

Zero Two

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LIT 319 - Shakespeare

Hamlet: Madness or Misdiagnosis?

I. Introduction

Throughout *Hamlet* there are multiple instances of Hamlet's "madness", usually declared as such by another character. While no mad person is going to admit that they are mad, it is interesting to note that the behavior begins only after Hamlet declares it will and it is perceived as such only by the people who are against him. Are they actually acts of madness then, or only faked, to the accuracy of what people imagine a real madman is like, to further Hamlet's plan? Why are these particular actions seen as madness?

II. Origin of Madness

There are two causes for Hamlet's "madness", one genuine and one perceived. Both are given to the audience by characters expressly stating it as such. The first, and real cause for Hamlet's madness, occurs in Act 1 Scene 5 when Hamlet learns of his father's murder. At the ghost's pleading, Hamlet vows to get revenge. He then makes Horatio swear to tell no one what happened or to acknowledge that Hamlet is only playing at madness.

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy, / How strange or odd some'er I bear myself /
(As I perchance hereafter shall think meet / To put an antic disposition on) / That you, at
such times seeing me, never shall, / . . . / . . . to note / That you know aught of me—this
do swear, / . . . (Ham., 1.5 188-201)

Hamlet tells the audience that he is going to be pretending to be mad in order to investigate his father's murder. From this point of view, the origin of his "madness" is the reveal of his father's murder and his desire to reveal the truth.

The second cause for madness is given to the audience as an account of the supporting characters, and happens almost directly after Hamlet tells Horatio that he is going to start behaving oddly. Hamlet's off screen actions, recounted by Ophelia, are the perceived evidence to explain his sudden change in behavior. Ophelia tells her father, Polonius, that Hamlet had come into her room late at night, half dressed with his shirt open and stockings undone, grabbed her arm and then just stared at her before leaving. They both attribute it to her having turned down Hamlet's courting, at her father's advice. Polonius then tells the king and queen that Hamlet ". . . Fell into a sadness, then into a fast, / Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness, / Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension, / Into the madness wherein now he raves . . ." (Ham., 2.2 156-158). After Polonius reads aloud a letter Hamlet had written to Ophelia, they all agree that his previously taciturn, and now visibly crazy, behavior is because he is mad with lovesickness.

III. Results of Madness

Following the two causes of Hamlet's madness, there are roughly two resulting pathways that emerge due to his actions; others investigating Hamlet's odd behavior and Hamlet piecing together his plan for revenge. The two often crisscross, and eventually merge into one climax. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in an effort to wheedle out why Hamlet is behaving oddly, encourage him to see a play by a passing troupe. Hamlet uses it as an opportunity to feel out if Claudius is guilty by asking the troupe to perform a play of his making; a reenactment of the murder. Hamlet's "mad" behavior during the play lets him confirm that Claudius killed his father, but it also raises Claudius's hackles. This sets Hamlet down his path of revenge and

causes Claudius to start seriously doubting Hamlet and fearing for himself. Here, Hamlet's "madness" has led both him and Claudius to the conclusion that they need to kill the other.

After witnessing Hamlet's "madness" in action, Claudius' fear and guilt has him ask Polonius to hide in Gertrude's chambers and listen in on her and Hamlet speaking. In this instance, Hamlet's "mad" behavior indirectly leads to Polonius' murder when Hamlet thinks it is Claudius hiding in the room. Hamlet's actions cause Claudius to investigate further, which in turn results in Hamlet's anger being seen as another act of madness when he accidentally kills Polonius. Polonius' murder is the spark for the rest of the play. Claudius decides such dangerous madness needs to be stopped, but rather than kill Hamlet himself and cause domestic discourse, he sends Hamlet to England with a letter telling the English King to execute Hamlet. Hamlet's "madness" directly results in Claudius sending him to England for execution, and then indirectly results in the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. While it is Hamlet who switches his execution order for theirs, the result is only indirect because it was a calculated survival move on Hamlet's part.

Claudius' fear of Hamlet being a dangerous madman, after Hamlet killed Polonius, continues to propel Claudius' actions for the rest of the play. Claudius doesn't hold back in telling Laertes who killed his father and encourages Laertes to seek his own vengeance through a duel. Claudius poisons the swords, as well as a goblet of wine for extra assurance that this time Hamlet will be well and truly dead. The scuffle and dramatics of the final scene are the direct result of Hamlet's madness striking fear into Claudius' guilt-ridden heart so much that he felt the need to murder Hamlet too. Therefore, the deaths of Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius, and Hamlet himself are an indirect result of Hamlet's "madness".

IV. Acts of "Madness"

The inciting act of madness, seen off screen only by Ophelia, is Hamlet entering her rooms improperly dressed and staring avidly at her without saying a word. Ophelia, finding this odd and creepy, tells her father Polonius. This marks the outward change in Hamlet's behavior from disquiet over his father's death to acts of "madness". However, almost every instance of Hamlet's madness comes with a mocking of the current situation that flies over the head of every character he is speaking to. Hamlet says to Polonius, For if the sun breed maggots in a dead / dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a / daughter? / . . . / Let her not walk i' th' sun" (Ham., 2.2 197-201). Polonius entirely misses that Hamlet was all but comparing Ophelia to a maggot infested dog corpse. To the audience, this is also clearly Hamlet being upset at his mother for having succumbed to seduction and marrying Claudius, and now feeling disinterested in all women. Polonius attributes Hamlet's words to him being befuddled by love, lost in his madness. Hamlet's words and metaphor are too precise and clever to be simple ravings though. Hamlet even continues to make fun of Polonius for not being precise with his words. "POLONIUS . . . What do you read, my / lord? / HAMLET Words, words, words. / POLONIUS What is the matter, my lord? / HAMLET Between who?" (Ham., 2.2 208-212).

