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ENGL 1202 S13
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There's Something Seriously Wrong with the People in Charge of Running the Establishment: An Introspection of Shakespeare's Hamlet

Madness in Shakespeare's Hamlet is a central theme that serves as a driving force for the play's narrative and character development. The varying nature of madness exhibited and expressed in Hamlet deepens the questioning of human nature, outside influences, truth and deception. Hamlet's feigned madness portrays how individuals cope with grief, heartbreak, and societal pressures and eventually become convinced of their lies if the lies are told often enough. The consistent existential despair due to the effects of the political turmoil of Denmark reinforces the mental fortitude of characters already being tested by their environment. Shakespeare delves into the psychological and emotional landscapes of madness, revealing the fragility of the human when confronted with overwhelming grief and distress. Madness functions as a motif that facilitates the play's exploration of deception, moral corruption, and existential dread, with Hamlet's strategic descent into insanity not only exposing the nature of others but also reflecting his internal struggle with identity and the search for truth. I will analyze Hamlet's madness, feigned and then genuine, his interactions with other characters, primarily Claudius and Ophelia, and how madness, used for deception and revenge, can have tragic consequences.

From the outset, Hamlet's madness is a subject of ambiguity and intrigue. Hamlet himself declares that he will "put an antic disposition on" (1.5.179), suggesting that his madness is a deliberate act meant to distract others from his true intentions. This feigned madness serves several purposes. Firstly, it allows Hamlet to investigate the truth behind his father's death

without arousing suspicion. By acting mad, he can speak and act in ways that would otherwise be unacceptable, providing him the freedom to probe and challenge those around him. Secondly, it allows him to maneuver unmolested in the political sphere and eventually remove Claudius and reclaim the throne. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that Hamlet is genuinely cracking under the weight of his grief and his father's demands for revenge.

His antic disposition becomes increasingly troubling as he grapples with his father's ghost, the late King Hamlet. The dead Hamlet urges the living one to avenge his death,

> If thou didst ever thy dear father love-
> Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder (1.5.24,26).

This serves as a transformative moment for Hamlet. The ghost's final command, "… remember me," (1.5.91) serves as a pivotal moment, intertwining revenge and memory as the driving forces of the narrative. This directive amplifies the power of memory, highlighting its ability to consume and dominate the human mind. Hamlet's relentless fixation on his father's ghost and the quest for vengeance becomes a profound meditation on the limitations and capacity of memory to drive madness.

The line between Hamlet's feigned madness to uncover the truth and genuine madness driven by his obsession with revenge becomes increasingly blurred. His erratic behaviour, harsh treatment of Ophelia, and existential soliloquies suggest a deep inner turmoil that borders on absolute insanity. Hamlet's soliloquies, particularly the famous "To be or not to be" speech (3.1.57), reveal his contemplation of life, death, and the nature of existence, indicating a mind grappling with overwhelming despair and confusion.

While he is feigning madness, Hamlet's interactions with other characters provide insight into their true natures. For example, Polonius's attempts to decipher Hamlet's madness expose his own groveling character. He confidently declares,

> Though this be madness,
> Yet there is method in't (2.2.203-204),

implying that he can see through Hamlet's erratic behaviour. Claudius's reactions to Hamlet's act reveal his guilt. He says,

> Oh, my offence is rank.
> It smells to Heaven.
> It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
> A brother's murder" (3.3.36-38),

comparing his act to the biblical murder of Abel by Cain and showing that, while he would like to repent, he feels his sin is unredeemable. He happily uses it to maintain his power and control, stating, "madness in great ones must not unwatched go" (3.1.185), monitoring Hamlet to keep him under control. The general response of the Danish court underscores its corruption and moral decay. Even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's former friends, agree to spy for Claudius just to maintain their own positions. Hamlet, aware of their treachery, states,

> Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining?
> Is it a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me (2.2.267-268).

