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Survey of Criticism

On Hamlet's Delay

Hamlet's delay has been one of the most analyzed topics in Shakespeare's works. *Hamlet* is considered by some to be Shakespeare's greatest work, while others argue that it is complex because it is poorly written. Critics examine Hamlet's mind as well as the dramatic circumstances that lead to his procrastination. Still others believe there was no intentional delay at all on Hamlet's part. This survey of criticism examines the conflicting modes of thought concerning Hamlet's delay in exacting revenge upon his uncle. I begin with the position that Hamlet's delay is just one circumstance that reveals *Hamlet* is poorly written and that study of this text is essentially the fabrication of a greatness that simply does not exist. This position is represented by W. Teignmouth Shore and T.S. Eliot. Most of the remaining positions are a response to this claim. Alfred Harbage, Harry Levin, David Bevington, and G.B. Harrison specifically address *Hamlet* as "tragic greatness",¹ specifically through Shakespeare's use of the Revenge Play structure. Next, I explore the viewpoint that Hamlet's procrastination is a sign of weakness of character—that he is merely the "prince of philosophical spectators"²—which is represented through the criticism of William Hazlitt, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Gunnar Boklund,

¹ Bevington 60

² Hazlitt 111

and Bernard R. Conrad. In response to this argument, Karl Werder, Cedric Thomas Watts, and Vivasvan Soni draw attention to the characterization that describes Hamlet as a man of action. G.B. Harrison and A.C. Bradley also address this perception of Hamlet; they examine the dramatic circumstances in order to determine that Hamlet did not delay at all. Another perspective on Hamlet's delay is the psychological diagnosis of melancholy, represented in this survey of criticism by Marvin W. Hunt and A.C. Bradley. Ernest Jones also looks to Hamlet's psychology by applying Freud's theories to his delay. Others analyze how Hamlet's delay fits into his role as a tragic hero. I focus on Paul Gottschalk, Eleanor Prosser, Paul Arthur Cantor, Aaron Landau, and Thomas M. Kettle and their insights into tragic form. Finally, I explore C.S. Lewis, Eleanor Prosser, and Marvin W. Hunt's insight into the relevance of the Ghost, as well as Charles Taylor, Roberta Kwan, Paul Yachnin, Janet Clare, and Huston Diehl's insight into how the concerns of the sixteenth century regarding religion and secularism complicate the play through the appearance of the Ghost.

In order to analyze Hamlet's procrastination, *Hamlet* must be a work that is worthy of criticism. This is not something that has been universally accepted. Shore and Eliot are among the critics who believe Hamlet's dramatic situation is difficult to understand because the play is badly written. Eliot claims that "Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him" (58). Shore also writes,

Hamlet's character is a puzzle. Why? For two reasons. It is partly our own fault, because we will absurdly probe Hamlet as if he had actually lived, whereas he is only an imaginary character. It is partly Shakespeare's fault, the character [Hamlet] being badly drawn. ...Hamlet is a poor piece of material too richly embroidered. To make him out to be a wonderful psychological study is absurd. (204)

If this is in fact the case, then the complexity of Hamlet's character and deliberation can be reduced to a consequence of the playwright's inadequacy.

The claim that *Hamlet* is poorly written is confronted in a variety of ways by critics including Harrison, Bevington, Harbage, and Levin. Harrison writes about the structure of *Hamlet* as a revenge play rather than a tragedy. *Hamlet* not only fits the storyline structure of the Revenge Play but also contains the etiquette element of revenge. Revenge Plays dictate that a perfect revenge goes beyond the "eye for an eye" type of justice; rather, a perfect revenge requires a vengeance that demands "both eyes, a jaw full of teeth, and above all that the victim, after exquisite torments of body and mind, should go straight to Hell there to remain in everlasting torment" (Harrison 239-40). In this case, *Hamlet* is a well-written Revenge Play in which Hamlet goes about exacting a perfect revenge. Bevington's analysis of *Hamlet* as a tragedy also counters Eliot's assessment. According to Bevington, Shakespeare intentionally "humaniz(es)" Hamlet as a revenger by creating him as a character "who is thoughtful, introspective, witty, capable of enduring friendships, deeply moved by the need for human affection both in his family and in romantic attachments, and philosophically inquisitive," which directly counters the "dehumanizing thrust of the revenge tradition" (59). Shakespeare also selects the perfect location for this drama. With the Pagan legends of revenge to the North in Scandinavia and theology and intellectual education to the South in Europe, Denmark is the physical intercept of the two standards for belief that contribute to Hamlet's internal conflict. This intentionality as well as the humanization of the revenger causes Bevington to identify *Hamlet* as "tragic greatness" (60).

