William Shakespeare was a master at plumbing the depths of the human psyche, all the while keeping his prose vibrant and entertaining, even humorful. Among his great variety of carefully crafted modes and moods of the human spirit, his most masterful often seem to be his scenes and characters of utter madness. There are many of them in his dramatic landscapes of the soul, and every one rings true. He knew whereof he spoke. He understood the contours and confections of insanity from inside out. I wish herein to set them forth in critical review, empathic to the characters and scenes, but most of all discerning of the inner world of the *dramatis personae*; and of the theatrical persona of the author that those characters reflect.

Of course, it required no rocket scientist and no bard of Shakespearean stature to discover in every human life an exciting and unsolvable puzzle, bound up in an enigma, wrapped in a mystery. Were Shakespeare’s people mostly sad or mad, glad or scared? Lots of all of those moods and emotions populate his poetry, and frequently in the same person at the same time. Everyone knows of Hamlet and his progressive slide into paranoia and depression. Almost all of us feel ambivalent about his insanity; its causes seem obvious, its inevitability predictable, but is he not merely the victim of circumstance? Or does he simply feign such dysfunction? How else could he cope? What then of Othello and his consorts, Iago, Roderigo, Cassio and company. Who is the mad one there? Or Romeo and Juliet, are they unhinged by fate or infatuation in their slide down the slippery slope of doom? Macbeth, of course, and Lady Macbeth, in company of Banquo and Macduff: heroic in dimension, as the gods of the Niebelungen; or just plain crazy? One can go on to Lear, Polonius, Poor Yorick, and the others.

What is of interest here is not merely to name or numerate them but to look into the manner in which Shakespeare so cleverly crafts the humanness of three of their number, as it slides subtly into the strange-
ness so common among humans, yet so dreadful. What is the artful nature of his storied descriptions; what his diagnoses; does the characterization carry through authentically; how does he have them well and ill, crazy and profound, all at the same time, offering at once near divine revelations and the sputterings or obsessive logorrhea of the damned insane?

Caroline F.E. Spurgeon, in her analysis of imagery in five of Shakespeare’s plays, declares that in general Shakespeare was naturally a man of his own moment as he viewed humanity, but on the issue of madness he showed “a comprehension far beyond his time.”

His sensitive understanding of the influence of mind on body…put him nearest to modern expert opinion, and this is as marked in his early as his later work. Thus the whole story of the cause and development of madness in a brain over-strained with exasperation and anguish is sketched in the _Comedy of Errors_, fifteen years before the full portrait of it is drawn in _King Lear_. But apart from the great pictures of mind acting on body in such plays as _King Lear_ and _Macbeth_, the detailed knowledge of how this interaction works peeps out in unexpected touches in the images, as when Lucrece laments, “To see the salve doth make the wound ache more (Romeo and Juliet 1.1.201),” or when Romeo points out the ill effects upon a sick man of urging him to make his will.

In interest of time and space, let us look specifically at three cases only: Iago, King Lear, and Hamlet, as paradigmatic of Shakespeare’s incredible discernment of the nature and causes of insanity, as displayed in his magnificently crafted characters. There will be other occasions to deal with the rest of the panoply of sick and disturbed characters in Shakespeare.

_Othello_ was Shakespeare’s twenty ninth or thirtieth play, written when he was 40 years of age. It was first played at the Court Theatre in London on 1 November 1604. Parrott thinks that it “is in many ways Shakespeare’s masterpiece of construction in the realm of tragedy;” its characters and scenes the most authentic and believable of all the

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2 Spurgeon, _Shakespeare’s Imagery_, pp. 136-137.