

The mind of the mad: analysis of hamlet

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The Mind of The Mad What is it to be mad? Is it related to something of biological background? Or is it to do with the complex breakdown of one's emotions? Or is it both? These questions are important to keep in mind when understanding whether Hamlet is truly mad or feigning madness as part of his 'plan' in which Shakespeare builds up throughout the play. This relates to the second aspect which must also be looked at when comprehending the fictional play Hamlet. This aspect is the certain 'key' events that take place, and how they not only provide a basis for, but also shape and mould the emotions of the character Hamlet. When Hamlet is first introduced into the story, his dark mood can be perceived as an inveterate shape of mind which can be traced to his father's passing. Shakespeare uses many statements, such as, 'Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief, That can denote me truly', to convey the dark mind of Hamlet. George Wilson Knight believes that Hamlet's grief for his father's death and his mother's 'quick forgetfulness', both contribute, 'if not wholly', to Hamlet's fragile state of mind, and that they are an important basis to Hamlet's madness. The madness of Hamlet is first introduced when he learns of his father's ghost, who has been taken by death, and discovers his uncle as the murderer, who now wears the crown. One can see the scene with the ghost as a phantasmagoria which Shakespeare uses to 'play' with the storyline. Is this ghost truly Hamlet's father or is it a shade of the Devil? The answer for this is left completely up to the discretion of the reader. Shakespeare does however litter the text with clues that can justify either side of the Arcanum. One such comment is by the guard Marcellus when Hamlet leaves with the spirit. He says, 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.' Hamlet's madness can

be seen in many scenes; however it still cannot be labelled as 'real' or not. During Hamlet's talk with Polonius after the King and Queen leave, in which he acts quite fractious, he begins with the insult of 'Fishmonger'. This can either be seen as a comical input by Shakespeare, as there are many throughout Hamlet, or as a hint to Hamlet's madness. In this conversation Polonius attempts to elicit the reason behind Hamlet's attitude, and to find duplicity in his behaviour. Hamlet's conversation at this point can be identified to be a duplicity as it can be seen that he drops many hints of his knowledge. An example of this is when Hamlet quizzes Polonius of his honesty and says, 'Ay, sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.' This purely relates to his treacherous uncle Claudius, and also opens the question, is one of the reasons behind Hamlet's madness to do with Hamlet's 'denied' access to the throne? The fact that Hamlet states 'Ay, sir, but 'while the grass grows' – the proverb is something musty' to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in reference to his 'desire' for advancement leaves this question open. Is this purely for comical relief? Or is this his madness and a darker greed that had not been illuminated yet? The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is a very complex one in Hamlet, and in which Shakespeare uses many plot elements to manipulate. When first understanding this relationship, one must be aware of the hints placed throughout the play of the relationship between the two characters before the start of the book. These hints indicate Hamlet was deeply in love with Ophelia and that he wrote her many love letters. However, when the play reaches the stage when Hamlet first interacts with Ophelia, the emotions one can derive from it are much different to the emotion we know

as love. In this scene Ophelia is used by The King and Polonius as a bait for Hamlet, while Ophelia's wishes remain uncorrupted as she wishes to give back to Hamlet the letters he gave her, stating that, ' And with them words of so sweet breath composed as made the things more rich. Their perfume lost. This gives the reader a feeling of Hamlets attitude towards Ophelia. However the reason for this is left completely up to the reader. Hamlet begins this conversation with, what seems, talking to himself. He then notices Ophelia and begins to talk to her. He denies the letters that Ophelia claimed he gave her. This is also left ' open' by Shakespeare, in the sense that the reader may believe that Hamlet did in fact give letters of a very affectionate nature to Ophelia, or that Hamlet never gave her letters, and that he's denial is truthful. It is however commonly believed that Hamlet did in fact write Ophelia letters which, as mentioned before, Shakespeare uses to establish a history of Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship. This being the case, why would Hamlet deny giving these letters? In the argument that Hamlet is truly mad by this stage, it is believed that he truly has no idea that he ever gave letters to Ophelia. However to argue the fact that Hamlet isn't really mad, it is believed that to maintain his illusive madness he must end his relationship with Ophelia, and break all ties with her for his madness to look convincing. This is another example of Shakespeare ' playing' with the madness of Hamlet, and to keep the reader guessing. It is also interesting to briefly look outside the text of Hamlet, and into other Shakespearian plays, where he depicts madness to a similar level. The Character Lear, from King Lear, also suffers from a similar, brought on, madness. This argument of whether the madness is real or not can also be asked of the character Lear.

Does he really go insane from the flagitious actions of his two daughters? Or is he faking it as part of a big scheme to get revenge? Like Hamlet, Shakespeare leaves many plot clues that point ‘both ways’. Shakespeare plays with Lear’s madness in a similar way he does with Hamlet, and through this, creates many different ‘ways to travel’ when deciding what one believes in. It is important to note that Hamlet is a tragedy, and holds many of the characteristics tragedies held in the renaissance. Tragedies feature the main character being brought to ruin and grief and usually, but not always, result in death of the main character and others. In Hamlet we see that Hamlet is either brought to ruin through the fate of his father and the actions of his mother, or by his own ‘selfish’ and colluding attitude. The madness that he suffers after this could be the final element that pushes him to ruin. However many could also argue that the fate and actions of his father and mother alone brought him to this ruin, and that he solely concentrates on revenge now by feigning madness. A tragedian named Catherine Belsey believes that the readers of today read tragedies from ‘... he present, to produce for it a meaning intelligible from our own place in history.’ This interesting point must be taken into account when asking the play questions such as these. From a look at today’s beliefs, many readers tend to justify the main character and brand him as a ‘good’ character or heroine. However it is interesting to ‘turn’ the text Hamlet around. When doing this one can still see Hamlet as the main character, however one can also see him as a villain, bringing ruin and chaos to Denmark through the actions of his ‘madness’. In this sense, one can see the incredible flexibility Shakespeare has when moulding the story. From the evidence mentioned

before, the capricious text of Shakespeare can be turned on all angles. This is due to how he plays with Hamlet's madness, and uses it to make readers question its own authenticity. Because of this, the very revenge that Hamlet has planned can be questioned. Are his actions brought on by madness and no other motivation, or is it planned, and will it save Denmark or break it? These questions prove that to answer a question such as this, many things must be taken into account. Hamlet is an extraordinary text in this sense, and whichever way one 'turns' it, a new direction in its plot is found.

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