

Hamlet- his procrastination and its causes

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Hamlet, by William Shakespeare, is one of the most celebrated plays in the English language. Throughout the play, Hamlet struggles with the death of his father and the swift remarriage of his mother to his father's brother. In Act I, scene iv, his father's ghost appears, urging Hamlet for revenge over his untimely murder (committed by his own brother). Taken aback by shock, Hamlet agrees with to revenge, "...with wings as swift / as meditation or the thoughts of love" (l.

iv. 29-30). After this visitation however, many critics proclaim Hamlet procrastinates action for various reasons. Some relate his delay to his high intellect and over analysis of the situation; others declare his lack of courage caused his inaction.

Two of the strangest interpretations include the following: that Shakespeare penned the delayed simply for the purpose of having a five-act play, and that Hamlet was truly "a woman in disguise!" ("Hamlet: His Own Falstaff" 12). Regardless of the various reasons attributed to the hesitation, his delay is especially noticeable because it lies in stark contrast to Fortinbras and Laertes' passionate desire for their respective fathers' revenge.

As Curtis Perry articulates, "[Hamlet's] hesitation stands out as all the more unusual due to the others unmatched need for vengeance" ("Thematic and Structural Analysis" 22).

Many take a very literal interpretation of the play and maintain that many of that situations in which Hamlet delays were a necessary and essential step in the process of revenge. An example lies in Hamlet's first confrontation with the Ghost. Upon seeing the Ghost's image, Hamlet remarks, "Be

thou a spirit of health or goblin damned, / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell, / Be thy intents wicked or charitable, / Thou comest in such a questionable shape / That I will speak to thee" (I. iv. 40-44). This quote demonstrates Hamlet's fear that his father's ghost could be a devil from hell sent to pressure him to sin. He brooded over this fear until the traveling players (actors) enter the story. The performance of the play, "The Murder of Gonzago" presented Hamlet the opportunity to see if the ghost was lying about his murder.

He altered a speech in the play to read exactly as the ghost said he was murdered. He planned to watch his uncle's reactions and he believed, "if his occulted guilt / Do not itself unkennel in one speech, / it is a damned ghost that we have seen" (III. ii. 85-87). Many critics use this for evidence that Hamlet delays in the murder of his uncle until he has verification that the ghost is not a demon. However, after his uncle, King Claudius, flees from the room before the play's completion it is obvious that Claudius is the murderer. Hamlet, intent on murdering him, follows him to where he is praying. He once again refrains from the murder because it was a religious belief at the time if a man is killed while praying, his soul is saved and sent to heaven. Hamlet wishes to kill both Claudius' body and soul.

William Hazlitt is one of the critics who take an opposing point of view to Hamlet's inaction. Hazlitt views Hamlet as follows:

"He seems incapable of deliberate action... when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided, and skeptical, dallies with his purposes, till the occasion is lost... for this reason he refuses to kill the King when he is at prayers, and by a refinement in malice, which is in truth only an excuse for

his own want of resolution, defers his revenge to a more fatal opportunity””” (””” On Hamlet””” s Power of Action””” 26).

Hazlitt believes that Hamlet””” s inaction is partly due to his cowardice. Hamlet himself indicates this in his soliloquy in act IV, scene iv, lines 41-46 that although he has all the reasons in the world to murder, he cannot seem to commit himself to the action. As T. McAlindon phrases it, ””” the great hole in the middle of the play is the unwritten soliloquy in which Hamlet weighs the rights and wrongs of private revenge and identifies the cause of his delay. Hamlet””” s failure to do this testifies to the depth of his confusion””” (””” On Love in Hamlet””” 65).

McAlindon reasons that his inability to act is a combination of his cowardice and his hesitation of what to do in the situation. Goethe says, quite harshly, that Hamlet lacks, ””” the strength of nerve which forms a hero””” (””” On William Meister and Hamlet””” 24). Critic August Wilhelm von Schlegel goes as far as to say that of the few times that Hamlet did act out, it wasn””” t because he was brave. When he, ””” succeeded in getting rid of his enemies, [it was] more through necessity and accident... than by the merit of his own courage, as he himself confesses after the murder of Polonius, and with respect to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern””” (””” On Hamlet””” s Flaws””” 36).

Harold Goddard takes a different viewpoint concerning the spur-of-the-moment killings of Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. Goddard likens Hamlet””” s choices to a tug of war: ””” If two forces pulling a body in opposite directions are unequal, the body will move in response to the preponderant force. If the two are nearly equal, but alternately gain slight ascendancy, it will remain unmoved except for corresponding vibrations”””

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('"' Hamlet: His Own Falstaff"' 20). Those "' corresponding vibrations"' he speaks of are the instances in which Hamlet finally takes action. Harry Levin carries a similar opinion, arguing that Hamlet, "' deliberates between rival options: either to revenge or not to revenge, whether a visitant comes from heaven or hell"' ('"' Interrogation, Doubt, Irony"' 51). Levin implies that Hamlet"' s delay is due more to his mental deliberation and doubt than to cowardice.

The mental deliberation, which Levin and Goddard speak of, is due to the high intellect that Hamlet possesses. Goddard, believing that Hamlet is a born intellect, considers in this extreme example that having him play the role of avenger, "' is almost as if Jesus had been asked to play the role of Napoleon..."' ('"' Hamlet: His Own Falstaff"' 12). In one of the most famous analyzations of Hamlet, Friedrich Nietzsche compares Hamlet to a Dionysian man:

'"' Knowledge kills action; actions requires the veils of illusion: that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no-true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive of action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man"' ('"' On Hamlet as the Dionysian Man"' 40).

