Hamlet Insane or Sane?

Throughout Shakespeare’s play, the main character, Hamlet, is confronted with the obligation of attaining vengeance for his father’s murder. He decides to feign madness as part of his plan to gain the opportunity to kill Claudius. As the play progresses, his depiction of a madman becomes increasingly believable, and the characters around him react accordingly. However, through his inner thoughts and the apparent reasons for his actions, it is clear that he is not really mad and is simply an actor simulating insanity in order to fulfil his duty to his father.

Hamlet only claims madness because it allows him to say and perform actions he otherwise would be prohibited from, while keeping people from taking his actions seriously. This seems to be part of his initial plan that is first mentioned when he asks Horatio and Marcellus not to make any remarks in relation to his “antic disposition (1.5.192).” Hamlet’s madness allows him to talk to Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, and Polonius in a manner unsuitable for a prince. He is often disrespectful and insulting in his remarks. Although his acting backfires during his speech to Gertrude, Hamlet is able to severely criticize her for her actions because she thinks he is insane. During the play he also makes many sexual innuendos and even blatantly sexual remarks towards Ophelia such as “That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs (3.2.125).” His convincing insanity act gives him the chance to vent his anger towards Ophelia for her abandonment. Similarly, in another scene, he is able to tell Polonius his true feelings through his guise. Upon Polonius deciding to “take leave” of Hamlet, Hamlet replies, “You cannot, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal (2.2.233).” Furthermore, Hamlet uses his madness as almost an excuse, and definitely part of his apology, towards Laertes for his murdering of Polonious. Would a madman be able realize he was mad and call his actions uncontrollable? Were it not for his “madness” he would have been reprimanded rather than feared, pitied, or ignored. Hamlet’s madness redirects attention away from what he is thinking about his father’s death, and puts it on why he has gone insane. This allows only himself to know what he is truly thinking, does not require him to answer any questions as to why he might be acting strange, and allows him to continue to plan his assault on Claudius. His plan to maintain an appearance of a madman is an ingenious one, and the fact that he does a good job in his portrayal only makes him more ingenious, not more insane.

On the other hand, Hamlet acts perfectly sane when acting insane is unnecessary. When he talks to Horatio about watching Claudius for signs of guilt during the play, he says “Give him heedful note, for I mine eyes will rivet his face, and, after, we will both our judgments join in censure of his seeming (3.2.87).” His words to Horatio are those of a sane man. Horatio is one of the few people to whom he does not need to prove he is “insane,” and as such, he does not try. Also, when he is explaining to the players how to act, he is surprisingly organized and natural sounding. For example, he asks “You could, for a need, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set...
down and insert in ‘t, could you not (2.2.565)?” His question is direct and simple as all his instructions are, and it seems that the player not only understands completely, but also is comfortable with Hamlet and what he asks. It is much more plausible that a sane man could play an insane one, than an insane man could play a sane one, and so reason would deem Hamlet sensible.

Additional proof that Hamlet must be sane is that even in his “madness” he is clever in his retorts and speech, and has a full understanding of the situations around him. He plays his madman character almost too well, and each phrase he utters appears to be an attempt towards conveying his madness or confusing his adversaries. Not one of his remarks, although laden with hidden meanings, made to Claudius for example, is a normal statement that would not be considered insane. When he talks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, not only is Hamlet clever enough to realize their true purpose for visiting, he tells them he is not really mad – in a manner that would be considered insane! “I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw. (2.2.401). Hamlet is able to toy with his two friends through his illusory madness and, thus, free from their questioning, able to maintain the secrecy of his thoughts and goals. Later, he is even able to have them killed in his place using his father’s seal, through the method cunning for even a sane man, let alone an insane one. In fact, Hamlet, in the same conversation with Polonius mentioned above, is so creative in his responses made to convey a countenance of madness that Polonius remarks on their ingenuity. “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t (2.2.223).” Hamlet’s wit and role-playing of a madman combine to make too witty of an exaggerated madman, for him to actually be insane.

Many would point to the murder of Polonius and say that Hamlet’s action, at least in this case, was caused by insanity. According to this believe, unlike all his other actions he was impulsive and almost thoughtless, but this is not true. Almost directly before his arrival in the chambers of his mother, Hamlet had been thwarted in his attempt to kill Claudius because he was praying. However, at the time he felt ready to exact his revenge. When he goes to his mother’s room not only did he most likely still have this fervor within him, her reaction towards his attempt at an explanation probably further impassioned him with anger for Claudius. When she calls for help and Polonius, his voice muffled from behind the curtains, calls back, Hamlet may have thought he was Claudius and therefore killed with no need for additional thought. Even assuming he knew it was Polonius, it made sense for Hamlet to kill him. The “rat” as Hamlet calls him, could have been anyone, but they had heard his conversation with Gertrude and his father’s ghost. Such knowledge, as Hamlet would have quickly realized, could have jeopardized the secrecy of his feigned madness and his plans. Killing Polonius, or any rat for that matter, was therefore a rational action.

Most importantly, Hamlet does not think as a person who is mad would. When he sees Claudius praying he thinks very logically, and realizes that he will not attain full revenge if he kills Claudius and sends him to heaven. “Now might I do it, now he is a-praying, and now I’ll do’t. And so he goes to heaven, and so am I revenged...A villain kills my father, and for that I, his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven (3.3.77).” His thoughts to himself are common sense, follow a logical
progression, and are in no way jumbled or erratic in nature. He is a sane man acting only for the audience around him. In each of his soliloquies, he thinks through the same inner debate a sane man would. For instance, he realizes that his father’s ghost may have been a devil in disguise and so he plans to watch the king during the play he has engineered for his own means. “I’ll have these players play something like the murder of my father before mine uncle. I’ll observe his looks; I’ll tent him to the quick...The spirit that I have seen may be a devil...(2.2.623).” Hamlet even goes further to ask Horatio to watch with him in case he is biased. A madman would not have had the foresight, reason, or possibly even care, to think in this very organized fashion. Even when questioning whether “to be or not to be (3.1.64)” Hamlet is sane in his thinking. He measures the “pros and cons” of his situation, and although at this point he appears mad to most everyone, he is most definitely sane in thought.

Hamlet can be considered no worse than an eccentric, determined, and possibly single-minded man, who was made so by his father’s murder and his request for revenge. His feigned madness is maintained because it allows him to continue with his plans. This madness is not, however, sustained when guard is unnecessary. Maybe Hamlet thought too much, but he thought as a sane man would. He commits no actions without reason, and he is far too astute and organized to be proclaimed mentally unstable. Hamlet’s portrayal of a madman is also very complex because it allows not only his points to be made, but in a believably insane way, which contrasts greatly with the expected ramblings of a truly insane person.