Harbage's argument is along this same vein, though he includes that even if Shakespeare did not intentionally create the complexity that exists within *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's

intentionality is irrelevant due to its indeterminacy. *Hamlet's* complexity comes from its ability to evade any one answer to the question of why Hamlet delays. The two most plausible answers to the question are that Hamlet procrastinates due to squeamishness and that Hamlet suffers from melancholy, which are contradictory points. Because these two answers do not easily prove one another wrong while both providing answers, *Hamlet* becomes a complex play that is inherently worth studying in order to find multiple answers that reconcile the truths of one another (109). Levin agrees with this point, highlighting the complexity of the duplicitous nature of both the structure and the substance of the drama (49).

Harbage's first potential answer to the question of Hamlet's delay is that he exhibits a weakness of character by procrastinating fulfilling his duty to his father. This is a position shared by Coleridge, Conrad, and Hazlitt. Hazlitt coins a title for Hamlet: "the prince of philosophical spectators" (111). In Hazlitt's argument, Hamlet cannot have his perfect revenge due to his philosophical ideals, so he exhibits a weakness in choosing to continue thinking rather than taking action. He even claims that "Hamlet is as little of the hero as a man can well be" (111). Coleridge expresses a similar viewpoint, writing, "[Hamlet] mistakes the seeing his chains for the breaking them, delays action till action is of no use, and dies the victim of mere circumstance and accident" (138). In this contribution to the study of *Hamlet*, Hamlet is overcome by his tragic tendency to procrastinate, which could have been easily avoided by obeying his father's command through the Ghost, as was his uncontested duty. As Conrad points out, Hamlet appears to have little doubt in the Ghost's message initially (as revealed by his conversation with Horatio), so his apparent deliberation is merely a case of hesitation (682). This argument takes seriously Hamlet's self-criticisms of thinking too much without acting. Conrad writes, "Hamlet is held in the leash of his own nature; his will to do is not taken away, but turned aside by his

power to think” (687). Boklund’s conclusion is that Hamlet is “hypersensitive, hyperintelligent, and witty, but sadly inexperienced and morally unsophisticated;” he is a “young man ...shaken to the core of his being by intimate contact with what he considers unprecedented evil” (135). According to Boklund, through his procrastination, Hamlet ultimately resigns to the fact that he cannot do anything to change his situation. This passivity correlates with Coleridge and Hazlitt’s critique of Hamlet: he is a man overtaken by his own procrastination and, because of this fatal flaw, inadvertently causes the death of almost the entire cast.

Coleridge and Hazlitt’s perspectives are rejected by primarily two sets of critics: those who argue that Hamlet’s judgements are appropriate and those who argue that Hamlet did not actually delay at all. Each of these critics draws attention to other dramatic circumstances that make Hamlet’s delay not only reasonable, but also the best option. Werder does this by redefining Hamlet’s duty from killing his uncle to revealing the truth behind his father’s murder and convicting the king as well as killing him. Thus, Hamlet’s delay is appropriate due to the objective steps he needs to take in order to fulfill his duty. For example, immediately killing the king would have left Hamlet with no defense other than the word of a ghost and the king would have been remembered as an unjustly killed hero (Werder 249). Watts has a similar theory, adding that Claudius objectively appears to be a competent leader who is respected by his subjects, outside of Hamlet. This complicates the simple plot of Revenge Plays, where the murderer often reveals his corrupt nature through open wickedness and lust. Hamlet’s self-reproach in his lack of action is honest, but he is also faced with a difficult problem in which he must determine if this outwardly competent king is truly corrupt (Watts 58-60). Soni, too, is among these critics, drawing attention to the judgements Hamlet consistently makes throughout the drama. Rather than procrastinating because of a weakness of character, Hamlet makes clear

judgements throughout his narrative, especially concerning when would be the appropriate time to execute his revenge. Hamlet does not accept his first impression of his uncle's guilt because he is aware of his own bias; rather, he collaborates with his community. This would reject the proposition that he lacks resolve. He also views the Ghost as an agent that enables judgement, rather than something whose word should be unquestionably followed. His decision not to kill his uncle when discovering him in prayer is again not an act of indecision or delay but an example judging the timing of his revenge. Each of Hamlet's judgements shapes his situation so that he may finally righteously act. According to Soni, Hamlet's course of action is not full of "accidental judgements," or causes with no purpose. Hamlet does not unconsciously accept his fate or delay until he accidentally stumbles upon the moment of revenge, for "accidental judgments' are not in fact judgements at all" (Soni 62).