Their actions illustrate how the court's moral decay sacrifices trust for political expediency. Ophelia is bewildered and deeply distressed by Hamlet's erratic behaviour. She describes to Polonius a disturbing encounter,

> He took me by the wrist and held me hard.
> Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
> And, with his other hand thus o'er his brow,
> He falls to such perusal of my face as ‘a would draw it (2.1.87-90),

frightened and confused about Hamlet's intentions and mental state. As the play progresses, she too eventually descends into madness, singing after her father's death,

> He is dead and gone, lady,
> He is dead and gone.
> At his head a grass-green turf,
> At his heels a stone (4.5.29-32).

She has been driven insane by her heartbreak and the broader depravity and violence in the court.

Madness in Hamlet examines the themes of reality and deception. This deception, while initially a strategy for uncovering the truth, ultimately contributes to Hamlet's isolation and insanity, raising questions about the cost of using deceit to achieve one's ends. The madness of both Hamlet and Ophelia highlights the difficulty of discerning reality from illusion. The play is full of characters struggling to differentiate between appearance and reality. The ghost of King Hamlet raises questions about the supernatural and the reliability of perceptions. When it appears to Hamlet, the ghost's very existence and the truth of its words are subjects of intense scrutiny and doubt:

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable. (1.4.42-44)

This ambiguity is between what is real and what is imagined. Ophelia's encounter with Hamlet, where he visits her in her chamber, leaves her unable to discern whether it is truly Hamlet or a figment of her imagination,

> Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced;
> No hat upon his head; his stockings fouled,
> Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle;
> Pale as his shirt; his knees knocking each other;
> And with a look so piteous in purport
> As if he had been loosed out of hell (2.1.79-84)

Another theory is that the ghost of old Hamlet visits her, leaving the readers perplexed about their own beliefs of reality and imagination. Her inability to discern which Hamlet visited her in the dead of night—whether it was her once noble lover or a madman—reflects Elsinore's pervasive uncertainty. Hamlet's erratic behaviour further emphasizes this blurring of reality and illusion, which leaves others, including Ophelia, questioning his sanity and true intentions. Hamlet's madness blurs the lines between genuine emotional disturbance and calculated performance, challenging the audience to ask what is real and feigned.

Madness in Hamlet is intricately tied to the theme of revenge. The ghost's disclosure and command for Hamlet to avenge his murder sets off a version of reality that leads to Hamlet's feigned madness. Hamlet's struggle with the morality and consequences of revenge is reflected in his actions.

> To take him in the purging of his soul,
> When he is fit and season'd for his passage?
> No!
> Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:
> When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
> Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed; (3.3.85-90)

His hesitation and philosophical considerations about taking revenge are expressed through his mad behaviour, which masks his inner turmoil and delay. Laertes's reaction to his own father's murder contrasts sharply with Hamlet's. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes is driven to immediate and passionate revenge without the pretense of madness.

> How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with:
> To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!
> Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
> I dare damnation: to this point I stand,
> That both the worlds I give to negligence,
> Let come what comes; only I'll be revenged
> Most thoroughly for my father. (4.5.128-136)

This act, manipulated by Claudius, leads Laertes's to a single-minded pursuit of vengeance, his actions mirroring the corruption he seeks to punish.

The tragic consequences of madness, disconnect with reality and revenge in Hamlet are far-reaching and affect nearly every character in the play. Hamlet's feigned madness leads to actual death and destruction, including the accidental killing of Polonius, which precipitates Ophelia's madness and Laertes's quest for revenge. These events culminate in the tragic finale, where the royal family meet their demise. Madness, whether actual or simulated, impacts the play's tragic events. It exposes the fragility of reason and the destructive potential of unchecked emotions. The pervasive presence of madness in the play underscores the themes of mortality, betrayal, and the search for meaning in a corrupt and uncertain world. In Hamlet, there's something seriously wrong with the people in charge of running the establishment. The Danish court is steeped in corruption, deceit, and moral decay, with Claudius's murderous ascent to the throne serving as the most glaring example. His manipulation and dishonesty permeate the kingdom, creating an environment where truth is obscured and trust is eroded. This pervasive corruption not only drives Hamlet’s quest for revenge but also the play’s broader themes of appearance versus reality and the destructive nature of unchecked power. The tragic downfall of nearly every major character serves as a stark reminder of the catastrophic consequences when those in power are morally compromised.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, edited by David Bevington, Broadview, 2018.