



“Madness As A Strategy: An Analysis Of Hamlet’s Use Of Feigned Insanity To Manipulate And Deceive”

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare’s Hamlet is one of the most famous tragic characters in the world literature, and with him, **THE QUESTION OF HIS MADNESS TOO**. An exploration of Hamlet's madness can be structured around three key perspectives: the nature of his madness, the influence of his delirious associations on how he perceives other characters, and the implications of his playfulness. Hamlet exemplifies a blend of madness and steadfast wisdom. Though seemingly fragile, this wisdom emerges as the dominant force steering his actions. The question of whether Prince Hamlet is truly sane or insane remains one of the most debated aspects of the play. Some believe his apparent madness is a masterful act, in line with his declared intent to “put an antic disposition on.” Others contend that Hamlet occasionally crosses the line into genuine madness during the course of the play. This debate has led critics worldwide to distil three main perspectives regarding Hamlet’s mental state:

- a) Hamlet is genuinely insane.
- b) Hamlet is partially insane, exhibiting moments of madness.
- c) Hamlet is the sanest man in all of Denmark.

This paper examines each interpretation in detail and offers insight into Hamlet’s character, highlighting the enduring complexity of Shakespeare’s masterpiece.

Keywords: Hamlet’s Madness, Antic Disposition, Feigned Madness, Insanity, Question of Madness, Performativity.

Introduction

Madness—whether genuine or feigned—is deeply woven into the fabric of many Shakespearean plays. This research work is an attempt to examine the technicalities of madness, whether real or feigned, in Shakespeare’s famous tragedy-Hamlet. Lunacy, a pathological condition widely prevalent during Elizabethan times, manifested in various forms such as paranoia, hallucinations, delusions, suspicion, secrecy, confinement, and societal isolation. Shakespeare captures this symptomatic malady with remarkable fidelity in both his tragedies and comedies. Consequently, falsity, pretentiousness, or role-playing for personal motives becomes as significant element as genuine madness, often fuelled by reckless ambition, irrational jealousy, filial ingratitude, abandonment, and deceit. As a master craftsman, Shakespeare skilfully employs these themes to highlight the political and social consequences of the irregularities and abnormalities of the human mind. This, in turn, mirrors a parallel world of insanity in the external realm, one plagued by distrust, betrayal, and deception. Beyond mirroring the political unrest of the time, it intensifies the atmosphere of pathos, misfortune, and the eventual self-destruction of the protagonists. In the play Hamlet, his protagonist, Hamlet, intertwines madness with an unyielding sense of wisdom. Though this wisdom may appear fragile, it ultimately dominates his actions and decisions.

Shakespeare’s protagonist Hamlet assimilates madness in the most obstinate wisdom. This wisdom may be thin, but it reigns supreme. (N, 2023). Shakespeare’s play critiques the pernicious nature of autocratic systems that centralize power in a single ruler. It also examines the profound, internal journey of mourning—a nuanced psychological transformation—that, when observed from the outside, is frequently misinterpreted as madness. (Bray, 2019) Particularly as portrayed in Ostermeier’s depiction of the prince as a mad Prince. (Bahrami, 2018).

Review Of literature

During the Renaissance, madness was often linked to a state of uncontrollable hysteria or deep, inexplicable melancholy. This condition was widely attributed to intense suffering or the burden of sin (Dumitrašković, 2023), reflecting the era’s intertwined perspectives on mental health, morality, and spirituality. (T., 2023)



William Shakespeare is celebrated for his unparalleled ability to conjure vivid imagination and for his masterful exploration of psychological intricacies, particularly in his depictions of madness. His body of work reflects an extraordinary insight into human nature, demonstrating a profound comprehension of the complexities of the human psyche, character, and behaviour. Nowhere is this more evident than in the character of Hamlet, whose embodiment of madness reveals a defiant wisdom that transcends convention. This wisdom may be thin, but it reigns supreme. (Ritu A. M., 2023) Hamlet, one of William Shakespeare's most complex and iconic characters, grapples with themes of morality and the craft of feigned insanity throughout the play. (Ahmed Mabkhoot, 2024). Corrupting Influence of Power in Shakespeare's Plays". Lord Acton splendidly maintained that "power tends to corrupt. And absolute power corrupts completely." Shakespeare's plays qualify as such a lot of ingenious investigations into the implications of possessing power. (Sanyal, 2022) While performativity has frequently been explored as a central theme in Hamlet, such discussions have predominantly focused on Hamlet himself, overlooking its broader implications for other characters, particularly the Ghost. (H., 1998) Insanity—whether genuine or deliberately obscured—is woven into the very fabric of many of Shakespeare's plays. Beyond mirroring the political upheavals of the time, madness deepens the atmosphere of pathos, misfortune, and the self-destruction of his protagonists, serving as a pivotal element in their tragic trajectories. (S., 2014) By examining the underlying reasons for Hamlet's precarious balance on the edge of madness and Ophelia's descent into insanity, we can shed light on the enduring mysteries surrounding Hamlet's procrastination and the essence of his antic disposition.

