

THREE GANSER STATES AND HAMLET.

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IN 1897 Ganser (1) gave a lecture entitled "Ueber einen eigenartigen hysterischen Dämmerzustand." This has been translated literally as on "A specific hysterical twilight state," which we consider unfortunate, as in keeping the words it loses the sense of the original, for the notion of a twilight state remains foreign to us, and is better rendered as a "dimming of consciousness" or "clouding of consciousness." Further, the concept of hysteria has changed considerably since then and his cases would now be regarded as psychotic.

The essential feature was that when questioned they gave foolish answers which, nevertheless, showed that they had perfectly understood the nature of the questions; e.g. when asked what number followed one, a patient answered "Two." But when asked what came next, he said, "Twelve, ninety-three." He was asked how many legs a horse had and answered "Three." Another patient, asked to read from the paper, stupidly read, "Bismarck, King Albert, Rothschild, money, Strehlen, Bismarck, Rothschild, majesty, cabbal," repeating the same words in a different order. A dollar, a mark piece, and a fifty pfennig piece he constantly called a mark. He declared a five mark note to be only printing paper, of whose value he did not want to know anything. Later, however, he read the printed "5" and recognized the fifty pfennig piece and the dollar at their true value.

This syndrome is commonly called the Ganser state, and although common in prisons it is rare elsewhere. It only shows itself when the patient is questioned, and it will not be noticed unless constantly born in mind. We propose to describe three cases which have recently been in our care. It will also be shown that Shakespeare, who was "acquainted well with every tone of madness," has provided us, in Hamlet, with a beautiful example of this condition, undoubtedly copied from life, and that this solves the great problem of the play.

CASE 1.—A spinster, a hosiery mender, had been left an orphan at the age of three months, when her mother was found drowned. She had always been peculiar, with alternating periods of elation and depression, each lasting a few months.

She was first admitted to this hospital in November, 1927, suffering from mania with schizoid features. After two months she was transferred to another institution, whence she was discharged.

She was readmitted in February, 1931, with a similar attack and was discharged recovered at the end of a year. After each of these illnesses she remained hypomaniacal, which appeared to be her normal state.

She was admitted a third time on April 5, 1939, in a similar state. A history was obtained from a young man, who had just been divorced by his wife, with the patient cited as co-respondent. He said that on March 20, when she was cycling to work, she passed a stationary 'bus at a cross roads. Two lorries suddenly came out. One knocked her down. As she lay on the ground she saw its wheels about to go over her head. She moved and the lorry collided with the 'bus instead. She was taken to hospital and an X-ray confirmed that no bones were broken, although she was bruised.

She remained well until April 1, when she failed to keep an assignation with her lover. The next day was Sunday, and when, contrary to her wont, she gave £1 each to the communion collection, the service collection, and the lady who runs the boys' club, he realized that she was not well. Later she became moody and incoherent, gradually growing worse.

On admission she was physically normal, but was excited, talkative and exalted. The next day she gave Ganser answers to questions. When asked, "Where is this?" she replied, "It was a hospital, but is not now." To the question, "What are you doing here?" she fatuously answered, "Knitting." Later she mistook identities, and was noisy, catatonic, cataleptic, incoherent, and faulty in habits. She gradually quietened. It now transpired that she was claiming compensation for her accident, and on May 1 she was specially examined from this point of view. She then denied that she was suffering from a mental illness, but gave a full and graphic account of the accident, and alleged that her spine was badly injured. She slowly recovered and left the hospital on September 30.

CASE 2.—This man, a general labourer, was said to have been normal until he was 21, since when he had "kept bad company" and spent much time in drinking and fighting. He was a well-known local bad character, and had often been imprisoned for being drunk and disorderly. At the age of 32 he left his wife for another woman and she then noticed that he was "queer." His mother fed him until he struck her.

He was transferred to this hospital on June 2, 1939, at the age of 35. The most obvious feature of his case was that he was giving Ganser answers to questions; e.g. when asked his age, he said he was 19. It was therefore concluded that he had recently come from prison. He had, in fact, been certified three months before when in custody. The Ganser state soon disappeared and it became evident that he was a typical case of dementia praecox, with hallucinations and stereotypies. His language was obscene and he made occasional violent attacks on other patients. He has shown little further change in spite of a course of convulsion therapy.

CASE 3.—He was single, aged 27, an illegitimate child whose father deserted his mother 11 years ago. She reported that he was normal in his early years, giving no trouble until he left school, when he did not keep any post for more than a few months and when 16 he joined the Army, serving in India and Egypt. After his discharge he had various jobs and was constantly moving from one part of the country to another. At the outbreak of war he was called up as a reservist and served in France and Belgium. He was brought back to England in what was described as a stuporose condition and taken to a military hospital. We have been unable to obtain any details of his mental state while there, but he was discharged from the Army in August, 1940. On leaving the hospital he returned

to his mother, who was now married to another man. He was so rude and offensive to his stepfather that they had to turn him out after a few weeks. He then wandered from one lodging to another and did not settle into any regular work. He had been engaged to a girl, but she broke it off at about this time. His mother made further attempts to have him at home, but his insulting remarks and gestures to her husband made it impossible.

