

FROM ILLNESS TO META-SELVES IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* AND *KING LEAR*: NEW IDENTITIES IN THE TIME OF DISEASE

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates pictures of disease and corruption in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* and their role in changing identities and creating the concept of the meta-self. Images of rottenness, contagion, ulcers, surgery, diseased bodies, and sickness are displayed and discussed. The research traces three interrelated trajectories. First, it proves that illness and diseases were a major preoccupation in England during the Early Modern period. Second, it demonstrates that diseases could be considered a source of inspiration by playwrights like William Shakespeare. *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are depicted as plays teeming with images of contagion, decay, and an unhealthy atmosphere. Third, it examines the link between sickness and the transformation of the main characters in the time of disease. The metamorphosis of the characters follows what Baudrillard calls “hyperreality” or the “traversing” self. The research has corroborated the pertinence of the concept of “the meta-self” as a manifestation of “the transmigratory nature of the text” while dealing with the protagonists of both plays. The meta-self is part of personal identity since self and identity are interrelated concepts. The meta-self is a self that goes beyond challenging social and ethical standards; it shuns dogmatic overconfident beliefs about life and functions as a traversing mind that constantly reassesses the certitudes of humans. The meta-selves become like re-narrated self-narratives. Once told, they help the protagonists reconstruct their identities amid chaos, disease, and pandemics. The article draws a guiding thread tracing the undercurrent dynamic between characters, on the one hand, and disease, on the other. The meta-self is multifaceted; it is not only about mental or psychological growth but also the creation of a new theatrical self. In the transformation process, characters represent theatrical entities and acquire theatrical identities.

Keywords: *Diseases and illness, King Lear, Hamlet, meta-self, self and identity, trans migratory nature of the text, Shakespeare, Baudrillard*

INTRODUCTION

Late Medieval and Early Modern periods witnessed periodical disease and epidemic outbreaks. Historical records of the late fifteenth century, for example, have dwelled on a deadly London disease called the “sweating sickness” that cost the lives of thousands of people²³. The second half of the sixteenth century

²³ In his article entitled “The English Sweating Sickness, with Particular Reference to the 1551 Outbreak in Chester” (1991), Hunter, P. R. dwells on the disease and its consequences on England: “During the 15th and 16th centuries in England, there were five epidemics of a disease characterized by fever and profuse sweating and associated with high mortality. This disease became known as the English sweating sickness. The first epidemic occurred during 1485 at around the time of Henry Tudor's victory at Bosworth Field, and the last took place during the reign of Edward VI in 1551. The disease tended to occur during the summer and early autumn. The relatively affluent male adult population,

was characterised by profound topographical and demographic changes in London²⁴ as well as continuous waves of plagues to the point that theatres were closed from 1592 to 1594, then from 1603 to 1604²⁵. Significant events like the coronation of King James the first were delayed because of plagues²⁶.

Because medicine was not a well-developed science and because diseases are inter-related with life and death, Shakespeare and his contemporaries have theatricalised notions of disease and sickness in their plays and conferred on them a specific discourse, explicit imagery, and equivocal spaces in a context where plagues were feared, and psychological illnesses were observed as spectacles. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ([1602] 1982) and *King Lear* ([1606] 2005) display manifestations of physical and mental illness; they also examine their effects on protagonists in agony. In these plays, there is an interconnectedness between diseases and tragic outcomes. Critical reception has been aware of the possibilities corruption, and disease could offer to early modern playwrights. In that vein, Jacqueline Vanhoutte emphasises in her article "Denmark's Rotting Reconsidered" (2012) the interest Shakespeare and his contemporaries could have had for staging sickness by infusing images of disease into their works, stressing the intensity of such an element both on stage, and in exploring psychic and physical transformations of protagonists.

Elizabethan playwrights and pamphleteers continued to find the disease a convenient device for exploring the relationships between mind and body, self and community, and soul and God. Leprous symptoms feature prominently in the anti-theatrical fulminations of Stephen Gosson, who associates the "filthie corrupt, spotted and defiled" nature of plays with the tendency of actors "by outward signes to shewe themselves otherwise than they are" (393).²⁷

The primary research problem that the present article raises is to study the development of selves and identities in a pandemic context characterised by decay, contagion, and hostility. Suppose the present-day situation makes the study of pandemics and identity development up to date within a post-Covid-19 context. In that case, the bridge between self, identity and diseases within an Early Modern context remains to be discovered. The choice of William Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* stems from the fact that these two tragedies offer rich possibilities of interpretation for the interrelatedness between the self and identity, on the one hand; and between self-development and disease, on the other. Another major challenge the research raises is bridging the gap between different kinds of selves, such as individual and theatrical selves. Three main areas will constitute the bulk of the analysis. The first part of the research aims at portraying the social reality of the Early Modern Period in times of pandemics and then compares it to the world of the plays under study. The opening section is twofold. A preliminary historical investigation will survey the pandemic status of London during the early modern period. The research will then investigate pictures of physical and mental disease and corruption in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear* through the study of imagery. Elsinore, as well as Denmark, are going to be investigated as unhealthy places. Images

particularly the clergy, seemed to suffer the highest attack rates, and, except in one epidemic, the disease appears to have attacked only individuals native to England. » (Hunter 303).

³²Grantley (2008, pp. 14-15) comments on the extensive growth of London in the sixteenth century London and highlights how new demographic areas were created outside the walled city.

³³ See Cutler, A. (2020). Plague and Pandemic in Shakespeare's Time. *Rose Theatre*.
<https://rosetheatre.org/news/plague-and-pandemic-in-shakespeares-time>

³⁴Kelsey, H. (2016) explains in her article entitled « Sovereign and the sick city in 1603 » the difficult instances of King James' access to the throne because of the intensity of the plague: "James had barely got comfortable on his new English throne before a devastating outbreak of plague swept through London and the surrounding countryside. This was to be one of the deadliest instances of plague in England's history, eventually claiming around a quarter of London's population." (n.p).

