation, and to parallel this idea with the current construction of mental health in the Western world. Case studies have been a staple of clinical education since the inception of counseling (Breuer & Freud, 1895), and *Hamlet* will offer fertile ground for the narrative counselor to explore how discourse and meaning creation influence identity and family choices. Many characters and perspectives are presented for the purpose of demonstrating that discourse and the negotiation of meaning are complex. One of the main points illustrated is that the continued, complicated, and very difficult process of negotiation for truth is not without frustrations if ultimate truth or explanation is sought. There is no way to explore the process of truth creation in a manner that reduces the tension of readers who struggle with ambiguity and seek ultimate truth. This tension from a postmodern perspective is present in all clinical practice informed by constructionism.

It is suggested from a narrative perspective that *Hamlet* represents an individualizing discourse that is dominant in current Western society and that this discourse operates within and between people by means of Foucault's concept of self-subjugation and the gaze (Foucault, 1979). Please note that although *Hamlet* is situated to place and time and the discourses that will be discussed primarily emanate from the 16th and 17th centuries, it may be easy to recognize some of the beliefs in current Western society. To this end, this article is divided into areas of exploration as follows: Postmodernism and Narrative, *Hamlet* Overview, Narrative Analysis, and Conclusion.

## POSTMODERNISM AND NARRATIVE

Narrative finds its roots in social constructionist theory. Briefly, constructionism is a philosophical approach which, in its most basic form, holds that reality is uniquely experienced, interpreted, and created by individuals in relationship (Gergen, 2001). This understanding is premised on the belief that events do not inherently contain meaning to be deciphered by the observer, but rather that individuals create their own meaning about the events in their lives based on past experiences, understandings, education, and socialization. This premise then allows for an understanding of reality as a "multi-verse" rather than a "uni-verse." With the notion of the individuation of reality, the positivist claim for an ultimate truth, or way of seeing, breaks down (Witkin, 1990). Social constructionism holds that reality is jointly constructed through language and that one comes to know this reality in unique ways (Gergen, 2001).

Constructionist-informed narrative practice broadens the discussion to include linguistic and cultural influences on one's reality construction and thus ways of being (White & Epston, 1990). Weick (1993) maintains that human knowing or way of understanding is shaped by culture to the extent that understanding something "as it really is, is no longer tenable" (p. 17). With an acceptance that culture influences how individuals perceive reality, both the creation and methods of maintenance of that culture and the creation and maintenance of self-in-culture are put into question. Foucault (1979, 1988) has extensively explored the link between the creation of self in a negotiated reality and the apparatus of cultural power and social control. He maintains that perception and concepts of self may be controlled by internalized social expectations and maintained by self-subjugation based on these expectations. These social rules have been described as discourse. Discourse encompasses the taken-for-granted assumptions and meanings underlying social practices that are accepted as truth and reality. Discourse acts as invisible, intersecting rivers of meaning and influence that pull individuals in different definitional directions. The deconstruction of the influence of discourse on individuals therapeutically has been championed by such therapists as Anderson and Goolishian (1988), Hare-Mustin (1994), Laird (1995), and White and Epston, (1990). For the sake of further clarity, Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) have outlined four basic tenets of social constructionism: (1) understanding of the world is created largely through "linguistic conventions" and cultural/historical contexts, (2) understanding occurs through social interaction, (3) dominant ways of understanding are socially negotiated, and (4) the categorization of understanding social phenomena "constrain certain patterns and reinforce others" (p. 211).

