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### **Portrait of a "Madman": Hamlet's Psychological Instability**

In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, most of Hamlet's life is spent under the influence of his father, the king of Denmark. After the king's sudden death, his brother Claudius takes over and he is as different from Hamlet as night is to day. He constantly manipulates members of the court to achieve his aims and favors spying and secrecy over integrity. Prince Hamlet does not adjust well to this new style of rule. He is constantly forced to choose between following his heart and following the new rules of his society. It is sometimes so difficult for him to make a decision that he becomes filled with psychological distress. Although he is only pretending to be insane in order to investigate his uncle, he sometimes has moments of irrationality that causes him to appear insane in truth. There are times when Hamlet suddenly explodes into anger or does things that contradict his previous behavior, further entrenching the concept of his madness in the minds of everyone around him. His assigned task is a burden on his mind, influencing his behavior and his decisions. Several notable examples exist throughout the play. The contrast between the misery illustrated by his first soliloquy and the rage his father's ghost inspires in him after its shocking announcement is the very first. In Act III he delivers a calm, thoughtful speech as he strolls through the palace lobby then mistreats the woman he loves mere moments later. In Act III, Scene 2, during the performance of the traveling players, he is alternately friendly toward Ophelia and hostile toward his mother. Lastly, he undergoes several behavioral changes in a remarkably short span of time in the final scene of Act III: the cold calculation Hamlet exhibits as he debates whether or not to kill Claudius during a rare moment of vulnerability, the outraged way he berates his mother for choosing Claudius as

her new husband, and how he behaves as he speaks to the ghost a second time comprise a triple contrast.

The first instance of contradictory behavior occurs in Act I and features a transformation of mood from depression to fury. Hamlet has recently been reprimanded by Claudius for mourning his father longer than is socially acceptable and has been urged to think of him as his new father. His mother, Gertrude, agrees with Claudius instead of coming to his defense. He is eventually left with only his misery to keep him company. In his very first soliloquy he wishes that he no longer had a physical body with which to feel pain and would gladly end his mortal life if only God had not declared suicide a sin. "Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!" (1.2.129-32). He fondly remembers how much his mother adored the way his father doted on her and cannot reconcile this with how soon she remarried after his death nor with the man she chose to marry. He wants to rail against the desecration of his father's memory but propriety will not allow him to do so.

There are comparisons drawn between his father and his uncle in this soliloquy. For example, Hamlet says at one point that his father was "[s]o excellent a king, that was to this / Hyperion to a satyr" (1.2.139-40). He thinks of his father as one of the twelve great Titans from Greek mythology and thinks of Claudius as a satyr, a mythical being that is half goat and half man that comes from the same ancient culture. Satyrs are often associated with uncontrollable lust. This quote also reveals Hamlet's belief that Claudius seduced his mother. He can't comprehend why she submitted to Claudius' advances and it is yet another thing that weighs heavily on his mind. He tries not to think about it but is unsuccessful and that frustrates him. "Frailty, thy name is woman!" he cries (1.2.146).

This Hamlet is completely different from the one you see near the end of the first act. After the apparition that claimed to be the ghost of his dead father reveals to him that King Hamlet's death was actually the result of murder, Prince Hamlet is filled with rage so

profound that he wants to find the perpetrator immediately in order to exact vengeance. His grief now has a target. He is no longer a helpless victim of Death. When he learns that his uncle, Claudius, is the one to be held responsible, Hamlet swears he has known all along and vows to kill him. He promises to dedicate himself solely to this task, erasing "all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past" (1.5.99-100) so that the ghost's request will be the only thing remaining "[w]ithin the book and volume" (1.5.104) of his mind.

Another dramatic shift in Hamlet's behavior occurs in Act III when he ponders life and death while strolling through the palace lobby then expresses a short while later the disgust he feels for his mother's actions by using Ophelia as a target. The famous soliloquy in this act reveals a rational, analytical mind. He wonders whether it is better "to be, or not to be" or, rather, to be alive or to be dead (3.1.57). Is it better to endure what he calls the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or is it better to fight back by freeing ourselves from our problems by committing suicide (3.1.59)? He eventually comes to the conclusion that it is the fear of the unknown, the fear of "what dreams may come" during the "sleep of death," that stops us all from ending our lives (3.1.67).