³⁵Vanhoutte, J. (2012). "Denmark's Rotting Reconsidered".

of rottenness, contagion, ulcers, surgery, diseased bodies, and sickness will be displayed and discussed. The Ghost's account of the poison going through "the natural gates and alleys of the body" (Shakespeare [1606] 2005, 1.5.66) and thickening his blood is a poignant graphic medical description of his anatomy. Moreover, the analysis will prove the existence of a carefully constructed pattern where imagery of medicine and surgery is used as a remedy against the dominating sickness of Denmark. Prince Hamlet compares himself to a surgeon who will "tent [Claudius] to the quick" (Shakespeare, 2. 2. 550); meanwhile, Claudius confesses to Laertes the need for drastic surgery to put an end to "the quick of th'ulcer" (4.7. 120). *King Lear* follows a similar pictorial and emotional logic as *Hamlet*. It develops images of a "gored" Kingdom, wounded flesh, and broken minds. The patriarch affirms that his two daughters are "a disease that's in [his] flesh [...] a boil / A plague-sore-, or embossed carbuncle, / in his corrupted blood" ([1602] 1982, 2. 4. 216-220). The second part of the article plays the role of a pivotal transitory section that aims at tracing the link between the self and identity and then examine both the questions of the self and identity in Early Modern England from the perspective of notorious scholars such as Yeung and Martin (2003), Taylor (2022), Alissandri (2021), Barker (1995), Hackett (2022), Belsey (1993), Maus (1995), and Prickett (2021). Working on the self and identity, whether from a contextual perspective or a broader sense, will corroborate that selves and identities change and witness drastic transformations due to external social factors and pandemic situations in both plays. The final part of the article will empirically demonstrate how selves change, and new identities are acquired due to external factors. The analysis displays what happens to the humanness of the protagonists amid disease and chaos. It explores how sickness transforms the behaviour and attitudes of the major characters in both plays by paving the way for their moral growth. The analysis will highlight Prince Hamlet's and King Lear's metamorphosis after being violently confronted with illness. Their transformation follows what Baudrillard calls "hyperreality" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 22) or the "traversing" self (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 106). The research will corroborate the applicability of the concept of "the meta-self" as a manifestation of "the transmigratory nature of the text" (Ben Amor 2020, p. 17) while dealing with the protagonists of both plays. The last part of the analysis will show that the traversing self or the meta-self is also theatrical.

Literature review

There have been prolific studies about diseases and corporeality in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, notably Altick, R. D. (1954), who in "Hamlet and the Odor of Mortality" has read the play as a demonstration of "the corruption of mortal flesh" (167) and Hunt, J. (1988) in "A Thing of Nothing: The Catastrophic Body in *Hamlet*" who dwells on the importance of the body as a "medium" of suffering (27) leading to nothingness and Hassel, R. C. (1994) who, in "Hamlet's 'Too, Too Solid Flesh'", has dealt with the dichotomy between flesh and soul from a religious Lutheran perspective²⁸. There has also been very pertinent research mapping the dynamics of sickness in *King Lear* from the perspective of psychoanalysis. Somasundaram Ottilingam, in his article "The Psychiatry of *King Lear*" (2007), has enumerated some of the most critical investigations

³⁶Hassel, R. C. (1994) explains the link between the play and Lutheranism as follows: "From a Lutheran perspective, the sexuality Hamlet complains about in Ophelia and Gertrude more appropriately describes the "concupiscence and self-will" of Hamlet's own self-absorption. In expounding his theology of grace, Luther repeatedly calls this spiritual illness the prudence or wisdom of the flesh. In this context the primary symptom of Hamlet's "too, too solid flesh" is his frustrating, paralyzing desire for perfect knowing and perfect doing, a desire John Donne once calls the 'carnality of the understanding' " (609).

studying *King Lear* from the lens of psychiatry, such as Andreasen, N. J. C. (1976), Kail, A. C. (1983), Colman, E. A. M. (1986). Trethowan, W. H. (1988), and Truskinovsky, A. M. (2002)²⁹.

However, the lack of focus on the effects of sickness on the character's transformation has triggered the present research's focal attention. Illness will not only be diagnosed; there will also be an emphasis on the moral change of both King Lear and Hamlet in the last part of the analysis. If Shakespeare's plays show explicit references to diseases and pathologies, that is because the sanitary situation in England was a significant source of preoccupation for his contemporaries.

External factors that shape identities: Diseases and pathologies in the time of the Renaissance

Diseases and bad health conditions were widespread in Elizabethan England. In the Early Modern Period, people were showing discrimination against individuals with perceptible signs of illness. London, the overcrowded city then, was rat-infested because of terrible hygiene conditions, lack of sanitation, and the profusion of open sewers running in the city's streets. In addition, sexual promiscuity caused so many diseases, such as syphilis. Collin Milburn, in his article "Syphilis in Faerie Land" (2005), talks about the "syphilitic apocalypse" (597) and claims that:

Near the end of the sixteenth century, the spread of syphilis in England seemed to many contemporary observers to have exploded into epidemic proportions. London surgeon William Clowes reported in 1585 that there were not enough beds in London's hospitals to accommodate the number of syphilis patients requiring treatment (Milburn 597).

Elizabethan London was a boiling cauldron for all sorts of diseases such as the Bubonic Plague, also called the Black Death, typhoid, skin diseases and smallpox, abscesses, broken bones, bone diseases like rheumatism or arthritis, lung diseases such as tuberculosis and gastroenteritis, known at that time as bloody flux, among a plethora of other diseases. Elizabethan medicine was relatively simple; it relied on old Hippocratic medical traditions, including letting blood, medicinal herbs, bandages, wormwood, balms, etc. Healers were divided into hierarchies with Licensed Physicians on top of the rank, then Surgeons who were inferior to Physicians, and finally Barbers who are practitioners allowed very few tasks such as pulling teeth or letting blood. In his article, Milburn (2005) summed up some of the most important medical practices by famous Elizabethan physicians.

³⁷Ottilingam S. in "The Psychiatry of *King Lear* (2007) gives a survey of the most interesting researches that studied the madness of the king: "Madness in *King Lear* continues its spell over the psychiatrists of the 20th and 21st centuries. Andreasen makes a diagnosis that "Lear's madness can be explained in part as the development of a psychotic disorganization precipitated by severe stress in an elderly man already showing some signs of senile organic brain disease." Therefore, in her interpretation, "Lear has a mild organic brain syndrome that develops under stress into a reactive psychosis." In his 1983 article, Kail takes an interesting excursion into the history of psychiatry, as it relates to Shakespeare and diagnoses in Lear "a case of progressive senile dementia" that is "accompanied by attacks of what could be described today as acute mania, as demonstrated by his faulty judgment, disorientation and irrational behavior." Colman established for Lear a diagnosis of brief reactive psychosis with a background of organic mental disorder, perhaps of a vascular origin, exemplified by the King's visual hallucinations and an intimation of a stroke just before Lear's death. Trethowan thinks that Lear was a depressed victim of "involutional melancholia". According to Truskinovsky the case of Lear warrants the diagnosis of bipolar I disorder, most recent episode manic, severe with psychotic features. The manic episode was primary and the psychosis developed on its background, provoked by the increasing agitation and physical exertion. It's a wonder how Shakespeare's characters fit so well into the categories of DSM IV and ICD 10. We can only join Ben Jonson when he says of Shakespeare 'He was not of an age, but for all time.'" (Ottilingam, 2007, p.55)

Famous Elizabethan healers like William Clowes and Peter Lowe, along with those Continental writers whose translated treatises on the pox were most popular and widely available in late-sixteenth century England, such as Ulrich von Hutten, Giovanni da Vigo, Daniel Sennert, and Philippus Hermanni, advocated the following procedures that—usually performed in order of increasing interiorisation, from external surgery to internal physic—comprised the best-known regimen for successfully rooting out the disease: (1) bloodletting, lancing, and cauterisation; (2) resolution and desiccation; (3) mercury; and (4) guaiacum (Milburn 603).

