Is Hamlet Loony? Essay, Research Paper

Throughout Shakespeare s play Hamlet , Hamlet is described as ‘mad’ by the other

characters: as he encounters the ghost of his father in Act I, as he kills Polonius and

confronts his mother in Act III, and ultimately when he confronts Laertes and Claudius in

the final scene. But this ‘madness’ is a broad term used by the characters, and Shakespeare,

to refer to the actions taken by Hamlet while he is in this state of mind. With all things

taken into account, this lunacy can actually be seen to be a facade put on by him, a type of

feigned madness meant to deceive and entrap Claudius.

Some of the most obvious evidence of Hamlet s mental confidence and lack of

insanity is when he is talking to himself . Shakespeare uses his soliloquies and asides to

demonstrate this to the audience, but his appearance of confusion, indecision and

nervousness leads the other characters to label him ‘mad’. This is established quite early in

the play, and much of the following action revolves around Hamlet’s scheming under the

disguise of ‘madness’. Shakespeare shows that madness can be used describe something

as trivial as Hamlet s first signs of lunacy, as well as true insanity as we see in Ophelia.

Also included in the definition is the passion and obsession that Hamlet displays in later

Acts in the pursuit of his revenge.

At the start of the play, Hamlet is shown to be mourning his father s death. As the

queen encourages him to look to the future, he responds angrily to her suggestion that he

appears to be grieving: “But I have within which passeth show; these but the trappings and

the suits of woe.”. We see immediately the kind of strained relationship that Hamlet has

with Claudius, and the his attempts to win over Hamlet, or at least to control him.

From the outset, then, we see that Hamlet is not entirely at peace with himself, and is

prone to emotional outbursts at those around who do not understand him. His soliloquy in

Act I Sc. ii explains some of the reasons for his distraction: the death of his father, the

remarriage of his mother to his evil brother; all these have shaken Hamlet’s faith in the

world. This passage is also a prediction for the course of the rest of the play, as he

struggles between passion and reserve in order to enact revenge for his father. But at this

point, Hamlet is perhaps at his most ‘mad’ – he is tormented with grief, but has not yet

decided to act.

The encounter with the ghost of his father changes Hamlet’s nature considerably.

He is shaken but becomes determined to act in some way and starts the scheming that

continues throughout the rest of the play by swearing his friends to secrecy about the

meeting. He also develops a new found sense of looniness (new word?), because of his

unique ability to understand his father’s communications, i.e. the guy talks to ghosts. This,

more than anything, makes him seem mad, and draws the many of the side-plots with

Ophelia, Polonius and Laertes into the play.

After the confusion caused by Hamlet’s meeting with the ghost, his appearance is

misinterpreted by Ophelia and Polonius as love: “That hath made him mad” concludes

Polonius. But Ophelia is not Hamlet’s target and once she and her father have begun to

think that she is, Hamlet’s behavior appears more and more bizarre to them. Polonius’

snooping, which alerts Claudius to Hamlet’s ‘madness’, eventually leads to his own death -

but by this point, Hamlet is more composed, and he has a clear end in sight.

However, Hamlet does not appear in his original, placid state. From Act III

onwards, Hamlet appears in control of his ‘crafty madness’ as Guildernstern calls it. He

dispatches Rosencrantz and Guildernstern to their deaths in England, instructs the Players

to give Claudius a performance that is rather too close to home, and finally he engages

Laertes in combat. By the final scene, Hamlet’s state of mind is again in confusion: in his

passionate desire to avenge his father’s death, he had not understood the full extent of

Claudius’ plotting against him, which leads to the deaths of both of them, as well as his

mother and Laertes.

Hamlet’s state of mind is initially confused as he feels that the order of his world

has been upset, and evil (in the form of Claudius and his marriage to Gertrude) has

triumphed over good (in the form of his father). He is also indecisive, but his encounter

with the ghost is his motivation for action in the rest of the play. Because he is not used to

deceiving and killing, he finds himself holding back from killing Claudius, remembering the

ghost’s instructions to ensure that he go to Hell. The audience sees a more in-depth look at

this hesitation than the other characters, through Hamlet’s soliloquies and asides, and

therefore see the development of Hamlet’s ‘madness’ more roundly. Hamlet’s world

becomes one where the line between reality and fantasy is blurred: he talks to the ghost as

a living person, and uses the play as a tool against Claudius.

Hamlet, once having decided to kill Claudius, becomes less disturbed and more

scheming. Being classified as mad by Polonius only provides Hamlet with the time

essential to perfecting his plan. Ironically, it is Ophelia , not Hamlet, who becomes mad in

the traditional sense, and terminally so. Hamlet’s confusion becomes an obsessive

determination to enact revenge, in which he demonstrates his passion and vitality, and also

selfishness over the murder of Polonius, and his harsh treatment of Ophelia. His ‘friends’

Rosencrantz and Guildernstern become his enemies, and he appears increasingly isolated

as the play progresses, perhaps as a result of his obsessions while plotting his actions. As

Claudius schemes with Laertes in his customary way, Hamlet is also scheming as we see in

this full change in his personality. Ultimately however, Hamlet’s simplistic scheming is no

match for Claudius’ but Hamlet achieves the revenge he aimed for. Laertes becomes a

more decisive Hamlet who is quick to avenge his father, demonstrating none of the

procrastination Hamlet might be said to.

It would be wrong to say that Hamlet is mad. He is confused, unsettled, then

determined, clever and courageous: an impression that Shakespeare confirms by

developing contrasts between his and Laertes’ courage, Ophelia’s madness and

Claudius’ scheming. While he may not develop into the picture of a hero, he also does not

fit the mold of a madman.