The other view that contradicts Coleridge and Hazlitt is that Hamlet does not truly delay at all. In addition to Harrison's view that *Hamlet* is a revenge plot that demands the damning of the soul of the revenged, Bradley identifies Hamlet's mental state as proof of his lack of procrastination. According to Bradley, Hamlet's mental state is something like moral perfectionism. On one hand, he is loyal to his friends and is not skeptical of their actions unless they give him sufficient proof to be. On the other hand, he has an "aversion to evil," demonstrated through his hatred of drunkenness, his mother's open sensual nature, shallowness, and deception (Bradley 21). According to Bradley, "*Hamlet* deserves the title 'tragedy of moral idealism' quite as much as the title 'tragedy of reflection'" (21). When confronted with the evil of these abnormal dramatic circumstances, Hamlet is thrown into melancholy, in which he for a time "literally *forgets* [his duty]" (Bradley 29). This is not procrastination at all; it is the natural consequence of an abrupt confrontation of the values Hamlet relies upon. In fact, Hamlet is not

the “prince of philosophical spectators” that Hazlitt claims; on the contrary, he is athletic, charming, never timid, and fearless, though he is inclined to extreme changes in mood. None of these things point to a man whose character’s downfall is the inability to act.

Bradley also makes a case for describing Hamlet as a Melancholic, without agreeing with Coleridge’s assessment of Hamlet as a man with an unbalanced inclination towards thought over action. He writes,

The direct cause [of Hamlet’s delay] was a state of mind quite abnormal and induced by special circumstances,—a state of profound melancholy. ...And, again, the melancholy, once established, displayed, as one of its *symptoms*, an excessive reflection on the required deed. But excess of reflection was not, as the theory makes it, the *direct* cause of the irresolution at all; nor was it the *only* indirect cause; and in the Hamlet of the last four Acts it is to be considered rather a symptom of his state than a cause of it. (17-18)

As Bradley points out, the Elizabethan doctrine of temperaments would have been well-known to Shakespeare at the time of writing *Hamlet*, and it could be that Shakespeare deliberately bestowed upon Hamlet “a temperament which would not develop into melancholy unless under some exceptional strain, but which still involved a danger” (19). Other critics, like Hunt, believe that Hamlet’s procrastination was rooted in his psychological “diagnosis” of Melancholy, rather than having his melancholy be result of the strain of his situation. Hunt explains,

To find Hamlet, we must look to mental illness. ... Caught in a horrible situation, Hamlet’s doubting nature and his learned skepticism combine with a peculiar habit of ‘thinking too precisely on the event’ to plunge him, at times, into madness. ...

Shakespeare’s age was just beginning to probe the disturbances of the mind. Its

understanding of mental illnesses would have ascribed Hamlet's symptoms to melancholy. (125)

Hunt refutes Werder's view by pointing out that the argument that Hamlet only delays for objective reasons is hardly founded in the text: Hamlet does not contemplate the objective consequences of regicide without trial. He does, however, frequently contemplate the meaning of his own life and struggle with the emotional tolls of determining his purpose (Hunt 130-31).

Hamlet's mental state is also traditionally analyzed using Freudian concepts developed after the writing of *Hamlet*. Earnest Jones represents this view, claiming that this situation is unique because Hamlet cannot be considered a man of inaction in any other area of his life. He determines that the root cause of Hamlet's procrastination in this particular circumstance is his unconscious battle with what Claudius symbolizes to him. According to Jones, "[Hamlet's] uncle incorporates the deepest and most buried part of his own personality, so that he cannot kill him without also killing himself" (100). When the Ghost gives Hamlet the order to avenge his murder, Hamlet's motive instead becomes ending the incestuous relationship Claudius has with his mother (Jones 109-10). In this case, Hamlet's delay is in his psychological wrestling with his place in desiring his mother's affection and his view of Claudius as his other self. Hamlet unconsciously knows that his embarking to kill his uncle will result in his own ruin. Hamlet's melancholy is the essence of the drama, and "only when he has made the final sacrifice and brought himself to the door of death is he free to fulfill his duty, to avenge his father, and to slay his other self—his uncle" (Jones 100).