Notorious writers, namely Gil Harris in his book *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England* (1998) and Crane M. T.'s review of Michael C. Schoenfeldt's *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (2001) but also Kevin P. Siena in his article "Pollution, Promiscuity, and the Pox: English Venereology and the Early Modern Medical Discourse on Social and Sexual Danger" (1998) and Andrew Wear in *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550-1680* (2000), among others, have worked exhaustively on the different pathologies in the Early Modern period and their relation to the body significantly. The purpose of the present article, as I have explained earlier, is not to endeavour to detail the pathologies and the medicine of the period under study; it is instead to build the bridge between the reality of the period and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ([1602] 1982) as well as *King Lear* ([1606] 2005) where pictures of disease, contagion, corruption, rottenness, decay, unhealth and surgery are going to be detected through scrutiny of the text, and finally related to the main characters who, out contagion and diseases, experience a state of metamorphosis and via a transcending "meta-self".

Pictures of Disease and Corruption in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*

From the outset, *Hamlet* foreshadows a turbulent atmosphere. Immediately, William Shakespeare introduces a mood of anxiety and fear. The dialogue between the soldiers on the gun platform of the castle of Elsinore is fragmented; the rhythm is broken, and the verse does not flow. Interrogative forms colour the speeches of the soldiers. William Shakespeare gives a tone to the tragedy by the plethoric use of images of disease and corruption. Hamlet's opening scene introduces a sentinel who is "sick at heart" on stage. As for Marcellus, the other sentinel on the gun platform of Elsinore Castle, he sustains that: "something is rotten in the State of Denmark" (1. 4. 90). Gertrude herself uses in Act Four Scene five the term "sick" (4.5.16) to qualify her soul which reinforces what Hamlet has told her in Act three, Scene four (3.4.42-44) about her virtue taken as a rose and replaced by a "blister" on her head. Prince Hamlet himself believes that his country has become "an unweeded garden" inhabited by "things rank and gross in nature" (1. 2. 35-36). As for the Ghost, he describes murder as: "foulest, as in the best it is" (1. 2. 27), and the assassination of a king, a representative of God on earth and a close family member, as "foulest, strange, and unnatural" (1.2. 28); he insists on the agonising nature of his Purgatorial suffering.

I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires, (1. 4. 10-13)

Claudius occasions the tragic outcomes in *Hamlet* by committing fratricide and regicide. The Ghost gives a minutely detailed account of the scene in a highly violent graphic description in which he harps on the poison's assault on the sacred body of the king and reinforces the Early Modern English medical beliefs that the human body is the host of various fluids.

And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment [...]
Swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body, (1.5.63,64, 66)

Shakespeare does not limit his description of Claudius as a "treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain" (2.2.581) or a "satyr" (1. 2. 140); he, instead, compares him to a stinging serpent of the Garden of Eden and the cause of the pollution of "the royal bed of Denmark", again, the description is graphic. The surgical medical act of stinging is accentuated.

'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me—so the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abus'd (1. 5. 35-38)

Caroline Spurgeon (2001) insists on the prevailing images of sickness and relates them to the whole situation of Denmark, whether from a political or a moral perspective: "We discover that the idea of an ulcer or tumour, as descriptive of the wholesome condition of Denmark normally, is, on the whole, the dominant one" (Spurgeon, 2001, p. 316). In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare works carefully on the setting of a binary dynamic built on chaos/disease: wherever there is a threat, conflict, struggle, and chaos, there are images of sickness and traces of wounds and blood. Hamlet considers the shameful adulterous relationship of his mother as a disease, an infection, "an ulcerous place" (Shakespeare, [1602], 1982, 3.4.149) that needs to be healed (3.4.148) as Laertes attempting to contain the femininity of his sister Ophelia, warns her of the dangers of Hamlet and the risk of "contagious blastments" (1.2.42) if she loses her virginity. Threats in the play are not only about females trying to find a place and males containing them; they are also of a political level where a medieval order struggles to survive within a new Renaissance logic built around realpolitik. There is state violence; there are wars and invasions. Hamlet considers the war between Norway and Poland as a tumour that grows until it becomes dangerous: "That inward breaks and shows no cause without / Why the man dies." (4.4. 27-28). Hamlet is also unable to cope with all sorts of threats in his world; that is one of the reasons why his "wit's diseased" (3.2.291) and days are "sickly" (3. 3. 96). It seems that Denmark is in total disintegration where "the toe of the peasant comes so near to the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe." and "diseases [are] desperate grown" (4.3.9). Corruption and diseases are the consequences of a crown loathed by adultery and murder. The gravediggers, in a carnivalesque scene par excellence, work and sing amid "pocky corses" and stinky dead bodies. In the same scene, Horatio chokes Hamlet's epiphanic moment by stressing the stinking atmosphere at the graveyard.

Hamlet: Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion in the earth?
Horatio: And smelt so? Pah!...(5.1.173-174)

Shakespeare pushes the carnivalesque and the grotesque to the extreme when he displays, through the words of Hamlet, excessively violent, disgusting but cryptic, poignant, and staccato responses to Claudius' interrogations.

Claudius: Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

Hamlet: At supper.

Claudius: At supper where?

Hamlet: Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms is e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table. That's the end.

Claudius: Alas, alas!

Hamlet: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

Claudius: What dost you mean by this?

Hamlet: Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. (4.3. 18-32)

Hamlet, while doing his favourite exercise, directing a play, performs the role of a doctor and enjoys the image of stabbing human flesh. Talking about Claudius, he expresses his unfulfilled desire to “tent [him] to the quick” (2. 2. 550). Similarly, to fantasise about his frustrated desire to act through bloodshed, he graphically paints images of disease and ulcers to describe his mother’s incestuous and adulterous relationship with his uncle.