Moreover, this exploration allows us to address a frequently overlooked question: why Hamlet, despite his lack of traditional heroic actions, emerges as the most celebrated hero in Western theatre (J., 1976). In Hamlet, Shakespeare portrays the tension between the absurdity of human existence and the agonizing awareness of it within a meaningless world, devoid of rationality and coherent explanations. (G., 2021) There is no narrative in Western literature that embodies the prevailing Western discourse of individualism more distinctly, or its consequences more boldly, than Shakespeare's Hamlet. The famous line, "This above all: to thine own self be true" (Act I, Scene 3. Line 78), serves as the foundation of Western individualism, emphasizing the primacy of the self over relational considerations. Despite being written over 500 years ago, Hamlet's exploration of individualism resonates powerfully with contemporary Western understandings of madness in mental health, reflecting an ongoing cultural emphasis on personal autonomy and the internal struggle. (C., 2016)

The Objective of the Research Paper

- To explore the performative aspects of Hamlet
- To investigate the nature of Hamlet's madness
- To analyse Shakespeare's intentions in portraying his protagonist as a complex character like Hamlet
- To examine the potentialities of Hamlet's antic disposition
- To understand the mental state of Hamlet
- To justify Hamlet's cynical behaviour

The Outcomes of the Research Work

The outcomes of pursuing these objectives will yield a deeper, multifaceted understanding of Hamlet and its protagonist, contributing to various interpretive and analytical insights:

- Exploring the performative aspects of Hamlet: This will illuminate how Hamlet's actions, speech, and emotional displays serve as a complex performance within the play, shedding light on how performativity shapes both his identity and interactions with others, particularly in relation to his feigned madness.
- Investigating the nature of Hamlet's madness: This inquiry will clarify the psychological and thematic dimensions of Hamlet's madness, distinguishing between genuine mental distress and calculated behaviour. It will explore the ambiguities of his state, addressing whether his madness is real, feigned, or a complex mixture of both.
- Analysing Shakespeare's intentions in portraying Hamlet as a complex character: This will offer insight into Shakespeare's artistic choices, revealing how Hamlet's multi-dimensional nature serves broader themes such as existential doubt, moral ambiguity, and the human condition. It will also highlight the tension between internal conflict and external action.
- Examining the potentialities of Hamlet's antic disposition: This will help unpack Hamlet's strategic use of feigned madness, considering how it reflects his deeper motivations, strategies for survival, and philosophical reflections. It will also allow for a discussion of how the antic disposition functions within the context of Elizabethan beliefs about madness.



- Understanding the mental state of Hamlet: This objective will contribute to a nuanced psychological profile of Hamlet, assessing the impact of grief, revenge, family trauma, and philosophical introspection on his emotional and mental stability, while exploring the possibility of mental illness or a psychological breakdown.
 - Justifying Hamlet's cynical behaviour: This will explore the motivations behind Hamlet's cynical outlook on life, revealing how his disillusionment with human nature, societal norms, and the moral decay around him contributes to his complex personality. It will provide a rationale for his sarcastic, sceptical actions and remarks, positioning them within the broader existential context of the play.
- Together, these objectives will offer a comprehensive analysis of Hamlet's character, providing new insights into his behaviour, psychological state, and Shakespeare's broader thematic concerns.

Methodology:

The methodology for this paper has been divided into two parts. First, Shakespeare's Hamlet was meticulously analysed with the paper's title as a guiding framework, gathering scattered evidence to support the argument. Second, a study of specialized literature was conducted, revealing a significant number of research exclusively dedicated to Hamlet's madness. We propose a comprehensive literature review spanning from J., M.E. (1976) and Brierre de Boismont (1868) to contemporary psychoanalytic analyses. By integrating perspectives from literary and cultural studies, this paper connects a close reading of madness in Hamlet with psycho-social theories of malingering and the insanity defense in modern philosophy. Efforts have been made to understand the techniques employed by Shakespeare in the play. He portrays his characters with extraordinary depth and complexity, crafting them as individuals with intricate personalities and motivations. The ambiguity surrounding Hamlet's madness—whether it is feigned or genuine—stands as one of the play's central enigmas, offering endless possibilities for interpretation.

