

To define madness

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Hamlet's madness is one of many disguises used to gain power over others. Because the line between madness and sanity is subject to change (depending on the context of one's actions), Hamlet's choice of disguise is both the most effective and the most volatile form of power in Shakespeare's play. There are considerable distinctions between the actions of Hamlet in his "mad" state of mind and the few other characters that undoubtedly lost sanity. Hamlet is a smart, scholarly man, and faking a mental disability could certainly be apart of his plot to avenge his father's death, which was a command of his father. Hamlet gives a warning to Horatio and others that he might act strangely at times, which would put whatever mad tendencies he displays into perspective. He unmistakably informs his mother, the queen Gertrude, that she was not to reveal to Claudius that he was "...not in madness, but mad in craft" (3. 4. 209-210). She is not convinced that her son is alright, however, he is clear in his point. A mad man would certainly not care about other's thoughts and opinions of him. There are many less reasons for him going mad, and as a scholar he would have more sense than to not tell anyone. Hamlet would certainly tell his friend Horatio that he was not feeling himself if given the chance, which he never did. Horatio would have noticed if his friend was acting out of the ordinary without reason, and brought it to someone's attention, had it been serious enough. The first time the king and queen become aware of his "madness" is when Polonius announces it to them and tells them of Hamlet's love for his daughter, Ophelia: "Your noble son is mad. "Mad" call I it, for, to define true madness, what is't but to be nothing else but mad? (2. 2. 99-101). Polonius is an untrustworthy character, and does not do anything in the whole length of the

play to help Hamlet with any of his problems, chiefly caused by Polonius and the King. He is the first to bring the idea of Hamlet's insanity to the King and Queen; therefore, at first, it could just be a technique to give more reason to send Hamlet away to England. Ophelia reports to her father that Hamlet was somewhat violent with her, both physically and verbally. From her description he displayed drastic unawareness, through his lack of proper clothing and insensible speech, so much that it seems highly improbable that he went mad so quickly. It most likely would have been a more gradual process. Later while Hamlet is speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, there is no textual note of odd dress, or unordinary facial expressions through the rest of the play, like those that Ophelia reported to her father. Hamlet is talking as anyone would when he greeted his childhood friends, a large contrast to the tone and attitude he had moments before they entered the room. His remark "these tedious old fools" (2. 2. 237), referring to Polonius and Claudius, is a glimpse of Hamlet's sane side, which he was choosing not to show to the king and his advisor. After the play, The Murder of Gonzago, Hamlet talks to Horatio about Claudius' reaction to the play, and seems to be fine. It would be very strange that the prince would be able to regain his sanity after such intense periods of speaking gibberish. Given this evidence, it is already assumable that it is a show the others are seeing, not true madness. Queen Gertrude is confronted again with the idea of her son's madness. When he faces her in her chambers, the ghost of his dead father visits Hamlet, Gertrude claims not to see the ghost of her late husband, asking "Whereon do you look?" (3: 4: 141), which may or may not be true. Given that his mother is telling the truth, it is still highly probable that the

ghost is physically in the room, rather than in the mind of Hamlet. In the first scene of the play, upon the ghost entering for the first time, it makes itself clear in that it will not speak to Horatio, Bernardo, or Marcellus. The only human it converses with is Hamlet, which would explain its choice not to reveal its presence to the queen. She might even be lying about not noticing the ghost, or she might feel so much guilt about marrying her husband's brother that she chooses not to see what causes her so much pain. Gertrude most likely told the king of Hamlet's hallucinations, and they based the majority of their opinion on that moment, though her first thought was that Hamlet's madness was caused by her " ...o'er hasty marriage" to Claudius (2: 2: 60). Claudius himself cared little for his step-son, made clear when he sent Hamlet away to be executed, and could easily stretch a story to make it more outrageous, thus giving more reason to do away with him. Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius and others base their convictions of Hamlet's insanity on his belief of the presence of a ghost. They are wrongfully condemning his guilt, because not only do others see the ghost, but also it makes a statement of its need to see Hamlet, and only him. Gertrude denied sight of the ghost of King Hamlet a few times throughout the play, but that is not true with everyone. Marcellus and Barnardo saw the ghost initially, and though they were unsure who the figure was, the two men were smart enough to find a more scholarly and cultured man to judge the identity of the figure. The play opens with Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo watching for the spirit. Horatio is skeptical at first, but after seeing the former king, he finds his friend Hamlet, and tells him what happened. That is the first time we meet the young Hamlet. He is confused and troubled upon hearing the