It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen. (3.4, 148-150)

The prince is not the only one affected by illness and whose “wit’s diseased” (3.2.291). His uncle, the usurper of the throne and the adulterate father-in-law, claims that Hamlet is similar to a plague “like the hectic in my blood rages” (5. 3. 62). Claudius who wants to use the term “remedy” to express his desire to get rid of the young Prince. After sending Hamlet to England to execute him, Claudius ascertains that “Diseases desperate grown/ By desperate appliance are relived” (5. 3. 9-11). He maintains that there is a need for drastic surgery “to the quick of th’ulcer”. To the interrogations of the suspicious Claudius, Hamlet explains that the flesh and the guts of deceased corpses, whether they belong to kings or beggars, mix to become a dish for worms (4.3.18-32). Images of prostitution run through the play as a complement to the imagery of disease. Hamlet believes that the consequences of the sexual depravity of Gertrude are similar to a wound that “sets a blister there” (3.4.44) and affects his relationship with Ophelia. Decay, corruption, and contagion are manifestations of permanent violence that take different forms in the play. They are both physical and mental. They also echo the alienated self of Hamlet in his quest for truth. In this context, Stephen Greenblatt in *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2013) believes that the “corrosive inwardness is the hallmark” of the play whose hero suffers from a “contagious, almost universal self-estrangement.” (Greenblatt, 2013, p. 14). Chaos and violence, from this perspective, become the results of both external rottenness, decay, and brutality in *Hamlet*; they are linked to transgressions and the disturbance of natural order caused by adultery, fratricide, and regicide. Indeed, if violence and chaos dominate the atmosphere of the play, it is because of the monstrosity of anti-ethical deeds causing total dismay in the state of Denmark. Later in the analysis, the effect of decay and corruption on Hamlet will be discussed. However, to show the same emotional logic between *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, the forthcoming analysis will investigate the disease concept in *King Lear*.

Shakespeare’s *King Lear* follows a similar pictorial and emotional logic as *Hamlet*. It develops images of a “gored” Kingdom, wounded flesh, and broken minds. The patriarch affirms that his two daughters are “a disease that’s in [his] flesh [...] a boil / A plague-sore-, or embossed carbuncle, / in his corrupted blood” (2. 4. 216-220). In Elizabethan times, warts, sores, and blisters were harbingers of contagious diseases such as plague, syphilis, and smallpox, so their fear was well-founded. Indeed, from *King Lear*’s denunciation of “Thou art a boil, a plague sore, an embossed carbuncle” to the constant abuse heaped upon *King Henry IV*’s Bardolph for his nose like “an everlasting bonfirelight” (Shakespeare, ([1599] 2009), the bard has no lack of skin condition-derived insults.

Thematically and literally speaking, the play deals with blindness as a pathology, an illness, but also symbolic blindness. Zied Ben Amor (2020) has exploited the concept of illness in *King Lear* in his article entitled “Mapping Sight and Blindness in *King Lear*(s) of William Shakespeare and Roberto Ciulli: Towards a Poly-optic Reading”. Apart from the pathology of blindness, the play offers interesting possibilities for psychiatrists and neurologists to establish a diagnosis of King Lear as falling prey to diverse types of mental illness. In that vein, Tibon Roni (2017) has examined *King Lear* from the lens of neurosciences and concluded that the ageing monarch is affected by dementia.

King Lear’s symptoms mostly fit with Dementia with Lewy bodies (DLB), which is the second most common diagnosis of dementia after Alzheimer’s disease [...] King Lear exhibits cognitive and motor

impairments, irrational thinking, sudden mood changes, paranoia, hallucinations, delusions, and inability to recognise people he knows.” (Tibon np).

Moreover, the American Psychiatric Association (Ed.) has qualified in, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1998), the victims of Narcissistic Personality Disorder as individuals who “crave attention from others [and who] usually want praise for their ‘superiority’” (657); these victims are also described as individuals who “have a lack of empathy and [...] difficulty recognising the desires, subjective experiences, and feelings of others” (1998, p.659). The above description corresponds precisely to the portrayal of King Lear, who, at the beginning of the play, reacts violently against the resistance of his daughter Cordelia and who fits within the diagnosis of the Narcissistic as someone who “may react with disdain, rage, or defiant counterattacks” (660).

The present article raises a focal research point that has not been investigated before, which consists in bridging the gap between illnesses, diseases, and the transformation of the characters. The research will demonstrate that William Shakespeare uses pathologies to problematise his plays, enhance the theatrical, and reinforce the tragic consequences. If illness affects the body, how does it shape and transform minds? The coming analysis will explore the transformations in the characters’ minds and link them to theatricality by introducing what I would call the theatrics of the mind. The theatrics of the mind constitute a whole process of internal conflicts that ultimately lead to creating a new self on the stage, consequently a new identity within the space of the theatre. The use of theatrics, in this context, pinpoints the idea of performance or histrionic manifestations where there is self-display, theatre-within-theatre, and selves within selves. The term theatrics relates to acting and creating on-stage theatrical entities. Theatrics is used in matters that concern theatre or could be easily adaptable to the requirements of the stage. Building a bridge between the self and identity is crucial before dealing with the notion of the meta-self, whether the concept of the meta-self is mental or theatrical.

Questions of the Self and Identity in Times of Pandemics and Early Modern England

This intermediate section aims to pave the way for studying the growth of the concept of the self in situations of chaos and disease, which will be discussed in the last part of the article. The final part of the analysis will show how the self develops in a context where two problems are at work. The first one is the pandemic environment, times of disease and decay. The second one is identity formation and its relation to the self. Working on questions of the self and identity in the time of pandemics will pave the way to investigate the transformation process of King Lear and Hamlet amid disease and rottenness until the birth of what the research calls “meat-selves” because of permeating chaos and corruption. The present section attempts to explain that self and identity are interrelated matters. Pandemic life, times of crisis, and the threat of diseases undoubtedly create psychological changes. Whether in literary works or real life, the chaos caused by diseases is reinforced by ambiguity mixed with a misunderstanding of the situation and a sense of emergency. From the moment that science considers “the self as a social product” (Yeung and Martin 843), decay and corruption might push characters to question their selves and their identities through various phases starting from expressing a desire to return to previous situations or better ones and moving towards circumstances of development and change. In his article “The psychology of pandemics” (2022), Steven Taylor emphasises how pandemics affect selves, minds, and psychologies more than physical bodies.

The psychological footprint of pandemics tends to be larger than the medical footprint, in that psychological effects are more pronounced, widespread, and longer-lasting than the purely somatic effects of infection (Taylor 587).

In the same vein, Guido Alessandri insists in his article “Can Self-Concept Clarity Protect against A Pandemic? A Daily Study on Self-Concept Clarity and Negative Affect during the COVID-19 Outbreak” (2021) on the presence of an intrinsic link between the self, its development, and the stress process caused by diseases and pandemics.

Findings from the present study suggest that self-concept clarity has a beneficial effect on psychological adjustment, as it plays a protective role against a stressful event at the beginning of the lockdown. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a unique, unprecedented event [...] Having a sense of self that is clear and stable, being related to a short-term gain in lower negative affect during the lockdown, may likely make a difference in terms of behavior and attitudes toward the pandemic. At the same time, these results point to self-concept clarity as a potential focus area for interventions to enhance emotional well-being under stressful circumstances (Alessandri 16).