A narrative exploration of family will pay close attention to meaning creation and maintenance in that family. Particularly, a focus is placed on the use of language by the family, which creates and maintains family discourse, and limits change and opportunity by both the family and individual members. This has been described as the problem story (White & Epston, 1990)—a story or narrative being described as a series of events, linked in sequence through time, according to a specific plot (White, 1991). The goal in a narrative case study, therefore, is to understand the problem story, the problematic meaning in a family, and co-develop new meaning, (a new story) for the family. Ideally, this new story is one of optimism, collaboration, respect, and hope (Inger & Inger, 1992). In both deconstructing the problematic story and developing the new, a broader view considering all influences concerning those *in language* about a specific problem or situation should be included (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

It must be pointed out at this point that the use of the term *case study* is precarious, for postmodernism maintains that the observer is a part of the observed because one can never escape the limits of their interpretation. Thus, reality is always filtered through the biased interpretation of the observer (Laird, 1995). But postmodernism can be utilized in multiple ways provided that a claim to exclusive truth is made. I have made clear that these are "games of truth," as Foucault has stated (2011),

and that this case study is not stating facts or imposing views of truth on fictional characters; rather, it is an attempt to use *Hamlet* as one way to open several of a multitude of possibilities of understanding. Therefore, *postmodern case study* is, in actuality, a misnomer, and *postmodern conversation or collaboration* would be more suited; but given the limited possibilities of sitting down with Hamlet and family, this author asks that the reader forgive his postmodern trespasses for the sake of offering a discussion that it is hoped could exercise our thinking as practitioners and offer a new possibility for students and trainees to learn about narrative ideas. A brief overview of the story will now be presented to reacclimatize the reader to the story of *Hamlet*.

### BRIEF OVERVIEW OF HAMLET

*Hamlet* is an intricate story, and while it would be of benefit to have read or seen the play, this brief summary is offered to facilitate the narrative case study that follows. Please note that this story is complex, as are most stories of the families we work with in practice. The summary is presented as briefly as possible.

Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, and his father, “Old Hamlet,” has been killed by his uncle Claudius, who married Hamlet’s mother two months after the funeral and became King. Hamlet was unaware that Claudius had killed his father until a ghost claiming to be Hamlet’s father visits him. The ghost informs Hamlet of the murder and of his duty as a son to revenge his murder by killing Claudius.

Meanwhile, Ophelia, Hamlet’s girlfriend, is instructed by her father Polonius not to see Hamlet, whom she loves, because Hamlet is troubled. Two months pass, and Hamlet is either feigning madness or is mad, depending on one’s perspective. Polonius is also counselor to the King and diagnoses Hamlet as mad, but Hamlet’s mother Gertrude is uncertain. The Hamlet family asks Hamlet’s friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to return to Denmark to verify that he is insane.

Hamlet meanwhile contemplates suicide and decides to investigate whether his father was murdered. Hamlet hires actors to enact the murder of his father in front of the court. During the play, Hamlet watches Claudius carefully who, when the moment of the King’s death is presented, stops the play and runs out of the theater. Hamlet then believes his father was murdered. He severs his relationship with Ophelia because she assisted Polonius in spying on him and demands that she go to a nunnery to avoid men and marriage. He again contemplates suicide, decides against it, and solidifies his goal to kill the King. He goes to his mother to confront her about the murder. After a short discussion, Hamlet realizes that someone is hiding behind the tapestry spying on their conversation. He kills the spy and discovers it is Polonius. Hamlet finishes confronting his mother and explains that he is not mad.

Upon leaving, Gertrude tells the King that Hamlet has gone mad, and the King arranges for Hamlet to be sent to England and killed. He asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet with sealed instruction letters, but unbeknownst to his companions, Hamlet changes the letters and escapes. Meanwhile, in Denmark, Ophelia

has gone mad and died either accidentally or by suicide, depending on the interpretation. Hamlet returns to find that Ophelia is dead and is confronted by Laertes, son of Polonius and brother of Ophelia, who wishes revenge for his father's death. Hamlet and Laertes duel, and both are wounded with a poison blade. Gertrude accidentally drinks poisoned wine meant for Hamlet. Gertrude dies knowing that Claudius had attempted to poison Hamlet but killed her instead, Hamlet kills Claudius, and both Laertes and Hamlet die.

