

## Delay, Thy Name is Hamlet!

By Nina M

Hamlet is an enigma. His father is dead and his dearly loved mother is married to his uncle, when the ghost of his father informs him that he was murdered by his uncle and demands revenge. What does Hamlet do? He delays killing his uncle for over two months, before finally murdering him in a fit of emotion. Hamlet's postponement of his vengeance is a great mystery. Reasons given for his hesitation include a psychological disorder, a weak-willed and contemplative nature, or a moral objection to revenge.

“Something very serious is the matter with Hamlet” (Campbell 103). Some say his problem is that he is manic-depressive, or as the Elizabethans would say, “melancholic” (Willson 816). Hamlet himself speaks of “...my weakness and my melancholy” (II. ii. 609). According [written at eastern alamance h.s. in '06] to this theory, Hamlet was at one time capable of acting in a rational manner, but the death of his father and subsequent call to revenge provided a shock that brought about this condition (Detmold 126). At times he is extremely depressed, such that he dwells on death and suicide and is incapable of firm action. At other times, he is overexcited and gives sweeping speeches and takes action—though often in the wrong manner, as evidenced by the slaughter of Polonius. Throughout the play,

his emotions continue to cycle in this manner, but they never seem to occur at times that would advance his vengeance. Finally, however, the cycle ends in his passionate killing of Claudius and his following thoughtful and plaintive lament of his own death (Campbell 105-106). Other critics, who believe Hamlet suffers from a mental condition but do not attribute it to melancholy, subscribe to the Freudian theory that he has an Oedipus complex. According to this theory, Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because he is “secretly envious of Claudius for murdering his ‘rival’ for his mother’s affections” (Willson 816). This idea is supported by Hamlet’s obsession with his mother’s and Claudius’s sexual relations, demonstrated by such lines as Hamlet’s [written at eastern alamance h.s. in 06] demand that the queen “...go not to my uncle’s bed” (III. iv. 180). The Oedipus complex theory explains why he is unable to kill Claudius while he is defenseless at prayer; he still feels guilty for sharing the same desires and cannot in good conscience murder him. Once Claudius kills his mother, he finally becomes angry enough to murder him. Thus, when he does get his vengeance, it is caused more by his mother’s death than his father’s (Detmold 127). Both the theory that Hamlet suffers from melancholy and the theory that he has an Oedipus complex characterize him as a man of action under normal circumstances, but not all explanations classify him as such.

A contrasting hypothesis claims Hamlet is incapable of decisive action because he lacks willpower and possesses a nature that is more thoughtful than

active. As Hapgood writes, “There is a sense in which everything Hamlet says and does is a substitute for the delayed act of killing the king” (92). One of the best examples of this happens immediately after the Ghost demands revenge. Instead of going and killing Claudius—or even formulating a plan to kill him—Hamlet writes about what he has discovered concerning villainy. This shows he would much rather think and study the matter than actually do something about it. Later, he finds another [written at eastern alamance h.s. in ‘06] reason to delay his revenge by deciding to prove Claudius’s guilt through a play, though he did not have any doubts about the Ghost’s words earlier (Detmold 127). Even when presented with the perfect opportunity to kill Claudius while he is praying, he talks himself out of it (“Hamlet” 74). However, Hamlet’s indecision is not limited to avenging his father. He also shows his weak will in his many postponed exits from stage (Hapgood 90). For instance, in the scene in his mother’s bedroom, he tells Gertrude “goodnight” five times before he finally leaves. Hamlet is not oblivious to his lack of fortitude, for he even muses to himself that he may be “...thinking too precisely on the event” (IV. iv. 43).

While it may be that Hamlet is more of a “thinker” than a “doer,” he could also have moral reasons to delay carrying out revenge against his uncle. Hamlet is shown to be a Christian through his conviction that his soul would be damned if he commits suicide, as well as his assertion, “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends”

(V. ii. 11). Therefore, since he is religious, he may take moral objection to killing a man, as well as to all the deception he must employ in order to accomplish the murder (Mack 86). For this reason he puts off the revenge for as long as possible. Additionally, he cannot be sure that the Ghost is actually his father's and not a demon in disguise, saying, "The spirit that I have seen may be a devil" (II. ii. 606-607). Because of this doubt, he delays revenge until he can use the play-within-the-play to test the truth of the Ghost's claim (Bevington 79). Once Claudius's guilt is determined, Hamlet's only opportunity to kill him before Hamlet is sent to England comes when [written at eastern alamance h.sh in '06] he sees his uncle confessing his sin to God. However, he cannot murder him in the process of praying, for "...repentance of past sins, however heinous, was tantamount to the soul's salvation" (Reed 94). Killing Claudius while praying would send his uncle sent to heaven, which would be more reward than retribution. Therefore, according to this explanation Hamlet delays killing Claudius for lack of a morally acceptable reason and manner of vengeance.

Even when given great consideration, there is no simple answer to the question of Hamlet's hesitation in avenging his father. A mental disorder, a lack of internal fortitude, or his Christian beliefs could each be the reason behind his procrastination. Obviously, there is nothing close to a consensus among readers as to Shakespeare's reasoning. Perhaps this is part of what makes Shakespeare so

appealing throughout history: there is no one “right” explanation. Each actor’s interpretation [written at eastern alamance h.s. in ‘06] will vary based on his perception of Hamlet’s lines, his personal experience, and the culture to which he belongs. I think it is for this reason that Ben Jonson characterized Shakespeare as “...not of an age, but for all time” (41).

## Works Cited

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