His thoughts are interrupted and his mood transforms once he catches sight of Ophelia, the woman he loves. He is friendly with his approach but is thrown off-guard when she insists that she must give back the gifts he gave to her. Instead of being visibly upset, Hamlet becomes cold and denies all knowledge of them. The two of them argue for a short time about this before Hamlet accepts that Ophelia is acting on someone else's orders. He sends a message to the puppeteer by asking, "Are you honest?" (3.1.105). Then he asks "Are you fair?" (3.1.107). Is she virtuous? Is she beautiful? He believes that beauty can transform a good woman into a harlot more easily than virtue can transform a beauty into a good woman. It seemed contradictory, and was once unclear to him, but her recent behavior has helped him to understand. He then tells Ophelia, "I did love you once"

(3.1.116-17). Almost immediately afterward he tells her that she should not have believed him and says "I loved you not" (3.1.120-21). He urges her to go to a nunnery, which could mean either a convent or a brothel during Shakespeare's time, so that she will not give birth to any children who could possibly commit the sins that he can accuse himself of. Hamlet lists what he perceives to be his faults and the faults of humankind, insults Ophelia's father, and is very bitter by the time he proclaims all women to be deceitful monsters and denounces the very idea of marriage. "Those that are married already, all but one, shall live. The rest shall keep as they are" (3.1.148-49). People who are already married will remain that way and people who are single will stay single. He wants his mother's marriage destroyed, however. The anger and betrayal he feels due to his mother's actions has been extended to every person who shares her gender. By the time he finishes his tirade, Ophelia is practically in tears and has repeatedly asked God to change Hamlet back into the man he once was. "O, help him, you sweet heavens!" she cries (3.1.135). "Heavenly powers, restore him!" (3.1.143).

***A short while later, during the performance of the traveling players, Hamlet is pleasant one moment and critical the next.*** He sits beside Ophelia after rejecting his mother's invitation and speaks to her as if the confrontation in the lobby had never occurred. They converse for a short while before the start of the performance and Ophelia observes that he is in a good mood. He asks her "What should a man do but be merry?" (3.2.114-15). Whenever Ophelia asks him to clarify something during the play he does not hesitate to do so. She once remarks that he is sharp of wit in response to his claim that he could "interpret [the conversation] between [her] and [her] love[r]" and Hamlet teases her by saying she can dull his edge by having sex with him (3.2.230).

As he makes comments about the play, Hamlet also makes snide remarks about his mother. After Ophelia complains that the prologue was awfully brief, Hamlet replies, "As woman's love," insinuating that his mother is very fickle (3.2.139). When he asks Gertrude

what she thinks of the play and she says "The lady protests too much, methinks" (3.2.216) in reply, Hamlet responds, "Oh, but she'll keep her word" (3.2.217). The actress playing the queen has just cursed herself with misery for the rest of her life and beyond if she married again after her husband's death. Hamlet believes that she—unlike his mother—will not betray her king.

There is also a series of behavioral contradictions that occur near the end of Act III. In roughly ten minutes' time, Hamlet shifts from calculating to wrathful to accommodating to desperate to calm. In Act III, Scene 3, Hamlet overhears Claudius confessing to the murder of King Hamlet. Claudius can't decide whether or not God will forgive him since he is still "possessed / Of [the] effects for which [he] did the murder" (3.3.54-55). He has benefited—and is still benefiting—from the crime he committed. The play that Hamlet asked the traveling actors to perform has aroused his guilt, which was its purpose. Claudius is so preoccupied with his thoughts that he doesn't notice his nephew enter the room. Hamlet draws his sword and prepares to kill his uncle, but then pauses to consider the possible consequences of his actions. He comes to the conclusion that Claudius will go to Heaven if he kills him now because he is trying to repent for his sins. Hamlet wonders if he will have avenged his father if he "[takes] him [during] the purging of his soul / When he is fit and seasoned [prepared] for his passage" (3.3.86-87). He decides to wait for a better time and thinks it will come soon. He is able to create a somewhat long list of possible scenarios during which he can kill the king and send his soul straight to Hell. The very last thing Hamlet wants to do is inadvertently help Claudius.