## NARRATIVE CASE STUDY

This exploration will begin with a general overview of the challenges of Hamlet's family from a narrative perspective and will proceed to more detailed accounts and examples that support the overview. The format will be in keeping with the non-linear circularity of a narrative approach as ideas build upon ideas. Through this narrative paradigm, the reader is invited to suspend linear thinking and opt for a paradigm of exploration. Values of good and bad must be suspended. Hamlet states this most succinctly when he says, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (II.ii.245). With this lens, events occur through interaction rather than from a cause and effect stance, and issues of guilt or innocence are mute. An exploratory, non-accusing vantage point is of particular importance when viewing the murder of Old Hamlet by Claudius.

From a narrative perspective, it is not the death of Hamlet's father, but the struggle to define the death that is the central problem for Hamlet's family. With this understanding, the family is locked in a struggle over the negotiation of how this event will be defined. What meaning will be attributed to it? Will it be privileged in the family's narrative? How will it be seen? How will it be negotiated into "reality?" The crux of the play then, from a narrative perspective, becomes a struggle for the grand narrative of this event.

Hamlet, fueled by discourse concerning sonly duty and struggling with adherence to social requirements, is attempting to have his father's tragic story honored. Claudius, meanwhile, struggling with his own interjected drive, is attempting to privilege the love between his wife and himself. He has killed for love and is fueled by a Machiavellian discourse, which offsets his crime as one he could not overcome because of love and ambition, "I am still possess'd / Of those effects for which I did the murder— / My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen" (III.iii.53–55).

From a narrative perspective we are presented with characters operating under the influence of multiple discourses and perspectives, Hamlet and Claudius, each struggling with what discourse and duty require of them. Claudius has acted and must find a way to live with his action, while Hamlet has yet to act and must struggle with discourses of son, duty, and honor.

Broadening this struggle to that nexus of people languaging about the problem, as time unfolds a negotiation is enacted in the social environment, both in and

surrounding the family, concerning when it is acceptable to murder. This again is dependent upon interpretation. Claudius has murdered Old Hamlet out of love for Gertrude as well as his own ambition and the discourse of success. If this is the case, then the question becomes, is it acceptable for Hamlet to murder him out of love for his father? Or is this revenge? Which story will be most accepted?

Likewise, after Hamlet kills Polonius, is it acceptable for Laertes to kill Hamlet out of love for his fallen father? Or is this revenge? The same is true for the death of Gertrude.

What we are left pondering from a narrative view is the ineffectiveness of linear revenge and causality. Where does it stop? Within this framework, the circular nature of revenge is exposed, thus shedding light on the discourse that perpetuates it, which is the true problem discourse of the story: *To thine own self be true*. The problem, of course, from a postmodern perspective is that this in and of itself is a discourse.

The discourse to which all are tragically bound is one ironically rooted in Western individual thought. It is verbalized by Polonius, “This above all: to thine own self be true” (I.iii.78). The absent but implicit message (White, 2000) in this discourse is that to be true to one’s self is to be rigid and non-negotiable concerning one’s perceptions—a stick-to-your-guns mentality disguised as honor and duty. This discourse operates to keep the Hamlet family isolated and separate from one another.

When held in a narrative context, particularly with reference to Foucault’s work (1979) concerning the influence of culture on self, the question must be raised, are the characters being true to themselves or to those discourses which surround them as members of royalty in Denmark? Are they, just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, puppets of social power? Likewise, are those we work with in our own practices working under allegiances to social discourses that separate them from themselves and operate in ways that disempower them?

The main point in *Hamlet* as a case study for the narrative therapist is to note how each character is moved to action by internalized social discourse and that this discourse drives not just action but the negotiation for meaning that occurs in social interactions. It is abundantly clear in *Hamlet* that the concept of social discourse is not just a philosophical concept but one that has real and very powerful effects. The Hamlet family is locked into a struggle based on individual discourses of revenge, honor, and sonly duty, with the aim of regaining social power to the extent that Hamlet believes he no longer has control over his own decision making due to being bound by duty.