Observations

While Hamlet exhibits traits such as impulsiveness, emotional volatility, suspicion, and revengefulness, Shakespeare portrays these qualities as part of his human and relatable complexity. In the view of the playwright, Hamlet's behaviour, though extraordinary under his circumstances, ultimately reflects the normal range of human responses to profound loss, betrayal, and existential questioning. Whether Prince Hamlet is sane or insane at various moments in the play is highly debatable. Some argue that Hamlet's seeming madness is only good acting, following his expressed intention. 'To put an antic disposition on' others argue that prince hamlet goes over the edge into madness at times during play. All over the world critics try to find the answers to it and extracted or achieved one of the three views about his madness, the views are as: -

- a) Hamlet is insane or mad
- b) Hamlet is half insane or half –mad
- c) Hamlet is the sanest man in all Denmark

Discussions & Results:

The first view—that Hamlet is mad—is entirely misguided. Hamlet is the hero of the play, and no dramatic purpose would be served by portraying him as a madman. Madness implies a complete derangement of the mind, leading to a consequent irresponsibility in action. However, Shakespeare carefully scatters references throughout the play that demonstrate Hamlet is not truly mad. These hints suggest that his actions, however erratic, are deliberate and driven by a deeper sense of purpose, rather than the result of an uncontrollable mental breakdown. For example,

Hamlet tells Horatio that he will '*Put an antic disposition on*', (Act I, Scene 5, Line 192). Here it should be remembered that the feigning of madness was a part of the convention of 'THE REVENGE PLAYS'; and so, it is in Hamlet too. The fake abnormality will certainly help hamlet to carry out his purpose i.e. avenging his father's murder and the other reference is find all when hamlet admits his acting, madness while talking to his mother –

**'It is not madness
That I have utter'd; bring me to the test
And I the matter will re-word, which madness
Would gambol from'**

Act III, Scene IV, 142-145

There can be no more convincing proof of Hamlet's sanity than his words to his mother (Gao, 2024) then again, he is ever sane in his talk with Horatio and players or even with the gravedigger.



Lowell aptly remarks- "If you deprive Hamlet of reason, there is no truly tragic motive left. If Hamlet is irresponsible the whole play is a chaos." Thus, we find that the first view, "Hamlet is mad as mad can be", is completely wrong and must be rejected.

The Second view is, "Hamlet is half mad". The underlying idea is that Hamlet behaves in an abnormal way on certain occasions as:

- (a) His behaviour after he has met The Ghost.
- (b) His behaviour in the scene of the play within the play or Mouse trap as it known.
- (c) His behaviour with Ophelia in the nunnery scene
- (d) His behaviour in the scene of the graveyard

These are the scenes where Hamlet appears to behave abnormally, but if we delve deeply into Shakespeare's intentions, we may form a different opinion about Hamlet's character. The first such scene occurs when Hamlet encounters the Ghost and learns that his father has been murdered by his uncle, who now holds both his father's crown and his mother's affections. This revelation of betrayal and moral corruption could very well explain Hamlet's apparent instability, as he grapples with the enormity of his emotions and the weight of the task ahead, rather than indicating true madness. He is overwhelmed with sudden shock and melancholy and utter'd:-

"Let me take out my memorandum –book and write init."

(Act I, Scene 5, Line 107)

This is certainly an abnormal behaviour, but this is also true that when we suffered from passionate shock like one Hamlet had, this type of baser activities helps to hold our reason intact and help us to become normal.

The second occasion is the famous nunnery scene, where Hamlet's behaviour towards Ophelia is far from normal. To understand his actions, we turn to the view of Dover Wilson in his book *'What Happens in Hamlet'*. Wilson suggests that Hamlet has overheard the plotting of King Claudius, Polonius, and Queen Gertrude (Soileh, 2024), who were conspiring to uncover the reasons behind his supposed madness in Act II, Scene II. This knowledge explains why Hamlet first asks Ophelia, "Where is your father?" (Act III, Scene 1, Line 130)—he seeks to determine whether she aligns with him or with her father's side in this plot. When Ophelia replies that Polonius is at home, then Hamlet acts show of feigned madness. His erratic behaviour becomes a deliberate act of performativity, a strategy to protect his true intentions and mislead those who are watching him.