Hamlet's delay also requires us to analyze his effectiveness as a tragic hero, whether or not he suffers from psychological strain. *Hamlet* is a tragedy, so in judging Hamlet's delay, we must be aware that we are not looking for the right answer to save him from his tragic ending.

Gottschalk³ and Prosser discuss Hamlet's turn toward villainy throughout the play, identifying that the dramatic elements are not only presented to determine the guilt of Claudius but also the guilt of Hamlet. Hamlet's guilt stems from his suspicion of Claudius before the Ghost even urges him to seek vengeance. Because of his villainy, there is a need for an ultimate redemption of Hamlet before the end of the play, which takes place when he chooses not to kill Claudius when he is vulnerable in the prayer scene. If Hamlet were to have acted rather than chosen to delay, he would have finished the drama as a villain who killed a passive man. Because of his choice to kill Claudius when he is armed with the poisoned sword of Laertes, Hamlet can die a tragic hero.⁴ Hamlet's delay in this critical moment saves his soul and reputation—thus, his delay is not a weakness of character but an essential element of his heroism.⁵ Landau explains part of the natural law of Hamlet's world, describing it as “inescapably political, not philosophical: it is political in the sense that errors, partial judgements, and theological (mis)conceptions are never only academic, they cost people their lives and cannot, therefore, be dismissed as unavoidable and innocuous imperfections or indifferent trifles” (228). This natural law eliminates the possibility for Hamlet to avoid all consequences of his encounter with the Ghost.

Both Kettle and Cantor also argue for the tragic structure of the plot when defending Hamlet's delay. Kettle's argument differs slightly because he draws attention to *Hamlet* being a primarily “external” play rather than “internal,” as it is commonly regarded (140). However, he believes that the tragedy is set in place by the sinful actions of Claudius and Gertrude, with

³ pp. 156, 168

⁴ Prosser 187-88

⁵ Gottschalk 168

Hamlet tragically being caught up in the results. *Hamlet*, in Kettle's argument, is not about Hamlet's indecision at all:

If Shakespeare had intended to exhibit a mind which is at once absolutely sure of itself and incapable of action, would he not have brought the murder to light by the agency of some courtier who had secretly witnessed it? In fact the Ghost is the one great blot and uncombining ingredient in the play. Had Shakespeare preserved the mental climate of the original story the Ghost might perhaps have been tolerated, but he is quite out of joint with so thorough a modern as Hamlet. He complicates the whole action, and steeps it in incongruity. (Kettle 142)

Hamlet is never able to be completely certain of the details of the crime, and he is not presented with an opportunity to avenge the crime without ultimately hurting himself in the process. Kettle points out that *Hamlet* is a ghost story as well as a tragedy, so Hamlet's mental deliberation cannot be simplified in any way that is no longer hinged on the incongruity of the Ghost.

On the other hand, Cantor draws attention to the internal conflict of Hamlet, pointing out that Shakespeare went out of his way to ensure that Hamlet's conflict was internal rather than external, despite his circumstances. He writes that this internal conflict primarily stems from the impossible nature of the Ghost's request. The Ghost essentially asks him to find a way to follow both a pagan vengeance and a Christian way of life.⁶ This strips away aspects of Hamlet's heroism, not because he is not heroic but because heroism is a deeply problematic concept, and feeds into the fact that *Hamlet* is a tragedy.⁷ There is no right answer to get him out of his

⁶ Cantor 55-56

⁷ Cantor 27

dilemma. The dramatic circumstances do not provide a solution for Hamlet to have a happy ending, so his delay in choosing revenge or passivity is not more problematic than any other solution (Cantor 63). Hunt and Prosser agree with this assessment, determining that *Hamlet* is essentially “a tragedy of personal choice” rather than a Greek tragedy, defined as “the struggle of a man against fate.”⁸