The findings of Alessandri in the above quotation are of paramount importance since they point towards how a stressful pandemic situation could affect the self but, at the same time, could lead to psychic and behavioural transformations leading to character development. The final part of the analysis will focus on such a matter. From a macrocosmic scale, the present article negotiates the idea of the interconnectedness between identity and the self in times of pandemics. Identity cannot be separated from the self. The self is an inner entity of a person. Meanwhile, identity is acquired and practised at a social exterior level. Consequently, the self reflects one's identity since the different components that constitute an identity are assimilated and re-distributed to constitute what a self is. Jean-Claude Kauffmann argues in his article entitled “Identity and the New Nationalist Pronouncements” (2011) that the concept of identity cannot be separated from the individual and his past; he consequently draws the link between identity and the self.

It is a common mistake to believe that identity deals with history, our memory, and our roots. While the center of identity-related processes is quite different, it cannot certainly ignore objective reality, and the individual's past. The inflationary use of the term dates only half a century back. Before that (except for administration) rarely was there any question of identity posed because the individual was defined mainly by the institutional frameworks that determined him (Kauffmann 1).

At the same time, it is possible to consider the presence of a multitude of selves within one individual, such as the private self, the public self, and even the cyber self, if we talk about our current modern context. Undeniably, the public self has much in common with identity since both are manifested as social behaviour. In the metamorphosis of Hamlet and King Lear, the creation of what will be called later the meta-self is going to be observed via what the public self would display to the outside world. Researchers in the field of psychology as a science dwell on the interconnectedness between the various layers of the self and identity. In that vein, Liudmila N. Liutsko ascertains, in her article “Proprioception as a Basis for Individual Differences” (2013), that there are eight stages necessary for individuals before reaching a mature awareness of themselves in the process of what she calls “proprioception” (111). According to her, the eight factors prove the interconnectedness between notions of self and identity³⁰. In *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, characters undergo different experiences shaped by chaos and disease before reaching significant transformations. The scope of the reflection on the self during Elizabethan England has been an area of investigation by a plethora of critics, such as Francis Barker, who, in his book *The Tremulous Private Body* (1995), investigates the idea of the self-possessed subject in relation to body, corporeality and politics. In

³⁰The eight factors developed by Liutsko in her above-mentioned book are the sense of body or bodily self, the sense of self-identity, the sense of self-esteem or pride, the sense of self-extension, self-image, sense of self as a rational coping being, appropriate striving or motivation, and self as knower or as a subject of knowledge (110-112).

her book *The Elizabethan Mind: Searching for the Self in an Age of Uncertainty* (2022), Helen Hackett dedicates an entire chapter to discussing how the self for Elizabethans is constructed upon the medical findings of the period that claim the interconnectedness between the body and the mind. Hackett insists that a healthy self cannot be separated from a healthy body in sixteenth-century medical knowledge. Her book draws heavily on the sixteenth-century beliefs in the viability of the Hippocratic humoral theory or the Theory of the Four Humours stipulating that the link between body and mind determines temper and humour, which are based on the balance or the absence of balance between four essential fluids that the human body hosts which are blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm³¹. Hackett's book explicitly draws how Early Modern England's knowledge of the mind was built on a mixture of philosophical and medical data with an insistence that minds, i.e., selves and/or identities, are shaped and affected by the disease, contagion, and decay

According to The French Academy, a widely read compendium of philosophical and scientific knowledge, the state of a person's mind was clear just from looking at the shape of their head. 'They which have the head over-great and ill-favoured [badly formed], whom we commonly call great blockheads', were 'naturally unapt to conceive, and to bring forth any sensible and witty thing'. The Examination of Men's Wits agreed that a big head indicated slowness and stupidity, because it 'consists all of bones and flesh and contains a small quantity of brain, as it befalls in very big oranges, which opened, are found scarce of juice and hard of rind'. These ideas that the size and structure of the head reflected mental abilities formed part of an extensive body of sixteenth-century thought that linked body and mind (19).

The study of Prince Hamlet and King Lear's development from characters in grief into emancipated ones takes into consideration Hackett's ideas that, for Elizabethans, a mind in agony reflects an unhealthy environment. Hackett's analysis also proves that bodily health is closely related to the mental one, which means that selves can be affected and transformed by situations of pandemics and disease.

In *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (1993), Catherine Belsey explores the matter of self and identity within the Elizabethan males and females from a differential perspective by focusing on the idea of asymmetry of gender paradigms in the time of the Renaissance. She dwells on the concept of subjectivity and compares it to a present-day reading with males as subjects to whom femaleness is related. She also highlights the importance of the growth of selfhood. By discussing the matter of the self and identity, Belsey shuns the concept of unity in classical drama; she undermines the idea of the homogeneity of culture. She also ascertains that the dramatic persona is a developing entity in the context of antagonistic forces within hostile environments. Undeniably the questions raised by Belsey, which focus on maleness and femaleness, are legitimate. What is interesting about her work is the focus on the idea of the subject in Early Modern England. Equally, the concept of asymmetry while tracing gender paradigms is essential. In a broader sense, notions of subject and asymmetry could be applied to the individual, the mental, and the self. It becomes, thus, interesting to investigate the development of the self amid chaotic atmospheres such as pandemic eras and diseases. Complex characters with antagonistic attitudes and a complex diet of characters like the ageing old Lear and the young enigmatic Prince Hamlet fit perfectly within the paradigm of characters as asymmetrical subjects. Notions of the self, subjectivity, and self-reflectivity have been dealt with from different angles. One of the most interesting investigations was led by Katherine Maus in her book *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (1995), where

³¹Exhaustive data about the old Greek Four Humours Theory which was popularly followed in the Middle Ages and Early Modern England were given in many articles and books such as "The Four Humours Theory" by Javier Hope or *The Beginnings of Western Science* by David C. Lindberg or "The Hippocratic Humoural Theory: A Proper Philosophical and Historical Context" by Richard G Parker.

the focus was not on the psyche or the subject on their own. Her research is pioneering since it introduces the idea that there are discrepancies between visible outward appearances and an inward disposition via the existence of theatrical subjects as entities which can display a theatricalisation of inwardness, an invisible one shown in a visual world which is the world of the stage (32). The article's final section will build the bridge between the self and theatre. It will show that a meta-self, as a transcending self, has the same emotional logic as metatheatres because they are both trans migratory. The growth that both Lear and Hamlet will reach by the end of the plays is not only about selves that change because of disease, pain, and chaos but also because these characters are theatrical beings. In his book *Secret Selves: A History of Our Inner Space* (2021), Stephen Prickett investigates how literature can create a sense of self and individual identity. The central point that Prickett defends is how literary texts witness the birth of a sense of self³². Both the idea of the emergence of the new self and the bridge between self and identity advanced by Prickett corroborate my coming analysis. The following section will investigate the growth of self and identity within complex characters surrounded by decay and corruption. My study will follow a multifaceted process that combines conscious, unconscious, and theatrical elements, which are considered as the stage of a series of interrelated developments covering all the changes in the way Hamlet and King Lear see themselves in relation to others and to their sociocultural context which is characterised by contagion and corruption.