Hamlet's behaviour in the Player scene can also be justified. When he instructs the players to avoid the "dumb shows" in his speech (Seyedeh Zahra Nozen, 2021), his demand is rooted in his desire for authenticity and emotional depth in performance. He insists that the actors should focus on delivering lines with genuine expression, rather than relying on the silent, exaggerated gestures of a dumb show. This reflects Hamlet's own struggle with the idea of appearance versus reality. He is not merely acting out a madman's behaviour but is deeply concerned with the integrity of expression and the portrayal of truth—both within the play and in his own personal quest for revenge. When he says:

**'..... For the most part, are capable of nothing but
inexplicable dumb shows and noise.**

Pray you, avoid it'

(Act III, Scene 2, Lines 12-14)

However, when Hamlet later observes that his instructions were in vain, and there was still a dumb show, to divert the king's attention, he deliberately feigns madness, using it as a strategic tool to manipulate the situation. Hamlet succeeds brilliantly in this instance, as his behaviour serves to draw attention away from his true intentions, allowing him to gather more information and further his plan without arousing suspicion. His feigned madness here is not a sign of instability but a calculated move in his ongoing quest for revenge.

The fourth occasion, in the graveyard scene, also shows Hamlet behaving unusually. His speech, too, seems to reinforce the impression of madness, especially when he shouts, "Alas, poor Yorick!" (Act V, Scene 1, Line 190) and engages in a dialogue with the skull of the court jester. This moment, while it appears to be a stark departure from Hamlet's usual demeanour, is actually a profound reflection on mortality and the inevitability of death. His seemingly erratic behaviour and cryptic musings reveal a deep existential contemplation rather than genuine madness (Ali, 2024). Hamlet's outbursts in the graveyard are part of his ongoing internal struggle with the nature of life, death, and fate, demonstrating his philosophical complexity (Huang, 2023) rather than instability.

Hamlet's speech too seems to confirm the impression, he shouts.



**"Swounds! shows me what thou'll do;
Woo' t weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast? Woo't tear thyself?
Woo' t drink up easel? Eat a crocodile?
I 'll do 't?"**

(Act V, Scene 1, Lines 277-280)

Indeed, Hamlet's speech in the graveyard may appear to be that of a madman, but there is a method behind his apparent madness (Hossain, 2024), driven by his thirst for vengeance. Just moments before, Hamlet had expressed, with genuine sincerity, his deep love for Ophelia in his passionate mourning for her (Al-Shraah, 2018). This juxtaposition of emotions—his profound love for Ophelia and his outward display of madness—highlights the complexity of Hamlet's character. His actions are not driven by true insanity but by the intense psychological turmoil and emotional conflict he experiences as he navigates his quest for revenge, love, and loss. Hamlet's apparent madness, therefore, becomes a tool to mask his inner pain (Peruzzi, 2024) and to serve his larger, deeply personal agenda.

Yes, it looks like a speech of madman, But Hamlet has good reason to act like a mad man with a vengeance. Just a minute ago he utter'd, in all the sincerity of heart, the most passionate love for Ophelia.

**'I loved Ophelia, forty thousand brothers.
could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum"**

(Act IV, Scene 7, Lines 155-157)

His avowal of love may be a bit too extravagant and exaggerated. But there is the true tinge of sincerity. His excessive and insensate behaviour immediately preceding this speech, take in both the king and his mother and they miss the genuine- of his utterance -they fail to notice that it is a same man speaking. But there is something strange about his behaviour or this reference 'to be or not to be', is a one of the famous soliloquies which seems out of place too, in this his behaviour cannot be justified, why he is feeling so melancholy when he has a hard task to fulfil in the same manner when to Horatio and others, he told, it was an honest Ghost (Zijun Shena, 2024) but before departing he utters the words

**"The time is out of joint. Ocured spite,
That ever I was born to set it right."**

(Act I, Scene 5, Lines 188-189)

In Hamlet, William Shakespeare explores universal themes by probing into a son's emotional turmoil following his father's death and his mother's subsequent remarriage. The haste with which Gertrude marries Claudius may indeed explain Hamlet's melancholic state, as he struggles with the perceived betrayal of his mother. While his mother once adored his father, her quick surrender to lust and power causes Hamlet to feel disillusioned. This frustration ultimately leads him to generalize about women, famously declaring, "Frailty, thy name is woman." (Act I, Scene 2 Line 146) Hamlet's deep disappointment in his mother's actions colours his perception of women, and he condemns them collectively, seeing them as weak and morally compromised.