The acceptance and self-subjugation around the Western discourse of stoic individualism appears to be the root of the *Hamlet* tragedy, for none wish to go forward, but all are *compelled by duty* to do so. Laertes speaks of Hamlet, “His greatness weigh’d, his will is not his own, / For he himself is subject to his birth” (I.iii.17–18). Hamlet makes mention of this inner struggle throughout the play:

O cursed spite  
That ever I was born to set it right! (I.v.189–190)

Am I a coward? . . .  
 Why what an ass am I! This is most brave,  
 That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,  
 Prompted to revenge by heaven and hell,  
 Must like a whore unpack my heart with words  
 And fall a-cursing like a very drab." (II.ii.556, 568–572)

And, in perhaps the most famous soliloquy in literature, "To be, or not to be" (III.i.56), Hamlet contemplates suicide to escape the discourse of sonly duty to exact revenge on Claudius, when he knows the action will destroy his mother, his family, and himself.

Wrapped in the discourse of individual honor, Hamlet sees no alternative but the binary decision to either kill Claudius or kill himself. In his contemplation, he decides that it is the unknown fear of death that holds all to life and that this same fear stagnates action. He thus accepts the discourse of honor/revenge and decides to kill Claudius. Hamlet speaks that,

[T]he dread of something after death. . . .  
 Makes us rather bear those ills we have  
 Than fly to others we know not of?  
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all . . .  
 And enterprises of great pith and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry  
 And lose the name of action. (III.i.78, 81–83, 86–88)

Blinded to any alternative solution but suicide or murder by the problematic individualized discourse masquerading as the idea to be true to oneself, Hamlet accepts the duty of revenge rather than take his own life.

Paralleling our current society, many of our clients may also fall under the influence of being bound by duty to the extent that they are feeling conflicted, stressed, and depressed: the gay adolescent who feels guilty because he receives messages that normality is heterosexual; the male who does not wish to climb the economic ladder but would rather stay home with his children and be a father; and the female who wishes to climb the corporate ladder and has less interest in motherhood. All of these are potential scenarios in which feelings of depression and general angst are directly related to internalized discourse. Shakespeare was well aware of the struggle between what we wish to do or be and the social pressures of what we are taught we are supposed to do or be. His brilliant capture of this tension is what has made *Hamlet* a legendary play.

### **Ophelia, Gertrude, Female Discourse, and Foucault's Docile Body**

Moving briefly into a feminist realm of narrative case study, while Hamlet and Claudius are struggling with self-definition and action, Ophelia and Gertrude



are subjugating themselves according to the dominant understanding of what a female should be in that era, that is, they are struggling to appease. The problem with which both must contend is whose meaning do they appease? The discourse of appeasement is presented often by Hamlet, “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (I.ii.146) and “O, most pernicious woman!” (I.v.105), as well as by Laertes, “Keep you in the rear of your affection, / Out of the shot and danger of desire” (I.iii.34–35). Further, while it is unclear whether Gertrude is aware that Old Hamlet was murdered (this has been a point of debate for literary scholars since the play’s publication); during the actors’ portrayal of the King’s murder, Gertrude’s response concerning the Queen is, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks” (III.ii.221), thus reflecting her view of the dominant female discourse that the Queen’s virtuous duty is to be amiable.

The connection between female discourse in *Hamlet* and present counseling is quite obvious given the continued message of female subservience prevalent today. Though it may be argued that this has subsided, evidence shows that females continue to be paid less than men for the same job, that there is often an expectation for full-time working females to also be primary caretakers of the home, and that females tend to have the most guilt related to lack of time spent with their children (Alcoff & Potter, 2013).