Towards the Meta-self in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* in the Time of Pandemics

The primary starting point of the present section will adapt the findings that connect self and identity³³. The section's primary focus is to introduce the idea of the birth of a meta-self, which is multidimensional due to a social context characterised by pandemics and corruption. In *Hamlet*, physical and mental illness are tokens of suffering that reverberate selves in agony and identities in struggle, as Stephen Greenblatt (2013, p.208) has explained. Diseases are intrinsically related to a mind in development and a new self in gestation, which will traverse the permeating rottenness and challenge the world order imposed on Hamlet. The internal violence of Hamlet will lead him to reach a new paradigm twice far away from reality, as Jean Baudrillard states in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 105). The study of the applicability of the Baudrillardian paradigm to *Hamlet* will be displayed in the coming analysis. However, the investigation of the prince's mental journey needs to be elaborated first. Hamlet's theatrics of the mind are the media that lead to the creation of the new space beyond.

There has been an ongoing debate to determine the nature of prince Hamlet's dilemma, which is complex and much more problematic than the blatant filial duty to execute revenge. As his different soliloquies prove, Hamlet's awareness of theatre, human injustices, questions of life and death, material and immaterial substances, reason, and action witness a quest and a thrive towards building a broader sense of justice. During a significant part of the play, Hamlet is out of the stage, out of space, and out of place. The refusal of his world order is echoed by the permeation of corruption and diseases in the world he lives in. That is why he spends all his energy creating his own stage. Hamlet does not identify himself either with the

⁴⁰Prickett dedicates the 7th chapter entitled "Experience of Self: From Identity to Individuality" to trace the link between the self and identity.

³³ Zacarés & Iborra ascertain in "Self and Identity Development during Adolescence across Cultures" (2015) the connection between self and identity "different theoretical approaches recognize several levels at which identity and self can be defined and understood: the personal or individual level, the relational level, and the social or collective level. Personal identity refers to those aspects of self-definition at the individual level including goals, values, beliefs, and a whole set of associated self-representations and self-evaluations. Relational identity refers to the contents of identity present in 'face-to-face' interactions and that have been framed in a variety of social roles and positions" (432).

Medieval values reflected by the Ghost or Fortinbras or Laertes or with the Renaissance Machiavellian spirit expressed by characters like Claudius and Polonius. Amid his violent dilemmas, his words and acts betray him, and it is the space separating the words and actions from the mind that creates dynamics that the present research calls the theatrics of the mind. During his encounter with the Ghost in Act one, Scene four, Shakespeare demonstrates that Hamlet is not fit for the role of the typical Medieval revenge hero. As a response to the Ghost's account of the murder, Hamlet promises the following:

Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge. (1.4. 29-30)

Hamlet's emotional words, "meditation or the thoughts of love," are jarring in a situation that requires a different semantic and syntactic register. Hamlet's conception of the hero goes through a mental self-reflexive process that transforms the original concept of the hero into a meta-hero. The meta-hero is then an invention, a result of the theatrics of the mind. This discordance between discourse and reality will continue throughout the play stressing the power of the mental process and the dominance of the theatrics of the mind. Hamlet's need to dissolve himself and to create a meta-being is not only a token of his capacity to exercise himself as a theatrical being, a man of thought and imagination; it is also a witness of the violent mental ordeals he suffers from and the urgent need for him to invent new ethical codes based in a broader understanding of justice.

It is both the weight of physical and mental agony on Hamlet and his desire to find a peaceful haven that would accelerate the building of a holographic existence that refutes corporeality. Hamlet desires that "this too sullied flesh would melt, /Thaw and resolve itself into a dew" (1.2.129-30). Undoubtedly, agonies of the flesh and torture of the mind urge him to find sites of stability. He struggles, like in gestation, but he constantly fails. During these failed thrives, the prince gives testimonies of an atrocious ill-being and alienation "How all occasions do inform against me" (4.4. 32). He believes he is on trial, hence, the need to invent a new meta-being. Very soon, he acknowledges that his revenge is "dull", comparing it to a spiritless horse "And spur my dull revenge." (4.4.32). No matter how much his revenge is spurred, it will not go ahead because taking revenge does not fit within the paradigm of the meat-being he has created. Hamlet is not becoming of the world, the world of his uncle, his mother, his late father, and his lover. Earlier in the play, in his famous "to be or not to be soliloquy" (3.1), he delivers a metaphor that confirms his feelings of being unfit for the task assigned to him by the Ghost. The lines "Take arms against a sea of troubles, /And by opposing end them" (3.1. 59-60) enhance his moral dilemma since attempting to set the world to rights would be a nonsensical task, utterly absurd. That is the problem, and that is why Hamlet, during most of the play, cannot find any course of action adequate to solving his predicament, which does not come from a personal defect within Hamlet but rather because the outside world wants to force its canon on him.

The difficulty of the prince's task comes from his instance, as an individual, to set the world to rights. His permanent failures accentuate his agony, but his determination to find his path pushes him to change the stage of the world he lives in by crafting his own stage where his new self is going to perform serenely, and that is how the theatrics of the mind take place. The new self or the meta-self is challenging and mocking the same way metatheatre is challenging and mocking. Metatheatre indeed refutes the insinuation that theatre is realistic and mocks it. The meta-self, in turn, releases itself from the dogmatic belief in its world order and its institutions of power; it is a site of resistance, an alternative, and a traversing mind which is staged. The achievement of the meta-self has been built on inter-connected experiences, series, and episodes where Hamlet endures self-loathing, paranoia, and disintegration, each time ending with a resounding failure. The more Hamlet is overridden by self-disgust, the more he is resolute to act. However, the more he advances, the more he shows his inaptitude to concoct an act of cold-blooded revenge, and the more he

comes close to creating the alternative of the meta-self, which is to challenge the codes and the mores of his age.