Throughout the rest of the play, the characters continually display a lower level of intelligence compared to Hamlet. Ophelia has to ask Hamlet what "The Mousetrap" introduction means, despite the troupe's actions being clearly played out. Ophelia comments that the prologue is brief, Hamlet replies, "As woman's love," seemingly linking two unrelated things when he is really comparing the play to his mother's swift remarriage (Ham., 3.2 174-175). He even goes so far as to call out the king and queen's actions by enthusiastically commentating on their relationship through the guise of speaking on the play. "You shall see anon how the / murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife" (Ham., 3.2 289-290). His over-exaggerated speech and actions

come off as improper and rude, and therefore mad, but in actuality it is Hamlet calling everyone out on their fallacies using the play as a medium.

Each of Hamlet's acts of "madness" are intelligently calculated, even Polonius' accidental murder since Hamlet thought it was Claudius —because who else would be in his mother's chambers? Hamlet had purposefully decided to wait and kill Claudius when he was doing something reprehensible. Rather than killing Claudius while he prayed and potentially increasing his chances of going to Heaven, Hamlet chose to kill him in the act of something heinous, like sleeping with his brother's widow. Hamlet was clearly not acting madly, but making intelligent and thought out decisions. If each of Hamlet's acts of madness were done for the best effect in achieving his vengeance, why is it so often debated as to whether or not he really went mad?

V. Madness or Misdiagnosis?

Hamlet is seen as being unable to maintain friendships through his distance with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He has problems seeing another person's point of view when Claudius and Gertrude try to tell him he is being too depressed. When speaking with Polonius in Act 2 Scene 2, "POLONIUS . . . What do you read, my / lord? / HAMLET Words, words, words," he takes Polonius's question too literally, making the conversation difficult (Ham., 2.2 208-212). Polonius and the queen mention how often Hamlet walks the hall reading, showing focused interest and a routine. He has difficulties in social interactions and interpreting social rules, as seen in his conversations with Ophelia where he quickly goes from faked social politeness to all but calling her a whore when he tells her "Get thee to a nunnery" (Ham., 3.1 131). All of these interactions are interpreted by the other characters as Hamlet having gone mad, acting outside of what is socially expected.

All of these interpreted qualities in Hamlet's behavior are common characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). "Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges" ("Autism Spectrum Disorder").

Common characteristics include: difficulties [in] interpreting social rules and body language, . . . forming and maintaining friendships, a tendency to take things literally, problems with understanding another person's point of view, difficulties initiating social interactions and maintaining an interaction; may not respond in the way that is expected in a social interaction; a preference for routines and schedules, specialized fields of interest or hobbies ("Autism and Adults").

Hamlet's behavior is seen outside of the norm of what is socially acceptable, and therefore an affliction of "madness". Autistic people "often [miss] or [misinterpret]" social signals and "might be mistakenly perceived as being rude or unfeeling" ("Autism and Adults"). The misinterpretation of social cues can cause issues, however, people with ASD aren't mad.

The interpretation of these behaviors are due in part to late knowledge development and understanding of ASD. Autism wasn't first described until 1943 when Austrian-American psychiatrist Leo Kanner wrote about children with these behaviors. He "noted that the children were often intelligent" and as such viewed autism as "a profound emotional disturbance that does not affect cognition" (Zeldovich). In 1952, the second edition of the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" (DSM) "defined autism as a psychiatric condition — a form of childhood schizophrenia marked by a detachment from reality" (Zeldovich). This is something mirrored in Hamlet speaking to the ghost of his father. While three other people see the ghost in Act 1, and those persons cannot also be attributed to Hamlet's own creation ala Fight Club (as

Horatio is seen interacting with other characters), Gertrude is unable to see the ghost in Act 4. To her point of view, Hamlet is having hallucinations and speaking to himself, something commonly attributed to schizophrenia. It wasn't until the DSM-III in 1980 that autism was "established as its own separate diagnosis and described as a 'pervasive developmental disorder' distinct from schizophrenia" (Zeldovich).

While autism can be accompanied by other disorders or mental illnesses, today it is considered a developmental disorder on a spectrum with a wide range of symptoms and severity. Experts and caregivers are still struggling with how to handle ASD in adults, especially when it comes to the violent outbursts sometimes seen, another trait Hamlet shows in Act 5 when he attacks Laertes over Ophelia's funeral. As the research on autism is still ongoing and people continue to be misdiagnosed, it's no wonder that someone displaying these symptoms during Shakespeare's time would be considered "mad".

VI. Conclusion

While there are clear origin points for madness developing in Hamlet, he proves multiple times that his acts of madness are in fact just an act. Hamlet proves himself to be intelligent and calculating through his speech and deduction ploys. He continually makes use of behavior seen as socially unacceptable to perpetuate the image of madness, enabling him to investigate and ultimately enact his revenge. The traits Hamlet purposefully uses as his mask are common characteristics found in people with ASD, a developmental disorder that causes people living with it to have difficulties in social interactions. ASD is often accompanied by mental illness, such as schizophrenia, which Hamlet also displays instances of. The non-existent psychiatric knowledge of the 16th century led to the labeling of people, who displayed instances of

ASD-common social struggles, as being “mad”, something that Hamlet unknowingly took advantage of to achieve his revenge.

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