In *Hamlet*, both Gertrude and Ophelia find themselves trapped between family members. Gertrude is torn between Claudius and Hamlet, particularly concerning Hamlet’s madness. Ophelia is in much the same position and is trapped between her love for Hamlet and duty to her father. She has sworn to her father that she will not speak to Hamlet, yet she loves Hamlet and must deny these feelings. Both are in a position by virtue of internalized gender discourse to limit themselves to inaction. This discourse is to the detriment of both, as they meet their demise in ironic ways. Gertrude is killed by a misinterpretation when she drinks what appears to be Hamlet’s wine, but which is actually poison, thus dying in that betrayed space between Hamlet and Claudius. Ophelia is put in a position between discourses, a classic double bind (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). She has promised her father not to see Hamlet, but she loves them both. Hamlet has demanded that she go to a nunnery, and subsequently kills her father. She finds herself at a point from which she cannot escape so she appeases all by going mad, which from a narrative view could be seen as the ultimate form of self-subjugation (losing contact with one’s reality).

But is self-subjugation madness? In the convergence of internalized discourse, madness is the only way of being which will allow Ophelia to meet the expectations of the men she loves, her father and Hamlet. Through madness, she fulfills all the duties placed upon her: to stay away from Hamlet, stay away from all men, and go to a safe place, a nunnery. The irony is in the manner in which she dies. Ophelia is the literary docile body (Foucault, 1979), for in death, as in life, she was floating unknowingly down a stream, was caught up in the currents, and drowned due to the weight of her garments.



## The Construction of Madness

The topic of madness is not limited to Ophelia. Attention will now turn to a discussion of Hamlet's madness. Is Hamlet's madness real or feigned? A narrative exploration would state that it depends on one's perspective and that all perspectives, provided they have internal consistency, are acceptable. T. S. Elliot, when asked the same question responded, "Is the madness of Hamlet's critics real or feigned?" (Elliot, 1922/1998, p. 45). Elliot, perhaps inadvertently, makes a wonderful constructionist informed point in his response. Like all great art, the act of interpretation is a co-creation between creator and interpreter, just as a narrative perspective on interpretation is one of collaboration between observer and observed (Hare-Mustin, 1994). Therefore, *Hamlet* is different things to different people. This multiple perspective or multiverse is demonstrated often in the play through conversation.

The first exchange between Hamlet and Claudius is a pivotal example and sets the tone for all interaction that follows. Claudius asks Hamlet, after the wedding to Gertrude,

How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

*Hamlet*: Not so, my lord. I am too much i' th' sun. (I.ii.66–67)

Here one is faced with a multiplicity of meaning. The reader is asked to accept a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" perspective. Shakespeare leaves this decision to relational perspective. Claudius may interpret the word "sun" as celestial, or Hamlet may be referring to "son," as he is experiencing stress over being a son and the duty which comes with it. In this case, though both are talking, their meaning with one another is lost. Interpretation is present in Old Hamlet's funeral when Horatio explains to Hamlet that he came for his father's funeral, and Hamlet replies, "I think it was to see my mother's wedding. . . . / The funeral bak'd meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (I.ii.178, 180–181). What is seen as a wedding by some is a funeral to others. Both views are true. Even Denmark is subject to interpretation. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern allude to the wonderfulness of Denmark, to which Hamlet replies, "Denmark's a prison" (II.ii.240). Perhaps the closest to the discussion of the perception of death, Hamlet tells his mother after he has killed Polonius and before killing Claudius, "I must be cruel, only to be kind; / Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind" (III.iv.178–179). Again, action is open to interpretation of meaning.

Madness then is dependent upon the perspective of the observer, and as Foucault (1988) points out, truth is a negotiation of perspectives. In Hamlet's case, what may be perceived as madness may be his way of protesting against the dominant narrative that his father has been forgotten, or it may be a rational choice to escape the bonds of his station for a time, or a tool to plot against Claudius; or further, it may be seen from multiple other perspectives. The flatness of defining his madness

from an expert position is demonstrated by Polonius in his role as “counselor” to the King.

Your noble son is mad.

Mad call I it, for, to define true madness,  
What is't but to be nothing else but mad?

*Gertrude*: More matter with less art.