It is his movement towards the building of a meta-self that explains how his actions diametrically contradict his mind; it is his thoughts that are going to be bloody rather than his actions. Hamlet's moral dilemma reinforces his disorientation to the point that he falls prey to explicit contradictions when he states that "examples gross as earth exhort me" (4.4.46). Later, in the same soliloquy, Hamlet is on the verge of verbal disintegration since he uses the phrase "divine ambition" (4.4.48), which is semantically paradoxical, knowing that Christianity's primary virtue is humility, not ambition. Probably ambition is divine for pagans; however, Hamlet is even incapable of reasoning in pagan terms since "fame" for him is "a fantasy and trick", "an egg-shell" (4.4). Hamlet is like an impresario or a play director, trying, guessing, probing, combining contradictions, and improvising. Before building a meta-self, the theatrics of the mind function as a lengthy process punctuated by crises. The crucial theatrical expression of Hamlet's moral dilemma that betrays his inability to resort to crude violence occurs in Act two, Scene two, after watching one of the actors he invited to perform the *Murder of Gonzago* brilliantly playing a scene from the *Trojan Wars*. Hamlet's soliloquy is very revealing; after observing the Principal Player's performance, transported by a powerful cathartic effect, he falls into a frenzied and highly violent process of self-rejection. Hamlet's verb in the below lines does not flow; his utterances are so fragmented that they exhibit a violent state of breakdown. Hamlet's soliloquy reveals a paradoxical ambivalent nature with agonising psychology indulged in self-flagellation, on the one hand, and a redeeming salutary side, showed by theatricality, on the other. It is theatre that plays the role of a leveller helping Hamlet to progress and discover other areas of his personality. Theatre plays a redeeming side allowing Hamlet's mind to recover. Medically speaking, antagonistic whims and abrupt humour changes are a witness to a psychologically fragile personality. Metaphorically speaking, the tempestuous ordeals of Hamlet are a purging process leading to a self-healed from its wounds. In terms of performance, one can talk about the theatrics of the mind where paradoxical manifestations are at work. Barriers between acting and reality blend; they mix up and create new theatrical identities. Play-goers hardly distinguish between clinical impotence or spite or play-acting with performers "drowning the stage with tears". Hamlet, in this soliloquy, undergoes a painful process like a gestation momentum preceding birth.

O what a rogue and peasant slave am I![...]
 A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
 Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
 And can say nothing—no, not for a king,[...]
 Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
 Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,
 Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie I'th' throat
 As deep as to the lungs—who does me this,
 Ha![...]
 Bloody, bawdy villain!
 Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
 Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
 That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
 Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
 Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
 And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
 A scullion! Fie upon't! Foh! (2.2. 544, 62-64, 67-71, 76-83)

It is the mind of Hamlet that becomes a theatre of a self in gestation. Hamlet's agonising self comes from internalising the murderous order imposed on him by his father's ghost. This interiorisation that emanates from a need to rehearse the ghost's order and soliloquise on it and then theatricalise it constitutes a whole cycle of gestation leading towards a new re-birth ending with the exorcism of the Ghost from his mind and soul to replace it by a meta-self. While commenting on players acting in a scene from the Trojan wars, Hamlet experiences a purgation moment leading to his recovery and the creation of meta-self. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Baudrillard has inspired the present research to use the concept of the meta-self when he evokes how humans exist in a dimension of hyperreality after a confrontation between different overlays, each disrupting one another, creating holograms and residues.

The real, the real object is supposed to be equal to itself; it is supposed to resemble itself like a face in a mirror — and this virtual similitude is in effect the only definition of real — and any attempt, including the holographic one, that rests on it, will inevitably miss its object because it does not take its shadow into account (precisely the reason why it does not resemble itself) — this hidden face where the object crumbles, its secret. The holographic attempt literally jumps over its shadow, and plunges into transparency, to lose itself there (109).

Baudrillard emphasises the notion of the existence of a space of a mental dimension. This simultaneous existence refutes the 'truths' dictated to him by the world order and the values of his age. Paradoxically, it is in the site of chaos and perdition, exemplified by the symbolic space of the graveyard and in a culminating carnivalesque, almost Beckettian setting, that Hamlet embraces the meta-self. The prince, in the middle of "the poky corses", while holding the skull of his jester Yorrick, experiences an epiphanic moment suggesting the world in which he lives is fake. Hamlet is like Baudrillard and Poster when they claim that the society we live in has obliterated all reality "the simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true." (Baudrillard and Poster 166)

The truth is that legendary historical leaders like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar are not that great since they are reduced to dust in the same fashion as the buffoonish Yorrick. The graveyard scene, which is the culmination of a process punctuated by agony and self-hatred, leads Hamlet to a holographic state of transparency and liberates him from the grasp of the Ghost and the moral ties as well as the overconfident views of his age. It is amid chaos, an ultimate moment of surrealism, surrounded by the corpses of the dead, that Hamlet declares for the first time in the play, "This is I/ Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.250-51), announcing, thus, the birth of a meta-self. Hamlet has never been able to claim his family name as if he were ashamed. Only after a whole gestation process crowned by the carnivalesque grave digger's episode is his mind at peace. In the play's final act, the prince can use the royal "we" as a token of reconciliation with himself. Act five does not portray a prince in turmoil; it does not either refer to the Ghost or the father. Undoubtedly, the urge to avenge has faded away and been replaced by a new Hamlet. The pace of Act 5 is steady, the tempo is slow, and the verb is gentle; it is neither abundant nor economical. Soliloquies, performances, puns, cryptic answers, carnivalesque episodes which were means of derailment, and tokens of a self once in agony are no longer present in the play's last scenes. No matter whether Hamlet lives or dies, what matters is that he has found a new self. Hamlet has reached a state of quietus and does not feel himself a victim of "outrageous fortune" anymore. His last exchanges with Horatio are almost biblical; they are reminders of the last supper of Christ before his elevation. It is the meta-self that has created in Hamlet a redemptive nature.

As a character in agony, King Lear experiences the same emotional, agonising, and quest process that Hamlet has undergone. Carnivalesque episodes in both plays are catalysers that echo not only the pain and the agony and the diseased minds of the characters but also levellers that help characters reach ultimate peace of mind crowned by the creation of meta-selves. The graveyard in *Hamlet* could be compared to the heath in *King Lear*. On the heath, the storm is tempestuous; it serves as a metaphor for England's suffering

and Lear's. Lear tries to find answers to two questions. Why do his daughters have such hard hearts, and what is the cause of thunder, i.e. What is the cause of wrath, and what is the reason for madness? Lear wants to know whether nature is responsible for the turmoil on the heath. The heath, then, becomes the stage, the theatre, and the space of reflection, comparing and introducing opposite and conflicting views of nature and what is natural. The heath and the storm are reflected in Lear's speech. Indeed, the storm, the heath, and Lear become one.

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!
 Your cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt-curriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou-all shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world,
 Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
 That makes ingrateful man! (Shakespeare, [1606] 2005, 3.1.1-9)

