

The Theme of Madness in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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Although revenge is the most obvious theme in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare writes extensively about madness. As the play progresses, the thin line between sanity and madness blurs, leaving readers to wonder if Hamlet is insane. Ophelia has a minor role in the play, but the theme of madness is central to her story. Even Claudius has moments of madness when he is not acting as the chief mourner of Denmark. Of these three characters, it is Ophelia whose madness is genuine. Hamlet is feigning madness, while Claudius is simply an evil man driven by his desire for power.

Scholars have been debating Hamlet's sanity for centuries. Those who believe Hamlet was truly mad cite his abrupt mood changes and erratic behaviour as proof that his father's death drove him insane. Hamlet even reveals that he is feeling depressed following the king's murder. He wails, "O God, God, how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!" Hamlet also says, "Oh, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew." By stating that he wishes his flesh would melt, he is indicating his desire to die. However, experiencing grief after a loved one's death is hardly an indicator of true madness. The way Hamlet interacts with his mother is also used as proof of his insanity, but this is not a fair assessment. He has plenty of reasons to be upset with the woman, the least of which is her hasty marriage to Claudius shortly after her first husband's death. Hamlet's behaviour may be disrespectful and immature, but it is not a sign of madness.

Evidence of Hamlet's sanity appears in several scenes. In the fifth scene of Act I, Hamlet says, "How strange or odd some'er I bear myself." He is telling Horatio that he plans to behave as a crazy person so that he has the freedom to determine if Claudius is responsible for his father's death. Acting like a madman would make him appear as less of a threat, drawing

attention away from his investigation. Both Claudius and Polonius admit that Hamlet's actions, while odd, do not seem to be related to genuine madness. Polonius even says, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't," indicating that there seems to be a reason for Hamlet's strange behaviour. Finally, Hamlet only behaves as a madman when he is around certain characters. His madness appears when he is with Claudius, Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Gertrude. Hamlet behaves normally when he is with Francisco, Bernardo, and Horatio. If he were truly mad, he would not be able to maintain such precise control over his behaviour.

Claudius is willing to kill his brother to take control of Denmark, but this does not mean he is truly a madman. His sanity is apparent in the brief moments of guilt he experiences when he is alone with his thoughts. "O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven; it hath the primal eldest curse upon't, a brother's murder. Pray can I not, though inclination be sharp as will. My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent; and, like a man to double business bound, I stand in pause where I shall first begin, and both neglect. What if this cursed hand were thicker than itself with brother's blood..." Claudius worries about what effect his deeds will have on his soul. If he were truly insane, he would not be able to distinguish right from wrong.

Shakespeare provides little background on Ophelia, making it difficult to determine the true extent of her madness. A superficial analysis links her madness to the death of her father. However, her insanity likely stems from her lack of power as a woman living in the late middle ages. In Ophelia's world, men are responsible for making all the decisions. She grew up learning how to obey her father and brother, not how to make her way in the world. Ophelia is envious of Hamlet's ability to say and do almost anything he pleases, as she has to suppress her emotions and behave as society expects. To Ophelia, madness represents the freedom to express her

feelings. It does not matter if people perceive her as mad as long as she has the opportunity to experience the full range of emotions she has been hiding.

Ophelia's death is a clear indicator that she was not completely sane following the deaths of Hamlet and her father. Whether Ophelia intended to die is up for debate, but her madness played a significant role in her drowning. "There, on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke, when down her weedy trophies and herself fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide, and mermaid-like a while they bore her up, which time she chanted snatches of old lauds as one incapable of her own distress, or like a creature native and indued unto that element." Even if Ophelia did not intend to fall into the water, her madness made her incapable of taking any action. Instead of fighting for her life, Ophelia sees her death as almost inevitable. She is not in the right frame of mind to fight against the current or try to shed some of the heavy clothes that are dragging her under the water.

Madness is a recurring theme in *Hamlet*, but it is not the title character who displays the characteristics of true insanity. Hamlet purposely alters his behaviour so that he can investigate his father's death without Claudius thinking he is much of a threat. Claudius murders his brother, but he is well aware that his actions were illegal and immoral. Both characters have moments of madness, but they are able to maintain their grip on sanity. Ophelia actually succumbs to her madness, leaving her completely unable to fight for her life when she falls into the river. Although many scholars attribute her madness solely to her father's death, it is more likely that she had a damaged psyche long before Polonius died. After years of coping with unfair expectations and conflicting advice, Ophelia was not strong enough to overcome her father's death and Hamlet's rejection of her love. This makes her the only character in *Hamlet* who has the characteristics of true madness.