He was admitted to this hospital on May 3, 1941, having been found wandering by the police, and talking in a confused and incoherent manner. On admission he was in good physical health. When questioned he gave Ganser answers :

E.g.: "What is your name?" . . . "Black."
 "Where do you live?" . . . "White."
 "Where is that?" . . . "Over the hill."
 "How are you to-day?" . . . "Rather treacly."
 "How old are you?" . . . "Six months."

He was cheerful and showed no resentment at being in hospital. He seemed to understand the questions, and carried out orders promptly and correctly. When asked to write his name he studied the piece of paper for a few seconds and then drew a straight line. He continued to give this type of "crooked answer" whenever questioned, but asked for cigarettes and other things he wanted and showed no abnormal behaviour. He was sociable, but did not engage in spontaneous conversation.

He competed in the hospital sports, gaining several shillings in prize money. When asked how much he had won, he replied, "The Sahara Desert." In answer to questions about the races in which he took part, he said, "The monkey up the tree race." When asked what this was he said, "We had to climb up trees to get coconuts."

He had phases in which he became mute to all questions. He also wrote a number of nonsensical letters, the contents of which, like many of his replies to questions, showed extremely lewd allusions. The following extract from a letter selected as being free from obscenities shows a schizoid type of thought :

"I hope this letter reaches the corner. It was very terrible about the Storm at Sea with Lionel Barrymore. You may be sure they like him because he has bags of money. Will the Hardy's family know anything about this? I will tell you what happened. Lionel was having a butter and there are millions of things I must not tell you. When this chap Black man he might have been who took the photo."

He gradually developed a clowning or buffoonery syndrome in which he continually tried to attract attention, looked for the laughter and approval of his audience, and guffawed at his own amusing and phantastic stories. In this condition he did not wait to be questioned, but took every opportunity to launch into a long, rambling, and often amusingly disconnected speech. He would give an imaginative account of how he could prepare beer from Australian apples, and then pass on to describe how he had been to Australia that morning before breakfast. He was mischievous and put articles through the windows or hid them under mattresses. As this phase subsided he became quieter and ceased giving so many crooked answers. He gave sensible replies to general questions, but was evasive when asked about personal matters. When the reason for this was demanded, he said, "I know the Service is pretty beastly and that I have done wrong." This gives a possible motive for his condition. He became duller and more apathetic, showed incongruity of affect, and spent much time sitting staring into space, but could not give any account of what he was thinking about. The schizoid features are gradually becoming more prominent.

DISCUSSION.

We think that the Ganser type of response is accurately described by the English expression of giving "crooked answers" to questions.

The Ganser state occurs in people who, although mentally deranged, not realizing this, wish to appear so. It follows that there is always a strong motive. Hence it is commonest in prisoners, especially those awaiting trial (cp. Case 2); it is also seen nowadays in service men, who, broken in mind under the strain of their duties, are anxious to be discharged back to civilian life (Case 3), whilst Case 1 was striving to obtain compensation for her accident. The reason why it takes this particular form is that to the popular mind persons suffering from mental illness are characterized by an extreme simplicity; this is seen in the numerous funny stories and jokes about lunatics, so that it is perfectly natural for those people to feign insanity by giving these silly crooked answers to questions.

It follows that in all cases of the Ganser state we should ask ourselves two questions: Is the patient insane, and what is his motive for appearing to be so?

We are now in a position to consider the case of Hamlet from the psychiatric aspect. It is not intended to deal with his deep psychological motives and inhibitions, for these have already been analysed by Jones (2). It is interesting to note that the word Hamlet, or Amleth, means mad.

HAMLET.

The cardinal problem of the play is whether Hamlet was mad or only pretended to be so. This problem will be examined from a strictly psychiatric viewpoint.

Hamlet is at the outset extremely worried over the incestuous, as it was considered, union between his mother and Claudius. Later the suspicion, and then virtual certainty, of the latter's murder of his father is added. In addition it has recently been pointed out that he suspects he is being cheated of the throne*: III, ii, 97.

King : How fares our cousin Hamlet ?

Ham. : Excellent, i'faith; of the chameleon's dish :

I eat the air, promise-crammed : you cannot feed capons so.

and V, ii, 65 :

He that hath kill'd my king, and whored my mother ;
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes.

As to evidence of insanity, it is seen that he is already suffering from melancholia, which he describes I, ii, 77 :

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,

* Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 3rd ser. : " Hamlet." London, 1937. Footnote, p. 142.

Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly : these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play :
But I have that within which passeth show ;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

He contemplates suicide in the same scene, 129 :

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew !
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter ! O God ! God !
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world !
Fie on't ! ah fie ! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed ; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this !

He is excitable and hysterical, I, v, 115 :

Mar. : Hillo, ho, ho, my lord !
Ham. : Hillo, ho, ho, boy ! come, bird, come.

and III, ii, 282 :

Ham. : Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play ;
For some must watch, while some must sleep :
Thus runs the world away.
Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers—if the rest of my
fortune turn Turk with me—with two Provincial roses on my razed
shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir ?
Hor. : Half a share.
Ham. : A whole one, I.
For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself ; and now reigns here
A very, very—pajock.

