

## Antic Disposition in Hamlet

To the casual reader, Hamlet appears to simply be a tragedy about murder with a recurring theme of revenge. While this is certainly true, that vengeful mindset was produced from the diminishing mental state of certain characters. A closer study reveals antic disposition as a more prevalent theme in the play, and one vitally important to the plot. This lunacy, which Hamlet initially displayed as a controlled act, eventually engulfed him and led to his ultimate demise.

“How strange or odd some'er I bear myself — As I perchance hereafter shall think meet, to put an antic disposition on” (I, v). Hamlet's own words to his friends first introduced the concept of an antic disposition. He wanted his friends to know that, no matter how insane he seemed in the coming days, it was all a facade; an act which he would use to gain information regarding his father's murder.

Hamlet first displayed antic disposition when he met with Ophelia, his lover, in the second act of the play. This encounter was not witnessed by the audience, but rather described by a frightened and hurt Ophelia, who voiced these concerns to her father, Polonius, a chief officer in the royal household and a good friend to the king.

OPHELIA: My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,  
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac'd,  
No hat upon his head, his stockins fouled,  
Ungart'ed, and down-gyved to his ankle,  
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,  
And with a loot so piteous in purport  
As if he had loosed out of hell  
To speak of horrors — he comes before me (II, i).

Ophelia's explanation to Polonius worked perfectly into Hamlet's plan. He knew that Polonius would tell Claudius that Hamlet seemed insane, which was exactly what Hamlet wanted everyone to believe. Hamlet put on his act because he needed to gain information regarding his father's death, yes, *but* he also planned to avenge his father and to kill his murderer, Claudius. He knew there was no better way to get away with murder than to convince all parties involved of his insanity.

Unfortunately, even someone as cunning and intellectual as Hamlet could not understand and control his own grief. What he first considered an act began to take him over entirely. He still hadn't avenged his father, even after being presented with opportunities, and Hamlet became frustrated with himself. "O, what a rogue and peasant slave I am" (II, ii). His frustration led to a deeper depression, which led to thoughts of suicide. "To be, or not to be, that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them" (III, i).

Hamlet wasn't the only one who was putting on an act in this scene. Ophelia was being forced to playact as well by her father, the king, and the queen. They wanted to know whether Hamlet's madness came simply from the recent loss of his father or from the even more recent loss of his lover, Ophelia, with whom her father had forbidden any further relationship. Claudius, however, had yet another reason for spying on Hamlet through Ophelia: He needed to learn how much Hamlet knew; did he know Claudius was responsible for his father's murder? Hamlet was hardly deceived in this scene. He knew he was being spied on, and rather than speaking directly to Ophelia, he spoke through her to those he knew were listening.

The King understood the reason for Hamlet's antic disposition, and he determined to get rid of Hamlet. Claudius was the only person who understood the true mental state of Hamlet;

others accepted the idea that he may truly be insane. The King knew that he could use this for his advantage. He now had the opportunity to send Hamlet away because his insanity was detrimental to his health and the health of those around him.

KING: How fares our cousin Hamlet?

HAMLET: Excellent, I' faith, of the chameleon's dish: I eat the air, promise-cramm'd — you cannot feed capons so.

KING: I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet, these words are not mine. (III, ii)

By the end of the first scene, in act three, Hamlet had convinced the most significant characters in the play that he was, in fact, insane. To make it obvious to everyone else that he was mad, and to further distance himself from his Ophelia, whom he now thought was connected to his father's murder, he wrote a play.

The play was intended to make Claudius nervous, but Hamlet also used it to publicly display himself as insane to the court. He knew that by acting mad and making a public disgrace of himself, it would spread gossip throughout the kingdom. This would make Claudius's life and rule of his kingdom more difficult.

There was a problem, however. Hamlet still hadn't avenged his father. He was becoming more insane as his soul was stretched between his choices. He wanted to avenge his father, but he wasn't willing to accept the consequences of that vengeance.

The loss of control of his life became evident in Hamlet's character as he sought vengeance for his father; he continually lost and even threw away the dignity and respect for those he truly loved, and those who truly loved him. The ones that Hamlet should have turned to for help he rejected, afraid that they too would turn against him—the thoughts of a mind diseased with paranoia.

Hamlet's control over his antic disposition appeared to be completely gone when he murdered Polonius. Though he mistook him for Claudius, Hamlet shows no remorse for

murdering the “intruding fool” (III, iv). Shortly after this murder, while Gertrude was still in the room, Hamlet was again visited by the ghost of his father. Gertrude, however, did not see the apparition, thus adding to the appearance of Hamlet's insanity.

HAMLET: A man may fish with the worm that hat eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

KING: What dost thou mean by this?

HAMLET: Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar (IV, iii).

Though Hamlet may be considered certifiably insane at this point, the reader must still understand that he still had full control of his wits. He made this evident when Claudius questioned him as to the whereabouts of the body of Polonius.

By the end of their witty banter, Hamlet thought he had the upper hand when, in reality, Claudius planned to have Hamlet killed in England. So, as Hamlet vowed “O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth” (IV, iv), he did not fully comprehend the weight of what was currently happening to him.

By some random chance or fate, Hamlet returned to Denmark to fulfill his plot of vengeance. When he came upon a funeral for someone who had committed suicide, Hamlet realized that it was his love, Ophelia. This was the final piece that completely broke Hamlet of his sanity. He had completely lost everything in his life that he held dear, and ultimately he ended up losing his own life as well.

In the end, Hamlet's antic disposition was ultimately the cause of the death of Laertes, Queen Gertrude, King Claudius, Ophelia, Polonius, and even himself. Instead of controlling his antic disposition and using it to gain information and avenge his father's death, Hamlet instead fell victim to his own mind, which digressed into madness, and lead ultimately led to the demise of himself and everyone he loved.

## Bibliography

Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Ed. Susanne L. Wofford. Boston: Bedford/Saint Martin's, 1993.