C.S. Lewis also defines *Hamlet* in terms of the Ghost: “The *Hamlet* formula, so to speak, is not ‘a man who has to avenge his father’ but ‘a man who has been given a task by a ghost.’ Everything else about him is less important than that” (179). The presence (or lack of presence) of the Ghost is yet another critical conversation in the justification of Hamlet’s procrastination. Lewis explains that Shakespeare’s use of the Ghost means “the breaking down of the walls of the world and the germination of thoughts that cannot really be thought: chaos has come again” (179). When Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet*, there was a historical shift from an enchanted to a disenchanted view of the world. Because of the shift to a “secular age,” Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost is overshadowed with an inherent suspicion towards any kind of magic or enchanted substance.⁹ Prosser also writes extensively about Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost. In order to determine whether the Ghost is truly Hamlet’s father or whether it is an evil spirit, Prosser establishes several references to consider.¹⁰ Ultimately, she determines that, in Shakespeare’s

⁸ Hunt 153-54

⁹ For more information about the shift to the Secular Age, refer to Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.

¹⁰ Prosser’s assessment of the Ghost can be found in *Hamlet and Revenge* on pp. 118-43. Hunt conducts a similar assessment with the same conclusion in *Looking for Hamlet*, pp. 149-50.

time, the Ghost is most likely a malevolent spirit come to wreak disaster. Not only that, but the command toward revenge is unacceptable from a Christian perspective. Thus, despite audience perspective that delaying feels wrong, the moral thing for Hamlet to do would be nothing.

However, Prosser and Hunt are careful to clarify that this tragedy cannot be simplified into a fable warning against listening to evil spirits. The Ghost does reveal the truth of an evil deed that appears to demand justice. This clash between moral purity and justice is precisely what causes Hamlet's predicament as well as the audience's. Prosser determines that Hamlet cannot be merely an instrument of the Ghost, good or evil, because his heroism (and hamartia) must come from his own free will. In Hunt's words, "To ignore the Ghost's command to avenge his murder, to leave vengeance to God, might be the morally correct choice, one insisted upon by virtually every commentator in Shakespeare's time; but it's difficult to imagine now that would have produced a tragedy for Hamlet, much less a great one" (151). Hamlet's role as a tragic hero is wrapped up with the existence of the Ghost and the impossible decision set before him.

The presence of the Ghost is especially unsettling due to the religious unrest in this time period, particularly the Protestant conflicts with Catholicism. Clare, Kwan, Diehl, and Yachnin focus on the pressures of Protestantism in Shakespeare's day. These critics draw attention to the complexity of the appearance and message of the Ghost through the lens of various Christian theologies. On one hand, if the Ghost represents a Catholic view of purgatory, there is a possibility for it to be bringing a benevolent message despite its morally questionable call for revenge. However, in an evangelical's point of view, the spirit is most likely diabolical or some kind of devil due to their denial of the existence of purgatory. Kwan points out the Ghost's mirroring of Christ's words, which could point towards its benevolence and perhaps representation of Christ (9). Hamlet's deliberation about the moral state of the Ghost is founded

in Luther's assertion that "there is no middle ground" between heaven and hell for spirits (Kwan 11). The fact that the spirit appears as his father only complicates the situation rather than providing an easy answer for the urgent question. Kwan also draws attention to Hamlet's dual educations; his education at Wittenberg would have suggested that the ghost is evil, as would his understanding of the Christian outlawing of revenge. On the other hand, his love for his father and dislike for his uncle would incline him to trust the Ghost—which could represent the spiritual crisis since its words mirror Christ's (Kwan 12-13). In Clare's words, "Wittenberg has transformed the protagonist of a revenge tragedy, obsessed with the task in hand, into a hero, deeply suspicious of externalizing displays of devotion and emotion, highly conscious that he is a sinner, acutely aware that the times are disordered, out of joint, and that he must put them right (26).

The factors that must be considered in an examination of Hamlet's delay include the quality of the drama itself, the internal and external factors that make up his procrastination (or lack of procrastination), and the concerns of the sixteenth century in matters related to the appearance of the Ghost. If Hamlet can be simplified to a man with an imbalance of thought and action, as claimed by Hazlitt and Coleridge, then *Hamlet* becomes something very close to a didactic tale. On the other hand, if Hamlet does not delay at all and instead suffers from a mental issue such as Melancholia, as Bradley claims, his heroism must be defended so that he is still sufficient to have stood as the protagonist of the tragedy. If the Ghost is a critical element of the drama, then it must play a significant role in future criticism. Prosser reveals the importance of the Ghost and its effect on the rest of the story. Her criticism in particular could be an important aspect of determining whether the problematic nature of the Ghost justifies Hamlet's delay.

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