He is even hallucinated, III, iv, 102 :

Ham. : A king of shreds and patches—
(Enter GHOST.)
Save me and hover o'er me with your wings,
You heavenly guards ! What would your gracious figure ?
Queen : Alas, he's mad !
Ham. : Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by
The important acting of your dread command ?
O, say !
Ghost : Do not forget : this visitation
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.
But look, amazement on thy mother sits : . . .
Ham. : . . . How is it with you, lady ?
Queen : Alas, how is't with you,
That you do bend your eye on vacancy
And with the incorporal air do hold discourse ? . . .

But Hamlet apparently has no insight, as he decides to feign insanity, I, v, 170 :

How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on,

and even admits this, III, iv, 187 :

That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft.

This simulation is first seen when he appears all dishevelled before Ophelia, II, i, 77 :

Oph.: My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,
Ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ancle ;
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors, he comes before me.

He also pretends to be insane with her, III, i, 103 :

Ham.: Ha, ha ! are you honest ?
Oph.: My lord ?
Ham.: Are you fair ?
Oph.: What means your lordship ?
Ham.: That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.
Oph.: Could beauty my Lord have better commerce than with honesty ?
Ham.: Ay, truly ; for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness : this was sometimes a paradox, but now the time gives it proof. I did love you once.
Oph.: Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.
Ham.: You should not have believed me ; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it : I loved you not. . . .
. . . . Go to, I'll no more on't ; it hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriages : those that are married already, all but one, shall live ; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go. (*Exit.*)
Oph.: O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown !

although he does not convince the king who is concealed in the room, 171 :

King : Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,
Was not like madness.

He also simulates before Osric, V, ii, 81 :

Osr.: Your lordship is right welcome back to Denmark.
Ham.: I humbly thank you, sir. Dost know this water-fly ? . . .

His pretence, however, has not convinced Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have been set by the king to watch him, III, i, 1 :

King : And can you, by no drift of circumstance,
Get from him why he puts on this confusion,
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
With turbulent and dangerous lunacy ?
Ros. : He does confess he feels himself distracted,
But from what cause he will by no means speak.
Guil. : Nor do we find him forward to be sounded ;
But, with a crafty madness, keeps aloof,
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state.

However, the common people appear to think that he is mad, as in the amusing passage, V, i, 160 :

First Clo. : . . . it was that very day that young Hamlet was born : he that is mad, and sent into England.
Ham. : Ay, marry, why was he sent into England ?
First Clo. : Why, because a' was mad ; a' shall recover his wits there ; or, if a' do not, 'tis no great matter there.
Ham. : Why ?
First Clo. : 'Twill not be seen in him there ; there the men are as mad as he.

At the end of the play Hamlet himself says that he was mad, V, ii, 239 :

And you must needs have heard, how I am punish'd
With sore distraction. What I have done,
That might your nature, honour and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes ? Never Hamlet :
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then ? His madness : if't be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd ;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

So far we have evidence both that Hamlet is mad and that he feigns insanity. Are these two views contradictory ? It is submitted here that they are not, but that Hamlet is in a Ganser state. He gives typical crooked answers, II, ii, 173 :

Pol. : Do you know me, my lord ?
Ham. : Excellent well ; you are a fishmonger.

And in the same scene, 192 :

Pol. : . . . I'll speak to him again.
What do you read, my lord ?
Ham. : Words, words, words.
Pol. : What is the matter, my lord ?
Ham. : Between who ?
Pol. : I mean, the matter that you read, my lord.

Like our Case 3 above, he then passes through a stage of clowning in the same scene, 433 :

Pol.: What follows, then, my lord ?

Ham.: Why

“As by lot, God wot.”

and then you know,

“It came to pass, as most like it was.”—

The first row of the pious chanson will show you more ;

He clowns also in the whole of IV, ii, in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are looking for Polonius's body, and IV, iii, 18 :

King : How, Hamlet, where's Polonius ?

Ham.: At supper.

King : At supper ! where ?

Ham.: Not where he eats, but where he is eaten : a certain convocation of public worms are e'en at him.

and, also like our Case 3, he is sometimes very coarse, e.g., II, ii, 173 quoted above, whether provoked, the same scene 238, or not, III, ii, 125. Finally he has comparatively lucid intervals, as he himself puts it, II, ii, 396 :

I am but mad north-north-west : when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.

To sum up, Hamlet shows a typical Ganser state occurring during the course of another psychosis.

SUMMARY.

1. Three cases of the Ganser state are described.
2. This state occurs in psychotics who, ignorant of their own illness, simulate mental derangement.
3. There is always a strong motive for the feigning of insanity.
4. The case of Hamlet is examined and reasons are given for believing that he suffers from a Ganser state, the explanation of the problem of his mental condition and of all such states being given in Polonius's words :

Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.

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- (1) GANSER (1898), *Arch. Psychiat. u. Nervenkr.*, **30**, 633.
- (2) JONES (1923), *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis*, London and Vienna, p. 1.