

Example of essay on the antic disposition in hamlet

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



The character of Hamlet in William Shakespeare's play of the same name is one of the more complex and interesting characters in the western canon – in attempting to take revenge on his uncle Claudius for his alleged murder of Hamlet's father, the young prince feigns insanity in order to get the man's guard down and keep him off balance until finding the right time to strike. However, the question remains – by the end of the play, just how much is Hamlet pretending to be insane? Is it really an act, or has Hamlet really taken on an “ antic disposition” as Hamlet vows to put on (I. v. 172)? While it can be confirmed that Hamlet's insanity is more or less a ruse, his own dedication to his task, as well as the uncertainty he has about following through with it, lead to several moments of true insanity for the character of Hamlet. The character purports to put on a veneer of madness merely as a simulation, but his own grief and the weight of his intended plan leads him to go down a path that clouds his mind with sadness and into insanity at various points.

For the sake of defining ‘ insanity’ in the world of Hamlet, one must distinguish the moments and behavior of Hamlet between what is sane and what is insane. For Hamlet, playing the fool and putting on his ‘ antic disposition’ means behaving in a deliberately excited way to achieve a certain effect – in essence, he is putting on a show for Claudius (in the same way he puts on a play depicting the acts he committed against Hamlet's father) and the others to make them doubt his sanity. However, insanity in this play would also be defined by actions that are extreme and excited which seem uncontrolled by him – natural responses and behaviour which are insane, and not put on as an affectation. While the latter comprises the

majority of Hamlet's acts of insanity, there are still a few moments in which his own depression at his situation clouds his judgment and turns him truly mad.

The first instance of this true insanity is in Hamlet's first encounter with the ghost, after which he seems to be so agitated as to border on madness, and even becomes fully mad at several points. Horatio wishes to give him pause to consider his "wild and whirling words" (I. v. 889). Even before that, Hamlet by himself thinks about the things he has heard from his father's ghost, and decides to take a moment to write on tables a funny saying – "So uncle, there you are. Now to my word." (I. v). During this scene, his excitability is great; he jokes about the ghost being a "true-penny" and "this fellow in the cellarage," which is an incredibly flippant way to discuss an out-and-out spiritual experience he would have just had of his father confirming his suspicions.

The most reasonable explanation seems that he either decides to play the fool much earlier than he purports to, or he has momentarily lost sight of himself. Furthermore, if he was actually playing mad, it would be foolhardy to tell Horatio and Marcellus the plan while doing it. Telling them he is to "put an antic disposition on" seems to tip his hand far earlier than he would like, making a joke of the entire plan – at the same time, he is also clearly shaken and agitated by his experience. The distracted and uncertain nature of Hamlet at this time seems to suggest at least a moment of madness immediately following the appearance of the ghost.

Another instance in which Hamlet appears genuinely mad is when he first interacts with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Up to this point, from his scene

in Ophelia's room to the letter he gives her, it could be said that he is still pretending to be mad. Furthermore, as he interviews Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he seems to be quite lucid and interrogative, trying to sniff out their motives and allegiances while telling them what he wants them to think. However, near the end of this scene, he starts to hint at what he knows, talking about his "uncle-father and aunt-mother," showing them that he recognizes the incestuous betrothal of his mother to Claudius (II. ii). While Hamlet demonstrates great intelligence and savvy during this scene, he also is tipping his hand far too much for these spies (of whose real allegiances he still is not sure). Hamlet certainly benefits from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern not immediately reporting what happened to them to the king. It is this lack of control over what he says that implies Hamlet's momentary true insanity – in pretending to be mad, he may in fact be putting up a smoke-screen to prevent himself from recognizing how truly mad he is. Hamlet also raises questions of his sanity during his scene questioning Ophelia, when Polonius and Claudius hide behind the tapestry – it remains ambiguous whether or not Hamlet was actively playing mad, and if so to what end. If his goal was to deceive Claudius into thinking he is mad, it does not work:

“ Love! His affections do not that way tend;

Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,

Was not like madness. There's something in his soul,

O'er which his melancholy sits on brood;

And, I do doubt, the hatch and the disclose

Will be some danger” (III. i)

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It is true that Hamlet's speech to Ophelia was somewhat without form, particularly in comparison to the soliloquy that came directly before it. Claudius is not in denial of Hamlet's insanity, but instead doubts he is mad (something implied to be much more violent than simple insanity). While he does come close to discerning Hamlet's true plan, he does not think that he is just faking insanity, and we are given little reason to think otherwise as well. Except for the few times that Hamlet hints that he is putting on his 'antic disposition,' Hamlet's own behaviour is consistent with insanity. This is evidenced by his apparent lack of care and discretion by which he handles his secret, as previously mentioned – he shouts loudly to the room (implying he knows Claudius is there) that “ he may play the fool nowhere but in his own house” (III. i). Hamlet also makes a threatening statement about Claudius, an outright death threat that would effectively tip his malicious hand, as he states that “ those that are married already, all but one, shall live” (III. i).

Throughout this scene and many others, Hamlet shows that his will is defective, working himself up into passionate cries and outbursts of grief and anger – these scenes show the first steps of real madness in Hamlet. During the burial scene, Hamlet seems to be violently insane, especially due to the line he crosses in dishonoring Ophelia's grave (a woman he clearly loved before all of this happened). Hamlet says later to Horatio that “ the bravery of his grief did put me into a towering passion” (V. ii). He is usually honest with Horatio, so we have reason to believe this is true, and that Hamlet cannot completely control his actions – he was not faking his behavior there. Because of this, it is reasonable to assume that there are actually moments

where Hamlet is really insane, and not just faking it to fool Claudius.

In conclusion, Hamlet's insanity is much more ambiguous than his outright statement of putting on an "antic disposition" would imply. There are several moments in the play where he shows that he cannot really control his behavior, and right from the start he seems to be extremely emotional and violent in his outbursts. It is easy to see how the grief of his father's death, included with the indecisiveness he has in what he wants to do to Claudius, could lead him to have a much looser grip on reality than he might want. Hamlet often forgets himself and where he is, and if he wants to pretend to be mad while actually being strictly sane, he would not be so careless with his real plan, especially if he knows that his enemies can hear him. Because of this, Hamlet's "antic disposition" can be seen as something that is not completely put on.

References

Shakespeare, W. (2006). Hamlet. (3rd ed.) Arden Shakespeare.