
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

Shakespeare Speaks

Though this be madness, yet there is method in't



Narrator

It was late in the evening. Actors Thomas Swann and Robert Harley are having a drink in the Duck and Whistle after a rehearsal of William Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Barmaid

Here you are Mr Robert, Mr Thomas: two more ales.

Thomas Swann

Now Robert, the big question in Hamlet for me is – oh, hello, Will.

Will

Good evening Thomas, Robert...

Thomas Swann

Will. About your character Hamlet. Is he really mad?

Barmaid

Good evening Mr Will – oohh, he's a tricky fellow that Hamlet. The way I see it, Mr Thomas, is, he's not really mad. He wants to find out who killed his father, and he thinks if he pretends to be mad, the killer will stop hiding the truth from him. Isn't that right Mr Will?

Will

Indeed it is, Bess.

Barmaid

Hamlet says all sorts of crazy things about maggots in dogs and crabs walking backwards... no wonder everyone thinks he's mad. I'm a big fan of yours, Mr Will.

Will

Thank you, Bess.

Robert Harley

But if Polonius thinks Hamlet is mad, why does he say: Though this be madness, yet there is method in't?

Barmaid

Well I think, Mr Robert, that's partly because some of the crazy things that Hamlet says actually make sense. That's why Polonius thinks Hamlet is somehow in control of his madness, because Hamlet says: For yourself, sir, should be as old as I am...

Robert Harley as Hamlet

For yourself, sir, should be as old as I am, if like a crab you could go backward.

Thomas Swann as Polonius

Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.

Barmaid

That Polonius is an old fool – he doesn't know Hamlet's insulting him. I've seen all your plays, Mr Will.

Will

I know you have, dear Bess.

Narrator

We'll leave them there for now. The name Hamlet is very similar to Hamnet, Shakespeare's son, who died at just 11 years old. It's possible that Shakespeare's grief influenced the outpouring of hopelessness and grief in Hamlet's speeches that follow the death of his father, the King. The modern version of the phrase **Though this be madness, yet there is method in't** is simply: **there's method in his madness** – or **her madness**, or **my madness** – and it means: there's a sensible reason for something that seems crazy. Take snooker champion Ronnie O'Sullivan, talking about how his father introduced him to snooker. He said:

Clip 1

My dad's method in his madness was to try every sport and then observe what I liked. I played football, tennis, golf, cricket – but I loved my snooker.

Clip 2

My mum's desk is covered in papers. There's method in her madness, though. She knows where everything is!

Thomas Swann

So Hamlet isn't mad – he's just pretending.

Shakespeare

That's right – exactly.

Robert Harley

This is one crazy plot...

Barmaid

Mr Will knows what he's doing, believe me.

Robert Harley

Hmm... To be-lieve or not to be-lieve:

Thomas Swann

...that is the question.