Hamlet"' s intellect has also been used negatively as a reason for his deterrence in action. Lawrence Danson believes that Hamlet does not feel satisfied to kill Claudius at any time; Hamlet must kill in a moment with poetic justice and beauty. Hamlet wishes to commit the murder in all perfection, "' and because he cannot have his revenge perfect, according

to the most refined idea his wish can form, he declines it altogether” (” On Hamlet” s Power of Action” 26). In the final murder, ” as the overdetermined image of Pyrrhus in the Player” s speech suggests, avenger and victim must finally become one. Hamlet dies, and his death, the necessary end of this tragedy, enables his expressive gesture” (” Tragic Alphabet” 85).

Another negative view on Hamlet” s intellect and delay is that he is a dreamer who cannot relate to the real world. C. S. Lewis borrows from one of Hamlet” s soliloquies as he describes the picture the reader perceives of Hamlet as, ” a dull and muddy-mettled rascal, a John-a-dreams, somehow unable to move while ultimate dishonor is done him” (” On Hamlet” s Soliloquies” 50). Samuel Taylor Coleridge reasons that the cause for Hamlet” s inability to move is that his balance between the world of the mind and the real world are disturbed. As a cause, ”[he] delays actions till action is of no use, and dies the victim of mere circumstance and accident” (” On Hamlet” s Intellectualism” 38-39). His inability to deal with the real world make the situation presented to him (revenge of his father” s murder) almost too great for his mind. Oscar Wilde describes the situation as follows:

” He is a dreamer, and he is called upon to act. He has the nature of the poet and he is asked to grapple with the common complexities of cause and effect, with life in its practical realization, of which he knows nothing, not with life in its ideal essence, of which he knows much” (” On Rosencrantz and Guildenstern” 41).

Many critics follow Wilde's belief that Hamlet was unfit for the task of revenge. However, other experts attribute his inadequacy in the part of avenger not to a habit of dreaming but rather to his lack of a violent nature. To Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Hamlet, with a "soul unfit" for the deed, is like, "an oak-tree planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; [but regrettably] the roots expand, [and] the jar is shivered" ("On William Meister and Hamlet" 24).

Northrop Frye expresses that Hamlet must clear his mind over everything he is accustomed to - "thought and feeling and observation and awareness" - and focus, "solely on hatred and revenge, a violent alteration of his natural mental habits" in order to commit the act of revenge ("The Tragedy of Order" 131). Best said according to this school of criticism, Hamlet is in itself the story of an "intelligent man and the uncongenial role-that of avenger- that fate calls upon him to play" (Rosenblum 117).

An important consideration in the examination of Hamlet's procrastination is his own recognition of it. In act II, scene ii, lines 599-602, Hamlet proclaims: "Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave, / That I, the son of a dear father murdered, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, / Must (like a whore) unpack my heart with words..." Earlier in this same soliloquy, Hamlet asks, "What would [Hecuba] do, / Had he the motive and the cue for passion / That I have?" (II. ii. 574-576). Curtis Perry, of Harvard University, stresses that the use of the words "prompted" and "cue" in the same speech imply that Hamlet feels as though he is only an actor preparing for a role; he feels he "lacks the passion to commit a rash murder" ("Thematic and Structural Analysis" 18).

He is disgusted that the players (actors) could create more passion "all for nothing" (II. ii. 571) than he can for the revenge of his father. Hamlet has a similar self-confrontation in his fourth soliloquy in act IV, scene iv: in these scene, he encounters the captain of Fortinbras' army marching to battle over a, "little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name" (IV. iv. 18-19). He is amazed over the willingness of these soldiers to die in the pursuit of honor in contrast to his own "dull revenge" (IV. iv. 33). He commits himself to pursue only bloody thoughts and to no longer delay in his father's revenge.

Perhaps one of the most widely debated reasons that critics have attributed to Hamlet's delay is Sigmund Freud's controversial Oedipus Complex. In this school of criticism and psychology, every son has strong repressed sexual feelings towards his own mother.

According to Freud:

"Hamlet is able to do anything- except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish" ("On Hamlet and His Father" 44).

Harold Bloom, stands in stark disagreement to Freud's beliefs. Bloom believes that, "The Hamlet Complex is not incestuous but...[instead] theatrical" (54).

A school of thought not often considered is why the reader feels he must obey his father. Harold Goddard believes that in all of us there is, "" stored up within ourselves so many unrequited wrongs and injuries, forgotten and unforgotten... that we like nothing better than to rid ourselves of a little of the accumulation by projecting it... on the defenseless puppets of the dramatic imagination"" ("" Hamlet: His Own Falstaff"" 13).

Cedric Watts stresses perhaps the most important belief in the analysis of Hamlet: "" there is no master-Hamlet to be discovered by poring over the text, and we don"" t need such a discovery"" ("" On the Many Interpretations of Hamlet"" 63). Watts stresses that Hamlet was written not to be interpreted in one sole fashion, but to be interpreted in a multitude of different ways. The joy in trying to read Hamlet and analyze the reasons for his procrastination lay in the fact that, "" if we fail to seek what it never surrenders, we fail to enjoy what it renders"" ("" On the Many Interpretations of Hamlet"" 63).

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