*Polonius*: Madam, I swear I use no art at all.  
That he's mad, 'tis true, 'tis true. (II.ii.92–97)

Connecting to discourse from a narrative perspective, it is only through the maintenance of firm conviction in being true to oneself (one's perceptions) that one may see another as mad. When each is firm in his or her conviction, there is no room to negotiate reality, only to stake claim to one's piece of it. This conviction and the acceptance of the individualistic problematic discourse that sets the stage for the entire family interaction are shown by Hamlet in his fourth line of the play when he responds to his mother's comment that he “seems” consumed by his father's death. Hamlet responds, “Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not ‘seems’” (I.ii.76). This again leads the discussion back to the individual discourse, self-subjugation, and the influence of the mantra “to thine own self be true,” thus creating no space for the family to redefine itself and find a new story.

### CONNECTING THE CONSTRUCTION OF MADNESS TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF DIAGNOSIS

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents a story in which the negotiation for truth and madness can serve as a platform to understand how the process of diagnosis in contemporary society is an act of definition, power, and control (Foucault, 1988). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is the preeminent manifestation of the biophysical paradigm and is used as a process of symptom interpretation. From a postmodern perspective, the act of symptom interpretation is not an objective act but one of many ways of constructing meaning (Gergen, 2001; Kutchins & Kirk, 2003). Think of the tired father who brings his child in to get meds for ADHD, but the child may be acting out for attention he never gets. Or the mother who claims her child is depressed when perhaps she, the mother, is overbearing in the family and argues with her husband, yet seeks ways to keep the family together. The thrust of diagnosis is to assess for disorders. This construction of madness is the running theme of Shakespeare: Which character in *Hamlet* is mad? What is often missed in a diagnostic process is that the act of blaming and scapegoating only serves to keep invisible the forces of discourse that may be at play in the actions of clients and their families. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

is a brilliant illustration of the tensions inherent in the negotiated construction of madness and diagnosis.

## CONCLUSION

From a narrative view, the Hamlet family is engaged in a struggle to negotiate the meaning of the traumatic death/murder of Old Hamlet and the subsequent marriage of Gertrude to Claudius. Each family member has internalized the discourse, “This above all: to thine own self be true” (I.iii.78), which serves to keep them separated by limiting communication and negotiation, leaving no room to “see” the other. Hence, in the story, family members are conversationally deaf to one another; and this is the true tragedy. They share common events, but the perceptions of events differ, and they have no space in which to discuss and negotiate meaning. It is clear that the individuation discourse may not be in the family’s best interest. Each member is operating according to social discourse based on gender and status, and each is trapped and struggling against this self-subjugation. Family members’ choices are reduced to the point that their actions are no longer their own. One event leads to another as a house of cards falls by the rules of individual honor and vengeance.

A final point must be made concerning the brilliance of Shakespeare in his ability to include an audience in the interpretation of events and to represent multiple interpretations of the same event by characters and audience alike. This collaborative meaning-making action is invited, in particular, through discussions of madness, through the irony of the play that occurs within the play, and in lines such as Hamlet’s promise to remember the ghost, “Remember thee? / Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe. Remember thee?” (I.v.95–97). The globe in this line may be understood as Hamlet’s mind, the world of which he is a part, or the name of the theater in which Shakespeare’s plays were performed, the Globe. Through Shakespeare’s brilliant use of language, he creates a world in which reality lay upon reality, a multiverse is created, and madness is an interpretive socially constructed notion.

Ultimately for the narrative therapist, *Hamlet* is a rich story for exploring discourse and the effects of self-subjugation based on internalized social discourse and the interpretation and negotiation of meaning. Most specifically, the direct impact of discourse in the Hamlet family becomes exceptionally clear and the real impact of this discourse is seen. Finally, *Hamlet* is a story from which narrative therapists can explore and recognize the complexity of madness and potentially question the current disorder and diagnostic era in mental health. The play can be used as a vehicle to show that the definitional power to define normality and madness is based in local and social politics, power, and control. *Hamlet* is an intricate play written by an author well aware that social

interactions create the reality of which we all are a part. It is a rich and fertile ground from which narrative conversations may spring and expanded notions of mental health may evolve.

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