A minute or two later, Hamlet tells his mother exactly how he feels about the recent decisions she has made. Almost from the first moment he enters her room he is brimming with hostility. Gertrude accuses him of offending his new father, Claudius, with his behavior and he immediately accuses her of offending his true father, Hamlet Sr., with her own behavior. She says "Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue" (3.4.12). She thinks he is

being foolish. He responds "Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue" (3.4.13). He thinks she is pretending to be ignorant of her misdeeds. Gertrude is offended. She wonders if he has somehow forgotten her identity in his madness and, thus, has also forgotten that he should always treat her with respect. Hamlet tells her that he knows exactly who she is, though he wishes at the moment that she was not his mother. When she tries to leave in order to spare herself more verbal abuse, he orders her to sit back down. He will not let her go until she has looked into the innermost depths of her soul and realizes that she has sinned.

His mother, afraid that he will kill her in his anger, calls out for help. Polonius, who is eavesdropping from behind a tapestry, is so alarmed that he accidentally reveals himself. Believing that Claudius is the one hiding, Hamlet stabs him through the tapestry with his sword. When his true victim is revealed, he is more annoyed than remorseful. "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell. / I took thee for thy better" (3.4.32-33). He thought Polonius was a better man than he turned out to be. He tells his horrified mother that what he did is "[a]lmost as bad . . . / As kill[ing] a king and marry[ing] . . . his brother" (3.4.29-30). His mother does not appear to understand the reference. He elaborates a little more, accusing her of a deed so terrible that it makes a mockery of everything humanity holds dear. Again, she questions him. Hamlet, at last, abandons subtlety and attacks his mother head on. He holds before her a picture of each king—the old and the new—and compares them on several levels. His father is elevated to the status of a god while Claudius is cast into the deepest pit of Hell. He questions her sanity for even entertaining the idea of marrying Claudius then claims that her senses must have failed her because even "madness would not err" (3.4.74). In other words, even an insane person would be able to tell the difference between his father and his uncle, a good man and a bad one. He asks her twice: "Have you eyes?" (3.4.66; 3.4.68).

Hamlet goes on to say that there is no one else in the world who could make the

mistake she has made. "Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight, / Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all . . ." (3.4.79-80). Even if she was missing one of her senses she should be able to recognize Claudius' failings. He wonders why she isn't ashamed of herself. Gertrude begs him to stop because he is forcing her to acknowledge the "black and grainèd spots" (3.4.91) that stain her soul, but she is ignored. Hamlet has worked himself into a frenzy and will not relent until his ire is satisfied. He calls Claudius a "[m]urderer and a villain, / A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe / Of [her] precedent lord . . ." (3.4.97-99). He doesn't think that Claudius is even one twentieth of one tenth a man that his father was.

He continues judging Claudius until the ghost of his father appears moments later. In an instant his anger dissipates and he becomes very accommodating. He asks, "What would your gracious figure?" (3.4.106). What can he do for him? As Gertrude cannot see or hear the ghost, she worries about the state of her son's mind. He desperately tries to make her understand that his father has returned from beyond the grave and is present in the room, but he is only further confirming her suspicions that he is completely insane. After the ghost leaves, Hamlet is calm. He does not continue to scold his mother but, instead, instructs her on how to redeem herself. Before he removes Polonius' body from the room, he tells Gertrude that God is punishing him by assigning him the task of being "[his] scourge and minister" (3.4.178). Hamlet believes that he is both God's executioner and his judge.

Throughout the play, Hamlet is plagued by conflicting thoughts and emotions. He wants to do as his father's ghost commands but finds it very difficult to take his uncle's life. Time and time again something stops him from making a final decision, which only results in the prolongment of his psychological suffering. His internal pain seeks release and often finds it through emotional outbursts or by causing him to mistreat many of the people he comes into contact with. As he himself said before he spoke to his mother after the end of the play, "[M]y tongue and soul in this be hypocrites (3.2.372)."

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