

Insanity or feigned madness



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Throughout William Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, the protagonist, Prince Hamlet, is faced with avenging the cruel murder of his Father. In attempts for vengeance, Hamlet feigns madness as a ploy to perform actions he would normally be prohibited from and as a way to prevent people from taking him seriously, thus allowing him to execute his plans unnoticed. He uses his 'insanity' as a way to vent his feelings and thoughts towards other characters as shown when he is speaking to Claudius, Gertrude and Ophelia.

Hamlet blatantly states on various occasions that he in fact is not mad and even says that he will put on an "antic disposition". He also only portrays his madness when necessary for his underlying goal, but when there is no need to deceive, Hamlet acts as a perfectly sane person would which is demonstrated when he speaks to Horatio as well as the actors. Finally in comparison to Ophelia, who is the portrait of madness and has undergone similar tragedies as Hamlet, he appears as normal as anyone else. Hamlet appears to be mad as a way to vent his emotions and conceal any action he plans to take against Claudius to avenge his father.

This is part of Hamlet's initial plan when he tells Horatio and Marcellus that he will "put an antic disposition on" (I. v. 173) and that they must swear not to speak a word of his feigned madness. This allows Hamlet to maintain his appearance of insanity thus allowing him to make his remarks of disgust towards Gertrude and Claudius without being punished or taken seriously as a sane prince would be. Through his act, Hamlet is able to vent his feelings towards Gertrude about how she married too soon after the death of his father and is even able to criticize her.

Hamlet also uses his feigned madness as an excuse for his actions. This is shown when Hamlet apologizes to Laertes: Was't Hamlet wrong'd 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,(V. ii. 224) Even in Hamlets apology he makes it seem as though he is mad. The line “ If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away” represents the modern description of madness stating that Hamlet was not all there.

He also speaks about himself in third person, which is seen for the first time in the play, and also conveys the principle of madness. By apologizing in a ‘ mad state of mind’, Hamlet hopes to make his insanity more believable thus making it easier for Laertes to accept it. By feigning insanity, Hamlet is able avoid questions about his peculiar behavior and is able to focus on his revenge on Claudius. Hamlet only uses his guise of madness when necessary. Proving his sanity, Hamlet is able create a play based on what the ghost of his father told Hamlet about his death.

Also when telling Horatio, a scholar, of his plan Hamlet not only appeared sane but Horatio had no issues with his instructions “ Observe mine uncle: if his occulted guilt Do not itself unkennel in one speech it is a damned ghost we have seen,”(III. ii. 79) Hamlet tells Horatio to watch Claudius for any signs of guilt. Showing that he is not insane, Hamlet also questions the intentions of the ghost and whether it is good or evil. If he were mad, then he would not even contemplate the intentions of the ghost. Above all Hamlet was correct with his plan and the king did in fact show signs guilt.

Even other characters notice that Hamlet is not completely mad. A prime example is when Polonius was speaking to Hamlet and says, “ Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t. ”(II. ii. 204). Although Hamlet was able to fool Polonius that he was indeed mad, Polonius notices that Hamlet’s remarks are full of meaning and quick-witted, no easy task for a man who is truly insane but not as difficult for a man nearly playing the role. Polonius’ analysis of Hamlet proves to be true when Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he in fact is not mad. I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw. (II. ii. 376).

Though spoken in an unconventional way, Hamlet blatantly states that he is not mad. Hidden within that statement, Hamlet also was able to convey the message that he can recognize his enemies, “ I know a hawk from a handsaw”. Some have analyzed this quote as an attack towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern¹. Hamlet is not mad he is merely feigning it and with his knowledge of acting he is doing an exceptional job. Similarly to Hamlet, Ophelia suffers the same tragic loss of a father.

Cambridge University did a study on the effects of losing a parent and came to the conclusion that “ The death of a parent imposes an unexpected crisis for most healthy, well-functioning adults. This crisis can result in high levels of physiological distress, increased risk for depression, impaired physical health, or increase alcohol consumption. These effects go largely unrecognized by everyone except those going through the loss. ”(Umberson, 7). This study proves true to Hamlet who undergoes similar signs of depression and physiological distress.

Ophelia on the other hand shows true signs of insanity. She is unable to process thoughts logically and when she falls in the water she is unable, or unwilling, to sense the danger at hand and drowns without the slightest struggle. Unlike Ophelia, Hamlet is constantly thinking and rationalizing his possible actions. This is shown when Hamlet has the opportunity to kill Claudius: Now might I do it, now he is a-praying; and now I'll do't: and so he goes to heaven: and so am I revenged. That would be scann'd: A villain kills my father, and for that,

I, his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven. (III, iii, 74-79) Hamlet's thoughts follow a logical progression that shows his understanding of the situations around him. With the chance to kill Claudius, Hamlet realizes that by killing him while he is repenting his sins, Hamlet would thereby be sending him to heaven and thus doing Claudius a favour. Hamlet proves that he is sane by having the ability to think logically and therefore in comparison to Ophelia he is far from madness. The question of Hamlet's sanity is one that has been questioned since the moment Hamlet was first performed.

Madness is one of the main elements driving the plot and as the play progresses, Hamlet's depiction of a madman becomes increasingly believable. His feigned madness is a mere ploy for vengeance on Claudius and should not be mistaken for true insanity. Hamlet himself states that he is not mad and will put on an "antic disposition" and in comparison to Ophelia, Hamlet is the picture of sanity. In William Shakespeare's play Hamlet, Young Hamlet feigns madness in attempts to avenge the death of his father and although he shows signs of depression he should not be believed to be a madman.