news, but does not hesitate in volunteering to go see for himself. When they arrive at the tower and see the ghost, Horatio and Marcellus try to keep their friend Hamlet from going along with it. They knew so little about the image; it could very well have been a war omen, or a demon. After he is certain that the figure is the Dane, and not a demon, Hamlet converses with it. His father tells him of the horrid way his own brother killed him and how revenge was crucial. This all happens before the close of the first act. Hamlet's organization of The Murder of Gonzago is something Hamlet had preformed to determine weather or not the ghost that spoke to him was real, or in his mind. The first piece of evidence that comes from that is whether a mad man would care to find out if his madness was genuine. Hamlet certainly did make an effort to justify the strange sights he saw, which is a very sensible thing to do. The second and most essential part of this evidence is Claudius' reaction to the play. He rises upon hearing that Lucianus puts poison in the Kings ear, exactly the cruelty that Claudius inflicted on his brother, the late King Hamlet. Horatio makes it apparent that he knew of the ghost, when he said " There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave, to tell us this" (1. 5. 139-140) in response to Hamlet's rude remark about King Claudius. Both men swear not to reveal what they have seen, to anyone- proof that they had seen something out of the ordinary. The ghost did make an appearance in the first and fifth acts, and characters other than Hamlet recognized it. If any of Hamlet's madness is based on his talk of ghosts, his accusation is a blunder. Hamlet did not do a bad thing by frightening his uncle, but it certainly did make an impact. Claudius' startled state after the players' performance is proof that Hamlet is correct in his accusations. The Ghost of

his father was the one that informed Hamlet of this ill deed. If the spirit were simply a fabrication of his imagination, than there would be no explanation for Hamlet's knowledge of his father's murder. He was the one that instructed the players to put on the show; therefore he must have gotten the information about the characters from some source, namely his dead father. Most of the "trustworthy" characters in the play recognize the ghost. Hamlet informs Horatio and Marcellus that he will "...put an antic disposition on" (1: 5: 192), and might mutter strange phrases and demonstrate other acts of insanity. There is no doubt that others think he is unwell, but it could just be a statement used to back up the idea of sending him away. Claudius is opposed to Hamlet's presence from the beginning, but chooses to let him stay for his own purposes. Though Hamlet's insanity is the main focus of distress for most, other individuals are mad as well, and for the first time quite genuinely. When Ophelia is seen as mad for the first time (4: 5: 26) she is openly singing and chanting- things that Hamlet never did. He talks of Polonius as a "fishmonger" (2. 2190), and often makes reference to other seemingly ridiculous things, which could, and do at times, have deeper meaning. He was generally just talking sharply about some of his enemies. The strange behavior was a way to distract Polonius, Claudius, and perhaps the Queen, while Hamlet seeks revenge for his lifeless father. The most suspicious aspect of the "madness" is that his moments of visible mental uneasiness go on and off. One moment he will be talking nonsense to the King and his advisor, and within minutes he is talking in a perfectly understandable tone to his old childhood friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When Hamlet apologizes to Laertes he is sincere, and shows

very few signs of madness, if any at all. He knows this will be his last chance at apologizing, so he tries to make it believable. Hamlet contemplates suicide from the beginning of the book, questioning whether he wants " to be, or not to be..." (3: 1: 64) which would explain his seemingly impulsive choice to fence with Laertes. He questions issues of humanity often, especially towards the close of the play, which would explain his hasty choice to fence with this dangerous rival, who is plotting to take away the only thing Hamlet has, his life. Much unlike a truly insane person, Hamlet does not act spontaneously. There is never a significant thing done on his part that was not well thought out in advance. The " madness" that Hamlet portrays in the tragedy, though believed to be true by many, is false. It possibly allowed Hamlet more time to plot the revenge for his father's death by Claudius, or was just an example of the young prince's love of drama. Either way, there were many flaws in his act that go unnoticed by the other characters, but can be picked up only by the reader. Hamlet's frequent switching from sanity to madness, are obvious clues that he is pretending. The ghost of his dead father and the play that proved his existence outside of Hamlet's mind, are convincing confirmations that he was not hallucinating. All the characters that used Hamlet's " disability" as a tool were merely forcing themselves to believe that Hamlet is mad. He only went along with their unfortunate thoughts to convince them he was mad. In Shakespeare's masterpiece, Hamlet draws in so many people because of these debatable arguments. The question of Hamlet's madness is reasonable, and after re-reading all the textual evidence, one must lean towards the fact that Hamlet

is sane, for whatever reasons he chooses. It is a marvelous plan on his part, and should be noted as such.