Throughout the centuries, people have grappled with the deaths of their loved ones and the profound grief that follows. In Hamlet, William Shakespeare explores these universal experiences by delving into a son's struggle with his father's death and his mother's remarriage. He further examines questions of purgatory's existence and debates surrounding eschatology during the English Reformation.

Conclusion:

These are the very words that some critics have contested, while others claim they capture the essence of Hamlet's character as portrayed by Shakespeare. However, it is a universally acknowledged fact that almost all human beings exhibit abnormal behaviour under certain circumstances. Intense frustration, sudden bereavement, or an unexpected crisis can disturb our mental equilibrium, causing us to act in extraordinary and unconventional ways. Yet, no one labels us as mad during such moments. As aptly observed, any definition of madness broad enough to include Hamlet would inevitably consign at least three-quarters of humanity to an asylum.

The second perspective, therefore, fails to provide a persuasive interpretation of Hamlet's personality. We firmly believe that Hamlet is as rational as one can be. In our view, we align with the third interpretation, which holds that Hamlet is the sanest man in all of Denmark. Hamlet emerges as a man of unparalleled intellectual genius, profound moral sensitivity, and vivid imagination. As explained earlier, the scenes that critics argue display his madness are, in fact, instances where he cleverly feigns insanity. In these moments,



Hamlet demonstrates remarkable skill and cunning, managing to deceive others, such as Claudius and Polonius, even though they remain somewhat sceptical of his mental state. Nevertheless, Hamlet manipulates them effectively.

One of the most compelling instances of his simulated madness occurs in his interaction with Guildenstern, where he says:

**"Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?
Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me,
You cannot play upon me."**

(Act III, Scene 2, Lines 357-359)

These lines are so imbued with the magnetic power of Hamlet's character that no one can remain unaffected by them. They leave no room for doubt about Hamlet's sanity. His sharp wit and profound insight reveal a man in full control of his faculties.

Moreover, even in moments of profound turmoil, Hamlet regains his mental composure swiftly. For example, when the ghost's revelation (Dr . Alhaj Ali Adam Ismail, 2024) initially shatters him, he soon recovers his balance and devises a plan. He resolves to do the guise of madness to conceal the dreadful secret that torments his mind. Hamlet fears that in a moment of emotional intensity, he might inadvertently disclose the ghost's revelation. By feigning madness, he ensures that his erratic words and actions will be dismissed as meaningless by Claudius and others. This is why he informs Horatio and his other friends that he will "put on an antic disposition."

Hamlet understands the need for time to carefully devise and execute his plan for revenge. During this period, he must prevent any inadvertent revelation of his innermost thoughts. Thus, his assumed madness is not a symptom of mental instability but a deliberate and strategic measure to achieve his objectives.

That Hamlet is not truly mad but only feigns madness is evident from his soliloquies, which reveal profound reasoning and the depths of great wisdom. Moreover, he remains consistent and rational in his interactions with Horatio, displaying no signs of instability. His conversations with the players are equally marked by clarity and sense. There is no question that his madness is an act.

If further evidence is required, the genuine madness of Ophelia provides a striking contrast to Hamlet's feigned insanity. A man who was truly out of his senses could not have meticulously orchestrated the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet acts mad only toward those he wishes to deceive, and he openly confides the truth to his mother when he says:

**"That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft."**

(Act III, Scene 4, Lines 188-189)

Stopford Brooke aptly observes in his book *"Ten More Plays of Shakespeare"*:

"The fact is that Shakespeare never intended to represent Hamlet as mad, or half-mad, or verging on madness. He expressly made him a feigner of madness. And when he wished to portray true madness and contrast it with feigned madness, he created the real madness of Ophelia and did so with remarkable truth and skill. There is not a trace of madness in Hamlet."

This deliberate contrast between Hamlet's calculated pretence and Ophelia's genuine mental breakdown further underscores Shakespeare's intent to depict Hamlet as a character of profound intellect and strategic brilliance, not one overcome by madness.

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