Lear is the storm on the heath. His actions have led to misrule in the kingdom, and the barren turbulent world reflects that chaos. Lear has made the world suffer; now, the storms make him suffer to purify his soul and protect him from the dangers of the Machiavellian world of England and his elder daughters. Lear on the heath experiences a two-step dynamic: Suffering, self-flagellation, then expiation of sins and purification. The heath starts as a hinterland and finishes by being a homeland and a refuge protecting the fragile ageing monarch from the world's oddities. Indeed, in a first step, Lear welcomes his own destruction when he yells, "Singe my white head". Very soon, he recognises that he cannot rule the elements "Here I stand your slave, A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man". At that very moment, Lear starts to have a universal, humanistic understanding of the world. At that moment, the heath has changed from a hostile hinterland to a welcoming shelter. Lear, within the hostile hinterland, starts to open his eyes to consider the world's injustices and denounce criminals and tyrants who remain "unwhipped of justice". He looks at the lives of those he was responsible for as a ruler through new eyes, struggling to understand the world revealed to him. Lear, in the process of purgation and in a moment of unison with the hinterland that has become harmless, tries to remove his clothes to humble himself further; he moves closer to empathising with the plight of the "unaccommodated man". On the heath, thoughts about filial ingratitude overtake Lear; he also considers broader questions as he struggles to retain his wits. The hinterland scene makes Lear move towards a vivid self-awareness and gives him a sense of generosity. For example, the king considers the Fool's suffering alongside his own on the heath, and in return, the latter remains loyal and affectionate to the king. In the same way, the gravedigger's scene in *Hamlet* is epiphanic since it allows him to reach a meta-self" the storm scene plays the role of the leveller that helps Lear get his meta-self when he wakes up after the storm and meets Cordelia in Act 4, scene 7. Zied Ben Amor explains in his article "That ebb and flow by th' moon": The Dynamics of Flow Theory and Optimal Experience in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*" (2022) that the old King reaches on the heath a state of flow.

The episode of Lear on the heath in Act three, scene two, paradoxically speaking, is a scene of pain, toil, and agony where the old monarch endorses his humanity forgets about his earthly condition, and creates a parallel world, reaching, thus, a state of flow with "feedback" and challenge of his conditions. Lear on the heath witnesses a process of purification which is of a healing and pleasurable nature despite oddities and ordeals. There is pleasure through pain which has been crowned by epiphanic understandings of the world. Amid the storm, Lear, in an ultimate moment of focus, does not hearken to his surrounding; he ignores Kent's bids to seek shelter and keeps addressing the winds, the thunder, the rain, and the "great gods" as if he were delivering a solemn speech in front of an audience. The supernatural elements fade away and

become a backdrop, a rear stage, and scenic props helping to cast the main hero in action and direct the whole attention to the powerful speech of the King. On the heath, Lear is the storm, and the storm is Lear. (47)

Ben Amor tries to liken Lear's new state of mind after the passionate experience on the heath to what is known as a state of flow according to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's ideas about flow theory from the field of positive psychology³⁴. The common point between Ben Amor's statement in the article mentioned above and the present one is the existence of a process of growth, a transformation, and a shift from one mood to another, one mode to another, and oneself to another. The transformation process towards acquiring a new identity is mental or psychological. One of the most interesting moments during the transformation of Lear's identity is his acquisition of a theatrical identity. The mock-trial scene in Act III, scene 2, where Lear performs an imaginary trial of his daughters, is almost of Beckettian intonation where Lear parades a metatheatrical self, a subliminal one that resorts to acting and performance to accomplish suppressed desires of revenge. Lear, here, is like Hamlet, who concocts a play-within-a-play to trap his uncle. For Lear and Hamlet, performance "is the thing" wherein a new theatrical self could be achieved. In *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (1995), Katherine Maus develops this very idea of the theatrical self, which takes an outward appearance that informs much about the inward disposition of characters in agony. The mock trial and the play-within-the-play are visible theatrical momentums that stage inwardness. They are tokens of a transformation process that will lead to the birth of the meta-self.

The encounter between Lear and Cordelia in Act four is peaceful and calm; it contrasts with the old king's self in agony during the storm. The reconciliation is not only between Lear and his daughter but also somewhat between the old Lear and the new one. The awakening of the king is like a new birth. Lear wears fresh new garments. The pleasant sound of music plays when he opens his eyes and sees his daughter to the point that Lear thinks he has gone to the afterlife. Lear, in the encounter scene, is humbled as he tries to kneel in front of his daughter. The development he witnesses is the opposite of Hamlet. Meanwhile, Hamlet can use the royal "we" in the gravedigger's scene; as we have shown earlier, Lear uses the first-person pronoun in this scene: "methinks" and "I". Hamlet conciliates with himself, and Lear shuns his omnipotence and regality. What happens to Prince Hamlet and King Lear corresponds to the words of Salman Rushdie, who states in his book *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism* (1992) the following:

Those who do not have power over the stories that dominate their lives, the ability to retell them, rethink them, deconstruct them, joke about them, and change them as times change, indeed are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts (Rushdie 432).

The meta-selves become like re-narrated self-narratives. Once told, they help the protagonists move a step forward and grow to acquire new selves and, thus, new identities. It is amid chaos, disease, and pandemics that meta-selves are born. The article's essence has been an attempt to draw a guiding thread tracing the undercurrent dynamic between characters, on the one hand, disease, on the other, and distress leading to self-reconstruction.

The present research has attempted to draw, via using history, contextualisation, psychology, sociology, and literary criticism, logical correlations between the growth of new selves and new identities in situations of pandemics. Disease, corruption, decay, contagion, and hostility are external social factors that affect personalities, trigger off growth, and lead to the creation of meta-selves, both transcending and theatrical.

³⁴The bulk of the flow theory was detailed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness* (1988), and in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1991).

The analysis has traced three trajectories which are related to each other. The first has proven that illness and diseases were a major preoccupation in England during the Early Modern period. The second has demonstrated that diseases could be considered a source of inspiration by playwrights like William Shakespeare. As our investigation has shown, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are depicted as plays teeming with images of contagion, decay, and an unhealthy atmosphere. The third one, the culminating point of the analysis, has been a humble attempt to bridge the gap that the previous literature review has left unabridged concerning the link between sickness and identity formation in the time of pandemics. Our investigation has demonstrated that pandemic times affect identity formation and cause psychological adjustment. Questions of self and identity in Early Modern England undergo an ongoing reflection by critics like Francis Barker, Helen Hackett, and Catherine Belsey. Our analysis has gone a step further to explore the idea of the transcending self, the meta-self, and the notion of the theatrical performative selves. The overall study shows that the transformation of the main characters in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* leads them to acquire new selves and new identities. Times of pandemics and corruption constitute the backbone for new identity formation. *Hamlet* and *King Lear* follow similar logic for self-transformation and new identity acquisition. The transformation of the characters follows what Baudrillard calls “hyperreality” (22) or the “traversing” self (106). The research has corroborated the pertinence of the concept of “the meta-self” as a manifestation of “the transmigratory nature of the text” (Ben Amor 17) while dealing with the protagonists of both plays. The meta-self is a self that goes beyond challenging social and ethical standards; it shuns dogmatic overconfident beliefs about life and functions as a traversing mind that constantly reassesses the certitudes of humans. The analysis has also shown that the meta-self is multifaceted; it is not only about mental or psychological growth but also the creation of a new theatrical self. In the transformation process, characters represent theatrical entities and acquire theatrical identities. It is then possible to use the term theatrics to qualify the change that the characters’ witness. The theatricalisation of the inwardness is nothing but a token of the creation of the meta-self. One can talk about the theatrics of the mind that result in the creation of new meta-selves either for Lear or for Hamlet.

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